

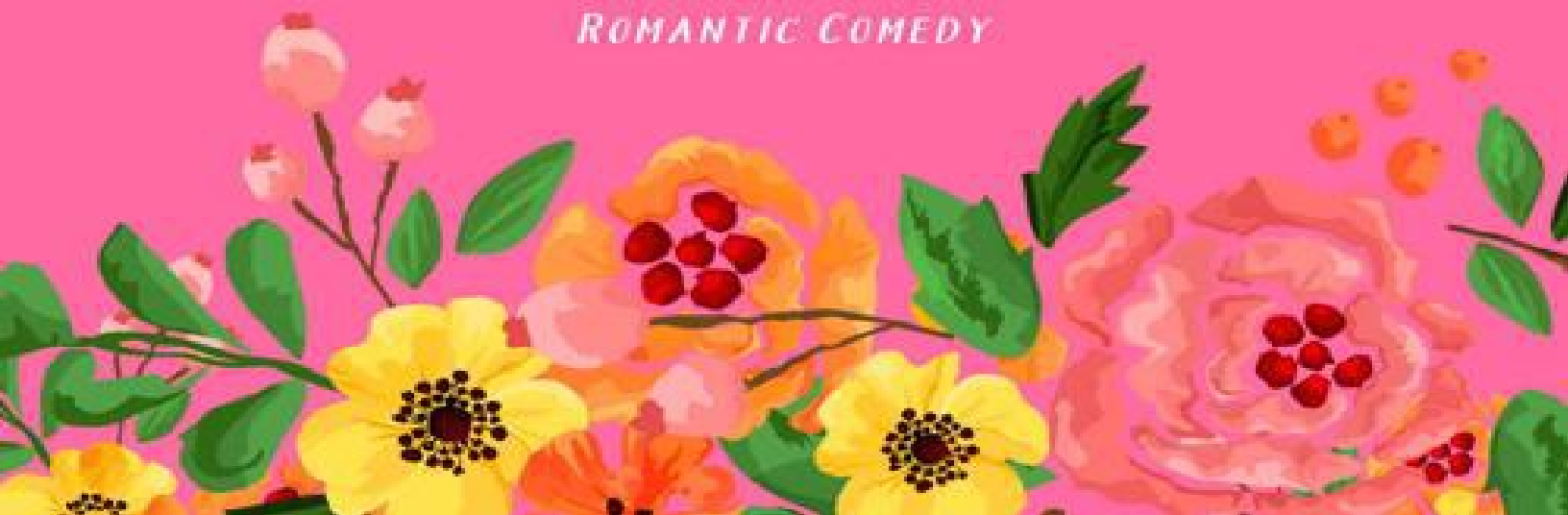
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LILY KATE

# FLOWER GIRL



*A SMALL-TOWN  
ROMANTIC COMEDY*



# Acknowledgments

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To all of you, **readers**—beta readers, ARC readers, bloggers, and the entire book community—you're all fabulous!

To my very **best of friends**... you know who you are!

To my **family**, I love you!

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

FLOWER GIRL

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To my readers, thank you for being here!



# Flower Girl

I've never been on great terms with my sister, but things definitely hit rock bottom when she asked me to be the flower girl in her wedding. Keep in mind, I'm thirty-one. I've got a 401k, an apartment in New York, and a decent amount of cleavage with the right push-up bra. I am not exactly flower girl material.

The only thing worse than getting asked to be the flower girl in my sister's wedding is coming face to face with my older brother's best friend while I'm decked out in twenty-five pounds of chiffon. Of course Noah Donovan is looking like an actual god while I'm looking like Tinkerbell chewed me up and spit me out with pleasure. Of course he's in the wedding party, and not as the ring bearer. Of course that standoffish, beautiful man has the guts to *wink* at me while I walk down the aisle performing the duties of a three-year-old.

I'm only in town for the wedding for a week. Nothing bad happens in a week. Not really.

Except I'm wrong. Apparently I can make *plenty* of bad choices in seven days, and sleeping with Noah Donovan tops the list.

But can things really be that bad if I'm desperate for more? As it turns out, nights with Noah Donovan are downright delicious. And the mornings, to my great surprise, turn out to be even better. So when our little agreement to sleep with one another to get the attraction out of our system falls apart, could it be possible we're left with something real?





# Chapter 1

**E**llie “Hi, sweetie.”

My sister greeted me like she was my grandmother, carefully doling out two cheek kisses, deliberately not touching my skin with her lips. I couldn't tell if Monica, my one and only sister, was afraid I'd give her cooties or if she actually thought her recent two-week trip to Paris had made her European.

“Hey, *hon.*” I sat across from my sister and set my purse on the seat next to me. Monica missed my sarcasm.

“Can I order something for you?” Monica asked. “On Derrick, of course.”

“Derrick doesn't have to buy my latte,” I said, looking around as if my sister's boyfriend was lurking behind one of the café windows. I wouldn't doubt it with the way she liked to keep an eye on him. “But it's so nice of Derrick to offer.”

She again missed my vague sarcasm, so I turned my attention to the menu. Monica and I were currently seated at The Bean Counter, the one and only café in my hometown of Fantasie, Maine. Despite the name of our little slice of heaven in the northeast, Fantasie was not a place where dreams came true, at least not mine—no matter what anybody wrote on the town sign next to the freeway in janky permanent marker. Hence the reason I'd left after high school.

Chuck sidled over to our table. Chuck was the owner of The Bean Counter, and he was about as wide as he was tall. A former motorcycle dude, he now wore his tattoos proudly while slinging espresso-based drinks.

Despite the fact that he was the toughest eighty-year-old man I knew, he had a penchant for gossip, and I knew the only reason Chuck had slipped out from behind the counter to take our order himself was because I was back in town, and that was a reason enough for gossip. I didn't make it back to town all that often anymore.

“Hey, Chuck,” I said. “I'll take a latte, please.”

“Good to see you, Little Turner,” he said. “It's been a while.”

“It has,” I said, not falling for Chuck's baited prompt. I knew he wanted me to tell him why I was in town. The truth was, even I didn't totally know why I was here just yet. “I've missed your caffeine.”

“Ah.” Chuck waved a hand, though secretly I could tell he was proud of the compliment. “I’m sure it’s nothing compared to that expensive crap you’ve got in New York.”

I winked at him. “I’d prefer a cup of joe from you any day, Chuck.”

Still grinning like I’d asked him to marry me, Chuck turned toward Monica. She sniffed, seeming a little annoyed that Chuck had given me attention before her. Monica—the older, more beautiful, more put-together sister—had always gotten the most attention.

“I’ll take a *cappuccino*,” Monica declared with a ridiculously festive Italian flair. Apparently her recent layover in Rome had made her fluent in Italian.

“Look, I know it’s really hard for you to get to town these days,” Monica said. “I appreciate you being here.”

“Hard to get to town?” I glanced out the window and noted one of the boisterous DiMaggio clan strolling on by looking like a Greek god. There were so many of them it was easy to start mixing up names of those boys now that I’d been away for so long.

“I mean, gas is so expensive, and renting a car...” Monica leaned forward, gave a little simper that looked like it was supposed to be cute. *Thoughtful?* It was hard to say. “I know finances are tight. I told you Derrick could’ve sent a car to collect you.”

I gave my little sister a tight smile. It was about all I could manage. It wasn’t that it was hard, physically or financially, to get from my New York apartment up to Fantasie. There was a train that ran to a station about forty minutes away, but the station was still far enough from Fantasie that I’d probably end up renting a car anyway or paying for an expensive Uber. For how rare my trips home were these days, it was usually just easier and faster to rent a car in New York and drive myself up.

But it wasn’t the financial end of things that kept me in New York, either. To be quite honest, I could be up here every weekend if I wanted. The problem was that I didn’t have the energy to come home and spend time with my family. It was the family that was the problem, not the drive.

I had the sort of family that was easier to love from a distance. Not like the DiMaggio boys whose lives were so on top of one another it made a girl wonder if they kept any secrets to themselves. They always seemed so loud and so happy. It was weird.

“I really appreciate you being here. I actually had Derrick pick up a little something to say thank you...” Monica reached into an expensive-looking purse and pulled out an even more expensive-looking wallet. She let her flashy-yet-understated French tip manicure rest a beat longer than necessary as she flicked a card out of its slot and slid it across the table.

I bent forward, frowned as I read the name on the gift card. *Guzzle & Go*.

“You bought me a gift card to Morty’s gas station?” I was so shocked I actually picked up the piece of plastic.

“It’s not much. Just, like, a hundred bucks or something,” she said flippantly. “You know, enough to get you here and back. I just felt obligated to try and help you out, seeing as I’m the one who asked you to be here in the first place.”

I pushed the card back across the table to her. “Speaking of, why *am* I here? Couldn’t we have done this over the phone?”

“Not really.” Monica batted eyelashes that looked new.

I was in the middle of debating if she’d gone the Botox route or if she’d just invested in a really, really good skincare line, when a hand flashed up in front of my face, and suddenly she was waving a rock the size of Pluto, back when it was a planet, in my face.

“We’re engaged!” Monica screeched. “I didn’t want to post it on social media until you saw my ring up close and in person.”

I gave an obligatory yelp of happiness that I hoped sounded genuine while I reached for her hand. I decided she must’ve gone the really, really good skincare route because even the skin around her knuckles looked phenomenally smooth.

“This is a beautiful ring,” I said, which was about the first truly genuine thing I’d said all day. “It fits you perfectly. Congratulations, Monica. I’m happy for you.”

My sister smiled, pleased with my response. Personally, I was pleased I’d managed to scrounge up enough *gush* and *squee* for the occasion. In reality, there was a pinch of dismay in my stomach behind the happy façade. Monica and I had never been the best of buds. She’d been pretty and stylish and popular with the cheerleader crowd. I’d been nerdy and artistic and wore flannel shirts much too big for my scrawny teenage figure.

Monica had put it in no uncertain terms that I was not allowed to speak to her in the school hallways back in high school, so that had sort of put the kibosh on our super-friendliness. At least three people had told me on my

graduation day that they hadn't realized I was one of *those* Turners. You know, one of the Turners who was pretty and rich like Monica and my mother.

Despite our lack of camaraderie in the Fantasie High School hallways, at the end of the day, Monica was still my sister. And even if I didn't feel the need to live next door to her or call her monthly, she was still my blood, and I did want what was best for her. Unfortunately, I was solidly convinced Derrick was not what was best for her.

"This is what you want?" I asked, still holding her hand. "You're sure?"

"This is just like you." Monica yanked her hand back from me. "Squashing any fun that I'm actually having. Well, I'm not letting you squash me, you...squasher."

"I'm not trying to squash anything. Just genuinely asking. Looking out for you like any sister would do."

She contemplated my reply, her eyebrows not quite knitting together. *Botox and really, really great skincare*, I decided. *Final answer.*

"Okay," she said, as if giving my motivations the benefit of the doubt. "Then yes, this is exactly what I want."

"Good. I'm glad. I really am."

Monica rolled her eyes. "You don't have to pretend to like Derrick. I *know* you don't like him, even though I don't know what your problem is with him. He's always such a gentleman to you, taking care of you and giving you things."

"He sure tries," I said, which was about as far as I could go without wincing.

Derrick tried to give me things, all right. Like gas cards to *Guzzle & Go*. Gift cards to the grocery store at Christmas in lieu of a gift with a note that said '**hope this helps make ends meet.**' He liked to give out advice that wasn't desired, that was for sure.

The positive facts I know about Derrick made for a short list. I know that he enjoys hair products more than I enjoy cheese, which meant a lot considering my love for pimento. As far as I can tell, he appreciates his own reflection in the mirror more than my sister's. He talks about golf and boating, but I've never actually seen him doing either.

But he's a doctor with rich parents. And that was all my sister and my mother needed to know before deciding that Doctor Derrick Henry would belong to Monica until death do us part.

“It doesn’t really matter what I think,” I said, trying to smooth things over. “He’s just not my type is all. If he makes you happy, that’s what matters.”

“Not your type,” Monica muttered. “You mean he makes a decent living and wants to settle down and have a family?”

Fortunately, a server returned just then and plunked down an even lovelier latte in front of me. I supposed Chuck had given up on serving us himself when he’d realized I wasn’t in a particularly chatty mood and wasn’t going to enhance his daily gossip quota. I thanked the young server and pulled the warm drink close to me like a safety blanket.

The latte gave me something to do with my hands to allow enough time and silence to pass to slowly tiptoe away from the Derrick subject like it was a tiger ready to pounce.

As we sipped, I processed the fact that Monica had returned from her trip weeks ago, which meant I was definitely the last person to find out about her news. I was one step above social media. I was completely unsurprised by my very last place in line of priority.

“So when’s the wedding?” I asked, my belly feeling a lot warmer and more content now that I had some frothed milk and espresso in it. “How did he propose?”

“He proposed in Paris. In front of the Eiffel Tower.” Monica blinked at me. “Don’t even say it.”

“Say what?”

“How cliché it is.” Her eyes flashed as she prepared her defense.

“I was just going to say that was super romantic and very thoughtful of him.” I shrugged. “You always wanted to go to Paris. You’ve always said it was the most romantic place in the world, and you’d love to get engaged there. So it was perfect.”

“Just not your style,” Monica snipped.

“I really am happy for you,” I said, and left it at that.

I was happy for her. I was glad she’d met a man who, if nothing else, could give her the lifestyle she wanted. Derrick could give her all the nice face creams and gorgeous Instagram photos she could dream of. Being a doctor’s wife had been Monica’s dream since she’d picked up Barbies and started hosting weddings when she was six. It wasn’t my dream, but I wasn’t here to judge anyone else’s life.

“How’s New York?” Monica coughed, like it was physically difficult to care about my life.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Same old.”

“Are you still living with that mooch?”

“You mean my roommate?” I asked. “Yes, Katie’s great.”

“About the wedding.” Monica abruptly changed the subject back to her, but frankly, it was the longest she’d kept the conversation on me in quite some time. “I have something I’d like to ask you.”

I raised my eyebrows, anticipating the bridesmaid question. I was under no impression that she’d ask me to be her maid of honor. That title would obviously go to Derrick’s sister who had booted me out of my spot the second Monica realized she shared the same Pilates studio with Erica Henry.

“I would really like you to be in my wedding,” she said, biting her lip. “I know it’s a little unconventional, but...”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I already know what you’re going to say. It’s really fine, I promise.”

“You know?” Monica tried to knit those brows again in confusion. “Who told you?”

“I mean, I’d just assumed you’d want Erica to be the maid of honor. I’m not bothered, even though it’s usually the bride’s sister that gets that title. But whatever.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

“Have you chosen the bridesmaid dresses?” I asked. “Do you know your color scheme?”

“Ellie, it’s not that.”

I hesitated. Monica never referred to me as Ellie, my preferred nickname. She always called me Eleanor, as if her using my full name would make me more civilized. Would make me fit in a little bit better to our picture-perfect family of five—minus one.

Me. I was the minus one. The imperfect one. My mother had actually photoshopped an old picture of me into the last family Christmas card we’d taken as a family before my big brother graduated and moved out because they hadn’t ‘agreed’ with my pixie haircut or the pink highlights that went with it. They hadn’t even bothered to give me the time or the date that they had taken the photo. I’d found out about my Photoshopped face the same time as my Aunt Jill and Grandma Bettie—when the cards were sent out.

“You don’t want me in the wedding at all?” I said.

I processed for a minute, aware that I should feel more than a little bit stung that I was at the prospect of being kicked out of my own sister's wedding. It wasn't like I hated her. It wasn't like I had murdered anyone and was a real grisly stain on our family's name. Basically I just had different ideas of what a happy life looked like than most of the other Turners.

Really, though, the most I could muster up was a sort of miffed indifference. The sort of annoyance that went with having to retype in my credit card number to the Victoria's Secret website after I'd checked out online there one million times. Fleeting frustration that passed as quickly as it'd come.

Then I started to see the positives of this little situation. No shelling out for an expensive bridesmaid dress and shoes. No obligation to throw an expensive bachelorette party for Bridezilla. Hell, maybe I wouldn't even have to *attend* the night of dainty debauchery. As much debauchery as a couple of women could get into without drinking too many calories.

"No, no, of course not, sweetie." Monica tapped her fingers nervously against the table. "I *do* want you in the wedding. Derrick and I had a long discussion on how to fit you in."

Fit me in, like I was an errant puzzle piece in the wrong box, and maybe if they tried hard enough, they could really shoehorn me into a corner where most people wouldn't notice the intrusion of the misplaced piece.

"Sorry to be so difficult," I said dryly.

"Yes, it's fine." Monica waved me off as if she was used to the fact that having a little sister was such a strenuous fact of life. "And really, the only place we could fit you in was as the flower girl."

I swallowed wrong, and I wished I could blame it on the fact that I was drinking my latte, but that wasn't it at all. It was my own saliva choking me up because even that was a new low for Monica.

"The flower girl?" I gasped after catching my breath again. "You mean, the job given to most toddlers?"

"It's not like that," she huffed. "I knew you were going to be weird about this."

"Weird about being a thirty-one-year-old woman who doesn't want to be dressed in tulle and throwing out rose petals?"

"You are making this into a thing. I told Derrick you'd be unruly."

"Unruly?"



“We’re having a modern wedding.” Monica looked at me like I was supposed to know what that meant. “We’re not following all the traditions of a normal ceremony. We’re having a very small event and, well, frankly, Derrick has a lot of sisters and the wedding party is already full. Sorry.”

“Don’t you get a say in what you want?” I raised a hand before she could flip out at me for doubling down on the unruliness. “I’m not asking that for my sake. But for yours. Is this what you want? All Derrick’s sisters standing next to you, and me holding a basket the size of a wheel of Brie filled with rose petals?”

“What’s with you and cheese?” The shift in her gaze told me that this hadn’t been one hundred percent her decision, which softened me somewhat. As much as I could be softened after just being asked to be the flower girl in my own sister’s wedding.

“Is it what *you* want?” I pressed.

“Yes.” Even Monica couldn’t look me in the eyes for that one.

“Okay.”

“Okay you’ll do it?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said. “I don’t want to be the flower girl. I think I’ll just sit this one out.”

“You have to do it.” Her eyes actually met mine, and there was a hint of desperation there. As if she really did care on some level. Just not a big enough level to boot one of Derrick’s sisters out to squeeze me in next to her. “Please, Ellie. I never ask you for anything.”

It was sort of true. Monica really couldn’t be bothered to ask me for much of anything seeing as she preferred to remain politely distant from me and keep our in-person associations to an obligatory holiday or two per year.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “Though it really is a little ridiculous. And I’m not wearing tulle.”

“You don’t have to wear tulle,” she said, reaching for my one demand like it was a lifeline, like it was some sort of confirmation that I’d do it. “Like I said, we’re having a very modern wedding. All sorts of things are different. Like, I’m not wearing a white dress. We’re not having a long engagement. That sort of thing.”

“Are you having one of Derrick’s friends be the ring bearer then?”

“Not exactly.” Monica flagged down the young server for the bill.

It dawned on me that Monica might be trying to get someone close enough to her side to intercept in the event that what she was about to say

next might make me reach across the table and physically throttle her.

I narrowed my eyes. "Tell me the ring bearer is not a child."

"It's not a child," she said quickly, tossing a credit card at the server. "It's a dog. Derrick's mom's dog."

"A dog?!" I blinked at her. "A *dog*."

"It will be cute." Monica wiggled lower into her seat. "Anya has a very cute dog."

"I'm sure the dog will be freaking adorable in a freaking adorable little bow tie," I said. "It's not the dog I'm concerned about. It's me, having to follow the adorable dog down the aisle. I'll look like an absolute..." I could not find a word to fill in the blank that didn't completely insult me to the point of no return. "It would be ridiculous."

"It's modern," Monica emphasized, like it was her lighthouse in this raging storm. "You, of all people, should understand alternative lifestyles."

I'd hardly call my moving to New York and pursuing a creative career an alternative lifestyle, but hey. To some people apparently it was as wild as landing a rover on Mars.

"Just say you'll do it," she said. "Please. *Please*, I really do want you to be in my wedding."

"I don't know, Monica. It's unconventional and a little demeaning. You have to admit it."

"It's—"

"If you say modern, I will walk out that door right now," I said. "It's not modern. It's strange."

"It's a little odd, but Derrick really wants his sisters as the bridesmaids, and... it's the only option, Ellie."

"How about you add another bridesmaid?"

"I suggested that as an option but Derrick said flat-out no because he couldn't think of any other men who could be in his wedding party. He was already stretching to find enough to cover it as is. I don't want to make him embarrassed."

Right. I'd temporarily forgotten that Derrick's ego was more fragile than my mother's never-used china, and to make Derrick embarrassed would be a mortal sin. Though I took a tiny bit of solace in the fact that Derrick didn't have enough friends to fill out a wedding party. I could be petty when I felt like it.

"The best I can say is I'll sleep on it," I said. "That's the most I can do."

“Great. But you’ll have to let me know soon because the wedding is in a month.”

“What month?”

“One month. Next month.”

“February?”

“February.”

“Of this year?”

“Of this year.”

“Why?” I asked. Then, “Monica, you’ve always wanted to have a huge wedding. Not a small wedding that’s supposedly modern. You have had wedding planners on speed dial since you were thirteen. I can’t count the number of bridal magazines you murdered making emo-collages. A wedding like that takes planning for at least a year. You talked about how things booked up months and months in advance.”

“Dream boards.”

“What?”

“I didn’t murder magazines into emo-collages,” Monica corrected. “I elegantly arranged dream boards.”

“You sure did.”

“This is what we want,” she snapped. “I thought you were happy for me.” I swallowed hard. “I am. I am just making sure this is what you want. You are an equal part of this marriage. It’s not a game of Derrick Says.”

“You don’t understand. You’ve never been with someone like Derrick.”

Monica spit it out so fast that I wondered if, for the very first time, she was hitting on a truth. A real, raw truth that wouldn’t have popped out if she had any say in the matter. But her feathers were getting ruffled, and her filter was loosening, and I could see from the gleam in her eye that she was feeling real emotions for once, and not the pretty version of them.

“You only date losers,” Monica said, recovering quickly, hiding that raw part of her that I wasn’t allowed to see. “You just wouldn’t understand.”

Monica did recover her biting remarks with haste, but it wasn’t fast enough. She was like an ice castle, all stoic and beautiful and cold on the outside. But I’d gotten a view up close and personal, as if I’d rubbed the palm of my hand on a frosted window and peered through, catching a glimpse of a brighter, warmer interior.

“You’re right,” I said quietly, hoping to leave today on somewhat decent terms. After all, it was her wedding, her engagement, her time to shine, and I

didn't want to dull any of it. I was beginning to understand that *none* of this was about me, and that helped me to let things go a little quicker, with a little less bite. "I'm sorry. I guess maybe I don't understand. I'll think about it."

Then I took money from my wallet, set it on the table, and stood.

"Congrats, Monica," I said, reaching for my sister's hand and giving it a quick squeeze. "You'll make a great wife. I do mean that."



## Chapter 2

**N**<sup>oah</sup> “You did what?” I demanded.

My mother turned away from me and began fiddling with the powder blue tea kettle on the stove. As if her putzing with it would make the water boil faster.

“It’s just wearing a suit and standing next to the groom,” Lily Donovan, my mother and current saboteur, muttered more to the warming water than to me. “I really didn’t think you’d mind lending a hand, all things considered.”

“I knew this was a damn trap.” I scowled, then saw my mother’s shoulders tense. “Sorry about the cursing. But come on, Mom. You shouldn’t have done that. You know I don’t like being in front of people. Or getting dressed up. Or even going to weddings.”

“I didn’t really have a choice.” My mother whirled around to face me, smoothing her apron down nervously. “I mean, I guess I had a choice, but this was the most sensible choice. Or so it seemed at the time.”

My mother didn’t get nervous. Lily Donovan had raised three wild Donovan boys. She’d seen it all. But that little pat of her apron, the tuck of her hair behind her ear, told me that even she was treading on eggshells here.

“Derrick Henry is an asshole,” I said. “I’ve never liked him.”

“The two of you went to prom together.”

“No, we didn’t. I went with Sally Montgomery.”

“Well, he was in one of your photos,” my mother hedged. “In the very corner.”

I eyed her. Derrick had been in the corner of one of those photos because he’d been trying to mack on Sally Montgomery. *My* date. Not his. His date had left early because Derrick had ignored her all night in lieu of trying to get with my date.

“I guess Derrick has a lot of sisters,” my mother said. “He needs to have enough groomsmen to match, and he’s run out of people he knows.”

“You mean he has no friends?” I said. “Go figure. Why can’t Lucas do it?”

My mother held up her hand, ready to tick off her fingers. This pre-organized list of reasons she had at-the-ready told me that she’d not only been prepared for this question, but she’d known it was coming.

“Number one, Lucas just got back from his honeymoon with Chloe. They’re busy being wrapped up in love with one another, and he doesn’t need a distraction.”

“You mean, you’re hoping for a pregnancy announcement?”

My mother barreled on. “Number two, Derrick doesn’t actually know Lucas. Lucas is older by a few years. Not to mention, you actually work on Derrick’s cars.”

“I know his cars. I don’t know him.”

“Three,” my mother said, undeterred. “You’re Aiden’s best friend. At least you know the bride’s family quite well. Do it for the Henrys if not for Derrick.”

“Women can walk themselves down the aisle these days. Very modern.”

My mother rolled her eyes. “You know how Anya and Bridget are. They want this wedding to be perfect for their kids. Bridget has been looking forward to seeing Monica get married for decades. And Anya is... well, Anya.”

“Are Anya and Bridget getting married?” I asked. “Shouldn’t this be Derrick and Monica’s decision on who to have in their wedding and not their mothers’ choices? How did Derrick even think of me? It’s not like we keep in touch, and my working on his cars is hardly the basis for a friendship.”

My mother’s cheeks turned peony pink, and I sensed this was the crux of the issue here. Something fishy was happening, and my mother was using me, that was for sure. It was damn lucky I loved that woman more than life itself.

She jumped as the teakettle whistled, and I could see her hands fluttering about as she made two cups of tea. Earl Grey, splash of cream. I was the only one of her sons who pretended to tolerate tea for her sake. Which meant that every time I wandered over to my mother’s house, we had a fucking tea party. But it made her happy, so I continued to choke down my leaf-scented water because I knew it meant something to her and my brothers were too weak to help shoulder the burden.

My mother brought both cups to the table. She slid into the chair next to mine, dunked her teabag in that familiar way a few times before speaking. It was hard to be mad at my mom, here in her cheerful yellow kitchen, where she’d cooked us more meals than I could ever count. I suspected she’d known this when preparing for her ambush.

“The Turners and the Henrys both stayed here last weekend.”

“The parents of the bride and the groom stayed here at the same time?”

“They were scoping out venues for the wedding, the reception, the place where they’d recommend guests to stay after the ceremony. I invited them down for dinner one day. Had Millie come by with a smattering of her custom-made candles to show for table toppers. I had Dani from the bakery come by with some of her cakes. You know. Showing off what we could do for them.”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, we got to talking, and they mentioned that Derrick was in a bit of a pickle trying to come up with enough groomsmen to match the bridesmaids in the wedding party. Anya was worried he’d feel a bit embarrassed if he admitted to his new bride he was struggling to come up with enough friends.”

“The man needs to nut up,” I muttered. “Who fucking cares?”

“Derrick is just very busy at the hospital. He has a long commute, and not very much time for a social life, and—”

“And he’s a jerk.”

“Maybe he’s misunderstood.” My mother shot me a gaze that told me to bear with her even though she didn’t sound convinced. “Then Anya said she knew that Derrick brings his cars to you for routine services, and that maybe you’d be interested in standing up for him at the wedding. Not as the best man, but just the guy at the very end of the line or whatever.”

“No.”

“I sort of already told them I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Mom!”

“I know, I know. I knew you’d hate it, and I *am* sorry, but I was giving them a tour of the rooms, and they were mentioning how they’d like to stay at the B&B after the wedding when Anya asked if you’d do it, and I was so flustered and caught off guard I said I didn’t think you’d mind. I did say that I’d check with you first.”

I licked my lips. “You’re prostituting me out as a groomsman to get business for your inn?”

My mother smacked me on the arm. “It’s not like that. You *do* service Derrick’s cars. You might not be best friends with him, but would it really kill you to walk down the aisle and stand there for a few minutes? They’ve already agreed to have post-reception drinks here and for the wedding party to stay the night at the inn. It would be very important for my business.”



“It just might actually kill me. I already did my wedding for the year. Lucas and Chloe had to bribe me with booze and cake to be in their ceremony, and that was for my fucking brother and the love of his life.”

“Well, there is one more thing.”

“There’s more?”

“You *have* always liked Ellie.”

I blinked, feeling my heart do a little backflip in my chest. “Ellie Turner?”

My mother’s lips turned up into a smile, as if she could see my physical reaction to the name. “She is Monica’s little sister, you know. Maybe you could do this as a favor to Ellie. I’m sure she wants to see her sister happy on her wedding day.”

“Now you’re really stretching.”

“She was there for you when your father died,” my mother said softly. “Ellie has always been there for you.”

“That’s a low blow.”

“Look, I really am sorry, honey. I understand I shouldn’t have said anything at all about this without your permission, but I was thinking about the business first, I admit it. I’ve been preoccupied lately, and I haven’t told anyone, but I’ve had my eye on this little place about an hour north that’s supposed to go on the market.”

I nodded for her to go on.

“It’s the most adorable house, and it would be perfect to fix up and turn into a B&B. I’ve been trying to save up for it, but it’s slow going when I only have so many rooms to book out here. Even when I’m filled to capacity, I’m trying to save every penny so I can grab this new place. I’ve even talked to your cousin about it already.”

“Gavin?”

My mom nodded. “He’s already agreed to fix up the place. He needs a break from his job, and I need a handyman. You boys are too busy to do it all yourself, so it’s perfect.”

“Mom, if you’re having money trouble, you could’ve just said—”

“It’s not money trouble,” she said. “Business is fine. I’m just trying to give you context here. I had my eye on the bigger prize, and that’s what I was thinking about when I sort of volunteered that you’d be interested in the role. I admit, I wasn’t thinking of how you’d feel, so I’m sorry for that.”

“It’s fine,” I said gruffly.

My mother bit down on her lip, a hint of worry furrowing her brow. “The more I think about it, the more I guess I should admit that I’m wrong. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have even brought it up. I knew it was wrong from the second I agreed, it was just me trying to be nice, and please others, and that’ll be the death of me.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. You’ve spent your life making other people happy. Nobody is surprised by that. I’m just annoyed about it because Derrick’s a prick.”

“You know what? You’re right. I’ll tell Anya that you can’t do it. It’s fine. She probably won’t stay at the B&B, and even if she does, it’s not worth it if I can’t sleep at night because I made my son uncomfortable.”

“Just give me a day to think about it. Don’t tell her anything just yet.”

“But—”

“I didn’t think about it from the bride’s point of view. Maybe it would make Monica happy to have her bridal party match up or whatever the hell they’re wanting. I suppose I could do it for her and not for Derrick. Maybe.”

“Honey, I really don’t want to pressure you—”

“Just let me think about it.” I pushed my chair back from the table and stood, my stomach churning too much to even pretend I was in the mood to guzzle milky-water-leaves today.

Earl Grey normally didn’t send me into queasy fits, but something about it wasn’t sitting right with me today. Nerves? Maybe it was the nerves. I hated doing anything in public. Speaking. Walking down an aisle. Standing at the front of a church. I’d always hated when anyone’s eyes were on me.

I was the middle child, through and through, and I liked to blend in. Skate beneath the radar. My older brother, Lucas, was a legal genius who’d taken over my dad’s law practice and was the shining star of the Donovan name. My younger brother Carter was a badass motherfucker who ran his own private security firm in California. And I was Noah, the car mechanic, who worked out of my home shop a couple of miles away from the actual house where I’d grown up. I wasn’t fancy. I wasn’t shiny. I wasn’t impressive.

Or maybe, just maybe, the angry growling in my stomach came from the name Ellie Turner. The thought of seeing her again, of maybe, possibly, walking down the aisle next to her.

It wasn’t like we had any sort of real history outside of a lifelong friendship. Nothing had ever happened between us; her brother had made sure of it. Aiden Turner had threatened to smack me to smithereens if I’d ever

laid hands on his sister, and I was one million percent positive he'd meant it. I was also sure he could deliver on it. He worked for my brother these days out in California at said badass security firm. Same with my cousin Gavin.

But I just might be willing to risk the wrath of Aiden Turner to have a legitimate excuse to be in the same room as Ellie Turner again. I just might.



## Chapter 3

**E**<sup>llie</sup> “She asked you to be the *what?*”  
My very fabulous and not-at-all-mooch-of-a-roommate Katie Sanders sat on the couch in thick sweats and a cut-off top that showed off a very slim figure. She was currently slurping on a popsicle with sounds I tried to ignore because they were definitely rated R.

I’d been back in New York for a couple of days after my trip to Fantasie, which had given me time to process the news that my sister had wanted me to be the flower girl in her wedding. Katie, on the other hand, had just gotten back from a trip and was finding out the news while we caught up on the latest episode of *The Bachelor* together.

“I know, I know.” I grabbed the box of sushi I’d picked up from the little place at the end of the block. I sat down, added enough wasabi to make my eyes water, and took a bite. “I don’t think it was totally her fault though.”

“How the hell do you figure? Monica is the bride. All decisions are up to her.”

Katie sat back on the couch. She kicked her feet up on the armrest, her enormous silver hoops dangling halfway down to her shoulders. She was a year younger than me and worked as a flight attendant. We’d started living together years ago when we were both new transplants to the city. We’d never stopped because, frankly, we both liked the company.

Not to mention, pursuing a career as an artist of any sort in NYC wasn’t exactly a recipe for becoming rich. It helped to have an assist on the rent. And from Katie’s point of view, she loved traveling almost as much as she loved the popsicle she was inhaling. She worked a lot of flights to Europe and, some months, would be home for just a few days. Add to that the nights she spent with her on-again, off-again boyfriend, and it didn’t make sense for her to keep her own place in a city with rent bills that could cripple a person.

“I don’t understand why you’re agreeing to this,” Katie said. “You don’t have to do any of it. You don’t have to go to the party tonight.”

“It’s my sister’s bridal shower.”

“She asked you to be her flower girl.”

“I know, but maybe she’ll only get married once. I would feel too guilty missing her big day over a technicality.”

“Knowing your sister, she’ll get married three times. Monica will work her way up until she’s married to the richest man in America or pretty darn close. No offense.”

Katie licked her popsicle stick one final time then tossed it in the trash. On the way back to her hibernation on the couch, she nabbed a piece of sushi from my box without asking. We were close enough where I found it endearing and not at all annoying.

“She’s still my sister.”

“Dude.” Katie coughed from a blast of wasabi. “Monica asked you *not* to come back for New Year’s Eve at your parents’ house because all of Derrick’s friends were going to be there.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the couch. “I had planned to stay here with you anyway.”

“She didn’t know that.” Katie narrowed her gaze on me. “I’m not trying to take a giant shit on your sister. But I’ve lived with you for almost a decade now. I have spent more time with you than you have with your sister in, probably, your whole life. You’re a good person, sweetie. You don’t deserve to be treated the way your family treats you.”

“They just don’t really understand me.” I blinked, blaming my own misty eyes on the glob of wasabi that had worked its way onto my tempura roll. “Anyway, I should get dressed. If I’m going, I don’t want to be late.”

“I still think you should stay here with me. We need to find out who gets voted off this shitshow of an episode and then we’re going to need to watch something to cleanse our minds from this garbage.”

“I would rather, but I already RSVP’d yes.”

Katie squinted at me, as if calculating something in her head. “How’d they plan a party so fast? I mean, you just found out a few days ago about the wedding, right?”

“Everything’s on an accelerated timeline because they’re getting married so quickly.” I shifted under Katie’s gaze. “Also, I wasn’t exactly the first person my sister told about the engagement.”

“Seriously? How long did she wait to tell you?”

I shrugged. “They got engaged in Paris, and their trip was over the New Year.”

“That’s *weeks*. She probably only told you because she felt obligated that you knew before Brandi-from-the-third-grade found out on Facebook.”

“I think even Brandi-from-the-third-grade probably heard rumors before me. But it’s fine. Anyway, they were already planning the party; I’m just late to the game in finding out about it.”

“You are too nice to your family, girlfriend.” Katie rolled her eyes. “Do you have to drink Shirley Temples all night seeing as you’re the flower girl?”

“Ha-ha. Why don’t you come with me? You know they’ll have good champagne. The food is being catered by some out of town company and it’s supposed to be incredible.”

“Okay.”

“What?” I swiveled to face Katie. “You’d really come with me?”

“Good champagne, good food. Can I drink until I’m a hot mess and embarrass the crapola out of your sister?”

“Um—”

“Great. I’m in.” Huge earrings dangling, Katie leapt off the couch and headed to the closet. “Do you mind if I wear fishnets and my new rhinestone bra?”

I barked a laugh. Katie was one of the most accomplished, responsible women I knew. The woman was great at her job. She was a black belt in one of those black-belt-art-things and could kick any guy’s behind. She had graduated with honors from college.

She also liked to dress in sky high heels, really, really little black dresses, and fix up her sex-kitten hair. When Katie went out at night, she went out with the confidence of a Victoria’s Secret model. She was sort of my idol.

“Plus, Aiden really laid the guilt on me,” I said. “He’s actually the one who convinced me to agree to do all this.”

“Aiden’s gonna be there?”

Katie had already disappeared into her closet, but her voice squeaked out about two octaves higher.

“Yes, Aiden’s gonna be there,” I said. “I told you it’s a co-ed party. For both the bride and the groom.”

“In what world did that mean Aiden was coming? He has even less to do with your family than you.”

“Yeah, but he’s handsome and manly and successful, so they love him,” I said. “I’m awkward and female and broke-ish.”

It sounded like Katie was choking, so I headed into her room to make sure she didn’t need resuscitation. I found her flipping through black dresses, eyes watering, like she really had just gotten her oxygen supply back.

“What’s your deal with him, anyway?” I asked.

“No deal,” she said, but it was way too quick.

I wasn’t sure of the exact details, but there’d been one family reunion that my family had accidentally invited me to. I’d brought Katie for support. My brother Aiden had shown up.

One night, we’d all gotten a little drunk. Katie and Aiden had disappeared for a bit outside, nobody knew where. They hadn’t made eye contact for the rest of the trip. I had my (obvious) suspicions about what had gone down, but Katie swore up and down that nothing had happened between them, so, the jury was still out on what had made the two act like they’d had a one-night stand if they hadn’t.

“You already agreed to come with me,” I said. “No backing out now.”

Katie visibly swallowed. “I might have to visit Ben.”

“You broke up with him over two months ago. I should know. I gained three pounds from your breakup while you lost weight from stress. Totally unfair.”

Katie popped gum into her mouth. “Does that mean Noah’s going to be there?”

I grabbed a piece of gum from her, paying her back for the pilfered sushi earlier. “Shut up.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”





THE PARTY WAS IN FULL swing when we arrived. The happy couple, or rather, the happy couple's parents had decided to host the event at a fancy hotel just outside Fantasie city limits. Although the actual wedding would be downtown, apparently the Turner-Henry wedding needed a little more pizzazz for their pre-nuptial parties than the banquet hall in town.

Katie and I parked the car I'd rented in the parking lot of the hotel. Despite the snow piled on the ground, Katie and I had dressed like we were going to a tiki bar. She'd put on her standard little-black-dress with her standard high heels and her standard hoop earrings. She had dramatic mascara and eyeliner with a swoop more intense than I'd seen on her in months. I took that to be her newly-single and about-to-see-Aiden armor. A little more sex-kitten than flight attendant. Not to mention the shot of tequila she'd taken in the parking lot.

"Do you have one more of those little tequilas?" I asked, feeling my throat go dry as a whoosh of warm air enveloped us as the front doors opened. I grabbed her elbow a little harder when she clutched her purse tighter to her body. "Don't be a hoarder."

There was an actual clatter of glass on glass as Katie reluctantly opened her purse strings and handed over a little bottle.

"Holy smokes," I said, peering inside. "How many of those do you have?"

"I'm a flight attendant," she said defensively. "I love my little liquors."

I didn't know whether to laugh or roll my eyes, but I was spared the decision as Katie swooped her arm through mine, her back straightening. She stiffened, those shoulders going into a no-nonsense stance that told me we were entering a battlefield.

I wrapped the tequila shooter in my palm as both sets of parents from the wedding party approached. My mom and dad. Derrick's mom and dad. They'd locked eyes on us, sizing up our attire with what looked to be less than approving glances.

In my defense, my outfit hadn't entirely been my choice. Katie had insisted on dressing me in one of her uniform little black dresses. I'd argued my way out of a pair of crazy stilettos for a more modest set of black pumps with some sparkly buckles. Also Katie's. I'd swept my hair into a low

ponytail, added some curls, and thought the whole thing looked considerably New York chic.

“Little short on the hemline, *hm?*” My mother leaned in, her greeting soft, for my ears only. “And it would’ve been nice to see you put in some effort on your hair today of all days.”

“Good to see you too, Mom.”

My mother, Bridget Turner, was probably the most well-preserved woman in Fantasie, second only to Anya Henry. Hence the reason the mothers of the bride and groom got along so well in that politely competitive sort of way.

My mother was short and tiny. Petite in that lithe, Pilates-exercised way, not in the scrawny way that I was thin. She wore a perfectly modest royal blue dress with lots of lace and red-bottomed shoes. My dad stood next to her looking smaller and older than I remembered. More frail. More nervous.

My father had always worked a bunch. Looking back on our life, and the way his relationship with my mother consisted mostly as a list of things to do, I wondered if traveling was his way of keeping whatever smidgeon of independence he had left. He was terrified of my mother. I didn’t totally blame him.

Anya Henry, on the other hand, was tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular. She radiated confidence and towered over most other women, not shying away from wearing high heels despite her 5’10” figure. She was the CEO of some marketing agency. Her husband was an even taller, even broader man who spent half his time in New York working as some sort of surgeon. Needless to say, he and I didn’t run in the same New York City circles.

“Welcome, Eleanor,” Anya said, extending her hand to shake mine. She spoke like I was one of her interns on orientation day at her company and I’d already garnered her disapproval. “Thanks for showing up on time.”

I felt my face burn up as I realized that my mini tequila bottle was still clutched in my palm. I carefully transferred it from my right hand to my left hand, but obviously not carefully enough, because Katie accidentally bumped my arm, and I dropped the bottle. It shattered on impact, sending little bits of glass and tequila all over the floor. My cheeks colored two shades beyond mortified.

My mother’s lip curled into a little snarl as she glanced down, her eyes registering what, exactly, had happened. Anya’s expression was completely unreadable. My dad didn’t even bother to look anyone in the face. He was

staring up at the chandelier above us like it might portal him away into another dimension where his wife wasn't livid and his daughter wasn't smuggling in alcohol to a party like a teenager.

"Sorry," Katie said, when she realized I was speechless. "That was mine. Pre-gaming, you know?"

"This isn't a frat party," my mother hissed. "What were the two of you thinking?"

"Sorry," I said. "We just—"

"Hey. Bartender." Anya snapped her fingers in a bossy way that made me cringe. "Can you clean this mess up?"

"It's fine," I said, heading over to the lobby bar. "I can handle it. By the way, congratulations, Mrs. Henry on the engagement and wedding."

Anya looked at me like I'd grown an extra limb, as if cleaning up the mess without assistance had never actually occurred to her. Her husband had already disappeared, but that wasn't all that surprising, seeing as he was never around. From what I could tell, he had little interaction with his family aside from ensuring regular deposits in their bank account.

Slinking away at the sight of a broom, I was beyond grateful to have an excuse to leave the awkward introduction. As I sidled up to the bar, I found a surprise in an old high school acquaintance working behind the counter.

"Hey, Travis," I said. "I didn't know you worked here."

"Ellie!" Travis was a band nerd like me, but he'd also been a phenomenal soccer player, so he'd walked this strange line between being oddly popular but still a very nice person. "Great to see you. How's the famous artist doing?"

"Still not famous," I said, grinning. "How about you, Ronaldo? Taken over the FIFA world yet?"

He sucked on his lower lip. "Tore my meniscus playing last season. I'm bartending at night, getting my degree during the day. Should've probably done that years ago, but hey. The call of the field was too strong."

"You had a good run," I said. "I caught a few of your games when you were playing for the Thunderbolts."

"Aw, shucks. Something I can get for you?"

"All the alcohol you have on tap?" When Travis raised his eyebrows, I continued. "My sister's getting married. It's a complicated situation. Oh, and also, a broom."

He leaned his head toward me. “Ms. Witch, are you planning to fly out of here after a few martinis on my enchanted broom?”

“I wish,” I said. “I dropped my roommate’s tiny tequila on the floor in front of my parents and now they think I’m an alcoholic.”

“That much embarrassment physically hurts me.” Travis reached behind the bar, grabbed a broom, propped it against the counter. Then he grabbed a smaller, personal sized bottle of bubbly and handed it across. “This’ll go down easier than Jose Cuervo.”

I barked a laugh and accepted the prosecco. I reached for the broom. “Thanks, Travis. Good to see you.”

“Stop back later if you need another round,” he said. “I love nothing more than making sure an open bar lives up to its name.”

“It’s the little things,” I agreed.

“On second thought, the bar’s slow right now. Let me get the mess.” Travis grabbed the broom back from me. “Don’t want to keep you from the festivities.”

As Travis came out from behind the bar, he wrapped me in a friendly hug that swung me around to face him. We’d never been anything more than friends, though he had been my prom date when my other date had ditched me two days before the dance to go with my sister. Long story. Actually it was a short story, just very unpleasant.

I hugged him back, feeling pure relief at a friendly face in this sea of very uptight, very expensively dressed folks who really, honestly, wanted nothing to do with me.

As I stepped back from Travis, I twisted the top off the prosecco bottle he’d handed me. I was just in the middle of taking my first swig of the fizzy bubbles when I saw him. The *other* face. I wasn’t sure if it was a friendly face or not, but it was...a face. A very beautiful face.

The face of Noah Donovan.



## Chapter 4

**N**<sup>oah</sup> “Don’t be a bitch,” Aiden said. “Move it.”

I glanced over at my best friend of, hell, how long had I been alive? Thirty-three years? That long. That was how long Aiden Turner and I had been friends. Closer than friends. Close enough that he could call me names while knowing I wouldn’t punch out his front teeth.

“Put on the damn suit and let’s go,” Aiden said. “We’re already late to the party, and my parents are going to flip their lids if we aren’t in our seats before dinner.”

“I still can’t believe you convinced me to do this.” I shoved up my sleeves and staunchly refused to put on a suit jacket. I looked at myself in the mirror. Ran a hand through my hair. It’d have to do, considering I didn’t even want to be here in the first place.

But between my mother’s guilt tripping me to stand in as a groomsman to help ensure her livelihood and my best friend’s argument that at least we’d be doing this shit together, I’d agreed. In a very grumbly, very reluctant fashion. It was clear to everybody and their mother that I wasn’t happy about any of this.

When I turned away from the mirror, I found Aiden holding out a drink to me. Whiskey, rocks. I wasn’t sure even that would be enough to get me through the night. The only thing propelling me down those stairs was the thought of seeing Ellie Turner again in a neutral setting. It’d been years since I’d spent any time with her, and a guy was curious.

A man spends his entire life growing up next to his best friend’s little sister, the most gorgeous woman in the universe—and brilliant to boot—and it did a number on one’s psyche. I was curious, in those years apart, what she’d done with her life.

I knew, factually, what she’d been up to. It was the other things that were the bigger question mark. If she still wore that pretty brown hair in those tantalizing curls. If she wore those same jeans that made her curves look like they belonged to a Romanesque statue. If she laughed with that same soul-crushing smile that could bring a guy to his knees, willing to do anything just to see it one more time.

A guy wondered.

Aiden and I clinked glasses. We both downed our drinks, neither of us needing to feel embarrassed that we both needed the boost of liquid courage to get us down those stairs. Outside of Aiden and Ellie, the Turners were a pretty fucked up family.

Aiden had escaped unscathed for multiple reasons. None of which were fair. But the Turners had done a number on Ellie, and a part of me wanted to be there for her, like I'd always wanted to be there for her. To protect her from her bitchy mother and her whisper of a father.

Aiden and I made it onto the landing a good forty-five minutes late. With perfect timing to see Ellie and a girlfriend stumble inside the building, huddled against the wintry chill outside. Aiden stilled next to me, and it took me a long minute to realize the only reason he wasn't digging an elbow into my side for ogling his sister was because he had eyes for Ellie's friend.

*Katie*, if I remembered correctly. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened between her and Aiden, but judging by the look in my best friend's eyes, it hadn't been a good something. Or maybe it'd been too good of a something, and then it'd crashed and burned. What the hell did I know? We didn't sit around sipping rosé and discussing our love lives.

All I knew was that it gave me time to flinch as Ellie greeted her parents and Aiden's parents together. That was a lot of bridal party parentals at once. Then Ellie dropped something that appeared to be a baby-sized bottle of alcohol on the ground. It shattered. Things got awkward.

I watched as Ellie scuttled off to the bar, and for a second, I thought she was going for another round of tequila. Then I realized that she was talking to someone she knew, and there was a brief moment when my brain ceased to function correctly when a man came out from behind the bar with a broom, and Ellie proceeded to go in for a full-frontal embrace.

I turned to Aiden and gave him a full-knuckle punch to the arm. "Why the hell didn't you say something?"

Aiden, scowling, turned to look at me while massaging his bicep. "What the fuck are you talking about, man?"

"You never told me that Ellie got a boyfriend."

"She doesn't have a boyfriend. At least not that she told me about." Still scowling, Aiden followed my line of sight to find his sister at the bar. "Get a grip. That's the damn bartender. She's probably trying to get a free drink."

It took me a long minute to swallow past my embarrassment. I was off my game. I'd spent the better part of my late teen and early adult years

erecting a fortified castle around me to convince Aiden there was nothing between me and his sister. And there wasn't anything. Because he'd told me there wouldn't be.

"What the hell's your problem?" Aiden rolled his shoulder, as if I'd dislocated his arm. "What's it to you if she's dating someone, anyway?"

He looked genuinely mystified. It dawned on me his reaction meant that my guarded fortress had been doing its job all these years. Aiden looked truly confused at why I'd care about Ellie's love life. Which meant I hadn't let my feelings slip enough to make him suspicious, and I had to keep it that way. I had to double down on my fortress walls until this shitshow of a wedding was over and done with, and Ellie and I could retreat to our separate corners once again.

"You're the one who moved to the other side of the country," I growled at him. "You're the one who asked me to keep an eye on her. I was feeling like shit thinking I missed something as big as her getting engaged to some idiot."

Aiden's gaze was more piercing as he looked at me a second time. "I hope you're not watching her too closely. You know what I said about—"

"Yes," I interrupted dryly. "I have a very accurate recollection of you telling me exactly how you'd cut my dick off and where you'd put it if I touched your sister."

Aiden had the gall to look a bit proud of himself at his very unoriginal threat, but it didn't last long. I'd hit the defensive strong, and I wasn't giving up all that easily. My first priority was keeping my friendship with Aiden. I couldn't screw up that relationship by letting him think I'd harbored feelings, or whatever the hell you'd call it, for his sister for years. It just wasn't going to happen.

"You're the one who's looking all moony-eyed at her friend," I said. "You never did tell anyone what the hell happened between you two."

"Nothing," he said, looking like he wanted to sucker punch me right back. He refrained, however, when the parental units of the bride and groom turned, their eyes locking with ours on the staircase.

"Good luck," I muttered. "This is where I ditch you."

"Asshole," he muttered back.

I managed a quick greeting while skirting the parents swarming on Aiden and made my way around to where Katie and Ellie had reunited, somewhat close to the bartender sweeping up Ellie's spilled booze. The man had blond hair and a tan complexion and looked like he'd stepped out of a magazine. It



irked me that she'd hugged him. It irked me he'd looked at her like he adored her. All of it irked me.

"Ladies," I said, glancing to Ellie first, but quickly averting my eyes when she flicked a loose strand of hair back into her ponytail and looked up to me.

If I looked into her eyes too long, if I let myself think about tucking that hair back for her...if I thought how she looked in that little black dress that had no business fitting her so well, I would be sporting a hard-on for the entire world to see. This wedding had enough drama without me, the stand-in groomsman, bedding the maid of honor. Who was absolutely off-limits in so many ways.

"Hey there, hot stuff," Katie said in that little sarcastic drawl of hers. "Fancy seeing you here, Noah."

"Why are *you* here if you're not required to be?" I shot back easily to Katie, light and friendly.

"She's my date." Ellie reached over and clasped Katie's arm like it was her life jacket in stormy waters. "Why are *you* here?"

"I wish I wasn't," I said.

"Me too," Ellie admitted.

The bartender snorted. I'd forgotten he was there. Fucking irked me that he thought he could join in our conversation. I was about to turn and tell him off when he disappeared back to the bar with a wave of his hand. I stood around with the two women watching him go like he was some hot new program on the Discovery Channel.

The bartender came back a minute later. He held three little bottles of prosecco out.

"Sounds like the whole lot of you need a little something to hold you off until dinner." He passed out the bottles like we were boozy trick or treaters on Halloween. "And hey, man, I've got some whiskey in the back if that's more your style. Stop on by."

Even the man's kindness irked me. Who was this fucking Hercules of a man, and why was he spending time around the one woman I could never claim as mine? A fact that inherently left her open to everyone else. Including this perfect Ken doll of a man. I was no Ken doll, that was for sure.

"Thanks," I grumbled. "I might take you up on that."

Ken doll laughed again. "Anytime."

“This is Travis,” Ellie said, looking at me like I should remember Hercules. “I went to prom with him.”

Travis held out a hand. “That’s right. You’re Noah Donovan, right? I remember you. I was in Ellie’s grade. A couple of years younger than you. Loved watching you play ball.”

Two years younger than me to be exact. Which was another reason I’d shut down any feelings for Ellie like a maximum-security prison when I was graduating high school at eighteen, and she was behind me two years at sixteen-almost-seventeen. It hadn’t felt right. Or, more accurately, it had felt all-too-right which actually made it all-too-wrong.

“Yo, Travis,” Katie said, “can I take you up on that whiskey if Noah here is going for the bubbly?”

Travis raised his eyebrows. “Absolutely, Ms. Whiskey. Come on back.”

I didn’t miss the little wink Katie gave Ellie as she sauntered back toward the bar closely on the heels of Travis. I had to admit I was a helluva lot more relieved to see that Travis seemed to smile just as easily at Katie as he did at Ellie. Small miracles.

Not that it meant a whole lot, seeing as someday Ellie would find her plus one, and it would be serious, and I’d have to get over myself and my stupid unresolved twinges of feelings for my best friend’s baby sister. She was off-limits, plain and simple, and I wasn’t sure why it’d taken my body over twenty years to catch up to the memo.

“No offense, but why are you really here?”

Ellie’s question shook me back to attention. I turned to face her.

“Long story,” I admitted, “but my mother and Aiden colluded in blackmailing me to stand in as a groomsman.”

“Do you even know Derrick?”

“I have, uh, worked on his cars.”

“I see.”

Ellie didn’t look entirely surprised. I wondered just how common this practice was to stuff random men into suits and pretend they were groomsman.

Then Ellie and I turned to watch Katie and Travis each shooting back a shot of whiskey at the bar. We watched them like it was still the Discovery Channel. I could feel my face heating at just standing this close to Ellie. I couldn’t think of a damn thing to say, and obviously she couldn’t, either.

“How’s New York?” I asked dumbly.

“Great,” she said. “How’s your shop?”

“Keeping me busy.”

A look of relief swept over Ellie’s face as someone in a long red dress started ushering people toward the banquet room. There was a dinner associated with this party, and I’d been required to come as part of the wedding party. Ellie and I shuffled toward the staircase together and made our way up to the second floor together.

I was just in the process of wondering which was more painful—sitting stupidly next to Ellie with nothing to say or sitting far away and watching her converse with random dudes—when the decision was taken away from me.

“You guys are sitting over there.” Katie snuck up behind us. “I shuffled some cards around.”

“Katie,” Ellie hissed. “You can’t do that. My sister’s gonna notice.”

Katie shrugged, and I had to admit I admired the girl’s chutzpah. I agreed. Screw the seating arrangement. I followed Katie’s extended finger, found where she’d placed me next to Aiden, then Ellie next to me.

“Where’s your seat?” I asked Katie.

“I’ll just sit in the back with my wine bottle,” she said. “I don’t need to be up here. I’ll just go have a chat with my new friend Travis.”

“The hell you will,” I said, grabbing a chair for Katie and shoving it on the other side of Aiden. If I had to sit next to my best friend’s little sister, then Aiden was sitting next to her fucking roommate. We were going to be equally uncomfortable.

Katie flounced into the seat. I didn’t miss the approving look she shot to Ellie, like I’d somehow made the right decision. I pulled out Ellie’s chair for her, waited until she sat, then scooted myself in, anticipating the horrified look on Aiden’s face when he discovered the doctored seating arrangement.

“He’s going to be pissed,” Ellie said, leaning closer to me, accidentally brushing her leg against mine as her voice slid low and husky. “You know Aiden’s going to throttle you.”

I cracked a laugh. “Worth it to see his face.”

Ellie grinned. “I wholeheartedly agree, so long as he’s pissed at you and not me.”

Ellie’s closeness brought me to an uncomfortable position. I adjusted myself or, more aptly, my pants, to make sure that the touch of Ellie’s leg against mine—and my response to it—was not noticeable to the general

public. When she'd leaned in, her breath had whispered against my arm. Her elbow had brushed my skin. Her knees had knocked mine.

Then she'd smiled, that smile that'd haunted my dreams for years, and I'd gotten a damn hard-on at the dinner table. And just like that, I was fucking fifteen again.

We didn't have to wait long for the show. Aiden strode up the steps, the massive hulk of a man chatting with Finn DiMaggio as they entered the banquet room together. Aiden was laughing, distracted. He was a giant of a man these days. I wasn't sure what they were feeding him out in San Diego, but it was impressive.

We'd always been close to the same size, both tall, big guys, but this security job had done a number on him. It was enough of a reminder that I really, really didn't need to be touching this guy's sister. He was my best friend and all, but nobody wanted to cross Aiden Fucking Turner.

As if to prove my point, Aiden gave Finn a good-natured slap on the shoulder. Finn, the local sheriff who was no slouch in the size department himself, jerked forward like he'd gotten whiplash. Aiden seemed mostly oblivious to his own strength as he split from the cop and headed for his seat, his face quickly melting into a frown as he searched for his name. When he located his place card, and the group of us watching him, he paled a few degrees. Then narrowed his eyes at me.

"Asshole," he muttered, slapping me upside the head.

"I didn't do anything," I said. "It was her."

I jerked my head to Katie. She smiled sweetly up at Aiden.

"Do you have an issue sitting next to me?" Katie asked. "Because I already volunteered to sit in the back and take shots with the cute bartender while you guys do this jazz."

"Fuck no," Aiden rumbled, sitting in his seat, looking like he was about to pull Katie onto his lap before letting her go and take shots with the cute bartender.

I could feel Ellie cracking up next to me, and then she leaned against my arm, clearly hiding her face from her roommate and brother. I fought against the desire to slip my arm around her back and let her snuggle into me, but then she dipped her head forward and wiped at her tears, and I gave a big shift in my seat because she was getting a little too close to the issue I was trying to hide. In my pants. That issue.

The four of us finally settled a few moments later as Anya took the stage. She stood, her figure imposing even to a big guy like me, and thanked everyone for being there. Then she introduced the bride and the groom who did a grand march like they were in a parade onto the stage.

“We’d like to invite the bridal party to come up on the stage with us,” Anya said. “I asked every member of the bridal party to prepare a short, fun little anecdote about the couple to share. Keep it PG, folks. Thanks. Let’s start with the bridesmaids. Erica, as the maid of honor, would you like to get things started?”

I felt Ellie tense next to me. Leaning over, I muttered in her ear, “You’re not the maid of honor?”

Ellie shook her head, the movement barely perceptible.

“But you’re the bride’s sister.”

“I can see you’ve been studying our family tree,” she muttered. “Of course I’m her sister.”

“But—”

Ellie turned a set of pretty brown eyes on me, and the look in them shut me right up. Her eyes were soft, sweet, but rimmed with anger and hurt. I wanted to tuck her under my arm and carry her out of here like a fucking football, protecting her from the bruises her family had been doling out to her tender heart for years.

“That’s fucked up,” I whispered. “I’m sorry, Ellie.”

She ignored me, her arms crossed tight. I took that as my cue to stop talking. Clearly I was poking my nose where it didn’t belong, and the last thing I wanted to do was pile on to any amount of hurt she was already experiencing.

I could barely listen while the bridesmaids went down the line and shared tittering, very-vanilla stories about their friendships with Monica and Derrick. I was too focused on the woman sitting next to me.

“Great, thank you, bridesmaids,” Anya said, taking the microphone. “Groomsmen, you’re up next. Noah, shall we start with you, and we’ll save the best man for last?”

“What the hell?” I muttered. “I don’t even know Derrick.”

Ellie turned a half-smile on me. Like she sort of found this moment humorous, but also like she was too upset to really capitalize on it and poke fun at me.

“You’re up, Champ,” she said. “I’d get moving before you get on Anya’s bad side.”

“But you didn’t go yet,” I said stupidly. “You’re a bridesmaid.”

“Noah?” Anya called, and the way she spoke sounded like my ninth-grade science teacher, and I had flashbacks to getting yelled at from the back row.

I pushed myself to my feet and shuffled to the stage. Someone had left me off the email chain that this situation was happening. I was still trying to sift through my knowledge of the couple when Anya handed me the microphone.

“I, uh, am honored to be here.” I coughed. “I know Derrick... Well, I’ve got to be honest, I know his cars better than I know Derrick, but he’s got a great Audi, let me tell you.”

There was some chortling from the men in the audience. The men who cared about driving Audis. Not me, but the others.

“And Monica, I know you’ll make a great partner for Derrick. I’ve known you since you were a little girl, and you’ve always wanted...” I swallowed hard, trying to stick as close to honesty as possible. “To be married. So congratulations on what’s sure to be a beautiful day.”

I shoved the microphone into Anya’s hand before I could screw up my speech even more. Then I made my way back to my seat and shoved myself next to Ellie, feeling a little overwhelmed with the whole situation.

In the back of my mind, I registered that there had been some applause, which gave me a snippet of relief. I hadn’t messed up so catastrophically that the room had gone catatonic, so that was something.

“You’ve always wanted to be married.” Ellie studied me as I sat down, her expression unreadable as she spoke. “Nice.”

“I was trying to be honest,” I bit off, still reeling at this whole bridal party situation. “I’m not wrong, right?”

She grinned then, sending tendrils of relief flooding my heart. “I thought it was brilliant. It’s about the same thing I said to her when she told me she was engaged.”

I knew I should probably care more about offending the bride, especially since I was technically a groomsman. But I’d had it with the Turners and the way they treated their youngest child, like it would’ve been easier if they’d just never had her in the first place.

If you asked me, she was the gem of the whole fucking Turner line. All one had to do was take a look at the wedding party situation to know how

screwy the Turners could be when it came to family ties.

“Do you know what’s really genius?” Ellie whispered as the next groomsman shuffled up on stage, looking just as reluctant to be there. “She won’t even have noticed because you dropped the words ‘beautiful day’ in there, and she’ll latch onto that and think you gave her the biggest compliment.”

I raised my eyebrows, sat back, and threw my arm around the rear of her chair. Ellie looked surprised for a moment, then settled back. I hadn’t meant it to be romantic. I’d meant it to be protective, but the signals got all sorts of confused when Ellie’s low ponytail brushed against my rolled sleeves. The feel of her hair against me, the warmth of that soft line of her neck against mine, had my old issue popping right back into position.

Well aware that I was as restless as a toddler in church, I shifted forward, curling in to whisper in Ellie’s ear. “So what the hell’s going on with you and Monica? Are you in the wedding or not?”

Ellie went tense. My arm cinched tighter, my fingers gripping the back of the chair until my knuckles turned white.

“It’s nothing,” she whispered. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m just curious. I mean, are you not a bridesmaid? You’re sitting up here, your sister’s the bride, but you weren’t asked to make a speech. Even *I* was asked to say a few words about a man I barely know.”

Ellie’s lips pinched together, and she didn’t look my way. “Just leave it alone.”

“Is it a secret?” I pressed. “I’m going to find out sooner or later. The wedding’s a week away.”

“Yeah, well, I’m in the wedding party. Happy?”

“Mostly confused.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Ellie glanced over at me before facing forward again. “I don’t want to tell you. You’ll laugh at me.”

“Ellie, no. Why would I ever laugh at you?”

She shot me a gaze that told me whatever she had to tell me was that bad. Or at least she thought so. Little did she know that it would just about take a lobotomy for me to find anything about her unappealing.

I bit my lip, gave a big sigh. “I’m sorry you think so, but Ellie—”

“I’m the flower girl, okay?” Ellie whipped her head to face me, anger and embarrassment warring in her gaze. “Are you happy now?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Right?”

“Did you say the flower girl?”

“So you do understand English.”

I blinked. “Your sister made you the fucking flower girl? Doesn’t that job usually go to a child?”

Unfortunately, my last phrase—starting with the profanity—popped out exactly as the groomsman finished his very un-rousing speech and the place fell silent. While I was speaking much too loud. So the entire room heard me. All heads swiveled to face us.

Ellie’s cheeks turned a fiery red. A flush crept up the back of her neck. She was so completely still she appeared to be frozen. Where Monica had always loved being the center of attention, Ellie had always hated it, just like me.

Even Anya was looking our way, and Anya seemed the sort of woman to be unfazed by pretty much anything. I chanced a glance at where the bride and groom were sitting and caught Monica’s gaze. She was looking at me and Ellie like she was livid. As if by simply existing, Ellie was ruining this day for her. Even though she was the one who had made Ellie the flower girl in the first place.

The only person who seemed to be grinning was fucking Finn, and that was because his grumpy ass was thinking this whole disaster was hilarious. He only wiped the smile off his face when Josie Andrews, local flower slinger and thorn-in-Finn’s-side, elbowed him hard enough to turn his grin into a scowl.

Movement happened on the other side of me, and I saw Katie shifting her posture, looking like she was going to burn the world down at the way everyone was looking at Ellie. It was then and there that I decided I liked Katie. A lot. Any woman who had Ellie’s back was a comrade of mine.

Katie started to stand, her mouth half open, as if she was about to address the room. Which, more power to her. I almost wished I’d thought of it first, but somewhere deep down, I’d already known that would only make the situation worse. Ellie hated attention, so the last thing she needed right now was more eyes drawn to her. What she needed was a distraction.

I locked eyes with Katie as her mouth shut. Then she looked down at Aiden, and a little gleam appeared in her eyes. It was like I could read the idea forming on her face, like she had an announcement scrolling through her eyes that was only legible to those on Team Ellie.



Without wasting another second, Katie slapped her long, bright orange nails on either side of Aiden's face, squished his cheeks like he was a cute baby and not a terrifying giant of a man, and lowered her face to his. Then, softly, she muttered something to him. He gave a little nod.

Then Katie planted a big, smacking kiss right on Aiden's lips.

It started out almost comical, a big smooch only meant to pull the attention away from Ellie and put it onto a new subject. Aiden's eyes widened at first like he wasn't sure exactly what he'd agreed to.

Then, slowly, it was like the kiss took on a life of its own, and the awkwardness faded and something real took its place. Aiden's hand came up, landed on Katie's back, too low to be platonic. His thumb was practically caressing her butt cheeks. Katie's eyes closed, the kiss deepened, and I swear to God there was tongue happening about a foot away from me.

I turned away, both for their sakes and also to check on Ellie. Her mouth was parted in true shock. She wasn't the only one. I caught sight of Mrs. Turner looking like she was going to faint. Then I glanced at Monica, and I could just about feel the steam coming out of her ears. If she was broadcasting a message, it was along the lines of her being pissed off that someone was out-romancing her at her own party.

"Get up there, big guy." Katie pulled Aiden to his feet, then gave him a resounding slap on the ass, sending him jerking forward like he'd been electrocuted. "Time for the best man's speech."

Fortunately, Anya regained her composure right about then. She took a glance at Monica's face, then gave a little chuckle into the microphone.

"Ah, young love. Maybe Aiden's new girlfriend will catch the bouquet and we'll have another ceremony to look forward to?" Anya gave another lighthearted cackle. "Aiden, let's hear a few words from you about your gorgeous sister. It's Monica's day, after all."

Despite Anya's diplomatic changing of the subject, Monica still looked miffed. Though that smoothed itself over a little more as Aiden mumbled through a lot of complimentary things about his sister and her wedding day, as if he knew that he'd be in hot water if he didn't lay it on thick.

When Aiden's speech finished, he walked himself back to his seat, plopped down, and stared straight ahead like he was coming out of anesthesia and was mostly confused about where he was and who was around him.

We sat through a few more painful speeches about how great of a couple Monica and Derrick would be, and by the time Mrs. Turner had finished her

speech with some well-faked tears about how proud she was of her daughter for marrying into such a great family, Monica was looking back to her normal self and it seemed like Ellie was breathing without having heart palpitations.

Katie was on her third glass of wine in ten minutes and Aiden still looked like he was in some hospital recovery room waiting to come back to reality.

When the announcement came that speeches were done and dinner was served, Ellie excused herself to use the restroom. Aiden found himself getting tugged away from the table by his mother, no doubt demanding an explanation for his (mostly) reluctant public display of affection. I was certain Mrs. Turner would be Googling Katie Sanders by the time the appetizers made their way around the room.

“I guess it’s just me and you,” Katie said, sliding one seat over. “Sorry about getting all up on your best friend, but it was for—”

“For Ellie, I know.” I blinked, looked at her, then held out a hand. “I hope to one day have a friend as good as you are to Ellie.”

Katie smiled, shook my hand pleasantly. “I mean, Aiden can be an idiot, but he’s a good guy. The two of you are lucky to have each other too.”

I nodded, agreeing silently, but not willing to get sappy. “That was... something.”

“It was just an act,” Katie said flippantly.

But it was a lie, and I could tell. Katie seemed like the sort of girl who told things like they were, without a lot of extras, and I doubted she had a lot of practice lying.

“I think the tongue was a little excessive,” I pointed out, “but okay.”

“I think putting your sister as the flower girl in your own damn wedding is excessive, but that’s just me.”

“No argument there.”

“Speaking of, I should go check on Ellie.” Katie stood. “I wanted to give her a few minutes alone, but I also need to make sure she’s not drinking all my tequila shooters in the family stall.”

“Do you mind if...” I hesitated. “I feel like this is sort of my fault. Maybe I can talk to her first?”

“What are you waiting for?” Katie sat back in her seat, crossed her arms across her chest. “I’ll just sit here, alone, knowing absolutely no one in this room, and eat all of your food.”

I blitzed right past her sarcasm and headed out of the room. I'd also seen the gleam of approval there, and it made me feel good. Secure. Ellie had a good head on her shoulders. She chose her friends wisely, and it was a relief to see that even if I couldn't keep my eye on her all the time, she had surrounded herself with good people. Not that it was my business. Not that it was my business at all.

I made my way to the restroom, gave Ellie a few more minutes, then pulled out my phone.

**Noah: You okay? I'm outside the door. I'd like to talk.**

I waited for a beat, but there was nothing. Just when I was about to forfeit and go get Katie for backup, the door opened and Ellie appeared.

Her eyes were a tiny bit red, and I could tell there had been a few tears. I tried my best to tamp down the primal nature in my chest that was starting to feel like it was ripping me apart, but I did a poor job of it. My only options were to explode in the direction of the people causing Ellie harm or to lean into her, and I made the knee-jerk decision to do the latter.

I folded her into my chest, smelling her signature sweet, vanilla and honey scent that brought me back to when we'd sit next to one another in the movie theater as teens, and I'd have to sit there, our arms brushing against each other's on the armrest while we shared popcorn. I'd spent most of those long hours fighting back the urge to take her hand in mine. To slide her onto my lap. To press a kiss against those soft cheeks of hers so everyone would know she was mine.

As I held her here and now, as she crumpled against me, her hands balling against my shirt, her face pressed against my chest, a thought crossed my mind that hadn't been there in years. The little voice wondering if Ellie had felt it too. If all those years my feelings hadn't been as one-sided as I'd thought.

I wondered if, back in the day, she'd shuffled past Aiden purposefully to sit next to me in the theater. If she'd purposefully not purchased a popcorn, only to ask me to share minutes later. If she'd purposefully asked me for rides home from school on days when she'd known Aiden wouldn't be able to tag along. If she'd looked forward to those stolen minutes of alone time like I had.

"I'm sorry," I whispered into her hair. "About all of it."

"It's not your fault," she said, inhaling deeply, sniffing a little, trying to cover it as she smiled up at me. "It's not anybody's fault really."

“It sure as hell is. It’s your sister’s fault.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Not really,” I argued. “Her wedding, her choice. Pretty fucking stupid choice if you ask me.”

“She’s my sister, Noah.”

Ellie tensed in my arms, and I put my foot in my mouth, reminding myself that Ellie was an entire world kinder than me. She cared about her family like they were, well, family. But she cared about them as if they actually treated her like she was family too, and it wasn’t fair. It was a one-way street.

But the last thing I wanted to do was push Ellie away, especially not when holding her close felt so damn good.

“You’re right,” I said. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that, especially not here.”

Ellie looked up at me, a half-smile on her face. “It’s fine. It’s just, you know, this is her wedding. It’s her choice.”

“You do have the right to say *no*. You do know that, right? She can ask you to do something, but you don’t have to do it just because she’s your sister.”

“Yeah, I think I can make my own decisions,” she said, sounding annoyed. “But thanks anyway for the vote of confidence.”

“I just meant—”

“I know what you meant,” she said. “I’m just saying, you don’t understand everything you think you do about my family.”

On the contrary, I was pretty sure I understood it pretty well as a somewhat unbiased third party. Ellie’s family treated her like crap. I’d never understood why, but I had understood that she always gave them another chance. Always. Because she was the world’s most kind, most patient human being.

“Just let it go,” she said. “The wedding’s in a week. I’ve just got to walk down the aisle, and then I’m sure I won’t have to do anything family related until Christmas.”

I bit back a wry laugh. “You’re going to make for the world’s most beautiful flower girl.”

“Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?” Ellie peered up at me.

I was already wincing. “Yeah, that sounded weird. Sorry.”

She bit her lip, a smile crinkling her eyes. “I mean, I guess...thanks?”

I squeezed her tight once more, then reluctantly let her go as I could see her eyes shifting back and forth toward a few women heading toward the restroom. Clearly she didn’t want to be caught in an embrace with me, and I wanted to respect her space. She’d had enough of a roller coaster for one day.

“If you want me to be the ring bearer, I’d happily hand in my groomsman badge.”

Ellie’s eyes lit up, and it warmed my heart to see life flooding back into her face. Happiness where angst and sadness had been moments before. It’d thrilled me back in the day to see her smile, and somehow, the pull to make her happy had only intensified as the years had passed.

“Oh, someone very important already has that job,” she said with mock seriousness. “Anya’s dog.”

I blinked. “You’re the flower girl, and a dog is the ring bearer?”

“Just when you thought things couldn’t get any worse. I have to follow an adorable morkie down the aisle.”

“The morkie doesn’t stand a chance next to you.” I winked.

Ellie laughed, leaned against me, then stepped back as she nodded at the women entering the restroom. Once they were gone, she gave a little shrug.

“Hey, thanks. For checking on me. I was fine, it was just a lot. All at once.” Ellie looked a bit uncomfortable. “It can be stressful being around my family, and I really hate being the center of attention, and anyway. It just bubbled over. I’m really fine.”

I nodded because my mouth felt too dry to speak. And frankly, I wasn’t sure there were words that could make anything better.

“I should get back.” Ellie gave me a smile.

The smile was more practiced, glued on for the sake of her family, a mask to cover up the tears she’d shed behind closed doors. To cover up the embarrassment she’d felt at being the center of attention. To be the good girl in a family that, in my opinion, didn’t deserve her. Not that I deserved her either, but then again, that was why I had let her go in the first place.

As I watched Ellie wind her way back through the crowd, taking care not to draw attention to herself as she slipped back to her seat, I felt an old ache in my chest returning to its place. Whispers of the one that had been there before, reminders of a past riddled with missed chances and close encounters.

There were many reasons I couldn’t touch Ellie Turner. Her brother had forbidden it for starters, and he was my best friend—a brother to me, really.

To go against Aiden, to break his trust behind his back, wasn't the sort of thing I was prepared to do. Then there was the fact that I'd never deserved Ellie. She was the artist, the dreamer, the Big City girl. I was the simple, small town mechanic. Our stories would never fit together.

And now I was going to have to watch her walk down the aisle as the fucking flower girl.



## Chapter 5

**E**llie I was working on settling the thumping in my chest that was probably my heartbeat overreacting to the close proximity in which I'd been standing to Noah Donovan.

When my phone had buzzed in the bathroom stall with Noah's message, I'd panicked and debated holing up permanently in the hotel. I'd debated the possibilities of ordering room service to the fifth stall in the ladies' room on the second floor when I figured that sooner or later, Noah would send Katie in after me. And she'd done plenty for me already, considering she'd macked on my brother just to draw the attention away from me.

So I'd washed myself up to the best of my ability, reapplied my mascara, and added a swipe of lip gloss in hopes it would cover up my red eyes.

It wasn't one thing in particular that had made me cry. I understood I had the right to separate myself from my family. To tell my sister no. But what people like Noah didn't understand—people who had loving, inclusive families—was that if I didn't make the effort to be a part of my family, I wouldn't *have* a family.

And sure, my family could stress me out. I had a few bones to pick with my sister. My parents... Let's just say if I ever had kids, I'd do things a bit differently. But I had Aiden, and he was great, and if nothing else I had a working relationship with my family. We talked once in a while. I made it home for a couple of holidays a year, for a day or two, and at least that was something.

Yes, I had friends in the city. Katie was the cheese to my macaroni, and yet she had her own family. She went home for Christmas and Easter. She had boyfriends. While I was sure she'd invite me to tag along with her at special occasions, I didn't feel comfortable intruding on her family time no matter how much she'd insist it wasn't an imposition. I wasn't ready to give up my family completely, no matter how difficult our situation might be.

"There you are." Katie studied me closely behind her cheerful expression. "Are you doing okay?"

"Better now," I said. "Just, you know, too much tequila and prosecco mixing together. Sort of bubbled over."



“Yeah, hon. It’s okay.” Katie pulled me in for a hug. “You want to get out of here?”

“No, I’m okay. Really. I, uh, chatted with Noah.”

“And?”

“Don’t give me those raised eyebrows,” I retorted, taking a seat and finding a plate of food before me. My stomach growled. “What about you and Aiden?”

“That was just a spur of the moment convenience thing.” Katie stabbed her salmon like it had personally insulted her. “I would’ve kissed my own brother if it would’ve helped. He just happened to be sitting next to me.”

“You don’t have a brother.”

“Theoretically.”

“Yeah, but I bet you wouldn’t have added that much tongue.”

Katie choked on that bite of salmon until I whacked her on the back.

“Okay, sis,” she said dryly, wiping her watering eyes. “That’s how you’re gonna be after I went out on a limb to help you out?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate it. I’m just saying, the same thing could’ve been accomplished without sticking your tongue down his throat.”

“Now you’re just overexaggerating.”

“I’m definitely not overexaggerating when I say that it was a two-way street.” I was practically humming with glee at how shifty Katie was looking. She was rarely flustered. “I saw that butt squeeze from Aiden. Is something going on?”

“I guess we both just know how to put on a good show. You’re welcome. Aiden’s still getting a tongue lashing from your mother about making out with me in public, and your sister has completely forgotten about you in her bid to be pissed at me for stealing her sexual thunder.”

I slid a glance at Monica and, sure enough, I did catch her sending a few scathing looks over toward Katie. Katie looked too, caught one of those glances, and raised a forkful of salmon in salute. Monica furrowed her eyebrows in return. I suspected Katie would not be receiving an invitation to the wedding.

“You know I’m never gonna be allowed back in Fantasie, right?” Katie chomped happily. “Might as well go out with a bang.”

“Might as well,” I said. “I’d make a joke about Aiden and you and going out with a bang together, but that’s gross because he’s my brother, and I already had to watch him touch my best friend’s butt today. So I’m going to

leave the joke and eat my food so I can stop the room from spinning. How much tequila is in those little bottles?”

“Hits you like a sucker punch, right? Remember, we didn’t stop for lunch. Low blood sugar. It’s physics. Or chemistry. Something.”

I was already eating, seeing as the food was about the only portion of the evening’s events I was looking forward to. According to the itinerary Anya had sent out in advance, there would be a gift opening ceremony in about forty minutes. Then the group would split into males and females to play a few games. Then we’d reconvene for dessert before Anya would surely bang her gavel and declare the night concluded, sending us on our merry little way with expensive gift bags containing hand creams I’d never use.

I was so very into my salmon that I didn’t notice Noah making his way back to the table. I only looked up as my body sensed his presence behind me, like we were two forces that couldn’t exist on the same plane without having a reaction to one another.

I shifted to make room for him next to me, giving him a wide enough berth so that I lowered the risk of our limbs touching. Brushing against one another. Bumping elbows. Knocking knees. Because there had already been too much of that for one day, and my nervous system was in overdrive. My body was running on prosecco and adrenaline right now, and if I didn’t finish my salmon and potatoes pretty soon, I worried I might actually pass out from the exhilaration of sitting this close to Noah Donovan.

Over the next five minutes I was so focused on ingesting my food without touching Noah’s arm as he shoveled in his own dinner that I didn’t notice Katie slip away from the table. Or Aiden return. Or the fact that Katie’s hands were shaking as she reached for her phone.

When Noah elbowed me gently, I jerked upward like someone had put a tack under my behind.

“What?” I yelped. I straightened myself in my chair, set my fork down gently. “Sorry. You startled me.”

“I can tell,” Noah murmured. “It’s just...”

He gave a twitch of his head, and I followed his gaze to where Katie looked as stiff as a gargoyle, frozen over her phone, her face turning shades of white I’d never seen on her before.

“Switch seats,” I muttered to Noah, and he was moving before I could finish my thought. After seating myself next to Katie, I leaned into her gently. “Everything okay?”

“It’s my cousin,” she whispered. “She’s in the hospital back in New York. I guess there was a car accident. I mean, she was on her bike, and a car hit her, and...”

“Oh my God,” I forced out. “Is she okay? I mean, is she—”

“She’s in the hospital,” Katie whispered. “Her mom just texted me wondering if I could go be with her. Her mom’s abroad right now for work, and I’m the only family member who lives close enough to the city. She lives in New York by herself.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll go with you. Let’s go get the car, and I’ll drive you back.”

“Hold on,” Katie said, “my aunt is calling me. I’ll be right back.”

After Katie left, Aiden looked over her empty seat at me. His eyes narrowed.

“You’re not driving anywhere,” Aiden told me. “I know that look. That’s your ‘I’ve got the spins from tequila’ look.”

“You can’t tell that by looking at me,” I said, but he wasn’t completely wrong.

Katie had been planning to use her points to get us a room at the hotel if we both ended up drunk. She’d called ahead and had been assured that there’d be plenty of rooms open if she wanted to book last minute. So neither of us had been all too concerned about driving home.

“I’ll drive her back,” Aiden said. “Do not argue with me.”

“But you—”

“Are not drunk,” Aiden finished. “I had one whiskey over an hour ago now, and I’m a two-hundred-pound male. I’m fine to drive. But I will need to use your car. I didn’t rent one to use this time.”

“Yeah, sure.” I fished my own rental car’s keys from my pocket and tossed them over. “I will ride back with the two of you.”

Katie returned looking a little calmer but still significantly jittery which, for a woman like Katie, meant something. She didn’t rattle easily.

“That was my aunt,” Katie said. “The hospital left her a message when Jasmine was admitted. I guess Jasmine has a broken leg and probably a concussion. They’re going to take her in for surgery now, and I want to be there when she wakes up. But I’m not sober and neither are you, El.”

“I’m driving you.” Aiden stood decisively.

His voice was low, rumbly. I studied my brother, realizing for the first time that he was a grown-ass man. I mean, I knew that, logically. He’d

always been my bigger, older brother, and I was used to that fact.

But I hadn't seen a look this serious on his face in a long, long time. He didn't take charge like this often. He was a pretty laid-back guy until you pushed the wrong buttons. And then he could go off in a big, big way.

This version of Aiden reminded me that he was one whole adult. He had a big-boy career doing things he couldn't even tell me about. It was a little bit scary. *He* was a little bit scary, and I didn't see him enough for that to have sunk in yet.

Katie turned her head robotically to look at him. I could see every instinct in her trying to fight back, to tell him she didn't need a ride. That she could do this herself, that she'd be fine. But her lips couldn't form the words.

I wasn't sure if she was so desperate to see her cousin that it outweighed everything else or if it was my brother's stance, the way Aiden spoke like there was no other option, that made her listen.

"It's your sister's wedding shower thing," Katie said half-heartedly to Aiden. "I can't ask you to leave."

"You're not asking me to do a damn thing," he growled. "Now grab your purse and let's go."

I grabbed Katie's purse and slung it over her shoulder since she seemed to be moving at a slower pace than usual.

"I'm coming with you," I said. "I don't mind leaving the event. Trust me."

"No." Katie looked at me. "I mean, thank you, but no. You should stay. It's your sister's party."

"Maybe you'll need help back in the city."

"Please, Ellie, stay. I need to focus on my cousin, and I already feel guilty about dragging one of the Turners away from the party. Your mother would shoot me in the forehead if I took both of you with me."

"I'll get you back to your apartment tomorrow, Ellie." Noah stood behind me, a hand coming to rest on my shoulder. "It's not a problem. You can stay tonight if you want, and I'll drive you back to the city first thing in the morning."

"Thanks, Noah." Katie brushed a kiss against my cheek. "I'm sorry, hon. Have a good time. Tell your mother I took Aiden home to bang his brains out if you want, and she'll be so pissed at me she won't care if you streak butt-naked through this hot mess of a party."

I gave a laugh that was on the verge of tears as I pulled Katie in for a quick hug. Even when she was the one in pain, she went out of her way to lessen the blow for others. To make me smile. To throw herself under the bus. To pull a joke from between the layers of fear and worry and anxiety that must have been piling on top of her about her cousin.

Before I could truly process any of it, Katie and Aiden were off, Aiden with his arm wrapped around Katie's shoulders, keeping her tucked close to his side. Possessive. The further away they got, the less I recognized my brother. By the time they reached the doors, it was like I was staring at strangers, a couple that might or might not have been in love. At least, that was what it looked like from a distance.

It took me another full minute to speak.

"I should have gone with her," I said. "It was like I couldn't think fast enough. Like other people made the choice for me, and I didn't stick up for myself, and—"

"Ellie—"

"If I wasn't so shy and so timid, then maybe—"

"Ellie."

"What?"

"Aiden is with her," Noah said. "He will take care of her."

"Yeah, I know Aiden's great and all, but she's *my* friend."

"He's the one she was making out with."

"True, but that was fake. Sort of." I amended, "I'm not sure what that was."

"Maybe this will give them some private time alone to clear it up."

My shoulders slumped. "I don't deserve a friend like her. Katie's amazing."

Noah shifted in his seat, his big figure blocking out the view of everyone else. His dark hair was in a bit of disarray, his shirt open one extra button which was probably an accident. His forearms were on display with his sleeves rolled up, and even in my state of emotional distress I couldn't tear my eyes off that man.

Noah leaned in, took my chin firmly in his hand. He looked me dead in the eyes. "I think you're pretty damn amazing too."

"I don't know about that, but—"

"I do. And she's just as lucky to have you. She knows it, too, which makes me like her a helluva lot."

I licked my lips. “Yeah, well.”

“I know you’re disappointed you didn’t go with Katie, but you’re overthinking it. I hate to admit this, but I feel the same way about Aiden that you feel about Katie.” Noah cleared his throat. “You ever repeat me saying that, and I’ll deny it. But honestly, Aiden’s got a heart of gold, and he’s the best man for the job. He’s going to take care of Katie and her cousin.”

“I know.” I hesitated a beat. “For what it’s worth, he’s lucky to have you too.”

We both looked back at our plates, unsure where to go from here.

“Ellie, one more thing.”

I peered up at Noah. “What’s that?”

“I saw the car you drove up here in.”

“What about it?”

“It’s got two fucking seats,” he said, a grin splitting his lips wide. “Unless you were planning to ride in the trunk, you weren’t hitchin’ a ride back with them.”

I blinked. “Oh my gosh. You’re right.”

“Why would you drive a two-seater convertible up here in winter?”

“We had the top on,” I said defensively. “And we got a discount on it.”



## Chapter 6

**N**<sup>oah</sup> The next couple of hours passed in a mixed bag of emotions that was both a blur and a drag all at once. I spent most of the time staring at Ellie, and the other half of the time trying *not* to stare at Ellie.

It seemed like she'd lost her appetite the second Katie and Aiden had headed back to the city. I'd finished Ellie's food. She'd finished my drink.

The most miserable part of the event had been splitting up by gender so we could play stupid games that nobody wanted to play. But Anya had put more work into organizing the evening's agenda than she probably did for her company parties, so nobody dared to opt out of wrapping the bride in toilet paper or playing guessing games about the groom's middle name.

Then I'd had to watch Monica squeal through three zillion gifts. To get through that mess of glitter and ribbon, I'd ended up drinking *way* more whiskey than I'd intended on having tonight. Fortunately, I'd eaten two dinners and I was a large man, so I was holding onto things okay, but judging by the rate at which the server topped up Ellie's glass, she was probably a little wobblier on her feet than me.

When the party blissfully came to its conclusion around ten p.m., with some folks arranging to stick around for a nightcap while others blitzed their way out of the banquet room, I headed over toward Ellie wondering exactly what her plan was for the night.

"Hey," I said quietly, trying not to startle her as I sidled up next to her. "How're you feeling?"

"Fantastic." Ellie turned mid-conversation to face me, her cheeks flushed pink. Her eyes were opened a little too wide. Her hands a little too fidgety.

"You?"

I rested my palm on her shoulder and steered her away from the group of women she'd been standing around. I'd seen Josie along with Clarice, the local psychic, chatting Ellie's ears off, and those two women were dangerous for a multitude of reasons when they put their heads together. I led Ellie to a mostly unused corner of the banquet room where the only activity was the occasional server bussing the last of the dishes back to the kitchen.

The sun had set hours ago, so the enormous windows showed only darkness outside, along with a smattering of lights in the distance from the



nearest homes. Inside, the room burst with sparkles. From what I could tell, the theme of the party was pizzazz. Every surface—the tablecloths, the photo backdrop, the little goody bags—had been touched by some sort of silver ribbon or glittering adornment.

“Have you heard from Katie?” I asked Ellie.

“No. Aiden said he’d text me once they got situated at the hospital. Nothing from Katie. I’m not planning on bothering her tonight. She’s got enough on her plate to deal with.”

Ellie’s voice sounded uncertain, like she regretted her choice to stay back in Fantasie for the night.

“Aiden will keep you posted,” I assured her. “Both he and Katie know how much this means to you too. Don’t kick yourself for staying back. Being there wouldn’t have helped much, to be honest. Aiden’s with her. He’ll do whatever needs to be done tonight.”

“Yeah, no, I know. Of course. It’s probably better he’s there anyway. He’s got all sorts of contacts and whatever. Plus, he’s way cooler than I am under pressure. I mean, it’s his job to be unshakable. I feel flustered for about three days if I find a spider in my bathroom.”

I couldn’t help a grin at the sheer honesty in her voice. “Is that right?”

“I hate spiders, but I can’t bear to kill them either.”

“So what’s your compromise?”

Ellie gave a limp shrug. “Mostly I end up having a terrified staring contest for a few days with the spider before I bully Katie’s boyfriend to come collect him in a cup and let him go outside.”

“Katie has a boyfriend?” I didn’t realize my voice came out sharp, judgmental even, until Ellie whipped up an equally sharp look in my direction.

“Okay, Judgy McJudgerson,” Ellie said. “No, Katie doesn’t have a boyfriend. There’s this guy she sometimes sees casually. On and off again. Not that it’s any of your business, but they are definitely off right now and have been for a while.”

“Sorry.” I ran a hand down my face and sighed. “Nerves are running high. And like I said before, Aiden’s a good guy. He’s my best friend, and I can’t help but look out for him.”

“Yep,” she said dryly. “I am well aware of all those facts. Big facts.”

“I just don’t want him to get hurt.”

“If you think me or Katie would ever do something like that, or put Aiden in a position like that, then you don’t know us as well as I thought you did. I know he’s your best friend, but he’s my brother too.”

“I don’t know Katie that well.”

“No, but you know me.”

I inclined my head in agreement. “Sorry.”

Ellie blew out a breath. “I’m ready to leave this party. Monica opening gifts took longer than it takes to print a CVS receipt. I saw Finn duck out mid-dessert course, lucky guy.”

“No kidding,” I said. “Are you staying at the hotel tonight?”

Ellie’s face paled. “I guess. Maybe.”

“Maybe? What was your plan when you came up here?”

“You don’t have to sound like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*.” Ellie waved a hand like it would magically clear things up. “I did have a plan, for your information. Katie and I were going to make a last-minute decision on whether or not we were drinking or staying sober and book a hotel room accordingly.”

“Solid plan.”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “If we decided to drink—”

“I’d say you decided to drink the second you walked in the door with a purse full of tequila.”

Ellie licked her lips and shot me a scathing glare which, I’ll admit, did something to my stomach. Maybe it was seeing her tongue on her lips that put naughty thoughts into my head. Or maybe it was finally seeing that feisty woman I knew so well returning in full force.

“Katie travels a lot, so she was going to book us a room with her points. She didn’t book us a room yet, and I’m certainly not going to bother her now, so I guess I’ll just book myself a room. We confirmed they had plenty of openings tonight so it won’t be an issue.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I mean, I have a room. Aiden and I grabbed a double. He’s not using his bed obviously, so you’re welcome to it.”

Ellie’s eyes widened as she looked at me. “Me? Stay with you?”

“You’ve slept over at my house before,” I said easily. “This would hardly be our first sleepover.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t pack pajamas.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” I said, trying to keep my voice even, though the thought of seeing Ellie in nothing but her underwear was making me feel like I was fourteen years old and my voice was struggling to find its lower register while I battled puberty.

Ellie’s flush deepened. Really, though, it was the truth. With how close Aiden and I had always been, it was natural that Ellie had wanted to tag along with us as a kid. And my mother, being Lily Donovan, didn’t believe in excluding anyone.

So yes, Ellie and I had spent plenty of nights together. Hell, we had photos of me, her, and Aiden in the bathtub together when we were all toddlers. Of course, I didn’t remember those times. I remembered some of the sleepovers, especially once we’d started getting into our middle school years.

Things had gotten a little more awkward during those early teen years when I was figuring out I liked girls but wasn’t sure what to do with that knowledge. Mostly, we’d shot a lot of Nerf guns and water balloons at Ellie. Then Aiden and I had figured out how to get onto the roof of the garage and pull the ladder up before Ellie could join us, and we’d managed to get some time away from his little sister.

Not that *I’d* needed the time away from Ellie, but Aiden had pressed for it. He hadn’t loved that Ellie always wanted to tag along. To be fair, even back then, a part of me had wondered if the reason he pushed her away so hard was to keep things separate. His friendship with me. His sibling relationship with Ellie.

And I had to wonder if, even back then, he’d been jealous when Ellie would side with me. When we’d have our movie nights, Ellie and I would always vote for pineapple and bacon pizza and Aiden would be left scowling with his hand in the air for pepperoni.

When the three of us had ridden to school together, we’d switched off on who deejayed the radio controls. Aiden would always switch the channel to the popular pop tunes. Ellie and I leaned more toward the classics. And when we’d play kickball in the alley behind my house with my brothers, Ellie would always pick me first, even before Aiden. Before any of the other girls.

So now that I was a grown-ass adult looking back, I had to wonder once again if there was more to the story than I’d suspected at the time. I’d been so busy tamping down any feelings I might have toward Ellie that I’d never stopped to notice that maybe she’d returned the crush. I’d never really considered that the reason Aiden had pushed her away from us wasn’t

because she was annoying, but because she'd invested more of her attention on me than on him.

Feeling like I had a lot to unpack, I tucked Ellie under my arm, a bit too possessively, and marched her out of the room. We made it out of the banquet hall, back down to the main level, and I felt her tense as we reached the lobby. Her head turned as she glanced at the bar.

I stiffened when I saw Ken doll raise a hand from behind the counter. He was once again holding the broom from earlier, but instead of looking like some sort of entry-level janitor, he looked like he should be a model on some hot-dude calendar. I scowled when he started walking over to us.

"Travis," Ellie said, gently pushing away from me.

I made absolutely zero move to relinquish my hold on her. Instead, I stepped forward, keeping her locked under my arm.

"Hey, guys," Travis said, his cheerful eyes taking us both in. "Have a fun night? Stumbling out of here, I can see. Can I call you a cab?"

"I was going to book a room, actually," Ellie said, "but my friend had to leave, and—forget it. Long story."

"You need a place to stay?" Travis said. "I live down the road from here and have a guest bedroom. Or I'm sure I can get you a discount on a room at the hotel. It's a slow weekend for us aside from the party."

"She's staying with me," I said, "I have spare rooms."

Ellie wiggled out from under my arm. She glowered at me, but apparently decided she didn't want to out me then and there to her bartender friend. I folded my arms across my chest feeling like a jerk but equally unable to do much about it. The moment felt pretty unsalvageable at this point.

As I tried to tune out the sound of Ellie talking to Travis, I felt the same flutter in my chest that I'd felt when I was about sixteen. At another one of those core memories from my youth that I just couldn't seem to get over. Another sleepover with Ellie. Another missed opportunity, except this time the opportunity hadn't been missed so much as botched.

My mom had let me throw a little party in the basement for my friends one random weekend. It was during this event when someone had suggested a game of spin the bottle. And because we were all awkward and full of hormones, nobody had been brave enough to say no. So we'd played by default.

Well, my bottle spin had landed on Ellie. Aiden had visibly cringed when the spinning came to a stop on his sister. I did my best to blow it off and

laugh about it. Ellie had flushed, and I'd taken it to be embarrassed. She had been so shy at that age she'd clam up if she got called on in class. Then someone had dared us to do it, and I'd asked Ellie if it was okay. She'd nodded. We'd kissed.

And then we kept kissing. In my memory, it felt like our lips had been glued together for about three damn years. In reality, it was probably twenty seconds. But damned if it didn't bring Aiden to the cusp of exploding. Apparently I'd 'sucked his sister's face off' and he would 'make sure I could never have children' if I did anything like it again.

That was the year Ellie got boobs and a bikini and sunbathed at the pool with a book where I was a lifeguard. Every. Damn. Day. It was pretty fucking lucky that nobody had inhaled water in the pool that year and needed actual CPR because I'd been too busy hiding behind my sunglasses and trying to keep my eyes off my best friend's little sister. Lifeguard trunks didn't hide a whole lot of excitement.

That was the same summer the Donovans and the Turners had decided to go camping together, and I'd gotten thrown in a tent with Aiden and Ellie because we were 'the best of friends' of the group, and I'd had to sleep with a hard-on half the night because Ellie had snuggled up against me in her sleep while Aiden snored on my other side. I'd never in my life been so damn tired the next morning. Or frustrated—sexually, mentally, physically, emotionally.

Thankfully, that was the last time the Donovans and the Turners had gone camping together. Not because anyone had caught onto my little issue in sleeping next to Ellie, but because Bridget and her husband were a little nuts, and even Lily Donovan could only handle them in small doses.

"What do you say?"

I blinked. Ken Doll Travis was talking to me, and I'd been so lost in the memory of having to sleep with Ellie snuggled up next to me for the longest seven hours and twenty-three minutes of my life that I'd missed whatever he'd said completely.

"I've got an Uber headed this way," Travis said. "It's yours if you want it."

I didn't think twice. "I'm ready to get out of here."

"I thought you booked a room here," Ellie whispered. "You don't have to give it up for me."

"You didn't seem inclined to want to sleep next to me in the hotel room," I pointed out. "At least at my house, you can have your own room with a

locking door and it won't cost you a cent."

Ellie looked at me like she was ready to put a nail gun to my head. I had been a little dick-ish with Travis, I had to admit. And maybe a little dick-ish in trying to hold her captive to my side to give off the impression we were something that we very much weren't.

"Yeah," she said finally. "That sounds fine. Thanks for the help tonight, Trav."

"Call me while you're in town, yeah?" Travis gave her a little hug. "I'd love to catch up and hear about your life in the big city."

Ellie smiled, and as she opened her mouth, I squinted toward the front door and interrupted her.

"Is that our ride?" I asked. "The red Honda?"

Travis looked out the front door. "I don't think that's her car, but she'll be here any minute."

Behind Travis's back, Ellie gave me the middle finger. Apparently my coy little game wasn't very coy anymore. And Ellie wasn't here for it.

"I'll call you," Ellie said pointedly to Travis. "Thanks again for the booze and the ride."

I grudgingly thanked Travis as well after seeing the look on Ellie's face. And, of course, knowing it was the right thing to do. The only real bone I had to pick with Travis after all was the fact that he was good looking and on friendly terms with Ellie Turner. Hardly a reason to treat him like the devil incarnate.

Travis gave us a salute as he headed back to the bar. I ducked upstairs to grab my bag from the hotel room, then Ellie and I shuffled outside. She made sure to stay a step ahead of me, just out of arm's reach. When we reached the chilly outdoors, itsy bitsy snow flurries were falling, like the sky was decorating with a saltshaker full of glitter dust. It landed in Ellie's hair as she huddled against herself, looking miserable in her outfit.

"Why didn't you bring a jacket?" I asked.

"I left my jacket in the car because I didn't want to check it, and we were just running inside." Ellie glared at me. "I also left my duffle bag in the trunk. I wasn't thinking earlier. Now all my possessions are back in New York with Aiden and Katie."

"Technically you *were* thinking," I said, "just about other things."

She looked like she was unsure if I was being facetious or not.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, quickly trying to smooth things over. “I’ve got spare clothes, a spare room, and a shower. I can get you back to the city as soon as we wake up in the morning. I hitched a ride here, so I need a way back anyway.”

Just then a car pulled up, and I realized I knew the driver based solely on the vehicle. The driver was a woman named Angelica who spent more time getting high and playing video games than she did doing much else. She was great. Very nice. Incredibly chill. Her car was held together by bumper stickers and sheer good karma because she was so damn nice.

“Hey!” Angelica hollered out her car window. “What’s up, Noah? Trav didn’t tell me you were my fare. Hop aboard with your girlie.”

“I’m not his girlie,” Ellie said, but Angelica had already started rolling up the window against the chill.

Then Angelica started cursing like a sailor when the window wedged itself halfway open.

“Damn it all to shit-hell,” she said, smiling like she’d just won the lottery. “Maybe you feel like taking a look at that window while we drive, eh, Noah? The bastard keeps getting stuck.”

Ellie was looking like she really didn’t want to get inside the vehicle. I happened to know Angelica much better than she did, though, and I knew that Angelica took her job as one of the only Uber drivers within a fifty-mile radius very seriously. Or mostly seriously. Or a tiny bit seriously.

At least I could vouch to say that Angelica brought her vehicle in for regular maintenance at my shop. She often sat around and shot the breeze with me while I did repairs because there weren’t enough other Uber drivers around to get her a ride back. Plus, I suspected she liked my coffee, seeing as she drained me of at least three lattes every time she came in. Just last week, she’d stopped by for a diagnostic check on the car, claiming it was because her check engine light was on.

The check had turned up a myriad of issues. Angelica had shrugged them all off like she’d expected a poor report. Then she’d asked me for a refresh on her latte and had driven off with the check engine light still glowing proudly.

I happened to know that the damn light had been blinking at her for about five years. She hadn’t ever wanted to fix it. She’d just wanted access to my espresso machine. If she wasn’t so freaking nice to everyone, I might’ve been annoyed. But as it was, we had an odd sort of friendship as two people whose

livelihood depended on functioning cars, and I didn't mind sponsoring her caffeine addiction.

"It's okay," I whispered to Ellie as she stalled on the sidewalk like the concrete was still wet and her feet were stuck in it. "She's not as bad as she sounds."

"The car or the woman?"

"Both?" I said.

"That's not reassuring," Ellie muttered back, "because the car, at least, looks pretty bad."

Indeed, it was difficult to tell the original paint color of the vehicle. Even as the car idled, Angelica got out and, whistling the theme to Pokémon, hustled around the rear of the vehicle while pulling the colorful scrunchie-thing out of her hair. She tied that scrunchie around the side-view mirror which I just now realized had been dangling from a wire.

Then she scooted around the back of the car, pulled something out of her back pocket. I saw it was yet another bumper sticker. She slapped that sucker onto the taillight which looked like it had a new hole in it. Still whistling, she headed straight back to the driver's seat and hollered for us to hop in before she ran out of gas.

"If she kills us," Ellie whispered to me, "I'm coming back to haunt you for the rest of your life."

"If she kills us, I'll be dead too."

"You'd better hope so," Ellie said, "because I'm pretty sure I'd make for one helluva ghost, and you wouldn't want to be haunted by me."

We climbed into the car. I was in the middle of buckling my seatbelt when Angelica took off like Team Rocket was chasing her. She was still humming the Pokémon theme song. It was going to be stuck in my head for weeks.

"My seatbelt doesn't work," Ellie said.

"Yeah, that bad boy snapped off last time I got into an accident."

Angelica interrupted her tune to explain. "Haven't been in an accident since, so your odds are okay."

"Okay," Ellie mouthed to me.

I ran a hand over my face. So maybe I'd based my opinion of Angelica on the fact that she was always nice to me, and she sometimes gave out rides for free, and she genuinely seemed to be a cheerful person. I just assumed the part about her being a decent driver.



Ellie reached for my hand as we skidded around a corner.

“Black ice there,” Angelica said without tapping the brakes. “Just gotta fly on through it. The brakes don’t do much. Speaking of, they’ve been squeaking, Noah. Do you think brakes or alternators are a higher priority, if we’re splitting hairs here? I’ve only got the funds for one.”

Ellie blinked at me. I made a noncommittal noise in my throat.

“Actually, I’ll just bring her by the shop for another diagnostic check sometime this week,” Angelica said. “That should do the trick.”

I made a mental note to make sure I picked up more lactose free milk to have on hand because last time, she’d complained I’d given her ‘painful amounts of gas’ by serving her a whole milk latte. If that sounded like it was too much information from a client it was because it was.

“So when are the two of you getting married?” Angelica asked. “That was a wedding party at the hotel tonight, yeah?”

“My sister’s,” Ellie said through clenched teeth. “*Not* mine.”

“That’s great,” Angelica said. “They didn’t happen to send you home with doggy bags, did they? I love buffet food.”

“It wasn’t a buffet,” Ellie said, as if carrying on a conversation was helping her from having a heart attack.

“Even better,” Angelica said. “So is that a yes to a doggy bag?”

“No,” Ellie said, “but if you get us home in one piece, you can have the goody bag they sent home with us.”

“Sweet.”

I’d been sort of hoping to have a quiet conversation with Ellie on the way home from the event, but that obviously wasn’t happening. Ellie alternated between shooting me glares filled with disdain and squeezing my hand for dear life. I vastly preferred the latter to the former, even if she did quite possibly fracture several smaller bones in my hand. I could only imagine being the person to be holding Ellie’s hand when the time came for her to have a kid if this was how hard she squeezed during an Uber ride.

I made the mistake of having that thought during one of the times Ellie was holding onto my hand like the world was ending, and I squeezed her hand right back so hard I made her yelp.

Angelica looked into the rearview mirror and gave me a thumbs up with absolutely no subtlety.

“I’m fine with a cute couple like you getting a little hot and heavy in the backseat, but keep the clothes on until you’re in your own home, got it? It’s a

newer rule of mine, but you know what they say—rules exist for a reason. Gotta learn from past experiences.”

Ellie winced and looked down at the seat fabric like it might be contagious.

“Don’t worry,” Angelica said, looking at her. “I got the car cleaned real good after the last ride when someone puked. It’s good as new.”

It was about three more verses of the Pokémon theme song that got us home. I was a little relieved that Ellie’s disgust at the car ride overshadowed anything else. Say, for example, the reason I’d squeezed her hand like I was in labor.

Because the thought of Ellie pregnant, having kids, starting a family, had hit some primal button in me. It wasn’t like this information was new to me. I’d always known in the back of my head that Ellie would grow up. Get married. Settle down. Maybe get a dog or a kid.

But in the past, it had always seemed so far away. Like it was some distant reality that I didn’t really have to worry about. Like it might never come. Like how it felt to middle schoolers to know that someday they’d have to move out of their parents’ home—something to think about, sure, but nothing that affected them immediately.

Except in this scenario, it felt like I was suddenly eighteen and in the middle of senior slide, paying for my cap and gown and staring down the barrel at prom with graduation just around the corner, the threat of moving out soon to follow.

I wasn’t sure if these thoughts were just hitting me harder now because it’d been so long since I’d seen Ellie. It’d been several years since I’d really spent any time with her, and there was simply no denying that she was a real adult now. She hadn’t moved to New York and then come running home with her tail between her legs a month later. Ellie was there, doing her thing, living her life, pursuing her career. She wasn’t coming back. She seemed happy.

Even though I’d wanted her to succeed in New York, there’d been a piece of me wondering if, like so many others, she’d move there and come back when things got hard. When her dream career didn’t fall into her lap. When she got stuck in a crappy apartment. When she realized the streets of New York could be just as dirty and frightening as they could be glittery and thrilling.

But I should’ve known. Maybe I had known all along. Ellie had more grit than anyone else in my life. How could she not, considering the family she’d

grown up with? Considering all the shit she'd had to deal with from her parents? New York couldn't hold a candle to her resilience.

So I hadn't actually been surprised when she'd made a real life for herself out there. The thing that surprised me now was the realization of how much Ellie *didn't* belong in Fantasie anymore. Ellie didn't know the little things anymore, like the fact that Angelica had brought Uber to our small town. Everybody knew Angelica. But not Ellie because she no longer fit in here.

Angelica's stop in my driveway was abrupt. Of course she hadn't needed directions. Of course she hadn't needed her GPS. Because Angelica was from Fantasie. I was from Fantasie. Ellie had been from Fantasie, but she'd wiped that slate clean when she'd taken the train to New York almost a decade ago.

I handed over a wad of cash as a tip to Angelica who rifled through it and tucked it into her pocket. Then she gave me a salute and a wink and told me to 'get lucky' before squealing out of my front yard. She narrowly missed running over my mailbox and gave the recycling bin sitting at the end of my driveway a little love tap before squealing off in the opposite direction.

Ellie turned to look at me. She seemed to be holding her breath so she wouldn't explode all over me. All I could do was grin back at her and raise my arms in surrender.

"You made it alive," I offered. "And to that point, I expect Angelica's going to be back looking for that goody bag you promised her."

Ellie rolled her eyes and stomped toward the front door.

I followed, still feeling a little dizzy from my epiphany in the car that Ellie just might get married and have kids sooner rather than later. Assuming she met someone. And that thought had my stomach feeling all sorts of knotty.

As I unlocked the front door, I was beginning to think a sleepover with Ellie Turner was quite possibly the worst idea on the planet. Because I had not been prepared for my feelings for my childhood crush to return in such full force upon seeing her again. And now that we were both adults, was there really anything stopping us from acting on those feelings?

Except, quite possibly, the threat of dismemberment from Ellie's very frightening big brother...and my best friend?



## Chapter 7

**E**llie We barely made it in the front door before it bubbled out of me. “What the hell was that, Noah?”

Noah locked his door behind him, then cast a glance at me standing in his front hallway and sighed. He ran a hand through his adorably ruffled hair and let out a breath slowly.

“I had no idea Angelica drove like that. I’d always assumed that because she was doing well as an Uber driver, she was a good driver. I admit that I assumed wrong.”

“Doing *well*?” I held up my phone where I’d pulled up the Uber app. “Angelica has two stars if I round up.”

“It was a free ride.”

“Not the way you tip,” I retorted. “Not to mention, I’d rather have walked than died.”

“We survived.”

Actually, I hadn’t been trying to pick a bone with him about Angelica. Though in my defense it was a very reasonable bone to pick. “Don’t get me started on the fact that her window didn’t work, nor did her heat, nor did her radio if her humming that soundtrack to that annoying song I can’t quite place is anything to go by.”

“Pokémon.”

“What?”

“It was the Pokémon theme song.”

I snapped my finger in relief. “Yes! That has been eluding me since she turned her mouth-radio on. Thank you,” I said a little grudgingly. “It would’ve driven me nuts trying to figure out what she was singing.”

“Anytime. Now would you like—”

“That’s not what I’m mad about,” I shot, interrupting him before he could change the subject and, God forbid, be kind enough to me once again that I forgot about picking the rest of my bones with him.

“It’s not?” Noah leaned against his front entryway. “How long is this list of complaints? Can I get you a glass of wine? A cup of coffee?”

“Yes,” I said, practically shouting. “I would really like a cup of coffee.”

“Fine,” he practically shouted back, his eyes twinkling as he obviously mocked my angry acceptance of his hospitality. “I’ll put on a pot.”

I wound my way after him into his kitchen. I was so focused on keeping my list of grievances top of mind that I barely noticed Noah’s house around me. What I did notice, however, was nice. So nice that I added the niceness right onto the list of my grievances.

Noah’s home was on a plot of land that had been nothing but open fields when we’d been kids. It backed up to thick forests teeming with white-dusted evergreens in the thick of winter.

When we’d arrived out front, I’d noticed—between heart palpitations from Angelica’s skid into the driveway—the neat little shop right next to his house. The sign that had hung out front said **NOAH’S** in a simple neon font. It had looked neat and modern and relatively high end for a car shop with new-looking garage doors and absolutely zero clutter in the parking lot out front.

Which was why his actual home had surprised me. The shop was all black and metallic and full-wall-windows. It burst with sleek modern design. I’d expected his home to be the same, almost cold in its staged perfection. But I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Noah’s house looked like a cottage tucked into a little alcove of evergreens, as if the very forest was protective of his home. The exterior was covered in off-white siding, and pretty window boxes adorned the outside. They were currently bare, which was a shame. I’d love to have window boxes in my New York apartment to decorate for the seasons, but alas, I was lucky to have space for a microwave. In the living room sat a big, rock fireplace that I bet piped out smoke on cold days when Noah lit the fire in the hearth.

The decor of Noah’s place was homey and warm. Simple, mostly manly, very inviting. Art hung on the wall, lots of cars and nature type things, but in nice-looking frames and thoughtful arrangements. Throw pillows were scattered across the over-stuffed couch. The pillows didn’t match, and they were a little old and threadbare, but they looked cozy. Snuggly blankets were tossed over the ottoman like they’d been in use and then rapidly discarded. The faint smell of smoke as if a fire had been burning in that hearth not all that long ago lingered pleasantly.

“Regular or decaf?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I’m a New Yorker. I live on caffeine. I can down a latte and fall asleep five minutes later.”

Noah turned back to make coffee with a grin on his face, but it was a complex grin. Not the bright, gut-splitting smile I liked to see there.

“A New Yorker, huh?” he said mildly once his back was to me. “You’ve spent more of your life in Fantasie than New York, technically.”

“Yes, but I didn’t choose it to be that way. My entire adult life I’ve chosen to live in New York, and I think that counts for more than being held captive in a small town.”

“Held captive,” he repeated.

“I’m exaggerating,” I said, plopping myself at his kitchen table, a round oak thing with scratches on it in a way that told me it had been well-used, well-loved. Like the dinners here were more about family and food and conversation than about the appearances of those same things.

Unlike at my parents’ house where things had been all about appearance. One time I’d accidentally made a water ring on the kitchen table from a glass when I was six, my mother had taken my allowance for three months to put toward the refinishing ‘she’d just have to do’. After that, coasters had become my best friend.

So when Noah handed me a surprisingly delicious smelling cup of coffee and I asked for a coaster, and he looked at me like I was nuts, I felt a little embarrassed. Like the upbringing I hadn’t wanted was showing through. I’d tried to scrub myself from the lingering effects of growing up in the Turner household, but I hadn’t fully succeeded.

“Coasters at the dinner table?” Noah remarked like it was a completely foreign concept.

“You know my mother,” I said simply. “Old habits.”

Noah gave a slow nod. “Yes, I do remember that now. Coasters on every damn surface of her house. Does she collect them?”

“Oh, it’s nothing that interesting,” I said. “I think she bulk orders them from Pottery Barn.”

Noah made a little noise in his throat that told me exactly what he thought about that.

“Sometimes,” I said, playing with the edge of a napkin as I wiggled my eyebrows, “she might branch out and order from Crate and Barrel. You know, if she’s feeling really inspired.”

“Oh, God,” Noah said. “Is that a shipping store?”

I laughed, completely taken aback by Noah’s delightful disinterest and obliviousness to name brand things.

“If it’s not clear by my place...” Noah waved a hand a bit apologetically, “I don’t care much about labels.”

“I think your place is great,” I found myself reassuring him before I could remember that I was supposed to be airing my grievances in a less than agreeable manner.

Noah raised his eyebrows like he didn’t quite believe me.

“I mean it,” I said, glancing around his kitchen. “I really like your artwork. And that living room looks like a dream on a winter’s day. Comfy couch, old quilt, roaring fire. It’s really great.”

“Really.”

“Really,” I said again. “If I’d grown up in a place like this, maybe I wouldn’t have felt such a burning desire to get away from it.”

“Have you ever considered the fact that it’s not Fantasie that you have a problem with, but something else?”

Noah was tiptoeing around the delicate relationships I balanced within my family tree. Like he didn’t actually want to derail our conversation by insulting me or anyone else.

“It’s possible. I mean, two out of the three Turner kids moved out on their eighteenth birthdays by choice, which is probably saying something about the way I grew up. And the one who didn’t is...well, Monica.”

“Uh huh.”

“But New York has been good to me. I met some really good friends there, and there are more people like me in the city than here.”

“People like you?”

“You know, people who don’t fit in. It’s easier to not fit in when you’re in a city with millions of people. You can just sort of blend in. You don’t stick out like a sore thumb because you’re different.”

“I think being different is a good thing,” Noah said, “and nobody else in Fantasie thought you were weird besides your family. There’s a lot I could say on that, but I won’t because we’re drunk, and I don’t want to say something I’ll regret.”

“Smart man.” I sat back in the weathered kitchen chair with an intricately carved back design on it and tucked my legs up despite my short dress. I pulled the coffee to me and took a sip. “How is this so good?”

“I’m telling you,” Noah said, raising his glass in a salute, “just because Fantasie’s a smaller town doesn’t mean we’re animals. Even a small town guy like me can appreciate a decent cup of joe.”



“Do you know what?” I leaned forward. “This is better than just about anything I’ve had in New York. Granted, I buy a lot of convenience store coffee because I’m broke, but still. Every now and then I splurge for the good stuff. If you wanted to open up a coffee shop alongside your garage, you could do it.”

“No interest,” Noah said, “though I think some people already feel like I’m running a coffee shop here.”

“Huh?”

“Angelica comes in at least once a week for a diagnostic check on her car, and—”

“Do you tell her to let it rest in pieces already? For Pete’s sake.”

Noah grinned, and this time it was a real smile. That mood-lifting, panty-melting smile that made me feel like I was the only girl in the world when he shined it at me.

“Anyway, I’m pretty sure she just uses my garage as a place to sit around and sip free lattes between Uber rides.”

“You’re saying that you *knew* the laundry list of problems on her car, and you still agreed to get inside of it? People in Fantasie are crazier than I remember.”

Noah was all out laughing by the time I finished my theory, and I was torn between wanting to laugh and returning to safe ground where I wasn’t having so much fun with my brother’s best friend. So I took another sip of coffee.

I figured that if Noah’s sizzling looks or sparkling personality weren’t enough to make me fall in love with him, then his barista skills might just do the trick. That was the thought that made my stomach quiver and my mind urge me to retreat, retreat, retreat to safer ground.

“Speaking of death traps,” I said, “I have not finished my list of grievances with you.”

“I was just trying to distract you until I got some caffeine in my system so I could properly address your comment cards on my concierge services. Go on.”

“What the hell was that with Travis?”

“Who?” Noah looked genuinely confused for a long moment. Then, “Oh, Ken doll.”

“What?”

“The bartender.”

“He’s not Ken doll. He’s a super nice guy.”

“Okay. If handing out free prosecco makes this guy a hero, then I guess.”

I narrowed my eyes at Noah. “Travis was nothing but nice to you, and you couldn’t stand to be nice to him. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Then you were all touch-feely with me in front of him like you were trying to give off couple vibes.”

“I thought women liked that.” Noah paused, then looked at my face and obviously realized he’d need to explain that thought further. “I thought it was chivalrous when a guy pretended to be a woman’s boyfriend to ward off creeps.”

“Yeah, sure, but I didn’t see any creeps,” I said. “I really like Travis. He was always nice to me.”

“My bad.” Noah didn’t exactly sound sincere, and he didn’t exactly make eye contact.

“Don’t *my bad* me. Why’d you do that in the first place?”

“I misjudged the situation.” Noah still didn’t look at me.

“You’re full of crap,” I said, pushing my chair back from the table. “And you’re not stupid. At least man up to whatever was really happening.”

“Was that a compliment?” Noah rose as well, taunting me with his cute face as he leaned over the table. “In that case, thank you.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “You might not be stupid, but sometimes you’re a real idiot.”

I started stalking away from the table, but on second thought, I turned back to retrieve my mug full of coffee because it was annoyingly delicious. I sucked it down like it was cough syrup, slammed the cup on the table, and then properly resumed my stalking off.

While I’d called Noah an idiot, I wasn’t exactly sure what that made me as I stalked away from *his* dinner table, in *his* house, back into *his* hallway. Because I’d just stalked off from him with no real idea where I was going and that didn’t say a lot about my IQ.

There was no way in hell I was walking out of here tonight in my drunken state and high heels and little dress. And I sure as hell wasn’t calling Angelica back for another ride. So I was a little stumped as to where I’d intended to stalk off to as Noah lazily followed me, leaning against the doorway and sipping at that delicious coffee.

I turned my sights on a set of French doors I'd initially missed when I'd first entered the house and pushed them open, finding myself in a bona fide library slash office with wall-to-wall bookshelves and a big mahogany desk.

I flicked on the light switch and a dim glow filled the room, giving off a cozy, romantic ambiance. I could snuggle up in an armchair here and draw for hours, the quiet lull of thousands and thousands of pages of books and stories and manuscripts all around me. I could sit here and sip ridiculously lovely coffee and look out the window at the pretty, snow-covered evergreen forest and watch as snowflakes curled down from the sky and fire cracked next to me. I could see it all.

But something interrupted my daydreams as I stood in the office and scanned the bookshelves. Most of the books looked older, weathered, their spines cracked and worn as if they'd been read hundreds of times. As if this whole collection of books had been second or third or fourth hand, passed down from one person to the next.

Except for one row. I whispered under my breath counting eight—*eight?!—*copies of a children's book on the shelf closest to the window. They were perched right in the middle of the shelves as if spotlighted for guests to see. As if the books' owner was proud to have them displayed in his collection. They had their own set of bookends, little metal cars, that held them up.

These books, unlike the rest, were colorful. All the same bright yellow spine. All the same title. All the same author name down the side.

*My name.*

"What the hell is this?" I whispered.

I walked across the room, bypassing all of the fancy tomes and encyclopedia collections and literary masterpieces to find my little children's book—*eight copies of it?!—*displayed proudly on Noah's shelves.

I turned and found Noah still lounging against the door to the office, but this time instead of it looking like he was holding the wall up, it was the other way around. He looked like he might collapse and it was just luck that his huge figure was balanced in the sturdy doorway to keep him from melting into a puddle on the floor.

Noah cleared his throat. "I mean, I think you know what it is."

"Yeah, you have my book." I pulled one from the shelf. It was stiff, new. It hadn't been read. "Why do you have it? Plus seven other copies?"

Noah shoved his hands into his pocket, twitched that dark hair out of his eyes. "Because you wrote it."

The way he spoke, it was like that answer should be enough. Like the fact that it was something I'd made, something I'd felt passionate about, was enough of a reason to have it. I couldn't quite understand why, but that affected me more than I could've expected.

Sure, I'd been touched when Katie had bought ten copies and a bottle of champagne on my book's release day, but I knew she'd done that just out of obligation, and because she was a good friend, and because she knew I'd been terrified that I wouldn't sell a single copy.

And I'd equally tried not to be hurt when the copy I'd autographed to my mother had turned up in a Little Free Library two towns over because she hadn't wanted to spread the news of my 'creative endeavors' in our hometown.

"I've sold about twelve copies of this book," I said, "if I take out the ten copies that Katie bought on release day."

"Fucking slacker," he muttered under his breath. Then he winked at me. "She only bought ten? I bought the other twelve copies."

That should've made me feel horrible. Really terrible to know that the only copies of my illustrated children's book had gone to people I'd known, and actually zero copies had reached my actual intended audience: children.

But somehow, it didn't. It made me feel warmer and more intoxicated than before. Because somehow being drunk was the only thing that helped me understand—or not understand—this situation.

"How'd you even know I published this book?" I asked. "I didn't really tell anyone. It was just a passion project. You know, to see if I could do it. Write and illustrate and publish it myself."

"And you did it." Noah finally found the energy to take a few steps into the room. "I thought that was pretty fucking great. You've always been a talented artist—that's no surprise to anybody."

Noah reached over me to take a second copy of my book off the shelf. As he did, the scent of him, warm and homey, a little pine and spice and coffee wrapped around me like a fuzzy robe, and a part of me wanted to lean into him, wanted to snuggle up against that big chest so he could hold me and make everything else disappear.

"C'mon," he said, standing too close to me. He'd dropped his cup off on the desk on his way across the room. "I couldn't pass up the story of Rusty." I blinked. "You remember?"

"Of course I remember Rusty. How could I forget?"

I'd come up with the idea of *Rusty*, the title of my one and only children's book, on that fateful camping trip in which I'd accidentally snuggled up against Noah Donovan in my sleep. I remembered waking up feeling hot and bothered and completely embarrassed by my physical reaction to him. But I also remembered the conversation from the night before, when it had been just Noah and I talking late into the darkness before I'd accidentally curled into him and fallen asleep.

After Aiden had fallen asleep in our tent and was sawing logs, Noah and I started shooting the breeze to pass the time. It'd slowly morphed into us sharing our dreams, those wild and elusive dreams that only made sense under the cover of night to optimistic teenagers.

I'd shared that it had always been my dream to write and illustrate children's books. To use my art in a way that made kids feel happy and joyful. Instead of laughing at my ambitions like I'd suspected, like my parents had done when I'd told them, Noah had simply squeezed my hand in my sleeping bag and told me that he knew I'd do it.

I'd lain in that tent, on the cold, hard ground, my eyes smarting. Aside from Aiden, nobody had ever believed in me like that. Just implicitly, without explanation, without reason, without logic. He'd just *believed*. In me.

That moment stuck out in my memory as the night I knew that somehow, somehow, I was in love with Noah Donovan. I also knew that there was nothing I could do about it.

Noah was my big brother's hot best friend. He was popular. Two years older than me. He was well-loved in a town that felt like it had rejected me. The two of us didn't make any sort of sense. So as clearly as I'd known that I loved him, I'd also realized that my love would have to be from afar. That we could never have anything outside of the friendship we'd already cultivated.

After reassuring me that I could achieve my dreams, Noah had then left my hand tucked into his as he started spit balling ideas for kids books with me. Silly, ridiculous, wonderful ideas. A flamingo who'd been born blue. An airplane that couldn't fly. A monster who didn't want to be scary. But the real winner had been *Rusty*, the old red truck who lived on a farm and didn't belong because he was broken down and rusted. Everyone had thought he had been useless and ugly, a heap of scrap metal, until he would inevitably come through and save the day.

It wasn't all that genius or original of a story idea. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't anything new. But it was ours, and it combined Noah and me. His

love of rehabbing old cars and bringing them back to life. My love of art and storytelling. It had been ours and that was what had made it special above all else.

“I can’t believe you remember that night,” I said, glancing down at the book in my hands. “I mean, the camping trip when we came up with Rusty’s character.”

“Rusty became a big part of our lives.” Noah winked at me, giving me the opportunity to let some of the tension drain that’d crept between us. “I’ve got a portrait of him on my wall.”

Noah nodded his head, and I turned to find the picture I’d drawn of Rusty the red truck. Sure enough, it was hanging on the wall behind the desk in the office. I’d illustrated it for him as his graduation gift, back when I was way too broke to buy anything of real value. I’d signed it with a scribble and, on the back, had inscribed:

***For Noah,***

***You can sell this for the big bucks when I’m famous.***

***You’re welcome.***

***Love, Ellie***

I had meant it to be a joke, but it had never truly been a joke to me. I’d just told myself it was a joke so it wouldn’t hurt when Noah viewed it as a laugh. It had been the story I’d told myself so that it would sting less when he tossed it out with the rest of his graduation cards.

“You framed Rusty?”

“Hell yeah, I did,” Noah said, almost sounding proud. “I wasn’t going to let that bad boy slip out of my fingers and get auctioned off for millions when you became famous.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. It’s taking a little longer for that to pay out than I intended,” I said with a faux-wince.

“I’d never part with it anyway,” he said flippantly.

“Or maybe it was just a long con to not have to spend money on a graduation present for you.”

“This was the best kind of gift. Frankly, it’s the only one I remember after all these years.”

We were dangerously close to a lot of things. Dangerously close to one of those tender moments I hadn’t felt with anyone since I’d been a teenager in a sleeping bag. Dangerously close to one another in physical proximity. I could feel his big figure radiating warmth next to me. Dangerously close to having

our hands brush against one another. Dangerously close to wondering what a kiss might feel like all these years later. Or maybe that was just me, but it was definitely me.

“You still haven’t explained why you bought twelve copies of my stupid book,” I said. “I could see one copy maybe, you know, like how a mom hangs artwork up on a fridge that everyone knows is terrible but she feels obligated to display it, but twelve? You’re just papering that fridge with old report cards,” I joked. “I’d hate to see how many popsicle stick art projects you’ll save when you have kids of your own someday.”

A complex look crossed Noah’s face, and he turned to face me square on. It was possibly the first time that I’d ever realized his physical presence could be intimidating to someone not in his inner circle. He was big, dark, serious. I’d just never thought of him that way because he’d always been *My Noah*, not some stranger I was sizing up for the first time. It must have just been the years away from him that had dulled my remembrance of his physical size.

Noah reached for me, rested his hands on my shoulders. I thought he might just kiss me when he looked me in the eyes, but instead he gave a mystified shake of his head. “It’s not stupid, Ellie. Nothing about you or what you do is stupid. I think it’s pretty fucking amazing, actually.”

I licked my lips, not used to this level of attention from anyone or anything. Sure, Aiden had always been supportive. He asked about my ‘art’ like he was trying to encourage me but didn’t really know what to say about it. He’d asked for a signed copy of my book, and I’d sent it to him, but he’d never mentioned reading it let alone looking at it, and I sure as hell could guess that it wasn’t displayed on a shelf like it was here.

All that to say Aiden had been the only one who even tried to be supportive in my family. Which was why this version of Noah was a little hard for me to handle. A little hard to decipher. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why he believed in me so much. Why he’d followed my lackluster career as a moderately talented artist in a city full of exceedingly talented creative types.

“Okay,” I managed.

“I ordered those books because I wanted them.” Noah rubbed a hand over that gorgeous face that was starting to look a bit tired. “I’m going to kill myself for saying this in the morning when I’m sober, but every once in a while I’d Google you just to see where you were in your career. I always knew you’d succeed, it was just a matter of how many times I had to type

your name in the search bar before results would start popping up. So when I got a result that you'd published a book, I bought it without thinking."

"Twelve of them?"

"They're kids books," he said with a shrug. "I've got a massive family. I give them out as gifts at birthday parties. When a kid stops by the shop and needs to kill time while their mom's car is getting fixed, I hand one over. That sort of thing. The only reason you haven't sold more copies is because nobody's heard about you. I figure, if I can get the word out about you a little more, maybe you'll get a few more sales when you publish the sequel."

"The sequel? There's no sequel."

"There should be," he muttered. "I'd hate to say goodbye to Rusty after just one installment. Plus, that chicken in the book is fucking hilarious."

"You actually read it?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course I read it. That's what you're supposed to do with books. Not to mention, I know I was the unnamed mystery person you referred to in the dedication. How could I not read a book that was dedicated to me?"

"My you're confident."

"Not confident, just observant." Noah grinned broadly. "Unless you were talking about some other childhood friend with a love of junky old cars?"

I had an image of Noah then, my big, lumberjack Noah dressed in a flannel shirt, his hulking figure tucked onto that threadbare couch before the fire, grease up to his elbows while he sipped whiskey on ice and cracked open a children's book as his Saturday night entertainment.

The image just about made me cry. So naturally I burst out laughing, in hopes to avoid tears. It worked because Noah looked at me like I had a tinge of psychopath in my blood.

"Why are you like this?" I blurted out.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Supportive. Sweet. You are being so nice to me."

"You mean I'm being a decent human being?"

I swallowed hard. "It's just..."

When it became clear I was struggling to finish that sentence, Noah stepped closer to me, so close that I took a step back in surprise. I bumped back against the big mahogany desk.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said in that deep, rolling tone.

"No, it's fine." I felt boiling hot after our close encounter, even though he stayed a foot back. "You were saying?"



“I’m saying you don’t need to be this appreciative of me. You don’t need to thank me or question why I’d want to be supportive of you.” Noah crossed his arms. “You’re Ellie Turner, and you’re a fucking rockstar.”

“But I’m not,” I insisted. “I’m scraping by. I can barely afford rent in New York in a tiny two bedroom with a roommate. I literally self-published my book because no publisher would touch it. You realize that used to be called vanity publishing?”

“All I know is that you are smart and driven and talented.” Noah wasn’t backing away from his support. If anything, he was doubling, tripling down. “Just because you don’t have the sort of family unit that supports you in the way you should be supported doesn’t mean you’re less than.”

The gap between us sizzled with anticipation. It felt like one thousand suns were burning down on us in this tight, cramped library that was too cozy and too perfect. In a moment that was too tender and too raw. With a man who was too beautiful and too kind.

“I’ve always cared about you,” Noah said, his voice coarse, rough as sandpaper.

“If you’re acting this way because you feel like I’m some sort of little sister to you—”

“Ellie.” Noah sounded a little strangled. “I’ve never looked at you like a little sister.”

“But—”

Something shot into Noah’s eyes, a dark sort of poison that dilated his pupils and changed his posture to seem even bigger, even sturdier, more aggressive. Like a cornered animal.

“Ellie,” he said, and this time his voice was a whisper, the exact opposite of everything he was in this moment. Big, strong, hard. Yet his voice was soft, tinged with an edge of pleading. “I have never looked at you like a sister.”

Before I could fully contemplate those words, his big strong hands reached out and took my face in his. He closed the gap between us, ramping up the temperature of those thousands of suns until we were burning up like kindling in a bonfire. Quick, fluttering flames licked my stomach. Where his hands landed on my cheeks felt like an inferno.

Noah waited just long enough, a hair longer than I would’ve liked, to give me the chance to back away. I could’ve done it. Easily. I could’ve saved us from the heartache of what we both knew would come next, but I didn’t.

Instead, I slipped my arms around his waist, pulled his body against me. I leaned in, pressing my lips to his, making the choice to turn whatever relationship we'd been carefully balancing all these years on its head.

“Fuck,” he muttered when we both paused for air. “You have no clue how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

I murmured something in response, but my arms were busy tangling their way around his neck as his hands slipped down from my face and grabbed at my hips. The way his fingers dug into the skin of my waist, way too low to be anything decent, drove me mad. It was enough to convince me there were no thoughts of being his little sister, or Aiden’s little sister, or anything but my own woman in this moment.

I nipped at his lower lip, then let him take the lead as he lifted me onto the desk. The sound of things clattering to the floor vaguely echoed in the back of my head, but not enough to be concerned about those clattering things. I only had room to be concerned about the way my legs found themselves wrapping around Noah’s waist.

He groaned, leaned into me, and I could feel his erection pressing between my legs. A heavy weight pooled between my thighs, my skimpy black dress not in any way, shape, or form covering me. Then his hands twitched at my dress to situate me better, and the dress hiked up to my belly, draping over my upper thighs but leaving most else exposed. Like my lacy black undies which I really hadn’t been wearing for any special reason. Though I was glad to give them a special reason to be seen, all things considered.

“Damn, El, you feel good.” Noah’s hand dug through my ponytail, tugging, pulling my head back so my chin tipped upward. “Everything about you feels good, baby.”

I curled into him in silent agreement. The way he’d called me baby, the way he tugged at my hair demanding I look him in the eyes as he shifted impossibly closer to me, brought years and years of old feelings bubbling to the surface.

I had dreamed of this moment, fantasized about it. I’d stood beside Noah freaking Donovan for years pretending he meant nothing to me. Pretending that his hard muscles did nothing to my hormones. Pretending that those eyes didn’t ignite something in my belly. Pretending that I didn’t want to be the woman on his arm.

And now it was hard to pretend anymore. It was hard to pretend I didn't want him inside of me. It was hard to pretend I wasn't halfway to falling in love with my older brother's best friend all over again. It was hard to pretend this didn't feel exactly right.



## Chapter 8

**E**llie

“Stop thinking so damn much.”

I looked at Noah as he startled me from my thoughts about him. I burst out in laughter. “Am I that easy to read?”

“I’ve been reading you like a book since high school.”

“I don’t know if we should be doing this,” I admitted.

“Do you want me to stop?” Noah’s eyes clouded with concern, his hands frozen. “I never intended to make you uncomfortable.”

“Noah—”

“We can forget this ever happened. I’ll never say another word about it.”

“Noah.”

“I’m sorry if I read the situation wrong—”

“Noah! I don’t want you to stop.” I grabbed his shirt, pulled him lower toward me, brushed my lips against his. “I kissed you first, remember?”

His eyes darkened. “I didn’t know it was a competition.”

“I’m just saying, for the record, you don’t need to overthink anything.”

“Then why are we still talking?”

“Beats me.”

This time I let him take the lead as he rushed his lips to mine, his tongue snaking between my lips, parting them hungrily. His hands gripped my arms, my biceps, as he held me against him, his fingers curling into my skin like he damned well knew he’d be leaving his mark on me. Like he *intended* to make his mark on me

“Shit,” he muttered, more to himself than to me. “I can’t handle this, El. I want you so badly. So fucking badly.”

“I want you too.”

Noah’s hands slid down my arms. His hands lingered by my wrists. I was balancing myself on the desk, my legs wrapped around his waist. I’d taken my heels off at the door, so my feet were bare as I dragged him closer to me, needing to put an end to the pressure in my sensitive zone.

“I want to be inside you so badly,” Noah said. “I’ve got a condom.”

“Good,” I said, my voice sounding a little extra breathy. “Works for me.”

“The things I have dreamed about doing to you.” Noah pressed his lips roughly against my ear, nipped, wound his fingers into my ponytail until he

teased out the ribbon and let my hair fall around my shoulders. As he freed my hair, he paused, almost recoiled slightly, taking in the new look with my hair down.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re so damn gorgeous.” He swallowed, and it looked painful, like he was chewing on glass. “I’ve waited to be here for years, Ellie. Fucking years.”

“No you haven’t.”

Noah dipped his head again, brushed a necklace of kisses around my collarbone. He ran his fingers through my hair like it was spun gold, precious and fragile and a little bit magic. His breath burned against my ear as he whispered to me.

“I have,” he murmured. “I’ve dreamed of what it would feel like to hold you. To see you naked. To feel my cock sliding into you, baby. The thoughts I’ve had about you...” He sucked in air through his teeth, shook his head. “It’d make you blush.”

I was pretty sure my cheeks were already Barbie-pink and then some. I wasn’t the sort of girl that men saw in bars and approached. I wasn’t the sort of woman men were inspired to talk dirty to. I wasn’t the desired one. But here we were, and I was pretty sure we were in the throes of desire, and I could hardly comprehend any of it.

My breath was coming in shorter bursts, and I didn’t know what to say that could top any of the things Noah had uttered, so I settled for letting my arms fall from his neck down to his hips. I hooked my fingers into his waistband and jerked him toward me, his hardness pressed against my core. I hoped that showed how in agreement I was with everything he’d said and then some.

“Do you feel what you do to me?” Noah’s voice sounded like he was gritting his teeth together to hold things inside. All sorts of things.

He pressed harder into me, letting me feel him, the entire length of him. I gulped as his hands slid beneath my dress, his fingers spreading wide to palm my ass, to keep me close against him.

“Uh, yeah,” I managed. “I do feel that.”

Noah threw his head back, laughed. “Are you nervous, Ellie Turner?”

“I’m not all that experienced,” I said, feeling my ears turning pink to match my cheeks. “This is sort of new territory for me.”

I felt the moment my words registered with Noah. The moment he went still, his entire body frozen pressed against me in the same position. “Don’t tell me you’ve never—”

“No, I’m not a virgin,” I said quickly. “But I’ve only been with a couple of guys, and the sex wasn’t particularly memorable, and those men definitely weren’t, uh, packing such a punch, if you know what I mean.”

Noah looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He stayed frozen for a long moment. “And you’re sure you want to do this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Baby, those idiots don’t know what they were missing out on.”

“Huh?”

“You’re insanely gorgeous. I mean, look at you. Plus, you’re funny? Smart? It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that any man who sleeps with you is the lucky one. And it’s a damn shame those men didn’t realize that, or else they would’ve made sure you fucking remembered it.”

“Oh.” The word was more of a gasp.

Noah’s fingers were playing with the lace of my panties which were more than a little bit wet. I was fantastically positive this was already the best sexual experience of my life, and we hadn’t even gotten to the good stuff yet. My brain felt like it might actually explode if things progressed, but I was willing to take that risk.

“I can promise you one thing.” Noah gently stroked along the exterior of my panties, hissing when he felt what was happening between my legs. “Is this okay?”

“Stop asking,” I muttered, “you can do whatever the hell you want to me if you just stop asking.”

“I want to make sure this is your choice.” Noah used his other hand to tip my chin up. “I’m older than you. Bigger than you. I want to do this because *you* want to do it, not because you feel in any way like it’s something I’m expecting.”

“But you *do* want it?”

“More than I want to breathe.”

“I want you, Noah. I want you to rip my damn underwear off—metaphorically—and have your way with me. If you don’t put yourself inside me right now, I just might die of need.”

Noah took exactly three seconds to process my words, then a big grin broke out on his face. “Baby, then let me promise you this: I want to make

this the best fucking night of your life.”

“Can you get started already then?” I asked impatiently, practically panting for him. “Less talking. More doing. Doing of me, in case that wasn’t clear. Doing me.”

Noah grabbed me then, lifted me, hauled me to him like a sack of potatoes. I clung to him like a koala, letting him shift me so that I was perched right over his length, his cock pressing against my panties, teasing me.

“Not here,” he muttered. “Bed.”

“I’m pleased with your monosyllabic answers,” I said. “Much improved over you talking so freaking much.”

Noah laughed, burying his face into my neck as he carried me out of the room like I was no heavier than a bag of sugar. His breath tickled me, sending me into a fit of giggles as I leaned into him, wrapped my legs and arms tighter around him, sank against his giant form while he huffed it up the stairs of his charming country cottage.

Noah bypassed the overhead lights and opted to flick on the much dimmer tabletop lamp beside the bed. His bed was surprising to me, a wiry white thing that looked exactly like it fit into his sort of threadbare, hand-me-down decor. I briefly wondered if his mother had decorated his place, then pushed all thoughts of family out of my mind as quickly as it had entered because that was where things started getting complicated. And I didn’t want complicated.

Tonight, I just wanted Noah.

Noah moved to the side of the bed, but before setting me down, he dipped another finger around the outside of my panties, stroked, hissed again. Then he slid his finger beneath the thin, damp lace and ran one digit along my slick folds. I was slip-and-slide levels of ready for Noah Donovan to put himself inside of me.

“The condom,” I whispered.

“Not yet,” he informed me. “We’re just getting started.”

Then Noah stood over me while I lay on the bed and gently peeled my dress over my head. He smiled, his fingers sweetly tucking my hair around my head so that it framed me like a halo while I shivered, feeling exposed in just my bra and underwear.

It seemed like he and I both needed a little breather before things progressed since we were both about ready to go off like rockets. But Noah



made sure I couldn't overthink for too long. I was lost the second his head dipped to my neck, pressing a kiss along the sensitive spot near my collarbone. One of his hands slid beneath my bra and massaged my breast. His mouth dipped lower, taking one nipple in his mouth, giving a gentle tug before continuing lower as he planted a trail of kisses along my stomach.

Was this what sex was supposed to be like? Laughing, joking, having actual fun with it? It wasn't that I hated sex. I didn't have any super uncomfortable experiences with it, I just also hadn't totally understood the hype around it.

I was just now starting to get it, to see that sex could be more than a sort of choreographed routine, that it could be more than one thing at once. It could be passionate and hilarious and awkward and new and exciting and terrifying and thrilling all at once.

Noah lowered himself to the edge of the bed with his knees on the ground, then guided my legs so they hung over his shoulders as he situated his face between my legs. He hesitated a few moments, stroked the outside of my undies until my back was arching into the bed and the sheer thought of him putting anything inside of me at this point, even a finger, had me gripping the sheets like I was about to start levitating.

"Can I—"

"Yes," I gasped before he could finish speaking. "Please."

Noah tugged off my panties and let them fall to the floor. Before I knew it, his head was between my thighs, his tongue on me, in me. He took his time, a lazy, slow pressure that mounted, mounted until I was pretty sure there was nothing better in the entire universe.

"Noah, please," I murmured. "I'm ready for you. You don't have to do this. I want you to—"

"Fuck you?" he interrupted, popping his head up over my belly so I could see him. "Yeah, I'm working on it. You taste like fucking dessert, Ellie. I could do this every day of my life."

"But I want you," I argued weakly.

"And I want you to relax and enjoy," he shot back, keeping his eyes locked on me as he slid a finger inside me.

It made it hot, a little forbidden, the way Noah watched me, watched my face, as he worked his finger in and out, added a second finger, pumped harder. I wanted to tell him to stop. I wanted to tell him that he didn't need to worry about me so much, to concern himself so thoroughly with *my* pleasure.

I wanted to tell him to get the hell up here, but I couldn't form words in English. Or in any language. I was so far past words all I could do was hold on for dear life.

Then Noah pulled his gaze from mine and dropped to his knees before me. His hands slid up, splaying wide against my stomach, curling around me so that he was gripping my bare ass. He grabbed me, slid me closer to him like I was a pillow he was adjusting so he could better reach me.

When he added his tongue to my tender folds, while continuing to work his fingers in and out of my channel, I let out an honest to God yelp of appreciation. I arched my back and felt him moan into me, but instead of pulling back, instead of getting out that freaking condom, he held me closer. Harder. Working me until I couldn't take it any longer.

“Noah, I'm going to—”

“Come for me, baby. Come for me, Ellie. Make my fucking day.”

Noah peered over at me one more time, caught my gaze, then licked the center of nerves in my core and sent me flying over the cliff. I'd felt myself riding toward the edge, and then I just sailed right on over it, unable to stop if I'd wanted to. Unable to put the brakes on because everything he was doing, every sensation had put me into overdrive.

My mind went completely blank, and I wasn't sure what was happening below the belt except that fireworks were blasting on all cylinders, and Noah was the only thing holding me to this earth. His hand gripped my waist, his fingers pumped me, his tongue swished over me, drinking me in. He smelled like Noah, that piney, spicy scent I loved, along with a touch of coffee, a lingering whiff of whiskey. All of it was too much, and I crumbled in his arms.

“There you go, baby.” Noah pushed himself to his feet, cupped my face in his hand and studied me like a piece of fine art. “There you go, baby. How does it feel?”

“My brain is telling me to feel embarrassed,” I said, once I'd caught enough breath to speak, “but my body doesn't have enough energy to support that emotion.”

Noah barked a sort of laugh, but it didn't reach his eyes. “Why would you feel embarrassed?”

“Because it's you, and it's me, and we've been sort of friends forever.” I hesitated. “Plus, you didn't get any satisfaction out of that.”

Noah blinked, looking like I'd smacked him across the face. "Didn't get any satisfaction out of that? What planet are you from?"

"Huh?" I was still too limp, my limbs like jelly, to formulate a more enthusiastic response as Noah climbed onto the bed next to me, rolling against me.

"I've got to be the happiest man in the universe," Noah said, trailing an arm down my skin. "I've been dying to do that. Literally dying a little bit every time I saw you with another man. Then tonight, fucking Ken doll—"

"You're cute," I interrupted. "But you've got no reason to be jealous. I've had a crush on you since you kissed me playing spin the bottle. I mean, technically even earlier, but that was a little kid crush. That kiss, though, had my mind doing funny things."

Noah ran a hand over his mouth like the memory of that teenage kiss was still fresh. Like his lips were still on fire from that moment.

"I was addicted to the taste of you from that night," Noah admitted. "I can't believe it's taken this long for me to get another shot."

"Why *did* it take so long?"

"That chat is for a later date," Noah said. "If you don't mind putting that on the backburner, I still have plans for you tonight."

"Oh, crap." I looked at the clear, huge bulge in his pants. "I'm so sorry. Here I am chatting while you're ready to joust. It's just, that was the most amazing thing ever, and now, well, I don't know what to say, Noah. You rocked my world. There's *more*?"

He grinned. "You don't know how much that means to me, baby."

"Do you want me to..." I forced myself to sit up on the bed, despite my very low amounts of muscle tone at the moment.

I gestured toward his erection. I wasn't used to saying naughty words like cock or blow job. Nobody in my family had talked about sex. Ever. I still wasn't entirely convinced my parents hadn't done IVF to get their three kids with how little they seemed to be attracted to one another. I figured my mother wouldn't love dealing with the messy business of ejaculation. My mom viewed sex as dirty and sloppy and too much work.

I could hereby confirm that sex could be dirty and sloppy and well worth any effort exerted, and we hadn't even gotten to the *really* good stuff yet.

"We're only going to do what you're comfortable with," Noah said. "We can stop whenever you want. Technically, if we go to bed now, we can still say that we haven't had sex."

I stared him dead in the eyes.

“Technically,” he said with humor, “there wasn’t penetration.”

“But I want there to be penetration,” I said. “Like, right now.”

“Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

I raised up and climbed on top of him, sliding myself up and down over his length, taunting him, teasing, loving the way his eyes practically rolled back into his head, knowing I was the one making him lose control.

“Do you know what you’re doing to me?” he rasped. “You’re going to make me finish before you even get these pants off me.”

“Then let’s do something about that.”

Reluctantly I slid down him, unbuttoned his top button, savored the way he leaned back on arms with muscles that looked like small mountains. He was clearly holding himself back, tense, his teeth gritted as he anticipated what came next.

As I tugged his pants down, his erection sprang free into a pair of boxers with little cows on them. It gave me pause.

“Cows?” I said, unable to hide my thoughts. My walls were all down at this point. Noah had just had his face in my lady business. There wasn’t much privacy left between us.

“I wasn’t expecting to have my boxers on display tonight,” Noah growled. “Are cows a problem?”

“No, I’m just wondering, like, what inspired you to buy underwear with cows on them?”

“They were a gift.”

“Someone gave you cow underwear as a gift?”

“Do you really want the long version of this story right now?”

I stared down at the cows, felt myself warm with embarrassment.

“Right.”

“White elephant gift,” he muttered. “Happy?”

“I think I love cows now,” I said, admiring the way his quite sizeable package was tenting said cow boxers.

He barked a laugh, ran his hand through my hair, slid his hand down the side of my face until he was cupping my chin. “God, nobody makes me laugh the way you do.”

“Sorry?” I winced. “Should we not be laughing now?”

“No, God, no. I love it. You make me fucking happy, Ellie.”

“But I—” I cut myself off, feeling a little bit confused.

This wasn't casual sex territory anymore. This was full-on feelings territory, and while I'd certainly harbored some feelings for Noah for quite some time, we hadn't had that conversation just yet. It felt too serious, too full of commitment for this moment.

As much as I did care for Noah, I was fairly confident we'd both gone into our hanky panky activities feeling like it was more of an exception than a rule. That it was a fun, drunk activity, burning off some pent-up attraction to one another that'd surely work its way out of our systems once we'd slept together. Right? *Right?*

So naturally, I figured the best way to change the subject was to finally release my patient lumberjack from his misery. I freed Noah's cock from his boxers, blinking in surprise at the sheer size of it, before slipping my lips around him. I figured if I had a mouthful of Noah Donovan, I couldn't say something in actual English that I'd regret. Right? *Right?*

The moan that slipped from Noah's lips confirmed I'd made the right choice in skipping the small talk and getting down to the happy business of trying to make Noah feel as wonderful as he'd made me feel. He'd been so attentive, so gentle. The hunger in his eyes had burned a hole right through me, and for that moment, I'd been able to pretend that Noah only had eyes for me. That he'd only ever had eyes for me. That all my fantasies of accidentally ending up naked in the bed with Noah hadn't been wasted.

Noah sucked in a breath as sharp as the blade of a knife. He laid back on the bed, letting his arms come up from his sides to cover his face, like he couldn't quite look at me.

"Noah?" I murmured. "Is everything okay?"

He raised his hands, peeked out from underneath at me. Past his huge cock, standing at attention between us like a statue. "Yes, Ellie," he said, almost sounding like it was taking him a lot of effort to keep his voice even. "Everything is just fine. That was a noise of pleasure, in case you weren't aware."

"I know that," I said, "but you're covering your face like you don't want to look at me."

"I *don't* want to look at you."

"If this has been awkward for you," I snipped, "you should've said something before you stuck your tongue places that, you know, are private."

He groaned. "Baby, I can't look at you because if I do, I'm going to come immediately into your fucking mouth, and I'm not ready for this to be over."

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Oh.”

“Well then,” I said, wrapping my hand around his impressive length. “Moving along.”

It sounded like Noah tried to laugh, which turned into more of a guttural groan as I wrapped him with my lips again, sliding my tongue down his ridges. He reached down, gripped my hair with his hands, and it legitimately felt like he was holding on like he would on a rollercoaster. Like if he let up the pressure for even one second, he might fly off the ride to his death.

I worked Noah slowly, savoring every taste of him. I’d imagined taking him like this before, controlling every moment. Taking the lead, bringing him to the edge of climax, then slowing. Building again, and again, and again. I took him as deep as I could, and he groaned like he might just die then and there from pure pleasure.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you,” he rasped. “Fucking torture.”

“I am thoroughly enjoying this,” I said, sliding my tongue up slowly, closing my fist around him, pulsing his shaft until he started cursing a blue streak.

“Fuck,” he said. “Baby, I don’t want to come like this, not the first time. I need to be inside you.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Noah finally reached for that condom and tore the foil open, but just as he rolled it onto himself, the sound of my phone blaring from downstairs interrupted. I’d turned the ringer up high just in case someone tried to contact me from the hospital.

“Let it go to voicemail,” I said, then hesitated. “Unless...”

Noah and I locked eyes over his hard-on.

At the same time, we both said, “Katie.”

I waited a beat. “It can probably wait,” I said.

“She might need you,” Noah said, looking like he was having to tear his own arm off just to spit those words out. “You should answer it.”

“I don’t have to,” I said.

“Go answer it,” Noah said. “We can finish later.”

“I can call her back.”

The phone blissfully stopped ringing. I eyed Noah like he was my Thanksgiving feast, and I’d starved myself for years just to prepare.

“Great,” I said. “She can leave a message.”

“Perfect,” he said. “Now get up here, because I’m going to fuck you until —”

The phone blared again. Noah flopped back on the bed. I took a deep breath, covering my eyes with my hands.

“You should really get that,” Noah said. “She’s called you twice in a row. It might be urgent.”

“I should really get that,” I said reluctantly, taking one last, mournful look at Noah as he lay back on the bed, one large tower pointing up toward the heavens. And while I did feel bad about leaving Noah in the middle of the worst case of blue balls ever, my loyalty toward Katie tugged me toward the phone. What sort of friend would I be if I ditched her while she was alone in the hospital caring for a family member who might or might not survive a car wreck?

I sighed, pulled myself to my feet. I’d be a very sexually satisfied friend if I ignored Katie’s calls, that was for sure. Another orgasm from Noah was definitely at the top of my bucket list, but Noah was right.

I would regret not being there for Katie. I would feel guilty for the rest of my life if I chose an orgasm over being a support for my friend. I was pretty sure, maybe 84% sure that Katie would stop mid-coitus to support me, and I was pretty sure I was expected to do the same for her.

But damn if it didn’t take all of my self-control to walk away from Noah. I threw on my dress over my bra. It took all my logic to jog down the stairs and scrounge for where I’d left my phone in the entryway.

“Hello?” I gasped into the phone.

“Are you okay?” Katie asked. “You sound like you’ve been running away from a man with a chainsaw.”

“Yeah,” I said, thinking of Noah and his very long steel rod waiting for me upstairs. “Something like that. How are you? How’s your cousin?”

In reply, Katie burst into tears. Immediately, the lady version of blue balls drained from me. Every inch of it. While regretful Noah and I hadn’t consummated our fantasies together, it definitely ranked lower on my list than being there for my hurting friend. Absolutely. Positively. No doubt in my mind. Except for maybe two percent of regret which Katie would absolutely understand. Eventually.

“Honey,” I said, “what happened?”

“I mean, it’s fine, it’s fine,” Katie said. “But my cousin’s banged up pretty bad. Broke her leg in multiple places. They’re taking her in for surgery

right now, it was delayed some from before. She was in so much pain, it was awful, Ellie. Just seeing her attached to all those tubes, knowing she didn't have anybody but me there. Plus, she's a marathoner. She lives to run. Just thinking of how devastated she's going to be when she wakes up and fully starts realizing what happened to her..."

"I'm so sorry." Even that final two percent of regret faded now.

There were truly more important things than sex with Noah, even though it hadn't seemed like it in the moment. Maybe there was just one percent of regret left now. Probably even less.

"That is so awful, Katie. I am so sorry. For your cousin, for you. It's so hard having to be the only one there for her, bearing this all on your shoulders. Should I come down there tonight? I can get a cab. Whatever it takes. I'll go into debt taking an Uber if you need. Just say the word."

"No, no. Just the fact that you answered the phone is perfect."

*Adios* to my one percent of regret. I felt fully confident in my decision to abandon Noah at full-mast. He would recover.

"Is Aiden there?" I asked. "Can I order you guys some food or something?"

"Food," she echoed. "I didn't think of food. But no, I think Aiden said he was going to take care of that. I don't know, he's waiting for me just down the hall. I asked him for some privacy to talk to you. I just had to cry, and I don't know, I didn't want to put that burden on him. He's already done enough."

"I'm always here for you," I reassured her. "But Aiden can handle it. I've gotten mascara on his shirt more times than I can count. He knows not to fuss about it."

Katie gave a sobbing laugh. "This is why I knew I should call you. You always know exactly what to say. And it's like, mentally, I know my cousin will be okay. The doctors have reassured me she'll survive, that she'll walk again, even if it takes her a while, and all of that. But it was just a lot, you know? Walking into the hospital, the surprise of seeing my cousin—who's normally the fittest, strongest person I know—laying there so weak and frail looking. Thinking of how her life changed in a second. I don't know, it just shook something in me."

"That's understandable, sweetie," I said. "You are allowed to be emotional. And I'm the right person to lean on. I will be there first thing in



the morning. I'll stay at the hospital while you catch some rest, whatever you need. You just say the word."

"Thank you, Ellie. I can't tell you how much it means to me."

"Anytime."

She sniffed. "It didn't help that I was still a little loaded on those stupid tequila shots."

"Right," I said. "Or that you made out with my brother."

"Really, Ellie? Now?"

But I could hear her smiling across the phone line.

"I did that for you," Katie continued haughtily. Then she softened her voice, lowered it as if Aiden might be listening. "He's been great though, Ellie. Really great. You are right—he was the right choice to bring me here. I wouldn't have made it this far without Aiden."

"He's a good guy."

"Yeah," she said, softer, and I could practically picture her looking down the hall at him. "Well, I should go. Aiden's gesturing for me to head back, so..."

"Go," I urged her. "Call me. Anytime. I'll text you when Noah and I are leaving in the morning."

As I hung up, I heard the shower flick on upstairs. I leaned against the hallway wall, letting my brain process. Everything happening with Katie. Everything that had happened with Noah. It was a lot. The whole day had been a lot.

The sound of water rushing down the pipes throughout the house made its way to me in the silence after the phone call. Noah had obviously hopped in the shower, and while a part of me still desperately wanted to climb back into bed with him and pick up where we'd left off, another part of me was grateful for a moment alone to process. I wasn't sure if I was fully ready to dive back into a sexy mood considering the phone call I'd just had with my best friend.

I wasn't totally sure what to do with myself while Noah showered. I considered jumping back into his bed, but I didn't totally want to assume that we were planning on sleeping together in the same room even after what had transpired earlier. It felt a tad too assumptive considering we weren't any sort of *thing*.

I made my way to the kitchen, found a bottle of open wine on the counter with a temporary cork in it, and poured myself a glass. I was already on edge

knowing I wasn't with Katie and feeling guilty about it, and now there was a little uncertainty on where things stood with Noah.

I certainly didn't regret what had happened between us. If anything, I regretted not finishing what we'd started and clarifying how happy I was about it. But some of those persistent little doubts crept in around the edges anyway, wondering if Noah felt the same way, or if maybe, possibly, he was regretting the line we'd crossed?

So while I tried to figure out what to do next, I sat in Noah's kitchen, pantyless, drinking wine by myself. *Super classy, Eleanor.*

I spotted the overstuffed couch in the living room and it looked like the most inviting thing in the world at this moment, so I made my way over to it, wishing the fireplace was crackling. Since it wasn't, I grabbed two of the fluffy blankets draped over the side of the couch, a couch that had a sort of weird, mustard-yellow sunflower pattern stamped over it, and curled onto the cushions.

I finished the last sip of my wine and arranged my dress so it covered my nether regions. Then I flopped around to get somewhat comfortable in a sleeping position. To my surprise, while a little lumpy, the couch cushions were deceptively soft, and I felt like I was enveloped into a cloud as I rested my head on one end. My eyes had barely closed before I fell into a deep, dream-riddled sleep.

At one point, a set of big, burly arms picked me up from the couch. Not sure if it was a dream or reality, I curled into that big, warm chest. It was the scent that did it for me, that convinced me Noah was real. That sharp pine, expensively clean scent even stronger now that he was fresh from the shower. I rested my head against him, closing my eyes again, not particularly caring where we were going, so long as I was going with him.



## Chapter 9

**N**<sup>oah</sup> “What are you doing down here?”

I bounded down the last few stairs, trying to tamp down the feeling of disappointment that had blossomed in my chest when I’d climbed out of the shower to an empty bed. A part of me, an embarrassingly large part, had hoped to find Ellie curled under my covers, her hair spread out on my pillow, the scent of her on my sheets. I wanted to slide in next to her, kiss that fine neck, let her snuggle against me.

I also understood anything beyond that probably wasn’t happening tonight. I’d overheard the first part of Ellie’s conversation with Katie downstairs before I’d hopped in the shower, at least one side of it, and it was clear that Katie had been distressed over the situation at the hospital. Rightly so.

Ellie’s voice had changed immediately from that sex-hazed drawl into a softer, tender, reassuring murmur. It was clear where Ellie was needed tonight, and as much as I wanted her, I wasn’t her first priority, and that was how it should be.

So I’d gone for a quick rinse, hoping that would take some pressure off her when her phone call was done. If I could make things easier for her, make it crystal clear that she was enough, that what had happened was enough, that there were no expectations to pick up where we’d left off, then I wanted to do that for her.

I hadn’t wanted to kick her the hell out of my room, which was, in retrospect, probably how she’d taken it. Or so I figured when I saw her sleeping on the fucking sunflower couch that had been a hand-me-down from my mother’s inn when I’d moved into the house.

It wasn’t that I didn’t take pride in my house. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to make it comfortable. But I fueled all of my passions into my shop. I’d built it from the ground up with my brothers’ help, and that was where every ounce of interior decorating energy I possessed had gone. Which admittedly wasn’t a lot. That was where I’d splurged on the nice couches and the sleek artwork and the fantastic espresso machine.

My mother had taken pity on me and the futon that had served as my living room couch and, one weekend when I’d been out of town, she’d had

my brothers move a ton of furniture from her inn into my place. She claimed it was because she was redecorating her place. She'd said I was doing *her* the favor so she didn't have to worry about selling off her things.

I wasn't exactly complaining. Yes, my home did look a little bit like an eighty-four-year-old cat woman lived here, but it was warm and comfortable, and frankly, nobody saw it but me and my family. I spent most of my time in the garage.

I took a few deep breaths when I found Ellie out cold on the couch. Her chest was rising and falling evenly beneath so many blankets I could barely see her. Only the top of her head poked out on a squashy old pillow that I was pretty sure my grandmother had cross stitched. The last thing I wanted was to move Ellie from her cozy nest, but I didn't want her to feel like she wasn't welcome in my house. I had three beds. There was no way in hell she was sleeping on the couch.

So I strode across the room before I could talk myself out of my plan. Ellie looked like heaven, and after having a taste of her, getting to enjoy the way she smelled, moaned, smiled, I knew I wanted more. *Nay*—needed more.

But definitely not now. Not tonight. Tonight, she needed her rest. Everyone needed some rest.

I scooped Ellie up right along with her blankets and carried her to my bedroom. I laid her on the bed, tucked her in, enjoyed the scent of her hair as I gave her a little nuzzle before stepping away.

I licked my lips. Ellie Turner looked damn fine in my bed. In fact, I wasn't sure I ever wanted her to leave, and that scared the living daylights out of me.

I backed out of the room, closed the door most of the way, leaving it just a crack so a little light from the hallway poured in, just in case she woke while it was still dark and wanted to take a stroll around the house.

I debated sleeping in one of the guest rooms, but I decided against it for a few reasons. For starters, if she woke before me, I didn't want her to scour the house looking for me if she needed something. More selfishly, the way she'd looked on the couch, all snuggled up and sweet, had me thinking that would be a much better spot to sleep.

I plopped there, kicked my feet up and inhaled. Sure enough, it smelled like Ellie. And if I wasn't so damn tired, I might've hopped right back in the shower and finished myself off while thinking of her lips on my cock. But

there'd be time for that later. I had a day of driving ahead of me tomorrow, and who knew what would be waiting for Ellie at the hospital. I wanted to be the support she needed. Then, once she was all settled and no longer worried about her friends, *then* I'd have my way with her.



I *intended* to wake up before Ellie. In fact, I had set my alarm for 5:30 to be sure I was up and ready to make my unexpected houseguest feel comfortable, but I'd snoozed that motherfucker into tomorrow. Or technically for five minutes, I'd just done it thirty times. At any rate, I woke up to the face of an angel staring over the couch at me looking halfway to irate.

"Why the heck did you sleep on the couch in your own house?"

I rubbed my eyes, blinked. I'd been dead to the world. There was something magic about this couch, I was pretty sure. Either that or the blankets I'd draped over me. Or the fact that it still smelled like Ellie. A less angry version of Ellie than the one standing above me.

"I didn't want you to sleep on the couch." I flopped my feet to the ground and swung into a seated position. "That would've been rude."

"Uh huh."

"Look, I don't know what happened with your phone call, but it sounded like you were stressed." I ran a hand down my face and peered up at her, really seeing her for the first time.

Ellie was still wearing her dress from last night, and my filthy mind immediately wondered if she'd retrieved her panties from—God, where had those gone? Her hair was tousled from some combination of sex and sleep that should have been patented into a legitimate style because it turned me on so much I got all hot thinking about tugging on those strands while she climbed onto my lap and straddled me into awakeness.

I cleared my throat and tried to remember exactly where I'd left off in our conversation. Words were eluding me.

"You were saying?" Ellie prompted. "That you were eavesdropping on my phone call..."

"I wasn't eavesdropping," I said quickly, too quickly, because when I looked up and saw that she was grinning, and that she'd been teasing me, I knew I was off my game. A part of me was still sleeping. "Right, well, it's hard to form a complete thought when I'm over here wondering what the hell you've got on under that dress."

Ellie's cheeks flushed, and it was my turn to grin. Two could play at that game.

"On that subject," she said, stage-whispering as she leaned forward, looking like she'd gotten an instant sunburn, "I really *can't* find my

underwear.”

“I’ve got no fucking clue.”

“I’m just saying, I guess I don’t need it all that bad, but if you have a woman over and she finds them, she might be pissed.”

“There’s no other woman.” I said it confidently and without thinking. I must have still been asleep because Normal Noah wouldn’t go blurting out things like that on a first date. Or pre-first date. Or whatever last night had been.

“Oh.”

“Since you were asking,” I said, trying to scrape back what was left of my dignity, “I just thought I should let you know I haven’t been seeing anyone else recently.”

“Me neither,” she said. Then, almost sheepishly, “since you were fishing for my relationship status.”

“I hate fishing.”

“Me too,” she said.

“Great.” I stood. “Coffee?”

“Great.”

I made my way to the kitchen and let Ellie follow behind me. I moved like a champion power walker because if I didn’t, Ellie would see the massive erection tenting out my gym shorts. And if she said anything about it, or if she even looked that way, I’d be tempted to pick her up and see what was under that dress for myself. Or what wasn’t under there, which was even more delightful. In theory.

I ground the beans, set up the pour-over, then made a couple of cups of coffee. By the time Ellie had wandered in behind me and sat herself at the hand-me-down dining room table, I’d managed to get my pants problem somewhat under control.

“About last night,” she said, as I plopped her cup on the table before her. “I’m sorry about how things ended.”

“I’m not.” I sat across from her. “You did what you had to do. I completely respect that. I’ll survive.”

“I just wanted you to know it wasn’t my intention to…” Her cheeks pinkened again. “You know, leave you in the lurch.”

“It’s truly fine and also not your fault. You don’t need to say another word about it.”

“Great. Thanks.”



We sat awkwardly at the kitchen table for a minute. Ellie hadn't exactly said anything about how last night was a mistake, or that she regretted it had happened. She also hadn't expressed any enthusiasm for picking up where we'd left off now, or in the future, so I felt like we were a bit in limbo.

I didn't mind taking the lead on our romantic relationship so long as I knew she wanted it too. I wanted her to make the first move because she wanted to, needed to. Not because she felt obligated. I feared that if I took the lead, she might feel like she fell into a relationship without having any say on it. The only stumbling block to me asking her to be my girlfriend right now was the fact that Ellie's brother would make sure I could never have children if that happened.

"Can I see your shop?" she asked abruptly. "I feel like it's probably your pride and joy."

Relieved to have something to do, I grunted in agreement and stood, nodding for her to follow me. I wished I'd thought of it first so we hadn't wasted precious time staring awkwardly at each other while she crossed and uncrossed her legs like she was a little worried about that whole situation.

We were all the way to the garage before I realized I should've offered to ease her clothing situation.

"Can I get you a pair of shorts or something?" I asked. "You can borrow some sweats."

"Gee," she said dryly, "you could've offered that when we were back at the house so I didn't have to walk across the lawn commando in the middle of winter."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not used to being awakened from a deep sleep after a night of drinking by a beautiful woman. The caffeine is just sinking in, and I'm finally starting to have cohesive thoughts. Like just a little bit of cohesion. Like a crappy Elmer's glue stick, not full-on super glue."

Ellie raised some skeptical-looking eyebrows at me.

"I admit my thoughts aren't all great, and a lot of them have to do with what is or isn't under your dress," I admitted, "but I'm only telling you that because I'm an honest guy."

Ellie laughed, a sound that I was realizing I needed more of in my life. I liked seeing her like this, makeup free, bright-eyed, holding my cup of coffee on my property. I pulled open the door to the garage and let her enter first.

"You think I'm beautiful?" she murmured, almost soft enough that I wondered if she'd meant to say it aloud.

There was a bit of uncertainty there in her words, almost like it was a rhetorical question.

I slid my arms around her waist from behind her, pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck, then whispered in her ear, “I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Ellie shivered, leaned closer into me, lingered there. I held still, unable to believe my luck. I wondered if I’d pushed things too far, if she was trying to think of a nice way to let me down.

“Your place is beautiful.” Ellie’s words came out lyrically, like she really meant it, but the real music to my ears was when her hands came to rest on mine, and she pulled my arms tighter across her soft belly. She leaned back against my chest, and that perfect ass of her pressed into my crotch which was, as one might expect, the proud owner of a steel rod.

“Really?” she said, giving an extra wiggle that had my dick jerking in response. “You work fast.”

“It’s easy to do when I’ve got a gorgeous woman in my arms.”

“Noah—”

I spun her around to give her some air. I gave us a foot of space.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Ellie,” I said, “I fucking loved last night. I want to be very clear that I don’t have any regrets about it.”

“I-I don’t either.”

“I am a little worried about what your brother might do if he finds out about us, but I’d take a few broken ribs for what we had last night.”

“Really? Because you didn’t even...” She gestured.

“Come? Fuck you? Finish?”

Ellie cleared her throat. “You could say any of those things.”

“It was great. But like I said last night, I need you to make some decisions here. I don’t want you to be with me because you feel obligated.”

“Who said anything about being together?”

“I’m just saying,” I said, “I’m not going to pursue you right now because I want to give you space. I get our situation is a little different. I’ve—” I just barely stopped myself from saying I’d loved her since we were kids. “I’ve known you since we were little. I know Aiden isn’t a big fan of us being an *us*. You live in New York. I live here. There are some hurdles.”

“I didn’t think sleeping together once meant we really had to discuss all of this right now,” Ellie said, her eyes darting, looking a little panicked. “I wasn’t really looking for a serious relationship.”

“Right, absolutely,” I said. “That’s what I wanted to hear. Thank you for clarifying.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Baby, there are no hard feelings,” I said, grabbing her wrists as she started gesticulating. “We had a fun time. That’s it. We don’t need to discuss it anymore.”

“Let me finish,” she said, looking a little miffed and also a little impish. “I had a fun time too. Just because we’re not looking to get married tomorrow doesn’t mean we couldn’t have a little more fun, right?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure that’s a great idea.” I held up a hand in a stop sign. “Not because I don’t find you sexy because I sure as hell do, which my damn dick is informing you of right now. But I’m not sure it’s a good idea because I wouldn’t want our lines to get blurred. Like I said, we’ve got obstacles.”

“You’re looking at this the wrong way. The obstacles make it easier,” Ellie said. “We *know* we don’t make sense in a relationship, but physically, we’re sorta compatible.”

“Sorta,” I echoed dryly.

“So maybe we just have some fun for a bit.” Ellie gave me a downright sly look. “You’re not afraid of a little fun, are you?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m not going to get hurt,” she said, and it was a bit of a challenge. “Look, Noah, we’ve already broken our friendship boundary. That line is already crossed and no matter how hard we try, we can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I wouldn’t want to.”

“So let’s just cross that boundary a few more times.”

“Why?”

“Why?” she repeated. “What do you mean?”

“You could have any guy,” I said. “You could date someone in New York. You could go on a dating app. You could try to be with someone who is invested in making a future with you. Why give that up to have some no strings attached fun with me?”

“Because I didn’t realize sex could be so enjoyable, and we didn’t even really...” That flush again. “You know, get to the really good part. I want to do it some more. So I figure, why not do it more with you? I trust you. I care

about you. I know it's not going to be a one-night stand, really, because we were friends before and we'll stay friends after."

"You sure about that?"

"Which part?"

"The friendship after," I said feeling growly. "Because I'm not sure a few nights of good sex are worth throwing away a lifetime of friendship."

"We're fine now, aren't we?" she said with a shrug. "So I don't see what a few more nights of good sex would do to us."

I was feeling all sorts of things in my stomach. Good things. Bad things. Hot things. Cold things. Her talk of sexy nights had my cock twitching. Her talk of wanting to have more sex in general made me all sorts of possessive. The mere thought of her looking for a series of one-night stands on some stupid dating app had me breaking out in hives.

Ellie, for the adventurous, artistic, New York type that she was—all big personality, bold moves, brave spirit—still felt wonderfully naive in some ways. Like a bit of childhood Ellie peeped out when she was around me, the part of her that played kick the can until the streetlights came on. The version of Ellie who threw eggs at my first car when I refused to give her a ride to the ice cream shop. (Which *I* hadn't refused, but Aiden sure had, and I'd had to play along to avoid a busted lip.)

I wanted to cradle that innocent part of her, store it in a little treasure chest only to be admired and enjoyed for myself. I didn't want her to give that part of her to anyone else. It made me grumpy. Grumpy, grumpy.

"Fine," I said a little too snarly. "How does this arrangement work then, boss?"

"It's not like we need a contract," Ellie shot back. "Just, you know, when the mood strikes, we go for it. When it's no longer mutually beneficial, we take a step back from the physical."

"You want me to go for it?" I raised an eyebrow. "If *you* want to practice sexing, maybe you should practice initiating."

Ellie looked like she wanted to spit back another retort in my face, but at the last second, the clouds parted over her face like she'd had a realization. A coy little look appeared on her face, and I realized I'd shot myself in the foot. I was in a whole heap of trouble if Ellie Turner turned herself into a sex goddess and set her sights on *moi*.

Both my worst nightmare and my greatest desires came true as she took a step toward me. Took my coffee from my hand, set both mugs on the nearest

table. Ellie pressed the door to the garage shut behind me, then completed her little obstacle course by pressing herself right up against me.

“Pick me up,” she said.

“Huh?” The jolly old idiot—also known as me—managed to say.

“Pick me up,” she insisted.

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I mean, technically, I did need to be asked twice, but once it finally sank in, I realized she was making good on our deal here and now. I let her loop her arms around my neck and hoisted her up, sliding my hands down to her thighs.

“Now touch me,” she said.

“Huh?” I repeated.

“Touch me,” she said again.

“Where?”

“Are you that thick?”

I blinked. “We’re really doing this?”

“Do you have a condom?”

“I, uh, yeah,” I said. I was an idiot, but not that much of an idiot. I’d stuck a condom in my shorts pocket last night, just in case. And here we were.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Good.” She leaned in, nipped at my neck. “Because you’re going to need a couple. Now touch me, Noah.”



## Chapter 10

**N**<sup>oah</sup> Apparently I'd done something to strike favor with the gods. It was the only explanation for what was happening right now. It was the only thing that made sense.

Under no other circumstances could I have imagined me being shoehorned into a wedding I didn't want to be in could've ended with me lifting Ellie Turner onto my aching cock in my garage. Yes, a favor from the gods was the only explanation.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, sliding my arms around Ellie's back, fanning my palms over her perfect ass. I raised her until her legs twisted around my waist. "Whatever you say."

There were a lot of thoughts swirling in the back of my head, but the morning fog, plus the sex-haze that was already pummeling me from the sheer thought of getting with Ellie Turner, had those thoughts remaining on the backburner. Like a tumbled mess of dirty laundry that could be sorted out later.

A part of me knew this was a bad idea. I'd never looked at Ellie as a one-night stand. Granted, this arrangement wasn't exactly a one-night stand by nature, but still. My brain knew it was more complicated than either of us was willing to admit. But apparently both of our hormones were speaking louder than our brains because I couldn't actually think of one reason I shouldn't have sex with Ellie right here, right now, until we were both panting, happy, and drained. That was what she wanted, wasn't it?

*And I had always wanted to make her happy...*

"Stop thinking so much." Ellie pressed her lips to my cheek. "You haven't had enough coffee to think. I know this about you."

"That is very fair," I groaned into her ear as she wriggled a little higher onto me and situated her over my gym shorts. The sheer knowledge that she had on no underwear was about to send me over the fucking edge.

"So you're sure you want to do this."

"Positive," she said, "I want you right now, Noah. Right here. Hard."

Ellie's lips were on my neck, her hips grinding into me, needing, desperate, and I wanted nothing more than to reward her initiative. Hell, if she wanted to have some fun sex, I'd be happy to do it. It wasn't exactly a

hardship. Or rather, it was very much a hardship that I didn't mind whatsoever.

"I'm going to put my finger inside you," I whispered to her, "I'm going to make you so wet you're dripping for me, begging for me to be inside you."

"Yes," she groaned, dragging her teeth down skin. "Please, Noah."

"And then I'm going to stop, walk you back," I said, walking my fingers under her dress, "and I'm going to make you beg just a little bit. Then I'll build you back up. I'll stick my head between your thighs, eat you for breakfast."

Her breath hitched.

"And just when you think you're going to see fucking stars, I'm going to stop, and I'm going to spread you open, press myself inside you until you can't take it anymore, and then—"

"Yeah," she gasped, almost sobbing, "please do that. No time for all of it, let's just get through maybe item one on your list."

"But—"

"Noah!" Ellie practically shrieked at me. "Put your freaking penis inside of me. I want you so badly that I'm going to come from dry humping at this rate."

I gave a short laugh, tucked hair behind her ear with the hand that had been toying with the bottom of her dress. "Patience, baby."

"Less patience," she argued back. "We can do this as many times as we want now that we've got our arrangement sorted. And right now, I want you fast. Hard."

Something about that hint of wildness in her eyes was enough to convince me she was dead serious. That she truly, desperately wanted exactly what she was saying, and damned if that didn't turn me on so hard it hurt.

"Your wish is my command," I muttered, bringing that hand back down to where her dress fluttered loosely over her ass, and I plunged a finger inside of her, gasping when I felt the slick wetness there. She was a step beyond ready for me.

"I told you," she said, giving a little sob-laugh. "I'm desperate, Noah."

The way she said my name, panting, a bit frenzied, made me ready to bury myself inside her right then and there. Maybe I'd stay there forever, inside her, warm and cozy and filling her to the brim with all of me. I wanted to make my mark on her. Spill myself into her. I wanted her to be mine.



“Fuck, baby.” I added a second finger, pumped inside of her hard, fast, until she arched herself backward, her hair dangling down while I finger fucked her right up to the edge, right until I saw the climax hovering in her eyes, and then I knew I needed her. This time, we were coming together. Or we weren’t coming at all.

“Oh, my God,” she groaned in time with my fingers.

Then, as I dragged my hand away from her core, she let out a whimper that was so sad, so desperate it just about broke my heart. The puppy dog eyes that accompanied that sound filled me with a desperate need to put my cock inside her and send that look away forever and ever. That look gave me a new mission. To give Ellie Turner orgasms that rocked her world for every day of the rest of my life. Or until she decided to move on from me to someone... else.

The thought of our arrangement, though fleeting and brief and very, very unwelcome, sent a shock of anger through me. Not anger at Ellie, but at whoever this future partner might be, and it rattled me to my core. I shouldn’t be feeling this way. Things were already too complicated. But I couldn’t help the growly grumpiness that was overtaking me.

“What happened?” Ellie asked, cupping my face with her hands, pressing her swollen lips to my lips. “Where’d you go, baby?”

Her legs were still intertwined around my waist. Her wetness was probably seeping onto my gym shorts. Hell if I’d ever wash those bastards again. I mean, I would, but reluctantly.

“Promise me one thing.” I set her down gently, feeling a bit proud as she leaned against the couch nearest us for support on legs that looked a tad wobbly.

“What’s that?” she said, her voice breathy as I tugged off my shorts.

I rolled on my condom, took her in my arms, laid her back on the couch. I perched my cock over her entrance. I eased it in, slowly, and judging by her wince she wasn’t used to for my size.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I’ve never seen a penis that size.”

“Am I hurting you?”

“Just go slow,” she said.

I added a finger to toy with that nub of nerves, and that helped her to relax, helped her knees to fall open. She let me slide inside another inch, then two inches. By then, I was working her, watching her eyes go a little glazy as she threw her head back, arching those hips to give me access to the depths of

her. Depths no man had ever been before. I didn't care how long it took, I needed to fill her completely. All the damn way.

"Promise me," I growled again.

"Anything," she muttered, her hands coming up to grip my arms like they were a lap bar and I was the roller coaster cart, and she had to hold onto me or fall to her death.

"While we're doing this arrangement, while I'm—" I stopped myself from saying *making love* or *having sex* or something that gave a head-nod toward an actual relationship, when it was clear that that situation wasn't what Ellie wanted. "While we're fucking, Ellie Turner, you're mine. We see nobody else. Understood?"

"Of course, Noah," she said, letting out a cry as I slid my cock home inside of her. Her mouth parted in an 'o' as a tear slid from her eye. "It's always been you."

Her words broke me. I pulled back and thrust into her, buried myself up to the hilt, wanting to stay here forever, and ever, and ever. Not willing to admit those words had driven me to the brink, and when I looked in her eyes and saw those tears there, that passion driven wild, I knew there was no coming back from this edge.

"Noah," she gasped, "I'm going to—"

"Yes, baby." I pounded into her, holding onto her like my own life depended on it, because it just fucking might. "Come on me."

When her walls began to quiver, and the waves rocked her, I let myself release inside her, letting go of everything and anything, losing my absolute mind. Seeing stars. Dying and going to heaven. And I kept moving in her, my brain ceasing to function, milking her orgasm and mine until the last waves crashed to shore, and I was completely spent.

Then I dropped onto the couch next to her, let my hand trail down her arm, still somewhat hard inside her. Ellie snuggled up next to me, throwing one leg over me, so we were cocooned sideways.

"God," she said.

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Was that..." She propped herself up a bit. "Okay for you?"

"Okay?" I peeled one eye open to look at her. "Did that *feel* okay?"

"No, it felt insane. But I don't have as much experience as you, and you probably have had a lot of sex, so you have more to compare it to."

“Baby.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “That was fucking mind blowing.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“Hell no. I only got through item one on my sexy to-do list because I couldn’t control myself. I would’ve finished in my pants the way you were talking to me.”

“Ah, okay. Well, I’m glad you liked it.”

My hand moved down to her thigh, which was draped over me. We faced one another, cuddled on a couch not quite big enough for both of us. My hand ‘accidentally’ found her ass, stroked that soft, supple curve of her skin. My cock was already jerking at the thought of another round.

“I mean...” Ellie kissed my forehead back, then her eyes slid directly south. “I’m up for it if you are.”

“Are you talking to me or my dick?”

“Whichever is listening because your eyes are still closed.”

I blinked them open. “I have never ejaculated so hard in my life. I think I need an IV to replenish some fluids.”

“I’m just saying,” Ellie said, “we might as well take advantage of our handy dandy arrangement. So if you want to try for round two...”

I reluctantly pulled myself out of her, stumbled away to do a half-assed clean up job, then staggered back to the couch feeling wobbly on my own feet. Ellie was already sitting by the time I returned. Instead of sitting next to her, I kneeled before her, parted her legs, and when she put her hands in my hair and instructed me to stand, I batted her gently away.

“No,” I said. “My turn to give the orders.”

As I stuck my head under her dress, toyed with her slick folds still swollen from sex, there was a knock on the door behind us, and then before either of us had the chance to get decent, the door flew open and Angelica walked in.

“Oh, shit!” she said, grinning and covering her eyes. “Sorry, dudes.”

Ellie’s face went white. I couldn’t decide between her default emotion being livid anger or complete embarrassment.

“What the fuck, Angelica?” I said, reaching for a couch pillow to cover my crotch while I placed myself in front of Ellie as she scrambled for a blanket.

“I’ll come back,” she said. “Enjoy, you two cool cats.”

The door was already shut by the time I could really begin to gather my thoughts. I was still sleepy. Still hadn't finished my coffee. Still thinking about the taste of Ellie on my lips, and my brain had yet to catch up to what was happening.

"What just happened?" Ellie whispered aloud, echoing my very confused and slightly delayed train of thought.

"Angelica," I muttered. "I told you she'd be back for a fucking latte and her treat bag."

Ellie let out an embarrassed groan and slid downward on the couch. "I am not cut out for this life, Noah Donovan."

"What life is that?" I turned back toward her, well aware I was holding a pillow with a set of Audi rings embroidered on it over my crown jewels.

"The sex kitten life." Ellie ducked her head under a Porsche blanket that'd been a Christmas gift. "This is so embarrassing. I was trying to be all forward and goddess-like, and look where it got me."

"Where did it get you?" I asked dumbly.

"Caught," she hissed. "Walked-in on while naked. So embarrassing."

"While not ideal," I admitted, "that is not even on the scale of weird things that Angelica has witnessed. Trust me on that. She likes to chat while imbibing my caffeine, so I've heard it all."

"I'm so alarmed you actually thought it was a good idea to get in her car last night."

"You and me both," I admitted. "If I knew she thought brakes and stop signs were optional, I would probably have had a different opinion on the whole matter."

"Uh huh." Ellie sounded unconvinced. The only part of her that was visible was her eyebrows above the blanket.

I sat next to her. Then, on second thought, I tugged on my shorts because I was pretty sure that there was no coming back from an Angelica interruption. At least not at the moment, and it felt more decent not to be sitting next to Ellie buck naked.

"Hey, it's okay," I said, tucking Ellie under my arm. "Don't lose any sleep about it. Angelica might be a psychopath on the road but she's a good person. She won't say anything to anybody, especially if I ask her not to. And if I throw in a free oil change for her and a mocha, she'll take this to her grave, guaranteed."

Ellie's eyes flashed open even wider. "Oh. My. God."

“What did I say?” I felt taken aback by her shock. I thought I’d been speaking the obvious but I’d missed something.

“I didn’t even think of that.”

“Of what?”

“Of her telling people!” Ellie reflexively reached a hand out and smacked me on the chest. “What if she blabs and it gets back to Aiden?”

“I just said she probably won’t.”

“I know what you said, but I wasn’t even thinking about that.” Her eyes were like two moons beaming back at me.

“Then what were you thinking about?”

“Just embarrassment and being caught naked while you were doing dirty things to me.”

“Look, Ellie,” I said, tucking her back under my arm, tighter this time, running my fingers in lazy circles down her smooth skin. God, it would be so inappropriate to get turned on at a time like this when I was supposed to be consoling her. Right? *Right?*

“You don’t have anything to be embarrassed about,” I reassured her. “We are two consenting adults in my private space, and if anyone should feel embarrassed, it should be Angelica for marching in unannounced.”

“She didn’t seem embarrassed.”

“I don’t think that word is in Angelica’s vocabulary.”

Ellie gave a dry laugh.

“It’s fine. We weren’t doing anything wrong,” I said. “Just enjoying one another’s company. Not to mention, babe, you’ve got a great body. You should show that thing off more often.”

Ellie whacked me again.

“You’re right.” I tucked her close to me, buried a kiss into her hair.

“Don’t do that. While we’re enjoying one another’s company, I don’t want anyone else looking at you.”

“Uh huh.” She leaned her head on my arm, cozy, snuggling in. “What about Aiden?”

“I told you, Angelica won’t say anything,” I said. “She’s not malicious. I’ll just ask her to keep her mouth shut.”

“I know, but what if it wasn’t her walking in? What if it was someone else? It just makes me think we were being too careless.”

“How many people do you think I have walking in here unannounced at nine a.m. on a Saturday?”

“You know, I would’ve guessed zero,” she said dryly, “but clearly that was wrong, so I have no idea.”

“Touché.”

In retrospect, I was pretty damn glad it was Angelica who’d walked in and not someone else, considering I actually did have quite a few people poking their heads into my shop unannounced. Hazards of a small town. I should’ve known better.

“Let’s just say it was lucky that it was only Angelica,” I remarked in response.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, Noah.”

“Which part?” I kept my fingers stroking on her arm, hoping she didn’t feel my body tensing against her obvious pullback.

“Us. You and me. It sort of feels like we’re sneaking around.”

“We’re not sneaking around. We’re just not broadcasting it.”

“You’re planning to blackmail Angelica with oil changes and mochas so she won’t spill the beans on us. That’s sneaking.”

“We don’t owe anyone a report on our love lives, do we?” I asked, instantly feeling her tense at the words *love life*. Possibly should have said sex lives, but it was too late for that, so I overcorrected. “It’s our business who we’re sleeping with or not sleeping with, and nobody else’s.”

“That’s true.”

There was a *but* hanging on the tip of her tongue. I could feel it, the elephant in the room. And I couldn’t bear the thought of Ellie leaving here tense and upset and frustrated when I’d had the best damn morning of my life.

“Honey,” I said, tilting her chin up to face me, “if you don’t feel comfortable with this, let’s stop it.”

“What?” Ellie’s lips parted slightly, her eyes meeting mine, looking uncertain. “You’re not enjoying it?”

“I am thoroughly enjoying it. I enjoy you and everything about us. But I don’t want you to be stressed about spending time with me,” I said. “If you’re worried about Aiden finding out, maybe I should just go to him, have a man-to-man conversation, and move on with it.”

“No!” Ellie shook her head vehemently. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Please don’t do that, Noah. Promise me.”

“If you don’t want me to, I won’t. I was only offering to do it because I thought it might help make you feel more comfortable.”

“You telling my brother that you’re putting your penis in my vagina?” Ellie shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“I mean, if you put it like that,” I said, “I see your point. I just meant that I could let him know we were interested in dating, seeing where things go casually.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That puts a label on things, and that’s exactly what we didn’t want to do.”

I didn’t correct Ellie. It was what *she* didn’t want to do. I’d consider putting a ring on her finger right now if she wanted. I didn’t have a shred of doubt left that she was the woman for me, especially not after this morning.

“Let’s just go with our initial plan.” Ellie nodded her head firmly, as if that would help make this decision easier. “You’re right. I’m a grown woman. It’s really not Aiden’s business if we’re sleeping together. And, yeah, I had fun. I don’t want to stop just yet.”

I leaned in, kissed her hard on the mouth. “Me neither.”

“So a fun fling?” she asked. “Until one of us calls it off?”

“Sure,” I said. “If that’s what you want.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s what I want.”

“You know, if I wasn’t halfway sure that Angelica wasn’t standing behind that door,” I murmured into her ear, “I’d finish what I started.”

“Oh?” she gasped, a bit breathless, arching into me.

Ellie started letting those hands of hers wander, little fingers walking down my chest, past my stomach, down to my shorts. By the time she fisted my cock, I was as hard as the sword in the stone.

“Oh,” she murmured, this time not a question.

“Oh,” I said, taking her mouth in mine, feeling like I could devour her whole.

Her tongue slipped between my lips, and despite the fact that my brain had been telling me to put on the brakes, every part of my body needed this woman more than any logic I possessed. The way her hands ran up and down my length with the perfect grip, the perfect stroke, I felt like I was getting my first hand-job again back in high school. It was thrilling and very nearly embarrassing.

“God, I need to be back inside you,” I said gruffly, feeling my cock leak as she continued to massage, not letting up. “This is torture.”

“So you’d say I’m a fast learner?”

“Fuck,” I muttered, caging her between my arms and wanting to pick her up, set her on my lap, and let her ride me until I was on the verge of blacking out.

“We should probably see what she wanted, huh?” Ellie said, her voice tantalizingly breathless.

“Who?”

“Angelica.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, there’s a lock on the door.”

I took Ellie’s face in my hands, reluctantly starting to pull away so I could hit the lock on the door when it opened again.

“Oh, wow, you two are still going at it, huh?” Angelica stopped. “I guess I’ll just take off and stop by later.”

“It’s fine,” Ellie called, still from her hiding place beneath the blanket. “Just give me a minute, and then he’s all yours.”

I realized Ellie’s urgency was probably because she wanted me to have that conversation with Angelica about keeping this on the down low before it was too late. Before she left here to go buy a coffee at The Bean Counter and spread the word to everyone and literally my mother that she’d caught me having sex in my garage.

I rolled my eyes, gave a stupid thumbs up to Angelica as she backed out of the door, and then reluctantly tossed myself back against the couch.

“You’re intoxicating, you know that?” I stood after a moment, threw on my shirt, waited a few seconds in hopes my dick would relax. The poor thing had seen a lot of blue balls in the last twenty-four hours. But also a lot of good sex. So the slate was mostly even. “Coffee?”





WHILE ELLIE TOOK SOME time to clean herself up in the garage's bathroom, a very nice bathroom if I said so myself, I fired up my espresso machine and pulled three lattes.

I knocked on the bathroom door to check in on Ellie. "I've got your latte here when you're ready."

The restroom door opened and a skinny arm stuck out. "Oh, God, you're my hero."

I couldn't help the smirk as I leaned against the doorframe. "Does this mean you're not coming out until Angelica is gone?"

"No. I'm already mortified enough. Don't make me face her while I'm not wearing any panties."

"Shit, Ellie, you're not making this any easier on me." I hesitated, wondering how far I could take things before Ellie got a little worried about my sex drive. "The bathroom door does have a lock if you're interested."

"You insatiable scoundrel. You need to go catch that very terrible Uber driver before she goes blabbing about our naked tango all over town."

"Roger that. More naked tango later, then."

As I closed the bathroom door and heard Ellie click the lock shut, I also heard a little snicker of laughter that melted its way down to my belly. Shaking my head, still smiling, I ran a hand through my hair and double checked that I was fully dressed. I'd thrown on a new set of clothes that I'd had sitting around the garage in hopes it had me smelling a little less like sex. Not that Angelica was one to talk about scents all that much, seeing as we'd almost got a contact high riding in her vehicle.

I made my way back to the front door and slung it open, giving a nod at Angelica who was standing outside in a puffy coat and ripped tights, her hands shoved into her pockets.

"Fuck, it's cold out here," she said, giving me a coy little side-eye. "You got any caffeine in there that could warm a girl up?"

I handed over her latte without preamble, then nodded for Angelica to follow me inside. She tramped in behind me and plopped herself across from me at the big, sleek black desk that served as front desk, my personal desk, and basically the entire administration portion of my company. It was me. I was the admin portion of my company. And the mechanic. And the billing, booking, scheduling.

If it sounded like too much on my plate, it was because it was. But I'd started off as a humble guy tooling away on cars in my dad's garage for five bucks. It still felt odd to me that I was making an actual living at this. An actual damn good living at this.

The idea of being able to hire employees made me a little itchy. I wasn't like Anya who ran an entire fucking company. I wasn't like Lucas who needed interns and helpers. I was the basic-ist of the basic and that was what made me happy. I'd never really yearned for more than what it would take to pay my bills. It wasn't me.

"I've got a favor to ask you." I didn't mince words as I pulled my own latte toward me and took a sip. "It's important."

"Shoot, big guy."

"I can't have you telling anybody about this." I gestured across my desk.

"The lattes?" Angelica blinked. "I mean, I thought that was just a freebie for anyone who came in here, but if it's something special you do for me, I mean, I guess. I'll keep my mouth shut if the caffeine keeps flowing."

"I'll keep the caffeine flowing if you keep it on the downlow what you saw here today."

Angelica looked a little dumbfounded.

I looked pointedly at the couch.

"Oh. *Oh*." She gave a little shimmy with her shoulders. "You mean you and your date doing the nasty."

I winced.

"There's nothing wrong with that. I thought it was cool and all. I mean, I can't say I've never considered what it'd be like to get all hot and heavy with a mechanic. I mean, not *you*, obviously, because you're like a bro to me, but I just mean—you know, fantasy. Good for her, is all I'm saying."

"All *I'm* saying is that I know it's not a big deal, but I don't want anyone to hear about it. Me and her specifically."

"Oh. A torrid affair?" Angelica's eyes glinted a little.

I suddenly began to wonder if I'd made a mistake by bringing this up with her in the first place. Frankly, it seemed like she'd already forgotten it.

"Not at all," I said. "Fledgling relationship. We're not ready to tell anyone else about it yet."

"Oh," she said again, the spark dulling. "Boring but understood. So long as you understand that my silence is going to be partially bought by your lattes."

“Angelica, you’ve been mooching lattes off me for two years now. If anything, this saves us both time.”

“How do you figure?”

I spread my hands wide. “You can skip the fucking diagnostic checks and requests for windshield wiper fluid refills and just come in and get your damn latte and leave. I’ve got real work to do.”

To my surprise, Angelica’s cheeks reddened the slightest amount, and I realized that the embarrassment *was*, in fact, in her vocabulary. Very, very far down the list, but it did exist. And it put us on slightly more even ground which I appreciated.

“Fine.” Angelica stuck out a hand, covered in a fingerless glove, and gave me a shake. “Deal.”

“Deal.” We shook on it. I held on a beat longer. “But if it gets back to me that anybody knows about us, I’m cutting off your lattes and car service forever.”

“The pressure’s on.”

“It is.”

“No tire rotation?”

“Not so much as a gas fill-up or an oil change.”

Angelica’s eyebrows flicked up. “I read you loud and clear, buddy. Mum’s the word. By the way, I’ll be back for my treat bag when your girlfriend who does not exist feels comfortable coming out of the bathroom.”

I licked my lips, trying to bite back a smile. “I’m sure she won’t mind. We’ll leave it outside for you later today. We’re not going to be around much for a couple of days.”

Angelica waggled her eyebrows. “Have fun with your imaginary friend. Care to warm up my latte before I take off? How about a pump of peppermint or something? Let’s not be stingy.”

After sending Angelica on her way with a carrying case full of lattes for good measure, some that she promised to let cool down in the fridge for tomorrow, I turned to find the door to the restroom propped open and the most beautiful figure in the world leaned against it.

Ellie looked smaller than before, dwarfed by the huge, open spaces of the garage. She seemed petite, a little shrunken from how she’d looked the night before. On her face was a shade of uncertainty that drove a bit of a knife through my heart. Uncertainty at what—me? Uncertainty at getting caught

doing the deed in an almost-public place because we couldn't control ourselves? Uncertainty in general?

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I'm fine. But I did text Katie, and I think it's probably time for us to get going."

"Of course," I said. "God, Ellie, I'm sorry about this morning. I shouldn't have pushed things with us."

"No," she said, crossing the room. Ellie's hands came up, grasped my T-shirt between her fingers. She leaned onto tiptoes and pressed the sweetest of kisses against my lips. "Trust me, it was just what I needed. Thank you."

"Thank you, Ellie." I nuzzled my head to her hair, took a deep inhalation, trying to imprint this memory in my brain forever and ever, just in case.

Just in case this whole thing was a mirage. In case this was a dream and when I woke up, it would all be gone. In case Ellie changed her mind the second we arrived in New York. In case she realized when she got back to the city that this whole thing with me had been nothing but a fantasy that needed to be discontinued.

When she stepped back, and I had to let her go, it felt like a goodbye. A small goodbye. The tiniest of goodbyes, but a bitter goodbye. Because I knew already that in a relationship as precarious as ours, each touch could be the last. Each day the last time we looked at one another like this. One wrong word could change everything.

"Let's go," I said gruffly. "We'll pick up breakfast on the way."

"There's just one thing," she said, a little sheepishly, leaning her head against my chest.

"Mmm?" I murmured.

"I really need to find my underwear."



# Chapter 11

**E**llie Once my underwear had been located, I opted to take a quick shower at Noah's place before we hopped on the road back to the city. Originally, I'd thought I'd stop at my apartment once we got to New York to rinse off and change, but driving in the city was a nightmare, and I didn't want to ask Noah to shuffle me around like an Uber driver. He was already doing me a big enough favor driving me back this morning.

When I stepped out of the shower, I found a set of sweats laid out thoughtfully on Noah's bed. I shimmied into them, finding that Noah's clothes dwarfed me quite a lot. But they were cozy, warm, and they smelled like him. It was much better than wearing the dress I'd worn last night, that was for sure.

Noah had the car warmed up and waiting for me out front. When I climbed into the passenger's seat, I found a Styrofoam container of takeout food that smelled downright amazing.

"I know I said we'd stop for breakfast, but I figured you'd want to save time," Noah said. "So I ordered a bunch of stuff from The Bean Counter and had Chuck drop it off for me while you were in the shower."

"That's so thoughtful." My mouth watered as I cracked open the container to find a spread of gooey eggs and hashbrowns and butter-soaked toast slathered with jam. "I could inhale this in a second, but I don't want to eat in your car."

"It's just a car. I'm not precious about it."

Noah flicked on a blinker and pulled out of his driveway and onto Main Street. He took the streets through town slowly, then picked up the pace once we reached the freeway that would carry us most of the way to New York.

I liked watching him drive, all slouched in the seat like he was part of it, a hand on the steering wheel like this was something he could do in his sleep. He had always taken pleasure in his cars, ever since he'd started working on them in middle school.

Noah had never been one for flashy vehicles. He'd always chosen understated cars, the collectibles, treasures he'd find at barn sales and lovingly fix up for months before the engine would even turn over. But he wasn't an idiot, either. He chose cars that he could turn over for a profit.

I'd once Googled the make and model of his project car back in high school, and scrolled through the listings until I found the correct year and color. My eyes had bugged out of my head when I'd seen what cars like his went for when they were fully restored. Not to mention a couple of motorcycles. I'd seen them in the back of his shop, stored safely away for winter, gleaming and sparkling and just waiting to stretch their legs when warmer weather rolled around. All that to say I was a little terrified of dropping crumbs into any of Noah's prized vehicles.

"Seriously," Noah said, glancing over at me. "You can eat. I can hear your stomach growling at me."

"Your car's so clean. I don't think I could live with myself if I got egg guts on your carpet."

"That's what the vacuum is for."

I wrinkled my nose, but when my stomach rumbled louder in protest, I daintily raised the toast to my mouth and nibbled very carefully on one edge. Eventually, I settled into a more comfortable rhythm and polished off the whole meal. Noah'd helped himself to a breakfast burrito which he'd inhaled in about three seconds with one hand.

"Thanks for breakfast," I said. "I was starving."

"Anytime."

"Speaking of clean cars," I said, tapping my seat, "it seems like your business is doing really well."

Noah glanced at me. "I get by. It's all I've ever really wanted to do."

"I mean, I saw your garage," I said. "It's really fancy. That wasn't built off hopes and dreams. It must have cost a lot of money."

"I earn a fine living," he said, clearly uncomfortable.

"I'm just complimenting you," I said. "I mean, I always knew you'd be the best in the business around here, but it's nice to know I was right."

Those eyebrows raised again, and Noah studied me for a long minute before turning his attention back to the road. "How do you figure?"

"You love what you do. I mean, it's obvious. Other people recognize it too. Plus, you are a nice person, which counts for a lot, especially in the auto industry. Who wouldn't want to take their car to you instead of whatever chain store is on the corner?"

Noah remained silent.

"I think it's great," I reiterated. "You deserve it. I'm happy for you, Noah."

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. I just think someone needs to tell you you’re doing a good job.”

“I don’t need anyone to tell me anything.” Noah looked my way, but he wasn’t reprimanding me, he was just stating a fact. “I’m content. I make a living doing what I love. Frankly, I don’t give a crap what other people think because I’ve got almost everything I’ve ever wanted in life.”

I swallowed hard. *Almost everything?* I wanted to ask what his life was missing, but after what had happened last night, I wasn’t sure that was an appropriate conversation to have anymore.

Noah reached across the console, squeezed my hand. “I’m not built like you.”

“Huh?”

“You have big dreams. You want to be someone, make a name for yourself, live in the big city. I think it’s incredible; I think *you’re* incredible. But that’s not me. I’m content here, doing my own thing, in the middle of nowhere.”

“I don’t think we’re all that different,” I argued. “I’ve never wanted to be famous. I just want to make a living doing what I love, too. My thing just happens to be art.”

“You’ll get there soon enough, El.”

“I don’t know. Some days it just doesn’t feel possible.” I sighed. “It’s like something is missing and I can’t put my finger on what. Like I’m chasing a dream that may or may not even make me happy. Sometimes I feel stupid for not giving up and getting a regular job so I don’t have to worry about an overdraft when I buy groceries.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Noah murmured, and then gave my hand a little squeeze.

Then he took his hand back and let it rest on the wheel, and that was how we drove the rest of the way to New York. When we reached the hospital, Noah pulled into the valet line.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, feeling a little panicked as the valet approached the car. I wasn’t the sort of girl who had the cash laying around to pay big parking fees and tip valets. I was the sort of girl who got dropped three blocks away and walked in heels at two o’clock in the morning just to save a couple of bucks.



“It’s on me,” Noah said easily. “I want to walk you in. What was I going to do, drop you on the corner while the wheels were still rolling? Did you see the traffic back there?”

I shrugged a little because that was pretty much how I’d pictured our goodbye. Not to mention that it would’ve made things a lot easier. If he all but tossed me to the curb while the engine was still running, I wouldn’t have a lot of time to think about our goodbye. Did we kiss? Hug? Promise to call?

If he’d just dumped me on the curb like I’d been planning in my head, I would’ve barely had time to wave and get out of the way before he ran over my toes. It sort of would have made things a lot simpler.

But Noah already had his wallet out and his door open. Then my door was being opened by the valet, and before I knew it Noah had my hand clasped tightly in his, and he was leading me into the hospital like he was my bodyguard. He kept me tight next to him, as if he was planning to shield me from whatever we found ahead of us.

We checked in at the front desk, got the floor and room number for Katie’s cousin, and then started down the hallway toward the elevator. We lucked out and got an elevator all to ourselves. Once the doors shut, the skin on my hand started to tingle where it met Noah’s. We were still holding hands, and I was acutely aware of the fact that I didn’t want him to let go of me. Quite possibly ever. My stomach flipped.

“Thank you,” I whispered, peering up at him while we were still alone in the elevator. “For everything.”

Noah turned to look at me, a darkness brewing in his eyes. He bit down on his lip, his gaze flicking toward the glowing button panel where the lights clicked by for each floor. We only had a couple more floors to go.

It was as if he was calculating, calculating, and then *bam*. His decision was made, and I could see it in his eyes the second he decided to go for it. The second there was no going back from whatever choice he’d made.

Noah leaned into me, dragging our intertwined hands up so he deposited my hand around his neck. My other arm found its way up, and I clasped him in a hug around as he pressed a hand into my lower back, molding my body to his.

His mouth landed on mine, hot and heavy and hard. There was a clock ticking, we both knew it. Both inside the elevator and out of it. Now that we were back in the real world—my real world of New York City—our

relationship seemed both smaller and larger. Scarier and more natural. Like it was the most absurd thing in the world but also completely normal.

As Noah pulled me to him, it was like our bodies connected on some basic level. Noah, large and hard and strong and handsome. Me, shorter, scrawny, simple. When our lips tangled and my body arched toward his, it gave me flashes from this morning.

A plume of heat shot through my body as I recalled in vivid detail the way he'd filled me so thoroughly I could hardly breathe. My body was already desperate for more. I could feel the need racing through my blood, but it went deeper than that. It burned through every fiber of my being.

"I think I'm addicted to you," I blurted when I could, my lips still touching his. "I need more of you, Noah."

"Thank Christ," he groaned. "I'd ask to stay over at your place tonight, but—"

The elevator opened at that very moment, the ding sending us leaping apart like two naughty kids at a Catholic school dance. I said a little prayer that we hadn't scandalized whoever was on the other side of the elevator doors.

My cheeks felt hot. My hair was a mess. I was wearing baggy sweats, and I could feel where Noah's hand had slipped under my shirt to caress my stomach just moments before. I didn't dare look at Noah; I didn't want to know how he was doing.

"There you are." Katie stood on the other side of the elevator door. "We thought the two of you got lost on the way."

Aiden stood next to her. I barely managed to let go of Noah's hand and pull my oversized sweatpants up as Katie flung herself into my arms.

It was lucky, really, really lucky, that Aiden had been looking at Katie with a frown on his face, so intently staring at her that it seemed like he hadn't noticed anything odd about me and Noah being in the elevator together. Like the fact that I had sex hair and sex face and had been holding hands with his best friend. Even Katie didn't seem to register anything out of the ordinary, which said quite a lot.

Katie was obviously distracted by her cousin.

Aiden was obviously distracted by Katie.

I was distracted by Noah.

He was distracted by me.

What a tangled web we had woven.

“Thank you for coming.” Katie had her hands over my shoulders and was pulling me down the hallway, leaving the two men behind us. “I appreciate you being here.”

“Of course. I’m sorry I couldn’t be here sooner.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Tears were in Katie’s eyes, but she was valiantly holding them back. “But I’m a little emotional, just giving you fair warning. I’ve barely slept at all since last night. Okay, I took a little nap because Aiden insisted, but I swear it wasn’t more than thirty minutes. He swears it was four hours, but I think he’s exaggerating. Then again, I guess I was technically sleeping on his lap, so maybe he’s right—”

“Katie.” I stopped walking, faced her toward me, put my hands on her shoulders. “Look at me. Take a breath. I’m here. We’re all here for you. You’ve got an entire team here to help you with Jasmine. Slow down. Take a breath.”

Katie took a long, shaky breath. And then burst into tears.

I pulled her to my chest, stroked her hair. “I’m so sorry honey,” I said on repeat, soothing, stroking her hair, repeating more soothing words. “I’m so sorry.”

I caught Aiden and Noah’s eyes and nodded for them to give us some space. Aiden gestured for Noah to follow him, and I figured they’d go off to find some food or otherwise give us privacy.

By the time the guys returned a half an hour later, Katie had fallen asleep, her head on my shoulder, as we’d curled up on chairs in the waiting room. Noah held a couple of sandwiches. He offered one to me, but I shook my head, gesturing that I’d wait until Katie woke up.

“She’s exhausted,” Aiden said, sitting next to me. “She slept a couple of hours last night when I forced her to. But it wasn’t a good sleep, I could just tell. I’m sure she’s wiped.”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “She’s not usually like this. She’s usually pretty composed.”

Aiden nodded, a muscle flicking in his jaw. He looked exhausted too, if the bags under his eyes were a sign to go by. I was willing to bet he’d slept even less than Katie. But he was holding it together like the big brother I’d always remembered.

Aiden had always been the saving grace of my childhood. The one member of my family who had never cared who I was on paper, or what

color my hair was dyed, or who my friends were. He'd always liked me well enough just for being me. Which had meant a lot to me.

I reached over, gave Aiden's hand a squeeze. "That was nice of you to be here for her last night, especially since I wasn't able to drive her back."

"It's fine," he muttered. "It was nothing."

"But it wasn't nothing. Quite honestly, I think Katie needed you here last night more than she needed me. It was really great of you."

Again that tight jaw as Aiden looked away, and I wondered what had transpired between them last night. It wasn't exactly tension in a bad way. Maybe more of a longing? A frustration? It was hard to say, but it wasn't the place or the time to ask more questions.

So we sat, the four of us, for two hours. Katie slept, Aiden paced, and Noah ate three sandwiches. Then a nurse came out and found us, and I gently woke Katie.

"Jasmine is awake and asking to see you," the nurse said kindly to Katie. "She's doing very well after her surgery. She should be able to get out of here in a few days. We can discuss the details in private once you've seen her."

"Go ahead." I rubbed Katie's back as she blinked sleepy eyes at me. "We'll be waiting here for you."

Katie followed after the nurse like a zombie. Once she'd gone, that left me alone with my brother and... my brother's best friend? My new sex partner? *My* Noah? *Aiden's* Noah? I shivered, realizing just how complicated things had already become in a few short hours.

At my shiver, Noah reached over and gently rested a hand on my knee. I started at his touch, then my gaze jerked toward my brother. Fortunately, Aiden was too busy running his hand over his five o'clock shadow and staring down the hall after Katie to notice.

Noah's gaze met mine, and he jerked his hand back. He coughed, stood up and folded his arms protectively over his chest, as if he didn't know what else to do with them. As if he physically needed to put distance between us so he didn't accidentally touch me.

"Are you taking off then?" Aiden turned his gaze back to Noah.

"Oh. Well." Noah gave another awkward cough. "I don't have anywhere to be. I'm happy to stick around if I can be of help in any way."

"Nah," Aiden said. "I think—"

"Want me to grab you guys some food?" Noah suggested. "Coffee?"

Aiden stared at him. "You just ate three sandwiches, man."

“I’ve got a car here,” Noah said, “so I can drive y’all where you need to go.”

“I think we’re fine.” Aiden stood, clasped his best friend on the back. “Thanks for driving my sister down this morning. There’s no need for you to stick around; I’m sure you’ve gotta get back to the shop. Seems like business is booming.”

“What about you?” Noah fired back. “Are you just...hanging around?”

“I’m in town until the wedding,” Aiden said. “I needed some time away from the job anyway, and it seemed stupid to fly back and forth so much when I could just spend some time at home. So I’ve got nothing to do, and I’m happy to stick around the city and help out the girls as needed.”

“All right, then.” Noah seemed out of arguments as he glanced over Aiden’s shoulder at me, and I was pretty sure I detected a slight wince on his face. “I guess I’ll be taking off. Are you okay, Ellie? Can I give you a ride home?”

“We don’t live far from here,” I said. “I’ll find a way home when I’m ready to go. I’m not leaving until I feel comfortable with how Katie’s doing.”

The three of us stood in a triangle: me as the pinnacle, then my brother and Noah towering over me.

“Right, then, I guess if there’s nothing more for me to do here, I’ll get going.” Noah lowered his gaze to mine. “Unless there’s any reason you can think of that you’d like me to stay?”

I could think of several reasons that I’d like Noah to stay. None of them were reasons I felt comfortable even *thinking* in the presence of my brother.

“Really, I’m fine. Let me walk you to the elevator,” I said, scrambling to find a way to give us a moment alone. I just wanted him to hold me once more. A simple hug, a quiet goodbye. Anything. “I need to stretch my legs anyway. Aiden, can you wait here for Katie?”

Aiden nodded, then plunked himself back down in the chair again. I walked next to Noah, and when we turned a corner or two and found ourselves alone, I was relieved when his hand came down and clasped mine in his much larger one.

“I’ll stay for you.” Noah’s voice was low, rocky. “I don’t care what anyone else says, if you want me to stay, I will. I can sleep on a couch. I can’t cook well, but I can buy food. Or I can just sit with you.”

“I could use a hug,” I admitted.

“That I can do,” he said gruffly.

Then Noah wrapped his arms around me in a big, tight bear squeeze that had me feeling like I wouldn't see him again for years. When really, that was ridiculous.

"I mean, I'll see you in a week," I said, trying to lighten the mood as we each stepped back from one another.

"A week," he echoed, like I might as well have said an eternity.

"At the wedding?" I prompted. "Just keep an eye out for the flower girl."

Noah's jaw twitched, and for a second, I thought he was going to be pissed all over again. Then he looked at my face, saw my smirk, and he burst into laughter.

"You'll be the most beautiful damn flower girl in the world," he said. "I don't care how that sounds, it's true."

I tumbled forward into Aiden's chest for one more hug. The way his fingers stroked through my hair made me feel safe, calm, relaxed for the first time in days.

"I guess I'll give you your clothes back when I see you at the wedding?" I said into his chest, taking in a deep inhalation, savoring the minty scent of him. "If you don't mind?"

"They're yours. For as long as you want them."

Noah's voice sounded heavy, like there was more to his statement, like he was talking about more than clothes. The thought gave me both shivers of delight and trembles of fear.

I leaned onto my toes, quickly brushed a kiss across his neck. Noah groaned so low, so quietly, but so primal it had a weight returning between my legs. I wanted to invite him back to my apartment so badly that it ached, even if it was just to be near him, just to keep him within arm's reach.

"God, I'm gonna miss you," he mumbled into my hair.

"I'll miss you too. I would ask you to stay longer, but I don't think it's the time for it. Or the place." My voice wobbled. "I think I should make myself available to help Katie as much as I can. Without, you know, complications."

"Complications." Noah's voice was a little hollow. "Of course."

"It's not that you're complicated, but—"

"But I am. It's okay, I get it." Noah brushed his lips against my forehead. His hands clasped around my biceps, holding me to him like he was reluctant to let me go. "We'll talk more later. I'll see you at the wedding, flower girl."

Then one more brush of his lips to my cheek that sent a shiver trailing down my spine, and he was gone into the elevator. I stood there until the

doors closed, and then for a few minutes longer. Just standing, waiting to see if he would come back.

But he didn't come back, and eventually I headed for the cafeteria to grab a cup of coffee. It would help me explain to Aiden why my walk down the hall had taken so long.

I grabbed a Styrofoam cup of decaf, took a sip, and just about choked on it. It wasn't even close to the caliber of coffee Noah had made for me this morning. I dumped the whole thing in the garbage and stalked my way back to the waiting room, thinking it was dangerous how every little thing now seemed to be making me think of Noah.

Very, very dangerous indeed.





## Chapter 12

**E**<sup>llie</sup> The next week brought both good news and bad news. The good news was that Katie's cousin was eventually released from the hospital with the expectation that she would make a full recovery. The bad news was that she would need some help before she was feeling back to her usual fit and energetic self, and that form of help looked like *not* living on her own in New York City.

Jasmine's only options were to move home with her mother in Arizona, or to move into the apartment I shared with Katie. Since Jasmine didn't want to leave the city, Katie had asked me if it would be okay for her to offer our place up as a crash pad for a couple of weeks, at least until Jasmine was able to get around on her own again.

Of course I had no issues with Katie letting her cousin stay with us, but it did create a pretty claustrophobic living situation. Katie had moved onto the couch, and Jasmine was in her room, and there were three of us sharing one bathroom and one teeny tiny kitchen. There were crutches, and all of Jasmine's things, and a wheelchair also adding new bulk to our stuff.

Then there was the fact that Aiden had been staying in our apartment for the first few days after Jasmine's accident. He'd traded off being at the hospital to give me and Katie breaks and helping run errands and set up our new living space to accommodate Jasmine's move into the space. Fortunately, by the end of the week, he'd returned to Fantasie where he'd stay until Monica's wedding.

As much as I wasn't looking forward to returning to Fantasie for the impending wedding, I was looking for a little breath of fresh air from sharing a tiny apartment with two other women. I'd found it hard to get much work done with our new living arrangement, especially since I was trying to help with Jasmine's needs as much as possible.

But to be completely honest, it was really probably the fact that I was desperate to see Noah again that was helping me look forward to the ceremony. We'd been texting all week; it had started with little messages, a note from Noah asking how Jasmine was doing. A text from me asking about business at his shop. Those little messages that weren't really that important at all.

The *important* part was that I felt it in my chest every time my phone pinged, hoping it was Noah, waiting to hear from him, looking for any excuse to pick up the phone and let him know that I was thinking of him too.

As I packed an overnight bag the morning of the wedding, my shoulders were tense and there was a buzz of anxiety settling in my stomach. I was nervous to see my family. I was nervous to see Noah. I was nervous to do all of it wearing a dress made with copious amounts of chiffon.

My phone beeped with a text, that fluttery butterfly feeling pinging in my chest like a pinball machine. I couldn't help but smile when I saw Noah's name on the screen.

**NOAH: Where are you staying after the wedding tonight?**

My entire body thrummed with embarrassment. I smacked a hand to my forehead and flung myself onto the bed. To be fair, I had intended to book a room at the Fantasie Inn, the bed and breakfast Noah's mother ran. But when I'd called earlier this week, Lily had regretfully informed me that she was completely booked.

Which wasn't a completely big deal because I'd figured I'd book a room at a hotel in a nearby town. I would do just about anything to not stay with my parents. But for some inexplicable reason, I had never made the phone call. I mean, I *knew* why I hadn't made the phone call.

With how much I'd been thinking about Noah, anticipating seeing Noah, finding any random excuse to text Noah, I'd just sort of assumed I'd stay with him. But as I started to type out **No Plans** in a message, I realized that sounded ridiculous. While I'd assumed we'd be staying together, I hadn't actually ever verbalized it. I didn't want him to think I expected him to host me for my sister's wedding.

I realized Noah could probably see the three dots which meant I'd typed and deleted my response several times. I was just trying to figure out how to word the fact that I hadn't booked a place to stay this week that wouldn't make me look clingy since that would *not* be a good look in our *not* official relationship.

My phone beeped again.

**NOAH: Stay with me.**

**ME: Are you sure? I have other options.**

**NOAH: Do your other options make coffee like me?**

A thrill made my whole body wiggle on my bed.

**ME: My other options don't do a lot of things like you.**

I hit send before I could reread my text and really relish in the awkwardness of it.

**NOAH: Glad to hear it. So you'll stay with me?**

**ME: If it's not an imposition.**

**NOAH: I can't wait to see you.**

I toyed with my phone, wanting to text him back. I could text this man all day. Just seeing his name on my screen brought me the sort of joy I didn't know a phone could bring to a person's life. I didn't even care what he texted me. He could text me all the parts of his BMW's engine and I'd still take pleasure in the fact that he was texting them to *me*.

I put my phone down, then picked it up, then put it down, then repeated the process about thirty times before I got up the courage to write out a reply.

**ME: I can't wait to kiss you.**

**NOAH: I can't wait to do a lot more than that.**

I wasn't sure if I actually made a sound in my throat, or if it was just sort of in my head? But my physical reaction was very real. I closed my eyes tight, and for the first time in this entire process, I couldn't wait to see my sister get hitched.

"Aren't you supposed to be packing?" Katie knocked on my door, then pushed it open when I called for her to come in. "Why are you just laying on your bed?"

"No reason."

"You look like Santa came back with a whole second load of gifts. Why are you smiling like that?"

"No reason," I said again.

"Noah?"

"Maybe."

Katie came into my room and plopped on the edge of my bed. She squinted at me. "I know I'm off my game. Sorry about that."

"About what?"

"I should've been digging into your business earlier this week. In my defense, I was a little distracted."

"For good reason."

"But now that Jasmine is feeling better," Katie said, "I've got you in my sights again. Did the two of you have sex?"

"Nothing like cutting to the chase."

"You *did*? How did you not tell me this news?"

“You’ve been busy with your cousin,” I said. “I didn’t want to make this week about me.”

“How was it?”

I flopped back again. “This is why I’m lying on my bed like a puddle of Jell-O at the thought of seeing him again.”

“It was that good?”

“Better.” I blinked, edged into a half-seated position. “I mean, you probably know how I feel. You and Aiden have obviously...” I wiggled my eyebrows.

“Obviously what?” she dead-panned.

“I mean, you know,” I said. “You guys must’ve done something. There’s *something* between you guys.”

“This conversation is about you right now.” Katie narrowed her eyes at me. “So are you staying with Noah tonight?”

I held up my phone. “Yes. He just asked me to sleep over.”

“Hot damn! Good job, Noah. I like that this man isn’t beating around the bush.”

I blew out a huge breath. Then I realized who I was talking to. I shot into an upright position and pointed a finger at my best friend. “Don’t you dare mention a word of this to Aiden.”

Katie tsked. “I’m no snitch. But I do have to ask, what exactly is there to mention? Are you two an official thing?”

“No thing. I mean, not an official thing,” I said. “We are a sexy thing. Look, the sex is great. And to be honest, we both want to do it some more.”

“As one does.”

“But neither of us is ready to commit to calling what we have a relationship.”

“Why not?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, if the two of you have great sex and *also* like being around one another, that’s usually called a relationship. I’m unclear your reasons for not just being together.”

“There are lots,” I hedged. “We live in separate towns. We have different visions of what we want our futures to look like. Not to mention, we’re both a little terrified of what Aiden would think if he found out we were sleeping together behind his back.”

Katie chewed on her lip. “Yeah, he’d probably fly off the handle. But I could help with that if you want. You know, talk to him.”

“No, he’d hate it if he learned about it from a third party, even if it was you.” I sighed. “He’d have to learn about it from me and Noah, and he’s not going to learn about it because we’re not a thing.”

“What’re you so scared of?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean in general. You guys are sleeping together. Texting each other with goofy smiles on your face. Just because you don’t call it a relationship doesn’t mean it’s not one. Feelings are already involved, so if that’s what you’re trying to avoid, it’s too late.”

I threw a pillow at Katie. “Don’t say things like that.”

“You’re blind if you’re pretending it’s not true.” She caught the pillow matter-of-factly and squeezed it to her chest. “You’re practically salivating over the guy. Hell, you might be in love with him already, but that could be confused with lust. Either way, you feel something.”

“Stop talking like you make sense,” I said, feeling extra defensive and growly. “Technically what you’re saying makes sense, but sometimes it’s not that simple.”

“Talk to me like I’m in preschool then. Try to explain it.”

“We’ve been friends for years. I mean, a lifetime. We’ve never crossed this line before, and now that we have, it feels dangerous. Like we could throw away an eternity of friendship for a relationship that might fizzle out in a few weeks.”

“It’s still a risk, even if you’re just banging. Someone will still get hurt. Not to mention, Aiden is going to find out at some point.”

“It’s less of a risk because there are rules. Structure,” I said. “Rules that we don’t fall in love, and we keep things quiet from everyone else, and we just enjoy what we have. We’re just getting the physical part of this out of our systems. When it runs its course, we’ll still have our friendship because there weren’t any expectations. No broken hearts.”

“Uh huh. So when Noah meets some local girl in Fantasie and breaks things off with you so he can go marry her and get her pregnant and buy her a house, that’s not going to bother you at all?”

“Jeez, hit me with your best shot,” I said dryly, feeling each one of her words puncture me like a knife. “I mean, I guess maybe it will sting, but I

wouldn't hold it against him. If that made him happy then, well, I'd be happy for him. I still want the best for him. I still care about him."

"What about you?"

"Huh?" I asked again.

"What about you?" Katie asked, quieter. "When Noah moves on, what about you? What do you want?"

I didn't want to admit it, but when she asked what I wanted, it was like a neon sign popped up in front of my eyes blinking Noah's name. It looked very much like the sign in front of his garage.

It was easy to want that. Noah, and all that came with him. Those big, manly hands, with those gentle, hungry fingers. The way his lips touched mine, the way those eyes looked at me like I was the only girl in the world. The way we felt like one being when he was inside me, moving against me like we'd been made for one another.

Then there was his house, the cozy little cottage that looked like a little granny had lived there before him with its hand-me-down furniture and welcoming kitchen. Warm cups of coffee. Oversized sweats that I'd adopted as my own. I was still wearing his clothes as we spoke, for crying out loud.

Then there was the glittering, sleek garage that was so Noah, so organized and clean and elegant and unassuming, yet available to anyone and everyone who needed anything from a hand with their car to a cup of joe. There was his family, a family full of people who were just as friendly and supportive and lovely as Noah.

I'd be crazy not to want all of that. It sounded like the perfect life. But it wasn't the life that I'd made for myself, the life that I'd let myself dream of having.

"I need to be in New York if I want to have a chance of making a living with my art," I argued.

"Bullshit. Next?"

"I don't want to live in Fantasie. It's a small town."

"Sorta bullshit," Katie said. "You don't want to be too close to *your* family. You can exist in the same town as your family without getting brunch with them on Sundays. Knowing your family, they'll do their best to avoid you, so you won't even have to do any of the work."

As much as that stung, it was mostly the truth. Even when I'd lived at home, my conversations with my own family members had been limited. I'd lived down in the basement, wrapped up in my art and education and dreams

of getting away from it all. So why did the thought of moving back make me feel like such a failure?

“You want his babies, it’s fine,” Katie said. “It’s okay to change your dreams, sweetie.”

“I’d never give up my dreams for a man or any other person, I’m sorry,” I said. “Non-negotiable.”

“I didn’t say *give up* on your dreams. I said to change them,” Katie said. “Have you explored options for working from places that aren’t New York? Illustrators can live anywhere these days. Have you heard of the internet?”

“It’s just—”

“Living in New York is great. I’m not trying to convince you to move,” Katie said, resting a hand on my knee. “I promise you I’m not trying to kick you out of here. I don’t want you to move away. What I do want is for you to be happy, and if you’re tethered to this city based on an old dream that isn’t actually factual, that doesn’t do anyone any good.”

“I don’t know,” I said doubtfully. “Noah and I aren’t even in a relationship. There’s no talk of moving anywhere.”

“Oh, hon.” Katie leaned in, gave me a big hug. “You love that big, handsome man. Just don’t sabotage the idea of having a real family because your family sucks. I mean, they mostly suck. Aiden’s okay.”

I gave a little laugh. “Yeah, he’s okay. I’d grade him B+.”

Katie stood, grinning at my assessment. “By the way, have you changed out of those sweats all week?”

“Yes. I went to the grocery store in leggings,” I said defensively. “I washed them. I showered.”

Katie gave me a little salute that told me she was onto me. “Have fun this weekend, babe. Sorry I can’t be there with you.”

“It’s no problem. I hope Jasmine feels better. If anything changes, text me, and I’ll come right back to the city.”

“Don’t worry about us, sweet cheeks. We’ve got a movie marathon lined up and snacks for days.”

“I’ll tell Aiden hello for you.”

Before she closed my door, she playfully flashed me the middle finger. I was still laughing as I finished packing. Buoyed by the pseudo-pep-talk I’d gotten from Katie, I felt a renewed burst of energy that what I was doing with Noah wasn’t wrong. Even if I couldn’t say that it was right, it felt...good.

I picked up my phone, took a selfie of myself in Noah's sweats, and sent it to him with the caption: **Think Monica would die if I walked down the aisle wearing this?**

**NOAH: Fuck. I'm hard already.**

I burst out laughing. From the other room, Katie shouted, "You want his babies!"

I deftly ignored her. But as much as I was laughing, I was also a little hot under the collar because I figured there was about a fifty-fifty chance that he wasn't kidding. I decided to drive the nail home for good.

**ME: Just wait until you see what I'm wearing underneath.**





## Chapter 13

**N**<sup>oah</sup> It had been a week from hell.

Okay, that was an exaggeration, but also, not really. I felt physically in pain being away from Ellie for so long. Granted, after she moved to New York, we'd gone years without seeing each other. But that had been different.

Back then, we'd had walls up. Castles around us that prevented these feelings from getting in the way. Moats that swallowed any curiosity about the desires that'd lurked beneath the surface for years. Now that my walls had been crushed like Wreck It Ralph had gotten to them, it was hard to go five minutes without thinking about her.

The number of times I'd picked up my phone this week to text Ellie, just wanting to see her name across my screen, was ridiculous. I'd managed to mostly hold back until the anticipation of wondering where her head was at got the best of me. Thank God I'd broken down and texted about her overnight arrangements, because now I had a helluva lot to look forward to tonight, seeing as she'd agreed to stay with me.

Fortunately, the shop kept me busy during the week. Even now, the day of the wedding, I was still working in the garage. I figured if I could get ahead on a few things before Ellie got to town, it'd leave me with more free time once she got here. And more free time with Ellie sounded delightful.

An hour before I had to be at the church, I locked up the garage and headed inside my house. I showered, dressed in my suit, glanced at the clock. Ellie had declined a ride to the wedding ceremony, so I was only responsible for getting myself there.

I hitched a ride to the church with Finn since he'd been forced to attend the wedding as well. He'd somehow weaseled his way out of being in the bridal party by spewing some crap about he couldn't do groomsman duty while also on police duty. It was a load of baloney.

"You're full of shit," I greeted Finn as I climbed into the car. "You're in higher standing in this community than me. I'm pretty sure Doctor Derrick would rather have you standing up there than his mechanic."

Finn gave me a salacious little smile. "Gotta work, man."

"So I'm not going to see you drinking, then?"

Finn's face fell a little bit. Then he perked back up. "There are ways. Where's your girlfriend?"

"My girlfriend?"

"Dude." Finn glanced at me. "I saw you whispering sweet nothings into Ellie's ear at the party. Does Aiden know?"

"Fuck off. You're only giving me a ride because Josie still hates your guts for some reason."

My cousin and I had a great relationship. *Obviously*. We also knew when to stop talking so we could keep relative peace. This was the point where we stopped talking.

Finn parked, and then we split ways as he went to look for some pilfered alcohol he could drink on the sly, since he was in no way on duty today. I went to find the rest of the groomsmen while wondering how on earth I was supposed to keep a straight face around Aiden when what I was really thinking about was getting his sister naked in my bed tonight.

The oldest church in Fantasie was a beautiful historic structure, often the subject of photographs for tourists passing by. Weddings booked up here far in advance because of its local fame. I wondered how Monica and Derrick had managed such a last-minute reservation here. Then I remembered that their mothers were Bridget Turner and Anya Henry, and they could pretty much do whatever they wanted.

On the invitation, it had stated that after the wedding ceremony, there would be a reception in the grand ballroom across the street, a structure that had been built for just such occasions. Then there'd be a nightcap back at the Fantasie Inn for immediate family only when the reception wound down.

A layer of dusty snow lay on the sidewalk. Enough to leave footprints, not enough to get my shoes wet. I was grateful for the cold. It gave me a little shock to the system and brought me back down to earth after spending half the day daydreaming about getting my hands back on Ellie Turner.

As I pushed open the doors to the church, I found that I was a couple of minutes late for my scheduled arrival time, but fortunately nobody seemed to notice. Aiden walked in right behind me and clapped me on the back. He didn't look particularly thrilled about being in his own sister's wedding, which made me feel a little better about how much I was dreading it.

From where we were gathered, I could see that other guests were already starting to arrive. Dani from the bakery shuffled in holding an armful of sweets that she announced were a surprise for the wedding party.

Josie bustled around fiddling with the flowers and sending glares over her shoulder at Finn, who was watching her like it was his job. For being a cop, Finn was not sly at sneaking little nips from a flask in his pocket. Seemed like a lot of people weren't going to make it through this ceremony sober.

Clarice wandered through the church in a flowing, peony-pink gown that had her looking like some sort of Greek goddess. She had her eyes closed as she breezed down the aisles like she was waiting for some sort of psychic thoughts to hit her right before the wedding march started. I made a note to stay far, far away from her this evening. I wasn't ready for a dose of Clarice's eerily accurate predictions in my current state of mind.

I felt a clap on my shoulder and turned, thinking I'd find Aiden, but instead found Lucas and his new bride, Chloe, arm in arm with one another.

"Oh, you bastard," I said, pointing at him. "You know this should be you in my place."

Lucas grinned like an idiot. "I don't know the guy."

"You're a lawyer. I'm just the mechanic."

"You're the one who knows the Turner family better than anyone else." Lucas glanced at Chloe. "My brother always had a thing for Ellie, the youngest sister."

"Oh?" Chloe suddenly looked intrigued, her head whipping around to check for this mystery woman. "Where is she?"

"Not here," I snapped. "And I didn't have a thing for her. We were pals. We hung out a lot because Aiden was my best friend."

Lucas rolled his eyes, squeezing Chloe tighter, dusting a playful kiss to the side of her head. "He's full of it."

"Oh, I know." Chloe winked. "A girl can always tell. Don't worry, bro-in-law, I'll keep your secret."

Fortunately, Aiden gestured for me to leave Lucas and Chloe to join the other groomsmen in the back of the church. Once there, one of the other guys offered up a round of whiskey shots. Aiden and I helped ourselves. Twice.

Derrick came around and shook our hands, looking like he helped himself to plenty of the booze before we'd even gotten there. His eyes were a little too red, his movements a little too fidgety. When Derrick shook Aiden's hand, the tension was practically visible.

"That's my sister you're marrying, yeah?" Aiden didn't let go of Derrick's hand.

Derrick went pasty-white. "Of course."

“You’re gonna take care of her. Do right by her.” The way Aiden spoke, it wasn’t an option.

I wasn’t exactly afraid of Aiden, seeing as we were as good as brothers, but even I had to flinch as I pretended not to eavesdrop. The whole thing did give me a little hesitation as I found myself wondering which bones of mine Aiden might crunch if he found out what I was planning to do to his other sister tonight.

“Of course, man,” Derrick said with a cough. “I plan on it.”

Aiden waited. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you love her?” Aiden asked. “Are you going to protect her? Take care of her? Keep my sister as happy as she’s ever been?”

“Yeah, man,” Derrick muttered. “Of course I love her. We’re getting married.”

I pressed my fingers to my forehead. I wasn’t sure if Derrick was too drunk or too dumb or just too entitled that he didn’t actually realize how he was coming off. Which was like a dick.

“Glad to hear it,” Aiden said. “Because you and I won’t get along if you let her down. Do we understand each other?”

“Shit, man. I’m a doctor. I need my hands.” Derrick finally wriggled his hands free. “Fuck.”

“Happy wedding.” Aiden clapped him so hard on the back that Derrick pitched forward.

Before I could even raise my eyebrows at Aiden, I saw Derrick heading straight for the liquor bottle.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered. “This isn’t gonna end well.”

Aiden blew out a breath. “This has never been something I saw ending well.”

“Why didn’t you say something about it sooner?” I asked. “If you don’t like him, why didn’t you tell Monica?”

“Have you met Monica?” Aiden shrugged. “I think the guy’s a dick, but Monica seems to really love him. I’ve made no bones over the fact that I don’t understand Monica, so how the hell am I supposed to know what she needs in a marriage? The only thing I can do for her now is be there if things fall apart.”

I contemplated this, wondering if he felt similarly about Ellie. If he’d be as protective of her, or maybe even more protective. Or extra, *extra*

protective to the n<sup>th</sup> degree because it was me on the receiving end of things, and not some random dude. And he knew me, inside and out. Aiden knew what I was capable of, the good and the bad.

“I guess it’s time to go,” Aiden said. “One more shot for the road? If the groom’s halfway to hammered, I figure one more ain’t gonna kill us.”

We clinked glasses, tossed our liquor back, and then we all got in line. The next chunk of time was more or less a blur as we walked down the aisle partnered with a slew of bridesmaids that all looked pretty much the same to me. Slim, blond, pretty in a polished way. I understood most of them were Derrick’s sisters.

I couldn’t focus on much of anything except where to stand in line while I waited for the woman I wanted to see walking down the aisle. I knew I was about to get my wish when a little dog scurried the aisle. A damn dog.

I held my breath because I knew what was coming next. While the crowd was still oohing and aahing over the cuteness that was a little morkie named Maxine, I felt my heart thumping in my chest because I knew how much Ellie was dreading this moment. I could feel it, as if she was a part of me. A part of me wished I could go and walk down the aisle next to her just to give her something to lean on.

Then the music resumed and flower petals hit the floor. I dragged my eyes up to find the woman of my dreams walking down the aisle, a little smirk on her face that told me she’d had a shot or two herself, and my entire fucking heart quivered.

Even though I was laser focused on Ellie, I couldn’t help but notice the reaction of the people waiting to get a glimpse of the bride. It was like a wave building, a whitecap of a whisper cresting as people realized that the flower girl wasn’t a three-foot-tall toddler. It was a full-grown woman, and not just any woman, but the bride’s sister.

A couple of my DiMaggio cousins furrowed their brows in confusion and murmured to one another. The people who knew what to expect seemed like they were trying their best to keep straight faces, letting no emotion show through. And then there were the people who didn’t care at all, the people I could hear whispering, wondering why in the hell the flower girl was Ellie Turner.

So I did the only thing I could think of to do, and I winked at her. She looked nervous, the poor thing, like she was trying to keep it all in. I could see the tension in her jawline as she tossed out petals onto the carpet. The

way she deftly avoided eye contact with anyone but me, because she wasn't deaf, and she could hear the whispers around her.

And yet she had agreed to do this; to embarrass herself in front of her entire town, just to make her sister happy. That was reason number 501 that I was starting to fall in love with Ellie Turner.

Something about seeing Ellie here, walking down the aisle of a church—even in fifty-five pounds of tulle—had me thinking that I could see this for us someday. A wedding, a life together, a future. And it made my heart feel like it was about to fucking crack.

Mercifully, Ellie finished a walk that probably felt to her like it had taken seventy-five years and took her place as the rest of the crowd rose and the live band began to play the traditional bridal march. Before I knew it, Monica was standing in front of Derrick and vows were being read. To be completely fair, I wasn't sure exactly what the hell was being said because I couldn't tear my eyes off Ellie's face.

Her hair was tied up in a cascade of curls that just begged me to unravel them. The picture of those curls bouncing up and down in my lap as she took me in her mouth was so hot that I had to stare down Aiden's grandma for fifteen minutes to prevent a hard-on during the ceremony.

I said a little prayer of thanks when Monica and Derrick sealed their nuptials with a kiss, and the priest sent us on our way out of the church. I spent the next ten minutes looking around for the walking pom pom with the delectable curls. When I spotted Ellie talking with a few of the bridesmaids, I marched right up to her and grabbed her hand, dragging her away from her conversation.

"Oh good." Ellie seemed mildly amused. "How could you tell I didn't want to talk to anybody right now anyway?"

"Because if you're feeling the same way I am, then I need to get you somewhere alone. Now. Or your grandmother is going to be seeing me with an erection all night."

"Oh." Ellie's eyelashes fluttered. They were a bit more made up than usual, a bit more dramatic. "Noah, we can't have sex in a church."

"I didn't mean a church," I said. "My house isn't far from here."

"I can't leave right now." Despite her words, Ellie looked like she sort of yearned to leave, but her sense of obligation was too strong. "I'm sorry. I mean, I want you, but maybe we can just, I don't know, wait?"

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed a hand against my forehead. “I’m so sorry. It’s just that I’ve been thinking of you all week, and then finally seeing you walk down the aisle made me wild.”

“Well, if you put it like that...” Ellie’s lips looked fuller, redder as her cheeks reddened. “I want you too, Noah. I just, I’m new at this sort of very passionate thing. I don’t know the mechanics of it.”

“No mechanics needed.” It was torture not to touch her since I’d had to let go of her hand once I’d dragged her away from the bridesmaids. “I’m a grown-ass man. I can control myself. I didn’t mean to put any pressure on you.”

Ellie leaned onto her tiptoes, pressed her hands to my chest. She smelled like rose and sugar and champagne, and Christ, I could eat her for breakfast with whipped cream on top. “You’re not putting any pressure on me, Noah. Just wait until you feel what I’m wearing under here.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Two words. Crotch-less.” Ellie paused. “Or is that one word? Or a hyphen? I’m not really sure, but I guess I should probably Google it before I ruin my dirty talk sounding like a dictionary, huh?”

“I stopped listening at crotchless, to be fair,” I said, feeling like I was going to need to take my jacket off pretty soon or else I’d be sweating an obscene amount despite the February chill. “I don’t give a damn about hyphens in this context. Or really, in general, if you want full transparency.”

“I’m sure there’s a closet we can make out in somewhere.” Ellie winked. “Maybe we can head over to the reception hall and find a quiet corner before the rest of the group gets the memo? Let off a little steam so we don’t scandalize Grandma?”

I grabbed her hand and marched across the street like I was a train with one stop in mind. Hell, I was running off the rails. I needed to get myself under control before I screwed everything up by being too damn eager.

“There’s one more thing,” Ellie said in a little whisper.

As my little pom pom skipped her way next to me across the street, I realized I was walking so fast that she could barely keep up in her heels. I slowed, let her catch up, only then taking a real look at her face and seeing her cheeks turn a bright pink.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing’s wrong. It’s just. I mean, I thought I should let you know I went on birth control,” she said quickly, looking a little sheepish. “I didn’t



want to assume anything, but I thought it was better safe than sorry.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I’ve got condoms too.”

“Yeah, I thought it would just be good to have me on the pill as a backup. I’m tested, and I’m clean.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Well, glad we got that sorted so I guess now is just the fun part, huh?”

The way she was so freaking thoughtful had me feeling even more protective over my pink pom pom. Not to mention the fact that she’d been anticipating having sex with me again had me feeling downright growly. I’d spent a week in my head wondering if Ellie had been doubting this whole arrangement, wondering if she’d thought I’d been a huge mistake.

Sure, we’d been texting all week, and she’d given me no indication that she was having second thoughts about what was happening between us. But still, being away from her had done funny things to my head. My heart knew what it wanted, and that was Ellie. It was the logistics of it that were getting a little tangled up at the moment.

The building across the street had been built to accommodate larger receptions for things like weddings, birthdays, graduations, and more. The church itself was beautiful, but it was a historical marker and very small, and the town hadn’t allowed any changes to the actual property.

The ballroom across the street was also beautiful, built in a way that blended into the town’s historical decor while also having a sense of newness and modernness that helped with things like hosting large catered meals and bringing in deejays and dance floors.

The venue had been decorated to the nines with more whites and silvers and glitter. There was a coat closet where I gratefully checked my jacket. We paused to peek at the room decked out in fairy lights and chandeliers. Ellie muttered a few *oohs* and *ahhs* before following me up a staircase. I had no idea where it led, but we were the first ones in the building, and I figured the second floor would give us the most privacy to just be alone.

I checked behind one door.

“I spy a lock,” I said, nodding to a spare room that was probably used for bridal parties to get ready or something. “How do you feel about a kiss?”

Then she was on me, and I was on her. Ellie flung herself toward me, and I lifted my little pom pom like she was nothing more than a few pounds of tulle, and our mouths met in a fantastic tangle of desire and heat.

I finally didn't have to fight my hard-on any longer, and my cock jerked to attention like it was his entire life's job to be ready for Ellie Turner. As it did, Ellie gasped, and I lowered her so that she was perched in such a way that she could feel every inch of me.

"You've been teasing me for so long, I'm going to need to make sure you're not all talk," I joked, letting my teeth drag down her cheek to her chin. "I've got to see what's under your dress."

"Yes," she gasped.

I slid my hand beneath her tulle. But I only found more and more layers of tulle. It took quite some time for me to actually make progress on getting to the part of her I really wanted to touch.

"Do you need a map to find my panties?" Ellie smirked.

"You think you're funny," I hissed at her, finding her core and plunging a finger inside of her.

That smirk disappeared as her eyes rolled back into her head and she jerked against me. Her gorgeous curls flung backward as her sex crushed against my lap, and I wanted more than anything for the barriers between us to disappear.

"Crotchless panties," I muttered in mystified confirmation. "God, you know how to drive me wild."

"I mean, I've never used them before," she said, breathing heavily. "But so far? Five stars. Highly recommend."

"You haven't seen anything yet, baby," I said. "We're just getting started. And yet, you're already wet for me. Have you been thinking about me this week?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"Touching yourself while you thought of me in your bed?" I asked. "While you were wearing my sweats?"

"No," she murmured. "I mean, yes to the sweats, no to the touching."

I swallowed against the sting of rejection.

"I didn't touch myself this week," Ellie said, locking her arms around my neck and staring into my eyes. "Because I only wanted the real thing."

"Fuck. I need you, baby. I know I said we could wait, and if you want to, just say the word, but—"

"I'm ready," she said. "Please."

"Shit," I said, hanging my head. "My condoms are in my jacket pocket. What an idiot."

Ellie peered up at me through those thick lashes. "It's fine with me if it's fine with you. I swear I'm on the pill, and I haven't missed any."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I don't want to pressure you into anything."

"So you've said," she murmured, a hint of amusement playing on her lips. "You're not pressuring me. Do you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you."

"Then I'll leave it up to you," she said simply.

I reached for her, drew her closer to me, though admittedly the layers of tulle created a bit of a pillow-squish between us.

"Sorry," Ellie muttered, swatting an errant piece of fabric away.

"Nothing I can't work around," I said, and to prove my point, I reached under that dress and found her panties with the little slit in the middle just for me.

I dipped my finger inside, slower this time, teasing. Playing, just enjoying the look on her face as she tensed under the pressure of my finger in the best way.

"I can't wait to be inside you," I rasped against her hot mouth. "Will it ruin your dress if I pick you up?"

"I don't mind changing," Ellie said. "I have an extra dress in my suitcase. I didn't want to look like Tinkerbell all night."

"Don't change out of these panties," I groaned, sliding another finger inside of her, working her until she moaned against me. "I've grown quite fond of them."

"Oh," she said, nipping at my neck as I stroked her harder, faster, bringing her to an edge and then slowly, deliberately, backing away.

I paused for a moment to take in the room which I'd mostly been oblivious to for obvious reasons. It's a simple multipurpose room that was mostly empty aside from a table along one wall, a couple of armchairs along another, and a little café style seating set in front of the window. I spotted what I was looking for and shuffled Ellie over to a basic upright chair without armrests. I slid her onto my lap.

"I see your plan," Ellie said, settling onto me, her legs falling on either side of the chair. "But you're going to need to take your pants off."

"Yes, ma'am."

I unbuttoned my pants, shifted them lower while Ellie waited impatiently nearby. Once I was free, I pulled her onto my lap, but she teased me, taking me in her hand and stroking me. One of my hands eased into her hair, tugging

against those curls I knew I should leave alone, but I couldn't help it. They'd been taunting me, begging to be touched since I'd first seen her at the ceremony.

My other hand slid around her back, dragging her closer to me. Closer, closer, because I couldn't get enough of her. I wanted all of her. Mind, body, soul.

"Christ," I muttered. "You feel amazing."

Ellie teased me, grinding herself against my cock. I was already leaking for her, desperate for more. It was official. I was going to go insane when Ellie drew an end to our arrangement. There was no way around it.

"You're sure you're comfortable with this?" I asked. "I can run down and grab the condoms."

"Can you?" she asked, lips quirking in amusement. "Right now? Looking like this?"

"I mean..." I coughed, grinned at her callout. "I mean, I can put my head between your thighs and finish you off that way if you want. And we can save the rest for later."

"Though a generous offer, I want you now."

To punctuate her sentence, Ellie closed her eyes and slid onto my cock, slowly at first, her head falling back as she moved, inch by inch, allowing me access to her core. I hissed out a sigh that felt like it held all of the weight of the week in it.

I leaned forward, dragged a trail of kisses down her beautiful, exposed throat. Ellie shivered with the sensation, plunging downward on me so hard that she gasped as I filled her. Her eyes flew open as she took me with a jerk right up to the hilt, and I could see in her eyes the shock and awe and desire.

"How do you feel?" I asked. "Are you hurting?"

She shook her head, swallowed, seemingly unable to speak.

"Tell me if you are," I demanded, "and we'll stop."

"No," she gasped. "It's incredible."

I dragged her roughly closer to me, savoring the sharp inhalation of breath as she moved on me. I was harder than I'd been in my entire life as I watched the expression on her face as I filled her.

Then Ellie began to move, cautiously at first, letting herself stretch, obviously feeling the fullness of me inside her. Then faster, then more and more confident until she was riding me like the world was about to end.

I felt her starting to quiver, and I watched her eyes, waiting for the glorious moment when the orgasm promised to rock through her. But instead of pushing herself off the cliff, she slowed our rocking, situating herself so fully onto me that she gasped when I slid the rest of the way home. Further than ever before, looking into my eyes as it happened. So vulnerable, so sweet.

“How is this possible?” Ellie’s voice shook, sounded a little broken.

“What do you mean?” I murmured hoarsely.

Ellie’s lips pouted in uncertainty, and she blinked a little faster. She moved, and her walls clenched around me, nearly sending me into a frenzy.

“Move like that again, and I’m going to finish inside of you,” I gritted out. “Baby, I’ve never been inside anyone without a condom before. You feel incredible.”

“We only slept together a week ago, and I can’t stop thinking about you,” Ellie blurted. “I have never felt like this before. I couldn’t wait to see you again, Noah.”

“I know, baby, I know,” I said. “I thought about you all week long. In the shower. In my bed. On the couch. Christ. If I didn’t have to work, I would’ve been doing nothing but thinking of you all week.”

Ellie’s lips flickered into a little smile. “So it’s not just me?”

“Do you feel me inside you?” I raised my eyebrows. “No, babe. It’s not just you. I have never felt like this before about anyone.”

“I don’t know what it means.” Ellie shifted a little on me, slow, intense movements, keeping our eyes locked, our bodies locked, our hearts locked.

It felt torturously good. Ellie was teasing me, dragging me to the finish line inch by fucking inch. The way her eyes looked at me, so intent, so vulnerable and honest, I felt like I was having a heart attack. I couldn’t breathe, I cared so viciously for this woman.

I knew what it meant. It meant I was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with Ellie Turner, but I couldn’t say that right now. Not while I was fucking her in a tulle dress in a public place. The timing wasn’t right. The ambiance wasn’t right. Not to mention, she’d been the one to request an arrangement, not me. Me confessing love to her one week later was obviously not in Ellie’s plans.

I wasn’t ready to scare Ellie away by confessing my feelings for her. I had the sneaking suspicion she’d retreat back to New York at the first whiff of the word *love* from me. I couldn’t stand to lose her just yet, not when I’d spent all these years waiting to have her, even a little piece of her.

“What do you want it to mean?” I growled.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, pressing a hand to her stomach as if to feel me inside her. It was fucking sexy. “I just know I don’t want to stop doing this.”

“Then let’s not,” I said. “Move in with me.”

“What?” Ellie’s eyelashes blinked.

“I didn’t mean *move-in*, move in,” I corrected. “I meant that you could stay with me. Your apartment’s crowded. Just for a week or two. We can do this whenever you want. You can work remotely in your own room with your own space.”

“Tempting.” Ellie’s arms locked around my neck. She toyed with my hair. “I don’t know if I can agree to that while you’re inside me, Noah.”

“Then agree to it later,” I breathed, nipping at her ear, sliding my hands down around the tulle to fist her ass. “Baby, don’t worry so much about me. Worry about what you want. I’m here for you no matter what you decide.”

“No matter what?”

Ellie’s voice caught for real then, and I could see in her eyes true fear that I didn’t mean what I said, that I was just saying it because she was putting out for me. A lick of anger surged up my belly, and I placed my hands on her cheeks, forcing her to look me in the eyes because I knew these wounds of hers weren’t from me, they were from a lifetime of growing up with parents like hers.

“No matter what, I’m here for you,” I said firmly. I planted a hard kiss on her mouth, and it was all I could do not to crush her with my desire to keep her safe and close. When I finally pulled back, held her face in my hands again, I made her another promise. “You want to have sex with each other for a while and then go our separate ways? Great. You want to fall in love with me and get married? I’m there. You can drive this train, El.”

“But—” she blinked. “*Noah.*”

I blinked back, gave her my best grin. “Whatever you want, babe. I’m here for you. I mean it.”

“Noah,” she gasped, as we rocked faster and harder against one another, the sound of flesh on flesh growing in intensity as our wetness crushed together. “*Noah.*”

The way my name spilled from her lips pretty much cemented everything I already knew. It was Ellie Turner. It had always been Ellie Turner.

“Say it again,” I instructed her.

I could tell she was dizzy with the building orgasm, and she had no idea what she'd just said. Which made it even more meaningful when her nails dug into my shoulders, and she propelled herself down onto me, taking me fully, as she rode out the wave to the final climax.

"God, Noah," she cried, and I drove into her, pounding harder, faster, a celebration of slick skin and pent-up desire and unrequited love as I drove toward a finish that felt just out of reach.

I couldn't stop myself. We were almost manic for one another, me driving into her over and over and over again until she tipped into the abyss of pleasure, and I tumbled right over with her. She took me completely, her trembling walls milking me of every last drop until we were both completely spent, and she collapsed, clinging to me like a buoy in a stormy sea.

I ran my hands down her back, grazed my fingers against her skin as I listened to her ragged breaths. If I'd known sex with Ellie Turner would be like this, there was no way I would've been able to wait this many damn years to do it. All this time spent building up walls between us when what we'd needed to do was forgo our separate castles and shack up in one together.

With a big moat around it to keep everyone else out.

The slightly sobering thought popped into my head just then that my feelings for Ellie were getting deeper much faster than I'd intended. I'd always had feelings for her, sure, but I'd been able to pretend they were something else for a long, long time. The more real I suspected my love for Ellie was getting, the more uncomfortable I felt sleeping with my best friend's sister behind Aiden's back.

As if on cue with my mounting concerns, there was a knock on the door.

"Oh, crap," Ellie said, pulling herself off me and reaching for a tissue box nearby. "We probably should've wrapped that up a lot sooner, huh?"

I turned away from her, cleaned myself up in a snap and had my boxers pulled up and my pants buttoned. I wouldn't have changed anything about it. I wouldn't have wrapped it up a second sooner.

Something bigger had happened here than I thought either of us had anticipated. We'd both convinced ourselves we were in it for the passion. We'd both thought this would be hot, needy sex, a little taboo, a little forbidden in a public place. But really, it had been so much more. The look in her eyes, her confession that she didn't know what these feelings meant. My asking her to move in with me...

I cut my own thoughts off, groaning at the words that had come out of my mouth. In about five minutes, I had asked Ellie Turner to move in with me and then offered to marry her. God, how embarrassing. I could not think straight when she was in my arms.

*Strikes one and two*, I told myself, feeling like the whiskey and the sex had caught up to me in a dangerous cocktail that had me not sure exactly what was coming out of my mouth. Hopefully Ellie had been in some sort of similar fugue state and had forgotten about my gibberish completely.

“Coming,” I growled at the door.

“Take your time,” a female voice called back. “It’s just me.”

The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. It sure as hell wasn’t my mother, which was Win Number One. It wasn’t Monica either, because she wouldn’t be so patient. Win Number Two.

“Do you need anything?” I asked Ellie quietly.

“A new identity,” Ellie snapped back. “Half this town is going to have seen my vagina by the time we’re through.”

“Not my fault you wore crotchless panties.”

Despite my quick retort, I felt an ache. There it was again, our end date. *By the time we’re through*. Her words hit me in the chest like an ice pick. Fortunately, I had something quite pressing to attend to, I smiled at Ellie, waited until she’d adjusted herself, and then made my way to the door.

I opened it and found none other than Clarice there. I wasn’t totally sure of her last name. I wasn’t sure if many people knew it. But everyone knew *Clarice*—she was the local self-proclaimed town psychic that’d been wandering around the wedding venue looking like she was waiting for divine intervention before Monica’s wedding.

Apparently her psychic powers worked super great in every circumstance except this one. Because if her psychic powers had been working, she would’ve stayed far away from the room where I was having sex with Ellie Turner.

“Hey Clarice,” I said. “Did you need something? Ellie was just...fixing her curls.”

“Uh huh.” Clarice’s eyes sparkled.

Clarice was a woman of indeterminate age. Honestly, she could’ve been in her twenties or her fifties, and I wouldn’t have batted an eye. Her hair was pale, wrapped in a low chignon today. The psychic still wore that peony-pink flowing dress, and now that I was seeing her up close, I noted she’d paired it



with massive hoop earrings that dangled from her ears. She held a wrapped present in her hands.

I could tell Clarice didn't believe my lie. Which was fine because I didn't believe it either. And if she actually was psychic, this shouldn't be a surprise because she'd have known exactly what we were doing in this spare room.

"I just popped up here in case the room was occupied," Clarice said, an amused lilt to her voice. "I overheard Monica asking that all of the guests be directed this way to drop off their presents in this room. So unless Ellie wants an audience while she's—" Clarice gave a little smirk—"fixing her curls, then I'd suggest you two find a new location."

"Thanks," I muttered.

I didn't embarrass easily, but I had to admit the edges of embarrassment were there. If Clarice hadn't seen fit to issue us a warning, then we could've been interrupted by someone else, and that could've been really horrible. It could have been Ellie's mother at the door. Or Derrick's mom. Or Monica. Or Aiden. Or hell, the entire bridal party. I thanked my lucky stars she'd been hit by whatever lightning bolt had struck her in that church.

"Hair's fixed," Ellie chirped an octave too high behind me. "Thanks, Clarice."

"Anytime." The psychic held up her wrapped present. "I think I'll just leave this on the table then."

As Ellie and I ducked down the hallway, sure enough, I could hear some of the staff talking about getting the presents up to the utility room on the second floor.

"I guess having a psychic around isn't all bad, huh?" I muttered to Ellie. "Perks of a small town."

She just glared at me. "I'm going to change."

"Change?" I asked.

"Out of this." She gestured at her rumpled tulle. "And actually fix my hair."

"Great," I said, pulling her into a little alcove where it was just us. I pressed a quick kiss to her head, then whispered in her ear. "But don't let those panties out of sight. I've got plans for them later."



## Chapter 14

**E**llie After slipping into a much more reasonable dress, a pretty navy-blue thing that matched Noah's eyes *just so*, I ducked out of the bathroom stall and checked on my hair.

The carefully constructed curls were a lost cause at this point, so I shook my hair out and re-tied it back into a tight ponytail, making it look like the messy bun at the back was intentional, and not the result of Noah's hands tugging through my locks as he came inside me.

The thought of those moments we'd shared in the spare room heated my cheeks. I'd never been so irresponsible in my life. Contrary to what my mother believed, I wasn't actually much of a rebel. I liked different music and art and hairstyles than she did, but I didn't actually break all that many rules.

I was a pretty strict rule follower, or I had been until Noah returned to my life in all his glory. Something about that man caused my inhibitions to die a fast and furious death. All he had to do was look at me, and I could feel a weight pooling between my thighs, a magnetism revving between us, the desire to be near him overwhelming all logical thought.

I definitely hadn't grabbed this dress out of Katie's closet because it had reminded me of Noah's eye color. It wasn't like I'd drifted off to sleep all week long thinking of nothing but him, and those eyes, and the way his skin felt against mine. I definitely wasn't feeling like what was happening between me and Noah was more than just a physical thing.

And yes, I was absolutely, positively in denial about my feelings for Noah Donovan at this point. But I wasn't ready to let go of my staunch denial just yet because I was freaking terrified of what might happen if I did.

Somehow, miraculously, seeing him today in person was even better than what I'd expected in my imagination. I wasn't sure how that was possible, seeing as he was pretty darn near perfect in my dreams, but it was something intangible. Something primal. Something so basic that it couldn't be verbalized, or stored, locked away like a keepsake. Something I so hungrily wanted to keep for myself forever.

"You changed."

I turned from reapplying my previously obliterated lipstick to find Monica had entered the otherwise empty restroom.

“Did you really expect me to wear a pom pom around all night?” I asked. “I couldn’t have sat in a chair to eat anything. If I’d wanted to dance with someone, we would’ve had to dance three feet apart.”

To my surprise, instead of her usual biting quip, Monica flashed a softer smile on me. “You look very pretty in that color.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a sudden wave of nervousness. Monica was not usually this nice to me, and it had all my hackles raised. “That’s very nice of you to say.”

We stood there in awkward silence.

“Your ceremony was incredible,” I said, “and your vows were perfect. I know I already told you, but you really do look like the most stunning bride in that dress.”

“Thank you,” she said, glancing in the mirror at herself.

The look wasn’t filled with her usual dose of self-admiration. Instead, there was a bit of longing, almost a forlorn tinge to her expression. I wondered if she’d been so excited about the act of getting married that, now that it was almost over, she was starting to see the road ahead more clearly. Less glitz and glam of wedding planning. More long-haul marriage with Derrick.

“Are you doing okay?” I ventured. “You seem a little down.”

“I’m fine.” Monica turned to me, flashed a quick, faker smile. “Just a little tired. It’s been a long day. I know this is a little awkward to ask, and I should probably be getting my maid of honor to do this or something, but would you help me out before you go?”

I blinked. “Help you out?”

She blinked back at me. Gestured down to the big, puffy, princess-like skirt that billowed around her. Then she looked pointedly at the stall doors.

“Oh, you need help going pee,” I said, piecing everything together at once. “Yes, of course.”

“You’re sure?”

“Monica.” I deadpanned her with a look. “I’m your sister. I’ve seen you naked more times than your bridesmaids. At least, I hope so.”

Monica burst out in the first gale of real laughter I’d heard from her since about middle school. Just as quickly, she covered her mouth with her hand, as

if it was such an unguarded piece of her that she couldn't possibly let her laughter be heard by anyone else.

A twinge of sadness twanged in my gut as I looked at my sister in her full face of makeup, on arguably one of the most important days of her life, and realized I wasn't even sure she was enjoying it.

There was something about her that was off. Something very un-Monica of her. In a way, it made her seem more human. A part of me felt almost grateful to get this glimpse of my sister. It felt raw, more honest, than anything I'd seen out of her in years. For just a moment, I wished she'd let herself go—let herself laugh with abandon. Curse like a sailor. Drink too much. Eat the extra piece of cake. *Live.*

"Are you coming?" Monica cleared her throat and nodded toward the bathroom. "I'd like to get this done before anyone else comes in and gets a free show."

"Sure, of course."

I headed into the largest stall after Monica and did my sisterly duties of holding the dress while she went to the bathroom. When she'd finished and we were back at the sink, I found myself unable to let go of the thought that I was good enough to help Monica pee, but not good enough to be a bridesmaid. It summed up our relationship in a nutshell quite well.

"I'm sorry," Monica whispered.

I looked over at Monica, first of all surprised she'd spoken to me, and second of all surprised that those words had come out of her mouth. I would've been less shocked if she'd started speaking to me in Arabic.

"Huh?" I managed.

"I'm sorry." Monica dabbed a tissue near her eye. "About the flower girl thing. I appreciate you going along with it. I, uh, realize it was unconventional."

"A little. But, I mean, it's your wedding. I just wanted you to be happy."

"Yeah." She swallowed a little harder than necessary. "I know that. I appreciate it, Ellie. Really."

I turned to face Monica. Something was definitely off. Had someone spiked her wedding champagne? As far as I knew, Monica had never been drunk. First of all, alcohol contained too many calories for her restricted diet, and second of all, being drunk wasn't always an attractive state. Monica did have a thing for being in control. But I was wondering if this was the drunk version of Monica. If so, I realized further, I didn't hate it.

“You know that I’m your sister,” I said, trying to keep my voice matter-of-fact. I sensed that she’d spook like a rabbit if I laid on the empathy too thick. “I’m always here for you.”

Monica opened her mouth to respond, but at that moment the door opened and two giggling and obviously drunk wedding guests tumbled in. Upon seeing Monica, they gasped and gave her the obligatory gushing of what a beautiful bride she’d been.

I was annoyed at the two women, wanting to rush them right back out of the bathroom so that I could continue the first real moment I’d had with my sister in way too long. But I knew, even if they left now, that whatever had happened between us was over. The mood had been broken, the magical spell that had opened up Monica to look at me differently ceased to exist.

“Do you need help with anything else?” I asked Monica.

“No, thanks.” Monica barely acknowledged me, confirming our moment was indeed over.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” I said, hoping she understood that I was offering to be there for her not only as a bathroom attendant, but also as a sister.

With that, I ducked out of the restroom and headed back to the reception. My first instinct was to scan the room for Noah. I didn’t spot him immediately. I must have looked lost because Lily Donovan, Noah’s mother, sidled up next to me and gave me a knowing smile.

“Aiden found Noah and pulled him away to help move some of the bigger presents to the spare room,” Lily said in her kind voice.

“Oh,” I said, feeling sheepish that she’d known exactly who I was looking for. And more awkwardly, that it was her son. “Right. Has dinner started yet?”

Lily gave me a gentle smile. She raised a hand, rested it on my shoulder. “I wanted to invite you to my house on Friday night for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Family dinner.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude. I don’t even know how long I’ll be in town. That’s almost a week away, and—”

“It’s any and every Friday night,” Lily clarified. “I have standing dinners at the inn for all friends and family of the Donovans. Usually something simple, pasta and garlic bread and salad.”

“It’s not a private thing?”

“No, it’s a very public thing.” Lily’s eyes crinkled. “I’ve been having these dinners for years. People float in and out week by week. Some cycle in over the years. Others have never missed a dinner. Some have only come once. I never know how many places to set, but we’ve never run out of food, so that’s something.”

“That is impressive,” I said. “I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“Well, we always were big on doing family dinners, albeit much smaller family dinners, when my boys were young.” Lily’s eyes sparkled fondly as she looked out over the room. “Then they started getting big, as children do, and I realized I wanted them to know they were always welcome to come back. So long as they were in town, there’d be food on the table for them. For anyone in Fantasie, really.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“I don’t know about generous. I was going to say selfish.” Lily winked at me. “I was worried my boys would only pop over when my pipes burst or if I requested they move a piece of furniture. But if I’ve learned one thing as a mother to three boys, it’s that the way to their heart is through food.”

“You’re right. Your plans are very Machiavellian indeed.”

Lily burst into a tinkling laugh. “I knew you’d see it my way.”

“I take it your plans worked?”

“Mostly. Carter still moved away, but I rope him into dinners when he comes back. Lucas is often busy with the law firm, and for a while, he sort of drifted away from the family gatherings. Once, he sent his poor assistant to pick up food and bring it back to the office for him.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Then he met Chloe, and they’ve barely missed a dinner since they’ve been together.” Lily leaned a little closer to me. “She’s so good for him. I’m just thrilled they found one another. Have you met her yet?”

“No, though I heard Lucas got married,” I said. “I haven’t spent much time in town, so I haven’t had the chance to meet her.”

“Chloe’s from New York, you know.”

I blinked at her, feeling like this conversation was getting a little suspicious. But I was willing to go with it because I was genuinely intrigued. “She is? But she got married and moved here? Is she happy?”

Another tinkling laugh from Lily. “I sure hope so. It seems that way to me, and I know I’ve never seen my son happier than he is now. Chloe is not

originally from New York, but she was quite a successful chef there before she came here to open up her own taco truck.”

“Wow. That’s a big change.”

“She seemed ready for one. What about you?”

“Me?” The twist in the conversation threw me.

“You’re in New York these days, I hear. Do you like it there?”

“I do. It’s a good spot to be for someone in my field.”

“Uh huh.”

“I have a great roommate there,” I said. “We’re best friends, and that counts for a lot. A bit of a built-in family. Or mini family.”

“I see.”

But I could see that Lily didn’t completely believe me, and why should she? She didn’t need to build her family with unrelated friends. She had a wonderful, loving, overflowing family that she’d been given biologically.

And even though her husband had passed, Lily had shared a great love with him, too. Even now, her life was filled with her sons, her town, her inn. Soon enough, there would probably be grandchildren, if the wedding bells ringing lately were any indication. Lily was not at a loss for family or friends.

“I think building your own family can be important,” Lily continued. “In a way, that’s what our Friday dinners are. A place for everyone to come together. You’ll stop by for one, won’t you?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be in town this Friday, but I appreciate the invite.”

“Well, you’ll be in town on a Friday sooner or later, and the invite stands. So sometime, I hope to see you there, Ellie Turner.”

Lily Donovan gave my bicep a gentle little squeeze, then turned and disappeared into a crowd of sparkling dresses and fine suits. The wedding dinner was clearly getting started, and I shuffled like a zombie toward my seat feeling a little mystified by the whole interaction with Noah’s mother.

What did Lily Donovan know? What was she getting at? Why had she chosen me to focus on just now when there were so many others at this wedding she knew much better?

My seat for dinner was located near the bridesmaids table but not directly with them. I was seated at a table with a few grandmas and distant cousins, which seemed about right. My parents sat with Derrick’s parents. Monica sat with her new husband. The bridesmaids all sat together and the groomsmen all sat together.



A whole slew of handsome DiMaggio men sat at a table near the back, talking a little too loudly for any of them to be sober. I glimpsed Noah's brother Lucas sitting with the woman who must be Chloe, the new-wife-from-New-York, who I just might have to talk to later. Josie fluttered around the room, picking at the flower arrangements like she couldn't totally relax.

I pulled out my phone and snapped a discreet picture of the seating placements, making certain that it was obvious how far away I was from anyone I knew.

Then I texted the picture to Katie, along with the message: **Miss you and your rebel seating arrangements.**

She texted me right back: **Have you gotten laid yet?**

I felt my face flush and started to tuck my phone away, figuring I'd ignore it. But something about the adrenaline from the day, the alcohol I'd imbibed before the ceremony, the odd interaction with Lily Donovan had me feeling on edge. I texted her back the thumbs up emoji.

She responded with applause and an eggplant.

And then dinner was served.



## Chapter 15

**N**<sup>oah</sup> I didn't recognize the number on my phone. But the instant I read the message, I knew who had sent it.

**UNKNOWN: Make room for Ellie next to you. Or on your lap? She's lonely.**

I grinned, texted Katie back: **You are not allowed to play matchmaker from your apartment.**

**KATIE: Just saying. She wouldn't hate it.**

Apparently I was smirking so much that even Aiden noticed. He elbowed me, gave me a wry smile.

"Who are you texting looking like that?"

Without thinking, I shot back, "Katie."

I just wanted to see Aiden's reaction. And boy, did I get a reaction. His eyes darkened, his mouth pinched together. A muscle twitched in his forehead. "Katie?"

"Yes. Your girlfriend Katie."

"She's not my—" Aiden stopped himself and frowned at me. "You're the one texting her and smirking like that. I knew you were dating someone. Is that it? Katie? Is that why you haven't told me about it, because you think I'll be pissed?"

I set my phone down and eyed Aiden. "You seriously think I'd pursue the one girl you've been in love with for years? And even worse, not tell you about it?"

As soon as I said the latter, I realized I doing something exactly of the sort. *No, quite possibly worse.* I was sleeping with my best friend's sister behind his back. I wasn't exactly sure if that was worse, but in this moment, it sure as hell felt like it.

"I'm not in love with Katie," Aiden said. "She's a nut."

"Okay," I said, glad that Aiden seemed as off-kilter by this conversation as I felt. "Then she's a nut. But I'm not into her if that's what's got you going all Hulk on me. She just had a question about Ellie."

"Why's she asking you?"

Shit. I was digging this hole deeper than it needed to be. The whiskey had not done a favor with the logical part of my brain. Not to mention the post-

sex high I was still coming down from, plus the added bonus of feeling a little bit terrified about how Ellie was feeling about everything.

We hadn't had the chance to chat since she'd ducked off to change, and I had been replaying the things I'd said to her on repeat like an idiot. It was a bit hazy because of how lost in the moment I'd been, but I was damn near confident I'd asked her to move in with me. Even though I hadn't really meant it in that way, it had come out in that way, and Ellie couldn't read my mind. She hadn't known what I'd intended to say.

"Katie knew we'd all be together," I said. "Maybe she would've texted you if you didn't make things so complicated between the two of you. How'd you leave things with her anyway?"

"What do you mean?" Aiden shrugged. "I slept there for a night or two on a pull-out couch, then I helped her get her cousin back to her apartment. That was it. Then I came back here."

"I see."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"You're the one who should talk," Aiden said. "I know you're getting laid like a motherfucker right now. The signs are all there. Why haven't you told me about her?"

I just about swallowed a piece of salmon whole. "What?"

"That stupid look on your face. If I didn't know any better, I'd have said you had sex before you came to the ceremony. Is she here?"

I had never been more relieved when spoons started clinking against glasses. I wasn't huge into watching other people kiss, but I hooted and hollered and watched Monica and Derrick share a chaste peck on the cheek like it was the best thing since sliced bread. Because watching that was still better than having to face Aiden in another lie.

"You're full of it," I said. "I'm going to the bathroom."

I downed the last of my whiskey and took my time finding the restroom. I didn't make my way back into the reception hall until I heard the deejay announcing the first dance of the night so I could freely escape my prison of a seating arrangement.

I hung around the edges of the crowd as the first few obligatory dances played through. When the formalities were finally done and the deejay invited the rest of the couples out onto the dance floor, the crowd started to disperse, and I found myself shuffled forward with the others.

The overhead lights dimmed. Twinkles of fairy lights burst onto the scene as a slow song commenced and couples pulled one another onto the dance floor. A few little kids shimmied in one corner. Monica and Derrick were in the middle of the room, interrupted so often by other guests with congratulations that their dance was more of a stand-still conversation than a true romantic moment.

“There you are.” My mother startled me, coming up from behind me. “I haven’t seen you all night.”

“I’ve been around,” I said, nursing the whiskey I’d picked up on my way back to the dance floor. “Are you sticking around? I thought you were heading back to the inn soon to get ready for guests.”

“Just about,” Lily Donovan said, bustling about, “just one or two things to take care of first.”

My mother looped her arm around mine and started pulling me to the dance floor.

“Ma,” I groaned. “You know I don’t dance.”

“That’s a lie,” she said. “You can dance with your mother for one measly song. Don’t make me give you the I-was-in-labor-with-you-for-63-hours speech.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d heard the story a time or two. Had absolutely no desire to hear it again. The details always varied, depending on how much she was trying to guilt me into doing something.

“May I have this dance?” I asked grudgingly, with a big, fat roll of my eyes.

“Oh, how kind of you to ask so sweetly.” My mother gave me a little swat upside the head, then curled into my arms. “You look very nice today, honey.”

“Thanks, Ma. So do you.”

I led my mother gently around the dance floor, reluctant to admit this wasn’t quite as bad as I’d anticipated, but still not exactly what I wanted to be doing right now. Even so, my mom was my mom, and if she wanted a dance, so be it. My dad wasn’t around to do it anymore, so if one slow spin around the floor was what she wanted tonight, I’d damned well better man up and give her one.

“You’re a good son.” Lily Donovan blinked back tears. “You look like your father when you’re dressed in a suit.”

“Mom, come on.”

“It’s true.” She brushed a thumb against my cheek. “He’d be so proud of you, honey.”

I shrugged. My dad had been a great guy, but he’d been an intellectual. A lawyer. I wasn’t sure how he’d felt about my affinity for cars.

“It was his idea to buy you your first car,” my mother said with a little chuckle. “That old rust bucket.”

“I always assumed that had been your idea. Or Lucas’s. Or something.”

“Nope. It was his idea. He saw you had a talent and wanted you to pursue it. He wouldn’t be surprised to see how well you’ve done for yourself. That’s all we want, Noah, is to see you happy.”

“I’m happy,” I said, and I realized I meant it. Mostly.

I was happy right now. I had my business, I had my family, I had my home, and I had Ellie. And if the latter piece weren’t in such a precarious position, I’d be downright ecstatic. But I wasn’t sure what Ellie and I were doing or how long we’d last, so all I had was happy-for-now, and that would have to do.

My mother gave a knowing little wink. A pat on the shoulder. “I know, dear.”

Before I knew what was happening, Lily Donovan took the lead, making me realize this whole time she’d just been letting me think I was leading her around the dance floor. She was a damn magician, and this whole thing had been a grandiose illusion to bring me to one destination.

To Ellie Turner.

“Here, Ellie, I need to get back to the inn to prepare for guests.” Lily Donovan didn’t let go of my hand for a minute, the grip with her thin fingers like cement. “Take my son for a spin around the floor for me, will you?”

“Oh,” Ellie said, the breath whooshing out of her lips to form a perfect little ‘o’.

“Please,” Lily said. “Do me a favor. I can’t leave him hanging in the middle of a song, and I need to get going.”

“I guess, if you really need me to,” Ellie said.

“Great.” Lily maneuvered Ellie into my arms, leaving no room for us to negotiate the terms. Before taking off, my mother winked at Ellie and whispered, “You can let him think he’s leading, but it’s really better if you show him how it’s done or you risk a broken toe.”

With that she was gone, and Ellie was locked in my embrace, and I was spinning her around the dance floor. It took us both a long time to speak. I

was still in shock at my mother's nefarious plan to get me together with Ellie. Was it obvious to everyone how much I cared for her? Or had someone spilled the beans?

"That was bold," Ellie said finally. "You don't have to dance with me if you don't want to. I swear I won't snitch on you to your mother. She just ducked out the back door. I think she just barely missed Finn sneaking out early again."

"I'm fine to dance if you are," I said gruffly, realizing that I really didn't need to be so hard on my mother. After all, she'd gotten me exactly what I wanted: Ellie in my arms. And this way, there was an excuse. Plenty of people had overheard my mother passing me off to Ellie.

"I'm fine with it," she said softly.

"You look incredible," I told her. "That color on you is just magnificent. I mean, I loved you as a pom pom, but honestly, this blue is something else."

She took my breath away in her gown. It was a floor length royal blue thing with the most subtle of shimmers to it when she moved beneath the lights. The straps on it were nothing more than pieces of string, little strands I could snap with my teeth. Her V-neck gave me a delicious view of cleavage from my vantage point above. I wanted to dip my head to her, nuzzle at her neck, press a kiss to that collarbone.

I swallowed hard, forced my eyes up to Ellie's. "I can't keep my eyes off you," I admitted. "I'm sorry if I'm staring."

Her lips quirked. "I don't really mind."

"I wanted to talk to you about earlier."

"Now?" Ellie's eyes widened, and she looked around, a touch nervous, as if our conversation might be broadcast to a larger audience.

"Or later," I said. "That's fine too."

But Ellie must have noticed the same thing I noticed. That nobody gave a crap about the two of us dancing together. The floor was filled with couples dancing forehead to forehead. The song had changed, and I hadn't even noticed we'd rolled over from one slow song to the next. Everyone who wasn't dancing was taking a peek at the dessert spread appearing along one wall or dispersing into other conversations. We were alone in a crowd.

"It's fine," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing like that," I said. "I had a great time. Thoroughly enjoyed it. I just wanted to make sure you felt the same way."

“Yes, Noah, absolutely.” Ellie’s eyes sparkled. “I thought that was pretty obvious at the time. Why would you think I didn’t enjoy it?”

“From what I gather, you don’t often have sex in semi-public places,” I said wryly. “So for starters I wanted to make sure you didn’t feel like I expected you to do that.”

“Trust me. I wanted it as much as you.” Ellie’s eyelids narrowed. “We’ve discussed this. Let me remind you I’m the one who wore the—” she cleared her throat—“special underwear.”

“Which I very much appreciated,” I said. “Anyway, I also wanted to check in with you because I said a few things, and—”

“And I’ve been thinking,” she interrupted quickly, as if she needed to say whatever was on her mind before I had the chance to speak, “that I don’t think it’s a terrible idea.”

“Which part?” My heartbeat raced a little bit. The marry me part? The move in with me part? I supposed I’d mostly meant all of it, but I also hadn’t intended to, you know, fucking propose like that. If Ellie and I did end up together, which admittedly was a long shot, I wanted to do things right.

“I was thinking I could probably stay with you for a little bit if that’s still all right,” Ellie said. “My apartment is really cramped right now, and you mentioned having extra rooms, and I thought I might actually be able to get some more work done if I had some peace and quiet. I love Katie, but she and her cousin have been having movie marathons day and night, and it can be hard for me to concentrate at home.”

“Yes, God, yes.” As soon as the words escaped my mouth, I realized I sounded a little desperate with relief. I quickly added, “I mean, of course that would be fine. One of my spare rooms has a great view this time of year over the forests. With all the snow, I can see how it might be very inspiring for creative work.”

I wondered if I sounded as much like an idiot as I felt, or if Ellie was just as nervous as I was, and therefore she was oblivious to my bumbings. I mostly hoped for the latter.

“You’re sure I’m not imposing?” she asked. “Because I really am fine in my apartment, I thought it might just be nice to offer the space to Katie and her cousin for another week or so while Jasmine is getting back on her feet. That way Katie can sleep in my bed and, you know, not have to sleep on the couch.”



“I think it’s a great idea,” I said, realizing as soon as I said it that I was complimenting my own damn idea. “You can stay as long as you want.”

“Thank you, Noah.” She leaned in, pressed her forehead against my chest. “It was really thoughtful of you to offer.”

I pressed Ellie closer to me, holding her to my body, never wanting to let her go. Not caring who saw us here, clearly wrapped together in a way that wasn’t just because my mother had asked her to dance with me as a favor.

I was on the fence if I should address the rest of the things I’d said in the heat of the moment. Like, for example, that I would marry her, but either she had forgotten about it, or she hadn’t heard it, or she was pretending it didn’t exist, so I took her lead. If she was going to stay with me for a week or two, then we’d have plenty of time to talk more if she wanted. In private.

“A word?”

The gruff voice startled me out of the most perfect moment. My girl with her head on my chest. Lights dim, music pulsing through us, rocking together. Out in public, not caring who saw.

It felt like we were in a real relationship, and for a moment, I got a taste of what it would be like. What it would be like to hold Ellie without worry. What it would be like to hold her hand, to press a kiss to her hair, to twirl her around the dance floor like she was mine. And that taste had me hungry for more.

But the angry words in my ear startled me out of my reverie, and I turned, keeping a hand tucked in Ellie’s to find Aiden standing there.

“I’d like to talk to you outside,” Aiden growled at me. “Alone.”

“Aiden,” Ellie said. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just a chat between friends.” Aiden’s face looked anything but friendly. “This doesn’t involve you.”

“Yeah, we can talk,” I said. “It’s fine, Ellie. Give me a minute.”

Ellie looked at me, a bit of fear in her eyes, and she gave me a little shake of her head. I looked back at her intently, trying to figure out what she meant. She shook her head again, the repetition of the gesture making me think she was trying to tell me that I should keep my mouth shut about us to Aiden. If that were the case, I’d have to start making up a story fast.

As I left Ellie behind on the dance floor and followed Aiden’s stalking through the crowd, my mind raced with what to tell him. I was torn because seconds ago I would’ve pulled Aiden outside and told him the truth. Hell, I’d

have told him the truth after the first time Ellie and I got together, but she hadn't wanted me to.

Herein lay the problem: I had loyalty to Aiden. We'd been best friends for life. He'd always had my back, no matter what. But now I had Ellie to consider, and her feelings, and what the fallout might be if people found out we were sleeping together. She'd expressly asked me to keep this quiet, and I felt like I owed it to her on an intimate level to be loyal to her too. Frankly, her sex life was nobody's business but her own and her partner's. And that partner was me.

Aiden marched right through the party, past the lobby, out the front doors and into the cold. I followed him. Neither of us wore a jacket. The closer I got to Aiden, the more I realized he was probably a little drunk. Not wild, not out of control, but just enough to add a little fuel to a fire that was already burning.

He marched right across the street and into the parking lot next to the church where his sister had just gotten hitched. I slowed as he turned. I stopped a few feet in front of him, just out of reach of his right hook. I was no slouch in a fist fight, but Aiden was at another level. He could waste me if he really wanted, and the way he was looking at me, it looked like he might want to.

"First you're texting Katie," Aiden said, "now you're feeling up my sister?"

"I told you, the thing with Katie was nothing. We're not even what I would call friends. We're barely acquaintances. I didn't even have her number until tonight."

"How'd she get it?"

"I don't know," I said. "You? Ellie? It certainly wasn't me."

"You fucker."

"You should talk," I said. "You want answers? Have a fucking conversation with Katie instead of just assuming the worst. She's the one who just stuck her tongue down your throat last week, remember?"

Aiden blinked, a bit shaken by my retort. Maybe part of it had hit home. *Good.*

"That's not the point," Aiden continued, still furious. "There was nothing innocent about the way you were dancing with Ellie."

"Who are you? Her warden?"

"No, I'm her fucking brother, and you're my goddamn best friend."

I held up my hands. “We were dancing. My mother literally handed me off to her if you didn’t see. Everyone saw.”

“Did your mother put your hands on her ass?”

I thought back. I supposed I had let my hands slip down a little low as we’d twirled around the room. It’d been hard not to, considering the way she’d looked in that blue dress and the way she’d been cozied up next to me like she had no plans to ever leave.

“You know it,” Aiden fired back. “And I told you tonight I knew you were getting laid. Is it Ellie? Are you sleeping with Ellie?”

“Look, Aiden. You’re my best friend. But with all due respect, this is none of your business.”

“I knew it.”

Without warning, Aiden swung at me. I dodged it, but there was ice on the ground, and we both slid toward one another. He swung again before I could right myself and this time he connected with my nose.

I felt the blood dripping, tasted metallic, before I caught sight of the bright red splotches marking the snow. I didn’t swing back. I took a few steps from Aiden, holding my sleeve to my nose. It didn’t feel broken, which was a plus. The poor footing had thrown his aim off some which was great news for my face.

“You’re drunk, Aiden,” I said. “And you’re reading too much into this.”

“Am I?” He breathed heavily. “Tell me you’re not sleeping with my sister.”

“It’s none of your business,” I said, finding it physically impossible to lie to him.

The way he was looking at me, that fire in his eyes, I knew he was trying to keep his sister safe. It was the love he had for Ellie that had brought him here, that had brought both of us here, and I couldn’t be mad at that. I was a little pissed at the bloody nose, but it was nothing I didn’t understand.

“It’s more than that, and you know it,” Aiden spat. “You and I have always had each other’s back. It’s the lying. The deception. You really couldn’t come to me like a man and have a face-to-face conversation?”

A wash of shame fell over me. Maybe I should have pushed harder on Ellie in an effort to let me have a conversation with Aiden. It was a confusing situation. I didn’t want to rock any boats. I wanted to keep my loyalties to everyone. And somehow, I was still the bad guy.

Aiden was nodding. “You know it, too. Damn, Noah. I never expected it to be you. How long has it been going on?”

“Listen to me, Aiden,” I said. “I’m not saying another word except this: you’re like a brother to me. We’ve known each other our entire lives. You need to trust me on this. I would never hurt Ellie.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “How do you think any of this ends?”

The only thing ending right then, however, was our conversation because at that moment we both heard the shriek and saw Ellie running across the street, her blue dress dragging along the snowy road.

“What happened to you, Noah?” Ellie ran right up to me, cradled my face in her hands. She turned a scathing look on her older brother. “What did you do to him, Aiden?”

“It’s not broken,” Aiden snarled.

Then Aiden stalked off toward the banquet hall without a look back.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie whispered, still holding my face. “I’m so sorry.”

“No.” I raised a hand, pressed it to hers. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault. Don’t blame yourself. I handled this poorly.”

“Did he…” Ellie inhaled a deep breath. “Does he know?”

I gave a little shrug. “I think it’s safe to say yes, even though I didn’t confirm it. I was trying not to say anything to him, but I also couldn’t find it in me to lie. So I think he assumed.”

Ellie winced. “If I hadn’t made you keep this quiet, none of this would’ve happened.”

“It’s just a little blood.” I gave her a quick smile. “I think I’m done here tonight. And as much as I appreciate you being here, I’m going to get blood on your dress if you don’t take a step back.”

Ellie stepped closer, pushed my hair back from my forehead. “I think we should go home,” she whispered. “If that’s okay.”

I wanted to kiss her, but that would’ve been gross with a bloody nose, so I settled for a squeeze of her hand. “That is always going to be okay with me, baby. Let’s go.”

“Hey, lovebirds, you ready for a ride?” Angelica climbed out of her bumper-stickered car.

I hadn’t realized she’d been parked outside the church this whole time waiting around to pick up drunken fares from the reception. Angelica had probably gotten a front row view of me and Aiden having our little disagreement. And the fallout after. I heaved a huge sigh and looked at Ellie.

“I’ve been waiting all night for someone to get sick of the party,” Angelica said. “What do you say to a ride?”

I looked again at Ellie, who looked a little pale.

“Wait, is that blood?” Angelica wrinkled her nose. “Sorry, Donovan. You heard what I said last time about body fluids. Y’all are on your own unless you get that cleaned up.”

I waved Angelica away, then guided Ellie back across the street. I popped inside and grabbed my jacket from the coat check, and I also picked up Ellie’s one suitcase which she’d left at the coat check too.

Ironically, Aiden had offered to pick up Ellie from the train station forty minutes outside of town. I’d wanted to tell him that I could do it, but I hadn’t been able to think of a way of offering without sounding desperate. At that point, I’d still been trying to hide my feelings for Ellie from my best friend.

We bumped into Lucas and Chloe as we left the church.

“Aw, shit,” Lucas said. “Seriously?”

“Don’t ask,” I muttered.

“Hi, I’m Chloe.” Chloe extended a hand toward Ellie, and they shook. “I definitely think you and I are going to need to catch up later, but a girl knows when to not ask questions.”

Ellie gave a grateful nod and held onto my arm a little tighter.

“I’ve got a towel in the trunk,” Lucas said. “Y’all can sit in the back and we’ll give you a ride home, but I swear if you get blood on my upholstery, you’re paying for a detail.”

“Dude.” I stared at him. “I *am* the detailer for your vehicle.”

Lucas jangled his keys with a coy little smile. “I knew you’d see things that way.”



## Chapter 16

**E**llie Waking up next to Noah Donovan was some kind of magic. This time, I couldn't even blame it on some sort of post-sex spell that he'd put me under because we hadn't had sex. At least, not since the wedding.

Noah's altercation with Aiden and subsequent bloody nose had put a bit of a damper on any sort of fun-filled activities. After we managed to get him cleaned up, we'd shared a quick and somewhat handsy shower, and then we'd both gotten into bed and passed out before either of us could say goodnight.

Noah was still sleeping as I rolled over and looked at him. He was naked except for his boxers, and his figure was a gorgeous mountain range of man. I hoisted myself up onto my elbow, unable to keep from tracing my fingers down the ridge of his nose where a slight bruise was starting to form.

It made me ache that he'd gotten that injury because of me. Because of my brother. Because of my insistence that we keep things secret. He'd paid the price for my desires, and he hadn't blamed me for a second. I leaned in, pressing the softest kiss to his lips.

I wasn't trying to wake him. It was just an overload of emotion between the joy of waking up next to him and the ache from seeing the physical injury I'd inadvertently caused.

But something about my kiss drew him out of his slumber because his hand cinched around my back without him even opening his eyes. He pulled me on top of him so I lay with my head on the pillow next to his, my legs tangled up with his. As I sprawled over him, I felt him starting to grow hard beneath me.

"Noah," I whispered into his ear, "your nose is still injured. You're getting a black eye."

"That doesn't affect the function of my dick."

I burst out in laughter, and finally, one of Noah's eyes peeked open.

"It was a war with myself to keep my hands off you last night," Noah said, "but you were tired, and I was a little worried about getting blood on you, but now..."

I slid more on top of him, letting his hardness press up against my thighs. I'd worn nothing but one of his oversized T-shirts to bed along with an itty bitty pair of panties.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "Are you...okay?"

"I'm more than okay." I rose to a sitting position, straddling him, looking into his sleepy eyes. "God, I feel so terrible about your nose. The whole thing with Aiden."

"So terrible you feel like making me feel a little better?" Noah teased, his hands coming to my hips, digging into my flesh, pulling me tighter to him. "Because you're doing a good job of it. I can feel you wanting me already."

I rocked my hips against him, just hard enough to elicit a long groan from him.

"That's it." Noah reached between my thighs, slid my panties to the side, stroked me once, twice, then he must have figured I was ready because he moved his boxers away and pressed himself inside me, long, hard, slow.

I felt him go in, every inch of the way, bare and raw and full. It was incredible.

"Fuck," he cursed, stilling. "I didn't even think about a condom, baby. I'm sorry. Do you want me to—"

I moved against him. "It's fine with me, if it's fine with you."

"I can't tell you how fine it is with me." He raised my hips, then pounded me down on him, tearing a cry from my lips. "I can't get enough of being inside you like this. You feel incredible. Fuck, baby, I could do this all day long."

"Yes," I gasped. "Please."

I rocked against him, moving faster, faster, and then without warning, he took me in his arms and tossed me onto my back on the bed, sliding my panties down as he moved.

"You got to ride me yesterday," Noah growled, looking down at me. "My turn."

Then without further ado, he pressed himself back inside me, sheathing himself fully, and took no time at all in ramping up the speed until his thrusts had us shaking the bed, the headboard rattling, and all I could do was clutch his shoulders and hold on for the ride.

As I started to tremble, he dipped his head to me, pressed his lips to mine possessively, and swallowed my screams with the most intense kiss of my



life. I felt every pulse as Noah poured himself into me, as we quivered together, then collapsed, fast, furious, spent.

“Well,” Noah said a few minutes later. “I guess that’s one way to wake up.”

“I’ll take it,” I said with a light laugh.

He ran his hand down my back. “Plans for today? Other than doing that again?”

I leaned up on an elbow, teased my hands down his chest. “That can definitely be on the agenda. But I also need a shower, and then I’m going to talk to my brother.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Noah asked. “I thought it might be more appropriate if I talked to him. I just wanted to have a conversation with you before I went back to Aiden to make sure you and I are on the same page with what we’re going to say.”

“That’s sweet, but he’s my brother.” I ran a hand over his bruise again. “Let me talk to him.”

“I really think—”

“No offense,” I said, “but if you think Aiden wants to see you today, you’re dead wrong. If you think he’d react well to you showing up at his door, you’re even more wrong.”

Noah considered, and I could see his mind going through his past relationship history with my brother, computing, computing, until he realized that I was absolutely correct. Of course I was. I knew Aiden as well as anyone.

“I think it’s sweet you want to have another conversation with him,” I said, “but I’d prefer it to be a productive one and not just a further nose-breaking session.”

Noah scratched his head. “Yeah.”

“Give him some time to cool down and process.”

“If that’s your logic, then why are you going over there?”

“Because I’m his sister,” I said, “and I’m annoyed at him. It’s different.”

With that, I pulled myself reluctantly out of bed and headed to the shower. I waited to see if Noah was going to join me, but when he didn’t, I used it to take a productive rinse.

I stepped out feeling good, got dressed in one of the few spare outfits I’d packed for what I’d thought would be a short overnight stay with Noah. I’d have to get some more clothes stat if I was going to be sticking around

Fantasie. Walking around in Noah's sweats outside of his home would be a dead giveaway that something was going on more than some sort of platonic roommate situation.

I found Noah in the kitchen, sort of cooking up eggs but not looking to be doing a very fine job of it. I had to wonder if he wasn't the best cook, or if he was just supremely distracted this morning. Either way, the coffee was excellent as usual.

"I'm not hungry yet," I said, waving off his offer of breakfast. "I'll just take coffee to go. I can bring you home some food from the café if you'd like."

Noah pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Just worry about yourself. I'll take care of the food. By the way, where's Aiden staying?"

"He got a room at your mother's inn," I said. "I was planning to walk there."

"Wanna take one of my cars?"

"Nope," I said. "I don't trust myself with something that nice."

"I've got a spare car that I use as a loaner if people need something for the day while I'm working on their vehicle." Noah handed over keys as if he'd already decided. "I parked it in the driveway. It's yours to use while you're here, and before you argue, it's nothing special. It's been dented and scratched and God only knows what else. You could paint it with spray paint for all I care."

"Now that, I can agree to." I took the keys from his hand. "My kinda car."

Another long, lingering kiss from Noah at the front door held me up for a couple more minutes. When a car flew past on the road out front, we broke apart, and I settled for heading toward the Fantasie Inn in the crappiest of Noah's cars.

I parked outside of Lily's quaint building. It had been remodeled extensively by the Donovan boys on the inside, but on the outside, it looked like another historical landmark. Cheerful pastel pink siding added a pop of color in the sparkling snowscape. Pretty landscaping hid beneath a fresh layer of fluffy white snow. The path to the front door had been neatly shoveled and salted despite the early morning dusting of flurries.

I went inside and, after waiting at the front desk for a few minutes, decided to make my way deeper into the house where the sound of pattering came from the kitchen.

I knocked on the swinging door, then gently let myself in when someone hollered a greeting.

“Hi, Lily,” I said. “Good morning. Sorry to barge in on you, but I was waiting at the front desk and didn’t see anyone.”

“Come on in,” Lily said, as the smell of fresh baked cinnamon rolls encompassed me in a cozy hug. “Have a bite to eat.”

“I actually came to talk to my brother. I was wondering if you might know which room he’s in.”

“I do,” she said carefully. “Does he know you’re coming?”

“It’s better that it’s a surprise. It’s complicated. But I’m his sister,” I added. “He’ll definitely want to see me.”

“I don’t usually like to give out my guests information, but I suppose I’m not telling you anything much if I let you know that the honeymoon suite is obviously taken, along with the two rooms to the left at the top of the stairs.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m not going to bother him, I promise.”

“Uh huh.”

“I won’t bother him *much*,” I amended.

I scurried upstairs, found the door that was presumably my brother’s, and gave a short knock. A shirtless Aiden opened the door with one eye closed and the other eye partially open. I was pretty sure I’d roused him from sleep.

“What are you doing here?” he croaked.

“Put a shirt on,” I said, moving past him into the room. “I don’t want to have this conversation with you half naked.”

My brother looked bigger than before. He seemed a little taller, a little broader, a little stronger. I wondered, not for the first time, what he did in a day’s work for his job. It seemed to have changed him, and I was curious about it, but I didn’t press. That was a conversation for another day.

“I see you have a problem with me not wearing a shirt,” Aiden said, shrugging into a threadbare V-neck. “But not Noah.”

“So that’s how this is going to go? Really? I thought you graduated middle school.”

Aiden sat on the edge of his bed. The room was cute and cozy, but not so frilly and girly it didn’t suit him. It was homey in a lumberjack sort of way, with deep flannel colors that would look really pretty around Christmas time. A fire crackled in a small hearth. The windows overlooked a glittering expanse of white behind the inn.

“What was that last night?” I asked, perching next to my brother on the bed. His figure felt more hulking than usual. More intimidating. I wasn’t afraid of him, but I could see how someone else might be.

“What do you mean?” Aiden asked. “It was a chat between two guys.”

“That ended in Noah bleeding everywhere.”

“His nose isn’t broken.”

“So you said,” I said dryly. “Does that make everything better?”

“We’ve fought before. That’s how it goes. It happens.”

“It doesn’t just happen. You let your anger get the better of you, and you socked your best friend in the face. There’s not really an excuse for that.”

Aiden rubbed a hand down his eyes. “Maybe. I’d had a little more to drink than I usually do, so I got fired up. Then I saw you and him together, and I don’t know. I just lost it a bit.”

“A bit.”

Aiden gave me a wry smile. “You wouldn’t have wanted to be around if I’d really lost it.”

I knew my brother wasn’t a dangerous, impulsive guy. But I suspected there was an element of truth to it. Aiden had always been a step beyond loyal. He defined loyalty to a fault, emphasis on the *fault*. Sometimes his loyalty clouded the rest of his judgment.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Aiden, but I am here to tell you I’m a grown woman. What I do really isn’t any of your business. I barely ask you about your job, let alone your love life. I expect the same sort of respect from you.”

“It’s because I have respect for you that I acted like that.”

“Bullshit. If you cared what I thought, maybe you would’ve talked to me before laying into Noah.”

Aiden closed his eyes for a moment, moved uncomfortably. “To be honest, the argument wasn’t really about you. I mean, sure, you were at the base of it, but my anger wasn’t directed at you.”

“No kidding. I assumed it was directed at the person you made bleed.”

“It’s Noah I’ve got a fucking problem with, not you.”

“Why do you have a problem with Noah?”

Aiden glanced out the window at the pretty view. He seemed lost though, not really seeing what was there. “It’s complicated. We go back a long time.”

I nodded, feeling like he was on the tip of really cracking open, of really explaining what was going on in his head. To interrupt him might pull him

out of the moment, and I couldn't risk that.

"I always suspected," he murmured, still looking out the window. "I always suspected there was something between the two of you, and I fought long and hard to make sure it never came to fruition."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why what?"

"Why everything?" I continued. "Why would you think there was something between me and Noah when there wasn't?"

Aiden swiveled his gaze on me. "You're telling me there was nothing between the two of you?"

"No. Never." I felt his gaze boring holes into my head. "I mean, there was a friendship, but that was never a secret. You and me and him were always inseparable."

"What about the two of you always siding together and ganging up on me or outvoting me when we were kids?"

"If you're talking about the choice of music in the car, it's because yours sucks."

"It's not just that, it's everything," he said. "It just felt like there was some bond between the two of you. Like you always got each other a little better than I got either of you."

"That's not true," I said. "I was always the third wheel. The two of you were inseparable. I mean, people thought you were related. You could practically read each other's minds."

"Yeah, we were best friends, and I wanted to keep it that way." Aiden rested his hands on his thighs. "When we were younger, and we thought girls were gross, everything was fine. Even as we got older, I suppose I kept close with him in a way that you couldn't because we played sports together, talked about girls together, did stupid guy shit together."

"Exactly. You always tried *not* to include me," I said. "I was the third wheel."

"You had to be excluded, or you would've taken Noah from me."

"Were you seriously jealous of me? I never would have tried to take Noah from you. It was the three of us that would hang out."

"Except for the times he'd drive you home from school when I couldn't be there. Or when he'd pick you up from practice without asking me if I needed a ride. Yeah, I noticed all of that. Even how you'd look different

when he was around, like you'd wear different clothes or makeup or something."

"That's not true," I said, though it was a little bit true. "Okay, maybe some of it's true. Maybe I had a little crush on him, but it was nothing I was ever going to act on, especially not then."

Aiden just looked at me. "I know."

It took me a minute to figure out what he was insinuating. As I processed, I started to understand. "You made sure of it."

Aiden licked his lower lip.

"God, you can really be an asshole." I stood up, my hands clenching at my side. "Did you say something to Noah when we were younger? Tell him to stay away from me?"

"In a few words," he said through gritted teeth, though the flash in his eyes gave away the fact his words might've been a little more crude.

"What an idiot! Why would you ever do something like that?"

"I was trying to protect you, and to save us."

"Us? Who is this *us* you speak of?"

"Our trio. Me, you, and Noah. How do you think it would've worked if the two of you had started dating? Sure, maybe it would've been okay for a while, but then you would've wanted time alone with him. You'd have eventually stopped inviting me to hang around. I would've lost my sister *and* my best friend."

"You wouldn't have lost either of us!" I said, my fists clenching as a burst of anger hit me. "How dare you think you have any right to say who I can be with or not. Or Noah, for that matter. He's not even related to you, even though you might think so."

"It wasn't only a selfish move," he shot back. "It was for all of us. What if the two of you had dated for a couple of months, got all hot and heavy, and then imploded like—might I remind you—most high school couples do? Then what? Then we'd lose our threesome anyway. No way could we ever hang out like we used to. I'd have to be careful when I invited Noah over because he'd feel awkward running into you. Carpooling to school would've been murder."

"I see you thought my love life through very thoroughly," I said. "So instead of letting us decide if we wanted to take that risk, you fought tooth and nail to make sure that we didn't even have an option. We never stood a

real chance of feeling what attraction might have been between us because of you.”

“Ellie, come on. I did it because I love you.”

“Loving me doesn’t mean controlling me or the people around me.”

“No, but someone had to give a damn about you, and it wasn’t our parents.”

We were both standing now, both breathing a little heavier. We stood a few inches apart. I had to look up at him to make eye contact.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my voice catching.

“You are my little sister, Ellie.” Aiden’s voice was gruff, hard, but oddly tender. Like hot steel—unyielding, until heated, and then it would bend. Quite a lot like Aiden. “You’ve always been my little sister, and I feel like I’ve always understood you a little more than anyone else in our family.”

“Yeah,” I acquiesced. “Sure. Fine.”

“I wasn’t blind. By the time we were teenagers, me, you, and Monica all knew they’d pegged Monica as the favorite child. And I was able to skate by because I’m a guy, and Mom never really knew what to do about me. The harder she pushed me, the more I rebelled, so eventually she just let me do my own thing and we reached a truce.”

“Trust me, I know. I was there.”

“It’s not fair how they treated you, tried to mold you into someone who you were never meant to be.” Aiden’s jaw was tight, his fingers clenched. He obviously felt very strongly about this. It was sweet how much he cared even though he could be annoying. “I hated how they treated you, but Mom’s mom, and nobody can change her. Dad is afraid of her, so whatever.”

I nodded along.

“I tried to keep you under my wing as much as I could. It always felt like me, you, and Noah had a safe little circle. My best friend and my little sister. I felt pretty fucking lucky we had each other, and I didn’t want to lose any of that. Because what would you have had without us? Honestly, El? What would you have had?”

I was still angry at my brother. Or rather, I wanted to be angry at him. But I was an adult, and I was trying to see things from his point of view, to be receptive to the things he was saying, and honestly, it was working. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I could see why he’d acted the way he had back then. Even if I didn’t agree with it, I believed he’d been coming from the right place. At his core, my brother was a good man. I never doubted that.

“I appreciated you looking out for me,” I said, softer. “I always have. And you’re right, I didn’t have a lot of friends. I was a disappointment to Mom, so living at home with them, especially after you moved out, wasn’t wonderful.”

Aiden ran a hand along his jaw. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You couldn’t have stuck around longer. You needed to get out.”

He nodded.

“What I’m trying to say, clumsily,” I added with a little smile, “is that I can sort of see things from your point of view. And I have always appreciated that you looked out for me. Don’t ever think your protectiveness went unnoticed or unappreciated, because that would be the wrong moral to take away from this story.”

“What is the right moral, then?”

“The right moral is that times are different now.” I returned to a seated position on the bed, patted the comforter next to me. Aiden sat heavily. “I have been taking care of myself for a long time now.”

“I know, and in case nobody has told you, it’s pretty damn impressive what you’ve done on your own. Especially considering the support, or lack thereof, that you had growing up.”

I shrugged off the compliment. “I’m just saying that if I want to ruin my own life, it’s my prerogative now. I don’t need you to keep me under your wing, though I do appreciate that you still care about me.”

“Of course I do.” Aiden swayed so he leaned against me. “You’re still my little sister.”

“And as much as I enjoy seeing you and Noah together when we all get together, it happens, what, once a decade now? Even if Noah and I tried a relationship on for size and it failed, it’s not like it would ruin anything. Hell, you don’t even come home anymore unless someone’s getting married.”

Aiden gave a little snort. “Do you?”

“I make an effort to squeeze in Christmas lunch.”

Aiden barked a laugh. “How noble.”

“It does feel that way sometimes.”

We were both laughing, sitting in a warm nostalgic fugue for a moment.

“So is that what this is, then?” Aiden asked after some time. “You and Noah trying a relationship on for size now that I’m not around to interfere anymore?”

“I don’t know what it is,” I said, “and that’s the beauty of it. We’re just exploring.”



Aiden winced, as if he could tell that my word choice was a euphemism for sexual activities. Very sexual activities.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about the details with you any more than you want to hear them from me, but yes,” I said. “Noah and I are trying an arrangement on for size.”

“An arrangement?”

“Just stop asking questions you don’t want to know the answers to,” I said. “I’m staying with him for a little while since Katie’s cousin is in our apartment. It’s not a big deal. I’m not moving in with him, just spending time with him. Seeing what happens.”

Aiden gave a slow nod. “And you expect me to be happy about this?”

“I’m not expecting you to be anything about it, and that’s the point. I’m asking you to be neutral about it because, respectfully, it’s none of your business.”

Aiden swallowed hard. “I mean, I see your point. I guess.”

“Nice of you to understand.” I slapped his knee a little too hard. “Plus, you’re going to head back to California in a couple of days, and you’ll be none the wiser. So don’t worry about it.”

A look passed through his eyes that had me stopping what I was saying.

“You are going back to Cali?” I pressed. “I figured you’d be on the first plane out of here after the wedding. You like being in Fantasie even less than me.”

“I am, but I’m sticking around for another week or two.”

“Because of Katie?” I blurted.

“No, not because of Katie.” He looked at me like I’d grown an extra head. “Why would I stay because of her?”

“Okay, so we’re still in denial that something’s going on there,” I said with a huff. “Then why are you sticking around?”

“I’m helping Lily with the acquisition of a new property,” Aiden said.

“Don’t say anything because nothing’s for sure yet.”

“Of course not.”

“She’s wanting to open another inn because she’s constantly booked here. Lucas will handle the paperwork, but I’m going to check out the property for her to see what sort of repairs it’ll need, what I think she’ll need to put into it money-wise, et cetera.”

“I see.”

“Lily didn’t want to ask Lucas to do any more than he already offered, and she knows Noah’s swamped at his shop already. She mentioned it to me, and I offered to take a look with her this week and help figure out some plans.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“What about you and Noah? Are the two of you serious?” Aiden asked. “I mean, could you see it getting that way?”

“Too early to tell.”

“Do you think you would’ve…” Aiden gestured with his hands. “I mean, years ago, if I wasn’t such an ass about it, do you think you would’ve gotten together with Noah?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “It was a complicated situation.”

He nodded, seeming to process this with some degree of severity. Finally, “I’m sorry if I ruined something I shouldn’t have.”

“Things happen for a reason.” I leaned my head against his shoulder. “Maybe you were meant to be a dick so I didn’t get together with Noah sooner than I was meant to.”

Aiden gave a short laugh. “You’re welcome. I hear I can be a real dick when I want to. Glad to have your review in support.”

“Five stars. Highly recommend you for dickish behavior,” I said, still grinning. “So are we good? You’re going to retire said behavior now that we’re all grown adults?”

“Consider this me hanging up my dickish uniform in lieu of indifference.”

“Wonderful. I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Me too.” Aiden pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I stood up. “Noah mentioned he wanted to talk to you.”

“Absolutely not. I don’t want to see that fucker just yet.”

“You need to relax,” I told him. “It’s my fault Noah didn’t tell you. I’m the one who asked for him to keep it secret. He was just respecting me.”

“Look, that’s great and all, but I have a separate relationship with Noah—he’s my best friend. It’s just different, and I can feel however the hell I want to feel about him.”

“I guess, but it’s still stupid.”

“With all due respect,” Aiden said, “we’re all adults, and frankly, it’s none of your business.”

I smirked at Aiden spitting my own words back at me. “I still think you should give him a break.”

“Well, today’s not that day,” Aiden said stubbornly. “And if I see his ugly mug back here today, I’m going to finish the job I started on his nose.”

“Message received,” I said. “So when would be an appropriate time for Noah to show his ugly mug around here?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Glad you’re feeling super mature about this.”

“It’s none of your business,” Aiden said again. Then, “He’s treating you right?”

I was already making my way to the door, and I turned back around, gave him a look. “What do you think, Aiden?”

Then I turned, and left him with that to chew on. As I made my way into the lobby, I felt more chipper than I had in a long while. I wouldn’t exactly say I’d garnered Aiden’s approval of my relationship with Noah, seeing as Aiden still wouldn’t speak to Noah, but I didn’t need his approval either. I felt good about my conversation with my brother, and that was all I could control.

As I came to the landing and found Lily Donovan waiting for me with frosted cinnamon rolls packaged to go, I saw the knowing little smile she snuck in as she handed them over.

“Noah loves these,” Lily said. “And the poor guy is a terror in the kitchen unless he’s making a caffeinated beverage, so I hope this helps. I’m looking out for you more than him, but still.”

She winked, and I flushed, but I realized I wasn’t all that embarrassed. Of course Lily Donovan would know I was staying with her son. Aiden knew that I was staying with his best friend. The longer I stayed with Noah, the more people in town would pick up on it, even if we didn’t explicitly broadcast it.

I thanked Lily, then shuffled my way back to Noah’s place, thinking that maybe one of the reasons for my updated stance on chipperness was the fact that my secret was slowly becoming less of a secret. It was just becoming A Thing. A Fact. The knowledge that I was staying with Noah Donovan was becoming more widespread, and instead of it feeling like this huge, hulking weight on my chest, it was just that: a fact.

I was staying with Noah. We were sleeping together. We liked one another’s company. Did we need to explain anything to anyone? Maybe not.

Did we need to hide it? Also maybe not. Especially since we were doing a terrible job of keeping our secret. So what the hell? Maybe we could just do our thing and have fun, and that might just be enough.



## Chapter 17

**N**<sup>oah</sup> God, I could get used to this.

I took a long drag of my piping hot latte before setting it down to slip on a pair of gloves. I was in my garage, preparing to do some detail work on one of the higher end cars that came to my shop, feeling relaxed and ready for the day.

Andrei Thompson drove his BMW sixty-three miles one way to get it serviced at my place. Andrei was a good guy. A nice, well-off single dude in his thirties who prided himself on his vehicle. It felt good knowing people like him trusted me with their cars.

But the real reason for my satisfaction was the fact that every time I glanced over at my front desk, I was treated to a view of Ellie Turner. The same view I'd had for the last few days. Ever since she'd made my desk into her impromptu office for the week.

The expensive, oversized desk had been neat as a pin when it had belonged to me a week ago. Now, it was a whirlwind of paper and drawing utensils. Her tablet and cell phone perched on one edge of it, and old coffee cups she'd gone through and forgotten to move littered the other side. I didn't dare touch her workspace. There seemed to be some sort of method to her madness, and I didn't want to interfere.

I'd initially set up Ellie in one of my spare bedrooms, the one with the fireplace and the excellent view, but she'd never really settled there. It was around lunchtime two days after Monica's wedding when Ellie wandered into my garage mid-oil change, wondering if she could try working at my desk for a while. A few hours later, she'd all but taken over the place, and we'd never spoken another word about it.

From then on, she'd worked in the garage with me, morning until night. It was like once Ellie had settled into this space, she'd gone into a sort of workaholic frenzy, sometimes not even stopping for lunch or dinner. I'd bring her easy things to eat, sandwiches or wraps or a bowl of soup when I would hear her stomach growling or when I'd realize hours had gone by without her moving from my chair.

She was so obsessed with working in the garage that I'd set out a key for her on the kitchen table in case she wanted to get started before I was up and

ready for the day. Ellie Turner had beat me to my own damn desk.

The one thing Ellie did make time for, outside of work, was sex. The best part about living together, even temporarily, was our ability to have fun with each other. We had lazy morning sex. Middle of the night quickies. A little lunchtime break in the shower. Once in a while the mood would strike in the garage, and I'd lock my doors and pull the shades, and she'd ride me on the couch until I was seeing stars.

It was fucking magnificent. She was magnificent. My life right now was magnificent. If I could freeze frame these moments, I would absolutely do it.

Ellie's phone rang, interrupting the low music thrumming through the shop. She answered, looking more agitated than usual, and I rolled out from under the car and watched her expression.

"You're kidding me," she was saying. "You're kidding me."

There was a long pause.

"Oh my God, yes, of course I can. Thank you, thank you so much, Dana."

*Dana*. Her agent. Something good was happening. It had to be good, judging by the look on her face. I pulled my gloves off, anticipating some celebratory news.

Ellie hung up, still looking mystified. "They like it."

"They like what?" I asked, making my way toward her.

"They like my sample pages," she remarked, seeming shocked with the admission. "I can't believe it. The pages I sent to Dana were so spur of the moment, just a rough draft really. But Dana thought my idea had potential, so she sent it out to some of her editor friends for opinions, and they *liked* it."

"Baby, you're going to have to slow down," I said. "You haven't even told me what you've been working on like crazy lately. I haven't wanted to interrupt you, and most of the time we're talking, it's been—"

I stopped, not wanting to say that we only spoke during sex. Because that wasn't true either. We'd talk after sex for hours, as we lay in one another's arms, staring into the darkness. We'd talk while we ate meals, when she felt so inclined to take a break. We'd make small talk during her breaks, and just like that, I realized we talked all the time. It was just that with her, the conversation felt so easy I hadn't realized how much time we'd actually been spending getting to know one another.

"When I started working from your garage, I got a new idea for a kids book," Ellie said hurriedly. "I mean, it's nothing crazy original. It's about tools in an automotive garage that work together fixing different cars as they

come in. I thought little kids would like it. Katie has a nephew who's so obsessed with tools she gets him a different screwdriver for each of his birthdays."

"Sounds like me as a kid."

Ellie gave a little smile. "Then maybe you'd have liked my book."

"I'm sure I will," I said, moving it to the present tense. "So what's happening with your idea?"

"I sent a few character sketches and some of the text I'd come up with to Dana, just asking what she thought of it. You know, if she thought there was potential and I should keep working on it, or if she thought it was garbage."

"I can tell you right now I don't think it's garbage."

"She didn't think so either! She sent my rough sketches to a couple of her editor pals at a few publishers, along with a copy of Rusty so they could get a taste of my finished artwork."

"And?"

"And two of them made offers. On rough sketches!"

"Oh my God, Ellie, that's incredible. Congratulations."

Her mouth was still parted in shock. "I can't believe it."

"You should believe it," I said. "We always knew this day would come. I guess it just took the right inspiration."

I gave her a wink, trying to be playful, but she took it more seriously than I'd intended. Ellie flung herself into my arms.

"You're so right," she said. "Thank you so much for letting me turn your desk into a tornado. I couldn't have done it without you."

"I didn't do anything." I pressed a long kiss to the top of her head. "You did this all on your own. Right place, right time. It would've happened eventually no matter what."

"I just can't believe it."

"What comes next?" I asked. "Seems like people are eager to work with you."

Ellie nodded, still clinging to me. "Dana wants me to come into the city on Friday for lunch with one of the publishers."

"That's great news."

"I'm supposed to try and get a few more sketches done, maybe add some color to some others, things like that. Basically, Dana wants me to do as much work between now and Friday as I can."

"It's Wednesday," I said. "That's not long."



“No, but there’s something magical about working here. It’s a very creative environment.”

“I think it’s all the caffeine.” I winked.

“I think you’re not totally wrong.” Ellie stiffened. “Oh, shoot.”

“What?”

“You and I were supposed to go to your mom’s dinner thing on Friday. I told her we could make it.”

I waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. My mother’s dinners aren’t obligatory. They’re always there. She’ll understand. In fact, if I tell her why, she’ll be ecstatic.”

Ellie licked her lips. “I think I might have to stay at my apartment for the week up in the city.”

“Oh?” I didn’t want to admit the disappointment coursing through my chest, but I hadn’t been prepared for this magnificent new arrangement to be so short-lived. I’d been having the time of my life, and this, right here, was a reminder of why we’d never agreed to get into a real sort of relationship. Because Ellie was convinced that our lives didn’t mesh well together at their core.

She was a city girl, an artist, and wasn’t that especially coming true now? I was thrilled she was finally getting her success, but along with that came swanky lunches in the city and cocktail hour and meetings with her agent. My life was here. I’d literally put my blood and sweat and every penny I’d earned into this place. I couldn’t possibly pick up and move anywhere right now.

I clutched Ellie closer to me, not willing to admit that it felt like some sort of ending for us. I’d fight tooth and nail to not give up on us, but ultimately it wasn’t up to me. It was a two-person decision, and if Ellie decided that I wasn’t the right fit for her, that would be the end of it.

“I guess I should get back to work,” Ellie said, pulling back. “Dana said she’s going to start sending the submissions wider, to other publishers, but it needs to be a little more put together before we can do that. So I owe her a few things by tonight.”

“Of course, of course,” I said. “Whatever you need. I’ll bring you food, inject you with caffeine, whatever helps.”

“I’m okay. Just maybe a little…” Ellie reached over, gave my butt a playful pinch. “You know, a little cuddle-action later.”

“Just say the word,” I said, hoping she didn’t notice that my cock was reacting to her suggestion as if she’d dropped herself naked in front of me right now. I had no chill when it came to her.

Unfortunately, as the hours clicked on throughout the day, I realized Ellie’s proposed cuddle-break wasn’t going to happen. Her eyebrows knitted with stress as the darkness fell on the garage, and she was flying through papers faster and more furiously than ever before.

I brought out some dinner and dessert, and she thanked me with a kiss so spicy it had me thinking we were going places, but then she pulled back and sadly patted my butt again in a way that told me she was stressed and needed some time to herself.

“I’m sorry, maybe tomorrow,” she said. “I really have to get this done.”

At about eleven thirty p.m., I was spent from working on cars all day. I’d never put in so many hours in my shop since I’d built the damn thing. I gave it up for the night and flicked on the TV in the garage and flopped onto the couch a few feet away from the front desk.

About one thirty in the morning, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“You should go to bed.” Ellie leaned over, dusted a kiss on my lips. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to work a little longer.”

“It’s practically morning,” I groaned, rubbing my eyes and sitting. “I can sleep on the couch if you want company.”

“Don’t be silly.” Ellie sat on my lap, straddling me, her eyes looking playfully into mine. “I wish I could join you in bed, but since I can’t right now, just think of me as you drift off to sleep.”

My hands fixed on her hips. My cock strained at my jeans. God, I wanted this woman, even though I knew I couldn’t have her right now. I was sleepy and turned on and insatiable. She looked tired but happy. Her hair was a mess, and I wanted to eat her up.

“You’re sure, baby?” I asked, moving slightly, enjoying the groan she let out as she moved in a slow dry hump against me. “I can be fast.”

“I really should get back to work.”

“Maybe this will give you a burst of energy? Endorphins or the like?”

“Do you promise me you’ll go and sleep in your bed if we do this?” Ellie asked. “I would hate to see you sleep on the couch out here. You’re exhausted, and you should’ve been in bed hours ago.”

“Whatever you say, babe.” My fingers were already dipping into her leggings. “Your wish is my command.”

Then her pants were off, and she was working herself against my fingers, and before I knew it she was the one moving for my pants and unbuttoning my jeans and pulling them off. My dick sprang free, looking pretty ecstatic after a day of half-hard-ons from watching Ellie sit mere feet away from me.

I tried to keep two of my fingers inside her, but she slipped down, took my cock in her hand, and then blissfully put her lips around its aching head. I was already leaking for her, and though I wanted to tell her to stop, to not waste her precious time on me when all I wanted was to be inside her, I couldn't. I leaned my head back, the groans coming out of my mouth downright feral.

Finally, when I was about to explode, I yanked her from the floor, lifted her like she was a sack of flour, and plunged her onto my cock, sheathing her completely. Her cry was not muffled, echoing around the garage, the most wonderful sound I'd ever heard in my entire life.

Then she moved against me, slowing us from the fast fucking we'd intended on to slow, deep, meaningful thrusts that I felt in my core. God, this couldn't even be called sex anymore. This was making love.

I looked into her eyes, felt her fingers dig into my skin through the thin fabric of my shirt as her hips bucked so painfully slowly against me, every inch of me sliding in and out of her, I knew I was a goner. I was in love, but it was a different sort of love now. I loved this woman for years, whether I admitted it fully or not, but now it was a full, complete love that I felt with every fiber of my being.

It was like Ellie could feel my realization. As if the realization of my love for her was tangible, a thing that zipped between us, linking us on some soul crushing level. She looked into my eyes, so tentative, so vulnerable it was as if she was on the verge of tears, and that wrecked me. I bucked inside of her, unable to hold back, and poured into her, linking together with her on some primal level as I spilled myself raw into her. My orgasm tipped her over the edge, and her walls tightened around me, and we came together, trembling, weak, changed.

I almost whispered into her ear that I loved her. I was a second away from doing it, but I bit my tongue until it hurt. It was not the time. She'd just found out that she might have a huge book sale. Maybe she'd have to move back to New York permanently.

And damned if I was going to be the one holding the woman I loved back in a town she despised.



## Chapter 18

**E**llie “We love it. Here’s the number we’re thinking. This would be a preempt.” Lucy Swanson, well-known editor at Little Books, pushed a piece of paper across the table to me at the restaurant. “We’d have to know your answer by the end of the weekend.”

I looked at the number. It was a bigger number than anything I’d ever made in my life, and it was only for one book. This book was intended to be a series.

Dana took one look at it, nodded. “Can I talk to you for a minute outside, El?”

“Actually, I need to use the restroom.” Lucy winked at the two of us. “I’ll take care of the bill while I’m up. The two of you discuss, and I look forward to hearing what you think when I return.”

Lucy tapped the table, her pretty blond curls bouncing as she bobbed away toward the restroom. I sat back in my seat, shuffling my Niçoise salad around my plate as I blinked at the number on the paper again.

“That’s a nice number,” I said when I found my voice again. “I’m going to be honest, I didn’t expect to see anything like that when I came here today.”

Dana gestured around me to Fibonacci’s, the quite fancy restaurant we were dining in. “Authors don’t get wined and dined at a place like this for a four-figure book advance, honey. This isn’t going to be the last offer, either.”

“It’s a really strong first offer.” I slid the paper closer to me. “I could be really happy with this offer.”

“I think we have to consider more than the number on the paper.”

“Oh?” It was hard to tear my eyes away from said number.

Dana tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear. Dana was shorter than me, rounder than me, and bolder than me. She wasn’t afraid of confrontation, and she wasn’t afraid to tell me when my work could be better and still sound nice about it.

“You have to consider the publisher behind the offer, too,” Dana said. “Granted, Little Books is at the top of the children’s market game. They’ve rocked the New York Times bestseller charts this year. I’ve already asked

them to put together a marketing deck for us. Lucy said her team's working on it, and they'll have something to us by the end of the day."

"A marketing deck?"

"A presentation as to how they're planning to market your book. You know, if they'll send you on tour or submit your book to prestigious clubs or for awards. I'd also want to know what they plan to do for digital marketing on Facebook or Instagram or TikTok, both paid and unpaid. They'll tell us what their relationships look like with physical bookstores—can they get you an endcap at Target?"

"That's a lot of marketing."

"I'm not saying you'll get all of that, but you should get some of it." As per usual, Dana had much more confidence in my work than I did. "You've got a winning idea, and I'm not just saying that. I don't need to convince you. The offers will speak for themselves."

"I guess."

"Not to mention, when you're getting offer letters of this size, it's a good sign they're going to be putting some marketing behind you." Dana bit down on her lip. "The more money they invest in you, the more money they need to make back. Therefore, the more they'll put into advertising."

"That makes sense. It's just a lot. A shock over the crickets I've heard in the past."

"All it takes is one brilliant idea. Especially an idea like this that can easily grow into a series. The merchandising opportunities are endless, which is great if it becomes a big hit."

I was having a hard time picturing my book on a bookshelf, let alone picturing a little plushie wrench next to it that had come from my imagination. It was too much for my fragile confidence.

"On top of that," Dana plowed ahead, completely unfazed by the sort of life changing information she was sharing with me, "there's the actual editor you'll work with that needs to be considered as well."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the way you feel toward your editor is important too. What's her reputation like in the industry? What's her vision for your work—does she want to change every word on the page, or is she going to give you more creative freedom with it? It's important that you're happy, too."

"I see."

“I mean, there will probably be some obstacles or disagreements with whoever you go with. Something as simple as title page or phrasing in some of your sentences, but that’s okay. You’ll just figure out where you want to compromise and where you want to push back, and I can handle the rest of it.”

“I sort of just want to write my book and illustrate the pictures and turn it in.” I couldn’t stomach another bite of my very expensive salad. “I knew publishing was a process, but I sort of didn’t realize how much went into it.”

“How could you know?” Dana had no problem munching her way through her hamburger. “Trial by fire. Nobody knows what they’ll feel like until the offers start rolling in and they’re in the middle of it. You’ll be fine, babe. You just focus on the work and I’ll do the rest. Keep your head in the game. We’ve just got to make a few decisions before I can send you back to your cave to work while I battle things out on the contractual front.”

Retreating to a cave to work sounded idyllic right now. Except the sort of cave I was picturing wasn’t any sort of dark room anywhere. It looked a heck of a lot more open and bright. Eerily similar to Noah’s garage, the place where I’d come up with the lightning strike of inspiration from the very start.

“I can handle the cave thing so long as you’ve got the rest.”

“Great. Now let’s talk about the preempt. I think you should turn it down.”

“Excuse me?” I had just worked up the nerve to take a sip of my very frothy cappuccino when my hand trembled, and the ceramic mug clattered against the plate. “Did you just say we should say *no* to this offer from a great editor at a great publisher?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “You know what a preempt is, right?”

“It wouldn’t kill me to hear the details again.”

“Basically, they want world rights to your work for this book, and they want the first pass on your next work as well. This is a good offer, quite strong as a matter-of-fact, but it’s lower than it could be. The catch is that you basically have to commit to them now.”

“Like, at this lunch?”

“Probably not, but pretty damn close. It looks like this expires over the weekend. Honestly, babe. I don’t think you need the weekend to think about it.”

“Really?” My voice sounded squeaky. “Thinking about it and not rushing into anything sounds pretty good right about now.”

“This is for world rights, sweet cheeks. All your rights, gone like that.” Dana snapped her fingers. “If you turn down this preempt, I can try to sell all your rights separately. US rights. UK rights. Foreign rights—all those smaller countries who might want to translate your books. We can talk about how we want to view ebooks and paperback rights. Have I mentioned audio rights? I won’t even start on the beast that is film rights.”

“Film rights?” I looked skeptically at her. “Do you really think they’re going to make a big blockbuster out of my little kids’ book?”

“You’d be surprised. Not to mention, it doesn’t have to be a big blockbuster. All these streaming services are hungry for kid shows. There’s good money to be made with a lot of luck and little push from someone like me. Even if your project were to never get greenlit, you could keep getting option money from studios for a long, long time.”

“Okay,” I agreed, “you do make that sound like there are a lot of rights to sell.”

“The point of *this* particular offer is for the publisher to tempt you into taking the deal right away while you’re emotional and excited. They want to snap this project up so nobody else can even see your work. They’re preying on your fear and uncertainty, not maliciously, but it’s also not necessarily in your best interest.”

“I see.”

“They want to capitalize on those little thoughts in your head that say, ‘Well, maybe I won’t get any other offers, so I should probably take the safe bet’.”

“I admit there’s a little voice that sounds like that in my head.”

“It’s totally natural for you to feel that way. There’s a reason preempts work. They’re not always a bad deal; there’s always a risk you won’t get a better offer.”

“Let’s talk about that. What happens if we say no, and then no one else offers?”

“That won’t happen.”

“But if it does?” I insisted.

“It’s a risk we run. If there are no other offers, then we’re in a tougher spot.”

“See?” I remarked like that proved my point.

“But that’s not going to happen. You already know other publishers are thinking it over, and I haven’t even sent it out to my whole list of contacts



yet. Who knows what Monday morning could bring?”

“Maybe nothing?”

Dana gave me a playful eyeroll. “Have some confidence, honey. Let me lay out the flip side scenario for you.”

“Please do.”

“If you take this offer on the table now, and then someone comes along and offers double what Little Books is willing to pay—well, sorry Charlie, you’re locked into the lower offer and leaving a lot of money on the table.”

“Double?” My mouth felt a little dry. I washed down my words with a sip of cappuccino. It was really very good. But still not as good as Noah’s coffee. Or maybe it was the ambiance, the company, the everything else. But suddenly I was thinking of Noah and what he’d recommend I do.

“Can I tell you my thoughts?” Dana asked.

“I mean, of course you can,” I said, a little desperately. “You’re my agent. I was hoping you had some answers for me.”

“While I am your agent, at the end of the day, this is your book and your money,” Dana pointed out. “So I can counsel you and give you advice until the cows come home, but you are the one who has to feel happy with your choice.”

“No pressure.”

“Let me break it down this way.” Dana quickly scanned the room for Lucy. Not seeing her, she continued. “If you turn down this offer, I bet Lucy comes back with another offer for US rights for the book. It’ll be a little lower because it won’t be world rights, but it would be a solid start.”

“Okay.”

“I truly think we’ll be able to make up the difference by selling off all the other rights I mentioned above. I think dividing up your rights into pieces is the best way to go, hands down.”

“Sounds risky.”

“On the contrary, I don’t believe so. I think this could go to auction, and then who’s saying how much the book could go for? People want you, Ellie. They want this book now, and they’re willing to pay for it. You just have to have the confidence to believe in yourself.”

“It’s just hard when one day, nobody knows who you are, and the next, you have to make a split-second decision about a life-changing amount of money.”

“It’s not a split second,” Dana said with a little wink. “I’ll give you until the end of lunch to think it over.”

If I wasn’t so riddled with adrenaline and feeling a tad stressed, I might’ve laughed. I appreciated Dana’s confidence in me. I just wasn’t there yet with myself.

“Not hungry?” Lucy rejoined the table and nodded at my salad. “I vote we box up our lunches to go and order a huge slice of cake instead. Sugar always helps. Plus, we’re celebrating.”

The three of us spent the next half an hour sharing a massive slice of chocolate lava cake and ordering second rounds of coffee and tea. The conversation shifted from being specifically about me and *my* book to chatter about the book world in general.

Dana and Lucy reminisced about people they both knew and projects they’d worked on together. Lucy talked a little bit about the publisher where she worked, what their team was like, some of the marketing they did for their authors. But it was all very loose, easy going, no pressure, and I felt myself relaxing.

My mind wandered to the slip of paper on the table. Every practical fiber of my body told me to take the safe option. There was no shame in taking the money and running. It was still a good amount of money. But what if Dana had a point? What if taking the risk was actually the only real option?

After all, I’d been taking a lot of risks lately. Sleeping with Noah. Sleeping with Noah in public places. Going behind my brother’s back to sleep with Noah. Okay, a lot of my risks involved being naked with Noah Donovan, but what if I’d gone with the safe option on that first night, and I’d pulled away from him instead of leaning into our attraction?

Where would be I now? I’d be *wondering* what it was like to wake up next to him. What it felt like to whisper with him late into the night. What it felt like knowing there was someone I could call, no matter the hour, just to talk. I’d be left wondering, wondering, wondering.

Instead, I knew. I knew what it was like to feel his warmth beside me as we woke together on a chilly winter morning. I knew what it was like to see his eyes darkening as he turned me on. I knew what it was like to feel doted on while I worked in his garage and he cared for me like he really, truly...*cared* for me.

“Thank you so much for this offer, Lucy,” I blurted, fingering the slip of paper on the table. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me.”

Dana swiveled her head in my direction. Lucy looked surprised and maybe a little amused, but she quickly composed herself.

“Of course,” Lucy said. “Happy to do it. Thanks for clearing the schedule to have lunch today, Ellie.”

“With that said, I think I’m going to have to decline,” I said, without even looking at Dana, only having the energy to focus on Lucy. “I can’t reiterate how much it means to me to get this offer. It’s my first ever, and honestly, I’m still shocked.”

Dana nudged me under the table, probably to get me to stop talking, but I couldn’t rein it in.

“As grateful as I am,” I continued, “I don’t feel comfortable selling the world rights just yet without taking the time to explore the rest of my options. So I’m going to have to respectfully decline.”

Lucy gave me a big smile, nodded her head. “I admire your confidence. Thank you for your quick decision.”

The check had already been paid by Lucy’s corporate credit card, so all three took my answer as a cue that it was time to wrap up. We stood around, shook each other’s hands, and shared friendly smiles. I was relieved to see that everyone still seemed more than amicable despite my rejection of the offer.

“When should I expect to see the offer for US rights on my desk?” Dana asked Lucy with a conspiratorial little smile as we strolled out of the restaurant. “I expect Little Books will be submitting a new offer?”

“I’ll send through a revised letter this afternoon once I run it by finance, along with a marketing deck.” Lucy shook Dana’s hand, then mine, as we reached the sidewalk out front. “I look forward to hopefully working with you soon.”

As Lucy walked away, I stared after her. Then I turned to Dana. “It’s that easy?” I murmured. “There are really no hard feelings from Lucy because I said ‘no’?”

“This is totally normal,” Dana said, throwing an arm over my shoulders. “Lucy knew I’d tell you to turn it down. This was really just a whole song and dance, a formal routine if you will, trying to woo you to consider Little Books first. She still wants your freaking book, honey. Let’s see what she sends over this afternoon, and we’ll go from there.”

“Wow. Okay.”

“Get ready for a wild week ahead, sweetie. I have a feeling things aren’t slowing down anytime soon. Then after your book is purchased, it’s really go-time. We’re going to have you on book tours, signings not only in the city but beyond. Library stops. School visits. I’m telling you, all your dreams are about to come true.”



I CALLED NOAH THE SECOND I got back to my apartment. I went out on the teeny, tiny balcony and shut the door to talk to him in peace and quiet, away from Katie and Jasmine's very curious ears.

I knew Katie was already prepared to celebrate with me; I'd seen the bottle of sparkling rosé she'd preemptively stashed in the crisper drawer of the fridge. We'd get to it for sure, but a larger part of me wanted to share this news with Noah first.

"I was waiting for your call." Noah answered in a low, gravelly tone. He sounded calm and sweet and perfect. "How'd the big meeting go, rockstar?"

"It went well," I said. "I'm still shaking. I got a better offer than I could have imagined."

"That's amazing! Congratulations, El. I always knew you'd do it. That's fantastic."

"I didn't take it."

"Right. Obviously that makes total sense."

I barked a laugh, relieved that Noah could make me grin even when I was stumbling down an uncertain path into my future. That was the beauty of being with him. He made every moment just a little bit easier, a little bit better, a little bit more optimistic without missing a beat.

"It's a long story, but basically they offered me a preempt for world rights," I said. "My agent thinks that if we say no to the exclusive deal, she'll be able to sell off my rights individually, and the sum will actually be more than this initial offer."

"I get it in theory," Noah said. "I mean, at a certain point, you can get more money from selling the individual pieces of a shitty old car than you can from selling the whole damn thing put together. It's a completely common practice."

"I guess that's a good way to look at it."

"I'm not saying your book's a shitty old car, babe."

I laughed, practically seeing the glimmer of amusement in his eye. "I mean, if the shoe fits."

Noah chuckled softly on the other end of the phone, and a few minutes of silence passed. "I'm really proud of you, Ellie. I know it had to be hard to say no after seeing a number like that. Especially in person."

"It's like you can read my mind."

“Nah, I just know you.”

“Do you think I made the right choice?”

“Do *you* feel like it was the right choice?”

“It was the best I could do with the information I had,” I said. “I guess we’ll see how it shakes out.”

“That’s all you can ever do. So yeah, I think you did the right thing.”

“You inspired me a little, you know.” I picked at a peeling patch of paint on the balcony railing. “I mean, you helped inspire the confidence I needed to turn it down.”

“Glad to know I inspired you to turn down a very nice chunk of change.”

Still grinning, I continued. “I was inspired to take a risk. You know, the last risk I took paid out for me, so I thought I’d roll the dice again.”

“Oh yeah?” It sounded like Noah had stopped putzing with whatever he was doing in the background. It was dead silent. “What risk was that?”

“Sleeping with you and seeing where our connection could go.”

A long silence followed. I worried I’d said the wrong thing.

“I was really worried that taking a risk like that wasn’t worth it,” I said. “I never wanted to lose you just because the two of us realized we’d been harboring feelings for one another all these years.”

“Absolutely.”

“So you agree the risk was worth it?” I asked, desperate for him to give me something. I thought I’d been saying mostly good things about us, but his lack of concrete response was making me wonder if he’d taken it that way.

“Of course,” he murmured. “You coming back into my life has been the best part of this whole damn year, Ellie.”

“Oh, good.” A sizable wave of relief crashed out of me. “Well, I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss me?” The tension was evident in Noah’s voice.

“I just mean now that the wedding is over, I am going to miss seeing you so much. My agent was explaining all the things that are going to come, and…” I blew out a huge breath. “It’s a lot. It sounds like they’re going to be keeping me really busy down here.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “But of course, El. You’re in high demand. Everyone wants a piece of you. We knew that was coming.”

“It’s fine, though,” I said. “We’ll figure something out. If you want to.”

“Sure.”

“You can come visit me, and I’ll come and visit you.”

“Just say the word. Actually, I was thinking about driving to New York to take you out for a drink tonight to celebrate, but I forgot that—”

“That’s right, your mom’s dinner,” I said. “I forgot about that too. Of course you should go. Tell her I’m so sorry I ditched at the last minute.”

Noah gave an amused snort. “I’d miss my mother’s family dinner to see you anytime. I was going to say that I forgot I’m meeting a client here at eight tomorrow morning. I’d reschedule it if I could, but it’s been on the calendar for ages, and he drives in from almost an hour away. It’s a whole thing.”

“No, please,” I said. “Don’t apologize. That’s totally fine. There’s no need to drive to the city right now. We’ll celebrate when I get back.”

“Which will be tomorrow?” Noah asked hopefully. “You could pop back up for the weekend. I’ve been promising Chloe that we’ll stop by Taco Bout Love so she can have the chance to meet you and talk to us when I’m not covered in blood.”

“I wish,” I admitted, “but my agent said this is going to be a whirlwind of a week, so she suggested I keep my head in the game, whatever that means. I think it means I need to be available for more meetings, so I’m going to stick around here for now. I owe her some more pages by Monday anyway, and I’m not sure I’m going to have time to eat or sleep let alone do anything that resembles fun.”

“I get it. Hey, you should enjoy getting wined and dined. Rack up those offers. You’ve worked years to get to this point. You have earned every bit of it.”

“Yeah...” I licked my lips, both grateful for his kindness and understanding while also feeling a pinch of uncertainty.

We weren’t technically in a relationship, yet here I was, experiencing all these emotions as if we *were*. Feeling like my being apart from him was disappointing him on some level I didn’t want to confront. It wasn’t that I *wanted* to be apart from Noah, but my life was currently keeping me here, and his life was keeping him there. Which we had known would happen from the very start. Which was why we hadn’t gotten emotionally involved—or why we’d *promised* that we wouldn’t get emotionally involved.

But I was failing big time at my end of the deal. I was full of feelings for Noah Donovan, but I couldn’t exactly tell him that. It’d put him in a difficult position, and me too for that matter. What were we supposed to do? Try out a long-distance pseudo-relationship that was destined to fail? One of us giving

up our dreams so we could move to be with the other? Noah had worked hard to make his shop perfect. I had worked for over a decade to get an offer like this. Sometimes timing just sucked.

So did my ability to exist in a casual relationship. I super-sucked at that, because even though I knew that Noah and I were supposed to be keeping things light and physical, I couldn't shake the feeling that this thing between us was turning into something more...something neither of us had been prepared to see through.

Sooner or later, we'd have to decide what we were to one another. And I just wasn't sure that, no matter how much we enjoyed being together, our lives would ever fit together in a way that made sense.





## Chapter 19

**N**<sup>oah</sup> The weekend passed. That was about all I could say about it. After Ellie had called me on Friday afternoon to let me know the news of her huge deal, I hadn't been able to shake the consistent pinch in my stomach, like a side ache that just never went away after a football game.

By Monday morning, I felt a little better. Mostly because I'd come up with a plan to see Ellie. Lord knows I couldn't wait another second to get my hands on her, to tease my fingers through her hair, to press a kiss against her lips, her neck, places too inappropriate to mention aloud.

"I didn't know Ellie was back in town." Josie eyed me over her kitchen table. She had spread a variety of pink and purple flowers there and was currently bundling them up for me. "I thought she went back to New York for some big meetings or whatever."

"Who told you that?"

"Dude." Josie glared at me like my doubting her was a personal offense. "I know everything."

"You've got to stop talking with Clarice so much. That woman is going to get you in trouble. The flowers?"

"Are you sure you don't want to take her one of my bulb gardens?" Josie suggested. "I feel like in New York this time of year, a miniature garden would bring some real happiness to that city slicker you're dating."

"I just want some flowers, Josie. I don't know what the hell a bulb is."

"Fine. I know your shop is doing well. Andrei told me that he had to book three months out just to get a slot with you. You can afford both a bouquet and a bulb garden—I'll get it ready for you."

"Now you know all the gossip from everyone who's *not* in Fantasie too? Andrei drives over an hour to get here."

Josie preened as if that was a compliment. "I have eyes and ears everywhere, Noah Donovan. Did Ellie get a book deal?"

"Sort of," I told her. "I don't know how much I can say. She's super busy taking meetings though, and she's talking to her agent like thirteen times a day, so something's happening."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you sounded a little jealous, sir."

"Jealous of her agent? Nah, Ellie's not interested in Dana like that."

Josie gave a little snort as she wrapped brown parchment paper around a massive display of flowers. “I meant jealous of her life in the city, you idiot.”

“Why would I be jealous? I’m happy for her.” I stared pointedly at the colorful array of petals. “Hence the reason I’m driving down to surprise her.”

Josie’s eyes narrowed at me. “You’re surprising her?”

“Why do you make it sound like a bad idea? I thought it would be romantic.”

“I mean, maybe, sure, if all goes well. But it’s a long way to drive without knowing if she wants to see you. Or *can* see you.”

“I guess. But that’s the beauty of a surprise, isn’t it?”

Josie didn’t comment. She flicked a piece of hair out of her eyes, then straightened the pinafore apron she was wearing over a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

Finally, Josie spoke. “Is she as committed to this as you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I sounded growly even to my own ears.

“Whoa, Nelly.” Josie put up her hands like she was calming an energetic horse. “I just meant you seem smitten. I *know* you’re smitten. A guy doesn’t buy flowers and drive hours one way to see a girl just for the sex.”

I coughed, gave a little splutter.

Josie gave me an impish grin. “*Even* if the sex is that good. Trust me. I know. Not a lot of guys are as invested in the women they’re sleeping with as you are.”

“Wom-*an*. I don’t do this with just anyone.”

“Exactly.” Josie smiled more broadly. “And as my duty as a citizen of Fantasie, I care about you, Noah. I’m just looking out for you. I’m afraid you’re getting too invested in something that to Ellie is just physical.”

“It’s not like that. She’s not like that.”

“Dude, you don’t have to get defensive.” Josie ducked out of the room, returned with a terracotta pot filled with dirt and some little stems sticking out. “Ellie’s great. I have zero issues with her. I respect that she saw what she wanted and went after it. The two of you want to have great no-strings-attached sex? Go for it. Just make sure that’s what you *both* are doing. Otherwise, you’re going to get hurt.”

“Do you charge extra for the therapy?” I said dryly. “I just wanted the fucking flowers. And what the hell are you doing with that pot of dirt? It’s not going in my car.”

“It’s a bulb garden, and yes, it is.” Josie reached for a cardboard box and began packaging things up. “You do you, pal. You’re an adult. Just, you know, keep your expectations tempered. Ellie lives in New York. She’s lived there for years, and she seems happy enough with it. Her dreams are finally starting to come true. She’s got friends there, a life.”

“You keep talking like that and you’re going to lose business,” I told her darkly. “I’m going to go steal Chuck’s flowers from the café tables just so I don’t have to talk to the likes of you.”

“You love me,” she said blithely. “Anyway, I don’t think either of you are right or wrong, I’m just looking at things from an outsider’s point of view. I know Ellie wouldn’t want to change you, want you to give up your garage, your home, the very things that make you Noah. But you wouldn’t want her to give up those things either, would you?”

“There are ways around logistics,” I said. “Not to mention, is this any of your business?”

“I’m making it my business,” she chirped. “I’m trying to look out for you.”

“I don’t need you to look out for me.”

“That’s a hundred and fifty dollars,” Josie said. “It’s extra for the attitude.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Yeah, I am. It’s on the house. Tell her congratulations on the book business from me. And Noah...” Josie stopped me, though I’d already spun to leave. “I hope things work out for you two. I know how good of friends the two of you were back in the day, and it’s obvious the chemistry is still there. I really do hope your surprise works out perfectly tonight, and that my inserting myself into your business was an absolutely useless cause.”

“I love you too,” I tossed over my shoulder. “Next oil change is free.”

“Don’t I know it,” Josie shouted after me. “They’re all free.”

I packed myself in the car and headed for the city. I packed the flowers, dirt and all, into the seat next to me. Then I cruised down the freeway, letting my mind wander. About an hour into the drive, Josie’s words started getting to me. I pulled over to fill up on gas and grab a coffee, and I chickened out on the surprise. I pulled out my phone and shot Ellie a text.

**NOAH: Interested in dinner tonight?**

Then I pulled back onto the road, trying not to think about the silence on my phone. There were no pings for the next hour, or the one after that. I was

about an hour outside of the city when I got a message from the name that made my heart leap.

**ELLIE: I'm so sorry, I just got out of another meeting and am just seeing your text now. Unfortunately, Dana's got me heading to cocktails at seven. She said it's probably going to run late. Talk tomorrow?**

I glanced over at the flowers. Glanced at my dashboard. Glanced at the stupid pot of dirt I'd never wanted in the first place. Chugged the rest of my coffee, then turned my car the hell around. Before I pulled out onto the freeway, I texted Ellie back.

**NOAH: Yeah, no problem. Good luck tonight!**

My exclamation mark felt forced. I regretted it the second I sent it, but I didn't want her to think I was upset, and I'd wanted to show my support. And now I was analyzing text messages like a fucking thirteen-year-old girl texting her crush.

I harrumphed out a breath, rolling the tension out of my shoulders. The whole drive back, I had a lot of time to think and ponder. Josie's words, meant kindly and from a person who had the biggest heart of all time, were starting to get to me. Nettle at me. Raise my hackles in a way that I didn't like because maybe there was some truth to them.

In no way was I upset with Ellie. This was her week, and she should be taking it all in, enjoying every moment, savoring every cocktail and appetizer and business deal. She'd worked a lifetime for it.

But where did I fit into that picture? I was, and I always would be, the small-town mechanic. In my heart, I knew I'd move anywhere to be with the woman I loved. But I also wondered if that was enough to make me happy. As much as my family irked me, I couldn't imagine living far away from them.

I enjoyed having personal relationships with all my clients. I didn't hate that Angelica used me for free lattes and Josie expected free oil changes and all zillion of my DiMaggio cousins thought I was their personal 'car guy'. That was a part of me, a part of Noah's garage, a part of the way I ran my business. I wasn't sure I could replicate that sort of life anywhere else. Even if I was with the woman I loved, I suspected I wouldn't exactly feel fulfilled picking up a position at the local Jiffy Lube as a long-term thing.

I stepped on the brakes, realizing I was flying close to twenty miles over the speed limit. I'd let my emotions get the best of me, and if I didn't settle

down before city limits, Finn was going to be grinning when he slapped a speeding ticket on me.

I made it home free of speeding tickets and Finn's ugly mug. I stopped by my mother's inn, pilfered some dinner from the fridge, and left Josie's flowers on the counter for someone to enjoy, since it wasn't going to be Ellie. I had no idea how long the life cycle of a fucking bulb garden was, but I was pretty sure those puppies would be dead before I saw Ellie again.

"Sneaking out of here so soon?" My mother stopped me at the front door. "At least you could say thanks for the meatloaf."

"Thanks." I raised the package. "You're welcome for the flowers."

"Things didn't go well with Ellie?"

"What the hell? A guy can't buy his mother flowers?"

"I talked to Josie."

"I swear to God, that woman..." I ran a hand through my hair. It wasn't Josie's fault. I hadn't exactly sworn her to secrecy.

"Oh, don't take it out on Josie." My mother gave me a sympathetic smile. "Want to talk about it?"

"Do you think I'm holding her back?"

"Honey." My mother's face turned gentle, soft. "I think anybody would be lucky to have you in their life. Ellie included."

"You're right. What the hell am I thinking getting advice from my own mother? It's not like you're exactly unbiased."

"What I mean is that you're not the sort of person to hold anyone back," my mom continued. "You support others. You want the best for them, especially the people you love. You have a good heart, Noah."

"Why do I think a 'but' is coming?"

"Because sometimes timing plays a role in things too." Lily raised her shoulders. "You and Ellie have had a wonderful friendship, and I suspect you two could be very good together. It's obvious there's chemistry, and it's obvious you both care about each other."

"Get to the 'but' already."

"*But* sometimes that's not enough. It just depends, sweetie. You're going to need to talk to her about that." Lily licked her lower lip in thought. "I'd tell you to move to New York to be with her if that's what I thought would make you happy. As much as it would pain me to see another of my sons move away, I'd be honest with you if that was what I thought was best. But honey, I think your heart is here."

“Yeah.” My voice was husky. It wasn’t *not* the truth.

“I don’t see you as a city slicker. You’ve never had a desire to go to the city, not even once, not even on a vacation at Christmastime. You have your land, your garage, your clients, your home—”

“Just not the person I care about.”

My mother nodded. “And you have too big of a heart to expect Ellie to change, either. Which is how you should feel. You don’t want to change anyone to be with you. With the right person, things will work. I promise you.”

“I feel like you’re telling me there’s no chance this will work with Ellie.” I grumpily studied her. “That’s more pessimistic than you usually are.”

“No, sweetie, that’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m telling you what I see as your mother. I love Ellie, I think she’s a wonderful person, and I *also* want what’s best for her. Now the two of you just need to talk, and to be honest with yourselves and each other, before either of you gets more hurt than you are already in danger of becoming.”

“The way people talk, it’s like we’re planning an engagement,” I shot back at her. “We’re not even dating. We’re just...seeing what happens.”

“Uh huh.” My mother sounded wholly unconvinced, then shot a pointed glance toward the kitchen as if she could see the arrangement of flowers there with some sort of motherly laser vision. “Well, just be careful. I love you, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Love you too, Ma.”

Then I spun and left the inn, taking me, myself, and my meatloaf home for a night alone. Again.

Then I ate my meatloaf, went to bed, and found myself wondering what in the hell I was supposed to do about any of this.

Unfortunately, Tuesday morning didn’t suddenly bring me any more clarity. If anything, the next day was worse because I’d cancelled all of my early appointments in anticipation of spending last night in the city and having to drive back in the morning.

I tinkered on an old motorcycle of mine, wishing for a break in these cold temperatures so I could get out on the road, feel the wind in my hair, push the speed limits on my bike. I needed to do *something* to relax, and I was coming up empty on ways to get her off my mind.

When my phone rang, I gave it two jingles before I answered, just so Ellie wouldn’t think I was sitting on my ass and waiting for her call.

“Hey, you,” Ellie said when I answered. “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you last night. I appreciated the dinner invitation, but I just couldn’t get away to make a trip up, and—”

“Oh, I didn’t expect you to come here,” I said lightly. “I could’ve gone there.”

“Come on, Noah,” Ellie said cheerfully. “I know how busy you are during the week. We both are. That’s why this works out so well. You know, both of us keeping busy so one of us isn’t sitting around waiting for the other person to call.”

I sat back, kicked my feet up on the desk, and lied, “Absolutely.”

“What’ve you been up to?”

“Not much,” I said, glancing around at the empty garage and the junky old bike I was working to make shine. “Fixing up an old motorcycle this morning. How were all your dates last night?”

“Great!” Ellie launched into a recap of everything she’d been offered yesterday. “I’m just so relieved that there are more offers on the table. This just means that everything Dana promised is coming true. I was so worried that turning the preempt down would bite me in the butt, but guess what?”

“What?” I drawled.

“I’ve already got offers that are better than the preempt, and it’s only Tuesday. I’ve got meetings packed until Friday. Maybe into next week.”

“That’s incredible, El. I knew it was the right choice. I knew people would want you and your books. They’re fighting over you like animals.”

“Thanks, Noah. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your support. It’s nice, you know...” Ellie’s voice dropped, grew soft. “I appreciate that I can call you and just talk without having to worry. I’m just really glad that what happened between us didn’t ruin our friendship.”

*Ruin our friendship?* The way she phrased it had me wondering if Ellie was getting at something else. Like, maybe, the fact that she was ready to call the physical part of us quits and just go back to being friends. My heart felt like there was a fissure running down the middle of it, threatening to crack with one more blow.

“I agree,” I said and latched onto a piece of truth in there that I could agree with. “I really enjoy talking to you too. You can call anytime, you know.”

“The same goes for you,” Ellie said. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You sound a little down.”



“Nah, just busy,” I lied. “Got some work stuff on my mind.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry—here I am calling you in the middle of your busiest time because *my* work doesn’t start until lunch these days.” Ellie gave a light laugh. “I wasn’t thinking, I’m sorry. Call me later, sometime when you’re free?”

“Sure thing,” I told her, not quite ready to hang up, but not quite sure what else to say. “Good luck today, Ellie. Can’t wait to hear all about it later.”

It was a relief when the appointments started flowing in after lunch. And I was grateful when the appointments filled up my schedule for the next couple of days too because contact with Ellie was few and far between. I called her Wednesday night, but by the time she called me back I was out with Lucas and Chloe and hadn’t heard my phone ring. It was too late to call her back by the time I’d gotten home and realized I’d missed my only chance to talk to Ellie for the whole day.

Thursday we connected over lunch, but Ellie was rushing between meetings, and the sound of the bustling city in the background gave me anxiety that I was keeping her from something more important, that she was just calling me to fill in a checkbox and complete an obligation.

I begged off the call, claiming a client was waiting for me. It was a big fat lie, and the real truth was that I felt like an obligation. A weight. An anchor on the ankle of a beautiful woman, dragging her down as she was just starting to find her footing in the world. And I would never, ever want to get in the way of Ellie’s happiness—even if that meant walking away.



## Chapter 20

**E**llie “I’m really not sure this is a good idea.” I stood in front of the mirror with Katie by my side, surveying the black dress she’d loaned me along with the heeled boots that went up to my knees. “Surprising him is probably stupid.”

“Are you kidding me?” Katie dangled hoop earrings before me until I snatched them out of her fingers. “One look at you, and he’s gonna handcuff you naked to the bed so you can never come back to the city. P.S., don’t let him do that. Or call me if he does because I’ll come set you free. I know how to pick a handcuff lock.”

“Do I want to know why you have that knowledge?”

“Nope,” Katie said happily. “Plus, it’s not like you’re just showing up for no reason. His mom literally invited you to her place. So even if he doesn’t want to see you, you’re still getting a free meal and a place to stay, and you can be back tomorrow by noon and never see the bastard again. But that’s not gonna happen.”

“Thanks?” I gave her a look that told her the muddled pep talk wasn’t helping.

“Just being honest,” she said. “Have a great time.”

“You sure you don’t want to come?” I asked her. “Aiden’s still in town. I guess he’s helping out Lily with some real estate or something.”

“Is he going to be at the dinner?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t keep tabs on him. But I’m sure if he knows you’re coming, he’ll be there.”

“Sorry,” Katie said. “I’m busy.”

“That’s a load of baloney.” I stared at her. Katie was already in her pajamas despite it practically being lunchtime. “You’re not doing anything.”

“I’m doing a *lot* of resting and watching TV and eating Chinese food, and you’re not going to stop me.”

I sighed, bid Katie goodbye, then headed out for what was sure to be a disaster.

It had been two weeks since I’d seen Noah for the wedding weekend. The first week I’d been back in the city had passed in a blur of meetings with Dana and publishers and editors. The second week had slowed down some on

the in-person meetings, but the behind-the-scenes stuff was just as active if not more.

I averaged talking to Dana nine times per day, and those were just the phone calls. I wasn't counting in person meetings, emails, or texts. The latter of which Dana was *very* fond of sending. I talked to my agent about a hundred times more than I managed to talk to Noah.

At first, I thought things between Noah and I had been great. We'd both been busy, but not so busy we hadn't managed to talk to one another throughout the week. But toward the weekend, something had changed in his voice. Not anything I could put my finger on, but something subtle. Like the tone of his voice—a hint more resigned, a bit sad, distracted.

The second week I'd been feeling nothing but guilt over the fact that Noah and I couldn't quite seem to get on the same page. There was a heaviness in my stomach, something weighing me down. I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't giving Noah what he needed, what he wanted from this relationship, and it gave me a physical ache that I might not be enough for him.

So when Lily Donovan had reached out to me via text to invite me to one of those family dinners she hosted on Fridays, I took her up on the offer. I needed to see Noah in person. And, more importantly, I needed to see where things stood between us. This in-between business was too stressful, too heavy sitting in the back of my mind. If he was ready to move on, then I needed to hear it now, before I let myself keep thinking of him day in and day out.

In my wildest, best dreams, Noah would wrap his arms around me the second I arrived in Fantasie and tell me that he'd been thinking of me nonstop while I'd been gone. That he'd missed me as much as I'd missed him, like it was a physical pain in his body, a missing limb, something he couldn't imagine living without.

But the realistic side of me knew that was probably too good to be true. A part of me sensed that Noah was already putting distance between us, preparing us for the worst so that when he cut things off, it wouldn't sting so much. It had to be the only explanation. My instincts weren't often wrong, and my instincts had been screaming at me that something wasn't right between us.

I made the easy drive up to Fantasie in my rental and parked outside of Lily's adorable inn. The pink siding was a lovely bright spot against the

snowy backdrop, even though the sun had already set. Lights burned inside the house, warmth and glow spilling out like the house was overflowing with food and family and joy, and the sheer building couldn't contain it.

I was just climbing out of the car, already running twenty minutes late to dinner, when I heard two male voices approaching on the sidewalk behind me. It was clear they hadn't realized anyone was around just yet.

"Stop fucking moping and walk already," Finn said. "I know three-year-olds that move faster than you."

I glanced up, felt my heart stutter as I saw Sheriff Finn marching Noah down the sidewalk like he was under arrest.

"You're the one who dragged me out of my house and demanded I come tonight," Noah grumbled. "I don't want to be here. I don't get what's so important about this dinner that I *absolutely* had to be here."

"Don't ask me, ask your mother," Finn shot back. "I'm just doing my job."

"Pretty sure your duties as sheriff don't involve picking the lock on my front door and hauling me out of my own damn house for dinner."

"I didn't say they were sheriff duties," Finn retorted. "Call them family duties."

"Asshole."

As Noah glared at Finn, he caught me in his line of sight. I was standing, sort of frozen, on the curb by my rental car. Finn looked up, noted me, then noted the shock on Noah's face.

"Yeah, I'll leave you to this." Finn clapped Noah on the shoulder. "Evening, Ellie."

"Hi, Finn."

We waited for Finn to go inside the building, and then I moved a few paces to stand in front of Noah who looked like he'd frozen solid on the pavement.

"Hey," I said softly.

"Ellie?" he asked like it was a ghost. Then he cleared his throat and tried again. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother invited me. Personally. Like, she texted me twice and insisted I come," I added. "I had been promising I'd come to a dinner sooner rather than later, and I had some free time tonight, so I thought I'd come and...also surprise you?"

The last part lilted, and I realized how unsure I was feeling about this whole thing, especially now that I was here. Seeing Noah in person only made things more complicated. A lifetime of feelings for the man came flooding back to me, along with the new feelings, the adult ones that had joined the lifetime of friendship already built between us.

If I'd been under any illusions that Noah would wrap me in his arms and confess his undying love for me, they'd definitely been wrong. I was glad I'd tempered my expectations because Noah was still looking at me like I existed on a different plane entirely.

"I'm glad to see you," I said. "It's felt like a long two weeks being away from you."

"I can't believe my mother." Noah raised a hand, scratched at his forehead. "She set us both up. Finn fucking picked the lock on the door and dragged me off the couch tonight. I'm sorry that my mom is trying to play matchmaker. I'll talk to her about it."

"No, no. It's fine, at least on my end. Lily was just being nice inviting me to dinner because I had to miss the last one," I said. "You don't have to be here if you don't want to, but I drove all the way here for this pasta, and I'm starving."

"Yeah, of course. We should go inside."

But neither of us made a move to go inside. There was a new awkwardness between us, one that hadn't been there before. A new element to our relationship that had developed over our two weeks apart. I couldn't tell if it was me or Noah, or maybe both of us, who'd had something change. All I knew was that I wanted him to wrap his arms around me, and he was standing there with his hands shoved in his pockets like he was doing everything in his power to keep his distance.

"Look, Noah..." I blew out a sigh. "This is a little awkward, but there's something I wanted to talk to you about—"

"Me too," he said quickly, so fast he cut me off. "I know what you're going to say, and I promise you it's fine. I was thinking the same thing."

"Really?" I asked, pretty sure he had no clue what I was going to say.

But now I was curious to hear him out. I didn't want to influence him with what I had to say, specifically how much I missed him, and how much I wanted him to pull me to his chest and kiss my hair and tell me that we would figure everything out.

I wanted to know that I wasn't the only one who felt this way—the only one who felt like I wasn't completely whole when I was away from him. That, although our relationship was new and early, and—heck, technically not even a relationship just yet—that I thought the little flame we'd ignited together was worth fighting for.

That there had to be a way for us to make this work. Whether that involved me spending weekends in Fantasie or Noah coming to the city when he could swing it. That even if it didn't work out in the long run, it was worth not giving up on so easily. So I held my breath as Noah ran a hand through his hair and waited to see what he had to say.

“I think it's probably best if, like you said, if we focus on the friendship piece of what we have right now.” Noah's face was stony, hard to read as he spoke. “I care for you a lot, El. And I think with how things are going for you in the city, it's best if you keep your focus there, your eye on the prize if you will.”

“Okay.” I tried to make it sound like a statement, but my voice turned up at the end like it was also a question.

“You're busy in New York, and you're only going to get busier as your career launches.” Noah cleared his throat twice, like the first time didn't quite work right. “As much as I'd like to spend some time with you in the city, I have people who are counting on me here. My house, my business, my clients, my family.”

“Of course,” I said, also speaking too fast. “No, I totally get it.”

“Don't get me wrong.” Noah finally stepped closer to me, rested a hand on my shoulder, but it was too stiff. “I don't regret what we did, what we had. But I value our friendship most of all, and I just don't want us to go too far down a path where one of us gets hurt and we can't repair it.”

“Agreed,” I said, feeling hoarse. “That was the whole point of the arrangement anyway.”

Even though I could kick myself right now for being the one to drive the arrangement. Katie had had a point. From day one, she'd told me it was stupid, that there would be a day when Noah would break things off, and I'd have to be okay with it. And here I was, pretending to be okay with it when I was turning into a puddle of Jell-O inside.

“Are you sure you're okay with that?” Noah looked into my eyes, searching for something.

Almost like he was waiting for me to tell him that he was wrong, that this wasn't the right course of action for us. But I could also see from his robotic movements, the stony look on his face, that he'd been working up to this moment for two weeks. I knew now the reason his voice had changed. The distance, the shorter replies—he was growing the space between us as a warning, so when this moment came, it wouldn't hurt so damn much.

Well, it still did.

“I understand, Noah,” I told him. “Truly. We knew we'd get to this point. I mean, my life is in the city, and your life is here, and neither of us expects the other to change because we care about each other too much, and we value our friendship too much to lose it.”

“Exactly.” Noah gave a weak smile. “Too much of everything.”

“Too much,” I said, not even sure what we were talking about anymore.

We stood around, Noah having removed his arm from my shoulder to shove it back in his pocket. He glanced at the front door.

“You said you're hungry?” he said. “We can head inside now if you want, I guess.”

“Sure,” I said because it didn't seem like there was much else to say.

Really, I wanted to climb back in my car and drive back to New York and drown myself in Chinese food next to Katie, but I'd come this far, and if I gave up on the front stoop, I'd be letting down Lily and her invitation again. Not to mention, I'd be exposing to Noah how much this breakup, if it could even be called that, had affected me.

For Noah's sake, I needed to put on a brave face, smile, and make it through dinner so that when I drove home, he didn't need to look over his shoulder and worry about me. Because we were still friends, and friends looked out for one another, and I knew what Noah had told me tonight hadn't been easy. I didn't want to make it any harder for him because I knew at the end of the day, he'd had both of our best interests at heart.

So, we climbed up the stairs to the house, desperately not touching one another, and joined the party.





## Chapter 21

**N**<sup>oah</sup> I felt like shit. I was a piece of shit. Everything about this situation was shitty.

I'd seen the blip of surprise in Ellie's eyes as I'd effectively 'broken up' with her, if this counted as a breakup considering the stipulations of our agreement. But I wasn't doing it for me. Hell, if it was me, I'd handcuff her to my bed the way she was looking tonight and demand she stay here with me.

But I couldn't hold her captive. I couldn't even *ask* it of her. I'd seen a new happiness in Ellie's eyes tonight. The flutter of an almost frenzied excitement, and who the hell would blame her after the two weeks she'd had in New York? A whole new phase of her life was just beginning, and I wasn't going to be the one to cage her here. I wasn't going to be the anchor holding her to a town she'd never wanted to be a part of, and similarly, I couldn't move my entire life to New York right now.

Could we have tried long distance? Sure, I supposed we could have. But in the mere two weeks we'd spent apart, I'd already felt like a burden. The number of times Ellie had texted me a message that started with *Sorry I missed you!* was more than I was comfortable with. I didn't want to be an obligation to her, a weight demanding her time and attention when she needed—*deserved*—to be focusing on herself for once in her life.

I hadn't planned to do it like this.

I hadn't planned to come to my mother's inn for dinner, but apparently my mother and Finn, the conniving pair, had had other plans for me. I was sure they'd meant it kindly, trying to get me and Ellie back together. But boy had it backfired.

I'd known from the second I'd laid eyes on Ellie tonight, though, that if I didn't blurt out the need to keep our physical distance, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her. She looked better than I remembered, and the smile that had lit her face when she'd seen me—it'd just about changed my fucking mind.

Then I'd remembered my mother's words, Josie's words, and Ellie's *I'm sorry!* messages, and I'd blurted it out before my guts turned to goo. I took

the easy way out before I could pull Ellie to me, kiss her senseless, take her home to my bed and beg her selfishly to stay with me.

A rush of warmth hit our faces as the door to my mother's inn opened, and we were ushered inside by my mother, who deftly didn't look at me. Behind her, several DiMaggio cousins moved through the lobby. I spotted my brother Lucas sitting with his arm around Chloe at the dinner table.

My mother beelined for Ellie, dragging her inside and leaving me behind. My mother offered me a brief hello without eye contact before issuing me marching orders to stir the gravy and grab the rolls in the kitchen. Apparently the whole crew had been waiting for our arrival to sit down and eat.

"You shouldn't have waited for us," I overheard Ellie telling my mother. "Sorry I was late. New York traffic."

I didn't hear the rest of the conversation because I knew that if I didn't get to the gravy before it burned, I was going to be in deep trouble. Not that I really cared, but I needed something to do. I didn't care about a whole lot right now except getting my hands on a stiff drink and not getting into a fistfight with anyone tonight because my temper was *on edge*.

A few stirs later, I gave up on the gravy and dug up the basket of rolls. I shuffled back into the dining room, not feeling totally comfortable leaving Ellie on her own for too long. Not because she couldn't handle herself, but because this was my family, and I felt protective of her, even if we weren't together *in that way* any longer. Like I said, we were still friends, first and foremost. That was the whole reason we'd parted ways now, before the damage was too irreversible to remain friendly.

I stopped in my tracks the second I came out of the kitchen and landed in the dining room. The look on Ellie's face just about stopped my heart. I glanced at my mother, then back to Ellie, trying to read the room and figure out why it looked like Ellie had seen a ghost.

It was only when I glanced down at the table that things started to click into place.

Next to every plate at the table—and there were a lot of plates on a very long table—sat a copy of *Rusty*. Ellie's illustrated and self-published picture book. The very one I had purchased twelve copies of myself. The way Ellie had frozen with a copy of her very own book in her hand and a big fat Sharpie marker in her other hand, told me that my mom had downright ambushed Ellie with a book signing.

I rolled my shoulders, trying not to let the tension build up. Every instinct in me wanted to pull my mom aside and tell her what an awful idea this was. Ellie had always hated attention. She'd never once been the sort of girl who'd wanted to be at the center of any gathering. She'd spent her childhood fluttering around the edges at holidays, hanging with me and Aiden at school functions and parties and dances and sporting events.

I couldn't help feeling like this was a multi-layered trap. A shock of icy water felt like it splashed down my spine. Playing matchmaker was one thing. Setting Ellie up as the surprise guest of honor at a dinner party was another thing entirely.

"I thought this was just dinner," I said stonily to my mother, who was at Ellie's side. "What the hell is this?"

Ellie gave a weak clear of her throat. "It's dinner and a book club. With *my* book. Isn't that something?"

"Something, all right," I growled. "Ma, can I have a word?"

"Sure, honey," Lily Donovan said, either completely oblivious to the fact that I was upset or completely ignoring it. "I just want to get my copy signed first. Then I'll grab the food while everyone else gets their books signed."

"Ellie," I said. "Can I steal you for a minute? In the kitchen? Alone?"

"Um..." Ellie glanced down. "Let me just do this real quick, and then I'll be right there."

I waited in the doorway while she signed my mother's damn book. Then I pushed the swinging door open. Ellie followed me inside. I crossed the room, dug my nails against the counter as Ellie came to stand beside me.

"I am so sorry for this." I pinched my forehead. "If I had any idea my mother was going to pull this shit, I would've never walked through that door. I swear, I didn't know anything about this."

"Noah—"

"I know how much you hate being the center of attention."

"It is okay, Noah."

"No, it's not," I insisted. "I would never have been okay with my mother ambushing you like this. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll fix it. Anything. Just say the word. You want me to collect all the books and hide them? Carry you out of here on my shoulder? I'm open to options."

Ellie gave me the ghost of a smile. "It's really okay. I promise. Nobody has ever been this interested in me and my work before. Nobody's really

cared to support me like Lily has done tonight. I'm flattered, really, even if I'm having a hard time showing it. I just have a lot to process."

*Right, because I'm a dick.* "Of course. Can I do anything to make this easier?"

"When my book first came out, I gave my mom a copy. I didn't expect much, but I thought she might stick it on a shelf or something." Ellie raised her shoulders. "Well, a friend texted me that she found my mom's copy in a Little Free Library—my friend lives *two towns* away. I still think my mom didn't leave it in Fantasie because she didn't want people seeing my name on it."

"That's fucked up, Ellie. I'm sorry, I know that's your mom, but that's screwed up."

"It's just not her thing," Ellie said dismissively, bobbing her shoulder again. "I didn't hold it against her. I just realized then that she would never care what I did with my life. So that was the point when I really stopped telling her anything. That was the day I decided to have zero expectations of her. That way, anytime she did speak with me, it was just a little bonus."

I wrapped her in a bear hug that was probably more to prevent me from saying some naughty words about her mother than it was to comfort Ellie. But the way her fingers clutched my T-shirt, I could tell that I'd been slightly wrong. She needed the hug as much as I did, even if it hurt both of us.

I wanted to keep her there, pressed to my chest, but my mother came through the swinging door then, so I took a step back out of respect for Ellie's wishes. But I kept her slightly tucked against my body in case she wanted to use me like a shield. Which was a little hilarious seeing as my mother was an absolutely petite woman, but still. Lily Donovan was small but mighty.

My mother already had her hands raised in surrender. "You can put down your weapons, Noah. I come in peace."

Ellie gave a forced laugh, and I tried to relax slightly, an effort that mostly failed.

"I can tell by my son's reaction that I may have overstepped my boundaries," Lily started, her voice gentle and soothing. "So I do apologize if I at all made you uncomfortable, Ellie."

Ellie shook her head. "It's really fine. I'm flattered you'd plan something like this for me."

I wasn't ready to forgive so easily. After all, my temper was still at the ready. "You really couldn't have at least given me the heads up about this, Ma? I could have warned Ellie what she was walking into at least. You know she's never liked being the center of attention."

Lily's eyes flicked from mine to Ellie. "I don't know if she was ever given the chance."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked sort of snarly.

"I don't know if Ellie grew up getting a lot of attention and praise." Lily cleared her throat diplomatically, speaking around a sensitive subject. "You forget, Noah, that I was your mother all these years."

"Trust me, I haven't forgotten," I said.

"I saw the three of you—Aiden, and the two of you—running around together for *years*. I know the Turner family just as well as you do. And I'm just not sure Ellie was ever given her chance to truly shine."

Ellie swallowed hard but didn't speak to her family's defense.

"Mom," I said firmly. "I'm not sure that's appropriate. Especially not in this time or place."

"It's okay." Ellie rested a hand on my chest. "I want to hear the rest of what she has to say."

Lily reached out, grabbed Ellie's hands in hers. My mother's eyes welled with tears. "I've known you since you were a little girl, honey. I've watched you grow up playing with my son, turning from an adorable, lanky little girl into a beautiful, accomplished young woman. You two have known each other practically from birth. You knew my husband; you were at his funeral."

Ellie nodded but seemed unable to speak.

A tear slid down Lily's cheek as she continued. "How special that the woman my son is dating had the chance to know his father."

"Your husband was a truly good man," Ellie said. "I'm grateful I was around to know him. I can't imagine never having the opportunity to meet him."

Ellie cast a look up at me that shot an arrow straight to my heart. I didn't want to get into this conversation now. Or maybe ever. I wasn't ready for the emotions that were bubbling up with it, especially after the stunt I'd pulled on the front sidewalk tonight.

"Exactly. Now that you and Noah are..." Lily blinked rapidly. "Well, whatever you are, I won't ask for specifics. But it's clear as day that you are important to Noah, and therefore, Ellie, you are important to me."

“Thank you,” Ellie murmured like her voice was fragile glass. “That means so much to me.”

“And it’s not just because of Noah,” Lily said. “It’s because you are a good person, sweetie. I’ve always loved having you around. I’ve always thought you were great for my Noah, as was Aiden. I never did more when you were younger, or said more, because I’m friends with your parents, and I’d never want to inadvertently hurt them by overstepping my boundaries. But you are an adult now, so I feel a little more freedom to celebrate you the way I feel you deserve to be celebrated.”

“I understand,” Ellie said. “I have a complicated relationship with my family.”

“Mmm,” Lily murmured. “Well, there’s one more thing I should tell you.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned. “This isn’t enough, Ma?”

“I invited your mother tonight,” Lily said to Ellie, ignoring me. “How could I not? Tonight’s dinner is an event to show off our Ellie, and what mother wouldn’t want to be present to bask in her daughter’s accomplishments?”

“It’s fine,” Ellie said hurriedly, more to me than to my mother. “I’m sure my mom won’t come anyway. She wasn’t big on attending any of my school functions either. Unless it was one of Monica’s beauty pageants, she was usually busy.”

“That’s her loss, honey.” Lily took both of Ellie’s hands in hers. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that it already feels like you’re a part of our family. I’ve already gained one wonderful daughter-in-law with Chloe, and I just want you to feel like you belong too. We’re your family too.”

“Whoa, Ma,” I said, feeling like she was stabbing darts into my eyes. But I couldn’t let it show how much it bothered me and risk upsetting Ellie further. “Relax on the matchmaking, please.”

Lily let go of Ellie and gave a playful wink. “Like the two of you won’t get married.”

Ellie’s eyebrows shot up. “Sorry?”

“Oh, come on,” Lily said with a little wave. “It’s pretty clear Noah’s been in love with you since he figured out cooties didn’t exist. And if he lets you get away, sweetie, then he’s a fool.”

Ellie sucked in a breath. I bit down on my lip and shook my head.

*If only my mother knew.*

“Ignore her,” I said to Ellie under my breath. “She’s still high on Lucas and Chloe’s wedding fumes. Wishful thinking and baby fever is a dangerous cocktail.”

“Sure, Noah,” Lily said, sounding overly placating. “Now, so long as it’s okay with Ellie, I think we should get back to the party. It’s low key. We’ll eat, sign some books, and play Pictionary with whoever sticks around for the dessert course.”

“That sounds really fun,” Ellie admitted. “And Mrs. Donovan—”

“Lily,” my mother corrected.

“Thank you for tonight. It’s very sweet.”

Lily just gave a nod, then grabbed a huge platter of noodles and made her way out of the room, leaving us alone.

“I’m so sorry,” I said to Ellie. “I can’t tell you how shitty I feel right now.”

Ellie rested a hand on my arm, her face pale. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Noah.”

“I’m sorry, Ellie. Look, if things were different...” I struggled with what I wanted to say. An apology that wasn’t quite working out. “I care for you, but it’s just—”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence because Ellie yanked her arm off me just then as her eyes widened.

Ellie’s hand went up to cover her mouth. “Mom?”





## Chapter 22

**E**llie “What the hell is this?” Bridget Turner asked, gesturing toward me and Noah. “So it is true.”

“What’s true?” I asked, looking at my mother, feeling horrified that she’d walked into Lily Donovan’s kitchen at this very moment. My mother appearing here was about the only thing that could make this night get any worse.

“You moved back to town without even telling your own mother.” Bridget stepped deeper into the kitchen, her eyebrows knitted together. “Worse, you moved in with a man I didn’t even know you were dating.”

“You have no clue what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Because you haven’t told me. Your own mother.”

My entire body was starting to shake. “Mom. You haven’t cared about where I live or what I do since I turned eighteen. And you only cared before then because legally you had to provide a home for me or else people would talk.”

“That’s not true! You’re my daughter.”

“Right,” I said dryly, feeling the sting of what she didn’t say. “You feel obligated to me because I’m your daughter by blood. Not because you love me.”

“You should talk, Eleanor. It’s not like you ever tried to fit into our family.”

“Fit in?” I asked. “What was I supposed to do? Stick on fake eyelashes and parade around beauty pageants? Is that what would have made you love me?”

My fingers were balled into fists. I knew somewhere, deep down, that my mother had some sort of love for me. I knew that there were some sort of caring emotions tucked inside of her. But I was sick of having to get my own shovel out and dig for them over and over again. I was too old to be excavating for my mother’s reluctant love.

“You’ve never listened to me,” Bridget said. “You’ve never cared about the family name. You’ve never realized that how you act reflects on *me*. Monica has always tried to represent our family with pride.”

“In beauty pageants? By marrying a person who *you* told her it was okay to marry?” I asked. “A doctor who doesn’t actually care about her?”

“Derrick loves your sister,” my mother snapped. “Shame on you for speaking like that about Monica and her new husband.”

I took a deep, steadying breath. “Why are you here?”

“I was invited.” My mother straightened. “I came to see what all the fuss was about. What an embarrassment this is to our family, Eleanor. I can’t believe I’m finding out last that you’re moving back to town, and moving in with a man no less. Not married, not engaged, nothing.”

My mother was so far off base that I had to wonder where she was getting her information, but the gossip in Fantasie traveled like wildfire. Quite honestly, I didn’t care to correct her. I didn’t care about much of anything at this point. I just wanted to make it through the stupid book signing and drive myself back to New York.

“Respectfully, it’s none of your business,” I shot back, not giving my mother the satisfaction of letting her know that even the man I was falling in love with didn’t want to be with me any longer. “I can live where I want with whom I want. If you cared to call me, maybe I would’ve had the chance to tell you.”

“You have my phone number,” my mother said. “You know where to reach me.”

“It never felt like you wanted me to reach you,” I said. “I used to try, Mom. I really did. But to be honest, I don’t see the point anymore.”

My mother gave a little sniff. “I don’t understand what all the fuss is about with your book anyway. Now you’re making Lily Donovan bully half the town into buying some book you threw up on Amazon just to make a couple of bucks? Shameful.”

I felt him move before I could do anything to stop him. I’d felt Noah against me, tense and unmoving and stoic during this whole conversation. One of his hands had gone to my hip, and he’d steadily dug his fingers deeper and deeper into my flesh, as if it was helping him to keep his mouth shut against everything he wanted to say. Until it became too much.

Noah took a step forward, tucking me gently to his side, a little behind him, letting his wide berth and broad shoulders make a silent statement. My mother looked up at him, obviously reading his stance as combative. But she didn’t back down.

“It’s time for you to leave,” Noah said softly.

And that was it. Simple. Swift. Effective.

“What did you say to me?” my mother shot back. “You can’t talk to me like that.”

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” he repeated. “Please.”

Bridget shook her head. “Are you trying to be funny?”

Noah’s voice was thin, like the edge of a knife, as he spoke again. I could practically taste the cool steel of the imaginary blade as he spit out his next words.

“I don’t appreciate you speaking to Ellie like that,” Noah said. “This night is a celebration of her talent, and if you’re not here to participate, then this isn’t a place you need to be right now. You’ve stolen enough moments from her.”

“What’s she told you about me?” My mother glanced at me. “I haven’t stolen anything from her.”

“Ellie doesn’t need to tell me anything,” Noah said. “I grew up with you guys. I have eyes. I could see the way y’all treated her, and it wasn’t right.”

“Why do you care, Noah?” my mother retorted. “It’s none of your business.”

“Here’s the thing you need to understand,” Noah said, clutching me to him. “I’m not a doctor. I’m just a guy who works on cars for a living. I’m not filthy rich. I’m a simple man. But I care deeply about your daughter, and I won’t let you, or anyone else, talk to her that way.”

“It’s fine, Noah,” I whispered. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” he muttered back. “I *want* to do it. You deserve someone on your side, Ellie. Even if it’s just as a friend.”

The last part was punctuated with an ache that was tangible. *Just a friend.*

My mother watched our exchange and of course interpreted it incorrectly. “How romantic.”

“I will never understand how you don’t see Ellie and love everything about her,” Noah continued. “She’s beautiful and smart and talented, and I’m willing to bet you haven’t told her any of that, which is a damn shame.”

“You don’t know anything about our relationship,” my mother said, but she didn’t sound completely convinced.

“Ellie deserved a lot more from you, and frankly, she’s given you so many fucking chances to be the mother she wanted you to be. You didn’t take her up on a single one of those chances. Hell, she’s *still* giving you chances. If you just picked up the damn phone and called your daughter once in a

while, you might just be surprised to find out how amazing she really is.” Noah’s shoulders rose and fell. “And if you die without getting to know your daughter for the person she is and not the person you want her to be, then it’s your loss.”

“What a potty mouth,” my mother said. “Really, Eleanor? This is who you’re choosing to spend your time with?”

I felt Noah pause, as the question was technically directed to me.

I dodged her question. “Noah is a wonderful person. I care about him.”

Noah gripped me just a little bit tighter.

“Well, then.” My mother looked between us. “I can see I’m banging my head against the wall trying to get through to you, Eleanor. So it might just be best if I take my leave before our conversation deteriorates further.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Noah said. “I can walk you out.”

“I’ll walk myself out. Thank you, Noah.” Bridget said the last word like it was a curse, and I hated she was taking her issues out on Noah now, too.

My mother left the room without a backward glance. I had no clue when I’d see or hear from her next. And frankly, it was a relief.

“I’m sorry,” I gushed to Noah, the second the front door shut, and she was gone. “I can’t believe she spoke to you that way.”

“*You’re* sorry?” Noah wrapped me in another bone crushing embrace. “I’m sorry, Ellie. I know it’s not my place to have talked to her like that, but I just couldn’t help it.”

“I appreciate it,” I said, feeling my chest swell with emotion.

“I cannot fathom how that woman sees you,” Noah whispered into my hair. “You are the most incredible person, and she had the good fortune to be your mother. It’s terrible that she squandered the relationship.”

“I tried,” I said, feeling the tears burn my eyes as I held Noah’s shirt. “I tried to be the daughter she wanted me to be, but I couldn’t do it.”

“You should never have had to try to be anything but you.” Noah kissed my forehead in a way that made my body physically hurt. “You’re perfect the way you are.”

I wanted that kiss to mean something more than it did. For it to be a promise that he’d have my back, and I’d have his back, because we meant something to each other.

But as we separated from our embrace, it felt more like a goodbye.



## Chapter 23

**N**<sup>oah</sup> I woke up with a hangover that would've killed a smaller man. I'd managed to survive dinner at my mother's, but just barely. It'd been torture, sitting across from Ellie as she'd pasted on a smile and done her best to make it seem like she was having the time of her life, but I'd been able to see past the feeble façade.

The lack of pink color on her cheeks had given it away. Not to mention the tremble in her hand as she autographed Lucas's copy of *Rusty* to give to Mason, the little boy whose mother he'd helped out of a sticky situation with her husband a couple months back.

Then there had been the look in Josie's eyes, one brimming with pity and heartbreak, when I'd seen her note the flowers—the bulb garden meant to be blooming in Ellie's New York apartment—that were sitting in full bloom as the centerpiece of my mother's table. When Josie had started beelining for me during dessert, I'd ditched her and decided I was done for the night.

Before I'd left, I'd cornered Ellie and offered her my place to stay for the night, or a ride home if she needed it, but she'd politely declined without making eye contact. I'd taken my cue and left the party so Ellie could enjoy the rest of the evening without having to avoid me.

I was sure people would talk about the fact that Ellie and I weren't spending the night together, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to care. Or to respond to my mother's text. Or Josie's. Or even Lucas.

Groaning, I rolled over in bed, wishing this morning had gone a lot differently. Instead of telling Ellie that we needed to keep our physical distance last night, what I should have done was drag her back to bed with me, make love to her until neither of us could move, until neither of us had enough energy to think about what the future held for us. We'd been doing a good job of that up until she'd left for New York, and then it'd crumbled when reality had come crashing back onto our shoulders.

But what good would that have done? Even after a great weekend together, Ellie would still have to go back to New York, and I'd still be here in Fantasie, and we wouldn't be together. For...the foreseeable future?

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I missed the sounds coming from my downstairs until it was much too late. I'd brushed off the light thump, the

hiss of murmured whispers, the creak of the stairs as my imagination. But when my bedroom door opened slowly, I flew up in bed looking around for something to use as a weapon.

“Whoa.” Finn held up his hands. “Put down the lamp, buddy.”

I rolled my eyes and released my poor bedside lamp back onto the nightstand. “What the hell are you doing in my house?”

“I don’t want to be here. She made me.” Finn jerked his head behind him.

“Are you dressed?” Josie’s voice called from behind the door. “I sent Finn in first to make sure you were decent.”

“God, Josie. You’re ridiculous.”

Josie slid past Finn without giving him the time of day. She was wearing a matching hot pink tracksuit that made her look like a Barbie doll as she hopped onto the foot of my bed, bounced once, then lounged like a cat at my feet.

“We love you, buddy.” Josie patted my foot through the comforter. “We wanted to make sure you were okay. Last night didn’t go great.”

“Good observation,” I grunted. “Why are you in my house? How are you in my house?”

“Finn knows how to pick locks.” Josie glared at him. “He picks mine all the time.”

“Not my fault you’re prone to leaving your tea kettle on the stove with the fucking burner *on*.” Finn looked just as grumpy to be here as I felt.

“I was coming *back*,” Josie retorted.

“Three hours later,” Finn muttered.

“We’re here for Noah, remember you oaf?” Josie turned her gaze from Finn back to me. “Anyway, how you doing, buddy?”

“I’m alive,” I said. “And uncomfortable. You’re cutting off blood flow to my toes.”

“Sorry.” Josie shifted. “What happened last night?”

“Where’s Ellie?”

“She drove back to New York early this morning,” Josie said. “I talked to your mom. I guess she stayed at the inn last night on Lily’s invitation, but Ellie was gone before breakfast. She left some sort of bogus note about forgetting some brunch in the city.”

“Uh huh.” I rubbed my eyes. “Great.”

“So what happened?”

“Your matchmaking fucking backfired.” I shot a glare at Finn.



“Dude. Don’t look at me. I was just the messenger,” the cop said.

“Breaking into my house,” I said.

“Call the cops,” Josie said with a little smirk toward Finn.

“You guys are hilarious,” I said. “What do you want from me?”

As annoyed as I was to find these two knuckleheads in my house on a Saturday morning, I couldn’t stay mad at them. The DiMaggio and Donovan houses had always been open to any of us at any hour of the day. The unspoken invitation still stood, even if Finn had to maneuver my locks to let himself inside. And I’d known Josie forever. She was like a little sister to me. An annoying, pesky, well-intentioned sister.

“What happened?” Josie asked more softly.

“I broke things off with Ellie,” I said. “I told her I thought it was best if we just stuck to being friends so we didn’t ruin that.”

“You’re such an idiot.”

“What?” I looked at Josie. “I was going off your advice.”

“My advice wasn’t to break up with her!” Josie threw her hands up, exasperated. “I told you to *talk* to her. To tell her how you were feeling. If eventually that meant the two of you decided to mutually part ways because you were both unhappy, fine. But you being a controlling douchebag who took the choice away from her was *not* part of my therapy that came with the flowers.”

“Tell me how you really feel,” I said. “How was that controlling? I was being the opposite of controlling. I was letting her go so I didn’t weigh her down. She’s never wanted to live in Fantasie, and I can’t realistically see myself moving to New York in the near future. So where does that leave us?”

“Ellie is smart, yeah?” Josie prompted.

“Of course she is.”

“She’s an adult, yeah?”

“Also yes.”

“She is half of the relationship that the two of you were in, right?”

“Get at your point, Barbie.”

“I told you that was a Barbie outfit,” Finn said to Josie. “And you smacked me.”

“Nobody’s talking to you,” Josie said to Finn. Josie turned to me. “You should’ve respected Ellie enough to have a real conversation with her instead of just making the choice for her like some prick.”

“I wasn’t trying to be a prick.”

“Well, you succeeded anyway.” Josie crossed her arms, but her eyes were kind. “You know I love you, Noah. I swear I’m looking out for you.”

“If this is how you look out for me,” I said dryly, “I wouldn’t want to be on your bad side.”

“Tell me about it,” Finn muttered darkly. “Been there for half my life.”

“Your own damn fault,” Josie said under her breath. Louder, back to me, she said, “You’re like a brother, Noah, so I’m telling you like it is. But I also care about and respect Ellie, and I don’t think you did right by her. You didn’t give her any choice in the matter.”

“I was doing the hard job!” I argued. “I didn’t want her to have to worry about me.”

“Are you that blind?” Josie snapped. “She’s already worried about you. Hell, she’s probably loved you in the background for years. You can’t just take away her feelings because *you* thought it was time that the two of you back off. I mean, if you were over the relationship and had to break it off, fine. But I don’t think you’re over her.”

I didn’t reply. I was half wondering if Josie was still talking about me, or if there was a little Josie-Finn undertone to her outburst, but I didn’t have the bandwidth to figure that out right now. I supposed my being drunk as a skunk on Saturday morning probably was enough of an answer for her anyway.

“She wasn’t over you either,” Josie said.

“How do you know?” I asked too quickly. “Did she tell you anything?”

“A girl can just tell. You broke her heart, Noah Donovan.”

I swallowed, and the dryness in my throat had nothing to do with last night’s whiskey.

“Now, maybe the two of you aren’t meant to be together, or maybe at least not right now.” Josie held up her hands. “I’m not telling you what to do or what not to do.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I mean, a little bit,” Josie said. “I’m just guiding you into having a discussion. I’m not making any decisions for you. That’s all on the two of you, pal.”

“It’s done,” I said. “It’s over with. It’s probably better to just let her move on. I already ripped off the Band-Aid.”

“If you’re going to be a mopey loser, then I can’t help you.” Josie stood, shockingly pink in her suit. “Finn, can you drop me at the café? I need more coffee after this.”

“I’m not being a mopey loser. I’m being realistic.”

“Then fix it,” Josie said. “With any luck, it’s not too late. Pick up the damn phone, Noah. Call your girl. Tell her how you feel. And *then* see what happens. I promise, if it’s over with after that, then I’ll take tequila shots with you at The Cow Tipper to mend your broken heart. But maybe you’ll be surprised.”

Then Flower-Slinger Barbie and Grumptastic Sherriff disappeared from my bedroom. I heard some curses as the front door seemed to slam a little too hard, like maybe they couldn’t quite get the lock back the way it was supposed to go. I rolled my eyes at those two. One couldn’t help but love them and the sloppy mess they left everywhere they went.

I huffed myself out of bed with a lot to think about. More than I really wanted to think about, technically. I had to admit, Josie had a point. I’d meant my conversation with Ellie to be more of an actual conversation... not just a monologue where I ran my mouth saying stupid stuff I didn’t really mean in an effort to protect the girl I loved.

I headed to the shower, feeling pinpricks in my chest that felt suspiciously like hope. It was the first time outside of anything resembling misery since leaving Ellie’s side last night. I latched onto that feeling, wondering, hoping, praying that maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t too late.



I WAS JUST JUMPING out of the shower when the doorbell rang. For a second, I thought it might be Finn and Josie back to make sure their pep talk had worked. But I quickly realized they wouldn't be ringing the bell; they'd have already been halfway up the staircase to my room.

Still feeling a little hungover but slightly refreshed from the shower, I was already annoyed at the person ringing the doorbell at ten a.m. on a Saturday. This was three too many visitors for this morning.

I opened the door to the morning chill in only a pair of gym shorts because I hadn't managed to find a shirt after the shower just yet. I was beyond surprised to find none other than Aiden Turner standing there. I immediately went on high alert.

"Come to finish the job?" I asked. "Maybe if I stop moving, you'll actually be able to break my damn nose this time."

"Get out here, fucker."

I slipped into a pair of sandals and grabbed a thick flannel shirt from the hook beside the door. I slid into it, though I didn't button it up just yet. I stood there on my own damn doorstep, half naked, staring down my best friend and the big brother of the woman whose heart I'd just been accused of breaking.

"It's cold," I said, nodding at the snow. "Can we make this quick? I'm assuming you don't have plans to stay for coffee. Look, I'm not in a good mood this morning."

"I've got a flight today."

"Okay. Maybe make it less bloody during this conversation. I can't afford to keep going through shirts like at the wedding."

"Bullshit. You do fine for yourself." But Aiden's lips quirked into a little smile.

It was progress. We'd fought before, often about little things, and we often resolved our issues as fast as they'd come up. Aiden was the sort of guy to let his anger flame big and fast, and then just as quickly let it die out. I knew this about him, so I mostly let him shoot his shot and calm down, and then he'd apologize and we'd be good.

"I heard you got into it with my mom last night," Aiden said. "Kicked her out of her own daughter's event."

“So that’s the way Bridget’s spinning this story?” I rubbed my jaw.  
“Sure. I mean, I guess technically speaking, she’s not wrong. Seems like she left out a few details, but it doesn’t surprise me.”

“Uh huh.”

I raised my hands. “Is that what this is about? First, I overstepped with your sister. Now, I overstepped with your mom? Look, Aiden, I’m sorry.”

I took a deep breath, folded my hands behind my head.

“I really am sorry,” I said to my best friend, meeting his eyes, hoping he knew I was serious. “I feel terrible about lying to you about Ellie. But you should know that everything I said and did was out of respect to her. If she wasn’t ready to share where we were with our relationship, then I didn’t feel it was my place to come to you. I would have. The second she gave me the green light, I would’ve come to you.”

Aiden nodded, but his face was unreadable.

“I’m not sorry for what’s happened with your sister, though. There was something special between me and Ellie, and I—” I sucked in a huge breath, dropped my hands to my side. “I didn’t see it coming.”

“You never saw it coming?” Aiden sounded skeptical.

I shook my head. “It just sort of happened. Then it was like once we pushed past that friendship boundary, things were set in motion, and I couldn’t stop seeing her differently.”

“Dude.” Aiden shook his head. “*Everybody* fucking saw that coming. How could you have missed it? Why do you think I was adamant you not touch her when we were kids?”

“What?”

“I *knew* you wanted her. It was obvious, and the way she looked at you...” Aiden shook his head. “Nobody is surprised the two of you got together. You’ve loved her for years, even if you still won’t admit it.”

“So you’re saying you knew about it? Why be pissed at me then?”

“I wanted you to come to me first. I would’ve hoped that as my best friend, you’d have had the respect to let me know before I found out myself. But—” Aiden raised his hands. “Trust me, I understand. I realize Ellie’s an adult and can handle her own business.”

“A little bit,” I said dryly, itching my nose pointedly.

Aiden gave a short laugh. “I’m sorry about the nose, but it’s a little bit of revenge for the time you smacked me with a hockey stick in ninth grade the day before pictures.”

“That was actually an accident.”

Aiden was still smiling. “Yeah, well, take the olive branch where you can get it.”

“Noted,” I said. “However, we really haven’t addressed the situation with your mom. I have to say, I’m not really all that sorry about that. She was not behaving in a way that was respectful to Ellie, and I didn’t want Ellie’s night to be ruined.”

Aiden’s smile disappeared, but his look was contemplative. “I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“Still not totally getting it, man.”

Aiden scratched at his hair, then finally looked at me. “I’m here to officially pass the torch. To you.”

“What torch?”

“The Ellie torch. I’ve been her older brother for her whole life, and I’ll always be there for her, but I don’t think it’s my duty to protect her anymore. I think that goes to you.” Aiden swallowed, looking a little annoyed. “I’ve always been the one to stand up to my mom when she was being unreasonable with Ellie. You know, expecting Ellie to do stuff she just couldn’t do, things like that.”

“I know. I remember,” I said. “I was there back in the day too. I didn’t see everything, but I saw enough to get a taste.”

“It hit me last night, hearing my mom recount what happened at Lily’s place. It finally hit me that I am not needed in Ellie’s life in the same way that I was when we were kids.” Aiden paused. “Especially now that she’s got you.”

“Ellie can take care of herself,” I corrected, since technically I’d done a piss poor job of taking care of her feelings in light of recent events. Josie had made sure I understood exactly how much I’d screwed that one up. “I just want to be there for her to lean against if she needs it.”

Aiden pulled me against him, clasped a hand against my back. “Exactly.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling the guilt building. Aiden obviously hadn’t realized that I’d already fucked things up with his sister.

“Are you gonna marry her?” Aiden asked.

“I don’t think that’s up to me,” I said. “I fucked up, Aiden.”

I saw the anger flare in his eyes, then he took a deep breath and it settled.

“How?” Aiden managed. “You two were together last night.”

“I told her I thought we’d be better off as friends. I don’t want to hold her back from all the incredible things she’s doing in New York.”

Aiden gave a slow nod. “Are you happy about that?”

“Hell no, but I can’t be the source of her unhappiness. She’s never wanted to be in Fantasie, and I can’t be in New York.”

“You’re still trying to protect her by walking away?”

“Doing a terrible job of it.”

“Did you ask her opinion on the matter?”

I winced. “Josie already got on me about that this morning. I’m going to try and fix it.”

“Good luck with that.”

“That’s it?” I prompted. “No black eye for the trouble I’ve caused your sister?”

“She’s an adult. You’re an adult.” Aiden shrugged. “Took me a while to see it, but frankly, I’m too old to be caught up in your mess. Send me an invite to the wedding when you’re done groveling.”

With that backhanded vote of confidence, Aiden gave me a salute and jogged off my front steps, headed down the path to a rental car that’d take him to the airport and back to California. Having officially passed me a torch I wasn’t sure I was fit to handle. Wasn’t sure I *deserved* to handle.

But I was coming to realize that that decision wasn’t mine to make, at least not alone. And I had a hell of a lot of work to do before I could make things right.





## Chapter 24

**E**llie The very last place on earth I wanted to be driving right now was back to Fantasie. At nine p.m. on a Sunday night. But when my sister of all people had called me in tears, begging me to come home, telling me she'd explain everything once I got here, I didn't ask questions. I picked up a rental and drove myself back to my hometown.

My breakup with Noah had sent me into a spiral unlike anything I'd ever imagined possible after the short time we'd spent together. But it wasn't just the short time that we'd been physical that had contributed to my emotions—it had been *years* and *years* of emotions that'd built up in the background. Years of developing a rock-solid friendship with Noah. Years of admiring him from a distance, knowing he was completely off-limits. Years of wishing that things were different so we could have a chance to be together.

And then we'd had our chance, and it had been all shades of wonderful while it lasted. Unfortunately, it was my own stupidity's fault that the breakup had happened in the first place. I was the one who had insisted we keep things physical. I was the one suggesting we not let emotions into our agreement because it could ruin our friendship. And where had it gotten me?

Hurt. Lost. Confused.

But mostly sad.

Sad because I hadn't given Noah enough of what he'd needed, and he hadn't been happy with our arrangement. I'd *known* it would end eventually; Katie had warned me we'd end up here from day one. But I'd been too stupid and naïve, too busy falling head over heels into lust or love or whatever it had been, to think that it would ever happen like this, so quickly, so painfully.

I pulled up outside Monica's house. I was just fiddling with my keys and purse, preparing to get out of the car and face my sister, when a knock sounded on my window. I looked up and found Monica staring back at me.

"Monica?" I cracked my door open. "What are you doing out here?"

"I need you to give me a ride."

My mouth parted in surprise. "You made me drive *hours* up here so you could get a ride? You do know there's an Uber around here, right? And...other people?"

“Angelica should not be legal to be on the road,” Monica said. “She rear-ended me a few weeks ago because she was eating nachos behind the wheel. Can you just let me in and drive somewhere please? Anywhere?”

It was then that I realized the slight hysteria in Monica’s voice. The lack of makeup on her face. The smear of black under her eyes. It was dark outside, and I’d been caught off guard by her presence, so I hadn’t noticed the shocking difference in her appearance until now, until the uneven cadence to her voice gave it away.

“Yeah, sure, of course.” I hit the locks to open her side. “Climb in.”

When Monica got in the car, and I could see her a little better, I noted that sure enough my sister looked completely unlike herself. Her complexion wasn’t as smooth and shiny and tan as it usually was. Her face was a little splotchy and red, and she had a zit on her cheek that wasn’t covered up with makeup. Traces of black were under her eyes, as if day-old mascara had been smudged from tears.

Which didn’t make any sense because my sister wasn’t a crier. She was like my mother and prided herself on showing very little emotion, and that often translated into caring very little about quite a lot.

“Monica?” I said again. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Even if my sister was on her deathbed, I still found it hard to believe she’d come to me. Or rather, call me to her doorstep. Monica had always been close with my mother, and I was already wondering why she was with me and not at our parents’ house.

“Did you and mom get into an argument?” I asked, feeling like that was a longshot. The two rarely disagreed strongly enough on anything to have anything resembling an argument.

“It’s Derrick. Can you drive?”

“Any place in particular?” I asked, pulling away from the curb.

“Around, for now,” Monica said. “Eventually to Lily Donovan’s inn. I booked myself a room there.”

“Okay.” I drove, sensing there was more going on here than my sister’s random temper tantrums. I’d half expected that she’d called me up here because of a manicure emergency. I wasn’t happy to be proven wrong, now that I saw what it meant for Monica and her state of distress.

“Sorry to make you drive up here so late.” Monica curled into her jacket. “I’m sure you didn’t expect to hear from me.”

“Never do,” I said, and then realized that had come off harsher than I’d intended. “I just mean, we don’t exactly chit chat often. But it’s okay, I’m glad you called me; you’re my sister, and I’ll always be here for you.”

“Yeah,” she said, though it was a whisper. “No offense taken. It’s true, what you said, how we don’t really talk.”

Monica pulled her jacket up higher, shivering despite the warmth of the car. Her jacket probably cost as much as the advance I’d secured for my new book. And it was a healthy advance.

“Take a breath,” I said, sensing my older sister actually needed instructions today, instead of the other way around. “You can talk when you’re ready.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, wow!” I blinked. “Congratulations. That was—”

I stopped myself. I didn’t totally know the ins and outs of pregnancy timelines, but it felt very fast to me considering how recently they’d gotten married. I hadn’t even known it was possible to find out so quickly. I suppose time had snuck by faster than I was willing to admit.

“That’s so great,” I said. “You must be thrilled. I know you always wanted to be a mom. When are you due?”

“May.”

“May,” I said, and did some napkin math in my head.

“I can see you calculating,” Monica said, a bit bitterly. “I’m already in my second trimester. I’ve been pregnant for a while. Obviously before the wedding.”

“Ooh.” I drew the word out so it had extra vowels. Again, I wasn’t intending to be rude, but the words kept coming out of my mouth sounding funny. “Is that why you wanted to get married so quickly? Because of the baby?”

“Partially.” For having blurted out the pregnancy information so quickly, Monica didn’t seem inclined to share a whole lot more right now. “Among other things.”

“Look, if you’re upset about the baby, I think that’s probably completely normal. Women go through all sorts of emotions when they find out they’re pregnant, and—”

“How would you know?” she snapped. “Have you been pregnant?”

“No, but I have watched some of my friends start families, and it seems like a rollercoaster. One of my friends had an ‘oops’ baby from a one-night

stand, and she felt a lot of anger and resentment for most of her pregnancy. She told me later she didn't fall in love with the baby until months after he was born. She had some bad postpartum depression, and the bonding with her son didn't happen immediately," I said. "Now he's three, and she wouldn't trade him for the world."

"Good for her," Monica said. "But that's not my problem."

"Well, whatever you're feeling is okay," I said. "But Monica, I can't offer you much in the way of advice if you don't feel like sharing. So I'll just keep driving around until you tell me you're ready to stop. I don't want to pressure you."

"I called you here for a reason, so obviously I want to talk," Monica said, a bit of snideness creeping back into her words. Then, just as quickly, "Sorry. I'm not used to being such a mess. This is new to me."

It was almost like a backhanded compliment, like I was such a pro at being a mess that I should really understand. I let it slide and decided to just let Monica take over the helm of this ship.

It took several long minutes. It wasn't until Monica's lip quivered, and a tear appeared on her cheek, that I realized she was trying very hard not to cry. It broke my heart.

I rested a hand on her arm and gave a gentle squeeze. It felt wildly unnatural, as Monica and I had never been super close. We'd never shared girls' nights or sleepovers. She'd always had fancier friends for that, and I'd be left in my room hoping that Aiden and Noah would let me play with them instead.

But it also seemed to help. Monica visibly relaxed. Her chest heaved with a sob, and she didn't pull away from me. And despite the unnaturalness of the moment, there was a part of me that felt like this was how it should be. Family, just being together when things got hard. Talking, not talking, it didn't matter.

"I told you I got engaged in Paris." Monica spoke in a shaky voice. She pulled a ratted Kleenex from her pocket and dabbed at her nose with it. "That wasn't a total lie, but it isn't the full story either."

I waited while she turned her head to blow her nose, then she settled back into the seat. I just kept cruising around city limits, keeping well below the speed limit to avoid a run-in with Finn.

"I told Derrick that if he didn't take me to Paris and propose to me with the ring that I specifically sent him a link to, then I was breaking up with him

and spilling his dirt.”

“Well...” I cleared my throat. “I suppose that’s one way to do things. I mean, obviously he agreed to do it.”

“I blackmailed my husband into marrying me.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But you guys had already been dating for so long, and everyone assumed you were talking about marriage anyway. Was it a huge leap to assume you’d want him to propose to you?”

“He didn’t know I was pregnant,” Monica said, another sob wracking her shoulders. “I hid it from him until after the wedding. Then I told him. He was pissed.”

“Pissed about the baby?”

“Pissed because he thought I’d done it on purpose. That I’d gone off birth control so I could trap him into marriage.”

I didn’t want to ask if she’d done it, but my sister had just admitted to blackmailing her husband into marrying her, so it sort of wasn’t out of the realm of possibility.

“I *didn’t* do that on purpose,” Monica said, a little defensive. “But I suppose it is a legitimate question. But I swear I took antibiotics for a stupid UTI a few months ago, and I totally forgot about it. It’s not like we have sex that much, but I guess it happened to be the right time.”

“Do you want to keep the baby?”

“Yes, of course. I have always wanted a baby, maybe just not so soon after the wedding. It’s going to be awkward explaining to Mom why our months-premature baby is nine pounds.” Monica gave a hiccupping laugh with her sob. “But knowing how much I want a baby, no other option even crossed my mind except to keep it.”

“You do know it’s not Ancient Rome? I’m pretty sure nobody cares if you were having sex before you got married.”

“Yeah, but still. Can you imagine what Mom will say?”

“I can imagine,” I said, “but it’s also you, and it’s also Derrick, so I think she’ll be understanding. She’ll be happy to have a grandchild.”

“There’s more.” Monica sniffed.

“Ah.”

“The reason I was able to blackmail Derrick is because I found out he was fucking the front desk receptionist.”

“Oh, yikes. I’m so sorry, Monica.” I swallowed. “Is he still with her?”

“He better not be,” she said. “But honestly, I don’t know. I’d say I don’t care, but I guess I do actually care, because I’m here crying over it.”

“It’s completely normal to care,” I said. “I’d worry if you didn’t care at all.”

“I told him he had to keep his dick out of his secretary and propose to me by January, or we were done, and then I’d share the pictures I had a private investigator take of him getting a blow job from Blondie.”

That was a lot to take in. I took a moment to unpack everything she’d told me in that short piece of news.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” I said, gently resting a hand on her leg, “but did you consider breaking up with Derrick before the wedding? I mean, if he was treating you so poorly, why did you go through with the marriage? Even now, it’s not too late to get out of it if you’re so unhappy.”

Monica gestured to her stomach. “I’m already having a baby I conceived out of wedlock. Now if I divorced the father before the baby is even born? Can you imagine what people will say?”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone will say,” I insisted. “No matter what, the baby will be loved. You’ll be a great mom. I’d love this baby very much, and I’d help out when I could. I know it’s not a lot, but it’s something. You know Mom would come around when she sees his little face too.”

“Her.”

I blinked. “It’s a her? You’re having a girl?”

Monica smiled, nodded. “It’s a little girl.”

“Congratulations! That’s so exciting, and you will be such an amazing mom to her. And when our mom sees her little face, you know she won’t be able to resist buying all the cute clothes and helping with your daughter.”

“Maybe. It’s just a lot. I don’t want to be a single mom. I want to be married to a successful husband.”

“Is it worth being married to a successful husband if he’s not respecting you?”

“I thought so.” Monica looked away, and a tear slid down to the end of her nose. “I could get over the cheating. I mean, I doubt this is the first time he’s done it. I was suspicious in the first place, hence the private investigator. I know, I know, it’s not healthy. But I thought it might scare him into stopping.”

“It didn’t?”

“I’m not completely sure,” she admitted. “But the damage was already done. His secretary called me tonight and told me she’s pregnant. Due in June.”

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry,” I said. “And she’s completely sure the baby belongs to Derrick?”

“She seems to think so, and he doesn’t seem to be denying it, probably because he knows a paternity test is going to give the truth sooner rather than later.”

“Wow. That’s a lot,” I said. “I am so sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“Me neither. So I told Derrick not to come home tonight. I haven’t even seen him in person yet since his secretary called me and told me the news,” Monica said. “I was shaking so badly when I got off the phone. I called Derrick and just screamed at him for a little bit. He didn’t try to deny anything. He just told me to sit tight and we’d talk about it later. I told him I needed some time and that he shouldn’t come back for a day or two.”

“I’m glad you asked for your space,” I said. “Are you scared for your safety at all, or the baby’s safety?”

“Not really.” Though it didn’t sound like Monica was trying to actually hide anything, she didn’t seem totally convinced either. “He’s never hit me. He yells sometimes, but so do I, so I guess it’d be hypocritical of me to get mad at him for that.”

“Oh, Monica,” I said, grasping for her hand, my voice a mere whisper. “I’m sorry you’re going through this. Have you thought about what you want next? I’ll help you however I can. If you want to divorce him, you can stay with me in New York for a while, until you deliver the baby if you want, and even then for a little while. It’ll be cramped, but it’s doable.”

“You’d do that?”

The confusion probably showed on my face. “Take my sister in when she’s having a hard time? Yeah, of course.”

“That’s really nice of you.”

Monica’s response did sort of have me wondering if she wouldn’t have offered the same thing. And I realized that no, she probably wouldn’t have. She probably would’ve blamed any unexpected pregnancy on my *wild and crazy New York life* or something. She probably would’ve said I’d gotten myself into the situation, I should get myself out of it.

But that was the Old Monica. Maybe this was the start of the New Monica. What sort of sister would I be if I didn’t give her the chance to come

around?

“No, I don’t need anything like that,” she said finally. “I have resources, and even though we signed a prenup, I made sure I would get some money if we divorced because of unfaithfulness. Because I knew the bastard was cheating.”

“That’s smart of you.”

“Do you want to know the really sick part?”

“You can tell me whatever you feel comfortable with.”

“I’m not even sure, after all of this, if I want a divorce.”

I bit down on my lip. I’d never really liked Derrick. I disliked him even more now. “I mean, you obviously married him for a reason. I’m assuming you guys loved each other at some point. The situation is complicated. It’s not like you just fell out of love with him because he made a terrible mistake.”

“I don’t know how much of what’s keeping us together is love,” Monica admitted. “We fit well together. I don’t mind that he’s gone all the time or acts like a jerk, and he doesn’t mind that I spend a lot of money and don’t want to work and am sometimes high maintenance.”

“Okay, well, I’m sure there are other men who fit that bill without being a jerk.”

“I mean, I can be sort of hard to handle.”

“I think it’s a good idea you got a room away from your place for a while. You can have some space and time to think, and I’ll stay with you if you want. Would you like me to do that?”

“You would?”

“Of course.”

“I just...” Monica sighed. “I could go and stay with Mom. I haven’t told her any of this yet.”

“Stay with Mom?” I wrinkled my nose. “Why would you do that?”

“I mean, it’s Mom.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Why would you put yourself through the extra hell of living with her during a time like this? She’d try to make all your decisions for you. If money is an issue right now with Derrick’s credit cards or whatever, I can help you out.”

“I really don’t want to talk to Mom about any of this,” Monica said reluctantly. “Usually, we see eye to eye, but I don’t know. It’s like, now that I’m pregnant...”



Monica hovered a hand over her stomach, almost as if she was afraid to admit the baby was actually there, that it was a real, little bean in her belly. Monica wasn't really showing, but she was wearing baggier clothes than usual and a puffy jacket, which was sort of telltale in and of itself.

"Now that I'm going to be a mom," Monica continued, "I just feel so protective of my little girl. I want to do what's best for her."

"You will," I agreed. "*You're* her mom, and only you know what's best for her."

"My daughter." Monica's hand came to rest on her belly.

"It's really nobody's business but your own what you decide, and you can tell whoever you want whenever you want, whatever you want about your situation."

"Is that how you live your life?"

"What?"

"Just not caring what people think?" Monica asked. "It must be nice."

I took my time in responding, shuffling my hands around the steering wheel in thought. "That's not it at all. I care very much about what other people think. But after years of trying to be what other people wanted me to be, after failing again and again and again, I guess I grew some callouses."

"I'm sorry." Monica's lip trembled. "For my part in that."

The people-pleaser part of me wanted to blow off her apology, to gloss over this vulnerable moment, to ease her discomfort at being so open with me. But I had truly never thought I'd hear those words from my sister, and even though it was a little late, it wasn't *too* late, and it meant a lot more to me than I'd ever dreamed.

So instead, I held her hand, squeezed it tighter. "Thank you, Monica. That means more to me than you'll ever know."

"I don't know why you're so nice to me when I've been such a shitty sister."

"We're still sisters."

"Yeah." Monica nodded, seemingly lost for words. "I'm going to try to be better. I'm still going to suck on occasion. Okay, on a lot of occasions. I can't fix this—" she gestured to herself—"overnight, but I will try to at least be more respectful of you."

"That's the only thing I've ever wanted." My eyes welled with tears. "I've never even cared if you and Mom liked me. I just wanted it to be okay for me to be my own person. Because no matter what, I'm just never going to

be like the two of you. I'm just not that pretty, and I'm not that organized, and I can't do any sort of work except for creative work, and I'm just not happy sticking around in the small town of Fantasie. Or at least, I wasn't for a long time."

Monica latched onto the latter part and raised a curious eyebrow. But she didn't ask about that part. Instead, she surprised me again.

"That's not how I saw you," Monica said. "You always seemed so cool and creative. Man, I watched you plow through a platter of lasagna in high school, and you still weighed like ninety-five pounds."

"Yeah, because I was tall and gawky. I looked like Gumby. You had nice hair and big boobs, and all the boys wanted to date you."

"Yeah, but not because they actually liked me," she said. "Anyway, even if you looked a little like Gumby, I was still jealous. I've been counting my calories since I was eleven."

"Well, that's probably because Mom started you on diets when you were eight to fit into your beauty contest clothes."

"Yeah. I suppose."

"I wasn't cool in school. I was a nerd."

"An artsy nerd. And then you left town after school, and everyone thought you were so brave and neat and eccentric, but in a nice way. I felt so boring and lame compared to you."

"That's funny. I felt like an outcast because I was never like you or Mom."

"I think we were both just scared of you."

"Scared?" I gave a little laugh of disbelief. "I don't think I have an ounce of intimidation in my body."

"Scared because of what we knew you'd be. It was like, you were never destined to be here in Fantasie. You were destined to be someone big and great and wonderful, and you just had to grow into it." Monica expelled a slow breath. "For me, the pinnacle of my success was only ever going to be marrying a rich guy and getting pregnant with his babies."

"It's not too late to make your life about you if that's how you feel," I said. "I mean, it's *your* life. And you're having your own daughter, so you can parent her however you like. You can take what you like from Mom and get rid of anything you don't like. It's like Yahtzee. Take what is helpful and re-roll the rest."

She chewed on that. “I don’t know how to be anything different than what I am. I don’t know how to be like you.”

“You don’t have to be like me, Monica,” I said. “That’s the point. Just take some time to think about who you want to be. Not you and Derrick, not you and the baby, not you as a Turner. Just you.”

Monica looked like I’d just explained logarithmic functions to her in Swahili. Like she’d never actually thought about what it would be like to just do what she wanted.

“If you want my advice,” I said. “It’s probably past time for you to figure out some things you like to do and then spend some time doing more of that. Find what you really enjoy in life.”

“Easier said than done.”

“None of this is easy. But if you try to focus on your happiness and your health—physically, mentally, and emotionally, you might find that this turns into some sort of big blessing in disguise.”

Monica didn’t seem all that convinced, and I didn’t blame her. It was hard to see this as a blessing when she was in the middle of the abyss. She couldn’t even see over the lip of the mountains on either side of her just now, but if she started climbing, one day she would.

“You really don’t mind staying with me for a little bit?” she said finally. “I’m totally exhausted. I’d love to just take a shower and go to sleep, and I’m not sure I want to be alone.”

“Of course,” I said, pointing the car in the direction of Lily’s inn. “I’ll go check us in. You can take a minute to yourself and come in when you’re ready.”

I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Noah’s mother just yet, and especially not under these circumstances, but I knew enough about the Donovans as a whole to know they were good people. I was pretty confident Lily would be able to read the room and understand that tonight wasn’t anything to do with me and Noah. I trusted she would respect that, as well as our discretion.

Fortunately, I didn’t have anything to worry about. Lily had left a key and instructions for us at the front desk. I led Monica upstairs, helped her peel off her jacket and clothes and change into pajamas. She was in bed before I had even kicked off my boots.

“Thank you, Ellie,” Monica whispered, her eyes already closing. “Thank you for being the sister I was too afraid to be for you.”



## Chapter 25

**N**<sup>oah</sup> I was covered in grease and under a car when I heard the ruckus outside the shop. I was pretty annoyed about the fact that someone was showing up at my garage unannounced at ten p.m. on a Sunday night, especially when I had shit to do.

I stormed past the front desk of my shop where the carcasses of two days' worth of fast food and pizza were spread. Soda bottles, sandwich wrappers, whatever the hell else I'd eaten to get me through the weekend. I'd been busy, working in the shop around the clock, intent to get my project done as soon as possible. I was running low on sleep and patience, and God help whoever it was pounding at my door and taking away from the only thing I currently cared about right now.

"Derrick?" My mood soured as I saw Monica's husband on my front steps. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is she here?" Derrick's eyes were wide. He smelled like booze and cigarette smoke.

"Who, Ellie?"

"Monica. Is she here?"

"No. Why would she be here?" I asked. "I haven't seen Monica since the wedding. What's going on?"

"I need to speak to my wife. This is none of your damn business. I know you're shacking up with Ellie, and this is the only place I haven't checked. Monica called her sister tonight. I saw her phone log."

"Why would Monica be here?"

"We had a misunderstanding," Derrick said. "A disagreement. She's not at home."

"That's between you and your wife," I said. "Get off my property."

"It's over with my secretary," Derrick drunkenly slurred. "Monica's spreading lies that aren't true. Did she tell you she hired a private investigator to fucking spy on me? And she's threatening to ruin my medical practice with the photos she got?"

"You had an affair with your secretary?"

Derrick's eyes didn't seem like they could focus on me. "Don't play stupid. I know Monica's telling everyone about it, running her mouth like she

always does. I'm sure she told you about the baby too, but did Monica tell you she did it on purpose? Tricked me into getting her pregnant so she could blackmail me into marrying her?"

From what I could gather from Derrick's drunken confession, Monica was pregnant, and Derrick had screwed his secretary. This was not shaping up to be a good night for anyone. I felt instantly bad for Monica. But my mind also went to Ellie. Monica had dragged her into this mess? Was Ellie in town to deal with it?

"All I know is that the two of y'all are married," I said. "This is between the two of you. If Monica's pregnant with your child, then you need to man up and take care of her and your baby. It's pretty simple—don't treat her like a piece of shit. I'm not even going to start on the situation with the secretary because it's not my business. Now get yourself a cab home now."

"I'm not drunk."

"Your cologne tells me otherwise," I said. "What is it? Expensive bourbon with notes of your secretary's perfume?"

"Watch your mouth, Donovan. You don't know what you're talking about."

"You are not welcome here," I repeated, trying to keep myself on the straight and narrow.

I really didn't want to get into a fistfight with the good doctor. Actually, I supposed a part of me would love to knock him down a few pegs, but I knew I'd never hear the end of it if I did. Not to mention, the bastard would probably sue me for breaking a bone, and I was pretty sure that my lawyer—aka my big brother Lucas—would be pissed if I tied up all his time in court with Derrick Henry.

"I need to have a conversation with my wife," Derrick snapped. "I love her, and she loves me, and this is between us."

"That's bullshit."

All my resolve to keep my cool flew out the window at Derrick's statement. Not to mention the fact that my nerves were already frayed, and I was running on fumes, and I missed Ellie so damn much it just about killed me. And this guy had the gall to stand in front of me and claim he loved his wife when he was acting like a first-class jerk. He *had* a wife and a child, and he was throwing it all away. And that pissed me right off.

I stepped closer to Derrick. "You don't know what the hell it means to be in love."

“I’m married,” Derrick retorted. “What do *you* know?”

“I know that when you find the love of your life, it pains you to be away from her,” I said, my throat feeling like I’d swallowed shards of glass. “It physically hurts your body to be away from her. You can’t stop thinking of her in every spare moment of your day, and sometimes in the moments even when they’re not spare. In fact, you think about her so much you can barely function in life because you’re too busy worrying about when you’ll see her again, when you’ll touch her next.”

“So you read romance novels,” Derrick said. “But that’s not how it works in real life, big guy.”

“You don’t know what it means to care about someone,” I said. “If you did, you’d be doing everything in your power to treat your wife in the way she needed to be treated. And yeah, sure, people make mistakes. But you’re not worried about your mistakes—you’re only pissed because you were caught.”

“That’s not—” Derrick’s eyes darted away from me. “That’s not true.”

“Monica deserves better, Derrick. Your baby deserves better.”

“That’s not your choice to make.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “But this is my damn property, and I’m calling the police if you don’t get out of here in the next thirty seconds.”

“But—”

“It doesn’t matter whether your wife is here or not. Go home and sober up. Talk to her once you’ve got your head on straight.”

“Fucker.” Derrick backed away, raising his middle fingers. “Watch your back.”

I just nodded because I wasn’t scared of a coward like Derrick. I also knew that his threats were empty; men like him just wanted the last word. He was rich and entitled and didn’t know how to end a conversation except on top.

Well, he wasn’t on top, but at least he was no longer on my doorstep. I caught the flash of an interior car light as he hauled himself into the back of the waiting cab. I was breathing heavily as I shut the door behind me.

As Derrick’s cab took his sorry ass home, I glanced back at my lit up garage and knew that, whether I liked it or not, I had to be ready. Now. Tonight.

I pulled out my phone, hesitated for one split second, then ignored my racing heart as I dialed the only person I figured could help me now.





## Chapter 26

**E**llie “I swear to you I didn’t give him any information.”  
I blinked at Lily Donovan as she blurted out the phrase through the crack in the doorway. Shifting my robe tighter, I opened the door to reveal the full form of Noah’s mother. She stood in the hallway outside of the room I was sharing with Monica at the Fantasie Inn. Lily was dressed in a cute purple dress with fluttery sleeves and a lacy hem. I was wearing threadbare pajamas and a complimentary robe.

“What?” I croaked, my voice still hoarse with sleep. “Who?”

“I’ve got the breakfast you ordered here, dear. You were awake, weren’t you?” Lily asked anxiously. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry if I woke you. I just figured, I mean, didn’t I talk to you on the phone half an hour ago when you asked if I could deliver breakfast to your room?”

“I’m just sleepy,” I said, accepting a tray of wonderful smelling eggs, and toast oozing with butter, and coffee—a delightful looking pot of coffee.

“Monica’s in the shower. Do you want to come in for a second?”

I moved inside the room to set the tray on the little café style table near the window. I poured myself a cup of coffee into a pretty teacup with hand-painted roses curling up the side of it.

Lily took a nervous step just inside the room and closed the door behind her. “I just wanted you to know that I didn’t tell Noah a thing when he called last night.”

My spoon clattered against the edge of the teacup. “Noah? What about Noah?”

“So he hasn’t contacted you?”

I shook my head, taking a gulp of coffee that was a little too hot to be gulped. “Noah and I are just friends these days, in case he didn’t pass along that information. Plus, I didn’t plan to be in town still.”

“I gathered as much,” Lily said. “So when he called last night and asked if you were staying here, I said my guests’ names were confidential information and I couldn’t tell him a word. I want you to know that I respect your privacy, and whatever’s going on with you and Monica. I can gossip with the best of them, but I understand when it’s inappropriate too.”

“I appreciate it.” I raised my free hand. “You can relax, Mrs. Donovan. I’m not upset. I was just surprised to hear Noah’s name, is all. We haven’t really talked since, well, since Friday night.”

“I see. Well, it’s none of my business. I just wanted you to know he didn’t find out from me that you’re here.”

“How do you know that *he* knows I’m here anyway?”

“Well, honey...” Lily wrung her hands together. “He’s out front. I think he’s waiting for you. At least, he doesn’t show any signs of moving from his parking spot. Based on the size of the coffee mug he borrowed from the kitchen, he’s going to be planted there a while.”

“He’s out front?” I asked. “Now?”

“I can send him away if you’d like.”

“No, I mean...” I blinked. “I just can’t figure out why he wouldn’t call me if he needed to talk to me. I’m just confused is all.”

“Yes, well...” Lily raised her hands. “Not my business. I’m just delivering the news. What would you like me to do, sweetie? I’m happy to get Finn to give my son a parking ticket so he has to move if that would be helpful.”

I gave a short laugh at the look on Lily’s face. “Not necessary. I’ll go see what he wants. It’s not like Noah and I are on bad terms, we’re just...”

The silence stretched between us. Friends didn’t seem quite right. Exes didn’t seem right either. So maybe we weren’t anything just yet. Maybe that was what we had to figure out.

Lily backed out of the room. I threw on a bra and a hoodie and a pair of black leggings. I hadn’t packed a whole lot of stuff, seeing as I’d been kind of blindsided about the last-minute trip up here. Plus, it was nine o’clock on a Monday morning and I wasn’t sure exactly what the occasion was that I was supposed to be dressing for.

I called to Monica that breakfast was here, and that I was going outside for a couple of minutes. I was pretty sure, judging by the array of soaps and shampoos that Monica had packed in her little overnight bag, that she’d be in the bathroom for at least another thirty minutes anyway.

Then I jogged down the stairs, my heart in my throat as I processed the fact that I was about to come face to face with Noah for the first time since we’d parted ways. I’d spent the weekend thinking about our situation, wondering where I’d gone wrong, wondering how this could be fixed. Could we really just be friends? Was there anything worth salvaging between us? Was Noah even *thinking* of me?

“Noah.” I felt out of breath as I made it onto the front steps of the inn. “What are you doing here?”

Noah was leaning against a painfully old truck that had more rust on it than actual paint. He peeled himself off the vehicle, the gigantic mug of coffee that his mother had referenced in one hand. He placed the cup of coffee on the hood of the rust bucket, then took a few steps toward me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I was hoping to talk to you. Don’t worry, my mother protected your privacy with her life,” Noah said. “I was half waiting to see if Finn and Morty were going to show up and tow me away. I only guessed you were here because Derrick turned up at my doorstep looking for Monica last night, and he said she’d called you. I pieced together the rest myself.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised you don’t need a tow, seeing as that thing looks to be in worse shape than Angelica’s car, and that’s saying something. It’s saying a lot of somethings.”

Noah gave me a little grin. “Doesn’t this little guy look familiar? Cute as a button, if I do say so myself.”

I blinked, confused, before I took another look at where Noah was gesturing. He was staring at the rusty old vehicle, and that was when it clicked. It wasn’t just any rusty old truck; it *was* Rusty. The character from my first children’s book. The book that had sold copies only to Katie and Noah himself. The original truck, the car Noah had always had his eye on, when the initial inspiration for the story struck.

“You’re kidding me.” I moved toward the vehicle. “You made a real-life Rusty? It’s *perfect*, Noah.”

“I’ve been working on it around the clock for the last two days to make it look this crappy.” Noah gave a good-natured wink at me. “Then again, the fact that it was sitting at the rear of Grandma DiMaggio’s property for the last decade helped me out with that.”

“You bought the truck?”

Noah nodded and scratched at his arm, looking embarrassed. “It was the first car I bought once I got my shop up and running and business was doing well. Old man Thompson was finally ready to let it go, and I was ready to buy.”

“I can’t believe he sold it.” I rested my hand on the hood. “He loved this thing.”

“I promised him I’d take care of it.”

I blinked, finding it hard to believe that Noah had not only remembered Rusty, but that he'd actually gone through with purchasing it. And then he'd *kept* it, all these years, stored on his grandmother's ten-acre plot. It blew my mind.

"I think it's pretty picture perfect now," Noah said with a throat clear. "If you don't mind me saying so."

"It is. Absolutely."

"It's yours," Noah said. "If you want it."

"I mean, thanks," I said, "but I'm confused. I don't have a space to park anything in New York. And I don't actually drive anywhere either."

Noah's face turned more serious, and he expelled a huge breath. "I need to take a big step back. I meant to start by saying I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" My heart pounded. I wasn't quite sure where he was going with any of this, but just seeing him here, seeing his face, knowing he was close enough to touch me gave me butterflies.

"For how I treated you." Noah ran a hand through his hair. "When I said those things the other night, I wasn't doing it because that was what I wanted to happen. I was doing it because I thought that was what was best for you."

"Okay."

"I knew I made a huge mistake the second the words were out of my mouth. I realize now that I should've talked to you about how I felt, and then I should've heard you out, listened to your side of things." Noah looked down, shifted his weight from one foot to another. "I swear, Ellie, I was just trying to do what was best for you. And I'd been caught off guard, not knowing you'd be in town that night. Things just came tumbling out of my stupid mouth."

"How was ending things between us what was best for me?" I took a step closer to him. "The only thing I wanted was you."

"But..." Noah's gaze snapped up. His eyes met mine, and he looked genuinely shocked to hear that was even a remote possibility. "Everything you had going on in New York. Your book deals, your tours, school visits, publicity stuff. You've worked your whole life to get this breakthrough."

"I was never planning on giving any of that up," I said. "But I didn't realize that we needed to end our...relationship either, especially not right now, and not in that way."

"Yeah." Noah's voice was broken, a whisper. "Believe me, I've spent every minute of the weekend regretting every word from that night."

“I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but it’s not so black and white,” I said. “I came back here to see you that night because I missed you. I wanted to try and figure out how we could be together *more*, not less. I’d even been hinting to my agent that I might want to spend some time working from Fantasie once we’d gotten a deal signed. Because I’m happy here.”

Noah looked like he’d been run over by a semitruck. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, Noah. Of course I’m serious. I know I didn’t always do a good job expressing the fact that I had real emotions for you while we were...together. I know I pushed us to focus on the physical relationship because I wasn’t ready to admit that I was falling in love with you so soon.”

“God, Ellie. I’ve loved you since...” Noah shrugged. “I don’t even know. I think I’ve loved you since we were teenagers. I *know* I’ve loved you since we crossed the line from friends into something more.”

“Me too,” I whispered. “And I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner.”

Noah took a step closer to me, put his hands on my face. “No, I’m sorry. This is all my fault. I just couldn’t see a future where we made things work without me holding you back. I had all this guilt weighing me down thinking that I was going to be the thing holding you back from achieving your dreams.”

“You’re the *reason* I’ve been achieving my dreams,” I said. “You’re one of the big reasons I’ve made it this far. I’ve never wanted to give you up, Noah. I never saw it like a trade-off.”

“It’s always been you, Ellie.” Noah pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I am so sorry for this, for everything. God, I’m terrible.”

“No, you were just trying to do the right thing.” I let myself fall against his chest. “But the right thing to do now would be to hug me and tell me that you love me. I mean, if it’s still true.”

Noah gruffly pulled me to him. “I love you more than life itself, Ellie Turner. I’d marry you tomorrow because I know it’s you I want to be with. You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

“It turns out, I’m not against being in Fantasie,” I said into his chest. “I might need to keep my apartment in the city for a while as these deals get sorted out, but I don’t love the city like some people do.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“This is the twenty-first century, Noah. I can write and draw from anywhere. Being in New York wasn’t so much about my choosing to be there because I loved it.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No. It was me choosing to be anywhere *but* here because I didn’t fit in. With my family, with the town, with anything really. In a city of millions, it’s easier to be invisible. It’s more accepted to be weird and artsy. New York is just a place to me; I don’t love it the way some people do. It’s just a means to an end for me.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“I swear,” I said. “Like I said, I’m not planning to give up my apartment anytime soon, but that’s mostly on a practical level. I don’t want to leave Katie in the lurch without a roommate, and I might need to be in town for some work stuff over the next year or so.”

“Completely fair.”

“But I know you could never relocate, at least not easily, and I wouldn’t want you to.” I leaned toward him. “I like it here. I like you here. I like us here.”

“You do?”

“Maybe for the foreseeable future, if you’re up for it, we can try different things and take it slow. I’ll stay here when I can, and you can come to the city with me some weekends when you’re free.”

“I’ll go wherever you are,” Noah confessed. “Hell, I’d relocate for you, even if I had to find a job rotating tires at the Jiffy Lube. I wouldn’t be happy doing it forever, but if it was a means to get you in my life forever, I’d do it and figure the rest out later. I’ve loved you since before I knew the meaning of the word.”

“I know.” I pressed a kiss to his lips. “Me too. Each in our own ways.”

“You know, something hit home with me Friday night when my mom was talking about how you’d had the opportunity to meet my dad.” Noah cleared my throat. “My dad always loved you. And that does mean something to me, quite a fucking lot actually. It also meant a lot to me that you were there for me the day of his funeral. I’ve never forgotten it.”

“I wish he could have been here for this, for everything. He’d have loved Chloe too.”

“Oh, yes he would’ve loved Chloe,” Noah said. “And it’s a shame he never met her because she’s perfect for Lucas. But it makes me feel extra lucky that you knew him. He’d love you even more now. I like that you’re a part of my family, Ellie. Every damn inch of it.”

“I really, really love you,” I told him. “Don’t you dare ever break up with me again for no reason at all because I will run you over with Rusty.”

Noah grinned at me. “Understood. By the way, the truck actually runs pretty good. I thought you might like driving it around because you could run right into a damn parking meter and it wouldn’t make a difference. There’s nothing precious about this car.”

“Just the way I like it,” I told him. “But I’m not sure I can drive that thing to New York with a straight face.”

“Nah,” Noah said. “But I’ll bet you could take it to book signings locally and the kids would love getting their photos taken with it.”

“I can’t believe you made my dreams come true,” I said, looking at the truck. “I mean, that’s all Rusty has been my whole life. A little dream I doodled onto a piece of paper.”

“No.” Noah looked me in the eyes, an intensity there that I wasn’t expecting. “You’re the one who made all my dreams come true.”





# Epilogue

**6** *months later*  
*Ellie*

“El, can you come here for a second?”

I looked up from the front desk in Noah’s garage at my very official boyfriend. Noah was covered in grease as he slid out from underneath a vehicle. I glanced over my shoulder to take in his glorious figure for a long moment, enjoying him in his element, doing what he loved.

“I need your hand with something,” he said. “It’ll just take a minute.”

“Let me finish this one thing first.” I pulled my iPad closer, finished adding color to a layer on my work-in-progress. “Just a moment.”

My book was officially due in a week, and I was putting the finishing touches and tweaking the drawings based on feedback from my new editor. We were getting close to actually seeing my tiny idea become a real physical product that I could hold in my hands. It still seemed surreal that I was getting paid to do what I loved, at least for now. And that was all I needed.

The doors to Noah’s garage were thrown wide open to let in the first fingers of an autumn breeze that scratched at the windows and whispered along the pavement. The promise of pumpkin spice and cinnamon and hot apple pie sizzled just on the horizon, as the last of the summer warmth clung desperately to our town.

*Our town.* Fantasie. The place where I knew I wholeheartedly belonged. Earlier this month, I’d officially signed over my portion of the lease on my New York apartment to Jasmine. Katie’s cousin had never really moved out after her surgery, and I’d suggested that when her lease ran out, she take over mine. It would make the switch easier on everyone.

Katie and Jasmine had happily agreed, but only after making me promise that I’d stay with them whenever I needed to be in the city for book business. A very easy promise to make since that meant it was basically a glorified girls’ weekend every time I popped down to the city to meet with Dana.

I’d been mostly living with Noah for the better part of the last six months anyway, staying at my apartment so sporadically I mostly slept on the couch when I went. After getting called back to Fantasie on that fateful night to help with Monica and Derrick’s messy situation, I’d discovered a second reason to

spend more time in town, and that reason was my brand new, adorable niece Marla.

When Monica had decided to part ways with Derrick for good, I hadn't wanted my sister to be alone, with only my mother and father as her support system, as she prepared to do life by herself for the first time ever. All while welcoming a new baby into her world.

Six months later, I was beyond glad I'd stayed in Fantasie because nothing in the universe would ever be able to replace the moments I'd spent with Monica in the hospital, holding her hand as her baby girl took her first breaths. Even still, I hardly look at Marla without tearing up, thinking of the way Monica had transformed the second that baby had been placed in her arms.

"Ellie?" Noah prompted.

"Right."

I'd gotten sucked into my work again, carried away as I was prone to do. I'd almost permanently made Noah's desk my workspace, not bothering to move my tablet at night or organize the messy stacks of red-lined manuscripts that littered my desk. There was just something about being near him, both of us quietly tinkering away at our passions, together but also independent, that was absolutely right.

I rose from my desk and shuffled back to where Noah had moved to sit on the couch. Apparently he'd been waiting for me a little longer than I'd intended. So long he'd made himself comfortable on the sofa. He'd wiped himself down with a rag, so he was significantly less grease-covered than when I'd found him. I winced, slid onto his lap, and relaxed when he folded his arms around my back and pulled me too him.

"Sorry," I said. "I was focused on something."

"I love when you're focused." Noah kissed my forehead.

I knew he wouldn't exactly start something sexy now. I'd already told him that Monica would be heading to the shop anytime now because I'd promised to take Marla for a walk while she ran some errands by herself.

Not to mention the fact that all the windows and doors were thrown wide open to the public. But there was something in the way that Noah was looking at me that made me do a double take as to what he really needed in this moment.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Did you need a hand with something?"

“Actually, yes.” Noah gently slid me off his lap until I was sitting on the couch next to him. He shifted so he was facing me. “I didn’t exactly plan to do this now.”

“Plan what?”

“I wanted to talk to you about something. I’d intended to maybe take you out to dinner, or wait for a significant day or something, but I was just under that car now, and I looked over at you, and I thought there never was a more perfect moment than this one.”

“Okay.”

“I looked over at you, and I realized I’ve never been so happy in my life. Not only are you here, but you’re *happy* in Fantasie, with me, and it made me realize what a lucky bastard I am. I don’t know what I did to deserve moments like this, to deserve a woman like you in my life.”

“I like days like this too,” I confessed. “These are the special days, Noah, the in between days. It’s why I wanted to move back here to be with you. For moments like these, not for the big moments that come every so often.”

The fall breeze blew into the garage, rustling leaves, brushing a warmth over our skin. The sun gleamed from behind a row of pines, adding sparkle to the already fine sheen of the garage. Then there was the way Noah was looking at me, a look that made my breath catch in my chest.

“I don’t ever want this to change. I don’t want us to change,” Noah said. “I mean, I want us to grow and adapt together from here on out. I realized right now that waiting for a special day, or a big event, or a fancy dinner—that’s not us. *This* is us. Here, you and me, just being together.”

“Absolutely,” I whispered, my throat feeling dry. “I agree.”

Noah shifted his weight so he was no longer on the couch. He moved so that he had one knee on the ground, and then in his other hand a beautiful box appeared. Before I knew it, that box had popped open to reveal a stunning diamond ring.

“Marry me, Ellie,” Noah asked, his voice taking on an uncertain lilt. “I know I’m filthy with grease and grime, and that we’re not out to eat at some expensive restaurant, but I just got to thinking that I can’t go another day without you knowing that I want—that I intend—to make you my wife. If you’ll have me?”

“Oh, Noah.”

“I want you to be a part of my everyday forever and ever. I want to start a family with you. I want our dreams to grow together, to support each other,

and Ellie—I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you’re the woman for me. I’m going to love you until the day I die and then some.”

“Of course, Noah,” I said, tears pooling in my eyes as I pulled him close to me, pressed a kiss to his mouth. “Of course. Of course. Of course.”

“You don’t mind that I’m covered in grease?”

“I love it,” I promised him. “You are perfect just like this. This is the Noah I fell in love with, not some Noah shoved in a suit at a fancy restaurant. To know that your words came from your heart, that it’s just the two of us together, is all I’ve ever needed. I love you too, Noah.”

Noah pulled me to him in a crushing embrace. Then, with me laughing, a little teary, Noah slipped the ring on my finger. After he pulled me to him again, he crushed a kiss to my mouth, and was just murmuring in my ear about how we should go inside to celebrate when a car pulled up onto the gravel out front.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Monica. I forgot I said I’d watch Marla for a bit this afternoon.”

Noah winked, gave me a slap on the behind. “That’s fine. We can save the celebrations for later. It’ll give me some time to dream of all the things I’m gonna do to you later.”

I let out an antsy sigh, thinking this might be the one time I wasn’t *technically* in the mood to babysit. As much as I loved baby Marla, the promises twinkling in Noah’s eyes were quite appealing in and of themselves.

“Something happened.” Monica stepped out of the car, registering the joy on our faces correctly. She gestured behind her. “Marla’s sleeping in her car seat, and I left the window open so we can hear if she cries. Now, what’s going on?”

I glanced at Noah, then I flashed my sparkling ring toward Monica. “Noah asked me to marry him!”

Monica squealed, and I could tell that she was truly happy for me, and that just about made me cry all over again because never in a million years did I ever expect the first person I’d share my engagement with was my sister. The fact that it had happened so naturally, so joyfully, made this moment more perfect than it already was.

“I’m so happy for you two!” Monica winked at Noah. “It’s about time you’re making my sister an honest woman there, Donovan.”

“Hear, hear.” Noah gave a salute toward Monica. “I’m just glad she said yes.”

“So,” I said. “I guess there’s just one thing left to discuss.”

“No.” Monica waved her hands at me. “Absolutely not. I’m taking Marla home, and the two of you are celebrating all afternoon. She can come see her auntie on a different day.”

“Okay,” I said. “But that wasn’t exactly what I was going to say.”

“Oh?” Monica looked at Noah in confusion, but he just shrugged.

“Monica,” I said, mock-seriousness on my face as I approached my sister. “Will you be the flower girl in my wedding?”

Monica looked flustered, shocked, and then burst into laughter. She wiped her eyes with tears, she couldn’t stop laughing so hard.

“Oh, El,” Monica said. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

“I’m just kidding,” I said. “Of course you don’t have to be the flower girl.”

“But I would.” Monica pointed toward me with a playful finger. “Just so long as I don’t have to wear tulle.”

THE END



## BONUS CHAPTER

**T**wo years later  
Ellie

“Yeah, thanks, Dana,” I said into the phone. “I appreciate the update. I’ll have those pages to you by the end of the day. Does that work?”

My fingers clicked over the keyboard as I finished punching out the acknowledgments in my latest manuscript. My typing was a little shakier than usual, a little more start-and-stop. This was new territory for me. Something I hadn’t expected, at least, not yet.

I hit *print*, then scooped up the pages of my newest book, the fourth book in my illustrated children’s book series—the same series Dana had first sold for me.

Manuscript in hand, I made my way downstairs, taking shallow breaths and feeling like I wasn’t getting enough air. I wasn’t exactly nervous, but—okay, I was a little nervous.

On the staircase were the photos from our wedding, a destination wedding in Mexico that we’d celebrated with just immediate family and friends. Noah’s mother had gotten them framed for us, and he’d hung them when I’d been in New York for work to surprise me.

I passed the library and saw that Noah’s old collection of my self-published *Rusty* titles had grown to contain far more copies of all my books than I’d ever need. But Noah had insisted on having too much of my work on display, and his pride for my accomplishments had sort of bled into me. Over time, I’d realized I liked seeing them there too. They made me happy.

My new book series hadn’t been an instant bestseller, but it was gaining steam as the series went on, and more importantly, I kept getting book contracts. I was making enough of a living doing what I loved, living where I wanted to be, spending my time with the man I adored. And that was all I needed to be content.

I shuffled outside in nothing but jean shorts and a thin white tank top. I hadn’t dressed up for this occasion because I wasn’t aware it had *been* an occasion until about an hour ago. I’d thought we’d be celebrating the completion of my fourth book today, but now I was thinking my new update might overshadow our previous plans.

It was only ten in the morning, but already the sun was warm this fine summer morning, beating down on my shoulders as I shuffled out to the garage in fuzzy flip flops. My manuscript fluttered against the breeze while I clutched it to my chest.

Today, Noah had all the garage doors open. He'd moved a couple of cars up on lifts and had kept one or two parked in the driveway. His garage really was a thing of beauty. All black and white and sleek, lovingly kept clean and tidy, a real source of his pride. But the source of *my* pride was the man inside.

I could tell Noah had a big day ahead of him because he was wearing a pair of dirty old jeans that he only pulled out for the really grimy work. He had on a white T-shirt that was already stained with grease. But the beauty of his old work clothes was that they really conformed to his body. It was like the jeans knew each curve of his butt, his thighs, his calves, almost as well as I did. And the T-shirt, the way it stretched over his biceps as he dragged a sleeve across his forehead, had me fanning myself with my manuscript.

"Is Drew here yet?" I asked.

Noah ignored me. "I told you, Mrs. Donovan, I have a dress code out here."

"Oh yeah?" I sidled up to Noah, swinging the papers around behind me in favor of teasing him with a little kiss to the lips as I went up onto my tiptoes in my fluffy sandals. "What's the dress code again?"

"You're not allowed to wear those damn shorts out here unless you want me to take them off." Noah dropped the wrench he'd been holding on his desk, then picked me up until my legs wrapped around his waist.

He gave me a kiss that was so deeply full of need and desire that I dropped all of the pages of my manuscript that I'd been hiding behind me. I squealed and wriggled to get down from his embrace.

"Oh, c'mon, babe. You can print them out again." Noah winked at me. "Can't that wait?"

"I take it Drew's not here?" I asked, my eyes skirting the garage for Noah's newly hired help.

It'd taken practically a year of convincing, but finally, Noah had seen the logic in my argument. I'd explained over and over again that although Noah was so successful, he was capping himself in his business's growth because he refused to hire help. He finally believed me when I told him that by hiring someone to help him out, he'd actually be *creating* a job which was a good thing, and that was what had tipped him over the edge.



It helped that Lily Donovan had hooked up Noah with a local high school kid. Drew Walker had been caught stealing a car from under Finn DiMaggio's nose—the town sheriff—and Lily had thoughtfully suggested that Drew be allowed to work off his punishment in Noah's garage. Noah had agreed, and as it just so happened, Drew was quite adept at knowing his way around a car. The whole situation had turned into a win-win for everyone.

“Nah. Drew actually asked a girl out on a date, and they went to the movies last night,” Noah said with a smirk. “I told him he could come in around noon and work late.”

“Nadia?” I squealed. “Drew's been drooling over her for, like, a year.”

“I don't know her name,” Noah said. “We don't talk about that stuff in detail.”

“Men,” I said, scurrying around, retrieving the pages of my manuscript.

It wasn't the glorious entrance that I'd expected, me bent over with my butt in the air, scraping dirty pages together off the ground, but that was pretty much my style. I didn't do anything the easy, fancy way. Never had, never would, and the best part about it was that Noah didn't care one single bit.

“Here,” I said, shoving the pages at him. “I finished my book.”

“Congratulations.” Noah accepted the pages, a smile beaming on his face. “I thought we had plans to go out to dinner tonight to celebrate. Crack open a bottle of wine, see where the night led us...”

“I mean, we do,” I said. “But I wanted you to read the acknowledgements first.”

“Honestly, babe. I told you that you don't have to acknowledge me in every book. I appreciate it, I sincerely do, but you can thank other people too. Your sister, your niece, hell—thank my mom. I'm just saying, I won't be offended if you share the love.” Noah leaned forward, kissed my forehead. “I know exactly where I stand in your life, Mrs. Donovan, without you having to put it in ink.”

“Just read it,” I blurted. “I like to acknowledge you.”

Noah played along with me, flipping over the title page until he got to the page in question. He read it the first time, passively keeping that ‘doting husband’ smile on his face.

Then the words started to sink in. And Noah read it again. I was pretty sure he got through it a third time before he looked up at me.

“You’re serious?” he asked, his eyes wide, the smile gone from his face. “Are you serious right now, Ellie?”

I bit my lip, nodded. “I know we weren’t totally trying, but we weren’t totally not trying, especially if you remember a few weekends ago after that wedding, and—”

“I’m going to be a dad!” Noah blurted out. “I’m going to be a *dad*?!”

He repeated the phrase a few more times like a broken record before I finally took his hands in mine and held them to my chest.

“Yes, honey,” I said. “I’m pregnant. I took a test an hour ago when I realized I was late, and I hadn’t been feeling very well. Then I started thinking about that wedding a few weekends ago when we weren’t exactly careful, and I put the pieces together.”

“You’ve known for an hour?!” Noah was still speaking like he was sort of stuck on the shouty-emoji button. “Wow, really?!”

“I spent the next hour working up the courage to tell you,” I admitted. “I know we talked about waiting until we had my next contract in place before starting our family, but—”

Noah finally seemed to break free of his odd streak of shouty-repetition and swooped me into a hug, crushing a kiss to my neck.

“Oh, my God,” he said, his voice coursing with emotion. “This is the best news ever. Oh, my God. We’re having a baby?”

“We’re having a baby,” I confirmed.

“A baby,” he said. “Monica is going to be thrilled Marla’s finally getting a cousin. This is amazing, Ellie. How are you feeling about it? Are you... Are you happy?”

Noah stilled slightly. The thing was, we’d talked about kids before. We both wanted them, but we hadn’t been in a rush. I hadn’t technically gone off birth control, but I had missed a couple of pills a few weeks back when we’d been traveling for a wedding. I’d told Noah about it and suggested he could use a condom if he was worried about it. Noah hadn’t seemed bothered by it, nor had he been bothered to pull out, which had been fine with me.

I hadn’t expected to get pregnant on the first try, but I had been feeling more settled in my career, and I knew that if a baby had happened, I’d be thrilled about it, even if I didn’t expect it. I’d thought it had been a low-risk thing, and yet here we were, expecting the unexpected.

“I’m so happy,” I said, tears welling in my eyes. “I didn’t even know how happy I could be about the thought of becoming a mom until I saw the

positive test.”

“A baby,” Noah whispered. “You’re going to be a mom, and I’m going to be a dad. Come on, honey. We’re going inside to celebrate.”

“But—” I stopped talking the second Noah scooped me off my feet.

The pages of my book fluttered to the ground. The page with the acknowledgments landed face up.

***To Noah, the best husband, and now the best father.***

Noah dipped his face to meet me, locking his lips to mine. He stopped halfway to the door at the sound of crunching gravel on the tires. Drew had shown up to work early.

The kid was climbing out of his car when Noah spun around without setting me down.

“Everything okay?” Drew shouted across the driveway.

“I’m going to be a dad!” Noah shouted back, and then marched me right up the stairs and into the bedroom where he proceeded to show me exactly how thrilled he was that we’d made a baby.

When we finished, we lay in each other’s arms. Faint sounds of work came from the garage as Drew set into his tasks for the day.

“This is the best day ever,” Noah said, brushing one last, lingering kiss against my neck. He looked into my eyes, pulled away slightly. “I love you, Ellie Donovan.”

“And I can’t live without you, Noah Donovan.”

“I think my new title just upgraded to Baby Daddy. You can call me Baby Daddy from now on.”

I swatted him playfully. “Don’t make this weird.”

“Me? Make things weird? Never.”

“You’re really happy about it?” I asked. “I thought you might’ve said it was too soon. Or at least had some reservations about it.”

“I’ve wanted to knock you up since the day you agreed to be mine.” Noah spoke teasingly, in light and playful words, but there was a hint of sincerity there. He brushed my hair. “All I mean is that when I thought of a future where you were with someone else, having their children, sleeping in their bed, God—I was *not* okay. That was when I realized what we had between us was not just sex.”

“It was never just sex,” I whispered. “I just wanted it to be because I was scared of getting hurt.”

“I’d take this risk over and over again,” Noah said. “Every damn day for the rest of my life if it means I end up with you.”

And then Noah, already hard again, slid back inside me. This time, instead of the frenzied excitement of earlier, he moved slowly, deliberately, letting me feel him as he filled me with long, hard strokes. Our heartbeats raced together, circling as one beat, as he poured himself into me.

“I was never going to leave you, baby,” Noah whispered as he finished. “You’ve always been mine.”

THE END



## **Author's Note**

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this installment in The Donovan series!

The next book in the series is coming this fall, and it is already up for pre-order. Josie and Finn's story, also set in Fantasie, is coming shortly after and is up for pre-order as well!

Sign up for my newsletter at [LilyKateAuthor.com](http://LilyKateAuthor.com) or find me on Facebook for more information on releases, cover reveals, ARC opportunities and more!



*Lastly*, if you happened to enjoy the story and can spare five minutes out of your day, honest reviews at the retailer of your choice are always welcome and appreciated.

Thank you so much in advance!