



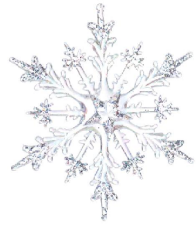
Secret
FAMILY
CHRISTMAS

Over the Top

SECRET
ADMIRER

NIKKI ROME

Noelle's
SECRET
ADMIRER



Content Warnings

This is a kinky holiday series that includes past child abuse and neglect, alcoholism, drug use, pregnancy, profanity, anxiety, loss of parents, adoption, past childhood trauma, and elements of kink such as impact play, breeding, breath play, restraints, praise, degradation, CGL relationships, Shibari, wax play, eStim, and humiliation.

As a reminder, this is not to be used as an instruction manual. The things read in these books are fictional and anyone taking part in the practice of BDSM, should do so under the guidance of a trained professional with enthusiastic consent.

Noelle's Secret Admirer by Nikki Rome

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Chapter One

Noelle

The door to my small one-bedroom apartment slammed so hard I thought it split in two. Andrew, my amazingly terrible boyfriend, had found yet another way to make me hate myself. I curled into a ball on my bed with tears in my eyes, wondering when this hell I was living would end. It wasn't like I had planned to date another dick. Every time I thought I'd found someone who made sense in my world, it fell apart. The first few months were amazing, like usual. Then he showed his true colors. Prioritizing his friends over time with me, acting like I was crazy for questioning why he'd disappeared for days without so much as a text message. We lived in a small town in upstate New York and rumors were flying for weeks now. I denied them. Then a letter showed up on my desk at work. A letter that I didn't expect and one that wouldn't let me deny the truth.

For years they came, their frequency changing constantly. Lately they would come weekly, sometimes it was monthly. Never had I gone longer than two months without one. I kept them all. Something deep inside me wouldn't let them go. I knew it was crazy, fantasizing about a secret admirer that I didn't even know, but I couldn't help myself. Nights like these usually led to dark days of me doubting every decision I'd ever made, but those letters kept me sane through all of it. In the beginning, it scared me a bit how much he knew. I imagined a stalker following me around and watching me, and it was worrying but also exciting. On my eighteenth birthday, the first letter came. It was in a pink envelope with nothing on the front but my first name. I entered my bedroom at my

parents' house and there it was, sitting on my pillow. I had assumed it was one of my siblings, but when I opened it, I knew that couldn't be the case.

Noelle,

Fuck, I feel like I've waited a lifetime to send this to you. I'm not even sure it's a good idea to leave it for you now. If anyone knew, I'd be chastised and judged, but the truth is I keep finding it harder and harder to stay away. You are the other half of me. The thing that I know will make me whole and yet I can't bring myself to tell you face to face.

I need you to know how special you are. I need you to know you are loved. I need you to know you are mine.

He didn't sign it. I reached for my nightstand and pulled the old worn letter from the top of the pile and read the last line to myself.

"I need you to know you are mine," I whispered to myself.

My voice sounded foreign to me. Strained from screaming and stressed from the tears that invaded my soul. Andrew wasn't the man for me. That was clear by the pictures of him in bed with Lucy Monroe, but that didn't matter. What mattered was I had a man who loved me. I just didn't know him yet.

I jumped at the sound of my phone ringing. I shook myself from my misery and did my best to put on a happy face in hopes my sister would think everything was fine.

“Hey, Eve.”

“What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Noelle, I hear it in your voice. What did he do?”

I fell back onto the bed in defeat. If it had been my sister Holly, then maybe I'd stand a chance of fooling her, but Eve was too empathetic for her own good. Two words and she could see right through me.

“The rumors were all true,” I choked out as she let out a sigh. “I just don't get it, Eve. What the hell is so wrong with me that I can't seem to find anyone worth dating?”

“You know it's not you, so don't even say that.”

“It's getting harder and harder to believe that.”

“Listen, we all knew from the beginning that Andrew was a total ass. I'm not going to say I told you so, but I told you so.”

“You just said it.”

“I can't help myself sometimes. Even if I thought he was a dick, that doesn't mean he is allowed to treat you like shit.”

“I'm just so naïve sometimes. It's like I want to see the best in people, but then they show me who they are and I am left kicking myself in the ass.”

“Are you sad because you loved him?”

“No. I didn't love him. I'm not even sure I liked him. Men suck.”

“Yes. Yes, they do. I don’t know why you’ve been on such a kick lately about being in a relationship, anyway.”

“I just don’t want to be alone forever.”

“You won’t be. Everyone has someone special.”

“Easy for you to say. You have Rio.”

“Ha! Please. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Maybe not, but I know he will be here by your birthday. Just like he promised. You’ll be next on the list of Saint family members who have found their forever and I’ll be completely alone.”

“Not true. Just because the guys finally found their women doesn’t mean that Holly or I will.”

“I’m telling you, Eve, there is something in the water around here. You just wait.”

I spent the next hour on the phone with my empathetic sister. Christmas was right around the corner and my family was obsessed with it. This year, I had a new niece and a nephew on the way. I loved the kids. In fact, having them around was the highlight of my week, but it also reminded me constantly of how badly I wanted that for myself. Eve was right. I had been on a mission to find the right man because I was ready for forever. I wanted the husband, the kids, and the white picket fence. I get that the idea of it all was outdated for most people, but it wasn’t for me. I wanted to be loved; I wanted to be cherished, and I wanted to be someone’s everything. But it seemed like every time I tried, I ended up

with the same type of guy. The type of guy who only cared about himself and didn't give a damn about anyone else.

I got myself up, showered, and changed into pajamas. Regardless of what a shitty day I had, life still went on and everyone expected me at my parents' in the morning. The only good thing that I had to look forward to was my letters. Somehow, whenever I was going through a breakup, he knew, and the frequency would increase. I smiled to myself as I scrolled through my phone, hoping sleep would take over. That's when I heard a knock on the door. I hesitated before getting up to answer it. It was late, and I wasn't expecting anyone. My heart raced with fear when the thought of Andrew coming back for another round of arguments crossed my mind, but when I opened the door, there was no one there. Just a single pink envelope on the ground.

I picked it up and opened it. My hands shook with anticipation. The letter inside was short and to the point.

Noelle,

You have nothing to worry about. You belong to me.

I felt a chill run down my spine. That questioning feeling that always crept in was settling in the pit of my stomach. Maybe he wasn't just a secret admirer, maybe he was a stalker after all. And now, he was getting bolder. There was snow on the ground, but it was all packed down from people walking by all day. I didn't see anyone, and there weren't any signs that

someone was even still out there. I stepped back inside and pulled the door closed. Maybe I had encouraged him somehow by keeping them. Could he have even known? The thought of throwing them away made me feel sick to my stomach. They were the only thing that made me feel loved and wanted. I tried to push the negative thoughts out of my head and focus on getting some sleep. But as it continued to evade me, I found myself once again reaching into my nightstand and pulling out some of my favorites.

Noelle,

I'm so proud of you. I wish I could share this time with you in person, but I know it's for the best that I keep my distance. You are remarkable in how you set your mind to things and accomplish them. I need you to know that, regardless of any difficulties you may face in the future.

That one came the day I graduated from college. It was bittersweet, as most of my major accomplishments were. I was one of six kids and multiple foster kids that my parents had loved and cared for. I was beyond grateful for every one of them, but the day I graduated, one of my foster brothers had gotten into a car accident and my dad missed my graduation. I was sad and scared. I wanted to be with my foster brother and the rest of the family, but my mom insisted I attend the ceremony. We postponed my party and a week later, everything was back to normal. My brother was fine. The party went on without a hiccup, but I felt guilty for being upset

that my day was ruined. It felt selfish, but that was always the thing that appealed to me about having a family of my own. I would be the center of their world and they would be the center of mine. The memories of my first parents were cloudy since I was so young when I was adopted, but the few that I had made it clear I was never a priority for them. My mom and dad changed that for me and I loved them dearly, but they were always spread thin. As an adult, I understood, but as a child, it was difficult to deal with.

I guess somewhere deep inside, I had hoped Andrew could be that person for me. The one who would help me start the family I dreamed of. That hope made me blind to reality. It made me believe things that weren't real and now I was full of regret and anger. Not so much with him, but with me.



Chapter Two

Maxwell

Leaving that note at her door was a risk, but I needed her to get it. The overwhelming urge to just stand in front of the door and let her see that it had been me all along was getting harder and harder to fight back. Noelle Saint was my life. Everything I did was for her, and she didn't even know it. I was insane, that was a certainty, but in the end, it would all be worth it. Whitewood is a small town and I couldn't leave her. Living here as a troubled teen left me with a shitty reputation as a young adult. I left for college but came back after dropping out. Being away from her was too hard. I couldn't think straight on the other side of the country. Not being able to see her regularly made me uneasy. My mind always raced with fear that she would need me and I'd be too far to help, so I dropped out and came back. Now, years later, I was still leaving her notes and hoping that one day I'd have the guts to tell her the truth.

When I left her house, I headed straight for the asshole that broke her heart. It killed me to see her with other men, but I knew it was inevitable. Most I could chase off early in the relationship, some I even intercepted before they approached her, but Andrew was a tricky bastard. I had been bogged down with work at the shop and I wasn't checking on her as frequently as I usually do. By the time I realized they were dating, he had already taken her out twice and when I followed them to the movie theater in the city, she seemed happy and I couldn't bring myself to let her get hurt again. That was until today, when I finally got the proof I needed to get her to call it off.

I parked in the small alley behind Rosie's Bar and walked inside. The smell and feel of the place brought back memories of my childhood. Rosie was friends with my mom, and for years, when the world felt like it was coming down around me, I sought refuge working as bar-back or clearing tables for her. It wasn't a normal job for a fifteen-year-old kid, and honestly, I'm not even sure it was legal for me to be working at a bar that young, but that was one of the perks of a small town. People turned a blind eye to others who lent a helping hand.

"There he is," John, one of the old timers, said the second I sat down next to him. "What brings you in tonight?"

I made eye contact with the bartender and motioned for a beer as he lifted his glass to his lips. "Just a drink and little business, old friend."

"Business, huh? What kind?"

The bartender placed a bottle in front of me and I pointed it to where Andrew was sitting in the corner with a redhead I didn't recognize. The filthy fuck broke my girl's heart and then jumped right onto the next one.

"I see. That kid has been nothing but trouble since his old man took off on his ma."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, no respect for anyone or anything. Heard he was dating one of the Saint girls."

"Not anymore."

"I guess that's your business, then?"

“It is.”

“Just try to not make too much of a mess, okay? Rosie has had a long week.”

“She okay?”

“Yeah, she just lost another waitress, so she’s been working doubles to make up for it.”

“I told her to call me if she needed help.”

“You know how she is.”

I nodded and threw back what was left of my beer before standing and leaving cash on the bar. “I’ll take it outside. No worries.”

John nodded and smirked, giving me a wink that only an old man like him could pull off. I made my way to the booth and nodded at the redhead when I slid in next to Andrew. “Hey pretty lady, why don’t you find some place else to be?”

Andrew wanted to argue, but one look at the knife I had at his side stopped him. He gave a terrified nod. I laughed as she slid out of the booth and John called her over to the bar. Old man still thought he had it in him.

“What do you want?”

“Truth? To cut your fucking heart out and serve it to her on a silver platter.”

A nervous laugh trickled out of his thinned lips. “Come on, man, it’s no big deal. Relationships end, she’ll move on.”

“Funny how you knew exactly who I was talking about, isn’t it?” I pressed the knife to him, and he whimpered in pain as the tip of my blade pierced his skin. “Now, why don’t you do everyone here a favor and get up slowly and follow me?”

“I’m not going anywhere with your fucking crazy ass.”

“I knew it would be too easy for you to just follow instructions.”

I reached up and wrapped my hand around the back of his neck before slamming his pretty boy face into the table. He screamed in pain, and a handful of people in the bar turned to see what the problem was. Another benefit of a small town that turns a blind eye is the people who didn’t care when the town fuckup got violent with the town asshole. John was right. Andrew caused problems for everyone when he was younger and now, as an adult, he was doing the same thing. I grabbed him by his neatly pressed polo and dragged him out of the booth. People in the way made a clearing as I pushed him through the bar to the kitchen, then out the back door. I swear as the door swung shut behind me, I actually heard some people cheering.

“Come on man, you don’t want to do this,” he cried out as I threw him down onto the ground just beside my bike.

“Do what Andrew? What exactly do you think you deserve?”

“Nothing. I apologized to her. What more could I do?”

“You didn’t apologize. You acted like it was her fault you couldn’t keep your fucking dick in your pants.”

His face went white when realization came over him. He couldn’t lie his way out of this.

“She told you?”

“She didn’t have to.”

When my fist collided with his face, that familiar feeling I used to get from back in the days when I was a regular fighter came over me. Anger and frustration spurred me on that this asshole could so easily access Noelle when I couldn’t. I beat the fuck out of him until his face was a mess and my hands were covered in his blood, then I stood over him and spit.

“Now see what you made me do?”

I wiped my hands off on the bandana I had wrapped around my wrist and reached into my pocket for my phone.

“Hey, any chance you could come clean up a little mess?”

“How little?”

“I don’t know about 230–235 pounds. A weak fucker.”

“Where are you?”

“Rosie’s.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Rocco was the one regular I could count on. He’d worked with me at the shop ever since I opened it, but what was more, I could trust him. I left the asshole where he was and walked back into the kitchen. It wasn’t like he was going anywhere

anytime soon. By the time I was done cleaning up in the employee bathroom, Rocco was strolling in the back door greeting the kitchen staff.

“Hey man,” I said as I approached.

“He’s already in the back of my truck.”

“You’re fast. Time for a drink?”

“A quick one. I tied him up in case he comes too,” he said with a wink. “I always hated that guy.”

We went back to the bar and took a seat. “He fucked with Noelle.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No.”

“Max—”

“Please don’t start with me tonight,” I said as I ran my hand over my face, trying to clear the aggravation from my expression. I trusted Rocco, so he was the only person in the world who knew how I felt about Noelle.

“I’m not starting with you, I just think... hell, you know what I think. You need to talk to her.”

“It’s not the right time. She’s upset about what happened.”

“I heard they were dating. No thanks to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I see you every day and have to deal with your erratic behavior about her since childhood, and half the time I don’t

even know what's caused it."

He was right. It was hard enough knowing he thought I had been fucking up for years by not telling her how I feel. The idea of updating him every time my jealousy sparked at a new level was just too much. He had no idea about the letters I had been leaving her, and really no clue how much of a fucking stalker I had become, but he knew enough to have the opinion that I'm a fuckup by not reaching out to her and explaining myself.

"You're right. I'm an ass. I'm sorry."

"You say that now," he said with a laugh, "But I have a feeling you are only apologizing because I came to clean up your mess... again."

I laughed, "You're probably right. I can't be seen bringing him home and you know that. Besides, you are scarier than I am."

"I try."

We didn't stay any longer than needed. I climbed on to the back of my bike and watched him pull away with Andrew tied up in the back of his pickup. This was pretty much a flawless process for us by now. I'd lose my temper over someone hurting Noelle. He'd come clean up. I had never taken it too far, but I'm not going to lie. Tonight, I wanted to kill that motherfucker. Instead, I stop when they are unconscious and then Rocco comes and gets them. I never really asked what happens after that, but whatever he says to them keeps them quiet. It's the only way I've been able to stay in Whitewood as

long as I have and not get myself charged with assault by any of these dicks. The closest I came to having an issue was when Noelle was in college. She had an art professor that kept hitting on her. My sweet girl didn't even recognize the signs back then. It took some physical reminders that he was way too old for her *and* her teacher for him to back off. He sent some threats to the shop, and Rocco intervened. That was when I broke down and told him what had been going on. Since then, he's been the closest thing I have to a best friend.

I was standing in front of Noelle's bedroom window, watching her sleep, when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I looked down to find it was my sister Eve.

Eve: Hey, just a heads up Noelle is going through another break up and she's pretty beat up about it. Will you be at Mom and Dad's in the morning?

Maxwell: Yeah, I'll be there. Thanks for the heads up.

Even though my sister was probably the closest person in my life, she didn't know how deeply I cared for Noelle. We didn't share that kind of relationship, and the idea of exposing my vulnerability to one of my family members scared the hell out of me. I couldn't risk certain people knowing my secrets.

Eve: Okay. Goodnight, Max.

I put my phone away, glancing back through the window, taking in Noelle's sleeping form. Her room was dimly lit,

casting soft shadows over her features. I wished I could climb into bed with her, hold her close and comfort her.

Just as I was about to turn away, Noelle stirred, sleepily reaching for something on her bedside table. I held my breath, my heart pounding in my chest. She held the note I'd left for her, the one that carried my heart in its words. She squinted at it in the dim light and then sighed.

I watched as a tear slipped down her cheek, breaking me into a thousand pieces. I wanted to wipe it away, to make her forget the pain she was feeling, but all I could do was stand outside her window and silently promise her I would make it better.

As she finally drifted off to sleep, clutching the note to her chest, I felt a sense of hope. Even though she didn't know it was me, she held onto the words I'd written, finding some solace in them. It gave me the courage to keep doing what I was doing, to keep protecting her from the shadows, waiting for the right moment to step into the light.

My phone buzzed again, pulling me away from my thoughts. It was Rocco.

Rocco: Just dropped the bastard off. I think he got the message.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

Maxwell: Good. He won't be bothering Noelle again.

Rocco: You can't protect her from the world, Max.

His words hit me hard. I knew he was right, but I couldn't stop trying.

Maxwell: Maybe not. But I'll die trying.

Rocco: You're a damn fool. But you're a good man, Max. I hope one day you'll see that.

I didn't respond, my eyes back on Noelle's window. His words echoed in my mind, adding to the turmoil I felt. I knew I was walking a thin line, playing a dangerous game. But when it came to Noelle, I would risk everything.

Rocco: Anyway, I'm heading home. You sure you're okay?

Maxwell: Yeah, I'm good. Thanks, man.

Rocco: Anytime. Just remember, this can't go on forever.

I stared at the message, the truth in his words gnawing at me. I knew he was right. One day, I would have to face Noelle, tell her everything. The thought terrified me. But for now, I'd keep my secrets, keep protecting her.

For Noelle, I would face any danger, bear any burden. As I turned away from her window, I took one last glance at her

sleeping form, whispering into the night, “I’ll always be there for you, Noelle. Always.”

And with that, I walked away, back to my lonely existence, praying for a day when I could share my life with Noelle. Until then, I would continue to love her from afar, bearing the pain that came with it. She was worth every bit of it.



Chapter Three

Noelle

I slept like the dead. After laying in bed and crying like an idiot, I spent the rest of the night flipping through my old letters. With the holiday right around the corner, my mother was working overtime to ensure we had the best holiday ever. She was obsessed with Christmas and my dad did everything he could to encourage her obsession. Today was a baking day. With one week left until the holiday, there was a list of cookies that needed to be baked, pies to be made, and because my mother was a literal saint, no one said no when she put out a call for help.

I walked in the front door to the smell of sweet honey and vanilla. The house was warmer than normal, which likely meant the oven had likely been running for hours.

“You’re here!” Mom’s voice was a symphony of excitement and relief that echoed through the house. Her giddiness was contagious, causing a lazy smile to stretch across my tired face.

“Yeah, sorry it’s late. I slept in,” I apologized, shedding my coat and scarf in the hallway. The familiar clamor of my family’s chatter filled the air as I moved deeper into the house.

As I drifted through the living room, I paused to say hello to my dad and three brothers. My baby niece Belle was bundled up in my brother Nick’s arms, and he handed her over to me with a sulky expression. I smiled at the giggling baby in my arms as I entered the kitchen where Kyra, my sister-in-law, was stationed in the corner, gently rubbing her heavily pregnant belly.

I leaned in to give Kyra a gentle kiss on the cheek, mindful not to jostle Belle too much. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m about to burst open like a stuffed pig,” Kyra replied.

“A beautiful stuffed pig!” my brother Jack chimed in from the living room, his voice brimming with humor and affection.

Kyra rolled her eyes in response, and I couldn’t help but smile at the sweet dynamic between them. They were childhood sweethearts and had rekindled their relationship last Christmas. The love they shared was tangible, akin to a heartwarming Hallmark movie.

I passed Belle over to her mother, Ansley, when she entered the kitchen and took a seat at the counter. Mom pushed a pile of dough toward me, her blue eyes sparkling with maternal love.

“Make one-inch balls with that, will you?”

I smiled up at her and no sooner than I got started, Eve started in on questions about how I was doing.

“I’m fine, really.”

“Are you sure, honey? I mean, we love to have you here, but if you need some time for yourself, we will understand.”

“I love you, mom, but that’s the biggest lie ever,” I replied, prompting a ripple of laughter to move through the kitchen.

“I’m okay. Honestly, I don’t think I even liked Andrew that much. It was just the whole idea of a happily ever after that I

was drawn to.”

“I never liked that boy much. He always caused problems when he was younger.”

“Still does,” Holly said. “I heard he’s been a complete asshole of a realtor. Charging all sorts of fees to people relocating into town.”

“I kind of suspected as much.”

“Listen, you will find the perfect man. It might take some time, but everyone is destined to share their life with a partner.”

My mom’s overly positive attitude was something I loved, but also something that was driving me a little crazy right now. We worked in the kitchen until around noon. A handful of my foster siblings came and went, and Jack and Nick took their wives home early. With Belle still being so little and Kyra ready to pop, it wasn’t surprising. The only ones missing from the bunch were Kane and Trinity, but they were due in from the city in a few days. There was no question about whether people would show for the holidays, it was only ever when.

I excused myself and made my way up to my old room. It was great being around family, but it was also loud and hard to maintain a cheerful face for so long. Being back in my old room was like stepping into a time capsule of my younger self. The faded posters of pop bands and actors that I’d swooned over still adorned the walls, and an array of books still graced the shelves. I flopped onto the bed, the soft floral comforter

wrapping me in its familiar scent as I stared at the ceiling, dotted with glow-in-the-dark stars I'd stuck up there years ago.

I had spent a lot of my childhood in this very room, ruminating on the cruelties of adolescence. Being a bit larger than my peers had given me a distinct disadvantage in the social circles of our small town. The kids at school were merciless with their snide remarks and outright bullying. Yet, despite the emotional scars those years left, they were also interspersed with memories of unexpected kindness from strangers and the unwavering love and support of my family.

My brothers, despite their occasional immaturity, were fiercely protective of me. They'd step in when the bullies grew too bold, often landing themselves in detention or even the principal's office. But it wasn't just their readiness to come to my defense that comforted me. It was their wordless acceptance of me, exactly as I was, that truly made me feel loved. It was as though they instinctively knew that my struggles ran deeper than the surface level insults flung at me in the hallways. And for that, I was eternally grateful.

A soft knock at the door jerked me out of my contemplative state, followed by its quiet creaking as it opened. Wiping the tears that had silently trailed down my cheeks, I sat up to see Max stepping into the room. His presence was like a salve to my aching heart.

“Hey Elfie, how you holding up?”

I scrambled into a sitting position and wiped my face as I looked up into his dark eyes. The small smile that was just for

me made my heart race like it always had. He didn't bother to wait for a response but instead crawled into bed next to me and pulled me into his chest. I took in a deep breath of his scent and immediately the sadness that had invaded my soul disappeared.

“I'm better now. I didn't know you were coming.”

“Mom called and told me I didn't have a choice. I had to finish up on a car, but Rocco is closing for me.”

Max had been part of our lives since I was twelve. He had been a troubled teenager, introduced to our family through a mentoring program my father was involved in. Yet it didn't take long for him to integrate into our familial chaos, thanks to my mom's tireless efforts and her insistence that he was one of her own.

Despite his rocky past, Max had turned his life around and now ran his own business. His transformation had always inspired me, but there was also something else about him. A magnetic pull that I'd felt ever since I was a teenager. It was an unspoken understanding, a quiet resonance that seemed to vibrate between us whenever we were in the same room.

“I'm happy you're here. I've missed you.” His breath caught in his chest and I looked up at him to find a pained expression on his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I'm more worried about you than anything.”

“Eve told you what happened.”

“She did.”

“I feel like I should be mad at her for blabbing to everyone, but it’s hard to be mad at Eve.”

He laughed, “Oh I know, she’s more like mom than she’s willing to admit. Besides, she’s not blabbing to strangers. We are a family. It’s different.”

There it was, that reminder that Max and I were family. I spent years ignoring the pull I had to him. It wasn’t right to have a crush on your foster brother, but it didn’t stop my heart from yearning for him to become something more. It was my mind that set me straight every time. He was older than me, not by that much, but old enough that my twenty-three-year-old self recognized I had nothing to offer him. I was teaching at the local high school, barely making rent and regularly making the worst decisions of my life.

“I guess it is different.”

“What did you see in this guy, anyway?”

“I’m just tired of being alone. I know I’m still young, but I want more out of life. I want everything that Jack, Nick and Kane have. I just want to be happy.”

Max’s arms tightened around me, “You don’t need someone else to make you happy Elfie, you just need to be happy with yourself. You are the most amazing person I know, capable of anything you set your mind to, but every time you have a setback, you forget how fierce you are.”

The use of his nickname for me made me smile. “You always know just what to say to make me feel better.”

I felt his lips on the top of my head and held my breath as he placed a kiss there. I stayed still as I could and closed my eyes, imagining what it would be like if things were different between us. If our childhood hadn't made us part of the same family but we had met by chance. Certain I was thinking too much into some friendly words from my brother, I pushed up and went to stand.

“Come on, if I don't head back down to help mom in the kitchen, she will make all her lovingly passive aggressive comments about how much she had to do on her own.”

“Yeah, I walked right past Dad, Jacob, and Andre outside chopping firewood. I'm sure I'll hear shit about not helping, but I wanted to check on you first.”

I stood there for longer than I should have and smiled at the man who was now sitting on the edge of my childhood bed. He was too freaking hot to be this nice, and I was having a harder time than ever, not thinking about all the fantasies I had over the years. He stood and pulled me into one last hug before we made our way back downstairs. I walked toward the kitchen and he went straight to the backdoor and outside to help everyone.

Christmas was a huge production around here and throughout the entire holiday, most of our extended family, foster siblings, friends of the family and coworkers would stop by the Saint household to wish everyone the best and

celebrate. I normally loved everything about it, but this year my heart was struggling as badly as my mind was. Out of all our family members, it was clear from the beginning that I would be the one to maintain most of the family traditions. My brothers couldn't be bothered, and Eve and Holly weren't as into it all as I was. My mom shared recipes and menus with me. We would talk extensively about all the preparations, and it brought us closer year after year. However, as I stood at the counter rolling out a pie crust and watching Max out the window with my dad, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if I never found my person. The sun rose and set in my father's eyes for my mother. That was precisely the reason he was sixty-two years old and outside, slinging an ax and cutting wood for her fireplaces. She loved them and he loved her. Something that special was scarce, but growing up in this house, I knew it was possible.

Max stopped to take his coat off and looked up at me in the window. His smile grew wide when I gave him a little wave. He winked at me as he picked his ax back up and I nearly melted. Fantasizing about my foster brother while standing in the kitchen with my mother and sisters was a recipe for disaster.

“Mom, I think I'm going to head out after making this last pie.”

“Are you sure you don't wait to stay for dinner, honey?”

I looked back out the window at the one man who I couldn't have even if he wanted me and nodded. “Yeah, it's getting late

and I have to finish up some shopping in the morning.”

“Max said he hasn’t even started shopping yet,” Holly said as she put another batch of cookies in the oven. “I swear, I wonder sometimes how men make it through life at all.”

“Noelle, why don’t you take him with you? I’m sure he could use the help, and don’t forget you all are only buying for the kids this year.”

My heart skipped a beat at the idea of spending the day with Max. Every year my mom said the same thing and every year we didn’t listen. We bought for the kids, sure, but we also tried to find something special for her.

“Sure, I’ll see if he wants to come with me.”

I filled the pie with apples and sealed it with a top crust before placing it on the counter, lining it up for when the oven was free. After I washed up and said my goodbyes, I climbed into my car only to be startled by a knock on my driver’s side window. I rolled it down and smiled.

“Can I help you?”

“Mom says I’m supposed to go shopping with you tomorrow. What time do you want me to come get you?”

“I can just pick up whatever you need and you can pay me back.”

“I want to come.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since we’ve hung out and I missed you too, Elfie.”

I smiled up at him like the fool that I was. “How about ten?”

“So late?”

“I happen to know you are a complete grouch in the morning and never wake up early, so yeah, I’d rather wait until ten than deal with your sleepy ass.”

“Fair enough. Ten it is.”

He stepped back from the car and I rolled up my window and pulled out while he stood in our parents’ driveway watching me go.



Chapter Four

Maxwell

I pulled up outside of Noelle's townhouse in my truck nearly at eleven. I didn't mean to be late, but I also couldn't pull myself away from her window last night. Holding her in my arms the day before was a dream come true, but there was a reason I tried not to physically console her anymore. My body and my mind were on two different paths. My mind knew how fucked up it was to be obsessed with my little sister, but my body didn't care. I never really looked at Noelle as my sister. Not in the same way I looked at Eve or Holly. From the day I walked into my parents' house, I knew she would one day be mine. I'd never admitted to anyone, but she was the reason I denied my parents as long as I did about moving in and making them my family. I didn't regret my decision, hell, if I stayed on the path I was on at eighteen, I would probably be dead right now, but it certainly complicated things for me.

Noelle came out of her front door in a tight red dress with black knee-high boots and a black leather bomber jacket. I bit my lip as I watched her make her way to me, trying to fend off the thoughts I was having about peeling those boots off her body and worshipping her. I leaned over and opened the passenger door from where I was sitting as she approached. She caught it and smiled that damn smile that made me melt before climbing up into my truck and leaning over to kiss my cheek.

“You made it.”

“Did you doubt me?”

With a small laugh, she said, “Yep.”

“Oh, little Elfie, when will you learn I’d never let you down?”

The drive into the city was calm and familiar. For years, we would do our Christmas shopping together and it felt perfect to have her next to me. She sang along to Christmas songs and we laughed about every adorable thing my niece had done the day before. If you didn’t know any better, you never would have guessed she spent one too many nights crying herself to sleep. Noelle put on the perfect mask for everyone around her, but I could see through it. The sadness seeped in when you least expected it and it broke my heart. My obsession with her grew at the same speed as my need to make her happy. When she was at work, I’d sneak inside with the spare key she gave my parents and moved some of my letters from the box she had in her closet to the nightstand. I would pick out one or two that I knew would bring a smile to her face when she read them before bed. Every night I wanted her thinking of me as she drifted off to sleep.

“Max, did you hear me?”

“No, sorry, I was lost in my head.”

“Do you want to drop me off and then meet up when I’m done?”

“Done doing what?”

“Wow, you really weren’t listening.” Her hand reached out and patted my knee. It took everything in me not to catch it in

mine and force it to stay.

“I guess not, sorry.”

“I said I still need an outfit for Christmas Eve so I can get that done first, then come meet you and we can get started on the kids.”

“No, I want to come.”

“You want to come? Won’t you be bored?”

I smiled over at her as I pulled into the mall parking lot. “Bored watching you try on a million dresses and decide that you hate them all? Nope. Sounds like the perfect afternoon.”

We started at the largest department store and I had been sitting in a seat just outside the dressing room for longer than I would have liked. I told Noelle I wanted to see everything on her, but she still hadn’t come out.

I stood up and walked down the hallway of the bustling dressing room, much to the dismay of the women in there. “Noelle, where are you?”

“Max? You can’t be in here!”

I heard her voice from the last little room on the right and knocked on the door. She cracked it open, holding a strapless dress up to cover her breasts. I swallowed hard as I looked into the mirror behind her. The dress was unzipped and I could see she no longer had a bra on. Not only that, the zipper came down far enough that I stole a glimpse of her red lace thong and the top of her gorgeous ass.

“This better be an emergency,” she said through gritted teeth.

“It is. I needed proof of life since you still hadn’t come out to show me anything.”

“Nothing fit. Now go back out there and wait or I’ll meet you later.”

Her little temper was adorable. “You’re cute when you think you can tell me what to do. Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around and I’ll zip this one up for you.”

Her hand immediately went to cover her backside as if she just realized she was completely on display, but she turned slowly. I placed my hands on her hips to move her right where I wanted her and looked into the reflection in the mirror.

“You really are beautiful, you know that?”

Noelle just stared at me and shook her head slightly as I reached for the zipper at her back. My fingers caressed her warm skin, and I desperately wanted to lean down and kiss her neck, her shoulders, and her back, to reassure her of her beauty. Instead, I pulled the zipper up slowly and let out a little whistle, giving her a wink as she stepped toward the mirror.

“Now I know why you didn’t come to show me the others.”

“Why is that?” she said in a small voice as she ran her hand over the soft fabric and down her side.

“Because this one is perfect. It’s the only one I was meant to see.”

Her eyes caught mine in the mirror and, for the briefest moment, I let myself believe that the softness in her eyes was more than sisterly love. She looked away and back at her reflection. “I don’t know. It feels too tight.”

Against my better judgment, I stepped closer to her and took her hand in mine. I wanted to run my hands over her body but directed her own. “Does it feel too tight, or do you feel it’s too tight?”

Her breath caught as she watched us in the mirror. “It’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s not Noelle, because I think this dress is fucking amazing, and the only thing better is you.”

Her gasp was audible, and I knew in that moment I had fucked up. I dropped her hand and took a step back out of the small enclosed space just as an employee was coming toward me.

“Sir, you can’t be in here.”

Noelle turned, and I looked down at her as I responded to the angry woman, “It’s fine. I’m just leaving.”

I turned and walked out of the dressing room, taking my place back in the chair I had started with. The same chair I probably should have never left because now I was sporting a hard-on like a thirteen-year-old boy and the sound of Noelle’s little gasp was echoing inside my head. I pulled my phone out

and started doom scrolling social media while I waited for her. I tried my hardest not to imagine that sound coming out of her as I thrust my cock in and out of her, but by the time she made it back out, I was a complete fucking mess and she wasn't holding the dress.

“Where is it?”

“I'll find something else. It was nice, but you wouldn't believe the price. I should have looked before I pulled it off the rack.”

Money was one of those things my sweet girl always worried about and it gutted me every time she passed up on something she wanted. I let her walk past me without another word and made a mental note to come back and buy it for her. I just wasn't sure if it was going to be Max, her big brother, giving it to her or her secret admirer tuned stalker.

I made it through the rest of the afternoon, causing no further harm to our relationship. Anytime I was with Noelle, I'd keep her in my line of sight trying to catch glimpses of her and commit them to memory, but today I kept feeling like she was doing the same.

“It's been too long since we've spent time together,” she said as she speared a boring piece of broccoli with her fork at lunch.

“You're right, it has. I didn't realize you had turned into a bunny, though.”

She raised her eyebrow at me and smirked. “I like vegetables.”

“No, you don’t. You eat them because you think you should. You like french fries,” I said as I held one up to her mouth, teasing her with the scent of something that actually tasted like it was worth eating.

Her head shook slightly and the smile she was trying to hold back broke free.

“Come on, take it. You know you want to.”

She licked her lips and then parted them slightly as I pressed forward and touched her bottom lip with the fry. French fries shouldn’t be sexy, but everything about Noelle just did it for me. When her tongue darted out and she licked the end of it, I nearly saw stars. I was smiling like a fool when she gave in and opened her mouth, but the second her lips wrapped around the fry, I realized the fatal mistake we both had made. My fingers were caught in the mix and the feeling of the soft pull of her lips on my skin went straight to my cock. I groaned at the same time her eyes went wide and she pulled back, covering her mouth with her hand as she swallowed.

“I– uh–”

“Alright, so how is everything? Need a refill on that soda?”

The waitress’s irritating voice was like ice water to my cock. The timing was perfect, and I reached into my pocket to pull out my wallet handing her my card.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Here, you can cash us out whenever you are ready.”

The waitress took my card and left. I looked back to Noelle and a look of both confusion and hurt crossed her face before she plastered on the fake smile she gave so many people. I had to get some distance between the two of us before I did something stupid and hurt her unintentionally.

“I should get to the shop and check on Rocco.”

“Yeah, right, I didn’t realize it was so late already.” She reached for her phone, looking at the time before pushing her plate away and reaching for her purse.

“You should finish.”

“I’m good. Are you done?”

I looked down at my plate. The massive burger I ordered was long gone, and all that was left was a few fries. “I am. Let’s have her pack yours up to go. You didn’t eat enough.”

“I ate plenty, and I certainly won’t die if I miss out on some of a meal.”

She laughed at her own self-deprecating joke and I grit my teeth, trying not to correct her. I hated when she made comments like that about herself, but it wasn’t really my place to constantly control her thoughts. I wanted to be the person who helped her remember how amazingly gorgeous she was and the person who reminded her every day how much she was loved, but our situation was complicated. I still didn’t

know if Noelle could look at me as anything more than the older brother who was always there to look out for her.

The incidents that had happened today made me want to believe she'd be open to something more, but once time and space separated us again, I'd realize I was just looking into things a little too hard and hoping a little too much that our destiny could be different.

"Noelle," I started, my gaze flicking to her as I drummed my fingers on the edge of the table. "When was the last time you ate a full meal?"

Her eyes flicked up at me, a soft shade of surprise blooming in them, before she returned her gaze to the uneaten food on her plate. "What does it matter?"

"It matters because I care," I said, a hint of exasperation creeping into my voice. "You always push your food around on your plate, rarely eating more than a few bites. It's not healthy."

She looked back up at me, her brown eyes hardening slightly. "I don't need you to babysit me, Max. I'm an adult."

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. I let out a sigh, trying to control the frustrated thoughts in my head. "I know you're an adult, Noelle, but you're not taking care of yourself. And as someone who cares about you, it's hard for me to watch."

Her gaze softened, but her voice remained steely. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm capable of managing my own

health. I've had a lot going on lately, that's all."

"I get it," I said, rubbing the back of my neck awkwardly, "But you've got to understand my worry, too. I've seen you go through some rough patches, and I can't stand to see you in that state for long. You deserve happiness."

She looked down again, her shoulders dropping as if she had the weight of the world on them. She remained silent, stirring her uneaten food with her fork.

"Noelle, I-"

"I don't want to talk about it, Max," she cut me off, her voice breaking slightly. I clenched my jaw, swallowing the lump in my throat. I wanted to comfort her, to hold her, but I didn't want to cross any boundaries. The silence that hung in the air was heavy and palpable. We avoided each other's gaze until the waitress returned, handing me back my card and placing the box for her uneaten food on the table.

"Let's go," Noelle said abruptly, getting up from her chair and heading towards the exit. I gave the waitress a tight smile before following her out.

The drive back to her place was silent. The tension seemed to thicken with each passing minute. When we arrived, she got out of the truck without saying a word, grabbing her shopping bags and the box of her uneaten lunch.

As she headed towards her front door, I couldn't hold back anymore. I jumped out of the truck, closing the distance between us in a few long strides.

“Elfie, wait.” I grabbed her arm gently, turning her to face me. She looked up at me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She shook her head, pulling her arm out of my grasp. “It’s not your fault, Max. It’s just... everything feels overwhelming right now.”

“Then let me help you,” I pleaded, feeling my heart tighten at the sight of her, so defeated. “You don’t have to go through life alone.”

She gave me a weak smile, placing a hand on my cheek. “I know, Max. But this is something I need to figure out on my own. I can’t rely on everyone around me to make me happy.”

I nodded, even though I hated the idea of her fighting her battles alone. I watched as she unlocked her front door and walked inside, leaving me standing on the cold pavement with a fear gnawing at the pit of my stomach. A fear that I was losing her. Losing her to her own struggles and to the inevitable distance growing between us. I didn’t know how to fight it, and it scared me.



Chapter Five

Noelle

My mind was playing tricks on me. It had to be. I was standing in my bedroom looking down at the box that had been delivered. Inside was the silky dark green strapless dress I'd tried on at the department store and laying on top of it was a pink envelope with my name on it.

Noelle,

This one was my favorite. When you wear it, think of me.

I looked around my room as if someone was playing tricks on me. Max was the only person who had seen me in the dress. I suppose it was possible my secret admirer had been there and saw me pull it off the rack, but that seemed like a stretch. It had been two days since our shopping spree and I still couldn't get my mind to stop thinking about what had transpired between us. His hands on me in the dressing room were only the start. The words he said to me and the groan as my lips made contact with his fingers were all signs of something more. Weren't they?

I lifted the dress out of the box and held it up to myself in front of the mirror. I closed my eyes, remembering the feel of his touch on my back. The way his fingers seemed to caress my skin as he pulled up the zipper and the need that ran through my body was suddenly too much. I hung the dress in the closet and put the envelope in my nightstand before pulling out my favorite little vibrating wand from the drawer. It was late, but I was needy and for the first time, I let myself imagine

what it would be like if Max was the one who had left me all the notes. I slipped out of my clothes and crawled onto my bed. Then closed my eyes as I spread my legs and pinched my nipples. My mind was racing with everything he could do to me. His rough, calloused hands caressing my body as they had in the dressing room, but this time with intent.

I turned on the little toy to the constant vibration setting I loved and ran it over my breasts and down my belly until I settled it between my folds and over my clit. I was too worked up to edge myself tonight. Too worked up to even play with my other toys. I needed release, and I needed it as fast as I could get it. My hips bucked upward as I slid the wand through my slit, covering it in my wetness. My scent filled my senses, and I cried out as I imagined Max between my thighs, thrusting into me as he massaged my clit. That was the last scene in my mind right before I exploded, calling out his name as I crashed into a wall of sheer pleasure.

I came hard and fast and as I laid there naked with my legs feeling like jelly and my heart racing, I realized I needed more. I turned the toy off and propped one leg up on a pillow and slid my finger between my folds. I circled my clit gently with the slick wetness that remained from my climax. I always needed more, wanted more after the first time I got off. Men I dated never understood. Their priority was the finish line and as soon as I came, they figured they accomplished what they set out to do. They didn't. My body was greedy and as I played with myself like a finely tuned machine, I smiled at the thought that Max would never be like that. He spent his entire

life helping me get everything I wanted out of it. Sure, there were times we weren't as close or he was busy, but I always knew if there was something I needed or wanted, he would be the person to give it to me.

My eyes caught the dress hanging on my closet door and my breath caught at the thought that maybe, just maybe, it was him all along. My second climax was slower to build, and longer to last. I ran my free hand over my breasts and fondled my nipples as I rocked my hips into my hand. Before long, I closed my eyes and pictured Max, laying there next to me sucking on my nipples as his fingers pleased me. I would lie in his arms as my second climax rose and crushed me. He would be the ultimate dream come true. He'd hold me as he did it, tell me everything he loved about me and when I finally came down, he would roll over on top of me, spread my legs and make love to me again.

The visions in my mind were so vivid I couldn't argue with them. I believed in my heart that is exactly how things would go and that belief sent me over the edge. The feeling of love and safety that consumed me, even though he was on the other side of town in his own bed, he set me off in a way I had never experienced before. Instead of screaming out for him, I moaned and writhed under my own fingers as my lips parted and I had nothing left in me but a whisper. His name passed my lips and met my ears and I smiled.

I let out a sign and stretched my body before sitting up to take a shower, and that's when I saw it. There was someone outside my window. At least I thought it was someone. A

shadow moved in the night behind my blinds and I cursed myself for never fixing the corner that had broken when it fell shortly after I moved in. It was a small hole, but certainly enough for someone to look through. Honestly, I never even thought about it anymore, but now I had to wonder what the person who was standing out there saw. I ran for the bathroom and covered myself in my robe before pulling the blinds open and looking outside to look for a clue. Something that told me I wasn't crazy, but there was nothing. The street was quiet because it was so late. There was no one in sight and I stood there for longer than I should have been trying to figure out if I lost my mind or if the man I had been fantasizing about for years was closer than I imagined.

I pulled the blinds shut and got in the shower. My mind was a wreck. I had to know if it was Max. But now I didn't know if I wanted it to be the stranger of my dreams or him. The longer I stood under the hot water, the more and more I realized it was Max I was hoping for, and I was about to do one of the dumbest things I've ever done in my life. I got out and got dressed. What should have been a relaxing shower before bed turned into a race to get out of the house. I had to see him. I needed to know if he was the one that left so many words of affirmation for me at the times when I needed it most and more than anything, I needed to know if he was the one who promised I was his.

I raced to the shop and used the key he gave me years ago to get inside. I never had a need for it until now, but he said he wanted me to have it in case I ever needed him so I kept it in

the glove box of my car. When I got inside, I went straight to the stairs that lead to his apartment upstairs. His bike and truck were both parked out front, but that didn't say much. He could easily have made his way back here while I was in the shower. I stood in front of his door with the key in my hand and made the first smart decision of the night as I knocked rather than barged in on his personal space.

There wasn't a sound behind the door. I knocked again, harder this time.

“Max, I know you are here. Open up.”

“I'm coming Elfie, hang tight.”

His voice sounded like he was getting closer and when he opened the door, I nearly fell over. Standing in front of me was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. His dark hair was damp and dripping down his bare chest. Tattoos covered his body with the most intricate designs that wrapped over his shoulders, down his chest and eventually trailed below the waistband of the black sweatpants he was wearing.

“I... I'm sorry. It's late... I...”

Fuck, I sounded like a complete idiot, and it was clear he was in the shower. Could he have made it back and showered, too? Maybe I was as crazy as I thought I was, maybe it wasn't Max after all. A chill ran through my body at the thought that it wasn't him, but a stranger who didn't really know me at all. Suddenly, the secret admirer that I had grown to love weirded me out instead of giving me the comfort I adored. I took a step back and nearly tripped, but he reached for me.

“Noelle, what’s wrong?”

He held my arms with his large hands, and my skin burned where we touched. Something had shifted between us and I didn’t know what to think about it.

“I’m fine. I shouldn’t be here,” I said as I shook my head.

“Yes, you should. Something happened. Tell me what’s going on.”

“You’ll just think I’m crazy. Maybe I am. I need to go home, Max. I have an early morning.”

His hands ran down my arms, and he pulled me into his apartment. “No, you’ll stay here. Something is upsetting you, and until you tell me what’s going on, I’m not letting you leave.”

He reached for the door and closed it behind me. I took in his space and smiled. “I forgot how big it was up here.”

“It’s been a while since you’ve been by.”

“I know.”

He tilted his head to the side, taking me in before leading me to the couch that sat in the middle of the oversized studio apartment.

“Here, sit down. I’ll get you some water, or do you want something stronger?”

I looked up at his muscular frame and fuck if I didn’t want to lick the drips of water from every muscle that shown as he moved.

“Something stronger.”

He nodded, and I watched him go to the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. To his credit, he also reached for a bottle of water and handed it to me first.

“Drink up.”

I couldn't help but do as he told me. My need to please him and make him happy ran deep within me. It was a desire that took root when we were kids, and I learned I was one of the few things that brought a smile to his face. I had become addicted to it then, and I never looked back. Once I put back some water, he handed me a shot of whiskey. I looked at it, knowing what a huge mistake it was, but clinked my glass against his and relished the burn as it traveled down my throat and warmed my belly.

“Better?”

“A bit.” I said as I held my glass out and he poured me another. I wasn't much of a drinker, but anytime I drank, he was almost always with me. Either he and Rocco would come out with me and my friends, or he'd run into us while he was already out. Another coincidence I never realized until now. Leaning back on the couch, I stared at him, trying to figure out what it meant that I hoped beyond hope that he really was who I thought he was. But my fucked up mind kept telling me there was no way that was the case. First, he was fucking hot as hell and could snag just about any woman in Whitewood, and second, he was my foster brother. He didn't like me like that, did he?

“Noelle?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did when I came here, but now I’m not sure.”

“Is it because it’s me? I could call Eve or Holly.”

“No. It’s okay. I guess I just think maybe I’m crazy, that’s all. It will sound weird if it’s not true.”

I threw back the second shot of whiskey and held my glass out to him. “More.”

His eyebrows raised, but he took my glass and poured me another.

“You know you can tell me anything.”

“Can I?” I asked as he drank another shot and poured himself one.

“Always.”

“But you can’t tell me anything, can you?”

His hand froze as it was moving to put the bottle back on the table.

“Why do you say that?”

“I always feel you are hiding something from me and now I’m wondering if I know why or if I’m crazy.”

“What happened tonight, Noelle? And what does it have to do with me?”

“Probably nothing.”

“Tell me what happened. I’m not going to ask again.”

Max reached and took the glass from my hand, replacing it with a bottle of water.

“There was someone outside my window tonight.”

His face hardened instantly, a scowl deepening the lines of his forehead. His grip tightened around the neck of his glass, but he didn’t take another sip. Instead, he leaned forward on his knees, his intense gaze locking onto me with a fierceness that was both comforting and intimidating.

“Did you see who it was?” he asked, his voice low, a dangerous edge creeping into his tone.

“No, I only saw a shadow, a movement. By the time I opened the blinds, there was no one in sight.”

The room fell into silence, the hum of the heater the only sound to fill the thick tension. His fist clenched and unclenched around his glass, the white-knuckled grip betraying his calm demeanor. This was Max, always the protector, but seeing him so clearly bothered by this news was a cold splash of reality. Maybe I wasn’t as safe as I thought I was. I pretended for years whoever left me the letters would never hurt me. If it wasn’t Max, then who was it? And what did they really want from me?

“You should’ve called me right away, Noelle.” His anger wasn’t directed at me, but at the situation, I knew that. Still, it stung.

“I...” I began, but words got caught in my throat. The truth was, I was scared. Scared of what he might think of me, scared of what he might say. “I was afraid you would think I’m crazy.”

He sighed, running a hand through his damp hair. “Crazy or not, if you’re in danger, you call me, understand? No matter what.”

I nodded, unable to meet his gaze. The intensity in his eyes was too much, too revealing. It was like he was seeing into my soul, picking apart every secret I had ever kept from him. I clutched the bottle of water in my hands, my mind reeling with fear and a different sort of anxiety.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” His voice was softer now, understanding replacing the edge that had been there a moment ago. I glanced up at him, and the gentleness in his eyes pulled at my heart. He was more than just my foster brother, he was my friend, my confidante, my sanctuary. I had to trust him. I needed to trust him.

I swallowed, pulling my knees up to my chest. “There’s been someone leaving me notes, gifts even... and tonight, there was a dress. The dress I tried on when we were at the department store together.”

He took in my words, his gaze never leaving my face. “The dress... that green one you liked?”

I nodded. “Yes, that one. And there was a note with it saying to think of him when I wear it.”

There was a pause. “And you think I’m this person?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I felt my cheeks burn under his scrutiny. “I don’t know,” I admitted, my voice trembling slightly. “It’s crazy, isn’t it? It couldn’t be you... could it, Max?”

The room was charged with electricity as his gaze locked onto mine. There was a storm brewing in those dark eyes of his, emotions I couldn’t decipher. He looked torn, caught between a confession and denial, and it made my heart pound in my chest. The fear of the unknown, of the dangers lurking in the shadows, seemed to pale in comparison to the fear of what his answer could mean.

We were teetering on the edge, a single word away from tipping us over into the unknown.



Chapter Six

Maxwell

My heart seized in my chest. She saw me and I couldn't lie to her, could I? Here she was outright asking me and I still couldn't bring myself to answer her, so I deflected.

“You're certain you saw a person out there tonight?”

“I don't know, really. It was more like a shadow.” Her voice was quiet, but her gaze was steady.

I reached for the bottle and poured myself another shot while pointing at the bottle of water in her hand. She drank it as I poured myself another shot and threw it back before pouring a fourth. I knew I was making a mistake, but I couldn't slow my heart and calm the fear of losing her that had been running through me. If she caught me on her own and I didn't have a chance to explain, she would never forgive me.

I fell back onto the couch next to her and stared out the windows that glowed with the Christmas lights of our little downtown. “Okay, maybe it wasn't a person, but I don't want you going home tonight. You'll stay here and in the morning I'll fix your blinds, then we will figure out what to do about the letters. ”

Noelle's head dropped to my shoulder. “Thank you.”

I lifted my arm and pulled her into my side, loving the scent of her. “You don't have to thank me.”

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. Her hand was on my chest as I held her to me, but when she started stroking my skin, I felt like I was burning up inside. I couldn't bring myself to stop her, either. I took in a sharp breath as her fingers

slipped down my chest and to my waist. The sound of it caused her to freeze mid-motion. She pushed herself up and looked at me with desire and fear in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Her voice cut off, but her lips kept moving as if she ran out of words without realizing it. I reached for her chin and let my fingers run softly down the side of her neck. Looking at her now, I could see it. So many times I convinced myself it was my desire that was clouding my judgment with Noelle, but there was no doubt in that moment she was feeling it too.

“Don’t apologize to me.”

I felt the muscles in her neck contract as she swallowed, and her lips parted.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Noelle.”

Her eyes went wide, and she tried shaking her head no, but I still had a hold of her.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“You can do anything you want to do. You’re an adult now and you can make decisions on your own.”

“But they are always bad.”

I shook my head slowly, “No, they aren’t and you already know that deep in your heart.”

The pulse under my thumb quickened as I traced the contour of her throat. The world outside the window seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of us.

“Noelle,” I started, my voice sounding more intimate than I intended, “Your decisions are your own, no one else’s. You’re capable and smart.”

“But what if...” she started, her voice barely above a whisper, “What if this decision is more than just a decision, Max? What if it changes everything?”

My eyes searched hers, hunting for the words she couldn’t say. “Some changes... they’re worth it.”

“But what if I get it wrong? What if I misunderstand something, and then... and then...”

She couldn’t finish her sentence, her eyes filled with fear.

“There’s a chance you might,” I told her, “But what’s life without risks? We make mistakes, we learn, we grow. It’s a cycle. You don’t have to be afraid.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “I can’t lose you.”

“Who said anything about losing?” I whispered, my thumb brushing over her lower lip.

“I... I’m scared,” she admitted. “Scared of what I’m feeling for you.”

“What are you feeling?” I dared to ask. Her body tensed, but she didn’t look away. She remained silent, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths.

I moved a bit closer, closing the gap between us. Her eyelashes fluttered, her gaze lingering on my lips before she

met my eyes again.

“You can tell me.”

“Desire...” she started, her voice trembling,

My heart thumped at her confession, a surge of relief flooding me. She wasn't indifferent.

“Desire?” I echoed, the word hanging heavy in the silence of the room.

“Yes,” she whispered. Her eyes seemed vulnerable, raw, “I think... oh hell Max, I don't know what to think.”

Her confession echoed in my ears, my pulse pounding in sync with the word. Could desire turn into love? The one thing I had wanted to hear for so long.

“Noelle,” I cupped her face in my hands, my thumbs gently wiping away the tears that had slipped from her eyes. “I...” My words were heavy, filled with years of suppressed feelings. “I want you.”

A moment of silence hung between us as our confessions lingered in the air, binding us in a way we had never been before.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper. “Because if this is a misunderstanding, I can't... I can't handle it.”

“I've never been surer of anything in my life,” I told her honestly, my gaze never wavering from hers.

I had moved closer to her without even realizing it. So close that I could feel her warm breath on my lips and all I had to do was shift forward slightly to capture her sweet mouth with mine. She bit her bottom lip and the sight of it broke all control I had. A growl from deep inside my chest rumbled out of me as I not only pressed my lips to hers, but pushed her back onto my couch and covered her body with my own. The second our lips touched, I lost all my senses to her. I was consumed by her as her arms wrapped around me and her legs parted, making room for me to settle myself in between them, pressing my hard cock to her center before I thought to stop myself.

“Fuck, Max.” Her words came out in panting breaths as I kissed my way down her neck and along the tops of her large breasts that had been teasing me since she stepped inside my door.

“Elfie, tell me to stop. I need you to tell me no,” I begged like the lovesick fool that I was.

“Never.”

My mind was shattered and suddenly, nothing else mattered. I reached for the waistband of her pants, desperate to taste her. Watching her earlier tonight was the worst kind of torture and I already beat the fuck out of my cock in the shower as soon as I got home, but it wasn't enough. It was never enough. I needed all of her.

I pulled her boots from her along with her pants, then I lifted her black thong to my face, taking in her scent. “These

are mine.”

Noelle’s face went from shock to pure joy as I maneuvered our position on the couch so she was sitting up and I kneeled on the floor in front of her.

“You have no idea how long I have wanted to taste you.”

Her eyes never left me as I propped her legs up over my shoulders and ran my tongue through her already slick folds.

“Fuck!” she screamed out as her fingers gripped my hair and she held me to her pussy. I sucked on her sweet little clit as I ran my fingers around her opening, dipping in only enough to tease her. My girl loved to edge, but I didn’t know if I had it in me. My cock was so impatient that I hardly had any control over it. Noelle’s legs tightened around me as her body shook and the sounds that came from her were enough to make me come in my pants like a horny teenager. If I didn’t feel the pain of her pulling my hair, then I would have pinched myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. I ran my fingers over her thick thighs, licking her gently as her body calmed and she opened her eyes to gaze down at me.

“That was...”

“Amazing.” I said as I stood, reaching for her hands and pulling her up to me. I held her close, keeping her shaky legs from giving out. “Noelle, I—”

Her finger came up to my lips to quiet me. “Please don’t. Please don’t tell me this was a mistake.”

The fear of rejection in her eyes caused so much pain in my heart I couldn't speak, so instead I covered her lips with mine before pulling her towards my bed and removing what was left of her clothes.

"You are a damn dream come true." I murmured into her ear after crawling up next to her.

"This is a lot."

"I know, but it's not a mistake. If you want me to stop, you need to tell me. It will be hard as fuck, but I will. I don't want you to hate me."

Her hand came up to the side of my face. "I could never hate you."

What should have been a reassuring statement left me with fear in the pit of my stomach. She could hate me, she probably would once she learned everything I had done. She had outright asked me if I were the one leaving her letters and I'd ignored her question, instead distracting her with how badly I needed her. How could she ever forgive me? I shook my head, clearing the visions of losing her, and focused back on the beautiful woman in my bed.

Noelle's hand carefully slid between us as she looked up at me for reassurance.

"Can I touch you?"

"Yes."

I couldn't help but grind my hard cock into her hand the second she ran it over me. Even with my sweatpants on, every

touch from her felt amazing.

“You’re sure this is okay?”

“It’s not okay, it’s fucking amazing.”

I caught her mouth with mine as she continued to run her hands over my body. The pain of taking things slowly was the only thing that kept me grounded. I ran my fingers over her hip and up her side, but her body tensed when I reached her belly.

“Not there,” she panted out between breaths.

I pulled back, looking. “Why?”

Tears sprung up in her eyes faster than I could stop them. “Please, Max, not now.”

I pushed her onto her back. “Yes, now.”

Her head shook as the tears continued and when her arms went to cover her body, I nearly saw red. All the years my brothers and I spent defending my sweet girl as a kid, followed by all the asshole men who tore her down, left a larger wound than I could have ever imagined.

“Don’t hide yourself from me.”

I pulled her hands from her, and she tried to turn away from me. I caught her chin and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are.”

She watched me carefully as I moved my way over her body. I took her breasts into my hands, sucking one of her taut

nipples into my mouth as I pinched the other. Her eyes closed, and she let out a small moan.

“Open your eyes, Elfie. I want you to see how much I love your body.”

Noelle did as I asked and I moved further down her. Kissing the soft curve of her belly and her sides as I ran my hands over her soft skin. It wasn't until I felt her hand reach out and touch me I stopped and looked up at her. The love that radiated from her was something I wasn't prepared for. I knew how I felt about her, but the look she gave me at that moment made me wonder if there really was a chance for the two of us.

“You are too good to me,” she whispered.

“I'm not nearly good enough, but I'll try my hardest to prove to you I can give you what you need. I'll remind you every day how beautiful you are. Those negative thoughts that crept in will be a thing of the past because you, my sweet Elfie, should never have had them to begin with.”

I crawled back up her body and slid my fingers between her folds, circling her clit as I lowered my head and sucked her nipple into my mouth. Her back arched, and she groaned.

“It's your turn.”

“Not yet. I want to see you come undone again. It was the most erotic thing I had ever experienced and I can't wait much longer to see it again.”



Chapter Seven

Noelle

I took in the sight of Max as he crawled up next to me. He pulled my body close, positioning himself on his side. He moved my leg over his hip with such deliberation that the simple gesture had me trembling. The sensual ministrations of his hands and mouth threatened to unhinge me completely.

A slow, sultry build of pleasure was standard, but not tonight. Tonight, it was a sprint to ecstasy. I was racing toward an end I didn't want to control. As his fingers moved in sync with his thumb, pressing just right, my body had a will of its own, and it wasn't patient.

"Max... I can't..." My voice was a whisper as I felt myself teetering on the brink. "I'm so close."

His voice was soft and laced with a desire that matched my own. "Then don't hold back, Elfie. Let go."

His words were the catalyst, sending me spiraling into a world of exquisite pleasure. My body shattered the second his teeth closed over my sensitive skin. The combination of pain and pleasure was almost too much to bear. I closed my eyes as the waves slowed and curled my body into his. With one arm, he held me tightly, and the other brushed a piece of hair out of my eyes. I sought refuge in his comforting embrace. His body was a haven.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, his words warming me from the inside.

My fears started to creep in again. The insecurities about my body, about my worth, started to tarnish the perfect moment.

What if he saw this as a mistake? What if he rejected me? The thought was unbearable.

Max's voice jolted me back to the present. "Where'd you go?"

A soft chuckle left my lips. "I'm here, Max. I'm here."

His gaze on me was intense, a burning need evident in his eyes. "You're here physically, yes, but your mind is elsewhere. I keep feeling like I'm losing you."

"I'm sorry, I..."

My apology was cut short by his soft laughter.

"We need to work on that. You apologize too much."

As the conversation took a lighter turn, I couldn't help but laugh along with him. His laughter and happiness were infectious. The sweet sound of it always put me at ease.

His gaze softened, concern lacing his question. "Are you still good, Elfie? Do you want to stop?"

My heart pounded in my chest, but I shook my head. "No. Don't stop. Please, I need this. I need you."

He sighed, relief washing over as the predatory smile that twisted his lips sent a thrill coursing through my veins. He stripped out of the rest of his clothes, and I couldn't pull my eyes away from him. It was the first time I had ever seen him fully bare, and the sight took my breath away. He was magnificent, everything I'd ever imagined and more. I could

see the desire burning in his eyes, the intensity of it mirrored in my own.

Max's voice was husky, sending shivers down my spine. "Come here, baby. I want to watch you ride me."

His instruction made my heart race, but I did as he asked. His touch was electrifying, his hands a sweet torment on my skin. Each touch, each kiss, each intimate exchange only heightened the tension in the room. His shaft lay against his stomach between us and when he pulled me down, the feel of his hardness against my clit felt unbelievable. I rolled my hips and ground myself into him as his hands came up and he gently massaged my breasts. A soft moan escaped my lips as I moved against him, the friction between our bodies lighting a fire that was threatening to consume us both.

"God, you're gorgeous, Noelle," Max breathed out, his eyes glued to me. "I could watch you all night."

I replied by leaning in for a kiss. His hand came up to cup the back of my head, keeping me in place. His tongue teased mine, the taste of myself on his lips intoxicating. I lifted my hips and placed my hands on the mattress by his head while I relished his touch moving down my body. He took his cock in his hand and rubbed the tip against my clit again before finally lining himself up perfectly with my core.

"Take it slow, baby."

His voice was there, but I didn't want to listen. I needed him inside me more than I've ever needed anything before. With

one smooth but swift movement I lowered myself, loving the burn of his thick cock stretching my center.

“Fuck, Max,” I moaned in a breathless whisper as his hands ran up and down my back.

“Too fast,” he grunted as I raised and lowered myself, grinding my clit into his pelvis with each movement. I could barely see straight. Max took one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked on it hard as his other hand slowly wandered over my body. I should be done. There was no reason for my body to rise as quickly to pleasure as it was. Only moments had passed since I got off, and yet here I was again fighting off the inevitable.

“Look at me, Noelle. I want to see your face when you come.”

I lifted my body slightly so I could look him in the eye. His eyebrows were raised in an expression of wonder as my body tingled with excitement.

“Max, I—”

“I know, baby, it’s okay. Just let go.”

I was having a hard time keeping up with the pace and rhythm I had set. Max reached for my hips and thrust up from under me and I reached between us, massaging my clit with my free hand.

“Damn, you are... so... fucking... hot,” he ground out in between thrusts and then finally my body fell over the edge. My mind exploded into thoughts of the future. Thoughts of us

together without the stress of who we were or what was expected from us. Just Max and I together forever. It was a sweet fantasy filled with happiness that burst through me until finally my body came down and reality set in.

My body collapsed, completely spent. I immediately worried I was crushing him, but rather than letting me go, Max wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer to his chest. I could still feel his hard cock pulsing inside me as my sweat covered body finally learned what true relaxation felt like. Max's lips pressed against my temple and then the top of my head. He pulled out of me and rolled to his side.

"I'm not done with you yet." The words sent a chill down my spine as I let him maneuver my body to where he wanted me. "Lay here and let me hold you while I fuck you."

His body curled around mine, with my back to his chest and my head on his outstretched arm. He lifted my leg and slid his fingers through my folds, and then slowly entered me from behind. His hips thrust forward with so much force I could barely stay where he had me. The angle was different, not as deep as before, but his pace was consistent and the movements made everything inside of me feel amazing.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this. Waited for you," he whispered into my ear. "I don't know how I'll let you go now. I don't think I can go back."

I closed my eyes as I listened to his words. Everything he said was everything my heart had felt, but I was too afraid to say.

“My beautiful Elfie. Always there to help everyone but herself. I won’t let that happen anymore. I am here now. I will be the one to take care of you and anything else anyone asks of you. You are my heart, sweet girl, and I took way too long to tell you.”

Tears stung my eyes as Max’s grip on me tightened. His movements got more erratic and his soft words traveled into my ear as his body tensed behind me and I felt him finally let go.

As I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the feeling of rightness that had come over me was slowly dissipating and the fears of what I was about to face came creeping in. Our family would never approve. Jack, Nick and Kane would likely try to kill Max and yet it was my mom I was most worried about. We were days away from Christmas and the thought of ruining what was her favorite time of year was too much. If what Max had said was true, then he had to have thought this through more than I had. My mind never let me believe he would care for me as more than a little sister, and yet here we were with what felt like a complicated world of opportunities ahead of us. Sure, we were both adults and we could make our own decisions, but the decisions we made affected those around us in ways felt like we had yet to even see.

“You are thinking too loud.” Max’s scratchy voice traveled to my ears as his grip tightened and he pulled me closer to him.

“I can’t help it. You know how I can be.”

“I do.”

“What are we going to do, Max? Were you telling me the truth earlier when you said you had been waiting for this? Because if you were, then does that mean you’ve figured out a way to make this work?”

His fingers pushed aside the hair covering my eyes, and he smiled. “One question at a time.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I’d rather start with the ‘Were you telling me the truth’ question.”

“Elfie, I’ve never lied to you, and I never will. I’ve left out details of things, sure. There are stories and parts of my life I haven’t shared with you, but I’ve never lied to you. I have waited for this. In my eyes, you were mine the day I met you.”

“But I was just a kid.”

“And I was eighteen. I couldn’t go near you. I wouldn’t risk it even though my heart felt as if it found my other half. Family is now, and always has been, one of the most important things in our life and I wouldn’t ask you to risk that. Even now.”

“So, if I don’t want everyone to know, you would be okay with that?”

His body stiffened, and he took a deep breath before answering me, “For now. Yes.”

“How long is now?”

“I get that this is complicated, but Noelle, you have to understand. I’m not talking about a simple fling with you. I want you forever and for that to happen, we will need to face our family.”

“Forever?”

“Forever. I want to walk you down an aisle and make you legally mine,” he said as he placed a kiss on my ring finger. “I want to see you round with my children,” he said as his hand moved to my belly. “And I want to shout from the fucking rooftops that you belong to me.”

My breath caught in my throat as I looked up at him and could see the sincerity in his eyes. I opened my mouth to speak, but his finger pressed against my lips. “Let me finish before you say anything. I fucked my life up for a really long time. I made a mess of it when I was younger and I’ve worked really hard to move on from all that, but it’s still part of who I am. My reputation around this town isn’t the best. In all honesty, I should have opened my shop anywhere but here, but I couldn’t leave. I own this building and the business pays for itself. I don’t live a life of luxury and you deserve everything you could desire. I don’t want you to agree to a future with me if you haven’t had a chance to think it through.”

The room was dim, but the Christmas lights from the small tree Max had in the corner illuminated his face. I placed my hand on his cheek. “I don’t need to think this through. This feels right, everything feels right.”

“Still, there is no need to rush things.”

“I just worry about mom. Maybe we wait until after Christmas to talk to her and dad.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“It is. Besides, if we have them on our side, it will be easier to fend off Jack, Nick, and Kane.”

Max grunted as he pushed me back onto the mattress and covered my body with his. “They will kill me, you know.”

“I know, but maybe we can fit in a few more orgasms before I have to plan your funeral.”

His laugh lightened my heart. “Is that all I’m good for?”

As I made a show over thinking about it, his hands slipped between my legs and I lost all hope in any clear thoughts. We spent the rest of our time together laughing and fucking and holding each other until we drifted off to sleep.



Chapter Eight

Maxwell

Over the last three days, bliss had been my constant companion. My beloved Elfie spent her days busy with work and errands in the company of my mother as they both prepped for the impending holiday season. Her nights, on the other hand, were spent with me. I wished our life would always look like this. Still, the reality was far from it; every time she left my place, a wave of cold, panicky sweat washed over me. My mind refused to function without her close, a sensation that felt ludicrous yet entirely necessary. I needed every part of her to be mine and space always made me nervous that she would question what we were doing.

A change in this routine emerged when my brothers had decided to get together for a drink, an invitation I would have ordinarily accepted. However, the prospect of spending time with Noelle was much too enticing, causing me to decline their offer. Honestly, I just didn't want to miss out on any chance I had of her laying naked in my arms. My refusal led to their current invasion of my shop, demanding answers which now had me questioning if my dick was making the decisions lately, or if I was.

"Alright, give it up. Who is she?" Kane's voice echoed over the radio, startling me. I looked up from the engine I was working on to find him, along with our two other brothers, sprawled across my garage. Shaking my head, I strolled over to the workbench, turning down the music.

"Nice to see you too," I retorted dryly.

“Yeah, yeah. What’s the deal, man? I haven’t been in town in months, and you couldn’t be bothered to hang out with us last night? Jack even came,” Kane pressed, eyes narrowing.

I raised my eyebrows at Jack. His wife was on the verge of giving birth, and he had still managed to find time to hang out with the guys. His mildly reckless behavior certainly wouldn’t play in my favor.

“Kyra let you leave for the night?”

“She doesn’t control me.”

Each one of us turned in his direction as Kane let out a laugh. Jack had enough decency to look down and mumbled, “I didn’t stay long.”

“Yeah, but he came. More than I can say about you. So who is she?”

“Why does it have to be a girl?” I evaded, trying to change the topic.

“Because we all know you have no life, and we spotted Rocco at Rosie’s,” Nick chimed in, eyes twinkling with mischief.

My gaze shifted to Rocco, my best friend, who was avoiding eye contact while fiddling with a carburetor.

“Did you now?” I asked, irritation simmering under the surface.

“Come on, just give it up. We’re happy for you, really,” Kane elbowed Nick, who nodded in agreement.

My gaze swept over the three men I once aspired to be like. They were successful owners of a lucrative construction company, and all I had was my garage. I was proud of my business, but compared to them, it didn't seem like much. My competitive nature was often one that tore me down. I never felt like I accomplished enough, which may be one of the reasons I always convinced myself Noelle could do better than me. I just could never get myself to allow her to look.

“Well, thanks. If there's something to share, I will,” I said, hoping to placate them.

“That means he doesn't want to tell us who it is,” Nick muttered under his breath.

I turned to Kane, irritation flaring. “No, that means it's none of your business, not yet, anyway.”

“Ohhh, so he's serious about this one,” Jack said, bumping into Nick's shoulder. To his credit, Nick looked like his temper was about to explode, but instead of turning and knocking out Jack or Kane, he just grunted. Of the three he was never one to mince feelings, and as kids he was always my favorite to scrap with. A fighter to the core, Nick was always a bit of a dick.

The conversation halted when I heard a car screech into the parking lot. My heart sank as I saw it was Noelle. Of all the times to drop by unannounced, she had chosen this moment. I could hear her music blaring over the radio as she parked her car and stepped out, arms laden with food.

“Lunch is- Oh, hey guys, I didn't know you were here,” she stammered, a hint of surprise in her voice as her face drained

of color, and Rocco smirked. An instinctive need to protect her from our brothers' intrusive queries seized me.

"Hey, Elfie, thanks for picking this up while you were out," I said, stepping forward to help her with the bags.

"No problem, I was going to be driving right by Rosie's, so it didn't mind," she said, her voice steady despite the surprise.

"Sorry, if I knew you guys were coming, I would have ordered more," she added.

"It's all good. We were just heading out," Jack said, getting up from his sprawl across my workbench.

"You were?" I asked, my voice a mixture of relief and confusion.

"Yeah, I need to get back to Kyra. We have a doctor's appointment this afternoon," Jack said, alluding to his heavily pregnant wife.

"I can't believe that little munchkin is so close to being here," Noelle replied, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

It was Nick clearing his throat that pulled my attention away from her. The knowing look he shot me through his squinted eyes sent a chill down my spine.

"Mom wants me to bring Trinity by for dinner tonight. Will you be at the house?" Kane asked Noelle, unaware of the tension.

Before answering Kane, she cast a quick glance at me, immediately realizing her mistake. "Uh, yeah, maybe. I have a

lot to get done beforehand, though,” she replied, her cheeks flushing. Luckily, no one noticed but me.

The guys bid their goodbyes and left, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I pulled Noelle into my arms, my body craving her proximity.

“What was that about?” she asked, her voice muffled against my chest.

“They came by to give me shit for not going with them last night,” I confessed.

“I told you that was a mistake,” she murmured.

“Yeah, well, it’s a little too late for it now. Besides, how was I supposed to tear myself away from you?” I replied, my words causing her to giggle.

She looked up at me, her eyes soft, “Listen, I’m not here to tell you how to live your life, but if you don’t want us to get found out, then you are going to need to do a better job of keeping up appearances.”

“Me? You were the one whose eyes shot straight at me when Kane asked if you’d be at the house tonight.”

“I guess that wasn’t a good move, either.”

“Come on, let’s take this upstairs.”

I was keen on spending some private time with her and I climbed the stairwell behind her, my gaze focused on her round ass. My appetite swiftly changed from food to Noelle.

When the door to my apartment closed, I dropped the bag on the counter and pulled her towards my bed.

“What are you doing? We need to eat,” she protested, trying to stifle her laughter as I showered her neck with kisses.

“I am going to eat.”

“Max, don’t you need to get back to work?”

“Rocco can handle it.”

I reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. Her large breasts were bound by another lace bra and they bounced as she laughed and tried to push me away.

“I have an idea.”

The tone of my voice must have caught her attention, because she froze and looked up at me. “You do?”

“How do you feel about ropes?”

“As in, to tie things together?”

“As in, to tie things up.”

“I mean... I have nothing against them. Should I?”

“I want to show you something.”

Once she was settled on my bed, I reached into the drawer of my nightstand and pulled out a few bundles of rope. Noelle raised her eyebrows and a small smirk came over her face. “You want to tie me up?”

“I do.”

“Is this something you do often?”

“Not anymore, but I studied it for a few years and I still practice by creating harnesses and knots on myself. I would keep you safe and I always have these handy.” Her eyes traveled to the pair of shears I pulled out and laid on the bed. “We don’t need to do this now. In fact, I’d rather you think about it and learn some more before we do. I just want to know if it’s something you would be open to someday.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I will think about it. I like the idea of it, and if it’s important to you, then I’d like to learn more before making a decision.”

I pushed aside the rope and crawled onto the bed next to her. A soft laugh escaped her again as I covered my body with hers, pulling away the last of her clothes. “Now that we have that out of the way, let’s get back to what we started.”

“We? I didn’t start anything. I just brought my... I mean you. I just brought you lunch.”

As I looked into her eyes, the slightest glint of fear shone. “I am yours, Elfie. I always have been and I always will be.”

Clothes disappeared faster than I could have imagined, and my sweet girl lowered herself on my hardened cock. The feel of her around me was something I’d never get enough of. I reached into the drawer I had left open and pulled out a small wand while she rocked steadily back and forth, raising her hips slightly and taking from me what she needed. Her eyes went

wide when I twisted the bottom of the wand and the buzzing sound echoed between us. I ran it over her nipples and down her center until I settled it on her clit.

“Oh fuck, Max... yes... that’s perfect.”

Her voice was breathy and desperate, and the sound was something that would forever be ingrained on my soul. I caught one of her breasts in my mouth and sucked hard on her nipple as she panted and groaned until finally I felt her walls clench down around me. Her back arched and my mind went blank. The only thought that was left was how fucking amazingly beautiful my woman was.

My cock exploded, and as I thrust up, emptying myself into her. I couldn’t help but hope that someday soon she would be off the damn birth control that kept me from leaving her with a piece of me. A child between us that would be the beginning of our very own family.

Later that day, my phone was buzzing with incessant messages from my family, thanks to Kane’s loose tongue.

Mom: Just tell me if I need to set another place setting for Christmas Eve.

Maxwell: No need Ma.

Mom: But Kane said you’re seeing someone. Wouldn’t it be nice to invite her?

Exasperated, I threw my phone onto the workbench. The fear of my family finding out about Noelle and me was worse than I had imagined.

Rocco, sensing my tension, walked over. “Did you tell them about Noelle yet?” he asked.

I shook my head, frustration seeping into my voice. “No. You saw my brothers. They are all a bunch of assholes. Kane opened his mouth to my mom, and now she won’t stop texting me.”

Rocco shrugged. “You know how she gets around Christmas time. Are you surprised?”

His words struck a nerve. Was I hiding Noelle because I was afraid of what my family might think? Was I treating her as a secret because I feared losing her? A realization dawned on me— I owed Noelle the truth, not just about my feelings but also about my fears.

I decided it was time for an actual conversation with Noelle, one where we laid all our cards on the table.

Maxwell: Hey, do you have some time to talk?

As I hit send, a wave of anxiety washed over me. But amidst the fear, I also felt a glimmer of hope. We had been living in a beautiful lie, but it was time for an even more beautiful truth.

I paced the length of my workshop, my heart pounding in my chest, my mind running through every possible scenario.

What if she thought I was overreacting? What if she wanted to keep things as they were? What if she wanted more than I could give? The questions kept coming, each one darker than the last. This was new, and we were moving fast but I needed more.

My phone buzzed on the workbench, and I nearly knocked over a can of paint thinner in my hurry to reach it.



Chapter Nine

Noelle

My heart dropped into my stomach and my knees went weak as soon as I saw his text. This was it, the other shoe was about to drop and there was nothing I could do about it. Things had only started a few days ago, but it had been the best few days of my life and now it was all going to come crashing down.

Noelle: I'm with Eve at mom and dad's but I can meet you somewhere.

Maxwell: I don't want to pull you away from them if you are busy.

Noelle: It's fine. I think Eve is leaving soon, anyway. She's acting really weird and mom keeps asking her questions she doesn't seem to want to answer.

Maxwell: Is she okay?

Noelle: I think so. I feel like it has to do with Rio, but she keeps saying it doesn't.

Maxwell: Okay, let me know when you get home. I can meet you there.

I dodged my family as quick as I could without drawing too much attention to my need to get out of there. I texted him to tell him I was on my way home and was surprised that he wasn't at my place when I got there. I spent my time waiting by running around like a chicken with my head cut off,

cleaning things I never clean and stressing out about what was going to happen. I was so distracted by a spot on the baseboard I was scrubbing that I screamed when he was standing over me.

“Everything okay down there?”

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I see that.”

I reached for his outstretched hand and he pulled me to his body, capturing my lips in a kiss. Everything melted away, and it wasn’t until cool air came between us that I opened my eyes and all the fears I had came back with overwhelming dread. Tears rushed to my eyes, and I turned away quickly, hoping he wouldn’t catch them, but I was too late. I felt his hand on my face and his grip on my hip tightened as he spoke.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“You need to stop apologizing to me, Elfie. You didn’t do anything wrong that warrants an apology.”

I nodded, but I still couldn’t come up with words that wouldn’t embarrass the hell out of me.

“Talk to me Elfie, please.”

“You asked to talk. You first.”

Max was quiet for a bit before he stepped back and reached for my hand, pulling me over to the couch. His physical touch was both driving me insane and confusing me at the same

time. If he was here to call things off, then he would keep his distance, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. I could almost convince myself that wasn't what was happening, but the look on his face was not only one of concern but fear.

“What’s going on Max?”

“I wanted to talk to you about everything that’s going on between us. It’s my fault we didn’t have this conversation sooner. I regret that I’ve let us get this involved without having some decisions made about how we would handle everything.”

His eyes dropped to where my hand gripped his tighter and I watched as he lifted them to his lips and placed a kiss on each of my fingers. His eyes never left mine.

“The look you are giving me makes my chest hurt. Noelle, I never want you to doubt how I feel about you. I’ve been honest about that from the beginning and nothing has changed.”

“You say that, but clearly something is bothering you.”

“You’re right. I never intended for us to be a secret. I agreed because I thought that was what you wanted, but you deserve more than that from me.”

“Max, I—”

“Please, let me finish. I’ve waited so long to have you and now I realize it was out of fear. I was scared you didn’t feel the same way about me, scared you might lose your family if you did. The fear caused me to make some pretty shitty decisions over the years and I can’t help but feel like I’m making

another one. If you are serious about us, then I want to talk to mom and dad. As long as they are okay, I can deal with everyone else, but I know it's important to you to get mom's approval about all this."

My head was swimming. Of course, I was serious about Max. Being with him was amazing, but it was so much more than sex. He made me feel loved and whole and as if I could actually trust someone for the first time in my life, but he was right. Mom's approval was important to me.

"I know it's stupid. I mean, I'm a grown woman making my own decisions but-"

"You don't have to explain. I understand and I respect that. I just wanted to talk to you before I speak to them."

"Wait, you want to talk to them on your own?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Max pulled his hands from mine and leaned back on the couch. "If I had a better idea of how it would go, then I'd ask you to come with me. But if mom starts crying or dad starts yelling, I'd rather be the one they are mad at. I thought about it on the way over here. I'll tell them I've been crazy about you for my entire life and that I want their approval to date you. Dad's old-fashioned like that anyway, and I'm sure it would make him feel better regardless of who I am. If I can't get their support, then we will discuss it. This way you won't be

subjected to the emotions that come along with explaining how I'm in love with my foster sister.”

His voice sounded defeated, as if he had already come to the realization that our parents would be against us and this would be the end.

“No.”

“What?”

“No. You aren't going alone. I can handle them. If they don't approve, then that's their problem.” His eyebrows rose but before he could start to argue, I kept talking, “It's time you recognize I am a woman who can make my own decisions too. Yes, of course I want mom and dad to be okay with this, but if they aren't, that won't change how I feel about you. I'm not going to let you tear us apart because you think it would be better for me to have them happy with me than it would be for me to be with you. You are the best thing for me, Max. I am tired of questioning myself and my feelings. You are it for me.”

He was shaking his head the entire time I spoke until finally I reached for his face and held it in my hands. “You have no idea what an amazing human you have become. I get it, I do. But you aren't the fucked up eighteen-year-old that came to live with us. You are kind and generous. You bust your ass at work and have built an entire business in this small town of ours. Mom and dad are so proud of you, but you just can't see that.”

He pulled his head from my hands and turned toward the window. I held my breath as I waited for him to say something, anything, that would help me understand what he was thinking.

“Okay, let’s go.” He pushed up from where he was sitting on the couch and looked back at me. “Do you need anything before we leave?”

“Wait, right now?”

“Yeah. I want us to get past all this.”

I stood and grabbed my purse while he made his way to the door. His excitement at being with me seemed to fade faster than I expected as the uncomfortable feeling of dread settled into both of us. I held his hand while we made our way back to my parents’ house, but neither of us talked. There is this comfortable silence that I had grown used to from him, but this wasn’t that. This was so uncomfortable that I spent the entire ride shifting in my seat.

When we walked in the house, my mother made a big show of happiness that Max came by and looked over his shoulder while she hugged him, giving me a questioning glance.

“I just love having my kiddos here,” she said as we settled into seats at the oversized kitchen table.

“Where’s dad?”

“He should be down soon. He went up to the attic after Eve left to pull out some decorations I needed to set the table for Christmas Eve.”

“I should go help.”

Max went to stand but as soon as he did my dad made his way into the kitchen, “No need son, the woman is crazy. There are no little pine trees in the big red bin like she says there are.”

“Yes, there are. I saw them when I went back up for the cookie cutters. I don’t know why I send you after anything. You couldn’t find your ears if they weren’t attached to your head.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the small digs my parents always threw at each other. Growing up with them helped me understand how life, love, and relationships are meant to be fun. I always took myself too seriously, and they led by example, showing me often that it wasn’t worth the energy.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you both, but what are you doing here?”

“George!”

“What? It’s an honest question. Max avoids this place like the plague this time of year, not that I can blame him. These women are nuts,” he said, turning in our direction, “And Noelle, you just ran out of here an hour ago like your hair was on fire.”

The dad gaze that he set on us both made me uncomfortable. I felt Max’s hand on the top of my knee as I shifted again in my seat.

“There is something we would like to talk to you both about, and I didn’t want to wait until after the holiday.”

“Is everything okay, honey?” Mom asked as she reached for Max’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

“Yeah, everything is fine. Well, better than fine, but since it involves the family, we wanted to talk to you before things... progressed.”

I watched the look on my father’s face as he caught on where this was going. He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest as my mother started in with twenty different questions, not giving anyone time to answer.

“Mom, stop. Please, just listen to what Max has to say.”

I looked over to him and found him staring right at dad as he spoke, “I love you both and I owe my entire life to you for the sacrifices you made to help me when no one else would. That’s why this has always been so hard for me to admit. See, I didn’t think I had a right to be happy. I didn’t deserve it because of all the fucked up things I did as a kid.”

“Language,” my mother said when Max stopped for only a second to breathe.

“Sorry, ma. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is I love Noelle. I mean, I’m in love with her. I have been for as long as I remember and I just recently learned she would be open to us possibly being together. I get how messed up it all is, believe me I do, but it’s important to her... and me... that you two are okay with this.”

My father's face had turned a weird shade of red and my mother had tears in her eyes that she attempted to wipe away without us noticing. The silence stretched between us until finally she plastered a ridiculously fake smile on her face and nodded her head slightly.

“Anyone want pie? I think I want pie.”

I watched as she stood and made her way through the kitchen and unwrapped a pie that was meant for Christmas Eve. If that wasn't enough of an indication that she was out of sorts, her taking a fork to the center of it certainly was. Max and I sat there watching her eat the center of one of her prized pies as my father's gaze shot daggers into the side of Max.

“I think we should go,” he mumbled.

“No.”

All eyes shifted to me. “No, I am not going to just tuck my tail and run. I understand this may be hard for the both of you to wrap your heads around, but you need to understand that for the first time in my life I am happy.” I reached for Max's hand and held it in my own. “You don't know what it was like growing up and always feeling like you were second best to everyone else in the room. I valued the time I had alone with the both of you because those were the only times I ever felt like I was seen. Everyone was always stretched thin and I'm a constant people pleaser. I never wanted to get in between you and any of the other kids. I have had one failed relationship after another for years because I was desperate to find what you and mom have. I had nearly given up hope when Max

finally admitted how he felt. He makes me feel loved, and that alone helps me love myself. I'm not going to give him up. I just hope you won't make us give you up so that we could be happy."

Mom was full on crying now. She put the pie and fork down and crossed the kitchen pulling me into her arms, "My little girl, I would never make you choose. I love you so much, all I've ever wanted was for you to be happy."

Tears burned in my eyes, and I didn't dare look at my dad or Max.

"I love you, mama."

"This will be hard," she said as she pulled back from me, "But if it's true love, it always is. You'll get through it, I promise you."

I watched as my dad got up from the table and left the room.

"It may take him a little more time to understand, but don't worry, I'll talk to him."

I nodded as she wiped the tears from my eyes and laughed when I did the same to her. Then she turned to Max and held out her arms.

He stood slowly and made his way over to her. "I'm serious about what I said. This will be the hardest thing you ever do... well, until you have children and that becomes the hardest thing. I love you and I will always love you, but just know if you break my little girl's heart, I will beat your bottom with a wooden spoon."

“Got it, ma.”

“Same goes for you, missy,” she said as she shook her finger in my direction, “You better treat my boy like the saint that he is. I have no doubt this thing will work out between the two of you because you wouldn’t have taken on the risk of telling us if you weren’t serious about each other, but relationships have difficulties. Sometimes people say hurtful things when they are trying to protect themselves and words do a ton of damage. Communicate. Don’t bottle your feelings up like you usually do. Max needs to know what’s going on with you all the time for this to work.”

She held her arms out and this time, we both stepped into her embrace.

“Now, go. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon. I’ll deal with that grizzly bear of a husband I have, and we will see the two of you at dinner tomorrow night.”

“I thought you wanted me to come early?”

“It’s okay, dear, spend the morning with Max. Both of you come by whenever you are ready.”

Leaving without saying goodbye to dad felt weird, but knowing mom supported us definitely helped. I was a little concerned about what the rest of the family would say and I could tell by the silence in the car that Max felt the same way. I worried he was going to just drop me off at my place, but instead of turning right on Main Street he turned left. It wasn’t long before he was pulling into his spot behind the shop and when he turned off the car, I finally broke the silence.

“That wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“No, I guess it wasn’t.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I will be.”

“I don’t have anything with me.”

“That’s okay. We can head back to your place tomorrow afternoon. Right now, I just want you naked and in my arms until the outside world needs to creep in again.”



Chapter Ten

Maxwell

The feeling of disappointment seemed to permeate the room. It was Christmas Eve, and Noelle and I had just walked into my parents' house. The grimace on my father's face was as clear as an Arctic morning. A wall of tension greeted us, filling the room like a suffocating fog. I felt Noelle stiffen beside me, instinctively withdrawing from my grasp as all eyes fell on us.

“Uncle Max!”

The cheer of my nephews almost sent me toppling backward, shattering the silence. A brief moment of joy pierced the air as the boys rushed towards me, bodies slamming into mine like hyperactive torpedoes. I loved these kids - their innocence, their relentless energy, their obliviousness to the awkwardness of adult situations. I scooped up the youngest, his laughter like music to my ears, and made my way deeper into the house.

Noelle, a beam of sunlight against the backdrop of frosty relations, made her way towards the kitchen. I took a moment to scan the room. The silence was rapidly being replaced by the more customary sounds of Christmas- laughter, chatter, clinking glasses. Yet the sight of Rio Montoya, sitting in a corner with a drink in hand, jarred me. What was he doing here?

Eve whispered in my ear, “You’re in for a world of shit.” There was a note of humor in her voice, but the warning was clear. “Eat, make merry, and get the hell out of here early.” Her

words were softened by the smile on her face, but the seriousness was clear.

“Yeah, we figured as much.”

“Everyone will play nice while there are people here, but my advice to you would be to eat and dip early.”

Nodding in understanding, I passed my squirming nephew into her arms. This was a war zone, and right now, my priority was to survive. My mind spun as I tried to figure out everything that was happening. It was more than just Noelle and me. Where was Holly? Why was Rio here?

“Thanks. Want to explain what that asshole is doing in our living room.”

“Nope,” she said with a wink, “Thanks for checking though.”

I looked around and realized I’d rather take my chances with the women, so I turned and headed in there. The kitchen was a hubbub of activity, a mess of laughter and banter that felt both warm and jarring. My two sisters-in-law, Kyra and Ansley, were deep in conversation. Kyra, heavily pregnant, was subjected to Ansley’s graphic tales of motherhood.

“If you are going to hide in here, then you are going to work. Go wash up!”

Mom’s voice cut through the chatter, directing me to wash my hands. Her glare was both a rebuke and a shield. She was my mom, and even amidst all this, she would protect me, admonish me, but never abandon me. Her comment about me

hiding was both sharp and ironic. She knew I was seeking refuge, and so did I.

“I mean, it’s not like there is anything wrong with breastfeeding, but I swear that little leech is ruining my tits.”

“Language, Ansley!”

“Sorry, mama.”

My two sisters-in-law were sitting in the corner while Ansley was apparently trying to scar Kyra for life.

“Stop telling her all these horror stories,” my mother said as I crossed the room to see if I could help Noelle chop the vegetables she had in front of her. It was clear the women of the family were taking their cues from mom and the men from my dad. I squeezed in between her and Noelle and reached for a knife.

The evening dragged on. We ate dinner amidst laughs and occasional awkward silences. Gifts were exchanged, and desserts devoured. The clock ticked inevitably towards our escape time, and I watched it like a hawk. I loved my family, but tonight was tough.

Just as I thought it was safe to begin clearing the table, Noelle caught my attention. Her eyes sparkled with both mirth and a hint of trepidation. She knew what was coming next, and her words confirmed it.

“Should I take this as your cue that it’s time to leave?”

“I think it’s for the best, don’t you?”

“Probably. If we leave now, at least they can redirect their judgment on Holly for showing up late and sitting on her phone all night,” I suggested.

“Or the fact that Eve brought Rio?” Noelle offered, a touch of excitement in her voice.

“He treated her like shit when he left,” I countered, my eyes narrowing.

“Don’t give her a hard time, they are meant for each other,” she defended. “You don’t know the whole story.”

“Does anyone?”

“Eve, I’m sure. Maybe we should just focus on sneaking out of here instead.”

As if summoned by our rising tension, Mom appeared, her maternal senses alert to the brewing storm. “Make sure you say goodnight to your father.”

“He hasn’t said two words to me all day,” I mumbled, my frustration seeping into my tone.

“Maxwell,” Mom’s voice adopted a stern tone, “Be the bigger man here. You’re fighting for your forever.”

Noelle managed a small smile at Mom’s words. The gravity of the situation had us clinging to any scrap of reassurance. We exchanged hugs and words of farewell with my mom, then we made our rounds through the house. I found Dad out back, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the porch light, Nick and Kane at his side. They all seemed to be immersed in a deep, likely bourbon-fueled conversation.

“Hey, we’re heading out,” I announced, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Noelle too?” Kane asked, although it was clear he already knew the answer.

“Yeah. She’s inside if you want to say goodbye.”

“I’ll do that.” Kane moved past me, leaving me alone with Nick and my dad.

Nick was as fiery and impulsive as ever, a volcano barely contained. Only Ansley and their daughter seemed capable of softening his rough edges. But my dad was different. He was always kind but quiet, a gentle soul, and right now, the disappointment in his gaze cut through me like a knife.

“Okay, so I’ll see you guys for New Year’s then?”

“Yeah, man. Listen, I don’t agree with what you two are doing, but you need to know I respect your decision to come forward about it,” Nick’s comment startled me. He offered his hand, and I shook it, surprised by the genuine respect in his eyes.

“Thanks, Nick,” I said, my surprise morphing into gratitude.

Turning to my dad, I swallowed hard. “Love you pop. I’ll be in touch later this week.”

The disappointment in his gaze hadn’t waned, but I met his eyes head-on. Our silent exchange was filled with the weight of years and understanding. I watched as Noelle came outside and gave him a hug. My sweet girl gave him no option to turn her away and he never would have. She was his little girl and

in his eyes I was the fuck up, or at least it felt that way right now. I'd give mom some time to work her magic on him. The fear that always plagued me when it came to Noelle and I was more about her relationship with them than my own. I could survive without family, she couldn't. It was part of who she was at her core. I called her Elfie since she was always the one running around helping mom with anything anyone needed in our family. She was the person who gave more than she should have, but she loved every minute of it. It wasn't until we got older that I saw the effect it had on her.

I held her hand on our way out to the car, opened her door, and buckled her in. She was quiet on the way home, not her typical bubbly self after getting recharged by family, but I understood why. When we got back to my place, she stripped out of her clothes and crawled into bed.

"Are you okay?" I asked, the words gently floating in the soft, dim light of the room. I was looking at her, my gaze tracing the exhaustion etched subtly on her face.

"Yeah," she answered with a sigh, the weight of the day sinking in her voice. "Just tired, I think. It was a long day."

I crawled into the bed next to her, the warmth of her presence a comforting contrast to the chill of the sheets. "Heavier than a usual holiday, I suppose," I said, trying to inject a bit of levity into our conversation. "Do you regret leaving early?"

"No, not really." She turned her face to look at me, her eyes mirroring the conflict within her. "I hated the space between us

while we were there, but I hated the weird underlying tension even more. It was suffocating.” She paused, her gaze dropping to our intertwined fingers. “Do you think it will get better?”

“It will,” I assured her, squeezing her hand gently. “I trust mom will handle dad and everyone else will fall into line. It’s just a matter of time.”

She was silent for a moment, her eyes searching mine. “You’re sure about this, aren’t you? I mean, about us, right?”

I pulled her body closer to mine, encasing her in a tight embrace. “Of course I am. I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. What would ever make you doubt that?”

Her lips parted as she began to answer, but then she hesitated. “I don’t know. I just... I struggle sometimes with self-esteem and I get bombarded by these thoughts that I’m not good enough for you.”

As I opened my mouth to interrupt her, she placed a finger over my lips to stop me. “I know it’s crazy,” she admitted with a soft sigh. “I get that. I’ve just never been with anyone who doesn’t have some alternative agenda or changes their mind about me after a couple weeks. I can be... a lot to handle.”

“You are not a lot, Noelle. You’re far from it,” I assured her, cupping her face gently with my hands. “You are amazing. You are the most important thing in my life and you always have been. I regret...” My voice faltered slightly, choked by the intensity of my truths. “I’m so sorry I didn’t take the time to tell you that sooner. Maybe if I had, I could have saved you

from some of the assholes that tore you down sooner rather than later.”

Silence fell between us, punctuated only by our soft breathing. I held her tighter, my resolve strengthened by our conversation. I was certain, more than ever, that we were going to weather this storm together, no matter how long it took.

I leaned forward, and the second our lips touched, my already hard cock pulsed with need. The fire she ignited in me was more than anything else I had experienced before. I tangled my fingers in her hair and pulled her head back, exposing her neck. She moaned when I sucked on the delicate flesh behind her ear and shifted her body until she was straddling me and grinding her pussy into my hardened shaft.

“Fuck Elfie, I can feel your juices coating me already. How are you so ready for me all the time?”

She lifted her head and smiled down at me. “Have you seen yourself? I spent most of my younger years closing my eyes and picturing your hands on my body. Now, every minute I spend with you, another fantasy comes true.”

I growled in pleasure and lifted her hips as her small hands wrapped around my cock and lined me up with her core. Instead of a slow and steady start, I thrust my hips upward so roughly her hands flew to my chest to keep herself in place.

“Fuck, Max. Yes, just like that.”

She lifted her hips and met my movements until she pushed me down and a light lit up her eyes that I had never seen before. She reached for her purse on the nightstand as she gently rocked her hips and before I realized what was happening, a small lipstick sized vibrator was in her hand. I reached for it and turned it on, sliding it between us so it was perfectly in line with her clit. Noelle's head fell back, and she changed the way she moved on top of me. Rather than sliding up and down my cock, her walls clenched slightly around me as she rocked her hips with me fully seated inside her. Grinding herself forward with each movement, her breathing quickly became irregular, and I reached for her nipples, pinching and pulling them as she fucked herself with my cock, taking everything she needed.

“God, you are so fucking gorgeous,” I said as I pushed her long hair out of her face and held it in my hands so I could watch as she came undone. Her body trembled as her mouth fell open and the most beautiful sound fell from her lips as her pussy clenched around my cock, pulling my orgasm from me within seconds.

Noelle collapsed on top of me, and I held her tight. “My love, I have no idea what I've done to deserve you. This is heaven. You are an angel. A fucking hot as hell angel that turns my entire life on end, but still something otherworldly.”

Her soft laugh rippled through the quiet room, an antidote to the weighty silence that had descended upon us following dinner with the family. That sweet sound, so distinctively hers, lightened my heart, and I couldn't help but return her

infectious smile. If I could, I would keep her here forever, wrapped in our own protective cocoon, sheltered from the world and its disappointments.

As her breathing gradually slowed, I laid there in quiet contemplation. For the first time in my life, I was acutely aware that I had everything I had ever wanted within arm's reach. My business was flourishing, secure enough to provide for her and our future family. Even though the family's acceptance of us would take time, the most important approval, mom's, was already secured. I had friendship with my siblings and of course, Rocco.

Added to that, I was blessed with wonderful nieces and nephews I adored more than anything. And of course, I had her, Noelle, the woman I loved more than life itself, safely ensconced in my arms. In all respects, everything was perfect. Almost.

The only thing casting a shadow on my happiness was the years I spent penning those letters to Noelle. The lengths I had gone to protect her, the wrath I'd unleashed on the men who had harmed her, all shrouded in secrecy. The guilt, like a dormant volcano, was bubbling just beneath the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment. How would she react if I told her everything? Would it shatter her trust in me? For now, it seemed wiser to leave it unsaid, even if the guilt gnawed at me, promising to slowly chip away at my peace. The fact that she hadn't brought them up since the first night she came to me didn't sit well. Did she still suspect it had been me all along?

A soft squeeze brought me back from my musing. “I thought you fell asleep on me,” I whispered, as I felt her arms tighten around me.

“That’s kind of hard to do when your dick is still hard and inside me,” she said with a laugh.

“Sorry about that. He has a mind of his own and it’s only centered on you.”

“I can get behind a one-track mind.”

I wrapped my arms around her again and flipped us around so she was on her back, thrusting my cock deeper inside her. Her laughter washed away any negative or concerning thoughts I’d had in the silence and my mind was once again consumed by all things Noelle.

“Let me show you what I can really do with him.”



Chapter Eleven

Noelle

New Year's was better than Christmas. My siblings finally acknowledged the existence of Max and I as a couple. Dad even went as far as to approach Max at one point, engaging him in a conversation that left me puzzled and curious. Upon returning home, I asked Max about the strange interaction between them. He couldn't quite decipher the exchange himself. All he knew was that Dad had made small talk, as if the past was simply water under the bridge, and I chose to view that as a promising sign. The men in my life were notoriously inept at admitting their mistakes, and my dad was no exception.

I pulled up to the shop with two bags of greasy burgers from Rosie's. It had become a bit of a Friday tradition over the last few weeks, and I loved having the chance to spend time with Max in the middle of the day. When I walked in, he was busy talking to a guy who was dropping off a truck, so I headed into his office. Rocco wasted no time claiming two burgers before retreating to the back of the shop. Some days he ate with us, other days he gave us some space and I respected the hell out of him for it. I was setting out food when the phone started ringing and no one looked as if they were going to make a move to answer it, so I did.

“Max's Auto, how can I help you?”

“Hi, I have an appointment to drop off my car tomorrow, but I was wondering if I could come earlier in the day,” the woman on the other end explained.

“Uh, sure,” I replied, slightly taken aback. “Let me take down your number, and I’ll have Max or Rocco call you back when they’re free.”

As I rummaged through the desk drawer for a pen and paper, my eye caught a hint of pink in the dark recesses of the drawer. It was as if some unknown force pulled me to them. The woman’s voice on the phone became a distant echo as my focus honed in on that familiar color. With shaking hands, I pulled out the edge of a pink envelope - the same shade, the same feel as the ones my secret admirer had been using for years.

The phone dropped from my hands as I extracted more and more envelopes from the back of the drawer. My heart pounded in my chest as I stood there, a growing stack of secret love letters held in trembling hands. Anguish washed over me, a torrent of betrayal and disbelief. How could Max keep this from me? Why would he?

In my blind panic, I knocked over the chair as I stumbled away from the desk. My mind was racing, and I felt the room spin. I grabbed my purse and made a wild dash for the door, just as Max looked up from his work and glanced through the glass window separating his office from the auto shop. He stood there, frozen, watching as our world shattered in a single moment. His eyes locked onto mine, and in that instant, I felt the fool I had been my entire adult life.

Ignoring Max’s shouts, I threw myself into my car and sped away. All I knew was that I needed to get away from him,

from the shop, from everything that reminded me of him. The streets of our small town blurred past as I made my way to the highway, my mind whirling in confusion, heartache, and betrayal.

It had been hours since I turned my phone off and started walking through the mall when I arrived in Rochester. It was one of the larger cities near us and I needed to be some place where I didn't know anyone who would look at me with pity once they realized that yet again I fucked things up and found a man I thought was honest and true. I found solace in a dark movie theater, watching a romantic comedy unfold on the screen while my own love story lay in shambles. I watched the few couples around me lost in their world, oblivious to my heartache. Bitter resentment bubbled within me as my dreams of a future with Max all came crashing down. An internal battle raged within me, between hatred for Max's deception and an irrational urge to justify his actions. I knew he was scared to tell our parents about us being together. Could that have been what caused him to keep his distance for as long as he did? I thought back to the letters realizing the words that brought me happiness in such shitty times were still him and that hurt. It was like every good memory I had was tarnished by a lie. I loved Max so much and what he did to me just wasn't fair. The second the thought entered my mind I heard my mother's voice correcting me. "*Nothing in life is ever fair.*" She wasn't always right but she was about that. The

realization struck me that I wouldn't know the truth unless I confronted him.

After leaving the theater, I was surprised to find that darkness had fallen. The screen of my phone was lit up with a barrage of missed calls and text messages. I dismissed them all and trudged towards my car.

Once inside, I put the key in the ignition and turned it just for nothing to happen. I tried again and the same thing. Lights on the dash would light up, but the damn thing wouldn't turn over. I screamed. I screamed so loud that the woman walking by my car with her son picked him up and ran. Anger rose in me faster than it ever had and I beat the fuck out of my steering wheel. With no other option, I called my Eve. The relief in her voice was evident, but it did nothing to alleviate my emotional turmoil.

“Thank god, Noelle! Where are you? Everyone is freaking out.”

“I'm in Rochester and my car won't start.”

“What are you doing there?”

“What do you mean, everyone?”

“Haven't you checked your phone? Max sent a message out in the family chat saying you were upset and took off. He's losing his mind over at mom and dad's trying to find a way to track you down.”

Her words cut through me, a sharp reminder of the reason I was in this mess. I was upset that he would involve our

families in this personal mess.

“Can you come get me?”

“Yeah of course, it will take me a while but we’ll head that way now. Are you somewhere safe?”

“I’m at the mall, so yeah. I’m parked in front of the movie theater. I’ll just wait here.”

“Okay, we’ll be there soon.”

“We? No, Eve, don’t bring anyone else. Just come alone, okay?”

“See you soon.”

She hung up and dread came over me as I realized she didn’t agree to come alone. I contemplated hiring an Uber to just take me back to Whitewood, but that would cost a ton of money that I didn’t have. Tears ran down my face as I looked at myself in the rearview mirror. Having a large family had its benefits, but it also had the downside of everyone sticking their nose where it didn’t belong. It had only been a few weeks since everything started with me and Max, but we’d got serious fast and I was already making arrangements to move in with him. My sister thought I was crazy and now as I sat there thinking about it, even if she came alone, I’d still have a million questions to answer that I just wasn’t ready for.

I dozed off in my car until the sound of soft tapping on my driver’s side window woke me. Much to my dismay, it wasn’t Eve. It wasn’t even Eve and Max or one of my parents. It was Max, and he was alone. The tow truck from the shop was

parked in front of me and he had his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground by the time I looked up. I ran my hands through my hair, trying to figure out how to get through the hour-long ride back to Whitewood in the tow truck. I needed to talk to him but the thought of having no way to escape made me more nervous than I expected. I cracked the door open, unwilling to get out and admit that I was nearly freezing to death because I'd fallen asleep in a broken-down car.

“Hey.”

“Hey, you okay?”

“My car won't start.”

“Yeah, Eve told me. Why don't you go jump in the truck and warm up?”

I reached for my purse and without a word, did what he asked. I watched as he worked to get my car out of the spot it was in and hooked up while texting Eve how much I hated her for sending Max instead of coming on her own. By the time he was done, I was warmed up, but when he got into the truck, I had to look away as the tears started streaming down my face. Max pulled onto the highway and handed me a small pack of travel tissues, saying nothing. In my mind I thought maybe if he did I'd feel better, but my heart was breaking and the fear of it getting worse was too overwhelming. I retreated into silence, a painful wall between us as we made the drive back to Whitewood. I must have dozed off again because before I knew it, we were parking at the back of the shop.

“I’m really sorry Noelle. I’ve been a disaster all day worrying about you. It wasn’t until the drive back here that I could even try to come up with the words to explain everything, and I have nothing. It all just sounded ridiculous in my head.”

“That sounds like your problem, not mine.” I looked over at him for the first time since we got in the car and that’s when I realized how badly I wished I could turn back time. “I want to go home, Max.”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I mean, if you hadn’t put us in this situation, then I wouldn’t be alone, but now I have no choice.”

“But you do.” He reached for my hand and I pulled it away. I couldn’t let him touch me. If he did, I’d forgive him. I’d fall back into his arms and make myself pretend he hadn’t spent my entire adult life being the only hope I had at someone truly loving me for me. I shook my head at the thought. Everything felt so insane and I hadn’t even said the words out loud.

“I want to go home.”

“Let’s take my truck.”

Max got out of the tow truck and walked through the parking lot to his F350. I sat and watched as he unlocked it, got in, and turned it on. It was late and the red lights of the truck illuminated the parking lot. Christmas was long over and I missed the cheerful glow that seemed to permeate our small town. Even on a cold and depressing night like tonight, the

holiday decorations could bring a smile to anyone's face. I took a deep breath and got out, heading to the truck. I was so tired my body felt as if I were walking across the grand canyon. My chest hurt so much it felt as if I were having an actual heart attack. The emotional turmoil of the day clearly had a physical effect on me, and there was no way I could handle a confrontation with Max right now.

The ride back to my place was quiet, and I was thankful. When I went to get out Max caught my hand pulling me back.

“Noelle, please. Just let me know you're okay.”

“I will be. I always am.”

I pulled away from him and got out of the truck. Walking to my front door alone nearly killed me, but I did it. The sound of the lock clicking under my fingers echoed through my cold townhouse. My body shook as I gave in completely to the pain and tears that tore through my body. I leaned against the wall and slowly lowered myself to the ground. I couldn't keep it together anymore and since I was finally home, I didn't need to. I laid on my side and closed my eyes as the memories of the last few weeks raced by. Everything hurt so much. In my heart, I knew it all felt worse than anything I had ever experienced before because it was Max. I had spent too many years of my life dreaming of the perfect man I imagined had been sending me letters, only to find out he was part of my life all along.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Max's presence filled the room. He said nothing, just laid down next to me on the floor

and pulled me into his arms. As his arms tightened around me, a strangled sob escaped my lips.

“You’re not alone,” he said, his voice low and thick with emotion. “You’re not alone, Noelle. You’ve never been alone. I’ve always been with you.”



Chapter Twelve

Maxwell

Time slipped away from me as Noelle surrendered to my hold, lying quietly on the floor until her trembling ceased and she eventually drifted into sleep. With careful movements, I detached myself and lifted her in my arms. She murmured something unintelligible as I gently laid her down in her bedroom. I couldn't bear to leave her. As she sobbed, I had reiterated my promise not to abandon her, time and time again. Noelle had become my entire world, and I was responsible for shattering hers. It gutted me.

The look of utter devastation on her face as she fled my shop had nearly been my undoing. The subsequent hours of uncertainty were agonizing. My father had cornered me, threatening me with a fury I had seldom seen, while my mother shed tears of disappointment – her usual response to the full spectrum of emotions, from joy to anger to sorrow. This time, her tears reflected my downfall. I had disappointed everyone who meant anything to me.

Yet, amid the chaos, I was at a loss for words to ease the situation. Despite what Noelle had discovered, I was still scared to confess the full extent of my actions to my family. There was no way they could understand my reasons. I was certain everyone would think I was insane, so the only hope I had was that, eventually, Noelle might find it in her heart to forgive me.

She shifted, letting out a groan that was muffled by her pillow. Watching her sleep from inside her room was certainly different from watching from out her window. She stretched

her arms over her head and looked down at the sleep clothes I had put on her the night before. That's when she looked up and saw me.

“Why are you still here?” she questioned, her voice laced with disbelief.

“I promised I wouldn't leave you.”

“I told you I'd be okay.”

“But you weren't being honest,” I countered.

I moved to sit beside her on the bed, the letters from her nightstand clasped in my hand.

“These letters are from me. I know I told you yesterday that I couldn't find the words to explain myself, but I believe I now have them. The man you've been in a relationship with since December is the same person who penned these letters. It wasn't until I read through these last night that I fully comprehended the terrifying prospect of losing you, and potentially, our family.”

“You read my letters?”

“To be fair,” I replied, trying to hide the guilt in my voice, “I was the one who wrote them.”

“Don't remind me,” she said, her voice a bit hoarse. Her anger was palpable, even in her curt responses.

She rolled over, turning her back to me.

“Talk to me, Elfie, please.”

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

A knot tightened in my stomach as I pleaded, “Tell me you hate me, tell me you’ll never forgive me, just say something. Anything.”

“I can’t tell you I hate you,” she said slowly, “because as much as I keep trying to, I don’t.”

The words felt like a release, a breath of air that I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

I reached for her shoulder and turned her to face me. Her eyes were brimming with tears, matching the sorrow I felt.

“You have no idea what a relief that is,” I confessed.

She didn’t return my smile, instead, she looked at me with a mixture of sadness and resignation.

“I’m not mad anymore. I’m sad and hurt. I understand being afraid of losing everything, but I suffered for so many years waiting for you. Dreaming of you, and then learning that everything we have been doing for the last few weeks, was all a lie. It hurt so much, Max.”

“It wasn’t a lie. Nothing I’ve said or done was ever a lie, Noelle. You are my world and you have been from the first day I saw you.” I held up one of the well-loved envelopes. “This is me. So is this one, and all the others sitting here. From the very first letter to the hundreds that came after, I wrote each one from my heart. I do own you and you own me. I can’t let you go, Noelle, I won’t. If you need time, I

understand and I will give you that time, even though it will kill me.”

“Was it you? Were you the one outside my window?”

“Yes,” I admitted, my heart heavy.

She turned away, her face unreadable. “Had you done that before?”

“I’ve always been close. Probably too close, but I couldn’t help myself. The pull my heart has to yours is hard to deny, especially when you are hurting. If I could have done everything over again, I would.”

“What would you have changed?”

“Huh?” I was taken aback by her question.

“What would you have changed? The last few weeks? The letters? Waiting our entire adult lives to tell me you loved me. I mean, do you even love me, or do you just love the idea of accomplishing what you set out to do?”

Her words stung. But they were necessary. “I love you, sweet girl, don’t ever question that. I’ve dedicated my entire life to fixing my mistakes and building a future that would include you and our children.” I ran my hand over her belly and she shuddered under my touch. “I was too messed up and too cowardly as a kid to have told you the truth back then. If I could change things, then I would have spent more time being there for you when you needed me and less time obsessing over the what if’s. I know you loved my letters and I wouldn’t trade the expression on your face as you read them for

anything else in the world, but I wouldn't have taken as long to tell you who I am and what you mean to me. That was the biggest mistake I've ever made."

She was silent for a long while, her eyes searching mine. "So, you're saying you love me, not just the chase, not just the idea, but me?"

"Yes," I confirmed, my voice thick with emotion. "I love you, Noelle, all of you. Every bit, every flaw, every strength, everything that is you."

The atmosphere had shifted, from one of tension and hurt to a fragile understanding, one I was determined to strengthen. I knew then that the road ahead of us was long, but it was one I was more than willing to traverse, for her, for us.

I leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead before standing and heading to the kitchen. I'd made French toast and bacon while she was sleeping, since I knew it was one of her favorites. I pulled everything from the toaster oven where I had it kept warm and poured her a cup of coffee. When I got back to the room, she was sitting up with my letters in front of her, reading one. I placed the plate and coffee on her nightstand and kissed the top of her head.

"Call me when you are ready to talk. I love you, Noelle."

There were tears in her eyes as I left the room. I couldn't force her into a decision. I couldn't make her forgive me. She needed time, and I wasn't lying when I told her I was willing to give it to her. I locked the door behind me and went to my truck, feeling as if someone had torn my heart from my chest.

I had no idea how long she would take or how I would survive it.

When I got back to my place, I took a shower and got started on her car. It was Sunday morning, and the shop was closed, so the last thing I expected was the buzzing sound of the bell out front. My heart leapt hoping it was Noelle, but when I opened the door, it was Eve.

“Hey.”

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and the opportunity to explain yourself before I kick your ass.”

I loved my little sister, but she maybe weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. Her larger than life personality and rascally nature made up for the difference.

“If it makes you feel any better, I hate myself,” I said as I stepped back from the door and let her in.

“It does.”

She moved through the garage as if she owned the place, getting herself coffee and climbing up on top of my workbench to sit there and give me the evil eye. “Well?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to explain to me why you ruined the best thing in your life.”

I shook my head slowly as I bent back under the hood of Noelle’s car. “I can’t answer that. I mean, you know I’m pretty

good at screwing things up, and I did it again without even realizing how bad it was.”

“You didn’t cheat on her, did you?”

“No, god no! What kind of man do you think I am?”

“One that normally kicks the ass of anyone who hurts my sister, so I don’t really understand how this time it was you who hurt her.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it.”

I closed the hood of the car and leaned against it. “I kept something from her that I shouldn’t have.”

“What, that you beat the hell out of all her exes?”

“How do you know as much as you do?”

“It’s a small town.”

I rolled my eyes at her, “Fine. Whatever. I did everything I could to explain myself this morning. She’s going to need to decide if my explanation is enough. I don’t want to force her into anything she doesn’t want.”

“What do you want?”

“Her. It’s always been her.”

“Does she know that?”

“She does now.”

Eve nodded her head and jumped down from where she was sitting before she wrapped her arms around my waist. “Okay.

That's all I needed to know. I'll talk to her."

"I love you, Eve."

"I know you do."

I heard a car door shut and looked up to find Rio getting out of his blacked-out Mercedes. He didn't make a move to come in but instead leaned against the front of it with his hands in his pockets, watching her.

"Talk."

"About what?" she said with a shrug.

"What is he doing here?"

"He lives here. Moved back just before Christmas."

"That's not what I mean."

"He's just a friend."

"Rio has never been just a friend to you. I'd have kicked his ass years ago if I didn't think he'd kill me," I admitted, my gaze shifting to the imposing figure outside. Rio was a dangerous man, more so than me, but he had always been fixated on my little sister. "I don't want him to hurt you."

"He won't."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I have something he wants."

I frowned at her cryptic response. "And what happens when he gets it?"

“Then we can all live happily ever after,” she said, her eyebrows raised suggestively. It only heightened my concern about what she had gotten herself into.

“Eve, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

She offered me a reassuring smile, though it did little to quell my anxiety. “I always do.”

“Be careful Eve.”

“Always.”

I turned my attention back to the garage. Rio remained by his car, his gaze fixed on the garage. There was an air of danger about him, but his apparent patience tempered it. Still, I knew better than to trust him entirely.

I glanced at Eve, “And what if he decides he wants more than you are willing to give?”

She paused, her smile fading slightly. “Then we’ll deal with it when it comes. For now, he needs me more than I need him. It’s a precarious balance, but it’s a balance, nonetheless.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Just promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

“I can’t promise that, but I can promise I’ll do my best to keep myself safe,” she replied, her gaze locking with mine, full of stubborn determination. It was classic Eve. It was why I loved her, but also why she worried me so much. I could only hope that she knew what she was doing, for both our sakes.

She gave me a quick hug and left out the side door. I watched through the windows of my shop as she jumped up into the passenger seat of his car rather than back into her own. Once her door closed, he finally pulled his eyes away from me and got in the car. Something about him never sat right with me and since he'd been back in town, it felt like he was even more on edge than he was when they were kids. I knew the promise they'd made to each other. Hell, everyone did, and Eve's birthday was days away. My parents believed the best in people, and at times I wish I had been with them since I was born. Maybe then I could think that way too.

I reached into the pocket of my coveralls and pulled out my phone.

Maxwell: I know I said I'd give you time and I will, but I wanted to remind you that you're not alone. I love you Noelle, and if you need me for anything, please call me. I won't press you for answers. I just want to be there for you.

I watched as the three little bubbles popped up as if she were about to respond, and then they disappeared. Standing there alone with her car in front of me and my heart torn to shreds, I faced the reality that the next few days or weeks were going to be the worst of my life.



Chapter Thirteen

Noelle

Three weeks. It had been three weeks since I last saw Max and it was the hardest three weeks of my life. I ran through every emotion I've ever had and settled on contentment for the time being. The pain and sadness were only rivaled by the confusion and hurt. I cried more than I knew I could. I'd leave my blinds open some nights in hopes he was out there watching me, and yet every time I thought I saw a shadow, he was nowhere in sight. He said he'd give me space, but more times than not, I wished that weren't true. Other than seeing my dad when he dropped my car off to me, I stayed clear of my parents. I assured both of them that what Max and I were going through had nothing to do with the family and we both committed it would affect no one other than us. My mother didn't believe me, but that wasn't surprising in the least. She always saw right through my bullshit, which was one of the many reasons I loved her.

It was late when I got to the garage. They had been closed for hours and most of the town was sound asleep, but when I looked up to the second floor of the building, I could see a light on in Max's apartment. I used the key I had to enter the side door and climbed the stairs. When I got to the top, he was standing there in nothing but a pair of sweatpants. The light behind him illuminated his features and something deep inside me fluttered its pleasure at seeing him again.

"You're here."

"I am," I said, my voice a bit uncertain.

“Do you want to come in?”

He stepped to the side, and I walked into his space. The heat of his body so close made me want to fall into his arms, but I knew I had something that needed to be said before we made any moves to fix what we both had broken. I made my way over to the couch and saw it covered where he had been sitting with bundles of rope.

“Working on a side project?”

“Honing my skills,” he said, raising his eyebrows with a small smirk.

That’s when it clicked and I realized the ropes in front of me were just like the ones he showed me one of the first times we were together. I never gave him an answer about playing with them, but as I reached for a bundle and felt the fibers in my hands, I knew without a doubt I wanted this with him. I wanted everything he’d be willing to give me in this life.

“Do you want a drink?”

“Uh, no I’m okay.”

“Okay.”

We stood staring at each other as I struggled for the words I had practiced again and again on my way over here. Seeing him was harder than I realized it would be. I suddenly didn’t want to talk. I wanted him, but we still had so far to go.

“So, uh... how’s the car running?”

“Good. Yeah, thanks. I still owe you for that.”

“No, you don’t. Consider it a family discount,” he winked and my insides turned to mush.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“I figured that might be why you are here.”

“I thought I’d have more questions, but I don’t and I thought you were lying about giving me space but you weren’t, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t lying. Did you not want me to give you time to think about everything?”

“I thought I did. I had a hard time looking back on all the times I thought someone was watching me and realizing it was you. It was even harder rereading my letters and hearing your voice instead of mine.” I sat down on the couch and watched as he moved to do the same.

“I’m sorry I put you in a position that made things so difficult for you.”

“Did you really break Andrew’s nose?”

He let out a small laugh. “Yeah. I would have done worse, but the fucker passed out.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Because he hurt you.”

“But what did that have to do with you?”

“If you have to ask me that, then I haven’t done a good enough job showing you how much you mean to me. I can fix that, if you’ll let me.”

I was off track and I had no idea what to say next. When Eve told me what Andrew told Rosie about the night we broke up, I thought she was kidding, but after a few calls, I learned Andrew wasn't the first. My brother and the love of my life had spent years beating the hell out of anyone who did anything to hurt me.

“I understand why you did it. I just wish you had told me the first night we were together. By keeping it from me, you took away my choice. From now on I get to choose what happens next. We work together, not separate, and we do so with honesty, no matter how much it might suck. I don't want to spend the rest of my life with someone I can't trust.”

“That's what you want? The rest of your life to be with me?”

“More than anything in the world. But you have to understand what that will consist of. I want it all, Max. Love, friendship, family. I want to get married and have ten kids of our own to drive us crazy. I want noisy Sunday mornings and huge holidays to celebrate. I want all of that, and no matter how hard I've tried over the last three weeks to convince myself I could do all that without you, I can't. Every time I close my eyes and dream of the future, you are a part of it, so it's time for me to stop fighting my heart.”

Max reached for me, and I willingly moved into his arms. His hands came up on either side of my face as he looked me in the eye and said the words I had been desperate to hear for weeks now.

“I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too.”

Tears stung my eyes, but when his lips crashed into mine, I couldn't think of anything other than him. Maxwell was my world and now I knew without a doubt I had always been his. I crawled into his lap and straddled him as he pulled the oversized sweater I was wearing over my head. His mouth traveled down my neck and his thumbs grazed over my already hardened nipples. I moaned into his mouth as I ground my hips forward into his hard cock, wanting nothing more than to tear away everything that was between us. The clothes, the worry, the stress of the future. None of it mattered anymore now that I knew we would battle it all together.

“Fuck, Elfie. I've missed you so much.”

His voice caught when he called me by my nickname, and then his mouth captured me through my bra. I cried out at the pain of his teeth. When his tongue dipped into the cup, I nearly saw stars.

“Please Max, I need you.”

My voice sounded wanton and needy as I pulled at his pants, desperate to expose him to me. He didn't give in but lifted me with him as he stood, reaching for two bundles of rope before making his way to the bed and carefully laying me on it. He stood there looking at me as I reached for him and the smirk that came upon his face made the fire inside of me burn even hotter than before.

“I never gave you an answer about the ropes,” I said, looking at them in his hand. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I want them. I read everything you sent me and I’m ready.”

“We can start small,” he said, his voice tentative and soft, “Nothing too complicated at first but in time that could change.”

“I’d be more comfortable with floor work than suspension.”

Max tilted his head as an approving smile crossed his face. “You did your research.”

I gave him a quick wink. “I said I did.”

He reached into the drawer and pulled out a sharp pair of scissors, laying them on the nightstand before he undid my jeans and pulled them with my panties from my body. Next came my bra and finally his pants.

“I need to see all of you. Show me what’s mine.”

His voice was demanding and hot as fuck as he pushed my legs up until my knees were bent, exposing me completely to his gaze. I watched as he lowered his head and then felt the familiar feeling of his tongue working its way through my folds and over my sensitive clit.

“Always so ready for me. What did I ever do to deserve you?”

My toes curled as he dipped two fingers deep inside my pussy. Then he took his slick fingers and rubbed tight circles over my clit with alternating speeds that were enough to make me insane.

“Does that feel good?”

I moaned in pleasure.

“Not good enough. Tell me what you’re thinking about.”

“You fucking me.”

“Come for me first.”

His raspy voice ratcheted up my excitement and when his mouth closed over my clit and he began sucking, I screamed as my orgasm tore through me like wildfire. Max didn’t stop, though.

“Again.”

He pinned my legs with one arm as his fingers slid through me. My body was burning. Raw heat ran through me as I looked up and caught his expression. It was wild with need and fascinated me. My heart beat so loud I could hear it, or maybe that was his. My body rose to his demand, and I felt another climax quick on the tail of my last one.

“That’s it. Show me how much you need me.”

My lips parted as he continued to tease my clit with his fingers.

“That’s it baby, look right at me. Watch my every move.”

Max parted my legs as they began to shake and with one hard, smooth movement, Max slid inside me. My core clenched around him at the intrusion, and my body arched to him as my mind exploded. A whimper escaped me as he thrust forward again and again, leaving me no room to recover, only room for more pleasure. His forehead was to mine, and the scent of sex and arousal surrounded us. I could taste myself on his lips and before I realized what was happening, I felt the taut fibers of the ropes come around my wrists. He pushed himself up while still deep inside me and I looked above me to catch him pulling a string through the binding he had just created. My arms were above my head and I was immobile. No longer able to touch and feel him in the way I wanted to.

“No fair,” I whispered, as he slowly began to move his hips again. The deep fluid motion intensified everything I felt. Every nerve ending was on fire as dozens of sensations skirted over my skin.

“Very fair.”

His hands slid under me and he pulled my body up to his and slid his head between my arms. The ties he put in place were only around my wrists, but they were tight enough that the space between us was slim at best. My oversized breasts squished into his chest and my legs wrapped around him.

“Now ride my cock like the needy little Elf that you are.”

This new position left him deeper inside me, allowing him to drive into that spot that was often so hard to reach as he thrust up into me from below. He wanted me to fuck him, but

my body went limp in his arms. I was his to control, and he wasn't even asking for it. My mind and body were giving it to him freely. His cock drove harder into me as his hands gripped my ass. I gave him all of me and in that moment, every barrier between us came crashing down. He roared as his orgasm ripped through him and I arched my back, loving the feel of his release.

My mind trailed off into an unknown place of peace. I felt as if I were floating above my body and looking down at us. We were two people with complicated and fucked up pasts who loved each other. Two people who would burn down the world to protect one another and two people who would forever be bound by the love we shared.

I closed my eyes as my head fell back and Max moved us into a position where I was laying with him. He must have undone the ropes that bound my hands, because I could feel his chest under my fingers.

“I'm here, I've got you.” His voice was small and quiet compared to the echoey space that seemed to surround me. “You're not alone. I am here. I love you.”

As reality started to crowd its way back into my line of sight, I felt his hands running over me. “I love you, Elfie. I've got you.”

“Is this subspace?” I murmured.

“Likely, but it's okay.”

“That means I'm going to drop.”

“Never, I won’t let you fall.”

It was in that moment that I knew we would be okay. Until that point, I had hoped we would be. I figured it wouldn’t be easy, but we would find a way to make it work. Yet as I laid there and listened to his soft voice tell me how much I meant to him and promise me the world I knew without a doubt, we would not only be fine, but we would be amazing.



Eve's Marriage Pact

It was a childhood promise we both meant to keep. I didn't expect for it to take me so long to get back to her but I finally made it. Things were more complicated than they had ever been but our souls were bound together by love. I wasn't taking no for an answer so whether Eve liked it or not I was here to stay.

Want to see what happens next? Click [HERE](#) to read Eve's Marriage Pact.



About the Author

USA Today Best Selling Romance Author Nikki Rome has been a romance junky since a young age. As a girl she reached for book after book, looking for that happily ever after she always believed in. She loves all forms of romance and you can find her latest read not far from her reach.

Nikki writes contemporary romance with a touch of danger and kink. Her love of realistic characters who face real problems provides a story that touches the hearts of many. As a writer, reader and lover of words, it only made sense that she publish her stories.

Now years later she owns and manages Smut Lovers: The Community. A group of like minded individuals that come together to talk about their love of all things smut. You can find her hosting Smut Lovers: The Podcast or running Smut Lovers: The Conference. Either way you know she'll always be talking about her love of books.

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