

A STEAMY CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE ROMANCE

Wild Tangled Hearts



C.M. SEABROOK

WILD TANGLED HEARTS

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ROMANCE

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*To my rock and best friend, Jamie,
In you, I've found the embodiment of all my swoonworthy
heroes, and every word in this book is a tribute to the
extraordinary man you are.
With all my heart,
Chantel*

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INTRODUCTION

Ever wondered what it's like to be the mastermind behind a love story? Well, now's your chance! Meet Bella Montgomery, an elementary school art teacher with a heart as colorful as her paintings and a knack for getting into hilarious predicaments. You're in control of her fate, and it's time to dive headfirst into a world of romance, adventure, and laughter.

Here's how to enjoy this interactive romance eBook:

Pick Your Path: As you read, you'll encounter moments where you decide what happens next. It's like being the director of your own love story! Just tap on your choice.

Click to Turn: After making a choice, tap the link to jump to the next part of the story. It's as easy as clicking a button.

Go on Adventures: Don't be shy – try different choices to explore new twists and turns. You can always go back and change your mind.

Expect Surprises: Every choice leads to a different story. Embrace surprises and enjoy the ride!

With your eBook and a few clicks, "Wild Tangled Hearts" becomes your playground of love and adventure. So, dive in, pick your path, and have a blast navigating your way through this romantic escapade. Your happily ever

after is just a tap away. Enjoy!

PART ONE

THE MEET CUTE MARATHON

Meet-cutes: Because sometimes, fate needs a little help from clumsy humans to make us believe in love stories.

CHAPTER I

THE MEET CUTE MARATHON

The school bell has released me from a classroom that had become a battlefield of crayon warfare and art project casualties. I swear, teaching art should come with a warning label: “May incite glitter-induced chaos.”

As I restore order to the room, a sigh of relief escapes my lips, and I can’t help but reflect on the absurdity of my love life, or rather the glaring absence of it.

I’ve had more chemistry with the classroom’s pet goldfish, Bubbles, than with any potential guy lately. But, to be honest, I’ve been okay with it. After all, a single broken heart is one too many in my book.

Have I mentioned that I’ve mastered the art of heartbreak avoidance? I was in love once. Or at least, I thought I was. Until I discovered the guy was sleeping with my best friend. So, while they’re living out their happily ever after in suburbia with two kids and a labradoodle, I’ve been content to embrace my single status.

There are plenty of silver linings to being unattached. *Right?* I get the entire bed to myself, the toilet seat’s always in the down position, and that last, precious slice of pizza is my undisputed territory.

But, I’ll confess, there’s been this persistent little itch lately, an itch my trusty vibrator can’t quite scratch. Yet, even if I’m willing to take another chance at love, I swear this town is like a deserted island when it comes to hot, single guys. They’ve all gone into hiding or formed an underground society of eligible bachelors, and I missed the memo.

To lift my spirits, I escape to the “Artful Bean,” my favorite local coffee shop, where the barista knows me by name and knows my drink order by

heart: a caramel macchiato.

As I push open the door to the coffee shop, I'm enveloped by the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee, like a warm hug for my senses. My moment of aromatic bliss is abruptly interrupted when I run straight into a wall of pure, rippling muscle.

My unexpected collision with what feels like a solid oak tree sends me stumbling backward, but I regain my balance with the help of one firm, calloused hand that grabs my arm.

A deep, chuckling voice responds, "Easy there."

After taking an appreciative moment to admire the tree of a man standing in front of me, my eyes finally lift from the impressive bulging muscles that threaten to burst through the confines of the man's shirt.

As I regain my senses, I'm met with warm, hazel eyes that twinkle with amusement. His tousled sun-kissed hair, faded jeans, and well-worn boots hint at recent adventures in the great outdoors. He looks like he's just walked out of a hiking catalog, and I can't help but feel captivated by the rugged charm that oozes from him.

"Sorry, I...um, didn't see you," I blurt out, my words stumbling over each other as I fumble for something more profound to say, realizing that eloquence is not my strong suit at this particular moment.

"No harm done," he winks, his hand still on my arm, his touch sending a shiver of warmth straight through my body. "I'd be happy to have you run into me anytime."

My cheeks heat, and I can't help but smile. "Well, come by here any day and you probably will."

One brow lifts. "I just might start," he says, releasing me. He grins, revealing a charming set of dimples, and extends his hand. "I'm Alex, by the way."

I shake his hand, feeling that same delightful tingle run up my arm. "I'm Bella, the art teacher at Crestwood Elementary." I pause, realizing I've introduced myself as if we're in a formal interview. "Sorry about that. It's like I'm presenting my credentials for a first date or something."

Alex's laughter fills the air, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Well, if that's the case, consider yourself hired. Now, all I need is your number so we can set it up."

"Oh...um..." *Is this seriously happening?*

"Unless you're not interested," he says, his hazel eyes never leaving

mine, a playful challenge in his gaze.

“I’m interested,” I blurt out with too much enthusiasm, making him chuckle again. I scramble to get my phone out of my purse, my hands trembling as I hand it to him to input his number.

When he hands it back, he gives me another charming, dimpled grin. “Hope to hear from you soon, Bella.”

My heart does a little pitter-patter thing as I watch him walk out the door, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve just stepped into a rom-com movie, and the leading man has just asked for my number.

Savoring the warm, fuzzy feeling from my run in with Alex, I stroll up to the counter and place my order for my trusty caramel macchiato. Sarah, the barista, greets me with her familiar smile, affirming that this daily ritual has become a cherished routine here.

“I see you’ve met our handsome new regular,” she says with a wink.

“Uh, yeah, Alex, right? He’s...um, friendly.”

She laughs. “Oh, ‘friendly’ is one way to put it. I’d say he’s more like ‘interested.’ I think you’ve brewed up some romance in your caramel macchiato today.”

“Well, in that case, I hope he likes his coffee with a side of quirky art teacher.”

“He sure seemed like he did.”

I shrug, knowing the whimsical world of romance is just that...*whimsical*.

With my steaming cup of liquid comfort in hand, I make my way to my favorite corner of the cozy coffee shop. It’s the spot where the soft, golden sunlight filters in through the window just right, casting a warm glow on the worn wooden table. This is my haven, my sanctuary, where creativity flows as freely as the coffee.

I pull out my beloved sketchbook, its pages filled with a mosaic of memories and inspiration. Flipping to a fresh, blank page, I’m absorbed in the world of lines and shades, bringing my thoughts to life on paper.

My two favorite things, coffee and art, intertwine as my pencil dances across the sketchbook. But as I draw, my thoughts drift back to Alex. Could he join the ranks of my cherished favorites? The thought lingers in the corners of my mind, a reminder that life is full of surprises.

In my haze of sketching, a strange sensation tingles at the back of my neck, like the prickling awareness of being watched. It’s intense enough to draw my attention away from my sketchbook.

My heart skips a beat when I spot him — tall, dark, and impossibly handsome. His leather jacket screams bad boy, and the motorcycle helmet he holds casually in his hand adds to the image. But it's those piercing ice-blue eyes of his that capture me completely.

I can feel my cheeks flush as he gives a small, subtle nod in acknowledgment. There's no smile, just an intense, smoldering stare. And then, as if the moment never happened, he pulls his gaze away.

He strides over to the counter, a confident swagger in his step, and orders an espresso with an intensity that leaves Sarah blushing. It's as if he's radiating charisma, and the air around him crackles with an irresistible allure. I can tell he's the kind of guy who should have a warning label. There's an undeniable sexiness to him. Definitely not boyfriend material. But on the flip side, I don't doubt for a nanosecond that he'd be an absolute rock star in bed. I mean, those bad boy vibes practically come with a "Certified Sex God" certificate, right?

Just as I'm about to ignore the sexy stranger and lose myself in my art once more, fate has other plans. With his espresso in hand, he saunters over to my table, and those piercing, ice-blue eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that makes my heart race.

"Mind if I join you, gorgeous?" he purrs, his voice sending a sultry shiver down my spine.

I swallow hard, tongue-tied. "Uh, sure," I stammer out, shifting in my chair.

He takes a seat across from me, his leather jacket creaking softly as he settles in. "Damien," he introduces himself, extending a hand.

I take it, and a jolt of electricity passes between us at the touch. "Bella," I reply, feeling a flush of warmth in my cheeks.

"Bella." He leans in closer, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. "You've got a smile that could stop traffic."

I chuckle, my heart pounding in my chest. "Thanks."

His eyes twinkle with mischief as he reaches for my phone that's sitting on the table.

"No passcode," he says, one brow raised in disapproval. "I'd like to see that smile again. Mind if I add my number to your contacts?"

Unable to tear my gaze away from his intense stare, I reply, "Go ahead," my voice barely above a whisper.

As he hands my phone back to me, our fingers brush, and more heat pools

inside of me.

“Call me,” he says, standing and grabbing his coffee in one hand and his helmet in the other. “And think about putting a passcode on your phone.”

“Okay,” I reply, not entirely sure which part of his request I’m agreeing to.

It takes a full minute after he leaves for my breathing to return to normal. But the heat in my cheeks is still burning hot, a lingering reminder of our brief encounter.

Sarah catches my gaze and she mouths, “What was that?”

I shrug in response because, truthfully, I have no idea what just happened. Or if I’ll even consider calling him. I mean, maybe...if my reliable vibrator stops working.

Stop. I warn myself, shaking my head to clear the tempting thoughts. The last thing I need is to stumble into a friends-with-benefits arrangement. Because that’s all a guy like him is good for. *Right?*

As I leave the cozy coffee shop, my mind is still entangled with thoughts of the two handsome strangers. There’s Alex, the boy next door type, exuding rugged charm, and then there’s Damien, the undeniable bad boy radiating sheer hotness. They couldn’t be more different, and yet I’m drawn to both of them.

The joyful laughter of a child diverts my attention. I turn just in time to see the boy lose his grip on a colorful balloon, and it floats away, threatening to take his happiness with it.

Without a second thought, I spring into action, determined to save the day. I rush toward the escaping balloon, my fingers brushing its string as I make a desperate grab. But in my earnest attempt, I step off the curb, oblivious to the oncoming traffic.

Just as my heart leaps into my throat, a silver Mercedes screeches to a halt inches from me, the driver forcefully hitting the brakes. Time seems to slow as I meet the incredulous gaze of the man behind the wheel, his gorgeous, dark brown eyes holding a mix of concern and anger.

Slamming the door, the man exits his car. “Are you out of your mind? You could’ve been hurt!”

I blink, realizing the gravity of my impulsive act. “I just...I didn’t want the kid to lose his balloon.”

His eyes widen, then shift to the balloon and back at me before shaking his head.

It gives me a second to return the balloon to its relieved owner. The boy looks up at me with a grateful smile before he and his mom continue on their way.

“I hope your car is alright,” I say, glancing around him at the expensive vehicle that definitely costs more than my annual salary.

“I don’t care about the car,” he says, stepping closer. “I could have hurt you, or worse.”

“I’m fine.”

The man's gaze captivates me with his enigmatic charm. His tailored suit highlights the strength of his broad shoulders, and his dark scruff adds a touch of ruggedness to his polished appearance. But it’s those eyes, deep, dark and mysterious, that draw me in like a moth to a flame.

He clears his throat. “You know,” he begins, “risking your life for a balloon is a new one on me.”

“Yeah, not my best decision, I admit.”

He extends his hand. “I’m Sebastian.”

As I reach out to shake his palm, a subtle but electrifying sensation courses through me. His touch is warm and confident, sending a delightful shiver up my arm. It’s a feeling that goes beyond mere politeness; there’s an undeniable connection, an unspoken spark that leaves me with a flutter in my chest.

“I’m Bella.”

“Bella,” he utters my name, savoring it like a delectable flavor on his tongue. Soft, sensual, and my entire body ignites with warmth. Hand still firmly grasping mine, his dark eyes pierce my soul. “That was quite an introduction.”

“Yes,” I murmur, fully aware that I’d repeat that solitary word endlessly in his presence.

“I’m late for an appointment. Can I give you my number...” He gives a confident, sexy grin. “As a precaution if you decide to chase after another balloon?” He leans closer, dark eyes twinkling with promise. “Or in case you’d like to have dinner with me sometime.”

“Okay,” I say, handing him my phone, and he adds his number.

He shoots me a smoldering look before getting into his car.

And with that, he drives away, leaving me with a racing heart and the tantalizing possibility of yet another unexpected romance in the making.

Is there some sort of hot guy convention in town that I wasn’t aware of?

Three swoonworthy men in one day? The last hour of my life felt like a meet-cute marathon in a romance novel. But who am I to complain? It's the most excitement I've had in forever.

I look at my phone, which now holds the numbers of Alex, Damien, and Sebastian, each offering a unique flavor of intrigue and temptation.

Who will I call?

With a bemused shake of my head, I can't help but wonder if fate has played matchmaker, and I'm merely along for the ride. As I make my way home, the possibilities and uncertainties of this unexpected romantic adventure continue to dance through my mind, leaving me both exhilarated and utterly perplexed.

Reader's Choice:

Who should Bella go on a date with?

Alex: the rugged outdoorsman with dimples and a heart of gold. [Turn to this page.](#)

Damien: the mysterious bad boy who rides a motorcycle but has a soft side. [Turn to this page.](#)

Sebastian: the impeccably dressed hero with a smile that could rival a thousand sunsets. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART TWO

FIRST DATES

First dates are like the warm-up round for your heart's grand performance. Embrace the awkwardness because every hilarious hiccup brings you one step closer to your romantic masterpiece.

CHAPTER 2

DAMIEN

CHOOSING THE DANGEROUS PATH

I *did it*. I made the call. And now the elusive bad boy is on his coming to pick me up. I can't help but wonder if this is the best decision I've ever made. After all, those ice-blue eyes and that slightly crooked grin have heartbreak written all over them. But tonight, my motto is "Be brave." Or maybe it should be "brace yourself" — either way, I have a feeling this is going to be one wild ride.

I stand on the curb, fidgeting with the strap of my purse. The anticipation of our first date has me acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. I have to take a few steadying breaths to get my heart rate under control when the roar of his motorcycle engine cuts through the evening air. I feel a flutter in my chest at the sight of him in his leather jacket and jeans that cling tightly to his muscular thighs.

"Wow," I mutter to myself as he parks the bike and removes his helmet, revealing his rugged, stubbled jawline and dark, tousled hair.

He catches my gaze and offers a crooked grin that sends a flood of warmth across my skin. Yeah, this is the best bad idea I've had in a very long time.

Damien's confident stride brings him closer, and his masculine scent, an intoxicating blend of cologne mingled with the faint trace of sweat, awakens a longing within me I never knew existed.

"You look gorgeous, Bella," he says, his voice deep and rough, filled with promises that threaten to unravel my entire world.

And I'm entirely prepared to let him unravel me, even if it's only for a single night. *Oh my god, when did I become so bad?* I know exactly when — the second I laid eyes on Damien Blackwood.

“Are you ready?” he asks, a mischievous smirk on his lips. His gaze locks onto me like a cat watching a mouse, poised for the thrill of the chase as if he knows I might bolt at any moment.

But tonight, I’m not playing the mouse. I’m ready for anything Mr. Bad Boy Biker wants to throw my way.

I release an audible breath, and that smirk on his lips twitches in response. It dawns on me that I haven’t uttered a single word. Perhaps I’m more nervous than I’d like to admit.

“Are we taking that?” I nod towards his bike.

He chuckles and extends a hand toward me. “Your chariot for the evening, princess.”

I remind myself that tonight is about being brave, even if it entails riding on the back of a perilous metal beast. It’s the driver I should be more concerned about, because those intoxicating eyes of his are probably the more dangerous of the two.

I take his hand, and the moment his skin grazes mine, electricity courses through me. That smirk plays on his lips, and the look he gives me, smoldering and just plain hot, tells me he knows exactly the effect he’s having on me.

This is such a bad idea.

“Ready for an adventure, Bella?”

Nope.

“Absolutely,” I say with the most confidence I can muster.

As he helps me onto the bike I’m glad I opted for casual jeans instead of a dress.

I’ve never been on a motorcycle before, and the idea of straddling the sleek machine with my arms wrapped around Damien’s muscular chest is both thrilling and nerve-wracking.

Once I’m settled behind him, he hands me a helmet with a grin. “Safety first,” he says, his voice a low, velvety rumble.

There is nothing *safe* about any of this; my brain chimes in.

I take the helmet and slide it on, securing it with his help. Damien does the same and starts the engine. The vibrations beneath me as the motorcycle roars to life send shivers down my spine, and I won’t say what else it does to my body. But let’s say it has very similar results as Damien’s touch.

“What do I do with my hands?” I ask loudly over the rumbling.

He takes my hands and wraps them around his waist.

Oh my god.

I can feel his hard abs under the cotton of his t-shirt, the warmth of skin through the material, and my insides turn to molten lava.

With a gentle rev of the engine, we pull away from the curb and onto the open road. The wind rushes past us, whipping my long hair around in a wild dance. I can't help but feel exhilarated, the adrenaline pumping through my veins. *And heat.* Intense, crazy, wonderful heat as my body is pressed tightly against his.

The scenery blurs into a colorful mosaic of lights and sounds as we cruise through the city streets. No wonder people do this. It's intoxicating. Damien's confident control of the bike and the feel of his muscles beneath my fingers fill me with a sense of danger and excitement.

A tinge of disappointment washes over me as he finally eases the bike's speed and guides it to a stop, parking it by the side of the road.

As we dismount, my legs feel wobbly, and I'm grateful for the solid ground beneath my feet.

"You okay?" Damien asks, a hint of concern in his stormy gaze as he helps me with the helmet.

I nod, trying to steady myself. "Yeah, just a little shaky. But that was... incredible."

"First time on the back of a bike?" He asks, a playful smirk tugging at his lips.

"Well, I had a tricycle when I was four, but I don't think that counts."

He laughs, a deep, throaty sound that sends warmth spreading through me. "Well, you handled yourself like a pro, princess."

I grin. "I'll just add 'extreme motorcycle enthusiast' to my list of unexpected hobbies."

That crooked grin of his makes my knees wobbly for a whole other reason as he moves closer. "Well, maybe I'll turn you into a biker babe in no time," he teases, his voice laced with irresistible charm.

His fingers brush a stray lock of hair away from my face, and he leans in even closer, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine. "Glad you liked it. It's been a while since I've taken someone for a ride," he says, his lips dangerously close to mine.

"I doubt that," I say, chuckling, taking a small step back before I fall permanently down the rabbit hole of Damien Blackwood.

His stride follows mine, eyes narrow, and he places his fingers under my

chin, lifting my face as he studies me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I swallow hard. “Well, look at you. I doubt you spend many nights alone. And I’m pretty sure if this date goes bad, you’ve got more than a dozen other girls on speed dial.”

His brows furrow briefly, then he sighs and drops his hand. “So you think this is a game to me?”

“That’s not what I meant.” However, it’s precisely what I’ve thought since I saw him at the coffee shop. Guys like him don’t date girls like me. I don’t think they even date. *They play*. And I knew that coming out tonight.

“You’ve got me all figured out, huh?” He tilts his head, studying me like he can read my thoughts.

“Come on,” I say playfully, “you ride a motorcycle, wear a leather jacket, and then there’s this whole mysterious, bad-boy aura you have going on.”

He lets out a deep, throaty laugh and shakes his head. “God, Bella. I knew I was going to like you.”

A smile curls on my lips, and a fragment of my defense softens with those words.

His fingers graze my skin, feather-light, as they trace the delicate curve of my cheek. I meet his gaze, and those stormy, mysterious eyes hold me in a hypnotic trance.

“Not saying my life isn’t complicated. You’re right to be guarded. But I won’t hurt you.” I swear I catch a slight hint of vulnerability in his words.

Careful, my brain warns.

But a part of me wants to believe him. Maybe he is more than just a one-night stand and a heartbreak on a motorcycle.

Or maybe he’s just really, really good at this game.

“Hungry?” He asks, breaking the moment and taking a small step back.

“Famished.” *But not for food.*

That smirk is back in full force, and I swear the man can read my thoughts. “Come on,” he says, “Taking my hand.”

We head inside a small Italian restaurant. Soft, warm lighting bathes the rustic wooden tables with checkered red-and-white tablecloths. The walls are adorned with vintage Italian posters and framed photographs capturing the essence of Italy, and the aroma of garlic, tomatoes, and freshly baked bread fills the air, instantly making my stomach growl.

As we’re led to our table, I can’t help but notice the admiring glances from other diners. Damien’s presence seems to command attention.

“Do you ever get used to everyone staring at you?” I ask, chuckling when I see more heads turn in our direction.

He places his hand on my lower back as we walk to our table and whispers in my ear, “Pretty sure they’re staring at you, beautiful.”

My cheeks flush at the compliment.

Yeah, he’s good. But I can’t deny the fact that I love it.

“So, you’re a teacher,” he says as we settle into our seats, menus in hand.

I nod, feeling more at ease as the conversation turns towards something less intense. “I’m the art teacher at Crestwood Elementary. Some people think it’s a simple job, but it has *interesting* days.” I know I’m rambling, but Damien smiles, his demeanor giving the impression that he’s genuinely interested in what I’m saying. So I continue, “Like today. I was teaching my students about impressionism, and I had this one boy, Oliver, who got a little too ‘impressionistic’ with his painting. Twelve-year-old boys can be the most challenging.”

Damien chuckles. “Sounds like Oliver and I would have gotten along.”

“Yeah,” I say lightly, a smile tugging at my lips. “I have a feeling you gave your teachers a run for their money.”

“You have no idea.” He winks. Then his expression grows more contemplative, and his brows pull down in a slight frown. “Kids are a handful,” he says, that serious broodiness returning. “Teaching is an important job. I admire your dedication.”

“There’s nothing else I’d rather do except maybe spend my days with my sketchbook and watercolors,” I say sincerely. “I genuinely love my job. So, what about you? Who is Damien Blackwood?”

His gaze turns distant momentarily, as if deciding how much of himself to reveal. “Well, I run my security business and enjoy the thrill of the open road. Motorcycles are my passion. As for the rest…” He winks. “You’ll just have to find out.”

It’s a challenge that both intrigues and terrifies me.

Throughout dinner, the conversation flows naturally, with Damien showing genuine interest in getting to know me. However, he skillfully avoids delving into deeper discussions about his own life, leaving an air of mystery that only reinforces that bad-boy aura of his.

But, god, that smile and those eyes are an irresistible trap. One that I am easily and quickly falling into.

He doesn’t miss a chance to brush my hand with his fingers or grace my

arm with his touch. The chemistry between us is undeniable, an electric current that crackles with every subtle touch and lingering gaze.

Fire. That's what he is — a dangerous inferno of temptation.

And I love it.

Damien is uncharted territory for me, but maybe he's exactly what I need — a tall, mysterious, brooding figure who will sweep me off my feet and take me on an adventure I never knew I craved.

Or perhaps I've recently been indulging in one too many angsty romance novels. The ones that tempt us to believe that there are *good*, bad boys. All they need is to find the right girl.

My inner pragmatist rolls her eyes at the thought and reminds me that real life rarely mirrors the pages of a romance novel.

But I could definitely use some of those steamy scenes in my life.

The night air is cool and crisp as we leave the restaurant, and he helps me onto the back of his bike. As I settle onto the sleek leather seat behind Damien, I can't help but feel a thrill of anticipation coursing through my veins, not just for the ride, but for what else the night has in store.

Should I invite him in? I chew on my bottom lip, knowing what will happen if I do.

With a confident twist of the throttle, the powerful engine roars to life, sending vibrations humming through the frame.

We glide smoothly through the darkened streets, the city's lights painting streaks of vibrant color across the canvas of the night. The wind rushes past, tousling my hair and carrying with it a sense of freedom and exhilaration.

I could get used to this.

The familiar surroundings of my neighborhood come into view, bathed in the soft glow of streetlights. With practiced ease, Damien maneuvers the bike, guiding it gracefully to a stop in front of my home.

The engine's growl fades into a quiet hum, and the night's serenity envelopes us again. Damien switches off the ignition, and as he helps me off the bike, our fingers touch, sending a delightful shiver down my spine.

The atmosphere between us is charged with anticipation as he assists me in removing my helmet. I can feel the intensity in his gaze, as if he's entirely focused on me and nothing else.

"So, I suppose this is goodnight," I say, my teeth gently tugging at my lower lip.

"Suppose so." He brushes my hair behind my ear, a playful smirk tugging

at his lips. “But you know, I’ve got a confession to make.”

“Oh?”

“I brought you home safely, but I must admit, I’m not entirely sure how to say goodbye properly.”

I grin and shake my head. “You mean you didn’t plan a dramatic movie-style ending with a grand speech and a passionate kiss? What kind of bad boy biker are you?”

He erupts into a hearty, full-throated laugh. “What can I say? You figured me out! I even practiced my dramatic monologue in front of the mirror.”

“I’m almost disappointed you didn’t use it.”

He smirks. “Well, maybe next time.”

Next time. Will there be a next time?

“Maybe,” I say softly, falling deeper into those stormy eyes. His gaze remains locked onto me, scorching and intense, pulling me irresistibly closer until there’s barely a breath of space between us.

“Bella?” His fingers trace my jawline, sending a thrill straight to my core.

“Hmm?”

“Can I kiss you?”

I swallow and nod.

He leans in slowly, and our lips meet. Soft. Gentle. His warm breath mingles with my own. Those long, powerful fingers cup the back of my neck, tangling in my hair as the kiss deepens.

Oh my god, he’s a good kisser.

Every cell in my body is screaming out for more. But I’m not sure I can handle more of Damien Blackwood.

As we pull away, he breathes softly, “Bella, I want to see you again.”

I’m left breathless, torn between the thrill of this enigmatic man and the fear of getting hurt.

“I’m willing to take a chance on something...” His thumb gently traces my cheek as he leans in closer and whispers in a husky voice, “Something real.”

Something real. My heart skips a beat. Is it possible with this man?

A thousand thoughts race through my mind. The chemistry between us is undeniable, and my heart whispers that this might be a chance worth taking. Should I play it safe and end things now, or take a risk and agree to another date? *Or* do I listen to the ache between my legs and invite him inside?

I meet Damien's intense gaze, his eyes mirroring my desire. The choice is mine to make, and it's a decision that could change everything.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Turn up the heat, take a risk, and invite **Damien** inside. [Turn to this page.](#)

Say goodnight, but still embrace the danger and go on another date with **Damien**. [Turn to this page.](#)

Call **Alex** and accept a date with him. [Turn to this page.](#) If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a **second date** by [Turning to this page.](#)

Call **Sebastian** and accept a date with him. [Turn to this page.](#) If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a **second date** by [Turning to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 3

DAMIEN

RECKLESS AND LOVING IT!

“Do you want to come inside?” I ask. Lust knots in my stomach, vibrating in my thighs. I want this. I want him, even if it’s just one night.

Damien’s gaze intensifies, his desire mirroring my own.

“You sure that’s what you want?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Those stormy blue eyes fixate on me. When he finds whatever he is searching for, his lips hover over mine, and he groans. “You’re a surprise, Bella.”

He kisses me, and my head spins as the passion between us escalates, my entire body aching with a need I didn’t know I had until now. Somehow, we reach the patio, and in between whimpers and moans, I get my keys out of my purse and unlock the door.

Inside, Damien’s hands roam free, skirting under my top, palming my breast, his thumb circling my already painfully tight nipple through the thin fabric of my bra.

Desperate for more of his touch, I arch against him, liquid heat pooling in my core.

He groans, shrugging off his leather jacket, as my fingers find the hem of his t-shirt and the abs beneath it. His chest, arms, and shoulders bunch in a beautiful symphony of muscle and sinew as he pulls the shirt over his head and tosses it on the floor with his jacket.

“Bella.” His breath is ragged, and his intense gaze locks on me. My belly does that fluttering thing when I see the primal look there. I could get lost in him, in the stormy blue eyes that threatened to devour me. “Do you want me

to stop?”

I know I'll probably regret this in the morning. I don't do one-night stands. But I need this, crave it.

“I want this,” I tell him, my voice barely sounding like my own.

Another deep groan rumbles in his chest, and he lifts me in one swift movement. My legs straddle his waist, and my fingers dive into his thick hair as his lips find mine again. I can feel the hard length of his erection pressing against my belly through the fabric of his jeans, and I whimper, arching against him.

“Bedroom?” he asks against my mouth.

“There.” I nod to the second door on the right, my lips never leaving his.

I lose track of time, of everything except Damien's touch, his kiss, as he lays me down on the bed and slides my jeans over my thighs, then removes my shirt and bra. I squirm beneath him, sparks racing across my skin as his touch teases the bare flesh at my hip. I clutch at him, digging my fingers into his back, my body aching for more.

“Damien!” His name is a gasp as his fingers slide beneath my panties. I arch against his palm, needing more, begging for release.

He pushes himself up to kneel between my thighs and undoes his belt and the top button of his jeans.

I soak him in. Every delectable inch. Broad shoulders, powerful muscles that define his chest and arms, and the dark patch of hair that disappears beneath his pants.

He's so freaking sexy.

My fingertips trail across his abs, then lower. He groans and moves to the edge of the bed, shoving his jeans and boxers down his legs so he's standing naked, his thick, long erection straining towards me.

Oh my god, he's incredible to look at.

That cocky smirk is back on his lips, and I know he's fully aware of how hot he is. “Like what you see?”

“Pretty impressive,” I say with a slight tease, a smile tugging at my lips as he crawls back onto the bed.

“You're gorgeous.” Those icy eyes of his burn with blue fire as he stares down at me.

My pulse thuds a wild beat. Damien, Damien, Damien.

I don't care if this is a game for him. Because whatever the hell it is, I am enjoying every second. Even if it's just for tonight, my head is creating

memories that will help me through any future dry spells.

He captures my mouth again. His lips are warm and demanding, and his palms slip across my wanting flesh, and I jerk towards him.

“More,” I beg.

“God, Bella, you’re killing me,” he hisses, his finger plunging deep inside my pussy, pulling a strangled cry from my throat. The last remaining fabric on my body is peeled away, my panties discarded on the floor, and I hear the plastic tear before he rolls the condom over his cock.

An overload of sensations fires through me, infusing every cell with lust.

“Bella,” he moans against my lips, the thick head of his cock nudging against my entrance. “You still want this?”

“Yes,” I whimper.

He fills me with one hard thrust, and I cry out at his fullness.

Heat blazes like an inferno across my skin, pleasure coiling inside me.

His thrusts are fierce and intense, and I match his pace, my hips moving with him, my hands raking across his gorgeous flesh.

Our movements are desperate. Almost feral. Lust raging like a storm, just waiting for its release.

And then I swear I burst into a million pieces of ecstasy.

I gasp, fingers digging into his back, as wave after wave of pleasure rips through my body. With a strangled groan, he goes rigid before collapsing beside me.

We lay there panting, unable to move. I don’t trust my legs to work even if they had to.

I expect him to get up and leave, but he pulls me against him, wrapping an arm around me, his voice a guttural rasp as he says, “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

A smile pulls at my lips, my eyes heavy.

And as I lay in his arms, sleep engulfing me, a small dance of hope plays in my chest.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

As the first rays of morning sunlight filter through the curtains, I stir from my slumber, the remnants of our passionate night together still lingering in my thoughts. Stretching, I reach out to the other side of the bed and find the space empty.

Reality rushes in, and I can’t help but feel a pang of disappointment.

But what did I expect?

With a sigh, I pull myself out of bed and slip into a robe, my footsteps taking me to the kitchen. And there, on the wooden table, sits a single rose, most likely taken from my neighbor's garden, a rebellious yet charming gesture that Damien would make. Beside the flower is a caramel macchiato from the Artful Bean, steam still rising from the cup, and a note.

Thank you for an amazing first date. Can't wait to see you again.

Damien

A smile tugs at my lips, and the disappointment from his absence dissipates. Maybe there's more to this bad boy than meets the eye.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Embrace the danger and go on another date with **Damien**. [Turn to this page](#).

That was fun, and it scratched an itch. But one night with the bad boy is enough.

End things with Damien and make the call to **Alex**. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a **second date** by [Turning to this page](#).

End things with Damien and call **Sebastian**. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a **second date** by [Turning to this page](#).

CHAPTER 4

ALEX

COFFEE AND CHEMISTRY

I'm a bundle of nerves as I stand in front of the mirror, trying to decide on the perfect outfit for my date with Alex. I've gone through my entire closet, and it feels like I've tried on every piece of clothing I own. It's just coffee, I remind myself — no need to overthink it.

I settle on a simple yet cute floral sundress that makes me feel comfortable and confident. I add a delicate necklace and slip into a pair of sandals. I check my reflection one last time and take a deep breath.

You've got this, Bella.

I grab my purse, where my phone sits on top like a prized possession. I can't help but look at the messages I exchanged with Alex earlier: flirty but fun. And I'm hopeful for where the date might lead.

Locking the door, I head to the Artful Bean. The sun is still shining, casting a warm glow over the streets, and as I approach the coffee shop, I spot Alex through the window, sitting at a corner table.

He's wearing a red plaid shirt and jeans, looking as charming as he did when we first met. His tousled sun-kissed hair and easy smile make my heart skip a beat. But those dimples steal the show, the ones that appear when he flashes that heartwarming grin.

The safe choice, that pragmatic voice inside my head says.

But make no mistake; beneath that wholesome exterior, there's an undeniable magnetism, a simmering attraction that's impossible to ignore.

He's not just safe; he's sizzling hot, a blend of rugged adventure and irresistible charm.

The Artful Bean's familiar coffee aroma greets me as I enter. It's a comforting scent, like a warm hug, putting me at ease.

Alex looks up from his seat as I enter, and his smile widens when he sees me. “Bella, you look amazing,” he says as he stands up to greet me. He hands me a caramel macchiato and gives me one of his dimpled smiles.

“How did you know what I like?”

There’s a hint of mischief in his eyes. “You said you come here most days, so I asked the barista if she knew what the pretty art teacher from Crestwood Elementary usually orders.”

I glance at Sarah, who gives me two thumbs up before returning to the espresso machine.

“Well played,” I reply, my cheeks warming at the compliment. “I guess you’ve done your homework.”

He chuckles and gestures for me to take a seat across from him. “I couldn’t resist the opportunity to impress you,” he says with a wink.

I take a sip of the caramel macchiato, savoring the sweet and creamy flavor and unable to hide my smile. “So, what’s your go-to coffee order?”

He leans back in his chair, his eyes locked onto mine. “You know, I’m a bit of a coffee enthusiast,” he confesses. “I love trying different types of beans, but if I had to pick one drink, I’d say a well-brewed espresso. It’s the purest form of coffee and packs a punch.”

I raise an eyebrow playfully. “Ah, a coffee connoisseur.”

Alex chuckles.

We both take a sip of our coffee and for a moment, there’s a comfortable silence as we soak in each other’s presence. The Artful Bean’s ambiance, with its cozy corners and the soft hum of conversation in the background, provides the perfect backdrop for our date.

“So,” Alex finally says, breaking the silence, “tell me something interesting about yourself.”

I lean forward, and my eyes locked onto his, a playful glint in mine. “Well, besides being an art teacher and an aspiring world-renowned artist,” I say with a wink, “I have a not-so-secret life as an undercover ninja.”

Alex raises an eyebrow. “A ninja? Wow, that’s quite the side hustle.” He leans forward, giving me a dimpled grin. “And what’s your special ninja skill?”

I tap my chin, pretending to ponder. “I can turn any spilled paint into a masterpiece with just a flick of my brush.”

He grins. “I have to confess I don’t meet many ninja art teachers in my line of work.”

I chuckle and admit, “Honestly, though, I did take a few Karate lessons when I was younger. Other than swimming, it was the only sport I ever tried. I was more of an arts and crafts kind of kid. But I bet you were into all the sports.”

“Yeah, pretty much. But I found my passion for hiking and rock climbing.” His smile falters, some memory stirring in his hazel eyes before those dimples return. “It’s one of the reasons I started SummitStar Adventures.”

“I’ve heard about the company. It’s guided hiking trips, right?”

Alex leans in, and I can tell he’s eager to share his passion. “It’s all about helping people experience the magic of the mountains,” he begins. “We offer guided expeditions and outdoor adventures focused on exploring the beauty and challenges of high-altitude terrain.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“It is, but the company is still growing. When the season’s slow, I sub as a gym teacher from time to time. My parents would prefer me to settle into a more permanent teaching position, but I prefer the thrill of the wilderness and the freedom of the mountains.”

“I get that. Maybe not the outdoorsy part,” I say, grinning. “But I know what it’s like to have a passion. I feel the same when I have my sketchbook out or a new palette of watercolors and a blank canvas in front of me.”

“I’ve never had much of an artistic streak,” he says. “But I’ll make you a deal.”

“What’s that?”

“You join me on a hiking trip, and you can teach me how to use a paintbrush on the next date.”

I laugh. “Hmm, maybe. I may have to up my cardio before I take you up on the offer.”

Alex grins, leaning in closer. “I promise I won’t take you on a grueling expedition. It’ll be a hike tailored to your comfort level.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh, you’re saying you won’t make me scale any sheer cliffs or cross rickety rope bridges?”

He chuckles. “No cliffs on your first attempt, but I can’t promise no rickety bridges.”

My stomach twists at the thought of an adventure with Alex, a mix of nervous excitement and anticipation. “Well,” I reply with a hint of teasing, “I suppose a rickety bridge or two could add some thrill to the experience. Just

promise to hold my hand if it gets too scary.”

Alex’s grin widens, his eyes sparkling. “Deal. I’ll be your fearless guide through the wilderness and the world of rickety bridges.” His hazel eyes locked onto mine and he grins. “Plus, I have a secret.”

“Really?” I ask, intrigued. “What is it?”

“Well, when I’m not conquering the great outdoors or teaching kids to do the perfect push-up, I moonlight as a...professional marshmallow roaster.”

I burst into laughter, unable to contain it. “A professional marshmallow roaster? That’s the most intriguing secret identity I’ve ever heard.”

He shrugs with a grin. “Hey, marshmallow roasting is an art form. Perfectly toasted and gooey on the inside, just like the perfect date.”

My stomach flutters, and I easily fall into his gaze. There’s no denying the spark between us. He’s sweet, charming, and gorgeous.

And safe.

Alex leans in closer as we finish our coffee, and a gentle, lingering silence hangs between us.

With a soft, sincere smile, he breaks the silence. “I had an amazing time today,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “And I’d like to see you again.”

My heart flutters at his words, but a hint of uncertainty lingers in my mind. He seems almost too perfect. But before I can voice my doubts, Alex closes the distance between us. His lips, soft and warm, meet mine in a sweet, lingering kiss.

As Alex pulls back, he gives me that irresistible dimpled grin, and a warmth washes over me. He’s charming, sweet, and undeniably attractive. But as I sit there, contemplating my choices, I can’t help but feel torn.

“Hope that’s a yes,” he says.

I nod, smiling at him. But in my thoughts, I can’t ignore the other choices that beckon: Damien, the bad boy with a hint of danger, and Sebastian, whose irresistible allure calls to me like a siren’s song. But then, taking a chance with Alex might be the most unexpected and thrilling adventure of all.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Play it safe and go on a second date with Alex. [Turn to this page.](#)

Call **Sebastian**, the impeccably dressed hero, with a smile that could rival a thousand sunsets, and accept a date with him. [Turn to this page.](#) If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a second date by [Turning to this page.](#)

Choose a little danger. Call **Damien**, the bad boy biker with a smirk who makes hearts race with just a glance. [Turn to this page.](#) If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a second date by [Turning to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 5

SEBASTIAN

WAITING FOR THE UNKNOWN

Sebastian — tall, dark, and incredibly sexy, Sebastian. The mere thought of his name sends a shiver down my spine. Tonight is our first date, and I can hardly contain my excitement or my nerves.

His bronze skin and those broad shoulders have left a permanent imprint in my mind. Not to mention, his dark hair that looks like it was made to be touched, and even darker eyes that seem to hold a universe of secrets.

I glance at my phone; the screen displaying the recent texts between us.

Sebastian: I'll pick you up at 6:00. Looking forward to spending an evening with you.

Bella: Me too! See you then.

My stupid nerves are sending my heart and head into a full-on conversational loop of whether or not this is a good idea. I can't help but second-guess myself as I pace my small living room.

A voice of caution reminds me of past heartaches, of promises broken and dreams left unfulfilled. It's easy to let fear take the reins, to retreat into the comfortable shell I've built around myself.

Then I remember the way his voice sounded on the phone, warm and reassuring. It was a stark contrast to the nervous tremor in my own words. It's as if he knew how to steady me with just his tone, how to melt away the uncertainty that usually ties my tongue in knots.

But, what do I really know about him?

Google was my friend earlier, revealing the basics about Sebastian Sinclair. A successful entrepreneur who's built an empire from the ground

up. The man has ambition, that much is clear. And the photos...well, they don't do him justice. It's not just his looks, though; it's the air of mystery that surrounds him.

Beyond those online snippets, I know very little about the man. One thing is for sure: he has impeccable taste. Tailored suits, crisp dress shirts — every image I found screamed sophistication. A stark contrast to my more bohemian style. It makes me wonder if we're too different, or if we'll be able to bridge the gap between our worlds.

As I glance at the clock on my phone, the minutes tick away. I'm not one to get all glammed up, but tonight is special. I've put in a little extra effort with my outfit and makeup, though I still feel like a fish out of water.

What am I getting myself into?

The sound of an engine approaching draws my attention to the window, and I see his silver Mercedes pull to a stop by the curb. I take one last look in the mirror, adjusting my hair and giving myself a small pep talk. Then, with a deep exhale, I make my way outside to meet him.

As I approach, he steps out, and my breath catches in my throat.

God, the man is gorgeous.

He's dressed in a sleek grey suit that fits him like a second skin, accentuating his tall and trim physique. But, it's his eyes that ensnare me most, darker even than his hair. They possess a piercing and intense quality as if they guard a realm of secrets waiting to be unveiled.

His smile, confident and undeniably sexy, curves at the corners of his lips as he takes in my appearance. I can feel his appreciative gaze, and despite my earlier nerves, a surge of confidence washes over me.

"Bella," he says in that warm, melodic voice, breaking the spell his presence has cast. "You look stunning." His words send a shiver down my spine, and I offer a nervous but genuine smile.

"Thank you," I reply, my heart still racing but my anxiousness slowly giving way to anticipation.

Sebastian extends his hand with a warm grin, inviting me into the sleek car. The interior is a realm of luxury, with pristine leather seats and a high-tech computer system that looks straight out of a sci-fi movie.

He settles next to me, and the gentle hum of the engine surrounds us. As we merge into the city's evening traffic, he asks, "Have you ever been to the opera?"

"Does 'Wicked' or 'Hamilton' count?" I ask with a grin.

He laughs warmly, a rich sound that fills the car. “No, not quite.”

I shrug. “Well, I’m willing to try anything once.”

His smile widens, and there’s a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Do you like French cuisine?”

“Well, if french fries count, then definitely,” I say with mock seriousness. “Actually, other than croissants and wine, I don’t know what French food is.”

Those dark eyes glance at me, and his smile removes all insecurities. “It’s about elegance and flavor. Imagine delicate cheeses, fine wines, and exquisite dishes like coq au vin or duck à l’orange.”

“You lost me at cock—” I cover my mouth in embarrassment as I realize my mispronunciation, but he just laughs.

“Your pronunciation was right.” That sexy smile tugs at his lips again. “I’ve booked a reservation at ‘Le Charmé. And after, the theatre is just across the street, and I have tickets for The Marriage of Figaro.”

French food and an opera — It’s exactly the date night I expected from a man who drives a car worth more than my small house. But even though it’s not something I would ever do on my own, I’m looking forward to the evening.

We arrive at ‘Le Charmé,’ and I’m immediately struck by the ambiance — soft lighting, white tablecloths, and an air of sophistication that envelops us. As I peruse the menu, the assortment of dishes appears exotic and alluring, though the prices are shockingly high. The wine he selects is certainly pricier than the typical Merlot I purchase at Walgreens.

"Do you know what you’d like?" he inquires as the waiter approaches.

I nibble on my lower lip. "How about you choose for me?"

He nods, then fluently, in what I believe to be flawless French, he orders.

“You speak French,” I say when the waiter leaves.

Sebastian pours more wine into my glass. “I spent three years in France when I was younger.”

"Of course, you did," I reply with a chuckle, but I immediately regret my comment when I see him frown.

"My brother was there receiving medical treatment that he couldn't get here," he explains.

"Oh. Is he okay now?" I inquire.

A shadow darkens his gaze, and he looks away. "He passed away several years ago."

"I'm so sorry," I offer my condolences.

"Thank you," he says, clearing his throat and shifting the topic. "What about you? Any siblings?"

"No, I'm an only child," I respond.

He continues to ask me questions about my family, my childhood, and my interest in art. However, whenever I attempt to steer the conversation back to his family, he quickly changes the subject.

The first bite of my meal sends waves of delight through my tastebuds. The flavors are complex, and the presentation is impeccable. "Wow."

He grins. "You like it."

"It's delicious."

The dinner and dessert surpass any culinary experience I've ever had, yet it's the opera that leaves me speechless.

Seated in the dimly lit theater, the haunting melodies and fervent performances echo through the hall. Although I may not comprehend the language, the emotions conveyed by the music and the commanding voices on stage stir something within me.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I glance at Sebastian, who smiles at me. It's a moment of pure connection, where words aren't needed to express the profound impact of the opera on our souls.

When the final encore fades and the applause subsides, Sebastian drives me home. The ride is filled with light chatter, a mix of our thoughts on the opera, and our shared laughter. There's something about his presence that puts me at ease, like we've known each other forever.

Eventually, we arrive at my place, and Sebastian gracefully walks around the car to open the door for me. He extends his hand, and I take it, stepping out.

My heart flutters as he walks me to the porch. There's a moment of hesitation, a charged pause as we stand there, our eyes locked.

"I had a wonderful time tonight," he says, his voice soft and sincere. "I'd love to see you again."

I feel fluttery inside at his words, and a surge of excitement builds within me. But then, my nervous side kicks in, and I make an awkward joke to diffuse the tension. "I'll introduce you to my idea of French food — Arby's curly fries."

He chuckles. "Actually, I'm more of a Chick-fil-A waffle fry kind of guy."

"Well," I say, in mock indignation. "I suppose you can't judge someone

based solely on their taste in french fries.”

Sebastian bursts into laughter. It’s a sound that warms my heart, and I can’t help but chuckle along with him.

“You have a point there,” he says, still smiling. “French fries are a serious matter.”

I nod, chuckling.

“Goodnight, Bella,” he says, leaning in closer. I can feel the warmth of his breath against my skin.

“Goodnight,” I reply, my heart pounding in my chest.

And then, it happens. Our lips meet with a soft, initial brush, like the flutter of a butterfly’s wings. There’s a moment of hesitation, a shared breath before our mouths meld together in a warm and lingering embrace.

The taste of him is intoxicating, a subtle blend of mint and a trace of the wine we shared earlier. His breath against my skin is a warm caress, sending shivers down my spine and making my heart race. Our mouths move together with a natural rhythm, a silent conversation of longing.

My fingers instinctively find their way to the back of his neck, tangling in his soft hair, pulling him closer. His hand cradles my cheek with a gentle touch, his thumb lightly tracing my jawline, igniting a delicious ache deep within me. When we finally pull away, Sebastian looks at me with a smile that makes my knees go weak. “I’ll call you soon.”

I nod, my mind a whirlwind of emotions. Our worlds are so different, and while I’m undeniably attracted to him, I can’t help but worry about the challenges our differences might bring.

But as he leans in for one more gentle kiss before saying goodnight, I can’t deny the chemistry between us. I watch him drive away, my heart torn between excitement and uncertainty. The question lingers in my mind: is he the one who can break through my guarded heart? Or will he be another man who will break it?

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Arrange a second date with **Sebastian** to explore whether there's a deeper connection beyond just chemistry. [Turn to this page.](#)

Choose someone a little more down-to-earth. Accept a date with **Alex**. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a second date by [Turning to this page](#).

Choose a little danger. Call **Damien**, the bad boy biker with a smirk who makes hearts race with just a glance. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a second date by [Turning to this page](#).

PART THREE

SECOND DATES

Second dates are the canvas where you begin to paint the masterpiece of your connection. The first was merely the sketch; now, let your heart fill in the vibrant colors of a beautiful love story.

CHAPTER 6

DAMIEN

TWO WHEELS AND A SPARK

My heart races as I prepare for my second date with Damien. But there's no backing down, because I hear that deep rumble of his motorcycle approaching, sending a thrill down my spine.

"You've got this," I mutter to my reflection, giving myself a little pep talk as I add the final touches of lip gloss. Holding my purse, I stride confidently to the door, ready for the excitement and trouble that comes with being with Damien.

I walk outside just as he dismounts his bike, and he greets me with a smoldering look that could make even a nun blush. "Hey, there, beautiful."

I love when he calls me that. But I wonder how many other girls shared the nickname.

"Hi." I don't resist when he pulls me towards him and gently kisses my lips.

My knees do that wobbly thing that they do whenever he touches me, and I let out a shaky breath against his mouth.

Wow.

He grins down at me. "Ready for an adventure?"

I meet his gaze with a playful grin, my voice teasing as I reply, "I don't know. An adventure with you seems like it could be dangerous. Should I be prepared for anything?"

Moving closer, he whispers against my ear, "I promise to keep you safe, Bella." With a playful wink, he adds, "And thoroughly entertained."

I laugh, my heart fluttering. "Well, in that case, Mr. Mysterious, lead the way. I'm all in for whatever you have in store."

"I knew you were my kind of girl," he says, chuckling.

Damien helps me onto the back of his motorcycle, and I wrap my arms around his strong, hard body, feeling a delicious shiver of excitement as we speed off towards a nearby park. The wind in my hair, the thrill of the ride, and the tantalizing mystery of Damien Blackwood — he’s turning out to be an adventure in every sense.

An irresistible, intense, mysterious, and dangerously attractive adventure.

I’ve always been the type to play it safe, reside firmly within my comfort zone, and steer clear of anything that might be deemed too risky. But with him, there’s a shift in my perspective.

That’s not to say that my rational mind isn’t screaming at the top of its lungs with warnings and cautions. It is. But at least for today, I’m determined to embrace my buried wild side, to venture beyond the boundaries I’ve set for myself.

We drive out of town, my cheek pressed against his muscular back, my arms wrapped low around his waist. And as we race down winding back roads, maneuvering between cars, a spontaneous hoot of exhilaration escapes my lips, and in response, Damien’s rich laughter rumbles through the air.

I could get used to this. The thrill of the ride mixed with the comforting presence of Damien — I feel scared and safe all at once.

As he starts to slow, I realize we’ve arrived at an overhanging cliff that looks out over a serene lake, the same one my mom and dad used to take me to when I was little.

“Thought this place would be a perfect spot for a picnic,” he says, helping me off the bike.

I take in the view, the large oak and pine trees surrounding us, and the dark blue lake glimmering in the sunlight.

“I haven’t been here in years,” I say, reminiscing. “We used to come to this lake when I was little.” I point to a spot further down. “There’s a public beach over there. We’d swim all day, and my dad would cook hotdogs and hamburgers on this portable grill he used to have. Some of my best childhood memories were made at this lake.”

Damien’s fingers graze a loose strand of my hair, tucking it behind my ear. His touch is delicate, almost reverent, sending a shiver down my spine. “Sounds like you had good parents.”

“Yeah. They weren’t perfect, but I was pretty lucky. What about you?”

His smile falters, and he looks away for a moment. “Let’s just say I’m pretty sure our childhoods didn’t have many similarities.” The dark, brooding

look returns, but then he shakes it off and starts unpacking things from the motorcycle's side compartment.

He lays out a checkered picnic blanket under a massive oak tree, and I watch him, thinking about what he said about his family. The puzzle surrounding Damien only deepens, and I can't help but wonder what lies beneath that rugged exterior.

"You know," I begin, sitting and giving him a teasing smile. "I never expected a bad boy to be such a romantic."

Damien's chuckle is a low, sexy rumble. "I have my secrets," he says, a mischievous glint in his eyes, before reaching into his backpack to unveil a thoughtful surprise — sandwiches, a bottle of sparkling wine, and plastic champagne flutes.

I raise an eyebrow, a playful grin tugging at my lips. "I can only imagine the secrets you have," I tease, accepting the glass Damien hands me with a twinkle in my eye.

He pours the wine, and as the bubbles effervesce, he leans closer. "And *you* don't have any secrets?"

I meet his gaze with a teasing grin. "Nope. I'm an open book. Ask me anything, and I'll tell you."

His voice lowers, laced with intrigue. "Anything? Are you sure about that?"

I chuckle, enjoying the flirtatious banter. "Absolutely. Try me."

Damien's eyes twinkle with mischief. "Okay, then. Tell me your deepest, darkest secret."

I feign surprise, placing a hand on my chest. "I thought you'd ask for something more challenging. But here it goes: I secretly have a stash of chocolate hidden in my closet. I know, it's scandalous."

He laughs, the sound warm and infectious. "Chocolate, huh? That is a dangerous secret."

I wink at him. "That's just the tip of the iceberg. But for now, it's your turn. Tell me something intriguing about Damien Blackwood, the man of mystery."

His expression turns contemplative before he answers, "I can recite the entire first season of 'Peaky Blinders' from memory."

I burst into laughter. "Seriously? That's your hidden talent?"

Damien shrugs, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Hey, you asked for intriguing, not earth-shattering."

Our playful conversation continues, each question and answer revealing more about ourselves while keeping the mood light and flirtatious. It's a delightful dance of getting to know each other, and with each passing moment, I'm even more drawn to him.

Minutes or hours, I don't know, because I lose track of time when I'm with him go by, and the setting sun casts a warm, golden glow around us. The occasional breeze rustles the leaves of the massive oak tree, sheltering our picnic spot as if nature is eavesdropping on our conversation.

"Tell me more about your family," Damien requests, his posture relaxed as he lies on his side. One arm is propped up, his hand resting casually on the back of his head, and his muscles bulge through his black t-shirt. It's hard not to be distracted by the sight.

"They're great," I say. "My dad is a bit of a goofball, always cracking jokes and making everyone laugh. And my mom, she's a real sweetheart."

He listens, a soft smile playing on his lips. His eyes, those enigmatic ice-blue orbs, hint at curiosity as he leans in, showing genuine interest in my stories.

I glance at Damien, sensing an opportunity to learn more about him.

"What about your family?" I ask again, this time with a gentle persistence, hoping he'll open up a bit more. "Do you have any siblings?"

Damien's expression grows somber, and for a moment, I think he might deflect the question. But then he exhales, as if making a decision.

"Yeah," he begins, his voice carrying a hint of vulnerability, "I have a sister. We used to be pretty close when we were kids, but...life happened, you know?"

I nod, sensing that there's more to this story. "I understand. Family dynamics can change over time."

He continues, "My mom, she's a fighter. She's worked hard, but life hasn't always been kind to her." There's a note of admiration in his voice when he talks about her and a touch of sadness.

I reach out and place my hand on his, offering a reassuring squeeze. "What about your dad?"

Damien's expression darkens, and he looks away for a moment. "My dad isn't in the picture. He left when we were kids."

I can sense the complexity of his emotions and the pain of his family history. "I'm sorry," I say softly, giving his hand another comforting squeeze.

As I watch Damien lost in contemplation, I can't help but wonder about

the stories he keeps hidden, the scars that have yet to heal. There's a vulnerability in this moment, a rare glimpse beneath his tough exterior.

Damien turns back to me, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that I'm not sure I'll ever get used to.

"Enough of the past," he says, his touch gentle as his fingers brush my cheek. "I'd rather focus on what's right in front of me."

I lean into his touch with a soft smile, savoring the moment. As he sits up, his eyes never leaving mine, a tender smile graces his lips. He leans closer, the gap between us narrowing until our breaths mingle in the space between our lips. His hand cradles my cheek, his touch gentle yet filled with a heat that fills my whole body.

As his lips meet mine, time seems to stand still. The world around us fades away, and all that remains is the gentle pressure of his mouth against mine. It's a kiss that ignites a thousand sparks, a slow and passionate dance of lips and tongues, a symphony of desire and longing. Every nerve in my body comes alive, tingling with sensation, and my heart races. I could lose myself in the sweet ecstasy of his kiss.

As we pull away, breathless, I know I'm falling too fast for him. But it's so damn easy.

Slow down, my brain urges. But my heart has other plans, and its steady beat is one word on repeat: *Damien, Damien, Damien.*

Or maybe it's really saying, *danger, danger, danger.*

"We should head back," Damien says, pulling away from our shared moment. He glances at his phone, which lights up with a new message, distracting him from the intensity of our connection.

The stars twinkle in the evening sky, and Damien starts packing the picnic items and returning them to the bike.

As I stand up and stretch, I notice that his cell has slipped and fallen onto the grass. I plan to give it to him, but my curiosity is piqued by a flurry of new messages.

Don't read people's private conversations, my head warns.

But I can't look away.

Stacey: Call me ASAP!!!

Lexi: Bring ice cream. Please.

Stacey: Stop ignoring me.

Lexi: And Chips.

But the last text catches me off guard, and my throat tightens with an unsettling feeling.

Lexi: Love you so much, Dami.

What the hell? My mind races as I try to process this unexpected revelation.

“Have you seen my phone?” Damien asks, and when I turn, he’s walking toward me.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammer, still trying to wrap my head around the texts. “It was on the ground. Here.”

“Thanks,” he says, putting it back in his pocket without glancing at the messages. He grins at me and reaches out to touch my face.

I can’t help but flinch, confusion and unease swirling inside me. Who are Stacey and Lexi, and why is the one telling him she loves him? Maybe my first suspicions were correct. Perhaps he’s just really good at playing the game.

“You okay?” Damien asks, brows drawing down.

“Yeah.” I force a smile and rub my arms. “Just a bit cold.”

“I’ll drive you home now,” he offers. “I’m running a bit late, anyway.”

Running late to bring ice cream and chips to Lexi or going to see Stacey?

But I don’t question him about what he’s running late for or who he might be running to. Deep down, I know that seeking the truth may lead to answers I don’t want to hear. It’s been a fun two dates, but maybe two is my limit when it comes to mysterious bad boys.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Trust **Damien** is into her, and confront him about the texts on their next date. [Turn to this page.](#)

Worry about the texts and go out for coffee with a **friend** to talk about it. [Turn to this page.](#)

End things with Damien and call **Alex**, the rugged outdoorsman with dimples and a heart of gold, and accept a date with him. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a **second date** by [Turning to this page](#).

CHAPTER 7

ALEX

SPARKS BY THE CAMPFIRE

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I tell my mom as I try on the old hiking boots she’s pulled out of storage. After multiple flirty and super cute texts from Alex, I accepted his challenge to go on one of his overnight hiking adventures. But at the moment, I’m regretting the decision.

“You’ve always loved the outdoors,” Mom says. “You’ll have fun. And it’s good for you to step out of your comfort zone. I’m glad you’re taking some risks.”

“Right,” I grunt, tying the shoelaces. “You mean you’re just glad I’m *dating* again.”

She chuckles. “Well, that too. I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.” I stand and wiggle my toes against the stiff leather. “Not everyone is lucky enough to meet their perfect soulmate when they’re eighteen, like you and Dad.”

“It’s not about finding the perfect match, sweetheart. It’s about making a decision each day to work for the love you choose.”

A sigh escapes my lips, and I know she’s right. But it’s hard not to want my Prince Charming when the fairytale has been told and retold since the beginning of time.

I glance in the full-length mirror and assess myself. I’ve tried to choose an outfit that’s both practical and cute, opting for comfortable leggings, a fitted tank top, and a light jacket. My hair is pulled back into a messy bun, and I’ve applied just a touch of mascara and lip gloss.

“Darling,” my mom says as I walk out of the quaint suburban house that was my home growing up, “remember to keep that heart of yours wide open.”

Oh, how I wish I could.

But the reality is for every Prince Charming waiting to sweep a girl off her feet, there seems to be a thousand cheaters and jerks, just waiting to play the villain and break a girl's heart.

But Alex seems to be one of the good ones. At least, I hope he is.

A fluttering sensation fills my chest as I drive toward our designated meeting spot. The prospect of spending two days with Alex, deep in the heart of the woods, rickety bridges and all, stirs a mix of emotions. It's an unconventional setting, but it's the perfect opportunity to gauge his character, and our chemistry.

I spot Alex waiting by his pickup as I pull into the parking area. He looks rugged and handsome, dressed in outdoor gear, accentuating his muscular physique. My nerves intensify as I step out of my car, and for a moment, I'm worried I might trip over my feet.

But then I glimpse those warm hazel eyes, and all my worries melt away.

"Bella!" he calls out, his voice filled with genuine excitement, as he gives me a dimpled smile.

"Hi," I reply, my voice breathless as I approach him.

He greets me with a hug, and for a moment, I revel in the warmth of his embrace. Something about how he holds me makes me feel safe and desired all at once. Those muscular arms of his are nothing short of awe-inspiring.

"I'm so glad you decided to come," he says, pulling back slightly and glancing down at me, his smile wide and infectious.

"I'm a little nervous," I admit, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

"You'll do great. And I promise as few rickety bridges as possible."

I chuckle, and we chat for a while as we wait for the rest of the hiking group to arrive. Alex tells me more about his love for the outdoors, his passion for nature, and his work with SummitStar Adventures. His enthusiasm is contagious, and I find myself more drawn to him with each passing moment and even a bit excited about starting the hike.

As the group assembles, I feel a sense of camaraderie among the hikers. They all seem friendly and thrilled about the trek ahead. Alex introduces me to everyone, and I'm relieved they're a welcoming bunch.

We set off with our backpacks secured and our hiking boots laced up. The trail winds through lush forests and opens up to breathtaking vistas. Alex takes the lead, his knowledge of the area and charismatic personality shining through as he shares stories and points out interesting landmarks.

Throughout the hike, Alex and I find moments alone, exchanging playful

smiles and whispered conversations that make my heart flutter with excitement.

“Let’s take a short break here,” Alex announces to the group, gently placing his backpack beside a towering oak tree. “Feel free to grab some water and a quick snack if you’d like, but remember not to wander too far,” he adds.

As the other hikers disperse, heading for nearby rocks or fallen logs to rest and refuel, I linger near Alex and sip my water bottle.

Alex leans against the massive tree. “Not in a hurry to explore the area?”

“I think I’ll stick with the guide.” I say, half teasing, “My luck, I’ll get lost or run into a grizzly bear.”

He chuckles. “There aren’t any grizzlies around this area. We do see a few black bears from time to time, but—”

“You’re kidding me?” I can feel my eyes widen, my face losing color as the realization that we could come into contact with a bear hits me.

Another deep laugh rumbles in his chest. “Don’t worry. I promised you I wouldn’t put you in any danger.”

I relax slightly, nudging him, and tease, “You know, if a bear does show up, you’ll have to protect me with those strong arms of yours.”

He grins, stepping closer. “I’ve got a few wilderness survival tricks up my sleeve. Always ready to put these arms to good use.”

Alex’s words and the seductive look he gives me make my cheeks flush with warmth. The chemistry between us feels intense, and it’s only growing hotter with each passing minute I spend with him.

It’s so easy to get lost in his hazel eyes, their depths pulling me in like a powerful current. I can’t help but want to reach up and trace my fingers over those sexy dimples that appear when he smiles.

The bushes beside me start to rustle. At first, it’s just a faint sound, but then it grows more aggressive. My heart races as my mind jumps to one thought — *bear*. A sharp yelp escapes my throat, and I step closer to Alex, my eyes widening with fear.

“Easy, Bella,” Alex says, humor in his voice, but not missing the opportunity to pull me close to him. “It’s just—”

“Hey,” Craig, one of the other hikers, pushes through the bushes. “Sorry, Bella, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I let out a shaky breath. “I thought you were a bear for a second.”

Craig grins. “Don’t worry, you’re not the first to make that mistake. My

wife swears I snore like one.”

Alex laughs. “Good to know. I’ll put you in the tent at the far side of the camp.”

As Craig walks away, I let out an embarrassed groan and cover my face. “Maybe I’m not cut out for this.”

“You’re doing great.” He takes my hands, eyes locking onto mine. “And you’re safe with me.”

I realize it’s not just about feeling *physically* safe with Alex; my heart feels safe, too.

It’s a good feeling. *A really good feeling.* And nerves turn to excitement at the possibilities to come.

As the day turns into a dusky evening, our hiking group arrives at the campsite, a breathtaking clearing nestled by the side of a glistening river. The scenery is picturesque, with the setting sun casting a warm, golden hue over the tranquil waters.

The campsite is already fully set up with sturdy tents, a well-equipped grill station, and a small, hut-like building that holds non-perishable foods and essential emergency supplies.

Amid the awe-inspiring natural beauty and the campsite’s thoughtful preparations, the mood is set for an unforgettable evening.

“You can take this one,” Alex says, helping me with my backpack and placing it inside the tent.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I’m over there.” He nods at the tent closest to the river, then glances back at me gaze holding mine, and butterflies take flight in my stomach.

His rugged appearance adds to his undeniable charm, with a hint of scruff on his strong jawline, giving him a rugged and effortlessly sexy edge. His sun-kissed hair, tousled by the day’s adventures, frames his handsome face and adds to his overall appeal. With a commanding presence and those mesmerizing hazel eyes, he’s a vision of rugged masculinity that’s hard to resist.

God, he’s sexy.

He clears his throat, dragging a large hand through his hair and over the back of his neck. “Get settled, and then we’ll eat. You must be hungry.”

“Famished,” I say, the huskiness of my voice surprising even me.

Alex grins, then winks. “Good.” He turns and walks away, and I’m left there staring after him, enjoying the view.

With a contented sigh, I enter the small tent. I find a wooden pallet with sturdy foam padding for my sleeping bag, a flashlight and lantern for illumination, and a large bottle of water for convenience. Alex has taken comfort into account.

Despite the coziness, or maybe because of it, a part of me doesn't want to sleep in it alone.

It's too soon, my brain and heart warn. But my body has a whole other plan of what it wants. And why not? We're both adults. There's nothing wrong with having a little fun. But a small nagging voice in my head protests. *Take it slow if you want this to be more than a one-night stand.*

When I exit my tent, the fire is crackling, and the air is thick with a savory aroma that makes my mouth water.

Alex is at the heart of the culinary magic, tending to a large pot perched over the flames. A bubbling stew and an array of campy foods promise a delicious and comforting meal.

As I approach, he flashes me a warm smile, and the sight of him skillfully preparing the feast only deepens my admiration for him.

"And he cooks too," I say, teasing. "You really are perfect."

Those dimples deepen. "I've got skills you wouldn't believe." He winks and leans closer, gaze filled with humor. "But I'm no undercover ninja."

I chuckle and accept the bowl that Alex hands me. "Maybe there's something I can teach you."

He raises an eyebrow. "I have a feeling there's a lot you can teach me, Bella."

His flirtatious response sends a pleasant shiver down my spine, and I find a spot on a log near the fire, my cheeks still tinged with a warm blush. It's been a fantastic day, and I can't help but reflect on how stepping out of my comfort zone and choosing to embark on this adventure has been one of my best decisions.

As the group disperses following the meal and clean up, I find myself staying closer to the campfire, reveling in the moment's warmth and serenity. The forest comes alive with night sounds, and the fire's dance casts an enchanting glow over the campsite.

"Ready for some marshmallow magic?" Alex asks, sitting beside me, a playful grin tugging at his lips.

I watch in amusement as he rotates the marshmallow over the flames, brows drawn down in concentration.

“Impressive skills you’ve got there,” I tease.

He smirks. “Well, I like my marshmallows just right — golden on the outside and gooey on the inside. Just like me.” He flashes those dimples again, and I don’t know whether to swoon or laugh.

I do both. “So, you’re saying you are the perfect marshmallow?”

He grins. “I guess you’ll have to find out.”

The night air is charged with electricity as our playful banter continues, our laughter and flirtatious exchanges creating an undeniable connection. The campfire’s glow reflects our simmering chemistry, and it’s clear that this wilderness adventure is becoming an unforgettable journey in more ways than one.

And I’m unsure how I want this night to end.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Time to take a risk and find out if Alex's skills are as outstanding inside the tent as they are in the great outdoors. [Turn to this page.](#)

Not ready to turn up the heat. Offer Alex a tender goodnight kiss and retreat to the tent alone. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 8

ALEX

MOONLIGHT INVITATION

The sensation of the campfire's warmth on my skin mirrors the heat surging inside me. It's as though the flames of uncertainty and desire are dancing in unison, casting their flickering glow over my decision.

The other hikers have retreated to their designated tents, leaving Alex and me alone beneath the canopy of twinkling stars. I lean against him. One of his powerful arms is slung over my shoulder, and a soft sigh of contentment escapes my lips.

"This is so nice," I admit. "I forgot how much I enjoy being outdoors."

With a gentle touch, his rough and calloused hand glides along my jaw, tilting my head to meet his gaze.

The flames dance and flicker in the darkness, painting fleeting shadows across Alex's handsome face. I'm drawn nearer to him, unable to resist the magnetic attraction pulling us together.

"I enjoy spending time with you," he whispers, his hazel eyes locked onto mine with an ardent intensity. "And I want to see where this connection between us leads."

"I want that too," I admit.

He kisses me, and it's as if time stands still. It's a gentle exploration at first, our lips brushing softly, testing the waters. But as our kiss deepens, passion ignites, and our mouths meld together in a fervent discovery.

His lips are soft and warm, moving against mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. My fingers tangle in his hair. I can't get enough. I want more. The soft, urgent press of his mouth against mine, the way his hands roam down my back, pulling me closer, tells me he wants more, too.

Breaking away from the kiss, I look into his eyes, my voice soft and husky, “Today has been amazing.” I pause, the weight of the question in the air. “I don’t want it to end.”

“Bella,” my name escapes his lips in a throaty whisper, a gentle caress to my senses. But I detect a hint of inner conflict in those hazel eyes. While desire burns with the same intensity, there’s a subtle undercurrent of vulnerability, as if he’s torn between surrendering to the moment and guarding his heart.

A wave of uncertainty washes over me as I search his eyes. “It’s okay. I’m pretty tired.”

Alex grabs my hand when I move to leave, standing with me. “Bella, wait.”

My heart skips a beat, and I turn to face him, his fingers still intertwined with mine. His eyes hold a mixture of longing and something more profound, something he’s grappling with. He glances away, then gives a slight shake of his head, and when his gaze falls back on mine, all trepidation is gone. All that remains is a burning hunger.

“Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

A lump forms in my throat, and I manage a nod.

His lips curl into a smile, and he guides me towards his tent.

Inside, we’re enveloped in darkness, shrouding us in shadows. Yet, it sharpens my other senses — the lingering taste of his kiss, the intoxicating scent of his rugged masculinity. My fingertips vibrate with electricity as I touch his face, running them over the stubble of his jaw and soft lips and the warmth of his breath playing across them.

He kisses me, hands holding the back of my head, matching my need for something more.

As our bodies press closer together, I can feel his heart beating in tandem with mine, the rhythm of our desire echoing in the intimate darkness of the tent.

His hands are on me, fingers caressing my skin as the inch under the fabric of my shirt. His gentle touch sends waves of pleasure down my spine, and I surrender to his embrace. As his lips leave mine for just a moment, he traces a path of gentle kisses along my jawline, to my neck. Each touch sends a delightful shiver through my body, and I arch my neck, inviting more of his affection.

Our clothes become an obstacle, and with a shared sense of eagerness, we

help each other shed them. His fingers explore my curves, igniting sparks of pleasure with every caress. There's an urgency in his touch, a longing that matches mine.

I gasp when his warm mouth covers one nipple. His tongue swirls and flicks the bud as his hands spread my thighs, and his fingers slip between my panties, stroking my clit.

"Alex," I moan. He silences me with another searing kiss, his voice husky and filled with longing as he murmurs, "We have to be quiet."

"I'm trying, but you're not making it easy."

He chuckles against my mouth. One finger nudges at my entrance, then pushes inside, and I arch against his palm. "Damn, Bella, you're so wet."

"I want you," I groan, running my fingers under his boxers' elastic and sliding them down. The hard length of his cock nudges against my thigh, and a deep growl rumbles in his chest as I wrap my fingers around the silky flesh. He's huge and thick, and I want him inside of me.

In the dark, he fumbles in his bag, and I hear the rustle of plastic, the tear of it, before he slides the condom over his engorged head. Then his mouth is back on mine, and our breaths quicken.

"You sure you want this?" He asks, fingers teasing my clit.

"Yes," I whimper.

He slides my panties down my thighs, his lips trailing kisses along the inside, then rolling his tongue across my pussy, licking and sucking at my clit, until I have to cover my mouth so I don't cry out in pleasure.

"Alex," I whisper, gripping his shoulders and leading him up so that he hovers above me, his cock sheathed and ready to be inside me.

I take his long length and guide it towards my entrance, and he slowly lowers himself until I take every delectable inch of him.

It takes me a moment to adjust to his size, and he holds still above me, his mouth on mine, kissing me softly.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Better than okay," I whimper. "You feel incredible."

I sense his smile against my mouth, and he begins to move. I grip his arms, every knot and muscle bulging beneath my palms as he uses his strength to hold himself above me. He slides out of me and thrusts back inside, and I gasp. His pace is slow and steady, and I explore his body with my fingers.

Tracing a path over his chest, the hardness of his pectoral muscles

beneath his skin, ripple and flex with every movement, beckoning my touch. The man is enormous in every way.

And I love it.

Descending to his abs, my fingers trace his chiseled six-pack. Each abdominal muscle stands out in bold relief, separated by shallow, enticing crevices. The muscles contract in response to my caress, and he groans. Moving lower, my palms rest on his hips, nails digging in as I draw his next thrust harder. His pace quickens and his mouth meets mine, tongue sweeping across my lips before parting them.

Our movements become desperate. Almost feral. Lust raging like a storm, just waiting for its release.

And then I swear I burst into a million pieces of ecstasy. A blissful symphony of sensations igniting every nerve ending courses through me.

I cry out, Alex's kiss doing little to silence me as wave after wave of pleasure rips through every fiber of my body.

With a strangled groan, his body stiffens, and his cock pulsates.

He rolls onto his back, and in the darkness, I can hear him discarding the condom before laying back beside me. One muscular arm stretches out and pulls me against his side.

We lay in silence for a few minutes. The only sound is our labored breaths and the chorus of crickets outside the tent.

He swallows hard before asking, "You okay?"

I nod against his chest. His arm tightens around me, and he presses his lips to my head.

The air is cold and mixes with the damp sweat on my skin, making me shiver.

"You're cold," he says, sitting up and helping me find my clothes in the darkness.

As we dress, an uneasy silence lingers in the air, and a palpable tension settles between us.

"Ouch," I say when our heads collide.

"Shit. Sorry," he grunts.

"It's okay." I chew on my bottom lip, my mind racing with uncertainty. Being with him was incredible, but our weirdness now makes me worry that I may have screwed everything up. "I'll go."

"You can stay." His hands find me, and his fingers trace my jawline with a tenderness that sends conflicting emotions swirling within me.

I sit there in the darkness, torn between staying with him and retreating to the solitude of my tent. A deep sense of uncertainty gnaws at me, and I can't help but hope that, regardless of the choice I make, regret won't taint the memories of this night in the morning light.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Bask in the comforting embrace of Alex's strong arms and spend the night in his tent. [Turn to this page.](#)

Opt for a quiet exit to avoid any morning awkwardness and return to the tent that Alex assigned. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 9

SEBASTIAN

A TASTE OF BELLA

Sebastian stands at my doorstep, looking every bit the embodiment of sophistication. He gives the impression of casual confidence, his light blue shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, and his sleeves are rolled up over powerful forearms. The dark grey dress pants he wears emphasize his lean, muscular form. I can't help but admire the way he carries himself with such effortless charm.

A smile tugs at the corners of his lips. "Bella," he says, his voice a warm invitation.

"Hi." My heart flutters with nerves.

"So," he begins, stepping closer, "what's the plan for tonight?"

"You'll just have to wait and see," I say, grinning up at him. "But I can promise you this: you won't need your car. We're going to be doing a bit of walking."

He raises an eyebrow, a small grin tugging at his lips. "I don't do well with surprises."

"Or not being in control," I chuckle lightly. One date and I already know this much.

"True," he grins, extending his hands in a gesture of submission. "But I surrender myself to you tonight."

"Good. Because I'm excited to show you some of my favorite places." It's my turn to treat him, and I've planned an evening that's a reflection of me, of my world.

I can't help but feel a little giddy as we head down the cobblestone streets. The night air is crisp, and the soft glow of streetlights casts a warm, romantic ambiance.

“How was your week?” he asks.

As we stroll, our hands brush against each other, sending warmth up my arm.

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe the chaos,” I reply, my voice filled with affection and exhaustion. “There were paint spills, glitter explosions, and a paper mache mishap that somehow ended up as a dinosaur hat.”

He chuckles. “Did you always want to be a teacher?”

“I’m an artist first,” I say, shrugging. “But I love kids. Their curiosity and boundless creativity inspire me every day. Teaching allows me to nurture not only their minds but also their imagination.”

I notice a fleeting shadow cross his expression, but it vanishes as swiftly as it appears. “Your students are lucky to have you,” he says, his words laced with sincerity.

We reach our destination, a hidden gem tucked away in a narrow alley. The sign simply reads “Mykonos Restaurant” in rustic letters. The scent of grilled meats and Mediterranean spices wafts through the air, making my mouth water.

The restaurant is dimly lit, with flickering candles and a soft murmur of conversations in the background. It’s the kind of place that feels like a well-kept secret.

As we’re seated at a corner table with a perfect view of the bustling kitchen, Sebastian raises his brows. “This place is great.”

I lean in with a playful wink. “And about a tenth of the price of your fancy French restaurant.”

The corners of Sebastian’s lips curl into an amused smile as he leans in closer, his eyes sparkling with intrigue. “I can appreciate someone who’s savvy and frugal.”

I shrug. “Why spend a fortune when you can enjoy incredible food without breaking the bank?” I glance around, taking in the cozy, rustic charm of the place. “Besides, hidden gems like this have character. It’s not just the food; it’s the experience.”

Our waiter arrives, and I eagerly order a sumptuous array of my favorite dishes: tzatziki with pita, spanakopita, moussaka, keftedes, dolmas, saganaki, and a bottle of Retsina to wash it all down.

Sebastian grins at me, his eyes widening. “That’s a lot of food.”

“They’re small portion sizes,” I justify with a playful wink. “And I love to eat.”

“We have that in common—” He coughs, and when it doesn’t subside right away, he excuses himself and steps outside.

Concern washes over me as the seconds tick by and he doesn’t return.

I take a sip of the dry wine the waiter pours, my eyes flickering between the doorway and the seat across from me. After a few moments that seem longer than they are, Sebastian returns, his brows still furrowed as he sits down.

“Sorry about that,” he says, clearing his throat.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my concern lingering.

“Just a tickle in my throat,” he reassures me with a small smile, then takes a sip of water.

“I was worried I’d overwhelmed you with my food choices.”

Sebastian grins, his eyes sparkling again. “I’m up for the challenge.”

As if on cue, our table fills up with the mouthwatering dishes I’d ordered. The fragrant aromas mix in the air, creating a tantalizing symphony of Mediterranean flavors.

I gesture toward the array of dishes. “Dig in. We’re not fancy here.”

Sebastian laughs, the sound blending with the restaurant’s ambiance, and he fills his plate. I can’t help but notice how much he seems to enjoy the food. His appetite surprises me, and I can’t resist teasing, “Wow, you can really put it away.”

He wipes his mouth with a napkin. “I have a fast metabolism.”

“Clearly,” I say. “I doubt there’s an ounce of fat on you. Just lean muscle and sinew.”

Sebastian’s dark gaze goes serious, and he gives me a smoldering look. “And you can tell all that without even seeing it in full detail?”

Heat rises in my cheeks as I realize he’s playing along with my banter. I can’t help but respond with a sly grin, “I appreciate the male form in all its glory.”

He raises an eyebrow, his smile growing wider. “Is that so?”

I nod, unable to suppress a subtle squirm in my seat as he holds my gaze with a look that sends a shiver down my spine, making my belly clench and heat pool between my legs.

Before the charged atmosphere between us can escalate further, our waiter interrupts, clearing his throat and placing the check on the table.

Sebastian quickly reaches for the bill, but I shake my head.

“No, it’s my treat tonight,” I insist. He opens his mouth to protest, but I

hold up a finger, cutting him off. “You can get the next one.”

Sebastian relents, his lips curling into a fond smile. “Alright. Only because it guarantees another date with you.”

I can’t stop smiling as we step out of the restaurant into the cool evening air. I take Sebastian’s hand, leading him through the charming streets towards Harrison Park.

His fingers intertwine with mine, and his touch feels perfect — warm, sensual, and familiar.

Nothing about our connection makes sense. We’re like two puzzle pieces from separate boxes, originating from different backgrounds, different worlds, almost. Yet, somehow we match. He’s easy to talk to, and there’s no denying the chemistry between us. It’s an electric current that crackles in the air, drawing me in with every stolen glance, every touch.

There’s something about those dark, intoxicating eyes of his that pull me in, but it also leaves me with a nagging curiosity. I can’t shake the feeling that there are secrets hidden beneath that polished exterior, waiting to be uncovered.

But I’m content to savor the moment and let the night unfold naturally.

As we approach the park, the sounds of country music drift through the air, drawing us closer to a bandstand where a small concert is in full swing. The stage is bathed in warm, golden light, and the twang of guitars and heartfelt lyrics fill the air.

“Do you like country music?” I ask, nodding towards the bandstand.

“Of course,” he admits, surprising me.

“Really?” My brows shoot up. “I’d have thought you’d be more of a jazz guy.”

He chuckles, a low and charming sound, as he pulls me closer, molding our bodies together, and we dance. “I like jazz. But country has a time and place. Like now.” He leans down, and his lips brush against mine.

A rush of sensations floods through me. His mouth is tender, yet there’s an undeniable hunger in his kiss that sends shivers down my spine. Heat pools within me as his tongue delicately parts my lips, his touch both confident and gentle.

I’m breathless when he pulls back. Those dark, magnetic eyes pierce through me with a smoldering look that leaves no doubt in my mind — he wants more than just that kiss.

I inhale in a deep breath, the anticipation building between us like a slow-

burning fuse leading to an explosion of desire.

Sebastian takes a small step backward as if he's giving me back the oxygen his electrifying presence momentarily sucked up. "This is nice," he says, our bodies swaying with the music. "I haven't had a night like this in a long time."

"Too many French dinners and operas?" I tease.

"More like too many boardroom presentations and late nights at the office," he admits with a sigh.

I smile at his response and wrap my arms around his neck, my hands resting on his broad shoulders, and I confess, "I admit I googled you."

Sebastian grins, his eyes twinkling with curiosity. "Really? What did you find out?"

"A lot of useless stuff about your company. But not much else."

"I try to keep my private life off the internet."

I can sense a certain guardedness in Sebastian's demeanor. The air around us, so charged with chemistry moments ago, now carries a hint of vulnerability. I decide to probe gently, hoping to uncover more about the man beneath the composed exterior.

"Tell me about your family," I inquire softly.

There's a subtle clenching of his jaw, a slight furrow of his brows, and he looks away. The vulnerability in his expression is palpable. "It's just my dad now. My mom passed away after my brother."

"Oh, Sebastian, I'm so sorry."

"My parents were hardworking middle-class people who did their best to provide for us. But we..." He clears his throat. "My brother was sick from an early age," he says, gaze distant as he recalls the past. "The disease took a toll on every aspect of our family."

After a moment of silence, I ask, "How old were you when he died?"

Sebastian's expression turns solemn. "I was twelve," he replies, his voice tinged with a mix of sorrow and resilience. "Thirteen when Mom..." He curses under his breath and shakes his head. "When she passed."

"I can't imagine how hard that was." Holding his gaze, I place a palm on his cheek. I can feel the pain that he's trying to rein in.

Sebastian brushes off the heaviness by twirling me around, and I gasp with delight as he pulls me to his chest.

As we continue dancing beneath the open sky, a sudden downpour catches us by surprise. Raindrops fall hard and fast, drenching us within

seconds. We scramble to find shelter under a nearby tree, but the rain is relentless, and we're still getting wet.

I glance up at the sky, bewildered. "There wasn't rain in the forecast."

"Weather is as predictable as the stock market," Sebastian chuckles, his dark hair plastered against his forehead. His shirt clings to his muscular chest, emphasizing the contours of his abs. "My place is nearby," he gestures towards a luxurious apartment building north of the park. "We can go there."

As we huddle closer under the tree, seeking shelter from the downpour, he turns to me, and his suggestion hangs in the damp air. I'm fully aware of the consequences of my decision, and where it could lead if I choose to go with him..

"Or," Sebastian continues, gaze searching my face. "I can call a car to take us back to your place."

The choice hangs in the air. Should I embrace the spontaneity and turn up the heat at Sebastian's apartment? The thought of exploring the chemistry we share is thrilling.

Or should I opt for the safer route, have him call a car and head home? Our connection is fresh. Maybe I should get to know him on a deeper level before diving into something more physical.

I can't help but smile, realizing that no matter which path I choose, our relationship is just beginning, and I'm excited to see where it leads.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Decide to go to Sebastian's apartment. It's time to stoke the flames of passion and elevate the connection to a scorching new level. [Turn to this page.](#)

Have Sebastian call a car. End the night with a sweet kiss. Kindle the slow burning desire and make plans to see him again. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 10

SEBASTIAN

THE PENTHOUSE

Rain pours down in relentless sheets, drenching us as we race across the street, desperately seeking refuge. Sebastian does his best to shield me from the worst of it, but as we reach the grand entrance of his apartment building, we're soaked to the bone.

The concierge greets us with a respectful nod. "Good evening, Mr. Sinclair," he says, his tone carrying an air of familiarity. He nods in my direction. "Miss."

"Harold." Sebastian nods in acknowledgment and guides me toward the elevator.

I shiver from the chill of the rain-soaked clothes that cling to my skin.

"You're freezing," he says, as the doors close, and he wraps his arms around me, rubbing my back. I lean into him, grateful for his warmth.

"I probably look like a drowned rat," I say, only half joking.

He moves a strand of wet hair from my cheek, then brushes his lips softly against mine. "You're gorgeous."

His compliment and gentle kiss cause butterflies to take flight in my belly and heat to pool in my core.

I know, deep down, just how easy it could be to fall for him.

The moment is interrupted by the elevator's ding, and the doors slide open. Sebastian releases me from his warm embrace and takes my hand, his fingers interlacing with my own. With a gentle tug, he leads me into the private foyer of his apartment, and my breath catches in my throat.

Polished marble floors glisten under the soft glow of a crystal chandelier, casting prismatic rainbows across the space. It's as though I've stepped into a world of opulence and elegance, and I feel like an intruder in my own life.

Sebastian takes my hand and leads me into the expansive living area. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame panoramic city views, and I'm mesmerized by the glittering lights that stretch out before me.

With a flick of a switch, the marble-encased fireplace crackles to life with a warm and inviting glow, providing a stark contrast to the storm that still rages outside.

He disappears briefly into one of the adjacent rooms, and when he returns, he's holding a plush towel and dry clothes. He offers them to me. "The washroom is the third door on the left."

"Thank you," I say, gratefully.

In the bathroom, I slip into the comfort of an oversized hoodie and soft jogging pants, reveling in the warmth and coziness they provide. With the towel, I dry my hair as much as possible, then brush my fingers through it, attempting to tame the unruly strands. Mascara streaks on my cheeks, and I wipe it away.

As I gaze at my reflection in the mirror, a myriad of emotions swirl within me, and I take a steadying breath.

The prospect of what lies ahead fills me with anticipation. Nerves race through me. But amidst the uncertainty, one thing remains crystal clear — I don't doubt my decision for a single moment.

I want to be here.

And I'm willing to take a risk, to open my heart to the possibilities that this night may bring.

With a resolute smile, I remind myself of my mom's advice, that the most incredible moments in life come when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and when we dare to follow our hearts.

I find Sebastian standing by the fireplace, his eyes fixed on the dancing flames.

He's changed into dry clothes — a crisp white t-shirt that molds perfectly to his lean torso, accentuating his broad shoulders and defined chest and grey jogging pants that show off his long muscular legs and strong glutes.

God, he's sexy.

As if sensing my presence, he turns, those dark eyes piercing me with a look that makes my core clench.

He takes a step closer, his charisma commanding the room. "Feel better?" he asks, his voice a rich, velvety timbre that washes over me like a caress.

"Much better," I admit, taking the glass of wine he offers. "I just wish we

could have finished our date. I had a few other surprises in store.”

Sebastian chuckles, his laughter a warm melody in the luxurious penthouse. “Well then, can I get a rain check?”

I grin at his pun, appreciating his sense of humor. “Funny. And yes,” I reply, “because there’s a cute little karaoke bar that I’m dying to take you to.”

His eyes widen, and for a moment, he looks like a deer caught in headlights. “Karaoke?”

“It’s fun, I promise.”

Sebastian steps closer. “I look forward to hearing you sing.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Trust me, I can’t carry a tune to save my life. But that’s what makes it entertaining.”

His laughter rings out, a rich and genuine sound that fills the room. “I like that about you.

“What’s that?”

“You don’t take life too seriously. It’s refreshing.”

I meet his gaze, sensing a connection that goes beyond the superficial.

“You only live once,” I say, my voice filled with conviction. “Might as well enjoy every moment you get.”

A shadow darkens his features, fleeting yet noticeable. It’s a subtle shift, but one I’m becoming increasingly aware of. There’s a depth to him, a complexity that I can sense just beneath the surface, and it intrigues me.

He nods in agreement. “You’re right. Life is meant to be savored.”

I lean in a little closer. “So, how do we savor it tonight?” I ask, my voice low and suggestive.

His lips curl into a seductive smile. “Well,” he begins, taking my glass and placing it down. He pulls me close, arms wrapping around my waist. “I have a couple of ideas.”

As I lean towards him, our chemistry crackles, and the heat between us intensifies.

“Tell me,” I whisper.

Without a word, his lips capture mine. His kiss is hungry, and my fingers find their way to his strong shoulders, pulling him closer.

Sebastian’s hands move with a purpose, trailing down my back, igniting sensations that send shivers through my body. His touch is electric, setting every nerve ending ablaze with desire.

Our tongues dance in a sensual rhythm, exploring and teasing. When he breaks the kiss, our ragged breaths mingle in the air, and his eyes search

mine.

“How about we—” He coughs suddenly, a harsh, rasping sound that interrupts our intimate moment. He turns away, and his second cough is even harder, punctuated by a string of curses muttered under his breath. “I’ll be right back,” he says, voice strained, and he excuses himself.

My concern deepens as I listen to his coughs from the other room.

When Sebastian returns, his face is visibly paler. “I’m sorry,” he says, voice weak.

I reach out to him. “Are you okay?”

He hesitates, that shadow crossing his features, before nodding. “I’ll be fine. I’ll have a car drive you home.”

There’s a noticeable change in his demeanor, a wall that has risen between us.

In silence, he orders a car, the tension palpable in the confined space of the elevator. The distance seems to grow with each passing second, and I feel a sense of unease.

When we finally reach the ground floor, the rain has let up, leaving the night air cool and refreshing. Sebastian walks me to the curb, but the connection we shared now seems muted.

“Goodnight,” he says, his tone formal.

My mind races with thoughts about what could have caused the sudden shift in his demeanor. The uncertainty gnaws at me, and I can’t help but wonder if I’m the reason for his abrupt withdrawal.

Unable to shake off my concerns, I muster the courage to voice my worries. “Did I do something wrong?”

Sebastian’s walls seem to crumble, and I catch a glimpse of vulnerability in his eyes. His head shakes slowly, and he reaches out to brush his thumb over my cheek.

“I’m sorry for ending things so abruptly.” He offers a faint smile. “I don’t want to get you sick.”

His explanation seems reasonable on the surface, but there’s a nagging feeling that it’s not the whole truth.

“I understand. I hope you get better soon.”

“I’ll call you,” he reassures me, though his words leave me with a lingering sense of uncertainty about what lies ahead for us.

I get into the car, a mixture of concern and confusion coursing through me. As the vehicle pulls away from the curb, I steal a glance back at

Sebastian, who stands alone on the sidewalk, his expression unreadable.

It dawns on me that I left my rain-soaked clothes in his restroom. But in his hurry to see me off, he's left me no opportunity to retrieve my belongings. And not only that, his car is still parked outside my house, yet he didn't come with me.

I can't shake the feeling that there's something I'm missing, something beneath the surface of Sebastian's actions. And a sense of caution rings warning bells in my head. Should I end things before I become too emotionally invested? The fear of being hurt looms heavy in my thoughts. As I weigh my options, I can't help but wonder if it's better to step away now, while there's still a chance to protect myself from potential heartache.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Wait for Sebastian's promised text. Even though there's a mystery to the man, there's also some serious chemistry. [Turn to this page.](#)

If there are warning bells already, it's probably best to move on now. Maybe it's time to give someone else a call. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER II

SEBASTIAN

A SCOOP OF SECRETS

Moonlight dances on the rippling waters of the river, casting a spell of enchantment as Sebastian and I stroll hand in hand along the promenade. Our laughter fills the night, punctuated by the occasional murmurs of people walking by, and the distant hum of city life. I steal a glance at him, and my heart flutters like a trapped butterfly.

Each date with Sebastian feels like a piece of a beautiful mosaic falling into place. But there's something I can't quite put my finger on, a mystery in his eyes, a guardedness that keeps me from diving headfirst into the sea of my emotions.

As we continue our leisurely walk, the aroma of freshly baked waffle cones drifts toward us.

"How about some ice cream to sweeten the night?" he says, nodding towards the food truck parked at the water's edge.

"You know the way to my heart," I say, grinning. "Double chocolate fudge."

He orders two cones and hands one to me, our fingers brushing. It's a fleeting touch, yet it sends warmth shooting through me.

We stroll to a nearby bench overlooking the river.

"What a beautiful night," I say between bites.

"It is," he replies, his voice soft and sincere. "Even better because I'm with you."

There it is again, that tantalizing promise of something more. I want to ask him what he's thinking, to delve into the depths of his heart and soul, but I hesitate.

I can't help but think he's keeping things from me, a secret that he's not

ready to reveal. The way he hesitates at times, the slight furrow in his brow when certain topics arise — it all points to a hidden part of his life that he's chosen to keep locked away.

Sometimes I think I still only know as much about him as I did on our first date. And I'm desperate to know more. To unravel the mystery that is Sebastian Sinclair.

"So," I say, glancing at him, my tongue darting out to catch a drip of ice cream escaping from my cone. "I know that you've never been married. But what about other relationships? Anything serious?"

He takes a nonchalant lick of ice cream, his expression cool as he shrugs. "Nothing significant."

"I get it," I tease, "you left a trail of broken hearts in your wake? Love 'em, and leave 'em type of guy?"

"Not quite," he chuckles. One arm rests comfortably behind me on the bench, and he takes another leisurely bite of ice cream before answering. "Considering I didn't kiss a girl until my freshman year of college—"

I nearly choke. "Wait, what?"

Sebastian chuckles at my reaction, his laughter like a soothing melody in the night. "It's true," he confesses, a hint of sheepishness in his tone. "I was a late bloomer when it came to the whole dating scene."

I set my half-eaten ice cream aside, my attention fully on him now. "Tell me more," I urge. "What took you so long?"

"With all the hospital and doctor visits, my mom homeschooled Toby and me," he begins, his voice softening as he delves into the past, "until..." He glances toward the river, his gaze distant as he trails off.

I place my hand on his leg, and he takes it, entwining his long fingers with mine.

"I started at the local high school the following year. Let's just say the scrawny, socially awkward new kid didn't have girls lining up for him," he says, chuckling. "Thankfully, by college, I'd put on a few pounds and grown a foot taller."

"So, who was the lucky girl to get your first kiss?"

His expression turns thoughtful. "Her name was Baila. She was in one of my economic classes."

"Was it serious?"

Sebastian's gaze returns to the present, and he shakes his head. "It only lasted a few months until she broke it off."

“Sorry.”

He shrugs. “It was easier that way. Let me focus on my schoolwork, and —” His words are abruptly interrupted by a sharp cough, which swiftly escalates into a fit, leaving him desperately gasping for air.

His face contorts with discomfort, and he fumbles to retrieve an inhaler from his pocket. He takes a puff, his breath gradually steadying, but his eyes still betray a sense of vulnerability.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Standing, he tosses the remainder of his ice cream in the garbage.

“My mom has asthma too,” I tell him, having faced many similar moments with her. “It’s scary. I can’t imagine what it must be like not being able to breathe.”

Sebastian’s eyes lock onto mine, vulnerability lingering in his gaze. He opens his mouth, as if preparing to share, but then hesitates. His lips part, but no words emerge, and I can sense that there’s more he wants to express, something he’s struggling to articulate.

As we walk back to my place, I notice the shift in his mood, the way his thoughts seem to have retreated into a state of contemplation.

Eventually, we arrive at my patio, the soft lights casting a gentle ambiance over the space. The silence lingers, heavy with unspoken words and emotions. I turn to him, my gaze searching his eyes for any hint of what he’s feeling.

His knuckles trace a slow, intimate path down my cheek. He leans down, closing the distance, his lips meeting mine in a tender, lingering kiss that quickly becomes more intense, more needy. His tongue parts my mouth, and his fingers tangle in my hair. When he pulls back, my face feels flushed, and my core aches with a need for release.

A desperate need for him.

“Are you planning on leaving me wanting more?” I ask playfully.

A mischievous smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “I’m a firm believer in taking things slow and savoring every moment.”

My heart races at the sultry tone of his voice, and I can’t resist leaning in closer, our breaths mingling. “Slow, huh? Well, slow can be...quite tempting.”

Sebastian’s thumb grazes my lower lip, and his eyes darken with desire. “Temptation can be a dangerous thing. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I whisper, closing the remaining

space between us for another kiss, and my fingers find their way to his strong shoulders, pulling him closer.

Sebastian's hands move with a purpose, trailing down my back, igniting sensations that send shivers through my body. His touch is electric, setting every nerve ending ablaze with desire.

Our tongues dance in a sensual rhythm, exploring and teasing. When he breaks the kiss, our ragged breaths mingle in the air, and his eyes search mine.

"Do you want to come in?" I ask, fingers gripping his shirt. Ready to beg if necessary.

"I'd like that—" He coughs suddenly, a harsh, rasping sound that interrupts our intimate moment. He turns away, and his second cough is even harder, punctuated by a string of curses muttered under his breath. This time the coughing doesn't let up even when he uses his inhaler.

"Can I get you some water?" I ask, placing a hand on his back.

"No." He says, the coughing finally easing.

"Let's go inside." I take his hand, but he remains rooted in place.

"I should go." I catch a glimpse of vulnerability in his eyes, and he reaches out to brush his thumb over my cheek. "I'll call you," he reassures me, though his words leave me with a lingering sense of uncertainty as he gets in his car.

I can't shake the feeling that there's something I'm missing, something beneath the surface of his changing moods. And a sense of caution rings warning bells in my head. Should I end things before I become too emotionally invested? The fear of being hurt looms heavy in my thoughts. As I weigh my options, I can't help but wonder if it's better to step away now, while there's still a chance to protect myself from potential heartache.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Wait for Sebastian's promised text. Even though there's a mystery to the man, there's also some serious chemistry. [Turn to this page.](#)

If there are already warning bells, it's probably best to move on now.

Maybe it's time to give someone else a call. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART FOUR

TANGLED SIGNALS

Love's greatest peril lies in the chasm of misunderstanding. Approach with empathy, tread with patience, and build bridges of communication, for the heart is easily misled in the realm of unspoken words.

CHAPTER 12

DAMIEN

TRUTH OR LIES

“Any chance you’ll let me in on the secret destination? I ask while Damien skillfully secures the helmet to my head, then helps me onto the rear of his motorcycle.

He gets on the bike and throws a sly grin over his shoulder. “I thought you said you liked surprises.”

“Only when I know what they are.”

Damien laughs. “Trust me, I think you’re going to like it.”

“Oh, well, that clears everything up,” I say, my words dripping with sarcasm.

He chuckles once more, then revs the engine, and we speed down the street.

I attempt to push the thoughts of the text messages I’d spotted on his phone to the back of my mind. At some point, I’ll need to muster the courage to ask him about them, but for now, I focus on relishing the present moment.

We weave through traffic, Damien’s expert maneuvers making it feel like we’re dancing through the rhythm of the metropolis. Laughter and chatter from sidewalk cafes, coupled with snippets of music from passing cars, contribute to the lively soundtrack of our ride.

The city’s energy seems to crescendo as we reach the market square. There’s an art exhibit on this weekend. I’d been planning to come on my own, and I’m hoping that this is our final destination.

As we approach the bazaar, Damien gently stops the bike. I swing my leg over the seat, dismounting with a mix of excitement. My feet touch the pavement, and I can’t help but smile at Damien.

“Told you you’d like it,” he says with a wink.

The marketplace sprawls before us, a sensory feast for the eyes and ears. Stalls adorned with captivating artwork line the pathways, their colorful creations like invitations to a world of imagination. The air is filled with the murmur of art lovers, the occasional artist's pitch, and the sweet scent of anticipation.

Hand in hand, Damien guides me into the pulsating heart of this artistic wonderland. The vibrant tapestry of people, sounds, and scents surrounds us, threatening to engulf my senses.

As we stroll through the maze of creativity, our conversation flows effortlessly. Yet, an insistent voice nags at the back of my head, a constant reminder of the infamous text messages. I can no longer postpone the inevitable, the discussion that needs to happen.

Approaching a stand where double chocolate chip ice cream beckons, I gather my courage to address the issue that has been festering in my mind. "Damien," I begin, my voice trembling slightly, "there's something I need to talk to you about."

He turns to me, those stormy eyes fixing on mine.

Taking a deep breath, I fidget with the hem of my dress, my fingers betraying my nerves. "I saw some texts on your phone the other day."

He frowns. "Okay?"

"They were from someone named Stacey and Lexi. I couldn't help but wonder—"

"Damien." A woman strides toward us; her gaze locked onto Damien like she's been fervently searching for him. Her arrival is as unmistakable as an approaching tornado, poised to disrupt everything in its path.

"You can't keep ignoring me," she exclaims, her voice sharp with accusation. She's stunning, with jet-black hair and bright blue eyes, and instantly, a wave of jealousy stirs in me.

Damien's expression remains unreadable, his tone turning icy as he responds, "Stacey."

A torrent of questions whirls through my mind. Besides, most likely being the notorious Stacey from Damien's phone, who is this woman, and what connection does she have to him? The tension between them is palpable, and I can't tear my gaze away.

"Fuck," Damien growls out, darkness I haven't seen before forming in his eyes.

Stacey's desperation radiates as she fixes an intense glare on him, her

words tinged with a slightly whiny tone reminiscent of a child's plea. "If you'd answer my calls, I wouldn't have to track you down." Her gaze briefly flickers in my direction, and I catch a momentary glimpse of embarrassment crossing her pretty features. "I need—"

"Not here," Damien interjects sharply, his fingers gripping her elbow as he guides her away, taking their conversation out of earshot.

Anxiety and uncertainty clutch at me as time drags on.

Is Stacey an ex-girlfriend or a more significant figure in his life?

As they talk, Stacey's anger seems to turn to guilt and humiliation. She looks over at me, then drops her head, dark hair hanging over her face.

Damien says something to her, and she gives a slight nod. Finally, Damien pulls out his wallet and hands her a few bills. She flips through the money and then looks like she's about to argue again, but the pointed glare he gives her makes her shut her mouth on whatever she is about to say.

When she leaves, Damien returns to my side, his brows drawn down, that brooding look back with a vengeance.

"If you need to go with her, I understand," I say, my words tumbling from my lips, laden with my insecurities. "I mean, we've only been on two dates; it's not like we've made any promises, and—"

"Bella, stop," he says, his voice laced with frustration. "It's not what you think."

"Okay," I reply, my heart pounding in my chest. I'm not sure what to expect, but I need answers.

He takes a deep breath before continuing. "Stacey is my sister. She's been going through a difficult time."

"Oh." I chew on my bottom lip.

"And Lexi is Stacey's daughter. My niece. The kid lives with my mom because..." He pauses, his fingers rubbing over his scruff, frustration etched into his features. "It's a complicated mess. And I didn't want to bring you into it all."

"I'm so sorry," I stammer, my face warm with embarrassment as the weight of misunderstanding lifts from my shoulders.

"How old is Lexi?" I ask, attempting to steer the conversation toward a lighter topic.

"Six," he replies, his demeanor softening. "She's a handful. Full of energy, curiosity, and the occasional mischief, but she keeps life interesting."

I smile at the affection I hear in his voice for his niece. "I'd love to meet

her sometime.”

“Yeah? I can arrange that.” Something stirs in his eyes before he admits, “Want to know a secret?”

“Always,” I say, grinning up at him when he cups my face with his calloused palms.

“You’ll be the first girl I’ve ever brought home.”

“Honestly?”

He nods, and I can’t help but smile at the revelation, feeling a rush of warmth fill my chest.

The bustling crowd around us fades into the background as Damien leans in closer, his presence becoming the sole focus of my attention.

His breath is a gentle whisper against my skin, sending shivers down my spine, and our lips meet in a soft kiss. Our mouths move in perfect harmony, lips that are warm and inviting, and I feel a rush of emotions coursing through me.

Time stands still as our kiss deepens, our bodies leaning into each other. It’s a moment of pure intimacy, and as we finally pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, I can’t help but feel that maybe, just maybe, I’ve found something extraordinary in Damien Blackwood.

“You’re killing me, beautiful,” Damien murmurs, his voice tinged with desire. “But we should probably dial it back before we unintentionally become the headliners of a show they didn’t sign up for.”

I chuckle and take his hand, continuing our stroll through the marketplace.

My heart keeps beating that wild rhythm: *Damien, Damien, Damien*. This man is way too easy to fall for. And I’m enjoying every minute of the fall.

As we navigate through the art stalls and food vendors, a glint of designer elegance catches my eye from a distance. I recognize the tall, captivating figure by his profile alone. A strong, chiseled jaw covered in dark scruff, hair meticulously combed, and dark, intelligent eyes that hold an allure of their own.

Sebastian.

He’s engrossed in studying a piece of art at one of the vendor stations, his presence exuding a magnetic charm that captures the attention of those around him.

I find myself momentarily captivated by the sight, watching him with a sense of intrigue. He appears to be in his element, appreciating the intricate

details of a sculpture he's engrossed in.

But as Damien and I continue to walk, I lose sight of him, and a small part of me asks, *what if?*

“Everything okay?” Damien inquires, gently twirling me around to face him, his strong arms enveloping my waist. “You seemed a bit lost there for a moment.”

I shift my attention to Damien, attempting to push aside the fluttering butterflies that Sebastian’s brief appearance stirred within me. “Nothing,” I respond casually. “Just thought I saw someone I knew.”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Time to turn up the heat and take the relationship to the next level.

[Turn to this page.](#)

End the night with a kiss and agree to meet his mom and Lexi on the next date. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 13

KAVYA

A CANDID CONVERSATION

I woke up this morning with a sense of resolve. I've decided to meet up with my friend Kavya for coffee at The Artful Bean and share with her the confusing and unsettling texts I saw on Damien's phone.

Kavya and I have been friends since college, and I trust her advice and wisdom. With her remarkable talent for decoding love, I swear she's somehow made a secret pact with Cupid himself.

While my own love life resembles a comedy of errors, her love life resembles a well-scripted rom-com, complete with plot twists and her perfect happy ending.

Sitting alone in a cozy corner of the coffee shop, waiting for Kavya to arrive, I fidget with my cup. The swirling thoughts of Damien create a whirlwind of emotions.

Damien, the very embodiment of irresistible charm, plays like a movie before my eyes. His crooked smile, those captivating frosty eyes that have a way of thawing my soul, and those abs...oh, those abs.

Yet, amidst all his heart-throbbing allure, a cacophony of warning bells rings loud and clear. The red flags, particularly those alarming text messages, wave like a bullfighter's cape in a fiery bullring.

"Bella!" Kavya walks in with a bright smile, dark brown eyes lighting up when she sees me. She's warm and empathetic; I know she'll lend a sympathetic ear.

"I'm so glad you texted; it's been way too long," she exclaims, reaching out to hug me. "How have you been?"

I return her hug and offer a small smile. "I've been good. How about you?"

Our conversation flows effortlessly as Kavya and I catch up on the latest chapters of our lives. We delve into the intricate tapestry of work, hobbies, and recent adventures, savoring each anecdote like a sweet sip of our steaming coffee. Ever the storyteller, Kavya regales me with tales of her swoonworthy husband, Darius.

As she speaks about their exciting plans to build a new house near the school she works at and close to Darius's residency at the hospital, it's evident that their life together is idyllic. With each detail she shares, it becomes apparent that Kavya has not only mastered the art of deciphering love but has also crafted a perfect love story of her own.

After a lull in the conversation, I take a deep breath and decide it's time to share what's been bothering me. "You know how I mentioned that I'm seeing this new guy. I'm just not sure if I should continue with him or not."

Kavya leans in, her expression filled with curiosity and concern. "From what you said about him, it's definitely not because you don't find him attractive. So what is it?"

I begin to recount the events of my second date with Damien, including when I saw the messages on his phone from someone named Stacey and Lexi. As I speak, I can't help but feel a knot of anxiety tightening in my stomach.

Kavya listens attentively, her brow furrowing as I finish recounting the events. She takes a sip of her coffee before speaking, choosing her words carefully.

"I completely get why you might have your reservations, but let's not forget the significance of giving people the benefit of the doubt," Kavya asserts, her gaze locking onto mine with intent. "Additionally," she continues, "it's equally important to open up and discuss your concerns and emotions with those individuals. Your track record on that front isn't exactly stellar."

I arch an eyebrow and pretend not to know what she's getting at, although deep down, I'm fully aware she's hit the nail on the head. I feign innocence and reply, "What do you mean? I'm an excellent communicator."

She chuckles and shakes her head, then leans forward, her gaze steady. "Just don't jump to conclusions until you talk to him about it. We all have private aspects of our lives, and sometimes, messages or relationships with others might not mean what they seem on the surface. There could be explanations that you're not aware of."

I take a moment to absorb Kavya's words. She has a point; I hadn't

considered that there might be more to the story. "You think I'm jumping to conclusions too quickly?"

Kavya nods. "It's possible. This guy might have his reasons for those messages. If you're interested in him, you should have an open and honest conversation about your concerns."

Her advice resonates with me, and I start to see things from a different perspective. Maybe I had been too quick to judge Damien based on a few messages. I should give him a chance to explain.

"You're right," I admit, even though I have no idea how the text messages could mean anything besides what they said.

Kavya smiles encouragingly. "Remember, relationships require trust and communication. Allow him to explain; hopefully, you'll find some clarity."

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Answer Damien's text and go on another date with him. [Turn to this page.](#)

Take a little more time to think about things, and spend the night alone. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 14

DAMIEN

COINCIDENTAL CROSSINGS

I wander through the bustling outdoor art market, enveloped by the vibrant tapestry of creativity on display. The warm night air carries the irresistible scent of street food, and the symphony of laughter from fellow art enthusiasts fills the ample open space. A few of my students spot me, and their infectious energy radiates as they excitedly share their art discoveries before darting back into the crowd. I release a sigh and try to enjoy myself, but I'm finding it difficult.

Usually, I relish being alone with my thoughts, but tonight feels different — lonely. Especially when I could be with Damien. But I've been avoiding his text messages and calls. I know I should respond but I haven't gathered the confidence to confront him.

What if Kavya's wrong and the only explanation is that he's playing me?

Lost in my thoughts, I accidentally collide with someone. "Shoot, sorry," I mutter.

I'm about to walk away until I glance up, and my gaze lands on those stormy blue eyes that I haven't been able to stop dreaming about. "Damien," I gasp, not expecting to see him here.

"Bella." He appears just as stunned as I am, and he rubs the back of his neck, his usual cocky confidence gone. "I should have known you'd be at something like this. You "with someone?" His gaze is dark when he looks around.

"No," I admit.

He gives a stiff nod, but I see his expression relaxes slightly.

I swallow hard, falling into his intense gaze, feeling my knees weakening. "What are you doing here?"

"My team is in charge of event security." That broody is on full display, and his lips thin before he continues, "I was hoping you'd have returned my calls. I wanted to bring you here myself."

"I was going to...it's just..." I stumble over the words, glancing away.

"I thought things were good between us."

"They were. I mean, they are, but..." *Just spit it out, Bella.*

His eyes lock onto mine, his frown deepening, waiting for me to continue.

Taking a deep breath, I fidget with the hem of my dress, my fingers betraying my nervousness. "I saw some texts on your phone the other night. They were from someone named Stacey and Lexi. I know I shouldn't have read them, but they just kinda popped up, and—"

"Damien!" A woman's sharp voice pierces the space between us.

"Fuck," Damien mutters, glancing at the approaching whirlwind of a woman. She's stunning, with jet-black hair and bright blue eyes, and I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy wash over me. Damien's expression remains unreadable as he responds, "Stacey."

A torrent of questions whirls through my mind. Besides being the infamous Stacey from Damien's phone, who is this woman, and what connection does she have to him?

Stacey's desperation emanates as she glares up at Damien, her words slightly whiny, reminiscent of a child's plea. "You can't just keep ignoring me. I need—"

"Not here," Damien interjects sharply, his fingers gripping her elbow as he guides her away, taking their conversation out of earshot.

Time drags on as I stand there, anxiety and uncertainty gripping me. Is Stacey an ex-girlfriend or a more significant figure in his life?

I think about walking away, letting them deal with whatever they're fighting about, but I catch Damien's eyes, and he puts up a finger and mouths for me to stay.

Stacey's frustration seems to wane as their conversation continues, and Damien points toward me. I can't hear their words, but realizing they're discussing me sends a shiver down my spine.

Finally, Damien pulls out his wallet and hands her a few bills. She seems on the verge of starting another argument, but the stern look he gives her halts her in her tracks. When she takes off, Damien returns to my side, his brows furrowed deeply, his jaw clenching with frustration.

"If you need to go with her, I understand," I say, my words tumbling from

my lips, laden with my insecurities. "I mean, we've only been on two dates; it's not like we've made any promises—"

"Bella, stop," he says, his voice laced with frustration. "It's not what you think."

"Okay," I reply, my heart pounding in my chest, and I hate the jealousy that stirs in the pit of my stomach.

Damien takes a deep breath before continuing, "Stacey is my sister."

"Oh," I mutter, instantly feeling like a colossal fool. Kava's words about not assuming the worst echo in my mind, a gentle reminder to give people the benefit of the doubt and not jump to conclusions too quickly.

"She's been going through a difficult time," Damien continues, glancing over to where the woman had been seconds ago and exhaling a heavy breath. "And she has a six-year-old daughter named Lexi. I help my mom take care of the kid sometimes because Stacey isn't in her life right now. She's..." He pauses, his hands scrub over his face roughly, frustration etched into his features. "It's a complicated mess."

"I'm so sorry," I stammer, my face flushed with embarrassment. "I jumped to conclusions, and I should have trusted you."

"No." He steps closer, leaning in, gaze trained on me. "Trust is earned." He takes my hand, our fingers lacing together. "You're smart to be cautious. I've got a lot of shit going on in my life, Bella. Stuff that keeps me up at night."

Danger, danger, danger, my brain warns. I mean, the guy is practically admitting it to me. But that damn heart of mine plays its own beat, *Damien, Damien, Damien*.

"You help out with your niece a lot?" I ask, changing the subject. My brain doesn't need any more reason to scream danger. I want to know more about the good stuff.

"But I'll be honest," he says, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Lexi is one of the bright spots in my life. I think you'd like her. And I know she'd love you."

I love you, Dami. The text had read. My chest swells with affection for a man who could evoke such unwavering devotion from a six-year-old.

"I'd love to meet her," I tell him honestly.

"And I'd love her to meet *you*." As our lips draw closer, the anticipation in the air is electric. Damien's eyes, filled with warmth and affection, lock onto mine. His breath whispers gently against my skin, sending shivers down

my spine. Our faces inch closer, the world around us fading into obscurity, until finally, our lips meet in a soft, tender kiss.

It's a kiss that speaks volumes, a silent promise of understanding and acceptance. Our mouths move in perfect harmony, his lips are warm and inviting, and I feel a rush of emotions coursing through me.

I can't help but melt into him, savoring the taste of his affection.

Time stands still as our kiss deepens, our bodies leaning into each other. It's a moment of pure intimacy. And as we finally pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, I can't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, there could be something real between me and Damien Blackwood.

Something real.

“Would you mind if I joined you?” He asks, nodding toward the art displays. “We can grab some food if you're hungry and check out some vendors.”

“I'd like that.” I smile up at him and take his hand when he offers it.

As Damien and I wander through the bustling marketplace, the loneliness and mistrust that had weighed on me earlier is nowhere to be found. Instead, a thrilling sense of adventure and excitement takes its place. And I find myself embracing the notion of a hint of danger in my life.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Time to turn up the heat. [Turn to this page.](#)

End the night with a kiss and agree to meet his mom and Lexi on their next date. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 15

ALEX

DECISIONS AND DEPARTURES

I wake up in Alex's tent, the warmth of the morning sun seeping through the fabric. My heart sinks as I realize he's not here beside me. The faint echoes of our passionate night linger in my memory, but doubt begins to creep in.

Did I make the wrong decision last night?

With a sigh, I drag my fingers through my hair, trying to untangle it from the disarray of sleep and desire. The lingering traces of his woody, masculine scent still permeate the tent, and I could easily fall back against the sleeping bag and let dreams of him replace the reality of whatever awaits me today.

But I can hear voices outside, a chorus of conversations and laughter pulling me from my cocoon. I realize I can't linger here, hiding from Alex. It's time to face the day and whatever it may bring.

Leaving the tent, I step outside, and the world comes alive around me. The campsite is buzzing with activity. The other hikers have already started their day, and the aroma of coffee, pancakes, and maple syrup fills the air. It's a heady mix that both comforts and distracts.

I spot Alex by the campfire, his back to me as he expertly prepares food. Our eyes meet, and he nods at me, a silent greeting that leaves my stomach in knots.

As I take a tentative step closer to the campfire, one of the hikers, Kurt, a tall and handsome guy with tattoos and smoldering dark brown eyes, offers me a cup of coffee. The rich, aromatic scent envelops me, and I gratefully accept the cup, allowing its warmth to seep into my hands.

"Thanks for this," I say, sipping the coffee.

“Ready for the hike back?” Kurt leans against a nearby log, a cocky grin tugging at his lips. His eyes roam over me, and I recognize that all-too-familiar look I've encountered from guys in the past. It feels intrusive. And unwelcome.

“Yeah, I guess.” My gaze drifts to Alex, who's engrossed in conversation with some of the other campers.

Kurt's tone drips with arrogance. "I've hiked these trails countless times. I practically know them like the back of my hand."

I nod politely, not wanting to engage in a conversation that might encourage him.

"You know," Kurt continues. Undeterred, he moves closer and rests a palm on my knee. "if you ever want to go on a real adventure, I'd be happy to take you."

I stand quickly so that his hand falls away. I'm about to tell him I'm not interested when I glimpse Alex watching me with a furrowed brow.

Those hazel eyes flash with vulnerability, and I can't figure out what he's thinking, but I swear I see a myriad of emotions there: hurt, suspicion, resignation. Then he looks away, masking his feelings, and then he turns his attention back to the conversation with one of the hikers. The unspoken tension between us hangs heavy in the air, leaving me with a sinking feeling of regret.

Despite the uncertainty that races through my mind, the atmosphere is lively as we pack our gear and work together to clean up the campsite, gather trash, and dousing the campfire. The group's chatter and laughter serve as a happy backdrop, but the distance between Alex and me remains palpable. He doesn't talk to me except to bark orders, and whenever I catch his gaze, he frowns and looks away.

By the time we're about to leave, I'm as irritable as Alex seems.

“Stupid,” I mutter, struggling with my backpack.

It's Kurt who races to my side, helping me with it. He grins at me, “If it's too heavy, I'll carry it for you.”

“I'm fine.” I give him a polite smile, annoyed by his helpfulness and flirting.

Kurt moves closer. “If I adjust the straps—”

"We've got a long hike ahead." Alex interrupts, his voice gruff and distant, and his jaw clenches, looking between Kurt and me. “If you can't carry your gear, let me know now, and we'll leave it in storage."

“I said I’m fine.”

He gives a stern nod, then glares at Kurt. “Your water canteen is empty. Fill it up before we leave.”

The two men hold each other's gazes until Kurt finally sighs and walks away.

“Alex,” I say, reaching for his hand.

He flinches and pulls back, his gaze dark, before he scrubs his hands over his face and exhales heavily. “Let's talk when we get back to headquarters. Okay?”

I nod, not knowing what else to say. He’s clearly having second thoughts about us, and I feel like an idiot.

The hike is long and arduous, a trail that winds through dense woods and rugged terrain, demanding our full attention. It seems even more treacherous and demanding than the day before. Alex remains ahead of us, his back rigid as he forges ahead. The silence between us is like an unspoken chasm, and I can't help but feel a growing sense of unease.

Despite the physical challenge, Kurt's relentless attempts at conversation persist.

"You know," Kurt says, walking beside me even though the path is narrow and meant to be hiked single file. “There's something incredibly sexy about a woman who can handle herself in the wilderness.”

I don’t answer him because I’m too worried about the cliff to my left to try and bait off his advances.

Kurt flashes an arrogant grin that's become increasingly annoying. “There's a certain spark in your eyes that's hard to resist, Bella.”

I glance ahead to see Alex walking stoically, his eyes fixed on the trail. “Listen, Kurt. You seem nice—”

He keeps talking, seemingly unaware of my multiple attempts to brush him off.

And I can't help but wish for solitude to collect my thoughts. Kurt's relentless flirting is increasingly grating, and my mind keeps drifting back to Alex, who remains moody and withdrawn. It's a challenging hike in more ways than one.

My patience with Kurt's advances wears thin, distracting me from the treacherous path. It's a precarious balance between managing my irritation and keeping myself from stumbling.

“Look,” I start, ready to lay into the guy. “I hate being rude, but—”

Suddenly, my foot snags on a protruding root, and I lose my balance.

Panic surges as I begin a chaotic descent down the steep hillside. Each roll and bump is a tumultuous journey, the unforgiving terrain of twigs, brush, and rocks amplifying the terror of my fall.

The world becomes a dizzying blur, my heart racing with the adrenaline coursing through my veins. My attempts to grab onto anything are futile as I tumble downward. Time seems to stretch as I helplessly roll, the sensation of weightlessness mingling with the jolts of pain.

Finally, with a jarring thud, I suddenly halt against a massive tree trunk. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and I lay there gasping for air, my vision blurred and my head spinning. My chest aches from the shock of the collision, and I clutch it, attempting to steady my breathing.

As I lay there, gasping for air, I hear the frantic sound of footsteps approaching. Through the haze of pain and dizziness, I see Alex rushing down the hill toward me. His features are etched with panic, and the fear in his eyes is unmistakable.

He reaches me in seconds, dropping to his knees beside me. His touch is gentle as he assesses my condition, his hands moving carefully to check for any signs of injury. "Bella," he says, his voice remaining steady despite the worry in his eyes. "Don't move."

"I'm...fine," I reply, my voice shaky. But when I try to sit up, every muscle in my body hurts, and I wince.

Alex's fingers tenderly brush against my cheek, offering comfort despite the pain. "Let me check," he says, his tone reassuring.

He carefully examines me, his hands moving methodically to assess potential injuries. After what feels like an eternity, he looks up at me with relief. "Nothing's broken, and I don't think you have a concussion. But I'll call for an airlift—"

"No way." I wince again, managing to sit up fully. "I'm fine. I can walk."

He grips my elbow as I try to stand. "I don't want to risk anything."

Our gazes lock, and for a brief moment, I'm embraced in the warmth of our undeniable connection. It's as if his defenses have crumbled, revealing the vulnerability, fear, doubt, and worry lurking in his eyes. For a fleeting instant, it feels like everything between us might be okay, that the connection we shared before still exists.

But the illusion shatters when one of the hikers calls down to us, forcefully yanking me back to reality.

The deep frown returns and Alex's jaw clenches. "You think you can make it back to headquarters? We still have a good hour's walk."

I take a few tentative steps and nod.

A fierce internal battle plays out in his eyes before he concedes with a sigh. "Just stay with me from here on out."

It's exactly where I wanted to be all along.

Without another word, Alex helps me up the cliff, bearing the weight of my backpack as if it were nothing.

"I can carry it," I tell him when we're back on the path.

He grunts in response, seemingly ignoring me as he shifts his focus to the rest of the group. With authority in his voice, he addresses the gathered hikers.

"Listen up, everyone," Alex begins, his tone firm and commanding. "Since some of you didn't listen, I'll reiterate that these narrow paths can be treacherous, as Bella's fall demonstrated."

My cheeks heat up with embarrassment, but it's not me who his pointed gaze lands on, and I see Kurt squirm under Alex's glare.

"As I said from the start, we walk single file on these trails," Alex continues, gesturing to emphasize his point. "Watch your step, and keep a safe distance from the trail's edge."

As we resume our hike, my emotions swirl in a chaotic whirlwind—gratitude for his support, the haunting sense of our lingering closeness, and the ever-present, suffocating uncertainty that lingers like a relentless shadow over whatever exists between us.

Relief washes over me as the parking lot comes into view, and my boots kick up stones and pebbles. Every step of the past hour had felt like an uphill physical and emotional battle.

Silently, Alex helps me stow my backpack in the trunk of my car. His features are drawn into a deep frown, etched with frustration and concern. It's as though a storm is brewing within him, and I'm left to wonder what turbulent emotions are churning beneath the surface.

His hand lifts. I think he will touch my face, but then he thinks twice and rubs the back of his neck. "I should take you to the walk-in clinic—"

"I can go on my own if anything starts hurting."

His frown deepens, and he hesitates before reaching into his bag and pulling out paperwork, "I'm going to need you to fill out an incident report."

"Sure." I take the forms and study them, unable to meet his gaze.

I was an idiot to think he was any different than any other guy.

“Bella, I—”

There’s a commotion on the other side of the parking lot, and his eyes narrow on Kurt and another hiker exchanging threatening words.

"Don't leave," Alex says, his tone leaving no room for argument. He turns and strides towards the impending fight, clearly determined to defuse the situation.

I watch him go, torn between my desire for a hot bath, rest and the sense of uncertainty that continues to gnaw at me. Alex's mixed signals have left me in a state of confusion, unsure of where we stand.

Alex and the other men have disappeared into the small wood hut that serves as SummitStar Adventures' office. The door swings shut, muffling voices and obscuring my view.

I fill out the incident report and place it on the windshield of his truck.

Should I stay and face whatever awaits, or should I slip away into the fading light of the day, leaving behind the enigmatic man who has both ignited and confounded my feelings?

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Get in the car and drive away. If Alex wants to talk, he can call. It’s time for a hot bath and a glass of wine. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay and hear Alex out, even if it means ending the relationship for good. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 16

ALEX

ESCAPE TO SOLITUDE

Waking up inside my tent, I'm cradled by the crisp morning air, yearning for the comforting embrace of Alex's strong arms that I'd left behind last night. The choice to leave lingers in my mind, a quiet undercurrent of regret tugging at my thoughts. Insecurity had led me to seek solitude, but now I'm left questioning if it was the right decision.

Retrieving a small compact mirror from my belongings, I inspect my reflection and notice streaks of dirt on my cheek. With a quick swipe, I clean away the remnants of yesterday's adventures, determined to face the day with a fresh start.

I sigh, unzip the tent, and step outside. The fresh mountain air greets me with a gentle embrace, and the early morning light bathes the surroundings in a soft glow.

The other hikers have already started their day, and the aroma of coffee, pancakes, and maple syrup fills the air. It's a heady mix that both comforts and distracts.

I spot Alex by the campfire, his back to me as he expertly prepares food. Our eyes meet, and he nods at me, a silent greeting that leaves my stomach in knots.

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Finally, with a jarring thud, I suddenly halt against a massive tree trunk. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and I lay there gasping for air, my vision blurred and my head spinning. My chest aches from the shock of the collision, and I clutch it, attempting to steady my breathing.

As I lay there, gasping for air, I hear the frantic sound of footsteps approaching. Through the haze of pain and dizziness, I see Alex rushing down the hill toward me. His features are etched with panic, and the fear in his eyes is unmistakable.

He reaches me in seconds, dropping to his knees beside me. His touch is gentle as he assesses my condition, his hands moving carefully to check for any signs of injury. "Bella," he says, his voice remaining steady despite the worry in his eyes. "Don't move."

"I'm...fine," I reply, my voice shaky. But when I try to sit up, every muscle in my body hurts, and I wince.

Alex's fingers tenderly brush against my cheek, offering comfort despite the pain. "Let me check," he says, his tone reassuring.

He carefully examines me, his hands moving methodically to assess potential injuries. After what feels like an eternity, he looks up at me with relief. "Nothing's broken, and I don't think you have a concussion. But I'll call for an airlift—"

"No way." I wince again, managing to sit up fully. "I'm fine. I can walk."

He grips my elbow as I try to stand. "I don't want to risk anything."

Our gazes lock, and for a brief moment, I'm embraced in the warmth of our undeniable connection. It's as if his defenses have crumbled, revealing the vulnerability, fear, doubt, and worry lurking in his eyes. For a fleeting instant, it feels like everything between us might be okay, that the connection we shared before still exists.

But the illusion shatters when one of the hikers calls down to us, forcefully yanking me back to reality.

The deep frown returns and Alex's jaw clenches. "You think you can

make it back to headquarters? We still have a good hour's walk."

I take a few tentative steps and nod.

A fierce internal battle plays out in his eyes before he concedes with a sigh. "Just stay with me from here on out."

It's exactly where I wanted to be all along.

Without another word, Alex helps me up the cliff, bearing the weight of my backpack as if it were nothing.

"I can carry it," I tell him when we're back on the path.

He grunts in response, seemingly ignoring me as he shifts his focus to the rest of the group. With authority in his voice, he addresses the gathered hikers.

"Listen up, everyone," Alex begins, his tone firm and commanding. "Since some of you didn't listen, I'll reiterate that these narrow paths can be treacherous, as Bella's fall demonstrated."

My cheeks heat up with embarrassment, but it's not me who his pointed gaze lands on, and I see Kurt squirm under Alex's glare.

"As I said from the start, we walk single file on these trails," Alex continues, gesturing to emphasize his point. "Watch your step, and keep a safe distance from the trail's edge."

As we resume our hike, my emotions swirl in a chaotic whirlwind—gratitude for his support, the haunting sense of our lingering closeness, and the ever-present, suffocating uncertainty that lingers like a relentless shadow over whatever exists between us.

Relief washes over me as the parking lot comes into view, and my boots kick up stones and pebbles. Every step of the past hour had felt like an uphill physical and emotional battle.

Silently, Alex helps me stow my backpack in the trunk of my car. His features are drawn into a deep frown, etched with frustration and concern. It's as though a storm is brewing within him, and I'm left to wonder what turbulent emotions are churning beneath the surface.

His hand lifts. I think he will touch my face, but then he thinks twice and rubs the back of his neck. "I should take you to the walk-in clinic—"

"I can go on my own if anything starts hurting."

His frown deepens, and he hesitates before reaching into his bag and pulling out paperwork, "I'm going to need you to fill out an incident report."

"Sure." I take the forms and study them, unable to meet his gaze.

I was an idiot to think he was any different than any other guy.

“Bella, I—”

There’s a commotion on the other side of the parking lot, and his eyes narrow on Kurt and another hiker exchanging threatening words.

"Don't leave," Alex says, his tone leaving no room for argument. He turns and strides towards the impending fight, clearly determined to defuse the situation.

I watch him go, torn between my desire for a hot bath, rest and the sense of uncertainty that continues to gnaw at me. Alex's mixed signals have left me in a state of confusion, unsure of where we stand.

Alex and the other men have disappeared into the small wood hut that serves as SummitStar Adventures' office. The door swings shut, muffling voices and obscuring my view.

I fill out the incident report and place it on the windshield of his truck.

Should I stay and face whatever awaits, or should I slip away into the fading light of the day, leaving behind the enigmatic man who has both ignited and confounded my feelings?

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Get in the car and drive away. If Alex wants to talk, he can call. It’s time for a hot bath and a glass of wine. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay and hear Alex out, even if it means ending the relationship for good. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 17

ALEX

STUCK IN NEUTRAL

The murmurs from the small wood hut persist. I retreat into my car and close my eyes, grappling with frustration and confusion. Maybe it's best to leave. I had hoped this hike would be a way to break out of my comfort zone, but now it feels like a mistake. I considered Alex the safer choice, but now I'm second-guessing that decision. Perhaps I should have called Damien instead; at least with him, I knew the trouble I was getting into.

Sweat beads form on my forehead, the sun turning my tiny car into a sweltering sauna. I roll down the windows, letting in a rush of cool air, and steal one final glance towards the hut.

"This is stupid," I mutter.

Just as I'm about to give in to the urge to start the car and drive away, the office door creaks open, and Alex steps out. His brow is still furrowed, but the storm raging within him earlier appears to have calmed somewhat. He spots me sitting in my car and walks over, his boots crunching on the gravel. We lock eyes for a moment before he breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry about all of this," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know I've been a bit of an ass today."

"A bit?" I raise my brows at him.

He leans against my car, and the vulnerability in his eyes catches me off guard. "I've got some baggage I'm dealing with. Not that it's an excuse for how I acted." He runs his hands across his face and lets out a deep sigh. "I like you, Bella."

I frown up at him. "You've been sending mixed signals all day. It's hard to know where I stand. I thought yesterday, last night, that we had a real

connection. But if that's not what you want, we can be friends."

"I don't want to be friends." He leans into the car and places a palm on my cheek. "I mean, I want to be your friend, but I also want more. But..." He looks away.

"Even that, Alex. It's mixed signals." I sigh, feeling the weight of his confusion pressing on me.

His gaze returns to mine, and for a moment, he searches my eyes for answers. His hand remains on my cheek, warm and comforting.

"I want you to know where I stand," he says. "I like you. A lot." He takes a deep breath, stroking my cheek, and I resist the urge to lean into his touch.

"I can sense the 'but' coming," I say, removing his hand from my face.

His jaw clenches, and he draws back slightly. "My last relationship ended badly." Vulnerability flashes in his eyes. "I'm still trying to figure some shit out."

"You're still in love with her."

"No." He shakes his head adamantly. "It's not like that. It's..." His nostrils flare, and he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fuck."

"I get it. I've been hurt, too. But sometimes, taking a chance on something real is worth the risk." At least, that's what I thought yesterday. Today, I'm second-guessing myself.

He nods. "I want that. I do. I just think I need to take things a bit slower. Until I get my shit figured out."

I pause, letting his words sink in. My heart aches with the raw honesty he's shared, but I'm grateful I stayed to listen. Slowly, I begin to rebuild the protective walls around my heart. I had let my guard down with him, and now I regret it.

Frustrating and confusing emotions surge within me, and I swallow hard, fighting back the tears that threaten to surface. I'm not entirely sure why this hurts, but it does. For a fleeting moment, I believed he might be the one, making it all the more painful.

"I appreciate your honesty," I tell him, turning the ignition key. "It's important that you take the time to figure things out."

"I promise you, I want this to work. I don't want to rush into something and make the same mistakes again."

I barely hear his words because my heart seems to be beating inside my ears, and I know I need to drive away before I let him see me cry.

"I need to go," I say with a forced smile, putting the gear in reverse.

“Bella, wait.”

This time, I don’t wait. I shift the car into reverse, and he takes a step back. As I attempt to switch back to drive, the gear stubbornly gets stuck in neutral, causing my engine to roar. “Shit.”

Panic sets in as I repeatedly shift the gear lever to coax it into the correct position. The engine's roar intensifies, and I can feel Alex's gaze on me.

"Come on, come on," I mutter, frustration building as the car refuses to cooperate.

Finally, with one last forceful push, the gear clicks into place. The engine quiets down, and I let out a sigh of relief. Glancing in Alex's direction, I offer an apologetic shrug, embarrassed by the sudden mechanical hiccup.

He gives me a reassuring nod, his expression understanding.

I carefully pull out of the parking lot, still feeling the residual unease from our conversation. The mixed signals between us are mirrored by the car's mechanical confusion, leaving me with a sense of uncertainty that I can't shake.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Maintain the hope that things will work out with Alex. Allow him the space and time he needs. [Turn to this page.](#)

Since things with the Boy-next-door didn't work out, why not embrace adventure with a real bad boy? Call Damien and arrange a date. [Turn to this page.](#) If you’ve already had a first date, you can have a second date by [Turning to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 18

ALEX

STAG AND DOE WOE

The days have dragged by at an excruciatingly slow pace. The cuts and bruises from my tumble in the woods have finally healed, but it's been even longer since I received Alex's last message, the digital equivalent of a wellness check — since then, there has been nothing but radio silence.

And I'm fine. I'm over him. Even as I think it, I know it's a lie.

My phone suddenly buzzes with a new message, and my heart leaps momentarily, only to deflate when I see it's not from Alex. It's a text from my friend Jessica.

Jess: Stag and Doe for Kimmy tonight. You still coming?"

I sigh, my thumb hovering over the keyboard as I contemplate my response. The last thing I feel like doing right now is attending a celebration of love, a stark reminder of something I don't have. But Jessica relentlessly pursues a good time, and I know she means well. Kimmy and I were college friends, and I should be there to support her.

Bella: Wouldn't miss it!

As I hit send, a sense of resignation washes over me. A night out with Jessica and the gang may help distract me. And who knows, some good company and a few drinks will make it easier to forget and move on.

I stand in front of my closet, contemplating what to wear. After indecision, I settle on a knee-length, navy blue dress with a flattering wrap-style top that strikes the right balance between casual and dressy.

I slip into the dress and glimpse myself in the mirror. The reflection

staring back at me is a mix of uncertainty and determination. I brush through my hair, leaving it down, and add a touch of mascara and lipgloss, then slip on comfortable heels and grab a small clutch purse. With one last glance in the mirror, I head out the door, ready to face the night ahead.

The venue is bustling with activity when I arrive. The cheerful chatter and laughter fill the air as people enjoy the festivities. Colorful lights drape from the ceiling, casting a warm glow over the room.

Kimmy and Jessica spot me as soon as I enter, and they rush over for a group hug. Kimmy, radiant in her bridal glow, beams at me.

"Bella, I'm so glad you could make it!" she exclaims.

I return her hug warmly. "I'm so happy for you."

Jessica, ever the energetic one, chimes in, "We're going to have a blast tonight! There are so many hot guys here, and I've decided to take one home."

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. "Well, Jess, you always know how to enjoy a party."

"You know I do," she says, grinning, her blue eyes roaming the room as if searching for her prey.

Kimmy introduces me to her fiancé, Hal, a tall and friendly guy with a warm smile. I can tell that she's head over heels for him. It warms my heart to see her so happy.

"Ready to spend some money?" Jess says, grabbing my arm and dragging me to the game area. There's the classic ring toss, a lively game of darts, and a "Pin the Cock on the Jock" setup that elicits fits of laughter from those playing.

I buy a handful of fifty-fifty tickets and play a few games of BlackJack while Jess feeds me drinks.

She hands me Cosmopolitan and links her arms with mine as we walk over to where a live band plays.

"Drink up, Bella! It's going to be a wild night!" Jess says, polishing off her Cosmo in one gulp.

"I don't think I can keep up with your pace," I say, chuckling.

"You never could hold your liquor. Remember in college, when—"

I interrupt her, "Not the Jägermeister story. Please."

She laughs. "I'm just saying you can be fun when you want to be."

"Hey. I'm fun." I sip the fruity cocktail, the tartness tingling on my tongue.

“Oh,” she says, already moving on from our conversation. “Jello shots.”

I let out a playful groan, though secretly, I'm relishing the moment. Jess passes me one of the jello shots, and we raise our petite cups in a wordless salute before simultaneously knocking them back. The sugary, gelatinous blend glides smoothly down my throat, leaving behind a comforting warmth.

As the night progresses, the Stag and Doe kicks into high gear. The dance floor becomes a swirling mass of people, and Jess, with her boundless energy, drags me into the midst of it. We dance like no one's watching, lost in the pulsating beat of the music.

But then, as I spin around, a shiver runs down my spine. An invisible gaze has settled upon me, and I can feel someone watching. I turn, scanning the crowded room, my eyes searching for the source of this strange sensation.

And there he is.

Alex stands at the edge of the dance floor, his gaze fixed on me. My heart races, and it's as if time stands still. The chaos of the party fades into the background, and it's just him and me in that charged moment.

I watch him watching me, his expression a mix of emotions I can't quite decipher. It's a collision of our unresolved feelings.

A gorgeous blonde approaches him, her delicate hands moving to his chest. My heart sinks as I watch her draw closer to him.

Alex grabs her wrist, leaning in to say something in her ear. Her lips move in response, and whatever they exchange remains a secret. Then he pulls her away, guiding her through the doors that lead to the outside.

The sensation that had gripped my heart only moments ago morphs into a crushing disappointment. I can't help but jump to conclusions — maybe he's already moved on, perhaps he's a player, and I was just another fleeting interest to him.

I turn back to Jess, my face flushed with frustration, and I manage a forced smile. "I need more shots."

She raises an eyebrow, clearly noticing the shift in my mood. "Are you okay?"

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "Yeah, just...I want to have some fun tonight."

“Shots it is!” Her arm links with mine, and we head to the jello shots table. I throw myself into the revelry of the Stag and Doe, determined to drown my sorrows and maybe, just maybe, find a new connection amid the lively crowd.

The shots keep flowing, and I feel a pleasant warmth spreading through me. It's not long before I spot a cute guy across the room, and as the alcohol takes its effect, my inhibitions start to fade. I make my way over to him, swaying slightly.

With a playful smile, I strike up a conversation, the music making it necessary to lean in close to be heard. He's charming and easy to talk to, and I find myself flirting shamelessly.

"Another shot?" he asks.

"Sure," I grin at him, stumbling a little, my balance compromised by the alcohol coursing through my veins. His hand steadies me, fingers brushing against my arm and lingering longer than necessary. I should care, but at this moment, I don't.

"Maybe we should find a quieter place to talk," he suggests, his eyes locking onto mine.

A familiar voice pierces through the haze when I'm about to lose myself in this reckless escape. "Bella, can we talk?"

I turn to find Alex standing beside me, his eyes filled with concern. The room spins a bit as I try to focus on him. "Talk to your girlfriend," I slur, my words not as coherent as I'd like them to be.

His brows furrow in confusion, and he attempts to explain. "Bella, she's not—"

But I turn away, dismissing him, and grab another shot from the table. I raise it in a clumsy toast to the cute guy beside me, who joins in the drinking without hesitation.

I'm determined to forget Alex, even if it means drowning my feelings in alcohol and reckless flirting with Mike, or was it Matt? Honestly, I don't care.

But Alex doesn't leave. Instead, he grips my elbow and whispers, "How much have you had to drink?"

"None of your beeswax," I slur, then giggle at how the word tingles on my tongue. "Beezwax."

Alex sighs. "You should have some coffee."

I pull my arm away. "I'm fine."

The cute guy pulls me back against his chest. "You heard her, buddy, she's fine. Come on, sweetheart, let's get another drink."

"She's had more than enough to drink." Alex asserts firmly. Jaw clenched, he steps between me and the guy.

"Who asked you to play hero?" the cute guy retorts with a cocky grin. "She's a big girl who can make her own choices."

Alex's frustration is palpable. "Look, man," Alex says through gritted teeth, "she's had enough. It's time for her to take a break."

The cute guy's arrogance doesn't waver, and he seems unfazed by Alex's presence. He leans in closer, invading personal space with a challenging glint in his eye.

"What are you gonna do about it?" he taunts, the atmosphere growing increasingly tense.

The thumping music and swirling lights form a chaotic backdrop to their confrontation. My head is spinning, and I sway, feeling a strange mix of vulnerability and confusion.

As the situation escalates, I can't help but wonder how it will all unfold. The alcohol in my system only adds to the uncertainty, and I grapple with a growing sense of unease.

Jessica appears out of nowhere, her bubbly energy pulling me back into the whirlwind of the dance floor. She grabs my hand and starts dragging me away from the confrontation. "Come on, Bella! Let's dance like nobody's watching!"

Her infectious enthusiasm momentarily distracts me, and I allow her to lead me into the midst of the dancing crowd, the thumping music enveloping us. I start moving to the rhythm, losing myself in the pulsating energy of the party.

Yet, in the back of my mind, I can't shake the nagging feeling that I need to make a choice. Should I continue with reckless indulgence, dancing away the pain and uncertainty? Or should I listen to that quieter voice urging me to find clarity by going home and getting some rest?

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Continue to party with Jessica. Indulge in more shots and reckless flirting. Forget about Alex and embrace the party atmosphere. [Turn to this page.](#)

Tonight has been fun, but it's time to go home and sleep off the alcohol-induced haze. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 19

ALEX

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

The music pounds in my ears, and the room seems to blur as I lose track of time. I keep dancing, laughing, and downing shots with Jessica, but amid the celebration, I can't shake the feeling that Alex is watching me.

I glance around the room, and there, in the dimly lit corner, I see him. His gaze is fixed on me, his expression unreadable. My heart skips, and I wonder why he's still here. Or better yet, why he's here at all?

Jessica keeps dancing, oblivious to my internal turmoil, but I can't ignore the tension. I sway to the music, torn between the desire to forget and the need for clarity.

Laughter, dance, shots — it's all a blur.

The night stretches on, and Jessica's my partner in this wild ride. The music pounds in my ears and time's lost in the chaos.

The cute guy I'd been flirting with earlier dances close by. In the dim, frenetic swirl of the party, his hands snake around my waist with a presumptuous familiarity. Startled, I instinctively pull away. His wide grin falters momentarily, and he attempts to bridge the gap with a playful comment, but I take another step back, losing my balance and bumping into someone.

I'm way too wasted, and I need some fresh air. Stumbling, I navigate the crowd, avoiding drawing attention to my tipsy steps. Outside, it's a whole different world. The night's calm moonlight paints soft patterns on the pavement, and I lean against the building, taking deep breaths of the crisp air. But it doesn't do much to stop the stars above me from spinning.

Music still throbs faintly from inside, and I swear I can still feel the heavy

beat pounding inside my chest.

The cute guy, who does not seem so pretty anymore, stumbles out the metal door, his gaze locking on me. He's got a grin on his face that says he's also had a few too many shots.

"Come on, Bella," he slurs, leaning in closer. "Let me take you home. You're too pretty to be out here all alone."

My words slur, "No, I need to go home alone."

"Come on, sweetheart, just one kiss."

"I said no."

But he seems to need help getting the message, and he becomes more persistent, his hands wandering where they shouldn't. Panic starts to bubble within me as I try to push him off.

"Seriously," I slur again, "Leave me alone."

He doesn't listen, pushing me further towards the parking lot. My legs wobble beneath me, and I stumble. His grip tightens, and he insists, "I'll make sure you get home safely."

Fear courses through me, and I attempt to break free, but he's stronger and more determined.

Suddenly, a prominent figure appears in the shadows.

Alex.

His face is a mask of fury, and he grabs the persistent guy by the collar, slamming him against a nearby car. Fists clenched in the guy's shirt.

"I suggest you back off right now," Alex warns through gritted teeth, his eyes locked onto the *not-so-cute* guy. "She doesn't want to go anywhere with you."

The guy, caught off guard by Alex's swift intervention, tries to save face. He stammers, "Hey, man, I was just trying to help her. She looked like she needed it."

But Alex isn't buying it. In a swift move, he delivers a powerful punch to the guy's gut. The force of the blow leaves the guy gasping for breath, collapsing to the ground in agony. He crawls away, whimpering, muttering curses.

Alex turns back to me, his expression softening from anger to concern. "You okay?" he asks, offering me a steadying hand.

I nod, tears welling in my eyes, grateful for his timely intervention. "Yeah," I whisper, still trembling from the encounter. I want to go home. But before I can do anything else, my stomach revolts, and I lurch forward,

vomiting on the pavement.

Alex is quick to react, holding my hair back and rubbing my back gently as I empty my stomach. It's embarrassing, but I'm grateful for his unshakable presence. When it's finally over, I feel even weaker, unable to walk.

"Oh god," I moan, leaning against him.

He hoists me up gently, cradling me in his arms like I'm weightless. I'm only vaguely aware of him carrying me. My eyes flutter open just enough to catch a glimpse of someone else — it's Hal, Kimmy's fiancé. Alex is talking to him, filling him in on what happened and reassuring him that he's taking me home safely.

As I drift in and out of consciousness, I hear Alex's voice saying, "Let her friends know she's okay," and I'm overcome with a sense of gratitude that he's looking out for me. Then, everything fades into a hazy blur as I surrender to the darkness.

I awaken to the relentless assault of a pounding headache, my consciousness emerging from the depths of slumber like a ship navigating through dense, murky waters. My thoughts are trapped in a thick, disorienting fog, a shroud that blankets my mind and obscures any trace of clarity. The world around me feels distant and hazy as if I'm observing it through a veil of uncertainty.

Every movement sends a jolt of discomfort through my skull, a reminder of the revelry and indulgence from the night before. The events leading to this state are fragments of fractured memories, scattered and elusive. I grope for coherence in the haze, attempting to piece together the puzzle of my actions and choices.

As I lay there, vulnerable and disoriented, I can't help but wonder how I ended up in this state and what consequences await me on the other side of this throbbing fog.

I blink slowly, sunlight assaulting my eyes. The room around me is unfamiliar, and panic grips my chest as I struggle to remember how I got here. My mouth feels dry like I've swallowed cotton balls, and I groan in discomfort.

With slow, shaky movement, I sit up and glance around, panic coursing through me. It only intensifies when I notice the oversized t-shirt I'm wearing. It's not mine; it's a man's shirt.

The door to the room creaks open, and my heart lurches in my throat.

"Alex." his name is a sigh of relief.

Hazel eyes, warm and expressive, peer out from beneath the tousled, sun-kissed strands of his messy hair. A hint of morning scruff graces his strong jawline, adding a rugged charm to his already striking features. His t-shirt, stretched taut by the contours of his well-defined pecs and biceps, paints an enticing silhouette.

"How are you feeling?" he asks gently, handing me a mug of steaming coffee.

I take a sip, the warmth of the liquid soothing my raw throat. "Better," I manage to croak. "But I don't remember much, to be honest."

"You had quite a night." He takes a seat beside me. "I was going to take you back to your place, but I couldn't find your purse."

Panic washes over me as I realize the implications. "My purse...I had my ID, my phone, everything in there!"

Alex places a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry," he reassures me. "Jessica found it and brought it over this morning."

Relief floods through me, and I let out a shaky laugh. "Thank goodness for Jessica. I owe her big time."

"She was worried about you, too."

I glance down at the oversized t-shirt, a blush rising. "Sorry about this."

Alex chuckles softly. "It happens to the best of us sometimes. Don't worry about it."

He stands. "I've washed your clothes. They're on the dresser with your purse. Why don't you have a shower, and we'll talk over breakfast."

I'm touched by his thoughtfulness and the effort he's gone through to make me feel comfortable. "Thank you,"

As he leaves the room to give me privacy, I stand up, my mind still reeling from what I remember about last night's events.

My purse catches my eye, and I retrieve it to check my phone. The screen lights up with a series of messages from Kimmy and Jessica, both filled with concern for my well-being.

Then, there's a message from my mom, and my heart skips a beat as I read her reminder about the family brunch to celebrate my dad's retirement. It's a day he's been looking forward to for so long, and I know how important it is to him.

As I mull over the messages, a dilemma starts forming in my head. Part of me longs to stay here, have breakfast with Alex, and hear what he has to say. But the other part knows that I committed to my family, especially my

dad, and I can't let them down on his special day.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Scratch the brunch arrangements and stick around to listen to what Alex has to share. [Turn to this page.](#)

Family comes first. Brunch it is! Apologize to Alex for an abrupt departure, and maintain the optimism that if he genuinely wishes to have a conversation, he'll call. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 20

ALEX

CLEARING THE HAZE

The pounding music fills the room as I dance with Jessica, but I can feel the alcohol's effects weighing me down. The world blurs and my steps become increasingly unsteady. It's as if a haze has settled over my senses, muffling the noise of the party and slowing my thoughts.

I lean close to Jessica and shout over the music, "I think I've had enough, Jess!"

She raises an eyebrow, her eyes dancing with the intoxication of the night and the numerous shots. "Are you sure, Bella? We're just getting started!"

I can feel the alcohol-induced haze creeping in, clouding my judgment and dampening my energy. I need clarity, not chaos.

I need fresh air.

"I'm sure," I reply.

Jessica pouts playfully but eventually relents. "If you say so. But you better get some rest because Kimmy's wedding is just around the corner, and I need you rested for another fun night."

I groan, thinking about drinking again.

My speech is slurred as I say goodbye to Kimmy and Hal. I see the concern in my friend's eyes when she asks, "Are you sure you don't want me to help you get home?"

"It's your Stag and Doe. I'll be fine." I hug her, then turn and stumble towards the exit.

As I step outside into the cool night air, relief washes over me. The brisk breeze helps clear the fog in my mind, and I take a deep breath, inhaling the freshness of the night.

I can't help but feel a pang of disappointment that I didn't get to see Alex

again. But deep down, I know it's for the best. The unresolved tension between us needs time to settle, and a clear head will help me understand it all.

My stomach lurches, and I fumble with my purse, trying to find my phone. My fingers seem clumsy, and it takes a few attempts before I finally retrieve it. With relief, I unlock the screen and open the Uber app. As I enter my location and request a ride, I lean against the brick wall, using it as support.

"Bella." The cute guy I'd been flirting with exits the building, holding a pack of cigarettes. His smile is now replaced with a predatory look, and the alcohol in my system no longer blurs my perception of the situation. "I'm glad I found you."

"I'm going home," I mumble, my words slurring slightly. "I'm not feeling well."

"I'm sure I can make you feel better."

A sense of vulnerability washes through me as he steps closer, his large frame caging me against the wall. His breath smells like alcohol, and his intentions are clear. One hand strokes my arm, the other lands on my hip, his fingers squeezing tightly.

"I don't want this."

"How you've been throwing yourself at me all night says differently."

Panicking, I push him away, but my movements are sluggish, and he manages to lean in, attempting to kiss me. I turn my head at the last moment, and his lips graze my cheek. The feeling of his unwelcome advance sends a shiver down my spine.

"Leave me alone," I manage to say, trembling but determined.

Suddenly, the man is forcefully pulled away from me. Before fully comprehending what's happening, I hear a loud thud followed by a string of curses.

Alex.

He's punched the guy square in the face, and the man stumbles back, clutching his bleeding nose. Alex steps forward, his eyes blazing with anger. "If you ever come near her again," he growls, "you'll regret it."

The man retreats, wiping his bloody mouth with the back of his hand as he goes. "You're both crazy," he mutters, disappearing into the night.

Alex turns toward me, his expression shifting from anger to concern. "Are you okay?" he asks, checking if I'm hurt.

"I'm...I'm fine," I stammer, avoiding his gaze.

As Alex and I stand in the dimly lit street, my stomach lurches, and I suddenly realize I'm far from fine. The combination of alcohol, stress, and the recent confrontation with the persistent guy sends me stumbling towards a nearby patch of bushes. I barely make it in time before I start retching.

My face burns with embarrassment as I empty the contents of my stomach into the greenery, praying that no one else is witnessing this pitiful display. Alex is beside me, gently pulling my hair back as I heave.

When it finally subsides, I feel utterly mortified. I glance at the approaching Uber, hoping the driver didn't witness my unfortunate episode. But my hopes are dashed when the driver rolls down the window and says, "Sorry, but I can't take her in that condition. I won't have puke on my seats."

I want to disappear into the ground, but Alex steps in before I can even form a coherent thought. "Don't worry about it. I'll take her home."

I look up at him, my gratitude mixed with shame. "I'm so sorry," I mumble, my voice shaky.

Alex just smiles reassuringly. "Let's get you home."

My head is spinning, and the world blurs around me as I slump back in the truck's seat. The night's events have taken their toll on me, and I can't help but feel an overwhelming mix of emotions — embarrassment, relief, and a strange gratitude for Alex's intervention.

I manage to tell him my address before the rhythmic motion of the car lulls me into a drowsy state, and my eyes shut. The last thing I remember is the soft hum of the engine and the faint glow of streetlights passing by.

The next time I regain consciousness, I'm no longer in the truck. Panic momentarily washes over me, but as my groggy mind clears, I realize I'm in my room, lying on my bed, a cool washcloth on my forehead.

My head throbs with a relentless ache, and I feel like I might be sick again. I push myself up, trying to regain my bearings.

The room spins for a moment, and I groan in discomfort.

Then, I hear movement nearby, and I turn my head to see Alex standing by my bedside, concern etched on his face. "Hey there," he says softly. "Take it easy."

I blink, still trying to process everything. "Alex? How did I get here?"

He gives me a gentle smile. "I carried you inside. You were out like a light."

Which is a nice way of him saying I passed out in his truck.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment, and I run a hand through my messy hair. "I'm so sorry for all of this."

Alex shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're okay."

But I'm not okay. My stomach churns, and I feel like I'm on the verge of another bout of nausea. I scramble out of bed, stumbling towards the bathroom. This time, I make it to the toilet before emptying the remnants of the night's excesses.

As I sit there, feeling utterly miserable, I can't help but reflect on the series of poor choices I've made. My head pounds with regret, and I wonder how I could have allowed myself to reach this low point.

When I eventually leave the bathroom, I find Alex waiting for me. There's a slight furrowing of his forehead and a subtle tension around his eyes, and I can tell he's worried about me.

"Thank you for bringing me home, but you better not stay too long, or your girlfriend might get jealous." It's a dig that feels petty and untrue even as I say the words.

"She isn't my girlfriend, Bella. That was my ex."

"Are you sure she knows that?"

"I want to talk to you about that. About everything. But right now isn't a good idea."

I groan, both from the lingering effects of the alcohol and the weight of my own poor decisions. "Yeah, maybe you're right," I mumble, closing my eyes briefly to quell the dizziness, but it only worsens it.

"You should lie down," he says, grabbing my elbows and helping to steady me. He guides me back to the bed, and I sit on the edge, still feeling queasy.

Alex looks at me, his expression filled with concern. "Do you want me to stay for a bit? I can make some coffee."

I find myself torn, his offer lingering in the air. One part of me yearns for his presence, craving the comfort and reassurance it brings. Yet, another part hesitates, plagued by uncertainty, especially after the revelation about his "ex." There is still something between them, or at the very least, the breakup is still fresh. But there's also an undeniable connection between us, and he's proven tonight that he cares about me, even if it's just as a friend. I'm left grappling with the question of what to do next, knowing that my choice could profoundly impact our already complicated relationship.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Give him a chance to linger and brew some coffee. Take a refreshing shower to clear your head, then prepare your heart to hear what Alex shares. [Turn to this page.](#)

Say goodnight to Alex. A good night's sleep is the magical elixir for life's twists and turns and a raging hangover. If his interest is genuine, he'll reach out tomorrow. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 21

ALEX

A BREWING CONNECTION

A gentle vibration radiates from my phone resting on the desk. Even though I usually avoid responding to messages during class, the grade three students are immersed in crafting their nature mandalas. Sticks, leaves, and glue have transformed the typically energetic bunch into a serene and focused collective. This momentary lull allows me to glance at the message discreetly.

Alex: Are you busy after school? Let's grab a coffee at The Artful Bean.

I take a moment to collect myself, feeling my heart race. It's been a few days since my utterly cringe-worthy evening of making a fool of myself, and I doubted I would hear from him. I type my reply, my fingers tapping lightly on the screen.

Bella: What time works for you?

Almost instantly, my phone buzzes again.

Alex: How about 4 PM?

Bella: See you then.

I can't control the nerves that cause my palms to sweat. There are so many things left unsaid between us. I wonder if he wants to be friends or is interested in taking things slow. As much as I'm attracted to him, I'm unsure if I want to give him another chance. He's not the safe choice I once believed

him to be; he's complicated and a bit of a mess.

Just like me. I grunt at the thought, knowing it's the truth.

But I'll hear what he has to say. It's the least I can do after how he took care of me.

He was so gentle and sweet. And I know how easy it could be to fall back into his charms, those hazel eyes and dimples. I sigh. He's given so many mixed signals, and I'm unsure if my heart is ready to navigate this romantic rollercoaster again.

I feel a gentle tap on my arm, drawing me out of my thoughts.

"Ms. Bella," Addy says, her voice filled with excitement. "Look at my mandala! It's like a magical forest!"

I can't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

"That's fantastic. You've captured the magic of nature beautifully in your mandala."

Addy beams with pride. "Thank you, Ms. Bella!" With that, she skips back to her seat.

Returning to my project, I carefully arrange its elements and contemplate the possibility of untangling the mixed signals between Alex and me. Something beautiful could emerge amid this uncertainty, like the evolving patterns of my mandala.

It's precisely four when I step into The Artful Bean. The soft chime of the doorbell announces my arrival, and I scan the cozy coffee shop. It doesn't take long before I spot him.

Alex.

He's sitting at a corner table, a smile playing on his lips when our gazes meet. My heart flutters as I approach him.

"Hey," he says, rising from his seat to greet me with a warm hug. His muscles press against me as he leans in, and I can't help but notice how strong he feels.

"Hi," I reply, my voice a tad too breathless. Alex has that effect on me – effortlessly making my heart race.

He gestures to the seat opposite him, and I slide into it. He's already ordered my favorite – a caramel macchiato, and as I take my first sip, the familiar blend of sweet and bitter washes over my taste buds, soothing my nerves. I glance over at him, and he's watching me with those captivating dimples that make me smile.

"Thanks for the coffee," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

His dimples deepen. "Thanks for meeting me."

His woodsy and masculine scent wraps around me, making me feel safe and strangely connected.

"I wanted to thank you again for helping me the other night," I say.

"I'm just glad you're feeling better," he replies sincerely.

"I was shocked to see you at the stag and doe," I admit, curiosity tugging at me.

"Hal and I went to school together," he says.

"Oh, that makes sense. I met Kimmy in college. They seem to be happy."

"Yeah." He rubs the back of his neck. "I never thought he was the settling down type. But he's head over heels for her."

Silence hangs between us, and I take another sip of my coffee.

"Alex—"

"Bella—"

We say in unison, then laugh nervously.

"You go first," I tell him.

He drags his fingers through his sun-kissed hair and lets out a heavy breath. "I need to explain something about my past. It's why I've been struggling with us. And I know it isn't fair to you..." There's a war in his eyes as if he's battling his inner demons before laying his history bare before me.

I reach across the table and take his hand, and his calloused fingers tighten around mine.

"You know I was in a long-term relationship, which ended badly."

"With the woman at the Stag and Doe?"

He nods. "Angie. We were together for years, since high school. There was a group of us. Me, her, Hal, and Sawyer. We were inseparable."

"That's a long time to be with someone." And I can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

"Looking back, I think we stayed together because it was familiar. Safe. I don't know. I guess I thought I loved her. And in a way, I did. But not the way I should. Does that make sense?"

I nod. "Why did you break up?"

He laughs, but there's no humor in the sound, only a bitter undertone that hangs in the air. "I knew Sawyer and her were close. But it wasn't until I found them in her bed that I realized how close they'd gotten."

"She cheated on you."

"They both did. He was my best friend. And I'm still not sure who I was

angrier at. Found out that it had been going on for years.”

“I’m so sorry, Alex. I know how hard that is. To trust someone and have them betray you like that is one of the most painful things in the world.” I pause, my heart aching for him.

Alex's gaze locks with mine. "You've been through this too?"

“Yeah. And it sucks. It took me a long time to start dating again.” I wonder if he’s ready or if the wound is too fresh. I don’t want to be his rebound. “What about your relationship with Sawyer?”

“He...” His eyes close as he begins to speak, and a pallor washes over his sun-kissed cheeks. I can sense the depth of his anguish radiating from him, and it's nothing short of palpable. The intensity of his pain hangs heavy in the air, almost as if you could reach out and touch it. “He and I started SummitStar Adventures together. It had always been our dream. After I found out about him and Angie, I wanted to walk away. And I did for a bit. But...” His voice cracks.

I gently squeeze his hand, and his gaze returns to meet mine.

"He started taking stupid risks, hiking unsafe trails, attempting dangerous climbs. It was as if he was trying to prove something to himself, or maybe he just didn't care anymore," Alex continues, his voice tinged with a mix of sorrow and frustration. “He tried calling me to explain his side, but I wouldn’t listen. I hated him.”

“That’s normal.”

He snorts bitterly. “Yeah. But I probably would have heard him out if I’d known...” His words trail off, and a wave of regret washes over his features, the pain of missed chances etched on his face. “He died six months ago.”

“Oh my god, Alex.”

"Idiot did a solo climb on Seagull Ridge. No one knows exactly what happened. They say it was an accident, but..." Guilt lingers in his eyes, casting a shadow over his words.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But sometimes I wonder if things would be different if I’d forgiven him.”

I can feel the weight of his grief and guilt. “Forgiveness is hard.”

"Shit," he mutters, running his hands through his hair and exhaling deeply. "I'm sorry for dumping all this on you. But I needed you to know. I like you, Bella — a lot. And I want to explore where this connection between us might lead. But if all of this is too much, I understand."

“What about Angie?” I ask. “At the party, she seemed like she isn’t over you.”

“Angie and I are done, Bella. Even before I found out about them, I knew she wasn’t the person I wanted to spend my life with. But yeah, she wants to get back together. I’ve tried to be supportive because of everything we’ve lost. But there’s nothing there. I promise you.”

His words carry a sense of finality as if he's closing the door on that chapter of his life for good.

I want to believe him, to trust that he’s ready to move on. To believe that he wants to be with me. Yet, I can't ignore the lingering pain that flickers in those hazel eyes.

Alex reaches across the table, his warm hand finding mine. “Meeting you and spending time with you feels different. It feels right.”

A hopeful smile tugs at my lips. "I feel the same way, Alex. I just...I don't want either of us to get hurt."

He squeezes my hand gently. "I don't want that either, Bella. We'll take it slow, okay? No rushing into anything. “Will you give me another chance?”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Take it slow, go on a few dates, and see where things go. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay friends and spend time together. If romance blooms, then it was meant to be. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 22

ALEX

CLEARING THE HAZE

The steamy embrace of the hot shower calls out to me, and I step beneath the cascading water, hoping it'll help me sober up. It does little to alleviate the throbbing in my head, but at least it washes away the fog of alcohol.

Leaning my forehead against the cool shower tiles, I linger under the warm stream until the water loses its comforting heat. Deep down, I recognize that this prolonged shower is my way of dodging Alex. The embarrassment of the night lingers heavily within me, making it difficult to face him.

I slip into a pair of faded sweatpants and an oversized hoodie, their loose embrace offering a modicum of comfort. I glimpse my reflection in the bathroom mirror and can't help but groan at the disarray that stares back at me. My usually vibrant complexion appears pallid, a stark contrast to the dark circles that have taken up residence beneath my bleary eyes.

"I am never drinking again," I groan.

As I shuffle into the kitchen, the comforting aroma of coffee fills the air.

Alex glances over his shoulder as he pours two cups. "Feeling any better?"

I sink into a chair at the table, rubbing my temples. "I feel like crap," I admit.

He chuckles and places a mug in front of me. "You'll probably feel worse tomorrow."

I roll my eyes, managing a weak smile. Taking a few sips of the coffee, I start to feel a bit more human. Alex joins me at the table, sitting across from me.

“I don’t usually drink like that.”

“You don’t have to explain. You’re allowed to have fun.”

I grunt. “Not sure how much fun puking in the bushes is.”

He laughs. “You looked like you were having a good time before that.”

I give him a weak smile. Knowing the only reason I’d been trying so hard to have a good time was to forget him.

“I was shocked to see you there,” I admit.

“Hal and I went to high school together,” he says, lifting his mug to his lips. “He’s been a good friend over the years. Hal said you and Kimmy went to college together.”

I nod in acknowledgment. The fact that he’d inquired about me from Hal lingers in my thoughts, causing a subtle flutter of anticipation in my stomach.

She seems to be really happy with him.”

“Yeah.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I never thought Hal was the settling down type. But he’s head over heels for her.”

Silence hangs between us, and I take another sip of my coffee.

“Alex—”

“Bella—”

We say in unison, then laugh nervously.

“You go first,” I tell him.

He runs his fingers through his sun-kissed hair, his gaze troubled, and exhales deeply. “You deserve an explanation for why I’ve been so...”

“Erratic,” I interject, finishing his sentence with the word that best describes his behavior.

He snorts. “That’s one word for it. But I admit I’ve sent mixed signals. And I know it isn’t fair to you...” There’s a war in his eyes as if he’s battling his inner demons before laying his history bare before me.

I reach across the table and take his hand, and his calloused fingers tighten around mine.

“You know I was in a long-term relationship that ended badly.”

“With the woman at the Stag and Doe?”

“Angie. We went to high school together. There was a group of us. Me, her, Hal, and Sawyer. That’s why she was at the stag and doe. We started dating senior year.”

“That’s a long time to be with someone.” A pang of jealousy forms in my chest.

“Looking back, I think we stayed together because it was familiar. Safe. I

don't know. I guess I thought I loved her. And in a way, I did. But not the way I should. Does that make sense?"

I nod. "Why did you break up?"

He laughs, but there's no humor in the sound, only a bitter undertone that hangs in the air. "I knew Sawyer and her were close. But it wasn't until I found them in her bed that I realized how close they'd gotten."

"She cheated on you."

"They both did. He was my best friend. And I'm still not sure who I was angrier at." He rubs his eyes, shaking his head. "Found out that it had been going on for years."

"I'm so sorry, Alex. I know how hard that is. To trust someone and have them betray you like that is one of the most painful things in the world." I pause, my heart aching for him.

Alex's gaze locks with mine. "You've been through it too?"

"Yeah. And it sucks. It took me a long time to start dating again." I wonder if he's ready or if the wound is too fresh. I don't want to be his rebound. "What about your relationship with Sawyer?"

"He..." His eyes close as he begins to speak. I can sense the depth of his anguish radiating from him. The intensity of his pain hangs heavy in the air, almost as if I could reach out and touch it. "He and I started SummitStar Adventures together. It had always been our dream. After I found out about him and Angie, I wanted to walk away. And I did for a bit. But..." His voice cracks.

I gently squeeze his hand, and his gaze returns to meet mine.

"He started taking stupid risks, hiking unsafe trails, attempting dangerous climbs. It was as if he was trying to prove something to himself, or maybe he just didn't care anymore," Alex continues, his voice tinged with a mix of sorrow and frustration. "He tried calling me to explain his side, but I wouldn't listen. I hated him."

"That's normal."

He snorts bitterly. "Yeah. But I probably would have heard him out if I'd known..." His words trail off, and a wave of regret washes over his features, the pain of missed chances etched on his face. "He died six months ago."

"Oh my god, Alex."

"Idiot did a solo climb on Seagull Ridge. No one knows exactly what happened. They say it was an accident, but..." Guilt lingers in his eyes, casting a shadow over his words.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But sometimes I wonder if things would be different if I’d forgiven him.”

I can feel the weight of his grief and guilt. “Forgiveness is hard.”

"Shit," he mutters, running his hands through his hair and exhaling deeply. "I'm sorry for dumping all this on you. But I needed you to know. I like you, Bella — a lot. And I want to explore where this connection between us might lead. But if all of this is too much, I understand."

“What about Angie?” I ask. “At the party, she seemed like she isn’t over you.”

“Angie and I are done. Even before I found out about them, I knew she wasn’t the person I wanted to spend my life with. But yeah, she wants to get back together. I’ve tried to be supportive because of everything we’ve lost. But there’s nothing there. I promise you.”

His words carry a sense of finality as if he's closing the door on that chapter of his life for good.

I want to believe him, to trust that he’s ready to move on. To believe that he wants to be with me. Yet, I can't ignore the lingering pain that flickers in those hazel eyes.

Alex reaches across the table, his warm hand finding mine. “Meeting you and spending time with you feels different. It feels right.”

A hopeful smile tugs at my lips. "I feel the same way, Alex. I just...I don't want either of us to get hurt."

He squeezes my hand gently. "I don't want that either, Bella. We'll take it slow, okay? No rushing into anything. “Will you give me another chance?”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Take it slow, go on a few dates, and see where things go. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay friends and spend time together. If romance blooms, then it was meant to be. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 23

ALEX

MORNING OF RESOLUTIONS

With a groan of appreciation, I step into the warm embrace of Alex's shower, letting the water cascade over me. It's as if each droplet carries away the remnants of last night's misery. My head continues to throb, and my stomach protests the mistreatment it endured. Nevertheless, I feel a hundred times better as I wrap myself in one of Alex's plush towels.

I appreciate Alex's gesture in washing my dress, but as I ease into it, the desire for something more comfortable tugs at me. Hoping he won't take offense, I venture into his closet, searching for an alternative. My eyes land on a soft, grey hoodie, and without hesitation, I slip into its cozy embrace. The hoodie carries the faint, woodsy undertones of his masculine scent, wrapping around me like a warm, comforting hug.

"Hope you don't mind if I borrow your sweatshirt," I say, walking into the kitchen where Alex is scrambling eggs.

He glances over his shoulder at me and gives a dimpled grin. "Looks way better on you than me. Keep it as long as you want."

"Thanks." I sit down at the table, appreciating the effort he's gone to.

Crispy bacon, fresh-cut fruit, and fluffy waffles sit in the center. I'm surprised that my stomach doesn't revolt — instead, my mouth waters in anticipation.

"You didn't have to do all this," I say, genuinely touched by his efforts.

"I didn't know what you'd want, so I figured I'd make everything." He sets a plate of perfectly scrambled eggs on the table, then pours me a cup of coffee.

I take a bite of the crispy bacon and wink at him. "If you keep cooking

like this, I might never leave."

He chuckles. "Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing, is it?"

I can't help but wonder if he's being sincere. Moments like these leave me baffled by the mixed signals he sends. His smile is genuine, his actions thoughtful, yet a part of me hesitates, questioning the depth of his intentions.

"I was shocked to see you at the stag and doe," I say, changing the subject.

"Hal and I went to high school together," he says.

"Oh, that makes sense. I met Kimmy in college." I scoop some eggs on my plate and take a small bite. "They seem to be happy."

"Yeah." He rubs the back of his neck. "I never thought he was the settling down type. But he's head over heels for her."

Silence hangs between us, and I take a sip of my coffee. So many unsaid words linger between us, and I need answers. I like him. But I don't want to play games, especially if he's still hung up on his ex.

"Alex—"

"Bella—"

We say in unison, then laugh nervously.

"You go first," I tell him.

He drags his fingers through his sun-kissed hair and lets out a heavy breath. "I need to explain something about my past. There are things that I'm dealing with. Shit, that has my head pretty fucked up right now. And I know it isn't fair to you..." There's a war in his eyes as if he's battling his inner demons before laying his history bare before me.

I reach across the table and take his hand, and his calloused fingers tighten around mine.

"You know I was in a long-term relationship, which ended badly," he says.

"With the woman at the Stag and Doe?"

"Angie." His eyes twitch, and his breathing changes. "We were together for years. We started dating in high school. That's why she was at the Stag and Doe. There was a group of us. Me, her, Hal, and Sawyer."

"That's a long time to date someone." And I can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

"Looking back, I think we stayed together because it was familiar. Safe. I don't know. I guess I thought I loved her. And in a way, I did. But not the way I should. Does that make sense?"

I nod. "Why did you break up?"

He laughs, but there's no humor in the sound, only a bitter undertone that hangs in the air. "I knew Sawyer and her were close. But it wasn't until I found them in her bed that I realized how close they'd gotten."

"She cheated on you."

"They both did. He was my best friend." He lifts his cup, taking a deep sip of his coffee, his gaze drifting into the distance. "I'm still not sure who I was angrier at. Found out later that it had been going on for years."

"I'm so sorry. I know how hard that is. To trust someone and have them betray you like that is one of the most painful things in the world." I pause, my heart aching for him.

Alex's gaze locks with mine. "You've been through it too?"

"Yeah. And it sucks. It took me a long time to start dating again." I wonder if he's ready or if the wound is too fresh. I don't want to be his rebound.

"Sorry that happened to you," he says, thumb absentmindedly tracing the rim of his cup.

"What about your relationship with Sawyer?" I ask.

"He..." Alex's eyes close as he begins to speak. I can sense the depth of his anguish radiating from him. The intensity of his pain hangs heavy in the air, almost as if you could reach out and touch it. "He and I started SummitStar Adventures together. It had always been our dream. After I found out about him and Angie, I wanted to walk away. And I did for a bit. But..." His voice cracks.

I gently squeeze his hand, and his gaze returns to meet mine.

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"Oh my god, Alex."

"Idiot did a solo climb on Seagull Ridge. No one knows exactly what happened. They say it was an accident, but..." Guilt lingers in his eyes,

casting a shadow over his words.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But sometimes I wonder if things would be different if I’d forgiven him.”

I can feel the weight of his grief and guilt. “Forgiveness is hard.”

"Shit," he mutters, running his hands through his hair and exhaling deeply. "I'm sorry for dumping all this on you. But I needed you to know. I like you, Bella — a lot. And I want to explore where this connection between us might lead. But if all of this is too much, I understand."

“What about Angie?” I ask. “At the party, she seemed like she isn’t over you.”

“Angie and I are done. Even before I found out about them, I knew she wasn’t the person I wanted to spend my life with. But yeah, she wants to get back together. I’ve tried to be supportive because of everything we’ve lost. But there’s nothing there. I promise you.”

His words carry a sense of finality as if he's closing the door on that chapter of his life for good.

I want to believe him, to trust that he’s ready to move on. To believe that he wants to be with me. Yet, I can't ignore the lingering pain that flickers in those hazel eyes.

"Meeting you and spending time with you just feels different," he admits, his voice carrying a weight of sincerity. He sets his coffee cup down gently. His eyes fixed on mine as if searching for a way to convey the depth of his feelings. “There's this connection between us, and it's different. It’s...shit, I wish I had the right words.”

A hopeful smile tugs at my lips. "I feel the same way, Alex. I just...I don't want either of us to get hurt."

He squeezes my hand gently. "I don't want that either, Bella. We'll take it slow, okay? No rushing into anything. “Will you give me another chance?”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Take it slow, go on a few dates, and see where things lead. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay friends and spend time together. If romance blooms, then it was meant to be. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 24

SEBASTIAN

WILTING PETALS

Rain taps against my windowpane, and my caramel macchiato sits on the table, untouched, as I hold my phone in my hand, its screen lighting up with Sebastian's name. I've been caught in a whirlwind of mixed signals and text exchanges for days now.

It's been two weeks since I last saw him in person, and his absence is confusing. We've shared intimate phone calls that made my heart race, but it's not the same as having him right here.

I read his latest message.

Sebastian: I've been swamped with work, but I can't stop thinking about you. I got you something, by the way. Check your doorstep.

I open the front door to find a bouquet of roses, a delicate mix of crimson and ivory, waiting for me.

The gesture is sweet, but it adds another layer of confusion to my already mixed feelings. I clutch the bouquet in my hand, the petals velvety beneath my touch.

My phone vibrates, jolting me from my thoughts.

Sebastian: Did you get the flowers?

Bella: Yes, they're stunning. Thank you.

Sebastian: Glad you liked them. I wish I could be there with you.

Then why aren't you? My heart questions.

Bella: I wish you were here too. When can I see you?

Time stretches as I anxiously await his reply. The downpour outside grows heavier, mirroring the turmoil raging within.

Sebastian: I'm hoping to clear my schedule next week.

Relief washes over me, and a smile tugs at my lips, hoping that when I see him, all my doubts will melt away in the warmth of his embrace.

But as another week passes without seeing Sebastian, my anticipation turns into a gnawing sense of disappointment. I glance at the roses that have wilted, just like my hope in our relationship.

My cell buzzes with Jessica's incoming call. I can't help but hesitate. Her bubbly personality, which usually brings so much energy and excitement, feels overwhelming.

I cave and answer her call. "Hey, Jess."

"Bella!" Jess's cheerful voice bursts through the line. "Are you ready for a night out? It's Friday, time to party!"

I sigh, my doubts still clouding my thoughts. "I'm really not in the mood."

We've been friends since college, and I love her, but I also know that when we're together, I tend to make some questionable decisions. Especially when my heart is in a state of uncertainty and doubt.

Jess, always the persistent one, doesn't take no for an answer. "You've been moping around for weeks now. It's time to let loose, forget about whatever's been bothering you, and have some fun."

I glance at the wilting roses on the table, a tangible reminder of my uncertainty with Sebastian. Maybe Jess is right; perhaps it's time to move on, at least for a night. I need a distraction from the endless waiting and wondering.

"If you decide to come," Jess continues. "We'll be at Club Pulse around nine."

Hanging up, doubt fades and anticipation grows. Perhaps tonight I can let go and enjoy myself, and forget about Sebastian.

There's nothing a little tequila can't fix, right?

My cell vibrates with a new text message.

Dina: Hey Bella! I had the baby. It's a boy! Eight pounds, two ounces. It was a grueling twenty-four hours, but so worth it. You won't believe how adorable he is! 🍼❤️

I smile at the news. Dina and I share countless childhood adventures and memories. The thought of her becoming a mom warms my heart. I quickly reply.

Bella: Oh wow! Congratulations! That's amazing. I'm so happy for you. Can't wait to meet him.

Dina: Thank you! 😊 I know it's short notice, but do you want to come visit? And, if it's not too much trouble, could you bring me a bean burrito from Del Taco? Hospital food is awful, and I'm craving something real!

I can't help but chuckle at Dina's request. But I only have the energy to do one thing tonight: go out with Jess for our girls' night or visit Dina at the hospital.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Girls' night can wait. Rush to the hospital for some baby snuggles? [Turn to this page.](#)

Time to drown out thoughts of Sebastian with Jess and tequila. Make some questionable decisions tonight and visit Dina tomorrow. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 25

SEBASTIAN

LOST AND FOUND

The hospital room is bathed in soft sunlight as I sit beside Dina, cradling her newborn in my arms. His tiny hands clutch at my finger, and I can't help but smile as I gaze at him.

"Isn't he amazing?" Dina says, her voice oozing with love.

"He is." I grin at her and nod. We've been friends since we were kids. Getting married and having babies was something we'd spend hours talking about. And I'm so happy that she's found her happily ever after. "What are you going to call him?"

"Jason and I are still debating. He likes Axel or Jagger, but I prefer Peter, after my dad." She rolls her eyes, and continues, "But, apparently it's too boring, and my husband thinks our son should be named after an aging rockstar."

"Whatever you call him, he'll be a charmer. Look at those long eyelashes and those chubby cheeks." I lean closer and inhale his baby scent, then place him back in Dina's arms. "I'm so happy for you. You're living your dream life."

Her smile widens as she looks at her son and nods. "I'm just happy he's here and healthy." She glances at me. "What about you? I've been a terrible friend. I know nothing about what's happening in your life."

A small frown tugs at my lips. It's been three weeks since I last saw Sebastian. The calls, texts, and flowers continued, but there's been no effort on his part to bridge the physical gap between us. It's left me with a gnawing sense of uncertainty, a longing for something more substantial than words on a screen.

It's time to move on.

“You’ve had more important things to worry about than me.” I place a hand on her shoulder and gently squeeze.

“Any new romances brewing?” she asks.

“Well, I thought there was something, but it turns out my love life is as boring as...”

“As hospital cafeteria food?” Dina interrupts with a laugh.

I nod, chuckling. “Exactly! I guess I’ll stick with my romance novels for now.”

Dina gives me a sympathetic look. “You deserve someone amazing. Don’t settle for less.”

“I might not have found my prince charming, but I’ve got the best friends in the world.” I smile, grateful for her and Jess.

Dina yawns and stretches, looking tired. “I think I could use a nap.”

“Of course. Get some rest,” I say, giving her a gentle hug.

Leaving the room, I navigate the corridor. Hospital layouts can be a maze, and I find myself in an unfamiliar wing.

“Tobias Sinclair Pulmonary Ward.” My heart skips as I read out loud. Sebastian must have donated a significant amount of money to the hospital to have this ward named after his brother. The act of generosity speaks volumes about the person he is.

A masculine voice breaks the silence behind me. “Do you need any help?”

Startled, I turn around to meet the gaze of a tall, handsome man in scrubs. His hazel eyes widen slightly when they meet mine, and I can’t help but feel a flutter in my chest. I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure.

“Oh, um, yes, I’m lost,” I admit, my voice stuttering. “I’m trying to find the north exit.”

A sexy smile spreads across his face, making my heart skip a beat. “Just head down that corridor, take a left at the end, use the elevators to go down to the first floor, and you’ll see the signs for the north exit.”

“Thank you.” I turn to leave, but before I can take a step, he speaks again.

“It’s forward, I know,” he begins, his tone hesitant, “but would you be interested in having coffee sometime?”

I blink, caught off guard by his directness, but also pleasantly surprised. I glance at his ID badge, which reads “Dr. Anthony Laframboise.” His warm smile and the sincerity in his eyes make it difficult to refuse.

My cheeks warming slightly, I nod. It’s time to realize that Sebastian just

isn't that into me.

I need to move on.

With a newfound determination, I retrieve my phone and hand it to Anthony. "You can add your number."

With a gracious smile, he types, and after a moment, he hands my cell back and says, "It's under Anthony Laframboise."

"Yeah, I read your name on your badge," I admit with a playful grin.

Anthony chuckles. "Then I guess you have a one-up on me."

I arch an eyebrow. "How's that?"

He smiles, his eyes sparkling with humor. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

I chuckle, a hint of embarrassment warming my face. "I'm Bella."

"I look forward to coffee, Bella."

As I exchange a final smile with Anthony and turn away, a sudden shift in the atmosphere catches my attention. I sense a presence at the end of the hallway, and when I turn, my heart skips a beat.

Sebastian.

As he approaches, he emanates power and magnetism. He moves with a graceful confidence that demands notice, every step deliberate and purposeful. His eyes are trained on me, yet they betray no emotion.

I swallow hard as I take him in.

His chiseled features are framed by a hint of stubble, and his dark hair is impeccably styled. He's dressed in a tailored grey suit that drapes over his lean frame with an effortless elegance.

He stands before me, his presence echoing the complex feelings and unanswered questions that linger between us. It's also a reminder of just how sexy the man is. And as much as I want to move on, seeing him again makes it difficult.

Sebastian's gaze briefly shifts past me and he nods. "Anthony."

I glance at the other man, who looks between us with curiosity, before focusing on Sebastian.

"Can't get enough of this place, huh?" Anthony quips, though it's clear that his attempt at levity doesn't resonate well with Sebastian.

"There's an emergency shareholders' meeting." A firm and unmistakable look accompanies Sebastian's words, leaving no room for misinterpretation. It's a clear signal to Anthony that his presence is no longer welcome.

Anthony nods, acknowledging Sebastian's unspoken message. Before

leaving, he turns to me with a warm smile. “Nice to meet you, Bella.”

I swear I hear a faint, low growl rumble from deep within Sebastian’s throat. It’s a sound so subtle that it could easily be dismissed, but it sends a shiver down my spine. Whatever emotions are simmering beneath his composed exterior, they remain concealed.

“What are you doing here?” his voice carries an edge, his gaze piercing and unyielding.

I swallow hard, feeling the weight of his scrutiny. “I was visiting a friend. She had a baby, and...” I trail off, my explanation faltering as I realize there’s no need to justify my presence here.

The tension between us is palpable, and the unspoken emotions that have been lingering for weeks seem to hang in the air, demanding to be addressed.

“Look, I don’t know what game you’re playing,” I say, my voice tinged with frustration. “But you either don’t have time for me or don’t want to—”

Before I can finish my sentence, Sebastian suddenly closes the distance between us, pulling me against him with a fierce intensity. His lips crash down onto mine in a passionate, desperate kiss that leaves me gasping for breath.

My knees weaken beneath me as desire courses through my veins, and I respond with equal fervor, my hands finding their way to his strong shoulders, fingers curling into his suit jacket.

Sebastian finally pulls back, his breathing heavy as he gazes deeply into my eyes. There’s a vulnerability in his expression, a rawness that wasn’t there before.

“All I think about is you,” he says, voice raspy. “I’m sorry for being so tied up these past few weeks. But I’m not playing games, Bella.”

I place my trembling hands on Sebastian’s chest, pushing him away gently. As much as I want to believe him, to surrender to the intense connection we share, I can’t ignore the nagging feeling deep within me. I deserve someone who will make time for me, someone who won’t leave me hanging in uncertainty.

Sebastian curses under his breath as he checks the time, his face etched with frustration. “I have to go,” he says, his voice heavy with regret. “But have dinner with me tonight. I’ll have a car pick you up at seven-thirty—”

“No.” I cut him off, my resolve firm. “I don’t want any more fancy dinners or operas. I just want to be able to talk.”

His gaze softens, and he nods. “We can have a conversation tonight,” he

assures, his voice filled with sincerity.

Before he leaves for his meeting, he leans down and kisses me one more time. As he departs, I'm left standing there, my heart divided.

There are so many mixed signals with Sebastian. So many unanswered questions, and I'm torn between giving him another chance and starting something new with Anthony.

The uncertainty weighs heavily on my mind. But I have to choose a path that will lead me toward the kind of love and commitment I deserve.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Trust Sebastian's intentions and have dinner with him tonight. [Turn to this page.](#)

It's time to move on. Call Anthony and set up a coffee date. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 26

JESSICA

THE TROUBLE WITH TEQUILA

The pounding bass reverberates through the air, making it impossible to hear anything but the music. The bar is a whirlwind of neon lights and dancing bodies, and my heart races in rhythm with the beat. Jess is in her element, her blue eyes shining as she laughs and twirls around. I can't help but join in the infectious energy as we dance.

“Come on, Bella! Let loose!” Jess yells over the music, handing me a shot glass filled with amber liquid.

I grin and grab the glass, clinking it against hers. “Cheers.”

“To a night we won't remember!” She shouts.

The tequila burns as it goes down, but I welcome the warmth that spreads through me. The group we're with is a mix of familiar faces and new acquaintances. I met a few of them during previous nights out with Jess.

One of the girls, Sage, leans in close, her voice barely audible above the music. “This place is insane.”

I nod in agreement, taking in the chaotic scene around us. The bar is pulsing with energy, and it's a perfect escape from the mundane routine of our daily lives.

Another girl, Mischa, raises her shot glass and shouts, “Cheers to the best girls' night ever!”

Tequila flows freely. Laughter and cheers fill the air as we lose ourselves in the moment. The music shifts to an upbeat pop song, and Jess grabs my hand, pulling me onto the makeshift dance floor.

We move with wild abandon, the world fading away as we sway to the rhythm. Jess's blonde hair flies around her face, and she grins at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. I know she's the life of the party, and I'm grateful to

have her as my friend.

I find myself surprisingly present in the moment. It's strange how I'm barely thinking about Sebastian. He's been a constant presence in my thoughts lately, but now, with the music blaring and the tequila flowing, he seems like a distant memory.

Bullshit, my heart beats. But the rhythm beats louder, and another tequila shot helps to silence it further.

The alcohol continues to flow, and I can feel its effects coursing through me, warming my body and loosening my inhibitions. The music seems louder, the lights brighter, and the emotions stronger.

As I dance with a handsome stranger, I let my mind wander back to Sebastian. The memory of his smile, the feel of his lips on mine, it all rushes back, and I'm overcome with a bittersweet mix of longing and regret. Maybe it's the alcohol talking, or maybe it's just the way my heart works, but I can't help but feel a lump forming in my throat.

I lean in closer to Jess, shouting over the music, "Do you think I should call Sebastian?"

She raises an eyebrow, her blue eyes filled with concern. "Remember rule one of girls' night, no drunk calling exes."

"I'm not drunk."

"You are definitely drunk," she says, laughing. "Stay with me and have fun. You can pout about him tomorrow when you're nursing a hangover."

I throw myself back into dancing, letting the pounding rhythm of the music wash over me. But after a while, the world starts to spin, and the room feels like it's closing in on me. My vision blurs and I stumble slightly. I tap Jess on the shoulder, gesturing that I need some fresh air.

Outside, I pull out my phone. My fingers fumble as I unlock it, the screen glaring brightly in the darkness. I start typing, my thumbs moving clumsily across the display, and before I can stop myself, I've sent a text.

Bella: Hey Sebzzzz...I'm rly drunk 🍷😵...but I just had to tell u...ugh, miss u like crazy 😭❤️. Let's talk soon! 🥺🥺

The message floats in the digital ether, and I watch as the three dots indicating a response start to appear. My heart races.

Sebastian: Where are you?

I hesitate, my thumb hovering over the screen. Panic sets in, and I decide

not to reply. Maybe if I ignore it, he'll forget I texted.

But then my phone starts ringing.

Shit.

I fumble with my device in my intoxicated state, desperately trying to press the "End" button. My fingers, however, seem to have a mind of their own, and I accidentally hit the "Answer" button instead.

"Bella?" His deep voice resonates across the line. "Where are you?"

I contemplate remaining silent, hoping that Sebastian might assume the call was dropped or unanswered. I hold my breath, trying to keep quiet.

"Bella?" he repeats, his voice filled with concern, and it becomes clear that my attempt at evasion isn't working.

I inhale sharply and eventually answer, my words slurring, "I'm...*hic*..okay."

He mutters something under his breath, then demands, "Tell me where you are and I'll come get you."

My words tumble out in a messy slur, my tongue feeling like it's grown ten sizes too big. "I don't need you to res-*hic*-cue me. I just need...some...some air." I plop down on the curb, feeling the hard concrete beneath me, and let out an exaggerated groan, as if the whole world has suddenly become a dizzying carnival ride.

There's a muffled sigh from the other end, and I can almost picture Sebastian running his fingers through his hair in frustration, but his voice remains steady and calm. "Is there anyone with you?"

"Jess...*hic*...is inside."

Sebastian's tone takes on a sense of urgency. "You need to tell me where you are. I can't help you if I don't know where to find you."

I glance around the dimly lit alley, squinting at a sign in the distance, trying to make out the name of the bar. "I think...Pulse-something-or-other," I slur, not confident if I've got it right.

But before I can provide any more information, my device goes dead, the screen blank.

"Fudge!" I mutter, realizing I'm stuck with a dead phone in the middle of a tipsy adventure, and I'm not quite sure how to navigate my way out of it.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Go back inside and keep partying with Jess. Somehow, they'll get home safely. [Turn to this page.](#)

Find Jess and ask to use her phone to call an Uber. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 27

ANTHONY

CLOSURE OR TEQUILA

The soft buzz of conversation and the aroma of freshly ground beans fill the air, as I find a seat in the corner of the shop and take a sip of my caramel macchiato. It's fine, but it doesn't compare to the ones Sarah makes at the Artful Bean.

But I'm not here for the coffee. I'm here to meet Anthony.

Despite my effort to concentrate on the present, my thoughts keep wandering to Sebastian. The way he kissed me at the hospital. How my heart raced when he touched me. It's all I can think about.

And the tinge of guilt that I feel for ending things without hearing him out.

I shake my head in an attempt to clear my thoughts. I can't let Sebastian consume my every waking moment, especially when I'm trying to move on and see if there's a connection with someone new.

Anthony walks in, a warm smile on his face when he sees me. Even though he's cute, it's challenging not to draw comparisons. Sebastian is the kind of handsome that has the power to leave a lasting impression.

His dark, compelling eyes draw you in with their intensity. His chiseled features, including high cheekbones and a sharp jawline, give him a striking presence. His lips, soft and inviting, hint at playfulness when he smiles. His overall allure is heightened by an air of mystery and self-assuredness that makes him stand out in any crowd.

And, I remind myself, his mixed signals are like a rollercoaster ride, with moments of intense connection and warmth, followed by abrupt shifts into distant and aloof territory. Just when I thought I grasped his feelings, he pulled away, leaving me baffled and questioning the authenticity of the

relationship.

I suddenly realize that Anthony is looking at me expectantly, a quizzical expression on his face. He must have asked me a question, but I was so lost in my thoughts that I completely missed it.

“What?” I ask.

He chuckles. “I asked if you want anything else, another coffee or pastry?”

“No, thank you. I’m good for now.”

With a nod, he heads to the counter to place the order. As he walks away, I take a deep breath and glance back at my phone. Sebastian’s message still sits there, imploring me to respond.

Sebastian: Please answer me. We need to talk.

I know I should reply, but I can’t deny the apprehension and uncertainty welling up inside. When Anthony returns with his coffee, I muster a forced smile.

“I’m glad you texted me,” he says with a hint of sincerity in his voice. “I was a bit surprised.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Really? Why’s that?”

His gaze meets mine, and there’s a curiosity in his eyes. “Well,” he begins cautiously, “you and Sebastian Sinclair seemed pretty close.”

I pause, my mind racing for a moment. Sebastian’s name hanging in the air between us sends a shiver down my spine, a reminder of the complicated emotions I’m trying to navigate. I chew on my bottom lip, searching for the right words.

“Oh,” is all I manage to say, a word heavy with unspoken complexities.

Anthony doesn’t miss a beat. “You don’t deny it?” he asks, his tone a mix of curiosity and something else I can’t quite pinpoint.

I take a deep breath, my thoughts on Sebastian, my mixed feelings, and the tangled web of emotions we share. It’s a conversation I’m not ready to dive into, and yet, I can’t deny the truth.

“No,” I admit quietly. “Sebastian and I...we...” I exhale heavily. “I don’t know what we are. I mean were.”

His brows draw down, and there’s a flicker of concern in his eyes.

“It’s over between us,” I add quickly.

“The way he was looking at you the other day would say otherwise.”

I can’t help but feel a hint of guilt as I acknowledge Anthony’s

observation. “It’s...he’s complicated,” I admit, my voice trailing off.

He grunts. “*Complicated* is an understatement. But considering his history. I understand the walls he puts up.”

“You mean with his brother? I saw that the ward was dedicated to him, but I don’t even know how he died. Every time I bring it up, Sebastian shuts down.”

His gaze locks onto mine, and it’s as if he’s trying to read something in my expression. “What do you know about Sebastian’s...*history*? “ he asks, his tone serious, like he’s probing me for information he already knows.

I sigh, frustration bubbling up. “That’s the problem; he won’t open up. He barely tells me anything about his past. And then, all but disappears for three weeks without a good explanation. Of course, I’m going to think he doesn’t want to see me, or he’s playing games—”

“Bella.” Anthony puts up a hand to stop me. He shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck, his features a mix of concern and exasperation. “What a fucking mess. And I just put myself right in the middle of it.”

“Sorry. I really did want to try to get to know you. But...”

He reaches across the table and grabs my hand, squeezing it. “I understand.” His pager goes off, breaking the moment. He checks it with a hint of frustration. “Sorry. This is terrible timing, but I have to get back to the hospital.”

As Anthony leaves and I’m left alone at the coffee shop, my thoughts swirl with conflicting emotions. I feel like an idiot, going on a date with one guy, only to talk about someone else.

But he’s right, Sebastian and my relationship is *a fucking mess*. And maybe I need to hear him out. Find some closure.

As my fingers hover over the screen, debating on responding to him, a new message from Jess pops up.

Jess: You have to come out with me tonight. I won’t take no for an answer this time.

I hesitate, torn between the craving for closure and the prospect of a night filled with tequila shots and the potential for regrettable decisions.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

It's Sebastian's turn to wait. Text Jess and plan a night of dancing, flirting, and tequila shots. [Turn to this page.](#)

Agree to meet Sebastian. Give him one last chance to explain his mixed signals. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART FIVE

EMBRACE OF DESIRE

Sex is like a secret language only two lovers understand, where words give way to whispers, and every touch writes poetry on their skin.

CHAPTER 28

DAMIEN

A MOVIE, PIZZA, AND DESSERT!

The night air is crisp as we stand outside my front door, the glow from the porch light casting playful shadows on Damien's rugged features.

"Are you coming in?" I ask, my voice soft but filled with anticipation.

He grins, "I'd love to." His thumb traces my jaw, and he leans closer, gaze searching mine. "Any chance to spend more time with you, I'll jump at."

I'm convinced he possesses an uncanny ability to say the perfect thing to make my heart flutter with every word.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, opening the door, my stomach rumbling with the mention of food.

"I can always eat," Damien says, frowning as he studies the latches and lock of the door. He kneels and traces the deep scratches that scar the once-pristine paint job. "What's this?"

"I had some raccoons living under the porch last year. I left the door slightly open once, and they got into the house and went through my trash. After that, they wouldn't stop trying to get in. I had to call Pest Control to get rid of them."

He stands and shuts the door, still frowning. "Think you should consider a security system."

"It's a pretty safe neighborhood."

He wraps his arms around my waist and chuckles. "Well, you never know when those raccoons might make a return visit."

I chuckle. "I'll think about it. But how about we start with pizza: Pepperoni or Delux?"

He kisses my forehead. "Surprise me."

I quickly place the order and join him in the living room, where all six-foot-two of him is sprawled out on my tiny couch. He pulls me down beside him, large arms wrapping around my shoulder like it's the most natural thing in the world. The contrast between his size and the quaintness of my home doesn't go unnoticed.

Snuggling into him, I ask, "So, what do you want to do?"

He lets out a low, seductive chuckle and nuzzles my neck with soft kisses. "Well, I have a few ideas in mind," he whispers, his breath sending shivers down my spine. "But how about we kick things off with a movie?"

A part of me can't help but feel slightly disappointed that he's not ripping my clothes off right here and now. But there's something incredibly sweet about this moment, about having him here, being in his arms, cuddling like tonight is more than just about sex.

The first thing that comes on is a cheesy romantic comedy, and I'm surprised Damien doesn't protest.

"You're sure you're okay watching this?" I ask.

"I grew up as the only guy in the house. Trust me. I've seen my share of rom-coms." He pulls me closer, and I'm obsessed with how perfectly I fit in his arms.

It's a perfect moment. One that I don't want to end.

It's not until the pizza arrives that I realize how hungry I am when I open the box. I dig in, take a big bite, and moan in pleasure as the first taste of melted cheese, pepperoni, and carbs hits my tastebuds.

"I like that," he says with a mischievous grin.

I pause mid-bite. "What?"

He leans in closer, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "How much you enjoy your food," he says with a playful wink.

I can't help but laugh, a blush creeping into my cheeks. "Why?"

"You're not afraid to indulge in your desires," he says, his voice filled with a hint of seduction that makes my heart race. "And, I'd like to hear that moan again, just next time; I'd like it to be me who causes it."

His words send my imagination into overdrive, and suddenly, the pizza becomes a mere afterthought. My focus is now entirely on the incredibly hot man sitting beside me. My mind races with desires, imagining the sensation of running my fingers over his chiseled chest across those bulging abs, eager to explore every contour.

Damien chuckles softly and returns his gaze to the movie. "Patience,

beautiful," he teases, his eyes fixed on the screen. "Let's watch the movie, Bella."

I playfully pout and nudge him. "You're such a tease, you know that?"

A sly grin tugs at the corner of his lips, and he replies with a mischievous glint in his eyes, "You have no idea."

As the evening unfolds, we engage in light-hearted banter about the movie, sharing laughter and playful remarks. Damien's sense of humor shines through, and I can sense his guarded demeanor slowly melting away, revealing a side of him that's more relaxed and carefree.

As the credits roll and the movie ends, there's just one slice of pizza left in the box.

"Do you want the last slice, Bella?" he asks, but his eyes tell a different story.

I pretend to consider it. "Well, I did order it for us to share..."

He plucks the last piece of pizza from the box and offers it to me.

I shake my head, a coy smile on my lips. "I think I'll save my appetite for later."

He chuckles, then leans closer, his eyes locked on mine. "Ready for dessert now?" There's a hint of teasing in his expression, so I play along.

"If you want, we can raid my secret chocolate stash."

He chuckles. "That wasn't what I was thinking. But your rules, beautiful. Whatever you want."

"You know what I want?" I say playfully, fingers moving under his shirt, brushing against his warm skin, up his abs.

"What's that?" He swallows hard as I lean closer.

"You."

He lets out a low growl and tosses the pizza slice back into the box. "You're something else, you know that?"

Before I can respond, he captures my lips in a passionate kiss. The taste of pizza lingers on his lips, and the sensation sends a rush of desire through me.

In one smooth motion, Damien sweeps me up off the couch, his strong arms effortlessly lifting me. My heart flutters with excitement as he carries me towards my bedroom.

A journey that feels like an eternity and a fleeting moment, a whirlwind of anticipation and longing.

"You are so fucking, beautiful, Bella," his voice is dark and rough.

His hand skims down my neck and over the curve of my shoulder as he places me on the bed. He kisses the hollow of my throat, and I shiver, my skin blossoming with a thousand goosebumps.

Oh God.

Every ounce of oxygen disappears from my lungs.

Our tongues dance, teeth gently grazing, hands exploring. We consume each other as if the world teeters on the brink of oblivion, and this is our final opportunity to savor sensation.

My panties are slick with arousal, and I tug on Damien's hair, desperate for more. More of his touch, his kiss, his scent. I want to fill every inch of my body, heart, and soul with this man.

He removes my pants, sliding them down my thighs, the callused tips of his fingers rough against my skin. Next, my shirt, his hands roaming over my body, over the lace of my bra, and then down, cupping my ass.

So good.

He sweeps his palm up my inner thigh to my core and lets out a low growl when he discovers how wet I am. "You're killing me, Bella. I want to take this slow. Make it special—"

"It's perfect," I rasp, not wanting him to stop.

His thumb rubs over my clit through my drenched panties, and I arch against his hand, needing more. His fingers grip my panties, and he slowly rolls them down my thighs, tongue following the path down, then back up — his lips and tongue trail across my hips, stomach, and breasts.

"Damien." His name is a whimper of pleasure that escapes my throat.

He removes my bra, playing and teasing my nipples until I'm writhing beneath him.

"Please," I beg.

My plea does the job because it's only a few moments later that he's completely naked. *And so gloriously beautiful.*

I let my gaze linger on the thick length of his erection. Heavy veins strain against satiny flesh, and a small drop of pre-cum glistens at the tip of the bulging head.

He pulls a condom from his discarded jeans, and I take it from him, ripping the package open and slowly sheathing his thickness.

His groan vibrates through the room. "Damn, Bella."

trail across my hips and stomach, up to my breasts, playing and teasing the nipples.

“I want you,” I whimper, positioning the tip of his cock at my entrance.

He strokes my clit, and I fight to breathe through the incredible sensations. But then he thrusts into me with one forceful movement, and I cry out as every erogenous zone in my body vibrates with pleasure.

He slides his cock out until just the tip remains, then slams forward again, and again, and again, so deep, so fast, a rhythm that makes my moans a scream of pleasure.

“Damien.”

There’s a primal need between us, a fierce hunger that threatens to undo me.

A tsunami of emotions and erotic pleasure roll through me. “Oh, god,” I cry out. The sensation is almost too much, but I want more. I want all of him. “Come for me, Bella.”

My name on his lips is my final undoing. The orgasm that rips through me is mind-shattering. Perfect. Addictive.

He thrusts one more time, and with a curse on his lips, his whole body quivers with the intensity of his pleasure. “My god, Bella, you’re so fucking amazing.”

He falls back on the bed, drags me into his arms, and a comfortable silence settles between us. My heart races, not only from the moment we've shared but from something deeper, something I never expected to find.

I watch his steady breaths and trace my fingers lightly across his chest. With every beat of his heart beneath my touch, I feel myself inching closer to a revelation I hadn't anticipated. Could it be? I wonder.

Something real.

Something I never thought possible with a man like Damien.

In the stillness of the night, I let my thoughts drift. Perhaps it's too soon to be sure, but I can't deny the warmth spreading through my chest, the way his presence makes me feel safe, cherished, and seen. It's not just the physical connection; it's something more profound that goes beyond the realm of desire.

I gaze at the man beside me, sleeping in my bed, who has ignited this unexpected spark within me. My heart whispers the words I haven't dared to utter aloud, but they're there, a fragile seedling of emotion taking root.

I might be falling in love, and as I close my eyes, I welcome the sweet uncertainty of this new chapter in my life, eager to see where it might lead.

As I fall asleep, my heart beats with a steady rhythm: *Damien, Damien,*

Damien.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Time to meet Damien's family. Set up a date to meet **Damien's** Mom and niece. [Turn to this page.](#)

Agree to meet her high school friend, **Mitchell**, for coffee since he's in town for the week. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 29

MITCHELL

COFFEE AND GOSSIP

Stepping into the cozy little café, a bell overhead announces my arrival. The air is filled with the comforting fragrance of freshly brewed coffee, an instant pick-me-up for my spirits. My eyes quickly find Mitchell seated at our familiar corner table, draped in his effortlessly chic ensemble that could transform a simple paper bag into a fashion statement. I approach him with a sense of anticipation, and he rises from his seat with an exuberant grin, extending his arms for a warm embrace.

"Bella, darling, you look positively radiant!" Mitchell exclaims as he takes a step back to look at me.

I chuckle and wink. "Well, someone had to fill the glow quota around here since you moved to California."

Mitchell's laughter is infectious as he gestures for me to sit. "So, what's the secret?" He gives a knowing smile. "Let me guess, it has something to do with a gorgeous, muscular hottie?"

I can't help but blush a little. "Actually, yes. But we'll get to that later. First, I want to hear about you."

"Well," he says, fanning himself and batting his false eyelashes. "You know I'm always more than happy to talk about me."

"Tell me about California?"

He grins and takes my hand. "You have to come visit me. With your legs, I'd have you running the catwalk like a pro in no time."

"You're hilarious." I take a sip of the caramel macchiato he had waiting for me, grateful to indulge in the warm cup of caffeine and sugar.

"Now tell me more about this new beau. Who is he? I need deets."

Grateful for any chance to talk about Damien, I share, "Well, he's

gorgeous for starters,” I say with an exaggerated sigh.

“Oh no, you did *not* just sigh like that.”

“What?” I take another sip of coffee and look at him like I don’t know what he’s talking about. The mere thought of Damien has my whole body vibrating with a wicked, delicious heat.

“Oh, you know what, darling. Whatever this whole thing is.” He circles his hand in front of me. “It’s got trouble written all over it.”

“You might be a little right,” I admit.

“So tell me more.”

“Well, he’s got this sort of a bad-boy thing going. He’s mysterious and a bit...dangerous.”

Mitchell groans. “Next, you’re going to tell me he drives a motorcycle, wears leather, and remarkably resembles Ian Somerhalder—” He stops midsentence when heat creeps into my cheek, and I blush, looking away. “I’m right, aren’t I!”

“Yes to the first two and a little to the Ian Somerhalder comment. Although I never really saw it until now.”

“Sounds like delicious trouble, so I approve. At least he’s getting you out of that funk you’ve been in for the past few years.”

“He’s *definitely* helped with that,” I say, placing my hands on my hot cheeks at the thought of how helpful his mouth, tongue, and cock have been in helping me consistently for the last few nights.

Mitchell laughs. “Well, what’s this mysterious leather-clad man’s name?”

“Damien Blackwood. He’s in security, and—“

“Uh, uh, girl.” Mitchell shakes his head at me, dark eyes filling with concern as he leans forward and grabs my hand. “Did you say Damien Blackwood? *The* Damien Blackwood?”

“You know him.” I frown.

“Not directly, but I’ve heard some... *interesting* stories about the guy.”

My stomach twists, and I’m almost afraid to ask, but I do anyway, “Like what?”

Mitchell leans in even closer, his eyes darting around the coffee shop, his voice dropping to a calm, conspiratorial tone. “Let’s just say he’s earned quite the reputation as a heartbreaker. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. He’s on a whole different level of danger. Not the ‘too hot to handle’ dangerous, but the ‘messed with the wrong sort of people’ dangerous.”

I frown, suddenly feeling a tad defensive. “This town is full of gossip.”

Mitchell raises a brow and leans back, sipping his coffee. "I'm not just talking about the local gossip mill, Bella. I know people who know his people. You want my advice?"

"Probably not," I mutter.

"Get out while your heart's still intact. I know you well, and you weren't made for the kind of life he leads. He'll either shatter your delicate soul or break that beautiful heart." Mitchell's tone shifts as he takes another sip of his coffee. "But hey, enough about your love life drama. Let's talk about the fabulousness that is me."

I chuckle, appreciating his attempt to lighten the mood. "Alright, spill the tea. Tell me everything about you," I say, trying not to dwell on his warning.

He doesn't know Damien. My heart latches onto all the good moments we've shared.

But that pesky voice of reason reminds me that as close as we've gotten recently, I don't know that much about him either.

Mitchell keeps chatting, telling me about his glamorous California life and the latest fashion trends. I try to listen, but he's planted a seed of doubt, and my brain has latched onto it like a stubborn vine that threatens to choke my trust.

Maybe some of the things Mitchell said are true. But I've already gone down the wrong path of misunderstanding and accusations with Damien.

Still, a warning shiver races down my spine as I go home. Doubts and questions swirl in my mind, a quiet storm of uncertainty, reminding me that my choice regarding Damien could have far-reaching consequences for my heart and future.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Ignore Mitchell's warning and agree to meet **Damien's** Mom and niece. [Turn to this page.](#)

Take Mitchell's warning seriously and break things off with Damien for good. Wait a few weeks and go on a date with **Alex**. [Turn to this page.](#) If you've already had a first date with him, you can have a

second date by [Turning to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 30

ALEX

BRUSHSTROKES AND KISSES

“You’re sure you want to do this?” I ask as I spread out a canvas, easel, and acrylic paints on the dining table.

Alex chuckles. He leans down, pressing a soft, sweet kiss to my lips, sending a delightful shiver down my spine. When he pulls back, he cradles my face in his hand, those hazel eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my knees go weak.

"I'm up for the challenge," Alex says, his voice soft and filled with affection. "But I should warn you, my artistic skills are...well, nonexistent. Kind of like that guy who got famous for painting blocks of color."

I can't help but burst into laughter at his comparison. "Piet Mondrian?" I ask, still chuckling.

"Yeah, that guy."

"He's one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century," I say, trying to defend the renowned painter.

Alex grunts and raises an eyebrow, clearly not buying into the idea that his artistic talents aren't on par with the minimalist master.

I laugh, feeling a warmth in my chest that has nothing to do with the easel or the paints. "Alright, Picasso, let's see what you've got."

As he dips his brush into a vibrant blue, I can't help but admire his determination. His strokes start off hesitantly, but with each passing moment, he grows bolder. We exchange playful banter, using the brushes as our weapons of choice in a colorful duel, all while trying to create something resembling art.

My gaze keeps drifting to him, my chest aching with something I've never felt before. It's like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, unsure of what

lies beyond but fully aware that the view is breathtaking.

It's a beautiful and somewhat terrifying sensation.

I'm falling for Alex.

He's made it impossible not to.

There's a vulnerability that comes with opening your heart to someone, and it scares me, but it also feels incredibly right.

Alex, his face smudged with paint, suddenly glances my way and gives me a dimpled smile when he catches me watching him. "Having fun?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. Emotions squeeze my throat, and I swear my heart might explode if I fall any more for him. But in true Alex fashion, he lightens the mood by tapping me gently on the nose with his paintbrush.

My eyes widen in mock indignation. "You did not just do that?"

He grins mischievously, the smudge of blue on his cheek making him look utterly endearing. "Oh, but I did. Consider it a brushstroke of affection."

I playfully roll my eyes, and then, without warning, I dip my fingers in some paint and daub a bright spot of color on his nose. "There, now we're even."

We both burst into laughter, our playful antics turning our painting session into a delightful mess of colors, laughter, and affection.

Our faces draw closer, and before I know it, our lips meet in a sweet, lingering kiss. It's as if the world around us fades, and all that remains is the tender connection we share.

When we pull away, Alex grins mischievously. "I have to say, this art stuff has its perks."

I chuckle, brushing a smear of paint off his cheek. "It certainly does. But don't think it'll get you out of cleaning up afterward."

Alex's expression grows serious as he gazes into my eyes. "Since we're on the topic of art, I was wondering if you wanted to go to the art gallery this weekend."

"You're not art-ed out after all this?" I tease.

"My sister is flying in from Denver, and I thought it would be great if you could meet her. She's an art enthusiast, too, and I think you two would get along well."

The thought of meeting his sister fills me with excitement and nerves, but I can't help but smile. "I'd love to."

"Good." His eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. It's a look that feels like an electric current, a magnetic force

pulling me closer. In his gaze, I see desire, a hunger that mirrors my own, and it makes my heart race.

Our lips meet in a lingering kiss, like the soft brushstrokes of a masterpiece just beginning to take shape. It's a kiss filled with sweetness, a tender exploration of each other's desires. Mouths moving in perfect harmony, savoring the moment, as if time has slowed down just for us. The kiss deepens, growing more heated every second.

I'm left breathless as he pulls away, a sly grin on his lips. "After all this painting, I think we both need a shower."

His words, laced with a hint of seduction, send a playful jolt of anticipation through me. I meet his gaze, my own eyes dancing with mischief. "Hmm, and what do you have in mind for this shower?"

Alex leans in closer, his voice a low, husky whisper. "I feel like I didn't get to show you how creative I can be."

"A shower sounds intriguing. But I've heard the bedroom offers even more creative options."

He groans softly, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he scoops me up, his strong arms cradling me. With a teasing smile, he asks, "Ladies' choice. Bed or shower?"

My heart races as I weigh the tantalizing possibilities, knowing that whichever option I choose, it will be a night to remember.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Step into the tantalizing steam of the shower and let Alex's imagination take you on a seductive journey. [Turn to this page.](#)

Forgo the shower and plunge headlong into the sheets with Alex. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 31

ALEX

PLAYFUL CURRENTS

Being *just friends* with Alex is like walking an emotional tightrope. Every moment spent together deepens our connection, but I also fear the risk of heartbreak. I hang on to his every word and analyze every interaction, torn between wanting more and treasuring our friendship. It's a delicate balance that can be both exhilarating and tormenting, a constant reminder that my heart doesn't want to follow the rules of friendship.

"So, what do you think?" Alex asks, his hazel eyes twinkling with humor as we sit in our usual spot at the Artful Bean. It's become an after-school ritual, a comforting routine that I look forward to each day. "Bella?"

"Yeah?"

He chuckles. "Did you hear anything I said?"

"Sorry. I'm a bit distracted today." Today, yesterday, every day that I'm with him. I find myself struggling to focus on the conversation. It's more than just his eyes; it's the way he smiles, the way his laughter sends a warm shiver down my spine. It's how his voice drops slightly when he shares something personal, making me feel like I'm the only person in the room. Every stolen glance and every accidental touch between us ignites a different kind of longing. It's a magnetic pull that I can't deny, a physical ache deep within my chest.

"I was asking if you want to visit the Art Gallery this weekend." He smiles, displaying those deep dimples. "I heard there's a new exhibit."

My breath catches for a moment as I contemplate his offer. "Won't you be bored?" I inquire hesitantly.

Once again, those dimples flash and my heart does somersaults. "I'm never bored when I'm with you," he says with a sincerity that sends a rush of

warmth through me. "And I love the way your eyes light up when you talk about art."

His words hang in the air, and I can't help but feel a wave of emotions surge within me. It's moments like these that make it so hard to deny the attraction I feel, the connection that seems to deepen with each passing day. As I gaze into his hazel eyes, I wonder if he's sensing the same magnetic pull between us, the unspoken longing that hangs in the air whenever we're together.

"Plus," he adds with a mischievous glint, "I may have an ulterior motive."

I lift a brow, intrigued, and sip my coffee. "And what's that?"

"My sister is flying in from Denver tomorrow. I thought you might like to meet her. We could go to the Gallery and then have dinner after."

My heart flutters at the thought of meeting his family. "Okay."

His smile widens. "Great."

As we make plans, my mind flashes back to all the cute texts we've exchanged, the late-night movie marathons with endless popcorn, and our short hikes in the woods. It's been a whirlwind of fun and laughter, and I can't deny that I want more.

I've seen that he's trustworthy and genuinely caring, and I believe he's moved on from his ex. There's something between us that's undeniable, a connection that's grown stronger with each passing day. And at this moment, as we plan to meet his sister, I hope that our friendship evolves into something more.

"So," I fidget with my coffee cup, not meeting his eyes. "Do all your friends meet your family?"

Alex reaches across the table, his warm hand enveloping mine. His touch is electrifying, his calloused fingers rough against my skin, sending a wave of heat racing up my arm. I can't help but feel a rush of desire and connection in that simple gesture, a physical manifestation of the unspoken longing building between us.

"You know that I want more, Bella," he says, his voice soft but filled with sincerity. "But I won't push it."

I release a shaky sigh, realizing that my irrational fear has only kept me from taking the leap.

We finish our coffee, lost in thought, our fingers intertwined, completely breaking the *just friends* rule. But I don't care. Eventually, we leave the cozy coffee shop and step out into the cool evening air. Alex offers to walk me

home, and I gladly accept.

As we walk hand in hand, our fingers interlaced, I can't help but feel a tinge of excitement mingled with uncertainty.

Alex glances at me with a playful grin. "This might be the first time I've walked a friend home while holding hands."

I chuckle. "Well, I guess there's a first time for everything, right?"

He tightens his grip on my hand. "Absolutely. Who says friends can't be a little...hand-holdy?"

I playfully roll my eyes. "Hand-holdy? Is that even a word?"

Alex shrugs, feigning innocence. "It is now. I just made it up."

I steal a sideways glance at him. "So, Mr. Hand-Holdy, what's your next move in this master plan?"

He pretends to ponder, tapping his chin with his free hand. "Well, I was thinking that maybe you might want to invite me in."

"Oh really? And then what?"

"Well, you still owe me that painting lesson you promised on our first date."

I chuckle. "You want to paint?"

"I want to do anything that means I get to spend more time with you."

Butterflies flutter in my chest. "How about you come in, and I'll order take-out, and we can watch a movie."

Alex raises an eyebrow, pretending to ponder the offer. "Hmm, painting lesson or takeout and a movie? Tough choice."

I playfully nudge him. "Come on, it's a win-win situation."

He laughs, shaking his head. "Alright, you've convinced me."

As we approach my doorstep, I stop and turn to face him, our hands still entwined. "Alex, I want you to know that I'm willing to give this a chance, whatever 'this' is."

His eyes soften, and he leans in closer. "What this is is me falling head over heels for you."

He closes the remaining distance between us and presses his lips to mine, his kiss soft and tender, a delicate exploration of unspoken feelings. It's a kiss filled with promise, a promise of the unknown and the potential for something beautiful.

Alex eventually pulls back, his gaze playful as he looks into my eyes. He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, his fingers lingering on my cheek.

“So, you still want to invite me in?” he teases.

“Only if I get to choose the movie.”

He raises an eyebrow, feigning contemplation. “You drive a hard bargain. But sounds fair.”

As I open the door and we step inside, I can't help but feel a sense of anticipation for the moments yet to come.

“What are you hungry for?” I ask, pulling out my phone.

He chuckles and lifts an eyebrow. “That’s not a fair question, Bella.”

I blush at the undertones of his words. “I mean food.”

“Hmm, how about we try the new takeout place on Front Street? They make amazing shawarmas.”

“Shawarmas sound fantastic.” I quickly place an order on the app, then sit beside him on the couch.

“So what are we watching?” he asks, pulling me back against his chest as I scroll through the movies on Prime Video.

“How about Bridget Jones's Diary? It’s one of my favorites.”

“Ah, Bridget and her diary,” he chuckles. “If I had a diary, it would probably be full of coffee stains and to-do lists.”

I laugh, playfully nudging him. “And here I thought it would be filled with epic tales of your adventures.”

He wraps his arm around me. “Well, this movie's got nothing on our real-life adventure.”

The movie plays on, but honestly, the easy back-and-forth between us, the way our laughter fills the room, and the sheer enjoyment of each other's company make being with him so special. We dive into our shawarmas, tossing jokes and laughing, turning our meal into a delightful comedy show.

Every time I glance over at Alex, he's already looking back at me. We exchange these wordless moments where our eyes meet, and it's like we're sharing a secret language. This knowing smile passes between us like we're in on the same inside joke. Those shared smiles make me feel like two puzzle pieces clicking perfectly into place.

As the credits roll, I sit with my back against Alex's chest. His arm wraps gently around me, his fingers brushing softly against my cheek. He clears his throat, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

“I should probably get going,” he says, his voice filled with reluctance and responsibility.

But as he mentions leaving, a wave of hesitation washes over me. I can

feel his warmth and comforting presence behind me, and the thought of him going suddenly feels unbearable. My internal struggle begins, torn between the desire to ask him to stay and the fear of pushing too much too soon.

I weigh the options in my mind, my heart racing. Should I risk it and tell him how much I want him to stay, or should I play it safe and bid him goodnight?

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Ignite the passion and ask him to stay over because sometimes, love can't wait until morning. [Turn to this page.](#)

Give him a sweet goodnight kiss, leaving just a hint of anticipation in the air. Keep the flames of desire at bay for now, and instead, let him know how excited you are about your upcoming date to the Art Gallery with him and his sister! [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 32

ALEX

TENDER DESIRES

Alex's eyes lock on mine with a mixture of desire and affection, and I can feel his strong heartbeat against my chest. He leans in, and our lips meet in a passionate kiss. It's a kiss that speaks volumes, filled with the longing and unspoken promises that have been building between us.

"Bedroom," I say breathlessly against his mouth.

Alex responds with a deep, primal growl of desire, his arms securely cradling me as he effortlessly carries me toward the bedroom. Instinctively, my legs wrap around his waist, drawing us closer together as our bodies press tightly against one another.

Every step he takes feels charged with electricity as if the mere act of carrying me to our destination ignites an unquenchable fire between us. As he pushes open the bedroom door with his foot, the room is cast in a soft, dim glow, lending an aura of intimacy to our encounter. Our lips remain locked in a fervent kiss, and my heart beats wildly, wanting more, wanting all of him.

He gently lowers me onto the bed, my back sinking into the soft sheets. His hands roam over my body, my fingers frantically tugging at the clothes that hinder our flesh from touching.

He chuckles, his lips pressing soft kisses along my neck. "Are you in a rush?" he teases, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine.

"Yes," I groan, unable to resist the delicious sensation of his mouth against my skin. My fingers tangle in his hair, my hips arching shamelessly against his hard body.

His laugh is deep and rich, a seductive sound that drives me even more crazy with need.

Alex's lips and tongue work their magic, each kiss and nibble sending

waves of pleasure coursing through me.

With a deft touch, his hands begin to undo the buttons of my blouse, one by one, his fingers brushing against my heated skin. The fabric falls open, revealing the lace of my bra underneath, and his gaze intensifies, filled with a hunger that mirrors my own.

Slowly and sensually, he peels each layer of fabric from my skin, his mouth following in the wake of his hands, kissing every new area he exposes. His lips leave a trail of heat and desire, igniting a fiery passion within me.

His kisses grow more fervent as he explores every inch of my exposed flesh. Every sensation is heightened, every caress igniting a flame of desire that burns hotter with each passing moment.

Our hands roam freely, tracing the curves and contours of each other's bodies, until the sensation is too much, and I need him inside of me.

"Alex," I whimper, arching my hips against the hard length of his cock, feeling the silky heat pressing against my entrance. "I want you."

He groans and rolls over, grabbing a condom from his jeans pockets. I watch as he slides it over the engorged head, down each delectable inch. And when our eyes meet, he gives me a dimpled grin, a playful glint in his hazel eyes.

I sit up and straddle his waist, his cock pressing against my belly.

His hands cup my face, his gaze searching mine with a tenderness that makes my heart flutter. "Hey," he breathes out.

I smile at him, my heart swelling with emotion. "Hey."

He kisses me, soft, gentle, and I lift myself so that his cock presses at my entrance, then slowly slide down his thick length. We groan into each other's mouths. I swear every nerve ending in my body sparks to life, the sensation of him filling me so completely that I almost come undone. My clit already pulses, my pussy clenching around him in tiny spasms, and I let out a whimper of pleasure.

His hand cups my breast, thumb flicking at the sensitive nipple, and I move, my hips creating a rhythm Alex matches. Our bodies move in perfect sync, a harmonious dance of passion and desire. Every touch, every kiss is building up to the moment of pure ecstasy. And it washes over me wave after wave of rapture, each sensation more intense than the last. Our bodies are entwined as we reach the pinnacle of pleasure together,

Alex gives a low guttural groan, and I whimper, falling against his chest, unable to move. Then, with a gentle touch, Alex rolls me onto my back, our

bodies parting as he slides out.

“So damn, beautiful,” he says breathlessly.

The room is filled with a comforting silence, broken only by the occasional sigh of contentment. Alex's arms are wrapped securely around me, holding me close as if he never wants to let go.

It's a perfect moment. There are no worries, no uncertainties — just the profound connection we share. Our fingers are intertwined, and the world outside fades into insignificance.

I turn my head slightly, my lips grazing his jawline, and he responds with a soft, affectionate smile.

"Are you thirsty?" Alex's voice breaks the tranquil silence, his warm breath brushing against my ear.

I nod slightly.

With a soft kiss on my temple, he carefully disentangles himself from our embrace and slides into his pants. I watch him, feeling a sense of contentment and warmth wash over me. The way he cares for me, even in these simple moments, fills my heart with love.

He returns with a glass of water and offers it to me with a tender smile. I take a sip, feeling the cool liquid soothe my parched throat. His fingers brush a strand of hair away from my face, and he leans down to place another sweet kiss on my forehead.

God, he is so sweet. So perfect.

As we lie there, our intimate moment still fresh in our minds, Alex's phone suddenly vibrates. His expression tightens with worry when he glances at the screen. "It's the hospital." Without hesitation, he answers the call.

I watch him anxiously, my heart racing as I sense something is wrong. The conversation is brief, but the gravity of the situation becomes evident when he hangs up.

"It's about Angie," he says, his voice tinged with concern. "I'm still listed as her emergency contact."

"Is she alright?"

"She's been in a car accident. I don't know how serious it is. But I need to go."

My heart sinks as I hear the news and instinctively reach to touch his arm. "Do you want me to come with you?"

He looks torn, his gaze filled with gratitude and indecision. "I appreciate it, but I'll text you with updates. Right now, I need to be there."

I nod, understanding the urgency of the situation.

He swiftly gathers his things and rushes out the door, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Minutes turn into what feels like hours as I anxiously await a message from Alex. My mind racing with every possible scenario and hating myself for the jealousy and insecurities that well up in my chest.

Finally, my phone buzzes, and I hastily grab it, my heart pounding.

Alex: Angie is fine. Just some minor cuts and bruises.

Bella: That's good news.

Alex: She's pretty shaken up. I'm going to stay with her for a bit.

My thumbs hover over the screen. "Don't be jealous," I whisper. "They're still friends. That's all."

But even as the words fall from my lips, a nagging voice in the back of my head tells me otherwise.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Have faith in Alex's genuine intentions. His friendship with Angie is purely platonic, and friends support one another. Embrace his offer to accompany him to the wedding, accepting the invitation to share this special event together. [Turn to this page.](#)

Follow Alex's example and be a supportive friend – don't let Jess down. Accompany her to the wedding because, after all, Alex hasn't formalized their relationship yet. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 33

ALEX

SHOWER ME WITH ASSURANCE

A longing moan escapes my lips, and I murmur the word "Shower" against Alex's mouth.

His strong arms envelop me, holding me close as my legs remain tightly wrapped around his waist. A playful chuckle escapes from Alex's lips as he acknowledges my choice. "Shower it is," he murmurs, his eyes filled with a mixture of desire and amusement. With effortless strength, he carries me into the bathroom.

The sensation of his kiss has consumed me so completely that I'm oblivious to the fact that he's led us into the shower until the cool rush of water splashes over my face. I gasp in surprise, the sudden awareness hitting me like a shock.

"We're still dressed," I point out, my voice a mixture of laughter and disbelief, as I glance down at our soaking clothes.

Alex grins mischievously, his hands deftly working on the buttons of my blouse. "Well, it seems we'll have to remedy that situation, won't we?"

As the fabric falls to the floor, he reaches for the buttons of his own shirt, and together we strip away the wet garments, leaving them in a sodden pile. The cascade of warm water washes over our naked bodies, and our laughter turns into a shared sense of excitement as we embrace the intimate spontaneity of the moment.

Our hands find each other, fingers entwining as our lips meet in a tender kiss. A kiss that becomes increasingly heated. Each touch, each caress, ignites a fire of passion that burns hotter with every passing moment.

Alex's lips trail a path of longing from my neck to my collarbone, his mouth creating a symphony of desire that resonates deep within me. I arch

my back, offering myself to him completely.

He lifts me up, my legs wrapping around his waist, the thick length of his cock pressed against my belly. My hands, guided by desire, roam over his muscular shoulders, tracing the contours of his well-defined arms and down to his strong pecs. Fingertips glide along the ridges of his sculpted abs, and with each touch, the connection between us deepens.

Our kisses grow more passionate, tongues entwined in a dance of longing. The water flows over us, a sensuous backdrop to our fervent exploration of each other's bodies.

We exchange soft whispers and fervent moans, lost in the sensual rhythm of our movements, and I whimper against his lips, "I want you inside me."

Alex responds with a deep, primal growl of desire. "Condom."

I nod, grateful that unlike me, he's thinking with more than just the pleasure of the moment.

He carries me to the bedroom. Our lips remain locked in a fervent kiss, and my heart beats wildly, wanting more, wanting all of him. He gently lowers me onto the bed, my back sinking into the soft sheets.

His kisses grow more fervent as he explores every inch of my exposed flesh. Every sensation is heightened, every caress igniting a flame of desire that burns hotter with each passing moment.

Our hands roam freely, tracing the curves and contours of each other's bodies, until the sensation is too much, and I need him inside of me.

"Alex," I whimper, arching my hips against the hard length of his cock, feeling the silky heat pressing against my entrance. "I want you."

He rolls over and leaves for a moment, returning with a condom. I watch as he slides it over the engorged head, down each delectable inch. And when our eyes meet, he gives me a dimpled grin, a playful glint in his hazel eyes.

I sit up and straddle his waist, his cock pressing against my belly.

His hands cup my face, his gaze searching mine with a tenderness that makes my heart flutter. "Hey," he breathes out.

I smile at him, my heart swelling with emotion. "Hey."

He kisses me, soft, gentle, and I lift myself so that his cock presses at my entrance, then slowly slide down his thick length. We groan into each other's mouths. I swear every nerve ending in my body sparks to life, the sensation of him filling me so completely that I almost come undone. My clit already pulses, my pussy clenching around him in tiny spasms, and I let out a whimper of pleasure.

His hand cups my breast, thumb flicking at the sensitive nipple, and I move, my hips creating a rhythm Alex matches. Our bodies move in perfect sync, a harmonious dance of passion and desire. Every touch, every kiss is building up to the moment of pure ecstasy. And it washes over me wave after wave of rapture, each sensation more intense than the last. Our bodies are entwined as we reach the pinnacle of pleasure together,

Alex gives a low guttural groan, and I whimper, falling against his chest, unable to move. Then, with a gentle touch, Alex rolls me onto my back, our bodies parting as he slides out.

“So damn, beautiful,” he says breathlessly.

We lie entwined in the aftermath of our lovemaking. Our breaths slowly return to a tranquil rhythm. The room is filled with a comforting silence, broken only by the occasional sigh of contentment.

Alex's arms are wrapped securely around me, holding me close as if he never wants to let go.

It's a perfect moment. There are no worries, no uncertainties — just the profound connection we share. Our fingers are intertwined, and the world outside fades into insignificance.

I turn my head slightly, my lips grazing his jawline, and he responds with a soft, affectionate smile.

"Are you thirsty?" Alex's voice breaks the tranquil silence, his warm breath brushing against my ear.

I nod slightly.

With a soft kiss on my temple, he carefully disentangles himself. I watch him, feeling a sense of contentment and warmth wash over me. The way he cares for me, even in these simple moments, fills my heart with a profound sense of love.

He returns with a glass of water and offers it to me with a tender smile. I take a sip, feeling the cool liquid soothe my parched throat. His fingers brush a strand of hair away from my face, and he leans down to place another sweet kiss on my forehead.

God, he is so sweet. So perfect.

As we lie there, our intimate moment still fresh in my mind, Alex's phone suddenly vibrates. His expression tightens with worry when he glances at the screen. “It's the hospital.” Without hesitation, he answers the call.

I watch him anxiously, my heart racing as I sense something is wrong. The conversation is brief, but the gravity of the situation becomes evident

when he hangs up.

"It's about Angie," he says, his voice tinged with concern. "I'm still listed as her emergency contact."

"Is she alright?"

"She's been in a car accident. I don't know how serious it is. I have to go."

My heart sinks as I hear the news and instinctively reach to touch his arm. "Do you want me to come with you?"

He looks torn, his gaze filled with gratitude and indecision. "I appreciate it, but I'll text you with updates. Right now, I need to go."

I nod, understanding the urgency of the situation.

He swiftly gathers his things, struggling to put on his wet clothes, then rushes out the door, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Minutes turn into what feels like hours as I anxiously await a message from Alex. My mind racing with every possible scenario and hating myself for the jealousy and insecurities that well up in my chest.

Finally, my phone buzzes, and I hastily grab it, my heart pounding.

Alex: Angie is fine. Just some minor cuts and bruises.

Bella: That's good news.

Alex: She's pretty shaken up. I'm going to stay with her for a bit.

My thumbs hover over the screen. "Don't be jealous," I whisper. "They're just friends. That's all."

But even as the words fall from my lips, a nagging voice in the back of my head tells me otherwise.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Have faith in Alex's genuine intentions. His friendship with Angie is purely platonic, and friends support one another. Embrace his offer to accompany him to the wedding, accepting the invitation to share this special event together. [Turn to this page.](#)

Follow Alex's example and be a supportive friend – don't let Jess down. Accompany her to the wedding because, after all, Alex hasn't formalized their relationship yet. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 34

SEBASTIAN

THE QUEST FOR ANSWERS

The elevator doors glide open, and I step out into Sebastian's penthouse apartment. My breath catches in my throat the moment I enter and see him.

I meet Sebastian's dark gaze and let out a shaky breath. His shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a glimpse of dark bronze skin, and the sleeves are rolled up over his muscular forearms. He's dressed in sleek dress pants that cling to his slim waist, and every inch of him exudes power and confidence.

"Thank you for coming," he says, his voice low and husky, sending shivers down my spine.

His presence is magnetic, drawing me toward him like a moth to a flame. My heart races as I approach him, my steps echoing in the spacious penthouse.

He extends his hand, and I place mine in his, feeling the warmth and strength of his touch. His fingers close around mine, and he says, "I've missed you."

I bite my lower lip, a wave of emotions crashing over me, and I wonder if I'm just setting myself up for heartbreak. It's impossible to ignore the heat that simmers between us, the unspoken desire that hangs in the air. I sense it in the way our eyes lock, in the gentle touch of our hands as they graze against each other.

But I also know that I need to tread carefully.

"I've missed you, too," I admit. It's the truth. As hard as I've tried, I can't stop thinking about him.

With a tender touch, Sebastian cups my face. He leans in, and our lips

meet in a soft kiss that sends a wave of lust coursing through me. But as our mouths mold together, a knot of confusion tightens within me. This isn't what I expected. I'm here to talk, and yet, his kiss speaks a different language — one of passion and want.

I pull back, my breath uneven, and meet his dark, intense gaze. "You wanted to talk," I remind him, my voice trembling slightly.

His eyes hold mine for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty passing through them before he nods. "You're right," he concedes, his voice husky with a mixture of desire and restraint. "But, let's eat first."

I follow him into the kitchen and settle at the large marble island that dominates the room. As I watch him move around, some of my tension eases. I sip the wine slowly, relishing the rich flavor.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, glancing over at me.

I nod, my stomach growling in agreement. "I forgot to eat today, so I'm starving."

Sebastian works with quiet confidence, preparing the salmon with lemon dill sauce and the colorful medley of vegetables.

"I didn't know you could cook," I say, watching him with genuine interest.

"After mom..." he begins, his tone carrying the weight of a painful memory. "I took on a lot more household work after she took her own life."

My heart tightens at the revelation he's shared, and I feel a wave of empathy wash over me. The pain in his voice is palpable, a stark reminder that beneath his powerful exterior, there are wounds he's been carrying.

"I'm so sorry, Sebastian," I whisper.

"I never talk about it with anyone. It's not something I like to share."

He places a dish in front of me and then takes a seat.

The meal, though delicious, feels secondary now, as the weight of his confession hangs in the air.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," I say, placing a hand on his arm.

He nods, his gaze fixed on his glass. "I hated her for a long time," he admits, his voice heavy with emotion. "I know it wasn't fair. She was grieving the loss of her son. But..." He takes a deep sip of his wine, his eyes distant as he recalls painful memories. "She forgot I was still there. That I needed her. That my dad needed her."

As he speaks, I hear the complex tapestry of emotions he's been carrying for years. My heart aches for him, for the pain he's endured and the burdens

he's shouldered alone.

"You had every right to be angry with her," I tell him. "It was a selfish thing to do."

Sebastian's gaze lingers on his plate for a moment, his fork absently moving a purple carrot around. "It was. But CF is a brutal disease," he explains. "It destroys families. She never got over the guilt."

I furrow my brow, curiosity piqued. "What's CF?"

He holds my gaze, an inner turmoil in his eyes, when he says, "Cystic Fibrosis."

"I've never heard of it," I admit.

He takes a deep breath. "It's a disorder that affects the lungs and digestive system. It's caused by a faulty gene, and it leads to the production of thick, sticky mucus in the lungs and other organs. It can affect people differently, but in my brother's case, it was aggressive. The mucus clogs the airways. It also traps bacteria, leading to chronic infections and lung damage. Over time, it becomes difficult for the person to breathe and function normally."

As he speaks, I can hear the weight in his voice, the sadness of losing someone he loved deeply. It's a stark reminder of the hardships he's faced and the wounds that still run deep.

"Many people with CF can live a fairly normal life, especially with the advances in medical therapies." He sighs, his expression growing somber once more. "But Toby had a particularly aggressive form of the disease. Despite all the treatments and interventions, his lung function deteriorated rapidly. He developed a severe respiratory infection that his weakened immune system couldn't fight off."

"I'm so sorry." I reach out and put my hand over his, offering comfort in the face of his heartbreaking memories. The depth of his pain is palpable, and I can only imagine the toll it has taken on him.

The pieces of a puzzle are falling into place, and I can see him more clearly now. The walls he's constructed, the layers of self-protection, make sense considering the burdens he's carried.

I rise from my seat, and he shifts on his stool to make space. I stand between his legs; the proximity creating an intimate bubble around us. I run my fingers through his dark hair, a tender gesture meant to convey my gratitude for his willingness to open up to me. My heart swells with affection for him.

"Thank you for sharing your story with me," I murmur. "I know it must

have been difficult.”

Sebastian’s eyes meet mine, and there’s a deep vulnerability there. “Bella, I—”

I stop his words with a kiss, and he groans against my mouth. The taste of him is exquisite, a blend of wine and something uniquely Sebastian. His mouth is warm and inviting, and our tongues dance in a tantalizing, intricate rhythm. The sensation of his lips moving against mine, the softness and warmth, ignites a fiery heat within me.

When our lips part, Sebastian’s breathing is ragged, his dark eyes filled with a depth of emotion that takes my breath away. His fingers brush a strand of hair from my face as he speaks, his voice laced with sincerity. “I want to be with you. I want to make this something real.”

His words echo the longing in my heart, and I meet his gaze with an intensity that matches his. “I want that too.”

Sebastian’s eyes search mine, his expression tender as he continues, “We can take things slow, whatever pace you’re comfortable with.”

I smile and I reply, “Sebastian, this is us taking things slow. Honestly, I’m ready to speed things up.”

“Is that so?” he asks, a playful gleam in his eyes.

I nod, my voice a sultry whisper as I lean in closer. “Yes,” I murmur, my lips just inches from his ear, “I want you now.”

A deep groan vibrates in his throat, and he takes my hand and leads me to the bedroom.

Sebastian undoes the buttons on my blouse. His gentle touch is filled with desire, and the room is charged with anticipation.

With each button released, he leans in, his lips tracing a path of kisses along my exposed skin. The warmth of his mouth against me sends shivers of pleasure down my spine, and I gasp as his lips find mine once more.

His touch becomes more urgent, more demanding. My fingertips trace the contours of his chest, over the firmness of his muscles beneath his shirt, while his hands explore the curves of my body, leaving a trail of desire in their wake.

I find myself driven by an insatiable need to explore every inch of him. My fingers tremble slightly as I reach for the buttons of his shirt, and one by one, they come undone. As it slides off his shoulders and falls to the floor, I’m met with the breathtaking sight of his chiseled chest. It’s a masterpiece of lean, powerful muscles that ripple beneath his dark bronze skin.

My fingers trace a slow, tantalizing path across his chest, reveling in the sensation of his warmth and strength. I feel the rhythm of his heart beating beneath my touch, each pulse echoing the desire that courses through us both.

“You’re even more incredible than I imagined,” I tell him.

He chuckles, the sound of a warm rumble against my ear.

With a shared urgency, we shed the remaining layers of clothing, our need intensifying with each garment that falls away. There’s an undeniable hunger between us, a yearning that can no longer be denied.

My body is set ablaze by his kisses, his touch. He explores my breasts with tender reverence, his mouth and tongue igniting sensations that leave me gasping.

His breath grows ragged against my skin, and I can sense the restraint that has held him back beginning to unravel. His lips find mine with an intensity that leaves no room for hesitation, and our kisses become more voracious, more primal.

Taking my hand with a gentle but determined grip, he locks his dark eyes onto mine with unwavering resolution. Without a word, he leads me to the bed, our fingers entwined, our connection unbreakable as he eases me down onto the soft sheet.

From the bedside table, he takes out a foil wrapper. I take the opportunity to appreciate all of him. Every inch of his body is perfectly sculpted. His waist is slim and toned, emphasizing the powerful lines of his abdomen and the definition of his muscles. I lick my lips at the sight of his long, thick cock. I take the condom from Sebastian and roll it over his delectable length. He groans and crawls onto the bed, moving so that his legs spread mine.

Those dark eyes hold my gaze, searching.

“I want this,” I tell him, gripping his hips and arching against him. “I want you.”

His lips brush mine, and he says against my mouth, roughly. “Don’t want to lose you, Bella.”

“You won’t.” My heart belongs to him now. “Make love to me, Sebastian.”

His hips move, and I guide his cock to my entrance. As he fills me, my body aches in pleasure as it stretches to receive him, and I gasp.

“You okay?” he asks.

My response is to pull his mouth to mine, my fingers tangling in his hair, and whimper against his lips, “So good.”

Our movements are slow, our touches tender, and when he pulls back to hold my gaze, I know this is so much more than sex.

And I lose myself in him. Every kiss, every caress, every whispered word of affection, it all blends together.

Sebastian's fingers move across my body with expert precision. His hands seem to know every secret, every hidden want, as he navigates the landscape of my skin.

Ripples of pleasure course through me as his thumb brushes over my nipple and his tongue parts my lips, and I cry out with the pulsing, pleasure of the orgasm. "Oh god."

He smiles against my lips. "I love that sound."

"Sebastian," I moan as he continues to move inside me.

It's hours and multiple orgasms later, when his thrusts become more demanding, his rhythm speeding up, and his breathing ragged.

"So good," I gasp, every nerve ending in my body sparking to life. The sensation of him filling me so completely, so powerfully, undoes me. My clit pulses, my pussy clenching around him with wave after wave of pleasure, each sensation more incredible than the last.

He gives a low guttural groan and his body goes rigid, his cock pulsing inside of me. He adjusts his position to lay by my side, our bodies still intertwined, and our hands finding each other's.

"Wow," I murmur, my voice filled with a mixture of awe and satisfaction, as I turn to look into Sebastian's eyes. "That was...just wow."

Wow is an understatement, a mere whisper in the face of what we've shared. It was more than that; it was the most incredible sex of my life.

His fingers caress my cheek as he chuckles. "I'm going to visit my dad tomorrow. Do you want to go with me?"

I'm surprised by the invitation and grateful for the chance to be part of his life.

"I'd love to, but my aunt is having a barbeque and I promised my mom I'd go."

Should I break my commitment to my family to spend time with Sebastian and his father, deepening our connection even further? Or should I invite him to the barbeque, a step toward merging our lives and introducing him to my loved ones?

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Choose to spend time with Sebastian and his dad. [Turn to this page.](#)

Invite Sebastian to the family barbeque and introduce him to her loved ones. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 35

SEBASTIAN

TIPSY NIGHT'S RESCUE

The bass thumps in my chest as I stumble back into the dimly lit club, my head spinning from way too many drinks. The vibrant lights overhead blur into a kaleidoscope of colors, making it hard to focus on anything. I push my way through the crowded dance floor, searching for Jess. It's a miracle I can even make it through this sea of swaying bodies without tripping over my own feet.

"Jess!" I call out when I see her.

She spots me and waves me over to where she and the other girls are dancing. I reach her, but as I try to speak, the noise is deafening, drowning out my words.

Grabbing my hand, she pulls me into the group. Reluctantly, I let her lead me into the heart of the pulsating music. The rhythm courses through my body, and for a moment, I forget about everything else. We dance, or rather, I sway and stumble, my world spinning around me.

But the dizziness catches up with me. I position myself next to Jess, trying to make myself heard. "My phone's dead."

"What?" she yells.

"My phone," I say, clutching her arm for support. "I need...to call an Uber."

Jess misunderstands me amidst the deafening beats. "More shots!"

Before I can clarify, the other girls in our group overhear Jess and join in, shouting, "Shots! Shots! Shots!" Their voices blend with the pulsating music, and suddenly, I'm being dragged toward the crowded bar.

My protests fall on deaf ears as they order a round of drinks, and I watch as the bartender lines them up, filling the small glasses with colorful, potent

concoctions.

I lean in close to Jess. "I need to go home."

She pouts, her disappointment clear. "The night's still young, and we're having so much fun."

"Can I use your *hic* phone to call an Uber?" I ask, my voice slurred from the alcohol, my words stumbling over each other. Jess hesitates for a moment before nodding and handing me her cell.

I fumble with the display, my vision seeing double as I navigate to the rideshare app. My fingers seem to have a mind of their own, but I order a ride and provide my location. A sense of relief washes over me as I see the estimated arrival time.

"Thank you." I wrap my arms around her in a wobbly hug, and she squeezes me tightly before letting me go. "I'll call you tomorrow."

With a last wave to the other girls, I stumble my way outside to wait for the blue Toyota with a driver named Bart.

As I stand alone on the sidewalk, the night air slowly clearing my head, a couple of guys come out of the club, clearly inebriated. Their voices echo loudly, reverberating in the night's stillness, and their demeanor is brash and obnoxious.

A tall and wiry man with disheveled blond hair and an arrogant glint in his eyes sees me and asks, "Need a ride home, sweetheart?"

"I...I'm fine." I reply, my words not as clear as I'd like them to be.

He persists, moving closer, and putting his arm around my shoulders. My heart races, and I try without success to push him away. "No, thank you."

His breath smells of alcohol, as he leans in and says, "You look like you could use some help, beautiful."

A nervous knot tightens in my stomach, and I wish I had a clearer head to deal with this situation. I scan the area, hoping to catch sight of my Uber, but there's no sign of the blue Toyota or Bart.

"Stop. Let go..." I hate the way I stumble over each word. "Please."

The guys merely chuckle. The one with his arm around me tightens his grip, pulling me closer and turning me within his grasp. "We're just trying to be friendly," he insists, his tone far from reassuring.

I muster the strength to push him away, but my unsteady balance betrays me. I stumble backward, right into the arms of the other guy, who wastes no time in encircling me with his own, holding me tightly and leaving me trapped and vulnerable.

As I struggle in the grasp of the persistent stranger, a sudden, sharp sound cuts through the tension — a car door slamming shut.

Then, a familiar and commanding voice sends shivers down my spine as it echoes through the night. “Release her. Now.”

Sebastian.

The grip of the two guys on either side of me loosens instantly as they turn their heads toward the source of the voice. Their expressions shift from arrogance to unease, and Sebastian’s commanding presence shatters their bravado.

“We were trying to help her,” the wiry guy stammers, raising his hands in a surrendering gesture, but the withering look Sebastian levels at them is enough to have them scurrying away.

Sebastian strides toward me, those dark eyes searching mine. “Are you okay?”

I manage a shaky nod, my head still spinning from both the alcohol and the ordeal.

“Why the hell are you out here alone?”

“I’m waiting *hic...*” I sway slightly and his hands steady me. “For Bart.”

“Bart?” His brows furrow.

As I sway slightly, struggling to maintain my balance, the Uber finally pulls up to the curb, and I nod at the blue Toyota. “Bart.”

Sebastian rubs his hand over the back of his neck. “I’ll drive you home.”

I protest, my slurred words stumbling over each other as I attempt to decline his offer. But when I meet his gaze, I close my mouth abruptly, and stumble over to the passenger side of the car.

My fingers fumble with the seatbelt, my coordination still impaired, and I sigh in frustration, struggling to make sense of the simple mechanism.

Just as I’m about to give up, Sebastian reaches over to help me. His touch is gentle and reassuring as he threads the belt through its buckle and secures it in place.

“Thanks,” I mumble, embarrassment heating my cheeks.

The engine purrs to life as Sebastian starts the car, and we pull away from the curb, leaving the dimly lit streets behind us. The silence is thick, filled with unspoken words and tension. I fidget with the hem of my shirt as memories of my drunk texts and the phone call make my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

I’m grateful when he pulls into a fast-food drive-thru and orders a

chocolate milkshake. When he hands me the drink, I give him a grateful smile and take a sip. The cold, creamy sweetness is a welcome change from the alcohol-induced haze that had clouded my senses, and as I continue to sip the milkshake, I can feel myself starting to sober up, my mind slowly clearing.

“Thanks for this,” I mumble, my voice still shaky.

“I’m glad you called.” His knuckles whiten over the steering wheel as he pulls out of the parking lot and onto the main road.

My gaze lingers on him. The dim streetlights cast subtle shadows on his face, accentuating his chiseled features, strong jawline, and that hint of dark scruff. His eyes, dark and mysterious, hold secrets he won’t share. *At least not with me.*

The alcohol still lingers in my system, emboldening me to broach the subject I’ve been agonizing over. “What is this between us?” I ask, my words forthright, even as my voice retains a slight slur. “Do you have feelings for me or not?”

He glances at me, dark brows furrowed. “Of course I do. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the first day we met.”

“Then why all the mixed signals?” I press.

He lets out a frustrated breath and shakes his head. “Because I’m…” He starts to speak, but his words falter.

“This is what I mean,” I say, frustration bubbling up. “You shut down. I want to know you, to be with you. But how can I when you won’t tell me anything?”

His shoulders slump, and he seems weighed down by a heavy burden. “My life’s a shitshow, Bella.” He pulls the car over in front of my house, his gaze fixed on the darkness beyond the windshield. “And I don’t want to scare you away.”

I place my hand on his arm. “You choose to push me away instead.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. I guess I did. Fuck. Sorry.”

Silence fills the air, the tension thick. My feelings for him are still so raw, a mix of desire and frustration, and the complexity of our connection weighs on me.

“Do you want to come in?” I ask softly. Not wanting him to go.

He nods. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

I lead the way into my home, flicking on soft lights that cast a cozy glow over the living room. As I disappear into my bedroom to change into

something more comfortable, I quickly slip into a soft, oversized t-shirt and a pair of comfortable sweatpants before returning to the living room.

Sebastian has taken a seat on the sofa, his eyes lost in thought. I join him, snuggling into his side as he wraps a comforting arm around me.

The heaviness of the moment lingers as we sit in silence, both of us lost in our thoughts. Then, Sebastian breaks the quiet with a question that carries a weight of its own.

“Do you know what Cystic Fibrosis is?”

I turn to him and shake my head. “No.”

He takes a deep breath and rubs the back of his neck. “It’s a genetic disease that affects the lungs and digestive system. Many people can live fairly normal lives with it, but my brother Toby had an aggressive form. His lung function deteriorated rapidly, and he developed a respiratory infection that his immune system couldn’t fight off.”

“I’m sorry.” I reach out and put my hand over his.

“After he died. My mom...” He curses under his breath. “She couldn’t handle it. I think she blamed herself, blamed my dad...blamed me.”

I shake my head with a surge of anger at the unfairness of it all. “That’s not right. You were just a kid. None of it was your fault.”

He meets my gaze. The vulnerability I see there takes my breath away.

“I know,” he says, even though I see a shadow of doubt in his expression. “But when she ended her life, leaving dad and me alone...I hated her, hated myself for a long time.”

The pieces of a puzzle are falling into place, and I can see him more clearly now. The walls he’s erected, the layers of self-defense, they all make sense considering the burdens he’s shouldered.

I shift on the couch, moving closer to him until I’m straddling his lap. My fingers gently run through his dark hair. He reaches up to cup my face, his thumb brushing against my cheek.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I murmur. “I know it must have been difficult.”

“Bella, there’s—”

I stop his words with a kiss, and he groans against my mouth. The taste of him is exquisite, a blend of something uniquely Sebastian. Our tongues dance in a tantalizing, intricate rhythm. His lips moving against mine, the softness and warmth, ignite a fiery heat within me.

When our mouths part, Sebastian’s breathing is ragged, his dark eyes

filled with a depth of emotion that takes my breath away.

His fingers brush a strand of hair from my face as he speaks, his voice laced with sincerity. “I care about you, Bella. But you deserve someone who...someone who isn’t so complicated.”

Our foreheads touch and my fingers get tangled in his hair. “I can handle complicated. I just want to know where we stand.”

“We can take things slow,” he says, hands resting on my hips. “Whatever pace you’re comfortable with.”

“I don’t think we can take things slower.” I say, chuckling against his mouth, “I’m ready to speed things up a bit.”

“Is that so?” he asks, palms running under the t-shirt, across the bare skin of my lower back.

“Yes,” I murmur, my lips just inches from his ear, “I want you, now.”

A deep groan vibrates in his throat.

His touch is filled with desire, and the room is charged with anticipation as he lifts the shirt over my head. He leans down, his lips tracing a path of kisses along my exposed skin. The warmth of his mouth against me sends shivers of pleasure down my spine, and I gasp as his mouth finds mine once more.

The soft warmth of the alcohol still lingers within me, but my head is clear now. And I know what I want — *Sebastian*.

My fingers tremble slightly as I reach for the buttons of his shirt, and one by one, they come undone. As I slide it down his shoulders, I’m met with the breathtaking sight of his chiseled chest. It’s a masterpiece of lean, powerful muscles that ripple beneath his dark bronze skin.

My fingertips trace a slow, tantalizing path down his abs, reveling in his warmth and strength. I feel the rhythm of his heart beating beneath my touch, each pulse echoing the desire that courses through us both.

“You’re even more incredible than I imagined,” I tell him.

He chuckles, the sound of a warm rumble against my ear. He leans in to whisper his response, his voice husky, “*You’re* incredible, Bella.” Holding me, my legs wrapped around his waist, he stands. “You sure you want this?”

I murmur a resolute yes against his lips, then tell him, “Bedroom. Now.”

Without breaking our kiss, he finds the door and places me on the bed. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he says as we shed the remaining layers of clothing.

My need intensifies with each garment that falls away. He explores my breasts with tender reverence, his mouth and tongue igniting sensations that

leave me gasping. Then his lips find mine with an intensity that leaves no room for hesitation, and our kisses become more voracious. My palms run over his sculpted shoulders, down his powerful arms, his muscular chest, across the ridges of his abs.

I moan as I wrap my fingers around Sebastian's long, thick cock, feeling every inch of his perfectly chiseled body. "Sebastian."

A low growl rumbles in his throat, and he moves off the bed, grabbing a condom from his pocket. He swiftly rolls it over the straining head, down the velvety length.

In the dim light, I sense those dark eyes hold my gaze, searching. I take his hand and pull him down to me, his thighs pushing mine apart.

"You're sure?" he asks, brushing my hair away from my face.

"I want this." I wrap my hand around his thickness and arch toward him. "Want you," I rasp, as I guide his cock to my entrance. Slowly, he fills me, and my pussy aches in pleasure as it stretches to receive him. I gasp. "Oh, god."

His gaze never leaves my face as he groans and sinks fully into me. "You okay?"

I respond by pulling his mouth to mine, my hands gripping his hair, and whimpering against his lips, "So good."

Our movements are slow, our touches tender, and when he pulls back to hold my gaze, I know this is so much more than sex.

"I love the way you look at me," he says, entwining his fingers in mine and placing them above my head. He lowers his mouth to my breast, licking and sucking at the nipple until I whimper.

Each kiss, each caress, each whispered word of affection make me fall harder for the man. Sebastian's hands move across my body with expert precision. His fingers seem to know every secret, every hidden want, as he navigates the landscape of my skin.

"Don't stop," I beg, as his thumb brushes over my nipple and his tongue parts my lips. His thrusts hit the right spot and I cry out with the pulsing pleasure that ripples through my core. "Oh god, Sebastian."

He smiles against my lips. "I love that sound."

"Sebastian," I moan again, as he continues to move inside me.

It's hours and multiple orgasms later, when his thrusts become more demanding, his rhythm speeding up, and his breathing ragged.

"So good," I gasp, every nerve ending sparking to life. The feeling of him

filling me so completely, so powerfully, undoes me. Each sensation more incredible than the last. My clit pulses and my core clenches around him in pure ecstasy.

“Bella,” he growls out my name, a deep guttural sound, and his body goes rigid. I feel his cock pulsing inside me, causing my pussy to tighten in response, as another wave of pleasure washes over me.

He adjusts his position to lie by my side, our bodies still intertwined, and our hands find each other’s.

“Wow,” I murmur, my voice filled with a mixture of awe and satisfaction, as I turn to look into Sebastian’s eyes. “That was...just wow.”

Wow is an understatement, a mere whisper in the face of what we’ve shared. It was more than that; it was the most incredible sex of my life.

His fingers caress my cheek as he chuckles. “I’m going to visit my dad tomorrow. Do you want to go with me?”

I’m grateful for the opportunity to be a part of his world, but I already have plans.

“I’d love to, but my aunt is having a barbeque and I promised my mom I’d go. But...”

Should I break my commitment to my family to spend time with Sebastian and his father, deepening our connection even further? Or should I invite him to the barbeque, a step toward merging our lives and introducing him to my loved ones?

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Choose to spend time with Sebastian and his dad. [Turn to this page.](#)

Invite Sebastian to the family barbeque and introduce him to her loved ones. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 36

SEBASTIAN

TEQUILA TALKS

Multicolored lights flash and twirl, painting the club with vibrant hues that blur together in a dazzling display. My head is spinning, not just from the alcohol coursing through my veins, but from the reckless abandon I've surrendered to tonight.

I'm drunk. Far drunker than I should be, and I can feel the room whirling around me. Each step I take is like a precarious dance with gravity, and I know that tomorrow morning's hangover will be a brutal reminder of tonight's recklessness. But I can't bring myself to care.

As Jess and I twirl together on the dance floor, I suddenly stumble, my world tilting dangerously. Panic surges through me until steady hands wrap around my waist, pulling me back from the brink of falling.

I look up, blinking against the blinding lights, and my breath catches in my throat. It's him, *Sebastian*, his piercing dark eyes locked onto mine.

"You're here," I say, my voice wavering.

"And you're drunk," he replies, his tone a mix of exasperation and worry.

I nod, unable to contain a tipsy giggle. "I know," I admit, though the humor fades as I take in the furrowed lines on his forehead.

My fingers curl into the fabric of Sebastian's shirt, and I lean in closer, my voice dripping with intoxication and boldness. "You know," I slur, "you're...you're so hot."

He raises an eyebrow, a faint smirk playing on his lips as he leans even closer, our faces just inches apart. "How much have you had to drink, Bella?" he asks, his breath warm against my skin.

I giggle, unable to give a coherent answer. Instead, I close the remaining gap between us, my lips meeting his in a kiss that's fueled by the reckless

abandon of the night.

He curses under his breath. "I'm going to drive you home now. Tell your friend you're leaving."

I smile, my fingers deftly unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. "Then take me *hic* to your place," I say, trying to pronounce each word carefully. "I want...you."

"Let's go."

Holding me steady, Sebastian doesn't leave my side as I turn to say goodbye to Jess. She gives me an amused and knowing look before returning to dance with the other girls.

With one arm wrapped protectively around my waist, he guides me towards the exit. Outside, he helps me into the passenger seat.

As the engine purrs to life, I muster all the energy I can and murmur drunkenly, my words barely coherent, "You're so...so sexy. But you're also...mean."

"Mean, huh?" he says.

"You...disappeared," I mumble, my words carrying the weight of disappointment.

My eyelids grow heavier, and I surrender to the embrace of sleep, drifting into a dreamlike state. As consciousness fades, I swear I hear Sebastian's voice, soft and regretful, whispering something that barely registers in my drowsy mind. "I wish I could be the man you deserve."

I'm disoriented when I finally open my eyes, my head pounding in protest against the assault of the morning light. Panic washes over me for a moment as I realize I'm not in my bed, but then the memories of the previous night come rushing back. Sebastian. The club. The reckless decisions made under the influence of alcohol.

As I examine my surroundings, I notice a steaming cup of coffee on the side table with a message beside it. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips as I read his words.

I went out to pick up some hangover-approved food. Have a shower, and I'll be back soon with lunch.

I glance at the clock, and my eyes widen in disbelief. It's already noon.

A hot shower sounds like a blessing, and I stumble into the bathroom, hoping the water will wash away the remnants of my girls' night out.

Feeling somewhat human again, I slip into one of Sebastian's oversized t-shirts and a pair of his jogging pants. I find him in the kitchen, cooking. I clear my throat nervously, meeting his gaze with a mixture of gratitude and self-consciousness.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, moving toward me.

"Better. Thanks," I reply, my voice raspy. "I don't usually drink like that."

He reaches out and cups my cheek, those dark eyes intensely focused on me. "I'm glad you called me."

"Last night is a bit of a blur," I admit, my cheeks warming with embarrassment.

"Don't worry," he reassures me. "Nothing happened between us."

"So I didn't make a complete fool of myself?"

Sebastian chuckles, his laughter warm and reassuring. Without another word, he lowers his mouth, brushing his lips over mine softly. When he pulls back, a shadow flickers in his expression and I can't help but notice the change in his demeanor, as if he's carrying a weight he hasn't yet shared.

"We need to talk," he says. "You're right that I haven't been fair to you. And there are things I haven't shared."

My heart skips a beat as my apprehension deepens. I can sense the gravity of the conversation we're about to have, and a mixture of anticipation and fear churns within me.

"But you should eat first." Sebastian takes my hand, and I follow him to the marble island, sitting on one of the white leather stools.

"I didn't know you could cook," I say, watching him with genuine interest, as he continues scrambling eggs and frying bacon.

"After mom..." he begins, then clears his throat, and continues. "I shouldered a lot more household responsibilities after she...took her life."

"Oh my god, Sebastian," I whisper. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not something I like to share." He places a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast in front of me.

I pause to absorb his words. The meal, though delicious, seems secondary now, as the weight of his revelation hangs heavily in the air.

Taking a seat beside me, he sips his coffee, and I can see the pain in his

features as he opens up. “I hated her for a long time,” he admits, his voice heavy with emotion. “I know it wasn’t fair. She was grieving the loss of her son. But...” He shakes his head, eyes closing as he continues, “I needed her.”

My heart aches for him, for the pain he’s endured.

“You had every right to be angry with her,” I tell him. “It was a selfish thing to do.”

Sebastian’s eyes remain heavy with the weight of his memories. “It was. But CF is a brutal disease. It destroys families. She never got over the guilt.”

“What’s CF?” I ask, grateful that he’s opening up.

He holds my gaze, an inner turmoil in his eyes, when he says, “Cystic Fibrosis.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” I admit.

“It’s caused by a faulty gene.” He takes a deep breath and rubs the back of his neck. “It leads to the production of mucus in the lungs and other organs, and it also traps bacteria, leading to chronic infections and lung damage. Many people with CF can live a fairly normal life, especially with the advances in medical therapies.” He sighs, his expression growing somber once more. “But Toby had an aggressive form of the disease. Despite all the treatments and interventions, his lung function deteriorated rapidly. He developed a severe respiratory infection that his weakened immune system couldn’t fight off.”

“I’m sorry.” I reach out and put my hand over his.

The pieces of a puzzle are falling into place, and I can see him more clearly now. The walls he’s constructed, the layers of self-protection, they all make sense considering the burdens he’s carried.

I rise from my seat, and he shifts on his stool to make space. I stand between his legs and I run my fingers through his dark hair, a tender gesture meant to convey my gratitude for his willingness to open up to me.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I murmur. “I know it must have been difficult.”

Sebastian’s eyes meet mine, and there’s a deep vulnerability there. “Bella, I—”

I stop his words with a kiss, and he groans against my mouth. The taste of him is exquisite, a blend of coffee and something uniquely Sebastian. Our tongues dance in a tantalizing, intricate rhythm. The sensation of his lips moving against mine, the softness and warmth, ignites a fiery heat within me.

When our lips part, Sebastian’s breathing is ragged, his dark eyes filled

with a depth of emotion that takes my breath away.

His fingers brush a strand of hair from my face as he speaks, his voice laced with sincerity. “I care about you, Bella. I don’t want to fuck things up. But my life is complicated...”

I rest my forehead against his, fingers tangling in his hair. “I can handle complicated. I just want to know where we stand.”

“We can take things slow,” he says, hands resting on my hips. “Whatever pace you’re comfortable with.”

“This *is* us taking things slow.” I say against his mouth, “I’m ready to speed things up a bit.”

“Is that so?” he asks, palms running under the t-shirt, across the bare skin of my lower back.

“Yes,” I murmur, my lips just inches from his ear, “I want you now.”

A deep groan vibrates in his throat, and he doesn’t hesitate. He takes my hand and leads me to the bedroom.

His gentle touch is filled with desire, and the room is charged with anticipation as he lifts the shirt over my head. He leans in, his lips tracing a path of kisses along my exposed skin. The warmth of his mouth against me sends shivers of pleasure down my spine, and I gasp as his lips find mine once more.

I find myself driven by an insatiable need to explore every inch of him. My fingers tremble slightly as I reach for the buttons of his shirt, and one by one, they come undone. As it slides off his shoulders and falls to the floor, I’m met with the breathtaking sight of his chiseled chest. It’s a masterpiece of lean, powerful muscles that ripple beneath his dark bronze skin.

My fingertips trace a slow, tantalizing path down his abs, reveling in the sensation of his warmth and strength. I feel the rhythm of his heart beating beneath my touch, each pulse echoing the desire that courses through us both.

“You’re even more incredible than I imagined,” I tell him.

He chuckles, the sound of a warm rumble against my ear. He leans in to whisper his response, his voice a husky murmur that sends shivers down my spine. “You’re gorgeous, Bella.”

We shed the remaining layers of clothing, our need intensifying with each garment that falls away. He explores my breasts with tender reverence, his mouth and tongue igniting sensations that leave me gasping.

His breath grows ragged against my skin, and I can sense the restraint that has held him back beginning to unravel. His lips find mine with an intensity

that leaves no room for hesitation, and our kisses become more voracious, more primal.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the bed, easing me down onto the soft sheet.

From the bedside table, he takes out a foil wrapper. I seize the chance to appreciate all of him. Every inch of his body is perfectly sculpted. His waist is slim and toned, emphasizing the powerful lines of his abdomen and the definition of his muscles. I lick my lips at the sight of his long, thick cock. I take the condom from Sebastian and roll it over his delectable length. He groans and crawls onto the bed, moving so that his legs spread mine.

Those dark eyes hold my gaze, searching.

“I want this. Want you,” I rasp, as I guide his cock to my entrance. Slowly, he fills me, and my pussy aches in pleasure as it stretches to receive him. I gasp. “Oh, god.”

“You okay?” he asks.

I respond by pulling his mouth to mine, my fingers tangling in his hair, and whimper against his lips, “So good.”

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I’m grateful for the opportunity to be a part of his world, but I already have plans.

“I’d love to, but my aunt is having a barbeque and I promised my mom I’d go.”

Should I break my commitment to my family to spend time with Sebastian and his father, deepening our connection even further? Or should I invite him to the barbeque, a step toward merging our lives and introducing him to my loved ones?

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Choose to spend time with Sebastian and his dad. [Turn to this page.](#)

Invite Sebastian to the family barbeque and introduce him to her loved ones. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART SIX

FAMILY MATTERS

You can't choose your family, but you can choose to love them, quirks and all. It's like being in a lifelong game of 'You're Stuck with Me, and I'm Stuck with You!' But hey, it's the quirks that keep life interesting!

CHAPTER 37

DAMIEN

THE FAMILY TEST

Usually, I'm a master at striking up conversations with new people. Alright, maybe not so much with the hot guys, but I've aced every first day of school, conquered those cringe-worthy parent-teacher meetings, and even had the cashier at the grocery store cracking up just last week. But let me tell you, the mere thought of meeting Damien's family has my stomach in knots. It's like a full-on squirrel party is happening in my stomach—nervous squirrels, excited squirrels, and a couple of rogue squirrels of fear, all doing the jitterbug in there.

But one glance at Damien as we approach the front door of his family's house and my emotions decide to take a break from their squirrel party and start doing jumping jacks for an entirely different reason. God, those eyes. They pierce me with a steely heat that goes straight to my core. And those lips of his – they're like a magnetic forcefield pulling me closer.

He leans in, his warm breath tickling my ear, and whispers, "You'd better stop looking at me like that, Bella or this dinner is going to be torture."

I can't help but let out a playful chuckle. "Well, as much as I'm looking forward to dinner with your mom, I'm even more excited about dessert." I flash him a mischievous grin so he knows where my priorities lie.

He groans, then gives me a small swat on my ass. "Be good." He leans closer and growls into my ear. "At least until I get you back to my place."

The promise of his words makes that ache between my legs throb. "Now, who's being bad."

He chuckles, then opens the front door of the tiny house and calls out, "Ma, we're here."

The home is cozy but modest, a living testament to the resilience of the people who reside here. It's spotlessly clean, yet the furniture shows signs of wear and tear, hinting at the years of hard work and dedication that have gone into maintaining this place.

"In here," a woman's voice calls out.

Damien leads me into the cozy living room, where Kathy, his mother, is seated on the couch. Her eyes light up with warmth and joy when she sees us, but I notice a slight wince as she attempts to stand. It doesn't deter her, though; she greets me with one of the tightest hugs I've ever received.

"Damien didn't lie; you are the prettiest little thing, aren't you?" Her eyes mirror Damien's cool blue gaze and hold a similar depth.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Blackwood."

"Call me Kathy, sweetheart."

Just then, a whirlwind of energy storms into the room, a child who couldn't be anything other than Lexi. Damien scoops her into his arms, and she grins at me, introducing herself, "I'm Lexi."

"Nice to meet you, Lexi," I smile, shaking her tiny hand when Damien gently puts her down.

"Dami says you're an artist. Wanna draw with me?"

"Maybe after dinner," Kathy interjects with a warm smile. "Now, go wash up. We're eating in a few minutes."

Over dinner, Kathy doesn't hesitate to share stories about Damien as a kid, and I relish every word. There's something incredibly endearing about glimpsing the moments that have shaped the man who is currently in the process of stealing my heart.

Kathy grins mischievously, her eyes twinkling with affection as she scoops another helping of homemade macaroni and cheese onto my plate. "Oh, Bella, you wouldn't believe some of the trouble Damien got himself into as a child."

"I don't think Bella wants to hear about that," Damien says, frowning.

Chuckling, I give Kathy's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Actually, I do."

She laughs, her eyes lighting up as she reminisces. "One time, he tried to fix the leaky sink in the bathroom. Damien ended up busting the whole pipe. I came home, and the entire house was flooded."

"I was ten," he mutters. "I've improved my plumbing skills since then."

Kathy shakes her head, smiling warmly. "Any trouble he ever got into was always because he was trying to do a good thing."

Damien's gaze darkens, and they share a somber look before he pushes his chair back and begins collecting the dishes.

"Life wasn't always easy for him," Kathy says softly, then winces and massages her lower back.

"Are you okay?" I ask

"Just a little back pain," Kathy responds. "But I make do. Damien's been my rock, supporting me when I couldn't work full-time anymore. I try to take on part-time jobs when my health allows."

I glance over at Damien, who is standing at the sink, brows a frown tugging at his lips as he washes dishes.

"He's always been a good son," Kathy adds, looking fondly at Damien. "He had to grow up too fast." Her eyes momentarily reflect a deep introspection and a flicker of emotion passes across her face. "I wish I could have given him more."

Damien stands behind his mom and places a hand on her shoulder, slightly squeezing it. "You gave me and Stacey everything you had. Even when it meant you went without."

"See," Kathy says with a gentle pat on his hand. As she rises and turns away, I notice tears in her eyes. "Always such a good boy."

Damien swallows hard, and his eyes meet mine. In that momentary connection, I sense the inner turmoil he carries. It becomes evident that the lighthearted dinner conversation was a deliberate effort to protect both themselves and me from the haunting shadows of their past, instead choosing to concentrate on the happier memories they've built together.

After dinner, as I sit on the floor doing a craft project with Lexi, I overhear snippets of conversation between Kathy and Damien. It's clear that she approves of me, but her motherly instincts are at the forefront as she quietly warns her son not to break my heart.

It's something I'm worried about too. Because the closer Damien and I get, the more I realize how deep his pain goes and how little I know about him.

As the night wears on, Damien becomes increasingly withdrawn and broody. It's only after we've said our goodbyes and he's assisting me onto the back of his motorcycle that he breaks his silence from dinner.

"I'll take you home." His voice carries a stern tone, and he avoids making eye contact.

I place my palm on his chiseled jaw, the rough scruff grazing my delicate

skin as I turn his face to meet mine. "Did I say something that upset you?"

He lets out a deep sigh. "No. It's just..." He takes my hand and presses his lips softly against my knuckles, then shakes his head as if trying to clear the darkness from his thoughts. "Let's go." He secures my arms around his waist and revs the engine.

I assume he's taking me back to my place until we stop in front of an old warehouse.

"Where are we?"

Guiding me off the bike and taking my hand, he leads me inside. "My place."

The loft apartment feels like a world away from the cozy family home we just left. It's enormous but empty of the basics, starkly contrasting the warmth and cluttered memories that filled his mom's place.

Damien tosses his leather jacket over a metal bar stool at the kitchen island, takes a deep breath, and turns to face me. His eyes hold a mixture of fear and longing, and he starts, "Bella, I don't know what this is between us." His voice hints at vulnerability. "But I've never felt this way, and it terrifies me."

"It terrifies me too," I admit, drawing nearer to him. I place my hands on his chest, sensing the erratic rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my palms.

"I've done things I'm not proud of," he confesses. "I've walked down a shadowy path that led me to some dark places. Crossed paths with dangerous people who still bear grudges against me." His eyes meet mine, and I can see the unease in them. "The thought of involving you in my complicated life terrifies me even more."

I've never known anyone like this man: dark, brooding, mysterious, and undeniably dangerous. The fear is mutual, but I can't imagine walking away from him despite my apprehension. Because he might be dangerous, but he's also vulnerable, sweet, caring, and...everything I never knew I wanted.

"I like what we have," I tell him, downplaying how much he's already starting to mean to me. "And want to know everything about you. The good, the bad, all of it."

He sighs, his expression reflecting the weight of his past. "Trust me, Bella," he begins, his voice tinged with remorse, "our lives are so fucking different. When I saw you in the coffee shop, I knew you were too good for me. That my life would only pollute your perfect world."

"My life was far from perfect when I met you. Sure, it was good. But it

was also incredibly boring. When I'm with you, I have no idea what will happen next."

"There's something good about predictability," he says.

"There's also something good about being with you."

He holds my gaze for a moment, and then his eyes shift away. "It's not just the shit I've done, Bella, but..." His breath catches, and I glimpse the boy he once was—scared, vulnerable, and broken. "A lot of fucked-up shit was done to me as a kid. And I'm fucking terrified I'll bring that toxicity into our relationship."

I move closer to him and rest my hands on his chest. My heart feels like it's shattering, not for me, but for him. For the pain he's gone through — the fear he still holds.

"I want to be with you," I assure him, my voice filled with conviction. I kiss him, our lips meeting in a soft, lingering moment, and I feel a sense of belonging, as if the universe has conspired to bring us together. That maybe I was meant to help heal the broken boy that lingers within him. He might find the haven he's never known with me.

But deep down, a small worry remains — a whisper of doubt.

We break the kiss, and Damien gazes into my eyes, his vulnerability laid bare. "You deserve better than me, Bella. I'll never be your Prince Charming if that's what you're after."

I give him a wry smile. "Who said I want a fairy tale? I want real, messy, complicated love. And if that comes with a side of danger, I guess I'll have to learn to be a badass like you."

He chuckles, and the tension in the room dissipates.

I nestle my head against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart. "Maybe I'll be your Princess Charming, or whatever the equivalent is."

He laughs and kisses my head, his lips lingering there. "I've never met anyone like you, Bella."

I smile, bunching my fists in his t-shirt and letting my thumbs brush against his abs. "I'm wondering if your command from early is still in effect?"

"My command?" He asks, raising a brow.

"The one to be good. Cause..." I lean up and nip at his bottom lip. "I'm having some naughty thoughts right now."

A mix between a chuckle and a groan escapes his lips. "Really? Because I'm having some pretty wicked thoughts myself." He scoops me up in his

arms swiftly, and I let out a startled laugh. “I guess you have a choice to make.”

“Yes,” I moan, twisting in his arms to find his mouth. “Yes, and yes.”

“You didn’t even hear the choices,” he says against my lips, moving me so I sit on the kitchen island, my legs straddling his waist.

“Just yes,” I say again, pulling at his t-shirt until he helps me remove it.

“If you don’t answer me now, there’ll only be option A, me fucking you right here because I don’t think I’ll last if you keep moving your hips against me like that.”

“What’s option B?” I ask, panting, as he pulls my shirt over my head, and his calloused hands brush against my sensitive skin, sending shivers throughout my whole body.

“Bedroom,” he groans, his control faltering. “And I take my time.”

My brain isn’t firing right because, greedily, I want both options.

“Choose,” he demands, growling. “Now, Bella.”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Keep the heat turned up, and have sex in the kitchen. [Turn to this page.](#)

Take Damien to the bedroom and make love to him, slow and sweet. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 38

DAMIEN

OPTION B

“Option B,” I whimper against his mouth, unable to control the tremble of desire that races through me.

I feel him smile against my mouth, slowing his kiss. His tongue sweeps across my bottom lip before he pulls back slightly.

He gives a cocky smirk, then scoops me in his arms, carrying me to his room. “Your wish is my command, princess.”

I chuckle. “I thought you said you weren’t my Prince Charming.”

He grins down at me as he places me on his bed. “Tonight, I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Bella.”

“Well, you’ve already mastered the bad boy biker vibe,” I say, running my palms over his abs and pushing his t-shirt until he helps me remove it. “That’s the only fantasy I need.”

“It’s no fantasy, Bella.” He holds my gaze. “It’s real. *We’re* real.”

I swallow over the lump in my throat, wanting to believe him. And maybe it’s true, but even as he says the words, I see the conflict in his gaze.

There’s always a part of himself he keeps hidden, a part that looks ready to run away from whatever we are.

Don’t think about it. Not now.

Pushing the doubt away, I pull my shirt off and toss it aside.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he says, his gaze roaming down my body, one hand unfastening the button of my jeans. He lowers his mouth to one breast, undoing my bra, and takes my nipple between his lips and sucks it, twirling his tongue around the bud.

Goosebumps assault my skin, making me shiver.

It feels good. Better than good. Being with him feels fantastic.

And *dangerous*.

But deliciously so.

I lay under him in only my panties and one large palm sweeps between my thighs. The pulsating ache that starts is so intense my entire body shudders in response.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin as his head lowers.

Pushing my thighs open with one hand so that his face is between my legs, he blows a warm breath against my damp panties before dragging his teeth across the material, then giving my clit a tiny nip.

“More,” I moan, arching towards him, needing friction.

He laughs against me, the vibration almost making me come. The man is so good at being bad, and I absolutely love it.

When he slides a finger under the material, pushing it aside, my entire body trembles with need.

Damien’s tongue dances across my clit until I squirm and beg him to be inside me.

He chuckles before lifting himself off the bed and discarding his jeans and boxers. Then his mouth is back on mine, and he kisses me with a greedy hunger. A hunger that matches my own.

His hands explore my body, and I’m helpless to him. Arching and aching as his fingers are again inside me, his thumb flicking at my clit.

So many times, I get close to coming, and he pulls back, that cocky smirk on his face as he moves to another spot that sends pleasure racing straight to my pussy.

My fingers curl into the sheets as he enters me, and I suck in a breath as my body expands to take in his full length and thickness.

He takes his time, a slow, steady rhythm that leaves me whimpering for more.

“More,” I whimper, arching toward him and digging my fingers into his hips.

He chuckles, “Demanding, aren’t you.”

“Please,” I beg. And his thrusts become faster, harder, more primal. I’m so close to coming, and I cry out desperately. “It feels so good.”

Every hard, delicious thrust sends exquisite pleasure racing through my entire body. I clench around him as I’m thrown over the edge of ecstasy. Eyes closed, I swear I can feel the pleasure in every cell of my body.

“Bella, look at me,” Damien growls out.

My vision is a lust-filled haze. I blink up at him, and his look is like a hot spear that cuts through the last ounce of self-preservation I have left, leaving me defenseless.

His body trembles and then goes rigid as he comes hard inside me. Collapsing against the mattress, he makes a deep rumbling noise, “Holy god, Bella, you drive me insane.”

I chuckle, feeling the same way.

He pulls me into his arms and murmurs against my ear, “Stay the night.”

“I have an early morning meeting.” I trace the lines of his abs and ask, “Next time?”

“Next time.” I hear the smile that tugs at his lips as he says the words.

Next time.

A promise.

And I want a million *next times* with him. The revelation is both terrifying and exciting.

Damien helps me retrieve my bra and panties, and when we’re dressed, he brushes his lips against my forehead. “I’ll drive you home.”

How can this dark, brooding man be so gentle and sweet? I hate leaving him. Especially when I feel entirely unraveled.

Because every look he gives me, every touch — it’s too real, too genuine, and a nagging voice in my head warns, *too damn good to be true.*

And riding back to my place, clutching onto his muscular frame, my head swims with all the possibilities of what a future with him could look like.

Outside my home, his lips linger on mine before he gives me one of his cocky grins and tells me, “Goodnight, beautiful.”

“Night,” I say with a sigh as I watch him ride away, the muffled sound of his motorcycle's engine growing fainter as it disappears around the corner.

My heart is flayed, fully open, and I know he already has the power to destroy it.

But as I open my front door, my vulnerability truly sets in.

The unsettling feeling that something is wrong strikes me even before I look at the chaos that has enveloped my home.

“Oh my god,” I gasp, dropping my purse and stumbling back when I see the broken picture frames that litter the floor, my grandmother's cherished vase shattered, and the clothes strewn about in a chaotic mess.

But before I can cry out, a large, gloved hand covers my mouth, and I'm forcefully pulled back against a foul-smelling body.

"Scream, and I'll cut you," a raspy voice growls menacingly into my ear. "I've got a message for your boyfriend. Tell him that payback's a bitch, and this is only the beginning."

With a forceful shove, the man propels me to the ground, and by the time I regain my balance, he's gone.

Panic sets in, and I don't think; I just run. I can't even remember if I shut the door behind me as I dart out of my house, and it's only when I spot the headlights that I realize I'm in the middle of the road. Brakes screech and a silver car comes perilously close to hitting me. As the driver gets out, his curses fill the air, but I'm frozen.

"Bella. What the hell?" The voice is familiar.

"Sebastian," I say, trembling.

"What's happened?"

"A man..." Words won't form in my throat.

"Who?" Sebastian takes my hands, his dark, piercing eyes searching mine.

"Someone was in my house. He...he threatened..." My voice cracks with every syllable.

Sebastian guides me to the passenger side of his car. "Sit here, and I'll call the police."

My entire body trembles now, and I remain seated, minutes ticking by, hating how my body betrays me. Cold. Paralyzed. Shaking.

"They're on their way," Sebastian says, kneeling beside the open door and holding my hand. "Is there anyone you need to call?"

Damien. I need to tell him what happened.

"Bella?" Concern is etched deeply across Sebastian's handsome face, visible in the furrowed lines on his forehead and the tightness around his mouth.

I reach for his phone, my trembling fingers hovering over the screen. The decision weighs heavily on my heart. With all his unpredictability and intensity, Damien has been a force of nature in my life, leaving an indelible mark on my heart and soul. I know I need to tell him, but I fear his reaction. A palpable sense of trepidation washes over me like a cold, unrelenting wave.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Call **Damien** and tell him what happened. [Turn to this page.](#)

Have **Sebastian** stay until the police arrive and figure out what to do.
[Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 39

DAMIEN

OPTION A

“Option A,” I moan, and as soon as I make the choice, Damien’s lips crash down on mine, and one hand twists in the mass of my hair. “You drive me crazy, Bella,” he rasps against my mouth, his kiss and touch rough with desire.

My whole body reacts to the sexual energy that radiates off him. My knees wobble, my breath comes out rough, and as our gazes tangle, I know this man will be my undoing.

But it’s too late now. I’ve already fallen deeper than I should, and I give in to the need that races through me.

We tear at each other’s clothes, a feral intensity that leaves us both panting. I slide his pants and boxers over his hips, and his cock springs free.

With a teasing smile, I take the engorged head in my mouth, swirling my tongue across it, and watch Damien’s self-control unravel. His fingers knot in my hair, and he lets out a guttural groan.

“Easy, beautiful,” he rasps, pulling me up. “I won’t last long if you keep doing that.”

Heat blisters through me as Damien’s mouth retakes mine. This kiss is even wilder, more crazed, more feral, and I feel myself unraveling, my inhibitions falling off me like chains that have kept me weighted down.

His hands, big and rough, unhook my bra before pulling me against his chest. His skin is hot against mine, and I let out a small moan as my nipples brushed against his warmth.

The remnants of our clothes discarded, he lifts me so that I’m straddling his waist, his hands cupping my ass. My pussy is ready for him as he enters me in one hard thrust.

I cry out, my head tilting back at the pleasure of his fullness inside me. He steadies himself, one palm firmly planted on the fridge as he thrusts against my hips, over and over again, my pussy claspng tightly around his cock.

Each touch, each movement, each kiss is laced with something that hadn't been there before. He thrusts inside me hard and fast, my fingers digging into his back as I match the rhythm of his hips with my own.

Broken moans and whimpers fill the space between us. And when we finally come together, I swear the world moves beneath us.

He holds me tight against my chest, our breathing ragged. Perspiration still beads along my forehead, and a hundred emotions beat erratically in my chest. Hope. Uncertainty. Fear. *Love*. But the only thing I know for sure is I never want to let him go.

"Stay the night," Damien murmurs against my ear.

I let out a frustrated sigh, wishing I could. "I have an early morning meeting. Next time?"

"Next time." A small smile tugs at his lips as he says the words.

A promise.

And I want a million *next times* with him. The revelation is both terrifying and exciting.

Damien helps me retrieve my bra and panties, and when we're dressed, he brushes his lips against my forehead. "I'll drive you home."

How can this dark, brooding man be so gentle and sweet? I hate leaving him. Especially when I feel entirely unraveled.

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A palpable sense of trepidation washes over me like a cold, unrelenting wave.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Call **Damien** and tell him what happened. [Turn to this page.](#)

Have **Sebastian** stay until the police arrive and figure out what to do. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 40

ALEX

FALSE IMPRESSIONS

The crisp Saturday afternoon air fills my lungs as I walk hand in hand with Alex, heading toward the art gallery. The sun's warm rays kiss our faces, but my heart flutters with anticipation and a hint of nervousness.

Today marks a significant step, as I'm about to meet his sister for the first time. He's told me countless stories about her, their close bond, and the adventures they've shared over the years.

I feel a tightening in my chest as we approach the gallery entrance. Naomi is already waiting for us, and from Alex's description, I spot her instantly — a striking blonde with a poised demeanor. She's dressed impeccably, and her confident presence is undeniable.

"Alex," she calls out, her voice carrying warmth and authority. They embrace tightly, and I can see the genuine affection between them.

I step forward, and Naomi's gaze locks onto mine. Her smile is friendly, but there's something in her eyes, a subtle scrutiny that makes me suddenly self-conscious. "You must be Bella."

I extend my hand, feeling the weight of her expectations. "It's great to meet you finally."

We exchange pleasantries, but I can't help but feel like she's assessing me, trying to discern whether I'm the right fit for her brother. Her questions about my job, interests, and relationship are polite, but there's an undercurrent of something else — an almost imperceptible skepticism.

As we stroll through the gallery, Naomi engages us in discussions about the art, her knowledge and passion for the subject evident. But the uneasiness in my chest lingers, growing like a shadow that I can't escape.

"What do you think of this one, Alex?" Naomi inquires, focusing on a piece by the incredibly talented Christina Quarles.

Alex chuckles softly and shrugs. "Honestly, everything here looks the same to me." He wraps an arm around my shoulder, drawing me close. "Bella's the art expert."

Naomi's smile remains polite, but her eyes have a hint of amusement as she turns her attention toward me. "And what's your opinion?"

I study the artwork, taking in the intricate details and vibrant colors. Despite my unease, I offer my honest opinion. "I think it's quite striking. The use of color and texture is captivating and evokes a sense of depth and emotion."

Naomi's gaze narrows ever so slightly, and her lips curve into a faint smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Interesting. It's always refreshing to hear different perspectives."

Her response leaves me feeling like I've been analyzed and assessed, as if every word I've spoken is being scrutinized.

But I refuse to let the discomfort dampen our day. Instead, I focus on enjoying the moments with Alex and learning more about his family, hoping that the uneasiness will dissipate with time and our connection will only grow stronger.

We continue our day with a leisurely lunch at a nearby chic restaurant called The Velvet Table. The atmosphere is lively, and I can't help but feel more at ease, hoping that the change of scenery will lift the weight of tension that has descended on my shoulders.

We settle into our seats, and the menu offers a distraction, giving us something else to focus on. The conversation flows more naturally as we discuss the restaurant's cuisine, and Naomi shares stories of her life in Denver.

But when Alex excuses himself to take a phone call, the atmosphere at our table shifts. I glance at Naomi, who seems to seize the opportunity to delve into a topic that makes my heart sink.

"It's adorable this thing—" She motions towards me. "—between you and Alex."

"Thanks." I chew on my bottom lip, feeling the undertone of her words.

"It must be intimidating to be his rebound after Angie. They really were perfect together."

I swallow hard, feeling a wave of discomfort wash over me. "Until she

cheated on him," I remind her.

"Who hasn't made mistakes in relationships?" Naomi's gaze hardens on me, the same scrutiny I'd seen earlier returning. "They just had this connection, you know? It's rare to find two people who are so perfectly suited for each other."

I struggle to find the right response.

"You and Angie were friends, I'm guessing."

"We still are," she says, sipping her wine, gaze never leaving mine. "She's like a sister to me."

Her words, spoken and unspoken, hang in the air.

"So what are we talking about?" Alex asks, returning to the table, his presence providing a welcome interruption to the conversation.

I plaster on a polite smile, but inside, my emotions are a swirling mix of discomfort and uncertainty. The shadow of Angie and the weight of Naomi's unspoken judgment linger, casting a cloud over what was supposed to be a delightful lunch.

Naomi's demeanor suddenly shifts, and she offers a warm smile. "I was just telling Bella how cute you two are together."

I manage a grateful smile, but my emotions remain in turmoil beneath it. The shadow of Angie and the unspoken judgment from Naomi continue to weigh on me, leaving me uncertain about where I stand in this complex family dynamic.

We finally bid Naomi farewell at the restaurant. She embraces Alex warmly and hugs me, her polite facade never slipping.

As we step out into the street, I still wrestle with the unease that had settled during our lunch. I don't share with Alex the subtle tension and unspoken judgments between Naomi and me. Part of me wants to protect him from potential family drama, but another part yearns to confide in him.

We walk hand in hand back to my place, the weight of my insecurities heavy on my chest. The silence between us grows.

"Is everything okay?" Alex asks, his voice soft and gentle.

I take a deep breath, looking into his eyes, so warm and reassuring. "I'm probably being silly, but..."

He cups my face in his hands, his touch sending a soothing wave of reassurance through me. "You never have to feel silly talking to me."

I take a moment to gather my thoughts. "It's just that Naomi mentioned Angie, and it made me wonder if she's comparing me to her somehow."

Alex's eyes soften, and he brushes his thumb over my cheek. "Bella, you are incomparable. You're unique, and I love everything about you."

His words melt away my insecurities, and I feel warmth and love envelop me.

He leans in, and our lips meet in a sweet, lingering kiss, a silent affirmation of his feelings. As we pull away, he whispers, "You are the one I choose, Bella. There's no comparison because you are everything I've ever wanted."

His words and touch erase my doubt, leaving me feeling cherished and secure.

"I was thinking..." Alex says, "Hal and Kimmy's wedding is coming up, and I was wondering if you'd be my date?"

His question takes me by surprise. I've already promised Jess I would go to the wedding with her. My mind races as I weigh my options, but I can't deny the flutter of anticipation that his invitation stirs within me.

"I'd love to," I begin, "but I've already told Jess I'd go with her. Let me think about it and talk to her."

"Of course." he nods understandingly, his fingers gently tracing patterns on my arm. Alex's mouth meets mine in a sweet, lingering kiss filled with tenderness and a hint of longing. But as our lips part, Alex's mischievous side resurfaces, and he teases me. "As long as I'm the one who gets to take you home."

I playfully retort, "Well, if you promise to be on your best behavior at the wedding, I might consider it."

He chuckles, fingers dance along my cheek, and he leans in again, his lips brushing against mine, this time with a sensual edge. The kiss deepens, our mouths moving in sync as desire flares between us.

With a playful grin, he pulls back just slightly, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. "God, I love your lips," he whispers. "I could kiss you and never stop."

I chuckle softly, my fingers tracing his jawline. "Who told you to stop?"

A low rumble vibrates in his throat, and his mouth is back on mine, hungry and intense. Our lips remain locked in a passionate embrace, desire surging between us like a tidal wave. It's a kiss filled with longing and unspoken promises, leaving me breathless and yearning for more.

Alex scoops me into his arms effortlessly, my legs wrapped around his waist as he carries me toward the bedroom. I can't help but laugh in delight at

his playful yet sensual gesture, the electricity between us palpable.

As he gently sets me down on the edge of the bed, our eyes lock once more, the unspoken understanding between us growing stronger by the second.

Our clothes are discarded quickly, his mouth finding every sensitive spot on my body, and I arch towards his touch, his lips. Every movement between us, every caress, kiss, and gaze, transcends words. His hands against my skin ignite a fire within me, and the feeling of his body pressed against mine sends waves of pleasure coursing through every nerve ending.

I cry out when he enters me, needing a moment to adjust to his length and thickness. My body pulses around him, our gazes locked.

“God, you’re beautiful.” He kisses me softly, and my breath catches in my throat, overwhelmed by the depth of emotion that surges through me.

Our bodies begin to move together in a slow and steady rhythm. The room is filled with our moans and whimpers' soft, melodic sounds. Until our movements synchronize in a dance of passion and intimacy that takes us to the peak of pleasure. Time seems to stand still as we lose ourselves in the ecstasy of the moment, our bodies and souls merging in perfect harmony — a beautiful crescendo of pleasure and desire.

We lie entwined in the aftermath of our lovemaking. Our breaths slowly return to a tranquil rhythm. The room is filled with a comforting silence, broken only by the occasional sigh of contentment.

Alex's arms are wrapped securely around me, holding me close as if he never wants to let go.

It’s a perfect moment. There are no worries, no uncertainties — just the profound connection we share. Our fingers are intertwined, and the world outside fades into insignificance.

I turn my head slightly, my lips grazing his jawline, and he responds with a soft, affectionate smile.

"Are you thirsty?" Alex's voice breaks the tranquil silence, his warm breath brushing against my ear.

I nod slightly.

With a soft kiss on my temple, he carefully disentangles himself from our embrace and slides into his pants. I watch him, feeling a sense of contentment and warmth wash over me. The way he cares for me, even in these simple moments, fills my heart with a profound sense of love.

He returns with a glass of water and offers it to me with a tender smile. I

take a sip, feeling the cool liquid soothe my parched throat. His fingers brush a strand of hair away from my face, and he leans down to place another sweet kiss on my forehead.

God, he is so sweet. So perfect.

As we lie there, our intimate moment still fresh in our minds, Alex's phone suddenly vibrates. His expression tightens with worry when he glances at the screen. "It's the hospital." Without hesitation, he answers the call.

I watch him anxiously, my heart racing as I sense something is wrong. The conversation is brief, but the gravity of the situation becomes evident when he hangs up.

"It's Angie," he says, his voice tinged with concern. "I'm still listed as her emergency contact."

"Is she alright?"

"She's been in a car accident. I don't know how serious it is."

My heart sinks as I hear the news and instinctively reach to touch his arm. "Do you want me to go with you?"

He looks torn, his gaze filled with gratitude and indecision. "I appreciate it, but I'll text you with updates. Right now, I need to go."

I nod, understanding the urgency of the situation.

He swiftly gathers his things and rushes out the door, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Minutes turn into what feels like hours as I anxiously await a message from Alex. My mind racing with every possible scenario and hating myself for the jealousy and insecurities that well up in my chest.

Finally, my phone buzzes, and I hastily grab it, my heart pounding.

Alex: Angie is fine. Just some minor cuts and bruises.

Bella: That's good news.

Alex: She's pretty shaken up. I'm going to stay with her for a bit.

My thumbs hover over the screen. "Don't be jealous," I whisper. "They're still friends. That's all."

But even as the words fall from my lips, a nagging voice in the back of my head tells me otherwise.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Have faith in Alex's genuine intentions. His friendship with Angie is purely platonic, and friends support one another. Embrace his offer to accompany him to the wedding, accepting the invitation to share this special event together. [Turn to this page.](#)

Follow Alex's example and be a supportive friend – don't let Jess down. Accompany her to the wedding because, after all, Alex hasn't formalized their relationship yet. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 41

SEBASTIAN

DAD JOKES AND GRILL SMOKE

“Sounds like a real party,” Sebastian says, his eyes twinkling with curiosity as we make our way toward the bustling backyard of my Aunt Helen’s. The mouthwatering scent of barbecue wafts through the air, blending with the symphony of laughter and animated conversations.

“Our family get-togethers always are,” I reply, leaning into him and giving his arm a gentle squeeze. I smile up at him, a rush of gratitude for his presence by my side. “Don’t worry, they’re a rowdy bunch, but they’re mostly harmless.”

“Mostly?” he raises an eyebrow, a playful glint in his eye.

I chuckle. “As long as you can survive a few dad jokes and my aunt’s flirting, you’ll be fine.”

He laughs, a rich and melodic sound that makes my heart skip a beat. Leaning down, he presses a tender kiss to the top of my head. “I think I can handle that.”

I stop and put my arms around his neck, drawing him down into a kiss. Everything seems different now. It feels right. Like I’ve always belonged with him. Sure, his world is fancy French restaurants and operas, and mine is family barbecues and school art projects, but I know this thing between us is real.

“There you are,” my mom’s voice interrupts the moment, and I sigh, turning as she walks towards us, her smile beaming.

“Hi,” I say as she envelops me in a tight hug. “And you must be Sebastian” She pats his face lightly. “I can see why she’s so smitten with you.”

“Mom,” I give her a look of warning, my cheeks hot with embarrassment.

Sebastian, however, handles the situation with his usual grace and charm. He grins, his eyes sparkling with genuine warmth, effortlessly winning her over. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Montgomery,” he says with a respectful nod.

My mom’s smile widens, and I can tell she’s already planning to interrogate him about his life, his intentions, and every detail she can squeeze out of him.

“Everyone is waiting to meet you,” Mom says to Sebastian as we follow her towards the noise.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Sebastian smiles warmly, his confidence unwavering despite the bustling scene that awaits us.

As we step into the backyard, I grin at the lively chaos that surrounds us. It’s a dynamic mix of people, ranging from the tiniest member of our family, my cousin’s two-month-old daughter, Leilani, to the more seasoned, like my great-uncle Charlie.

I spot my dad manning the grill, a pair of tongs in one hand and a cheeky grin on his face. He’s in his element, flipping burgers and distributing hotdogs to the kids. His eyes light up when he sees me. Setting the cooking gear aside and enveloping me in a bear hug.

“Dad, this is Sebastian,” I say, introducing them.

Extending a grease-smear hand, my dad gives a hearty grin. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Montgomery.” he nods towards the barbeque. “Looks like you’re quite the grill master.”

“Well, I do my best,” he says, puffing out his chest playfully. “You know, I used to be a baker.”

“Really?” Sebastian asks.

“Yep.” Dad looks at me and winks. I groan, knowing what’s coming. “But I couldn’t make enough dough, so I kneaded a change.”

Sebastian chuckles, then glances at the grill, where burgers sizzle and hotdogs sputter. “Do you need any help? I’m a pretty mean grill assistant.”

“I think I’ve got it under control, but I appreciate the offer. The real challenge is keeping up with these kids and their appetites.” He nods toward the group of cousins who are now devouring burgers and hotdogs with gusto.

He laughs, his eyes following Dad’s gesture. “I can see that. It’s like watching a pack of hungry wolves.”

As the day unfolds, Sebastian is in a deep conversation with my cousin

Tucker, their discussion revolving around stocks and investments. They're engrossed in conversation, so I decide to take my leave and head over to where my cousin Sophie is, cradling her newborn baby, Leilani.

Sophie looks up and smiles as she sees me approaching, her eyes reflecting the exhaustion that comes with caring for an infant. "Hey, Bella," she greets me softly.

I reach out and gently stroke Leilani's tiny hand with my finger. "Hi, Sophie. How are you doing?"

She chuckles, her fatigue momentarily melting away as she looks down at her precious daughter. "Good, but I'd love to get some food. Would you mind holding her for a bit?"

"Of course."

"You're the best." Carefully, she passes Leilani into my arms, and I hold the little bundle close, marveling at the fragile beauty of this new life. Leilani's wide, innocent eyes lock onto mine, and my heart skips a beat.

Imagining the future possibilities and the family that Sebastian and I might create together someday, makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. It's probably way too early to think about a life with him, but I can't help myself. I'm already falling hard.

I glance around the backyard, searching for Sebastian. He's deep in conversation with one of my uncles, his expression thoughtful. But as our eyes meet, a faint frown creases his brow.

It's a look I've seen before, one that makes me worry he's pulling away again. My heart tightens with concern, but before I can dwell on it further, my mom approaches, her presence a welcome interruption to my thoughts. She smiles down at me, her eyes filled with warmth.

"You found someone to snuggle," she remarks.

A smile spreads across my face as I glance down at Leilani. "She's a cutie."

"You've always been good with babies and kids. You'll make an amazing mother when the time comes."

I chuckle softly and shake my head, trying to downplay the idea. "Easy there," I say, teasingly. "Let's not jump ahead of ourselves."

My mom laughs, a warm and knowing sound. "I'm just saying, Bella, it's a beautiful thing when you find someone who shares your dreams and aspirations. And from what I can tell, Sebastian might just be that person."

I pass Leilani to my mom, who cradles the baby with gentle expertise. "I

hope so,” I admit, my voice tinged with both hope and uncertainty. “But you know, he’s still kind of a mystery I’m trying to unravel.”

“It takes time to understand people,” she chuckles. “I’ve been married to your dad for over thirty years, and he still surprises me.”

As we share this moment of reflection, Sebastian approaches, his footsteps soft on the grass.

I glance up at him with a playful smile. “Are you overwhelmed by my crazy family yet?”

He chuckles. “They’re great. Although your aunt did ask me if my dad is single. I think she’s serious because she’s been hounding me for his number all night.”

My eyes widen, and my cheeks heat with embarrassment. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry about that,” I mutter, mortified by my aunt’s boldness.

Sebastian laughs it off, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “It’s all good. Who knows, he might be interested.”

“Let’s hope not,” I say, chuckling, then turn to my mom. “We’re going to head out now.”

The stars are starting to dot the sky as we say our goodbyes to my family, exchanging hugs and well wishes as we walk hand in hand through the crowd. As we reach the car, Sebastian turns to me with a tender smile. Without hesitation, he leans in and kisses me softly, his lips warm against mine. When we finally pull away, his thumb strokes my cheek.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day,” he admits.

My heart flutters as I meet Sebastian’s gaze, and I can’t help but wonder if I was wrong earlier about his mood. His eyes hold a depth of affection and tenderness that reassures me.

“I have to go to New York for a few days,” he says, his tone filled with regret. “But if you can get some time off, I’d love for you to come with me.” He adds, his voice low and seductive, “I swear I’ll make it worth it.”

A rush of excitement courses through me at the thought of exploring New York City with him. His sexy smirk and the promise in his eyes only add to the temptation.

My palms rest on his stomach, and through the fabric of his shirt, I can feel the sculpted contours of his abs. The idea of spending three days alone with Sebastian in a hotel room is incredibly enticing.

“I’d love to go. But I’ll have to check and see if I can manage it.”

Sebastian kisses me again. This time it’s anything but soft. The potency

of our connection electrifies the surrounding air, and I can sense his desire mirrored in every touch, every embrace.

When he finally pulls away, he looks into my eyes with a smoldering intensity. “If you can’t make it to New York,” he says, his voice husky, “I’ll block off next weekend just for you. Either way, Bella, I’m going to have you in my bed for three days straight.”

His words send an aching warmth to my core, and I don’t know what to choose, because both options sound absolutely delicious.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Even if it means getting in trouble, take time off work and go to New York with Sebastian. [Turn to this page.](#)

As fun as New York sounds, it’s not a good time to go away. Miss him for a few days while he’s gone, and spend the entire weekend with him when he returns. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 42

SEBASTIAN

CHOPPING THROUGH THE LAYERS

“My dad can be a stubborn ass,” Sebastian says, glancing at me, his hands firm on the steering wheel, his brows furrowed. “But he’s a good man. He’s not one to sugarcoat things.”

“I’m not nervous.” I put my hand on his forearm and give a reassuring squeeze.

He chuckles softly, the tension in his face easing. “Good. I’ll be nervous for the both of us.”

“Sebastian Sinclair nervous? This has to be a first,” I tease, leaning closer. “He must have some real dirt on you. Is it the embarrassing stories, or the cringeworthy photos you’re most afraid of?”

A grin tugs at his lips, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll have stories and photos. But I can handle a little embarrassment. It’s just…” He takes a deep breath, gripping my hand and squeezing it. “You’re the first girl I’ve ever brought home.”

“Really?” I can’t help but smile, my heart fluttering in my chest.

Sebastian nods, his gaze briefly flickering away before returning to mine. “I’ve spent the last decade focused on building a legacy. But I never let myself want anything other than that. But with you, I’m thinking about a future.”

His confession sends a rush of warmth through me. *A future.*

“Well, now I am nervous,” I say, playfully hitting his arm, trying to lighten the mood. “That’s a lot to throw at a girl before she’s about to meet her future father-in-law.”

I expect him to chuckle at my attempt at humor, but his dark eyes remain serious, searching mine. My playfulness fades, and I hit him again, an

anxious laugh escaping my lips. “That was a joke. I’m kidding around.”

He grunts, his jaw tightening as he keeps his focus on the road. “Too bad, because I wasn’t.”

My heart skips a beat, his words sinking in. The gravity of his confession washes over me. This is real, and the future he spoke of is something he’s seriously considering. A whirlwind of emotions courses through me — excitement, nervousness, and a profound sense of hope.

As we pull up to his father’s house, I can see a figure in the distance. An older man, rugged and strong, stands beside a pile of chopped wood. He’s dressed in a plaid shirt and worn jeans, a stark contrast to Sebastian’s impeccable suit and polished demeanor.

Sebastian cuts the engine, and we step out of the car. The crisp air fills my lungs, and I shiver slightly.

He drapes his arm over my shoulders. “Remember what I told you. He may seem gruff at first, but he’s a good man.”

I nod, feeling a mix of excitement and trepidation.

Sebastian’s father turns to us, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. The striking similarities between father and son — same bronze complexion, lean, muscular stature, and intensity in those dark eyes that can command a room — are even more apparent up close.

“You brought a guest.”

Sebastian nods and gestures toward me. “Bella, this is my father, James.”

“This is a surprise,” James says, brows raised as his gaze focuses on me. He steps forward, his deeply calloused hands reach out to grasp mine, shaking it with a firm grip.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Sinclair,” I say.

He waves away the formality. “Call me James. We’re not much for titles out here.”

We follow James into the house, the wooden floors creaking beneath our feet as we move through the cozy space. The walls are adorned with photographs, capturing moments from the past.

There’s one photo that catches my attention — a portrait of a beautiful woman with light brown eyes and a sad smile. Sebastian notices my lingering gaze and quietly says, “My mom.”

Curiosity and sympathy tangle within me as I nod. I can only imagine the complexity of emotions tied to the memories of his mother and brother.

Sebastian points out more pictures, some of the whole family, most just

Tobias and Sebastian. In each one, he and Tobias look like twins, despite being two years apart. Their resemblance is uncanny, from the shape of their faces to the identical mischievous grins they share in many of the pictures. But as I look closer, I notice subtle differences.

Tobias appears smaller and thinner, his eyes carry a haunting hollowness that's absent in Sebastian's.

He points to one photo in particular, their arms slung over each other's shoulders, grinning. "This was taken on a camping trip, right before we moved to France for our—" He clears his throat. "For Tobias' treatment."

I squeeze his hand in silent support.

James clears his throat. They share a hard look that I can't quite decipher. Then, James breaks the moment, his voice gruff but warm as he says, "Lunch is ready."

Sebastian and I follow James into the kitchen, where he's prepared a delicious pot roast with roasted potatoes and carrots.

I smile at James as he places the steaming platter on the table. "This looks amazing."

James chuckles, his gruff exterior giving way to a warmth in his eyes. "I've been cooking this pot roast for years. It's a Sinclair family tradition."

I take a bite of the meat, savoring the flavors. "Well, I can see where Sebastian gets his cooking skills."

Sebastian grunts. "His ego doesn't need anymore inflating."

"I think you're worried about the wrong Sinclair," James says, his eyes narrowing as he focuses on his son. "My ego is fully in check. I'm not the one driving himself into an early grave."

Sebastian's gaze shifts, a hint of tension in the room. "You know that's not why I've worked so hard."

James leans back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "Then why don't you share with us the real reason?"

Sebastian's nostrils flare, his gaze filled with anger as a non-verbal conversation unfolds between him and his father. Tensions mount, and the atmosphere in the room becomes charged with unspoken words. It's clear there are deeper issues at play, ones that have long simmered beneath the surface.

With a frustrated sigh, Sebastian pushes his chair back abruptly, the scraping sound echoing through the room, and he storms out of the kitchen. I instinctively start to rise, intending to follow him, but James holds up a hand,

his expression stern.

“Let him go,” James says, his voice gentle but firm. “He needs space when he gets like that.”

I sit back in my chair, torn between wanting to support Sebastian and respecting his father’s wishes.

James leans forward slightly, his eyes fixed on mine. “What has Seb told you about our family?”

I meet his gaze steadily. “I know about Toby and the Cystic Fibrosis. And I know about your wife...how she died,” I tell him. “I know you both have experienced a lot of heartbreak.”

A deep sadness flickers across James’ eyes, and he nods slowly. “Yes, we have,” he says quietly. “Life has a way of throwing challenges at you when you least expect it.”

I can sense the weight of those challenges in the lines etched on his face and the weariness in his voice.

“You’re worried about him?” I ask softly, my concern mirroring his.

“He works too hard, and he’s a stubborn ass.” James sighs, weariness clear in his posture as he scrubs his hands over his face. “But he’s a good man.”

“Funny,” I say, “he said the same thing about you.”

James grunts and then nods toward the window, drawing my attention to Sebastian, who’s outside chopping wood with determined vigor. His muscular form moves rhythmically, each swing of the axe echoing through the air.

“You better go to him,” he says.

I step outside, the sound of the wood chopping growing louder as I approach Sebastian. He stops when he sees me.

“What did he say to you?” his voice is gruff, gaze piercing, and yet there’s a vulnerability in his expression as he searches my face.

“He’s worried you work too hard, and...” I move toward him and place my hands on his chest. “He thinks you’re a stubborn ass.”

Sebastian chuckles, the sound warm and genuine, and leans down to kiss me. The world seems to fade as our lips meet, the intensity of our connection momentarily overpowering any lingering tensions.

When we finally break the kiss, Sebastian looks into my eyes and says softly, “I’m sorry for storming out. My dad has a way of getting under my skin.”

I smile and brush a lock of hair from his forehead. “It’s okay, Seb. We all have our moments.”

“Seb?” he asks, raising a brow.

“I heard your dad call you that. I like it.”

He grunts, his lips brushing mine softly. “I don’t mind when you say it.”

“And I don’t mind watching you chop wood. That was pretty sexy.”

“Really?” Sebastian raises an eyebrow, his lips curving into a teasing smile.

I wrap my arms around his neck, drawing closer, and whisper against his lips, “I could get used to lumberjack Seb.”

His head tilts back as his laughter fills the air, a warm, melodious sound.

“Should we go back inside?” I ask.

“Yeah.” His breath is warm against my mouth. “I was wondering if you could take a few days off this week.”

“Why?”

“I have to go to New York for a few days and I was hoping you’d come.”

He adds, his voice low and seductive, “I swear I’ll make it worth it.”

A rush of excitement courses through me at the thought of exploring New York City with him. His sexy smirk and the promise in his eyes only add to the temptation.

My palms rest on his stomach, and through the fabric of his shirt, I can feel the sculpted contours of his abs. The idea of spending three days alone with Sebastian in a hotel room is incredibly enticing. “I’d love to go,” I say, my voice filled with desire, “but I’ll have to check and see if I can manage it.”

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What should Bella do next?

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As fun as New York sounds, it's not a good time to go away. Miss him for a few days while he's gone, and spend the entire weekend with him when he returns. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART SEVEN

NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

In the theater of love, some wear masks so well, we may not see the true actors until the final act unravels.

CHAPTER 43

DAMIEN

THE TURNING POINT

The seconds drag on like hours as I clutch Sebastian's phone, my trembling fingers nearly slipping off the edges. The police are still in my house, going through the shattered remnants of my once-peaceful home. The intrusive flashlight beams dance across my living room, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

I've already given my statement. The words were heavy on my lips as I recounted the terrifying intrusion. The man's threat still echoes in my ears, and my heart races with fear. But it was nothing compared to the call I made to Damien, hearing the anger and fear in his voice that mirrored my own.

Sebastian hasn't left my side, and I'm grateful for his presence. But it's Damien I honestly long to have standing beside me.

A shiver races through me, and I rub my arms. "I'm not sure why I'm so cold."

"Here." Sebastian grabs a blanket from the couch and places it over my shoulders, and he pulls me against him, rubbing my back. "You'll warm up soon. I have an aged malt whiskey that would help if you change your mind about coming to my place." He winks and gives me a teasing grin.

"Thanks, but my boyfriend..." I stumble over the word because I'm not sure that's what he is. We've never really named what we are. "He'll be here soon."

I hear the front door open, and my heart skips a beat. *Damien*. As he steps inside, his eyes lock onto the scene before him, and I can see the jealousy that flickers in his gaze.

Sebastian releases me and extends a hand. "Ah, the infamous boyfriend, I assume?"

Damien grunts, ignoring Sebastian's outreached hand, and strides directly to me. He pulls me so tightly against his chest that I can hardly breathe. His lips press against my forehead, and he growls, "So damn sorry, Bella."

"I'll leave you two alone," Sebastian says, his voice low, and even in Damien's presence, he doesn't back down. "But remember, Bella, call me if you need anything."

"Thank you," I say softly.

Sebastian chuckles, his dark eyes holding a glint of mischief, and I wonder if he enjoys making Damien jealous. "We should stop meeting like this," he adds with a faint, strained smile, referring to the near miss with his car earlier.

Damien's jaw clenches as he watches Sebastian exit, and his anger simmers just beneath the surface. I can tell he wants to confront me, but the ordeal I've just been through weighs heavily on us.

"I'm glad you're here," I tell him. And it's the truth.

His eyes soften with concern as he takes in my shaken state. Without a word, he pulls me into another tight hug, his arms a reassuring fortress around me.

"I'm so sorry, Bella," he whispers, his voice filled with remorse. "This is all my fault."

The police officers finally finish their work. They've gathered evidence and taken my statement, but there's nothing else they can do now.

Damien is a relentless force as he helps me clean up the chaos that has befallen my home, but I'm utterly exhausted, my body weighed down by the night's events.

He notices the weariness in my eyes and gently urges me, "You should go have a shower and lie down. I'll finish up here." His concern is evident, and I nod gratefully.

Upstairs, I step into the welcoming warmth of the shower, allowing the hot water to cascade over me. The sensation is soothing, a brief respite from the fear and tension gripping me. But despite the steam and the comforting flow of water, my fears linger, stubbornly refusing to be washed away entirely.

As I stand there, my body aches from the ordeal, and my mind races with the unsettling events of the night. The intrusion, the threat, and the knowledge that danger now looms over my life. It's a weight that clings to my skin no matter how hard I try to scrub it away.

I close my eyes and let the water flow over me, hoping it will somehow cleanse not just my body but also my soul. Yet, as the minutes tick by, I can't shake the feeling that the shadows of fear and uncertainty still linger in the corners of my mind, refusing to be washed away by even the steamiest of showers.

I hear the sound of the bathroom door opening, and Damien's strong presence fills the room. He steps into the shower with me, his powerful arms wrapping around me, pulling me close. His embrace is a lifeline, a source of comfort and strength I desperately need.

I lean into him, my body relaxing against his, as if his presence can chase away the shadows that haunt me. His hands move soothingly over my back, his touch a balm to my weary soul. With each gentle caress, I feel the fear and tension slowly ebbing away, replaced by a sense of security and warmth.

"I already called my guys, and they'll be here first thing in the morning to install a security system." He brushes his thumb gently over my cheek, his touch tender. There's something in his expression that guts me. Something that tells me that he's made a decision I won't like.

I cup his face, forcing him to meet my eyes. "Listen to me," I say with determination, "what happened tonight, it doesn't change anything—"

"It changes everything, Bella." His expression is darker than I've ever seen. "I fucked up, being so careless—"

"Damien," I stop him with a kiss. "No more talking right now. I just need you."

He kisses me back, and it quickly changes from something tender to something desperate. Our mouths move with need and urgency, and the passion between us ignites. The ache in my chest is replaced by an even stronger ache between my thighs.

Our bodies press together, seeking solace and desire in each other's arms. The steam from the shower swirls around us as the world outside fades away, leaving only the fierce connection we share.

"God, Bella," he groans. His hands roam across my body, each touch conveying his raw desire and need for me. They move with an urgency that matches the intensity of our passion, leaving a trail of fiery sensations in their wake. "You're destroying me," Damien whispers, his voice heavy with emotion.

I feel the overwhelming intensity of what we are to each other. It's a sensation that threatens to consume us, yet I want more, craving every part of

him. But he's right; something has shifted. I sense it in how he kisses me now, with a fervor that speaks of urgency, as if this moment may be our last.

"Don't stop," I beg. Every touch, every kiss, every breath we share is filled with a hunger that's both rough and needy. Our bodies crave each other, and there's an urgency to our lovemaking as if we're trying to bridge the gap created by the events of the night with the intensity of our desire.

Damien lifts me effortlessly. I wrap my legs around his waist, our bodies pressed close, the hot water spraying down on us. In one swift, powerful motion, he enters me, the sensation intense and electrifying as our connection deepens.

My back is pressed firmly against the shower wall, and Damien steadies himself with one hand beside my head. His other hand tightens its grip on my hip, his fingers digging into my flesh as his teeth rake across the delicate skin of my neck. The sensation sends pleasure coursing through me, and I cling to him as he thrusts into me hard.

"Yes," I gasp, my body clenching around his hardness, each contraction a spasm of pleasure that seems unending. The ecstasy courses through me, leaving me breathless and lost in the overwhelming sensation.

"Bella," he groans, his release pulsing inside me, and then he's left panting against my neck. We cling to each other, the aftershocks of our passion still coursing through us as we catch our breath.

It's minutes before we can muster the energy to move again, and if I thought I was tired before, I now know what true exhaustion feels like.

Turning the water off, Damien grabs a towel and tenderly helps dry me off. He then carries me to the bed, laying me down gently and tucking me in beneath the heavy comforter. His lips brush my forehead for a moment before disappearing into the bathroom.

The sound of clothes rustling tells me he's getting dressed, and I lay there, still catching my breath, feeling the finality of the moment lingering in the air.

When he comes back into the room, that heaviness is even thicker.

"You're leaving," I say, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me. It's not a question. Even as we stood together in the shower, I sensed his decision, our bodies intertwined. This is the end, and it feels like a chasm has opened between us.

He stands at the door, his silhouette outlined by the dim light filtering through the room. I can't see his features clearly, and part of me is grateful for

that because I don't know if I can bear to look into those icy-blue eyes right now, knowing that he's about to shatter my heart.

"I need to make some phone calls," his voice is rough and thick with emotions that threaten to overwhelm him. "One of my guys will watch the house for the next few days."

"I don't need—"

"I won't let anything happen to you again, Bella." He cuts me off, his tone filled with anguish. "I should never have put you in this position in the first place. My life is too dangerous—"

"So that's it," I say, sitting up and drawing my legs to my chest. "You're giving up on us."

"I'm protecting you, Bella. It's what I should have done from the start."

"You're protecting yourself, Damien." I refuse to beg him to stay. My trepidation and fears weigh heavily on me, and I don't have the strength to carry his doubts as well. If he's unwilling to fight for us, maybe he isn't the man I thought he was.

"Take care of yourself, Bella." With those words, he turns and leaves, disappearing into the darkness. With him, a piece of my heart goes, leaving an emptiness I never thought I'd have to face.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Go to work and try not to think about her heartbreak. [Turn to this page.](#)

Feel all the feels, skip work, and spend the day eating chocolate and ice cream. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 44

DAMIEN

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

The seconds drag on like hours. The police are still in my house, meticulously combing through the shattered remnants of my once-peaceful home. Intrusive flashlight beams dance across my living room, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

I've already given my statement, and the words felt heavy on my lips as I recounted the terrifying intrusion. The man's threat still echoes in my ears, and my heart races with fear. But what weighs even heavier is the guilt that lingers, the knowledge that I still haven't called Damien.

Each passing moment intensifies the nagging sensation in the pit of my stomach, a relentless reminder of my silence. My phone lies nearby, its screen dark and untouched. I had thought of reaching out to Damien, wanting his reassuring presence, but uncertainty held me back.

As I watch the police work diligently, I can't help but wonder how Damien will react when he finds out what happened and that I hadn't sought his comfort in this dire moment. Guilt and apprehension swirl within me, adding another layer of complexity to the already tense situation.

Sebastian hasn't left my side, offering quiet comfort, and I'm grateful for his presence. But it's Damien I honestly long to have standing beside me.

A shiver races through me, and I rub my arms. "I'm not sure why I'm so cold."

"Here," Sebastian says, grabbing a blanket from the couch and placing it over my shoulders. Sebastian's comforting presence surrounds me, his gentle touch and soothing words offering solace amid chaos. His offer of aged malt whiskey and a change of scenery tempts me, and a few weeks ago, I might not have hesitated to accept.

But now, all I can think about is Damien. My heart aches for him, and the urgency to have him by my side outweighs any other consideration. Our relationship might be undefined and complicated, but in this moment of vulnerability, he's the one I yearn for.

Call him, my heart yells, the urgency growing stronger with each passing moment. But my brain, ever practical, knows that no matter my choice, things between Damien and me will change after this night.

The room feels tense as I sit on the couch beside Sebastian, my phone in hand but my thumb frozen over the call button.

Suddenly, the front door bursts open, startling us all. My heart skips a beat as Damien strides into the scene, his eyes blazing with anger, concern, and something I can't quite decipher. *How did he know?* I never called him.

Sebastian stands, his expression shifting to surprise as he takes in the unexpected arrival of my not-quite boyfriend. Damien's gaze locks onto me, and I can see the jealousy that flickers beneath the surface.

"Bella!" Damien's voice is laced with irritation, though I can detect a hint of relief beneath the anger. "Why the hell didn't you call me?"

I'm too shocked to respond immediately. I stare at him, my mind racing to understand what's happening.

Sebastian clears his throat awkwardly, glancing between Damien and me. "Ah, the infamous boyfriend, I assume?"

Damien grunts, still ignoring Sebastian, and strides directly to me. He pulls me so tightly against his chest that I can hardly breathe, and his lips press against my forehead in a possessive kiss.

My mind whirls with confusion and questions, but for now, I'm overwhelmed by the surprise of Damien's arrival and the warmth of his embrace.

"You're okay?" Damien demands, his voice tight with concern. "He didn't hurt you?"

I shake my head, still bewildered by Damien's unexpected arrival. "How...how did you know?"

Damien glances at Sebastian, suspicion evident in his narrowed eyes. Then, his gaze shifts to one of the police officers, and he nods, an unspoken conversation conveyed in that single, deliberate movement. My heart beats harder as I realize that Damien's connections and resources go far deeper than I'd ever known.

"What's important," he says, gazing back at me, his tone softening but

still tinged with frustration, "is why didn't you call me?"

I swallow hard, the guilt settling heavily in my chest. The truth is fear had held me back. But as I meet Damien's gaze, I realize that this incident has brought us to a critical juncture where honesty and vulnerability will determine our path from here.

I meet Damien's intense gaze, my voice trembling as I try to explain. "I was going to...I just...I needed a minute to process everything."

My words hang in the air, heavy with the unsaid emotions and uncertainties that have plagued our relationship. In this tense moment, I can see the turmoil in Damien's eyes.

"I'll leave you two alone," Sebastian says, his voice low, and even in Damien's presence, he doesn't back down. "But remember, Bella, call me if you need anything."

"Thank you," I say softly.

Sebastian chuckles, his dark eyes holding a glint of mischief, and I wonder if he doesn't enjoy making Damien jealous. "We should stop meeting like this," he adds with a faint, strained smile, referring to the near miss with his car earlier.

Damien's jaw clenches as he watches Sebastian exit, and his anger simmers just beneath the surface. I can tell he wants to confront me, but the ordeal I've just been through weighs heavily on us.

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Upstairs, I step into the welcoming warmth of the shower, allowing the hot water to cascade over me. The sensation is soothing, a brief respite from

the fear and tension gripping me. But despite the steam and the comforting flow of water, my fears linger, stubbornly refusing to be washed away entirely.

As I stand there, my body aches from the ordeal, and my mind races with the unsettling events of the night. The intrusion, the threat, and the knowledge that danger now looms over my life. It's a weight that clings to my skin no matter how hard I try to scrub it away.

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Turning the water off, Damien grabs a towel and tenderly helps dry me off. He then carries me to the bed, laying me down gently and tucking me in beneath the heavy comforter. His lips brush my forehead for a moment before disappearing into the bathroom.

The sound of clothes rustling tells me he’s getting dressed, and I lay there, still catching my breath, feeling the finality of the moment lingering in the air.

When he comes back into the room, that heaviness is even thicker.

"You're leaving," I say, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me. It's not a question. Even as we stood together in the shower, I sensed his decision, our bodies intertwined. This is the end, and it feels like a chasm has opened between us.

He stands at the door, his silhouette outlined by the dim light filtering through the room. I can't see his features clearly, and part of me is grateful for that because I don't know if I can bear to look into those icy-blue eyes right now, knowing that he's about to shatter my heart.

"I need to make some phone calls," his voice is rough and thick with emotions that threaten to overwhelm him. "One of my guys will watch the house for the next few days."

"I don't need—"

"I won't let anything happen to you again, Bella." He cuts me off, his tone filled with anguish. "I should never have put you in this position in the first place. My life is too dangerous—"

"So that's it," I say, sitting up and drawing my legs to my chest. "You're giving up on us."

"I'm protecting you, Bella. It's what I should have done from the start."

"You're protecting yourself, Damien." I refuse to beg him to stay. My trepidation and fears weigh heavily on me, and I don't have the strength to carry his doubts as well. If he's unwilling to fight for us, maybe he isn't the man I thought he was.

"Take care of yourself, Bella." With those words, he turns and leaves, disappearing into the darkness. With him, a piece of my heart goes, leaving an emptiness I never thought I'd have to face.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Go to work and try not to think about her heartbreak. [Turn to this page.](#)

Feel all the feels, skip work, and spend the day eating chocolate and ice cream. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 45

ALEX

LAVENDER DREAMS OR NIGHTMARES

The sun streams through the open windows, casting a warm, golden glow across Jess's cozy apartment. I stand in front of the mirror, my reflection framed by the delicate lavender silk dress that Jess insisted would complement my eyes.

She's right.

Jess always has an impeccable sense of style. The dress falls gracefully, hugging my curves in all the right places. It's a color I'd never have chosen for myself, but it feels oddly perfect today.

"Wow," Jess says, her voice full of admiration as she adjusts a loose strand of my hair. "You look stunning in that dress. Alex is going to be speechless when he sees you."

A shy smile tugs at my lips as I glance at Jess's reflection. "Thanks. I hope so." I've felt slightly insecure about my relationship with Alex lately. It's not that I doubt his feelings for me, but rather his feelings for Angie.

Jess, always the discerning friend, catches the uncertainty in my eyes. She gives me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. "You know, everyone has their moments of doubt. But Alex is crazy about you, and you deserve all the happiness in the world."

I nod, fighting back the swarm of insecurities that threaten to engulf me. Jess is right. I should trust in us, in what we have. Alex has been supportive and understanding, even when I've been buried in the whirlwind of grading art projects. He's texted, he's called, but I've been avoiding him, using my work as a convenient excuse.

My phone buzzes on the dresser. I snatch it up, and it's another text from Alex.

Alex: Can't wait to see you. I've missed you so much.

A pang of guilt courses through me. He's been nothing but sweet and thoughtful — The kind of guy who'd ride to the rescue of a damsel in distress, even if it was his ex-girlfriend.

God, I hate how jealous I am.

Jess glances at me. "That's him, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I chew on my bottom lip, thumbs hovering over the phone.

She places a comforting hand on my arm. "If you're feeling insecure, you need to talk to him."

"I know," I admit. As I take a deep breath and prepare to reply to Alex's text, I realize Jess is right. It's time to confront my insecurities and talk to the man who's stolen my heart. With newfound determination, I type out a message.

Bella: I've missed you too. Can't wait to see you tonight.

"Good," Jess says. "Now help me get ready for this wedding so I can find a hot, sexy man of my own."

I chuckle. "You don't need any help in that department, Jess. You're gorgeous; any guy would be lucky to have you."

Once Jess gives her nod of approval to her reflection in the mirror, we swiftly exit her apartment, our heels making a rhythmic click-clack on the sidewalk as we make our way toward the church. As we enter the old building and take our seats, there's an air of excitement and anticipation. I scan the room, searching for Alex among the guests, but there's no sign of him.

Just as the ceremony is about to begin, the large wooden doors at the back of the church swing open, and Alex walks in looking handsome as ever in his grey suit and crisp white shirt. I'm relieved to see him, but my relief quickly turns to disappointment as he takes the only spot left – the one beside Angie.

Alex catches my gaze and waves, giving me a dimpled grin. I force a smile and let out a slow, steadying breath.

It doesn't mean anything, my heart beats. Where else is he supposed to sit?

Jess leans in and whispers, "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." But it's not fine, and I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. I don't know if my old insecurities are forcing

themselves to the surface or if new ones are trying to take root.

My attention shifts as the notes of the wedding march begin, and the wooden doors gracefully swing open to reveal Kimmy in all her bridal radiance. The moment she begins her walk down the aisle, Hal can't contain his emotions, and tears stream down his cheeks. It's a touching sight, a testament to their love, and I find myself wiping away my own tears.

"She's so happy," Jess whispers, then smiles mischievously. "Also, I call dibs on the second brother. Oh my god, he's delicious."

A soft laugh escapes my lips, and a lady seated in the row ahead swiftly turns, her finger pressed to her lips to hush us.

After the ceremony, I spot Alex making his way towards me. My heart flutters with anticipation.

"Hey," he says softly, his eyes filled with warmth and affection. "You look stunning, as always."

A rush of emotions washes over me, and I'm tempted to throw my arms around his shoulders and kiss him. But before I can say or do anything, a photographer interrupts. "The bride would like some photos with you."

I offer Alex an apologetic glance and mouth, "I'll be right back," before being pulled away. But once I'm done, I don't see Alex again until Jess and I get to the reception hall. He's already taken his place at his assigned table, and a pang of frustration courses through me as I notice that Angie is seated right beside him.

Jess and I find our seats on the opposite side of the room, and it becomes apparent that the venue has been divided into sections — one side for the bride's friends and family and the other for the groom's.

I could have been with Alex, my brain reminds me.

Alex catches my gaze and rises from his seat, prepared to make his way in my direction. His intention is thwarted as the master of ceremonies begins announcing the members of the wedding party. He lowers himself back into his chair, his lips forming "sorry." I muster up another strained smile in response, but it fades quickly when Angie places a hand on his arm and leans in to engage him in conversation.

I avert my gaze, my heart heavy with an inexplicable mix of emotions. Instead, I allow my eyes to wander around the room, seeking a distraction from the knot in my stomach.

It's then that I spot someone I hadn't expected to see here — Sebastian, seated on the groom's side. He looks incredibly handsome in his well-fitted

suit, and I can't help but wonder how he's connected to Hal.

As if sensing my stare, Sebastian turns his head toward me, and our eyes lock. He nods with a confident, seductive smile that sends a shiver down my spine. Caught off guard, I offer a hesitant smile before quickly looking away, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment and intrigue.

“Here,” Jess says, pouring a glass of the white wine on the table. “You look like you’re going to need this.”

I take it gratefully and drain half the glass. “You know me too well.”

She smiles and pats my arm. “I also know you overthink everything. Try to have some fun tonight.”

I glance at Alex only to find him frowning at me.

My phone vibrates on the table with a message from him.

Alex: You're sure everything's okay?

Bella: Yep!

Liar, my brain screams.

Alex: Wish I were sitting with you.

Bella: You look pretty cozy over there.

I type the words and hit send without thinking, immediately regretting it.

Alex: ???

“Shit,” I groan, feeling like a jealous idiot.

Bella: We should pay attention to the speeches. Talk later.

Turning my phone off, I place it in my purse and focus on Kimmy’s mom, who is making her daughter and half the room teary-eyed.

The reception continues around me, filled with laughter, clinking glasses, and joyful celebrations, but I can't shake the unease in my chest.

As the evening progresses, music fills the large hall, and guests begin to take to the dance floor. Couples sway to the romantic melodies, and the atmosphere is charged with an undeniable sense of love and happiness.

A gentle hand on my shoulder has me turning and looking up.

Alex.

He offers me a warm, dimpled smile and extends his hand. "Would you like to dance?"

My heart flutters, and I nod. We move to the center of the dance floor, surrounded by other couples sharing this intimate moment.

As we dance, Alex's arms around me, he looks down at me with concern. "Is everything alright?"

I hesitate for a moment, my emotions swirling. Opening up feels vulnerable, but I know it's necessary. "I've just been feeling a bit off lately," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Alex pulls me a little closer, his touch comforting. "You can talk to me, you know. I'm here for you."

I nod, grateful for his understanding but still unprepared to spill my insecurities. Instead, I muster a small smile. "It's nothing. Let's just enjoy this moment."

Alex chuckles, a mischievous glint in his eye. "You're a tough nut to crack, Bella."

His teasing breaks the tension, and I relax in his arms.

Alex remains a constant presence by my side for the rest of the night. We dance to slow songs and more upbeat tunes, our bodies moving in perfect harmony. We mingle with the other guests between dances, exchanging pleasantries and laughter. Alex introduces me to some of his friends and Hal's relatives and I'm struck by how welcoming and friendly they all are.

Alex seizes every opportunity to touch me, whether it's a gentle squeeze of my hand, a subtle caress of my back, or simply wrapping his arm around my waist. Each gesture sends a rush of warmth through me, dispelling any lingering doubts or insecurities.

As Kimmy and Hal prepare to leave, Kimmy wraps her arms around me in a warm and heartfelt hug. Her eyes sparkle with happiness as she holds me close. "Bella," she says with a grin, "hopefully, the next wedding will be yours."

My stomach flutters at the thought, and I return her hug, a mixture of emotions swirling within me. "Maybe," I reply and shrug playfully. "Weirder things have happened. But," I say, glancing over at Jess, who is flirting shamelessly with one of Hal's brothers. "Jess is giving it her all in the competition."

Kimmy chuckles, and she gives me one final squeeze before releasing me and turning back to her new husband, sharing a look that would rival any

romance novel cover. It's a subtle affirmation that love is a beautiful and unpredictable journey, and I can't help but feel a surge of hope and excitement for the future.

I scan the bustling reception hall, looking for Alex. He's nowhere to be seen among the sea of smiling faces and dancing couples. An uneasy feeling starts to creep over me, but I push it aside, hoping he's caught up in a conversation or helping out with something.

Jess drags me onto the dance floor, and I don't resist. We laugh and twirl, and the world fades away for a while. But as the songs blend into one another, I begin to feel a need for fresh air, for a moment of solitude to clear my head.

Where is Alex?

I excuse myself and step outside into the cool night air. The serene silence of the night is a stark contrast to the bustling reception inside. I take a deep breath, relishing the calm.

But my peace is short-lived as I hear a couple arguing, one voice all too familiar. As I round the corner of the venue, my heart stops. In a dimly lit area, I see Alex, his back to me, engaged in a heated conversation with Angie. My stomach clenches at the sight of them together.

Angie spots me, and her gaze is piercing like shards of glass being thrown my way, but then a wicked smirk spreads across her lips. She wraps her arms around Alex's neck and pulls him into a passionate kiss.

My heart feels like it's been ripped apart, and the world around me blurs into a whirlwind of confusion and pain. Without a second thought, I turn and run, the courtyard and its painful scene quickly disappearing behind me.

"Bella," Alex's voice calls out behind me.

Tears blur my vision, each step echoing the torment in my heart. All I can think of is escaping the pain, humiliation, and overwhelming heartbreak that threatens to consume me.

As I run through the dimly lit parking lot, I feel a crushing weight on my chest. Desperation to get away forces my every step, and I don't notice the figure that suddenly steps into my path.

I collide with him, nearly stumbling to the ground. Strong arms reach out to steady me, and I look up, my vision still blurred by tears.

Sebastian.

His concerned gaze search mine. "Are you alright?" he asks, his voice laced with worry.

I can't find the words to respond. All I can do is shake my head and let the tears flow freely. In this moment of vulnerability, I'm grateful for his presence, even though it's a stark reminder that I made the wrong choice by choosing Alex.

"Are you hurt?" Sebastian asks, those dark eyes searching mine.

I take a shaky breath and speak through the tears, "I just need to call an Uber."

"I can wait with you until it arrives or drive you home."

My heart aches, torn between my heartbreak and gratitude for his kindness. I consider his offer momentarily, unsure of what to do next.

"Bella." Alex's deep voice resonates behind me. "Let me explain."

I turn slowly. His eyes are pleading, but my heart is a tangled mess. The image of him kissing Angie burns in my mind, and I don't know if I can bear to hear his explanation.

"Bella, please," he implores, taking a step closer, his eyes filled with desperation.

I hold up a trembling hand, stopping him in his tracks.

The chaos of emotions in my heart threatens to consume me, and I need space to think, to breathe. He runs a hand through his hair, his face contorted with fear, and I can see the pain etched into every line of his expression.

My heart aches, torn between love and doubt, between the memories of our shared moments and the undeniable truth of what I witnessed.

Sebastian's offer to drive me home is tempting, a lifeline of escape from this painful situation. But a part of me wants to hear Alex out, to understand the truth behind that kiss and the state of our relationship.

There's also a part of me that's considering ending things altogether. My heart can only endure so much.

I need to choose. To end things for good and let Sebastian drive me home, or to give Alex a chance to explain and confront the tangled web of our emotions head-on. The decision feels impossible, but it's one I must make.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Things aren't always as they seem. Listen to Alex's side of the story and then choose whether to stay or go. [Turn to this page.](#)

It's undoubtedly the end. There's no coming back from this. It's time to bring closure to this chapter and accept Sebastian's offer. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 46

ALEX

IN THE SHADOW OF DOUBT

“**C**onfidence, Bella,” I murmur to myself, my reflection looking back at me with wide, anxious eyes. My dark hair cascades in loose waves down my back, and I smooth the silk dress, a delicate shade of lavender that Jess had insisted would complement my eyes. It hangs gracefully on me, a whisper of elegance in the soft morning light.

Today is Hal and Kimmy's wedding day, and I can't help but feel a mixture of excitement and nerves. It's not because I'm worried about their love – I've never met a couple more perfect for each other – but it's the whirlwind of emotions that seeing Alex with Angie stirs within me.

He warned me that she will be there. And as much as I try not to worry about their friendship, it's hard not to remember that she was his first love, and it's pretty clear she still wants to be with him. The thought nags at me like a persistent itch, refusing to be ignored.

My phone buzzes on the vanity, startling me.

Alex: On my way, beautiful. Can't wait to see you.

I can't help but smile at the message. Our relationship has been an exhilarating rollercoaster ride. Alex, with his rugged charm and infectious laugh, makes me feel like the only woman in the world when he's with me. But there are moments like this one when I wonder if I'm just a temporary stop on his journey, a placeholder until he figures out what he truly wants – Angie.

The doorbell interrupts my thoughts, and my heart leaps in my chest. I take one last look in the mirror, hoping I look confident and beautiful, and then I rush to the front door. As I swing it open, my breath catches in my

throat.

Alex is dressed in a sharp charcoal-gray suit and a perfectly knotted navy tie. It's a stark contrast to his usual attire of jeans and t-shirts, and my jaw drops at the sight of him. He looks stunning like he's just walked out of a men's fashion magazine. Dark hair falls casually across his forehead, and his hazel eyes sparkle with a hint of mischief.

"Wow," is all I say, my heart doing somersaults in my chest.

He grins, those dimples deepening in a way that weakens my knees. "You look gorgeous," he says, his voice low and tender as he steps inside and pulls me into a warm embrace.

I melt against him, inhaling his familiar scent, a mixture of fresh aftershave and the earthy aroma of the great outdoors. "You clean up pretty well, too," I tease, my voice trembling with nerves.

"I thought I'd take a break from the flannel shirts and hiking boots for one day."

I chuckle, feeling some of my tension dissipate. "I must admit, you look irresistible in that suit."

His hazel eyes flicker with mischief as he glances my way. "Irresistible, huh? That's a dangerous word, Bella."

I bite my lip, trying to suppress a smirk. "Well, you've been warned."

We share a laugh, and it feels good, like a soothing balm to my worries.

The moment we step into the church, the scent of fresh flowers and the hushed whispers of guests wash over me. Hal stands at the front with his brothers, and his expression is a mix of joy and nerves.

My attention is drawn to the back row, where Angie sits. Her eyes lock with mine for a brief, tense moment, and then she looks away, her lips curling into a glare that sends a shiver down my spine. It's a cold, calculated look that tells me she's not ready to let go of the past, that she resents my presence in Alex's life.

I swallow hard, trying to shake off the feeling of being watched.

Alex tightens his grip on my hand and smiles at me as we sit. "Hal looks like he's about to pass out," he whispers.

I chuckle. "As long as he doesn't take off."

"No chance of that," Alex replies, his eyes still fixed on the front of the church. "I've never seen him so in love."

The ceremony begins, and the church falls into a reverent hush. My heart swells with emotion as Kimmy, radiant in her white gown, starts her walk

down the aisle. Hal's eyes glisten with tears of joy as he watches his bride approach. It's a beautiful moment, a reminder of the power of love to bring two souls together, and I can't help but hope for my own happily ever after.

Maybe, hopefully, with Alex.

The vows exchanged between Hal and Kimmy are heartfelt and tender, filled with promises of love, loyalty, and unwavering support. They share their first kiss as a married couple, sealing their commitment with a passion that's palpable, and the church erupts into applause.

As we exit the church, the sun bathes the newlyweds in a warm, golden glow. I look up at Alex, a smile tugging at my lips. "It was a beautiful ceremony, wasn't it?"

He nods, his eyes fixed on me, something stirring in his gaze as he brushes his thumb tenderly across my cheek. "Yeah, it was."

His touch sends a shiver of warmth through me, and my heart beats again with a steady rhythm of hope.

The reception is a lively affair. Alex and I sit together, enjoying the delicious dinner and the heartfelt speeches from the wedding party that bring tears to my eyes. Amid the celebration, I spot Sebastian at one of the tables, and he flashes me a seductive smile when he catches my gaze, his dark allure as potent as ever. I quickly look away, focusing on Alex, whose presence grounds me.

The night wears on, and the dance floor fills with couples swaying to the music. I take Alex's hand, pulling him onto the dance floor. We move together, lost in the rhythm of the music, our smiles reflecting the happiness surrounding us.

As Kimmy and Hal prepare to leave, Kimmy wraps her arms around me in a warm and heartfelt hug. Her eyes sparkle with happiness as she holds me close. "Bella," she says with a grin, "hopefully, the next wedding will be yours."

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CHAPTER 47

SEBASTIAN

A WEEKEND OF TEMPTATION

“I’ve missed you,” Sebastian murmurs, his lips brushing against my earlobe, sending warmth to my core.

I pull back, my eyes locked onto his handsome face, and I smile. “I missed you too. I’m sorry I couldn’t get work off and go to New York with you.”

His hand caresses my cheek. “There’ll be lots of opportunities in the future. I was hoping to take you to Rome in the summer when you’re not teaching.”

“Rome?” I gasp, my pulse quickening at the mere thought of it. “That would be amazing.”

He grins and kisses my nose. “I want to show you the world.”

“You shouldn’t spoil me. I might get used to it,” I tease.

“Good. Because I have a lot of plans for us.”

“Really?” I ask, loosening his tie. “And what do you have planned for right now?”

Sebastian’s eyes gleam with mischief as my fingers work their way down the buttons of his shirt. His voice, filled with a seductive undertone, replies, “Tonight, I have something entirely different in mind.”

Before I can react, he scoops me up into his arms, causing me to squeal with surprise. The world spins around us as he carries me towards his bedroom.

With a playful grin, he gently lays me down on the silky sheets. As he hovers above me, the connection between us is tangible. *Real*. And I know I’m past the point of falling,

I’m in love with him.

His lips brush against mine. The taste of him is addictive. His touch is a promise of things to come, and I arch into his caress, my desire building with every stroke.

“Sebastian,” I whisper his name, heat pooling in my core.

His lips trail from my mouth down to my neck. Each sensation sends ripples of pleasure through me, and I revel in the exquisite torment.

His fingers deftly find the zipper of my dress, and with a slow, deliberate movement, he unzips it, revealing the lace and silk of my lingerie, a secret I had saved for this very moment. His eyes darken with desire as he takes in the sight, and a low growl of approval escapes his lips.

“You’re stunning,” he murmurs, his voice filled with reverence and hunger.

I tug at his shirt, eager to have his skin against mine. With each button undone, I uncover more of his sculpted chest. My fingers trace the contours of his muscles, feeling the warmth of his bronze skin beneath my touch. His shoulders rise and fall with every ragged breath, his hands caressing my body with a fervent hunger.

The hours fade into a symphony of whimpers and groans, and he plays my body with expertise. As each orgasm ripples through me, I cling to him with a need that’s more than just physical.

“I love you,” I moan against his lips.

He pulls back, dark eyes searching mine. A small smile tugs at his mouth. His cock is still buried deep inside me, and he brushes my hair away from my face. “I love you, too, Bella.”

My chest squeezes with the intensity of the moment. And when he moves inside me, his thrusts, his touch, his kisses are even more consuming. With a primal need, I arch my back, pressing myself closer to him, and the world disappears.

There’s only him and me, and the ecstasy that builds, until it peaks, and I cry out, “Sebastian,” as pleasure rips through me. A sensation stronger than anything I’ve ever experienced before.

Sebastian’s groan is guttural, his kiss feral as his body quivers with his orgasm.

“My god, Bella,” he says roughly against my mouth. “We may never leave my place if you keep that up.”

I chuckle, snuggling into his arms as he rolls on his back. “I’m good with that. Doesn’t matter where we are if I’m with you.”

We heed Sebastian's words and barely venture out of his apartment for the entire weekend.

Nights are spent curled up on his sofa, watching movies. We cook together, our laughter mingling with the aromas of delicious dishes that fill the air. The hours slip away as we talk, our conversations flowing effortlessly from the trivial to the profound. It's as though I'm unraveling the mysteries of Sebastian Sinclair, one word at a time. And when the talking subsides, we map out every inch of each other's bodies, uncovering the secrets and desires.

Sunday afternoon arrives too soon, and I hate leaving, but he has a meeting, and I need to prepare for this week's lessons.

As I step out into the bustling city, it's like a different world from the cocoon we created over the weekend. I decide to stop by the grocery store on my way home, picking up the essentials for the week ahead. The mundane task of shopping can't quite erase the smile on my face from the memories of our time together.

It's not until I'm back at my house, unloading groceries, that I realize my phone is missing. I left it on Sebastian's kitchen counter. I groan at my forgetfulness.

With a resigned sigh, I grab my keys and head back to his apartment.

As I enter the lobby, I approach the concierge, who's seen me with Sebastian a few times before.

"Hey, Harold," I say. "I left my phone. Do you think you could let me up to his apartment to retrieve it? I promise it'll only take a minute."

Harold looks at me, considering my request. He's not supposed to let anyone up without proper clearance, but after a brief pause, he nods, and I take the elevator up.

The doors open directly into his suite, and I step out. But the sound of a muted conversation tells me Sebastian isn't alone.

"Shit," I mutter, not wanting to interrupt him, but needing my phone.

I hear a woman's laughter ring out, and my stomach clenches. I follow the voices to the living room. It's the woman I see first, tall and beautiful, wearing a navy dress that hugs her slim waist and curves. Her presence alone is enough to leave me feeling uneasy.

But as she steps aside, my gaze falls upon Sebastian, seated on the couch, his shirt hanging over the armrest, his sculpted chest bare. The room seems to spin as my mind struggles to process what I'm seeing.

"Sebastian?" My voice wavers.

Questions and doubts flood my mind as I stand there, like an intruder.

Sebastian's eyes widen when he sees me. "Bella" He stands, grabbing his shirt, and muttering, "Fuck."

I take a step back, my body trembling, and then another. My head spins, and I can't make sense of the scene before me. I feel like a fool, a pawn in some messed-up game.

He calls after me, but I can't bear to hear his excuses or explanations. I turn and flee, the weight of my emotions too much to bear.

Reaching the elevator, I jab at the button frantically. It opens and I step inside, my chest constricting as I see Sebastian racing towards me as the doors slide shut. I struggle to breathe, feeling my world crumbling around me.

When it finally reaches the lobby, I burst out and sprint towards the exit. The cool air outside hits me like a slap in the face, my breaths coming in ragged gasps.

I fumble with my keys, trembling hands making it difficult to unlock my car.

From the corner of my eye, I see Sebastian, shirt unbuttoned and barefoot, desperation in his eyes.

"Bella, stop," his voice is rough.

As I open the car door, he reaches me, pushing it shut. He places his hands on either side of me, his breathing harsh, nostrils flaring, eyes frantically searching my face. "Listen to me—"

"No. No more lies, Sebastian." I shake my head, my voice trembling, as tears blur my vision, threatening to spill over. "Just let me go."

Sebastian's grip loosens, but he doesn't release me. "I know how bad this looks, but I promise you, it isn't what you think. Come back to the apartment and let me explain."

My heart aches, torn between the love I feel for him and the overwhelming sense of betrayal. And I don't know what to do. I'm not sure I can survive any more lies.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Hope that maybe there's a reasonable explanation. Go back to his apartment and let him explain. [Turn to this page.](#)

There's nothing he can say to justify him being shirtless with another woman. It's over! Leave and go home. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 48

SEBASTIAN

A SUITE ESCAPE

The moment the plane touches down at JFK Airport, I can barely contain my excitement.

We grab our luggage and then step into a waiting limousine. It's hard for me to tear my eyes away from the window as we drive through the bustling streets of the city, taking in the iconic skyline and the sea of yellow and green taxis.

When we arrive at the hotel, I'm blown away by the grandeur. It's like stepping into a fairytale.

"Welcome to The Ritz-Carlton," a receptionist greets us at the front desk.

As Sebastian completes the check-in process, I glance around at the walls decorated with elegant and timeless artwork, the luxurious seating areas, and the gleaming marble floors.

"Ready?" he asks, smiling down at me.

"This place is incredible."

He leans in and whispers, "Wait until you see the bedroom."

I grin, my heart fluttering with a mixture of anticipation and delight. Sebastian's teasing only adds to my excitement.

The Suite is even more magnificent than I could have ever imagined. It's as if we've stepped into a world of lavish comfort and timeless elegance. My eyes dart around the room, taking in every exquisite detail. It's a symphony of luxury, with tasteful furnishings and elegant decor.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I turn to Sebastian. "This is beyond anything I could have imagined."

He chuckles softly. "I'm glad you're with me."

My palms rest on his chest, and I stand on my toes to brush my lips

against his.

His arms wrap around me, pulling me close, and I can feel the steady rhythm of his heart.

When we finally break the kiss, I can't help but smile up at him, brimming with happiness. "I'm glad I'm with you, too."

"We have a lot packed into the next few days," he says. "I want to show you Times Square, the Empire State Building, and, of course, a Broadway show."

"Really? Which one?"

"I have tickets for Six. It has excellent reviews, but if you would like to see something else—"

"No, that's perfect."

"Good." His thumb strokes my cheek. "I have a couple...meetings that I need to attend while we're here. But every free moment is yours."

"And what do you have planned for *right now*?" I ask, loosening his tie.

Sebastian's eyes gleam with mischief as my fingers work their way down the buttons of his shirt. His voice, filled with a seductive undertone, replies, "Now I have something entirely different in mind."

Before I can react, he scoops me up into his arms, causing me to squeal with surprise. The world spins around us as he carries me towards the plush king-sized bed, the luxurious centerpiece of our suite.

With a playful yet irresistible grin, he gently lays me down on the silky sheets. Sebastian hovers above me. The connection between us is tangible. *Real*. And I know I'm past the point of falling,

I'm in love with him.

He kisses me softly. The taste of him is addictive. His touch is a promise of things to come, and I arch into his caress, my desire building with every stroke.

"Sebastian," I whisper his name, heat pooling in my core.

His lips trail from my mouth down to my neck. Each sensation sends ripples of pleasure through me, and I revel in the exquisite torment of his touch.

Deftly, his fingers find the zipper of my dress, and with a slow, deliberate movement, he unzips it, revealing the red lace and silk of my lingerie, a secret I had saved for this very moment. His eyes darken with desire as he takes in the sight, and a low growl of approval escapes his lips.

"Stunning," he murmurs, his voice filled with reverence and hunger.

I tug at his shirt, eager to have his body against mine. With each button undone, I uncover more of his sculpted chest. My fingers trace the contours of his muscles, feeling the warmth of his bronze skin beneath my touch. His shoulders rise and fall with every ragged breath, his hands caressing every inch of me with a fervent hunger.

The hours fade into a symphony of whimpers and groans. He plays my body with expertise, and as each orgasm ripples through me, I cling to him with a need that's more than just physical release.

"I love you," I moan against his mouth.

He pulls back, dark eyes searching mine. A small smile tugs at his lips. His cock is still buried deep inside me, and he brushes my hair away from my face. "I love you, too, Bella."

My chest squeezes with the intensity of the moment. And when he moves inside me, his thrusts, his touch, his kisses are even more consuming. With a primal need, I arch my back, pressing myself closer to him, and the world disappears.

There's only him and me, and the ecstasy that builds, until it peaks, and I cry out, "Sebastian," as pleasure rips through my body. A sensation stronger than anything I've ever felt before.

His groan is guttural, his kiss feral as he quivers with his release.

"My god, Bella," he says roughly against my mouth. "We may not leave the Suite if you keep that up."

I chuckle, snuggling into his arms as he rolls on his back. "I'm good with that. Doesn't matter where we are if I'm with you."

Love. We said that important word. But it seems almost inadequate in the face of such profound emotion.

The following two days are a whirlwind of extraordinary experiences, exceeding all of Sebastian's promises. We stroll through Central Park, indulging in meals that could easily surpass my entire week's salary. But it's the simple hours spent wrapped in his warm embrace I treasure most.

Sebastian has a meeting this afternoon, and I welcomed the opportunity to immerse myself in the world of New York culture. As I set out on my own, making my way towards The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the anticipation of exploring its vast collection of treasures fills me with excitement.

The brisk air and the bustling streets only add to my sense of adventure. But as I'm about to cross a busy intersection, a sudden jostle in the crowd sends me stumbling. I gasp as I feel a cold, sticky sensation on my blouse,

groaning when I see a mess of ketchup and mustard smeared across the front of my outfit.

With a frustrated groan, I trudge back to The Ritz-Carlton, my mood a far cry from the excitement that had filled me earlier. At the hotel, I fumble with the keycard until the lock clicks open, and I step into the sanctuary of the suite. The moment the door closes behind me, I hear Sebastian in a conversation with someone.

A woman.

I follow the sound, my heart pounding with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. The voices lead me to the living area. It's the stranger I see first, tall, beautiful, with long dark hair that falls in waves down her back. She's wearing a satin blouse and navy skirt that hugs her slim waist and curves. Her presence alone is enough to leave me uneasy.

But as I move further into the room, I see Sebastian, seated on the couch, his shirt folded over the armrest, his sculpted chest bare. The room seems to spin for a moment as my mind struggles to process the scene before me.

"Bella." Sebastian's eyes widen when they land on me. "Fuck."

I take a step back, and then another. My head is spinning, and I feel like a fool, a pawn in some vicious game.

He calls after me, but I don't want to hear his excuses or explanations. I turn and flee, the weight of my emotions too much.

Through the door, down the hall, I run, my heart pounding, until I reach the elevator. I jab at the buttons frantically, needing to get away. My chest constricts and I struggle to breathe, feeling like the world has crumbled around me.

Sebastian's hurried footsteps echo down the hallway.

He struggles to put his shirt on, his feet bare, but his disheveled appearance only adds to the chaos of the moment.

"Stop," he calls out.

The elevator doors open, but before I can step in, he grabs my wrist, spinning me toward him. The look in his eyes is a mixture of desperation and panic. "It's not what you think."

"No more lies," I say, my voice trembling. Tears blur my vision, threatening to spill over as I blink them back. "Let me go."

"I know how bad this looks, but I promise you, I can explain. Just come back to the room. Please."

My heart aches, torn between the love I feel for him and the

overwhelming sense of betrayal.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Hope that maybe there's a reasonable explanation. Go back to the Suite and hear Sebastian out. [Turn to this page.](#)

No explanation could justify him being shirtless with another woman. Leave and find a way home alone. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART EIGHT

DOUBTS AND DILEMMAS

Doubts and dilemmas in love relationships are the crossroads where we must choose between fear and faith, for it's in navigating these uncertainties that our love story truly finds its path.

CHAPTER 49

DAMIEN

GO TO WORK AND TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT HIM

As I step into my classroom, I silently vow to myself: Today, I will not dwell on my heartbreak. I'm here to teach art, and that's exactly what I'll do. My students deserve my full attention, even if my heart is in shambles.

But I barely slept last night because every time I closed my eyes, the memory of Damien walking away from me haunted my thoughts. And when I did manage to drift into slumber, nightmares of the intruder would jolt me awake.

Even now, with the morning sun streaming in through the large windows, casting a warm glow over the room, I feel the darkness of the night before weighing heavily on me.

I take a deep breath, and with a shaky exhale, I try my best to focus on the positive. I'm safe now, and everything broken can be replaced or repaired — *except maybe my heart.*

The grade three class I'm teaching this period is excited and eager to dive into another day of creative adventures. Their enthusiasm is infectious, and for a brief moment, I manage to push the weight of my emotions to the back of my mind.

But every second I'm alone with my thoughts, my heart begins that torturous beat, *Damien, Damien, Damien.*

I sit in the teachers' lounge during lunch break, picking at the garden salad I brought from home, but my stomach churns with every bite. I push it away and glance at my phone. Nothing. I'm not expecting him to message me after the way he left, but my stupid heart clings to hope.

"Hey." Maryam, a kindergarten homeroom teacher, sits across from me.

“You look terrible, Bella. Everything okay?”

“Thanks,” I say, laughing at her bluntness. One thing Maryam is is honest, and I appreciate her for it.

“You always look beautiful, but you seem worn down today.”

I give her a small smile and swallow over the lump that’s taken up permanent residence in my throat. “Oh, you know, just the usual. Life stuff.”

Maryam raises an eyebrow, clearly not buying my attempt to brush off my feelings. “Want to talk about it?”

I shake my head. “Not really. I’m still trying to process everything,” I admit.

Maryam leans in closer, her voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well, I know one thing that will cheer you up. Wait until you get a look at the new substitute gym teacher. The man is hotter than a freshly microwaved burrito.”

“A burrito?” I chuckle. “That’s a creative metaphor.”

“Well, you know how much I like my burritos,” she says with a wink. “But honestly, wait until you see this guy. I’ve got all kinds of saucy metaphors for a man who looks like that.” Her dark eyes twinkle as she continues, “He’s like a heatwave in the dead of winter, a walking, talking furnace of attraction. He’s hotter than a double shot of espresso on a scorching summer day, a blazing meteor streaking across the starry night sky—”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” I interrupt her, shaking my head. “But I think I’ve had my fill of hot guys for a while.”

She grins mischievously. “Good, then I call dibs.”

I chuckle, the ache in my chest still present but momentarily eased. “He’s all yours.”

Walking to my next class, that nagging need to check my phone persists. But my screen remains disappointingly blank — no messages, no calls, nothing.

My fingers type out a message to Damien, but I quickly erase it when I see how desperate I sound. Stupid tears start to well up, and I wish I’d stayed home today. I’m too distracted to be here, barely focusing on where I’m going.

And then, bam! It feels like I’ve walked right into a brick wall, or at least that’s what my dazed senses suggest. It takes me a second as I stumble backward, and the “wall” moves to catch me before I look up into familiar

hazel eyes and deep dimples.

"Bella," Alex says, grinning down at me. "I was hoping to see you."

"Alex?" I frown. "What are you doing here?"

"Subing for Mike Parkers for the week."

"You're the substitute gym teacher." It suddenly clicks why Maryam was going on about him, and she wasn't exaggerating. Alex is hotter than...well, hotter than any metaphor she could come up with.

"You could at least pretend you're happy to see me," he teases.

"Sorry." I glance down at my phone, then back up at him. "I'm just dealing with some things. It's nice to see you again." My thoughts are all over the place, and I'm grateful when one of my students interrupts us.

It's Grace, one of my kindergarteners, clutching a finger painting of a rather abstract-looking dog.

"Miss Bella," she says earnestly, "I made a dog, but it kinda looks like a pancake with legs."

Suppressing a chuckle, I examine her masterpiece. "Well, Grace, I think it's the most unique dog I've ever seen. Maybe it's a pancake dog, and you've just invented a new breed."

Grace's eyes light up with delight before she hurries away, eager to share the news about our encounter with her friends.

Alex is still watching me, and he leans against the wall casually, arms crossed, making his biceps flex in a way that would typically have me swooning. "Maybe we can grab a coffee after work—"

Our conversation is cut short by the ringing of the bell.

"Sorry," I say with an apologetic smile. "I have to get to class."

Alex nods understandingly. "Of course, duty calls. We'll catch up later. Don't be a stranger, Bella."

With a nod and a fleeting smile, I hurry to my next class, leaving the promise of a future conversation in the air.

The last thing I can think about right now is having coffee with Alex. I'm not denying there's a spark there because there definitely is, but it will take some time for me to heal the shattered bits of my heart. Letting go seems like an impossible task at this moment.

And as the days and weeks pass by in a haze of unanswered calls and unspoken words, I wonder if I'll ever get over Damien. It feels like a relentless ache in my chest, and I can't help but replay the moments when he decided that protecting himself meant leaving me behind.

I grapple with my emotions during this angsty period, torn between wanting to cling to the memory of what Damien and I shared and wanting to move on from the pain he caused. My mind tells me that I should get back out there, that maybe it's time to let go. And there are moments when I consider ending my dating hiatus. But for now, I rely on the comforting embrace of ice cream and chocolate to soothe my emotions and desires.

Spoon in hand, I take the double mocha chocolate swirl ice cream out of the freezer and sit on the couch to indulge in my current after-school routine: Sugar and Netflix.

There's a knock at the door, and I let out an irritated sigh at the interruption of my future chocolate-induced coma. I've stopped jumping out of my skin whenever I hear a loud sound. There's been no other sign of the intruder, and Damien's guard dogs aren't parked outside my house. Even the bad guys got the memo that Damien and I are done.

There's another knock, but I don't get up. Other than a package from Amazon Prime, I'm not expecting anyone.

Bang, bang, bang. This time, it's louder, more forceful.

"Bella?" Damien's muffled voice penetrates the silence.

I sit there, momentarily paralyzed.

Eventually, I regain control of my body and cautiously move towards the door. With trepidation, I crack it open.

Damien leans against the doorframe, his appearance disheveled. His ice-blue eyes carry a mixture of regret and desperation, accentuated by noticeable dark circles beneath them.

"Can I come in?" he asks, his voice strained and vulnerable.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I reply, my heart shattering at the sight of him.

"Please, Bella. I need to talk to you, to explain..." He utters a curse under his breath, running his hands over his face with frustration. Then, he fixes his gaze on me with those eyes that could beckon me into darkness without my even realizing it. "Bella, please," he implores.

I stand there, the weight of his past actions bearing down on me. He broke my heart without a second thought and left me when I needed him the most. Can I trust him? Knowing he might hurt me again, can I let him back into my life? Or do I turn him away and try to find happiness with someone new?

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Let **Damien** in and hear what he has to say. [Turn to this page.](#)

It's Over! Shut the door on him, let your heart heal, and see where a romance with **Alex** could lead. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 50

DAMIEN

FEEL ALL THE FEELS! SKIP WORK AND EAT ICE CREAM!

Today, I need a break from the world, a chance to indulge in sugar therapy. So, with a deep breath, I reach for my phone and dial the school's number. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for calling in sick when I'm not physically unwell. But I know that sometimes, caring for your heart is just as important.

With the day off, I embark on my ultimate healing plan: chocolate, ice cream, and Netflix. I raid my secret stash of chocolates and select a few pints of my favorite ice cream flavors. Then, I transform my living room into a cozy nest of blankets and pillows.

As I nestle in with a tub of double chocolate fudge ice cream and a plate full of chocolate truffles, I can't help but wonder whether Damien is wrestling with his feelings just like I am. Did he lie awake all night, thinking about us? Or has he moved on effortlessly, leaving me to drown in this sea of emotions?

A pang of doubt gnaws at me. Perhaps it really was a game to him, and me just another conquest in a long line of women. If he genuinely cared the way I thought he did, he wouldn't have abandoned me at one of my most vulnerable moments. Sure, his team was here before the sun was in the sky, setting up the new security system, and there's that ever-watchful black SUV parked on my street, manned by one of Damien's security personnel. But he'd be here with me if his feelings ran as deep as I had believed.

My fingers hover over my phone screen, the urge to call him nearly overwhelming. But I muster all my strength and toss it across the room as if casting away the last remnants of hope. Wiping away the foolish tears that escape, I remind myself sternly, "He's just a dumb boy."

I remember that nagging voice in my head that had warned me not to trust him and cautioned me against falling too deeply. I wish I had heeded that voice. Perhaps then, I wouldn't be sitting here, nursing a broken heart and yearning for a love that may have been nothing more than a mirage.

I spend hours watching romantic comedies, losing myself in the antics of quirky heroines and dashing leading men. But as the chocolate wrappers pile up and my ice cream begins to melt, I feel no better than when I woke up this morning.

A sudden knock on my door startles me, causing my heart to race with fear, the remnants of the terrifying night before still fresh in my mind. But then, a rational thought dawns upon me – someone attempting to break in probably wouldn't knock first.

Still, my nerves are on edge as I cautiously approach the door. My emotions are a whirlwind of anticipation and trepidation. Could it be Damien, arriving at last to offer an explanation or an apology? Or perhaps it's another unexpected twist in this rollercoaster of emotions, a new development in the ongoing drama of my life.

With trembling hands, I reach for the knob, my heart pounding in my chest, but as I slowly open the door, there's no one there, just a delivery truck that speeds away and a large bouquet that graces my patio. My heart leaps with hope. Could this be Damien's way of reaching out and making amends?

I pick up the flowers with trembling hands and spot a small note nestled among the tulips and lilies. My fingers tremble as I open it, eager to read the words that could hold the key to my shattered heart.

Bella,

I hope these flowers bring a touch of brightness to your day. I'm just a phone call away if you ever need someone to talk to or a friend to lean on.

*Take care,
Sebastian*

As I read Sebastian's heartfelt words, a wave of emotions washes over me. While his message is comforting and supportive, there's a bittersweet realization that the flowers aren't from Damien.

I place the bouquet on my table, the vibrant colors a reminder that life goes on, even in the face of heartbreak.

"I'll be fine," I whisper, though the words feel hollow and untrue. Deep down, I yearn to be wrapped up in Damien's strong arms, to have him by my side. But his leaving last night is a stark betrayal of what we shared. Now, I need to forget him to find a way to move forward. But before that can happen, I know there will be many more empty tubs of ice cream in my future.

And as the days and weeks pass by in a haze of unanswered calls and unspoken words, I wonder if I'll ever get over the man. It feels like a relentless ache in my chest, and I can't help but replay the moments when he left me when he decided that protecting himself meant leaving me behind.

I grapple with my emotions during this angsty period, torn between wanting to cling to the memory of what Damien and I shared and wanting to move on from the pain he caused. My mind tells me that I should get back out there, that maybe it's time to let go. And there are moments when I consider ending my dating hiatus. But for now, I rely on the comforting embrace of ice cream and chocolate to soothe my emotions and desires.

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"Please, Bella. I need to talk to you, to explain..." He utters a curse under his breath, running his hands over his face with frustration. Then, he fixes his gaze on me with those eyes that could beckon me into darkness without my even realizing it. "Bella, please," he implores.

I stand there, the weight of his past actions bearing down on me. He broke my heart without a second thought and left me when I needed him the most. Can I trust him? Knowing he might hurt me again, can I let him back into my life? Or do I turn him away and try to find happiness with someone new?

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Let **Damien** in and hear what he has to say. [Turn to this page.](#)

It's Over! Shut the door on him, let your heart heal, and see where a romance with **Sebastian** could lead. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 51

ALEX

CONFLICTED HEARTS

I stand in the dimly lit parking lot, the soft hum of the night surrounding me. The air is charged with tension, and I can feel the weight of the men's gazes on me. Sebastian looms behind me, a silent presence, his concern almost palpable. But it's Alex who stands before me, his expression a mixture of desperation and longing. He yanks at his tie, and I can't help but notice how his fingers fumble with the top buttons of his shirt.

"Please, Bella," he implores, his voice raw with emotion. "Just hear me out."

Sebastian's voice cuts through the tense atmosphere like a knife, his tone calm yet tinged with concern. "Bella, what do you want to do?"

Alex's eyes narrow on Sebastian, and his nostrils flare before returning his gaze to mine. His jaw clenches, frustration and longing etched across his handsome face.

Their contrasting energies pull at me from either side, and I feel like I'm standing at the crossroads.

Swallowing hard, I turn to Sebastian. "Thank you for the offer," I say, my voice trembling slightly. "But I'm staying."

A fleeting look of disappointment passes over Sebastian's face, but he nods, understanding in his gaze. "Call me anytime, Bella," he says softly before turning away and retreating into the shadows.

I turn back to Alex, my heart pounding like a drum.

His intense gaze softens, his shoulders relaxing. "Thank you for giving me a chance," he says, stepping closer.

I put my hand up, stopping him. I can feel the pull between us, the undeniable chemistry that's always existed. I don't trust myself not to melt

into his arms.

His gaze softens, understanding dawning in his eyes. He takes a step back, giving me the space I need.

"Okay," I say softly, my voice barely more than a whisper. "I'm listening."

We stand in the parking lot, a world away from the wedding reception, still in full party mode inside. The cool night air wraps around us, carrying the weight of unspoken words and tangled emotions.

"I didn't kiss Angie," Alex's voice breaks through the silence. "She kissed me, and I pushed her away immediately."

I search his eyes for any hint of deception but find none. Relief washes over me, knowing my eyes hadn't deceived me earlier. But it wasn't just the kiss. It's so much more.

"Why were you alone with her in the first place?"

"She needed to talk," he replies, his eyes searching mine for understanding.

"And, of course, you jumped to be her hero again," I retort, my voice tinged with frustration. "Just like the other night."

"You're upset I went to the hospital?"

My frustration turns into a knot of conflicting emotions. "No. Yes. Maybe. It's not just that. It's...she's everywhere. She's part of your friend group. Even your sister wants you back together. And the way she looks at you, touches you, you have to know she wants you back."

My words spill out, my insecurities and fears exposed. I watch Alex's face, hoping he can decipher the turmoil that's been churning within me.

"But I don't want her," Alex insists, his voice brimming with earnestness. "We've been over for a long time."

I can't help but challenge his words. The pain is still too raw. "Really? Because from where I'm standing, it doesn't feel like that."

Tension thickens between us, emotions swirling in the night air. Alex takes a step closer, his body radiating warmth, his ragged breaths echoing the chaos of our emotions. His gaze locks onto mine with a penetrating intensity that leaves me breathless.

"I need you to understand," he says, his voice soft but persistent. "Angie told me she wanted me back. I wanted to make it clear that I would never be with her again."

I can't help but snort at his words, skepticism lingering. "Well, by the

look of that kiss, Angie definitely didn't get the memo."

Alex's faint smile carries a hint of amusement, as if he comprehends my doubts. "Bella," he begins, his words deliberate, "I had just told Angie that I was in love. Deeply. Passionately. Head over heels. Never looking back in love."

My heart skips a beat, realization dawning. He's not talking about Angie; he's talking about me. His gaze never leaves mine as he continues, "I love you."

Torn between my love for him and the need to trust him fully, I release a shaky breath, because I know that without trust, there can be no future for us.

"I love you too," I admit.

A soft smile graces his lips, and he moves closer, but I gently place my hands on his chest, halting him. My head shakes slightly, and I meet his gaze with a mix of longing and caution.

"Loving someone isn't enough," I whisper, my voice trembling with the weight of my words. "We need to trust each other."

Alex's eyes reflect understanding. We both bear the scars of past relationships, the pain of betrayal etched in our hearts. We know that rebuilding trust is a monumental task once it's shattered.

"I know," he replies, his voice sincere. "And I would never do anything on purpose to hurt you. As for Angie, I won't see her anymore." Alex's voice is firm. "I made it clear that she crossed a line, and our friendship is done. The only person that matters to me is you, Bella."

A cold gust of wind sweeps through the parking lot, causing me to shiver involuntarily. Alex steps closer, his strong arms wrapping around me, pulling me against his muscular chest. His touch is like a warm cocoon in the chill of the night, and it's impossible to deny the longing that surges within me.

He places a gentle palm on my cheek. "Bella," he whispers, a soft, reassuring murmur. "I love you so damn much, and it's killing me that I hurt you. Forgive me."

With a tenderness that speaks volumes, he leans in, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that ignites a fire within me. It's a kiss that conveys all the love, longing, and promise that words alone could never capture. As the kiss deepens, I can taste the sweetness of his breath, and feel the gentle pressure of his lips molding to mine. I melt into his embrace, our bodies pressed together, every inch of us aligned.

Alex pulls back, hazel eyes searching mine. "If you want to leave, I'll

drive you home," he offers.

I nod, a deep sense of relief washing over me. The thought of returning to the reception and possibly encountering Angie is something I can't bear at the moment.

As I glance down at my reflection in a nearby car window, I can't help but cringe at the state of my makeup. Tears have left their mark, and my carefully applied mascara and eyeliner are now smudged, my cheeks flushed and blotchy.

"I'll text Jess and let her know I'm headed home," I say.

I quietly slide into the passenger seat of Alex's truck, the engine humming to life as he starts it up. The ride back to my place is silent, but my thoughts are anything but quiet. Insecurity claws at the edges of my mind, not just because of what happened with Alex tonight, but because of the scars left by a past relationship, leaving me with a lingering fear of betrayal.

I glance at Alex, his profile illuminated by the soft glow of the dashboard lights. I know he carries his own insecurities, the wounds inflicted by Angie's betrayal etched deep into his heart. We're both a bit of a mess.

As Alex pulls up to my house, the engine falls silent. He clears his throat, breaking the silence. "I want you to know that what I said earlier...I meant every word."

I nod.

His gaze is locked on mine, searching for some reassurance. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes to earn your trust back. I never want to see you hurt like this again."

The night has been filled with emotional turmoil, and I am at a crossroads.

I could say goodnight, allow him to prove himself, and rebuild the trust that was broken. The thought of taking things slow, allowing time to mend the wounds of the past, is a tempting prospect.

It's the safer path.

But even as I think it, I know that love is never without risk. It's a daring journey that requires vulnerability and courage.

Do I have the courage to trust him completely? To invite him inside, allow him to hold me and reassure me with his touch and presence. Finding healing in his arms is undeniably tempting. Whatever option I choose, one thing is certain — I choose him.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Be courageous and trust his sincerity. Invite him inside and find healing in his arms. [Turn to this page.](#)

Believe that he's telling the truth. Trust takes time. Say goodnight, and let him prove his love and commitment. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 52

ALEX

THE WRONG RIGHT CHOICE

The gentle hum of Sebastian's silver Mercedes fills the space between us as we glide through the city streets. My heart aches, the image of Alex and Angie's kiss haunting my thoughts. How could I have been so blind, so foolish to think there was a chance for us? I stare out the window, my gaze fixed on the passing city lights, their glow illuminating the dark streets.

Sebastian glances at me from the corner of his eye. Concern etched into his features. "If you want to talk, I'm a good listener."

I force a smile, though it feels fragile, like it could shatter. "Thank you." But the words catch in my throat, and I can't bring myself to say more. Sadness weighs too heavily on my heart, leaving me speechless and drowning in my thoughts.

He doesn't press further, and I'm grateful for his understanding.

As we pull up to my house, I turn to Sebastian, my voice trembling. "Thanks for the ride. I appreciate it."

His smile is both confident and sensitive, a rare combination that never fails to make my heart flutter. I can't help but be grateful for his understanding and the warmth he offers.

"It was nice seeing you again," he says, his voice soft and reassuring. "I know you have a lot going on, but my offer still stands. Call me anytime."

I nod, my throat tight with emotion.

He reaches across the center console to gently squeeze my hand, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. "Take care of yourself, Bella."

I watch as he drives away, his taillights disappearing into the night. I'm left alone with my thoughts, his offer lingering. But it's thoughts of Alex that

continue to take center stage in the tumultuous theater of my heart. The image of him and Angie locked in an embrace plays on a loop, a dagger to my fragile emotions.

Walking up to my front door, I insert my key in the lock, my hand trembling slightly, and the familiar click of the bolt sliding open provides a momentary distraction. Just as I'm about to step inside the sanctuary of my home, the screeching of tires shatters the stillness of the night.

My heart leaps to my throat as I turn to see Alex's truck skidding to a dramatic stop in front of my place. The engine rumbles to a halt, and he practically leaps out, slamming the door with a force that echoes in the quiet street.

"Bella!" he calls out, desperation lacing his voice. "Wait, please, we need to talk!"

His words pierce through the darkness, and I can see the urgency in his eyes, a mixture of sorrow, regret, and even fear. My heart aches at seeing him, torn between the anger that still simmers within me and the love that had begun to take root.

In the moonlight, Alex appears disheveled and undone. His tailored suit jacket is discarded, and the top of his collared shirt is unbuttoned, exposing the hint of his sculpted chest beneath. His hair is a tousled mess as if he's run his fingers through it in frustration.

I take a hesitant step away from my door and meet his gaze. "We can talk," I reply, my voice soft but firm. "But let's do it outside."

I know I can't trust myself if I let him in, can't let my guard down like before. I need to stay firm, and focused on protecting my heart. I won't allow myself to fall for that charming dimpled smile again, no matter how much my heart yearns for the familiarity of his presence.

He nods, his expression a mix of relief and apprehension as he takes a few hesitant steps towards me.

His hazel eyes fix on mine, and I see the anguish in his gaze. He starts to reach for me, his hand extending hesitantly, but then he stops himself as if uncertain of how I'll react. "I didn't kiss Angie," he says, his voice steady but filled with emotion. "She kissed me, and I pushed her away immediately."

His words hang in the air, and I can see the truth in his eyes. I had seen what happened, but hearing him confirm it gives me a sense of relief. But it still doesn't change anything.

"Why were you alone with her in the first place?"

“She needed to talk.”

“And, of course, you jumped to be her hero again,” I respond, unable to keep the bitterness out of my tone.

“You're upset I went to the hospital?” he asks, searching my eyes for an answer.

I let out a frustrated breath, trying to find the right words. “No. Yes. Maybe. It's not just that. It's...she's everywhere. She's part of your friend group. Even your sister wants you back together. And the way she looks at you, touches you, you have to know she wants you back.”

The words spill out in a rush, my insecurities and fears laid bare. I watch Alex's face for a reaction, hoping he can understand the turmoil that's been churning within me.

“But I don't want her,” Alex insists, his voice filled with earnestness. “We've been over for a long time.”

I can't help but challenge his words, the pain is still too raw. “Really? Because from where I'm standing, it doesn't feel like that.”

The tension between us thickens, our emotions swirling in the night air.

Alex takes a step closer, and I can feel the warmth of his body radiating toward me. His ragged breaths seem to echo the chaos of our emotions, and his gaze locks onto mine with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

“I need you to understand,” he says, his voice soft but determined. “Angie told me she wanted me back. I wanted to make it clear that I would never be with her again.”

I can't help but snort at his words, my skepticism still lingering. “Well, by the look of that kiss, Angie definitely didn't get the memo.”

Alex's smile, though faint, seems to hold a hint of amusement, as if he understands my doubts. But then, his expression grows earnest, and he takes a step closer, his voice filled with a vulnerability that pierces my heart.

“Bella,” he begins, his words slow and deliberate, “I had just told Angie that I was in love. Deeply. Passionately. Head over heels. Never looking back in love.”

My heart skips a beat as I realize the weight of his words. He's not talking about Angie; he's talking about me. His gaze never leaves mine as he continues, “I love you.”

Torn between my love for him and the need to trust him completely, I let out a shaky breath. I know that without trust, there can be no future for us.

“I love you too,” I admit.

A soft smile forms on his lips, and he draws me closer, but I gently place my hands on his chest, stopping him. My head shakes slightly, and I meet his gaze with a mixture of longing and caution.

"Loving someone isn't enough," I say, my voice trembling with the weight of my words. "We need to be able to trust each other."

Alex's eyes fill with understanding. We both carry the scars of past relationships, the pain of broken trust still etched in our hearts. We know all too well that once trust is shattered, it's a monumental task to rebuild.

"I know," he replies, his voice soft and sincere. "And I would never do anything to break your trust. As for Angie, I won't see her anymore." Alex's voice is firm as he continues, "I made it clear to her that she crossed a line, and our friendship is done. The only person that matters to me is you, Bella."

His words wash away most of my doubts. But can I trust myself when he's so close? His masculine scent envelops me; those hazel eyes have always been my undoing.

The weight of the decision is heavy on my shoulders, and I know I have a choice to make. I can choose to believe him and take the chance on mending what's been broken between us. Or I can take some time for inner reflection, sort through my insecurities and fears, and say goodnight for now, hoping that time will heal our wounds.

The final option looms like a shadow in the background: to end things for good, to walk away from the love that has both lifted me up and torn me apart. The moonlight offers no answers, and the night holds its breath, waiting for my decision.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Trust in his sincerity and invite him inside. There's nothing a little forgiveness sex can't heal. [Turn to this page.](#)

Believe that he's telling the truth. But trust takes time to rebuild after it's shattered. Say goodnight, and let him prove his love and commitment. [Turn to this page.](#)

Time for a fresh start. Say goodbye to Alex. Take a couple of weeks to heal and then accept a date with Sebastian. [Turn to this page](#). If you've already been on a first date, go on a second date. [Turn to this page](#).

CHAPTER 53

SEBASTIAN

A HEART IN PIECES

I stand by the window, gazing out at the streets, rubbing my arms as a fresh wave of betrayal rushes through me. It's been a week since I left New York, leaving behind my suitcase and the man who shattered my heart.

He showed up at my doorstep with my luggage, pleading for a chance to come in and explain. I turned him away and blocked his calls and messages, wanting nothing more than to forget the pain he caused.

Except I can't forget him. The image of Sebastian with that woman won't leave my mind.

And even now, I can't stop loving him.

Groaning at how pathetic I feel, I grab my purse and get ready for work. Locking the door behind me, I make my way to my car. Knowing the familiar routine, teaching and an after-school coffee at The Artful Bean will ground me, if only temporarily.

My stomach clenches when I spot Sebastian's Mercedes parked nearby. He gets out, his dark eyes locked on mine as he approaches.

"I don't want to talk to you," I say, trying to keep my voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"Bella, please—" Sebastian coughs roughly. And I take a moment to glance at him. His disheveled appearance surprises me. His face is pale, his hair is a mess, and his shirt is untucked and unbuttoned at the collar.

His vulnerability makes my heart ache, but I ignore it.

"Hear me out," he implores, his voice strained and desperate. He takes a hesitant step closer, and I shake my head.

"There's nothing you can say, Sebastian."

“I promise you, Bella, I would never betray you like that. I was—”

“How stupid do you think I am?” My voice raises, and when a man walking his dog lifts an eyebrow at me, I lower my tone. “You were alone in a hotel room with another woman, half-naked.”

“She’s a doctor.”

I laugh, the sound holding no humor. “Right. How long did it take you to come up with that?”

He takes another step towards me, those dark eyes imploring. “I promise you. Her name is Dr. Jasna Loncar. She’s a pulmonologist. You can look her up.”

My anger wavers, and for a moment, doubt creeps in.

Could he be telling the truth?

As much as I want to believe him, my heart has been through too much pain already.

“Why was she there?” I know that even asking puts my fragile heart at risk once more.

“Because—” As he attempts to speak, he coughs uncontrollably, doubling over in a fit so violent he clutches his chest in pain. I take a step toward him, my anger momentarily replaced by concern.

“Are you okay?”

He doesn’t respond immediately, still wracked with coughing. But as he pulls his hand away from his mouth, it’s streaked with blood.

Alarmed, I gasp, “Sebastian.”

He shakes his head. “I’m okay, I just...I need you to know that I love you. So fucking much, Bella.”

I meet his gaze, and in that moment, I see the undeniable truth in his eyes. Despite the pain and confusion between us, his love for me is unwavering, and I can feel it deep within my soul.

Sebastian coughs again, and this time it’s even worse. He staggers and collapses onto my porch, gasping for breath. Panic courses through me when he pulls his hand back, displaying more streaks of bright red blood.

My heart races, and without hesitation, I grab my phone and dial 911, my hands trembling. “I need an ambulance,” I say urgently, trying to keep my voice steady as I provide my address.

Fear grips me as I kneel beside him, and he struggles to breathe.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this,” he says, between gasps of air.

A team of paramedics rushes to help Sebastian as soon as the ambulance

arrives. They quickly get to work, assessing his condition and administering oxygen to help him breathe. I watch in sheer terror, helpless as they work to stabilize him.

The paramedic looks at me and asks, “Does he have any underlying medical conditions?”

I’m taken aback by the question, but before I can respond, Sebastian speaks weakly, “Cystic fibrosis.”

“What?” I stammer, unable to comprehend his words. My mind races with a thousand questions, each more urgent than the last.

The paramedics work diligently to stabilize Sebastian as they prepare to move him into the ambulance, and a sense of dread grips me. The memories of the stories he’d shared about his brother Tobias linger in my mind like a haunting shadow.

I step closer, my voice shaking, but filled with determination. “I’ll meet you at the hospital,” I tell him, my eyes locked onto his. “It’ll be okay.”

He nods weakly and mouths the words, “I’m sorry.”

They close the doors, and a deep sense of unease rushes through me as the vehicle starts to pull away, its sirens blaring.

As I follow the ambulance through the crowded streets, regret and guilt gnaw at me. I’d been so wrong about him, about the assumptions I’d made, and the anger I’d harbored. My emotions are a turbulent storm of frustration and fear, and it feels like my body is numb with the weight of it all.

I park my car and rush inside when I arrive at the hospital. Minutes and hours seem to stretch endlessly as I pace the sterile waiting area.

Finally, a nurse approaches, and I follow her down the hospital corridors. When I enter Sebastian’s room, I see him lying in the hospital bed, looking visibly better than when he was on my porch. He manages a weak smile as he reaches out his arm toward me.

I step closer and take his hand, sitting gently on the edge of the bed. His fingers tighten around mine.

Sebastian’s thumb strokes my cheek, then tucks my hair behind my ear, his touch sending a comforting warmth through me.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “For not giving you a chance to explain.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” His voice, though raspy, carries a sincerity that melts away my lingering guilt. “I’m the one who needs to apologize. I should have told you.”

“Why didn’t you?” I ask, entwining his fingers with mine.

He glances away. “So many reasons. I wanted you to see me, not the disease. And then, I was afraid.” Those dark, intense eyes focus on me. “I don’t want to lose you. And I know it’s not fair to ask you to be with me. Not when my future is so uncertain.”

My breath catches at his words, confirming what I already know. His life is fragile.

I brush my lips against his, a gentle kiss that conveys all the love and frustration warring inside me. Then I rest my forehead on his chest, his arms wrapping around me in a protective embrace.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too,” he says, tilting my chin so I look at him. “I want a life with you. A future. But I can’t guarantee anything, Bella.”

Tears prick at my eyes, spilling over my cheeks. This is so much worse than thinking he’d cheated on me. I can’t help but wish, in the deepest recesses of my mind, that I could go back to the days when I was blissfully unaware.

But I love him. Even in the moments when anger and hurt clouded my heart, it was still his. How can I even entertain the thought of walking away now?

I hold him tighter as if my grip alone can anchor us in this storm of uncertainty and fear. Clinging desperately to him, not wanting to let go, as if he might somehow drift away from me.

“Bella?” his tone is tired, defeated. “You should also know that most men with CF are infertile. A life with me means you’ll never have kids.”

The revelation lands like a heavy blow, knocking the wind out of me.

Part of me wants to tell him it doesn’t matter, that we’ll face anything life throws at us. That our love is stronger than any obstacle, any disease. But there’s another voice inside me, one that tells me I need time to think, talk to my mom, and consider the impact of what he’s told me.

My heart aches with love for him.

But is love enough?

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Take time to think about what a life with Sebastian means. Maybe it's better to lose him now than after years of loving him. [Turn to this page.](#)

Love wins, even when it loses. Accept a future with Sebastian, no matter what the cost. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 54

SEBASTIAN

BROKEN HEART OR SHATTERED DREAMS

A week has passed since I walked into Sebastian's apartment and saw him with that woman. It's a cruel twist of fate that I had only gone there to get my forgotten phone, but instead, found my heart shattered into pieces.

I hate him. At least I try to. But there's a nagging voice in my head wondering if there could be some logical explanation.

"Don't be an idiot," I mumble. He's just like the rest of the men I've dated. *A liar and a cheat.*

I've avoided him at all costs, going as far as getting a new phone and a new number to ensure there is no chance of contact. There is no forgiveness for what I saw that night. I have to forget him and move on.

Except it seems like an impossible task. Even now, I can't stop loving him.

Groaning at how pathetic I feel, I grab my purse and get ready for work. Locking the door behind me, I make my way to my car. The familiar pattern of teaching and indulging in an after-school coffee at The Artful Bean should serve as a momentary anchor, helping me regain a sense of stability.

My stomach tightens in unease when I notice Sebastian's Mercedes parked nearby, and as he steps out of the car, his intense gaze fixes on me as he approaches.

"I have no desire to hear anything you have to say," I assert, striving to maintain a composed tone despite the inner turmoil.

"Bella, please," Sebastian pleads, his voice strained with a rough cough. I steal a glance at him and find myself taken aback by his disheveled state. His pallid complexion, unruly hair, and the disarray of his shirt, with buttons

undone and the collar askew, all catch me by surprise.

I can sense his vulnerability, and it tugs at my heart, but I ignore it.

“Hear me out,” he begs, his voice tinged with desperation and strain. He cautiously takes a step closer, but I firmly shake my head.

“No, Sebastian.”

“I promise you, Bella, I would never betray you like that. I was—”

“How stupid do you think I am?” My voice escalates, and I lower it when I notice a passing man walking his dog, raising an eyebrow in our direction. “You were alone in your apartment with another woman, half-naked.”

“She’s my doctor,” he insists.

I can’t help but laugh, though there’s no humor in it. “Sure. How long did it take you to come up with that excuse?”

He takes another step towards me, those dark eyes imploring. “Her name is Dr. Ingrid Berglund. She’s a pulmonologist. You can look her up.”

My anger wavers, and for a moment, doubt creeps in.

Could he be telling the truth?

As much as I want to believe him, I’ve been through too much already.

“Why was she there?” I know that even asking puts my fragile heart at risk once more.

“Because—” As he attempts to speak, he coughs uncontrollably, doubling over in a fit so violent he clutches his chest in pain. I take a step toward him, my anger momentarily replaced by concern.

“Are you okay?”

He doesn’t respond immediately, still wracked with coughing. But as he pulls his hand away from his mouth, it’s streaked with blood.

Alarmed, I gasp, “Sebastian.”

He shakes his head. “I’m okay, I just...I need you to know that I love you. So fucking much, Bella.”

I meet his gaze, and in that moment, I see the undeniable truth in his eyes. Despite the pain and confusion between us, his love for me is unwavering, and I can feel it deep within my soul.

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Without hesitation, I grab my phone and dial 911, my hands trembling. “I need an ambulance,” I say urgently, trying to keep my voice steady as I provide my address.

Fear grips me as I kneel beside him, and he struggles to breathe.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this,” he says, between gasps of air.

A team of paramedics rushes to help Sebastian as soon as the ambulance arrives. They quickly assess his condition and administer oxygen. I watch in sheer terror, helpless as they work to stabilize him.

The paramedic looks at me and asks, “Does he have any underlying medical conditions?”

I’m taken aback by the question, but before I can respond, Sebastian speaks weakly, “Cystic fibrosis.”

“What?” I stammer, unable to comprehend his words. My mind races with a thousand questions, each more urgent than the last.

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As I follow the ambulance through the crowded streets, regret and guilt gnaw at me. I’d been so wrong about him, about the assumptions I’d made, and the anger I’d harbored. My emotions are a turbulent storm of frustration and fear, and it feels like my body is numb with the weight of it all.

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Sebastian’s thumb strokes my cheek, then tucks my hair behind my ear, his touch sending a comforting warmth through me.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “For not giving you a chance to explain.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” His voice, though raspy, carries a sincerity that melts away my lingering guilt. “I’m the one who needs to apologize. I should have told you.”

“Why didn’t you?” I ask, entwining his fingers with mine.

He glances away. “So many reasons. I wanted you to see me, not the disease. And then, I was afraid.” Those dark, intense eyes focus on me. “I don’t want to lose you. And I know it’s not fair to ask you to be with me. Not when my future is so uncertain.”

My breath catches at his words, confirming what I already know. His life is fragile.

I brush my lips against his, a gentle kiss that conveys all the love and frustration warring inside me. Then I rest my forehead on his chest, his arms wrapping around me in a protective embrace.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too,” he says, tilting my chin so I look at him. “I want a life with you. A future. But I can’t guarantee anything, Bella.”

Tears prick at my eyes, spilling over my cheeks. This is so much worse than thinking he’d cheated on me. I can’t help but wish, in the deepest recesses of my mind, that I could go back to the days when I was blissfully unaware.

But I love him. Even in the moments when anger and hurt clouded my heart, it was still his. How can I even entertain the thought of walking away now?

I hold him tighter as if my grip alone can anchor us in this storm of uncertainty and fear. Desperately, I cling to him, not wanting to let go, as if he might somehow drift away from me.

“Bella?” his tone is tired, defeated. “You should also know that most men with CF are infertile. A life with me means you’ll never have kids.”

The revelation lands like a heavy blow, knocking the wind out of me.

Part of me wants to tell him it doesn’t matter, that we’ll face anything life throws at us. That our love is stronger than any obstacle, any disease. But there’s another voice inside me, one that tells me I need time to think, talk to my mom, and consider the impact of what he’s told me.

My heart aches with love for him.

But is love enough?

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Take time to think about what a life with Sebastian means. Maybe it's better to lose him now than after years of loving him. [Turn to this page.](#)

Love wins, even when it loses. Accept a future with Sebastian, no matter what the cost. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 55

SEBASTIAN

THE AGONY OF UNVEILED TRUTHS

I can't bring myself to meet Sebastian's gaze; instead, I focus on the tiles beneath my feet as we walk silently through the lobby. He doesn't touch me as we step into the elevator, but I can sense his restraint, his effort to hold back.

When the doors slide open, my gaze instinctively flickers upward.

The woman walks towards us, looking as awkward as I feel as she glances at me.

Sebastian clears his throat. "Bella, this is Dr. Ingrid Berglund," he says, his voice strained.

Doctor?

"Nice to meet you, Bella," she says, then turns her attention to Sebastian. "Remember what I said. It's important you see me this week. We need to change your dosage."

He rubs the back of his neck and nods as she steps onto the elevator. The doors close, leaving us alone in a silence that's now more bewildering than ever.

"She's your doctor?" I finally manage, my mind racing, to catch up with this unexpected revelation.

Sebastian hesitates, his gaze not meeting mine. "Yes," he admits, his voice heavy with weight I can't quite decipher.

I'm left standing there, my heart pounding even harder now. I had assumed the worst and imagined the most painful scenario.

My breath is shaky when I start, "I thought..."

"I know what you thought." He removes the distance between us. "You have to believe me, Bella, I would never..." He cups my face, lifting my chin

and forcing me to look at him. “Ever, hurt you like that.”

His words hang in the air, and the sincerity in his eyes pierces through the layers of doubt.

Pulling me closer, Sebastian releases a shuddering breath, and the way his arms wrap around me, the apprehension in his embrace, tells me there’s more he needs to say.

I tilt my head back to look at him, my eyes searching his for the unspoken words that linger between us. “Sebastian,” I whisper, my voice soft but filled with curiosity, “what’s really going on?”

He hesitates, his eyes closing for a moment before meeting mine once more. “There are things I haven’t told you...”

“I can’t handle any more secrets.” The weight of uncertainty presses down on me, and my heart yearns for the truth.

He nods and gestures toward the living room. “Can we sit down?”

Without a word, I follow him to the couch, my chest pounding as we take our seats. The silence stretches between us, pregnant with unspoken words, and I can feel the tension in the air like a storm on the horizon.

“I don’t want to lose you, and I know when I tell you...” He pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters a curse. “You have every right to be angry. To leave. And maybe it’s not fair for me to even ask you to stay, but I love you, Bella. So fucking much, it hurts...”

His voice breaks, and I can see the torment etched in the lines of his face. The vulnerability he’s revealing leaves me speechless, torn between my desire for honesty and the fear of what that truth might be. But one thing is clear — no matter what he’s about to confess, his love for me is undeniable.

“I never thought I’d have this,” he continues, his words spilling out from the depths of his soul. “Never wanted to love someone, knowing...Fuck.”

“Whatever it is,” I say softly, taking his hand, “we’ll face it together.”

The way he looks at me, I can tell he doesn’t seem certain, as if he’s gauging my reaction. But then he takes a deep breath and continues, “Remember how I told you CF is genetic?”

I nod slowly, my stomach twisting. “Yes.”

“There’s a fifty-fifty chance that siblings will have it. Tobias and I both drew an unlucky hand.”

My heart sinks at his words. The weight of his revelation is staggering.

“You have cystic fibrosis?” I manage to ask, my voice trembling with a mixture of shock and disbelief.

He nods. “Yes.”

“But...” I stutter, struggling to process the information. “You’re healthy.”

“I’m doing better than most. But I’ve been fighting this battle for years. I take over thirty pills a day. I’m on nebulizers and digestive medications, as well as antibiotics to help prevent lung infections. And that’s when I’m healthy. Sometimes I have to be admitted to the hospital for treatment.” He squeezes my hand. “It’s why I couldn’t see you those three weeks.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tears well up in my eyes as the enormity of his secret sinks in.

“I don’t tell many people. And I...” He drags his hands through his hair and then roughly over his face before admitting, “I didn’t want to scare you off. I know that’s not fair, Bella, but...”

“I get it,” I say softly.

He takes my hand, pressing his lips against my palm. “You need to understand that I’m healthy today, but that can change quickly. If we’re together, your life will always be filled with uncertainty.”

My heart aches at the stark reality of his words. I chew on my bottom lip. I love him so much. But can I handle losing him?

“There’s something else,” he says, fingers tightening around mine. “I know that you want children. And you would be an amazing mom. But most men with CF are infertile. A life with me means you’ll never have kids.”

The revelation lands like a heavy blow, knocking the wind out of me. It’s a painful truth, one that I need time to process.

As he watches me, his eyes filled with understanding and fear of what my response might be, I’m torn. Part of me wants to wrap my arms around him and tell him that it doesn’t matter, that we’ll face anything life throws at us together. That our love is stronger than any obstacle, any disease. But there’s another voice inside me, one that tells me I need time to think, talk to my mom, and consider the impact of what he’s told me.

My heart aches with love for him.

But is love enough?

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Take time to think about what a life with Sebastian means. It's easier to prevent a fracture than to heal a break. Maybe it's better to lose him now than after years of loving him. [Turn to this page.](#)

Love knows no boundaries of time; it flourishes in the briefest moments, leaving a lasting imprint on our hearts. Accept a future with Sebastian, no matter what it means. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 56

SEABASTIAN

WHEN TRUTH REVEALS PAIN BEYOND IMAGINED LIES

My feet feel like lead as Sebastian and I stand in the dimly lit hallway outside our hotel room. His gaze is pleading, and I want so desperately to believe that there's a reasonable explanation for what I saw inside.

"Please, Bella," he implores, his voice shaky. "Just hear me out."

I should turn and walk away from this mess. I should demand answers right here in the corridor. But there's a part of me that needs to hear what he has to say, a part that still hopes for some rational explanation.

With a reluctant nod, I follow him back to the room, flinching when he reaches for my hand. My heart pounds loudly in my chest, and I can hardly bear the idea of facing whatever awaits us inside.

The door opens when we get to it, and the woman emerges. She glances awkwardly between us before Sebastian breaks the tense silence.

"Bella, this is Dr. Jasna Loncar," he says, introducing her with a hint of hesitation in his voice.

Doctor?

The woman nods at me, then says to Sebastian, "It's important you see your regular physician when you get home."

He runs his palm over the back of his neck. "I will. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

What the hell is going on?

Dr. Loncar gives me a polite smile and heads down the hallway, leaving us alone. The tension in the air is palpable as we step into the suite.

I need distance, and I find refuge on the couch, pulling my knees to my chest.

Sebastian stands, watching me, then he sighs heavily and takes a seat beside me, his voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Still unable to comprehend the situation, I rub my temples. “No more lies, Sebastian. Tell me the truth. All of it. Why was she here?”

“Dr. Loncar is a pulmonologist. My oxygen levels were low this morning, and I was worried about a chest infection.”

The confusion inside me swirls with anger and relief. I had jumped to conclusions, assuming the worst. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why the secrecy?”

He rubs his temples, his voice strained. “Because I’m a selfish asshole, Bella. Or a fucking coward. I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Like what?”

“Weak.”

He’s anything but weak. He’s the most powerful person I’ve ever known. Yet, in this vulnerable moment, it’s as if he’s bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“I don’t understand any of this,” I admit. “People get sick. It’s a part of life. You don’t need to hide it from me.”

Sebastian sighs heavily, his gaze fixed on the floor, then he mutters a curse and roughly drags his fingers over his face. “I’m not just sick, Bella.”

“What do you mean?” I ask cautiously, my stomach twisting.

“Shit...” He pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters a string of curses.

“You’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

His gaze finds mine, and when he reaches for my hand, I don’t pull back

“Tell me,” I say softly.

“You have every right to be angry with me.” His fingers squeeze mine, and he leans in, eyes pleading. “I’ll understand if this is too much for you. And maybe it’s not fair for me to even ask you to stay, but I love you, Bella. So fucking much, it hurts...”

His voice breaks, and I can see the torment etched in the lines of his face. The vulnerability he’s revealing leaves me speechless, torn between my desire for honesty and the fear of what that truth might be.

But one thing is clear — no matter what he’s about to confess, his love for me is undeniable.

“I never thought I’d have this,” he continues, his words spilling out from the depths of his soul. “Never wanted to love someone, knowing...*Fuck.*”

“Whatever it is,” I say, moving closer. “We’ll face it together.”

The way he looks at me, I can tell he doesn't seem certain, as if he's gauging my reaction. But then he takes a deep breath and continues, "Remember how I told you CF is genetic?"

I nod slowly, my stomach twisting. "Yes."

"There's a fifty-fifty chance for siblings to get it when the parents are both carriers. Tobias and I both drew an unlucky hand."

My heart sinks at his words. The weight of his revelation is staggering.

"You have cystic fibrosis?" I manage to ask, my voice trembling with a mixture of shock and disbelief.

He nods. "Yes."

"But..." I stutter, struggling to process the information. "You're healthy."

"I'm doing better than most. But I've been fighting this battle for years."

"What does it mean?"

He lets out a deep sigh. "The disease is part of my life. Every single day, I take over thirty pills, digestive medications, as well as antibiotics to help prevent lung infections. I have nebulizers and vibration vests, and that's when I'm healthy."

My brows furrow. How could I have been so blind? I remember his cough. I'd thought it was asthma.

"Sometimes," he continues. "I have to be admitted to the hospital for treatment. Sometimes for days and weeks at a time."

"When you couldn't see me and I thought..."

"I should have told you, Bella."

"Why didn't you?" Tears well up in my eyes as the enormity of his secret sinks in.

"I don't tell many people. And I..." He drags his hands through his hair and then roughly over his face before admitting, "I didn't want to scare you off. I know that's not fair, but..."

"I understand," I say softly.

He takes my hand, pressing his lips against my palm. "I get it if you want to walk away. If we're together, your life will always be filled with uncertainty. I'm healthy today, but that can change quickly. I can't guarantee you how long...how many years I'll have."

My heart aches at the stark reality of his words. I chew on my bottom lip. I love him so much. But can I handle losing him?

"There's something else," he says, fingers tightening around mine. "I know that you want children." His thumb traces my jaw, and he forces my

eyes to meet his as he continues, “And you would be an amazing mom, Bella. But most men with CF are infertile. A life with me means you’ll never have kids.”

The revelation lands like a heavy blow, knocking the wind out of me. It’s a painful truth, one that I need time to process.

I’ve never imagined a future where I’m not a mom.

As he watches me, his eyes are filled with understanding and fear of what my response might be. The truth is, I’m torn. Part of me wants to wrap my arms around him and tell him that it doesn’t matter, that we’ll face anything life throws at us together. That our love is stronger than any obstacle, any disease. But there’s another voice inside me, one that tells me I need time to think, talk to my mom, and consider the impact of what he’s told me.

My heart aches with love for him.

But is love enough?

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Take time to think about what a life with Sebastian means. It’s easier to prevent a fracture than to heal a break. Maybe it’s better to lose him now than after years of loving him. [Turn to this page.](#)

Love knows no boundaries of time; it flourishes in the briefest moments, leaving a lasting imprint on our hearts. Accept a future with Sebastian, no matter what it means. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART NINE

GRAND GESTURE

Love is a verb, and its true magic lies not in words, but in the countless deeds that reveal your genuine affection for those who hold your heart.

CHAPTER 57

DAMIEN

APOLOGIES AND VULNERABILITY

A tumultuous storm of emotions rages relentlessly within me as I find myself standing there, locked in an unwavering gaze with those piercing, icy blue eyes. Eyes that have always had the power to leave my knees weak. My breath quivers, and my heart feels caught in a vice as I drink in his presence, a poignant reminder of the moments we once shared.

Damien's lips, once the source of comfort and sweet words, now form a thin line, strained and unsmiling. The air between us becomes palpably heavy, choked with the weight of things left unspoken, like shards of promises shattered into a thousand pieces. His presence crashes over me like a relentless wave, pulling me into a bottomless abyss of yearning and resentment, leaving me gasping for the elusive breath of closure he has avoided for far too long.

For a moment, I consider leaving him standing there, just as he left me in the dark days that followed the intrusion. But as I look into his stormy eyes, I see the turmoil within him, the regret etched into the lines of his face. Despite everything, the love I once felt for him still lingers, and a small glimmer of hope that he can explain himself tugs at my heart.

"Come in," I finally say, my voice soft and uncertain.

Damien steps inside, his eyes never leaving mine. The tension in the room is palpable, and the air is thick with unspoken words. He looks around as if seeing my home for the first time, taking in the remnants of the shattered vase and the replaced picture frames.

He drags his fingers through his messy hair, a desperate gesture, and then rubs the back of his neck, his body language betraying a vulnerability I've never seen before. Gone is the old cocky stance, replaced by something

shattered and fragile. In that fleeting moment, a surge of compassion washes over me, and I feel an intense urge to rush to his side, to encircle him with my arms, and attempt to shoulder his pain as if I could erase the fractures in his spirit with a mere embrace.

No, I warn myself. *He'll leave again. It's who he is.* My mom always says, "Trying to change someone is like expecting a river to flow uphill. It's against their nature."

I gesture to the couch, and we sit down, a polite distance between us. Silence hangs heavy, a testament to the weight of the unspoken. Finally, Damien breaks it.

"I know I messed up," he begins, his voice raw with emotion. "Leaving you like that was the hardest thing I've ever done, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

I clench my fists, fighting back the tears that threaten to spill over. "You didn't even call, Damien. I was left alone, scared, and vulnerable."

He nods, his gaze fixed on his hands. "I was scared, too. And so fucking angry with myself that I put you in that position." He looks up, his eyes filled with remorse. "I told you. I've done things I regret and been involved in shit that I can't escape. There are a lot of people who want to hurt me, but I never thought they'd come after you, Bella. You have to know that if I thought you were in danger, I'd never have..." He scrubs his hands over his face and mutters a string of curses under his breath.

"I know," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I'm not angry about that. Yeah, I was terrified after that guy broke in. But what was worse was you leaving."

His eyes meet mine, and he speaks with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. "I had to make it right. I couldn't rest until I knew no one would ever come after you again." He takes my hand, his grip firm and reassuring. "And they won't, Bella. I guarantee you."

The unwavering certainty in his voice leaves me stunned. His actions to ensure my safety are written in the lines of his face and echo loudly in unspoken words between us.

I'd known Damien had a complicated past, but I had never fully comprehended the extent of it until now.

But he still left, I remind myself. Not one call, not one text.

"I've missed you so fucking much."

I watch him closely, his sincerity evident in his eyes and the way his voice trembles. Despite the pain he's caused, I can't help but feel a flicker of

hope.

Don't be stupid, my brain warns. "I missed you, too. But you hurt me, Damien."

"I know," he says, his voice heavy with regret as he rises and starts pacing. "I thought I was trying to protect you. And I was. The things I did... had to be done. But every day without you, I felt like I was missing a part of myself. It killed me staying away."

"Then why didn't you call or even text?"

"Because I'm a coward," he admits, coming to a halt and locking eyes with me. "A fucking coward. Protecting you became an excuse to shield myself from facing the truth. I've never felt like this about anyone. And when that guy hurt you because of me..." He tugs at his hair, desperation etched in every line of his face. "When I thought I might lose you for good, it sent me spiraling over the edge. My whole life, I've tried to protect the people I love, and it always gets fucked up. Someone always gets hurt. I couldn't bear hurting you any more than I already had."

Nothing has changed, my head warns. But my heart is already betraying me. And when he sits down and reaches for my hand, I let him. It's probably stupid because my body follows my heart's lead, melting into his familiar touch.

"I know you deserve so much better than me. Than what I can offer you," he says, features bearing the weight of his words. "And I know I don't deserve another chance..."

The pain he caused still lingers, but it's not as piercing as before. His presence, vulnerability, and remorse begin to erode the resentment that had taken root. But how can I trust him again?

"How do I know you won't vanish again the next time you're scared? I don't know—"

"I'll never leave again, Bella. I promise you that. And I'll do anything to show you how much I..." He swallows hard, his voice trembling, before he continues, "I love you."

Love. Is it possible?

"I love you too, Damien," I say softly, "But..." I chew on my bottom lip, uncertainty mixing with hope in a battle my heart and mind war with.

"My heart belongs to you, Bella." His hands cup my face, his touch gentle despite the desperation I see in his eyes. "My life, my secrets. Everything from this moment forward is for you. Give me a chance to prove it. That's all

I ask.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a delicate silver chain with an emerald pendant.

"I don't have many things that I consider valuable." He places the necklace in my hand. "It was my grandmother's."

"It's beautiful," I reply softly.

"I was six when she gave it to me. A funny gift to give a kid, right?" He chuckles, but there's no humor in the sound, only sadness. "It was the only thing she possessed that meant anything to her. Probably the only thing worth any money my family ever had."

"Why did she give it to you?" I ask, curiosity tugging at my heart.

A cloud shifts across his features, casting a shadow over the memories he's stirred up. "She was dying, and I think she was worried if she gave it to my mom, she'd pawn it. Or that my father would get ahold of it and use it to pay off his gambling debts." Damien shrugs. "I don't know. But she made me promise to keep it safe until..." He brushes my cheek with his thumb. "Until I found the girl I wanted to spend my life with."

I draw in a small, shaky breath. His eyes plead with me to accept what I know he's about to ask. They beg for forgiveness, for a second chance, for something deeper and more meaningful.

We sit there in silence for a moment, the weight of the past still heavy in the air.

Damien leans closer, and I can feel his breath against my lips. The pull between us, the magnetic force that had drawn us together in the first place, is undeniable. He kisses me, soft, gentle, and full of promises I want to believe.

"I want you to have it, Bella. And when you wear it, I want you to know I'm yours."

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Forgive Damien completely and jump headfirst into a passionate, intense relationship with him, setting aside fears and doubts. [Turn to this page.](#)

Push Damien away and insist on healing and rebuilding trust before fully committing to a relationship with him. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 58

DAMIEN

EMBRACING FORGIVENESS

In this pivotal moment, I stand on the precipice of a decision that could redefine my life. Damien's eyes bore into mine, brimming with hope and vulnerability.

With a deep breath, I nod, accepting the necklace and the promises it represents.

The silver chain feels cool against my skin, and the green gemstone pendant seems to hold a world of possibilities within its depths. Damien's gaze intensifies as I fasten it around my neck, a silent acknowledgment of my chosen path.

Damien pulls me into his arms as if the pendant were a talisman, a symbol of our rekindled connection. His lips meet mine with a fervor that ignites a blazing fire within me. The kiss is a passionate declaration of our desire, and I surrender to the intoxicating pull of his presence.

The world around us fades as we lose ourselves in the whirlwind of our emotions. The fears and doubts that had haunted me for so long are pushed to the far corners of my mind, overshadowed by the overwhelming intensity of our connection.

Damien's touch electrifies my skin, sending shivers down my spine. His hands trace a path of longing and redemption along my body.

"Bella," Damien murmurs against my lips, his voice husky with desire. "I missed you so damn much."

My heart races, matching the rhythm of his words, and I find myself whispering, "I missed you too."

His eyes, dark with passion, search mine, and I see a mixture of relief and joy reflected in them. "Bella, I promise you, this time will be different. I

won't let anything come between us."

In his embrace, I allow myself to believe in the possibility of a love that defies the odds.

I'm acutely aware of the risks I'm taking. But at this moment, I choose to embrace hope and dive headfirst into the whirlwind of Damien Blackwood. I can't predict the future, but I'm willing to take the chance, knowing that love can rewrite even the most turbulent stories.

He smiles a glint of excitement in his eyes. "There's a cottage in the mountains near Bearclaw Lake. It's quiet, secluded, and the perfect place for us to escape from everything for a weekend. Come with me."

The idea of escaping to a tranquil cottage, far removed from the chaos of our lives, stirs a sense of longing in my heart. I can feel the weight of our past and the uncertainty of our future, and I realize that maybe, just maybe, a weekend away is what we need to reaffirm our love and rebuild our spirits.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Go with Damien to the cottage for the weekend. [Turn to this page.](#)

Accept the invitation to go to the cottage, but first, he has to meet the parents. Turn to this page. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 59

DAMIEN

UNCERTAIN GROUND

I can still feel the lingering warmth of Damien's lips on mine as he hovers beside me, his eyes locked on me, searching for a sign of what I'll choose.

The kiss we just shared was a spark, a reminder of the passion that once bound us together, but it also brought forth a whirlwind of emotions I'm not sure I'm ready to confront.

"God, Bella," he growls softly, his fingers still tangled in my hair. "You have no idea how much I missed you."

His words hang in the air, heavy with meaning, and my heart aches at the raw honesty in his voice. I know he's sincere and regrets his past actions, but trust is fragile, easily shattered, and slow to mend.

I sit back, creating a little space between us, and look down at my trembling fingers that clutch the silver chain. "I need you to understand something. I want to believe you. I do. But it's not that simple."

"I know I hurt you, and I can't take that back. But I'll do anything to make it right."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I struggle to find the words. "I need time, Damien. Time to heal, time to rebuild the trust that was shattered when you walked away."

His eyes never leave mine, and there's a vulnerability in his gaze that tugs at my heart. "I'll wait, Bella. I'll wait as long as it takes."

As much as I want to give in to the allure of what could be, there's a part of me that's still hesitant, still scarred from past wounds. "I appreciate that, I do. But there are things we need to talk about, things we need to work through."

He nods again, his jaw tight with determination. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes. Just tell me what you need."

Silence hangs between us for a moment, the weight of our shared history and the uncertainty of our future pressing down on us.

"I need us to take things slow," I say, finally meeting his eyes again. "To rebuild our connection from the ground up, to rediscover each other, and to learn to trust again."

"I can do that, Bella. Whatever you need."

As we sit there, wrapped in each other's arms, I can't help but feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, we can find our way back to each other, stronger and more resilient than before.

And maybe I'm fooling myself.

He brushes his thumb across my cheek. "There's a cottage in the mountains near Bearclaw Lake. It's quiet, secluded, and the perfect place for us to escape from everything for a weekend. Let me take you there."

The idea of escaping to a tranquil cottage, far removed from the chaos of our lives, stirs a sense of longing in my heart. I can feel the weight of our past and the uncertainty of our future, and I realize that maybe, just maybe, a weekend away is what we need to reaffirm our love and rebuild our spirits.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Accept the necklace from Damien and go to the cottage together.

[Turn to this page.](#)

Take things slow and go on more dates with Damien. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 60

DAMIEN

FERRIS WHEELS AND ROLLERCOASTERS

As weeks roll into months, Damien works tirelessly to prove his unwavering commitment to me. He becomes a master of little surprises, from hiding love notes in unexpected places to planning spontaneous picnics in the park. His efforts aren't just about grand gestures but also the everyday moments that show he's fully invested in our relationship.

The fear that once held me back slowly begins to fade. A growing sense of security and warmth replaces it. Damien's consistent love and effort become the building blocks of our renewed connection, creating a solid foundation for the future I'm now daring to dream about.

"You know, I just thought of something," Damien says with a mischievous glint in his eyes as we ride the Ferris wheel at the Market Fair. He grabs a handful of the overly salted popcorn, tossing a piece in the air and catching it in his mouth, then smirks.

"What's that?" I lean into him as he wraps a strong arm around my shoulder.

"Our relationship is kinda like a Ferris wheel."

"Really, how so?"

"It's had its ups and downs, and—" I burst into laughter, and he gives me a mock frown. "What, too cheesy?"

"No. I love when you're cheesy, but I'm sure you meant roller coasters. Ferris wheels go in circles, not up and down."

He taps the tip of my nose playfully, "What direction are we going in right now?"

"Uh, up, I guess."

“And when we get to the top, we’ll go down.” He shrugs and looks smug. “See, up and down.”

I chuckle. “Okay, I guess you win.”

“But you’re right,” he says, smiling. “Rollercoaster makes way more sense.”

In the warmth of our laughter, Damien draws me closer, his lips gently grazing the top of my head. It's a tender gesture that sends a wave of relaxation cascading through my entire body as if all the worries and doubts are swept away in that single, affectionate kiss.

Time is our ally, gradually erasing the scars of our turbulent past. With each passing day, I find myself trusting Damien again, and though I didn't think it was possible, I've fallen even more in love with him.

"Bella," he says, his voice suddenly filled with tension, "You know I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy." His sincerity is palpable, and the weight of his words hangs in the air, promising a future we're both cautiously inching toward. He takes a deep breath, his vulnerability shining through. "I'm willing to prove myself to you every day for as long as it takes."

With a trembling hand, Damien reaches into his pocket and retrieves the delicate silver chain. The pendant with the deep green gemstone, his grandmother's cherished heirloom, is suspended from it. His eyes meet mine, and it's clear that this necklace is more than just jewelry; it symbolizes his commitment and a pledge to mend what was once broken.

"Bella," he says softly, holding the necklace out to me, "will you please wear this? Wear it as a reminder of my promise, of my love."

I nod, my voice steady but filled with emotion. "I will."

As I fasten the chain around my neck, Damien leans in, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that seals our unspoken agreement. It's a kiss filled with hope and the promise of a future we're determined to build together, one day at a time.

The kiss deepens, and Damien's longing intensifies; a low, needy groan escapes his lips, echoing the pent-up passion between us. "Let's go away for the weekend. Just you and me."

"I'd love to, but..." I chew on my bottom lip, my thoughts turning to my parents' inquiries about meeting Damien. I didn't want to introduce him until I knew that things between us were solid, which they are now. But the idea of a weekend dedicated to just me and him, without any outside distractions, is

tempting.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Go to the cottage for the weekend, but first, Damien has to meet the parents. [Turn to this page.](#)

Make this weekend all about romance. Go to the cottage with Damien! [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 61

SEBASTIAN

ONE YEAR LATER

The penthouse living room has become a hub of glitter, colored paper, and glue. Tomorrow's art project for my grade three class has taken over every inch of space, but it's Sebastian struggling with a hot glue gun beside me that brings a smile to my face.

He glances over and catches me watching him, his brow furrowed in concentration. "You look entertained."

I chuckle. "I never thought I'd have a CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company helping me glue felt hearts to popsicle sticks."

"This is a lot more difficult than I thought it'd be." He carefully squeezes a line of hot glue onto a popsicle stick. "You know, I've faced tough board meetings and high-stakes negotiations, but this glue gun is a formidable opponent," he quips, a playful glint in his eyes.

As we work side by side, our fingers sticky with glue and our laughter filling the room, I'm grateful for this simple moment.

Sebastian's cystic fibrosis has been under control, but there's always a nagging fear at the back of my mind, of how quickly his health could deteriorate. The sight of him struggling to breathe or the sound of his coughing fits can be heart-wrenching. It's a reminder of the fragility of life and the relentless battle he faces against this disease. But we're facing each day together.

And life with Sebastian is anything but boring.

It's filled with fancy dinners, charity galas, and weekend trips to Rome and Paris. Sometimes I can hardly believe this is my life.

As I watch him, my heart swells with love.

Despite the art project chaos surrounding us, there's an undeniable

intimacy in this shared moment. It's times like this, these seemingly ordinary moments that I treasure the most.

"I love you," I say softly, my chest aching like it could explode from the emotions that well up inside me.

Love is such a simple word for such a powerful feeling.

Those piercing eyes of his lock onto me. His lips curve into a warm smile, and my breath catches in my throat.

Mine. That's what he is — all *mine*.

"I love you too," he replies, his voice soft as he puts the glue gun down.

One glance at his smirk and I should be prepared for his playful attack, but he's quick, and in an instant I'm on my back, Sebastian, hovering above me, smiling wickedly.

"Don't even think about tickling me," I warn.

He dips his mouth down to my ear, his breath shallow as he whispers, "But I like watching you squirm."

My fingers curl in his t-shirt and I smile up at him. "I know you, do. But I still have twenty pairs of googly eyes to add—"

His kiss stops my protest, his fingers threading through my hair, and I tremble beneath him, heat pooling in my core. "I think we deserve a break."

A whimper of desire escapes my lips, and he matches it with a deep groan. I arch toward him, aching to get closer. One touch. One kiss. And the world is forgotten. Only Sebastian exists.

He pulls my bottom lip between his, and my mouth parts as his tongue strokes against mine.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and his hands slip under my shirt, pulling the fabric over my head. Desperate touches, and feral kisses, we explore each other's bodies, removing the obstacle of clothing between us.

Lifting me, he carries me to the bedroom, placing me on the king-sized bed, mouth, and fingers gliding over my curves, over my breast, my stomach, my hips, until he grips my knees, spreading them. His fingertips run along the slit of my pussy and I gasp.

"So wet." His words are a growl of desperation.

I hold on to his shoulders as he pushes a finger deep inside me. His tongue licks at my swollen flesh, and I whimper as he devours me, lapping, licking, sucking until I'm crying out his name. "Sebastian."

My fingers tug at his hair, and I pant, knowing I'm only a second away from convulsing against his tongue.

“So good,” I gasp, as my entire body trembles with ecstasy as I ride out the orgasm against his mouth. I quiver and shake for a long moment, and then he’s touching me again, slow and tender as he crawls up the bed, spreading my knees further with his own.

“You taste incredible.” His thumb traces over the contour of my cheek, his thick, engorged cock pressing teasingly against my belly.

Desire throbs, starting brand new.

“I need you inside me,” I whimper.

His groan rips out as he sinks into me, our breath mingled, heart beats in sync. Every single part of us shared.

As the room fills with our sounds of pleasure and rapture ripples through my body, I lie in Sebastian’s arms, satiated and consumed by euphoria.

“That was a nice break,” I say, grinning up at him.

“Better than nice.” He presses his lips against my forehead.

I sigh, the sound a mix of contentment and reluctance. “Wish I didn’t have to pack everything up and go home,” I mumble as I sit up.

But Sebastian doesn’t let me move away. He pulls me back down against his chest, his arms securely around me. “Then stay,” he whispers.

I hesitate, my mind racing with thoughts of responsibilities and commitments. “I can’t. I have other supplies I need for tomorrow. And my clothes—”

His kiss silences my words, and he murmurs against my lips, “Stay.” He places a soft kiss on my nose. “Here.” His lips move to my neck. “Always.”

I grip his shoulders, pushing him back slightly so I can look into his eyes, searching for clarity. “You mean move in?” I ask, my heart pounding with the possibility of what he’s suggesting.

That mischievous grin returns to his face, and he reaches across me, fumbling in the bedside table drawer before retrieving a small teal box. My heart races as he sits up and opens it.

The room seems to hold its breath as I stare at the ring inside, my emotions swirling.

Sebastian takes a deep breath, his eyes locked onto mine. “From the moment we met, my life changed in ways I never could have imagined. You gave me more than just love; you gave me full acceptance, unwavering support, *and* the most incredible sex.” He chuckles softly, and I smile through the tears in my eyes.

He continues, his voice steady and filled with conviction. “I know there

will be times when I have to ask more from you because of my illness, and I'm grateful that you never make me feel less because of it. I want to spend every minute I have loving you and making you happy, Bella. You've shown me what it means to truly live."

Those gorgeous, smouldering dark eyes never leave mine. "So, with all my heart, I ask you this: Will you marry me?"

"Yes," I whisper, "yes, a thousand times, yes."

My heart soars as he slides the ring onto my finger.

"I guess I have one more question?" he says, fingers tangling in my hair.

"What's that?"

He smiles, his thumb gently caressing my cheek. "Do you want a big wedding? Something grand that would take at least six months to prepare? Or do you want something smaller, more intimate, and get married as soon as possible?" He leans in closer, his warm breath tickling the nape of my neck. "Like next week."

Reader's Choice

What should Bella do next?

Give him an enthusiastic "YES!" and plan a wedding so epic it would make Cinderella jealous. [Turn to this page.](#)

Don't waste another moment. Choose to get married next week at the courthouse. Who cares about a big wedding? It's the everyday moments that matter. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 62

SEBASTIAN

WHEN LOVE FEELS INSUFFICIENT

As I sit on the porch of my childhood home, the old oak tree rustles in the breeze, and I clutch my hot chocolate like it's a lifeline while pondering the vast knowledge I've gained from my week-long deep dive into cystic fibrosis on the internet. I take a steadying breath, trying to calm the racing thoughts in my head as I contemplate everything I've read on WebMD.

Closing my eyes and cradling a steaming cup of hot chocolate, I let the familiar sounds of neighborhood children playing and the scent of freshly cut grass wash over me. These sensations should be comforting, but my heart is burdened by the heavy truths I've unearthed.

My mom senses my turmoil and reaches out, taking my hand in hers. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I struggle to hold back the tears threatening to spill. "It's Sebastian," I finally say, my voice trembling as I utter his name. "He..."

Her voice softens with concern, and she asks, "Did you two break up?"

I shake my head, my emotions too overwhelming to contain. "It's so much worse than that," I reply, taking a deep breath to steady myself. The words pour out of me, an uncontrolled torrent, as I reveal everything to her — about the disease, about Sebastian's secrecy, and about the daunting future we face together. I speak of the fear that grips my heart, the uncertainty that shrouds our path, and, above all, the depth of my love for him.

My mom listens intently, her eyes filled with compassion and understanding. As I finish, she enfolds me in a warm and comforting embrace. "Oh, honey," she murmurs, "I can only imagine how challenging

this must be for you.”

Tears flow freely now as I bury my face in her shoulder. “I don’t know what to do, Mom. I’m so scared. I love him so much, but it feels like a weight I can’t bear. What if...”

Those two words have been my mantra this week. *What if...what if...what if.*

Mom soothes me with gentle strokes of my hair, her voice carrying a calm and reassuring tone. “Sweetheart, love can be a complicated journey, and life often throws unexpected challenges our way. What’s clear is that you care deeply for Sebastian, and he cares for you. Committing to someone means facing difficulties together.”

I pull back slightly, seeking guidance from her loving gaze. “But what if I can’t handle it? What if I’m not strong enough?”

My mom offers me a soft, reassuring smile, wiping away a tear from my cheek. “You’re stronger than you think, Bella.” She embraces me once more, her love enveloping me like a warm cocoon. “You’ll find the strength you need. Love has a way of helping us rise above the challenges that are sure to come. Just remember, your dad and I are here for you, always.”

She’s right. I can’t let fear paralyze me. In all the uncertainty, I cling to one truth like a lifeline — I love him, and he loves me.

As I drive away from my parent’s house, I call Sebastian. His voice fills the car’s interior, tired and weakened from his recent hospital stay.

“Hi,” he says, his voice lacking its usual confidence.

“Are you at home?” I ask, fully aware that he shouldn’t be anywhere else, given what the doctors have said. But I also understand Sebastian’s tendency to disregard rules.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” I respond. “We need to talk.”

There’s a brief silence on the line, followed by a heavy sigh. “Okay.”

When I step off the elevator, into his penthouse apartment, he walks towards me, his dark eyes searching mine with a mix of emotions. Without a word, he draws me close to his chest, and I melt into his embrace, finding solace in his presence and the familiar scent of his cologne. He presses his lips tenderly against the top of my head, and for that moment, all worries and uncertainties fade away.

“I missed you,” I whisper, feeling his body relax slightly at my words. But when I pull back and look up at him, I see doubt flickering across his

expression. His brows knit together and his features tighten.

I gently cup his face in my hands. "I'm glad you're home."

"Sorry for scaring you like that."

"I'm just glad you're better now. I mean..."

A sad smile tugs at his lips, acknowledging the unspoken truth. "I know what you meant."

His lung infection has been treated, but we both know there's no cure for cystic fibrosis.

"You wanted to talk?" he says, pulling away slightly and rubbing his palm over the back of his neck.

I refuse to let him create a barrier between us and move closer. Fisting my hands in his shirt, I tell him, "I love you, Sebastian. I'm sorry I needed time to process everything, but—"

"It's okay." He brushes a strand of hair off my cheek. "It's given me time to think, too. It was selfish to ask you to be with me."

"Bullshit." I shake my head. "You deserve love just as much as anyone."

He rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closing briefly as if searching for the right words. "I don't want you to wake up one day, five, ten years from now, and resent me. To regret being with me. This disease, it's brutal and not fair—"

"You're right," I assert, my voice brimming with determination. "It's not fair. It's incredibly difficult, and I wish you didn't have to endure it."

"But I do," he says, his expression reflecting the weight of his condition, and what it means for both of us. "It's not a choice for me. But *you* do get to choose."

"And I've made my choice. I choose you, Sebastian."

"Bella—"

"I refuse to let fear dictate how I feel about you."

His fingers become entangled in my hair, and I can see a battle raging in his expression. The torment in his eyes. He shakes his head, torn by conflicting emotions.

"Do you love me?" I ask.

"You know I do. That's why I want to protect you."

I nod, my determination growing. "I'm not naïve. I know love alone is not enough. But every relationship demands effort, compromise, and challenges."

"You're right," he concedes, acknowledging the truth in my words.

“My only fear is losing you, and that’s what would happen if I walked away.”

He hesitates, his body tense. But then, he clings to me as if I’m his lifeline, and I can feel the depth of our connection, the weight of his emotions in that embrace.

“I love you, Bella. So much,” he says, and then his lips find mine, soft and hesitant as if testing the waters, and quickly becoming more demanding. In an instant, his restraint crumbles, and our mouths crash together in a kiss that’s primal and all-consuming.

His breathing grows unsteady, and the turmoil within him becomes palpable. It’s as if the emotions he’s bottled up are unleashed, and he pours them into our kiss. His desperation mingles with passion, and our lips move together hungrily, seeking solace and reassurance in each other’s embrace.

When he draws back, his hands cradling my face, his voice cracks as he says, “Marry me.”

“What?” I whisper, searching his eyes.

He takes a deep breath, his gaze locked onto mine. “I love you, Bella. And I want to spend as many years as I have left being your husband. Marry me. Be my wife.”

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Give him an enthusiastic “YES!” and plan a wedding so epic it would make Cinderella jealous. [Turn to this page.](#)

Seal the deal by grabbing his hand and leading him to the bedroom. Who needs a big wedding when you can create magical little moments every day? [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 63

SEBASTIAN

LOVE AND GUIDANCE

The old oak tree outside my childhood home rustles in the gentle breeze, casting dancing shadows on the porch. Sitting there with my mom, I take a deep breath, trying to calm the ache in my chest as I think about what I read on the internet. I've spent the past week learning everything and anything I can about cystic fibrosis.

I close my eyes, holding my steaming cup of hot chocolate, listening to the distant sound of the neighborhood kids playing, and inhaling the familiar scent of freshly cut grass. It should be comforting, but my heart is heavy with the weight of what I've discovered.

My mom takes my hand and squeezes it. "What's wrong, honey?"

I swallow hard, trying to hold back the tears that threaten to spill over. "It's Sebastian," I say, my voice cracking on his name. "He..."

"Did you break up?" she asks with a sympathetic tone.

"No." I shake my head. "It's so much worse than that." My emotions overwhelm me, and the words spill out of me like a dam breaking as I recount everything to her. About the disease, about how he's been hiding it from me, and about what it would mean to be with him. I tell her about the fear that grips my heart, the uncertainty that looms over us, and how much I love him.

My mom listens attentively, her eyes filled with compassion and understanding. As I finish, she wraps her arms around me in a comforting embrace. "Oh, darling," she murmurs, "I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you."

I bury my face in her shoulder, tears flowing freely now. "I don't know what to do, Mom. I'm so scared. I love him so much, but this feels like a

weight I can't bear."

"Sweetheart, love is complicated, and life often throws unexpected challenges at us," she gently says, offering reassurance. "It's clear that you care deeply for Sebastian, and he cares for you, too. Sometimes, love means facing these difficulties together."

I pull away, looking into her eyes, seeking guidance. "But what if I can't handle it? What if I'm not strong enough?"

My mom smiles softly, wiping away a tear from my cheek. "You're stronger than you think." She hugs me tighter. "You'll find the strength you need. Love has a way of helping us rise above the challenges that come our way. Just remember, Dad and I are here for you, always."

She's right. I can't let fear paralyze me. In all the uncertainty, I hold on to one truth like a lifeline — I love Sebastian, and he loves me.

As I drive, I call him, and his voice fills the car's interior as he answers.

"Hi," he says softly.

"Are you at home?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies, his tone subdued. "Do you want to come over?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes. We need to talk."

There's a brief silence on the line, followed by a heavy sigh. "Okay."

When I step off the elevator, he strides towards me, his dark eyes searching mine with a mix of emotions. Without a word, he pulls me close to his chest, and I melt into his embrace, surrendering to the comforting warmth of his body. He presses his lips tenderly against the top of my head, and for that moment, all worries and uncertainties seem to fade.

"I love you," I whisper.

He relaxes slightly at those words. But when I pull back and look up at him, I see doubt flickering across his expression. His brows are drawn down, and his features are strained.

I gently cup his face in my hands. "And I missed you this week. I hate being away from you."

He opens his mouth to speak, but I press my fingers to his lips to silence him.

"I love you," I say again. Needing him to not only hear the words but believe them.

He rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closing briefly as if searching for the right words. "I don't want you to wake up one day, five, ten years from now, and resent me. To regret being with me. This disease, it's not fair

—”

“You’re right,” I interrupt, filled with determination. “It’s not fair. It sucks. And I wish that you didn’t have to suffer with it. But it’s part of who you are. Loving you means accepting everything about you. I know there will be bad days. And I know I still have a lot to learn about the disease. But I won’t let fear stop me from loving you.”

His fingers tangle in my hair, and I can see a war raging in his eyes. He shakes his head, clearly conflicted. “Bella—”

“Do you love me?” I interrupt, searching his gaze for an answer.

His response comes without hesitation. “You know I do.”

I nod, my resolve growing stronger with each passing moment. “I’m not naïve to think that’s all that matters. But *every* relationship takes work. It involves making compromises and facing challenges together. My only fear is losing you, and that’s what would happen if I walked away now.”

He hesitates, his body tense, but then he clings to me as if I’m his lifeline. I feel the weight of his emotions in that embrace, the relief that I won’t abandon him, and the depth of our connection.

Tentatively, his lips brush mine, as if he’s testing the waters of his own emotions. His breathing is unsteady, and I can sense the turmoil within him. Then, in an instant, his restraint shatters, and his mouth crashes into mine with a kiss that’s feral and consuming.

It’s as if all the pent-up emotions he’s been holding back flood through him, and he pours them into our kiss. His desperation mingles with passion, and our lips move together hungrily, seeking solace and reassurance in each other’s embrace.

He pulls back slightly, his hands cupping my face, his voice cracking as he says, “Marry me.”

“What?” I whisper, needing confirmation of this life-altering request.

He takes a deep breath, his eyes locked onto mine as he asks again, “Marry me, Bella. Be my wife.”

Reader’s Choice

What should Bella do next?

Give him an enthusiastic “YES!” and plan a wedding so epic it would

make Cinderella jealous. [Turn to this page.](#)

Seal the deal by grabbing his hand and leading him to the bedroom. Who needs a big wedding when you can create magical little moments every day? [Turn to this page.](#)

PART TEN

THE MAKE-OR-BREAK MOMENT

Trust is the bridge that spans the river of insecurities, and vulnerability is the foundation upon which it's built. In the landscape of love, these are the landmarks that guide us to the most profound connections.

CHAPTER 64

DAMIEN

MEET THE PARENTS

I can't help but feel a flutter of nervous excitement as Damien and I approach my parents' cozy suburban home.

We climb the porch steps, and I take a deep breath before ringing the doorbell. A few moments later, the door swings open, and there my mom stands, her warm smile immediately putting me at ease.

"Bella, darling!" Mom exclaims, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Hi, Mom," I say, returning the embrace. Then, I step back and gesture towards Damien. "Damien, this is my mom."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Montgomery."

Mom's eyes twinkle with their usual warmth. "Call me Jane." As we enter the front foyer, she calls out, "Bill, they're here."

When my dad comes out of the living room to meet us, his expression is unreadable as he assesses Damien. "So, you're the young man who's been spending time with my daughter."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Montgomery." Damien looks uneasy as he reaches to shake my dad's hand.

"I suppose this is when I ask your intentions with my little girl."

"Dad!" I give him a look of warning, not knowing what game he's playing.

"Don't worry about him," my mom says to Damien, swatting my dad's arm. "He's completely harmless."

"Not sure about harmless. Remember," My dad's attempt at being intimidating falters, and he grins, falling back into typical goofy nature, as he continues, "I've got a black belt in dad jokes, so if you ever break her heart, I'll have to unleash my ultimate power... the 'dadvice.'"

I groan and shake my head. "No dad jokes tonight, please."

"You know, there was a time you thought I was the funniest guy in the world."

"There's a difference between laughing at you and laughing because of you," I tease.

"Ouch. Right to the ticker." He grabs his chest, feigning heartbreak.

"Enough, you two," my mom warns, then says to Damien, "They're like little kids when they get going with the jokes and teasing."

"Something smells delicious," I say, redirecting the conversation. "Please tell me you made your homemade lasagna."

"And garlic bread and cheese," Mom says with a hint of pride, motioning us to follow her.

My dad places a hand on Damien's shoulder as we walk to the kitchen and sit at the large oak table. "You know," he says, "they say the key to a happy life is laughter. Or was it ice cream? Either way, welcome, Damien, and we'll try to supply you with both!"

Damien chuckles, and I grab his hand, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

As we settle into an easy conversation, my parents regale Damien with stories of my childhood. Dad can't resist telling him about the year I insisted on wearing nothing but pink from head to toe. He even pulls out a photo album filled with embarrassing pictures of me in various shades of pink, each outfit more outrageous than the last.

"She had an artistic streak even at age five," my mom says.

Amidst the laughter and storytelling, I glance at Damien, who is fully engaged in the conversation, his eyes sparkling with genuine amusement. And I can't help but fall in love with him all over again, seeing how easily he fits into my family's dynamic.

After an afternoon filled with laughter, we say our goodbyes. Mom hugs me tightly and whispers, "He's a keeper, Bella. We like him."

A sense of relief washes over me. Damien has won over my parents, and my heart swells with happiness as we head out.

Damien's motorcycle roars to life when we hit the open road. The wind rushes around us, tousling my hair as I grip him tightly, a rush of exhilaration washing over me. I feel a growing sense of contentment and freedom with each passing mile.

The road narrows as we wind through the forest, the dappled sunlight playing on the leaves overhead. I can't help but feel a sense of wonder as I

take in the beauty of the natural world around us. The anticipation builds with every mile we cover, and soon, the cottage comes into view. It's a charming, rustic cabin nestled amidst the trees, its wooden exterior blending seamlessly with nature.

I glance at Damien, and his expression mirrors my emotions. *Happy. Peaceful. Loved.*

He unlocks the door, and we enter the cozy interior: A large stone fireplace, plush furnishings, and huge bay windows that frame picturesque views of the surrounding forest and lake. It's a world away from Damien's sleek loft apartment, with all its high-scale security.

"It's gorgeous."

"I hoped you'd like it." His arms encircle me, and I rest my back against his chest. "What I *really* think you'll like is the ensuite bathroom. There's a tub built for two."

I twist in his arms. "Well, that settles it. I know what I want to do first."

He chuckles. "Really? Because my first preference was christening the primary bedroom, then the bathtub, and if you still have energy, the couch."

I kiss him, then murmur against his lips. "Best plan ever."

"God, I love you."

And for the next several hours, he shows me just how much.

Completely sated and exhausted, we sit in front of the crackling fireplace, wine in hand, and Damien's fingers trace patterns along my arm, his touch even now sending shivers of desire down my spine.

"Thank you for bringing me. It's beautiful here."

"This place has a lot of memories." He brushes his thumb across my cheek. "But this one is my favorite." Something dark flickers in his eyes. It's a darkness I've seen often, one he's become an expert at dismissing. "I'm hoping together we can erase the other ones."

"What do you mean?" I probe.

He takes a deep breath, a battle raging in his stormy gaze like he's debating how much to share. "I dreaded coming here for a long time."

I place my hand on his arm, hoping he'll keep opening up. That he'll finally show me some of the demons I know he's been fighting.

"As a kid, this place was barely a shack in the woods." His gaze drifts to the flickering flames. "When my grandfather died, he left it to me. I thought about selling it..." His brows are drawn, and he shakes his head, sighing. "But then I figured it would just be letting the bastard win if I did. So, I

decided to fix it up. I've spent the last several years trying to update it, make it a better place."

He turns to look at me, his eyes filled with vulnerability. "This cabin was the site of some of my worst nightmares, Bella. It's where my dad used to bring Stacey and me when he wanted to hurt us." He pauses, then adds, "A place where the neighbors couldn't hear our screams."

My breath catches in my throat as his revelation sinks in.

"The "last time I was here with the bastard..." Damien drags a hand over his neck, jaw clenching, then continues, " It was the only time I ever dared to fight back."

I can feel the weight of his words, the pain and anger he must have carried for so long. I squeeze his hand again, urging him to go on.

"He'd already taken his anger out on me, and I thought his cruelty was over." His gaze is distant and unseeing, and fear flashes there as if he's reliving the moment. "Stacey had upset him somehow. He hit her. Then he hit her again and again. So fucking hard her eyes rolled back in her head, and I thought...I thought he was going to kill her."

"Oh my god, Damien."

"I grabbed a cast iron frying pan. Shit, I could barely lift the thing, but I managed enough strength in that moment to hit him with it." He snorts, shaking his head. "Knocked that bastard out cold. Thought for a hopeful moment that he was dead."

A shiver runs down my spine as I imagine the scene playing out in this very spot. The darkness that must have haunted him, that still haunts him.

"What did he do?"

"I thought he'd beat me senseless when he finally came to. But he didn't remember a thing when he woke up the next morning. Acted like it never happened."

I take Damien's face, making him meet my gaze. "I'm so sorry."

He offers a faint smile. "It was the last time he laid a hand on either of us and took off not long after. But the damage had already been done. Stacey felt it the most. She never really recovered from the shit he'd done to her. Started spiraling by the time she was thirteen, got messed up with drugs, then started dating assholes who were fucking clones of our father. I thought having Lexi would change things, but it just got worse. Child Services were going to take Lexi away if my mom hadn't stepped in."

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close, my heart breaking for the

pain he and his family endured. “You and your mom have provided a stable home for Lexi. I’ve seen her, and I know she’s thriving.”

He nods, resting his head against mine. “We're doing our best.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“I hate that I have so much fucked up shit in my past, Bella. You deserve better.”

I climb onto his lap and straddle him, placing my hands on his face. “I love you, Damien Blackwood. Demons and all. And if it takes months or years, I promise we’ll fill this place with laughter and love.”

“And sex,” he says, grinning, that playful smirk back on his lips.

I laugh. “Yes, lots and lots of sex.”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Be adventurous. Make new memories with Damien with a midnight dip in the lake. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay warm, but not dry. Make new memories with Damien in the two-person jetted tub. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 65

DAMIEN

UNVEILING SHADOWS

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I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close, my heart breaking for the pain he and his family endured. “You and your mom have provided a stable home for Lexi. I’ve seen her, and I know she’s thriving.”

He nods, resting his head against mine. “We’re doing our best.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“I hate that I have so much fucked up shit in my past, Bella. You deserve better.”

I climb onto his lap and straddle him, placing my hands on his face. “I love you, Damien Blackwood. Demons and all. And if it takes months or years, I promise that we’ll fill this place with laughter and love.”

“And sex,” he says, grinning, that playful smirk back on his lips.

I laugh. “Yes, lots and lots of sex.”

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Be adventurous. Make new memories with Damien with a midnight dip in the lake. [Turn to this page.](#)

Stay warm but not dry, and turn up the steam in the bathtub. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 66

DAMIEN

A DIP IN THE LAKE

Above us, a million stars spark to life, their luminous dance reflecting upon the lake's surface. The full moon, a radiant silver orb, casts its tender glow, lighting our way as we walk along the shore.

"This night is perfect," I say, digging my bare toes into the cool sand and leaning into Damien's embrace.

"It is." He kisses the top of my head and then whispers in my ear. "You know what would make it even better?"

I glance up at him, narrowing my eyes, when I hear the mischief in his voice. "What's that?"

"A quick dip in the lake."

"No way," I say, chuckling. "It's freezing."

"Not once you get in. I promise." A playful glimmer dances in his eyes and a mischievous grin curves his lips.

I glance down at my clothing, realizing we hadn't prepared for this impromptu adventure. "We don't have our bathing suits," I protest.

"Who needs suits?" With a devil-may-care attitude, he begins to undress, his chuckles echoing in the stillness of the night. Clothes fall to the ground, leaving him standing in the moonlight, looking like a Greek god in all his glory.

"You're crazy. I'm not skinny dipping."

He strides into the lake, then takes the plunge, disappearing beneath the surface with a playful splash.

I hesitate, my toes dipping into the water. It's colder than I anticipated, a sharp shock sending a gasp to my lips. Damien's head emerges, his teasing grin still intact.

"Come on, Bella," he encourages, his voice coaxing.

I strip off my clothes, the night air raising goosebumps on my skin, and I step into the water. The cold grips me, making me shiver, but determination keeps me moving forward. "Oh my god, it's cold."

"Just think about how good that bath will feel later."

"That's not helping," I say, then finally make the full plunge. I gasp when my head emerges, but like Damien noted, it only takes a few seconds before the water feels warmer than the night air.

"Come here." Damien lunges towards me, and I squeal, attempting to dodge his playful attack. It's no use. He's faster than me, and in fairness, I don't try too hard to get away.

His arms wrap around my waist, and those stormy eyes, illuminated by the moonlight, lock onto mine, a smile tugging at his lips. "You know what else would make this night perfect?"

I feel my heart quicken, a rush of anticipation coursing through me. "What?"

"This," he says, kissing me.

It is perfect. A moment that will forever live in my heart. It's as if time conspires to give us an eternity in a single night.

We spend the next two days in a blissful blur of laughter, love, and simply enjoying each other's company. It's as if time itself has slowed down. We take long walks in the forest, hand in hand, and sit by the crackling fire in the evenings, lost in conversation and each other's gaze.

I savor every stolen kiss, every shared laugh, and every loving glance. These moments are a gift, a testament to the healing power of our love.

"I don't want to leave," I say against Damien's lips, wishing that tomorrow wasn't a school day and we could stay here for another few days or even forever.

He smiles down at me, tucking my hair behind my ear. "It's only a short ride home. We can come back next week—"

Bam.

The peaceful atmosphere of the secluded cabin is shattered as the front door swings open, revealing a chaotic and desperate figure.

"What the hell?" Damien's voice carries a low, menacing growl, and I see his posture shift, instantly becoming one of protection, his body shielding me from the intruder.

"Damien?" The woman whispers, holding onto the door for support.

His eyes narrow on her. “Stacey.”

My heart races as I follow his gaze, trying to make sense of the situation. The peace and serenity of our time at the cottage is shattered instantly, replaced by a tense anticipation of the unknown.

Stacey stumbles inside, her disheveled appearance and wide-eyed fear making it clear that she had no idea Damien would be here. Before I can process the shock of her sudden arrival, she falls to her knees.

My heart lurches with concern, and I rush to her side to offer comfort and support. But as I look into her hollow eyes and notice the track marks on her arms, a sinking dread settles in my chest.

Damien shuts the door and then kneels beside his sister, his face a mixture of anger, concern, and frustration.

"What's happened?" he demands, his voice sharp with worry.

She swallows hard, her words coming out in a rushed whisper. "I didn't know you'd be here. I just...I needed a place to hide."

The tension in the room escalates as the distant sound of an approaching truck reaches our ears.

“They’re coming.” Stacey's eyes widen in terror.

“Fucking hell,” Damien growls as a faded blue pickup pulls up outside the cabin.

Through the large Bay window, I see four men get out, their menacing presence sending shivers down my spine.

Stacey trembles beside me. “They’re going to kill me.”

Damien’s nostrils flare, and his features instantly change from fear to action. Those icy blue eyes lock on me. “You trust me?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Get to the bedroom and stay down. Don’t come out until I say it’s safe.” Damien's command snaps me into action, and I let out a shaky breath, my heart pounding.

I guide Stacey toward the bedroom, staying low as we move. As we enter the bedroom, I shut the door and push the bed against it, trying to create a barrier between us and the unfolding chaos outside. I quickly grab a quilt and wrap it around Stacey's shoulders.

Her voice trembles as she speaks, her guilt and fear evident in her words. "He's never going to forgive me. I've messed up so many times... I'm never going to get Lexi back now."

I want to offer her reassurance and tell her everything will be okay, but I

know that false promises won't help in this situation. My primary concern is Damien, and the muffled arguments and shouting continuing outside the room only heightened my anxiety.

"I'm sorry," Her lips and eyes have turned an unsettling shade of blue, her pallor is ashen, and her body shakes unnaturally — like she's fighting the coldness in her soul. And when I look into those blue eyes that are so much like Damien's, I see familiar demons there.

"We'll figure this out," I tell her, putting my arms around her shoulders and pulling her close. "Damien will fix this."

But my reassurances are cut short by the horrifying sound of gunshots, one after another, followed by shouting, chaos, and fear that permeates the cabin. The realization that Damien is out there amid this terrifying confrontation fills me with an overwhelming sense of dread and helplessness.

"Oh my god," I gasp.

The mayhem outside continues, shouts and threats blending into a cacophony of horror and violence. But amidst the turmoil, there's a stark absence of Damien's voice. My heart races with each passing moment, dread clawing at my insides.

Two more gunshots pierce the air, and then... silence. A profound and deafening quiet settles over the cabin, broken only by our uneven breaths. I can feel the terror in the air, see it reflected in Stacey's wide eyes as she utters those dreaded words, "He's dead."

No, I want to scream. It can't be true. I refuse to believe it. He promised me he'd never leave me again. The weight of uncertainty and fear presses down on me, threatening to consume me whole.

And then, just as despair threatens to overwhelm me, footsteps. The bedroom door slowly scratches open, pushing against the bed until it moves, and my heart leaps into my throat.

I forget to breathe in that moment until I see him.

"Damien!" I cry out, my voice a mixture of relief and desperation. Without hesitation, I rush to him, my arms wrapping so tightly around his chest that he grunts. His presence and warmth are a lifeline in this nightmare, and I hold onto him as if my very life depends on it.

"It's okay, Bella," he murmurs. "Everything is going to be okay."

I clutch onto his neck, tears streaming down my face. "I thought..."

His grip on me tightens, and he gently kisses my forehead. "I promise,

Bella, I'll never let anything happen to you again. I'll protect you with everything I am."

"I wasn't worried about me." I lean back and study him, then gasp when I see the blood on his shoulder. "You're hurt."

He grunts, wincing at his injury. "It's just a scratch. I'll be fine," Damien reassures me, his forehead resting against mine. "I'm so fucking sorry I put you in danger again."

I reach up and gently cup his face in my hands. "Don't," I start, my voice trembling. "Don't do that."

His lips thin, and his jaw clenches, a mixture of guilt and frustration in his expression.

I shake my head, tears welling up in my eyes. "I love you. Anything that happens, we're in it together. Promise me that."

His gaze meets mine, and I can see the truth in his eyes. "I'm not leaving you, Bella," he says with a fierce determination that sends a shiver down my spine.

I nod, my heart finally finding some solace in his unwavering commitment.

"I need you to stay here with Stacey until my men come," Damien says firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument. "You don't need to see any of this."

I swallow hard, feeling a mixture of fear and relief, and nod in agreement.

Then, his gaze shifts to Stacey, and his expression hardens. "And you," he begins sternly, "this is it. When my men get here, they drive you straight to rehab. You'll stay there until I know shit like this will never happen again."

Stacey nods, her eyes downcast and her shoulders slumped in resignation.

"We'll be okay," I assure him.

He gives me a grateful smile, kisses me hard, and then turns to shut the door behind him, leaving Stacey and me alone.

Hours pass like an eternity, and Stacey somehow manages to find sleep amidst the turmoil. But I'm left to pace the room, my mind a whirlwind of worry and uncertainty.

When Damien's men arrive, I hear their muffled voices, muttered curses, and the tension in the air. I don't know how they're handling the situation, and I'm not sure I want to know. I want to be in Damien's arms, safe and reassured.

Finally, the door swings open, and Damien enters, flanked by two

imposing, muscular men. Their presence alone is enough to send shivers down my spine. One of them silently approaches Stacey, lifting her gently and carrying her out of the room. With a slight, reassuring nod to me, the other follows suit, leaving Damien and me alone in the wake of the chaos that has unfolded.

Damien approaches, his eyes filled with a mixture of exhaustion and relief. He pulls me close, and I can't resist the magnetic pull of his lips on mine. The kiss promises safety and love amidst the chaos we've endured.

He grunts when I touch his shoulder.

I pull back and frown up at him. "You need to see a doctor."

He chuckles softly, though it's tinged with a hint of discomfort. "I've had worse, Bella. Trust me."

His attempt at reassurance doesn't ease my worries, but I can't deny the rush of emotion that surges within me. He kisses me repeatedly, his lips a sweet distraction from the lingering fear.

Adrenaline courses through me, my body still buzzing with the remnants of fear and heightened emotions. It's as if the intensity of the recent events has created an electric charge within me, and I can't help but seek a release for all this pent-up energy.

Our hands are frantic, tearing at each other's clothes with a feverish urgency. Each garment discarded leaves us more exposed, our breaths growing increasingly ragged with desire and need.

Naked and rampant, our bodies collide, the heat between us intensifying with every touch, every kiss. The room is filled with the symphony of our moans and the rustling of sheets as we tumble onto the bed. Our movements are desperate, fueled by the fear and adrenaline of the night's events.

Damien's lips find mine, and we kiss with a raw hunger, tongues dancing in a passionate tango. His hands explore my body, igniting a fire that burns hotter with each caress. My fingers trace the contours of his muscles, feeling the strength and warmth that I know so well.

Our bodies move in harmony, desire, and longing as we seek solace in each other's embrace. Damien's touch is tender and passionate, and every caress sends pleasure down my spine.

As the room fills with the warmth of our love, the world outside fades away, and it's just Damien and me sharing a moment of intense connection. The scars of the past and the fear of the present vanish as our bodies intertwine.

His kisses are a promise of devotion, a pledge to protect and cherish me no matter what challenges may arise. In his arms, I find sanctuary, and the worries that had gripped me earlier are replaced by a sense of security.

Our release is as explosive as our lovemaking. In the aftermath, the room is filled with the soft echoes of our heavy breathing as we lie tangled in each other's arms, our bodies glistening with the sheen of passion.

Damien's fingers trace lazy patterns along my skin, soothing and reassuring, while I run my fingertips through his damp hair, relishing the intimacy of the moment.

As we lay together, our bodies entwined, Damien's whispered words of love fill the room. "I'll never leave you again, Bella. I promise to always protect you with everything I am."

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

[Turn to this page](#) for **Damien and Bella's Happily Ever After.**

[Turn to this page](#) for an **Unexpected Surprise.**

CHAPTER 67

DAMIEN

BUBBLES AND WINE

The soft glow of candles dances on the tiled walls, casting flickering shadows. Steam rises from the bath, and the scent of lavender fills the air, making me anticipate the luxurious soak ahead.

I slip out of my robe, the plush fabric pooling around my feet. With a contented sigh, I lower myself into the warm, inviting water.

“This feels amazing,” I say with a grateful moan as the jets caress my muscles.

Damien chuckles at the door. “I thought those sounds were only for me.”

“You have a way of making everything feel amazing,” I reply, my voice laced with playful affection. “Even baths.”

He sits on the edge of the tub, his fingers tracing the line of my neck and shoulder. “You know what would be even more amazing?”

“If you joined me in here,” I say, smiling up at him.

“Well, that too,” he says, starting to undress.

The way his muscles bunch and coil with every movement has me licking my lips.

He slowly lowers himself into the bath and pulls me to him so I’m straddling his waist. “I was thinking that we could spend the summer here when school is out. The place is pretty much finished but could use some artistic flare.” He grins, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“I would love that.” Placing my hands on his jaw, I kiss him softly.

“There’s a small shed by the lake; I could fix it up, put in some windows to let the light in. I think it would make a perfect place for you to paint.”

“Okay, now you’re just trying to seduce me,” I say, chuckling against his lips.

He laughs. "Is it working?"

I move against him, feeling his cock hardening and straining against my belly. "Mmm hmm."

His palm cups my breast, his thumb flicking against the hard bud, and I whimper.

"Anything you want, beautiful, I'll find a way to give it to you."

"Just you," I say, my fingers tangling in his hair as I lift myself so his engorged head is pressed against my entrance. "I just want you, Damien."

He groans loudly, mixed with my sounds of pleasure as I slide down, taking him in completely.

My clit already pulses, the beginning of what I know will be the first of many orgasms tonight. My body is his instrument, and he plays me perfectly. Every touch, every kiss, every thrust pushes me to a place where nothing exists but him and me.

"I wish..." I say breathlessly, moving against him.

"What, Bella? What do you wish?" His stormy blue eyes fixate on me, blazing with a hunger that matches mine.

"That we could stay like this."

Cupping my neck, he pulls my head down and kisses me hard. "Sweetheart, anytime you want me inside of you, all you have to do is ask."

My whimpers turn to moans, the water splashing around us as the intensity of our lovemaking finds the perfect tempo to send me over the edge. My head tilts back, and I cry out as waves of pleasure rip through me.

He comes with me, and I collapse against his chest, my body aching in the most delightful, satisfying way.

It's another perfect moment. A moment that will forever live in my heart. Another moment to help erase the terror that this place once inflicted.

We spend the next two days in a blissful blur of laughter, love, and simply enjoying each other's company. It's as if time itself has slowed down. We take long walks in the forest, hand in hand, and sit by the crackling fire in the evenings, lost in conversation and each other's gaze.

I savor every stolen kiss, every shared laugh, and every loving glance. These moments are a gift, a testament to the healing power of our love.

"I don't want to leave," I say against Damien's lips, wishing that tomorrow wasn't a school day and we could stay here for another few days or even forever.

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next week—“

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"Oh my god," I gasp.

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And then, just as despair threatens to overwhelm me, footsteps approach. The bedroom door slowly scratches open, pushing against the bed until it moves, and my heart leaps into my throat.

I forget to breathe in that moment until I see him.

"Damien!" I cry out, my voice a mixture of relief and desperation. Without hesitation, I rush to him, my arms wrapping so tightly around his chest that he grunts. His presence and warmth are a lifeline in this nightmare, and I hold onto him as if my very life depends on it.

"It's okay, Bella," he murmurs. "Everything is going to be okay."

I clutch onto his neck, tears streaming down my face. "I thought..."

His grip on me tightens, and he gently kisses my forehead. "I promise, Bella, I'll never let anything happen to you again. I'll protect you with everything I am."

"I wasn't worried about me." I lean back and study him, then gasp when I see the blood on his shoulder. "You're hurt."

He grunts, wincing at his injury. "It's just a scratch. I'll be fine," Damien reassures me, his forehead resting against mine. "I'm so fucking sorry I put you in danger again."

I reach up and gently cup his face in my hands. "Don't," I start, my voice trembling. "Don't do that."

His lips thin, and his jaw clenches, a mixture of guilt and frustration in his expression.

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I nod, my heart finally finding some solace in his unwavering commitment.

"I need you to stay here with Stacey until my men come," Damien says firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument. "You don't need to see any of this."

I swallow hard, feeling a mixture of fear and relief, and nod in agreement.

Then, his gaze shifts to Stacey, and his expression hardens. "And you," he begins sternly, "this is it. When my men get here, they drive you straight to rehab. You'll stay there until I know shit like this will never happen again."

Stacey nods, her eyes downcast and her shoulders slumped in resignation.

"We'll be okay," I assure him.

He gives me a grateful smile, kisses me hard, and then turns to shut the door behind him, leaving Stacey and me alone.

Hours pass like an eternity, and Stacey somehow manages to find sleep amidst the turmoil. But I'm left to pace the room, my mind a whirlwind of worry and uncertainty.

When Damien's men arrive, I hear their muffled voices, muttered curses, and the tension in the air. I don't know how they're handling the situation, and I'm not sure I want to know. I want to be in Damien's arms, safe and reassured.

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Damien approaches, his eyes filled with a mixture of exhaustion and relief. He pulls me close, and I can't resist the magnetic pull of his lips on mine. The kiss promises safety and love amidst the chaos we've endured.

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Adrenaline courses through me, my body still buzzing with the remnants of fear and heightened emotions. It's as if the intensity of the recent events has created an electric charge within me, and I can't help but seek a release for all this pent-up energy.

Our hands are frantic, tearing at each other's clothes with a feverish urgency. Each garment discarded leaves us more exposed, our breaths growing increasingly ragged with desire and need.

Naked and rampant, our bodies collide, the heat between us intensifying with every touch, every kiss. The room is filled with the symphony of our moans and the rustling of sheets as we tumble onto the bed. Our movements are desperate, fueled by the fear and adrenaline of the night's events.

Damien's lips find mine, and we kiss with a raw hunger, tongues dancing in a passionate tango. His hands explore my body, igniting a fire that burns hotter with each caress. My fingers trace the contours of his muscles, feeling

the strength and warmth that I know so well.

Our bodies move in harmony, desire, and longing as we seek solace in each other's embrace. Damien's touch is tender and passionate, and every caress sends pleasure down my spine.

As the room fills with the warmth of our love, the world outside fades away, and it's just Damien and me sharing a moment of intense connection. The scars of the past and the fear of the present vanish as our bodies intertwine.

His kisses are a promise of devotion, a pledge to protect and cherish me no matter what challenges may arise. In his arms, I find sanctuary, and the worries that had gripped me earlier are replaced by a sense of security.

Our release is as explosive as our lovemaking. In the aftermath, the room is filled with the soft echoes of our heavy breathing as we lie tangled in each other's arms, our bodies glistening with the sheen of passion.

Damien's fingers trace lazy patterns along my skin, soothing and reassuring, while I run my fingertips through his damp hair, relishing the intimacy of the moment.

As we lay together, our bodies entwined, Damien's whispered words of love fill the room. "I'll never leave you again, Bella. I promise to always protect you with everything I am."

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

[Turn to this page](#) for **Damien and Bella's Happily Ever After.**

[Turn to this page](#) for an **Unexpected Surprise.**

CHAPTER 68

ALEX

FORGIVENESS AND TANGLED SHEETS

As I push open the door to my house, a palpable tension hangs between us, thick enough to cut with a knife. Alex follows me inside, his footsteps echoing in the entryway. I can't help but sneak a glance at him as he closes the door behind us.

His suit jacket and tie have been discarded, and his muscular chest stretches against the fabric of his white shirt. It's slightly unbuttoned, the sleeves rolled up. He runs his fingers through his dark hair, the strands falling back into place with a messy perfection that's undeniably sexy.

I put my purse down and kick off my heels. The hardwood floor is cool beneath my feet, and I take a deep breath.

"Alex..." I start, but words fail. Stupid insecurities keep racing into my mind.

He takes a step closer, and I can feel the warmth of his body radiating toward me, drawing me in like a magnet. My heart pounds in my chest as he reaches out, his fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw, his touch sending shivers down my spine.

"I promise you can trust me, Bella," he says. "We can talk about—"

I place a finger on his lips, silencing him, and then trace it down to his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my touch. "I don't want to talk about anything right now. I just want to forget. Forget about Angie. Forget about everything. I need..."

I can't find the words to express what I need, but my body knows. I close the remaining distance between us, pressing my lips against his with a fierce urgency, pouring all my desire and longing into that kiss. His arms encircle me, pulling me closer. The kiss deepens, becoming a wildfire of passion and

need. All the doubts and fears clouding my mind melt away, replaced by a burning hunger. I tug at his shirt, wanting to feel his bare skin against mine, to lose myself in the heat of the moment.

To lose myself in *him*.

Desperation courses through my veins. He steals my restraint, leaving me powerless to resist the pull between us. Our relationship might be complicated, but at this moment, I embrace the chaos he brings.

More.

More.

More.

The mantra reverberates as our passion swells, a tidal wave of longing crashing over me.

My fingers curl tightly in his shirt, clinging to him as if he's my lifeline. "Stay the night," I whisper, the words tinged with vulnerability.

He pulls back slightly, his gaze locked onto mine, searching for any hint of doubt. His eyes, intense hazel pools, hold a promise and a question. "You're sure?" he asks, his voice a gentle reassurance.

I nod, my heart pounding in my chest. I'm certain. I don't want him to go, I want him here, to chase away the shadows that have haunted me all evening, and replace them with the warmth of his presence.

"I want...I need..." I chew on my bottom lip, then whisper, "Make love to me."

He doesn't hesitate. His mouth immediately captures mine in a hungry, passionate kiss that leaves me breathless.

With a soft touch, he takes my hand and leads me toward the bedroom, our fingers intertwined.

In the soft glow of the moonlight, he moves close, his touch tender and loving as he helps me remove the lavender dress. His fingertips brush gently against my neck, arms, and back, sending shivers of excitement through me. It's a slow, deliberate dance, of tenderness and passion.

Clothes discarded, he presses his lips to my forehead, then my cheeks, and finally finds my mouth. His hands explore my bare skin, caressing every inch with a reverence that leaves me trembling with need.

I trace the contours of his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my fingertips.

Every touch, every kiss, is achingly slow.

He consumes me, his mouth everywhere, exploring every contour of my

body with a hunger that matches mine.

His lips trace the curve of my neck, the swell of my breast, the dip of my waist, igniting a trail of fire in their wake. His hands, strong and possessive, roam across my body, sculpting sensations that send shivers through me.

I arch into his touch, gasping for air, needing more. He lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist, straddling him. His hard cock presses against my belly. My fingers entwine in his hair as our mouths find each other, and the kiss is no longer slow and sweet, but feral and untamed. It's a wild, passionate exchange of desire, a primal need that consumes us both. Our lips crash together with an intensity that leaves us breathless, tongues dueling in a heated dance.

With a gentleness that contrasts the intensity of our desire, he carries me to the bed and places me down, our eyes locked in a fiery gaze that speaks volumes. The room is filled with the soft glow of moonlight, casting shadows that dance across our entangled bodies.

As he hovers over me, the engorged head of his cock pressing against my wetness, he says, "I love you," as he slides inside of me. And I take in each delectable inch, moaning at the fullness.

I lose myself in the intoxicating sensation of him, the taste of his kisses, the feeling of his muscles bulging and contracting under my fingers.

His thrusts increase, his moans growing ragged. And I whimper and beg until we're a tangle of limbs and pleasure-filled noises. And when my orgasm rips through me, my body shudders with the force of my pleasure, a powerful release that leaves me gasping for breath.

I feel his orgasm pulse against the back of my womb, so intense that he lets out a guttural cry that fills the room. He falls back onto the mattress, his body quivering with the aftershocks of our shared climax. The room is hushed, save for our labored breaths, and we lay there, tangled in the sheets, our chests heaving.

He reaches out to brush a strand of hair from my face, his touch tender. "You make me want things I never knew I wanted."

"Like what?"

"I never thought seriously about marriage or starting a family. But..." He lets out a shaky breath. "I want to marry you."

A nervous laugh escapes my lips, but I see the vulnerability in his eyes and I realize he's serious. "Alex—"

"I know we haven't been together long." He turns on his side, and his

warm hand cups my cheek, his thumb tracing a delicate path along my bottom lip. "But what we have is real."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"I want to be with you, Bella, and not just a couple nights a week. I want us to share a life. When you come home from work tired or frustrated, I want to be the person you turn to. I want to hold you in my arms every night before we fall asleep and wake up with you every morning. I want to have a wedding and invite the people closest to us, so I can tell everyone how crazy in love with you I am. I want you to be my wife."

My heart races with an overwhelming mix of joy and uncertainty. Of course, I want to marry him. I've never loved anyone like I love Alex. He's the person I want to spend my life with, one hundred percent.

But, there's a nagging insecurity that claws at the edges of my happiness. A part of me that wonders if I'm ready for this commitment. I know that marriage takes work. It's a vow to be there through the highs and lows, to weather storms together, and to face my own insecurities head-on.

I debate whether to say yes, to embrace this beautiful future with Alex, or to ask him to wait, to ask me again in a year, to see if he still feels the same about me. It's not a doubt about him — it's a doubt about myself, about whether I can be the partner he deserves.

Whatever I decide, one thing is certain: when I say yes, it's a commitment from the depths of my heart, a promise I'll honor for a lifetime.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Say 'yes' to love! Picture a grand, unforgettable wedding where all friends and family come together to celebrate the love story of the year! [Turn to this page.](#)

Why rush love's sweet journey? Savor each moment and continue dating, allowing time to reveal if feelings remain as strong a year from now. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 69

ALEX

A SURPRISE AND A JOURNEY OF TRUST

I sit in the passenger seat of Alex's truck, the sun-kissed mountains stretch out before us, their majesty taking my breath away, and I can't help but smile as I glance over at him. His strong hands firmly grip the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on the winding road ahead.

"So, what's this surprise you've been teasing me about?" I ask, my heart fluttering with anticipation.

He grins, that mischievous glint in his eyes making my pulse quicken. "It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you." His deep voice rumbles, sending shivers down my spine.

I playfully roll my eyes. "You know I hate suspense."

Alex chuckles. "Just a little longer. I promise it'll be worth it."

We continue our journey up the winding mountain roads, and memories of the past few months flood my mind. We've gone on countless dates, explored the city hand in hand, and I've even spent time with his wonderful group of friends — Angie excluded. As promised, she's no longer in his life. And my insecurities are a distant memory.

"Are we hiking that?" I ask him, nodding at the looming peak ahead of us.

He chuckles and doesn't answer. His silence only adds to the intrigue, and I can't help but wonder what he has in store for us today. Nothing would surprise me anymore.

Last week he convinced me to go white-water rafting, and although I was terrified at first, the exhilaration of conquering those wild rapids was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

He reaches over, his hand finding mine. The contact sends a rush of

warmth through my body. Every day, I find myself falling more in love with him. His kindness, his unwavering support, and the adoration in his eyes when he looks at me — it all makes me feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

As we reach a clearing at the top of the mountain, Alex pulls the truck to a stop. He turns to me, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that steals my breath. "Okay, we're here. Ready?"

"I don't know," I reply with a playful smile, "because I don't know what to be ready for."

He chuckles softly, his fingers gently tracing the outline of my hand. "Well, that's the fun part, isn't it?"

I step out of the truck, the cool breeze tousling my hair as I take in our surroundings. The scent of pine trees and earth fills the air.

"So we are hiking," I remark, my tone playful but tinged with worry. "I don't have the right shoes."

Alex chuckles, his laughter like a soothing melody. "Don't worry. We're not going far, just a short walk."

With that, he places his hands over my eyes, blocking my vision. I feel a flutter of excitement mixed with curiosity as we start walking again, his grip steady and guiding. My trust in him is absolute, and I allow myself to be led into the unknown.

The ground beneath my feet changes from gravel to soft earth, and the distant sound of a bubbling stream reaches my ears. Each step we take together deepens the sense of adventure and intimacy. I can't help but wonder what surprise awaits me at the end of this path.

Finally, Alex comes to a stop. "We're here." He removes his hands from my eyes, and as I blink against the sudden burst of sunlight I gasp.

Before us stands a luxurious yurt, its cream-colored canvas walls adorned with intricate patterns that seem to dance in the sunlight. It's nestled beneath a canopy of tall trees, creating a sense of seclusion and intimacy. Two vibrant red Muskoka chairs are set up around a cozy fire pit, and a large sheet hangs from the branches above, forming an impromptu movie screen. A projector stands ready, casting a soft glow in the late afternoon light. The area around us is adorned with flowers and vines, their colors and fragrances filling the air with a sweet, intoxicating scent. Soft blankets are laid out on the ground, inviting us to sit, relax, and enjoy the beauty of this carefully crafted paradise.

"Wow," I whisper, my voice filled with emotion as I turn to face him. "This is beyond incredible. How did you even think of this?"

He smiles, his eyes never leaving mine. "I wanted to create a special memory, just for us."

My heart swells with love for this amazing man who continues to surprise and delight me.

Unable to contain my surge of emotion, I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

As we pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, I whisper, "I love you."

He gives me a dimpled smile. "So you like it?"

"So much!"

"Good," he says. "Because it's ours."

"What do you mean?"

"I bought this land a few years ago with a plan in mind. I wanted to make it another base for SummitStar. But..." His thumb strokes my cheek. "You made me want something different. I wanted to create a space just for us. And if you ever want someplace to go to paint or draw, it's here for you."

My heart swells with emotion as his words sink in. "Thank you."

He grins. "Come on. There's more." His hand finds mine, and we make our way toward the yurt.

The moment I step inside, my breath catches. The interior of the yurt is as enchanting as the outside, with soft, ambient light casting a warm, inviting glow. Plush cushions and blankets create an inviting, cozy nest. In the center, a low table is adorned with a bottle of champagne, glistening in a silver ice bucket, and two crystal glasses.

A magnificent bed, dressed in fine linens and plush pillows, promises nights of shared passion. My heart flutters when I see the art easel that stands proudly in one corner, surrounded by an array of vibrant paints and a canvas ready for creation.

There's even a small but well-equipped kitchen area, with a wood-burning stove that promises warmth during cooler nights.

"It's incredible. You've thought of everything."

I close the distance between us, my fingers gently tracing the contours of Alex's jaw. His eyes hold a yearning that mirrors my own.

Our lips meet in a tender kiss that quickly deepens with an intensity that leaves me breathless. His hands, strong yet gentle, trace a path along my

back, igniting a trail of sensations that send shivers down my spine. My fingers weave through his hair, holding him close.

"I think we should see how comfortable that bed is," I say, smiling up at him.

He gives a low groan and picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. His mouth never leaves mine as he carries me to the bed and lowers me onto the plush mattress.

Our hands explore each other's bodies with a hungry yearning, igniting a blaze of longing that threatens to consume me.

Alex's lips break away from mine, and he gazes into my eyes with a smoldering intensity that sends a delicious shiver down my spine. "You're irresistible," he murmurs, his voice heavy with desire.

I respond with a sultry smile. "And you," I whisper, tracing my fingers along his jawline, "are dangerously intoxicating."

He pulls his shirt over his head, and my mouth practically waters as I feast my eyes on the chiseled abs that form a tantalizing ladder down his torso, the well-defined pec muscles, and those broad, powerful shoulders. All I can think about is holding onto them as he buries himself inside of me. I lick my lips and he groans.

His eyes, dark with desire, lock onto mine, and he murmurs in a voice rough with need, "You have no idea what you do to me."

I smile up at him, undoing his belt. "Show me."

He undoes his jeans, pulling them down over his hips, and his hard, cock springs free, in all its glorious length and girth. As he helps me undress, I can't help but admire his sculpted body — well-defined muscles that ripple and flex with every movement. The play of light and shadow accentuates every ridge and curve.

"Not to inflate your ego," I say, fingers dancing across his flesh. "But you're like a living Greek statue."

Alex lets out a low, throaty chuckle, his eyes smoldering with desire. "I promise I'm flesh and blood, with a heart that beats only for you."

"Prove it," I whisper, my voice heavy with desire.

His response is immediate and primal. Alex leans down, capturing my lips with his in a searing kiss, his hands roaming my body possessively. He enters me, slowly, patiently, as I moan, arching my back, my knees dropping to the bed as I accept him. All of him. The way he has always accepted me.

Our bodies move together, as our kisses deepen, and the world outside

ceases to exist — the only reality is the intoxicating connection we share.

Over the next few hours, we lose ourselves in each other's moans and whimpers until we're both left breathless and sated. We collapse onto the bed, our bodies spent and lay there, wrapped in the afterglow of our shared ecstasy, our fingers gently tracing patterns on each other's skin.

Alex rises from the bed and begins to dress, his movements deliberate yet graceful. I watch him with a contented smile. Once he's dressed, he turns to me, his eyes sparkling with emotions I can't decipher. "We've spent the whole day in the tent. It's already getting dark outside."

I prop myself up on my elbows, and tease, "I didn't hear you complaining earlier."

Leaning down, he kisses my nose. "Best hours of my life. But I've got more things planned for us."

He stands and retrieves a grey hoodie and jogging pants from a bag, handing them to me, I slip into them with a quizzical look. "More surprises, huh? You're really keeping me on my toes."

Alex takes my hand and leads me out of the yurt. The world outside has transformed as the sun begins to set, painting the sky with a breathtaking mix of purple and orange hues. Fireflies dance on the edges of our camp, their soft, flickering lights adding a touch of magic to the evening.

As he starts a fire, I sink into one of the inviting Muskoka chairs, my gaze fixated on him. The flickering flames cast a warm, mesmerizing glow on his features, enhancing the rugged contours of his face. There's a quiet confidence in his movements that makes my heart flutter.

He catches me watching him and he gives me a dimpled grin. "Ready for a movie? I thought you could watch the new Reese Witherspoon rom-com you were talking about, while I prepare dinner. What do you think?"

"I *think* you've just secured a year's worth of boyfriend brownie points."

He chuckles and moves to the projector, switching it on.

I nestle beneath a warm flannel blanket and relax as the movie begins, and the stars start to appear above me.

Alex is a flurry of activity, gracefully transitioning between the yurt kitchen and the outdoor barbecue. The tantalizing scent of food wafts through the air, and my stomach responds with an eager growl.

"Hope you're hungry," he says on cue.

My fingers eagerly reach for the plate he offers, and as I take in the sight of the beautifully arranged steak, creamy mashed potatoes, and charred,

golden grilled corn, an appreciative moan escapes my lips. “This looks delicious.”

He takes a seat beside me, his plate in his hand, and we begin to eat.

“It’s confirmed,” I say, between a bite of perfectly cooked steak. “You officially win the best boyfriend of the year award.”

He chuckles. “You deserve nothing but the best.”

God, I love him.

As the heroine confesses her feelings on the screen, a familiar flutter of emotions surges within me. The movie's plot may be captivating, but it pales in comparison to the real-life love story that Alex and I are weaving together. Our moments, our shared glances, and the unspoken words between us create a narrative that is infinitely more enchanting and beautiful than any film could ever be.

With the last bite of food consumed and the credits rolling on the screen, Alex gathers our empty plates and heads to the yurt's kitchen. I stand up and stretch, wrapping the blanket around my shoulders and inhaling the crisp mountain air.

Returning, Alex stokes the fire, coaxing its flames to dance and cast a warm, flickering glow around us. He wraps his strong arm around my waist, pulling me closer. We stand there in silence, the only sounds around us the crackling fire, the rhythmic chirping of crickets, and the gentle rustling of leaves in the night breeze. It's as if nature itself is serenading our love story.

With a gentle touch, he turns me in his arms until I'm facing him. He brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear and lets out a gentle sigh, those hazel eyes gazing into mine with an intensity that I'll never get used to. Sometimes I wonder if a heart can burst from loving someone too much.

“Bella—”

“Alex—”

"Go ahead," he encourages, his eyes locked onto mine.

I take a moment to compose my thoughts, wanting to express my feelings with sincerity. "I just wanted to say how thankful I am for everything you did," I begin. "Today has been perfect."

A soft smile plays on his lips, and he replies, "Good. I wanted it to be, because..." He pauses, and for a moment, his usual confidence wavers. His brows furrow slightly, and it's as if he's searching for the right words.

My palm rests on his cheek. “Alex?”

His voice trembles slightly when he starts, "I want you to know how

much I love you. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you, making more moments like this. Making you smile." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small velvet box, and he opens it to reveal a breathtaking ring, its sparkle reflecting the firelight. "Bella, will you marry me?"

Without hesitation, I cry out, "Yes!" My voice carries the weight of a thousand emotions, all wrapped up in that single word.

He gently slips the ring on my finger. It fits perfectly as if it was always meant to be there.

His mouth finds mine, and I melt into his kiss, and my heart beats a love song, "Alex, Alex, Alex."

As we catch our breath, his voice, filled with a hint of playfulness, caresses my lips. "So I guess I only have one more question," he says.

I lean back, curious. "What's that?"

"How long before you want to have kids?"

I can't help but burst into laughter, taken aback by the suddenness of his question. But as I look into his eyes, I see a sincerity that stops me in my tracks. "You're serious?" I ask, searching his face for confirmation of this life-altering conversation.

"I want whatever you want," he continues, his voice filled with sincerity. "A handful of kids, or one or two, or if you want it to just be you and me for a long time, or forever, I'll be happy, because I'll be with you."

As I look into Alex's eyes and consider all the possibilities our future could hold, I'm filled with a profound sense of contentment. The world is vast, and there are countless paths we can choose to walk together. The thought of building a life with him, filled with love, adventures, and perhaps a family, fills my heart with excitement and anticipation.

Alex's words echo in my mind, and I realize that he's right. It doesn't matter what life throws at us, as long as we're together. Whether we decide to have a family or cherish the moments of just us two, whether we face challenges or sail through calm waters, our love will be the constant that guides us.

In this moment, I understand that our love is the anchor that keeps us steady, the fire that warms our hearts, and the light that guides us through the darkest nights. No matter what the future holds, I'm certain that with him by my side, our journey will be filled with love, laughter, and the kind of happiness that only comes from sharing a life with your soulmate.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Hold off on starting a family and have a big outdoor wedding with family and friends. [Turn to this page.](#)

Embark on another adventure — the adventure of parenthood. Choose to have a small wedding, and start trying for a baby. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 70

SEBASTIAN

CHOOSING LOVE OVER CERTAINTY

It's been a whirlwind of a day, one filled with smiles, tears, and heartfelt vows exchanged in the presence of our parents. Our small, intimate wedding was everything I had ever dreamed of, and now, alone with Sebastian, I can't help but let out a contented sigh.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Sinclair," he says, holding me close as the elevator doors open to his penthouse. A wicked grin tugs at his lips, and I gasp as he scoops me in his arms.

"What are you doing?" I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"Carrying my wife across the threshold." He nuzzles his nose against the shell of my ear as he steps into the apartment.

My heart flutters and I bury my face in the crook of his neck, breathing in his familiar scent.

"Husband," I say, testing the word. "I like the sound of that."

His smile is contagious as he carries me through the foyer, not stopping until we reach the bedroom, where he gently lowers me onto the bed, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Never imagined I could be this happy," he murmurs against my mouth. His tongue parts my lips, sweeping inside, reigniting that ever-raging heat.

Every insecurity. Every fear. It's all washed away. Because I am his.

His hands roam over the satin of my dress as our tongues tangle, my fingers grasping at his shirt, needing to have his flesh against mine.

Love.

I can sense the power of it pulsing between us.

Need tumbles through me, hungry for his touch, my body begging for the kind of pleasure only Sebastian can give.

“Nothing has ever felt better than touching you, Bella,” he says, voice a rasp. “Except now, you’re mine.” Those dark eyes stare down at me, penetrating my very soul. “My wife.”

“Only yours,” I whisper.

“Loving you makes me feel...” His breathing is harsh, his words dense with emotion. “Like I’m not just surviving, but actually living.”

My chest squeezes with the intensity of his confession.

“I love you, Sebastian. And I’ll continue to love you every day of the rest of my life.”

His mouth is back on mine, kissing me with a hunger that matches my own. We peel away our clothes, every touch an act of devotion.

When he sinks inside me, possessing me, I lose myself in him. His cock thrusts into me, over and over again.

Fast. Hard. Deep.

His body pounds into mine until a cry escapes my lips and I’m writhing beneath him. My orgasm rips through me, infiltrating every part of my being. Sebastian’s breaths come jagged and hard. I can feel every ripple, every pulse of him as he pours himself into me.

Spent and unable to move, he holds himself inside of me for a moment until his breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

“You’re incredible,” he groans, lying back against the mattress and pulling me into his arms.

I rest my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. “I’ve never been happier.”

“I want to always make you happy, Bella,” Sebastian whispers, his fingers tenderly brushing through my hair. I sigh contentedly, reveling in the sensation of his touch. “I spoke with a urologist a few days ago. I didn’t want to tell you until I knew for sure...”

Hearing the seriousness in his tone, I turn onto my stomach and rest my chin on my hands, my brows furrowing. “About what?”

His gaze is unwavering. “To see if I’m just infertile, or sterile.”

I reach out to touch his cheek, my fingers gently grazing his stubble. “Does it matter?” I ask softly. He knows that I’ve already come to terms with the fact that we won’t have biological children.

Sebastian takes my hand, pressing a warm kiss to my palm. “Yes,” he admits. “Because there are treatments now, assisted reproductive technologies, where it’s possible for us to have kids.”

I sit up abruptly, my eyes widening. “Really?”

He nods, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up. And there are no guarantees, but the possibility is there. If that’s what you desire.”

I lean back, my mind spinning with thoughts and emotions. The love I have for Sebastian is already more than I ever dared to hope for. Our relationship, our marriage, is a dream come true. But the idea of having a baby with him, with the possibility of a tiny life that carries both of our love, makes my belly flutter with longing.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Pursue the possibility of a family. Explore the assisted reproductive technologies, understanding the emotional and physical challenges that lie ahead. [Turn to this page.](#)

Choosing the certainty of love. Family is not solely defined by the presence of children, but by the sacred promise two hearts make to build a life together. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 71

SEBASTIAN

A FAIRYTALE BEGINNING

Today I become Mrs. Bella Sinclair.

The church is alive with anticipation, filled with the hum of excitement and the scent of fresh flowers. White lilies and pastel roses adorn every corner, a sea of soft colors that seem to have sprung from a fairytale.

“You look beautiful,” my mom says, her eyes glistening with tears as she gazes at me. Her words are a balm to my racing heart, and I smile at her.

“We’re so proud of you,” my dad chimes in, his voice choked with emotion. He takes my arm, and I place my hand in his, reveling in the comforting strength of his grip.

I wanted both my parents to walk me down the aisle. It wasn’t a decision I took lightly. They have both been there for me throughout my life, supporting me, loving me, and guiding me. It only felt right that they share this moment.

“Love you both so much,” I say, my voice shaky, a lump forming in my throat.

“It’s time,” my dad says, his tone steady and reassuring.

I glimpse Sebastian at the end of the aisle, bathed in soft, golden light, and all my nerves melt away.

He’s a vision of perfection. His tuxedo hugs his broad shoulders and trim waist in all the right ways. The crisp white shirt beneath the jacket accentuates the darkness of his hair and his bronze skin.

As I approach him, my heart skips a beat. He looks every bit the prince charming I had always dreamed about. His gaze never flickers from mine, and when he smiles, it’s as if time stops. It’s a smile that says, “You are the

love of my life, and today, we begin our forever.”

My belly flutters with a mix of excitement and affection, and my chest swells with emotions that threaten to overflow.

And I know that I am the luckiest woman in the world to be marrying this extraordinary man.

Mine, my heart beats. *All mine*.

I stand before him, and no one else exists. It’s just the two of us.

He leans in closer, his lips brushing against my ear, and he whispers, “You look beautiful.”

I can’t help but shiver with delight at his words. “This feels like a dream.”

“If it is, I never want to wake up.”

We turn our attention to the officiate when she clears her throat. As we exchange rings and seal our vows with a kiss, the church erupts in applause. We step hand in hand into the world as Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair.

The lavish reception that follows is nothing short of magical. The ballroom is adorned with twinkling fairy lights, crystal chandeliers, and flowers. Tables are set with fine china and elegant centerpieces, and the aroma of delicious cuisine fills the air.

We share our first dance as husband and wife, surrounded by the enchantment of the evening. Family and friends toast to our love, and the night is filled with laughter, heartfelt speeches, and moments that will be etched in our memories forever.

As the night draws to a close, Sebastian and I steal a quiet moment on the dance floor. He holds me close, and I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

Love.

I can sense the power of it pulsing between us.

“I’ve never been happier,” I tell him.

“I always want to make you happy, Bella,” Sebastian whispers, his fingers tenderly brushing my cheek.

I sigh contentedly, reveling in the sensation of his touch.

“I spoke with a urologist a few days ago,” he says, tilting my chin so that I meet his gaze. “I didn’t want to tell you until I knew for sure...”

My brows furrow. “About what?”

His gaze is unwavering. “To see if I’m just infertile, or sterile.”

I reach out to touch his face, my fingers gently grazing his stubble. “Does it matter?” I ask softly. He knows that I’ve already come to terms with the

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"Really?"

He nods, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "I didn't want to get your hopes up. And there are no guarantees, but the possibility is there. If that's what you desire."

The love I have for Sebastian is already more than I ever dared to hope for. Our relationship, our marriage, is a dream come true. But the idea of having a baby with him, with the possibility of a tiny life that carries both of our love, makes my belly flutter with longing.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Pursue the possibility of a family. Explore the assisted reproductive technologies, understanding the emotional and physical challenges that lie ahead. [Turn to this page.](#)

Choosing the certainty of love. Family is not solely defined by the presence of children, but by the sacred promise two hearts make to build a life together. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART ELEVEN

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Happily ever after isn't the end of the story; it's the beginning of an adventure where love writes the most beautiful chapters.

CHAPTER 72

DAMIEN

DAMIEN AND BELLA'S HAPPILY EVER AFTER

The sun paints the sky in hues of pink and orange, and as I stand on the porch of our cottage, a gentle breeze rustles the leaves in the surrounding woods. It's a picturesque scene, and I can't help but feel a sense of contentment wash over me.

The sound of laughter echoes from inside the cottage, and I step through the doorway to find Damien engaged in a heated game of Uno with his mom, Lexi, and my parents. Lexi giggles as she plays a wild card, clearly winning over everyone's hearts and the game.

"Lexi's the Uno champion!" I declare, clapping for her, and she beams, her dimples deepening.

Damien grins, his eyes sparkling with a mischievous glint. "You taught her well, Bella."

My dad, always the joker, chimes in, "Where do you think Bella learned to win." He points his thumbs at his chest.

"You haven't won a game since Bella was six years old," my mom says, shaking her head at him.

"Exactly," he says with a wink. "I told you, I taught her how to win."

Laughter erupts around the table, and I can't help but marvel at how effortlessly my family has blended with Damien's.

Damien's phone rings, momentarily silencing the room. A frown tugs at his brows as he stands to answer it, moving to the bedroom to take the call. But when he returns, his expression is lighter.

"That was the rehab center," he says with a hint of disbelief. "Stacey's six months sober and seems to be making real progress. They want to release her soon."

I exchange glances with Damien's mom. Her eyes glisten with hope and unshed tears. Stacey's journey has been long and arduous, but finally, there's a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

I reach out and place a reassuring hand on Damien's arm. "That's good."

Damien nods. "I'm so proud of her. It's the longest she's been sober in years." Then he says quietly for only me to hear, "Maybe one day she'll be healthy enough to be the mom Lexi deserves."

Stacey's progress is a testament to the power of love, support, and the unwavering determination to heal and grow. It's a reminder that even in the face of the darkest storms, there can be a glimmer of hope, a chance for a better tomorrow.

Damien suddenly excuses himself, and I watch as he grabs his coat and heads outside. I worry about him when he doesn't return for a while.

"I wonder if I should see if he's okay," I say, frowning at the front door. He's been a little off today, more in his head, and I worry that something is bothering him.

"Maybe he's going to bring you back a shooting star," Lexi says, grinning up at me.

I chuckle. "Maybe." But deep down, I feel like something is up.

But when I'm about to get up, Damien returns, his cheeks flushed. Blue eyes hold a mix of nervous energy and excitement.

I stand to meet him. "Is everything okay?"

He takes a deep breath and then lets it out unevenly. "I've never been better, Bella," he says, pulling a small velvet box from his pocket.

"Damien," I gasp, hands clapping over my mouth as I shake my head, not believing this is happening.

"Bella," he begins, his voice quivering ever so slightly. He kneels in front of me and tears well in my eyes. "You've brought light and laughter into my life, and I can't imagine a future without you. Will you marry--"

"Yes, Damien, yes!" I exclaim, not caring that I've interrupted his proposal.

He chuckles, and with trembling hands and a wide grin, Damien opens the small velvet box to reveal a stunning diamond ring. He slides it onto my finger, his touch gentle and full of love. The moment the ring slips into place, I feel an overwhelming rush of emotions, a promise of forever in the sparkling gem.

Then he stands and kisses me, sweet and gentle, full of the promises of

years to come. And my heart is ready to explode.

Our families erupt in applause and cheers, and Lexi claps her hands, delighted by the commotion. And when she sees my rings, she exclaims loudly, "See, I told you he was getting you a shooting star."

Laughter fills the air, along with warm hugs and heartfelt congratulations.

Later, we find ourselves sitting on the porch, the world bathed in the soft glow of twilight. My head rests against Damien's chest as we embrace each other.

"I can't believe we're engaged," I murmur, feeling overwhelmed with love.

"You're happy?"

"Happier than I've ever been," I tell him honestly. "I love you, Damien."

"And I love you, Bella." With those words, we settle into a comfortable silence, gazing out at the lake, our future stretched before us like a vast, open road. Once a place of nightmares, the cottage has become the backdrop for our happily ever after.

In Damien's arms, I know that no matter what challenges lie ahead, we'll face them with laughter, love, and a burning passion that will never fade. Our love story, unconventional and wild, is a testament to the transformative power of love itself, and I can't wait to see where our adventures take us next.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

Read Bella and Damien's Epilogue. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 73

DAMIEN

UNEXPECTED SURPRISE

The sun dips below the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the tranquil lake. Nestled amidst towering pines, their branches swaying gently in the breeze, this place, this moment, feels like the culmination of our journey together.

Damien's arms wrap around me, his lips brushing against my earlobe. "You know," he murmurs, his voice low and husky, "I can't resist you when we're here."

I chuckle and say playfully, "You can't seem to resist me anywhere."

He laughs. "That's very true. But..." Damien says, his voice dripping with mystery, "I've got something special planned for tonight. It's a surprise, so you'll have to be patient."

I raise an eyebrow, feigning impatience. "You're killing me with suspense."

His rich and tantalizing chuckle adds to the allure of the evening. "Trust me, it'll be worth the wait," he promises.

"I don't need anything but you and this moment. This is perfect."

He gazes into my eyes, his love shining brightly. "God, I love you," he confesses before claiming my lips in a kiss that grows increasingly passionate. The kiss deepens, quickly igniting a fiery desire between us.

With a tender strength, Damien lifts me into his arms, carrying me towards the bedroom.

Laying me on the bed, he meticulously takes off my clothes, kissing each area he exposes. I squirm beneath him, loving the mixture of feelings: the roughness of his scruff, the velvety softness of his lips, the warm, wet strokes of his tongue.

“Oh god,” I moan, arching toward him, needing more.

Damien and I explore each other's bodies with a familiarity that comes from hours and hours of passionate encounters. Our connection is more profound than ever, each touch and caress a testament to our bond.

As our bodies entwine, the room fills with the sweet sounds of our whispered declarations of love and the soft rustling of sheets. The world outside fades away, and all that remains is our intense love for each other.

Hours melt into moments, and when we finally lie entangled in each other's arms, our hearts and bodies sated, I can't help but smile. Damien brushes a strand of hair from my face, his gaze filled with tenderness.

"I love you more than words can express," he whispers, his voice a soothing melody.

"I love you too," I reply, my voice filled with warmth and contentment.

I'm not sure anything can diminish the overwhelming happiness surging through me. But later, when Damien is outside chopping wood, and I'm rummaging through my bag to find the heavy sweater I'll need when the temperature drops, my hands brush against a box that sends my heart racing: a pregnancy test. I've been feeling off lately. I'd told Maryam at work my symptoms, thinking I was fighting something off, and she'd returned the following day with the at-home test.

“There's no way I am,” I mutter, even though I know there's a hundred ways I could be just this past month.

And that nagging voice in my head that I've been trying to ignore all week is confirmed when I take the test.

Pregnant.

I let out a shaky breath, not knowing what to feel. I've always wanted to be a mom, but I thought I'd be married when it happened.

Panic and mixed emotions run through me. How will Damien react? Will this change everything?

I take a deep breath and decide to confide in him. There's no reason to keep it a secret. He'll react the same way whether I tell him now or in a few weeks.

He's in the kitchen when I come out of the room, and I see in his expression that he instantly knows something is off.

His brow furrows as he storms across the room towards me. "What's wrong?"

I take his hand in mine, feeling the weight of my revelation. "I think..."

Well, I guess I know... ” Shakily, I continue, “I’m pregnant.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and wait for his response.

His eyes widen, and for a moment, he's silent. The suspense is unbearable. "Bella," he finally says, "that's incredible."

“You’re not upset?”

“Of course, I’m not upset. You’re going to be an incredible mom.” He pulls me against his chest and then kisses me hard. When he pulls back, he grins down at me. “I guess we’re both getting a surprise this weekend.”

“You keep talking about a surprise, but I’m not sure I can handle much else,” I say, feeling overwhelmed.

“I think you’re going to like this one. At least, I hope you do. I wanted to make a grand gesture, but...” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a velvet box. “I think this is a good moment to ask you to not only be my best friend, the love of my life, and,” he chuckles, brushing a tear that’s fallen down my cheek, before continuing, “the mother of my child, but also hopefully my wife. Will you marry me, Bella?”

I gasp, tears streaming down my face as I nod vigorously. “Yes, Damien, yes!”

He grins, sliding the ring onto my trembling finger, then stands, spinning me around in a dizzying dance of pure joy. The world around us fades, and Damien is all I can see and feel. Our lips meet passionately, sealing our love and commitment to each other.

This guy, my bad-boy biker, who, at the start, I figured would bring nothing but chaos into my life, has somehow managed to become my entire world.

With Damien by my side, I feel invincible. Our love is a blazing fire that nothing can extinguish, a force of nature that will light up our future. As the stars twinkle overhead, I know that our love story will be filled with more joy, more passion, and more love than we ever imagined.

Reader’s Choice:

What would you like to do next?

Read Bella and Damien’s Epilogue. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to](#)

this page.

CHAPTER 74

ALEX

RAINDROPS AND WEDDING GOWNS

As I sit in front of the vanity mirror, my heart flutters with a heady mix of anticipation and nerves. Today is the day, the day I'll become Alex's wife. The butterflies in my stomach are in a frenzy, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady my trembling hands.

My mom stands behind me, her gentle hands securing the delicate veil in my hair, her voice soothing. "You look radiant," she murmurs, her eyes misty with emotion.

Jess and Kimmy sip champagne, their laughter filling the air. Jess raises her glass, her smile infectious. "Cheers to the most beautiful bride in the world!" she exclaims, her eyes dancing with excitement.

Kimmy chimes in, "Bella, seriously, you're like a goddess in that gown."

I can't help but blush at their compliments, but glancing in the mirror, I am thrilled with how my hair and make-up turned out. And my bohemian-inspired wedding gown with its lace details and flowing sleeves makes me feel ethereal, like I've stepped out of a dream.

But I can't shake the worry about the weather. The clouds outside have been ominous all morning, threatening to rain on our outdoor wedding. Panic wells up in me. Rain on my wedding day? That's got to be bad luck, right?

My mom catches my worried gaze in the mirror. "Don't worry. Everything always works out."

"But what if it storms?" I chew on my bottom lip.

"You knew that was a possibility with having it outdoors. And that's what the tent is for."

She's right, of course. We'd chosen this beautiful outdoor setting for its natural charm, but with nature comes unpredictability. The large enclosed

canopy tent we'd set up is our contingency plan, a safeguard against the unpredictable whims of weather.

My mom places her hands on my arms and smiles reassuringly. "Plus, rain on your wedding day is good luck. It's nature's way of reminding us that love can weather any storm and still shine."

I chuckle. "I can always count on you for wisdom and cheesy quotes."

Her infectious laughter fills the room, and I can't help but join in. As cheesy as her words may have been, they carry a profound truth, and a sense of peace washes over me.

But as I stand at the edge of the forest, the lush canopy of towering trees providing a natural backdrop, my nerves come rushing back with a vengeance. The tranquil beauty of the surroundings contrasts with the whirlwind of emotions inside me.

The distant hum of chatter and soft music from the ceremony area reminds me that this is the moment I've been waiting for, the moment that will change my life forever. My heart beats faster, and I take deep breaths to calm the butterflies in my stomach.

"You've got this." Jess squeezes my hand gently, a silent gesture of support, before she and Kimmy step ahead of me. Their strides are light and graceful, their smiles radiant beacons of encouragement.

I watch them disappear down the path, their dresses blending seamlessly with the natural surroundings.

Then, it's my turn.

"Are you ready?" my dad inquires, his expression a blend of pride and affection as he meets my gaze.

I nod, my voice momentarily escaping me.

My dad takes my arm, and I feel his strong, reassuring presence beside me. With that simple gesture, we begin our walk down the aisle; the path lined with wildflowers leading us closer to the love of my life. My excitement and nervousness build with each step, but the moment my eyes find Alex waiting at the end, all worries disappear. The world narrows down to just the two of us, surrounded by the beauty of nature and the warmth of our family and friends.

The ceremony continues, a blur of murmurs and words that barely register. All I can focus on is Alex, his hazel eyes keeping me grounded in this moment of overwhelming emotion. My mind has wandered when the officiant clears his throat and looks at me expectantly.

Alex leans closer, his warm breath brushing against my ear, and he whispers, “Your vows.”

With a sheepish grin, I nod and clear my throat. “Oh, right,” I reply, my words drawing chuckles from our guests.

“Alex,” I begin, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips, “From the moment we met, and I saw those dimples, I was done for. And I knew a life with you would be an adventure.”

Alex grins, those dimples making an appearance.

I pause for a moment, locking eyes with him, feeling the depth of our connection.

“But in all seriousness,” I say, my voice softening, “I promise to be your partner in all of life’s adventures, to cherish each day with you, and to make every moment count. I vow to stand by your side through the ups and downs, the sunny days and the rainy ones.” I end with a smile and a heartfelt, “I love you, Alex, today, tomorrow, and always.”

Alex takes a deep breath, his eyes glistening with emotion. He clears his throat before he begins.

“Bella,” he starts, his voice quivering slightly, “I’ll never forget the day fate brought you crashing into my life at that little coffee shop. You bumped into me, and it was like the universe was saying, ‘Hey, pay attention, this is the moment your life changes.’”

Laughter erupts, and I smile up at him, giving his hands a gentle squeeze.

He continues, “You’ve shown me that even the simplest, most unexpected moments can turn into something beautiful.” With quivering lips, he concludes, “I love you, Bella, more than words can express. More than I ever thought possible. You are my everything, and I can’t wait to spend forever with you.”

Tears of joy gather at the corners of my eyes, and my chest feels light yet full, as if my heart can barely contain the emotions that are coursing through me.

The officiant asks, “Do you, Alex, take Bella to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Alex looks deeply into my eyes, his voice steady and filled with love as he says, “I do.”

A collective sigh of happiness sweeps through the gathered guests.

My heart races as the officiant asks, “Do you, Bella, take Alex to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.” *I do. I do. I do.* Every day for the rest of my life, I do.

“I now pronounce you...” the officiant begins, but before he can finish the declaration, Alex’s mouth finds mine in a kiss that leaves both of us breathless and sends a wave of cheers and applause through our gathered loved ones.

The clouds overhead, which had been threatening rain all day, finally decide to open up. Raindrops fall gently at first, but within seconds, it’s pouring down, as if the sky itself is showering us with blessings.

The guests gasp and scramble for cover, searching for shelter under the canopy tent and the towering trees. Umbrellas pop open like colorful mushrooms.

Yet, amid the downpour, Alex and I remain locked in our embrace, our kiss unbroken. The warm rain soaks us, matting my hair against my forehead and drenching Alex’s suit. But I don’t care.

Our kiss deepens, a sweet mixture of rain and love, and the world fades into the background.

Alex’s hands cup my face, and he pulls back slightly, his warm breath caressing my lips. “I love you,” he whispers, his eyes filled with tenderness.

I kiss him again, unable to resist the magnetic pull of his lips. Then, still close enough that our words are shared against each other’s mouths, I say, “I love you, husband.”

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through our kiss.

I reach up to brush a strand of his wet hair away from his forehead. “We’re definitely going to have to change.”

“Sorry, it rained,” he says, a hint of playful remorse.

My heart is filled with nothing but joy. “It made our day even more memorable,” I reply. “I wouldn’t change a thing.” I grin at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “My mom told me that rain on your wedding day is good luck. It’s nature’s way of reminding us that love can weather any storm and still shine.”

His thumb gently traces the curve of my cheek. “And we will. Whatever happens in our lives, I promise the one constant will always be my love for you.”

I lean in to kiss him, the raindrops mingling with our shared breath. And as we stand together in the warm rain, I know that our love is unbreakable, capable of withstanding any storm that life may bring our way.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Enjoy a happily ever after with love, laughter, and little footsteps. Take the plunge into parenthood. [Turn to this page.](#)

Embrace the freedom of child-free marriage. Craft a life full of travel, romantic date nights, outdoor explorations, and spontaneous adventures. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 75

ALEX

A YEAR'S JOURNEY OF TRUST

“So, what's this surprise you've been teasing me about?” I ask, seated in the passenger seat of Alex's truck, mountains stretching before us in all their majesty.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you," he says with a mischievous grin.

I playfully roll my eyes. "You know I hate suspense."

Alex chuckles. "We're almost there."

As our journey up the winding mountain roads continues, the passing scenery triggers a cascade of memories from the past year. It's been a transformative time for me in more ways than one. I've not only grown closer to Alex but also found a place within his family. Even Naomi has gradually opened up.

On the flip side, my parents have welcomed Alex with open arms. Just as I had predicted, he charmed them effortlessly. My dad, in particular, has formed a unique connection with him, and they've established a monthly tradition of going on fishing trips together.

As we've ventured deeper into each other's lives, I've had the privilege of getting to know Alex's incredible circle of friends. The one notable absence is Angie, who, as promised, is no longer part of Alex's life. This assurance has solidified the trust and security in our relationship, erasing the lingering insecurities that once plagued me. And I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the love and connections that have enriched my life in the past year.

As we reach a clearing, Alex pulls the truck to a stop. He turns to me, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that steals my breath. "You ready?"

"I don't know," I reply with a playful smile, "because I don't know what

to be ready for."

He chuckles softly, his fingers gently tracing the outline of my hand. "Well, that's the fun part, isn't it?"

I step out of the truck, the cool breeze tousling my hair as I take in our surroundings. The scent of pine trees and earth fills the air.

"So we are hiking," I remark, my tone playful but tinged with worry. "I don't have the right shoes."

Alex chuckles, his laughter like a soothing melody. "Don't worry. We're not going far, just a short walk."

With a playful gesture, he gently covers my eyes with his hands, enveloping me in darkness. A surge of excitement, mingled with curiosity, courses through me as we resume walking, his touch firm and guiding. My trust in him is unwavering, and I willingly surrender to the thrill of being led into the unknown.

The ground beneath my feet changes from gravel to soft earth, and the distant sound of a bubbling stream reaches my ears. Each step we take together deepens the sense of adventure and intimacy. I can't help but wonder what surprise awaits me at the end of this path.

Finally, Alex comes to a stop. "We're here." He removes his hands from my eyes, and as I blink against the sudden burst of sunlight I gasp.

Before us stands a luxurious yurt, its cream-colored canvas walls adorned with intricate patterns that seem to dance in the sunlight. It's nestled beneath a canopy of tall trees, creating a sense of seclusion and intimacy. Two vibrant red Muskoka chairs are set up around a cozy fire pit, and a large sheet hangs from the branches above, forming an impromptu movie screen. A projector stands ready, casting a soft glow in the late afternoon light. The area around us is adorned with flowers and vines, their colors and fragrances filling the air with a sweet, intoxicating scent. Soft blankets are laid out on the ground, inviting us to sit, relax, and enjoy the beauty of this carefully crafted paradise.

"Wow," I whisper, my voice filled with emotion as I turn to face him. "This is beyond incredible."

He smiles, his eyes never leaving mine. "I wanted to create a special memory, just for us."

My heart swells with love for this amazing man who continues to surprise and delight me.

Unable to contain my surge of emotion, I wrap my arms around his neck

and kiss him.

As we pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, I whisper, "I love you."

He gives me a dimpled smile. "So you like it?"

"So much!"

"Good," he says. "Because it's ours."

"What do you mean?"

"I bought this land a few years ago with a plan in mind. I wanted to make it another base for SummitStar. But..." His thumb strokes my cheek. "You made me want something different. I wanted to create a space just for us. And if you ever want someplace to go to paint or draw, it's here for you."

My heart swells with emotion as his words sink in. "Thank you."

He grins. "Come on. There's more." His hand finds mine, and we make our way toward the yurt.

The moment I step inside, my breath catches. The interior of the yurt is as enchanting as the outside, with soft, ambient light casting a warm, inviting glow. Plush cushions and blankets create an inviting, cozy nest. In the center, a low table is adorned with a bottle of champagne, glistening in a silver ice bucket, and two crystal glasses.

A magnificent bed, dressed in fine linens and plush pillows, promises nights of shared passion. My heart flutters when I see the art easel that stands proudly in one corner, surrounded by an array of vibrant paints and a canvas ready for creation.

There's even a small but well-equipped kitchen area, with a wood-burning stove that promises warmth during cooler nights.

"It's incredible. You've thought of everything."

I close the distance between us, my fingers gently tracing the contours of Alex's jaw. His eyes hold a yearning that mirrors my own.

Our lips meet in a tender kiss that quickly deepens with an intensity that leaves me breathless. His hands, strong yet gentle, trace a path along my back, igniting a trail of sensations that send shivers down my spine. My fingers weave through his hair, holding him close.

"I think we should see how comfortable that bed is," I say, smiling up at him.

He gives a low groan and picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. His mouth never leaves mine as he carries me to the bed and lowers me onto the plush mattress.

Our hands explore each other's bodies with a hungry yearning, igniting a blaze of longing that threatens to consume me.

Alex's lips break away from mine, and he gazes into my eyes with a smoldering intensity that sends a delicious shiver down my spine. "You're irresistible," he murmurs, his voice heavy with desire.

I respond with a sultry smile. "And you," I whisper, tracing my fingers along his jawline, "are dangerously intoxicating."

He pulls his shirt over his head, and my mouth practically waters as I feast my eyes on the chiseled abs that form a tantalizing ladder down his torso, the well-defined pec muscles, and those broad, powerful shoulders. All I can think about is holding onto them as he buries himself inside of me. I lick my lips and he groans.

His eyes, dark with desire, lock onto mine, and he murmurs in a voice rough with need, "You have no idea what you do to me."

I smile up at him, undoing his belt. "Show me."

He undoes his jeans, pulling them down over his hips, and his hard, cock springs free, in all its glorious length and girth. As he helps me undress, I can't help but admire his sculpted body — well-defined muscles that ripple and flex with every movement. The play of light and shadow accentuates every ridge and curve.

"Not to inflate your ego," I say, fingers dancing across his flesh. "But you're like a living Greek statue."

Alex lets out a low, throaty chuckle, his eyes smoldering with desire. "I promise I'm flesh and blood, with a heart that beats only for you."

"Prove it," I whisper, my voice heavy with desire.

His response is immediate and primal. Alex leans down, capturing my lips with his in a searing kiss, his hands roaming my body possessively. He enters me, slowly, patiently, as I moan, arching my back, my knees dropping to the bed as I accept him. All of him. The way he has always accepted me.

Our bodies move together, as our kisses deepen, and the world outside ceases to exist — the only reality is the intoxicating connection we share.

Over the next few hours, we lose ourselves in each other's moans and whimpers until we're both left breathless and sated. We collapse onto the bed, our bodies spent and lay there, wrapped in the afterglow of our shared ecstasy, our fingers gently tracing patterns on each other's skin.

Alex rises from the bed and begins to dress, his movements deliberate yet graceful. I watch him with a contented smile. Once he's dressed, he turns to

me, his eyes sparkling with emotions I can't decipher. "We've spent the whole day in the tent. It's already getting dark outside."

I prop myself up on my elbows, and tease, "I didn't hear you complaining earlier."

Leaning down, he kisses my nose. "Best hours of my life. But I've got more things planned for us."

He stands and retrieves a grey hoodie and jogging pants from a bag, handing them to me, I slip into them with a quizzical look. "More surprises, huh? You're really keeping me on my toes."

Alex takes my hand and leads me out of the yurt. The world outside has transformed as the sun begins to set, painting the sky with a breathtaking mix of purple and orange hues. Fireflies dance on the edges of our camp, their soft, flickering lights adding a touch of magic to the evening.

As he starts a fire, I sink into one of the inviting Muskoka chairs, my gaze fixated on him. The flickering flames cast a warm, mesmerizing glow on his features, enhancing the rugged contours of his face. There's a quiet confidence in his movements that makes my heart flutter.

He catches me watching him and he gives me a dimpled grin. "Ready for a movie? I thought you could watch the new Reese Witherspoon rom-com you were talking about, while I prepare dinner. What do you think?"

"I *think* you've just secured a year's worth of boyfriend brownie points."

He chuckles and moves to the projector, switching it on.

I nestle beneath a warm flannel blanket and relax as the movie begins, and the stars start to appear above me.

Alex is a flurry of activity, gracefully transitioning between the yurt kitchen and the outdoor barbecue. The tantalizing scent of food wafts through the air, and my stomach responds with an eager growl.

"Hope you're hungry," he says on cue.

My fingers eagerly reach for the plate he offers, and as I take in the sight of the beautifully arranged steak, creamy mashed potatoes, and charred, golden grilled corn, an appreciative moan escapes my lips. "This looks delicious."

He takes a seat beside me, his plate in his hand, and we begin to eat.

"It's confirmed," I say, between a bite of perfectly cooked steak. "You officially win the best boyfriend of the year award."

He chuckles. "You deserve nothing but the best."

God, I love him.

As the heroine confesses her feelings on the screen, a familiar flutter of emotions surges within me. The movie's plot may be captivating, but it pales in comparison to the real-life love story that Alex and I are weaving together. Our moments, our shared glances, and the unspoken words between us create a narrative that is infinitely more enchanting and beautiful than any film could ever be.

With the last bite of food consumed and the credits rolling on the screen, Alex gathers our empty plates and heads to the yurt's kitchen. I stand up and stretch, wrapping the blanket around my shoulders and inhaling the crisp mountain air.

Returning, Alex stokes the fire, coaxing its flames to dance and cast a warm, flickering glow around us. He wraps his strong arm around my waist, pulling me closer. We stand there in silence, the only sounds around us the crackling fire, the rhythmic chirping of crickets, and the gentle rustling of leaves in the night breeze. It's as if nature itself is serenading our love story.

With a gentle touch, he turns me in his arms until I'm facing him. He brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear and lets out a gentle sigh, those hazel eyes gazing into mine with an intensity that I'll never get used to. Sometimes I wonder if a heart can burst from loving someone too much.

"Bella—"

"Alex—"

"Go ahead," he encourages, his eyes locked onto mine.

I take a moment to compose my thoughts, wanting to express my feelings with sincerity. "I just wanted to say how thankful I am for everything you did," I begin. "Today has been perfect."

A soft smile plays on his lips, and he replies, "Good. I wanted it to be, because..." He pauses, and for a moment, his usual confidence wavers. His brows furrow slightly, and it's as if he's searching for the right words.

My palm rests on his cheek. "Alex?"

His voice trembles slightly when he starts, "I want you to know how much I love you. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you, making more moments like this. Making you smile."

"I want that too," I say softly.

"A year ago I asked you a question. And you said you wanted to wait to answer me, to see if I still feel the same way about you. And I don't."

I frown up at him, my heart sinking. "You don't?"

"No, Bella, the love I felt for you then is nothing compared to how in love

with you I am now. And I'm glad we waited. Glad we took the time to get to know each other better. To get close with each other's friends and family. But..." From his pocket, he retrieves a small velvet box and, with a deliberate and almost ceremonial touch, he opens it. Before me lies a breathtaking ring, its facets catching the dancing firelight, creating a dazzling display of brilliance. "I don't want to wait any longer. I want you to be my wife. So I'll ask you again. Isabella Pearl Montgomery, will you marry me?"

Without hesitation, I cry out, "Yes!" My voice carries the weight of a thousand emotions, all wrapped up in that single word.

He gently slips the ring on my finger. It fits perfectly as if it was always meant to be there.

His mouth finds mine, and I melt into his kiss, and my heart beats a love song, "Alex, Alex, Alex."

As we catch our breath, his voice, filled with a hint of playfulness, caresses my lips. "So I guess I only have one more question," he says.

I lean back, curious. "What's that?"

"How long before you want to have kids?"

I can't help but burst into laughter, taken aback by the suddenness of his question. But as I look into his eyes, I see a sincerity that stops me in my tracks. "You're serious?" I ask, searching his face for confirmation of this life-altering conversation.

"I want whatever you want," he continues, his voice filled with sincerity. "A handful of kids, or one or two, or if you want it to just be you and me for a long time, or forever, I'll be happy, because I'll be with you."

As I look into Alex's eyes and consider all the possibilities our future could hold, I'm filled with a profound sense of contentment. The world is vast, and there are countless paths we can choose to walk together. The thought of building a life with him, filled with love, adventures, and perhaps a family, fills my heart with excitement and anticipation.

Alex's words echo in my mind, and I realize that he's right. It doesn't matter what life throws at us, as long as we're together. Whether we decide to have a family or cherish the moments of just us two, whether we face challenges or sail through calm waters, our love will be the constant that guides us.

In this moment, I understand that our love is the anchor that keeps us steady, the fire that warms our hearts, and the light that guides us through the darkest nights. No matter what the future holds, I'm certain that with him by

my side, our journey will be filled with love, laughter, and the kind of happiness that only comes from sharing a life with your soulmate.

Reader's Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Hold off on starting a family and have a big outdoor wedding with family and friends. [Turn to this page.](#)

Embark on another adventure — the adventure of parenthood. Choose to have a small wedding, and start trying for a baby. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 76

ALEX

PRIVATE PROMISE

The sunlit courthouse feels almost empty, echoing with the distant voices of clerks and lawyers. In this quiet moment, that will change my life forever, it's just Alex and me — exactly how I want it.

Alex's hand feels warm and steady in mine as we stand before the magistrate. His eyes are locked onto mine, a storm of emotions swirling within them.

I can't wait to be his forever.

The magistrate's words drift through my consciousness, but they are secondary to the feeling in my heart. The vows we exchange are simple, yet they hold the weight of a thousand promises.

The ring slips onto my finger, a symbol of our love and our commitment. Alex's eyes shimmer with unshed tears.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the magistrate says, her voice filled with a kind of warmth that makes this small ceremony feel more significant than any grand event could.

Alex leans in, capturing my lips with his in a gentle, lingering kiss. We're married, truly and completely. And my heart aches with something I've never truly experienced until him.

Love.

It's a word that's often tossed around, but right now, it takes on a depth and meaning I never knew possible. It's a beautiful, terrifying, and exhilarating sensation that courses through my veins, binding me to him in ways I can't fully comprehend.

But I also know it's more than love. It's something that defies the limitations of that single, overused word. It's a connection that transcends the

ordinary, an intimacy that goes beyond the physical.

My parents have planned a backyard celebration for a few of our closest friends, and Alex's family, but we still have a few hours before we have to be there. We take the time to go back to his place and lose ourselves in each other's embrace.

Alex wastes no time in pulling me into his arms. His lips meet mine in a hungry, passionate kiss that leaves me breathless. There's a raw intensity to our connection, a sense that this moment is meant to be savored, cherished.

Our hands explore each other's bodies with fervor. The weight of our vows, the promise of forever, feels even more significant now. And as our bodies become one, his moans and my whimpers fill the bedroom.

We come together in a cry of ecstasy, completely unravelling as pleasure rips through me, and his orgasm pulsates against my womb.

Exhausted, we collapse onto the bed, panting. Alex pulls me into his arms, and I nestle my head against his chest, finding solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"I love you, husband," I murmur, tracing circles on his chest.

Alex chuckles softly, his fingers gently combing through my hair. "I have to admit, I like the sound of that."

I raise my head to look into his eyes. "So, husband, how does it feel to be a married man?"

He grins, his thumb caressing my cheek. "Absolutely incredible, wife. I can't believe I get to spend the rest of my life with you."

I plant a tender kiss on his lips. "Likewise. Our forever starts now."

"You know, now that we're married, we can start trying for a baby."

I smile softly. "We don't have to try," I reply, my fingers tracing invisible patterns on his chest.

His brow furrows in confusion, and he asks, "Have you changed your mind about kids?"

"No," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I haven't changed my mind because..." I pause, letting the words hang in the air, teasing him.

He leans in closer, his eyes searching mine. "Because what?"

I can't hold back the smile that spreads across my face. "Because I'm already pregnant. I took a test yesterday, and it confirmed it."

Alex's eyes widen, and a mixture of shock and joy washes over his face. He pulls me into a tight embrace, his lips finding mine in a passionate kiss that says more than words ever could.

“We’re going to have a baby,” he says.

“Yes, we are,” I whisper, my heart soaring with happiness.

We lie there in each other’s arms. The promise of a new life, a new adventure, fills the room with a sense of magic and anticipation.

With a contented smile, I close my eyes, snuggled up to the love of my life, and let the warmth of the moment wash over me.

I know that the journey ahead will have its challenges and surprises, but I am filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and happiness. Together, we will navigate this new chapter of our lives, hand in hand, and heart in heart.

Reader’s Choice:

What should Bella do next?

Love, diapers, and other surprises. See what five years of parenting adventures and loving Alex looks like. [Turn to this page.](#)

Wrinkles, rocking chairs, and grey hairs. See what a lifetime of love and adventure with Alex looks like. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 77

SEBASTIAN

A GALLERY OF LOVE

Five years ago, this moment seemed like a distant dream, but now, it's my reality. Tonight is my very first art premiere, and I can't believe how far I've come. The gallery is bathed in soft, warm light, casting a golden glow over the vibrant paintings adorning the walls. Each canvas holds a piece of my soul, a testament to my passion and dedication to art.

As I scan the room, my eyes land on the person who's been my biggest cheerleader through it all — Sebastian. He catches me watching him, and his grin widens as he makes his way towards me.

"You did it," he whispers against the shell of my ear, his voice filled with pride. "After tonight, the world will know the name Bella Sinclair."

"I couldn't have done it without you." It's true even though he'll deny it. Because of him, I was able to focus on my art, and only teach part-time.

"We make a good team."

"We do," I agree.

I'm so proud of the advocate he's become for bringing awareness to cystic fibrosis. He's opened up publicly about his battle with the disease, and together, we've turned his struggle into a source of strength and hope for others facing the same challenge.

Life is good.

Of course, it comes with its struggles too — those inevitable lung infections and hospital stays that remind us of the fragility of life. But even in those difficult moments, I wouldn't change a thing.

Loving someone who's battling a terminal illness is a wake-up call to soak up life's beautiful, fleeting moments. When you're with them, you realize how courage can be a powerful force, and it teaches you to find

happiness in the simplest things, like sharing a laugh or just feeling their heartbeat next to yours.

He wraps an arm around my waist, his eyes sparkling playfully. “You know, now that your art career is taking off, we should celebrate with a world tour.”

I laugh. “A world tour, huh? Where would you like to go first?”

He pretends to ponder, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Well,” he begins with a mischievous glint in his eyes, “we could start in Paris, of course, for a taste of romance and culture. Then, perhaps we’ll rent a villa in Tuscany, where we can sip wine and dine on delicious Italian cuisine. And, don’t forget your favorite, a week in the Azores for that perfect blend of tranquility and natural beauty.”

I pause, studying his face. It’s not like Sebastian to plan such elaborate trips on the spot. The realization dawns on me, and I see the sincerity in his eyes. *He’s serious.*

“You’ve already planned it, haven’t you?”

My heart swells with emotion as I grasp the magnitude of his proposal. The absence of children in our lives, a conscious choice we made, has allowed us to indulge in our shared passion for travel. It’s one of the things that has inspired my paintings, the vibrant colors of the world we’ve explored together.

Sebastian’s smile widens, and he nods. He doesn’t need to say a word; his eyes tell me everything.

Unable to contain my emotions, I throw my arms around him, holding him tightly. “You’re amazing,” I whisper.

“I was going to tell you later,” he admits. “I’m stepping down as CEO so we can spend more time together.”

His lips brush over mine, and I don’t care that we’ve gathered a small crowd of onlookers and photographers. Let them capture our love.

“Nothing is more important to me than being with you,” he says, thumb stroking my cheek.

I smile against his mouth, and whisper a quote that’s become my daily mantra, “In the end, we only regret the chances we didn’t take and the moments we didn’t savor.”

Sebastian’s eyes lock onto mine, and he nods in understanding. We both know that life is too short not to seize every opportunity for love, adventure, and happiness.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new story with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 78

SEBASTIAN

A NURSERY OF DREAMS

“Are you sure you’ve got this figured out?” I chuckle as I watch Sebastian wrestle with the crib’s instruction manual and the scattered screws and nails on the floor.

He glances up, mischief twinkling in his dark eyes. “It’s all under control.”

I arch an amused eyebrow. “Do you recall the last time you attempted something like this? It took us eight hours to assemble that bookshelf. And we still had to call my dad in the end.”

“This is different. I’ve got this.”

His stubborn determination makes me laugh, and I put my hands up in surrender. “Alright. I’ll just be here, offering moral support.”

Five years have passed since the day we exchanged our vows, and while many things have changed, the most remarkable transformation is the lively duo currently locked in a spirited wrestling match within the confines of my expanding belly.

“You realize there’s a whole other crib to set up after that one,” I remind him.

He smiles and returns to the crib, trying to fit a piece into a place that clearly doesn’t want it. After a few more minutes of struggle, he throws his arms up in defeat.

“Okay, okay,” he concedes, “I’ll call someone tomorrow to set them up.”

I shake my head with affection for my determined husband. As he stands up, his gaze lingering on the incomplete crib, he reaches for me, pulling me into his embrace.

His hands rest on my stomach, and he smiles when he feels the twins

kick. “Incredible,” he murmurs, resting his forehead against mine.

It is incredible. A miracle of science and a journey of patience and hope. We faced heartbreak and uncertainty during the first few attempts, but we persevered. And in less than a month, we’ll get to meet our miracle babies.

Sebastian’s battle with cystic fibrosis has been another hurdle. He’s had his fair share of hospital stays, a constant reminder of the fragility of life, but despite the challenges, he’s doing remarkably well.

Our new place, which Sebastian lovingly calls a “house,” while I prefer the term “castle,” is another significant change in our lives. We moved to the countryside, where the air is cleaner and the pace of life is gentler, all for Sebastian’s health. The vast lot is nothing short of paradise, and it fills me with anticipation for the childhood our twins will have, surrounded by nature and wide-open spaces.

“I love you,” Sebastian whispers, his voice filled with emotion.

I caress his cheek, gazing into his eyes. *How did I get so lucky?*

We share a moment of quiet, our love speaking volumes in the silence. “Have you thought about names?” I ask.

He nods. “For the boy, I was thinking, Tobias, after my brother. And for the girl, how about Pearl, after your middle name?”

“I love that.”

He leans in to kiss me again. “I can’t wait to hold them in my arms,” he whispers against my lips.

“Me too,” I reply, my voice soft.

The nursery may still have a few pieces to be put together, but everything feels complete. I refuse to let myself fall into the old patterns of wondering, “What if?” Life is filled with uncertainties, and Sebastian’s illness is just one of many.

In his smile, I find my strength, and in his embrace, I’ve discovered the essence of what family truly means. I hope with all my heart that our children will bask in his love for many years to come. But even if fate has different plans, he will live on through them, a living legacy that speaks of our love.

What Sebastian and I share will transcend time and endure eternally, a testament to the profound beauty of giving our hearts without reservation, even when our souls ache for more time together. Our love is a flame that will never be extinguished, a light that will guide our family through every challenge that life may throw our way.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new story with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

PART TWELVE

EPILOGUE

If you relish the journey, every single moment you live becomes your 'happily ever after,' for life's true beauty lies not just in reaching the destination, but in savoring every step along the way.

CHAPTER 79

DAMIEN

5 YEARS LATER

"Mommy, watch me!" Jackson exclaims, his sandy hair flying as he zips down the slide in our backyard. I applaud his daring feat, a proud smile on my face.

"Well done," I cheer.

Damien joins me, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "You know he gets his fearlessness from his old man."

I chuckle. "That's true. And I'm terrified for the teenage years."

"One day at a time, beautiful." Damien leans in and kisses me, his lips warm and familiar. "I love you," he murmurs against my mouth.

"Yuck," Jackson shouts before running over to his sister Ashlyn, who looks up at him with the adoring eyes of a two-year-old.

Our life is a whirlwind of diapers, playdates, and bedtime stories. I still teach art, but now it's part-time so I can be home for our kids while they're young. It's not everyone's idea of a happily ever after, but it's mine and Damien's. And every day, I treasure the little things, knowing that it's not just who you pick to spend your life with but the love and effort you give back.

In the quiet moments, when I watch our children sleep, I'm reminded that the real magic lies in the ordinary, in the everyday acts of love and devotion. It's in the way Damien and I steal glances and share secret smiles when the chaos of parenthood surrounds us. It's in the feeling of our hands entwined as we face each day's challenges together, knowing we are stronger as a team.

Our love has evolved and deepened, woven into the fabric of our family. The late-night cuddles on the couch after the kids are asleep, the stolen kisses in the kitchen amidst cooking dinner, and the shared dreams whispered in the

dark.

Our happily ever after may not be filled with grand gestures or extravagant adventures, but it's a life rich with love, laughter, and unwavering support. The warmth of home and the sanctuary of our love make every day a chapter in our unique fairy tale. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

As the sun sets and casts a warm, golden glow over our backyard, we gather around the picnic table for dinner. Damien grills some burgers, and the delicious aroma fills the air. Jackson and Ashlyn eagerly munch on their food, their faces smeared with ketchup and smiles.

After dinner, we clean up the backyard, and Damien and I take turns giving the kids their baths. Ashlyn giggles as she splashes water while Jackson insists on telling us his adventurous tales from the day.

Once the kids are tucked into bed with their favorite bedtime stories, Damien and I find a moment of quiet on the porch. We sit side by side, gazing at the stars above.

"It's amazing how our lives have changed," Damien says, his voice filled with contentment.

I nod, resting my head on his shoulder. "Yes, but it's a beautiful change."

Damien wraps his arm around me, and we sit in companionable silence, relishing the peace of the evening. The fireflies dance in the distance, and the world feels perfect in its imperfection.

Our life may be a whirlwind of chaos and love, but it's the most beautiful whirlwind I could ever imagine.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 80

ALEX

LIFE IN FULL BLOOM

It's been five years since Alex and I said "I do," and life has never been the same since. Our love has grown, our family has grown, and every day feels like an adventure. We're now the proud parents of a rambunctious four-year-old, Matthew, as well as the mischievous two-year-old twin boys, Tristan and Owen. And, to top it all off, I'm pregnant again.

I feel Alex's warmth as he comes up from behind, his hands gently resting on my baby bump. I smile, knowing he loves feeling our growing child move within me. His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "You know, you're the sexiest woman in the world."

"You always say that." I chuckle, leaning back into his embrace.

"Cause it's true," he insists, his voice low and tender.

"Just wait another three months, and I'll be the sexiest whale in the room."

"But you'll be my whale." He laughs softly, his fingers tracing circles on my belly.

"You're terrible." I mock huff at him and playfully swat his arm.

He nuzzles his face into my neck, planting a sweet kiss there. "And you love it."

I can't deny it. I do love it — I love our playful banter, and I love him and our crazy, hectic family. I couldn't ask for anything more.

Today is one of those chaotic, frenzied days that I cherish. It started with Matthew waking up early, jumping on our bed, and declaring, "It's a beautiful day, Mom and Dad! Let's make it awesome!"

And it is. Even when the milk spills, and the twins have runny noses, even when Alex and I argue about silly things that don't matter, even in the

chaos that has become my life — it is in Matthew’s words, “Awesome.”

Matthew is currently running in circles, pretending to be a superhero, with a bedsheet cape flapping behind him. He shouts, “Captain Matthew to the rescue!” and crashes onto the couch. The twins join the chase, but Tristan falls with a holler. Matthew rushes to help, and they resume their adventures with laughter echoing through the room.

Alex takes one look at me, grinning, and says, “Our living room has become a war zone, Commander Bella. Permission to join the fray?”

“Permission granted, Captain.” I salute him.

We dive into the mess, pretending to be superheroes too, and the laughter in our house reaches epic levels.

“Mom, Dad, watch me fly!” Matthew declares, jumping off the couch with all the grace of a superhero, which is to say, none. He lands on the cushions with a dramatic thud.

Alex helps him up, playfully scolding, “Remember, superheroes always stick the landing.”

Breakfast is a spectacle. Matthew insists on wearing his superhero costume — a mismatched ensemble of pajama pants and a t-shirt. He spills milk all over the table, but his giggles are infectious, so I can’t help but laugh along.

Once I’ve cleared the breakfast battlefield, it’s time for a family outing. We pack the kids into the car, and Matthew demands that we play his favorite song, and we sing along as we drive to the local park.

At the playground, chaos reigns supreme. Matthew runs around like a whirlwind, with the twins wobbling behind him. Alex chases after them, trying to keep up.

“Dad, can we go on the swings?” Matthew asks, breathless from all his running.

“Sure thing, buddy,” Alex replies, lifting him onto the swing with a grin.

As Matthew swings higher and higher, he shouts, “I’m flying, Dad! Just like a superhero!”

I watch with a smile, sitting on a nearby bench with Tristan and Owen in a double stroller. Owen babbles something that sounds like his own version of “superhero,” and Tristan giggles in agreement.

By the time we head home, we’re all exhausted, but it’s a happy exhaustion. We tuck the kids into bed, read them their favorite stories, and give them goodnight kisses.

Finally, Alex and I collapse on the couch, holding hands and sharing a moment of peace. The house is quiet, and it's just the two of us.

As I rest my head on his chest, I can't help but think about the choices I could have made, the paths I could have taken. I think about the pivotal moment when I first chose Alex, not just that fateful day at the coffee shop, but every day since then.

I remember our first date, and the warmth in his eyes when he smiled at me across that crowded cafe, the way our conversation flowed effortlessly as we shared stories and dreams. In that moment, I made a choice to give love a chance, to embrace the unknown. And there have been so many choices since then. The choice to trust my heart, to love Alex, to spend my life with him, to start a family.

Together, we've chosen to face sleepless nights, messy diaper changes, and endless giggles because we know that every moment is a gift.

"I love you," Alex whispers, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

As I lay there with Alex, feeling the rise and fall of his chest with each breath, I wouldn't change any of my choices. Our love, our family, and our adventures are the most precious things in my life, and I am grateful for every single choice that led me to this moment.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

Wrinkles, rocking chairs, and grey hairs. See what a lifetime of love and adventure with Alex looks like. [Turn to this page.](#)

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 8I

ALEX

FULL HOUSE, FULL HEARTS

A decade has passed since Alex and I exchanged our vows, and our lives have undergone a remarkable transformation. Our love has deepened, our family has expanded, and each day has become an exhilarating journey. Presently, we joyfully embrace the roles of dotting parents to a spirited four-year-old named Matthew, as well as the playful and mischievous two-year-old twin boys, Tristan and Owen. To add an exciting twist to it all, I am expecting once again.

Becoming parents has completely shaken things up, but it's brought a whole lot of joy into our lives.

I feel Alex's warmth as he comes up from behind, his hands gently resting on my baby bump. I smile, knowing he loves feeling our growing child move within me. His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "You know, you're the sexiest woman in the world."

"You always say that." I chuckle, leaning back into his embrace.

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Reader’s Choice:

What would you like to do next?

Wrinkles, rocking chairs, and grey hairs. See what a lifetime of love and adventure with Alex looks like. [Turn to this page.](#)

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 82

ALEX

A TRAIL OF LOVE

“This is way better than any Google picture,” I say, breathlessly, as the Appalachian Trail unfolds before us.

Alex chuckles. “I knew you would enjoy it.

The rustling of foliage and twigs beneath our boots is our rhythmic soundtrack as sunlight filters through the canopy, painting the forest floor with patches of golden light. Brimming with the scent of pine and earth, the air is crisp and invigorating. It’s a perfect day, much like the past five years we’ve spent together.

I steal a glance at Alex, his rugged silhouette framed by the natural beauty surrounding us. His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining effortlessly.

“Happy Anniversary, Beautiful,” he says, his voice filled with affection.

I turn to him, a smile lighting up my face. “It seems like only yesterday, but at the same time, it seems like forever.”

“We’re incredibly lucky, aren’t we? To have found each other and to share all these amazing experiences.”

I give his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I couldn’t agree more.”

We come to a halt; the trail opens up to unveil a breathtaking panoramic view. The mountains stretch as far as the eye can see, an awe-inspiring sight that makes me feel small in the grand scheme of nature’s beauty.

Alex places a hand under my chin and lifts my face to meet his. His lips brush softly against mine. I curl my fingers in his plaid shirt as I allow his mouth to consume me. There’s a tender urgency to his kiss as if he’s trying to convey all the emotions that words alone can’t express. Our mouths connect perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle coming together. A silent promise of forever.

We finally break the kiss, and Alex has a mischievous glint in his gaze like he's keeping a secret that he really wants to share.

"What aren't you telling me?" I ask, nudging him.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes. You're a terrible secret keeper."

He chuckles. "I didn't want to tell you until tonight," he says, his voice tinged with excitement, "But I've got another anniversary gift for you."

My curiosity piqued, I turn to him, a smile playing on my lips. "Really? What is it?"

"Well, I remembered you talking about how much you wanted to visit France. So I booked a trip to Paris. We leave in two weeks."

My eyes widen in surprise. "Paris? Are you serious?"

He nods, his dimples deepening. "Happy Anniversary, Bella."

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him hard. "Thank you," I say against his mouth. "I can't wait to explore the Louvre, see all the incredible art, and immerse myself in history."

"You can lose yourself in the Louvre, and I'll lose myself in the croissants and wine." He winks playfully.

I nudge him with my elbow. "Of course, you would think about the food first."

He shrugs with an exaggerated expression of innocence. "What can I say?" He shrugs with an exaggerated expression of innocence. "I have my priorities."

Breaking away from our embrace, a grin tugging at my lips, I tell him, "You really are the best husband in the world."

He chuckles, that charming glint in his eyes never dimming. "Well, I aim to please. And..." His thumb strokes my cheek. "Considering I'm married to the most incredible woman in the world, I know I better keep my performance high."

I can't resist a playful grin. "Oh, don't worry. Your performance in all areas of our marriage has been nothing short of excellent."

As we stand there, our playful banter fading into a more serious tone, I can see a hint of contemplation in Alex's eyes. His fingers gently trace patterns on my arm before he finally speaks up.

"You know," he begins, his voice softer, "I've been thinking about something lately. I know you said when we got married that you didn't want to have kids. And I want to make sure that's still the case."

His question catches me off guard. It's not something we've discussed in a long time. "Is that something you want, Alex?"

He smiles warmly, his hand finding mine. "Honestly, I think our family is already complete with just the two of us. I love our life together, just us. But I also don't want you to feel like you've missed out on anything, especially if you ever have a change of heart."

I appreciate his thoughtfulness and the way he's considering my feelings in this matter. With a gentle squeeze of his hand, I respond, "You know, I've thought about it too, but right now, I'm content with our life as it is. And I love our adventures and the freedom we have. But if that ever changes, if I ever feel differently, I know you'll be there to support me."

He leans in and kisses my forehead. "That's all I want, for us to be happy together, no matter what we decide."

As I gaze into His hazel eyes, I'm transported back to the early days of our relationship, when we first met and embarked on this incredible journey together. We've shared countless adventures, celebrated victories, and supported each other through challenges. Our relationship has grown and evolved, and it's a testament to the love we share that we can openly discuss such an important topic as starting a family.

We're not just a couple; we're a team, partners in every sense of the word. And in that unity, we find the strength to face whatever the future holds.

The unspoken understanding between us speaks volumes, reinforcing the strength of our connection and the certainty that our future, whatever it may hold, will be bright because we face it together.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

Wrinkles, rocking chairs, and grey hairs. See what a lifetime of love and adventure with Alex looks like. [Turn to this page.](#)

Embark on another adventure — the adventure of parenthood. [Turn to this page.](#)

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CHAPTER 83

ALEX

A LIFETIME OF CHOOSING LOVE

“Can you believe it's been fifty years since we made our vows?” I ask, my voice filled with a mixture of awe and nostalgia.

Alex stands beside me, his presence a comforting anchor in this momentous occasion. His strong arm wraps around my shoulder, drawing me closer, and he smiles down at me, that familiar dimpled grin lighting up his face. "It feels like just yesterday we were saying 'I do' and embarking on this incredible journey together."

I tilt my head to gaze into his eyes, the same hazel gaze that captured my heart all those years ago. His hair has turned a distinguished silver, and those deeper wrinkles around his eyes only add character to his ruggedly handsome face. Time may have left its mark, but it has only enhanced his appeal.

"It's been a beautiful journey," I say, placing my palm on his cheek. "So many memories and moments. And through it all, you've remained the most handsome man I've ever known."

Alex chuckles softly, his eyes still locked on mine. "Well, I have you to thank for that, my love. You've made every day of the past fifty years worth it."

Today, as we celebrate our golden wedding anniversary, our love feels stronger than ever. We're here in the beautiful garden we've nurtured over the years, a tranquil oasis untouched by the pitter-patter of little feet. Our decision to be child-free allowed us to focus all our attention on each other, nurturing a love that has grown deeper and more profound with every passing day.

Our shared love for adventure took us to over thirty different countries, where we marveled at wonders and hiked mountains. SummitStar Adventures

thrived before Alex retired, and I embraced a fulfilling art career after retiring from teaching.

But our most precious moments were the everyday ones, waking up together, sharing breakfast, and simply loving each other. Our love was the thread that wove our lives together, guiding us through every twist and turn. Today, surrounded by our friends, we're grateful for the choice we made five decades ago — to love deeply and unconditionally.

As we sip champagne and share stories, laughter dances in the air. Our friends raise a toast to us, celebrating the bond that we've nurtured and the love that has been our guiding star.

Our neighbor Maya, a young woman just embarking on her life, leans over to me, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "How did you two stay together for so long and still have so much passion and love?"

"Love is a choice." Smiling, I hold Alex's hand, squeezing it before saying, "And we choose each other every day."

"That seems too easy," she says, chuckling.

"Some days it was. But there were times when it seemed easier to give up than to love. But over the years, we learned to cherish the little moments, forgive the big mistakes, and always..." I smile at Alex. "Always communicate."

He grins and brings my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. "And we never forgot to say 'I love you' every morning and every night, no matter what."

I still get those familiar butterflies in my stomach when he looks at me the way he is now. After all these years, his gaze remains the most enchanting thing in the world.

As the sun sets, casting a warm glow over the garden, our eyes meet, and we share a look that transcends words. It's a look that speaks of a lifetime of shared memories, joys, and sorrows. It's the look of a love that has stood the test of time.

"Alex," I whisper, "I love you more today than I did fifty years ago."

He pulls me close, his embrace as warm and comforting as it was on our wedding day. "And I love you more than words can express."

We clink our glasses together, celebrating not just fifty years of marriage, but a lifetime filled with love, laughter, and the knowledge that no matter what challenges life may bring, our love has always been, and will always be, constant.

Reader's Choice:

What would you like to do next?

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Go back to the beginning and start a new journey with Bella. [Turn to this page.](#)

CHAPTER 84

ALEX

GOLDEN HEARTS

“Can you believe it's been fifty years since we made our vows?” I ask, my voice filled with a mixture of awe and nostalgia.

Alex stands beside me, his presence a comforting anchor in this momentous occasion. His strong arm wraps around my shoulder, drawing me closer, and he smiles down at me, that familiar dimpled grin lighting up his face. "It feels like just yesterday we were saying 'I do' and embarking on this incredible journey together."

I tilt my head to gaze into his eyes, the same hazel gaze that captured my heart all those years ago. His hair has turned a distinguished silver, and those deeper wrinkles around his eyes only add character to his ruggedly handsome face. Time may have left its mark, but it has only enhanced his appeal.

"It's been a beautiful journey," I say, placing my palm on his cheek. "So many memories and moments. And through it all, you've remained the most handsome man I've ever known."

Alex chuckles softly, his eyes still locked on mine. "Well, I have you to thank for that, my love. You've made every day of the past fifty years worth it."

Today, as we celebrate our golden wedding anniversary, our love feels stronger than ever. We're surrounded by our children, grandchildren, and a few close friends in the beautiful garden we've nurtured over the years. The garden, like our marriage, has weathered storms, and seen its share of blooming and withering, but has always come back to life with renewed beauty.

As we sip champagne and share stories, laughter dances in the air. Our granddaughter, Rylee, leans over to me, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Nana, how did you and Papa stay together for so long?”

Smiling, I hold Alex’s hand, squeezing it before saying, “Love is a choice, and we choose each other every day.”

“That seems too easy,” she says, rolling her eyes in true teenage fashion.

I chuckle, remembering the days when I was a young, headstrong girl just like her. “Some days it was. But there were times when it seemed easier to give up than to love. But over the years, we learned to cherish the little moments, forgive the big mistakes, and always...” I smile at Alex. “Always communicate.”

He grins and brings my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. “And we never forgot to say ‘I love you’ every morning and every night, no matter what.”

I still get those familiar butterflies in my stomach when he looks at me the way he is now. After all these years, his gaze remains the most enchanting thing in the world.

Our son, Matthew, raises a toast. “To Mom and Dad, who showed us that love is not just a feeling, but a commitment. Here’s to fifty incredible years, and many more!”

As the evening sun paints the sky in shades of gold and orange, I steal a private moment with Alex. Our eyes meet, and we share a look that transcends words. It’s a look that speaks of a lifetime of shared memories, joys, and sorrows. It’s the look of a love that has stood the test of time.

“Alex,” I whisper, “I love you more today than I did fifty years ago.”

He pulls me close, his embrace as warm and comforting as it was on our wedding day. “And I love you more than words can express.”

We clink our glasses together, celebrating not just fifty years of marriage, but a lifetime filled with love, laughter, and the knowledge that no matter what challenges life may bring, our love has always been, and will always be, constant.

Reader’s Choice:

What would you like to do next?

End your journey and go to the Afterward. [Turn to this page.](#)

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AFTERWORD

Thank you for embarking on this journey through the pages of **Wild Tangled Hearts**. I hope you enjoyed the opportunity to guide Bella's journey into the realm of love.

Within these pages, you wielded the reins of Bella's destiny, navigating decisions that ignited sparks, uncovered secrets, and occasionally led to heartbreak.

As you bid farewell to Bella's world, remember that your own life is an unwritten story awaiting your authorship. Whether it involves navigating the intricacies of love, embarking on uncharted adventures, or discovering joy in everyday moments, your journey is uniquely yours to craft.

Remember that by savoring the journey, every moment you live becomes your personal 'happily ever after.' Life's true beauty resides not solely in reaching the destination but in cherishing each step along the way.

So, thank you for venturing into **Wild Tangled Hearts**. As you move forward, may your life be graced with exhilarating adventures, profound connections, and experiences that leave you breathless.

Until Next Time, Love Hard,
C.M. Seabrook

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amazon bestselling author C.M. Seabrook is known for crafting scorching hot romances that delve into the magnetic allure of possessive bad boys and the fierce, passionate women who can't resist their charms. Her stories ignite the page with sizzling chemistry, leaving readers breathless and craving more. Get ready to be swept off your feet in Seabrook's world of heart-pounding, swoonworthy romances that will keep you hooked from start to finish!

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