

Whisked Away



*A Small Town
Romance Novel*



*The Dove Point
Series*

M. COLETTE

whisked away

A NOVEL

OceanofPDF.com

M. COLETTE

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author's note

Special shoutout to the reader holding this book. I poured a lot of my own life experience into this story that I'm still, to this day, learning and growing from. I'm excited for you to go on this journey with Ellie and Rowan. I hope they become your best friends too.

P.S. to my family: You can still turn back now and save yourself from what will be the most awkward moments of your life.

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content warnings

Parental abandonment

Infidelity (committed by a side character; occurs off page)

Explicit sexual content

Panic attack

Trauma

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prologue

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ROWAN



Ten Years Ago

...THE FINAL CHECK-IN is being completed, and the captain will order for the doors of the aircraft to close in approximately five minutes...

We hear the flight attendant make the final announcement. Ellie and I look at the passengers forming a line at the gate, eager to either get back home or leave for a visit. Dove Point is known to have the smallest airport in the West Coast and right now I can't help but thank this tiny airport for allowing us to be here with Ellie while we send her off. Our fingers are intertwined, and I feel her gentle squeeze when she looks back at me.

I gaze into her sky-blue eyes, tears gathering on the bottom lashes. Everyone is here to send her off: our friends, her parents, and her brother, August. They've all said their goodbyes before giving us privacy.

A small tear escapes the corner of her eye, and I let go of her hand to wipe it away with my thumb. Her eyes flutter shut before she opens them again.

"You promise to call me every day?" Her voice cracks toward the end.

I place my other hand on her cheek, tilting her head up, and smile. "I'll call you morning, noon, and night. You'll get so sick of me." A small laugh breaks free from me.

Ellie's soft, small hand lies on top of mine when I see a tiny smile form on her lips. My heart is telling me to get on that plane with her. Leave Dove

Point—the West Coast—behind and start a new life in New York City while she attends culinary school.

But my mind is second-guessing itself, wondering if she wants me and if I'm enough to go with her. My best friend, the girl I love, is leaving to live on the other side of the country for two years. We don't know where our relationship is going to go. We talked about long distance and making it work. It *needs* to work. I've already lost one person in my life. I refuse to lose another, especially Ellie.

We just need to get through two years apart, and then I'll get to have her again. When those two years are up and she comes back, I'm going to propose to her. Sure, we'll only be twenty-one, but I know I'm not meant to be with anyone else but her.

"I love you, Rowan," she whispers to me, leaning her cheek further into my hand like she's trying to remember how this feels so she can take it with her.

"I love you too, El. I promise these two years will fly by, and you'll be home before you know it." My lips find her forehead and I linger there for a moment while I close my eyes.

She nods and lets out a breath through her nose. She looks over her shoulder, both of us noticing the line getting shorter.

"I better get going," she says, turning back to me.

She stands on her toes, and I lean down to kiss her warm, plump lips. We stay like this, savoring each other, and I feel a tear drop slide between our lips like it's trying to tear us apart. My forehead falls onto hers when we pull away.

"I love you," I say again, giving her another kiss.

"I love you."

She grabs the strap of her backpack and lifts it up further onto her shoulder before walking over to everyone else to give another final goodbye before boarding. We all stand together and watch her approach the flight attendant. Ellie gives us one more look, smiling, and turns back to hand her ticket to one of the attendants.

I feel a soft squeeze from someone's hand on my shoulder, not bothering to look and see who it is. Instead, I keep my eyes on the girl who captured my heart at sixteen years old and watch her disappear behind the doors.

The wetness of her tears still lingers on my lips.

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one

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ROWAN



Ten Years Later

BUZZ...BUZZ...BUZZ

An irritating sound comes from my phone—the vibrations against my nightstand slowly pulling me from my sleep. I groan while my hand fumbles against the cold surface in search of the annoying wake-up call. My eyes refuse to open and today is a day I usually get to sleep in. After a long night at work, all I want to do is sleep and dream.

Last night's crowd was unexpected. My sister, Addie, booked a band from Chicago to play at The Salty Dog. The small stage that sits outside in the beer garden was crowded with so many people that I'm pretty sure was a fire hazard. She told me it was just a small band that was touring to play in smaller spaces. Turns out, it was a well-known, up-and-coming band that just signed with a record label.

I didn't get home until three in the morning.

"What?" My voice comes out raspy and dry.

"Don't freak out," Addie says in a calming voice.

I lift myself up from my bed, fully awake now, and go straight into panic mode. Three simple words that cause my heart to start rapidly beating in my chest like a jackhammer. These three words could put me into cardiac arrest.

"What? What is it? Is it the machines?"

"The machines are fine." Addie says nonchalantly.

I close my eyes and exhale through my mouth. A wave of relief washes over me, and my shoulders drop down to relax. I run a hand through my

dark brown hair, pausing when my fingers brush the nape of my neck. It's longer than usual. A change I haven't bothered to fix, especially after Ellie mentioned during a video chat a few weeks ago how much she liked it this way.

"It's actually the merchandise," Addie says.

"What about the merchandise?"

"Well, the logo is wrong, the color is wrong, and they sent us wine glasses instead of beer glasses," she says timidly.

"I'll be right there."

Addie sighs on the other end of the line. Meanwhile, I'm already out of bed, putting my phone on the nightstand and hitting the speaker button so I can get ready.

"What time did everything come in?" I ask, shuffling around my room for clothes.

"It was delivered at four this morning. I went through the items, and that's when I called you." I hear another sigh through the phone before she continues, "I knew you would freak out. I shouldn't have bothered you with someone so miniscule..."

I tune her out while she continues to ramble on about responsibilities, trusting her, and for me to stop trying to control everything. I pull my shirt over my head and quickly grab a pair of black jeans.

"Rowan?" she calls out. "Don't try to control this situation when *I* have it under control."

"Keys, keys, keys...Where the hell are my keys?" I say to myself, patting my jeans pockets repeatedly as if they will magically appear.

My eyes drifts to the dresser, where my car keys and wallet sit next to a photo of me, Addie, and Mom.

"Milo?" I shout.

"Ro, are you even listening to me?" Addie shouts over the phone speaker.

I hear Milo running up the stairs, the sound of his nail's pitter-patting on the wooden floor, his golden fur shining in the sunlight as he enters the room. Milo, my golden retriever, best friend, and constant shadow, barks in excitement.

"Yes, I'm listening. Trust issues, control freak, got it," I respond while running down the stairs and toward the front door. Milo tagging behind me.

"You're insufferable, you know that?" Addie chides.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t be a big brother if I wasn’t.”

I grab my black Vans, tugging one on while balancing on the other foot, my phone wedged between my shoulder and ear. Milo looks up at me, tail wagging, letting out a soft whine of eager anticipation.

“I’ll see you in five minutes,” I quickly say.

“Ro, you don’t—”

I hang up—fighting the urge not to be a dick—because if I keep talking to her, she’ll just slow me down.

Everyone, including my family, always joke that I need to be in control of everything—that I need to ensure things go exactly how I want them to. I don’t see the problem. I have expectations, I set them, and I follow through.

Especially when it comes to my business.

I built The Salty Dog from the ground up, and now it is one of the main tourist attractions in Dove Point. I put my blood, sweat, and a lot of tears into it.

I barely get the open the door before Milo walks out, holding his leash in his mouth, and doesn’t wait for me to get to the car. I never planned on having a dog, but when I found him as a puppy on the side of the road just outside of town, that suddenly changed.

I took it as a sign from the universe that we needed each other. Both being abandoned at some point in our lives.

When I saw him, there was no one around, so I decided to park further down the road to avoid scaring him off. When I stepped out of the car, he didn’t move. He just looked up at me from inside the box with nothing more than a few toys and a leash.

The wooden porch creaks under my shoes when I lock the door and quickly turn to go down the wooden stairs, almost falling off one that’s loose. I glare at it quickly while muttering a curse word under my breath and continue to walk.

Milo spins around, waiting for me to let him into the passenger seat.

“I know, I know. I’m going as fast as I can. *You* don’t need to worry about getting dressed and putting shoes on.”

Opening the passenger door, Milo leaps in, and his paws thud softly against the seat. His excited eyes track every move I make. As I circle the car, his gaze follows me, then shifts back to the door as I slip into the driver’s seat and turn the key. The engine hums to life.

Times Like These by The Foo Fighters starts to play, Milo barks at the music in approval. He may be just a dog, but he has incredible taste in music.

“Alright, let's put your seatbelt on.”

I lean over to strap Milo into the harness that acts like a seat belt for dogs, and he gives me a quick lick on the cheek.

“Good to go?” I pat his head and lean back in my seat.

He barks in approval before I give him another scratch on his head.

“Alright, buddy, let's go.”

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two

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ELLIE



Meanwhile, 2,801 miles away in Brooklyn, New York.

“ELLIE, cupcake, let’s just work this out.”

I stuff my suitcase in the backseat of my deep green Volkswagen Beetle, then take off my yellow cross-bag to throw in the car. My braid snags in the strap, and my frustration starts to reach its peak.

As if I’m not already at my limit.

The sticky morning air clings to my skin now that summer is here. Stray bits of hair from my braid glue to my neck as I push some of my chestnut-colored hair behind my ear.

I turn to Charlie—my now *ex-boyfriend*—planting my hands on my hips. My stance says it all—I’m done, and he knows it. At five-foot-two, I might need to tilt my head to meet his eyes, but my glare could melt ice.

“There’s nothing to work out, Charlie,” I say with an aggravated sigh.

“Look, I know what I did was fucked up, okay?” Charlie says, dragging a hand through his blond hair. “She didn’t mean anything to me.”

I look at the man I love—or thought I loved—the man I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with. His golden hazel eyes stare into my icy blues as he pleads for me to stay.

“She didn’t mean anything to you? You were talking to her for *months*, Charlie. In comparison, I was breaking my back at work. You weren’t there for me. You were there for someone else,” I snap back.

Charlie wraps his hands around the back of his neck, tugging it in frustration. It’s a telltale sign that he knows he’s fucked up and is scrambling for what to say.

Before I let him say another word, I turn my back to him and shove my giant suitcase in the backseat. I didn't pack for a quick trip. I packed everything I owned, ready to leave him and this place behind, at least for now, until I need to go back to work. I successfully get it tucked away and slam the door shut, using everything in my reach to further prove my point.

"You did this to yourself, Charlie. Not me." I point my finger at him.

"I know, and I fucked up. I'm admitting that." Charlie raises his voice, his eyes drifting to some of the early commuters who are on their way to work. He takes a deep breath as he attempts to gather himself and calm down.

His gaze tracks back to me, another attempt to reason with me, but I'm *done*.

My chest feels heavy, almost unbearably so. I force myself to push down the lump in my throat and the emotions wanting to tumble out of me. But he will not get a single tear from me. At least not while I'm standing in front of him.

"I'm an asshole, and I'm selfish," he begins, an edge I don't recognize in his voice. "You were constantly at work, giving that all your attention while I was home alone. You were never like that when we met each other and then started dating. You're the one that's changed."

I rear my head back, startled.

Have I changed?

Of course, people change. I'm not the same person I was when I met him almost six years ago. A lot has changed since I started culinary school and then started working at one of the most well-known restaurants in the country.

I'm not the carefree, happy-go-lucky person I used to be. The thought of baking outside of work feels like a chore now. I'm too drained to even pick up a whisk. I can't remember the last time I took a real vacation. My life's been consumed by the kitchen.

I wish I could bake a triple chocolate chip cookie. Simple, but still delicious. Unfortunately, when you work at a high-end restaurant, people don't come for that.

"Why didn't you try to talk to me?" I ask in defeat.

"I saw what you were going through, what you were dealing with at work. I didn't want to put my problems on top of that."

“So, you go on a dating app? Instead of, I don’t know, going to a therapist?” I narrow my eyes at him so hard I want red beams to shoot out and obliterate him.

“I just needed to talk to someone.”

“Talk to your parents! Your friends!” I shout. “The dog that sits on the stoop of our building! Talking to someone doesn’t mean putting your dick in them. Unless your dick talks? Were you holding out on me?”

“Ellie, I’m sorry. I don’t know how many times you need me to say it to you to forgive me and come back upstairs.” He gestures toward our building with a wave of his hand.

I throw my hands up, fed up with the endless back-and-forth. This is going nowhere, and I need to leave before I say something I’ll regret—even if he deserves every bit of it.

“So, you’re really going to go home for the entire summer? Just up and leave and not even try to fix things with us?” Charlie pauses and stares at me. “Will you at least not call this off between us? Our relationship. Our friendship. Please. I love you so much, Ellie.”

I cross my arms and glare at him. The audacity of this man to tell me he loves me after he confessed last night that his talking dick was in someone else.

“As of right now, Charlie, we aren’t together. Okay? It’s time you figure your shit out, and I’ll figure out mine.”

I watch his throat bob while his eyes are stuck on me. I need space to figure out my next steps—If I can forgive him after this summer and start over. A whole summer away from this city, from my job, is exactly what I need to clear my head.

I open the car door and slip inside, not bothering to say goodbye or even glance at him. Because if I do, I’ll lose the courage I have right now to walk away.

three

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ROWAN



“ROWAN,” Addie scolds. “I can handle this. It’s literally my job.”

“I know you can handle it. I’m just trying to help.”

With my trusty clipboard in hand, I scribble down everything that needs to be fixed—shirts, tote bags, coasters, glassware. So many things. If I don’t get a grip on this now, who knows how long it’ll take to fix it all?

I trust my sister, I do, but I can’t help it. My mind keeps telling me that if I don’t fix it, it’s on me. It’s my fault, even if I wasn’t the one who screwed it up in the first place.

“You’re not helping,” she says. “You’re dictating. Relax and trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

Addie follows me around the table where all the merchandise is splayed out. She’s right, everything is wrong. The coasters that are supposed to be circular are square. The logo on the shirts that say, ‘Salty Dog’ should be ‘*The Salty Dog*.’

“Addie, I love you, but if you really know what you’re doing, how the hell did all this happen?” I don’t look at her as I speak, just focusing on the merchandise and my clipboard.

“Obviously, there was some miscommunication,” she replies, shrugging. “Accidents happen. Things go wrong. It’s part of life. Not everything is going to be perfect.”

I stop what I’m doing and turn to my sister. She has the same dark chocolate hair and blue-gray eyes; it’s like staring into a mirror. Only my sister is five-foot-five. Her thick, wavy hair dances on top of her head in a messy bun as she speaks.

“If you keep acting like this, I’m going to tell Mom.” She points her finger at my chest.

I give her a smart-ass grin and hold the clipboard to my chest. I can feel my hands grip each side of it out of stress that needs to be released.

“Addie, I’m a grown-ass man. Are you really going to tattletale like you did when we were young?”

“Being adults won’t stop me from letting Mom *and* Aunt Rosey know that you are being a controlling asshole who won’t let me handle things.”

My smile falls. I should stop underestimating her.

She wants to go to our mom. Fine, I don’t care. But when she wants to involve our aunt, the one woman who terrifies me, that’s when my attitude changes.

Mom and Aunt Rosey like to play good-cop-bad-cop. My mom is the sweetest woman you’ll ever meet—A true *Mary Poppins* caretaker. My Aunt Rosey, on the other hand—she’s Ellen Ripley from *Alien*. A total badass who would take down an entire alien species.

My arms fall to my sides. “That’s just cruel.”

Addie folds her arms and returns that smart-ass grin I was just giving her a minute ago. “We live in a cruel world, my friend.” She holds her hand out, waiting for the clipboard.

I narrow my gaze, and she narrows hers back. I hesitate, but I hand it to her while she still carries that smile. She knows she won and can’t help but gloat.

“Just make sure that you write every little thing that’s wrong with the merch,” I direct. “The t-shirts, the glassware, the tote bags, *everything*.”

Addie rolls her eyes at me, shaking her head as she turns on her heels and starts to jot down notes.

“Un-freakin-bearable,” she mutters under her breath.

“I heard that,” I call over my shoulder.

I walk to the long, glossy wooden bar and pick up a hand towel, slinging it over my shoulder. Bending down, I start to count all the glasses that are tucked under the bar, the neatly stacked napkins that are on the opposite side, and the coasters we currently have with the logo fading away.

“Please tell me you’re not here because of the merchandise mishap?” A deep voice calls from behind.

I don’t bother to turn around to look at James—one of my best friends. We met in elementary school on picture day, and I remember it like it was

yesterday. I had on a pink and white striped polo, and he told me to take it off because I looked douchey.

I didn't even know what a douche was. I had to ask my mom, who then told me never to say that word again, or I'd get soap in my mouth. I didn't say it until I turned fifteen years old. And that was to James.

"Are you really that shocked?" I smirk to myself.

I hear him climb up the ladder behind me. "I'm an optimist, Rowan, and I believe that one day you will change your ways."

"You have so much faith in me. I admire you for that."

I stand up and turn around, leaning back onto the slick, cool bar counter, crossing my arms. I hear the chalk tapping on the big, wide chalkboard that hangs above the bar. I look up to see James writing down our specials for today.

"Someone has to," James mutters.

"You shouldn't want to change your best friend. You should like them for who they are."

"Not when they self-sabotage themselves."

"Dude, you have no room to talk, you're just as bad."

James gives me the finger over his shoulder before coming back down from the ladder. He may come off as an asshole, but once you get to know him, you learn he has a heart of gold. He's quiet, reserved, and keeps to himself. Yet women flock to him, and he doesn't know how to hold a conversation to save his life.

After I became friends with James, I met his younger brother, Beau. It's like night and day with those two. James is quiet, while Beau likes to be the center of attention.

"Good morning, everyone," a chipper voice filters from the entrance.

I turn to see Riley, Ellie's best friend, walking in with a smile on her face. Her shiny blond hair is wrapped in an identical bun to Addie's, and she's wearing her usual yoga attire. The sound of her sneakers tapping on the wooden floor causes a slight echo in the empty brewery.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" James asks, pushing a strand of his dark walnut-colored hair out of his face.

Riley sits on a stool in front of us. The giant, purple water jug she carries around makes a *thud* sound on the counter.

"So, you haven't heard? I figured," Riley says, letting out a sigh.

“Heard what?” Addie appears behind Riley and sits on the stool next to her, placing the clipboard on top of the counter.

“I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.” Riley looks at me with confusion. “She texted me at three in the morning. Maybe she wanted to spare you because, apparently, *I* don’t need sleep.”

“Who the hell are you talking about?” James asks impatiently.

Riley rolls her eyes at us like we’re the ones being vague about something.

“Ellie!” she exclaims with a smile. “She’s coming home for the summer.”

Addie and James both look surprised by the news. I, on the other hand, try to suppress a giant smile that wants to come out at the sound of her name.

A million feelings are running through me, and I can’t process them this fast. The sound around me starts to fade away while my heart thunders in my chest at the thought of those perfect blue eyes.

The last time I saw Ellie in person was last Christmas. Unfortunately, her boyfriend Charlie was with her, so I had to put on a happy smile and act like I loved the guy. Trying to do that for so many years gets exhausting.

I pull out my phone to see if there are any missed calls or texts. Nothing. The last text from her was a couple of days ago. A photo of two pigeons eating ice cream in a cone that was dropped on the sidewalk. One of the pigeons was completely covered in vanilla ice cream.

I laugh again when I look at the photo. *It is truly* an incredible sight to see. It’s one of my top five favorite photos that Ellie has sent to me. I turn off the screen and put my phone into my back pocket.

“Why is she coming home?” I ask cautiously, trying not to sound too eager.

Riley lifts her brows and shrugs. “All she said was that she’s coming home for the summer, and she will catch up with all of us when she gets in. Trust me, I called her like a million times. But she didn’t answer any of them.”

Addie looks around at us and says, “I hope everything’s alright with her.”

“I’m sure everything’s fine. She probably just misses being home and wants to see her family and friends,” James states optimistically.

I feel nervous and excited. Nervous because that's all I am when I'm around her. The girl that I've been head over heels for since I was a teenager. The girl that I had until I stupidly decided to let her go when she officially left for culinary school all those years ago.

Me and Ellie, it isn't in the cards anymore. She's a big-shot pastry chef in NYC and I have a business here, a life here. The last thing I would ever do is get in the way of that, knowing damn well how hard she's worked to get to where she is.

I remember when she made me a cake after my first girlfriend dumped me. It was my favorite—funfetti with vanilla frosting. She made the frosting from scratch, and when I tasted it, I swear I melted. I didn't even know food could make you feel weak in the knees, but there I was, completely floored. She didn't even bother cutting slices—just grabbed two forks from my kitchen, and we ate it straight from the pan, laughing between bites.

She dipped her finger in some of the frosting and put it on my nose when I wasn't paying attention. I couldn't get mad even if I tried. Not when she let out a laugh and looked at me with the smile I fell in love with.

I always spotted her small dimple when I made her laugh. She had just the one, but anytime I would see it, I felt like the world got a little brighter.

"Rowan, do you know anything about this?" Addie pulls me from my thoughts.

"Wish I did." I shrug casually and bite back a smile.

four

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ELLIE



THE ROAD STRETCHES OUT AHEAD, empty—not a car in sight. My windows are down, causing the wind to tangle through my hair, and my hand slices through the air. The sun beats down on my side of the car, warm against the glass, almost too hot when it touches my skin.

To reach Dove Point, the road winds up a steep hill flanked by nothing but nature. The view stretches out, just the road ahead and birds singing as if greeting you. There are tall trees that rise on either side, their branches wide and protective, while the grass gleams bright and green in the sunlight. Once I reach the top of the hill, I park on the side of the road, the gravel crunching beneath the tires as I come to a stop.

I step out of the car, my body aching from the long drive from New York and back home to the West Coast. Stretching my neck, I work out the tension in my shoulders, then lean back against the car door, lifting my face to the sun. The warm, soothing rays feel like a rare moment of peace.

The drive's been relentless—just bathroom breaks and quick coffee stops. Audiobooks and music have been my only companions, hours ticking by as I try to push Charlie and work out of my mind.

I didn't want to stop overnight. No time for rest. So, here I am, running on empty, my last cup of coffee a distant memory from seven hours ago. Sleep? It hasn't come since Charlie shattered everything. Every time I close my eyes, I see him—his body tangled with hers, and my mind won't let me forget it.

I always thought people who enjoyed road trips were insane. Stranded in a car for more than a day. With enough motivation and willpower, anyone can certainly do it.

I can see everything from the top of the hill. Even though I would need binoculars to see the small town, there is one view that pops out, and that is the bright blue ocean and the white waves crashing in. When I look over the town, I can see all the houses scattered like little dots.

I can hear the waves crashing to the surface if I concentrate hard enough. If I take a deep breath and focus on the scents, I can be taken in by different smells: fresh flowers, newly sprouted tree leaves with fresh redbud, and a hint of saltwater.

Closing my eyes, I face off with the sun, and I soak in this peaceful moment before getting back into the car and driving into town.

I try to remember the last time I've felt this at peace. The last time, it was *quiet*. I've gotten used to the consonant sounds in the city. Trains, car horns, people yelling. My own mind has become chaotic, never giving me a moment of silence. If it wasn't the city being loud, it was my own thoughts about work crashing around in my head. The next dish, the next review, the next event.

But I don't want to feel trapped or anxious. I've been extremely lucky to do what I love—creating dishes that draw people from all over the world at a prestigious restaurant called The Red Table. It's a dream come true, and I made it happen. On top of that, the restaurant owner has presented me with a lifetime opportunity, one I still haven't decided how to approach or told anyone about.

After two years of culinary school, I decided to stay for another two years to continue my education with some of the great culinary chefs. The *crème de la crème* of the pastry world. I couldn't pass up the chance when I was given the choice. Either graduate or continue with the best. So, I stayed.

Leaving Dove Point behind was the hardest decision I had to make. I went back home for a couple of weeks to talk to my parents about it because their opinion meant everything to me. I wanted to make them proud, and they were one hundred percent supportive of it all. Even my brother, August, and our friends.

But the one person who mattered the most would make or break the decision. Rowan. The boy I fell for at sixteen. The boy who finally asked me out when we were seventeen. The person that I planned on being my forever.

I still remember the conversation like it was yesterday. I try not to look back on that day. There was a moment I thought he was going to say, ‘*fuck it*’ and come with me. Start a new life together in New York. Instead, he nodded his head after I told him everything. He didn’t look me in the eye. ‘*I understand*’ was the only thing I got from him.

When I came back to New York, I fought with myself, wondering why I wasn’t the one who told him to come with me. I just thought he would be the one to make that decision, and I regret never building up my own courage to ask him. I always wonder if he would have said yes and what would have happened between us.

We’ve stayed friends. Close friends. We didn’t want to lose that part of our relationship. At first, it was hard, and we didn’t speak to each other for a year. Two years after living in the city, I went back home for the holidays, and there was Rowan.

He looked...different. Grown. A man and not a boy. He had scruff all along his cheeks and jaw. His shoulders were broader, and his arms were covered in tattoos. Riley threw a holiday party, and when I saw him across the room, it felt like the world stopped spinning, my breathing escaping me.

We both stood still, looking at each other. It took a lot of liquid courage to finally talk to him and to my surprise, our conversation was easy, like we never stopped talking. Picking up right where we left off.

I pass the welcoming sign reading, *Welcome to Dove Point Est. 1801. Population 10,000.*

Slowly entering the town, I look around at the familiar buildings that I grew up shopping or hanging out with friends when there was nothing else to do.

The brick sidewalks come together with the storefronts. White light poles are snuggled between trees going down the curb. The town is small, and everybody knows everybody, no matter how hard you try to keep your life private.

I pass all the connected shops: small square buildings, chalkboard signs displayed out front, doors propped open, inviting anyone in.

The coffee shop tables outside were filled with people enjoying the weather or working on their laptops. A group of people nod their heads to the beat of a guitar being played by a man.

I stop at Ashburn Road and see my favorite little ice cream shop with a sign across the top of the roof that says *Ollie’s*. It’s an A-line shack with a

yellow roof, white body, and painted ice cream covering the walls.

They have the best hot fudge sundaes. Homemade vanilla bean ice cream. Hot fudge zigzagged across it, a tower of whipped cream sprinkled with nuts, and a cherry on top.

When I was a little girl, I was excited to do my chores because, after I received my allowance, I would skip my way straight to Ollie's, rewarding myself. There's no indoor seating—just the workers behind the counter. Customers place their orders at the window, standing outside. I used to have to stretch up on my tiptoes just to peer over the ledge to place my order.

While I look at the line of people getting ice cream, I hear a woman call out my name. Before I pulled into town, I folded down the soft top of my car, turning it into a convertible. I was willing to risk people stopping me to talk, even though I've got no energy and no coffee.

Dove Point is *slightly* gossipy.

"Ellie! Oh my gosh, is that really you? I can't believe it's been so long! How have you been? Are you back in town for a visit?" Beatrice, Mrs. Anderson, exclaims.

She's a vibrant artist who owns Art Fusion, the local gallery. With her spiky gray hair, thick tortoiseshell glasses, and mango-colored overalls paired with Dr. Martens, she somehow pulls off a look that defies age. At sixty, she's as unapologetically herself as ever, embracing her passions with every step.

"Hi, Mrs. Anderson." I nod before saying, "Yep, I'm here for the summer. I just got in."

"Oh, how wonderful! I just saw your mom a couple of days ago, and she didn't mention anything."

And that's because I didn't tell her,

Or my dad. Or my brother August. No one knew I was coming home. I can only hope that word of my arrival doesn't reach my parents before I have a chance to tell them myself. I should have kept the damn car top on.

"Well, here I am." I smile at her and force out a laugh.

"I'm having an art show soon. Would you be around to make those amazing peanut butter chocolate squares? Of course, I would pay." She beams.

I open my mouth, waiting for words to tumble out, then close it. My plan was to *not* work and pick up any type of baking tool. But everyone

knows I can't say no. I'm also living off my savings, which is not much, so extra money wouldn't hurt.

"Sure, I'd love to. I can swing by in the next couple of days, and we can talk?"

Mrs. Anderson claps her hands once in delight before saying, "Wonderful! We'll talk soon! It is so good having you back here, Ellie. Tell your parents I said hi," she says cheerfully.

I smile and nod, waving goodbye as I start to drive away.

"Will do," I mutter to myself and then sigh.

As I drive through downtown, I spot the brewery in the distance. My heart starts to speed up for a multitude of reasons.

For one, I've only let Riley know that I was coming home. She texted and called me a million times after I told her, but I didn't pick up or respond because I wanted to wait until we were all together.

And second, Rowan. Our friendship has always been different, deeper, than with anyone else. We just get each other. He's my best friend...and, well, my ex. When we broke up, it wasn't messy—no hard feelings. We both knew it was for the best, and we wanted to salvage our friendship. Thankfully, we've done just that.

I love Charlie, and right now, I hate that I still do. But Rowan has always taken up a large part when it comes to my heart. He was my first teenage love. My first kiss. My first, well, *everything*.

Taking a deep breath, I turn into the lot connected to the brewery and turn off my car, needing to take a minute to myself before walking in there. I try to mentally prepare myself. Addie, Hailey, and Riley will freak out, but I don't want to deal with their sympathy and pity.

I just want this to go as smoothly as possible—tell them what happened and move on to a relaxing, stress-free summer. I should have just told Riley over the phone and had her tell everyone else. I really don't want to deal with this right now.

I'm tired and hungry, and I'm sure I'm getting my period because I am extremely moody. And it isn't helping that Charlie was still contributing to that moodiness. I want to cry because all I want is a cupcake. That's when I know my baby box is about to sabotage the hell out of me.

Pulling down the sun visor, I flip the cover to look into the mirror. I look at my eyes that have a purple hue due to lack of sleep. Reaching for

my bag in the passenger seat, I dig through it, wondering if I left concealer in there. No luck.

“Dammit,” I murmur to myself.

Staring back in the mirror, my fingers trace the bags under my eyes. They’ve never been this bad before, and now my very close friends will get to see a side of me that they’ve never seen before.

I let out a breath, trying to hype myself up. “Just walk in there with your head held up high and tell them, ‘*Hey guys, I don’t think I can handle my life anymore. Charlie cheated on me because I paid too much attention to work and not him. It’s all good.*’”

I fill my lungs with a deep breath and hold it until they feel like they’re burning. The air leaves my lungs as I blow through pursed lips. My eyes close as I take in one more deep breath before getting out of the car.

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ELLIE



EVERY TIME I step into the brewery, I get a warm fuzzy feeling. Rowan and James made sure to make the environment welcoming for anyone who comes in. It was a shock when I saw the final set, and James ended up taking all the credit when I know most of it was Rowan's idea.

The man has good taste.

I grab the brassy gold handle connected to the large wooden doors. I stand there for a second to take *another* deep breath.

Inside, high wooden beams stretch along the ceiling, making the space feel larger than it already is. Bright light pours in from the large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook everything inside. The family-style wooden tables soaking in the rays the sun has to offer today.

The rich brown wooden floors and brick walls give the place a comfortable rustic feel. Amber-colored furniture is placed throughout the brewery, with some of it tucked in corners for more intimate gatherings. Wooden stairs lead up to the second floor, where there are more camel-leather furniture and wooden tables and chairs. String lights hang from the ceiling and cast a warm glow at night. Tall narrow windows line up across the back wall, displaying a wide view of the ocean.

Rowan's pride and joy are all the vast brewing equipment that sits behind a glass display where he can highlight how to make the beer and how the machines work. I've asked him at least ten times to explain again how it all worked, and of course, he didn't mind. He was always happy to re-explain it to me.

The sun cascades through the brewery during the day, but at night, that's when it really comes to life. The ambient lighting throughout the space

creates a relaxing atmosphere. The beer garden out back displays string lights that hang along the long wooden fence and wrap around tree trunks.

Addie came up with the genius idea to build a small stage outside for bands to play. The guys weren't sure, considering how small the town is and there aren't many bands around, but once Addie took over the marketing team, she created so much social media that bands would come to town to play.

"Ellie!" Riley gets up from a bar stool and runs to me with open arms.

My arms wrap around her waist, my face in her boobs. Riley towers about six inches over me. She tugs me into her lean body. She works at a yoga studio, so her body's always in peak shape. I made the mistake of attending one of her classes, not realizing it was hot yoga. About halfway through, the heat got to me, and I fainted.

I never did it again.

"Ry, I can't breathe."

"Sorry! I've just missed you so much!" Riley's words tumble together quickly. "I know I only saw you a few months ago and video-chatted a couple of days ago, but still! It's so nice to have my bestie back for an entire summer." She pulls away, her hands still on my shoulders, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Okay, okay, stop hogging her, it's my turn!" Addie shouts. "I'm so happy you're here."

She jumps on me, wrapping her arms around my neck, and I almost fall over. When we pull away, I spot James watching us. His golden tan skin contrasts with his dark hair, and his silver-gray eyes seem to catch the light. James walks toward me, a shy, lopsided smile in place.

"Look who it is." James says.

"Wow, growing some facial hair Jameson? Looks nice," I reply.

We give each other a friendly, quick hug. I've always looked at James, and his brother, Beau, like family to me. And he treats me like a sister.

I look around before asking, "No Hailey or Beau?"

"Hailey has a full day of tattoo appointments," Riley says.

"I have no idea where my brother is," James says lazily.

"Probably getting a tattoo by my sister," Riley replies.

I laugh, and then my eyes land on the one person my heart thrums for.

Rowan.

He stands off to the side, arms crossed, that signature pose of his making him look almost impossibly serious. But when his eyes meet mine, everything changes. Those eyes—like the ocean, deep and quiet—hold a kind of calm power. The blues and grays shift, catching the sunlight in a way that makes my chest tighten.

He could melt glaciers with those eyes.

My heart starts pounding, the rush of blood moving through my veins, pushing straight to the tips of my fingers. And when he smiles—God, those dimples. The same ones I haven’t kissed in what feels like forever.

They make you want to grab his cheeks and tell him how cute he is. The tattoos that play along his muscular arms, causing my eyes trail along the black ink of American traditional tattoos. Out of all of them, there’s one that catches my eye. The only one in color. The small ladybug on the inside of his wrist that I picked out when he wanted to get his first tattoo after graduation.

“Ellie Thompson,” Rowan says in his deep voice.

It’s the kind of voice that makes your toes curl, the hair on your arms rise, and you desperately want to hear him whisper your name in your ear as he holds you.

“Rowan Williams.” I suppress a smile, trying to stay serious in a playful way.

Before I move toward him, he’s already making his way past our friends. I open my arms excitedly, smiling so hard that my cheeks start to hurt. I love a good hug, but Rowan’s hugs are out of this world. The warmth of his body against mine does things to me. Unspeakable things.

When he wraps his arms around my waist, I tug him down with mine wrapped around his neck. The familiar embrace makes my heart go into hyper-speed. I suddenly feel the tension in my shoulders melt away.

I want to stay here, stay in this moment. Feeling safe and tucked away, as though no one can hurt me, no one can get to me, because I know Rowan wouldn’t let anything happen to me if he could help it.

I breathe him in and feel my heart slowing down to a healthy rhythm. His scent is cool and refreshing. A fresh breeze of coastal air and blue cypress.

“I’ve missed you so much, El,” Rowan whispers in my ear.

And just like that, the hair on my arms rises. “I’ve missed you too.”

I can feel my lips barely brush the skin on his neck when I say those words. Four words that mean more than he could understand.

“Should we, uh, leave you two alone?” James chimes in.

We’ve been hugging longer than I realized. I gently pull away in no rush to separate. I can tell he’s trying to hold on a little longer, too. I can feel his large, strong hands unwrapping themselves on the lower side of my back. My hands brush the skin of his neck.

A shiver goes down my spine, but it’s not like I’m touch deprived. The last time Charlie and I were intimate was—oh shit.

When was the last time?

I need to tilt my head up all the way just to meet his gaze, but I don’t mind, I’d be okay with having neck pain for the rest of my life if it meant I got to look at those beautiful, ovary-scream-inducing eyes.

“Okay, I don’t know about you guys, but I am very eager to hear this news of yours, Ellie.” Addie pushes her brother out of the way.

My body tightens, and a familiar knot forms in my stomach. I need another hug. *Rowan, read my mind, give me another hug.*

Riley and Addie loop their arms into mine on each side, guiding me outside to the garden. I can hear the guy’s shuffle behind me and look at Rowan with pleading eyes to save me. He just smirks at me.

Bastard.

“What is going on? I’m dying here,” Riley urges, pulling my attention to her.

“Once we sit down, I’ll spill everything,” I respond.

“Oh my god, there’s spilling. This is going to be good,” Addie says, stretching out the last word. “Unless it’s something bad, then it won’t be good.”

“Patience, children. Patience.” I pat their arms.

When we reach the fire-pit on the right side of the garden, everyone takes a seat on one of the Adirondack chairs. I look at Rowan and notice him watching me, waiting to see where I’m going to sit. I give him a knowing look, and he rolls his eyes while he walks to sit in the chair next to me, his hands flexing and slightly shaking.

“Okay, tell us. I don’t think I can wait any longer,” Ry says.

“Stop pestering her, damn. Let her speak when she wants to.” James glares at Riley.

She gives him dagger eyes, and he just rolls his right back at her.

I start spinning the ring on my finger, the smooth motion grounding me. It's one of those fidget rings—perfect for when you can't sit still, always needing to move. I turn it over and over when anxiety creeps in. The rose gold has dulled over time, worn down from the countless times my fingers have twisted it, seeking comfort.

Addie looks at me with her storm-blue-doe eyes, while Riley leans herself forward in her chair. I'm sure she's about to fall out of it and face plant onto the ground. I look around at everyone, my close friends, my ex-boyfriend. Maybe I should have only pulled the girls aside. Too late now.

I clear my throat, sit up straight, and spill it all. "Okay, so I wasn't planning on visiting any time soon, but something happened." I avert my eyes to the ground and roll my lips in before I continue, "I was having a hard time at work, something I don't want to get into right now, but the main reason I came home was because of Charlie."

I peer over to Rowan, where concern is written all over his face. His perfectly shaped brows are furrowed, and I can see his jaw muscle tick while he keeps his eyes on the ground. He's the only man I know that can look that handsome while pissed off about something.

"What happened?" Addie asks softly.

I twist my lips to the side before saying, "I haven't been happy for a while. With my job, the city, Charlie. I felt—feel—burnt out." I look down to my lap and play with my fingers. "Charlie said because of the stress I was dealing with at work, it affected him, and that he felt alone. So alone that he took it upon himself to talk to someone about it."

"Like a therapist?" James asks.

I give a tight smile at the irony. "If you want to call a random woman you meet to talk to and then fuck a therapist, then sure, why not."

There's a pause as everyone falls completely silent, and I glance around at their faces. Addie's eyes widen, almost comically so. James is deliberately avoiding my gaze, his brows raised in some mix of confusion and disbelief. Riley looks ready to body-slam Charlie. As for Rowan—he looks like someone just told him his beer tastes like shit.

"Get the fuck out," Riley exclaims.

I scrunch my nose and attempt to pull my legs up on the chair, wrapping my hands around my knees. Although I'm smiling like I'm not at all affected, internally I'm screaming and punching the air.

"That shriveled-up shrimp *cheated* on you?" Ry shouts.

“Riley, if you keep shouting, you’re going to lose your voice.” I tilt my head. “Charlie would have rather me stay in the city with him, which just blows my mind. I told him it would be smart if we were separated—broken up—for the summer so we can both figure things out.”

“So, this isn’t a break? This is a full-blown break up for sure?” Addie asks.

“We are fully broken up. But by the end of the summer, I will know for certain if it will stay that way.” I lean back, letting my body rest and go slack again.

“Wait, you’re thinking about going back to him?” Riley asks in shock, her eyebrows flying up to her hairline.

I lean my head back and look up toward the clear blue sky. A bird flies by, and I pray it doesn’t shit on my face. That would tip me over the edge of no return.

“Honestly? I don’t know. We’ve been together for five years. We’ve talked about marriage and kids.” I pause, looking at Rowan, and I see a muscle tick in his jaw. I look back toward the group. “It’s not that simple.”

“It is! It’s a very simple solution. You say, ‘*fuck you*’, give him the finger, and break up,” Riley states.

“Can I do anything? Can we do anything?” Addie asks.

I shake my head, letting out a heavy sigh. “No, it’s fine. I just want to go home. I’m so exhausted, and all I want to do right now is sleep.” I try putting on a brave smile, but I feel so weak, mentally and physically. “I’ve gone almost four days without sleeping thanks to work, and this whole mess, and I can’t tell if this is all real or a hallucination.” I let out a laugh because I feel like I need to lighten up the mood with my horrible humor. It’s not working. “Is Milo here? I could use some of his energy and positivity,” I ask Rowan.

He turns his attention to me, giving me a small smile. “Oh, yeah. He’s sleeping in the office. Come on.”

Rowan stands up from his chair, and I follow. I pass by Riley, James, and Addie, all giving me sympathetic looks. I know damn well they’re going to talk once I’m far enough out of reach to hear them.

If anyone is going to continue to talk about what I just went through, I’d rather it be my close friends who know me versus the people in this town who *think* they know me.

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ROWAN



I LOOK OVER AT ELLIE, who looks adorably tired. When we went into the office, Milo woke up and whimpered when he saw her.

He missed her just as much as I did.

It's one of my favorite sights—seeing her with Milo. She's the only one who knows those secret scratching spots that make him groan and collapse in pure bliss. It probably feels like ages since he's seen her, even though she was home over the holidays.

I asked her if she was okay, truly okay, and not just saving face in front of our friends. Ellie is tough. She knows how to handle herself and doesn't need any of us to keep her up on her feet. But I know this broke her heart.

Charlie. That piece of shit. I never thought he was good enough for her—I never ever thought *any* guy was good enough for her after we ended things. I can only hope to run into him so I can knock him on his ass. And I'm not a fighter. I've never allowed myself to get to that level of anger. But Charlie has a punchable face so maybe it's time I break my knuckles in.

Five minutes into our conversation, she was falling asleep on the couch. I didn't feel comfortable having her drive when she was this tired. Falling asleep in my office meant she shouldn't be driving her car.

I scooped her up from the couch and brought her to my Jeep, thinking about getting her car tomorrow instead. Her body was limp, and I could feel exhaustion radiating off her. Due to her lifestyle and always being on the go, I can't help but wonder when the last time she took time for herself. Relax and not worry about work. If what she's telling us is true, working long hours, not giving herself a break, then I'm happy she's home.

I pull up to her parent's house and park the car.

“Thanks for bringing me home. I didn’t think I’d fall asleep that quickly on the couch,” Ellie’s voice comes out groggy.

“No problem. You know I’m always here to help in any way I can,” I say, giving her a crooked smile.

She leans her head back on the headrest and turns to look at me. Her sleepy blue eyes look bright and clear. The color always shone the brightest when she’d wake up. And I was always eager to see them.

Ellie would almost always nap after coming home from school. We’d leave once the day was done, go back to her place, watch some television, and do homework, only for her to fall asleep thirty minutes after we got there. By the time our favorite show would come on, I would gently wake her up by rubbing her back and whispering her name. She’d huff out a breath through her nose in annoyance. But was always stunning no matter what her mood was.

Sometimes I would pepper her with kisses on her cheeks and head. A slow smile would spread across her face while she pretended to still be sleeping.

She reaches out to put her hand to mine and places it on top. Her soft skin rubs on my rough skin. I resist the urge to wrap her hand in mine, pressing my lips to each knuckle, savoring the feel of her skin on my lips.

“Do you want me to go in with you? Help you break the news to your parents? Is August here?” I ask.

She shakes her head lazily. “I have no idea if he’s here or if my parents are even home.”

She lets out a sigh and looks toward the beautiful Cape-Cod-style home. The long porch showcases the white wicker furniture and powder-blue cushions. The light blue and purple hydrangeas overflow on the sides of the staircase that leads up to the front door.

“Shit,” she mutters under her breath and turns back to me. “I’m just so exhausted, Ro. I don’t know if I can deal with that right now. Maybe if I should just slip by and sneak into the guest house in the back.”

She tries to keep her eyes open, but they look heavy. I avert my gaze to the road in front of me. All the houses lined up, the trees cascading around us.

I bite the bottom of my lip, debating if I should take her back to my place so she can sleep in peace and feel recharged.

I turn my focus back to Ellie, once again falling asleep. The clock on my dashboard says it's five in the evening, and I need to get back to the brewery sooner rather than later before it gets too busy. People were already starting to trickle in when I was carrying Ellie.

I'm sure that will be spoken about throughout the night. Ellie and Rowan, together again.

"El," I say as softly as I can.

"Hm," she mumbles.

"Do you want me to take you back to my place? You can sleep there for the night, get your energy back to deal with your family tomorrow?"

She breathes out through her nose in an approving yes and tries to nod her head. I can't help it when my hand reaches over to brush a strand of her hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. The simple gesture is so familiar and nostalgic.

Deep down, I want to thank Charlie for pushing away the most incredible woman straight into my arms again. He doesn't know what he just lost like I do.

And I'm going to make sure I don't lose her all over again.

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ELLIE



I WAKE up in a dark room and adjust to my surroundings.

A lot has happened in such a short amount of time, and I'm not sure where I am until I feel something warm against me. I look to see Milo tucked into me. The bed I'm on is huge, probably a king-size bed, yet this dog needs to be all up in my business.

Good thing I love him.

I rub the side of his stomach while he continues to sleep, and I lean up on an arm, rubbing my free hand over my face. I spot my phone on the nightstand next to me, plugged into a charger. I don't remember doing that. I pick it up, bracing myself for the bright light from the screen, only to find that the brightness has been dimmed all the way down.

Interesting.

Two in the morning? I don't know what time I fell asleep or how long I've been sleeping. I lift myself up more and look around the room.

Rowan's room.

The wheels in my head start to turn. I met everyone at the brewery, spent time with Milo, and fell asleep on the couch. The next thing I remember was being in front of my parent's house in his car.

I was running on empty—wanting to cry from exhaustion—and I'm sure I told him to take me back to his house.

I look around and spot Rowan lying on an inflatable mattress. His bare back facing toward me, the muscles in his shoulder blades move with each breath he takes. I let my eyes trace the long tattoo that goes down his spine. A sword with a snake wrapped around it all in black. Both of his hands are tucked under the pillow, the blanket only up to his waist.

The crickets outside are chirping, but everything else is silent—except for the little snores Milo lets out every other minute. When my eyes adjust to the darkness that surrounds me, I spot Rowan's dresser on the far wall across from the bed.

A few music posters hang in frames around his room. One poster displaying Vampire Weekend, the same poster he bought when we went to see them in concert. It hangs above his desk, where two large desktop screens sit. A complete setup.

I look down and see the clothes I've been wearing all day. No wonder I'm uncomfortable. This damn bra is digging into my ribcage. I need to change.

My eyes go back to Rowan, and I notice how close the air mattress is. Only inches away from the bed, placing himself in front of the door. He doesn't move or make a sound; he looks peaceful.

I crawl over the bed, not wanting to disturb Rowan. I don't know what I'm going to wear. I think my suitcase is still in my car. Shit. I'm going to have to borrow his clothes.

I don't know where he keeps anything. Ugh. Cool. This is very cool.

Getting to the edge of the bed, I spot something on top of his dresser. Narrowing my gaze through the darkness while I carefully try not to make a sound, I see a pile of neatly stacked clothes with a piece of paper that looks like it was ripped out of a notebook.

El, I picked out some clothes for you to change into if you get uncomfortable. You went to sleep right away, and I didn't want to bug you.

I stop reading the note and look at the clothes. A large shirt that looks extremely cozy, and he gave me a choice of basketball shorts or sweats. I continue to read the note.

I gave you shorts and sweatpants, I wasn't sure which one you would want. They both have drawstrings on them to tighten on your waist, but in case the sweats are too long for your short legs, I figured shorts would be the better choice.

Short legs? Rude.

I look back at Rowan as he sleeps and stick my tongue out at him. Just for that, I'm going to wear the sweatpants. I read the note again.

The sweatpants will probably be too long for you, and you might trip over them, so choose wisely. Sleep tight. I'll see you in the morning.

What great hospitality. He's always one step ahead of me, like he knows I'm going to wake up from being uncomfortable in my restrictive clothes. Women who wear bras to bed? Godspeed.

I grab the clothes, walk into the master bathroom, and quickly change. Much more comfortable.

Okay, so...maybe he was right, and I can't see my feet. But I still stand by my choice. The fabric is warm and a bit fuzzy on the inside. The material is nice and breathable, a bit thin.

My legs and feet swim in his sweatpants. The fabric drags on the smooth wooden floors while I creep back into bed. One foot at a time, I'm almost there. Almost—*thud*.

Rowan shoots up in panic and looks at the bed. "What happened? Ellie? Are you okay? Milo, where's Ellie?"

Milo lifts his head and spots me, and Rowan turns to where he's looking. I'm on my back; my head turns in Rowan's direction. I lift a hand in a lazy finger wave.

"Hello," I say quietly in embarrassment and let my hand fall.

Rowan covers his head in his hands and rubs his palms up and down his face before looking back up at me and squinting.

"Are you okay? Why are you on the floor?" He pinches his eyebrows together and looks at my legs.

My eyes go back up to the ceiling while I let him figure that out on his own. A chuckle comes out of him; all I can do is close my eyes and accept my fate.

"I told you."

Ignoring the comment, I get up and walk over to his bed. My knees press into the soft mattress as I crawl back into bed. Rowan continues his laughter at my pain.

It's not until I'm situated back in my spot that I see his bare chest. Oh. Well. That's nice.

Rowan notices where I'm looking and covers his nipples with his hands.

"Hey, this isn't a free show, Thompson. Don't ogle me."

My eyes go up to his, and I raise my hands in defense. "I'm sorry if I made you feel comfortable. Can't blame a girl for looking."

Rowan smiles at me and shakes his head. I tuck myself in under the covers and lay down to face him. He does the same.

"Thanks for bringing me here. I appreciate it," I tell him quietly.

“I figured you’d need a clear headspace before seeing your family.”

I rub my face out of pure exhaustion before holding my hand toward him, hoping he will take it. He doesn’t hesitate as I feel his thumb making circles along the top of my hand.

The sensation lulls me back to sleep while he continues.

I don’t remember dreaming before I woke up. But I have a feeling I will now.

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ELLIE



SOMETHING WET RUBS against my neck and jaw, pulling me out of my dream. A warm breath blows into my ear, causing me to lift my shoulder to block it.

The wet feeling is trailing across my cheek and to my nose. I groan out of frustration before something rough and calloused bops me on the head.

What the hell?

Finally deciding to open my eyes, I see big chocolate brown ones staring right back at me.

“Milo,” I whine. “Is this how you wake up your dad?”

He looks at me with his tongue hanging out to the side, giving me one quick lick on my cheek, and runs out of the room. I rub my eyes, willing myself to get up and stretch.

The sound of clinking pots and pans echo from downstairs. My nose is hit with the smell of wood-smoked bacon. I'm almost positive my body levitates like a cartoon character, my nose following the scent to the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

Rowan is at the stove, his back facing me, but he has a shirt on. That's no fun. I want to see his smooth skin, his muscled back, his —

Wait, get your head out of your ass Ellie. You just got home, and you're already drooling over your best friend. Your best friend you dated in high school. And have seen shirtless. But his muscles, oh his muscles.

The sun streams in through the window above the white ceramic farmhouse sink. The light wooden counter spreads across on either side of the sink. Above the sink on the windowsill sits small pots of soil and green

leaves sprouting above. All edible plants: mint, basil, parsley, cilantro, and rosemary.

A skylight window shines more natural light down into the kitchen.

Rowan grabs a copper cast iron pan that hangs on a hook above the stove. The other pans line up on hooks that hang from beneath the cabinets on either side of the stove.

The sound of crackling bacon echoes in the kitchen while Milo's nails tap on the hardwood floor, disappearing as he lays down on a rug below the sink.

I tug at a chair to sit down, resting my elbow on the table, and plop my cheek into my palm. Rowan opens one of the glass cabinets and pulls out a deep blue and purple mug that's sprinkled with stars all over it. Mimicking the night sky.

It's embarrassing to think about how much tea I drink when visiting Rowan. He has an entire drawer that is meticulously organized with any tea you can think of. I always felt bad for constantly using his mugs and dirtying them, telling him I'd buy my own to keep here.

When I came back for another visit, he was already brewing water in the teapot, and I spotted a mug on the counter. He poured me a cup of tea in the starry mug, and told me it was mine, that no one else can use it. The deep swirls of blues and purples had golden flecks of stars. He looked at me with softness in his eyes and said, *it reminds me of the nights we would go on the roof of your parents' house and watch the night sky.*

I cried later that night on the plane going back to the city. Because Rowan was right. The night sky and its twinkling stars are my favorite. You can't see one single star in the bright lights of New York the way you can see them in Dove Point.

Rowan sets my mug filled with chamomile tea down in front of me. He smiles and turns back to the stove to finish cooking. I pick it up, the warmth going around my hands, and take a deep smell. He added honey—my favorite—for sweetness.

"I don't deserve you as a friend," I drawl.

Rowan's shoulders bounce lightly, letting out a laugh while he continues to cook.

"And why is that?" he asks without looking at me.

"Well, for one, you let me crash in your bed. I didn't realize how exhausted I was until I fell asleep in your office."

He flips over a pancake, the sizzling sound hitting the pan gently and then subsides.

“And two, you served me tea just the way I like it without having to ask. *And in my mug.*”

Rowan stops and turns to me. “Ellie, it’s tea with honey. I would be shocked if someone couldn’t remember that.” He turns back to the stove.

“You would be surprised,” I say into my mug as I take my first sip. The steam from the mug hovers over my nose, and the warmth of it coats my throat nicely.

“If they don’t know your favorite type of tea, then they aren’t worth calling a friend.”

I grimace. “So, it doesn’t make it any better that it was Charlie who didn’t know?”

Rowan turns back to me, a stony look on his face. “You’re joking?”

“I wish I were,” I say as I take another sip.

He stares at me for a beat before saying, “I’m going to keep my mouth shut.” He points the spatula in my direction and turns back to the stove.

He moves around the kitchen, grabbing his mug and setting it down on the counter. The coffee pours into the pot as a beeping sound goes off, letting us know it’s done brewing. A plate of stacked pancakes and a bowl of fresh fruit is placed in front of me, and then he swiftly grabs the coffee pot, pouring the dark liquid into the mug while steam rises from it.

My eyes track every movement he makes. The way his biceps flex when he picks things up and sets them down. A single wet strand of wavy hair falls next to his temple. The tip of his tongue slightly sticks out with pure concentration.

Rowan nods at me to start piling food on my plate, and I don’t hesitate. Every meal we have together, he ensures my plate is filled before his.

When I’ve picked the pancakes along with the bacon, he starts to build his plate, taking five pancakes and five pieces of bacon.

“Are you ready to go to your parents’ place today?” he asks as he pours syrup onto the fluffy stack.

I chuckle with a mouth full of food before saying, “No.”

“How do you think they’ll react?”

“August will be happy. I’m his favorite besides you, James, and Beau. Dad will be shocked and surprised at first, but that will fade away into excitement. Mom will be happy but upset I didn’t tell her.”

“I can already imagine what she’s going to say.” Rowan laughs.

I mimic my mom's voice, “*Ellie Alexandra, why didn’t you tell me you were coming home? I didn’t have time to set up the guest house. I need to go buy more food to feed you. I can’t believe this.*”

Rowan tilts his head back and laughs. “That sounded a little too close to your mother.”

“I know, it’s scary.” I dip my bacon in some maple syrup before I take a bite.

“You want me to go with you?”

“Don’t you need to go to the brewery today?”

I grab a blueberry and examine it before popping it into my mouth. The ripeness of it bursts with sweet and sour, causing my lips to twist. Rowan’s eyes land on my lips and then go to my eyes. The heat in my cheek’s blooms.

Rowan clears his throat. “James will be there, and last time I checked, I’m the owner and can do what I want. If I want to show up late, I’ll show up late.”

“Well, my mom *is* always nicer when you’re around. I can tell her the worst news, and she’ll keep her tone in check because she doesn’t want to scare you off. She loves you.”

Rowan gives me a cheeky smile. “I’m a lovable person.”

“Oh, yeah, super lovable,” I say sarcastically and throw a blueberry at him.

He catches it in his mouth—which wasn’t supposed to happen—and smiles at me.

I point to him and say, “Don’t get cocky.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me while tossing a blueberry up and catches it in his mouth effortlessly.

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ROWAN



ELLIE SINGS to Celine Dion as it blares through the speakers—I feel the vibration near my leg. She attempts to hit the high notes, and I applaud her for her effort, no matter how terrible. She always did this when she was about to do something that made her nervous, and I am very okay with watching this performance. It always puts me in a better mood. It's great entertainment. My own private concert.

After breakfast, we went to pick up her car at the brewery, and she offered to drive. My head is literally touching the car ceiling. I put the seat back as far as it would go, and my knees *still* hit the glove compartment. Of course, I'm not going to complain and say anything because this is her car, and it works for her. Being tiny and all.

She's been back home for one day, and it's like a breath of fresh air. When I'm with her, I worry less about work, my anxiety, Mom, Addie. She takes all those stresses in my life and tucks them away into a jar she hides from me.

As we pull up in the driveway of her parent's house, she shuts off the engine and slumps into her car seat. I reach for the door handle to get out, but Ellie doesn't move.

"You ready?" I ask.

Ellie glances at me, and the corner of her lip tugs upward slightly. Her eyes look clear, but there's still so much pain behind them that all I want to do is take it away and tuck it into the same jar with all my problems. Her eyes break away from mine, and she looks down at her ring. The sound of the metal circling over and over can put someone in a trance. Her teeth pull

at her bottom lip, and I can see the wheels turning in her head. The space around us fills with her anxiety, trying to suffocate her.

I grab her hand to pull her attention away from her own thoughts. “It’s going to be fine,” I say quietly, letting a small smile escape me. “I’m going to be right next to you the entire time. I know your mom can be... a little over the top—”

“A *little* over the top? Remember sophomore year during homecoming? She decked out the house in balloons and flowers when I told her I was having everyone meet at our house for photos. She spent a week making sure that the colors of the balloons matched the theme of homecoming. She called the principal for the colors, Rowan.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“We were only there for ten minutes,” she exclaims and lets out a laugh.

“It’ll be fine,” I reassure her before opening my door and getting out of the car.

My muscles are screaming as my body stretches from being cramped in the car. The time it takes to drive from the brewery to her house is less than ten minutes, but my neck feels like it took an hour to get there as I stretch it from side to side.

Opening the back door, I grab Ellie’s suitcase and shut the car door. Ellie, “*Ms. Do It All Herself*,” tries grabbing it from me. I pull the suitcase away from her and put it behind my back, carrying it from the strap instead of using the wheels on the ground.

“I got it,” I say sternly.

Ellie puts her hands up and backs away. “Whatever you say, muscle man.”

“Muscle man?” I arch a brow.

“You’re carrying that thing like it’s one pound.” She points to it.

“It’s really not that heavy at all.” I show off and lift it above my head like it’s nothing. My workout consists of lifting bags of barley that are almost two hundred pounds.

“Considering you carry around bags of grain every day at the brewery, I’m not surprised. You’ve gained some muscles. Have you ever thought about modeling near your brewing machines? That would be a great advertisement for you.” She crosses her arms, eyeing me from top to bottom

“Look, if you want me to toss you over my shoulders, just say the word, El.” I give her a wink, and her jaw drops.

She looks around, making sure we’re alone, before looking at me, “Rowan Williams, don’t you dare even attempt to toss me over your shoulder.”

The corner of my mouth tugs up, tilting my head to the side while I eye her up and down. “Alright, stop stalling and let’s go.” I jerk my head toward the front of the house.

“I’m not stalling. I just complimented you on your physique. Take the compliment.”

“I’ll take the compliment when you step through the front door.” I place my hand on top of her head, leading her toward the front steps.

The pinks, purples, and blues of hydrangeas come into view, bursting from the front porch. The scent of honey surrounds us when we walk up the stairs. Ellie stops in front of the door, and her finger hovers over the doorbell. She hesitates before pushing the button and we hear the loud chime from inside the house echoing.

My brows pinch together in questioning. “Why are you ringing the doorbell?”

“I don’t know!” she exclaims, “I panicked. I should have just walked inside. I know they leave this door unlocked, even though they shouldn’t.”

“This isn’t New York, Ellie.”

She glares at me and says, “You would lock your doors too if you’ve seen what I’ve seen. Now zip it.” She turns back toward the white door.

The large lavender wreath bounces on the door when it swings open, and we’re greeted by August. His smokey blue eyes go comically wide, and his lips pull into a grin of excitement. He’s coated in sweat and looks like he just came from a run.

“Holy shit!” August yells out.

August pushes the screen door open and grabs Ellie into his arms, enveloping her tightly. He pulls her off the ground, squeezing her. If you were to meet them for the first time, you’d think August is the big brother when he stands next to Ellie.

“Oof, you just cracked my back,” Ellie grunts as he sets her down. “Thanks.” She smiles up at him.

“What the hell are you doing here?” August asks excitedly while pushing his round glasses back up his nose.

“I’m... uh, well, I guess I’m home for the summer?” Her words trail off as a question, and the corners of her mouth tug up slightly in an awkward smile. “Surprise,” she says, raising her hands to her sides.

August’s dark eyebrow arches, and a wicked smirk pulls at his lips. He places his hands on his hips. “Did you warn mom?”

Ellie sucks some air through her teeth, the awkward smile still playing along her lips.

August’s shoulders bounce as he laughs. “Oh, this will be fun.”

He looks past Ellie and sees me with a suitcase. “Rowan.” August nods, still smiling at me. “I’m assuming you’re here to soften the blow?”

I shrug. “You know how much your mom loves me.”

Ellie turns to look at me with a deadpan expression.

I laugh, throwing my free hand out in questioning. “What?”

She turns and looks at August. Her brother looks at us, smiling, and turns around to walk back into the house.

“Ooh, Mom! Dad! I have a surprise for you!” August shouts gleefully.

Ellie looks over her shoulder to me again, her head falling back. I place a hand on her lower back, gently guiding her in as she groans.

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ROWAN



“SURPRISE,” she says with a shrug, stretching the word out nervously. She shifts from foot to foot, waiting for their reaction.

I stay close behind her and lower the suitcase to the oak floor. Ellie’s parents sit at the white marble kitchen island, drinking their coffee.

Ellie’s mom, Helen, goes from calm to pure shock and surprise. She sets her mug down with a soft click against the counter and rises from her chair. Her light brown hair that falls just past her shoulders sways when she moves toward us. Her smooth, glowing skin makes her look younger than she is.

“Honey, what are you doing here?” she asks as her brow furrows. “Is everything alright?” Ellie’s mom grabs her arms and scans her eyes up and down.

A small tug pulls at her corner lip. “I’m fine, mom.”

“What brings you all the way home? Did you fly here?” her dad asks.

If her parents knew she was coming home and found out she planned on driving from New York to the West Coast, they would have bought a plane ticket.

“No, I drove here.” She tilts her chin up.

“*You drove?*” Ellie’s mom shouts.

“Sweetie,” Ellie’s dad says, “let me hug our daughter first, and then you can interrogate her.”

Jake smiles down at his daughter and brings her into a bear hug. His body towers over her, and Ellie smiles brightly. His arms tug her into his strong and sturdy build.

“Hello, my sweet girl. I’m so happy to see you,” her dad says softly before giving her a kiss on the top of her head.

Growing up, watching the bond Ellie and August shared with their dad always tore at my heart. Jake was the kind of father who would do anything for his kids—a kind of love I would’ve given anything to have with my own father.

The last memory I have of my dad is him kneeling in front of me, telling me that he and Mom were splitting up and that maybe he’d see me around—maybe.

I remember running after him, begging him to take me with him, but he didn’t look back. He just kept walking, and when he got into his car, I yelled and cried, hoping he’d change his mind. I sat on the front porch, sobbing, convinced he’d come back for me.

He never did.

I’m pulled back to the present when Ellie says, “Hi, Dad.”

Jake pulls away, and her mom cuts in, “So, is this just a surprise visit?” Helen pulls Ellie in for a hug and rocks her back and forth. She pulls away, looks down at the suitcase, and then looks at me. “Hello, Rowan.” She smiles and opens her arms to greet me with a hug. “How are you?” She pats my back softly.

One thing I really like about Helen and Jake is that they are always very welcoming. They’ve known my mom and Aunt Rosey since they were teenagers themselves since we all grew up in Dove Point.

And, unfortunately in Dove Point, everyone knows my story. Something I was never able to keep to myself for protection. After word spread, Mom didn’t let it get to her. She held her head high, putting on a strong front, while I would hear her softly cry in her room at night.

Helen and Jake were there for her the next day. They came by with dishes of food, making sure that me and Addie were taken care of while my mom grieved her failed marriage.

“Do you want to sit down?” Jake asks.

Her dad somehow always knew when Ellie went through something. She walks next to her dad into the living room, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, comforting her, while her mom follows behind them.

“So, what brings you all the way home?” Helen asks.

She sits on the powder white sofa chair, crossing her legs as she pulls down her maxi dress to cover her feet and then rests her hands on her lap.

I glance at Ellie, sitting beside her dad on the other end of the sectional. I watch her throat bob as she swallows, her shoulders tense. She meets my gaze, and I give her a small, reassuring nod as we communicate in that same unspoken way we always have been able to.

You can do this, Ellie.

“Before I tell you, I need you to promise me that you will listen and not interrupt me. Not until I’m finished talking.” She raises her brows.

Her dad and August agree and give her a hesitant, worried smile. Then we all turn to look at her mom.

“Okay, okay.” Helen holds up her hands, “I won’t say a word until you’re done talking, sweetie.” She motions, zipping her mouth shut.

Ellie sits up straight and clears her throat. She tells them everything she told the group at the brewery. She again holds herself together through the entire story, just like at the brewery. She mentions the stress at work and feeling run down. There was a moment where she paused before she finally told them about Charlie. When she’s finished, she looks at me and I give her a reassuring smile.

“Are you okay?” August asks first.

August wasn’t the type to react quickly. During any situation, whether good or bad, he listened, asked questions, and ensured that the person was okay. In contrast, I had to control everything in me not to get up and drive my ass across the country and beat the shit out of Charlie. Keeping my facial expression in check when I’m angry is hard when someone I love is hurt.

“I think so. It all kind of happened so fast, I don’t think I’ve processed anything yet. I just...left.” Ellie’s eyes turn glossy.

“Are you two broken up then?” Helen asks.

Ellie nods quickly before looking down at her lap.

Jake places his hand on her shoulder and says, “You did the right thing. I’m glad you decided to come home, even if it’s just for a little while. Is there anything you need from us?”

“Well, now that you’ve mention it. I kind of need somewhere to stay. I was hoping I could crash in the guest house,” Ellie says wearily.

“Of course,” her dad replies.

He pushes a hand through his salt and pepper hair and then folds his arms across his chest. It looks like he has a lot more he would like to say but thinks better of it.

“And what about work? What’s going on with that then?” Helen asks.

“I don’t know, Mom. It’s only been a couple of days since it all happened. I just want to get settled and just spend time with everyone.”

Jake stands from the couch, and Helen follows his lead. “We’ll get everything set up for your stay. I’ll grab your favorite knitted blanket in the upstairs closet and make sure you have that.”

“I’ll go grab some things for you from the store,” Helen chimes in. “Give me a list of things you will need.”

“Mom, you don’t need to get me anything. I just need somewhere to sleep.” Ellie tilts her head, exhausted from the conversation already.

“You sure you don’t want to stay in your old bedroom?” August leans against the wall in the kitchen with his arms crossed and smiles.

“And sleep in my very tiny childhood bed? No thanks.” She turns to her parents, “I’m not gonna lie, I was kind of dreading this conversation with you guys.”

“You mean you were dreading the conversation with Mom.” August smirks.

Ellie narrows her eyes at him. “Shut up.”

August chuckles and shakes his head. “It’s good to have you back, Ellie.”

“Ro.” Ellie turns to me. “Thank you for everything.” She grabs my hand and squeezes it.

I shrug. “It’s no problem. I actually need to head out and see my mom and Aunt Rosey.”

Ellie and I start to walk toward the front door. I don’t have a reason to see my family, but I can feel myself starting to get attached to Ellie, and I can’t let myself do that. I need to keep reminding myself that she’s only here for the summer and that we’ve both moved on.

Or at least convince myself that *I*’ve moved on.

“Can I see you tonight? At the brewery?” she asks.

“Always, El.” The corner of my mouth tips up.

“August.” I turn to him. “I’ll see you around.”

Her brother walks toward me and holds out his hand to pull me in, slapping his other hand on my back. “Always a pleasure. I’ll probably see you tonight too. Enjoy a couple of beers.”

Ellie points to August. “Oh, I’ll just ride with you then.”

August rolls his eyes dramatically before saying, “I *guess* you can come with me.”

Ellie gives August a playful shove, and he staggers back, though he’s a foot taller than her. She’s stronger than she looks. “Shut up, you love me.”

August grins and pulls her into a messy headlock, ruffling her hair. Ellie squirms, shouting at him to stop, her voice a mix of annoyance and affection. “You smell terrible, August! God, how long did you run for?” She wiggles in his grip, trying to break free, then turns toward their parents. “Mom! Make him stop!”

Her dad chuckles from the kitchen and gives her an amused look before focusing on his laptop on the kitchen counter.

“Alright, that’s enough. August, let go of your sister,” Helen says from the kitchen sink.

I watch the scene unfold, a warm feeling settling in my chest. It’s chaotic, it’s loud, but it’s perfect.

And it’s so good to have her home.

eleven

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ROWAN



AS I WALK to Mom and Aunt Rosey's house, I think about how it's only been two days since Ellie has come back to town, and I've continuously had to stop myself from doing more than just hugging her. Last night, when we went back to sleep, she grabbed my hand and held it all night.

Laying in the same position the entire night was not ideal, and my shoulder is killing me, but I refused to let go of her hand. Not even an earthquake would tear me from her. I'm supposed to see her later tonight at the brewery to meet up with everyone and I have no idea how I'm going to control myself.

I run my hand through my hair and whip it forward. My brain is going into hyper-drive just thinking about how her hand would feel on my chest, on my stomach, and...

My hands brush through my hair again, and I stop walking, tilting my head up toward the sky. I haven't allowed myself to indulge in a woman in a long time. Exactly 243 days. 8 months. 5,840 hours.

Every relationship I've had has ended badly. Me, pushing them away. Making sure that they don't leave me before I can leave them. Blaming something that I know wasn't there. Deep down, I knew it was because they were never going to live up to the girl I once had and lost.

I never pushed Ellie away. Not intentionally. When we were nineteen, she was moving to New York. We tried staying together long distance, but when you live on opposite sides of the country, it gets tough. Especially since we were teenagers who can't afford to see each other anytime you want.

When she came back two years later—we'd successfully stayed together the entire time—she dropped the biggest bomb on me. She was going to stay in the city for *another* two years and take advantage of an opportunity that doesn't present itself that often.

At the time, all I thought about was the ring that suddenly felt like a heavyweight pulling me down. My mind shut down, and I lost my voice. I couldn't think. All I could do was nod and tell her I understood.

After that happened, I was in a dark place for a long time. Not just because of Ellie, but it also took me back to my dad. Being left, *again*. I didn't do anything that made me happy for a long time. Not until a year later when I woke up one morning and finally felt like everything was going to be okay.

As I approach my mom and Aunt's house, I look up to see my Aunt Rosey and a smirk looking right at me. She and my mom in their wicker chairs on the porch.

"Well, look who it is. I'm so glad we are worthy of your attention," Aunt Rosey says.

After Dad left us, my aunt thought it was a great idea for us to move into her house. It's large with plenty of room. She nagged my mom until she gave in. And *she's* the younger one by two years.

You would think they were twins if you didn't know much about them. They both have strawberry blond hair, hazel eyes, and freckles scattered on their face. I look like a spitting image of my dad, as does my sister, Addie. Unfortunately, his genes are strong.

You can tell them apart by how they dress. Aunt Rosey has a boho beach style, always wearing long, flowy skirts or a dress that shows off her tattoos. She doesn't have as many as I do, but she's the one who got me into them.

My mom is your typical coastal mom, always in light blues, different shades of white, sage green, and tan. Every day she wears the necklace I bought her for Christmas when I was eighteen. A simple chain necklace with a turtle charm. Her favorite sea animal.

"Who is that handsome man standing in front of us?" my mom says.

I playfully roll my eyes and walk up the steps to the porch.

"Can I get you a drink? Water, lemonade, tea, beer? It's not *your* beer, but you know, hospitality and all." Rosey waves her hand.

My hand holds my chest, and I close my eyes, “My own family, how could you?” I open my eyes and smile.

“Rose, stop messing with your nephew and get him a drink.”

Aunt Rosey gets up, muttering something under her breath about my mom, which she ignores.

“Come sit.” My mom pats the seat of the other wicker chair next to her, smiling at me like she hasn’t seen me in months instead of days.

Growing up, my mom overcompensated, showing extra love after my dad left. Sometimes, it felt like she was trying to protect us so much that it felt forced. I never blamed her for doing that. She wanted us to know that it wasn’t our fault. But how do you convince a small child that a parent leaving you isn’t your fault?

Just to make her feel better, I would always nod my head in understanding, give her a kiss on the cheek, and tell her I love her.

My body slumps into the chair, and I let out an exaggerated sigh. I let my head fall back and close my eyes for a moment, but when I do, all I see is Ellie. The way her hair always smells like vanilla and strawberries, how the sun makes the swirls of blue in her eyes look like a calming sea, or when you get her to laugh just hard enough that a snort slips out of her, making her laugh harder.

“Penny for your thoughts?” my mom asks, taking me away from those crystal-clear eyes.

“Ellie’s back in town,” I reply quietly, turning my head to look at my mom.

She smiles at me and nods. “Your sister told me after you and Ellie left the brewery. How is she doing?”

“Addie didn’t tell you why she came home?” I arch a brow.

“All she mentioned was something about an ex-boyfriend and her job. Ex-boyfriend, I assume she’s talking about Charlie?”

My face grimaces when she says his name. I try not to let him have that effect on me, but the guy sucks. I had no issue with him when they first started dating—of course I wallowed in despair when I saw that she was moving on, but if she was happy, then I was happy. As the years went on and I got to know him more, there were things that I noticed that made me question him as a person.

There was one time we went to the Christmas market that Dove Point has for the season. Ellie came across a booth where there were handmade

aprons. There was one that she wanted. The color was off-white, with these little flowers embroidered on the upper half of the apron and then on each pocket on the bottom.

I remember the look on her face when she saw it. She let out a small gasp, her eyes bright with excitement at what she'd found. Ellie said she absolutely needed to get it, but Charlie told her she had enough at home and that there wasn't enough space.

Her mood completely changed after that. After we were done walking around, I went back to that booth and bought it for her as a Christmas present. When she opened it in front of Charlie, all he did was glare at me while I had a smug smile on my face the entire time.

The screen door opens, and I'm jolted out of my memories when Aunt Rosey comes back out with my drink. She hands me fresh lemonade and then sits down.

"So," Aunt Rosey says, "what's going on with that blond guy? The one with Ellie. Are they still going out?"

I rub the stubble on my jaw. "No, they're not together right now."

"Oh no, what happened?" Mom asks gently.

"Well, from what Ellie told me, she was dealing with a lot of stuff at work. I guess she was so wrapped up in that, that it caused some issues between them." I feel my jaw clench when I think about what I'm going to say next. "He ended up cheating on her."

"*He cheated on her?*" Aunt Rosey exclaims.

I nod my head.

"How did she find out?" mom asks.

I huff out a laugh and shake my head before looking at them. "He told her."

"What a little asshole," Aunt Rosey says.

"Rose," mom scolds.

"No, he's an asshole. Ellie is a sweet girl. She doesn't deserve that." Rosey looks at my mom with furrowed brows. Her lips press into a line like she's trying to stop whatever it is she wants to say, but she continues, "How did Helen handle the news? The woman is such a worry wart over everything. Always making a fuss over her daughter."

My brows knit when I think about the conversation. Helen was oddly—calm. She didn't make as big a fuss like she would with anything else. "Actually, she was fine." I look at them. "Her parents listened and said they

would help her set up the guest house since she's staying for the next three months."

"Probably because they didn't like the pretentious little shit," Aunt Rosey utters.

"I'm sure you're excited to have her back for an entire summer," Mom says.

I avoid the comment and turn my head away to look at the other houses, trying to hide the smile that wants to betray me and come out.

"Did you guys make plans for anything?" Mom asks.

"Not yet. I was letting her settle in and spend time with her parents and August. I'm sure we will plan another hangout soon. I want to get in as much time as I can before she goes back to the city."

Aunt Rosey eyes me. "*If* she goes back."

"Why wouldn't she? She works at the best restaurant New York has to offer." I pick at a piece of lint on my jeans, trying to distract myself from this conversation I don't want to have.

Aunt Rosey leans toward me and over my mom before she starts to count on her fingers. "She just got cheated on. She's burnt out from her demanding job. Her mother says she doesn't have many friends in the city because her life revolves around said job. She's unhappy. It's as simple as that. Why would someone smart like Ellie go back somewhere that makes her miserable?"

My head leans back onto the chair again, and I think about the implications. Rosey makes great points, but that doesn't determine anything. This summer can be the recharge that Ellie needs to get back to how she was when she first started there.

Aunt Rosey continues, "I think deep down she came here for another reason. Not just to get away for a summer. But to see someone that she needs in her life again. What do I know, though? I'm just an old woman who's had a long life and has gone through my own challenges."

"I don't know," I finally say. "She's built a life there. She's lived there for ten years. She works at a highly sought-after restaurant that attracts visitors from around the world. Why would she walk away from that?"

I look out toward the road, thinking. Thinking about how I can have that second chance with her, but will I allow myself to have that? Can I give her what she wants? Would I be enough? Will she up and leave again because of something amazing that could happen again? My thoughts start to spiral,

and I go into that dark place that is hard to get out of. She ran away from a messed-up situation. I can't let her walk into another one. I have my own baggage that I keep ignoring, hoping that it will just go away. I want what's best for Ellie, even if it's not me.

I still have some things in my own life to fix. I don't want to keep thinking about if I'm good enough. Good enough for Ellie, for my business, and as a son. I don't want to worry that I'll be left behind again.

I will only allow myself to have Ellie when I decide to finally talk to my dad and close that chapter of my life. This could be my second shot at having her and not letting her get away this time.

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ELLIE



“CAN I get the campfire sundae? All the fixings.” Addie asks while she stands in front of the small window where a teenager is taking her order.

I dip a spoonful in my vanilla ice cream, scooping up fresh strawberries, hot fudge, and caramel sauce. I let out a deep, satisfying breath. The thickness of the vanilla ice cream mixed with everything else melts perfectly on my tongue.

Riley licks her chocolate and vanilla ice cream, the colors swirling together in the large waffle cone that wraps around it.

The bright blue skies and wisps of clouds cover the town. The sun is shining down on everyone, embracing them. The summers in Dove Point are out of a fairytale. We have our rainy days, but most of the time, it is always sunny and warm.

Living in New York for as long as I have, I’ve developed thicker skin—mostly thanks to the brutal winters. When I first saw snow during my first winter there, I was giddy, like a little kid. The way it blanketed the streets, turning everything into a winter wonderland—it felt magical.

But as the years went on, that magic faded fast. The snow changed from pure white to black and gray. The thick fluffiness turns into mush. I cursed the weather gods every time I slipped on a patch of ice or trudged through piles of slush.

I was never meant for that kind of weather. It’s just not in my bones.

We walk around town, eating our ice cream, and take in our surroundings. The town is holding a music festival, and some of the shops have tables displayed outside their storefronts, covered in items they sell.

“Why couldn’t Hailey come with us?” I ask Riley, thinking about how much I miss her sister and haven’t had the chance to catch up with her yet.

“She’s on a date with some guy she met from out of town.” Riley licks more of her ice cream.

“A date in the middle of the day? That doesn’t seem like her,” Addie replies and grabs a piece of graham cracker that was poking out of her ice cream and dips it in the melted marshmallow, vanilla ice cream, and hot fudge.

“I think it’s a beach date, nothing too serious, just casual. You know Hailey, she’s all about fun and not getting all tied up in a relationship.”

“Whatever happened to Zach? I thought things were going well with him?” I ask.

Riley sighs before saying, “He broke things off, said he wasn’t sure if he was ready for something serious. I think he turned her off to relationships, and now she’s just dating.”

We start to walk toward the heart of the town, passing under a large banner that hangs from two lamp posts on either end of the sidewalk.

Dove Point Music Fest is written across it. The road is closed with groups of people taking advantage of walking down it, because that’s what we do when a road is closed. When a street is closed for a festival of some sort, people flock to it like we’ve never seen a street before.

Kids are running around with their faces painted. I spot a lion, Spiderman, unicorn, and something that looks like a terrifying SpongeBob SquarePants.

Toward the end of the street, a large stage looms, the hum of activity surrounding it. I spot a band setting up their instruments, adjusting the microphones and tuning guitars, preparing for the night ahead.

Meanwhile, a DJ plays upbeat tracks through the speakers, the music spilling into the streets, giving an energetic pulse that seems to ripple through the crowd.

“Last night was fun. Who knew Milo could have a tray strapped to him and carry drinks to customers? I noticed the small cups attached to the tray where the glasses sit. Clever,” Riley says, sitting down at a table outside a shop.

“When you’re getting paid in treats, anything is possible. Plus, it took forever to train him to do that. Rowan taught him a trick that lets us know

when he wants to do it. So, he chooses his own hours.” Addie licks some ice cream off her thumb.

“I also noticed someone staring at James almost the entire night.” I smile at Addie, who shovels a mouthful of ice cream in her mouth.

She winces and fans her hand toward her mouth. “Cold!” she cries out.

Riley lets out a cackle before scrambling to eat as much ice cream as she can as it runs down her fingers and into the napkin around the cone.

“I wasn’t staring. He was talking, so my attention was on him,” Addie murmurs.

“He answered a question that Rowan asked, and you kept your eyes on him after that,” Riley says.

“I didn’t know I couldn’t look at people, sorry.” Addie rolls her eyes.

Riley tilts her head. “There’s a difference between looking at people and eye-fucking.”

“I was *not* doing that,” Addie says matter-of-factly.

I look at Riley with a smirk, and she mirrors my expression.

Addie sits up straighter and puts her hands between her legs. She looks around before whispering, “I had a crush on him *one* time during middle school, and you guys never let me forget it.”

Riley and I start to giggle like little schoolchildren and Addie hides her red face in her hands, shaking her head.

thirteen

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ELLIE



THE NIGHT SKY is in full effect. I decided to sit on the beach and take in the waves. Everyone else gathered around the stage while the band did a sound check. I look up at the beautiful, dark blue sky, watching the stars twinkle. This is my happy place. The sounds of the waves crashing into the surface, the seagulls flocking above while they call for each other, the calm of everything around me. I didn't have a towel with me, so I sacrificed my clothes and hair and lay down on the bare sand. With how the night sky looks tonight, it's worth it.

I tried many times to spot stars in the sky when I was in New York. I could never find them. Only emptiness. I'd go on the rooftop of my apartment, sit in a chair, and just *try*. When I wasn't successful, I would stare at the moon. Hoping that Rowan was looking at the moon with me all those miles away.

I've gotten used to the chaotic life of the city. The hustle and bustle. The loud noise you can't escape from.

When I settled my life there, I was enamored by it all. The people, the lights, the energy that folded itself around me. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I thrived in it and felt proud to be part of a beautiful city that millions of people travel to for the experience.

People say that New York is not for the weak. Especially when you weren't born and raised in it and go there to achieve a dream you have. Those people aren't wrong.

Three years into my relationship with Charlie, the happiness I once had slipped through my fingers. My mind remembers the day the flicker of excitement was no longer there. I went from waking up in the morning,

excited to see what the day was going to bring, to wanting to throw my phone across the room when my alarm would go off.

No one ever knew the dread that would sink in when I woke up in the morning. Because that isn't how I was supposed to feel. I should have been thankful for being a part of something that so many pastry chefs would kill to have.

I took the negatives and tried to reframe them as positives. Every compliment and praise I received toward my work made me hope that those words would ignite that flame in me again.

It never did.

"Ellie!"

Looking behind me, I see Riley in the distance waving. I get up, brush the sand off my shorts, legs, and hands, and walk toward the sounds of people talking and laughing, along with the echoing sound of the mic check.

"How old do you think the drummer is?" Riley asks.

"Why? You think he's cute?" My eyes follow hers toward the stage, and I tilt my head.

"I'm going to say twenty-eight," James butts in. "She's trying to sleep with the guy."

"You're going to have to wait in line." I point to the group of women staring at him while he twirls his drumsticks in his fingers.

"I've always liked a little competition." Riley wiggles her brows, and as she walks toward the front of the stage, her golden hair stands out in the crowd.

Riley has the type of confidence that sometimes can make a man intimidated. Her type is men who like casual. No relationship, no strings, just fun.

We hear a tapping sound from the stage, and a guy with a guitar strapped to him starts to speak. He introduces the band when my attention is pulled away from a sound behind me.

"Hey, guys." Hailey walks up to me and James, Beau trailing behind her.

Hailey has this effortlessly cool vibe, with light brown hair and curtain bangs, one section dyed a striking icy blond. Tattoos wind down her arms, and her septum and nose rings glint as she moves. Her winged liner is always on point—sharp enough to cut through anything. Her high-rise jean

shorts show off her long legs, and her blue button-up has the first few buttons undone, the sleeves rolled up.

“Hey, Hails.” I pull her into a tight hug, rocking her back and forth, and pull back. “How was your date?”

“It was fine. Not sure if I care to see him again. He did tell me about this cool club thirty minutes from here. We should check it out.”

“Ooh, what’s the name?” I ask.

“Ecstasy,” Hailey says casually.

James laughs. “How the hell do they get away with a name like that?”

Hailey shrugs before replying, “How should I know?”

“I could totally use some dancing in my life right about now,” I whine.

“I’m in,” Beau says from behind Hailey.

Hailey turns to look at Beau, who looms behind us, his tall, broad frame hovering over the two of us. The pair of them look like two peas in a pod. He’s covered in tattoos, even on his neck, with a nose piercing to match Hailey’s. He and James share similar features, making it obvious they’re related.

“Who invited you?” Hailey peers at him.

“Hey, if you say there’s dancing, I’m going. That means a lot of women will be in attendance.” Beau shoves his hands into the pockets of his rugged jean jacket.

“I see your face enough at the tattoo shop,” Hailey responds.

Beau’s brows knit together, and he says, “How is it my fault I like getting tattoos?”

“You don’t see me going to the barber shop and bugging you all the time.”

“Oh, please. You love seeing my handsome face.” Beau takes out his hand and wraps an arm around Hailey, tugging her body into him.

She rolls her eyes and takes a swig of her drink. I hide my smile when I look at James, giving him a look that says, *can your brother be more obvious?* James shrugs and lets out a quiet chuckle.

The band starts to play, and Hailey grabs my arm, her eyes lighting up as she looks at me. The first chords of *Teenage Dirtbag* by Wheatus starts to play, and excitement thrums through my body.

“I love this song,” Hailey yells out in excitement and starts to sing.

We serenade each other while dancing obnoxiously around the crowd. My arm accidentally bumps into James, his hand holding his beer up.

“Alright, alright, calm down.” James wipes off his drink from his shirt. I wince. “Sorry.”

“Hi, guys!” Addie yells, running toward us. “I was just up front with Riley, and she’s *glaring* at the drummer.”

“That checks out,” August says from behind, scaring the shit out of me.

“Where the hell did you come from?” I ask.

He looks at me, pinching his index finger and thumb together, mimicking smoking. I lift my chin up and then nod without saying a word. That simple gesture tells me Rowan was with him, but I don’t see him anywhere.

An hour later, I can feel the sweat accumulating on my body from jumping, singing, and dancing with my friends. Another song ends, and the lead singer bends down to pick up his drink, quickly taking a swig before putting it back down. He says something to his band and turns toward the mic.

“This cover is a little slower, but it’s a good one.”

He starts to play the intro for *Sailor Song* by Gigi Perez.

My arms and legs start to feel warm and fuzzy inside from the drinks I’ve had all night. I sway back and forth while singing with the band, closing my eyes as my arms sway with me, and once the chorus hits, I start to sing with them.

Letting my thoughts get lost in the music that vibrates through the crowd, I stop thinking about work, Charlie, and feeling alone. The memories of all the times I felt my body start to panic when I would wake up in the morning and think about all the dishes that needed to be done.

Someone warm and solid presses themselves against my back, and I think nothing of it. It’s gotten more crowded since we’ve been here, so I expect people to lose self-awareness when it comes to personal space. But then I feel a hand on my shoulder and immediately look up.

Dark blue eyes framed by thick lashes stare back at me, along with a smirk that showcases a dimple I’m all too familiar with. I smile up at Rowan and look back toward the band, trying to steady my breathing. I go back to what I was doing, swaying to the music, as I feel his hand slide from my shoulder and down to my arm. Stroking my skin.

For a moment, I let myself get lost in his touch. The way it soothes me and helps ground me. The simple act of his touch lets me know that he’s here. That it’s going to be okay.

The song ends, and the crowd erupts with shouting and clapping. The band announces they will be playing one last song for the night. I immediately notice the melody of the music, and I can't contain my excitement as *Adore You* by Harry Styles blares from the stage.

My eyes find Rowan again, and I grab his hand, dragging him through the thrum of people and toward the stage.

"What are you doing?" he asks, laughing.

His tall frame helps separate people so we can get through. When we get as close as possible to the band, I turn around, still gripping his hands to steady myself from the spins. My hair whips around this way and that, and my smile beams across my face. Rowan spins me around once and then pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around me.

I don't let go of his hold, mainly because the spin still has me dizzy because I'm drunk. I crane my neck up and start to sing toward Rowan, serenading him until I'm blue in the face.

His smile is beautiful and alluring when he looks down at me. I feel his grip on me tighten, pulling me as close as possible. The heat on my cheeks feels like they're going to burst into flames from the touch of him. My mouth curves into a smile, and I take in the warmth of his body onto mine.

A feeling of happiness spreads through me, and I make sure to hold on to that feeling while I dance with my best friend to one of my favorite songs. I lock this moment into my memory as we spin in each other's arms.

fourteen

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ROWAN



“GOOD MORNING, SUNSHINE.”

I slide into the booth across from Ellie. Her head is down on the cool table, and she groans. She wasn’t fond of the idea of meeting me for breakfast, considering how late we stayed out last night and how many beers she decided to drink.

We decided on Daddio’s, one of Dove Points’ well-loved diners. Stepping into the place is like stepping into a time capsule. Old Hollywood photos of celebrities spread along the walls in frames, some of them signed. Small jukeboxes sit at each table so the customers can choose the music that plays through the speakers.

Ellie rolls her forehead back and forth across the shiny table, her thick hair falling over her shoulders. She continues to roll her head along the table.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m cooling down my forehead,” Ellie complains.

“You had a lot to drink last night.”

“You don’t say,” she mumbles.

It’s impossible not to feel bad. I reach out and start massaging her head, running my fingers through her hair, not thinking anything of it other than trying to make her as comfortable as possible. I see her shoulders drop, and her head tilts to one side on the table.

The sound of a moan slips through her lips, and my hand stops. The desperation I feel running through my body, wanting to hear it again, is agonizing. I also can’t hear it again without reacting.

“Why did you stop?” she whines.

“Sorry.” And despite my better judgment, I start again.

“This feels incredible. Oh my god.” She moans again quietly.

Don't get a boner, don't get a boner, do not get a boner.

My mind decides to be an asshole and comes up with images of what she would look like while she says those six words. In bed, on her knees, bent over a kitchen counter while my name slips out from her pretty mouth.

I shake my head, trying to wipe away all thoughts of Ellie in that way, but I can still feel my dick getting hard, and I'm not dealing with this right now. Quickly, I pull my hand off her head just in time for the server to come to our table and take our orders.

The server looks over to Ellie, who is still face down on the table, not even attempting to order her food or lift her head. I look back at the server with an apologetic smile and give her my order along with Ellie's usual. She jots it down on their notepad and leave with a smile.

Ellie slowly picks up her head and keeps her eyes closed as she lays her head back on the headrest of the red booth.

“You remember my order?” Ellie's voice comes out raspy.

“El, you've ordered the same thing since we were kids. It's your go-to breakfast order.”

I cross my arms and continue to look at her. She doesn't have a lick of makeup on, so I can see the freckles that trail along her nose and some on her cheeks. Her pouty lips look so kissable that I need to withstand the urge to reach across the table, cup her face, and lay one on her.

“Did you know that Charlie doesn't even know what my favorite breakfast is? I've told him a million times what I like, but he never remembered,” Ellie says gently. “One year of being friends, five years of being together, and he couldn't remember. I chalked it up to a bad memory. He did forget a lot of things that didn't even involve me.”

Her eyes are still closed while I look at her. I can feel my hands turn into fists while my arms are still folded across my chest. Just the sound of his name spikes my blood pressure.

He doesn't know what tea she likes or her preferred breakfast dish? How can he not remember that when he's been with her for five years? Then again, the dick decided to cheat on her when she was busy, drained and tired from work, and he couldn't handle asking her if *she* was okay.

What did she see in him? Why would she rather be with him when she could be with someone like me? I know that it's a two-way street and that I

could have made the move, but I let my stupid fear of losing her all over again get to me.

“I guess it’s a good thing you aren’t with him anymore then, hm?” I managed to say, biting back the words that really wanted to come out of my mouth.

“He texted me last night.” She rubs her temples, eyes still closed, and her head still resting on the booth.

My body goes rigid while I hold my breath, wondering what he said and if she responded to him. I didn’t think he’d have the balls to reach out to her, considering she ended things with him. Unless she really is going to go back to him at the end of the summer. I never asked too much about their relationship. I couldn’t.

I swallow the lump in my throat and then clear it. “What did it say?” I mutter.

Ellie shrugs. “Just asking how I’m doing and that he misses me. You know, bullshit.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my lip, and I feel my hands relax and my shoulders drop. “Did you text him back?”

My finger taps on the table, a tic that Ellie knows all too well. I stop and resist the urge, moving my hand to my lap and out of sight.

“I didn’t. I opened it. Read it. And left the text on read.”

“Oof, the dreaded read text. That’s gotta hurt.”

“If it hurt just as much as when he told me he cheated on me, then fine. But I doubt it.”

My smile falls. I wish I could reach out and hold her hand. I wish I could move over to her side of the booth, wrap her in my arms, and tell her how I think about her every day. That I think about how if she were with me, I would remind her every day just how fucking crazy I am about her.

“Where’s our food?” she draws out.

I look over to the cooking station near the counter where people enjoy their breakfast. The server has a tray filled with our dishes. Balancing them perfectly.

“French toast and milk,” the server says, then places a plate in front of Ellie, “and the works.”

She gives us a smile, asking if we need anything else, and heads back to the kitchen.

Ellie opens her eyes and whips her head down to look at her plate, which is full and stacked high. The maple syrup drips off the edges of the bread that is fried to perfection. The chocolate chips start to slowly melt on top. Strawberries are scattered on the plate, along with powdered sugar and whipped cream.

She pulls a hair tie from her wrist and wraps her hair in a loose bun, not taking her eyes off her dish. She gets everything in order. The napkin goes on her legs. She pours *more* syrup on her plate, grabs her fork and knife, then starts to cut into the bread.

“Rowan,” she says without looking at me.

“Yeah?”

“Stop staring at me and eat your food.”

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fifteen

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ROWAN



“EL, can you make sure my hair looks okay from the back? I don’t want another tragedy like prom where you can see all the clippings from my extensions,” Riley asks, turning around in the backseat.

Ellie, Riley, and Hailey are squished together in the backseat, the three of them laughing and chatting, their voices mixing with the hum of the car. Ellie leans against the window, her eyes flicking between the passing city lights and her phone, probably checking messages or snapping photos.

I’m upfront with August, the familiar sound of his music filling the space between us. His hand taps on the steering wheel to the beat, and every now and then, he glances at me with a grin when he hears Riley talking. Beau and James will be meeting us at the nightclub, but for now, it’s just the five of us, the laughter and energy building as we near our destination.

“The back of your head looks fine,” August drawls, looking at Riley from the rearview mirror.

“August, shut up. I didn’t ask you.” Riley glares at him. “I cannot wait to get to this place. All I want to do is dance with my bestie and sister and have a fun time. I do not want any guys bothering us.”

“Your hair is good to go, Ry,” Ellie says.

“Thanks, boo. I’m proud of my outfit tonight too. I thought long and hard about it.”

“I have something long and hard that you can think about,” August says with a grin.

“Ew, August.” Ellie grimaces.

“Augustus, you would be so lucky if I were to think about your shriveled penis.” Riley smiles at him brightly with playful eyes.

“Hey, it is not shriveled. It is large and in charge. It is a shower *and* a grower. You would know if you took a chance on me.” August places a hand on his chest.

“In your dreams, playboy.”

Pulling into the parking lot, I see flocks of people stepping out of their cars. The five of us pile out while other partygoers rush toward the music. The sound thumps from inside when the black doors open and close. Groups are separated outside, talking or waiting for others to show up.

“Finally,” Beau yells from the sidewalk.

“Sorry. We were waiting on these three.” August gestures his head toward Ellie, Riley, and Hailey.

“Um, sorry for wanting to look good tonight,” Riley shouts.

“Come on, let's go.” Ellie pulls Riley's arm.

We follow the girls, and I keep my eyes locked closely on Ellie. Tonight, will be interesting. Interesting in the sense that I will have to glare at any man that wants to go *near* her. Plus, with the clothes she's wearing tonight, I need to keep myself in check and make sure I don't have an inconvenient boner.

The white halter top shows off her cleavage, and it's an amazing sight. Skinny, small tassels hang on the hem in the front, making it look more playful. And she's wearing these incredible jean shorts that should be illegal.

They cut off just past her ass, with some fringes from the hem coming undone. Her shorts are so short you can see the inside fabric of her pockets poke out from underneath. She paired her jeans with a brown belt and her white high-top Converse sneakers.

“This is my heaven.” Beau looks around like he's a kid in the candy shop.

Hailey peers at him. “Beau, please don't get us kicked out.”

“Looks like we have a bachelorette party here with us tonight. Guys, care to join me?” Beau asks with a smirk.

“I guess,” James says with a huff.

“Don't need to ask me twice,” August replies.

I push my hands into my pockets. “I'm gonna stay back.”

The nightclub is buzzing with music and laughter. The dance floor is packed with people, their bodies moving in sync with the pulsing beat. Above them, the ceiling is adorned with a cluster of disco balls in varying

sizes, their reflective surfaces casting shimmering spots of light across the room.

The red and soft orange lighting bathes the space in a sultry glow, giving everything an almost hypnotic, alluring vibe.

I watch the guy's saunter over to a table filled with women. Deep maroon vines and foliage hang above the long section of tables, a white glow emanating off it. Behind the DJ booth is a neon light that says, 'Dance first, think later.' I would have never known a place like this existed outside of town. It's an entirely different world from Dove Point.

"Where's Hailey?" Ellie looks around us.

Taking advantage of my height, I look around and then spot her at a high-stand table, talking to a man decked in all black. He's built like Beau, muscular, with tattoos running down his arms.

That checks out.

"She's over there." I gesture with my chin.

"I'm going to get us some drinks. I'll be right back." Riley gestures to the bar.

The bar is one of the showstoppers. Red lighting shines softly under the entire counter. Glass shelves run across the wall behind the bartenders, filled with bottles of liquor. Then, there are three separate arches below the shelves, stocked with different brands of alcohol, all lined up in their signature glass bottles.

"So, are you going to dance?" Ellie stands on her toes and shouts to me over the blaring music.

Bending down, I tilt my head toward her to hear her better and shrug. "The floors are crowded, and I don't know if anyone wants a tall man bumping into them constantly." I catch her laugh, straining my ears to hear it over the music.

She shakes her head. "It'll be fine!"

There's a shimmering glow on her cheeks that reflects off the light. It's small flecks of gold, and it makes her even more beautiful than she already is — like a damn goddess.

I point to my own cheek before saying, "I like the sparkles on your cheeks."

Then I close my eyes and dip my head a little.

Sparkles? I like the sparkles on your cheeks? I couldn't have said something better than I like your damn sparkles? You look beautiful tonight.

It's like you're glowing.

At least that'd be better than telling her I like the sparkles.

She tilts her head back and laughs while I dip my head down, trying to hide my embarrassment, and she surprises me by meeting my eyes. Her head angles down with a smile plastered on her face.

"Thank you. It's a highlighter blush. It gives me a bit of a glow." She places her hand under her chin and smiles.

I lift my head and give her a sheepish smile.

"Well, it looks beautiful on you."

The lighting in here is dim, but I feel like I can almost make out her cheeks turning red. She's blushing and trying to hide her smile by covering her face. Well, I can't let that happen. I gently grab her wrists and pull her hands away from her face.

"Don't hide that smile from me."

She locks her eyes with mine and tugs at her pillowy bottom lip. My hands still hold on gently to her wrists while we enjoy this moment alone together under the moody lights of the nightclub.

"I come *beering* gifts." A smile tugs at Riley's lips. "Get it?" She holds up the five beers in her hand.

"Very funny." Ellie grabs her beer from Riley and starts to drink it.

"Great joke, Riley." I grab mine and salute her in thanks.

She deadpans and walks past us, glaring as she sets down her sister's beer.

The music changes to something upbeat. Ellie takes another swig of her drink before Riley tells her to go to the dancefloor with her.

"Wanna come?" she asks.

"Nah, I'm good."

A hand lands on my shoulder, and I turn to see August standing next to me. I follow his gaze, and he's looking right at Riley.

The way August looks at Riley is the same way I look at Ellie. I don't know what happened between the two of them. They were close, best friends, years ago, and then, one day, they just stopped talking.

I trail my eyes back to Ellie, her skin glistening under the dance floor lights, her hair moving gracefully as she turns her body.

The song is halfway finished when I see a guy move his body closer to hers, and knowing Ellie, she isn't going to shy away from someone wanting

to dance. He's tall, not as tall as me, but enough for Ellie, and she smiles at him.

My grip tightens around my beer bottle, and if I don't relax, it's going to shatter in my hand. I loosen my grip and instead put the pressure into my jaw, tightening it while I clench my teeth. My jaw will be sore tomorrow, but I can't help it. Seeing Ellie with another man makes my blood boil, but I know I won't do anything to stop it.

The guy turns his hat backward, letting me get a better look at him, and *what the fuck*. He looks like he just left from a modeling gig and decided to go dancing right after. He's putting me to shame dancing with *my girl* while I'm standing here like a fucking dumbass.

The song fades and goes into the next one, and my eyes almost bulge out of my head when he reaches for her to give her a hug. She returns an awkward side hug with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. I attempt to control my annoyance and remind myself that she's friendly. I watch him gesture his head in the opposite direction of us while I continue to watch this interaction.

Ellie smiles politely and shakes her head. I can see her trying to walk back toward my direction, but the guy is being relentless. I can feel my jaw muscles pop while my chest rises and falls in an unsteady rhythm. She holds up a hand toward him, and her facial expression changes from pleasant to irritated.

I set down my beer on the round high-table, and when my eyes connect back to them, his hand tugs at her wrist, and all I see is red. My body moves fast as I approach the two of them.

"Hey." My voice comes out threatening, and I can feel my pulse quickening by the second.

He turns his head to look at me, and I have a slight height advantage, making his chin tilt up to speak to me.

He signals to Ellie with his head. "Do you mind? I'm talking to someone."

"I do mind, actually," I say, keeping my voice steady.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. Why the fuck are you touching her?" My hands clenched into fists, my nails biting into my skin.

The man looked at Ellie and then back to me. "Look, man, all we were doing was talking."

Ellie chimes in, “Yeah, and then you wouldn’t let me go back to my table.”

I turn my focus back on the guy and size him up. Red-hot anger rushes through me, and I almost bare my teeth at him like some wild animal. An emotion takes over me that I’ve never felt before. The last thing I want to do is cause a brawl in this place. That isn’t me.

My voice comes out low and threatening, “Get your fucking hands off her.”

He narrows his gaze at me, but then I see his hand let go of her out of the corner of my eye. Ellie takes her arm back and wraps her hand around her wrist where he was holding her. He stares at me, not averting his gaze, and I’m more than happy to stare back. Just for the hell of it, I let a small smile tug on my lips.

He looks at Ellie and dips his head in a curt nod. “Have a great night.”

I watch him, making sure he doesn’t backtrack and bother Ellie again. Soft hands tug on my arm, but I don’t let my eyes falter until the man reaches his table with his friends. I look down and see her hand on my biceps.

“Ro, let’s go.” Ellie pulls me toward her, and I remove my hands from my pockets, setting them at my sides, feeling Ellie’s hand run down my arm to my hand and lock her fingers through mine.

She leads me back to our table, where our friends are staring at us. Each of them carries a different expression: shock, surprise, pleased, giddy. Ellie doesn’t drop my hand when we get to them but grips it tighter like she’s nervous about the man coming back. I give her a gentle squeeze, reassuring her that I’m going anywhere.

“What a creep,” Riley says with disdain.

“I’m sorry I didn’t see what happened, Ellie,” August says with a worried expression. “I would have stepped in.”

Ellie shakes her head. “It’s okay. Rowan stepped in. My knight in shining armor.” She looks up at me with a beaming smile.

I feel my heartbeat quicken at the small compliment.

She takes another long swig of her drink, polishing it off, and sets it back down on the table while everyone continues their conversation over the loud music. Ellie stands on her toes, and I lean down to hear what she’s saying over the music.

“You wanna dance?” She drops back down on her feet.

I stand up straight and look at her. Dance with Ellie? I know I danced with her at the music festival, but that song was more upbeat and fun. This is...I look at the dance floor behind me, and it's more intimate by the way people are dancing.

Before I let my fear get in the way, I nod my head yes with a small smile, and she leads me to the dance floor. I have no idea how this is going to play out. Do we dance like it's homecoming again? Her hands on my shoulders, mine on her waist, leaving space for Jesus?

My heart thumps through my chest once we get back on the dance floor.

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ELLIE



I'VE NEVER SEEN that side of Rowan before. But I guess when a man grabs a woman after saying no, it can pull all types of emotions from someone else who cares about you. My feelings are bubbling to the surface, and I can't hold them down.

It was...*hot*. But I know he was doing it because that's the kind of guy Rowan is. He will always stand up for someone if he needs to. It doesn't matter who they are. Best friend or not.

I asked him to dance before I chickened out. I can hear a song playing over the speakers, and the dance floor is fairly crowded with couples. I knew I wanted to dance with him, so I made sure to drink enough to get liquid courage to ask.

His tall frame faces me, and I'm not sure what to do with my hands, so instead of overthinking everything, I let my body take control and do what it wants. My hands find his shoulders, trailing down his biceps and onto his waist. I turn around, pushing my back against him, his strong chest pressed against me.

The dim lights cast a glowing sensation over the dance floor, turning everyone's bodies into shadows.

I can't get enough of him. His calloused hands drag along my body, pulling my hips into him. Rowan hasn't touched me like this in a *very* long time. I feel his face fall into my neck, the warmth of his breath caressing my skin. My hips sway to the rhythm of the song, and I let my body lose itself to him.

Everything fades around me, and it's just us.

I turn my body to face him. Needing to see his face. His lips part when our eyes find each other. I see his throat bob, and I fight with myself to push away. The space between us is inches apart, and I can feel the heat of his body.

This can't happen. I can't let myself have him when I'm the one who left him behind to move to a new city and start a new life. I go back and forth in my head, from needing him to letting him go. But when I get lost in his eyes, I'm taken back to our first kiss. I can still feel how soft his lips were on mine.

My hands go up his chest to his shoulders, moving toward the back of his neck, where I feel strands of silky, thick hair running through my fingers. His tongue swipes the bottom of his lip and drags it under his teeth. I know he's thinking the same thing. He wants to taste me just as badly as I do him.

I need to cool myself down because with of the way my heart is pounding, and the ache I feel between my legs, I'm in dangerous territory. Within seconds, I watch him lean down, coming closer to me, my face. I can practically feel his lips inches away from mine. He cups my face in his hands, and my hands find his as I close my eyes.

Shit. Is he about to kiss me?

My body pulls toward him, and I almost feel the graze of his lips as my feet move toward him, meeting him halfway when the music suddenly changes into something with a quicker tempo. The once smokey orange glow of the mood lightening turning to a deep blue.

I pull myself out of that bubble of lust and drop back to my feet, staring up at Rowan. My eyes go straight to his chest, which continues to rise and fall. The adrenaline courses through our bodies. For a moment, we stand in the middle of the dance floor with people still surrounding us, and we keep our eyes on each other.

Neither one of us dares to move.



Ellie: I'm in deep shit.

Ellie: HELP

Riley: Whoa

Addie: What's wrong?

Ellie: Pizza, chocolate, movies.

Hailey: Why are you all up so early? Please stop blowing up my phone and let me sleep.

Addie: Emergency movie night? Oh, this is code red.

Riley: I'll bring the pizza.

Addie: I'll bring the chocolate.

Hailey: I'll bring the tequila.

"I'm here," Riley sings out once she enters the guest house, a pizza box in each hand.

Addie follows from behind, holding two full bags of every type of chocolate you can think of. Then Hailey walks in, two full bottles of tequila in her hands, with a wicked grin.

We're all in our loungewear, no makeup, no bras, and no boys. I decided to wear an oversized shirt with simple cotton shorts. Riley has on her dinosaur onesie that she bought to wear on one lazy Halloween. Addie has on a dark green pajama set, a buttoned-up shirt, and matching shorts with white trim. Hailey has on a black T-shirt that says, '*Tattoos Are Stupid*,' despite being covered in them, and black leggings.

Emergency movie started the night Riley lost her virginity. It was in the back of a pickup truck after our junior year homecoming dance. Every time something monumental happened (at least to us), we would call for an emergency movie night. This meant whatever plans you originally had, canceled, done, sorry not sorry.

"I have all our movies queued up and ready to go." I point to the television that hangs above the fireplace, where it's surrounded by the couch and lounge chairs.

We end up moving everything, including the coffee table, making a large pillow and blanket bed. We all lay together, eating and gossiping while Bridget Jones's Diary plays.

Five slices of pizza later, I'm ready to spill my guts. But first, I take a shot of tequila.

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ROWAN



THE GUYS COME OVER to hang out and grill. My kitchen counter is stacked with food for four men who are ready to devour everything in front of them after a grueling workout together. We all went on a ten-mile run when I asked if they would be up for it. Milo wanted to join, but I wouldn't allow him to run ten miles. That's animal torture. So, I gifted him with a new chew toy and bone.

"Where the hell is your mustard?" James asks, rifling through the fridge and pulling out all the condiments he can find.

"Bottom shelf inside the door," I tell him while setting up my plate of food.

After that, we pile on all the food that can fit on our plates: burgers, grilled asparagus, corn on the cob, salad, and grilled potatoes.

"So, what was last night about?" Beau asks before picking up his burger and taking a large bite out of it.

"What happened last night?" I say, trying to sound clueless.

I look up at the guys, breaking my gaze away from my food, and they all have shit-eating grins on their faces. Except for August, who has more of a grimace.

"You know exactly what we're talking about." James laughs.

"I had to turn around the minute I saw my sister get all handsy with you. Why would you do that in front of me?" August gestures to himself with both hands, giving me a disapproving look.

"I was just following her lead." I bite back a smile.

I start to think about us dancing under the mood lighting, the base vibrating off the floor and into our bodies. I can still feel the handprints she

left on me as she moved them around my upper body.

When her hand landed at the nape of my neck, I wanted to go feral. My body felt like it was on fire, but at the same time, the desire that poured out of me when I slid my hands over her waist and hips. I let myself go a step further when I passed the hem of her shorts and landed them on her bare thighs.

Teenage Rowan would lose his absolute shit if he saw that happening.

I felt myself get hard when she presses her ass into me, and even though I knew I should have stepped back and taken a breather. My body didn't want to leave hers. It just pressed in closer.

"You guys looked like you were about to eat each other's faces." Beau joins the laughter with his brother.

August groans to Beau, hitting him on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Dude."

I roll my eyes before saying, "Nothing happened."

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ELLIE



“SO MUCH HAPPENED,” I tell the girls.

I give Addie the rundown, already knowing Riley and Hailey were there. The touching, grinding, stroking. The way my heart practically leaped out of my chest. How we were so close to kissing, and I was scolding myself in my head for even thinking about wanting him to land his lips on mine.

And I’m almost positive I felt something on my ass. But I’m not going to share that with them.

“I can’t believe I missed this!” Addie shouts.

Hailey looks at her with pinched brows.

“You want to see your brother and Ellie make out?” Riley replies.

Addie slumps her shoulders and rolls her eyes. She pushes her hair out her face and composes herself. “No, that’s not what I mean. I mean that I wish I saw Rowan almost beat the shit out of a guy. My brother can’t hurt a fly. Remember when I saw a spider crawling on top of his desk at work, and I told him to kill it?”

Addie pops a piece of a chocolate bar into her mouth. “He got the creepy thing in a glass and brought it outside to put on a bush. Who does that? So, when I say I wish I were there because my brother was staring down at a guy who was being rude to you, I’d pay money to see that fight.”

“The guy wasn’t rude to me. Just, a little aggressive, I guess. He wanted to continue hanging out, and I didn’t want to. That’s when he grabbed my wrist, and I didn’t even hear Rowan come up behind me.” I shrug. “Do I attract assholes or something? All the guys I’ve met outside of Dove Point are creeps or jerks. The many dates I’ve gone on, I could write a horror

book about. Like one time, I went on a date with a guy who *seemed* normal, only to tell me that the government was watching us and that they put a chip in our brains when we were born.”

Hailey lets out a cackle. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah, I stayed the entire time because I was too scared to abruptly end the date. I smiled, nodded, and never saw him again.” I shiver.

“Okay, going back to what we were originally talking about,” Riley states. “Did you want to kiss Rowan?” She leans from across the floor with a gleeful smile.

“I’m not going to lie and say no.”

Addie shrieks.

“You know, it’s weird that you’re excited over your friend and older brother almost kissing,” Hailey says to Addie with a worried expression.

“It’s not weird! If they get back together, then Ellie is my sister again!” Addie can’t hold her excitement.

When Rowan and I dated in high school, Addie took that as us planning to get married and started calling me her sister. It was very cute, and of course, I never told her to stop. Rowan didn’t either. The day we decided to end things, Addie took it harder than the actual couple who split up.

“We’re not getting together,” I say in defeat.

Addie frowns. “Why not?”

“For a multitude of reasons. I have a career that I’ve built a great reputation with. I’ve created a life in New York. I have an apartment there.”

“Jobs come and go, but love is forever,” Addie says triumphantly.

“God, you’re such a romantic,” Hailey drawls.

“So, what if I am?” Addie crosses her arms. “I’m sorry that I’m all for a happily ever after. They can happen.”

“El, do you love your job?” Riley asks.

Oof, the question I’ve been dreading since I got here. I’ve specified the stress I’ve accumulated over the job, but I never went into full details.

I sit and ponder. At least, I make it seem like I’m pondering, like I’m *really* thinking about it. When, in fact, I know the answer already. I just don’t want to come off like I’m some depressed, lonely person. Which I am.

Plus, the thought of giving up a career like that, it means I’ve given up. Admitted defeat. Let down everyone around me. If I leave that life behind, that means that I gave up the life I could have had here. With Rowan.

I shift my focus back to them, and they're all waiting for my answer. Fine.

"Do you want the surface-level answer or the deep-level answer?" I ask.

"As deep as the ocean, baby girl," Hailey says.

I cover my face with both hands, dragging them up and down.

"I *loved* my job. I loved every minute of it. It made me feel unstoppable, like I could do anything, and people would still come to see my work. To taste my work. I couldn't get enough. It was addicting. The rush of it all.

"When I would step into that kitchen, my heart would start thundering in my chest out of the adrenaline I would get. Getting to use a skill that I've come to love since I was a little girl. One day, when I wanted cookies, Mom showed me her recipe book so I could try them on my own. It led me to something that I never thought I'd love as much as I do. But what I'm doing now." I shake my head. "I'm falling out of love with it. That's what Charlie saw. He noticed it first. I started sinking into myself, ignoring my feelings, ignoring what Charlie wanted and needed from me."

"I'm going to stop you right there," Hailey demands while holding up a hand. "You are *not* going to blame yourself for what that worthless piece of a man did to you. If he felt what he felt, what he told you, he should have ended things."

Addie and Riley nod in agreement.

I put my hands up in defeat. "Fine, I won't blame myself." I let out a sigh. "I don't know what I'm doing with my life anymore. I miss the simple things. I miss the kind of baking that brings people joy. Don't get me wrong, the things I've made are incredible, but sometimes they look so..."

"Lifeless?" Addie adds.

I drop my shoulders and look at her. I see the sadness in her eyes, the sadness for me. I can't help but feel that same sadness that has built in me. My chest feels heavy, and my eyes start to prickle without me stopping them. I want to let everything out. I want to cry, yell, and be mad. I haven't let myself really feel everything I've been through. I've been ignoring everything when it comes to my mental health.

A tear escapes when I tell them something I never told anyone. "There was one day at work when I was preparing for an event. I was under a lot of stress. A lot of pressure for everything to be perfect. There was a day when I slept at work because I was too wrapped up in not failing.

“Then, on the day of the event, one of my dishes was messed up. I realized that I’d forgotten a key ingredient, and it was the main display.” I shake my head, remembering the impending doom I felt. “I panicked. I was the only one in the kitchen, and I panicked. I started feeling like I couldn’t breathe. I went to the fridge to grab what I needed to fix it, but my hands were shaking so badly, I couldn’t open the door.

“The next thing I knew, I dropped to the floor and cried. I felt like my chest was going to explode. Everything around me blurred, and I remember pulling at my jacket, tugging it away from my chest because I couldn’t breathe. I felt like my heart was about to explode.”

I look down at my hands and realize I’ve been picking at my nails this entire time. I swallow before continuing, “I sat on that floor for two hours. The only reason I got back up was that someone else came into the kitchen to start their own work. I felt so helpless.

“I went home that night. I remember Charlie was waiting for me in the living room, telling me he needed to talk to me about something, but I blew him off. I made it about me. I told him that I had a terrible day and wasn’t in the mood to talk about anything. I went straight into the bedroom and cried myself to sleep.

“Since coming back home, I’ve been able to look back at everything, missing the signs of him trying to talk to me. I pushed him away without ever realizing it. It’s my fault Charlie cheated on me,” I say weakly.

The tears in my eyes turn everything around me into a blur. All I see are three figures coming up to me, and I feel their arms wrap around me, telling me over and over that it was not my fault, telling me that everything will be okay.

Nothing will be okay because it’s my fault. I was the one who drove Charlie into another woman’s arms because I was so focused on not letting my boss down, the event down, that I didn’t notice I was letting the person I loved down.

Charlie was right. I’ve changed. And not for the better.

nineteen

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ROWAN



TODAY IS BOATING DAY, and I could not be more excited. This is a yearly thing the group, and I do together every summer. We all pitch in and rent a large boat that fits all of us. Sometimes, we go all out and get the nicest one and spend the entire day on the water, followed by a bonfire.

We decided to go with a large boat this year. Considering Ellie is back for the summer, it's more of a celebration. The ocean is sparkling today, which means it's going to be a good day.

I haven't seen Ellie in almost four days. We've texted here and there, but not much else. It feels like she's back in the city even though she's less than five minutes from me. I've busied myself with work as a distraction, wondering if I did anything wrong.

I'm not sure what's been going on, if Charlie is doing something, or if she's just spending time with her family, but I hope she's okay. I'm not exactly sure why I don't text or call her. It would be me simply checking in with her. That's what friends are for.

"Woo! Boat day!" Beau yells as he throws his hands in the air.

"Boat day!" James's voice is boisterous with his hands cupped around his mouth.

They keep repeating themselves over and over. They would be voted the most annoying brothers of the year if that were a thing. I should make it a thing.

James is sporting a simple shirt and board shorts. His brother, however, the man who is covered in tattoos, with a nose piercing, is wearing a colorful Hawaiian shirt with salmon-colored boat shorts.

"It's boat day, baby!" August adds in.

Riley walks toward the guys with a vicious look in her eyes. “If you don’t shut up, I will gag all of you.”

“Promise?” August replies, and I swear I spot a twinkle in his eyes.

Riley scowls at him and gives him the finger, only for that to get a laugh out of August.

I look around and see Hailey and Addie walking up behind me. The girls have large tote bags on their shoulders, sunglasses covering their eyes, and barely any clothes. Addie has shorts and a shirt on, and I pray to the high heavens that she isn’t wearing floss underneath that. I cannot and will not allow my baby sister to strut around nearly naked.

“Hi, guys!” Addie beams in a cheerful tone.

“What up,” Hailey adds casually.

I try to look nonchalant when I search for someone who is missing from this group. I could ask where she is, but I don’t need my friends teasing me like they did freshman year of high school. Milo starts to bark and whine, and when I look down at him, his gaze is in the opposite direction of where I was looking.

I turn to see what he’s excited about, and my heart skips a beat. I’d be barking and whining too if I saw her first, looking like a goddamn snack.

Avert your gaze. Do not call Ellie a snack. Why did I say that? Because she is a snack, and you want to gobble her up. I shouldn’t be allowed here right now. I should just go home and lock myself in my room and —

“Hey, everyone.” Ellie smiles and waves at us, then bend down to pet Milo.

He licks her cheeks and chin, and my god, I wish I were him right now. All right, pack it up, Rowan. You’re done for the day.

“Hey, El.” I try to sound casual. Normal. Like I wasn’t just thinking about licking her in places that I haven’t tasted in a very long time.

“Hi, Ro.” She looks up at me with a smile, the dimple on her left cheek coming out as she puts her hand on my arm.

I swear my body tenses at her touch. Not in a bad way, but in an ‘*If she touches me again, she will see a side of me that not a lot of people see*’ way. I would throw her over my shoulders and tell everyone to have a wonderful day on the boat.

“Alright, let’s get this going. I already started drinking, and I want to keep up the momentum. Let’s go, let’s go, move, move, move,” Beau yells.

“Dude, you’re not some army sergeant. Tone it down,” James knits his brows at Beau, passing him by to get on the boat.

“I wouldn’t have to be if you guys weren’t moving so slow, now get your asses on the boat!” Beau demands.

By the time everyone gets on, the captain of the ship lets us know the dos and don’ts while on this precious boat. No jumping up and down anywhere on the boat. Do not lean over the ledge when the boat is moving. Do not take the glass bottles from behind the bar. Let the crew member handle your drink. But most importantly, do not try to be Jack and Rose at the front of the ship.

Fair.

“I’m going to the second level to tan. Who’s joining me?” Riley asks.

All three girls nod in agreement and follow Riley up the stairs.

The boat starts gliding on the water and takes off away from the pier. Beau already has his shirt off, oiling himself up, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was making a porno.

“Why are you oiling yourself up like that?” James asks.

“Like what?” Beau stops what he’s doing.

James mimics Beau. Rubbing his chest seductively and slowly while adding a little bit of body rolls that Beau for some exaggeration.

“I was not doing that,” he exclaims.

“Beau, I’m pretty sure you need to give yourself an X-rating because of how you just lathered yourself,” August tells him.

“If you can’t handle this,” Beau says, modeling for us, “then that’s on you.”

August connects his phone to the Bluetooth speaker he pulled out of his bag and selects the playlist we’ve all been working on for this day. By we, I mean the guys. The girls have no idea about this playlist.

We’ve added so many songs that, at this point, we have no idea what’s on there. At first, we paid attention, making sure we were all on the same page. Then it just became chaotic as the days went on. I gave up looking at who added what.

“What the hell?” James says just as the music starts to play.

August starts laughing and says, “Don’t look at me. I did not choose this song.”

Beau starts to sing *Cool for the Summer* by Demi Lovato, ignoring the look that James is giving him. I joined August, laughing while we watched

the talent show. Beau is not a shy man. He will enjoy himself the way he wants. Don't threaten him with a good time.

"How do you know all the lyrics?" James asks.

Beau ignores his question and continues to lip-sync while looking at James.

"Dude, stop." James starts to laugh and holds his hands up.

The chorus of the song hits, and Beau lets go, lip-syncing for his life to James, giving him great facial expressions and arm movements.

"Dude, this song is a fucking banger. Don't diss Demi," Beau points out to his brother.

"Do you even know what this song is about?" I ask.

Beau shrugs. "Yeah, we're just being cool for the summer."

August and I laugh harder.

"What?" Beau asks.

"It's about two women hooking up in secret," August says through his laughter. "You're singing about two women exploring their sexuality."

Beau looks around at us with a shocked expression that turns into a bright smile and nods his head. "Nice."

twenty

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ELLIE



“DID I just hear a Demi Lovato song?” Riley looks over to me, and I shrug in answer.

The four of us are laid in a row on tanning chairs that the boat provides. It took all eight of us to pay for this boat just for the day. It was... *a lot*. And I will not be telling my parents how much money August and I spent just to be on it for a day.

When I heard about the annual boat day, I knew I had to buy a brand-new swimsuit. The question was just how slutty I wanted to look. I’m usually very modest, but the little devil on my shoulder told me to go with the thong bikini, while the angel on my other shoulder told me to go with a simple one-piece.

The devil won. Kicked that angel right off my shoulder.

I’m not one to wear something like this, but since I am back home to have some fun and be happy again, I said to hell with covering my ass cheeks! Single Ellie is in town!

“So, El,” Addie says, “how’ve you been doing since you know... everything?”

That’s a great question. How have I been? I took a couple of days to myself after my meltdown. It wasn’t out of embarrassment, but ever since I came home, it’s been non-stop hang-out sessions. I finally made the time to go to the art studio and talk to Mrs. Anderson about the chocolate peanut butter squares for her art show.

She was being way too generous and wanted to pay five hundred dollars for three dozen chocolate peanut butter squares. I insisted she didn’t need to pay that much. Even fifty would have been good enough despite me already

using half of my savings. When I spoke with Mrs. Anderson, I felt my anxiety hovering over me, waiting to drop. Thinking about having to work for an event again brought up memories I really don't care to remember.

But I don't know how to say no.

I bought a journal the next day, and over the past couple of days, I've been writing in it every day. I was once told that writing your feelings helps, so why not? I'm surprised I didn't do this sooner, but I also thought I was fine and didn't need to express my feelings because all of it was "normal." It was normal to feel stressed, burnt out, unhappy, and lonely.

"It's been okay." I shrug. "I think taking time to myself kind of helped."

"If I spend a minute alone with myself..." Riley shakes her head. "I can't be alone with my thoughts."

"So, what have you been doing? Baking?" Addie asks.

"Nope. I did speak with Mrs. Anderson about catering for her art show next week. But it's super simple even though it's work."

"Wait, really? I heard about the art show that's happening. How cool is that?" Addie smiles.

I nod. "Yeah, I'm just doing it for some extra cash. I wasn't planning on doing any type of work while being home, but when you're broke, you kind of have no choice."

"God, I wish I was a billionaire," Riley sighs out dreamily.

"Me too, but I'm sure it's going to be fun. We can all go and support you and the art pieces, of course," Addie says.

"How much did she pay you?" Hailey asks.

"Hailey, you can't just ask people how much money they're making," Addie whisper-yells.

I let out a laugh and turn over on my stomach. I rest on my elbows while I look at the girls. "She's paying me enough."

"That means it's a lot," Riley mutters.

"El, you know how the town holds The Taste of Dove Point?" Addie asks.

I look over at her and nod my head. I place my hand over my eyes to get a better view of her.

"What if you sign up? You know, have your own table and sell some stuff you love? You can make a lot more money from that."

"Oh, I don't know about that." I shake my head.

“Why not? Sounds like a great idea,” Riley responds and turns over on her stomach.

I shrug. “I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem like something I would do.”

“You ran the bake sale throughout high school, Ellie,” Hailey says.

“Well, yeah, but it was to raise money for something. You know? There was a purpose behind it,” I add.

“You can have a purpose behind this too,” Addie says.

I could probably do it for charity. Give the proceeds to an animal shelter or something. Give back to the community type thing. It does sound kind of fun, being able to bake what I love and miss and share them with festival goers.

Addie gasps and sits up straight. Her hands are held up, and a giant smile is plastered on her face.

“What, what’s wrong?” Hailey shouts.

“I just had a genius idea.”

Riley perks up, the comment pulling her attention. “Do share with the class.”

Addie looks at me. “Ellie, I know you’re only here for the summer, but...”

twenty-one

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ROWAN



“I WONDER what the girls are talking about,” August says curiously.

“I don’t know, probably girl stuff.” Beau shrugs.

“And what would that be?” I turn toward Beau, who sits across from me in the boat's seating area up front.

He looks around at the group while we drink and eat the food that the crew provided. He pinches his brows together, thinking, like he’s making sure not to sound stupid with whatever it is he’s about to say.

“I don’t know. Leonardo DiCaprio?” he suggests.

James quirks a brow. “You think the girls are talking about him? Why him?”

Beau shrugs again. “I don’t know. Women seem to be obsessed with the dude.”

“I’m pretty sure they can have more intellectual conversations than that,” I add.

Beau raises his palms upward. “You guys asked.”

“Yeah, should’ve known better,” James says before taking a drink from the liquid amber in his glass.

We hear someone come down from upstairs and see Riley beaming with excitement as she walks to the bar to get a drink.

Beau raises his brows. “See? They *are* talking about him.”

Riley comes out from the bar, and before she heads upstairs, James calls her over.

“What’s up?” she asks.

“What were you guys just talking about up there?” James tilts his chin toward the upper deck.

Riley arches a brow. "Nothing you need to worry about."

"Just humor me," James asks smoothly.

"Well, if you must know." Riley's smile is back on her face. "Addie has this crazy idea about what Ellie should do."

I lean in, barely noticeable, just to make sure I hear whatever it is that's going to come out of Riley's mouth.

"And what would that be?" August cocks his head with a smile.

Riley's smile drops when she looks at August and then turns back to look at us, her smile back on display.

"Addie thinks that Ellie should take part in The Taste of Dove Point. You know, baking is what used to make her happy, and none of that fancy shit she does. Cookies, brownies, cupcakes. The other night, when we were all talking about how she hasn't been happy at her job, she had full-on waterworks. I swear, she almost made *me* cry, and you know I don't cry. But seeing her heartbroken like that, I couldn't handle it. Did you know that she blames herself for what Charlie did? She says she was so focused on this big event, and Charlie tried talking to her while that was going on, and she was too mentally exhausted to keep up with everything."

I look at August, who looks just as confused as I feel. Clearly, she didn't tell him or her parents that part. What else could she be hiding? Why wouldn't she tell me? I press my lips together, and my brows furrow while I wrap my head around all this.

"Is she okay?" I ask.

"She says she's fine now, feeling better after taking some days to herself."

"I have an idea." Beau holds out a finger, gesturing at us to listen, "Operation *get Ellie to move back home*." He looks at us and smiles.

"What?" Riley squints at him with pinched eyebrows. "This isn't *Mission Impossible*, Beau."

He raises both his hands and shakes his head. "Someone doesn't know how to have some fun."

Riley waves him off and says, "But Ellie said there needs to be a purpose behind her doing it, like when she would host the bake sales at school."

Twice a year during high school, Ellie would hold a bake sale, and the girls would help her with that. One year, she made 700 dollars and donated it to a charity to save bees after a hurricane damaged 95,000 hives.

She had pamphlets about the charity, where to donate if you didn't want to buy baked goods (which, let's be real, she sold out within two hours), and they made a presentation board about bees and why they are needed for our environment.

"She can easily find something that would be worth signing up for the festival," James said.

"Well, Rowan." Riley looks at me with her head tilted. The look she has in her eyes is starting to scare me. "Your sister said that Ellie would have the best reason to raise money from what she sells."

"And that would be?" I gesture my hand in a circle, telling her to continue.

"To move back home, permanently, and open her own bakery!" Riley shouts with an excited smile.

We all look at her dumbfounded because that is a wild idea that involves so much work. Don't get me wrong, if Ellie decided to leave what she built on the other side of the country, you would catch me doing backflips. And I don't know how to do that.

But no one would just leave all that behind. A successful job, which is burning her out, a nice apartment that probably cost more than my mortgage, and—wait—is that all she would have if she went back? She's not with Charlie anymore. I'd never heard her mention any friends. Was it just her and Charlie? Maybe Charlie's friends?

"Why the hell would Ellie just up and move back home? Do you know how hard it is to start a business? I would know," August tells Riley.

August and Mr. Thompson own the surf shack. August and Ellie's dad opened the shop before they were born and has had it ever since. After college, August joined his dad, and now they co-own the business.

Riley glares at him. "Yeah, August, you do know. So, *maybe* you can convince your sister how much of a great idea it is?" she retorts with a smart-ass tone. "Plus, Rowan and James also run a business. Obviously, it's doable." She rolls her eyes at him.

"I mean, sure," James replies. "But it's time-consuming and can be stressful if you do it by yourself. You need to find a location, get a loan, get permits, and then construction. It's *a lot* of work."

"Well, good thing she has *friends* who can help her." Riley looks at us like she's about to chew us up and spit us out. "Plus, you think I want to

work at my dad's dentist's office my entire life? I have a yoga studio, but it's not a full-time gig. *I can co-own the bakery with Ellie.*"

"You really think you can convince her?" Beau pulls her attention.

"She's only been here for two weeks. That means we have plenty of time to drill the idea into her head. I mean, come on, she ran back home away from a shitty relationship and a job that has taken over her life. She isn't happy. Any time she visits home; she looks tired and worn down. When she gets ready to leave, she looks like her normal self again but goes back to the stressful environment she came from. I think she needs to be surrounded by a group of people who will always be there for her. A support system. It seems like she doesn't have that where she is now."

"What did she say when Addie brought this up?" I ask as my nerves take over my body.

Riley lets out a laugh. "Oh, she thought it was hilarious. She laughed for about five minutes, and that's when I came down here to get a drink. The look on Addie's face when Ellie started laughing was pure gold." She mimics the expression, and it looks like a toddler who was told no after asking for a toy they saw in a store.

I tap my fingers on the seat while I think to myself about the possibility of Ellie staying in Dove Point for good. I want her to be happy, and I want to be happy with her. If she is willing to change her life and come back home, then why can't I support that?

An hour later, everyone is hanging out in front of the boat, but Ellie is nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, where's El?" I ask Hailey.

"I think she's still upstairs. She was lying down when we decided to take a break from the sun, but she didn't come with us," Hailey says.

I get up and find myself walking toward the stairs to where Ellie is by herself. The idea of her opening her own place and staying home puts a smile on my face. I would pour all my money into the venture if she could stay home for good.

When I get to the top of the stairs, I look at where the white tanning chairs are, and holy hell. Ellie's ass is...tan. I swallow and then clear my throat when I slowly approach her while she lies on her stomach. She turns her head to me, and she moves her sunglasses to her forehead, giving me the smile I always melt for.

"Hey, what's up?" she asks.

“I, uh.” My eyes quickly roam her body. She’s never worn something like this around me before.

I watch her as she turns over, and sure enough, her nipples are showing off through the fabric of the small bikini top. I would do anything to see the tan lines she gets after today.

The skinny straps tie at her waist. A simple pull at the strings, and it would fall down her legs. My hand stays where it’s at, but I can feel my fingers move like they’re imagining gliding down her soft, golden skin.

“Rowan,” Ellie says, snapping me back into reality.

“Yeah?” I squeeze my eyes shut and then open them, putting my hand over my eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asks timidly.

I wave her off and place my hands on my hips before saying, “Yeah, I’m fine. Just got a lot of sun today. It’s making me a little tired. Don’t worry.”

She lets out a laugh and then pats the seat next to her. “Come sit. Talk to me.”

I feel my legs move before my mind can process what she asked, and when I’m done processing what she said to me, my ass is already on the chair next to her. I can’t control my legs, but I swear I need to control my eyes. How am I supposed to think or function when her boobs are right there?

It’s not like I haven’t seen her boobs before. I mean, I’ve only seen them a few times, and dumb-ass teenage Rowan was so busy being in shock each time that I never took a mental image in my head. It was the first time I saw boobs in person and not on a screen. I didn’t know what to do.

“What have you been up to these last couple of days?” Ellie asks.

“Not much. Working. Hanging out with Mom and Aunt Rosey.”

She lets out a small gasp and asks, “Oh my gosh, how are they? I haven’t seen them yet. I miss your mom’s baked ziti so much. Ugh, it’s so good. And your Aunt Rosey, is she still dating around?”

I laugh at that last part. “Yeah, Aunt Rosey goes on dates here and there, but not as much lately. My mom is doing well. She’s happy you’re back for the summer. You should definitely stop by. I know she would love to have you over for dinner. You were always her favorite. And Aunt Rosey—she always loved having you around. You can keep up with her wit.”

I feel her knee brush against mine and she doesn't move it right away. I wonder if she misses me just as much as I miss her. Or if she thinks about me when she looks up at the stars at night, like we used to do as kids. Being around her is just a reminder that I've always let the relationships in my life dwindle because she's never left my mind or my heart.

Not even when she left to get on that plane.

"We should totally plan a dinner at their house," Ellie says. "That sounds like fun."

"Okay, sure. I'll ask them what day works out for them. Now that they're both retired, they have a lot of time on their hands. My mom would love nothing more than for you to see her. When was the last time?"

Ellie scrunches her nose, her freckles squishing together. "It's been long enough. I know I come to visit when I can, but since it's always in such short bursts, I only ever have time to see family. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to see you guys. I should bring her flowers."

A corner of my lip tilts up. "Or you could bring her favorite brownies." I raise my eyebrows in question.

She tilts her head at me. "Rowan, you know I'm here to relax. Not to work."

"That wouldn't be working, and you know it," I tease.

She lets out a huff of a laugh and says, "Yeah, I know, but I don't know." She sighs. "I'm scared to step into the kitchen again. I know I'll need to get over that soon enough, considering I said I would cater Mrs. Anderson's art show." She looks down at her lap.

"Wait, you're going to cater? What made you say yes to that?"

She deadpans. "You know I can't say no to people."

I go against what I know I shouldn't do, but I pull her into me, wrapping my arm around her in comfort. I feel her arms wrap around my waist and feel the sensation of her shoulders rise and fall as she takes a deep breath.

"You're too nice. It's okay to say no sometimes," I say quietly.

"*I know.* I just don't like seeing people upset."

My hand starts to rub at her back, and all I want is to feel her shoulders relax and her breathing slow down.

"Sometimes you need to think about yourself before you put others in front of you. It's okay to look out for yourself."

"I know," she mutters.

“Are you sure you want to deal with catering? You can change your mind.”

“I need the money. I’m dipping into my savings while I’m here since it was an unexpected stay.”

I rest my cheek on the top of her head. The warmth of her head pressing into my skin makes me feel like I can stay here all day.

“Ellie, if you need money, I can take care of that. I just want you to feel relaxed and have a good summer. I’ll take care of everything for you while you’re here for the next two months.”

I feel her body move, and I pick my head up to look at her. She’s giving me a look I know all too well. Her mouth tightens up, and her eyes are questioning me.

“I’m not letting you spend a dime on me, Rowan. I’m a grown adult and I can handle myself. I’m sure catering will be fine. Plus, it’s only chocolate peanut butter squares. Nothing crazy. It’s the simplest thing she can ask me to do for her.”

“Then let me at least help with that.” My arms are still around her, and hers are still wrapped around me.

“I’m not letting you burn the chocolate,” she says playfully.

“Fine, I can handle the peanut butter.”

She raises her brows and looks away from me.

“It’s peanut butter? How can I mess that up?” I ask.

“Fine, fine. If you want to help, who am I to say no to that?” She gives me a lopsided grin.

I let out a sigh before saying, “What am I going to do with you?” And give her a kiss on her head.

“Oh, shut up. You love me.”

If only she knew just how much.

twenty-two

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ELLIE



AFTER SPENDING the day on the water, we decide to go back to shore as the sun sets and get ready for the bonfire. The girls and I went back to my place to quickly change into bonfire attire, get out of our wet bathing suits, and meet the guys back at the beach.

August points to the orange and red flames that rise to the sky and break into little pieces, flying away. “Look at that. Look at the fire. I did that.”

“Congratulations, you know how to burn wood,” Riley says slowly.

“One day, Riley. One day.” August shakes his finger toward Riley.

“Yes, August, one day you will learn that anyone can make a fire.” Riley smiles sweetly at him.

August continues what he’s doing, muttering something under his breath, and I almost gag when I hear the words *slap* and *ass*. One can only hope he isn’t talking about slapping my best friend’s ass.

Riley and August always had an interesting...friendship. Although, I wouldn’t say it’s a friendship, more of a tolerance of each other. They’ve known each other our entire lives.

They used to get along just fine, and then, one day in high school, it suddenly changed. I tried asking each of them what happened, but neither wanted to talk about it. I decided it was better that I just leave it alone.

“I brought stuff to make s’mores if anyone wants some.” Addie lifts a bag filled with marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate.

“Yes, please.” Hailey takes the bag from her.

All the chairs were set up around the fire, spread out but still close enough to have a conversation without yelling.

I shuffle my feet in the sand when I walk over to where Rowan is sitting, looking at his phone, the colors of the sunset cascading over him. His long legs are spread out in front of him, showing off the tattoos on his knees. There's a beautiful moth with intricate details on top of his right knee and a wreath curving upward under his left knee.

How he was able to handle that pain, I have no idea. I only have one tattoo, and that's my whisk with a dollop of whipped cream on my forearm.

"Can I join you?" With my hands tucked into my hoodie, I gesture to the empty beach chair next to him.

The colors of his eyes look aquamarine as he meets my gaze. I feel my heart slow down when I see them, putting me at ease. If I could look into his eyes all day without looking unhinged, I would.

"My lap is much more comfortable if you're interested," he says with a one-sided smile, showing off his dimple.

I roll my lips, trying to hide a smile and shake my head as I sit down next to him. He's still holding his phone in his hand, and I lift my chin towards it.

"Anything interesting?" I ask.

"Nah, just doom scrolling." He gives me another quick smile. "Riley told us what Addie suggested today."

I look at his finger on the armrest, tapping away. I know he does that when he's thinking about something, or rather, he's *overthinking* about something.

"Oh yeah?" I turn my body toward him, facing him head-on. "And what do you think of this crazy, ridiculous, impossible idea? Do you think I should leave everything behind and come back home?" I smile brightly at him with my brows raised.

I'm curious what Rowan has to say about this. He usually gives me a realistic answer to things, and I end up agreeing with him. But there is a small part of me hoping that he will tell me to stay. Tell me that I will be happier here, with our friends, my family, and with *him*.

I sit up straight and control my breathing, because one simple answer could decide the path I go on. He looks at me with a neutral expression on his face and clears his throat. He breaks eye contact and looks down and then back up to me.

"I think you should do what you want to do. Don't listen to what anyone else wants because, at the end of the day, it's your life. You need to decide

what path you want to stay on.” His eyes roam my face like he’s trying to figure out if what he said was the right thing.

“Hm,” is all I can say.

I press my lips together and slowly nod my head. That wasn’t the answer I was expecting. I can feel my body deflating, and I feel uncomfortable. I feel stupid for asking. He wouldn’t tell me what to do. He’s never done that. He’s always supported me with whatever *I* chose to do in life.

It’s one of the many things I love about him. He’s my cheerleader, my best friend, and someone’s opinion that I take to heart.

“Is that what you really think?” I ask in a hushed tone.

His eyes scan me, thinking, contemplating.

Come on, Rowan, tell me you want me to stay. That I’m better off coming back home for good. To start over. To start over with you.

Be reckless. I’ll be reckless with you.

“Yeah. It’s what I really think,” he answers.

I narrow my gaze at him, and I watch his throat bob. “And what if I decide to stay here instead of going back to New York?”

At this point, I’m just hoping that he gives me an inkling of how he feels. I could be the one to say it—say how I feel and what I want to do, and that he never left my mind when I left.

But I can’t.

Because it’s not that simple. Now I wish I had never asked that stupid question.

“If you stayed, Ellie, I would do anything and everything I can to help you to be successful here.” His voice is low. Quiet, like he just wants this conversation between the two of us. “I’d make sure you never leave here again.”

I swallow, trying to clear my throat when I say, “Oh?”

“You know we would do anything for you, El. You’re our best friend. The core person of this group.”

My body deflates. Oh. Best friend. *Right.*

I nod my head slowly and force a small smile on my face while I feel my heart drop to my stomach. “What are best friends for?”

twenty-three

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ROWAN



IT'S BEEN three days since Ellie asked me that question at the bonfire. In those three days, I worked, cleaned my already clean house, went on too many runs, took Milo to the beach, and even lounged on my couch while I played my records.

Of course I wasn't going to tell her what I really thought. If I did, I would look pathetic. I would have gotten down on my knees and *begged* her to stay. Come back home, where she could open her own business that I know she would succeed in, and have her friends around who will always have her back.

Be with me.

But could I do that? No. The last thing I need is to drive her away and freak her out with my feelings. Especially since she just left a five-year relationship. Who knows where her head is at right now? Not on me.

I'll admit that there have been some questionable moments from the days we've spent together. I've noticed when she's touching me intimately, how she danced with me, and when she held my hand the night she slept in my bed. I rub my temples on both sides when I hear a knock at my office door.

"Yeah," I shout, still rubbing my temples as I hang my head with my eyes closed.

"Can I come in?"

Without looking up, I hear Addie's voice and can tell that she's worried about me. If I open my eyes to look at her, it will just confirm what I already know. I take a deep breath and pull my gaze up to her. I gesture to

the couch against the wall in front of my desk. I don't say anything due to being mentally exhausted.

I'm draining myself over something that *I'm* causing, but also too stubborn to fix it. Because I let fear take me over. I let the anxious voice in my head tell me that it's better to be alone. If you're alone, you won't be disappointed or hurt all over again.

"We need to talk." Addie sits down on the couch, but her expression has gone from soft to stoic. I've never seen this expression on her face before.

I lean back in my chair and swivel it back and forth, needing some movement since I can't sit still. I wave my hand out to her, telling her to say what she needs to say.

She folds her arms and crosses one leg over the other. "You gotta get a grip."

I stop moving.

"Excuse me?" I stammer.

"Do you need me to say it again?"

"You sound like mom. It's freaking me out."

"Good! I want you to be freaked out, dumbass."

She unfolds her arms, uncrosses her leg, and places her elbows on her knees. All right. She's serious. "What are you doing?" She throws her hands out in a question.

"I'm sitting at my desk."

"No shit, dummy, but I'm not talking physically. I'm talking up here." She taps her finger on the side of her head.

I rest my elbow on the chair's armrest and hold my head up with my hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I absolutely know what she's talking about, but I'm not giving her the satisfaction.

"Don't play dumb with me, Ro. You're screwing things up with Ellie, *again*."

"What are you talking about?"

She puts her finger on her chin and tilts her chin up. "Hmm, maybe like when she asked for your opinion on my idea, and you just told her to do whatever she thought was right? *What the hell are you doing?*" she exclaims.

I hold my hands out to the side. "What else should I have told her?"

“I don’t know, Rowan. Maybe the truth? She knows everyone will tell her to stay and screw the life she built in the city, and that’s all fine and dandy. But our opinions don’t matter most to her. *Yours does*,” Addie adds some emphasis to that last part.

“My opinion matters too much to her, which is why I told her to do what she thinks is right. I’m not going to tell her what to do because it’s what I want. That’s selfish.”

“She wants you to, you idiot!” Addie jumps up from the couch and shouts, splaying her hands out at me.

I jerk my head back and lift my hands. “Whoa, you need to chill out. What the hell has gotten into you?”

“You! You and your stupid self-sabotaging personality. Rowan, Dad left us *years* ago, and you still let him control your life. When are you going to wake up and realize that the man never gave a shit about us? You think I’m going to let him decide my life choices? That I’m going to let that man make me feel like I’m not worthy of love?”

“Addie, you’ve been in, like, two relationships.”

“Two more than you’ve ever had.”

My mouth gapes open, and my brows knit together. “I’ve been in plenty of relationships.”

Addie narrows her eyes and cocks her head. “You’ve dated. You’ve never been in an actual relationship. You would find someone you like to be with them for what? Two weeks and then tell them ‘*It’s not working*.’” She mimics my voice. “I don’t think that counts.”

“I’m picky,” I mutter.

“You’re *picky* because you compare every woman to the one you really want. You’re *picky* because you find any sort of problem with a girl to give you a reason to break things off. You look for signs of them leaving because you didn’t see the signs with Dad. Now, you’re not taking the chance, and you’re getting in your own way of happiness. I know you want to be with Ellie again. I want that for you, Ro. You’re an incredible person, and we were raised by two badass women who taught us our value and worth. I understand that you looked up to Dad, and I never did, but he doesn’t deserve you pouring your energy into him. Questioning your worth. I know you, and I know every day you fight with yourself in your head. You’re a chicken shit.”

I was obsessed with my dad. When he would come home, I never wanted him to leave. I followed him around everywhere. I wanted to do everything he was doing. Then one day, everything changed. He left. And my mom, she was depressed, and Aunt Rosey made us move in with her.

"I don't do that," I argue.

"You think you don't, but you do, even if it's subconscious. You carry that trauma around like a badge of honor."

"Stop." My voice is becoming stern. A tone I've never used with Addie.

"You're letting that man ruin your life."

"Stop it," I repeat, my voice growing louder. I start to feel my emotions rise higher and higher as she continues, and I don't know how to handle this side of my sister.

"Mom didn't even let that man ruin her life," Addie says. "And she was *married* to him."

"That's enough!" I shout, rising from my chair.

I pull myself back and look at my sister. She didn't flinch, didn't move a muscle. She keeps her eyes laser-focus on me with determination. She may be smaller than me, but she's mighty.

I let out a deep breath and run both my hands through my hair, leaving them on my neck as I pulled down on it. I close my eyes and tilt my head up.

"What do you want me to do, Addie? I can't tell her to stay," I say in defeat.

"Yes, actually you can." Her voice is calmer, sweeter. "You're a lot stronger than you think you are emotionally and mentally, Ro. You have so many people in your life who love you, and you've never once tried to push them away. So, what makes Ellie so different?"

I let go of my neck and fall back into my chair. "She left once, Addie. What makes you think she won't leave again? How would I know that I'm worth it for her to stay?"

Addie walks around my desk and sits on the edge of it. She folds her arms and looks at me with sadness in her eyes. "That was different, and you know it. She didn't leave you because she was done with you. She left because she had an amazing opportunity that she knew would change her life. You guys decided it was for the best to split up. But I think it was the worst thing you two have ever done."

I rub my eyes with my fingers and then drop my hands to my lap. “So, what do I do?”

“You really want to know what I think?” Addie asks me in an ominous tone.

“What else do I have to lose when I’ve already lost my dignity.”

Addie rolls her eyes, but then a devilish grin appears on her face. I drop my facial expression because Addie only makes that face when she has some sort of diabolical plan. She may as well steeple her fingers and tap them against each other. Really adds to the evilness.

“Take out your phone,” she orders. “Right now.”

“Shit. Do I even want to know anymore?”

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twenty-four

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ELLIE



I'M LYING on the couch with a bag of chips on my stomach while Riley rests on the floor, feeding herself Sour Patch Kids.

"Ry, you're going to choke. Sit up," I demand before I stuff my face with chips.

It's that kind of day—where I wallow in despair. Wondering where I went wrong and reevaluating my life choices. I know I'm only twenty-nine, but I had a plan.

Graduate high school, graduate culinary school, make a name for me, and live happily ever after.

Boom. Done.

Instead, I have a pile of crumbs on top of my shirt because I don't know how to properly feed myself.

"If I die, I die. At least I go out with a bang while I eat my favorite candy," Riley replies lazily.

I hear my phone buzz from the floor next to Riley's head.

"Who is it?" I ask in a careless tone.

Riley doesn't move her head or body but reaches her arm across her face to grab it. She looks at the screen and shows it to me.

She shakes my phone toward me. "It's Rowan."

"What does it say?"

She's quiet for a moment and then says, "Ooooh," in a tone like I'm about to get in trouble.

The box of candy falls off her stomach and onto the floor, getting sugar everywhere. Great.

"What?" I ask annoyingly.

She turns toward me, walking on her knees to me. *Did something bad happen? Did something happen to Milo? His mom? The brewery?* I sit up just as quickly and snatch the phone from her hand. The floppy bun on my head droops to the side, with loose strands of hair falling out.

Rowan: Hey, El. I wasn't sure if I should text you this or ask you over the phone or in person. I figured this would be the easiest since I'm at work and can't really leave.

The gray dots appear, bouncing as I wait for his reply. I look up at Riley who has crawled her way over and is kneeling next to me, looking at the screen.

"What do you think he's going to ask?" I look at Riley.

"I don't know, but it's going to be good. I can feel it." Riley beams.

I look at her and squint my eyes. "You're so odd. You know that?"

Riley slaps my arm over and over and says, "he texted!"

We both look at the screen, and my eyes almost leave my face.

Rowan: Can I take you out to dinner?

Riley looks at me with her jaw still on the floor. "Holy shit. I can't believe he just asked you out. It's like high school all over again."

"He didn't ask me out. He asked if I wanted to get food with him."

I refuse to let my mind wander. Rowan and I have gone out to eat *alone* plenty of times in the past few years. The only difference now is I'm single.

"He's probably wanting to go to the diner or something," I muse. "Or that taco place I like."

"El, you're joking, right? Yeah, sure. Let's see where he suggests first, shall we?" Riley looks back at the phone.

"Riley, even if it was a date, which it isn't, you know it would be a bad idea."

"Bad idea, my ass. It would be a great idea. You two were *the* couple back in high school. Everyone thought you were going to be high school sweethearts."

I roll my eyes. "Trust me, I know."

"If you do not answer him, I will." Riley lunges to grab my phone out of my hand, but I stand up just in time.

"I'll answer." I hold up my phone away from her. "Just let me think."

“What is there to think about?”

“Um, Charlie, for starters?”

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me. You’re still thinking about giving that asshole of a guy a chance? No, I won’t allow that. Not when you have someone incredible like Rowan standing right in front of you. *Again.*”

“What about my job? New York? And if something does happen between me and Rowan? I’m just expected to leave and start that ridiculous idea of opening a bakery?” My tone comes out a bit harsher than I expected.

“For all you know, you try this out and realize that you’re actually better off as friends, *not that I believe it for one minute,*” she mutters.

The thought of Rowan getting down on one knee and proposing to me is something I can picture. Teenage Ellie dreamed about that, but teenage Ellie also dreamed about Rick from The Mummy proposing to her. Brendan Fraser was at his prime that year.

I drop my arm down and look at Riley. Charlie texted me a second time a few days ago. I left him on ‘read’ again. This time, asking me *if I’d changed my mind early and if I was coming back home. He misses me, and everyone at work misses me.*

Which I know is a big fat lie, since everyone at work focuses on themselves and their dishes. I’ve never gone out to get drinks with my crew or anything. I wasn’t like that with them.

Before I start to overthink, I lift my phone up and text him.

Ellie: Sure! Where are you thinking? The diner? That taco place by the beach?

Rowan: I was thinking Zesty Ziti. Is Friday cool? I can get you around 7PM.

My mouth gapes as I stare at the screen. That place is not the type of place that would serve you a greasy burger. From what I hear that place is where you go for an anniversary or to wine and dine with your significant other. Or go on a date.

“What did he say? Where is he taking you?” Riley asks eagerly.

I hold out the phone to her, letting her read his text. Her jaw drops, and her eyes widen. “Ellie,” she says.

“Shut up,” I reply, looking back down at my phone.

“Ellie.”

“Don’t say it, Riley,” I beg.

She gives me an all-too-big smile. “This is a date.”

“It can’t be a date. He should know better. I’m only here until the end of the summer. I’m not staying here.”

“Rowan and Ellie, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n—”

“Do *not* finish that.” I point to her.

“G.” She opens her mouth, smiling like she just challenged me.

I let out a sigh and looked back down at my phone while mumbling, “I should have let you choke on a sour patch, kid.”

I hear Riley laugh to herself while I send my reply.

Ellie: Okay, can’t wait :)

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twenty-five

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ROWAN



I THINK I'm going to throw up.

I still have my towel wrapped around my waist, so if I do, I think I'll be okay.

I don't know why I let Addie push me into asking Ellie to go out to dinner. She was relentless that day. She won the 'annoying little sister award,' and I told her that. She shrugged and said, *I'm okay with that*.

I was almost positive Ellie wasn't going to agree to a date. Then again, I didn't specify that this was a date. Just two friends going out to eat. That's normal, right?

There were a lot of reasons why she could say no. So, when I asked her, I wasn't getting my hopes up. I can't control how Ellie feels, what she thinks, or what she will say. It's one of the reasons I tend to keep myself distant from potential relationships. I can't control another person, and I'm not going to be the controlling type in a relationship. That's not me, and that's a really shitty thing to do. I can control my life and what happens because it's *mine*.

I question my worth every single day with everything. Am I good enough at my job? Does everyone enjoy the beer James and I create every day? Am I a good son, a good brother, am I worthy of everyone's friendship, am I worthy of Ellie?

It's exhausting to question myself every day. Addie is right. I need to stop letting our father control how I look at life. I grew up with a lot of love from everyone else, but a dad and son are supposed to have this unbreakable bond.

I wonder if he would be proud of how I've carried out my life. I know I shouldn't care, but I can't help it. He's still my dad at the end of the day. Even if he doesn't love me.

I place my hands on the bathroom counter and look at myself in the mirror. My stormy, sky eyes look right back at me, and I can see all the scars behind them. The memories that I've tried to repress. It's hard to do that when I see my father in the mirror every day.

I break my gaze and return to reality when I hear my phone buzz on the bathroom counter next to my hand. I look down at the screen, and Addie's photo glows toward me. I slide the green button and hit the speakerphone.

"What's up?" I ask.

"I..." She sighs. "I just wanted to see how you're feeling. I know I was a bit harsh on you the other day and pushed you to do this. I don't have any regrets, but I know I could have been a bit softer with my approach."

I let out a silent laugh and drop my head between my shoulders. My hair falls, and I can see the strands swaying in my peripheral vision. I need to get a haircut.

"It's okay," I reply.

I can hear relief on the other end of the line when she sighs. "Are you nervous?"

"Well, if you were to see me hovering above my bathroom sink, would you say I look nervous?"

"Ro don't get in your head. You two are going to have a fun time."

"I know we will." I try to sound confident, but my facial expression says otherwise.

"Do you know what you're going to wear?"

"What? You don't trust my outfit choices?" I smile at the phone.

"I do. But because this is a special occasion, I want you to look your best."

I stand up straight and grab my phone off the counter. I walk over to my closet and look at everything available to me. Flannels, plain T-shirts, graphic T-shirts, casual button-ups, and dressy button-ups.

"Did you decide where you're taking her?"

"Yeah, I made reservations at the new Italian place," I reply while moving around my hangers.

"Zesty Ziti? I hear that place is so good. They have this cookie skillet that's supposed to be amazing. You should get that."

“I’ll get it if Ellie wants it.” I pull out a shirt and hold it out. “Would you say a band T-shirt is too casual?”

“Ro, really? A band T-shirt? Ellie deserves better than that, and you know it.”

I put the hanger back and drop my hand to my side.

“Why don’t you wear the short-sleeved button-up, the navy blue one with the tiny white polka dots? Pair it with those chino pants. You know, the darkish khaki ones? It will go well with your shirt.”

I cross to my dresser, open the middle drawer, and grab my pants. For a moment, my hand hovers over the first drawer. I feel my hand clench and release. When I open it, I look down to see neatly folded stacks of socks, but I let my hand go toward the back until I hit something.

A small box.

My hand wraps around the velvety surface as I pull it out from the drawer. I set my phone down on top of the dresser while Addie continues to talk. My finger grazes around the edge, feeling the fuzz-like material against my skin.

I’m just about to open it when I hear Addie break through this trance.

“Rowan are you still there?” she asks.

I close my eyes for a moment before opening them and tucking away the jewelry box back in its place where it’s been sitting for ten years.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, sorry. You don’t think that would look too dorky?”

“Rowan, you’re a dork to begin with. Plus, there’s not much to work with when it comes to your wardrobe.”

“Ouch. All right.”

“Now get dressed, do your hair, and pick up your dream girl. You’re already running late.”

“You don’t even know what time I made the reservation for.”

“It’s already six o’clock, so I can only assume your reservation is between seven-thirty and eight.”

“Creep.”

“You know you love me.”

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ELLIE



I LOOK at the restaurant in awe when we pull up to the valet. The exterior exudes old-school Hollywood glamor, giving a 1930s feel. If the outside makes it feel sophisticated, I can only imagine what it will feel like once we step inside.

“How did you even get a reservation? I heard this place has been booked for months.” I look at him and feel my body get a warm and fuzzy feeling inside.

He looks so handsome tonight. I haven’t seen him dress up to this extent in a long time. He’s usually in a T-shirt and jeans. I like that the casual button-up he’s wearing is short-sleeved. I always love having a chance to admire his tattoos. Especially the ladybug.

“I know the owner,” he replies, looking at me before he puts the car in park.

“No shit?” I look back to the beautiful vine-covered building. “Wow.”

He shrugs. “He owed me a favor.”

“Keep the favors coming,” I mutter.

We walk into the dimly lit restaurant. The low chatter amongst the guests and the sound of clinking glasses fills the space. Rowan walks confidently to the host stand, one hand in his pocket, and his ass? Phenomenal.

I look around and admire the deep forest green painted walls scattered with old Hollywood photos. Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Al Pacino hang behind the host stand. I find myself walking toward him, still looking at the details of the lights that hang throughout the space. The mood lighting is perfect enough to feel romantic.

Romantic. *Not* a casual restaurant that friends would go to for dinner.

"I didn't get to tell you how beautiful you look tonight," Rowan says, his eyes wandering my dress.

"Thanks," I say shyly.

Okay... Maybe this is a date.

I wanted to wear something simple but cute. Not too sexy and not too revealing. I don't want him to get the wrong idea and make him feel uncomfortable. However, this was the perfect excuse to buy myself something new, which I haven't done in some time, considering I *was* in my chef uniform most of the time.

The draped, dark red, A-line dress hugs my figure in all the right spots. The silky material glides on my skin like water. The thin straps make a crisscross on my back, and I can feel the cool breeze in the restaurant brush against my skin. The black, strappy heels give me an extra three inches. Still nowhere near close to be eye level with Rowan.

Okay, so maybe it is sexy.

"Mr. Williams, your table is ready." The host pulls his attention away from me and we follow her to the table.

I almost stop in my tracks when I see the table she's taking us to. It's an intimate booth — perfect for two people—in the shape of a U. A beautiful set of candles sits in the middle of the table, lit. I notice other tables around us have a single candle lit in the middle, but there are three on our table. A wine bottle is placed in a bucket of ice on the edge of the table. Wine glasses are ready and waiting.

As we get closer, I see a beautiful bouquet. My lips part when I recognize the arrangement. Delicate, blush pink roses are tucked away with off-white rabbit tail grass and a white silk ribbon.

I feel Rowan's hand on my lower back as he guides me onto the caramel-colored leather booth. The glossy dark wood is smooth against the palm of my hands.

The host places our menus on the table and lets us know our server will be with us shortly to get our drink orders. I set my purse on the seat next to me and then grab my hair, letting it fall onto my back. Rowan sits close to me, maybe leaving an inch or two of space between us.

He clears his throat before saying, "I hope you don't mind the flowers."

I pick up the bouquet and inhale the soft scent of the flowers. The rabbit tail grass tickles the tip of my nose. I glide my thumb and forefinger on a

rose petal and look at him. “Do you realize that this is the exact arrangement that my corsage was when we went to prom? It’s...” I shake my head in disbelief, feeling silly for remembering something from so long ago.

The corsage was so beautiful that I preserved it for as long as it would let me. I kept it alive for almost two months until the petals started to wither away and fall off its stem.

The corner of his mouth turns up, and his eyes sparkle under the candlelight. “That’s exactly what I was going for. I can’t believe you remembered.”

A smile tugs at my lips, and I half bury my face in the bouquet. “Of course I remember. I was obsessed with it and kept it alive for over a month.”

“You looked incredible that night,” he says in a low voice.

“You remember?” I ask suspiciously.

He tilts his head, giving me a smile like he’s challenging me. I put the bouquet down and twist my body toward him, smiling back.

“You wore a blush pink, strapless dress with a sweetheart neckline. The top part of the dress had swirls of flowers stitched into it. Your favorite part of the dress was when you would spin in it, and the bottom half would swirl around you,” he finishes.

My eyebrows raise in surprise. “How did you—”

“Ellie, you talked about it for months after you found it. You told me every detail down to the stitching. But the day I saw you in it for the first time.” He pauses, closing his eyes and shaking his head. His eyes find mine again, and the sound of his voice comes out in a husk when he says, “It was better than I had imagined it in my head for weeks. I was lucky to have Ellie Thompson, the most stunning girl in our school, as my date. It was the best night of my life.”

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I just look at the man that I let go of all those years ago, wondering why I had made such a terrible mistake.

This is definitely a date.

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ROWAN



WE LOOK at each other for what feels like hours. Neither of us is speaking. I feel like my mouth has gone dry after telling her that. Something that happened years ago, and I never told her how I felt that day. I was too stunned to speak when I saw her walking toward me on that warm, sunny day.

She opens her mouth slightly and says, “Rowan, I—”

“Hello, welcome to Zesty Ziti. I’m Justin and I’ll be your server for this evening. I see that you have a special menu that was put together just for you two tonight. Have you had a chance to look over it?”

Ellie turns to the server and smiles. “Hi, um, we haven’t had a chance to go over it yet. Sorry.”

The server smiles brightly at her. “No worries. I will let you two look over it, but in the meantime, would you like me to open your bottle of wine for you? It’s one of the owner’s favorites.”

“Yes, please,” Ellie says happily.

I haven’t broken my gaze from her during the server’s oration. I want to tell him that he can go away and forget the damn wine. What was she going to say? I pull away from my thoughts and adjust myself to face the server. I put on a forced smile while I watch him pour the golden white wine.

After we give it a taste and are happy with it, our server leaves us for a moment to go over the menu. I can’t think about food anymore. I want to go back to what we were just talking about. Did I make her uncomfortable? There was this look in her eyes that I couldn’t quite figure out.

“So.” Ellie picks up the menu and looks over it. “This is a special menu? What’s the occasion for it to be special?”

I follow her lead and forget the conversation. Now I know what I'll be spiraling over tonight.

"The special occasion is you being home," I tell her with a smile. "Get whatever you want."

"Are you sure you want to stick to that? That's a dangerous game you're playing."

"I'm willing to take the chance. My wallet can handle it."

"Ooooooh, what if we eat in reverse?"

I arch a brow to her in question.

"You know, dessert, entrée, appetizer."

"That's just psychotic." I put my menu down and splay my arm across the top of the booth, trying to relax my body.

I see Ellie's eyes follow my movement, wondering if this is okay. She doesn't say anything and instead makes herself more comfortable.

I feel her lean into me before saying, "Fine, if you don't want to do that, can I at least get the cookie skillet after our meal?"

"Of course. I'm not going to deprive you of your sweets. I'm trying to make a good impression tonight."

"Uh-huh." She turns her body toward me again, leaning her elbow on the table and placing her fingers along her jawline. "Why are you trying to make a good impression tonight?"

"Because I'm trying to make you forget about your asshole ex-boyfriend. My job tonight is to remind you how you *should* be treated daily. To remind you what you're worth."

She scoffs. "Rowan, you don't need to do that."

"You're right. I know I don't need to—I *want* to. There's a difference."

She puts her hand down on the table, one side of her lip tips up in a smirk, and she narrows her eyes toward me. "You are such a suck-up."

I chuckle. "Nope, that's me overcompensating for my daddy issues."

"Hey," she says sharply, holding my stare. "I thought you were working through all of that? Going to therapy and trying to move on?"

I bring my arm back down and onto my lap. I start to fidget with my fingers while I look down at them. Ellie's hand covers mine, her way of making me stop. I look at her, and all I see is worry in her sparkling blue eyes.

"I've been going to therapy. I go every other week. We got to a point where we were talking about me seeing him."

“What?”

“Hypothetically speaking, I’ve been wondering, if I were to see him, what would I say?”

Ellie nods. “Oh, okay. Can I ask what that would be?”

I shrug. “I guess I would just ask for his side of the story. I know Mom's side already.”

On my twenty-first birthday, I decided that I wanted to know more details about why he left. I wanted to stop feeling so empty, and maybe if I knew the story, I wouldn’t feel this pit in my stomach and wonder why every day.

My parents met when they were in elementary school. My dad's parents moved to Dove Point when he was nine years old. He was the new kid. One day, my mom spotted him in one of their classes and introduced herself. Because that’s the type of person my mom is: welcoming and friendly. Ever since then, they started to become friends. It wasn’t until they were sixteen that my dad asked her out on a date. He never thought he’d land a girl like Mom, but he didn’t want to regret not trying, from what she told me.

I feel Ellie’s hand squeeze mine as I’m pulled from my memories. I must have zoned out because the server came by again, asking us if we were ready to place our orders. Ellie took the lead, letting me deal with my thoughts.

“What would you like?” he asks.

“The bacon-wrapped asparagus, tomato burrata bruschetta, and zucchini fries, please,” she replies in a sweet tone.

My brows shoot up after she lists off the apps she wants. I forgot how much she loves to eat. She could win a pie-eating contest, the filling spread all over his face, and I’d still be head over heels for her.

“What?” she asks before taking a sip of her wine.

“You sure you’re going to have room for the entrée and dessert?” I laugh.

She sets the glass down, rests her arms on the table, and looks at me. “Rowan, you’re the one that eats the majority of the food.”

“I do not,” I say in a defensive tone.

She deadpans. “Remember when we shared that huge burrito one summer? The one that was the size of your head. You ate all of it.”

“Whoa, the only reason I ate all of it is because you took four bites and said your stomach couldn’t handle the rest.”

She narrows her eyes at me and smiles slowly. “Bad example.”

I scoff. “Only example.”

Ellie rolls her eyes and tries, but fails, to hide a smile. She changes the subject, not going back about my dad, but instead focusing on the event for Mrs. Anderson. At this moment, I feel so grateful to have someone like her. Someone who knows my moods and can read me like a book.

The one woman who knows me better than I know myself.

After we finish our entrée, the server takes our plates away and tells us our dessert will be out momentarily. I can feel my stomach on the brink of explosion, but I’m stubborn and will be enjoying a cookie skillet.

I’ll deal with the consequences later. Whatever they may be.

Ellie grabs my forearm and looks past me. “Oh my god.”

I turn my head and see the server approach us with a large skillet, and a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream peeks out of it. There’s a small sparkler on top, grabbing the other guests’ attention. I turn back to Ellie, wanting to witness her facial expression.

I pull out my phone to get a recording just for the sake of wanting to remember this moment. I focus my camera on her the entire time, and when she gets a full glance at the cookie and ice cream, her face lights up. She looks like she was just given gold on a plate.

She realizes I’m recording her when she tells me how incredible it looks. The smile falls from her face, and she looks at the camera in horror.

“You’re recording me? Ro!” she whines.

I laugh and put my phone away. “What? I knew it would be too good. You looked so cute, *especially* when you realized I was recording you.” I continue to laugh, thinking about the facial expression change.

I hold the spoon up to her with a smile, gesturing to her to take the first bite. Ellie and her desserts are the one thing you don’t want to get in the way of. One time, August swiped at some frosting for a cake she was making for their mom. I have never seen someone grab a wrist so fast. August had to scream, *Uncle*.

“Rowan Andrew Williams, did you just call me cute?” She looks at me with a playful smile while grabbing the spoon from my hand.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It must be all the sugar that’s in your head.” I look away and pick up my spoon, waiting for her to take the first bite.

“You haven’t called me cute in years. Good to know I still got it.” She dips her spoon into the cookie, dipping it into the vanilla ice cream.

“Wow, you are so into yourself. New York really changed you.” I shake my head.

“Shut up,” she says, pushing her shoulder into mine.

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twenty-eight

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ROWAN



“DO you want to keep hanging out?” I ask Ellie while we wait for my car from the valet.

She looks at me with a tired smile. “Sure, I’m having a good time.”

I try to contain my giddiness, but I can’t help but bounce on my toes a little that she still wants to hang out after something that felt intimate.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

She holds the bouquet of flowers to her chest. When I turn my head, I see straight down her dress, and I snap my head back up. The small glimpse I got of her cleavage was enough to make my dick twitch. I’m innocent. I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m just a very tall man who is standing next to his noticeably short, cute friend.

A friend I once dated and have seen naked before. Someone I pined for, for years. And still have the ring I was going to give her.

I also haven’t been touched in so long, and the small physical touches that Ellie gives me set me on fire. I haven’t felt like that from any other woman I’ve been with. I never had that spark. I never craved for them to touch me more.

“Can we just go back to your place?” she asks. “Hang out with Milo? Maybe watch a movie?”

I put my hands in my pockets when I feel them start to sweat out of nerves. Being alone with Ellie at my house isn’t anything new. But after taking her out to dinner, and again, not specifying if it was a date, it could lead to other things. And I don’t want to mess anything up.

“That sounds good. Have a movie in mind?” I ask.

The car pulls up, interrupting our lively conversation, and I open the passenger door for Ellie. I notice how gently she handles the flowers, making sure they don't hit anything, and lay them on her lap.

"I love this band," she exclaims when she climbs into the Jeep.

I turn to look at her, catching her eyes on me when I get in.

"I know you do." I glance at her while Radiohead plays in the background.

I took the cover off the Jeep before I picked up Ellie, taking advantage of the warm weather, we were having today. When I let my eyes wander to her, the night lights streaming across her face give her a beautiful glow.

Her hair flows around her, and I'm taken back to a time when we would take nightly drives as teenagers. We didn't always have a destination. Sometimes it was just to spend time together under the night sky. I would find a secluded place for us, and we would lay on the hood of the car, talking while the softness of the music played in the car.

That was the first night I kissed her. The first night that I got to feel her soft lips on mine.

I see a smile on her face as she looks out to the ocean. The moon makes it sparkle against its light. She reminds me of that sparkle. Always shimmering.

"I gotta pee so bad," Ellie blurts out just as we pull up in front of my house.

She rushes out of the car and does this sort of waddle walk toward the house and up the porch. I've already passed her, opening the door quickly for her, and she runs inside.

I watch her slip on the hardwood floor as she runs. "El, be careful."

I put my keys on the entrance table and hear Milo running down the stairs to greet me.

"Hey, buddy." I bend down on my knees, giving him a kiss on the top of his head while he wags his butt and lets out happy whines. "I know, I've missed you too."

Ellie returns with a sigh. "Whew, I feel so much better. Lighter even."

I straighten. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Milo walks to her, and she cups his face and kisses the top of his head.

"Okay," she claps. "What will we be watching?"

She throws herself on the large sectional in my living room, making herself comfortable. She's done this a thousand times. She comes over, we

hang out and just talk, so why does it feel different? I sit beside her, grabbing the remote to turn on the TV.

She looks at me excitedly. “Ooh, let's do what we used to do in high school.”

“Choose a random movie? I think it was easier with DVDs because we could spread them out and blindly pick a case. How would we do it now?”

She gives me a look that says, *are you really underestimating me?* and takes the remote from me.

“What genre?” she asks without looking at me.

“Horror.”

“Horror? What are you trying to do? Get me to jump in your arms when I’m scared?”

“That’s the plan, yeah.” I let myself get more comfortable, leaning into the couch and draping my arm across the top.

Her eyes roll, and she selects the horror genre through one of the many streaming services I have. “Okay, this is how it’s going to work. We are going to close our eyes, and I’m going to slide my thumb down the circle thingy—”

“Circle thingy?” I interrupt.

“I don’t know what this thing is called. This is like a futuristic remote.”

I nod. “Okay, you’ll slide your thumb down on the circle thingy.”

“And then you’ll say stop, and I’ll pause the scroll. Whatever it lands on, that’s what we’ll watch. Sounds like a plan?”

“I don’t know if I trust this process, but fine.”

“What’s not to trust?” Ellie looks away from me, closes her eyes, and scrolls.

I count to three and say stop. I open my eyes but look at Ellie first, and she still has her eyes closed.

“Are you going to open your eyes?” I ask.

“I’m scared. What if it lands on a *really* bad movie?”

“Then we can laugh at the really bad movie.” I gently put my hand on her leg, making her jump just the tiniest bit. “Sorry.”

“You can’t do that when I have my eyes closed, and we’re choosing a horror movie.”

“Sorry, sorry. Are you going to open your eyes, or are you going to make me tell you?”

“Okay, okay.” She peeks with one eye and then opens the other. Ellie starts to shake her head and looks at me. “I’m not watching *The Conjuring*. No way.”

“Hey, you’re the one that did this. It was your idea. Now we need to stick to it.”

I get up from the couch and walk toward the front of the living room.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I’m turning off the lights,” I say without looking back at her.

“No, we are not turning off the lights.”

“It wouldn’t be a true horror movie if we watched it with lights on, now, would it?” I flip the switch and walk back toward the couch.

She looks up at me with a worried expression because the movie that it landed on is a movie she is terrified of.

Again, she did this.

“I’ll stay close to you and protect you. I promise.” I sit down next to her and take the remote from her, hitting play.

Ellie groans and pulls one of the throw pillows on the couch to her chest, clutching onto it.

“You’ll be fine.” I wrap an arm around her shoulder casually while she whines into the pillow.

I smile at her, wondering if she will, in fact, get scared to the point that she wraps her arms around me. She shouldn’t have asked me to choose the genre. That was her first mistake.

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ELLIE



"I HATE THIS PART," I say, still clutching the pillow to me.

I'm using it as a shield when I see a scary part coming that I do not like. Why did I let Rowan choose the genre? I didn't think he would choose horror. We're nowhere near October, so I didn't think that would come to mind. I know he did this on purpose. A mistake I will not make again.

I stopped the scrolling and landed on *The Conjuring*. We saw this movie in theaters, and it terrified the living shit out of me. I don't mess with demons. I'm not a religious person per se, but I believe there are evil things in the world that walk among us.

The part where the lady lights a match and looks down into the very dark, very scary basement, and then the hands clap behind her? Yeah, well, I had my feet up on the chair in front of me at the theater, and when that happened in the movie, I jumped and kicked the person who was sitting in front of me in the head.

I felt terrible. I bought them candy and a slushy to make up for it. Ever since then, I've never put my feet on movie chairs again.

"Crap!" I shout.

I was so busy thinking about things that I was looking at the television when the creepy woman was atop the wardrobe cabinet. I already know that I'm on top of Rowan because watching this movie in the dark is not a fun time.

He already had his arm around me, but I've dug myself deeper into him. I don't care how this comes off. That thing is going to jump through the television screen and pull me into the depths of hell.

I take a deep breath when another scene comes up. I know what happens, but I can't help but get scared. All right, it's coming up. *Just look at the screen, you're a bad bitch, Ellie. It's fine. It's —*

I scream. I scream and jump up from the couch when I feel something skitter across my arm. I look at Rowan, who is keeled over laughing, and that's when I realize that he's the one that caused me to jump up and almost piss myself.

"Rowan! That's not funny!" I stomp my foot and throw the pillow at him.

He catches it while still laughing and then puts it next to him. He wipes his eyes because he has tears from how hard he's laughing.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it," he breathes through his laughter.

"I am *not* sitting by you for the rest of the movie."

His laughter slows down, and he lets out a breath. "Okay, okay. I'll stop. I'm sorry, come back." He holds his hand out.

I look down at his hand and then back to him. I narrow my eyes on him. "Do I need to make a pillow barricade between us?" I ask.

"I promise I won't do that again. The movie is almost over, anyway." He holds his hand out. "Come on."

"Fine," I mumble.

I sit back down but leave more space between us. I allow an empty cushion between us, and for safety measures, I place a throw pillow on top of it. I'm tempted to tell Milo to lay between us.

"What?" I ask when I notice him looking at me.

"Why are you sitting so far away?"

"Because I don't trust you."

He clutches his chest. "You don't trust me? Your own best friend?" He grabs the decorative pillow and tosses it to the other side of the couch.

"What are you doing?"

"If you won't come to me, I'll come to you." He starts to scoot over toward me.

"No way, I'm not playing games, Rowan. That really freaked me out." I scoot a smidge over, away from him.

"Oh, come on, El. I promise I won't do anything. I'm sorry. It was a mean joke." He stops moving and looks toward me.

"Only if you promise not to scare me again."

“I promise I will not scare you again. I’ll be sure to protect you this time.”

“If you break this promise...I’m going to give this hangout session a two-star rating.” I point to him.

“Two stars! Well, that just can’t happen. I need this to be top tier, five stars, would-hang-out-again, type rating.”

He gets a chuckle out of me, and of course I forgive him. And I trust him. He’s someone I would trust with my life because I know he wouldn’t do anything to really hurt me. Even if it’s from a scary movie.

I move over to him and cross my arms, letting out a breath while the movie continues.

“Come here,” he croons, tugging me into him, his arm wrapping around me. “The big, scary monster won’t get to you.”

“Oh, you’re going to be my knight in shining armor?” I question. I look at him to continue teasing him when I quickly realize how close our faces are to each other.

I inhale sharply at the surprise. The tips of our noses barely touch, and I can see specks of gray in his eyes. The touch of him like this is all too familiar. Memories start to flood over me. Us at his house while his mom and aunt were out of town for the weekend. Watching a movie in the dark.

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest, I swear he can feel it too.

The night we decided to lose our virginities to each other. The night he told me he loved me. A month before I had to leave for New York.

My arms fall, and I can feel my body lean into him more. My hands grip the silky fabric of my dress as I try to contain myself. Force my body to no longer move and avert my gaze from him. But I can’t. Because right now, we’re back to being eighteen years old, and our lives are about to change forever.

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ROWAN



I CATCH myself rubbing my thumb up and down her bare arm, feeling the goosebumps I'm giving her at my touch, and damn if that doesn't boost my confidence with her. I wonder if she's thinking about the same thing as me right now.

That night, everything changed. I still remember every little detail because before then, we'd just fooled around and would make out for hours. Always being so close to just letting it all go and giving in to temptation. Every time we were almost there, one of us would stop.

It felt like such a monumental thing. And it was. I didn't look at losing my virginity just to accomplish it in life. I knew who I wanted to lose it to. I remember the gasp she made after she told me she was ready and felt myself go in her. The warm sensation I felt immediately.

Asking her every five minutes if she was okay and if we needed to stop because I always heard how it hurt for the girl the first time. I didn't want to hurt Ellie, and I think that's why I was always too scared to follow through. We knew she was leaving soon, and we didn't know what would happen between us.

I like to think that that's why we finally decided to go through with it. Because we didn't want to experience our first time with anyone else.

"Rowan?" her voice comes out small.

"Yeah?" My voice matches hers.

"Why did you ask me out tonight?"

I swallow down what is now a very dry throat. I can't tell her why I asked her. That would be very pathetic.

Oh, I asked you out because my little sister bullied me into doing it.

I should just lay it all out for her. Just tell her why but leave out the part about Addie. It's simple. It's so, so simple.

I asked you out because I needed to remind you what we can have again. What you can have again. Someone who will walk the ends of the Earth for you. Someone who thinks about you when they go to sleep and when they wake up. Someone who shouldn't have let you get on that damn plane ten years ago.

"I, um. I asked you out because," I whisper while trying to get over my fears. Fear of rejection and loneliness. Just *tell her*. "Because we're friends."

Wait, what?

Ellie's brows knit together, and she pulls back, lost in confusion. "Oh."

She leans back onto the couch and looks at the TV showing the movie cover in dim lighting. *Why the fuck did I say that?* I lean my head back on top of the couch and look up at the ceiling.

"I should get home. It's getting late," she mutters under her breath.

I whip my head toward her. Say something, anything to keep her here. "Okay."

Okay? What am I doing? Why do I hate myself? Don't push her away. Don't put her in that box with every other girl you've pushed away. She is not one of them. This is Ellie. You thought you lost your chance. Well, here she is. On your fucking lap.

"Okay," Ellie's tone is completely defeated.

Fuck. Shit. Say something. Anything.

"You can spend the night if you want?"

What? *Not that, you fucking dingus.* That's going far beyond what you should have said. What is the matter with you?

"Spend the night?" she asks. "Like a sleepover?"

"Sleepover?" I stammer.

"Well, yeah. If you asked me out because we're friends, then it would be a sleepover, right?"

Fuuuuck.

She keeps her eyes locked on me, searching my eyes, waiting for something. But now, she's smiling. "I'm joking. No, it's okay. I should get going. I'll see you tomorrow or something," she continues. She gets up from the couch, and I follow suit.

Well, I royally fucked this up. I rub at my face, cursing under my breath.

She turns and looks at me before she opens the door. “It was a great night, Rowan.”

“Wait, let me take you home. I’m not going to let you walk outside by yourself this late at night.”

“No, please. I could really use the walk. It’s fine.”

“Ellie, it’s five blocks away.”

“It’s okay. Really. Thank you for a great night.” She smiles up at me and stands on her toes.

I slightly bend down, letting her give me a kiss on the cheek.

“Have a good night, Rowan.”

And with that, she closes the door, and I’m standing there alone like the biggest moron.

Shit.

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ELLIE



Riley: What are you doing today? Want to hang out?

Ellie: Mom asked if I wanted to go out to lunch. I haven't really hung out with her since I've been home.

Riley: Aw! My mom never asks me to go to lunch. I wonder what that feels like.

Ellie: You can join us if you want? You know she loves you.

Riley: No, it's fine. I'll just sit in my apartment alone, dealing with my mommy issues. And daddy issues.

Ellie: Ry, stop. You cannot go back down this road again. We've talked about this.

Riley: You still need to tell me what happened between you and Rowan. The date was like five days ago, and every time I bring it up you totally sidetrack the conversation.

Riley: Are you ignoring me?

Riley: You can't avoid this conversation forever, Ellie.

Riley: Fine! I'll ask Hailey and Addie to annoy you until you talk to us about it.

MY MOM CHOSE a seat outside for us to sit at the diner. The same table she sits at every time we go to Daddio's. I smile at the memories of spending our little lunch dates together when I was a little girl. At the very same table we're at now.

We both grab our menus and look over our choices, even though we are getting the same thing we always get on our lunches. A green goddess salad for Mom and a double patty cheeseburger for me.

"So," she says, setting the menu down. "What have you been up to? You've been staying in the backyard, and I feel like you're still in New York with the number of times I've seen you."

"Sorry, sorry. I've been keeping myself busy. I need to make the pastries for Mrs. Anderson's event tomorrow night." I take a sip of my water.

"Are you excited for that?" She places her napkin on her lap.

The other customers murmur around us, the grill sizzling with the orders, and little kids laughing while their parents tell them to settle down.

I shrug. "As excited as I can be to make chocolate peanut butter squares." I laugh.

She tilts her head at me, giving me her typical mom looks that tells me not to poke fun at myself. "Ellie, you should be excited. This could be a great opportunity for other people to reach out to you for little events or parties."

"There was a time when I would be excited for something like that. But it's not the same anymore." I frown.

Mom sighs and reaches across the table for my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze before letting it go. "What are your plans when the summer is over?"

This has never happened before, but my mind goes blank. I always have a plan. I always have a guide to what I want to do in life. Goals to achieve. I've achieved those goals, but now what? I'm slowly losing my love for something that brings smiles to everyone who has tried my desserts.

"I honestly don't know," I admit. And the thought of that is scary.

"Have you heard from Charlie?" she asks timidly.

I nod. Mom and Dad always thought Charlie was fine. He was nice and respectful. He and my dad didn't have a lot in common, so conversation

between them always felt forced. Charlie would talk about sports, but my dad didn't pay enough attention to discuss it.

My dad would talk about surfing since that's what he did growing up. Even entered some competitions and won a few. Charlie would always make sure he looked interested when I knew that he didn't care much for it.

"He keeps texting me. Hasn't tried to call me yet." I cross my fingers, hoping it won't come to that. "I don't want to talk to him. Me coming home was supposed to be us not talking to each other. Figuring out what it is that we want."

"Please tell me you aren't giving that man another chance."

This comes as no surprise to me. She always said whatever was on her mind or how she felt. She never sugar-coated things, and I admire that about her.

"With how things have been with Rowan," I say under my breath.

Mom perks up at this. A wide smile plastered on her face; her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline. "What's that about?"

I roll my eyes. "Nothing, Mom."

She places her elbows on the table and looks at me sweetly while her chin rests in her hands. "I loved you two together so much. You were both so sweet to each other. You brought the best out of each other."

I fail at the smile I'm trying to hide because she isn't wrong about that. He was my cheerleader through everything.

"Would you give that another chance?" she asks.

I furrow my brows. "I don't think there is another chance. At least not with how our lives are now. Me being in the city. Him being here."

"I don't know, Ellie. You were head over heels for him. And I know he was with you. I think he still is."

"What makes you say that?"

"I can just tell. He reminds me of your dad." She smiles to herself. "A sweet man who wasn't afraid to express his love for someone. I swear, I don't know how I got so lucky."

"I'm sure Dad is the one who feels he's lucky to have you." I take another sip of my drink.

I watch Mom as she goes into dreamland, thinking about her and Dad. I grew up in a house that was filled with love. They are what fairytales were based on. Dad always looks at Mom like she's his queen. They still hold hands, cuddle up on the couch, and give each other positive affirmations.

It's the kind of love I only hoped for. I thought I had that with Charlie. I look down at the ring on my thumb, slowly spinning it as I think back to how our relationship used to be. He always catered to my needs, even when I didn't ask. He would listen to me talk about my day and ask questions.

As the years went on, that dwindled. He would ask about my day, but not really listen, just nod and answer with one word. I would be the one to ask him what he wanted for dinner, and he would say it was whatever I wanted, not really caring.

Little by little, I started to care less and less. The spark was slowly dwindling until it was nothing but smoke. But I never noticed that feeling. Not until I came home.

"Well, I hope you do find what you're looking for, honey. You deserve the best, and I hope you realize that" Mom says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I smile at her. "Yeah, I hope I find that out soon."

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ELLIE



AFTER LUNCH, I decided to stop by Riley's place before I had to head back home to start baking. I know this is just an excuse to procrastinate. But I'm dreading having to look at anything baking.

I approach Riley's building. She lives above the town's coffee shop, Sip-Sip Hurray, in a cute little apartment. I hit the buzzer at the side door, hearing the ringing that allows me to enter. When I walk in, I'm hit with the aroma of coffee, and my body melts. Honestly, who needs candles when you can just smell coffee all day? The only time her place doesn't smell like coffee is when the shop is closed.

She always opens the windows to waft out the smell and lights up her candles that smell like citrus. My favorite is pink lemonade.

"Hey, girly pop," Riley shouts from her kitchen.

Her sage green velvet couch comes into view on the right side of the entrance. Her bay windows pour sunshine throughout the living room, the stained glass creating a prism across the hardwood floor. A large, fuzzy area rug sits in the middle, with a cute wooden table on top of it. A television sits on the wall across from the couch, with a decorative table underneath covered in candles, frames, and small cactus plants.

The kitchen sits on the left side of the room and is big enough for three people to stand in. The entryway of the kitchen is an arched wall that is decorated with drapes that are pulled to the side. Then there's a long hall where her bedroom and bathroom are. Cute and quaint, if I do say so myself.

"Hey, Ry," I say in exasperation.

"I hope you don't mind, but Hailey is coming over." Riley walks out of the kitchen and to the living room.

We both sit on the couch, and I move a decorative throw pillow on the floor to make more room for us.

"It's fine. She can help me rethink my life decisions and where they've led me." I throw my arm over my face and slump my body into the couch.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Just feeling existential dread. I've realized that I don't know what I'm doing anymore, and I'm almost ready to give up."

"Ellie." Riley reaches her hand out to me, placing it on my forearm.

"It's fine. I think everything is just catching up to me now. I'm just mentally exhausted and trying to get over this stupid hump. I know it won't stay like this forever, but you know how it is when you feel like nothing is going right in your life, and it feels like it's not going to change?"

"Oh, trust me, I get it. I'm living in a small, but cute, apartment, working at a yoga studio half the time and at my dad's dentist office the other half. I can't stand being around my parents, yet I work at one of their businesses. I gave up a long time ago...my life sucks."

"Have you ever thought that maybe you just need someone in your life that you can go home to and forget everything else? Getting excited to go home and see them. Catch up on each other's day."

Riley mimics a gag before saying, "Sounds gross."

I chuckle and lightly hit her on the arm. We hear the door open and see Hailey.

"Yo," Hailey says, throwing her bag on the floor.

"Hi." I wave lazily.

"Hey, Hails," Riley replies.

Hailey looks over at me as she sits on the floor and asks, "You, okay?"

"She's having a life crisis. Just your normal Tuesday," Riley says.

Hailey tilts her head back and says, "Ah, that'll do it."

"Did you get a new tattoo?" I point to the clear wrap on Hailey's forearm, trying to change the subject.

She holds out her arm. "I sure did."

"What did you get this time?" Riley asks.

"Whiskey and Butterscotch." She gets on her knees and scoots over to us.

The tattoo shows two cats, but in a yin and yang symbol, curled into each other. The cutest thing I've seen.

"That's so cute," Riley squeals. "Have you had any hot clients lately?"

"There was one guy that came in. Totally my type." Hailey wiggles her brows.

"Oh, so Beau?" I tease.

"Ew, gross." Hailey grimaces.

I chuckle. "What? You two are a match made in heaven."

Riley cackles. "More like hell."

Hailey points to her sister in agreement.

All three of us jump when the buzzer rings in the apartment. It continues and doesn't stop, just a consistent buzzing.

"Who the hell is that?" Hailey asks.

Riley gets up from the couch, looks at us, shrugs, and hits the buzzer.

"Are you seriously letting someone in that you aren't expecting?" I ask.

"Ellie, we live in a very small town, not the city," Riley replies.

"Why does everyone keep comparing things to the city?" I ask.

Hailey looks at me. "Because *you* compare it now."

Someone opens the door, and we see Addie rushing in. She's huffing and puffing like she's about to blow this house down.

"Whoa." Hailey looks up at Addie.

She turns to close the door and drops her backpack on the ground. Her dark brown hair whips around, and she goes to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"My brother is an idiot." She pours herself some water from a jug into a glass and chugs the whole thing before she sets it back down.

We stare at her and then at each other, then back to her. Unless Rowan told her how the other night went, I don't know what else he could have done to Addie for her to call him an idiot.

She sits down on the other side of the coffee table and sets her phone down in front of her. "Ellie, I am so sorry. I just found out what happened when James told me at work. I had to drag Rowan to the office and scold him."

I look at Addie with wide eyes. "I didn't tell them what happened." I gesture to Riley and Hailey while I lay back on the couch and cross my arms.

“I’m scared to ask what happened now. Do I want to know?” Riley asks before looking back at Addie.

Addie looks at me for confirmation to continue. I wave a hand at her.

Addie lets out a breath and says, “From what my brother told me, it was great. He made a reservation, asked for a special menu, bought you a bouquet of flowers, and had wine waiting for you two, the whole nine yards. He then tells me that you went back to his place—”

Riley gasps and looks at me with excitement. I shake my head at her.

“Yeah, that was my reaction when he told me that. But get this.” Addie laughs sarcastically and holds out her hands for the dramatics. “Ellie, what did you ask my brother?” Addie looks at me with a smile.

I roll my eyes. “I asked him why he asked me out.”

“Correct. You asked him why he asked you out,” she repeats this like she’s a talk show host. “And what did he say in return?” She places her arms on the table and clasps her hands together.

“Because I’m his friend,” I mutter.

Both Hailey and Riley gasp, their mouths open, staring at me. Hailey starts to laugh, and Riley has her hand on her mouth.

“What did you say?” Riley asks.

I look at them, tired of this conversation already. “I repeated what he said to me aloud, making sure I heard correctly. I told him I should go home. He was quiet for a moment, and then he said I could stay the night.”

Riley grabs my arm. “Please, tell me what you said,” she begs.

I let out a snort. “I asked, ‘like a sleepover’. Which confused him, and he questioned that, so I said, yeah, since we’re friends.”

Hailey starts to laugh again. “Oh, shit.”

I should laugh with Hailey, but that would just look pathetic, considering my life is already one big joke. First Charlie and now Rowan.

I wave a hand in annoyance. “Why the hell did he ask me out? It seemed like a date, which I never confirmed because of everything he did for me. I’m just...”

Addie pulls her hands into her lap and looks around the room, avoiding my eyes. I narrow mine at her and angle my head.

“Addie,” I say to her.

She looks up at me with an innocent face. “Hm?”

“What did you do?” I ask.

“Well,” she drags the word out. She starts to fidget with her hands and scrunches her face. “I kind of, may have, pushed him to ask you on a date.”

“Addie!” Riley shouts.

“I was just trying to get him to stop letting his fear get the best of him!” she replies.

My expression drops and is now completely neutral. I feel confused inside, but I make sure not to show it.

“Why would you do that?” I ask.

She opens her mouth, looking nervous. She knows she overstepped with all of this. I would agree with that. But this is no surprise when it comes to Addie. She asserts herself in everyone’s business.

“I just can’t see my brother like this anymore. Ellie, I don’t think you realize how much he cares about you. He won’t let himself have you again because he’s scared that you’re going to leave him. I mean, technically, you will when you go back to the city. I don’t know. I was just trying to nudge him a little.”

“You can’t push your brother to do anything,” I say. “He’s a grown man who can make his own decisions. Plus, we aren’t getting back together. I don’t know how many times I need to tell you guys that.”

And myself.

“But you’re going back to Charlie, and we don’t want you to do that. I thought maybe if I just pushed you two together, you’d see that you two are made for each other. I read too many romance books. This is all my fault.”

Hailey, Riley, and I hold back a laugh because no one can ever be angry with Addie. Not when she does things with good intentions.

“No way in hell are we allowing Ellie to go back to that pud,” Hailey chimes in.

“Yeah, if Ellie decides to give him another chance, I’m moving to New York with her until she comes to her senses,” Riley adds.

I get up from the couch, go to Addie, and take her into my arms for a hug. The little sister I never had.

“You need to let me and Rowan figure this out on our own, okay? And when it comes to Charlie.” I look around at the three of them. “Being home has made me realize that I do deserve better than that. But Rowan needs to realize that he deserves better when it comes to the situation with his dad. I think once he figures that out, he won’t be so scared to take what he wants.”

And I want that to be me.

“I punched him in the arm for you,” Addie mutters.

I laugh. “Thank you.” I let out a sigh and looked at them. “Look, I will talk to him tomorrow. I’ll talk to him, and we can navigate things. Whether that’s us trying things out again or not. I will always love Rowan. I don’t know if he knows that, but he’s never left my heart. He was my first everything, and I’m happy that I was able to have him when I did.”

Riley places her hands on her chest, a small frown appearing on her lips.

“I’m sorry,” Addie says, hugging me again.

“It’s okay.” I pull away. “I need to get going. I need to make the stupid dessert that I agreed to do for Mrs. Anderson. Wish me luck.” I salute them with two fingers.

“You’re going to kick ass,” Hailey shouts as I walk through the door.



I wrap my hair up after changing into comfortable clothes for the night. I breathe out a heavy sigh while I place my hands on my hips, looking at the kitchen in front of me. It never used to be like this. I never had to drag myself when it came to baking.

I was always in the kitchen on my own accord, testing new recipes, calling out for Mom, Dad, and August to taste test. Every time they smiled and told me how amazing it was, I felt like I accomplished something. Making people happy. It’s all I wanted.

I walk into the kitchen and look at everything I need displayed on the table. A simple dessert containing graham cracker crumbs, sugar, butter, peanut butter, and chocolate chips. At least it isn’t 800 crème brûlées.

I grab my phone and select the playlist I made for baking. I haven’t listened to it in almost two years. All the songs were upbeat and always put me in a good mood. I hesitate to push play, nervous about how I’ll feel once I hear the first track.

I hope it’s not a trauma response because that would absolutely suck.

I hit play, and the sound of a piano quickly starts, and then the voices of two women start to sing together. *Dancing Queen* by Abba blares from the Bluetooth speaker. I feel my toes move to the beat of the song.

A small smile forms on my lips, and I feel myself shift to a lighter mood. I'm ready.

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thirty-three

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ROWAN



“MOM, Aunt Rosey, you’ve outdone yourselves again. The food is so good,” Addie says as she takes another bite of the twice-baked potato that was seasoned to perfection.

It was the best comfort food that I could have asked for. Mom made her famous baked macaroni and cheese, Aunt Rosey handled the rotisserie chicken, Addie made homemade mashed potatoes, and I grilled vegetables with garlic seasoning.

“So, you two, how has work been? I heard about the merchandise mishap a few weeks ago. I forgot to ask you about it,” Mom asks while spearing her asparagus.

“I was able to handle it just fine.” Addie glances at me. “Everything was fixed within the same week. I was able to get half the money back while still receiving the correct items, *and* they gave us a fifty percent discount for our next large order.” She angles her head at me with a smile.

“Now that’s how you get shit done,” Aunt Rosey replies, pointing a fork at us.

“If Rowan could only trust me enough to do my job, he wouldn’t have had to rip out his hair.” She continues to look at me.

I take another bite of the chicken and down it with Mom’s fresh lemonade. I continue to look down at my food, smiling to myself.

“Well, I’m proud of you for letting your sister handle things, Ro.” My mom bumps her elbow into mine.

Addie smiles. “It took a lot of nagging to get what I wanted, but it worked.”

“I know, I know,” I reply in self-defeat, raising my hands in surrender. “I’m sorry for not trusting you to control the situation to begin with. It’s a huge flaw of mine to try to do everything myself, not let anything bad happen.”

“If you keep trying to control everything in your life, you are going to have a miserable time,” Aunt Rosey tells me.

My mom nods in agreement without looking at me, continuing to eat her food.

“I’m going to start stepping back,” I say, “and let Addie do what she does best. I know it’s not fair of me not to let her do her job.”

I know it’s not going to be a cakewalk to try to let go of some of this control. I’d even gotten into tiffs with James when we first started building the idea. It almost ruined our friendship.

Addie narrows her eyes at me.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t believe you for one second. You’re not going to step back and let me do my job. You say that now, but I bet by tomorrow, you’re going to find something to complain about.”

“Addison, why don’t you believe your brother would do that for you?” Mom asks.

“He’s controlled every single part of our lives ever since Dad left. How is he just going to change overnight and tell me that he’s going to let me take control of the things I need to do when it comes to the brewery?”

I gesture to myself. “Hey, I’m sitting right here.”

“It’s true, Ro,” Addie replies. “How can I believe that you will let me do what I’m best at? I didn’t get a degree in marketing just for fun. You know how you almost lost your friendship with James over the same thing? I know you’re not trying to push me away, but you’re going to if you keep this up.”

I set down my fork. “After what happened with Ellie on the ‘date,’ I don’t know. I kicked myself in the ass for how I ended that night. It took going out with her to realize how I’m fucking up everything in my life. Do I like the idea of trying not to control things? No. It’s going to take a long time for me to learn how to stop doing that.”

“What happened on your date with Ellie?” Aunt Rosey asks.

Addie sits back in her chair and her expression softens while she looks at me. I know she feels bad for pushing me into asking Ellie out. After she

dragged it out of me, she was furious with how I handled things.

Later that day, she came back and apologized. I could tell she had been crying. Of course, I could never stay mad at my little sister when I know she wants the best for me. She just doesn't know how to go about it in the right way.

She's an optimist, always looking at a glass half full instead of empty. That's how she looked at her situation with our dad. If he left, it was for good reason, and that was that. She cleaned her hands of him and moved on from the situation.

I let out a breath before telling both my mom and aunt exactly what happened. I tell them how it started, how despite me being so nervous, it felt *right*. Treating her the way she is supposed to be treated. I still watch the video I took of her at the restaurant when she saw the cookie skillet. And every time, it makes me smile.

I continue to tell them about what we did afterward when I scared her and the way she jumped up from the couch and screamed. The way my abs hurt when I couldn't stop laughing. And then when she asked me that question that should have been so easy to answer.

"Oh, honey." My mom gives me a pitying look, which I would have been offended by, but at this point, I know I screwed up.

"Rowan, what the hell is wrong with you?" Aunt Rosey says sharply.

"I panicked." I cover my face with my hands and drag them down.

"You panicked, and that was the best thing you thought you should say?" Aunt Rosey continues. "Rowan, honey, I love you, but that was a dumbass move."

"I know," I shout in annoyance and then let out a laugh. "You don't think I know that? I know I had the perfect opportunity to just lay all the cards on the table. But I got into my head. Besides, she's not staying here, she didn't move back. She took a break from her job. What would be the point in trying to start something with her when it's going to end up with me being left behind? Again? I know that I'm self-sabotaging myself, but I can't help it. The two of you have shown me so much love and positive affirmations, but it still hurts that someone who is supposed to love me couldn't."

The table is quiet for a moment. Addie looks down at her plate, my mom still giving me her sad eyes, and my aunt narrows her gaze at me. I look at her and don't avert my gaze from her. I know in that terrifying head

of hers, she wants to say something, and she's trying to figure out how to say it in a subtle way.

"Your father was a great man," she says.

Well, that was not what I was expecting. I can tell from Addie's expression she wasn't thinking that either. My mom's, however, it doesn't change.

"I'm sorry, but did you just compliment a man who left his wife and kids?" Addie's tone is anything but nice.

"Watch it," my aunt says with a pointed finger.

"Seriously?" Addie says.

"Addie, you have not taken the time to ask your mom about your dad. Rowan has. You are automatically judging him for what he did without knowing the full story," Aunt Rosey says.

"Because why should I care about a man who up and left us? He didn't love us. He never tried to see us after that. Not a phone call or a letter." Addie says.

"It's a two-way street, honey," Aunt Rosey retorts.

Addie rolls her eyes and pushes the chair back from the table. The legs scraping against the hardwood floor. "If you'll excuse me. I have some work to do. Thank you for dinner." She turns on her heel to leave.

"Rose," Mom scolds.

Aunt Rosey shakes her head. "No. I've had it with her bad-mouthing her father. She never bothered to ask about him. Plus, if he had called or written, would she have given him the chance? I don't think so. She's as stubborn as a mule."

"I wonder who she gets that from." Mom gives her a pointed look.

"Rowan," Aunt Rosey says. "I think you should see your father."

I raise my eyebrows in confusion. She tells me that, like it's so simple, to just go see him. A man I haven't seen in so long.

"I don't know where he lives," I say.

"Three hours away," Aunt Rosey responds.

My mom's expression is neutral, like her sister isn't telling me to see a man who most likely didn't care about us and lives three hours away. Three hours. He is so fucking close to us. For how long? I feel my teeth clench and I try to calm down my breathing.

"He lives three hours away, and he has not once visited," my voice comes out angry and frustrated. I look at my mom, waiting for her to say

something.

She turns to me and grabs my hand in hers. I don't think I'm going to like where this is going.

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thirty-four

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ELLIE



I'VE ALREADY WRITTEN HALFWAY through the journal I picked up not that long ago, thought after thought pouring onto the pages.

It's amazing, really, the way our body goes through stress and anxiety. If I look back through the pages, I can see when I had anxiety, when I felt helpless. My penmanship isn't clean or legible. It's fast and sharp, like if someone were rushing to sign documents.

Most of the pages with the desperate handwriting are about work and Charlie. The pages with soft, smooth writing are about my family, friends, and Rowan.

I came across a page I'd written after having my breakdown in front of the girls on emergency movie night. Anxiety was pumping through me the entire night after they left. Some of the lines are shaky or scratched deep into the paper to the point where you can see an indent on the other side. I've never felt this much pressure in my life. Not even during culinary school.

I hear a knock on the guest house door and turn from the kitchen table chair to see August peeking his head in.

He gives me a cheesy smile. "Can I come in?"

"Like you even need to ask." I turn my attention back to my journal, finishing the entry for the day and then closing it.

August walks to the cabinets in the kitchen and grabs himself a glass, then opens the fridge, scanning his options.

"How's your day going?" he asks and then pulls out a jug of sweet tea.

I relax more into the chair, grabbing my hair to wrap it in a ponytail and out of my face. "My day has consisted of cleaning, going to the farmers

market, and journaling. I dropped off the desserts for Mrs. Anderson's show."

"Oh shit, how did that go? I didn't know that was today."

"It was fine. I got there an hour before it started. I've never seen someone that excited over something as simple as chocolate and peanut butter."

August tilts his head and deadpans. "That's because the favor came from someone who genuinely enjoys what you make. You remember how she always had her daughter buy a box full of pastries when you ran the bake sale? Answer me this: how did it feel to see her react that way?"

I tap my finger on the table and think back to her expression. It was full of light and joy. Such genuine happiness that it made my heart feel full. I didn't stay to see what she thought about them. But after I left, I felt... happy and calm. I felt like I accomplished something that didn't give me anxiety. I felt grateful for agreeing to do it when I dropped it off and witnessed the smile on Mrs. Anderson's face. I smile to myself thinking about it again.

"You don't even need to answer me when you have that look on your face." August pulls me from my thoughts. "Admit it, Ellie, you felt great. You probably even felt amazing. Don't you miss that feeling?"

I look up at him from the table. "Of course I miss that."

"What are you going to do about it?"

I tilt my head back, close my eyes, and then bring my focus back to my brother. "I don't know August. You know I can't just leave New York and everything I've worked so hard on."

"Look, all I'm saying is that you should really give this all some thought. Okay? At least promise me that."

"I will. I promise." I give him a smile and quickly change the subject. "Now, enough about me. What are you doing today?"

"I have a date tonight." He smiles brightly.

I wiggle my eyebrows with a knowing grin. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Someone Beau knows. He thought I'd have a fun time." He shrugs.

I grimace. "Wait, are you getting his sloppy seconds?"

August makes an equally horrified look. "God, no. They're just friends. And they aren't each other's types."

"Is this date a serious one or more of a casual thing?"

"I'm not going into it looking for a relationship. Just something casual."

A sly smile plays across my lips.

“What?” he asks.

“Are you trying to make *someone* jealous?”

He pinches his brows and jerks his head back. “Why in the world would I try to make someone jealous?” He crosses his arms.

“Don’t play dumb with me.”

“I’m not playing shit.”

I raise my hands with a smile. “Whatever you say.”

“Shut up.”

I laugh, watching him put freshly washed green grapes in a bowl and sit across from me. He picks a grape off its stem and looks at me.

“So.” August throws a grape into his mouth before saying, “Heard about the date you had with Rowan.”

“Everyone keeps saying this was a date. It wasn’t a date. It was two friends going out to eat.” I raise my brows.

“Yeah, sure.” He pops another grape into his mouth. “Have you talked to him since then?”

“Yeah, we’ve been texting, but I haven’t seen him in person. It feels awkward, which sucks because I miss him. I want to hang out with him.”

“I think he’s mad at himself. He said he was going to come talk to you in person.”

“He hasn’t said anything about coming to talk to me. When did he tell you this?”

“Yesterday. When he does talk to you, are you guys going to—you know—try again, or?”

“I don’t know. I’m still figuring out things with work. I spoke with my boss the other day. They were checking in, and I told them that I was looking forward to coming back to work. I haven’t given them an answer on what we spoke about before I left for vacation.”

“What are you talking about?” August arches a brow.

I fiddle with my fingers before answering. “They want me to be the head pastry chef. *Executive* pastry chef.”

August chokes on a grape, coughing before he looks at me. “What? Why didn’t you tell any of us? That’s a big deal, El.”

“I don’t know!” I exclaim, raising my hands. “So much shit was happening at once. I couldn’t process it.”

“You need to tell mom and dad.”

“I know, August,” I say, exasperated.

“Right now,” he pressed, his eyebrows raising.

“What? I’m not telling them right now.”

August rises from his chair. “If you don’t tell them, I will.”

I stand up. “It’s not your business to tell them.”

“Ellie.” He walks over to me, and I peer up at him. “This is very big news. This can change a lot for you. Maybe it will be positive, maybe it will be negative, I don’t know. But what I do know is you came home partly because of work. If you were in a different position, it would be an easy answer. You know it’s not. Not anymore.”

I slump my shoulders. I know he’s right. I know that it’s not an easy choice to make. Maybe it would have been a few years ago when I was in a better space mentally. Then again, it’s an opportunity I may not have again.

August puts his hands on my shoulders. “Ellie, you need to tell Mom and Dad. The sooner, the better. Please.” He looks at me with pleading eyes. I would do anything for my brother, as he would for me.

Am I willing to put myself through more stress just to take another step in the culinary industry? Will my becoming an executive change things for me and I get back to who I used to be?

I’m scared to find out.

thirty-five

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ROWAN



I TAP my finger on the steering wheel of my car as I drive to Ellie's place. A container of cookies in the backseat, and Milo in the passenger.

I haven't seen Ellie since we went out, but we've been texting back and forth, not missing a day. I could tell that we both felt weird after the couch incident. I figured it'd probably be best to give us some space, as much as I hated it.

She mentioned again that Charlie keeps texting her and that he's not taking the hint that she doesn't want to talk to him. At least, not right now. If she gave me full access to contacting him, I would tell him to crawl to the woman that he so desperately needed because Ellie wasn't around enough.

I pull up to the house and put the car in park. I turn to look at Milo, his tongue hanging out, giving me a smile that dogs somehow do. My body twists when I lean back to grab the container, Milo sneaking a quick lick at my cheek, before placing the cookies on my lap.

"I don't know if I should give these to her." My gaze goes back to Milo, still smiling with his tongue out.

The night of the bonfire, I was looking for cookie recipes on my phone. I wanted to do something nice for Ellie. Maybe get her to miss the simplicity of desserts and baking. I'm sure I followed the recipe well enough.

If I can brew beer, then I'm pretty sure I can make decent cookies. I did not try one because I wanted Ellie to have the first one. I'm also scared they taste like shit. I know Ellie will tell me the truth and be gentle about it.

Milo and I walk up the driveway and to the gate that leads to the backyard. The greenery cascades over the path leading to the small guest

house in the back.

Birds fly by, chirping and following each other. A bee sits on a bed of purple mums, causing Milo to stop and look at it. I whistle to him to keep walking. I take a minute to breathe before lifting my fist to knock on the glass door.

I made sure to let Ellie know I was stopping by, not wanting to show up unannounced. My heart eases when I see her walking up to us, a gorgeous smile on her face. I can see the tan lines on her shoulders from when we were on the boat. The ribbed tank top leaves nothing to the imagination while it shows off her golden skin.

The door swings open with a blast of cold air. “Hi!” She looks down next to me. “You brought Milo,” she says excitedly, kneeling to his level. “Hi, baby boy, I’ve missed you so much.”

I watch as he licks her face over and over. She attempts to give him a hug around his neck, but he’s too excited to sit still. She kisses the top of his head before standing up and walking back into the house.

I walk in with my arms open. “What, no hugs or kisses for me?”

Ellie turns around with a smile, rolling her eyes when she walks back to me. She pulls me in for a hug, her arms wrapping around my lower back. My arms are snug around her shoulder blades, and my nose buries itself in her hair, smelling rich vanilla.

When we break apart, our eyes stay on each other for a moment. I don’t mind this. I could do this all day. Her long hair braided and falling over one side of her shoulder, her freckles on full display on her bare skin.

Even wearing a simple shirt and cotton shorts, she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. She breaks eye contact and looks at the container I’m holding, curiosity covering her face.

“What’s that?” She points to it.

“What’s what?” I keep my eyes on her.

“The container in your hand, dummy.” She points again and laughs.

I blink and pull myself back to reality. I look down at the container and remember what it was that I brought her.

“Oh, shit, yeah. I made these for you.” I hold out the container to her.

“Oh?” She grabs it, then gently shakes it. “What’s in it?”

I shrug. “You need to open it to find out.”

She bites the corner of her lip when she looks back down, pulling the lid off. She lets out a small gasp and looks back at me with a bright smile. Her

eyes are soft, pure, and beautiful, like the ocean.

“You made me cookies?”

I nod and smile.

“Is this to make up for the interesting ‘date’ we had?” she teases.

I shrug. “I’ve wanted to make you cookies for a while now, and I looked up a recipe the night of the bonfire. I wasn’t sure when I wanted to until the terrible ‘date’ we went on.”

She angles her head and says, “It wasn’t terrible.”

I look down to the floor, smiling, trying to hide the blush that's creeping up on me because I'm a fucking teenager all over again.

“Now, I’m going to try one of these, and I’m sure it’s going to be *amazing*.”

I peer back up at her and scrunch my nose. “They’re probably going to taste like shit. I haven't tried one yet.”

She smells inside the container. “You didn’t poison these or anything?”

“No, but they’re definitely coated with a lot of love and apologies.”

She picks one up and inspects it and I’m suddenly extremely nervous. I watch her carefully as she takes a bite out of it, a generous one at that. Maybe too generous. Probably should have stuck with a nibble.

I watch her start to chew slowly, and her eyes squint but then open back up, and I’m almost positive she’s going through the five stages of grief.

“Mmm.” She looks up at me, plastering on the fakest smile I’ve ever seen her make. “Ro, these are delicious,” she says with a mouthful of half-chewed cookie.

I narrow my eyes at her and start to laugh at how ridiculous she looks, trying to lie through her teeth. I grab a cookie, desperate to see how these taste, and holy shit, these are atrocious. I walk to the garbage can and spit the cookie out of my mouth. It doesn’t even deserve to be swallowed.

I motion to the garbage. “Ellie, spit it out.”

She furrows her brows, trying to finish the cookie because she has a heart of gold. She shakes her head and waves me off.

“Ellie, please spit it out.”

She waves me off again. “It’s fine.”

I cross my arms and look at her. She’s smiling at me the entire time through slow chews and small bites.

“The best cookie ever.” She points to it and still has an entire half left.

I watch her in pain, trying to make me happy and not hurt my feelings. She puts the entire other half in her mouth like she's trying to get it over with and chews furiously like she's angry.

I have tears in my eyes at this point because watching this is comical and sad at the same time. She swallows the last bit and forces a smile on her face.

"Ellie, it's okay, they were terrible." I wipe my eyes.

She walks over to me. "No, they were so good! I mean, they can definitely use some work. I think you missed a step, but they were good."

I look at her, and my cheeks hurt so much from the laugh attack I just had over a fucking cookie.

"Well, I would love to know where I messed up."

She taps her finger on her pink lips, looks around the kitchen, and then looks back at me. "How about you make cookies with me, and I can show you?"

"When?"

"Right now."

"Right now?" I ask.

"Right now."

"I'm going to be a terrible student."

"In my kitchen, no one is a terrible student. Now, let's get to work."

thirty-six

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ELLIE



“OKAY, now go ahead and put the mixer on, and I’ll grab the chocolate chips,” I tell Rowan while I open the door to the freezer, pulling out my favorite brand of chocolate chips.

Luckily, I had them on hand. I went to the store the other day for some regular groceries but ended up in the baking aisle. I added some simple ingredients, wondering if this would spur some inspiration for me to bake. I haven’t touched any of it until now.

“You keep them in the freezer?” Rowan asks.

“Yes, I like to put them in there. Not everyone does, but I think it helps during the baking process. Don’t ask me how. I have no idea. It just works.” I put the bag on the counter and looked at the stand mixer. “Are you going to turn it on?”

Rowan startles. “Oh, yeah. Sorry, I did all of this by hand at my place. I don’t have one of these things.”

“You see that lever on that side?” I point to the side of the mixer. “Flip it to the other side and it locks the top of this in place.” I place a hand on the top of the mixer. Rowan does it and then looks at me. “Then, on the other side, you have the same lever, and the numbers represent the speed.”

I see Rowan’s hand go over it to turn it on. “Oh, that’s it? That’s simple.”

“Yeah, but—”

He turns it on at the highest speed, and flour goes everywhere. It hits my face and then I look at Rowan, and he’s covered more than me. His hands are out in front of him and he’s too busy trying to stop the flour with his hands instead of the lever.

“*Shit, shit, shit,*” he shouts repeatedly.

I laugh and quickly turn it off, slowing it down to a stop. Rowan’s eyes have gone wide; his mouth slightly opens out of horror, and he looks at me. The flour that’s in his hair whips into the air. I keel over in a laughing fit.

His chest rises and falls quickly. “What the hell just happened?”

I try to talk through the laughter. “You put it on the highest setting,” I point at it.

“I put it on five. Isn’t five slow, and then one is fast?”

I pinch my brows together and continue to laugh. “Five is the highest speed.”

He looks back at it and carefully pushes the lever to number one. The mixer slowly starts up at a calming speed, the ingredients mixing beautifully. Rowan drops his head down and lets out a sigh. The flecks of flour float in the air. We brush the flour off our clothes as much as we can, but Rowan’s hair is pure white.

I grab his hand and walk him to the bathroom. “Here, come on.”

When we get there, I open the shower curtain and turn on the water. His eyes roam to the tub faucet, pouring with water, then to me.

“Get on your knees,” I tell him.

He widens his eyes, and the corner of his lip tugs into a smirk. “I know we used to be in a relationship, but you’re coming on a little strong.”

I tilt my head. “Ha, ha.” I tug at his wrist. “I’m going to wash your hair for you.”

“You don’t need to do that. It’s fine.” He ruffles his hair with both hands, making a bigger mess. “See?”

Flour continues to float through the air when I wave my hand around, getting it out of my face.

I tug on his wrist again. “Yes, I do. You look like Casper the ghost.”

“Casper, the *friendly* ghost.”

“Just get on the floor, Rowan.”

He finally does what I ask but gives me the stink eye the entire time. I reply with a pretty smile. When he gets on his knees, he grabs the back of his shirt with one hand and pulls it off and over his head.

My lip’s part when I look at his smooth, tanned skin and the muscles that work through his back. I didn’t think about him taking his shirt off. I figured he would have left it on.

“You have a lot of bottles in here. Is all this shampoo?” His voice echoes off the tub and through the small space.

He looks at me, and when I realize I’m still staring at him, I snap out of it. I look at the bottles. I have no shame when it comes to my shower game. There are multiple bottles of shampoo and conditioner in different scents. I base the scent on my mood of the day.

Lavender, vanilla, coconut, lemons. I also had a body scrub that smelled like a margarita. Riley stole that one from me.

“Yeah, do you have a specific scent you like?” I ask. “What type of mood are you in?”

He turns around. “My mood?” He looks back at the display of bottles. “Use whatever one is your favorite.”

My favorite. The one that’s used the most out of all of them. It’s a strawberry vanilla scent that pairs with a conditioner. I grab the bottle and pour some into my hand, lathering it up.

He grips the edge of the tub and leans forward under the bathtub faucet. His shoulder blade muscles are working, and his biceps are flexing. His deep brown hair hits the rush of the water and makes it look much darker than it is.

I let my eyes wander over his skin. Every freckle that covers his shoulders. The tiny birthmark that sits between his shoulder blades. The way his neck moves gracefully.

“I’m ready,” Rowan says, pulling my attention while he’s still bent under the water.

“Okay, go ahead and sit up. I’ll try not to get any soap in your eyes.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

After I wash his hair, he offers to do the same for me, and I am not going to pass up the opportunity to have my hair washed by him. His large hands brush gently over my wet hair, letting it suds up perfectly. He takes his time to massage my scalp as well, causing my eyes to roll to the back of my head.

I’m sure I let out a soft moan because he stopped for a moment and then continued again. I was expecting Milo to come in here and see what was going on, but he was sleeping in the sun that was bathing him through the windows. I wouldn’t have moved either.

When Rowan's done washing my hair, he grabs a towel from the closet and gently dries it for me. I smile through the whole thing.

"Want me to brush your hair for you?" he asks, wrapping the towel around his neck.

His shirt is still off, and I wonder if that's on purpose. I won't question it. I look down at my own shirt and it's still covered in flour and a little wet in random spots.

"Can I change out of my clothes?" I ask.

He looks down at my shirt and back into my eyes. His piercing, deep blues have me weak in the knees. I force myself to keep my hands at my sides, trying not to touch his chest. My eyes trail down from his to his strong jaw that's covered with scruff, to his collarbones, over his chest, and down to his abs, where a dark, happy trail dips into his jeans.

I feel my head tilt, then force my eyes back up to him. A playful smirk is on his face, and I roll my eyes, pushing past him. A smile escapes my lips.

thirty-seven

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ROWAN



I HEAR Ellie close the door to her room after I caught her staring at my chest. I wasn't going to take off my shirt, but I saw the opportunity to show off what I've worked so hard on, and it was worth it.

I grab my shirt and walk out of the bathroom to the living room. I spot Milo basking in the sun, completely unbothered. I go over to pet him, my hand landing on his very warm belly, and he groans in appreciation.

Just as I'm about to put my shirt on, I hear a *thud* come from Ellie's room. I look behind me and shout, "El, you good?" I straighten and walk toward her room. I listen carefully, not hearing anything. I rap my knuckles on the door. "El? Are you okay?"

I think I hear something, but maybe my mind is playing a trick on me. I knock again. "Ellie, if you don't answer, I'm coming in."

I count to three and say, "I'm opening the door."

I open the door and see Ellie on the floor, hugging her knee. Her face is scrunched up, her eyes squeezed shut. She's rocking back and forth while taking deep breaths through her nose and mouth.

"Ellie, are you okay? What happened?" I walk toward her, quickly kneeling. I don't want to touch her until I know what's wrong.

"I'm a dumbass, that's what happened." She lets go of her knee and winces. "I banged the shit out of my knee. I was walking to the dresser to change into a different shirt, and I ran right into the corner of the stupid bedpost."

"Let me see," I murmur before placing my hand around her knee. I try not to wince when I see how much skin is scraped off. Specks of blood appear, but nothing terrible.

“Stay right here.” I stand and go to the bathroom closet, where I grab a small towel. I remember seeing rubbing alcohol and cotton balls while digging through a basket filled with Band-Aids. When I have everything, I need, I go back to her, getting on my knees once more. “Okay, this might sting a little.”

I dab some of the alcohol on the cotton ball and gently grab her knee. I start to wash away the broken skin and hear Ellie hiss through her teeth.

“Sorry.” I bend closer to blow on it, trying to cool it off for her. “Better?” I glance up.

“Yeah, thanks.” She lets out a heavy breath, and her shoulders sag. “I’m going to have the worst bruise tomorrow.”

I let out a laugh and smile. “It’s okay. You’ll still have cute knees.”

“My knees are *not* cute. They look like an old man’s face.”

I finish cleaning the wound and close the cap on the bottle. “Well, you have cute, old man face knees.” I grab the small band-aid and put it on her knee.

She laughs. “That makes no sense.”

As my worry clears, I take in Ellie, and ho-ly shit.

She’s in her bra.

My eyes travel down to the simple blue bra that looks like it’s made of cotton. Her breasts fill the cups, and I, for the life of me, cannot look away.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” Ellie stands up. “I forgot I didn’t have a shirt on.”

I pick myself up and look at her before saying, “It’s okay, don’t worry. I heard you fell and needed to see if you were okay. I didn’t even notice until now. Plus, I’ve seen you shirtless before. It’s never left my memory,” I tease, giving her a lopsided smile.

“Oh, do you dream about me shirtless?” She has a wicked grin, but I play along.

“Every night when I’m in bed,” I rasp.

Ellie tilts her head, looking at my chest. “Well, I guess we match.”

Her eyes scan my body, and I oddly feel confident when she does. The lower she goes; I notice her drag her teeth over her bottom lip like she’s trying to contain herself. I urge myself not to step closer, grab her face, and kiss her. Maybe I can ask her. Be a gentleman? Would that be weird or nice? I have no idea.

Fuck it.

“El,” I mutter softly, barely hearing myself.

Her eyes find mine, but she doesn't say anything. I can feel my heart beating through my chest like a drum. My breathing feels shallow. I feel the softness of her hand grab mine and start to trail up my arm.

Oh, there goes her hand, right over my stomach. Her hands are just the tiniest bit cold, causing my abs to clench.

"Rowan," she breathes out, and her eyes search mine.

I force a swallow down before answering, "Yeah."

"Kiss me."

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thirty-eight

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ELLIE



I COULDN'T HANDLE it anymore. With one touch on his bare skin and rippling muscles, I knew that I needed him. I need his hands, his lips, his entire body on me.

“Kiss me.” I look into his eyes, and his lips part.

His beautiful, full lips that I can't stop thinking about. I had to ask before my heart gave out. If I was going to die right now, I'd make sure I'd get that kiss from him.

His hand is gentle when he caresses my jaw, and I close my eyes. I want to savor his touch. With my eyes still closed, I can feel his thumb brush over my bottom lip, and he pulls down on it. I almost melt onto the floor. How can a touch as simple as that make my knees feel like jelly? It takes everything in me not to put his thumb in my mouth and suck on it.

“If I kiss you,” he whispers, “I won't be able to stop kissing you until I take my very last breath.”

The deepness of his voice, the husk, and—is that desperation I hear? I need him to kiss me now. I nod my head because I can't get any words out.

He pulls me in, and I wrap my arms around his neck. Standing as tall as I can, meeting him halfway, and the moment our lips touch—my knees buckle, and I see stars. I open my mouth for him and let his tongue dance along mine.

With every movement of his tongue, he follows my lead. He will do what I want now that he has me again. Every gentle bite he gives me on my bottom lip, every caress he makes with his tongue, I press my body into his. Needing more, more, *more* of him.

His strong hands go down my body and to the backs of my thighs. In one swift movement, he has me in his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist. I let myself get lost in him.

I feel my back press against the wall. Every movement he makes, it's like he's taking away every wound I've carried my entire life. He moves his lips from mine and brushes them across the crook of my neck.

I let out a faint whimper when I feel the scruff on his jaw graze my skin. The tiny, small bites with every kiss. Then his lips meet my ear, and I feel his lips hover. "Ellie, I don't think you realize how long I've wanted this again, wanted *you*," he says desperately.

He kisses behind my ear and gives it a flick of his tongue before pulling back and looking at me. Our eyes meet again, and with one look, I can see he wants to devour me. And I'm going to let him.

"Why didn't you ever come get me?" I ask with each heavy breath I take.

He continues to hold me against the wall and keeps one hand under me while letting the other one gently hold my cheek. He gives me one small kiss on my nose.

"Because you deserved more than I could have ever offered you, El. You deserved someone who could always make the stars shine for you when you needed them most."

I stare into his sweet, sad eyes.

"I ran away from a place that couldn't give me stars," I whisper. "And then I remembered where I can always find them, and that was home. *You're my home.*"

I search his eyes, wondering what he's thinking, what he wants to say. He could give me everything and more. I need him to realize that. Tell me to stay. Tell me I can be his again.

"And you're the light that I need to shine away the darkness I've lived in for so long," he whispers back.

I feel the pressure building up in my chest, my eyes starting to prickle. I place my hand on his cheek. "Let me be your light."

His lips find mine again, and I feel us moving away from the wall and to my bed, where he lays me down. His lips find my jaw, my neck, and my chest. I arch into him, needing him more.

I can feel how hard he is for me.

"You have no idea what you do to me, Ellie," he says onto my skin.

His lips trail down from my chest to my stomach, going further down while he moves his body. I feel a kiss just below my belly button. I look down at him, his eyes asking me if I want him to keep going. I nod.

He smirks and lifts onto his knees, his fingers trickling down my stomach, making me shudder from the lightness of it. He lands them on the waistband of my shorts and stops.

Looking at my body, he asks quietly, "You sure?"

I nod frantically, practically begging as I lift my hips up.

He lets out a sigh when he pulls down my shorts, leaving on the cotton underwear that matches my bra. If I'd known this would happen, I would have put on something a bit spicier. But I guess this will have to do.

He throws my shorts on the floor, his eyes going up and down every part of my body like he's trying to memorize every part of me.

"You are so goddamn beautiful," he rasps. "More beautiful than I remember."

I calm my breathing down. I decide to move my hand down my stomach, and I almost reach my underwear when he grabs my wrist.

"No." He looks at me and says, "Keep your hands above your head, and don't move them."

I swallow hard as my eyes widen at his demand. I don't know this side of Rowan, and I am one hundred percent here for it. I do as he says and grip my pillow with both hands. He licks the bottom of his lip slowly, pulling it under his teeth, and rubs a hand over his jaw. I look at his chest, and my eyes go back to the small trail that disappears below his jeans.

"Hey," he says.

My eyes snap back up to him.

"Keep your eyes on me," he demands with a rough edge to his voice.

His hands find my waist, and he glides them down to the waistband of the cotton material, hugging my hips. Then slowly, painfully, he tugs them down. I can feel myself becoming more wet by the minute. Rowan slides them off swiftly like he's done this a million times.

I hate every woman he's been with after me.

He lowers himself down at the same time my underwear comes off, throwing them on the floor with my shorts, and runs a hand through his hair. Before I can think or say anything, his hands wrap around my thighs, and he pulls me forward, letting himself kneel on the floor.

I let out an unexpected gasp when I feel him aggressively pull my body to him. He desperately wants a taste of me, and I'm letting him have it. He peppers me with kisses on my inner thighs, taking his time to torture me. I push my hips toward him, trying to guide his mouth where I want it, but he pulls his head back.

He clicks his tongue three times, and I bite my lip. I want him to do that again. I smile when I push myself again, but he controls me when he wraps his arms around my thighs entirely. His biceps flex with strength.

"Please, Rowan," I beg.

His blue-gray eyes look at me, and I stop breathing. His look screams that he is about to claim me again. He dips his head and kisses the inside of my thigh, moving closer to where I need his lips to be. I let out a gasp and moan when I feel the flick of his tongue. My back arches, and my hips thrust. I need more, so I tell him.

"More," I moan out weakly.

I can feel his lips turn into a smile, and I don't care how desperate I look by begging. I reach down to grab his hair, and without stopping, he says, "Keep your hands above your head," in the darkest tone I didn't know existed in this man.

I do as he says, not wanting him to stop, and grip the pillow again. He licks every inch of me and flicks his tongue where I need it most. I arch my back and moan out every curse word under the sun as he continues. I sit up to look at him, licking and sucking me like he's never tasted something this good before. I've never had a man become so—so—I can't even think straight once I feel a finger slip into me.

I fall back on the bed. I grip the pillows harder as he starts to pump in and out of me. My moans become longer, and I bite my lip, trying to hold them in. I feel another finger slip in me, thrusting harder, deeper, and faster. My vision goes dark, and I see stars.

He keeps his finger and tongue at the same speed, my toes curling, my legs shaking. Every pump matches every flick of his tongue. I can feel my toes curling tighter, my heels digging into his back. He groans out in pleasure.

Just when I think it can't get any better, I feel his fingers move, like he's beckoning me, and hits a spot that I've never thought possible. *When did he learn this?* I hope he learned that little trick just for me.

My arms come down, and I grip the sheets at my sides, squeezing my eyes shut. I see different colors in my vision as my release shoots out of my body. My moan grows louder, and I pray all the windows are closed.

I scream in pleasure while he lets me ride out my orgasm on his face, shouting his name, worshipping him. I can feel and hear the groans that come out of him, and finally, I feel my body fall back onto the bed. My heart is galloping, and his tongue is slowing down along with his fingers. I try to catch my breath and steady it. His fingers slip out of me, and his tongue stops. He kisses the sensitive nerves, and my body jolts.

I watch him stand up—his gaze pinned on me—and he puts both his fingers in his mouth, licking me off him. I stare at him in complete shock. This is a new side of Rowan that I am so happy to see.

“One day, I’m going to let you clean my fingers for me. But tonight, it’s all for me.”

When he’s done savoring me on his fingers, I let my head fall back on the bed and close my eyes. *Holy shit.*

thirty-nine

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ELLIE



I FEEL like my body is floating through the clouds, like a feather drifting with the wind. My head lies on Rowan's chest, and I hear every slow heartbeat that can lull me to sleep.

After Rowan gave me the best head I've ever had, I wanted to return the favor, and he stopped me. I knew he saw my facial expression change, going from excited to confused to hurt, and he stopped me before my emotions could go any further.

I want this night to be about you, he spoke softly. I've waited years to have my chance of getting to taste you again. If you insist on giving me something tonight, let it be me holding you in my arms.

I thought Rowan had one side to him: a gentle, sweet man. After tonight, I've learned that he also has a little devil on his shoulder that comes out to play. We've both grown up. We've both explored different things. This was nothing like what we used to do. There was so much passion and fire.

He didn't touch me with any hesitation. He touched me like he *owned* me.

I trace the tip of my finger along the ladybug tattoo I remember him having me pick out. It was his very first tattoo. Of course, I thought it was very cute, but I didn't think he would get it. A simple, red ladybug.

"Did I ever tell you why my favorite color is blue?" Rowan breaks the comfortable silence first.

"No, you haven't," I answer quietly, lost in a trance of his tattoos.

I can hear a laugh from deep inside his chest. A hesitation. "The moment I fell in love with your eyes, it was game over. Blue took over my

world.”

I pick up my head, my chin resting on his stomach when I look up at him. He continues to draw random shapes lazily on my skin.

“That was the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard.” I smile and tease him.

The corner of his lip tugs up. “It was, wasn’t it?”

I pinch my two fingers together while squinting with one eye.

“I guess I’m cheesy, then, because it’s true,” he tells me while brushing a piece of hair away from my face.

The touch of his fingers sends a chill down my spine.

He blinks slowly at me like he’s the calmest he’s been in years. “Let me take you out again. A re-do.”

“Another date? I don’t know, Ro. Are you taking me out again because we’re just friends?” I poke fun at him.

He shakes his head, placing a hand on his face while he curses at himself. “That was incredibly stupid of me to say. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I accept your apology. That’s what friends do.” I smirk.

“Okay, that’s enough.” He grabs my pillow and lightly hits me on the head, laughing.

We hear his phone buzz on the nightstand, both of us turning our heads toward it. He groans out of frustration. Reality pulls us out of this dreamy state of mind.

“I don’t want to get out of this bed,” he mutters.

“I know, but we have things to do,” I respond.

“The only things I want to do involve you, this bed, and some heavy breathing.”

“Rowan!” I exclaim in shock while my jaw drops from the unexpected response.

Getting up on my knees to grab his phone off the nightstand, I feel a gentle slap on my ass. I jolt up, pushing him by his shoulder while he laughs at me. I roll my eyes and hand him his phone.

He stifles his laugh and looks at his phone before answering. “What’s up, James?” He’s quiet for a beat. “Already? It’s only—” He pulls the phone away from his ear to look at it and puts it back. “—four o’clock.”

He looks at me and gives a tight smile, holding up a finger. I lie down and stare at the ceiling. When I start to space out with my thoughts, Milo comes crashing onto the bed, licking my face.

“Milo, I didn’t even hear you come in. How are you so sneaky?” I scratch his ears and chin.

“I need to go.” Rowan gets up, puts his jeans on, and tucks his phone into his pocket.

I sit up to look at him. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, James needs me to get there a little earlier than expected. The band that’s playing tonight has a lot of people coming to the brewery.” He bends down, his abs crunching in the process, grabs his shirt, and quickly puts it back on.

We walk out of the room with Milo following us. I cross my arms over my chest—suddenly feeling cold with goosebumps after the warmth from his body disappears—and watch him put his shoes on. I look over at the kitchen counter and remember we were in the middle of baking cookies.

“Oh, well, maybe I’ll see you there later tonight? If you want?” I ask hesitantly.

He lifts himself back up and gives me a warm smile. “I’d love that.”

He grabs me by the waist, pulling me into him, and I bury myself against his chest. I inhale the scent of vanilla and strawberry that surrounds us from our hair washing earlier. I feel one of his hands stroke my back in comfort as he kisses the top of my head.

My mind takes me back to the day I left. He was holding me the exact same way and kissing me on top of my head. Except that time, I was crying and telling myself to stay with Rowan.

forty

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ELLIE



I WOKE up the next day, staring out of my bedroom window. The sun cascaded through the thin curtains, a summer breeze pushing past them and into the room. Last night, I dreamed about what Rowan, and I did in this bed yesterday. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that would ever happen again.

Not just what happened between us, but also my willingness to bake—and enjoy it—even though we made a mess.

I didn't have any hesitations when I told him we would make cookies. I didn't think about my anxiety, work, or messing things up.

Plus, Rowan desperately needed to know how to make *good* cookies. I don't know what he did wrong with his, but they tasted like I was eating chalk.

I saunter from the guest house to my parent's house in a pair of cozy sweatpants and a shirt and open the patio door into the kitchen. I see my dad sitting in a lounge chair, reading a book. He looks over at me and smiles.

He closes his book and takes off his reading glasses. "Hey, kiddo. What brings you here?"

I sit on the sectional, pulling my feet up with me, and let out a sigh. "I need to talk to you and Mom about something. It's actually really important." I pick at the string hanging from the band of my sweatpants.

Dad sits up straighter. "Is everything okay? Apart from everything else you've been dealing with?"

I let out another sigh and gave him a tight smile. "It's part of why I came back home, to think, but I didn't tell anyone about it until the other

day when I told August.”

He nods slowly and gets up from the chair. “Let me go grab your mother.”

He walks past me and pats my shoulder. His footsteps sound further away as he walks up the stairs to the bedroom. I hear the clock that hangs from the wall in the living room tick. Each tick reminds me that each second that goes by, the closer we get to summer being over and me having to return to New York. A place that doesn’t feel like a home anymore.

I sit with my thoughts and think about the offer that was given to me. I was in the middle of preparing dishes for the night's menu. Chocolate mousse that was sprinkled with gold flakes. Chocolate mousse and gold flakes. That was when I knew what I was doing wasn’t passionate but pretentious.

Ellie, in culinary school, would have found that incredible, different, and spectacular. Gold on chocolate? What an insane concept. I laugh at myself when I think about it now. There’s no passion in that. No heart or love. It was just the next thing to get in a magazine and be bragged about.

“Honey,” Mom says to me.

I look at my parents, who are sitting in front of me. I didn’t hear or see them come in. I don’t know how long they’ve been here waiting, how I look to them. I shake the thoughts from my head and pull myself together.

“You wanted to talk to us about something?” Mom asks.

I swallow before saying, “Yes. There is something I didn’t share with you guys. Something I knew I should have told you once I found out.”

I watch my mom grab my dad's hand, something she does when she isn’t sure what is coming her way.

I let my body fall back against the couch as I tell them what happened the day Charlie told me his news. As I tell them, I feel this weight lift off me, this shift in my life that I didn’t know would come. I feel like I can breathe a little easier with each word that comes out.

This is the first time that I’ve felt at peace.

I know what I need to do.



Three hours later, I walk back to the guest house exhausted. It's the type of exhaustion you have after you've cried your eyes out and gone through so many emotions that your brain needs to catch up to process it all.

It's the type of exhaustion that I welcome.

My parents didn't say a word until I was done talking. They took a moment to themselves to process the whole thing as well. I didn't realize that it would affect them too. Or August. And if it affected them like that, then I know it's going to hit Rowan even harder.

They spoke their minds, being truthful about everything. Living in New York, my relationship with Charlie, and moving up the ladder in the restaurant industry. They didn't mind Charlie, but they saw my light start to dim the longer our relationship went on. Now they know that it was partly because of work as well.

I made sure not to leave out any details. I shared what I told the girls the night of emergency movie night. The panic attack and not giving the time to listen to Charlie. Blaming myself for that entire situation, which they did not allow. But at the end of the conversation, they held me in their arms while I cried again.

Now that it was all out in the open with my family, my body broke down. It released everything that had been building up for years that I'd stuffed down and never allowed to break free. I couldn't let myself fail with work and my relationship, and this is where it had gotten me.

I get to the couch and fall onto it, letting the cushions absorb my body. I can feel the dry tears along my cheeks. The adrenaline that was shooting through my body is finally at bay but still hovering around.

Now that all of that is said and done, there is only one person I want to talk to, to be around. And that's Rowan. I need to tell him everything. I need to tell him how I feel about us. He needs to know that I *need him*. I look over at my phone that's on the coffee table and when I reach to grab it, my phone lights up.

Charlie. A photo of us at a time when it was nothing but love and happiness. The fall leaves surround us in our scarves and knitted hats. I know I need to talk to him. I sit up, and my thumb hovers over the green button. I answer.

"Ellie? Oh my God, Ellie, cupcake, I can't believe you picked up. I thought I was never going to hear your voice again," Charlie says, and I

hear him trying to control his breathing. His heart is probably pounding as hard as mine. But mine isn't pounding out of love or excitement.

I thought I cried all my tears away, but I guess I didn't. Hearing his voice, my heart breaks all over again.

"Ellie are you there?" his voice cracks.

I still say nothing. I knew what I was going to say. I prepared what I was going to say, but now my mind has come up blank.

I hear Charlie sigh on the other end.

"Alright, if you won't say anything, then I'm going to take this opportunity to talk to you." He pauses, waiting to see if I will speak, but I don't, so he continues, "I am so, so sorry. What I did was terrible, unforgivable, and I wouldn't blame you for hating me. I didn't handle the situation well. I should have made more of an effort to grab your attention. I felt abandoned and left behind. I couldn't handle it. You were the love of my life, and I was losing you. I didn't know what to do, and I did something that made no sense. It was nice to talk to someone, but after what I did with that woman, I wanted to throw up. I wanted to take it all back because it wasn't what I wanted. I was a fool. An absolute idiot.

"I will do anything to prove to you that I will never do something like that again. Ever. Anything you need. If you want me to move out so you can have your space, I will do that. If you want us to go to couples counseling, I will do that. Please. Just give me another chance. We can't just give up after five years together, Ellie. We talked about getting married and having kids. What our lives will look like when that time comes. And I don't want that to go away."

I pull the phone away and put it on mute because I can't hold these emotions in any longer. I sob on the other end of the phone as I gasp for air. The man I once loved wants me back, and there's the smallest part of me that wants to take him back. To try again.

I put the phone on speaker, the screen drenched in tears, and I look at it. I hear him continue to talk, and I listen. I listen to him plead. I listen, and I stare at my phone, thinking back to memories of us and when we were happy. Just as I'm about to press the button to unmute myself, it's like the universe is playing a fucking joke on me because Rowan's name comes up on my screen.

He's calling. As if my heart isn't already on the brink of pounding out of my chest, the other man that I've loved longer than Charlie, the other man

that I grew up with and trusted with my entire life, is on the other line.

I battle with my emotions and my mind. I battle with my heart. Charlie continues to talk, and I count down the seconds I have until Rowan goes to my voicemail. I need to decide right now, or I'll hate myself.

So, I do.

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ROWAN



A WAVE of excitement pierces through my body when I hear Ellie's voice on the other end of the phone. But the excitement turns into fear when I hear her on the other end of the line crying. Crying so badly that I can barely hear the words she's trying to say.

"Ellie," I say in a panic.

But she continues to cry and continues to drown out any other sound around me.

"Tell me where you are, and I'll come to you. Please," I beg.

"I-I'm." She lets out a breath. "At home."

I grab the keys off the table in the entryway and run out the door. I don't hang up on her. "Ellie, stay right there. I'm on my way. Do not hang up the phone," I plead urgently.

I don't know why, but I do what my body commands, and I run. Ignoring my car completely, thinking that I'll get there faster on foot. I run until my lungs are burning, my feet pounding on the concrete. She is five blocks away. That's it.

Five blocks until I can get to her, hold her, and take her pain away. I jog past her car and up the driveway, opening the wooden fence, not bothering to close it, and run until I see the white doors to the guest house. I don't bother knocking on the door and run inside, where I see Ellie covering her face with her hands, sitting on the couch.

My chest rises and falls as I try to calm my breathing down. I kneel before her and gently move her hands, cupping her face in mine so I can look at her.

"Ellie, honey, breathe for me. I need you to breathe."

I search her eyes, trying to find the brightness in her baby blues, but all I see is pain. I brush my thumbs on her cheeks and continue to talk to her.

"El, breathe. Follow my lead, okay? Breathe in." I take a deep breath, watching her do the same thing. "Breathe out." I let out a small smile once I notice her breathing has calmed along with her tears. "There you go, that's it."

Her breathing starts to slow down, and her eyes start to clear. Red-rimmed eyes, and she's still the most beautiful person my eyes have ever seen. I start to lift myself up and let go of her face when she grabs onto my wrists.

"I'm not going anywhere, I promise. I'm just going to sit down next to you, okay?"

She doesn't tear her gaze away from me with each movement I make. I sit down next to her and wrap my arm around her shoulder, guiding her to lay on my lap. She rests her head on my leg while she pulls her arms into her chest and lifts her legs onto the couch.

I brush the damp hair off her face and continue to run my fingers through it with each calming breath she takes.

Ten minutes later, I hear Ellie breathing normally, and her body is relaxed. I never stopped brushing her hair with my hand. I wanted her to know that I was here, and I was not going anywhere.

"Today was an exhausting day," Ellie finally says. Her voice comes out raspy and tired.

I look down at her as she lies on her side. Her arms, once tucked against her chest, are now wrapped just above my knee, clinging to me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask softly.

I see her shoulders lift and then fall back down. "I talked to my parents about something. Something I should have told them when I first got home. I didn't tell August until the other day, and he begged me to tell them. If I didn't, he would have told them."

I catch my breath and hold on to it. Something this big that she never mentioned to anyone, on top of everything else she was dealing with. I don't know what to say. I don't know if I should ask her to tell me or if I should leave it alone.

"I...I was offered to take over the executive pastry chef role. They offered it to me the night Charlie told me everything. I haven't given them an answer yet."

I don't say anything. I don't know how to answer that. I mean, I know how to answer that, but it's not something that I think Ellie should hear. We aren't together. We have our separate lives. Who am I to tell her what to do?

She continues after a beat. "I was trying to forget about it, which I know isn't right for me to do when it's the opportunity of a lifetime. I would get to work with chefs I've always dreamt of meeting. I would get to travel all over the world. Be a part of curating the menu, which has always been something I've wanted to do. To put my own spin on things. Me and Charlie not being together now changes things. I could say yes and just go. I wouldn't need to worry about what he's doing or who he's fucking. I wouldn't have anything that would hold me back because I'd be by myself. I'd be following my own rules."

I clench my jaw at the thought of rarely ever seeing Ellie again. I push back the tears I feel building up in my eyes. Sending her off again on a fucking plane, having to say goodbye, *again*.

"What do you think I should do, Rowan?"

My heart nearly stops at the question she's just asked me. I take a minute to myself to collect my thoughts. I don't want to blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind. I know I need to go about this the right way. But how do I do that?

How do I make sure that what I'm about to tell her is the right thing for *her*? I want to be selfish, and I want to take control of this situation because I didn't get to have that with my dad. But I don't want to lump her in the same world as my dad. He never asked me if I wanted him to stay or if I wanted to go with him.

Right now, I have Ellie asking me what I think she should do. I could be selfish, just this once. I can risk it all with her.

"Do you want the truth, or do you want me to tell you what I always tell you?"

She's quiet, and I can feel her thumb brushing over the rough fabric of my jeans. "The truth," she whispers.

Anxiety thrums through my body. I notice her biting her lip and I'm sure she has a million thoughts running through her mind like I do.

"I want you to stay here," I mutter so quietly that I wonder if she heard me.

Her thumb stops moving, but she doesn't look at me. "Stay here and do what, Rowan?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Make a life here. Open your dream bakery. Be *happy*. Wake up in the morning and not dread going to do something that you are supposed to love. Surround yourself with family and friends who will support you through the good and the bad. *Stay, Ellie.*”

She turns her body and looks up at me. Her face is slightly puffy from crying. But her eyes are bright again and are the bluest I’ve ever seen them. I watch her throat bob and wonder if what I just told her was too much.

Was I being too selfish?

She breaks the silence between us. “What about *you*? Do you think you should be on that list of why I should stay?”

I look at her and continue to brush my hand through her hair. Her eyes shut momentarily with the comfort. Slowly, she opens them again. Her long lashes flutter when she blinks.

“Rowan,” she says, asking in question.

Before she can continue, before I lose her again, I reach down and kiss her, needing to feel her lips on mine again. I gently cup her cheeks in my hands and keep my lips on hers. I feel her touch on me, in my hair, her fingers running through it.

I tuck my arm under her, lifting her up closer to me. I lock her there. Holding one side of her cheek while my other arm is wrapped around her. I pull her in tighter, not willing myself to let her go.

I feel her tongue on my lips, and I let her in. She’s slow and lazy, just the way I like it. No rush, just enjoying each other, the taste of each other. I feel her fingers against the scruff of my jaw, and it sends electricity through my body.

I let myself bite her lip softly, a moan slipping through her lips and onto mine. I’m going to let myself have her right now. Because I don’t know if I will be lucky enough to have her again like this.

I’m going to make her *mine*.

forty-two

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ELLIE



HIS LIPS PRESS into mine unexpectedly, but I take every ounce of him in. The warmth of his smooth lips, the way his tongue sweeps against mine as we play with each other. I can feel my body arching into him, wanting to straddle him and take over.

But I'm not going to. I've only ever experienced this side of Rowan once, and I want to explore that part of him more. So, I do. I let him take charge. I let him do what he wants with me.

He nips at my bottom lip, surprising me with his tongue again, and my mind goes back to that night in the bedroom and how his tongue felt on me. My legs have a mind of their own, and I end up straddling him. I place my hands on each side of his shoulder, lifting myself up but not letting my lips leave him, and start to grind on him.

His large hands slide up my thighs and cup my ass, helping me move on top of him. I let a whimper of a moan release from my mouth and into his, which in turn makes him let out a low groan. I miss the feeling of him like this. Miss how he feels against me while I move on top of him through our clothes.

His fingers grab into my ass, and my hands slide up into his hair, gently tugging at it. I want to see how far he will let me go, let me set myself free and wild. I want to learn what he's learned throughout the years of us being apart.

I was brought back here because of work and my ex, but I like to think that I was really brought back here for Rowan. To come back to him. To realize the potential we could have and not waste any more years on it.

"Let me take you to the bedroom," he says between kisses.

I push myself full up while he keeps his hands on me, both of our chests rising and falling, panting. I can feel how hard he is under me, and I swear to God, my body shivers. It *shivers*. He presses himself into me, and I let out a sharp gasp.

I show him a devilish smile because even though this is the hottest moment I've ever had in my life; I can't resist playing childish games with him.

I wink at him and quickly push myself off. "First one in the room gets to call the shots."

"Oh, you do not know what you've just done."

Just as quickly as I move, he's moved faster. He grabs my waist and playfully tosses me back on the couch while he runs to the room. I jump off the couch and run after him.

"Shit," Rowan shouts when his socks slip on the freshly polished wooden floors. He grabs the wall to catch his fall.

I laugh as I try to go around him, only for him to grab me by the waist again and tug my body into his. He spins our bodies around, his back facing the bedroom door. He scoots me forward and turns around again, crossing into my bedroom.

"Woo," he lets out in victory.

He turns around just as I'm about to walk into the bedroom, but he wraps one arm around my lower back, pulling me into him. He presses his lips to mine, and I can feel them turn into a smug smile.

The only sounds I hear are our lips sucking, releasing, and sucking again. It's a beautiful sound I never want to stop hearing. The pink and purple sunset streams into the bedroom through the sheer curtains, casting a glow on us. I grab the hem of his shirt and start to lift it up. He breaks away from my lips, tugs his shirt off, and pulls me in again.

In a matter of seconds, he's in his dark red boxer briefs. The first thing I notice is the tent he's pitching under there. I don't remember it being this big. Then again, I'd never really taken the time to look at it. I'd given him plenty of hand jobs when we were together, but we were too busy making out while he was also touching me.

When we lost our virginity together, I felt how much he had to offer, but I was too busy trying to control my breathing. I smirk when I take in what I'm seeing.

"Huh, red boxers. You wear that color for me?" I wiggle my brows.

He crosses his arms, his biceps showing off, and angles his head. "You think I planned this?"

I mimic him and tilt my head to the side, then narrow my gaze at him in challenge.

"Ellie Thompson, if you don't take off your clothes in five seconds, so help me, you will not like what I'm going to do to you in that bed, against that wall, on this floor, and on that dresser." He gestures to all of it with his head.

I place my hands on my hips, challenging him because I am *very* okay with seeing what he wants to do to me. He gets down on his knees and looks up at me while he drags my sweatpants down my legs.

When he sees what I'm wearing underneath, he presses his forehead to my stomach, letting out a sigh. I didn't pick out my underwear on purpose. I just grabbed what was available, and that so happened to be cheeky, black-lace panties.

"You have no idea what you're doing to me," he groans.

I bite the bottom of my lip trying to smother my smile that wants to slip out. "Well, I hope you're ready to see what's underneath my shirt," I say teasingly.

He looks at me with a grin and lifts the bottom of my shirt with one finger and angles his head to look under. He lets his finger slip away while he shuts his eyes.

He places his hands together and mutters, "Thank you."

I'm not wearing a bra. I cup his face in my hands and kiss him, not needing to bend down since he's already so tall. I feel his hands glide under my shirt and onto my warm skin. They trail along my back.

He stands up swiftly while at the same time grabbing the bottom of my shirt and pulling it off. My nipples are hard, and I know it's not from being cold. Rowan stops to put his hands on his hips and lets out a deep breath while staring at my breasts.

He runs a hand down his face and then looks at me. "I don't think you realize how many times I've dreamed about this, about you, and having the privilege of seeing how incredible your body truly is. If I get my way, getting to see this as much as I want, I'll gladly keep falling to my knees before you. I'll always worship you. More than I already do."

"Rowan, you've seen me like this before. It's nothing new."

“Not like this, Ellie. We were so young the last time I saw you. I thought what you had to offer before was incredible. But this.” He gestures over my body with his hand. “You’re a grown woman now. You’ve filled out in places you weren’t before. The curves of your body.” His hand traces my waist and down my hips, and he shakes his head. “Now get in that bed and show me what I want to see.”

I lift my chin up and pin my eyes on him before asking, “And what would that be?” I walk around him and toward the bed, not letting my eyes drop from looking at him, and he follows my every movement with his. The back of my knees hit the bed.

“I want to see you touch yourself for me,” he tells me in a smoky, rough voice.

My eyes can’t help but widen slightly because I’ve never had a man ask that of me. And Rowan was the last man I ever thought would say something like that. My toes curl, and the bottom part of me aches for him.

I do as he says, lying my body on the bed and propping myself up on my elbows. I move one hand slowly and carefully because I’m in control of this. He may tell me what to do and I do it, but I can tease just as bad.

My fingers start to skim the top of the lace, and his eyes follow every movement my hand makes. Those dark blue eyes shine with hunger, something I’ve never seen from him before, and it makes me crave him more.

I slip my hand under the lace, and I can feel how wet I am. A part of me wants to pull Rowan’s hand nearer so he can feel what he does to me. I hum when I touch the sensitive part of me, the pleasure flowing through my body.

I take my time when I start to play with myself. Feeling every part of me, knowing that Rowan is looking at me. He leans against the dresser and crosses his arms casually, like he’s having a normal conversation with someone. But he pierces me with his stare while he takes me in.

I close my eyes from the pleasure.

“Keep your eyes on me, Ellie,” he demands. “I want our eyes on each other when you lose control.”

I open my eyes to look at him. I can feel the pressure building up as I move my body with my hand, arch my back, and bite the bottom of my lip. I start to moan out his name, and then I see him clench his hands into fists at his sides. His throat bobs, and his jaw ticks.

“Do you know how beautiful you sound when you moan my name?” His voice is rugged and raw. He brings his hand down on himself over his briefs.

I stop what I’m doing, catching his attention. “If you touch yourself, I stop,” I tell him.

He lets out a deep breath and pulls his hand away, allowing me to continue. I bite my lip and play with myself faster, my breathing picking up. I let out sharp gasps as I feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge of release.

“Shit,” I whisper when I continue to look at Rowan. “I’m close.”

I watch him walk over to me just as my body is about to release from pleasure. But then he grabs my wrist and stops me.

I pant and glare at him. “What are you doing?”

He lifts my hand away and bends down toward me. “You’ll finish when I let you finish.”

I swallow before letting my lips part. I bounce my eyes between his and his extremely hard length that twitches. I grab my wrist out of his hold and lean myself up, making him stand again. I get to the edge of the bed and stare up at him through my lashes.

My hands land on his hips, on top of his briefs, and I start to pull them down.

Two can play this game.

forty-three

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ROWAN



I CAN'T BELIEVE *this is happening. Is this really happening? Am I dreaming? How do I prove to myself that this is real? I could poke her in the head.*

Okay, I can't help it.

"What the—" Ellie looks up at me. "Did you just poke me in the head?"

I look down at her and her furrowed brows.

"I was just making sure this is real and not some wild dream that I've had before." I spread my arms out.

She smirks and says, "You've dreamt about this before?"

"Only a million times."

"Ah, not a million and one? Got it. Well, it's real. I'm real. I'm here, facing off with your dick that I really want right now. So, can you let me do my thing?"

"Yes, please," I answer quickly.

"Good," she whispers and then presses her lips to my stomach with a smile. "I've dreamed about this too. How much I've missed having you, touching you, tasting you." She grips the top of my briefs and slowly drags them down.

My abs clench with excitement and desire.

She drags my briefs down, and my dick springs up, finally free from the shackles that were my briefs. I watch every expression on her face, trying to read it for myself. Her eyes widen. That's good. Her lips are parted. That's better. Then she lifts her eyes to me.

"Rowan," her voice wavers.

I don't say anything and continue to watch her. I'm eager to hear what she wants to say. Again, she's seen me before, but maybe it's different now.

"No other woman is allowed to have you ever again." Her brows rise in confirmation.

She grips my throbbing dick in one of her hands and kisses the tip of it. I suck in a breath through my teeth at the touch of her lips. She takes her time with me, kissing every inch like she's claiming me. She can claim me all she wants.

I put my hand on her head before asking, "Is this okay?"

Her lashes flutter, and she grips me tighter, nodding her head. She sticks out her tongue and licks the underside of my tip, making me groan.

"Fuck." I pant, trying to control myself.

She smiles and then wraps her mouth just around my tip and sucks on it teasingly. I feel my hand grip her hair, trying to control myself and not wanting to hurt her.

"Ellie, I need to tell you something."

She keeps her mouth on me but lets out an, "Hm?"

"I haven't been with anyone in almost ten months. I don't know how long I'll last, especially now that it's with you."

I see this look in her eyes, a sparkle and a smug smile before taking my entire length in her mouth. She gets about halfway until she needs to pull back and release me.

"I want you to know," she says. "You can grab my hair, control me if you want. I don't mind. Not with you." Without any warning, she guides me back into her mouth.

My hand grabs her hair again, and she lets out a sweet, sweet moan. She tries to get me deeper into her mouth, but she gags. That makes me want to come. I try to pull myself back, but she grips the sides of my legs and takes me in again.

"Shit," I groan out.

She takes my dick in her hands again and works them up and down with her mouth at the same time. Sucking and pumping. My hips start to move on their own accord while my hand gently pushes her head in rhythm.

"Holy shit," I sigh out and drop my head back. "This is all I fucking want, Ellie. *You're* all I want."

She grips me tighter and speeds up to match my rhythm. I start to pant and grab her hair more, twisting it in my palm. I tug on it a little harder, not

thinking before doing it, and to my surprise, Ellie moans and whimpers in pleasure.

“Fuck, I’m close,” I pant out.

I don’t want to come in her mouth. I need to be inside of her, *now*. I pull myself out with force, and she looks at me while she licks her lips. I pull her up by the waist and scoot her further on the bed.

I’ve lost all self-control at this point. I pull down the black lace she’s wearing and stand in front of her, running my hand through my hair. She lays there as I trace every inch of her with my eyes, making sure I remember everything. Her freckles, her birthmarks, the way her breasts move when she breathes.

“Turn around for me and hold on to the headboard,” I demand.

Without hesitation, she’s on her knees with her ass facing me. My hands are on her waist and trailing up the sides of her until I can feel her breasts in my hands. I bend down to kiss between her shoulder blades. My dick rubs above her ass.

I move my lips toward her ear and say, “I’m going to start slow. If you need me to stop, tell me. Don’t force yourself if it becomes uncomfortable and hurts, okay?”

All she does is nod for me, and I kiss her temple.

“I don’t think you understand how weak you make me.” I trail my lips on her earlobe.

I let my hand slide up the side of her stomach to her arm and then place my hand on hers so we’re both gripping the headboard.

I grab my dick with my other hand and start rubbing around the precum that’s spilling out. I tease both of us a little bit, rubbing my tip over her sensitive clit and down near her entrance.

“Do you want me to use a condom?” I ask. I chuckle as I say, “I would need to steal one.”

“I’m on the pill, and I’m clean. I haven’t...slept with anyone in months. I want to feel all of you inside me, Rowan. I didn’t get to before.”

“You want me to fill you up, Ellie?” I whisper to her.

All she gives me is a whimper, and I smile against her neck, still rubbing myself against her. My precum lubricated her on top of how wet she was. I want to bury myself in her.

“Has any other man done that to you before?” I let go of myself and wrap my arm around her, letting myself feel how wet she is for me.

She gasps at my touch before shaking her head and saying, "I've always used condoms. Even with...him."

I feel a wicked smile play across my lips. The thought of her wanting me to be the only man that goes in her bare and raw. Fuck. I need to slow down my thoughts. I grab my dick again and rub myself against her.

She tilts her head up and turns her gaze on me. "Don't make me beg."

"How badly do you want me inside you?" I continue to tease us, allowing myself just a taste by letting my tip go inside.

She moans out of frustration and tries to push her hip into me, but I pull mine back.

"Rowan," she cries in desperation, and fuck if that doesn't make me want her more.

I give in and slowly give us what we both want, feeling her tightness and warmth around me. We both moan once I get the tip in, and I need to breathe.

"Please, Rowan. I need more," she gasps out.

I shake my head. "I need to go slow for both of us. Just getting a taste of you right now is putting me over the edge."

She whines and tries to push herself onto me, but I grab her waist, holding her. My dick throbs as I slip into her, inch by inch.

"Fuck," she cries out.

I let out another breath and pushed myself in fully. We both moan in pleasure, and my fingers dig into her waist. I move her hips, pumping myself in and out. She continues to moan and say every curse word under the sun. She holds onto the headboard but lowers herself, giving me more access to go deep into her.

I start to feel her lose control of herself. She starts to move with me, slamming into me harder and harder. The headboard continues to hit the wall, and I put my hands over hers, so she doesn't destroy her knuckles.

I use the headboard to thrust into her. I start to lose myself, picking up my pace and slamming into her.

Right now, I know this is us fucking, not making love. I know the difference, and I'm okay with that right now. Because I know we'll have our moment where we can make love slowly, lazily, wrapped in each other's arms. What we're doing now, ravenous and wild, is from all the pent-up sexual frustration between us, and we can finally have what we want.

I feel her hand beneath mine grip the headboard harder as she tries to catch her breath. I let my other hand wander and grab one of her breasts. My fingers skim her sensitive, peaked nipple. I test her and pinch it.

“Oh my *God*,” she cries out again.

I smile and pinch it again. “He isn’t here right now, baby. It’s just me.”

“Rowan,” she moans out after I continue to pinch and rub her nipple between my fingers.

I attempt to slow down my hips, wanting to feel every part of her. I pull out until it’s just the tip and push myself back in, pulling a moan from her. I do it again, getting a gasp from her.

“You make the most beautiful sounds come out of that mouth of yours,” I say, bending down when I place my lips on her shoulder.

I pull my dick out when I feel myself toward the edge of release, and she whips her head back to me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks in a sweet voice while she catches her breath.

“You’re making me go crazy. I don’t want this to end.” I pepper her shoulders with kisses.

She sits up and turns around, cupping my face, kissing me passionately and roughly at the same time. I bite her lip, and our tongues sweep over each other. I feel her hands on my chest and the pressure she gives to push me back.

I lay down, and she straddles me. I hold on to her hips while she rocks herself on my dick while it lays flat on my stomach. Slowly and sensually.

forty-four

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ELLIE



I ROCK myself back and forth on him while I bite my bottom lip out of pleasure. Rowan Williams has certainly been blessed. I bend down to kiss him deeply while I run my fingers through his hair. I never want this to end.

“Lift your hips for me, baby,” Rowan tells me deeply with a whisper of his lips.

I do as he says, and he takes himself in his hand and props it up perfectly for me. I feel the tip of him, and I bury my face in his neck. The feel of him makes me lose control, and I bite his neck gently. To my delight, this gets a groan out of him.

I smile to myself and bite him again. I bite and suck and lick.

“You are going to drive me fucking crazy, woman.” He shoves himself into me, and I cry out in a moan.

He holds my hips and pumps himself into me while I continue to move my lips on his neck, shoulder, and jaw.

I can feel our bodies heat up and feel the sweat begin to build as we both work our muscles and energy. Using every ounce that we have in us. I push myself up and he stops once he realizes that I’ve taken control now. I slowly ride him and keep my eyes on him.

“Play with your nipples for me,” he commands.

With a smile, I pinch them and apply just enough pressure that makes me arch my back in pleasure. When Rowan did that before, I felt my body lose control. I never thought I’d like the pleasure and pain part of sex.

“That’s it, baby, keep doing that for me.” His hands roam my body, and he continues to praise me. “You see how incredible we are together? Our

bodies are made for each other. I was made for you. I want to drown in you.”

I try to bury myself in him more and more. I want all of him, not just this, but his love, his devotion to me. I haven’t felt like this with any other man. He makes me see stars that I didn’t know existed.

“This is only for you, baby,” he says with so much roughness in his voice. He sits up, holding onto me, while I continue to ride him. I feel myself rubbing on him in the best way possible. “I want you to come for me again.”

My arms wrap around his neck, and he buries his face into my chest. I feel his tongue glide over my nipple and then his teeth biting down on them. One at a time.

“Fuck, keep doing that, it feels incredible,” I tell him.

I feel him smile as he sucks at my nipple and licks it again. His teeth gently graze against the hardness, and he lightly bites it. I feel my orgasm about to reach the surface of my body, and I tilt my head back, giving Rowan more access.

“Rowan, I’m—”

He bites down again, and I start to feel myself lose control. I ride him quicker and messier, my moans becoming louder as I call out his name like he’s a fucking God. *My God*. I hear his breathing pick up, and before I know it, he has me on my back, and he grips the headboard.

He thrusts harder and harder into me as I ride out my high with him. The sound of the headboard hitting the wall over and over with each thrust. Who knew a sound like that could be so beautiful? I match his rhythm, moving my hips as we push together.

“Fuck,” Rowan yells out. He groans as his thrusts get deeper and slower. He bends down and kisses me passionately with incredible intensity, then buries his head into my neck and moans my name into my ear, making me feel like I’m his goddess.

I feel the warm sensation of him pouring into me, and I want to moan and cry and tell him I love him. The connection this brings us. This moment we’re sharing together has my emotions in overdrive, and I wonder if he feels the same way. It’s like we’re solidifying something so special, so magical.

His movements begin to slow down while we catch our breath together. He picks up his head and looks at me, then kisses me over and over. On my

lips, my cheek, my jaw, my neck. Every spot he can reach.

I still feel him inside me throbbing, and I don't want him to leave me. I want him to stay inside me just a little longer. He knows it's what I want without saying anything because he doesn't pull out just yet.

I can feel my eyes watering before I can catch myself and make it stop. But I can't. The tears stream down my face and onto Rowan's cheeks. I've never felt so overwhelmed in such a good way.

He lifts his head, still holding onto me, still in me, when he asks, "What's wrong? What happened?" His brows knit together, and the look in his eyes shows so much love and care for me.

I shake my head and smile. "Nothing is wrong. This is just," I whisper, grabbing his face gently, "perfect."

His face relaxes, and a smile tugs at his lips.

Our arms stay wrapped around each other as we lazily kiss.



We barely get any sleep throughout the night. We held each other, talking quietly and bringing up old memories. Sometimes, we would find ourselves lost in each other again. Orgasm after orgasm. Kiss after kiss. I couldn't get enough.

"Is this what it feels like?" I ask quietly as we lay in bed.

"What?" he whispers.

The sun starts to shine through the curtains, and we bury ourselves under the blankets, wanting to block out the world so it's only the two of us.

"To be absolutely, head over heels, crazy for someone?"

Our fingers intertwine, and he brings my knuckles to his lips, kissing them one by one.

"I'm afraid I'm going to wake up, and find out this was all a dream," he says.

"Me too."

We're both quiet for a moment, brooding in our own thoughts. We don't take our eyes off each other, but I can tell he wants to ask me a question.

"What's on your mind?" I finally ask.

He holds my hand close to his face, practically snuggling with it.

"Are you going to stay?" he whispers to me.

I stare at him with so much love in my heart that I can't stand the idea of leaving him again. But...

"I still need to figure things out," I answer him.

His eyes close, still pressing my hand into him.

"Stay, Ellie. Stay for me." He opens his eyes, and I watch a tear fall from the corner. The glossiness makes his eyes look like the deep blue ocean.

I bite the inside of my lip. This is all I wanted to hear him say. So why is it so hard to accept it?

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forty-five

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ROWAN



“YOU’RE GOING to see your dad?” James asks.

I nod and take a drink of my beer.

“What are you trying to get out of it?” Beau asks.

Me and the guys decide to hang out on the second level of the brewery while customers mingle downstairs. After the incredible night I had with Ellie, I had to clear my mind. Especially the conversation where I begged her not to leave.

I look at Beau over my glass and then set it down on the wooden table we’re sitting at. “I think it’s time that I finally go see him.”

“What’s making you want to do this? Is it because of a certain woman?” Beau asks.

Yes, it is, but I’m not going to tell him that. I need to let myself heal from all the bullshit I’ve put myself through. I want to be a better man, not only for myself but for Ellie.

I’ve pushed people away my entire life, and I can’t let myself do that anymore. I need Ellie in my life. Whether that’s us staying here or me moving to New York.

“I just need to clear some things up. I’m not going to lie and say that Ellie coming to town didn’t have any influence, because it did. I’m twenty-nine, and I know I can’t keep living like this. I’m driving myself crazy wondering what can happen if I talk to him. If I can’t find the courage to do this, how am I going to be able to overcome my fears with other things in life? Will it be easy? No. But if Ellie can deal with everything that’s going on with her, why can’t I?”

“Because the situation with your dad is very different from her situation,” James says.

“James, you have the best relationship with both of your parents, I don’t know if you can understand this. I’m not trying to be a dick, but you were lucky enough to not come from a broken home,” I tell him.

Beau darts his eyes back and forth between me and James. He doesn’t say anything. He just stares and listens. I’ve been close to these two for as long as I can remember, and they have the healthiest relationship with their parents, *their* dad.

“Fine.” James slams his glass on the table. “I’m going back to work.” He gets up from his chair and walks back downstairs.

Beau rubs his face with his hands and then runs them through his dark hair.

“What? Am I wrong?” I ask.

I’m being a fucking dick, and I need to stop, but I can’t. I’m a fucking mess. A mess over my dad, over Ellie, over my entire life.

“What the hell is going on with you? You’ve been acting like an asshole these past few days,” Beau says. “This isn’t like you.”

I clench my jaw and fight with myself if I should tell him or not. I sure as shit can’t tell Addie. I can’t tell August. And I just pissed off James.

Beau is sitting in front of me, giving me an opportunity to tell him what is running through this pathetic mind of mine. So, I give in and tell him. Everything. I tell him about Charlie and Ellie and hooking up with her.

Beau sits back in his chair and folds his arms across his chest, letting out a low whistle. He rubs his hand against his jaw with his eyes on the table.

“That’s a lot to process,” he finally says.

“Tell me about it.”

“And you think going to speak with your dad is going to help you with Ellie?”

I shrug, “I think it’s going to help with a lot of things.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

I put my glass down. “At least I’ll be able to move forward in whatever direction I may take with my dad. I don’t know.”

“Wait, what do you mean? Are you trying to have a relationship with him?”

I don't answer because I don't know how to answer that question. Young Rowan wants to have a relationship with his dad. Present Rowan doesn't know if it's the best idea because he doesn't know the man anymore. He could be a scumbag for all I know.

Beau continues, "Don't tell James this. If you are going to talk to your dad to hear his side and possibly build a father-son relationship with him, don't tell James. I know we were kids when it happened, but he hated seeing you like that after your dad left. Why do you think he always wanted you over? Because he wanted our dad to consider you like a son to him. And our dad does."

"I know that. I'm extremely grateful for all the things your dad has done for me. But it isn't the same."

"I know. I know I don't understand. Does Addie know you're doing this?"

I shake my head and look at the table.

"Does your mom?"

"Yeah, she does," I mutter.

"And she's okay with this?" He leans on the table with his arms and pulls my attention back to him.

"I'm an adult, and she knows she can't stop me from doing this. She told me not to go in with high expectations. He only lives three hours from us. How am I supposed to continue moving on with my life when I find that out?"

"I get it, okay? I'm not trying to convince you not to do this. I just want to make sure I understand this, understand you and where you're coming from. Does Ellie know?"

"She doesn't. I was going to tell her today. She's supposed to meet me here so I can talk to her about it."

Beau nods. "Okay, all right. Do you want me to be here when you tell her?"

"No." I breathe out. "It's okay."

"I hope she doesn't take the news like James did."

I pick up my glass again and down the rest of the beer.

forty-six

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ROWAN



“IT’S a little early to be drinking already, don’t you think?” Ellie says from the stairs.

I look at her, and no matter what, she always takes my breath away. Her long hair flows over her shoulders. She’s wearing a simple outfit: jeans and a shirt, and she still looks like a queen to me.

“It’s one in the afternoon on a Saturday,” I counter. “Plus, this is the only one I’ve had.”

She sits down across from me and puts her bag on the chair next to her.

“Do you want anything?” I ask.

She waves me off and says, “Nah, I’m good. So, what’s up? What did you want to talk about?”

I sit up straight and clear my throat. When I look at her, she pinches her brows and worry spreads across her face.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Uh, well. I don’t know how to exactly say this, so I’m just going to come out with it. I’m going to see my dad.”

The worry expression is replaced with shock and surprise. She opens her mouth like she’s about to say something but stutters her words as she holds up her hand.

“Hold on. You’re what?” She turns her head to the side, her ear facing me like she needs to hear this again.

“I’m going to drive three hours out of town to see my dad.” I keep my voice stern and steady. Not letting the emotions control me.

“Why?” she asks sharply.

“Why not?”

“Because the guy left you and your family, Ro. Why would you want to talk to a man who broke your heart and left you?”

“This is the first step that will allow me to move forward with my life.”

Her brow arches. “Why now?”

I look at her and I don’t say anything. Hoping that she will put the pieces together. Having the conversation with my mom and aunt and then Addie. All the women in my life are pushing me toward Ellie. Maybe seeing my dad is the extra push I need.

“Why, Rowan?” she asks again.

“Because I just need to do this. I need to move on from my past with him and start thinking about the future and what I really want.” I stare at her.

She crosses her arms and presses her lips together. “Fine. I’m going with you.”

I knit my brows together. “Ellie—”

She holds up her hand. “Rowan, I’m going with you. I’m not having you do this by yourself, okay? I’ll sit in the car when you go talk to him. I just can’t let you go alone. Okay?”

I look at her and don’t say anything.

“Please,” she pleads.

I nod my head once before saying, “Okay.”

She lets out a loose breath, and she drops her arms. “Okay. All right. When are we going?”

I continue to stare at her and say, “Right now.”

“Now?” she slightly shouts.

I splay my hands out and don’t say anything. She bites the bottom of her lip, and I can feel her leg start to bounce under the table. Then I hear the little squeak that’s coming from the ring she’s spinning on her finger.

“Okay, let’s go.”



Ellie decided that she was going to drive. However, I told her that I couldn’t sit in her car for three hours. Some of us aren’t fortunate enough to fit in a small car. The face she made was ridiculously cute; she was annoyed, but I couldn’t help but laugh at her annoyance.

She rolls her eyes and asks for my keys. I was hesitant to give them to her because she's never driven my car before, and it's bigger than hers. So far, she's proving me wrong. We've been driving for an hour, and we have not gotten into an accident.

"How am I more nervous than you? It's not even my dad," she says while the wind whips her hair around.

"Because you care about me and my feelings." I turn my head on the headrest and give her a smile.

"Well, duh. I swear, Rowan, if that man hurts you any more than he already has." She shakes her head. "I will fight him." She looks at me quickly and then back to the road.

"El, I can handle it. I appreciate it, but it's fine."

I watch her chew her lip and push her hair out of her face. I can tell she's anxious, and I don't know what else to do to calm her down, so I reach across the console and gently grab her hair. I see the hair tie on her wrist and gesture to it with my hand.

She looks at me, confused.

"Let me get your hair tie," I say through the wind.

She takes her hand off the wheel, replacing it with the other, and I slide it off her wrist. I, horribly, try to put her hair in a ponytail, trying not to hurt her. I wrap her hair and lean back to look at my work. Not too bad.

Ellie smiles while looking out at the road. "Thank you."

I nod and place my hand on the nape of her neck, massaging it for her.

"I should be the one giving you a neck massage. I'm not the one going to talk to my estranged dad."

"You can give me one tonight."

She looks at me, and I wink at her, making her roll her eyes with a laugh. My heart still races every time I look at her. I suddenly feel her body stiffen. I look at her and see she's thinking about something.

We pass hills, small towns, vineyards. I've never seen this part of the coast. Never had a reason to drive this way, not until now. I'm eager, anxious, and curious. I don't know what to expect. I know I already look like him. But will he notice?

Will he be nice? Will he want to talk to me? Is this a smart idea? My mom didn't stop me, and I think she would have if she hadn't seen anything good coming out of this. She knows him more than I ever had.

I feel bad for not telling Addie, but she would have stopped me and guilted me into not going. I know it would be out of protecting me, but I need to do this. I know I will regret it if I don't. I'm also scared I'll regret the fact that I did.

"I called Charlie," she says, breaking the silence, but she doesn't look at me.

"You did?"

I see her throat bob and nod frivolously. "Yeah."

I take my hand off her neck and put it in my lap. I see her look at me, and I continue to look ahead of us. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her shoulders rise and fall, and her grip on the steering wheel tightens.

"I told him that I don't think we should work things out. That I wouldn't be able to trust him again." She lets out a shaky breath before continuing, "Once a cheater, always a cheater, right? If he can't handle my lifestyle now, what's it going to be like if I take the new position? I don't know. I did the right thing, right?" She looks at me quickly and turns her face forward again.

I nod and say, "Absolutely. You did what was best for you, and I'm proud of you. I know it was hard for you to do. It's not easy walking away from someone you love." I look at her and watch as she places her hand on mine.

I pick up her hand and kiss her. Reassuring her she did the right thing. But now what?

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ROWAN



I CLENCH and unclench my hands while I stare at the *enormous* two-story house that displays itself in front of Ellie and me. Both of our mouths gape with our heads tilted back.

“Holy shit,” Ellie whispers out.

I say nothing.

I continue to stare toward the house that sits in the hills amongst other large homes. Is my dad some sort of drug lord? How the hell does someone own a house like this? It towers over us. I know Mom mentioned him going to school for engineering, but can someone with that profession live in a place like this?

It’s surrounded by large trees, shrubs, and more trees. My eyes follow the long driveway that I assume leads to an entrance. Unless there isn’t one, and I need to teleport myself inside the house.

“I was not expecting this.” Ellie breaks into my thoughts.

We continue to stare at the house, and I reply, “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. A townhouse, maybe? A small one-bedroom house? Is he some celebrity we don’t know about?”

“That would be better than a drug lord,” I murmur.

Ellie turns her head to me with pinched eyebrows. “A drug lord?”

I wave her off. “Let’s go.”

We walk up the driveway and as we turn around a curve, a long path continues, and I must admit, even the driveway is nice. It leads up the hill where the house sits, a brick path leading the way. I look at Ellie, and her eyes scan everything around her.

Finally, I see the stairs in the distance on the left side of us but notice the path continues up. Maybe to the garage?

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Ellie says in an exasperated tone.

When we reach the front of the stairs, both of our heads tilt slightly upward, following the concrete stairs that go up and up and up. It’s surrounded by more trees that hover above it. You can tell that this space was made for privacy.

Once we get to the top, I look over at Ellie, who tries to catch her breath and places her hands on her hips.

“I gotta lay off the sweets,” she breathes out.

The house exterior is a deep charcoal with beadboard siding. A wooden pergola roof is entwined in more greenery, covering the large porch. The porch is filled with potted plants that either sit on the floor or hang from the wooden roof of the pergola.

It’s only when we start walking down the path to our right, toward the door, that we both turn and look over the railing.

The ocean’s sprawled out and vast, you can see so much of it. Below us are more homes, and in the distance, we can see more large homes that sit in the hills.

When I look down, I notice that the driveway goes next door to another house, a neighbor, instead of a garage. We must have missed it somewhere in the jungle. I feel Ellie grab my hand, and I look down to her.

“You ready?” she asks gently.

“No,” I reply.

We walk toward a light wooden door, and I can’t seem to lift my hand to knock. I feel paralyzed. I stare at the door, and I can feel every thud my heart makes against my chest.

“Do you want me—” Ellie points to the door.

I don’t look at her, but I nod in reply. She takes a deep breath, like she’s doing it for the both of us and then lifts her fist to knock on the door. My heart feels like it’s fluttering around in my chest, and I tap my finger on my jeans with my other hand that’s not wrapped in Ellie’s.

The door opens, and I hold my breath. A blond woman stands at the entrance of the home. She’s small, like Ellie, with hazel eyes. Her warm smile greets us, and she looks like someone who would take you in with open arms.

“Hi, can I help you?” Her voice comes out angelic and sweet.

Ellie looks at me and I can't seem to find my voice. My mouth is suddenly dry. Ellie looks back at the woman.

"Hi, um, I'm Ellie. This is Rowan." She points to me. "We were hoping we could speak with Michael Williams?"

The moment Ellie says my name, the woman's smile falls and turns into surprise. She looks behind her and then back to us. I still can't say anything, still can't move. She forces a smile on her face.

"Of course, hold on just a second, okay?" She leaves the door open and quickly walks back into the house.

Ellie slightly leans in, trying to peek inside. "Wow, and we thought the outside was big."

From where I'm standing, I can see it's an open-concept layout. Dark wooden floors, but everything else is a bright white. The furniture color scheme is in a cream, tan, or powdered white. The kitchen cabinets are walnut with white marble countertops. Black pendant lights hang above the dining room table and kitchen. A large, black candle chandelier hangs above the seating area.

We hear footsteps approaching, and I think my heart stops beating. I breathe in a sharp inhale when I see my dad walk toward me. I see Ellie look between us, noticing the resemblance. The dark blue eyes and deep brown hair. Except his hair is shorter. He has the same nose with a small bump, and he's the same height.

He widens his eyes when he gets a full look at me.

"Hi." Ellie holds out her hand. "I'm Ellie."

My dad looks at her, still stunned, and he takes her hand in his. She gives him a smile, holding his stare.

"I'm sure you remember your son, Rowan?" she says confidently.

My dad blinks between me and Ellie while his wife stands behind him, wringing her hands together, showing her nerves.

"I do, of course." He places his hands on his hips for a second before turning to the side, then gestures us inside. "Please."

Ellie lets go of my hand, but I still need to touch her. I put my hand on her lower back. I gently guide her in first because she is taking the lead with this. The space is clean and bright. On the left is a railing that goes downstairs to another level, while ahead of me is a large glass door that leads to the deck.

There are windows throughout the home, showing trees and the ocean. A surfboard hangs on the wall above the staircase that leads to the lower level.

“Would either of you like something to drink? We have lemonade, sparkling water, tea?” the woman asks.

I shake my head, and Ellie says, “No, thank you.”

“Let’s sit outside. It’s beautiful today.” The woman turns to start walking, then turns back around. “I’m so sorry. Where are my manners? I’m Amy.” She holds out her hand to Ellie.

Ellie smiles politely and shakes her hand. She reaches her hand out to me, and I force my arm to move, grabbing her hand in mine. It’s warm and soft. She doesn’t grip my hand. A gentle shake is all she gives me.

We step outside to the large patio, and I have never seen a patio as big as this one. I stop where I am and look around me.

You can host an entire party on this thing. There’s an entire furniture set on one side and a table on the opposite side with a large umbrella along with a marble bar and window to the kitchen.

The entire ocean surrounds the view. I guess being on top of a hill that’s the kind of view you get when you live on the coast. I’d have to go on the roof of my house to see the ocean. They guide us to the couch, letting us sit down first, and they take the two lounge chairs across from us.

When Dad sits down, he rubs his hands on his jeans, a small smile appearing on his face. We sit there in silence, and I grab Ellie’s hand again, not wanting to let go. I need her more than ever, and I’m going to thank her a million times for forcing me to let her join.

My dad looks good for his age. He looks healthy. His skin is smooth and tan, even his hands don’t look like they’ve aged. Same as Mom. He must take good care of himself because his body looks strong, and his posture is confident.

The blue button-up he has on makes the color of his eyes seem brighter, friendlier even. He looks like someone I would aspire to be as an adult. And the thought makes me sad.

“So,” Ellie says.

I keep my eyes on my dad, and he does the same. We don’t speak, just stare, like we’re trying to read each other’s mind. I look down at his hand and see his finger tapping on his leg. Well, we have one thing in common so far.

“So, Rowan. How have you been? Your dad has told me so much about you. I feel like I know you,” Amy says.

I furrow my brows in confusion. Know me? How would she know me? I haven’t seen or spoken to my father since I was a kid. Her kind smile fades when she notices my expression. I feel Ellie squeeze my hand, telling me to relax and be nice.

I clear my throat and throw on a smile. “I’ve been fine,” is all I can manage to say.

“Oh, that’s good.” She nods and looks at my dad.

He looks at her, and she angles her head toward me in the faintest motion. I can tell she’s trying to tell him to talk to me.

“Ellie,” Amy says. “I would love to show you a tour of our home. Maybe give these two some privacy?”

Ellie hesitates and looks at me. “Oh, um, yeah, that would be great.”

I whip my head to her, and my grip on her hand tightens, willing her not to go.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll just be inside,” she whispers. “It will be okay.” She kisses my cheek, and I reluctantly let go of her hand and watch her and Amy go inside the house.

forty-eight

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ROWAN



“I’M REALLY glad you decided to come see me,” my father tells me.

He’s glad that I came here. Interesting. I wasn’t expecting any of this. I’m not sure what I was expecting. I had all the questions ready in my head. But they all disappeared when I saw him at the door.

I turn to look inside the house and see Ellie and Amy.

When I think about Ellie and how close she is to me even though she’s inside, I get this spark in my chest. This courage. I swallow down the nerves that have built up. I’m not leaving here until I have my questions answered.

“Amy, is she your wife?” I finally ask. A question I didn’t initially plan but seeing her was unexpected and went to the top of that list.

My dad lowers his eyes and then nods. When he looks up at me, he smiles and says, “We’ve been married for five years now.”

Five years. That’s—not a long time at all. The next question comes to me.

“How did you two meet?” I keep my facial expression neutral and my demeanor calm.

He smiles brightly at me, clearly happy that I asked that question. “I kept running into her every morning on my runs. I would take a path along the beach, and she would run past me every time. As time went on, we started greeting each other. First, a small smile, then a nod. Two weeks in, she said hello to me.”

He peers into the house. I follow his gaze, and it lands on Ellie, talking to Amy in the kitchen. She’s smiling and even laughs a little bit. I feel my lip curving into a smile, but I suddenly stop it.

“Every morning,” dad continues. “I would get excited to see her. The little interaction always had me looking forward to the next day. A month later, I asked her if she wanted to grab lunch after her run. That was that.”

“So, you run?” I ask.

He lifts his brows and then smiles. “I do. I try to run every day. It helps with my anxiety. It’s one of the reasons I run, not because I enjoy it, but it really helps with that and stress.” He puts his hand out to me and says, “Enough about me, please. I would love to hear what you’ve been up to all these years.”

I’m caught off guard by the change in conversation. I wasn’t planning to tell him anything about me. I wanted to know everything about him and why he left. I want to hear it from *him*. But there’s another part of me, the kid in me, that is happy he wants to know about me and what I’ve been up to.

I clear my throat before saying, “Well, I have my own business. I run a brewery back in Dove Point.”

He smiles excitedly. “That’s amazing, what’s it called? How long has it been up and running?”

“It’s called The Salty Dog. Me and a close friend co-own it. The name came from my dog, Milo.”

“Oh, wow, what kind of dog is Milo?”

“A golden retriever. I found him outside of town on the side of the road. Someone left him there with his things when he was a puppy. I took that as a sign that he needed me in his life—and I needed him in mine.”

His smile fades away when he nods, and I’m sure that story opened wounds for him. I can take the opportunity to steer the conversation in the direction I want.

“How come I wasn’t enough? Enough for you to stay. Not only for me and mom, but for Addie, too,” I ask quickly.

He lets out a heavy breath, and I can tell he’s uncomfortable. “I don’t want to blame my age because your mother is the same age as me, of course. But I’m not going to lie and say that wasn’t part of it. Everyone grows up differently. People change. Sometimes, it can be a good change or a bad change. I wasn’t the father that I wanted to be for you and your sister. I did try. I tried my hardest, but I felt like I had to grow up. Rowan, I loved your mom so much. I loved her so much that it killed me to leave you all, and I didn’t leave because I wanted to. I left to protect you and your sister. I

knew that I would not be the dad you deserved to have. I was young and immature. We had you and Addie very quickly. You two are only a year apart. We were thrown into parenthood so fast.

“Your mom was the stronger one between the two of us. She is the most incredible woman that I’ve had the pleasure of knowing and getting to marry. I wasn’t there physically, but I always made sure that the three of you were always taken care of. We grew up together, as I’m sure you know. She was the first girl I’d dated, the only girl I’d dated. We were each other’s first. All I knew was her, and all she knew was me. I knew I wanted to be with her after we graduated high school.” He shakes his head before continuing, “We got married very, very young. We were still learning about ourselves, who we were, what we wanted. As time went on.” He looks down at his hands. “I started to question what I wanted. I kept convincing myself that the family I had was what I wanted. Telling myself that I was a good dad and husband. Your mom and I would have these arguments. She would need to tell me when she needed help instead of me just helping her. We made sure never to have them in front of you and Addie.

“She said that I needed to be home more, and that I needed to pull my weight when it came to all of us. I was a terrible father.” He takes a breath and looks at me, his eyes suddenly glossy. “I remember the day I left.” He looks up to the sky, trying to blink away the tears and face me again. “It was both of our decisions that it was for the better. I...I remember you running after me, crying for me. And it completely broke me,” he says through tears, his voice cracking. “I wanted so badly to take you with me, but I knew that I couldn’t. I knew I couldn’t because I was leaving for the exact reason I couldn’t be around. I didn’t have the mentality to take care of you. I thought parenthood would click for me, like it did for your mom, but it didn’t. Not until I was much older.” He sniffs, running his fingers under his eyes. “When you were calling out for me...I...I was clenching my fists so hard that I made my palms bleed. I dug my nails so hard into my skin because I had to stop myself from taking you with me.

“I wanted to be that role model for you. I wanted you to look up to me.” He shakes his head again. “But I couldn’t let myself do that. It wouldn’t have been fair to you. You would have just thought that your dad was a joke. I would rather you hate me than think I was a pathetic dad who couldn’t give you what you want.” He wipes another tear away. “I hated myself for *years*, Rowan. I thought about you and Addie day and night. I

thought about how I didn't deserve you all. I didn't deserve your mom. I wish I had known all of that sooner. But at the same time, I'm glad. I'm glad I stayed with your mom and had you and your sister. You guys bring so much joy into your mother's life. But I knew the best way to take care of you was from afar."

I swallow down the urge to walk away. Seeing my dad like this, seeing him broken, and admitting that it was just as hard for him to leave me as it was for me to watch him leave. All this time, I thought it was something so simple for him. In front of me, all I see is a man who was just as broken as I was. But one thing he said had me questioning him.

"You said you took care of us. What do you mean?" My voice quivers.

He opens his mouth, shuts it, then opens it again. "I've said too much."

"You've already said it, so tell me," I argue.

"Maybe you should talk to your mother more. I don't know how much she's told you, and I'm not trying to come between you and her. That's not my intention." He looks at me cautiously, like he's not trying to cause an argument.

"I'm a grown man. I'm twenty-nine. I can deal with mom after you tell me what you meant by 'take care of us.' Please, just tell me," I beg, leaning forward while I rest my elbows on my knees.

He lays back in his chair, propping both of his arms on the armrests. He's thinking, trying to decide if it's his place, even though he's the one that slipped up.

He puts his hands out and finally says, "You can see that I'm doing very well for myself. I don't need to tell you that."

He's a drug lord. I knew it.

He angles his head while keeping his eyes on me. "No, I'm not part of some drug cartel or mob."

I twist my face in confusion, splaying my hands outward, and then clasp them together again, wondering why he would say that. He chuckles and smiles at my reaction.

"You don't think people wonder that? At least, people who don't know me. I'm a private person, so people assume." He shrugs. "It's kind of fun."

"So." I pause for a moment, then continue, "What do you do for a living?"

He gives me a warm smile and says, "I'm an engineering executive at an employee-owned engineering and consulting firm."

Shit. So, he's a genius. And he makes a shit load of money. I don't say anything. I just wait for him to continue.

"I've been helping your mom support you and your sister. It was the least I could do if I wasn't going to be there—in your life."

I let out a chuckle. "Yeah, that's called child support. You kind of had no choice there."

"Fair, but your mom didn't ask for money or come after me for it when she found out how well I was doing. We spoke over the phone. I told her how much I would send her each month, and she wasn't having it. Your mom can be a scary woman when she holds her ground on something, but I told her to think about you and Addie. How much it would benefit all of you. Affording school, clothes, sports, hobbies. I wanted you two to be as comfortable as you can. I wanted you two to achieve whatever it was that you wanted to do in life. Help put you through college. So, I've been sending her two checks a month ever since you were ten."

I think back and realize just how much mom has given us. How she afforded all those extra things, and she didn't seem to stress or struggle. I was on the surf team in high school, and she paid for everything. She paid for Addie's car when she turned sixteen.

I was able to get a scholarship for college, but she still took care of all my books, the laptop I needed, and my dorm room. And then Addie when she went to school. It didn't click until now that mom wouldn't have been able to afford that, especially when she was just a florist. You don't pay attention to that stuff as a kid.

I swallow down the tears that try to well-up in my eyes. I try to distract myself from those emotions as much as possible. I rub my hand on my jaw, the stubble gently scratching my palm, and then run my hand through my hair.

"Rowan, I've waited years to apologize to you. I want to apologize to your sister. I would love to have you two back in my life."

"Why didn't you ever come to us? Why did you wait until one of us went to you?" I ask harshly.

"Trust me, there were many times that your mother and I talked about it. We both didn't know when the right time would be. As the years went on." He shrugs. "I thought maybe it was best to leave you and your sister alone. As long as you two were happy, then I was happy."

“But I wasn’t happy. Dad, when you left, I thought you hated me. I questioned myself every day. I wondered what I did wrong to make you leave. I would tell myself I wasn’t good enough. I wasn’t the son you wanted, so you left.”

His shoulders fall. “Rowan.” He looks away, cursing at himself, and then back to me. “I am so sorry that I put you through that. I’m going to regret how I went about things for the rest of my life. I was a coward. I will never forgive myself for putting you through that.” He puts a hand on his chest. “From what your mom has told me; you sound like an amazing son who treats your mother so well. I’m so proud of you for the things you’ve accomplished in your life, and I hope that you will allow me to now be part of that.

“I want to be part of the milestones you still need to accomplish. I want to meet the person you want to marry. I want to find out if I have the privilege of being a grandpa. I want to meet Milo, tour your brewery, and catch up on everything that I’ve missed out on. But that’s only if you will let me. I will not make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

I let myself go and let the tears fall from my eyes. The man I thought didn’t love me, appreciate me, or want me—it was the complete opposite. He thought about me every day, just like I thought about him every day. He was and is proud of me. I’m not the fuck up I thought I was. He’s proud of me. *Me*.

I place my elbows on my knees again, covering my face and hiding my emotions. I’m so wrapped up in it, none of this feels real, not until I feel a hand on my shoulder. A strong grip that holds on to me. I look down, noticing my dad's Vans. And I can’t control the laughter that bubbles out of me.

I suddenly feel his hand lift off my shoulder and I’m sure I’ve startled him. I pull myself back up and look at him. The confusion knits his brows together.

“Your shoes,” I say weakly and point to them.

He looks down, lifting one foot before setting it back down. “My shoes?”

“Are those your favorite or something?”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve worn them ever since I was a kid. I would skateboard with my friends through town. We would try to find the highest hill possible, and I always had my Vans. I’ve broken many boards.”

A smile tugs on my lips, and I continue to laugh. I hear his laugh, and when I hear it close, we have the same laugh. I always thought my laugh was silly and a little bit annoying but knowing it's something else I share with my dad; I don't find it really annoying anymore.

"Can I show you something?" he asks.

I sit up straighter and say, "Sure."

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his brown leather wallet. Is he going to show me all the hundred-dollar bills he keeps in it? When he opens it, he pulls something out from a small pocket and shows it to me.

A small boy with his two front teeth missing. His hair is disheveled while wearing his Power Rangers pajamas, and his arms are wrapped around a young girl with thick, wild hair. Both give the biggest smile they possibly can.

"I've had that in my wallet for about twenty-three years. Any time I would buy a new wallet; it would go into that one. I always keep it with me." He looks down at the photo, smiling.

I think about Addie and what she would think about all of this. Would she roll her eyes at this gesture? Probably not, since she would most likely not give him the time of day to begin with.

I look at my dad, his eyes beaming with pride.

He puts his hand back on my shoulder and says, "I would love to have you two back in my life if you let me. Be a part of me and Amy and your stepsiblings."

That gets my attention quickly, and I look up at him. Stepsiblings? I didn't notice any photos, family photos. Then again, everything stunned me. I don't even remember stepping into the house.

He gives me a bright smile, and I look into his glossy eyes. I can feel my head starting to pound by the amount of crying I've just done. I can have my dad back. I can start over with him. Of course, I'm still weary and wonder if he will leave again. But I need to try, and I know he will too.

forty-nine

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ROWAN



WE'RE FINALLY BACK on the road after spending *three hours* at my dad's place. I didn't expect to stay there that long or for how well it went. He's done a lot of growing up from what I've learned, and it's encouraged me that I can move on from things as well.

I don't know how I'm going to tell Addie. She's made it clear that she has no reason to see our dad. He wasn't around, only Mom and Aunt Rosey. But she doesn't know the entire story. Mom and Aunt Rosey only told us their side of the story, and that's why I decided to go to him so I could decide on my own what path I wanted to take.

I found out that I have four stepsiblings, all Amy's kids, and that Amy is a widower. She originally lived up north, and when she retired, she moved to the west coast. Her kids, now adults, are still in the area they grew up in but always come to visit for the holidays.

Ellie and I were invited to come back for the holidays. They also said I could bring my mom, Aunt Rosey, and Addie. Even Milo can tag along. We have a few months until I need to worry about that, where my head will be and my life. Especially with Ellie.

"Their house was huge, Rowan. I can't wrap my head around it. They had an elevator that goes down into the wine cellar. An elevator!" Ellie shakes her head while she drives us back home.

She didn't allow me to drive again because of the emotions I'd gone through. After what she went through with her parents and Charlie in one day, she knows that your energy is depleted after that. Ellie decides we need to let out the emotions we've both dealt with this summer so far and puts on a playlist.

Misery Business by Paramore blares through the speakers, and we start to sing at the top of our lungs. I feel like a teenager all over again. The sun beyond us starts to set in the sky, changing the colors all around us to pinks, oranges, and purples.

The wind slams into me in the best way possible. I feel almost lighter. I feel like my younger self is starting to heal. I can have my dad back in my life. He's letting me make the choices, letting me decide how quickly I want to move forward or how slow I want to take this.

I need to talk to my mom and tell her everything. Her opinion is the only one that matters to me when it comes to him.

I look over to the woman beside me who sings her heart out to the next song that plays. This is the Ellie I fell in love with all those years ago. I was able to get one person back into my life who I thought I'd never see or speak to again.

Now, I need to get the girl.

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ELLIE



WHAT A WHIRLWIND OF A WEEK.

I told my parents about work, made the breakup permanent with Charlie, and inserted myself into meeting Rowan's dad. That last one was going to happen no matter what. If he had called me, and I was still across the country, I would have booked a flight and gone straight to him.

I'm lying in my bed when I hear someone walk in through the doors of the guest house. I don't bother to get up since I am absolutely drained.

"Ellie?" my mom calls out.

I sit up and walk out of the bedroom to where my mom is standing in the living room. Her hair is tied up in a hair clip, and she wears a beautiful yellow, flowy dress.

"Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"There you are." She smiles at me. "I wanted to ask if you want to go around town and shop. I want to take advantage of the weather, and I haven't really spent time with you. I'd like to get as much in before you leave in a couple of weeks."

My stomach sinks when she says that last sentence. I have a couple of weeks left here before I need to go back to the busy life that I ran away from. This also means I need to speak with Chef Roberts about the position that's waiting for me.

I push the thought out of my head.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun. I haven't gone shopping yet, so I would love to pick up some new clothes, maybe get something for Rowan." I shrug.

My mom grins at me. She can see right through me and what I've been up to this summer.

"Stop," I whine and feel my cheeks heat.

She waves me off, shaking her head at me. "You act like you two haven't dated before. You were in a relationship when you were teenagers. You had a crush on him that started in middle school. I'm your mother. How would I not notice these things?"

I gape and quickly change the subject. "Did you know August went on a date? I never asked him how it went."

"You think your brother talks to me about his dating life? I just see women come and go, and I never ask. I don't want to know what that boy is up to. He reminds me of your dad."

We decided to walk down instead of driving. Mom insists she gets her steps in.

"Wait, what? August was like dad? I thought you and dad were together since you were young. I've seen the photo albums."

"We were on and off throughout high school," she says this like it's no big deal.

"What? I thought dad was obsessed with you."

"He was and still is." She looks at me with a smirk. "He just had some growing up to do. We were kids, and I never held it against him. There were times when he wanted to have fun, and I wanted to have fun, so we would stay friends. We would date other people, but something always pulled us back together."

Like me and Rowan.

"When did you guys finally decide to stop messing around?"

"When we graduated high school. He knew he wanted to be with me, and even though we were still incredibly young, he knew what he wanted and went after it." She eyes me like she's trying to get through to me with something.

I look at her, but I don't say anything as we approach one of the shops. I look to see August talking to dad when we enter the Surf Shack. They have plenty of customers but have teenage employees taking care of them while they handle other business.

"Well, well, well. To what do we owe the pleasure of seeing you two," Dad says as he walks to mom, giving her a big kiss on the cheek, and drapes his arm over her shoulder.

“I want to get something for Rowan,” I say, crossing my arms and smiling.

“Oh?” Dad grins.

I look at August with a tired look, hoping he would back me up, but all he does is wiggle his brows. Thanks, bro. I roll my eyes and walk away. I’m not sure what I want to get Rowan, but I figure if it has anything to do with surfing, he will like it either way.

I was never one to surf. I tried, and I’m bad at it. But any time Rowan wanted to surf, I would suck it up and go with him. When I felt defeated, I would drag my board back to the beach so I could watch him.

He was always so graceful when he was out on the water. He held so much control and made it look effortless. Not to mention he looked incredibly hot doing it, his hair slicked back when it got wet, his stomach tightening when he held his posture.

Now, my mind reels back to the night we had together. I can feel my eyes turn heavy when I think about the way he dominated in the bedroom. He’s such a sweetheart, kind and gentle. But when it came to the bedroom, he transformed into someone who knew what he wanted. I’ve never been more turned on.

I need to squeeze my legs together. I do not want to be turned on at my dad and brother’s shop. Remembering where I am snaps me out of it. I look at the display table where shirts are neatly folded, and jeans are displayed on the bottom shelf.

I love this space. It sits across from the beach, the path separating the shop from it. You can literally buy a board and run across to the beach. The door is always open because it’s the type that you need to lift, like a garage door, so people walking by can always look inside.

The walls are painted a cool green color, and surfboards hang from the ceiling and are perched against the walls. There’s a glass display on each side of the shop that shows surf accessories.

“Hey, August,” I say over my shoulder.

“What’s up?” He walks over to me. His tall, big frame hovers over me.

“Do you think I should get Rowan new board shorts? I don’t know how many he has.” I cock my head at the table, thinking.

“Lucky you, he was just telling the guys he was looking into getting new ones.”

I smile to myself and browse the table with different colored shorts to choose from.

“How did things go with the woman you were taking out?” I pick up a deep blue pair and hold them in front of me, then set them back down.

“It was fine. It was more of a friend vibe. She was chill, but nothing really sparked there.” August picks up board shorts in a copper tan color. I shake my head.

“Really? I’m sorry,” I say with a frown.

“Don’t be. I’m fine with it.” He shrugs, putting his hands in his pockets.

“You’re fine with it because you’re holding out for someone else.” I give him a smirk.

“No, I’m not. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He looks around, exasperated.

“Enemies can make great lovers, August. You should read a romance book with that trope.”

“God, you’re annoying.”

I turn to laugh at him and then back to the table, picking up a pair of pale aqua board shorts. I angle my head side to side, picturing Rowan in them. His tan skin would look great with the color.

“What’s going on with you and Rowan?” he asks.

I hold on to the winning pair. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ellie, you need to cut the shit. You’re only here for a little while longer, and you need to figure things out. Are you really going to leave again? Go back to a place that doesn’t even make you happy anymore?”

I roll my head back. This conversation. Again.

“What do you want me to do? Not take the promotion and stay in Mom and Dad’s guest house?”

“You can stay with me.” He points to himself with his hand.

“And deal with women coming in and out of your bedroom at all hours of the day? No thanks.”

“I can pause my sex life if it means you come home.”

I grimace. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Don’t need to do what?” Dad interrupts us.

We both turn to him and smile.

“Nothing,” I blurt out and then stare back at August, telepathically saying that this conversation is over.

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ROWAN



“ADDIE,” I call out to my sister as I walk up to her where she’s folding shirts on the display shelf where our merchandise is.

She turns to me, her deep brown hair whipping over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

I jerk my head toward the exit of the brewery and say, “Let’s go to lunch.”

She gives me a confused look, which I expected. When I’m at work, I don’t take lunch breaks. I’m constantly busying myself.

“What happened?” is all she says as she lays the neatly folded shirt on the shelf.

“Can’t a brother take his sister to lunch without there being a reason?” I splay my arms out.

“No,” she says flatly. “But, since it’s free food, sure.”

We head to the pizza place a few buildings down. You can smell the fresh bread and cheese the closer you get. They offer a full pan of pizza or individual slices. The individual slice itself is the size of a twelve-inch pan pizza. It was a hot spot to go to when the guys would get very drunk and stagger to the place at two in the morning.

Considering we are not twenty-one anymore, we haven’t done that in a long time. I open the door for Addie, and we are quickly slapped in the face with the smells. It’s a pleasure slap. One I would take to the face every day.

I tell her to pick a spot for us to sit, and I order two slices of pizza. When I get back to the table, pizza in hand, I grab the hot sauce and dab a generous amount over my slice. Heartburn be damned.

“So, what’s up? What’s this special lunch occasion for?” Addie takes a bite of her cheese, tomato, and spinach pizza.

I hold out a finger while I chew and swallow the piece I bit off. The spice hits and is mixed with the sausage, bacon, and tomato. Incredible.

“What I’m about to tell you, I need you to not freak out, okay?” I wipe my mouth with my napkin.

She sips on her drink through her straw and narrows her eyes toward me. “What did you do?”

I take another bite of my pizza, trying to delay what I’m about to tell her.

“Rowan?” she coaxes.

Thank God we’re in a public space.

“I went to see Dad. and Ellie came with me.” I wince.

Addie’s facial expression stays neutral, bored even. She doesn’t react immediately, so I’ll take that as a good thing.

“I went to his house and met his wife, Amy, who is very nice, by the way,” I say quickly.

Now her eyes are back to narrowing, but her lips don’t move or twitch. She leans her forearms on the table like she’s making sure she heard me.

“And we have four stepsiblings.” I give her a tight smile.

She angles her head at me and makes a facial expression that sends chills down my spine. My sister is an angel, but you don’t want to see her angry or passionate about something. It takes a lot to make her mad.

She doesn’t change her posture and keeps her head angled. She sits perfectly still when she says, “Rowan, why would you see him?” Her voice is deathly sweet voice.

Why do I feel like the young sibling who’s gotten in trouble with something?

“When Mom and Aunt Rosey told me he only lived three hours away, I don’t know, something in me needed to see him. I had to take the chance to ask him questions.”

“Did you get what you wanted out of it?”

“Yes.” I accentuate in a nervous tone.

“And you came back home happy?” Her face is still stoic.

I nod once, unsure where she’s going with this.

She removes her arms from the table and sits back in her seat. She purses her lips, and I can see her shoulders fall. “Okay,” she says quietly.

My brows shoot up in surprise and confusion. “That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?”

She folds her arms across her chest. “What do you want me to say, Rowan? You said you got what you wanted out of it and that you’re happy.”

“You’re not mad that I went to see him?” I ask cautiously.

She shrugs. “Who am I to say what you can and can’t do?”

My body relaxes, and I feel like I can breathe again. I didn’t notice until now just how fast my heart rate went up.

“Are you going to ask me what I learned about him?”

“No,” Addie replies quickly while picking up her pizza and taking another bite.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t care,” she says through a mouthful.

“So, you’re not even going to *try* to have a relationship with our dad?”

“I’ve gone this long without him, and I’m fine.” She has a bored expression on her face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My eyebrows tug together, my defensive shields going up.

“What do you mean—what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re making it sound like I was never fine with him not being in our lives.”

“Because you weren’t, Rowan. You were a mess. He made you a mess. Why would I want to have a relationship with someone who caused my brother to hate himself?”

“I don’t hate myself,” I mutter.

“Ro, you’re my brother. I love you and would do anything to keep you out of harm’s way, just like I know you’d do for me. Of course I’m going to take issue with our dad. But if you got what you needed out of seeing him, then I’m happy for you. Just don’t push me to do something when it comes to him. Please,” she asks softly.

I slowly nod my head. “Okay, I won’t bother you with it. But if you suddenly change your mind and want to ask about him, I’m here.”

“I don’t think that will happen any time soon, but thanks for the offer.” She lifts her pizza in a salute. “The only question I have is, did you make Ellie go with you?”

I take a drink from my cup before saying, “She invited herself. She was the one who drove there and back. Actually, she had to speak for me when

we first got there.”

Addie nods. “That sounds about right.”

“She told me that she talked to Charlie.”

Addie raises her brows. “Oh?”

“She told him that she didn’t want to work things out,” I say before taking a drink from my cup.

Addie’s lips tip up in a smile and says, “What does that mean for you two?”

“I’m going to enjoy the rest of the summer with Ellie as much as I can. I did ask her on another date.”

“*What!*” Addie shouts, causing other customers to look at us. She ignores them and claps her hands quickly while giving me a toothy smile. The claps and smile stop abruptly when she says, “Don’t screw this one up, Rowan.”

“Trust me. I have the perfect plan for this date.”

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ELLIE



“WHAT DO I DO? What do I do?” I whisper to myself while I stare at the white ceiling.

I’m lying on the cozy couch in the living room of the guest house, thinking to myself about many things. I’ve been in the same spot for two hours, going back and forth in my head. While I was out with Riley and Hailey at the beach, I got a phone call from my job.

I wanted to throw up when I saw “work” pop up on my phone screen. Chef Roberts wanted to know when I’d be returning. What I hadn’t expected her to say was that she thought of me as a daughter and was invested in me as her successor.

The dread started to settle into me after the phone conversation. My mind is completely blank on what I need to do. Not one single thing. All this pressure isn’t helping, needing to perform to the absolute best of my abilities. And this new role would up my stress tenfold.

My stomach turns with anxiety at the thought of it all. Especially when I need to get my stuff out of the apartment I shared with Charlie. I let myself forget all about that. Ugh. Being an adult blows.

I groan out of frustration when I feel my phone vibrate on my belly. I grab it and see a text from Rowan. I instantly smile.

Rowan: I’m taking you out tonight.

Ellie: Oh? A “date” re-do?

Rowan: Yes, and I promise that this time, I'm asking you because I have a crush on you. Hope that's okay.

The cheesiest smile escapes from me, and I would gag at myself for how I look. Good thing I can't see my reflection. At least he was smooth this time when asking me again. The very first time he asked me on a date, he stammered a lot and kept wiping his hands on his jeans because of how nervous he was.

Ellie: You have a crush on me? Oof, good luck with that. Three out of ten stars would not recommend it.

Rowan: I don't know. I'm looking at the reviews right now and you've got high ratings. I'm looking at one right now by this guy named Rowan. Weird, we have the same name. He says he wished he didn't fuck up the first time because he really, really likes you. Yikes, poor guy.

Ellie: lol what am I going to do with you?

Rowan: I'll pick you up at 7pm.

Ellie: *heart emoji heart emoji heart emoji*

Rowan: *blush emoji*



"The beach?" I look at Rowan, who's carrying a basket of goodies, a blanket, two hoodies, and a lantern.

We continue to walk toward the beach as the sun sets in the sky. A slight breeze pushes off the ocean, blowing my hair back behind my shoulders. Rowan told me to wear something comfortable. I wasn't sure what that meant. Comfortable can mean a lot of things.

I played it safe, wearing leggings and an oversized shirt with my sneakers. Rowan is wearing gray sweatpants and a simple shirt. I keep catching myself looking down at his pants, and I'm going to rip my eyeballs

out if I don't stop. Ever since that incredible night, I can't stop thinking about wanting him again.

"I thought going to the beach on our second 'date' wouldn't have as much pressure as our first did. Now that we've gotten past the awkward first one and had *amazing* sex, I'm playing off our vibes."

"And our vibes are the beach?" I smirk.

"Our vibe is chill, fun, and feeding each other chocolate covered strawberries while looking at the beautiful sunset."

I look at him and let out a laugh. "Who are you?"

"I'm your best friend-turned-lover. Again."

"Lover? Bold of you to assume I love you."

"I know you love me as a friend, and I'm slowly working my way back up again. Don't you worry."

"And what about you?" I look at him again, his beautiful wavy hair blowing in the wind.

"What about me?" He looks down at me.

"Do I need to work my way up for you to love me more than a friend?"

"Who's to say?" He winks at me.

Rowan puts the basket and lantern on the sand and then hands me a hoodie. I can't help but bring it up to my nose and smell the scent of him. A manly smell but also comforting. I can't explain it. It makes my knees weak, and that's all that matters.

"Help me with this." He opens the blanket, which is much larger than I expected. It could fit at least four people.

I grab the other end and help him place it on the sand. Once that's done, we settle ourselves onto the blanket and he starts to grab things out of the wicker basket.

"Where did you get the basket from?" I point.

"Aunt Rosey."

"Okay, that makes sense." I nod.

He pauses to look at me. "What? You thought this was mine?" He gestures to it with his head.

"For all I know, it was helping you get back to Kansas, Dorothy."

I make him laugh, his dimples showing off. My mind pushes me to kiss them before they disappear, and so I do. I catch him off guard completely.

He stops what he's doing and looks at me with a shy smile. "What was that for?"

I shrug. "I really wanted to kiss your dimples."

"My dimples? You've kissed them plenty of times before."

"And each time, it gets better and better. They're just so dang cute." I squeeze his face with one hand and let go.

He looks down, trying to contain his small smile that wants to grow into a grin, then looks at me again. "Well, thank you."

Rowan finishes taking everything out of the basket, and my eyes roam at what we have in front of us. A small charcuterie board with bread, burrata, sharp cheddar, and meats. On another small platter are chocolate-covered strawberries. He wasn't lying about those.

I gasp when I see the sandwich shaped foil that he pulls out last. He passes it to me and then pulls out a tiny container filled with ketchup. Only Rowan wouldn't judge me for my weirdness at what he's made for me.

"I can't believe you made this for me. Do you know how much the girls *and* August find it weird that I like cold grilled cheese and dip it in ketchup? They say it's just a regular cheese sandwich at that point. They just don't get it." I unwrap the foil and marvel at the perfectly toasted bread. I look back at him with raised brows in question, expecting him to read my mind.

"Yes, I used mayo and not butter. I used *four* slices of white American cheese," he says.

An evil laugh pours out of me as I wiggle my fingers that pick up the sandwich. I rip a piece off and dip a bit of it in the ketchup. "Mmm."

"I won't lie to you, but it took me a very long time to accept the fact that you eat grilled cheese like that. Normally, people will have grilled cheese with tomato soup. Both warm. It's like you're doing the complete opposite."

I bounce my shoulders up and down in enjoyment. This is the *best* date I've ever had. I'm a cheap date. What can I say?

"And then you realized that I'm a genius." I take another bite.

"Good thing you bake," he mumbles.

"Hey." I slap his arm. "I heard that."

He laughs and digs into his own sandwich that he made. A "regular" sandwich. Whatever that means.

"Now you don't get your gift." I turn up my nose.

"You have a gift for me? Well, in that case, you are a genius. The best cook in the world. Whoever said cold grilled cheese is gross has no taste

buds.”

“That’s what I thought.” I give him a big smile, grab my tote bag with his new board shorts, and hand them to him.

He unrolls them and holds them out. I keep my eyes on him while he looks over at what I’ve gotten for him. I hope he likes them even though they are just simple board shorts.

“Oh, hell yeah. You bought me new board shorts. I love the color.” He turns to me and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“You like them? I was hoping the color was okay. August suggested a salmon color, which is not you, like at all.”

“No way, not me at all. These are perfect. Thank you.” He gives me another kiss on the cheek, and I feel his scruff brush against my skin in the most pleasurable way.

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ROWAN



I WATCH Ellie when she takes a bite into one of the chocolate-covered strawberries. Everything around me slows down while I take in the beautiful woman sitting next to me. The way the sunset reflects off her perfect golden skin, the way her hair wisps around her skin, making her look ethereal.

How I've gotten so lucky to keep her as a best friend, I will never know. But to have her more than that, my best friend *and* someone I can spend my life with intimately until my last dying breath, would change everything. Whatever the universe has planned for me, I hope part of it is to let me have her back in my life.

But there are days when I get angry all over again. When my mind goes back to the day she left for good. When I had the small box in my pocket. After she left me a second time, that's when everything came crashing down on me.

My mental health was shit.

I remember losing weight rapidly from not eating. The bags under my eyes were so hollow that my family forced me to go to the doctor. They didn't know what to do, and at the time, I didn't care what happened to me.

Everything sets back into motion when I watch her laugh to herself about something. The small dimple that comes out when she smiles just enough to make it appear.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

She lightly shakes her head and looks at me, dragging away a strand of her hair with a finger.

“I was thinking about the time James challenged you to see who could drink their slushies the fastest when we left the movies. Remember? I think we were seventeen?”

I huff out a laugh and close my eyes at the memory. Then I look at her. “Of course, I remember. I won.” I place my hand on my chest.

“But do you remember what happened after?” She smiles and takes another bite of the strawberry.

I grimace while I think back to what happened after. James finished seconds after me, and I was already celebrating my win when tragedy struck.

“James throwing up a blue slushie a minute after? And some of that getting on Riley who absolutely freaked out,” I say.

“And you, Mr. Champion, were laughing hysterically until you started holding your stomach, only to run to the nearest garbage can and vomit your guts out.”

“I couldn’t have another slushie for two years.”

Ellie throws her head back and laughs more before saying, “I just remember Riley’s face when James got it down her shirt.”

Ellie looks at me and mimics Riley’s facial expression. She was in absolute horror and screaming like someone was trying to kill her.

“I had the worst brain freeze. I’m pretty sure I was questioning life at that point.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever laughed that hard. The three of you,” Ellie says through a laugh. “You and James are vomiting while Riley is holding out her arms and turns into a statue, not knowing what to do.” Ellie’s laughter slows down, and she takes a breath. “Memories like that just make me miss home even more.”

My smile fades when I remember that she isn’t here for good. I don’t know how I can convince her, but I need to find some way to get her to stay. Even if it’s just for a few more months—I’ll take anything.

“August said I could live with him if I really wanted an out. I laughed at that idea. Can you imagine? Me living with my brother, knowing his dating history?”

“I don’t think that would be a terrible idea. I think anyone would be willing to have you stay at their place if it means you get to come back home. A lot of people miss you, Ellie. This summer has been—amazing since having you back home.”

She looks at me and I can see her thinking, processing what I'm telling her. I've already asked her not to leave me once, and it would look pathetic if I were to ask her again. I just got my dad back in my life, and it took me a long time to make that happen.

She averts her gaze, and I can see her shivering despite having my hoodie on.

"You want to go back to my place? Hang out more?" I ask while I start to clean up everything around us.

All she does is nod her head in agreement and help me gather everything we need before we start to walk back to my house.

I can't get my foot in the door without Milo bombarding the two of us while we try to get inside. He jumps and whines at us.

"I was only gone for two hours, bud," I tell him after I set everything down and get on my knees to give him a proper greeting. "I know, I know, I missed you too." I get up, and he quickly goes to Ellie after he notices her.

He jumps up on her, and she makes an *oomph* sound while holding his front legs under her arms.

"Milo," I say in my stern-dad voice.

He hops down from her, and she thanks him, bending down to scratch under his chin and around his ears before placing a kiss on top of his head.

I close the door behind us and take off my shoes.

"Want anything to drink?" I say over my shoulder, walking to the kitchen.

"I can get it myself. I know where everything is."

"Ellie, I don't mind catering to you."

"Well, in that case." She throws herself on the sectional and gets comfortable. "I'll take sparkling water, please and thanks."

"One sparkling water coming up."

She smiles at me when I walk over to her and hand her the can. I grab one myself and sit down next to her with a hefty sigh. Ellie opens her drink and takes a large gulp out of it, which makes her let out a huge burp.

She covers her mouth with widened eyes. "I'm so sorry, that was gross."

I chuckle and shake my head. "It's fine. It's not like I haven't heard you burp before."

"It was still gross, and I'm sorry."

We sit in a comfortable silence and my mind starts to wander like it usually does. We're getting closer to the end of the summer, and there are

still so many questions I have for Ellie that I need to know the answer to. The question to myself is, do I take the chance and ask her?

“Ellie.” I break the silence, needing the questions to leave my head. “Why did you let yourself burn out? You knew what you were doing. I know you did. Why did you do it? That isn’t you. You say it’s your passion, and you get to impress the culinary world, but why did you let yourself get to the point where you end up falling out of love with it?”

“Rowan,” she says, sighing.

“Please, El, answer the question. I just need to know because I care about you and want to try to help you fix your situation. Why did you throw yourself into work all of a sudden? Why were you ignoring Charlie?”

“Because I didn’t want to feel anything anymore,” she blurts out. I watch her throat bob, and her lips press together in a tight line. “I was depressed. I knew that I lost myself in my job. I knew that Charlie wasn’t happy. I ignored all of it because I couldn’t handle facing everything, I worked so hard for. I fell out of love with it, and I was...ashamed. Embarrassed.”

I watch tears forming in her eyes, and this isn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want her to cry. I didn’t want to be the reason for making her cry. I should have never asked. I should have kept my mouth shut.

“How am I supposed to walk away from something that people know me for? I built my life on this. I worked my ass off to prove to myself that it was what I wanted. I left home Rowan. I left everything behind because I had this goal in life. I left *you*. When I know I shouldn’t have,” she murmurs that last part. “It was the biggest mistake I ever made. I realized that when I was too deep into my work and into my relationship with Charlie.

“I pushed Charlie out of my life because I was too busy trying to prove to myself that the path I decided to take wasn’t the wrong one. I had a passion, and I followed it. But then I lost everything. My confidence, my relationship, my friends. You. It took Charlie cheating on me to realize everything. If he hadn’t done that, I’d probably still be in that kitchen, feeling numb and taking the new position that I was offered. I should thank Charlie. He pushed me to realize how much of a fucking screw-up I am. I should call him and tell him how much I appreciate what he did.”

I cup her face in my hands and keep my eyes on her, catching the tears that continue to pour out.

“Stop,” I say gently. “Stop it. I am not going to let you talk about yourself like this. I’m sorry that it came to this. I’m sorry that you fell out of love with something that made you happy. I’m sorry that you felt you had to prove your worth when you shouldn’t. But you came home. You came back to a place you knew you could run to. A place that has so much love for you, Ellie. I’m sorry that you had to go through what you did, but you’re the strongest person I know. You’re the reason I finally did what I did with my dad. You’re the reason I want to change and treat myself better. It’s because of you.”

My heart races with every word that comes out of my mouth. I need to let everything spill out of me and lay everything out for her.

“The courage you had to leave home, go after your dream.” I pause to let out a breath. “It didn’t turn out the way you wanted, but at least you get to say you did it. You were able to make a name for yourself. You got to show the world who Ellie Thompson is, and they are so God damn lucky to even get the pleasure of knowing who you are.

“You, Ellie Thompson, are the girl that I fell in love with all those years ago because of how much love and joy you bring into people’s lives. Whether that came from your passion for baking or just a simple friendship, it’s time to focus on your own joy and start loving yourself again.

“If you have trouble trying to love yourself again and believe in yourself, I’ll be there. I will love you on the days you can’t love yourself. I will believe in you when you feel hopeless. I will pick you up and never let you fall. Don’t let anything try to dim the light that you shine into people’s lives. If you do, it’s going to be a dark and miserable place.”

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ELLIE



I GRIP my hand on Rowan's wrist while I listen to him pour his heart out to me. I've never had anyone fight for me like this. Little did I know, the man who's loved me since we were teenagers has always been fighting for me in his own way. He didn't run after me and go to New York, but I know I never left his heart.

He finishes talking, and I soak everything in. I don't want to let him go. I can't let him go. He said I went after what I wanted and that I made him do that with his dad. And now he's trying to make things happen again between us. He told me to stay, but he deserves someone who would never leave him like I did. He should be with someone who realizes just how lucky they are to have someone like him and to never let go.

"I'm scared, R-ro," my voice breaks.

"I know. I know you're scared of starting over. But I won't let you do it alone. You forced yourself into the situation with my dad when I went to see him. Now, it's my turn to force myself in your situation. We're a team, and we will get through this together. I promise. Now, will you stop crying? I hate seeing you like this."

His hands are still cupping my face when he presses a kiss to my forehead and then to my lips. He lingers there, and I can feel my entire body melt. My shoulders drop, my jaw unclenches, and I breathe.

He leans his forehead on mine and closes his eyes. "I need you in my life. Please stay. Stay here, stay with me. We can make this *our* home. You're my girl, Ellie Thompson. *I love you.*"

My cheeks heat up when I hear those three words, I never thought I'd hear again. Never thought it was possible to have that from him again. I

know I can trust him. He would rather fail if that meant saving me from my own despair. My body and soul aches for him. I'm his, and he's mine.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

He lifts his head and looks at me in disbelief. "Can you say that again?" he asks softly.

"I love you, Rowan."

He searches my eyes like he's making sure I'm here, in front of him, before saying, "I hope I'm not dreaming. I would really hate to wake up right now."

I laugh softly and say, "I promise you that you're not dreaming. I never stopped loving you. I left and still loved you. It wasn't fair to Charlie because I knew it would never be what we once had."

He looks at me with his smile, which makes my knees weak, and kisses me softly. Lovingly. It's strong and passionate. Not rushed, harsh, or forced. It's slow like he's making sure that I'm here.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him in more, and we continue to kiss. He bites my bottom lip tenderly, and a small moan escapes me. He only allows himself to pull away for a second before telling me he loves me again. I smile against his lips, telling him I love him.

But there's a moment when I feel his lips leave mine, and I look at him. His eyes are no longer on me. His head is turned down, and before he places his gaze back on me, he says, "There's something I need to tell you."

I can feel my heart begin to beat faster because his eyes changed in a matter of minutes. The spark that was just there has now been taken over by something heavy.

"What is it?" I ask quietly.

"When you came back home from New York after you were done with school..." He pauses, and I feel this overwhelming sense of worry.

"What?" I ask.

He rubs his face with his hand and sits back on the couch, his body facing away from me. Then he sits forward, his elbows on his knees while he looks down at the floor. "I, uh, I was planning on proposing to you when you got back. But then you said you were going to stay in the city for another two years."

I suck in a breath out of pure shock. That was the absolute last thing I ever thought he would tell me. I think back to that day, trying to remember

if I missed something. I told him I was going back, and that I had to take the opportunity that was given to me.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to concentrate. *His hand slid down into his pocket, and what I thought was him clenching his fist out of heartbreak or hurt...*

“Rowan,” I say, my voice breaking. I cover my mouth while trying to hold back the tears that so desperately want to come out again.

His eyes are still on the floor, and he fidgets with his fingers. “I didn’t want to get in the way of something that could have led you to bigger things. And it did. You became someone that everyone wants to meet. You made a name for yourself.” He lifts his head to look at me, and his lips curve into a tiny, sad smile.

I swallow the lump in my throat, not knowing what to say or what to do. I just sit there while emotions thrum through my body and mind. The biggest emotion is anger. Angry at myself. I feel my hands turn into fists on my lap.

Yes, I’ve made a name for myself, but I ended up being miserable and feeling broken. All this time, I could have made a different life for myself. Maybe created something here, as Addie suggested. I could have been with Rowan this entire time, and maybe we could have had a family by now.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Hey,” he says in a low, soft voice.

I feel his hands on mine, willing them to relax.

“Ellie, look at me, please.”

I let out a shaky breath before setting my gaze on him. The prickling sensation consumes me as I fight away the tears.

“You never left my mind, Ellie. I never hated or resented you. I did what I thought was best for you. I had a hard time and didn’t go about it in the healthiest way after you left. But that was the reason I didn’t speak to you for those two years. But do not blame or hate yourself because I know that’s what you’re going to do, and I refuse to let you do that.”

“Rowan, I—”

“Ellie.” He shakes his head and smiles at me. *Smiles.*

I pinch my eyebrows together, waiting for him to continue.

“I would still marry you to this day. You’re the only person for me. It’s always been you. Always. And if I ever get that chance to ask you to be my wife.” He lets out a small laugh and then wipes away a tear I didn’t feel

falling down my cheek. “Well, I would be the luckiest man. I’ll wait for you, Ellie. For as long as I need to because there’s no one else. I love you, Ellie Thompson.”

I sit there, looking at the man that I’ve dreamt about proposing to me. Maybe I can make that dream a reality.

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ELLIE



“SO, you told Charlie you were done for good, huh?” Riley asks, taking a bite of her burger.

“I sure did.” I grab a fry and toss it in my mouth, savoring the saltiness.

“What does this mean now?” Hailey asks.

“What do you mean? What does it mean?” I arch a brow at her.

“Like, are you going to have him move out of the place or what? What are your plans since you’re going home next week?” Hailey asks very nonchalantly, like it’s not a huge deal that I’m leaving. Everyone else has been making it a big deal. But that’s Hailey.

I pick up my cup and bite the straw, thinking before I take a drink. I didn’t tell them what the phone call was about that day on the beach—just work calling me about when I’ll be back. Which isn’t fully a lie. I’ve just left out some information I’m not ready to tell them yet.

I’ve been thinking about the possibility of staying and how I can make it work. *Suppose* I can make it work. I want to be with Rowan, there’s no hiding from that, especially with what happened the other night. I’ve decided that I won’t be sharing what he had planned ten years ago with anyone. I want that to be kept between me and him.

It’s also not my place to share. I’m still shell-shocked by that information. My mind won’t let me not hate myself. I was the reason Rowan didn’t talk to me for two years. I was the reason he went into such a dark place that it brought everything back up with his dad.

I don’t know if I could ever forgive myself for that. But I’m also trying to look at it in a different way. I’m here now with Rowan, and we’re letting ourselves have this second chance. This can be the chapter in our lives

where he can finally do what he had planned eight years ago when I came back after culinary school only to go back to New York.

And the fact that he waited for me. It just makes me feel terrible all over again.

I would never make him leave Dove Point behind and go with me to New York. I know he would hate it. If he did come with me, he would pretend like he loved it for my sake and my job. *Fuck*. This stupid fucking job that's draining every ounce of energy from me.

What if I *do* open my own bakery? I don't have much in savings, but I could maybe look into a business loan. I would have to start researching. I can already imagine what the place would look like. Powder-blue painted walls, mosaic tiles, gold and vintage frames covering the walls with beautiful paintings.

It sounds so dreamy when I really think about it. I can make whatever I want, even for the holidays. Pies, tarts, cakes, brownies. Anything.

I also don't need to make anything official with Rowan. We just—know...without having to say anything. When you spend thirteen years in love with someone, words aren't needed.

"Earth to Ellie." Riley snaps her fingers near my face.

I blink and look at her and Hailey. "What?"

"What are you going to do?" Hailey asks again.

I let out a slow, relaxing breath. "Well, things have gotten more complicated now, and my head is kind of all over the place," I say quietly.

Hailey and Riley look at each other with curiosity and turn back to me.

"Go on," Riley says, gesturing her hand in a circular motion.

I set my drink down and looked around us. Each table at the diner is almost full, so they cannot freak out over what I'm about to tell them. I lean over the table slightly and look back at them.

"What I'm about to tell you, you can't freak out, okay? Well, there are two things I need to tell you," I whisper.

Riley's eyes go round with excitement, and Hailey grows a smirk. They both lean in across the table in the booth we're sitting in. Their bright, hazel-green eyes stared at me in anticipation.

"I was offered a new position at my job as the executive pastry chef. I was on my way to tell Charlie the news when he told me his news instead. So, I never talked to him about it. I never gave my boss an answer, and that was who I was on the phone with the day we went to the beach.

“I told my parents, August, and Rowan about it. It felt really good to get it off my chest, but then it kind of made things more complicated for me, trying to figure out what exactly it is that I want to do. Then there’s Rowan. We have history. We all know this. That isn’t new. We’re both still in love with each other, and we’ve been having very hot sex. He definitely has learned a lot of things since we last slept together, and let me tell you, it’s mind-blowing.

“I never realized how big he is even though I lost my virginity to him, but I didn’t think about the size of a dick when I was a teenager. More just about being horny and your hormones going out of control. It’s really interesting to think about. But the man has me on my knees every day, both out of weakness and because I’m pleasuring him. So, yeah.” I let out a breath.

I look at them, waiting for a reaction, while they stare blankly at me.

Riley shakes her head. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I was given a promotion and me, and Rowan still love each other. And we’ve slept together multiple times.”

“Multiple times?” Riley shouts, causing everyone to turn their heads to us.

Hailey quickly pulls her sister into her and covers her mouth while Riley tries to continue to talk.

“Ew, did you lick me?” Hailey rubs her hand on her shirt.

Riley slaps Hailey’s arm with both her hands over and over and says, “Did you just hear what she said?”

“Yes, I did,” Hailey says quickly, her perfectly arched eyebrow rising.

“How are you not freaking out?” Riley exclaims.

“I don’t know. Maybe because I saw this coming? Why is this so surprising?”

“Hey, give me a little credit,” I tell Hailey.

“Was it good?” Riley asks quietly with a big smile. “Wait, tell me when.” She places her palms toward each other and slowly starts to move them outward. “Here?” She continues, and I stare, entertained, laughing. “Holy shit, here?” Her eyes go wide.

Hailey pushes Riley’s hands away. “She’s not going to tell you that, weirdo.”

“I’ll tell you about the guy I’m seeing if you at least give me a rating.” Riley smiles wide.

“Wait, pause, you’re seeing someone? Since when?” I ask.

Riley raises her shoulder like it’s no big deal. “I met him at the club we went to.”

“What,” I shout. “That was, like, weeks ago. Who is he? What does he look like?”

“Well, he’s tall, has a good head of hair, and the most gorgeous light brown eyes. It’s not serious or anything. We’re keeping things casual.” She smooths out the air with her hands.

“Do we get to meet the lucky guy?” I ask.

“Absolutely not. That’s why it’s casual. He has been to my place multiple times.” She wiggles her brows.

My mouth drops. “How—”

“I’m very good at keeping things on the down low. No one knows except you guys.” Riley looks at me. “Now spill. What’s the rating?”

I bite down a smile before saying, “he’s this entirely different person when it’s just the two of us, and it’s really, *really* hot.” I bite my lip, thinking about the other night. “He does things that I never imagined he would do.”

I feel my toes curl just thinking about it. All it took was that one thought and now I need to leave this diner and go straight to him. I know he’s at work, but I don’t care. I need to touch his warm skin, hear the way he moans deeply, the way he fits so perfectly inside of me.

I squeeze my legs together and pull out my phone.

Ellie: Can I come to see you?

Rowan: You don’t need to ask me. I will always want to see my beautiful girl.

“I need to go. I’ll talk to you guys later,” I tell them as I slide out of the booth.

“Where are you going?” Riley whines.

Hailey looks at me with a devilish smile. “Probably to go sit on Rowan’s face.”

My eyes roll so hard they get stuck in the back of my head. Although, she isn’t wrong.

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ROWAN



I HEAR a knock on my office door while I'm setting up new ideas for flavors I want to play with. We're starting to go into the fall season, and I like to mix things up and bring some new flavors that complement the crisp air and warm meals.

"Yeah," I shout.

The door opens, and when I look up, I see the one woman who can always make my heart gallop out of my chest. Her smile brightens my entire mood when I watch her walk in. Her tan legs show off under the shorts she's wearing. The white, low-cut top makes her breasts look incredible.

I'm drooling, and I'm not ashamed.

"Hey," I say, getting up from my chair and walking over to her.

I pull her in for a hug, and my body melts when her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me down to her. She kisses my neck and then looks at me.

"Hi," she says warmly.

"Hi." I look into her blue eyes, and right now, it's just me and her, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

"Watcha doin?" She gestures to my desk.

"Getting some ideas for new beers to brew. With the season changing, I want to swap out some summer tastes for some fall ones."

Her smile fades and stiffens around me. I furrow my brows in confusion.

"What's wrong?" I stand up straight and guide her to the couch in the office.

When she sits next to me, she brings up her legs and tucks them against her, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“I didn’t get to tell you this, but my job called me when I was at the beach with Riley and Hailey.”

My stomach drops. We’ve been so wrapped up in each other’s arms, forgetting the real world, that I forgot all about her job back in New York. And after the bombshell I dropped on her a couple of nights ago, my mind has been occupied, to say the least.

“What happened?” I grab her soft hand in mine while I listen.

“My boss called. She was checking in on me, seeing how I was doing, but also asked if I was still thinking about the new position. I told her I would have an answer for her soon.” She rests her head on the side of the couch, still looking at me.

I nod my head slowly while my mind runs a mile a minute. I need to rip this fucking band-aid off and just ask her what she plans to do. About work, about us. Where her mind is after telling her about the proposal I had planned.

“Do you have an answer for her?” I ask.

She lets out a sigh before saying, “My head is telling me to go back to that kitchen. Take the promotion.”

I continue to look at her, waiting for her next words, hoping that I am included.

“But my heart is telling me to stay here. Stay with the people who make me happy. Stay with you and see where things go. I...don’t think I want to lose that chance again.”

My brows lift in surprise. My heart flutters like a butterfly from the thought of her staying for good. That or I’m having an arrhythmia.

She looks down and bites her bottom lip, thinking. I love this girl so God damn much that I’d be willing to leave the brewery to James and follow her back to the city if I need to. I can’t lose her again. So, I risk saying what I’m thinking.

“If you feel like you need to go back to New York.” I pause when I notice her looking back at me with worry in her eyes. “I will go with you.”

Her head snaps back up. “What?”

“I will follow you, stay with you if it means you can keep the job you’ve worked so hard at. I want you to be happy, and if that means me coming with you, then I will do that.”

“I’m not letting you move across the country just for me. You have a business here, family here. And Milo? He’s too good for the city. You can’t take him away from here.”

“Milo would drag my ass to follow you. He loves you just as much as I do. Haven’t you noticed how he always follows you around? I had to carry him out of the bedroom just so I could get you to myself.” I chuckle.

Ellie laughs and covers her face with her hand. But it stops quickly when she starts to think about things again.

I lean toward her and meet her eyes. “I’m not letting you go this time. Not again. I will get on that plane with you. Make August drive your car back.” I smirk.

She looks at me with so much wonder in her eyes, and I never want to let that shine burn out. I will do anything to keep it from fading.

“You’re *mine*, Ellie. The moment you said those three words back to me, it was game over. You’re stuck with me, and I’m stuck with you.”

She places her hand on my cheek, rubbing the stubble on my face gently, and I close my eyes while soaking in the touch of her.

“What about your dad? You just got him back in your life,” she whispers.

“I’ll worry about that when the time comes.” I open my eyes to look at her again.

She shakes her head. “You can’t drop your life for me, Ro. Not when you have your dad back. I won’t allow it. Plus, my mind is still trying to process what you told me the other night. You know, your undying love for me and wanting to propose.”

“You can joke and poke fun all you want if that’s what makes you feel better. You can fight me on this till you’re blue in the face. I’ll pack up my things right now while you continue to try to ‘not allow’ me to do this.” I playfully mock her.

“You’re such a butthead.” She narrows her eyes at me with a smile.

“Yeah, but I’m your butthead, and you’re stuck with me.” I bop her on the nose and smile. “Now can I have a kiss?”

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t hide the smile. She meets me halfway and gives me a soft kiss, her pillowy lips caressing mine in the sexiest way. I know we’re in my office, but I would take her right now.

Our kiss turns deep, passionate, and slow. She parts her lips for me, allowing me to let my tongue find hers. I brace my hands on her waist and

pull her on top to straddle me. Her arms wrap around my neck again.

"You don't need to come with me," she breathes between kisses.

"Ellie," I reply while I continue to kiss her. "I go where you go." I tug on the bottom of her lip.

"No," she continues. "I mean." She pulls back, her lips already red, and looks at me. "I can stay here for good. I—I can leave my job. Come back home. Give us a fresh start."

My brows pinch together, and I shake my head. "You're not going to do that. What you have going for you is incredible. You're not leaving that world behind just for me."

"I *want* to, Rowan. When I came back home, I thought I didn't have anything to keep me here again. That I was just here for the summer and that was it. But now, well, now, I have so many reasons to stay. The biggest one is you.

"I've been thinking about a lot of things. A lot of it has to do with how unhappy I am back in that fast-paced world. I did it for years, and... I think I'm ready to move on. Come back to a place where I can see the stars every night. Be here with my brother. Everyone. And maybe even start a bakery here?

"I don't know, maybe I won't, and I'll do something else. What I do know is that I want to stay here. Where I was for the past nine years," she shakes her head, "I lost myself, and I won't let that happen again. You reminded me who I used to be. You made me remember what it feels like to be genuinely happy."

She cups my face in her hands, looking at me with so much admiration and love, something I never thought I'd get from her again.

"I know you said that I was a big part of the reason you decided to see your dad and start to heal yourself. But you've done just as much for me to really decide what the hell I wanted to do. Seeing the courage, it took for *you* to see a man you never thought you'd ever see again and look how well that out for you. I want that for myself. I want to feel whole again, and I know it will only happen if I'm here with you. So please." She kisses me. "Let me make this decision and stay. Let me start a new chapter in my life with you."

"Are you sure?" I can't help but ask.

"The stars brought me back home to you. And I am so deeply and madly in love with you. So yes, I'm sure."

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ELLIE



"I FEEL SO NAUSEATED RIGHT NOW," I tell Rowan while I pace back and forth in his living room.

The next day, I decide that I needed to call my boss. The big guy. The head honcho. And tell her that I'm resigning. I've never felt so sick in my life. I feel terrible for letting her down, for having to say no, something I really don't like doing. But at the same time, I think she will want me to be happy. Truly happy.

"I can pretend to be you. I'll do it." Rowan shrugs.

I stop to look at Rowan, and he clears his throat.

"Hi, Mrs. Chef, it's Ellie," he tries to sound like me but is doing a terrible job.

"Okay, stop that immediately. You are not doing that, and I do not sound like a mouse from Cinderella."

He crosses his arms and grins at me. "Maybe Milo can do it for you then?"

I look at Milo, who's lying on his back and snoring. If I could trade places with him, I would. I take a deep inhale, filling up my lungs until I can't anymore, and exhale it out. I press the call button on my phone, holding it up to my ear and covering my eyes.

"Why are you covering your eyes? She's not here," Rowan says.

I swat my hand at him, silently telling him to please shut up, and then I hear the phone stop ringing.

"Hello," Chef Roberts says through the phone.

"Hi, C-Chef Roberts? It's Chef Thompson. I mean, Ellie, it's Ellie." I place my hand on my forehead and tilt my head back. Get your shit

together, Ellie, stop stuttering.

“Ellie, I’m so happy to hear from you again. How are you? I am counting down the days until you come back to the kitchen. I miss seeing your work,” she says excitedly.

“Yes, about that,” I say nervously and look at Rowan.

He gives me a thumbs-up and the sweetest smile ever. I smile back, and he mouths *you’ve got this*. I nod my head.

“I’m sorry to say this over the phone, but I will not be returning to the kitchen. I’m resigning.” I stop pacing and hold my breath.

I hear absolutely nothing on the other end. No static. No breathing. Nothing. I pull the phone away to make sure she’s still on the line. Rowan lifts his hand in question, and I shrug in return. I put the phone back to my ear.

“Chef?” I ask.

“I had a feeling this would happen.” Her voice comes out eerily calm.

I swallow what feels like a rock in my throat and try to keep my voice steady. “I’m sorry?”

“I’ve worked with you for nine years, Ellie. I’ve noticed the change in your demeanor, the creativity, and the drive you once had. You did not have that fire in your eye like you once did. The passion isn’t there like it used to be, and it breaks my heart for you. I know how hard this industry can be, and I was hoping that it would not break you.”

I stand there, no words coming out of my mouth, no sound. I don’t move. I’m not sure what to say to that. Do I let her keep talking?

“Is this true, Ellie? Do you believe that you have lost your passion in this work?” she asks.

I open my mouth, trying to find the words that want to come out. Yes and no. Yes, I’ve lost it for what I was doing. No, I haven’t lost it for what I *want* to do.

“I’m afraid that I’ve burned myself out. I love what I’ve done these past nine years, and I am so grateful for the opportunity I was given and the achievements I’ve accomplished. But it’s not the same anymore. I am very sorry for disappointing you. You know it’s something that I don’t like doing. I hate myself for it.”

“Ellie, please do not hate yourself. That is ridiculous. You are still so young and have so many things you can be doing. You can travel and learn more. You can work in a small bakery. You can open *your own bakery*.”

“Funny that you mention that. My family and friends have been nagging me about opening my own bakery.”

Rowan looks up from his phone at me. He raises his brows in questioning, and I give him a tight smile.

“Ellie, I think you have so much talent that I’m scared you are going to put it to waste. You have an incredible imagination. I would hate to see that go away. I never shared this with anyone except my wife, but I’ve always loved the idea of opening my own space. A little family company that I can pass down from generation to generation.

“But I also liked the fast pace of life. I liked the loudness of the kitchens and the chaotic yet structured life. The adrenaline of it all. But you, *you* have something, an opportunity that you can take and run with. This could be something that you can pass down. You’ve already made a name for yourself, so now, you should do what truly makes you happy. If that’s baking at home in private, that’s fine. If you decide to open a bakery, that would be incredible, and I will be the first in line when it opens. I have so much faith in you and your abilities. I know you can do whatever it is that you put your mind to.”

I wipe away the tears that caught up to me unexpectedly. Relief runs through my body, and I feel...excited for this new chapter. One of the most influential and important people in my life has just given me what I needed. What I didn’t know I needed.

“I do have a request, though,” she adds.

“A request?” I say through watery tears.

Rowan looks at me, now just seeing what my emotions are doing to me. He quickly gets up and wraps his arms around me while I continue to talk on the phone.

“Yes. How would you feel about curating the dessert menu for me? Think of it as one last hurrah. I’ve seen what you make in your spare time. I would love a piece of you with me as you start this new journey.”

I let out a sigh and a smile, processing what she just asked of me. Something I never thought I’d dream of doing in a place like The Red Table. I hold on to Rowan’s arm while the phone is still pressed to my ear.

I sniff. “How soon would you need it?”

“Two weeks. Can you do that for me?” I hear the smile in her voice.

I wipe away a tear.

I nod enthusiastically. “Yes. I can get the menu for you.”

Rowan bends to the side to look at me, and all I can do is smile at him, telling him through my expression that this is good news. I nod lightly to him.

“Two weeks,” she repeats.

“Yes, of course. Thank you so much for this opportunity.”

“No, thank you, Ellie. I’ll speak with you soon.”

“Yes, I’ll speak to you soon. Goodbye, Chef.”

I hang up the phone and look at Rowan.

“What? What happened?” He unwraps his arms from me and places his hands on his hips, waiting for whatever it is I’m going to say.

I look at him and then at his giant kitchen and point to it. “Mind if I use your kitchen?”

fifty-eight

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ROWAN



ELLIE HAS NOT STEPPED out of the kitchen in *four days*. The only time she has is when I force her to shower, eat, and at least sleep for five hours. I don't know how she's working on no sleep. Then again, this is what she did throughout her 20s.

When she told me what happened, I wasn't sure if I should have been happy or worried. Happy because she's officially moving back home, or worried that she now has two weeks to produce five dessert items for her boss.

After she told me that, she started writing down ideas and making a list of everything she needed. I insisted on going shopping for her so she could stay home and continue to come up with more ideas. I've even cracked an egg or two for her while she was running around with flour on her face and arms.

There was a night when I made her go to bed with me and she woke me up by reciting a recipe *in her sleep*. Call me crazy, but when I heard her talking to the ceiling in measurements, I grabbed my phone and started typing what she was saying.

She swears she doesn't remember doing that but kissed me about ten times while thanking me for it. It was for some sort of blueberry dish that had to do with a crust. I wasn't exactly sure. It did sound good, though.

Watching Ellie work in the kitchen, doing what she does at The Red Table, no wonder people go to her for her work. This is some straight-up fancy shit. I don't necessarily understand why she needs to break something that was placed perfectly on a plate. But it's a thing.

I watched her make a key lime tart with berries and white chocolate, and it was interesting. It took her an hour just to perfect one. She made dough, key lime filling, raspberry foam (I told her that sounded like a cleaning product, and she rolled her eyes at me), and a whipped white chocolate ganache.

After she completed putting everything together and made it look like a fancy building you would see in New York, she took multiple photos, wrote it on the menu, and then had us try it.

I was wrong about the foam. It was awesome.

“Okay.” Ellie claps her hands and flour puffs in the air. “I have four out of five desserts. We have the key lime tart, the mini blueberry mousse cakes, the caramel apple mascarpone vanilla mousse cake, and the three chocolate plaisir sucre.” She lets out a breath after naming off all four of the dessert names. “I just need one more, but my mind feels like mush.”

“You have time to think about the last one. You were able to get all of these done in almost a week. Take this extra time to give yourself a break.” I lean on the marble counter.

“I can’t. I have a rhythm now, and I don’t want it to stop.” She continues to move things around: bowls, plates, whisks, spoons.

“Okay but you can’t think of anything else, so you should take this time to let your mind recharge. Don’t force it, or it won’t be something you’re happy with.”

Ellie slumps her shoulders and tilts her head back. “I know. I just don’t want to stop.”

I walk around the kitchen counter and pull her into my arms. “I know, but it’s healthy to give yourself a break. And a shower.”

Ellie pulls away and tilts her chin up to look at me with squinted eyes. “Are you saying I smell?”

I pinch two fingers together. “Only the tiniest bit.”

She deadpans and starts to walk away toward the stairs. “Well, I’ll go scrub my ass nice and clean just for you,” she says over her shoulder.

“I can help with that if you want,” I reply while I stay back in the kitchen, watching her take the first step on the stairs.

She looks at me with a glare, and I laugh, holding up my hands. “I’m joking.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I’m not. But I will clean up the kitchen for you.”

She leans against the railing, exhausted. “Ugh, thank you. I love you. You’re the best.”

“I will never get tired of hearing you say that.” I smile at her, and we lock eyes until she makes it upstairs.



An hour later, Ellie is sparkling clean and wearing a smile. “Ah, that feels much better.” She sits next to me on the couch while I scroll through my phone.

“I’m glad.” I give her a kiss on the side of her wet hair and look through my phone some more.

She lays her head on my shoulder before asking, “What are you looking at?”

“I’m looking at the line-up of vendors for the Taste of Dove Point.”

“Shit, it’s already coming up?”

I nod and say, “Mm hm.”

She peeks to look at the list I have pulled up. We have about fifty businesses taking part, which is more than I thought we’d have this year. Addie even rented a table to offer free tastings to the tourists who will soon be pouring into town.

“I think you should do it. It couldn’t hurt to see where it takes you. What else would you be doing now that you’ve decided to stay here?”

“Crap,” she whispers. “I didn’t even think about what would happen after. I just knew I wanted to be back home and fuck everything else.” She waves a hand.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re staying with me. You can figure out what to do without worrying about expenses.”

She pulls back her head to look at me. “I’m not doing that.”

I angle my head and give her a *Don’t be stubborn* look.

“I’m not going to mooch off you. If I wanted to do that, I would just go live with my parents until I figured things out.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re staying here, and you are going to figure out what your next move is. I don’t want you to worry about anything else. That is your job, for now, to figure out what you want to do. Don’t feel any pressure.”

“Do you know who you’re talking to?”

“Fine. Let’s start with the festival. We can sign up right now.”

“Right now?”

I nod. “Right now.”

“Do they have any spots left? I don’t even know when it will happen.”

I click on the vendor signup sheet and sure enough, it’s still open. But the deadline is today.

“It’s next weekend, so you have about a week. And with what I saw in the kitchen this past week, I think you’d be able to do it, especially when it’s desserts *you* want to make and not for someone else. You already have a town full of people who are familiar with your work, but now you will get to show off to people coming to visit for the festival.

“It’s a great opportunity to see how well you do by selling whatever it is that you want to make. Do you want to make a simple chocolate chip cookie? That will sell out because that’s just how good you are at what you do. I will be there to help you out every step of the way and I’m sure our friends would also pitch in. I’m not the only one here that wants to see you succeed and be genuinely happy.”

She stays quiet and thinks about what I just said.

“The deadline to sign up is *today*,” I say to her.

She looks at me with raised brows and says, “Oh, shit. Okay.” She bites the corner of her lip and spins the ring on her finger. “I guess it couldn’t hurt if I’m making simple things, that is. What’s the signup fee?”

I look at my phone and read the information and then I show her.

“Two hundred.” She keeps her eyes on the phone screen. “I don’t know.” She looks at me.

“I’ll pay the fee.” I bring my phone back to me and start to type in her information.

“No, you won’t.” She reaches for my phone, but I snatch it away quickly, holding it toward the opposite side of her.

“Ellie,” I say sternly. “You’re going to let me do this for you. It doesn’t matter if you won’t let me do it now, but I will do it. The moment you’re not around, I’m going to pay the deposit.”

She sits back down on the couch and crosses her arms. “Fine. But I’m paying you back.”

I bring my phone back down and continue to type. “You can pay me back in extra cookies.”

I finish filling out the application, pay the fee, and hit send. I have a giant smile on my face when I look at her and show her the phone screen that it's been accepted.

"I still need to come up with one more dessert for my boss. Well, ex-boss now."

"Continue to brainstorm, but not today. Start again tomorrow. You need to give yourself time to rest. Me and the guys will look at the list of everything you will need to bring. I can buy all the baking items you need. I'll even make sure to put the speed on the mixing stand at one and not five."

I get a laugh out of her for that, and my heart thrums at the sound of it. She shakes her head and then tilts it. "What would I do without you?"

I get up from the couch while she keeps her eyes on me. I hold out my hand to her, and she looks at it.

"What?" she asks.

"I want to take you somewhere. Come on." I gesture with my head. She hesitantly takes my hand, trying to hide her smile. "Okay."

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ELLIE



WE WALK OUTSIDE into the backyard, where a ladder leans against the side of the house. I look at it and then back to Rowan.

“What are we doing?” I ask skeptically.

He points upward and says, “We’re going to go on the roof and star gaze.”

I let out a laugh. “What? Ro, we haven’t done that in years. I don’t know if it’s actually safe to do that.”

He starts to walk while holding my hand. “We did it all the time.”

“Yeah, when we were dumb kids who didn’t know any better. We’re adults now, and we definitely know better.”

We stop at the ladder, and he turns to me. “I promise we will be fine. I will not let you fall, and if you do, I will soften the fall for you. I will throw myself under you.”

“Have I ever told you how dramatic you are?”

“I’m only ever dramatic when it comes to you, my love.” He kisses the top of my head and then gestures to it. “After you.”

I stare at him and then back to the ladder.

“Go on.” I gesture with my hand.

I walk past him and carefully start to climb it step by step, taking my sweet ass time because I am *not* going to die today. I know I called Rowan dramatic, but I have every right to be. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gotten afraid of heights. If I look down now, it’s over.

I can feel myself gripping onto the sides of the cool metal, still moving carefully, one step at a time.

“You’re almost there. I’m holding it, so don’t worry,” I hear Rowan call up to me.

He’s holding it. Okay, that’s fine. My head gets to the top, and I can see the roof and the dark gray shingles. How did I do this as a teenager? I lean on the roof; thankfully, it’s a flat area, and I baby crawl on it.

I slowly turn around, and when I do, I see Rowan already at the top.

“I was afraid we’d end up seeing the sunrise by the time you got up here,” he tells me jokingly with a chuckle.

“Hey, I’m not as risky as I was when we were younger. I developed my frontal lobe long ago,” I say, turning slowly and sitting down.

He sits next to me, and the sun fully sets, bringing out the deep blue sky above us with specks of sparkles. It’s incredible up here. If you close your eyes, you can hear grasshoppers chirping and the waves crashing.

The town has plenty of lights to guide us, but we still have the pleasure of getting a night sky full of stars. I feel my body relax, and I take the opportunity to lie down on my back so I can get the full view.

Rowan follows my lead and grabs my hand. We lay there in complete silence. Comfortable silence makes me feel grateful. I feel his thumb brush the top of my hand, and I count out all the stars I can see.

“I never told you this,” I say, “but I used to go on the roof at my apartment and try to spot any stars I could. There would be moments when I thought I saw some, but they were just planes passing by. When I didn’t see any stars, I’d just look at the moon, wondering if you were looking at it too. And if we were looking at it together.”

I see his head turning toward me, but I keep my eyes on the sky.

“Every year on your birthday, I would come up on my roof,” he says, and his voice is deep and quiet.

I turn my head to look at him, and it’s like the stars never left because I see them in his beautiful dark blue eyes and the way they sparkle.

“Why?” I ask.

“After we would get off the phone, when I would call you to tell you a happy birthday, I’d wish I had more of you. The only way I could think of having that is by coming up here at night and looking at the stars.”

“Are you trying to make me cry, Rowan Williams?” I laugh through what sounds like a cry. I can feel my eyes prickle with tears.

“I would never try to make you cry. Not if it’s a tear of anger or hurt or worry.”

I can feel a single tear fall down my temple, but Rowan gets closer to me and kisses it onto his lips. He sets his head back down and cradles my face with his other hand.

“I’d like very much to kiss you right now,” he tells me.

“I’m all yours.”

He leans in while still holding my cheek and presses a soft, warm kiss to my lips. I lean in toward him while my hand finds the nape of his neck. I feel his tongue slide into my mouth, and I suck on it, letting myself taste him in every way.

I feel his hand that was on my face, running down my neck shoulder, and stopping at my waist. I can feel his fingers dig into my skin in the most sensual way. I let out a small whimper when I feel him nip at my bottom lip.

A second later, I find my body turning itself toward him, wanting to feel him on me. He lets go of my hand and slides it on the other side of my waist, gently bringing me on top of him while our lips are still locked together.

My body shivers when I start to feel him press against me in the most delicious way. I can feel my knees start to get bothered with the material of the roof, but I don’t care. Let them get scratched up.

“I want to fuck you. Right here,” I tell him desperately against his lips.

I move my lips to his neck, his jaw, and the back of his ear.

“We will need to be very, very quiet.” His large hands caress my ass, moving my hips. “Do you think you can stay quiet?”

I moan quietly into his ear before telling him, “I can try. But I can’t make any promises.” I lift my gaze to him, and he licks my lips with the tip of his tongue before pulling me in for more.

I pull myself up and quickly unbutton his pants and see the pre-cum on his briefs. I look at him with a devilish smirk.

“That’s what you do to me, honey,” he says with a similar smirk.

I tug down his briefs just enough, and his hard, solid length springs upward. I need to wrap my hand around him. I need to feel the warmth. I only grab it long enough to lick his tip, making him inhale a sharp breath. I look up at him with an arrogant smile.

“Don’t tease me, Ellie,” he pleads.

I raise myself and go back to him, kissing him while I pull my lace underwear and cotton shorts to the side. I lift my hips up while still holding

him in my hand and slide the tip of him back and forth along my clit.

His hand finds my hair and tugs on it so nicely while he lets out a groan. I feel his hips moving up, but I continue to tease him by stroking his tip up and down on me.

“You’re so goddamn wet.” He pulls me down to kiss him again. The kiss is rough and needy. His tongue plays with mine, begging me to give him more.

I smile against his lips and then drag his tip to my entrance, continuing to tease him while I take full control of him.

“Shit,” he groans. “Honey, Ellie, I will beg until my voice is hoarse. Please.”

I look at him and kiss him one more time before saying, “Well, since you asked nicely.” I kiss him while I lower myself onto him, and we both moan into each other’s mouths.

Every inch of him stretches me so perfectly, and I can’t get enough of it. I let go of him and lower myself on the rest of him until I feel him completely fill me. We continue to kiss while I rock my hips and move up and down.

His hands hold my hips, and I let him guide me at the rhythm he wants me at. A slow, lazy, loving pace. He wants to enjoy this. Enjoy me and how I feel. Nothing rough or fast, but just the comfortable, slow movement.

“I love you so fucking much, Ellie. You have no idea,” he breathes out while he stares into my eyes.

I push myself up and start to control my movements now. I look down at him, my hair falling into my face. “I love you, Rowan,” I say through each breath I take.

“You’re a fucking goddess, the way you look under these stars while you fuck me. You ride me so goddamn good, baby.” His fingers dig into my hips.

I let my hands roam over my body, going under my shirt and to my hard nipples. I play with them while I look at Rowan and the hunger he carries in his eyes for me.

He takes his hand, slips it under the fabric of my underwear, and starts to play with me, sending a shockwave through my body. I gasp and pull one of my hands from my shirt to cover my mouth, holding in a moan I so desperately want to let out.

Rowan gives me a pleasurable smile. “You like that?”

I nod my head, still covering my mouth. He makes circular motions with his thumb, keeping up with the pace of me riding him. I can feel myself start to lose control and quicken my pace. I bend down and, place my hands on his cheeks and kiss him, tugging on his lip, sucking his tongue.

The position I'm in lets me go deeper and quicker. I feel myself reaching the edge of pleasure when he continues to rub me over and over.

"I'm close," he says in a rasp.

We kiss harder, and I move my hips more and more. As fast as I can go. The pain in my knees dulls as the pleasure in my body rises.

"Rowan, I'm close."

"Keep riding me, baby. Let me fill you up."

He tugs my hair, bites on my lip, and tips me over into the best orgasm. I moan into his mouth, and he continues to rub my clit, letting me ride it out. I hear him groan, and his hand tightens on my waist.

"Shit," he whispers into my mouth.

I keep my lips on him, trying to cover all the noise we're making. His breath quickens, and his hips thrust into me when I'm too tired to keep going. I lift my hips while he pumps into me. I bury my face in his neck, taking in the fresh scent of him, and kiss his neck until I feel him start to slow down.

I set myself back down on him and keep him in me while we kiss and pant. His hands cradle my face, and he looks at me. His dark eyes searched mine.

"We just fucked on the roof," he says, out of breath.

I smile and nod. "Yeah, we did."

He looks at me and raises his brows. "That was awesome."

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ELLIE



A FEW DAYS AGO, I finally came up with the very last item I wanted to put on the menu. I fought with myself internally, wondering if it would be good enough. All the desserts I made were known for sleek presentation and considered a delicacy.

Four of the items are just that, but not the last one. The last one I've decided will be my own personal touch. I want to leave them with something rooted in my nostalgia, hoping to share that warmth with others.

A simple cinnamon apple crisp. Tender and crisp granny smith apples sprinkled with cinnamon and a buttery crumble topping. Topped with a generous amount of vanilla bean ice cream with caramel drizzled over it.

I sent the seasonal menu and waited. Waited to see if it was good enough and if I still had what it took to create something beautiful but also inviting. I never dared let myself come up with something that I would have made in my own kitchen.

"You need to start getting ready for the festival. I know you're waiting on a response for your menu, but you only have a few days to get everything set," Rowan says.

"Do you doubt my ability to get what I need to be done in a timely manner, Mr. Williams?"

Rowan raises his eyebrows at me, dipping his chin slightly. "I didn't know you calling me Mr. Williams would be a turn-on, but here we are." He splays out his arms.

I let out a laugh and hold up a notepad, showing him I've already been prepping for the food festival. "I'm on top of it, Ro. You don't need to worry."

"I got something you can be on top of," he mutters while hiding a smile and walks past me to the kitchen.

"Hey." I smack the notepad on his butt.

"Please tell me you're going to make those caramel stuffed brownies, or the Oreo balls, or those mini caramel cheesecake bites."

Milo's nails tap on the floor while he follows Rowan around the house, watching him eat the cereal he just made for himself.

"I have the caramel brownies; that's a top contender. I also want to do simple things, like chocolate chunk cookies sprinkled with sea salt, cinnamon rolls, lemon truffles, and homemade rice crispy treats. Ya know?"

"That doesn't sound simple. That sounds like a lot of work."

I tilt my head and look up at him. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

He raises his hands, a spoon and bowl in each, and then continues to eat.

"I just need you to help with the setup. If you can help with that, I can get the baking done. Plus, I know Riley and Hailey want to help me. Addie is busy setting up for The Salty Dog."

"Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

I stop writing and look at him. "Man, if I'd known you'd do *anything* for me, I would have put out the first day I came back."

He winks. "Yeah, well, now you have some catching up to do."

"That I do. You should invite your dad and Amy."

He chews slowly while he thinks about it. Milo is sitting down next to him looking up, while patting Rowan's leg over and over for a taste of the cereal.

"I don't want to take away from your day," he tells me through a mouthful.

"You're not. I want you to invite him. I mean, that is unless you're not ready. I also don't want Addie to feel bombarded. Okay, maybe it's not a great idea." I continue to write.

Rowan drinks the milk in his bowl and then looks at me. "I'll talk to Addie and Mom. I would like to see him, have him visit, but I want to make sure they're okay with it first."

"That's fair." I look at him with a smile. "I can't wait to see where your relationship with him goes."

He smiles at me. “Me too.”

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sixty-one

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ROWAN



“ANYONE HOME?” I shout out from the entrance of my mom and aunt’s home.

I don’t hear an answer, so I close the door behind me and walk through the house.

“Hello?” I shout again.

“We’re in here,” my aunt exclaims from the sunroom toward the back of the house.

I stride into the warm, sunny room where my mom and aunt are painting. My mouth curves into a smile when I notice their focus is on each other as they paint.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

My mom doesn’t look away from her canvas before saying, “We’re painting each other.”

“I can see that. Why?”

My aunt responds while looking at my mother, “We saw this thing on the socials. People paint each other and then show the person at the end.” Her eyes bounce from the canvas to my mom.

“We’re almost done,” my mom murmurs.

I look between the two of them before walking to my mom’s side. I roll my lips in and close my eyes after I see what is *supposed* to be my aunt. I think?

“Okay, I’m done,” my mom says proudly.

“Just one more thing,” my aunt mutters and then cocks her head to the side. “Alright, I’m done.”

I lay my arms across my chest, determined to hide my smile with a hand.

“On the count of three,” Aunt Rosey says. “One, two, three.”

They both flip their canvas around and look at each other’s work. My aunt gapes at Mom’s painting and squints her eyes at the creation that was made.

“I don’t have pink hair.” Aunt Rosey has confusion written all over her face.

Mom turns her head to look at her work again and says, “I know, but I thought you looked cute with it.” Then turns back to Aunt Rosey.

“I look like Frenchie from Grease!”

“Well, I think it looks lovely,” I chime in.

“Don’t encourage her.” Aunt Rosey points to me.

“You gave me a unibrow,” Mom yells.

“Because you have one!” Aunt Rosey yells back.

My mom gasps. “I do not.”

“Then what are you plucking at every morning, hm?” Aunt Rosey retorts.

I glance up at the ceiling to avoid this conversation. They’ve been doing this for as long as I can remember, and it doesn’t faze me at all, but when one of them pulls me in—which happens half the time—it gets ugly.

I clear my throat to try to stop the back and forth between them. They both look up at me while I stand there.

“As much as I would love to watch you two go back and forth on who painted who the worst, I came over to talk to you about something.” I place my hands on my hips.

“Is everything okay?” Mom asks in a tender voice.

I rock my head from side to side, not knowing how to answer that.

“Take a seat.” Aunt Rosey gestures to a chair across the room. “What’s going on?”

I place my hands on my knees as I sit down and let out a heavy breath. “It’s about Dad,” I tell them, taking my hat off and running a hand through my hair.

“Did something happen after you spoke with him?” Mom turns to me.

“No, nothing happened. Everything is fine. Ellie, she just got this idea in my head, and I don’t know if it’s a good one.”

I rest my cheek on my fist and look at them.

Aunt Rosey throws her hand toward me. “Go on.”

“Ellie suggested that I invite Dad to the food festival. She's signed up for it—technically, I signed her up—and she thought it would be fun to have him, and Amy come to town for the weekend.”

“Oh.” Mom looks at her sister, and they both have the same surprised expression. Then she turns back to me. “Are you asking us if that’s okay?”

“I guess? I think it’s more about Addie and how she would feel. She doesn’t care to meet him, and I don’t want to put her in an uncomfortable situation.”

“But...” Aunt Rosey says.

“But I would like to show Dad around town. Show him what’s changed, and I don’t know, get to know him again. I know I can do that by going to him, but I also want to be able to have him come to me. See my house, my business, my life.”

My mom reaches out for my hand. I look down at it when I wrap mine in hers. Holding my mom's hand makes me feel like a kid again. All those memories of just the two of us walking down the beach hand in hand while we collected seashells.

“I’m not going to get between you and your father. We have no issues with each other, and although he wasn’t physically around, he always took care of us, and you know that. He’s a good man.” She gives a slight shrug. “He just chose a different path in life. It’s not worth holding grudges against someone. Life is too short to do that, and I knew that he would one day be a part of your life again. As for your sister, well, that’s a conversation between the two of you. You know how stubborn she can be. She got it from this one.” She throws a thumb over her shoulder toward Aunt Rosey.

“What you call stubborn, I call headstrong.” Aunt Rosey waves her off.

My mom's expression is unamused by the annoyance of her sister. I laugh and nod my head.

“Why don’t you go and talk to her right now?” Mom asks.

“Because I don’t want to upset her. I don’t want her to feel like I’m choosing Dad over her feelings.”

“I know you love her, but you need to do what’s best for you. And if that means having your dad come to visit you, then she’s going to need to find a way to go along with it.” Aunt Rosey says.

“I guess.” I sigh.

“How’s everything else going? How’s Ellie? I hear she’s staying in town now,” Mom says.

“No surprise there,” Aunt Rosey mumbles.

I arch a brow at her.

“Oh, please.” She waves me off. “That girl was going to stay. I knew the moment she came running home. Why would someone decide to stay home for the entire summer and not just a week? I’ve known that girl since she was in her mother’s belly. I should have had a bet going on in town if she were to stay or not. I would have made a killing.

“Everyone in town was talking to each other, saying that she was going to stay because people always come here when they need to escape from something. I like to think the town has some magic to it, to help people.”

“I may be part of the reason for her staying,” I gloat, knowing that I am.

“Are you two *finally* together again?” Aunt Rosey drawls.

I splay my hands out. “Give me a break.”

“Only took you a million years to get her back.” She raises her brows with a smile.

“Do you hear how she talks to me?” I ask my mom and point at my aunt.

My mom places her hand on my cheek and gives me the warmest smile. “It’s out of love.”



I use my spare key when I get to Addie’s place and let myself in. Which I know I shouldn’t do. But I’m her big brother, so technically, I’m allowed. When I step into her apartment, I see her on the couch reading one of her romance books.

She quickly closes it when I come into view. “Rowan,” she says in a small, panicky voice.

I look around her living room, noticing she’s by herself. “Sorry, did I interrupt something?”

She shakes her head. “No, not at all.” She puts on a controlled smile, and I swear her cheeks turn red.

Whatever it was that she was reading just now...I don’t want to know.

I close the door behind me and say, "Can we talk really quick? It won't take long."

She studies me and pinches her brows together, placing her book on the coffee table in front of her. "Is everything good?"

I sit down on the other end of the couch and rub my hands on my jeans. "I wanted to talk to you about Dad." I look at her.

"Oh." She turns her body toward me with a neutral expression.

"I was thinking about inviting Dad to town for a weekend during the festival. Just him and Amy." I clear my throat, trying to shake out the nerves. "But I won't do that if you're not comfortable with it. You're my baby sister, and you come first."

Addie gives me the smallest nod that you wouldn't have noticed if you weren't staring. She moves her eyes to the other side of the living room and purses her lips. "Hm."

"I really don't need to invite him. I can go to him. Forget what I asked." I start to stand up, but she puts her hand out to stop me.

"Wait," she tells me without looking at me. "Sit down." She runs her fingers through her thick, wavy hair and keeps it there. Still looking anywhere but at me. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Go ahead. Tell him to come for a weekend." She finally looks at me.

"Are you sure?"

"No. But I want you to be happy, and I don't want to get in the way of that. I know I can be stubborn sometimes, but this is something I know I can't be stubborn about. I'm not going to talk to him. I still feel the same way toward him."

"What if you run into him?"

She shrugs. "I'll handle it when that time comes."

My shoulders sag in relief. "Thank you."

"Rowan, I love you. You're my brother. I'll put my bullshit aside and deal with it."

"I really appreciate that." I stand up and hold out my arms.

She gets up and wraps her arms around me for a quick hug. When we pull back, she folds her arms across her chest and looks at me.

"How is everything going with Ellie? I've been so busy with things; I haven't really had time to catch up with her."

I beam at the sound of her name. “Everything is going great. She still hears from Charlie from time to time, but hopefully that will stop soon.”

Addie winces. “I hope so. What if he keeps bothering her?”

“Then I’ll take matters into my own hands.”

“Rowan, you don’t fight.”

“But for her, I would.”

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ELLIE



I STEP BACK after setting everything up for the festival. I've been placed in one of the most popular areas for people to come by. I was lucky. I'm also nervous. I shouldn't be questioning my profession, but I think it's because I grew up here, where everyone knows me.

I shouldn't be considering what I do professionally, but I think because this is where I grew up, and everyone knows me.

I have all the goodies perfectly displayed. Riley and Hailey helped put everything in individual boxes, along with Hailey creating a logo for me. They convinced me to use a name I'd have as a bakery versus just Ellie Thompson.

It didn't take long for me to share the name that I'd thought about for days on end. I wanted it to sound light and cute. Simple. I look at one of the small brown boxes, and on top is a round sticker that displays the name *Honey Cakes*. The name is below a design of a small whisk and spatula with two curved wreaths on the side. Below the name, it reads *homemade sweets*.

She also made the design into a banner to hang over the table and created a board that shows everything we're selling and the cost. Rowan and James set up a canopy for shade, which caused Riley to freak out due to how "ugly" it looks, and she bought powdered blue and white balloons.

It looks so official. My emotions turn into a rollercoaster of sad, nervous, and happy because I get to share my pastries. Sad, because I've left a place that didn't bring me that happiness anymore. And nervous, because well, you know.

“It looks perfect, El! I am so excited. I can’t wait,” Riley says excitedly to me. “Didn’t Hailey do such a cool job on the logo? It looks like the real deal.”

“I’m happy that I was able to provide my artistic skills for you.” Hailey walks toward us.

“Considering you’re a tattoo artist; I’d hope they would have come out cute.” Riley gives Hailey a smart-ass smile.

“Glad you put your trust in me, sis.”

“Have you seen Rowan today?” Riley looks at me.

“Just this morning. He helped get everything here but then had to go back home. His dad is coming to stay for the weekend,” I tell them nervously.

Riley’s eyes widen. “What, oh my gosh. Does Addie know?”

“She said it was okay, but that she was going to steer clear of him.” I shrug.

“That should be interesting.” Hailey laughs.

“Are you guys ready to help? This thing starts in five minutes, and there are already people walking around,” I say.

Riley and Hailey nod, and we walk behind the display table. Riley is overseeing the handling of the money, Hailey is going to help put desserts in small boxes and bags, and I’ll be writing down how many items we sell while telling the customer about what the desserts are.

“Alright, here we go!” Riley exclaims.



Two hours later, it feels like we are moving non-stop. There is a continuous line of people coming to buy what I’ve made, and I’ve had so many people ask if I have a business card or if I am opening my own bakery here in Dove Point.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so much and I had to drink so much water due to how much I’ve been answering questions and having conversations, making my mouth dry. Every time someone asks if I’ll be opening a bakery, I honestly don’t know how to answer. I’ve given many different answers that range from, *Yeah, probably*, to, *I’m not sure*, to, *No, I’m sorry*.

“Honey! Ellie!” My mom yells out, her hand popping out from the crowd in a wave.

I see her walking up to my table with Dad, hand in hand, looking so cute together. My mom is beaming from ear to ear, unable to hold her excitement for me. She’s dragging my dad, telling him to pick up the pace.

“Hi, guys!” I ran around the table to hug them in greeting.

My mom wraps her arms tightly around me, embracing me and telling me how proud she is of me. “So, how much have you sold so far?” she asks after pulling me from her.

“I have no idea. A lot. I lost count. I thought I overdid it with the amount I made of each item, but I think it was the right call. Sorry you didn’t see me for like, a week. I was holed up in Rowan’s kitchen. Did I tell you how amazing his kitchen is? He had to drag me out of there from time to time because I wouldn’t leave. He would force me to sit and then make me lunch and dinner. It did help that he had everyone come over and help with the final additions.” I take a breath.

Mom smirks. “Good. That’s what someone does when they love someone.”

“What do you have left?” Dad peers at the table behind me, his tall frame hovering over both me and my mom.

I look back to the table where Hailey and Riley are still helping customers who keep showing up.

“We’ve sold out of the cinnamon rolls, considering I only made fifty of those.” I look back at them.

“Fifty? How on earth did you do that?” Dad asks in shock.

My expression falls, and I tilt my head. “Dad, I do this professionally. Did I ever tell you about the event I worked at where I had to make six hundred crème brûlées? That is something I never, ever want to do again. You could offer me a million dollars, and I would gladly say no. I did, however, make five hundred mini tarts and mini cheesecake bites. Along with two hundred cookies and Oreo balls.”

My parents’ gape at the numbers I just threw out at them. Considering I chose pastries that were very easy to make in large batches, it didn’t feel like I was making six hundred crème brûlées. I would make a thousand cookies over that any day.

“Come on.” I gesture with a tilt of my head toward the table. “I’ll see what we have left, and you can take what you want.”

“Not for free,” Riley utters while taking a glimpse at my parents.

“Riley,” I say sternly.

“What? I know they’re your parents, and I love them like they’re my own, but this is no exception. We are here to make money, Ellie.” Riley looks at my parents. “Mr. And Mrs. Thompson, I love you, but no. Cough up the money.” She holds out her hand.

“Gladly,” Dad exclaims. “I would never take things from my daughter for free.” His lips curve into a smile.

“Great, here you go.” Riley gives them two cookies, two mini tarts, and two mini cheesecake bites. “That will be twenty-six dollars.”

My dad’s eyebrows lift quickly. Riley stares back at him. He takes out his wallet and gives her his card. She smiles genuinely and packs the goodies she picked for them.

“Enjoy!” she says cheerfully, handing them the little bag that has a Honey Cakes logo.

My mom grabs the bag and looks at the name. “Did you come up with the name yourself?”

“I did.” I feel proud of myself for something so small, like a name.

“Sweetie, if you open a bakery, you should hire Riley as a co-owner. She knows what she’s doing,” Dad says matter-of-factly.

“Oh, she has no choice.” Riley smiles at me.

I smile back in annoyance and feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. When I see that it’s my ex-boss calling, my heart picks up speed.

I look at everyone before saying, “I need to take this.” I gesture to my phone and walk away from the festival and noise.

“Hello?”

“Ellie! I’ve received the menu and have gone over it with the team.”

My body stiffens, and I wait for her to continue talking.

“This is a fantastic menu, Ellie. Everyone is so excited for it. Even Chef Wilson is impressed with what you’ve come up with. And you know how much of a hard ass he is when it comes to the menu.”

I let out a breath and laugh. “Thank you. I’m glad you approve.”

“Ellie. You will be missed in this kitchen. I want you to know that. I look forward to seeing what you do next. Please let me know if you will be opening a bakery. I would really love to visit and see what you’ve come up with. Can you promise me that?”

I bite down on a cry and smile. “I promise.”

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ROWAN



“AND THIS IS THE BEER GARDEN.” I walk through the back of the brewery, Dad and Amy following me.

When I reached out to them, asking if they’d like to visit for the weekend, they did not hesitate when they said yes. The kid in me bounced up and down in excitement, knowing that my dad was coming to see me.

Sometimes I think that it’s too good to be true. All of it. My dad, Ellie, my confidence. The two people that I felt were missing from my life have filled the gaping hole that was in my heart, and I’ve never felt so full until now. I never want this feeling to go away.

There is still a part of me that’s hesitant and wary. It may be like that for a long time until I realize that he’s staying for good. I’ve talked to him a lot since I saw him for the first time. He mentioned that he went to therapy for a long time to recover from what he had done. He had to work on forgiving himself.

Since then, I’ve looked into going to therapy myself. I know there is still so much that I need to work on, and I’m looking forward to it.

Dad and Amy said they were going to stay in the town's hotel, but I insisted they stay in the guest room. I was relentless, and when they arrived, I personally took their bags and brought them into the house without question.

I was nervous about Milo meeting them because he’s my best friend, and who he likes and doesn’t like determines everything. Yes, I let Milo take charge of this friendship. If he doesn’t like someone, it must be for a good reason. Right?

Then again, Milo likes everyone.

“This took me and James some time to put together. This wasn’t here initially when we opened the brewery. We knew it was something we wanted to do; we just had to pick the right time.”

I look at my dad, focusing all my attention on him, and watch every facial expression he shows. His dark blue-gray eyes round, and I feel like I see a spark of amazement in them. He places his hands on his hips and slowly walks in a circle to take everything in.

“You did this all yourself?” Dad asks.

“Yeah.” I place my hands on my hips, mimicking him like a child wanting to be just like his dad. “James and I built everything. With the help of Beau and August, of course.” I chuckle before saying, “Actually, if you look right over there, you’ll see our initials from when we poured the concrete.” I point toward the bottom of the entrance.

James and I put our initials on one side of the large sliding doors and Beau and August put theirs on the opposite side. When we walk through the entrance, we are always reminded that we did this together. We celebrated after the final completion with tacos and beer around the campfire.

Hailey, Riley, and Addie were with us. But it still felt empty without Ellie, despite me calling her and video chatting with everyone in the background. I still remember her reaction when she first saw the setup. She was in her chef’s coat, her cheeks red, and her hair wrapped tightly in a sleek bun.

Holy crap, you guys did all that? That’s amazing, Rowan. Ugh, I wish I could just fly out there now and be with you guys. I miss you all so much. Especially you.

I remember my heart tugging at that, and I gave her a lopsided smile.

I wish you were here too. It doesn’t feel the same without you.

“Do you guys’ host bands?” Amy asks, pulling me out of my memories.

“We do. We post on our social media pages and usually have a lineup of bands willing to come out to play. Just small bands, nothing huge like Aerosmith.” I laugh.

“Hey, Aerosmith would be lucky to play here.” Dad beams.

“You know, my son, Theodore, he’s in a band. Maybe he could play here sometime?” Amy suggests.

“That would be cool. What’s his band’s name?”

“Maybe you’ve heard of them, Yellow Sundays? He’s touring right now, actually.”

“Wait.” I hold up a hand. “Are you telling me that your son is Theo Grant? Holy shit, yeah, I’ve heard of them. I’ve listened to them since they were just a small band. Their music is great.”

“Well, I can talk to him about this.” Amy points to the small stage. “I’m sure he would be happy to do it. He may be well known, but he’s still my Theodore and never skips any family functions. Especially when his sisters nag him long enough.”

“My stepbrother is Theo Grant. This is absolutely wild. Addie is going to flip her shit when I tell her.”

I notice my dad puts on a smile, but it carries a lot of sadness behind it. He knows Addie doesn’t want to see him, and even though he’s upset about it, he understands.

“Would you guys’ mind if we check in on Ellie? I only saw her this morning before the festival started. Maybe she still has some desserts left.”

“Oh, yes, please. I would love to.” Amy looks at Dad.

“Yeah, let’s go see how she’s doing. I’m excited to see what she’s made.” Dad smiles at me and places a hand on my shoulder, guiding us back inside the brewery.

We haven’t run into Addie. Mostly on purpose because she’s doing her part in avoiding him and Amy as much as she can. I told her I was taking them to check out the brewery, so she made sure she wasn’t around that. She told me where she was setting up the table, and I’ve been kind enough to avoid that area.

But if Dad happens to run into her and sees her at the table, I’m not going to stop whatever he decides to do. Yes, I want to protect Addie. But at the same time, I’m hoping she changes her mind. I would *really* love it if she changed her mind.

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ELLIE



I AM *EXHAUSTED*. I wore my Converse, not thinking I should wear more comfortable shoes, and my babies were howling. I should have known better, but I didn't think it would be as busy as it was, and that people would flock to our table.

When I get up from the chair to stretch, I look over the throng of festival goers and really notice how crowded it is. Yet I somehow manage to spot the one person that's been on my mind all day. The bright smile that looks toward me when we lock eyes.

When I see his dad and Amy next to him, my heart feels so full and happy for Rowan. I've seen him happy, but not happy like this. He looks like he's floating on air, and nothing can bring him down. Seeing him like this reminds me just how much I am head over heels for this man.

I've always loved him, even if I didn't let myself have him. I feel like all the pieces are coming together in my life and I don't regret one moment for leaving it all behind in the city. This is where I'm meant to be. With my friends, my family, and *him*.

"There's my girl," Rowan shouts as he walks closer toward us.

He's in a simple dark blue shirt, a hat that's backward (please calm down, ovaries), and black jeans with black Vans.

I can feel my cheeks heat up, and I tuck my bottom lip in my mouth and bite down on it, trying not to giggle like a teenage girl. *His girl*. I'm his. I find myself walking toward him, not realizing that I just left the table. All I see is him and the way his blue eyes sparkle in the sunlight. The dark gray swimming along with the blue.

I tilt my head all the way up, placing a hand on his solid chest, and reach up to him for a kiss. He grabs my waist, pulling me into his body, and his soft, full lips melt away all the aches in my body from the long day I've had.

"Hey, handsome." I grin, not taking my eyes off him.

"How did everything go today? Did you sell out of everything like I said you would?"

I close my eyes and nod slowly, then open them back up to him. "I did. But I made sure to save some goodies for your dad and Amy, of course. We just sold the last of everything we had about twenty minutes ago." I let out a breath of relief. "I just want to go home and lay on the couch while you rub my feet. They are painfully sore."

He looks down at my shoes and shakes his head before saying, "I told you not to wear those. You should know better, chef."

I pull my head back, and a smile grows on my face. "Did you just call me chef?" I bite my lip and look away, blushing again.

He bends down, his lips near my ear. "Yes, chef."

"Well, I guess I found a new praise kink," I utter, trying to suppress my laugh.

His lips leave my ear and trail below on my neck while he says it over and over. I can feel my knees weaken and my body screaming for him. I raise my shoulder to cover my neck and let out a laugh.

"Rowan, not here."

"Mmm, fine." He groans into my ear. He stands up straight and nods to Riley and Hailey in greeting.

"Here, take this," Riley tells him, handing him a white bag filled with desserts. "This is for your dad and Amy. Do not steal any of this. It's only for them." She points. "Ellie, go have fun. Hailey and I can handle it from here."

"Are you sure? I don't mind staying."

"Rowan, take your woman and go," Riley commands.

"Aye, aye captain." He takes the bag, and we walk over to where his dad and Amy are.

They're standing in front of a table where there is homemade jewelry spread across the table. Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, rings. I scan over everything; all the sparkles and pretty colors draw me in like a moth to a flame.

“Look at these, aren’t they beautiful?” Amy asks, showing me a pair of amethyst stone earrings.

“Oh, wow, those are gorgeous,” I say.

“Do you really like them?” She hands them to me so I can look closer. The little purple crystals glimmer in the sunshine. If you turn them directly toward the light, you can see the different shades of purple that run through the stone.

“This is actually my birthstone color.” I hand them back to her with a smile.

“Oh? When is your birthday?”

“It’s in February.” I smile.

“Well, then.” She walks to the other side of the table where a woman is sitting, creating more jewelry while everyone looks around at the products. “Hello, I’d like to buy this, please.”

The woman looks up and smiles at her, quickly setting down what was in her hands and getting a small box ready. When I realize what’s happening, I walk to Amy.

“Are you getting those for yourself?” I ask curiously.

“I’m getting them for you, darling,” she tells me sweetly.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that.”

“I want to. As a thank you. I see the way you’ve helped Rowan. Not just with his dad but with a lot of things. He told your dad so much about you when you guys came over. He is absolutely in love with you, and it just makes me so happy that he has someone like you in his life.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat, fighting the tears that are creeping up on me. I’ve only spoken to Amy a few times since we first met, and she’s the sweetest person I’ve come to know. She welcomed both me and Rowan with open arms. No judgment, no questions.

“Thank you,” I tell her quietly.

“Of course.” She turns to me and hands me the small box. I see her arms open, and she gestures for a hug. I take in her embrace.

When we pull back, she looks at me and asks, “Are you coming to dinner with us tonight?”

“Oh, uh, maybe. What time are you guys going to eat?”

Amy looks at her watch and then goes back to me. “In about three hours. Do come. I would love for you to join us.”

“Okay, that sounds great.”



An hour later, Rowan is taking me home. Riley and Hailey told me to go and rest. I couldn't be happier to have them help me with all of this. It was such a whirlwind. All the excitement that surrounded me. I must admit, it's pushed me even more toward the idea of making Honey Cakes a real thing.

I told Rowan I wanted to walk home and change for dinner. He insisted that he give me a piggyback ride because of how much I've complained that my feet hurt. I didn't pass up the opportunity.

"Who knew how much I'd be able to see at this height? No wonder you can see the next town over, you're giant," I mock.

"I can see the craters on the moon from where I stand," he jokes back.

I slide off Rowan's back and open the door to the guest house. I kick off my shoes and let out a sigh while I walk to the kitchen, exhausted from the success I've had today. As I grab two glasses, I feel Rowan's large hands wrap around my stomach and his chin dipped into the crook of my neck.

"I love you," he whispers.

A smile tugs at my lips while the warmth of him relaxes my body, "I love you," and pulling him into my chest. His arms wrap around my waist.

He pulls back, turning me to face him, and looks into my eyes and then down to my lips. His way of telling me he wants a kiss. I gave him one. With his lips against mine, all I feel is happiness. Me in Rowan's arms. Him in mine. I place my forehead on his and breathe in his scent.

He smells like salt water and citrus.

"I'm the luckiest person to have you in my life, Ellie Thompson."

I pull my head back, and he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

"This was the craziest summer of my life, and I wouldn't take back one minute of it. And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you," he whispers. "Only if you'll have me forever."

"You *are* my forever. Maybe someday, I'll be Mrs. Williams." I smile.

He looks at me for a beat and then throws me over his shoulders. I let out a scream and start to laugh while he walks us to the bedroom. "What are you doing?" I slap his butt while I yell.

"I'm going to make love to the woman of my dreams. And then we're going to shower and continue our love making. Then we're going to get ready to go to dinner, come back home, and not get any sleep. So, I hope you're ready."

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

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ELLIE



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NEW YEAR'S EVE

"THANK YOU, everyone, for coming to celebrate with us," Rowan announces to the crowd in the cavernous room.

I look up at him and admire his beauty. He's wearing a sleek, black suit. His jacket isn't buttoned, along with the first two buttons of his crisp white shirt. His hair is pushed back, with a small strand falling above his brow.

My lips want to feel his clean-shaven jaw that the Greek Gods blessed him with. Even though I woke up with him between my legs this morning, I want to take him back home and tangle up together in bed.

"I chose to have our New Year's party here because this is the space that will soon be Honey Cakes," he says.

The room around us gasps. My mom and dad are struck with awe. Addie jumps up and down in excitement.

"Wait, this is going to be your bakery?" August asks, looking around with his hands in his pockets.

"Yes, Clark Kent," Riley drawls.

"You think that's an insult, but Superman is a very handsome man." August pushes his glasses up his nose with a finger.

"Riley will be helping when she isn't working at the yoga studio. Just with accounting. I'll need to hire someone to help with other things, but I'll worry about that when the time comes," I say.

Riley takes a large gulp of her wine. "And I'm going to rock the shit out of it."

"How exciting!" Rowan's mom exclaims.

I look over to my mom, who's brushing a tear off her cheek. "Mom, please don't cry."

She fans herself with her hand. "I'm sorry. I'm just so happy. You've been so happy since you decided to move back home. Now this."

My dad wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her in.

"Alright, we have two minutes until the clock strikes twelve," Rowan shouts to everyone.

There's music playing in the background, and everyone gets their drinks refilled, making sure they find their loved ones to share a kiss with. At least

the ones who are with someone. Which isn't many.

I look over at Riley, who's not in the greatest mood, considering she ended things with the guy she met at the bar. Turns out, he's a huge scumbag who was seeing three other women. It was entertaining to watch Riley chew him up and spit him out. She knew it was casual but didn't like being lied to when she asked about it the first time.

"Okay, here we go!" Addie shouts.

We all start to count down from ten. I'm wrapped in Rowan's arms, and we gaze at each other. He places his thumb on my cheek and gently strokes it. We look around to everyone when we get down to three.

"Happy New Year!" everyone shouts.

Rowan kisses me long and passionately. Then I turn to give everyone else a hug, wishing them a happy new year. The rest of the year was amazing. I was lucky to get a loan to buy a storefront in the heart of town.

Riley and I already started mapping out what the shop will look like. We're sticking with the vision I had. The powder blue walls, the Victorian style paintings with the golden frames. A long, beautiful off-white couch that will pair with a bistro table and chair across from it.

Rowan has gotten better with letting other people handle things with the brewery. He's learned to let go of some of that control. Only a little. Addie still nags him about it, and James rolls his eyes at every disagreement Rowan and Addie have because he's stuck in the middle.

Riley grabs my hands, and her mouth curves into a smile. "I'm so excited for you to start the next chapter of your life."

"Aw, thanks, Ry. It's a new chapter of *our* lives. The new chapter of Honey Cakes Bakery." I look around the space behind Riley.

"Yeah, and you'll be able to call yourself Mrs. Williams too." She wears a smirk.

I let out a dreamy sigh. "Someday, yes."

She laughs and peers over my shoulder, and I slowly turn around. My heart starts picking up. If I'm about to see Rowan kneeling, *I'm going to lose my mind*. My eyes land on him, and he is, in fact, down on one knee. His piercing smile shows those amazing dimples of his as he looks up at me. A small, forest-green velvet box is displayed openly in his hand.

"Ellie, the love of my life. The day you came over with a cake you made for me to cheer me up, I was whisked away." He pauses and I see his shoulders bounce while he lets out a laugh. Of course, he adds a pun while

proposing to me. “I let you go once, and now I have you back in my life. I’m never going to make that mistake again. Ellie, will you—”

“Yes,” I shout quickly.

His shoulders shake again from laughter. “You didn’t even let me ask you—”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes.” I throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. I pull back and hold his face in my hands. “Yes, yes, yes.” I kiss him between each yes, over and over.

“You didn’t even see the ring.” He kisses me back.

“I’ll take a ring pop and be happy. I don’t care.”

Everyone around us claps and hollers in excitement. I hear his dad in the background whoop, my mom crying more, but all I see is my future husband in front of me. My best friend. He places the small box in my vision, and I look at the ring.

“Holy shit,” I exclaim, taking the box. Inside sits a pear-shaped diamond that’s placed beautifully on a rose gold band with smaller diamonds spaced out around the band.

“You like it?” He looks up at me with a smile.

My mouth gapes when my eyes are on the sparkle of the diamond, and I look back at him. “Is this...*the* ring?”

“It is. With a few upgrades.” He takes it out of the box and slides it onto my finger, and it fits perfectly.

Now I’m the one that starts crying. I wipe away the tears quickly, so I don’t mess up my makeup that I spent a long time doing. And I hate putting on makeup.

“Look at you. My Fiancé,” Rowan whispers in my ear and kisses my neck. “Let’s get out of here. Celebrate the way we like.” He wiggles his brows.

Goosebumps rise along my arms. He’s still kneeling on the floor while everyone around us continues to enjoy the party. Me sitting on his bent knee.

I wink at him. “First one to the bedroom gets to call the shots.”

He smiles. “You’re on.”

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about the author

M. Colette was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. Throughout her life, she's always been surrounded by art. Whether that was her own or family members. She started writing her first book in May of 2024 after falling back into romance books in 2023. All of her books will always have a happily ever after and realistic relationships that the reader can connect to in some way. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading her own tbr pile, cuddling with her cat, Bobby, or watching her favorite reality television shows.

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