
Kiriah Kache
Chapter & Charm
Open Mic Tonight At 7!!
Safe With you



Safe With YOU

KIRIAH KACHE

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2026: Kiriah Kache All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any references or similarities to actual events, real people, living or dead, or the real locals are intended to give the novel a sense of reality. Any similarity in names, characters, places, and incidents is entirely coincidental.

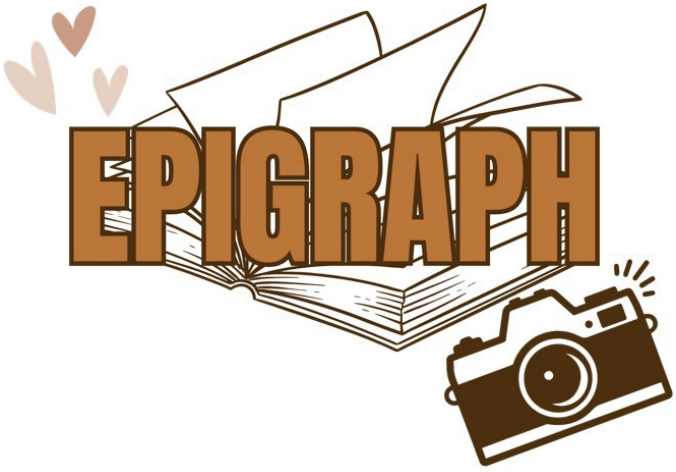
OceanofPDF.com



For the ones who spent too long trying to earn a love that should've been given freely.

May you find the courage to walk away—and the kind of love that never makes you question whether you're worth choosing.

OceanofPDF.com



Maybe the bravest thing we can do after being hurt is believe that love can still be safe.

OceanofPDF.com



Safe With You is a contemporary romance centered on healing, grief, vulnerability, and learning what it means to feel safe in love again.

This story includes themes and discussions surrounding grief and loss.

While some moments may be heavy, *Safe With You* is ultimately a story about hope, family, community, and finding a love that doesn't ask you to lose yourself in order to keep it.

Please read with care and take care of yourself along the way.

OceanofPDF.com



Apple Music

OceanofPDF.com

contents

Acknowledgements

Prologue

1. Chapter 1/Something Easy
2. Chapter 2/Living Again
3. Chapter 3/The Story Around Us
4. Chapter 4/When No One's Looking
5. Chapter 5/Worth the Yes
6. Chapter 6/We'll Be Back
7. Chapter 7/Something Already Changing
8. Chapter 8/What Comes Next
9. Chapter 9/The Way He Sees Me
10. Chapter 10/A Reason to Stay
11. Chapter 11/Reaching for Him
12. Chapter 12/Both Things Can Be True
13. Chapter 13/No Hurry to Leave
14. Chapter 14/She Chose Me
15. Chapter 15/What Happens Next
16. Chapter 16/Making Room
17. Chapter 17/Let Myself Keep It
18. Chapter 18/Something I Can Trust
19. Chapter 19/Plans Change. Mine Didn't
20. Chapter 20/Nothing to Earn
21. Chapter 21/Come Over
22. Chapter 22/For Tonight
23. Chapter 23/Let Myself Want It
24. Chapter 24/Just Living
25. Chapter 25/Room for Both
26. Chapter 26/Exactly Where I Want to Be
27. Chapter 27/Before It Disappears
28. Chapter 28/Let It Be
29. Chapter 29/The Ordinary Things

30. Chapter 30/You Coming?
Epilogue

Author’s Note
Discussion Questions
About Kiriah Kache
Also by Kiriah Kache
Feedback
Connect with Kiriah Kaché

OceanofPDF.com



First and always, thank You, God. Thank You for the gift of storytelling and for allowing me to continue doing something I love. Thank You for carrying me through every moment of doubt and giving me the strength to keep going. None of this would be possible without You.

To me, because I deserve to acknowledge myself too. I'm proud of you. Eleven books in, and you're still growing, still learning, and still showing up for the stories on your heart. Keep going.

To my alpha and beta readers, thank you for being some of the first people to step into Luna and Ellis's world. Your time, honesty, and feedback helped me strengthen this story, and I'm grateful you were part of the process.

To my ARC readers, thank you for choosing to read *Safe With You* before it officially made its way into the world. Thank you for every read, review, post, and recommendation. Your support means more than you know.

To my graphic designer, Kalee Eternity, thank you for taking my vision for *Safe With You* and helping bring it to life. There's something special about seeing an idea that once lived only in my head become something real, and I'm grateful for the creativity and care you poured into it.

And to my Sunnies, my readers, my people. Whether this is your first Kiriah Kaché book or you've been here since the beginning, thank you for

continuing to make room for my stories. Every purchase, download, review, message, and recommendation allows me to keep doing what I love.

Thank you for giving my stories somewhere to go.

With all my love,

Kiriah Kaché 💛

OceanofPDF.com



RAIN TAPPED STEADILY against my windshield, the wipers pushing water aside just long enough for downtown to come back into focus before disappearing behind another sheet of rain.

My phone sat face-up in the cupholder beside me. Dark.

I checked it anyway.

Nothing.

Across the street, a florist hurried to pull buckets of flowers inside before the weather got any worse. Two women ducked beneath the awning of the coffee shop next door, laughing as they shook rain from their umbrellas before disappearing inside. Life kept moving around me while I sat parked outside Lucas's apartment building, watching the minutes slip by one at a time.

I glanced at the clock on my dashboard.

7:53 p.m.

Twenty-seven minutes.

I wasn't counting anymore. At least that's what I'd been telling myself for the last ten.

My phone buzzed, and I reached for it before I could stop myself.

Lucas: coming now

I stared at the screen, waiting for the rest of the message.

Sorry.

Lost track of time.

I'll make it up to you.

Anything.

But the three little dots never came. Just two words.

Coming now.

I let out a slow breath and locked my phone before setting it back in the cupholder. I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror and frowned at the curls the humidity had already started shrinking toward my shoulders. Twenty-seven minutes sitting in a car, and apparently my hair was paying for it too. The passenger seat held the takeout I'd picked up on my way over.

We'd agreed on dinner at his place tonight.

There had been a time when staying in with Lucas meant ordering too much food, arguing over what to watch, and somehow ending up talking until two in the morning even though we'd both sworn we were tired.

The last time we'd stayed in, we'd ended up dancing in his kitchen while dinner burned on the stove. He'd pulled me close, kissed my forehead, and told me, "You know you're my favorite person, right?"

I'd believed him then.

There had been a lot of things to believe in once.

Lucas used to call just because something reminded him of me. He remembered which candy I picked around in the bag and which songs I played until everybody around me got tired of hearing them. When I had a bad day, he didn't always know what to say, but he stayed on the phone until I was ready to talk about it. For a long time, loving him hadn't felt difficult. It had felt like having somebody who knew me.

Maybe that was why I'd held on so long after things changed.

Nothing between us had fallen apart all at once. There hadn't been some single betrayal I could point to and say, *There. That's when we broke.* It happened in smaller ways. Calls came later, plans changed more often, and conversations left me wondering if I'd asked for too much when all I'd asked for was him.

And every time I got close to admitting something between us wasn't working anymore, Lucas would give me another glimpse of the man I'd fallen in love with. A good night. An unexpected call. His hand finding mine while we walked somewhere. Just enough to make me think maybe we were finding our way back.

So, I stayed. I kept chasing nights like the one in his kitchen, hoping they'd become our normal again instead of our exception.

Tonight, I'd been waiting twenty-seven minutes for dinner.

And he wasn't the one sitting in a parking lot waiting.

The apartment doors finally opened.

Lucas jogged through the rain with the hood of his navy sweatshirt pulled over his head, the navy fabric pulling across his broad shoulders as he hunched against the weather. He yanked the passenger door open, bringing a rush of cool air and rain inside before sliding into the seat beside me.

"Damn," he said, brushing water from his sleeves. "It's really coming down."

The door shut, and just like that, it was quiet again.

The rain drummed against the roof while the heater hummed softly beneath the dashboard. His cologne filled the car almost immediately—warm, familiar, the same one he'd worn for years. I hated how comforting it still was.

He reached up to push his hood back, revealing freshly brushed waves and that crooked smile that had gotten him out of more arguments than it ever should've. The small tattoo beneath his eye moved with the smile, the little patch of hair at his chin freshly trimmed.

"What?" he asked.

I looked at him for a second. "You really don't know?"

His smile faded. "Luna."

"You had me sitting out here almost thirty minutes."

He glanced toward the windshield like the rain might somehow defend him. "It wasn't that long."

I didn't answer right away. Instead, I looked at the clock.

7:54.

Then back at him. "The clock's right there."

He followed my eyes before letting out a quiet breath. "Aight...maybe twenty."

“It was twenty-eight.”

His eyebrows lifted, and he stared at me for a second before exhaling through his nose. “You counted?”

“That’s the part you took from what I said?”

“I’m just saying.” He relaxed back into the seat. “You act like I left you stranded.”

Something in me tightened because that was always how this went. I’d express hurt, and somehow the conversation would shift into me overreacting instead of him understanding why I was upset in the first place.

“You knew I was outside.”

“And I came downstairs.”

Eventually.

The word sat heavy on my tongue, but I swallowed it.

Lucas reached over and rested his hand on my knee like he always did whenever he wanted the conversation to soften. Normally, it worked. There had been plenty of times when one touch from him was enough to make me decide whatever bothered me wasn’t worth ruining the rest of the night over.

Tonight, I looked down at his hand for a long moment before gently lifting it and placing it back in his lap.

He blinked. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“This bullshit you doing right now.”

“You ever notice how every time I’m upset about something, suddenly I’m the problem for reacting to it?”

His jaw tightened slightly. “That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant. I just...” I rubbed my thumb against the steering wheel. “I don’t understand how you knew I was sitting out here, and you still weren’t in a hurry.”

“I was coming.”

“I know.”

“I texted you.”

“You did.”

“So what’s the issue?”

I turned to look at him again. “The issue is that you don’t think there is one.”

For a moment, he didn’t say anything.

“Luna,” he sighed. “You know how things been lately.”

There it was.

Things.

That was always the explanation. Work. Stress. Pressure. Bad timing. His family. His schedule.

And for a long time, I’d understood. That was another reason I stayed. I knew what his job demanded from him, when things with his family got complicated, when money was tight, and when he was simply exhausted because life seemed determined to pile one thing on top of another.

I’d never wanted to be another *thing* Lucas had to manage, so I adjusted. Dinner became *whenever you’re free*. Phone calls became *whenever you get a chance*. Disappointment became *it’s okay*. Somewhere along the way, though, understanding him had started requiring me to ignore myself.

There was always some invisible thing standing between us and the relationship I kept convincing myself we were eventually going to have.

Eventually.

I had built an entire relationship around waiting for someday. Someday he’d be more available, communicate better, and stop making me feel like I was asking for too much simply because I wanted consistency. I’d spent years loving him through phases he never seemed to grow out of.

“You know what?” I muttered quietly. “Never mind.”

“Nah,” he said immediately. “Don’t do that either.”

“Do what?”

“Shut down instead of saying what you actually feel.”

I blinked at him in disbelief because the irony of that almost made me laugh.

“I’ve never expected you to be perfect, Lucas.”

“I know.”

“So why does it feel like asking you to show up on time is asking for too much?”

He looked at me, confusion written all over his face. “I’ve never said that.”

“No.” I swallowed. “You’ve just made me feel like it.”

For a second, neither of us spoke. Rain tapped steadily against the roof while headlights slid across the windshield in soft streaks.

Then I asked the question that had been sitting in my chest for months.

“Do you ever think maybe you only love me in moments?”

Lucas went still. I could tell by the look on his face that he wasn’t expecting that. Honestly, neither was I, but the words had come out raw, quiet, and far too honest to take back.

“Where is this coming from?” he asked after a long pause.

I looked away from him. “That right there.”

“What?”

“You always answer my questions with another question.”

“Because I’m trying to understand what you mean.”

“No.” I shook my head softly. “You’re trying to avoid answering.”

“That’s not fair.”

I finally looked back at him. “You know what’s not fair? Feeling like I have to squeeze reassurance out of somebody who says they love me.”

Lucas leaned back against the seat quietly. For once, he didn’t interrupt me, so I kept going.

“I just...” I swallowed hard. “I don’t know how to keep doing this version of us.”

“What version?”

“The one where I only feel important when it’s convenient.”

His gaze drifted toward the rain sliding down the windshield. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to hear me.”

“I am hearing you.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You’re listening so you can respond. That’s different.”

His jaw tightened. “So now I don’t know how to listen either?”

I closed my eyes for a second.

This was what I meant. Every conversation somehow became about proving I wasn’t asking for too much instead of him wondering why I felt unseen in the first place.

“I’m not trying to argue with you.”

“It kinda feels like you are.”

“I’m trying to tell you how I feel.”

“And I’m telling you I think you’re making something out of nothing.”

The words settled between us, not because they were new, but because they weren’t. I’d heard different versions of them for years.

You’re overthinking.

It ain’t that deep.

Why you always assume the worst?

His face shifted then, not with anger or irritation, but something that looked a lot like guilt. The problem was that guilt had never changed anything before.

“I love you,” he said finally.

And the crazy thing was, I believed him.

That was the part that broke me.

Lucas loved me. I knew he did. I’d known what it felt like when his love was something I could settle into without questioning it. Even now, pieces of that man still showed up in the random affection, the late-night phone calls, the soft moments that felt so good they carried me through weeks of uncertainty afterward.

Maybe that was why I’d spent so long convincing myself those moments were enough.

But moments weren’t the same thing as stability, and love without consistency, intention, or effort had started to feel an awful lot like being unloved.

I stared at him quietly before asking the question I probably should’ve asked years ago.

“Then why do I always feel alone in this?”

Lucas looked down at his hands, and the silence that followed stretched longer than it should have. Long enough to hurt. Long enough to remind me that silence was an answer too.

Outside, a couple hurried down the sidewalk beneath a shared umbrella. The woman laughed about something while the man pulled her closer into his side like it was instinct.

I wondered what it felt like to be loved without constantly questioning it.

“You know I’m trying,” Lucas said quietly.

I nodded once. “I know you are.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

The exhaustion that hit me then felt bone-deep because how could I explain something I’d spent years trying to justify to myself? How could I explain that loving somebody who kept almost choosing you slowly started to feel like grief?

I looked down at my hands in my lap.

“I’ve never questioned whether you love me.”

His forehead creased. “Then what is this?”

I let out a slow breath. “I question whether I’m supposed to feel this lonely while being loved.”

The heater hummed softly beneath the dashboard while the rain danced against the roof of the car.

“I spend so much time convincing myself not to need anything,” I admitted. “I tell myself you’re busy. I tell myself you’ll call later. I tell myself tomorrow will be different.”

I laughed quietly, though nothing about it felt funny.

“I celebrate the smallest things because I’ve gotten used to expecting so little.”

Lucas stared ahead through the windshield, his jaw tight. “I didn’t know you felt like that.”

“I know.”

“I would’ve wanted you to tell me.”

“I’ve been trying.”

His eyes fell to his hands. “I guess...” He paused. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That I’m doing the best I can.”

“I do know.” I nodded. “I think you are.”

He looked up. “Then what are we even talking about?”

I looked at him for a long moment before answering.

“I think the best you have to give...isn’t what I need anymore.”

The words hurt differently once they were out, maybe because there was nothing to argue with. Lucas didn’t have to be a bad man for this to be wrong for me. He didn’t have to stop loving me. There didn’t have to be another woman, some unforgivable betrayal, or one terrible thing I could point to when somebody asked what happened.

Maybe two people could love each other and still reach a point where love wasn’t doing enough of the work.

For years, I’d been waiting for something dramatic enough to give me permission to leave. Sitting there beside him, I wondered if feeling this lonely was permission enough.

Lucas was quiet for a moment before shaking his head. “I feel like no matter what I do, it’s never enough.”

“It’s not that you’re not enough.” My voice barely rose above the rain coming down. “It’s that I’ve spent so much time making room for you...” I looked down at my hands. “...I don’t recognize the space I’ve left for myself.”

Neither of us spoke. Outside, headlights swept across the windshield before disappearing down the street. Life kept moving while ours felt suspended inside the car.

Finally, he broke the silence.

“So...what are you saying?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

And that was the truth. I didn’t know if this was the end or if we could fix something that had slowly unraveled over years. I only knew I couldn’t keep pretending I wasn’t breaking.

“I don’t know when I stopped feeling secure with us.” I blinked against the tears gathering in my eyes. “I just know I did.”

“You want to break up?” he asked quietly.

My chest ached immediately because despite everything, the thought still hurt.

I loved Lucas.

God, I loved him.

But somewhere along the way, loving him had started costing me pieces of myself I wasn’t sure how to get back.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

It wasn’t the answer he wanted, and it wasn’t the answer I wanted either. Five years should’ve made the decision easier somehow. Instead, five years meant there were birthdays and inside jokes and ordinary Tuesdays tangled up in everything that hurt. Leaving him wouldn’t only mean walking away from who we were now.

It meant letting go of who we’d been too.

Lucas rubbed both hands over his face before sighing deeply.

I’d spent so much time making excuses for him. Protecting his intentions. Minimizing my feelings. Shrinking my needs. And in the end, none of it had saved us from this moment.

“I don’t think you realize how hard it is loving somebody who keeps making you feel unsure.”

His expression softened then, and for a second I hated it because softness without change had become our language too.

Neither of us spoke after that. The rain continued falling steadily around us while *Heather Headley's In My Mind* played quietly through the speakers, low enough to almost disappear beneath the storm.

Lucas reached for my hand eventually.

I let him hold it this time because even now, part of me still wanted to believe love could survive on potential alone.

After a while, he sighed. "I'll call you tomorrow."

He leaned over and kissed my forehead.

Tomorrow.

Another word that suddenly felt exhausting.

It was the kind of kiss that would've fixed everything a year ago.

When he pulled away, he rested his forehead against mine for just a second.

"I love you, Lu."

"I know."

He gave me the saddest smile I'd ever seen before climbing out into the rain.

I watched him disappear inside the apartment building without looking back.

And just like that, I was alone again.

The passenger seat still smelled like him. My hand still felt warm where he'd held it, and my chest still ached with the kind of sadness that didn't arrive loudly.

There was no screaming. No slammed doors. No dramatic ending.

Just quiet disappointment settling into the spaces where hope used to live.

I finally pulled away from the curb a little after midnight, carrying the weight of a goodbye neither of us had actually said.

The streets were nearly empty now, the city washed clean beneath the storm. Water streaked across the windows while soft music continued playing low through the speakers, but even that couldn't drown out the thoughts circling my head.

I thought about all the times I'd defended Lucas to people who loved me.

He's trying.

He's just busy.

That's just how he is.

Like saying the words enough times would eventually make them hurt less.

A tear slid down my cheek before I could stop it. I wiped it away quickly, even though nobody was there to witness it.

By the time I stopped at a red light a few blocks from my apartment, my chest felt unbearably heavy.

And somewhere between the rain, the silence, and the exhaustion sitting deep in my bones, I finally realized the hardest part of loving Lucas wasn’t that he didn’t care about me.

It was that I kept falling in love with the version of us I was still waiting to get back.

OceanofPDF.com



5 YEARS *LATER*

By thirty-one, I had learned there were worse things than being alone.

Being unsure was one of them.

I didn't hate love. That was the part people always got wrong. I loved love. I loved the idea of slow Sunday mornings, shared grocery lists, inside jokes, forehead kisses, and somebody knowing the smallest details about you without having to be reminded. I loved romance in theory. In songs. In books. In the old couples I saw walking hand in hand outside the farmer's market every Saturday morning like time had been kind to them.

I just didn't trust it with me anymore, not after Lucas. Whatever had been left of us after that night didn't last much longer, and when it finally ended, I swore off love. In the words of Meredith Grey, I'm closed for business. Vagina city is a ghost town. The orgasm train doesn't roll through here anymore.

"Luna, are you listening to me?"

I blinked, looking up from the stack of flyers in front of me. Naomi stood across from the front counter with one hand on her hip and the other wrapped around a half-empty iced coffee, her expression somewhere between amused and irritated.

I had known Naomi since college, which meant she knew my face too well. Every version of it. The one I put on for work. The one I wore when I

was annoyed. The one I used when I was pretending not to overthink something I had absolutely been overthinking for the last fifteen minutes.

“I’m listening,” I said.

“No, you’re not.”

“I heard… most of it.”

She lifted a brow. “What did I say?”

I glanced down at the flyers and picked one up like it could save me. “You said something about the event.”

“Luna.”

“What?”

“You are the owner.”

I sighed and dropped the flyer back onto the counter. “Okay, so I heard the important part.”

Naomi laughed, her long braids shifting over her shoulders as she shook her head and stepped closer. “I said the photographer for tomorrow’s poetry night had to cancel.”

My stomach dipped a little. “Cancel as in reschedule, or cancel as in we’re about to be taking pictures on somebody’s iPhone with portrait mode and prayer?”

“Both, depending on how fast you can find somebody.”

“Naomi.”

“I know.” She held up her free hand. “I’m sorry. She said her daughter’s sick, and I couldn’t even be mad because, you know, kids.”

I leaned back against the counter and looked around Chapter & Charm, the bookstore I'd spent the last three years building into something more than a place people came to buy books. It sat tucked between a boutique and a small floral shop downtown in Easton Grove, Mississippi, with exposed brick walls, warm lighting, overflowing shelves, and a coffee bar in the back that made the entire place smell like espresso and vanilla.

Owning a bookstore sounded dreamy when people said it out loud. What they didn’t see was everything that came with it. I wore more hats than I could count. On any given day, I was the owner, event planner, marketer, customer service representative, book buyer, therapist, emergency problem solver, and the person who knew exactly how many folding chairs could fit between the romance section and the front window without violating common sense.

And somehow... I loved every second of it.

Thankfully, I wasn't doing it alone. As my assistant manager, Naomi kept the bookstore running whenever I felt like I was being pulled in ten different directions at once.

Tomorrow night, we were hosting our first open mic poetry event. Weeks of planning had led to this one evening, and I wanted everything, from the participants to the pastries, to make people feel like they'd found a place worth coming back to. Tickets had sold out in four days. The local paper was supposed to stop by. Three vendors were bringing tables. A spoken word artist from Atlanta was closing out the night.

And now we had no photographer.

Perfect.

One thing at a time.

I reached for my coffee and took a slow sip even though it had gone watery. "Okay. Let me think."

Naomi leaned against the counter. "I may have a suggestion."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why did you say that like I'm not going to like it?"

"Because you're you."

"That explained nothing."

"It explained plenty."

I gave her a look.

She smiled too sweetly, the expression looking entirely too innocent against her deep brown skin. "There's a photographer I know. Well, I don't know him know him, but I know of him. He did my cousin's engagement shoot last fall, and the pictures were beautiful. Soft, clean, romantic without being cheesy."

"Okay…"

"And he's local."

"Okay…"

"And available."

My eyes narrowed further. "Why do I feel like there's a catch?"

"No catch."

"Naomi."

She took a long sip of her coffee, clearly stalling.

I groaned. "Just say it."

"He's fine."

I stared at her.

She stared back.

“That is not relevant to the event,” I said.

“It could be relevant to your life.”

“I’m thirty-one, Naomi. I own a bookstore. I have friends. My life is fine.”

“Your life is organized. That is not the same thing.”

I looked down at the flyers, suddenly more interested in their perfectly straight edges than I was a second ago.

“I’m not doing this with you today.”

“You never want to do this with me any day.”

“Because you keep trying to turn every mildly attractive man within a fifty-mile radius into my future husband.”

“Not every mildly attractive man.” She shrugged. “Some of them are not husband material.”

“Goodbye, Naomi.”

“I’m just saying, you could at least look at his work.”

“For the event?”

“For the event,” she agreed, entirely too fast.

I didn’t trust her, but I also didn’t have time to be stubborn. I held out my hand. “Send me his info.”

Naomi’s smile widened.

“And don’t make it weird,” I added.

“I would never.”

“You absolutely would.”

She was already typing on her phone. A second later, mine buzzed on the counter.

I glanced down.

Ellis Monroe Photography

Beneath the name was a link to his website and a phone number.

I didn’t click it right away.

I don’t know why.

Maybe because Naomi was watching me too closely. Maybe because part of me already knew she had an ulterior motive.

Naomi tapped the counter with one acrylic nail. “Well?”

“I’m working.”

“You’re avoiding.”

“I’m multitasking.”

“You’re single-tasking, and the single task is avoidance.”

I looked up at her. “Do you want this event to have a photographer or not?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me handle it.”

She lifted both hands in surrender, but the knowing smile stayed on her face. “Fine. Handle it.”

When she walked off toward the back of the store, I finally clicked the link.

The site loaded quickly, opening to a black-and-white photo of an older couple dancing in the middle of what looked like their kitchen. The woman was laughing with her head tilted back while the man held her like he’d been holding her for decades and still hadn’t gotten tired of it.

The picture made me pause, but I reminded myself I wasn’t here to admire his work. I needed to know if he could handle a bookstore full of eighty people, questionable lighting, and a spoken word artist who liked to wander into the crowd halfway through her set.

I scrolled past engagement sessions and family portraits until I found his event galleries. A community festival. An art showcase. A private dinner with enough people packed into one room to make tomorrow night look manageable. The photos were clean, well-lit, and, most importantly, didn’t look like everyone had stopped what they were doing the second he lifted his camera.

Okay.

Naomi might actually know what she was talking about.

I clicked over to the About page, mostly looking for how long he’d been doing this professionally.

Then I saw his headshot.

And, unfortunately, Naomi was also right about the other thing.

Ellis Monroe was fine.

His photo sat beside a short bio I suddenly wasn’t paying nearly enough attention to. Deep brown skin, warm eyes, a clean low cut, and a beard trimmed neatly along his jaw. There was an easy confidence in his expression, like he knew exactly who he was and didn’t need to convince anybody else.

I stared for half a second too long before catching myself.

Nope.

Absolutely not.

We needed a photographer. Whether or not the photographer happened to be fine had absolutely nothing to do with me.

I clicked over to the contact page before Naomi could come back and catch me staring at his picture. His email address and booking information were easy to find, and before I could second-guess myself, I started typing.

Hi Ellis,

My name is Luna Bennett, and I'm the owner of Chapter & Charm Bookstore downtown. Naomi Carter recommended your photography services for an event we're hosting tomorrow evening.

We're having an open mic poetry night from 7–10 PM on Tuesday and are looking for event coverage throughout the evening. If you're available, I'd love to discuss pricing and details further.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Luna Bennett

I reread the email twice before hitting send.

"There," I muttered, locking my phone. "That's professional."

Naomi looked up from behind the espresso machine immediately. "You contacted him?"

"Yes."

"Lemme see."

"No."

"Luna."

"You are way too invested in this."

She grinned without shame. "Because your dating life has been giving absolutely nothing for years."

"My dating life is not your business."

"It became my business when you decided emotional isolation was a personality trait."

I stared at her flatly. "You rehearse these speeches at home?"

"Sometimes."

I laughed despite myself. Naomi always had a way of pulling reactions out of me even when I wanted to stay in my own head.

The bookstore slowly filled as the afternoon went on.

A mother and daughter wandered through the children's section near the back. Two college students sat near the café sharing a muffin while

pretending to study. Somebody in fiction dropped an entire stack of paperbacks loud enough to make half the store look up at once.

That was probably why I loved Chapter & Charm as much as I did.

There was safety in knowing what to expect.

I spent so many years attached to unpredictability that routine eventually started feeling like peace.

"Your phone," Naomi sang from across the room.

I looked down automatically.

A new email notification sat at the top of the screen.

From: Ellis Monroe.

My stomach did something small and annoying.

"You are not about to act nervous over a photographer," I whispered to myself.

"What was that?" Naomi called.

"Nothing."

"Mhm."

I opened the email.

HI LUNA,

THANKS FOR REACHING OUT. I'M AVAILABLE TOMORROW EVENING AND WOULD LOVE TO HELP IF YOU STILL NEED COVERAGE FOR THE EVENT.

I'VE PHOTOGRAPHED A FEW SPOKEN WORD AND COMMUNITY EVENTS BEFORE, SO THE SETTING SOUNDS RIGHT UP MY ALLEY. IF YOU WANT, SEND OVER A FEW DETAILS REGARDING TIMING, ATTENDANCE, AND OVERALL VIBE, AND I CAN SEND PRICING INFORMATION AFTERWARD.

LOOKING FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU.

BEST,

ELLIS MONROE

I read the email twice. There was something unexpectedly calming about his straightforwardness.

"You smiling?" Naomi asked immediately.

I looked up sharply. "Why are you watching me?"

"Because I know your face."

"You don't know anything."

"You like him already."

I almost choked on air. "I have literally never spoken to this man."

"That has never stopped women before."

I rolled my eyes and walked toward the back office before she could continue embarrassing me in front of customers.

The tiny office behind the storage room had become my escape space over the years. It wasn't much—just a cramped desk buried beneath inventory sheets, event calendars, sticky notes, and a coffee mug I'd forgotten to take home days ago—but it was the only place in the bookstore where I could hear myself think. The muffled chatter from the café blended with the rustle of turning pages on the sales floor, familiar enough to settle my nerves.

I sat down in the chair and, against my better judgment, clicked back onto Ellis's website.

More specifically, the About page.

Naomi would've been insufferable if she knew.

According to the short bio beneath his photo, Ellis had been working professionally for almost seven years. He specialized in portraits, lifestyle photography, and community events. There was a small paragraph about storytelling through images that should've sounded cheesy but somehow didn't.

Maybe because his work backed it up.

Everything about his photography felt raw. People looked comfortable in his pictures. Seen. Like he knew how to capture moments before they disappeared. I paused on one photo longer than I meant to.

A woman sitting on a kitchen counter laughing while a man stood between her knees holding her face like she'd said something worth memorizing.

Soft. That was the word that kept coming to mind. Easy. The kind of softness that wasn't rooted in weakness, but in confidence. The kind that felt intentional.

My chest tightened unexpectedly.

I exited the page almost immediately.

Absolutely not.

I was not about to start projecting emotional depth onto a man because he knew how to hold a camera correctly.

And yet, here I was, psychoanalyzing email tone in the back office of a bookstore because Naomi sent me the website of a ridiculously attractive photographer.

Embarrassing.

My phone buzzed again.

Another email.

Hi again,

Also, no pressure at all, but if it's easier, feel free to call instead of emailing back and forth. Either works for me.

Ellis

I stared at the screen, then looked down at his number sitting neatly beneath the message, my pulse giving one unexpected skip.

I grabbed my phone before I could overthink it again and pressed call.

The phone rang twice before he answered.

"Ellis Monroe."

His voice was deeper than I expected.

"Hi, this is Luna Bennett from Chapter & Charm. I just got your email."

"Hey, Luna."

I sat up a little straighter in my chair. "I hope calling's okay."

"Yeah, absolutely."

The steady tapping of keys faded in the background before everything went quiet, like he'd turned his full attention to the conversation.

"So," I said, "I wanted to go over tomorrow's details really quick if you still have a minute."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"The event officially starts at seven, but vendors will probably begin arriving around five-thirty. We're expecting somewhere between eighty and a hundred people."

"Okay." A brief pause. "And you're mainly wanting candid coverage?"

"Mostly, yeah. Crowd interaction, performances, bookstore atmosphere. Stuff like that."

"Got you."

I scribbled something down on the notepad in front of me even though I already knew the information.

"There'll also be a featured spoken word artist closing out the night around nine."

"Perfect." I heard him typing again. "How's the lighting in the space?"

"Depends where you are." I glanced toward the bookstore floor through the office window. "The front is fine, but the café area in the back gets a little dim once it gets late."

"Okay. I'll probably bring additional lighting just in case."

“Thank you,” I said honestly. “This whole thing came together a little faster than expected.”

“That’s usually how events go.”

I laughed softly before I could stop myself. “That obvious?”

“A little.”

There was a brief pause after that.

“Naomi said you’ve done community events before.”

“Yeah. A few poetry nights, art showcases, stuff like that.”

“Well hopefully this one runs smoothly.”

“I’m sure it will.”

I checked the clock on the wall and blinked slightly when I realized almost fifteen minutes had passed already.

That definitely hadn’t been intentional.

“Well,” I said, sitting back in the chair, “I think that’s everything on my end.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll email over the finalized schedule tonight.”

“Sounds good.”

A small pause followed.

Then:

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Tomorrow.”

After we hung up, I stared at my phone for a second before setting it down on the desk.

The conversation hadn’t been flirty. But it had been easy. And somehow, after everything with Lucas, that felt extraordinary enough.

Right on cue, Naomi appeared in the doorway.

“Well?”

I looked up flatly. “Please find something else to do.”

“That good, huh?”

I rolled my eyes, but a small smile still pulled at my mouth anyway.

OceanofPDF.com



“DAD.”

I opened one eye.

“Dad.”

The small hand pressing against my cheek grew more aggressive.

“Daaaaad.”

I exhaled slowly before opening both eyes and finding my daughter standing beside the bed with her hands on her hips and an expression that looked entirely too irritated for seven in the morning.

“Mila,” I said, my voice rough with sleep. “Why are you standing over me like a debt collector waiting to collect a debt?”

“Because you said we could make pancakes.”

I glanced toward the alarm clock.

7:12 a.m.

“You woke me up eighteen minutes early for pancakes?”

“You said we could make pancakes on a school day if I was good yesterday, and I was.”

“I did.”

“Then why are you still in bed?”

I stared at her for a moment before rubbing a hand over my face.

There were some arguments you could win as a parent.

This wasn’t one of them.

“Give me five minutes.”

“You said that yesterday, and we were late for school.”

I sat up. “And somehow you survived.”

Mila grinned before taking off down the hallway.

The sound of her feet hitting the hardwood floor echoed through the house.

For a second, I remained where I was.

The house was quiet except for the distant hum of the refrigerator and Mila talking to herself from the living room. Morning sunlight filtered through the curtains, casting soft gold across the walls.

Three years ago, I wasn’t sure I’d ever appreciate mornings again.

Three years ago, silence had felt different.

Heavier.

Now it simply felt like home.

I pushed myself out of bed and caught my reflection in the bedroom mirror, smoothing a hand over my low fade before heading toward the kitchen. Mila was already sitting at the island by the time I walked in. She had a coloring book spread open in front of her and three markers scattered around her like she’d been working for hours instead of a few minutes.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning.”

“You couldn’t have started with that?”

“I did.”

“No, you started with harassment.”

She laughed.

I grabbed the pancake mix from the pantry while she continued coloring.

The routine had become familiar over the years.

Breakfast.

School.

Work.

Homework.

Dinner.

Bed.

There was comfort in knowing exactly what most days would look like.

Life hadn’t always given me that luxury.

I was halfway through pouring batter onto the griddle when Mila spoke again.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have pictures of Mommy when she was little?”

A question about her mom wasn’t unusual. It still caught me off guard every time.

I flipped the pancake before answering.

“A few.”

“Can I see them later?”

“Sure.”

“What was she like when she was six?”

A smile tugged at my mouth despite myself.

“Bossy. Like you.”

Mila’s mouth fell open.

“Daddy!”

“What?”

“I’m not bossy.”

“Sure.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay, Mila.”

“I’m serious.”

I laughed.

Questions about her mother came more often these days.

Mila was old enough now to realize there were pieces of the story she didn’t know. Old enough to understand that most of her friends had memories she didn’t. Some days the questions hurt, but most days they didn’t; most days, I welcomed them.

The last thing I wanted was for Elena to become a person we stopped talking about because it was easier than missing her.

“Mommy really was bossy?” Mila asked.

“Absolutely.”

“More bossy than Auntie Tasha?”

I nearly choked.

“No.”

“Then she wasn’t that bossy.”

I shook my head and slid a pancake onto her plate.

“Eat your breakfast.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer you’re getting.”

She accepted defeat long enough to drown her pancakes in syrup.

Three years ago, I wasn’t sure what our mornings would look like.

Three years ago, every plan I’d made for my future disappeared in the span of a single phone call. A car accident had taken Elena, and everything after that became about figuring out how to keep going.

There had been a time when grief followed me everywhere. It sat beside me at dinner, climbed into bed with me at night, rode shotgun during school drop-offs and grocery store runs and doctor appointments.

Life kept moving anyway.

Not because I wanted it to or because I was ready, but because Mila still needed breakfast. She still needed rides to school. She still needed somebody to help her find her shoes and sign permission slips and explain why the moon sometimes looked bigger than usual.

The world hadn’t stopped when Elena died.

Neither had parenthood.

And somewhere along the way, surviving slowly turned into living again.

Twenty minutes later, we were headed across town.

Mila sang along to a song on the radio while I drove.

Or at least I thought she was singing.

It sounded more like yelling with rhythm.

When we pulled into my sister’s driveway, she was already opening the front door.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

Mila was out of the car before I had fully shifted into park.

“Slow down,” I called.

She ignored me completely.

Tasha laughed from the porch, pushing a few of her long locs away from her face.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

“You’re early.”

“Apparently pancakes create energy.”

“That’s your fault.”

“Probably.”

She stepped aside so Mila could run into the house.

The sound of my nephew immediately followed.

Chaos. Complete chaos.

Which meant she’d have a great day.

Tasha folded her arms across her chest, watching me with the same warm brown eyes people always said we shared.

“You working late?”

“Bookstore event tonight.”

“Another wedding?”

“No.”

“Family session?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Open mic night.”

She stared.

“Open mic?”

“That’s what I said.”

She laughed.

“People hire photographers for that?”

“I think people hire photographers for everything now.”

“Fair.”

I checked the time on my phone.

“I should get going.”

“Tell Mila bye before you leave.”

“Of course.”

A few minutes later, after promising my daughter I’d be back before bedtime and agreeing to bring her favorite snacks on the way home, I headed downtown.

The studio had become one of my favorite places over the years, not because it was fancy—it wasn’t, but because, despite being smaller than what some photographers worked with, it was mine.

Every framed photograph hanging on those walls represented something I had built myself.

Photography had been one of the few things that still made sense because people trusted me with their important moments, and all I had to do was show up and capture them.

The work gave me somewhere to put my focus when everything else felt impossible.

Now, seven years into doing it professionally, I couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside, sunlight streaming through the front windows and illuminating the row of framed prints that lined one wall—families, graduates, couples, community events—pieces of people’s lives frozen in time.

I set my camera bag down and headed for my desk.

Most of the morning disappeared into editing.

A maternity session from earlier in the week.

A graduation shoot from Thursday.

An engagement gallery that needed final adjustments before delivery.

The work could be repetitive, but I didn’t mind; editing gave me the space to think when I needed to and the distraction not to when I didn’t.

Around noon, I took a break and walked next door for coffee. The barista already knew my order, which was both convenient and mildly concerning.

“Large cold brew?”

“You know me too well.”

She laughed, and a few minutes later I was headed back to the studio with my drink in hand.

A notification sat in my inbox when I opened my laptop again.

A request for a family session.

The Martins.

I’d photographed them three years in a row. Every fall, they booked the same weekend, and every year the kids seemed taller than the last time I’d seen them.

I replied, confirmed the date, and added it to my calendar before moving on with the rest of my afternoon.

By the time evening arrived, the event wasn't taking up much space in my mind.

I loaded my equipment into the back of my SUV and checked the time.

Six thirty-two.

Perfect.

Traffic was light heading downtown. The bookstore sat halfway down the block between a boutique and a floral shop, warm light spilling through the front windows despite the late hour. The place looked welcoming before I even stepped inside.

I grabbed my camera bags and headed toward the entrance. The smell hit me immediately—coffee, books, and vanilla. The combination felt oddly familiar, comforting in a way I couldn't quite explain. A small bell chimed overhead as I opened the door.

The bookstore buzzed with activity as people moved between shelves carrying boxes and folding chairs. Near the front, a vendor arranged candles on a display table while someone toward the back tested a microphone. The entire space felt lived in and loved, the kind of place people returned to because it made them feel something.

I slowed my pace and took it all in. Observing had become second nature over the years. Photographers noticed details—the young couple standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the romance section, the older woman reading the back of a book while holding a latte, the handwritten recommendation card tucked beneath a display. They were little moments, tiny stories unfolding all at once.

Then my attention landed on the woman moving through the center of it all. A few loose curls framed her face, escaping whatever style she'd started the morning with. A pen rested behind one ear, and she moved with the quiet confidence of someone who knew exactly what needed to happen next. She carried a clipboard in one hand and a phone in the other, answering questions almost as quickly as they were thrown her way. Someone stopped her. Another person called her name from across the room. A vendor flagged her down before she'd taken three steps. She adjusted something on a table, checked a list on her clipboard, and kept moving.

As if sensing my gaze, she looked up. Our eyes met across the room, and a flicker of recognition crossed her face before she made her way toward me.

“Ellis?”

Her voice sounded exactly like it had over the phone.

I shifted my camera bag higher on my shoulder.

“That’s me.”

She smiled.

Not the polite customer-service smile people gave out automatically.

A real one.

The kind that reached her eyes.

“I’m Luna. Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

For a second, I almost laughed.

After spending the last ten minutes watching her coordinate half the room, thanking me felt backwards.

“Happy to help.”

Something in her expression softened.

“Trust me,” she said. “You have no idea how much I appreciate that.”

I found myself watching her as she headed toward the next problem waiting for her attention.

OceanofPDF.com



I HATED TO ADMIT IT, but Naomi had been right.

That man was fine.

He was taller than I'd expected from his picture, broad through the shoulders in a way the headshot hadn't shown.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to think about that.

"Luna, where do you want the extra chairs?"

"Against the back wall for now."

"The café's almost out of oat milk."

"I'll grab another carton in a second."

"Do we have another extension cord?"

"Bottom drawer behind the register."

The questions came one after another, but somewhere along the way I'd learned how to answer one while already thinking about the next.

One thing at a time.

I stepped around two volunteers arranging the front display, resisting the urge to fix the stack of paperbacks leaning slightly to the left. The problem was convincing the part of my brain currently cataloging everything that could possibly go wrong in the next hour.

"Those look good," I told them as I passed.

One of the volunteers laughed. "You sure? You've looked over here like three times."

“Have I?”

“At least.”

“Then I’m going to stop looking.”

“I give you five minutes.”

I laughed. “Don’t say that.”

She laughed again before turning back to the rest of the display.

I glanced around the bookstore, mentally running through the list I’d been repeating to myself since I unlocked the doors that morning. Programs were stacked on the welcome table. Mrs. Jenkins had already dropped off the peach cobbler, Naomi’s brownies had somehow survived, and Denise was near the stage flipping through her notebook while a volunteer handed her a bottle of water.

The sound system was the only thing left that made me nervous.

My eyes found the microphone immediately.

Naomi crouched beside the speaker with a roll of black tape in one hand.

“I think that’s going to hold,” she called.

“It better.”

She laughed. “Always the optimist.”

“I prefer prepared.”

“You prefer worrying.”

“I do not.”

Naomi lifted an eyebrow.

I sighed.

“...Okay, maybe a little.”

“A little?” She stood, brushing her hands together. “Luna, you’ve checked those chairs four times.”

“They’re uneven.”

“They’re chairs.”

“They’re uneven chairs.”

Before she could respond, the bell above the front door chimed.

A few guests wandered inside, immediately slowing as they took in the string lights stretched across the ceiling and the rows of chairs waiting near the front of the store.

That never got old.

A young woman lingered just inside the entrance, clutching a black notebook to her chest.

She couldn’t have been much older than twenty-two.

She looked toward the stage, then the rows of chairs before glancing back at the front door like she was already considering turning around. I recognized that look immediately.

I made my way over before she could change her mind.

“Hi.”

She looked up, almost startled.

“Hi.”

“You here for open mic?”

She nodded once.

“It’s my first time.”

“I can tell.”

Her brows pulled together.

“Was it that obvious?”

“Only because I’ve seen that look before.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“I’m Luna.”

“Rachel.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Rachel.”

She shifted the notebook in her hands.

“I almost turned around.”

“I know.”

“You...know?”

“I’ve watched a lot of people stand exactly where you’re standing.”

She glanced down at the floor before looking back at me.

“What if nobody likes what I wrote?”

I smiled.

“Then they’ll clap anyway.”

She blinked.

“Really?”

“Really.”

I nodded toward the rows of chairs.

“This isn’t one of those places where people are waiting for you to mess up. They’re rooting for you before you ever touch the microphone.”

Some of the tension left her shoulders.

“You promise?”

“I do.”

She let out a slow breath.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

She smiled for real this time.

“Okay.”

I stepped aside, giving her room to walk past me.

As she headed toward the sign-in table, I caught myself smiling.

Moments like that never got old.

Books brought people through the door.

Community gave them a reason to come back.

“Luna?”

I turned toward the café.

Maya stood behind the counter holding up an empty sleeve of cups.

“Please tell me we have more of these.”

“Storage closet,” I answered, already walking toward her. “Top shelf. Behind the vanilla syrup.”

She disappeared before I even finished the sentence.

Good.

One less thing.

I barely made it two steps before someone else stopped me.

“Excuse me?”

I turned to find an older gentleman holding one of the event programs.

“Is there assigned seating?”

“No, sir. Sit wherever you’d like.”

He smiled.

“Then my wife will be happy.”

I laughed.

“Happy wife, happy life?”

“Forty-two years,” he said. “I’ve learned a thing or two.”

“I’d say so.”

He thanked me before heading toward the second row.

I watched him wave his wife over before turning back toward the welcome table.

“Hi, Mrs. Williams.”

She smiled. “You know I wouldn’t miss poetry night.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

I smiled at Mrs. Williams before weaving around two college students who were debating the pastries.

“Get the lemon bar,” Maya called from behind the counter.

“Trust me.”

One of the girls laughed.

“That’s what you said last week.”

Behind them, the espresso machine hissed before another drink order was called out.

Someone near the fiction shelves burst into laughter.

A chair scraped across the hardwood floor.

“No, not there,” Naomi called. “If y’all keep moving those chairs, Luna’s eye is going to start twitching.”

“It already is,” I mumbled.

She grinned.

“See?”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t argue with her.

The event officially started in five minutes, and despite spending the last three weeks planning every detail, I still felt like I was putting out one small fire after another.

One thing at a time.

“Luna?”

I turned to find Denise, tonight’s featured poet, smoothing invisible wrinkles from the front of her blouse.

“You nervous?” I asked.

She laughed softly. “I’ve been doing this for almost ten years.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“It never goes away.”

I smiled.

“Good.”

She tilted her head.

“Why is that good?”

“Because I think if it ever stops mattering, it’s probably time to stop doing it.”

For a second, she just looked at me before letting out another laugh.

“I like that.”

“I’m stealing that from someone wiser than me.”

“I won’t tell.”

She glanced toward the stage.

“What time do you want me up there?”

“As soon as I finish the welcome.”

She nodded once.

“I’ll be ready.”

“I know you will.”

She reached over and squeezed my hand before making her way toward the reserved chair beside the stage.

One less thing.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket.

Naomi.

WHERE ARE YOU?

I looked up.

She stood beside the microphone with one hand on her hip, staring directly at me.

When I pointed at my phone, she mouthed, *Seriously***?**

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’m coming,” I called.

“So you do know how to listen.”

“I heard that,” Maya shouted from behind the café counter.

“Good!” Naomi shot back.

The bookstore had changed without me realizing it. The rows of chairs were almost full now, conversations layering over one another until they became a comfortable hum, broken every few seconds by the hiss of the espresso machine or the clink of ceramic mugs against saucers.

My gaze drifted toward the front of the room.

Ellis had started working.

He moved through the bookstore with an ease that surprised me.

There was nothing rushed about him.

Nothing performative.

He wasn’t directing people into awkward poses or asking anyone to smile for the camera. If anything, he seemed determined not to interrupt whatever moment was already unfolding.

He paused near the café, lifting his camera just as Maya slid a latte across the counter to one of our regulars.

Click.

A few steps later, he crouched near one of the lower shelves, photographing a little girl who had settled cross-legged on the floor with a picture book spread across her lap.

She looked up when she heard the shutter.

Instead of taking another picture, Ellis lowered the camera just enough to show her the image on the back of the screen.

Her entire face lit up.

I found myself smiling before I even realized I was doing it.

He looked up, like he could feel me watching him, and our eyes met across the room.

I should've looked away, but neither of us did.

Then the corner of his mouth lifted, just slightly, and something warm settled low in my stomach.

I would've expected someone photographing an event to focus on the stage. Instead, he seemed more interested in the people who had come to experience it.

"Luna."

Naomi's voice snapped me back.

"If you keep staring into space, I'm introducing you as tonight's featured poet."

I blinked.

"I was not staring."

"Mhm."

"I was making sure everything looked okay."

She glanced around the room before looking back at me.

"It does."

There wasn't a trace of teasing in her voice that time.

Just certainty.

I followed her gaze.

Rachel was laughing with the woman beside her.

Denise was flipping through her notebook one last time.

The café line had finally disappeared.

The microphone was still standing.

The bookstore felt...full.

Not just with people.

With life.

For the first time all evening, there wasn't anyone calling my name.

Just the quiet anticipation that settled over a room moments before something began.

Naomi leaned closer.

“You can breathe now.”

“I have been breathing.”

“Barely.”

She reached over and squeezed my forearm.

“You did good.”

I’d spent so much of the day thinking about everything that could go wrong that I hadn’t stopped to notice everything that had gone right.

One thing at a time.

I’d made it here.

I smoothed my hands against the front of my dress before making my way toward the microphone. The familiar knot of nerves settled low in my stomach, the same way it did before every event I hosted, no matter how prepared I was.

As I stepped onto the small platform near the front windows, conversations gradually softened. Heads turned in my direction, and someone in the back hurried to claim the last empty chair before settling beside his wife.

Even the espresso machine seemed to choose that moment to fall silent.

I looked out over the bookstore, letting my gaze drift across the room.

Every chair was filled.

“Welcome to Open Mic Night at Chapter & Charm. Whether you’re here to perform or just listen, we’re really glad you came. My name is Luna, and tonight is all about celebrating stories, poetry, music, and the courage it takes to share a piece of yourself with a room full of strangers.”

I glanced toward Rachel, offering what I hoped was a reassuring smile before looking back at the audience.

“My hope is that everyone who walks through these doors leaves feeling a little lighter than when they came in. So grab another cup of coffee, cheer a little louder than you normally would, and don’t be afraid to encourage the person standing behind this microphone. You never know how much they might need it.”

A ripple of applause filled the bookstore.

I stepped back from the microphone, my shoulders relaxing as I caught Naomi grinning at me from the front row.

Rachel sat a little straighter than she had ten minutes ago.

Mrs. Williams already had a tissue tucked into her sleeve.

She always cried during at least one poem.

Maya caught my eye from behind the counter and gave me a thumbs-up.

Everything was running smoothly.

For now.

Across the room, Ellis lifted his camera again.

The lens wasn’t pointed at the stage.

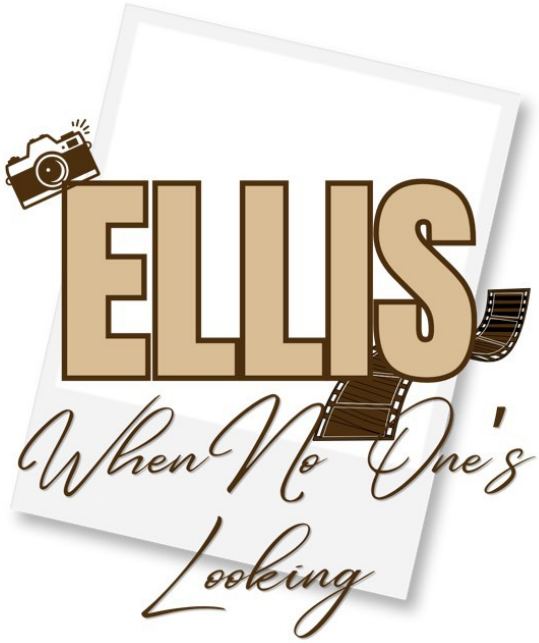
It was aimed at the audience, catching the smiles, the laughter, the quiet moments between people who’d arrived as strangers and were already beginning to feel like neighbors.

Maybe I’d been wrong.

Maybe the story wasn’t only happening at the microphone.

Maybe it had been happening all around us the entire time.

OceanofPDF.com



CLICK. *Click.*

The best photographs usually happened before people realized they were being watched.

I learned that years ago.

The second someone noticed a camera, shoulders straightened, smiles stiffened, and moments became performances. People wanted to be seen a certain way instead of simply existing.

That was never the story I was interested in telling.

The applause from Luna's welcome faded through the bookstore as I adjusted the focus ring on my camera.

One by one, people took the stage after Luna's welcome.

Some shared poetry. Others performed spoken word pieces that filled the bookstore with laughter, quiet nods, or the occasional tear. A few read excerpts from works-in-progress, their voices growing steadier with every page they turned. It was beautiful to watch. I'd never realized open mic nights could draw a crowd like this, and I definitely hadn't expected something like it in a small town like Easton Grove. My late wife, Elena, would've loved nights like this. She never needed much of a reason to support local artists or spend an evening surrounded by books. More than likely, she would've had Mila curled up beside her in one of the front-row chairs, clapping after every performance whether she understood it or not.

A burst of applause pulled my attention back toward the stage.

Denise stepped up to the microphone, smiled at the crowd, and adjusted the stand a fraction of an inch.

“My name is Denise,” she said, “and this first piece is called ‘Home.’”

I lifted my camera again, letting the audience fill the frame instead of the stage. Anyone could photograph the person holding the microphone. I was more interested in the people who forgot they were listening.

Home

Home isn’t always four walls and a front porch.

Sometimes it’s a voice that says,

“I’m glad you came.”

Sometimes it’s a chair someone saved without realizing they were saving it for you.

It’s the smell of coffee lingering in the air.

The sound of strangers clapping like they’ve known your heart for years.

The courage to speak…

and the grace of someone choosing to listen.

I used to think home was a place I had to find.

Now I think it’s something we build—

one conversation,

one kindness,

one open door at a time.

Maybe home isn’t where you came from.

Maybe it’s where you finally stop wondering if you belong.

The last line settled over the bookstore like a held breath, and for a second nobody moved.

The applause lingered for a few seconds after Denise stepped away from the microphone. Mrs. Williams dabbed discreetly at the corner of her eye with the tissue she'd tucked into her sleeve before the event even started, while the older gentleman beside her reached over to squeeze her hand. Rachel sat a little straighter than she had before, her notebook resting open across her lap now instead of clutched tightly against her chest. Whatever nerves she'd walked in with hadn't disappeared, but they no longer looked quite as heavy.

I lifted my camera again. A quiet smile. A tear quickly brushed away. Someone nodding because a line had found them before they were ready for it. Those were the moments people forgot happened until someone handed them a photograph months later.

Click.

I lowered the camera just long enough to glance toward the side of the room, where Luna stood near the café speaking quietly with Maya while absentmindedly gathering empty mugs from one of the tables. Even now, with the event finally underway, she hadn't really stopped working. She smiled at something Maya said before taking the stack of mugs from her hands and disappearing behind the counter long enough to rinse them out. By the time she stepped back onto the floor, another guest had already stopped her with a question, and without missing a beat, she answered it with the same patience she'd shown everyone else that evening.

It was funny. Most people would've assumed the microphone was the center of the room. I wasn't so sure anymore.

The applause carried Denise back to her seat, and I caught the smile she tried—and failed—to hide as people thanked her for sharing a piece of herself with a room full of strangers. Luna met her at the edge of the platform with a quick hug and a few quiet words I couldn't make out before stepping back in front of the microphone.

"I think we can all agree Denise set the bar pretty high," she said, earning an easy laugh from the audience. "Let's give her one more round of applause."

The room happily obliged.

She waited until the clapping settled before glancing down at the paper in her hand.

“Our next participant is joining us for her very first open mic.”

Rachel.

Even from where I stood, I saw her shoulders tense.

She looked toward Luna, then back at the notebook in her lap, almost as if she’d forgotten she’d written her own name on the sign-up sheet.

A few people turned in their seats, smiling encouragingly as Luna called her name again.

“There she is,” Luna said, her voice carrying just enough warmth to reach the second row. “Take your time.”

Rachel stood slowly, smoothing her palms against the front of her jeans before making the short walk to the microphone. She adjusted it once, then twice, letting out a nervous laugh that drew a few understanding smiles from the crowd.

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” she admitted.

“You’ve got this,” someone called from the back.

A chorus of agreement followed.

Rachel laughed again, this time sounding a little less afraid.

I lowered my camera.

There was something sacred about those first few seconds. They belonged to her, not to a photograph.

She took a breath, found her place on the page, and began to read.

By the second stanza, the shaking in her voice had settled. By the third, she stopped looking at her notebook after every line. She looked at the audience instead.

That’s when I lifted my camera again.

Click.

Somewhere along the way, she’d stopped worrying about getting it perfect and forgotten I was there.

As Rachel finished, applause filled the bookstore once more. She smiled—a real smile this time—and walked back to her seat with her shoulders just a little higher than before.

Across the room, Luna clapped just as enthusiastically as everyone else, pride written all over her face. She looked less like the owner of the bookstore and more like someone watching a friend accomplish something they’d been too afraid to try.

I found myself wondering how many stories had started exactly like that.

One nervous person.

One open microphone.

One woman quietly believing in them until they believed in themselves.

The evening settled into an easy rhythm after that. One performer gave way to the next, each bringing something different to the room. A retired English teacher shared a poem he'd written for his wife after forty-three years of marriage. A high school senior read the opening chapter of the fantasy novel she'd been working on since sophomore year. A college student performed a spoken word piece about learning to forgive his father, leaving half the room wiping at their eyes before the applause finally broke the silence.

I moved constantly, weaving between bookshelves and tables, searching for the moments that happened between performances instead of only the ones under the spotlight.

A grandmother reached for her granddaughter's hand after a particularly emotional poem.

Two strangers compared book recommendations while waiting for the next reader.

Maya quietly replaced an empty coffee mug before its owner even realized it had disappeared.

Through it all, Luna never stopped moving. Somehow, she managed to make every person who spoke to her feel like they were the only thing she had to do.

I caught myself smiling more than once, and I was fairly certain she had no idea anyone was paying that close attention.

By the time the final reader stepped away from the microphone, the bookstore had taken on that comfortable kind of exhaustion that only followed a good evening. Conversations lingered long after the program ended. People hugged goodbye, exchanged phone numbers, promised to come back, and wandered toward the register with books tucked beneath their arms.

The event had ended.

The community hadn't.

I lowered my camera and glanced through a few of the photographs I'd taken throughout the night.

Rachel's nervous smile before she found her courage.

Mrs. Williams laughing with the man sitting beside her over coffee.

The little girl proudly holding four picture books instead of three.

Luna, caught completely off guard, smiling at something a customer had said while carrying a stack of empty mugs back toward the café.

She hadn’t been looking at the camera.

She hadn’t been posing.

She’d simply been herself.

For reasons I couldn’t quite explain, it was my favorite photograph of the night.

I looked up just in time to see Luna thanking the last few guests as they made their way toward the door. She looked tired, but there was something deeply satisfying about the smile she wore now. It was the kind that only came after watching weeks of planning become an evening worth remembering.

I lowered the camera just as the bell above the front door chimed one last time.

“Drive safe!” Luna called after the final customer, waiting until the door closed behind them before reaching up to flip the sign from **OPEN** to **CLOSED**.

The bookstore settled into a silence that felt different from the one before the event had started. This one wasn’t filled with anticipation anymore. It was the quiet contentment that only followed a night well spent.

Luna rested both hands on the edge of the front counter and let out a long breath. She closed her eyes for just a second before a small smile found its way onto her face.

It was the kind of smile that came after realizing something had gone exactly the way you hoped it would.

I lifted my camera.

Click.

OceanofPDF.com



THE BOOKSTORE always felt different after an open mic night.

The conversations were over, but traces of them still lingered between the shelves. Empty coffee mugs sat forgotten on end tables, programs peeked out from beneath chairs, and the smell of espresso still hung in the air, softened by old books and the vanilla candles we'd lit before guests arrived. It was quieter now, but not empty. It felt full in a different way, as if the walls had absorbed every laugh, every poem, every story someone had been brave enough to share.

I stood behind the counter for a moment longer than I needed to, glancing over the attendance sheet before setting it aside. My feet ached, my shoulders were beginning to protest, and I was almost positive I'd survive the rest of the week on coffee alone, but as I looked around the bookstore, I couldn't stop smiling.

We'd done it.

First Open mic in the books.

"Don't even think about it."

Naomi's voice floated across the room just as I reached for a stack of abandoned programs.

I looked over my shoulder.

"What?"

"I know that look."

“What look?”

“The one where you convince yourself you’ll ‘clean up one little thing,’ and forty-five minutes later you’re reorganizing the entire poetry section.”

“I would never.”

She laughed loud enough that Maya looked up from the café sink.

“Luna Bennett, you are a terrible liar.”

“I am not.”

“You alphabetized the bookmarks once.”

“Because they were mixed together.”

“They were bookmarks.”

“They were out of order.”

Naomi looked at Maya as if asking for backup.

“You see what I deal with?”

Maya shook her head, laughing as she rinsed the last coffee mug.

“I stopped arguing with her months ago.”

“I can hear y’all,” I muttered.

“We know.”

“Seriously,” Naomi said, softening this time. “Leave the rest. Maya and I have it. Close the register and go home.”

I looked around the room, instinctively searching for the next thing that needed my attention.

A chair sat crooked near the front row.

Someone had left a scarf draped over the back of another.

A stack of programs still needed to be recycled.

One thing at a time.

“Fine,” I sighed. “I’m leaving it. Going to the front.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

I smiled to myself and wandered toward the front windows instead, more out of habit than intention. Outside, Main Street had quieted considerably. A few cars rolled past beneath the glow of the streetlights, and somewhere farther down the block, laughter drifted from a restaurant that hadn’t quite closed for the night.

I turned just in time to see Ellis adjusting the strap of his camera bag before glancing around the bookstore as though he were making sure he hadn’t forgotten anything.

For a second, I simply watched him.

Even now, he wasn’t checking his phone or rushing toward the door. Instead, he paused beside one of the displays, studying a framed print from a local artist that hung on the wall.

“You survived,” I said as I walked over.

He looked up, a smile spreading across his face.

“I was about to say the same thing.”

“I wasn’t the one carrying two cameras around all night.”

“No,” he agreed. “You were only carrying the entire event.”

I laughed quietly.

“When you put it like that, I think I got the worse deal.”

“I don’t know.” His gaze drifted around the bookstore before settling back on me. “You made it look easy.”

The compliment caught me off guard.

Most people complimented the event itself. The turnout. The decorations. The coffee. They didn’t usually notice the work that happened between all of those things.

“It definitely wasn’t,” I admitted. “I was one missing extension cord away from a breakdown.”

He chuckled.

“I couldn’t tell.”

“That’s because I have years of practice pretending I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“I don’t think you were pretending.”

If anything, he sounded certain, and somehow that made the words land even harder.

“I’ve photographed a lot of events,” he continued. “Most people focus on what’s happening on the stage. You seemed more interested in what was happening everywhere else.”

I folded my arms loosely, leaning against the edge of a bookshelf.

“I think that’s the important part.”

He tilted his head.

“The stage?”

“The people.”

For a moment neither of us spoke.

The quiet wasn’t awkward.

It felt like we’d both stumbled onto the same thought from opposite directions.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“I was going to say the exact same thing.”

I smiled too.

Maybe Naomi had been right.

Not just about him being fine.

But about there being something...very much something...about him.

Before either of us could say anything else, Naomi appeared between us carrying a stack of folding chairs that looked far too heavy for one person.

“If y’all are planning on standing there all night, one of you could at least pretend to help.”

Ellis reached for the top two chairs before she could finish the sentence.

“I thought you told me not to.”

“I changed my mind.”

He laughed, taking them from her with ease.

“I had a feeling.”

Naomi looked at me, then at Ellis, and a knowing smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“I’ll let y’all finish talking. Maya and I are about done back there anyway.”

“We’re not—”

She was already walking away before I could finish defending...whatever it was I thought I was defending.

Ellis watched her disappear toward the café before looking back at me.

“She always like that?”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Worse.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“She’s known me since our college days. At this point, she thinks it’s her full-time job to keep me humble.”

“I’m guessing she enjoys it.”

“Entirely too much.”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

Our laughter settled between us before fading into a comfortable silence.

Ellis rested the folded chairs against the wall before glancing around the room again. “You really built all of this?”

His question caught me off guard.

I followed his gaze, seeing the bookstore the way I imagined he must have been seeing it all evening. The bookshelves I’d spent months searching for at estate sales. The mismatched reading chairs people always seemed to fight over. The local artwork hanging on the exposed brick walls. The café tucked into the corner that had started as nothing more than a crazy idea scribbled in the margin of a notebook.

“It didn’t look like this at first,” I admitted. “When I signed the lease, there wasn’t a single bookshelf in here. Just concrete floors, white walls, and a whole lot of dust.”

“What made you do it?”

There it was.

The question almost everyone eventually asked.

I leaned against the end of one of the shelves, running my fingers along the spine of a novel that had somehow ended up in the wrong section.

“I’ve loved books for as long as I can remember,” I said. “Libraries were always my favorite place growing up. They were quiet, but they never felt lonely.”

He listened without interrupting, and somehow that made it easier to keep talking.

“When I started thinking about opening a bookstore, I realized I didn’t just want people to come in, buy a book, and leave. I wanted them to stay. Read for a while. Meet somebody. Find a new favorite author because the person sitting next to them wouldn’t stop talking about a book they loved.”

I smiled to myself, remembering how impossible that dream had sounded when I first said it out loud.

“So,” I said, folding my arms loosely, “how’d you end up behind a camera?”

His smile softened, and something unreadable flickered across his face before he answered.

“It started as a hobby.”

I didn’t press. Not yet.

Instead, I smiled. “I have a feeling that’s not the whole story.”

His eyes met mine, and for the first time all night, I watched him hesitate.

“No,” he admitted quietly. “It’s not.”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, I found myself hoping I’d get to hear the rest of the story one day.

My eyes drifted to the camera hanging from his shoulder, and I laughed softly.

“I almost forgot you were actually here to work.”

He glanced down at it before looking back at me.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to remember.”

“Maybe you’re distracting.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly.

I realized what I’d said a second too late.

“I mean, the conversation.”

“Right.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “The conversation.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Whatever that was.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

The smile he was trying to hide said otherwise.

I shook my head. “I promise I didn’t hire you just for the conversation.”

“I would’ve been slightly offended if you had.”

“Only slightly?”

“I’ve got to protect my ego somehow.”

I smiled, and his eyes stayed on mine just long enough for me to notice.

“So...” I said, looking away first, “how long do you usually take to get photos back?”

“It depends on the event, but I should have everything sorted tomorrow. I’ll spend another day or two editing, and I’ll send you the final edits by the end of the week.”

“That’s quicker than I expected.”

“I don’t like sitting on people’s memories.”

The words caught me off guard.

“People’s memories?”

He nodded.

“I know they’re photographs, but they’re more than that. Someone will look at one of these ten years from now and remember exactly how tonight

felt. I figure they shouldn’t have to wait too long to get them.”

I found myself smiling before I even realized it.

“That’s...a really nice way to look at it.”

He shrugged, almost embarrassed by the compliment.

“It’s just the way I’ve always seen it.”

I folded my arms loosely against the bookshelf beside me.

“Did you get what you needed?”

“I did.”

“You sound pretty confident.”

“I am.”

“What about the pictures?” I asked with a grin. “Did you get any good ones?”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he rested a hand on the camera.

“I think there are a few you’re really going to like.”

“Just a few?”

“I’ve learned not to overpromise.”

“I appreciate the honesty.”

“The rest you’ll have to judge for yourself.”

Before I could ask another question, Naomi’s voice floated over from the front of the bookstore.

“Luna!”

I turned toward the register.

“We’re about ready whenever you are.”

“I’ll be there in a second.”

Outside the front windows, Main Street had grown quiet, leaving only the occasional headlights passing beneath the streetlamps.

Ellis adjusted the strap of his camera bag before extending his hand.

“Thanks again for trusting me with tonight.”

I slipped my hand into his, surprised by how natural the gesture felt.

“No,” I said, smiling. “Thank you for saying yes on such short notice.”

“It was worth it.”

The sincerity in his voice made me hesitate for just a second before letting go.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the gallery.”

“I’ll send it over as soon as it’s ready.”

He turned toward the front door, giving me a small wave before pushing it open. The bell chimed softly overhead as he stepped onto the sidewalk, disappearing into the warm evening air.

I watched the door swing shut before shaking my head at myself.

One thing at a time.

I smiled to myself as I made my way back toward the counter, already bracing myself for the questions Naomi was undoubtedly waiting to ask.

OceanofPDF.com



BUTTER MELTED across the griddle just as I heard little feet padding across the hardwood floor behind me.

"Morning, Bug."

A sleepy "Morning," floated back.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Mila standing in the kitchen doorway, rubbing one eye with the sleeve of her pajamas. Her curls had flattened on one side sometime during the night, and the stuffed dinosaur she'd been carrying around all week hung loosely from one hand. She blinked up at me with the same warm brown eyes everybody swore she'd gotten from me.

She wandered over without saying another word and climbed onto the stool she'd claimed as hers years ago. It wobbled slightly beneath her, though she barely noticed.

"Can I help?"

I looked at her for a second.

"You wash your hands yet?"

Her eyes widened.

"...No."

"Thought so."

She sighed like I'd asked her to do the impossible before sliding off the stool.

"I was gonna."

"I know you were."

A few seconds later, the faucet squeaked on.

I smiled to myself as I poured another scoop of batter onto the griddle. It spread farther than I'd meant it to, one side thicker than the other.

Mila came back drying her hands on the front of her pajama shirt instead of the towel hanging beside the sink.

"Use the towel."

She looked down at her shirt.

"Oh."

Without another word, she walked back and grabbed the towel.

By the time she climbed onto the stool again, tiny damp footprints dotted the hardwood behind her.

"Now can I help?"

"You remember the rules?"

She nodded.

"I stay on the stool."

"And?"

"I don't touch nothing hot."

"And?"

"I wait 'til you say."

"There you go."

I handed her the measuring cup.

"Pour it slow."

She stuck her tongue out in concentration as she tipped the batter onto the griddle. It landed somewhere between a circle and...well...something else entirely.

She frowned at it.

"It don't look right."

"It'll taste the same."

"It look funny."

"So do I before my coffee."

That earned me a giggle.

When bubbles finally started to rise to the surface, I slipped the spatula beneath the pancake and rested my hand over hers.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

"One...two...three."

Together we flipped it.

It landed slightly crooked.

Mila stared at it for all of two seconds before gasping.

"The sacrificial pancake!"

I laughed.

"There it is."

Every batch had one.

At least, according to Elena.

The first pancake was never perfect. She used to hold it up like she'd won a prize instead of made a mistake.

"Every batch has to give one to the breakfast gods," she'd say.

Neither Mila nor I had ever figured out who the breakfast gods were.

We just knew the first pancake belonged to them.

Three years later, the first pancake was *still* the sacrificial pancake.

Mila reached for the spatula again.

"My turn?"

I slid the bowl of batter closer instead.

"You can help me pour the next one."

She nodded like she'd just been handed the most important job in the world.

Together, we worked our way through the rest of the batter. The pancakes got rounder after the first few, though none of them were perfect. Mila declared one looked like Texas, another looked like a cloud, and one looked "like nothing at all."

By the time we finished, the stack on the plate leaned just enough to make me nervous.

"I carry syrup," she announced.

"I think that's a great idea."

She wrapped both hands around the bottle and carefully shuffled to the table while I followed behind with the plates.

Sunlight stretched across the kitchen floor, warming the hardwood beneath our feet. Cartoons played softly from the living room, filling the quiet between us with familiar background noise.

Mila dug into her pancakes without waiting for me, then reached for the coloring book she'd abandoned earlier. She flipped it open beside her plate

and picked up a green crayon, her tongue peeking out as she carefully colored inside the lines.

I smiled to myself.

Somewhere along the way, I'd learned pancakes came first.

Everything else could wait.

Six-year-olds didn't stay six forever.

I reached for my coffee and took a sip.

Cold.

Figures.

"Daddy?"

"Hm?"

"You not eat."

I looked down at my plate before realizing I'd been staring at it instead of eating.

"I'm about to."

"You were thinking about Mommy."

It wasn't a question.

Kids had a way of noticing the things adults missed.

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She nodded like that made perfect sense before taking another bite of pancake.

"I was too."

I watched her for a moment before finally picking up my own fork.

Mila could miss her mother one minute and laugh over something small the next without treating one feeling like a betrayal of the other.

I was still learning how to do that.

Some mornings, remembering Elena settled over the house like a weight neither of us knew what to do with. Other mornings, it felt more like she'd simply pulled up a chair at the table with us, smiling because we'd remembered the sacrificial pancake again.

Mila carried her plate to the sink with both hands, setting it down with a clink that made me glance over.

"Careful."

"I was."

She hurried back to the table and pulled her coloring book closer, scattering crayons across the space where her plate had been. Within

seconds, she was bent over the same dinosaur she'd been working on all week, changing colors every few strokes as though she hadn't decided what kind of dinosaur it was yet.

Saturday mornings usually settled into this kind of quiet once breakfast was over. Mila colored or watched cartoons while I answered emails and caught up on whatever work I had put off during the week.

I reached for the laptop at the end of the table and opened it.

The last handful of photographs from Tuesday night's open mic waited where I'd left them.

"Daddy?"

"Hm?"

She held up the page for my inspection.

"Can dinosaurs be pink?"

I looked from the coloring book to her hopeful face.

"I don't see why not."

"I knew it."

The grin that spread across her face told me she'd already colored it pink before asking.

I smiled to myself and turned my attention back to the laptop.

I moved through the final images, making small adjustments as familiar moments from the evening filled the screen. Rachel smiling after her reading. Mrs. Williams pretending no one had noticed her tears. Denise laughing beside the stage.

I realized I'd been smiling at the screen longer than I'd intended.

"You smiling."

I looked up.

Mila was watching me now instead of coloring.

"I am?"

"Yes."

She looked back at the screen for another second before climbing out of her chair and making her way around the table.

"Can I see?"

I turned the laptop toward her.

Rachel stood at the microphone with both hands wrapped around her notebook. Her shoulders were still a little tense, but the nervousness she'd carried to the stage had already started to soften around the edges.

"Was she scared?" Mila asked.

“A little.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes people get nervous when everybody’s looking at them.”

She studied the picture. “But she still did it.”

“She did.”

I clicked to the next image.

Mrs. Williams sat beside her husband with a tissue pressed beneath one eye while he smiled at her over the rim of his coffee cup.

“She crying.”

“She liked the poem.”

“People cry when they like stuff?”

“Sometimes.”

Mila thought about that for a second. “Grown-ups are weird.”

I laughed. “You’re not wrong.”

The next few photographs moved across the screen slowly. Denise laughing beside the stage. Maya reaching across the café counter with a latte. The little girl I’d photographed on the floor with a picture book spread across her lap.

Then Luna appeared.

She stood behind the counter with a stack of mugs balanced against her hip, her head tipped back slightly as she laughed at something outside the frame. One curl had fallen loose near her cheek, and there was something unguarded about her expression. She hadn’t known I was watching.

That was probably why I liked it.

Mila leaned closer.

“She pretty.”

I glanced at her. “You think so?”

“Mhm.” She pointed toward the screen. “She look happy.”

I looked back at the photograph.

“She does.”

“Is that the bookstore lady?”

“The bookstore owner.”

“She got dinosaur books?”

“I’m sure she does.”

Mila looked at me then, her expression suddenly thoughtful.

“You done working?”

“Almost.”

“You said today was our day.”

“I remember.”

“You still working.”

“I’m sitting at the table.”

“With your work.”

I leaned back in my chair and looked at the handful of photographs still waiting to be adjusted. They would probably take another hour at most. Maybe less if I stopped staring at the same image every few minutes.

Mila had already returned to her coloring book, apparently satisfied that she’d made her point.

I saved the gallery and closed the laptop.

Her head lifted immediately.

“You done?”

“For today.”

A grin spread across her face. “Really?”

“Really.”

She pushed away from the table so fast one of her crayons rolled onto the floor.

“Daddy-Daughter Day.”

“I know.”

“Can I wear my sparkly shoes?”

“You can wear whatever shoes you can find.”

She was already halfway down the hall before I finished.

I gathered the breakfast plates and carried them to the sink, listening as drawers opened and closed in her room. A few seconds later, something thudded against the floor.

“You okay?” I called.

“Yes!”

Another thud followed.

I shook my head and turned on the faucet.

By the time I finished cleaning the kitchen and changed clothes, Mila was sitting on the living room floor with one sparkly shoe on and the other nowhere in sight.

“Where’s the other one?”

She looked around. “I don’t know.”

We found it beneath the kitchen table beside the crayon that had rolled away earlier.

Mila slipped it on and stood. “See? I knew where it was.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I knew it was in the house.”

I grabbed my keys. “Come on.”

She skipped ahead of me, completely unbothered.

Outside, the morning had settled into the kind of warmth that promised a hot afternoon without making good on it yet. Mila climbed into the back seat while I loaded the camera I’d brought out of habit into the passenger side.

“Where we going?” she asked once I started the truck.

“I thought this was our day.”

“It is.”

“So what do you want to do?”

She went quiet.

I glanced at her through the rearview mirror. “You don’t know?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Take your time.”

She looked out the window as we pulled away from the house. “Can we get something sweet?”

“That covers a lot of ground.”

“A cinnamon roll.”

“Breakfast was twenty minutes ago.”

“That was pancakes.”

“I’m aware.”

“Cinnamon rolls are different.”

I smiled despite myself. “Of course they are.”

We ended up downtown a little after eleven, mostly because the bakery made the kind of cinnamon rolls that had convinced Mila they counted as their own food group. The line stretched halfway to the door, and by the time we reached the counter, she had changed her mind twice before ordering the same thing she always did.

A red velvet cinnamon roll.

Extra icing.

She carried the box carefully to a table near the window while I grabbed *another* coffee.

Mila pulled the cinnamon roll apart with her fingers instead of using the fork sitting beside the box.

“You got icing on your nose.”

She froze. “Where?”

“Right side.”

She wiped the side of her nose.

“Other side.”

She wiped it, but still didn’t quite get it.

I grabbed a napkin and leaned across the table. “Hold still.”

“I had it.”

“You absolutely did not.”

She smiled while I cleaned the icing away.

She made it through less than half before announcing she was full and closing the box for later.

We wandered downtown for a while after that, stopping whenever something caught Mila’s attention—which meant nearly every window we passed. By the time we reached the park, she had asked for three bracelets, a dollhouse, and four different pets.

“Who’s cleaning the tank?” I asked.

“You.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it would be your turtle.”

“But I’m a kid.”

“You’ll still be a kid when it needs cleaning.”

She sighed. “You don’t understand animals.”

“I understand them enough to know I don’t want one living in my house.”

“Our house.”

“Exactly.”

She let that go long enough to count three dogs walking past us before starting again.

“What about a fish?”

“No.”

“A hamster?”

“No.”

“A lizard?”

“Mila.”

“Daddy, watch.”

“I’m watching.”

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

“No, watch for real.”

“I have been watching for real.”

She narrowed her eyes like she didn’t believe me before hanging upside down from one of the bars.

“Mila.”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re going to fall.”

“I’m not.”

She did not fall.

That didn’t make me feel any better.

I sat on a bench nearby once she moved toward the swings, watching her pump her legs higher and higher until her laughter carried across the playground.

The camera stayed in the bag beside me.

For a few minutes, I let the moment exist without trying to preserve it.

Mila had gotten taller again. I noticed it in the way her feet nearly dragged across the ground when the swing slowed. Her face was changing too, losing some of the roundness she’d carried as a toddler. Every few months, she seemed to become somebody new while still being completely herself.

“Daddy!”

I looked up.

She leaned back as the swing climbed. “I’m touching the sky!”

“You’re not even close.”

Her laughter rang out across the park.

I reached for the camera before I could stop myself.

By the time I lifted it, she was coming forward again, curls lifting around her face and sunlight catching the wide smile she hadn’t grown into

yet.

Click.

She heard the shutter and immediately dragged her shoes against the mulch to slow herself down.

“You took a picture.”

“I did.”

“Let me see.”

She ran over and leaned against my side while I pulled it up on the screen.

“My hair look crazy.”

“Your hair always looks crazy when you’re playing.”

She looked offended. “No, it don’t.”

“It does.”

She studied the picture again.

“I like it.”

“So do I.”

She smiled before running back toward the swings.

By the time we left the park, lunchtime had already passed us by, and Mila had grass stains on one knee of her jeans and apparently no idea what she wanted to eat. Mila ordered pizza and ate one of my chicken tenders anyway.

“I thought you didn’t want chicken,” I said as she reached across the table for another.

“I wanted pizza too.”

“So you ordered pizza.”

“I like options.”

“You like my food.”

“That too.”

I slid the rest of the fries toward her and gave up.

On the way back to the truck, we passed one of the little wooden libraries the city had installed along Main Street. Mila stopped without warning and opened the glass door.

A few mysteries sat on the top shelf beside a cookbook and two old romance novels. The bottom shelf held a thin stack of children’s books.

She crouched and started pulling them out one at a time.

“Read that one.”

“Got that one.”

“Too babyish.”

I leaned against the post beside her.

She reached the final book and sighed. “I already read all these.”

“All of them?”

“Most.”

“That’s not all.”

She returned the books to the shelf with far less care than I would’ve liked.

“I need a new dinosaur book.”

“You have several dinosaur books.”

“I read those too.”

“Every one?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t believe her, but I respected the commitment to the story.

She closed the little door and looked up at me expectantly.

“What?”

“You know where books live.”

I laughed. “Books live in a lot of places.”

“The bookstore.”

The word came out like the answer should’ve been obvious.

I glanced farther down Main Street. Chapter & Charm sat less than two blocks away, its dark green awning visible between the boutique and the floral shop.

For a second, the photograph from that morning came back to me.

Luna laughing behind the café counter, unaware anyone had noticed.

I pushed the thought aside.

“Come on.”

Mila grabbed my hand. “We going?”

“We’re already walking.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Yes, we’re going.”

She smiled and pulled me down the sidewalk.

The bell above the door chimed when we stepped into Chapter & Charm.

Saturday felt different from Tuesday night. The rows of folding chairs were gone, the microphone had disappeared, and the bookstore had settled back into itself.

Mila stopped just inside the door.

“Where the dinosaurs?”

“I have no idea.”

She looked at me like I’d failed an important test.

“You said they had books.”

“They do.”

“But where?”

Before I could answer, an older woman approached the register carrying three mysteries. Luna stood behind the counter, listening as the woman explained why the second book in a series had been better than the first. She had on jeans and a soft brown T-shirt with Chapter & Charm printed across the chest, her curls pulled away from her face in a loose puff.

She didn’t notice us.

Mila tugged on my hand.

“Daddy.”

“Give her a second.”

“She don’t look busy.”

“She’s talking to someone.”

Mila watched for all of three seconds before letting go of me and hurrying toward the children’s section.

“Walk,” I called.

She slowed without looking back.

I stayed near the front while Luna finished the transaction. She tucked the books into a paper bag, added a bookmark, and walked around the counter to hold the door open for the customer when her hands were full.

“Come back and tell me what you think of the third one,” she said.

“I will.”

Luna waited until the woman stepped outside before turning back toward the register.

Then she noticed me.

Recognition crossed her face before a smile followed.

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

Her eyes moved past me toward the children’s section. “You brought company.”

“My daughter.”

Before I could say anything else, Mila appeared at the end of the aisle holding a book in each hand.

“I found them.”

Luna looked at her. “Dinosaurs?”

Mila nodded.

“That was fast.”

“I’m good at books.”

“I can see that.”

Luna walked toward her and crouched beside the shelf rather than asking Mila to come closer.

“What do you have?”

Mila held up the first book. “This one got facts.”

“And the other one?”

“This one got a dinosaur who don’t got friends.”

Luna studied the cover. “That sounds serious.”

“It is.”

“Which one do you like better?”

Mila looked between them.

“Both.”

Luna nodded like that was a perfectly reasonable answer. “That does make the decision harder.”

“I can get both.”

It wasn’t a question.

I folded my arms. “You can pick one.”

Mila’s face fell immediately.

Luna glanced at me, then back at her.

“What if you start with the one you think you’ll read first?”

Mila looked down at the books again. “The sad one.”

“The dinosaur without friends?”

“Yes.”

“Good choice.”

Mila handed the fact book back to Luna reluctantly.

Luna returned the fact book to the shelf, then noticed another book angled halfway out of the display beside her.

“This one isn’t about dinosaurs,” she said, sliding it back into place, “but it does have a dragon.”

Mila’s attention shifted.

“A real dragon?”

“As real as the dinosaurs in your story.”

Mila took the book and opened it immediately.

I watched Luna sit back on her heels while Mila turned the first few pages, giving her the same undivided attention I’d watched her give people Tuesday night.

She didn’t talk down to her.

She didn’t rush her.

She simply waited.

Mila looked up. “Can I get this one too?”

I sighed.

Luna pressed her lips together, but the smile still showed.

“You’re not helping,” I told her.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Mila held both books against her chest. “One dinosaur and one dragon.”

I looked at her hopeful face, then at Luna’s not-at-all-innocent expression.

“Fine.”

Mila grinned. “I knew you’d say yes.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

She headed toward the register before I could argue.

Luna stood and brushed her hands over the front of her jeans.

“She’s persuasive.”

“She’s dangerous.”

“I heard that,” Mila called.

“I meant for you to.”

Luna laughed, and the sound was quieter than it had been in the photograph but just as easy.

We followed Mila toward the counter.

While Luna rang up the books, I noticed a stack of event flyers beside the register. The open mic had already been replaced by announcements for a children’s story hour and a local author signing.

“You don’t slow down much, do you?” I asked.

She glanced at the flyers. “Not if Naomi has anything to say about it.”

“Is that the friend from Tuesday?”

“The one and only.”

A voice floated from the café.

“I heard that.”

Luna closed her eyes briefly.

Naomi appeared behind the espresso machine with a towel draped over one shoulder. Her gaze moved from Luna to me, then to Mila, before settling back on Luna.

She smiled.

Luna shook her head and turned back to the register.

I handed her my card.

She slipped both books into a small paper bag, then added two bookmarks.

“One for each,” she told Mila.

Mila peeked inside. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

As Luna handed her the bag, Mila looked up at her.

“Do y’all got more dinosaur books?”

“We do.”

“A lot?”

“Enough to keep you busy for a while.”

Mila nodded, satisfied. “We coming back.”

Luna’s eyes flicked toward mine.

“I guess that settles it.”

“Apparently.”

Mila walked toward the door, already pulling one of the books from the bag.

“Not while you’re walking,” I said.

She stopped long enough to open it anyway.

Luna leaned against the counter. “You finish the gallery?”

“Almost.”

“I thought you said the end of the week.”

“Saturday still counts.”

“Barely.”

“I’ll send it this evening.”

“No rush.”

Mila tugged on my hand.

“Daddy.”

“We’re leaving.”

I looked back at Luna. “Thanks for helping her.”

“She made it easy.”

“That’s not how I’d describe her.”

“I like her.”

For some reason, that landed differently than it should have. I hadn’t realized until then that I’d wanted her to.

Mila tugged again.

I opened the door.

“We’ll see you around.”

“I have a feeling you will.”

The bell chimed as we stepped back onto the sidewalk.

Mila waited until we were halfway to the truck before looking up at me.

“I like that bookstore.”

“You do?”

“And the lady.”

I glanced down at her. “You’ve known her for ten minutes.”

“She know about dragons.”

“Fair enough.”

Mila hugged the bag closer to her chest as we continued toward the truck.

Behind us, Chapter & Charm disappeared between the boutique and the flower shop. But Luna crouching beside Mila, listening as though dinosaur books were the most important decision she’d make all day, stayed with me.

Mila was right.

We’d be back.

OceanofPDF.com



I LOOKED up from the register when the bell above the door chimed.

A woman stepped inside, paused just past the entrance, and slowly turned in a circle, taking in the shelves around her.

I smiled.

First-timers always did that.

"Hi," I called. "Welcome to Chapter & Charm."

She returned the smile as she made her way over. "Hi. I need help finding a book."

“You’ve come to the right place.”

She rested both hands on the counter. "I'm trying to buy a book for my sister, but I have absolutely no idea what she likes."

I laughed.

"That's okay. We can figure it out together."

"She's thirty-five. Loves romance. Says she's 'read all the good ones,' which feels impossible."

"I've heard that sentence at least once a week."

The woman grinned.

"So there's hope?"

"Always."

I stepped out from behind the register and motioned toward the romance section.

"Tell me about her. Is she a happy ending no matter what kind of reader, or does she enjoy having her heart ripped out before it's put back together?"

She stopped walking.

"...Those are options?"

"They're very different options."

She thought for a moment.

"I think...a little bit both?"

“Perfect. My favorite kind of reader. That narrows it down."

Behind me, Naomi snorted from the café.

"Only Luna could call 'both' narrowing it down."

"It makes sense in my head."

"I'm sure it does."

The customer laughed as we disappeared more into the romance section.

An hour later, she left with three books instead of one and promised she'd be back if her sister approved.

I watched her walk out carrying the bookstore bag against her hip before turning back toward the register.

“Three books,” Naomi said. “You did it again.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Mhm.”

“I didn’t.”

“You also handed her a fourth book before she left.”

“That one was a recommendation.”

“That she bought.”

“I never said I was good at self-control.”

Naomi laughed and disappeared back behind the espresso machine.

My phone vibrated against the counter.

I glanced at the screen.

Ellis Monroe

Subject: Open Mic Gallery

I stared at the notification for a second before locking my phone again.

"You're not gonna open it?" Naomi asked without looking up from the latte she was pouring.

“It’s the gallery from Tuesday. I want time to actually look through it.”

She glanced around the bookstore. “Looks like you’ve got time.”

I followed her gaze.

For the first time all afternoon, the shelves had gone quiet. A man sat near the front windows with a paperback open across one knee, and two teenagers whispered to each other near the young adult section, but neither looked like they needed me.

Naomi slid the finished latte toward the woman waiting at the café counter, then wiped her hands on the towel tucked into her apron.

I pulled my laptop onto the counter.

"Happy now?"

"Ecstatic."

I opened my inbox, found Ellis's email at the top of the screen, and clicked it.

LUNA,

THANK YOU AGAIN FOR TRUSTING ME WITH THE EVENT. THE FULL GALLERY IS LINKED BELOW. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO DOWNLOAD BOTH HIGH-RESOLUTION FILES AND SMALLER VERSIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA.

I INCLUDED A SEPARATE FOLDER WITH A FEW OF MY FAVORITES, BUT EVERYTHING IS YOURS TO USE.

LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK. IF IT'S EASIER, FEEL FREE TO TEXT ME WITH ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GALLERY.

ELLIS

236-874-8335

The message was simple. Professional. Exactly what I should have expected.

Still, I read it twice before tapping the link.

A black screen loaded first, followed by the Chapter & Charm logo and a photograph of the storefront beneath it. The gold lettering across the window glowed beneath the streetlights, and through the glass, rows of people faced the small stage we had pieced together near the back of the store.

I hadn't seen the building from that angle that night.

I hadn't had time.

While everyone else arrived, settled in, ordered drinks, and found their seats, I had been moving between the register, the café, and the stage, checking off tasks in my head faster than I could complete them.

But in Ellis's photograph, none of that showed.

Chapter & Charm looked warm. Full. Alive.

"Oh," I said quietly.

Naomi came around the café counter. “Move.”

“There’s an entire counter over there.”

“And the pictures are over here.”

She squeezed in beside me, smelling like vanilla syrup and coffee, and rested her elbow on the counter while I opened the first folder.

The opening shot was of the crowd before the event began. People stood between the shelves with drinks in their hands, leaning into conversations with strangers. The next showed Mr. and Mrs. Williams seated in the second row, her head tipped toward his while he whispered something that had her trying not to laugh.

There was Rachel near the side of the stage, gripping her pages with both hands.

Then Rachel again, this time at the microphone.

Her shoulders were still tense, but her chin was lifted. The audience behind her had blurred into soft shadows, leaving her at the center of the frame as if she belonged there.

“He captured her beautifully,” I murmured.

Naomi nodded. “He did.”

Every photograph seemed to pause on a moment I hadn’t known existed: Rachel’s nervous smile before her name was called. Denise’s quiet exhale after finishing her poem. A woman brushing away tears. Friends leaning into each other. Naomi laughing so hard she had to brace herself against the espresso machine.

Ellis hadn’t just captured Open Mic Night.

He’d captured what it felt like to be there.

I continued scrolling.

It was me.

I stood beside Rachel near the stage, one hand resting lightly on her arm while she looked down at the pages she’d nearly dropped. My mouth was open mid-sentence. Rachel’s brows had loosened, the panic from moments before no longer pinching her face.

I remembered telling her to take her time.

That no one in the room wanted her to fail.

What I didn’t remember was Ellis standing close enough to capture it.

Naomi went quiet beside me.

I enlarged the photo.

My curls had started to frizz around the edges from moving around all evening, and one side of my blouse had come untucked. I wasn't posed. I wasn't looking at the camera or thinking about how I appeared.

But I looked happy. Settled, like there wasn't anywhere else I would rather be.

I hadn't realized that was what I looked like when I was doing the thing I loved most.

"That's a really good picture of you," Naomi said.

"It is."

Her head turned sharply toward me. "Look at you accepting a compliment without arguing."

"I can admit when a picture is good."

"Mhm."

"It's not even really about me. Look at Rachel."

"I'm looking at both of you."

I closed the enlarged image and continued through the gallery before Naomi could say anything else.

There were more pictures of me than I expected, though not enough to feel strange. In most of them, I was somewhere in the background—greeting guests, speaking with Denise, carrying an extra chair through the aisle. He had captured the parts of the night I had been too busy to notice.

By the time I reached the final photograph, the man near the window had closed his book and was making his way toward the register.

I locked my phone and slid it beneath the counter.

"Hi," I said as he approached. "Find everything okay?"

He placed the paperback in front of me. "I did. Do you have any more by this author?"

"I think we have two in stock."

I scanned the book, then walked him back to the shelf to show him the others. He bought all three, along with a blueberry muffin Naomi convinced him he needed for the ride home.

The quiet stretch ended after that.

By closing time, I had only managed to look through half the gallery again.

Naomi flipped the sign on the door while I counted the register.

"We're doing another one," she announced.

I kept sorting bills. "Another what?"

“Open Mic Night.”

“That’s not a decision you get to make by yourself.”

“I’m not making it by myself. The pictures made it.”

I glanced up at her.

She nodded toward my phone. “You saw that place Tuesday night. People loved it.”

“I know they did.”

“So why would we make it a one-time thing?”

“Because one successful event doesn’t automatically mean we need to add something else to our schedule every month.”

“True.”

“And we’d have to coordinate the performers, rearrange the store, order extra café supplies, promote it, make sure Maya can work—”

“Also true.”

Naomi crossed the store and leaned against the counter.

“You’re listing logistics like I said we should do it again next Tuesday.”

“That sounds like something you would suggest.”

“I was thinking next month.”

I tucked the deposit slip beneath the cash tray.

“It could work,” she continued. “Not just poetry either. We could do an author spotlight one month. Maybe acoustic music another.”

“We are not turning the bookstore into a concert venue.”

“One man and a guitar is hardly a concert.”

“One man and a guitar can still get us a noise complaint.”

She smiled. “So you’ve considered it.”

“I’m considering asking you to mop.”

“Now you’re getting bossy.”

I laughed and handed her the keys to the supply closet.

“Go.”

She walked away mumbling about hostile work environments, but the idea stayed with me.

Another Open Mic Night.

Until Naomi said it aloud, I hadn’t let myself think beyond Tuesday. The possibility that people might want another one had seemed too optimistic to hold onto.

Now there were photographs proving they had come, and more than that, they had stayed.

When I returned to the front, she was waiting with her purse over one shoulder.

“Monthly,” she said.

I picked up my keys. “Good night, Naomi.”

“Every second Tuesday.”

“Drive safely.”

“We could call it—”

“Go home.”

She laughed as we stepped outside.

The humidity wrapped around me immediately, thick enough that my curls would regret the short walk to my car. I locked the front door and tugged it once, then again when Naomi looked at me.

I waited until her headlights came on before getting into mine. The steering wheel was warm beneath my palms, and the air conditioner took several seconds to do more than push hot air into my face.

By the time I pulled onto the street, Naomi’s idea had already begun arranging itself in my head despite my best efforts to leave work at work.

Monthly Open Mic.

A local author series.

Maybe a children’s story hour on Saturday mornings.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

One thing at a time.

Tuesday had been successful.

That should have been enough.

But somewhere between Ellis’s photographs and Naomi’s impossible ideas, Chapter & Charm suddenly felt smaller than the dreams I’d stopped letting myself have.



MY APARTMENT WAS quiet when I got home. After changing into an oversized T-shirt and my favorite Victoria’s Secret slippers, I reheated the pasta in my refrigerator and settled onto the couch with a glass of sweet tea.

I turned on an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, something familiar enough that it wouldn't matter when I stopped paying attention.

Which happened almost immediately.

I opened Ellis's email again.

Before I clicked the link, my eyes drifted to the bottom of Ellis's message.

If it's easier, feel free to text me with any questions about the gallery.

Beneath it was his phone number.

I stared at it for a second.

It was probably something he included with every client.

Still...

Before I could overthink it, I added him to my contacts. ***Ellis Monroe.***

Satisfied, I opened the gallery again. I balanced my plate on one knee and returned to the first photograph.

Without Naomi beside me or any customers, I moved through the images more slowly.

Ellis had photographed the room without making anyone look observed. I didn't know how he did that. Maybe it was patience. Maybe it was knowing when not to interrupt a moment by asking someone to look at the camera.

I stopped at the photograph of Rachel and me again.

Seeing myself through someone else's eyes had always made me uncomfortable. Even when the picture was good, I usually found something to criticize before anyone else could.

My smile looked forced.

My arms looked awkward.

My hair had been better before the humidity got to it.

But this time, none of those thoughts came.

Ellis hadn't made me look perfect.

He had made me look like myself.

I opened my messages and tapped Ellis's name.

Ellis, I finally had a chance to sit down and look through everything properly. These are beautiful. You managed to capture exactly what I hoped the night would feel like, including moments I didn't even realize were happening. Thank you for being so thoughtful with it.

I read the message twice.

It sounded too formal.

I deleted *being so thoughtful with it* and typed:

Thank you for seeing the heart of it.

That felt more honest.

The episode playing on television ended and moved into the next one. I set my empty plate on the coffee table, promising myself I would take it to the kitchen in a minute.

Naomi's voice returned to me.

Why would we make it a one-time thing?

My planner sat on the shelf beneath the coffee table. I pulled it free and flipped past the pages filled with supply orders, payroll reminders, and upcoming releases.

The following month was mostly blank.

I found the second Tuesday and wrote:

Open Mic Night?

The question mark bothered me.

I crossed it out, rewrote the words beneath it, and circled them.

Then I turned to the notes section.

Local Author Spotlight

Saturday Story Hour

Romance Book Club

I added Blind Date with a Book Night, stared at it, then drew a line through it because Naomi would somehow turn it into actual speed dating if given the opportunity.

My phone vibrated beside me.

I reached for it too quickly and nearly knocked over my tea.

Ellis had replied.

I'm glad you like them. The heart was already there. I just happened to have my camera.

A smile pulled at my mouth.

Before I could put the phone down, another message appeared beneath the first.

Are you planning to make Open Mic a regular event?

I looked toward the open planner on my lap.

Apparently, I wasn't the only person who had seen the possibility in those photographs.

Naomi already decided we are. I'm still pretending to weigh the pros and cons.

Another text appeared.

Sounds like Naomi.

I sat up a little straighter.

He had only met her twice, but somehow that was enough.

You caught on quickly.

She isn't subtle.

I laughed softly and glanced toward the television, though I had no idea what was happening onscreen anymore.

No, she is not.

His next response took longer.

For what it's worth, I think you should do it again. People were still talking about the event when Mila and I stopped by today.

I read the sentence twice.

There was nothing particularly personal about it, but knowing he'd noticed what people were saying sent a little warmth through my chest.

I think we might. Maybe monthly. I'm also considering a few other events.

I looked down at the list in my planner.

The next thought came before I could talk myself out of it.

Would you be interested in photographing more of them?

This time, the typing bubble appeared, disappeared, then returned.

Definitely.

One word, but the speed of the answer made me smile.

Another message followed.

Actually, I had a couple ideas while I was putting the gallery together. Not just for the events. The store photographs well, and you could probably use some updated images for the website and social media.

I glanced around my apartment as if someone might be there to see the way my eyebrows lifted.

He had been thinking about Chapter & Charm after the job was finished.

I have been meaning to update those. Meaning to was the important part.

I figured. Your website still has an old café counter in half the pictures.

My mouth fell open.

You looked at the website?

His reply came a few seconds later.

Research.

I narrowed my eyes at the screen.

Of course. Very professional.

Extremely.

But it no longer felt like a text exchange between a client and a photographer.

My thumb hovered over the keyboard.

Before I could decide what to say, another message appeared.

It might be easier to talk through the ideas in person. Are you at the store before opening Monday?

I checked the calendar even though I already knew the answer.

I'll be there around eight-thirty.

I can stop by at nine. I'll bring coffee.

I smiled before I could stop myself.

Naomi runs the café. She may take that personally.

Then I'll bring breakfast and let her handle the coffee.

The apartment suddenly felt quieter than it had a few minutes ago, still enough for me to notice that I was sitting alone on my couch, smiling at my phone over plans that could have easily been handled through email.

Nine works.

See you Monday, Luna.

I looked at my name on the screen longer than necessary.

Then I set the phone beside me and stared down at the planner still open across my lap.

For the first time since opening Chapter & Charm, the ideas didn't feel like more weight being added to my shoulders.

They felt possible.

Maybe because, for once, I was letting myself think about what the bookstore could become instead of everything it would take to get there.

I picked up my pen and wrote one more note at the bottom of the page.

Monday, 9:00 — Ellis

I drew a box around it, then closed the planner before I could examine why seeing his name there made me feel like something had already begun to change.

OceanofPDF.com



THE FIRST SOUND I heard every Monday morning was the alarm on my nightstand.

The second was the house settling around me.

I reached across the mattress without opening my eyes, silencing the alarm before it could buzz again, then stayed where I was for another minute anyway.

I let out a quiet breath and swung my legs over the side of the bed, pausing long enough to stretch the stiffness from my shoulders before making my way toward the bathroom. By the time I finished showering and getting dressed, the mirror had long since cleared. I ran a hand over the low waves I'd brushed into place, checked the line of my beard out of habit, then followed the smell of coffee into the kitchen.

That first cup always tasted better standing at the counter.

Maybe because the house hadn't fully woken up yet.

Maybe because for a few minutes, everything was still.

I wrapped both hands around the mug and looked out the window above the sink. The grass still glistened from the sprinklers that ran before sunrise, and Mrs. Patterson across the street was already out walking the little white dog that barked at absolutely everything except the mailman, who probably deserved it most.

The corner of my mouth lifted.

Some things never changed.

Others did without asking permission.

My gaze wandered down the hallway, stopping where it always seemed to when the house was quiet.

The framed photograph hanging beside the linen closet wasn’t large. Just a candid I’d taken years ago of Elena sitting on the back porch with Mila asleep against her chest. The edges of the frame caught the morning light, and for a second, it almost looked like she was smiling into it.

I found myself smiling back.

“Morning.”

The word came naturally, without expectation or any conversation about what it meant. Just an acknowledgment, the same way some people waved at a neighbor while passing their house.

I took another sip of coffee before lowering my head.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, the words meant for Someone else entirely. “For another day.”

That was usually where my prayers started.

Not with requests.

With gratitude.

The rest tended to find their way in eventually.

A floorboard creaked somewhere down the hall, followed by the unmistakable sound of a bedroom door opening.

“Daddy?”

I set my mug in the sink before she had the chance to call again.

A few seconds passed before Mila appeared at the end of the hallway, one hand rubbing at her eyes while the other held her stuffed elephant by its trunk. Her curls pointed in every direction, and one side of her face still carried the faint imprint of her pillowcase.

“There she is.”

She squinted at me. “How’d you know it was me?”

“I took a wild guess.”

She considered that for a second before nodding. “You’re good at guessing.”

“I’ve had practice.”

She padded the rest of the way into the kitchen and wrapped both arms around my waist without saying anything. Mornings usually started this

way. No matter how independent she insisted she was these days, she still needed a minute before she was ready to be six years old.

I rested my chin against the top of her head.

“You sleep okay?”

“Mhm.”

“Any dinosaurs chase you last night?”

“No.” She pulled back just enough to look up at me. “Just a turtle.”

“A turtle?”

“He was nice.”

“That’s good to know.”

“He said I still need one.”

I laughed, already reaching into the cabinet for a cereal bowl.

“The turtle would say that.”

“He was very convincing.”

“I’m sure he was.”

By the time I’d poured her cereal and sliced a banana over the top, she’d wandered into the bathroom to brush her teeth. I started packing her lunch while she hummed some song she’d apparently learned at camp over the summer, loud enough that I could hear every third word from down the hall.

“Daddy?”

Her voice echoed through the hallway.

“Yeah?”

“Can I wear my butterfly shirt?”

I glanced toward the pile of clothes I’d already laid across the foot of her bed.

“I picked something out.”

“But does it have butterflies?”

“...No.”

She went quiet long enough that I thought she might actually be considering it before calling back, “I vote butterflies.”

“I had a feeling you might.”

Five minutes later, she’d successfully argued her case. The dinosaur shirt I’d picked out was folded neatly back into her dresser, replaced by a lavender shirt covered in butterflies wearing tiny sunglasses.

By the time we were both dressed, backpacks packed, and lunches zipped inside insulated bags, the house had fully come alive. The dishwasher hummed in the background, cartoons played softly from the

living room where Mila insisted they made breakfast taste better, and my coffee had gone from hot to merely warm after being reheated twice.

That was about average.

I grabbed my mug and leaned against the counter while Mila finished the last few bites of cereal, kicking her legs against the barstool.

I rinsed out the bowl she'd left behind and set it in the sink, then reached for my keys from the ceramic tray near the door. My camera bag was already waiting beside it, packed the night before with an extra battery, a notebook, and my laptop.

I almost walked past the bakery box sitting on the counter.

Almost.

I'd picked it up on my way home yesterday afternoon after deciding it would be easier than trying to stop somewhere before nine. Fresh croissants, blueberry muffins, and a handful of cinnamon rolls filled the white box, the smell of butter and sugar escaping the moment I lifted the lid to make sure everything still looked the way I remembered.

It did.

I closed the box again, grabbed the handles, and reached for my coffee.

"Daddy?"

Mila stood in the doorway with one sneaker on and the other dangling from her fingertips.

"Who's that breakfast for?"

I looked down at the box.

"The bookstore."

She nodded like that answered everything.

Maybe to her, it did.

"I like the bookstore."

"I know you do."

"Can I come?"

"Not today. You've got school."

She sighed dramatically enough to belong on a stage.

"I always have school."

I laughed as I bent down to help her tie the shoe she'd somehow managed to knot around itself before it ever made it onto her foot.

"I think your teacher would disagree."

Mila didn't look convinced, but she finally pushed her foot into the sneaker and stood while I grabbed her backpack from the hook near the

door.

By the time we made it outside, the heat had already started settling over the neighborhood, carrying the kind of Mississippi humidity that made the air feel heavier than it had any right to this early in the day. I got Mila settled in the backseat, tucked the **baked goods** safely on the passenger-side floorboard, and pulled away from the house with enough time to make it to school without rushing.

Mila filled most of the drive with a story about a girl in her class who'd lost a tooth over the weekend and gotten five dollars from the Tooth Fairy.

By the time we reached her school, the drop-off line already stretched past the entrance.

"Have a good day, Bug. Listen to your teacher and be kind."

"I will."

She leaned between the seats far enough for me to kiss her forehead.

"Love you, Daddy."

"Love you more."

"No, you don't."

"We're not doing this in the drop-off line."

She laughed as she climbed out.

I waited until she reached the covered walkway before pulling away, catching the wave she threw over her shoulder just before disappearing through the doors.

The truck went quiet without her.

I looked at the clock on the dashboard.

8:04 a.m.

My meeting with Luna wasn't until nine, which left enough time to stop by the studio before heading to Chapter & Charm. Going home didn't make much sense, and showing up nearly an hour early definitely wasn't an option.

At the next light, I turned toward the studio.

By eight forty-five, I was back in the truck with the box beside me, this time headed toward Chapter & Charm.



I PULLED into the small lot beside Chapter & Charm at eight fifty-six.

The front windows were dark except for the lamps scattered between the shelves, and the sign on the door still read CLOSED. Through the glass, I could see Luna moving behind the front counter with a stack of papers tucked beneath one arm.

I grabbed my camera bag from the backseat and balanced the bakery box against my hip before heading toward the entrance.

She looked up when I knocked.

For a second, she just stood there.

Then her eyes dropped to the box in my hands, and a smile spread across her face as she came around the counter.

The lock clicked.

“You actually brought breakfast.”

I stepped inside. “I said I would.”

“I thought you were being polite.”

“I don’t make promises about food I don’t intend to keep.”

“That’s a very serious stance.”

“It should be.”

She laughed as she locked the door behind me again. “Good morning.”

“Morning.”

The bookstore felt different before opening. Quieter than it had been Saturday, without customers moving between the shelves or the espresso machine running in the background. Music played low enough that I couldn’t make out the song, and the smell of coffee lingered in the air even though the café lights were still off.

“Naomi isn’t here yet?”

“Not until nine forty-five.”

I looked down at the bakery box.

“So I have about forty minutes before she judges what I brought.”

“Less than that. She has a gift.”

“I’ll prepare myself.”

Luna motioned toward the café. “You can put everything over there. I’m almost finished with the opening stuff.”

I followed her toward one of the tables while she returned to the counter. A notebook lay open beside the register, along with a calculator, two pens, and what looked like a stack of invoices.

“You always get here this early?”

“Usually earlier.”

“What time?”

“Depends on the day.”

“That’s not an answer.”

She glanced at me. “Seven-thirty. Sometimes eight.”

“And you open at ten?”

“Mhm.”

I looked toward the sign on the door and then back at her.

“So you voluntarily come to work early?”

“It’s different when you own the place.”

“I own my studio.”

“And?”

“And I don’t voluntarily show up earlier than needed.”

“That’s because you lack dedication.”

She said it without looking up from her notebook, her pen still moving across the page like she hadn’t just insulted me.

I laughed and set my camera bag beside the chair. “That’s what it is.”

“Obviously.”

She finished whatever she’d been writing and closed the notebook before joining me at the table.

“Okay. What did you bring?”

“I thought we were here to talk about pictures.”

“We can talk about pictures after I determine whether inviting you here was worth it.”

“That’s fair.”

I opened the bakery box.

Her eyes widened.

“You brought all of this?”

“Cinnamon rolls, blueberry muffins, croissants.”

“There’s enough food in here for six people.”

“I didn’t know what you liked.”

“So you bought the bakery.”

“Seemed easier.”

She reached for a cinnamon roll, then stopped with her hand hovering over the box.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Where did you get these?”

“Sweet Magnolia.”

Her hand dropped immediately.

“Okay, you can stay.”

I laughed. “That serious?”

“Their cinnamon rolls are to die for.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She looked at me.

I reached for a blueberry muffin.

Luna seemed not to notice.

Or maybe she did and decided not to say anything.

“Do you want coffee?” she asked.

“I already had some.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

I looked toward the dark café.

“I thought Naomi wasn’t here.”

“She’s not. I do know how to work the espresso machine.”

“Does she know that?”

“Unfortunately.”

I smiled. “Then yeah. Coffee would be good.”

“Regular?”

“Yes, black please.”

She stopped walking.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Luna.”

She turned around slowly. “You drink black coffee?”

“Every day.”

“On purpose?”

“Usually.”

Her face did something between confusion and disappointment.

I leaned back in my chair, already entertained by how personally she seemed to be taking this. “What do you put in yours?”

“Things that make it taste good.”

“Black coffee does taste good.”

“Black coffee tastes like somebody burned a bean and poured hot water over it.”

“That’s exactly what happened.”

“Which is why we add things.”

She gestured toward the café like the collection of syrups behind the counter proved her point.

I laughed as she disappeared behind the café counter.

I liked that.

Probably more than I needed to.

I pulled my laptop from my bag while she worked behind the counter. The espresso machine hissed to life, followed by the clink of a mug against the counter.

She came around the counter carrying two mugs. Mine was black. Hers was several shades lighter and topped with enough foam to prove she’d ignored everything she’d just said about keeping things simple.

She set mine in front of me.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

She sat across from me with her cinnamon roll and pulled her notebook closer.

“So.”

“So.”

“You apparently have ideas.”

“I do.”

“Enough ideas to invite yourself back into my bookstore.”

I paused with my coffee halfway to my mouth.

“I don’t remember inviting myself.”

“You suggested an in-person meeting.”

“And you agreed.”

“Because you offered breakfast.”

“Ah. So this is transactional.”

“Very.”

I smiled and opened my laptop.

“Good to know.”

Her expression shifted when I pulled up the Chapter & Charm website, amusement giving way to something closer to embarrassment.

“Oh, God.”

“What?”

“You really did look at it.”

“I told you I did.”

“I thought you meant you glanced at it.”

“I don’t glance.”

“Of course you don’t.”

I turned the laptop slightly so she could see the screen better.

“The website isn’t bad.”

“That sounded like the beginning of an insult.”

“It’s not.”

“It definitely is.”

“It’s functional. It’s easy to navigate. The problem is the pictures don’t match the store anymore.”

She leaned closer.

Her shoulder brushed mine for barely a second before she shifted the chair toward the laptop.

It wasn’t enough to mean anything.

Still, I noticed.

I clicked onto the About page.

“This one is probably the biggest example.”

The photograph at the top showed Luna standing behind the old café counter. Her hair was shorter, the wall behind her was painted a different color, and half the shelving I’d photographed Tuesday night didn’t exist yet.

She groaned.

“I hate that picture.”

“Why?”

“Because I look tired.”

“You probably were.”

“I was.”

“Then it’s accurate.”

She looked at me. “You’re supposed to tell me I look great.”

“I thought this was a business meeting.”

“It is.”

“Then you look accurately tired.”

Her mouth dropped open.

I laughed before she could respond.

“I’m kidding. It’s not a bad picture. Just outdated.”

She reached for her coffee, still looking suspiciously at the screen.

“I’ve been meaning to replace these for at least a year.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Time, mostly. And every time I think about updating the website, something else feels more important.”

I nodded because I understood that better than she probably realized. The things that weren’t actively on fire tended to stay exactly where they were.

“That’s why I brought it up,” I said. “You’ve already done the hard part.”

She looked at me.

“What’s the hard part?”

“Building a place worth photographing.”

Her fingers stilled around her mug.

I clicked back to the homepage before I could think too much about the way she went quiet.

“The pictures are easy.”

Luna looked at the screen for another second before reaching for her notebook.

“Okay,” she said, flipping to a clean page. “What do you think we need?”

“We?”

She looked up. “You came in here with ideas. You’re involved now.”

“I didn’t realize that was how this worked.”

“It is today.”

I smiled and turned the laptop back toward myself.

“First, the storefront. What you have now isn’t bad, but it doesn’t show what the place looks like when people are actually here. Tuesday night did.”

“That was also eighty people packed inside.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t hire eighty people to stand around every time we need a picture.”

“You don’t need eighty.”

I clicked back to the gallery and pulled up the photograph from outside the store. Even in the morning light coming through the windows around us, the warmth of Tuesday night came through on the screen.

“You need people,” I said. “The bookstore looks good empty, but that’s not what makes it interesting.”

Luna rested her chin against one hand.

“What does?”

I glanced around.

“The fact that people want to stay.”

Her eyes followed mine toward the front of the store.

The chairs from Open Mic Night were gone, and the tables had been returned to their usual places, but the room still carried pieces of the same feeling. A paperback sat facedown beside one of the armchairs near the window. Someone had left a handwritten recommendation card sticking out beneath a display. A ceramic mug waited upside down beside the espresso machine.

“It doesn’t look staged,” I continued. “That’s what I’d lean into. People browsing. Somebody sitting with coffee and a book. The café when it’s busy. Naomi working. You at the counter.”

Her pen stopped.

“Me?”

“You own the place.”

“I know that.”

“Then why do you sound surprised?”

“Because I thought we were talking about the bookstore.”

“We are.”

“I don’t need to be in the pictures.”

I leaned back in my chair.

“You’re in half the ones from Tuesday.”

“By accident.”

“And they work.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “You’re very determined to photograph me.”

There was enough amusement in her voice to keep the question light, but it still caught me off guard.

“I’m determined to photograph the person who owns the business we’re trying to promote.”

“Very professional.”

“Extremely.”

Her mouth curved.

I recognized the callback immediately.

So did she.

For a second, neither of us said anything.

Then Luna looked down at her notebook and started writing again.

“What else?”

I let her have the subject change.

“Details.”

“What kind of details?”

“The things people notice when they’re actually here.”

I pointed toward the shelves behind her.

“Staff recommendations. Displays. The coffee. Whatever makes Chapter & Charm look like Chapter & Charm instead of any bookstore somebody could find online.”

She wrote as I talked, occasionally stopping to ask a question or draw an arrow between two ideas. Her handwriting got smaller the farther she moved down the page until she finally turned to another one.

“We could do seasonal pictures too,” she said. “Not every month, because absolutely not, but maybe a few times a year.”

“That would work.”

“And when we do another Open Mic Night—”

I looked at her.

She stopped.

“What?”

“You said when.”

Her eyes dropped to the notebook.

“I said if.”

“No, you said when.”

A line appeared between her brows as if she could somehow force the last ten seconds to rearrange themselves.

“I haven’t officially decided.”

I nodded toward the notebook. “Looks pretty official from here.”

She glanced down at Open Mic Night circled twice.

“That means nothing.”

“Of course.”

“You’re irritating.”

“I’ve been told.”

“Recently?”

“Very.”

That earned another laugh.

She flipped the page before I could see what else she'd written, but not fast enough.

"Wait."

Her hand stopped.

"What?"

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"That was a whole page of nothing."

She pulled the notebook closer to herself.

"You're nosy."

"It was directly in front of me."

"Ellis."

I laughed. "Fine."

I reached for my coffee.

She stared at me for another second before opening the notebook again.

"Local Author Spotlight," she read.

I lowered the mug.

"Saturday Story Hour. Romance Book Club."

She hesitated.

"And apparently I briefly considered Blind Date with a Book Night."

"Why briefly?"

"Because Naomi would turn it into actual speed dating."

I laughed.

"You think I'm joking."

"I don't."

"That's the problem."

She smiled and looked back at the page.

"I don't know. They're just ideas."

"You have a lot of those."

"Too many."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"When you're the person who has to figure out how to make all of them happen? Sometimes."

She tapped the end of her pen against the paper.

"I've always wanted this place to be more than somewhere people come to buy books."

I didn't say anything.

Something about the way she said it made me think she wasn’t finished.

She looked around the store before continuing.

“When I was figuring out what I wanted Chapter & Charm to be, I kept coming back to how bookstores made me feel growing up. I could go in one by myself and stay for hours without feeling like I was somewhere I didn’t belong.”

Her thumb moved slowly along the edge of the notebook.

“I wanted that here. Somewhere people could come alone and not feel alone, if that makes sense.”

“It does.”

“People can buy books anywhere now. Half the time they can get them cheaper without leaving home.”

“That’s a hell of a sales pitch.”

She laughed. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“So if they’re going to come here, I want there to be a reason beyond the book itself. Maybe they meet somebody at a book club. Maybe they hear a poem that sticks with them. Maybe a kid comes to story hour and finds the first book they actually love.”

She shrugged, almost like she hadn’t just explained the entire reason the place existed.

“I just want people to feel like they can stay.”

I looked past her toward the front windows.

Tuesday night made more sense now.

The chairs squeezed between shelves. The extra tables. The café running nonstop. Luna moving from person to person while somehow making each interaction look like it deserved all of her attention.

Even Saturday, when Mila had been trying to decide between dinosaurs and dragons, Luna hadn’t spoken to her like she was a kid taking up space in an adult bookstore. She’d crouched beside her and listened.

I looked back at Luna.

“You did it.”

She frowned. “Did what?”

“Built what you just described.”

Her expression changed, not much, but enough that I noticed.

“I’m still working on it.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t already here.”

She lowered her eyes to the notebook, and for once, she didn’t have an answer waiting.

I took another drink of coffee and gave her the space to find one.

“Why photography?”

The question caught me off guard.

“What?”

She looked up again. “You know why I opened a bookstore now. Seems unfair that I don’t know anything about you.”

“You know things about me.”

“I know you have a daughter, you own a studio, you drink terrible coffee, and apparently you spend your free time judging outdated websites.”

“That’s plenty.”

“It really isn’t.”

I laughed and leaned back in my chair.

“What do you want to know?”

“When did you know you wanted to be a photographer?”

I looked down at the laptop between us.

There wasn’t one answer.

I’d taken pictures long before I ever thought somebody might pay me for them. Disposable cameras when I was a kid. My mother’s old digital camera when I got older. A used DSLR I’d saved for months to buy because I was convinced better equipment would automatically make me better at using it.

It hadn’t.

“I don’t think I knew,” I said. “Not at first.”

Luna waited.

“I just liked taking pictures.”

“Of what?”

“Everything.”

“That sounds expensive.”

“It got expensive.”

She smiled.

“I was the annoying person who always had a camera around. Family stuff. Friends. Random things I thought looked interesting.”

“Were you good?”

“No.”

She laughed. “Not even a little?”

“I thought I was.”

“That’s worse.”

“Much worse.”

Her laugh lingered as she reached for her mug, and I found myself smiling with her.

“I got better. Eventually people started asking me to take pictures for them. Graduations first. A couple family sessions. Then somebody trusted me with a wedding, which I’m still not convinced was a good decision on their part.”

“Did you ruin it?”

“No.”

“Then I think you were fine.”

“They got lucky.”

“Or you were good.”

“Maybe both.”

I ran my thumb along the edge of my mug as she studied me for a second.

“You talk about pictures differently.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” She tilted her head. “Like you’re not really interested in making things look perfect.”

“I’m not.”

“That sounds like a strange thing for a photographer to admit.”

“Perfect usually isn’t interesting.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

I nodded toward the laptop.

“Rachel’s picture wouldn’t have been better if I’d stopped her and fixed her hair first. Mrs. Williams wouldn’t have laughed the same way if I’d asked her husband to whisper something again. You wouldn’t have looked the same if I’d told you I was taking your picture.”

Her eyes held mine.

“So you just wait?”

“Sometimes.”

“For what?”

“The part people aren’t doing for the camera.”

Something in her expression softened.

“You make it sound like you’re collecting memories.”

The words landed somewhere I hadn’t expected.

For a moment, all I could hear was the low music playing through the store and the faint hum of the refrigerator behind the café counter.

Memories.

I’d spent years taking them for other people.

Birthdays. Weddings. Babies. Families.

Proof that somebody had been there.

That something had happened.

That a moment existed even after it was gone.

“Something like that,” I said.

The lock at the front door clicked before Luna could ask anything else.

Naomi stepped inside carrying an oversized tote bag on one shoulder and sunglasses pushed onto the top of her head.

Her gaze went to Luna.

Then me.

Then the open laptop.

Then the bakery box.

She closed the door behind her.

“Is that Sweet Magnolia?”

Luna sighed.

“Good morning to you too.”

Naomi dropped her bag behind the counter and walked straight toward us.

“I asked a question.”

“It is,” I said.

She opened the box and stared inside.

“You brought outside baked goods into my café?”

“I was told you might take it personally.”

Her eyes moved slowly toward Luna.

Luna lifted both hands. “I warned him.”

Naomi looked back at me.

Then she reached into the box and took a croissant.

“I’ll allow it.”

I nodded. “Appreciate that.”

She tore off a piece and pointed it at the laptop.

“What are we doing?”

“Apparently,” Luna said, “Ellis has decided my entire website is outdated.”

“I said the pictures were outdated.”

“Same thing.”

Naomi chewed thoughtfully. “He’s right.”

Luna stared at her.

“What? I’ve been telling you we need new pictures.”

I looked between them. “You two do this every morning?”

“Yes,” they answered at the same time.

I laughed.

Naomi pulled out the chair beside Luna and sat down.

“All right, photographer. Tell me what we’re changing.”

“We’re updating the pictures,” I said. “Storefront, café, shelves, staff. Luna.”

Naomi looked at her. “Obviously Luna.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Luna said.

“You own the bookstore. Why wouldn’t you be in the pictures?”

“That’s what I said.”

Luna looked between us. “You two have known each other for five minutes.”

“Some things don’t require time,” Naomi said.

I laughed.

The front of the store suddenly felt a lot less quiet than it had twenty minutes ago.

And somehow, I didn’t mind.

Naomi stayed long enough to give her opinion on a few of the ideas before finally carrying her bag behind the café counter to start opening for the day.

Luna shook her head as she watched her go.

“She’s been like this since college.”

“How have you survived?”

“Barely.”

“I heard that,” Naomi called.

“You were supposed to.”

The lights over the café came on one section at a time. Luna checked the time and pushed her chair back.

“We open in about ten minutes.”

I glanced at the corner of my screen.

9:50.

We’d been talking longer than I’d realized.

“I can get out of your way.”

“You don’t have to.”

The answer came quickly enough that I looked at her.

She seemed to realize it too.

“I mean, we haven’t finished,” she added, gesturing toward the laptop. “Unless you need to get to the studio.”

“I’ve got time.”

“Okay.”

She stood and gathered the empty napkins and paper plates from the table.

“Give me a few minutes to finish opening?”

“Take your time.”

While Luna finished opening, I organized the shot list we’d made.

By the time she unlocked the front door, Chapter & Charm had started waking up around us.

The first customer came in less than five minutes later.

I tried to return to my notes, but mostly, I watched.

Luna crouched beside a little boy long enough to help him find a book about construction trucks, then stood and pointed his mother toward the children’s section without making either of them feel rushed.

“You’ve been staring at that same page for five minutes.”

I looked up.

Naomi stood behind the café counter watching me.

“I haven’t.”

She raised an eyebrow.

I glanced at my laptop.

The same seven lines I’d written earlier stared back at me.

“Thinking.”

“Mhm.”

I knew that sound.

I’d heard Luna make it enough times.

“Don’t start.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were about to.”

“Wasn’t.”

“You definitely were.”

Naomi smiled and turned toward the espresso machine before I could ask what exactly she thought she’d noticed.

I went back to my notes.

This time, I actually worked.

By the time Luna made it back to the table, I’d finished putting together the shot list and organizing the ideas we’d discussed into something we could actually use.

We spent another twenty minutes going over the details, stopping whenever someone needed her at the register or Naomi called her toward the café. By the time we finished, the cinnamon rolls were gone, my coffee had been empty long enough for the residue at the bottom of the mug to dry, and Chapter & Charm had settled into the steady rhythm of a weekday morning.

I closed my laptop.

“What time is it?”

Luna picked up her phone.

Her eyes widened.

“Ten forty-three.”

I looked at my watch as if her phone might be lying.

It wasn’t.

“Damn.”

She laughed. “You’ve been sitting in my business for almost two hours. Don’t you have one of your own?”

“Apparently.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You came with a whole presentation.”

“It wasn’t a presentation.”

“You had bullet points.”

“That’s called being prepared.”

“That’s called a presentation.”

I slid my laptop into my bag.

“I’ll come back Wednesday and get the rest of the photos.”

Luna reached for her phone. “What time?”

“Eight?”

She checked her calendar.

“Eight works.”

“All right.”

“And don’t be early.”

I laughed as I zipped my bag. “I’ll try.”

Naomi looked over from the café.

“You’re leaving?”

“Apparently I have a business.”

“That’s unfortunate. I was starting to like you.”

“I told you not to tell her,” Luna said.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

I stood and pushed the chair beneath the table.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

Luna walked with me toward the front, stopping when a customer asked where she could find contemporary romance.

“Second aisle on the left,” Luna said. “Past the display table. If you tell me what kind you’re looking for, I can help you in a minute.”

“I’m just browsing.”

“Take your time.”

The woman headed toward the shelves.

I glanced at Luna.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because you keep asking.”

She narrowed her eyes, but the smile pulling at her mouth ruined whatever effect she was going for.

At the door, I shifted my bag higher on my shoulder.

There was a beat where neither of us moved.

Not awkward.

Just longer than it needed to be.

Then Luna reached for the door.

“Thanks for this morning.”

“You already thanked me.”

“For the pictures.”

“Oh.”

She looked back toward the table we’d taken over for most of the morning. Her notebook was still there, open beside the empty bakery box.

“I’ve had some of those ideas sitting in my head for a while. It’s different saying them out loud.”

“Different good or different bad?”

“Good.” She smiled a little. “Less overwhelming, I guess.”

I understood that.

Ideas had a way of getting bigger when you carried them alone.

“You already had all of it figured out.”

“Not all of it.”

“Most of it.”

“Maybe.”

“You just needed to put it somewhere besides your head.”

Her eyes met mine.

“Maybe that too.”

I pushed the door open.

“And Luna?”

“Yeah?”

“Do the Open Mic Night.”

She laughed.

“I knew you were going to say that.”

“Then I saved us both time.”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“Sure.”

“I am.”

I stepped outside.

“See you Wednesday.”

“Bye, Ellis.”

I made it halfway to my truck before my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out.

You left a blueberry muffin.

I looked back at the bookstore.

Through the window, I could see her standing behind the counter with her phone in one hand.

Keep it.

The three dots appeared almost immediately.

Too late. Naomi claimed it.

I laughed.

Tell her that’s payment for allowing outside baked goods on the premises.

A few seconds passed.

She says your balance is now paid in full.

Good. I was worried about collections.

I slipped the phone into my pocket and opened the truck door.
It buzzed again before I could climb inside.
I looked down.

And I circled Open Mic Night.

I read the message once.
Then again.
A smile pulled at my mouth.

Knew you would.

Her reply came before I started the truck.

Don’t get cocky.

Too late.

I set the phone in the cup holder and pulled out of the parking lot.
I’d gone to Chapter & Charm that morning to talk about photographs.
We’d done that.
None of it had felt particularly important while it was happening.
Maybe that was why I kept thinking about it.
The light ahead turned red, and I stopped behind a line of cars.
My phone sat quiet in the cup holder now.
Wednesday at eight.

There was work to do before then. Galleries waiting at the studio, emails I should’ve answered an hour ago.

My life was still exactly what it had been when I woke up that morning. Full. Good. Nothing about that had changed because I’d spent a couple

hours at Chapter & Charm.

At least, I didn’t think it had.

But when the light turned green and I continued toward the studio, my mind wandered back to Luna anyway. More specifically, to the fact that somewhere between talking about her website and walking me through the bookstore, I’d started wondering what she might text me about next.

The thought stayed with me for the rest of the drive.

And this time, I let it.

OceanofPDF.com



THERE WERE four shirts on my bed, and somehow this was Ellis Monroe's fault.

It was Tuesday morning, and instead of getting ready for work like a normal person, I was standing at the foot of my bed in a towel, staring at four perfectly acceptable shirts like one of them had personally offended me.

The cream blouse was too plain. The rust-colored one had a neckline I suddenly wasn't sure about. The green one looked good against my caramel skin, but I'd worn it recently.

And the black one was black, which usually made it the winner.

I crossed my arms.

This was ridiculous.

They were pictures for the website, not a magazine spread.

I picked up the cream blouse.

Put it down.

Picked up the green one.

Put that down too.

My phone rang from the nightstand before I could make another decision I would immediately reverse.

Mom.

I grabbed it and answered.

“Hey, Mama.”

“Good morning. You busy?”

I looked down at the towel wrapped around me, then at the four shirts spread across my bed.

“Depends on your definition.”

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to get dressed.”

“At almost eight o’clock?”

“I’ve been up.”

“I didn’t say you hadn’t been up. I asked why you weren’t dressed.”

I smiled and put her on speaker before setting the phone on my dresser.

“Did you call to check on me or monitor my morning routine?”

“I called because I hadn’t talked to you yesterday.”

“You talked to me Sunday.”

“And today is Tuesday.”

I shook my head.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine. Your daddy has been outside messing with that grill since seven this morning.”

“The same grill he was supposed to clean last week?”

“The very one.”

I laughed and started returning shirts to my closet while she told me he’d ordered some new attachment he apparently needed despite having used the grill perfectly well without it for years.

That led to her telling me about a package she’d been waiting on, which led to my aunt, which somehow became a story about somebody from church I hadn’t seen since I was seventeen.

I stopped trying to figure out how we’d gotten there.

That was how conversations with my mother worked.

“You coming Sunday?” she asked eventually.

“I was planning to.”

“Planning?”

“I’m coming.”

“Okay, then.”

I smiled. “You know, most people ask before deciding somebody is coming to their house.”

“Most people aren’t your mother.”

“Convenient.”

“It is.”

I returned the last shirt to my closet, leaving the green one draped across the chair.

At least one decision had been made.

“What time?” I asked.

“After church is fine. I’m cooking.”

“What are you making?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Then how do you know you’re cooking?”

“Because people do it every day, Luna.”

I laughed. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Okay. Just don’t make anything weird.”

“When have I ever made anything weird?”

I opened my mouth.

“Don’t answer that.”

I laughed harder.

“I have to finish getting ready.”

“All right. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

The simple admission softened something in me.

“Well, you heard it.”

“And got smart with me the entire time.”

“You called knowing who I was.”

“That is unfortunately true.”

“Love you, Ma.”

“Love you too, baby. Have a good day.”

“You too.”

I ended the call and set my phone on the dresser.

The green blouse was still waiting on the chair.

I looked at it once more before heading toward the bathroom.

Tomorrow’s problem.

Today, I was already running five minutes behind. I finished getting ready and got dressed in something that required significantly less thought than tomorrow’s outfit had.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, I had just enough time to make coffee without convincing myself I could also sit down and enjoy it.

My planner was still open on the counter from the night before, three pages of notes staring back at me while I waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

The one thing nobody tells you about being your own boss is that every good idea eventually becomes another thing you have to do.

Somehow I'd taken one successful Tuesday night and turned it into a second Open Mic, a possible local author series, a Saturday story hour I hadn't technically committed to yet, new photographs for the website, and three pages of notes I'd written after convincing myself I was only going to jot down one thing.

This was why I couldn't be trusted with momentum.

One thing at a time.

I'd been telling myself that for years.

Apparently, I had stopped listening.

The coffee maker sputtered behind me, and I reached for my mug before adding enough vanilla creamer to make Ellis question whether what I drank could legally still be called coffee.

I paused with the bottle in my hand.

Then frowned.

Why had I thought about him?

It had been one conversation.

One very long conversation, but still.

I poured a little more creamer into my cup on principle.

Whatever.

Tuesday had enough problems of its own.

My phone lit up on the counter.

For half a second, I looked at it expecting—

I stopped myself before the thought could finish.

The notification was from Naomi.

If you're stopping anywhere before you get here, I need oat milk.

Of course she did.

Good morning to you too.

The three dots appeared.

Good morning. I need oat milk.

I smiled.

I'll get it.

And vanilla syrup.

Now you're pushing it.

We literally sell coffee, Luna.

I slipped my phone into my purse without answering.

By the time I pulled into Chapter & Charm, the morning had settled back into something familiar.

Naomi was waiting near the front door when I unlocked it.

Her eyes dropped immediately to the bag in my hand.

"You got the syrup?"

I handed it to her.

"No hello?"

"I texted you good morning."

"That doesn't count."

"It absolutely counts."

She took the bag anyway and headed toward the café.

I followed her inside, locked the door behind us, and switched on the lights.

One section at a time, Chapter & Charm woke up around me. The lamps between the shelves came on first, followed by the register and the music playing low through the speakers. Naomi started the café equipment while I opened the computer and checked the previous day's numbers.

Normal. Exactly the way I liked it.

Yesterday morning had been different.

Cinnamon rolls on the café table. A laptop open between us. Ellis sitting across from me while we somehow turned a conversation about website pictures into almost two hours.

Today, his chair was empty.

I noticed it.

Then I opened my email and got to work.

The first thing waiting for me was an invoice from one of our distributors.

The second was a shipping notification for an order I'd forgotten was arriving this week.

The third was an email from a woman who'd attended Open Mic Night asking when we were doing another one.

I stopped scrolling.

Her message wasn't long. She'd come with a friend, stayed for the entire event, and wanted to know if there was a way to sign up to read next time.

Next time.

Naomi had been saying it since Saturday like the decision had already been made. Apparently, everyone else had decided too.

I pulled my notebook planner from my bag and opened it beside the keyboard.

The question mark was already gone.

OPEN MIC NIGHT.

I stared at the words for another moment before opening a new email.

If I was going to do this, I needed to stop treating it like an idea.

I started with Denise, asking if she'd be interested in coming back next month or recommending another local performer. Then I emailed Rachel.

I told her I hoped she was proud of herself.

Then I asked if she wanted to do it again.

I hit send before I could decide I was putting too much pressure on her.

"What are you doing?"

I looked up.

Naomi stood on the other side of the counter with a cup in each hand.

"Working."

"I can see that."

She placed one of the cups beside me.

I looked at it suspiciously. "What is this?"

"Coffee."

"I know that. What did you put in it?"

"You ask too many questions for somebody receiving a free beverage."

"Girl, this is literally my bookstore."

"Exactly, which means you should know better than to question the person who makes your coffee. Vanilla with a little caramel."

I took a sip.

She watched my face.

“It’s good.”

“Obviously.”

“Don’t ruin it.”

She leaned over the counter far enough to see my planner.

Her eyes landed on the date.

A smile spread across her face.

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were about to.”

“I was about to congratulate you on making an excellent decision.”

“I haven’t made a decision.”

A smile spread across her face.

“You took the question mark off.”

I looked down at the planner.

Maybe one successful night didn’t mean I had to figure out what this could become, but I didn’t have to be afraid of doing it twice either.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s official.”

Naomi grinned. “Monthly?”

“Let’s survive the second one first.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

“That wasn’t a no for now.”

I took another sip of coffee.

That seemed to satisfy her enough to send her back toward the café.

I opened the bookstore’s event calendar and added the date before I could change my mind.

The empty box filled with words.

Open Mic Night.

No question mark.

I sat back.

It was a small thing, one date on a calendar, but Chapter & Charm had been built out of small things.

The first wholesale order I’d been terrified nobody would buy.

The first customer who came back.

The first event we hosted with more empty chairs than occupied ones.

The café expansion I’d spent six months convincing myself we weren’t ready for.

None of it had happened all at once.

One thing at a time.

Maybe that rule wasn’t supposed to keep me from wanting more.

Maybe it was only supposed to remind me that I didn’t have to build everything in the same day.

My phone vibrated beside the keyboard.

I reached for it without thinking.

Ellis.

I became aware of how quickly I’d picked it up only after it was already in my hand.

I frowned at myself.

His message was simple.

Quick question before tomorrow. How do you feel about being told what to do?

I stared at the screen.

Then laughed.

Naomi looked over from the café.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Her eyes narrowed.

I turned slightly away from her and typed.

That depends entirely on who’s doing the telling.

His response came less than a minute later.

That sounds threatening.

It’s a warning.

Good to know.

I waited.

Another message appeared.

For the pictures tomorrow. I need you to trust me a little.

My thumb stilled over the screen.

Trust me.

Two ordinary words.

There was no reason for them to sit differently than the rest of his message.

But they did.

I read them again before answering.

How much is a little?

Enough to stop asking what to do with your hands every five seconds.

My mouth fell open.

I have never asked you what to do with my hands.

Not yet.

I narrowed my eyes at the phone.

You seem very confident about this.

Occupational experience. Everybody forgets they've had hands their entire life as soon as a camera comes out.

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

Fine. I'll try to trust you a little.

The typing bubble appeared.

That's all I need.

I looked at the message longer than I needed to.

"Nothing, huh?"

I locked my phone.

Naomi was still watching me.

"What?"

"You're smiling."

"I laugh all the time."

"I said smiling."

"Go make somebody a latte."

She turned away, but not before I caught the smile she was trying to hide.

I shook my head and put my phone facedown beside the keyboard.

A few minutes later, Rachel replied to my email.

I opened that one first.

She wanted to do it again.

I smiled.

Somewhere between lunch and the afternoon rush, Denise wrote back too.

She was in.

By the time I left Chapter & Charm that evening, the second Open Mic had two returning poets, a date on the calendar, and the beginning of a plan.

I carried my purse to the car and tossed it onto the passenger seat before sliding behind the wheel.

My phone connected to the speakers automatically.

For a second, the screen displayed my recent notifications.

Ellis's name was still there.

That's all I need.

I looked away and started the car.

Tomorrow morning, he would be back at Chapter & Charm.

With his camera.

To take pictures of me.

I immediately remembered the green blouse waiting across the back of my bedroom chair.

"Lord."

I backed out of the parking space.

Tomorrow's problem.

For real this time.



BY SEVEN-FIFTEEN WEDNESDAY MORNING, I had already regretted the green blouse twice. The first time happened in my bedroom mirror, and the second came when I caught my reflection in the darkened front window of Chapter & Charm and decided my mother had no idea what she was talking about.

I tugged lightly at the hem before unlocking the door. There was nothing wrong with the blouse. It was fine, and so was I.

More importantly, I had approximately forty-five minutes before Ellis arrived, which was plenty of time to stop thinking about what I looked like and remember that these were pictures for my business.

Not me.

Well.

Some of them were technically of me.

But that wasn't the point.

I pushed through the door and reached for the light switches. The bookstore came alive around me one section at a time, and almost immediately, I felt better.

I set my purse beneath the counter and carried my coffee toward the back. Naomi wasn't coming in until closer to opening since Ellis and I had already planned to start with the empty-store shots. She'd been deeply offended by this arrangement until I reminded her she was still getting paid for the same number of hours.

That had healed her quickly.

Somehow I still found myself wiping down a counter I'd already cleaned ten minutes earlier.

I stopped.

"This is ridiculous."

The bookstore didn't answer.

I tossed the paper towel into the trash and checked my phone.

Nothing.

Of course there was nothing.

He wasn't supposed to be here until eight.

I had just locked my phone again when someone knocked on the front door.

I looked toward the window.

Ellis stood outside with a camera bag slung over one shoulder and a cardboard drink carrier in one hand. His low waves looked freshly brushed beneath the morning light, his beard neatly lined along his jaw, and the dark T-shirt he wore fit close enough across his shoulders that I immediately redirected my attention to the coffee in his hand.

I checked the time again.

7:31.

I walked to the door and unlocked it.

“You’re early.”

“Good morning to you too.”

“It’s seven-thirty.”

“Seven thirty-one.”

“Which is still not eight.”

He stepped inside when I moved aside, his eyes traveling briefly around the bookstore before settling on me. For a second, he didn’t say anything. The pause wasn’t long enough to be strange, but it lasted just long enough for me to notice it.

Then he lifted the drink carrier.

“Peace offering.”

“For what?”

“What I’m about to put you through.”

I closed the door behind him. “See, saying things like that isn’t helping.”

“It’ll be painless.”

“You told me yesterday I had to trust you.”

“A little.”

“And now you’ve shown up thirty minutes early talking about what you’re about to put me through.”

“Twenty-nine.”

I stared at him.

His mouth twitched.

“Do you want your coffee or not?”

I looked down at the carrier.

“Depends. Did you ruin it?”

He handed me one of the cups.

I pulled back the tab and looked inside.

The coffee was several shades lighter than anything I’d ever seen him drink.

I looked at him.

“You remembered?”

“You spent enough time disrespecting my coffee Monday. It wasn’t difficult.”

Something small shifted in my chest.

I ignored it.

“Vanilla?”

“And whatever unreasonable amount of cream they thought was appropriate.”

I took a sip.

It was almost exactly how I liked it.

Almost.

“Not bad.”

“That’s it?”

“What do you want, applause?”

“I remembered your coffee order after hearing it once.”

“I don’t remember giving you my coffee order.”

“You didn’t.”

I lowered the cup.

Ellis was already walking toward the café table.

I followed him with my eyes.

That was somehow worse.

He set his camera bag down and started unzipping it like he hadn’t just admitted he’d paid enough attention Monday to figure out how I took my coffee.

I took another sip.

“Still needs more creamer.”

He laughed without looking at me.

“Of course it does.”

I carried the cup over to the table.

“So what’s first?”

“Exterior while the light’s good. Then I’ll get the store before people start coming in—the café, shelves, displays, all the little details.”

“Okay.”

His eyes moved around the bookstore once more before coming back to me. “Then you.”

My confidence disappeared immediately.

I took another sip of coffee. “Maybe people will start coming in early.”

“They won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re not getting out of it.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“You immediately tried to manifest customers.”

“I was making an observation.”

Ellis pulled one of his cameras from the bag and attached a lens.

I ran my thumb along the seam of my coffee cup, suddenly a lot more interested in it than I’d been thirty seconds ago.

“Relax.”

“I am relaxed.”

He looked up.

The camera stayed in his hands.

His expression changed just enough that I knew he didn’t believe me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That wasn’t a nothing look.”

“You have different looks categorized?”

“I’m a photographer.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting right now.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He smiled and slipped the camera strap over his shoulder.

“Come on. Let’s start outside.”

For the next half hour, I got to stay on the safe side of the camera.

Ellis moved through the bookstore differently when he was working.

I’d noticed it during Open Mic Night, but I hadn’t been able to watch him then. I’d been too busy making sure eighty people had somewhere to sit and nobody knocked over the microphone stand.

This morning, I could.

He took his time.

He stood near the entrance for a while without taking a single picture.

I tried not to watch.

Eventually, curiosity won.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking.”

“You’ve been looking for five minutes.”

“That’s usually helpful before taking a picture.”

I rolled my eyes.

He lifted the camera.

Click.

“Did you just take a picture of me?”

“No.”

“Ellis.”

“I took a picture in your general direction.”

“Delete it.”

“No.”

“You said we weren’t doing me yet.”

“We’re not.”

“Then what did you take?”

He turned the camera around.

I walked closer.

The photograph was mostly the bookstore.

Morning light stretched across the hardwood floors from the front windows, catching the edges of the tables and shelves. I was near the register in the background, slightly out of focus, one hand wrapped around my coffee.

I wasn’t even looking at him.

“Oh.”

“You’re part of the store,” he said.

I looked at the picture again.

The way he said it made arguing feel unnecessary.

“Fine.”

“That’s twice.”

“What?”

“You’ve agreed with me twice in three days.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

He turned the camera back around and continued working.

I returned to the register.

For a while, that was all it was.

Ellis photographed.

I answered a few emails, checked an order that was supposed to arrive that afternoon, and tried not to become too aware of the quiet clicks of his camera moving around the bookstore.

Then, eventually, they stopped.

I looked up.

Ellis stood on the other side of the room.

Camera lowered.

Looking at me.

I knew immediately.

“No.”

He laughed. “I haven’t said anything.”

“You don’t have to.”

“We need the owner portraits.”

“The store opens in twenty minutes.”

“Plenty of time.”

“Naomi will be here soon.”

“Also plenty of time.”

I looked toward the front windows like a customer might materialize and save me.

Nobody did.

Ellis walked closer.

“You said you’d trust me.”

“I said I’d try.”

“Same thing.”

“Those are absolutely not the same thing.”

“They are today.”

He stopped a few feet away and lifted the camera, and almost immediately, I became aware of every part of my body. I didn’t know what to do with my shoulders or whether I was holding my chin too high. My mouth suddenly felt awkward, my arms felt stiff, and somehow I had completely forgotten what people normally did with their hands.

Especially my hands.

I looked down at them.

Ellis lowered the camera.

I looked up.

He was smiling.

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to.”

His smile widened.

“Everybody forgets they’ve had hands their entire life.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

The answer came so easily that I didn’t have one ready for it.

He nodded toward the shelves.

“Come here.”

“Why?”

“Because standing there thinking about being photographed isn’t working.”

“That’s because you’re pointing a camera at me.”

“Exactly.”

He walked toward the romance section.

I followed, mostly because apparently I’d lost control of my own bookstore.

“What are we doing?”

“Pick a book.”

“Any book?”

“One you like.”

I looked at the shelves.

“That’s not narrowing it down.”

“Good. Take your time.”

I glanced at him.

He’d lowered the camera again.

“You’re not going to tell me how to stand?”

“No.”

“Where to look?”

“No.”

“What to do with my—”

I stopped.

Ellis’s eyebrows lifted.

I laughed despite myself and turned toward the shelves.

“You’re irritating.”

“I’ve been told.”

I ran my fingers along the spines, scanning titles I knew almost as well as the books on my own shelves at home.

After a minute, I pulled one free.

“Why that one?”

I looked down at the cover.

“Because I love it.”

“Why?”

“Are you interviewing me now?”

“Humor me.”

I leaned against the shelf.

“It’s one of those books where nothing about the relationship feels rushed. They become friends first. They actually know each other before everything gets complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

I looked up.

Ellis was watching me instead of the camera.

“Life.”

“Very specific.”

“You asked about the book, not for a dissertation.”

“I’ve got time.”

“Some of us have businesses to run.”

“So I’ve heard.”

I smiled and opened the book, flipping through pages I’d read enough times to know where certain scenes lived.

“The characters feel like real people,” I said. “That’s probably what I like most. They have entire lives outside of each other. Family. Friends. Work. Things they want that have nothing to do with falling in love.”

The camera clicked.

I looked up.

“Ellis.”

“Keep talking.”

“You just tricked me.”

“I’m working.”

“You asked me about the book so I’d stop paying attention.”

“Is it working?”

“No.”

Click.

I tried not to smile.

“Yes.”

“Then keep talking.”

I told him about the book.

Not the entire plot, because despite what he seemed to think, I did have some self-control. But enough that I eventually stopped noticing when the camera clicked.

“Sounds frustrating.”

“It was.”

“But you love the book.”

“That’s why it was frustrating.”

“I don’t understand readers.”

I laughed and slid the book back into its place on the shelf.

“What do you read?”

“Why are you assuming I read?”

I stared at him.

Ellis lowered the camera.

“What?”

“You have a six-year-old daughter who walked into my bookstore and immediately started looking for dinosaur books. You read.”

“That’s Mila.”

“And you?”

“Biographies mostly.”

“That tracks.”

His face appeared from behind the camera. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You said it like you did.”

“It feels right.”

“Anything else?”

“Thrillers sometimes. History. Whatever Mila brings me and decides we’re reading together.”

“So dinosaur books.”

“Lots of dinosaur books.”

“And dragons.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered.”

The words came out before I thought about them.

Something passed over his face.

Small enough that I might have imagined it.

Then he smiled.

“She still hasn’t decided which one would win.”

“Dragon.”

“Absolutely not.”

“It breathes fire.”

“Dinosaurs existed.”

“That doesn’t help them in a fight with a dragon.”

“You sound like her.”

“Because we’re right.”

He shook his head and lifted the camera again.

“Turn toward the window.”

I did.

“Not that much.”

“You said turn.”

“I didn’t say leave.”

“You’re very particular.”

“It’s almost like you hired me to be.”

I adjusted until he stopped correcting me.

“Now what?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Just stay there.”

I looked toward the window.

Morning light spilled across the floor in front of me, warming one side of my face. Outside, downtown had started waking up. A car eased into a parking space across the street. Someone walked past carrying a paper cup and a bag from the bakery.

By now, I had stopped asking what to do with my hands.

I hated that he’d been right about that.

I was starting to notice something else too.

Ellis rarely took the picture when I expected him to.

He’d lift the camera, and I’d straighten automatically, only for him to wait. Then I’d roll my eyes at something he said or look away when I started laughing, and the shutter would click.

At first, I thought it was coincidence.

By the third time, I knew better.

“You keep doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Waiting until I’m not ready.”

The camera lowered just enough for me to see his eyes over it.

“That’s usually when you look the most like yourself.”

Before I could figure out what to do with that, he lifted the camera again.

“Don’t think about it.”

“Too late.”

His mouth curved.

Click.

I shook my head. “You’re annoying.”

Click.

“See?”

I laughed despite myself.

Click.

“Ellis.”

“What?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“I know.”

I looked away before he could catch whatever that did to my face.

He did anyway.

A few minutes later, he moved us toward the café. He photographed me behind the counter, then sitting at one of the tables with a book and my coffee. When I started posing again, he asked me a question or made some unnecessary comment until I forgot what my face was doing.

It should have annoyed me.

Instead, somewhere along the way, it became easy.

That was the strange part.

I had never liked having my picture taken when I knew it was happening. Candid pictures were different. There was nothing to prepare for. Nothing to fix before someone pressed the button.

But give me a camera pointed directly at my face and suddenly I had too many teeth, nowhere reasonable to put my arms, and no idea what expression I’d been using naturally for the previous thirty-one years.

Ellis didn’t tell me to smile.

Not once.

He didn’t ask me to tilt my chin until my neck felt unnatural or keep shifting my body until I became convinced there was something wrong with the way I’d been standing in the first place.

He just talked to me.

And took pictures in between.

Eventually, he lowered the camera.

“Come here.”

I stayed where I was.

“Why?”

“Because I want to show you something.”

“That sentence has gotten me in trouble before.”

“With a photographer?”

“No.”

“Then statistically, you’re probably safe.”

I laughed and walked over.

Ellis held the camera between us, and I leaned closer to see the screen. Our shoulders brushed. He didn’t move away.

Neither did I.

“You gonna show me the picture or just make me stand here?”

“I’m getting there.”

“You’re taking your time.”

His mouth curved. “You complaining?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

He looked at me then, just long enough that I became a little too aware of how close we were.

Then he looked back at the camera and pulled up one of the photographs.

For a second, I didn’t realize what I was looking at.

Me.

I was standing near the romance shelves with the book still open in my hands. My head was slightly turned, curls falling over one shoulder, and I was smiling at something outside the frame.

At him, probably.

But that wasn’t what made me quiet.

I looked...

Like me.

Not the version of myself I knew how to produce when somebody told me to smile.

Not the one that automatically straightened her back and sucked in her stomach the second a phone came out.

Just me.

“Keep that one.”

Ellis glanced at me.

“I was planning to.”

“No, I mean—” I pointed toward the screen. “I like that one.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was a something face.”

“You have those categorized now too?”

“I’m learning.”

He looked back at the picture.

“I just thought you sounded surprised.”

I was.

More than he knew.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen a picture of myself and liked it before finding something wrong.

There had been a time when taking pictures had been fun, before every request for another one started feeling like an inconvenience.

This one is fine, Luna. You look the same. How many pictures do you need?

Eventually, Lucas hadn’t even needed to say anything. A sigh had been enough. A look. I’d learned to glance at the screen, say it was fine, and move on because that was easier than feeling like I was asking for too much over something that wasn’t supposed to matter.

I looked at the photograph again.

No one had asked Ellis to take another one.

He’d taken his time because that was what he did.

And somehow, in the middle of it, I hadn’t felt like something that needed to be corrected.

“You don’t like it anymore?”

I blinked.

Ellis was watching me.

“No.”

His brows pulled together.

“No, I do.” I laughed softly. “That’s the problem.”

“The problem is that you like your picture?”

“When you say it like that, I sound ridiculous.”

“I wasn’t going to say ridiculous.”

“You were thinking it.”

“I was thinking confusing.”

“That’s not better.”

“It’s a little better.”

I looked back at the screen.

“I usually don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Like pictures of myself.”

He glanced at the camera, then at me.

“Why?”

The question was simple, without any disbelief or an immediate compliment meant to convince me I was wrong. He just wanted to know why.

I shrugged.

“I always find something.”

“Like?”

“My hair. My smile. The angle. My arms. Pick something.”

He was quiet for a second before looking down and pressing a button. The next photograph showed me laughing, followed by one of me reaching for a book and another with my head tipped slightly as I listened to him say something I couldn’t remember now.

He stopped.

“What?”

“I’m giving you options.”

“That’s your solution?”

“I’m increasing my odds of you finding one where you don’t.”

I stared at him.

He said it so matter-of-factly that there wasn’t much room to turn it into anything else.

Still, warmth settled beneath my ribs.

I looked down at the camera again.

“I like the first one.”

“Then that’s the one.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s your picture.”

I smiled.

“Okay.”

He nodded once and started to lower the camera.

“Wait.”

He stopped.

“Can you send it to me?”

“The whole gallery will be ready—”

“No. That one.”

His eyes met mine.

I almost took it back.

“That one?”

“Yes.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You sure?”

“Before I change my mind.”

“Then I better hurry.”

He pulled out his phone, and mine vibrated on the café table a few seconds later.

I picked it up.

The picture filled the screen.

Without the small camera display, I could see even more of it. The light. The shelves behind me. The way my smile looked like it had happened before I had time to decide whether I wanted anyone to see it.

I saved it.

Then, before I could overthink that too, I made it a favorite.

“There.”

I looked up.

Ellis had the camera raised again.

My mouth fell open. “You just took another picture.”

“You were smiling.”

“I was looking at my phone.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re sneaky.”

“I prefer observant.”

“I prefer sneaky.”

“Good thing you’re not writing my website.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

The lock on the front door clicked before he could answer.

Naomi stepped inside, sunglasses on top of her head and her purse hanging from one shoulder.

She took three steps into the bookstore before stopping.

Her eyes moved from Ellis and his camera to me standing beside the café table.

Then to my phone.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“No,” I said immediately.

“Pictures,” Ellis answered at the same time.

Naomi’s eyebrows rose.

I pointed toward the café. “Go to work.”

She looked at Ellis. “Has she been this mean to you all morning?”

“Worse.”

“Ellis.”

He laughed and started putting one of his lenses away.

Naomi shook her head as she walked behind the café counter.

“I leave y’all alone for an hour and come back to workplace hostility.”

“You weren’t scheduled to be here.”

“Still.”

I looked at the clock.

Eight fifty-eight.

“Wait. We’re almost done?”

“With you.”

“That sounded personal.”

“Photographically.”

Naomi snorted.

I turned toward her. “Nobody asked you.”

“I’m literally not saying anything.”

“That noise counted.”

Ellis laughed again.

I looked at him. “You’re enjoying this entirely too much.”

“A little.”

He switched lenses and nodded toward Naomi.

“Your turn.”

Her entire demeanor changed.

“Oh.”

I folded my arms. “What happened to all that talking?”

“I’m preparing.”

“For what?”

“To be photographed.”

“You’ve had hands your entire life,” I said.

Ellis looked at me.

I smiled sweetly.

Naomi frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Inside joke,” Ellis said.

The words landed before I could prepare for them.

Inside joke.

Naomi caught it.

Of course she did.

I turned away before she could decide to become unbearable.

For the next twenty minutes, I got to enjoy watching her discover that being on the other side of Ellis’s camera was significantly harder than she’d assumed.

I leaned against the counter.

Eventually, the front door unlocked for the day, the café equipment came on, and the bookstore began its familiar shift from quiet to open. Ellis worked around us as the morning got underway, getting the rest of what he needed in pieces. He photographed Naomi behind the espresso machine, the pastry case before we sold half of what was in it, and coffee being poured for some of our first customers. He even got a few shots of the two of us behind the counter, although those took entirely too long because Naomi couldn’t stop making me laugh.

Once the first customers started coming in, Ellis moved into the background and I fell into my usual routine. At first, I noticed every click of his camera. Somewhere between helping one customer and ringing up another, I stopped paying attention altogether.

By eleven-fifteen, I was behind the register checking an online order when he walked over with his camera bag zipped and hanging from one shoulder.

“All done?”

“For today.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“You’ll survive.”

“I did pretty well.”

“You did.”

I looked up.

There was no teasing in his voice that time.

Just an observation.

For some reason, that made it harder to look at him than the teasing had.

So I glanced at the computer.

“When do you think you’ll have everything ready?”

“A day or so. These won’t take as long as the event gallery.”

“No rush.”

“I’ll send you a few before then.”

“Including mine?”

“Especially yours.”

I smiled before remembering I was trying not to.

“Okay.”

He shifted the strap of his bag higher on his shoulder but didn’t move toward the door.

I waited.

He looked toward the café.

Then back at me.

“You eaten?”

I glanced at the clock.

“It’s eleven-fifteen.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“I had coffee.”

“That also wasn’t my question.”

I thought about the granola bar still buried somewhere in my purse.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

I waited for whatever came next.

Ellis rubbed his thumb along the strap of his camera bag.

“There’s a place around the corner I’ve been meaning to try.”

The bookstore suddenly seemed louder around us even though nothing had changed. The espresso machine hissed behind Naomi, someone turned a page near the front window, and the bell above the door chimed as another customer walked in. They were all normal Wednesday morning sounds, but somehow I was aware of every single one of them.

Maybe because, for the first time since Ellis walked through the door that morning, whatever was happening between us had nothing to do with

pictures, the website, or Open Mic Night. He'd gotten everything he needed, and there wasn't anything left for us to discuss that couldn't wait.

I looked at Ellis.

"Are you asking me to get breakfast with you?"

"Technically, I think we're getting close to brunch."

"That wasn't my question."

His mouth curved.

"Yeah, Luna. I'm asking if you want to eat with me."

I should've checked what needed to be done.

Asked Naomi if she could handle things for a little while.

Looked at the schedule.

Found at least one practical reason to think about it first.

Instead, I looked toward the café.

Naomi was steaming milk with her back to us.

I knew without asking that she'd be fine.

I looked back at Ellis.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"You asked."

"I did."

"And I said yes."

His smile came slowly.

"Then I guess we're getting breakfast."

"Brunch," I corrected.

"Now you care?"

"Words matter."

He laughed.

"Give me ten minutes."

"I'll wait."

I watched him walk toward one of the tables near the front window and set his camera bag down.

Then I looked at the computer in front of me.

The order I'd been checking was still open on the screen.

I couldn't remember what I'd been looking for.

I blamed the pictures.

It seemed easier than examining any of the other possibilities.

OceanofPDF.com



I HADN'T PLANNED to ask Luna to eat with me.

At least, that was the lie I told myself while I sat near the front window of Chapter & Charm waiting for her to grab her things.

The truth was, the thought had crossed my mind sometime between the romance shelves and watching her forget I was taking her picture.

So I made a reason to stay.

Food.

Simple enough.

From where I sat, I could see Luna talking to Naomi behind the register, her purse hanging from one shoulder while she pointed at something on the computer screen. Naomi said something I couldn't hear, and Luna immediately shook her head.

Then Naomi looked over at me and smiled.

I looked away.

Whatever was happening over there had nothing to do with me.

Probably.

A minute later, Luna came around the counter with her purse hanging from one shoulder. The green blouse I'd noticed when I first walked in looked different outside the bookstore lighting, brighter against her brown skin, and her curls shifted around her shoulders as she glanced back at Naomi.

“Ready?”

I stood and lifted my camera bag onto my shoulder. “You sure you’re allowed to leave?”

She glanced back at Naomi. “Apparently, my presence is no longer required.”

“Your presence is never required,” Naomi called from behind the counter.

Luna stopped halfway to the door and turned around. “See, now I’m staying.”

“No.” Naomi pointed toward the door. “Go.”

“You just said—”

“I know what I said.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, but apparently not well enough because Luna caught me smiling when she turned back around.

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re laughing.”

“I’m standing.”

“With a smile on your face.”

“That’s allowed.”

“Barely.”

Behind her, Naomi waved. “Have fun!”

“We’re getting food,” Luna called back.

“I know!”

Luna closed her eyes for half a second like she was reconsidering every decision that had led to hiring Naomi. I opened the door before she could decide to stay out of spite.

“After you.”

She walked past me, muttering, “If she texts me while we’re gone, I’m blocking her.”

“You’re not blocking her.”

“No, but thinking about it makes me feel better.”

The door closed behind us, cutting off Naomi’s laughter, and the late-morning Mississippi heat met us immediately.

The restaurant was only a few blocks away, close enough that I’d planned to walk, but before I started down the sidewalk, I glanced at Luna’s feet.

She caught me.

“Why did you look at my feet?”

“Making sure you can walk.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Excuse me?”

“To the restaurant,” I clarified. “I meant the shoes.”

Luna looked down at the flat sandals she was wearing, then back at me like I’d somehow made the explanation worse.

“These?”

“I’ve made the mistake of assuming a woman could walk somewhere because she was wearing shoes before.”

“Who?”

The question came easily.

My answer didn’t.

Elena.

For half a second, I could see her standing outside a restaurant in Memphis, looking at me like I’d personally designed the heels she’d insisted on wearing. We’d parked four blocks away because I’d said it wasn’t far.

She’d reminded me of that statement for years.

“My wife.”

The word left my mouth before I thought about whether Luna knew.

Her steps slowed, and I made it another couple of feet before realizing she wasn’t beside me anymore.

When I looked back, she was watching me.

“Your wife?”

“My late wife.”

Luna’s expression changed. Not pity, at least not the kind I’d learned to recognize over the last three years. Just surprise.

“I didn’t know.”

“I figured.”

Her lips parted, then closed again, and I waited for what usually came next.

I’m so sorry.

A question about what happened.

Sometimes both.

Instead, Luna looked down the street for a second before turning back to me.

“Were the shoes at least cute?”

I stared at her.

Then I laughed.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“You keep saying that.”

“They were.”

“Then she had a reason.”

“She couldn’t feel her toes by the time we got back to the car.”

“Beauty requires sacrifice.”

“That’s what she said.”

Luna smiled, and just like that, we started walking again.

I appreciated that more than I knew how to explain.

“You were married,” Luna said after a few steps.

“Eleven years.”

Her head turned toward me. “Eleven?”

“Together longer.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Exactly.”

I laughed. “We met young.”

“How young?”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, wow.” She looked ahead again. “So high school?”

“High school.”

She was quiet for a second, not in a way that felt uncomfortable or overly careful. Just thinking.

“That’s a long time to know somebody.”

“It is.”

“How long ago?” she asked.

“Three years.”

She nodded, and this time, when she went quiet, I had a pretty good idea what she was deciding.

“You can say it.”

Her brows pulled together. “Say what?”

“That you’re sorry.”

A small smile touched her mouth. “I am. I just didn’t know if you wanted me to.”

“I’ve survived hearing it before.”

“I figured.” She glanced at me. “Doesn’t mean you always want to.”

I looked at her, but she kept her eyes ahead as we walked.

“I’m sorry, Ellis.”

“Thank you.”

And that was it. No question about how Elena died. No sudden change in the way Luna looked at me now that she knew there had been a wife before this version of my life.

By the time we reached the corner, the light had changed, and Luna stopped beside me.

“Did Mila get her shoe opinions from her?”

I smiled before I could stop myself. “Absolutely.”

“I knew it.”

“You met her once.”

“That was enough.”

“She made sure we didn’t leave the house without her sparkly shoes.”

“For Daddy-Daughter Day?”

“Yes.”

Luna shrugged like that sounded completely reasonable. “Maybe she wanted to look nice.”

“She was wearing overalls.”

She laughed just as the light changed, and we stepped into the crosswalk.

“See? She knew what she wanted.”

“She knew she wanted to make us late.”

“She’s six.”

“Exactly.”

Luna looked up at the sign before turning toward me. “You’ve never been here?”

“No.”

“But you’ve been meaning to try it?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You could’ve been bringing me somewhere terrible.”

“I checked the reviews.”

“Oh, good. Research.” Her smile widened. “Very professional.”

I laughed as I pulled the door open for her. “You’re going to keep using that, aren’t you?”

“Probably.”

The restaurant was busier than I expected for the middle of a Wednesday morning. A few tables near the windows were occupied, and somebody sat alone at the counter with a laptop open beside a plate of pancakes.

A hostess led us toward a booth near the back, and Luna slid into one side while I took the other.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about it. Two people sitting across from each other in a restaurant.

But this was the first time I’d seen Luna somewhere that wasn’t hers.

Just Luna.

She opened the menu and barely made it halfway down the first page before she said, “Oh, good, they have shrimp and grits.”

“That’s what you’re getting?”

“I’ve been looking at this menu for twelve seconds.”

“You sounded committed.”

“I was excited. There’s a difference.”

Luna looked over the top of the menu at me. “Do you always have something to say?”

“Usually.”

She shook her head and went back to the menu.

A server came over a few minutes later and took our drink orders—sweet tea for Luna, water for me—and as soon as she walked away, Luna looked across the table.

“No coffee?”

“I already had coffee.”

“That has never stopped anyone from having more coffee.”

“I know my limits.”

“You drink it black. Your limits can’t be trusted.”

I laughed. “Are we still doing this?”

“Probably forever.”

The word slipped into the space between us without either of us reaching for it.

Forever.

Luna didn’t seem to notice. Or if she did, she didn’t show it.

I looked back down at the menu. “Get the shrimp and grits.”

“You don’t know if they’re good.”

“You’ve looked at them four times.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been sitting across from you.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to watch me.”

I looked up.

She was smiling.

“I thought we’d already established that I notice things.”

“That’s different when you have a camera.”

“Not really.”

The server returned with our drinks and broke whatever had started sitting between us.

Luna reached for her tea. “So what are you getting?”

“Eggs. Bacon. Potatoes.”

She stared at me.

“What?”

“That’s it?”

“And toast.”

“Wow.”

“What exactly were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Something with personality.”

“My breakfast needs a personality?”

“Everything needs a little personality.”

“I’m eating it, not dating it.”

She laughed into her glass, and there it was again.

That feeling I’d had earlier while photographing her.

I liked making her laugh.

More than I should’ve been paying attention to.

I dropped my eyes to the menu even though I’d already decided what I wanted.

“So you cook?” Luna asked.

“What makes you think I cook?”

“You made Mila pancakes Saturday.”

That got my attention. “She told you that?”

“She told me a lot of things.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It was mostly dinosaurs and the fact that you don’t let her have a turtle.”

“She does not need a turtle.”

“She strongly disagrees.”

“She also thinks she’d remember to feed it every day.”

Luna took a sip of tea. “Somebody has to advocate for her.”

“She has grandparents for that.”

“And now she has me.”

Something in my chest tightened at that.

“She’d appreciate that,” I said.

“See?”

“I’m still not buying the turtle.”

“I didn’t say you should.”

“You’re thinking it.”

“I think a hamster might be more reasonable.”

I stared at her until she laughed.

“I’m kidding.”

“You’re never talking to her without supervision.”

The server came back before she could argue, and we placed our orders.

Shrimp and grits for Luna.

Exactly what she’d been pretending she wasn’t already going to get.

She shook her head and took another drink of tea.

For a few seconds, neither of us said anything.

The silence wasn’t uncomfortable. With Luna, it never seemed to need filling.

She looked toward the front windows. “So did you always know you were staying here?”

“In Easton Grove?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned back against the booth. “No.”

“Where were you going?”

“Everywhere.”

She laughed. “Very specific.”

“I was sixteen.”

“So?”

“So sixteen-year-old me had plans.”

“What kind?”

“Atlanta for a while. Then Chicago.”

“Those are two very different winters.”

“I hadn’t thought that far.”

“Clearly.”

“I think at one point I was moving to New York too.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “You?”

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t give New York.”

I stared at her.

She laughed.

“What do I give?”

Luna considered me with entirely too much seriousness before saying, “Somewhere with parking.”

I laughed hard enough that the couple in the booth beside us glanced over, which only made Luna grin wider.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“Exactly.”

I picked up my water. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You always plan on staying in EG?”

Her finger moved through the condensation on the outside of her glass.

“No.”

That surprised me.

“Where were you going?”

“Atlanta.”

“Really?”

“For about six months.”

“What happened?”

“Life.”

I waited, and eventually she looked up.

“What?”

“That’s the same vague answer you initially gave me about your book yesterday.”

“Maybe I like vague answers.”

“Maybe.”

She smiled, but there was something behind it that told me not to push.

So I didn’t.

I reached for my water instead.

“What made you stay?”

This time, she answered.

“Chapter & Charm, eventually.”

“That came later.”

“It did.”

“So there was something before that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re nosy.”

“I’ve been told.”

“By me.”

“More than once.”

She laughed softly and looked back down at her glass.

“My plans changed,” she said. “That’s all.”

“Fair enough.”

I took a drink of water instead.

The food arrived a few minutes later, and whatever had settled over the table disappeared the second Luna looked down at her plate.

“Oh, yeah.”

I laughed. “You haven’t even tasted it yet.”

“I can tell.”

“From looking at it?”

She stared at me. “You’re exhausting.”

“And yet you came to eat with me.”

Her fork stopped halfway to her plate.

I hadn’t meant anything by it.

At least, I didn’t think I had.

Then one corner of her mouth lifted. “You asked.”

“And you said yes.”

“I was hungry.”

“Of course.”

She shook her head and took her first bite.

“I’m eating eggs.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing about this is weird.”

Her eyes closed for half a second.

I noticed.

Of course I did.

“Well?”

She swallowed. “You’re lucky.”

“Me?”

“This is sooooo good.”

“I chose the restaurant.”

“You Googled a restaurant.”

“And brought you here.”

“Do you need credit for everything?”

“Only the things I do.”

She laughed again.

I pushed my plate slightly toward her.

“You could’ve ordered potatoes.”

“I didn’t want potatoes.”

“You’ve eaten three of mine.”

“Those are different potatoes.”

“They came from the same kitchen.”

“They came from your plate.”

She smiled and stole another one, and even though I could’ve moved the plate out of reach, I left it where it was.

“My ex used to hate when I did that.”

The sentence was casual enough that it took a second to register. Luna seemed to realize what she’d said around the same time I did, but instead of retreating from it, she took a sip of her tea and looked back at me.

“Your ex?”

“Lucas.”

It was the first time she’d said his name around me.

“How long were you together?”

“Five years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Yeah.” She moved her thumb slowly through the condensation on her glass, leaving a clear path through the water beading along the side. “It was.”

I hesitated before asking the next question, mostly because I wasn’t sure whether it belonged to me yet. “What happened?”

The second it was out, I wished I’d phrased it differently. Luna looked at me, and I shook my head before she could answer.

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

A small smile touched her mouth. “Look at you correcting yourself.”

“I can mind my business occasionally.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“I appreciate that.”

For a few seconds, she focused on what was left of her food, and I figured she’d decided to leave the conversation there. I would’ve let her. Then she rested her fork against the edge of the plate and said, “We wanted different things.”

The answer sounded practiced. Not fake, exactly. More like something she’d said enough times to know which parts of the truth fit comfortably in a sentence.

“Different things?”

Her eyes lifted to mine. “You’re not very good at minding your business.”

“I said occasionally.”

That got a laugh out of her, but it faded as she looked down again. “He was comfortable. I wasn’t anymore.”

“With him?”

“With...” She paused, searching for the rest of the answer. “Everything, I guess. I spent a long time thinking my life was going to look a certain way. We were together five years. Everybody knew us together. Our families knew each other. There were conversations about what came next.”

“Marriage?”

She nodded. “But it never happened.”

There was something in the way she said it that told me the obvious follow-up wasn’t one I needed to ask.

“And then I started realizing I wasn’t happy,” she continued. “Or maybe I’d known for a while and finally stopped finding reasons not to know.”

“So you left.”

“Eventually.”

The woman sitting across from me didn’t seem like someone who had trouble making decisions. I’d watched her run a bookstore, manage people, organize an event with a hundred moving parts, and tell me exactly what she did and didn’t want every time I pointed a camera at her. Whatever had made *eventually* take five years mattered.

I didn’t ask.

Luna noticed anyway. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was definitely something.”

“I was thinking.”

“About?”

I considered giving her the same answer she’d been giving me all morning, but there didn’t seem to be much point. “Whether I should ask another question.”

“And?”

“I decided against it.”

Her smile came back. “Growth.”

“Apparently.”

She took another bite, and the conversation might’ve ended there if she hadn’t looked across the table and said, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You asked me what happened. Now I’m being nosy.”

“About Elena?”

“If that’s okay.”

Those three words made more difference than I expected.

People usually asked about Elena carefully enough that I could feel them bracing for whatever answer I gave, or directly enough that I sometimes wondered whether they’d forgotten they were asking about a person I’d built half my life with. Luna didn’t sound afraid of the subject. She just sounded like she wanted to know where the boundary was.

“Depends what you want to know.”

She thought about it for a second. “What was she like?”

Of all the questions she could’ve asked, that wasn’t the one I’d been expecting.

I looked down at my plate and smiled before I could stop myself. “She was funny.”

“Funnier than you?”

“Everybody thinks they’re funnier than me.”

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“Yes.”

Luna laughed. “You said that really fast.”

“She knew.”

“What else?”

I leaned back and let myself think about Elena instead of everything that came after her. Not the accident. Not the phone call. Not the funeral or those first months of learning how to wake up in a house where one person was suddenly missing.

Just Elena.

“She talked to everybody. Didn’t matter where we were. Grocery store, gas station, standing in line somewhere. I’d walk away for two minutes and come back, and she’d know somebody’s name, where they worked, how many kids they had, probably what they were cooking for dinner.”

“That sounds terrifying.”

“It was.”

Luna laughed again. “Meanwhile, you look like you don’t want strangers speaking to you.”

“I don’t.”

“I knew it.”

“She used to say I needed balance.”

“Sounds like she was right.”

“Don’t take her side.”

“I like her already.”

Her words settled deeper than I expected them to.

It must’ve shown, because Luna’s smile softened. “Was that okay to say?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat, but I didn’t need to think about the answer. “It was.”

There was something unexpectedly comforting about hearing someone who had never known Elena respond to her like she’d been a person instead of a tragedy. Elena had been funny and loud and nosy and incapable of leaving a grocery store without talking to somebody.

“She would’ve liked you too,” I said.

The words came out before I had time to decide whether they should.

Luna went quiet, and for a second I did too.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“How?”

“You both steal food.”

Her mouth fell open, and I laughed.

“That is not enough to build a friendship on.”

“It would’ve been for Elena.”

“Then maybe you’re right.”

Luna pushed her nearly empty plate away. “So, are you going to show me the other pictures?”

I frowned. “What other pictures?”

“The ones you kept scrolling past this morning.”

“You noticed that?”

“I notice things too.”

“There were more than three.”

Her eyes widened. “Ellis.”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you show me?”

“Because you asked to see one.”

“That doesn’t mean I only wanted to see one.”

“See, that’s information you could’ve provided.”

She narrowed her eyes at me and held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re eating.”

“We’re finished.”

I looked pointedly at the bite of grits still on her plate, and she followed my gaze before rolling her eyes.

“You’re irritating.”

“So I’ve heard.”

She reached across the table for another potato, and without thinking, I caught her wrist before her fingers made it to my plate.

We both stopped.

It wasn’t dramatic. My hand wasn’t even wrapped tightly around her, just enough to interrupt what she was doing, but the warmth of her skin registered before anything else did. Luna looked down at my fingers around her wrist and then back up at me, one eyebrow lifting.

I let her go.

“You’re serious about these potatoes.”

My voice sounded normal enough.

Her mouth curved. “Apparently, you are too.”

Then she took the potato anyway.

I laughed and reached for my water, but I was still aware of the place where my hand had been a few seconds earlier. It wasn't a handhold. It wasn't anything, really.

Still, I noticed.

That was becoming a problem.

The check arrived before I could spend much time deciding what kind.

Luna reached for the check at the same time I did, but I got there first.

"You're not paying for both of us."

"I asked you to come."

"I could've paid for myself."

"I know."

I handed the server my card before Luna could argue again.

She folded her arms. "You're very stubborn."

"I've heard that."

"Fine. But I'm getting the next one."

I looked at her.

Her lips parted slightly before she recovered.

"Deal. If there is one."

"If?"

She smiled but didn't answer.

I signed the receipt.

By the time we stepped outside, the heat had settled properly over downtown, the kind that made every patch of shade worth noticing. Chapter & Charm was only a few blocks away, and there wasn't really any reason not to head straight back.

We made it half a block.

Then Luna slowed beside the window of a stationery shop.

I took another couple steps before realizing she wasn't beside me anymore and turned back to find her studying a display of journals arranged behind the glass.

"You coming?"

"In a second."

I walked back to where she stood, and she pointed through the glass. "That's cute."

A brown journal sat near the front of the display, gold lettering stretched across the cover.

One thing at a time.

Luna smiled as she read it.

“What?” I asked.

She pointed at the words. “I say this to myself all the time.”

“One thing at a time?”

“Whenever I feel like I have too much going on.”

I looked at the journal again. “So you’re getting it.”

She laughed. “I don’t need another journal.”

“That wasn’t what I said.”

“I have notebooks at home I’ve never written in.”

“Then what’s one more?”

“Bad financial advice.”

She said it while continuing to stare through the glass at the journal.

I reached for the shop door.

Her head turned. “What are you doing?”

“Going inside.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve been staring at that notebook long enough that we’re clearly not leaving until you touch it.”

“I was appreciating it.”

“You can appreciate it closer.”

“I have to get back to work.”

I pulled out my phone and checked the time. “You’ve been gone forty-eight minutes.”

“How do you know?”

“Because clocks exist.”

She glanced down the block in the direction of Chapter & Charm before looking through the window again. The decision lasted maybe three seconds.

“Five minutes.”

I opened the door for her. “Of course.”

Luna walked past me, and I followed her inside.

She found the journal almost immediately, picking it up from the display and running her thumb across the gold lettering on the cover.

“See?” she said, holding it toward me. “Cute.”

“So get it.”

She opened it, flipped through a few of the blank pages, then closed it again. “I told you. I don’t need another journal.”

“That hasn’t stopped you from holding it for the last two minutes.”

“I’m practicing restraint.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?”

She gave me a look before setting the journal back on the display. “One thing at a time, remember?”

I smiled. “Convenient.”

“Very.”

She wandered toward a table of pens near the back, and I followed, realizing somewhere between brunch and a notebook neither of us needed that we’d managed to extend the morning again.

I wasn’t complaining.

Five minutes turned into twelve.

Luna bought two pens she insisted she actually needed and left the journal exactly where she’d found it.

“See?” she said as we stepped back onto the sidewalk. “Restraint.”

“You bought two pens.”

“Pens are useful.”

“So are journals.”

“Not when you already have six.”

“You counted?”

“That’s not the point.”

I laughed as we started back toward Chapter & Charm. She’d made it half a block before looking over her shoulder toward the stationery shop one last time.

I noticed.

Of course I did.

OceanofPDF.com



SUNDAY DINNER at the Bennetts used to happen every Sunday.

Then life got busy the way it always seemed to do. Work schedules changed, weekends filled up, and I opened Chapter & Charm. Somewhere along the way, every Sunday became every other Sunday, then whenever everybody could make it.

Now, we tried for at least one Sunday a month.

Mama still called it Sunday dinner like we'd never missed one.

I pulled into my parents' driveway a little after three with *Sweet Magnolias* balanced on the passenger seat and my air conditioning fighting for its life against the Mississippi heat. I'd dressed for comfort in denim shorts, a loose rust-colored tank, and sandals, but the backs of my thighs were still sticking to the seat by the time I turned the car off.

My curls had lasted exactly long enough for me to leave the apartment. The humidity had already started softening the definition around my hairline, and I'd given up somewhere around the second red light, pulling half of it away from my face with a clip I kept in my purse for emergencies.

I'd barely gotten out of the car before I spotted Daddy exactly where Mama had predicted he'd be when we talked earlier in the week.

Standing over the grill.

Daddy looked up as I closed the door, the pair of tongs in his hand pointed loosely in my direction.

Laughing, I reached into the passenger seat for the bakery box before making my way toward him.

His attention dropped immediately to the box.

“What you got?”

“Nothing for you.”

“Then why you bring it to my house?”

“Because my mama lives here.”

He pressed a hand to his chest like I’d genuinely wounded him. “See how you treats me?”

“You’ll survive.”

I leaned up to kiss his cheek before peeking toward the grill. Chicken covered most of one side, ribs the other, and a foil pan sat on the upper rack. Everything looked considerably more under control than Mama had made it sound.

“Looks like you figured it out.”

His eyebrows pulled together. “Figured what out?”

“The grill.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with my grill.”

“Mama said—”

“Your mama don’t know nothing about grilling.”

The back door opened before I could tell him exactly what Mama had said.

“I know enough to know we ate at eight o’clock last time because you couldn’t get the temperature right.”

Daddy didn’t even turn around. “Nobody was talking to you.”

Mama stepped onto the patio with a dish towel thrown over one shoulder, her reading glasses still sitting on top of her head like she’d forgotten they were there.

“You’re in my backyard.”

“My backyard too.”

“Not if you burn them ribs.”

I covered my laugh with a cough and headed toward the house.

Daddy pointed the tongs at me this time. “And you ain’t slick.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You laughed.”

Mama held the screen door open for me. “Leave my baby alone.”

“Your baby started it.”

“I’ve been here three minutes.”

I kissed Mama’s cheek as I passed her. She smelled faintly like the cocoa butter lotion she’d used for as long as I could remember, mixed with whatever had been cooking in the kitchen all afternoon.

“See why I don’t come home?” I asked.

“Girl, please. You know where your key at.”

The kitchen smelled exactly like Sunday. Greens simmered on the stove beside a pot I couldn’t see into, macaroni and cheese cooled near the oven, and gospel music played low enough from the speaker near the sink that I could still hear Daddy outside muttering to himself about people who didn’t respect a man’s grill.

I set the box on the counter and lifted the corner of the foil over the macaroni.

Mama slapped my hand away without looking.

“Mama.”

“Wash your hands.”

“I was just looking.”

“You were just about to put your fingers in my macaroni.”

“I was not.”

She looked at me.

I sighed. “Okay, but I would’ve used a fork.”

“Bathroom.”

I laughed as I headed down the hallway, already pushing my bracelets farther up my wrist. By the time I came back, my hands still damp because the guest bathroom apparently hadn’t had a clean hand towel since my last visit, Mama had opened the bakery box.

She stared inside.

Then at me.

“You bought peach cobbler?”

“Yes.”

“For Sunday dinner?”

“That’s usually when people eat dessert.”

“Don’t get smart.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“Because I made peach cobbler.”

I stopped.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“You didn’t ask.”

I stared at her. “Why would I ask?”

Mama folded the box closed again. “Well, we’ll eat both.”

“Exactly.”

“Could’ve saved your money.”

“And if I hadn’t brought anything, you would’ve asked why I came over here empty-handed.”

“That is not true.”

Daddy’s voice carried through the open window.

“Yes, it is.”

Mama’s head snapped toward the sink. “Ain’t nobody talking to you!”

I bent forward laughing.

“I heard that mess,” Daddy called back.

“Then tend to them ribs!”

I was still smiling when Mama turned back to the stove.

Some things changed.

Apparently, some things didn’t.

And standing in my parents’ kitchen with two peach cobblers, my daddy arguing through a window, and Mama already finding something for me to do, I couldn’t remember why we’d ever stopped doing this every Sunday.

Mama found that something for me approximately thirty seconds later.

“Since you standing there, get the tea out and put some ice in the glasses.”

I pushed myself upright with a sigh dramatic enough to make her glance over her shoulder.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I opened the refrigerator and pulled out the pitcher.

I filled the glasses while Mama checked something in the oven. The back door opened a few minutes later, and Daddy came inside carrying a foil pan with both hands and looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“Move.”

Mama didn’t.

He stopped behind her. “Woman.”

“You have all that counter over there.”

“I need this one.”

“Why?”

“Because this the one I’m standing by.”

I looked between them. “Y’all know there’s enough kitchen for both of you, right?”

They answered at the same time.

“Stay out of it.”

I lifted both hands. “See, now y’all agree.”

Daddy laughed while Mama rolled her eyes, but she moved anyway.

He set the pan down and pulled back enough foil to inspect the ribs. The smell hit me immediately, smoky and sweet enough that I stepped closer without thinking.

Mama had already started carrying dishes toward the dining room, so I grabbed the macaroni before she could tell me to and followed behind her.

By the time everything made it to the table, there wasn’t an inch of space left that didn’t have food, a glass, or somebody’s elbow occupying it. Both peach cobblers sat side by side on the counter, waiting for us to argue over which one was better later.

I took my usual seat and reached for the serving spoon.

Mama slapped the back of my hand.

Again.

“Mama!”

“We haven’t prayed.”

I slowly put the spoon down. “I knew that.”

Daddy bowed his head, already laughing. “No, you didn’t.”

“Can we pray before I starve?”

“You been here twenty minutes,” Mama said.

“And haven’t been allowed to eat anything.”

“Because you kept trying to stick your hands in stuff.”

“I washed them.”

Daddy reached across the table for my hand before I could defend myself any further. “Come on before she wastes away.”

I gave Mama a look as I took her hand with my other one.

She ignored me.

Daddy prayed over the food, the family, and the people who couldn’t be at the table with us. He thanked God for another Sunday together and, after a small pause, asked that we not let so much time pass before the next one.

That softened something in me

I squeezed Mama’s hand before letting go.

“All right,” Daddy said. “Now you can eat.”

I reached for the macaroni immediately.

Mama shook her head. “Greedy.”

“Hungry.”

“Same thing.”

For a while, dinner was exactly what Sunday dinner had always been.

Daddy complained that Mama had put too much seasoning in the greens. Mama reminded him he’d been eating them for nearly forty years without dying. I asked whether that meant they’d been married that long or if she’d been feeding him greens before they got married, which somehow turned into an argument over when they’d started dating.

“I know when we started dating,” Mama said.

“Apparently not.”

“You asked me out in October.”

“September.”

“October.”

Daddy looked at me. “Your mama memory going.”

Mama slowly lowered her fork.

I covered my mouth.

“You might want to reconsider that sentence,” I told him.

He grinned. “I’m just saying.”

“And I’m just saying you can sleep out there with that grill you love so much.”

Daddy pointed his fork at her. “See? That’s why I don’t argue with you.”

“You are currently arguing with me.”

“I am explaining why I don’t.”

I laughed hard enough that I had to put my glass down.

This was what I’d missed.

The stories I’d heard enough times to know when one of them changed a detail. Daddy pretending he wasn’t going to eat the macaroni because Mama had used a different cheese, then quietly putting another spoonful on his plate.

I missed being somewhere I didn’t have to keep track of the time.

Here, the only thing anybody expected me to do was pass the cornbread.

So I did.

Mama was halfway through telling me about a woman from church when my phone vibrated beside my plate.

I glanced down automatically.

Ellis.

His name sat across the screen above a picture notification.

My attention lingered for half a second before I looked back at Mama.

"—and I told her if she wants all those books, she needs to call you herself because I'm not carrying a list back and forth."

"What books?"

Mama stopped.

Daddy looked at me.

I blinked. "What?"

"I just told you."

"Oh."

Her eyes dropped toward my phone before returning to my face.

I reached for my tea. "Sorry. What'd you say?"

"That woman from church wants to order books for her women's group."

"Tell her to email me."

"I did."

"Then we're good."

Mama gave me a look but reached for her glass instead.

Daddy laughed from the other end of the table.

I looked between them. "Why is everybody in my life suddenly not saying anything?"

"Don't bring me into it," Daddy said. "I'm eating."

My phone vibrated again.

This time Mama's eyebrows lifted.

I ignored her and picked it up.

Ellis had sent a picture.

Mila sat cross-legged on their living-room floor, surrounded by construction paper, crayons, and markers. The page in front of her held a purple dragon with orange wings, four uneven legs, and enough red crayon around its mouth to suggest the entire house might currently be on fire.

Beneath it was a message.

This is your fault.

I smiled before I could stop myself.

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

His response came almost immediately.

She has drawn six dragons.

Another picture appeared.

This one showed the drawings lined up across the floor, Mila’s little brown hand visible at the edge of the frame as she arranged them into some order only she understood.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Sounds like an artist to me.

She informed me they’re illustrations.

Even better.

The typing bubble appeared.

Apparently she’s making a book now.

I laughed softly.

Mama stopped talking.

I looked up.

Both of my parents were staring at me.

“What?”

Daddy went back to his plate.

Mama didn’t.

“Who you talking to?”

“A friend.”

The answer came so easily I didn’t think much about it until it was already out.

Mama nodded once and reached for her tea. “All right.”

I looked down at the phone again.

Another message waited.

She’s asking if the bookstore takes submissions.

I laughed.

Tell her Chapter & Charm has a very selective acquisitions process.

She’s six.

Then she should’ve started building her platform sooner.

A FEW SECONDS PASSED.

That’s cold, Bennett.

I stared at the last word.

Bennett.

I had no reason to like the way it looked coming from him.

I did anyway.

“Luna.”

I looked up.

Mama pointed toward my plate. “Eat your food before it gets cold.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Daddy’s mouth twitched as he reached for another rib.

I ignored him and picked up my fork, making it through approximately four bites before my phone vibrated again. This time, I left it where it was, only reaching for it once the conversation moved on.

She says she’ll revise and resubmit.

A second message sat beneath it.

Hope I’m not interrupting your Sunday.

My smile softened.

You’re not. I’m at my parents’ for dinner.

I hesitated before adding:

Daddy finally figured out his grill.

His reply took less than a minute.

Finally?

I glanced toward Daddy.

He was wiping barbecue sauce from his beard with a napkin, completely unaware that his grilling abilities had become a topic of conversation with a man he’d never met.

Long story.

I’ve got time.

I looked at the message for a second before locking my phone and setting it beside my plate.

So did I.

But Mama was already getting up to cut the first peach cobbler, Daddy was claiming hers needed ice cream before he’d even tasted it, and I wasn’t ready to trade one good thing for another just because both were available.

One thing at a time.

“Which one we trying first?” Daddy asked.

“Mine,” Mama and I said together.

He leaned back in his chair. “See, this is why I should’ve bought a cake.”

I laughed and got up to help with the dessert plates.

Ellis could wait.

The surprising part was knowing I’d text him back later.

Somewhere between cinnamon rolls, coffee, lunch, and a little girl drawing six purple dragons, Ellis Monroe had become someone I found myself looking forward to.

And for now, I was okay with not asking what that meant.

OceanofPDF.com



BY THE TIME Saturday came around, Luna and I had settled into something that felt surprisingly easy.

We talked when there was something to say and left each other alone when there wasn't. Tuesday, she sent me a picture of a handwritten sign Naomi had taped behind the café counter that read **STOP JUDGING PEOPLE'S COFFEE ORDERS! THIS MEANS YOU!** Wednesday, I sent her the first edited portraits from the shoot. She called almost immediately just to tell me she liked them, and somehow that turned into forty-three minutes on the phone.

Somewhere over the last week, Luna had become somebody I talked to. Not every morning or every night. Sometimes hours passed before one of us responded. Sometimes an entire day did.

I liked that.

There was no expectation attached to it. Something happened, one of us thought the other would find it funny, and that was usually enough.

By Saturday morning, my sister had called me three times.

The first was at eight-fifteen to ask if Mila and I were still coming over. The second came twenty minutes later to tell me she needed me to bring ice. By the third, I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror with clippers in one hand, trying to clean up the edge of my beard without taking off more than I intended.

Tasha’s name flashed across the screen again.

“Damn.”

I set the clippers down and answered. “What?”

“Why you keep sending me to voicemail?”

“I was doing something.”

“For six minutes?”

I looked at myself in the mirror. “Do you need something?”

“Two bags of ice.”

“You said one.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Of course you did.”

“And don’t forget them like you forgot the rolls at Easter.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Two bags, Ellis.”

I ended the call before she could add anything else and set my phone back on the counter.

“Daddy!”

Mila’s voice carried down the hallway.

“What?”

“Are we leaving?”

“In a minute.”

“You said that already!”

I leaned closer to the mirror and carefully ran the clippers along the other side of my beard. “And somehow it’s still true.”

She appeared in the doorway a few seconds later, already dressed in denim shorts and a yellow T-shirt, her curls pulled into two puffs that had looked considerably neater when I’d done them twenty minutes ago.

One of them was already leaning to the side.

I pointed toward it. “What happened?”

Mila reached up and touched the wrong puff. “What?”

“Your hair.”

She frowned at herself in the mirror. “Nothing.”

“It wasn’t doing that when you left me.”

She turned her head from side to side, inspecting my work like she hadn’t spent the last twenty minutes rolling around on her bed with a stuffed dragon.

“I like it.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I like it, Daddy.”

I stared at her reflection.

She smiled at mine.

There wasn’t much I could do with that.

“Go get your shoes.”

She disappeared down the hallway again, and I shook my head before turning my attention back to the mirror.

The beard was even enough. My hair was still low, waves laid the way I wanted them, and the gray T-shirt I’d thrown on fit well enough that I didn’t need to change it. We were going to Tasha’s house, not somewhere that required much more than being clean and presentable.

I unplugged the clippers.

My phone vibrated against the counter before I could leave.

For some reason, I knew who it was before I looked.

Important question.

I picked up the phone.

Why do I feel like it isn’t important?

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately.

That’s rude.

Was I wrong?

The three dots appeared, disappeared, then came back.

Do you put syrup on your pancakes or pour it on the plate and dip?

I stared at the message.

This is the important question?

Answer it.

On the pancakes. Like a normal person.

Her response came so quickly she had to have been waiting.

WRONG.

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it.

There's no wrong answer to this.

There absolutely is.

Why are you thinking about pancakes on a Saturday morning?

A few seconds passed.

Because I'm eating pancakes.

And instead of enjoying them you decided to bother me?

I needed a second opinion.

"Daddy!"

I slipped my phone into my pocket. "What?"

"We're still not leaving!"

I walked out of the bathroom and found Mila standing in the hallway.

Barefoot.

I looked down at her feet.

She followed my gaze.

"Oh."

"Go put your shoes on."

"I can't find them."

I closed my eyes. "Check under your bed."

She turned around without answering.

"That means you didn't check," I called after her.

By the time Mila found the shoes she'd sworn weren't under her bed, I'd gathered the rest of the things we needed, made sure she used the bathroom before we left, and checked twice that I had my wallet because Tasha would never let me live it down if I showed up with neither money nor ice.

We stopped for the two bags she'd requested on the way.

Tasha was standing on her porch when I pulled into her driveway forty minutes later, already pointing toward the back of my truck.

I lowered my window. "Both bags are back there."

She smiled. "See? Calling three times works."

Mila had her seat belt off before I could tell her to wait.

"Auntie!"

Tasha’s entire face changed.

“There go my baby.”

I looked over at Mila. “Interesting.”

She was already pushing the door open.

“Don’t run across—”

Too late.

She was halfway up the driveway.

Tasha crouched enough to catch her when she reached the porch, hugging her like they hadn’t seen each other in months instead of a couple weeks.

I climbed out and went around to the trunk for the ice.

“Your brother is here too,” I called.

Tasha looked over Mila’s head. “Hey.”

“That’s all I get?”

“I see you all the time.”

“You see her all the time.”

“She’s nicer.”

Mila nodded seriously. “I am.”

I grabbed both bags of ice. “Neither one of y’all getting Christmas presents.”

“You say that every year,” Tasha said.

The front door opened before she could respond, and my nephew came barreling onto the porch. He ran straight past Tasha toward Mila, yelling something about a game I’d never heard of, and Mila immediately forgot the adults existed and followed him inside.

I watched them disappear.

Tasha looked at me.

I looked at her.

“Two bags,” she said.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

I lifted them. “Happy?”

“Very.”

“Good. Move.”

She stepped aside, and I carried the ice through the house toward the kitchen.

I’d been coming to Tasha’s long enough that nobody needed to tell me where anything went. Her refrigerator was still covered in school pictures and magnets from places she’d never been, and the same ceramic fruit bowl she’d had since moving in sat in the middle of the counter, currently holding everything except fruit.

I dropped both bags into the cooler beside the back door, washed the water from my hands, then opened the refrigerator.

Tasha came in behind me.

I twisted the cap off the water and leaned against the counter while she went back to slicing tomatoes.

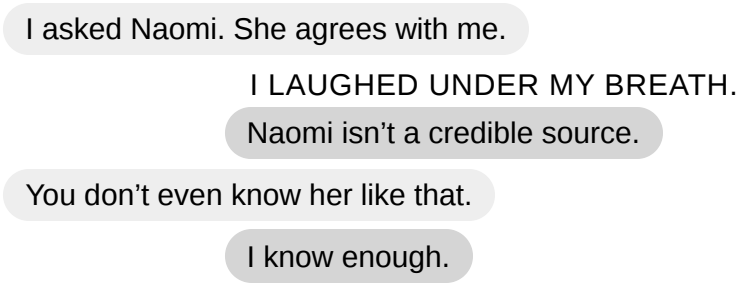
This was Tasha.

She’d call me repeatedly until I answered, insult me within five minutes of arriving, feed me before I left, then text later to make sure Mila and I had made it home.

There had never been much need for softness between us because it was already understood.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

I pulled it out.



“Who is Luna?”

My thumb stopped over the screen.

I looked up.

Tasha was still slicing tomatoes.

“What?”

She nodded toward my phone. “Her name just popped up big as hell while you standing in my kitchen smiling at your phone.”

“A friend.”

“A friend,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

She picked the knife back up. “Okay.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Tasha smiled without looking up.

“Go bother somebody else.”

I pushed away from the counter. “You’re irritating.”

“And yet you keep coming back.”

“Because unfortunately you are family.”

“Mhm.”

I was halfway out of the kitchen when she called my name.

“Ellis.”

I turned around.

Something in her expression had changed. Not enough to make the moment heavy, but enough that I knew whatever came next wouldn’t be another joke.

“You good?”

The question caught me off guard.

“Yeah.”

She watched me for another second. “You sure?”

I knew what she was asking.

Not about Luna specifically.

About me.

Three years was long enough for people to stop asking all the time. Long enough that grief wasn’t the first thing everybody saw when they looked at me anymore. Most days, that was a relief.

Tasha was different.

She’d been there for the parts nobody else saw. The nights after Elena died when Mila was asleep and I couldn’t figure out what the hell I was supposed to do with myself. The first birthday. The first anniversary. The first time Mila asked a question about her mother that I didn’t know how to answer without breaking apart in front of her.

Tasha knew the difference between me surviving and me being okay.

“I’m good,” I said again.

This time, I meant it.

Her eyes stayed on mine for another second before she nodded.

“All right.”

That was it.

By the time we ate, my nephew and Mila had turned Tasha’s living room into something that required half the couch cushions to be on the floor.

I didn’t ask.

Some things were better left alone.

I was sitting on the back patio with my plate balanced on one knee when Mila pushed through the screen door.

“Daddy.”

I looked up from my food. “Yeah?”

“Can we go to the bookstore?”

“Right now?”

“No.”

“Then when?”

She thought about it. “Later.”

“Later today?”

“Yeah.”

“You have books.”

“I know.”

“You have books you haven’t read.”

“I read them.”

“All of them?”

She hesitated.

I lifted an eyebrow.

“Most.”

“Mila.”

“I need another dragon book.”

“You don’t need another dragon book.”

Her face fell into the kind of expression she’d perfected sometime around four years old.

I looked away and took another bite.

“No.”

“Daddy.”

“No.”

“Please?”

I kept eating.

She moved closer until she was standing directly in front of me.

“Miss Luna might have another one.”

There it was.

I chewed slowly while Mila waited.

I could’ve said no.

Probably should’ve.

We’d already been out most of the day, and there were at least six books in her room she hadn’t finished. Chapter & Charm wasn’t exactly on the way home either.

My phone sat on the patio table beside me.

I looked at it.

Then at Mila.

Then back at my plate.

The truth arrived before I had much time to dress it up.

Mila wanted another dragon book.

I wanted to see Luna.

Both things could be true.

“Go ask your auntie what time she’s cutting that cake.”

Mila’s eyes widened. “We can go?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She was already running toward the door.

“Auntie!”

I shook my head.

A few seconds later, Tasha lowered herself into the chair beside mine with her own plate. For a while, neither of us said anything. The kids yelled somewhere inside. A lawn mower started a few houses down. The afternoon heat had settled into something thick and lazy, and even beneath the shade of the patio, sweat had started gathering along the back of my neck.

I picked up my phone.

My conversation with Luna was still open.

You at the store today?

Her response came a couple minutes later.

Unfortunately. Why?

I looked toward the house.

Mila is apparently in desperate need of another dragon book.

Three dots appeared.

Apparently?

Her word, not mine.

I don’t believe you.

I smiled.

We might stop by later.

I stared at the message for a second before sending it.
Might.
Like I hadn’t already decided.
Luna responded before I could put the phone down.

I’ll put a couple dragon books aside for her.

Then another message appeared.

And for the record, I still think you’re wrong about the syrup.

I laughed.

Let it go, Bennett.

Never.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket.
Tasha didn’t say anything.
I appreciated that.
Because the truth was simple enough without her help.
Mila wanted to go to Chapter & Charm.
And so did I.

OceanofPDF.com



I PULLED into the parking spot in front of Chapter & Charm eight minutes later than I planned, which wouldn't have bothered me nearly as much if Naomi wasn't already sitting on the bench outside waiting for me.

Naomi looked up from her phone when I climbed out of the car, then made a show of checking the time.

Her smile followed me onto the sidewalk.

"Good morning, boss."

"Good morning, employee who's about to get left outside."

"You wouldn't."

I stopped in front of the door and looked at her.

Naomi took a long sip from her water bottle. "Okay, you would. Open the door."

I laughed under my breath as I dug through my bag for my keys. I'd spent most of the drive mentally rearranging everything I wanted to get done before we opened, but the list was already starting to feel less urgent now that I was standing there. The shipment wasn't due until sometime before lunch, the invoices Naomi left on my desk yesterday weren't going anywhere, and the returns from yesterday still needed to be shelved.

One thing at a time.

The bell sounded above us when I pushed the door open, and Naomi reached past me for the light switch.

“I started on payroll yesterday,” she said, following me inside. “But I need you to look at something before I submit it.”

“That’s fine.”

“And the distributor emailed back about the order.”

“Good or bad?”

“Depends on how attached you were to getting those books before next month.”

I stopped halfway to the counter. “You’re lying.”

“I am.”

“Naomi.”

She laughed and kept walking toward the office. “They’re shipping Friday.”

“See, that’s why nobody trusts you.”

“You trust me.”

“Against my better judgment.”

Her laugh followed her into the back.

I set my cup beside the register and pulled my phone from my bag before dropping it underneath the counter with everything else. The screen lit up in my hand.

A text from Ellis.

The smile came before I opened it.

I didn’t think anything of it until I was already reading.

Morning. Mila would like me to inform you that she beat me at Uno last night.

I leaned against the counter.

Oh?

His response came before I could put my phone down.

Twice.

I laughed.

Tell her congratulations. I’m proud of her.

The typing bubble popped up almost immediately, disappeared, then came back.

Direct quote: “Tell Miss Luna Daddy cheated, but I still won.”

That got another laugh out of me.

I believe her.

Wow.

Sorry. She has an honest face.

And I don’t?

I thought about it for a second.

No comment.

Naomi came back around the corner and stopped.

Her eyes moved from me to the phone in my hand.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Ellis. Mila beat him at Uno last night, and apparently there’s some controversy surrounding whether or not he cheated.”

“Ah.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Naomi pressed her lips together and reached for her cup. “I’m just being supportive.”

“You’re being nosy.”

“I can be two things.”

I shook my head and reached beneath the counter for the opening checklist.

“See,” she said, picking up her cup, “now I’m in trouble for having eyes.”

Another message was waiting.

For the record, I did not cheat.

My mouth twitched.

I didn’t answer right away. Naomi was still standing there, and I refused to give her any more ammunition before we’d even opened for the day.

But I didn’t put my phone away either. By the time we unlocked the doors, Naomi had moved on—or at least she was pretending to. The rest of the morning settled into its usual rhythm.

The bell above the door chimed often enough that I lost track of who came in first. Mrs. Collins stopped by for the newest mystery release she'd had on hold all week. A young couple wandered through the romance section debating whether friends-to-lovers was better than enemies-to-lovers, and a college student camped out in the reading nook with an iced coffee from Maya's and enough highlighters to color-code an entire semester.

By ten-thirty, the bookstore felt exactly the way I liked it—lived in. The low hum of conversation drifted between the shelves while soft jazz played through the speakers overhead. Somewhere in the back, Naomi was helping a customer find a memoir she'd been raving about for months.

The morning kept me moving after that. Somewhere between helping a woman pick out a birthday gift for her sister and tracking down an online order that somehow ended up on the wrong shelf, ten-thirty turned into noon, and noon slipped into early afternoon without much warning.

By the time I finally made it back behind the counter, the crowd had thinned some, but not enough for me to sit down.

I rang up another purchase and handed the woman her receipt.

"Have a good day."

"You too, honey."

The bell jingled again before she'd even reached the door.

"I'll be right with you," I called automatically, already sliding another bookmark into a customer's shopping bag.

"No rush."

The voice was familiar enough that I didn't bother looking up right away.

I finished the transaction, tucked the receipt roll back into place, then glanced toward the entrance.

Ellis stood just inside the doorway with one hand tucked into the pocket of his jeans. Mila was beside him, already halfway out of her little denim jacket, her eyes scanning the bookstore like she was trying to decide where to go first.

The second she spotted me, her whole face lit up.

"Miss Luna!"

"Hey, sweet girl."

She took off before Ellis could remind her to walk, stopping just short of the counter.

“I beat Daddy at Uno.”

I grinned. “So I heard.”

“And he cheated.”

“Allegedly,” Ellis added from behind her.

Mila turned toward me, her expression serious. “He did.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. “I’m staying out of this one.”

Ellis’s eyebrows lifted. “Now you want to stay out of it?”

“I’ve had time to reconsider my position.”

“Convenient.”

Mila looked between us before shaking her head like neither one of us could be trusted.

“Can I go read?”

I glanced at Ellis, and he nodded.

“As long as you stay where I can see you.”

“I will.”

She disappeared toward the children’s section, abandoning her jacket with Ellis along the way. He caught it before it hit the floor and draped it over his arm.

“I hope we’re not interrupting.”

“Not at all.”

“We just left my sister’s. Mila decided we couldn’t go home without stopping here first.”

“I asked,” Mila called from somewhere between the picture books.

Ellis glanced in her direction. “You did.”

“Twice.”

“Because you said ‘we’ll see’ the first time,” she added.

I laughed. “Well, that explains the second time.”

“Exactly,” Mila called back.

Ellis looked at me. “Please don’t encourage her.”

“I’m just saying, ‘we’ll see’ isn’t really an answer.”

“Thank you, Miss Luna!”

“You see what you started?”

“I didn’t start anything. She already had a solid argument.”

He shook his head, but there was a smile tugging at his mouth.

“Well, I’m glad she wore you down.”

His attention settled back on me.

“She didn’t have to work that hard.”

Something in his tone made me pause.

Not long enough to figure out what.

“Daddy, look!”

Ellis glanced toward the children’s section.

“Coming, Bug.”

He started toward the children’s section before looking back at me. “It’s busy today.”

“It has been. I won’t complain.”

“I wouldn’t either.”

The bell rang again, and Naomi appeared from between the shelves before I could move.

“I’ve got this one.”

“Thanks.”

She passed me on her way toward the door, but not before her eyes moved from me to Ellis and back again. The grin that followed was subtle enough that he probably didn’t catch it.

Probably.

I gave her a look.

She kept walking like she didn’t see it.

Ellis watched her go before turning back to me. “Should I be concerned?”

“Oh, she’s harmless.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“It was the answer.”

His laugh followed me as I stepped from behind the counter to straighten the stack of bookmarks beside the register.

By the time I looked toward the children’s section again, Mila had made herself comfortable on the rug with three books spread around her. One was open across her lap, another sat beside her knee, and the third looked like it was waiting its turn.

Ellis followed my gaze.

“I’ve created a monster.”

“I don’t know.” I rested my forearms against the counter. “Looks more like you’ve created a reader.”

“Same thing when she figures out books cost money.”

I laughed. “There are worse habits.”

“That’s easy for the bookstore owner to say.”

“Exactly. I’m encouraging all of her financially irresponsible book-buying decisions.”

“I’m starting to realize you’re a bad influence.”

“She likes me.”

“That’s the problem.”

From across the store, Mila turned another page, completely unaware that we were talking about her. Her lips moved slightly as she read to herself, brows pulling together in concentration whenever she got to a word that took a little more effort.

Ellis rested one arm against the counter beside me.

For a while, we just watched her.

Neither of us seemed in much of a hurry to move.

Eventually, the bookstore made the decision for us when another customer approached the counter.

Mila was still tucked away in the children’s corner twenty minutes later, completely engrossed in a stack of books she’d somehow managed to collect from three different shelves.

I glanced over just in time to see her hold one up for Ellis.

“Daddy, can we get this one?”

He took the book from her, studying the cover with exaggerated seriousness.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Does Miss Luna think it’s a good one?”

Mila turned toward me so quickly I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well?”

I walked over and took the book from Ellis, flipping it over even though I already recognized the cover.

“It’s one of my favorites.”

“I knew it,” Mila said, beaming.

Ellis sighed. “So my opinion never really mattered.”

“Not this time.”

“I’ve been outnumbered since we walked in.”

“You’ve been outnumbered since she was born,” I teased.

He pointed at me. “See? This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

Before I could answer, the bell over the front door chimed again.

“I’ll be right back.”

The next hour passed in pieces. A woman looking for a birthday gift couldn’t decide between two novels, a regular stopped in just to tell me she’d finally finished the book I’d recommended last month, and someone managed to spill half a cup of coffee near the magazine rack. Naomi disappeared into the office to place an order with one of our distributors, leaving me bouncing between the register and the sales floor until the rush finally started to thin.

When I made it back behind the counter, the stack of new releases near the front was still exactly where the delivery driver left it.

I sighed. “So much for getting those shelved before lunch.”

Ellis looked over from the children’s section, where he was sitting in one of the chairs while Mila sorted through her growing pile of books.

“Need a hand?”

“I’ll get to it.”

His gaze shifted to the four boxes beside the counter.

“Eventually.”

“I said I’ll get to it.”

“I know.”

He got up anyway.

Before I could say anything else, he’d crossed the store and lifted the top box from the stack.

“Where do these go?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know.”

He adjusted the box against his chest and waited.

I looked at him for another second before pointing toward the back of the store.

“Fiction first. The cart’s back there.”

He nodded and started in that direction.

“You sure?” I called after him.

Without turning around, he lifted the box a little higher. “I’ve carried camera equipment heavier than this.”

“Show-off.”

“I heard that.”

“I wanted you to.”

His laugh followed him toward the back, and I turned toward the customer approaching the register.

By the time I finished ringing her up, Ellis had already emptied the first box and stacked the flattened cardboard neatly against the wall. Naomi stopped beside me.

“You know, I really like him.”

I kept my attention on the register. “Naomi.”

“What?”

“Leave it alone.”

She nudged my shoulder before walking away.

I shook my head and reached for the stack of receipts beside me.

A few minutes later, Mila called Ellis back over to the children’s section. She was pointing at something in the book spread across her lap, her forehead scrunched as she tried to work through a word. He crouched beside her, listened while she sounded it out, then quietly pointed her back to the beginning when she got ahead of herself.

I found myself watching longer than I meant to.

Then the bell rang again.

I turned toward the door.

“Welcome to Chapter & Charm.”

By the time the afternoon rush came and went, none of us had paid much attention to the time. At some point, Naomi disappeared down the block and returned twenty minutes later with a cardboard drink carrier balanced on top of a white bakery box.

“I come bearing gifts.”

I looked up from the stack of receipts I was sorting behind the counter. “Is one of those mine?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“How nice you plan on being to me for the rest of the day.”

I reached for the drink carrier.

She pulled it back.

“Naomi.”

“See? Already starting off wrong.”

I laughed and reached again, and this time she let me take the iced tea before setting the box on the counter.

“What’s in there?”

“Cookies.”

Mila’s head popped up from the little table where she and Ellis had been putting together one of the literary puzzles we kept around for the kids.

“What kind?”

Naomi looked over at her. “See, Luna? Somebody appreciates me.”

“I asked what kind.”

I pressed my lips together.

Naomi stared at her for a second. “You know what? I like you.”

Mila smiled and went back to the puzzle.

Ellis laughed as he got to his feet. “You didn’t have to get us anything.”

“I know.” Naomi opened the box. “But if I came back in here with cookies and didn’t offer a six-year-old one, I’d feel judged.”

“I would’ve judged you,” Mila said.

Naomi pointed at her. “Exactly.”

Ellis reached for his wallet. “At least let me pay you back.”

“You can buy next time.”

“Deal.”

He said it easily, already sliding his wallet back into his pocket.

Naomi glanced at me.

I didn’t give her the satisfaction of acknowledging it.

“Are we eating these cookies or not?”

Her mouth twitched. “We are.”

Conversation moved easily around the table after that. Naomi told Ellis about the customer who once spent nearly fifteen minutes arguing with her that autobiographies and biographies were the same thing because they were both about people’s lives.

“They are not the same thing,” she said, still offended even though it happened months ago.

“I tried to explain that.”

“You argued with that man for fifteen minutes,” I reminded her.

“Because he was wrong.”

“You could’ve let him be wrong.”

“In my bookstore?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “My bookstore.”

“See? Now we’re focused on the wrong part of the story.”

Ellis laughed. “I’m staying out of this.”

“Smart man,” I told him.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Naomi said.

“Too late.”

“So what’s the worst somebody’s ever acted during a photo shoot?” Naomi asked.

He let out a laugh. “You sure you want to know?”

“That bad?”

“Family of five. Mom, dad, three kids. Youngest couldn’t have been more than two.” He leaned back in his chair. “Every time I lifted my camera, that little boy lost it. Full tears. Screaming. Everything.”

“What’d you do?” Naomi asked.

“Put the camera down.”

“And?”

“He smiled.”

I laughed. “Of course he did.”

“So I picked it back up.”

“He cried again,” Mila said, already grinning.

Ellis looked at her. “You weren’t there.”

“You told me.”

“I tell you too much.”

She giggled.

“We spent almost an hour doing that. Camera up, tears. Camera down, happiest kid in Mississippi.”

“You cried too,” Mila added.

Ellis paused. “I did not.”

“You did.”

“I was frustrated.”

Mila turned toward me. “He made this face.”

She pulled her eyebrows together and pushed her bottom lip out, doing such an exaggerated impression that my laugh came out before I could stop it.

“I do not look like that.”

“You kind of do,” I said.

His head turned toward me. “I thought you were on my side.”

“I was.”

“And?”

I shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Traitor.”

“I prefer observant.”

“Of course you do.”

The smile stayed on his face when he reached for his drink.

Eventually, the cookies disappeared and our drinks were mostly ice. Mila slid down from her chair and wandered back toward the children’s section with the book she’d left open earlier.

Naomi gathered the trash from the table.

“I’ve got invoices calling my name.”

“They can wait,” I told her.

“They’ve been waiting since yesterday.”

“Exactly. They’re used to it.”

She gave me a look. “And this is why I have to be the responsible one.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

She started toward the office before glancing at Ellis, who was already reaching for the stack of books we’d left on the cart.

“Don’t let me come back out here and find romance shelved by color.”

He looked down at the books in his hands. “I wasn’t planning to.”

“I’m still figuring out what you’re capable of.”

“That sounds mildly threatening.”

“It’s supposed to.”

He laughed as she disappeared into the back.

I carried the empty drink cups toward the trash before returning to the counter. The bookstore had settled into one of its afternoon lulls, with only a handful of customers wandering between the shelves. Outside the front windows, a couple pushed a stroller down the sidewalk while a man walked past with an ice cream cone already melting faster than he could eat it.

Mila had reclaimed her spot in the children’s corner, legs folded beneath her as she worked her way through another picture book. Across the store, Ellis had somehow ended up in conversation with Mr. Williams near the history shelves. Whatever they were talking about had Mr. Williams gesturing toward one of the books while Ellis listened like he had nowhere else he needed to be.

I reached for my tea and took a sip, only to get mostly melted ice.

They’d been there for hours now.

I couldn’t remember the last time I wondered when they were leaving.

The bell above the door chimed, pulling my attention toward a woman stepping inside.

“Good afternoon,” I called, setting my cup down. “Welcome to Chapter & Charm.”

The rest of the afternoon slipped by one customer at a time. A mother and daughter left with matching copies of *Love Rehab* by Kia Smith, and Mrs. Collins circled back because she’d forgotten to use her loyalty card.

A man spent nearly twenty minutes wandering the history section before admitting he had no idea what he was actually looking for.

By the time the clock crept past five, the shelves looked a little less full, the café tables were empty again, and the steady hum of conversation had settled into comfortable silence.

Mila let out a dramatic yawn from the children’s corner.

Ellis glanced over.

“I think somebody’s running out of steam.”

“I’m not tired,” she said, yawning again before she could finish the sentence.

“Mhm.”

“I just...” Another yawn interrupted her. “...need to sit down.”

“You’ve been sitting down.”

“I need to sit... differently.”

I laughed as she curled up in the reading nook with a pillow tucked behind her back.

“That’s probably the funniest thing she’s said all day.”

Ellis smiled.

“She’s reached the point where she’s fighting sleep with every ounce of her being.”

“I heard that.”

“I know you did, Bug.”

The bell over the front door chimed one last time.

A young woman stepped inside, brows knit together as she scanned the shelves.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Are y’all still open?”

“For another fifteen minutes,” I told her.

“Oh, good.”

She disappeared toward the romance section, leaving the bookstore quiet once more.

Naomi slipped out of the office, keys twirling around her finger.

“I’m heading out.”

I looked up from the register.

“Already?”

“You say that like I haven’t been here since this morning.”

“I know, but...”

I glanced around the store.

My eyes drifted toward the cart Ellis started organizing earlier. There were still a few books left to shelve, boxes that needed to be broken down, and a register waiting to be counted. Naomi followed my gaze.

“You’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

She smiled knowingly.

“And you’ve got help.”

Before I could answer, she pointed a finger at Ellis.

“Don’t let her stay here all night.”

“I make no promises.”

“I heard that,” I said.

“I wanted you to.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Drive safe.”

“You lock up.”

With one last wave to Mila, Naomi headed out the front door, the bell chiming softly behind her. Without her voice filling the space, the bookstore settled into the quiet that usually came just before closing.

The woman in romance eventually brought two books to the counter. I rang her up, thanked her for coming in, and watched as she disappeared into the evening.

When the front door closed behind her, I reached over and flipped the sign.

CLOSED.

For a second, nobody said anything.

Behind me, I heard the scrape of a chair.

“I’ll wake her.”

I glanced toward the reading nook.

Mila was fast asleep with an open picture book resting across her lap.

I smiled.

“I think she’s earned five more minutes.”

Ellis looked over at her before looking back at me.

“I think you’re probably right.”

With the last customer gone and Mila asleep in the reading nook, the bookstore was finally still. The music continued softly overhead while headlights passed beyond the front windows.

I reached for the register drawer.

“I’ve got to count this down.”

Ellis was already walking toward the cart of books we’d abandoned earlier.

“What do you need me to do?”

I looked up.

“I didn’t ask you to stay.”

“You’ve already helped enough.”

“I know.”

He said it with the same easy certainty as before, already reaching for the cart.

I studied him for a second before handing him the stack of returns sitting beside the register.

“The blue cart first,” I said. “Everything on top goes back to fiction.”

He gave me a small salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

I laughed, shaking my head as I turned back to the register.

Ellis disappeared down the fiction aisle while I settled onto the stool behind the register, counting the drawer the same way I had hundreds of times before. The calculator clicked beneath my fingers as I jotted the final number onto the deposit slip.

“Balanced?” Ellis asked from somewhere behind the romance shelves.

“Thankfully.”

“I was rooting for you.”

“I could feel the support.”

“I do what I can.”

A smile tugged at my mouth.

The silence that followed didn’t feel awkward.

It was filled with the quiet shuffle of books sliding back onto shelves, the wheels of the return cart squeaking every few seconds, and the soft jazz still playing through the speakers overhead.

I locked the register drawer before carrying the deposit bag into the office.

When I came back out, Ellis was standing on the small step stool we'd bought years ago because neither Naomi nor I could ever reach the top shelf without it.

I stopped in the middle of the aisle.

"You know..."

He glanced down.

"What?"

"Watching somebody over six feet use that tiny stool is objectively funny."

He looked down at the stool.

Then back at me.

"I was trying to save my back."

"Mhm."

"I was."

"You look ridiculous."

"I feel judged."

"You should."

He laughed, sliding the last book into place before stepping down.

"There. Happy?"

I tilted my head, pretending to inspect his work.

"You put two books in the wrong section."

"I did not."

"You absolutely did."

He followed me a few feet down the shelf while I pulled out two hardcovers and switched their places.

"I was testing you."

"Sure you were."

I shook my head, unable to hide my smile.

"You know..." he said after a second, "I've never realized how much work goes into a bookstore after it closes."

"Most people don't."

"I figured once the customers left..." He gestured around the store. "...that was pretty much it."

I laughed.

"I wish."

I started pushing the return cart toward the back of the store, and he fell into step beside me.

“Closing is almost another job by itself. There are always returns to shelve, things to clean, orders to place, payroll to deal with, some event I’m supposed to be planning.” I glanced over at him. “Half the time I’m thinking about tomorrow before today is even over.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“Some days it is.”

“So why do it?”

The question caught me off guard.

I slowed my steps, looking out the front windows where the last streaks of sunlight were beginning to disappear.

“I don’t know.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You own the place.”

“I know.” I laughed softly. “I just...”

I searched for the right words.

“When I was little, libraries were my favorite place in the world. They were quiet without feeling lonely. You could sit there for hours and nobody expected anything from you except that you enjoyed yourself.”

I ran my fingers along the edge of a bookshelf as we walked.

“When I opened Chapter & Charm, I wanted people to feel that same way. Like they could come in carrying whatever kind of day they’d had and leave a little lighter.”

Ellis was quiet beside me.

When I glanced over, he was looking around the bookstore differently than he was a minute ago.

“As cheesy as it sounds...”

“It doesn’t.”

“...I wanted people to feel safe here.”

His eyes met mine.

“They do.”

His eyes stayed on mine when he said it, and for once, I didn’t feel the need to brush the compliment aside.

Before I could answer, a sleepy little voice drifted across the bookstore.

“Daddy?”

We both turned.

Mila was rubbing one eye, her curls a little messier than they were before she'd fallen asleep.

Ellis smiled immediately.

"Hey, Bug."

She blinked around the bookstore, still waking up.

"...Did I miss everything?"

I laughed.

"Only the exciting part."

Her tiny forehead wrinkled.

"There was an exciting part?"

"No," Ellis said, walking over to scoop her into his arms. "She's teasing you."

"Oh."

She rested her head against his shoulder with a dramatic sigh.

"I was gonna say..."

I smiled as I watched them.

"Looks like somebody's ready to go home."

Mila nodded against his shoulder.

"But can we come back tomorrow?"

Ellis chuckled.

"I think Miss Luna might like one day off from us."

I opened my mouth to agree.

Instead, the words that came out surprised even me.

"I don't mind."

For just a second...

Nobody said anything.

Then Mila smiled.

"I knew you'd say yes."

Ellis reached for Mila's backpack while I gathered the small stack of books she'd picked out before dozing off.

"I think these were the winners," I said, setting them on the counter.

Mila rubbed at one eye and nodded. "Daddy said I could get two."

"I did," Ellis replied, fishing his wallet from his back pocket.

I scanned the books while Mila leaned against the counter, still somewhere between awake and asleep.

"That'll be..."

I reached for the employee discount button out of habit.

Ellis caught it.

“Don’t do that.”

“It’s just a discount.”

“It’s your business. I’m paying.”

I looked at him for a second before canceling it.

“Fine.”

“I appreciate your cooperation.”

“Don’t push it.”

He smiled as he tapped his card against the reader.

“There we go.”

“Happy now?”

“Very.”

I tucked the receipt into the bag before handing it to Mila.

She hugged it against her chest like she’d been handed treasure instead of two picture books.

“Thank you, Miss Luna.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Ellis slipped her backpack over one shoulder before taking the bag from her other hand.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

I walked them toward the front door, switching off the lights one section at a time as we went. The bookstore settled into the soft glow of the lamps near the front windows, shadows stretching across the shelves I’d spent the last hour putting back in order.

When I unlocked the door, the evening air slipped inside.

It wasn’t as warm as it had been earlier.

Mila stepped onto the sidewalk first before turning back.

“I’ll see you later.”

The words were so certain they made me smile.

“I’ll see you later.”

She gave me a quick hug around my waist before hurrying toward Ellis.

He waited until she was a few steps ahead before looking back at me.

“Thanks.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I know.”

“I still wanted to.”

I smiled. “Drive safe.”

“You lock up.”

“I will.”

For a second, neither of us moved.

Then Ellis nodded once before catching up to Mila, who was already telling him something with the kind of excitement only a six-year-old could manage after being half asleep thirty seconds ago.

I stood in the doorway until he opened the passenger door for her and helped her climb inside.

Mila waved through the window before he closed the door.

I waved back, then stepped inside.

The bell chimed softly as the door closed behind me, and I turned the lock. The bookstore was exactly as we’d left it, with the return cart empty, the chairs pushed in, and the register balanced for the night.

Everything was in its place.

I slipped my bag over my shoulder and reached for the last light switch near the front door. Before I flipped it, I glanced through the window.

Ellis’s truck was still there.

Of course he was.

I shook my head, smiling as I turned off the light and the store fell quiet.

Quieter than it had been an hour ago.

I stood there for a moment, my hand still resting against the switch.

“Goodnight, Chapter & Charm.”

I stepped outside and locked the door behind me, tugging once on the handle before heading toward my car.

Ellis was still there when I climbed inside.

I started the engine and glanced toward his truck. He lifted a hand through the windshield, and I lifted mine back.

He didn’t move.

My smile returned as I pulled out of the parking space, and only after I turned onto the street did his headlights appear behind me.

OceanofPDF.com



BY THE TIME I got Mila into bed, she'd asked me three times if we could go back to Chapter & Charm tomorrow.

The first time, I told her we'd see.

The second time, she reminded me that Miss Luna said she didn't mind.

The third time, she was already halfway asleep, curled onto her side with one of the books we'd bought tucked against her chest.

I took it from her carefully.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Her eyes stayed closed.

"That means no."

"It means go to sleep."

"I am asleep."

I smiled.

"Goodnight, Bug."

"Night, Daddy."

I pulled the blanket higher over her shoulder and switched off the lamp beside her bed. The dinosaur night-light in the corner left enough of a glow for me to make it to the door without stepping on anything, which felt like an accomplishment considering the state of her floor.

I stopped before closing it.

"Daddy?"

I looked back.

Her eyes were still closed.

“What?”

“I like Miss Luna.”

The words were muffled against her pillow.

“I know.”

“She likes me too.”

“I know that too.”

A few seconds passed.

“Okay.”

That seemed to be all she needed.

I stood there a little longer, waiting until her breathing evened out before pulling the door mostly closed behind me.

The house was quiet when I made it downstairs.

Not completely. The dishwasher hummed in the kitchen, and the television was still playing whatever I’d left on before taking Mila upstairs, the volume low enough that I couldn’t make out what anybody was saying.

I picked up the remote and turned it off.

That made it worse.

I looked around the living room.

Uno cards were still scattered across the coffee table from last night. Mila’s shoes sat in the middle of the floor even though I’d told her twice to put them by the door, and one of her hair ties had somehow ended up on the arm of the couch.

Normal.

All of it.

I bent down and started gathering the cards.

For the record, I hadn’t cheated.

Mila had apparently decided otherwise, and Luna hadn’t needed much convincing to take her side.

A smile pulled at my mouth before I could stop it.

I stacked the cards and set them back inside the box.

I don’t mind.

That had been her answer when I’d told Mila she might want a day off from us.

I hadn’t expected it.

Maybe because I’d been halfway joking when I said it. We’d been at the bookstore for hours by then, long enough for Mila to make herself at home and for me to somehow end up helping Luna close a business I had absolutely no ownership in.

I’d stayed anyway.

Long after there’d been any real reason to.

I sat back against the couch.

There had been a time when days like that would’ve belonged to three people.

The thought came quietly.

So did Elena.

It wasn’t unusual anymore.

Three years hadn’t made me forget the way she could fill a room without trying. Or how she’d sit cross-legged on the living room floor with Mila when she was barely old enough to hold a book the right way, turning pages while Mila slapped both hands against the pictures.

Elena had been convinced she was raising a reader.

I used to tell her Mila was chewing on more books than she was reading.

She’d told me that wasn’t the point.

I smiled at the memory.

It still hurt.

I wasn’t sure there would ever be a version of remembering her that didn’t.

But the hurt had changed.

There had been a time when a memory like that would’ve stopped the rest of my night. When I’d sit with it until everything that came after felt wrong somehow, like moving on to something else meant I’d left her behind.

I didn’t feel that way anymore.

At least, not tonight.

Tonight, I could remember Elena sitting on this floor with our daughter and still think about Mila curled up in the reading nook at Chapter & Charm.

I could remember Elena’s laugh and still hear Luna laughing when Mila accused me of cheating at Uno.

One didn’t erase the other.

The realization settled quietly, like maybe I’d been learning it for a while and was only just now paying enough attention to notice.

I leaned forward and picked up the last Uno card from beneath the coffee table.

Luna had said she wanted Chapter & Charm to be somewhere people could walk into carrying whatever kind of day they’d had and leave a little lighter.

Somewhere safe.

I’d told her she’d done it.

What I hadn’t told her was that somewhere along the way, I’d started feeling it too.

And apparently, so had Mila.

My phone buzzed on the couch beside me.

I glanced down.

A message from Luna.

You left something.

I frowned.

Mila?

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately.

Unfortunately, you remembered her.

I laughed.

Good. Was worried for a second.

Her jacket.

I looked toward the chair by the front door.

Nothing.

Of course.

Again?

Apparently my bookstore is also a coat check now.

Put it on my tab.

Your tab is getting expensive.

I stared at that one longer than I needed to.
Then typed back.

Guess I'll have to come back.

The message delivered.
The typing bubble appeared before her response came through.

I guess you will.

I read it twice.
There wasn't anything particularly remarkable about four words.
That didn't stop me from smiling at them.
From upstairs, something hit the floor.
I looked toward the ceiling.
A second later—
"I'm okay!"
I shook my head.
"Go to sleep, Mila."
"I AM!"
I laughed under my breath and pushed myself off the couch.

Whatever was happening here, I wasn't ready to name it. But as I headed upstairs to investigate whatever my allegedly sleeping daughter had knocked over, one thing was harder to explain away.

I was already looking forward to seeing Luna again.



TWO DAYS LATER, Luna's name lit up my phone while I was sitting at my desk trying to convince myself I hadn't been staring at the same photograph for five minutes.

I finished the adjustment I was making before reaching for it.

Are you busy?

I looked at the time.

It was a little after three. Tasha was picking Mila up from school that day, which meant for once, I didn’t have anywhere I needed to be.

Depends.

Her response came almost immediately.

That’s not an answer.

I smiled.

It is if I don’t know what you’re about to ask me for.

The typing bubble appeared.
Disappeared.
Came back.

What do you need?

Long enough for me to set my phone down and turn back toward my computer.

It buzzed before I could touch the mouse.

I need help with something.

I read the message twice, not because there was anything confusing about it, but because in the few weeks I’d known Luna, I’d heard some version of *I’ve got it* more times than I could count.

What kind of help?

The able to lift things kind.

I laughed.

So I’m being used for manual labor.

I prefer “utilizing available resources.”

That’s worse.

Are you going to help me or not?

I DIDN’T MAKE HER ASK AGAIN.

I’ll be there in twenty.

Her response was nothing more than a thumbs-up.

Still, I was smiling when I put my phone down.

Twenty-two minutes later, I walked through the front door of Chapter & Charm.

The bell announced me.

Luna looked up from behind the counter.

“You made good time.”

“You said you needed help.”

“I didn’t say it was an emergency.”

“You also didn’t tell me what I’m doing.”

“I figured that would increase my chances of getting you here.”

I shook my head as I approached the counter.

“Before you put me to work, I need to collect something.”

Luna’s eyebrows lifted.

“What?”

“Mila’s jacket.”

“Right.”

She reached beneath the counter and came back up with the little denim jacket Mila abandoned two days ago.

“I was starting to think this belonged to me now.”

“You’d have to take that up with Mila.”

“On second thought, take it.”

I laughed and folded the jacket over my arm.

She laughed.

“Where is she?”

“With my sister, Tasha. She picked her up from school.”

“Mila agreed to that?”

“She was promised ice cream.”

“Ah.”

“Her loyalty can be bought.”

“I respect it.”

I folded the jacket over my arm and glanced around the store.

Nothing seemed particularly wrong.

A few customers were scattered between the shelves. Somebody was sitting near the café with a laptop open, and Naomi was nowhere in sight.

“So.”

Luna looked at me.

“So?”

“You summoned me.”

“I did not summons you.”

“You said you needed someone able to lift things.”

“I said I needed help.”

“Same thing.”

She gave me a look before coming around the counter.

“Come on.”

I followed her toward the back of the store.

“What am I doing?”

“You’ll see.”

“That sounds threatening.”

“It’s not.”

“That’s exactly what somebody says before asking you to do something terrible.”

Luna laughed but kept walking.

She led me toward the same section of the bookstore we’d cleared for Open Mic Night.

It looked different today.

Half the chairs had been pushed against one wall. Two of the café tables sat crooked in the middle of the floor, and several boxes were stacked nearby. A freestanding display had been pulled away from its usual spot, leaving the whole area looking like Luna started rearranging things and stopped somewhere in the middle.

I stopped beside her.

“What happened over here?”

“Nothing happened.”

“You sure?”

She gave me a look. “We have an event Saturday.”

“What kind?”

“Community reading day. Story time in the morning, a book drive, a few giveaways, then some activities for the kids in the afternoon.”

I looked around again.

“And this is the plan?”

“This is the middle of the plan.”

“Good.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“I was worried for a second.”

“You’ve been here five minutes, and I’m already regretting asking you to come.”

I laughed.

“Okay. What do you need?”

She pointed toward the tables.

“I need those moved closer to the front so we can use them for the book drive. The chairs need to go over there, and I want to clear enough space near the children’s section for the kids to sit on the floor during story time.”

I followed her hand as she pointed from one area to another.

“And the boxes?”

“Donations.”

I lifted the flap on the closest one.

Books.

Of course.

“There are more in the back,” she added.

“How many more?”

“Enough that I’m not answering that question.”

I looked at her.

She smiled.

“Naomi was supposed to help me get everything moved after we closed, but her mom needed her this afternoon.”

“So you called me.”

There was nothing particularly loaded in the words, or at least I didn’t mean for there to be, but Luna paused for a second before folding her arms across her chest, and I knew she heard something in them that I didn’t intend.

Luna paused.

“You sound surprised.”

“A little.”

“Why?”

I looked at her, and the smile already pulling at her mouth told me she knew exactly what she was doing.

“No reason.”

“Very convincing.”

I laughed.

She pointed toward one of the café tables.

“That needs to go over there.”

I reached for one end.

“Wait.”

I stopped.

“What?”

“You don’t have to move the whole thing by yourself.”

“You called me because I’m tall and able to lift things.”

“I didn’t say tall.”

“You thought it.”

“I did not.”

“You definitely did.”

Luna grabbed the other end before I could argue with her.

“On three.”

I looked down at her hands wrapped around the edge.

“You know I can get this by myself.”

“And I know I can help.”

I didn’t argue.

“One, two, three.”

We lifted.

The table wasn’t particularly heavy, but it was awkward enough that getting it around the chairs required more coordination than either of us anticipated.

“Left.”

“I am going left.”

“My left.”

“Your left is my right.”

“Exactly.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense.”

“Luna.”

“Ellis.”

I stopped when the back of my leg bumped against something and looked down. There was a chair directly behind me.

She laughed as we adjusted our grip, and this time I let her call the direction before we started moving again.

We eventually got the table where she wanted it without either of us dying.

Luna stepped back to look it over, then nodded.

“There.”

“Finally.”

“That took five minutes.”

“Five minutes longer than it should’ve.”

She rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face when she turned toward the rest of the setup.

For the next hour, we worked our way through her list.

Once I figured out what she had in mind, we didn’t have to talk much about where everything went. She started on the chairs while I brought the rest of the donation boxes from the back. When I came out with the last one, she’d already cleared a place for it near the tables.

I set it down.

“Thank you.”

I nodded and headed back for the freestanding display.

She thanked me when I moved that too. Again when I carried over another stack of chairs. Again when she asked me to reach a bin she’d stored high enough that I wasn’t sure how she got it up there in the first place.

By the fourth or fifth time, I started noticing. It wasn’t that she was being overly polite. It was that she said it every time I did something for her.

“Thank you.”

I set the bin on the table and looked at her.

“You know you don’t have to thank me every time I touch something, right?”

Luna looked up from the box she was unpacking.

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I have manners.”

“You thanked me for moving a chair.”

“You moved it for me.”

“Three feet.”

“It was an important three feet.”

I smiled, but she was already looking back down, sorting the books in front of her into two stacks.

Maybe that should’ve been the end of it.

Instead, I leaned against the edge of the table.

“You do that a lot.”

Her hands slowed.

“Do what?”

“Make sure people know you appreciate whatever they do for you.”

She picked up another book.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Then what are you saying?”

I thought about it.

“I don’t know. You just seem really careful about it.”

That got her attention.

Her eyes met mine for a second before dropping back to the book in her hands.

She shrugged. “Old habit.”

There was something different in her voice now, subtle enough that it didn’t make the conversation feel heavy but still noticeable.

“What kind of habit?”

She ran her thumb along the edge of the cover.

“The kind you pick up when somebody keeps score.”

I straightened slightly.

“Score?”

She didn’t answer right away.

Then she set the book down.

“Lucas.”

I knew the name. I knew he was the man before me, if there even was a *before me* and an *after me* yet.

Beyond that, Luna hadn’t told me much.

“He remembered everything he ever did for me,” she said.

There was no anger in her voice.

Somehow, that made me listen harder.

“If he picked something up because I needed it or changed his plans for me or helped me with something, eventually I’d hear about it again.”

“In an argument.”

Her mouth pulled to one side.

“Usually.”

I looked at her.

“Like what?”

She hesitated.

“Just...” She exhaled. “After everything I do for you. I did this because you wanted it. I changed my plans because you needed me. Stuff like that.”

The words came out almost too casually, like maybe she’d said them to herself enough times that they didn’t sound strange anymore.

“So you stopped asking.”

“It was easier.”

My jaw tightened before I could stop it.

Easier.

I glanced around at everything we’d moved since I got there.

“You asked me.”

Her eyes came back to mine.

“I did.”

“Why?”

For the first time since the conversation started, she looked uncomfortable. Not upset exactly, but like I caught her saying more than she meant to.

“I don’t know.”

I waited.

Luna sighed.

“I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

Four simple words.

Still, the words settled heavily in my chest

I could tell her I wasn’t keeping track, that none of this was going to show up in some future argument she didn’t even know we were going to have.

But saying that felt like asking her to trust something she hadn’t had enough time to see for herself.

So I didn’t.

I nodded toward the box beside her.

“What about those?”

She followed my gaze.

“Those are for the giveaway table.”

I picked up the box.

“By the front?”

“Yeah.”

I carried it over and set it where she pointed.

When I turned around, she was standing with her hands on her hips, looking over everything we'd done.

"Actually..."

I waited.

"Can you move that stack of chairs closer to the wall? Just so there's a little more room to walk through here."

"Yeah."

That was all she had to say. I didn't ask for an explanation before I moved the chairs. When I looked back, Luna had already gone back to sorting books.

She didn't thank me.

I didn't mention it.

For the next half hour, we finished the rest of the setup that way, with her telling me what she needed and me doing it. Sometimes I asked why. Sometimes I told her an idea wasn't going to work until she made me try it anyway and proved me wrong.

Once, I proved her wrong.

I made sure she knew it.

"You're enjoying this way too much," she said.

"I don't get a lot of opportunities."

"You've known me for five minutes."

"Long enough."

She rolled her eyes and handed me a roll of tape.

"Hold this."

I took it.

I wasn't sure she noticed the change, but I did, and I didn't say a word about it.

By the time we finished, the bookstore looked ready for Saturday.

The tables sat near the front with the donation boxes arranged underneath them. Chairs lined the wall until they were needed, and the area near the stage was open enough for more kids than Luna was probably expecting.

She stood beside me, looking it over.

"I think that's everything."

"You think?"

She glanced at me. "Don't ruin it."

“I’m just making sure.”

“That’s everything.”

“Good.”

She exhaled, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

“Thank—”

She caught herself.

I smiled.

Her eyes narrowed.

“Not a word.”

I lifted both hands.

She shook her head, laughing as she turned toward the front of the store.

Mila’s jacket was still folded beneath the counter where Luna put it earlier. I grabbed it and draped it over my arm.

“You heading out?”

“I probably should before Tasha decides keeping my child overnight is easier than waiting up for me.”

“Mila would love that.”

“Exactly why I can’t allow it.”

Luna smiled.

I started toward the door, then stopped.

“Saturday.”

She looked up.

“What about it?”

“You good?”

Her eyebrows pulled together.

“With the event.”

“Oh.” She glanced toward the setup we just finished. “Yeah. I think so.”

“You think?”

“Ellis.”

I laughed.

“Okay.”

I reached for the door.

“Hey.”

I looked back.

Luna was still behind the counter, and for a second, she looked like she was trying to decide whether to say whatever was on her mind.

“I’m glad I asked you.”

I almost asked if it was because I was tall, but there was something in the way she said it that made me leave the joke alone.

“Me too.”

Something softened in her expression.

“Drive safe.”

“You lock up.”

“I will.”

I stepped outside, and the bell chimed behind me.

By the time I reached my truck, I was still thinking about what she said, but it wasn’t the part about Lucas that stayed with me. It was the text that brought me there in the first place.

I need help with something.

Luna could’ve figured it out herself. I knew that much about her already. She hadn’t asked me because she had no other choice. She’d asked because, out of all the people she could’ve called, she chose me.

I opened the truck door and tossed Mila’s jacket onto the passenger seat, unable to shake how much that mattered to me.

OceanofPDF.com



I'D WATCHED twenty-three minutes of a show I couldn't name if somebody paid me.

The woman on the television was crying now, which felt important considering the music playing behind her, but I had no idea why. I'd missed whatever happened somewhere between reheating my dinner and sitting down on the couch, and instead of rewinding it, I reached for my phone again.

There was nothing new waiting for me, and I set it facedown beside me.

The woman kept crying.

"You and me both," I mumbled.

Except I wasn't crying, and nothing was actually wrong with me.

I was home before eight for the first time all week. I'd showered as soon as I walked through the door, changed into an old T-shirt and a pair of shorts, reheated the Chinese food I'd ordered the night before, and planted myself on the couch with every intention of doing absolutely nothing until it was time for bed.

This was what I wanted. A quiet night where I didn't have to think about customers, inventory, or whatever event was coming next. I didn't even have Naomi asking me questions from three aisles away because walking closer apparently took too much effort.

Just me, my couch, and a show I'd stopped paying attention to almost half an hour ago.

My phone was in my hand again before I realized I'd picked it up. It was 8:17, and when I checked my messages, there was nothing new there either.

I stared at the screen for a second before locking it. This was ridiculous. It wasn't like Ellis texted me every day.

At least, I didn't think he did.

I unlocked my phone again.

His name was close enough to the top of my messages that figuring it out wouldn't take much effort, but I refused to become the kind of person who scrolled through timestamps to determine how frequently a man texted her.

I tossed the phone onto the other end of the couch.

It landed against one of the pillows and stayed there.

"Problem solved."

The woman on television had stopped crying. There was a man with her now, and apparently I'd missed enough that they were kissing.

I reached for the remote and changed the channel, flipping past a couple of commercials before landing on a cooking competition. I left it there.

For the next ten minutes, I watched three people turn a basket of ingredients that had no business being together into meals that somehow looked better than anything I'd eaten that week. One of the judges took a bite and immediately made a face.

I laughed.

The contestant looked like he might pass out.

The judge chewed slowly before announcing that there was entirely too much salt in whatever he was eating.

My phone stayed exactly where I left it.

I looked at it anyway.

This time, I caught myself.

"Oh my God."

I pushed off the couch and carried my plate into the kitchen, even though there was still food on it.

Maybe I was just tired. That had to be what this was.

The last few days had been busy between the community reading day and getting the store back to normal afterward. Saturday had gone better

than I expected, and Mila had stayed attached to my side for most of it, with Ellis never too far behind. By Sunday, he was sending me pictures of her sitting on their living room floor surrounded by three of the books she'd gotten from the event. Monday, I sent him a picture of the denim jacket she'd managed to leave at the store for the second time.

Now it was Tuesday, and apparently one day without hearing from him was enough for me to notice.

I stood at the sink longer than necessary, staring down at my plate.

"That's weird."

Saying it out loud didn't make it less weird.

I scraped the rest of my food into the trash and rinsed the plate before putting it in the dishwasher. When I turned around, I could see my phone from the kitchen.

I could leave it alone.

There was absolutely no reason I needed to talk to Ellis that night.

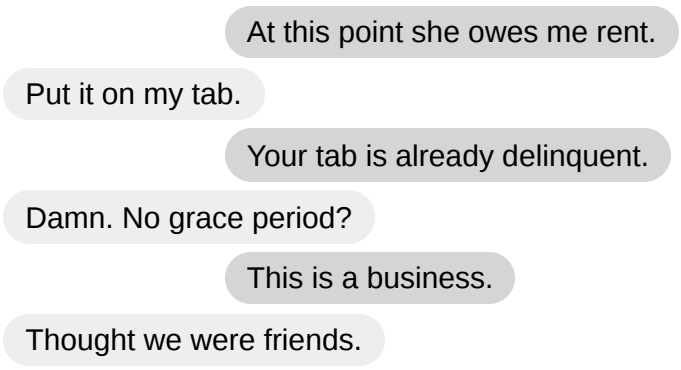
That thought followed me all the way back to the couch.

I sat down.

Picked up my phone.

And opened our messages.

The last thing there was the picture I'd sent him yesterday of Mila's jacket hanging from the back of my desk chair.



I'd stared at that message longer than I should have too.

Then I'd told him friendship didn't pay invoices.

He'd sent back a thumbs-down.

I smiled now just looking at it.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I opened the camera and took a picture of the television.

The contestant from earlier was standing in front of the judges waiting to find out whether he'd been eliminated.

I sent it.

This man just put strawberries in mashed potatoes.

The message delivered.

I immediately regretted it. I'd never sent Ellis something for no reason before. Usually there was the bookstore, pictures, Mila, an event—something that gave me an excuse to reach out.

This was just me deciding Ellis needed to know a stranger ruined mashed potatoes.

I was still considering whether that meant anything when the typing bubble appeared.

Call the police.

I laughed.

I think that's excessive.

You brought this to me. Don't start defending him now.

I was simply sharing information.

And now I'm upset.

Sounds personal.

His response came almost immediately.

You busy?

My smile faded just enough for me to notice it had been there.

I looked around my living room as if there might suddenly be something happening that I'd forgotten about.

Depends.

The three dots appeared.

You stole that from me too.

I laughed.

I adapted it.

Y’all really just making words mean whatever you want now.

Y’all?

You and whoever taught you that.

Sounds like a very smart person.

There was a longer pause this time.
Then—

You eat yet?

I glanced toward the kitchen.

Technically.

What does technically mean?

I ate enough to count.

That doesn’t sound like dinner.

It was leftover Chinese.

How much?

I narrowed my eyes at the screen.

Why are you interrogating me?

Because I’m about to go get food.

I waited.
Nothing else came through.
I didn’t know what I was expecting him to say, but apparently it was something because I was still staring at the conversation when another message appeared.

Come with me.

My thumb stilled over the screen, and I read it again.
Come with me.
There was no explanation attached and no real reason I should. I’d already eaten, technically or otherwise. I was showered, my hair was

wrapped, and I was wearing shorts that had seen better days. Leaving my house again wasn't included anywhere in that night's plans.

I should tell him no.

Instead, I typed—

Where?

His answer came so quickly that I wondered if he already knew I'd ask.



FORTY MINUTES LATER, I was sitting across from Ellis in a booth wondering when exactly I'd lost control of my evening.

"You know," I said, reaching for one of his fries, "I was comfortable at home."

Ellis moved the basket out of my reach.

"You could've stayed there."

I stared at him.

He stared back.

"Give me a fry."

"You said you ate."

"I did."

"Then you don't need mine."

"I didn't say I needed one."

His mouth twitched.

I held out my hand.

He ate one while looking directly at me.

"You're irritating."

"I was minding my business. You texted me."

"That doesn't mean you get to hold it over my head."

"I stated a fact."

"Give me a fry, Ellis."

He slid the basket toward me.

"Thank you."

The words were out before I thought about them.

His eyebrows lifted.

Mine did too.

Then he smiled.

I took two fries instead of one.

“That’s greedy.”

“Consider it interest on your tab.”

“My tab again?”

“Still delinquent.”

He shook his head, but he was smiling when he reached for his burger.

I settled farther into the booth, reminding myself that this wasn’t a date. I’d decided that while I was changing clothes. Dates required planning or, at minimum, both people knowing they were going on one.

This was just Ellis saying he was getting food and telling me to come with him, which was different.

Probably.

“What?”

I looked up.

“What?”

“You’re staring.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

“I was thinking.”

“About me?”

The answer came too quickly. “No.”

He laughed. “Damn.”

“You’ll survive.”

“I don’t know. That felt personal.”

“You asked.”

“And that was definitely a lie.”

I reached for another fry. “Prove it.”

His laugh came out louder this time, and I smiled before taking a bite.

That was what I kept noticing about being around Ellis. It was how little work any of this required. I didn’t have to search for something to say, and when there was nothing to say, the silence didn’t make me nervous.

When I reached for another fry, he let me take it without reminding me I said I wasn’t hungry.

By the time he finished eating, I’d probably had half of them.

He looked at the empty basket.

“You owe me fries.”

“Put it on my tab.”

“That’s my line.”

“I adapted it.”

“You’re getting too comfortable with that.”

Maybe I was.

The thought came without warning, and for once, it didn’t make me want to argue with myself.

Ellis wiped his hands on a napkin and looked toward the window.

“You ready?”

I should be.

It was getting late enough that tomorrow morning was going to come faster than I wanted it to, and I still had laundry sitting in the same basket I abandoned before leaving home.

Still, disappointment settled somewhere beneath my ribs.

I pushed it away before I could examine it too closely.

“Yeah.”

Outside, the air was cooler than it was when I arrived.

I folded my arms as we started down the sidewalk toward where we parked.

“My car is the other way,” I told him.

“I know.”

I looked over at him.

He kept walking.

“Then where are you going?”

“With you.”

“I know how to get to my car.”

“I would hope so.”

“Then why are you walking me?”

He glanced down at me.

“Why are you asking so many questions?”

“Because you’re going the wrong way.”

“For my truck.”

“But the *right* way for your car.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Ellis smiled.

“See? Adapt.”

“That’s still not what that means.”

“It does today.”

I laughed and bumped my shoulder against his arm, but he barely moved.

The sidewalk was mostly empty that time of night, with most of the businesses around us either closed or getting ready to. We passed a restaurant with chairs already turned upside down on the tables and a boutique with its lights off.

For a while, neither of us said anything.

I should probably be thinking about tomorrow.

Instead, I was thinking about the fact that I’d been waiting for him to text me that night.

The realization was harder to dismiss now that he was walking beside me. I’d missed him, though not in some dramatic, aching way. It had only been a day, but I’d noticed his absence, and when he hadn’t reached for me, I’d reached for him.

The thought made me a little nervous, just not enough to make me wish I hadn’t done it.

We reached the corner as the light changed.

I stepped forward, but Ellis’s hand closed around mine before I got more than a few inches.

“Hold on.”

A car turned through the intersection in front of us, close enough that I took a step back.

“People really don’t believe in stopping anymore,” he muttered.

I watched the car disappear down the street. When the light changed again, Ellis started across, and I fell into step beside him.

It took me until we were almost on the other side to realize he was still holding my hand.

His fingers were wrapped loosely around mine, warm against my palm. There was nothing hesitant about it, like holding my hand was the most natural conclusion to stopping me from stepping into traffic.

We reached the sidewalk, and Ellis still didn’t let go. I didn’t either.

I glanced down at our hands before facing forward again. His thumb brushed against the side of mine, and I couldn’t tell if he was

acknowledging that we were still holding hands or quietly asking if I was okay with it.

Either way, I answered by curling my fingers more securely around his.

He glanced at me.

I pretended not to notice.

“You good?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason.”

“Then stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

I looked at him now.

He was smiling.

“That.”

“I smile every day.”

I groaned.

“You’re never letting that go, are you?”

“Absolutely not.”

We kept walking hand in hand, and somehow, after the first few minutes, I stopped thinking about it. That might be the strangest part.

My car was parked half a block ahead when I realized I didn’t want to reach it yet. I slowed down without meaning to, and Ellis matched my pace.

“What time are you going in tomorrow?” he asked.

“Probably around nine.”

“You usually go in that late?”

“No, but Naomi opens on Wednesdays. I just normally show up before she needs me to.”

“Could you go in later?”

I looked over at him. “How much later?”

“Ten.”

“What happens at ten?”

“You go to work.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then what happens before ten?”

His mouth curved. “You have breakfast with me.”

I looked ahead again, mostly because the smile threatening to show up on my face was none of his business.

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“I thought I was pretty clear.”

“You said breakfast.”

“With me.”

“That doesn’t automatically make it a date.”

“It does when I’m asking you to go on one.”

I glanced at him again. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

I laughed. “You’re very sure of yourself.”

“I’m sure I want to take you to breakfast.”

That quieted me for a second.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I’ll have breakfast with you.”

“Before ten.”

“Don’t push it.”

He laughed. “What time should I pick you up?”

“Pick me up?”

“That’s my plan.”

“Why can’t I meet you there?”

“You could.”

“But?”

“I asked you on a date. Let me pick you up.”

I studied him for a second before shaking my head. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Don’t make me change my mind.”

His smile widened. “Address?”

I pulled out my phone. “I’ll text it to you.”

“See? That wasn’t hard.”

“You’re making it harder.”

When we reached my car, neither of us made a move toward the door. I looked down at our still-joined hands, and Ellis followed my gaze.

This was probably when one of us should let go.

He did eventually, but only so I could reach into my bag for my keys. I found them faster than I wanted to.

“So,” I said.

“So.”

I pressed the button to unlock my car.

The lights flashed.

Neither of us moved.

“You should probably go,” I told him.

“Probably.”

“Tasha has Mila?”

“Tonight, yeah.”

“You could’ve stayed home.”

“So could you.”

I looked at him.

There was no teasing in his expression now.

My fingers tightened around my keys.

“I wanted fries.”

“You ate mine.”

“They were good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them.”

“I did.”

Silence settled between us, not uncomfortable but different enough that I became aware of how close he was. I had to tilt my head slightly to look at him, close enough now to see the faint line between his eyebrows when his expression changed.

His eyes moved over my face before dropping to my mouth.

My breath caught before I could stop it, and when his gaze came back to mine, I knew.

Neither of us moved right away.

He gave me enough time to step back, open my car door, make a joke, do anything that would turn this into something else.

I didn’t.

His hand came up slowly, his fingers brushing along my jaw before settling against the side of my face. A few of my curls had fallen forward, and he gently swept them back, tucking them away from my face before his eyes met mine again.

“Luna.”

The way he said my name sent warmth through me.

I could wait for him to close the rest of the distance, but I didn’t. I leaned in, and his mouth met mine.

For one brief second, all I registered was warmth before Ellis kissed me with a softness that made my fingers curl into the front of his shirt. His hand stayed against my face, and there was nothing rushed or demanding

about the way his mouth moved against mine. He gave me just enough pressure to make me lean closer and forget about the keys still pressed into my palm.

When we pulled apart, neither of us went far. His forehead nearly touched mine, and the breath I let out sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Ellis smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That didn’t sound like nothing.”

“I’m allowed to laugh.”

“After I kiss you?”

I looked at him.

“That confidence came back fast.”

“It never left.”

“Clearly.”

His thumb brushed once along my cheek. I should probably step away, but instead, my eyes dropped to his mouth.

Ellis caught me, of course, and his smile changed.

“See something you like?”

“Don’t ruin it.”

He laughed softly, and I kissed him again.

This one was shorter.

Not because I wanted it to be, but because if I stayed where I was much longer, I was going to have to admit that I had no interest in going home.

When I pulled away, Ellis was still smiling.

“You done?”

“For now.”

“For now?”

“Goodnight, Ellis.”

He laughed as I finally opened my car door.

“Text me when you get home.”

“You know I live ten minutes away.”

“Still.”

I looked at him over the top of the door.

There were a dozen responses I could give him.

I could tease him about being overprotective. Tell him I’d been getting myself home safely long before he showed up. Remind him that I didn’t

need anybody checking behind me.

Instead, I nodded.

“Okay.”

He waited until I was inside before stepping back.

I started the car and pulled away from the curb, catching sight of him in my mirror as he turned toward wherever he’d parked his truck.

The smile came before I could stop it.

That morning, nothing about that day had included Ellis.

I’d wanted to talk to him, so I did.

He’d asked me to come with him, and I went.

Somewhere between stolen fries and the walk back to my car, I’d held his hand because I wanted to.

And when he gave me the chance to decide what happened next, I’d kissed him.

For once, I didn’t search any of it for something to worry about.

I just drove home smiling.

OceanofPDF.com



I CHANGED my shirt twice before I realized what I was doing. Somehow I was standing in front of my closet at eight-fifteen on a Wednesday morning with another shirt in my hand like breakfast required a dress code I wasn't made aware of.

I stared at it for another few seconds before tossing it onto the bed.

"This is stupid."

The empty house offered no disagreement.

Usually, Mila would be somewhere down the hall by then, either asking what's for breakfast while ignoring whatever I put in front of her or reminding me about something she swore she told me three days ago. With her at Tasha's, the house had been quiet since I woke up.

I grabbed the first shirt again and pulled it over my head. Problem solved.

My phone buzzed on the dresser before I could make it out of the bedroom. For half a second, I thought it might be Luna.

It wasn't.

> Your child has eaten two pancakes, half my bacon, and is currently asking for cereal.

I laughed under my breath.

Stop feeding her.

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately.

Come get her then.

Later.

Oh I know. You got plans.

I stared at the message until another one came through.

👀

I locked my phone and headed down the hall without answering. Whatever she was fishing for, she could keep fishing.

I made it halfway to the kitchen before my phone buzzed again.

Don't ignore me.

I did exactly that, which lasted all of ten seconds before she called.

Of course she did.

I answered as I stepped into the kitchen. "What?"

"That's how you answer the phone?"

"When I know it's you? Yeah."

Tasha sucked her teeth. "Anyway. Where you going?"

"Good morning to you too."

"It was good before you started being difficult."

I opened the refrigerator and reached for a bottle of water. "Didn't you call me?"

"Because you ignored my question."

"I didn't ignore it."

"You didn't answer."

"Same difference."

"No, it's not."

I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a drink.

"Is Mila good?"

"My niece is wonderful."

"Your niece?"

"For now. She becomes your daughter again when school lets out."

I laughed. "You still good to drop her off this morning?"

“Already planned on it. I got her.”

“Appreciate you.”

“Mm-hmm.” There was a brief pause. “So who you going to breakfast with?”

I reached for my water again. “Why I gotta be going with somebody?”

“Because you don’t change shirts to go eat by yourself.”

I looked down at what I was wearing.

“How do you know I changed shirts?”

“I don’t.” She laughed. “But thank you for confirming it.”

I closed my eyes.

The woman had never minded her business a day in her life.

“Tasha.”

“Ellis.”

“Luna.”

She went quiet long enough that I pulled the phone away from my ear to make sure the call didn’t drop.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You got quiet.”

“I’m just surprised.”

“About what?”

“You’re going to breakfast with Luna.”

“Yes.”

“Just y’all?”

I took another drink of water. “That’s generally how dates work.”

She went quiet again, and this time I didn’t bother checking the phone.

“Why are you being weird?”

“I’m not being weird.”

“You are.”

“I’m trying to figure out when y’all started going on dates.”

“We haven’t.”

“You just said you were taking her to breakfast.”

“I am.”

“So this is a date.”

“The first one.”

“Oh.”

I laughed. “Why you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I just told you I’m getting married.”

“I didn’t say all that.”

“You sounded like it.”

“I’m just saying. A date is different.”

“Different from what?”

“All that stopping by the bookstore and pretending you just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

I laughed. “I wasn’t pretending anything.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What?”

She went quiet for a second. “Something happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“Ellis.”

“What?”

“I know you.”

I probably should’ve left it alone, but the smile pulling at my mouth wasn’t helping my case.

My mind went back to Luna standing beside her car last night, her fingers curled into the front of my shirt and that little laugh she let out when we pulled apart. I could still see the way her eyes dropped to my mouth before she kissed me again.

I took another drink.

“Nothing you need to know about,” I corrected.

“Oh, something definitely happened.”

“I gotta go.”

“You ain’t gotta go nowhere. It’s eight-twenty in the morning.”

“I have somewhere to be.”

“With Luna.”

“Goodbye, Tasha.”

“Tell my sister-in-law I said—”

I hung up.

I stood there staring at my phone for a second before laughing and shaking my head. This woman.

Another notification appeared before I could put the phone down.

This time, it was Luna.

Luna: Please tell me you’re not one of those people who shows up fifteen minutes early.

I checked the time, then the directions to her place, and immediately realized she was right to be concerned. I'd been planning to leave in about five minutes.

Why?

Her response came almost immediately.

Ellis.

I smiled.

What?

What time were you planning to get here?

I considered lying.

8:45.

Three dots appeared.
Disappeared.
Came back.

You said 9.

8:45 is basically 9.

No it is not.

Close enough.

If you knock on my door before 8:55 I'm not answering.

I laughed.

Noted.

A few seconds passed.

I mean it.

See you at 8:55.

She sent me a thumbs-down.
I was still smiling when I grabbed my keys



I PULLED into the parking lot of Luna's apartment building at 8:54.

I knew because the clock on my dashboard changed the second I put the truck in park.

For a moment, I considered getting out anyway, but I remembered the thumbs-down she sent me and decided I'd rather not spend our first date standing outside while she proved she wasn't bluffing.

So I waited.

The building was smaller than I expected, two stories of brick with a row of balconies stretching across the front. A few cars were scattered throughout the lot, and I checked the address Luna sent me against the number on the building one more time before looking toward the second floor.

Apartment 214.

I had no idea which one that was from where I was parked.

At exactly 8:55, I reached for the door handle.

My phone buzzed before I could open it.

You can come up now.

I laughed.

Were you watching the clock?

Mind your business.

Coming from you?

8:56 is also acceptable.

I got out before she could move the goalpost again.

I found 214 near the end of the second-floor walkway and barely made it to the door before it opened.

Whatever I was about to say disappeared.

Luna stood on the other side with one hand wrapped around the doorknob, and for a second, all I did was look at her.

Her curls fell loose around her face and shoulders, fuller than they usually were when she was working and pushing them out of her way every five minutes. She was wearing a fitted brown top with jeans that hugged her in a way I probably shouldn't spend too much time appreciating if I planned on getting her to breakfast before ten. A pair of gold hoops caught the morning light when she tilted her head at me.

Her lips curved slowly.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

I let my eyes move over her once more before meeting hers. "You look good."

Something in her expression softened.

"Thank you."

Her gaze dropped over me then, taking in the dark jeans and button-down I eventually settled on. She lingered just long enough for me to notice.

"What?"

Her eyes returned to mine. "Nothing."

"That look wasn't nothing."

"I was looking at you."

"I noticed."

"And?"

I smiled. "You like what you see?"

Luna rolled her eyes, but the smile pulling at her mouth gave her away.

"See, this is why people shouldn't compliment you."

"You didn't compliment me."

"I was thinking about it."

"What stopped you?"

"You started talking."

I laughed, and she turned back inside to grab her bag from a small table near the door.

It gave me my first real glimpse into her apartment. I couldn't see much, only part of the living room and a bookshelf against the far wall that looked full enough to surprise absolutely no one.

It looked like her.

I didn't know why that thought made me smile.

She slipped the strap of her bag over her shoulder as she stepped back into the hallway and pulled the door closed behind her.

“You ready?”

“I’ve been ready.”

Her eyes narrowed as she locked the door. “You got here early.”

“One minute.”

“Early is early.”

“I stayed in the truck.”

“That doesn’t make you less early.”

“It means I followed instructions.”

She turned to look at me. “That is not what following instructions means.”

“I didn’t knock before 8:55, did I?”

She shook her head and started toward the stairs.

I fell into step beside her, smiling when I heard her mumble something under her breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s twice you’ve had nothing to say this morning.”

“And somehow you keep finding something to say.”

“Balance.”

She laughed as we reached the stairs, and I followed her down toward the parking lot.

By the time we were pulling out of her apartment complex, Luna had already changed the radio station twice.

I glanced over at her. “You done?”

“For now.”

“You’ve been in my truck three minutes.”

“And?”

“And you’ve touched my radio twice.”

She looked at me like I’d said something unreasonable. “I didn’t like what was playing.”

“It’s my truck.”

“And I’m your guest.”

I laughed. “That means you get control of the radio?”

“It means you should want me to be comfortable.”

I looked over at her.

She was fighting a smile.

“You practiced that?”

“No.”

“You should’ve. Might’ve sounded more convincing.”

“Just drive.”

I shook my head and turned my attention back to the road.

There was something different about having Luna beside me that morning. Neither of us had to pretend we didn’t know what this was.

A date.

Still, sitting beside her felt almost exactly the way it always did.

Almost.

At the next red light, I rested my hand near the gearshift and caught Luna looking at it.

I followed her gaze.

She looked out the window.

A smile pulled at my mouth.

“You good?”

She glanced over at me. “Yeah. Why?”

“No reason. Just checking.”

She smiled a little. “I’m good.”

The light turned green, and I pulled through the intersection before answering.

A few seconds later, her hand settled over mine.

I glanced down before turning my hand beneath hers and threading our fingers together.

Luna kept her eyes on the road ahead, but the smile she was trying to hide made its way onto her face.

For the rest of the drive, neither of us let go.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of a breakfast spot on the other side of town.

Luna looked up at the sign as I parked. “I’ve never been here.”

“Good.”

She turned toward me. “Why is that good?”

“Because if you hate it, you can blame me. If you love it, I get credit.”

“So either way, this is about you?”

“Seems pretty reasonable to me.”

“Of course it does.”

I laughed as I turned the truck off, and Luna reached for the door handle before I could say anything.

“Hold on.”

Her hand stopped. “For what?”

I was already opening my door.

She watched me walk around the front of the truck, and by the time I reached her side, she was sitting there with her arms folded.

“You know I can open a door, right?”

“I know.”

“I do it every day.”

“I believe you.”

“Then what are we doing?”

I opened the door.

“Going to breakfast.”

For a second, she just looked at me.

Then she shook her head, but she was smiling when she took the hand I offered and stepped down.

“You’re doing too much.”

“I opened a door.”

“Exactly.”

I closed it behind her. “Your standards might be a little low.”

“My standards are fine.”

“Apparently not if opening a door got me accused of doing too much.”

She started toward the restaurant. “You want me to get back in so you can do it again?”

I laughed as I caught up to her. “See, now you’re being difficult.”

“I learned from you.”

The restaurant was busy without being crowded, full of the usual Wednesday morning mix of people who apparently had somewhere to be and people who looked like they had no intention of being anywhere else. A waitress led us to a booth near the window and left two menus on the table before promising to come back for our drink orders.

Luna slid into the seat across from me and opened hers.

“You brought me somewhere with a four-page breakfast menu.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is when I have to be at work.”

“You have plenty of time.”

Her eyes lifted over the top of the menu. “You planning on getting me there by ten?”

“That was the agreement.”

“And if I’m late?”

“You’re the owner.”

“That does not mean I get to show up whenever I want.”

“Pretty sure that’s one of the benefits.”

“It is not.”

“Then you bought yourself a job with no benefits.”

Her menu lowered.

I smiled.

She stared at me for another second before a laugh slipped out of her. “I really don’t like you sometimes.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Why?”

“Because you agreed to a date.”

She looked back down at her menu, but not before I caught the smile she was trying to hide.

The waitress came back for our drinks, and Luna ordered orange juice while I asked for coffee. By the time she walked away, Luna had made it to the second page of the menu and somehow looked less certain than when she started.

“What are you getting?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“You’ve been looking at the same page for five minutes.”

“There are options.”

“It’s breakfast.”

She looked up from the menu. “And?”

“Eggs. Meat. Something made out of potatoes.”

“That’s why I don’t know what I want. Everything sounds good.”

She turned the page like she might find an answer on the other side. I leaned back against the booth, watching her scan a list she’d probably already read twice.

“Get what you usually get.”

“I don’t usually go out for breakfast.”

That caught my attention. “No?”

She shook her head. “Not really. If I eat before work, it’s usually something quick at home or whatever Naomi shows up with.”

“What does Naomi show up with?”

“Depends on how late she is.”

I laughed. “Her apology comes with food?”

“Sometimes coffee. The later she is, the better the offering.”

“That’s a solid system.”

“For her.”

The waitress returned with our drinks, and Luna thanked her before wrapping both hands around her glass.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“You do breakfast dates often?”

I looked at her.

She took a slow sip of orange juice like the question was completely innocent.

“No.”

“How often is not often?”

“Luna.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “I’m making conversation.”

“You’re being nosy.”

“I can be two things.”

I laughed because I’d heard that somewhere before.

She caught it immediately. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, what?”

I shook my head. “You and Naomi spend too much time together.”

“That sounds like something she said.”

“It is.”

Luna smiled and reached for her menu again. “She’s a wise woman.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I’m telling her you said that.”

“Of course you are.”

She studied the menu for another moment before setting it down. “Okay, seriously. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“I know.”

“I was just wondering.”

There was no edge to the question and no expectation sitting behind it. She was curious, and after everything we'd talked about over the last few weeks, I understood why.

I took a drink of coffee before setting the mug down.

"I haven't been on many."

Her expression changed slightly. "Since Elena?"

I nodded.

Luna already knew enough about my life that hearing my wife's name from her didn't catch me the way it might have once. Still, there was something different about talking about Elena while sitting across from a woman I'd kissed less than twelve hours ago.

"A few," I told her. "Nothing that went anywhere."

She traced one finger through the condensation on her glass. "Was that what you wanted?"

"What?"

"For them not to go anywhere."

The question made me think.

"Sometimes."

"And the other times?"

"I think I wanted to want more than I actually did."

Luna looked at me for a moment, and I could see her turning that over before she nodded.

"I get that."

There was enough behind those three words that I could ask what she meant. A few weeks ago, I probably would have.

Instead, I let her decide whether she wanted to give me more.

She did.

"I think sometimes you can know something isn't right and still spend a long time trying to make yourself want it to be."

Her eyes stayed on her glass as she said it.

I didn't need to ask who she was talking about.

Looking for another novel?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and start browsing.

Lucas had come up enough for me to know that whatever happened between them wasn’t as simple as two people waking up one morning and deciding they were done. Five years didn’t disappear that cleanly.

“Why?”

Her gaze lifted to mine. “Why what?”

“Why make yourself want something you know isn’t right?”

She sat with the question for a moment.

“Because leaving means admitting all the work you put into staying didn’t fix it.”

I didn’t say anything right away.

Neither did she.

The restaurant continued around us, dishes clinking somewhere behind the counter while a table across the room broke into laughter, and the waitress passed our booth carrying a tray balanced against one hand.

Eventually, Luna gave me a small smile.

“That got serious fast.”

“A little.”

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Bringing all that to breakfast, I guess.”

“You didn’t bring anything I didn’t ask about.”

Her eyes stayed on mine for a moment before she nodded.

“Okay.”

I reached for my coffee, and the quiet that settled between us felt lighter than the one before it.

Luna watched me take a drink.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re looking at me.”

“I do that sometimes.”

“I noticed.”

Her mouth curved before she looked down at her glass.

“So,” she said, running a finger through the condensation along the side of it, “what else should I know about you?”

I leaned back against the booth. “That’s a broad question.”

“We have time.”

“How much?”

She glanced toward the clock on the wall. “Not enough for your entire life story.”

“Then you better ask good questions.”

She smiled. “I can do that.”

“I’m sure you can.”

The waitress started toward our table before Luna got the chance.

“Looks like you’ve been saved.”

“From my own question?”

“From having to come up with a good one.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Oh, I have plenty.”

“Like what?”

Her smile slowly widened.

“We don’t have enough time.”

“You ready to order?”

“I am.” Luna closed her menu and looked at me. “He might need another minute.”

“I’ve been ready.”

“Of course you have.”

The waitress looked between us. “I’ll start with you, then.”

I ordered eggs, bacon, potatoes, and pancakes before handing her my menu. Luna waited until I was finished before ordering French toast with eggs and sausage, adding a side of fruit after another few seconds of consideration.

When the waitress left, I reached for my coffee.

Luna watched me take a sip.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I set the mug down. “You keep saying that this morning.”

“I’m observing.”

“Observing what?”

She nodded toward my coffee. “You.”

I looked at the mug and then back at her. “What about me?”

“You order coffee like somebody’s grandfather.”

I laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“Black. No cream. No sugar. Just suffering.”

“It’s coffee.”

“It looks like motor oil.”

“It tastes like coffee.”

“It smells angry.”

I stared at her.

She took another sip of orange juice, completely serious.

“You had a lot to say about my coffee the first time we ate together too.”

“Because you keep ordering it wrong.”

“I didn’t know there was a right way.”

“There is.”

“And I’m guessing it’s whatever you drink.”

“Obviously.”

I shook my head. “What do you put in yours?”

“Enough stuff to make it taste good.”

“So not coffee.”

“It starts as coffee. That’s enough.”

“That explains why Naomi had to put a sign up about judging people’s orders.”

Her mouth fell open. “That sign was not about me.”

“Sounded applicable.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have sent you that picture.”

“But you did.”

“I make mistakes.”

I smiled as I reached for my coffee again. “Apparently.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but there was no real threat behind it.

I told her about the family portrait session I had later and Mila’s firm belief that three children automatically meant I was going to need backup.

“She offered to come?”

“She offered to supervise.”

Luna laughed. “That sounds like her.”

“She’s six.”

“And?”

“And I’ve been doing this longer than she’s been alive.”

“Hasn’t stopped her yet.”

“Nothing stops that child.”

The affection in my voice must have given me away because Luna smiled, softer this time.

“She’s special.”

“She is.”

“You’ve done a good job with her.”

The words settled differently than I expected them to.

I looked down at my coffee for a moment before meeting her eyes again. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

There were plenty of things I could say after that, but none of them felt necessary. Luna knew enough about Elena now to understand that raising Mila had never been something I imagined doing alone, and she didn’t turn the compliment into sympathy.

She simply meant it. Our food arrived a few minutes later, giving us something else to focus on. We settled into eating, and it didn’t take long for the conversation to find its rhythm again.

For all the attention I’d given that morning to what I was wearing and whether eight-forty-five was too early to show up at her apartment, the date itself didn’t feel nearly as complicated as I expected it to.

It was still Luna.

She stole a piece of bacon from my plate less than five minutes after our food arrived and looked genuinely offended when I pointed out that she had her own. She told me about a shipment that was supposed to come into the bookstore sometime that afternoon and complained that the delivery driver had developed a habit of stacking boxes directly in front of the office door. I told her about Mila deciding last week that she wanted a pet, although the type of pet changed every time she remembered she was asking. Yesterday, it was a snake.

Luna immediately told me that under no circumstances should I buy my child a snake, and somewhere between that and me explaining that I never said I planned to, I stopped thinking about the fact that we were on a date.

Not because it stopped feeling like one, but because being there with her didn’t require me to become somebody different just because it was.

By the time the waitress cleared our plates, Luna checked the time on her phone and her eyes widened.

“What?”

“It’s nine forty-three.”

I reached for the check the waitress left behind. “Okay.”

“Okay?” She looked at me. “I have to be at the store at ten.”

“I know.”

“It took us twenty minutes to get here.”

“I know that too.”

“And you’re sitting there like we have nowhere to be.”

I pulled my wallet out. “You worry too much.”

“And you apparently don’t worry enough.”

“Good thing we found each other.”

The words left my mouth before I thought much about them.

Luna went still.

Not completely, but enough that I noticed.

For half a second, I wondered if I’d pushed too far.

Then she looked down at her phone, and a small smile pulled at the corner of her mouth.

“Pay the bill, Ellis.”

I smiled as I slid my card onto the check.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her eyes lifted immediately. “Don’t start.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You were thinking about it.”

“I was thinking about getting you to work.”

“Before ten.”

“Before ten.”

She pointed at me. “Because if Naomi says anything—”

“You own the bookstore.”

“That is not going to save me.”

“From your employee?”

Luna slid out of the booth and reached for her bag. “You don’t know Naomi.”

I stood and tucked my wallet back into my pocket. “I know enough.”

“Clearly not.”

I glanced at the time.

Nine forty-five.

Plenty of time.

Probably.

I got us back across town with a few minutes to spare, although Luna checked the time often enough that I was starting to think she didn’t trust me.

At the last red light before Main Street, she looked at the clock on the dashboard again.

“Nine fifty-four.”

“I can see.”

“I’m just making sure.”

“That the clock works?”

“That you understand what the numbers mean.”

I laughed as the light changed. “You’ve been worried about this since we left the restaurant.”

“Because I have responsibilities.”

“So do I.”

“You don’t have Naomi waiting to judge you.”

“Neither do you.”

Luna turned toward me. “You really don’t know her.”

I pulled onto Main Street, and Chapter & Charm came into view half a block later.

“Nine fifty-seven,” I told her.

“We’re not there yet.”

“You can see the building.”

“That is not the same as being inside it.”

“You’re a hard woman to please.”

“I was perfectly pleased at breakfast.”

I glanced at her.

She seemed to realize what she said at the same time I did because she looked toward the window, but not before I caught the smile spreading across her face.

“Were you?”

“I said what I said.”

I smiled as I pulled into an open space near the bookstore.

The clock changed to 9:58.

I put the truck in park and gestured toward it. “Two minutes.”

Luna looked at the dashboard before turning to me. “You want a prize?”

“I’d settle for an apology.”

“For what?”

“Doubting me.”

“I’m not apologizing for having reasonable concerns.”

She reached down for her bag and settled it in her lap. “You showed up fifteen minutes early to pick me up.”

“Fourteen.”

“That does not help your case.”

I laughed and reached for my seat belt, but Luna didn’t move to open her door right away.

For the first time since we left the restaurant, neither of us said anything.

It wasn’t uncomfortable. I’d had enough quiet moments with Luna by then to know the difference.

This one felt like neither of us was quite ready for the morning to end.

She ran her thumb along the strap of her bag resting in her lap before looking at me.

“I had a good time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned back against the seat. “Me too.”

Her smile came easily, and something about it made me forget about the clock for a second.

“I really like spending time with you,” I told her.

The words weren’t planned. I didn’t need them to be.

Luna’s expression softened as she looked at me. “I really like spending time with you too.”

Luna glanced toward Chapter & Charm and laughed softly.

“What?”

She shook her head. “I was just thinking about how weird this is.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Breakfast with me is weird?”

“Not that.” She looked back at me. “Just... all of it.”

I waited.

“Who would’ve thought my photographer canceling on me would lead to this?”

I smiled. “You mean lead to you almost being late for work?”

Her eyes narrowed. “See, I was trying to have a moment.”

“I’m listening.”

“No. It’s over now.”

“Luna.”

“You ruined it.”

I laughed and reached across the console, catching her hand before she could reach for the door.

“Come here.”

She looked down at our hands before her eyes came back to mine.

There was no hesitation this time.

Luna leaned across the console, and I met her halfway.

The kiss was softer than either of the ones we shared last night. There was no question behind it and nothing either of us was trying to figure out. My hand settled against the side of her face as her fingers curled loosely around my wrist, and for a few seconds, the bookstore, the time, and everything waiting for us outside the truck could wait.

When I pulled back, she stayed close enough that I could feel her breath against my mouth.

“I thought you had responsibilities.”

Her eyes opened.

“You’re getting on my nerves.”

I smiled. “You got about forty seconds.”

She looked at the dashboard.

“Ellis!”

I laughed as she snatched her bag into her lap and reached for the door.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I didn’t make you kiss me.”

“You told me to come here!”

“And you came.”

She pointed at me. “We’re going to talk about this later.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Her hand reached for the door.

“Wait.”

She looked over at me. “What?”

I didn’t answer. I got out and walked around the front of the car.

By the time I reached her side, she was watching me through the window with an amused look on her face.

I opened the door.

“You know I could’ve done that myself.”

“I know.”

She stepped out, and I closed the door behind her.

“And for the record, I still would’ve found another photographer.”

I held my hand out to her.

“But you didn’t.”

Her mouth curved as she slipped her hand into mine.

“No. I didn’t.”

We walked toward Chapter & Charm together, our hands swinging lightly between us. When we reached the entrance, she started to reach for the door, but I got there first.

She looked from my hand on the handle to me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That face says otherwise.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I pulled the door open for her.

She stepped toward the entrance, but I didn’t let go of her hand right away. Instead, I lifted it and pressed a kiss against her knuckles.

Her smile softened.

“See you later, Luna.”

“Later, Ellis.”

I let her hand slip from mine and waited until she was inside before heading back to the car.

The clock on the dashboard changed to 10:00.

Right on time.



THE BELL above the door chimed when we stepped inside Chapter & Charm.

Naomi looked up from behind the register first.

“Well, look who’s back.”

“Hi, Miss Naomi.”

“Hey, girl.”

Mila barely slowed down. “Where’s Miss Luna?”

Naomi’s eyes found mine, and there was a smile there before she even said anything.

I pointed at her. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to.”

She laughed and nodded toward the back of the store. “Office. She’s been fighting with invoices for the last half hour.”

“I have to show her something,” Mila said.

“Well, go save her.”

That was all the permission she needed. Mila took off toward the back, and I called after her to walk before she disappeared around the corner.

Naomi waited exactly two seconds.

“So.”

“No.”

“I haven’t asked anything.”

“Keep it that way.”

She leaned against the counter. “How was breakfast?”

I looked at her.

Her smile widened.

“How do you know about breakfast?”

“Luna came in here smiling.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“It answers enough of it.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Y’all are terrible.”

“Who is y’all?”

“You and my sister.”

“I’ve never met your sister.”

“You’d get along.”

“I already like her.”

“That’s exactly the problem.”

Before Naomi could dig any deeper, Mila’s voice carried from the back of the store.

“Miss Luna!”

A few seconds later, Luna appeared from around the corner with Mila beside her.

She looked different than she did that morning. Her curls were pulled away from her face now, and the sleeves of her top were pushed up to her

elbows, but the smile she gave me was the same one she had when she climbed out of my truck.

Maybe a little more surprised.

“You’re back.”

“Wasn’t my idea.”

Mila looked up at me. “You said we could come.”

“I said it wasn’t my idea. I didn’t say I was kidnapped.”

Luna laughed before looking down at the folded paper in Mila’s hands. “What did you bring me?”

Mila carefully unfolded it and held it out.

“We had to draw our favorite place at school.”

Luna took the picture, and I watched her eyes move over the page before her expression softened.

“Is this Chapter & Charm?”

Mila nodded. “That’s the kids’ section.”

“I see it.”

“And that’s me.”

“Okay.”

“And that’s you.”

Luna looked closer, and I did too.

There were two people standing near what I now realized was supposed to be the counter.

I pointed toward the taller one. “Who’s that?”

“You.”

I looked at Mila. “I’m in it too?”

She nodded like that should’ve been obvious. “You bring me here.”

Luna’s smile softened before she looked back down at the picture.

“And Miss Luna owns it,” Mila added.

“She does.”

Mila pointed toward another shape. “And that’s the reading chair.”

Luna smiled. “I like it.”

“You can keep it.”

“I can?”

“I made it for you.”

The softness in Luna’s face deepened as she looked at Mila. “Then I’m definitely keeping it.”

“Where are you gonna put it?”

“I don’t know yet.” Luna glanced toward the back of the store. “Maybe in my office.”

“So everybody can see it?”

“My office is in the back, Bug.”

The nickname slipped out so naturally that Luna didn’t seem to notice she said it.

I did.

My eyes lifted to her, but she was still looking at the picture in Mila’s hands, waiting while my daughter considered the problem like the placement of this drawing required serious thought.

“Put it by the register.”

Luna laughed. “Oh, so you’re picking the location too?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you are.”

Mila reached for her hand, and Luna took it without hesitation before letting her lead the way toward the front counter.

I followed a few steps behind, but my mind caught briefly on that one little word.

Bug.

I’d called Mila that for so long I didn’t remember exactly when it started. Somewhere between baby babble and scraped knees, it became hers. Tasha used it every now and then because she’d heard me say it a thousand times, but hearing it come from Luna felt different.

Not wrong.

That was the part that got me.

It didn’t sound like she was trying on something that belonged to me. It sounded like she’d spent enough time around us for a piece of our everyday life to find its way into hers without any of us noticing.

By the time I reached the counter, Luna and Mila were already debating whether the picture should go beside the bookmarks or closer to the little display of staff recommendations.

I didn’t say anything about the nickname.

I didn’t need to.

But I heard it again anyway.

“Here,” Luna said, reaching beneath the counter for a roll of tape. “How about we put it right here?”

Mila studied the spot she pointed to. “People can see it?”

“As soon as they walk up.”

“Okay.”

Luna tore off two small pieces of tape and handed one to Mila. Together, they straightened the picture against the side of the register, although Mila’s half ended up slightly higher than Luna’s.

Neither of them seemed bothered by it.

“There.” Luna stepped back. “Perfect.”

“It’s crooked,” Naomi said.

Mila turned toward her. “It’s supposed to be.”

Naomi lifted both hands. “My mistake.”

I laughed as Luna pressed her lips together, trying not to.

Mila stepped back to admire her work, apparently satisfied now that her contribution to Chapter & Charm had been properly displayed.

I was still looking at the picture.

Her favorite place.

What I wasn’t expecting was to be in it.

Or Luna.

To Mila, those were simply the people who belonged in the place she wanted to draw.

I looked over at Luna, crouched beside my daughter and listening like whatever she was saying was the most important thing happening in the store.

Somewhere along the way, Mila had made room for her.

And I realized I had too.

OceanofPDF.com



BY THE TIME Naomi asked me for the third time where I put the extra name cards, I was starting to regret ever agreeing to another Open Mic Night.

“They’re in the drawer.”

“What drawer?”

“The same drawer they were in last time.”

She looked toward the counter. “There are six drawers over there.”

“And somehow I believe in you.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be.”

Naomi gave me a look before heading back toward the register, and I turned my attention to the rows of chairs filling the event space.

The setup was almost identical to the first time we did this. Same small stage near the front. Same microphone we borrowed from the community center. Same little tables pushed along the wall with water, coffee, and enough snacks to keep people from wandering out halfway through somebody’s poem.

But tonight felt different.

Maybe because I wasn’t checking my phone every five minutes waiting for something to go wrong. Maybe because we’d done this once before and survived it.

Or maybe it had something to do with the man standing on the other side of the room adjusting the lens on his camera like he hadn’t spent the better part of the last week finding reasons to make me smile.

I caught myself looking and turned back to the stack of programs in my hands.

That didn’t last long.

When I glanced up again, Ellis was already looking at me.

He lowered the camera slightly and lifted his eyebrows.

I shook my head.

His mouth curved.

I looked back down at the programs before he could make whatever this was worse.

It had been like that since breakfast.

Nothing dramatic had happened since then. We’d talked a lot, which wasn’t exactly new anymore. There hadn’t been another date yet.

There had been a few kisses.

I was trying not to think too hard about what that meant, mostly because every time I did, I found myself searching for the part that should make me nervous.

So far, I hadn’t found it.

“Luna.”

I looked up to find Naomi standing beside me with the name cards in her hand.

“Found them.”

“Congratulations.”

“You were staring at him again.”

I straightened the programs even though they didn’t need it. “We’re dating.”

Naomi went quiet.

I looked at her.

She was smiling.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

I stared at her, and she walked away before I could respond.

“Annoying,” I called after her.

“I heard you.”

“You were supposed to.”

A laugh came from somewhere to my right.

I turned to find Ellis closer now, his camera hanging from the strap around his neck.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re laughing.”

“At something Naomi said.”

“You weren’t even over here.”

“Didn’t need to be.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Both of y’all are getting on my nerves tonight.”

“Event hasn’t even started yet.”

“Exactly.”

He smiled and reached for the stack of programs in my hands, taking half before I could stop him.

“Where do these go?”

“On the chairs.”

He started toward the first row.

I followed him. “You know you’re here to take pictures, right?”

“I can do two things.”

“That sounds familiar.”

“I learn from the people around me.”

We worked our way down opposite sides of the row, placing a program on each chair. Ellis didn’t need me to tell him what to do, but then again, he hadn’t the first time either. Once that camera was in his hands, he found his own rhythm and stayed in it.

Tonight, though, there was something different about the way I noticed him moving through Chapter & Charm.

Maybe because I knew him now.

Now, I noticed him even when I had no reason to.

I noticed when he moved a chair out of Naomi’s way without interrupting his conversation. When he reached behind the counter for the tape after she asked for it. When a customer recognized him from the first Open Mic and stopped him to ask about one of the pictures.

Mostly, I noticed how little any of it felt unusual anymore.

I was still thinking about that when the bell above the front door chimed.

“Daddy!”

Mila’s voice reached us first.

Ellis looked toward the entrance, and I followed his gaze.

Mila came through the door holding the hand of a woman I recognized almost immediately even though we’d never met. A little boy followed beside them, looking around the bookstore while Mila pointed toward something near the front.

There was enough of Ellis in the woman’s face to make the connection before either of them said a word.

Ellis let out a quiet breath beside me.

“What?” I asked.

“My sister.”

I looked at him, then back toward the woman I’d heard enough about by then to feel like we should’ve met already.

A smile pulled at my mouth.

“Finally.”

Ellis looked down at me. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’ve heard enough about her that I was starting to think you made her up.”

“I wish.”

“I heard that,” she called.

I laughed as Ellis closed his eyes.

“Definitely your sister.”

“Unfortunately.”

She reached us a few seconds later, and the resemblance was even easier to see up close. Not enough that anyone would mistake them for twins, but they had the same eyes and something similar around the mouth when they smiled.

Mila let go of her aunt’s hand as soon as they stopped in front of us.

“Miss Luna!”

“Hey, Bug.”

She wrapped both arms around my waist, and I rested a hand against her back before she pulled away.

“We came to Open Mic.”

“I see that.”

“Auntie said I couldn’t wear my sparkly shoes.”

“Because you were trying to wear them with watermelon socks,” Tasha said.

“They matched.”

“They absolutely did not.”

“They both have pink.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting a laugh.

Tasha looked at me. “See? I knew I was going to have problems with you.”

I laughed, and Tasha shook her head before turning toward me fully.

“I’m Tasha.”

“Luna.”

“I know.”

There was something about how quickly she said it that made me look at Ellis.

He looked away.

Tasha caught it.

“You talk about her.”

“I do not talk about her like that.”

“I didn’t say you talked about her like anything. I said you talk about her.”

I looked at Ellis.

Tasha smiled. “See what I deal with?”

“I’m starting to.”

“Luna.”

I laughed. “What?”

Tasha reached over and gave me a quick hug, catching me slightly off guard but not enough that I didn’t return it.

“It really is nice to finally meet you,” she said when she pulled away.

“You too.”

“And since my brother wants to act like he hasn’t told me half your business, I’ll behave.”

My head turned toward Ellis.

“Half my business?”

“Tasha.”

She laughed. “I’m exaggerating.”

“You better be.”

“I know you own the bookstore. I know Naomi is your best friend. I know you apparently judge people’s coffee orders.”

I closed my eyes.

Ellis laughed.

“Oh, you told her that?”

“It came up.”

“How does my opinion about your terrible coffee come up in conversation with your sister?”

“I don’t remember.”

“I do,” Tasha said.

He pointed at her. “Nobody asked you.”

“I also know you got him doing bookstore labor for free.”

“He volunteered.”

“He does that,” she said.

“I was there,” Ellis reminded her.

“I know.”

The little boy beside her laughed, and Tasha seemed to remember for the first time that she hadn’t introduced him.

“And this is my son, Jacob.”

He gave me a small wave. “Hi.”

“Hey, Jacob.”

“He’s eight,” Mila announced.

Jacob looked at her. “She didn’t ask.”

“I was telling her.”

Mila gave him a satisfied look.

Jacob sighed.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Come see my picture,” Mila told him.

“What picture?”

“The one I made for Miss Luna.”

“It’s still up?” Ellis asked.

I looked at him. “Of course it is.”

Mila beamed before grabbing Jacob by the hand.

“Come on.”

“I can walk by myself.”

“I know.”

She pulled him anyway.

Tasha watched the two of them head toward the register before looking around the bookstore.

“This is really nice.”

“Thank you.”

“No, I mean it. Ellis told me about the first Open Mic, but I couldn’t really picture everything.”

I glanced at him. “You told her about the first one too?”

Tasha laughed. “Girl.”

Ellis sighed.

I looked between them. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said.

His sister had a completely different answer.

“This man has been talking about this bookstore since the first time he photographed here.”

“I have not.”

“You have.”

“Tasha.”

“First it was the event. Then the pictures. Then something Mila did when y’all came back. Then Luna recommended this book. Luna said this about my coffee. Luna’s doing another event.”

I stared at him.

He shook his head. “She’s making it sound worse than it is.”

“Worse?” I asked.

His eyes closed briefly.

Tasha grinned.

“I mean more than it is.”

“That wasn’t better.”

“I know.”

I laughed, and something warm settled low in my stomach at the thought of Ellis talking about me when I was nowhere around to hear it.

“You good?” Ellis asked quietly.

I realized I was still looking at him.

“Yeah.”

His eyes stayed on mine for another second.

“Okay.”

There was something in Tasha’s expression when I glanced back at her. The teasing was still there, but it had softened around the edges.

She looked at her brother for a moment before looking at me again.

“So,” she said, “this is where you’ve been keeping him.”

“I haven’t been keeping anybody.”

“That’s what he says too.”

“I’m standing right here,” Ellis said.

“I know.”

Before I could answer, Naomi appeared beside us.

“There you are,” she said to me. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

Her attention shifted to Tasha, who looked back at her. Neither of them said anything for a second, but the pause lasted just long enough for me to notice.

“Tasha, this is Naomi. Naomi, Ellis’s sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” Naomi said.

“You too.”

They shook hands, and Naomi let hers fall back to her side before looking at me. Tasha did the same.

A second later, their attention drifted back to each other.

I narrowed my eyes.

Interesting.

“So you’re the best friend,” Tasha said.

Naomi lifted an eyebrow. “And you’re the sister.”

“I am.”

“Good to know.”

I looked between them. “Why did that sound like y’all just exchanged information neither one of you actually gave?”

Tasha laughed.

Naomi’s mouth curved. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Ellis stepped closer beside me. “Leave it alone.”

I looked at him.

“You’re thinking loud.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It does from where I’m standing.”

Someone near the entrance called Naomi’s name, and she started to turn away before glancing back at Tasha.

“You staying for the whole thing?”

“That’s the plan.”

Naomi nodded. “Good.”

Then she walked away.

Another group came through the front door, and Ellis's hand brushed against the small of my back as he moved out of their way, guiding me with him.

It was barely a touch.

Natural enough that I didn't think anything of it until I caught Tasha looking at his hand.

Her eyes lifted to his face.

She didn't tease him this time.

Instead, she smiled.

It was small and quiet and gone almost as quickly as it appeared, but there was something about it that made me wonder how long it had been since she'd seen her brother like this.

I didn't ask.

Naomi called my name from across the room, pulling my attention back toward everything that still needed to happen before we opened.

As I turned away, I caught Tasha looking toward the register.

Toward Naomi.

I had to fight a smile.

Interesting.

The next half hour passed quickly as more people filtered in and we finished getting everyone settled. By the time the first person was ready to step up to the microphone, almost every chair was filled.

A few people stood along the back wall, and two more had pulled chairs over from the reading area. The low conversation that filled the bookstore a few minutes ago settled as Naomi dimmed the lights closest to the shelves.

I took my place near the front, scanning the room one last time before my eyes landed on a familiar face a few rows back.

Rachel.

She had a notebook resting in her lap again, one hand curled around the edge of it. When she caught me looking, she gave me a small smile.

I smiled back.

She came.

The last time she sat in one of these chairs, she looked like she might change her mind right up until the second I called her name. I remembered standing beside her afterward and asking if she'd do it again.

Apparently, I had my answer.

I made my way to the microphone.

“Welcome back to Chapter & Charm.”

Applause rose around the room.

“For those of you who were here for our first Open Mic Night, thank you for coming back. And if this is your first one, thank you for trusting us with your Tuesday night.”

Someone near the back called, “We love it here!”

I laughed. “And we love that you love it here.”

More laughter moved through the room.

“Same rules as last time. Be respectful. Be kind. And remember that it takes a lot to stand in front of a room full of people and share something that matters to you.”

My eyes drifted toward Rachel again.

She gave me the smallest nod.

“And sometimes,” I added, “the hardest part is just doing it the first time.”

Her smile grew.

I stepped away from the microphone as the room applauded and our first reader took my place.

For the next several minutes, I managed to focus.

Mostly.

Then I heard the quiet click of a camera.

My eyes found Ellis before I meant for them to.

He was near the opposite wall now, camera lifted to his face as he photographed the woman at the microphone.

This part hadn’t changed.

Once Ellis started working, everything else seemed to fall away. He moved when he needed to, stayed still when he didn’t, and somehow managed to get close enough for the shot without becoming part of it.

I’d noticed that the first time.

Tonight, I noticed other things too.

The way his shirt pulled across his shoulders when he crouched near the end of the first row. The way he lowered the camera to check the screen, his eyebrows drawing together for half a second before he lifted it again.

The way—

I stopped myself.

Absolutely not.

I turned my attention back to the woman reading.

The room applauded as the first reader finished, and the next person made their way toward the microphone.

By the fourth performance, the event had found its rhythm.

A man read a poem about his grandmother that left the room quiet for several seconds after he finished. A college student shared something she wrote about moving away from home for the first time. One of our regulars read a piece that started as a love poem and somehow turned into a complaint about her husband's inability to replace an empty roll of toilet paper.

That one got the loudest applause so far.

Especially from the women.

Her husband, sitting in the second row, shook his head.

"I'm buying a new holder tomorrow," he called.

"You've had twelve years," she told him.

The room broke into laughter.

Even Ellis lowered his camera for that one.

When I looked toward him, he was already smiling.

Then his eyes met mine.

And there it was again.

That little moment.

It shouldn't feel like anything.

We were standing on opposite sides of a crowded bookstore. There were dozens of people between us, somebody was walking toward the microphone, and I had at least three things I should probably be paying attention to.

Still, his eyes stayed on mine for another second before he lifted the camera again.

This time, he pointed it at me.

I immediately shook my head.

He took the picture anyway.

I narrowed my eyes.

His grin appeared behind the camera.

Oh, he was annoying.

I turned away before I gave him another one.

"Miss Luna."

I looked down.

Mila was standing beside me.

“What are you doing over here?”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Where’s your daddy?”

She pointed.

Ellis was photographing the next reader.

“Auntie said she would take me, but she’s talking.”

I glanced toward Tasha.

She was, in fact, talking.

To Naomi.

Of course she was.

They were standing near the back of the bookstore, and whatever Naomi said made Tasha laugh before leaning closer to answer her.

Well.

Interesting.

“Miss Luna?”

I looked back down at Mila.

“Sorry. Come on.”

I held out my hand, and hers slipped into mine.

We made it halfway toward the back before Ellis noticed us.

His camera lowered.

I pointed toward the hallway and mouthed, **Bathroom.**

He looked at Mila, then back at me.

A nod.

That was it.

No question about where I was taking her. No stopping what he was doing to come over. No checking to make sure I could handle something as simple as walking his six-year-old to the bathroom.

He trusted me with her.

The realization landed quietly.

I squeezed Mila’s hand without thinking and kept walking.

By the time we came back, another reader was finishing and the room broke into applause.

“Can I sit by you?” Mila asked.

“You don’t want to go back to Auntie?”

She looked toward Tasha.

I did too.

Naomi had returned to the signup table, but Tasha’s attention followed her for another second before she turned toward the stage.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

“No,” Mila said.

“Okay. You can stay with me for a little while.”

She settled into the empty chair beside mine near the counter.

A few minutes later, Jacob appeared.

“Auntie said I could sit over here.”

“Of course she did.”

He dropped into the chair beside Mila.

“You have to be quiet,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“I’m just telling you.”

“I’m eight.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

I pressed my lips together and faced forward.

Not my business.

Naomi stepped toward the microphone once the applause from the next reader died down.

“Up next, we have somebody some of you might remember from our last Open Mic.”

My attention sharpened before she even said the name.

“Rachel.”

Applause rose around the room.

Rachel took a breath and stood.

Last time, she stayed in her chair for a few seconds after her name was called. I remembered wondering if I should walk over. If I should give her an out. If she was going to decide she couldn’t do it after all.

Tonight, she closed her notebook, got to her feet, and walked toward the microphone.

She was still nervous.

I could see it in the way her fingers tightened around the notebook and the breath she took once she was standing in front of everyone.

But she didn’t look at me for reassurance this time.

She opened to the page she marked and began.

Her voice shook on the first few words.

Then steadied.

I smiled before I could help it.

Across the room, Ellis raised his camera.

The shutter clicked.

For a second, I remembered the first photograph he took of her standing in that same spot.

Same microphone.

Same bookstore.

But not quite the same woman.

Rachel made it through the entire piece without stopping.

The applause started almost before she finished the last line.

Her head dipped, and when she looked up again, she was smiling.

Really smiling.

I clapped harder.

When she passed me on her way back to her seat, I leaned toward her.

“I knew you’d come back.”

She laughed softly. “I almost didn’t.”

“But you did.”

“I did.”

She returned to her seat, and I watched her for another second before looking across the room.

Ellis was checking the screen on his camera.

Something about the moment caught in my chest.

The first time we did this, I was so worried about everything going right that I barely had time to think about what might come after.

Whether Rachel would come back.

Whether people would want another Open Mic.

Whether the photographer Naomi recommended at the last possible second would give me anything worth using.

I knew the answers now.

Rachel came back.

So did everybody else.

And Ellis—

I stopped there.

Because Ellis didn’t just come back.

Somewhere between that night and this one, he became someone I expected to.

“Miss Luna.”

I looked down at Mila.

“What?”

“You like my daddy.”

My head turned so fast I almost hurt myself.

Jacob looked at her.

“Mila.”

“What?”

“You can’t just say stuff like that.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. You just can’t.”

I pressed my lips together.

Apparently, Jacob and I were on the same page.

Mila looked at me.

“You do, though.”

I lowered my voice. “We’re listening to the lady read.”

“That means yes.”

“Mila.”

She smiled.

I looked toward Ellis.

Thankfully, he was too far away to have heard any of this.

Tasha wasn’t.

She was sitting a few rows ahead of us now, turned just enough in her chair that I could see the smile she was trying to hide.

I closed my eyes.

Of course.

When I opened them again, she was facing forward.

I made a mental note to never tell Ellis this happened.

Something told me his sister would beat me to it.

The next reader started, and Mila finally turned her attention back toward the stage.

For a while, I did the same.

The words coming through the microphone filled the bookstore while people laughed when they were supposed to laugh and went quiet when something hit a little deeper.

Mila sat beside me.

Jacob sat beside her.

Naomi moved between the signup table and the back of the room whenever someone needed something.

And Ellis stayed behind his camera.

At some point, he ended up near us.

He didn’t say anything when he stopped beside my chair. His hand rested briefly against my shoulder as he leaned down to look at something Mila was showing him, then he straightened and moved away again.

Small.

Easy.

The kind of touch I probably wouldn’t think twice about from anyone else.

From him, I felt it long after his hand was gone.

I looked toward the stage again.

Then toward the people filling my bookstore.

Then, despite myself, back toward Ellis.

The first Open Mic Night gave me more than I expected.

Looking around that night, I was starting to realize just how much.

By the time our last reader stepped away from the microphone, the clock behind the register was creeping toward nine.

Applause filled the bookstore one more time before conversation slowly took its place. People stood and stretched, chairs scraped against the floor, and the quiet order we started with disappeared almost immediately.

I made my way toward the front as people began filing out.

“Thank you for coming.”

“We’ll be back.”

“You better.”

A woman I recognized from the first Open Mic stopped long enough to tell me she brought two coworkers this time. Someone else asked when we were doing the next one.

“I haven’t recovered from this one yet.”

“That means yes,” Naomi called from somewhere behind me.

I turned. “Nobody asked you.”

The woman laughed. “I’ll watch for the announcement.”

“Apparently there’ll be one.”

She waved before heading toward the door.

I shook my head.

Naomi was going to have me hosting these things every month if I wasn't careful.

"Miss Luna."

Rachel was waiting a few feet away with her notebook tucked against her chest.

I smiled. "You did good tonight."

"Better than last time?"

"You were good last time."

Her expression told me she didn't believe me.

"You were," I insisted. "You just looked like you wanted the floor to open up and swallow you afterward."

She laughed. "I did."

"And tonight?"

"I only wanted it to swallow me before."

"Progress."

"Exactly."

We laughed, and she looked around the bookstore before her attention came back to me.

"I'm glad you did another one."

"Me too."

"I almost talked myself out of coming."

"But you didn't."

"No." Her fingers moved along the edge of her notebook. "I remembered what you said last time."

Something warm moved through me.

"Well, I'm glad you came back."

"Me too."

She gave me a quick hug before heading toward the door.

I watched her leave, smiling to myself.

"Good night?"

I turned.

Ellis was standing a few feet away, his camera hanging at his side.

"Good night."

"Told you people would come back."

"You did not."

"I thought it."

"That doesn't count."

“It should.”

“It absolutely should not.”

He smiled and stepped closer.

“You happy?”

I looked around.

There were still people lingering between the shelves. Naomi was collecting abandoned cups from the tables. Mila and Jacob were helping Tasha stack programs that nobody used, although Mila appeared to be doing significantly more talking than stacking.

Rachel’s empty chair was still sitting in the third row.

“Yeah,” I said. “I am.”

Ellis nodded like that was enough.

Before either of us could say anything else, an older woman approached us with a tote bag hanging from her shoulder.

“I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed tonight.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely be back.” Her attention shifted to Ellis. “And the pictures from the last one were beautiful.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“You took those?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I thought so.” She looked between us. “You two make a good team.”

I smiled. “He makes my job easier.”

“I try.”

She gave us both a knowing smile.

“Well, it’s nice when you can work with your man and still like him when the night’s over.”

I blinked.

Ellis went still beside me.

The woman kept talking before either of us got the chance to respond.

“My husband and I tried working together once. Lasted three weeks.”

I laughed before I could stop myself.

“He kept telling me I was doing everything wrong,” she continued.

“Were you?” Ellis asked.

Her head turned toward him.

I looked at him.

He pressed his lips together.

The woman pointed at him. “See, now that’s the kind of question that’ll get you in trouble.”

“I realized that as soon as I said it.”

“You better learn.”

“I’m trying.”

She looked at me. “Help him.”

“I’ve been trying.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

She patted my arm before heading toward the door.

“Good night, y’all.”

“Good night,” I called after her.

The bell chimed.

Silence settled between us.

Not actual silence.

There were still people talking around us. Naomi dropped something behind the counter and muttered under her breath. Mila was explaining to Jacob why he wasn’t stacking the programs correctly.

But between me and Ellis?

Silence.

I looked at him.

He looked at me.

“Your man?” he asked, entirely too amused.

I looked at him.

His smile widened.

“You didn’t correct her.”

I should have known he’d notice that.

“Neither did you.”

“I didn’t need to.”

“Why?”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“Didn’t bother me.”

The answer came easily, without any teasing attached to it. Just the truth, and something about that shifted low in my chest.

I looked toward the front windows instead.

It didn’t bother me either.

That was the part I didn’t say.

“Y’all planning on standing there all night?”

Tasha’s voice broke through the moment.

I closed my eyes.

Ellis looked toward his sister. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Yes. At home. Which is why I’m trying to leave.”

“Then go.”

“With your child?”

Mila looked up from the programs. “I’m staying with Daddy.”

Tasha lifted both hands. “See? Problem solved.”

Jacob was already standing beside her with his jacket on.

Naomi came around the counter carrying a trash bag.

“You leaving?”

Tasha looked at her. “Eventually.”

Naomi smiled. “Oh.”

I looked between them.

There it was again.

Tasha reached for Jacob’s shoulder. “Come on before your mama gets accused of holding up bookstore operations.”

“You aren’t holding up anything,” Naomi said.

“I know.”

Tasha looked toward me. “It was nice meeting you, Luna.”

“You too.”

“I’ll be back.”

Ellis groaned.

I laughed. “You’re welcome anytime.”

“Don’t tell her that,” he said.

“Too late.”

Tasha smiled before pulling me into another quick hug.

When she stepped back, her expression softened.

“Really,” she said. “It was good meeting you.”

The way she said it felt different from the teasing. Warmer.

“I’m glad we finally did.”

She nodded before turning toward her brother.

“Call me.”

“For what?”

“Just call me.”

“I talk to you every day.”

“And?”

Ellis shook his head. “Good night, Tasha.”

“Good night, little brother.”

“We are fourteen months apart.”

“Still little.”

She started toward the door with Jacob.

Naomi looked up from tying the trash bag.

“Good night, Tasha.”

Tasha glanced over her shoulder.

“Good night, Naomi.”

There was nothing unusual about the words, though the smile that followed them might have been another story.

The bell chimed behind them.

Ellis reached for another chair as Mila came over and slipped her hand into mine.

“Can I help?”

“You can.”

“What do I do?”

I looked around at what was left.

“Grab the programs off the chairs for me.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

She released my hand and got to work.

For the next several minutes, the four of us fell into an easy rhythm. Naomi handled the trash and leftover refreshments while Ellis and I straightened chairs. Mila collected programs one by one, stopping every few minutes to show me how tall her stack had gotten.

Eventually, Naomi disappears into the office.

That leaves Ellis, Mila, and me.

When I straighten from moving the last chair and find Mila sitting on the edge of the stage while Ellis packs away one of his lenses, something about the picture makes me pause.

“Miss Luna?”

I looked at her. “Hmm?”

“Are you coming to dinner with us?”

Ellis looked up.

So did I.

“Dinner?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Ellis said.

“I know.”

I laughed.

He zipped his camera bag and stood.

“We can grab something on the way home.”

Mila looked at me. “You can come.”

My eyes met Ellis’s, but he didn’t jump in or turn Mila’s invitation into his. He simply let me decide.

I glanced toward the office. I still had closing to finish, and any other night, that would be enough reason to say no.

That night, I found myself wishing it wasn’t.

“I can’t tonight, Bug.”

Her shoulders dropped.

“But another time?”

“Promise?”

I smiled. “Promise.”

That seemed to satisfy her.

She hopped down from the stage.

Ellis watched her head toward the children’s section for the jacket she left there earlier.

Then he looked at me.

“You sure?”

“About dinner?”

He nodded.

“I still have to close.”

“We can wait.”

The offer was immediate.

Of course it was.

I smiled.

“If I let you keep helping me close this bookstore, I’m going to have to put you on payroll.”

“How much?”

“Not enough.”

“Benefits?”

“You get to be around books.”

“I don’t read enough for that to work on me.”

“You get to be around me.”

His eyebrows lifted.

The words registered about half a second too late.

I closed my eyes.

Ellis laughed.

“That sounded like a benefit to me.”

“I walked directly into that.”

“You really did.”

I shook my head. “Go feed your child.”

He was still smiling when he reached for his camera bag.

Mila returned with her jacket hanging halfway off one shoulder.

Ellis fixed it before taking her hand.

“We’ll let you finish.”

“Thank you.”

Mila hugged me before they left.

“Bye, Miss Luna.”

“Bye, Bug.”

She headed toward the door, but Ellis stayed behind for another second.

“You did good tonight.”

I looked around the bookstore.

“So did you.”

“Pictures should be ready in a couple days.”

“No rush.”

He looked like he was about to say something else.

Instead, he stepped closer.

Close enough that I already knew what was coming.

His hand settled lightly at my waist, and he kissed me.

It was quick.

Nothing like the first one beside my car.

Nothing that left me standing there trying to remember how breathing worked.

Just a kiss.

Easy.

Familiar.

When he pulled back, his thumb brushed once against my side.

“Good night, Luna.”

“Good night.”

He turned toward the door.

Mila was waiting for him with both hands on her hips.

“You take forever.”

“I was saying goodbye.”

“You already said goodbye.”

Ellis looked back at me.

I pressed my lips together.

“Come on, Bug.”

The bell chimed as they stepped outside.

I watched through the window as Ellis took Mila’s hand and the two of them headed toward his truck.

I was still standing there when Naomi appeared beside me. She didn’t say anything.

For once, I appreciated it.

My eyes stayed on Ellis until he opened the passenger-side door for Mila and helped her inside.

None of it scared me.

I waited for that realization to bring something else with it—a warning, a reason to slow down, that familiar voice reminding me how easily good things could become something else if I stopped paying attention.

It didn’t come.

All I felt was the smile pulling at my mouth as Ellis’s truck disappeared down the street.

And for once, I let myself keep it.

OceanofPDF.com



I'D READ the same paragraph four times.

At least I thought it had been four. It could've been five, considering I made it to the bottom of the page before realizing I couldn't tell you a single thing that happened at the top.

I slid my bookmark between the pages and closed the book over my finger, staring at the cover for a second like it was somehow responsible for my inability to focus.

My phone sat on the cushion beside me, close enough that I could see the screen light up if someone texted but far enough away that I could pretend I hadn't been checking it.

I wasn't waiting on Ellis.

I was reading.

Or trying to.

I opened the book again.

Two sentences in, my mind wandered right back to last night.

Tasha already knowing things about me. Mila asking if I liked her daddy. Neither Ellis nor me correcting that woman when she called him my man.

Then there was the kiss before he left.

Quick. Easy. Nothing that should still be taking up space in my head a full day later.

I turned the page before realizing I didn’t actually finish the one before it.

“Seriously?”

I flipped back.

This was the part I was still learning how to trust.

Not Ellis. Not anything he’d done.

How comfortable I was becoming with him.

Five years with Lucas had taught me to pay attention to every shift in a relationship. If he got quiet, I wondered what I’d done. If something felt off, I searched myself for the reason before it occurred to me to look at him.

Somewhere along the way, loving him had become something I was constantly tending to.

By the time I finally left, I didn’t know how to separate loving someone from the work I thought I had to do to keep them loving me.

Ellis didn’t make me feel that way.

That was the part I hadn’t figured out what to do with.

If he was busy, he told me he was busy. If he said he’d call, he called. When he wanted to see me, I didn’t have to pull it out of him. I didn’t spend hours wondering whether something I said bothered him because if it did, I trusted that he’d tell me.

There was nothing to decode with Ellis.

No version of myself I had to offer first.

And somehow, instead of making me relax completely, that left me waiting for the moment when there would be.

I looked at my phone.

The screen was still dark.

I hated how quickly I noticed.

We didn’t talk every hour of every day. We never had. Sometimes an entire day passed before one of us reached out, and I’d always liked that there was room between us without the room meaning something was wrong.

Tonight, though, I wanted to hear from him.

More specifically, I wanted to see him.

I let that sit for a moment.

I missed him.

It was strange how much harder that was to admit than it should’ve been.

Missing someone meant noticing when they weren’t there. Noticing meant I’d gotten used to having him around, and I’d spent years making sure I could build a life where nobody’s absence had the power to rearrange it.

My eyes drifted toward the book in my lap.

Maybe that was why I’d been on the same page for twenty minutes.

My phone vibrated before I could think too much harder about it.

I reached for it and immediately wished I’d moved slower.

You home?

A smile threatened before I could stop it.

Yes.

His response came a few seconds later.

Good.

I waited for something else.

Nothing came.

I stared at the screen.

That’s it?

Nope.

A knock sounded at my door.

My head lifted.

I looked toward the entryway, then back at my phone.

Another knock.

Ellis.

Luna.

By the time I got off the couch, I was smiling.

I left the book on the cushion and made my way to the door. When I opened it, Ellis was standing on the other side with a brown paper bag in one hand.

“Hi.”

I leaned against the doorframe. “What are you doing here?”

He lifted the bag. “Bringing you food.”

“Why?”

“Because I bought food.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“It answers enough of it.”

I looked at the bag, then at him.

“What is it?”

“Move and find out.”

“You’re bossy.”

“And you’re blocking the door.”

Ellis walked past me like showing up at my house on a Wednesday evening with dinner was something we’d been doing forever.

Maybe that was why I liked it more than I expected to.

I closed the door behind him.

“You could’ve told me you were coming.”

“I could’ve.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because then you would’ve told me I didn’t have to bring you anything.”

“I would’ve.”

“I know.”

He carried the bag toward my kitchen like that settled it.

I followed him.

He set the bag on the counter and started pulling containers from it. I watched him for a second.

There was nothing remarkable about what he was doing. He brought dinner. That was it. He was somewhere, thought about me, and decided to bring me food.

Lucas used to do things for me too.

The thought came first, and I hated that it did. There had been good years with Lucas. I wasn’t trying to erase those.

But somewhere along the way, every good thing started feeling like something I might eventually have to repay.

Ellis turned around.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes stayed on mine. “You sure?”

I nodded. “Just thinking.”

“Dangerous.”

I blinked, then laughed. “See? I was about to tell you something.”

“My bad.”

“No. Too late now.”

He reached for one of the containers. “Then I guess I’ll eat your food.”

“Move.”

I stepped around him and grabbed it before he could. His laugh followed me toward the table.

I sat down, and Ellis took the chair across from me.

“What did you bring?”

“Open it.”

I lifted the lid and stopped.

Shrimp fried rice. Extra shrimp, no peas, with an egg roll tucked into the other side of the container.

I looked up at him. “You remembered?”

“Remembered what?”

“That I don’t like peas. And I always get extra shrimp.”

“You told me.”

“I know.”

“So why wouldn’t I remember?”

I looked down at the food again.

He said it like it was obvious.

Maybe to him, it was.

I picked up my fork.

Across from me, Ellis started opening his own container.

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

We ate for a while without talking about anything important.

He told me about a client who wanted family pictures but apparently hated every location Ellis had suggested. I told him Naomi spent half the morning pretending she wasn’t interested when I asked how she enjoyed meeting Tasha.

His fork stopped halfway to his mouth.

“What?”

I smiled.

His eyes narrowed. “Is this about my sister?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I laughed and took another bite.

“Leave it alone.”

He shook his head. “Whatever.”

I smiled into my food.

He’d figure out Naomi was interested in his sister eventually.

For now, I wasn’t telling him.

We fell into another stretch of conversation, and I stopped thinking about how easy this felt.

I just let it be easy.

By the time we were done eating, the containers were pushed toward the middle of the table and Ellis had somehow migrated from the chair across from me to the one beside me.

I didn’t remember when that happened.

I didn’t mind it either.

His arm rested along the back of my chair.

“What are you and Mila doing Sunday?”

The question left my mouth before I could reconsider it.

Ellis looked at me.

“Sunday?”

“Yeah.”

“Nothing that I know of. Why?”

I ran my thumb along the edge of my napkin.

“My parents do dinner on Sundays.”

“Okay.”

I glanced at him.

“And I was thinking maybe you two could come.”

He didn’t answer immediately, and my stomach tightened.

There it was. That old instinct to fill the silence. Make it easier.

Give him an out before he had the chance to ask for one.

“You don’t have to if—”

“I didn’t say no.”

I stopped.

Ellis shifted in his chair until he was facing me more fully.

“I was thinking.”

“Oh.”

“Am I allowed to do that?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“How long you take.”

He smiled.

“See, now you’re rushing me.”

“I can take the invitation back.”

His hand closed around mine before I could pull it from the table.

“No, you can’t.”

I looked down at our hands.

Then at him.

“So?”

“So we’ll be there.”

“Mila’s going to be excited,” he added.

“You think?”

“You invited her somewhere with food and you.”

I laughed. “In that order?”

“Depends on what’s for dinner.”

“Wow.”

“I’m raising an honest child.”

“You’re raising a menace.”

“That too.”

His thumb moved slowly over the back of my hand, and I looked down at where our fingers were still tangled together.

Sunday dinner.

My parents. Ellis and Mila.

The thought should probably have felt heavier than it did. Instead, I was wondering whether Daddy would pull Ellis outside to show him the grill like he did anytime somebody gave him half an opportunity to talk about it. Whether Mama would ask Mila what she liked to eat and somehow make sure at least three of those things were on the table by Sunday.

I was already making room for them.

Nobody asked me to invite them. Ellis certainly hadn’t been pushing me to introduce him to my parents.

I wanted them there.

For a long time after Lucas, I protected every piece of the life I’d built back for myself. My home. My bookstore. My routines.

Ellis hadn’t asked me to rearrange any of them. Somehow, he’d just been fitting into the spaces I chose to give him.

Tonight, I gave him another one.

“You okay?”

I looked up.

Ellis was watching me.

“Yeah.”

“You disappeared on me for a minute.”

“I was thinking.”

“About?”

I glanced at our hands before looking at him again.

“Sunday.”

His expression softened. “You nervous?”

“A little.”

“Want me to say no?”

“No.”

The answer came out so quickly that he laughed.

I did too.

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

He squeezed my hand once before settling back into his chair, and the conversation moved on to something else.

I didn’t remember what.

For once, I wasn’t trying to figure out what any of this would look like three months from now.

Sunday was enough.

Dinner with my parents. Ellis. Mila.

And when I pictured all of us sitting around the same table, I didn’t feel the urge to take the invitation back.

I just wanted them there.

OceanofPDF.com



I CHECKED the time for the third time in less than five minutes.

3:38.

Plenty of time.

Luna told me to be at her parents' house at four, and according to the directions she sent, the drive should take twelve minutes. Fifteen if I caught every light between here and there.

Which meant there was absolutely no reason for me to be standing in my kitchen trying to decide whether showing up empty-handed to Sunday dinner was rude.

I looked at the bottle of wine sitting on the counter, then at the dessert I picked up earlier.

Maybe both was too much.

Maybe the dessert was enough.

I reached for the wine, changed my mind, then set it back down.

"Daddy?"

I turned.

Mila was standing in the doorway watching me.

"What?"

"Why you keep touching that?"

I looked at the bottle.

"I don't."

“You did it three times.”

Of course she counted.

“Go get your jacket.”

“Is that for Miss Luna?”

“No.”

“Who is it for?”

“The grown-ups.”

She looked at me.

“You’re a grown-up.”

“Thank you, Mila.”

“You can drink it here.”

I closed my eyes.

“Go get your jacket.”

She disappeared down the hallway, and I looked at the bottle again.

I should leave it.

Probably.

My phone vibrated against the counter.

Luna: You still coming?

I picked it up.

Me: You invited us four days ago.

Luna: That didn’t answer my question.

I smiled.

Me: Yes, Luna. We’re coming.

Her response appeared a few seconds later.

Luna: Okay. Just checking.

I stared at those last two words a little longer than necessary.

Just checking.

Maybe that was all she was doing.

But the question stuck with me.

I’d told her Wednesday that we’d be there. We hadn’t talked about changing plans since, and I hadn’t given her any reason to think we wouldn’t show up.

Still, she checked.

I didn’t know what to make of that yet.

Maybe nothing.

Either way, I’d told her we’d be there.

So we were going to be there.

Mila came back into the kitchen with her jacket bundled in her arms instead of actually wearing it.

“Ready.”

“You gonna put that on?”

“No.”

“Then why did I tell you to get it?”

She shrugged. “In case I get cold.”

I stared at her.

She stared back.

I decided I didn’t have enough time.

“Come on.”

I grabbed the dessert and started toward the door.

“What about the grown-up drink?”

I stopped.

Mila pointed toward the counter.

I looked at the wine.

Then at her.

Then back at the wine.

I grabbed it.

“Now can we go?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

I shook my head as she headed for the door ahead of me.

Six years old, and somehow she was the one keeping me on schedule.

The drive took exactly twelve minutes.

Mila spent most of it telling me about a girl in her class who apparently broke two crayons on Friday and blamed somebody named Kaylee. I was still not sure why this information required as much detail as she gave me, but by the time I turned onto Luna’s parents’ street, I knew Kaylee was nowhere near the crayons and Mila considered the whole thing deeply unfair.

“Is this it?” she asked.

I glanced at the house number Luna sent me.

“Yep.”

I pulled into the driveway and cut the engine.

For the first time since we left home, Mila got quiet.

I looked over at her.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You got quiet.”

She shrugged.

“You nervous?”

“No.”

The answer came too fast.

I smiled. “Okay.”

“I’m not.”

“I said okay.”

“Are you nervous?”

“No.”

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

“Let’s go.”

“Daddy.”

“Mila.”

She smiled.

I grabbed the dessert from the back seat and handed her the bottle of wine.

“Hold this.”

She looked at it. “Why?”

“Because I only have two hands.”

“So do I.”

I stared at her.

She hugged the bottle against her chest.

“Thank you.”

We made it halfway up the walkway before the front door opened.

Luna stepped outside.

Something in me settled at the sight of her.

She was dressed simply, jeans and a soft sweater, her hair falling around her shoulders. Nothing about her said she’d spent the last few days thinking about this dinner nearly as much as I had.

Then I noticed the way she rubbed her palms against the sides of her jeans.

Maybe I wasn’t the only one.

“You made it,” she said.

I stopped in front of her. “You sound surprised.”

“I’m not surprised.”
“You texted me to make sure.”
“I was confirming.”
“Four days later?”
“Plans change.”
“Mine didn’t.”
Her eyes met mine.
For a second, neither of us said anything.
Then Mila stepped between us.
“Miss Luna, Daddy made me carry the grown-up drink.”
Luna looked down.
Then at the bottle in Mila’s arms.
Then at me.
I closed my eyes.
“Why is she carrying wine?”
“Because I had the dessert.”
“You couldn’t make two trips?”
“Thank you, Luna.”
She laughed and took the bottle from Mila.
“Come here, Bug.”
Mila wrapped her arms around Luna, and Luna hugged her back easily.
Watching them still did something to me.
I hadn’t figured out exactly what.
Maybe I didn’t need to yet.
Luna pulled away and looked at the container in my hands.
“You brought dessert too?”
“I didn’t know what to bring.”
“So you brought everything?”
“Apparently.”
Her smile grew. “Were you nervous?”
“No.”
Mila looked up at her. “He kept touching the bottle.”
I looked at my child.
Luna pressed her lips together.
“Mila.”
“He did.”
“Go inside.”

She looked at Luna. “Is your mama in there?”

“She is.”

“Okay.”

And just like that, she was gone.

The front door closed behind her.

I stared after her.

“You just sent my child into a house full of people she doesn’t know.”

“She asked where my mama was.”

“You could’ve gone with her.”

“You told her to go inside.”

“I didn’t think she’d listen.”

Luna laughed.

I looked at her.

“You enjoying this?”

“A little.”

I shook my head and started toward the door, but her hand caught mine.

I stopped.

The teasing left her face.

“Thank you for coming.”

“You invited me.”

“I know.”

There was something else beneath the words.

Something I didn’t think this was the time to ask about.

I squeezed her hand.

“Told you we’d be here.”

Her fingers tightened around mine before she let go.

“Come on.”

I followed her inside.

The smell hit me first.

Whatever her mother cooked had been going long enough that the whole house smelled like it. Something savory, something baked, and something else I couldn’t place.

Mila’s voice carried from somewhere ahead of us.

“I’m six.”

A woman laughed.

“I heard you were six.”

I looked at Luna.

She smiled. “Mama.”

We found Mila in the kitchen standing in front of a woman I didn’t need an introduction to recognize as Luna’s mother. The resemblance was there immediately, especially around the eyes.

Mama Bennett looked past Mila toward us.

Her smile widened.

“So this is Ellis.”

Luna made a sound beside me. “Mama.”

“What?”

“You said it like you’ve been waiting at the window.”

“I wasn’t at the window.”

A man sitting at the kitchen table looked up.

“She was.”

“Marcus.”

“What?” He looked at me. “She was.”

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Luna closed her eyes.

“I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not,” her mother said.

“I just got here and I’m already tired.”

“You’ll be all right.”

Mama Bennett wiped her hands on a dish towel before coming toward me.

“I’m Renee.”

“Ellis. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, I know who you are.”

“Mama.”

I looked at Luna.

Her eyes closed again.

This might be fun.

Renee hugged me before I could decide whether we were shaking hands.

“It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“You too.”

She stepped back and looked at the container in my hands.

“And you brought something.”

“Dessert.”

“See? Raised right.”
“Mama.”
“What am I saying?”
“Too much.”
Her father laughed from the table.
I looked his way.
He stood and walked toward us, holding out his hand.
“Marcus Bennett.”
I shook it. “Ellis Monroe.”
“Good to meet you.”
“You too, sir.”
His grip was firm, his expression friendly enough, but he looked at me for a second longer than necessary before releasing my hand.
Not threatening.
Not unfriendly.
Just looking.
I understood it.
His daughter brought a man home.
I’d probably look too.
“And this is Mila,” Luna said.
Renee turned toward her. “I know. We’ve already been talking.”
Mila nodded. “She has macaroni.”
“I do.”
“And rolls.”
“Those too.”
Mila looked at me.
I already knew what she was about to say.
“I like it here.”
Everybody laughed.
“We haven’t even eaten yet,” I told her.
“I know.”
Renee pointed toward Mila. “I like her.”
“Don’t encourage her,” I said.
“Why not?”
“Thank you, Miss Renee,” Mila said.
Renee looked at me. “See? Manners too.”
I looked at Luna.

“Your mama is going to send her home spoiled.”

“She does that.”

“I like her,” Renee said, looking at Mila. “Let me have my fun.”

“You’ve known her ten minutes.”

“And?”

Mila smiled.

Renee pointed at her. “See? She likes me too.”

“Because you have macaroni and rolls,” I said.

“Whatever gets the job done.”

Renee had already turned toward the counter.

“Put that dessert over here, baby. Dinner’s almost ready.”

I carried it over.

Luna came beside me and lowered her voice.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

I glanced toward her mother, who was now asking Mila what she liked to drink.

“I’m sure.”

Watching Mila settle in this quickly caught me off guard, but not in a bad way. Ten minutes in the house and she was already talking to Renee like she’d known her longer than that.

I looked back at Luna.

“She likes your mama.”

Luna smiled. “My mama likes her too.”

“I noticed.”

Watching them together made something pull quietly in my chest.

I missed Elena.

It still happened like that sometimes. In moments that had nothing to do with her until suddenly they did. Mila laughing. Somebody fussing over her. Watching her get comfortable somewhere new.

For a second, I wished Elena was there to see it too.

The feeling didn’t take anything away from this, though. From Luna standing beside me or Mila laughing with her mama across the room.

I thought I was finally starting to understand that it didn’t have to.

“You’ll get used to it.”

The way she said *you’ll* made me smile

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I will.”
“Ellis.”
I looked toward Marcus.
“You grill?”
Luna groaned beside me.
“No.”
Her father looked at her. “Nobody asked you.”
“I know where this is going.”
Marcus looked back at me. “You grill?”
“I do.”
His face changed immediately.
“Come here.”
“Daddy.”
“What?”
“Dinner is almost ready.”
“This’ll take two minutes.”
“It will not.”
Marcus was already heading toward the back door.
Luna looked at me. “You’re really going out there, aren’t you?”
I smiled.
“Go.”
I smiled and followed him outside.
The door closed behind us.
Marcus walked across the patio toward a grill covered near the edge of the yard.
“I got this last year,” he said, already pulling the cover off.
I bit back a laugh.
Luna called it.
Of course she did.
“This one has the smoker attached.”
“That’s nice.”
“You smoke meat?”
“Sometimes.”
“What kind?”
“Brisket mostly. Ribs.”
He looked at me.
I recognized approval when I saw it.

“See, Luna acts like I talk about this grill too much.”

The back door opened behind us.

“I can hear you.”

Marcus didn’t turn around. “Ain’t nobody talking to you.”

The door closed again.

I laughed.

“She’s been like that her whole life,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Always got something to say.”

“I heard that too!”

Marcus smiled.

I looked back toward the house.

Through the window, I could see Luna moving around the kitchen with her mother. Mila was sitting at the table now, swinging her legs beneath the chair while she talked to both of them.

Something about the sight held me there.

Marcus followed my gaze, and for a moment, he didn’t say anything. Then he looked at me.

“You got a good little girl.”

I looked back through the window. “Yeah.”

“You’ve done good with her.”

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

“Thank you.”

I appreciated it more than he probably knew.

“Come on,” he said. “Before my wife comes out here and blames me for the food getting cold.”

“Pretty sure Luna already blamed you.”

“Luna blames me for everything.”

The door opened.

“Dinner!”

Marcus looked at me.

“See?”

I laughed and followed him back inside.

By the time we sat down, Mila had somehow ended up in the chair beside Renee.

I took the seat across from her, and Luna sat beside me.

Marcus settled at the head of the table.

For a few minutes, there was nothing but plates being passed and Renee telling everybody to take more than they needed.

“That’s enough, Mama,” Luna said when another spoonful landed on her plate.

“You barely got anything.”

“My plate is full.”

Renee pointed to an area approximately the size of a quarter. “You got space right there.”

I laughed.

Luna looked at me. “You’re enjoying this.”

“A little.”

Renee looked between us.

Luna caught it. “Mama.”

“What? I have eyes.”

Marcus kept his attention on his plate.

Smart man.

Mila took a bite of macaroni.

Her eyes widened. “This is good.”

Renee lit up. “You like it?”

Mila nodded.

“See?” Renee looked at Luna. “Somebody appreciates me.”

I lowered my head to hide my smile, but Luna bumped her knee against mine under the table. When I looked at her, she gave me a warning look.

I smiled anyway.

Her knee stayed against mine.

And somewhere between Renee insisting Mila needed another roll and Marcus asking me about photography, I stopped thinking about the fact that this was the first time I’d met Luna’s parents.

It didn’t feel like an interview. Nobody was asking what my intentions were or trying to decide whether I belonged at their table. They were just

making room for me and Mila, and somehow that felt better than anything they could've said.

She was listening to something her mother was saying, one hand wrapped around her glass. She laughed, her head tipping back slightly.

I'd seen Luna behind the counter at Chapter & Charm, tired after closing and nervous before our first date.

Here, she was somebody's daughter.

I liked getting to know her too.

"Did she tell you she used to alphabetize her books?"

My attention shifted to Renee.

Luna's head turned slowly. "Mama."

"What?"

"Why are you telling him that?"

"Because we're talking about books."

"We were not talking about books."

"We are now."

I smiled. "How old?"

"Ellis."

I looked at Luna. "What?"

"Don't encourage her."

"I'm asking a question."

"You know exactly what you're doing."

Renee laughed. "She had to be eight or nine. Had this little bookshelf in her room, and every book had a place."

"That sounds normal."

"It would've been if she didn't notice every time I moved one."

"I knew where my stuff was."

"You were nine."

"And?"

Marcus looked at me from across the table. "She gets that from her mama."

Renee's head turned. "Excuse me?"

He took another bite of food. "You heard me."

"See?" Luna pointed toward her father. "Now we're getting somewhere."

I laughed. "So the bookstore was inevitable."

Luna looked at me. "Apparently."

“It was,” Renee said. “She always had a book with her. And if she read something she liked, everybody in the house had to hear about it.”

Luna covered her face with one hand. “Oh my God.”

“You were sharing,” Marcus said.

“Exactly.”

“You were interrupting.”

“I was a child.”

“And now you own a bookstore,” Marcus said. “So I guess it worked out.”

Luna dropped her hand and looked at him. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome.”

I watched the smile that stayed on her face afterward, and Chapter & Charm made even more sense now.

I’d always known the store mattered to her. You could see it in the way she talked about it, the care she took with every display and event, how easily she remembered what somebody bought the last time they came in.

But sitting there, I realized the bookstore didn’t create that part of her.

She built the bookstore around something that had been there all along.

“I can see it,” I said.

Luna looked at me. “See what?”

“You doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Finding somebody just to tell them what happened in your book.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t do that anymore.”

“You told me about a book last week.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“I was recommending it.”

“You gave me the whole plot.”

“I did not.”

“You told me enough that I don’t need to read it.”

Renee laughed. “See? Same Luna.”

Luna looked around the table.

“I regret inviting you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Your parents started it.”

“And you joined them.”

“I’m trying to get to know you.”

The words left my mouth without much thought, but the teasing in her expression softened.

For a second, she just looked at me.

Then her knee pressed a little more firmly against mine beneath the table.

“You could’ve picked a less embarrassing way.”

“I like this one.”

A smile pulled at her mouth before she looked down at her plate.

Across the table, Renee suddenly became very interested in cutting another piece of chicken.

Marcus did the same thing he’d been doing all afternoon and minded his business.

Mostly.

Mila, thankfully, was more concerned with whether she could have another roll.

“Can I?”

I looked at her plate. “Finish the one you have.”

Mila stuffed the last piece into her mouth and looked immediately at Renee.

Renee laughed and put another roll on her plate.

I shook my head.

This was how it started.

Dinner stretched longer than I expected, but I didn’t notice until I glanced toward the clock and realized we’d been sitting there for almost two hours.

Mila was slowing down beside Renee, her answers getting shorter as the day caught up with her. She still insisted she wasn’t tired when I asked.

Her yawn said otherwise.

Luna caught it too.

“Somebody’s sleepy.”

“I’m not.”

“You just yawned.”

“I was breathing.”

I looked at Luna.

She pressed her lips together.

Mila looked between us. “Can I have more cake?”

“No.”

Her shoulders dropped.

Renee opened her mouth.

I pointed at her. “Don’t.”

She closed it again, smiling.

“Thank you.”

Marcus leaned back in his chair. “You might as well give up.”

“On what?”

He nodded toward his wife.

“She’s gonna feed that baby every time she comes over.”

Every time.

I glanced toward Luna and found her already looking at me.

Neither of us said anything about it.

We didn’t have to.

Because somewhere between walking through the front door and sitting there with an overly full six-year-old who was fighting sleep, this had stopped feeling like a first visit.

And apparently, without any of us discussing it, there was already going to be a next one.

BY THE TIME we were ready to leave, Mila had somehow talked Renee into wrapping up two pieces of cake for us to take home.

I found out when she came into the living room carrying a plastic container with both hands.

“What’s that?”

“Cake.”

“I can see that.”

“Miss Renee said we could take some.”

I looked toward the kitchen.

Renee was standing in the doorway.

“She asked nicely.”

“She already had cake.”

“And now she has cake for tomorrow.”

Mila smiled up at me.

I shook my head. “Go get your jacket.”

She headed toward the chair where she left it earlier.

“Thank you for having us,” I told Renee.

“You don’t have to thank me. I enjoyed having y’all.”

Marcus came in from the kitchen behind her. “Drive safe.”

“I will.”

He held out his hand, but this time when I took it, he used the other to clap me once on the shoulder.

“Good meeting you, Ellis.”

“You too.”

“And next time, I’ll show you the rest of the setup outside.”

Luna groaned from behind me.

“Daddy.”

“What?”

“You already showed him the grill.”

“Not everything.”

I looked at her. “There’s more?”

“Don’t ask.”

Marcus smiled.

“I’ll see it next time.”

Luna stared at me.

I laughed.

Mila came back with her jacket on, the container of cake tucked beneath one arm.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

Renee bent down to hug her.

“You come back and see me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And next time I’ll make you some more macaroni.”

Mila’s face lit up. “Okay.”

I pointed toward the door before she could start negotiating the entire menu.

“Come on.”

She hugged Marcus too before heading outside.

I followed her onto the porch, but when I realized Luna was behind me, I stopped.

“You coming out?”

“Yeah.”

She pulled the door closed behind her.

Mila was already halfway to the truck, so I called after her to stay where I could see her before turning back to Luna.

For a second, we just stood there.

The noise from inside was muffled through the door now, and the porch light cast a soft glow across Luna’s face.

“Your parents are cool.”

She smiled. “You can say that because you don’t belong to them.”

“I like your dad.”

“I knew you would.”

“Why?”

“The grill.”

I laughed. “That’s all it takes?”

“For him? Pretty much.”

“And your mama likes Mila.”

“My mama loves Mila.”

The correction made me smile.

“Yeah. I noticed.”

Luna glanced toward the truck.

“She had a good time.”

“She did.”

“So did I.”

Her eyes came back to mine.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know.”

Her expression softened, barely enough to notice.

A few weeks ago, I might’ve missed it.

I didn’t now.

I stepped closer.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “Doing what?”

“Giving me an out after I’ve already told you what I mean.”

She went still.

I didn’t say anything else.

For a moment, neither did she.

Then her eyes dropped.

“I don’t know.”

I could push.

The question was sitting right there between us, and part of me wanted to know the answer.

But I also knew Luna well enough now to recognize when she was trying to find one herself.

So I reached for her hand instead.

Her fingers slid between mine.

“I had a good time,” I said again.

She looked up.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

A smile started at the corner of her mouth. “I’m trying.”

I laughed softly. “I’ll take it.”

Her thumb moved across the side of my hand.

“I really wanted you here.”

The words were quiet.

I didn’t think she meant for them to hit me the way they did.

“Me or Mila?”

“Both.”

“Good answer.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

She shook her head, but she was smiling.

“I almost didn’t ask you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I kept thinking maybe it was too soon.”

“And?”

“And then I realized I wanted you here more than I cared about whether it was too soon.”

I looked at her for a second.

There were probably a dozen things I could say.

Instead, I squeezed her hand.

“I’m glad you asked.”

“Me too.”

The front door opened behind her.

Renee stuck her head out.

“Luna, you want to take some of this chicken home?”

Luna closed her eyes.

“Mama.”

“What? I’m putting it up.”

“I have food at home.”

“You always say that.”

“Because I do.”

Renee looked at me. “Ellis, you want some?”

“I’ll take some.”

Luna’s head snapped toward me.

“What?”

“You brought this on yourself.”

“How?”

“You invited me.”

Renee laughed as she disappeared back inside.

Luna looked at me. “I don’t like how comfortable you’re getting.”

“I do.”

“I can tell.”

I pulled her a little closer.

Her smile faded into something softer as my hand settled at her waist.

“You gonna text me when you get home?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“And I’m gonna call you tomorrow.”

“I didn’t ask all that.”

“You were going to.”

Her eyes narrowed.

I smiled.

Then I kissed her.

She leaned into me easily, one hand resting against my chest as the kiss lingered a little longer than I intended.

A car door opened behind us.

“Daddy!”

I pulled back.

Luna laughed against my mouth.

“Your child is waiting.”

“She has terrible timing.”

“I heard you!” Mila called.

Of course she did.

I kissed Luna once more, quicker this time, before stepping back.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

I made it down one step before she called my name.

“Ellis.”

I turned.

She was still standing beneath the porch light.

“Thank you for showing up.”

I looked at her.

“You don’t have to thank me for that.”

Her expression softened.

“I’m learning.”

I smiled. “Good.”

This time, when I headed toward the truck, she didn’t call me back. But when I pulled away and glanced in the rearview mirror, she was still standing on the porch, smiling.

OceanofPDF.com



ELLIS LOOKED at the container in my hands before he looked at me.

"What's that?"

"Dessert."

"I told you I was cooking."

"And I told you I was bringing something."

"You said you'd bring yourself."

"And I did."

His eyes lifted to mine.

"And yet."

"And yet I also brought dessert."

He stepped aside to let me in, but the smile on his face told me he was going to have something else to say about it.

I walked past him before he got the chance.

His house smelled like something had been cooking long enough to make me hungry despite the granola bar I'd eaten before leaving the bookstore. There was music playing somewhere deeper inside, low enough that I could hear Mila talking over it.

Or singing.

It took me a second to realize she was doing both.

"What is she doing?"

Ellis closed the door behind me.

“You’ll see.”

“That doesn’t sound promising.”

“It’s not.”

I laughed and slipped my bag from my shoulder.

I’d been here before, technically.

Once.

Long enough to pick him up before we went to breakfast last week because I’d insisted I could drive myself and he’d insisted that defeated the purpose of him taking me on a date. I’d made it as far as the front door before he came outside, so I wasn’t sure that counted.

This did.

There was something different about walking into somebody’s home when you knew you were staying awhile.

My eyes moved around before I could help it.

The living room looked exactly like I expected it to and somehow not at all. The couch was dark gray, wide enough that I could already picture Ellis stretched across most of it. A folded blanket was draped over one arm, and there were two books stacked on the coffee table beside a remote and a pink plastic bracelet I was almost certain didn’t belong to him.

A framed photograph sat on the table beside the couch.

Mila was younger in it, maybe three, sitting on Ellis’s shoulders with both hands planted on top of his head. He was looking up at her instead of the camera.

There were more pictures along the wall behind it.

Mila.

Tasha and Jacob.

Ellis standing beside an older couple I assumed were his parents.

And Elena.

I knew it was her before I had to wonder.

She was standing beside Ellis in one of the larger frames, her body turned slightly toward his while he looked at the camera. Mila was between them, small enough that Ellis was holding most of her weight even though Elena had one arm wrapped around her.

They looked happy.

Not posed or trying to be. Just happy.

I didn’t realize I’d stopped walking until Ellis came up beside me.

“That was her second birthday.”

I glanced at him. “Mila’s?”

“Yeah.”

I looked back at the picture. She was sitting in front of a cake almost as wide as she was, smiling at whoever was behind the camera.

“She looks so little.”

“She was.”

There was something in the way he said it that made me look at him again.

He was smiling, but his eyes stayed on the picture.

“You took this?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course you did.”

That got his attention. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I smiled and kept walking.

“Nothing.”

He took the dessert container from my hands before I could stop him.

“What is this anyway?”

“Banana pudding.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“You made it?”

I stared at him.

He laughed. “My bad.”

“You’re not getting any.”

“I already got it.”

“I can take it back.”

“You’re in my house now. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“That is not how that works.”

“It is tonight.”

Before I could argue, Mila came running around the corner.

“Miss Luna!”

I barely had time to brace myself before she wrapped both arms around my waist.

“Hey, Bug.”

The word came easier now.

Maybe because I’d already said it once without thinking.

Maybe because nobody had looked at me like I’d crossed some invisible line when I did.

I hugged her back.

“What were you doing?”

“Helping Daddy cook.”

Ellis made a sound behind me.

I looked over my shoulder. “What?”

“She stirred something twice.”

“I helped.”

“Then disappeared upstairs.”

“I had to get my markers.”

She held up the handful clutched in one fist like evidence.

“For what?”

“My homework.”

Ellis looked at her. “The homework you were supposed to finish before dinner?”

“I’m gonna finish it.”

“When?”

She looked at me.

I immediately shook my head. “Don’t bring me into this.”

Mila smiled and reached for my hand instead.

“Come help me.”

“I just got here.”

“It’s only sentences.”

“That sounds like homework.”

“It is.”

I looked at Ellis.

He smiled. “Welcome.”

“See what I deal with?”

“I’m starting to.”

Mila tugged my hand toward the kitchen.

“Come on.”

“I’m coming.”

I glanced back at Ellis. He was still holding the banana pudding.

“You better put that in the refrigerator.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I narrowed my eyes.

His smile widened before he followed us toward the kitchen.

The kitchen looked more lived-in than the living room. There was a backpack hanging from one of the chairs, two magnets holding a school calendar to the refrigerator, and a sheet of paper covered in spelling words sitting beside an open box of markers.

A pot simmered on the stove.

I leaned closer. “What is that?”

“Spaghetti,” Mila said.

“I was asking the person who cooked it.”

“I helped.”

“Apparently she stirred it twice,” I told her.

Her head turned toward the doorway. “Daddy!”

Ellis walked in behind us and put the dessert in the refrigerator.

“What?”

“You told her?”

“She asked.”

Mila folded her arms.

I looked between them. “I’ve been here less than five minutes.”

“Welcome,” Ellis said.

I laughed and moved toward the stove. “You really cooked.”

He leaned against the counter. “Why does everybody keep sounding surprised by that?”

“I’m not surprised.”

“You looked surprised.”

“I was checking it out.”

“For what?”

I glanced into the pot again. “Just making sure you knew what you were doing.”

Mila laughed.

Ellis looked at his daughter. “Whose side are you on?”

“Miss Luna’s.”

“Of course.”

I smiled and turned back toward the stove.

There was garlic bread on a baking sheet beside it and a bowl of salad on the counter. Nothing elaborate. Nothing that looked like he’d spent the entire afternoon trying to impress me.

Just dinner.

Something about that made me like it more.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing.”

I looked at him.

“You invited me over here to watch you cook?”

“I invited you over here to eat.”

“I can help.”

“I know.”

He pushed away from the counter and reached around me for the spoon resting beside the stove.

“But you don’t have to.”

The words were simple enough that I almost missed them.

Almost.

I looked at him, but he was already stirring the sauce.

A few weeks ago, I probably would’ve asked again. Found something to carry or something to wipe down. Some way to make sure I wasn’t standing in somebody else’s kitchen while they did all the work.

Tonight, I let my hand fall away from the counter.

“Okay.”

Ellis glanced at me.

That was all.

No smile like I’d passed a test. No comment about how I was getting better.

He just turned back to the stove.

Mila slid the box of markers toward me.

“You can help me.”

I looked down at the paper in front of her. “With what?”

“We have to make sentences.”

“With your spelling words?”

She nodded.

I pulled out the chair beside her. “That sounds suspiciously like homework.”

“It is.”

I looked toward Ellis. “So this is why you wanted me here?”

He laughed from the stove. “Don’t put that on me.”

“Seems convenient.”

“Take it up with your girl.”

Mila looked between us. “Are you gonna help me?”

I picked up a marker. “Apparently.”

Mila was already digging through her markers by the time I sat down, completely unconcerned with whether I’d agreed to any of this.

Across the kitchen, Ellis reached for the garlic bread like this was all perfectly normal.

And somehow, it was starting to feel that way to me too.

For once, I didn’t immediately reach for the part of me that wanted to figure out exactly what he meant.

I sat down beside Mila instead.

“What’s the first word?”

She pushed the paper toward me.

“Because.”

I looked at her.

“You need help using because in a sentence?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Because your daddy made me do homework on my night off, I’m taking all the banana pudding home.”

“I heard that,” Ellis said.

I smiled.

“I know.”

Mila giggled and lowered her pencil to the paper.

“Don’t write that,” Ellis told her.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

I pointed at him. “There you go. That’s your sentence.”

Mila looked between us before writing something down.

Ellis narrowed his eyes. “What did you put?”

She covered the paper with both hands.

“Nothing.”

“That means she wrote it,” I said.

“I know my child.”

“And yet you gave her the material.”

He shook his head and turned back toward the stove.

Mila whispered, “What’s the next one?”

I looked down at the list.

“Enough.”

She groaned.

“That’s how I feel too.”

“I don’t know what to write.”

“Think about something you have enough of.”

Her eyes moved around the kitchen.

“Books.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

From the stove, Ellis said, “Absolutely.”

Mila frowned. “No, I don’t.”

“You have books in your room, books downstairs, books in my truck, and three books from Chapter & Charm sitting on the kitchen counter right now.”

“That’s not enough.”

I looked at Ellis.

He pointed the spoon at me. “Don’t encourage her.”

“I agree with her.”

“Exactly.”

Mila smiled and wrote her sentence.

By the time she finished the last two words, Ellis was carrying plates to the table, and whatever argument I was preparing about there being no such thing as too many books got interrupted by the smell of food.

Mila pushed her homework aside.

“I’m done.”

“Let me see it.”

She handed the paper to Ellis when he came around the table.

He read the sentences one by one, stopping when he got to *because*.

His eyes lifted to mine.

I took a sip of water. “I had nothing to do with that.”

Mila looked at me. “Yes, you did.”

I closed my eyes as Ellis laughed.

“I was trying to protect you.”

“Why?”

“Good question.” I pulled her plate closer. “Eat your food.”

Dinner moved easily after that.

Mila did most of the talking, which I was beginning to realize was normal when she had an audience willing to listen. I heard about somebody named Kennedy who got moved to another seat for talking too much, a boy

who cried because he lost a blue eraser, and a class hamster that apparently belonged to everybody except the teacher who actually took care of it.

Ellis corrected her twice when the details started sounding suspicious.

She ignored him both times.

I asked questions anyway.

By the time our plates were mostly empty, I knew more about the social politics of a first-grade classroom than I ever expected to.

Mila pushed her empty plate away. “Can we have banana pudding?”

“No,” Ellis and I said at the same time.

She looked between us.

I looked at Ellis. He looked at me.

“Why did you say no?” I asked.

“Because she needs to finish getting ready for bed. Why did you say no?”

“Because I haven’t had any yet.”

He laughed.

Mila groaned. “I can eat it fast.”

“That’s not helping your case,” Ellis said.

He considered it. “Pajamas on, backpack by the door.”

“And then pudding?”

“A little. Then you brush your teeth and get in bed.”

She was out of her chair before he finished the sentence.

“Walk,” Ellis called after her.

Her footsteps slowed immediately.

I waited until she disappeared around the corner before looking at him.

“You’ve been holding banana pudding over her head this whole time?”

“I use the tools available to me.”

“That feels unethical.”

“It works.”

I laughed and started gathering the plates.

Ellis reached across the table and took mine before I could stack it.

“I got it.”

“You cooked.”

“And?”

“And I can clean.”

“You helped with homework.”

“I corrupted your child.”

“That too.”

I stood anyway and took Mila’s glass with me.

Ellis looked at it, then at me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was definitely something.”

He carried the plates to the sink while I followed with the glasses.

“I’m helping.”

“I can see that.”

“And you’re not going to stop me?”

“Would it work?”

“No.”

“Then I’ve grown.”

I smiled and set the glasses beside him.

“Proud of you.”

He bumped his hip lightly against mine before turning on the faucet.

I reached for the container of leftovers on the counter and started putting the rest of the spaghetti away while he rinsed the plates.

For a little while, neither of us said anything. Water ran into the sink, the refrigerator hummed behind me, and I could hear Mila moving around upstairs.

It wasn’t the kind of silence I used to feel responsible for filling.

I put the lid on the container and opened the refrigerator.

“You can put it on the second shelf.”

I moved the milk aside to make room.

There were drawings stuck to the refrigerator door with magnets, a grocery list in handwriting I assumed belonged to Ellis, a school lunch calendar, and one photograph of Mila grinning with two front teeth missing.

Normal pieces of somebody else’s life.

Except standing there didn’t feel quite as much like being in somebody else’s life as I expected it to.

I closed the refrigerator.

Ellis was watching me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You keep doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me and saying nothing.”

“I look at you all the time.”

“That is not a defense.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be.”

I shook my head and reached for the dish towel.

He caught my wrist before I could pick it up.

“I said I got it.”

“And I said—”

“I know what you said.”

His thumb moved once over the inside of my wrist.

“Go sit down.”

I looked at him.

“You kicking me out of your kitchen?”

“I’m telling you that you don’t have to clean it.”

“I know.”

The answer came before I thought about it, and Ellis paused, the corner of his mouth pulling slightly.

“I thought you were learning.”

“I am.”

“You sure?”

“Ellis.”

“I’m asking.”

My eyes drifted toward the towel before coming back to him. “It’s not that easy.”

His expression softened.

“I didn’t say it was.”

I knew he didn’t. He hadn’t asked me to change overnight or made me feel like I was doing something wrong every time an old habit showed up.

I let my hand fall away from the towel.

“I’m trying.”

“I know.”

He turned back toward the sink like that was enough, and somehow, that made it easier to walk away.

I sat on the couch and reached for my phone...

Ellis looked at Mila. “Why do you have your backpack?”

“You said put it by the door.”

“I meant put it by the door. Not wear it.”

“Oh.”

She slipped it off and carried it toward the front of the house.

I looked at Ellis. “She follows directions.”

“Eventually.”

Mila returned without the backpack and stopped in front of us.

“Pudding.”

Not a question.

I laughed.

Ellis pushed himself off the couch. “You got five minutes.”

“Five?”

“You have school tomorrow.”

“That’s not enough time.”

“To eat pudding?”

She thought about it. “Seven.”

“Five.”

“Six.”

Ellis pointed toward the kitchen. “Go.”

She took off.

“Walk.”

Her pace slowed. Barely.

I followed them into the kitchen, where Ellis scooped banana pudding into a bowl. Mila immediately looked disappointed.

“That’s little.”

“You’re little.”

“I’m six.”

“Exactly.”

She looked at me for support, but I lifted both hands. “I’m not getting involved.”

“You were on my side earlier.”

“That was before bedtime.”

Ellis slid the bowl toward her. “See? She knows.”

Mila finished her pudding faster than anybody should’ve been able to and pushed the bowl away.

“Done.”

Ellis looked at the clock. “Upstairs.”

“Can Miss Luna tuck me in?”

The question caught me off guard.

Not enough to make me uncomfortable, just enough that I looked at Ellis before answering.

There was no expectation in his face. He left the choice to me.

“If she wants to,” he said.

Mila turned to me. “Can you?”

“Yeah.”

Her smile came quickly. “Come on.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the stairs.

Her room was exactly what I expected after knowing her for more than a few weeks.

Books everywhere.

There was a short bookcase against one wall, another beside her bed, and a stack on the floor that looked like it started with good intentions before somebody gave up. A stuffed giraffe was wedged between two pillows, and glow-in-the-dark stars were stuck across the ceiling.

I stopped in the doorway. “You have a lot of books.”

“I need more.”

From behind me, Ellis sighed.

I smiled.

Mila grinned.

Ellis leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “Good night, Bug.”

“Night, Daddy.”

I started to stand, but Mila caught my hand.

“Good night.”

I looked down at her. “Good night.”

She held her arms out, and I leaned forward to hug her.

“Thanks for helping me with my homework.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And bringing pudding.”

I laughed. “That too.”

She let me go, and I followed Ellis into the hallway.

By the time we made it downstairs, I realized how easily I’d followed him through all of that.

Dinner. Homework. Dessert. Bedtime.

There had been no moment where I wondered whether I was supposed to be there or felt like I needed to step aside because this part belonged to him and Mila.

I was just there.

And somehow, that felt bigger than it should.

Ellis dropped onto the couch and reached for the remote.

“You want to watch something?”

“Sure.”

He looked at me.

“What?”

“That was easy.”

“What was?”

“You agreeing.”

“I agree with things.”

“Sometimes.”

I sat beside him.

“You want me to change my answer?”

“Nope.”

He turned on the television before handing me the remote.

“You pick.”

“That seems risky.”

“I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m learning.”

I turned my head slowly.

He smiled.

“You stole that.”

“I adapted it.”

“That’s my line.”

“Not anymore.”

I shook my head and started scrolling through the options.

I made it through maybe four before lowering the remote.

“You really think I’m not learning?”

Ellis looked at me.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You said you thought I was learning.”

“I do.”

“But?”

He leaned back against the couch, one arm stretching across the cushions behind me.

“I think sometimes you forget.”

I looked down at the remote in my hand.

Maybe because he was right.

Maybe because I already knew he was.

“It’s easier to remember when nothing’s happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“When it’s just us talking or hanging out, I know you’re not Lucas.”

Ellis didn’t react to the name.

“But then something happens that feels familiar, and I don’t know. I guess I go back to what I know.”

“Like trying to clean my kitchen?”

A small laugh escaped me.

“It sounds stupid when you say it like that.”

“I didn’t say it was stupid.”

“I know.”

I set the remote on the coffee table and considered leaving it there for a moment. We didn’t have to have this conversation tonight, and Ellis wasn’t asking me to.

That was probably why I kept going.

“Lucas used to keep score.”

Ellis shifted slightly beside me.

“Score?”

I nodded.

“It wasn’t like that in the beginning.”

Even then, I felt the need to say that first. Maybe because five years was a long time to spend with somebody if every memory was terrible.

Mine weren’t.

“There were good years,” I said. “Really good ones.”

Ellis didn’t interrupt.

“I loved him.”

“I know.”

The answer came so easily that I looked at him.

There was nothing strange in his expression. No discomfort because I said I loved somebody before him. No need to make what I had with Lucas smaller so whatever this was with Ellis could feel bigger.

I looked down at my hands.

“Somewhere along the way, everything started having a price.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he did something for me, I needed to remember it. If I asked for too much, eventually I’d hear about everything he’d already done. If he showed up for something, I was supposed to be grateful that he made the time.”

I paused.

“And I was.”

That was the part that was difficult to explain.

“I was grateful. I don’t think he made all of it up in his head. I probably didn’t say thank you enough sometimes. I probably did ask for things when he was tired or busy. I wasn’t perfect.”

“Luna.”

“I know.”

“No.”

His voice was gentle, but there was something firmer underneath it.

“You’re doing it now.”

My eyebrows pulled together.

“Doing what?”

“Finding your part in it before you’ve even finished telling me what he did.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

Because I was.

I didn’t know what to say to that, and Ellis didn’t seem to need me to. His hand found mine between us.

“Keep going.”

I took a breath.

“After a while, I got good at knowing what would become a problem before it became one. If I wanted him somewhere, I’d make sure he knew he didn’t have to come. If I needed something, I’d try to figure out whether I could handle it myself first.”

Sunday flashed through my mind.

Asking Ellis if he was still coming when he’d already told me he would.

Thanking him for showing up like doing exactly what he said he would do deserved something more than trusting him to do it.

All the little exits I kept building for him before he’d ever asked for one.

“I stopped asking for things unless I really needed them.”

Ellis was quiet.

“And when he did something without me asking, I made sure he knew I appreciated it. Because if I didn’t…”

I trailed off.

“What?”

I stared toward the television.

“Sometimes he’d pull away. Not completely. He’d just get different. Quieter. Shorter with me. And I’d know something was wrong, but he’d tell me everything was fine until eventually I figured out what I’d done.”

I swallowed.

“Or what I hadn’t done.”

Ellis’s hand tightened slightly around mine.

“So I got better at figuring it out before he had to tell me.”

The words settled between us.

For years, I’d thought that was what knowing somebody meant. Knowing when they needed space. Knowing when they wanted attention. Knowing when to ask and when not to. Knowing how to keep things good.

“I thought if I paid enough attention, I could keep us from getting to the bad parts.”

“And did it work?”

I smiled, but there was nothing funny in it.

“For a while.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I looked at him.

“No.”

He nodded once.

I leaned back against the couch.

“I know how it sounds.”

“How does it sound?”

“Like I spent five years trying to earn a relationship I was already in.”

He didn’t answer immediately.

I stared toward the television even though I couldn’t tell him what was on it now.

“I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing until after it was over. I just thought relationships took work.”

“They do.”

I looked at him.

“They do,” he said again. “But that’s not the same thing.”

“As what?”

“Working for your place in one.”

Something in my chest tightened.

Ellis turned toward me a little more.

“You don’t have to earn me, Luna.”

The words landed harder than they should have.

Maybe because they were too close to something I’d been trying not to name.

I looked away.

“You make that sound easy.”

“No.”

I turned back.

“I think it should be simple. That’s different.”

I didn’t say anything.

He lifted our joined hands slightly.

“I like you.”

A small laugh escaped me.

“That’s your big speech?”

“I wasn’t giving a speech.”

“Clearly.”

He smiled.

“I like you. I want to spend time with you. I want you here. None of that is something you have to keep earning every time I see you.”

My throat felt tighter than it did a second ago.

“And if that changes?”

The question was out before I could stop it.

Ellis didn’t flinch.

“Then I tell you.”

I stared at him.

“I don’t make you guess. I don’t punish you until you figure it out. I tell you.”

He made it sound so simple.

Maybe with him, it was.

“I don’t know if I’m good at believing that yet.”

“You don’t have to be.”

I looked at him.

“You don’t have to believe me tonight.”

His thumb brushed over my knuckles.

“Just keep paying attention.”

My eyes burned before I could stop them. Not enough to cry, but enough that I blinked and looked down.

Because that was what I’d been doing. Paying attention.

Every time he said he’d call and did. Every time he showed up when he said he would. Every time I gave him an opportunity to leave and he looked at me like he couldn’t understand why I was offering it.

He hadn’t asked me to trust a promise.

He’d been giving me proof, little by little, one ordinary thing at a time.

“I am,” I said.

“I know.”

I looked at him.

His mouth lifted at one corner.

“You know?”

“I’m learning.”

I laughed before I could help it.

“You’re irritating.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because you keep being irritating.”

“And yet you keep coming around.”

“That might be temporary.”

“See, now you’re lying.”

I smiled.

And just like that, the room felt lighter.

What I told him hadn’t disappeared. Lucas still existed. Those five years still happened, and I was still carrying pieces of them I was only beginning to recognize.

But Ellis didn’t look at me differently now that he knew. He didn’t look sorry for me or ask why I stayed or tell me what I should’ve done.

He was just sitting beside me with his hand wrapped around mine like nothing about telling him the truth changed whether I belonged there.

Maybe that was the part I wasn’t prepared for.

I’d spent so long believing that being fully known came with consequences that I’d never considered the possibility that sometimes you could tell somebody the thing you were afraid would change the room, and the room stayed exactly the same.

For a little while, neither of us said anything. Ellis's thumb kept moving over the back of my hand, slow and absentminded, while whatever preview was playing on the television ended and another one started.

Eventually, he looked toward the screen. "So are we ever going to pick something?"

I blinked. "What?"

"We've been on the same menu for twenty minutes."

I glanced at the television. He was right.

"You were talking."

"So were you."

"That feels different."

His eyebrows lifted. "How?"

"I was saying important things."

"And I wasn't?"

I turned my head and caught the twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"You know what I meant."

"I don't know. Sounds like you don't value my contributions."

I laughed and reached for the remote. "This is exactly what I'm talking about."

I shook my head, still smiling. "Just pick something."

He took the remote from my hand. "Now you trust me?"

"With movies."

"Progress."

I rolled my eyes, but somewhere between him scrolling through the options and arguing that I'd rejected the last three without giving them a chance, I shifted closer to him.

It happened without much thought. One second I was sitting beside him, and the next my shoulder was tucked against his chest while his arm settled around me.

No hesitation. No question about whether I was taking up too much space.

I just fit there.

Ellis kept scrolling until *The Equalizer* came up.

"This?"

"Sure."

"You didn't even read what it's about."

"I know what *The Equalizer* is."

“So you approve?”

“I said sure. Don’t push it.”

He laughed and started the movie.

For the first few minutes, I actually tried to pay attention.

Somebody did something they probably shouldn’t have, Denzel Washington looked entirely too calm about it, and somewhere along the way, I lost track of why any of it was happening.

Ellis shifted beside me, and his hand settled against my thigh.

Not high enough to turn the touch into something else. Just there. Warm. Familiar.

My body relaxed against him before I realized it had.

He looked down at me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s my line.”

“I adapted it.”

“You’re getting too comfortable.”

“Apparently.”

The word caught me, but not because of the way he said it. I realized I didn’t mind hearing it anymore.

Comfortable.

A few hours ago, the thought of getting too comfortable with him still carried enough weight that I could feel it sitting somewhere beneath everything else. Now I was curled against him on his couch after helping his daughter with homework and telling him things I’d spent years trying to convince myself didn’t matter anymore, and somehow, I was okay.

More than okay.

I tilted my head back enough to look at him.

Ellis glanced down. “What now?”

I didn’t answer. I reached up and kissed him.

His surprise lasted all of half a second before his hand moved from my thigh to my waist, pulling me closer as he kissed me back.

It wasn’t rushed. Nothing between us ever seemed to be.

His mouth moved against mine slowly enough that I felt every shift, every little change in pressure, the scrape of his beard against my skin when I turned toward him more fully.

My hand settled against his chest, and his heart was beating faster than it had been a minute ago.

That made me smile against his mouth.

Ellis pulled back just enough to look at me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Luna.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“You’re smiling.”

“You complain a lot for somebody getting kissed.”

His mouth curved. “Do it again.”

I shook my head, but I kissed him anyway.

This one lasted longer. His hand moved slowly along my back while mine slid up to the side of his neck, and for a few seconds, I forgot entirely about the movie playing behind us.

When we pulled apart, I stayed close, his forehead resting lightly against mine.

“You good?”

“With you, always.”

He studied me for a second, like he was making sure, then nodded. “Good.”

I settled against him again.

The movie had moved on without us, and neither of us bothered rewinding it.

A few minutes later, Ellis reached for the blanket folded over the arm of the couch and draped it over my legs without asking.

I looked down at it before settling farther beneath it.

He didn’t ask if I was cold.

I didn’t thank him.

We just kept watching the movie.

I nudged him with my elbow.

He laughed and tightened his arm around me.

This time, when the quiet came back, I let it.

I didn’t search his face for something I’d missed. I didn’t wonder whether telling him too much had changed the way he saw me. I didn’t start planning how to make up for taking up half his evening with a conversation he’d never asked for.

I just sat there with his arm around me, my legs tucked beneath his blanket and the sound of a movie neither of us was really watching filling the room.

Nothing had changed.

Except maybe me.

Not all at once. Not enough to make the old habits disappear overnight. But enough that when Ellis pressed a kiss to the top of my head and pulled me a little closer, I didn't wonder what I'd done to deserve it.

For tonight, I let myself believe I didn't have to.

OceanofPDF.com



I'D EDITED the same photograph four times and somehow liked the first version better than all of them.

I undid the last adjustment and leaned back from the computer.

Usually, this was when I started watching the clock. Mila got out of school in forty minutes, which meant whatever I was working on needed to be wrapped up before I left to get her.

Except today, I didn't have to.

Tasha had texted an hour ago to remind me that Mila was spending the night with her and Jacob, as if Mila hadn't reminded me every day since Monday.

Apparently, whatever they had planned tomorrow morning required a sleepover tonight.

What those plans were depended on which one of them I asked.

Tasha said breakfast and shopping. Mila said pancakes and "something Auntie said not to tell you."

I decided I didn't want to know.

My phone lit up beside the keyboard, and I reached for it without thinking.

Luna's name was on the screen.

She was calling.

I stared at it for a second, trying to remember if she'd ever actually called me before.

I didn't think she had.

We'd texted enough that her name stayed near the top of my messages now. Wednesday she'd sent me a picture of the banana pudding container with exactly one serving left and accused me of taking more than my share. Yesterday, I'd sent her a picture of Mila holding up the spelling paper they finished together like she'd won an award for it.

Luna's response had been immediate.

I expect partial credit.

Tuesday night hadn't made anything weird between us.

She'd told me something she hadn't told me before.

I listened.

Then Wednesday came.

Then Thursday.

Now it was Friday, and Luna Bennett was calling my phone for the first time.

I answered before she could change her mind.

"Hello?"

"You sound confused."

I smiled and leaned back in my chair.

"I am."

"Why?"

"You called me."

"I know how phones work, Ellis."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"You implied it."

"I'm just surprised."

"Do you want me to hang up?"

"No."

The answer came quickly enough that she laughed.

"Okay, then."

I heard voices somewhere behind her.

"You at the store?"

"Where else would I be?"

"You do have a house."

"I've heard."

I laughed. “So why are you calling me?”
“Maybe I wanted to hear your voice.”
I went quiet.
“Don’t make it weird.”
“I’m allowed to enjoy things.”
“Ellis.”
I smiled. Today, she wanted to hear my voice, so she called.
I didn’t point it out.
“What are you doing?” she asked.
“Working.”
“Still?”
“Some of us have jobs.”
“I own a business.”
“Allegedly.”
“See, this is why I don’t call you.”
I laughed. “You busy?”
“I’m at work.”
“That wasn’t my question.”
She was quiet for a second.
Then, “Are you busy tonight?”
“Not really. Mila’s staying with Tasha.”
“Oh.”
There was another pause.
“Come see me when you’re done.”
I stilled.
She hadn’t added *if you want to* this time.
“Come see me when you’re done” was all she’d said.
No *if you’re not tired.*
Just what she wanted.
“Okay.”
“Okay?”
“I’ll come see you.”
Her voice softened. “Okay.”
“What time do you close?”
“Seven.”
“I’ll be there.”
“All right.”

“And Luna?”

“What?”

“You can call me.”

“I know.”

I smiled.

“See you later.”

“See you.”

The call ended.

I set my phone beside the keyboard and looked back at the photograph I’d been editing.

I looked at my phone again.

Luna had called me because she wanted to hear my voice, and somehow I was supposed to get work done for the next two hours.

I reached for the mouse and looked at the photo on my screen.

The first edit was definitely better.

By the time I pulled up outside Chapter & Charm, the sun had started to drop behind the buildings across the street. The lights inside were still on, but the OPEN sign in the front window was dark.

Seven on the dot.

I locked my truck and headed toward the door, but before I could reach for the handle, it opened.

Naomi stepped out with her bag over one shoulder. She looked at me, glanced back through the glass, then smiled.

“I’m off the clock.”

I stopped. “I didn’t ask you anything.”

“Good. I’m not getting involved.”

I shook my head. “Y’all are strange.”

“Have a good night, Ellis.” She started down the sidewalk, then called over her shoulder, “She’s in the back.”

“I know where her office is.”

Naomi laughed and kept walking.

I pulled the door open before she could say anything else.

The bookstore was quiet, but not the after-hours quiet I’d gotten used to, with Luna moving between shelves while I helped her put something back together after an event. This felt different.

Everything was already done. The chairs were pushed in, the register was closed, and the lights over the café side had been dimmed.

There was nothing waiting for me to help with.

I was just there because she asked me to be.

I made my way toward the back.

Luna's office door was open, and I found her sitting behind her desk with her attention fixed on her laptop.

She didn't notice me immediately, so I leaned against the doorway and let myself look at her for a second.

Her curls were pulled up tonight, a few loose around her face. She reached for something beside her laptop without looking and nearly knocked over her water bottle.

I caught it before it hit the floor, and she looked up at me.

"Jesus."

"Good to see you too."

She pressed a hand to her chest. "You scared me."

"You were very distracted."

She shook her head, but she was smiling when she closed her laptop.

"You made it."

"You sound surprised."

"I'm not."

The answer came quickly, and then she caught herself. I did too, something warm settling low in my chest.

Three nights ago, she probably would've added something to that—a joke, an explanation, some little protection against sounding like she expected me.

Tonight, she just let it stand.

I pushed away from the doorway. "What are we doing?"

Luna looked at me. "I don't know."

"You called me."

"I know."

"Told me to come see you."

"I remember."

"And you had no plan?"

"I wanted to see you."

There it was again, simple and direct.

I walked toward her, and she watched me the entire way.

By the time I stopped in front of her desk, the teasing expression she had a second ago had softened.

“What?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“That look means something.”

“What look?”

“That one.”

I moved around the side of the desk as Luna turned her chair toward me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re staring.”

“I’m allowed to look at you.”

Her mouth curved. “Is that what you call it?”

“What would you call it?”

“Staring.”

“Then I guess I’m staring.”

I stopped between her knees.

Her smile faded.

Not because anything was wrong.

Because now I was close enough to see the way her eyes dropped briefly to my mouth.

My hand settled on the arm of her chair.

“You wanted to see me?”

She looked back up.

“Yes.”

No hesitation.

I liked that answer more than I should.

“Okay.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else am I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re the one who called me.”

“I’m starting to regret it.”

“No, you’re not.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’re very confident.”

“I’m standing between your legs.”

Luna looked down like she forgot that part.

When her eyes came back to mine, I was already smiling.

“You are so—”

I kissed her before she finished.

Her hand caught the front of my shirt, and whatever word she was about to use disappeared against my mouth.

I smiled into the kiss.

She pulled back.

“Did you just laugh?”

“No.”

“You did.”

“I would never.”

“You absolutely—”

I kissed her again.

This time, she didn’t try to finish the sentence.

Her fingers tightened in my shirt as I slid one hand along her jaw, tilting her face toward mine.

The kiss deepened slowly, not because I was trying to make it happen, but because neither of us pulled away. Luna’s other hand settled against my chest, and I felt the change in her breathing right along with my own.

That was when I became very aware of how quiet it was around us.

The bookstore was locked. Naomi was gone, and Mila was at Tasha’s.

We were alone. Luna was sitting in front of me with her knees on either side of my hips and her mouth moving against mine like she’d called me here for more than conversation.

I pulled back first, but not far enough to put any real space between us.

Her eyes opened, and she studied me. “What are you thinking about?”

I laughed softly. “You sure you want to know?”

Her thumb moved along the collar of my shirt as she kept her eyes on mine. “Yes.”

I could’ve told her exactly what I’d been thinking since she pulled me closer.

Instead, I ran my thumb along her cheek.

“You first.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You called me.”

“You keep bringing that up.”

“Because you still haven’t told me why.”

“I did.”

“You wanted to see me.”

“Yes.”

“And now you’ve seen me.”

Her mouth twitched. “Maybe I’m not done.”

I held her gaze for a second before leaning in and kissing her again.

My hand moved along her back as she shifted closer to the edge of the chair, and I had to remind myself where we were.

Her office, in her bookstore, with entirely too many windows.

I pulled back, and Luna looked at me.

“What?”

“We should probably remember where we are.”

She glanced toward the open office door.

“The store is closed.”

“That wasn’t my concern.”

Her eyes came back to mine.

It took her a second.

Then she laughed.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You think very highly of yourself.”

“I’m trying to think about both of us.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I smiled. “You disagree?”

She didn’t answer.

Instead, her fingers moved slowly over the back of my neck.

My smile disappeared.

“Luna.”

“What?”

“You know what you’re doing.”

“I’m sitting here.”

“You were sitting here five minutes ago too. It didn’t look like this.”

“What does it look like now?”

I stared at her.

She knew.

I could see it in the way she was looking at me, in the slight curve at the corner of her mouth.

“You want me to say it?”

Her eyes held mine.

For the first time since I walked into her office, she looked away.

She didn’t look uncomfortable. If anything, she looked like she was deciding something.

When she looked at me again, the teasing was gone.

“Come home with me.”

Everything in me stilled.

I understood exactly what she was asking, and there was nothing tucked behind the words. There was no hesitation. No easy way for either of us to pretend she’d meant something else.

No *if you want to.*

No *unless you have something else to do.*

No escape route waiting for me to take it.

Just Luna telling me what she wanted.

I searched her face.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

One question.

One answer.

That was enough.

I leaned down and kissed her once more, slower this time.

When I pulled away, her eyes stayed closed for another second.

“Okay.”

She opened them.

“Okay?”

I smiled.

“Yeah. I’ll come home with you.”

Her mouth curved.

“You’re following me.”

“I know where you live.”

“And you’re still following me.”

“Bossy.”

“You like it.”

I stepped back so she could stand.

“I’m learning.”

She laughed and reached for her bag.

“Shut up.”

I waited while she grabbed her phone and checked the office one last time. She shut down her laptop, straightened a stack of papers, then reached for another pile.

I caught her hand.

She looked at me.

“What?”

“You’re closed.”

“I know. I’m just—”

“Tomorrow.”

Her eyes moved to the papers.

Then back to me.

For half a second, I expected her to argue.

Instead, she let them go.

“Tomorrow.”

I took her bag from the desk and handed it to her.

“Come on.”

We walked through the bookstore together, Luna switching off the remaining lights as we went.

By the time we reached the front, only the light above the register was still on.

She stopped beside it and looked around the store once before reaching for the switch.

Darkness settled over Chapter & Charm.

I followed her outside.

She locked the door behind us and checked it once before slipping her keys into her bag.

“You ready?” I asked.

Luna looked at me.

There was something in her expression I hadn’t seen before.

Nerves, maybe.

But not doubt.

“Yeah.”

I believed her.

“Lead the way.”



BY THE TIME I pulled in behind Luna, her porch light was already on.

I turned off the truck and sat there for a second, trying very hard not to get ahead of myself.

Luna was waiting near her front door when I walked up.

“You coming in?”

“I drove all the way over here.”

“You followed me ten minutes.”

“Still counts.”

She unlocked the door.

I followed her inside.

I’d been here before, but tonight the house felt different.

Or maybe I did.

Luna dropped her bag onto the table near the door and slipped out of her shoes.

“You want something to drink?”

“Sure.”

“What do you want?”

“Water’s fine.”

She headed toward the kitchen.

I watched her go.

Then immediately told myself to stop watching her go.

That lasted maybe three seconds.

“You’re staring again,” she called without turning around.

I laughed.

“How do you know?”

“I can feel it.”

“That sounds made up.”

She opened the refrigerator.

“Do you want this water or not?”

“Yes.”

She grabbed two bottles and closed the door.

When she turned around, I was leaning against the entrance to the kitchen.

Her steps slowed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“There you go again.”

She handed me a bottle.

I took it, but she didn’t move away.

Neither did I.

The quiet stretched between us.

Not awkward.

Not uncertain.

Just full.

I set the unopened bottle on the counter beside me.

Luna looked at it.

“You asked for that.”

“I changed my mind.”

“About water?”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes lifted to mine.

I reached for her slowly.

She didn’t move away.

My hand settled at her waist.

“Still okay?”

“Yes.”

I kissed her.

This time, there was no office chair between us or storefront beyond the walls. Nobody could walk past a window and remind us where we were.

Luna’s arms slid around my neck as I drew her closer, and the kiss deepened almost immediately. She pressed into me, one hand slipping into the hair at the back of my head as mine moved up her back.

She caught my bottom lip between hers, and whatever control I’d walked through the door with got a little harder to hold onto.

I broke the kiss long enough to breathe.

“Luna.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t.”

She looked at me.

“I do.”

Her fingers curled into my shirt.

“I asked you to come home with me for a reason.”

I slid my hand along her jaw. “What reason?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know the reason.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

For a second, I thought she might tell me to go to hell.

Instead, she stepped closer.

“I want you.”

The words hit harder than they had any right to.

I looked at her.

She didn’t take them back. Didn’t soften them or add anything to make wanting me sound smaller than it was.

I kissed her again.

Her back met the counter, my hand settling beside her as I left enough space between us for her to decide how much closer she wanted me.

She closed it herself.

Her arms slid around my neck, pulling me against her, and whatever restraint I’d been holding onto started slipping.

I pulled back just enough to look at her. “Bedroom?”

She caught my hand.

“Come on.”

I let her lead me to the bedroom.

Her hand stayed wrapped around mine until we reached her bedroom, but the second she turned toward me, I caught her around the waist and pulled her back.

Luna laughed, the sound barely making it out before I kissed her.

There was no hesitation in the way she came against me. No space left for me to wonder whether she meant what she said in the kitchen.

I want you.

Her fingers slipped beneath my shirt, palms moving over my skin before she pushed it higher. I pulled back long enough to drag it over my head.

Luna watched me toss it aside.

Then kept watching.

I smiled. “What?”

“I’m looking.”

“I see that.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

I shook my head and reached for her.

My hands slipped beneath her shirt, moving over warm skin until her breath caught. I slowed, letting my thumbs retrace the same path along her sides.

Her body responded again.

I did it once more just because I could.

“Ellis.”

I pulled her shirt over her head.

For a second, I just looked at her.

She didn’t cover herself or turn away. She stood there and let me, and that got to me more than I expected.

“You’re beautiful.”

Something soft passed over her face.

“Thank you.”

I kissed her before I could smile at how easily she accepted it.

Her fingers found the button of my jeans as I walked her backward toward the bed, but I caught her hand before she could get any farther.

“Not yet.”

“Ellis—”

My mouth found her neck.

Whatever she was about to say disappeared.

I took my time moving lower, learning her as I went. Every place that made her breathing change. Every touch that had her leaning into me instead of away.

By the time I eased her onto the mattress and settled between her thighs, her fingers were already sliding into my hair.

“Ellis.”

I looked up at her.

She held my gaze.

“Tell me what you want.”

Her fingers tightened slightly in my hair. “Don’t stop.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Her head fell back against the pillow when my mouth found her, and the first moan she gave me went straight through me.

I held her closer and kept going.

I paid attention as I learned her, but I didn’t assume that meant I knew everything she wanted. Her breathing got quicker when I found the right rhythm, her hips lifting when she wanted more. When my hand joined my mouth, her fingers tightened in my hair.

“Ellis.”

I didn’t stop.

The tension built through her until her thighs tightened around me and my name left her mouth louder than before.

Then her whole body went taut.

I stayed with her through it, holding her as she came until the grip in my hair finally loosened.

By the time I kissed my way back up her body, she was still breathing hard.

I smiled.

I smiled.

Her eyes narrowed.

I laughed, but she caught the back of my neck and pulled me down.

The kiss wiped the smile off my face.

Especially when her hand moved down my chest and slipped beneath the waistband of my jeans.

My breath caught.

Luna felt it.

Her mouth curved against mine.

“Don’t,” I warned.

“I didn’t say anything.”

Then her hand closed around me.

“Fuck.”

Her smile got wider.

I kissed her before she could enjoy that victory too much.

By the time I reached for my jeans, neither of us was laughing anymore.

I got rid of the rest of my clothes and reached for the condom.

When I moved over Luna again, her hands settled against my shoulders.

“You good?”

“Yes.”

I kissed her.

Then guided myself between her thighs.

Her breath caught when I pressed into her, and I slowed immediately, watching her face as I sank deeper.

Her fingers tightened against my shoulders.

I stopped. “Talk to me.”

“I’m okay.” She pulled me closer. “Keep going.”

She pulled me back to her mouth.

I pushed the rest of the way inside her, and the groan that left me got swallowed by her kiss.

For a second, I stayed there, just feeling her around me.

Then Luna moved beneath me.

My eyes closed.

I pulled back and sank into her again, her nails digging into my back. The sound she made stripped away another piece of my control.

I did it again, slow and deep, until her legs wrapped around my waist and she started meeting every stroke.

My hand found hers against the mattress, our fingers locking together as the rhythm between us built.

The careful pace I started with didn’t last. It couldn’t when she kept pulling me closer, when every stroke had her body rising to meet mine, when she said my name like that.

“Ellis.”

I buried my face against her neck.

“Fuck, Luna.”

Her nails dragged down my back as I drove into her again.

Harder this time.

Her legs tightened around me.

“Don’t stop.”

I didn’t.

The bed shifted beneath us as I moved faster, the room filling with broken breaths and the sounds neither of us was trying to hold back anymore.

I lifted my head and found Luna already looking at me.

For a second, everything else disappeared. There was only her beneath me, her hand locked with mine and the way she looked at me without an ounce of hesitation.

I kissed her.

Her breathing changed against my mouth.

I knew that sound now.

I kept the same pace, and Luna's fingers squeezed mine as the tension started building through her again.

"Ellis—"

"I got you."

Her body tightened around me.

My name broke from her lips as she came, her legs pulling me closer while I kept moving through it.

Watching her lose herself beneath me took the last of my control with it.

I pressed my forehead against hers, our hands still locked together as I followed her.

For a while, neither of us moved.

I wasn't sure I could if I tried.

Luna's breathing slowly evened beneath me.

Mine took longer.

Eventually, I lifted my head.

Her eyes opened.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

"You okay?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah." Her fingers moved along the back of my neck. "You?"

"Yeah."

Neither of us looked away.

"Good," I said.

Her mouth twitched.

Then she started laughing.

I stared at her. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You're laughing."

"I know."

"After I just—"

She put a hand over my mouth.

"Don't ruin it."

I laughed against her palm.

She was still smiling when I kissed it.

Somehow, that felt right.

I took care of the condom and gave her a minute while she disappeared into the bathroom.

When she came back, I was under the sheet, stretched across one side of her bed.

She stopped in the doorway.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That word is getting banned.”

She laughed and climbed in beside me.

I lifted my arm, and she came without me asking, settling against my chest as I pulled the sheet higher around us.

For a few minutes, neither of us said anything.

My hand moved slowly over her back while her fingertips traced along my chest.

Then she said, “I’m glad I called you.”

I smiled. “Me too.”

“I almost didn’t.”

“What changed your mind?”

She was quiet for a moment before she shrugged against me.

“I wanted to.”

The answer was simple.

She wanted something, so she asked for it.

I kissed the top of her head.

“Good enough reason.”

She tilted her face toward mine.

“I’m learning.”

I smiled and pulled her closer.

This time, when the quiet settled around us, neither of us tried to fill it.

OceanofPDF.com



THE FIRST THING I remembered when I woke up was his mouth on mine.

The second thing I remembered made me pull the sheet a little higher.

I closed my eyes again.

Lord.

For a few seconds, I lay there beneath the covers with last night coming back to me in pieces.

Ellis in my kitchen.

I want you.

His hand wrapped around mine.

The way he looked at me.

The way—

Okay.

I opened my eyes to morning light slipping through the gap in my curtains and falling across the end of the bed.

I stared at the ceiling for a second before a smile pulled at my mouth, then reached beside me.

My hand met an empty sheet.

The smile disappeared.

I turned my head, but Ellis wasn't there. His side of the bed was empty, the pillow no longer carrying the shape of his head, and when I looked

toward the floor, I realized his shirt and jeans were gone too.

Something dropped low in my stomach.

I reached for my phone on the nightstand.

8:14 a.m.

There was no message from him.

I unlocked my phone anyway and checked, as if one might somehow appear once I was looking for it.

Nothing.

For one stupid second, I sat there staring at the screen.

He left.

The thought came so quickly I didn't have time to stop it. Maybe he woke up early or didn't want to wake me. There were a dozen perfectly reasonable explanations, and somehow my mind skipped every one of them.

I threw the sheet back and reached for the T-shirt hanging over the chair beside my dresser.

This was ridiculous. Ellis didn't owe me some formal checkout procedure because he spent the night.

Except he wouldn't leave without saying anything.

Would he?

My chest tightened, and that irritated me more than anything. Last night was good. I wanted him here. I asked him to come.

And apparently waking up to an empty side of the bed was enough for my brain to start searching for what I got wrong.

I grabbed my shorts from the floor and stepped into them.

Then I heard something.

I stopped.

A cabinet closed somewhere down the hall.

I stared toward my bedroom door.

Another sound followed.

Then Ellis's voice.

"Where the hell does this woman keep her coffee?"

My eyes closed.

Relief came so fast that I almost laughed.

Almost.

Because now I felt stupid.

I stood there for a second with one hand pressed against my forehead.

He didn’t leave.

He was in my kitchen.

Of course he was in my kitchen.

I made my way down the hall, following the sound of another cabinet opening.

When I reached the kitchen, Ellis was standing in front of the cabinets wearing his jeans and absolutely no shirt.

My panic from thirty seconds ago disappeared beneath an entirely different problem.

I stopped in the doorway.

His back was to me, and I let myself look.

Just for a second.

Maybe two.

He closed one cabinet and opened another.

“Not in there either.”

I folded my arms.

“You know breaking into somebody’s cabinets is generally frowned upon.”

Ellis turned.

His face changed when he saw me.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

His eyes moved over me.

I suddenly became very aware that I probably looked exactly like somebody who woke up five minutes ago.

He smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That smile isn’t nothing.”

“I said good morning.”

“And then you looked at me like that.”

“Like what?”

I pointed toward the open cabinet.

“What are you looking for?”

“Coffee.”

“You could’ve asked.”

“You were asleep.”

“So you decided to search my kitchen?”

“I was trying to do something nice.”

“You opened the cabinet with the pots three times.”

His eyebrows pulled together.

“Three?”

“I heard you.”

“Then you could’ve saved me some time.”

I rolled my eyes and walked past him.

“The coffee is over here.”

I opened the cabinet beside the refrigerator.

Ellis looked at it.

Then at me.

“I was getting there.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I had two cabinets left.”

“There are six.”

“Exactly.”

I laughed despite myself and reached for the coffee.

Ellis leaned against the counter beside me.

For a moment, I didn’t look at him.

The panic from upstairs was already fading, but I could still feel how quickly my mind filled in the silence before I knew what was actually happening.

“You okay?”

I glanced at him.

“Yeah.”

His eyes stayed on me.

“You sure?”

There it was.

The chance to tell him I was fine and move on.

I almost took it.

Instead, I set the coffee on the counter.

“I thought you left.”

Ellis went still. “When?”

“When I woke up.”

His expression shifted, and for once, I didn’t have to search his face to figure out what he was thinking.

He understood.

“I wouldn’t leave without telling you.”

“I know.”

The embarrassing part was that I did.

But knowing something and trusting it before I had proof were apparently still two different things.

“I just…” I shook my head. “Your clothes were gone, and you weren’t there, and for a second I thought—”

“I left.”

“Yeah.”

He reached for me.

Nothing dramatic.

His hand settled against my hip and drew me a little closer.

“I was trying to make you coffee.”

“You don’t even know where I keep it.”

“I know that now.”

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it.

His mouth curved.

Then the teasing left his face.

“I didn’t leave.”

I looked at him.

“I know.”

His thumb moved across the back of my hand.

And this time, I let myself believe it without looking for something else.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

I smiled.

“I’m learning.”

“There she is.”

“Don’t push it.”

He laughed and kissed my forehead before reaching around me for the coffee.

“So how does this thing work?”

I stared at him.

“The coffee maker?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re thirty-four years old.”

“I have a different one.”

“It’s a coffee maker, Ellis.”

“And yet I’m still standing here without coffee.”

I shook my head.

“Move.”

He stepped aside.

“Bossy.”

“You came into my kitchen.”

“And look where it got me.”

I started measuring the coffee while he watched.

His phone buzzed on the counter a few minutes later.

Tasha.

He reached for it and smiled almost immediately.

“What?”

He turned the screen toward me.

Mila and Jacob were sitting at a table with plates of pancakes in front of them. Mila was grinning at the camera with a piece of bacon in one hand.

I smiled.

“They look like they’re having fun.”

“Apparently they’re going somewhere after this too.”

“Where?”

“No idea. Tasha said she’d bring her back around two.”

I glanced at the clock.

A little after eight-thirty.

For some reason, knowing we had hours before he needed to be anywhere made the morning stretch differently in front of me.

Ellis set his phone down.

“What are you doing today?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Going into Chapter & Charm?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“A whole day away?”

He looked at me. “I do take days off.”

“Sure.”

“I do.”

“I believe you.”

“So come with us later.”

I looked at him. “With you and Mila?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“I’m taking her to the park, then she’s already informed me we’re getting ice cream.”

“She informed you?”

“Apparently I agreed to it yesterday.”

I smiled. “Sounds official.”

“Very. Come with us.”

“With you and Mila?”

“You already asked me that.”

“I’m making sure.”

“I’m still saying yes.”

The question rose before I could stop it.

“Are you sure?”

Ellis looked at me.

I already knew the answer in his face.

“How many times do I have to invite you before you believe me?”

I reached for my mug.

“Yeah. I’ll come.”

His smile softened. “Okay.”

And just like that, the conversation moved on.

Just coffee on a Saturday morning and plans for later.

Twenty minutes ago, I woke up and touched an empty side of the bed and convinced myself it meant he’d gone.

Now Ellis was standing barefoot in my kitchen, complaining because I wouldn’t let him pour half the sugar bowl into his coffee, and asking me to spend the rest of the day with him and his daughter.

Maybe learning didn’t always mean the fear stopped showing up.

Maybe it meant I stopped letting it answer for me.



BY THE TIME I pulled up in front of Ellis's house, it was almost two-thirty.

I grabbed my bag from the passenger seat and got out. I was halfway up the walkway when the front door opened.

Mila appeared first.

"Miss Luna!"

I barely had time to smile before she ran toward me and wrapped both arms around my waist.

"Hey, girl."

"I went bowling."

"I heard you had plans with Auntie and Jacob."

"I got a strike."

Ellis appeared in the doorway.

"She got a spare."

Mila turned around. "It was almost a strike."

"That's not how bowling works."

"I knocked all of them down."

"After you got a second turn."

She looked up at me. "He's being technical."

"Sounds like it."

I looked at him.

And immediately remembered this morning.

Which made me remember last night.

Not where my mind needed to be while his six-year-old was still holding my hand.

Ellis's mouth twitched.

I narrowed my eyes.

He knew.

Of course he knew.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"I saw you this morning."

"You could've kept that part to yourself."

Mila looked between us. "You did?"

"Your daddy came over for coffee."

Not technically a lie.

Ellis coughed.

I dared him with my eyes to say anything else.

Mila accepted the answer immediately.

“Can we get pizza?”

I blinked. “That was a quick subject change.”

“I told her she could help pick lunch,” Ellis said.

“Pizza sounds good to me.”

Mila smiled.

Ellis shook his head. “Two against one already.”

“You invited me.”

“Starting to question that decision.”

“No, you’re not.”

His eyes met mine.

“No,” he said. “I’m not.”

The words landed differently than they should.

Maybe because of this morning.

Maybe because I was still learning how often Ellis said exactly what he meant and left me to decide whether I was going to believe him.

This time, I did.

By the time we finished lunch, Mila had informed me that pineapple on pizza should be illegal, Ellis had judged me for leaving part of my crust on my plate, and I’d somehow agreed to accompany them to Target.

According to Ellis, we only needed three things.

According to Mila, that meant nothing.

She proved herself right before we made it halfway through the store.

“Daddy.”

“No.”

“You didn’t even look.”

“I know that voice.”

Mila held up a water bottle covered in sunflowers.

“I need this.”

“You have four water bottles.”

“This one has flowers.”

“So does one of the four you already have.”

“Those are daisies.”

I looked at the bottle.

Then at Ellis.

“She has a point.”

His head turned slowly toward me.

“Whose side are you on?”

“I didn’t realize there were sides.”

“There are always sides.”

Mila smiled at me.

Ellis took the bottle from her and put it back on the shelf.

“No.”

She sighed like this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

I managed not to laugh until Ellis turned away.

Twenty minutes later, we were standing at the register when he looked into one of the bags.

“What are those?”

I suddenly became very interested in the card reader.

He pulled out a pack of glitter pens.

“Luna.”

“They were four dollars.”

Mila smiled beside me.

Ellis shook his head. “I’ve lost control of this entire situation.”

“You never had it.”

The cashier laughed as she handed him the receipt.

Mila grabbed the bag with her pens while Ellis took the others.

I reached for one, but he moved it away.

“I got it.”

“I can carry a bag.”

“I know.”

There was that answer again.

Not *you don’t need to.*

Not *let me.*

Just *I know.*

I let him carry it.

Outside, Mila walked a few steps ahead of us, already talking about what she was going to draw when she got home.

Ellis reached for my hand.

His fingers slid between mine like they’d done it a hundred times.

I didn’t look down this time.

I just held on.

For a second, I wondered what we looked like to everybody else.

Probably nothing remarkable. Two adults walking through a parking lot while a little girl skipped ahead of them, swinging a bag of glitter pens she absolutely did not need.

Just something ordinary.

The thought didn’t scare me.

By the time we got back to Ellis’s house, it was after five.

Mila disappeared into the living room with her glitter pens almost immediately.

“You undermined me,” Ellis said as the front door closed.

“She’s happy.”

“She was already happy.”

“Now she’s glitter-pen happy.”

“That is not a thing.”

“It is now.”

He shook his head and carried the bags into the kitchen.

I followed him and started putting things away.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know.”

The words came out before I thought about them.

Ellis looked at me.

I paused with the toothpaste still in my hand.

Then I smiled.

“See?”

His mouth curved.

“Learning.”

He took the toothpaste from me and pointed down the hall.

“Bathroom.”

“I knew that.”

“Sure.”

I left him in the kitchen and carried it down the hall.

I’d been here enough now that I didn’t have to ask which door to open.

That thought stayed with me as I headed back toward the living room.

Mila was sitting on the floor at the coffee table, already testing every color in the pack.

“You missed one.”

She looked up. “What?”

I pointed toward the silver pen near her elbow.

“Oh.”

She grabbed it.

I smiled and turned.

That was when the photograph caught my attention.

I’d seen pictures of Elena before. Ellis had never hidden her.

But this one made me stop.

It sat on the shelf beside a framed picture of Mila. Elena was outside, laughing at something beyond the camera, her head tilted back slightly.

The picture didn’t look posed.

It looked caught.

There was something familiar about that.

The light.

The angle.

The way whoever took it waited until she stopped paying attention to the camera.

“Daddy took that.”

I glanced toward Mila.

She was still coloring.

“That one?”

She nodded. “She didn’t know.”

Of course she didn’t.

I heard Ellis come into the room behind me.

“You took this?”

His eyes moved to the photograph.

“Yeah.”

“She didn’t know?”

A smile touched his mouth.

“Not until after.”

I looked at it again.

“She looks happy.”

“She was.”

No hesitation.

Just truth.

“What was she laughing at?”

“Me.”

I turned toward him. “You?”

“I fell.”

A laugh slipped out of me.

“You fell?”

“Almost.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It is when somebody gets a picture of you halfway to the ground.”

“Where’s that picture?”

“Deleted.”

“Convenient.”

“Very.”

I looked back at Elena.

Now I could almost see the moment around the photograph.

Ellis behind the camera.

Elena laughing at him.

A life that existed long before I knew either of their names.

“It’s a good picture.”

“One of my favorites.”

I nodded.

And that was all.

I looked back at Elena.

He didn’t explain why the photograph was still here.

I didn’t need him to.

Elena was still here. In photographs. In Mila. In a story about Ellis almost falling while holding a camera.

And somehow, I didn’t feel like I was standing in her place.

I was standing in mine.

Ellis reached for my hand, his fingers sliding between mine without explanation or reassurance I had to ask for.

Just his hand around mine while Elena’s photograph stayed exactly where it belonged.

“Miss Luna.”

I turned.

Mila was holding up a piece of paper.

“Come see.”

“What’d you make?”

“You.”

I squeezed Ellis’s hand once before letting go.

Then I walked toward her.

I didn’t know exactly what I was becoming in their lives.
I didn’t think I needed to yet.
For now, I was here.
And for the first time, that felt like enough.

OceanofPDF.com



“YOU CHEATED.”

“I did not.”

“You absolutely did.”

Mila looked up from the Uno cards in her hand like I’d personally offended her. “How?”

“You put down two Draw Twos.”

“They were the same color.”

“That is not how Uno works.”

“It is at Auntie’s house.”

I looked across the kitchen table at Tasha.

She didn’t even bother looking up from her phone. “Leave me out of it.”

“You taught her this.”

“I taught her how to win.”

“You taught her how to cheat.”

Mila gasped.

I pointed at her. “Don’t act surprised. You know what you did.”

“I’m six.”

“That’s not a defense.”

“It should be,” Tasha said.

I shook my head and reached for the four cards Mila had decided I owed her anyway.

Sunday afternoons at Tasha’s had always been like this.

Too much food even when nobody asked her to cook. Mila and Jacob arguing over something neither of them would remember tomorrow. A television playing somewhere in the house with nobody actually watching it.

Normal.

Jacob had disappeared into his room almost twenty minutes ago after deciding Uno was boring, which I was pretty sure had more to do with him losing twice than the game itself.

My phone buzzed against the table.

I glanced at it.

I found glitter on my couch.

A smile pulled at my mouth before I could stop it.

Sounds personal.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Your child brought those pens into my life.

You bought them.

Under duress.

Nobody forced you.

I was manipulated by a six-year-old.

I laughed under my breath.

“Daddy.”

I looked up.

Mila was watching me.

“What?”

“It’s your turn.”

“I know.”

“You’re texting Miss Luna.”

I looked at my phone.

Then at her.

“That doesn’t mean I forgot the game.”

“You did.”

“I did not.”
“You’ve been holding the same card.”
I put it down.
“Happy?”
She looked at it.
“You can’t play that.”
I looked down.
Wrong color.
Tasha laughed.
I pointed at her. “Not a word.”
Mila reached toward the pile. “Draw.”
“This whole house is against me.”
My phone buzzed again.
Luna: Tell Mila I found one of her glitter pens in my bag too.
I glanced toward her.
“Luna says you left one of your pens in her bag.”
Mila’s eyes widened.
“The purple one?”
“She didn’t say.”
“Ask her.”
“You ask her later.”
Tasha laughed again.
I looked at her.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
There was something in the way she said it that told me it was absolutely something.
I ignored her.
Ten minutes later, Mila won.
I was still not convinced legally.
She gathered the cards before running toward the hallway.
“I’m gonna tell Jacob I won.”
“Tell him how.”
“I won!”
“That’s not what I said.”
She disappeared.
I started collecting the cards she left scattered across the table.

Tasha waited until we heard Jacob’s door open down the hall.

“So.”

I kept stacking the Uno cards. “Say whatever you’re going to say.”

She set her phone down.

“I like Luna.”

I blinked. “That’s what all this was for?”

“No. I’m starting there.”

“Of course you are.”

“She’s good with Mila.”

“She is.”

“And Mila loves her.”

“I know.”

I squared the edges of the deck against the table, even though they were already lined up.

“And you—”

“Careful.”

Tasha laughed. “See? That right there.”

“What?”

“You know exactly what I’m about to say.”

“I know you’re nosy.”

“I am. But I’m also right.”

“About?”

“You really like her.”

I looked toward the hallway.

Mila and Jacob were arguing about something now. I couldn’t make out the words, but judging by Mila’s volume, she was losing.

“Yeah.”

Tasha went quiet.

I looked back at her.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You wanted an answer.”

“I know.”

“And I gave you one.”

“You did.”

“So why are you looking at me like that?”

She shrugged.

“Because you said it.”

“I’ve never said I didn’t like her.”

“No, but you usually give me twelve other words before you answer the question.”

I laughed. “That’s not true.”

“It absolutely is.”

I reached for my water.

Tasha watched me for another second before something in her expression changed. Not serious exactly, just quieter.

“You look like yourself again.”

My hand stilled around the bottle. “What does that mean?”

“It means what I said.”

“I’ve been myself.”

“I know.” She leaned back in her chair. “I’m not saying you haven’t.”

“Sounds like you are.”

“No.” She paused. “You’ve been good, Ellis.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You’ve been taking care of Mila. Working. Doing your little pictures.”

“My little pictures pay my bills.”

“You know what I mean.”

I did.

She looked toward the hallway before continuing. “You’ve been good, Ellis. You built a life. A good one.”

“Okay.”

“But for a long time, that was enough for you.”

I looked at her. “It was supposed to be.”

The words came out before I decided whether I wanted to say them.

Tasha’s face softened, and I looked down at the bottle in my hand.

After Elena died, *enough* became a word I used a lot.

Mila was enough. My work was enough. Family was enough. The house, the routines, school pickups and editing pictures after Mila went to sleep.

None of it was a lie.

I loved my daughter more than anything in this world. I loved what I did. I loved the life I managed to build after losing one I thought I’d have forever.

But somewhere along the way, I stopped asking whether I wanted anything else.

Tasha tapped one finger against the table.

“That’s all I’m saying.”

I looked at her.

“You said a lot more than that.”

“I usually do.”

“That I agree with.”

She smiled.

Then she shrugged.

“You just seem open again.”

“Open?”

“To something you weren’t before.”

I didn’t need her to say Luna’s name.

I looked toward my phone.

The last message was still sitting there.

I was manipulated by a six-year-old.

Mila came running back into the kitchen.

“Daddy, can we stay for dinner?”

I glanced at the clock.

It wasn’t even four.

“You already ate lunch here.”

“So?”

“So Auntie doesn’t have to feed us every meal.”

Tasha looked up from her phone. “I made spaghetti.”

Mila turned toward me.

I closed my eyes.

“Why would you tell her that?”

“Because I made spaghetti.”

“Can we stay?”

I looked at Mila.

She gave me the face.

The one she thought worked because, unfortunately, it usually did.

“Fine.”

“Yes!”

She took off again.

Tasha smiled.

“You’re weak.”

“Mind your business.”

“I’ve been trying.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“True.”

I shook my head.

Her words stayed with me.

You seem open again.

Maybe there wasn’t one moment. Maybe it happened slowly enough that I didn’t notice until Luna was already part of Mila’s drawings and Saturday afternoons.



BY THE TIME Mila and I got home, she was halfway asleep.

She insisted she wasn’t.

Then she fell asleep while I was helping her get ready for bed.

I got her under the covers, turned on the night-light she claimed she didn’t need anymore but complained about whenever I forgot, and pulled her door mostly closed behind me.

The house went quiet.

I headed downstairs.

There was an Uno card sitting on the coffee table.

Yellow seven.

I picked it up.

“Cheater.”

I’d make her return it next time.

Probably.

I dropped onto the couch and reached for my phone.

There was a message from Luna from almost an hour ago.

Purple. Tell the criminal I found the purple one.

I smiled.

She’s asleep. Justice will be served tomorrow.

Her response came a minute later.

Thank you. I deserve peace.

You bought the pens.

Why are you committed to blaming the victim?

I laughed.

Then I sat there looking at her name.

Tasha’s words came back.

I didn’t know if I looked more like myself.

I didn’t even know what that meant.

But I knew something had changed.

A month ago, my evenings looked exactly like this. Mila asleep upstairs. A quiet house. Work waiting if I wanted it.

I never thought anything was missing.

That was the part I kept coming back to. Luna didn’t walk into an empty space I’d been waiting for somebody to fill. I had a life before her. I still did.

Somehow, she’d simply become part of the way I thought about things. I saw something Mila would like and wondered what Luna would say. Saturday came up and I accounted for her without realizing I’d done it, not because I had to, but because I wanted to.

Maybe that was what Tasha saw.

It wasn’t that Luna made me myself again. I never stopped being me.

I just stopped imagining that this part of me would have somewhere to go.

My phone was still in my hand.

I opened our messages.

You busy?

The typing bubble appeared.

Depends.

I smiled.

Thief.

I adapted it.

That's still stealing.

Prove it.

I shook my head.
Then typed what I meant to ask in the first place.

Come over.

There was a pause.
Long enough that I wondered if she was already settled in for the night.
Then—

Why?

I looked around the living room.
There was no reason I needed her here.
I just wanted her here.
My thumb moved across the screen.

Because I want to see you.

The message delivered.

Okay.

That was it.
I leaned back against the couch, a smile pulling at my mouth.
Maybe she wasn't the only one learning.
For the first time in a long time, wanting something didn't make me wonder whether I should.
I just let myself want it.

OceanofPDF.com



“NO, MAMA.”

“I’m just saying.”

“And I’m just saying you made that two Sundays ago.”

Mrs. Williams set two books on the counter in front of me, and I smiled as I reached for the first one.

“Hold on, Mama.”

I lowered the phone from my ear.

“Did you find everything?”

“And then some.” Mrs. Williams glanced toward the small stack in her hands. “I came in here for one book.”

“You say that every time.”

“Because every time I mean it.”

I laughed and scanned the second book.

Chapter & Charm was quiet enough that I could hear the soft music playing from the speakers near the front windows. There were only two customers left in the store, both regulars, and one of them had been standing in the mystery section long enough that I already knew he was leaving with something.

Naomi had left almost forty minutes ago after asking me twice if I was sure I didn’t need her to stay.

I didn’t.

Tuesday evenings were usually slow.

Besides, I'd closed this store alone more times than I could count.

"$28.64"

Mrs. Williams tapped her card against the reader.

Mama's voice came faintly through my phone.

"Who is that?"

I picked it back up.

"Mrs. Williams."

"Tell her I said hey."

"Mama says hey."

Mrs. Williams smiled. "Tell her I said she still owes me that pound cake recipe."

"You hear that?"

"I heard her. Tell her she's not getting it."

I shook my head.

"She said—"

"I heard her too," Mrs. Williams said, laughing.

"Good, because I wasn't about to repeat it."

I handed over her bag.

"You have a good night."

"You too, baby."

She headed toward the door as I picked my phone back up.

"See? This is why I don't put you on speaker."

"Didn't nobody tell you to."

"You were yelling."

"I was talking."

"Same thing."

Mama ignored that.

"Anyway, I don't know what else you expect me to cook."

"Something besides baked chicken."

"Your daddy likes baked chicken."

"Daddy likes anything you put on a plate."

"Exactly. Makes my life easier."

I smiled and started straightening the bookmarks beside the register.

The bell above the door chimed.

"Have a good night, Mrs. Williams."

"You too, Luna."

One customer left.

I glanced toward the clock.

7:53 p.m.

Seven minutes until close.

Mr. Martin finally made his way toward the counter with a paperback in his hand.

Knew it.

“Hold on again.”

“You’re supposed to be working.”

“I am working.”

I set the phone beside the register and checked him out.

By the time he left, the clock read 7:58.

I locked the door behind him, flipped the sign to CLOSED, and picked my phone back up.

“All right. I’m yours.”

“Finally.”

“You called me at work.”

“And you answered.”

“Because I love you.”

“As you should.”

I laughed and walked from behind the counter.

I started the usual closing routine with the phone tucked between my shoulder and ear. Straightened the display near the entrance. Picked up a coffee cup somebody left on one of the tables. Pushed in two chairs.

Mama had moved on from Sunday dinner to telling me about somebody from church whose name I vaguely recognized.

I made the appropriate sounds in the appropriate places.

Then she said, “Oh, before I forget.”

“Hmm?”

“Lucas reached out to me.”

My hand stopped on the back of a chair.

For a second, I thought I heard her wrong.

“What?”

“Lucas.”

I straightened slowly.

The store suddenly felt quieter.

“What about him?”

“He reached out to me.”

I didn’t say anything.

My fingers tightened around the phone.

Five years since I stood outside his apartment waiting for him to come home.

Five years since I finally walked away.

Apparently my body still knew his name before the rest of me decided what to do with it.

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

Yesterday.

I looked toward the dark windows at the front of the store.

“And you’re just telling me?”

“I wasn’t sure there was anything to tell.”

“Then why are you telling me now?”

Mama was quiet for a second.

“Because I didn’t want you finding out some other way and wondering why I kept it from you.”

I pressed my lips together.

Fair.

“What did he want?”

“Asked how you were doing.”

A laugh left me, but there was nothing funny in it.

“Five years later?”

“I know.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

I started walking again because standing still somehow made the conversation feel heavier.

I picked up another chair.

Pushed it beneath the table.

Straightened a stack of books that didn’t need straightening.

“What did you tell him?”

“That if he wanted to know how you were doing, he should’ve cared more about that when he had you.”

I stopped.

“Mama.”

“What?”
Despite myself, a laugh slipped out.
“You really said that?”
“I did.”
“Oh my God.”
“He asked me a question. I answered.”
“That was not an answer.”
“It was mine.”
I shook my head, but some of the tightness in my chest eased.
“What else did you say?”
“That you’re doing well.”
“That’s it?”
“That’s it.”
I waited.
Something in her pause caught my attention.
“Mama.”
“What?”
“What else did he ask?”
She sighed.
I closed my eyes.
“Mama.”
“He asked if you were seeing anybody.”
My eyes opened.
For some reason, that landed differently.
“What did you tell him?”
“Nothing.”
“Nothing?”
“I told him that wasn’t my business to share.”
I leaned against the edge of one of the tables.
“He asked if I was seeing somebody?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“You’d have to ask him.”
“I’m not asking him anything.”
“Then don’t.”
“Did you give him my number?”
“Luna Bennett.”

“I had to ask.”

“No, you did not.”

I smiled a little.

“No. I didn’t give that man anything that belonged to you.”

The way she said it made my throat tighten.

“Okay.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

And I was.

I wasn’t sad. I wasn’t tempted to call him or wondering what could have been. If anything, I was irritated that his name could still walk into my evening without permission and rearrange something inside me.

Five years ago, I would’ve given anything for Lucas to care enough to ask where I was.

Whether I was okay.

Whether somebody else had me.

Now he finally did.

And I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with the fact that it didn’t feel anything like I once imagined it would.

“You sure?” Mama asked.

“I’m sure.”

“All right.”

There was another pause.

Then, softer, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“And don’t let this mess up your night.”

“It won’t.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know.”

“I raised you better than to let some man who couldn’t act right five years ago ruin a perfectly good Tuesday.”

I laughed.

“There she is.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know.”

We talked for another minute before hanging up, and the store went completely quiet.

I stood beside the table with my phone still in my hand.

Lucas asked about me.

I waited for that sentence to become something bigger.

It didn’t.

Then another thought came.

Because I want to see you.

Ellis.

Sunday night. No reason attached to it, no explanation for why I needed to come over.

For your next romance novel.

Visit Lokepub and find a story to read.

He wanted me there, so he asked.

And I went.

I looked down at my phone.

For years, I thought the hardest part of leaving Lucas was accepting that he hadn’t chosen me the way I kept choosing him.

Maybe I was wrong.

Because even now, after Ellis had done nothing but show me otherwise, I could wake up to an empty bed and decide he was gone before I ever left the room.

I closed my eyes as the answer settled in.

It wasn’t Lucas. Not really.

It was what he left behind.

Some part of me was still living by rules I learned while loving him.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

I looked down.

Ellis: You home yet?

I stared at the message.

Then laughed softly.

Of course.
I typed back.

Still at the store. Just locked up.

His response came almost immediately.

By yourself?

I smiled.

Naomi left earlier.

Three dots appeared.

Call me when you leave.

There were a dozen ways I could answer.
Why?
I'm fine.
You don't have to wait up.
Instead, I typed the simplest one.

Okay.

Lucas asked about me yesterday. Ellis asked me to call when I left tonight.

One of those things would've meant everything to me five years ago. The other meant more to me now.

Maybe that was all I needed to know.

I put my phone down and finished closing.

It took another fifteen minutes to count the register, make sure everything was where it needed to be for tomorrow, and check the back door twice even though I knew I locked it the first time. By the time I switched off the last light and stepped outside, most of the businesses along the block had already gone dark.

I locked the door behind me and started toward my car.

My phone was halfway out of my bag before I remembered I told Ellis I'd call.

Or maybe I hadn't forgotten at all.

I tapped his name.

He answered before the second ring finished.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You leaving?”

“Walking to my car now.”

“Good.”

I smiled as I unlocked the door. “Were you waiting?”

“I told you to call.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“It was enough of an answer.”

I laughed as I slid behind the wheel and set my bag on the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?”

“Editing.”

“This late?”

“It’s not that late.”

“It’s almost nine.”

“Exactly.”

“That means nothing.”

“It means it’s almost nine.”

I shook my head as I started the car. “Where’s Mila?”

“Asleep.”

“Already?”

“She had a long day.”

“She’s six. Going to school is a long day.”

“You tell her that. According to her, first grade is very demanding.”

I laughed as I pulled my seat belt across my chest.

For a minute, he told me about whatever happened at school that apparently required Mila to spend fifteen minutes explaining why somebody named Caleb was no longer allowed to borrow her crayons. By the time he got to the part where she made him promise not to tell anybody, I was pulling out of the parking lot.

“Wait. If she told you not to tell anybody, why are you telling me?”

“You don’t count.”

“I don’t know if I should be offended.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Very convincing.”

“You know what I mean.”

I did.

The smile stayed on my face as I turned at the light.

There was an ease to talking to him that I’d stopped questioning somewhere along the way. Maybe I should’ve noticed when forty-minute phone calls stopped surprising me or when seeing his name on my screen started feeling less like an interruption and more like part of my day.

Tonight, I was grateful for it.

I didn’t need the distraction. I just liked talking to him.

“Can I tell you something?”

“Always.”

I hesitated, but only for a second.

“Lucas reached out to my mama.”

The silence on the other end was brief.

“When?”

“Yesterday. She told me tonight.”

“What did he want?”

“He asked how I was doing.” I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel. “And whether I was seeing anybody.”

“Did she tell him?”

“No.”

“Good.”

I glanced at the empty road ahead of me. “She told him if he wanted to know how I was doing, he should’ve cared more about that when he had me.”

Ellis laughed, the sound warm through the speaker.

“Your mama said that?”

“Word for word.”

“I knew I liked her.”

“You’ve met her once.”

“Didn’t take long.”

I laughed.

He let a few seconds pass before asking, “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

And I was.

It didn’t take me several minutes to decide. I didn’t have to search myself for some hidden feeling that might prove otherwise.

“He caught me off guard,” I admitted. “Hearing his name after all this time was weird.”

“I can imagine.”

“But I’m okay.”

“All right.”

For a few seconds, all I heard was the low hum of the road beneath my tires.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Trying to finish these edits.”

“Trying?”

“Mila decided she needed water three times before she went to sleep.”

I smiled. “Maybe she was thirsty.”

“She wasn’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I watched her take one sip and put the glass down.”

“That was still a sip.”

“Luna.”

I laughed as I turned onto the next street. “I’m just saying.”

“She also needed me to check under her bed.”

“For monsters?”

“For a sock.”

“A sock?”

“She lost it yesterday.”

The conversation moved on without either of us making a decision for it to. He told me about the edits he was trying to finish, and I told him about Naomi nearly ordering twice as many copies of a new release as we had space to display because she insisted they’d sell. Somewhere in between, Ellis asked what time I was going into the store tomorrow, and I told him earlier than I wanted to.

Normal things.

By the time I turned onto my street, Lucas’s name hadn’t come up again.

I noticed that more than I expected to.

Not because I was trying not to think about him. That was what felt different. There wasn’t anything I had to push away or talk myself out of. Mama told me he reached out, I let myself feel whatever came with hearing

that, and now I was driving home talking to Ellis about whether Mila actually lost a sock or hid it somewhere and forgot.

My life kept moving.

So did I.

I pulled into my driveway and put the car in park.

"I'm home."

"You inside?"

"I just pulled up."

"So no."

I smiled. "I'm getting out."

I grabbed my bag and climbed from the car, carrying the phone with me as I made my way toward the house.

"You can go back to your edits now."

"You dismissing me?"

"You said you were trying to finish."

"I was."

"And then I called."

"And I answered."

I unlocked my front door and stepped inside. "Goodnight, Ellis."

He laughed softly. "Goodnight, Luna."

I ended the call and set my phone on the table beside my bag.

The house was quiet, exactly the way I left it that morning. I kicked off my shoes and carried them toward my bedroom, already thinking about the shower I was going to take and whether I had enough energy to find something to eat afterward.

Tomorrow, I'd get up and go to Chapter & Charm. There would be orders to check and customers who needed something and at least one thing Naomi swore she told me about that I wouldn't remember her mentioning.

And after that, there would be another day.

One thing at a time.

The thought settled as easily as it always had. Only tonight, I didn't need it to pull me through anything.

I thought about the life waiting for me tomorrow, and for the first time in a long time, taking it one thing at a time didn't feel like surviving.

It just felt like living.

OceanofPDF.com



MILA HAD BEEN in and out of the kitchen three times in the last ten minutes.

The first time, she needed juice.

The second time, she couldn't find her other sock.

Now she was standing beside the table with said sock balled up in one hand, watching me pack her lunch.

"Daddy?"

"What?"

"Is Miss Luna my new mommy?"

My hand stilled over the container of strawberries.

I turned around.

Mila was standing exactly where she was a second ago, waiting for an answer like she'd asked whether I remembered to pack her juice.

"Why would you ask me that?"

She shrugged.

"Mila."

"Ava said."

Of course she did.

I set the container down. "Ava said what?"

"That if you get a girlfriend, she can be my new mommy."

I leaned back against the counter.

“And why was Ava talking about me having a girlfriend?”

“She wasn’t.”

“Then how did we get here?”

Mila looked down at the sock in her hand.

“She said her mama has a boyfriend now.”

“Okay.”

“And I said you have Miss Luna.”

I looked at her.

She looked back at me.

There were at least three different conversations buried somewhere in that sentence, and we had less than fifteen minutes before I needed to get her out the door.

I pulled out the chair across from her.

“Come here, Bug.”

She climbed into it, setting the sock beside her plate.

I sat across from her.

“Miss Luna isn’t your new mommy.”

“Oh.”

The disappointment in her voice was small, but I heard it.

“You already have a mommy.”

Her eyes dropped to the waffle left on her plate.

“Mommy’s in heaven.”

“I know.”

I reached across the table and took her hand.

“That doesn’t change who she is to you. Mommy will always be your mommy.”

Mila nodded.

“But that doesn’t mean Miss Luna can’t be special to you too.”

Her eyes lifted back to mine.

“Like what?”

“Like Miss Luna.”

Her nose wrinkled.

“That’s it?”

I smiled. “What’s wrong with being Miss Luna?”

“Nothing.”

“You love spending time with her, right?”

She nodded.

“And she loves spending time with you.”

Another nod.

“Then you don’t have to figure out another name for it.”

She thought about that for a second before reaching for her waffle.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

I squeezed her hand before letting go.

She took a bite, apparently satisfied enough to move on.

I should’ve known better.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

I closed my eyes.

Mila giggled.

“There it is.”

“What?”

“The real question.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“It was somewhere in there.”

She shook her head, still smiling.

I got up and carried her lunch bag back to the counter.

“Put your sock on.”

“You didn’t answer.”

“You have one sock on.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with Miss Luna.”

“It has everything to do with us leaving this house on time.”

“Daddy.”

“Sock.”

She let out a dramatic sigh but finally reached for it.

I turned back to the counter before she could see me smile.

The question followed me anyway.

Not the first one. I knew the answer to that.

Luna wasn’t replacing Elena. She never could, and I’d never wanted her to. Mila loving Luna didn’t take anything away from the mother she lost, just like the life we were building now didn’t erase the one we had before.

There was room for both.

The second question should’ve been easier.

Is she your girlfriend?

I knew what Luna was to me.

I knew what it meant when I reached for my phone because something happened and she was the person I wanted to tell. I knew what it meant when Mila asked if Luna was coming before I'd even told her what we were doing. I knew what it meant when I was standing in Luna's kitchen or she was sitting on my couch and neither one of us acted like there was somewhere else we were supposed to be.

I knew what it meant when I kissed her, when I woke up thinking about her, when she called and I answered without checking what I was doing first.

I knew what we were doing.

Apparently, I'd just never asked what we were calling it.

"Daddy?"

I glanced over my shoulder.

Both socks were finally on.

"What?"

"You're taking too long."

"To do what?"

"Answer."

I laughed. "Get your backpack."

She slid out of the chair.

"That means yes."

"That means get your backpack."

She ran toward the living room before I could say anything else.

My phone buzzed against the counter.

I glanced down.

Luna.

The timing made me laugh.

I blame you.

Good morning to you too.

The typing bubble appeared.

I woke up wanting pancakes.

I smiled.

Sounds personal.

You made them ONE TIME.

And changed your life apparently.

Relax.

You brought it up.

This is why I don’t compliment you.

That was a compliment?

There was a pause before her response came through.

Goodbye Ellis.

I laughed and set the phone down.

“Was that Miss Luna?”

I looked toward the doorway.

Mila was standing there with her backpack hanging from one shoulder.

“You are entirely too invested in my phone.”

“You were smiling.”

“I smile every day.”

She stared at me.

I stared back.

Then her eyes narrowed.

“Miss Luna says that.”

I laughed before I could stop myself.

“She does.”

“So it was her?”

“Get your jacket.”

She grinned and ran toward the hook by the door.

I grabbed my keys and followed her.

Apparently, I had two people in my life who didn’t know how to mind their business.

One of them was six.

The other one owned a bookstore.

And according to my daughter, I needed to figure out whether she was my girlfriend.

The question followed me all the way from Mila’s school to the studio, even though I told myself more than once that I wasn’t thinking about it.

By the time I unlocked the door and settled behind my desk, I'd managed to push it far enough to the back of my mind to get some work done.

The rest of my morning went the way most of them did. I answered emails, finished edits from a family session, sent off a gallery, then spent twenty minutes trying to figure out why a client's download link wasn't working only to realize she'd copied it wrong.

Then my phone rang.

Luna.

I answered and put her on speaker while I kept working.

"Hey."

"What are you doing later?"

No hello.

No lead-in.

I smiled. "Why?"

"I asked you first."

"I'm working right now."

"I said later."

"I have to pick Mila up."

"And after that?"

I leaned back in my chair.

"Nothing."

"Come over."

I glanced at the phone.

"You asking me to come over?"

"That's what I said, Ellis."

"I'm making sure."

"You want me to change my mind?"

"Nope."

"Then stop asking questions."

I laughed. "What time?"

"Whenever. I'm leaving the store around six."

"All right."

"And bring Mila."

"I wasn't leaving my child at home, Luna."

"You know what I meant."

"I don't."

“You’re irritating.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Six, Ellis.”

“We’ll be there.”

She hung up before I could say anything else.

I looked at my phone for a second before setting it back beside my keyboard.

No reason.

No plans attached to it.

She wanted to see me, so she asked.

Simple as that.

I turned back to my computer.

Maybe Mila wasn’t the only one who already knew what this was.



MILA WAS out of the truck before I finished telling her to wait for me.

“Slow down.”

“I am.”

“You’re halfway to the door.”

She stopped on Luna’s walkway and turned around like that somehow proved her point.

“I’m waiting.”

“Now.”

She smiled.

By the time I caught up with her, she was already reaching for the doorbell.

“Once.”

“I know.”

“You pressed it twice last time.”

“That was an accident.”

“Sure.”

The door opened before she got the chance.

“Hi, Miss Luna.”

Luna smiled as soon as she saw her. “Hey, sweet girl.”

Mila slipped past her like she lived there.

Luna looked after her. “Come on in, I guess.”

“You invited her.”

“I invited both of you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

She stepped aside to let me in.

“You want me to hug you too?”

“I didn’t say all that.”

“Then quit complaining.”

I laughed and leaned down to kiss her.

Her hand settled against my chest, and when I pulled back, she looked up at me.

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

“Better?”

“A little.”

She rolled her eyes and closed the door behind me.

Mila was already in the living room, kicking off her shoes beside the couch.

“Can I watch TV?”

“Ask your daddy.”

She turned to me.

“You heard her.”

“Can I?”

“Yeah.”

She grabbed the remote.

Luna headed toward the kitchen, and I followed her.

“What are we eating?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Who said I was feeding you?”

“You told me to come over at six.”

“And?”

“And that’s dinner time.”

“That sounds like poor planning on your part.”

I stopped beside the counter.

“You ate?”

“No.”

“Then why are we doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Pretending you didn’t invite me over because you wanted me to feed you.”

Her mouth twitched.

“I have food.”

“What food?”

She opened the refrigerator, stared inside for a few seconds, then closed it again.

“What do you want?”

I laughed. “That’s what I thought.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket. “Pizza?”

“Mila had pizza at school today.”

Luna looked toward the living room. “She did?”

“Apparently it was the highlight of her day.”

“Okay. Chinese?”

“That works.”

She reached for her phone.

“I got it.”

“I can order food, Ellis.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you taking over?”

“Because you’re going to spend fifteen minutes deciding between the same two things you always get.”

She stared at me.

I smiled. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

She didn’t.

I pulled up the menu.

From the living room, Mila laughed at something on television. Luna reached into the cabinet for glasses while I ordered, setting three of them on the counter before filling each one with ice.

By the time the food got there, Mila was already at the table asking which container belonged to her even though we all ordered enough to share.

Dinner settled into an easy rhythm after that. Mila talked through half of hers, bouncing from something that happened at school to what she wanted to do that weekend without much of a pause between the two.

“Chew first,” Luna told her at one point.

Mila did, then picked up exactly where she left off.

I smiled and reached for another egg roll.

It was the last one.

Luna noticed at the same time I did, but I got to it first.

She looked at the egg roll, then at me.

I tore it in half and put one piece on her plate.

“Thank you.”

Later, Mila settled back in front of the television while Luna and I stayed at the table with the remains of dinner between us.

That was when I remembered.

“Mila asked me something this morning.”

Luna reached for her drink. “What?”

I looked toward the living room before looking back at her.

“She asked if you were her new mommy.”

Her hand stopped around the glass.

“What?”

I laughed quietly. “Yeah.”

“Why would she ask you that?”

“One of her friends told her if I have a girlfriend, she can be Mila’s new mommy.”

Luna’s expression shifted.

“What did you tell her?”

“That she already has a mother.”

She nodded slowly.

“And that you being important to her doesn’t have to change that.”

For a second, Luna didn’t say anything.

Then she looked toward the living room.

Mila was stretched across the couch, completely unaware that we were talking about her.

“I would never want her to think I’m trying to—”

“I know.”

Luna looked back at me.

“I know you wouldn’t.”

“I love that she likes being around me.”

“She does more than like being around you.”

Her mouth curved a little.

“I love being around her too.”

“I know that too.”

She looked down at the table, running her thumb along the side of her glass.

“That’s kind of a big question for seven in the morning.”

“Tell me about it.”

She laughed softly.

I reached across the table and took her hand.

“She asked me something else.”

Luna looked at me.

“What?”

“If you were my girlfriend.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“And what did you say?”

“I told her to put her sock on.”

Luna stared at me for half a second before she laughed.

“Ellis.”

“She had one sock on.”

“That wasn’t what she asked you.”

“I know.”

“You avoided a six-year-old.”

“I was trying to get her to school.”

“Sure.”

I rubbed my thumb across her hand.

“She wasn’t wrong, though.”

The laughter faded from Luna’s face.

“No?”

“No.”

I watched her for a second.

“We never talked about it.”

“We didn’t.”

“So.”

“So?”

I smiled.

“You gonna make me ask?”

Her mouth curved.

“Yes.”

I shook my head.

“You want to be my girlfriend, Luna?”

She didn’t make me wait.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Ellis.”

I smiled and tugged lightly on her hand.

“Come here.”

“I’m sitting right here.”

“Luna.”

She laughed but got up anyway.

I pulled her between my knees, and her hands settled on my shoulders.

“So that’s it?” she asked.

“What else you want?”

“I don’t know. That was your big question.”

“It wasn’t that big.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“No?”

“No.” I slid my hands around her waist. “Feels like we’ve been doing this already.”

“We have.”

“So now we know what to call it.”

She smiled.

“My boyfriend?”

“See? You got it.”

She laughed just before I kissed her.

And that was it. No big moment or sudden change, just Luna standing between my knees in her kitchen while my daughter watched television in the next room and our dinner got cold on the table.

My girlfriend.

Yeah. That sounded about right.

OceanofPDF.com



I READ the email twice before I believed it.

Then a third time because apparently twice wasn't enough.

"Why are you staring at your computer like that?"

I didn't answer Naomi.

I was still somewhere around *We'd love to feature Chapter & Charm in our fall issue* when she came around the counter and leaned over my shoulder.

"Luna?"

"Hold on."

"You've been holding on."

"Naomi."

"All right."

She backed up, but not far.

I finished the email again.

The first time I thought I was reading too fast. The second time I was looking for the part where they asked me to pay for something.

There wasn't one.

The local magazine was putting together a feature on independent businesses downtown. Somebody who came to one of our Open Mic Nights had mentioned Chapter & Charm to the writer, which somehow led to her looking us up, which led to the email sitting in front of me now.

They wanted to interview me, photograph the store, and talk about how it started, what we'd built there, and the community that had grown around it.

I sat back.

"Well?" Naomi asked.

I looked at her.

"Chapter & Charm is going to be featured in the fall issue."

Her mouth fell open.

"What?"

I turned the laptop toward her.

She grabbed it before I could tell her not to.

"No way."

"That's what it says."

"Girl."

"I know."

"Luna."

"I know."

She read faster than I did, then looked up at me.

"This is big."

"It's a local magazine."

"And?"

"And I'm saying—"

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Make it little."

I closed my mouth.

Naomi turned the laptop toward me again.

"They came to you."

"I know."

"They want to interview you about your store."

"I can read."

"Apparently not with the way you're acting."

I laughed.

She came around the counter and hugged me before I realized that was what she was doing.

"I'm proud of you."

Something caught in my chest.

I wrapped my arms around her.

“Thank you.”

“And I’m telling everybody I work at a famous bookstore now.”

“Please don’t.”

“Too late.”

“We haven’t even done the interview.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She let me go and immediately reached for her phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“My mama.”

“Why does your mama need to know?”

“Because she’s been telling everybody I work at a bookstore since you opened it. Now she can add that it’s famous.”

“It is not famous.”

Naomi waved me off and started walking away.

I looked back at the email.

A minute ago, I wasn’t expecting anything from that day besides finishing payroll and figuring out why three copies of a new release still hadn’t shown up.

Now somebody wanted to write about Chapter & Charm.

My store.

I smiled and reached for my phone without thinking.

Ellis’s name was already on the screen before I realized who I’d decided to call.

Ellis answered.

“Hey.”

“Are you busy?”

“A little. Why?”

“I have to tell you something.”

There was a pause.

“Okay.”

I smiled.

“Chapter & Charm is getting featured in a magazine.”

“What?”

“A local one. They’re doing something on independent businesses downtown, and they emailed me asking if I’d do an interview.”

“Luna.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay.”

“That’s big.”

“That’s what Naomi said.”

“Because it is.”

“It’s not like—”

“Don’t.”

I stopped.

“What?”

“Whatever you were about to say to make it smaller.”

My smile faded into something softer.

“You and Naomi are annoying.”

“Probably.”

“They want to photograph the store too.”

“Who?”

“The magazine.”

“No.”

I laughed. “Excuse me?”

“Tell them you have a photographer.”

“Ellis.”

“I’m serious.”

“I think they probably have their own.”

“They don’t need him.”

I leaned against the counter.

“Are you jealous of a photographer you’ve never met?”

“I’m protecting my interests.”

“Your interests?”

“My girlfriend’s bookstore.”

I smiled at the word. It didn’t catch me off guard anymore. I just liked hearing it.

“I’ll make sure they know you’re very concerned.”

“Thank you.”

Someone said something on his end.

“I gotta go,” he said. “But we’re celebrating.”

“We are?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“You have Mila.”

“And?”

I smiled.

“And nothing.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Okay.”

“And Luna?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m proud of you.”

I looked at the email again, and my smile grew.

“Thank you.”

“Talk to you later.”

“Later.”

The call ended.

I stood there with my phone in my hand for another second.

Then Naomi’s voice carried across the store.

“Did you call Ellis?”

I looked up.

She was grinning.

“Mind your business.”

Her grin widened.

I looked down at my phone one more time before putting it away, still smiling.



ELLIS NEVER TOLD me what celebrating meant.

Apparently, I was about to find out.

His front door opened before I made it all the way up the porch.

“Miss Luna!”

Mila appeared in the doorway with Ellis right behind her.

“Back up,” he told her. “Let her get in the house.”

“I am.”

“You’re standing in the door.”

Mila moved just enough for me to step inside.

“Hi, sweet girl.”

“Daddy told me about the magazine.”

“Did he?”

She nodded. “He said your bookstore is gonna be in it.”

“It is.”

“Are you gonna be in it too?”

“I think so.”

“Can I see it?”

“Of course.”

“When?”

“When it comes out.”

“When is that?”

I looked at Ellis.

He shrugged. “You got this.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I turned back to Mila. “In a few weeks.”

“Oh.”

Apparently that was much too long to wait.

She wandered back toward the living room, where something animated was playing on the television.

I slipped out of my shoes and looked at Ellis.

“You told her?”

“She asked why I was cooking.”

I paused. “You cooked?”

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

I followed him toward the kitchen. “What did you make?”

“Steak.”

I stopped just inside the kitchen.

There were two skillets going on the stove, mashed potatoes covered on the counter, and a pan of green beans beside them. A bottle of sparkling cider sat in an ice bucket that I was almost positive he’d bought specifically for tonight.

“You really did all this?”

Ellis shrugged like there weren't two skillets on the stove and an entire dinner waiting for me.

"I told you we were celebrating."

"I thought you meant ordering something."

"You have very little faith in me."

I smiled. "I'm impressed."

"As you should be."

"Don't ruin it."

He laughed and turned back to the stove.

Mila came into the kitchen a few minutes later and climbed onto one of the stools.

"Is it ready?"

"Almost."

"You said that already."

"Because you keep asking."

She looked at me.

"He takes forever."

"I've been here five minutes."

"See?"

I laughed.

Ellis pointed the spoon at both of us.

"Neither one of y'all has to eat."

"Yes, we do," Mila said.

I nodded. "She's right."

"Unbelievable."

Dinner settled into the same easy rhythm it always seemed to when the three of us were together. Mila talked enough for all of us while Ellis kept reminding her to finish chewing before starting another sentence, and somewhere between the steak and mashed potatoes, I stopped teasing him about being surprised he could cook.

Halfway through dinner, she looked at me.

"Are you famous now?"

I almost choked.

Ellis dropped his head.

"No."

"But you're gonna be in a magazine."

"That doesn't make me famous."

She thought about it. “What makes you famous?”

“I don’t know.”

“Being on TV,” Ellis said.

I looked at him. “That’s not necessarily true.”

“I’m trying to get through dinner.”

I laughed.

By the time dinner was over, the magazine had become the least interesting thing in the room. Mila wanted to know whether fish slept, and when Ellis told her they did, she immediately wanted to know how.

“With their eyes open.”

She stared at him. “No, they don’t.”

“They don’t have eyelids.”

Mila looked at me.

I lifted my hands. “Don’t bring me into this. I don’t know enough about fish.”

“See?” she told Ellis.

“She didn’t agree with you.”

“She didn’t agree with you either.”

I took a sip of my drink. “And I plan to keep it that way.”

Eventually, Ellis glanced at the clock.

“All right. Go brush your teeth.”

Mila groaned. “Daddy.”

“You know what time it is.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Nobody asked.”

She slid off the stool. “Can Miss Luna put me to bed?”

I looked at Ellis.

He looked at me, then back at her. “Go brush your teeth first.”

Mila took off toward the hallway.

“Walk.”

Her footsteps slowed.

I looked at him. “You didn’t answer her.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

He started gathering the plates. “Because I figured I’d ask you.”

“Of course.” I glanced toward the hallway with a smile. “Bug’s my girl.”

Ellis looked at me.

“What?”

He shook his head, but there was a smile pulling at his mouth. “Nothing.”

A few minutes later, Mila was tucked beneath her blanket with her rabbit beside her and a book open across my lap.

I only made it six pages before she interrupted me.

“Daddy does the voice different.”

I looked down at her.

“Do you want Daddy to read it?”

“No.”

“Then this is the voice you get.”

She smiled.

I kept reading.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

By the time I reached the end, her eyes were heavier than they were when I started.

I closed the book and set it on her nightstand.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Miss Luna.”

I stood.

“Love you.”

I stopped.

The words came sleepy and easy, already halfway buried in her pillow.

I leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“Love you too, sweet girl.”

Her eyes were closed by the time I turned off the lamp.

Ellis was in the hallway when I pulled her door almost shut.

One look at his face and I knew.

“You heard that?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

I glanced back toward Mila’s room. “She’s never said that to me before.”

“I know.”

My eyes came back to his.

“Was it okay that I said it back?”

His expression softened. “Luna.”

“I’m just asking.”

“Of course it was okay.”

I nodded, even though something in my chest still felt too full.

Ellis reached for my hand. “Come on.”

I laced my fingers through his and followed him back toward the living room.

The television was still on, but Ellis turned the volume down until it was mostly background noise.

“So how you feeling?”

“About what?”

He looked at me.

I smiled. “The magazine.”

“You’ve had a few hours now.”

“It still feels a little unreal.”

“Somebody wants to write about your bookstore.”

“I know.”

“That’s a big deal.”

I looked down at my hands. “It is.”

His hand settled over mine.

“You did that, Luna.”

I looked at him.

“You built something people want to know about.”

My throat tightened before I could stop it.

“You trying to make me cry?”

“No.”

“Feels like it.”

He smiled. “I’m just saying.”

I leaned into him. “Thank you.”

He reached for my hand, his thumb moving across the back of it.

“You should be proud of yourself too.”

“I am.”

The answer came easily.

His eyes stayed on mine for a second before he nodded.

“Good.”

I looked down at our hands.

“They want to ask me about why I opened the store.”

“What are you gonna tell them?”

“The truth.”

“That you like telling people what to read?”

I laughed. “No.”

“Seems accurate.”

“I wanted somewhere that felt like mine.”

He got quiet.

I glanced at him.

“What?”

“I was listening.”

I settled farther into the couch.

“I don’t know what I thought it would turn into when I opened it. I just knew I wanted it.”

“And now?”

“Now Naomi thinks we’re famous.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“I know.”

He waited.

I thought about the email sitting in my inbox.

About the store I’d unlocked that morning the same way I did every morning. The same shelves. The same counter. The same place I’d spent years building one day at a time.

“Now it feels bigger than what I imagined.”

“Good bigger?”

“Yeah.”

I smiled.

“Good bigger.”

His thumb moved over my hand again.

We talked about the magazine for a while before the conversation drifted to the bookstore, then to a client Ellis had the next day who kept

sending him pictures from California and asking if he could make Mississippi look the same.

“Maybe you can.”

“I can’t create an ocean, Luna.”

“You’re the photographer.”

“Not a magician.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

He looked at me.

I laughed. “I’m just saying.”

“I’m gonna tell her you said that.”

“Don’t put me in it.”

“You put yourself in it.”

We kept talking until I lost track of how long I’d been sitting there. When I finally checked the time on my phone, it was later than I thought.

I glanced toward the hallway before looking back at Ellis.

“Can I stay tonight?”

His eyes met mine. “Yeah.”

“Okay.”

Something in his expression made me smile.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I can look at my girlfriend.”

“You seem real pleased with that word.”

“I am.”

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling when I leaned over and kissed him.

His hand settled against the side of my neck, and when I pulled back, I didn’t go far.

“I don’t have anything with me.”

“You need something?”

“Everything I use in the morning.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

I nodded.

“Okay.”

His thumb moved along my jaw before he kissed me again.

I shifted closer, my hand settling against his chest. The kiss stayed easy for a while, slow enough that I could feel him smile when I moved closer again.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Come here.”

“I’m already here.”

“Closer.”

I shifted until there was barely any space left between us.

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

I kissed him again before he could say anything else.

For a while, there was no rush to it and no wondering where this was going or whether I should slow it down before it got there.

I already knew I was staying.

Maybe that was why I let myself stop thinking about everything else.

My fingers slid along the back of his neck as the kiss deepened, and Ellis pulled me closer. His hand moved slowly along my back before settling at my waist.

I knew the feel of his hands now. The way his mouth curved when I pulled him closer. The quiet way he paid attention to every shift in my body without making me feel like I might break.

And when I wanted more, I didn’t wait for him to figure it out.

I showed him.

I kissed him harder, my fingers slipping beneath the hem of his shirt. His breath caught against my mouth when my hands met warm skin.

That got a smile out of me.

Ellis pulled back just enough to look at me.

“You smiling?”

“Maybe.”

His hand slid along my back. “Something funny?”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

I kissed him again before he could keep going.

Whatever teasing answer he might’ve had disappeared against my mouth.

The kiss changed after that. His hands moved with more certainty, mine doing the same, and when his mouth left mine for the side of my neck, I tilted my head to give him more room.

“Ellis.”

He paused.

I tightened my arms around him, pulling him back to me.

He understood.

When he kissed me again, I was already reaching for the bottom of his shirt.

His hand closed gently around my wrist.

“Bedroom?”

I looked at him.

There was no assumption in his face. No expectation because I’d asked to stay that night or because I was sitting in his lap with my hands beneath his shirt.

I stood and held out my hand.

“Come on.”

His smile came slowly as he took it.

I barely made it a few steps before he pulled me back for another kiss. I laughed against his mouth, but by the time we reached his bedroom, the laughter had faded into something warmer.

He closed the door behind us, and I turned toward him before he had the chance to come to me.

His shirt hit the floor first.

Mine followed.

By the time the backs of my knees met the bed, his mouth was on mine again.

I pulled him down with me.

His hands moved over my body with none of the hesitation from our first time, and I arched into his touch when his mouth found my neck. I knew what those hands could do now, and apparently so did he, because it didn’t take him long to find the places that made my breathing change.

My fingers dug into his shoulders.

“Ellis.”

He lifted his head, eyes finding mine.

I didn’t make him ask.

“I want you.”

His eyes stayed on mine, but the look in them changed.

“Yeah?”

I nodded, but apparently that wasn’t enough for him.

“Tell me.”

“I just did.”

His mouth curved. “Tell me again.”

I pulled him closer until his forehead touched mine.

“I want you, Ellis.”

The smile disappeared.

He kissed me before I could say anything else, and whatever patience either of us had left started slipping away.

The rest of our clothes didn’t take long to follow his shirt.

When he came back to me, I reached for him first.

There was no nervousness this time. No wondering what happened next or waiting for him to decide how far we went. I pulled him closer, and when he settled between my thighs, I opened for him without hesitation.

His mouth found mine as he eased into me.

My breath caught.

I remembered this.

The fullness. The stretch. The second it took my body to adjust before everything started feeling good.

Ellis stilled.

I tightened my arms around him.

“I’m good.”

That was all it took.

He moved again, slowly at first, and my eyes closed as pleasure rolled through me.

There was no uncertainty in this part either. I knew how good it felt when he pulled back and sank into me again. How his breathing changed when I wrapped my legs around him and brought him closer. How quickly that careful rhythm disappeared when I started meeting him instead of lying beneath him and taking it.

So I moved with him.

His hand tightened at my hip.

“Luna.”

The sound of my name against my skin sent a shiver through me.

I pulled him closer.

The next movement was deeper, and a moan slipped out before I could stop it.

I didn’t try to stop the next one.

There was nothing careful about the way I wanted him now. I met every movement, my nails dragging down his back when the pace changed and the pleasure started building faster.

When I needed more, I told him.

“Don’t stop.”

He didn’t.

I held on as the tension wound tighter, every movement pushing me closer until I couldn’t concentrate on anything except him.

His weight over me.

His breath against my neck.

The way he knew exactly what I was asking for without making me ask twice.

My body tightened around him.

“Ellis.”

The tension finally broke, pleasure rushing through me hard enough that I pressed my face into his shoulder and held on.

He stayed with me until it passed, his breathing just as uneven as mine before he finally went still against me.

For a while, neither of us moved.

I was breathless beneath him, one hand still curled against his back when Ellis finally lifted his head.

“You good?”

I laughed because apparently he was determined to ask me that in every possible situation.

“Very.”

His mouth curved before he kissed me again, softer this time.

Later, I was tucked against his side beneath the covers, wearing one of his T-shirts while my clothes sat somewhere near the foot of his bed.

Ellis reached over and plugged my phone into a charger on his nightstand.

I lifted my head.

“You just have an extra charger?”

“Yeah.”

“In your nightstand?”

“That’s usually where extra things go.”

I looked at him. “You have an answer for everything.”

“Most things.”

“That confidence is irritating.”

“Your phone is charging, though.”

I looked at the cord running from my phone to his wall.

“Okay. Fair.”

He turned off the lamp and slid back beneath the covers.

I moved toward him before he even got settled, tucking myself against his side.

His arm came around me.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“Very.”

He kissed the top of my head, and I closed my eyes.

Tomorrow morning, I’d have to go home before work and get everything I’d left there.

But that was tomorrow.

Tonight, I was exactly where I wanted to be.

OceanofPDF.com



“JUST WALK TOWARD ME. And don’t look at the camera.”

They made it three steps before she looked directly into the lens.

I lowered the camera. “What’d I just say?”

She laughed. “I’m sorry.”

Her husband shook his head. “She’s been practicing poses for two weeks.”

“Shut up.”

“I got emails.”

“You better delete them.”

“I’m keeping them for evidence.”

She bumped her shoulder against his, and he laughed.

I lifted the camera again.

There.

I caught the smile she gave him before she remembered I was watching.

Click.

Then the one he gave her back.

Click.

“Keep walking.”

They did, slower this time.

“Don’t look at me.”

“That’s hard when you’re pointing a camera at us.”

“You hired me.”

Her husband laughed. “I told you.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“His right now.”

She looked at him. “You’re supposed to be on mine.”

“I’ve been on yours for ten years.”

“That doesn’t mean you get days off.”

He reached for her hand.

She took it without looking.

I pressed the shutter.

Click.

That one might’ve been my favorite.

They’d stopped thinking about the camera.

That was usually when I got the best ones.

Not when somebody was standing where I put them or smiling because I told them to. It was the second after they stopped paying attention to me. When somebody fixed the other person’s shirt. Reached for a hand. Laughed before they remembered they were supposed to be posing.

The things people did when they forgot somebody was watching.

We moved farther down the trail.

“How long y’all been married?”

“Ten years today,” she said.

“Together fourteen,” her husband added.

“Fifteen.”

He looked at her. “We didn’t start dating until the next year.”

She looked at me. “You hear this?”

I smiled and raised the camera again.

“I stay out of marital disputes.”

“Stand over there for me.”

They moved toward the trees while I changed lenses.

Ten years married. Fifteen since they met, although apparently only fourteen of those counted depending on which one of them I asked.

By the time I looked up again, she was fixing the collar of his shirt.

He said something I couldn’t hear.

She laughed.

I didn’t tell them to stop.

Click.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

Click.

She reached up and wiped something from his beard.

Click.

“Y’all can look at me now.”

They turned.

I got a few more before lowering the camera.

“All right. I think we’re good.”

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.”

Her husband let out a breath.

She looked at him. “Don’t look so happy.”

He laughed, and I started packing my equipment.

It was easy between them. Not perfect—I didn’t know them well enough to know anything about that—but familiar in a way that probably took years to build.

Fifteen years of knowing how the other one took a joke, which argument wasn’t really an argument, when to reach for a hand without asking for it first.

The kind of things nobody decided to start doing. They just happened slowly enough that one day they belonged to the life you built together.

I zipped my camera bag.

I thought about Luna.

Nothing big. Just her.

The way she reached for my hand now without looking first. The way she settled into the corner of my couch like she already knew which spot she wanted. The way she’d said *Bug’s my girl* without thinking twice about it. The way she’d asked if she could stay.

I smiled to myself.

They were little things, the kind that didn’t seem like much while they were happening.

I slung the camera bag over my shoulder.

“Happy anniversary,” I told them.

“Thank you.”

“Send me the good ones,” her husband said.

His wife looked at him. “He’s sending us all the good ones.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“That’s not what you said.”

I laughed.

“Y’all have a good one.”

I left them to their argument and headed toward my truck.

Ten years.

Ten years.

The number followed me longer than it should’ve.

Maybe because lately, the future had started feeling like something I was allowed to think about again.

There was a time when thinking that far ahead came easily. I never had to make myself do it. There was always a next summer or Christmas, Mila starting school, another birthday or anniversary. The house we’d eventually outgrow even though Elena swore we wouldn’t.

There was always something after whatever was happening right then.

Until there wasn’t.

After Elena died, I stopped thinking that way. Not on purpose. Life just got smaller—not worse, just contained to Mila, work, home, and whatever needed to happen that day.

Then I’d wake up and do the next one.

I got good at living that way, and for a long time, it was enough.

I unlocked my truck and tossed my bag onto the passenger seat.

Once I was behind the wheel, I sat there for a moment without starting it.

I didn’t know where I’d be ten years from then. Never really did.

But the thought of there being something out there again didn’t feel as far away as it used to.

I started the truck.

For now, that was enough.



THERE WAS another session waiting to be edited when I sat down at my desk.

The anniversary pictures would have to wait.

I woke the computer and took a drink while everything loaded. My camera bag was beside the desk, two memory cards sat near the keyboard, and the stack of invoices I'd been ignoring was somehow still there despite me knowing exactly how long it had been.

For the next hour, I worked. I sorted through the session, deleted what I didn't need, made adjustments, and flagged the ones worth going back to.

When I finally imported the anniversary pictures, I already knew which one I was looking for.

It came up somewhere in the middle.

Her hand in his, neither one of them looking at me.

I marked it.

A few shots later, she was fixing his collar.

Marked that one too.

Then the forehead kiss.

I leaned back.

Those would probably be the ones they liked best. They usually were.

I finished the first pass and started organizing the files. The folder list ran down the side of my screen.

Names. Dates. Events.

Most of them didn't mean anything to anybody but me.

I scrolled past a wedding from last month.

Family portraits.

A graduation.

Then—

Chapter & Charm Open Mic.

My hand stopped on the mouse.

I hadn't opened that folder in a while, but I clicked it anyway.

The first few pictures were exactly what I expected. The storefront. Rows of chairs. People standing near the shelves. Maya behind the café counter and Naomi talking to somebody with one hand in the air.

I kept clicking until Luna filled the screen.

I stopped.

She was standing near the front of the store, turned slightly away from me. She wasn't posing. She didn't even know I was taking it. Her curls framed her face, and she was smiling at whoever was standing just outside the shot.

I remembered taking this one.

I remembered noticing her.

The next picture was Luna again, this time talking with one hand lifted and her eyes bright. A few shots later, she was laughing.

I sat back.

“Damn.”

I took a lot of pictures of this woman.

There were plenty that weren’t her. The crowd, the performers, people browsing between readings. But every few pictures, there she was again. At the counter. Near the stage. Talking to Naomi. Standing off to the side watching something I couldn’t remember now.

My camera kept finding her before I had any business looking for her.

I smiled and closed the folder before opening another from a later event at Chapter & Charm.

Mila appeared before Luna did.

She was sitting on the floor with a book open in front of her, her finger pressed against the page.

I clicked forward and found another one of Mila. In the next, Luna was in the background, crouched beside her and looking at whatever Mila was pointing to.

Neither one of them was looking at me.

I stared at the picture longer than I needed to before continuing.

Chapter & Charm. Mila. Luna. More pictures from that day.

Then all three of us appeared in the same frame, caught in the reflection of one of the store windows.

I almost passed it.

Then I went back.

I zoomed in.

It wasn’t a picture I’d ever deliver to a client. The focus wasn’t quite where I’d want it, and the reflection caught too much of the street behind us.

But I liked it.

I didn’t remember taking it. Maybe I wasn’t trying to.

I sat there for a minute before minimizing the folder. My desktop came back into view, along with the anniversary gallery I should’ve been finishing.

Instead, I created a new folder.

The cursor blinked in the empty box while I tried one name, deleted it, then tried another.

That one didn’t feel right either.

“Man.”

I left it untitled.

Then I went back to the Open Mic folder.

The first picture I copied was the one of Luna laughing. The second was Mila on the floor with her book.

I hesitated over the next one.

Luna crouched beside her.

I copied it too, then added the reflection from the store window.

Four pictures sat inside the folder when I was done.

I looked at them together.

Luna laughing. Mila with her book. The two of them beside each other. And the last one with all three of us caught in the glass, me barely visible behind the camera.

Pieces of days I didn’t know would matter when I took them.

I thought about the couple from that morning.

Ten years.

All the small things that must’ve happened between the first picture they ever took together and the ones I took that day.

Things nobody would’ve known to call important at the time.

I looked at the photograph of Luna laughing again.

My camera used to be the easiest place for me to disappear.

I could stand behind it and watch everybody else’s life happen without having to think too hard about mine.

Somewhere along the way, that had changed. I’d started taking pictures of things I wanted to remember again.

I looked at the four photographs one more time before closing the folder and going back to work.

OceanofPDF.com



THE BELL above the door rang before I could respond.

I looked up.

Ellis walked in.

I glanced toward the clock, then back at him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Good morning to you too.”

“Good morning.” I smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“I can’t stop by and see my girlfriend?”

“You can. You usually tell me first.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“What surprise?”

He came toward the counter with a small paper bag in one hand. Naomi made a sound beside me, but I didn’t look at her.

Ellis stopped in front of me and held out the bag.

“Here.”

I looked from it to him.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

“Why?”

“Luna.”

I took the bag.

“You’re bossy.”

“And you ask too many questions.”

“That’s not true.”

Naomi laughed behind me.

“Nobody asked you.”

I reached inside the bag and pulled out a journal.

Brown.

The words across the front stopped me.

One thing at a time.

For a second, I just stared at it.

I knew this journal.

My eyes lifted to Ellis.

“You went back.”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“A while ago.”

I looked down at it again.

I remembered standing in that little stationery shop with the journal in my hands. Telling him the words on the cover were something I said to myself whenever everything started feeling like too much.

I remembered putting it back.

I didn’t remember asking him to remember any of it.

Something tightened behind my ribs.

“You remembered.”

His expression softened.

“Of course I remembered.”

I pressed my lips together and ran my thumb over the words.

One thing at a time.

The same words I’d told myself more times than I could count. When I was overwhelmed. When there was too much in front of me and I needed to make everything smaller.

Except lately, they hadn’t felt quite as necessary.

And somehow, that made the journal mean even more.

I looked at him.

“You know I’m trying really hard not to get emotional, right?”

His mouth curved.

“Ellis.”

He laughed, and I stepped around the counter before I could think too much about what I was doing.

His arms came around me as soon as mine wrapped around him.

I held on a little tighter than the gift probably called for, because it wasn’t really about the journal. It was that I wanted something, put it back, and Ellis noticed anyway.

“Thank you,” I said against his chest.

His hand moved slowly over my back.

“You’re welcome.”

I pulled away, still holding the journal.

“How long have you had this?”

“Long enough.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It’s the one you’re getting.”

I shook my head, but I was smiling.

“I have to get to the studio,” he said. “I just wanted to bring it by before your interview.”

My smile softened.

“You came all the way over here before work for this?”

He gave me a look.

“Right. Another stupid question.”

He leaned down and kissed me.

“You’re gonna do fine.”

“I know.”

The answer left me before I could second-guess it.

Ellis smiled like he noticed that too.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

He headed for the door, and I watched until it closed behind him.

I looked down at the journal still in my hands.

One thing at a time.

The bell above the door chimed.

I looked up.

A woman stepped inside with another woman behind her carrying a camera bag.

Okay, here we go.

I smoothed my hands over the front of my dress and stepped out from behind the counter.

“Luna?”

“That’s me.”

The first woman smiled and held out her hand.

We exchanged introductions, and she told me again what she’d explained over email. They wanted to talk about Chapter & Charm, how it started, what we offered, and some of the events that had made the store part of the downtown community.

Nothing I didn’t already know. It was my store. I could talk about my store.

Probably.

Naomi passed behind me.

“You got it,” she whispered.

I turned my head. “Go away.”

She grinned and kept walking.

The writer laughed.

“Should we sit?”

“Yeah. We can use the café.”

I led them toward the back, where Maya already had a table cleared near the window. She gave me a small smile when I sat down, but thankfully, she left it at that.

The writer set her recorder between us.

“Do you mind if I record?”

“No. That’s fine.”

“Perfect.”

She checked it once before looking at me.

“So, tell me about Chapter & Charm.”

I glanced around the store.

“That’s a big question.”

“It can be a big answer.”

I laughed.

“Okay.”

I settled back in my chair.

“We’re an independent bookstore, but I’ve always wanted it to be more than somewhere people come to buy books. We have the café, events, Open

Mic Nights, author readings. People come in and work sometimes. Or read. Or meet somebody for coffee and somehow stay for three hours."

"Was that what you pictured when you opened it?"

"Some of it."

"Which part?"

"The books."

She laughed.

"I definitely knew there would be books."

"That's a good start."

"Right?"

I smiled.

"But everything else grew with the store. Some things I knew I wanted from the beginning, and some came from paying attention to what people responded to."

"Like Open Mic Night?"

"Definitely."

"That's actually how *Chapter & Charm* ended up on my radar."

"I heard."

"One of the people who attended told me I needed to look you up."

"That still feels a little strange."

"Why?"

"Because when we did the first one, I was mostly hoping people would show up."

"They did."

"They did."

I smiled.

"More than I expected."

"What made you nervous about it?"

"Everything."

She laughed.

"I'm serious. Attendance. Seating. Whether people would actually enjoy themselves. I probably checked the RSVP list more than I needed to."

"Do you still worry like that?"

"Sometimes. When something is yours, I don't think you stop caring whether it works. You just get better at knowing which things deserve your panic."

"That sounds learned."

“It was.”

She smiled before glancing down at her notes.

“You mentioned the store growing based on what people responded to. How much has the community shaped what Chapter & Charm is now?”

“A lot.”

“How?”

I looked toward the front of the store.

A woman was browsing one of the display tables. Someone else was sitting alone with a coffee and an open book. Naomi was behind the register helping a customer.

“People tell us what they want, even when they don’t actually tell us.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you notice what they come back for. What events fill up. What books people ask us to order. Which tables are always occupied. Who comes in every week and who starts bringing somebody with them.”

I smiled.

“We have customers whose names I know. I know what some of them read. I know who is going to come in asking if we got the new release they’ve been waiting on before they even make it to the counter.”

“So when did it start feeling like a community instead of just a business?”

That made me pause.

“I don’t know if there was one moment.”

I looked around again.

“I think I noticed it after it had already happened.”

She waited.

“Somewhere along the way, people stopped only coming here for books. They started coming because this was one of their places.”

“One of their places?”

“Yeah. Somewhere they feel comfortable being.”

I glanced toward the café.

“That was always what I wanted. I just didn’t know exactly what it would look like until people started giving it back to me.”

She made a note.

“What are you proudest of?”

This time, I didn’t have to think very long.

“That.”

“The community?”

“All of it.”

I smiled.

“The fact that people come back. That something I started became somewhere other people feel connected to.”

“And what about you?”

I looked at her.

“What about me?”

“You’ve told me what you wanted for your customers and what you’re proud Chapter & Charm gives them. What has building it given you?”

That one caught me.

Not in a bad way.

I looked around the store again, but this time I wasn’t searching for an answer.

“Something that’s mine.”

She didn’t interrupt.

“I built it. Not by myself—I have people here who are a huge part of why it works—but it started with something I wanted. And now I get to walk in every day and see what it became.”

“What does that feel like?”

I smiled.

“Pretty damn good.”

She laughed.

“Can I print that?”

“You know what? Yeah.”

“Good.”

I laughed with her and settled farther into my chair.

She asked me a few more questions after that. About what I wanted to do next. Whether I saw *Chapter & Charm* expanding. What events I wanted to keep growing.

I didn’t have an answer for everything.

But I didn’t feel like I needed one.

By the time she turned off the recorder, almost forty minutes had passed.

“That was painless, right?”

“Ask me when I read the article.”

She laughed as she gathered her notes.

“You did great.”

“Thank you.”

And I meant it without immediately thinking of something I should’ve said differently.



THE INTERVIEW MIGHT'VE BEEN over, but apparently my part wasn’t.

“Where do you spend most of your time?” the photographer asked.

I looked around the store.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Behind that counter.”

She laughed. “Then let’s start there.”

That sounded easy enough until I was standing behind the register with a camera pointed at me and suddenly couldn’t remember what I normally did with my hands.

“What am I supposed to be doing?”

“Whatever you normally do.”

“Normally nobody is taking pictures of me.”

“Pretend I’m not here.”

I looked directly at the camera.

“That’s not working.”

She laughed and lowered it.

“Okay. Forget about the pictures. Show me what you’d be doing right now if I wasn’t here.”

That I could do.

I straightened the stack of new releases beside the register, checked the hold slips tucked beneath the counter, then moved toward one of the displays near the front.

The camera followed me.

At first, I noticed every click.

Behind the counter.

Between the shelves.

At one of the display tables.

But after a while, I stopped thinking about where she was. A customer asked me whether we had the second book in a series, and by the time I found it and handed it over, I'd forgotten about the camera completely.

I was putting another book back in its place when the bell above the door rang.

"Miss Luna!"

I turned.

Mila came toward me with Ellis a few steps behind her.

I smiled before I could help it.

"Hey, Bug."

She wrapped her arms around my waist.

"Daddy said you were taking pictures."

"I am."

"Can I be in one?"

Ellis reached us.

"No."

Mila looked up at him.

"Why?"

"Because this is Miss Luna's thing."

I looked at him.

He gave me a small smile.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"You good?"

"Yeah."

His eyes stayed on me for another second, like he was making sure I meant it. I was starting to realize that was just Ellis. He asked, but he paid attention to the answer too.

"How'd the interview go?"

"Good."

Naomi appeared beside us before I could say anything else.

"She didn't embarrass herself."

I looked over at her. "Thank you, Naomi."

"I'm supportive."

“You’re something.”

Ellis laughed, and I glanced back at him. Seeing him there, comfortable around Naomi and Mila, felt more natural than it probably should have. Somewhere along the way, him being part of my world stopped feeling unusual.

The photographer lowered her camera.

“Are these friends of yours?”

I opened my mouth.

Mila beat me to it.

“That’s my daddy.”

The woman smiled. “I figured.”

“And Miss Luna is his girlfriend.”

My eyes moved to Mila before I could stop them.

The word still caught me sometimes, even though it hadn’t felt wrong in a long time.

“Mila.”

“What?”

I laughed.

The photographer did too.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you.”

Ellis shook his head. “You too.”

Mila looked at the camera again.

“Can I see?”

The photographer turned the screen toward her, and Mila immediately started asking questions.

I stepped closer to Ellis. “You brought her straight from school?”

“Yeah. She asked where I was going.”

“And you told her?”

“I made the mistake of saying your name.”

I smiled. “Sounds personal.”

“It is now.”

His hand found mine like it belonged there.

The photographer got a few more shots before lowering the camera.

“I think I have everything I need.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Naomi looked at me. “See? Famous.”

“Please stop saying that.”

“Never.”

The writer came over from the café, and we talked for another few minutes about when the article should run and anything else she might need from me.

Then the photographer looked around. “Before we go, do you want one with everybody? It won’t necessarily be for the article. Just while we’re here.”

Naomi was already moving.

“Yes.”

I laughed. “Of course you do.”

“Maya!”

A head appeared from behind the café counter. “What?”

“Come take a picture.”

“I’m working.”

“So am I.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Come on.”

Maya wiped her hands and came around the counter.

We gathered near the front of the store, Naomi on one side of me and Maya on the other. Mila squeezed herself between me and Naomi without asking anybody, and I laughed as I put my arm around her.

“Everybody ready?” the photographer asked.

I looked toward Ellis.

He was standing off to the side, watching.

“Ellis.”

He pointed at himself.

“Yes, you.”

He shook his head. “This is your thing.”

“I know.”

I held out my hand. “Come here.”

He looked at me for a second before crossing the space between us. Maya shifted over to make room, and Ellis stepped beside me, his hand settling against my back.

The photographer raised the camera. “Everybody look here.”

I did.

Click.

“One more.”

Mila said something under her breath that made Naomi laugh.

I turned toward them. “Stop.”

“What?”

“I heard you.”

Ellis laughed beside me.

The camera clicked again.

“There,” the photographer said. “That one’s better.”

“Can we see?” Mila asked.

She ran over before anybody answered, and the rest of us followed.

The photographer scrolled back one picture, then another.

The first one was good. Everybody looking at the camera. Everybody smiling.

Then she got to the second.

Naomi was laughing. Maya was looking at her. Mila’s face was turned toward me, and I was halfway between looking at her and looking at the camera.

Ellis was looking at me.

Of course he was.

I felt him beside me before I turned my head.

“You weren’t looking at the camera.”

“I was looking at something better.”

I pressed my lips together.

“That was smooth.”

“Wasn’t trying to be.”

Somehow, that made it worse.

The photographer smiled and turned the screen back toward herself. “I’ll send that one too.”

“Please do,” Naomi said.

They started packing up a few minutes later, and the store settled back into its usual rhythm. Maya disappeared behind the café counter, Naomi returned to the register, and Mila found a book she apparently needed to show Ellis immediately.

I stayed near the display table, straightening a stack that didn’t need straightening.

“Hey.”

I looked up.

Ellis was coming toward me.

“Hey.”

“You did good.”

I smiled. “How do you know?”

“I know you.”

“That confident?”

“About you? Yeah.”

He said it so easily, like being sure of me was the most natural thing in the world. I dropped my eyes to the stack beneath my hands, smoothing my palm over the top book even though I’d already straightened it twice.

My smile grew before I could stop it.

“You’re getting real sure of yourself.”

“I’ve been sure.”

He stopped in front of me.

“You happy?”

I looked around Chapter & Charm. Naomi was behind the register, and Mila was sitting on the floor a few feet away with a book open across her lap.

Then I looked at Ellis.

“Yeah.”

The answer didn’t take any thought.

“I am.”

He smiled.

And there it was.

I love him.

The thought came so easily I almost missed how big it was.

Almost.

I looked at the man standing in front of me. The same one who annoyed me over french fries and showed up to move furniture because I asked him to. The one who somehow became the person I called when something good happened and the person I wanted beside me when nothing was happening at all.

I love him.

I waited for something else to follow the thought. A question. A warning. Some reason I should slow down and examine it from every possible direction.

Nothing came.

Ellis studied my face. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

I smiled. “I’m happy.”

Something in his expression softened.

“Good.”

His hand found mine, his fingers slipping easily between mine.

“You ready?”

“For what?”

“Dinner.”

I looked at him. “I thought you came to see me.”

“I did.”

“And now you’re taking me somewhere?”

“That was always the plan.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What plan?”

“The one where I made reservations.”

I stared at him.

“You made reservations?”

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“Because you didn’t tell me.”

“That’s usually how surprises work.”

He started toward the counter like that settled it, taking my hand—and me—with him.

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

I glanced down at myself. “Ellis, I’m dressed for work.”

His eyes moved over me, slow enough that I felt the look before they made their way back to my face.

“You look good.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“You didn’t ask one.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting the smile threatening to give me away.

“You’re irritating.”

“You love it.”

My heart stumbled.

He had no idea.

I looked at him for a second before reaching for my bag.

“Come on.”

His eyebrows lifted. “That easy?”

“Don’t ruin it.”

He laughed and followed me toward the door.

Mila looked up from the floor.

“Are we eating?”

“Yes,” Ellis said.

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise.”

She closed her book and pushed herself to her feet. “Can we get pizza?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I already made reservations.”

Mila looked at him.

I looked at him.

“Reservations?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“For food?”

Ellis looked at her. “What else would they be for?”

“I don’t know.”

I laughed and grabbed my bag from behind the counter while Mila trailed after him.

“Can I know where we’re going?”

“Nope.”

“Can Miss Luna know?”

“Nope.”

Mila looked at me. “He’s being difficult.”

I laughed and came around the counter.

Ellis held out his hand.

“Come on.”

I took it.

He started toward the door with Mila still arguing that pizza would’ve been a better surprise.

“You don’t even know where we’re going,” Ellis told her.

“I know I like pizza.”

Mila kept talking, Ellis kept arguing back, and I listened to both of them as we stepped outside.

The thought was still there.

I love him.

This time, I let it be.

OceanofPDF.com



I USUALLY SENT my clients their galleries online.

The Harrises were different.

Mrs. Harris called two days after I sent theirs and spent almost twenty minutes going through the pictures she wanted printed. By the end of the call, twenty had turned into twenty-three, three of those needed larger copies, and she'd decided she didn't trust any of them being left on her porch.

Which was how I ended up delivering them myself.

Luna didn't have to come with me. She was at my house when I started packing everything into the box, sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop open while I checked the order one last time.

I told her I'd be back in about an hour.

She closed her laptop.

"I'm coming."

That was fifteen minutes ago.

Now she was beside me in the passenger seat, looking through the window while I drove, her bag at her feet and the box of prints resting safely in the back.

I glanced over at her.

"You know you could've stayed at the house."

"I know."

“You had work to do.”

“I still have work to do.”

“So why’d you come?”

Luna looked over at me.

“Why are you questioning my decision?”

“I’m asking.”

“I wanted to come.”

Simple as that.

I nodded and turned my attention back to the road.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes passed before Luna reached for the radio, lowering the music that wasn’t loud to begin with.

“Are these the anniversary people?”

“Yeah.”

“The ten-year couple?”

“That’s them.”

“I liked their pictures.”

“You saw about five.”

“I liked the five I saw.”

I smiled.

“Fair enough.”

“Did they like them?”

“Mrs. Harris ordered twenty-three prints. What you think?”

Luna laughed. “Twenty-three?”

“Started at twenty.”

“What happened?”

“She kept calling back.”

“I like her already.”

“You haven’t met her.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

I shook my head, but I was smiling when I made the next turn.

I pulled into the driveway a few minutes later.

The house was brick with dark shutters and a flower bed running beneath the front windows. I recognized it from the address Mrs. Harris gave me, but before I could check the number again, the front door opened.

“There she go,” I said.

Luna looked over. “She was waiting?”

“Apparently.”

Mrs. Harris stepped onto the porch as I parked.

“You weren’t lying.”

“I told you.”

“She really was waiting.”

I cut the engine and reached behind my seat for the box.

Luna grabbed her bag.

“You coming in?”

She looked at me. “I thought that was established when I left your house.”

I laughed. “Come on.”

By the time we made it up the walkway, Mrs. Harris was holding the door open.

“Right on time.”

“Three o’clock,” I told her.

“I know. I’ve been watching out the window since two forty-five.”

Luna laughed beside me.

Mrs. Harris looked at her for the first time.

“Well, hello.”

“Hi.”

“This is Luna,” I said. “My girlfriend.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Mrs. Harris looked back at me. “Come on in. He’s in the kitchen acting like he hasn’t been asking me when you were getting here all afternoon.”

“I asked once,” Mr. Harris called from somewhere inside.

“Three times.”

“That’s still closer to once than all afternoon.”

Luna looked at me, smiling.

I shook my head and followed Mrs. Harris inside.

Mr. Harris met us in the dining room and shook my hand before I set the box on the table.

“You brought all of them?”

“Everything y’all ordered.”

“Good. Maybe now she’ll stop asking me if I think they’re going to look different printed.”

“They do look different printed,” Mrs. Harris said.

“You haven’t seen them yet.”

“I know they do.”

Mr. Harris looked at me.

I lifted my hands. “I’m not getting in it.”

“Smart.”

Mrs. Harris pulled out the chair closest to the box. “Can I open it?”

“They’re yours.”

That was all she needed.

I moved the box closer and opened the top before taking out the first wrapped stack. I’d checked everything before we left, but I still watched while she removed the paper around them.

The first picture was one of the posed shots from the beginning of the session. They were standing together beneath the trees, his arm around her waist and both of them looking at the camera.

Mrs. Harris smiled.

“Oh, I like this.”

“You said you didn’t like that dress,” her husband said.

“I don’t.”

“You’re wearing the dress.”

“And I still look good.”

He looked at Luna. “You see what I’ve been dealing with for ten years?”

Mrs. Harris didn’t even look up. “He likes the dress.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Luna laughed, and Mr. Harris shook his head before pulling out the chair beside his wife.

She kept going.

Some she passed straight to him. Others she held a little longer before moving to the next. Every few pictures, she asked me something about the size or whether one would look right framed a certain way.

By the time she reached the second stack, Luna had moved closer to the table too.

Mrs. Harris got to the picture of them walking together and stopped.

I recognized it before she turned it around.

Her hand was in his, neither one of them paying attention to me.

“Oh, I love this one.”

Mr. Harris leaned over.

“Which one?”

“This.”

He took it from her.

For the first time since we got there, neither one of them had anything to say.

Mrs. Harris reached for it again after a few seconds.

“I didn’t know you took this.”

“You weren’t supposed to.”

She looked up at me. “What does that mean?”

“You were walking. I took the picture.”

“You didn’t tell us to hold hands?”

“No.”

Her eyes dropped back to the print.

“Huh.”

Mr. Harris smiled. “You grabbed mine.”

“Apparently.”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“I do.”

She looked at him. “No, you don’t.”

“I remember everything.”

Luna laughed again, and this time Mrs. Harris joined her.

She set the picture aside instead of putting it back with the others.

“That one’s going in the living room.”

She continued through the rest of the prints. By the time she reached the bottom of the box, she’d decided she wanted another one enlarged, and Mr. Harris had complained at least twice about how much money the pictures were costing him.

He didn’t sound particularly bothered.

Mrs. Harris started putting the prints back into their wrapping.

I helped her separate the ones she wanted framed from the ones she was putting in an album, and a few minutes later, the box was empty except for the packing paper.

Mrs. Harris walked us back toward the front door.

“Thank you, Ellis. I really do love them.”

“I’m glad.”

“I knew I would, but I really do.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Mrs. Harris told Luna.

“You too. Happy anniversary.”

“Thank you.”

Mr. Harris opened the door for us. “Ten years.”

Mrs. Harris patted his arm as she passed him. “And hopefully you’ll make it to eleven.”

“I’ve made it this far.”

“Barely.”

Their argument followed us onto the porch.

Luna waited until the door closed behind us before she looked at me.

“I really do like them.”

I smiled. “You said that before we got here.”

“No, I said I liked their pictures.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Now I like them too.”

I nodded as we headed down the walkway. “Mrs. Harris liked you.”

“She has good taste.”

We made it to the end of the street before Luna looked over at me.

“You knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That she was going to pick that picture.”

“The hand-holding one?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought she might.”

“How?”

I glanced at her before turning onto the main road.

“I don’t know. You start noticing things after a while.”

“What things?”

“Which pictures people keep coming back to. Usually it’s not the one they thought they’d like when we started.”

Luna shifted toward me a little. “Why not?”

“Because people worry too much about the camera when they know it’s there. How they’re standing. Whether they’re smiling right. What they’re supposed to do with their hands.”

“So basically me.”

I laughed. “You said it.”

“I hate taking pictures.”

“I know.”

“I never know what I’m supposed to do.”

“That’s because you’re thinking about it too much.”

She looked at me. “That sounds like something you’ve told me before.”

“Probably.”

“You have.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“I didn’t ask.”

I smiled and kept driving.

For a minute, she didn’t say anything. I figured the conversation was over until she reached for the air vent and turned it away from her.

“So what makes a good picture, then?”

I thought about it for a second. “Depends.”

“On?”

“What I’m shooting. Who I’m shooting. What they want.”

“That’s a terrible answer.”

“It’s the real one.”

She waited.

I glanced at her.

“What?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

I did.

I just made her wait another second before I answered.

“The ones that feel like the person.”

Luna was quiet beside me.

I kept my eyes on the road.

“Anybody can stand where I tell them to stand and smile when I tell them to smile. Sometimes those come out good too. But usually the ones people keep are the ones where they recognize something.”

“In themselves?”

“Or whoever they’re looking at.”

She settled back against the seat.

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m thinking.”

“That dangerous?”

“Shut up.”

I smiled.

She turned toward the window, and I left her alone with whatever she was thinking.

By the time we got back to my house, Luna had moved on from photography and spent the last ten minutes telling me about an order that showed up with six copies of the wrong book.

“They better fix it. I needed those for a display tomorrow.”

I laughed and cut the engine.

“They’re fixing it?”

“They better be. I emailed them before we left.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is I needed those books today.”

“For what?”

“A display I’m putting together tomorrow.”

I got out and grabbed the empty box from the back seat.

Luna met me around the front of the truck.

She followed me inside.

My camera bag was still on the dining room table where I left it before we went out, along with the packing paper I didn’t use and two extra prints I caught before closing the box.

Luna dropped her bag onto one of the chairs.

“You left a mess.”

“I was working.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?”

“It is when it makes me money.”

I set the box beside the table and started gathering the paper.

Luna reached for one of the prints.

“Is this theirs too?”

I looked over.

“Extra.”

She picked it up.

It was the same picture Mrs. Harris set aside first.

“Why’d you print another one?”

“I always do a couple extras.”

“In case something happens?”

“Sometimes. Or if I like one.”

Her eyes moved from the picture to me.

“So you really did like this one.”

“I told you I did.”

“I know.”

She looked at it again before setting it carefully on the table.

“They looked happy.”

“They were.”

I looked back.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She smiled and reached for another piece of packing paper.

I took it from her.

“You don’t have to help.”

“I know.”

“You keep doing stuff you don’t have to do today.”

“So?”

“So nothing.”

I threw the paper into the box.

Luna reached for another piece anyway.

I let her have it.

For the next few minutes, we cleaned up what I left behind before the delivery. It didn’t take long. Most of it was mine, but Luna found something to do anyway, stacking the extra prints while I put the rest of my equipment away.

When I came back from the office, she was standing near the refrigerator.

“You hungry?”

“A little.”

“What you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Helpful.”

“What do you have?”

I opened the refrigerator.

She came up beside me and looked inside.

“You have ingredients.”

“That’s usually how food works.”

She closed the refrigerator and started opening cabinets.

I leaned against the counter. “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“This is my kitchen.”

She opened another cabinet.

“And?”

I shook my head.

This was what she did now.

Came into my house and put her bag down like she knew she’d be there awhile. Checked my cabinets when she was hungry. Left a charger beside my couch and got mad when Mila used it even though she kept telling her she could.

None of it happened all at once.

I didn’t remember the first time she stopped asking for a glass before getting one herself, or when I stopped telling her where things were because she already knew.

I just knew I noticed when she wasn’t there now.

Luna closed another cabinet.

“You have nothing I want.”

“You don’t even know what you want.”

“That is not the point.”

“It feels like the point.”

She turned around and leaned back against the counter.

“What do you want?”

I looked at her.

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

I could’ve told her food.

Could’ve told her I didn’t care and made her choose, which was probably where this conversation was headed anyway.

Instead, I kept looking at her.

She waited.

And there wasn’t some big shift inside me before I said it. No thought I hadn’t had before or feeling I needed another minute to understand.

It was just Luna standing in my kitchen.

“I love you.”

She didn’t move.

For a second, I wondered if she heard me.

Then her mouth curved.

Not surprised.

Not nervous.

Just soft.

“I love you too.”

I smiled.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I reached for her hand and pulled her away from the counter. She came without resisting, her hands settling against my chest when my arm went around her waist.

I kissed her.

She kissed me back, slow at first, then deeper when her arms slid around my neck. By the time I pulled away, the refrigerator was still open behind us and neither one of us had figured out what we were eating.

Luna looked at me for a second, a small smile still on her face.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That doesn’t look like nothing.”

“I’m happy.”

The answer was simple, but something about hearing her say it made me pull her closer again.

“Me too.”

She smiled and kissed me once more before slipping out of my arms.

“Now, can we eat?”

I looked at the open refrigerator. “You were the one going through my kitchen.”

“Because you have nothing.”

“I have food.”

“You have ingredients.”

“That you can cook.”

She closed the refrigerator and looked at me. “Why am I cooking?”

“You’re the one complaining.”

“I came over here as a guest.”

“A guest?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been here all day.”

“And?”

“You went in my cabinet without asking.”

“I didn’t know there was a time limit on being a guest.”

I laughed and reached for my phone.

“What do you want?”

“To order something.”

“I figured that part out.”

She came closer to look at the screen while I pulled up the options nearby, resting one hand against my arm.

“Not that.”

“I didn’t pick anything yet.”

“I saw what you were looking at.”

“You don’t want that?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t.”

I scrolled past it.

“Okay. You pick.”

I handed her the phone.

She took it, but before she could move away, I caught her around the waist and kissed the side of her head.

“I love you.”

Luna looked up at me.

There wasn’t any hesitation this time either.

“I love you too.”

Then she looked back at my phone.

“Now let me order before everything closes.”

I laughed and let her go.

She ended up ordering from the same place I suggested five minutes ago.

I waited until she put my phone down.

“We could’ve saved some time.”

“I needed to look at the options.”

“You picked the first option.”

“After looking at the options.”

I smiled.

She pointed at me. “This is why I don’t tell you things.”

“You just told me you love me.”

Her hand dropped.

“That was before this.”

“Can’t take it back.”

She walked out of the kitchen. “Watch me.”

I laughed.

“Where you going?”

“To sit down and wait for my food.”

“Our food.”

“The way you’re acting, yours might not make it.”

I followed her into the living room, where she took her usual spot on the couch and reached for the remote. Before I could sit down, she stretched her legs across the cushions.

“Move.”

“You have a whole couch.”

“And I want this part.”

I shook my head but sat anyway, lifting her feet into my lap.

Luna turned on the TV like the argument was settled.

Maybe it was.

I rested my hand over her ankle while she started scrolling through something for us to watch.

Nothing about the room looked different than it did that morning.

Neither did she.

I liked that too.

OceanofPDF.com



NAOMI MADE a noise from behind the counter that had me looking up from the invoice in front of me.

"What?"

She didn't answer.

"Naomi."

"Hold on."

I stared at her. She was standing over a stack of mail with one hand pressed against her mouth.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you standing like that?"

Her eyes lifted to mine.

"It came."

I frowned. "What came?"

She held up a magazine.

I knew before I could read the cover.

"Oh."

"Oh?" Naomi repeated. "That's all you got?"

"Give it to me."

She turned away and started flipping through the pages.

"Naomi."

“I’m finding it.”

“You are not reading my article before me.”

“Found it.”

That stopped me.

Naomi turned the magazine around.

A CHAPTER OF HER OWN

The words stretched across the top of the page above a picture of me standing between two shelves.

For a second, I just looked at it.

I remembered when the picture was taken. The photographer had followed me through the store until I stopped noticing her, but I didn’t remember this one specifically. I was holding a book in one hand and looking toward something outside the frame.

Underneath the picture was my name.

Luna Bennett, Owner of Chapter & Charm.

“Girl.”

I took the magazine from Naomi.

“They used that picture?”

“You look good.”

“I look like I’m talking.”

“You probably were.”

I ignored her and looked at the other page. There was another picture of the store beneath the title. Customers near the front. The café in the background. One of the display tables I’d spent entirely too long rearranging that morning.

Then the article started.

I read the first paragraph standing right there at the counter.

Chapter & Charm was described as the kind of bookstore that made people want to stay longer than they planned.

I read the sentence again.

“Well?” Naomi asked.

“I’m reading.”

“Out loud.”

“You have your own copy.”

She looked down at the stack of magazines that came with the mail.

“Oh.”

“Exactly.”

She grabbed one.

For the next few minutes, neither of us said much while I read about the store. About Open Mic Night and author events. About the café and the local author section. About customers coming back often enough that we knew their names and what they liked to read.

Then I got to my own words.

Somewhere along the way, people stopped only coming here for books. They started coming because this was one of their places.

I remembered saying it. I remembered sitting across from the writer and realizing it was true while the store moved around us.

It looked different in print. Bigger somehow. Not because the words changed, but because somebody else heard them and thought they were worth putting on a page.

“Oh, I like this part,” Naomi said.

I glanced over. “Where are you?”

She pointed to the second page.

“Where you talked about being proud people come back.”

“I remember.”

I kept going until I reached the last paragraph. The writer ended with the same thing we’d spent most of the interview talking about: community. The way Chapter & Charm had grown into something beyond the idea I had when I first decided I wanted a bookstore.

I finished and turned back to the beginning.

Naomi looked at me. “Well?”

I smiled.

“I like it.”

“That’s it?”

“I really like it.”

“Better.”

I looked down at the first page again.

There was a time when I would’ve found something to qualify the moment with.

It’s only local. It’s only a few pages. It’s not that big of a deal.

I didn’t feel like doing that today.

Chapter & Charm was in a magazine. My bookstore. Something I built was sitting in my hands, written about like it mattered because it did.

I let myself enjoy that.

“We need to frame it,” Naomi said.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s obnoxious.”

“Being proud of yourself is obnoxious?”

“Putting an article about yourself on the wall of your own business is.”

She took the magazine from me. “I’m framing mine.”

“At your house?”

“No. Here.”

“Naomi.”

She walked away before I could stop her.

I was still laughing when Maya came from the café.

“What are y’all arguing about?”

Naomi held up the magazine. “We’re famous.”

I closed my eyes. “Please don’t start that again.”

Maya took the magazine from her. “Let me see.”

I shook my head and went back behind the counter.

I made it through half of the invoice before Maya called my name.

“Luna.”

“What?”

“You look cute.”

“Thank you.”

“Look at you accepting a compliment.”

I looked up. Naomi was smiling.

“Both of y’all have work to do.”

“So do you,” Naomi said.

“Which is why I’m doing it.”

I turned back to my computer.

The magazine stayed open on the counter beside me.

By lunchtime, three customers had mentioned the article.

One of them saw it before she came in. Another spotted the copies near the register and bought one along with her books. The third asked whether I was going to start charging for autographs now.

“Absolutely.”

She laughed. “How much?”

“Twenty dollars.”

“For your signature?”

“You brought it up.”

She shook her head and took her receipt.

“Congratulations, Luna.”

“Thank you.”

That part got easier every time I said it.

Thank you.

No explanation afterward. No reason the compliment didn’t quite count.

Just thank you.

The bell above the door rang again while I was putting a return beneath the counter.

“Miss Luna!”

I smiled before I looked up.

Mila was already coming toward me, with Ellis following behind her, one hand holding the strap of her backpack.

“Hey, Bug.”

“Daddy said your magazine came out.”

“It did.”

“Where is it?”

Not hello. Not how are you.

I pointed to the stack.

She grabbed one and immediately started flipping through it.

Ellis reached the counter.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

He leaned across and kissed me. It was quick, familiar enough now that I barely thought about the fact that Naomi was somewhere nearby and would probably have something to say about it later.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“You read it?”

“Twice.”

“And?”

“I like it.”

He smiled. “Just like it?”

“I really like it.”

“There you go.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“You and Naomi need to stop comparing notes.”
“We don’t.”
“Could’ve fooled me.”
“Miss Luna.”
I looked down.
Mila had the magazine spread open across the counter.
“Where am I?”
I laughed. “I don’t think you’re in it.”
Her face fell.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

“Why not?”
“Because it’s about the bookstore.”
“I come here.”
“You do.”
“A lot.”
Ellis took the magazine from her.
“That doesn’t mean you get to be in everything.”
“Why?”
“Because it doesn’t.”
She looked at me like she expected a better answer.
“Sorry, Bug.”
“Can I see the pictures?”
“They’re right there.”
Ellis handed the magazine back, and Mila started from the beginning again.
He reached for another copy.
“You haven’t read it yet?”
“Nope.”
“I thought you knew it came out.”
“Naomi texted me.”

I looked toward the other end of the store. “Of course she did.”

“She sent me a picture of the first page.”

He laughed and opened the magazine.

“I’ll read it now.”

“You don’t have to stand here and read it.”

Ellis looked at me over the top of the page.

“I know.”

The answer made me smile.

I turned back to the computer and let him read.

Mila wandered toward the children’s section after deciding there weren’t enough pictures to keep her interested. Ellis stayed at the counter.

Every now and then, I glanced over. He actually read the whole thing. Not skimmed. Read.

When he got to the end, he closed the magazine.

I waited.

His mouth curved.

“You want to know what I think.”

“Maybe.”

He put the magazine on the counter.

“I think it sounds like you.”

I wasn’t expecting that.

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“Helpful.”

He smiled.

“You should be proud of yourself.”

I looked down at the magazine between us.

“I am.”

Ellis’s smile changed.

“Good.”

I looked at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I can look at my girlfriend.”

I laughed.

“You stole that from me.”

“Still works.”

I reached across the counter and took the magazine from him.

“Go find your child.”

“She knows where I am.”

“That wasn’t what I said.”

He walked away smiling.

I watched him for a second before putting the magazine beneath the counter where it wouldn’t get bent.



“YOU DO NOT NEED TWO COPIES.”

Naomi tucked both magazines under her arm. “One is mine.”

“And the other one?”

“Also mine.”

I stared at her.

“Goodnight, Luna.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’re in a magazine.”

She made it out the door before I could tell her to shut up.

Maya wasn’t much better. She left a few minutes later after making me promise to save another copy because apparently her mother needed one too.

Once they were gone, Chapter & Charm settled into its after-hours quiet.

Ellis and Mila were still here.

Mila sat at one of the café tables doing homework while Ellis brought in the sign from outside. I counted the register, printed what I needed for tomorrow, and straightened the counter while he locked the front door behind him.

“Almost done?” he asked.

“Almost.”

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

“I was less almost then.”

“That makes no sense.”

By the time I came around the counter, Mila had packed her backpack and was waiting near the door.

“Can we eat now?”

Ellis looked at me. “Apparently she’s starving.”

“I am.”

“You had a snack an hour ago.”

“That was a snack.”

I grabbed my bag. “She has a point.”

Mila smiled.

Ellis shook his head. “Both of y’all.”

I laughed and reached for the magazine I tucked away earlier.

“You taking that home?” Ellis asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thought framing it was obnoxious.”

“I’m not framing it.”

“Yet.”

“Ever.”

He smiled like he didn’t believe me.

I slid it carefully into my bag.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Give me a second.”

I made one last walk through the store, something I did every night. I checked the café and the back, made sure nothing was left somewhere it shouldn’t be, and turned off the lights as I went.

By the time I reached the front again, most of Chapter & Charm was dark. The light above the register was the last one.

I stopped beneath it.

The store was quiet now, but evidence of the day was everywhere. A chair near the café wasn’t pushed all the way in. There was a book on the return cart that I’d shelve tomorrow. The stack of magazines beside the register was smaller than it was that morning.

I looked around.

I used to think safety had something to do with certainty. Knowing what came next. Knowing exactly where I stood. Knowing enough to keep myself from being surprised by the wrong thing.

For a long time, I thought if I paid close enough attention, I could protect myself. If I noticed the shift before it became distance, if I gave

enough without needing too much back, maybe I could keep something from falling apart.

I couldn’t.

And for a while after that, I thought the answer was needing less. Depending on myself. Keeping enough of me separate that if somebody changed their mind, they couldn’t take too much with them.

But standing there now, I knew that wasn’t safety either.

Safety wasn’t found in knowing nothing would ever hurt me again. It was found in knowing I wouldn’t have to face it alone.

That didn’t mean I knew what happened next.

I didn’t.

I didn’t know what Chapter & Charm would look like five years from then. I didn’t know what parts of my life would change or which plans would work exactly the way I expected them to.

For once, I didn’t need to.

“Luna?”

I turned.

Ellis was standing near the door with my coat draped over one arm. Mila was beside him, leaning against his side while she waited.

“You coming?”

I looked at them. At Mila fighting a yawn she would absolutely deny if I pointed it out. At Ellis holding the coat I forgot on the back of my chair. At the two of them waiting for me like there was never any question that I would be walking out with them.

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

I reached for the last light, and the store went dark.

Ellis held my coat out when I reached him, and I slipped my arms into it before picking up my bag.

Mila reached for my hand.

I took it.

Ellis opened the door, and the bell above it gave one last chime as we stepped outside. Once I locked Chapter & Charm behind us, his hand found mine too.

I laced my fingers through his.

Then the three of us walked away together.

OceanofPDF.com



TWO YEARS LATER

"You're going to be late."

"I'm not going to be late."

"You said that ten minutes ago."

"Because you asked me ten minutes ago."

Ellis stared at me from the bedroom doorway.

I stared back.

"That's not how time works."

"I don't appreciate your tone."

His mouth twitched.

"Baby."

"I'm coming."

"You aren't even dressed."

"I am dressed."

Ellis's eyes traveled slowly down my body, taking in the T-shirt I'd thrown on after my shower and the shorts I'd had on since that morning. When his gaze made its way back to my face, one eyebrow was raised.

I looked down at myself like maybe I'd missed something. "This is an outfit."

"For the house."

"According to who?"

“Society.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back toward the clothes spread across the bed. I’d already changed my mind twice, which was probably why he’d been standing in the doorway watching me instead of believing any of my promises that I was almost ready.

“Go help your child,” I told him, waving him toward the hallway.

“Our child was ready before both of us.”

My hand stilled over the dress I’d been reaching for.

Our child.

I paused.

Even after two years, he still did that sometimes. Said something without realizing it carried enough weight to stop me where I was.

Not in a way that erased Elena. Nothing in this house did. Her pictures were still here. Mila still told stories that began with, “My mommy used to...” Ellis still said her name. So did I.

Loving them had taught me that making room for something new didn’t require destroying what came before it. Grief could live beside joy.

“Luna?”

I blinked.

Ellis was still watching me.

“What?”

His expression softened.

“Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere.”

He walked into the room.

“That was somewhere.”

I reached for the shirt hanging across the foot of the bed.

“We’re going to be late.”

“Oh, now we’re worried about time?”

Ellis caught me around the waist before I could pass him.

I laughed. “Move.”

“No.”

“We have somewhere to be.”

“I’ve been saying that.”

“And now you’re holding us up.”

His mouth brushed mine.

“Seems worth it.”

I kissed him once before pushing against his chest.

“Go.”

He kissed me again.

“Ellis.”

“All right.”

He let me go, but not before his hand slipped from my waist and settled over the curve of my stomach.

It had become a habit over the last few months.

Sometimes I didn’t think he even realized he was doing it.

His palm stayed there while his thumb moved once beneath my shirt, and when I looked down, the ring on my left hand caught the light.

Nine months later, I still wasn’t completely used to seeing it there.

The stomach was newer.

Thirty-five weeks newer.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I told him.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m doing something.”

“You are doing something.”

“I’m standing here.”

“Growing my baby.”

“Our baby.”

His smile came slowly.

“Exactly.”

I rolled my eyes, but there was no stopping mine.

“Luna!”

Mila yelled from downstairs.

“See?” I pointed toward the hallway. “Your other child needs you.”

“Our other child,” he corrected.

Something in my chest squeezed.

“Go.”

He finally did.

I stood there for another second after he left, my hand falling naturally to the place his had just been.

Then I shook my head and finished getting dressed.

Twenty-five minutes later, Chapter & Charm came into view.

The new sign had gone up last month.

I still slowed down every time I saw it.

Not because the name had changed.

I would never change the name.

But beneath **CHAPTER & CHARM**, there were smaller letters now.

BOOKS • COFFEE • COMMUNITY

The expansion had taken almost a year.

A year of permits and contractors and me nearly losing my mind over paint samples.

A year of Ellis reminding me that I could ask for help.

A year of actually learning to do it.

Maya ran the café side now.

Naomi still claimed she was the only reason the bookstore hadn't burned to the ground.

She was wrong.

Mostly.

When we walked inside, the store was already full.

Too full.

I stopped just past the door.

There were people everywhere.

My parents were near the café.

Tasha was standing beside them with my nephew.

Naomi was behind the register wearing an expression I immediately didn't trust.

I turned toward Ellis.

"Why is your sister here?"

He shrugged.

I narrowed my eyes.

"And my parents?"

Another shrug.

"Ellis."

Mila giggled beside us.

My head turned slowly toward her.

Her eyes went wide.

Ellis reached for my hand. "Come on."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

"I own the building. There's nowhere in here I haven't seen."

He kept walking.

That should’ve been my first clue.

The second should’ve been Naomi pulling out her phone.

“Why are you recording?”

“No reason.”

“Naomi.”

Ellis stopped in front of the back wall.

For months, it had been empty. I’d planned to use it for local author displays eventually, but there was always something more important.

It wasn’t empty anymore.

Photographs covered the wall, and I recognized the first one immediately—the original Open Mic Night.

My hand flew to my mouth. “Ellis.”

He said nothing.

My eyes moved from one photograph to the next. There were pictures from that night and the events that came after it. Mila sitting cross-legged in the children’s section. Naomi behind the counter. My parents at one of our anniversary celebrations. Maya carrying trays from the café. Tasha and Mila laughing together.

Readers and authors filled the spaces between them, laughing, hugging, finding each other between the shelves.

Then I saw the photograph in the center.

Me.

I was behind the register, looking toward something outside the frame, and I didn’t remember him taking it.

Underneath the photographs was a small plaque.

THE LIFE WE FOUND ALONG THE WAY

I read it twice.

Then a third time.

“Ellis.”

He stepped beside me.

“I thought that wall needed something.”

I turned toward him.

“You did all of this?”

“Had some help.”

Naomi waved from across the room.

“Against my will.”

“She’s lying,” Ellis said.

“I’m absolutely lying.”

People laughed around us.

My eyes burned as I looked back at the wall.

“So this is why everybody’s here?”

Silence.

I turned.

That was my third clue.

Naomi’s smile got bigger.

My mother’s hands were already clasped in front of her.

Tasha looked like she was about three seconds from laughing.

And Ellis—

Ellis was trying entirely too hard to keep his face straight.

“What did y’all do?”

Nobody answered me.

Then Mila darted toward the café.

“Mila—”

She grabbed something from behind the counter and ran back toward me, holding what looked like a tiny book.

It took me a second to realize it was an invitation.

She pressed it against her chest like she’d been given the most important job in the world.

“Surprise!”

The room erupted.

I jumped even though I should’ve known something was coming.

Then I looked around again.

Really looked.

The flowers.

The gifts tucked near the café.

The little table covered in children’s books.

The photographs of Ellis and me mixed between decorations.

A sign I’d somehow missed when I walked in.

A NEW CHAPTER IS BEGINNING

“Oh my God.”

My hand went to my stomach.

Ellis came up behind me, his arm sliding around my waist.

“You did all of this too?”

“Some of it.”

“He’s lying,” Tasha called.

“I helped!” Mila said.

“I believe you.”

“I picked the books.”

“That I definitely believe.”

She grinned.

My mother reached me first. The second she wrapped her arms around me, whatever chance I had of keeping myself together disappeared.

“Oh, Mama.”

“I know, baby.”

I laughed against her shoulder even as the first tear slipped free. After her came Daddy, Tasha, my nephew, Naomi—who immediately told me not to get makeup on her—and Maya from behind the café counter.

And somewhere in the middle of all of them, I looked back at Ellis.

He was standing beneath the photographs.

Watching me.

The way he always did.

Like he still couldn’t believe he got to keep any of this either.

My eyes moved from him to the wall.

THE LIFE WE FOUND ALONG THE WAY.

My hand settled over my stomach again, and something shifted beneath my palm.

The movement was small and familiar, but it still caught me sometimes—the reminder of this little life growing inside me.

I laughed through the tears.

“She’s moving.”

Ellis was beside me almost immediately.

His hand covered mine.

“Yeah?”

“Right there.”

He waited.

Then his whole face changed.

There.

Another kick.

Mila rushed over.

“I wanna feel!”

Ellis moved his hand just enough for hers to fit beside it.

My hand.

His.

Hers.

And underneath all three, the smallest member of this family making herself known.

I looked up at the wall again.

At everything Ellis had captured before any of us knew where it was leading.

All those ordinary moments. All those days I thought I was simply living my life.

I didn’t know I was building one.

Sometimes I thought about the woman I was seven years ago, sitting in her car while rain hit the windshield, wondering whether she should wait another five minutes.

I wished I could sit beside her.

Not to change what she did. She figured it out eventually.

I’d just tell her to go.

Start the car. Drive home. Cry if you need to. Be angry. Miss him. Almost call him, but don’t.

Wake up tomorrow and do it again.

One thing at a time.

Because there was so much waiting for her that she couldn’t see yet.

A little girl who was going to leave her jacket in her bookstore so many times she’d eventually stop pretending it wasn’t supposed to be there. A man with a camera who would stay after closing without being asked. A bookstore she hadn’t finished building.

A version of herself she hadn’t met yet.

And a love she wouldn’t have to bleed herself dry to keep.

Ellis’s fingers slipped through mine.

I looked down at our hands.

My ring caught the light.

“You okay?” he asked.

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

He studied me for another second.

Then his expression softened.

“Come here.”

I went without hesitation.

His arms closed around me, and I rested my cheek against his chest while the bookstore moved around us.

Mila laughed somewhere behind me while Naomi told somebody entirely too loudly that she was responsible for all of this. The espresso machine hissed from the café, and the bell above the front door rang again.

Life kept happening.

Beautifully.

Ordinarily.

Mine.

Ellis pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“I love you,” he murmured.

I closed my eyes.

There was a time when those words would’ve made me wonder what I needed to do next.

How to keep them.

How to deserve them.

Now, I simply let them belong to me.

“I love you too.”

His arms tightened around me.

Standing there, surrounded by every piece of the life I once couldn’t see waiting for me, I thought about how afraid I used to be of wanting any of it.

I tilted my head and found Ellis already looking at me.

The man who never asked me to prove I was worth staying for. Who showed me that being chosen could feel quiet and steady without me having to hold my breath waiting for it to disappear.

I smiled.

After everything it took to get there, there was nowhere in the world I’d rather be than *safe with you.*

THE END!!!!!!!!!!!!!

OceanofPDF.com



Thank you so much for taking this journey with Luna and Ellis.

Safe With You holds such a special place in my heart. At its core, this story is about learning that love isn't something you should have to earn. It's about what happens when you've spent so much time questioning whether you're enough that being loved freely almost feels harder to trust than being loved conditionally.

Luna's journey is one of learning that being chosen should never require losing pieces of herself. She didn't need Ellis to save her, and I never wanted him to. She needed to choose herself first. Ellis simply showed her that love could meet her where she was—without asking her to become smaller, quieter, easier, or anything other than herself.

Ellis's journey is different, but just as important. Loving again doesn't mean forgetting the love that came before. Elena will always be part of him and Mila, and making room for Luna was never about replacing her. I wanted this story to hold space for the truth that grief and joy can coexist, and that opening your heart to something new doesn't diminish what you once had.

More than anything, I wanted Luna and Ellis's love to feel safe. Not perfect. Not untouched by fear or grief. Just steady, honest, and safe.

If you saw yourself anywhere in these pages, I hope you walk away knowing you were never asking for too much by wanting to be loved fully.

You should never have to audition for your place in someone's life, and love should never require you to lose yourself just to keep it.

Thank you for loving Luna, Ellis, Mila, and Chapter & Charm with me. I hope their story reminded you that sometimes walking away isn't the end of your happily ever after.

Sometimes, it's where it begins.

With all my love,

Kiriah Kaché 🤎

OceanofPDF.com



Thank you for reading *Safe With You*. Whether you're discussing with your book club, reading with a friend, or reflecting on your own, I hope these questions give you a chance to sit with Luna and Ellis's story a little longer.

1. Luna believes love is something she has to earn. Where do you think that belief showed up most strongly in her relationship with Ellis?
2. At what point did you feel Luna and Ellis's relationship shift from friendship into something deeper?
3. Ellis is learning how to love again without feeling like he's replacing Elena. How did you feel about the way the story balanced his past and his future?
4. What moment made you trust Ellis as a partner for Luna?
5. Luna and Ellis both carry different kinds of loss into their relationship. How do you think those experiences shaped the way each of them approached love?
6. What did "safe" mean to Luna at the beginning of the book versus at the end?
7. Which relationship outside of the central romance had the biggest impact on you, and why?

8. Was there a moment when you wanted Luna or Ellis to make a different choice? Why?
9. Which scene best represented the kind of love *Safe With You* is about?
10. Ellis often showed his feelings through consistency rather than grand gestures. Which of his actions stood out to you the most?
11. What do you think *Safe With You* ultimately says about the difference between being loved and **feeling safe in that love**?
12. If you had to describe Luna and Ellis's love in **one word** other than "safe," what would it be?

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT KIRIAH KACHE

Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”



Kiriah Kaché is a Mississippi native and author who has always found refuge in words. From an early age, writing became her safe space, a place where imagination thrived and stories offered both comfort and escape. What began as a childhood passion evolved into purpose, transforming an avid reader into a storyteller committed to creating meaningful, emotionally rich narratives.

Her experience within the field of education has shaped her thoughtful, empathetic approach to storytelling, grounding her work in real, lived emotion. She writes for those navigating

life’s in-between seasons and for the dreamers still chasing their happily ever after.

OceanofPDF.com



Find all my books on Amazon.

Visit my Website.

OceanofPDF.com



While every effort has been made to ensure this book is error-free, mistakes can occasionally slip through.

If you happen to catch a typo, formatting issue, or any other error, please feel free to email me at authorkiriahkache@gmail.com.

Your feedback is appreciated and helps me continue to grow as an author. Thank you for your support!

OceanofPDF.com



Facebook: Facebook (Author Kiriah Kache)
Instagram: IG (@authorkkache)
TikTok: Tiktok (@therealkiriahkache)
Facebook Group: Facebook Group (Kiriah Kache Collective)
Website: www.authorkiriahkache.com
Patreon: Join Here (AuthorKiriahKache)
Mailing List: Subscribe Here

OceanofPDF.com