



Irish Getaway

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: When world-famous actress Evelyn Cole, 47, escapes the pressures of Hollywood for a secluded Irish estate, she expects to find solitude and a chance to rediscover herself.

What she doesn't expect is Claire Hurley, the captivating 29-year-old stable manager who stirs a passion in Evelyn she's never experienced before, tempting her to step out of the shadows and embrace her true self.

As Evelyn and Claire's relationship unfolds against the picturesque setting of the West of Ireland, they must navigate the complexities of their growing attraction while confronting the realities of their very different lives.

Evelyn, long closeted and grappling with her identity, begins to open her heart to Claire. But with Evelyn's Hollywood life calling her back and societal expectations weighing heavily, can she take a leap of faith to embrace her truth and fight for a chance at real love?

Total Pages (Source): 41

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The scent of coconut sunscreen lingered on Evelyn Coleman's skin as she reclined on the cushioned lounger. The sun's rays warmed her skin, promising a natural tan in just a few days. She closed her eyes, listening to the gentle lapping of the infinity pool's waterfall, willing the rhythmic sound to relax her, but it was going to take more than some soothing background noise for her to get over yet another part slipping out of her grasp.

The loud thudding of her phone vibrating on the table beside her cut through the peaceful silence. She sighed as she opened her eyes and slid her shades on top of her head. She saw her manager's name on the screen for what felt like the tenth time today.

Evelyn stared at the screen, not yet ready to talk to Arianna. She set the phone down and reached for the chilled glass of lemonade beside it, the condensation wet against her palm. She took a long drink, the ice cubes gently clinking against one another. The sound of the sliding door opening drew her gaze to the house.

Evelyn stifled a sigh, knowing Arianna had let herself in with the spare key meant for emergencies. This hardly qualified as one. If Evelyn chose not to answer her phone, Arianna should respect that.

"There you are," Arianna's clipped voice carried across the pool area. "You've been avoiding my calls I see." She stood in front of Evelyn, blocking out the sun, her eyes flicking to the phone that was within Evelyn's reach.

“I need some time to process this.” After the first leading role she’d lost two years ago, she’d thought it had been a one-off thing. But the second time it happened, the actress had been ten years younger than her. The third time, Arianna had convinced her the director had a history with the actress chosen over her, that her Oscar and three Golden Globes were irrelevant. But now, another role had slipped away, and Evelyn was faced with the harsh reality of being a forty-seven year old woman in Hollywood.

Arianna sighed, her expression softening as she took a seat on the lounge beside her. “I know this is tough, but hiding out here isn’t going to change anything.”

Evelyn met her gaze before sliding her shades back on. “I’m not hiding. I just need some time.”

Arianna didn’t stretch out. She sat facing Evelyn, her hands clasped, her elbows on her thighs. “Call it what you want, but we need to strategize your next move. Sooner rather than later.”

A laugh bubbled up from Evelyn’s throat. “What next move? My last four moves have been complete failures. It’s not a coincidence. It’s not the director. I have to face the fact that I’m getting old, Ari.”

Arianna opened her mouth and closed it again. She pressed her lips together. “I’m not going to argue with you. We both know how unfair this business is to women our age. But that doesn’t mean it’s time to give up. There are other roles. Other projects.”

“Like what?” Evelyn tried to keep the irritation from her voice. This wasn’t Arianna’s fault. It was an inevitable fact about this industry. It had just come sooner than Evelyn had expected. “I’m not ready to be a grandmother yet. I can’t, Ari.”

“I know. And I’m not suggesting that.” Arianna leaned forward, resting a gentle hand

on her forearm. “You’re an incredible actress. It would be a shame to give that up.”

Evelyn exhaled as she turned to meet her manager’s eyes. “I’m just tired of constantly fighting. I really only felt like I belonged when I won that Oscar. That I’d finally cemented my name among the greats, and twelve years later, I can’t get a job?”

She took a deep breath, not willing to get emotional in front of her manager. They’d been working together for the last twenty-nine years, and while they were close, Evelyn wasn’t going to let Arianna see just how defeated she really was. Plus, there was nothing Arianna could do about it.

Evelyn’s gaze drifted to the palm trees rustling in the light breeze. She wasn’t ready to say goodbye to the thing that she loved most in the world, but she couldn’t compromise either just for the sake of staying in the movie business. The idea that her life as she knew it might already be gone made her throat tighten.

Arianna’s voice brought her back to the present. “Evelyn, look at me.”

Evelyn closed her eyes for a second before turning to meet her manager’s eyes.

“You are not done yet,” Arianna said. “And that does mean that we need to strategize about your next move. If you don’t want to do it today, let me come back another day, and we’ll open a bottle of wine and?—”

Evelyn swallowed hard. “Ari, I think I need a break.”

Arianna held her gaze. “Okay. Look, we can schedule something in a week or two.”

“No, I mean an actual break.”

“For how long?”

“A few months.” Evelyn let the words hang between them, bracing for her manager’s objections.

“Wow.” Arianna’s eyebrows rose. “As your manager, I don’t think that’s the right move, but as your friend, if you think you’ll come back recharged and ready to go out looking for your next role, then by all means.” She smoothed her hands over her black slacks. “Will you come out for dinner with me or...?” She sighed softly. “I worry about you being here on your own, for weeks on end.”

“I was thinking of going away.” The idea of getting away only came to her last night, when she couldn’t sleep, and she had no lines to memorize and nothing to look forward to. When she couldn’t switch her mind off, questioning what exactly she was doing with her life, and how she’d committed so many years to a business and an industry who could so easily cast her aside.

“Where?”

“You know how I got an Irish passport right around when we met?” Evelyn felt a smile tugging at her lips. “Back when I thought that I wasn’t going to have any steady work and I might travel around Europe for a few weeks.”

Arianna returned her smile. “But then the jobs kept coming in.”

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Evelyn nodded. “So, I never got there. I kept renewing it, always thinking I’d find a few weeks.”

“But you could go with your American passport for up to ninety days, I think.”

“I don’t want to limit myself like that. Thanks to my grandfather, I have an Irish passport, and I plan on taking full advantage of it. If I’m not ready to come back in three months, I’ll stay.”

Evelyn could see Arianna wrestling with her thoughts. As her manager, she was probably scrambling, trying to figure out how to change Evelyn’s mind, but as her friend, Evelyn knew that Arianna wouldn’t fight her on this.

“Will you stay in touch?” Arianna asked.

“Of course.” Evelyn gave her a warm smile, feeling a sense of relief washing over her, and she hadn’t even organized her flight or found suitable accommodation. “Even better, you should come visit me.”

“I’d love that, but you know how demanding some of my other clients are.”

“I know.”

Rising from the lounge, Evelyn walked over to the edge of the patio, gazing out at the expansive view of the city sprawling below. The late afternoon sun cast an ethereal glow, making everything shimmer. She inhaled deeply, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. This trip to Ireland wouldn’t just be an escape. It would be a chance

to rediscover herself outside the glaring spotlight of Hollywood.

Arianna's heels clicked against the flagstone as she moved to stand beside Evelyn. "I know I can't talk you out of this," she said softly, "But promise me one thing. Don't make any rash decisions about your career while you're away."

"I won't."

"What should I tell Rick? Have you talked to him?"

Evelyn shook her head, knowing she'd have to call her agent once Arianna left. "No. Not yet."

Arianna nodded. "Well, we'll see what the next few weeks bring in terms of scripts. If I find something, can I send it to you?"

Evelyn hesitated, ready to launch back into her argument that her career was effectively over, but she stopped herself. "Sure."

"When are you going?"

Evelyn folded her arms over her chest as she gazed out at the hazy Los Angeles skyline. "As soon as I can book a jet and find the right place to stay. Somewhere quiet. Private."

"Stay in touch," she said, pulling her into a long hug.

Evelyn returned the embrace, closing her eyes as she savored the warmth, unable to remember the last time someone had hugged her away from a movie set. "I will."

She watched as Arianna walked away, the sound of her heels fading into the

background. Turning back to the view before her, Evelyn let out a long breath, letting the weight of her decision settle in.

She knew this trip to Ireland wouldn't magically solve everything. The doubts, the fears, the creeping sense of irrelevance would all follow her across the ocean.

Even if Arianna didn't show it, Evelyn knew she wasn't happy with this decision. Rick wouldn't be either. She could hear his voice in her head before she even thought about making that phone call. 'Don't stay away too long, Evelyn. This town has a short memory.'

But Evelyn had spent her whole adult life listening to other people telling her what was right for her career, her future, and for once, she was going to listen to her own instincts. Not only did she need a break, she needed a change of scenery.

A flicker of excitement stirred within her. The idea of getting away, of leaving it all behind, even if just for a little while, felt exhilarating.

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The familiar scent of hay and horses surrounded Claire Hurley as she moved down the roll of stalls. The gentle whinnying of the horses filled the air along with the occasional stomp. Claire took her time, spending a few moments with each horse, greeting them by name and petting their neck or nose. It was almost meditative for her, and she always allowed the time for it, no matter how many other jobs she had on her list as stable manager that day.

Warm sunlight filtered through the stable windows, illuminating the dust particles floating in the air. As she reached the end of the row, a loud bang followed by a distressed whinny caught her attention. Claire turned to see Finn, the new colt, rearing up in his stall.

Claire approached the stall slowly, her movements fluid and non-threatening. She knew that Finn needed a calm, reassuring presence to settle his nerves.

“Easy there, boy,” Claire murmured, her voice low and soothing. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Finn snorted and pawed at the ground, his ears pinned back. But Claire remained patient, speaking softly and keeping her distance until the light gray colt began to calm down.

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As Finn's breathing slowed, Claire inched closer, extending her hand for him to sniff. The colt stretched his neck, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply. Slowly, tentatively, he nuzzled her palm. The colt leaned into her touch, his earlier anxiety melting away as she ran her hand over Finn's sleek coat, checking for any signs of injury.

"You're doing just fine," she said softly. "We'll take things slow and steady, you and me."

After a few moments, she led Finn out of the stall and into the paddock. Claire spent the next hour working with Finn. She watched carefully for any signs of stress or discomfort, adjusting her approach as needed to keep the colt feeling safe and secure.

After they finished in the paddock, Claire clipped a lead rope to Finn's halter and led him out of the stable for a gentle walk around the grounds of the estate. Finn's hooves crunched on the gravel path as they moved away from the stables and through the dense, wooded area that separated the stables from the main house. Above them, the soft rustling of leaves mingled with the chirps of birds moving among the branches as they followed the path.

This was Claire's favorite part of the grounds. Golden streaks of light filtered through the trees, and it was so peaceful here that she almost felt a sense of reverence each time she passed through the forest. Ferns brushed against her leg, and the scent of moss and fresh rain surrounded them. In the distance, she could just make out the quiet babbling of a stream.

It was only a short walk, maybe twenty minutes, before the land opened up, and they

emerged from the woods to the rolling green fields stretching out as far as she could see, beyond the walls of this estate. Sheep and cows were dots against the landscape, stone walls separating one farmer's field from another.

Just about every friend Claire had growing up had left the west of Ireland, whether it was for New York or Sydney, some only as far as London, but she knew she'd never leave.

She spotted Trish's white car pulled up in front of the main house, and Claire had to assume that a new guest would be arriving shortly. Claire guided Finn towards the house, feeling grateful that their walk so far had gone smoothly.

When Trish had inherited the Georgian manor almost ten years ago now, it had been in need of repairs and some modernization. And although the changes had been made, no one would ever know. The ivy-covered facades and weathered stone kept its old charm from the outside, and inside, all five-bedrooms were luxurious while still holding onto the past, furnished with antique pieces.

There were only so many people who could spend thousands renting a five-bedroom house like this, so it meant that it was only rented out a few times a year to wealthy families who wanted a week away in Ireland, exploring the countryside while staying somewhere grand and completely private.

When Trish offered her the chance to work with the horses here once Claire had finished college, she jumped at the idea. She hadn't really known what she was going to do, but if she could work with horses, she thought she'd be happy. And she had been. For the last five years, she'd been in charge of the stables. Sometimes, Claire gave riding lessons, but most of the time it was simply taking care of the horses and letting the guests come and spend time with them if they wanted.

Trish came out of the house a few minutes later, her blond hair tied back in a ponytail

today. “You might want to add horse whisperer to your CV,” she said with a smile as she strode across the immaculately manicured lawn to meet them halfway.

Claire returned her smile. “Well, when no one’s staying here, I have plenty of time to spend with the horses, and lately, it’s been Finn who’s been getting most of my attention. He’s really come on in the last week though, hasn’t he?”

“He has. And speaking of guests... The house has been booked from yesterday to October.”

“Six months?” Claire asked, her mouth falling open, immediately trying to do the maths and failing miserably. Who could afford to book this place for six months?

Trish nodded. “It’s an American actress who wants to get away for a while. Look, I don’t know much. She just asked me not to tell anyone, and well, you’ll meet her soon enough. Whenever she decides to arrive.”

“She’s not on the way?”

Trish shrugged. “She didn’t say when she’d arrive or when she’d leave. She just wanted to block book the house in case she wanted to stay for the full six months. And I get that. If she’s here for two months and wants to stay longer, she doesn’t have to worry about finding somewhere else to stay. Obviously, money isn’t an issue, and privacy was at the top of the list.”

Claire blinked. She didn’t think anyone had stayed longer than two weeks. Six months? And it was impossible to know what having a famous actress staying here would be like. Would she be demanding? Would she bring staff with her? Would she expect Claire to be her personal tour guide?

“I have no idea what to expect,” Trish said, having similar thoughts to Claire, “But if

she wants to get away from her life in Los Angeles, and she's coming this far to do it, my guess is that she'll keep to herself."

"She knows that there's no staff, right?"

"Yeah. That was a selling point actually. That she'd have the entire house to herself with no personal chef or house keeper."

Claire laughed softly. "Do you think that means she'll do her own washing and cooking?"

"Unless she's bringing people with her, then yes." Trish's lips curved into a smile. "She has my number in case there's some kind of emergency, and the entire house has been fitted with smoke alarms, so we should be fine."

"You won't tell me who it is?" Claire asked as Finn began to paw at the grass. He tossed his head, letting out a soft nicker as if to remind Claire of his presence. She glanced at him, a smile tugging at her lips. "Looks like someone's getting a bit impatient," she said to Trish, giving the lead rope a gentle tug. "I should probably get him back to the stables."

"Sure. I have a few things I need to take care of inside, and no, unfortunately I can't tell you who it is," Trish said with her hands on her hips.

"Will I know her?"

"I think just about everyone in the world knows who she is," Trish said before she gave her a wave and turned to walk back to the house.

Claire ran her hand over Finn's neck, softly stroking his gray coat. "Come on, Finn. Let's head back," she said as he shifted his weight from hoof to hoof, his tail

swishing back and forth.

It was impossible not to let her mind wander as they walked back, noticing a few dark clouds in the distance. Hopefully, they'd get back before it started to rain. Even though she had no idea what to expect or who this new guest would be, it was definitely going to be interesting, and a twinge of excitement mingled with a hint of apprehension as they entered the darkness of the woods on their way back to the stables.

Evelyn stepped out of the impressive period house that she was going to call home for the next several months as the sun was just coming up, although it was hidden by a blanket of clouds. The photos of both the house and the scenery hadn't done either any justice, and after she'd had her driver unload her suitcases from the car and bring them inside, she wanted to start exploring her new home.

Her head was still foggy from the long flight and the time difference, but she didn't let that stop her from taking a walk around the grounds, breathing in the damp, earthy scent as her ankle boots crunched over the gravel.

She'd arrived in the middle of the night, her private jet landing at a small airport in the west of Ireland, and it shouldn't have surprised her how different it was from LAX or JFK. The airport had a single runway and a modest building. A light drizzle had fallen as she'd slid into the backseat of the car, the driver she'd hired taking care of her bags.

Now, Evelyn's eyes swept over the Irish countryside stretched out before her, a patchwork of vibrant greens, and she stood with her hands on her hips, debating whether or not to take a jacket with her, but the forecast had been for a cloudy but dry day. The air was damp yet muggy, so she went without it, knowing that she'd be walking for several miles if she explored the entirety of the grounds, and she didn't want to have to carry around a jacket that she wasn't going to wear.

She didn't know if it was the smartest move, but she planned on trying to stay awake for as long as possible today and having an early night with one of the bottles of wine

from the impressive collection that the owner of the house had welcomed her to.

It had been almost a week since she'd officially booked the house, but she'd had a few loose ends to tie up at home, and Rick insisted on taking her out to dinner before she left. He hadn't exactly tried to talk her out of going, but he didn't hide his disappointment. Turns out, he fully expected her to take whatever roles came her way, grandmotherly or otherwise. That was a problem for her to deal with when she got back to Los Angeles and not a moment sooner.

Evelyn wandered across the short but lush grass taking in the views, still not quite believing that she'd wake up to this every day. She went towards the high perimeter stone wall that looked like it'd been here for hundreds of years, walking along side it. She'd done plenty of press over the years for movies, but that only ever really brought her to cities, so even though she'd been to Dublin, she'd never experienced this part of Ireland.

It was so quiet. The only noises she could hear were the birds hidden away in the trees along the long, windy driveway that led to the house, or cows in a distant field. The occasional neigh of a horse or the bark of a dog were the only other noises that she noticed as she left the grass to follow the gravel path that would bring her to the woods.

She'd only been here for a few hours, and she already knew she'd made the right decision. Yes, she'd be without her private chef who knew her food preferences better than she did at this point, and she wouldn't have a cleaner or her personal assistant at her beck and call, but she almost welcomed that. It had been so long since she'd lived a normal life, she nearly forgot what it was like.

Yes, she could hire a personal chef here or a cleaner, but Evelyn wasn't going to risk it. Whatever else happened during this trip, privacy was the most important thing. The second word got out that she was here, even in the country never mind this area,

her dream of escaping the world would be over, and then she might as well go back to the safety of her own home and security team.

She'd probably been walking for almost a half hour, and when she read the listing for this property, that was one of the things that stood out to her. That if she never left the walls of this estate, she would have hours of walking just on the grounds. She wouldn't be cooped up in a house with a modest backyard.

Evelyn reached the edge of the wooded area just as a few drops of rain began to fall. It was just a drizzle, but once she was under the branches, she didn't feel it. She looked around her as she entered the forest, and there was something almost magical about it. The trees looked ancient, their trunks knotted, with massive roots covered in moss. The forest floor was blanketed in ferns, and she couldn't take in all the shades of green. She paused along the path and stood there for a few moments, taking it all in, loving the scent of the damp earth and the sound of running water coming from a stream somewhere in the distance.

When she emerged from the forest her eyes were drawn to the stables tucked away at the back of the property, and her feet were bringing her there before she could even think about it. It was one of the things she missed the most about her childhood. She'd never been a Girl Scout or taken ballet lessons. Her life, up until she'd turned eighteen and moved to California, had revolved around horses whether it was 4-H shows or going on trail rides. It had been a constant in her life when she lived with her family in Colorado.

She stared out across the rolling green fields, light raindrops landing on her arms and face, but her mind was back in Telluride. She could almost feel the wind whipping through her hair as she tore across a meadow full of wildflowers. Somehow, in all her years in the business, she'd never played a part that had required her to ride a horse, and she hadn't been on one since she left Colorado.

Within seconds, the raindrops fell faster and before Evelyn knew it, she was standing out in the open, caught in a heavy downpour. She cursed under her breath and started to jog towards the stable, the rain falling harder, drenching her long before she could reach cover. She ran hard for the last few yards and her momentum carried her through the stable doors, and colliding directly with a solid, warm body.

The person grunted, staggering from the force of Evelyn barreling into them, but their hands were around Evelyn's waist, keeping them both upright.

Evelyn looked up, her heart still racing from exerting herself, but also from finding someone else here on the property. She blinked as she met the woman's striking blue eyes, her black hair tied back in a ponytail with stray wisps falling across her face.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other, the woman's hands still on her waist, and Evelyn's heart beat faster again, the heat of the woman's skin seeping through her drenched clothing. Her breath caught in her throat, but she swallowed down that feeling, taking a step back, causing the woman's hands to fall away.

"Sorry," Evelyn said with a exhale as she raked her hand through her wet hair, and then she saw that look she'd seen so many times, although this woman was doing a decent job of hiding her shock and recognition.

"No." The woman's hand was on her chest, as if trying to still her own heart. "No. It's fine. You emm... You were just trying to get out of the rain." She visibly swallowed as she held Evelyn's gaze. "You're the new guest. I hadn't realized that you'd arrived."

The woman was probably in her late twenties, and looked like someone you'd find in a stable. She wore a simple black t-shirt and well-worn jeans along with work boots that had seen better days.

“Well, I didn’t mean to run into you like that,” Evelyn said, looking away, needing to break the intense eye contact. “And yes, I’m staying here for the next few months, but I wasn’t aware that anyone else would be here.” Although the second she said it out loud, she knew that didn’t make sense. Someone had to take care of the horses.

“I’m Claire. I work here.” She slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

Evelyn nodded as she took a deep breath. “Evelyn,” she said as her mind drifted off. How had she not put two and two together? She’d seen the photos of the grounds and the stables. Of course, there would be someone back here, taking care of them. And would she have chosen another property because of that?

“How many people work here?” Evelyn asked, trying to temper her irritation.

“Full-time? Just me.” Claire shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Trish who you’ve probably met lives a few miles away, and we do have staff that would come and go between guests. You know, cleaners, landscapers. But I’m the only one who lives on the grounds. In the guest house,” she said, sliding her hand out of her pocket to point over shoulder.

Evelyn pressed her lips together, a shiver running through her. At some point she’d have to let the landscapers in at the very least or she’d be living in a jungle in no time.

Claire cleared her throat. “Do you want to come around the back?” She looked past Evelyn, and the noise of the rain had faded. “It looks like it’s stopped, and I can get you a change of clothes for your walk back. It’s not even a five minute walk away.”

“Okay,” Evelyn said, nodding as she followed Claire out of the stables. In her rush to book something, she’d missed the part where she’d be sharing the grounds with someone else, but then again, it was probably to be expected with the level of upkeep an estate like this would require.

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Claire's reaction hadn't been awful, but she had recognized her, and Evelyn knew she'd have to talk to her. All it would take was one post on social media, one text to a friend, and then the whole world would know exactly where she was.

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Claire's heart raced as she led Evelyn to the back of the stables, following the path to the cozy one-bedroom bungalow she'd called home for years now, the stone exterior blending right in with the landscape. She couldn't believe that the woman she'd just collided with was Evelyn Coleman.

In the six days since Trish had told her about the famous American actress who'd booked the house until October, her mind had bounced from one name to another, wondering who it could be. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that it would be the woman she'd had a crush on for easily the last ten years.

Now, here she was, just inches away. Close enough to touch. Close enough to smell the intoxicating blend of her perfume mixing with the fresh scent of rain that clung to her long damp hair.

"I checked the forecast before I left," Evelyn said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them as they walked. "It said nothing about rain. Just clouds."

Claire smiled. "I wouldn't pay much heed to whatever app told you that. Any day, you could have just about any kind of weather. Seriously," she added, meeting Evelyn's gaze, her eyebrow arched in disbelief. "It changes quickly. So, just be prepared if you're going for another long walk around the estate."

Claire couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this nervous, and as she unlocked her front door and pushed it open, she willed herself to get it together and act like a professional.

She held the door open for Evelyn Coleman. "Give me a second to grab you some clothes," Claire said, leaving the actress standing in the middle of her living area.

Claire took a deep breath as she walked down the short hall to her bedroom, pulling open the wardrobe door and finding something she'd wear on a run, knowing that her jeans or everyday shirts would probably be too small for her. She slid a black Nike tank top off the hanger and found a pair of matching track pants.

Claire found Evelyn standing with her hands on her hips, her eyes surveying the small space. As Claire handed her the fresh clothes, their fingers brushed briefly, and it sent a jolt of heat through Claire, a tingling sensation creeping up her arms as she held her gaze

"Thanks," Evelyn said, her caramel brown eyes flecked with gold.

"The bathroom is just through there," she managed to say.

When Evelyn disappeared behind the door, Claire leaned against the wall, her legs suddenly weak. She closed her eyes, trying to regain her composure, but all she could see was the way Evelyn's wet clothing had clung to her curves, the droplets of water that had glistened on her skin, the intensity of her gaze when their eyes had met.

Claire wiped a hand across her face as she made herself stand up properly, knowing Evelyn would emerge from her bathroom any moment.

When she did, Claire couldn't help but notice that she seemed a bit tense. There was something guarded about her expression, although Claire was having trouble noticing

anything other than Evelyn Coleman wearing her clothes.

“Thanks for the clothes,” Evelyn said, holding her wet ones in her hand. She looked past Claire. “It’s still dry, so I better get back while I can.”

“Sure.” Claire swallowed hard, still not quite believing that Evelyn Coleman was standing in her living room. She moved to the door and opened it.

As Evelyn stepped closer, she paused in the doorway, turning back to face her. “Listen, I need to know that you’re not going to tell anyone that I’m here.” She drew in a sharp breath. “I wasn’t expecting anyone else to be here, and the main reason I’m here is to escape for a while. All it takes is one word on social media or to a friend, and that’s over. I’ll have paparazzi at the gate of this estate, clamoring for a glimpse of me.”

Claire held back her own opinion, that this wasn’t Los Angeles, and instead simply nodded. “You have my word. Other than Trish and myself, no one will know that you’re here.”

Evelyn searched Claire’s eyes for a moment before giving her a small, grateful smile. “Thank you, Claire. I appreciate it.” And then she was gone.

Claire couldn’t stop herself from watching her, her damp hair thrown over one shoulder, her boots crunching along the gravel until she was out of sight.

She took a deep breath before stepping outside and locking the door behind her, knowing that she needed to get back to the stables and that her work would distract her.

All she could think about on the short walk back was that Evelyn Coleman was even more stunning in her person, and that there was something magnetic about her, even

when she was on edge.

Claire spent the rest of her day in a daze, already wondering when she'd catch another glimpse of Evelyn Coleman.

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Evelyn hovered at the entrance to the stables, a neatly folded pile of clothes in her hands. She pulled open the door, gently knocking on it once it was fully open.

“Anyone here?” Evelyn asked.

Claire's voice drifted down the stalls. “Yeah, I'm down at the end.”

Evelyn found her brushing one of the horses, her black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was dressed in a black tank top that clung to her figure and faded jeans.

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“Hi,” Evelyn said with a smile, the familiar scent of the horses bringing back memories of her childhood and all the time she spent in the barn taking care of them.

Claire looked up, a warm smile on her face. “Hey. How are you? Over the jet lag?”

The last time Evelyn saw her here, she was starstruck and flustered, but now she seemed completely at ease, and a feeling of relief washed over Evelyn. It was rare for her to meet someone who treated her like a regular person instead of a celebrity, and Evelyn was so thankful that she wouldn’t have to spend the next six months avoiding her.

“Good,” Evelyn said, glancing down at the clothes in her hand. “Yeah. I’ve just about adjusted to the time difference I think. I just wanted to return these, and thank you again for lending them to me.”

“It was no trouble.” The horse she was brushing neighed, and Claire laughed softly. “Guess, I’m not allowed to stop.” She met Evelyn’s eyes. “Thanks for bringing them back. You can just leave them on that stool.”

Evelyn did just that and leaned against the stall, watching as Claire continued brushing the horse.

“Are you settling in okay?” Claire asked as the horse shifted its weight from one hoof to the other.

“Yeah,” Evelyn said with a sigh.

“Everything okay?” Claire’s lips curved into a smile.

“Sorry. I guess, I’ve run into one problem. I’m nearly out of the fresh meat and vegetables that the owner of the house left for me.”

Claire nodded. “Well, the best shop is about twenty minutes away. Did you rent a car?”

“No,” Evelyn confessed. “I didn’t really think that far ahead. And to be honest, I don’t really want to risk anyone recognizing me. But this is also a problem.”

Claire’s hand stilled. “Well, I get my shopping delivered from a local organic farm every week. On a Tuesday. If you’d like, I could ask them to double the order. That’s the same day the butcher from town comes out with his van. I can get a few bits from him too. You can let me know if there’s anything you’d like in particular, but then I can just drive it all over to the main house. I’ve a quad so I can just take the short cut without going all the way around.”

“You would do that for me?” Evelyn asked, hardly believing that the solution would be this easy.

Claire shrugged, a slight blush coming to her cheeks. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll be over to your back door in less than five minutes on the quad.”

Evelyn nodded, a warmth spreading across her chest. “Thank you. You have no idea. I guess, I’ve been so stuck in my ways all these years that I forgot about the kinds of problems I run into when I get away from my everyday life in Los Angeles.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Claire said quietly, going back to brushing the horse.

Evelyn was about to say goodbye when she realized that she should have Claire’s

number. For the food delivery, but also if anything else cropped up at the house. “Can I get your number?” she asked after a moment.

Claire’s cheeks darkened. “Eh, yeah... Sure.” She nearly dropped the brush as she slid her hand out from underneath the strap and reached for her phone, sliding it out of the back pocket of her jeans.

Evelyn took out hers, and listened as Claire called out her number, reminding her to use the international code. Evelyn tapped on the new entry, and Claire’s phone chimed.

“Maybe for this week,” Evelyn said as she put her phone back in her pocket, “Just get me whatever you’re getting. And let me know what it costs.”

“Okay.” Claire ran her hand along the horse’s neck. “I’ll drop it over to you Tuesday?”

“That would be great.” Evelyn exhaled. “Thank you. I know this isn’t part of your job description. But I really appreciate it.”

Claire nodded. “Let me know if you run into any other problems.”

“I will.” Evelyn held her gaze for a second longer than was necessary, almost wishing she had a reason to stay, which was strange, because three days ago she was mentally cursing the fact that she essentially had a neighbor that she hadn’t asked for. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

Evelyn left, ignoring that feeling that Claire’s warm smile had awoken after so many years of being pushed down. She was so used to hiding anything that might even remotely look like attraction to another woman, that she’d gone into defensive mode without even thinking about it, but on the walk back to the house, Evelyn

remembered that there was no one to witness it.

If she thought Claire was an attractive woman, what was the harm in that? It wasn't like she was ever going to act on it, or that someone like Claire would even be interested.

This was probably the first time in her life that she could allow herself to feel drawn to another woman without worrying about who might notice. She didn't need to put on a show. She didn't need to make sure that she was seen out with a man every few weeks. She could just be herself, and as she followed the path back to the house, her steps felt light, a smile tugging at her lips as a misty rain started to fall.

6

As the sun began to set behind the mountains in the distance, Claire parked her quad at the back of the house. It had been a beautiful day, the first real one of the year, with blue skies from sunrise to sunset, and Claire had taken advantage of the good weather, getting some gardening in outside her bungalow before realizing that it was getting late and that she had to deliver Evelyn's shopping up to the house.

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This was her second week doing this, and since she hadn't seen Evelyn last week, Claire wasn't expecting to now, especially since it was almost nine-thirty.

The air was filled with the scent of freshly cut grass, and Claire wondered how Trish had managed to get the landscapers in under Evelyn Coleman's watch. Maybe Evelyn was okay with it if she knew when they were coming, and she could stay out of sight.

As Claire lifted the heavy crate with both hands and climbed the three steps that led up to the patio area, her steps slowed. Warm gold light filled the patio area, and there was Evelyn, sitting at the table with a glass of wine in hand, watching the sunset.

Evelyn turned when she heard Claire's footsteps. "I thought you'd forgotten about me," she said by way of a greeting. She stood, and dressed in jeans and a gray hoodie, her chestnut brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, her face free of makeup, Claire thought she looked even more beautiful than she did on screen.

Claire swallowed, shifting the crate as she met Evelyn at the back door. "Sorry, I'm so late. I got caught up in the garden. Days like this don't happen too often, so I like to take advantage of them."

"It's fine," Evelyn said as she opened the door and stepped into the kitchen, holding it open for her. "I've been outside all evening too. Yesterday I was thinking about going to Spain for a few days."

Claire laughed as she followed her inside and left the crate on the counter. "The weather here is incredibly unreliable. It's hard when it's May before there's any warm weather or sunshine like we had today."

“Right now,” Evelyn said as she lifted out the meat and put it in the fridge, “That’s the only thing I’m missing. Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Sure,” Claire heard herself saying, even though the idea of spending any time with Evelyn Coleman made her jumpy.

Evelyn poured her a glass of red wine and topped up her own. Claire was beyond distracted by the whole scene, and it still felt surreal to be in this woman’s presence. In the nearly three weeks since Evelyn Coleman had arrived, Claire had only caught glimpses of her when she was walking around the estate, but since that day that Evelyn had stopped by the stables to return her clothes, Claire hadn’t actually spoken to her.

And apparently, Claire was starstruck all over again.

“I have a feeling the sunset is going to be worth watching,” she said as she handed Claire a glass.

“Thanks.” Claire followed her outside and took a seat at the table. The air was cooler now without the sun’s warm rays, and Claire wished she’d brought a jumper with her. She suppressed a shiver as she took a sip of wine, and they both watched the sunset, the mountains dark against the sky that had been painted in shades of pinks and purples.

“So, have you thought about renting a car?” Claire asked after a moment.

Evelyn shook her head. “No. I don’t think I will.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “You haven’t left the estate at all?”

Evelyn sighed. “It might seem crazy, but that’s what my life is like in Los Angeles. I

have a beautiful house with an amazing pool and garden, and I spend most of my time there because leaving the house, unless it's very well planned, almost always ends in chaos."

Claire took another drink. Surely being famous wasn't worth that kind of hassle. And then an idea popped into her head. "I could take you sightseeing, you know. We're just an hour or two from so many beautiful places."

Evelyn looked at Claire like she'd just suggested something absolutely insane. "Do you know who I am?"

Claire felt her lips tugging into a smile. "Yes. Of course, I do."

Evelyn's expression remained serious. "Then you should know that I can't just walk around and go for a drive like a normal person."

Claire crossed one leg over the other. "Of course you can."

Evelyn turned to face her. "You don't think people will recognize me?"

Claire shrugged. "They probably will, but no one is going to bother you."

Evelyn shook her head, her frustration coming through as she spoke. "Why aren't you getting this? I have no security here. I can't just wander around."

Claire nearly sighed. This woman seemed nice, and she was undeniably stunning, but her ego was equally off the charts. "This isn't Los Angeles. You can leave the estate without being chased."

Evelyn sighed heavily. "Respectfully, you have no idea what you're talking about. Every time I go out in public, it needs to be planned. I'm always at risk, whether it's

paparazzi or some crazed fan.”

Claire met Evelyn’s gaze. “Sarah Jessica Parker has been spending time in Donegal for the last thirty years. She’s there every summer with her family, and no one bothers them.”

“Yes, but I’m more famous than Sarah Jessica Parker ever was.”

Claire couldn’t keep herself from laughing at Evelyn’s dead serious response. “Suit yourself,” she said as she brought her glass to her lips.

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They watched the last of the sunset, the pinks and purples fading into navy and black.

“I know I might seem paranoid,” Evelyn said as Claire got up, “But anytime I’ve let my guard down, it’s ended with me being swarmed by photographers or my car being chased.”

“I can’t begin to imagine what your life is like.” Claire stood beside her chair, her heart beating faster, and she felt a twinge of guilt. “I’m sorry,” she said with a sigh. “I was quick to judge you there. And I shouldn’t have been.”

“It’s okay.” Evelyn smiled softly. “Thank you for understanding. I know it’s not easy to.” She stood, hugging herself. “It gets cold quickly.”

Claire nodded, following Evelyn back inside. “I better head back,” she said, setting her glass on the counter beside the sink. “Thanks for the drink.”

“Thanks for bringing me food for the week,” Evelyn said, leaning against the counter, her arms folded across her chest, and Claire had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from grinning like an idiot. Evelyn looked so effortlessly gorgeous in that hoody.

“Well,” Claire said, finding her courage as she slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans, “If you’re not comfortable leaving the estate, you should come down to the stables. We can go for a ride around the grounds or into the next field. Trish owns it, so we won’t bump into a farmer or anything.”

Evelyn’s smiled, her eyes meeting Claire’s. “I would actually love that.”

Claire felt a warmth spread through her chest, and now she was unable to hide her smile. “Okay. We’ll do that then.” She held Evelyn’s eyes for another second. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Claire showed herself out, her steps light as she strode back to her quad. She took a deep breath, inhaling the chilly night air. She might be keeping it together on the outside, but inside, Claire was on a high. She was almost giddy, and on the journey back home, her hair whipping as she drove the quad through the darkness, she let herself have that goofy grin. No one was there to see it, and she couldn’t tell anyone, but she’d just spent the last hour with Evelyn Coleman watching the sunset and sipping on wine.

The whole thing was surreal, and Claire was pretty sure that she’d never forget it.

7

The wind whipped through Evelyn’s hair as she urged her horse into a gallop, the rhythm of its hooves pounding against the grass as they raced across the open field, the incline bringing them to the crest of the hill, the views stretching out before her, the greens vibrant against the clear blue sky.

Evelyn knew that this trip had been the right decision. The weight of her life in Los Angeles had gradually fallen away in the last month, and right now, as she slowed her horse to a trot, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this free, this happy.

She glanced over her shoulder, smiling when she met Claire’s eyes, a few strands of black hair escaping her ponytail as she brought her horse alongside Evelyn’s.

Claire’s smile was infectious. “When I asked you if you were comfortable riding a

horse, that's not at all what I imagined." Her eyes glinted with amusement and possibly a hint of curiosity although she didn't voice it.

Evelyn returned her smile. "I might have downplayed it," she admitted, "But that's only because I thought I might be a bit rusty. I grew up in Colorado, surrounded by horses, but when I left to chase my dreams when I was eighteen... That was it. This is actually my first time on a horse since then."

Evelyn looked away, thrown by the way her throat had just tightened, and her voice had quivered ever so slightly. She hoped Claire hadn't noticed.

"Well, you certainly haven't lost it," Claire said softly. "I could barely keep up."

Evelyn swallowed down her emotions, and the sound of her phone ringing cut through the stillness. She pulled it out of the pocket of her jeans, Arianna's name on the screen. "Do you mind if I take this? It's my manager. We've been playing phone tag for days."

"No, not at all," Claire said as she gently urged her horse forward with a light kick of her heels, giving Evelyn some privacy as she answered the video call.

"Evelyn," Arianna said with a smile. "Are you... Are you out riding?"

"Yes," Evelyn said, grinning. "The views are just..." She flipped the camera around to show her the scenery. "This is just beyond the house where I'm staying. Actually..." She slowly panned the camera. "There it is."

"Wow. It looks amazing," Arianna said. Evelyn turned and tapped the screen to get the camera back on her. "As do you. You look happy."

"I am." Evelyn ran a hand through her hair as her horse slowly walked on.

“Who’s that with you? Was that the woman you said works on the grounds?”

“Yes. That’s Claire.”

Arianna laughed softly. “Well, I’m guessing your opinion of her has changed. The last time I caught you, just after you’d arrived, you weren’t happy to have someone else on the property with you.”

Evelyn pressed her lips together. “Yes, it has. But she’s down at the other side of the estate. The woods and probably a thirty minute walk separate us, so it’s been fine.”

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“Good. I’m glad. Hey, I was thinking of coming out to visit you. Maybe sometime in July?”

“You should.” Evelyn felt her lips sliding into a smile as her eyes landed on Claire who was taking her time, walking maybe fifteen or twenty yards ahead of her.

“You’ll have been there for three months by then. You might even want to come back with me.”

Evelyn’s acting skills came to life as she smiled back at Arianna while internally, all she felt was panic gripping at her throat, her heart beating faster. The thought of returning to the chaos of her failing career sent a shudder of dread through her. She knew she couldn’t stay here forever, but after a month, she was only settling into her new, slower life here.

“Let me know when you’ve booked your flights,” Evelyn said with a smile, hiding the knot of apprehension tightening in her stomach.

“I will. I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. Talk soon.”

As she ended the call, Evelyn took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh scent of the grass and the wildflowers. She wasn’t in complete denial. She knew she’d have to go back. Just not anytime soon.

With a gentle kick of her heels, she urged her horse on, catching up to Claire. As she approached, Claire reached up to remove the elastic band from her ponytail, shaking her hair loose. Evelyn swallowed as she watched Claire run her hands through her

black hair, gathering it up to retie her ponytail. Evelyn knew she was staring, but she couldn't stop herself.

"Everything okay?" Claire asked as she pulled her hair through the band and turned to look at her.

Evelyn blinked. "Yes." She forced herself to smile. "Yeah. Everything's fine." She looked down at her horse, lifting her gaze to the mountains in the distance, anywhere but in Claire's direction.

"You sure?" Claire asked as they started heading back towards the stables.

Evelyn exhaled. "Yeah. She's thinking of visiting in July," she said as their horses fell into a comfortable pace beside each other. "And she threw the idea out there that I could go back with her." She paused, not sure if she wanted to bother Claire with her problems or if she'd even care. "Just before Arianna called, I was thinking about how glad I was that I'd come here. And the idea of going back..." Her voice trailed off. "I mean, I know that I have to at some point, but I can't think about it yet."

Claire didn't say anything for a few moments, and the sounds of birds chirping and the horses' hooves filled the silence.

Evelyn could feel Claire's gaze on her, but she kept her eyes focused straight ahead.

"Don't you have to go back at some point in July? I thought three months was the longest Americans could stay."

"I would if I didn't have an Irish passport," Evelyn said softly, daring herself to look at Claire again, reminding herself that it was okay to admit to herself that she found this woman attractive. No one was here to notice, and Claire would never suspect.

Claire's warm laugh made Evelyn smile. "You're full of surprises."

Evelyn ran a hand through her hair. "This is my first time using it though," she confessed. "I applied for one when I was eighteen. I wasn't making much progress in Los Angeles, and I was thinking about exploring Europe for a while. I knew my grandfather was Irish, and that I could get a passport that way."

"That's amazing. I had no idea."

They rode in silence for a while with just the sounds of nature all around them. Evelyn stole a glance at Claire, taking in the way the sunlight danced over her features, the way her body swayed with the rhythm of her horse, and she wondered what Claire would think if she knew the effect she had on her. This was the first time in her life that she'd ever allowed herself to openly check out another woman, and now that she'd done it once, she wasn't sure how she was going to stop.

As if sensing her gaze, Claire turned to look at her and met her eyes. Evelyn swallowed hard, feeling her face flush. "Thanks for doing this," Evelyn said in a rush. "You have no idea. I haven't had a day like today in so long."

Claire's lips slid into an easy smile. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. And we can go whenever you want. I'll always make time to go for a ride."

With a smile playing on her lips as they rode back, Evelyn felt lighter than she had in a very long time.

8

Claire arrived at Evelyn's back door with the usual grocery delivery the following Tuesday, and when Evelyn Coleman asked her if she'd like to join her for a drink, who was she to say no?

It had been raining on and off all day, and it was too cold to even think about sitting outside, so they brought their glasses of wine into the living room, and if Claire had to guess, she'd say this was Evelyn's third or fourth glass.

"I can't believe I had to light a fire in June," Evelyn said with a smile as she added another log.

"Well, it's not entirely unheard of." Claire took a seat on the couch while Evelyn stoked the fire. "Although, I imagine, coming from California weather, this is taking some getting used to."

"It's the inconsistency that's the problem." Evelyn's smile made Claire forget what she was going to say.

She was playing a dangerous game coming here every Tuesday evening, sharing a glass of wine with someone she'd been attracted to for years, albeit from a distance. Now though? When she had Evelyn Coleman sitting right beside her with just inches between them? Claire didn't know how she was going to keep her feelings in check, because of all the bad ideas she'd ever had when it came to falling for unavailable older women, this one was easily the most hopeless.

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Evelyn Coleman was a world-famous actress, undoubtedly straight, and so far out of Claire's league that it was laughable. Her crush had to remain just that. A harmless crush that she somehow had to keep Evelyn from seeing, because the last thing Claire wanted to do was make her feel uncomfortable.

"Yesterday, I was wearing shorts," Evelyn said, taking her away from her thoughts. "And this evening I can't get warm."

Claire's heart pounded as she met Evelyn's eyes caramel brown eyes. She swallowed, forgetting how to speak.

"But," Evelyn said with what sounded like a happy sigh, "What I can get used to is starving the paparazzi. A month without any new photos of me to analyze."

Claire took a sip of wine. "Tabloid nonsense?"

"Always. I've had two page spreads trying to figure out what's happened to me," Evelyn said.

"How do you mean?"

"Every other week, they're suggesting I have some secret disease or drug problem or you name it."

"But you look great." Claire wasn't afraid to say it, and she couldn't imagine Evelyn reading into it. It was simply a fact. She always looked great.

“Hm,” Evelyn said. “I look like the forty-seven years of age that I am except that no one knows what that looks like in Hollywood. I’ve never had plastic surgery or even botox, so when they compare a photo of me accepting an Oscar at thirty-five to me on the way to the airport at forty-seven with no stylist or makeup artist in sight, it creates quite the contrast.”

“Please tell me you don’t pay attention to any of that.” Claire searched Evelyn’s eyes, and she had a feeling that even if she said that she didn’t, deep down, it did affect her. “You have to know that you’re beautiful.”

“Even like this?” Evelyn asked with a smirk, her hand gesturing towards her body. “In sweatpants and an old hoody? With no makeup?”

“Especially then,” Claire said softly, before she could stop herself, and she had to hope that Evelyn hadn’t noticed the longing in her voice.

Evelyn glanced up in surprise, meeting Claire’s gaze. For a moment neither spoke, the crackling fireplace the only sound. “I feel like I’m at a disadvantage here,” Evelyn said. “You know where I’m from, what movies I’ve done, who I’ve dated. I don’t know anything about you.”

“What makes you think that I know anything about you?”

“You’re telling me that you haven’t looked me up since I arrived? Or maybe before then?”

Claire’s lips tugged into a smile as she spoke. “Okay. Maybe I have.” Even though Claire had seen just about everything Evelyn Coleman had been in, she’d spent a few minutes on her Wikipedia page the other night. No matter how pointless it was, she couldn’t stop herself from feeling a little bit jealous of the long list of men that she’d dated at some point in the last twenty-five years.

“See?” Evelyn said as she took a drink. “Now, tell me something about you.”

“Like what?”

Evelyn pressed her lips together as she thought. “Let’s say the roles were reversed, and I googled you. What would I find? Any scandalous headlines?”

Claire laughed as she exhaled. “I don’t live the most exciting life. But I grew up just a few minutes from here, and I knew from a very young age that I loved horses. I have two brothers.” She honestly couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Married?”

“No.” Claire took another drink, Evelyn’s question making her think about her exes.

“Oh, well, maybe there would be a scandalous headline actually.”

“Oh?”

Claire crossed one leg over the other. “I think my girlfriend in college was probably my only attempt at a normal relationship, but then she moved to Australia. After that? I ended up dating a married woman. I’m not exactly proud of it, but yeah... That’s what you’d find if you looked me up.”

Evelyn visibly swallowed. “So, you’re bi?”

“No. Well, I think I assumed that I was for maybe a month, but then I realized... No. Just women. So, I came out when I was seventeen. This is a typical rural area, so I was afraid, honestly, but I wasn’t the first. I’ve been lucky that it was a non-event really.”

“A married woman, huh?” Evelyn asked before she sipped her wine.

“When we met, I had no idea. She was from New York, and she’d be here every few weeks for business. Sometimes, I went with her when she had to go to London or Paris. It was never really going to work, but then when I found out about her husband... That was it.”

Evelyn nodded. “I’m sorry to hear that. That you didn’t know.”

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Claire shrugged. “It was a distraction really. I was devastated when my girlfriend from college left, and I met Olivia just when I was starting to think about putting myself out there again.”

“Was she older than you?”

Claire nodded. “She was fourteen years older than me.” She took another drink.

Evelyn shook her head as a slow smile came to her lips. “Now, who’s full of surprises.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Like I said, I’m not proud of what happened.”

“But if you didn’t know?”

“I didn’t ask about her life in New York. I was afraid to. If she had a girlfriend, I didn’t want to know about it. Turns out it was worse than that.”

Evelyn reached across the space between them, covering Claire’s hand with her own and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Claire forgot to breathe. For five minutes, she forgot who she was sitting across from, but now that Evelyn Coleman’s warm hand was resting on top of hers, Claire couldn’t focus on anything else.

“Everyone has done something that they regret,” Evelyn said before she slid her hand away and took another drink. “If you’re lucky, it’s just one thing.”

Claire wanted to ask Evelyn what she'd regretted doing, but she knew she had no right to ask. Yes, they were getting closer with these Tuesday evening chats, but she wasn't going to push it. If Evelyn wanted to tell her anything personal, it wouldn't be because Claire had asked.

"You're young," Evelyn said, taking her away from her thoughts. "By the time I was twenty-five, I'd already racked up plenty of regrets. You think that it couldn't possibly be worse, but then you get older. And if those decisions don't haunt you, there'll be new ones that you wish you could undo."

She was speaking so cryptically that Claire didn't think it was general life advice, and yet, she couldn't ask Evelyn what she was talking about. If she overstepped, this would be the last evening they spent together sharing a bottle of wine.

"But I guess," Evelyn continued, "You just have to hope that there's a greater meaning to it all."

"Fate?"

"I don't know." Evelyn inhaled a deep breath. "Something." She finished what was left in her wine glass. "Otherwise, what's the point of it all?"

Claire took her last sip of wine. She wasn't worried about Evelyn so much as she wanted to stay and let her keep talking if that's what she wanted, but Claire was too afraid to do anything other than stand up, and say that it was getting late. That she should go.

"Have a good night," Claire said as she acted on impulse and gave Evelyn's shoulder the lightest caress, just a gentle, reassuring squeeze on her way out.

"Goodnight," Evelyn said, looking up at her, and Claire couldn't read those

mesmerizing eyes.

But that was probably because Evelyn was always in control of what her face was portraying. Claire doubted that Evelyn ever let anyone see what was really going on beneath the surface.

9

On Thursday morning, Evelyn had woken up to sunlight streaming through her window and a clear blue sky. She'd had a quick breakfast and then gone down to the stables in search of Claire. She'd been thinking about what Claire had suggested, about going for a drive, and the more Evelyn thought about it, the more she wanted to venture out. Maybe, she was getting complacent after five weeks without an intrusion of her privacy, but with Arianna's reminder that she'd have to get back to her normal life eventually, Evelyn knew she'd look back on these months with regret if she didn't take the time to explore.

Claire had been thrilled, her face lighting up when Evelyn had told her that she'd had a change of heart, and given the day that was in it, Claire offered to go then and there.

Now, the sun was high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the rugged terrain of Connemara as Claire's car wound its way along the narrow roads. It felt strange to be sitting on the left and not having a steering wheel in front of her, but then again, it'd been years since she'd regularly drove anywhere. She'd gotten more used to riding in the back.

They had the windows down, and Claire put on a playlist that surprised Evelyn, because she knew just about every song. "You have good taste," Evelyn said as they slowed down to wait for two sheep to get off the road. "You weren't even born when most of those songs were out."

Claire shrugged. "Good music is good music, no matter when it was released."

As they continued driving, the conversation flowed effortlessly between them, ranging from their favorite artists to childhood memories and everything in between. Evelyn found herself opening up to Claire in a way she rarely did with anyone, sharing stories she'd never told before.

The scenery was stunning, and just when Evelyn thought it couldn't get any more breathtaking, they turned a corner and the way the sun shone on the rugged mountains, contrasting with the greens, a lake at the foot of the slope a sheet of glass, she couldn't look away.

"What do you think?" Claire asked, and Evelyn could hear the smile in her voice.

"I think it's incredible," Evelyn said without looking away, her eyes roaming over the dramatic mountains. "And not at all what I was expecting."

“They’re called the Twelve Bens.”

“In Telluride, the mountains are taller, but these feel so much closer, and the light... It’s not as harsh. It’s softer here somehow.”

“There’s a place to pullover up ahead,” Claire said and a few moments later she had the car parked, and they both got out.

As they leaned against the car taking in the stunning view, Evelyn couldn’t help stealing a glance at Claire. Her hair was down, falling a few inches below her shoulders. She wore khaki shorts and a black tank top, and there was an effortless beauty about her.

Claire turned and caught Evelyn’s gaze. “Is it worth the risk?”

Evelyn blinked, her mind scrambling to come up with something to say as her heart seemed to stall.

“Coming out here,” Claire said when Evelyn hadn’t answered. “We haven’t seen a single person. And I could bring you on ten different drives like this before you decide to leave.”

Evelyn swallowed, her heart slowing. Why had she assumed that Claire had noticed the way that she’d been looking at her? “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you,” Evelyn said as she turned back to the landscape. “But I’m glad that I came around eventually. Thank you. For doing this.”

As they stood side by side, gazing out at the rugged beauty of Connemara, Evelyn's mind drifted back to their conversation from the previous night. Claire's casual mention of her sexuality had caught Evelyn off guard, but she doubted that Claire had taken any notice of her reaction. Evelyn kept her expression neutral, but now, she couldn't deny that things had changed.

The idea that she could let herself be drawn to Claire, because it was harmless and Claire wouldn't notice, was gone. Evelyn had to forget about these last few weeks and all those stolen glances and lingering looks.

It wasn't even that she thought Claire would be interested in her. Evelyn was so much older than her, and it was beyond unrealistic. Their lives were so far apart on just about every level.

But still, that conversation had brought Evelyn's own long-buried feelings to the surface, forcing her to confront truths she had spent years denying. And she had alluded to it that night after a few too many glasses of wine. Regrets, she'd said, without specifying what they were.

In the chaos that was her life, working long hours and going from one award ceremony to the next, it was easy for Evelyn to forget that she'd spent decades hiding a fundamental part of herself, too afraid to ruin her public image, to potentially tank her career. She'd pushed down her own desires and thrown herself into her work instead, all the while maintaining a carefully crafted public persona, a handsome man never too far away.

But standing here, in this picturesque setting, with a woman who knew exactly who she was, Evelyn couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy, maybe even longing.

What would her life have been like if she'd been brave enough to be herself? Would she have met someone? Would she have been happier? Could she have had both? A

woman she loved and a career that would be remembered?

“Will we keep going?” Claire asked, taking her away from her thoughts.

“Yeah.” Evelyn took one last look, her eyes lingering on the few houses that were nestled at the foot of the mountains, and she wondered what it would be like to live somewhere so beautiful yet so remote.

10

As they got closer to home, an idea started to form in Claire’s head, but she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to convince Evelyn. They’d had such a lovely day that Claire was reluctant to push things, but at the same, when Evelyn was out and about and having zero problems with being recognized, Claire wanted to make the most of it.

She’d been overly cautious today, not stopping at some of the usual tourists spots like Kylemore Abbey, knowing that it would be almost certain that someone would stop Evelyn and want a photo with her.

Claire had stopped along the way for some food, putting together a picnic, and when they came across the perfect spot, they parked and sat on a rock away from the road, overlooking a lake while they ate.

Now, Claire had a decision to make. Was she really going to push her luck after how well everything had gone today? Her local pub came into view, and Claire turned off the road, parking outside it.

Claire could almost feel Evelyn tensing beside her in the passenger seat, and when she turned off the car and looked over, Evelyn was sliding on her shades.

“Give me two minutes,” Claire said as she opened the door. “I’ll be right back.”

Claire slid her hand into the pocket of her shorts as she pulled open the door to the pub, chatter and laughter pouring out. It was almost seven o'clock and maybe twenty people were sitting around the tables and on high stools at the bar. Claire said hello to a few familiar faces. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“What can I get you, Claire?”

She turned towards the voice of the owner of the pub as he left a glass of Guinness on the bar to settle and started to pour another. “Hey, Rory.” She took a deep breath. “I have a favor to ask you,” she said, leaning against the bar.

He glanced up at her. “What kind of favor?”

Claire swallowed, watching him set another pint of Guinness on the bar. “I have an American friend who wants to come inside and see what a real Irish bar is like.”

“Okay.”

“But she’s famous.”

Rory draped the towel he was holding over his shoulder and rested both hands on the bar. “Famous.”

“As in world-famous actress.”

Rory drew in a breath as he mulled it over, and then he nodded before ringing the bell behind the bar. “Hey, listen up everybody!”

It took a few seconds for the voices to die down and then everyone was looking at Rory.

“We’ve got a celebrity coming in here, right. And there will be no attempts at getting an autograph. No photos. No staring. She just wants to enjoy a few quiet drinks. Don’t even look at her. Got it?” He looked around the room, making sure he still had everyone’s attention. “If anyone doesn’t like it, they can leave. And anyone who doesn’t listen to what I just said is barred.”

A murmur of chatter started up and then a man in his fifties spoke up. “For how long?”

Rory glared at him.

“How long will I be barred for, Rory?” he asked again.

“Jimmy, get out.”

“I was only asking,” Jimmy protested.

“And I’m only telling you. Get out.”

Claire hid a smile as the bar came to life again and people resumed their conversations as Jimmy finished his pint and left. “Thank you,” Claire said as Rory went back to work behind the bar. “You have no idea. I owe you one.”

“Not a problem, Claire.”

She went back outside, the evening sun still warm as she opened the passenger side door. “Hey,” she said with a smile. “Want to have a drink before we go back?”

Evelyn stared at her. “There’s at least a dozen cars,” she said, looking around her.

Claire wasn’t surprised by the reaction. “I know just about everyone inside. It’ll be fine.”

Evelyn took off her shades, her eyes searching Claire’s. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t want you to go home with any regrets,” Claire said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Having a drink in a local Irish pub sounds like something an American would want to tick off their list when they come here. So,” she said, holding out her hand, “Will you trust me?”

Evelyn hesitated for a moment, looking at Claire’s outstretched hand. “You think it’ll be okay?”

Claire nodded. “I promise.”

Evelyn drew in a deep breath before she slid her hand into Claire’s.

Claire reluctantly let go of Evelyn's hand once she was standing and pushed the car door shut before leading the way to the door. Claire held it open for her, and she could feel her heart thudding wildly in her chest as she waited to see what would happen as they went inside.

But no one paid them any attention as Claire led them towards a small table tucked away in the corner of the bar, conversation continuing all around them without anyone even glancing in their direction.

Rory came right over. "What can I get you ladies?"

"I'll have a pint of Guinness," Claire said.

"You know what? I'll have the same," Evelyn said, her eyes darting from Rory to the rest of the people seated around the bar.

Claire tried to hide her smile as Evelyn looked around her, until she couldn't any longer. "I don't want to bruise your ego," Claire said as Evelyn's gaze returned to her. "So, I'll admit that I came in and asked Rory, the bartender there, to basically tell everyone to ignore you. I still think you could have come in here with minimal fanfare, but I didn't want to risk it. So, if anyone takes a photo of you or asks for an autograph or anything like that, they're barred."

Evelyn's lips slid into a smile. "I won't lie... I was wondering if my fame wasn't as far-reaching as I'd assumed."

"I'm not sure there's worse punishment than getting barred from your local, so no one's going to chance it."

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“Thank you,” Evelyn said with what sounded like a happy sigh. “I can’t remember the last time I did something normal like this. Having a drink in a bar. And to do it here? It’s something I won’t forget.”

Rory returned with their pints. “Enjoy.”

“You have to wait for it to settle,” Claire said before Evelyn could reach for it. “When it’s fully black with a white creamy head, then you can drink it. But the first gulp has to be a good one. If you just sip it, you’re only drinking the foam, so you should aim to split the G.”

“As in halfway through the logo on the glass?” Evelyn asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. You probably won’t be able. I don’t always make it, but it’s better to aim for that than take a tiny sip.”

“Wow,” Evelyn said with a smirk. “I didn’t think it was that complicated.”

“Just want you to enjoy it. I cringe when I see tourists sipping their Guinness like a glass of whiskey.” Claire picked up her pint. “Cheers, Evelyn. I hope you’ve been enjoying your time here.”

Evelyn did the same, lightly clinking her glass against Claire’s. “Cheers. And I am. You have no idea how much.”

They both took a drink. “Not bad,” Claire said as she set her pint back down. Evelyn’s had gone down to just the start of the G.

“I feel like I should take a photo of this.” Evelyn slid out her phone, and Claire expected her to take a picture of her pint, but instead she was extending her arm out and reaching for her glass with her left. “Get in,” she said, flashing her a smile.

Claire wasn’t going to argue. She grabbed her pint and smiled, leaning in to get in the photo, Evelyn’s perfume drifting into her space. It might have been the easiest, most natural smile Claire had ever attempted for a photo.

“Posting that on Instagram?” Claire joked.

“No. I’m sending it to my manager.”

Claire nodded, thinking back to that day they’d been out riding and her manager had called, reminding Evelyn that she could go back with her in July. “Are you close?”

Evelyn put her phone away. “With Arianna?” She raked a hand through her hair. “Yes. She’s been my only manager, so we go back... Twenty-nine years.” She shook her head. “Wow. It’s hard to believe that much time has passed,” she said with a sigh. “So, we’re close, but at the same time, she doesn’t know me. Not the real me. She’s an amazing manager. The best in the business, and I don’t think I’d be where I am today without her.”

Claire took a drink, not entirely sure what to make of that. It sounded like there was some strain there, but again Claire didn’t want to push her luck. If Evelyn wanted to elaborate, she could, but Claire wasn’t going to keep asking questions.

Evelyn’s voice took her away from her thoughts. “I think I’d like to do a movie set here.”

“Please don’t.” The words were out of Claire’s mouth before she could stop them.

“Are you joking?” Evelyn asked with a laugh, her eyes glinting in the warm glow of the cozy bar lighting. Her eyebrow lifted, and her gaze never left Claire’s.

She swallowed. “No.” Her heart raced as she locked eyes with Evelyn. “Do you know what the track record is for American actors thinking they can do an Irish accent?” When Evelyn shook her head, Claire continued. “Bad. Very bad. Shocking.” She took another drink.

Evelyn’s lips slid into a smile. “I get that, but hey, I have an Oscar and three Golden Globes.”

“Julia Roberts has a case full of awards too, and that didn’t stop her from doing one of the worst attempts at an Irish accent I’ve ever heard. I’m still a fan, obviously. And she’s just part of a very long list.” Claire bit the inside of her cheek. She might regret all of this, but she had to say it. “But don’t do it.”

“Well,” Evelyn said with a bit of a sigh as she reached for her pint. “I will take your advice on board, although with my current streak, I’m ready to take just about any part that comes my way. Getting old in Hollywood isn’t easy,” she said before she took a drink.

Claire waited for Evelyn to meet her eyes. “I know what I just said, but you are one of the most talented actresses of your generation.”

“Work hasn’t been easy to find lately.” Evelyn looked away. “That’s kind of what brought me here. One part after another, gone to someone younger, someone with less credentials. And as much as I’m enjoying my time here and would love to stay, I’m equally dreading going back to that struggle. And right now, I can’t even think about facing it.”

Rory stopped by their table. “Another round?”

Claire looked at Evelyn.

“Please,” Evelyn said with a smile that could light up a room when just a second ago Claire thought she might be tearing up, reminding her that she was very much in the presence of an amazing actress.

11

Evelyn leaned back in her chair, savoring the last sip of her white wine as the sun sank below the horizon. Empty plates sat before them, and Evelyn was happy with how the rosemary chicken and roasted vegetables had turned out.

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These Tuesday evenings with Claire had become something she looked forward to. Claire would arrive with fresh groceries, and Evelyn would invite her to stay for dinner. What had started as a simple gesture of gratitude had evolved into something more.

Ever since that day that Claire had taken her for a drive, they saw each other at least twice a week, sometimes three or four times. The weekly horseback rides were the highlight though, a chance to explore the breathtaking Irish countryside and to talk about everything and nothing. They'd gone on a few more drives too, with Claire taking them to two of the most beautiful beaches that Evelyn had ever seen.

She couldn't ignore the pull she felt towards Claire. Every time Claire smiled, Evelyn felt that flutter in her chest, and sometimes, she swore Claire felt it too. But Evelyn refused to act on it. She wasn't even going to bring it up. She was too old for Claire, her life too complicated.

It was somehow already the end of June, and she'd have to go back to L.A. in just a few months. A fling with someone like Claire was just a bad idea all around, especially with what Claire had said about her ex being married.

Claire deserved someone who could be in her life fully, and that would never be her. Her life was in Los Angeles, and she couldn't even imagine what it would look like for her to come out at this point in her life, so there was no point letting Claire think for even a second that Evelyn wanted her.

"You know," Evelyn said, pushing those thoughts aside. She set her wine glass down on the table. "I think this will be my first 4th of July away from the U.S."

Claire looked up, curiosity in her eyes. “Do you usually celebrate with family?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, not in a long time. Both my parents have passed. I usually go to a friend’s house. Someone always has a dinner party and a view. Last year, I was at Robert Larkin’s place in Beverly Hills. We could see the fireworks from the Hollywood Bowl really clearly, and there were a few smaller shows scattered across the hills.”

Claire met her gaze, her lips sliding into a smile. “I’ve gotten so used to being around you that I’ve forgotten that someone like Robert Larkin is your friend.”

Evelyn felt that warmth in her chest again as she returned her smile. “And that’s why I like spending time with you. I don’t have to put on a show. I can just be myself.” She swallowed down the emotion that had come out of nowhere. “You have no idea how rare that is,” she said softly, almost to herself.

As physically drawn to Claire as she was, it was the way Claire treated her that Evelyn found most attractive. In her world, superficial friendships were the norm, and all of her past romantic relationships had been purely for appearances. Genuine connections were so rare that she could count them on one hand - connections where she didn’t have to worry about ulterior motives or seeing her personal life splashed across the tabloids the following week.

Evelyn found herself already thinking about how much she would miss this when she returned to Los Angeles. Not just the quiet countryside, but the time she’d spent with Claire.

12

Not for the first time, Claire had to wonder what exactly she was doing when she let Evelyn top of her glass of wine as they enjoyed the last bit of sunshine out on her

patio. If their Tuesday evenings, their weekly horse rides, and the occasional drive to the coast wasn't enough, Claire had sent Evelyn a text earlier, asking if she could come over for a drink since it was the 4th of July. Claire didn't say as much, but she didn't want Evelyn to be alone, and she had a bit of a surprise for her.

She'd gotten lucky with the weather. Yesterday it had rained for most of the day, but today had been hot and sunny, and only a few clouds dotted the sky now at nine o'clock.

"You know, it would've been dark in Los Angeles an hour ago," Evelyn said. "This is another thing I could get used to."

"Ten o'clock sunsets?" Claire asked with a smile tugging at her lips as she looked over at Evelyn, the sun catching the golden brown highlights in her long hair.

Yeah, she was going to need some kind of therapy after Evelyn left. She could feel her crush moving into something much more dangerous with every additional day she spent with Evelyn. Claire was struggling not to let her mind wander, because it was so easy to imagine lifting her hand to brush a lock of hair behind Evelyn's ear or worse... She'd started thinking about what it'd be like to kiss her.

"Yeah. I love this. I'm a night owl naturally, although all those early mornings on set never gave me too many chances to stay up late."

As they finished their second glass of wine, Claire checked her watch. If she was really doing this, they'd have to get going.

"What do you think about moving to a better spot to watch the sunset?" Claire asked. "It's a two minute ride on the quad."

"Yeah. Sure."

They brought their glasses inside, and Evelyn followed Claire over to her quad. Claire's heart skipped a beat as Evelyn wrapped her arms around her waist, and she swallowed hard. The warmth of Evelyn's body pressed against her back sent a shiver down her spine, and she had to take a deep breath to steady herself.

Claire couldn't help but revel in the feeling of Evelyn's arms tightening around her waist as she sped up. The closeness was intoxicating, and Claire found herself wishing the ride would never end, but it was over just a few moments later when they reached a hill overlooking the fields below, the mountains in Connemara that Evelyn had been mesmerized by on their first drive together in the distance.

Claire hopped off the quad after Evelyn and spread out a blanket for them to sit on. The sun had dipped below the horizon and the sky was streaked with deep purples and vibrant pinks. They watched the sky change, getting more dramatic until darkness started to take over.

"Thank you," Evelyn said softly in the fading light, sitting with just a tiny gap between them, their arms accidentally brushing. "For texting me earlier. As much as I'm loving being here, there is a part of me that misses things about home. Silly things mostly, but I guess, between getting back into horse riding and today being the 4th, I'm feeling a little bit nostalgic." Evelyn turned to look at her. "And I'm glad I'm not alone."

Claire nodded, but before she could reply, a loud pop and a crackle echoed across the fields as a flash of white illuminated the dark sky. A second and third firework followed in quick succession, and the sounds of hissing and popping filled the air.

Claire didn't know how she could ever thank her friend, Michael, for coming through at the last minute. He owned the land on the opposite side of the estate, well away from the horses and with no houses nearby. He'd even found red, white, and blue fireworks, and the look on Evelyn's face made it worth the effort.

Claire barely noticed the fireworks as she watched Evelyn's expression turn from shock and disbelief to happiness, her lips sliding into a smile.

"I called in a favor," Claire admitted after a few moments, the fireworks still bursting against the night sky. She leaned over, lightly bumping shoulders with Evelyn as she said, "But don't tell anyone. Fireworks are illegal in Ireland."

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Evelyn turned to face Claire, her eyes shimmering with emotion, and then she was surging forward, her eyes fluttering closed, her hand reaching out to cup Claire's cheek, and when Evelyn's lips met hers, Claire's world stood still.

The feeling of Evelyn's lips against hers sent a surge of electricity through her body, and she didn't have time to process what was happening. Her heart raced as she brushed her lips over Evelyn's, and when a soft moan escaped Evelyn's lips, Claire felt it everywhere.

How was this happening? How was this even real?

Claire sighed into the kiss as the sound of the fireworks illuminating the night sky filled her ears. She lifted a hand to Evelyn's cheek, leaning in closer, deepening the kiss when Evelyn didn't pull away. Evelyn's fingers slid into Claire's hair, and Claire lost herself in the sensation of Evelyn's soft lips moving against her own.

As Evelyn pulled back, Claire searched her face for any sign of regret or uncertainty, but in the near darkness, it was impossible to tell.

Claire's breath caught in her throat as Evelyn scooted closer, the warmth of her body sending a tingling sensation down Claire's arm as they watched the final bursts of fireworks illuminate the night sky.

Claire's heart thumped in her chest, her mind still trying to catch up to what had just happened.

Evelyn Coleman had just kissed her.

None of this felt real, but the weight of Evelyn's head resting on her shoulder was undeniably real, and when Claire inhaled a deep breath, she caught the familiar scent of Evelyn's perfume.

Claire wanted to wrap her arm around Evelyn's waist, but she couldn't. She didn't want to ruin this moment, and until they were back at the house, Claire wouldn't be able to stop thinking about what had just happened and what it all meant for Evelyn.

Had she just gotten caught up in the moment, and because she knew that Claire was gay, she'd kissed her?

As soon as she'd thought it, she dismissed it. That didn't make sense.

But then she remembered one of their earliest conversations, how Evelyn had cryptically referred to having regrets.

And that set Claire's heart racing.

13

The quad's engine fell silent as they returned to the house, the headlights casting a dim glow on the stone façade, and Evelyn's heart pounded in her chest as she got off. The short ride back had been filled with a mix of exhilaration and nerves, her hands gripping onto Claire's body tightly as she wondered what Claire must think of her and what she'd just done.

Evelyn still couldn't believe she'd even done it as she climbed the steps to the back patio, waiting for Claire to get off the quad, but she stayed where she was. Evelyn ran a hand through her hair, her legs slightly unsteady beneath her. The back light flickered to life as Evelyn walked by the corner of the house, and she turned back to Claire.

Even in the soft glow of the outside light, she could see the mixture of emotions on Claire's face. Evelyn couldn't let her leave without an explanation, without acknowledging what had happened.

"Claire," Evelyn said softly, her voice wavering ever so slightly, "Would you... would you like to come inside?"

Claire swung her leg over the quad and walked slowly towards Evelyn. "Sure."

As they entered the house, Evelyn turned on some lights, and her heart raced as she closed the door behind them. She led Claire into the living room, gesturing for her to take a seat on the couch. She sat down beside her, acutely aware of the small distance between them. The air felt charged, and Evelyn had to figure out how she was going to approach this.

Her throat felt tight, and she swallowed, wishing she had a drink, but she didn't want to assume that Claire was staying for any length of time, so she hadn't offered, and she wanted to have this conversation now, without any delays.

"Claire, I..." Evelyn closed her eyes for a second, trying to steady herself and gather her thoughts. She opened her eyes as she ran her hands over her jeans. "I'm sorry that I just kissed you like that. Out of nowhere."

Claire sat quietly for a moment, her eyes locked on Evelyn's. "You don't need to apologize," she said softly. "Did you mean it?" she asked after a moment.

Evelyn inhaled a shaky breath as she looked away. "As in, am I attracted to you?"

"As in, did you just get caught up in the moment, and it didn't matter that it was me sitting beside you? Or did you mean it?"

Evelyn's heart clenched at Claire's words, and she turned to meet her gaze. "No." She pressed her lips together. "No, it wasn't just the moment, although that was easily the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me." She let her lips curve into a smile. "Thank you, by the way. But yes," Evelyn said, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I meant it." She forced herself to look at Claire, tears pricking at her eyes.

Claire's eyes locked onto Evelyn's, a mixture of surprise and something deeper flashing in her striking blue eyes. "When you spoke of regrets..."

Evelyn nodded, swiping away a tear before it streaked down her cheek. "I'm so tired of hiding who I am." She took a deep breath. "I've known since I was maybe nineteen or twenty that I was attracted to women," Evelyn confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. "But that was right when my career started taking off, and from that point on, my life has been one big orchestrated performance." A tear trickled down her cheek, followed by another. "These last few weeks, getting away from all that, being here with you... This has been the first time that I've felt this free, this happy. I haven't been looking over my shoulder, worrying about photographers, worrying about who might notice the way I'm looking at another woman."

Claire reached out and gently brushed the tears from Evelyn's cheek, but she didn't say anything.

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Evelyn's eyes fluttered closed as Claire's warm hand stayed, lightly caressing her jawline with her thumb. "And for the first time I haven't tried to fight it..." She slowly opened her eyes. "I know I shouldn't be attracted to you, but ever since I collided with you in the stables..."

Claire's hand fell away as her eyes searched Evelyn's. "Why shouldn't you be attracted to me?"

Evelyn sighed. "Because I'm too old for you. Because I'm here on vacation. Because I doubt you feel the same way?—"

Claire's lips were on hers before Evelyn could finish her sentence, the sudden contact sending a jolt of electricity through her entire body. For a moment, Evelyn was too stunned to react, her mind struggling to catch up with the reality of what was happening.

But then, as the warmth of Claire's mouth moved gently against her own, Evelyn melted into the kiss, her hands coming up to tangle in Claire's soft hair. The world around them seemed to fade away, and all that existed was the feeling of Claire's body pressed against hers.

Evelyn sighed as Claire's hands cupped her face, her thumbs gently stroking her cheek, and when Evelyn parted her lips, Claire deepened the kiss. Nothing could have prepared Evelyn for the rush of desire that flooded her body when Claire's tongue glided over hers. She whimpered, every sense heightened as one of Claire's hands slid away from cheek, moving down her neck, her fingertips dancing over her collarbone.

When they finally broke apart, both breathless and flushed, Evelyn couldn't help but stare at Claire.

"You might not have been fighting this," Claire said with a smile playing on her lips. "But I have. That day when you ran into me at the stables?" She shook her head. "I thought for sure you could see how attracted I was to you. And I've been trying to hide it ever since. I'll admit that I've been attracted to you for years. But not like this." She visibly swallowed. "That wasn't real. A crush. That's all it was. But these last weeks? No matter how much I didn't want it to happen, I can't say that I haven't thought about kissing you, about what it'd be like if you felt that same way about me." Claire smiled. "But I never thought... I had no idea that there was even a chance that you might feel the same way."

Evelyn smiled back at her as she reached up and placed her hand on Claire's cheek. "I guess, the question is what do we do about this?"

"I think we should take things slow," Claire said.

"We don't really have time to take things slow," Evelyn challenged, a smile coming to her lips as she spoke. "As much as I want to stay here, I can't hide from my life forever. At best, we'll have almost four months."

Claire held her gaze. "I want you, Evelyn. Whatever that means. But we can still take our time. I'm guessing that this is new for you?"

Evelyn nodded. "I was too afraid to take any chances and have something leak to the press."

Claire leaned in, slowly brushing her lips over Evelyn's, almost as if she could sense the wave of apprehension that had just come over her. Evelyn had more fantasies than she knew what to do with over the years, but that wouldn't mean that she'd be any

good at this.

Claire broke the kiss, although their foreheads were still touching as she spoke softly. “We’ll take this at whatever pace feels right for you. There’s no rush, no expectations.”

“This doesn’t feel real,” Evelyn murmured as she tilted her head, leaning in to find Claire’s lips. The feeling of Claire’s lips against her own was overwhelming, in the best possible way, and Evelyn had to wonder how she’d lived this long without experiencing what it was like to kiss another woman.

14

Claire glanced at the clock on the mantle as she settled back against the couch cushions, a glass of red wine in her hand. It was after midnight, but she wasn’t the least bit tired. How could she be, after everything that had happened tonight?

She still couldn’t quite believe it. Evelyn Coleman, the woman she’d had a crush on for years, had actually kissed her. And not only that, but she’d confessed to being attracted to Claire, to wanting something more between them.

It was surreal, like something out of a dream. But the taste of Evelyn’s lips, the feel of her body pressed against Claire’s, had been all too real.

They’d been sitting on the couch for the better part of an hour now, talking and kissing, getting lost in each other, a bottle of red wine on the coffee table in front of them. But even as they sipped their drinks, the electricity between them was palpable.

Claire studied Evelyn over the rim of her glass, marveling at how different she seemed from the polished, untouchable actress she’d seen on screen. Here, with her hair mussed from Claire’s fingers and her lips swollen from their kisses, she was

simply an incredibly stunning woman.

“What are you thinking about?” Evelyn asked, her voice low as she propped her elbow up against the back of the couch, sliding her fingers through her hair.

Claire set her glass aside, shifting closer. “You,” she said honestly. “How beautiful you are.”

Evelyn’s smile was soft, almost shy. “Really?” she whispered.

“Yes, really.”

“I’m so much older than you,” Evelyn said, her eyebrows furrowing slightly as she tilted her head. “And I don’t even know how much.”

Claire waited for Evelyn to meet her gaze. “I don’t think it matters, but I’m twenty-nine.”

Evelyn’s expression was unreadable, and Claire had to hope that the eighteen years that separated them wouldn’t scare her off. Because, as they’d already established, this would never be more than a holiday fling, and Claire couldn’t think about that right now. She knew that when Evelyn left, she’d have to pick up the pieces, but right now, she wanted Evelyn, despite all the reasons that she shouldn’t.

“I never thought I could have this, Claire. Even if it’s only temporary. I never let myself fall for anyone. Not even close.”

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Claire's heart clenched at the vulnerability in Evelyn's words. She reached out, cupping Evelyn's cheek in her palm. "Are you falling for me?" Claire asked, somehow keeping her voice steady when her heart was ready to jump out of her chest.

Evelyn's eyes fluttered shut as she leaned into Claire's touch. "I already have," she breathed.

Claire closed the distance between them, capturing Evelyn's lips in a searing kiss. Evelyn responded eagerly, her hands sliding into Claire's hair as she deepened the kiss.

Before Claire knew what was happening, Evelyn was straddling her lap, her body pressed flush against Claire's. Claire groaned at the contact, her hands gripping Evelyn's hips as their kisses grew more heated. Their hands roamed, and their tongues danced. Claire ran her hands up Evelyn's sides, and she moaned when Evelyn's fingers slid through her hair.

It would be so easy to get carried away, to let the passion consume them both. But Claire forced herself to slow down, to pull back just enough to catch her breath.

"Evelyn," she panted, looking up at her, lifting a hand to Evelyn's hair, guiding it behind her ear. "Against my better judgment," she said as she inhaled a deep breath, "I think I should go."

Evelyn held her gaze before she slowly nodded. She dipped her head down, capturing Claire's lips with hers once more, her tongue skimming over Claire's as she kissed

her deeply.

Claire whimpered when Evelyn eventually pulled away.

“Changing your mind?” Evelyn asked with a smirk as she swept a hand through her hair before she climbed off her. She got to her feet, holding her hand out.

Claire took it, letting Evelyn pull her up. “No,” she said with a smile. “As tempting as it would be, I am going to go.” She leaned in, one hand on Evelyn’s hip, the other on her neck, kissing her softly. “Come by the guest house tomorrow,” Claire said, their foreheads still touching. “I’ll make you dinner.”

Evelyn pull back to meet her eyes. “Okay. I’d like that.”

Claire’s hand fell to hold Evelyn’s, their fingers intertwining, and she couldn’t believe she was actually walking away from this, but it didn’t matter what she wanted. And god, she wanted Evelyn. But she’d tried to put herself in Evelyn’s shoes, remembering the way, only an hour ago, tears had streamed down her face, and it didn’t feel right for them to end up in Evelyn’s bed. Not tonight.

“I’m going to say goodnight,” Claire said, her hand still in Evelyn’s. “Or I won’t go.”

“Thank you for tonight,” Evelyn said, her eyes shimmering with emotion. “For all of it.” She lifted her hand to Claire’s cheek. “I’ll never forget it.” She looked like she wanted to say more, but her gaze dropped to Claire’s lips, and when she leaned in, Claire met her halfway, melting into the kiss.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Claire murmured as she pulled away.

“Tomorrow,” Evelyn echoed, her hand sliding away from Claire’s.

With one last lingering look, Claire turned and headed for the door, feeling Evelyn's eyes on her the entire way, and it took all of her willpower not to glance back.

15

When Evelyn left the house just before six with a bottle of red wine in her hand, she took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh scent of rain. It hadn't stopped all day, until the sky started to clear about an hour ago, and it was actually a nice evening now as she got ready to leave for Claire's guesthouse. The sun appeared from behind the clouds, and she grabbed a jacket on her way out, just in case, putting it on over her black tank top.

She'd spent longer than she would have liked getting ready, torn between treating this like any other evening she spent with Claire rather than a date, but also knowing that more than likely, she was going to end up in Claire's bed. The thought had sent a shiver through her body, bringing back everything that had happened last night and how amazing it had felt to kiss Claire. In the end, she'd decided to keep things casual, wearing faded jeans and ankle boots, her long hair down in loose waves.

As she followed the path through the woods towards Claire's house, her mind easily drifted to last night. When those fireworks had lit up the sky, Evelyn had thought it couldn't get much better than that, but when Claire had told her that they were illegal, and Evelyn realized how much effort must have gone into arranging it, she'd forgotten to filter her thoughts or her actions.

The idea of kissing Claire had started to invade her thoughts ever since Claire had said that she was gay, but in that moment, sitting beside Claire on that blanket, kissing her was the only thing Evelyn could have done.

Years and years of pushing her own wants and desires aside for the sake of her career had made her reckless, and she couldn't keep those feelings locked away any longer.

Thankfully, Claire seemed to feel the same way, and even if they had no future together, Evelyn couldn't stop herself from giving into this attraction.

Before she knew it, she'd left the woods, and Claire's home was in sight. She could already feel her heart rate increasing, and a flutter of excitement building in her stomach. Before she could knock, the door swung open, and Evelyn's breath caught in her throat as she took in Claire standing in her doorway dressed in black jeans and a white tank top, her black hair that she had pulled back in a ponytail more often than not tumbled over her shoulders in loose waves, her blue eyes almost sparking.

"Hey," Claire said with a smile, her eyes sweeping over Evelyn as she moved aside to let her enter. "Come in."

"Hi." Evelyn couldn't help but smile back as she stepped inside, almost taken aback by how much had changed since the last time she was here ten weeks ago. That day, she'd been so quick to ignore that initial spark she'd felt when Claire's hands had landed on her waist in the stable after she'd made a run for it to get out of the rain. When she'd come back to return Claire's clothes, she'd let her gaze linger on Claire, and she never could have imagined that a little over two months later, she'd have kissed her.

"Hope this is okay with whatever you're making," Evelyn said as she gave Claire the bottle of wine.

"Thanks. I'm sure it will be," Claire said, taking the few steps towards the kitchen to open it and let it breathe. "Let me hang up your jacket," Claire offered, and Evelyn shrugged it off her shoulders, handing it to her.

Evelyn watched Claire hang it on a row of hooks beside the front door. Before she knew what she was doing, she stepped into her space, and when Claire turned back to face her, Evelyn was there, hands on her waist, pushing her back against the door.

A hint of a smile ghosted Claire's lips as Evelyn leaned in, her eyes fluttering closed, and when their lips met, everything else faded away. Evelyn sighed into the kiss, loving the feeling of Claire's hands on her hips as they deepened the kiss.

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Evelyn's fingers threaded through Claire's hair at the nape of her neck, holding her close as their tongues danced together. Claire's hands slid up her back, pulling her closer, and Evelyn pressed her body against Claire's. The feeling of Claire's breasts against her own sent rush of desire through her body.

"You're so beautiful," Evelyn whispered huskily as she pulled away, voicing out loud what had been on her mind ever since they'd met.

Claire's cheeks darkened at the compliment. "I've been thinking about this all day," she murmured, reaching up to delicately trail her fingers along Evelyn's collarbone, sparking off a shudder that coursed through her. Claire's hands slid up to cup Evelyn's face, her thumbs caressing her cheek. "But also trying not to get my hopes up incase you'd changed your mind."

Evelyn leaned in, capturing Claire's lips once more, this time with even more intensity. She couldn't believe how much she wanted this woman, and she hated the idea of Claire thinking otherwise.

Evelyn hadn't even known it could be like this. Last night had been amazing in its own right, but now that Evelyn knew what it felt like to kiss another woman, to kiss Claire, she couldn't seem to think of anything else. She tilted her head as she continued to kiss Claire, both of them moaning softly when their tongues met again.

Evelyn broke the kiss, out of breath with her forehead still touching Claire's. "I haven't changed my mind," she said as she took a deep breath. "Not for a second."

"I'm glad," Claire said, her fingers trailing along Evelyn's jaw as she pulled back

enough to meet her eyes. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Evelyn said, and she was leaning in again before she even realized what she was doing. Claire kissed her back, her hand sliding into Evelyn’s hair as she did.

Evelyn knew that Claire had asked her here for dinner, but right now, with her hands on Claire’s hips, her fingers skirting under her top, skimming over her skin as they kissed, dinner was the last thing she wanted.

“But maybe dinner can wait,” Evelyn murmured between kisses.

Claire pulled back, her blue eyes searching Evelyn’s. “Are you sure?”

Evelyn nodded, her hand on Claire’s hip underneath her top, her thumb lazily swiping over her soft skin. “Yes.” Her heart might be racing, and her stomach was doing somersaults, but she was more than ready for this.

16

Claire felt like she was having an out of body experience as she led Evelyn into her bedroom and closed the door behind her. When she’d changed the sheets this morning, she told herself that she would’ve done it anyway, and that it had nothing to do with the fact that Evelyn was coming over.

Her head had been all over the place today, and everything took her longer than it should have. She kept thinking back to last night, and how not only had the fireworks gone to plan, Evelyn had kissed her.

And the rest of the night had played on a loop in her head all day today, remembering the way Evelyn had kissed her and climbed into her lap, the way she’d felt in her arms, the way they couldn’t seem to get enough of one another.

If she wasn't thinking about that, Claire was wondering how she'd walked away last night. She knew it was the right thing to do, but she'd been wondering all day if given the time to think about what had happened, would Evelyn change her mind? Would she come here this evening with an apology on her lips, saying that this couldn't happen? That there was no point?

Evelyn's eyes met hers now as Claire flicked on a lamp, the curtains already drawn from when she'd gotten changed a little over an hour ago, and Claire couldn't believe that this was real, that Evelyn Coleman wanted her.

Although, standing in front of her now, Claire didn't see her as world-famous actress Evelyn Coleman anymore. They'd spent too much time together for Claire to think of her as that now. To Claire, she was simply Evelyn, and while Claire had been attracted to Evelyn Coleman, what she was starting to feel for the Evelyn she'd gotten to know these last few weeks should have scared her.

Evelyn's gaze lingered on Claire, and she stepped into her space, reaching out to touch Claire's cheek. "I wish you hadn't left last night," she whispered.

Claire closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of Evelyn's touch as she leaned into her hand, her heart thudding in her chest.

"But I know why you did," Evelyn said, her thumb moving over her cheek. "And I appreciate that."

Claire's eyes fluttered open, and she could've gotten lost in Evelyn's caramel brown eyes.

"You have no idea how much I wanted you to stay last night," Evelyn said as she leaned in to lightly brush her lips over Claire's, sending a shiver of desire through her entire body as Evelyn's other hand found her hip, guiding her back against the door.

Claire sighed into the kiss, her hand sliding through Evelyn's hair, and not for the first time, time seemed to disappear when she was around Evelyn. She couldn't get enough of her.

Evelyn was the one to pull away, her lips on Claire's neck on, and Claire's knees went weak as Evelyn's lips grazed her collarbone.

"Promise me something," Evelyn said, her breath warm against her neck.

"Anything," Claire managed to get out, both hands on Evelyn's waist now.

Evelyn kissed her neck again, her tongue hot against Claire's skin, before she met Claire's eyes. "This is new for me..."

Claire swallowed as she nodded. "I'd made that assumption."

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“But it’s more than that. It’s the first time that I’ve really wanted someone.” Evelyn’s eyes searched hers. “But I don’t want you to go easy on me.”

Claire’s breath hitched as she took in the raw desire burning in Evelyn’s eyes.

“I don’t need you to be gentle,” Evelyn added, her fingers tracing a delicate path down Claire’s neck, over her collarbone, and between her breasts. “I don’t need you to hold back.”

The touch sent electric currents through Claire’s body, igniting every nerve ending. Without hesitation, she reached up and gently caressed Evelyn’s cheek, pulling her in for another searing kiss.

Evelyn moaned into the kiss, and Claire backed them up towards the bed, gently pushing Evelyn down onto the mattress, following her down and capturing her lips once more.

The kiss deepened as their bodies pressed closer together. Evelyn’s hand moved up Claire’s side, cupping her breast through the thin cotton of her top, and Claire’s eyelids fluttered shut as a jolt of electricity coursed through her. She was no longer thinking clearly, her body taking over, guided by this overwhelming desire she felt for Evelyn.

The finally broke apart, and Claire found herself staring down at Evelyn, her eyes searching her face. Her heart raced, and she felt like she was on a high, her body humming with desire. She swallowed, trying to get her breathing under control.

Claire gently brushed Evelyn's hair away from her face, trailing her fingers down her neck and shoulder. Claire kissed her neck, her teeth grazing her skin, and Evelyn moaned, her hips shifting restlessly against Claire's touch.

Claire loved the sensation of her body against Evelyn's, the heat between them only growing with each touch. She kissed her way back up Evelyn's neck, trying to take this slow.

"Claire," Evelyn breathed out her name, sounding so needy that Claire shivered at the tone. "This has to go." Without another word, Evelyn reached up and gently tugged Claire's tank top over her head, revealing the white bra she wore. Evelyn's hands lingered on her skin, tracing every inch of her collarbone and shoulders before cupping her breasts through her bra. Claire shuddered, her eyes falling shut as she let out a soft moan.

As Claire leaned in to capture her lips once more, they explored each other's mouths, their tongues locking in a heated dance. Claire found herself gripping Evelyn's hair tighter, loving the feel of the silky strands between her fingers. She slid her hands down Evelyn's back as they rolled onto their sides, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin fabric of her top.

Breathing hard, they pulled away from each other, panting. Claire watched as Evelyn's eyes fluttered open, her pupils blown wide with desire. She slid her hands beneath Evelyn's tank top, feeling the muscles beneath Evelyn's stomach jump.

Evelyn pushed herself up, and Claire reached for the hem of Evelyn's tank top, lifting it slowly, her eyes never leaving Evelyn's. The fabric rose, baring inch after inch of Evelyn's smooth skin, until it was over her head and discarded, falling over the edge of the bed.

"You're so beautiful," Claire murmured, her voice hoarse from their passionate kiss.

Evelyn's face was flushed, her lips swollen from their kisses, and Claire could feel her pulse swishing in her ears as she let her gaze move over Evelyn's body.

Slowly, Claire leaned in and captured Evelyn's lips in another deep, passionate kiss. This time, the kiss was more deliberate, slower, as she savored every second, every sensation.

Claire's hands moved to the button on Evelyn's jeans, fumbling momentarily—her excitement making her fingers tremble. She pulled away just enough to meet Evelyn's eyes. "Can I take these off?"

Evelyn nodded, her gaze a mixture of nervousness and eagerness. Claire's fingers undid the button and lowered the zipper. She hooked her fingers into the waistband and gently tugged, prompting Evelyn to lift her hips to assist.

Claire sat up slightly, giving Evelyn room to sit up too. Evelyn took off her ankle boots and Claire helped her shimmy out of her jeans, leaving her in nothing but a dark lace bra and matching underwear.

Claire could hardly breathe as she took in the sight of Evelyn. She got off the bed and unbuttoned her own jeans, not breaking their intense eye contact for a moment. She stepped out of her shoes and then her jeans, standing in front Evelyn in just her bra and underwear.

Evelyn moved to the edge of the bed, reaching out to pull Claire towards her. Claire straddled Evelyn's lap, feeling the warmth of her thighs beneath her own as her arms wrapped around Evelyn's neck. She kissed Evelyn deeply, their tongues dancing once more.

Evelyn's hands, warm and trembling, moved to unclip Claire's bra, pushing the straps off her shoulders as they continued to kiss.

Claire let the fabric fall away, feeling exposed and yet intensely aroused under Evelyn's appreciative gaze. Evelyn's lips trailed down Claire's throat, her kisses leaving a fiery path down to Claire's chest.

"You're incredible," Evelyn murmured, her voice breathy as she tasted Claire's skin. Claire shuddered in response, her hands roaming up and down Evelyn's back, feeling her soft skin beneath her fingertips. She unhooked her bra and guided the straps down Evelyn's shoulders.

Claire could feel the heat of Evelyn's body pressed up against her own as Evelyn's lips moved lower, and she had no doubt that she was soaking wet right now. She didn't think she'd ever been this turned on before.

Evelyn trailed kisses over Claire's chest and then her tongue was flicking over Claire's nipple, causing her to gasp. Claire closed her eyes, her head falling back as she savored the sensation, feeling every nerve ending in her body come alive.

Evelyn's palmed her breast, her fingers playing with her nipple, and Claire struggled to breathe, the sensation overwhelming.

Evelyn's other hand slid down Claire's back, her fingers splayed over the thin fabric of her underwear, and Claire couldn't stop her hips from rocking forward, a low moan on her lips as Evelyn took her nipple fully into her mouth, her tongue battering over it.

A ragged moan left Claire's lips, her fingers lost in Evelyn's hair as her hips continued to move, seeking any kind of friction. She was already so close.

Evelyn moved to her other nipple, and Claire didn't know how much more she could take. Evelyn must have sensed it, because she lifted her head to meet her eyes. Evelyn's hand left her ass, sliding over Claire's hip until she was tracing the

waistband of Claire's underwear.

Claire could feel her heart racing as Evelyn's hand stilled, her body tense with anticipation.

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“Can I?” Evelyn asked, her voice husky.

Claire nodded, her eyes fluttering shut as she felt Evelyn’s fingers sliding beneath the fabric of her underwear.

Claire’s breath hitched, and her hips jerked forward in response to the sensation. She gasped, falling forward, as Evelyn’s fingers slid through her wetness.

Evelyn’s eyes locked onto hers as she slowly circled her clit, teasing her, and Claire struggled to keep her breathing even.

This was not at all how she thought tonight would go. She thought that she would take the lead, that Evelyn might be somewhat unsure of herself, but Claire couldn’t have had it more wrong. Evelyn was taking charge, and Claire wasn’t going to stop her.

Claire’s heart raced, and her entire body trembled with anticipation. She could feel Evelyn’s eyes locked onto hers, watching her every reaction, and Claire knew that she was completely at Evelyn’s mercy right now.

Evelyn’s other hand slid up Claire’s back, her fingers tangling in her hair as she pulled her down for a searing kiss. Claire could feel Evelyn’s fingers continuing to tease her, and she whimpered into the kiss, her hips bucking up against Evelyn’s hand in desperation.

Evelyn broke the kiss, her eyes filled with lust as she stared up at Claire. Evelyn’s hand slid up Claire’s side, cupping her breast and teasing her nipple with her thumb.

Claire couldn't help but moan, her hips bucking against Evelyn's hand in an effort to get closer, to get more friction against her sensitive clit.

Evelyn's fingers slid lower, dipping inside Claire, and Claire let out a low moan, her head falling forward as she felt Evelyn's fingers slowly sliding in and out of her. She was so close.

She could hear Evelyn's soft moans as she continued to touch her, and Claire knew that Evelyn was just as turned on as she was.

Evelyn's fingers began to move faster as she found her rhythm, and Claire knew she wouldn't be able to hold back much longer. She could feel the orgasm building inside her, the tension coiling tighter and tighter with each stroke.

Claire's eyes flew open as she felt Evelyn's lips on her neck, her teeth grazing her skin as she sucked and bit at her throat. Claire's hands slid around to Evelyn's back, her body already trembling with the force of her impending orgasm.

Evelyn's fingers curled inside Claire, hitting that perfect spot that sent sparks shooting through her entire body. Claire cried out, her body bucking against Evelyn's hand as she came hard, her orgasm taking over. She gripped Evelyn's shoulders, her nails digging into her skin as she rode out the intense climax.

Evelyn's fingers continued to move inside her, prolonging the sensations and sending aftershocks through her entire body. Claire could feel Evelyn's lips on her neck, and as the last of the tremors subsided, Claire collapsed into Evelyn's body, her heart racing as she struggled to catch her breath. She could feel Evelyn's other hand on her back, gently stroking her skin.

Evelyn slowly withdrew her fingers, and Claire let out a shaky breath. She lifted her head, meeting Evelyn's gaze.

“I didn’t expect you to take control like that,” Claire said with a smile coming to her lips as she pushed a few strands of Evelyn’s hair behind her ear.

Evelyn gently kissed her neck before she looked up at her. “Was it okay?”

“Okay?” Claire chuckled softly. “Are you kidding? It was more than okay. It was incredibly hot.”

Evelyn’s eyes darkened with desire, and she reached up to caress Claire’s cheek. “Good,” she murmured, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Claire’s lips. “I might have been nervous.”

“I couldn’t tell,” Claire murmured against her lips.

This kiss was slow and tender. Claire savored it, letting herself melt into Evelyn’s arms, her hand on Evelyn’s neck as she lazily traced Evelyn’s jaw with her thumb.

Eventually, Claire broke the kiss and climbed off Evelyn’s lap, her legs wobbly as she stood. She took a moment to collect herself, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to Evelyn’s lips. “Lie down,” Claire whispered against her mouth.

Evelyn’s eyes darkened as she shifted her position on the bed, and Claire stepped out of her underwear before climbing onto the bed, her eyes traveling over Evelyn’s gorgeous body with no idea where to start.

17

Evelyn’s eyes followed Claire as she got on the bed, slipping one leg between Evelyn’s as she bent to find her lips. Evelyn sighed into the kiss, her hands roaming all over Claire’s smooth skin, her hips pushing back against Claire’s thigh.

As much as Evelyn was enjoying this, she was going out of her mind with want. Her entire body ached, and when Claire had fallen apart in her arms, Evelyn had felt it everywhere.

And if she felt that much then, what could she possibly feel when Claire was the one bringing her to the edge?

The thought of it was dizzying, never mind the feeling of Claire's breasts against her skin right now as she kissed her way down Evelyn's body.

Evelyn's legs fell open as she let her head fall back against the sheets, her skin tingling as Claire's lips traveled further south. Claire's hand covered her breast, the other gliding down her side, and Evelyn knew she wouldn't last long.

When Claire's palm landed on the inside of Evelyn's thigh, and her tongue pressed against Evelyn's clit through her underwear, Evelyn gasped, her hips lifting off the bed.

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“Is this okay?” Claire asked as she flicked her tongue over her again, her fingers hooking under the thin fabric.

“Yes,” Evelyn panted, her breathing already all over the place, and Claire had barely touched her.

Claire slid her underwear down her legs, and Evelyn still couldn’t believe this was real. Whenever she thought of being with another woman, it was always a hazy fantasy, both because she couldn’t know how it would actually feel and because she didn’t have a particular woman in mind.

But this was all very real, and it wasn’t just happening with anyone. Claire had gradually invaded her thoughts these last few weeks, and once they regularly started spending time together, Evelyn could do nothing to stop herself from falling for her.

Evelyn inhaled a shaky breath as Claire climbed on top of her. She’d been almost certain that Claire was going to stay between her legs, but right now, Claire was looking down at her with the most seductive gaze, her black hair tossed over one shoulder as she dipped her head to find Evelyn’s lips.

Evelyn sighed into the kiss, her hand on Claire’s cheek, the other sliding down her back and grabbing a hold of her ass, eliciting a low moan from Claire’s lips.

“I love the way you kiss me,” Claire murmured against her lips.

But before Evelyn could reply, Claire’s hand trailed up her thigh until she was cupping her sex, moaning when she found out just how ready Evelyn was for her.

Evelyn loved the feeling of having Claire on top of her like this, her silky hair brushing her skin as she moved, her breasts pressed against her own, her lips never too far away, and Evelyn forgot what she was thinking about when Claire's fingertips found her clit, tracing slow, tight circles around it.

"Fuck," Claire panted as she pulled back to meet Evelyn's eyes. "You're so wet."

Evelyn lifted her hand to Claire's cheek again, struggling to form the words, because with every little movement of Claire's fingertips, Evelyn felt herself losing control. "I need you," Evelyn managed, guiding Claire's lips back down to hers right as Claire slid her fingers inside.

Evelyn threw her head back, a low moan on her lips, her hand gripping Claire's shoulder, the other on her ass while Claire's fingers slid in and out. Evelyn could hear how wet she was, and her clit was throbbing, Claire's heel brushing up against it with every stroke.

"Oh fuck," Evelyn groaned, and then she had to kiss Claire, her hand on her cheek, pulling her down into a deep kiss, their tongues swirling while her hips moved of their own accord, matching Claire's thrusts.

It wasn't long before Evelyn had to break the kiss again, her breath coming in gasps as her orgasm grew closer, her body wound so tight. Claire's lips trailed down her neck and over her chest, taking a nipple into her mouth, teasing her with her tongue, and Evelyn had to bite down on her lower lip, barely able to make sense of the tension building up, of how close she really was.

Because whenever she'd taken care of herself over the years it was a struggle to get over the edge, and she couldn't keep those thoughts from entering her mind now, but Claire's lips were on her neck and then her jaw, her voice whispering in her ear.

“Come for me,” Claire said, her voice low, and then her lips were on Evelyn’s again, hungrily kissing her as her fingers curled inside Evelyn.

Evelyn held onto Claire, breaking the kiss and burying her face in Claire’s neck as her body shook, her hips grinding back against Claire’s hand.

Evelyn saw stars, and she briefly wondered if she’d blacked out. Her eyes fluttered open, her grip on Claire’s loosening. She was breathless and flushed, her heart pounding in her chest, a warmth flooding her body as she tried to recover.

Claire was kissing her again, her mouth tender and sweet as she eased her fingers out, and Evelyn couldn’t help but whimper into the kiss. Everything was magnified, every touch, every kiss leaving her skin tingling.

Claire pulled back to meet her eyes, her fingers lightly caressing her cheek. “Are you okay?” she asked, searching her eyes as she got comfortable beside her.

Evelyn moved onto her side, her hand on Claire’s hip, their legs still tangled. Evelyn ran her hand up and down Claire’s thigh. “Yes,” Evelyn said, her eyes locked on Claire’s. “More than okay.”

Claire smiled. “Good.” She leaned in to kiss her again. It started slow, their tongues lazily exploring, but it wasn’t long before their breathing became heavy, and Claire was back on top of her.

Evelyn let her hands wander down Claire’s back as she lost herself in the kiss, already feeling another orgasm building slowly, her hips moving against Claire’s body.

Claire broke the kiss, shifting her body and sliding down the bed, her lips pressing hot kisses on Evelyn’s neck and chest as she made her way down.

“Can I taste you?” Claire asked, looking up at her as she brushed her lips over her lower abdomen.

A shiver of desire ran through her, both at the way Claire just asked her that, and at the thought of what that would actually feel like.

“Yes,” Evelyn said, her voice breathy as Claire continued down her body, kissing her hip before moving to her inner thigh.

Evelyn moaned when Claire’s tongue parted her folds, and she gasped when Claire found her clit.

Evelyn’s fingers twisted in Claire’s hair, her hips lifting off the bed. She couldn’t believe how good this felt, how Claire’s tongue was making her feel like she was losing control.

Claire’s hands were on her thighs, holding her in place as she continued to flick her tongue over her clit, taking it into her mouth, and Evelyn could feel herself getting closer and closer to the edge, her breathing becoming more ragged as she moaned Claire’s name.

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Evelyn was hyperaware of every sensation, every touch, every movement. She could feel the way Claire's tongue was moving against her, the way her fingers were digging into her thighs, the way her own body was responding to all of it. It was overwhelming in the best possible way.

Evelyn let out a gasp as Claire's tongue swirled over her clit, her hips bucking involuntarily. She could feel herself starting to lose control, and she didn't want it to end, but she knew that she couldn't hold on much longer.

And then, with one final flick of Claire's tongue, Evelyn let out a cry as her body trembled, her hips bucking against Claire's mouth as she rode out the waves of another orgasm. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced before, and as her body slowly came down from the high, Evelyn tried to catch her breath. She could feel Claire's lips pressing soft kisses against her thighs, and she couldn't help but smile.

"Come here," Evelyn said, and she wrapped her arms around Claire, running her fingers up and down Claire's back, tears pricking at her eyes, but they were the good kind.

18

Claire stood in her kitchen, a contented smile playing on her lips as she stirred the bubbling pot of rich marinara sauce. The aroma of garlic and tomatoes wafted through the air mingling with the lingering scent of Evelyn's perfume that seemed to cling to her skin. If she thought she'd been playing a dangerous game by continuing to spend time with Evelyn, she didn't know what she was in for now, because the

memories of the past two hours spent tangled in the sheets with Evelyn were still fresh in her mind.

She'd been nervous, but she'd tried her best not to show it, because she wanted Evelyn to trust her. But nothing could have prepared her for the way they'd just seemed to fit together. Everything had been so intense but at the same time, so intimate. Just before they'd gotten out of bed, Evelyn's fingers had lazily traced a pattern over Claire's stomach, her leg draped over Claire's, and there was something about that moment that felt so natural, like they'd been together for months.

Claire had no idea how she was going to go back to her normal life when Evelyn left, and if she felt that way right now, what would she be like three months from now?

Devastated.

There was no other way that she would be.

As she turned the heat down to let the sauce simmer, she could hear the shower running. This morning, Claire had been afraid that Evelyn might change her mind, that she'd say that she'd temporarily gone mad and that starting something was a bad idea, but after this evening, Claire couldn't imagine Evelyn doing anything like that.

She had to wonder what this had meant to Evelyn, how it had felt to finally sleep with another woman. Claire exhaled as she leaned against the counter. She was coming up to her thirtieth birthday. She tried to imagine what it would feel like to never have been with a woman while knowing that that was exactly what she wanted.

And then she tried to fathom doing that for another seventeen years.

Claire's stomach sank as she realized the intense inner conflict Evelyn must have experienced over the years, torn between her ambitions and desires.

A knock at the door startled her. She made her way to the door and pulled it open. “Trish,” she said with a smile coming to her lips.

“Hi. I was just up at the main house looking for Evelyn. Have you seen her?”

Claire’s heart skipped a beat, her mind scrambling to catch up. “Evelyn?” she asked as she tried to figure out the best way to handle this. Claire really didn’t want her boss knowing that she was sleeping with her guest. She wasn’t sure that it was a conflict of interest, but she didn’t want to find out.

Trish’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. Evelyn. I just wanted to see how she was getting on. I thought she’d need something at some point or have a question. I’ve only spoken to her on the phone to make sure it was okay to have the landscapers stop by.” She paused, a knowing look crossing her face. “Please tell me you’ve figured out how to act normal around her.”

Claire opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, Evelyn’s voice drifted out of the bathroom as the door opened. Claire turned to say something. She didn’t know what, but Evelyn spoke first.

“That smells delicious,” Evelyn said, her head lowered as she towel-dried her hair. She was wearing a pair of Claire’s running shorts and a tank top, and she had no idea that anyone else was here.

Claire froze in the doorway, her eyes darting between the two women until Evelyn lifted her gaze and caught Trish’s.

An awkward silence filled the room.

“Sorry to bother you two,” Trish said, her hands on her hips now. “I was just up at the house to see if you needed anything,” she said to Evelyn.

“No. The house is perfect. It’s exactly what I was looking for, and Claire helped me out with getting food delivered and showing me around.”

“Hm,” Trish said with a sharp inhale of breath. “I can see that.” She turned her attention to Claire. “I’ll talk to you later.” She looked back to Evelyn. “Enjoy your evening.”

When the door closed, Claire exhaled, running a hand through her hair.

“Are you in trouble?” Evelyn asked with a smirk.

“I wouldn’t think so, but I don’t know.”

“Should I be worried about her?” Evelyn asked.

“No.” Claire shook her head as she went back into the kitchen to stir the sauce. “No. She barely told me anything about you when you booked the house. She wouldn’t even tell me your name. Just that an American actress was arriving and she wanted privacy. She would never say anything to anyone. That you were here, never mind...” She motioned between them. “This.”

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“Okay,” Evelyn said softly, coming up behind Claire, her back pressed against Claire’s as she leaned in, brushing Claire’s hair to one side so that she could lightly kiss her neck.

Claire pressed her lips together, feeling that gentle touch everywhere.

“Do I have five minutes to dry my hair?” Evelyn asked.

“Of course.” Claire turned, and Evelyn lifted her hand to Claire’s cheek, guiding their lips together. Claire’s eyes fluttered shut as she kissed her back, her hands resting on Evelyn’s waist.

“Be right back,” Evelyn murmured as she pulled away.

Claire watched Evelyn disappear into her bedroom, dressed in her clothes, and for a few moments, Claire let herself believe that life could be like this, that Evelyn could be hers for more than a few weeks.

19

Just before nine o’clock the following morning, Evelyn stepped out of Claire’s guesthouse, a hint of a smile playing on her lips as a light rain fell. The air was filled with the fresh scent of rain and the gentle chirping of birds, but Evelyn barely noticed, her mind still lost in the memories of the previous night.

As she walked along the path towards the main house, she felt lighter than she had in years. The events of the past forty-eight hours had been nothing short of life-

changing, and Evelyn could hardly believe that it was real.

She could still feel the ghost of Claire's lips on her skin, the tender caress of her fingers as they explored every inch of her body. The two hours they had shared before dinner were unlike anything Evelyn had experienced before, but it had only been the start. Sharing a meal and a glass of wine with Claire had felt so natural, but when they'd fallen back into bed together a few hours later? It had been electrifying. Evelyn hadn't even known that kind of passion, that raw desire was even possible.

As she walked, Evelyn's mind replayed every touch, every whisper, every moment of ecstasy that she had shared with Claire. The hunger in Claire's eyes, the gentleness of her touch, the way their bodies had fit together so perfectly... It was all etched in Evelyn's mind, and she was too happy to even think about the fact that this was only temporary. That she would have to say goodbye to Claire at some point.

She pulled out her phone when she got back to the house, waiting for her coffee to brew. She hadn't paid any attention to it since yesterday afternoon, and she'd missed Arianna's text hours ago.

Just booked my flights. See you Monday!

Evelyn typed a quick response as she leaned against the counter, wondering if she would tell Arianna. It was actually incredibly sad that Evelyn hadn't confided in her at some point over the years, but that's how guarded she'd been. She'd really been that afraid that she couldn't even tell someone as close to her as Arianna had always been.

She set her phone down, taking a deep breath as she poured herself a cup of coffee. Outside, the rain fell harder, and there was a rumble of thunder in the distance as she carried her mug over to the back door, watching the rain bounce off the patio.

Evelyn bit her lip, remembering how she'd woken up this morning, with Claire trailing soft kisses along her shoulder and neck from behind, her arm draped over Evelyn's stomach as she whispered in her ear that she had to go, that she was already late.

Evelyn exhaled, her head all over the place this morning. She was happy. She was on a high. But there was also this feeling of dread creeping in, because she knew that this wouldn't last, and she didn't trust herself to return to Los Angeles with some newfound bravery. While she was thinking about telling Arianna that she was gay, she couldn't see herself telling anyone else, never mind coming out. That wasn't even a possibility.

Was this all she'd ever have? These next few months?

She couldn't help but think about the future, about what would happen when her time here in Ireland came to an end. The thought of leaving Claire, of returning to her old life and hiding who she truly was made her heart ache.

As she stood there, taking a sip of coffee, watching the rain fall, Evelyn made a promise to herself. That she would cherish every single moment she got to spend with Claire, because she wasn't sure that she would ever feel anything like this again.

20

Claire stood in the stall, methodically brushing the chestnut mare's coat, her mind wandering more times than she could count today. She'd reluctantly left her bed this morning, as the sun was just coming up, hating that she couldn't stay with her arm wrapped around Evelyn for a while longer.

Everything about last night still felt like a dream, and the idea of keeping herself from falling for Evelyn was pointless. Claire was already so far gone.

If Claire wasn't thinking about Evelyn, she was wondering when Trish was going to show up and quiz her about last night.

Claire could still picture the shocked look that Trish had tried to hide when she saw Evelyn come out of her bathroom wearing Claire's clothes. Surely, Trish wouldn't care.

Lost in thought, she hadn't heard the stable door open or the soft footsteps approaching until she turned when Evelyn's voice drifted through the air.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Evelyn said as she approached her.

Claire took her in, dressed in jeans and a button-up white blouse, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, her hair tumbling over her shoulders. Claire couldn't help but notice how beautiful Evelyn looked without any makeup on, her features naturally radiant and flawless.

"No, not at all," Claire said, setting the brush aside. "I was just finishing up."

"How do you feel about going for a ride?"

“I’d love to,” she said with a smile.

Claire and Evelyn had been riding for over an hour, the steady rhythm of their horses’ hooves hitting the grass as they galloped over the fields. It was a perfect July evening, the air still warm with the sun low in the sky, casting a golden glow over the land. The mountains looked particularly rugged today in the distance, the sun illuminating the dramatic slopes as they slowed down to a walk.

“You know how my manager, Arianna, said that she would visit?” Evelyn asked, glancing over at Claire as they rode side by side.

“Yeah.” Claire couldn’t begin to describe how beautiful Evelyn looked right now, with the sun hitting her brown hair, bringing out the honey streaks.

“She’s coming on Monday.”

“Okay. You sound... Sad?” Claire guessed. “I thought you were close.”

“No, we are. I guess,” Evelyn started with a sigh, “I know that she’ll suggest that I go back with her. I have no intention of doing that, but I know she’ll bring it up. I’m sure she thinks that being away for two and a half months is more than enough time to relax, but I’m not going back.” Evelyn paused. “The other thing is that I’m thinking about coming out to her.”

“Oh?” Claire turned to look at her again, trying to decipher what that meant.

“She was the one person I could have told at any point in the last twenty-nine years.

She's always been there for me, but I never could." Evelyn stared off into the distance. "I feel like I should now."

Claire's breathing slowed. What was Evelyn implying? Was it because of her? But that didn't really make sense, because they didn't have a future together.

"Then there's the logistics," Evelyn continued. "I want to show her around, bring her to the places you brought me, so I need to rent a car."

"Are you worried about your privacy? When you go to get a car?"

"Yes," Evelyn said with an exhale. "But I'm not sure there's a way around it."

"You could borrow my car," Claire offered. "Assuming you can drive a manual car."

Evelyn gave her a half smile. "I'm afraid not."

"What if you use a car rental service that delivers the car directly to the estate?" she suggested. "I know some companies offer that service."

"That could work."

"And you could even arrange to have it dropped off down by the stables, using the back entrance to the estate," Claire said. "I mean, your name will still be there, and you'll probably have to be there when it's dropped off, but it's the best solution I can think of."

Evelyn nodded. "I think, after the pub experience and our drives, I might... I might be willing to let my guard down when it comes to my privacy."

"I know you didn't want to believe me, but there's just something different here

about the culture. And I guess it helps that there aren't hundreds of paparazzi lurking, waiting for a chance to drop everything and follow a tip. I'm not completely naive. You probably shouldn't go walk down Shop Street in Galway, but I think you could have a few days with Arianna, out and about, with no one bothering you. Maybe bring a hat, and avoid the main tourist spots." Claire looked over to find Evelyn smiling at her, shaking her head. "What?"

"Thank you," Evelyn said with what sounded like a happy sigh. "For trying to understand what it's like for me. And for being patient."

Claire looked away, pressing her lips together. It was another one of those moments, like when she'd woken up this morning with her body pressed against Evelyn's back, where she knew she was feeling way too much, but she had no idea how to stop it.

"And the other thing is," Evelyn said, taking Claire away from her thoughts, "Arianna is staying for a week, and I don't know how much I'll get to see you. I mean, I guess it depends if I talk to her, but even if I did come out to her, I don't know that I want her to know about us..." Evelyn's voice trailed off.

Claire's heart beat faster. At first, she couldn't help but take it as Evelyn being embarrassed to be with someone like her, someone who didn't have an accomplished career, someone so much younger, but then her stomach dropped.

"Arianna will want me to leave sooner rather than later," Evelyn said. "At the end of the day, she's my manager, and if she thinks there's a chance that I'll fall for you, that I won't want to leave..."

Claire's breath caught in her throat.

Evelyn shook her head. "I don't know. I just think it'll create more problems for us if she knows."

Claire could only nod, not entirely sure what to make of that. On one hand, just hearing Evelyn voice some concern about staying or not meant that Claire wasn't the only one struggling here, but on the other hand, Claire still knew that this was never going to last beyond this trip, however long it lasted, and there was no point in deluding herself.

Evelyn was always going to leave, and Claire knew that she'd never be enough to stop her.

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Evelyn's eyes fluttered open, stretching lazily in her cozy bed as she glanced at the clock beside the bed. It was almost six o'clock, and the soft, rhythmic sounds of rain hitting her bedroom window filled the room. She didn't know what time they'd drifted off to sleep. Maybe sometime around one.

Propping herself up on one elbow, Evelyn gazed at Claire's sleeping form, her black hair splayed across the pillow, her freckled shoulders rising and falling with each breath. She leaned in, brushing her lips against Claire's warm skin.

Claire hummed contentedly, her eyelids heavy with sleep as she rolled over to face Evelyn. "Morning," she murmured, her voice husky.

"Morning," Evelyn whispered back, brushing a stray lock of hair from Claire's face. She traced the line of Claire's jaw with her fingertips.

Claire's eyes drifted shut as she leaned into the caress, a contented sigh escaping her parted lips.

Evelyn's gaze roamed over Claire's face, committing every detail to memory, still not believing that this was real, that Evelyn had woken up with Claire beside her for the third morning in a row.

Evelyn's hand drifted down Claire's arm, her fingers lacing with Claire's as she brought their joined hands to her lips. She placed a reverent kiss on each of Claire's knuckles, savoring this, because Arianna would be arriving in a little over an hour, and Evelyn wouldn't be waking up with Claire again until after Arianna had left.

“I wish we had a few more days like this,” Evelyn whispered.

“Me too,” Claire murmured as her eyes fluttered open. “But it’s just a week. What time is it?” she asked, her voice still groggy.

“Six.”

“Shit.” Claire ran her hand over her face. “I have to go. I should already be gone.”

Evelyn slid her hand out of Claire’s. Dipping her head to place a few kisses along Claire’s neck.

“If you don’t stop,” Claire said, her voice low, “I won’t leave. And then your manager will be asking a lot of questions.”

Evelyn sighed, her hand gliding over Claire’s stomach, not ready to let go of her just yet. “She won’t be here until seven at the earliest.”

Claire laughed softly. “I’m not risking it. Plus the horses are waiting for me.” She cupped Evelyn’s cheek, leaning in to brush her lips over Evelyn’s. “But I can’t believe that you would.” She smiled as she threw the sheets back and got out of bed, and Evelyn immediately missed her touch. “I think you might be a changed woman,” Claire said as she picked up her clothes and got dressed.

“You have no idea,” Evelyn said, her eyes moving over Claire’s body as she stood at the foot of the bed in just her jeans, her slightly disheveled hair falling over her shoulders.

“Don’t forget the rental car is being dropped off around two this afternoon.”

“Hm. I’ll walk down.” Evelyn half sat up, fluffing up her pillow behind her so she

could lean back against the headboard. “Show Arianna the stables if that’s okay.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“And I’ll see you tomorrow?” Evelyn asked as Claire put her shirt on.

“Yes. I’ll stop by with your delivery in the evening, but you might still be out sightseeing.”

“Maybe leave it until later?”

Claire came around to Evelyn’s side of the bed. “Already worried about missing me, huh?” she asked as she leaned in for a quick kiss. “You can always come down to the stables during the day or my place for a few minutes if Arianna’s, I don’t know, in the shower or something.”

“We’d have more time if you came up on the quad,” Evelyn heard herself say.

Claire smiled. “And sneak into your bedroom at night?”

Evelyn covered her face as she laughed. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me.” She could feel the dip in the bed, and when she dropped her hand, Claire was swinging one leg over her, getting comfortable in her lap.

“I think I do,” Claire said with a mischievous grin as she ran her hand over Evelyn’s stomach and palmed Evelyn’s breast, her thumb lazily swiping over her nipple.

A whimper escaped Evelyn’s lips. Her hips rocked forward as she wrapped her arm around Claire. “You do?”

Claire’s hand slid down, over her stomach and between her legs, a smile coming to

her lips. “I think you might be addicted to this,” she murmured as she bent to kiss her, her other hand on Evelyn’s cheek.

And without warning, Claire’s fingertips went from circling her clit slowly to pushing inside her with a long, smooth stroke, taking Evelyn’s breath away, causing her to break the kiss, her head dropping to rest on Claire’s chest as she found a rhythm.

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Evelyn moaned, and she slid her hands up Claire's sides, tracing the outline of her ribcage before settling on her neck. She pulled Claire closer, their breaths mingling before Evelyn pulled her into a searing kiss.

Claire's fingers moved faster inside her, and Evelyn gasped at the intensity of the sensations coursing through her body, breaking the kiss before throwing her head back. Claire's lips found her neck, nipping at her skin.

"Oh fuck, Claire," she groaned, and her hips rocked faster against Claire's hand.

Evelyn could feel herself getting closer, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Claire's lips trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses along her neck, her tongue flicking out to tease her skin.

Evelyn cried out, her body shuddering as she came, clinging onto Claire as she struggled to catch her breath.

Claire withdrew her fingers slowly, moving off of Evelyn to sit beside her, her arm wrapping around Evelyn's shoulder. They stayed like that for a long moment, just holding each other, until Claire spoke.

"I have to go," Claire said softly, placing a soft kiss on Evelyn's head. "I'll see you later?"

Evelyn nodded as she sat up, leaning in to kiss Claire. "See you later."

Evelyn watched her go, and as much as she wished she could go back to sleep,

suddenly tired again after another intense orgasm, but she had to get in the shower. Arianna would be here before she knew it.

22

The last rays of sunlight filtered through the stable windows, casting a warm glow across the horse's walnut brown coat. Claire was lost in thought as she brushed the horse down, and she barely registered the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel path outside until Trish appeared.

"Hi," Trish said with a half smile as she walked towards her.

Claire had always had a good relationship with Trish, and this was probably the first time she'd ever felt apprehensive about seeing her. "Hey," she said, setting the brush aside and wiping her hands on her worn jeans.

"Can we talk?"

Claire nodded, knowing this was about the other night, when Trish had found Evelyn in the guesthouse looking very much at home.

"I don't really know where to start," Trish said with a sigh as she crossed her arms over her chest, leaning against the stall door. "I would have thought that after the last time, you wouldn't get involved with someone so... Unavailable."

Claire pursed her lips. "Yeah." She pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear that had fallen from her ponytail. "I would have too."

"And I know you have a serious crush on this woman."

"It's not even like that," Claire said before Trish could continue. "I forget that she is

who she is, if you know what I mean.”

“No. I don’t.”

Claire exhaled. “We’ve been spending a lot of time together these last few weeks, and I forget that she’s Evelyn Coleman, world-famous, Oscar winning actress. She’s just Evelyn now.”

“Claire.” It was impossible to miss the warning in her voice. “Is she even gay?”

“I can’t answer that.” Claire wiped her hand over her face. “Look, I know it can’t last. I know that. I’m not delusional.”

“Okay, well that’s something,” Trish said with a bit of a smile. “So, you’re okay with it ending in October?”

“I have to be.”

“I just don’t want to see you get your heart broken again. I know last time, you were kind of blindsided. This is different though. You know what the story is.”

“Yeah.” Claire swallowed hard. She’d known all of this, but saying it out loud? That made it so much more real.

“Just be careful, Claire. Maybe, it’s best to end it now. Before things get too serious.”

She knew that Trish’s words made sense. That would be the smart thing to do, but the thought of walking away, of knowing that Evelyn was up at the house, but that Claire wouldn’t so much as kiss her again? No, she couldn’t do it.

“I think either way,” Claire said, “It’s going to be hard, so I’m just going to enjoy the

time we have together.”

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Trish nodded, and even if she wasn't going to say it, Claire could tell that Trish thought she was crazy. She pushed herself off the stall door, closing the distance between them, and pulled Claire into a tight hug. "Promise me you'll be careful," she whispered.

Claire hugged her back, knowing that she was already too far gone to be careful, but she agreed anyway. "I will," she said as Trish's arms fell away.

"Obviously, I'm not going to say anything. I know you know that," Trish said. "But I feel like I should make it perfectly clear."

"I told her as much."

"Good. I'd hate for her to be worrying about that."

"Thank you," Claire said. "Her manager's just arrived this morning. In case you see another woman around the property."

"It's her house for the next few months. I don't care who she has up there. Including you," Trish said with a smirk as she turned to leave. "Enjoy your evening."

"You too." Claire smiled back at her as she watched Trish leave the stables, her words lingering as she finished up for the day. Things were not going to be easy when Evelyn left, but Claire would worry about it when that day came. Not a moment sooner.

Arianna smiled at Evelyn as she handed her a mug of coffee. “You look happy, Ev. Really happy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this relaxed. I’m glad you’ve had this time to recharge.”

Evelyn felt her cheeks heat up. It wasn’t just getting away that had her feeling this relaxed.

“But I have to admit,” Arianna continued as Evelyn sat down at the dining room table across from her, “I didn’t just come here to catch up and enjoy the Irish countryside.”

They’d just finished breakfast, and Evelyn imagined that they were going to make a plan for today now that Arianna had been here for twenty-four hours and adjusted to the time difference.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. “Oh?”

Arianna reached into her bag and pulled out what looked like a script, sliding it across the table to Evelyn.

“What’s this?” Evelyn asked.

“This is exactly what you’re looking for. Not only is this an impressive script, they want you. Specifically. For the lead role.”

Evelyn’s lips slid into a smile. “Really?”

Arianna nodded. “I had to bring it to you in person. I know what this means to you, and I wanted to see that look on your face.”

Evelyn drew in a deep breath. “I was starting to get used to the rejections. I honestly wasn’t sure anyone would ever come looking for me again.”

“Well, they have.”

“What’s it about?”

Arianna leaned forward, her voice low and conspiratorial. “It’s a gritty political thriller. You’d be playing a former CIA operative who’s haunted by her past and gets pulled back into the game when a terrorist cell threatens to unleash a devastating attack on U.S. soil. The story is raw, emotional, and absolutely gripping,” Arianna said with a grin. “It’s the kind of role that comes along once in a career, if you’re lucky. And the best part? The studio is fully behind it. They see it as a surefire way to revitalize your career, to remind everyone why you’re one of the best in the business. They want someone that can do this part justice. Not the hottest actress under thirty.”

Evelyn felt a mix of excitement and trepidation wash over her as she flipped through the pages of the script. After months of feeling like Hollywood had forgotten her, like her age had made her obsolete in an industry obsessed with youth and beauty, this script felt like a dream come true.

As Arianna continued to gush about the project, Evelyn felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. While she appreciated the incredible potential of the role, she couldn’t shake the thought of what accepting it would mean for her time in Ireland, and more importantly, her relationship with Claire. Would she have to leave earlier than the end of October?

Evelyn took a deep breath, trying to mask her inner turmoil as she smiled at Arianna. “This sounds amazing, Ari. It really does.”

Arianna beamed, clearly thrilled by Evelyn’s reaction. “I knew you’d be excited. Look, I know you were planning to stay in Ireland for a few more months, Ev, but the studio is really eager to get the ball rolling on this project. They want you to be involved in the pre-production process from the start. That means table reads, script

workshops, and meetings with the director and producers. They're also talking about getting a jump on the press and publicity, maybe even a few early photoshoots and interviews to generate some buzz. I know it's not ideal, but this is the kind of opportunity that requires you to be all in from day one."

"When am I needed?"

Arianna picked up her phone, scrolling through her calendar. "August 28th for the initial table reads and workshops. Those will run through the first week of September. Then, they want to start principal photography on September 23rd."

Evelyn's mind raced as she processed the information. That would mean cutting her planned stay short by nearly two months. Two months she had hoped to spend with Claire. But at the same time, the allure of the script, the promise of a role that could redefine her career and remind the world of her talent, was impossible to ignore. Evelyn had worked hard to get where she was, had sacrificed so much for her craft, and walking away from a project like just wasn't an option.

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“I assume I can tell them that you’re in?” Arianna asked, looking up from her phone.

Evelyn took a deep breath, trying to calm the swirling emotions within her. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, a mix of excitement and trepidation coursing through her veins. Her palms were slightly damp, and she wiped them on her jeans as she met Arianna’s expectant gaze.

“Yes,” she said, her voice sounding steadier than she felt. “You can tell them I’ll do it.”

“I was about to make the call now, but it’s the middle of the night back home. I’ll have to wait a few hours.”

Evelyn forced a smile, trying to match Arianna’s enthusiasm even as her stomach churned with anxiety. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Claire. How was she going to tell her that their time together was being cut short? And how did Evelyn care this much about someone so quickly? Yes, she’d been here for more than two months, but things had only changed between them a few days ago. This shouldn’t have her so torn up.

Evelyn could feel a lump forming in her throat, and she swallowed hard, trying to push down the wave of emotion that threatened to overtake her.

24

The sun had just started to set as Claire pulled up her quad by Evelyn’s back patio. She hopped off, carrying the crate up the steps and peered in the kitchen window.

She'd tried to leave it later than usual, hoping that Evelyn and Arianna were back from wherever they'd gone today, because she wanted to see Evelyn. She couldn't see from here whether the rental car was out front, but it was nine-thirty, so they were more than likely back.

Just as Claire was about to leave the crate down and knock, Evelyn came into view, smiling when she saw Claire through the glass.

Claire might have only left Evelyn's bed yesterday morning, but it had felt like days since she'd seen her.

"Hi," Evelyn said with a smile as she opened the door.

"Hey." Claire's breath caught when she saw Evelyn wrapped in a white robe, her hair damp, tossed over one shoulder.

"I was listening out for the quad," Evelyn said as Claire stepped inside and left the crate on the counter. "Arianna's working upstairs."

"Did you have good day?" Claire asked as she turned back to her.

"Hm." Evelyn's eyes wandered over Claire. "We did." She finally met Claire's eyes. "But as beautiful as the scenery was, I was looking forward to this more."

Claire crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned back against the counter. She could feel her cheeks heating up. "You were?"

Evelyn nodded. "Come with me for a minute," she said, her hand warm against Claire's forearm, a smile playing on her lips.

Claire let Evelyn lead her down the hall and into the smaller sitting room, and before

she could ask Evelyn what she was doing, Evelyn pushed the door closed and backed Claire up against it.

Evelyn's lips crashed into her own, hungrily kissing her. One hand was on Evelyn's cheek, the other tangled in her damp hair as Claire kissed her back passionately. Claire moaned when Evelyn's tongue danced with her own.

Claire had not expected this, but it didn't take long for her mind to catch up to her body, and as Evelyn pulled away from Claire, she couldn't think of anything else but pushing that robe over Evelyn's shoulders.

Claire's heart raced as Evelyn untied the sash of her robe and let it fall open. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of the swell of Evelyn's breasts, her gaze drifting further down her gorgeous body.

Evelyn stepped closer to Claire, her hands trailing over her arms and down to her chest. She cupped Claire's breasts in her hands, squeezing gently as she leaned in to kiss her again.

Claire moaned into Evelyn's mouth as their tongues danced together. She slid her arms underneath the robe, her hands on Evelyn's waist, pulling her closer as they kissed.

Evelyn pulled away, lifting Claire's shirt over her head, her hands moving behind Claire to unclasp her bra, pushing the straps down her arms. She leaned in, kissing Claire's neck and jaw as she unbuttoned Claire's jeans and started to tug them down.

Evelyn broke the kiss again, looking into Claire's eyes with a hunger that made Claire's heart skip a beat. "Take them off and lie down on the couch."

Claire swallowed. This was new. And she definitely liked it. She obeyed without

hesitation, stepping out of her shoes and then her jeans before lying down on the plush cushions. She watched as Evelyn shrugged her robe off, her breath catching as she took in Evelyn's body as she climbed on top of her.

Evelyn leaned in to kiss Claire again, this time more slowly and gently than before. As their lips met, she slid a hand between Claire's legs, circling her clit through her underwear.

Claire gasped into Evelyn's mouth as she felt the heat of Evelyn's touch everywhere. The feeling of Evelyn's hard nipples grazing her breasts sent a jolt of desire through her, and she squirmed beneath Evelyn, arching her back as Evelyn continued to tease her.

As their kiss deepened once more, Evelyn slid her hand inside Claire's panties and began to stroke her clit in small circles. Claire moaned into Evelyn's mouth as pleasure surged through every inch of her body, and she knew she wasn't going to last long.

Claire's hand roamed down Evelyn's back, squeezing her ass as their tongues met, and now it was Evelyn moaning. Claire couldn't resist slipping a hand in between Evelyn's legs, and she groaned when her fingers met Evelyn's slick heat. She was so wet and ready for her. Claire eased two fingers inside, and Evelyn broke the kiss with a low moan.

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“Fuck,” Evelyn murmured against Claire’s shoulder, but she quickly recovered, sliding her fingers lower and when Evelyn entered her with a long, deep stroke, Claire’s eyes slammed shut, her own fingers momentarily slowing down, but it wasn’t long before they found a rhythm, their hips grinding, a light layer of sweat breaking out on their bodies as they picked up the pace, Claire coming first with Evelyn just seconds behind her, their moans mixing, their free hands clinging to one another.

Claire opened her eyes, looking up at Evelyn who was smiling down at her.

“That was...amazing,” Claire said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I think I like you taking control like that.”

“You do?” Evelyn asked, an eyebrow arched as she got comfortable, half on top of Claire and half beside her, her arm draped over Claire’s stomach.

“Hm.” Claire inhaled a deep breath. “The robe was also appreciated.”

Evelyn laughed gently against her.

“Did you spend all day thinking about getting me back into this house?” Claire asked as she ran her hand up and down Evelyn’s back.

“And most of yesterday too.”

Claire smiled, wishing she could stay here all night, but she knew she had to get back home, and that Evelyn would be busy with Arianna tomorrow. But for right now, she

was going to enjoy lying here with Evelyn like this.

25

Evelyn brought out a second bottle of wine to the patio, and Arianna added another log to the fire pit, the flames jumping up to meet the split logs as the sun sank behind the mountains.

Evelyn refilled both of their glasses before taking a seat, holding her hand out to the fire. Once the sun was gone, it didn't take long for the nights to get cold.

This was Arianna's last night before she headed to Dublin tomorrow for her flight back to Los Angeles, and Evelyn had almost told her five different times this week. This was it though. Her last chance.

Evelyn's entire body hummed with nervous energy, her fingers fidgeting with the stem of her wine glass. She needed Arianna to understand who she was before Evelyn went back to Los Angeles next month. Claire had been the only other person that Evelyn had come out to, and while she was ninety-nine percent sure that Arianna's reaction would be positive, it was still hard to say it out loud.

"Are you okay?" Arianna asked, taking her away from her thoughts. "You've been unusually quiet today."

Evelyn took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. "There's something I need to tell you."

Arianna set her glass down, turning to face Evelyn fully. Her eyes were filled with warmth and understanding, silently encouraging Evelyn to continue.

Evelyn swallowed hard as she cradled her glass of wine. "I don't know how to say

this, so I'm just going to say it." She pressed her lips together. "Arianna... I'm gay." Her words hung in the air. "I've known for a really long time, but I don't know, being here has changed me. I'm sorry it's taken this long for me to tell you."

Evelyn's heart hammered in her chest as she watched Arianna's face for any sign of reaction. Seconds felt like hours as she waited.

To her surprise, a gentle smile spread across Arianna's lips. She reached out, taking Evelyn's hand in her own, her touch warm and reassuring.

"Oh, Evelyn," Arianna said softly, her voice filled with affection. "Please don't apologize. And to be honest, I've had a feeling for a long time."

Evelyn's eyes widened in shock, her mind reeling. "You... You knew?"

Arianna chuckled, giving Evelyn's hand a gentle squeeze. "I've seen the way you look at women, Ev. It's not obvious to everyone, but I know you so well at this point. And the more telling factor is that you've come up with an excuse for every single handsome bachelor in Hollywood. None of them lasted more than three or four dates."

Tears pricked at the corners of Evelyn's eyes.

"I know you've been focused on your career," Arianna continued, her thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of Evelyn's hand. "But I've always had a feeling that there was more to it than that. I've always thought that you were interested in women, but it wasn't my place to ask. I'm your manager at the end of the day, even if I consider you one of my best friends."

Evelyn let out a shaky breath, a smile spreading across her face even as tears began to fall. She pulled Arianna into a tight hug.

“Thank you,” Evelyn whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Arianna hugged her back just as tightly. “I will always support you, Evelyn. No matter what. You deserve to be happy, and I’m so proud of you.”

Evelyn felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She knew she still had to talk to Claire and tell her what was going on, but having Arianna on her side meant more to her than she ever could have imagined.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:26 pm

The horses were settled in their stalls, munching contentedly on their evening feed, and the only sound was the gentle rustling of hay and the occasional snort or nicker. Despite the peacefulness of the moment, Claire's mind was far from calm. It had been a week since Arianna had arrived at the estate, and Claire had hardly seen Evelyn since. They had managed to steal a few moments together three days ago, sharing a passionate kiss here in the stables before Evelyn had to hurry back to the main house, but it had only left Claire wanting more.

She knew that Arianna wanted Evelyn to return to Los Angeles with her, pointing out that she had already been at the estate for three months and that surely she must be ready to go home. The thought of Evelyn leaving caused a sharp pain in Claire's chest. She'd already grown so used to having Evelyn around, and the idea of her leaving was almost unbearable even though Claire knew it was coming. October loomed in the not so distant future.

Claire was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of footsteps approaching. She turned to see Evelyn walking towards her, a small smile playing on her lips. Claire felt herself smiling back at her. In the fading evening light, Evelyn's hair took on a golden hue.

"Hey," Evelyn said softly as she reached Claire, her eyes warm and inviting.

"Hi," Claire replied, trying to keep her tone light despite the butterflies that had suddenly taken up residence in her stomach. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten about me."

Evelyn laughed, the sound sending a shiver down Claire's spine. "Never," she said,

reaching out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Claire's ear. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much."

Claire nodded, leaning into Evelyn's touch. "Did you make use of your rental car?"

"We did. Arianna wanted to see the Wild Atlantic Way. She's one of those people who does plenty of research before she goes somewhere, so she had certain beaches she wanted to see and the Cliffs of Moher."

"No incidents?" Claire asked, a smile tugging at her lips as Evelyn's hand fell away. She wasn't about to tell Evelyn that she'd been right, but she was glad that she was finally relaxing.

"With fans? No. With roundabouts?" Evelyn made a face. "There was a near miss."

Claire laughed. "I probably should have given you a few pointers."

"Hm. Arianna was actually a good co-pilot, so between the two of us and the sat nav, we managed."

Claire's smile faded. "Is she...is she still trying to convince you to go back to L.A.?"

Evelyn didn't answer her right away, and Claire felt a twist of anxiety in her gut. But then Evelyn shook her head, her expression clearing. "No."

Relief flooded through Claire, so strong it nearly made her dizzy. She had been so afraid that Evelyn would leave, if not with Arianna today, then maybe in the coming days, that whatever was growing between them would be cut short. "So you're staying?" she asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"I'm staying," Evelyn confirmed, her smile widening. "I'm nowhere near ready to

leave this place...or you.”

Claire couldn't stop the grin that spread across her face. “Well, that's a relief,” she said, even though the logical part of her brain was telling her that Evelyn would still be leaving, that she couldn't get too caught up in this.

But Claire ignored those thoughts. Instead, she closed the distance between them, capturing Evelyn's lips with her own in a searing kiss. Evelyn responded eagerly, her hands coming up to tangle in Claire's hair as she deepened the kiss, a soft moan on Evelyn's lips. Claire lost herself in the sensation of Evelyn's mouth on hers, in the way their bodies fit together so perfectly.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing heavily. Evelyn rested her forehead against Claire's. “I've missed you,” she whispered.

“I've missed you too,” Claire replied softly, running her fingers along the Evelyn's jaw.

Evelyn sighed as she pulled away. “Are you free tonight?” she asked, searching Claire's eyes.

“Yes.” Even if Claire had any plans, she would have canceled them.

“When you finish up here, do you want to come up to the house? I'll make dinner.”

“I would love that.” Claire's gaze dropped to Evelyn's lips, already thinking about what would happen after dinner, and how much she was looking forward to waking up in Evelyn's bed again.

Evelyn's smile turned into a playful smirk. She leaned in close, her lips brushing against Claire's ear. “I can't wait to have you all to myself tonight,” she murmured,

her voice low and seductive.

A shiver ran through Claire, her body tingling in response to Evelyn's words. "I can't wait either," she breathed, her hands coming to rest on Evelyn's hips, pulling her closer.

Evelyn captured Claire's lips in another kiss, this one slower, more sensual. Her tongue teased Claire's lips, seeking entrance, and Claire gladly granted it. They lost themselves in the kiss, and Claire didn't think she'd ever get enough of her. She wouldn't in the next three months. That much she knew.

Evelyn pulled back, her eyes roaming over Claire's face. "You're so beautiful," she whispered, her hand coming up to caress Claire's cheek. "I should go," she said softly.

Claire nodded. "I'll come up around seven?"

"Perfect." Evelyn leaned in for one last, lingering kiss.

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With a final, smoldering look, Evelyn turned and walked away, leaving Claire standing there, her heart pounding in her chest. She watched until Evelyn was out of sight, then let out a long breath. She hadn't realized how afraid she'd actually been of Evelyn leaving with Arianna, or shortly after her, but hearing Evelyn say that she wasn't was the highlight of her day. They still didn't have much time. A little over three months. But a part of her, as delusional as it was, hoped that the more time they spent together, that maybe, maybe Evelyn wouldn't want to leave.

Claire leaned back against the stall door. It was a crazy thought. One she hadn't dared think until this point, but seeing the way Evelyn looked at her just now, with so much desire in her eyes, she knew Evelyn felt this too. That this was more than lust. That there was something real here.

27

Evelyn leaned back against the plush cushions of the couch, savoring the lingering taste of the wine still on her lips. Claire nestled her head on Evelyn's shoulder, her soft black hair brushing against Evelyn's cheek.

Evelyn's heart swelled with a mix of contentment and an undercurrent of anxiety she couldn't quite shake. She gently tucked a wayward strand of Claire's hair behind her ear, her fingers lingering on Claire's skin. Claire returned her head slightly, and their eyes met. Claire's lips curved into a smile, and she leaned in closer. Their kiss was soft at first, a tentative exploration that quickly grew deeper. Evelyn felt her heart beating faster as she parted her lips.

As their kiss intensified, Evelyn's mind raced, and she couldn't ignore the pang of

guilt in her chest. How much longer could she go without telling Claire about the movie and the fact that she would be leaving two months earlier than she'd planned? The thought was like a dark cloud hanging over her.

Claire pulled back slightly, her blue eyes searching Evelyn's, but if she noticed any apprehension in her eyes, Claire didn't say anything. She tilted her head, finding Evelyn's lips again.

Evelyn's thoughts drifted into the background as she kissed Claire back, sliding her hand into her hair. She tried not to think about what Claire's reaction would be when Evelyn finally told her. She had to hope that Claire wouldn't hate her, that she wouldn't end things then and there.

Evelyn forgot about all of that as Claire's hand slid over her shoulder and up her neck, her thumb swiping along her jaw as they deepened the kiss. Evelyn moaned, a wave of desire hitting her as Claire's other hand left her hip and moved down, over her shorts until her warm palm was caressing her thigh.

It had only been a week since Claire had dropped off her food delivery, and Evelyn had led her down the hall into the smaller living area with one thing on her mind.

Evelyn smiled into the kiss, and Claire pulled back to meet her eyes.

"What?" Claire asked, her cheeks slightly flushed, her black hair a little disheveled.

"I was just thinking about last week. When you delivered the food."

Claire smiled. "I spent all week thinking about that. And you in that robe."

"And I was just thinking about how I can't seem to keep my hands off you." Evelyn's hand slipped underneath Claire's shirt, sliding over her ribs and around to her back.

Claire's lips slid into a smile as she climbed on top of Evelyn, straddling her waist. "I know exactly what you mean," she murmured as she dipped her head, capturing Evelyn's lips once again.

Evelyn moaned into the kiss, a warmth spreading through her entire body as Claire's hips gently started to rock. Evelyn's hands fell to her backside, her fingers splayed over her navy shorts, adding to the pressure as they continued to kiss.

Soon Claire's moans mixed with her own, and Evelyn's body was on fire. Despite the guilt looming over her, Evelyn found herself lost in the moment. Claire's hands started to roam, one palming Evelyn's breast through her shirt, the other on her neck. Claire's touch was electrifying, and she couldn't get enough of it, arching into her, wanting more.

When they stopped to catch their breath, Evelyn nearly told her. It was right on the tip of her tongue. She opened her mouth, but Claire's eyes were raking over her, her hand sliding up into Evelyn's hair as she pulled her into a heart-stopping kiss.

And Evelyn almost said it as she led Claire into her bedroom. She'd stood beside Claire, her hands on her cheeks, searching her eyes, trying to find the words, but she couldn't do it.

Evelyn couldn't bring herself to tell Claire the truth.

28

Claire parked her quad and hopped off, lifting the crate and carrying it to Evelyn's back door. Claire smiled when Evelyn appeared in the kitchen. It was late, coming up to ten o'clock, but she'd been out having dinner with her family, and this was the soonest Claire could get here.

When Evelyn opened the door, however, Claire's smile faltered. Evelyn's usually vibrant eyes were dull and red-rimmed, her skin pale except for the feverish flush on her cheeks. She coughed into the sleeve of her hoodie, the sound harsh and painful, and offered Claire a weak smile.

"Just leave it there, Claire," Evelyn said, her voice rough and strained as she took a step back. "I don't want you to catch this."

But Claire was already coming inside, her concern overriding any thought of self-preservation. Claire set the crate down on the counter and started unpacking it, knowing where everything went at this point.

"Go sit down," she said firmly, her hand lingering on Evelyn's arm. "I'm making you a hot whiskey."

Claire filled the kettle and set it to boil. The whiskey was easy to find, and she rummaged through the cabinets, searching for the cloves and lemon she needed. As she searched, her eyes fell on what looked like a script pushed into the corner of the counter, the crisp white pages stark against the dark wood. Curiosity itched at the back of her mind, but she resolutely turned her attention back to the task at hand. The kettle whistled, and she poured the steaming water into a mug, the scent of whiskey and lemon rising up to meet her.

She carried the mug over to Evelyn, who had curled up on the couch, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The sight tugged at something deep in Claire's chest, but she pushed it down. She couldn't keep feeling like this. She wasn't in a relationship with Evelyn no matter how much it felt like she was.

"Here you go," she said softly, handing the warm mug into Evelyn's hands. "This should help."

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“Thanks.” Evelyn took a sip, her eyes fluttering closed as Claire sat down beside her. “I felt a little off this morning but nothing like this. I hope it’s just a bad cold and not the flu.” She took another drink. “How was your dinner?”

“Good yeah,” Claire said. Her mind drifted back to what she was nearly sure was a script, curiosity mingling with a sense of unease. Finally, she couldn’t hold back any longer. “When I was in the kitchen, I saw a script on the counter.” She managed to keep her voice neutral. “Is it something you want to work on?”

“Yes, it is,” she said, her voice soft and hesitant. “A major role. I still can’t really believe it. I was starting to think that I’d never get the lead actress in a movie like that again. Arianna brought it over herself. That’s how excited she was about it.”

“That’s great news,” Claire said with a smile. More than once, Evelyn had said something that made Claire think that she was worrying about her future in Hollywood.

Evelyn looked down at her mug, her fingers tightening around the ceramic. “It is,” she said, but there was a heaviness to her words. “It’s just... I have to go back sooner than I planned.”

The words hit Claire like a physical blow, stealing the air from her lungs. She felt a cold weight settle in her stomach, a sense of dread that she couldn’t quite shake, but she tried to rein it in. Maybe it was the middle of October instead of the end. “When?” she asked, her voice sounding distant to her own ears.

“The end of the month,” Evelyn said, the words hanging in the air between them.

Claire's world shifted on its axis, a feeling of dizziness overwhelming her.

The end of the month? That was so soon, too soon. She took a deep breath, trying to keep her emotions in check, because this was still good news for Evelyn even if it was terrible news for her. But then a sudden realization hit her, and she looked up at Evelyn.

She'd just said that Arianna had brought the script with her, and that meant that Evelyn had known about this movie for the last three weeks. "When were you going to tell me?" Claire asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Evelyn couldn't meet her eyes. "I don't know," she murmured.

Claire pressed her lips together, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall. She had known their time was limited. She'd tried to prepare herself for the inevitable end. But this sudden acceleration, and the idea that Evelyn might have waited another week or two to tell her, felt like a physical ache in her chest.

She wanted to be happy for Evelyn. She wanted to celebrate her success. But in that moment, she struggled to feel anything at all. It was like her body had gone numb.

"I'm sorry," Evelyn said, finally meeting her eyes.

Claire sighed, her hand coming to rest on Evelyn's thigh. "It's okay," she said softly. "I just wish you had told me sooner. Why didn't you?"

Evelyn took another drink before placing the mug on the coffee table. She looked like she was blinking back tears, but it was hard to tell when her eyes were a little puffier than usual, her cheeks already a little rosy. "I was afraid you'd want to end this," she said, motioning between them. "And I know that's not a good enough reason. I just... This last month." She shook her head, like she wasn't sure if she should continue.

“What?” Claire asked, finding Evelyn’s hand underneath the blanket and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.” Evelyn searched her eyes. “Acting has always been the thing that gave my life meaning, and the last year has just been rejection after rejection. I was starting to wonder what I was going to do with myself. I’ve been asking myself was it all worth it, you know, not living my life the way I could have. And then I came here, and I met you, and for the first time I’ve felt so comfortable just being myself. I haven’t orchestrated anything for the sake of a photo op.” She looked down at her hands. “I don’t even know if I could have, but I haven’t stopped myself from falling for you.”

Claire’s breath caught in her throat.

“And I was so afraid that if I told you I was leaving so soon,” Evelyn continued, “That you’d want to stop seeing each other.” Her eyes fluttered closed, and she drew in a deep breath. “I shouldn’t have been so selfish. I just couldn’t risk it. These last three weeks have been some of the best of my life. I told Arianna I’d do the movie, but I’ve been questioning that decision every day since.”

“What?” Claire couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You have to do the movie.” She swallowed. Hearing that Evelyn was debating giving up this chance to have a few more months with her was incredibly flattering, but Claire wasn’t going to let her throw away what very well might be Evelyn’s last chance at a starring role at this point in her career.

“I don’t have to,” Evelyn said softly. “I have more than enough money. I’ve won the awards. I don’t need to do this movie.”

Claire reached out to cup Evelyn’s cheek, her eyes never leaving Evelyn’s. “You have to do it. You already have so many regrets. Please, don’t add another one. I’ll be

here, okay?” Claire hated that her voice was wavering.

“I’m not going to ask you to wait for me.” Evelyn’s hand came up to cover Claire’s before she gently moved it, bringing Claire’s hand to her lips and placing a kiss on the back of it. “It could be a very long wait, and the idea of coming out...”

Claire’s heart felt like it was breaking in her chest. “You don’t need to come out.”

“If I wanted to be with you? I would.” A tear trickled down Evelyn’s cheek. “And as much as I want that, I think there’s too many things that would come between us. You’re so young. You have so much ahead of you.”

“Evelyn—”

She shook her head. “I’ll do the movie, but I’m asking you not to wait for me. Okay?”

Claire nodded even though she had no idea how she would ever move on from this. “And I want to keep seeing you until the day you get on the plane.”

“Yeah?” Evelyn asked, her eyes glistening.

“Yes.” Claire leaned in, brushing her lips over Evelyn’s in a soft kiss.

29

Evelyn rode alongside Claire, the gentle rhythm of the horses’ hooves on the soft grass filling the air. It was a cloudy day, and although it looked like it might rain at any moment, it had stayed dry so far. As they made their way through the familiar fields surrounding the estate, a feeling of sadness slowly started to take hold in Evelyn’s heart. The thought of leaving this place left her feeling so empty, and she was dreading going back to her chaotic life in Los Angeles. She’d come here looking for nothing more than a break, but she’d found so much more.

She turned to Claire, her voice soft and she could hear the tinge of sadness in it. “I booked my jet.” The words felt like a confession, an admission of the inevitable end to their time together. Evelyn’s gaze lingered on Claire’s face, trying to memorize every detail, every curve and line, knowing that soon, these moments would be nothing more than cherished memories.

“From Knock?”

“Yes. Two o’clock in the morning on August 27th.”

Claire nodded, her blue eyes reflecting a mix of understanding and resignation. They had both known this day was coming, but the reality of it still felt like a punch to the gut. Time seemed to be slipping through their fingers, each moment more precious than the last, and now she’d be leaving in less than two weeks time. Evelyn’s heart ached at the thought of leaving, of saying goodbye to Claire.

Over the past few weeks, they had spent nearly every evening together, savoring each other's company, and Evelyn had returned her rental car, knowing she wouldn't need it anymore.

As they rode on, Evelyn took in the breathtaking scenery that had become so familiar to her over the past few weeks. The rolling green hills stretched out before them, the gray stone walls separating the fields from one another. The distant mountains loomed on the horizon, their peaks seeming to touch the sky today. She tried to commit every detail to memory, etching each sight, sound, and scent into her mind, determined to be able to remember this months and years from now. A wave of emotion washed over her as she realized just how much she was going to miss all of this.

As they rode back towards the stables, Evelyn found herself holding back her emotions. She still had time left with Claire. This wasn't her last day, but booking her flight must have triggered this flood of emotions that seemed to keep bubbling up today. Having a time and a date for her flight made it all very real.

She dismounted her horse, and Claire did the same, lead her horse into the stables, her shoulders slightly slumped, as if she was feeling the same kind of dread that Evelyn was.

Evelyn followed, her eyes never leaving Claire. She watched as Claire removed the saddle, her hands moving with a practiced ease that spoke of years of experience, before she finally looked away to do the same.

When Evelyn was finished, she watched as Claire tended to the horses and got them back in their stalls. She stepped closer, her hand reaching out to gently caress Claire's back, seeking comfort in the warmth of her touch. Claire turned, her blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears, and Evelyn felt her own emotions threatening to overflow.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Evelyn whispered, her voice barely audible over the soft rustling of the horses in their stalls. “These past few weeks have been the happiest of my life, and the thought of walking away from you is tearing me apart.”

Claire pulled her close, and she felt Claire’s arms tighten around her, holding her as if she never wanted to let go.

“I know,” Claire murmured, her lips brushing against Evelyn’s ear. “But we knew this day would come. We’ve always known that our time together was limited, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Evelyn pulled back, her hand cupping Claire’s face, searching her beautiful eyes. She leaned in, her lips meeting Claire’s in a slow and tender kiss.

When they finally parted, Evelyn rested her forehead against Claire’s, her eyes closed as she tried to steady her racing heart. The words were on her lips, but she couldn’t say them, as much as she felt them. She couldn’t tell Claire that she loved her when she wasn’t prepared to make the necessary changes to her life that would give them a real chance together.

So she swallowed those words as she pulled away. She wanted to say something, something less intense, but her throat felt tight, and in the end she couldn’t say anything as they left the stables together, hand in hand as they made the short walk to Claire’s bungalow.

30

Claire guided the car along the road, stealing glances at Evelyn who sat beside her, a contented quiet stretching between them. The sun dipped low on the horizon, glistening off the ocean. As they approached a bend, Claire slowed and pulled the car over, parking half on the grass and half in the narrow shoulder, beside a low stone

wall. She couldn't remember when exactly she'd discovered this spot, but if you didn't know it was there, you'd never find it.

Both women stepped out of the car to take in the stunning view before them, of the ocean stretching out endlessly in front of them.

"Come on," Claire said softly, helping Evelyn over the wall. They found the grassy ledge, hidden from the road, with a perfect view of the sunset. They were right on the edge of the cliff, but the area was big enough that it had never felt dangerous.

"How did you find this place?" Evelyn asked as she sat down on the grass.

"I don't remember. I guess, I just pulled over, probably on an evening like this, to take in the view or watch the sunset, but I had no idea that this was here. I just looked over the wall and there was this perfect patch of grass, tucked away from everything."

Claire settled behind Evelyn, wrapping her arms around her. She pulled Evelyn close, savoring the feeling of her warm body pressed against her own. Evelyn sighed contentedly, leaning back against Claire's chest and sinking into her embrace.

It was so hard for Claire to believe that this was their last evening together, that when they drove back, Evelyn would be making sure she had everything packed up and ready, her driver arriving at midnight to bring her to the airport. Claire had offered to, but Evelyn had told her that she couldn't handle saying goodbye in public, even if it was in an empty airport.

So, they'd have to say goodbye in just a few hours at the house, and Claire still couldn't grasp the fact that the day they'd been dreading had finally arrived.

The last few days had been an emotional rollercoaster. The chemistry they'd always had together in bed had gradually changed into something that Claire hadn't been

prepared for. She'd nearly told Evelyn she loved her a few moments after they'd come together, their arms wrapped around one another, but Claire couldn't say it, afraid of Evelyn's reaction.

The rhythmic sounds of the ocean hitting the rocks below them mixed with the cry of seagulls. The sun slowly dipped toward the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant hues of orange and pink. But Claire barely noticed the beautiful sunset, her attention fully captivated by the gorgeous woman in her arms.

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Evelyn sighed, her voice barely above a whisper. “I wish I could stay like this forever.”

Claire’s heart ached at those words. “Me too,” she said softly. She wanted to tell Evelyn that she’d be here waiting for her, that she could come back when the movie was finished. But Evelyn had been clear. She couldn’t see herself coming out, and she didn’t want Claire to wait for her.

It would probably be a year or more before Evelyn’s schedule would allow her to return, and Claire knew she had to respect Evelyn’s wishes, no matter how much it hurt. Evelyn had been the sensible one, pointing out all the reasons why they wouldn’t work. But sitting here, with her arms around Evelyn, it felt like the most natural thing in the world, like they’d been together for years.

Claire tightened her embrace, pressing a gentle kiss to Evelyn’s temple. She wanted to memorize every detail of this moment, to hold onto it forever. The feel of Evelyn in her arms, the scent of her hair, the way the fading light danced across her face.

Claire held Evelyn close as the sun disappeared behind the horizon, the sky slowly darkening. She knew their time together was coming to an end, but she wanted to savor every last moment.

As they stood up to leave, Claire took Evelyn’s hand in hers, their fingers intertwining. They walked back to the car in silence, and Claire pressed her lips together as she started the car, willing herself to keep it together, reminding herself of the reason Evelyn was leaving. She had an amazing opportunity ahead of her, and Claire had to try and find some of Evelyn’s realism. Their lives were so different, and

the truth of it was that they were never going to work. The sooner Claire could get that into her head, the better.

31

Evelyn stared out the window of her private jet, her vision blurred by the tears that streamed down her face. The script she had been trying to read lay discarded on the seat beside her, forgotten in the wake of the emotions that had finally overwhelmed her. She covered her face with her hands, silently letting the tears fall as she tried not to think about her last moments with Claire.

The memory of their last embrace outside the house, just before midnight, replayed in her thoughts. Claire's eyes had been misty as she held Evelyn close, whispering that she had to go. Evelyn could only nod, her throat too tight to speak, as she let her hand slide out of Claire's. She watched, her heart breaking, as Claire got into her car and drove out the front gates of the estate.

Now, somewhere over the Atlantic, Evelyn felt the full weight of her decision to leave. She knew she had made the right choice for her career, but the pain of leaving Claire behind was already worse than she'd imagined.

Evelyn unlocked her phone, her fingers trembling slightly as she navigated to her photo gallery. She flicked through the seven photos she had of her and Claire.

The first photo was from the pub, both of them holding their pints of Guinness as they leaned in, smiling. The rest of the photos were taken in July and August, after they had gotten together, most of them taken while they were out on a drive, but there was one intimate shot of them cuddled up on the couch, Claire's head nestled in the crook of Evelyn's neck, her eyes closed. She didn't think Claire had even realized she'd taken that photo.

And then it struck her that Claire had never asked Evelyn to send her any of those photos, that Evelyn was the only one who had them. Claire had respected her privacy enough not to even ask, knowing that Evelyn might not want the photos to leak. More tears fell as Evelyn realized just how patient and understanding Claire had been with her.

Claire had been there for her when she'd been reluctant to go sightseeing, afraid of being recognized. She had held Evelyn's hand and listened without judgment when Evelyn struggled to tell her that she was gay. Even the fact that Claire hadn't slept with her that first night, despite the obvious attraction between them, spoke volumes about the kind of person she was.

She forced herself to focus on the task at hand, picking up the script again. Even though this was a role of a lifetime, one that could reinvigorate her career, she'd hardly looked at the script these last few weeks, her time with Claire more important than memorizing her lines.

Evelyn forced herself to focus on the script, pushing thoughts of Claire to the back of her mind. She knew she had to move on, to immerse herself in this new role and the challenges it presented. As much as she'd want to reach out to Claire in the coming days and weeks, to hear her voice and tell her how much she missed her, Evelyn knew it would only make things harder for both of them.

She had been the one to insist that they couldn't stay in touch, that a clean break was best. Claire had looked at her with those beautiful blue eyes, a flicker of hurt passing over her face before she nodded in understanding. Evelyn knew it was for the best, but that didn't make it any easier.

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In the week since Evelyn had left, Claire found herself struggling to adjust to life

without her. The estate felt emptier, the days longer, but at least she had the routine of managing the stables. The horses needed her attention, and the work kept her mind occupied for most of the day.

As she brushed Finn's gray coat, Claire's thoughts drifted to the moments she and Evelyn had shared in the stables, to the rides they'd gone on together. A lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed hard, focusing on the rhythmic strokes of the brush against the horse's gleaming coat.

The physical labor of taking care of the horses left Claire exhausted by the end of each day, and she welcomed the fatigue. Most nights, she fell asleep within minutes, her mind too tired to think about the fact that Evelyn was thousands of miles away now and not up at the main house.

The worst part was that she'd been prepared for this. She knew it was going to be awful going back to her normal life now that Evelyn had gone back to hers, but it was still extremely difficult to go from spending so much time with someone, someone she really cared about, to being alone again.

Claire found herself constantly checking her phone, hoping for a message or a call, anything to bridge the distance between them. But Evelyn was busy with her new project, and Claire knew that Evelyn had wanted a clean break.

As she closed the stall door, Claire leaned back against the rough wood, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

She sighed, pushing herself off the stall door. She needed to focus on her work, on the life she had here at the estate. It was a good life, one she had built for herself, and she couldn't let her feelings for Evelyn consume her.

As she organized the saddles and bridles, a familiar voice called out from the stable

entrance. “Claire? You in here?” Trish walked over, her expression a mix of concern and understanding. “Just wanted to check in on you, see how you’re doing.”

Claire shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “I’m alright, just keeping busy.”

Trish raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying it. “Claire, it’s okay to admit that you miss her.”

Claire felt her throat tighten, and she looked away, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall. “I do miss her. But I knew this was coming, and I have to find a way to move on.”

Trish placed a comforting hand on Claire’s shoulder. “Look, I know it’s not easy, and I’m afraid I don’t really have any advice for you, other than, maybe to keep doing what you’re doing. Staying busy.”

Claire nodded.

“There’s a group of German students staying with my neighbor for a week. I hadn’t realized, but they have four days left on their trip. Is it okay if I send them down here one of those days?”

“Yeah. Of course.” Claire hadn’t been giving lessons since Evelyn arrived at the house. At first, it was for her privacy, but it wasn’t long before Claire didn’t want to spend her spare time with anyone else.

“Great,” Trish said with a smile as she turned to leave. “I’ll be in touch when I know what their schedule is like and see what time suits you. That okay?”

“Sure.”

Claire watched Trish leave the stables, feeling a mix of gratitude and exhaustion. She knew Trish was trying to help, to give her something to focus on other than Evelyn. The idea of teaching a group of German students was a welcome distraction.

Claire knew that moving on wouldn’t be easy, but she also knew that she had to try. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life pining for a woman who had chosen a different path, no matter how much she cared for her.

Evelyn had made her decision, and Claire had to respect that, even if it broke her heart.

Evelyn sat by the pool, the script open on her lap, but her mind was miles away. The early morning sun was warm against her skin, a stark contrast to the gentle, misty mornings she'd grown accustomed to during her time in Ireland. She reread the words, trying to focus on the lines she needed to learn, but nothing was going in today.

It had been a month since she'd returned to Los Angeles, and the ache in her chest had only grown with each passing day, a constant reminder of what she'd left behind. She'd thrown herself into her work, hoping to distract herself from the gnawing emptiness, but even the prospect of a challenging new role couldn't seem to hold her attention.

Evelyn sighed, closing the script and leaning back in her chair. She knew Arianna would be arriving any minute, and she needed to pull herself together. She couldn't let her manager see how much she was struggling.

Arianna had been supportive when Evelyn had come out to her, but Evelyn didn't think Arianna would understand how she'd fallen so hard and so fast for someone so much younger than her.

Evelyn stood up, stretching her arms above her head and taking a deep breath before going inside, her bare feet cool against the tiled floor. She poured herself a glass of water, taking a long sip as she stared out the window at the perfectly manicured lawn.

She heard Arianna's car pull up, and Evelyn went to open the front door. Arianna got out of the car, pushing her shades on top of her head.

"Morning," Evelyn said with a smile that she had to force. When was she going to start feeling like herself again? How much longer could this emptiness that she always seemed to feel these days go on?

“Good morning.” She had two cups of coffee in her hand. “I know I was supposed to be coming here for coffee, but whatever beans the new café by my house is using... The coffee is divine.”

Evelyn thanked her when she handed her one of the coffees.

“So,” Arianna said, sliding onto a stool at the breakfast bar, “How are you feeling? Excited yet? We’re not that far away from getting started with this movie.”

“Yeah.” Evelyn took the stool beside her and brought the coffee to her lips, taking a sip. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Arianna sighed as she turned to face her. “Evelyn, I know this is a big change for you, coming back to L.A. after being away for so long, but I don’t understand why you’re not more excited about this movie. This role could be a game-changer for your career.”

Evelyn nodded, knowing Arianna was right. But the thought of throwing herself into work, of pretending to be someone else when she’d only just started to figure out who she really was, felt like a betrayal of everything she’d discovered in Ireland.

“I know,” she said, her voice quiet. “I’m trying.”

Arianna’s expression softened. “I know you are. And I’m here to help, in any way I can.” She searched Evelyn’s eyes for a moment. “You know what you need? You need to figure out how to bring whatever happiness you found in Ireland here.”

Evelyn looked away, distracting herself by taking another sip of coffee.

“And I think I know exactly how to do that,” Arianna said, a smile playing on her lips.

Evelyn swallowed, her heart beating faster. There was no way that Arianna could have figured out that her and Claire had started seeing each other. And even if she had, what was she going to do? Fly Claire out here for a week?

Arianna rested her hand on Evelyn's knee. "You need to find the time in your schedule to go horse riding."

Evelyn's eyebrows lifted, her heart rate slowing again. "Horse riding."

"You were so happy that day that I called you and you were out riding with Claire. You were practically glowing, Ev."

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Evelyn bit the inside of her cheek. Nothing had even happened with Claire at that point, except that Evelyn had let herself be attracted to her, and up until then, it had been one of the best days of her life.

Evelyn forced a smile, nodding at Arianna's suggestion. "You're right. I did enjoy riding again. Maybe I'll look into finding a stable nearby."

But even as she said the words, Evelyn knew it wouldn't be the same. Yes, riding a horse again had made her happy, but now? Now, Evelyn wasn't sure she'd ever feel like she had when she'd been with Claire. There was no quick fix to the way she felt right now.

"Good," Arianna said. "And speaking of Ireland, I was talking to Rick yesterday, and we both think it'd be a great idea for you to be on that genealogy show, so I've provisionally booked you in for next year. I know you know where your grandfather is from, but there's always so much more to the story when a professional really starts digging in. What do you think?"

Evelyn inhaled a shaky breath as she wrapped her hands around the coffee cup. It sounded like an amazing opportunity, but would she really be ready to go back to Ireland next year? Could she be so close to Claire and not see her? Why wouldn't she see her? Her mind was racing, but she could feel Arianna's gaze on her, and she knew she had to answer.

"Yes," Evelyn said with a smile tugging at her lips. "I think it's a great idea."

"Excellent." Arianna grinned back at her, and Evelyn had to hope that by the time

that trip came around, she'd have sorted her life out by then.

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7 MONTHS LATER

Claire walked beside Trish along Shop Street, the sun shining high overhead. Galway buzzed with life, and Claire felt a rare lightness in her step as she strolled beside Trish. A busker strummed an acoustic guitar, his voice melding with the chatter of tourists and locals. Crowds bustled around them, some stopping to read restaurant menus, others carrying shopping bags.

Trish laughed softly beside her. "There's nothing like a sunny day and a bit of heat to get people out. You'd swear it was race week."

"It was a long winter," Claire said as they moved through the crowded street, and she wasn't just talking about the weather.

The first two months after Evelyn left had been hard. Claire had thrown herself into her work, taking on more horse riding lessons, filling every spare moment with activity. She'd made a rule for herself never to google Evelyn's name. She didn't want to know how the movie was going or whether Evelyn was back in the tabloids. It hurt too much to think about. But now, seven months later, and almost a year to the day that Evelyn had arrived, Claire was finally starting to feel like herself again.

"Will we stop for a drink?" Trish asked.

"Sure."

They found a table outside one of Claire's favorite pubs, and she leaned back in her chair, savoring the warmth on her skin. Trish had gone inside to order two pints of

Guinness, and Claire watched the steady stream of people going by as she waited.

A few minutes later, Trish brought out their pints. She lifted her glass towards Claire's. "Cheers."

"Cheers," Claire echoed as they both took a long swig.

Trish let out a contented sigh as she sat back in her chair. "Evelyn Coleman is some woman, isn't she?"

Claire blinked, taken aback by the mention of Evelyn's name. She hadn't expected Trish to bring her up. "How do you mean?"

Trish studied her for a second. "You haven't heard?"

"No. Heard what?"

Trish chuckled. "I forget that you don't live on social media like most people your age. Evelyn Coleman came out yesterday. In the middle of an interview," she said with a laugh. "As casual as you like."

"What?" Claire felt her heartbeat quicken.

"Yeah." Trish nodded, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "I wonder how much of an effect you had on her. I heard you pulled out all the stops. Rory mentioned that you brought her to the pub, and it took some asking around to figure out who lit those fireworks," Trish said, giving her a knowing smile.

Claire's cheeks warmed under Trish's gaze. "I might have called in a few favors."

Trish grinned. "I didn't know you were such a romantic."

Claire took a long drink, letting Trish's words sink in. Evelyn had come out. Publicly. In the middle of an interview. Claire's mind raced, trying to process the information. She couldn't help but feel a surge of pride.

"I'm happy for her," Claire said softly, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "It couldn't have been easy to do."

Trish nodded in agreement. "It's a big deal, especially for someone as famous as her. I'm sure it took a lot of courage."

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Claire's thoughts drifted to the time she'd spent with Evelyn. She'd asked herself more than once if she could change things, would she? Would she erase the time she had with Evelyn to spare herself those long weeks of feeling so lost and lonely after she'd left?

The question gnawed at her in the quiet moments, often when she was alone in the stables or taking one of the horses out for a ride.

They'd barely had two months together, but somehow Claire had managed to fall so hard for Evelyn in that short space of time. They had been getting to know each other for the two months before then, when Evelyn first arrived at the estate, but still, it had all happened so fast.

But Claire couldn't bring herself to wish that time away.

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1 YEAR LATER

Evelyn sat across from the TV presenter, gently cradling a warm cup of tea in her hands. The room was filled with elegant antique furniture, and grand paintings adorned the walls.

Evelyn had been in Ireland for a few days now, staying at Ashford Castle while filming for the genealogy show.

The presenter, a friendly woman in her 40s, smiled at Evelyn as she laid out a series

of documents on the table between them.

“It’s wonderful to have you here in Ireland, exploring your family’s roots. What inspired you to embark on this journey?”

“I’ve always known that my grandfather, Patrick Coleman, was from Galway. He left Ireland when he was 18 and moved to New York, but beyond that, I don’t know much about his life here or his family. I guess I just felt this pull to connect with that part of my history.”

The presenter nodded, picking up the first document.

“We’ve uncovered some fascinating information about your grandfather’s early life. This here is his birth certificate. Patrick Coleman, born March 5, 1927, in a small village on the Galway-Mayo border.”

Evelyn took the document, studying the faded ink.

“It’s incredible to see it in black and white. I knew he was from Galway, but to have the exact location and date...”

“Absolutely. And here, we have the ship manifest from when Patrick emigrated to the United States in 1945.” She handed Evelyn the manifest, pointing to a line halfway down the page. “There he is, Patrick Coleman, age 18. He boarded the ship in Dublin and arrived in New York City on August 15, 1945.”

Evelyn scanned the document, imagining her grandfather as a young man setting out on a life-changing journey.

“He mentioned his early days in New York a few times,” Evelyn said softly, “But he never really talked about what he left behind in Ireland.”

“It must have been a tough decision,” the presenter agreed. “Leaving everything behind at such a young age. Now, let’s take a look at this map.”

She unfolded a detailed map of County Galway, pointing to a small village.

“This is where your grandfather was born and raised. It’s a beautiful area. Not far from Connemara but also just a short drive to Galway City.”

As Evelyn leaned in to study the map, a realization struck her. That village was just a few minutes drive away from the estate. She’d even passed through it a few times when she’d been out on a drive with Claire.

“We’ve arranged for you to be able to visit the home where your grandfather grew up. It’s derelict, but you can still get an idea for the place where he spent his childhood. It’s about a thirty minute drive from here.”

“I would love to,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “It would mean the world to me to see that piece of my family’s history.”

The presenter smiled. “Okay. Whenever you’re ready, we can get going.”

Evelyn nodded, not letting on that she’d spent months living just a few miles from there. The coincidence was almost too much to believe.

And inevitably she thought of Claire.

Evelyn had picked up her phone so many times in the last two years, but especially in the last few weeks, when she knew the dates that she’d be here. She couldn’t decide what the best thing to do was.

Evelyn didn’t think she could leave here without seeing Claire. It was probably a bad

idea, but she couldn't be this close to her without reaching out.

She probably should have sent her a text before she'd arrived, but it was too late for that now.

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She could text her right now. Ask to see her.

But what if she'd moved on? She almost surely had.

Evelyn could just show up at the guesthouse. It probably wasn't the best move, but she was too afraid to send a text and not get a response.

If she wanted to see her again, what other choice was there?

36

Claire stood in the doorway of her home, her heart racing wildly as she watched Evelyn gracefully step out of the car. She blinked rapidly, wondering if her mind was playing a cruel trick on her, conjuring up such a vivid image of the woman she'd been trying so desperately to forget.

As Evelyn approached, the gravel crunching beneath her ankle boots, Claire's breath caught in her throat.

It was really her, looking as stunning as ever in simple white jeans that hugged her curves and a red silk blouse. Her long brown hair was down, falling in loose waves across her shoulders, and her shades rested casually on top of her head.

How was Evelyn here?

Claire's heart skipped a beat as Evelyn got closer, a lopsided smile on her lips. "Hey," Evelyn said softly. "Sorry for just showing up like this. I should have called."

“No,” Claire replied, her own smile spreading across her face. “It’s fine.”

Evelyn’s gaze met hers, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes. “Are you busy?”

“No, not at all.” Claire took a moment to take in Evelyn’s appearance, still not believing this was real. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been staying at Ashford Castle the last few days,” Evelyn explained. “I’m doing a genealogy show, and we’ve been filming that the last two days.”

Claire’s eyebrows raised in interest. “Tracing your roots?”

Evelyn nodded, a thoughtful expression crossing her features. “It was surprisingly emotional, but good. I’m glad that I did it.” She paused, studying Claire for a moment before asking, “Can I show you something?” Her gaze drifted back towards her car.

“You rented a car?”

“Yeah,” Evelyn confirmed with a smile. “I wanted the freedom to explore a bit while I was here.”

Claire opened her mouth and closed it again. The Evelyn that she’d met two years ago had struggled to leave the grounds of this estate, too afraid of having her privacy invaded. Now, she was driving around Galway?

“Let me just lock up,” Claire said as she went back inside and grabbed her keys, locking the door behind her. “So, where are we going?” Claire asked as she got in the passenger seat.

“I wanted to show you where my grandfather grew up,” Evelyn said as she got in and started the car. “It’s not far.”

Claire's heart was still racing, and her palms were clammy. How was this even real? Only this morning, she'd caught herself thinking about Evelyn again and beat herself up for it. How was she still thinking about this woman two years later?

But now that Evelyn was here, that was the easiest question to answer.

How could she not be?

As Claire stepped out of the car, she took in the sight of the crumbling stone cottage, its walls nearly hidden beneath a thick blanket of ivy. The narrow driveway, with grass sprouting between the tire tracks, had been empty for a long time. She followed Evelyn as she led the way towards what was left of the house.

Claire turned to Evelyn, her brow furrowed in confusion as Evelyn showed her around the property. "Why didn't you come here when you were staying at the estate? It's so close."

Evelyn met her gaze, a hint of a smile on her lips. "I had no idea. All I knew was that he was from Galway."

Claire couldn't believe it. "That's just... wow. I don't know what to say. That's some coincidence."

Evelyn nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "It feels that way, doesn't it? Like everything that happened, me coming to Ireland, staying at the estate, meeting you..." She trailed off, her voice thick with emotion.

Claire's heart stalled at the mention of their time together. She'd tried so hard to move on, to convince herself that what they'd shared was just a fleeting moment in time, but seeing Evelyn now, standing here in front of her, it all came rushing back.

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“I can’t believe you’re here,” Claire whispered.

Evelyn visibly swallowed. “There’s a reason I wanted to show you this.” She looked away for a second. “Just as we were leaving here yesterday, the presenter said, jokingly I’m sure, that this property had just come up for sale and that I could buy it. So, I did. This morning.”

Claire’s breathing slowed, waiting for Evelyn to continue, her mind already jumping ahead to what this might mean.

“It’s a twenty-two acre site,” Evelyn said, “But the back of it runs up against this three bedroom bungalow that’s been on the market for a few weeks now.”

Claire felt like the ground might be tilting beneath her.

“And I put in an offer for that this morning too. All cash and above asking, so there shouldn’t be any problems,” Evelyn said, her eyes searching Claire’s.

“What are you saying?”

Evelyn took a deep breath, her voice steady but filled with emotion. “I tried to move on, Claire. I really did. Despite working on an amazing project, the kind of movie that I could only have dreamt about being a part of, and I was still miserable. I was so... I don’t know. Just sick of the way I was living. I had no intention of coming out, but I just felt so... suffocated. I’d backed myself into a corner, and I just couldn’t wait to get out. I knew I had to start making some changes.”

Claire shook her head, struggling to process everything Evelyn was saying. The idea of Evelyn buying property here, so close to where she lived seemed almost too good to be true.

“I still can’t believe you came out,” Claire said, her voice barely above a whisper. “You’ve changed so much since the last time you were here.”

Evelyn’s lips curled into a soft smile. “I don’t know about that. I’m still crazy about you.”

Claire’s heart skipped a beat at those words, and she felt a warmth spread through her chest. She felt like she was dreaming. Evelyn was here, standing in front of her, confessing her feelings and revealing the steps she’d taken to be closer to her. It was almost too much to process.

She reached out, her hand gently cupping Evelyn’s cheek as she gazed into those captivating brown eyes that had haunted her dreams for the past two years. “I tried so hard to move on,” Claire admitted, her voice wavering.

Evelyn leaned into her touch, a single tear sliding down her cheek. “I’m so sorry for leaving the way I did. You have no idea.”

Claire swallowed down the lump in her throat. “You had to. It was just bad timing.”

“Then I’m sorry for not staying in touch. For insisting that we didn’t.” Evelyn sighed. “I was just trying to protect myself.”

“Are you really staying?”

“Yes.” Evelyn inhaled a deep breath. “I haven’t really thought too far ahead. I didn’t know if you’d want to see me. Arianna has no idea I’m doing this. As for the

properties? Either way, I'd like to own this and hold onto that bit of history, but if you think you'd be willing to give me a second chance? Then yes. I'm staying."

Claire pressed her lips together. "I never thought I'd see you again," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I know," Evelyn said. "I'm asking you to forgive me."

Claire shook her head. "It's not a matter of forgiving you. I just can't believe this is really happening. That you're here. That you haven't forgotten..."

"Never. I could never forget," Evelyn said, her hand warm against Claire's cheek. "Never." She leaned in, her lips brushing softly against Claire's in a tender kiss.

EPILOGUE

Claire wrapped her arms around herself, trying to fend off the October chill that seemed to seep through every layer of her clothing. She stood on the outskirts of the set, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of crew members adjusting lights and positioning cameras. The normally empty fields had been transformed into a movie set, all of it revolving around a thatched cottage that had been restored just for this movie.

They were back filming again, and Evelyn, dressed in a stylish 1930s outfit featuring a belted burgundy wool coat and a vintage hat, stood out as the scene outside the cottage came to life.

Claire watched as Evelyn transformed into her character, a determined woman navigating the complexities of life during that decade, her expression intense and captivating despite the cold. Even in the midst of the organized chaos of a film set, Evelyn's presence was magnetic.

A few minutes later, the director's voice sent everyone in motion again. "Cut!"

Evelyn turned towards Claire, a warm smile replacing the fierce determination she'd worn moments before. She lifted the hem of her coat slightly, making her way over, her breath visible in the cool air. "Sorry you have to spend your birthday standing out in the cold."

Claire shook her head, her smile widening. "It's my first time on a set like this. It's amazing to see all the work that goes into it. And I'm with you, getting to see what you do best."

Evelyn laughed softly, her eyes almost twinkling. "Any comments on my accent?"

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Claire grinned, remembering when she told Evelyn never to do a movie where she'd have to attempt an Irish accent. "It sounds good to me," she said, holding up her hands as if surrendering. "And others have said it too. I'm sorry for doubting you."

"Don't think I won't use that in my acceptance speech. I have a feeling this movie is going to be nominated for a lot of awards."

Claire laughed. "Well in fairness, I didn't think you would've had almost four years living here to work on that accent. So..."

"I'm still not letting you live it down," Evelyn teased.

Before Claire could respond, the assistant director called out, summoning Evelyn back to the set. Evelyn squeezed Claire's hand, her fingers lingering before she turned to walk back. Claire watched, her heart swelling with pride and love as Evelyn resumed her position under the lights.

As filming continued, Claire's mind wandered back over the past four years. This was the first movie Evelyn had done since moving to Ireland, and Claire couldn't help but feel a surge of pride. After buying the ruins of her grandfather's home, Evelyn had thrown herself into renovating the bungalow.

Evelyn had rented out her Los Angeles home, cutting ties with her old life and fully embracing her new one here. Occasionally, she'd traveled to London for smaller roles in TV shows, but most of her time was spent here.

Claire had loved watching the transformation, not just of the bungalow, but of Evelyn

herself. With each passing day, Evelyn had grown more confident, more at peace with who she was and what she wanted.

When the renovation was finally complete, Claire had moved in without hesitation. Waking up next to Evelyn every morning, going for horseback rides, curling up together on the couch in the evenings... It was everything she'd ever wanted.

Standing here on the movie set, surrounded by the bustle of the crew, Claire still couldn't quite believe that this was her life. She'd never imagined, back when she'd first met Evelyn, that they'd end up here. That Evelyn would not only come out publicly, but that she'd make a home here in Ireland, with Claire by her side. It seemed like a dream sometimes.

As Evelyn glanced over at her from the set, her eyes warm and her smile bright, Claire felt a rush of love and gratitude. She knew she was lucky. Lucky that Evelyn had chosen to stay at Trish's estate all those years ago. It was a decision that had changed both of their lives forever. If Evelyn had picked somewhere else, they never would have met, and every single day, Claire remembered how lucky she was to have found this incredible woman.