



Pastries and Promises

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Description: At 32, Claire's world shatters when she tragically loses her husband. To escape her overwhelming grief, she leaves her old life behind and moves to the charming seaside town of Willow Cove. In this quaint, close-knit community, Claire hopes to find the strength to heal surrounded by her untamed garden and her cat, Daisy.

The first glimmer of hope comes when Claire meets Eva, the kind owner of a local cafe called Sweet Delights. A spark quickly forms between them, but Claire is still deeply grieving and Eva has recently faced a betrayal from her ex girlfriend.

Their friendship slowly gives way to romance, something neither woman expects. But prejudices lurk below the idyllic town's surface. As their relationship deepens, Claire and Eva encounter disapproval and obstacles to acceptance. Together they discover the remarkable strength of chosen family and fight for their chance to build a loving future.

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Chapter One

Eva arrived at Sweet Delights just as the dark pre-dawn sky began shifting to a muted gray blue. Inserting her key into the front door lock, she let herself in, immediately typing the memorized security code into the alarm system to disable it.

Flipping on the lights, Eva took a moment to appreciate the cozy bakery, quiet and still before the hustle and bustle of the day. The comforting scent of sugar and vanilla lingered in the air.

She headed through the back door and down the hallway to the employee break room. Dropping her purse in her spot, she grabbed a fresh apron from the shelf. She tied it snugly around her waist, the fabric worn and familiar.

After washing her hands, she got right to work preheating the large ovens. Soon, the familiar roar of the heating elements warming up filled the space.

Once the ovens were ready, she made her way back out to the front. Pulling out a large rolling rack, she began filling it up with baking trays. Humming softly, Eva started gathering ingredients - flour, sugar, salt, butter - to begin mixing up batter for the day's pastries. Her mind flipped through mental files of recipes she wanted to try out soon, always looking for new flavors to offer her customers.

With everything ready, Eva slid the first round of cupcakes into the oven, setting the timer before getting started on the next round.

While the cupcakes baked, she began working on the cookies. The work was second

nature to Eva, a soothing morning ritual. In this space, filling the cases and shelves with an array of her favorite baked goods, she felt content and peaceful in a way nothing else in her life had ever made her feel.

Eva heard the front door open and close, followed by footsteps entering the kitchen.

"Morning, Eva!" Michael greeted her cheerfully, setting his bag down on a chair in the back.

Eva looked up from measuring flour and smiled at her assistant. "Hey, Michael. How was your date?"

"Terrible, so let's forget about him forever," Michael laughed.

"I'm sorry," Eva said sincerely, knowing it had been a long time since Michael had found anyone who met his standards. He wasn't even asking that much. The guys he went out with were just that terrible.

"All good. And I picked us up some breakfast sandwiches too," he said, holding up a paper bag.

"You're the best," Eva grinned. It was an easy routine they had fallen into - Michael grabbing something quick for them to eat before the bakery got too busy.

As Eva continued mixing up batter, Michael went and switched on the fancy espresso machine they had invested in last year. The rich aroma of freshly brewing coffee soon filled the kitchen.

"So how was the rest of your night?" Michael asked, leaning against the counter as he waited for the machine to finish. "Get up to anything fun?"

Eva shook her head with a chuckle. "Just some movies and relaxing. Though I did try a new cinnamon bread recipe that I think will be a big hit. I'll have you be the taste tester today."

"I'm alright with that," Michael laughed.

When the machine finished, Michael poured two cups of steaming hot coffee, bringing one over to Eva. She thanked him and took a sip, the caffeine hitting her bloodstream almost instantly.

Eva washed her hands again and went to check her order book. She had a couple custom cake orders for upcoming birthdays, including a two dozen cupcake order that needed to be completed today.

Usually they switched off roles, but with a large special order to fill, it might make sense for her to stick to the kitchen. However, she knew mornings could get very busy up front.

"Hey Michael," Eva called over. "What do you think about you handling the counter today so I can dedicate time to this big cupcake order?"

"Of course, no problem at all," Michael replied without hesitation. "You pipe and frost away. I've got the front covered."

"I owe you," Eva said, meaning every word. She knew she could count on him to manage the morning rush.

Michael simply smiled and waved her off, snacking on his breakfast sandwich.

"Alright, let's get to work," Eva muttered, taking the next round of cupcakes out of the oven and beginning the process all over again.

As she scooped the rainbow sprinkle batter into the colorful liners, Eva's mind wandered to the child who would get to enjoy these vibrant creations. She imagined an excited young boy or girl eagerly devouring the cupcakes, proudly wearing a birthday crown.

Eva loved getting to play a small role in celebrating special moments for the local families and kids. Even if it was just providing a special dessert, it brought her joy to help make lasting memories.

By the time Eva was putting the finishing touches on the birthday order, the sounds of chatter and the jingle of the bell above the door filtered back to the kitchen.

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Eva glanced at the clock, estimating she had just under twenty minutes before the timer would go off. Then the cupcakes would need to cool completely before they could be iced. It was plenty of time to whip up icing and wash the pastry case displays.

As she prepared buttercream in a rainbow swirl, Eva made a mental note to do something extra nice for Michael soon - maybe surprise him with a day off or homemade dinner. She truly didn't know what she'd do without him handling the daily operations by her side.

The timer on the oven went off and Eva grabbed her oven mitts, carefully removing the trays of perfectly baked rainbow cupcakes. She set them on the counter to cool before frosting.

As the cupcakes cooled, Eva quickly washed the pastry case displays, removing any crumbs and smudges. She wanted the treats and pastries to look as fresh and appealing as possible for customers.

Soon the cupcakes were ready for decoration. Eva started by swirling vanilla buttercream over each one using a piping bag. Next came the fun part - decorating them with sprinkles.

Eva smiled as she worked, her heart light. She alternated adding rainbow sprinkles and edible glitter to create a whimsical, festive look. Eva stepped back admiring her handiwork - no two cupcakes looked exactly the same thanks to the rainbow batter peeking through.

After placing the iced cupcakes neatly into a box for easy transport, Eva cleaned up her frosting tools just as Michael ducked his head into the kitchen.

"All good back here?" he asked. "The morning rush is finally slowing down."

"Yep, all done with the birthday order," Eva said. "Do you want to see how the birthday order turned out before I pack it up?"

"Yes, please!" Michael said, coming closer.

Eva carefully carried the cupcake box over to the counter and lifted the lid.

"They are so cute!"

Eva laughed. "Why don't you take a break now that things are a little calmer?"

"Sounds good. I'm starving." Michael headed toward the back.

"We have some muffins that didn't sell from yesterday if you want some," she called after him.

Michael grabbed two on his way to the back room. "Thanks!"

Eva put the order aside and headed up to the front. The line of customers had finally disappeared. He'd been a saint to handle them all on his own. Some days she thought they needed another set of hands, especially for the busy morning rush, but finding someone who fit in with their vibe in such a small, conservative town had been difficult. They made it work, as they had for years, but she knew the rush could be overwhelming for them both.

Chapter Two

The morning sun crept through the thin curtains, casting the bedroom in a warm glow. Claire blinked awake, the haze of sleep receding as she turned to the empty space beside her. Just four months ago, David would have been there, his laughter bright as he pulled her close. Her heart ached thinking about him. Now at thirty-two, she was alone, and a widow when a heart attack had taken David from her. Claire released a shaky breath as the memories came rushing back. Memories of a future they should have shared, of years they had planned out.

All taken in an instant. She wiped her tears and sat up in bed, turning her face to the sunshine. "Time for a fresh start," Claire murmured, slowly swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. Her feet met the chilled floorboards, sending a shiver through her.

Claire stood and walked to the window, peering out. Her eyes traced the line of the street outside, watching the cars pass, and the people walking down the sidewalk. Willow Cove was a quaint little New England town, the kind seen in post cards and Hallmark movies. Online it had looked peaceful, the kind that she desperately needed. The cottage she had purchased held that same welcoming charm, and she was doing her best to settle into the unfamiliar town while being surrounded by the things she had David had gathered for their life together.

Despite her lingering grief, this new home offered hope that she could heal with his memory always close by. "Good morning, Daisy," Claire said gently to the petite gray cat curled up on the windowsill. As usual, she was basking in the morning sunshine. She had quickly found her favorite spot in the small cottage. Daisy slowly lifted her furry head, swiveling one yellow-green eye in Claire's direction before twitching the tip of her tail in acknowledgment and returning her focus to watching the small flock of goldfinches on the bird feeder in the front yard.

Claire padded down the worn hardwood hallway in gray socks. She marveled at the cottage's charm, so unlike their townhouse in New York which had been large and

often felt sterile. The cottage had faded paint and old wood floors. It had seen a century of life. She was glad to be among its history and warmth.

Stepping into the narrow kitchen, she filled the kettle. The song of morning birds floated in through the open window. David would have loved it here. She pulled down his favorite mug and held it in her hands as she waited for the kettle to boil. A little hot tea would help her wake up.

A few minutes later Claire softly smiled to herself as she sipped her steaming cup of chamomile tea and gazed out at the wild garden out front. "David would have eventually loved this little house," she said to Daisy who hadn't moved from her spot on the couch, "although it probably would not have been his first choice." David had always preferred a more modern, sleek aesthetic. He'd loved marble and steel. The townhouse had been so empty without him. Just as sterile as the hospital room had been as she'd held his hand one last time.

Claire took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She'd left the city, their memories, and the house behind. It was a new start, but a painful one.

"I think we are going to be okay here," Claire said, taking another sip of tea. Daisy flicked an ear in her direction but didn't move.

"You have the right idea. Let's just chill this morning," Claire told the cat. "I guess that means I'm having a lazy day," she chuckled.

She finished her tea and went to kiss Daisy on her forehead. "You're a good girl. Be good while I go get ready."

She was still unpacking most of her things after a few weeks of living in her new home, but her essentials were ready.

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She headed into the bathroom where she turned on the shower and let the water heat up while she undressed. She still wasn't used to the small, worn tub in this cottage bathroom, so different from the spacious walk-in shower she and David had cherished at home.

Stepping into the steaming spray, Claire let the hot water ease some of the tension from her shoulders. She lathered her hair with the lemony shampoo that reminded her of summer and washed her body with the vanilla soap that still felt too new. They were scents she was trying out, not ones that she and David would have bought together.

She enjoyed her shower, the old pipes protesting and creaking. She'd come to love the sounds of her house. The sounds of New York City had fallen away quickly, giving way to birds in the morning, Daisy's soft meows, and the old sounds of her house.

After toweling off, Claire pulled on her robe and padded into the bedroom where she pulled a green floral sundress out of her closet. She had ordered it online and hadn't been sure about the pattern when she first saw it on the website, but was now willing to give it a chance. It hadn't been expensive and it did fit well.

The soft material slid over her head easily and Claire looked at her reflection in the dusty full-length mirror propped against the wall. The V-neck showed just the right amount of cleavage and the three-quarter length sleeves hit at a flattering point on her wrist. The skirt swished gently around Claire's knees as she gave an experimental twirl. A small smile crept onto her face - maybe this dress wasn't so bad after all. She wished that she could share it with David. He'd always loved her in dresses.

Her routine was already starting to shift as she learned the pace of Willow Cove. It was slower, quieter. No one rushed. No one honked. There were no sirens at two in the morning, blaring and screeching and waking up the neighborhood.

In New York, her art career had been everything to her. David and her art. She hadn't painted in months. She hadn't even sketched. But the house had a second bedroom and she had already put her supplies in there. They were waiting for her, when she was ready again. Whenever that might be.

Claire sighed and glanced in the mirror. She had bags under her eyes and she hadn't bothered with make up since David's funeral. A little tinted lip balm helped some. It was enough for today.

The nearly constant noise from the town square only a block away had worried her at first, reminding her too much of New York. But then the low hum of the few cars and people walking around had started to fade into the background. Within the first week she had been able to ignore it almost entirely.

Having everything she could need only a short walk away had been one of the draws to this cottage. The square offered her anything she could want, and the grocery store was only a short walk away as well. Though she still had a decent amount of money remaining from David's life insurance payout and the sale of their townhouse, Claire had never been someone who valued flashy material things. Her old car was still running fine, so no upgrade was needed for the time being. She could relax and simply be for a while. Life would be there for her when she was ready again.

She was sure his family hadn't appreciated being given nothing, but he hadn't been close to them and they hadn't reached out since the funeral. His will had been explicit and none of them had been included. The loss of contact with anyone in connection to him had saddened her, at first, but she'd had months to move past their abandonment.

Daisy wound her way figure eights between Claire's legs, meowing softly for some morning attention. Claire bent down to scratch under Daisy's chin, eliciting a rumbling purr.

"We need a little food," Claire said softly, and the cat's ears pricked forward. "But let's take it easy this morning. We are still getting used to this new place, remember? I'm going to go to the cafe down the street and I'll bring you back some treats on the way home. Sound good?"

Daisy's eyes stared into Claire's and she could almost swear the cat understood her words. She'd had a lot of practice speaking to her. She picked Daisy up and put her back on her sunlit spot, giving her one last kiss for the morning.

Claire made her way back down the hall, stopping to slip her shoes on at the door. "See you soon, love," she called out to her as she left her house and stepped out into the garden.

It was wild and wonderful, with flowers everywhere and a small stone bench to sit and rest at. Someday she imagined she would be sketching on that bench. Maybe not today, or even this week, but her art wouldn't stay dormant for long.

She took out her phone and took a picture of one of the roses for her little sister, Julia. She lived just a few towns over, only about twenty minutes away. Much closer than the hours that had been between them before.

You are going to make this the best garden, Claire! I can't wait to see it when I visit soon, Julia texted back.

Claire smiled down at her phone. I can't wait for your visit, either.

They had been close growing up, the best of friends, but their lives had drifted apart

when Claire had gotten married. For ten years they'd barely seen each other. Now she wanted to make up for lost time, for neglecting her sister during her marriage. She was looking forward to rekindling their once close bond.

She touched a few of the flowers, admiring the bright colors and their fragrance, before leaving through the small gate that let out onto the sidewalk. Daisy's meow reached her from inside the house and she looked back to see her cat sitting in the window. She waved at her cat then headed down the street, toward the cafe for breakfast.

Chapter Three

A high pitched singsong voice calling out "Hey there, neighbor!" broke through Claire's thoughts as she stepped outside of her garden and onto the sidewalk. She looked over to see a woman around her own age smiling and waving at her from the porch next door. The woman spoke again, "I'm Abby, I just wanted to come introduce myself since I noticed you moving in last week. I would have introduced myself sooner, but I work a lot and this is the first morning I've had off. My husband, Peter, is usually around. And if you need anything, please let us know. We're always happy to help a neighbor."

Claire gave a small smile in return. "Hello, I'm Claire. It's nice to meet you."

Abby crossed the small yard. "Welcome to Willow Cove! Everyone here is so warm and friendly, we're like one big family. You'll love living here."

"That does sound lovely," she replied softly.

Abby looked curiously back at Claire's house. "So, are you married? I just noticed you moving everything in by yourself last week. Well, you and the movers."

"Oh. Uhm..."

Abby's face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. It's just, this is such a small town, so everyone knows everyone. I just figured... never mind, it's none of my business."

Claire hesitated a moment before replying. "My husband died a few months ago."

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"I'm so sorry. That's horrible. Was it an accident?"

Claire shook her head, swallowing around the lump forming in her throat. "He had a heart attack."

"I'm truly sorry," Abby said, sympathy in her eyes.

Claire tried to swallow again, but it hurt. "Thank you," she whispered.

Abby gave her a sad smile and patted her on the shoulder. "I'm truly sorry, Claire. If there's ever anything you need or you just want some company, please don't hesitate to let me know. Like I said, we really are like a family here. There are a few bad apples, but the majority of people truly are wonderful."

Grateful for Abby's easy empathy, Claire responded gently, "Thank you, Abby. That truly means a lot to me."

Abby nodded and patted her shoulder again. "Of course. I hope to see you around town and in our front yards too."

"Likewise."

"Welcome to ," Abby repeated with a warm smile, turning and heading back toward her house.

Claire continued on toward the town square, and the cute cafe she'd seen there. The sky was a bright blue, dotted with a few clouds and the sun was shining brightly. It

was a gorgeous fall day. She had a feeling she'd love living here, if she could get settled and find a new routine. She knew she had to get back to her art and the hours she used to spend in her studio.

The sidewalk was mostly empty, just a few people heading in the opposite direction. As she got closer to the square, the street grew busier. Cars drove by and a few people walked along the street with her. Everyone either waved or smiled.

She soon approached Sweet Delights Bakery, instantly drawn in by the scents of warm vanilla and cinnamon. The jingle of the bell above the door sounded as she entered the bakery.

"Welcome to Sweet Delights!"

Claire stepped up to the counter. The woman behind it smiled brightly at her. Her dark brown hair was tied up in a loose bun and a streak of flour dusted her cheek. Claire's attention was instantly pulled from the woman to the case of baked goods where rows of delicious looking treats greeted her.

"Wow. Those look amazing," she said, her stomach growling loudly.

"Thank you! They should, considering we've been baking since early this morning." The woman chuckled and Claire's gaze returned to her face. "I'm Eva, the owner. What can I get for you today?"

Claire returned Eva's warm smile, instantly at ease and feeling welcomed in the new place. "Hi, I'm Claire. I just moved in down the street."

Eva's smile grew wider. "Oh, you must be in the old Wilson house with that gorgeous garden out front! It's such a beautiful house. I saw the for sale sign get taken down a few weeks ago and was hoping someone was moving in."

"That's the one. I love it." Claire began perusing the selection, taken in not just by the visual appeal of each beautifully crafted treat, but the obvious love and care that went into each and every creation. She selected a raspberry scone and a chocolate biscotti, drawn in by both their simplicity and uniqueness. "Can I add a cappuccino too? I just saw that you have coffee."

"You sure can! Just give me a minute, I'll have it right up. That'll be eight dollars and fifty-two cents." She turned and called over her shoulder towards the back of the bakery, "Michael, could we have a cappuccino out here please!"

Claire paid and stepped off to the side, taking in the decor of the cozy cafe. The walls were painted a soft yellow and the furniture was made of a beautiful stained oak. The tables were filled with an assortment of chairs and stools, ranging from antique to brand new. The floors were a matching wood with a few rugs scattered throughout.

"Right away!" replied a young man who emerged from the back room. Michael appeared to be in his mid-twenties, around a decade younger than both Eva and Claire. He moved with an easy grace, his lean body reminiscent of an athlete. Michael flashed them both a grin as he walked over, revealing two dimples and a set of shining white teeth.

Eva made the introductions. "Claire, this is my assistant and barista, Michael. Michael, this is our new neighbor, Claire."

Michael shook Claire's hand gently but firmly. "Pleasure to meet you, Claire. Welcome to Sweet Delights."

"It's very nice to meet you, too." Claire gave him a polite smile.

He disappeared into the back then returned a few minutes later with a mug and her treats. She'd chosen a seat by the window to be able to watch people while she

enjoyed her breakfast. The rich aroma of espresso and steamed milk enveloped her. She sipped the drink carefully, making sure not to burn her tongue. The flavor was rich and creamy and perfectly balanced.

"Wow. That's fantastic. What kind of blend do you use?" she asked them.

Claire smiled at her, her cheeks turning pink. "We actually roast it ourselves. That's the River blend, which is our medium roast. I'm glad you like it."

Claire sipped her drink and nibbled at her treats. They were as good as they looked. The pastries were flaky and buttery and the perfect combination of sweet and tart. She'd found a new favorite place. Claire felt peace there and knew she'd be back for breakfast often.

Eva paused in her task of arranging scones in the glass display case and turned to face Claire. "So Claire, what brought you all the way to our little town?"

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Claire took a moment to gather her thoughts before responding. "After my husband, David, passed away recently, I needed a change," Claire began, speaking softly. "I needed a fresh start somewhere new."

Eva's expression changed, sympathy evident in her eyes. "I'm sorry. You've been through a lot. I'm glad you chose our town. It's a great place."

"Thank you, Eva."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, and I'm truly not trying to be nosy," Eva said, a hint of pink spreading across her cheeks, "but we don't usually get many newcomers unless they're just passing through. So I was wondering, what do you do?"

She met Eva's kind gaze and said softly, "I'm an artist." Claire's voice carried a hint of wistfulness as she continued, "Though it's been a while since I've felt inspired enough to paint. Maybe this fresh start and new surroundings will help reignite that spark. It would be nice to find my muse again."

"I hope you do," Eva replied warmly. "I'd love to see some of your work sometime."

Claire felt her cheeks grow warm at Eva's genuine interest. She replied shyly, "When I start painting again, I'll have to take some pictures to show you."

Eva's friendly smile grew wider as she said, "I'd like that."

Claire savored the last bites of her pastries and took a final sip of the luxuriously rich cappuccino Michael had crafted for her. She sighed contentedly. Standing up, Claire

turned to Eva and Michael with a smile. "Thank you both so much for the delicious treats and for your kind welcome," she said warmly. "I know I'll be back again soon."

Eva beamed at her. "Please do come again, Claire. And let me know if there's ever anything at all I can do for you."

Michael echoed Eva's sentiments. "It was lovely meeting you, Claire. I hope you'll consider Sweet Delights your new home away from home!"

With a final wave goodbye, Claire stepped back out onto the cobblestone street, already looking forward to her next visit.

Chapter Four

The bakery door chimed as the last morning customer left with a bag of pastries. Eva waved goodbye before moving to start clearing empty mugs and plates from the tables. They'd been packed with customers and she was definitely feeling how busy they'd been. Not that she didn't love the support, but she was looking forward to the chance to sit and take a break for a moment.

As she wiped crumbs into her hand, her thoughts kept straying back to Claire. "It's just because she's new in town and you don't meet that many new people." Eva gave herself a little shake as she continued cleaning. She was being ridiculous. Claire was just another friendly new customer.

Eva finished cleaning the last table and sat down behind the counter with a soft sigh.

Michael came up beside her, handing her an iced coffee. He had one for himself as well. "So...Claire was pretty."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Don't you start. Just because a pretty new woman comes

into our cafe..."

"Eva, we haven't had anyone new move here in nearly a year. I'm not saying marry her. I'm just saying it's nice that you have someone new to look at. Maybe she has a cute brother."

"You're ridiculous," Eva said, rolling her eyes even as she smiled. "She was really pretty though, right?"

Michael nodded. "And she's an artist. Maybe she's bi. Maybe you can just check her out when she comes back for breakfast soon." He gave her a playful nudge.

"Maybe. Now, can we talk about something besides my nonexistent love life?"

"What do you want to talk about then?"

Eva took a sip of her iced coffee. "We could talk about yours."

"Mine is in even more trouble than yours," Michael said with a laugh. His expression turned thoughtful. "In all seriousness though, it's nice to see you noticing women again after what Liz put you through."

At the mention of her ex, Eva's mood soured. Liz's betrayal still stung, even after all these months. Eva had truly believed they were soulmates. She looked down at her hands. "I can't just sit around and mope forever. But I'm still not sure I'm ready for a relationship yet. And besides, I only just met Claire. I'm sure I'm imagining whatever spark I think I felt." Even as she said it though, Eva found herself hoping she would see Claire again soon. There was just something about her.

Michael held up his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, no judgments here! I just think it'd be nice if you put yourself out there again, even if it's just as being friends with a

beautiful woman. You deserve to be happy and outside of our friendship, you've closed yourself off to pretty much everyone else. I know most of your friends were also her friends and they left in the break up, so maybe being friends with Claire wouldn't be a bad thing."

Eva sighed, turning to glance out the bakery window at the passersby on the sidewalk. "After what Liz did...it's hard to trust anyone new," Eva admitted quietly. "We were together for years. I thought she was my soulmate until..."

Her voice trailed off, but Michael knew the painful story well. He came over and gave Eva's shoulder a supportive squeeze.

"Liz made her choice, and it wasn't you. I know that hurts, but don't let it close you off forever," he said gently. "Take a chance if it feels right."

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Eva gave him a half-smile, wishing it was that easy to move on. "We'll see," she replied neutrally. "For now, I should probably focus on replenishing the baked goods before the lunch crowd comes in."

Michael nodded, knowing not to push the issue. "Is there anything I can do to give you a hand before the lunch crowd comes in?"

Eva considered for a moment. "Well, since we have some time, maybe you could whip up one of your amazing quiches? The spinach and goat cheese one is always a hit. I can slice up the fresh fruit from the market to have as a side."

Michael's face lit up at the suggestion. "You got it! One spinach goat cheese quiche coming right up." He headed to the kitchen, tying on an apron.

"Oh, and Michael?" Eva added. "Thank you. For listening earlier."

He gave her a warm smile. "Of course, that's what friends are for. I just want you to be happy. Besides, you've listened to every single one of my terrible break ups."

She returned the smile gratefully. Though her love life was complicated, at least she had the unwavering support of her best friend.

Eva prepared the fruit salad as Michael gathered ingredients for the quiche. She would stay up front for now to handle any customers while he worked his magic in the kitchen.

After washing and slicing the strawberries, Eva moved on to the watermelon and

cantaloupe. She added a touch of lime juice and honey to brighten the flavors. It was going to be delicious. As she worked, Eva's thoughts kept drifting back to Claire. She'd been so kind and had seemed so interested in Sweet Delights. She definitely looked forward to seeing her again.

"Earth to Eva! Come in, Eva." Michael's teasing voice interrupted her train of thought.

She blinked up at him. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I was asking if we had any fresh thyme. I was thinking it would be nice with the spinach and cheese."

"I think so." With the fruit salad done, she stretched before getting up to put it in the fridge. It took a few moments to find the fresh thyme, but when she did she handed it to Michael then cleaned up the mess she had made earlier.

"What were you thinking about?" Michael asked. "You looked lost in thought."

Eva blushed. "Claire." She sighed. "I don't know why I'm letting myself think about her."

Michael gave her a gentle smile. "Because you liked talking to her and she's pretty and she seems sweet. You can't stop thinking about her because you're curious. There's nothing wrong with being curious, Eva."

Eva shrugged, not wanting to get into it with him. She glanced at the clock. They had about an hour before the lunch crowd would be in. She went over and sat behind the register, ready to ring customers up when they came in. Michael returned to his cooking, humming to himself as he worked. He was the best assistant she could have ever hoped for, and more importantly, her best friend.

Soon the bell over the door rang again and a woman came in. The lunch rush was starting a little early today. At least more customers would be a good distraction for her.

The next few hours flew by in a flurry of activity. The lunch crowd was bigger than usual, and the line for pastries didn't die down until almost an hour past the lunch rush.

Eva took a moment to breathe as the afternoon lull set in. Her feet ached and her stomach was rumbling.

Michael appeared a moment later with the last slice of quiche. "Here, saved this for you," he said, handing it over. He'd even warmed it up for her.

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver." She dug in gratefully.

"I figured you hadn't had a chance to eat yet. I made a fresh pot of coffee if you want some too."

"That would be amazing."

Michael poured her a mug and added cream and sugar just the way she liked. Eva sighed blissfully and ate her meal in the back while Michael handled the cafe.

Chapter Five

Claire walked the short distance home from the bustling town bookstore, two new books cradled gently in her arms. Eager to learn more about her new surroundings, she had selected a history of the town as well as a guide to the local wildlife.

Once inside the cottage, Claire settled into her worn but comfortable reading chaise

with a contented sigh. Daisy leaped into her lap and made herself comfortable. Claire stroked Daisy's silky fur as she said softly, "I got coffee today at this lovely little place on the square, pretty girl. I think we're going to like it here after all."

Claire opened the cover of the history book and began reading about the founding of the town in the early 1800s. Names and dates swirled through her mind along with descriptions of the first shops and villages springing up along the main street. Claire imagined the town square in those long ago days, donning different facades but still possessing the atmosphere of peace that had drawn Claire here now, two centuries later.

After several pages, Claire's attention drifted to the window. She set the book aside, her fingers caressing the soft fur on the top of Daisy's head. The sun was starting to sink below the horizon. Daisy began to purr softly, enjoying her place on Claire's lap. Claire smiled, taking comfort in these simple pleasures.

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Claire thought of Eva and the cheerful atmosphere of Sweet Delights. Perhaps visiting the cafe regularly would help fill some of the void David had left in her heart. She read the history of the town for almost 2 hours, becoming so immersed in the tales of the town's early pioneers and growth that her eyes began to droop and her focus started to wane. She closed the book with a sigh and stood up from her cozy chair, deciding a short break and a cup of coffee were in order before resuming her reading.

She walked into the small kitchen of her new cottage and started the coffee maker. Claire gazed out the kitchen window at the stately old maple tree in her small backyard as she waited for the machine to heat up. She wondered how many years that tree had stood watch over this very cottage and property. How many seasons had it witnessed pass by throughout the town's long history?

As the coffee machine started to drip out her coffee, the rich aroma filled the air, waking Claire's senses and lifting her spirits ever so slightly. The coffee pot beeped, signaling it had finished brewing. Claire poured the steaming liquid into her mug, filling it almost to the brim. She added a splash of creamer before capping the container and returning it to the fridge. Claire considered simply returning to her worn reading chair and losing herself once more in the pages of her book. But the lure of her art studio proved too strong to resist.

The spare bedroom that now served as Claire's art studio was cluttered with half-opened moving boxes and covered easels. Art supplies spilled from cabinets and drawers, while canvases leaned haphazardly against the walls. Yet amongst the chaos, Claire felt a sense of peace wash over her. Here, surrounded by the smells of paint and turpentine, she knew she could not stay away from her brushes and canvases for

long.

In between sips of coffee, Claire began to unpack her art supplies, carefully placing each brush and palette on her workbench as if tending to a delicate garden. Her fingers trailed over her favorite set of oil paints, and she couldn't help but smile.

Finally, Claire pulled the dusty drop cloth off her easel, revealing the half-finished painting beneath. She'd nearly completed her study of the old oak tree in her backyard, the branches now beginning to burst forth in the first leaves of spring. "Alright, it's time to make some magic happen," Claire whispered to herself, rolling up her sleeves and picking up a brush. She dipped it into the swirling colors on her palette, feeling the familiar thrill of anticipation course through her veins. With each stroke, she poured her thoughts and emotions onto the canvas, allowing herself to get lost in the world of color and form. It wasn't her best work, she could admit that to herself, but she was painting again for the first time in weeks and that was what was most important to her.

Claire became so absorbed in her painting that she lost track of time. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since visiting the bakery hours before. Daisy wandered into the studio meowing for attention. Claire put down her paintbrush and lifted her cat, cuddling her close and kissing the top of her soft furry head. Daisy purred loudly, nuzzling Claire's face and making her smile.

Claire placed her feline companion on the floor, and stretched her tired limbs, her muscles protesting after hours spent standing hunched over her easel.

"Alright, alright. I know, you're hungry," Claire said, scooping up the cat. "Let's go find you something to eat."

Daisy meowed in response, rubbing her face against Claire's hand. Claire smiled at her cat and stroked her soft fur. "Actually, I'll make us both something to eat," Claire

promised her cat, as they walked out of her art studio and toward the kitchen.

Once in the kitchen, Claire opened a can of food for Daisy, put it into her bowl, then frowned. "It's getting late. Maybe we should get take out." After a moment she shook her head. "We can make pasta faster than we could get take out, and I'm not even sure who would be able to deliver in such a small town." She walked into the kitchen and opened the pantry, surveying her options for pasta. Eventually she pulled out a jar of marinara sauce. It would be plain, but it would be good.

She filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. While waiting for the water to heat up, Claire chopped some onions, garlic, and bell peppers and added them to the sauce she had sizzling in a pan beside the pasta water. Once the pasta was cooked, she drained it in a colander and mixed it with the sauce in a large bowl. Claire carried her meal outside and sat down at the small table on her back porch. The warm evening air was comforting. Daisy joined her, curling up at Claire's feet and basking in the last rays of daylight. She would get more done tomorrow, she vowed. It was enough that they had done the little that they had managed to today. She breathed deeply, letting the clean air fill her lungs. A slight breeze rustled the leaves in the nearby trees, causing them to sway gently.

"It's so beautiful here, isn't it, Daisy?" Claire asked her cat, who was still curled up at her feet. "What do you think of making breakfast at Sweet Delights a regular thing?" Her cat flicked her tail, largely ignoring her as she watched some birds. Shrugging, Claire kept eating. She hadn't seen much else to eat in the square. Maybe there were a few restaurants outside of the square, but it was nice to have a place to go within walking distance. "Yes, I think we'll do just that."

A few minutes later, Claire was finished. She rinsed off her dishes and left them in the sink. She would take care of them in the morning. It had been a long day.

"C'mon, let's get ready for bed, girl." She lifted Daisy and walked into the bedroom.

"I'm sorry, but I've had enough for today." She gave Daisy a kiss on the top of her head before setting her on the bed. She went and grabbed her pajamas from her dresser and her favorite book from her nightstand. Once she had changed and climbed into bed, she opened her book and started to read.

Her mind began to wander though, and after only a few pages, she felt her eyes start to grow heavy. She yawned and stretched before closing her book.

"Good night, sweet girl," she whispered to Daisy, reaching out to stroke her fur. She turned off her bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Chapter Six

Eva slid her key into the lock of her small, one-bedroom apartment with a weary sigh. She loved the bustle and chatter of customers at Sweet Delights during the day, and coming home to this empty space each night never failed to dampen Eva's spirits. If she could move into Sweet Delights full time, she would.

Pushing open the creaky door, she stepped into the dark, silent apartment. She flipped on the entryway light, illuminating the cozy yet lonely interior.

Dumping her keys and purse on the kitchen counter, Eva opened the fridge in search of something quick to eat. But nothing appealed to her appetite. She wasn't used to cooking for one. She would have grabbed some of the quiche Michael had made, but they had sold out of it quickly. He was definitely a genius when it came to savory foods.

Wandering into the living room, Eva contemplated pouring herself a glass of Malbec as she did most nights. But even the prospect of the velvety red wine easing her mind couldn't overcome the oppressive silence hanging over the apartment.

This place had never felt so empty before. But then again, she'd never been the only one living here. Not until Liz left. This had been their first place together, something they'd picked out and had both loved.

Apparently not enough though.

Eva sank down onto the couch, the weight of loneliness pressing down on her. How many nights had she and Liz curled up on this very couch, laughing over glasses of wine as they talked about their day or watched TV?

Before she could stop herself, Eva picked up her phone, fingers moving instinctively to Liz's number. She ached to hear the familiar voice that used to fill this void.

But just before calling her, Eva forced herself to stop. Liz had made her choice clear. Calling her now would only lead to more hurt. She would seem desperate, and like she was begging Liz to choose her. She was desperate and she would have begged, but it wouldn't have done any good. She'd already tried that.

Frustration boiled up to replace the momentary longing. She had trusted Liz with her heart for years. And it still devastated her to know that in the end, she was so easily replaced.

Standing abruptly, Eva grabbed her wallet and keys. She had to get out of this apartment tonight, even just for a little while. Being alone with her thoughts was dangerous, she knew from experience these past months.

Closing the front door behind her, Eva headed out into the evening - seeking light, air, anything to distract from the darkness Liz's betrayal had left lingering within these walls.

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Eva walked briskly, no destination in mind other than away from the empty apartment and its suffocating silence. The summer evening air was balmy, carrying the scent of grill smoke and fresh cut grass.

When she came upon a local Chinese restaurant, Eva decided to treat herself to takeout. But waiting alone for her order to be ready, she regretted the decision. Watching families and couples laugh over shared meals intensified her isolation.

Eva hurried home, containers of kung pao tofu and fried rice in hand. At least she could distract herself with mindless TV while she ate. She browsed through channels before settling on an innocuous sitcom.

But the laughing soundtrack grated on her nerves. Everything in this apartment reminded Eva of what she had lost.

After forcing down a few more bites, Eva abandoned her half-eaten dinner on the coffee table. The undeserved sense of betrayal still simmered under the surface months later.

Eva knew looking at old photos would only stoke the embers. But masochistic curiosity drew her to Liz's social media that night. She scrolled through images of Liz beaming next to the woman who had stolen her happiness. Something in Eva fractured all over again.

Exhausted by the emotional turmoil, Eva retreated to the cold, empty bed. Tomorrow she would focus on her true sanctuary - the bakery. Tonight she just needed to sleep and stop obsessing over her ex.

Chapter Seven

Claire awoke before the sun had fully risen. The moon still shone brightly in the sky, but the first traces of light were giving definition to the edges of objects around her. She was looking forward to breakfast at Sweet Delights again, and exploring more of the town. She was also looking forward to painting some more. She hadn't wanted to paint this much in weeks. She could feel David there with her, quietly giving his approval with a slight nod as she worked.

She padded softly into the kitchen with Daisy in her arms, the old hardwood floor creaking slightly under her slippered feet. The familiar ritual of making coffee was soothing, and she needed that sense of comfort this morning. She had dreamt of David. Of his smile. Of his laugh. He would have loved the cottage. He would have gone for walks all the time, exploring the little town. He'd talked about leash training Daisy someday. Now she wished he would have gotten that chance.

It had been good to see him again, even if it had just been a dream. She missed him, missed talking about him. His family had never really approved of them being together. And her friends had been vocal about their apprehension as well. She'd been twenty-two and he had been almost forty. But they'd had ten years together. Ten perfect, wonderful years.

She would have rather it had been a lifetime.

Now she found herself alone in a place she barely knew, trying to remember what life had been like before David had become such an integral part of her existence. As she moved to fill the coffee maker with water, Claire thought of all the mornings they had spent curled up on the couch together, cups of coffee warming their hands as they talked, laughed and planned for the day ahead. Those memories flooded her with bittersweet comfort. The familiar motions and aromas of brewing coffee calmed her troubled mind, though she knew it would take time to adjust to this new stage in her

life without David by her side.

She opened the cabinet where she kept the coffee tin and scooped some grounds into the filter. With a flick of the switch, the gurgling and hissing noises began that signaled the water was heating up. While she waited for the coffee to brew, Claire opened another cabinet and retrieved her favorite mug. It was a simple round ceramic mug with bluebirds painted on the side in primary colors, handmade by an artisan. David had given it to her only a few months before he passed away. Holding the mug now brought her bittersweet comfort, a reminder of his memory and their life together.

She wondered how long everything would continue to remind her of him, his scent still lingering in the air like a ghost. The sound of his laughter haunted her, ringing through the halls and echoing in her mind. And then, swiftly, she realized that even though it hurt to remember him, she didn't want to let go of the memories either. She clung to them like a lifeline because as long as she held those memories close to her chest, it was as if he were still there with her, alive and well.

As the coffee brewed, Claire leaned against the counter and watched the sun rise over the garden. It was a beautiful view from her new home. She wondered how many people had gazed at that same sunrise throughout the years, and felt a sudden kinship with those nameless strangers. She was a part of their history, and they were a part of hers.

Claire poured herself a steaming cup of coffee and sipped slowly, savoring the rich, earthy flavor. The coffee and quiet moments to herself had given her the boost of determination she needed to make the most of her time. First, she would walk to the bakery down the street for a pastry and a chance to explore the new neighborhood. Then, she would find a sunny spot in the yard to sit for a while with Daisy, listening to the birds and enjoying the fresh air. And in the afternoon, after a simple lunch, she would go to her art studio and paint. It was a perfect plan for a day when she didn't

need to get anything done but simply enjoy herself.

Claire stepped out onto the back porch, relishing the warmth of the morning sunshine on her face. She settled into an old wooden chair that groaned slightly as she sat down. Daisy wandered outside and immediately jumped into her lap. She curled up over Claire's thighs and began to purr softly as Claire started petting her.

She continued to pet Daisy with one hand as she sipped her coffee with the other, enjoying the stillness of the early morning. The sun had just risen over the trees in yard, its warm glow bathing Claire and Daisy in a peaceful light. A light breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass and blooming roses.

Claire savored the last few sips of her coffee, letting the warm mug cradle her hands as she enjoyed the rumblings of the neighborhood coming to life around her. Shutters clattered open, car doors closed in driveways, and the muffled sounds of people chatting and moving about filtered through the still morning air.

A few early birds flitted between branches as the sunlight crept higher, dappling the garden below with shifting patterns of light and shadow. Claire watched a squirrel dart across the lawn, pausing to sniff inquisitively at a fallen pine cone before scurrying up the trunk of a maple tree in a neighboring yard.

When the final drop of coffee was gone, Claire retreated inside. She set the mug in the sink and made her way down the hall to the bedroom. In the bathroom, she turned on the shower and let the warm water heat up while stripping off her clothes.

Steam soon filled the room as Claire stepped into the water, sighing contentedly as the water fell over tired muscles. She lathered shampoo into her hair, working up a rich foam that smelled of lemon and ginger.

After rinsing the remaining soap from her body, Claire reluctantly shut off the water.

She toweled herself dry and got dressed in fresh clothes, feeling renewed. Making her way to the kitchen, Claire smiled to herself. Maybe she and Daisy could make a new life here together.

"Bye Daisy," she said, giving her cat a kiss as she lay on the arm of the couch, soaking in the morning sunshine. "I'll be back soon."

Claire had barely made it outside when a car unexpectedly turned into her driveway. She paused and looked over in surprise as a beat-up old blue sedan came to a stop. The driver's side door opened and her sister, Julia, stepped out, a huge smile on her face.

She immediately made her way over to give Julia a big hug hello. Julia wrapped her arms around Claire in return. "What are you doing here?" Claire asked, still beaming at Julia.

"I wanted to come see the new place," Julia replied. "I hope you don't mind some company."

Claire shook her head vehemently. "I love that you're here. Thank you for coming to visit me. Let's go to breakfast. I found the cutest bakery yesterday."

Julia grinned, linking her arm through Claire's as they walked towards the bakery. "Lead the way," she said. "And tell me all about this new place of yours. Do you like it here?"

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Claire smiled and nodded. "It's growing on me," she said. "It's still weird being in a new town, but I'm excited to explore. And I love the house. It's old, but it has character. It reminds me of the houses we used to draw as kids, you know? Like it has secrets hidden behind every door."

Julia chuckled. "I know what you mean. And I'm glad to hear you're settling in. It's important to have a place to call home, especially after David. Honestly I'm surprised you settled here after leaving Boston, since it's so different here, but I am very glad to have you much closer now."

They arrived at the bakery and Claire led the way inside. The sweet, yeasty smell of freshly baked bread and pastries filled the air, making Claire's mouth water. They pushed through the glass-fronted door and into the bakery. The wooden floor creaked under their feet as they approached the display case which seemed to hold enough pastries and loaves of bread to feed a small village for a month.

"It's good to see you again, Claire," Michael said. "Eva's making cookies for an order, I'm sure she'll miss seeing you this morning."

Julia looked curiously between them. "It's good to see you making new friends so quickly," she playfully teased her sister.

Claire smiled at her. "Michael, this is my little sister Julia. Please tell Eva hello for me."

"I certainly will." He rang them up. "You two enjoy your breakfast. Would you like some tea as well?"

"Yes please," Claire answered for both of them. Julia nodded as well.

"I'll have it right out to you two. Take a seat wherever you like."

They found a small table by the window, allowing them to watch as the town slowly came to life outside. Claire tore into her croissant, enjoying the flaky layers and buttery taste. Julia nibbled on her cinnamon roll, savoring the sweetness and warmth of the pastry.

"So how did things end up with Steven?" Claire asked her. Julia hadn't mentioned him lately, so she assumed something had happened, but it had been hard to think about more than David for a while now. She had definitely not been the best sister lately, though she knew Julia understood.

Julia sighed heavily. "It was like he disappeared off the face of the earth. I tried to contact him but it was like he had blocked me out completely."

Claire shook her head sympathetically. "That's really rough. People can be so inconsiderate sometimes."

"I swear, all guys are the same," Julia said with a huff. "They just want one thing and then they disappear without any explanation."

Claire chuckled, swirling her tea around in its cup. "Not all guys are like that," she said. "You just need to find someone who's worth your time."

Julia rolled her eyes. "Easier said than done," she said. "I'm starting to think I'm going to be single forever."

Claire reached across the table and took Julia's hand. "Don't be silly," she said. "You're amazing. Anyone would be lucky to have you."

Julia smiled at her sister. "Thanks, Claire."

As Claire took a bite of her croissant, Eva emerged wearing an apron dusted with flour. "Hi Claire, Michael told me you and your sister were here." Eva said brightly, walking over to their table. Claire smiled at her.

"Hey Eva, how's it going?"

"I'm doing well, staying busy of course. I just wanted to come out and say hi, see how you're enjoying the croissant and cinnamon roll." Eva's eyes seemed to linger on Claire for a moment, her smile widening. Claire felt a flush of confusion at the attention.

"They're delicious," Julia replied with an easy grin.

"Wonderful!" Eva exclaimed. "Well, I should get back to work, but it was nice seeing you again, Claire, and good meeting you too, Julia." Her eyes met Claire's once more before she went to the back of the bakery.

Claire blinked, unsure of what had just transpired. She shook off the peculiar feeling as she took another bite of her pastry. Eva was just being friendly, she told herself. Still, something in the tone of Eva's voice and the way she had looked at Claire gave her an odd feeling that she couldn't quite pin down.

Claire shrugged off the strange feeling persistently nagging at her after Eva's visit. It was just her imagination.

Julia seemed to think differently. "I think someone has a little crush on you," she said in a teasing singsong voice.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. Eva was just being friendly."

"If you say so," Julia said, with a smile.

As they finished their breakfast and headed out of the bakery, Julia playfully nudged Claire. "Come on, Claire, you have to admit that Eva was definitely into you."

Claire laughed, but deep down she couldn't deny that Julia might be right. There was something in the way Eva had looked at her that made her feel noticed, desired even.

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"Maybe. But that's..." She shrugged. "Even if I hadn't just lost David, I've never considered dating another woman. I'm flattered, of course, though." Claire quickly brushed thoughts of Eva aside. "C'mon, I want to show you this adorable antique store I found yesterday too. Then we can go to the docks and spend some time by the water."

Julia nodded, following as Claire led the way down the street toward the antique store. As they walked, Claire couldn't help but replay the conversation with Eva over and over in her head. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more there, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Maybe it simply was that Eva was interested in her.

The idea of dating a woman had never occurred to her before, but she wasn't opposed to the idea. After all, there was nothing wrong with it. She was also kind and compassionate, and her laugh was contagious. Still, the timing felt wrong. It was too soon after losing David. She needed more time. She hoped that Eva would understand, and that they could still be friends. That was, assuming that Eva had been interested in her at all and it wasn't just her imagination and Julia's teasing.

Chapter Eight

Eva busied herself rolling out sugar cookie dough in the kitchen while thoughts of Claire's return visit lingered at the edges of her mind. She sprinkled flour across the counter, trying to focus on preparing the next batch of treats and definitely not on Claire. She was just a customer, she tried to remind herself, nothing more. But Claire had been so nice and friendly, not to mention easy on the eyes. She couldn't deny that she was attracted to her, but it was too soon since Liz and she wasn't ready for a

rebound relationship just yet.

But despite her best efforts, Eva couldn't ignore the persistent smile tugging at her lips whenever she pictured Claire's wavy hair and enchanting eyes. There was just something magnetic about her that Eva found hard to resist. She shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts of Claire from her mind. She needed to focus on work. The last thing she wanted was to get distracted and mess up an order. Besides, Claire was most likely straight, and probably not looking for anything serious right now anyway. Her husband had just died after all.

As Eva used cookie cutters to transform the dough into fun shapes, she considered what Claire's reappearance could mean. Was she reading too much into it? After all, Sweet Delights was becoming a popular neighborhood spot. Maybe Claire simply enjoyed the pastries. Maybe she just craved sugar.

She scolded herself for acting like a teenage girl with a crush, but she couldn't deny how happy it made her seeing Claire sitting in her bakery again.

As Eva scooped the shaped cookie dough onto baking trays, her mind kept straying back to Claire chatting and laughing with her sister in the front seating area. The musical sound of Claire's laughter filtered into the kitchen, making Eva unconsciously smile to herself.

She shook her head, trying to remain focused on the task at hand. But it was useless - thoughts of getting to know Claire better persisted no matter how intently Eva tried arranging the unbaked cookies on the sheets.

As the cookies baked, Eva wiped her hands on a nearby towel and peeked her head into the seating area. Claire and her sister had left. That was probably for the best though. Eva really didn't need that kind of a distraction today.

Michael popped his head into the kitchen. "The cookies are looking great!" he said. "They smell amazing too. I'm sure Claire will love them."

Eva felt her cheeks flush at his knowing grin. "You're imagining things," she insisted weakly. "I'm just being friendly to a new customer."

"Uh huh, sure," Michael replied with skepticism. "All I know is I haven't seen you this excited by someone in a long time." His expression softened. "It's nice to see you happy again."

Eva brushed the comment off with forced casualness, not ready to confront the spark of possibility Claire had ignited within her. She slid the cookie trays into the hot oven, hoping the conversation would end there.

But deep down, a voice whispered that just maybe, after so much hurt, she was finally ready to feel again.

She told that voice to quiet down and get back to work.

As Eva closed the oven door, Michael leaned back against the counter beside her.

"I'm happy for you, that's all," he said gently. "After everything with Liz, you deserve someone who will treat you right."

Eva tensed slightly at the mention of her ex. The hurt was still so raw, she had trouble imagining opening herself up to potential heartbreak again so soon.

"I don't even know Claire," Eva replied with a sad smile. "This little crush is probably just a rebound distraction from the breakup anyway. I doubt it'll lead to anything real."

Michael shook his head firmly. "Don't sell yourself short, Eva. What you and Liz had clearly wasn't healthy by the end. But that doesn't mean you aren't worthy of real love."

Eva crossed her arms with a pensive sigh. As much as she felt drawn to Claire, the lingering pain from Liz's betrayal held her back. She wasn't sure she could survive being hurt so profoundly again.

"Let's just be friendly neighbors for now," Eva finally said. "Once I finish healing, who knows? But I'm not ready to leap into anything serious yet."

Michael nodded in understanding.

When was the last time she had felt such an instinctive connection with someone? If Eva was being honest with herself, she hadn't experienced this giddy rush of intrigue since the early days with Liz.

But the sting of Liz's betrayal gave her pause. As drawn as Eva felt to Claire, she worried history could repeat itself. What if these feelings faded and she was left heartbroken again?

Still, the prospect of nurturing even just a friendship with Claire appealed to Eva. Perhaps by taking things slow and keeping her at arm's length for now, Eva could gradually open herself to love once more when the time was right. That was, assuming of course, that Claire returned her interest at all.

The oven timer jolted Eva from her thoughts. She slipped on mitts and removed the tray of perfectly baked cookies, breathing in their sweet aroma.

Eva carefully placed the warm cookies on a rack to cool, then turned to face Michael. "I appreciate your encouragement, but I think I just need time," she said.

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The bell chimed again and Michael left her to go tend to their customers. It was just as well, Eva needed to focus on the cookies, not how much she liked Claire's smile.

Chapter Nine

The antique store was tucked away at the end of a narrow alleyway, its windows filled with all sorts of treasures from different eras. Claire and Julia stepped inside and were immediately hit with the smell of old wood and musty fabrics.

"This place is so cool," Julia said, walking over to a display of vintage cameras. "I could spend hours here."

Claire smiled, scanning the shelves of trinkets and knick-knacks. She couldn't help but feel distracted, her mind still preoccupied with thoughts of Eva. "I knew you'd like it. Your apartment is full of fun old things."

Julia laughed. "That's true. I love collecting old things, and finding new stories for them."

As Claire followed her sister around the shop, she couldn't help but wonder if she'd misread Eva's interest. Had she just been projecting her own loneliness and grief onto the situation?

She mentally shook herself and pushed the thought aside. No, she was certain that Eva had been flirting with her. There was no denying the warmth in her gaze, the gentle tone in her voice, the way she'd stood so close. It was clear as day.

But that didn't mean Claire had to do anything about it. She was still grieving David, and Eva deserved someone who was able to give her their whole heart.

They left the antique store and headed toward the docks Claire found herself drawn to the sound of the seagulls and the smell of the salty sea air. She and Julia found a quiet spot by the water's edge and watched as boats floated lazily by. David would have loved this place. She was sure of it.

"Earth to Claire!" Julia waved a hand in front of her face, snapping her out of her thoughts. Claire hadn't realized that her sister had been talking.

"Huh? Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was asking if you're okay. You seem a little distracted."

Claire shook her head. "I'm fine. Just lost in thought."

Julia nodded, but Claire could tell she wasn't entirely convinced. She decided to change the subject. "Hey, let's go find some ice cream."

Julia's eyes lit up. "Yes, please!"

As they made their way down the boardwalk, Claire found herself once again lost in thought. She missed David and wished that he was here. She never thought that she would be having feelings for another person again or even flirting with someone else after his death. When he'd died she had thought that was the end of it. She had been fine with the idea that she would never date again, or ever love again. And even though she wouldn't be dating Eva, the interest Eva seemed to have in her was making Claire question what she had been so sure of after her husband's death.

When they reached the ice cream stand, Claire's thoughts were still swirling. She

couldn't help but feel a hint of guilt at the idea of moving on from David, even if it was only some small flirting with an attractive woman.

"Hey, let's get one of those double scoop cones," Julia said, pointing to the menu board. "I want to try the mint chocolate chip and the strawberry."

Claire laughed. "You're going to get a brain freeze with all that ice cream."

Julia shrugged. "It's worth it."

"Hey, Claire, what flavor do you want?" Julia asked, jolting her out of her thoughts.

"Um, I think I'll just have chocolate," Claire said absentmindedly.

Julia rolled her eyes. "Boring. But okay."

After getting their ice cream Claire and Julia headed back to Claire's house. On the way they spotted Abby, and the man with her Claire assumed was her husband since they were holding hands. "Hey, Abby, I'd like you to meet my sister, Julia," Claire called out, waving to her.

Abby turned at the sound of her name, her hair catching the sunlight. "Hi, Claire! Hi, Julia!" She gestured to the man beside her, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled. "This is my husband, Peter."

"Nice to meet you, Peter," Claire said, extending a freckled hand. Peter's large, calloused hand enveloped her own in a firm handshake. Julia also offered a polite greeting, her brown eyes warm and friendly.

"Nice to meet you both too!" Peter replied. "So, where did you get your ice cream?"

Julia pointed behind them with her cone, drips of mint chocolate chip running down the side. "We just stopped at that stand back there. It's pretty good."

Peter nodded, the feathered gray at his temples catching Claire's eye. "Very good. If you're looking for breakfast in town, you should check out Arnold's, it's about a twenty minute walk, but very worth it for their scones."

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Claire tilted her head to the side, considering the recommendation. "It sounds nice, but we checked out Sweet Delights this morning, and we really liked them." The memory of the buttery croissant still lingered on her tongue.

"But it wouldn't hurt to try another place too," Julia offered.

Peter smiled at them. "You won't be disappointed there at all."

"Sure, thanks for the tip," Claire said with a shrug of her shoulders. Exploring new places was part of the adventure of moving to a new town.

"Anytime, you ladies have a great day. We're heading down to the dock to feed the ducks." Peter gave a small wave as he and Abby continued down the street.

Claire smiled, breathing in the briny sea air as she watched the couple disappear in the distance. "It was good running into you!"

"You too!" Abby called over her shoulder. "See you around."

Once Abby and Peter were out of sight, Julia turned to Claire. Her brown eyes were warm and a smile played at the corners of her mouth. "They seem nice."

Claire nodded in agreement, a lock of her blonde hair falling across her cheek. "They do. It's good to have nice neighbors who are welcoming like that."

They headed inside Claire's small cottage where Julia flopped down on the plush gray sofa with a contented sigh. "So, what do you want to do now?"

Claire shrugged and sat down next to her sister, the familiar lavender scent of her perfume catching her senses. "We could watch a movie or just talk. It's been so long since we've had a chance to catch up without life getting in the way."

"Talking sounds perfect." Julia angled herself to face Claire. "You seem like you need to get what's on your chest off it." Her tone was gentle and comforting. "I know things have been hard since David's passing."

Claire nodded, fiddling with a loose thread on the sofa cushion. "They have been, but I'm slowly getting through a little each day. I doubt that missing him, or grieving him, will ever really go away, but it hurts a little less on good days like this. I'm glad you came out today. I missed you so much." A single tear escaped, trailing down her freckled cheek.

Julia reached out and grasped Claire's hand in her own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I missed you too, Claire-bear."

Claire wiped the tear from her cheek, giving her sister a weak smile. "Thanks for coming, Jules. I really needed this."

Julia nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind Claire's ear in a familiar, sisterly gesture. "Me too. We have to promise not to let so much time pass before we see each other again."

"I promise," Claire said. She meant it. Her sister's visit had reminded her just how much she relied on Julia's comfort and support.

Julia glanced at the clock on the wall, a frown passing over her face. "I should probably start heading back soon. I told my boss I'd stop by the office this evening to finish up a project." She sighed, not seeming eager to leave.

Claire felt a pang of sadness at the thought of saying goodbye. The day had passed too quickly. "Do you have time for a cup of coffee before you go?"

"I wish I did." Julia gave her an apologetic smile. "But I really have to get going if I want to make it back before dark."

Claire understood, though she couldn't hide her disappointment. "I'll walk you out then."

They stood up from the sofa and headed to the front door. As Julia slipped on her shoes, Daisy strolled into the living room and meowed loudly, rubbing against Claire's legs.

"Well hello, Daisy!" Julia leaned down to scratch the cat behind her ears. Daisy purred contently, arching into the familiar caress. "You've gotten so big. Still as adorable as ever though."

Claire smiled, scooping Daisy into her arms. The cat snuggled against her chest, kneading her paws into Claire's sweater. "She's my faithful companion."

Julia gave Daisy one last pat on the head before straightening up. "I'm glad you have her. I worry about you here alone."

"Don't worry, Jules. Between Daisy and the neighbors, I'm well looked after." Claire hugged her sister tightly with one arm, Daisy sandwiched between them.

Julia returned the embrace, reluctant to let go. But after a long moment, she pulled back. "Call me when you get the chance. I love you."

"I love you too." Claire walked Julia out to her car, Daisy still nestled in her arms. She waved as Julia drove down the street and out of sight, feeling the familiar ache of

separation in her heart.

With a heavy sigh, Claire headed back inside, locking the door behind her. The house felt empty and silent without Julia's laughter and company. Daisy meowed, bumping her head against Claire's chin as if sensing her sadness.

Claire gave the cat a weak smile. "Looks like it's just you and me again, Daisy." The cat purred loudly in response.

Chapter Ten

It was nearly 10pm by the time Eva unlocked her apartment door after closing up Sweet Delights for the night. Though she loved the hustle of the bakery during business hours, it sometimes left her feeling mentally and physically drained by day's end. A big, rush order had come in for a birthday cake. They'd paid extra and she hadn't wanted to turn it down. With Michael there they'd made it, but the long day had left her exhausted.

Kicking off her shoes with a weary sigh, Eva took a moment to stand still and release the tension from her shoulders.

After changing into a pair of soft leggings and an oversized sweater, Eva padded into the kitchen to scrounge up a quick dinner. She spotted the leftover Chinese food containers from the other night and decided that would do just fine for a low effort meal. Maybe, if she was still hungry later, she'd go out for a milkshake.

While waiting for the kung pao tofu to reheat in the microwave, Eva sank onto the couch and flipped on the TV, selecting a light romantic comedy she had seen before. The familiar plot and cheesy jokes were just what her tired mind needed.

Soon the aroma of reheated Chinese filled the small living room. Eva breathed deeply, grateful to have the night for indulging in some much needed TLC after her long day

Balancing the container of Chinese food on her lap, Eva tried to focus on the lighthearted rom-com playing on TV. But despite the predictable hijinks, her mind

kept wandering elsewhere.

She took a bite of kung pao tofu, memories of nights curled up right here with Liz unexpectedly flooding back. They would chat and laugh about their days over takeout dinners, the familiar routine always comforting after busy hours at the bakery.

Eva shook her head, as if trying to physically displace the recollection. That life was over now. She couldn't change the past.

Intent on indulging in self-care tonight, Eva hit pause on the movie and headed to the bathroom to draw a warm, soothing bath. Liz had never understood her love of leisurely soaks, considering it a wasteful indulgence. But that criticism no longer mattered.

After tying up her hair and lighting a cinnamon-scented candle, Eva sank into the perfectly heated water with a satisfied sigh. The tension began melting from her muscles as she fully relaxed for the first time all day.

As Eva reclined in the steamy, fragrant bathwater, she felt the stress of the day dissipating with each passing minute. The flickering candle and stillness enveloped her senses, letting her mind unwind.

Liz's voice echoed faintly, chiding Eva for her "wasteful" baths. But Eva turned the criticism down, embracing this moment of self-care she had denied herself for too long.

She took her time soaking, occasionally trailing her fingers through the foam swirling on the water's surface. No rushing - simply allowing the water's warmth to wash away the strains of work and past heartache alike.

When her skin had soaked long enough, Eva lathered herself leisurely in honey body

wash, taking pleasure in the sweet scent. She let suds trail down her limbs, rinsing away remnants of the day's labors. This bath was her well-deserved sanctuary.

As the water cooled, Eva finally stepped out, wrapping herself in a plush towel. After drying off, she smoothed on a hydrating overnight face mask and rubbed cocoa butter lotion into her skin.

Finally, she slipped on cozy pajamas and slid under the sheets, feeling genuinely relaxed and cared for.

Eva's alarm sounded at 3:30am, jolting her from sleep. Though early, she enjoyed having the bakery to herself in the quiet pre-dawn hours. This solitary time was peaceful, centering.

Brewing a strong cup of coffee to shake off any remaining drowsiness, Eva stood at the kitchen window gazing out at the inky night sky. Only a faint glow on the horizon indicated sunrise was still hours away. She had always been an early riser, even in her youth. As a child, she had eagerly awaited the first rays of sun, excited to see what each new day held.

The world slumbered on around her. But rather than feeling lonely in the darkness, Eva cherished the silence. No distractions or demands on her time yet - just her favorite mug warming her hands as she mentally planned the day's assortment of baked goods.

Leisurely getting ready in the dim apartment, Eva took her time choosing an outfit and combing back her hair. No need to rush - she had hours yet before customers would start arriving at Sweet Delights' door, but she had plenty to do before they got there.

Eva finished her coffee with one last long sip, embracing these predawn moments of stillness, then slipped on her shoes, grabbed her bags and keys, and headed out the apartment door just as the inky night sky began shifting to a deep purple-blue.

The morning air held a hint of the crispness that autumn would soon bring. Eva inhaled deeply, feeling reinvigorated after her indulgent bath and full night's rest.

The town was still fully asleep, only the earliest risers' lights glowing in windows here and there. The sidewalks lay empty except for Eva's lone figure. Even the birds had not yet begun their dawn songs.

In this meditative pre-morning hush, Eva walked unhurriedly, enjoying having the streets to herself. The day's clamor and busyness could wait a little longer.

Soon the cozy brick exterior of Sweet Delights came into view. Eva smiled, quickening her pace. Unlocking the front door to the still darkened bakery felt like coming home, sometimes more than coming home to Liz ever had. Maybe they'd rushed things in the beginning, or maybe they'd needed each other at one time. Whatever it was, Eva knew now that she'd stayed for too long in a relationship with someone who didn't value her. Being cheated on was a terrible way to find that out, but part of her was glad to know now.

Eva switched on the lights, the familiar space lighting up around her. She loved the bakery, but what she loved even more was making people happy with the delicious sweets and baked goods they created each day.

The kitchen was well-stocked and immaculate. She and Michael were both neat freaks and worked well together because of it.

Humming softly to herself, Eva began getting the ovens preheating and gathering the ingredients she'd need to make her special chocolate croissants.

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Just as she was rolling out the dough, Michael walked through the front door, his brown curls tousled from sleep.

"Morning, Eva," he yawned.

"Morning," Eva said cheerfully. "Would you like a coffee?"

"I'll get it." Michael poured himself a large cup of the freshly brewed coffee.

She smiled at him, glad for his help.

Chapter Eleven

Claire awoke the next morning feeling restless, her thoughts still swirling from the previous day's conversations. As she made breakfast, Claire contemplated Peter's suggestion of trying Arnold's for a change of scenery. However, the thought of Sweet Delights - the cozy wooden interior, the pastry case filled with treats, and most of all Eva's smiling face - drew her back like a magnet. Though Claire had a car, the bakery was only a few minutes walk away, making it hard to resist their allure.

After rinsing her dishes, Claire grabbed her worn sketchbook and a handful of pencils from the old pine bookshelf David had built years ago. She sighed as memories of him flooded her mind, before calling out a cheery "Goodbye, sweet girl!" to Daisy and stepping onto the front porch. The early morning sunlight was bright, causing Claire to squint as she made her way down the gravel pathway flanked by rose bushes heavy with red blooms. The air was already warm and humid, promising another hot late summer day. The weather app said it was supposed to storm later, but she was

sure she would be back home well before then.

As Claire walked, her heels clicking softly against the sidewalk, she inhaled the smell of cut grass wafting over from neighboring yards. She watched as a mockingbird hopped along the branches of an old oak tree, singing its cheerful song.

The aroma of freshly baked pastries and brewing coffee from Sweet Delights wafted up to greet her, drawing her down into the bustling bakery. As she pushed open the door, the warmth and chatter enveloping her like a comforting embrace.

"Morning, Claire!" Eva greeted her with a beaming smile, already placing a steaming cup of coffee and a croissant on the counter. "I thought you might like to try our special today."

"Good morning, Eva," Claire replied, her cheeks flushing slightly at the unexpected attention. "Thank you. It looks delicious." She quickly paid for her treats then got out of the way so that Eva and Michael could continue helping their customers. She was in earlier than she had been the previous morning, and the bakery was quite a bit busier.

As she settled into a cozy corner table by the window, Claire couldn't help but notice the steady stream of customers that flowed in and out of the bakery. They came from all walks of life – old, young, couples, friends – each greeted warmly by Eva and Michael, their orders remembered and prepared with care. Claire knew she would need to start coming up with her own regular order soon, possibly after she'd tried everything in the bakery though. It all looked so tempting.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" a sweet voice asked, snapping Claire out of her reverie. She looked up to see a woman around her age, a toddler balanced on her hip and a stroller laden with grocery bags parked beside her.

"Of course not, please join me," Claire said, gesturing to the vacant chair opposite her. She briefly looked around, there were no other empty spots in the quickly filling bakery.

"Thanks! I'm Lily, by the way. This little one is Max," the woman introduced herself, smiling gratefully as Claire helped her maneuver the stroller next to the table.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Claire," she responded, finding herself instinctively drawn to the small boy's infectious giggles.

"Are you new in town? I haven't seen you around before," Lily inquired, expertly juggling her iced coffee and muffin while entertaining Max with a stuffed elephant.

Claire was sure that she stuck out in the small town. "I am. I just moved in really. But I'm loving the town, and my sister is only about twenty minutes away so it's not like I don't have anyone nearby."

Lily giggled, it made her sound so young, maybe in her early twenties. "I grew up here, but Max's father was from further up the coast in Maine. We had a summer fling, as people like to call it." She rolled her eyes, but didn't seem upset about it.

Claire was sure she shouldn't pry, but she was curious. "Is it just you then?"

Nodding, Lily sipped her coffee. "It is. My parents help when they can, but we had a bit of a falling out when I got pregnant, especially because he wasn't in the picture as soon as I told him. It was a bit of a mess, honestly, for a while there. And Max and I were alone but we made it. And my parents are coming back around. I don't love what happened, but I absolutely love him. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I think it does," Claire replied, smiling at her. "This may seem odd, but I am an artist, may I draw your portrait?"

Lily's eyes grew wide and she blushed. "Right now? I'm a mess. I just came from the grocery store and..." She shrugged. "You know what? Sure. Go for it."

"Thank you." Claire gently laid out her art supplies, taking in every detail of the young woman and her son. Though Claire didn't typically draw strangers, something about this woman's shy smile and story resonated with Claire, and she wanted to capture their genuine spirit, even if it was just for a fleeting few minutes.

She was almost done with the sketch when Michael came over. He had two water glasses for them. "Can I get you ladies anything else?" He leaned closer and Claire tilted the sketch so he could see it better. It only needed the finishing details. "Claire, that's amazing. You've really managed to capture the two of them in your work. Eva talked about having a mural painted on one of the walls a few years ago, but nothing ever came of it. It's good to have an artist in town."

Lily glanced at her half-finished muffin and shook her head. "I'm good for now, thank you."

"I am too," Claire said brightly, "but I appreciate the water."

Michael nodded. "It's going to be a hot one. If either of you need anything, please let us know. The morning rush is starting to slow down now so I'll be all yours."

Lily blushed at his words. "Thank you, Michael." As soon as he was gone Lily said, "He's so cute, I wish he wasn't gay."

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Claire chuckled. "Yes, he certainly seems charming." She'd had no idea that he was gay and wondered if he had a boyfriend in town. The town seemed progressive, like most of New England, though she had yet to see any pride flags in town. Although she hadn't been looking for them either.

A few minutes later, Claire signed the bottom of the page. "All done." She carefully tore the page from her sketchbook and handed it to Lily.

Lily gasped, her eyes shining. "This is stunning, Claire, thank you so much! I love it." She reached out to squeeze Claire's hand.

"You're welcome," Claire replied. She watched as Lily packed up the stroller and headed out into the sunshine, turning to wave brightly before disappearing down the street toward the water.

Eva came out of the back of the bakery, a tray in her hands filled with a dozen neatly decorated cupcakes. The cupcakes were arranged in two rows of six, each with a different bright frosting color and design. The vanilla buttercream frosting had been expertly swirled and piped to create rose shapes in shades of pink, purple, and blue. Silver sprinkles had been arranged in rings around each base to match the various colors. The cupcake liners were perfectly straight and tidy, showing the amount of care Eva had put into preparing the tray for display. Eva took her time arranging the display case, making sure each cupcake had enough space around it and that the frosting designs were facing outward for customers to see.

Claire hadn't realized that she'd been watching Eva arrange the cupcakes for as long as she had, enraptured by the care and precision of Eva's work, until Eva looked up

and smiled warmly at her. She watched as Eva tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and left a faint smudge of frosting on her cheek without noticing. Even that small, imperfect detail seemed charming to Claire in that moment.

She returned the smile shyly, Julia's teasing about Eva being interested in her ringing loudly in her ears. Claire took another bite of the flaky croissant and sighed happily at the burst of filling on her tongue. "This is delicious, Eva. Thank you for recommending it."

Eva beamed, coming out from behind the counter to join her for a moment. "I'm so glad you like it. We have a lot of regulars now, but I always get excited when someone new discovers us." She leaned in conspiratorially, "To be honest, the croissants are my favorite too. Michael's buttery pastry and my fillings are a perfect match."

Claire chuckled, "Well your secret is safe with me, though with treats this wonderful I don't think you'll stay a secret for long."

"You're too kind." Eva squeezed Claire's shoulder warmly. "Let me know if I can bring you anything else. And take your time, there's no rush at all. Michael told me you were out here drawing. Feel free to draw here anytime. We're normally only busy for a few hours first thing in the morning but the rest of the time it stays fairly quiet."

"Thank you, I will." Claire smiled as Eva headed back to help another customer.

Claire stayed for another hour, quietly observing the steady stream of customers coming into Sweet Delights for their morning coffee and breakfast pastries. She watched as Eva and Michael moved about the bustling cafe with ease, greeting customers by name, taking orders, and delivering plates of food and cups of steaming coffee with smiles.

Everyone but her seemed to be a regular, though she hoped she was quickly becoming part of that group. The smells of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods filled the air, mingling with the murmur of conversation and the clink of dishes. Regulars chatted with Eva and Michael as they worked, catching up on neighborhood news.

Eventually, Claire realized just how long she'd been lingering at her corner table. She brushed a few stray crumbs from her plate and gathered her things. Eva smiled at her as she returned her dish to the designated spot under the counter.

"Will we see you tomorrow morning too?" Eva asked her. Claire caught the hopefulness in her voice and tried not to look too deeply into it.

"Maybe," she said, smiling back at her. "I don't have any other plans, and I do prefer your coffee to my own."

Eva laughed, a bright and cheerful sound that matched her warm smile. "Then we'll hopefully see you again real soon."

Michael waved goodbye to Claire from across the cafe where he was taking another customer's order. Claire pushed open the glass door of the bakery and stepped back out onto the street.

Chapter Twelve

Eva pulled up outside Michael's apartment building right at 7pm as planned. He emerged a moment later, waving eagerly before climbing into her passenger seat.

"Thanks for picking me up," he said, leaning over to give Eva a quick hug. "I'm starving so I hope you're ready for a big Italian feast!"

Eva laughed as she pulled back onto the road headed for their favorite neighborhood restaurant. "When am I not ready for carbs and wine?"

As Eva drove, she caught Michael up on the latest happenings at the bakery. "So I'm still fine-tuning a new lavender cupcake recipe," she told him. "I just can't seem to get the lavender flavor quite right yet."

"My first try was a total fail," Eva admitted with a laugh. "I used way too many dried lavender buds. The cake was just speckled all over with them. And it smelled really intense."

She shook her head at the memory. "But when I actually tasted the cupcakes, it was like eating pure lavender oil or something. The flavor was so ridiculously strong and perfumey. I could barely swallow the first bite, it was just too much."

Eva continued, "So for the second attempt, I dialed back the amount of lavender way down thinking that would fix it. The cakes had a pretty light purple color, so they looked perfect. But then when I bit into one, I realized I could hardly taste any lavender at all. It was just plain vanilla cake."

She sighed. "Finding that ideal middle ground between too much and too little lavender has been really tricky. I'm hesitant to waste more ingredients on another failed batch. But I'm determined to figure out that perfect faint floral sweetness!"

Michael nodded thoughtfully. "Have you tried steeping the dried buds in milk or cream first to infuse it and then using that in the batter? Might be more potent than just tossing them in dry."

"Oooh, that's a fantastic idea!" Eva said. She hadn't thought to steep and infuse the flavor first. That could definitely be the solution to maximizing the subtle floral taste.

Soon they arrived at the cozy restaurant. Soft lighting and the aroma of garlic and fresh bread greeted them as the host led Eva and Michael to a small booth.

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Settling in across from each other, Eva felt a rush of gratitude to share this tradition with her closest friend. They seemed to visit the trattoria at least once a month, though it never got old.

A waiter appeared to take their drink order. "Let's start with a bottle of Chianti," Eva suggested. Michael nodded his enthusiastic agreement.

Once they had ordered the wine and some appetizers to share, including bruschetta and fried calamari, Michael and Eva settled into easy conversation.

"So, how are things going with you?" Eva asked as the waiter came back with the wine. "Any exciting updates in the dating department?"

Michael rolled his eyes dramatically. "Ugh, I wish I had some fun gossip, but the guy I've been seeing on and off is really starting to get on my nerves."

Michael dramatically placed his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands. "Ugh, I don't even know where to start with this guy I've been seeing."

He sat up, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. "First, he takes forever to respond to texts. Like I won't hear from him for days, and then suddenly he pops up again like nothing happened."

Shaking his head, Michael continued, "And trying to pin him down for actual dates is impossible! We'll tentatively make plans, but then the day comes and he's nowhere to be found. No call, nothing. It's happened like three times now."

Sighing deeply, he took a long sip of wine before going on. "I'm tired of these games, you know? I'm starting to feel too old to be messing around with all this hot and cold ghosting stuff. Is it so much to ask for something steady and drama-free at this point?"

He slumped back in the booth, clearly exasperated but also a bit dejected by the dating struggle. "I don't know, maybe I sound pathetic complaining about this," he said with a weak, self-conscious chuckle. "But I really thought this guy could be different. Maybe I'm just getting too old."

Eva chuckled, taking a sip of wine as their appetizers arrived. "Too old? Michael, you just turned twenty-five last month."

Michael waved a hand. "I know, I know, but I feel at least thirty-five with how uninspiring the dating scene is."

Eva smiled sympathetically. "You're right though," she replied. "I can relate to wanting something more settled at this point. The thrill of casual dating definitely fades over time, at least it did for me."

Michael nodded, popping a fried calamari ring into his mouth. "Exactly! I'm so over all the games and uncertainty. I just want to find my person, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean," said Eva. Though her own romantic prospects were hazy, she hoped genuine love would find its way to her best friend soon. He deserved to have someone steady to share his big heart with.

"So I've been thinking," she began casually, "maybe it's time we expand our little social circle a bit."

Michael glanced up from his calamari with an intrigued look. "Oh? Got anyone in

mind?"

"Well..." Eva hesitated, feeling suddenly shy about voicing the idea aloud. "What would you think about me inviting Claire along sometime? To join us for dinner or drinks?"

A knowing grin spread across Michael's face. "Look at you putting yourself out there! I think that's a great idea."

Eva felt her cheeks flush. "It's not like that! I just think we could be friends." She focused intently on her bread.

"Uh huh, sure," Michael replied with a wink. But his tone was warm, not teasing. "Well, I'm fully on board with getting to know Claire better."

Eva smiled, thankful for his support and complete lack of judgment. It was just a small step, but reaching out to Claire felt like progress in moving past Liz.

"That was delicious. I'm absolutely stuffed," he said, patting his stomach. Eva agreed as she pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road headed to Michael's place.

She drove slowly, not in any rush now that their leisurely dinner had come to an end. The neighborhood transitioned from quaint shops and restaurants to modest residential streets.

Eventually they reached the outskirts of town, where buildings became more sparse. Eva pulled up to Michael's aging apartment complex, the paint chipping and weeds poking up in the cracks of the parking lot.

Putting the car in park, Eva gave Michael a sympathetic smile. "This place...you deserve better."

Michael waved a hand dismissively. "Oh it's not so bad once you're inside. But I do dream of having my own little house someday."

"Well, the offer still stands if you ever want to come back and room with me for a bit to save up," Eva said. "I know we've done that before, and I don't mind."

"You're sweet, but I do like my space," Michael replied with a good-natured chuckle. He leaned over to give Eva a peck on the cheek. "But I'll keep you posted if I find something nicer."

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"I promise I'll keep an ear out and let you know if I catch wind of any nice apartments coming available, or cute little rental houses," Eva assured him.

Michael's face lit up at the thought. "That would be amazing. Hopefully something perfect pops up soon."

He leaned over to give Eva a quick hug. "Thanks again for dinner. Let's do it again soon."

"Absolutely, it was so nice catching up outside of the cafe," Eva replied warmly.

Michael grabbed his leftovers container and climbed out of the car. Eva watched as he walked up to the main entrance of the aging complex and unlocked the front door.

He turned and gave one last wave before disappearing inside. Eva waited until she saw the living room light turn on, signaling Michael had gotten in safely.

Chapter Thirteen

The orange glow of the sunrise cast a warm embrace over Claire's garden, bathing each leaf and petal in a delicate hue. She sat on the worn bench, a sketch pad balanced on her lap. Daisy nestled beside her, purring contentedly as she soaked up the morning sunlight. Claire's pencil glided across the paper, bringing the untamed beauty of the garden to life. She shaded the full blooms of the roses, carefully detailing each velvety petal. Tiny leaves and stems took shape under her touch. As a butterfly paused to sip nectar from a purple coneflower, Claire quickly sketched its vibrant wings, smudging the pencil to soften the edges. She lost herself in recreating

on paper the sanctuary she had found within the garden.

David would have adored being here with her, tending to the rambling garden they could have made flourish together. She could picture him so clearly - his sandy hair shining in the sun, forehead creased in concentration as he gently pulled weeds from around the flowers. She would have brought him cool lemonade on hot afternoons, laying a damp cloth across the back of his neck as they took a break in the shade. They'd have laughed together at the birds playing on the fence, and talked for hours about plans to expand the garden even more the following year.

As she sketched, Peter emerged from the house next door, watering can in hand, his brow furrowed as he surveyed her overgrown garden. He leaned against the fence, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Your garden seems a tad neglected, don't you think?" he called out, the corners of his mouth twitching with a teasing smile.

Claire looked up from her drawing and smiled warmly at him, her gaze unwavering. "I love it just the way it is," she replied, her voice soft yet resolute. "Each plant has its purpose." She glanced back down at her sketchpad, her hand tracing the curve of a daisy's petals. She hoped Peter would take the hint.

Peter lingered his gaze on Claire, eyes trailing over her face and figure. She tensed, shoulders tightening as subtle discomfort prickled over her skin.

"Ah, I see," he finally said, nodding thoughtfully before returning attention to his meticulous watering. His eyes lingered on Claire for a moment longer, as if considering her again. She didn't relish his attention, not on herself or her garden. He could keep his gaze away from them both. He then returned his attention to his task, leaving Claire to her thoughts and the quiet serenity of her garden.

He tilted the watering can one last time, nourishing the colorful blooms beneath it before straightening up. "Well, I'll leave you to your... creative chaos." With a wink,

he turned on his heel and began to retreat back into his house.

"Have a good day!" Claire called out, waving cheerfully at his retreating figure, she was glad he was gone for the moment. Something about him rubbed her the wrong way, and it was more than just his mild insults to her garden. Claire kept her focus on the sketchpad balanced in her lap, willing him to go. She let out a soft breath as the creaky garden gate announced his exit. The tension eased from her body and she relaxed back onto the weathered bench.

"Hello Claire," a gentle voice called out from beyond the fence. Startled, Claire looked up from her sketchpad to see Abby standing there, clutching the wooden slats with a sheepish smile on her face.

"Abby! Hey!" Claire replied warmly, setting her sketchpad aside.

"I wanted to apologize for Peter earlier," Abby said, her eyes casting down in embarrassment. "His opinions can be... strong, sometimes."

Claire chuckled, shaking her head. "Don't worry about it, Abby. We all have our preferences." She gestured towards the vibrant chaos of her garden. "This is mine."

Abby smiled, her relief apparent. "You know, Peter has never been much of a gardener. He likes things neat and orderly. I'm the one with the green thumb in our family. If it weren't for me, we'd probably be living in an apartment right now."

"Really?" Claire asked, genuinely surprised. She glanced at the neighboring yard, where neat rows of plants stood like soldiers awaiting orders – a stark contrast to her own wild haven. "I wouldn't have guessed."

"Peter is more of an indoor person," Abby confided, a playful glint in her eyes. "He'd rather spend his time organizing bookshelves or rearranging furniture than getting his

hands dirty in the soil."

"Ah, the joys of order," Claire mused, stroking Daisy's fur absentmindedly. "I suppose there's a certain beauty in it, but I've always been drawn to the wilder side of life." She smiled at Abby. "I'm glad you're here to keep him grounded, though."

"Me too," Abby agreed, her gaze drifting over Claire's garden with admiration. "Your garden has a certain magic to it. It's easy to see why you love it so much."

"Thank you, Abby," Claire said with sincere gratitude.

Abby's gaze settled on Daisy, her eyes softening as she took in the contented feline. "She's beautiful," she remarked, reaching through the fence to gently stroke Daisy's fur. "I don't think I've ever seen a cat with such lovely markings."

"Daisy has been my rock through everything. Would you like to come over for some tea?" Claire asked. "I have some fresh mint from the garden that would make a delicious brew."

She let out a sigh and shook her head. "I wish I could, Claire, but I have a mountain of chores waiting for me inside. Peter is particular about the house being tidy, and I can't afford to fall behind." Her voice carried a hint of resignation.

"Of course," Claire said, understanding how much work took to keep a home clean and organized. "Another time, then. Just know that you're always welcome here, whether it's for tea or simply a chat by the fence."

"Thank you, Claire," Abby replied, her smile warm and appreciative. "That means a lot to me." And with a final wave, she turned and disappeared back into her own home.

Chapter Fourteen

The afternoon sun filtered through the large front windows of Sweet Delights as Eva sat behind the counter sipping an iced coffee. With no customers at the moment, she was enjoying the brief quiet lull. In the back kitchen, she could hear faint noises of Michael washing dishes and tidying up after the lunch rush. Soft acoustic music played over the speakers, adding to her relaxation.

Just as Eva was considering taking out her tablet to doodle some ideas for new cake designs, the bell above the door jingled. She glanced up from her coffee and felt a thrill shoot through her chest when she saw Claire walk in, her skin glowing in the sunlit bakery. She wore a flowing linen top. The sleeves and neckline were wide and off the shoulder, exposing light freckles across her delicate collarbones.

As Eva's eyes trailed over Claire's exposed collarbones and shoulders, she felt the nearly irresistible urge to reach out and run her fingertips along that delicate freckled skin. She imagined tracing patterns across her skin. What would it feel like to gently grasp Claire by the waist and draw her in close enough to tenderly kiss each and every warm freckle? Eva's heart quickened at the thought, heat rising in her cheeks.

"Afternoon, Claire!" Eva said warmly, hoping she didn't sound overly eager. "How's your day going so far?"

Claire smiled, approaching the counter slowly as her gaze traveled over the tempting array of pastries behind the glass. "It's going well. I wanted to pop in and get something sweet," she replied. Her eyes met Eva's again, making Eva swallow thickly. "How about you? Staying cool on this hot day?"

"Oh yeah, the AC is cranked up to the max in here," Eva laughed. "And I've been indulging in iced coffees to get through the afternoon." She lifted her chilled glass as proof.

"Hmm..." she murmured, clearly deep in contemplation about what delicious option to choose.

After a few more moments of careful perusal, Claire seemed to hone in on the snickerdoodles, neatly arranged on a tiered stand. "I think I'll go with one of these this time," she said decisively, pointing to the cookies dusted in cinnamon sugar. "And maybe an iced coffee too," she added.

Eva grinned, she'd had to stop herself from eating all the cookies as soon as they had come out of the oven. "Excellent choices," she said, grabbing a paper bag for the cookie.

As Eva rang up her order, she found herself wishing Claire would stay and chat instead of disappearing to one of the tables. To her pleasant surprise though, Claire leaned casually against the counter as Eva prepared her coffee. "Would you like caramel and vanilla in it?" Eva offered.

Claire made a sound of pleasure that went straight through Eva, deepening her blush. "That sounds delicious. Is that what you're drinking?"

"It's what I drink everyday, either hot or iced depending on the weather," Eva confessed. "So I hope you like it."

Claire grinned. "I'm sure I will."

"How's your sister doing?" Eva asked, hoping she wasn't overstepping by bringing up Claire's personal life.

"She's doing really well. I should call and catch up with her more often. When David was alive I was so busy, I didn't make as much time for her as I should have. Now, well, now I just need to call her more. No excuses anymore. It's good to have her close, to know that if I needed her she could be here in less than an hour, not a day."

Eva slid the finished coffee across the counter along with the cookie wrapped in a paper sleeve. "Always nice to have someone who has your back."

"Do you have any siblings?" Claire asked before taking an appreciative sip of the cold brew.

"No, just me," Eva said. "The perks of being an only child. Though it might've been nice to have a built-in friend growing up like you and Julia. Though I do think of Michael as my little brother as well as my best friend."

Claire nodded. "We definitely leaned on each other a lot. I can't imagine my childhood without her. Speaking of childhood, where did you grow up?" Claire asked. "Have you always lived around here?"

Eva nodded, leaning casually on the bakery counter. "Actually, I'm local, born and raised right here," she replied. "I've never lived anywhere outside of this little town. My childhood home is just a few streets away from the bakery."

She gestured out the window at the quaint downtown street. "I used to walk to school every day right down that road. And I worked part-time jobs all over this neighborhood growing up - the flower shop, the bookstore, the ice cream parlor that used to be on the corner."

"So this was your dream even as a kid then?" asked Claire. "To run your own bakery?"

"Very much so. I went to culinary school, learned how to be a pastry chef, and it snowballed from there. I started with custom cakes and I got so busy that I had to pull in Michael for help. Not long after that he was quitting his job at the liquor store to come work for me full time."

Claire chuckled. "That's amazing you knew your passion so early. I definitely didn't have it all figured out as a kid." She took a bite of the snickerdoodle cookie, the cinnamon sugar dusting her lips.

Eva couldn't help but watch. Building up her courage, she reached across the counter and gently wiped the corner of Claire's mouth with her thumb.

"Just a few little crumbs," she explained, hoping she wasn't being too obvious. Claire's eyes widened slightly but she just smiled, making no move to pull away from Eva's touch.

Heart racing, Eva slowly retracted her hand, the feel of Claire's soft skin lingering. An undeniable connection hummed between them.

Just as Eva contemplated whether she dared try to take Claire's hand, the swing door to the back kitchen suddenly pushed open.

"Hey Eva, do we have more cupcake liners...oh!" Michael halted mid-sentence, taking in the scene before him.

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Eva quickly took a step back. Claire also retreated a polite distance from the counter, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

An awkward moment passed before Michael recovered himself. "Oops, sorry to interrupt!" His eyes glinted with barely contained curiosity that Eva knew she'd have to address later. "I'll just, uh, check on those cupcake liners myself."

He disappeared back into the kitchen, the door swinging slowly. Alone again, Eva cleared her throat, willing her scarlet cheeks to cool. She met Claire's eyes tentatively.

"Well, I should probably let you get back to work," Claire said, though she sounded almost reluctant. "Thanks for the coffee, cookie, and chat."

Eva just nodded, pulse still racing. As Claire pushed open the door with a final friendly wave, Eva sighed, already eager for their next encounter, and wishing Claire hadn't had to go now.

She had a feeling she'd be seeing more of the charming and beautiful woman. Eva had a sinking feeling in her gut though, the kind that told her that her growing crush on the new neighbor would likely come to no fruition.

It was a shame.

She sighed. There were worse things in life than a harmless crush on a beautiful woman.

The bell above the door jingled and Eva looked up with a smile, hoping it was Claire again, but a middle aged woman approached the counter instead.

"Hello, how can I help you today?" Eva greeted, slipping back into customer service mode.

The woman frowned slightly as she peered into the display case, as if searching for something that wasn't there.

"You don't have any strawberry scones left?" she finally asked, sounding almost accusatory.

"Oh, no," Eva said apologetically. "They're a seasonal item. We won't have them again until the spring."

The woman let out a huff, clearly disappointed. "Fine. I'll take a blueberry muffin then."

"Excellent choice," Eva replied, reaching for a paper sleeve. "Did you want it warmed up?"

The woman shook her head, pursing her lips. "No, that's not necessary."

Eva handed over the muffin, hoping this interaction would be a quick one. "That'll be three dollars and fifty cents, please."

"Here." The woman pulled a five dollar bill out of her wallet and thrust it at Eva.

Eva accepted the money, trying not to show her irritation at the woman's rudeness. Too bad all of their customers couldn't be like Claire. "Here's your change." She set the coins on the counter and pushed them toward the woman.

"Thank you," the woman said, gathering up her muffin and change. "Have a nice day."

"You too," Eva replied, watching as the woman made her way to the door. She shook her head. Some people could be so rude.

The bell above the door jingled, signaling the woman's departure.

"Wow, what a grump," Michael said, coming up beside her. "But Claire was here." He bumped her shoulder playfully.

Eva blushed deeply. "It was nothing."

Michael laughed. "No it wasn't, but I'm not going to tease you anymore about it."

"Thank you," Eva said.

"She is really pretty. If I wasn't gay..."

"Yeah," Eva agreed. "She is. I can't help but feel drawn to her. She comes in and I feel like a teenager again. Like I did before Liz. Before I got jaded and heartbroken."

"Aw." Michael put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her close. "Proud of you. You're finally moving on from toxicity."

She was trying to at least.

Chapter Fifteen

Claire grabbed a small shopping cart and made her way into the produce section of the grocery store. She slowly walked up and down the aisles, carefully inspecting the piles of fresh fruits and vegetables. The store was quiet this afternoon, with just a few other shoppers browsing nearby.

As Claire came upon a display of avocados, she paused to gently squeeze several, looking for ones that were perfectly ripe. Claire was focused entirely on her careful avocado selection, tuning out the soft background music and other ambient sounds of the grocery store. She was caught off guard when a delighted voice suddenly called out her name from the other end of the produce aisle, breaking through her concentration.

"Claire! Hey!"

Claire looked up from the avocados to see Eva grinning and waving at her from the other end of the produce aisle. Pushing her cart slowly in Claire's direction, Eva had a cheerful sparkle in her warm brown eyes. They'd only seen each other an hour before, but Claire was happy to see her again too.

"Eva! Hi!" Claire responded, unable to stop an instinctive smile from spreading across her own face. She hadn't expected to encounter anyone familiar during this routine grocery run, though it was a small town so she shouldn't have been surprised.

"Are you stocking up for the bakery?"

Eva nodded, glancing down at her cart. "Yeah, just needed to grab a few things -

milk, eggs, butter. The usual essentials to get us through to the next delivery in two days." She looked back up at Claire. "Are you finding everything you need here in town?"

Claire considered the question as she moved slowly down the aisle, Eva keeping pace beside her. She realized that aside from the downtown square, she actually hadn't ventured much into the surrounding community.

"I'm still getting familiar with the area," she admitted, searching for a head of lettuce that looked crisp. "Any recommendations on places I should check out?"

"On Saturday mornings, the farmer's market sets up in the park. It's a good place to meet people in the community, and there is some amazing produce there. When fruit is in season I try to get it there and use it in specials during the week."

When they reached the pasta, Claire grabbed a box of linguine. "That sounds delicious. I'll have to go there. I've been trying some new recipes lately," she explained. "It helps me wind down after a long day of painting."

"Pasta is amazing. You'll have to let me know if you discover any good recipes."

In the freezer section, Claire impulsively grabbed a pint of chocolate ice cream. When Eva raised an eyebrow, Claire shrugged and said "Sometimes you just need a little pick-me-up at the end of a long day, though I haven't had many of those lately. I'm getting back into it though."

"No ice cream judgment here." Eva laughed. "Chocolate therapy is totally valid. I'm partial to cookie dough though." She grabbed a pint for herself.

As they approached the checkout lanes, Claire felt reluctant for their grocery store trip to end.

"This was fun," Eva said.

"I thought so too," Claire agreed. They loaded their groceries onto the conveyor belt, both smiling.

Eva was an easy person to talk to. In fact, their conversation came so naturally that Claire felt like they had known each other for a long time. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed an interaction with a near-stranger as much as she did with Eva.

After chatting idly while waiting in the checkout line, Claire and Eva made their way out of the grocery store, both pushing carts laden with purchases. The sunny afternoon wrapped around them as they crossed the parking lot toward their vehicles.

When they arrived at Claire's older model sedan, she turned to Eva with a warm smile. "It was really nice bumping into you like this," she said sincerely.

Eva nodded, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "It definitely was." She met Claire's eyes. "Hopefully I'll see you again soon?"

Claire heard a hint of hopeful anticipation in Eva's voice, and she tried not to read into it. "Actually, what's the pastry special at the bakery tomorrow?" she asked. "I was thinking of stopping by in the morning. It's easily become my favorite part of the morning."

"Lemon strawberry scones," Eva answered, her face lighting up. "They turned out delicious - sweet and tangy."

"That sounds amazing," said Claire. "I'll have to swing by and try one. Save me one?"

"Absolutely," Eva replied. "I'll set one aside for you. Have a great rest of your day,

Claire!"

They exchanged a final wave before Eva headed off toward her own car. Claire watched her for a moment before climbing into her driver's seat.

Chapter Sixteen

Early that evening Eva stepped back and surveyed the array of ingredients and equipment she had gathered on the counter - bags of flour and sugar, sticks of butter, bottles of extracts and spices, mixing bowls, measuring cups, whisks, and spoons.

Tying on a cherry-printed apron, Eva scanned her handwritten list of recipe ideas, feeling energized. She put on a cheerful folk-pop playlist before washing her hands and beginning to measure out the ingredients for an olive oil honey bread.

Humming along to the music, Eva focused on sifting the flour, whisking the wet ingredients, and kneading the dough. She added a drizzle of orange blossom honey and infused olive oil, inhaling the sweet, earthy aroma. If she could get the recipe right, it would be a special treat at the bakery soon.

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Her hands worked methodically, muscle memory taking over. The feel of the dough coming together soothed away the stress of the day. Here in this kitchen was her true happy place, where she could lose herself in the craft. Her kitchen was tiny compared to the commercial kitchen at the bakery, but at home she could be in her socks and not be tempted to eat all the cupcakes in the display case.

Once the dough had been kneaded to a smooth, supple ball, Eva set it aside to proof and let rise under a clean kitchen towel. She glanced at the clock, surprised to find over an hour had passed already.

Eva carefully lifted the bowl with the proofed olive oil honey bread dough, feeling its increased weight and size. The dough had doubled in bulk during its rise, perfectly airy and light.

She turned it gently out onto a floured work surface. After kneading once more to remove any gas bubbles, Eva shaped the dough into a neat round ball.

The oven had finished preheating, so she gently placed the bread into the hot Dutch oven, placing score marks across the top. As it began baking, the kitchen filled with the irresistible aroma of fresh bread.

Eva set a timer for 30 minutes, though she would check for doneness before removing it. Wiping her floured hands, she felt tired but satisfied after an evening experimenting with this new recipe.

While the bread was baking, Eva decided to step out onto her small balcony to enjoy the night air and admire the stars emerging in the dusky sky.

Out on the balcony, a gentle breeze ruffled Eva's hair as she sank into a chair. Birds chirped softly as she gazed up at the slowly setting sun.

The oven timer eventually interrupted Eva's peaceful stargazing. She slipped back inside, where the heavenly aroma of freshly baked bread filled the warm kitchen.

Carefully removing the hot Dutch oven, Eva admired the beautifully browned bread. The crust was crackled to perfection. As tempting as it was, she knew slicing into it now would be a mistake. It had to cool completely first. She would have to wait a few hours before she could try it.

So she simply breathed deeply, letting anticipation build for tomorrow when the flavors would meld and she could enjoy a taste. Maybe she would share a slice with Claire. The thought made her smile.

It was likely just a small crush, but nevertheless it was nice to have someone new captivate her thoughts, instead of only Liz still occupying her mind. This felt like progress.

Chapter Seventeen

Claire was curled up on the couch with a book and a cup of chamomile tea, taking some time to unwind. The only sounds were the faint murmurs of birds outside as evening settled in.

She was just losing herself in the story when an unexpected knock at the front door jolted her attention. Frowning slightly, Claire glanced at the clock - nearly 8 pm. She wasn't expecting any visitors this late.

Marking her place in the book, Claire set it aside and pushed herself up from the plush cushions. She padded across the living room in her sock feet and turned on the

porch light before peering through the peephole.

Claire was surprised to see Peter shifting impatiently on the doorstep, casting furtive glances out into the night. She hesitated briefly, then took a breath and opened the door.

"Peter," she greeted him, unable to keep the note of puzzlement out of her voice. "This is a surprise. Did you need something?"

Peter smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Evening, Claire. Do you have a moment to chat?" His tone was casual, but Claire detected an undercurrent of gravity.

She nodded slowly, standing back to let him step inside. She had no idea what this visit was about, but the serious look on Peter's face told her it must be important.

"Is everything okay?" she asked cautiously.

Peter cleared his throat. "I noticed you were talking to Eva at the grocery store earlier..." he began.

Claire tensed slightly. She had a feeling she knew where this was going, but she played it cool for the moment.

"Yes, I ran into her while shopping," Claire replied evenly. "It was nice chatting with a familiar face."

Peter rubbed the back of his neck, seeming uncomfortable. "Well, that's actually what I wanted to discuss with you," he said. "I just thought I should...give you some advice, as you're new to town."

He hesitated, as if choosing his next words carefully. "If you want to fit in around

here, it would be best if you're cautious about who you associate with."

Claire felt a flare of annoyance at his patronizing tone. "What exactly are you implying, Peter?" she asked pointedly, though she was certain she already knew.

Peter let out a sigh. "I'm just saying, some folks around here have...reputations," he said. "Like that Eva you were talking to. Getting too friendly with her could cause some problems for you."

Claire crossed her arms, fixing him with an icy stare. She wasn't about to just take Peter's arrogant warnings at face value. "And why exactly would being friends with Eva be a problem?"

Peter shifted on his feet again, clearly uncomfortable under Claire's scrutiny. But Claire wasn't about to back down or make this easy for him.

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Peter exhaled slowly, as if choosing his next words carefully. "It's just...Eva's lifestyle isn't accepted by most people around here," he finally said. "If you spend time with her, it could damage your own reputation. I'm just trying to give you fair warning as a newcomer," he continued. "This is a traditional town. It's best if you avoid ruffling feathers."

Claire shook her head, incensed by his arrogance. "I appreciate your concern," she said icily, "but I can decide for myself who to befriend. Eva has been nothing but kind to me since I moved here. I enjoy her company."

She fixed him with an unwavering stare. "And besides, a person's private life is their own business. It doesn't concern me."

Peter rubbed the back of his neck again, clearly irritated that Claire wasn't heeding his warning. "I'm just saying, you should steer clear of her if you know what's good for you," he insisted stubbornly.

Claire refused to back down. "Thank you for your input," she replied coolly, "but I don't require your guidance regarding my choice of friends. Good night, Peter." Having said her piece, Claire stepped forward and firmly closed the front door in Peter's still-sputtering face.

Leaning back against the solid wood, Claire slowly exhaled, trying to calm her anger. How dare he presume to dictate who she associated with? Or rather, anything about her life at all?

Taking a few more deep, grounding breaths, Claire felt her irritation start to subside

slightly. But she remained resolute - no pompous, overbearing man was going to tell her who she could or couldn't befriend.

Claire made her way back to the couch, where Daisy was curled up napping. "I won't let anyone control me like that," she declared as she stroked the cat's soft fur. Daisy blinked up at her drowsily.

Picking her book back up, Claire tried to find where she'd left off on the page. But concentration eluded her as residual frustration lingered.

A minute later, the slamming of Peter's front door resonated from next door. Claire pictured him storming home in a huff, fuming that she had defied his arrogant directives about Eva.

"What a terrible human being," she muttered to Daisy with a sigh. The cat simply yawned, then rested her head contentedly on Claire's lap. Claire exhaled, feeling her pulse finally slow to normal. She wouldn't waste any more energy on Peter's pettiness tonight.

Chapter Eighteen

Late that night, Eva was curled up on the couch catching up on a TV drama when her phone suddenly lit up with a new text notification. She glanced over to see a message from Liz. Hey, sorry to bug you so late. Is it okay if I swing by? I just realized I left some sweaters at your place.

Eva felt an immediate knot form in her stomach. She hadn't spoken to Liz in weeks and had been doing her best to move on. The last thing she wanted was her ex showing up out of the blue. But she also knew refusing to return Liz's belongings would just lead to unnecessary conflict. With a reluctant sigh, Eva typed out a reply. I guess so. Just to grab the sweaters quickly.

She hit send before she could overthink it and change her mind. Part of her hoped Liz would forget or not even bother coming over this late. But just twenty minutes later, a knock at the front door dashed those hopes. Taking a deep, bracing breath, Eva steeled her nerves and went to open it. Time to get this encounter over with as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Eva swung open the front door to find Liz standing there, looking just as pretty as ever. Her dark hair fell in glossy waves over her shoulders and she wore a flattering lavender sweater. Eva had to ignore the way her heart clenched. At least Liz hadn't brought her new girlfriend over. That would have been more than Eva could bear.

"Hey! Thanks for letting me come grab these," Liz said breezily, as if just stopping by her ex's place late at night was perfectly normal.

Eva simply nodded, not trusting her voice to remain steady. She stepped aside silently to let Liz in.

"So how have you been?" Liz asked brightly while glancing around the apartment as if looking for changes since she left. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"I've been fine," Eva replied tightly, not wanting to make small talk with the woman who had cheated on her and broken her heart only a few months before. "The sweaters are in the bedroom. I put them in a box in the closet."

She led the way down the hall, Liz following casually as if she still belonged here. Being in close proximity again after all this time felt like sensory overload for Eva. She was hyper aware of Liz's perfume, and her warmth.

Liz quickly gathered up her forgotten sweaters from the closet shelf where Eva had boxed them up. An uncomfortable silence hung in the air between them.

"Well, I guess I'll get going and let you get back to your night..." Liz trailed off, turning toward Eva.

As Liz went to leave, she unexpectedly stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Eva in a brief hug.

Eva's body went rigid, completely caught off guard. Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "Don't do that. Please."

Liz quickly released her, taking a step back. For a brief moment, Eva thought she saw a flash of sadness in her eyes. But then Liz's expression clouded over. "Fine, my bad," she said shortly, her tone now icy. "I didn't realize a simple hug would be so offensive to you."

Eva sighed, instantly regretting her reaction. "Liz, that's not what I -"

But Liz was already brushing past her, sweaters in hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll get out of your way." Without another word or backwards glance, Liz disappeared down the hall and out the front door, letting it slam behind her.

Eva stood frozen, emotions swirling through her. She was relieved Liz was gone, but also felt guilty for handling things so poorly. One short encounter had unleashed a flood of unresolved feelings. Exhausted, she retreated to the couch. But try as she might to lose herself in a movie, she could only pick halfheartedly at a cookie, wishing she knew how to fix her still-broken heart.

Eva aimlessly flipped through TV channels, unable to focus on anything for more than a minute. Her thoughts kept spiraling back to the painful encounter with Liz. She knew rejecting the hug had come across as cold, but the prospect of physical affection from her ex had felt overwhelming in the moment. There were still too many unresolved feelings between them.

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Part of Eva wished she had handled things more gracefully. But a bigger part still felt some satisfaction at holding her ground for once instead of letting Liz back in. They'd broken up multiple times during their relationship, but this one was final. Liz had cheated on her. There was no coming back from that.

As she halfheartedly nibbled another cookie, Eva knew lingering attachment was natural after a serious relationship ending. But rehashing the past wouldn't change anything. With time and distance, she hoped the hurt would continue easing. She deserved to move forward and find someone who wanted her, and only her. Who valued her and loved her in a way Liz either couldn't, or simply wouldn't. She knew she deserved better than that.

Still unsettled and needing her best friend, Eva picked up her phone and opened her thread with Michael, typing out, You'll never guess who just stopped by. Liz showed up out of the blue to get some stuff she left here. It was so awkward and painful.

Michael replied right away, Ugh, I'm sorry! I hope you broke her heart right back for a little revenge.

Despite herself, Eva smiled slightly at his response. I wish, but I couldn't. She just made me realize how much I'm not over the hurt yet.

Michael wrote, You will be, give it time. And you know what they say - the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.

Eva laughed out loud, trust her best friend to lighten the mood. You're too much. But thank you for the smile tonight, I needed that. I'll see you at the bakery in the

morning. Goodnight!

Michael's reply was nearly instant. Anytime, that's what I'm here for! Sleep well, see you tomorrow.

Setting her phone down, Eva felt at least a little better. She would just have to keep pushing through the hurt a bit longer.

Chapter Nineteen

The bell above the door jingled brightly as Claire entered Sweet Delights. The aroma of freshly baked goods and roasted coffee enveloped her, immediately lifting her spirits.

"Good morning, Claire!" Eva called out from behind the counter, flashing her a cheerful smile. "I have your lemon strawberry scone all set aside for you."

"Thank you, Eva," said Claire, returning the smile as she approached the counter. The cozy bakery felt like a sanctuary after the irritating confrontation with Peter the previous night.

Eva slid the plate with the perfectly golden scone across to her. Claire's mouth watered just looking at the sugar-dusted pastry.

"This looks amazing," she said. "I'll take a latte to go with it too, please."

As Eva rang up her order, Claire greeted Michael who was wiping down tables nearby. His rainbow bracelet immediately caught her eye. Without drawing attention to it, she made sure to smile warmly at him in a subtle show of support.

After Eva handed the steaming latte over the counter, Claire brought her breakfast to

a table by the window. The first bite of the scone was a burst of sweet, tangy perfection. She was going to have to start alternating between Eva's incredible pastries or she'd never fit into her clothes. Or, a better idea, and one that made her smile, was that she could just buy new clothes and keep eating everything Eva made.

Claire savored the scone and sipped her latte as she gazed out the bakery's front windows. The sleepy street was just starting to come to life with people opening shops and grabbing their morning coffee.

Eva and Michael chatted casually behind the counter while going through opening tasks. With no other customers at the moment, the cozy bakery was quiet and peaceful.

Finishing the last morsel of her scone, Claire debated whether to broach the subject on her mind. After a moment, she gathered her courage and turned to Michael.

"Hey Michael, do you have a minute to chat?" she asked.

He looked over, seeming surprised she had addressed him directly. "Sure, what's up?"

Claire twisted her napkin nervously. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but...is it difficult being openly yourself here in this small town?" She glanced deliberately at his bracelet.

Michael's shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly at the personal question. But he simply laughed wryly and said, "Let me guess - you've been talking to some of our less open-minded residents?"

His reaction told Claire all she needed to know. She felt sheepish bringing it up but pressed on. "I had a run-in with my neighbor Peter last night. He said some very backward things."

Michael's expression darkened at the name. "Ah, Peter. He's notorious for his outdated views around here." He shook his head. "But don't worry about me, Claire. I don't pay any attention to the bigots."

Claire smiled sadly. "I really admire your courage for living openly as yourself in this town. It can't be easy."

Michael waved a hand dismissively but gave her a grateful smile. "It is what it is. I try not to let the closed-minded folks get to me."

He leaned against the counter, glancing down at his rainbow bracelet. "I spent too many years hiding who I was. Now I refuse to pretend just to make bigots like Peter more comfortable."

Claire nodded. "Good for you. Everyone should be able to live as their true selves."

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Just then, Eva came over, having heard part of their conversation during a lull.

"Everything okay over here?" she asked, glancing between them.

"Just discussing narrow-minded perspectives," Michael replied with a sardonic grin.

Eva rolled her eyes knowingly. "Let me guess - Peter was spouting his typical nonsense? I figured, since you're here and accepting of us, that you may have a run in with him sooner or later. If you're friends with us it's hard to be friends with him too, even as just your neighbor."

"You got it," Claire confirmed, frustrated. "I don't understand people like him."

"Oh honey, don't even get me started," Eva said with a dry laugh, patting Claire's shoulder. "But, as Michael said, we just live our lives proudly. The Peters of the world can't stop us."

Michael gave Claire a wink. "Besides, it's not all bad around here. We have the support of people like you."

Just then, the bell over the bakery door chimed as a few customers entered.

"Duty calls," Eva said with a smile. "But we should all get dinner sometime soon." She gave Claire's arm a quick, supportive squeeze before heading back behind the counter.

"I'd love that," Claire replied warmly. After exchanging a friendly goodbye with

Michael, she gathered her things and stepped back out into the morning sun, feeling optimistic despite the lingering frustration from her run-in with Peter.

The morning sun shone down on Claire as she walked home, feeling rejuvenated after the visit to Sweet Delights. Seeing Eva and Michael's upbeat resilience had lifted her spirits.

As she approached her cottage, Claire was relieved to see no sign of Peter next door. His pickup truck was gone from the driveway.

Unlocking her front door, Claire stepped into the cozy entryway. Daisy wound around her ankles, meowing a greeting.

"Hey sweetie, did you miss me?" Claire cooed, bending down to scratch the cat behind her ears. Daisy purred contently in response.

After giving Daisy some fresh food and water, Claire gathered her painting supplies and brought them out to the porch. She breathed in the floral scents wafting from her rambling garden.

Glancing over at Peter and Abby's yard, she noticed Abby visible through the window over the kitchen sink. Claire gave a friendly wave. Abby looked up from the dish she was washing and waved back with a bubbly smile.

Chapter Twenty

Eva was just getting ready to close up Sweet Delights for the evening when the phone rang. "Hello?" she answered, hoping it wasn't someone wanting an order for tonight when they had already been closed for an hour.

"Hey Eva, it's Claire. I'm sorry, I don't have your number so I was hoping that you

might still be there. I wanted to see if you'd be interested in coming over for dinner tonight? I'm trying out a new pasta recipe and would love for you to be my taste tester." She hesitated. "If you're not busy of course."

Eva couldn't keep a huge smile from spreading across her face. "That sounds amazing, I'd love to," she replied. "Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself and your appetite," said Claire with a laugh. "Maybe around 6 pm, that's only an hour from now. Is that too soon?"

"Not at all, I'll be right there. And I know where you live. You're just down the street with the garden. It's hard to miss."

Claire chuckled. "That's the one."

"I'll see you soon. Thank you for the invite."

"Anytime, I can't wait to cook for you."

After hanging up with Claire, Eva tidied up the bakery kitchen quickly, excited energy propelling her.

At home, she took a speedy shower, wanting to look and feel fresh. After debating her outfit options, she decided on a floral sundress that managed to be both casual and flattering. And, she had never worn it for Liz. Her ex liked her in leggings and tight jeans, which was fine, but dinner with Claire felt like a date, even if it wasn't officially one, and Eva wanted to look nice.

She wrapped up the olive oil honey loaf in parchment paper and cloth, tying it with some twine. It would be perfect with any type of pasta, and she wasn't one to come to dinner without a gift.

The sun was just starting to sink toward the horizon as Eva drove, casting the street in a warm golden glow befitting the happiness bubbling up inside her. Soon she spotted the charming cottage with Claire's beloved garden. The flowers were bright bursts of color, even in the setting sun. Eva knew nothing about flowers, but she loved how they looked the wildness of Claire's front yard.

Taking a steadying breath, Eva went up and knocked lightly on the sage green door. A moment later it swung open to reveal Claire standing there with an excited smile. In her arms was a gray cat who meowed up at Eva.

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"Eva, you made it! Come on in," she said warmly, stepping back to let Eva enter.

"Thanks for having me over," Eva said shyly as she stepped into Claire's entryway.

"And your cat is adorable."

"Her name is Daisy, and I am very glad to have some company in the kitchen tonight," Claire replied. She led the way toward the back of the house, past the living room where she set Daisy down on the couch. Eva eagerly scratched her head before following Claire.

"You have such a lovely home," Eva said sincerely, taking in the charming details that made the space feel well-lived in. She held up the loaf she had brought. "I baked some olive oil honey bread."

"That sounds amazing." Claire took the bread and inhaled deeply. "It smells incredible, I can't wait to try it."

Soon they were side-by-side in the kitchen, Claire sauteing vegetables for the pasta sauce as Eva helped mix up the salad.

Eva found herself captivated by everything about Claire - her melodic laugh, the way she bit her lip while concentrating, how their hands occasionally brushed sending little thrills through Eva. She was entangled in the best possible way. This felt like exactly where she was meant to be.

The meal came together beautifully with both women adding their talents - Claire's savory garlic pasta dish paired perfectly with Eva's fresh garden salad and the crusty

olive oil bread.

Soon they were sitting down across from each other, the small dining table intimate. Candlelight flickered over their faces as they ate. Though Claire hadn't said anything about this being a date, it felt like one to Eva. And, if it was a date, it was better than most of the ones she'd ever been on.

"This pasta is incredible, Claire," Eva said after her first bite. "Seriously restaurant-quality."

Claire's cheeks flushed with pride. "You're too kind. But I'm so glad you like it." She took a bite of the bread, closing her eyes blissfully. "And this bread is so delicious! We make a great culinary team."

All too soon they had cleaned their plates. Claire began clearing the empty plates from the intimate table set for two.

"Here, let me help you with those," Eva offered, gathering up used utensils and wine glasses.

Side-by-side at the sink, Claire washed each dish as Eva dried them with a soft towel. Their arms and hands bumped together occasionally in the confined space, sending little thrills through Eva at each subtle contact.

She caught herself stealing admiring glances at Claire's face as they worked. The way she bit her lower lip in concentration, the loose strands of hair that had escaped from her ponytail, the smudge of flour on her freckled cheek from cooking earlier. Everything about her caught and then held Eva's attention. It was all she could do not to reach out and touch Claire's cheek or to hold her hand.

Through the kitchen window, the night outside called out, letting Eva know her time

with Claire was almost over.

After the last pan was dried and returned to the rack, they walked slowly to the front door together. Eva turned to Claire, not wanting to say goodbye just yet, but not having an excuse, or an invitation, to stay longer either.

"Thank you for everything, the dinner and the company. I had a great time."

Claire smiled, eyes crinkling. "We should do this again soon," she suggested.

"Of course, I'm so glad you could make it," Claire replied, leaning against the door frame.

"Oh, before I go, have you heard about the meteor shower coming up next weekend?" Eva asked. "It's always a big event here. Everyone heads down to the docks to watch together."

"I haven't but it sounds like fun."

"Would you want to go together?" Eva asked, feeling suddenly shy. "I could show you the best viewing spot on the pier."

"I'd really like that," Claire softly replied.

They lingered in the moment a few more seconds before Claire pushed off from the door frame. "Well, goodnight, Eva. Get home safe."

"Thank you. Sweet dreams," Eva managed.

Claire reached out and squeezed her hand. Eva felt a shiver run through her.

With a final smile, Claire closed the door. Eva stood there a moment longer, her hand tingling, a goofy grin on her face.

As she drove home, a sense of lightness settled over her. Claire was becoming an important part of her life. The thought made her smile.

Chapter Twenty-One

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Moments after Eva had left, Claire paced around her cozy living room, phone in hand. She knew she needed to call her sister Julia, but anxious nerves were making her hesitate. Finally working up her resolve, Claire sank down onto the sofa and dialed the familiar number before she could overthink it further.

After two rings, Julia's cheerful voice answered. "Hey Claire Bear! How's my favorite sister doing?"

Claire smiled at the childhood nickname. "I'm okay. There's actually something I've been wanting to talk to you about." She took a shaky breath, pulse racing. "So, I've started having feelings for someone. But it's not for a man...it's Eva. From the cafe." The words came out in a nervous rush.

A brief silence followed before Julia replied gently, "Claire, you know I love you no matter what. She's beautiful and sweet and makes amazing food. I knew she probably had a crush on you, but I'm surprised you're falling for her too. I'm happy for you though."

Claire exhaled in relief, suddenly emotional. "I honestly never expected to have feelings for a woman. But when I'm with Eva, everything just feels easy and right." She shook her head with a bewildered laugh. "I know it's new and confusing, but also kind of wonderful? She makes me really happy. I had her over for dinner tonight and it felt so right. Like the kind of right I had with David. Where nothing is forced and there's no awkwardness."

"That's so great, Claire," Julia said warmly. "You deserve to be with someone who brings you that happiness, regardless of gender. Our parents raised us conservatively

and maybe it's not how they raised us, but I'm happy for you."

Claire nodded, tears pricking her eyes. "Thank you, Jules. I was nervous to tell you but I should have known you'd react with nothing but love. I can't wait for you to come back here soon, get to spend time with her as the person I'm interested in, not just the owner of a cafe I'm at nearly every day."

"You know I'd love to come back and visit you. Anytime that's good for you works for me too." Julia laughed, making Claire smile.

Claire thought about the meteor shower, and thought it would be a good chance for them to all get together. "There's a meteor shower this weekend, it's apparently a big thing in the town. Would you like to come to that with us?"

Julia's voice brightened even more. "A meteor shower event? That sounds so fun! I'd love to be there. My town doesn't do anything exciting like that. Maybe I should move there. Just joking. But not really."

Claire smiled, already looking forward to the visit. "I wish you would. And Eva offered to show us the ideal viewing spot too."

"Eva seems lovely, I can't wait to spend more time with her and get to know her better," Julia said.

"Me too. I'm sure you'll adore her."

"And we're definitely going to have to find you a dress for the occasion."

"A dress?" Claire asked, puzzled.

"Yes, for the meteor shower! If it's a big event in town, I'm sure people will be

dressed up, right? You need to look extra cute for your date."

"Oh, well, we aren't technically dating, but yes, I suppose it's a bit of a date," Claire realized, her cheeks growing warm.

Julia chuckled knowingly. "I don't have time before then to come up and go dress shopping with you, so I'll order you something cute tonight and have it delivered by this weekend. I promise it'll be your style, though maybe just a little flirtier than usual."

"Okay, I trust you."

Julia laughed. "Sounds great. It'll be a lot of fun. I'll see you this weekend."

"Love you, Jules," Claire said sincerely.

"Love you too, Claire Bear," Julia responded warmly.

After they hung up, Claire hugged the phone to her chest, feeling optimistic and grateful to have her sister's support.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The night of the meteor shower Eva could barely contain her excitement as she picked up her phone to call Claire and let her know where to meet her later.

"Hello?" Claire answered after a few rings.

"Hey! It's Eva," she said, unable to keep the eager smile out of her voice. "Just wanted to check if we're still on for tonight."

"Of course we are, and Julia will be with us too," Claire said brightly.

Although Eva had wanted it to be just her and Claire, she was looking forward to getting to know Julia better too since she was important to Claire. "The more the merrier. When you come to the docks I'm by the giant dead oak tree, you can't miss it. The thing should have been cut down a long time ago, but it's so old it's practically a resident of the town at this point. Everyone knows it."

"I think I can do that. Will Michael be joining us too?"

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He hadn't been, but Eva planned to text him as soon as she was off the phone with Claire. "He should be here. It'll be a lot of fun."

Claire laughed. "That sounds perfect! A nice group outing."

Grabbing a sweater for the cool evening air, Eva headed out the door, blanket tucked under her arm. The sun was just starting to set, but she could already envision the magic the coming hours would hold. She texted Michael as she walked. Want to come to the meteor shower with us?

I thought that was a date... He texted back right away.

Eva sighed. I thought it could have been, but Claire's sister is joining us, which is fine, so you could come too.

I'll meet you at the tree lol.

Laughing, she put her phone away. Trust him to remember her favorite spot. The sky was just beginning to darken as Eva arrived at the docks, woven blanket in tow. Other groups and couples were already scattered along the wooden planks, staking out ideal spots to view the display. As she spread out the blanket, footsteps approached behind her.

"Hey stranger," came Claire's playful voice.

Eva turned to see Claire standing there grinning, with Julia at her side.

"Hey you two," Eva said, quickly embracing Claire in a hug she tried not to have last too long even though she wanted to keep holding onto her. She then hugged Julia as well, though for not nearly as long.

Julia glanced around in awe. "What an amazing little town you have here."

"It can be, yeah," Eva said, deciding not to mention the people in town she would have rather avoided.

Just then, Michael arrived with perfect timing and the group settled comfortably onto the blanket, looking up at the glittering night sky. Eva couldn't stop stealing glances at Claire seated beside her, their shoulders just barely touching. Having her there made the meteor shower even more beautiful.

Sitting together on the blanket, Eva was hyper aware of Claire's proximity. Their shoulders just barely grazed, sending tingles down Eva's spine. She was grateful for the darkness hiding her frequent sidelong glances.

A hush fell over the crowd as the sky continued to fill with stars. Then suddenly, a bright streak of light flashed overhead. "There's one!" Michael called out excitedly.

More meteors began streaking through the sky, dazzling against the darkness. Oohs and ahhs echoed from the spectators gathered along the docks.

Eva snuck a peek at Claire, seeing pure wonder light up her face as she gazed upward. Heart swelling, Eva leaned over and pointed up.

"Make a wish," she said softly, as a large meteor arced overhead.

Claire met her eyes, holding her gaze for a long moment. "I just might have what I wished for already," she replied, her voice soft and full of meaning.

Eva could hardly breathe, frozen in the intimacy of the shared look between them.

Just then Michael jumped up, breaking the spell. "Who wants hot cocoa? I'm making a run to the diner!"

Laughing, the group gave their orders. Soon Michael returned, passing out steaming cups overflowing with marshmallows. Eva wrapped her hands around hers, the warmth penetrating into her skin.

Beside her, Claire giggled and nudged Eva's arm playfully as she tried to steal a melting marshmallow. Eva laughed and held the cup out of reach.

Their eyes met, Claire's hazel ones twinkling. In the lighting, Eva caught the faint smattering of freckles across Claire's perfect nose. Unable to resist, she reached up and gently touched Claire's cheek.

Claire's breath seemed to hitch, lips parting slightly. Heart hammering, Eva began to slowly lean in. When Claire mirrored her movement, eyelids fluttering closed, Eva took it as permission.

The moment their lips met, everything else faded away. The crowd, the meteors, all that existed was the warmth and softness of Claire's mouth against hers. It was a kiss sweeter than any hot cocoa.

When they finally, reluctantly parted, Claire looked breathless. Her eyes searched Eva's, seeming to find something. She reached up and caressed Eva's cheek. "Wow."

"Wow is right," Eva agreed, still dazed from the kiss.

They both glanced over at Michael and Julia who were looking at each other with amusement, trying not to laugh.

Claire blushed and laughed. "I forgot we had an audience."

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Eva blushed and looked down, smiling. "Same here. But I'm not embarrassed about it."

"Neither am I."

The two women gazed into each other's eyes for another long moment.

"Thanks," Claire whispered, looking both dazed and delighted.

Eva simply pulled her close again, head nestled on Claire's shoulder. Together they turned their gaze back to the stars.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The full moon lit Claire and Julia's path as they strolled back to the cottage after the dazzling meteor shower. Claire's mind was still spinning from the intimate moment she'd shared with Eva.

Once inside, Julia turned to her with a knowing smile. "So...you and Eva seem pretty close, huh?"

Claire felt her cheeks flush. "I mean, we're still just getting to know each other." She sat down on the sofa, heart racing. "But there's definitely a connection there that I've never felt before, not even with David. My husband was sweet, and caring, but he didn't give me...well, this."

Julia nodded thoughtfully. "I could tell. The way you two look at each other...it's

special."

Claire sighed, looking down at her hands. "To be honest, I have no idea what I'm doing here, Jules. My feelings for Eva kind of came out of nowhere." She met her sister's gaze. "But even though it's new and confusing, I want to keep exploring this and see where it goes. Being with her just feels right, you know?"

Julia squeezed her shoulder supportively. "Then that's all that matters. Follow your heart and don't worry about the rest."

Claire pulled her into a grateful hug. She sighed happily as she and Julia broke from their hug. "I'm so glad you're here, Jules. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Julia waved off the sentiment. "You'd be just fine. You're so much stronger than you know." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Have you told Eva much about David yet?"

Claire tensed slightly at the question. In truth, she had shared only the bare minimum with Eva about losing her husband. The grief still felt so raw. "Not really..." she admitted. "I guess talking about David makes all this feel more real somehow. Like I'd be acknowledging he's really gone forever."

Julia nodded in understanding, rubbing Claire's shoulder. "You'll know when the time is right to share that with her. I know it's a lot, and I know it still hurts. You two were together for years."

"He was my best friend," Claire confirmed, sadness squeezing her heart. She missed him, but she knew he was gone. Finding someone new didn't diminish what she and David had shared.

The next morning, Claire made breakfast for her and Julia, feeling lighter after their talk the previous night.

"So, any plans for your visit?" Claire asked as she sipped her coffee and they ate their french toast. "I was thinking we could do some browsing through town, have lunch in the garden."

"That sounds perfect," Julia said. "And maybe we could stop by the cafe?"

Claire blushed, thinking of seeing Eva so soon, but she nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

After tidying up from breakfast, Claire and Julia made their way outside into the sunny town. As they walked together, Claire felt suddenly nervous about seeing Eva again so soon after their kiss under the stars last night.

Her mind kept replaying the tender moment - Eva's fingers tracing patterns on her skin, their pounding heartbeats drawing closer, the butterflies when their lips finally met. Claire touched her mouth absently, longing to feel Eva's lips again.

Soon the cheerful bakery came into view. Peering inside, Claire spotted Eva filling the pastry case. Her pulse quickened with anticipation.

Beside her, Julia gave Claire's clammy hand a little squeeze. "Ready?" she asked knowingly. Claire took a deep breath and nodded. She shouldn't have felt like such a teenager going to speak to her crush, but the butterflies were the same no matter how old she was.

The cheery bell above the door announced Claire and Julia's arrival. Behind the counter, Eva looked up and her face lit up with a delighted smile at the sight of Claire. A becoming blush rose on Claire's freckled cheeks.

"Good morning, you two!" Eva greeted warmly. "What can I get started for you today?"

When Claire just continued smiling bashfully, Julia chuckled and stepped forward. "Let's do a couple iced coffees and your chocolate chip scones please."

"Excellent choices!" Eva rang up their order, sneaking a wink at Claire that made her blush.

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They settled at a table beside the window while Eva prepared their items. Soon she brought over the coffees, scones, and a small plate with two cupcakes.

"A new pistachio recipe, on the house," Eva explained, setting the plate down. "Let me know what you think!"

As Claire and Julia sampled the tender cupcakes, Eva returned to helping customers at the counter. Claire's gaze kept straying to admire her as she chatted cheerfully with patrons.

She itched to capture Eva's beauty in her sketchpad, but knew no drawing could do her justice. Her voice was melodic, her hair shimmered under the lights, her smile made Claire melt.

Finishing their treats, the sisters brought the empty dishes to Eva at the counter. "Delicious as always," Claire complimented her.

"So happy you enjoyed them!" Eva replied. Her fingers discreetly grazed Claire's as she took the plate, electricity sparking at the subtle touch. A private smile passed between them before the sisters headed out the door into the sunshine.

As they walked away from the cafe, Claire couldn't resist glancing over her shoulder for one last glimpse of Eva through the window.

Julia nudged her shoulder playfully. "I think you really like her," she teased.

Claire felt her cheeks flush as she quickly turned her gaze back to the sidewalk ahead.

"I do," she admitted with a helpless sigh. "She just makes me feel..." She struggled to find the words to describe the intoxicating rush of emotions she felt around Eva.

"I feel like a teenager again, scribbling crushes' initials in notebooks," Claire continued. "I should be more composed than this at my age. But Eva makes my heart race with just a smile. All I want to do is run back and kiss her in front of everyone."

Julia laughed. "Maybe don't kiss her while she's working, but I am happy for you. And jealous. Think she has a cute brother?"

Claire chuckled at her sister's joke. As they continued on, she realized she actually knew very little about Eva's life beyond the bakery. "While I don't know much about her, I do know that she's an only child." Claire resolved to have a more meaningful talk with Eva soon, not just stolen kisses and longing looks. She wanted to know everything that made Eva who she was.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Eva hummed to herself as she wiped down the bakery counters, getting ready to close up Sweet Delights for the evening. Michael had left over an hour ago, and the last customers had filtered out with boxes of leftover pastries not long after.

As she went to lock the front door, Eva paused in surprise as she saw Claire through the glass, waving shyly. In her hands she held a small bouquet of colorful flowers.

Unable to keep from smiling, Eva ushered Claire inside. "Hey you," she said, taking in the bright blooms. "They're beautiful."

Claire blushed. "I was in the garden after Julia left this afternoon and wanted to give these to you. I know you're closed so I won't stay long." She held out the flowers.

"You're so sweet," Eva said. She took the bouquet, breathing in their scent before finding a vase behind the counter to arrange them in. "Thank you, I love them."

"It's no problem at all," Claire said, leaning against the counter. "I'm glad they make you happy."

Eva finished trimming and arranging the stems in the vase. She placed it right by the check out where everyone could see them. "There, perfect," she declared, admiring the pops of color. "This was so kind of you. You really made my day. And technically we are closed, but would you like to stay for a bit? I'll lock up and there's still coffee and lemonade and lots of sweets if you want a snack. On the house of course."

Claire's eyes brightened. "I'd love that. Can I help you close up at all?"

"I'm actually pretty much done, I just need to lock the door, so you caught me right in time." Eva went over to the door and quickly locked it. She then pulled the curtains to give them some privacy, and also to keep people from trying to get in since they might think she was still open.

"How about some iced coffee and cupcakes?" Eva offered.

Claire licked her lips, catching Eva's attention. "That sounds delicious."

Quickly ducking her head to hide her blush, Eva said, "Great, I'll be right back. Pick a seat anywhere."

As Claire settled onto the plush yellow couch, Eva stole frequent glances over at her from behind the counter, unable to stop a smile from spreading across her face. Claire was as bright and warm as the vibrant couch, and just as beautiful as the flowers she had brought.

Eva took extra care preparing their iced coffees, wanting everything to be perfect. She swirled whipped cream carefully on top, then drizzled chocolate and caramel in delicate patterns. She wished she had colorful sprinkles to add some fun flair, but had used up her supply earlier decorating a batch of sugar cookies.

For the pastries, Eva selected some simple vanilla cupcakes with a decadent lemon curd filling, ideal for enjoying on this sunny day. She carefully arranged two on a small tray along with the coffees before bringing it over to the cozy seating area.

As Eva settled onto the plush couch, slipping off her shoes and tucking her feet underneath her, Claire gave her a sympathetic smile. "I really could have helped out with all that, you know," she offered. "You didn't have to do everything yourself."

Eva waved off the concern as she lifted the chilled coffee glass to her lips for a long sip. "It's okay, really," she insisted after swallowing, meeting Claire's gaze. "I'm just very glad you came by today. This is exactly what I needed."

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"Was it a difficult day at the bakery?" she asked gently. When Eva merely shrugged in response, Claire prodded further. "You know you can open up to me, right?"

Eva took a sip of her coffee before answering. "Not so much hard as long. I came in early to get some baking done for an order, then she called two hours before pick up time asking for an extra fifty cookies. That was fine, but just unexpected. So Michael and I were scrambling for a little while to get lunch orders done and to get the cookies made in time. I could have refused her, or told her that the rest wouldn't be ready until tomorrow, but the birthday party was tonight and I hate disappointing people."

Claire took her hand. Eva sank into the gentle contact. "It sounds like a lot. I wish I could do something to help."

Eva offered her a tired but grateful smile. "Just you being here helps more than you know," she replied sincerely, interlacing their fingers and giving Claire's hand an appreciative little squeeze in return.

Eva found her eyes drawn to a loose lock of hair that had fallen across Claire's forehead. Unable to resist, she reached out and gently tucked the stray strands behind Claire's ear. At the tender touch, Claire's smile grew. They slowly leaned in, lips meeting in a soft, sweet kiss.

"Thank you again for the flowers," Eva said as they pulled apart. "They really brighten up the space."

Claire turned her face to press a light kiss to Eva's palm. "I'm glad. I'll bring you a

fresh bouquet anytime you'd like."

Their hands found each other again between them. Claire glanced around the quiet cafe. "It's so peaceful here like this. Unlimited coffee and sweets too. I'm jealous."

Laughing, Eva moved in closer beside her. "I love being here when it's just me, or when it's just Michael and I and we're baking or discussing specials for the week. It's quiet and it's our space then. And if you ever want to join us to sketch just let me know. We won't be officially open but there's always coffee and you would be welcome to come in and enjoy the quiet for a little while before we open or, like right now, when we're closed."

Claire's smile turned mischievous. "So we could have more moments like this?"

Eva laughed, echoed by Claire's delighted giggle. "I suppose we could find a few more excuses for moments like this," Eva admitted. She leaned in, nuzzling her nose against Claire's before capturing her lips in another sweet kiss.

Eva gently laced their hands together. Claire's thumb stroked a soft arc over her skin. She wanted to stay right there with Claire for hours.

Dusk was falling as Eva finally walked Claire to the door for a lingering, reluctant goodbye, neither ready to say goodbye just yet.

"I had a really nice time with you this evening," Claire said softly, turning to face Eva in the dim light.

"Me too," Eva said with a soft smile.

"Goodnight," Claire whispered. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Eva could only nod, wishing they could have more time together but knowing they couldn't linger there in the doorway forever. As Eva watched Claire walk away, she realized how much she missed her already.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next afternoon Claire sat in her garden. She hadn't used her watercolors in weeks, but she had them out today, painting the lush, colorful blooms before her. The soft breeze ruffled her hair as she mixed shades of red, orange, and purple to create the different hues of the flowers around her.

She was adding some details to the leaves when movement from the neighboring yard caught her eye. Claire looked up to see Abby padding barefoot across the lawn to collect the mail, clad in yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt.

"Hey!" Claire called out to her, waving her paintbrush in greeting. Abby glanced over, managing a weak smile in return. Claire's own faded slightly, immediately sensing something was off. Abby's eyes lacked their usual bright spark.

Concerned, Claire set her sketchbook aside as Abby came nearer. "How are you?" she asked gently.

Abby hesitated, one hand playing with her bracelet. "Oh, you know...same old," she finally said vaguely. But the shadow haunting her face told Claire there was more weighing on her than she wanted to let on.

Claire patted the empty spot on the bench, inviting Abby to sit. After a moment, Abby sank down with a weary sigh. Up close, Claire could see the dark circles under her eyes that even makeup couldn't quite conceal.

"Abby, what's going on?" Claire asked softly. "You seem really down. Is everything

okay with you and Peter?"

Abby tensed slightly at the question. Her eyes darted toward her house as if nervous at being seen talking alone with Claire for too long.

"It's just...Peter thinks he knows what's best for me," Abby finally murmured. "He controls a lot of decisions because he believes it's for my own good."

"I'm sorry, Abby," Claire said quietly, feeling her heart clench with sympathy. "Are you safe right now?"

Abby gave a quick, jerky nod. "For the most part," she whispered.

"Can I do anything to help you? Is there any way I can call someone, or talk to him, or...?" Claire trailed off as Abby shook her head sadly.

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"Peter doesn't believe there's anything wrong with the way he is. And we live in such a small, conservative town..." She looked down, a glimmer of shame in her eyes. "I know he means well, but sometimes I wish I had more choices of my own. More freedom."

Claire's heart ached for her neighbor and new friend. She reached over and gave Abby's hand a supportive squeeze. "You deserve that freedom, Abby," she said gently but firmly. "Compromise is one thing, but control isn't love."

Abby's eyes suddenly shimmered with tears. "You're so kind, Claire. I don't know what to do..." she whispered, a hint of fear in her voice.

Seeing Abby on the verge of tears, Claire put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"It's okay, you don't have to figure everything out now," she soothed. "I'm always here if you need to talk more or just need a friend. You shouldn't have to go through this alone."

Abby nodded, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "Thank you. I'm sorry for unloading all this." She managed a self-conscious chuckle. "It just helps so much to voice it out loud."

"Don't apologize!" Claire insisted.

Abby's smile held more warmth now. She stood, glancing anxiously back at her house. "I should get back before Peter wonders where I am. But thank you, Claire. For everything."

Claire rose from the bench to hug her tightly. "Anytime. If you ever need a break or just need to talk, you know where to find me. I'm always either here or at the cafe."

Abby squeezed her gratefully in return before hurrying back inside. Claire's thoughts were troubled as she went back to her sketch. If she could help her friend in any way, she would. With a heavy sigh, Claire turned her attention back to her garden. She could only imagine how trapped Abby felt. It was no way to live, and certainly no way to have a marriage.

When Claire finally stood to stretch and take a break, she glanced up to see Peter standing on their front porch. He'd brought out his watering can again. Claire gave him a wave then headed inside.

Claire was finishing washing the dishes when she heard the doorbell ring. Hoping it was Abby, Claire quickly dried her hands before heading down the hall.

But when she opened the door, her smile of greeting died at the sight of Peter standing on her doorstep, arms crossed. His mouth was set in a hard line, eyes cold and calculating.

"Can I help you?" Claire asked, unable to keep a slight edge of hostility from her voice.

"Your flowers are invading my lawn. You can cut them back. That would certainly help."

Claire bristled at his tone. "You're welcome to trim any of the flowers that cross over to your yard up to the point that they're back in mine."

Peter's scowl deepened. "Then I will."

"Please do," Claire responded. She held the door, waiting for him to leave. But he continued to glare at her, his stance unwavering.

"Anything else?" Claire prompted, her impatience growing.

Peter's eyes narrowed. "Abby is not a lesbian. Leave her alone."

Claire stared at him in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding. Abby and I are friends."

Peter snorted. "I've seen the way you two look at each other. She doesn't need you influencing her."

"What I feel for Abby is platonic. And I don't think it's up to you to decide who Abby does or does not speak to," Claire shot back. She took a deep breath. She did not need to get worked up over this man. "If there's nothing else, Peter, please enjoy the rest of your afternoon."

Before he could say anything more, Claire shut the door and locked it. She leaned against the wall, taking a few slow breaths to calm herself. It wasn't her fault if Peter was insecure, nor was it her problem. But that didn't make him any less frustrating or intimidating.

Mostly she just felt badly for Abby though.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Claire paced her cottage living room, cellphone in hand. She hadn't been on a real first date in over a decade but after the meteor shower, she wanted to see Eva outside of the cafe, and after Peter, she wanted to see her publicly. Drawing a deep breath, Claire dialed her number and after two rings, she heard Eva's friendly voice. "Hey you," Eva said. "Did you need to place an order for pick up?"

"Actually, I was hoping you'd go on a date with me."

There was a brief pause before Eva replied. "You're asking me out?"

Claire smiled. "I am. On a proper date. So...how does dinner sound?"

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"Dinner sounds great," Eva replied. "Did you have anywhere in mind?"

Claire hesitated. This was where her plan needed some help. "Actually, I don't really know the places around here all that well yet. Maybe you know of a place we could go?"

"There is a cute Italian place that Michael and I go to that I've been wanting to take you to. It's casual, good food. I think you'd really like it. We could do tonight at six? I'll pick you up?"

"Tonight at six is perfect. See you then," Claire said, smiling into the phone.

As soon as she hung up, Claire went to get dinner. She only had two hours before her date. When she was ready Claire went over to the mirror to check her appearance. She'd chosen a white sundress and had taken extra care with her makeup.

After a quick glance at her watch, Claire grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

The Italian restaurant was a cozy, welcoming space. Red and white checkered tablecloths and candlelight gave it a romantic vibe, which suited Claire perfectly. Eva smiled across the cozy corner booth at Claire, the candlelight flickering softly over her lovely features.

On top of the table Claire traced small patterns over Eva's hand. "I'm so glad we could do this tonight."

"Me too," Eva replied, turning her palm upward so their hands were clasped together.

The front door of the restaurant suddenly banged open loudly, making them both jump. Claire looked over to see Peter barreling in, his face mottled purple with rage. His eyes landed on them and narrowed. With a sinking feeling, Claire quickly pulled her hand back from Eva's just before Peter stomped over to their table. She braced herself, immediately sensing this unexpected confrontation would not be pleasant. Beside her, Eva sat very still, eyes widening.

Peter halted directly in front of them, fists clenched at his sides. "I should have known your type would be lurking around here," he snarled down at the couple. Claire felt herself tense, heart beginning to race. This was about to get ugly fast.

She kept her face neutral, hoping her voice would come out steady. "Peter, we were just having a nice dinner. I think you should go."

But Peter paid her no mind, continuing to seethe at them. Claire's mind raced, wondering if she should call for help or attempt to diffuse the situation. Eva reached over under the table and gave her hand a subtle, bracing squeeze.

Claire squeezed back, drawing strength from Eva's solid presence beside her, though anxious about what Peter might do next.

Eva kept her tone calm and even. "Peter, I don't know what you think you're doing, but we're just trying to enjoy our dinner."

"Don't play dumb with me," Peter spat back. "I know exactly what you two have been trying to pull, filling my wife's head with your twisted ideas."

Claire spoke up defiantly. "If you have issues in your marriage, don't blame us. Abby has a right to feel however she feels."

Peter's face flushed a deeper shade of rage. "How dare you try and turn her against

me?" His voice was rising now, attracting attention from nearby tables. "I won't just stand by while you flaunt your sick, unnatural lifestyle!"

"You can insult us all you want," Eva said steadily. "But we're not ashamed of our relationship, Peter. Your bigotry is the only sickness here."

Before he could retort, the cafe owner hurried over. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said sternly. "You're harassing my customers."

Peter pointed a threatening finger at Claire and Eva. "This isn't over, believe me." Then he turned on his heel and stormed out, the door slamming behind him.

A tense silence hung over the cafe after Peter's disruptive exit. Claire let out a shaky breath, looking rattled by his vitriolic outburst.

"I'm so sorry you both had to deal with that ugliness," the owner said kindly before leaving them to privacy again.

Eva squeezed Claire's hand reassuringly. "Are you okay?" she asked, gently brushing a lock of hair back from Claire's face.

Claire nodded, though still looking a bit shaken. "I'm fine. Just wasn't expecting him to confront us so publicly like that."

"Me neither," Eva admitted. "Though he's always been a terrible human being. He was absolutely awful when we were in school together too. Abby was a sweetheart, she always has been. I have no idea why she chose to end up with Peter of all people."

After a few minutes, they returned to their meal, and the mood lightened again. Eva's easy, open smile soothed away any remaining unease. By the time they finished their

pasta and shared tiramisu for dessert, Claire was feeling back to her normal self. Peter could say anything he wanted to. He couldn't actually hurt her.

She was safe with Eva.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eva drove them back to her cozy apartment located just a few blocks from the cafe. She suddenly felt a little self-conscious about its size as they walked up to the door.

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"It's not much, but I like being so close to Sweet Delights," Eva explained as she unlocked the door and gestured for Claire to enter first.

Claire stepped inside the small apartment and smiled. "It's wonderful," she said sincerely, taking in the brightly painted walls, plush sofa, and kitchenette.

Eva breathed a small sigh of relief, glad Claire wasn't judging the limited space. She watched as Claire made herself at home, trailing her fingers over the art prints and photos adorning the walls.

"Thank you again for dinner," Claire said, settling onto the couch. "Everything was delicious, especially the tiramisu."

"Of course, I'm so glad you enjoyed it," Eva replied, joining her. She loved seeing Claire in her personal space, looking utterly comfortable and content.

"Let me make you some tea, okay?" Eva said gently. Claire had played it off, she'd tried to seem brave, but Eva knew that Peter's interruption had shaken her. Eva was far more used to Peter, and all the other homophobic morons, in town and was less surprised by his outbursts, but was no less annoyed by his interruption.

Claire nodded. "I'd love a cup," she said.

Eva busied herself in the kitchen preparing two cups of tea, trying to calm the butterflies that were now flitting about in her stomach.

The tea was ready a few minutes later. "I hope chamomile is alright," she called,

bringing the two steaming cups into the living room and handing one to Claire.

"Chamomile is perfect, thank you."

They sat together, the silence between them stretching out.

"I just don't understand how you can be so calm after the horrible things Peter said. Aren't you upset too?" Claire asked her.

Eva nodded. "I am. But I'm also, sadly, used to him. He's always been terrible. Always. His idle threats don't faze me anymore."

"You shouldn't have to be so accustomed to cruelty," she said fiercely.

"I'm so sorry you've dealt with him before," Claire said, rubbing a comforting hand up and down Eva's back. "But I'm glad to know his bark seems worse than his bite at least."

Eva nodded. "Exactly. He'll stomp and shout but it rarely goes beyond that." She tucked a lock of hair behind Claire's ear. "But that doesn't mean he didn't scare you," she said, voice softening. "He shouldn't have done that, he had no right."

"I'm fine, Eva," Claire insisted, though her smile was shaky.

"I just hate the way he treated you, and that he had the nerve to interrupt our date." Eva sighed, shaking her head.

Claire gave her an understanding smile. "It's not your fault. And I'm just grateful I have someone to support me through all this. There have been a lot of changes recently. All of them good though." She took Eva's hand and kissed her palm.

Claire took a deep, shaky breath. "I really have grown to love it here, and almost all of the people here. You're a huge part of the reason I'm so happy here, you know," she added.

Eva grinned. "So are you, you make me happier than I've been in a long time."

Claire relaxed against her. "Really?"

Eva nodded, eyes bright with affection. "Yes, really. Do you want to go sit outside on the balcony?" Eva asked her. It was a nice night, maybe the last truly warm evenings they would have now that the chill of fall was coming in.

Claire nodded. "Let's take our tea though."

Eva led her out to the small balcony off the living room. She settled down onto one of the cushioned chairs. Claire joined her, sitting on her lap with Eva's arms securely around her.

They sat quietly, enjoying the soft sounds of the night and the warmth of each other.

"What were you like in school?" Claire asked, tilting her face toward the star-strewn sky.

"Not that much different from now, I guess," Eva replied.

"Me neither. I've always been quiet, always into art. David had to make the first move." She chuckled, her voice tinged with pain. "I don't think I'll ever really get over him. And I'm sorry to drag that into us and what we're becoming."

Eva gave her a gentle squeeze. "You two were married for a long time and then you lost him tragically. I wouldn't expect to take his place and I don't ever intend to erase

him. You can always talk about him with me. Bring him into what we are. He's a part of you."

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Claire turned in Eva's arms, tears shining in her eyes. "That's exactly what I needed to hear. I just don't know if I'll ever fully heal."

Eva nodded. "You'll keep healing, and then something will happen, and it'll set you back. But you'll still keep healing. And I'll be there every step of the way. I'm not going anywhere."

"I hope not," Claire said. "I'm glad we can be so honest with each other, Eva. I'm glad I met you."

"Me too," Eva said. She leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

Claire's hand went up and tangled in Eva's dark hair, kissing her back. They held the embrace for a moment, enjoying the tender connection between them.

When they pulled apart, Eva's smile was radiant. "You are incredible."

"So are you," Claire said. She rested her head on Eva's shoulder.

They sat like that, gazing up at the stars, until the tea was cold.

Finally, Eva said, "I hate to break the mood, but I should probably get you home. You have a cat to take care of."

Claire pouted. She didn't look happy about it. "I'm only a few blocks away. Would you want to stay over tonight? You can easily get to Sweet Delights in the morning. And I don't mind being woken up early. I could do some pre-dawn painting then."

"Well, if you're sure it's okay..." Eva said slowly.

Claire nodded eagerly. "More than okay," she assured her.

They finished their tea, then made their way back inside. Eva grabbed her bag, a change of clothes, and some toiletries so that she would be ready for work tomorrow. Then she followed Claire down to the car. It didn't take long to get back to Claire's cottage.

Something seemed to be weighing on Claire's mind though as they got ready for bed. "What is it?" Eva asked her. "Is it too soon? I can go back home if it is."

Claire gave her a shaky smile. "No, it's not that at all actually. With the way Peter reacted, I'm worried about Abby," Claire admitted quietly. "Do you think...could he be abusive towards her?"

Eva's expression turned grave. She hesitated before replying gently, "I can't say for certain, but honestly I wouldn't be surprised. His need to control feels very aggressive."

Claire picked up Daisy and looked out the bedroom window toward Peter and Abby's house. Eva came and looked with her. Their house was dark, and she was also worried. "I wish I could do more to help her," Claire said. "She's so sweet and we've spoken a few times, but it clearly seems to upset Peter."

"Just being a supportive friend is huge for Abby right now," Eva reminded her. "If she opens up again, you could suggest counseling or other resources?"

Claire nodded. "Hopefully we're wrong. But, if we're not, I'll be here for her."

"I will too. She's always welcome at the cafe. You could bring her in sometime," Eva

offered. She expected Abby to turn down any invitation to come to the cafe, but she always held out hope.

Claire leaned against her and let Daisy go on the bed. "I think that's enough darkness for one night."

Eva agreed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ruin the mood."

Claire shook her head. "You didn't. I asked and you answered. You never have to apologize for telling me the truth."

Eva pulled her in closer. "I'm so glad to have you." She kissed her gently.

"Me too," Claire murmured.

Then they settled down into the blankets, cuddling close together. Daisy curled up at the foot of the bed and quickly fell asleep. Eva reached over and clicked off the bedside lamp, then settled back into the warmth and comfort of the bed. Claire's body felt so perfect against her, so warm and solid. Eva was more grateful than she could express for Claire's presence in her life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next morning Eva hummed along to the radio as she restocked the pastry case, preparing for the influx of customers that would soon be stopping in. After a great night with Claire she was happy, energized, and ready for the day.

The cheery ringing of bell over the front door signaled the first customer had arrived. "Good morning, welcome in!" Eva called over her shoulder, expecting to see one of their regulars.

Instead, she froze in shock as she looked up to see Liz standing there awkwardly. She'd never hoped to see her ex again, especially not in the cafe.

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"Liz," Eva said flatly, not even attempting a smile. She'd always been civil to her, but she had no intention of welcoming her back.

"Hi Eva," Liz said, not meeting her eyes.

"I was hoping we could talk for a few minutes, if you have the time."

Eva slowly set down the tray of muffins in her hands, pulse racing. "Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, please," Liz replied gratefully.

Eva got her the cup, a little sweet from a splash of maple syrup with oat milk. She hoped someday soon she wouldn't remember her ex's coffee order so easily. "We can talk over here," Eva said, leading Liz over to a small table near the door.

Liz followed her over, looking nervous. "Thanks for the coffee. I really appreciate it."

"I can only spare a few minutes," Eva said curtly.

"Of course, of course," Liz assured her. "I won't take up too much of your time."

"Alright Liz," she said as evenly as she could manage. "What did you want to talk about?"

Liz sat down hesitantly across from Eva. "First, I just want to say I'm so sorry for ambushing you at work. I know me being here is probably really uncomfortable."

Eva remained silent, arms crossed. She refused to make this easy on her ex who had caused so much pain.

Liz took a shaky breath. "The truth is...I came here to properly apologize to you, Eva. What I did was absolutely inexcusable."

That caught Eva off guard. She had expected more excuses or accusations. Instead, Liz plowed ahead.

"I should have talked to you. I shouldn't have cheated on you. And I'm so, so sorry that I did. I didn't even tell you the full story. It was more than one woman. And I'm so embarrassed and ashamed that I did that."

"Liz, what do you want me to say? I accept your apology? We'll get back together?" Eva snapped, trying to keep her composure. "Because that's not going to happen."

"Of course not," Liz said.

"I know I can never undo the damage and hurt from my lies and betrayal. But I need you to know I fully take responsibility for my horrible choices. You did nothing to deserve that."

Liz's voice cracked slightly with emotion. "I'm just so deeply sorry, Eva. And so thankful that it seems you've found real happiness now. This cafe, Michael--"

"The woman I'm seeing," Eva added on for her, letting her clearly know that she was moving on. She sat very still, arms still crossed as she processed Liz's unexpected apology. The sincere remorse in her voice had caught Eva off guard.

"I appreciate you saying all of that," Eva finally replied slowly. "It doesn't erase the pain you caused, but it means a lot that you fully owned your actions."

Liz nodded, looking down at her hands. "I know nothing can undo the damage. I just hope someday you can forgive me, even if it takes time. I've done a lot of reflecting, and I know now that I was completely in the wrong with how I acted. The cheating, the lies - those were because of my own issues, not anything you did. The breakup was necessary, but only because I made such poor choices and destroyed our trust. You deserved so much better all along."

Liz was right, she did. And now she saw that. "I may forgive you, in time, but I don't want to make amends. I don't want you back, even as a friend."

"I understand," Liz said quietly. "And that's totally fair. I have no right to be in your life, after what I did. And I hope that, despite the fact that we didn't work as a couple, you find a great love. You deserve nothing less."

"Thank you, Liz," Eva said softly. Her anger had abated, replaced with a quiet calm.

"I'll let you get back to work now," Liz said.

Eva stood. Liz gave her an awkward hug, which Eva allowed, as the last one they'd ever share. As soon as Liz was gone Eva went into the back and sat down well away from where any customers could see her.

Michael emerged from the kitchen. "Hey, I thought I heard voices-" He halted when he saw Eva's expression. "Eva, what's wrong?"

"Liz was just here," Eva managed to squeak out. "She came to apologize for everything. I don't know how to feel."

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry." Michael hurried over and sat down beside her, taking her hand in his.

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Eva nodded. Her chin trembled. "It was good, honestly. I've wanted to hear her say those things for so long. But I'm also just in shock. I never expected to see her again, let alone have her apologize."

Michael gently wrapped an arm around her. "You'll have time to process everything. It's a lot. And you have me."

"I do," Eva said. She squeezed his hand tightly. Tears tracked down her cheeks.

"Oh sweetie..." Michael rushed over and pulled Eva into a hug as she finally let the tears fall. He gently stroked her hair.

"I think you need some time after that," he said. "Take the rest of the day for yourself, I can handle things here."

Eva nodded gratefully into his shoulder, too overwhelmed to protest. After a few more minutes composing herself, she grabbed her purse and keys.

Michael gave her hand a squeeze. "Call me if you need anything. Take care of yourself today."

Eva wasn't thinking clearly when she got in her car. She just started driving, emotions swirling wildly. Somehow she ended up at Claire's house, her heart knowing where it needed to be even if Claire wasn't home. Eva parked haphazardly in the driveway, not even noticing if Claire's car was there. She rushed to the front door, knocking insistently even though no reply came. Resting her forehead against the solid wood, Eva choked back a sob. She needed Claire right now.

Eva ended up among the sprawling flower beds of Claire's garden. She found a stone bench set back under a massive tree and nearly collapsed onto it. Closing her burning eyes, Eva breathed deeply, willing her hammering heart to slow. The fresh floral air filled her lungs.

Surrounded by the quiet haven Claire had created, Eva slowly felt the tension begin seeping out of her bones. She focused on the rhythmic songs of birds nesting above, letting her anxious mind rest for a precious few minutes. Eva gently ran her fingers over the velvety petals of a nearby hydrangea.

Somewhere nearby, wind chimes echoed in the breeze, a delicate soundtrack mingling with the birds' songs. Eva closed her eyes and just listened, feeling her inner turmoil quieting as she waited for Claire to find her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Arms laden with grocery bags, Claire stopped short on her way to the front door as she spotted Eva on the bench in her garden.

"Eva?" she asked, hurrying over.

"Claire," Eva breathed, jumping to her feet.

She looked like a wreck. Claire immediately set the bags down and gathered Eva into her arms. "What happened?"

"Liz came by the cafe this morning," Eva said into Claire's shoulder. "She apologized for everything. It was exactly what I've been wanting to hear from her but seeing her hurt so much. Michael is taking over today. I needed time to breathe. So I came here, to see you."

Claire nodded in understanding. "Let's go inside. I'll make us some tea." Curled up together on the plush sofa a few minutes later, Claire handed Eva a steaming mug of chamomile tea. "Drink this. It'll help."

Eva sighed heavily. "I'm still processing everything. Seeing Liz always rattles me. We didn't break up well, of course, and there are years of pain to deal with. The hurt, the anger. Part of me is glad that she apologized. But also, I kind of wish that I had never seen her again. She wants forgiveness but that's not something I'm going to jump into, and if it ever does come it's not something I'm going to call her up to tell her. Never seeing or speaking to her again would be just fine by me."

Claire rubbed gentle circles between Eva's shoulders. "Just take your time. I'm right here listening."

"I wanted to yell at her but, in the end, I just felt overwhelmed by everything," Eva admitted. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Does that make me weak?"

Claire quickly shook her head. "Of course not. You're so strong. Let yourself feel whatever you feel."

"I've missed out on so much time and energy because of her. I've had to rebuild my life, my trust. All while she goes on living. It's not fair." Eva's voice cracked with emotion.

"You're right. It's not," Claire murmured. "You deserve so much better than how you've been treated. You've already come so far. Remember that."

Eva nodded slowly. She took another deep, cleansing breath. Then she said, "I just want to focus on my life now. With the cafe, with Michael, and now with you."

When the mugs were empty, Claire took Eva's hands in hers. "How about a movie? I

think a bit of distraction might be a good idea."

"A movie sounds perfect," Eva agreed.

"I love The Princess Bride," Claire said. "Are you up for a little Dread Pirate Roberts?"

Eva laughed through her tears. "I will always be up for some of that. I don't love the kid talking parts, but the rest of it? Pirates, romance, magic? That's perfect. It's a little early for lunch maybe, but I could order us some delivery?"

"Chinese food and a movie, the perfect cure," Claire agreed.

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"It's a plan then." Eva got the phone.

They sat side by side on the sofa, curled together under a cozy throw.

"Thank you for everything," Eva said as she ordered them some food and sent Michael a text to let him know where she had ended up. "I'm lucky to have you."

Claire held her close. "No, I'm the lucky one." She reached up and gently brushed a stray tear from Eva's cheek with the pad of her thumb. "No matter what happens or how overwhelmed you feel, I'm right here by your side."

Managing a watery yet grateful smile, Eva said softly, "Thank you. For today, and every day."

Claire placed a soft kiss on the corner of her mouth. "No need to thank me. You mean everything to me."

She loved the smile Eva gave her.

"Now let's enjoy this movie," Claire said, returning her smile.

"And some Chinese food," Eva reminded her, glad for the lighthearted turn the morning had taken.

"That too," Claire agreed, pulling Eva against her.

Chapter Thirty

Eva woke up with sunlight against her face, birds right outside the window, and a soft gray and white cat against her throat.

"Daisy," she croaked.

The cat gave her a sleepy look and purred louder. Daisy gave her a slow blink and began to knead against her.

Eva sighed. She snuggled in against the cat and closed her eyes. Part of her knew she could get used to this. Movie nights with Claire, waking up with Claire's arms around her. Even having Daisy trying to strangle her during the night. She felt content and loved. Nothing was hard with Claire. Even in the early days of her relationship with Liz, things had been uncomfortable at times.

Looking back, there were early warning signs she brushed off. Liz hiding her phone or getting upset if Eva picked it up just to check the weather before they went out. Things she should have known were red flags but had ignored. She didn't want to think about her ex. She wanted to have a relationship full of peace and comfort. Eva rolled over and reached out, but the bed was empty.

"Claire?" she called out, hoping for a response.

There was nothing.

"Come on, Daisy. Let's find her."

The cat stretched luxuriously. Then she hopped down and padded into the living room. Claire wasn't in there. The bathroom was also empty. Eva walked to the kitchen and, looking outside, spotted Claire sitting in the garden, in her pajamas, painting.

Eva smiled. She pulled on some clothes and stepped outside.

"Hey, you," Claire said, not turning her head. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, now that I'm with you," Eva replied.

"Movie night helped a lot, didn't it?" Claire asked looking up from her painting.

"So much," Eva admitted. She stepped closer and watched Claire work. "So this is what a day with you is like, huh? Movies, Chinese food, and art? I could get used to this."

Claire smiled up at her. "Presumably there would also be trips to the cafe, walks around town, maybe getting Daisy some more toys."

"Oh, we have to," Eva agreed. "I saw the cutest cat tent on Instagram. I'll send you the link."

Claire's expression softened. "You're good for her. For me."

Eva smiled and blushed a little. "Right back at you. You're exactly what I've been needing all these years. Someone who is kind, loving, and has their shit together. And you're so beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you," Claire replied. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I could honestly paint you all day."

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Eva shook her head. "You don't have to lie to me, I'm not that good looking. I'm too tall and my nose is crooked."

Claire got up and put her arms around her. "You're absolutely beautiful. Every part of you. Your hair, your eyes, your nose."

Eva laughed. "My nose is crooked and weird."

"No, it's perfect," Claire insisted. "Just like the rest of you."

"And what about the other parts?" Eva teased her as Claire took her into her arms.

"All of you is perfect," Claire insisted, kissing her gently.

"I could get used to being perfect," Eva replied with a smile.

"It's all true, even if you can't believe it yet," Claire said. She kissed her again, then stepped back and picked up her paintbrush. "I'm going to keep working. Will you stay with me?"

"I'd love to," Eva said, taking a seat nearby and opening her phone. Michael had texted that he would take care of the cafe and she should enjoy her day with Claire. She planned to do just that. "Michael is covering the cafe this morning, but I'll go in a little later. He's so good to me."

Claire smiled and continued painting. "He is. I'm so glad you have someone like him in your life."

Eva nodded. "Me too. It was rough, coming out, dealing with Liz. He was always there for me," Eva said, smiling. She found a soft patch in the garden and sat back, letting the sun wash over her as Claire painted.

They stayed like that for a while, until Claire was happy with her work. Then, Claire packed her things up and joined Eva in the warm spot amongst the flowers.

"Hey," Eva said, putting her arm around her.

"Hey yourself," Claire said.

Eva leaned against her, wishing they could stay like that all day.

"Hey?"

She turned, surprised to see Abby at the fence.

"Oh, good morning Abby!" Claire called to her. "This is a nice surprise. What brings you by?"

Abby gave a small smile. "Good morning, Claire, Eva. I hope I'm not intruding. I just ran out of butter and wanted to see if you had any you could spare."

Claire stood and went to the small wooden garden fence, opening it for Abby. "Of course. Come on in."

Eva got up as well. "How are you?"

"Fine," Abby said with a little shrug. "I am sorry to interrupt. You two looked really happy and peaceful in the garden."

Eva didn't have the heart to tell her that she had interrupted them. "It's completely fine." Claire led them inside into the kitchen where Daisy immediately started seeking attention. Eva picked her up, holding her close and scratching her under her chin as Claire got Abby a stick of butter.

"Here you go," she said, handing it over.

"Thank you," Abby said, taking it and clutching it to her chest.

Eva frowned. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," Abby said again. She was staring down at her feet.

Eva didn't believe her.

"You can talk to us, you know," Claire said. "Anything you tell us will be in confidence."

Abby glanced over at her. "Even from Peter?"

Eva snorted. "Especially from Peter."

That got a little smile out of Abby. She looked between them. "He's been...controlling lately. More so than usual. He's not awake yet, or else he wouldn't be happy that I was over here. He's been accusing me of things, things I'd never do. But he doesn't believe me," her voice broke slightly. Abby lifted her head, eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I just feel so trapped," she confessed at last. "But maybe it's my fault for upsetting him..."

"No, Abby. This isn't your fault," Eva said firmly.

"Peter's behavior is on him alone," Claire added. "You've done nothing to deserve this treatment."

Abby looked uncertain, as if struggling to believe she wasn't to blame. Eva's heart ached.

"No one should ever make you feel controlled or scared in a relationship," Eva continued, holding Abby's gaze. "You deserve mutual love and respect."

Abby's shoulders shook. "I just don't know what to do. It's like I'll never be able to make him happy or meet his expectations." She sobbed and Claire quickly pulled her into a hug.

When Abby's tears eventually subsided, Claire kept an arm around her shoulders. "It's going to be okay," she soothed. "We'll help you find the resources and support you need."

Eva nodded encouragingly. "You're not alone. We're right by your side whenever you need us."

Taking a few deep, shaky breaths, Abby dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. "I'm sorry for getting so emotional," she said quietly. "I've just been holding all this in for so long."

Eva shook her head. "Seriously no need to apologize. It's okay."

"We're glad you opened up to us," Claire added.

"Is there anything we can do to help right now?" Eva asked gently.

Abby was silent for a moment, thinking. "I should probably start looking for a counselor, right?" she finally said. "To help make sense of my feelings?"

"That's a great first step," Claire said encouragingly. "My sister Julia sees someone wonderful - I can get you her details."

Eva chimed in, "And if you ever just need somewhere peaceful to take a break, you're always welcome at the cafe."

She glanced anxiously at the clock. "I should get back before Peter wakes up. But thank you again for everything. Both of you." She hugged them both.

They stood in the doorway and watched her walk away.

"I wish we could do more," Eva said. She and Abby had never been all that close, but she still cared about her.

"I know, but we can't," Claire replied softly, wrapping an arm around her waist. "She

has to leave Peter on her own terms."

Eva nodded. She knew Claire was right, but it was hard not to go next door and yell at Peter for every horrible thing he'd ever done, not just to her, or to Michael, but also now to Claire and Abby.

"I should probably get ready to go to the cafe," Eva said with a sigh. For once she wasn't looking forward to being at the place she loved. She would have rather stayed with Claire for the rest of the day.

Claire leaned over and kissed her cheek, making Eva blush. "Well, I could come and spend the day at the cafe with you and Michael. I could bring my sketchbook and make a day of it."

Eva smiled and reached over, squeezing her hand. "That would be amazing."

"Then it's settled," Claire said, smiling.

"You're amazing, did you know that?" Eva asked her.

"You're pretty incredible too," Claire told her. "Let's get ready."

Chapter Thirty-One

Michael smiled at them both as they came into the cafe, hands locked together. They kissed quickly then Claire went to a table by the window and took out her pencils. She looked up as Michael brought her an iced coffee and a scone.

"From a secret admirer, also known as my boss," he teased. "But seriously, what are you two doing here? I thought you'd be wrapped up in each other doing something fun."

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"This is fun," she said, grinning at him. She looked past him to see Eva smiling as she helped a child pick out a cupcake. "She loves this place."

Michael looked too. "Yes, she does. And, I'm pretty sure you're loving it too. It's good to see her happy. I don't know how much she's told you about Liz, but that woman broke her in so many ways and so many times. I haven't seen her smile like she does with you in a very long time. You're good for her."

Claire looked away, embarrassed. She'd had no idea she'd had such an impact on Eva. "Thank you."

Michael squeezed her shoulder. "You're welcome. Have fun drawing."

Claire nodded, but her mind was on Eva. Was it really true? Was she really helping her that much?

Her mind raced as she sketched and sipped her drink. Eva had changed her life in ways she'd never expected. She'd brought color and light back into her life. She'd made her feel alive in a way that had been missing since David's death.

She looked up at Eva, who had just handed over a muffin. There was a soft smile on her face. Claire loved seeing her smile. Maybe it wasn't the best timing, with both of them just recently out of serious relationships, but it felt right. She couldn't stop the words from forming in her mind. She was falling for Eva. It didn't make sense and maybe it was too fast, but she knew how she felt. She was falling in love with her.

Eva looked up and caught her staring. She gave a quick wave. Claire blew her a kiss.

A few moments later she was at Claire's table. "How do you feel about pizza and a movie at my place tonight with Michael? You could bring Daisy too, of course."

Claire was absolutely tempted, but she wanted to offer an alternative. "What if we did it at my place instead? It's right down the street. My couch is bigger."

"So is your bed," Eva replied with a grin.

"There is that too." Claire laughed.

Eva hesitated though. "You sure it would be okay? We're not trying to crash in your living room. Michael offered movie and pizza tonight and said we should invite you. I would love to have you there, either at my place or yours."

Claire nodded. "I'm very sure. I like having you in my house. I really liked waking up this morning and having you there. You and Daisy looked adorable together. I'm glad she likes you too."

Eva laughed and blushed a little. "Well, that's good to know. And I liked waking up with her too."

"How about seven at my place?" Claire asked, hoping she hadn't pushed too hard.

"Perfect," Eva said. She squeezed Claire's shoulder. "I have to get back to work. Want to invite Julia? We could make a whole thing of it."

Claire laughed. "You're amazing. You know that right? You want to bring my sister over. To spend time with my family."

Eva looked confused. "Of course I do. She's your sister. She seems like a really nice person. I want us all to be close."

Claire was sure Eva was crazy, but she was also absolutely wonderful. "See you tonight."

"Can't wait," Eva said, giving her a quick kiss on her cheek.

Neither could Claire. She looked forward to a fun evening with three of her favorite people. She took out her phone and quickly texted Julia.

Movie and pizza tonight at my place? Eva and Michael will be there. 7 pm.

The response came back almost instantly.

Absolutely! Can't wait.

"Well, that's that," Claire said, grinning. She went back to sketching, excited for the night ahead. Maybe someday soon they could even make this a regular thing, something that Abby could be invited to as well. That may have just been wishful thinking, right now, but Claire was hopeful.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Working together Eva and Michael managed to close the cafe right on time. Michael carried a tray of brownies as they walked down the street toward Claire's house. She was looking forward to tonight. To getting to spend more time with Claire, but also getting to bring their family together. Liz had never wanted to do things with Michael and she'd barely introduced Eva to her family.

Claire was completely different. She could see building a future with her.

"So, are you going to marry her or what?" Michael asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Eva rolled her eyes, but she couldn't help smiling at his teasing. "You know I'm not going to move that fast."

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Michael laughed. "I wouldn't blame you if you were thinking about it. But you go at the pace you like."

Eva smiled. "You're right. I will. She's amazing."

"Yeah, yeah, you're totally in love," Michael teased.

"Maybe I am," Eva replied.

"Then you should do something about it," Michael said.

Eva nodded. "Maybe I will."

Michael put his free arm around her shoulders. "I'm happy for you. Really."

Eva grinned. "Thanks. I'm happy for me too."

When they arrived at Claire's house, Julia was already there. The four of them hugged and headed inside. Daisy was excited, jumping around and wagging her tail.

"Pizza and movies!" Claire said happily, looking between them.

Eva couldn't stop grinning. "Sounds perfect."

Julia held up her bag of DVDs. "I brought some options. What are we feeling? Rom com, action, comedy, horror..."

"Rom com sounds fun," Eva offered, smiling at Claire.

"Rom com it is," Michael said, laughing.

They settled in on the couch, eating pizza and popcorn, and watching a romantic comedy.

Eva leaned against Claire and looked at their little group. Everyone was comfortable together, just as it should be. She could see doing this again. Spending nights together, being a family. She hoped Claire was thinking the same.

"This was the best night," Michael said as he got ready to go.

Julia laughed. "It was definitely a lot of fun."

Claire nodded. "Let's try and do it again."

Eva smiled. "Yes, let's. Soon."

Julia left first. Michael lingered in the doorway. "Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

"You are such a dork," Eva said, hugging him.

"But you love me," he teased.

"I do," Eva replied, laughing. "And, I'll see you tomorrow."

He left, waving over his shoulder.

Eva hesitated at the door. She wanted to spend another night with Claire, but didn't

want to assume.

"Want to stay?" Claire asked. "We could go cuddle with Daisy in bed."

"That would be amazing," Eva said.

Daisy was more than happy to see them and the three of them curled up together. Daisy fell asleep in between them.

"Tonight was perfect," Eva whispered.

"I couldn't agree more," Claire replied.

Eva leaned over and kissed her softly, not wanting to wake Daisy. "I'm falling in love with you," she whispered, her lips brushing Claire's.

"Me too," Claire whispered.

Daisy meowed in her sleep, interrupting their moment. They both laughed.

"Goodnight," Eva said, smiling.

"Goodnight," Claire replied, leaning over and kissing her again.

Daisy shifted in between them, making Eva laugh. "Looks like we have an adorable chaperone," she teased.

Claire laughed too. "I love her. She's a good girl."

Eva stroked her soft fur. "That she is. I'm so happy she's found a good home. Even if we have a chaperone."

"Well, at least we can kiss, even with her in between us," Claire said. She leaned over and kissed Eva's cheek.

"That's true," Eva agreed, blushing. "Thank you for inviting everyone over tonight. I had so much fun. It was exactly what I needed."

"Me too," Claire replied.

"I hope it's not too much," Eva began, but she didn't get a chance to finish.

"Not at all," Claire assured her. "It was lovely. And it was nice spending time with you and Michael together. Your little family."

"Our little family," Eva said quietly. She wanted to believe it could be true.

"Our little family," Claire echoed, smiling.

"I can't wait for us to have more moments like this," Eva confessed. "Even if it's not a lot right now, we'll take the time together."

"We will," Claire agreed. "It'll be worth it."

"I hope so," Eva said.

"I know so," Claire replied. "It's already been worth it."

Eva smiled, her heart feeling full.

Claire snuggled closer, holding her tight. "You're an amazing person, Eva."

Eva kissed her cheek. "You're the amazing one, Claire. I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"You're just being you," Claire whispered.

Eva smiled and kissed her again. "And, you're being you."

Daisy shifted, her paws moving in her sleep. She stretched her legs out.

"She's such a sweet cat," Claire whispered. "I'm glad I have her."

"And I'm glad she's here," Eva added. "Even if we are being chaperoned."

Claire laughed. "It's okay. We can do this. We can find the time and build a life together."

Eva grinned. "That's the best thing I've heard in a long time."

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"I mean it," Claire told her.

Eva nodded. "Me too."

Claire leaned over and kissed her cheek, smiling. "I can't wait."

"Me neither," Eva replied.

They both settled down, Daisy sleeping softly in between them.

"Night night," Eva said softly.

"Goodnight," Claire replied.

It didn't take long for them to fall asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Claire awoke feeling like there was a weight pressed down on her chest. As consciousness slowly filtered in, she remembered why - today marked six months since losing David. Half a year since her husband's sudden passing.

Her chest felt tight. Tears threatened to spill over.

She reached out, hoping to feel Eva next to her, but she was alone.

"Eva?" she called out, her voice shaking.

Eva appeared in the doorway, concern written across her face. "You're awake. Good morning, my love."

Claire held her arms open, silently pleading with her.

Eva hurried over and got into bed with her, wrapping her arms around Claire and holding her tight.

"Shhh, it's okay," she soothed, gently stroking her hair.

"Today is the six month anniversary," Claire said, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, my love," Eva said softly. "I'm sorry. What can I do to help?"

Claire shook her head. "Just hold me. I need to cry."

Eva tightened her arms around her, keeping her close.

"I miss him," Claire sobbed.

"I know," Eva said, still soothing her.

"I feel so guilty," Claire admitted.

"Why do you feel guilty?" Eva asked, stroking her hair.

"It's been six months and I've started to fall in love with someone new. What does that say about me?" Claire asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"It says you're human," Eva replied.

Claire looked at her, tears in her eyes. "You really think that?"

"I do," Eva said. "We're supposed to find love. That's the whole point of life. We find love and we share it with others. You're not being disloyal by moving on. It doesn't change how you felt about David. Or how you still feel."

"What if it does?" Claire asked, tears still streaming down her face.

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Eva wiped the tears from her cheeks, her touch gentle. "It doesn't. Trust me."

"How can you be sure?" Claire asked.

"Because that's not how love works," Eva assured her.

Her phone buzzed. Claire pulled away long enough to glance at the screen. "Julia checking in on me."

Eva rubbed her back.

"You should answer her," she said, squeezing her hand.

Claire picked up her phone and hit the call button. "Hey sis," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"How are you doing?" Julia asked.

"Today's the day," Claire whispered, fighting back tears.

"I'll be over in a hour," Julia said.

Claire nodded. "Sounds good."

Eva wrapped her arms around her, resting her chin on her shoulder.

"I love you," Julia said.

"Love you too," Claire said, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Eva squeezed her hand.

"I'll see you soon," Julia said.

"Okay," Claire replied. She hung up and leaned into Eva, letting her hold her close.

"You're not alone," Eva reminded her.

"I know," Claire said, sighing. "Thank you for staying."

Eva smiled. "Of course. I'm not going anywhere."

"I appreciate that," Claire said, wiping away her tears.

Eva cupped her face in her hands and kissed her forehead. "I'm here for you, whatever you need."

Claire sighed. "I think I need a shower."

"You do," Eva agreed, making Claire chuckle. "I'll be right here when you're done."

"What about the cafe?" Claire asked. Eva had already been away from the cafe a lot because of her.

Eva shrugged. "Michael can handle it. But I'll go in tomorrow for sure. Would you like to do anything together today or would you prefer to spend the day with just Julia?"

"I'd like to spend some time with you and my sister," Claire replied after a moment.

"I'll stay then," Eva promised.

"Thank you." Claire gave her a gentle hug.

Eva squeezed her tightly. "Of course."

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Claire felt a little better. She could do this. She had her sister and she had Eva. They would help her through it.

Eva got up and took her hand. "If you're feeling up to it later, we could go to a gallery. The three of us. And get food after."

Claire nodded. "Sure. I'd like that."

"I'm proud of you," Eva told her.

"Why are you proud of me?" Claire asked, confused.

"Because you're going through a rough time and you're still getting up every day and taking care of yourself. It's amazing," Eva explained.

Claire felt tears welling up in her eyes.

"No, no, no," Eva said. She leaned forward and wiped them away. "Don't cry. Please don't cry. Not because of me."

Claire laughed, but the tears continued to fall. "I'm trying, Eva. I really am."

Eva held her tight. "I know, my love. I know."

Claire buried her face in her shoulder.

"You're allowed to feel sad," Eva told her.

"But I've been sad for so long," Claire whispered.

"And you'll probably feel sad again, but that's okay. You can't always be happy," Eva replied.

Claire nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Do you want me to get you anything?" Eva asked.

Claire shook her head. "Just stay with me."

Eva kissed the top of her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you," Claire said, her voice breaking.

"Of course, my love. I'm here for you," Eva promised.

Claire clung to her, crying harder.

Eva held her tightly, letting her cry it out.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Claire whispered.

Eva smiled. "Well, that's something we'll never have to find out."

Claire sniffled. "Promise?"

Eva kissed her cheek. "I promise. Now, go get your shower. Julia will be here soon."

"Right," Claire said.

Eva hugged her one last time.

Claire headed into the bathroom and turned the water on. She stepped into the shower and let the warm water wash over her.

It was comforting. She closed her eyes and let herself relax.

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The knock at the front door broke her concentration. She finished up and dried off, quickly getting dressed. She came to the living room and found Julia and Claire quietly talking over coffee.

"Hey," Julia said.

Claire ran to her, hugging her tight.

"You doing okay?" Julia asked, holding her.

"No," Claire said, crying.

"It's okay. You're allowed to feel this way," Julia reminded her.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Come sit down and have some coffee," Julia offered.

Claire sat down and sipped her coffee. She breathed deeply, letting herself miss David while she was surrounded by people who loved her.

Hours later Eva pulled up to the art gallery with Claire beside her and Julia in the back seat. She'd wanted this to be a date, something special she could show Claire, but Julia was good company too and Eva was quickly warming up to her.

"This place is cool," Julia said as they entered the building.

"I like it," Claire agreed.

"This is the first time you've been here, isn't it?" Eva asked her.

Claire nodded.

"Come on. Let's take a look," Eva said. She took Claire's hand, leading her towards the paintings. "I thought you might find some inspiration here." Eva placed a gentle hand on the small of her back.

Claire leaned into her, looking around the gallery.

"There are so many different artists here," she said, admiring the art. She looked around in awe. The space was accented with tall potted plants and filled with a myriad of artworks. Paintings in intricate frames lined the walls, while lifelike sculptures stood on pedestals throughout the rooms.

Eva nodded. "And there's a lot to explore."

They wandered around the gallery, checking out the different paintings and sculptures. Julia wandered off, staying in the gallery but giving them some privacy too.

"I love this one," Claire said, admiring a large painting.

Eva smiled. "So do I. It's beautiful."

"Yeah," Claire agreed.

She walked slowly, taking in the diversity of styles and subjects depicted. There were vivid impressionist florals, moody abstracts, sweeping landscapes and more. The

artists' creativity and passion shone through in each unique piece.

Inspired, Claire began mentally cataloguing techniques she saw used. Thick, expressive brushstrokes here, muted earthy palettes there. She made notes to try out new methods in her own work.

"This one is beautiful," Eva said, pointing to a painting of a woman holding a baby.

"It is," Claire agreed. It was done in watercolors, the layers of paint adding depth and texture to the image.

They stood quietly together, gazing at the artwork.

After a while, Eva took her hand, and they moved around the gallery together, quietly appreciating the different works. As they meandered through the gallery, one painting in particular caught Claire's eye - a quaint cottage nestled in a meadow of wildflowers swaying gently in an imagined breeze. It reminded her instantly of her new cherished home.

"Eva, come look at this one," Claire called to her companion. As Eva came over, Claire said, "It feels so reminiscent of my cottage, doesn't it? I adore it."

Eva smiled, slipping her arm around Claire's waist. "It really does capture that cozy feel. Makes me think of you in your garden."

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Claire leaned against her, enjoying her warmth. "This was a wonderful idea. Thank you for bringing me here."

Eva gave her a gentle squeeze. "You're welcome, my love. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Claire rested her head on Eva's shoulder. "When we were young, our parents would take me and Julia on camping trips each summer to a meadow filled with wildflowers," Claire began. "One year, they gave me a little art set with watercolors. I sat in the field for hours, mesmerized, trying to capture the beauty around me. I think I was eight." Claire smiled softly at the recollection. "I was so proud when I brought my little paintings back to them. My parents framed each one and hung them up. Their encouragement meant everything. Art became my passion from that point onward."

"I love that you found something you really care about so early on," Eva said, kissing her temple.

Claire nodded. "It's always been my outlet. A way to process emotions, capture beauty, and feel...understood, I suppose."

"And you do it beautifully too," Eva said, her voice quiet as they stood together admiring the works of artists Claire had always loved and admired.

Claire blushed at the praise, feeling vulnerable but safe opening up with Eva. They continued walking hand-in-hand through the gallery. Maybe someday Claire would be in a gallery like this. It was a nice dream.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here," she said, turning to Eva. "It's been so motivational seeing all of these incredible works up close."

"Of course, I had a feeling you'd appreciate it," Eva replied. She tenderly tucked a loose strand of hair behind Claire's ear.

They met Julia near the front of the gallery, in the gift shop where prints and magnets lined the walls.

"Ready to head out?" Eva asked.

"I think so," Claire said.

"Let's go," Julia replied.

Eva led the way outside. The three of them got into the car and drove off.

"That was nice," Julia said, looking back at them.

Claire nodded. "Very."

"Where would you ladies like to go now?" Eva asked, glancing over at Claire.

"Anywhere you want," Claire said.

"We could get pizza," Julia suggested.

Claire grinned at them both. "I could definitely grab a slice with you two."

Eva nodded. "Sounds like a great plan."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Eva had enjoyed her days off with Claire, but she needed to get back to the bakery. Poor Michael looked exhausted. He'd helped with the morning rush but she'd given him the rest of the day off, and tomorrow as well. She would manage. He deserved the rest.

Eva's mind wandered to her girlfriend, as her thoughts often did lately. She couldn't help it as she wondered what Claire was doing right then, if she was happy. If she was thinking about her too. She hummed happily as she baked. The sweet aroma of sugar and cinnamon filled the air, making the cafe smell like heaven. It was perfect. Just what she needed.

Since the gallery Eva had been looking around at the cafe's blank walls. She needed art in there. The walls needed life and the cafe could use a boost of color.

Eva made a mental note to ask Claire if she would be interested in displaying some of her paintings around the cafe. She could already envision Claire's unique style and perspective bringing so much to the walls.

Maybe they could start with just a few small works here and there, Eva considered. Though she had a feeling once Claire began adorning the space with her talent, Eva would only want more of her art around.

Smiling to herself, Eva pulled the freshly baked cinnamon rolls from the oven. She would have to bring up the idea to Claire soon. For now, she breathed in the comforting scents of the bakery and daydreamed about seeing Claire's creativity come to life on the walls.

Michael came into the cafe and Eva was about to tell him to turn right around and go home and rest but he laughed and held up his hands as if he already knew what she

was going to say. "I couldn't stay away," he said.

She rolled her eyes and smiled at him. "Hopefully you came for some coffee then, because it's not busy enough for me to have you back here too. Seriously you were supposed to rest. You've done so much for me lately."

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He grinned. "I would love some coffee. But I also just thought you'd enjoy the company. I miss hanging out with my best friend." He came behind the counter and started making himself a latte.

"I am glad that you're here. And I missed you too." She plated a cinnamon roll for him.

"These look so good," he said, eyeing the cinnamon roll.

"Thanks," she replied.

"How is everything going?" Michael asked.

"With the cafe or..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Either."

She chuckled. "The cafe is fine, as you know. You're here everyday. I think the walls need some art though. What do you think?"

"You know I'd paint this place in pride flags if I knew it wouldn't impact sales," he said with a shrug. "Bring on the color."

"You're not wrong," Eva agreed. "I think a more subdued approach might be better. But I was thinking about asking Claire if she would consider putting some of her art in the cafe. Maybe she'd want to display some paintings."

Michael grinned. "You want her art in the cafe? That's amazing! I bet she'd love that."

Eva smiled. "I hope so."

"Are you going to ask her tonight?"

"I don't know." Eva sighed. "I want to. I just need to figure out the right time."

Michael nodded. "You'll find the right moment."

Eva hoped he was right.

"What are you two talking about?" a voice asked, and Eva's heart raced.

She spun around and saw Claire standing there. She was smiling at her, looking relaxed and beautiful. Eva was suddenly nervous.

"Nothing," Eva said, her voice wavering.

Claire raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Then can I get a chai latte while you two continue talking about nothing?" she teased.

Michael chuckled, clearly enjoying her nervousness. "Eva wants to host your art in the cafe."

"Michael!" Eva chided him.

He shrugged. "What? You said you'd ask when it was a good time. There aren't any customers. Now is a good time. Plus this way I get to see her reaction too."

Eva sighed and turned back to Claire. "So...what do you think about that? We could

have it be your own gallery opening. Later on maybe I'll bring in other local artists. I'm just coming up with ideas really here, but I would like your art in the cafe, if you're open to that at all."

Claire was silent, staring at her with wide eyes.

Eva bit her lip. She was afraid she'd offended her somehow.

"You'd do that for me?" Claire asked finally.

Eva nodded.

"And you want me to display my art in the cafe?" Claire added, still sounding shocked.

"Yes, of course," Eva assured her.

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"Wow, I don't know what to say," Claire said. She took a deep breath. "I mean, yes, absolutely. Yes."

"Great," Eva said, smiling widely.

Claire laughed happily.

Michael clapped. "This is going to be amazing."

Eva was beaming.

"Can I have my latte now?" Claire asked.

"Sure thing, darling," Eva said, giving her a quick kiss.

Eva made the latte for her and handed it over.

"Thanks," Claire said. She took a sip.

"How's the chai?" Michael asked.

"It's perfect," Claire told him.

"That's good," he replied.

Eva pulled up the calender on her phone, her mind spinning. "How about two weeks from now? Give me time to do some advertising. It'll be a Saturday evening, we'll

offer small finger foods, tea, water, coffee, and hot chocolate. Michael, your quiches, they'll be great as minis." She looked up at Claire. "Is that enough time for you? I probably should check with you to make sure that you have pieces ready before we get too far into planning this thing."

Claire smiled at her. "Two weeks is fine."

"Perfect. I'll make sure the cafe is stocked," Michael said, getting excited.

"I can't wait," Claire said, looking at them both. "This is amazing, really. Both of you. Thank you."

"We're happy to do this," Eva assured her.

"Well, I'd better get back to the studio," Claire said. "I've got a new painting in progress and I can't wait to see where it goes."

"Okay. Enjoy yourself," Eva told her.

"I will. You too," Claire said, giving her a hug.

"See you later," Eva said, watching her leave.

"She's so cute," Michael commented.

Eva nodded.

"I think we need music," he said, turning on the speakers.

"I can't stop thinking about her," Eva said, leaning on the counter.

"I'm so happy for you," Michael said, patting her back.

Eva sighed.

"You guys are really cute together," he added.

"Thanks," she mumbled, feeling like a lovesick teenager. "I need to get back to work doing something here, not spending all my time thinking about her."

Michael chuckled. "You really are adorable with her though. Honestly. Even early days with Liz, you weren't as happy as I see you here with Claire. You two just seem really good for each other. I'm jealous. Very jealous. But also incredibly happy for you both."

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She hugged him tightly. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being here. For being my best friend. And my wingman."

He chuckled. "I'd do anything for you, and you know it. You're my family. Now let's get back to work before your head gets any bigger."

She laughed. They worked together, talking and laughing until it was time to close up. The afternoon had been slow, but Eva hadn't minded. It had allowed them to talk and reconnect. As they were finishing up with the last minute tasks before they could close up the cafe for the night the rain started coming down. Thunder shook the building, making them both laugh.

"I think we're good to head out now," he said.

"Yeah," Eva agreed. She grabbed her things and headed to the door.

"See you tomorrow," Michael said. "Drive safe in this storm. It came out of no where. We weren't even supposed to get any rain tonight."

"You too." They quickly hugged then headed in opposite directions.

As she walked out of the cafe, the rain began coming down harder. She was soaking wet by the time she got to her car. She didn't want to impose on Claire, but the idea of spending an evening at home alone in her apartment didn't interest her at all. Not

when her girlfriend was only a few minutes away.

She pulled out her phone as the rain pelted against her car. Would you like some company tonight?

I always want your company. Get over here.

Claire's text had been nearly instant, making Eva smile. On my way.

She drove carefully through the storm and pulled up beside Claire's car. From there it was a quick dash over to the front door.

"Hey," Claire said as she opened the door, pulling Eva inside. "You're soaked."

"It's raining out," Eva pointed out, smiling at her.

Claire kissed her. "I noticed that too. Here, let me get you a towel. Do you want something to change into?"

"I'd appreciate it," Eva replied. "My clothes are all wet."

Claire led her to the bedroom where she got a towel for her and a change of clothes, a comfortable tshirt and a pair of shorts. "Is it silly to like the idea of you in my clothes?"

"Not at all," Eva assured her. She took the towel and did the best she should with her hair and clothes as Claire left the room. When she was changed she put her wet things and the towel in the wash and headed into the studio where Claire stood in front of a large oil painting of boats tied to docks.

Eva recognized the setting instantly. "That's the view from the tree where I took you

for the meteor shower."

"I've found a lot of inspiration in this little town." Claire glanced at her.

Eva moved closer to her, wrapping her arms around her waist. "I really love the way you've captured the light. The reflections in the water are breathtaking. You are very talented."

"I'm glad you like it," Claire said, blushing.

Eva leaned in, pressing her lips against Claire's, kissing her slowly, taking her time. "Do you want take out? I'll order us some dinner."

Claire smiled at her. "Yes please. I'll just be a few more minutes in here."

"Take your time," Eva told her.

"I'll meet you in the living room?" Claire asked.

"Yeah."

Eva watched her for a few moments, smiling as she went back to painting.

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In the living room Eva sat down on the couch. She had her phone out and was browsing through a couple of menus, trying to decide what they should get when Claire joined her.

They settled on Thai and cuddled on the couch together as they waited for it to be delivered.

Thunder crashed outside, making them both jump. Eva held Claire a little closer, rubbing her arm.

"I'm a little afraid of thunderstorms," Claire admitted quietly.

Eva kissed her. "Me too."

"You are?" Claire asked, sounding surprised.

"I am," Eva confirmed. "I grew up hearing horror stories of tornados in the Midwest, so thunderstorms are a little frightening."

"Tornados are terrifying," Claire said, shuddering.

"They are," Eva agreed.

Claire got up and went to the window. "It's really starting to come down now."

Eva came over to join her, looking out at the storm.

Lightning flashed and a loud crack of thunder shook the building. Claire clung to Eva.

Eva wrapped her arms around her. "It's okay," she said, holding her tightly.

Seconds later the lights went out.

"Damn," Claire said.

Eva laughed. "Guess we lost power."

They lit candles and listened to the storm until dinner was delivered. They ate in the living room. The food was good, and the company even better.

Eva knew she could have easily gotten used to being with Claire at her house all the time. It felt natural, like she belonged there, even though they hadn't known each other for long.

"Are you staying over tonight?" Claire asked when they were done eating.

"If you'll have me," Eva replied.

"Of course," Claire said.

"Then yes, I'll stay."

"Good."

They curled up on the couch together as the storm continued outside.

Chapter Thirty-Five

On the morning of the art gallery showcase, Eva woke up buzzing with excitement hours before her alarm. There was too much nervous energy coursing through her to continue sleeping.

In the quiet pre-dawn hours, she busied herself with tidying up every corner of the bakery and rearranging displays to perfectly frame the space for Claire's artwork. She wanted the cozy cafe to feel like a professional gallery for Claire's big debut.

Michael arrived right before they opened for the day, looking tired but still smiling.

"How are you doing?" he asked her.

"Really good. You look exhausted."

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"I couldn't sleep. Too much going on," he said. "But it's going to be an amazing night."

"I'm glad you're excited," Eva told him.

He grinned. "Are you kidding me? I get to help you celebrate love. I'm ecstatic."

Eva blushed.

"Seriously though, Claire seems perfect for you."

"Thanks." Eva couldn't keep the smile off her face.

Around noon, Claire arrived lugging her chosen pieces. "Thank you again for doing this," Claire said as she came over to kiss Eva's cheek. She helped Claire carefully hang each painting, making sure each was perfect and exactly where Claire wanted it to be before they moved onto the next one.

By the time the afternoon was over, they had set everything up, and the space looked even better than Eva had imagined it would.

Claire stood in the center of the room and smiled. "This is going to be wonderful."

Eva took her hand and squeezed. "It really is. Nearly everyone in town is going to be here tonight. I'm so proud of you."

Claire's eyes shone. "Thank you."

The afternoon passed quickly, and soon enough it was time for the cafe to close and for the night to begin.

Within an hour, the bakery was packed with supportive locals praising Claire's art. Michael weaved through the crowd refilling glasses and passing around sweet treats.

When Lily arrived with baby Max, Eva waved to them, glad they had decided to come as well.

"Everything looks incredible," Lily said. "How did you pull this off?"

"It was mostly Claire," Eva said, nodding to her.

"Your paintings are beautiful," Lily said to Claire as she stepped closer. "I love the sketch you made of Max and me. I had it framed."

Claire grinned. "I'm glad. I'm so happy with how it turned out."

A young couple approached Claire next. Eva stayed close, in case anyone needed anything, but Claire seemed to be doing fine on her own. She was smiling and happy, talking with people as if she'd been doing gallery showings for years, and not having her first one tonight.

"Could you paint our wedding portrait? We're getting married in two months," the couple asked.

Eva beamed at her, happy to see Claire readily agree to the project.

"What about pet portraits?" A man asked her. Claire quickly agreed to that as well.

Eva stepped closer once Claire was alone again. "Looks like you're getting lots of

commissions."

Claire blushed. "Yeah. This is insane."

"You're amazing," Eva told her.

"Thank you. For believing in me and making this happen. I can't believe I have a showing, and it's selling my art," Claire said.

"This was all you," Eva reminded her. "I'm just your biggest fan."

"I love you," Claire whispered.

Eva's heart fluttered. She'd wanted to say those words first. She called Claire her love as a term of endearment, but saying those words made it even more real. "I love you too."

They shared a soft kiss, before Eva was called away to help a group that had just walked in.

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Eva waved to Julia as she snuck in. "Hey, I'm so glad you could make it," Eva told her as Julia joined her in a quiet corner.

"There was no way that I was missing this. How's she doing? There are so many people here. I'd be overwhelmed, but she's smiling."

"She's really good," Eva said.

Julia hugged her. "You two are adorable together."

Eva blushed. She loved having Julia's support. "Thank you. I mean that. You, Claire, and Michael are my family."

Julia gave her a big hug. "This is going to sound really rash, but I'm secretly hoping for a garden wedding. Late spring when Claire's garden is in full bloom. Don't tell her I told you. And please don't freak out on me either."

Eva's cheeks grew impossibly more red, but now that Julia had mentioned it, she couldn't get it out of her mind either. "I'd like that too," she quietly confessed.

Julia gave her hand a squeeze before going to join her sister.

Michael came up beside Eva. "We should do this more often. Not just galleries, but just have parties for the town here. We've made a ton of money and look how happy everyone is. We've got the space, let's have the people."

She nodded. "Yes...We should..."

"You seem distracted," Michael said with a snort.

"Julia is thinking about Claire and me getting married," Eva said as quietly as she could.

Michael whistled low in surprise. "You don't seem freaked out though."

That was the weird thing. She wasn't. "I'm not saying getting married tomorrow wouldn't leave me in a panic of trying to get ready, but I'm not freaking out. Not at all. If she asked, I'd say yes. In a heartbeat. I don't think she's planning on proposing though. I think Julia is getting a bit ahead of herself. It's still very, very early in our relationship. But, I'd be lying if I hadn't thought about what it would be like to live with her. To wake up in that cottage, to share coffee in the garden while she sketches, to spend nights wrapped around her." She sighed wistfully.

"To letting me have your apartment," he added on, making her laugh.

"Yes, that too." She wrapped her arm around him from the side, hugging him. "But not today."

"I'm teasing, mostly," he said, kissing her temple. "But I'm so happy you've found her. She's amazing. I hope this night goes well. Everyone seems to really like her art."

They weren't needed for the moment so Eva stayed by him, quietly observing everyone who had come to the showing. "It means a lot that you like her, you know. I know you weren't always a fan of Liz."

"You were too wrapped around her finger. I didn't have that problem. But yes, I like her. A lot. I wish she had a brother. Or a cousin. Or a hot single dad." He shrugged.

"I'll keep my eye out for you," Eva promised. She wanted to see him happy too. He

deserved to find someone wonderful, just like she had.

"I'd appreciate that." He smiled at her, his expression softening. "I love you. So much. You're the best."

"I love you too," Eva said.

As the night continued, the crowd began to thin out. Eva and Claire cleaned up and said their goodbyes as Michael closed up the cafe and Julia drove back home.

"Can I walk you back?" Eva asked when everything was put away.

"That sounds lovely," Claire replied.

They took the short walk slowly, enjoying the night and the gentle breeze.

"I'm so glad I stepped outside my comfort zone."

"You deserve to have your talent recognized," Eva replied, taking her hand.

Claire turned and embraced Eva tightly when they got to her front door. "Thank you for pushing me and being by my side," she whispered into her hair. "I couldn't have done this without you. Come inside with me?"

Eva smiled at her. "I would love to."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Claire loved having coffee in the morning in the garden, but it was made even better by having Eva there with her. The gallery had been an amazing success. Two paintings had sold and her email inbox had multiple commission requests. She couldn't wait to get started on some new pieces.

But first, coffee and a quiet morning in the garden with the woman she loved deeply. They sat together on the bench, Daisy nearby, blinking up a bird in the tree above her. "You're not going to get that bird, darling," she said. Daisy ignored her. Beside her Eva chuckled.

Their peace was disrupted by the angry slamming of a truck door nearby. Claire looked over to see Peter stomping around, throwing boxes haphazardly into the bed of his pickup. His face was twisted in a scowl.

Eva shot Claire a questioning look, keeping her voice low. "What's got him so upset this morning?"

"No idea, but let's just ignore it," Claire whispered back. "This is our time together."

Eva nodded, lacing her fingers through Claire's.

Claire tried to keep her focus on Eva as Peter noisily packed up his truck next door. But his angry energy was palpable even from a distance. "I feel bad for Abby having to deal with that," she said under her breath.

Eva nodded in agreement, rubbing her thumb over Claire's knuckles. "Hopefully he leaves quickly and she gets some peace."

Soon they heard Peter's truck roar to life and peel away down the street. Claire let out a soft sigh of relief.

The stillness that followed was short lived as Abby's back door creaked open. Claire gave Eva's hand a little squeeze before calling over, "Abby! Come join us for coffee?"

Abby crossed the yard looking visibly upset. "Actually, do you mind if I talk to you both for a minute?" she asked timidly.

"Of course, what's going on?" Eva asked gently. Claire moved over, giving Abby plenty of room on the bench as she joined them in the garden.

"Well, Peter left today...for good this time," Abby said slowly.

Claire reached out and put a comforting hand on her arm. "Oh Abby, I'm so sorry. Are you doing alright?"

Abby gave a little shrug. "Honestly, I'm more relieved than anything. Our relationship has been strained for a while, as I'm sure you know. Last night we had a big argument. I wanted to come to your gallery, Claire. I heard it was amazing though and I wish I could have been there. He said absolutely not. And then this morning, I just finally found the courage to stand up for myself," Abby continued, a note of pride entering her voice. "I told Peter I wouldn't tolerate his controlling behavior anymore. Demanded he treat me as an equal or leave."

"That must have been so hard," Claire said. "But you should feel proud for putting your foot down."

"You absolutely deserve better than him," Eva added.

"I thought I would feel more heartbroken," she admitted. "But the strongest emotion is relief, along with being a bit scared of what comes next. I haven't been on my own in a very long time."

Claire grasped her hand reassuringly. "It's totally normal to feel overwhelmed. But you have allies who are here for you." She gestured between herself and Eva.

"Absolutely," Eva chimed in. "We'll be by your side for whatever you need during this transition."

Abby offered a watery yet grateful smile. "Thank you both, truly. Just knowing I don't have to face this alone means so much."

Claire got Abby some coffee and the three of them sat together in the garden enjoying the quiet.

Eventually Abby sighed and said, "Well, I should probably get back home. Start the process of...packing up Peter's things." She paled slightly at the thought.

Claire and Eva exchanged a look. "Let us help with that," Claire offered gently. "It's too much to take on alone right now."

Abby nodded gratefully, her eyes glistening. "I would really appreciate that."

Together they walked next door to Abby's house and helped her get started on the next phase of her life.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Claire slowed her bike to a stop and gazed out at the ocean, taking in the familiar view she had come to love. The waves lapped gently against the cove's rocky shore as gulls cried overhead. This little seaside town had become her home in ways Claire had never expected she she first arrived heartbroken and in need of a fresh start a year ago. Now her heart overflowed with love and belonging.

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Arms encircled her from behind and Claire smiled, leaning back into Eva's embrace. "Can you believe it's been a year already?" Claire asked as Eva nuzzled her neck.

Eva laughed. "Best year of my life."

Claire turned to capture Eva's lips in a tender kiss. Nearby, Michael and Abby waved from the cafe. Abby had been helping out part time, and she was working out beautifully.

"We should get back to the cafe so that Michael can leave early. He's got a date, remember?" Eva said, kissing her neck.

Claire grinned, hopping off the bike and pulling Eva close.

"You're not distracting me, not today." Eva kissed her once more before taking her hand and pulling her toward the cafe.

"Michael," Claire said as they walked inside. "Eva and I can close tonight. Go ahead and get ready for your date. Have fun."

He beamed at them. "You guys are the best. You know that?"

Eva nodded. "I do. Have fun on your date. It's number five with this guy right?"

He blushed. "It is. So I'll see you all later then. Eva, I've got some of your mail that's still getting delivered to your old place. I'll bring it here tomorrow for you. And Abby?"

She looked up from where she was cleaning the espresso machine. "Michael?"

"Great job today with that lunch rush."

She smiled and ducked her head. "Thank you."

Eva went behind the counter, making herself some iced tea.

"I'm so proud of you, Abby. I know it hasn't been easy, but you've been doing great," Claire told her, giving her a hug.

Abby beamed at her. "I'm really, really happy."

"That's all that matters," Claire said.

Eva finished making her tea. "Okay, so Abby and I are closing tonight and you're going back to the house to paint right?"

Claire nodded, stepping back. "I've got that pug portrait to complete. I'll make us pasta for dinner."

"And I'll bring some fresh bread," Eva promised.

She smiled at Eva. "See you later, darling."

"See you soon," Eva promised.

They kissed once more and then Claire left to head back to their cottage, intent on getting some painting in before Eva came home and they spent the evening together.

The End