



Starting Over With the Sea Monster

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Description: I've been burned before and I've learned my lesson. So the only thing this small town sea monster is looking for is a good review, not a fated mate!

As a chef and I know all about how to handle the heat in the kitchen, even if it takes all eight tentacles to do it! The same doesn't apply to my love life. Once burned, twice shy. I'm steering clear.

When famous human food critic Olivia Zeston walks into my brand new restaurant, she turns the heat up instantly. So much so that she's in danger of melting my icy resolve. Even worse, as soon as we start talking I realize she's more to me than just another hurt and lonely soul in need of comfort. She's my fated mate. The only problem? I don't want a fated mate. I can't be tied to anyone for the rest of our lives. I've learned the hard way that having those sorts of expectations is a recipe for heartache.

But beneath the veneer of Olivia's cheerful confidence, there's a woman who just needs to be loved. Can I stop myself?

I swore I'd never go down this path again, but here I am falling head over tentacles. The draw to her is like a rip tide, pulling me under. But this city girl from the other side of the world will never settle for a small town sea monster. Just when I've decided to risk handing her my heart on a plate, I realize I might have bitten off more than I can chew?

Total Pages (Source): 71

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

ONE

Olivia

Why do I do this to myself?

As soon as I open the trashy article, I regret it.

Olivia and Justin on the rocks

Olivia Zeston and Justin Bakersfield are the ultimate celebrity match. Young, gorgeous, and so in love. Or so we thought. Lately, it looks like this celebrity couple could be in danger of a split. Justin has been spotted out and about with fellow Glowup Goals star, Rechelle Oaks and Olivia is nowhere to be seen. Rumor has it she's still in Australia on her Downunder Food Tour, but she hasn't posted a new vlog in a week.

Could the breakup have already happened?

As always, here at Celebrity Watch, we'll bring you all the latest gossip as soon as it happens.

I shouldn't read this stuff. It always upsets me, even though I know it's not true.

The only reason I haven't posted this week is because I'm supposed to be on vacation. In fact, Justin should be arriving to meet me at any moment. His flight got into Sydney five hours ago.

I open my messages again just to check I haven't missed one from him.

Still nothing.

Frowning, I decide the flight was probably delayed. Maybe he's decided to stay in Sydney overnight before picking up the rental car and driving down to Kraken Cove, the tiny coastal town in eastern Australia we decided was the perfect spot for a romantic getaway. Surely this is the perfect place to escape the constant stalking of paparazzi determined to take the next pic that sells for thousands. The perfect spot to reconnect.

Weird that he hasn't called though.

He probably won't be hungry if he makes it tonight. I've adjusted to local time, since I've been in Australia for a couple weeks now, filming content for my food vlog. I think I'll eat dinner while I wait to hear from him. There's a new local restaurant I've been meaning to check out. Seafood is their specialty, and Justin's never been the biggest fan.

Grabbing the keys for my room at the bed and breakfast, I slip on my sandals and make the short walk along the main street and down the hill to The Snapper.

The sun is just starting to set over the inlet and the sky is lit up in competing shades of orange and pink and blue. It's so pretty here. No city smog in sight. No pollution. The air here is as clean as anywhere I've ever traveled, and the landscape is just stunning.

I was expecting everything to feel a bit barren, to be honest. When I heard people talk about Australia, I heard them describe the red desert of the outback, not the subtle greenery of the coast.

The Snapper is surprisingly busy when I enter, considering how sleepy this town feels on a Tuesday night. Most of the tables are full and waitstaff move quickly and efficiently, taking orders and tending to everyone. I note the elegant, modern decor and the subtle music playing in the background. Classy. Unexpected, even after everything I heard about this place.

I mean, I've heard it's good. Good even by Sydney standards, and I've got to say, the Australian food scene is exciting and impressive. Everyone I've spoken to about my stay in Kraken Cove has mentioned the up-and-coming new chef, Noah Wilson, who recently re-opened The Snapper.

I guess I figured most of the talk was because he's a monster.

A kraken to be specific. A sea monster with tentacles instead of legs, that Noah apparently puts to great use in the kitchen.

Supernaturals—supes—have exploded in popular media recently. They've been out in society for years, but since world-famous actress Bella Owens started dating a werewolf, supes have been all the rage. I'll admit, I came here thinking it might be interesting to get a little look for myself.

A young woman with a friendly smile and brown hair tied back in a braid greets me. "Good evening. Welcome to The Snapper. Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm sorry, I don't." Maybe that was a mistake. I just assumed there would be a table free. The place only re-opened a few months back after all, but it seems I was wrong.

Just then, another server approaches the young waitress and whispers something in her ear.

Her eyes widen and she looks at me more closely. "Oh, ah, let me just check with the

kitchen. I'm sure we can find something."

I guess they know who I am, then. That's a shame. I was hoping to have a quiet dinner.

She dashes off and the other server gives me a smile and returns to his tables. When the young woman reappears, she looks flustered. "Right this way, ma'am. The chef has reserved a special table for you by the kitchen."

I smile at her white lie. I feel bad for her. I didn't mean to stress her out. Normally when I'm writing a review, I call ahead and give the establishment notice that I'm coming. I wasn't planning on writing this up, though. But if they're going to a special effort to look after me, I might have to. Especially if they're as good as I've heard.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

She leads me to a little table right beneath the open window to the kitchen. Heat lamps and flames draw my eye to where a young, handsome man with vibrant blue-green skin barks orders at several men and women in chef's whites. I don't get a good look at him, but I note sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular arms covered in tattoos. And of course I spot the eight tentacles in place of feet, several of which are currently being used to toss food over a hot stove or spray himself with a small bottle of water.

I catch a glimpse of a stern, square jawline and dark eyebrows creased above green eyes before he turns away. I hope I haven't just made his staff's day hell. From everything I've heard, Noah Wilson has a reputation for being a bit of a tyrant in the kitchen.

He's younger than I expected. About my age, though it's hard to tell exactly. I'm no expert on supes. He acts with the authority of someone who's been doing this all his life, though.

"Can I get you something to drink?" the young waitress asks as I sit.

"A glass of white wine, please. Whatever you would recommend."

My phone beeps.

She comes back a moment later, but I'm only half looking when she unscrews the bottle. I'm too busy staring down at the message I just got from Justin.

Justin: babe, not going to make it to Oz. So sorry. It must be late there. I'll call you in the morning

It can't be. I must be reading it wrong. But it doesn't matter how many times I reread it, there's only one way to interpret it. My boyfriend just let me know, on the day he was supposed to be arriving, by text, that he's not coming on our romantic holiday. The one we've been planning for months.

"On second thought, maybe just leave the bottle," I mumble to the waitress. I think I'm going to need it.

She asks for my order, and I haven't even looked at the menu. "Fish of the day, please," I say, taking a stab. Surely they have a fish of the day. I'm not even sure I'm hungry anymore.

She hesitates for a moment, and I think she's about to tell me they don't. But then she nods and trots off to the kitchen, leaving me to stew over what the hell is going on with Justin.

The gossip articles are wrong. Of course they are. There's probably some very reasonable—maybe horrible—reason why he can't make it. Maybe his mom got sick, or something came up with work. Maybe I'm the jerk here.

He will explain tomorrow when we talk.

I take a long gulp of my wine while I tell myself that over and over. Just don't freak out. Everything is OK. I will talk to him tomorrow.

Then something occurs to me. I flick on my phone again and check the time difference. What's he talking about? It's almost two a.m. back home. Why is he only messaging now and why hasn't he called?

Hitting call, I lift my phone to my ear. Then I pull it away again to stare in disbelief at the screen when it goes straight to voicemail. He sent that message fifteen minutes

ago! Has he already gone to sleep?

And what am I supposed to do for the next seven or eight hours until he wakes up and calls me back?

Oh, I really don't like this.

I glance up to find a man at a nearby table watching me. He leans to the guy next to him and whispers something. Soon they're all looking.

I should be used to this. It's not the first time it's happened. I can just imagine the paparazzo sneaking around outside the restaurant, hiding in the bushes or peering through the window to snap a picture.

My throat is tight. I take a sip of wine and end up coughing into my napkin when it goes down the wrong way.

More people are looking.

Do they know?

Can they tell what a pathetic life I'm actually living? Do they see on my face how lonely I've been for months—how humiliated I am? Did they read that article too?

I can hardly breathe. Stumbling out of my chair, I gaze around frantically for the restroom. I need a minute to collect myself. To calm down. Somewhere no one can see me.

TWO

Noah

“What the fuck did you say to her already to piss her off that badly?” I hiss at the new girl. I knew I should have put someone else on the floor tonight. We’ve been expecting Olivia Zeston at The Snapper since word got out she was in town. At least I’ve been hoping.

Now there she is, looking effortlessly stunning and also like she swallowed five flies in the glass of wine she’s currently sipping.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Fuck!

I need this. A review on Zest for Life could make or break me here. I know not everyone in Kraken Cove keeps up to date with the biggest food vlogger since Anthony Bourdain, but Sydneysiders do. And Sydneysiders are a cornerstone of my new business, since it's them and the Canberra wankers from the capital who make up the bulk of the tourists in this area. Don't even get me started on the Canberra wankers.

"N-nothing. I swear. She seemed fine when I seated her." New Girl is practically trembling, and I tell myself to cool it. The last thing I need is her running to her parents saying I bullied her on her first job. Then it'll get back to my mum, and she'll never let me hear the end of it. I only hired her as a favor to Mum. Her family are long term friends of ours, and I was trying to do the right thing by them. How was I to know she's clumsy as a fucking wombat wearing a softball glove?

Not exactly my first pick for front of house staff. Or kitchen staff. Maybe she'd be alright as the dish pig.

"Get back out there and find out what is wrong and fix it," I tell her, spraying my overheated skin with another burst of cold water. I have to be careful not to dry out in the heat of the kitchen. As a kraken, my skin is delicate.

"Yes, chef."

She scurries away and I turn back to my staff. "Billy, you're in charge. I'm going to make this order myself. I don't want to be disturbed unless the restaurant is actually

on fire, you got it?”

“Yes, chef.”

She wants fish of the day. Of course she bloody does. There’s no fish of the day on the menu. Self-entitled fucking celebrity. Thinks she can custom design her own meal.

I guess she can, because here I am, scrambling around like a dog making it for her.

I growl to myself as I stalk into the walk-in fridge and dig out the fennel and some oranges.

Fucking fish of the day.

Lucky for me, Jess came up this morning with a fresh catch and the most beautiful snapper I’ve ever seen sitting on a big tray of ice, just glistening like a bloody princess. I bought it, along with half her catch of prawns and leatherjacket, just because it looked so good. Figured it’d be my dinner if nothing else.

Olivia Zeston wants fish of the day at The Snapper? She’s going to get snapper, isn’t she? And she’s going to get the best damn snapper she’s ever eaten.

I’m reducing the orange juice in the pan when I become aware of New Girl standing behind me again. “What?” I don’t even turn around.

“Um... it’s just that she’s...gone?”

“What!?” Now I turn, forgetting the orange juice and instead staring at New Girl’s pale face. “What do you mean she’s gone?” I have no doubt who she’s talking about. I just refuse to believe it. No way a major food critic does a walk out. Not unless

there's something very seriously wrong. And not ever in a restaurant I run.

“Well, I went back out there and I thought maybe she'd gone to the bathroom or something, but she's been gone ages. What if she's not coming back?”

I kill the gas on the stove with the tip of one tentacle and mutter every swear word I can think of under my breath. Stepping around New Girl, I slither out of the kitchen and into the restaurant. Curious eyes turn my way. I ignore them.

New Girl's fucking right. Table's empty.

Where the hell has she gone?

I scan the restaurant, but she's nowhere in sight. I walk out the front and gaze along the walkway to the pier and into the carpark.

Nothing.

I try out back and come in through the rear entrance to the corridor where the bathrooms are. I pause when I see the door to the storage cupboard has been left ajar. I don't know how many times I've told New Girl to close it properly. It looks untidy when guests walk down here to use the bathroom and all our shit is on display.

I'm just walking up to close it when a noise catches my attention and I freeze.

There's a sniffing coming from inside the cupboard.

I sigh.

Great.

I suppose at least whoever I made cry this time had the good grace to find a private space to have their meltdown. Still, it's a busy night. I need all hands on deck. I'm going to have to suck it up and apologize, aren't I?

I reach out and take hold of the handle, pulling the door open. I do not expect what I find there, though.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Instead of a sniveling member of staff, I open the door to Olivia Zeston, teeth around her knuckle, sobbing into her hand.

She looks at me and her eyes go wide.

What the bloody hell? “Ah, sorry.” Why am I apologizing? It’s my damn cupboard!

But the unexpected sight of her pretty face reddened and screwed up in distress is doing things to my insides. Twisty, unpleasant things I haven’t let myself feel in years. “Is everything OK?”

She takes her hand from her mouth and wipes it surreptitiously on her dress. “Yeah, I just... I just—” She doesn’t say any more before a fresh wave of tears overtakes her and her body shakes with another sob.

She looks like I probably looked for months after Charlotte left me standing at the altar like a fucking idiot. I can’t stand it.

I find myself opening my arms and pulling her in for a hug I never intended to give. Only she looks so sad and broken hiding here in my cupboard, and I don’t know what else to do. So I pat her hair awkwardly and make shushing noises, wondering what the hell I do here.

All of a sudden, two of my tentacles suddenly grow minds of their own. Without warning, they slide around her ankles, and I’m almost bowled over by the sweet flavor of her skin where her bare calves meet my sensitive limbs. My tentacles have taste sensors at the tips, perfectly conditioned to pick up sensitive changes beneath

the ocean or being really inappropriate with strangers. Only I usually have more control.

Fuck!

She gasps and pulls away. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. This is so embarrassing. I should go.” She rubs beneath her eyes and moves to leave.

“Wait.” It’s me who should apologize. That’s never happened to me before. I glance down and catch the faint but unmistakable glow of orange which lights up all eight of my tentacles.

I stare.

That’s not possible.

There’s only one reason a kraken male glows, and it’s wrapped up with a whole lot of mystical bullshit. I mean, the whole fated mate thing is most likely bullshit anyway. Some biological remnant of something we’ve long since evolved away from.

She turns to leave, and I can’t stop my tentacles from reaching out to stop her.

“Don’t go! At least let me make you something to go. On the house. Unless it’s the food. Unless that’s the reason you’re crying.” I grimace. Then I remind myself she hasn’t tasted it yet.

Her mouth drops open. “Oh, no. Please don’t think that. No, it’s just...I got some unexpected news.” Her lip trembles again and I half expect more tears. “S-some bad news and I’m not coping very well right now. It’s not you at all. Your restaurant I mean.” She flushes.

There's a pause. I don't know what to say and she still hasn't left. This is awkward as fuck. I'm hardly the guy you'd go to if you want comfort. I used to be OK with people, I guess. I remember I had friends. These days most people in town avoid me, except my brothers. They're the only ones I socialize with.

"I hope I didn't give you the wrong impression."

I frown. I'm trying to work out what she means.

"I'm not doing a post this week. I was actually supposed to be on vacation—" Her lip wobbles, and I have the urge to pull her into my arms again. I don't of course.

"Oh. OK."

I can't say I'm not disappointed. I was hoping this would be the big break I've been waiting for.

There's another pause.

"But I can! I mean you've probably already started making the food, haven't you? And I'm sure it's lovely."

I scowl. "I don't want you to write a review if you haven't eaten it. I'm not trying to guilt my way into a good review."

"Oh, no. I didn't think that. You know what? How about I just go back to my table." She shifts awkwardly and I feel like a dick.

"Hey," I soften my voice. "I'm sorry. You're having a rough night, and I get that. Believe me. What about we forget the whole review thing and I just cook you dinner. I promise you the snapper is amazing."

She nods. “Your restaurant is beautiful. And everything smells delicious.”

“The snapper I’m cooking you. Fish of the day, right?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Her eyes widen and a little unsteady laugh bubbles from her. “Oh! Oh, I see. Fish of the day. Snapper at The Snapper. Well how can I say no to that?”

Well at least she’s going to eat it. Before she can change her mind again, I steer her out of the cupboard and into the hall, closing the door behind us. “You can’t. So take a seat and don’t worry about a thing. I will take care of you tonight. I promise whatever it is that happened will keep until after dinner anyway.”

She sighs. “You’re right. And I’m starving. Are you sure you don’t mind? I don’t want to be difficult.”

I look down at her as she walks in front of me, noticing for the first time how much shorter she is. She seems taller on video. In person she’s delicate. Almost like she needs protecting. Which sure as fuck isn’t my job.

I snatch my hand away. “You’re not being difficult. Now take a seat. I’d better get back to the kitchen.”

I dart through the side door, leaving her to find her seat by herself. It’s unwise, but I need a minute to get my head together. I’m sure it’s just the fact that I haven’t held a woman like that in my arms since Charlotte. Not like that. Not for anything but sex.

I don’t do anything beyond sex.

Not cuddles or comfort or relationships.

Not me.

Once burned, twice shy, or so the saying goes. I might be thick, but I'm not that thick.

The kitchen goes really quiet the second I step back in.

I look down in horror, but the soft glow in the tips of my tentacles has vanished. Perhaps I only imagined it after all.

"What is it?" I snap.

Billy, my sous chef, clears his throat. "She's back, chef."

"Yeah. I know."

There's a pause. "And?"

"Well, we still making fish of the day?"

I growl. "I am making fish of the day. You are looking after the rest of the tables. Nothing has changed. Can you manage that, or do I need to get New Girl in here to run things?"

"No, chef. I mean yes, chef. I can manage."

"Good." I get another orange from the fridge and begin the sauce again. This meal is going to be the best fucking meal of her life as a matter of pride. Definitely not because I want the chance to make her smile.

Or maybe I do. This is the chance of a lifetime after all. That's all this is. And if I spend the next twenty minutes thinking about the way she felt in my arms, that's because I'm concentrating on getting this right and I'm just processing. Just trying to figure out how I hit that comfort food button that'll get me a five-star review.

Because even if she said she's not posting, if I blow her away, there's a chance—a tiny chance—she'll do it anyway.

THREE

Olivia

I slide a little lower in my seat, self-conscious every time anyone looks my way. Is it my imagination or is my makeup running? Can everyone in the restaurant tell I've been hiding in a closet crying?

I'm sure all the staff know by now. I can't believe the head chef caught me in his storage closet!

Maybe it's not too late to sneak out quietly. Only now I'll feel really guilty. He seemed so set on making that snapper for me.

At that moment, the door to the kitchen opens and Noah himself comes out holding an immaculate white plate. That only makes me blush more, remembering the fresh salty smell of him and the gentle way he held me as I cried.

He sets the dish down in front of me and I catch a whiff of citrus and fennel, an undertone of white wine reduction and fresh seafood. It's beautifully plated. A bright orange splash across the white plate draws the eye. The pale fish sits on top of a bed of green stems. It's a plant I don't recognize, and of course that gets my attention.

"Oh, this looks amazing. What is it?"

"Pan seared snapper with fennel and orange reduction on a bed of aromatic native greens." He straightens, and I know he's waiting for me to taste it.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I pick up my knife and fork and compose a neat mouthful, making sure to get some of the wilted greens, the sauce, and the flaky fish. The little noise of enjoyment that escapes me when I lift it to my mouth is completely unavoidable.

It's delicious.

Noah's expression lights up into a look of triumph.

I cover my mouth with my hand while I swallow. "Mmm, that's so good. What's the vegetable?"

He smiles. "There are two. Saltbush and warrigal greens. Both natives."

I push the fish a little so I can inspect them. One is stalky and has a little crunch. The other is softer, like spinach. That's what I thought it was until I tasted it. "I love it."

The grin stretches right across his face. He was handsome before, but when he's smiling? The girls of Kraken Cove must have to be on their guard. He's gorgeous.

"I'll leave you to enjoy. Please let my staff know if there's anything else you require. I'll be back with the next course shortly."

Noah brings me three more equally complex and well-thought-out dishes. Crispy, melt in your mouth fried squid tentacles, a single scallop raviolo in a delicate butter and pea sauce, and a tiny portion of lamb rump with a red wine jus. Everything is delicious.

I hardly even notice people coming and going. More miraculously, I'm not thinking about Justin or the message. Instead, I'm furiously scribbling in my notebook, recording everything so I know what I want to say tomorrow. There's no way I'm not posting. This is far too good not to share. Everyone needs to know about this place.

I look up when I realize Noah has returned and is standing by the table, watching me. He clears his throat. "I'm putting a few finishing touches on the dessert. Would you like a tour of the kitchen while you wait?"

The pen drops out of my hand, and I hurry to my feet. A tour of the kitchen sounds amazing, even though I can see most of it from out here. I've always loved the high energy feel of a commercial kitchen. That, and the creativity of a really great chef like Noah.

I used to think I wanted to be a chef. I never really had the talent, but I used to dream.

"Really? I'd love that."

Noah leads me through the big double swinging doors and into the noise and heat backstage. It's like stepping into a different world. I'm Alice stepping through the looking glass. I can see back to the real world, but in here, everything is a little bit magical.

"What did you think of the snapper?" he asks me. "I've been debating putting it on the menu, but I'm not sure how it will go with the locals. My main staples are deconstructed classics."

That reminds me, I didn't really look over the menu. Pretty remiss of me, but in my defense, I was distracted. "I'd love to see some."

An older man with graying red hair ducks his head as we pass his station. He's

plating fried chicken sandwiched between two white circles. As I look closer, I see it's rice that's been pressed into a flat disc shape. He dishes out a mound of dressed cabbage and sprinkles sesame seeds on top. "Oh yum." It's like a burger, but not a burger. Now I see what he means about deconstructed staples.

"Korean chicken burger." Noah looks over the plate, gives a curt nod, and a server quickly and efficiently takes it while the chef gets to work on the next thing.

"Beautiful." I'm staring as another woman bends over a delicate white flower of meringue and cream, carefully placing slivers of fruit and mint on top.

Noah chuckles. "Pavlova."

I look a little closer. I've heard of this traditional Australian dessert and always wanted to try it. I'm a sucker for sweets and fruit, so of course I have.

"And the snapper?"

I look around at him. He's waiting for my response. "Everything was just perfect. I'll be honest; I haven't had a meal that good in a long time. I know I said I wasn't going to post, but I think I have to."

He grins. I can almost feel the tension in the air evaporate a little under the exhaust fans. Like his staff have been collectively holding their breath for him to relax.

"Well, let's seal the deal with dessert, shall we?"

"Yes, please."

He glances down at his watch. "What I have in mind will take about forty minutes. Will you indulge me?"

I'm dead curious and nod enthusiastically. "Of course."

In the meantime, feel free to look around and ask me anything."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I'm practically vibrating with energy. I dart from station to station, watching as his staff serve up more beautiful creations. However, the orders soon slow. Eventually the movement and clamor is directed to cleaning. Staff wipe down surfaces and stack clean pans. I turn to look for Noah only to find that he's disappeared.

I wonder if I should go back to my table. I don't want to be in the way. Maybe he got busy and forgot about me.

Then the door to the large walk-in fridge opens and he steps out, holding something beneath a silver cloche.

"Just heading home, chef," the red-haired man calls.

"Righto, Billy. See you tomorrow."

"See you."

"See you Sunday, chef."

"Night, Sally."

"Night."

The door swings shut and silence falls over the kitchen for the first time since I stepped into it. And I realize we're alone.

That shouldn't be sending a little tickle of excitement up my spine. It certainly

shouldn't make me want to touch my cheeks to check if my blush has returned.

Noah sets the dish down and slowly lifts the cloche.

Seven neat squares of fluffy sponge cake are arranged on a plate as if they've fallen into a stack like toys out of a toybox. Around the outside there are tiny dishes with sauces and toppings. I see chocolate and coconut as well as a fruit compote, a dish with a creamy liqueur and some kind of white sauce that could be white chocolate.

"What is it?"

"Deconstructed lamington. It's still something I'm playing with, but the idea is you customize it by dipping the cake into whatever sauce and topping you like, to vary the flavor and texture."

I nod. "I've heard about lamington. I haven't had one, though. It's chocolate icing with coconut right?"

Noah smiles. "Allow me?" He takes a little metal skewer and spears a square of cake, then dips it into the liqueur, the melted chocolate, and finally the coconut. Twisting it dexterously, he lifts it to my mouth.

"Oh!" I open and he feeds the morsel to me. I don't stop to think about how sensual this is until I close my lips around the mouthful and he slowly draws the skewer out, brushing it against my lower lip in a caress. I can't help the little shudder that runs through me at the way his gaze is fixed on my mouth. Then the flavors hit me and I forget everything for a second. The rich, warm chocolate and subtle coconut are underpinned by the dizzying hint of alcohol. "Wow."

He grins. "Good?"

“Amazing for something so simple. I didn’t think lamingtons had alcohol, though.”

“Nah, but everything’s better with booze, right?”

He takes a new skewer and a new piece of cake. This time he gives me a completely different combination: the creamy sauce, the fruit compote. A twist of his wrist, and he lifts it to my mouth again before I can take it from him.

I moan around this bite. The first was delicious, but these flavors are some of my favorites. White chocolate, the tart fruit, the nutty cake. Perfection. The cake is so soft it practically melts in my mouth, and I need more immediately.

“You’re making me jealous,” Noah laughs. “You might have to share.”

Taking his cue, I pick my own skewer and stab a piece of cake, giggling when it falls off almost instantly and I have to stab it again, this time quite aggressively.

Noah whistles. “Geez. Got some anger issues you wanna talk about?”

Now I’m really laughing. Imagining the cake is Justin’s face sounds like a pretty good idea right about now. Makes me want to turn one into a pin cushion with the skewers.

“What do you want?”

“Surprise me.”

I dip the cake into the liqueur first. I loved the way the light, teasing flavor lingered on my tongue after the first mouthful. Then into the white chocolate and the coconut. I should probably just hand it to him, but Noah opens his mouth, and I lift the skewer, noticing far more than I should when his tongue curls around the cake and licks a

stray droplet off his lip.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

We stare at each other a moment longer, then Noah drops his gaze. He turns and grabs a small bottle of dessert wine, hunting until he finds two glasses and sets them on the counter. Then he pours and hands me one. “So, are you going to tell me what happened?”

I blink. The question takes me off guard. But why not? I’ll probably never see this guy again, and he’s been so nice to me. Since I’ve already cried on his shoulder, I may as well vent to him as well. “It’s probably nothing.” I take a sip of wine.

Noah snorts. “Didn’t seem like nothing back there in the storage cupboard.”

I sigh. “My boyfriend and I were supposed to be spending this week on vacation.”

“But?” Noah sips his wine, watching me.

“But he’s not coming. Couldn’t make it.” I shrug, trying to affect indifference.

Noah scowls. “Why the fuck not?”

I shake my head. I can’t speak. My throat is too dry. My hand is shaking so much wine dribbles over the lip of the glass.

“Sorry.” Noah takes the glass from me and sets it on the counter behind me. “I’ve upset you.”

He’s so close to me that I’m tipping my chin up to look into his eyes. Our lips are close. So close it makes me remember the way he licked the chocolate from his lip

earlier. Something I have no reason to be thinking about right now.

My head is swimming. I had too much wine. Too much wine and too much thinking. Only my thoughts are suddenly anywhere but on what we were talking about.

Noah still doesn't step back. A little growl low in his throat snaps me out of my thoughts and straight back into the moment. "Sounds like he's just fucking you around. You shouldn't let anyone treat you that way."

I don't want to cry again. I don't want him to remember me as the girl who blubbered on his shoulder twice in one night. So I do the only thing I can think of right then to stop myself. I stretch up on my toes, wrap my arms around his shoulders, and kiss him.

Noah hesitates for only a moment. My lips press against his, and I make the smallest movement, and all of a sudden, his arms slide around my waist.

At least I think it's his arms.

I hadn't stopped to think about how kissing a kraken would be different from kissing a human man. Suddenly Noah's hands and tentacles are everywhere. At my waist, brushing a long red curl from my cheek, curling around my ankles, and teasing up my thighs.

I gasp as the sensations overload me.

I expected his tentacles to feel slimy or sticky. Instead they're soft and smooth as they glide over my skin.

Noah uses the opportunity to deepen the kiss. His tongue nudges into my mouth, playing with mine. The lingering flavor of liqueur and coconut sweeten the kiss until

I'm drowning in it. This is a hundred times better than any kiss I've ever had before. He caresses my lips with his, teasing and withdrawing only to surge forward and demand once more.

He pulls me closer. My body molds to his.

Between us, a hard bulge pushes against his apron, pressing into my belly.

I moan and lift onto my tiptoes, trying to feel it where I want it most. My pussy throbs with awareness and an empty ache. A need to be filled.

This has gone from zero to a hundred in the blink of an eye, and I'm not ready to stop here. I want the dial up to a thousand. I want this never to end. I want the swirling, giddy feeling of kissing Noah Wilson to push away all my bad thoughts and worries from the last day.

There's a crash as Noah sweeps a tentacle across the counter, tossing food and bowls and equipment onto the floor, then he cups my ass and lifts me onto the space he's just cleared. My legs seem to spread by themselves. Or maybe it's his tentacles wrapped around them. Either way, my cotton panties are fully exposed as my dress rides up, and for the first time the cool air of the kitchen in that sensitive area makes me fully aware of just how wet I am.

I shudder as he slides a hand up my thigh and grazes the outside of my underwear with a knuckle.

He lets out a low curse and makes another pass, pressing harder, circling my clit through the fabric.

Oh god!

If he keeps that up, I'll come on his hand through my panties. I'm needy. Desperate for more, but he stops. "Oh, that's so fucking unfair."

I'm about to ask him what he means.

My brain is too foggy for me to comprehend his words.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

But he tugs at the hem of my dress until I wriggle enough to let him lift it over my head. I should probably stop him, but instead, as he drops my dress to the ground, I quickly reach behind and unfasten my bra. The next moment it joins my dress on the floor and my pink, peaked nipples are practically crying out for his attention.

“Why’d you have to be so fucking wet?”

“You don’t like it?”

He laughs. It’s a short, harsh sound. His breathing is ragged, and he leans closer, dipping his head toward my breasts. “No, I bloody love it. It’s my weakness.”

Then his mouth closes over my nipple and my back bows. My mind switches off entirely for a good few minutes while he plays with my breast and teases my nipple. He circles the sensitive peak with his tongue. He flicks it with his lips and teeth. He works me into a frenzy until just as I think I can’t take it anymore, he moves to the other breast.

If he thinks I was wet before, he’s seen nothing. I know without looking my panties are soaked. Drenched. Flooded.

Lucky he is supporting me with a hand on my neck, because otherwise I would have melted into a puddle on the floor by now.

A firm touch tugs aside my panties. It’s not his hand. It’s his tentacle. It doesn’t matter. It feels like I’ve died and gone to heaven when he slips the tip through my wet pussy lips and slides it carefully over my clit.

I cry out.

He repeats the motion. It's too good.

I'm quivering in his arms, pleading with him in incoherent sounds.

"Shh. I've got you. You need this don't you?"

I nod.

His tentacle slips to my entrance and I part my legs wider.

"Do you need to come, gorgeous?"

"Yes. Oh god. Please!" I'm whining, but I'm beyond caring. I don't think I've ever needed anything more.

I can't question it any more when he nudges inside, the tip finding the perfect angle as he suckles again on my breasts.

A few more quick strokes inside my pussy and a tug of his mouth on my nipple, and I shatter. I clench around him. My body shakes. I clutch desperately at his neck as the spasms overtake me and my legs convulse. The second wave of pleasure makes me seize up, and by the time it eases I'm gasping for air.

We're both breathing hard.

Noah slowly withdraws from my body. He dips his head, eyes pressed shut for a long moment. "Fuck." He shakes his head. "Your man was a fucking loser for throwing this away."

My man!

Oh god. Those words don't seem to connect to Justin. Not after today. Not after that.

But Noah's right. Even though he let me down, Justin is still my boyfriend. And what have I done?

I pull back, and the look of horror on my face must be obvious. Noah's brows, already drawn into a frown, close tighter together. "What is it?"

I'm shaking my head. My throat is tight and I can't seem to form the words. "He hasn't. I mean not yet. I mean we haven't—"

Now it's Noah's turn to pull away. He steps back, lifting his hands as if he's been burned. "You haven't what? Spit it out, Olivia."

I cover my mouth with my hand and the words come out muffled. "We haven't broken up. Not officially. We haven't really talked."

Noah curses. "No. No fucking way. Not again."

I can't make sense of his words and he doesn't give me a chance. Before I can speak again, he turns and hurries from the room. "Let yourself out."

The doors to the restaurant swing violently behind him as he leaves.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

With trembling hands, I collect my clothes and dress myself. It takes me longer than it should because I fumble over every item.

There's a swell of nausea in my belly, and when I bend over to put my shoes back on it rises, threatening to overwhelm me.

For a long moment I have to simply stand and breathe.

I just cheated on Justin. With a guy I barely know. Because we had one silly fight that wasn't even a fight. Because I got upset.

I never thought I'd do such a thing.

FOUR

Noah

Furious, I drive straight out of the carpark of The Snapper, leaving the place unlocked. Fuck if I'm spending another moment in there with her. I don't know if it's because I don't trust her or I don't trust myself not to take things further than I already did.

With another man's girl.

After what Charlotte did to me.

I screech around corners so fast there'll be another discussion about speed humps at

the next council meeting. I come to an abrupt stop at the top of the cliff at the lookout off the highway out of town.

By now, my skin is dry and I've long since shifted back into my two-legged form. Makes me a worse driver, but at least now I don't have to look at the tips of my glowing tentacles in the dark.

Killing the engine, I stalk from the car, slamming the door behind me.

It takes about two minutes in the blustery, salty, ocean breeze to clear my head enough for me to think again.

Fuck!

What did I just do?

There are about a hundred good reasons why I shouldn't have even kissed Olivia Zeston, let alone tentacle fucked her to a bloody glorious orgasm.

That's the kicker. The look on her face when she came around the tip of my tentacle was like she's never come harder in her goddamn life.

I run a hand through my hair. What with the sea breeze and the sweat from the kitchen and my messing with it, the longer middle section is probably sticking up at crazy angles.

I lean over the guardrail and draw in a deep salty breath and let it out as slow as I can.

I need to calm the fuck down and start thinking with my brain.

Not my dick. Not my tentacles which have been glowing for her from the moment I

saw her.

That scares the fuck out of me, but I reassure myself it's just an obsolete biological function.

I can't have a fated mate because I don't believe in fate. She's just a female that I'm highly compatible with. Which makes no difference to me because I don't intend to saddle myself with offspring and I certainly won't be settling down.

Not now.

Not ever.

After Charlotte left me at the altar, I promised myself I'd never let myself risk that kind of heartache again.

I'm a bitter shell of the guy I used to be. I couldn't survive that twice.

So I never let myself get attached.

Sure, I fuck women. I fuck plenty of women. I hardly ever fuck the same girl twice, though, and I cut short anything that feels remotely like there could be feelings attached.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I've made an art form of the clinical hookup. Of sneaking out before sunlight, the polite message the next day trailing into silence in the weeks that follow.

Best for everyone if feelings don't get too intense.

So why the fuck did I let myself get so carried away with Olivia that I was this close to pushing her back on the counter of my five-star restaurant and fucking her despite all the red flags?

It's just not like me.

Refusing to consider the obvious, I stomp back to my car to find my phone, which I stashed there earlier in the night. When I'm shifted, I don't tend to keep it on me. It only gets in the way.

I pull up a message to Billy and type.

Noah: feeling a bit rough. I'm going to b late in tomorrow. Can you manage prep?

It's late, but since when do sous chefs sleep?

Moments later, three dots appear, shortly followed by his message.

Billy: No worries, boss. Take it easy.

I don't feel bad about the lie. It's none of anyone's business what I do. I do feel bad about leaving everyone in the lurch, though. Once I've cooled off, I'll go back tonight

and set up some of the complex sauces and things I don't trust the apprentices with. Get them a head start before I lock up.

Not like I'll be sleeping much tonight anyway. I can feel that already.

Truth be told, I don't sleep well out of the water. Never have.

I hate the feeling of dry skin.

Since monsters came out, I took every opportunity, every moment I got, to be in my kraken form. The people of Kraken Cove quickly learned to get used to it, like it or not. Why should I hide what I am? I'll never understand why my parents and my brothers insist on doing so.

I've just been under a lot of stress lately. Things still haven't settled into a predictable rhythm at the restaurant since opening. Some nights I think we're going to get slammed and it's quiet. Others, I give someone the night off and the place blows up.

That's all this is. Just an over-reaction to all the pressure of starting my own business.

So what if my body reacted to her? It means nothing. I've no doubt offended her, so she won't be back. Done deal.

Which is a shame because I was really hoping for that positive review. Still, business is booming. We'll be right. Fuck her and fuck her review.

Fuck her useless fucking boyfriend too.

I would have said she deserves better, but apparently we're none of us any better than anyone else, myself included. I just wish I could care a little less about it.

The very worst part is that Charlotte was right—at least partly. She always said one day I'd understand.

I guess today's that day.

That only makes it worse, though. The way I hate myself today. Almost as much as I hate her and that asshole she left me for.

I wake at about three in the morning, cock aching and the phantom taste of Olivia on my lips. God she's sweet. Like the heady alcohol and sweet coconut of the dessert I made her, mingled with something so fucking right, even now it hurts just thinking about it.

Tasting with your mouth is nothing to tasting flesh like that. The sweet subtle flavor of a woman's skin. The salty tang of a juicy cunt.

And I've never tasted a cunt as sweet as Olivia's.

I punch my pillow and sit, dragging a hand over my face, wishing I could put it out of my head.

I can't, though. Every time I close my eyes, I'm right back in that moment, tentacles dragging through salty sweetness, lips closed around a pert nipple while he little moans fill my ears.

With a curse, I throw back the covers and drag on a shirt and some sneakers. It'll be cold on the bike, but I don't bother with my jacket. I need to feel the bite of the air on my skin.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

What the fuck made me go in that cupboard anyway? Why do I always have to play with fire?

I've never envied my brother Luke his happily ever after more. Getting back with the childhood crush he pined over for years seemed like all his dreams came true. The kind of thing that happens to guys like Luke, but not to me.

And for good reason.

Luke's always been the easy-going mender. Mending arguments and smoothing over things in our family.

And what was he always smoothing over? Nine times out of ten, it was the trouble I caused. Because as much as Luke's always been the good boy, I was the troublemaker.

Always was. Always will be.

I sling a leg over the bike and kick the engine into gear regardless of the late hour and the neighbors. Let them go have a word with my parents tomorrow. It wouldn't be the first time.

Living in a small town sucks the fun out of life. There's always someone to complain about every move you make. Every time you scratch yourself.

Not a single one of them really gets it.

Not a single one would stop to think about how my parents bent over backward to fit in here. They don't give a toss. They're all too busy squabbling over petty traffic infringements or the fact that the council might let that chain open their store in the center of town.

Well who cares?

They can go to hell just as soon as I've used them all as my stepping stones to a way out of this dead-end town and on to a better life.

FIVE

Olivia

I give up on sleep somewhere around three in the morning. I toss the pillow I had flung over my eyes onto the floor and click on the bedside lamp. The sky outside my window is still pitch black. I can't blame jetlag. Despite the fact it's morning back home, I adjusted to the time difference over a week ago.

It's morning and Justin still hasn't called or messaged back.

A swell of acrid tension rises in my belly as I replay the last twenty-four hours in my mind all over again. It's been happening on repeat ever since I rushed from The Snapper and back to my room hardly knowing what to do.

With shaking hands I pick up my phone from the nightstand and dial.

He answers.

It rang so many times I think it's his voicemail at first. And then he speaks. "Olivia, I wasn't expecting to hear from you so early. I thought it was still nighttime in

Australia.”

A little of the sick feeling subsides when I realize he must have been thinking about me to have considered what time it was for me. Perhaps all my stupid worries have been for nothing. Perhaps something really did come up for him at work.

My voice cracks with emotion when I try to reply. “J-Justin. Hi! I’m so glad I caught you. I’ve been missing you.” Another knot twists in my throat, and I have to press my lips together or else give in to it. He hates it when I cry.

“Oh come on, Liv. It’s only been a couple weeks. Haven’t you been having a good time?”

“Yes, but I still miss you.”

There’s a long pause. It’s so long I lift the phone from my ear to check that reception hasn’t cut out.

Justin clears his throat. “Listen, Liv. We probably need to talk. I was gonna wait until you got back, but maybe now is a good time after all.”

Oh god. Do we ever! I don’t think I’ll get another wink of sleep until I’ve confessed to him. Suddenly I can’t wait another moment. Whatever he has to tell me, it couldn’t possibly be as bad. “There’s something I have to tell you,” I say suddenly.

“Oh?”

“You’re gonna be mad. I know you will. I just need you to know that I love you, OK?”

“Liv—”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I can't let him stop me now, so I blunder on, afraid to stop. "I kissed someone else!"

There's another horrible pause and my heart thunders in my chest so violently I'm sure I can hear it.

"You what?"

I take a deep breath and try to be coherent. "I was upset. I just miss you. I was drinking and I wasn't myself. There's really no excuse, I know. But we kissed and he um... he touched me."

I expect anger. Disgust. I'm disgusted with myself.

What I don't expect is what comes out of his mouth. "Well, shit. I never thought you'd do something like that, but I've gotta say I'm relieved."

I blink. "You are?"

"Sure. I think it makes this whole conversation easier for both of us."

"It does?"

"Here's the thing. We've both been busy lately, and I guess we've grown apart a little. Truth be told, there's someone else. I wasn't going to say anything about that, only it seems like we're both on the same page."

"We are?" I can't seem to stop stupidly repeating back what he says without really

processing what's happening here. What is this? Is he saying what I think he's saying?

"Yeah. I mean. I'm glad we can still be friends. We've known each other a long time after all."

My mouth falls open, but try as I might, I can't make any words come out.

"Listen, you don't know how relieved I am that this doesn't have to be awkward. I was so worried," Justin continues. "I just have to follow my heart, you know? And you should follow yours. You know I only want the best for you."

I don't think his tone would be quite so breezy if he could see my face right now.

"Listen, I've gotta go, but maybe we can talk some more about this later on, OK? I'd like you to meet Rechelle. I think you two would really get along great."

Rechelle? As in Rechelle Oaks, the one all the gossip sites have been speculating about for months?

Heat rises up my throat until sweat prickles the back of my neck. "Justin, what are you talking about? I was calling to confess. To apologize. Because I thought you'd care. I didn't expect you to turn around and rub your own cheating in my face."

"Babe, what's the point in getting wound up about things now? We've both done things we're not proud of."

I grit my teeth around a particularly ugly insult. He's not wrong. Why does it seem like only one of us is actually sorry about it? "So that's it? You don't want to try to work things out?"

“Liv, I think we can both admit we’ll be happier this way.”

I swallow all the things I wanted to say. The part where I tell him I still love him. That I never stopped thinking about him. What good would it do?

He clearly doesn’t feel the same way.

I wonder how I could have been so blind.

“Justin?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How long have you and Rechelle...?”

“Oh um... well I was going to tell you. I guess it’s been about six months.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Six months!

All the time we were planning our trip and shopping for houses. How could he have done this to me? The nausea rises in my belly again.

I have to end the call then. I can't even say goodbye. I drop it on the bed and race to the bathroom to stand bent over the toilet for a long few minutes, bile bitter in my throat. But the vomit won't come out. Nor will any more tears.

When I stand and wash my face and stare into my reflection, my eyes are red and my skin is pale. But my cheeks are dry.

At least now my conscience is clear.

The little niggling feeling of guilt is lessened, but something is still eating away like acid at the bottom of my stomach.

The memory of Noah's horrified expression last night flashes in my mind's eye.

I still have to make that right somehow.

So that's why, at five twenty in the morning, I open up my laptop and begin typing the review.

After a few lines, I get up and dig through my handbag to find the notes I made. And by the time the sun is shining through the window of my room in the bed and breakfast, I'm already editing the video.

I'd normally start a story with a little clip from my table at the restaurant. But I didn't film one last night, since I wasn't expecting to post. Luckily I did take pictures of all my courses. So once I've filmed me talking, I can edit them in to show each one and the elegant way they were plated.

Just looking at them all makes my stomach rumble, and I remember I've been up for hours and have had no breakfast.

I push the feeling aside and keep working. Normal me would never skip a meal. No one needs to see me when I'm hangry! But there's a good reason today. This video needs to be perfect. It's the least I can do after putting Noah in a situation that clearly made him uncomfortable and after all the care he took to cheer me up and to prepare a beautiful meal for me.

It's not only that. The place truly deserves recognition. It would be a crime not to let everyone know about The Snapper.

When I'm satisfied that it's done, I publish right away and close the app.

There's still one more thing I need to do before I can stomach eating today.

SIX

Noah

"Hey, chef, that reviewer from last night was back in here before. Did she catch you?" Billy calls out to me as soon as I push the kitchen doors open, still tying my apron behind me.

I scowl. "No she didn't. I don't want her in here again."

The kitchen goes quiet as everyone holds their breath. A metal bowl clashes to the floor and the apprentice curses. “Sorry, chef.”

“Pick it up. Get on with it. Nothing to see here.”

“Yes, chef!” The sounds of chopping and orders being shouted across the kitchen resume and Billy comes over with the tablet, holding it out for me. “We’re gonna be short on eggs this week. Looks like our supplier had a shortage. They could only give us two-thirds of our order. I could get Blair to run up to the supermarket, but I wanted to check with you first since that’ll blow out costs.”

I shake my head. “Let’s not do that. We’ll take the pav off the menu for now and see if we can last until the new order comes in.”

“Yes, chef.”

He hesitates and I can tell he wants to ask about Olivia. I sigh. “What?”

“Well, it’s just that she said she posted a review and um... we might have looked.”

“Show me.” I hold out my hand, and he passes me his phone, screen already unlocked and the Instagram story playing.

Olivia smiles and leans in as if she’s about to tell the camera a secret, and I can’t help the little sizzle of excitement at the memory of those lips on mine.

Fuck.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“But you’d better be quick. I guarantee this place will be booked out for months next time I’m in Oz.”

I hand the phone back, not letting anything show in my expression. If she’s trying to appease me, she’s barking up the wrong tree, but I guess at least it’ll be good for business.

“We’re getting phone calls about next week already.” Jessie, my front of house manager pushes the door open and sticks her head in.

“Fine. Good. Let’s get our heads in the game for service.” I get my spray bottle and wet my skin down, then begin with a trip to the cool room to clear my head. Twenty minutes later, I’m whisking melting chocolate over a double boiler and Olivia Zeston is almost—almost—out of my mind.

It’s a good night. Despite not having the pavlova on the menu, we get twice the dessert order we normally would and we’re still serving the last table at ten. It’s eleven by the time we’ve cleaned down the kitchen and half-past eleven before I’ve updated our food order and checked tomorrow’s bookings.

I shift back to my two-legged form for the drive home, which I guess is why I don’t taste her on the air as soon as I step out into the carpark. In fact, I almost run straight into her since I’m still trying to find my keys in the pocket of the jeans I just put back on. “What the—?”

“Sorry. Sorry.” She holds up her hands and jumps out of my way. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

“At nearly midnight? You’re really waiting around her after dark on your own?”

What the hell is wrong with this woman?

“Please, I’m sorry. I feel so bad about last night, and I know I upset you.”

I scowl. “I wasn’t upset. I was angry.” I’m getting angry all over again and her soft, wide-eyed expression isn’t helping.

I forgot how fucking pretty she is.

Why am I even thinking about that?

Probably because, despite the fact that I made her come so sweetly for me, I am yet to have my own release. Something I was reluctant to do last night once I found out I’d as good as cheated with someone else’s woman.

“I’m really, really sorry. I just wanted to say that in person. And let you know I um... I posted my review. Because I didn’t want you to think there were hard feelings. At least on my end.”

I say nothing. She clearly isn’t going to leave me alone until she’s said her piece, but I don’t need to encourage her.

“So yeah.”

There’s an awkward silence. I fold my arms and watch her squirm, determined not to extricate her.

I wasn’t prepared for tears, however.

Her face sort of crumples. One moment she's giving me that pleading puppy-dog look and the next it's all screwed up and somehow still pretty and big fat tear drops are cascading down her cheeks.

"And I know you were mad about me cheating, but if it makes you feel better, I kinda wasn't. Because Justin found somebody else and he wants to be with her. So we're not even together anymore."

My mouth drops open. He left her? He's a fucking fool.

I should turn and walk away. This is none of my fucking business. Every muscle in my body aches to hold her. I can't, though. "He's an idiot," I mutter.

She sniffs. "Maybe this is what I deserve."

As much as I'm mad at her, I know the guy's a dick and I can't believe that. I shake my head. "That's bullshit, Zeston. I don't know you, but I know you're not that person. You made a mistake. Don't let your head do that to you." After all, one kiss and some heavy petting is not the same as leaving him standing at the altar and running off with his best friend.

She doesn't speak. She's struggling too hard with the tears. I glance around the carpark. "Where's your car? Come on. Let's get you out of here."

She wipes at her face, but more tears flow to replace the ones she wipes away. "I don't have one. I'm not driving in Australia."

I stare. "And you were going to walk home all alone in the dark?"

It might be Kraken Cove and I'm pretty sure there's no bad guy lurking between here and main street to get her, but I'm still not having that.

She shrugs. “It’s not that far.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I curse. “Come on. You’re coming with me.”

“What? No. That’s OK.”

I scowl harder. Not happening. It’s not very often I try to do a nice thing, and here I am doing it for this girl and she’s going to try to stop me? Not a chance.

I grab her hand and lead her to my bike, pulling off my jacket and holding it out for her. “Put this on.”

She blinks but does as I say.

I practically shove my helmet over her head. Her red hair is so long it trails from beneath the bottom of the helmet. At least now I can’t see her tear-stained cheeks anymore.

“Get on. And hold tight. You’re staying at Bella Vista Bed and Breakfast, right?”

SEVEN

Olivia

Noah speeds off the moment my key turns in the lock of the door, the engine of his bike making an angry buzz as he zooms off down the street. It’s loud in the quiet of the night in this sleepy little town. It makes me wince.

I guess he’s not interested in forgive and forget.

I tried. I knew I'd never be able to rest until I had.

Trouble is, even when I've brushed my teeth and climbed into bed, I still can't seem to drift off. I just keep running over our conversation—or lack of—in my head again and again.

He's just as handsome in his human form. He looks grumpier, or maybe that's just because he was grumpy with me tonight and with good reason.

With a sigh, I roll over and grab my phone from the nightstand. The screen is bright in the dim light of my room.

I stare at the pop-up banner at the top of my screen in astonishment. 99+ notifications. That can't be right. I've barely posted anything lately. I guess I've put The Snapper on the map at least.

When I open Instagram, I'm flooded with messages. One hundred people have liked your post. Two hundred. Five. I've been tagged in hundreds of messages and there are almost four hundred comments on the video I posted hours ago.

Usually I'd be delighted. This would be a very good day. When I open the first comment in my notifications, though, a sick feeling settles in my stomach.

Should have stayed missing. No wonder he left her. Just look at her.

The next message down is the same.

On and on until my hands are shaking and my throat is aching with unshed tears.

Why are people like this? None of these people know me at all. I'm just a name and a picture to them.

My private messages are just as bad. Seventy-two new messages alone!Grillmstr.Greg has shared an article with you. Forknspoon has shared an article with you. Bellabakes has shared an article with you.

It goes on and on. All the links are to the same article. They're all from fans. Many of them have kind messages, but it doesn't matter. The effect is the same as the comments from the trolls.

Broken Hearted Olivia Zeston Resurfaces in the Outback.

I know I shouldn't look. It's only going to make this worse. But nothing can stop me clicking on the link.

I'm taken to a short reel. It's a clip of Justin and Rechelle standing close and talking after a workout. They're both wearing lycra, looking gorgeous and tanned. It's a bit of a stab in the guts seeing Justin looking so good. Then they turn away from the camera and he slides a hand from her waist to her ass and gives it a little squeeze.

My stomach flips.

He said there was someone else. He said we were over. That doesn't make me want to throw up any less after seeing that.

The same day we broke up?

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I guess I can hardly blame him after what I did. But then it hits me. This clip isn't from today or yesterday. In the video, the sky is blue and clear. It's sunny and they're both wearing bike shorts. There's no way this was taken in February!

I really do fling the phone aside in disgust then.

I can't look anymore.

Only I'm right back to scrolling two minutes later, the twisty knotty feeling tightening in my gut every time I find a new comment or video. A new account who shared my misery, spread it further.

The things they say about me are ridiculous. I know they are. That it's my fault he left. That I've put on weight or haven't paid him enough attention or I've been too busy with work.

Of course they're all the things that have been going around in my head since he told me he wasn't coming on our vacation. The biting, noxious things that make me question whether I ever really deserved him at all.

Sleep seems to have completely deserted me.

Even though I wash my face and lie back down, I'm still blinking at the ceiling and chewing on my nails an hour later.

Two hours later, I set videos of my favorite celebrity chef on a loop. By five in the morning, I'm trawling for ASMR recipes, but nothing works.

I'm blinking through the window at the early morning light when my phone buzzes with a notification.

Mom: Olivia, we heard what happened. Are you OK, honey? Call when you get this and let's talk. We think you should move back home for a while.

I stare. Move back home?

Is that what this is? Part of me would really like to. I know what it would be like. I'd be up doing hot yoga with her at five in the morning everyday, eating vegan with her and my stepmom, Trish. Constantly surrounded by their picture-perfect love story.

I love them. Fiercely. They're inspirational.

But I can't be there right now. Not after losing my hopes of having anything like what they've got.

I dial the number and bring the phone to my ear, already blinking back tears.

When Mom answers, I can't even talk for a moment. All I can do is sob.

"Oh, sweetheart. I know. Let it out." She patiently talks me through it until I can be coherent again.

"I-I'm sorry." I sniff.

"Darling, what have you got to apologize for? It's that idiot of a man who should be apologizing."

I wipe my face on the sleeve of my pajamas. "No. It's complicated, but we're both to blame."

Mom makes a tsking noise. “When are you coming home?”

There’s a pause.

“Olivia!”

“Mom, I can’t right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just need some space. Some time to grieve. I’ll be OK.” I cut her off when she starts to protest.

“I’m going to stay in Australia a little longer. Avoid the media. Keep my head down.” I’m making stuff up as I go, but everything I’m saying sounds good. Like it is just what I need.

“I don’t like it.”

“Mom, I know. But I just need some time to process. I can make content here, and when I’m feeling better I will. But I have savings and that gives me time to work out what Justin and I will do about the apartment and all our stuff before I have to actually deal with it, you know?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

She sighs. “OK, but just know if you change your mind, or if something changes and you need money, you only have to ask.”

My voice wavers again. “Thanks, Mom. I know.”

“I love you, honey. And Trish is standing here waving at me in case I forget to tell you that she sends her love too. We’re thinking of you.”

I hang up and set my phone down.

I’m broken, but at least I can see how all the pieces might fit back together again. I just need a little time.

After that, I finally close my eyes and drift into a few hours of not very restful sleep.

It takes me a good few minutes to work out what time it is when I wake up. My body feels like it’s the middle of the night, but it’s full sunshine outside and my stomach is rumbling like I skipped ten meals.

OK. I guess I skipped one and my belly is a drama queen.

Rubbing at my eyes, I haul myself out of bed, take one look at my face in the mirror, and turn away. No good will come of looking too hard at my reflection today. The dark circles beneath my eyes are more like pitch-black pits, and my hair stands up on end in a wild ball of frizz that suggests I’m going to need five wash days to tame it.

Anyone who thinks wearing their hair curly is easier has never tried the curly girl

method before. I yank it into a top knot and wrap my purple scrunchie around it, fixing it in place wildly askew on my head. I pull on my sweatpants and give my face a hasty wash in the sink.

I need breakfast.

Unfortunately, by the time I stumble down the stairs, the host informs me breakfast finished two hours ago and they're not serving lunch or dinner because it's Monday.

Unable to face the thought of appearing anywhere remotely nice like a café or bistro, I stumble out, blinking into the sun, and drag myself the whole mile to the local supermarket. Some fruit and yogurt would be nice. Hell, a muesli bar would cut it this morning. I just need enough to give me the energy to take a shower and wash my hair so I can look presentable again.

Lucky I've been able to go pretty much unnoticed here in small-town Australia. I'm sure right now Justin's fans would have a field day with a picture of me looking like this.

The lights in the supermarket are too bright and the overhead in the fruit section flickers disconcertingly. I'm looking for the cereal aisle and accidentally turn down one with stationary instead when I have to double take.

The picture of the man on the cover of a magazine at eye level is all too familiar. My stomach does that flip flop it still does every time he smiles at me, only he's not smiling at me. Justin, my ex-boyfriend, is smiling the smile I thought was reserved for me at a woman whose back was to the camera when the picture was taken. But by now, I'd recognize that taut ass in skin-tight leggings anywhere. That's Rechelle Oaks.

An ugly sob rises in my chest until it has nowhere left to go but bursting from me. I

cover my mouth, but another wells up and another until I'm gasping, wracking sobs shaking my whole body. I stand fixed to the spot in the stationary aisle of the supermarket having a meltdown.

EIGHT

Noah

Kraken Cove is a dead-end town at the best of times, but on a Monday afternoon it feels like the ass end of the world. I'm reaching for a jar of burger pickles on the shelf at Woolies when a strange noise from the aisle opposite jolts me from thoughts of whether I can be bothered cooking dinner tonight.

There it is again. A guttural sob. A horrible indrawn breath. My whole body is instantly on alert and I can't explain why. All I know is my heart is racing a million miles an hour and I have the wildest urge to knock down the whole shelf of groceries to get to whatever it is on the other side.

Shoving the jar back onto the shelf, I leave my trolley where it is and dart to the end of the aisle and around the corner only to be met with a mess of red hair and the particular sweet and fragrant scent I've come to resent after getting far too close and personal far too many times in the last few days.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Olivia spins mid sob, hands covering her mouth and wide eyes blinking at me above them. Her whole body goes still, and I'm struggling against the urge to tear down the whole supermarket and fight whatever made her cry like that.

Fucking stupid kraken genes.

“Well?” I fold my arms across my chest and wait for her to answer.

She mumbles something, but it’s so muffled by her hands that I can’t make it out.

Irritated, I reach for her and realize a little too late just what I’ve done.

As soon as our skin makes contact, two things happen. I feel an instant sizzle of energy. A wild excitement that does nothing to soothe the rapid beating of my heart.

Then my hands come into contact with her tear-soaked fingers, and my whole body shivers.

Shit.

There's a rip. My jeans burst at the seams. My legs transform into tentacles and ruin my clothing, and I curse, trying to stay still as the transformation happens in order to keep the front of my pants intact and preserve a little of my modesty.

Olivia's wide eyes practically bug out of her face, but at least she stops crying. "Oh god. I'm sorry."

I'm fuming, but I really have no one to blame but myself. "It's fine."

"Oh, your clothes." She bends as if she's going to put my jeans back together by hand, and of course my cock and tentacles all jump to attention, the glowing tips of every limb that's not absolutely necessary to keep me upright coiling toward my fated mate.

Not that I believe in that bullshit. Just obviously my body has other ideas.

"Really. It's fine." I move back as far as I can make myself, and Olivia straightens.

There's an awkward pause as we look at each other. Her lip wobbles and my anger rises again.

"Really, what the fuck are you doing here, Zeston?"

She tips her head, the motion drawing my gaze to a rack of magazines behind her. I narrow my eyes, trying to read the headline before it dawns on me.

That asswipe in the photo on the front cover is her ex-boyfriend.

And yeah, I did some Google stalking. That does not mean I'm interested in her or I care about her situation. I just wanted to reassure myself that the guy's an idiot and he deserved to lose her.

That's all.

"Oh shit." I look closer, spotting the woman in the photo. "Is that her?"

Olivia nods and her eyes well with tears again.

For fuck's sake. I'm making this worse.

Any moment Brenda from Mum's book club is going to come into the aisle and spot me standing here in ruined clothes, berating Olivia while she cries, and next thing you know I'll be sitting through a three-hour lecture at my parents' kitchen table or, worse, an intervention with my older brothers. I barely dodged her in aisle nine when I came in.

It sure is hell having two charming, perfect older brothers who both act like the sun shines out their asses and butter wouldn't melt on their fins.

"Well fuck."

At that moment a trolley rounds the corner of aisle five, but it's not Brenda at the helm. Oh no. Far worse.

It's my older brother, Jack. He has his head turned, looking at rolls of toilet paper on the far side of the supermarket, so I have about thirty seconds to act.

I can hardly leave Olivia standing here weeping in the middle of the supermarket, but I can't let Jack see this. He'll assume the worst. That I've made her cry—haven't I?—that this is yet another girl who got the wrong idea about me despite me saying a hundred times I don't do relationships.

I glance down to where my glowing tentacles are still trying to touch every part of Olivia I can reach and realize just how dire the situation is. My brother will get some stupid idea in his head about what that means and I'll never hear the end of it.

"Come on." I put my hand around Olivia and instantly regret it. It makes all my tentacles seethe harder toward her, and I have to grit my teeth and force them away from her ass and thighs. "Let's get you out of here."

"But I need breakfast!"

I swivel my head to stare down at her in astonishment. "Breakfast? I thought I kept mad hours. It's almost two o'clock."

Her jaw drops.

Shaking my head, I tow her toward the exit. "I'll cook you something." I don't really need groceries today. I have plenty in the pantry. Not knowing what else to do, I hustle her out of the store and onto my bike.

Why the fuck did I make that promise?

I'll blame it on the pressure of not letting Jack know my secret. I'd rather not admit that the thought of taking her home and feeding her feeds something buried deep inside me. That the thought of helping stop those tears and rescue her from her mini-crisis is satisfying to me on a level I didn't think I was capable of any longer.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

She gets on the bike willingly enough, and I'm able to shift back to my two legged form, which makes it much easier to ride with her there. Olivia's arms around my waist feel a little too good, but I ignore that and kick the bike into gear, cursing my bad luck at running into her again like this. At not being able to control my reactions to her. At allowing my impulses to take over once again.

I should be looking for an excuse to be rid of her. But when I stop the bike in the carport below my apartment and Olivia gets off, she looks at me in embarrassment. "I thought you meant at The Snapper!"

I shrug. "It's closed on Monday. Today's my day off."

Her cheeks flush an even deeper red, making the freckles over her nose stand out. "Oh, please don't worry. I'll just go. I—"

I cut her off, unwilling to let her talk herself into leaving now. "Come on. You're here now. Might as well let me make you something to eat. You won't get anything at Bella Vista. Will you?"

She shakes her head. "No. Apparently not on Monday. Are you sure?"

"Wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it," I tell her gruffly. Then I turn away so she won't see me smile when she follows me up the stairs and waits while I unlock the door.

Another big mistake, no doubt.

I just can't seem to help myself where Olivia Zeston is concerned.

NINE

Olivia

Noah's place is small but immaculate. I can't help looking around, mentally cataloging every detail as fast as I can. A small sofa, no TV. A big kitchen for the size of the apartment. Neat and clean and wiped down. Utensils and pans hang from hooks beneath the cabinets and on the ceiling. Herbs in little pots are fixed to the wall. A gas range and a large, fancy looking oven. Yeah. A chef's place, even if he is a bachelor. There's a corridor I assume leads to the bedroom and bathroom. A glass sliding door looks out over a balcony, and I can just make out an ocean view. The sounds of the waves rolling in the distance is a hum in the background.

I'm a little embarrassed at being in his home after everything that's happened. I'm still blushing from my stupid meltdown in the supermarket for heaven's sake.

"You want something to drink?" Noah shuts the door behind him and toes off his shoes, striding to the kitchen and taking a bottle of red wine from the pantry and setting out two glasses before I've even replied. "You look like you need a drink." He pours a little into one glass and pushes it toward me, and I accept it gratefully.

"Let me just get changed out of this." He gestures at his ruined jeans, and I blush all over again.

"I'm so sorry."

He sighs. "Hazard of being a kraken," he says ruefully. "I should have known better."

Striding up the corridor, he disappears for a moment, and I hear wardrobe doors open

and the swoosh of clothing being dropped and pulled on over long legs.

I try not to think about how bad I must look in my most unpresentable outfit, only suitable for long plane trips and airports. With my hair in a mess piled on top of my head and no makeup on.

I guess Noah's not looking at me like that anyway, so no need to worry.

It doesn't stop me wishing I was looking slightly more glamorous. Like Rechelle Oaks looking effortless in leisure wear.

A moment later he reappears, and my mouth goes dry at the sight of him in gray sweatpants with a white tank top over them, relaxed and sculpted and absolutely stunning without even trying.

I can't seem to stop myself tucking the loose strands of hair behind my ears and shifting on the stool at the kitchen counter every time his gaze fixes on me.

He pours himself a drink and takes a large mouthful before setting down his glass and opening the fridge. "You like pasta?"

"Hmm?" Not me getting distracted by the way the muscles in his back move under his shirt. He really is very attractive.

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Cheer up, sad sack. I'll have to put you to work to snap you out of it."

"Oh I'm happy to help. What can I do?"

Noah fetches a wooden chopping board, a knife, and a handful of basil. "Chop this. Not too fine."

While I go to work on the herbs, he takes a second board and deftly slices some onion and a chorizo sausage in the time it takes me to chop the basil.

I watch while he halves some cherry tomatoes and takes down a wide flat frying pan and sets it on the stove. He puts a pot of water on to boil and seasons it before turning back to me. “Wanna talk about it?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I shrug. Not really, but I don't want to not talk either. I unlock my phone and turn the screen toward him without reading any more of the awful messages. Now that I'm not staring like a deer in the headlights at the magazine cover, all the nasty messages have come back to the forefront of my mind.

He takes the phone from me and reads silently. As I watch, his expression blackens and he lets out a mumbled curse. "Fuck that. People are all assholes. Why don't you delete the app?"

He hands the phone back, and I put it into my pocket. "I can't. That's my job."

He braces his hands on the bench, thinking. "Clear your inbox, block the fuckers."

I nod. "I need to. I just can't deal with it right now."

He holds out his hand again, gesturing for me to give him the phone. I do, and he bends his head over the screen, thumbs working and frown deepening.

When the water boils, he looks around for a moment, jerking his head toward the pantry. "Pasta's in there. Add about half a bag." Then he goes back to the phone. "Turn the other burner on."

By the time I've added the pasta to the water and figured out how his range works, he hands me back the phone. "That's most of it for now. I'll take another look later if you like."

"Thank you." God this guy seems destined to be my hero every time I'm having a

dark moment. He certainly seems to have a knack for being exactly what I need, exactly when I need it.

He tosses the onion and tomato in the pan, flicking it casually so the food is browned evenly on all sides. Then he adds the sausage. By now the savory smell is making my mouth water. How is it possible for something with only three ingredients to smell better than some of the hatted restaurants I've eaten in? But that's the beauty of a truly good combination. Sometimes simple, fresh, and perfectly seasoned trumps complex and over fussy.

"This is what I make when I can't be bothered cooking for myself," he tells me, tossing the food in the pan again.

I smile to myself. What I make when I can't be bothered cooking is an Uber Eats order, but I guess that's why I'll never be a chef.

"If you want my advice for nothing, I'd tell you you're better off."

Huh? Oh, Justin. I drag my mind away from the delicious smells Noah is producing and try to focus. I nod. "I mean, I know that intellectually. Clearly things haven't been good for a while. It just hurts, you know?"

"Yeah. I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I wish I didn't, but I do."

When I don't say anything more, he sighs and switches off the stove. He turns and leans against the counter. "I don't usually bother explaining. Everyone around here already knows, and new people don't need my sob story. Only I think you do, don't

you, Zeston?”

“Maybe. If you don’t mind.” I would never have dared to ask, but I’m so curious.

“I was engaged once. When I was younger.” He takes the knife and stabs it violently into the chopping board so it stands straight up. “Younger and stupid. It didn’t end well.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “Why be sorry? It’s not your fault. She didn’t know I was a kraken. This was back before monsters came out. I should have told her. I guess a part of me always knew she wouldn’t stick around.” He yanks the knife from the board and rinses it in the sink. “When she first found out, she pretended everything was OK. We were still planning the wedding. I bought her dress and paid for everything. I didn’t find out until I was standing at that fucking altar waiting for her like an idiot. She left me waiting there a whole hour before she called.”

“Oh, Noah. That’s horrible.”

The smile on his face holds no mirth. “That’s not the best part. The best part is I found out later she and my best friend had been screwing for a month before that. Two months later, they were married.”

He turns and removes the pot from the heat, draining the steaming water before adding the cooked pasta to the pan with the sauce. “Fool me once, or so they say. I don’t plan on having that happen twice. So I steer clear now.”

“Of women?”

He plates up the food and garnishes with cheese and a sprinkle of herbs. “Of

relationships. It's not worth it. It never is."

I'm quiet for a while. Mostly because I take a bite of pasta and basically die and go to heaven. It's savory and a little sweet burst of flavor from the tomato and the hint of garlic from the sausage is just everything. I take about five more bites before I come up for air. I kinda wish I had my notebook!

Then I look around at Noah, who's come to sit beside me at the counter and is digging into his own bowl. "But don't you ever just want to um... let off steam?" I shift uncomfortably. I don't want to make this weird after he's been so nice to me, but I can't help remembering the other night. The way he kissed and touched me was not the way a man kisses and touches if he's celibate.

He chuckles. "You mean if I want a fuck? I never said I didn't do that. I just don't do feelings."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“Well that must be hard on the women of Kraken Cove. I bet they find it hard not to get feelings for you.” I flush and look down into my bowl. I’ve revealed too much, but honestly, I can see him being really addictive. He’s bitter on the front of the palate like tonic, but beneath that, I think there’s depth and sweetness and maybe even a little vulnerability.

“That’s why I prefer seeing people from out of town if I can,” Noah says, continuing our conversation. “It’s easier that way. Simpler. Comes with a built-in expiry date.”

Huh. I mull over that a while, swirling the wine in my glass. Eventually I bite my lip and blurt out the thing I wanted to say all along. “You mean like me?” I dart a glance at him under my lashes, hoping. He’s going to say no. I know he will, but oh I could go for some hot rebound sex right now.

“Oh no.” He shakes his head, confirming my fear. “That would be a very bad idea, Zeston.”

I knew he would say that. I knew it and I’m still disappointed.

We eat the rest of our meal in silence. It’s so delicious I finish in record time and am tempted to lick the bowl to get the last of the oily sauce.

Noah takes the bowls and puts them in the sink. I can’t stop thinking about what he said about people from out of town. OK, I can’t stop thinking how hot rebound sex with Noah Wilson would be.

Finally, I move to the sofa and tuck my feet up under me while he cleans the last of

the things in the kitchen. I'm going to miss my chance in a moment. He'll change the subject or tell me it's time for me to go home. I gather my courage. "Why? Why is it a bad idea? Like you said, I'm not from here. When it ends, I'll fly back to the other side of the world and that's it. No awkwardness. No loose ends. Plus, I'm on the rebound. I'm not exactly in a position to start anything serious. I don't even know if I'll ever have another serious relationship."

He snorts, still bending over the sink.

"What?"

"Don't kid yourself, Zeston. You'll absolutely have another serious relationship. You won't be able to help yourself."

"You don't know that."

"Yeah I do. Just look at you. You're the wife type. The type who wants to settle down."

I glance down at my beige twin set and slides. At the hair tie around my wrist and the tangled locks of my long hair falling across my breasts. I guess he's right. I'm not exactly the seductive siren type. The sexiest pair of panties I own are white with tiny strawberries on them. I'm more flannel than Chanel.

I swallow down a tight feeling in my throat and keep my smile on my face. "What if this is my lightbulb moment, huh? What if this is when I learn how to fuck around and not get feelings?"

Noah chuckles again and I can't help noticing how his light hazel eyes sparkle and the corners crinkle when he does. "I'd like to, Zeston. Believe me. But I don't think I can trust you not to get too involved."

It's reckless. I'll probably regret it. I can tell by the way I want this too much already. And he's right about me. I'm still hoping for something lasting. Something real. But I also want to be with him again—badly. So I tug my lower lip between my teeth and smile up at him. “What if I promise?”

His gaze drops to my lips, and for a moment I think he's going to kiss me right then. A spark of awareness sizzles through me and I press my legs tighter together to savor it. “Oh, you are dangerous.”

“Me?” I bat my lashes innocently, loving the feeling of tempting this gorgeous guy.

Noah curses and runs a hand through his hair. “Fuck it. You know what? Fine. I've never pretended to be a saint. You wanna do this, we do this, but there are rules.” He waves a finger in my face. “Rules we don't break.”

“Of course. Like what?”

“No staying over.”

“OK.” That's fine. I can handle crawling back into my bed at six in the morning after he's rocked my world all night.

He narrows his eyes. “And no pet names or cutesy talk.”

I laugh. “Easy. Anything else?”

“No kissing.”

My mouth falls open. No kissing? The thing I've been dreaming of ever since that night.

“Don’t look at me like that, Zeston. Kissing you was a bad mistake last time. Look where it got us. Far too carried away, that’s where,” he says.

That seems like a mighty sacrifice, but since my choice is between that and nothing, I guess my hands are tied. “OK.”

He watches me for a moment more, arms folded across his chest as if waiting for me to break. I hold his gaze.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

He coughs. “Good. Then we know where we stand. What this is and what it’s not.”

I nod. “Exactly. And if I get hurt, that’s on me,” I say nonchalantly. I can’t see it going that far. I’m not planning on being in Australia long enough to really get involved and I’m still recovering from Justin. Besides, there’s no way

“Huh. Maybe I can teach you how to fuck and not have feelings. I’m somewhat of an expert now after all.”

Then we’re smiling at each other and the tension in the air is palpable. We’re doing this. We’re really doing this. He said yes, despite the way I look. Despite the fact I’m a mess and he’s picked up the pieces twice in the last two days. Despite his obvious reservations.

I don’t know what comes over me. Maybe it’s the hormones rushing through my body. The sizzling anticipation of being so close to him, of having his undivided attention fixed on me. Maybe it’s the two glasses of wine.

Whatever it is, I set aside the glass of water on the coffee table and say brazenly, “So are you going to fuck me yet, Wilson? Or are you going to make me wait all night?”

TEN

Noah

I laugh. I can’t help it. It’s good to see some spark in her after the way she was earlier.

Need for her is already pumping through every vein in my body. The sweet ache travels to the very tips of my fingers and toes as I consider how far I'm willing to take this tonight.

Even as I remind myself to be careful, I slide forward on the sofa until our thighs are touching. Her eyes go wide as I lean in. Our faces are so close I can feel her warm breath on my cheek, but we're not kissing.

I lost myself to it last time. Forgot the rules.

I won't be so stupid this time.

Despite the conversation we just had, Olivia's gaze drops to my lips. Her lids drift and her long lashes flutter. Bloody hell. I'm already thinking about breaking the rules again.

I refuse to give in. I won't cup the back of her neck, bring her mouth to mine to claim what we both want. Instead, I grip her chin, resting a thumb on those soft pink lips. Give her something else to keep her mouth occupied for a while.

Her mouth parts, and I push my thumb inside, demanding entrance like I want to demand entrance to every one of her holes.

"Oh, have I been keeping you waiting, hmm?"

She can't answer around my thumb, and I don't withdraw it to let her. Instead, I push her gently back until I'm bracing myself over her, my pelvis already nestled between her legs.

My cock is already hard.

I press closer, rocking my hips to let her know what's coming. God, the way she moans around my thumb has me dangerously close to losing control.

I pull back, pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it aside before I slide the sweatpants over my hips.

She watches hungrily as I fist my cock and stroke it slowly up and down. "You weren't the one left hot and bothered the other night. Maybe it's my turn to take what I want from you."

She nods. A small jerky motion as her tongue darts out to wet her lips. "Y-yes. I want to do that for you."

"I won't be gentle," I warn her.

"You don't have to." She sits up on one elbow, still watching while I tease my cock with my hand.

Well I like her spirit. She's not doing this by halves, and I can admire that.

Stepping close, I bring my cock to her mouth, waiting as she tips her head and opens for me. As the tip slides over her tongue, I have to turn away from the eager look in her eyes. For a moment I concentrate on my breath, on keeping my knees steady as I thrust my hips and fill her mouth.

Jesus, she takes me deep. Not all the way, but she doesn't pull back or lift a hand to stop me going as far as I want. I pull back myself when I feel her throat constrict and hear her gag.

Her eyes water, but she hasn't moved. She's still waiting there for me to use her face for my pleasure. I'm not sure even a better guy than I am could resist that.

Sliding a hand into her hair, I angle her face to my liking and sink my cock back between her lips. This time she closes them around me, cheeks hollowing out as she sucks me on the way out.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Christ, I need to be careful or I'll get carried away again. She looks so sweet watching me through watery eyes. Mouth open for my use, expression hungry and willing.

I pump my hips, thrusting into her mouth until the sweetness threatens to overtake me. Reluctantly, I slow, pulling back to allow her a breather.

Or me. I'm enjoying this far too much already.

When she pulls back, saliva coats my cock and trails to her lips as she sucks in a long breath. It's not wet enough yet to shift me. Saliva doesn't have quite the same qualities as tears or water. The salt in tears makes them especially dangerous. But it's not far off. She pulls forward against my hold on her hair, licking up the base of my shaft and drawing a muttered curse from me.

"Tell me what you want. Your mouth feels amazing, but what do you want from me?"

"I—?" She colors and drops her gaze. "Whatever you want."

I shake my head. "First mistake, Olivia. I'm not your boyfriend. This is a hookup. Don't trust me to make you feel good. Demand what you want."

Without giving her time to answer, I push her further back until her head is resting over the arm of the sofa. Then I lean over her to spread her legs and touch her over the thin yoga pants she has on as I plunge my cock back between her lips.

She parts her legs further, moaning around me as I use her mouth. At this angle, I can go deeper still and I take advantage. Soon I'm gritting my teeth, holding my own pleasure back while I rub her through her clothing, giving her enough pressure to make her hips roll as her need builds.

I love that this is turning her on like it's doing to me. That she wants this, even as she needs more. She lets me take what I want from her without protest, and I want her to protest. I want her to demand her own pleasure. I want her to chase it, to take it from me. That's how you fuck when there are no feelings involved. Ruthlessly. Hungrily. Until you've slaked your lust on the other person just as they have with you.

That's the first lesson Olivia needs to learn.

Her chest rises and falls with every rough circle of my fingers over her clit. Lifting her hips, she meets my touch, begging silently for more than what I'm giving her even as she drives me closer to my own orgasm every moment.

Usually I'd hold back. That's the difference between men and women. If I come too quickly, there will be a recovery period. Usually I'd take care of my partner first several times. Just because I'm ruthless in taking what I want doesn't mean I don't want them to enjoy themselves too. But if she wants this from me, she needs to ask. To demand.

My hips pump in a steady rhythm. My balls tighten as she takes everything I demand of her.

I'm naked, but she's still fully clothed, a fact I'd like to rectify. Only I don't want to stop now.

All my pent-up frustration from the last few nights rises to a crescendo. All that need I refused to release until now.

Roughly, I yank her top up to bare small pert breasts. Her nipples are tight with need, their dusky pink color standing out starkly against Olivia's pale skin. I remember how sensitive they are.

She cries out when I stop touching her pussy, but her mouth is busy. Cupping both breasts, one in each hand, I increase my speed until my orgasm is inevitable. I squeeze her, loving the way her back arches. She moans around my cock.

I don't stop to ask if I can come in her mouth, I just unleash. I come right down her throat, and, panting, I pull back to look down at the needy mess I've made of her.

Olivia wipes a hasty hand across her mouth. She presses her legs together and I know she must be aching. But she sits, adjusting her hair and smoothing down her top.

"God damn it, Zeston. Ask me!"

She blinks. "Oh, but I thought..." She squirms and I can see her fighting herself. "I thought you were making a point about the other night." Her cheeks are flushed, her hair a mess. She looks a picture of contrition and desire.

I should leave her like this and do just that.

Instead, a growl tears from my throat. "Do you need to come or not?"

"Yes." The word is barely a whisper, but the look of need she shoots me has my spent cock twitching and sends a twist of guilt through me.

Dropping to my knees before her, I grasp the waistband of her pants and yank them over her hips. She gasps as I tug them free of her ankles and toss them aside. "Then ask me to make you come."

“Make me...” She cuts herself off, blushing furiously, but I’m too impatient to wait any longer.

I pull one leg over each of my shoulders and dip my head toward her slick and swollen pussy. “Close enough.”

As soon as I get close, I can see how much she needs this. Her lips are plump and wet. The little nub of her clit pushes out from the hood, begging for my attention. Well she’s fucking got it.

Lowering my head, I take my first proper taste, and it nearly ends me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Sweet, tart, full of womanly promise and rich flavor; she's like my perfect meal. I've had one single taste and can already see how I could get addicted. I could live on my knees in front of this woman and never want to come up for air.

Ignoring that thought, I bend my mind to my task. I might have had my pleasure, but Olivia is still desperate for release. A state I've brought her to.

I thought I could do it, but I can't leave her like this.

She cries out as I run my tongue along her labia, up to tease at her clit with a light touch. Another swipe of my tongue on the other side, and she's practically vibrating with need.

Another day I could draw this out. I could make her suffer while she waits for me to give her what she wants. I could make her beg me.

Today she's had it rough. She's hurting and needy, already at breaking point.

Today is not that day.

It's probably a bad sign that I'm already thinking about the next time even before this time is over.

I ignore that too, planting my mouth over her most sensitive place and suckling until her hips buck and she squeezes her thighs around my ears.

She gasps as I draw on her a little harder. Moans when I use my teeth. By the time

I've worked out what she likes, she's writhing on the sofa, head thrashing from one side to the other. Her eyes are squeezed shut while I play with her, hands clutching the sofa cushion as her back bows, pushing her cunt into my hungry mouth.

Not much longer now.

Using the flat of my tongue, I press right over her clit, firm and commanding, giving no quarter.

Olivia gasps.

Using suction and pressure, I work her hard. I cup her ass and keep her right where I want her. I can feel her pussy clenching around my fingers as I thrust inside her, curling them to hit the spongy surface of her upper wall. I just keep right on going.

"Oh my god!" She lifts her head, clawing at the sofa as if she's trying to get away. I'm worried she's going to tell me to stop. Of course I would, though I don't want to.

I press that secret place inside her, and with a final cry she shudders and bursts all over my face. Sweet liquid coats my lips and drips down my chin. I slow my frantic movements and drink it in.

Delicious.

Wet.

I barely register the shift until glowing tentacles are creeping up her legs, eager to savor the flavor better than I can with my mouth alone.

Olivia's mouth drops open and she stares.

I'd stop and pull back, but there's no taming my questing tentacles right now. I'd be worried about scaring her, but the look she's giving me is anything but scared. Awed, slightly embarrassed. I've seen this expression enough times to know a woman who didn't know she could squirt until now.

“Did I just—?”

I nod, giving her pussy one final kiss before I lift my head. “Your first?”

Her laughter is breathless, and my cock, which was already growing hard again, stiffens fully at the sound of that laughter. “Oh my god.”

Her head flops back onto the sofa.

“Next time you'll know what to do, won't you? And you won't fight it.”

“Oh my god,” she says again weakly.

Listen to me. Next time? I nearly invited her back again tomorrow. Time to wrap things up here.

ELEVEN

Olivia

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

All I want to do is flop back onto Noah's couch and lie there in a puddle of bliss for about five more hours. I've never squirted before. I didn't even think I could, and somehow this guy drew that out of me like he was draining my mind out through my pussy.

Noah stands, or rather draws himself upright, on his eight tentacles. He wipes his face with his hand, and I'd feel embarrassed only his next move is to lick his fingers like he didn't get enough of my flavor after I exploded in his face.

Oh wow.

My pussy gives a limp attempt at a flutter and most of the rest of my body is starting to think about round two when Noah pats my leg. "Go clean up and I'll drive you home. Bathroom is at the end of the hall. Fresh towels are in the cupboard on the left."

Oh right.

We're not doing cuddles after or cute nothings or feelings. I'm apparently not even allowed to catch my breath. At least he's offered me a clean towel and a shower, I guess.

I make my way down the hall on shaky legs and only once I get to the bathroom and switch the shower on do I remember I'm not wearing pants and I have nothing to dress in once I'm showered.

My pants and underwear are in a pile somewhere beside Noah's sofa in the living

room.

Feeling the heat creep up my neck, I open the bathroom door and peek around it. Noah is nowhere to be seen, but given I can only really see the corridor and a sliver of living room, that doesn't tell me much.

I mean, I know he's basically seen me naked and his face was up close and personal with my pussy moments ago, but somehow I feel weird about walking around with no bottoms on in front of him.

I scurry out of the bathroom, only to run straight into him as he comes around the corner. He catches me with a laugh. "What? Back for more so quickly? Didn't I do a good enough job?"

I squirm. "I need my things."

He narrows his eyes. "Because it would be weird to have a shower and walk back out here naked, but scurrying around like a frightened rabbit with no pants on is normal?"

"Hey!" I instinctively slap his chest, which I'm glad to say does absolutely no damage. It's like solid muscle. "I'm not like a frightened rabbit."

"A mouse?"

I huff. "A jellyfish maybe."

Noah scowls. "What does that mean?"

I try to brush it off. "Oh, you know."

"No. Enlighten me."

“Well, it’s just that my bottom half is um... not my best half.”

“I disagree.” He holds me at arm’s length to inspect me, and the flush that makes my freckles stand out over my cheeks lights up my face yet again. “Actually, I’m not sure. I think I need to take a look at both halves together.”

He releases me but just waits there, obviously expecting me to drop the towel in front of him and let him look. This is not how I thought this was going to go. Behind me the shower is running, but Noah just leans against the doorway and folds his arms across his chest. “Come on, Zeston.”

“Fine.” Impulsively, I release the towel from around my hips, tug my top over my head and toss it in his face. “Happy now?”

Noah catches it quickly, still staring at me. His grin spreads. “Yes. And I have to agree with you. Your bottom half is not your best half.”

It’s fair. They’re my words after all, but my heart swoops to my toes and I drop my eyes so I don’t have to look at his face.

“They’re both equally good,” he continues. “I can’t choose. I think we might have to add a new rule. Be naked as much as possible.”

I look up startled, but I can’t tell if this is another dry joke or if he really means it.

“Go on. Shower if you’re going to. Then I’ll take you home.”

I turn and let out a squeak when he slaps my ass playfully.

“Mmm, that is a nice ass, though.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I almost manage a little sway of my hips as I walk away from him and into the bathroom, clothes forgotten. He thinks my ass is nice! This god of a creature thinks all my parts are nice.

I'm not sure I believe it, but since I guess he doesn't have any motive for lying, he might just be genuine.

That's all it takes to paste a huge smile on my face for the rest of the evening. It doesn't even faze me when I catch him in the doorway of the bathroom, watching me shower. I simply switch off the water, strut from the shower, and towel off quickly, breezing past him as if I walk around naked all the time.

I think I would if I had Noah around all the time just for the appreciative look on his face.

Collecting my things, I dress with regret and let him take me out to the bike and the quick ride home. At least this time he doesn't tear off down the hill as soon as my key is in the door. He waits until the door is closed before I hear him start the engine up again and take off.

I fall into bed and press my fingertips to the smile that's lingering on my lips.

That was just as good as I hoped it would be.

Now I need to make sure I don't let my heart get carried away because I need what just happened at least a hundred more times in my life.

TWELVE

Noah

As soon as I'm back home after dropping Olivia at her bed and breakfast, I strip off and wrap my towel around my waist, heading for the pool in my apartment complex. Technically the pool closes at ten, but that just means I won't have to share it with any of the other residents. I hate sharing.

And if anyone is offended by my naked late-night swimming, they haven't yet dared to complain to the strata management.

That first moment when I drop the towel and dive into the water feels almost as good as sliding my cock into Olivia's waiting mouth. By the time I'm immersed, I've shifted. My skin feels loose and soft. The tension falls away from my shoulders and I sigh, making a cloud of bubbles rise to the surface above me.

I don't bother coming up for air. In this form I can breathe through the gills, which open on my neck. Instead, I swim a few lazy laps in the too small pool and tuck myself into a corner, using four tentacles to keep myself in place.

God that was good today with Olivia. I could get used to having her around. This should be a red flag waving in my face, but I ignore it. That blowjob was too good to pass up the opportunity for at least one more when it's practically beating down my door. It's been a while since I fucked anyone I had that much chemistry with. Hard to define, impossible to predict, but you know it when you feel it. And with Olivia, I definitely feel it.

Not that I'm going to get all hung up on her.

I'm not.

I can safely fuck her a few more times while she's in town and when it's time to say goodbye, I'll put her out of my mind and move on with my life.

I'll miss the sweet taste of that pretty cunt, though.

And Olivia Zeston might have the softest skin in both hemispheres with the prettiest dusting of light brown freckles and the cutest nose.

OK, this needs to stop.

I throw myself into action, twisting to launch myself through the pool. I swim laps until I'm not thinking about anything else but the perfect time to spin into a turn, the perfect way to move my tentacles through the water to propel my body at the fastest speed.

When the water is churning and I'm satisfied my little episode is over, I haul myself over the edge of the pool and grab my towel. Wrapping it around my hips, I stalk back to my apartment and into a long hot shower. Every time I see Mum she berates me about my skin looking dry and that I'm not taking proper care of myself. She always tells me I should move back home so I can sleep underwater like a kraken should, but I can't bring myself to do that.

I value my independence too much.

Besides, my evening regimen of a swim and a shower is almost as good. I'm fine. I don't need her fussing over me.

Against my better judgment, I exchanged numbers with Olivia in case there's more online trolling overnight. So when I check my phone and see there's a message from her, I think at first it's bad news.

When I open it, however, I discover she just has a thing or two to learn about the whole fucking without feelings game.

Olivia: thanks for tonight. You're a really great cook and I had a good time *heart emoji*

I roll my eyes and toss my phone aside without answering. Can't let her get into the habit of expecting a response every time. That sends entirely the wrong message. And I'll have to speak to her next time about her use of emojis. Even a wink or the melting emoji would have been a better choice here. A heart is too... serious. Too much.

I drop into bed and doom scroll until my eyelids are drooping and I've almost lost the urge to check again and see if she said anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I wonder how soon is too soon to see her again. I don't want her to get clingy.

I do, however, want to bury my cock in that sweet little pussy very badly. So I don't think I'll leave it too long. If I had better options around here, I'd try to mix things up by seeing someone else first; but as it is, there's no one I'd rather fuck. Not by a long shot.

I guess I could drop in on Felicity, the twenty-something blonde I met up at Bega a few weeks ago. She's a farm girl with a no-holds-barred energy I appreciate, but it's a long drive and I'm not sure she's that great of a fuck.

I eventually drift into filthy dreams of fucking Olivia senseless and wake in a better mood than I've been in for months.

I manage to avoid seeing Olivia all week. Despite my best intentions however, we fall into a pattern of messaging every day. They're not even all dirty messages. Don't get me wrong, there are a few of those. She sends me a hot selfie of her right before she gets in the shower, her hands covering up all the good bits while she shoots me a cheeky grin in the mirror. So, of course, I retaliate by sending her a thirst trap pic of my own, hand covering my junk, but only just. And it kinda escalates from there.

Somehow after that, we get talking about the best dishes that are uniquely Australian. She tries to tell me meat pies don't count, because they're actually British, and while she's not wrong, she's not really right either. The meat pie is an Aussie staple, and while it might not be a dish worth a Michelin Star, it's also something that, done well, is a comfort food of mine.

When she tells me she doesn't get it, I insist on taking her for a drive down to Tuross where a little family run bakery used to make the best meat pies in the world. She agrees, and I somehow find myself with plans on my only day off, which I usually avoid.

But when she meets me out in front of her bed and breakfast wearing a tiny pair of denim shorts, a cropped white t-shirt, and a huge smile, I'm not even mad about sacrificing all my time off just to prove a point.

In fact, I'm actually looking forward to the closest thing to a date I've had in years.

THIRTEEN

Olivia

The drive down to Tuross is two parts exhilarating and one part pure terror. Once Noah tucks me into his thick leather jacket and plants his spare helmet over my head, I cling tight to his back as he ducks and weaves around corners, dipping into each bend, making me feel like I could fall off at any moment.

Once I get used to the motion of the bike, though, I realize he's not actually going all that fast. In fact, several cars pass us when we reach a stretch where there is room to do so. Is he going easy on me? That gives me confusing, warm feelings low in my belly until I figure he's probably just worried about me puking in his helmet.

Once I can appreciate the ride, I press myself against his solid muscular back, and, yeah, my hands roam just a little over his sculpted abs. He's pretty defined for someone who works with food all day. I'd never have the willpower.

Somehow I don't think willpower is something Noah Wilson struggles with. Not based on what I've seen of him so far.

I'm already seriously questioning whether I can actually do this fucking without feelings thing, even when most of the time he treats me like a minor irritation.

Because every now and then, he sends me a cute message or I catch a photo with a proper smile, and something in me just melts.

It doesn't help that he's drop dead gorgeous.

Seriously. He's chiseled and raw. All hard edges and bright blue eyes and a fierce look that seems like he could cut you straight to the bone with one comment. So much so that I sometimes wonder what I ever saw in Justin's cookie-cutter handsome.

Noah stops the bike on the sleepy main street out in front of a cute little bakery. The red-and-white sign has flaking paint, and the metal roof looks slightly rusted, but the windows are bright and clean and the cakes in the cabinet look beautiful. Elaborately iced chocolate ganache cakes and smooth cheesecakes sit beside apple pies loaded with whipped cream, which makes the lid look like it's exploding off the pie.

Just then, a woman with cropped blonde hair and reading glasses pushed up on top of her head emerges from a room at the back of the bakery holding an enormous three-tiered wedding cake. She's moving slowly, watching the cake until she sets it on the counter.

When she looks up and spots us, her brows shoot up and she gives Noah an odd smile. "Noah! How are you, love? It's been a long time. How are your parents?"

Noah shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and talks to his shoes. "Fine, thanks. We'll just take a couple of meat pies, please. With sauce."

I try to protest when he pays, but he insists, snatching the paper bags and shoving a twenty-dollar note across the counter. He does not ask the shop keeper how she is,

and as soon as she hands us our change, he turns and leaves the bakery. I hurry after him. “So these are the famous pies, huh? Am I going to be amazed?”

He just shrugs and hands me a bag. “Dunno.”

I want to ask what just happened, but I’m smart enough to realize he probably won’t tell me. So I take the bag and reach inside to pull out the pie.

I’m about to take a bite and test out Noah’s theory when he snatches it back. “Don’t eat it here. And don’t eat it with no sauce. That’s blasphemy. There’s a spot down by the water.”

It’s warm, so we hang the leather jacket over the back of the bike and grab some drinks from the local supermarket, then we walk down the hill to a little jetty on a tree-covered inlet. We sit with our feet hanging over the edge. “Wanna talk about it?” I deliberately mirror his words to me the other night, hoping for an opening.

He just scowls into his pie.

Then looks sideways at me and gives a disparaging sigh when I try to take a bite of pie and nearly spill it in my lap.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“Here.” He takes the parcel and folds back the paper bag and the foil pan and squirts a drop of sauce onto the part I’m about to bite. Then he holds it out.

I open my mouth and he feeds me a bite, somehow making the meaty, savory flavor something erotic. The crispy, buttery pastrymelts in my mouth but crumbles on my lips, and he tilts his hand, wiping a crumb from the corner of my mouth.

I flush.

Why does he have the ability to melt me with just a look? With the slightest touch?

Noah’s pie is finished, and he insists on feeding me the rest of mine.

By the time I’m done I’m flustered, my panties are damp, and meat pies are high on the list of my favorite foods. “OK, you win. That was good.”

I’m still licking my lips, enjoying the lingering taste, when Noah leans in.

His gaze drops to my lips. I almost think he’s going to kiss me.

Then he wipes his thumb across a spot on my chin and feeds a final drop of sauce into my mouth and I try not to be disappointed. I still give his thumb a thorough sucking, hoping to have some of the effect on him he’s having on me, but he turns away, apparently unmoved.

“What did it feel like the first time you had a video go viral?” he says suddenly.

It surprises me, but it doesn't take me long to form an answer. "Unreal." I laugh. "I couldn't believe it had really happened. And when I started to get more and more followers, it took a long time before I realized how it would change my life."

He nods as if he's thought about this before. "Do you like it?"

I lift a dry leaf from the jetty beside my thigh and let it flutter into the water below us. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's great. Being able to share a hidden gem. Or when people are friendly and leave kind or encouraging messages." There's a pause and, of course, I think about this week's awful ones.

"And sometimes it's not," says Noah heavily, reading my mind.

"Exactly."

"What would you have done if you hadn't become an influencer?"

"I always wanted to be a chef, but I'm not really a very good cook." I smile at him. "I'm much better at eating and writing about food than I am at making it."

"Sometimes I don't know how you find so many ways to describe what I just feel. What I know. I love your channel. I find it hard to look away."

A shiver runs right up my spine, and it's me who can't look away from the intensely honest expression on his face as he looks at me.

"What's it like when you change? When you transform into a monster?" I don't know what makes me ask him, except that moment where the walls seem to almost have come down. I want to stay here longer, so I sort of blurt the intimate question out.

"Shift."

I frown. “Huh?”

“We call it shifting. And it’s hard to explain. I don’t think about it often. It just feels natural. I’ve been this way all my life.”

“I think it’s beautiful.” Since we’re being honest, I tell him, but I have to drop my gaze and when I hear his low chuckle, I squirm in place.

“Do you now? You’re the first human who’s ever said that to me.”

At this, I look up. “All the colors spreading over your skin? It’s amazing.”

“Maybe you’d like to watch it again.”

I can’t help matching his flirtatious grin as he pulls his shirt over his head and stands to unbutton his fly. “What, here?”

“Why not? No one’s around.”

I giggle, looking around to check, but he’s right. The area is isolated from the rest of town and surrounded by trees. The jetty is old and the building which looks like it used to be a storehouse or a club house is abandoned.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“Come on,” Noah says. “Come in with me.”

My mouth drops open. “But I don’t have my bathing suit!”

“Neither do I. What a shame that we’d both be naked. I can’t promise my tentacles won’t roam. It would be a shame for you to miss it.” With a wink, he slides his jeans and underwear over his hips, exposing his lower belly and cock. Even soft he’s impressive. I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry.

Can I do this? Skinny dipping in the middle of the day in public is such a wildly outrageous act, I’d never even consider it back home.

Noah doesn’t leave me long to consider. He tosses aside the jeans and grins at me. “Five seconds to decide, Zeston.” Then he dives right in.

FOURTEEN

Noah

Seeing Barb again was harder than I anticipated. She’s aged since the last time I saw her, but I swear that look of pity instantly took me back five years. That expression is burned into my memory. Barb was always kind to me, but hers is the face I stared at from the altar on my wedding day. My not-to-be-mother-in-law.

Not her fault her daughter’s a piece of shit.

Or maybe it is. I guess I don’t really know her. I never had the chance.

The sudden cool of the water on my skin as I dive into the inlet washes all that away, and for a blissful moment I just float as my body shifts and I relax into my kraken form.

Then there's a shriek and a splash and I'm face-to-face with Olivia, who has jumped into the water about two feet from where I'm submerged.

Well fuck me sideways. I didn't think she'd actually do it. This girl just keeps on surprising me at every turn. Little bubbles of air escape her mouth as she kicks her legs and tries to keep herself from floating to the surface, presumably so she can watch me as my body completes the shift. Too bad she's too late.

Of course my tentacles glow brighter and my cock decides that now is a good time to put on a show as well, growing and lengthening to almost its full size. And yeah, I love the way her gaze drops there and her eyes grow wide and hungry.

When she starts to drift toward the surface, impulsively I reach out and pull her close, winding my tentacles around her legs and behind her back, drawing her to me.

A flurry of bubbles bursts from her as she lets out a startled noise muffled by the water, but her skin tastes of nothing but excitement and arousal. No fear.

I like the way she tastes. Every sensor on every tentacle is primed to devour the taste of her. Being in contact with so much of her skin all at once like this is almost overwhelming.

She'll need air if I'm to keep her underwater for much longer. I could release her, take her to the surface. But I'd rather keep her right here with me. So I bend the rules a little.

Leaning close, I breathe into her mouth—not a kiss—until her eyes widen and she

draws in air from my lungs. My gills allow me to take what I need from the water around us.

It might be a mistake. Even though it's not a kiss, my lips still linger on hers, brushing sweetly against the soft skin. As soon as my mouth closes over hers, she molds against me, breasts pressing against my chest, nipples hard and pebbled.

That makes it hard to pull away, especially when my cock throbs against her belly and the tip of one tentacle strays toward her succulent pussy and I get my first taste of just how slick and ready she is for me.

Fuck.

I draw back with a shudder rather than turn the breath-giving into something more. I've never wanted anything like I want to kiss Olivia. Twisting, I curl us through the water, fighting the impulse. I should let her go. I should back away from whatever it is we're doing here before I let myself get tangled in something that will keep me from ever surfacing again, but I can't make my tentacles release her.

So I propel us deeper, away from the jetty, lazily rolling through patches of sunlight and shadow, enjoying her smile of wonder and the way she clings to me. I take us further down the inlet until we can surface away from the prying eyes of anyone who does come along the road. Not that this spot gets much traffic on a Monday in the middle of the day, but occasionally a retired fisherman picks it or a local teen wags school and comes down for a swim. I should know. I was one of them a long time ago.

When I lift us to the sunlight, Olivia stays on her back, staring up at the wisps of white cloud in the blue sky for a long moment. Then she turns her head to look at me. "It must be so amazing to be able to do that. I wish I had half a hope of moving through the water like that."

“It comes with plenty of downsides, don’t worry.”

“Like?”

“Like never really feeling accepted. It took people in Kraken Cove a long time to get over their shock when my family revealed what we were. I don’t think some people ever really got over it. I certainly never felt like we were accepted in the community the same way after that. But I guess I never did even before they knew. I was never that good at making friends.”

Olivia rights herself, kicking her feet to tread water. “Oh, I bet that’s not true.”

I snort, facing her, longing to draw her close again but resisting. “Shouldn’t make bets you’re sure to lose, Zeston.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

She giggles, splashing water in my face, which of course does nothing. “Or else what?”

Oh, so we’re playing that game, huh? I quirk my brow and I’m about to put the challenge to her when a sound along the bank catches my attention.

“...such a beautiful day. I can’t believe the weather hasn’t cooled off yet.”

There are people coming. And the voice of the woman sounds horribly familiar. Probably just my overactive imagination after seeing Barb. It couldn’t be.

In the middle of the inlet, we’re exposed. And much as I’ve got no fucks to give about who sees me naked, I’m conscious that Olivia may not want to be seen like this. Gently, I wrap my arm around her and guide her close to the edge where fallen logs and thick foliage will cover us better.

Olivia gives me a curious look. “What is it?”

“Shhh.” I place my hand over her mouth, gesturing to the shore where a couple is walking hand in hand along a small trail that leads toward us.

Then I stiffen. There are times I hate being right.

As the couple comes closer, I can’t kid myself any longer. Charlotte is wearing her hair blonde these days, but I would know her face anywhere. It’s a face which has featured in both my dreams and my nightmares. A face that haunts me to this day. And the face of the man she’s walking hand in hand with is hardly less so. After all,

we were friends for nearly ten years, until he fucked my fiancé and stole my woman on my wedding day.

I spit onto the bank in disgust.

What the fuck is she doing here?

Of course, I know what. Visiting her parents who clearly still live here and run the local bakery. It's just my luck that she picked today of all days and I had to run into her.

Even though I want to, I can't look away.

Since that day, I've refused to see her, to speak to her. I never answered her calls, never responded to her false apologies. They didn't mean anything anyway.

She chose him.

What more was there to say?

Only now, the sight of her is like a current dragging me under. I'm sucked into a whirlpool of ugly thoughts and in danger of coming out in a very black place.

I'm still pinning Olivia to the bank, my hand over her mouth. When she wriggles and twists to be set free, I release her and she looks around at me. "Are you OK?"

I can't reply. I can't even give her my full attention. My tentacles squeeze. One of which is wrapped around a tree root below the water and tightens so far there's the dull cracking of wet wood breaking.

Charlotte and Cooper are closer now. So close they're almost on us, though I'm fairly

sure they haven't spotted anything.

She turns to him and laughs. "Oh, I guess I spent a lot of time down here as a kid. I can never remember why I liked it so much."

Her statement is like a long wound sliced along my side. It doesn't sting at first. Then all of a sudden it hits me, sucks my breath away, has me doubled over in pain. This was our spot. It was where I'd always meet her.

A gasp from Olivia finally drags me out of my own head and I realize I'm squeezing her too tight, just like the tree root. I should let her go. I should apologize. Explain.

I don't do any of those things.

Instead, I loosen my grip just a fraction. Then I use my tentacles to spread her legs for me and hold her gaze as I run my hand up her thigh. "Still want to make bets you're going to lose, Zeston?" I whisper.

She gasps again, but now I'm looking; I see the way her pupils dilate.

"Think you can keep quiet?" As I say this, I slide my hand higher until I'm cupping her upper thigh, fingers grazing her outer lips.

Olivia covers her mouth with her hand and nods.

I smile darkly. This is what I need. With Olivia, I'm in control. I take what I want and don't invest myself the way I did with Charlotte. That's who I am now.

And I'm stronger for it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I dip my fingers into Olivia's core and almost forget myself when I find how needy she is. Though we're still partially submerged in the water, she's so wet her pussy is slick and slippery under my touch. Ready for me right when I need her.

My cock, gone limp while I watched Charlotte, twitches against my thigh. I'm already imagining taking Olivia right here, right now, plunging inside her warmth so she can squeeze me tight. I lean in close, breathing her in, filling my senses with her. "Gonna be a good girl and come for me?"

She trembles. The look in her eyes is hungry, pleading.

Spearing my fingers into her pussy, I relish the way she takes me. So warm. So inviting. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold off sinking my cock all the way inside, burying myself deep.

Fuck, the thought has me rock hard, grinding myself against her thigh while I work her cunt. She moans against her hand, and we share a breathless smile at how close we are to being caught.

Would I mind if Charlotte found me here like this? If I have to see her again, I must admit, this way would be preferable.

Let her remember what she missed out on.

Olivia sucks in a breath and her cunt tightens around my fingers and thoughts of my ex are suddenly the last thing on my mind.

“You like the way I touch you, hmm?”

She glances around, but it's not lost on me how her pussy tightens even further. When I add my tentacle to rub her clit, her hand flies from her mouth and her lips fall open. And I can't wait any longer.

Removing my fingers, I have my cock ready at her entrance before she can miss the feeling of being full. I slide home, watching the expression on her face as I really stretch her out. Her eyelids flutter and she whimpers with need.

God, she feels amazing. She's snug and warm around my length, and with a few thrusts of my hips, she has me all the way. Only then do I come to my senses a little. I've gone in without a rubber. “Fuck. I didn't bring a condom.”

She stares at me. “But you can pull out, right?”

I breathe out a sigh of relief, pressing my forehead to hers as I roll my hips to move inside her. “Yeah, I can pull out.”

I don't have the willpower to stop now if she's fine with it. In fact, it's a struggle to hold my orgasm back as I plunge into her over and over. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I use my tentacles to brace us and move her back and forth on my cock as I fuck her.

It doesn't take long before she's right on the edge.

Her head falls back. Small damp tendrils cling to her flushed face. I almost wish we were underwater so I had an excuse to close my mouth to hers. To distract myself, I bring a thumb to her clit and give her a little nudge to help her over the edge.

Olivia's eyes fly open and she flings an arm around my neck, holding me close. She's

trembling. I fuck and fuck her in a steady rhythm until she bursts in a sweet clench of muscles tight around my cock. The pleasure makes her whole body tense before she releases into a languid sigh of bliss.

It's almost too much.

I grit my teeth and hold on until the last second. Until I can't hold on any longer.

Then, with regret, I withdraw my cock, sheathing it in my hand instead. It's a poor replacement for the perfection of Olivia's pussy, but it will have to do. I won't risk coming inside her. With a few quick pumps of my hips, I bury my face into her neck and groan out my own release. My cum clouds the water around us for a moment as it bursts from me in waves of orange and green. I shudder. Then I lift my head to find her watching me, a huge smile on her face.

"That was so hot."

Laughter huffs from my chest as the understatement of her words hits me. "Yeah." If only there was a stronger word. Hot doesn't seem to do what we shared justice. I'm still reeling in the feeling when it occurs to me I lost track of our audience.

It hardly seems to matter now, though. And since I hear nothing on the track, I drag Olivia back into the water just so I can hold her close a few more minutes. Three tentacles and my arms curl around her tightly and I try not to think about how reluctant I feel to ever let her go.

FIFTEEN

Olivia

Something has changed between me and Noah. That afternoon he's softer, quieter.

We find a sunny spot to dry off before collecting our clothes and dressing. I still can't believe I dared to go skinny dipping in the middle of the day. And do...other things in public!

I'm sliding my leg over the back of his bike when he twists to look back at me. "You want to come back to mine for a while?"

I try to cover up the moment where my voice refuses to work and simply stare and make choked noises low in my throat with a cough. "Oh, well if you're not busy. I wouldn't say no to another Noah Wilson meal." I waggle my brows suggestively at him, hoping he'll assume I'm in it for the food, rather than because I might be quickly growing addicted to his company.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Once he's checked that I have my helmet on securely, he takes off. This time I enjoy the trip a whole lot more. I lean with him into the turns. I cling tight around his waist and breathe in the salty manly scent of him. I'm not sure I've ever noticed a man's scent the way I notice Noah's.

He pulls up at the block of units and leads me to his, opening the door and stepping aside for me to enter. It's just as neat as the last time I was here, the kitchen is spotlessly clean and even his shoes are lined up on a shoe rack by the door.

I slide mine off and add them to the rack, smiling quietly to myself at how much smaller they look next to his.

“Want a shower?”

Oh, is that what this is? Am I about to be sent to shower and taken home? Wham, bam, thank you ma'am. I mean that is kinda what I signed up for, but I hoped...

Noah pulls his shirt over his head. “Olivia, I said are you coming?”

I nearly trip trying to take off my shorts at the same time as following him to the shower. Noah turns on the water and strips completely, and it doesn't matter that we were just swimming naked together, I still can't drag my eyes away. When he steps into the shower and transforms, the sight of his skin changing to the vibrant green blue of his kraken form is mesmerizing. His butt is taut and rounded and I spend a long time gazing at that too before I realize I'm growing cold.

“Are you just going to stand there and perv on my ass, Zeston, or are you getting in?”

Cheeks hot, I hurry into the shower only to discover it's so small there's no way to be here with Noah without at least some part of our bodies touching and as long as that's happening, it's like half my brain is switched off. Noah laughs at me when he hands me the soap and I just stand there looking at him. Then he takes it back and lathers his hands and starts rubbing them over my body until the other half of my brain switches off too.

His hands feel so good. They slide over my breasts, grazing over tight, sensitive nipples, making me sigh and lean back against him. They glide down my belly and over my hips, and when he finally slides them between my legs, I squirm at the feeling of being washed somewhere so intimate, but I'm too invested in feeling his touch there to stop him.

It's not a sexual touch. Rather, it's sensual, pleasure giving without demand for more, slow and firm and unhurried.

Tentacles wind around my legs and ankles. Then my waist and arms.

When his fingers push into my hair, I almost melt onto the tiles. It feels so good to have him gently massaging my head, washing shampoo through my salty, messy tangles. He's gentle too, despite what a matted mess my hair must be after the water and the helmet.

I'm stunned when he's finished rinsing the shampoo out and he lathers his hands with conditioner and begins again.

I don't think Justin knew what conditioner was and he would never have thought to wash my hair for me, let alone use conditioner on it.

I'll probably still end up with a frizzy mess since I don't have any of my normal curl products with me, but this feels too nice to care.

“I like your hair.”

I'm tempted to tip my head to the side to check if there's water stuck in my ear. Did I hear that right? “You do?”

“Mmm. I always loved long hair on a woman and yours is so thick and fluffy.”

I can't help the snort laugh that bursts from me and I cover my face with my hands. “Fluffy! No girl wants fluffy hair!”

“Why not? I think it's nice. It suits you.”

I just shake my head. I guess even monsters are just men sometimes. I'm smiling though, as he teases gentle fingers through it. “Add more conditioner or it really will be fluffy.”

He does as I ask, working through another large dollop of conditioner.

When we get out, I find that Noah has hair gel and I use some to scrunch through my hair and hope for the best. I dress again while he wraps his towel around his waist and goes to the kitchen.

While I'm squeezing as much moisture as I can from my hair with my t-shirt, the delicious smell of frying onions and garlic draws me to join him.

I'm only wearing my bra and my denim shorts since I used my shirt to dry my hair, and now it's damp and cold.

I watch Noah cook. He moves with the same fluid grace in his human form as he did in the kitchen of The Snapper in his kraken form. It's a pleasure to watch. I could dedicate a whole video just to that.

Today he's frying minute steaks. He sets them aside while he fixes a relish with beetroot and sour cream and then plates it all up with fried onion, cabbage, and toasted sourdough. It's too early to really be dinner and we technically already ate lunch, but I don't care. I am licking my fingers after finishing the last bite when he takes my plate and puts it with his in the sink. "I guess I wouldn't mind if you stay a little longer." He leans casually on the counter, but for some reason, the look on his face is anything but casual. His gaze slides away and he turns his back to wash the dishes.

"Well I guess I could put up with you a little longer," I tell him laughingly. "The food is good at least."

That earns me a quiet laugh. Noah finishes the washing up and wipes down the benches and stove swiftly like a reflex action.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“Ok, but it's my place so I'm choosing what we watch.”

We end up watching a documentary about crazy conspiracy theories and Doomsday preppers, something I never would have pegged Noah being interested in.

We sit side by side, not touching, but about halfway through he pulls my feet, which are tucked on the sofa, into his lap and turns to look at me. “Your feet are like blocks of ice, Zeston! Are you trying to single handedly combat global warming?”

I have gotten a bit cold since I'm sitting here with wet hair and no top on. Noah gets up and gets a blanket from the bedroom, wraps me like a burrito, and pulls me against his side into a half cuddle with his arm around me. “Better?”

“A little.” It feels amazing, but I'll never admit that. He'll probably stop.

I cheat my way into two episodes of cuddles, and by the time the credits are rolling for a second time, I'm feeling pretty smug. I'm also feeling like it's getting harder and harder not to get feelings for this grumpy sea monster. He's trying so hard to be a fuck boy, but I'm starting to see there's more beneath the surface than he'd like to admit.

I'm still curious about exactly what happened back at Tuross. Whatever it was, he got really intense there for a minute and seems almost shaken since. I keep getting glimpses of this deeper side to him. Like a puppy that's been left alone too long and won't allow himself to get excited when he sees someone coming. Only his wagging tail gives him away.

“Hey, Noah?”

“Hm?”

I’m just going to come right out and say it. “What happened today?”

He stiffens, his body going tense next to me. But then he sighs. “I dunno really.” I think he’s not going to say any more, but to my surprise, he continues. “I saw someone I know. Two people. From my past...”

“Your ex?”

He makes a grunt of assent. I twist, lifting my legs over his lap to look at him properly, but he won’t meet my eyes. “Hey.” His eyes flick to mine, only to dart away again when I ask, “Is a hug against the rules?”

His mouth opens and closes, then he shakes his head.

I climb into his lap, wrap my arms and legs around him, and just hold him for a while. I don’t know if this is doing anything for him, but it makes me feel better, and after all, he told me to ask for what I want.

After a little longer, Noah’s arms close around me and we sit like that for a long time.

He lets out another deep sigh into my neck, and it might be my imagination, but a hint of moisture makes me wonder if he is crying. I’m too scared to look and ruin the moment.

Eventually he coughs. “I guess I should drive you home.”

I release him, standing and self-consciously running a hand through my hair to loosen

my now-dry curls. “Thanks.”

I’m searching for my shirt when Noah surprises me again by holding out a folded black garment. I stare.

“Take this one. I don’t like it very much anyway.”

I accept his shirt, unfolding it and slipping it over my head. It doesn’t matter what he said, it makes me smile when his familiar scent surrounds me, and when he’s not looking, I lift the collar to my nose to breathe it in.

He’s quiet on the way home and all I get by way of a goodbye is a brisk, “See you.”

But when I’m tucked up in bed still wearing his shirt, just about to switch off the light on the nightstand, a message pops up on my phone.

Noah: thanks for today. I’m sorry I’m such a shit

I hold the phone to my chest for a long moment, running his words over in my head. Why does his gruff apology feel so much more meaningful than a whole sonnet from another guy would?

SIXTEEN

Noah

Sunday lunch with my parents is a Wilson family tradition I’ve been trying to escape for years. Somehow my older brothers always manage to guilt me into it. This year, of course, they have extra ammo in the form of Dad’s cancer treatment.

I’m lying on my bed on Saturday night—technically Sunday morning—with Olivia

curled up against my side. I'm scrolling when a notification from the group chat drops down.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Luke: @Noah don't forget lunch on Sunday

Jack: Yeah where were you last week? Hungover in bed no doubt

Rather than open the app and acknowledge that I've read their messages, I dismiss the notification. I'm reluctant to move. I think Olivia is asleep and don't want to disrupt her. I went pretty hard on her just now. The wet patch we're lying in and the fact that I still haven't shifted back is good evidence for that. And I don't hate the feeling of her in my arms. Her long red curls are spread out over my arm and my pillow, perfuming my bed with the scent of her. My tentacles rove over her skin softly, tasting, caressing, smoothing out muscles which are probably sore from cramping so hard earlier.

I go back to scrolling when another message pops up.

Jack: don't forget Dad's due back in Sydney this week for the next round of chemo. I could use a hand around the Inlet Views if either of you have time

Of course I'm worried about Dad. I know my brothers are too. The chemotherapy has been taking its toll on him, you can see it. If I'm honest, that's one of the reasons I've been avoiding family lunch when I can. I hate seeing him hunched over, skin pale and dry, his bald head missing the wild crop of graying hair he's always sported. He doesn't look like my dad anymore.

I'm not a complete prick, though. With a sigh, I open the message and type out a quick reply.

Noah: I'll be there

Jack and Luke both react with a surprised face emoji and I roll my eyes.

Noah: alright you jerks. It's been busy at The Snapper. OK?

Jack: yeah, you're right. Where me and Luke are just sitting around with nothing to do

Predictably, Lukey jumps in to smooth ruffled feathers.

Luke: I know we're all busy. Mia says she can help out on reception the next few weeks and it's been great being able to offer dinner vouchers to the guests. Mum says having The Snapper open again is really boosting bookings. I guess what I'm saying is we're all doing our bit, but I'm sure Jack would appreciate any extra help you could give him while Mum and Dad are away

I'm thinking about how to reply without pissing everyone off. I've been trying to be a bit more diplomatic lately. Take a page out of Luke's book or something. Maybe I'm just feeling more mellow since I've been having great sex regularly.

At that moment, Olivia stirs, rubbing her face and blinking up at me. I set the phone aside to deal with later.

"Did I fall asleep? Sorry."

I try to ignore the way my heart squeezes at her all sleepy and rumped in my bed. "No, I think that snoring was coming from Mrs. Harrison next door."

She flushes, then narrows her eyes. "I wasn't snoring! I don't snore."

I laugh. “Sure, sure. All I can say is, it’s a good thing we’re not doing sleepovers. I wouldn’t be getting any sleep with that racket going on.”

Looking indignant, she tries to get up, but I stop her with an arm around her waist. She swats at me uselessly and I grin. “What? Nothing to say to defend yourself, Zeston?”

Olivia hooks a leg over my waist so she’s straddling me, grabs my wrists, and pins them to the bed by my head. She’s cute, so I let her.

“I think the real reason you don’t want me to sleep over is because you snore ten times as loud. Admit it.” As she grins down at me, her hair falls forward into my face. She leans closer until her nose is almost touching mine, and I’m so fucking tempted to lift my head and kiss her that I reach for a distraction.

With a surge of energy, I flip us until it’s Olivia on her back and me leaning over her. My skin has finally dried, and as I do this, I shift back, meaning I need to rely on my hands alone to pin hers to the bed. Not difficult. When I’ve transferred both her hands into one of mine, I reach between us to where her pussy is still slick and most likely tender.

She gasps confirming it.

“I admit nothing. Now do I need to make you come again to shut you up or are you going to be a good girl?”

Her eyes widen, but as I make a cautious movement around her clit, her lips part and she rolls her hips.

I chuckle to myself. I love how constantly hungry for this she is. Always ready. I could get pretty badly addicted. I guess it’s lucky that she’ll be heading home to the

States in a few more weeks.

So that's how I get distracted and forget to reply to my brothers' messages for hours. When I finally look the next morning, I groan when I see what they sent.

Jack: Could you stop by the store on your way and pick up some burger buns and salad? I know you said you're too busy to cook so you can deal with my cooking. I'm doing BBQ

It's already 12. I'm going to be late as it is.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

No help for it, though. They'll be pissed if I turn up empty handed.

I race to the supermarket, cram the first dry, probably stale buns into my backpack, and give the side eye to all the prepackaged salads. Eventually I choose some leafy greens and fresh tomatoes. I'll make something simple when I get there.

By the time I do, Jack rolls his eyes when he spots me. "So nice of you to turn up, Noah. I thought you might have stayed in bed again this week."

I push past him on my way to the fridge. "Give it a rest."

My big brother grabs a pair of tongs and gives me a final icy glare before heading out to the balcony off the living area where Mum, Dad, Luke, and Mia are talking and sipping glasses of wine or bottles of beer.

Promising myself I'll keep my cool and not start something, I chop the tomato and whip up a dressing for the salad before grabbing a beer and heading outside.

"Hey, Noah. How are you?" Mia, Luke's fiancé, is standing closest to the door and turns as I step out onto the balcony. Her polished Sydney accent and mannerisms used to piss me off, but I've long since come to terms with the fact that though she can be shy, she's not a snob. She leans in to give me a kiss on the cheek, and I return her smile. "Can't complain. What about you? Luke says you're working on the final piece for the new show."

She nods and my brother turns, wrapping his arm around his fiancée and giving me a pat on the shoulder. "Hey, Noah. Did I hear you ask about Mia's show?"

Mia flushes. “Yeah, but I was just going to say it’s coming together, OK. I wish I had time for another piece, but what I have will have to do.”

Luke shakes his head. “Baby, it’s perfect. Trust yourself.”

I simultaneously want to throw up in my mouth at how fucking smug they are together and have to fight off a stab of jealousy at their relationship. I was pretty anti-Mia at the start, but that’s only because I thought she wouldn’t stick around. I still worry sometimes if I’m honest, but I can’t argue with how much she’s invested into supporting our family. That has to count for something.

I greet my parents, noting that Dad’s skin has slightly more color today than the last time I saw him. By the time Jack’s finished overcooking the meat and we’re all sitting around the outdoor table together, I’m not feeling too bad.

My phone buzzes and I lift it to see a message from Olivia. I check it under the table.

Olivia: was going to go to the gym today but uh... I think you might have broken me. I’ll be free later if you are

When I look up to see Jack watching me across the table, I make a better effort to wipe the silly smile off my face and type back.

Noah: that’s brave. What if I want to do it all over again?

She adds a flame emoji and I think she’s not going to say anymore, but then three little dots appear as she types.

Olivia: I was kinda hoping you would

I lock the screen, sliding my phone back into my pocket and shifting as my cock

twitches at the thought of repeating yesterday's activities. Do I want to make her come until she begs me to stop? Hell yeah I do.

When I look up, Jack is still watching me. What is his problem?

Everyone's finished, so I get up and clear the table, stacking all the dishes up my arm to carry them in one go. Just as I drop them in the kitchen, my phone buzzes again in my pocket.

Only this time it's not a text, it's a photo. Olivia is lying on her bed with her legs spread. The camera is pointed at her naked pussy and the caption reads: come kiss it better

I quickly turn my phone over when a cough from behind me makes me jump. "Do I want to know who that is?" asks Luke.

"Who what is?" Jack is carrying the tongs and aluminum trays he used for the BBQ. He stops and looks between me and Luke, who unhelpfully gives me a nudge. "Go on, Noah. Enlighten us. Or have you forgotten her name already?"

"Oh, it's like that huh?" Jack rolls his eyes and sets down the things in the sink. "Is that why you were so late?"

"No. And no, it's not like anything."

They both scoff and, fair enough, I've probably earned that. I've got a bit of a reputation in Kraken Cove.

Look's expression grows serious. "Look, Noah, as long as she knows what's going on, yeah?"

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh come on. Don’t play dumb. You know you’re the local pony. Everyone’s had a ride, but I don’t think many of them are ready for how quickly they get thrown off at the end.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

“So?” I fold my arms across my chest.

“Just don’t hurt anyone else, Noah. That’s all.”

What the fuck? “I don’t know what you think I do, but I’m not a liar and I’m not out to hurt anyone. That’s why I steer clear of relationships. Unlike you morons, I realize that’s how people get hurt.”

“So she’s just another girl for you to use and discard?”

I bristle. “You don’t get to fucking talk about her like that. And you don’t get to judge me,” I shout at Jack. From the corner of my eye, I catch Mum opening the sliding door. The last thing I need is her getting in on this.

“I’m leaving.” I wipe my hands on a dishcloth and throw it onto the counter. “Thanks for another stellar family lunch.”

Without waiting for any of them to try to stop me, I storm out of the Inlet Views and straddle my bike. Then I rev the engine and scream up the hill and straight to Bella Vista Bed and Breakfast. I’d much rather be chin deep in pussy than have to deal with their shit a moment longer.

SEVENTEEN

Olivia

Noah: done. Open the door and let me in

I almost drop the phone on my face in surprise. I mean I know the picture I sent was rude, but I wasn't expecting a five-minute turnaround! I'm lying on my bed, completely naked, toying with the idea of playing with myself a little while I wait. The only thing that stopped me was I don't want to make it sore for later.

My pussy squeezes as I jump off the bed and scurry to find something to put on. Fumbling with the clothes in my suitcase, I can't seem to find anything.

There's a knock at my door. "Don't bother getting dressed, Olivia. I'll only tear off whatever you put on the second you let me in."

An actual trickle of moisture threatens to drip from my suddenly soaked pussy to trail down my inner thighs and I let out a squeak of surprise and arousal. How does he always seem to know exactly what I'm doing?

Feeling flushed and excited, I hurry to the door. The window beside the door to the balcony has a translucent curtain which I tweak aside to make sure it really is Noah. When it looks like he's alone out there, I turn the latch and pull the door open, keeping myself behind it so no one passing by outside will see me.

Noah steps into the room, immediately dominating the space. His eyes lock on me. They never leave me as he kicks the door shut behind him, drops his keys onto the console table by the window, and strips off his jacket. "On the bed. Now." His tone is more than commanding. There's a hint of urgency in the low growl of his voice. I'm not sure I've ever heard him like this. Hoping I can avoid making a complete mess of the hotel sheets, I do what he says, perching on the edge, unsure of where he wants me.

Noah strips off his shirt, reaching behind his head to yank it off in one swift movement, and even that has my pussy throbbing with need. He strides toward me before I can remember how to breathe. He moves so fluidly. I can understand when

he's on eight tentacles, but even on legs it's like he's gliding across the floor.

The next second he pushes me onto my back and uses my legs to yank my butt to the edge of the mattress. "Spread for me."

He gives me no choice, pulling my legs apart to expose my wet and needy pussy. I squirm at the feel of the cool air and his hot gaze boring into me.

"Now show me where you need me to kiss it better." The look he shoots me from between my legs is absolutely incendiary. There's no justification for a sea monster being able to set me on fire like that with a look.

Provocatively, I lower a hand to my pussy and spread my outer lips, almost blushing at the moisture there.

Noah groans. His face is so close I can feel his exhale on my sensitive folds. "Show me," he insists.

With trembling hands, I stroke up the outer labia, making my way toward my clit. It feels so good, I know I'm going to come in moments after he starts, but he's still not touching me. "Here," I whisper, voice breathy with desperation.

"I can't hear you. Tell me where you want it."

I force the words out through a dry mouth, not able to wait a moment more to feel his mouth on me. "Please. Kiss me here. Suck me. And then I need something inside me. I need to come."

His thumb replaces my fingers, spreading me wider, and he makes a low noise of approval. "Good girl. Tell me if it feels too sore."

I can't say anything for a good minute or two after his mouth descends on my slick flesh. My back bows, I open my mouth in a silent groan, and I can't help the way my fingers curl through his hair, holding him there, pleading with him for more.

If I could, I'd tell him don't stop. Never stop.

I could do this with Noah all day every day and not feel like I've had enough. I roll in the pleasure of his mouth and fingers on my pussy for far too long, selfishly enjoying the way he devours me.

Eventually I look up and open my mouth to ask if he'd like me to reciprocate. He simply pushes me back down to the mattress and keeps going until I'm a mess of need and pussy juices spilling onto his hand, dripping down his chin. I can't say at what point he shifts, but after a while I realize he must have. He couldn't possibly be touching me in as many places as he is if he hadn't. A tentacle coils around my ankle, spreading me wider. One slides up my inner thigh, teasing at all the places his tongue and lips and fingers haven't captured.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

It builds and builds until an orgasm hits that has black patches at the corners of my vision. Belly sore and voice hoarse from screams I didn't even know I was making, Noah finally pauses long enough for me to catch my breath. "Oh god. Oh my god."

I'm shaking and the strangest urge to giggle bubbles up until I can hardly contain it.

"Mmm, better now?" He kisses my inner thigh softly.

I nod. "So much better. Just what the doctor ordered. But what about you?"

He shushes me, climbing onto the bed and pulling me into his arms. I'm too floppy and dazed to protest anymore, so I curl up at his side and let him stroke my hair until my eyelids are drifting closed. Which is ridiculous, because it's the middle of the afternoon and I've done practically nothing but lie in bed all day.

Noah's quiet for a while. When he still makes no move to continue, I blink open my eyes and look up at him. "Is everything OK?"

His hand on my hair stills. At that moment he shifts back to his human form, his skin changing from the pretty blue-green hue to the light tan of a guy who spends his free time in the sun. "Is this—am I hurting you, Olivia?"

"I—" I don't know what to tell him. Is he asking about my pussy? My gut says it's deeper than that.

Noah scowls. "I guess that's my answer."

“No. It’s not like that, I just...” I look away, unable to hold eye contact, and consider confessing the feelings I’ve definitely been developing. He said it was against the rules. I’m sure if I tell him I’ll miss him when I leave Australia, he’ll call it quits now. But I can’t face lying to him.

“I might have broken the rules just a little bit,” I tell him eventually, still not able to make eye contact.

A gentle hand at my chin encourages me to look up at him again. “What do you mean, Olivia?”

There’s something so intense in his gaze. A need there I can’t put words to. For a moment it looks almost as if he’s feeling a little like I’m feeling now, desperate to hear the words I know won’t be said. To know that he cares. “Well, I know you said you don’t do feelings, but I can’t help it. I actually like you.” My eyes skate away from his again and this time he lets me.

I sit and tuck my knees up into my chest, unable to bear the incredible moment of vulnerability any longer.

Then he shocks me again by rubbing a hand over his face and saying, “Yeah. Me too. I mean I actually like you.”

I’m staring. My heart pounds against the base of my throat and my palms are sweaty. “You do?”

Noah lets out a little laugh. “I know. Wild, huh? I don’t like anyone very much. Myself included, but I like you, Olivia Zeston, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” The words burst from me. Thoughtless as an ocean breeze, wishful and stupid. Of course he will. Or I will, because I don’t want to stop.

“I think you’re full of shit.” His sardonic look twists the truth out of me.

“OK, look. It’s true. It will hurt when it’s time to say goodbye, but here’s the thing. It would hurt just as much if that’s today or a week from now or months from now.” God, imagine months of this. I think I will be completely and utterly in love with him after months of wicked grins from over the top of my pussy or thoughtful caresses when he thinks I’m asleep.

“Hmm.” Noah sighs. “So you’re saying I’ve already hurt you?”

“Maybe it can’t be helped.” I can’t stand the dejected look on his face. My lower lip trembles and tears threaten to well in my eyes, so I blink them back. “But you’ve also given me so much.”

He scoffs.

I take his hands in mine, willing him to believe me. “I would never have thought I’d find this kind of passion and kindness. Not in a million years. You’re only a friend and you already treat me a hundred times better than Justin ever did.”

He curses. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? That guy is a piece of work, but, Olivia, you deserve better. So much better.”

“I know.” I squeeze his hands. “I know because you showed me. And now I won’t settle for less. And I have you to thank for that.”

“Stop being nice to me, Zeston.”

“I’m not. I’m being honest.”

Noah sighs. “I know you are. You’re always honest with me. That’s one of the things

that makes it so fucking hard not to like you. So what do you want to do? You have to tell me, or I'll just keep taking and taking. I won't be able to stop myself."

The raw need in his voice makes my pussy give a tired flutter. "I don't think you will. I think you'll keep pretending to be a bad guy when you're really the knight in shining armor."

“Bullshit.”

“Well I haven’t forgotten that you came here and gave me about a hundred orgasms and you haven’t even come yet yourself.” I can’t help smiling when his cock twitches against his thigh.

“Well, if I let you make me come, will you take back that shit about me being a fucking knight in shining armor?”

I grin. “I’ll think about it.”

He reaches for me, and I let him guide my mouth down toward his cock. “Good. Get started then. Let’s see who’s not a bad boy.”

I can’t reply after that. My mouth is full.

EIGHTEEN

Noah

Against my better judgment I let Olivia make me cum and then slink home like a coward. Or at least, that’s my intention, but instead of going home where I’ll only have hours to sit with my nagging conscience, I stop my bike out front of the pub on main street and stalk inside to find the darkest, emptiest corner I can.

Sunday is snooker night and some of the local guys my dad’s age are part way through a game. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I avoid making eye contact with

any of them. I pull up a seat at the far end of the bar and order a beer.

What am I doing?

No matter what Olivia wants me to think, I know I'm hurting her, and her brave face only makes that worse. The fact that I fucked her anyway today makes me feel every bit as low as I've been acting.

This is why I don't do this. I should have turned her down in the first place, before anyone had the risk of getting hurt. Only by that stage, I'd already glowed for her. Doesn't matter what happens now, there will always be a part of me that wonders what if.

What if I'd never asked Charlotte to marry me? What if I'd somehow met Olivia first before I was a jaded prick?

What if I could just let down my guard and imagine what things could be like—

I drain the glass and slam it down on the bar in disgust. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I can't do that. I won't do that. I've set a course and I'm sticking with it. I can't be that guy again.

I'm four beers in, thinking I can't even really remember what that guy used to feel like—the guy who looked forward to his future, who had hopes and dreams—when a familiar voice accosts me. “So this is where you ran off to.”

My older brother Jack pulls out the bar stool next to mine and sits without an invitation.

“Fuck off.” I order another drink. A shot this time. I down it when it comes and order another.

Pete, the bartender, gives me a look, and I glare right back until he shakes his head and gets it for me. “Slow down, Noah,” he says as he places my shot on the counter.

“Fuck you too.” I tap my card to pay.

Jack puts his hand over the shot glass before I can drink it. “What are you doing, Noah? What’s gotten into you? I know you’re an asshole, but you’re not normally this bad.”

I push his hand away and drink my shot. The room has taken on a pleasant buzz and the thoughts of Olivia have gone all fuzzy, which I take as a good sign. “I don’t want to talk to you, OK? Didn’t I make that clear earlier? Why can’t you take a hint?” I try to make eye contact with Pete, but he’s gone out back somewhere or else he’s avoiding me.

I’m seriously considering reaching over the bar to help myself to another when Jack grabs the back of my collar and hauls me back into my seat. “Well now I’m not giving you a choice. Stop acting like a dick and tell me what this is really about.”

I shove to my feet, flinging him off and almost losing my balance as I do. I guess those drinks caught up with me faster than I thought. I shake my head to clear it, but Jack is right in my face, finger pointed at my chest. “Can’t you see Mum and Dad need you right now? The family needs you. Pull your head out of your ass and man up for a change.”

I swipe his hand away. “Oh, you think you know huh? You always think you know everything. Well you’ve got no fucking idea about my life, Jack. You never had.” I’m shouting at this point. We both are. Standing in the middle of the Cove Inn two

seconds from taking a swing at each other.

A hand closes over my shoulder, and I wheel around, head spinning.

Frank Robertson, who owns the local tourist boat, takes a step back. “Hey, boys. I know your dad wouldn’t want to hear you’ve been laying on each other like this. Whatever it is, why don’t we all calm down and stop shouting at each other?”

“Why don’t you mind your damn business?” I retort.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Jack throws up his hands. “Can you hear yourself, Noah? Can you?”

God I’d like to wipe the smug, self-satisfied tone from his voice with my fist in his face.

The offended look on Mr. Robertson’s face isn’t lost on me though. Dad’ll be devastated when he hears about this, and he will. I wipe a hand over my face, but the room is still gently spinning.

I need to get the fuck out of here. I should have left the moment Jack came in rather than let him draw me into this argument that I didn’t want. “Go to hell,” I tell the room at large.

I turn myself in the direction of the doorway and I’m more or less moving in a straight line. I might bump into one bar stool, but in my defense, it was pushed out way too far.

Jack tries to stop me as I get close to the door. I speed up.

I’m so busy concentrating on getting away from my brother that I slam right into a familiar soft and curved body, and as I reach out to catch her and steady us both, I get a whiff of her hair—that particular perfume that she has—and need rises like a riptide to suck me under like I haven’t had her all day yesterday and again just a few hours earlier.

“Noah!”

I don't let her go. I just stand there in the street outside the pub, holding her like my life depends on it.

"Noah, are you OK?"

I realize belatedly that she's clutching a pizza box from the pizzeria next door. She's not here to find me like she somehow knew I needed her in my arms right this second. I still can't make myself let her go.

"Noah, would you just stop, you can't drive like—" Jack stops outside the door to the Cove Inn, taking in the picture of Olivia in my arms.

She looks carefully at me. "Have you been drinking?"

"Just a few."

The way her brow lifts tells me she pays that statement exactly as much attention as it deserves.

"Noah, would you just let me drive you home?" Jack's tone has softened, and the pity there makes me sick.

"I don't need your help, you prick. I'll walk." Taking my keys from my pocket, I toss them at his feet, forgetting that the keyring also has my house keys on it.

"Can I walk with you?" Olivia says softly.

My gaze snaps to hers. "No. You don't have to do that."

"I know, but I don't mind, and I think it'll make your friend feel better."

“His brother,” Jack butts in. “And it would. I’d come too if I thought this stubborn asshole would let me. Can I give you my number in case he gets difficult?”

“No!” I throw my hands up, but no one is listening to me. “I don’t need—”

Jack takes Olivia’s phone and types in his number, and I want to snatch it and erase it just because a hot anger creeps up my neck at the sight of another guy putting his number into her phone. I simultaneously want to go jump off the cliff behind the golf club and hurl myself onto the rocks and tear that phone from Jack’s hands and put my fist in his face. I’ve become so pathetic.

It’s just the booze. This isn’t me.

Only I’m pretty sure it is me. The side of me I’ve been quietly nurturing for the part of my life post-Charlotte.

“Come on.” Olivia tugs on my arm and we turn away from Jack, who’s still standing on the street watching us like he’s my dad and not my brother.

I hold up my middle finger to him as I let Olivia lead me away.

“Are you hungry?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I shove my hands in my pockets and trudge along beside her trying to make sure I’m not weaving like a drunk.

She opens the box and I get another smell and my stomach rumbles reminding me I haven’t eaten since the lunch I walked out of.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

Olivia holds it out for me.

“Fine.” I grab a slice and take a large bite and register exactly how hungry I am. Brenda’s pizza bases are average at best but tonight they taste like Michelin Star cooking.

Olivia takes out a piece for herself and I take the box, tucking it under my arm so she can eat.

We’re quiet for a while. The street is dark apart from the bright spots where the streetlights fall onto the path. We turn up the hill and soon we’re both licking greasy fingers and reaching for another piece.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble after we make it past the nursing home and after my third piece of pizza.

“What for?”

“For stealing half your dinner?” It’s a cop out answer.

Olivia laughs. “I was never going to eat this whole thing anyway.”

I sigh. “And for that. Back there. You didn’t need to see that.”

“I didn’t see anything. But if you wanted to talk about it...” She doesn’t look around, and I know why. I know I’ve put up a million brick walls in the way of anyone trying to get close to me. I know I’ve made her feel like she can’t ask.

She walks me all the way home, and like the stubborn prick I am, I can't make myself admit to her what got me so riled up in the first place. She walks me to my door, and by the time we get there and I realize I've got no key, all the pizza is gone and so is my anger.

I'm just left with this gnawing empty feeling where the anger used to be like I'm hungry for something other than food.

Olivia takes my key out of her pocket, and I try and fail to remember giving it to her. She opens my door. "Can I leave the garbage here? I'm going to call a cab. I know you won't let me walk back to Bella Vista by myself, will you?"

"Stay." The word escapes me before I can call it back, but it doesn't matter. I don't want to call it back. I want it out there. I need her tonight. I need her scent on my pillow and her body tucked against mine.

"But—"

"Fuck it. Fuck the rules. They're bullshit anyway. I should know. I made them up."

I see her biting her lip, debating with herself, and I do the stupidest, most selfish thing of all. I pull her against me and lower my mouth to hers and claim the kiss I've been thinking about for days. The second she's in my arms, she lifts herself up to meet me, giving me back all the passion I'm craving.

Then I pull her in over my doorstep and somehow manage not to fall over myself in my hurry to have her naked. To feel her skin against mine. Clothes go flying. I stumble out of my jeans and thunk into the wall behind me tugging at Olivia's top.

The moment she's undressed, I lift her into my arms and carry her to my bed and dive into her as if I'm ducking under a wave right before it crashes over my head.

NINETEEN

Olivia

When I roll over in the gray morning light and realize where I am, I press my lips together around a giddy smile, not daring to move. Noah is asleep on his back, with his hand stretched out toward me, his features softened in sleep.

I've never seen him sleep before.

He's never let me.

As quietly as possible, I tuck my hand under my cheek and watch him. His chest rises and falls with each slow breath and his dark brows are relaxed, long lashes brushing his cheeks.

As I watch though, his brows draw down and he rolls, hand searching across the mattress until it reaches me. He gathers me against him, letting out a long sigh. Then he's still again.

My heart about melts with sweetness at this unconscious sign of how much he wants me. He'll never let it show when he's awake. I guess I'll have to hold onto the memory of what he does when he's drunk or dreaming.

We lay like that another hour before he stirs again, and I don't have the heart to wake him even when my arm goes to sleep. When he finally groans and rolls away, I slide out of bed and fetch a glass of water from the kitchen, handing it to him as he props himself up on a pillow. "Thanks." His voice is rough and he rubs a hand over his face.

"How are you feeling?"

“A little raw.” He takes a sip of water. “You stayed.”

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I flush. Maybe he doesn't remember asking me. "Sorry, I—"

"Thank you. I like having you here in the morning."

Oh, my heart! "You want to get some breakfast?"

He grimaces. "How about I make you breakfast?"

"You don't have to do that."

"Yeah. I do. After last night, I owe you at least a hundred breakfasts."

OK, yeah. Now I'm wondering what it would be like to spend a hundred nights and mornings with this gorgeous guy. "Well, if you insist."

"Let me shower first and I'll get right on that." He drains the rest of the water, flings back the covers to reveal the rest of his body, and stands while my brain is still rearranging itself. Every time.

Every single time.

I'm about to join him in the bathroom when my phone buzzes on the nightstand and I pick it up.

As soon as I do, I regret it.

Jen: Hey, just checking on you cause you've gone radio silent. I hope you're OK.

When I check, I see that her last message from a week ago went unanswered. I guess I opened it and got distracted and never replied. A little twisty jab of guilt hits me, and I nearly dismiss this message, only I can't do that.

Gritting my teeth, I compose an answer.

Olivia: Hey. I'm sorry. Time difference and all that. I'm OK. How are things with you?

It's a crap excuse and I know she sees right through it when her reply comes in the next moment.

Jen: You sure? When are you coming home?

I pause. I still haven't really decided. I keep putting it off and there's one great big reason why which has nothing to do with the way I feel about what happened between me and Justin.

"You coming?" Noah calls from the shower. The water is already running, steam gently wafting from the ensuite.

"Yeah."

I set down the phone and Jen's message, resolving to look at some flights today and pick one. I can't hide forever, and my airline credit won't last forever either. Maybe Jen's message is the reality check I need.

It's the reality check I don't want, though, because as soon as I get into the bathroom, I spot Noah lathering his hands with soap and rubbing them down his green skin. He strokes a soapy hand over his cock, and as he does it lengthens and thickens and he grins at me. "I thought you were gonna be forever."

I snatch a towel from the closet in the hall and rush back, joining him in the shower and letting him wash away all thoughts of home and flights and responsibilities I don't want to face.

I haven't even posted anything on my page this week. I have a half-written book to finish and submit to my editor, and when I get home I'll have to start house hunting and move all my stuff out of the place I shared with Justin.

I forget about all that as Noah's soapy hands work over my body, kneading my shoulders and neck, drawing away tension. He lathers them and slides them over my belly and breasts, over my hips and butt. Teasing but never demanding, making me wish he would.

We spend the whole morning together until it's time for him to leave for work. When he drops me at my bed and breakfast on the way, he calls me back for a long, lingering kiss that leaves me weak in the knees and seriously questioning if this is really just a casual thing anymore. Now we're kissing? And staying over?

I'm so confused.

I'm also afraid to ask him about it in case he changes his mind or gets defensive. I've seen Noah defensive, and I don't think I'm ready to be on the other end of that firing line. I'm sad about the way things went between Noah and his brother last night. His brother didn't seem to be a bad guy. He was just looking out for Noah after all.

I kinda wish I had an older brother to look out for me, but I'm an only child.

Unable to sit still in the bed and breakfast, I head out for a walk as afternoon drifts toward evening. The blue of the sky is fading to a pinky orange, and the water is flat and still. The views out beyond the golf club are beautiful. The rough, rocky cliffs give way to the deep blue ocean that stretches on as far as the eye can see.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I'm breathing a little harder as the hill slopes upward. When I look up, I spot a woman standing and looking out over the ocean. She moves to the side, and I get a glimpse of a canvas on an easel before she straightens, lifting her brush to swipe a dark stripe of blue across the horizon. I can't help slowing my steps to watch as she paints. The image of the ocean comes to life one stroke at a time as if by magic.

As I come close, I swipe my hand across my forehead to brush away the stray curls which have snuck out from my ponytail. "Wow. You're really good."

The woman turns in surprise. Her shoulder length, wavy brown hair is tipped with lighter ends, as if she's been kissed by the sun, and her smile is just as warm. "Oh, thank you! I didn't see you there."

"Sorry for sneaking up on you. I was just walking by and had to stop and say something."

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, looking away for a moment. "No, it's just... Compliments always make me embarrassed. Are you staying in town? You look familiar."

I avoid telling her where she may have seen me before. "Yeah. I've been staying a few weeks. It's so beautiful here."

The woman nods. "The most beautiful place in the world. But don't tell anyone or they'll all move here like I did. I'm Mia." She holds out her hand, looks down, and seems to realize it's covered in smudges of paint and we both have a laugh.

I shake it anyway. “Nice to meet you, Mia. I’m Olivia. How long since you moved here?”

“About a year now. I love it. How about you? How long are you staying?”

I shrug. “I don’t know exactly. I haven’t decided. I can’t seem to make myself book my flight home.”

Mia laughs softly. “I can understand that. Are you traveling alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t it get lonely?”

I can’t help the silly smile that creeps over my face. “Well, it might except I’ve sort of met someone here.”

“Ah. Well now I understand. So did I. I won’t ask who, since you know what they say about small towns. I never realized how true that was until I moved here and everyone knows everyone’s business, but you know, if you want reasons to stay, I could write you a long list.”

I laugh. “Oh I think that’s far too dangerous. I’ve got a pretty long one myself.”

I wave goodbye to Mia, and she turns back to her painting. I’m still thinking about what she said as I make my way along the cliff path.

I could write a pretty long list of reasons to stay. My job is mobile. I’d have to travel no matter where I lived, but I could have a home base here. I already know I love the town. But could I really live in a place so small? It’s a long way from anywhere.

I mentally scold myself.

There's no point thinking about staying when the biggest reason to keep me here wouldn't want that in the first place. Would he?

It's too much to hope that his attitude has changed. It would be unfair on him.

Noah told me from the beginning that this was only ever temporary. I knew that. It's unreasonable to wish that this could be something more.

Only when I see him smile at me, when I see him soften, when I feel the tenderness in his kiss, his touch, I have this stupid dream that maybe I could be the one to heal his hurt.

And that's the most dangerous wish of all.

TWENTY

Noah

I wake up alone, reaching for a warm body beside me, and then want to kick myself. She stays over one time and I'm reaching for her in the morning, feeling her absence in the bed beside me?

The feeling doesn't go away, though.

I miss her in my shower too. I send her a dirty message and wait around for her response like a fool before I've even had breakfast.

I'm still salivating over the photo she sends back when a call comes through from Mum. No doubt Jack went running to her with his sob story about how I yelled at him

the other day. Or else she heard it from Mr. Robertson.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I don't want to deal with that right now. Dismissing the call, I return to the sight of Olivia's juicy pussy spread out on my phone screen. My dick was already hard and the sight makes it throb.

I still have hours before I have to be at work.

Noah: looks like you'd better come here and let me sort that out for you again

While I wait for her answer, I reach under the waistband of my sweatpants and stroke my cock slowly.

Olivia: I'm naked. And I see clearly from your picture that you have pants on. I think you'd better come here

I grin. That just means I'll get to have fun undressing you again when you get here. And if you come here I'll cook you breakfast

Her next reply is instant. Done. See you in 10

Works every time. I'm whistling to myself as I stroll to the kitchen and grab the bacon and eggs from the fridge then slice the rind from the bacon. Not everyone I know appreciates my cooking the way Olivia does. I know for a fact that even Luke, who eats like his stomach is a bottomless pit and won't shut up about my burger sauce, doesn't appreciate my cooking the way Olivia does. No one else understands it the way she does.

Well that's no surprise. She's a food critic. One with excellent taste. I've read her

reviews of some of the top restaurants in the world, and I know she fucking gets it.

It's flattering that she loves my cooking so much.

This meal might be a simple breakfast, but my pride won't let me cut corners, so by the time she knocks at my door, I've whipped the eggs, chopped fresh herbs, and I'm searching through my pantry for the ingredients for a dukkah to top our omelettes with.

"Come in. It's open!"

A moment later, I hear the door shut and Olivia's small hands slip around my waist and slide over my belly. My cock had gone down, distracted by the task at hand, but it's right back to throbbing again as she continues to explore my body, running fingertips up my abs and delving below the waistband of my sweatpants.

I groan. "You'll get no breakfast if you start that."

She plants a kiss in the middle of my back and lifts her hands from me. "OK, OK. I'm stopping. That's not a risk I'm prepared to take."

And immediately I miss her hands on me. As soon as I have the nuts and spices in the blender, I turn and lift her onto the counter, stepping between her legs. "I've changed my mind. I think you're breakfast and this is brunch."

She giggles as I push my leg between hers, subtly sliding my thigh against her pussy and capture her laughter in a kiss. Olivia tastes like laughter. Like air bubbles rising to the surface of the ocean, longing for sunshine. I can't believe I went so long without kissing her. How the fuck did I do it?

I linger there a long time, pushing her skirt higher, lifting her legs to wrap around my

waist. Her little moans have me forgetting all about the meal I was cooking. Her scent blooms until it's a command I can't ignore.

I check behind her to make sure the counter is clear, then I push her backward, lifting her ass to pull off the cotton panties which are now the only thing between me and her perfect pussy.

She's just as wet as I knew she'd be. She's flushed and pink and a string of slick trails between her inner lips as I bend my head. I have this urge to pull her under with me. As if we're standing on a cliff's edge above the sea and I could plunge backward, dragging her beneath the surface of the water, finding some cozy cave where I could hide her away.

But a girl like this isn't a girl you hide in dark caves.

She's a girl you take with you onto the sunny beach, into the bright air under the blue sky so every prick can see what a lucky bastard you are.

Someone someday better realize that. He'd better treat this girl like a fucking princess.

I wish it could be me.

I've forgotten why it can't be me.

I slide my tongue along soft, smooth lips, planting my mouth over her clit until she bucks under me. She tastes so fucking sweet it takes me far too long to react to the sound of a key in my door and voice calling out to me.

"Noah, it's Luke. I'm coming in. I know you heard me knocking."

“Fuck.” I lift my head quickly, helping Olivia to sit, pulling her skirt back down to cover her bare pussy. I don’t even have time to wipe a hand across my face before I turn to find Luke and Mia standing in the entrance to my apartment, staring at us. Not that I’d want to. I want to smell like Olivia all day.

“What the fuck, Luke?”

My brother raises his hands in the air defensively. “Hey, Mia’s here, so you’re not allowed to hurt me.”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

I growl. “That’s fucking low, using your mate to make me play nice. Mia, you better consider this all the favors I owe you because I’m not punching his face in right now.”

“Mia?” Olivia slips down to the floor and presses up against my back.

I turn. “You know her?”

Olivia’s cheeks are rosy pink and her hair is wild and mussed and gorgeous. She brushes a curl from her face. “Ah, we met the other day on the cliff walk. Well sort of. I interrupted her painting. Hi.”

“Hi.” Mia gives Olivia an awkward smile and there’s a pause where Luke and his fiancé just stand there looking at us.

“Well?” I snap, when no one speaks. “What is it? What’s so important you felt you had to barge in here?”

Luke coughs. “Look, maybe we can come back later. You know, if you would just answer your phone we could have avoided this whole thing.”

“Don’t try to blame this on me. I don’t want you to come back later. I want you to tell me what the fuck you want and then leave me alone.”

I’m fuming. Normally it would be Jack pulling something like this. The fact that he sent Luke to do his dirty work only makes me madder.

Olivia tugs gently at my arm. “Maybe we could all have something to eat?”

I blink. She wants them to stay?

She flushes. “Or I can go and—”

“Don’t go.” The words are growled, and I take a breath and try to keep hold of my temper. When I speak again, my tone is softer. “Don’t go. They should go. If you’re asking me to play nice, I’ll do it, but only because you’re asking.”

She gives me a tiny nod and a pleading look.

I sigh, turning back to Luke and Mia. “Make yourself at home, I guess. Looks like I’m making breakfast.”

I choose to ignore the look of astonishment my brother shoots me, instead turning back to my omelette mix and adding more eggs.

I listen with half an ear to the nothing small talk they make with Olivia as they all sit at the counter. Just enough to make sure my brother is not being annoying. Mia is here and she can usually be relied on to keep him in line, though. Olivia asks her about her painting, and Mia asks about Olivia’s hometown. I listen a little more attentively to that. Luke thankfully keeps quiet.

I serve coffee and tea for Mia. A few minutes later, I plate up the omelettes and lean against the other side of the counter to eat mine.

Luke clears his throat. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine.”

There's a pause and I look up. He hasn't touched his eggs, which makes me frown.

"Mum says you didn't answer her call."

"I was busy." I flick my eyes pointedly to Olivia and back to Luke who nods.

"Yeah, OK. She asked me to come round here, though, because there's news and..."
He rubs his hand over his face and my stomach flips like the omelettes in the pan a moment ago.

"What?"

Luke's face transforms into a grimace and suddenly the half-cold omelette is the last thing I want right now.

I push my plate away. "Dad?"

He nods.

"Fuck."

"What is it?" whispers Olivia. She and Mia have stopped talking, and she looks at me across the counter with compassion on her face.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:27 am

My throat is tight. I have to turn away.

A look passes between Luke and Mia and finally Mia speaks. "Cancer. He's been in treatment for a while, only they did another scan yesterday."

"Oh no." Olivia freezes.

"It's not terminal," Luke says quickly. "Well, they're not saying that yet. They just didn't get it all with the chemo. They're going to have to operate and remove some of his bowel, and there are complications and a longer recovery time. Maybe more chemo."

I swallow around the lump in my throat, looking down at the bench rather than looking at anyone. "OK."

"Mum wanted to make sure you knew."

I feel like a dick now. She was trying to tell me, and I dismissed her call like it didn't matter. Like she didn't matter. She's up in Sydney with Dad having to deal with all this, and I couldn't even answer her call. "Fuck."

Luke puts his hand on my arm, and I let him. Still can't look at him though. "He'll be OK."

"He might not."

"We can't think like that." My brother's words sound so firm. So decided.

I wish I could think like him sometimes. “What are we gonna do?”

“Mia and I are going up to Sydney to be with Mum. Dad is in hospital for three nights. Maybe longer.”

I nod. “Jack will need help at Inlet Views won’t he?” Helping Jack is the last thing I feel like doing right now, but he’s still my brother and it’s really for Mum and Dad.

“Yeah. If you can manage it without killing each other.”

I scowl at my hands. “I’ll manage it. Just warn him not to be an insufferable asshat.”

Luke laughs. “You know he can’t help himself any more than you can.”

That breaks the tension a little bit. They stay until the washing up is done and then leave after hugs and more reassurances I can’t quite buy.

When I close the door behind them, Olivia slips her hand into mine. “What can I do?”

God, I choke up all over again and have to pull her into a hug and breathe into her hair for a moment just to stop myself from crying.

“I’m going to call Mum,” I tell her, not letting go. “Stay?”

“I’ll stay as long as you want,” she whispers against my chest.

TWENTY ONE

Olivia

Noah doesn’t even work that day. I know that’s a big deal. Especially with how long

he spends on the phone with his sous chef. By the time the call is done, he's pacing the kitchen, running his hand through his hair until it's wild. Unable to do anything else, I go to him and wrap my arms around him. I expect him to complain or push me away, but instead, he holds me close and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"I better go talk to Jack." There's a pause. He still hasn't let me go. "Can I ask you for something else?"

"Of course."

"Will you come with me? The last thing I need right now is to lose my temper, and I'll have a better shot at that if you're there. Don't ask me to explain it cause I can't, but that's the truth."

My belly is alive with little flutters, but I just give him a squeeze. "I'd be happy to help."

We drive over to the Inlet Views, which is a cute little motel on the inlet right near the jetty. It sits almost on the water and has the most amazing views. Noah's restaurant, The Snapper, is on the ground level of the building. There's an office as well at the front, and I follow him inside, smiling at the little bell on the door that tinkles as we enter and the little welcome sign hung on the wall.

Noah's brother Jack is behind a tall counter, typing something into a computer. He looks up as we come in and his brows lift into an expression of surprise. Jack is a little taller than Noah and sports a short beard. His look is more traditional than Noah's, whose piercings make him look a little alternative. Jack wears a collared shirt and brown chinos but no tie. It's a smart casual look that suits him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

“Noah! Look, this isn’t a great day to argue. Maybe we can talk another time.”

Noah sighs. “I’m not here to argue with you.”

“You’re not?”

There’s a pause, and I hesitate, not sure whether to do anything or hang back. Noah asked me to be here after all, but I feel like such an interloper.

“Hi,” I give Jack a small wave, feeling awkward as hell.

Noah clears his throat. “I’m not. Look, I don’t think I introduced you to my friend the other day. This is Olivia.” He turns to me and ushers me forward. “She’s here to make sure I don’t start an argument. And I’m here to help.”

Jack blinks. “Wow.” Then his face breaks into a smile and he leans across the counter to shake my hand. “Olivia. So nice to meet you and thank you. I’m not going to ask any questions cause I don’t want to start anything, but welcome.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“I spoke to Mum,” Noah says.

Jack’s face falls. “You OK?”

Noah looks down at his shoes. “Yeah. You?”

“I will be. I’m just under the pump here, you know?”

“Well tell us what we can do. I know Mum said you could use some help.”

Turns out there are two rooms that need cleaning right away as new guests are arriving today and called to ask if they could check in early. There is an order of linen being delivered at ten and a contractor coming to do a routine fire alarm check.

Noah nods. “Leave the cleaning to me. You take care of the front of house stuff. You’re better at it.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll help!” They both turn to me.

“You don’t have to do that!”

“Come on, I’m not going to stand around and watch you clean!”

We collect the cleaning equipment and make our way to rooms four and five on the top floor. These are the biggest suites with two and three bedrooms, and they have the best views. As Noah opens the door to the first suite, I follow him in and walk straight to the sliding doors which look out over the balcony. The windows overlook the inlet, and the whole room is set up to take advantage of the view and the beautiful sunlight flooding inside. “Wow. This is nice.”

“It’s pretty great, isn’t it?”

With two of us working on it, the cleaning doesn’t take long. We have that room

spotless and turned down in half an hour, and we're ready to move on to the next.

I'm feeling pretty good until Noah opens the door to room five and we see the state it's been left in.

Noah lets out a low curse, and my mouth falls open as I stare around the room. Garbage is everywhere. Candy wrappers litter the floor and couch. Bottles and cans and dirty plates have been left scattered around. Even some of the couch cushions have been left on the floor. In the bedrooms wet towels and bedding are everywhere, and there's even a few used condoms in the toilet. "God, some people are animals." He shakes his head.

Noah pushes me out of the bathroom and refuses to let me help clean the worst of it, so I pack the dishwasher and take out the trash. Something is worrying at me, but I don't fully realize what it is until I stop for a glass of water. My belly is sore and crampy. No surprise really. I must be due for my period.

Actually, I think I'm overdue. I certainly haven't had it since I've been in Kraken Cove. I'm thinking back, trying to calculate just how long it's been, when Noah comes out of the bedroom with a bag of trash and a disgusted look on his face. "Fuck me. Remind me never to quit being a chef. There's no way I'd do this shit every day." He dumps the trash in the cleaning cart and together we make up the beds and straighten everything out.

I excuse myself to visit the restroom, but when I do, there's no blood. I guess maybe I'll get a surprise later today. I make a mental note to get some sanitary products and dismiss it as a later problem.

When we go back downstairs, Jack is dealing with the contractor and the phone is ringing. Noah answers the phone, greets guests, and deals with the delivery of linen.

Jack comes back to the front desk just after Noah steps out to pack the last of the linen away in the storage closet.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” I stand from the office chair behind the front desk and offer it to him.

He shakes his head with a smile then looks around for Noah. “Hey, I know I said I wasn’t going to ask questions, but I’ve gotta know. Is this—are you and Noah...?” He trails off, but I know what he’s asking.

I flush. “Um, we’re just friends. I guess I can see why you’re asking, but honestly, that’s it. I’m heading back to the States soon anyway.”

“Ah.” There’s a pause.

I’m about to say something else, but just then Noah returns and we both look around guiltily.

Noah pauses in the doorway and looks between me and Jack. “Was he being a jerk?”

“No! Not at all. I was just telling him I’ll have to head home soon. I’m not looking forward to that long flight.” My distraction seems to work.

Noah grunts and shoves his hands into his pockets. “Anything else that needs doing around here?”

“No. You guys have been great. I don’t know what I would have done without your help. The usual cleaner called in sick today, and I was staring down the barrel of a mess of a day. If I didn’t mention it already, I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.” Noah puts an arm around my shoulders. “Come on Olivia.”

We wave to Jack and head out the door and back to his bike.

“What do you want to do the rest of the day? Your choice. Anything you want. I owe you.”

I smile. “Oh I don’t mind. Honestly.”

Noah frowns. “Come on, anything. Let me take you somewhere nice. Is there something you haven’t seen around here?”

I shrug. “It’s just nice to spend time with you. I guess I won’t get to do that forever.”

He scowls and opens his mouth as if he’s about to say something before shaking it off. Reaching for the spare helmet, he fits it over my head. “Let me take you to the best beach, then. I reckon we’d have it to ourselves this afternoon and I could use a swim.”

TWENTY TWO

Noah

There’s something off with Olivia. I had a hunch as we left the Inlet Views, and the moment we step into the water and I transform, I can taste it. My legs split into tentacles, and the second I’m fully shifted they’re searching for Olivia’s skin.

When I make contact, though, her flavor is not what I’m expecting. Of course the sweet, bright sunshine scent of her remains, but it’s muted. Like a dish that hasn’t been seasoned properly.

What the hell? Have I done something?

Most likely. I've been pretty preoccupied with my own shit for the last couple days. Relying on her for comfort, treating her like a good feelings dispenser to get my hit whenever I need it.

I should have been checking more closely on how she's doing. Because it occurs to me now that it's literally on the tip of my tentacle, that it matters.

It fucking matters if she's not OK.

I can't really pinpoint the exact moment when it started to matter. If I'm really honest, maybe there wasn't one, because hasn't it always mattered? Didn't I drop everything that very first night when I found her crying in the cupboard at The Snapper just to make everything OK for her?

I guess maybe the whole fated mates thing might not be such bullshit after all.

On that terrifying realization, I wrap myself around her and draw her close. The water is at the level of her knees, lapping at our skin, waves rolling in. This beach is sheltered. The waves never get big here unless the weather is truly wild.

I pull Olivia close and stroke my thumb along her cheek. "Did I tell you already today you're amazing?"

The smile that breaks over her face is reassuring, but her flavor hasn't changed.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

“I mean it. I’d be a mess if you weren’t here. Or I would have completely fucked things up with Jack today.”

She smiles up at me. “You didn’t need me. You’re not as bad as you think you are.”

“Not when I’m around you,” I tell her earnestly. “You bring out a better side of me.”

I want to say more. I want to tell her how special she is, but I’m a coward and I’m scared of what all this means. So I take the coward’s way out, covering her mouth with mine, telling her with my lips and tongue instead. I tease her lips apart, caressing and licking into her mouth, feeling the way her body goes pliant against mine. I lift her into my arms and dive with her into the water, rolling and turning us until we’re out into the deeper, calmer section of the bay beyond the sand bank.

Never once does she resist or pull away. Trusting me unconditionally, she gives me complete control until I’m moving for her, breathing for her, thinking how perfect this is.

Just like my feelings for her crept up on me, my need is the same. With her in my arms beneath the water, I’m never going to last for long without having her.

My cock is a throbbing bar pressed tightly against her side, aching to be inside her.

I move her into position and gaze into her eyes as I nudge at her entrance, checking if she’s ready. The little nod she gives me undoes the last of my willpower and I slide home in one thrust, making her gasp out little air bubbles in a rush of motion as they escape toward the surface.

But though I rushed to this point, now that I'm inside her, I have no desire to hurry the rest. I pump into her in lazy strokes, moving my hips in time with our slow breaths, feeding air into her mouth, holding her close.

We hang like that, suspended in pleasure, needing only each other for god knows how long. I can't keep track. It might have been hours we've been out here except her body is still warm and languid in my grip. I focus on that, careful not to keep her out too long.

As she comes closer to orgasm, she becomes more restless, wrapping her legs around me, clinging to me, pleading without words.

Finally I slide the tip of one tentacle to tease at her tight ass and then I fill that hole too. Gently at first, then daring to stretch her further, close to bursting when she allows me that as well. Now it's me who's restless, who can't hold back. I hold her tight and plunder her body, taking pleasure from her little cries that I swallow as I feed her air.

At the last moment, when she's squeezing around my length, clamping down around my tentacle, I remember we haven't used protection.

Again.

With a curse, I pull from her body just in time.

Warm orange seed spills from my cock, painting the water around us, charging this moment with the evidence of my desire for her.

Then, because I'm not done, I don't allow her to be either. I continue to fill her ass, moving a tentacle to replace my cock in her pussy, feeding one into her mouth as well.

This time when she comes again, she's floating at my mercy, impaled on my body in three places and thoroughly, completely mine.

I savor the look of bliss on her face as I bring her back to awareness with a soft breath of air into her mouth a moment later. The breath turns into a gentle kiss.

Why the fuck did I waste so much time not kissing her?

We rise to the surface and I hold her as she adjusts to breathing for herself again, blinking into the late afternoon sun which feels hot on our faces after the deep water.

Olivia gasps. Tiny droplets of water pebble on her lashes. Her lips curve into a smile. "Wow."

My chest puffs out with pride. But her gaze darts away a moment later and I'm deflated.

Beyond the rich, deep taste of her arousal and her pleasure, the muted flavor of her uncertainty is returning.

I still haven't done enough.

How could I when I've spent weeks doing the damage?

I wish I could wave a magic wand and make it go away, but of course I can't. "Olivia, are you sure everything is OK?"

She gives me a smile I don't buy for a second. "Yeah. Of course."

I'm forced to take her back to shore before she starts shivering, though I'd rather keep her in my arms longer, feel the curves of her body pressed to mine, taste her with my

tentacles.

Instead, I relinquish my hold and we wade toward the sand, finding our clothes and dressing after I've dried enough to shift. And I spend the rest of the afternoon brooding about how I get my sunny, carefree Olivia back.

TWENTY THREE

Olivia

I spend the rest of the week dodging Noah's questions and waiting for my period, but it never arrives. The longer it takes, the more certain I am that I'm going to have to face this head on.

I've never done a pregnancy test before.

I've never needed to.

I've never considered just how daunting it could feel to pee on a stick, but as I'm standing in the aisle of the drug store staring at the five different options only to realize I've read the back of each packet and checked the price but haven't taken any of it in, suddenly just choosing one feels like an impossible hurdle.

"Olivia!"

I turn in surprise to see Mia enter the aisle where I'm standing. She walks up to me with a smile. "I thought that was you. How are you?"

I shift uncomfortably from foot to foot. Will it make it too obvious if I move away from the pregnancy tests now and pretend I was looking for something else? "I'm good. What about you?" I keep my eyes fixed on a row of lip balms just behind Mia's shoulder.

Don't look at the pregnancy tests. Don't acknowledge the pregnancy tests.

This is fine.

I'm fine.

"What are you up to today?"

My mouth opens. No words come out and instead my eyes dart right to the picture on the box of one of the tests of a happy smiling baby.

I want to throw up.

Mia frowns, her gaze following mine, and then her eyebrows lift and we look at each other for a long, awkward moment.

I cough. No point avoiding it now. Cheeks flushing a deep pink, I reach for the box and lift it off the shelf. "Um, this apparently. What about you?"

Her mouth drops into a little o. "Listen, Olivia. I know we don't know each other all that well, but I could never forgive myself if I didn't say something. You know if you want to get a coffee or a tea or just go for a walk..."

There's a pause. My heart drums against my ribcage and my palms sweat.

"If you wanted to," Mia continues. "I know you don't know many people here and this must be tough." Her smile firms into something really genuine, and I break.

"I'd really like that." I clutch the test box to my chest in desperation. "I don't know what I'll do if it's positive."

Mia slips her arm through mine and gives me a reassuring nudge. “One step at a time, OK? Let’s get to the counter and then we’ll get a juice and take a walk.”

I let her guide me to the counter where I buy the test and slide it into the brown paper bag the pharmacist gives me, tucking it into my handbag and hoping I can forget.

I can’t.

Mia takes me past the Coral Breeze Café and we order two large juices and she makes small talk while I try to figure out what the hell to say.

We’re walking along Cliff Road up toward the golf club by the time I have the courage to start, but she doesn’t push me. “So, I’m late.”

Mia nods. “How many weeks?”

I wince. “I’m not sure. I’m never all that regular, and when I travel, forget about it. But it’s been at least five or six weeks since my last.”

She’s quiet for a while. The breeze is gentle, but as the hill gets steeper, it picks up, cooling the heat from my cheeks and whipping my hair out to one side.

“I should tell him, shouldn’t I?”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

Mia shrugs. She doesn't ask and I don't say, but I'm sure it's obvious who I'm talking about. "It might be negative."

I let out a nervous giggle, watching as a gull dives and disappears below the cliff like my stomach when I think about being pregnant. "It might be. But what if it's not? I think I'll have a meltdown right there in the bathroom."

Mia pats my shoulder. "You won't. There are options, right?"

"Not easy ones."

She's quiet again, but I know she's listening. We sit on a wooden bench at the top of the hill until the wind makes us shiver and we've finished our juices.

"I know you didn't ask for my opinion," says Mia. "But they're a good family and even though Noah likes to pretend he's different, he's part of the Wilson family. He'll do the right thing."

"What is the right thing?"

Mia smiles. "Whatever you need is the right thing." She squeezes my leg.

I laugh. "Well I guess it's now or never because I really need to pee."

"Want me to come with you?"

I shake my head. "Um, thanks, but I think I'm good."

I wave goodbye to Mia and walk back to my bed and breakfast, heart beating faster the closer I get and the tighter my bladder feels.

But when I get into the bathroom and finally wrestle the first test packet from the sealed wrapping, my hands are shaking so badly. I hold the test in place then try to pee, but I have to look to make sure I get it on the right spot. I'm bending over and have already started to go when I drop it into the toilet. I can't stop the flow and the entire test strip is in the bowl.

"Damn it!"

I don't know if the results would be accurate even if I fished it out, which I'd really rather not do. And now I've peed already, so I'll have to wait and summon up the courage to take another try later.

I can't decide if I'm more scared of it being positive or negative. Actually I think what I'm most scared of is Noah's reaction.

TWENTY FOUR

Noah

I'm pulling up in the carpark at work when my phone buzzes. I stash my helmet and pull it from my pocket to find a message from Olivia.

Olivia: hey, can we talk?

I run my hand through my hair, glancing in through the windows to see that Billy is already here, switching on the lights.

Noah: I just got to work. What is it? You good?

Three dots appear on the screen, then disappear, then reappear again.

There's a really long pause and I start getting a nasty feeling low down in my belly that I push away. This is Olivia. She's not going to call and berate me for doing something wrong or hurting her feelings. Or have a go at me for the way I am. She gets me.

Besides, I asked her at least a hundred times today if she was OK and she told me she was.

When she still hasn't replied three minutes later, I lose my nerve.

Noah: babe, you good? Want me to come round after work?

Her reply is almost instant.

Olivia: yeah. I need to see you

Ordinarily I'd send back something dirty about what a nasty girl she is booty calling me as I'm about to start work, but something tells me there's more to this than that. And I'm not a big fan of that feeling.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I'm distracted through service. Halfway into it I get so pissed off with myself that I have Billy take over the steak I'm cooking and step into the coolroom for a breather. Leaning my hand on the shelf at head height, I slow my breathing and squirt some water over my drying skin. This is exactly the sort of bullshit I have spent the last five years trying to avoid. But this is Olivia. She's not a game player. That's something I like about her. I can rely on her not to get weird and emotional. To tell me what she's thinking. Isn't that how this whole thing started?

I try not to think about our impending deadline. The date she flies back to the States. It has to happen, and when it does, it'll be for the best. I wouldn't say this about anyone else, but I think with Olivia, I'll want to keep in touch. It'll be easier with some distance between us. Less intense if I don't see her every day.

I let myself close my eyes for a moment and imagine arranging annual getaways where we meet halfway and I remind her all the ways I touch her and make her come like no one else.

Only then I get to thinking about someone else trying to make her come and my blood boils so much I have to give myself another spritz of water.

Fuck.

Why am I such a mess over this woman?

The coolroom door opens and Billy sticks his head inside. "Hey, chef. There's a new group on table five and they've requested fish of the day. You want me to do it?"

I shake my head, pushing myself upright and mentally pulling my shit together. “No, you’re right. I’ve got it.”

I grab the stuff I need from the coolroom and head back into the kitchen, letting the distraction of the final dinner rush stop me from brooding.

When everything is cleaned down and the front of house staff have gone home, I’m already impatient to be gone myself. I leave Billy to brief the rest of the kitchen staff about tomorrow’s specials and jump on my bike, heading up the hill to Olivia’s bed and breakfast.

She must hear my bike because she appears in the doorway to her room as I’m climbing the stairs, face pale in the glow from the sensor light and expression drawn.

I hurry over, smile of greeting dropping from my face. “Hey, what is it? Tell me.”

She chews her lip, pulling me inside the room and closing the door. “I have to tell you something and I need you not to freak out, OK?”

“OK.” I search her face, but I can’t work out what she’d have to say that would make me react like that. I know where we stand. She’s not about to surprise me if she’s going to say she’s booked her flight home. I’m not ready for her to leave yet, but I know it’s coming. “Liv, I won’t freak out, I promise.”

She sighs. “I’m probably worried about nothing, only I tried to take the test today and then I dropped it in the toilet and I can’t make myself do another.”

“Huh?” Test. What test? I’m mentally retracing her words but can’t put the pieces together in a way that makes sense.

“My period is late.”

Those words hit home with the finality of a coffin lid closing and I physically recoil before I can stop myself. “Your period?” I know what it means only I can’t quite make my brain believe it. “But you haven’t taken the test yet. You’re not...” I break off, unable to spit out the words.

She’s not.

She can’t be.

Because if she is, then that means... “Olivia, have you been with anyone else?”

Her mouth drops open and I growl in frustration. “I’m not trying to be a dick about this, I’m just asking, would it definitely be mine? Is there a chance that it might be someone else?”

She just stares at me for a long moment. Then her bottom lip starts to tremble until she grips it between her teeth. “No. There’s no one else. God, how could you even ask me that? Don’t you know—” She breaks off, turning away. I still catch the hitch in her voice.

I swipe my hands over my face, trying to clear my head, but the acrid note in her scent isn’t helping. I’m not that far off panicking myself. I promised to keep calm and here I am losing my mind.

“Look. Like you said, we don’t even know. Let’s not freak out. How many weeks late are you?” I put my hand on her shoulder and she relaxes a little but still doesn’t turn around.

“Maybe six or seven. I’m not sure.”

“OK. OK. Well, there’s still time.”

Now she turns, blinking up at me. “Time for what?”

“Well, time to take care of it. It’s going to be OK.”

There’s a long, awful silence.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

“You are going to take care of it if you are, aren’t you?”

Now it’s Olivia’s turn to recoil. “Take care of it? You mean have an abortion? I don’t even know. I don’t know if I could. For heaven’s sake, I can’t even take a pregnancy test!”

Fuck. Bile rises in my throat and my hands are shaking. This is everything I was afraid of. The worst part is it’s my fault. I think back to that moment in the Tuross inlet when we had no condom. Then again in the bay. I let my need for her in the moment get the better of me and made two stupid fucking choices. “Fuck.”

Suddenly I need to hit something, to break something. I slap the wall, wishing I could put my fist through it, but it’s not my wall or Olivia’s. “Fuck.”

She’s watching me with wide eyes. The bitter note in her scent has risen to drown out all the sweetness, and now I’m cursing myself as much as the situation. I’m scaring her.

I’m scaring myself.

Fuck, Olivia is scaring me. I can’t be a dad. I just can’t. Kids change everything. I can’t be tied to someone like that for the rest of my life. We’ll both end up with broken hearts and a broken family. It’s not good for anyone.

“Don’t you see this is exactly what I was afraid of?” I’m shouting. My voice echoes through the quiet apartment and Olivia winces.

“Please don’t be angry.” Her voice trembles and I hate myself, but I can’t stop the rage boiling through my insides at how fucking unfair this is.

“What am I supposed to feel? Am I supposed to feel happy? This is a disaster! There is nothing good about this situation.”

“Noah!” She looks like she wants to reach for me, but I don’t let her. Turning, I pace toward the door then back again. I don’t know what to do with my body. It feels too big for the space. “There is no we, Olivia. There never was. You do what you need to, but you know where I stand. I can’t be a part of that. I’m sorry.”

Her mouth drops open and her eyes fill with tears. “Then I guess there never could be an us either.”

I want to spit the bitter taste from my mouth, tear apart the room, feel the sting of the cut as I purge my feelings with a razor blade on my arm like I used to when I was a stupid kid. Instead I shake my head. “I guess not.”

I leave without looking back. I know if I look back now, I’ll see the hurt on her face and I will want to comfort her. I’ll want to stay and wrap her in my arms and tell her I’ll make it alright, but I won’t, will I?

I’ll just make it worse.

Because I can’t be the man she wants me to be. The man she needs.

I can only be this monster whose only strength is shutting everyone and everything out so nothing can ever hurt me again.

The roar of my bike cuts through the awful sound of her crying I still imagine I can hear. I race up the hill, hardly caring where I end up, just knowing that I can’t stay

here.

TWENTY FIVE

Olivia

I stare at the door through blurry eyes long after Noah storms out on me.

What was I thinking? That I would somehow convert a guy like that into the green flag guy you take home to meet your parents? That we'd settle down and raise a family?

I must have fallen and hit my head or come down with some nasty tropical illness.

We were never anything, so why am I crying?

Only my heart is screaming that we were. I know we were. At least for me we were.

And I thought he felt it too.

At the beach when he plunged into me desperately, filled me up in every hole as if he was desperate to claim every inch of me. I guess it was just great sex and nothing more and I'm the only one who can't keep the two things separate. Just like he said in the beginning.

He tried to tell me. He tried and I didn't listen. I just insisted I could handle it. Well this is the opposite of handling it.

Crumpling to the floor, I hunch on the carpet and cry until there are no tears left.

Inelegantly, I wipe my hand across my face. There's no one here to judge anyway,

and if there were they'd have written me off as a hopeless case long ago.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I stupidly glance at my phone hoping against hope that there'll be a message there from Noah.

Nothing.

I don't want to cry over him. I'm sure my friends back home would tell me he's not worth my tears. I guess I was wrong about that too because for a moment there...

A powerful urge to walk into my mom's warm kitchen hits me. Mom would be sitting at the counter reading the paper while Trish cooks something with lentils in it and they'd both be overjoyed to see me. I wouldn't even mind a little overbearing advice. God knows I could use some overbearing advice right now.

Any advice really.

I'm a mess.

I guess there's nothing left to keep me here in Kraken Cove. Even if I choose to keep the baby—god I don't even know if there is a baby—I'd be doing it on my own.

This was only ever temporary. A holiday. A break from all the things I was trying to run from.

Well now seeing Justin and moving my things out of our apartment is the last thing I'm worried about. I'll probably be able to do it without even crying. As long as I don't think about the reason why I'm over Justin so quickly and so completely.

I suppose I should be grateful for that.

I'm ashamed to admit I spend another twenty minutes on the floor before I get up and wash my face and pull myself together. I pack my bag, stuffing the open box of pregnancy tests to the bottom of my suitcase and rolling my clothing, carefully stacking jeans and t-shirts on top so I don't have to think about it.

That's a problem for later.

Tonight I focus my energy on getting home.

I'm surprised when I manage to find a flight for two days' time from Sydney. I ring the airline and they kindly let me rebook my flights again. I must remember to recommend them to all my friends.

Then I book a bus in the morning and let the owners of the bed and breakfast know I'll be heading home early.

By the time I let myself check my phone again as I slip into bed, there's still no message or call from Noah. I wasn't expecting one.

I doubt I'll hear from him again. He made his feelings pretty clear.

Now I'm left wishing I'd made mine clear sooner, before things got messy. As if that would have made any difference anyway.

But as my head hits the pillow and I close my eyes, I can't stop myself wondering what if.

I wake in the pre-dawn light and can't get back to sleep. It's already mid-morning back home. Almost lunch time, so I call my mom and try to sound happy when I tell

her I'll be home in three days' time.

"Oh, sweetheart. I think that's a good decision," Mom says, and I hear her tell Trish in the background.

A moment later, Trish's warm voice fills my ear. "Liv, you do what you need to, love. But you know you're welcome here as long as you like. We've got your old room ready for you. Your Mom even made up the bed and everything."

"Oh, Trish!"

"Hey, please don't cry. We're looking forward to seeing you."

I laugh through tears at how accurately she has me pinned. "Thanks, Trish. I've gotta go, OK?" I wrestle to keep the emotion from my voice. "I'll see you soon."

"Bye, pumpkin," Mom calls from the background.

"Bye, Mom!"

I hang up before we can properly say goodbye, already too choked up with tears to talk. Will there ever be a day when I don't feel like this? Like he's ripped out my heart through my mouth and there's nothing inside me anymore but a big emptiness?

I felt bad after Justin left me, sure. But I didn't feel like this.

Maybe that's just because I've been distracted. Maybe now I'm mourning both of them and that's why it feels so bad. But in my heart of hearts I know it's more than that.

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I thought Noah and I had something special and finding out he's exactly as bad as he tried to tell me hurts way more than it has any right to.

TWENTY SIX

Noah

I ride to the top of the cliff looking over the ocean and hurl my phone into the sea so I can't call her—can't call her. I won't let myself be sucked into this shitstorm.

Only I can't sleep that night or the next without her. At two in the morning on the second night, when I'm ready to claw my eyes out, I finally stop to wonder how a few nights spent with her in my arms have made her as necessary to me as fucking water.

I'm so mad by the time I drag myself out of bed and onto my bike at three in the morning that I nearly crash the fucking thing into the lamp post in my apartment complex, and I'm so tired I hardly know how I make it to the bed and breakfast on the hill.

I storm up the steps to the top floor with no regard for the time of night or for the other guests who are probably sleeping. Then I pound my fist on Olivia's door. "Olivia! It's me. I need to talk to you."

She doesn't fucking answer.

I try again, ramming my fist against the wood. "Olivia! Would you open this fucking

door?”

A light flicks on downstairs. I see a curtain twitch in the room next door.

“Olivia, I’m sorry, OK? I fucked up. Could you just come out here and talk to me?”

“Noah Wilson, is that you?”

I spin to find Mr. Nguyen, the owner of the bed and breakfast, standing at the top of the stairs wrapped in a tartan robe and glaring at me.

“Oh fuck off,” I mutter under my breath. Then turn back to the door. “Olivia!”

“She left today.” Mr. Nguyen clearly did not fuck off. In fact, he’s come over to where I’m standing. “You’re out of luck. And you should know better than to talk to me like that, son. I was there at your high school graduation.”

I shake off the little twinge of guilt that tugs at me. He’s right. I should have a bit more respect. But damn it, desperate times. “What do you mean she left?”

Mr. Nguyen shakes his head sadly. “Noah, how much have you had to drink? She checked out. She’s gone. Got the bus back to Sydney this morning.”

“The fuck she has.” I brush past him, heading for the stairs. I’m not even sure I know where I’m going, but if Olivia isn’t here, I’ve no reason to stay.

“Not so fast!” The jangle of keys makes me turn to find Mr. Nguyen standing there waving my keys at me.

“What the fuck?”

He yanks them away when I reach for them. Tricky old bastard must have snatched them from my pocket as I went past. “You’re not driving in this condition. You come downstairs and have a cup of coffee and sober up.”

I drag my hand over my face. “I’m not drunk.”

He scoffs. “That’s what you said last time you had a few too many in the pub, but I could never forgive myself if I let Rob’s boy drive drunk.”

“I’m not—” I cut myself off with a groan. He’ll never believe me. “Whatever. Keep them. I’ll walk.”

Mr. Nguyen chases me down the stairs as I stalk from the bed and breakfast past my useless bike. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

“Fuck knows. To get some sleep I guess.”

“No. You turn around right now, young man, or I will call the Inlet Views and wake your parents.”

I roll my eyes. “Go ahead. They’re still in Sydney.”

“Noah Wilson!”

I ignore his shouts, shoving my hands in my pockets and taking a left at McPherson Road. He obviously isn’t that serious since he doesn’t follow me beyond the carpark. What the fuck am I supposed to do now? Olivia is gone and I don’t even know how to find her again. I can’t let myself think about the baby—if there is one. It scares me too much.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

Right now the only thought rolling in my head like seaweed in a rough sea is the thought that I've lost her.

I've fucked it up.

I acted like an absolute ass and got exactly what I deserved.

I'm so wrapped up in my self-absorbed thoughts that I hardly notice the car driving up the road until I'm caught in the headlights full on, blinking into the sudden brightness.

The car stops. A door opens.

I throw my forearm over my eyes, cursing whatever dickhead thought it'd be a good idea to stop and taunt me.

"Get in you fuck nugget. Don't make me stand around here in the dark all night."

I blink. "Jack?"

"Yeah, who else do you think would bother to drive down here at three in the goddamn morning to pick you up and make sure you get home safe? Mum and Dad are out of town, remember?"

I don't even fight him. After the last few days, I've come to terms a little better with Jack's overbearing fuckery. I stomp to the passenger side and get in.

A moment later Jack sits next to me behind the wheel and gives me a look. “I thought that would be harder. Who are you and what have you done with my idiot brother?”

I just roll my eyes and fasten my seatbelt. “Can we go back to Inlet Views? I think I need to be underwater.” I let my head thunk back against the headrest and shut my eyes.

I’m so tired. I don’t even know if being submerged will work, but beyond having Olivia in my arms, it’s the only thing I haven’t tried.

After a long silence where nothing happens, I glance around to find him watching me. “What?”

“What happened?” Jack whispers the words as if he’s afraid I’ll bite his head off, and to be fair, the old me would have.

This new, odd version of me doesn’t want to, though. I can’t even imagine mustering the energy to raise a fist. I just sigh. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Jack makes a satisfied hmph and releases the handbrake. “That’s more like it. Now how much did you drink and do you think you need a spew bucket, because I did bring one.”

“I didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“I wasn’t drinking asswipe. Mr. Nguyen just made that up because I was shouting in the middle of the night.”

Jack pulls off McPherson Road and onto Cliff Drive. “And why were you shouting at

Mr. Nguyen in the middle of the night, Noah?”

“I wasn’t shouting at Mr. Nguyen. I was shouting at Olivia. At least I thought I was, but she’s gone.” Something embarrassing happens then. My throat gets all tight and I suddenly have to stare hard out the passenger window so Jack won’t see the tears that prick my eyes.

Jack makes a low whistle. “Well fuck me.”

I don’t have to look to know there’s a highly irritating smug look on his face. I don’t, because so far he’s been pretty nice about this whole thing, and I don’t want to start shit.

“Hey,” he says eventually. “You OK?” His hand falls gently onto my shoulder, and I duck my head.

“Yeah. No. I don’t know.”

There’s a drawn-out silence, but it’s not sullen or tense. It’s me trying to man up enough to talk to him without actually crying.

“No,” I say eventually.

He stops the car in the carpark outside the Inlet Views and switches off the engine.

I cough. “She’s fucking gone, Jack, and I fucked it up and now I’ll never know if—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

To his credit, he doesn't interrupt and doesn't push for me to finish the sentence. He doesn't even say I told you so.

"It's been two days man, and I feel like I'm broken in half. What the fuck is that about anyway?"

"Is she your—"

"Don't say it." I hold up my hand. "Don't even say it. That shit is all just wives' tales and bullshit your grandparents spin you."

Jack scoffs. "You moron. Have you seen how brightly Dad still glows for Mum? You think that's bullshit?"

I don't answer him.

After a while he whistles again. "Then she is your fated mate."

"It's not that. I mean it is, but it's not just that. I didn't want to fall..." I swallow, afraid to say the words. "I didn't want to fall for her, but I couldn't help it. It's her. She's just... She's something else."

Jack nods. "I wish I had an answer."

"Thanks."

There's a pause. After a while, Jack pats my arm. "Try to get some sleep, OK? Want

me to come down with you or leave you alone?”

I give him a sheepish look. “Come with.”

Jack opens the door, and as he’s getting out of the car, I blurt, “Thank you.”

He actually bends and sticks his head back in the car to grin at me. “Oh, you’ve got it bad, huh?”

He’s still laughing when I get out and shut the passenger door, scowling at him. “Watch it.”

He just chuckles. “Thank you! God. I’ve heard it all now. Come on. The ladder is already down.”

We strip and climb down the ladder that descends from the basement of the Inlet Views into the water of the inlet itself to our family’s underwater cavern. The secret part of my childhood home. I’m not expecting it, but actually floating with my tentacles wrapped around my old rails that Dad installed for me when I was a kid buys me a few hours of sleep.

It’s not much, but it’s enough to give me some clarity in the morning to form a plan.

I haven’t tried hard enough to warrant giving up.

I haven’t really tried at all.

I promise myself that I’m going to give this thing my best fucking show, starting today with a new phone, a long list of apologies and the most severe case of online stalking you’ve ever seen, oh, and a flight to the USA.

TWENTY SEVEN

Olivia

My stomach feels like it's tied up in knots the whole flight home. I get up out of my seat three times in the first hour and know the man sitting next to me in the aisle is starting to lose his cool by the last time I make him pause his film and wrestle his way out of the tiny seat.

After that I make a concerted effort to sit still, but nothing distracts me from thinking about Noah. I try to watch a film, but twenty minutes in there's a kiss, and it only makes me thinklongingly about the way he kisses me. Deep and hungry like he'll never come up for air.

I try to close my eyes and get some sleep, but every time I do, I picture a time we were together, his tentacles curling around my thigh, his hands roving across my body.

There's an ache in my heart and my pussy, and I'm restless with missing him. I hate knowing I'll never feel his touch again or hear his whispered commands in my ear.

It doesn't help that I cracked right before I boarded the plane and sent him a message telling him I miss him. I wish I could take it back, unsend the message and pretend I'm not as humiliatingly hung up on him as I still am. Most of all I wish I could check to see if he's read it or if he responded. I don't think he will, but I know I'll check that stupid message ten times every day for the rest of my life wondering.

God, I'm pathetic.

Why am I doing this to myself?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

And so it goes, through the twenty something hours it takes me to land in Los Angeles and stumble, bleary eyed, from the plane. With shaking hands, I yank my phone from my purse and check it, but there's no reply. He hasn't even read the message, which only makes the awful knot in my belly tighten and tears sting my eyes.

There are two messages from Mom, though.

Mom: what time is your flight arriving?

Mom: nevermind, I checked and it says 9:30. We'll be waiting in arrivals when you get in. love you

I swallow hard, needing to let Mom and Trish wrap me up in the big hug I know is coming and embarrassed about the way I'm basically crying at the baggage claim already.

There's no way I can hold the tears back when I see Mom actually open her arms, and I rush toward her towing my bag the second I get out into the bright arrivals hall. Trish wraps her arm around both of us and kisses my head, and for a moment I'm back to being my fourteen-year-old self the first time a boy rejected me and I had to go to the spring dance by myself. "Hi." I sniff.

"Oh, sweetheart. We're so glad you're home." Mom brushes my cheek with her hand and Trish takes my bag.

"Come on, pumpkin. The car is in the multi-story parking garage, so it's a bit of a

hike. I bet you're tired."

I just nod and let them lead me away, cossetting me in their love, feeding me and putting me to bed in my old room.

I emerge once in the next twenty-four hours to use the bathroom, only to discover a patch of red on my panties which erases the need for the pregnancy test I still have stuffed at the bottom of my luggage.

If only I'd kept my cool. Kept my mouth shut.

But in the end, maybe it was for the best. If I'd stayed longer, who knows how deep I would have fallen. This feels bad enough already. In the end, Noah Wilson is not the guy I'm looking for. He can't be. Better to have ripped the Band-Aid off sooner rather than later.

It takes me a few weeks to build up the strength to start filming new content. I'm proud of what I achieve in those few weeks, though. I move my things out from my old apartment and even speak to Justin. It's an experience I feel oddly numb about, even looking back later.

I really am grateful to Noah for that.

Justin is polite and even a bit apologetic, which I didn't expect from him. He offers to send me the whole of the deposit we putdown together, but I decline, asking for only my half. Since I don't have an apartment to move into right away, he offers to pay me for the furniture we bought together, and I agree to let him do that.

On my blog and socials, I recycle throwback content and set comments to restricted so I don't have to face the questions about my love life I know are coming when I finally re-emerge from the fog of misery I'm wallowing in right now.

Toward the end of the week, though, a post pops up on my social media advertising a new restaurant opening downtown. It's Peruvian Japanese fusion, and of course I'm fascinated. I love unusual combinations and food that speaks of a chef's heritage. When I message and ask if I can book a table for one of their earliest dinner services, I'm met with enthusiasm and excitement which is flattering. Half an hour later we've settled on a date and time and I'm researching their menu and the chef's background, trying to decide on what angle I'll take when I write it up. I post a teaser and get a few comments from people excited to see me making new content.

Overall I feel positive about it. I even spend time choosing a nice outfit and extra time taming my curls so when I step into the restaurant, I'm feeling beautiful and confident. Which makes a nice change from frumpy and barely put together like I've been feeling since getting home.

The young man at the door has an eyebrow ring and a tattoo sneaking up above the collar of his shirt and looks hauntingly like Noah from the corner of my eye. For a moment I can't reply when he asks me if I have a booking.

Finally, I clear my throat. "Ah, yeah. I do. It's under Olivia. Would you let the chef know I'm here?"

His eyes widen a little and he straightens. "Yes, I sure will. Let me show you to your table."

I smile as he makes a fuss, fetching me water, a wine list, asking if I have everything I need. The restaurant is softly lit and furnished with rich red velvet seats. A mosaic pattern in deep earthy colors decorates the walls and multicolored lights hang from the ceiling. It's lovely.

My table is by the window, near the door, which I ordinarily wouldn't love, but from here I have a good view into the open kitchen and at the rest of the diners and out at

the city lights. And the entry has a double door arrangement which means I'm not chilled by the early spring breeze every time someone comes in or out. I'm already missing the hot Australian autumn I left behind. The long warm days and evenings. The beautiful coastline.

The locals.

With a sigh, I turn my attention to the menu and I'm just trying to decide what to start with when a familiar voice makes me cock my head to the side and listen.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?"

The Australian accent strikes me instantly as the new arrival replies, "Nah, I'm meeting someone, and I think I've spotted her."

I shake my head sadly. I'm facing toward the window, so I can't see, but it's obvious it's not Noah. It's not possible.

I look back at my menu wishing I could let it go. Wishing I could somehow convince myself to stop thinking about him.

The chair opposite me at the table is drawn out and someone sits. I look up in surprise, wondering who has mistaken my table for their own. This will make a funny story and might be a good place to start my next blog post.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

My thoughts trail off into a haze of raw awareness as I take in the figure of the man sitting opposite me. His brown hair is swept back from his face, and beneath his dark brows the look he's giving me is positively hungry. Like he wants to devour me whole.

I don't think I've ever seen Noah in a suit before. It suits him though. Everything suits him. I'm tracing the line of his broad shoulders in the well-fitted fabric, remembering how it feels to throw my arms around them. Then my mind catches up with my eyes and my mouth falls open. "Y-you! How did you get here?"

He laughs softly. "The same way you did I imagine. On a plane. It would have taken too long to swim and I'd already wasted too much time."

My mouth is dry. I can't speak. I can hardly process what's going on here. "But you never answered my calls or texts."

The smile falls from his face to be replaced with a rueful expression. "I know. I'm sorry. I may have destroyed my phone before I thought about what a stupid decision that was."

I blink. "When?"

He looks down for a moment. "The night we argued."

Then he hasn't been ignoring me all this time.

But why hasn't he contacted me elsewhere? It's not as if I'm hard to find.

Noah runs a hand through his hair, disrupting the neat do and making the front part fall over his eyes until he flicks his head and tosses it back. “Listen, I came all the way here to find you because I know I’ve been a complete tool and I fucked everything up, but I couldn’t not.”

I open my mouth to reply, not knowing what to say. I don’t even know how I feel.

A stupid grin is threatening to break out over my face just from seeing him sitting here in front of me. But tears sting the back of my eyes just as forcefully and I can’t help thinking about all the times I’ve cried over him since we met.

“Noah, I—”

A waiter comes over with the glass of wine I ordered and pauses, looking between us. “Ah, you were expecting company, miss? Should I set another place?”

I stare at Noah across the table. “Please,” he mouths.

And just like that, my resolve evaporates and I find myself nodding at the waiter who hurries away to do just that.

“How did you find me?”

Noah shrugs. “I’ve been stalking all the restaurants in town that I’d eat at and which you haven’t reviewed yet, hoping.”

A little laugh of surprise bursts from me. “You what?”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d talk to me if I messaged after this long. After what I did...” He trails off, pulling at the collar of his shirt. “Listen. Liv, I’m sorry. I really am. Can you forgive me?” He reaches across the table.

I look into his pleading eyes and my hands creep across the table to meet his. The sizzle of electricity as my fingertips come into contact with his almost makes me gasp out loud. There's never been any shortage of chemistry between us. "I don't know," I tell him honestly. "I don't know how I feel. But I have to admit, it's good to see you."

He nods. "Yeah that's fair. And you don't have to answer yet, but let's talk."

I have to admit, I want to talk to him. At the very least I need to tell him I'm not pregnant, but like an idiot I don't just come right out and say it.

And then the waiter brings the first dish and I forget for a long time that I need to.

TWENTY EIGHT

Olivia

Twelve delicately prepared shared plates and almost two bottles of wine later, we have neatly skirted around talking about anything real. About feelings or the faux pregnancy or the way we left things. Instead we talk about food and travel and Noah's impressions of the US so far.

I drift from the restaurant out onto the street and hand my phone to Noah. "Film me for a moment? I just want to do an intro for my next video."

I step back into a position in front of the restaurant. "Can you get the sign in?"

He nods. "Go ahead."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I don't even need to fake the huge smile I wear for the camera. I just let it show. "Oh wow! I'm back in the US and I've just had the most exciting meal I've had lately right here in this brand new Peruvian Japanese fusion restaurant. I can't wait to tell you all about it."

Noah presses something on the screen and gives me a little pout. "The most exciting? I won't pretend I'm not jealous, but I will admit it was pretty amazing."

"Aww, don't be jealous. I wasn't counting yours." I step toward him and have to catch myself against his chest when I almost stumble. I guess I've had more to drink than I thought.

He pulls me close until our lips are almost touching. Dangerous territory. "Of course I'm jealous. I want to be the most exciting thing in your life."

I lose control of my knees at about that moment when his words run through me like a lightning bolt. "Noah, we—"

I forget what I was about to say when his mouth crashes into mine and a groan tears from his chest. I forget everything. Cars and people passing by on the street, the chill air creeping beneath my jacket, the last few weeks of stress and angst and tears.

All I know is his lips are moving against mine. Our breath mingles, and it's stupid but maybe our souls do too. There's definitely some kind of strange magic that happens between us every time we're together.

That's my excuse.

It takes me over whenever I'm with him and tonight is no exception. Eventually, he pulls away, looking down at me. "Come back to my hotel. Or take me home with you."

I flush, thinking about the awkward conversation in the morning. "Your hotel."

He grins, and moments later, he's hailed a cab and pulls me into the backseat with him, dragging me right up against him as he gives the driver the name of his hotel.

I'm breathless with excitement, caught up in the flurry of emotion and relief. He leaves me no chance to come to my senses either. As soon as the driver pulls away from the curb, Noah's hand slides up my thigh beneath my skirt. "God, I need you."

My pussy agrees, throbbing as his hand slides higher.

I glance at the driver in the front, but his eyes are on the road. Noah notices the direction of my look and gives a low chuckle. "Am I embarrassing you? Should I stop?"

I bite my lip. I don't want him to stop. I want to make up for all the time we lost.

He grins, leaning in to graze his lips along my neck. "I didn't think so. I think you like it when there's a risk of getting caught. Better keep quiet, though. We don't want him to crash."

I almost lose the game right away when he nips at my earlobe. The sharp bite makes me press my legs together, aching for his touch there.

Noah just caresses my inner thigh with his thumb. "Shhh." His hand closes around my throat. The touch is gentle but possessive. Enough to command my complete attention. Like he didn't have it already.

He turns my head, captures my mouth again with a kiss. Outside the cab, the lights of the city rush past and we seem to float along the road like we're floating in the ocean. I feel like I did that day when he made love to me beneath the water. Reliant on him for every breath, both lost and found at once in his arms.

I blink when I realize the car has stopped and Noah reaches over me to open my door. "Here we are, Liv."

It seems like only a few moments until we're in his room and I'm thinking that I should call my parents and let them know I might not be home tonight. Noah presses me up against the wall, sliding my jacket over my shoulders as he kisses my neck.

Noah growls against my ear. "Do you know how badly I need you right fucking now?"

My pussy floods with moisture and I turn my head to find his mouth for another hungry kiss.

By the time we come up for air, his hand is rubbing my clit over my panties and I'm gasping into his mouth, desperate and needy. Determined to regain some control, I drop to my knees and reach for the waistband of his trousers.

When I free his cock, it swells rapidly in my palm. The foreskin stretches back as I stroke him, leaving the slick blushing head exposed.

He sucks in a breath when I open my mouth to lap at the salty liquid beading at the tip. The feeling of power when he has to brace himself against the wall goes to my head. I grin as I work my tongue around the crown of him, savoring the heat, the smell, the taste. All of it is addictive. When I finally close my lips around him and draw him into my mouth, his eyes flutter closed and his hand fists against the wall. I watch beneath my lashes in fascination as tendons begin to stand out on his neck, as I

bring this gorgeous monster right to the brink of his control.

He's panting when he pulls me away. "Enough. My turn."

My protests are ignored as he scoops me up and carries me to the bed. As soon as he deposits me on top of the covers, he tugs my dress over my head and yanks my panties over my ankles. I sit up on my elbows to ask him if he has a condom, but he interrupts me with a dark look, shoving my own panties into my open mouth.

"You're going to come at least three times on my tongue and hands before you need to worry about that, Liv," he says, as if he read my mind.

I subside into a meek puddle as he pushes my legs apart and makes good on his promise.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

This is crazy.

We haven't even really talked about where we left things. But does it matter? He's just here to prove some point to himself. And I can't care about that any longer when his tongue swipes around my clit and my eyes close all on their own.

I thread my fingers through his hair and pull him closer. We can't stop now. He's right. I need to come.

I'm a sticky mess by the time he lifts his head. I grin when I realize I'm such a mess he's shifted. I love seeing him in this form. He makes a low noise of satisfaction, dipping his head to take one more lick, which has my pussy clenching.

Oh god, I've missed this.

I steel myself for more, knowing it'll be almost as hard to say goodbye in the morning as it was when I left Australia. At least this time we can leave things on good terms. Not on an argument.

Then Noah yanks me to the edge of the bed and positions me bending over the mattress. He brings my arms behind my back, wrapping a tentacle around my wrists to keep them in place. Then he kicks my legs apart and there's a pause before he brings his cock to my pussy. "I'm wearing a condom this time, OK? I want to show you I can be responsible."

I don't have time to process his words before he thrusts forward and enters me in a single stroke. My pussy is so wet and ready that he slides right in. My hands tighten

and I gasp at the feel of him there. So full. So perfect.

Then he begins to move.

My knees buckle and I'm glad I'm braced against the bed. Oh fuck. He finds just the right spot like magic. Instantly the pressure builds again. I can't do anything but take it as he fucks me in faster and faster strokes, our bodies slapping together. I hear his grunts and groans of pleasure, and for a while that's all there is.

Then he flips us. I'm spread out again, legs hoisted up high, held secure by one of his many limbs. Noah leans over me and looks deep into my eyes. "I'm going to show you I'll be anything you want me to be."

I can't speak. He slips the tip of one tentacle between us and with that and his cock fucking into me in a steady rhythm, I can hardly breathe.

This feels like more than a one last time. It feels like he's offering me forever. But I can't do that with this guy. Not with the guy who walked out on me when I needed him. Not with the guy who doesn't do relationships. Who couldn't even take a pregnancy test with me.

All my thoughts shatter as he leans in to kiss me and I tip over the edge. He's everywhere. Possessing my mouth, my breath as I come apart. Leaning over me, continuing to pump into me through my orgasm.

When it ends, I blink up at him. "You can't. We can't." I push at his chest, and he frowns in confusion but pulls back.

"We can't what?"

My voice seizes up. My limbs won't cooperate. Noah withdraws and I stagger to my

feet, searching for my clothes. “We can’t do that. That’s not what this is.”

“What do you mean?” He’s staring at me as I fumble on the floor for my things.

“You didn’t come here thinking that we could be a couple, Noah. That’s not you.”

He reaches for me, but I dart away. “Olivia—”

“No.” I shake my head, dragging on my dress, pulling on my shoes. “Noah, I can’t. How can I trust you? I can’t do this.” I rush from the room while he’s still standing there staring at me looking horrified. I have just enough sense to hesitate in the doorway and fling back, “I’m not pregnant, Noah. I never was.”

I hate the thought that I’ve hurt him, but really, what did he expect? How can I give my heart to someone who already broke it? I rush down the stairs and into the street before I pause to call a cab and go home to nurse my broken heart all over again.

TWENTY NINE

Noah

I don’t chase her when she runs from me. I’d catch her if I wanted to. Especially on eight tentacles, but she’s right. I deserved that.

I turn up here thinking I can just apologize and everything will go back to the way it was. Or better yet, will turn into what I want, which is forever.

I haven’t shown her that I’m worth her trust. I haven’t shown her that she means the world to me. So instead of following, I link to the shower and turn the cold water up full. Standing under it has no effect on my throbbing cock. It stays erect for far too long, desperate for the release I so nearly had inside her body.

I rushed it. Fumbled it.

I have to take a step back and re-evaluate my plan so I don't make a complete mess of it.

I congratulate myself on making her come, until I realize that won't make her keep me around. She's not that shallow. Sure, that might make her lose her head for a while, but she needs more from me than that. She needs reliability. She needs availability. She needs vulnerability.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

And that scares the shit out of me.

The only thing that scares me more is losing her. So what choice do I have? I've faced that icy current once before and it drags me out to a sea I don't want to swim in.

I wait for my erection to slowly subside rather than taking care of it myself. Denying myself the orgasm I want so badly seems fitting, given how that played out.

I hope Billy and the rest of my staff are coping and can handle things for as long as this takes me. Because no matter what, I'm not going back to Kraken Cove unless Olivia is coming with me.

The first step is working out where she lives. I should feel worse about that but I'm not doing it to be a creep. I tell myself that as I lie on top of the covers, unable to sleep.

By morning, I've narrowed it down to a district, and that gives me enough of a start. I'm going to put everything I learned about her in person and on social media to use until I track her down and convince her I'm for real. That she can trust me.

That I'm not going to cock it up again this time.

By lunch time I've scouted the local area, found a deli café with an extensive vegan menu and talked the manager into hiring me as a dish pig. I'll need a reason to hang around and figure I could use some cash. I don't technically have a work visa, but cash in hand is pretty standard in the industry. She would have been a fool to turn me down after I showed her how I'd shift and get four times the work done that a human

would in the same amount of time. I don't even have to mention I have previous industry experience. To be honest, she'd probably think it was weird that a qualified chef wants to work as her dish pig.

I guess sometimes being a monster has its advantages.

Olivia

I hide in my room the next day like a spooked animal, afraid of what I'll do if I see him again. It was so, so tempting to let him kiss away all the hurt and win me over with the words I've been dreaming of hearing. But Noah isn't a guy who knows how to be in a relationship. He has told me himself he's spent his whole adult life avoiding them.

What good to me is a guy like that?

Because he's right about one thing. I am the wife type. I get feelings. I fall in love. And I want someone who's going to love me right back just the way I deserve.

At dinner time I'm quiet and I push the vegan curry Trish made around my plate with my fork rather than eat. It smells lovely. It's a rich dal and she's made handmade breads and sides, and they even cracked open their most recent batch of kombucha. I just can't stomach anything right now.

"Honey, did something happen yesterday?" Mom says eventually.

I look up to find them both watching me, their faces full of concern.

"No. Yes. I don't know. I saw Noah."

They exchange a worried look. In the time I've been back home, I filled both Mom

and Trish in about what happened while I was in Australia.

“You mean he called?” Trish asks.

“No, I mean he came all the way here and found me at Nikkei Sol last night and then we...” I flush, looking down into my dal.

Mom makes a humming noise.

Trish sets down her fork. “He flew all the way here? Did he have business in the US?”

“No,” I say miserably. “I think he flew all the way here for me. OK, I know he did. Well, that’s what he said only—”

“Only he’s let you down before?”

“Mhmm. And I think that’s a bad sign.”

“Sweetheart, I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but sometimes, just sometimes people change.”

“Huh?”

“Well,” Mom shifts in her seat. “Take me and Trish.”

I laugh. “Mom, I know you didn’t always think you were gay, but I refuse to believe it wasn’t there somewhere beneath the surface.”

“No, love. I mean when we first met, we were both still with other people. We didn’t mean to, but somehow we found ourselves in a situation we never intended.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

My eyes widen. “You cheated on Dad?”

“I’m afraid so. If I’m one hundred percent honest, I’ve cheated on all the partners I ever had until Trish. Turns out I finally found what I was searching for.”

Oh my god. Could they be any more perfect for each other? I want to cry, but they’re smiling so fiercely at each other and I’m happy for them too.

“Wait, are you saying I should give him a chance?”

“Do you want to?”

I think about the things Noah said. How he apologized and promised to be better. To be anything I needed. Wasn’t it Mia who said the right thing was whatever I needed?

I think if he wanted to, Noah could be that for me. The question is, does he want it enough? “I do.”

“Then give it to him,” Mom says. “But be careful. Take it slow. Give yourself time to see if he’s really what you’ve been looking for.”

“I don’t know, Mom. I’m not sure that’s such a great idea.”

THIRTY

Noah

I spritz myself with water to counteract the heat of the late spring air. It's not arid like an Aussie outback summer, but it's warming up and I still haven't found Olivia.

Every day I think I see her on the street or in a shop. I'll catch a glimpse of red hair or the sound of laughter and turn my head only to find it's not her.

Turns out a kraken isn't much of a tracker and my internet stalking only got me so far. I should be happy. I'd hate to think any loser online who's watched too many of her videos could find out where she lives. Only if that loser is me, well that's different.

In the video on my phone, she smiles and lifts a huge forkful of pasta to her mouth. She's so adorable. She looks happy.

Maybe that's my sign. Maybe I'm once again being selfish, pursuing someone who is happier without me. I don't hit like. I don't want her to see I've been watching. Somehow that feels wrong. I think if I messaged her she probably wouldn't answer.

I won't say I haven't been tempted. The sappy draft messages sitting on my account are evidence of that. But I think the right way has got to be face to face.

Pocketing my phone in the small shorts I bought to accommodate my tentacles, I head back inside, break over. I've been at work since seven this morning which was brutal on a Sunday, but Sunday is our busiest day and the pay is barely enough to keep me in food and accommodation. I need the hours.

I could go back home, of course, but I promised myself I wouldn't do that. Not without Olivia.

The longer it takes, though, the more I start to wonder if I've made yet another mistake.

While I've been on break, the dirty dishes have stacked up in the kitchen. I put my head down and get stuck into them, hastily scrubbing a large pot while I stack plates and cups into the commercial dishwasher tray with my tentacles.

There's a particularly stubborn stain on the rim of the pot. Reaching into the sink with the tip of a tentacle, I use my suckers to keep it in place so I can get a better look at it, then I pause. There's something strange about the color of my tentacle. It seems brighter. More luminescent. As I watch, a soft light within the tip begins to glow.

I drop the pot with a splash that splatters dirty dishwater all over the floor.

If I'm glowing, then she must be close.

I run from the kitchen on four tentacles, looking frantically around the café. There! Sitting at a table in the window are three women. Two older ladies in yoga gear and my beautiful Olivia. Her long red curls seem to glow like my tentacles in the mid-morning sun. She's facing away, talking to the other women, so she hasn't seen me race out here like I'm on fire.

Taking a calming breath, I wrest some control over myself. I should act like this is a causal encounter, shouldn't I? That's been my plan.

Act like I just happened to run into her and wondered if she would like to catch up over a coffee.

Only now she's here, I don't think I can do that. The intensity of my need for her feels like an ache in every limb. I can't wait a moment longer.

Ignoring Mandy, who is making coffees, and the line of customers at the counter and the servers who give me weird looks, I make straight for that table and stop, palms sweaty and mouth dry.

One of the older women with dark straight hair and a strong chin looks up at me and then at Olivia. “Hey, Liv, I think you’ve been spotted.” She jerks her head at me while I stand behind her trying to compose my thoughts into something witty or charming to say.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I've never been good at this. I always say the wrong thing. I can't put people at ease the way my brother Luke can. I never know the right thing to say like Jack does.

I clear my throat.

Olivia turns. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open, and for a moment we just stare at each other. "Noah?"

"Liv." My voice comes out as a croak. I don't know what else to do, so I lower myself to crouching height and take her hands in mine and give her the most earnest look I can muster.

"Noah, what are you doing here? I thought you'd gone home."

"I couldn't. I can't go. It won't be home if you're not there."

She stares at me. "You've been here this whole time?"

I nod.

"Why didn't you contact me again?"

"I—" I pause. I don't have a good reason. Only fear. But she needs to see that side of me too. "I was scared you'd reject me again. I was looking for a way to run into you. To see you without the pressure, and now I've gone and messed that up. But I couldn't help it."

She laughs in disbelief, but she still hasn't pulled her hands away. "I was scared too," she says at last. "That's why I never called either."

The woman on her right, the lady who I now see has the same color hair as Olivia, nudges her friend. "So this is Noah. Liv, do you want to ask your friend to join us?"

Olivia looks around at the two ladies and then back at me. "Do you want to have brunch with my mom and stepmom, Noah?"

I balk a little. I've made it a rule to never meet friends and family ever since Charlotte, and I'm not sure I was prepared for this to happen today with Olivia, but I need to show her I'm serious. "I'd love to, only I'm supposed to be working." I cast a guilty glance over my shoulder at Mandy, who is glaring at me from behind the coffee machine.

"Oh. You're cooking here?"

"Cleaning. Liv, please let me call you after my shift is over. Would you give me your number again?"

She chews on her bottom lip, but then she smiles. "Yeah. OK. You can do that."

If I thought I was anxious before seeing Olivia at the café, I'm about to shit a brick standing on the driveway outside her house in the dark, wondering if I can bring myself to ring that doorbell. We've messaged back and forth all afternoon, every second I got.

Understandably, she had a lot of questions, and I owe her an explanation. I've saved the biggest one for last because I'm not sure how to break the whole fated mates thing to her. The last thing I want is for her to think that's the reason for all this. It's not.

She's the reason.

From now on she's my reason for everything. The fated mates thing is just luck, but I've fallen for her, despite my reservations, despite my unwillingness. Because of who she is.

I brush a hand over the button-up shirt I chose for dinner with her moms. I still don't think I'm meet-the-parents ready, but I'm not going to be late. I remember that much of the manners my own parents tried to drill into me before I turned into the most obnoxious person in Kraken Cove.

I knock three times on the white door before I realize there's a doorbell and curse my own stupidity. I'm just debating whether to ring the doorbell or wait in case they think that's rude when the door opens and my breath catches in my throat.

It's cliché and trite, but that doesn't make it any less true. My mouth is dry and my fingers twitch with the urge to slide over her waist and haul her close.

Olivia's long red hair is bound up in a loose plait that trails over her shoulder. Tiny curls have sprung loose to coil around her forehead and ears, and she grins at me with her sunshine smile.

Thank god it's back.

I've really missed that smile.

"Hi." I feel a bit sheepish standing on the doorstep, not knowing if I'm allowed to hug her. Not knowing if she's going to give me the chance I so desperately need.

There's a moment's hesitation and then Olivia springs forward, throwing her arms around my neck to hold me close. The hug is tight. I feel and hear the sigh she lets

out before she releases me and steps back and it's everything. "It's good to see you."

I want to tell her it's better than good. It's plunging into the salty sea after spending days dry. It's the moment my legs split apart to form my true shape and I'm free to be just who I am.

“Yeah,” is all I manage.

She leads me into the house and into a bright white kitchen with colorful paintings hung on all the walls. At the stove, the dark-haired woman from the café is setting a hot dish from the oven on top. She shucks off her oven gloves and turns to me with a smile. “Hi, Noah. I’m Trish. So lovely to have you.”

I shake Trish’s hand and ask what she’s cooking, and she shows me the recipe she’s been tinkering with for vegan lasagne. The cooked lasagne on the stove smells delicious, and I read over the recipe with interest.

“The trick is soaking the lentils just long enough,” she says. “They still need to have some body, but you don’t want them dry or crunchy.”

“Noah?” I turn, and Olivia’s mom is standing in the kitchen behind me. With her gray-sprinkled hair bound in the same way Olivia’s is, I instantly see the similarity between them, though she’s taller and heavier built than Olivia.

I smile. “Mrs. Zeston?”

Olivia’s mom laughs. “Oh I haven’t been Mrs. Zeston for a long time. Just call me Rose.”

Another faux pax. I should have realized since Olivia introduced Trish as her stepmother.

“Sorry, Rose. Nice to properly meet you.”

“And you. You know I might not have recognized you if I’d walked past you on the street. I didn’t realize there were supernaturals who had two forms, but Olivia tells me that’s pretty common.”

I shift uncomfortably. “Yeah. The shift happens for krakens when our skin gets wet. It’s not something I can control. There are other types of monsters who can, though.”

“Fascinating.”

“Mom!” Olivia nudges her mother then gives me an apologetic smile. “Mom is a socio-anthropologist currently writing a thesis about how monsters have shaped human culture throughout history. Mom, you can’t make Noah a test subject, OK?”

I laugh. “Well I think for monsters, we’ve been shaped more by living in human society. Or hiding from it.”

Rose gives me a serious smile. “Yes. I think supernaturals have faced persecution from humans for many years.”

Of course it’s true. Olivia’s mother might be the first human I’ve heard say it out loud though. Maybe this dinner won’t be as tense as I had imagined.

When we sit down at the table and Trish serves the lasagne I’m impressed. It’s got a depth of flavor she’s built through stock and herbs and spices. She tells me shitake mushrooms and MSG give it the umami taste on the back of the palate, and I’m mentally taking notes. I might have to add more vegan food to my menu back home.

The conversation flows as smoothly as it can while I stumble over myself trying to think of small talk, and Trish saves the day by talking to me about cooking.

By the time it’s time to clean away the plates, I stand quickly. “Let me help with

these. I am a professional after all!”

Rose gives me a wink. “Well that’s an immediate point to you, Noah. Thank you.”

Olivia follows me into the kitchen. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

She turns on the tap and fills the sink with hot water.

“That’s fair. But I’m serious when I say I want to see you. I want a second chance.”

She sighs. “I’d like that, Noah, but I’m so conflicted about it. Obviously I still have feelings. I realized that as soon as I saw you.”

I grin and try to hide it in case she reads it as being cocky. “Well, I should have told you before that I have feelings too. And not seeing you has only made them stronger. I was an idiot not to realize sooner how much you meant to me. How much you mean...”

There’s a long moment where we just look at each other, and I’m too scared to push for her reaction.

She bends and retrieves rubber gloves from under the sink, and I laugh as she tries to fit them over my big hands. “So you don’t have to ruin your nice trousers,” she says, giving them an appreciative look.

“Thank you.” I was prepared to do it, but since I spent a whole week’s salary on this outfit I’m glad not to have to.

We wash the dishes in silence. Olivia dries them and stacks them away.

Finally she turns back to me. “If I say yes to seeing you, what then? I don’t think I

can go back to the way things were. I don't want that anymore.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

“I know. I don’t want that either.” I want so much more. My heart is beating fast and I’m having this surreal moment standing outside myself watching this scene unfold, knowing I have very little control. “Would you start over with me? Would you go on a date with me and pretend we’re starting from scratch? You could tell me what you do want. What you need, like we’re meeting for the first time and talk about the future and—” I duck my head. “Well all the things that might entail.” I can’t help the way my eyes stray to her belly. I haven’t let myself think about it too much, but after she left I’ve thought more than once about what it would be like if she had been pregnant.

“Really?” She stares at me.

I sigh. I’ve more than earned her distrust. “I’m sorry, Liv. I’m sorry for the way I handled it. I was an ass. But I didn’t come for you because I thought you were or weren’t. I came because I had to. I have to know if I can make this work.”

She nods. “I understand. I think there’s a part of me that’s still wondering too. Despite everything.”

There’s a pause. She lifts her hand to wipe a soap bubble from my cheek and the touch of her skin on mine sends a pulse through me.

“I’ll start over with you, Noah Wilson. Of course I will.”

I can’t help scooping her up into a hug even with the rubber gloves still over my hands. “You won’t regret it. I promise. Can I take you out tomorrow?”

THIRTY ONE

Olivia

I'm surprised when Noah asks me to meet him at University Park. I expected him to choose the beach or a restaurant, not the local park. He waves at me from across the street as I approach, with a light backpack slung over his shoulder and wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt with a loud floral design. The shirt makes me laugh and his big smile warms me up from the inside. When I cross the street, he takes my bag as well. "Thank you for coming."

I lean up for a kiss, but instead of meeting my lips as I expect, he brushes his against my cheek. "I hope you're ready. We're learning to paint today."

"Oh really? That sounds like fun."

I continue to be amazed as we join a small group of people already standing in the park in a shady spot with easels and brushes at the ready. "Wow, Noah, this is really lovely. How did you find out about this?"

He just smiles, looking very pleased with himself, and I turn my attention for a while to the teacher. I do my best to follow her directions, but it's not easy, and pretty soon my canvas looks like a paint factory exploded on it.

I look across to Noah's to find him scowling at it. "This would be easier if I was shifted," he complains.

I giggle. I can't help myself. We've been painting the landscape and Noah has chosen to focus on the university building in the background, but his building is very lopsided and a long smudge of green tarnishes one wall. "What happened there?" I point.

"It's harder than it looks, OK?"

“Oh I know. Look at mine.”

He does. Then looks back at his. “Mine’s worse.”

“It just needs a little...” Reaching across, I try to paint a brown branch under the smudge of green to make it look like the leafy branch of a tree is cutting across the foreground. That only makes things worse.

Noah’s mouth drops open in a look of mock outrage. “Oh, is that right?”

“Maybe.” I give him my best sorry not sorry look.

All of a sudden, he swipes across my painting with bright red. Then yellow and orange and the paint explosion turns into a paint-nami. We’re both giggling, and somehow I end up with paint on my cheek and Noah has a splodge on his nose.

The teacher gives us strange looks at the end of the lesson, and I hope she’s not too offended. I’m sure having two adults giggling through the session like a couple of school kids was not her idea of a pleasant Saturday morning, but she thanks us for coming and asks if we want to take our art home.

We glance at each other. “Uh, no. You can keep them. Thank you again for a great lesson. Sorry we were terrible students.”

Afterward, we sit on the edge of the fountain and eat the lunch Noah packed for us.

He takes only a few bites of his sandwich and sets it aside, whereas I polish off the whole thing and lick my fingers. Like everything Noah makes, it’s delicious.

I look around at him. “You’re not hungry?”

“Did I mess this up already? I didn’t mean to make the lesson into a joke. It’s just been a long time since I tried to date anyone.”

I reach over and take his hand. “You didn’t mess it up. This is perfect.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

“Well don’t worry. There’s still time.”

I can’t decide whether it’s adorable or frustrating to see this side of him. The vulnerable, wounded side that won’t allow him to believe things will work out the way he wants. And, really, can I blame him?

An idea pops into my head, and I act on impulse. “You can’t spoil it if I already have!” I give him a huge shove into the fountain and watch as his eyes widen and he topples backward.

He shifts as soon as he hits the water and there’s a gasp from a passerby, but they don’t stop and no one shouts. People around here are used to seeing monsters, especially on campus.

I’m still laughing at his outraged look when he rises on his tentacles, water pouring from his body and down the ruin of his shorts. Then I see the look in his eye and realize I might have miscalculated.

I squeal as he launches himself toward the edge. I don’t stop to wait for him to vault the side of the fountain. I’m already running, breathless with laughter, excitement and just a little bit of fear making my legs pump faster than usual.

It makes no difference.

A moment later, wet arms catch me and I’m hauled over his shoulder. “Don’t start something you aren’t prepared to finish, Zeston.”

I'm squealing with laughter as he marches me back to the fountain and tosses me in. By this point, I've forgotten about who is watching. I've forgotten about the park and the failed painting lesson and everything except the hungry look in his eyes.

Noah helps me to my feet, not releasing me even when there's no longer any risk of my slipping again. My hair is wet and plastered to my face. My clothes are dripping.

I don't care.

When he slips his hand around the back of my neck, I have already longed for his kiss for what feels like an eternity.

I missed this. I miss it every moment his lips aren't on mine. I love his taste, the firm feel of his mouth and the sensuous movement of his tongue. For a guy who spent so many years doggedly refusing to kiss anyone, he sure kisses like he's had a lot of practice.

I'm caught up in it just the way I always am when we're together. Only this time it doesn't feel like hanging over a precipice. This time it feels like coming home.

Eventually, he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine. "I'm going to stop now before I do something in public you'll regret."

I giggle. "Who said anything about regret?"

"Liv!" The word is growled like a warning, but it only sends a shiver of excitement through me imagining what he'd like to do to me. I guess it's probably best that we stop now. Even though I don't want to.

The tip of a tentacle brushes against my cheek and I smile. "I do love seeing you like this. Do all kraken glow so beautifully when they shift?"

His eyes flick away from mine, and I wonder for a moment if I've said the wrong thing. "There's um...there's something I should have probably told you about that. Only it never seemed like the right time."

"There is?"

He sighs. "Look, I held off because I didn't want this to change your decision. I want you to choose me because you want me. Not because you think you should or because of fate."

"Fate?" I echo.

"I glow when I'm around you and only you. The rest of the time my tentacles are as dull as the next male."

"You... wait. What does it mean?"

"It means you're my fated mate. Or that's the legend anyway. I never believed it. Not until I met you and everything kind of fell into place."

I'm glad my cheeks are still wet from the fountain, because it helps hide the fact that suddenly I'm crying in public. Though I guess by now we've made such a spectacle of ourselves a little crying won't matter.

"Shit." Noah scowls. "See, I knew I'd mess this up."

I reach up to caress his face and his scowl softens. "Noah, don't you see? I've been looking for a reason to believe you. To understand why you would chase me halfway across the world. To trust."

He shakes his head. "This isn't it. Liv, I can do better. I want to do better."

“Shhh.” I cover his mouth with my hand. “I know and you will. But I can see from the way you didn’t tell me that you mean to. Now, are you going to take me back to your hotel so we can dry off and then get wet all over again?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

The frown breaks into a grin and he lifts me and carries me toward the edge of the fountain and our things. “Fuck yes. You just say the word, and I’ll take you wherever you want. But please consider asking me to take you home with me to Australia.”

THIRTY TWO

Noah

I get halfway to the baggage carousel before I realize Olivia is no longer walking right beside me. Looking around, I spot her at the top of the ramp staring at her phone in her hands.

“Hey, Liv, you good?”

She doesn’t look up and she’s still standing fixed in place, so with a sigh, I walk back to retrieve her.

“Babe.”

“Oh my god.” Her words are whispered in such a reverent tone that I look down at her phone screen myself.

“What?”

“That stupid video we posted before we left? It’s got three million views and still rising.”

“It does?”

She turns her screen toward me as if it means a lot. I know enough to know that the red bubble with the stupidly high number of notifications is a pretty good sign. Wrapping my arm around her, I give her a squeeze. “That’s great. I’m glad. Come on, if we stand here any longer, the next flight will come through and it’ll take us forever to get through customs.”

“Huh? Oh right.” She follows me with her eyes still glued to the screen. So I steer her to pick up our bags and stack them on the trolley while she scrolls through messages.

“Oh wow,” she whispers under her breath.

I shake my head. “Come on. You can reply to your thousands of admirers later. My parents are waiting to meet us. To meet you.”

At this she lifts her eyes and grins at me. “I’m so excited. And also nervous. OK, I think I’m mostly nervous. Do you think they’ll like me?”

I press a swift kiss to the center of her forehead. “No. They’ll love you. Come on.”

In the end, the line for customs is short since we are the last ones from our flight to pick up our bags. As soon as the sliding doors open to the arrivals terminal of Sydney airport, my eyes snap straight to my mom who lets out a little gasp of delight and lifts her hands to her mouth. “Oh, Rob, it’s them.”

The sight of my dad hits me like a sharp piece of coral in the tentacle. His skin looks somehow thin. All the veins show through in his two-legged form, and he rests with one hand on the balustrade which he would never have done before.

When he sees us, though, he straightens and gives us a big wave.

I find a spot to park the trolley and draw Olivia in front of me. I've told them about Olivia of course, but this is their first time meeting face to face. It's adorable that Liv is nervous, but I couldn't be more sure that my parents will adore her. Just like I do.

"Mom, Dad, meet Liv."

In classic style, Mom opens her arms, tears filling her eyes. "Oh my love, it's so good to meet you. Can I give you a hug?"

"Of course."

Dad throws his arm around me. "Come here, kiddo. You're not old enough to get out of giving your old man a hug." I don't mind it. Not even when he ruffles my hair. I'm just glad to feel the familiar strength in his arms, even if I can't see it in his body. The surgery really must have made a difference. It's only now that I see him in person I can believe he might be on the other side of this.

When I pull back Mom grabs me, and soon I'm ready to tell them all to leave me alone. I don't, because I'm on my best behaviour today and from now on.

Liv gives me a little smile to let me know she can tell how I'm feeling. "Right. Come on. I've had enough of airports for a lifetime. Let's get out of here." I shoo Dad away from the handle of the trolley and lead the way. "I'm starting to regret not just getting a hotel here overnight. I don't think I got a wink of sleep on the flight."

Liv yawns, but I know for a fact she got at least five hours. "Long haul flights are the worst. I'm starving."

I laugh. "Of course you are. Let's get you something to eat before you get hangry. Trust me, you do not want to see this girl hangry."

She swats me with the back of her hand, but she's laughing too.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

On the drive back to Kraken Cove, I try to stay awake, but sheer determination only gets me as far as Nowra, and from there all I remember is the gentle hum of the engine and the low rumble of my dad getting to know my fated mate.

I wake in a dark room, unsure what time it is. When I roll over searching for Liv, I see her sitting up in bed, light from her phone screen illuminating her face. “Babe, what time is it?”

She turns to me. “Oh sorry. Did I wake you? It’s midnight, but I can’t sleep. It’s morning back home.” She stops herself with a laugh. “Back in the States. How strange. I’ll have to get used to this being my home now.”

I roll over and lay my head in her lap, enjoying the warmth of her body and the rich scent of her. “You know I’ll move back with you if you want to. It’s not too late to change your mind.” I’m already closing my eyes again. I can’t help it. I’m catching up on a whole night of sleep.

She strokes a hand absently through my hair. “Mmm, I know, but I like it here. It’s just a shame that I’ll have to travel so much for work.”

“Mmm. A problem for another day. Lie down.” I try unsuccessfully to tug her into her rightful little spoon position in front of me.

“Just a minute. I’m trying to answer all these messages, but I think it’s impossible. That video totally blew up. Like insane numbers. I might even get a big sponsorship deal if it keeps going.”

I chuckle. In the video she posted, we're fooling around as I try to make her pick all the ingredients of a new dish I created. She filmed it on a whim and posted it as filler between projects. I'm still a bit stunned this is the one that's gotten so much traction.

"Oh my god!" Olivia gasps. "Noah, I've got a message from someone claiming to be a producer at Food Network. They want to talk about a TV deal."

Instantly I sit, putting my head close to hers to see. "No way! That's amazing."

"I know. It's got to be a fake."

"Knock it off. You're brilliant. Your content is brilliant. I bet it's real."

She keeps scrolling, then turns to me with a smile. "Noah, look at this. They want both of us. They'd like us to make a food program together."

"What? That's impossible." I grab the phone, and now she's laughing at me as I stare at the words in the message for myself.

You two are dynamite together. You'd make great television. I've sent a DM. Let's chat. I want to work with you.

A buzz runs through my whole body. I grin at Olivia. "I think we should go for it. This will be great for your channel."

"But what about The Snapper?"

"Mate, if Jamie Oliver can write books, have his own TV show, and still run a bunch of restaurants, you bet I can do it too. Besides, you saw how well Billy ran things while I was gone. The reality is, it's still a small town. He doesn't need me breathing down his neck all the time."

She answers the message, and we grin at each other for a moment. I'm half expecting an answer to pop up straight away. The anticipation dies a little after a few minutes, and Liv puts the phone aside and throws her arms around my neck. "There's no way I'm getting back to sleep now."

"Me neither." I shiver as she presses soft kisses along my neck and over the lobe of my ear. "What were you thinking?"

"Let's go for a swim."

THIRTY THREE

Olivia

"Are you sure you don't mind my idiot brother being so pig headed about not having a proper wedding?" Jack hands me the cooler bag filled with breakfast provisions. His voice is pitched low so Noah won't hear. He's distracted anyway, leaning down to give his mother a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Luke and Mia's wedding was beautiful and it was lovely to be there, surrounded by people who already feel like an extension of my family. I have to admit, I had a few moments wishing that I could have that too. But I shake my head. "Listen, he might be pig headed, but the mate thing means more than a wedding anyway. And I don't want to bring up stuff from the past. This is a fresh start. It shouldn't feel like that. We'll do that mating ceremony and tomorrow we'll meet the celebrant and lock things down legally. That's all I need."

Jack gives me a hug and Noah takes the bag from me, taking my hand in his. "Ready?"

A smile passes between the two brothers. I only catch it from the corner of my eye as

I turn away and I'm not sure what it means. But I'm glad they're not at each other's throats anymore. In fact, while Jack seems stressed lately, he and Noah have gotten along pretty well ever since I returned to Australia.

When we've said goodbye to everyone and been wished well by all Noah's family as if we're going away on a five month trip instead of overnight, we climb into Luke's truck, which Noah borrowed for the night so he could bring about a hundred blankets, a tent, and heaven knows what else he has stashed in the five bags in the trunk. He's been so secretive about this whole thing, refusing to let me pack, only telling me the barest details.

I still have a flutter low in my belly at the knowledge that after tonight, I'll be his completely and he'll be mine.

After tonight, I'll be able to stay with him underwater for as long as I want. We'll officially be a mated pair.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I'm not really sure why I'm getting such flutters since we've been acting like a mated pair since that first date all those months ago. Only this is big for him. My heart has been committed for a long time. Longer than I've probably even admitted to myself. For Noah to make this step—well, it means a lot. I know it's not conventional in terms of human customs, but he's told me how much this means for kraken.

When we arrive at the tiny bay, there's no one around. It's late afternoon and the sun is at its hottest. The sand is scorching. We leave everything in the truck and dash to the cool relief of the water, hopping in the shallow waves to pull off our clothes and toss them as far back on the beach as we can manage. Daringly, I toss my bikini onto the pile, leaving myself completely naked. I could have pulled it to the side I guess, but it's much more fun this way, and if I'm going to be part kraken, I might as well embrace the kraken way of swimming!

Noah is still struggling with his shorts over his shifted tentacles as I dive into the water, sighing at the kiss of cool and the floaty lift of the waves. There's a splash beside me as he dives in too, and I twist in the water to watch him move.

I will never get over the way he propels and turns in the water. It's effortless. Joyful. I love the way he smiles in the water. It's the same unforced smile that flirts on his lips after he's had a really big orgasm, and I imagine shifting must feel something like that.

We swim together into deeper water, but too soon I have to come up for air. My head breaks the surface, and I float there for a moment, the sun warm on my breasts and belly and the water surrounding me cool in contrast.

Then Noah's warm arm slides around my middle and I drag in a quick breath before he pulls me under again. A muffled laugh escapes me in a flurry of bubbles as he rolls us. I draw air from his lips as he leans in to breathe for me. Perhaps one of the last times.

I think I'll miss it when he no longer has to feed me air this way, but I'm looking forward to the transformation.

Our lazy embrace turns to unhurried coupling after Noah works my pussy slowly to readiness with his fingers and tentacles. When he slips inside me at last, I moan, muscles automatically tightening and releasing, pleasure rising like our bodies toward a warm, languid release that seems to last forever. For a while, though, he fucks me like that, my favorite way. I'm held in his arms and filled with him, drifting on rolling tides of pleasure as he gently pumps into my body. To complete the ritual, I'll need to take his cock in my mouth and drink his cum. Doing it beneath the waves activates what Noah claims must be latent genes, but I like to think of as latent magic. But neither of us is in a rush. Instead, we savor each other. I relish the feel of floating in his arms, held close and loved.

Finally, his muscles tighten and it seems like he's nearing the end of his control. When his speed increases, he pulls out, giving me one final breath. I twist into position and take his thick cock between my lips, sliding my mouth over him as he draws me close with a hand on the back of my head.

As I suckle him, he lifts us toward the surface of the ocean so as his pleasure explodes in my mouth, we burst through into the air and I can pull back and suck in a breath through my nose as I swallow.

For a few moments, he holds me close and we wait, floating limp and spent on the surface of the water. The sun has slid beneath the horizon enough to paint pink and orange bands across the sky, and I smile at how perfect it looks. Who needs flowers

when the coastal sunset is more beautiful than an entire bouquet? Who needs a white dress when little puffy clouds float in the sky dipped in pastel shades that match the sunset?

I'm so relaxed it takes me a moment to notice the change in my body.

"Can you feel it?" Noah runs a knuckle along my neck, and I gasp at the feeling of him brushing a sensitive spot, then almost swallow water as I try to figure out how to breathe through my nose and gills at once.

"Oh my god! It worked!" I flounder into an upright position, treading water and grinning at Noah.

He laughs at me. "Did you think I was lying? Of course it worked."

Tentatively, I lift a hand and brush over the raised skin, feeling three slits that weren't there before. I snatch my hand away. "That feels so weird."

"You'll get used to it," Noah assures me.

"Why didn't it work all the other times we did that?" I giggle.

"You have to be in the water too."

I guess that seems reasonable enough. I laugh to myself at how simple it seems while we float some more hand in hand.

While I would love to stay in the water all night with Noah, after a few hours I'm starting to tremble. By this time we've swum around the bay, exploring the fascinating undersea world in a way I've never been able to before. Eventually he drags me away from a beautiful orange starfish and towels me off on the beach,

wrapping me in a blanket and insisting that I sit in the car while he puts up the tent.

It doesn't take long snuggled up inside the tent for me to stop shivering and fall into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Noah wakes me with bacon and egg rolls cooked over a small camping stove and a hot mug of coffee. I'm still wondering what on earth he packed in the other three bags we never opened when he stands and collects them from the truck.

"What's in those?"

Noah just smiles. "Finish your breakfast. All will be revealed soon, I promise."

OK, he's definitely up to something. That coy smile is so charming I can't help but laugh. I hunt down my phone and check the time, suddenly remembering we have an appointment at Town Hall today. "Noah, have you checked the time?"

"Don't worry about it." He's rooting around for something in the back of the truck.

We still have to pack up the whole campsite and dress. I'm starting to worry that I'll be getting married with my hair a wild tangle of knots when I hear the sound of a car.

I'm definitely not expecting Luke, Mia, and Noah's parents, Joanne and Rob, who all pull up in Joanne and Rob's old station wagon. "Good morning!" Luke calls.

"Hey!" Mia gives me a wave. "I hope we're not too early, but there's a lot to do before ten."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:28 am

I frown. “We’re only meeting the celebrant in town.”

At this point, Noah slides his arm around my waist and I look around to see that he’s changed into a sleek blue suit. He holds out a bag in his other hand. “This is for you. The celebrant is meeting us here. We’re just waiting on the rest of the guests.”

My eyes widen and yes, there might be a tightness in my throat that suggests tears are not far off. “You mean—?”

“We’re getting married. But you knew that.”

“I thought you didn’t want to make it a big deal.”

He squeezes me. “You are a big deal, Olivia Zeston. You’re a very big deal. And you deserve my everything, including a proper wedding. I just hope you’ll be happy with what I’ve done.”

Jack arrives with the celebrant and my heart feels so full when I open the bag to discover a beautiful cream-colored dress in just my size. It has spaghetti straps and a floaty hem that skims my mid calves and it’s absolutely perfect. Casual yet beautiful. Exactly what I would have chosen for myself.

Mia helps fix my hair into an updo that looks like I visited a salon rather than rolled out of the ocean like a seal, and it’s only then I notice everyone else looking around up the hill to where a little orange car is coming down the road from town.

“Did you invite someone else?” I ask Noah, surprised. I would not have picked him

inviting anyone from town, but perhaps some of the staff from The Snapper wanted to come.

When the car parks and I catch a glimpse through the windshield at the driver, my heart catches in my throat.

It can't be!

A moment later the doors burst open and Trish and Mom are beaming big bright smiles at me.

"Oh my god!" I run across the beach, not even noticing the harsh asphalt on my bare feet, and launch myself into their arms. "You're here! You came. How long have you known?"

Trish laughs. "We've been planning this since you and Noah left the States. It's been hell on your Mom keeping it quiet."

My mouth drops open and I stare at Noah, who just shrugs and grins.

I can't believe he's done all this after swearing never to have another wedding, never to get serious about another woman again.

Standing hand in hand on the beach with our families is the perfect way to formalize what we started last night. The celebrant keeps to the simple format we had discussed, and soon I'm looking into Noah's eyes and saying, "I do."

He leans in and gives me the softest, sweetest kiss I think we've ever shared, pulling back to rest his forehead on mine for a long moment. "I love you, Liv. Thank you for putting up with me."

Brushing a stray tear from my cheek, I press one final kiss to his nose. "Don't be

silly. Don't you know you were meant for me? I love you, Noah Wilson, and I'm honored to spend the rest of my life with you."

There's a low whistle from Jack. When I look around, he's smiling. He's the first to come and congratulate us. "I never thought I'd see the day, but I'm glad I have. You're the perfect mate for my brother." He kisses my cheek and then pulls Noah into a hug. "And you, little brother, I think you're turning into the perfect mate for her. I'm proud of you."

Luke approaches, clapping Jack on the shoulder. "Well now we just need to find a mate for you, Jack. Complete the happy family."

Jack nods sadly. "Yeah, if I thought I had even a hope of finding what you guys have found I'd agree."

I can't help thinking about this the rest of the day. When we slide into the back seat of Luke's truck for the ride back to town, Noah's warm palm squeezes my thigh. "You good?"

"Yeah, just thinking about what Jack said. Wouldn't it be great if we could fix him up with someone?"

Noah snorts, but Mia turns from the front passenger seat to look at me eyes wide with delight. "Yes! We should. You know, my friend Tegan keeps saying she's going to visit Kraken Cove. We should totally fix them up and then they can get married and she'll stay here forever."

We share an excited squeal.

Luke chuckles. "I love Teegs, but she's not exactly everyone's cup of tea, Mia."

Mia swipes her hand through the air. "Nope. Sorry, but it's a done deal. I'm going to

message her right now. I bet they'd be perfect for each other."