



The Single Dad

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Description: In the latest installment of Lena Little's bestselling series, "Steamy Shorts," prepare to be swept away by the unexpected romance between a single dad and his best friend's little sister. When Noelle steps into Adrian's life as his son's new nanny, he's blindsided by her transformation from a little girl he once knew to a stunning woman who ignites a fire within. But with a complicated past and a threatening ex lurking in the shadows, Adrian must navigate the treacherous waters of desire and responsibility. Can he protect his son, retain his best friend, deal with his ex and claim the love that's blossoming right before his eyes? Dive into "The SINGLE DAD" for a steamy tale of second chances, family reconstruction, and the undeniable pull of love. It's short, steamy, but also a sweet and life-affirming romance.

Adrian

I don't know what I expected to find on the other side of the door when she knocked. In my mind, I thought I would see Noelle, my best friend's baby sister and my son's soon-to-be live-in nanny.

But the moment I see her, my brain stops functioning, and all my blood rushes to the wrong head.

Noelle is all grown up, curves, charm, and confidence wrapped neatly in one deliciously tempting package. The sight is so unexpected that I struggle to reconcile the old and new versions of her.

The thing is, I need to remember she is off-limits.

First off, my best friend will likely have my head on a plate if I even so much as stare at her the wrong way, which I'm totally doing right now. Second, she's so good with my son that I don't want to risk losing her, both for his sake and mine.

Third, and perhaps the most important reason of all, is that she makes me hopeful for a future that doesn't look like it's in the cards for me. I have long made peace with the fact that the rest of my days will be spent with Tomtom. By the time he's older, I'll spend it alone.

But...

Jesus, dreams of a happy ending fill my mind when she comes back

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ADRIAN

“Yes? Can I help— Noelle? Is that you?”

Breath chokes in my throat, and my head spins.

I know my best friend’s sister, Noelle, is coming, but I remember her as the freckled-faced, chubby-cheeked ten-year-old next door who kept tagging along with me and my friends. More specifically, me and her brother, Peter. I remember how she would hide outside his bedroom door, drawing in her journal or doing her homework or braiding her Barbie doll’s hair.

It wasn’t because she liked to eavesdrop and report us to her parents, but more like she didn’t want to be left out. Noelle didn’t have a lot of friends at the time, so she always hung out with her brother’s buddies. I used to stay there a lot after school to play games, so we’d always see each other. She even liked to bring me snacks. Me, not her brother, but me. That always made me laugh.

Those are my memories of her.

So when she shows up at my front door, a twenty-five-year-old who’s about to become my son’s live-in nanny, I’m equally confused and disoriented. Gone is the awkward Noelle who’s always trying to keep up with us, and in her place is a grown woman. Not just any grown woman. A curvy, beautiful woman. And definitely not awkward. Definitely not the Noelle I used to know.

She's grown. Those pale green eyes are full of amusement and knowing as she catches me staring. If someone told me years ago that one day I'd be staring at Noelle, slack-jawed and a little nervous, I would have laughed. I never saw her that way. But like I said, this is a different Noelle. A warning would have been nice.

Her copper hair that she used to cut above her ears now cascades in waves over her shoulders. I'm thoroughly unprepared for the barrage of images shuffling in my mind. Images of that same hair wrapped around my fist as I tug or yank it, however she prefers. Of how her hair would look good fanning on my pillow, how her full red lips would feel against mine, how good she would feel around me, if she's responsive, if she likes to be dominant or be dominated.

Ah, fuck.

The world tilts, and I have to grab the door frame for support. I wasn't prepared to meet her ... or this version of her.

Goddammit.

When did this happen? When did she grow into this person who made my heart pound in my chest and my throat dry? When did I have a weak hold on my self-control? Why do I feel an instant deep longing in my bones?

Noelle flips her hair over her shoulder, and her face splits into a smile. No. This isn't the Noelle of old, all right. The confidence, the sexuality radiating from her. This is the Noelle who can make every head turn and wish they were either her or with her. This is the Noelle every man wants to marry.

My stomach flips at the realization, and I'm drowning. Completely, unspeakably, and utterly lost with one look from her.

“Hi, Adrian! Missed me?”

That playful tone is the only giveaway that somewhere under this woman is the girl who enjoyed my company and laughed at my jokes, no matter how awful they were.

My gaze drops to her mouth just briefly, and my blood rushes south. This is dangerous. She’s off-limits and untouchable. Just thinking of her this way feels wrong, like her brother can show up behind her and smack me in the face for letting my mind stray into forbidden territory.

Something rushes to the surface. Something raw, intense, primal, forgotten, and long buried.

“God, look at you. Come in, Noelle. The house is a bit of a mess, by the way. I just picked up Tomtom from preschool, and our place is never clean when he’s around.” Tomtom is my five-year-old boy. The center of my universe and the sole reason for my happiness these past few years. “Actually, you know what, the house is never clean. Let’s leave it at that.”

Noelle chuckles as I take the small luggage from her. “Wow, Adrian Grant. The guy who always had girls trailing him, offering him snacks, and giving him flowers. Now a single dad with a kid. Who would have thought?”

I cross my arms over my chest and raise a brow at her, feeling that familiarity between us bloom into something else. “Not really surprising since I’m already thirty-two. High school was decades ago.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re a pretty old man. How are your knees and back, by the way? I have a peppermint balm you can use.” She has the audacity to laugh, a rich, full sound that reverberates in the living room.

I snort, masking how my stomach tightens at the way she calls me that. “Old man? That’s bold coming from someone who used to have braces and trip over her own feet. I mean, remember when your dad put all those anti-slip tapes all over your stairs so you wouldn’t end up with a concussion every time you came down?”

She rolls her eyes. “That was years ago. I’m perfectly graceful now.”

“Yeah? Prove it.”

Before she can respond, tiny feet thump against the stairs, and my kid barrels into the room, barefoot and in his favorite ratty dinosaur pajamas. His hair sticks up in every direction, and there’s a red Sharpie smudge on his cheek. No idea how it got there or that we even own a red Sharpie. He probably doesn’t even know it’s even there. After all, he’s supposed to be in bed now.

“Hi!” Tomtom chirps, grinning up at her.

I try not to show my surprise. Tomtom is not the friendliest kid. He’s painfully shy. He doesn’t come up to people he hasn’t met and introduce himself.

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Noelle doesn't hesitate. She drops to my kid's level, smiling wide, and opening her arms. I'm about to tell her he isn't big on hugs. But my nth surprise of the night comes in the form of Tomtom stepping into the hug and wrapping his small arms around her neck.

And just like that, any hesitation I have about hiring her wavers. I watch in awe at the effortlessly easy way she coaxes my son from his shell.

"You must be Tomtom," she says, her voice warm, inviting. "I've heard so much about you."

Tomtom grins, rocking on her heels, clasping his hands behind him. "Did Dad talk about me?" He throws me a look, skeptical. "Because he always says I talk too much when it's time for bed."

I shove my hands in my pockets and lean against the wall. "I stand by that. All your stories and sudden realizations come out at bedtime."

The woman in front of me laughs, and it does something to my chest, something tight and unsettling, which I try to ignore ... unsuccessfully. "I like talkers," she tells Tomtom. "Makes my job more fun."

"Please don't call me Tomtom." He leans close to her to whisper, but his voice is loud enough that I can hear it all the way from here. "I like Thomas better."

"Oh, duly noted, Thomas." She lowers her voice, glancing at me playfully. "Are you the boss around here or is he?"

Tomtom nods, all serious. “Dad thinks he is. But really, it’s me.”

I huff, amazed at how, five minutes into meeting each other for the first time, they’re suddenly best friends and ganging up on me. “That’s not?—”

“Dad, please be quiet.” Tomtom presses a tiny finger to his lips. “You said it’s not polite to interrupt when people are talking.”

Noelle bites back a laugh, and I shake my head, watching as my kid takes to her like he’s known her forever. Tomtom chatters away, filling the room with his animated stories—something he only ever does with people he’s already comfortable with—and she listens with full attention, nodding, gasping in all the right places, asking questions as though she actually cares about every ridiculous detail.

It’s not surprising, not really. Peter mentioned in passing that she used to be a teacher, said she had the patience of a saint. But hearing it and seeing it are two different things.

I should focus on the fact that she’s the perfect nanny—capable, sweet, kind, and effortlessly handling my kid. But all I can focus on is the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when she laughs. The way her eyes flicker with amusement when she catches me watching.

Noelle came into our home, and all of a sudden, everything looked brighter, the colors more vivid.

My God. What in the world is happening to me? Have I gone way too long without a woman? Is my dry spell finally catching up to me?

I clear my throat. “All right, Tom, don’t overwhelm her on her first day. Besides, you should be in bed.”

Tomtom grins up at me. “She likes talkers, remember?”

Noelle shrugs, smirking. “He’s got a point.”

With a sigh, I tip my head to his bedroom upstairs. “Yes, but it’s past your bedtime, young man.”

Tomtom pouts, but he gives her a quick hug before hugging my leg and running upstairs. Noelle and I watch him, and I hear her soft chuckle. It’s not just about Tomtom chatting with her like he’s known her forever. It’s the fact that he hugged her. Twice.

Hug.

Tomtom isn’t normally affectionate. He is to me, but not to someone he’s just met.

God, I should be relieved that Tomtom likes her. That I’ve clearly found someone good and trustworthy. Someone I know will take good care of him when I’m not at home.

But all I feel is something else entirely—something that twists low in my gut.

Something dangerous. Something intense. Something difficult to ignore.

I’m in trouble. Deep, deep trouble. And the worst part is, I’m not even sure I want to dig myself out of this hole.

The beer is cold, and the game on TV is barely holding my attention. Normally, at this time, I’m already relaxing, unwinding after a long day, my muscles sore, but my mind keeps drifting to her. To the way she smiled at Tomtom, to the warmth in her voice, to the way she fit so effortlessly into my house a few minutes after arriving. As

if she already carved a spot for herself in our lives.

I take another swig, shaking off the thought. Bad idea. Very bad idea. Peter will have my head if he finds out I'm thinking of his sister this way.

When she was in high school, Peter found out she was dating a jock. He drove for three hours to corner the guy, and put the fear of God into him. He and Noelle apparently had a big row about it, but she ultimately understood he was just playing the part of a good big brother.

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Now the tables have turned. Am I about to lose my best friend because of these thoughts I have of his sister? But I guess, if they're just thoughts and I don't act on them, it will be fine. Right? Nobody else has to know.

“Ow! Crap!”

The loud yelp echoes from upstairs, sharp and pained. My chest tightens, fear crawling up my spine. I'm up in seconds, moving before my brain catches up, taking the stairs two at a time.

As a father to a boy who likes grabbing things he shouldn't, my protective instincts are sharp and give me superhuman strength and speed.

Without thinking, I shove open the guest bedroom door, heart hammering, half-expecting to find Noelle on the floor, injured and bleeding or worse.

Instead, she's standing in the middle of the room, balancing on one foot, her hands clutching the other. Her face twists in pain, frustration burning in her eyes.

No blood or broken bones. That's good.

I glance down. A single, cursed yellow LEGO piece lies on the floor, and another sticks to her foot.

Shit.

I exhale sharply, rubbing a hand over my face, willing my heart to calm down.

“Jesus. You almost gave me a heart attack over a LEGO?”

She glares at me. “Have you ever stepped on one of these? Because I swear, I saw my life flash before my eyes. I thought I stepped foot in hell.”

I smirk, crossing my arms. Have I ever stepped on one? She should have seen the murderous look on my face each time I saw someone gift my son a box of LEGOs. I’m still convinced it’s the work of the devil, and no one can tell me otherwise. “Want me to call an ambulance?”

She narrows her eyes. “Keep laughing, old man. Karma’s watching.”

I step closer, instinct pulling me in. She’s still balancing on one foot, still gripping her ankle, and for some reason, I feel the overwhelming urge to steady her. My hands twitch at my sides.

And that’s the exact moment it registers on me.

Noelle’s not wearing anything. She only has a thin towel wrapped around her luscious body.

Holy mother of...

That stops me in my tracks, my smile disappearing. I’m firing on all cylinders, spiraling inward. I need to step outside, go back to my beer, and forget the vision of a semi-naked Noelle.

My body fails to get the memo, though, and I stand there staring at her for what seems like hours. Noelle realizes it a beat too late because her eyes widen, and she briefly drops her gaze to the thin piece of fabric covering her. The only thing between us. Gone is the playful glint in her eyes and replaced by the flush creeping on her

chest, neck, and cheeks.

“I-I should leave. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Noelle nods and forces a smile. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Okay. Good. Just call me if you need anything.”

I start to back out of the room when my eyes snag on something. Her luggage is open, its contents spilling out. It’s just a bunch of clothes, some folders, but...

A bright pink eggplant-shaped something sits on top of it, and it looks suspiciously like...

“Oh my God.” Noelle runs across the room and dives to the floor to cover her luggage. “Don’t look, Adrian, please. I swear. This isn’t mine. My roommate must have packed it as a joke. I’m sorry. I’ll throw it out. Please forget you ever saw it.”

Noelle keeps rambling, but I can no longer hear a word she says. In fact, all my other senses have dulled except my sight. In her hurry to cover the sex toy, Noelle has forgotten one important thing—she only has a towel on. A towel that wasn’t secured to her body. A towel that slipped off her. A towel that now lies on the floor.

And there she is in all her naked glory.

Her ass is up in the air as she hurriedly zips her luggage, and I spot the exact moment she realizes it. Her whole body stiffens, and she slaps both hands to her mouth.

A more decent man would turn around and leave her in peace. But my moral compass has never truly pointed north, and I do what a shameless, sex-starved guy in my position will.

I stare and stare and stare.

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NOELLE

This feels like one of those weird dreams where you stand naked in the middle of a busy street. And then you wonder why you're naked, how you got here, and which you should cover first—your face or your private parts.

The small LEGO is still sticking at the bottom of my foot, the dildo my best friend and roommate—whom I will kill later—added in the luggage, and my ass in full view. That would have been fine. I don't have any issues parading naked since I'm confident in my own body.

But...

It's not just in front of anyone. It's Adrian. The hottest guy I've ever seen. The guy I've had a crush on since I was a kid. The subject of all my teenage fantasies. The standard by which every other boy was held. The one I wanted to marry.

It's been years since I last laid eyes on my brother's best friend, years since I forced myself to get over the stupid, girlish crush I had on him, years since I was broken-hearted after he got another woman pregnant. I thought I had grown out of it, moved past the flustered nerves and wide-eyed admiration.

But now, standing here, facing him, and talking to him again?

Yeah. No.

I am still that girl, apparently.

He was always big, always strong, but now? Now he's built like a damn door, broad shoulders stretching the fabric of his white shirt, arms thick with muscle. His black hair is cropped short, but it suits him, drawing attention to the sharp cut of his jaw, to the well-trimmed beard framing his mouth.

I cast him a panicked glance over my shoulder. He turns around but not before his deep brown eyes lingered on me, and wait a damn minute ... is that a tent in his pants?

No. No way.

That's not possible. Adrian used to treat me like I was nothing more than an annoying sibling, but he was always kind. He had a smile ready for me, and since he knew I liked sweet things, he would bring me a cupcake or something he picked up from the local bakery. Not to mention, he would help me with my homework when my own brother would just scoff at me.

And yet, there's no mistaking the brief darkening of his gaze. He walks out without a word, and I'm left in my new bedroom, shame churning in my gut. Shame and something else pooling low in my belly, something warm and pulsing.

It's my first day, and I'm already messing it up. After everything that happened in the past few weeks, this is the last thing I need.

I miss my old school, my colleagues, my students. But the job took too much of me. I was running on empty. One day bled into the next, and I just woke up and realized I was simply going through the motions. I still loved to teach and help my students, but each time I was called to the principal's office for not following one of their random, unrealistic rules meant to add unnecessary strain and burden to the teachers, I went

home drained. Exhausted.

I love teaching. I love watching their faces light up when something finally clicks, love the chaos of a classroom buzzing with laughter and chatter. But the rules? The endless paperwork? The useless meetings that could've been emails? They drain the life out of it.

My students were the only ones who kept me there, but one day, it was no longer enough reason.

So I packed my bags, quit, and went back to our small town. I needed a change of pace, a change of environment, and I wanted to recharge before applying to another school. Somewhere along the way, I lost the spark, and I needed to find the passion to teach again.

That's how I found myself in Adrian's house after Peter called me to ask if I wanted an easy job that paid well while I stayed here. My brother knew it would be a week tops before I got bored and restless and started looking for something to occupy my time. Besides, I had nothing else to do, and I had enough experience in babysitting.

The big bonus? Accommodations and meals are free too. Apparently, Adrian has his hands full with several big projects. Most days, he comes home late, so he needs someone to look after Tomtom—I mean Thomas—the whole day.

The surprise on his face earlier, however, made me wonder if Peter didn't mention I was his babysitter. It would be just like Peter to pull a joke like that on Adrian. He probably thought it would be funny. Or maybe Adrian was surprised I looked so different from the last time he saw me. Either way, it was wonderful to knock him off his feet for once. God knows he's done that to me too many times already.

Well, there's nothing funny about my current situation. Less than three hours and

Adrian's already seen me naked. Not front naked, sure, but naked nonetheless. I'm going to have to make up for it. But first, I need to delete that image of his face darkening and his pants tightening.

Based on what Peter has told me, Adrian hasn't had anyone special in so long, which is understandable. Between Thomas and his business, he probably hardly had time for himself, let alone date. Maybe it's been a while since he's seen a naked woman in the flesh. Too bad that woman happens to be me.

There's no way Adrian will ever look at me like that. That was just a one-time thing. It could have been any woman, and he would have reacted the same way.

After changing into a pair of pajamas—flannel pants and long sleeves for good measure—I gingerly walk downstairs and stand behind the sofa. Adrian is sitting with a beer bottle perched on his lap, his eyes trained on the television.

HGTV. Huh. That makes sense since he builds homes for a living. But I never would have guessed he enjoyed reality TV.

Wringing my hands together, I clear my throat. "Adrian? Listen. I'm sorry?—"

He twists at the waist to face me, his forehead furrowed. "No, Noelle. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have barged into your room like that. I thought something happened, and you were injured or something." Adrian purses his lips. "Not that it's a valid reason, but I'm sorry. I acted on instinct because that's what I usually do when I hear Tomtom yelp."

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Warmth spreads on my cheeks, and while I've been looking forward to this job and living under the same roof as my longtime crush, I don't want him to feel weird in his own house. "Did I just make things uncomfortable for you? I can totally just leave and?—"

"No!" He stands abruptly, the bottle dropping to the carpeted floor with a thud. "You're staying ... well, unless you don't want to anymore."

The intensity of his response shocks me. When he stands to his full height while I'm barefoot, I have to tip my head back to look him in the eye. He was always handsome to me when I was a teenager, but from the eyes of a grown woman, Adrian is a walking daydream. Unlike before, he's now rough around the edges, but that only adds to his allure.

The more I look at him, the more I feel tendrils of warmth weaving through my legs up, up, up to the apex between my thighs. My God, he's only become hotter, and I'm supposed to live with him and pretend he doesn't affect me the way he does.

My body throbs with raw need as his gaze drops very briefly to my chest. For the record, I did not plan to seduce him. It's just that I don't wear a bra ever. Outside, I wear pasties, but once I'm inside my house, I don't bother. I like to set the girls free, and bras are suffocating to me.

Unfortunately, that's where Adrian zeroes in, and he sucks in a sharp breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. He lifts his gaze to the ceiling and scrubs his face furiously.

That's when I notice, for the second time tonight, the tent in his pants. So I guess I

wasn't imagining it earlier, huh? He sees me watching his crotch but doesn't move to cover it.

"I-I'm sorry, Noelle. It's been a while." His voice is low, with something that sounds like ... sadness?

I still don't take my eyes off the tent. "How long?"

He spins on his heel. His back is to me, and I can't help but admire the thick muscles of his shoulders and arms stretching the fabric.

"Five years."

Wait, what? "Five? You haven't been with anyone for five years?"

He looks at me over his shoulder. "Being a full-time father and businessman kept me busy."

I may be overstepping a bit, but the need to know overrides logic. Actually, his proximity makes me lose my mind. "Thomas's mother?"

Adrian turns back to me and shrugs those broad shoulders. "She bailed out on him when he was eight weeks old."

My heart breaks for both him and Thomas. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was the best thing she ever did."

"Why?"

"She said she could never stay in one place."

Even for her own child? Wow. “She doesn’t get in touch with you?”

“No.”

“And you never have...?”

His face reddens, and he looks away. “No. So I’m sorry. If you feel uncomfortable or unsafe around me, I understand.”

I’m shaking my head even before he finishes the sentence. “I don’t.”

“It’s fine, Noelle. Really. I’ll tell Peter I found someone else. You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to.”

I hear him just fine, but I tune him out because all I can focus right now is the way his pants mold around his cock. And what a big, lengthy cock that is. I pulse with need, my head foggy with desire. I don’t care about anything but the need to make him relieve the terrible, empty ache within me.

I need Adrian to see me as a woman worthy of his attention, affection, and more. I’m not that doe-eyed kid anymore. I’ve worked on myself so that one day, when we meet again, he’ll look at me differently.

Jutting my chin at his erection, I smirk. “Want me to take care of that?”

His brows are drawn together, a deep crease forming between them, but his eyes, wide and unblinking, shine with something more than just fear. His lips part slightly, as if caught between a gasp and a question, and his breath becomes shallow, uneven. There’s tension in Adrian’s jaw, muscles flexing, yet his gaze remains locked in place, alternating between my eyes and my mouth.

This is a fight I need to win.

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“Noelle...” My name comes out as a growl, and I clench my thighs, all my desire for this man washing over me in waves. How many years I’ve pined for him, dreamed of him between my thighs, inside me, claiming me as his?

Primal desire pulses between us, and I can taste the tension on my tongue, feel it all over my skin. Knowing Adrian, he’s debating with himself over how unwise it is to get involved with me and if it’s worth Peter’s ire. I need to tip the scales.

“I know you feel it, too, Adrian. I’ve...” I trail off, wondering how much I should confess, but darn it. I’m here, and there’s no turning back. “I’ve had a crush on you since forever.”

His eyes widen at that, but the muscle in his jaw ticks, his nostrils flaring. I was right. He’s at war with himself. “I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage.”

Those words shred my last layer of self-preservation. Besides, what do I have to lose? He saw me naked, and I confessed to having feelings. I might as well go all in.

I walk closer to him, and with every step, his breathing becomes more ragged. I stop when I’m finally in front of him, my palms sweaty, my thighs sticky. His breath is warm against my forehead.

I don’t move. Neither does he.

The space between us is thin, fragile, buzzing with something heavy and crackling. Something unspoken. His dark eyes flick to my mouth a second time, just for a second, barely a glance, but it’s enough to send heat curling through my stomach all

over again.

Does he feel it? This pull, this tightrope stretched between us, begging to snap?

I swallow, pulse hammering in my throat. “I’m taking advantage of you, Adrian.” My voice is softer than I want it to be, a whisper between us.

Something shifts in his expression. A crack in his carefully controlled mask. He exhales slowly, his fingers flexing at his sides as if he wants to touch me but won’t let himself. As if he can’t.

Standing on my toes, I lean in, just enough to push him, to force him to make a choice.

“Fuck, Noelle.” His voice has grown gravelly with lust.

It’s the last thing I hear before his mouth crashes to mine and his arms wrap around me, pulling me to him. The kiss sets off fireworks in my head. It’s our first, and it’s anything but gentle.

The kiss is raw, hungry, and demanding. His tongue plunges into and invades my hollow mouth, and I can’t help the moan that escapes me. I don’t want to wake up Thomas with my animalistic sounds, but Adrian tastes too good. God knows I’ve wondered how he would kiss often enough, and he doesn’t disappoint.

Adrian knows how to kiss. I try not to think of all the women who came before me and gave him his experience. He grabs my ass and pulls me to him, his cock pressing against my stomach, and I moan again as I rub against him. Jesus. It’s like I’m being reduced to a virginal teen with the way I’m acting around him. Then again, who the hell cares? I’ve wanted this for as long as I can remember.

He breaks the kiss, and I groan in disappointment. “We need to stop, Noelle. I am dangerously close to ripping your clothes off and burying my cock inside you.”

Oh my God. Funny Adrian is my ultimate favorite, but this horny version is becoming a close second. “Then, do it, Adrian. Fuck me like you mean it.”

“No. We just met after a very, very long time.”

“So?”

“You don’t even know how much I’ve changed since we last saw each other.”

Biting back all my smart-ass responses, my breath coasts over his tanned throat, and I stop to lick his Adam’s apple, making him groan raggedly. “Tell me you don’t want me, Adrian, and I’ll go back to my bedroom and use that damn toy you saw earlier.”

His eyes flare with something like possession, and his voice hardens. “Sure, Noelle, if you want something smaller.”

Unexpectedly, the cockiness in his tone makes me laugh. “I’m willing to settle since you seem hellbent on leaving me high and dry.”

Adrian slips a hand inside my pajama bottoms and grazes my folds with a finger. Oh God. I arch into him, digging my nails into his shoulders. “You are far from dry, Noelle.”

“Please, Adrian. Please.”

“Please, what?” He glides the finger along my slit before dipping it into me. I wiggle my hips to take more of him, but he pulls it out and chuckles. Asshole.

“Adrian, I swear to God?—”

It takes me a second to realize he’s disappeared in front of me and is on his knees, pulling my pajama bottoms down my legs. I step out of them, and my pussy is bare before his face. What can I say? I like going commando. Or maybe part of me hoped this would happen. Either way, I’m glad only a few pieces of clothing separate us.

And if there’s anything about Adrian, it’s that he doesn’t waste time.

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He parts my folds with his thumbs and licks me, flattening his tongue against my clit and pressing soft kisses on my sensitive button. A full dose of pure desire shoots through my bloodstream.

My hands go to my mouth, trying to stifle a whimper, but he's far from done. He's almost right under me as he sucks and kisses my pussy with gentleness and reverence.

"Oh, God. Yes, Adrian. Right there, there."

With absolutely no shame, I grab his hair and begin riding his face. It's an awkward, slightly uncomfortable position—my legs apart, Adrian between them, and I'm holding on to him for dear life. My thigh muscles burn, but I'm past the point of caring.

This right here is my dream. Adrian pushes his tongue in and out of me as I rub my pussy against his face.

"Fuck! Don't stop. Please don't stop."

I get zero warning when my orgasm crashes into me, my legs giving out. But even before my soul lands back to earth, Adrian wraps my legs around his waist, and he backs to the sofa, sitting with a satisfied smile, his mouth glistening with my juices.

My juices on Adrian.

Damn. Who said dreams don't come true?

He takes out his cock, and I salivate at the sight of it—long, thick, and veiny. I have no idea how it's supposed to fit inside me, but I'm desperate for him. So without another word, I lift my hips and slowly lower myself onto him.

“Oh God. Oh God. GOD!”

It's a tight fit, but I slide easily enough until he's fully seated inside me. Until I'm impaled on his cock.

I have to take a moment to breathe. I feel full, and I know it will only take a few thrusts before I come again.

“Oh, fuck.” Adrian snaps his eyes shut and throws his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing. “Fuck, Noelle. I think I won't last.” Words I never thought I'd hear from my lifelong crush.

I loop my arms around his neck and drag my tongue along the shell of his ear. “Then, come for me and come inside me.”

His hands tighten on my thighs, but I don't let him deter me. I lift my hips, then slam back down. With my head burrowing in the crook between his neck and shoulder, I circle my hips and grind.

But Adrian doesn't just sit still either. He snakes a hand between us and strums my clit. It's still super sensitive from my earlier orgasm, but Adrian slows his finger and teases it.

“Noelle, you feel so damn good riding me like this. You ride me so well.”

He wasn't kidding when he said he wouldn't last. I can feel warmth weaving along my legs when he stiffens and thrusts from under me, his movements wild and

uncoordinated. The thought that he's about to fill me with his come is what tips me over the edge.

"Noelle, fuck!"

"Adrian, I'm about to?—"

Stars explode before me, and I bury my face deeper, inhaling his scent, and feeling his thick come coating my walls. Pure ecstasy floods my body, radiating to my fingertips.

We stay like that for a few minutes, our bodies connected until Adrian softens inside me. My legs feel like wet noodles, but I don't move. Instead, I nuzzle him, still in disbelief over what just happened. My breath has slowed down, but not my heart. It's still galloping like I just ran a marathon. "That was even better than I thought."

Adrian traces circles on the small of my back. "You thought about me fucking you?"

I smile and bury my face deeper in his neck. "You have no idea."

3

ADRIAN

After what happened last night, I didn't want to leave home. I wanted to stay and maybe take Noelle out for dinner and get to know her better because God knows we did it backward.

It all happened so fast, and I had to double and triple check with her if she regretted it. I know I don't, but she came here for a job, and not even one night passed before I was fucking her senseless. Okay, she fucked me, but semantics, semantics, semantics.

But how could I let her go back to her room, knowing she might use that god-awful pink thing instead of my cock? I am nothing if not a pleaser.

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I spent the whole day going back and forth between three sites—one was nearly finished, the second half-done, and the last had just been demolished. Even as tasks piled up and I was needed pretty much everywhere, my mind kept straying to Noelle.

Tomtom doesn't take easily to people, especially those he has just met, but he must have felt something about Noelle because he didn't even spare me a glance when I said goodbye. He was busy laughing at something she said. Not just laughing but holding her hand as he did so.

Watching that moment made my chest expand. Something thick lodged in my throat, and I had to turn away because it was too much. My feelings tangled in aching knots, and while I waited for the truck to warm, I replayed the scene over and over in my head.

Noelle at home with Tomtom. It was like the last piece of a puzzle slotting into place, as though we've always had a place for her at our table, at our home, in our hearts.

It's past five when I get home, rubbing the exhaustion from my eyes, ready to collapse after the longest day imaginable. But then I see it, and it stops me in my tracks.

Tomtom.

Riding his bike.

On his own.

Not even just that. He's riding and laughing out loud, clearly having a grand time.

I freeze, barely able to process what I'm seeing. The same kid who's thrown a fit every time I tried to teach him, who swore up and down that bikes were evil and he'll never touch one even if it's the end of the world, is now pedaling across the driveway like it's the easiest thing in the world.

And Noelle is by his side, clapping, laughing, whistling.

"Look at you, champ!" she calls, pure pride in her voice. "I told you you could do it!"

Tomtom laughs again, wobbling slightly before righting himself, his face shining with excitement. He pedals toward me, his face beaming. "Dad! Dad, look!"

I don't even realize I'm moving until I'm meeting him halfway and standing at the edge of the driveway, my chest tight with something big, something overwhelming.

Pride. Happiness. Love.

For my son, for his stubborn determination.

And for her.

Not even twenty-four hours with us, and she already did this. She has already changed our lives in the best way.

She turns then, meeting my gaze, her hazel eyes still sparkling, and my throat goes dry. Noelle fits seamlessly into our lives.

"You're home," she says, breathless. Home. Yes. Home. "Surprise." She lifts her arms in the air, and my heart stutters with an unnamed emotion.

I exhale a laugh, shaking my head. “How did you do it? I’ve been trying to get him to learn how to ride a bike, but he hated it.”

Noelle looks at Tomtom, her eyes softening. “I saw a neat trick online and thought I should try it. It worked.”

“Nono, did you see that?” Tomtom yells, his fist in the air. “So cool, right? Am I cool?”

Noelle runs to him and scoops him into her arms. She twirls them around, and they both laugh.

Something warm unfurls in my chest, the feelings I’ve been burying the whole day unspooling inside me.

I really am in trouble.

At dinner that night, it feels different.

Not in a loud, obvious way, but in the quiet moments. The way she passes Tomtom his favorite piece of chicken (thigh part with the skin on) without him asking, the way she listens to his endless stories with real interest (“I had no idea! I thought T-rex was the biggest dinosaur!”), the way she glances at me across the table, her eyes catching mine as we share a knowing smile.

My son chatters away between bites, swinging his legs under the table, completely at ease. I knew he liked her last night, but now? Now he’s comfortable with her. Like she’s been here forever with us. Like she belongs in our small family.

I swallow a sip of my drink, forcing myself to stay grounded, to not get carried away by the way she looks sitting across from me. But it’s impossible.

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Because she's right there, smiling, laughing, fitting.

The ache from earlier hasn't left. If anything, it's settled deeper in my chest, stubborn and unrelenting.

I want this. I want her. Not just for tonight. Not just for moments like these.

I want her here. Always.

And judging by the warmth in her gaze when she looks at me, maybe, just maybe, she wants that too. A man can hope.

Dinner is halfway done when Tomtom points his fork at her, chicken grease on his chin. "Did you know my dad doesn't like asparagus?"

She gasps dramatically, setting her fork down as though this is breaking news, widening her eyes at me. "No way. That can't be true. Adrian always ate the veggies my mom prepared, even broccoli."

My son nods eagerly, pointing his asparagus at me. "It is! He always makes me eat them, but he never does. I saw him eat once, and his face looked almost green. He didn't chew, just swallowed it."

She turns to me, raising a teasing brow. "Interesting."

I sigh, shaking my head, wondering if this will be my life from now on. "I eat them when I have to."

“Mm-hmm.” She smirks. “Let’s test that theory.”

Before I can protest, she spears an asparagus off her plate and holds it to my lips. I stare at her, unamused. She stares back, challenging. I never thought I’d see the day Noelle would one-up me, my own son egging her on.

Tomtom is practically bouncing in his seat. “Do it, Dad!”

I narrow my eyes. “This is bullying, and it’s about to stop being funny.”

She grins. “Come on now. Veggies are good for you. Didn’t you know that kids learn by example?”

I could refuse. I could remind them both that I am the parent here. That I am the head of this family. That my words are the law. That what I say goes.

But she’s looking at me with that playful glint in her eyes, and my son is watching like this is the most important moment of his life. I’d hate to be the party pooper. Like I said, I’m kind of a pleaser.

With a roll of my eyes and a heavy sigh, I take the bite.

Tomtom erupts into cheers. “We got him, Nono!”

Noelle laughs, clapping along with him, her smile so wide it makes my chest tighten again and again.

And just like that, I know this isn’t just dinner. This isn’t just another night.

This is home. Our home. Me, Tomtom, and Noelle. Our little family has grown overnight.

The house is quieter now, except for the low sound of the movie playing on the screen. The little guy crashed halfway through, worn out from all the excitement, and after hours of learning to ride a bike, and now it's just us. We're too invested in the movie to change it, so here we are, Noelle and I, watching a movie about weird little yellow creatures who love bananas and their boss, who's apparently the 'greatest villain on the planet'.

Noelle is on the opposite end of the couch, legs tucked under her. It's not her first night here, but she might as well have been living here for years.

I try to focus on the movie, but it's impossible when she's right there.

"So," she drawls, stretching her legs out until her foot nudges my thigh, "what's it like being old watching cartoons?"

I don't even look away from the screen, even as the side of my mouth twitches. "I wouldn't know. Early thirties is still young. But you tell me, what's it like being annoying since the day you were born?"

She laughs. "I mean, I used to see you and my brother hanging out when I was, like, ten. Back when I had butterfly clips and wrote in my notebook with a glitter pen."

I glance at her now. "Girl, I was just seventeen at the time. And you were a menace at ten, by the way. And I remember that glitter pen with the unicorn keychain. Peter brought it to school, and when I asked to borrow a pen, he gave it to me. I realized too late that I answered our math exam in pink."

"You stole my favorite pen?!"

“I didn’t. Peter did.”

“But you didn’t return it. I know because I spent an entire weekend turning my room inside out to find it.”

“Oops, sorry.”

She gasps, pressing a hand to her chest. She has always been dramatic. “You bastards.” Then, she flips her hair over her shoulder. Like I said, dramatic. “Also, I was never a menace. I was adorable.”

I huff a quiet laugh, shaking my head. “You followed us around everywhere.”

“I did not.” Her red cheeks say otherwise.

“You did. You used to hide behind the couch when we played video games so you could spy on us.”

She scrunches her nose. “Okay, maybe. But in my defense, you guys were loud, and I had no choice but to listen.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. That’s totally reasonable.”

She grins, nudging me with her foot again. “Besides, I grew up having a huge crush on you, so of course I needed to be wherever you were.”

The memory makes me smile. “I knew that.”

“Well, I did tell you that last night.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and laugh softly. “No, I knew it before you told me.”

Noelle gasps and squeezes my bicep. “No way. How did you know?”

I tip the bottle of orange juice to my lips, enjoying her intrigue. “Peter told me. Of course, I didn’t really believe it back then. He liked to pull my leg.”

“Peter?!” She slumps on the sofa, a look of pure disbelief on her beautiful face. “That asshole. How did he know?”

“I imagine it was after he saw my name on your notebook surrounded by purple and pink hearts.”

“Oh God. I remember doing that.” Noelle hides her face in her hands and groans. “And here I thought I was good at hiding it.”

“You were. Peter was just adept at being nosy.”

“Right? That was why my diaries had locks on them, and I kept the key around my neck!”

I try hard not to smile and pretend to be engrossed in the movie. Noelle notices immediately, and she turns me to the side so I’m facing her.

“Adrian, I need you to tell me the truth. Did Peter read my diary?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God. That bastard. When I see him, I swear?—”

“He didn’t read everything when he realized you were just obsessively recording the pupa you saw on your way to class and hatching a plan to put gum in your classmate’s hair.”

“Brie. That’s right. She was mean to me. And the pupa also didn’t become a butterfly. Something ate it.” Noelle realizes something, and she touches my forearm. I forgot how big she was on touching. “Was that why my entire pack of gum disappeared right before the weekend camp?”

“Yes. He gave it to me.”

“Oh, that. When I see him, I’m going to kill him.”

I smirk. “No, you won’t because you’ll be on the defensive.”

“Oh, right.” Noelle quiets, and I sense a shift in her mood. I mentally curse myself for reminding her of the elephant in the room. We had a good thing going, and I had to go ahead and destroy it with a few words.

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Still, we can't escape the confrontation. Sooner or later, Peter will know.

I take her hands in mine and kiss her lips softly. "It's fine, Noelle. I'll talk to him. Your brother can be annoying sometimes, but he listens to reason, and he genuinely cares about you. I got you, okay?"

"What if he doesn't approve?" Noelle scrunches her forehead, and I kiss it away.

"We don't need his approval, do we? As long as I don't hurt you, then I'm good. I have nothing to worry about. And we're both adults. He doesn't ask for your permission who to date, so why would he demand the same from you?"

Noelle chuckles. "You know, I always admired your confidence. I always wanted to be like you when I grew up."

"I'm not that old, Noelle."

She makes a face, and I can't help but pull her in for a kiss. It's supposed to be a light, playful kiss. Just a tease. But in seconds, my body lights up, and it deepens. So deep she rakes her nails along my scalp and sucks my bottom lip between her teeth.

We spend the next few hours learning more about each other's bodies, my universe whittling down to the constant need to please her and remind her of who she belongs to now.

That's right.

Noelle belongs to me. And despite my earlier bravado about Peter understanding reason, I'm not a hundred percent sure he'll get it. Then again, the moment Noelle and I touched last night, something changed in me. I should care about what Peter would think, but that requires more fucks than I'm currently willing to give.

4

NOELLE

I used to think hating things was exhausting and unnecessary. You spend so much energy when you hate something. It's best to just ignore it and move on. Well, at least that was how I felt before. I've never truly hated anything in my life. Not Brussels sprouts or pineapple on pizza, not waking up at an ungodly hour to take a math exam, not even PE classes.

But LEGO?

I loathe LEGO. With every fiber of my being. When I worked as a kindergarten teacher, I didn't mind them at all ... mostly because I had shoes on, so I had great defense against them. But here, in Adrian's home, they are everywhere.

Those tiny, evil, indestructible bricks lurk in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to destroy me and my sanity. They hide in the couch, behind the table leg, under the carpet, by the laundry basket. Basically in places no human hand has ever put them, I know because Thomas only ever plays with them on the LEGO table in his playroom. And yet, somehow, they magically appear in my path.

My soul leaves my body each time I step on one. My vision goes white, and a yelp gets stuck in my throat. I question every decision that has led me here and wonder if I steered an inch to the left, would I have avoided the cruel, unnecessary pain? I pick up the offending brick and glare at it.

I would burn every piece to the ground if they weren't Thomas's favorite toy.

That's why I'm more than glad to take him to soccer practice. At least once there, I'm in no danger of losing my good mood because of LEGO. God, I feel so mature right now.

The afternoon sun beats down on the field as I watch Thomas sprint after the soccer ball, his little legs moving faster than I thought possible. He's grinning, completely in his element, and I can't help but smile too.

I admit I was a bit nervous at first when I agreed to babysit him. But he's such a joy to be around, easy to laugh with, and even easier to love. He reminds me of the reason I loved my job in the first place. I like kids. I like their inquisitive, curious minds. I like their innocence. It's something I forgot after working for a while and realizing that being a teacher requires lots and lots of paperwork.

"Which one's yours?"

The voice comes from my left, and I barely stifle a sigh before turning. A man—probably mid-forties, thinning salt and pepper hair, cocky smile, expensive watch, too much cologne, and an aura of self-importance—steps close just enough that his overpowering scent threatens to make me sneeze.

I'm a pretty friendly person, but when someone invades my personal space, an overly friendly man no less, I immediately shut down.

"Thomas. I'm his nanny," I say smoothly, hoping that'll be enough and he realizes I'm in no mood for a conversation ... at least with him.

It isn't. Of course. Guys like this cannot take a hint. I can plaster a "Not Interested. Go Away" sign on my forehead, and he'll talk like I'm hanging on to his every word.

“Ah,” he says, flashing a grin and standing way too close for my comfort. “So, not yours. I knew I hadn’t seen you here before. Someone like you? I’d remember easily.”

I clench my jaw, force a polite smile, and nod. He still doesn’t take the hint.

“You must get lonely and bored. Always watching from the sidelines while the real parents do their thing.”

I exhale slowly, gripping the water bottle in my hands before I say something I shouldn’t. “I’m perfectly happy, thanks.”

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“Hey.” He steps even closer, and I resist the urge to flinch. “No harm in a little conversation. You should be a little friendlier. You know, maybe smile a little more. After all, I can show you around. Just the two of us.”

I open my mouth to politely ask him to leave me alone when a shadow falls over us. A very tall, broad, dangerous-looking shadow. I don’t even have to turn around to know he’s here, and I let out a breath of relief.

Adrian stands beside me, his presence alone making the other man shift uncomfortably and swallow hard. Adrian’s voice is calm, smooth, but ice-cold. “You got something to say to my girl?”

The other guy laughs nervously, his eyes darting toward his friends by the benches. “Just chatting. I saw her alone and thought she could use a friend.”

Adrian’s lips curl, but there’s no humor in it. His eyes—sharp, dark, deadly—never leave the man. I have never seen him like this. “That so?” He steps forward, forcing the guy to back up a step. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re being a problem. Can’t you tell if a woman’s not interested? And you even had the audacity to tell her to smile. She was smiling ... before you came and interrupted her peace.”

Color drains from his face, and he clears his throat. “Didn’t mean any disrespect.”

Adrian growls, “Then walk away.”

The other guy doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t even look at me, just rushes to his buddies.

Doesn't feel good when people make you uncomfortable, right? That should teach him. The lesson better land.

I cross my arms, shaking my head as Adrian watches him go. "You didn't have to scare him off that hard."

He turns to me then, eyes still burning. "He was looking at you like you were available. Like he had a chance. The fucking nerve."

I tilt my head to the side. "And I'm not available? Last I checked, I was just your live-in nanny."

His jaw ticks, and I don't miss the hot gaze he rakes up my body, making me pulse with want. "Not to anyone but me."

The possessiveness in his voice sends a shiver down my spine, pleasure singing through my nerves.

And honestly? I don't hate it. I'm starting to like this side of Adrian. I've been obsessed with him for so long that being on the other side feels too unbelievable. It's almost like waking up in an alternate universe.

God, I can't wait to tear his clothes off later.

He turns to me, eyes searching my face. "Are you okay, Noelle?"

I take a quick peek at Thomas and see him focused on the game, so I stand on my toes and give Adrian a soft kiss, my core clenching at hearing him gasp. "I'm so hot for you right now, you know that?"

He smiles against my lips. "Not yet, no, but let me know later. I will need proof."

We're at the small Italian restaurant my family and I used to go to. I have so many fond memories of this place. It was always where we celebrated birthdays, my parents' anniversaries, high school graduations, Peter's and my college acceptance, and pretty much every major milestone.

Now I'm here with Adrian and Thomas. Time does fly. In a way, this is a major milestone for me, too. Somehow, not even a week after I showed up at his front door and I already feel like this is that one place I was meant to belong.

The scent of fresh bread and pasta fills the air, along with shouts from the kitchen. Thomas happily twirls the cacio e pepe onto his fork—well, mostly onto his fork. Some of it lands on the table, but he's trying, his brows scrunching, and I respect the effort. He's so cute, and he doesn't even try.

"So," Adrian says, raising a brow, "how's your new boss treating you?"

"Oh, you know. Not bad."

"Not bad?!"

"I mean, he's okay. Not the best, just okay. Can be a bit demanding. Not sure I want to stay or find employment elsewhere."

Adrian's eyes look like they're about to pop out of their sockets. "Take that back."

I chuckle and fork a piece of ravioli before popping it into my mouth. "No."

He leans back and taps his finger on the table. "I will make you take that back."

Thoroughly enjoying myself, I shrug and mimic him by tapping my finger on the table. "You can try."

Thomas chooses that moment to ask between forkfuls of pasta. “Nono, Dad said you’re a teacher. Is that true?”

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I nod, warming up to the topic. I love talking about my job. “Grade school and kindergarten. Best job ever.”

He slurps up a noodle. “Why did you stop?”

I exchange a glance with Adrian, who’s watching me closely because maybe he, too, wants to hear my answer. I never told my parents or Peter. I told them I was quitting and coming home. That’s it.

“Because I needed a break,” I say, sobering a little but finally relieved to let it out. “Teaching is the best, and it’s very rewarding, but also takes a lot from me. I wanted to breathe for a little while before going back.”

His little face scrunches. “Are you gonna be a teacher again?”

I smile. “Absolutely.”

“Good.” He stabs a meatball from Adrian’s plate. “We need fun teachers, just like you.”

I press a hand to my heart, swallowing past the lump in my throat, surprised at the warmth I feel. “That might be the highest compliment I’ve ever received.”

He nods. “My kindergarten teacher was so strict. She always told me to sit still.”

I gasp. “Sit still? The horror! I would never.”

He grins, and it's always when he does that that I see he's a spitting image of his father. "I know! She also said I couldn't bring inside the worm I found by the playground."

"No way!"

"I named him Burt, but I returned him outside, and when I came back after school, he was gone."

Adrian interjects, "Maybe he turned into a butterfly."

Thomas stares at Adrian, his face full of disbelief and disappointment, and shakes his head. "Dad, Burt's a worm, not a caterpillar."

I swallow back a laugh and continue watching them. Adrian looks torn between confusion about the difference between a worm and a caterpillar and amusement at the way his five-year-old son just corrected him in public, with zero hesitation, too.

It's a beautiful thing to witness, Adrian becoming who he is.

I've always known Adrian would grow up to be a good man, but watching how he is as a father, the patience, love, and pride in his eyes? I'm falling dangerously deeper for him.

And honestly, I don't mind at all. It's a welcome feeling. He was and will always be the love of my life.

5

ADRIAN

Noelle promised she'd prove how hot she was for me, and filthy thoughts haven't left my mind ever since. The moment we closed Tomtom's door, we were all over each other.

Throughout the day, she kept teasing me, brushing her tits against my arm, grazing my crotch with the back of her hand, pretending to whisper when she's really nipping my earlobe. It drove me crazy.

So now I come to collect.

I sweep her into my arms, my tongue invading her mouth. I know this house inside and out, so I can navigate it with my eyes closed, something that didn't come in useful until now.

When we get into the bedroom, I kick the door closed and toss her onto the mattress.

Noelle laughs softly but gasps when I wrap a hand around her neck and pull her to me for another kiss. It's deep, hungry, and full of promise of what I'm about to do to her. I swallow every moan, but then she breaks the kiss. With a sultry look, she unfastens my jeans and grabs my cock in record time.

Jesus Christ.

"God, you're so big, Adrian."

"Fits you perfectly, though."

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Her small hands wrapped around my girth feels so fucking good, I almost come right there and then. I need some form of control if I don't want to coat her face with my seed five seconds after she blows me.

Gritting my teeth and focusing on my breathing, I lace my hands behind my head and look at the ceiling, trying to count how many nails there are, how many beams, and how long it took my men to finish it.

It calms my raging blood a bit, but not for long.

“Eyes down here, Adrian.” Noelle speaks in between taking me into her hot mouth. After forcing myself to look back down at her, she smiles, spits on my cock, and continues pumping, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Fuck, baby.” I twine my hands behind my head again and dig my heels into the floor, willing my body to hang on. The last thing I want is spilling my seed before I've sunk myself into her depths.

Noelle doesn't say anything, but she alternates between dragging her tongue along my length and sucking the head. And my God, her mouth is heaven.

My eyes roll to the back of my head, and I only get harder than a metal rod. If she continues, I really will end up disappointing her and myself.

“Baby, you need to stop.”

“No.”

“I need to fuck you.”

With a growl, I gently tug her off me, her mouth letting out a popping sound.

She shimmies out of her panties and splays her legs, her pussy bare and already glistening. Bracing my hands on either side of her head, I coast my lips over her cheek, jaw, and the side of her neck. I hit a sensitive spot because she digs her nails into my back and arches.

My good girl.

With one hand, I slide into her tight, wet hole, biting her shoulder and groaning.

Fuck, she feels so damn good. So damn tight. So damn wet. So damn mine.

Mine.

“You’re soaked, baby.”

“For you. Only for you.”

I sit back on my haunches, still buried deep inside her, and lift her legs, draping her calves over my shoulders, letting me go even deeper. I’m delirious with pleasure, and the look on Noelle’s face as she takes every thrust only propels me further to the edge.

I saw in and out of her, sweat dripping down my spine and chest. Everything in me screams to let go and let the pleasure wash over me, but I can’t. I refuse to. Noelle has to come first. Literally.

“Oh, God. Yes, yes, yes!”

“Yes what, baby?”

“Deeper and harder, Adrian.”

She thrashes beneath me, fisting the sheets and locking her ankles behind my head. Fucking Christ. A man can only have so much control.

“Deeper and harder, then.”

I help her out. I slip a hand between us and find her clit, gently rubbing circles and adding to her sensations.

The only warning I get is Noelle’s lips parting on unsteady inhales and her body bowing off the bed.

Her orgasm has just begun, but I’ve already snapped, my hips rutting into her.

“Oh, fuck, Noelle. Fuck, baby.”

Digging my fingers into her thighs for one final plunge, I bury myself as deep as I can and finish with a guttural noise coming from somewhere inside my soul. I’m still riding shockwaves of pleasure and spurting hot jets inside her inner walls as strength leaves my body.

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Holy hell. That was ... something. SHE is something else. I've never come as hard as I did, and it's like a brand new world has opened up for me, for us.

Noelle was supposed to be off-limits. It was the unspoken rule from day one. But I should have known, rules never stood a chance against her.

I want to care what Peter would think. Really, I do. But if it comes down to it, him or her? I already know the answer, and I'm sick and tired of lying to myself. I'm too far in. Too gone.

She's not just someone I like. She's the only person who's ever made me feel like I'm home.

I roll us over until she's above me, my cock softening but still inside her. My heart pounds like it's about to burst, but it's the feeling of warmth spreading from my chest to my limbs that makes me smile. I plant a kiss on her temple and whisper, "I'm never letting you go, baby. Never. No matter what."

6

NOELLE

"I applied to a couple of schools here, but we're almost to the end of the school year. So even if I get accepted, I still have a couple of months of rest." I take another bite of my pancake, savoring the warmth of maple syrup melting on my tongue. Across from me, Adrian sips his coffee, one hand resting lazily on the table as he watches me eat with an amused smirk.

“Can I sit in on one of your classes?”

I snort. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I try to picture you in my head as this teacher, but all I can remember is the ten-year-old who used her mom’s lipstick and smeared it all over her face.”

“God, why do you still remember that? I’ve already buried the memory deep in my brain. I’m not even sure that actually happened. For all I know, maybe it was something you and Peter came up with.”

“You know what young kids say today? Denial is a river in Egypt.”

“Young kids? Adrian, there’s really no need to show your age. Just say Gen Z.”

He ignores the jab. “Still an expert at steering conversations, I see. Well, let’s talk about the time you?—”

A sudden knock at the door interrupts us. Adrian’s forehead furrows, and he sighs, setting his mug down. “Be right back. Must be one of my employees.”

I smile at him and keep eating, biting a big piece of bacon and absentmindedly listening to his footsteps. He makes a pretty mean breakfast. Yet another thing I admire about him. He can have an early start at work, but he always, always makes sure to have Thomas’s breakfast ready when he wakes up.

The door creaks open, and I wonder if he’ll need to leave for an emergency issue on site. It won’t be the first time it happened.

After he opens the door, there’s silence, which is pretty weird. Did he get out or something? Did the neighborhood kids ring the doorbell and run?

But no. Adrian's speaking. His voice is low, clipped, and sharp.

I freeze mid-bite and blink slowly. It's not a tone I've heard from him before.

Raw, unfiltered anger. It's way more menacing than when he confronted the other dad at the game. I can feel his fury all the way from where I'm sitting.

My stomach tightens as I set my fork down, the food suddenly unimportant. Slowly, I rise to my feet, straining to hear. Who's she talking to? Adrian's not quick to anger, so there must be a reason.

His voice is firm, unwavering. "You shouldn't be here, not after all this time. "

A second voice responds, but it's too low for me to make out the words.

Adrian again, sharper this time, like he's trying to keep a lid on his temper. Very unusual for him since he's one of the most patient men I know. "I don't care. I stopped giving a damn about you the day you walked out on our son. Get the hell off my porch."

A chill runs down my spine. Oh my God. It's her.

I move cautiously toward the hallway, my pulse quickening with every step, taking care not to be seen but close enough to finally make out what they're both saying.

"I just need money, okay? Then I'll be out of your hair. If you want me to stay away, just give me a couple of thousand dollars. It's not like you're not loaded, and it's not as if you're ever short on funds." Her tone is enough to make me dislike her. Smug, arrogant, and cold. She's not even asking about Thomas, not begging to see him.

"No. You don't even bother to send him cards on his birthday or call to let him know

you're still alive."

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She scoffs. “Stop being dramatic, Adrian. You’re the one who wanted a child, not me. Listen, I won’t disrupt your day again, just give me money, and I’ll run so fast you’ll forget I’m here.”

Adrian pauses, and for a moment, I’m scared he’ll give in, that she’ll get her way. But he answers with a firm, “No.”

“I’m going to fight for custody. That’s going to be more expensive, don’t you think?”

“You just said you didn’t have money.”

“Not at the moment, no, but if I really want to be vindictive, I can always find a way to make you suffer.”

Adrian lets out a sound that’s part laugh, part growl. “You want to put our son through all that? Leaving him when he can’t even sit on his own isn’t enough? You’ll go to great lengths to hurt him? Jesus Christ.”

“I told you. Give me money and I’ll be gone. What’s ten thousand to you? It’s just the price of the kid’s day care, I bet.”

“The kid.” Adrian’s voice has taken on an even more dangerous edge. “His name is Tomtom. He’s your son. You don’t refer to him as ‘the kid.’”

“Is that your answer? Because I can go to the cops right now and tell them you’re keeping my kid away from me.”

A beat of silence. And another. And another. I don't even remember when I stopped breathing, but my palms are sweaty. I'm terrified for Adrian and Thomas.

Adrian has been doing his best to juggle his business and be a full-time father. He didn't get everything he has now by sitting idly and asking people for money.

When he finally speaks, his tone is flat. "You see this thing by the door? It's a camera. I've just recorded you trying to extort money from me in exchange for staying away. It's gonna show the kind of mother you are. We'll see how any judge thinks of that."

The woman hisses and stomps her foot. "Fuck you, Adrian. You've always acted high and mighty. Someday, Tomtom will see that. He'll see what he lacks. Someday, he's going to ask for his mom."

At this, Adrian's voice softens. "I know, and Noelle will be there for him."

My heart stops. Tears spring to my eyes at the conviction in Adrian's voice. I already knew I wanted to be there as Thomas grew up and became a good man just like his father. I wanted to help raise him and be everything he needed. I didn't want him to feel as though something was missing from his life, as though he felt incomplete.

I already love Thomas as though he's my own.

Side by side with the love is the anger toward the woman who birthed him. How can anyone, most of all his own mother, not care about that sweet, adorable, smart, and funny little boy? How can she walk away from him and not bother knowing him?

She has missed out on so many things, like him learning all the names of the dinosaurs in every period, him talking animatedly about the stages of life of a butterfly, him learning to ride a bike.

“Who the hell is Noelle?” she demands.

The anger rises to the surface, and I straighten, stepping into view. No more hiding. It may not be my place to talk to her like this, but I just can’t stand by and watch Adrian fight this battle alone. He has to know I’m here for him and with him. We’ll fight these battles together.

I lock eyes with her, and my first thought is, ‘She’s beautiful but empty.’ Yes, she must be turning heads everywhere she goes, and perhaps she likes the attention. But there’s nothing beneath that. No light in her eyes. I believe, based on my experience talking to different parents, that this woman has never known genuine happiness. I’ll bet my life on it.

Besides, I can see it in the way she assesses me with her gaze—the haughty lift of her chin as if she already finds me unworthy and beneath her, the sarcastic tilt of her mouth as though she’s saying, ‘Is this her?’

Usually, I’d squirm under such scrutiny. But not today, and not from her.

Finally, I can put a face to the woman whom I’ve only known by reputation. Adrian didn’t talk badly about her despite everything, but it doesn’t matter. I see her for who and what she is.

Another thought pushes itself to the forefront of my mind. I will never ever let her hurt Thomas and Adrian. Over my dead body.

“I’m Noelle,” I tell her, accepting Adrian’s outstretched hand.

She turns her gaze from Adrian to me and to our interlocked fingers. “Why the hell are you with him?”

I squeeze Adrian's hand, look up at him, and smile. This man I've been crushing on way before they met. "The question is, why aren't you?"

"Dad! I'm home." Thomas's small, quick footsteps patter in the driveway, and Adrian stands rigid, his whole body tensed like a coiled spring. He jogs toward us, hair messy from running around next door and playing with the other kids, sneakers kicking up little puffs of dust. His bright eyes dart between us, then land on the woman. He slows and scratches his cheek.

I stop breathing, curbing the urge to run to him, wrap my arms around him, and protect him from her. She is so not welcome here. I don't even have to ask Adrian to know we're in complete agreement.

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Thomas stops a few paces behind her. “Who’s that?”

His voice is light, innocent. But the weight in the air is anything but. That simple question sucks the oxygen from the space between us.

The woman—I refuse to say her name or call her anything else—smiles wickedly and turns to face Thomas. Adrian takes that as a cue to rush to his side and hold his small hand.

“Hi, baby.” Her cloyingly sweet voice grates on my nerves, but I force myself to stay where I am. Adrian’s with Thomas. He won’t let her touch him. “I’m your mom.”

I can’t help the gasp bursting out of me. I’m rooted to the spot, a hand on my chest, a heavy weight in my belly, waiting for Thomas’s reaction. The boy hasn’t done anything, and yet, she’s using him to get to his father and manipulate him. All for money.

The air is thick with tension as his little fingers twitch at his sides. Uncertainty flashes in his gaze as he shifts his focus from her to me.

She crouches and motions with her hand. “Come on, baby. Give your mother a hug.”

My heart clenches, a tear sliding down my cheek. This can’t be happening. One minute, she’s demanding money and threatening to go to court. The next, she’s pretending to care for him.

Thomas hesitates. Just for a second. Then, his free hand balls into a fist, and he

shakes his head hard. “No, you’re not.”

And then he runs. Straight to me.

My breath catches as his little arms wrap around my legs, holding on with everything he has. His cheek presses against me. My heart stops, stumbles, and soars.

“Sheis,” he says.

I blink rapidly, my throat burning. I don’t move. I don’t breathe. Despite the tears welling in my eyes, I will myself not to cry because this moment isn’t about me. It’s about Thomas trusting me enough to call me his mom.

I look up, meeting the woman’s stunned, angry gaze, but I can’t focus on her. Because right now, this little boy is choosing me.

Adrian’s eyes glisten, and his neck flexes as he swallows hard. His voice cracks when he finally addresses her. “You need to leave or I’m calling the cops.”

She mumbles a response, but I don’t hear it. I don’t give a damn because Adrian closes the gap between us with a few long strides. Then, he pulls us both to him in a tight hug.

It’s only been a few days, and yet, I have found my home.

My family. My boys. The loves of my life.

EPILOGUE

ADRIAN

The soft click of my son's bedroom door closing makes me glance up from where I'm leaning against the hallway wall. Noelle steps out carefully.

She turns, sees me watching, and smiles. "He's out like a light," she whispers.

"Not surprised. You have a magic voice."

"Okay, but it was after the fourth story."

"Fourth?"

"He negotiated for six, and we settled for four. Your son's good at this. I wonder who he got it from."

I chuckle and extend my hand to her. Bedtime storytelling is now her thing after Thomas complained how I read the lines robotically and without a hint of emotion. He's not wrong.

Noelle rolls her eyes but takes my hand, letting me lead her through the house toward the porch. We've fallen into a natural rhythm for the past few days, and it's like she's been living herewith us for years. She's the part I didn't know was missing until she came here. With her beside me, all the noise settles.

Everything suddenly made sense.

"Ow!"

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I freeze as she stumbles, clutching her foot.

“What the?—”

She growls under her breath, glaring down at the piece of plastic. Another stray LEGO sticking under her foot. It’s not even the regular kind. It’s a T-rex LEGO. “These things ... God, I swear, they multiply like evil little demons in the night.” She takes it between her fingers and tosses it to the nearby wicker basket, already half-full from all the random LEGOs we found around the house. “One of these days, I’m going to sue this company for injuries.”

I laugh softly. “You’re not alone. But I think I’ve just gotten adept at dodging those little shits. You good?”

“Physically? Sure. Mentally? The LEGO may have won this round. I’m already half-convinced whoever invented this wants the parents to suffer.”

Parents.

She just called herself a parent. Jesus Christ. I’m already about to burst from the seams—from that incident a few days ago to now. I’m not normally an emotional man, but my God, when I saw Tomtom run to her and claim her as his mom, I was about to break down on my front lawn and cry.

Shaking my head, I guide Noelle outside, where the night air is warm, thick with the scent of freshly cut grass. She sinks onto the porch steps beside me, stretching her legs out with a sigh.

“Do you ever just sit here and reflect on your life choices?” she asks, leaning back on her palms, her face glowing.

I smirk. “Every time I step on a LEGO. They tend to give you epiphanies every now and then.”

She nudges my knee with hers. “I was actually talking about us. This whole situation. Me, you, and Thomas.”

I watch her, the way the porch light casts a glow over her skin, how the night air lifts strands of her hair. My God, I have never seen a more beautiful woman.

“Regretting it already?” I ask, only half-teasing.

“Not a chance.” She takes her bottom lip between her teeth and smiles. “I love that boy, and him calling me Mom? I thought I’d die from happiness.”

Something inside me curls in on itself. Because I don’t think she realizes just how much she’s changed everything. She doesn’t see it, but I do. How her presence rewrote the way our house feels. Tomtom laughs louder. My chest isn’t as heavy anymore.

I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers, feeling the warmth of her skin. She glances at me, brows raised. “What?”

I swallow and shake my head. I can’t even begin to describe what I’m feeling right now. “Just thinking about my life choices.”

She grins. “And?”

I squeeze her hand. “Best damn ones I’ve ever made.”

“I love you, Adrian. I’ve always loved you.”

I take her face in my hands and kiss her deeply. “And I love you, Noelle. I always will.”

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

NOELLE

The afternoon sun slips through the oak trees, painting messy patches of light across our old red checkered picnic blanket. The soft and warm breeze feels so good on my skin. I toss another strawberry into my mouth, sweet juice hitting my tongue.

Beside me, Thomas giggles, kicking his little legs as he stuffs his face with peanut butter sandwiches. “You got peanut butter on your nose,” I tell him, laughing.

He scrunches his face and tries to lick it off.

“Missed it.”

Adrian chuckles, reaching over to wipe it off with his thumb. “You’re a mess, Tomtom.”

Thomas runs off to ride the kid-size Jeep Wrangler Adrian bought yesterday on a whim, and he buckles his favorite dinosaur stuffed toy beside him.

“He’s not the only one who’s a mess. So are you,” I tease, smirking.

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Adrian's tongue peeks at the corner of his mouth. "Oh yeah? You sure?"

Before I can react, he swoops in, kissing me quickly on the mouth.

I blink, my jaw hanging open. "Did you just?—"

"Yep."

"Right in front of your kid?"

Thomas grins from his Jeep. "Daddy likes you. I like you too."

I shake my head, trying to suppress a smile. These boys are really?—

"What the hell is going on?! What's this?"

I jump, whipping around to see my brother, Peter, standing at the back porch, arms crossed, brows raised so high they might launch off his face. He's the reddest I've ever seen him.

I glance at Adrian, who's frustratingly calm and unfazed.

"Hey, man," he says easily, like we weren't just caught in a kiss. Okay, a peck, but whatever. No one gives their nannies a peck unless...

My brother gapes. "That's it? Hey, man?" He gestures wildly between us. "My sister?! My baby sister?"

I sigh. “Nice to see you too, Peter. And for the record, I’m not a baby. I’m twenty-five years old, thank you very much.”

He ignores me, drilling his glare into my boyfriend and jabbing an accusing finger. “How long has this been going on? You’re so much older than her, man!”

Adrian meets his gaze evenly. “Since she got here. Listen, Pete. I didn’t mean for it to happen, okay? It just did. I saw her, all grown and sweet and beautiful and kind, and I fell for her hard. I got lucky because she was already in love with me.”

“Of course she was! Why the hell did you think she kept hanging around my room when you were there? Obviously, it wasn’t because she liked her brother’s company.” Peter’s hands go to his hair. For a second, I pity him. Then again, he’s being unnecessarily dramatic. We’re all adults here. “Why did neither of you think to tell me, huh? Were you planning to spring it on me at a family lunch or something?”

“We’re telling you now,” Adrian points out, ever the rational one.

Peter lets out an exasperated sound, then groans. “You didn’t tell me. I caught you!” He mutters a curse under his breath, being mindful that Thomas is around. “She’s my sister, bro.”

Adrian leans back on his hands and shrugs. “And?”

Peter’s jaw works, his nostrils flaring. “And...” He exhales sharply, rubbing his temples and trying to calm himself down. “I should punch you.”

“Probably,” Adrian agrees.

My brother glares at me. “And you?”

“What about me?” I ask innocently.

“You’re supposed to be smarter than this.”

I give him the sweetest smile I can muster. “Maybe I’m not.”

He starts to say something, but then notices Thomas staring up at him, entirely unaffected by the drama. With a resigned sigh, Peter kneels, pulling a wrapped box from behind his back. “Here, Tomtom. Got you something.”

Thomas’s eyes light up. “A present?”

“Yeah.” My brother ruffles his hair and smiles softly at him. “Unlike these two traitors, I actually like you.”

Thomas eagerly tears into the wrapping, revealing a box of LEGOs. “Awesome!”

Adrian and I groan, and I say, “Is this your revenge? Gifting him even more LEGOs that I might, probably will, step on?”

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“I don’t know what you mean.” He has clearly gotten over his anger or disappointment or whatever he felt earlier because Peter’s face splits into his trademark smile, mischievous and goofy. “You know what, maybe that could be my revenge. God knows you deserve it. In case you receive a package of at least a thousand LEGOs tomorrow, that’s from me.”

“I hate you so much. Leave.”

Peter pops a strawberry in his mouth. “Not a chance. I decided I would punish you the same way you did when we were growing up, by becoming a menace with just my presence.”

“Oh God, no.”

“Yes.” He smiles and points a strawberry at Adrian, giving him a warning look. “But I’m watching you.”

Adrian grins. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

The End