



# Unexpected You

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Cade: When I applied for a job as a personal assistant, I had no idea I'd be working for THE Eloise Roth. One of the queens of romance novels, who has dozens of bestsellers under her belt. I also had no idea that she would be strict, demanding, and difficult. Every single day I think about quitting, but for some reason I keep coming back for more.

Eloise: My new personal assistant Cadence "Cade" (ridiculous nickname, honestly) McCord is a chaotic mess who obviously lied on her resume, but something about her made me hire her anyway. Now I'm having regrets, but I'm also...intrigued. She's young and there's an energy about her that I like having around.

Cade: I have no idea when the hell Eloise went from my intimidating boss to the woman who stars in all of my dirtiest fantasies, but it's becoming a real problem, and my already scattered brain is having even more trouble functioning. I'm so getting fired.

Eloise: I'm going to have to fire her. There's no other solution to the situation I've found myself in. People assume that my life has been full of romance, but it's actually the opposite. I've always been laser focused on my career. So why am I suddenly having new and embarrassing (and inappropriate) feelings for my absolute disaster of an assistant?

**Total Pages (Source):** 78

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

## Chapter One

### Cade

“I’m seriously fucked this time,” I said to my best friend Hunter as I checked my email for the thousandth time to see if any of the jobs I’d put in applications for had gotten back to me.

Nothing.

Hunter grabbed a fry from the basket in front of me and rolled her big blue eyes. “You always say that, and then somehow everything always works out.”

“I mean, sort of. I wish ‘working out’ led to actual consistent employment and not me patching jobs together here and there that are never long term. The stress is going to kill me.”

Hunter gave me a sympathetic look and squeezed my arm across the sticky table. She had treated me to lunch today, but I was having trouble choking down my fish and chips, even though it was normally one of my favorite things.

“I’m sorry, my love. I wish I could help more.” She opened her mouth to tell me, for what felt like the millionth time, that she could loan me some money, but I put my hand up to stop her. We’d done this little dance too many times before and I was never going to let her do it. Other than buying me lunch, and giving me leads on jobs, and just being my best friend, I couldn’t accept more. Even if she had money to spare from her parents. It was a line I refused to cross.

“Can we please talk about something other than the crushing weight of my life?” I asked.

She perked up and smiled. “Mmmm, maybe we can talk about going out to Sapph next week? I know it’s weird with you working there sometimes, but it’s the only place with so many hot queer people around.” She had me there.

Our other friend, Reid, had hooked me up bartending a few times at Sapph, the only bar in the entire state of Maine that catered to queer women.

I sighed. “Fine. We can go and pester Reid to make us annoyingly complicated drinks.”

Hunter snorted. “Yeah, she loves it when we do that.”

“What are friends for?”

I choked down the rest of my lunch and we took a walk down the pier. Summer had fully arrived, and the place was crawling with tourists who walked too slow and took up too much room. But that was the price you paid for living here. By mid-September, everyone cleared out and peace was restored until the next summer season.

“Let’s find some shade,” I said, looking at my arms. I’d put on my regular layer of sunscreen, but that had been a while ago. No matter what I did, my pale, freckled skin seemed determined to burn every year. The curse of being a natural redhead.

Hunter claimed a bench near the ice cream stand, and I thumped down next to her.

My phone went off and I read the notification, my heart beating with excitement and nervousness.

One of the jobs had responded.

“Oh shit,” I said, reading the email. “I have an interview.”

“For real? Which job?” Hunter stopped fiddling with her long hair and leaned over to read my phone.

“The weird one working for an author. I’m still not totally convinced it’s not a scam or a trap, but I couldn’t miss the chance that it might be real. My desperation is probably going to compromise my safety at some point.” Still, the job listing had intrigued me, and I couldn’t really say why. Light on details as to who I’d be working for, but with a very specific job description.

Normally I would have just kept scrolling, but I’d done the little dance of inputting my resume and then adding the same information. Instead of a cover letter, they’d asked for your five favorite books and why. That was the part that had really interested me. I loved to read, so actually narrowing down my favorite books to only five had been a challenge. In the end, I’d also listed several more. Maybe that was a mistake, but enthusiasm couldn’t hurt, right?

And now I had an interview.

“They want me to meet in a public place for the interview, so that’s good.” And it was in just a few days, which was also good. The faster I could get through a job process, the faster I could either get the job, or move on to another application. I couldn’t pay my rent with job interviews.

“When is it?” I told her the day and the time, and she nodded before getting out her phone and then fiddling with it.

“Yeah, I can do that. I’m going with you. Just in case.”

Hunter's parents were rich, and she dabbled in a number of random jobs, including real estate, watercolor painting, teaching yoga, and making online hair tutorials. If she didn't work as hard as she did, I probably wouldn't have been friends with her. Our upbringings had been so opposite that it was a wonder we'd even bumped into each other at all a few years ago at Sapph. I'd actually met Reid first, and then we'd sort of adopted Hunter. Our rich-girl friend.

"You don't have to, but I'm not going to turn it down," I said. Better safe than wind up on a true crime podcast.

"Good. Plus, if it goes well, we can celebrate, and if it doesn't go well, I can help you drown your feelings with our favorite fries and a mojito." That sounded like perfection. One of the best local restaurants (and there were many) served french fries cooked in duck fat and served with truffle aioli and they were pure heaven. I'd eat my weight in those fries if I could afford it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

“You are the best,” I said, resting my head on her shoulder.

“I know,” she said, and I snorted.

\* \* \*

It was truly sad how much of my wardrobe consisted of job-interview outfits. The kind of clothes that I hoped made me look adult and responsible and not like a chaotic person with ADHD who couldn't seem to keep a job to save her life.

Twenty-six years old and I was still waiting to feel like a grown-up.

“Get your shit together,” I said to my reflection in the half-broken mirror that I had propped up next to my closet. My apartment was nothing to write home about, and I had to share it with my roommate, Danica. She was a college student who was barely ever home, but when she was, we got along well. The ideal roommate, in my opinion.

My jacket and matching pants fit me well, thanks to Hunter's magical sewing skills, and I'd actually ironed the ivory blouse I wore underneath. I'd pulled my strawberry-blond hair back into a smooth bun. It made me feel like I was wearing a costume, but what could you do? I checked the outfit from every angle, making sure my underwear wasn't showing, and there were no rips or stains that I hadn't noticed.

Since I didn't want to take any kinds of chances with heels, I wore my black ankle boots that didn't really work for summer but were better than anything else I owned.

“As good as it's going to get,” I said, remembering at the last second to put in my

pearl earrings. I'd inherited them from my grandmother and I only wore them for special occasions, which nowadays meant job interviews and not much else. Hunter's elaborate birthday parties, sometimes.

Hunter met me downstairs with her car. The fact that she was willing to drive me around and pay for parking was truly one of the greatest gifts she could give me. I had a car, but it was in long-term parking and I only used it if I had to get a bunch of groceries or go visit my parents on holidays. They lived further up the coast and I didn't get up to see them as much as I should. Having so many weird jobs with random hours and no vacation days, it was tough to make it happen, even for a weekend.

"You look great," she said, appraising my outfit. She was always offering to let me borrow something of hers, but since she was shorter and a little curvier, we weren't really the same size.

"Thanks. I'm crossing my fingers for this to either be a scam or be the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Let's hope for the second and prepare for the first?" she said, turning up the street that would take us to the café.

\* \* \*

Hunter let me out so she could find a parking spot and I arrived five minutes early for the interview. When it came to being on time, I wasn't the best, but this was important. I had Hunter to keep me on track so I'd managed to not fuck this part up. Now I just had to get through the rest of the interview without any mishaps.

I sent an email to the contact that I had arrived, since they hadn't given me a phone number. Just as I was looking around, Hunter walked in and gave me a wink before

she headed to the counter to order a coffee as if she wasn't babysitting me.

Scanning the shop, I froze when I saw a woman sitting in the front by the window at a table by herself. Her back was to me, but there was something about her that made me stand up straight. Poise? Was that the word I was looking for? Her outfit was sleek and obviously designer without me needing to check the tags. She looked down at her phone and then stood up, looking around the café for someone or something.

The second her eyes locked on me, they narrowed. Fuck. I'd never seen eyes like hers. They were blue but almost...violet? Was that a thing? Did people have violet eyes? Maybe they were contacts.

I was so stunned by her unusual eye color that I didn't realize that she was walking over to me.

"Cadence McCord?" she asked with a brisk efficiency that made me feel like I was about to be sent to the principal's office for doing something bad.

"Uh, yes?" I said. Smooth.

"Excellent. I'm Eloise Roth," she said, holding her hand out. Oh. Right. Handshake. I fumbled for a second but managed to give her a handshake that I hoped wasn't too weak or too strong or too trembly or too sweaty. A tall order at the present moment.

Eloise Roth. I knew that name. Everyone knew that name. Holy shit. Eloise Roth was here, in this café, about to interview me for a job.

People like Eloise Roth didn't interview assistants. They had underlings. And yet here I was, standing in front of her and wondering if any of this was real.

"It's nice to meet you," I managed to choke out. This was THE Eloise Roth. The



bestselling writer of dozens of romance novels that were sold in airports and read at book clubs and were made into blockbuster movies that raked in millions. She might as well have introduced herself as the queen, that was how improbable this meeting was.

I'd seen her in interviews, and in person she was even more stunning. Taller than I thought.

Her dark hair fell perfectly to her shoulders, and she held herself with the confidence of a woman who was completely aware of her own power and worth.

Fuck. She was so hot that my knees were ready to buckle.

"Shall we?" she asked when I didn't say anything and just kind of stared. She had definitely dealt with this kind of reaction before and knew how to handle it.

"Oh, uh, sure," I said, and it took me a second to remember how you were supposed to sit in a chair. I kind of fell onto it and banged my elbow on the table, rattling the cup with her espresso in it. Of course she drank espresso. Like a classy adult. No macchiatos for Eloise Roth.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

Eloise stared at me for a second and then sighed. “Go ahead.”

I’d missed something. “Go ahead with what?”

She pressed her lips together. “Get the shock out of your system. Tell me how much your mother, grandmother, sister, friend loves my books, ask me for an autograph, ask me what my next book is about, ask me if I can give you feedback on your manuscript, or get cast in the next movie, etc.”

She waved an elegant hand as she spoke. This was a speech she’d given many, many times before.

“Oh,” I said, flummoxed for a second. “My mom does like your books. I haven’t read them. Sorry.” I winced and realized I should have at least pretended that I had.

Eloise Roth’s lips twitched for a second. “No need to apologize. Anything else you need to get out of the way?”

I shook my head, wiping my sweaty hands on my pants.

“No, I’d like to start the interview, if we could,” I said. There. That was professional-ish. Sort of.

Eloise nodded, and then the interview started, and I wish I could scroll back to the beginning. Her questions were standard, but they were said with that clipped tone that did something to me. I didn’t want her to think I was completely incompetent, and not just because of the job. I would never survive having Eloise Roth meeting me

once and me making an absolute fool of myself.

There was no question that I wasn't getting the job. I had no idea what I was even saying half the time, as if my brain had disconnected from my mouth. I was giving her answers, but were they any good? Who the hell knew.

"Now, there is just the small matter of signing an NDA, should you move forward and be offered this position," Eloise said, pulling some documents out of her bag and sliding them over to me.

"Understood," I said, taking the paper and trying to figure out how to get it into my very small bag without folding or rolling it up like a commoner.

Eloise watched me struggle for a few seconds. "I can send you an electronic copy, if that would be better."

Feeling my entire face (including my ears) go red, I set the papers back on the table. "That would be great."

She nodded and sat back in her chair, studying me again. I had no choice but to let her. No doubt she was doing the math and realizing that I had wasted her time. I was about to thank her for her time when she spoke.

"What was the best book you read recently?" she asked, completely throwing me off.

"Oh," I said, my brain freezing for a second and then refusing to give me a single title. Answering questions like this under extreme pressure wasn't one of my skills. "Give me two seconds and I'll tell you."

I got out my phone and navigated to the reading app that I used to keep track of everything, and as a backup in case I forgot to charge my ereader, which happened a

lot.

“That’s right. It was the first book in this alien romance series that my friend Reid recommended. And by recommended, she basically forced me to read. So these women have been kidnapped from earth by aliens, but they end up crashing on this planet covered in ice and it just so happens there are a bunch of these big hot alien dudes with blue skin that need help repopulating the planet and you can imagine where things go from there,” I said, realizing I’d done that thing where I said too much, too fast and now I was definitely not getting this job.

Eloise opened her mouth and then closed it. “Blue aliens?”

“Yeah, they’re blue, but they’re all ripped, of course, and they’re really into pleasing the women, so after the initial shock, they end up falling in love. Oh, and there’s parasites involved that match them up.”

Eloise blinked those beautiful eyes at me.

“It was really compelling,” I added, wishing that I could pull a rope and fall through an escape hatch to get out of this situation. At least I hadn’t mentioned the unusual blue alien anatomy.

She shocked the hell out of me by pulling a pen and a little notebook out of her bag and asking, “what was the title and author?”

Shocked as hell, I told her and watched her write it down and then snap the notebook closed and set it on the table.

“I’m sorry I’ve never read your books,” I said again. “I don’t tend to read non-queer romance. With the exception of the alien books. Those were an experiment that paid off.”

Why? Why was my brain doing this to me?

“I’m not offended that you haven’t read my books, Cadence,” she said, and it was a good thing I was sitting down because the way she said my full name? Yeah, that worked for me. I closed my eyes for a second.

“That’s good to know. And thank you for your time. I really hope you find someone who meets your needs.” It was time to extricate myself from this interview and go and find Hunter so I could tell her all about my celebrity encounter and make her buy me something sweet.

Eloise nodded. “Of course. I’ll send over the NDA for you to look over. Let me know if you have any questions and I’ll be in touch about the position.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

We both got to our feet (her more gracefully than I) and shook hands again.

“Have a good rest of your day,” I said, instantly cringing inside.

Her lips twitched with a suppressed smile. “You too.”

### Chapter Two

Eloise

I watched the woman, Cadence, go toward the back of the café and meet someone who was obviously a friend who had come with her to the interview. With her back to me, Cadence collapsed into her chair and then I watched the shock on her friend’s face as she told her about the interview.

Deciding that I shouldn’t be too much of a creep, I called my literary agent, Sylvia.

“How are the interviews going?” she asked. I was surprised she picked up, but I had been her client for nearly twenty years and she’d made a lot of money off me, so taking my calls was in her best interest. On top of that, she was also one of my oldest friends, and the one who had pushed for me to get a new assistant after not having one for years.

“I just had one recommend me an alien romance book,” I said.

Sylvia laughed. “Oh, I read those. They’re fun. It’s a concept that you don’t think will work, but the strength of the writing and the worldbuilding holds up.” I hadn’t

expected her to say that.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to find someone that just...” I trailed off.

“Clicks,” Sylvia said. She often finished my thoughts for me. “Not like Mary.” My last assistant, Mary, had been with me for ten years. She’d started out as a fan and had gradually moved into an important role in my career and life. Cancer took her five years back, and I’d been unable to replace her since then.

“Mary was special,” I said, feeling that tightness in my chest when I thought about her.

“Yes, she was,” Sylvia said. “No one else is going to be Mary. Find someone that you feel comfortable with. Who is going to have your back. Maybe someone younger, since they’ll be helping with the social media part.”

Things had changed so much in the years since I started my career. I wasn’t used to this new era, where I had to be much more of a brand than a writer. I wasn’t sure if I liked it.

“I know,” I said. “The one who told me about the aliens has a good resume for that. Better than anyone else I’ve talked to.”

“Then give her a chance. I can tell you like her from your voice.”

Sylvia knew me too well. Sometimes it was irritating how much.

“She was...chaotic.”

“She was probably nervous. You’re an intimidating person, El,” she said. There were very few people who were allowed to call me that. Sylvia was one of them.

“At least she didn’t fawn or ask me for free books or try to email me a manuscript,” I said.

“See? Maybe she’s just what you need.”

I didn’t know about that, but there was something about Cadence. Chaos, yes, but a brightness about her that had made me lean closer and wonder what she was going to say next. She’d shocked the hell out of me with the alien book answer. Completely unexpected, but it had been honest. She wasn’t the kind of woman who had the skill to lie and there was something refreshing about that.

Sylvia and I talked about business for a few more moments and then she had to get to a meeting. I ended the call and looked over to see that Cadence and her friend were gone.

I pulled up my email and sent the NDA, along with the news that she had gotten the job.

My espresso was cold, so I went and ordered another, tossed it back, and went home.

\* \* \*

I loved my house. Sometimes I never wanted to leave. It was a gorgeous brick Georgian that I’d bought over a decade ago out in the suburbs just outside the city. Close enough that I could be near everything, but far enough that I could sit in the backyard with an iced tea and hear the birds in the trees. Children rode their bicycles on the streets and there were lemonade stands and community barbecues in the summer.

I mostly kept to myself, but it was still nice to see other people enjoying themselves. The greatest thing about where I lived, though, was that my best friend since first



grade, Camille, lived just a few houses away with her husband and three kids.

On days like today, I would get home from my afternoon errands just in time to head over to her house and join her for school pickup. Sometimes I'd bring my laptop and work while she waited for the kids, and other days we'd go early, get coffee, and then talk until the kids piled into the car.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

Today was the second kind of day.

“So, I think I’m hiring an assistant,” I announced when I walked into the kitchen. Camille and I both had open door policies in our homes for each other. More than once I had found one or more of her kids sitting on my couch as if they actually did live at my place.

“You are?” Camille said, looking up from her laptop, blinking at me from behind her blue light glasses. She worked part time as a scopist, editing court transcripts for various court reporters and she was damn good at it. She was also my main beta reader, since her eyes were so sharp.

She took off her glasses and stood up from the dining table where she’d been working. Even though she worked from home, she always dressed as if she was going to her office, like me. Mary had always teased me about it.

She had seen my good, my bad, and my ugly. That wasn’t going to happen with someone new. I was going to have distance. Boundaries. Things were going to be professional.

“I think so?” I said, taking the chair next to her and reaching for one of the cookies on the plate in front of her.

“After all these years you’re finally doing it?” She crossed her arms and gave me a skeptical look, raising one perfect eyebrow. Camille was painfully gorgeous, with hair that shaded between warm blonde and light brown and her eyes were warm like melting chocolate.

I nibbled on the oatmeal chocolate chip cookie and savored it. Camille had been making these from her mother's recipe ever since we were kids and I would never get tired of eating them.

"I think so," I said, exhaling and wiping away some crumbs. "I had this interview today and it was..." For someone who was good at words, I was struggling to describe the interview with Cadence.

Camille folded her hands in front of her and waited for me to go on.

"She's young and kind of a mess and she has this energy and...I don't know. I already talked about it with Sylvia and she somehow convinced me to send her the NDA and tell her that I'm hiring her on for a trial period. What the hell am I even doing?" I put my head in my hands and groaned. I needed to stop making rash decisions before I talked to Camille.

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind and hired her, El," she said. "So, what's the problem?"

"She's going to be a disaster!" I said.

"So then you can let her go after the trial period is over. Maybe she was just nervous. Clearly, there was something about her that made you send that email. This is the first time I've seen you this excited about anyone. Maybe your mind is telling you that this is exactly what you need."

I scowled at her. "That's exactly what Sylvia said."

Camille smirked. "Good. She and I are on the same page. You need an assistant, and since I can't do it, you've got to start somewhere. Give her a chance."

Camille smiled at me, and I hated that she was right. I'd gotten so many chances in my career and I prided myself on reaching out a hand and hauling others up the ladder behind me.

"I hate it when you're right," I said, shaking my head. Camille beamed.

"No you don't. You love it. If we leave now, we can stop and get drinks and finish them before the kids get out," she said, her eyes sparkling as she slammed her laptop closed.

"Deal," I said.

\* \* \*

We did stop and get silly frozen coffee drinks that we sucked down while I gave Camille more details from the interview. She hadn't read the alien books, but she immediately went and bought the first few of them and started reading them aloud to me in the car while I shook my head and begged her to stop.

"Hey babies," Camille said and signed in ASL as Ariel, Kati, and Noah piled into the backseat with their bags and overlapping voices.

"Hi Auntie Elle," Ariel and Kati said as Noah signed. He'd been born with profound hearing loss, so the entire family (and me) had learned ASL when he was a baby.

Growing up as an only child, I wouldn't ever get the chance to be an aunt, but here I had the three best kids to call me that. Sometimes life worked out in unexpected ways.

I listened and watched as they tried to tell me about their days and asked their mom to stop for fast food and begged to do things with their friends and all manner of kid

questions and queries. The noise was comforting, and I just sat back and let it wash around me.

“Staying for dinner?” Camille asked when we got back to the house.

I shook my head. “No, I have a bunch of things to get done. Tomorrow though, definitely,” I said, hugging her and all the kids. “Say hi to John for me.” No man was worthy of Camille, but John was close. They’d met in college and he’d been an absolute gem from their very first date.

I headed back to my big empty house that didn’t usually feel so big and empty, but lately it did. I’d lived alone for most of my adult life. I’d been engaged once, a long time ago, but we were waiting to live together until after a wedding that ended up not happening when he confessed that he’d felt pressure from his family and did not, in fact, want to be my husband.

Sure, I’d been on dates, but nothing for a while. My career was demanding, and some guys couldn’t handle who I was. They thought that I was a slut, or that I’d write them into my books, or they wanted to try and influence me, or they just didn’t get it or take it seriously. That was fine. Being alone was my default. It was my comfort zone. As someone who had taken a lot of risks with my writing, being able to have the rest of my life be safe was what I had needed.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

Camille had been on me for years to get a pet, at least, but since I traveled so much, that didn't seem fair, even though I could afford to have someone (or one of Camille's children) come and tend to it while I was away.

My home was filled with all the things I loved, and there wasn't one corner that I didn't like, but my office was my favorite place. In addition to the movie posters and dozens of foreign copies and the shelves of my awards, my desk had been custom made to look like four of my bestselling books stacked on top of one another. I'd commissioned it years ago and I still got a little thrill when I walked into the room and saw the titles and my name painted in gold on the spines.

I made myself a quick chicken and pasta dinner with a salad and organized my evening. I had two episodes of my favorite show saved, and a new advanced copy of a book that I needed to read and give a blurb to already loaded on my ereader. Most days it was a huge relief to read a book written by someone else.

In between the first episode and starting the second, I put on a hair mask and emptied the dishwasher.

Camille sent me a video of the kids playing board games together and fighting and it made me laugh and smile.

After my second show episode, I put on some music and started on the advanced copy. It was still astonishing to me that when I heard about a new book that wasn't published yet, more often than not, I could just ask Sylvia and almost immediately there would be an electronic copy in my inbox. It was one of the greatest perks of being a bestselling author. In addition to the money, of course.

My family had been constantly broke and on the verge of homelessness when I'd been growing up, so as soon as I turned eighteen, I was out on my own and making sure I never felt that way again. I'd worked my ass off doing any kinds of jobs I could find, put myself through college, and wrote instead of sleeping. There was no room for failure, no margin for error. I'd lived that way ever since.

I'd said before in interviews that books saved my life, and it was the truth.

When I started falling asleep on the couch with the book, I knew it was time to head to bed. I took my vitamins and turned out the lights and waited for sleep to take me away.

It didn't come for me immediately. Most nights I didn't have that much trouble falling asleep, thanks to my rigid routines. Tonight, though, my routines were failing me.

For some reason my mind drifted back to the interview. To Cadence. Obviously, I'd done a full background check on her, which included a perusal of her social media to look for any red flags. Most of the time I just read the reports and didn't actually look anything up, but this time, for some reason, I'd searched for Cadence.

Her social pages were as expected, including the pictures of her with her friends, showing off an arm covered in floral tattoos. I didn't have any of my own, but I wasn't against them. They worked for her. It hadn't escaped my notice that she'd worn a jacket to cover them for the interview. It also hadn't escaped my notice that she was even prettier in person. I'd always been jealous of women with red hair, but I knew I could never pull it off. I dyed my hair a few shades darker than my natural color and had for many years. I had a signature look and I wasn't ashamed of it.

Her hair had been pulled back and tamed, but I knew from her pictures that she usually wore it messier. With the flower tattoos and the hair and all those freckles,

she looked like she escaped from the fae as a baby. She certainly had a magical quality about her.

Eventually I got to sleep, but it was a long time coming as I replayed the interview over and over.

## Chapter Three

### Cadence

Holy shit. I didn't believe it when I read the email, but there it was. Eloise Roth had sent me the NDA as well as a brusque congratulatory message that said she was hiring me on a trial basis for a month. So I didn't have the job yet, but I had a trial, which was so much more than I expected.

The quick acceptance sent up all kinds of red flags. Because she should not have hired me and should have rejected me immediately. Her agreeing to let me have a trial period meant that she was having a hard time finding someone and that wasn't good for me.

"Shit, shit, shit," I said as I re-read the email and then dove into the NDA. About five minutes later, my eyes blurred at all the legalese and I sent Hunter a message begging for help. Her parents both had law degrees and were willing to do favors if she asked nicely. She got back to me right away and said she'd have her parents' answers within a few hours.

Eloise had also sent over another attachment. A schedule. My eyes blurred again as I looked through it. This woman loved a spreadsheet. A feeling of panic set in for a second as I thought about my role in maintaining that schedule.

For my ADHD brain, schedules could be good or bad, and I never knew which one I



was going to get. I thrived on novelty, but also needed a framework so I didn't go completely off the rails and spend an entire week reading twenty books in a row and barely eating or sleeping like I had the last time I'd been in between jobs. I'd been on medication off and on throughout my life, but right now with medication somewhat difficult to get consistently, I was trying to manage in other ways. Some days were better than others.

On second look, Eloise's schedule didn't seem that bad. She'd put in her writing time, her admin time, and everything else. Then there was my schedule, with my hours and tasks. During the interview, she'd spoken about what I'd be doing day-to-day. Some days I'd be at her house, helping her, and other days I was free to work from home. That I would definitely not be doing because if there was an enemy of productivity, it was me attempting to do work at home.

Yeah, I could do this. Probably. Plus, I couldn't really turn down the pay, which was higher than anything else I could get, even bartending. I almost wanted to point out to Eloise that her pay rate was wildly high, but if she was willing to give it to me, then who was I to enlighten her?

I'd put up with a lot for that hourly rate. Even if I just lasted the month, I'd still be coming out better than I was now, at least financially.

I thought about telling my parents about the job, but it was so much easier to just...not. My parents were sweet and naive and didn't know the realities of my life. Even when things went to shit, I kept our conversations light and didn't confide my troubles. They couldn't handle it. Never had been able to. I'd learned at an early age that the adults who raised me needed to be protected from the bad things in the world, and since I was the oldest, it was my responsibility.

I'd tell them once I'd gotten through the trial period. If I did.

Instead, I sent a message to my sister, Melody, who was three years younger than me and lived on the other side of the country working at an art gallery after she'd gotten her degree in ceramics. She did pottery on the side that she sold online as well, and I was so damn proud of her talent.

Somehow got offered a job as an assistant to a famous author. No, I'm not going to tell you who, but if I manage to outlast the trial period, this could really be something I sent.

Her response was immediate. OMG, that's so great! Of course you had to brag that it's someone famous and then refuse to tell me. Don't worry, I'll put my research skills to use.

She would probably figure out it was Eloise in the next five minutes but that didn't mean I had to confirm. Plus, I technically hadn't signed the NDA, so I wasn't in breach of anything. Yet.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

Just as I predicted, Melody sent back a message less than four minutes later.

ELOISE ROTH?!?!

I can neither confirm nor deny I responded.

She's big time, Cade. Don't fuck this up she sent, but it was with a kissing emoji and I knew she was joking about that last part.

Eventually I got out of bed and made myself some breakfast before heading to the gym where I worked a few hours a week managing the front desk. It was a fun job, but the pay was shit and my hours kept getting changed or cut so it wasn't reliable.

Still, it was fun, and I got to chat and gossip with my regulars and it wasn't too strenuous. I could sneak my phone when I was bored and read if I wanted to.

My shift ended at eight, and I stopped and picked up takeout on my way back home. Danica was out so the place was blissfully quiet when I got back with my too expensive (but very delicious) organic salad.

I went ahead and ate it standing up in the kitchen and then crashed on the couch with some cookies and a glass of wine mixed with juice because life was too short to drink alcohol that tasted like alcohol.

My book was steamy and my laundry was done. As I was mixing my second drink, I got a message from Hunter that her parents had looked over the NDA and had a few suggestions. I copied and pasted what they said into the email and replied to Eloise

before putting my phone on silent. She'd probably write back tomorrow. Eloise didn't seem like the kind of woman who checked her email outside of work hours, judging by her rigid schedule.

God, she was gorgeous. The kind of polished untouchable beauty that made you blink a few times because you weren't sure it was real. So intimidating that I wasn't sure I could function in her presence, but for the right pay? I'd suck it up and try not to look directly at her too often. Like an eclipse. Didn't want to burn my retinas.

Concentrating on my book grew more difficult as my thoughts about Eloise Roth swirled in circles like water down a drain. Only I couldn't seem to turn the water off, and the thoughts kept flowing.

My body warmed and I realized I was having...impure thoughts about my potential new boss.

Yeah, that was definitely bad. Very, very bad. Shut that shit down right now. I'd never had lusty thoughts about a boss before and this was definitely not the time to start.

I got up and went to take a cold shower, putting on music as loud as I could stand it to try and drown out the naughty thoughts.

\* \* \*

Eloise got back to me with a new NDA and a request for me to start on the following Monday, which was four days away. That gave me enough time to try and mentally get my shit together, buy a few new outfits, and tell my part-time jobs thanks, but I'm out. I didn't really have the cash, but I wanted to have a good first day outfit, so I hit my favorite thrift store looking for something nice.

The racks were picked over and the resellers were scouring for something good, but tucked in between a prom dress and a mumu I found an absolutely gorgeous green sheath dress that miraculously was my size. Black strips on the sides made my waist look nipped in and the length hit me perfectly, making my legs look longer than they really were. It was something like fate, trying that dress on and realizing it was practically made for me.

I could wear it with my comfortable black pumps and a cardigan. Hell, maybe I'd even put a brooch on. I had a beautiful gold bird that would definitely work. Something told me that Eloise would like it. Add some gold earrings and I'd be set for my first day. She wanted me to come to her house to look over everything and so she could train me in person. It made sense, but it also was stressing me out. There were so many things that could go wrong, or that I could do wrong, in one day.

So, so many.

I'd had dozens of first days, but this felt like more. More pressure. More anxiety.

Eloise Roth couldn't know I was a disaster. Or that I thought she was sexy as hell.

\* \* \*

"To Cade!" Hunter cheered as we all raised our glasses at Sapph. Reid raised her water from behind the bar. She was working tonight so she couldn't hang around, but she toasted and then went back to serving, moving in the limited space with all the grace of a dancer. She'd done ballet until her junior year of college and then quit, but you could still see her training. Every now and then we could convince her to shake it on the dance floor and she put all of us to shame.

I downed my sugary shot that Reid had made special for me and grinned at my friends. They were all dying to know what this latest job was, and I was still refusing

to tell them until I'd actually been hired. Besides, hearing their theories was even more fun than telling them. They had bets going on about what it was, and who was I to stand in the way of that? No one had guessed, and Hunter was keeping her mouth shut but kept throwing knowing smirks at me.

"Go dance with someone," Hunter said in my ear, and I tried to shove off her hand on my shoulder. I didn't want to do this tonight. I was wound tight about the job already and adding the pressure of trying to flirt and not make a complete fool of myself was something I didn't want to do.

"No," I said through clenched teeth. "I'm good."

Hunter sighed.

"Why don't you go find someone? You're single too," I said, glaring. Hunter was one of those people who liked to fix things to ignore what was going on in her own life. Her life looked pretty damn good from the outside, but she had a mountain of insecurities that she did her best to hide behind a serene facade. Only those who had truly earned her trust got a peak behind the curtain.

She let out a little huff of frustration at me turning the tables on her.

"You know it's true," I said, singing the last word.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

“Rude,” she said before going to the bar to get another drink.

Instead of finding someone to dance with, I nabbed the rest of my friends to shake it as a group instead.

I made it back to my apartment none the worse for wear and somehow made it to my own bed before completely passing out. The next morning was rough, but Hunter and Reid arrived to take me out to drag brunch, which was our tradition after a night out. You’d be surprised how much a drag queen and a giant breakfast sandwich with lots of bacon can help soothe a hangover.

“Since it’s just us three now, can we finally let Reid in on your new job?” Hunter asked, tossing her braid over her shoulder. Even though she was hung over, her hair was still elaborately done with flower clips woven through it.

Reid, on the other hand, had dark circles under her eyes from a long night at work and a frown permanently etched on her forehead, and she kept resting her head on the table like she was going to take a nap right there, but she perked up when Hunter spoke.

“Yes, enlighten me. Please tell me you’re an assassin in training, because I have a job for you and I’ve been saving my tips,” Reid said, poking at her plate. She’d ordered what the restaurant charmingly called The Garbage Plate, which was kind of every breakfast item piled together in a mess. I’d gotten it a few times, but it was the kind of meal that was a marathon and not a sprint and I wasn’t up for that today. The low-level panic about my new job simmered in my veins and in the back of my mind.

And now we were talking about it.

“Not an assassin. Much less interesting than that.” I shared a look with Hunter.

“Do you know Eloise Roth, the writer?” I asked. Reid took a second and then raised both her eyebrows.

“Uh, yes. My mom is obsessed with her books. She never misses one.”

“She’s hiring me on as an assistant. Potentially. I’m getting a trial period of a month,” I said, and Reid’s eyes went wide.

“Shit, Cade. She’s famous. This is a big deal,” Reid said, sitting all the way up.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “When I walked into the café and recognized her I thought I was going to faint. I have no idea how I’m going to actually going to function in her presence.” Not for the first time, I considered sending an email to Eloise Roth saying thanks but no thanks. And then I saw the emails about upcoming payments that I was barely going to cover now, and I remembered that wasn’t an option. I had to do this. For at least a month.

If I could.

“Hey,” Reid said, reaching across the table and touching my arm. “It’ll be okay, kid.”

I realized I’d been chewing the hell out of my lip and it was probably bloody.

“Yeah, thanks.” I licked my lips and went back to my drink.

“You’re going to do great,” Hunter said, and I hated that my friends had to reassure me like this. It made me feel like a child who couldn’t handle anything, not a grown



woman. But who else was going to keep me from spiraling? Not my parents. And my siblings didn't live around here. So it was Hunter and Reid, and sometimes Danica in a pinch.

"Can we stop talking about it please?" I asked and they did, swiftly changing the subject to one of our other friends and her relationship disasters.

They were the best and I knew how lucky I was to have them. Life would be a bleak place indeed without my support system.

After brunch I was feeling a whole lot better, so we took a little walk and visited the bookstore. The three of us bought books all the time for each other and would often buddy read if something was particularly good.

There was a table in the front with bestsellers stacked on it and everything in my body ground to a halt when I read the words ELOISE ROTH on several of them.

"Signed by the author," Hunter said, picking one up and turning to the title page and showing me the swirling signature. Even that was beautiful and professional.

"Yeah," I said. "I should probably read at least one."

Hunter snorted. "I can't believe you admitted to her that you hadn't."

I cringed at the memory. "Not my finest moment, but somehow, I still got hired. There has to be something wrong. That's the only explanation I can think of." Guess I was gonna find out either way.

"Or, hear me out, you made a good impression and you're actually going to do a good job," Hunter said, squeezing my shoulder.

I let out a breath. “Sure.”

I bought the book anyway.

Chapter Four

Eloise

What was wrong with me? I'd barely gotten any sleep on Sunday night. Having someone new in my house and around my work was clearly messing with my head. It was only a trial period but trusting someone new wasn't easy for me.

Still, this level of fluttery nervousness was unusual for me. My morning routine was all over the place. I forgot how to make coffee and spilled my creamer and burned the toast. I'd scheduled Cadence to arrive mid-morning to give me some time to prepare for her. I had the paperwork ready, her list of duties, and I had her new work laptop all loaded with everything she would need. It was a risk, giving a new employee something like that. Hopefully she wouldn't steal it. Nothing in her background check had come up about theft, but you never knew.

Cadence arrived right on time, which was a good sign. I opened the door after she rang the doorbell once. Truth be told, I'd been hovering in the entryway for at least ten minutes beforehand.

I hadn't felt like this in years. Breathless and unsure. I didn't like it.

"Good morning," she said, smiling and making something inside me flutter. I clamped down on it and gave her a professional smile in return.

"Good morning. Come on in." I held the door open for her and she walked in wearing pumps and a nice green dress with a black cardigan. There was a gold brooch pinned to the dress on her shoulder and I could tell she'd made an effort with her outfit. Her hair was pulled neatly back into a low bun that didn't suit her.

“Wow,” she said and then bit her lip as if she hadn’t meant to say it.

“Would you like a tour first?” I asked. Normally I wouldn’t have, but she was gazing around with such naked appreciation that something made me ask.

“Yeah, absolutely,” she said, setting her bag down on the table in the foyer.

I took her around the house, not showing her everything, but still showing her more than she needed to know. And telling her more than she needed to know. I was proud of the upgrades I’d done over the years. The house had been a mess when I’d bought it and I’d put a lot of blood, sweat, and money into making it exactly what I wanted.

She seemed to take everything in, and I enjoyed watching her move around my house. Her eyes lit up when we got to my library and her mouth dropped open.

“Oh my god,” she said, a little whispered exhalation.

There was awe in her eyes that was so open and sweet that I had to look away from it. I was finding out Cadence was an expressive person during this tour. I’d seen glimpses of it during the interview, but it seemed like her guard was down a little more. It wasn’t until we made it back to the kitchen that I realized I hadn’t asked her if she wanted anything.

“Can I get you some coffee?”

She smiled and for a second I forgot what I’d asked her. “Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that? As your assistant and all. Shit, should I have brought you coffee?” Her eyes went wide and I struggled to follow her quick words. “Oh shit, I shouldn’t have said shit.” She covered her mouth in horror.

It was so cute that I couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping from my mouth.

“Don’t worry about it, Cadence. As long as you can speak professionally when it counts, I don’t give a shit if you swear otherwise. As long as it isn’t excessive. Clear?” I said, and she nodded.

“Got it.”

It seemed like a good idea to move from the kitchen back to the office so I could show her what she needed to know. Her mouth dropped open in shock when I presented her with the laptop and gave her the passwords.

“This is for me?” she squeaked.

“Yes. It has everything on it you’ll need, including my sites, which are already bookmarked.”

She swallowed audibly as she touched the keyboard as if it was going to bite her.

“I can get you a keyboard and mouse if you’d rather use it as a desktop. Anything you need to make your job more comfortable, don’t hesitate to let me know. It’s a tax write off for me.”

She blinked a few times and nodded so I assumed she understood.

It was still up in the air as to whether she was going to handle all of this, but she’d brought a notebook and was taking a lot of notes, so that was a positive sign. She listened, but I did catch her eyes wandering every now and then and she’d sort of shake herself before looking back at me. Cadence also fluttered her hands randomly and did these little dances with her fingers that were interesting.

Observing her while she was with me was somehow more interesting than any of my work I was supposed to be doing. She’d thrown my whole schedule off and I knew it

was going to bother me later tonight, but right now having her with me was enough of a distraction.

Tomorrow I'd enforce my framework. Today was her first day and I needed to ease her in.

My main need for her was to wade through my inbox and prioritize emails, flagging the most important and making me aware of them right away. And then there was the endless website management. I'd had a website with a thriving community for decades at this point and moderating it and updating was a full-time job in itself. I'd been doing my best, but it had gotten way out of hand and the site was suffering as a consequence.

"This is a really impressive site," she said, once I'd taken her through everything and logged her in the back end.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

“Thank you. It’s a mess right now, but I’m hoping you can bring it back to its former glory,” I said, and she looked scared again but then she clenched her jaw and nodded again.

“Content moderation is key. I have volunteer admins, but you’ll be in charge of wrangling them and dealing with any larger crises that evolve. And there have been a few,” I said. Some of them over the years had gone viral and I’d had to step in myself and set people straight on how things worked in my little community.

Even this many years into being a somewhat famous author it still shocked me that people cared so much about what I had to say. It made posting in public a little harrowing, because every word would be scrutinized and dissected by my fans. They would read into anything and think I was giving them hidden messages about new books or old books or lore.

“I’m sure. That’s inevitable when you’ve got a group of people on the internet together. Regular social norms go out the window and anarchy rules. I’ve done moderation before, so that’s nothing new.” I had seen that on her résumé, so I was glad she seemed confident about this task.

“Why don’t you take a little while and just familiarize yourself with the site and my posts and everything else?” I asked. I needed some coffee immediately.

Cadence sat down at the chair I’d pulled up for her at the second desk that Mary used to occupy. I swallowed past a lump in my throat when I thought about the last time a person had sat at that desk.

I rubbed my forehead where I could feel a headache starting to take root. Migraines had plagued me off and on for years, but if I took my medicine now, I could head it off at the pass. The stress of having a new employee must have triggered it.

When I stood up, I found Cadence watching me and not her computer. “Do you need anything? I was serious about the coffee. I can make you a snack or something too.” Mary had always fed me whether I wanted her to or not, but Cadence was still a stranger to me, and I wasn’t comfortable with her rummaging around in my fridge just yet.

“Coffee is fine for now,” I said, and then realized that I’d have to show her how I liked it. It might be her first day, but she was going to learn. “Come with me.”

She followed me into the kitchen and watched as I pulled out the French press and gave her exacting instructions on how much coffee to use, how to pour, and how long the process would take.

“This is very expensive coffee and I don’t want it wasted. Understood?”

She’d been furiously scribbling and looked up, nodding at me. “Yes.”

I’d probably scared her, but hopefully that meant she’d do it right.

“How do you take your coffee?” I asked when it was ready. She’d been writing more notes about who knew what in the meantime.

“Oh, uh, I like mine with a lot of creamer,” she said, her cheeks going a little red, as if she was embarrassed about her preferences. Honestly, it wasn’t surprising.

“I have cream, but if you want flavoring or something like that, you’re out of luck. I do have vanilla on hand. You can order whatever you need.”



That seemed to surprise her, so I got out the cream for both of us and the vanilla, as well as some sugar for me.

I made her watch while I poured the cream and added two spoonfuls of sugar.

“That’s the right color,” I told her. She pulled out her phone and snapped a picture.

“There. Now I know what color to shoot for,” she said, and I had to admit, that made perfect sense. Maybe she was going to be a competent assistant after all.

\* \* \*

Cadence

Being in her home was terrifying. Not just because I was afraid to break or damage or mess anything up, but also because she was kind of terrifying. Her presence was just...so assured. This was a woman who knew exactly who she was and had never questioned it. Her authority was also unquestioned and now I was required to meet her expectations and I was scared as hell.

She hadn’t even asked me to do anything that hard, but she watched my every move and missed nothing. If I made a single typo, this woman was going to know. She wouldn’t even need to look. She’d just sense it.

As a result, I was on edge the entire day. It was exhausting. I sat straight in my chair and did my best not to fidget or make any excessive noise. I’d never been to catholic school, but it was how I imagined that would be, with disapproving nuns walking around and punishing you if you breathed wrong.

I wanted to put on my headphones and turn on some music or a podcast or something, but apparently Eloise Roth liked silence. The most silent silence I’d ever experienced,

and it was digging into my skin and making me want to scream. I'd have to deal with it today, but maybe in future I'd ask about headphones. Because I couldn't live like this.

The day crawled by as I tried to get a handle on this new job. Eloise had asked me to come in person all this week so I could come to her with any questions right away. I assumed it was also so she could keep an eye on me with this expensive new laptop that I was so worried about damaging or dropping. At least she'd bought a protective case.

The second desk that I guess was mine now was positioned perpendicular to hers so I could see her out of the corner of my eye. All the time. To say she was a distraction was a massive understatement.

I'd never seen someone have such intense focus in my life. She typed the way she did everything else. With intense purpose. I didn't need to read what she'd worked on today to know that there were probably very few typos or mistakes. I bet she was an editor's dream.

Her pace was steady, barely ever stopping or pausing. I wanted to ask her how many pages she wrote every day. What had gotten her started writing. If she loved it. She must love it, right? You didn't do something for that long that required that much work without loving it. At least I couldn't. But then I could barely commit to any kind of career in the long term. Eventually I'd get bored and stop trying. Or something else would go wrong.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

Eloise ordered out for lunch, and even though I'd brought one with me, she asked what I wanted and I couldn't say no. She'd ordered from a really fancy place that I never would have gotten to eat from if Eloise hadn't said "order whatever you want." I got a hold of myself and didn't order the most expensive thing, but I couldn't say no to a poke bowl and miso soup with a soda.

Eloise asked if I wanted to eat outside and I was curious about the backyard after I'd seen it through the windows. Her house was unreal. As in, it was hard to believe it was real. Every inch decorated and curated and filled with things. Not just books, but framed art and figurines and real plants and antique tables. There was even a grandfather clock that I really liked. The woman had a fucking china cabinet. With china in it. Her house reminded me of those '90s romantic movies. Warm with tons of light.

We sat outside on the huge porch in comfortable chairs that reclined. There were a number of bird feeders dotted around the perfectly manicured lawn. On one side by the fence was a little garden that I couldn't imagine she tended herself. The beds were laid out beautifully with stone borders and an arch with roses climbing on it.

"Someday I might put in a pond," Eloise said as we sat down to eat. Now that we weren't working, I had no idea what the hell to say to her. I was surprised that she'd asked to eat with me. I would have thought she might want some privacy or something.

"That would look nice," I said as I watched Eloise wield her chopsticks to eat her spicy tuna bowl.

Figuring that lunchtime chatting was allowed, I went for it. “Can I ask you something?”

She paused and glanced over at me. “That depends on what it is.”

“I was just wondering how you got started writing. I know you’ve talked about it in interviews, but what’s the real non-PR story?” After the job interview, I’d read her bio and scanned a few of the interviews that she had on her site.

Eloise studied me for a moment, and I did my best not to flinch too much.

“What makes you think the story I’ve told isn’t the truth?” she asked, turning things around on me.

“Maybe it is. I’d still like to hear your story from you,” I said, wanting to cross my arms. Something inside me fizzed pleasantly as I challenged her just a little.

Eloise pressed her lips together and nodded. “Let’s just say that I grew up without a lot. So from the time I was young, I was determined to be financially successful. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I knew I was going to be good at it. There was no other option. I had an English teacher in high school who saw some potential in me and gave me the spark I needed to start writing outside of class assignments. At first it was just short stories and I won a few small awards. Nothing major, but I knew I had a skill and I was going to use it. Then I went to college on a full scholarship and worked full time to save money. And then I wrote when I could. That English teacher had a contact at a large romance publisher and suggested I try my hand at it. They agreed to publish my first manuscript and then I went searching for a literary agent and found Sylvia, who I’ve been with ever since. That book hit the bestseller list and so did the next. Nearly every book I’ve ever written has hit a list and earned out my advances. I work hard. Every day. Year after year. Ass in my chair.” Hearing her say the word “ass” did something funny to my stomach.

She looked incredible when she was talking like that. I didn't even know what to say to that.

"Oh," I finally came up with.

"Any other questions?" She didn't look mad, exactly, but there was something guarded about her now.

I shouldn't ask, but my impulsivity was part of my charm. At least I hoped it was.

"Do you love it?"

She sat back, as if I'd surprised her with that question.

Then she exhaled and laughed a little. It transformed her face and for a second I felt like I was staring into the full force of the sun. She was blinding.

"Yes, I love it. Even when I don't."

We finished lunch and went back to work and I still hated the silence, but I was trying to be on my best behavior. Somehow, I'd almost made it through the entire day without messing anything up. I was on a roll.

An alarm went off that startled me.

"Quitting time," Eloise announced, stretching her arms over her head. She sighed and I realized I needed to get up and move around. I'd been sitting too long.

"You did well today," she said, nodding as she closed her laptop.

"Uh, thanks. It wasn't so bad."

She stretched her neck and then started doing some exercises with her wrists. “Remember I have Pilates tomorrow morning, so you don’t need to be here until ten thirty.”

“I could pick you up coffee on my way,” I said. She’d handed over a debit card for me to use which shocked me so much I almost choked on my own tongue. Between that and the laptop, this woman was putting a lot of trust in me. Sure, I’d signed contracts and so forth, but still.

Eloise did that thing where she pressed her lips together. “I’m sending you my order. Don’t get it wrong.” I sure as shit was going to try not to.

She typed out a message on her phone and mine pinged a second later. Not only did she have a specific order, but she demanded that I go not to one of the chain coffee places near my apartment, but the fancy place that was a bitch to get to. Fun. But I guess she was paying me enough to have the coffee that she wanted, so I was going to deliver. She hadn’t asked for anything with the coffee, but I made a decision right then and there to find out what she liked. I’d start with regular croissants and work my way through the pastries.

“Any plans tonight?” she asked. On a normal night, I might have gone to hang out with Hunter and Reid or gone out to dinner, but I was so completely and totally drained from this day that all I wanted was a shower and to let my brain shut off with some terrible TV and a piece of cake the size of my head. I’d have to pick the cake up on the way home, but it was a good reward after a job well done. Well, a job done, at any rate. I didn’t think I was going to be winning an assistant awards, but I’d done what she asked. Sorted her old emails into folders and backed up the website and updated things and had deleted comments on her social media. It wasn’t rocket surgery, but I’d done a decent job. And I hadn’t made any horrible mistakes or faux pas. That was a victory too.

“No, nothing special,” I said. “Uh, you?” It seemed rude not to ask.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

“Having dinner with my best friend, Camille. You’ll meet her at some point. She lives close by and she’s more like a sister than a friend.” She pointed to a framed picture on the wall of what had to be a younger Eloise and a gorgeous blonde woman holding each other and laughing as they stood in front of a sunset.

“Girl’s night. Sounds like fun,” I said.

“Mmm, not exactly. She has a husband and three kids, so it’ll be less margaritas and dancing on tables and more pizza and board games.”

This conversation was throwing me again. She didn’t seem like the kind of person who would want to spend her night hanging with a bunch of kids. More like she’d go out to a fancy bar wearing a cocktail dress and drink martinis mysteriously and catch every single eye in the room but rejecting all advances. Aloof and untouchable.

“Well, that sounds fun too,” I said, trying to remember the last time I’d played a board game. Probably during some brunch thing with Hunter and Reid when I was hung over.

“It is,” she said, nodding and then rolling her neck in a way that made me need to look away.

“I, uh, should get going,” I said. “Let you get to your big plans.” Oh no. I was starting to do that thing I did when I didn’t have much control over what came out of my mouth and I was bound to say something inappropriate or embarrassing or both.

“You did well today, Cadence,” she said, and I wondered why she couldn’t call me



Cade like everyone else, but I sure as shit wasn't going to correct her. She could call me Crapface for all she wanted.

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow with coffee?" She nodded and we both walked out of the office together. Eloise followed me to the door.

"See you tomorrow."

I waved like a dumbass before rushing to my car and shutting the door before I could do anything else to humiliate myself in front of her.

Hunter was sitting on the couch in the living room when I got back to my place.

"You know you can't just let yourself into people's homes," I said, dropping my bag and clutching onto the paper sack with the giant piece of red velvet cake that I'd picked up.

"I know," Hunter said, leaning back and pulling a beer out of the grocery bag at her feet and holding it out to me. "But I brought booze. And you need someone to help you eat that cake."

I hated how predictable I was. Cake was kind of my answer to a lot of things. Good day? Cake. Bad day? Cake. Medium day? Cake. Itch I can't reach on my back? Cake. Got a good parking spot? Cake.

"Ugh, fine," I said, but I was happy to see her.

"You know I had to find out how your day with the romance goddess went," she said, and I cringed as I popped the top on the beer. Not my favorite, but it was free so I wasn't complaining.

“Don’t call her that,” I said. “It’s weird. That’s my boss.”

Hunter shrugged and reached for the cake. “They better have given you two forks.”

They had.

I hadn’t eaten dinner yet, but there was no law against starting with dessert. And if there was a law, I would be the first one to break it.

“So, tell me how it was,” Hunter said as we attacked the cake together. It was a testament to how much I loved her that I was sharing at all.

“It was fine. No major disasters. Her house is ridiculous. It’s like stepping inside of a movie set or something. I felt like I was wandering around a museum and if I touched anything an alarm would go off. She bought me a laptop. A really nice one. And she likes quiet. Lots of quiet,” I said, my thoughts disjointed.

“But it was good and everything? You think it’s going to work for you?” I gulped at the beer, which was blessedly cold.

“I mean, it’s still too early to tell, but I think so? I don’t want to get ahead of myself and count on it.”

Hunter pointed at me with her fork. “Don’t do that. You’re amazing and smart and she is lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” I said, and we went back to the cake. “How was your day?”

“Filmed a new tutorial. What do you think?” She turned and showed me her braided hair which was so fantastic that I didn’t even know how she had done it. Guess I’d have to watch the tutorial.

“Gorgeous.”

“I also worked on a new painting and taught my usual class and then I grabbed beer and came here. Productive day.” I didn’t know what I would do if I had Hunter’s kind of money. I liked to think I’d be altruistic and spend my time volunteering or something, but I’d probably spend it reading books and scrolling the internet and eating my weight in cake all day. Maybe I’d take up an expensive hobby and rent a house on the coast and wear caftans or something. There were so many possibilities when you had money.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

I bet Eloise Roth had a caftan. She looked the type. I pictured her on the prow of a boat wearing a caftan over a bathing suit and staring off into the waves.

Shit. Naughty thoughts! I mentally slapped myself away from that kind of thought. You shouldn't have thoughts like that about your boss.

"Cade?" Hunter said, and I realized she'd been talking to me and I hadn't been listening. I'd been off in my little fantasy.

"Sorry, what?" I asked and Hunter's eyes narrowed for a second.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, just drifted off for a second. You know me." She did. Sometimes my brain didn't want to focus on conversations and got distracted by something else.

"Okay," she said, unphased before she repeated what she'd said. A story about someone in her yoga class.

I checked back in and tried not to have any more impure thoughts about my boss.

## Chapter Five

Eloise

Cadence showed up the next morning with coffees for both of us, but also with two croissants that I hadn't asked her to get.

“I couldn’t resist,” she said when she pulled them out and set them on two plates.

My class that morning had been brutal, and I kept wincing when I moved. Hopefully Cadence wouldn’t notice.

“I’m not much of a croissant person.” I’d had a custom blended smoothie from the Pilates studio after my workout and that was going to last me until lunch.

But now my new assistant had arrived with croissants. That I hadn’t asked for. A complication, a wrinkle. A minor one, but still.

Last night I’d been so rattled by the whole day. I knew that every single word I’d written was shit and would probably need to be deleted instead of salvaged. Having someone else in my office, in my space, had been jarring. Confusing. It wasn’t that she was loud or disruptive, but having anyone there with me was going to throw things off.

I could hear her breathing. I could hear her fingers tapping on the laptop keys. She also made little sounds as she worked and sometimes she hummed or even talked to herself under her breath. Not loudly, just...there. I was so aware of her there with me and it was going to take some getting used to. Hopefully today would be better. The arrival of the croissants wasn’t a good sign.

“If you don’t want them, I’ll take them,” she said when I took my coffee from her. I took a sip and was relieved that the order was right. I couldn’t handle my orders not being right. I knew I was overreacting, but something about it made me go from zero to homicidal in two seconds flat.

“No, thank you. It was a nice gesture,” I said.

She shrugged and didn’t seem all that perturbed. I took my coffee to the office and

she followed.

“How was your Pilates class?” she asked, and I almost tripped on my desk in surprise. Were we doing small talk now?

“Fine,” I said, hoping that she would get the hint and drop it.

She nodded and pulled something out of her bag.

“So, uh, I got the impression yesterday that you enjoy quiet while you work. I’m, um, kind of the opposite? I like listening to music or old shows I’ve seen a million times or podcasts. Anyway, is it okay with you if I wear my headphones? I know I won’t be able to hear you, but you can always wave to get my attention.”

Was she serious?

“Wave to get your attention,” I repeated.

Cadence nodded. “Yeah, or like, snap your fingers or something.”

She was serious.

“I’m not going to do that,” I said.

“You could throw something at me,” she said, smiling, and my stomach lurched for a second. I guess the caffeine was hitting me hard today.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

“I’m not going to do that either,” I said, sighing. “If I need to get your attention, I’ll send you a message.”

“You’re going to send me a message when we’re in the same room,” she said, as if that was more ridiculous than any of her ways.

“Yes,” I said.

She shrugged and pulled at the end of the croissant with her fingers. “Fair enough.”

There were now croissant crumbs on my office floor.

\* \* \*

She was louder today. Not by much, but definitely noisier. The headphones meant that she hummed more often. A very small part of me wondered what music she listened to. Probably sugary pop songs that you could dance to. Or maybe not. She could have hidden music depths. This young woman was still a stranger to me.

I tried to think of myself at her age and it was all a blur. I’d been at the start of my career, my eyes singularly on the next book. The next bestseller. Movie rights. Banking as much money as I could and then obsessively tracking my spending and constantly checking my bank account to make sure the numbers in it were real. There hadn’t been time or energy for much else.

Cadence obviously had more going on than I had, and that was good. If I could go back, I wouldn’t have changed anything, but I still wondered who I might have been

if my circumstances had been different. The years of making bad decisions and going to bars and dating and flirting and just...doing something silly for the hell of it. Who would I have been if I'd had the space for that kind of life?

There was a joyful energy to Cadence that I had never had, even when I was a child. I swallowed around a stab of envy and got back to my emails. It was much nicer to go to my inbox now and find the trash and spam deleted and the rest prioritized for me. Cadence had done that, which was what I'd hired her for. I responded to the most important first, and then worked my way down.

My agent and I were hammering out the contract for another movie, the audiobook had come in for the same book, and my publicist was working on the next set of appearances. I'd need Cadence to book me flights and hotel for those, so I forwarded those details to her in the assistant email box.

She was humming and bopping her head, so whatever she was listening to was a good song. I allowed myself to watch her for a few seconds. Her hair wasn't as polished today, with little wisps escaping around her face and by her neck. Her outfit today was also less put together. Her pants weren't perfectly ironed, and her shirt didn't fit her exactly. Still, I wasn't going to harass her about it. She'd worn the pumps again today, but I got the feeling that she would feel more comfortable in flats. Or even sneakers. If she got through the week, I'd speak with her about casual shoes.

Writing was a job and I had to treat it that way, so every time I pulled out my computer to write, I put on the kind of outfit I would have worn if I was going to an office. Early on, my clothing had been from the thrift store and most of it hadn't fit me, but that didn't matter. It could be three in the morning and I put on a blazer with shoulder pads and used shoes and typed on my laptop in my dorm room. My roommates had mocked me, but I hadn't cared.

Cadence was so focused on her work that I had to send her a message when it was



lunch. I tried not to order delivery every day of the week, so today I was going to make sandwiches.

She followed me into the kitchen and offered to help, but I waved her off.

“Eventually I’ll trust you with my meals, but we’re not there yet,” I said, and I watched her jaw clench for a second. “What would you like?”

I was a big fan of sandwiches, so I always kept tons of supplies on hand.

“Whatever you’re having is fine,” she said, and I could tell that she was trying to be easygoing, but that didn’t really work.

I made up my own turkey sandwich with bacon, Havarti, avocado, tomato, and a sun-dried tomato mayo. I turned to her and held up two bags of bread.

“Which one?” I asked. She pointed to the sourdough.

“Turkey, ham, salami, bacon? None of the above?” She’d had fish yesterday, but maybe she was a pescatarian.

I assembled her sandwich and hers was nearly identical to mine.

“Halves or triangles?” I asked her before I cut it.

She raised both eyebrows. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” I told her, surprised that she didn’t know. “It absolutely matters.”

“Okay then, do whatever you did for yours and then tomorrow do the opposite and I’ll compare them.”

I didn't know what to say to that. It was entirely logical.

I cut her sandwich on the diagonal and presented her with the plate.

"You really don't have to feed me," she said.

"Consider it a perk," I said.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:58 pm*

We took our sandwiches outside again, and this time she seemed thoughtful and quieter.

My gaze drifted to her arms, which were covered by three-quarter length sleeves and I could just barely see the end of her tattoo peeking out.

“What made you get the tattoo on your arm?” I found myself asking before I knew what was happening.

Cadence’s eyes snapped to my face.

“I know you have a tattoo, relax. You didn’t think I wouldn’t look up your social media?”

Her eyes went wide and the color drained from her face.

“You looked at my social media?”

She looked like someone had died.

“Yes? Did you not think that would be part of the background check?” Why was this a shock to her?

“No, I know someone would, but I didn’t know you’d see it,” she said, her voice trembling.

“I only did a quick scan. Not a deep dive. I didn’t see anything incriminating, if that’s

what you're worried about, Cadence. Calm down."

My voice was more forceful than I meant it to be, but she did need to get a handle on herself. "Do you really think I would have hired you if I'd seen something I didn't approve of?" I asked her.

She opened her mouth to say something and slammed it shut and shook her head. "I guess not."

"What were you scared I was going to find?" I asked, suddenly intrigued.

"Nothing," she said, looking away quickly, her face going from too pale to brilliant red.

"Can I see it? Your tattoo," I clarified.

She was quiet for so long that I wasn't sure if she'd heard me, but then she rolled up her sleeve and turned her arm toward me.

The tattoo was delicately done with soft lines and blurred colors of a profusion of wildflowers that covered the upper half of her arm. It must go all the way to the top of her shoulder because I couldn't see all of it.

"I got it a few years ago. I knew I wanted a tattoo, but didn't know what I wanted to get. So I made an appointment to put the pressure on myself and still didn't know until I got to the shop. I confessed to the tattoo artist that I didn't know what I wanted, and they gave me a book to look through. I didn't see anything and then I basically just told the tattoo artist to pick something for me. Yeah, I know," she said when I let out a shocked sound. I couldn't imagine agreeing to let someone put something permanently on my body like that.

“And then I came back an hour later and she showed me this book of illustrations and what she had in mind and I told her to go for it. I know it could have turned out bad, but it was exactly what I needed at the time. Just worked out.” She stared down at her arm and then pulled her sleeve down again.

“It is good that it worked out. You could have ended up with an embarrassing pornographic cartoon, or something even worse,” I said, and she choked on a bite of her sandwich.

“Yeah, that would have been bad. But I had her show me what it was before she inked me. I’m not that reckless.”

Reckless. Yes, she was. That was obvious. Normally I would have avoided her. My life was all about order and restraint. But something about Cadence’s kind of reckless drew me. Just hadn’t figured out what it was yet.

“No tattoos for you?” she asked, turning the question around on me.

“No, absolutely not. No offense.”

She shrugged her tattooed arm. “None taken. You can do what you want with your body.”

Her words made me feel warm and I fanned myself even though there was a chill in the air.

“Any plans for new tattoos?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not at the moment. Don’t feel the need for it. Maybe I’ll pierce something though.”

Now I was the one choking. Obviously she was talking about ears or nose, but for some inexplicable reason, my mind went to piercing other parts of the human anatomy.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Instead of answering, I went back to my sandwich.

### Chapter Six

Cade

Welp, the cat was out of the bag as far as the tattoos went. I almost died when she told me that she'd looked at my social media. There were too many things on there that I didn't want my boss to see, and not just the silly pictures from nights out with too many shots. The silly memes and other bullshit that I posted wasn't the kind of stuff you wanted to see from your assistant that you trusted with booking your plane tickets.

I almost wanted to escape from her and go through my pages and wonder what she'd seen. She'd said that she hadn't seen any red flags, but there were miles between red flags and complete humiliation. Hell, I posted sex jokes on there and a whole lot of lesbian things.

My boss didn't need to know how many scissoring jokes I'd made this week. Hopefully she hadn't looked too hard. Maybe she'd just done a quick scroll and that was it. Otherwise, I would not survive the mortification.

This was why Hunter had told me to have public accounts and then secret accounts for close friends, but I hadn't wanted to juggle multiple login information because I forgot my passwords enough as it was, and I would inevitably mess up and post on the wrong one, defeating the purpose.

At least things were going better with focusing now that I had my headphones. She hadn't complained about them, and every time she'd needed me for something, she'd just sent me a message. Seemed silly, but if that was what she wanted, she was the boss.

It was unbelievable how many emails she got per day. I'd thought my inbox was bad, but it was only bad because of all the spam from companies I got and kept forgetting to unsubscribe to. Eloise got actual important emails, just a lot of them. So many were high-priority that it was blowing my mind that she was so calm about it all, but she'd been doing this for a long time, so I guess it was all old news.

Eloise had given me a very extensive template for responding to emails that she didn't need to see. All I had to do was add the greeting and mostly copy and paste, which made it so much easier than trying to sound completely professional on my own.

She also had me going through her past social media and coming up with which posts had done the best numbers so she could replicate them with new content. And then there was coordinating the delivery of thousands of special edition hardcovers for her most-recent release so that she could sign them all individually. Apparently, I would be helping move them all from the garage to the basement where she already had tables set up because she'd done this before. We'd pack them all back up and coordinate pickup so they could be sent out by the publisher.

There were so many moving parts and keeping track of all of it made my head spin. I wasn't panicking yet about managing it all, but it was close. Using all my tips and tricks and apps and lists helped, and I had to keep reminding myself that this was a new job, and there was always an adjustment with something new. Anyone else in my place would have felt similarly. Eloise wasn't shy about correcting me either. The third time I hadn't done something in the right font, she had reminded me, and I'd apologized, but she'd just moved on and gone back to work while I tried not to have a



breakdown. I couldn't make mistakes like that. I had to keep it together and impress her.

At one point I was going through the tagged posts on social media for inspiration and found some absolutely incredible fanart creators for one of her most popular romance series. My personal homework for this weekend was to read at least three of the books, which centered on a family of seven growing up and finding love. Already two of the books had been made into blockbuster movies and the third was currently in negotiations, of which I was somehow a liaison.

I pulled up a new message to Eloise and started adding some of the fanart, as well as links to the creators. Why not share and celebrate them? She'd never really done anything like that on her pages, which I found a little odd for an author who had built such a close and inclusive community on her website.

Even though this was only my second day with Eloise Roth, I got the idea that she either didn't like social media that much, or she wasn't as comfortable with it. Understandable, seeing as how she had built her website up years ago and had much more control than she did on other social sites. Plus, dealing with that many followers and comments and everything else was daunting even for a regular person, let alone a bestselling author. I'd already seen some that were vile and had to ban and block too many accounts. There was a reason Eloise didn't have any easy way to contact her on her sites. She did have a general email account, which was going to be mine to manage, and that was a cesspool that I had been actively avoiding. I knew there were going to be threats and dick pics aplenty in there. Not to mention the people who had decided that romance novels were porn and that Eloise was responsible for the downfall of society. I knew that a lot of those messages were from women, and it just made me want to weep for the future of humanity.

Yeah, looking up fanart was much more enjoyable.

I also found a few memes that people had made of the books and I didn't know if they were accurate or not, but I added those as well. Maybe we could start adding one or two of them in her weekly newsletter that I would be compiling.

I sent Eloise the message with the memes and fanart and then got a message back immediately. Taking off my headphones, I turned my chair to face her.

"This is an interesting idea," she said, tapping her finger on the desk. "I've commissioned art before, but not for a long time and I've never highlighted individual artists. I have shared pictures of quote tattoos, but this is different." She seemed thoughtful.

"Why don't you start reaching out to them and ask if we can feature their art on the website? We could have a revolving carousel. You can build it out with a few images and send it to me to look over. Make sure you have at least twenty artists lined up with agreements, minimum." Oh, was that it?

Before I could stop myself, I blurted out "I'll get right on top of that, Rose." Shit.

Eloise seemed stunned for a second. "Do people your age still watch that movie? I would have thought it was too passé."

I shook my head. "No. My mom loved it and made me watch it growing up."

Eloise let out a little scoffing sound. "Stop reminding me how much older I am than you are."

"I'm sorry?" I said. "It's not something I can really do anything about."

She waved a hand and rubbed her forehead. "Yes, yes, I know. Let's get back to work. This chapter and I are in a battle and right now, it's winning."

Curious about her writing process, I asked if she wanted to talk about it. “Maybe saying something out loud will help you process. I know it helps me.” More often than not, just saying what a problem was, out loud to another person led me to a solution in the moment.

“No, thank you. I’ll manage. But I do think I need a break.” That was a surprise. Eloise scheduled her breaks and she wasn’t due one for another hour at least. From what I had observed, she treated her schedule like a religion. I made a mental note of the deviation.

“Would you like me to make you some coffee?” I still had yet to conquer the French press, but I needed to practice if I was ever going to get good at it. If all else failed, I could look up a video tutorial.

“Yes, thank you. I’m going to pace around the garden for a little while.” Fair enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Eloise did go out to the garden and I kept glancing at her as she walked and seemed to be deep in thought as I tried not to screw up her coffee. I got the color right and made a cup for myself, tasting it and hoping I'd gotten it right.

It tasted like coffee to me, so I went ahead and brought it out to her. Maybe it would help with whatever she was trying to work out mentally.

"Here," I said when she turned to face me. Her eyes took a second to focus on me and when they did, it was like being slammed in the chest. Those eyes were so incredible in certain lights. They were blue, but under the right conditions, violet. Like the day when I'd met her for the interview. Who had eyes like that? Seriously.

Eloise took the coffee from me and I waited for her verdict on pins and needles, trying not to fidget too much.

Eloise sipped and then nodded. "Adequate."

Hey, I'd take it.

"I'll let you get back to your rumination," I said, backing away.

"My rumination?" she asked.

"Whatever it is. I'll just go back to work."

Eloise pivoted away from me and started walking again. Guess I was dismissed.

I went back to my desk and thought way too much about blue eyes.

\* \* \*

Somehow I was even more mentally exhausted after my second day, but I didn't get cake on my way home. Wouldn't be a responsible financial decision, and I had to start making more of those. It had to get better, right? I couldn't already be thinking about quitting only two days into this job.

Danica was home when I got back, which was unusual. I found her slumped on the couch, looking dejected. That wasn't a good sign.

"Hey, long time no see," I said, dropping my shit and going to sit next to her.

"Hey," she said, her voice dull.

"What's wrong?" I asked when she didn't say anything else.

"Gavin and I had a fight," she said, referencing her boyfriend.

"Aw, I'm sorry. What did you fight about?" I was hungry, but I could see that she needed to get this out first. Then I'd make something warm and comforting for both of us and we could crash out on the couch with some edibles and a movie or something.

Danica gave me the whole long rundown, and I made all the right noises and took her side. It was easy because Gavin was being a dumbass. Even if she was in the wrong, though, I'd be on her side.

"Just give him some time to cool off and I'm sure he'll be crawling back to you with an apology." Danica and Gavin didn't fight often, and it was never about anything too

serious. They'd been together forever, even before Gavin transitioned, and I had the feeling that they were going to make it. The kind of relationship they had didn't come around every day.

Danica eventually begged not to talk about Gavin and asked me about my new job, so I filled her in on Eloise and she was shocked that I'd gotten the job but told me that she was happy and thought I'd be good at it.

"I don't know about that, but I did make her coffee adequately today, so that's something," I said while I rinsed rice to put in the rice cooker to go with butter chicken and some butternut squash soup I had in the fridge.

It seemed to perk her up and then we both chilled out and it was nice to let everything go for the evening.

I went to bed earlier than I normally would have because one of my library holds had come in and I was eager to read it. Probably should have been reading my boss's books, but I was saving them for the weekend. I guess I might have been putting off reading them for fear that I wouldn't like them. Sure, it was silly, but it was a real possibility. They just didn't seem like my kind of thing. No offense to any of her numerous fans. Not for me, and that was fine.

But now I had this job and I was going have to familiarize myself with them, at least a little. Eloise had been busy in her career, releasing no less than two books a year, and some years more, for nearly twenty years. That was a lot to go through. So much to keep track of. Her brain kind of terrified me. How the hell could you come up with that many unique stories? How could you keep them straight?

There had to be something magic in them, though, to have that many fans and to always sell well and to get movie deals. Something that kept those loyal fans buying every single book and seeing every movie and traveling to the locations and buying

merchandise.

The new book was exactly what I needed, and I passed out with page-turning remote in my hand.

\* \* \*

“You made it through the week,” Hunter said when she took me out for happy hour wings on Friday to one of our favorite local joints.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I did. Somehow,” I said, shaking my head. “I really don’t know how. I’m fucking tired. I thought about quitting at least once a day” The mental load of the new job was still so much, and I needed to get used to it sooner rather than later. And then there was the way that Eloise told me about the things I’d messed up. Which were more numerous than I would have liked, but there were so many times when she almost expected me to read her mind and I didn’t have those powers. She never got angry or yelled or called me names, but her quiet disapproval was almost worse. She’d also added a few other tasks, like picking up dry cleaning, returning items, and other little errands to my day and that was even more stress on top of stress. But I’d made it out alive.

“It’s good for you. Builds character,” Hunter said, and I gave her my middle finger. “Hey, that’s what my father says.”

“I don’t want to build character. I just want steady employment that doesn’t make me want to throw myself off a bridge and that also pays my bills.”

Hunter raised her beer bottle. “Let’s toast to that.”

We did and ordered a second round of wings and fries. I was happy to be with my best friend with my face covered in sauce and full of cheap beer and knowing that I didn’t have to work for the next two days. Sure, I had to do all the shit that I didn’t have time for during the week like cleaning and laundry and other chores, but still. If I wanted to lay in bed all day and read one book after another, I could. Bliss. I should also probably call my parents this weekend, and I did want to talk to my sister.

Too many things to do.



Hunter and I made a detour to Sapph to say hi to Reid while she was working and then Hunter asked if I wanted to sleep over at her place and I couldn't say no.

Hunter's apartment was lavish, and I already kept a bunch of my crap in her guest room. She'd offered to let me move in with her more than once, but I'd always declined. I would have felt weird living in that place with her and sooner or later it would have affected our friendship. Maybe. I didn't want to take a risk and find out. So I stayed in my crappy place with Danica and crashed at Hunter's whenever she asked me to.

We put on matching pajamas and she busted out her fancy skincare that I didn't even want to know the cost of and stayed up too late eating those expensive giant cookies that she had delivered.

"I wonder what she's doing this weekend," I mused as I licked chocolate off my fingers.

"Who?" Hunter asked from where she was sitting on the floor with her back against the couch where she'd been scrolling through her phone. We had something mindless on the TV but neither of us was watching it.

"Eloise Roth," I said. "It feels weird not using her full name." I was still a little buzzed from the beers at the wing place.

"I feel like it's something fabulous. Jetting off to New York for a Broadway show and then drinks with some other famous writers at a hidden bar that only famous people know about. Or maybe taking a private jet to Paris to meet some minor heir that she met on the exclusive dating site." Hunter would know about that exclusive dating site. She had an account but claimed that she never checked it. I was always bugging her to let me take a look and see if I could find someone for her, but she never let me.

“I’m sure it’s something like that.” Eloise Roth wouldn’t be laying in bed and doing nothing but rot for two days, that was for sure. I wondered if she would spend time with her friend. Somehow, I just couldn’t see Eloise Roth playing board games with a bunch of noisy kids. Eloise Roth eating pizza. Now there was an image. Sure, I could see her eating something like a flatbread with goat cheese and balsamic, but regular pepperoni pizza? No way.

“What is she like?” Hunter asked, examining the ends of her hair for split ends. As if she didn’t get strict regular trims to assure that didn’t happen.

“Eloise?” I asked. Hunter nodded. “She’s a really hard worker. Like, just sits and types for hours on end. Her focus is unreal. I’m so envious of it, actually. Demanding. Strict. She likes things the way she likes them.”

“Has she let you read any of her new stuff? It would be pretty cool to get to see it before it’s published.”

“No way. I think I’d get fired for snooping. I don’t even really know what she’s working on. I mean, I know what I’ve seen from some of the emails, but I haven’t read anything. I mean, why would she need my input?” I didn’t work in publishing. Sure, I read a lot, but I wasn’t a professional in any capacity. Hell, I couldn’t spell rhythm on the first, second, or third try. I always let autocorrect handle it.

“Still, must be fun to see the back end. You’re getting a lot of experience that you can use.” That was true. For as long as I got to work with Eloise, I was going to soak it up and learn as much as I could so I could carry it with me in the future. I mean, I’d never thought about a job in publishing, but if I was gaining all these skills, wouldn’t it be smart to put them to use?

“Listen, I gotta survive three more weeks of my trial period. Let’s just hope I can get through that and then I’ll start thinking long term.”

## Chapter Seven

Eloise

It was Noah's birthday weekend, and of course I was there to celebrate, but also to help Camille not lose her mind. He'd asked for a superhero party and Camille had somehow managed to find a company that sent people in costume to parties that also had at least one actor who was fluent in ASL. Then there was booking and receiving the bounce house and making sure it got set up and the food and cleaning the house and then Camille was at the end of her rope. John did his best to help carry the load, but Camille was so bad at delegating and then refusing to allow anyone to help when she got frazzled.

"My love. I'm going to need you to take a breath," I said, putting my hands on her shoulders and squeezing. One of her eyes was twitching in a concerning way.

"But—" she started to say. I dug my fingers in until she actually focused on my face.

"Everything is going to be fine. Noah's party is going to be perfect. Even if the cupcakes are wrong and it might drizzle a little bit. It's going to be perfect," I said and waited for her to start breathing normally again.

At last Camille nodded. "Okay. Okay."

The party was perfect. Noah was over the moon to sign with his favorite superhero, and the bounce house didn't deflate, and the rain held off, and there was no blood and very few tears.

Once the last kid had gone home and the grandparents had agreed to take the three kids for the night to give Camille and John a break, the three of us sat on the back porch with drinks and leftover lasagna.

“I’m never doing this again,” Camille said, slumped over in her chair.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Cam, you say that every year,” John pointed out. Camille glared at him.

“You do say it every year,” I said.

“I hate it when you two gang up on me,” she said with a groan. “I don’t know if I can get up from this chair, I’m so worn out.”

John put his drink down and stood up. “That’s what you have me for.”

Like the prince he was, he picked her up in his arms.

I laughed and said, “That’s my cue.”

They insisted that I could stay, but I wanted to sleep in my own bed.

Since I’d been drinking, I went ahead and walked home, hoping that no wildlife would see me as easy prey. This was a pretty safe neighborhood, but you never knew when a rogue skunk was going to crash out of the bushes and see you as a problem.

I made it home without incident and it was still early enough that I didn’t want to go to bed just yet.

I went to my office and realized that Cadence had left her headphones here. I pulled out my phone to send her a message about two seconds before realizing that it was late, and she didn’t need to be hearing from me on the weekend. Surely she was out with her friends doing whatever the hell twenty-six-year-olds did.

If she contacted me, I'd tell her they were here, but I wasn't going to reach out to her.

Shockingly, she'd done well this week. Better than expected. I'd truly thought she was going to crash and burn. I hadn't been nice or taken it easy on her because you should start as you mean to go on and I wasn't going to treat her with kid gloves and then have her flip out when reality set in later.

And she'd had a good idea about showcasing the fanart on my site. I was almost angry that I nor anyone on my team had thought of it first.

Social media wasn't new, but the way that my fans interacted with me on certain sites was, and I still struggled to get a handle on it. My website was one thing, but those pages were like the wild west and you never knew what was going to happen. One person could make an outrageous comment and before you knew it there were hundreds pouring in all talking about something completely off-topic that had nothing to do with the post. There was a need to say the most clever or meanest thing and I didn't care for a lot of it.

Alas, I had no choice in the matter and if I wanted to reach fans both new and old, I had to find a way to make it work for me.

Cadence seemed to have a good sense, so if this worked out, I was going to lean on her more in that department. I didn't like the idea of doing that, but I knew where my weaknesses were, and I knew how to utilize my resources.

Leaving the headphones on the desk, I closed my office door and went to my library to see if I wanted to find a book to read. After twenty minutes of picking titles and then putting them back, I went to my phone and looked up the alien books that Cadence had told me about. The first ebook was free, so what did I have to lose?

I clicked download before I could think better of it and grabbed my ereader from the

charger, curled myself into my favorite reading chair in the library and settled in with a small cheese plate and a cup of tea.

I didn't know what the hell I was getting into. Most of my reading was concentrated on colleagues' books, non-fiction, and the odd random romance that I picked up or that Camille recommended. I didn't have nearly as much time to read as I wished I did.

\* \* \*

Around two a.m., I realized that I needed to go to bed, but I didn't want to. I was absolutely engrossed in this strange tale of humans and blue aliens with spectacular anatomy. It shouldn't make sense, but the writing was snappy, funny, and kept me turning the pages. A complete surprise. Sylvia had been right. Cadence had been right.

Somehow I stumbled to bed and slept like the dead until my eyes opened the next morning and I was struggling for coffee. It was Sunday, which was normally my chore day. I'd go to the grocery store, strip the bed and wash the sheets and towels, and prepare for the cleaners to come on Tuesday morning during my Pilates class.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't want to do any of those things. Well, I wanted to do them, but there was something else I wanted to do more. Read.

I made myself a quick breakfast and parked myself in my reading chair until I had devoured the last page of the ebook and went ahead and bought the next five volumes. There were dozens of them, I found out, and I had no idea if I'd make it through that many, but I had to read more.

Audiobooks I usually reserved for travel, but I went ahead and got those too and wore my earbuds for all my errands, something I hadn't done before. I almost completely

forgot my grocery list and it took me forever to get through the store because I had to keep stopping and listening.

By the time I'd gotten everything done that I wanted to get done, I had switched back to ebooks and was well on my way to finishing the second volume.

For a moment, I considered sending Cadence a message that I'd started the books and was enjoying them, but why would I do that when I was going to see her tomorrow? Cadence was my employee, not my friend. Mary had been both, but that was after years of us being together. For now, I needed to keep a distance between me and Cadence. Strictly professional.

\* \* \*

She was late on Monday, and she arrived with coffee on her pants and her hair frizzing around her head.

"I'm so sorry. There was traffic and then they didn't make my order so they had to make it again and then I tripped." She was babbling and I wanted to put my hands on her shoulders like I did with Camille and tell her to breathe.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I don’t tolerate lateness, as a rule, because it shows disrespect for my time, but this is the first, and it sounds like it was out of your control. Just be sure to manage your time and build in a buffer for accidents next time.”

Her face went red and she looked down at her feet as if she was a child who was being scolded.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and I really hoped she wasn’t going to cry. I couldn’t handle someone who cried anytime I had a criticism or comment.

But then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and handed me my coffee. She had a bag with her, and I knew there would be some kind of pastry inside. Every day she brought me something different and tried to convince me to eat it. I’d turned her down every single day.

“It’s lemon blueberry loaf today. With a vanilla bean frosting,” she said as I passed the bag back to her.

“No, thank you.” I’d already told her not to bring me anything, but it hadn’t deterred her, so I wasn’t going to waste my breath.

She shrugged and went to get a plate in the kitchen.

“Do you mind if I make some coffee to replace mine?” she asked.

“Go ahead.”

I now had her favorite Irish cream coffee creamer in the fridge, so she went ahead and boiled some water for the French press as she set out the cake on a plate and grabbed a fork. She'd gotten more comfortable in my kitchen and I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"How was your weekend?" she asked, doing a little twirl and then making her coffee and waiting for it to brew.

"Fine," I said. "I started reading one of those alien books."

She spun around, her eyes lighting up as she grinned. "You did? And?"

I nodded and then sipped my coffee. "You weren't wrong about them."

She let out a little excited noise and bounced on her feet as if I'd just announced she was getting a pony for Christmas.

"I cannot believe you actually read one. Tell me everything."

I didn't want to tell her everything. We weren't friends.

"They're intriguing. Very readable. I can see why people love them." There. That was neutral.

"Okay, but when you read a few more, you have to tell me who your favorite couple is."

She was getting too excited and I needed to shut that down. "I'm not sure if I'll read more. Maybe." I took my coffee and went back to my office, effectively ending the conversation.

Cadence was more subdued when she joined me with her coffee. She must have eaten the cake in the kitchen before joining me.

“Can I make a request?” she asked before she opened her laptop and turned it on.

“Potentially,” I said, wondering what the hell it could be.

“Could we have a little, like, meeting in the mornings and go over everything I need to do? I’m good with lists, and it helps me focus. I’d also like to rate each task in order of priority so I can do the most important first. Is that okay?”

That sounded entirely reasonable to me. I’d gotten so out of practice working with another person. Mary and I had had twice-weekly chats like that, but at a certain point she was so good at her job that she knew what I needed before I needed it and my guidance would only be a hindrance.

“That sounds like a good idea. Maybe we keep it daily until your trial period is over and then we can reevaluate if we need it every day.”

She nodded and pulled her chair over to my desk with her notebook. She listed all her tasks for that day, and I told her which were most important, and which were less so. She took copious notes and I was hit with the sensation that it was nice to have someone here with me again. Someone to listen to me. Someone to talk to. Even just another breathing human in the room made me feel less alone.

Writing was solitary, and my laser focus on success had made me even more isolated. It was a miracle that Camille had stuck by my side for all these years, but she was an exception. Sylvia was my friend, but she was also my agent, which meant it was in her best financial interest to keep me happy.

I knew it wasn’t healthy to spend so much time with only my own thoughts for

company. That was probably why both Sylvia and Camille had been pestering me so much to hire someone.

“Okay, that’s perfect. Meeting adjourned,” Cadence said, clapping her hands together and making me jump.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Sorry,” she said, looking sheepish. “I’ll just get back to work.”

\* \* \*

For some reason, I kept finding myself looking up from my desk at Cadence. And not just when she was making noise, which was almost constant. I had adjusted a little bit to her noises, but that wasn’t what drew my attention.

The wisps around her face and neck should have looked messy. They did, but in an intentional way. Her forehead creased as she concentrated and then she huffed out a breath, puffing her cheeks out. I didn’t know if I’d ever seen someone with that many freckles. They were scattered all over her face and arms and fingers and probably elsewhere. Little sprinkles of cinnamon that made her interesting to look at.

An email came through and I saw that it was from Sylvia, so I forced myself to stop staring at my assistant and go back to my actual work.

\* \* \*

I’d managed to wrangle the difficult chapter from last week, but now I had a different problem. My characters needed to go on a date, and I was out of ideas. I’d gone through my lists and done searches and was coming up empty. It had to be unique to them, not just going to the movies or dinner. I was stumped and it was making me increasingly angrier. When the words didn’t flow, it was a level of frustration that I couldn’t explain to someone who wasn’t a writer.

I let out a sound of irritation and rubbed my forehead. Shit. It was hot, which meant

that I might have a migraine coming on. I pulled one of my pills out of the drawer in my desk where I kept them. I popped it and chased it with a sip from my water bottle.

“Everything okay?” Cadence asked, pulling down her headphones and letting them rest around her neck.

“Yes,” I said. “Just a little stuck.”

“Want to take a break and pace about it?” she asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“No, I do not.”

I considered going back to my computer and ending this little interaction, but I didn’t.

“Okay. Fine.” I crossed my arms. “Give me a unique date scenario.”

Cadence’s eyebrows went up. “Are you actually asking me for input right now?”

“Yes. Reluctantly,” I said, and she grinned.

“Okay, a date scenario. Between your book characters, I’m guessing. A guy and a girl?”

I gave her the rundown of my characters and their personalities directly from the profiles I’d built out before I wrote the book. I’d barely changed my process since I’d written my first book. First came the beginning outline. My characters got names, jobs, hobbies, personality quirks. It was basic and not very specific. Once I’d thought more about the story and done some refining, I did a much longer outline that was the bones of the book. Whenever I would get stuck or get off track, I’d go back to that outline and it would keep me steady to the end. I wrote from the first page to the last page, all in order. Once that was done, there were rounds of edits and back and forth

with the publisher and copy editors, but that process had worked for me so far.

I wasn't into collaboration. A few author friends I knew had written books with other people, and two were even a writing duo who had published dozens of books together. Not for me.

But I was a dry well and she was here, and maybe, just maybe, she might have an idea that would spark something.

“Are there any themes in the book? Something that's unique to the two of them? Or even unique to her, that he could make happen? Oh, and is there a budget?”

Her questions set off a flurry of thoughts in my head.

“Her mother, who died, loved monarch butterflies. She has a tattoo on her shoulder of one.”

Cadence turned to her computer and typed something in, and I waited.

“Okay, so depending on what time of year it's taking place, and where they live, he could take her to see the monarch butterfly migration. He could surprise her with it. Maybe keep it a secret until they get there. And then blindfold her and when she takes it off, she's absolutely surrounded by hundreds of them. Something like that.”

Well. There was an idea. It was a good one, too.

I nodded. “I'll think about it.”

She smiled again. “Does this mean I get a writing credit?”

“I'll thank you in the acknowledgments,” I said.

Cadence let out a little breath that was almost a laugh. “I guess. Still, that scene could make or break the book and I think I should get some kind of credit.”



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

She was persistent, wasn't she?

"I don't know that I'm going to use it anyway. It might not even work with the story."

She didn't seem upset. "That's fine. I've got lots of ideas. I'm a romance reader, after all."

And that was one of the reasons I'd even hired her in the first place. Someone who loved and respected the genre was the only kind of person I could have working for me.

"I need to get back to work," I said.

"Let me know if you need more ideas," she said, tapping her head. "Got 'em all up here."

I shouldn't have asked.

## Chapter Eight

Cade

I couldn't believe she'd actually asked me for help. She didn't appear to be the kind of person who needed help with writing, but she'd asked. And somehow, somehow, I'd come up with something good in the moment. My brain had actually done me a solid and coughed up an idea that made sense and was really fucking romantic.

Who wouldn't want their love interest to take them to see the monarch butterfly migration? I know I would. If I had a love interest, but it had been a while. Dating was so tricky for me. Either I'd subdue myself so much so I didn't scare someone off, or I'd come out, guns blazing and they'd get scared off by my too-muchness. That was hard on the ego, I wasn't going to lie.

Even though she hadn't asked me, I came up with some more date ideas. Some simple, some completely outrageous. They kept popping up in my brain, so I started an empty email for them. I didn't know if I was going to send it, but I typed them out anyway.

\* \* \*

"Read a few of your books this weekend," I informed her over lunch. Her reaction was subdued.

"Did you? And?"

I tried to keep my face neutral and made her wait.

She rolled her eyes. "You're not going to hurt my feelings, Cadence. You can tell me you didn't like them. As long as it doesn't affect your ability to do your job, it's not a problem."

Finally, I smiled. "I really liked them. I read three, and they were great. Let me tell you what a relief it was. You're incredibly talented."

She nodded, as if she'd heard that before. Of course she had. Probably hundreds of times, by people far more discerning than me.

"Thank you."

“You’re welcome. Now I have to watch some of the movies and compare. What is that like? Having a movie made of your work?” That was something I’d been dying to know.

We were on the porch eating grilled sandwiches that she’d made alongside salads. Last week, I had reluctantly admitted to her that it did matter how you cut your sandwiches. Both of ours were cut diagonally as a result.

I had kind of given up on bringing my own lunches because what she had was always better. I did bring my own snacks, though. I hadn’t gotten to the point where I could just raid her fridge when I wanted.

“Movies are tricky. On one hand, I feel such a sense of wanting to control everything, and then I have to let go of that control at the same time. I’ve been able to get producing credits on a lot of the more recent ones, which was nice. It wasn’t easy, at first, to let someone else direct my characters and my vision. When they cast actors that I didn’t think looked like my characters, or they made plot choices I didn’t agree with. The first few were lower budget and I cannot watch them now. I know some of them have a weird cult following, but I just can’t.” She cringed.

“Well, now I definitely want to watch them,” I said. I loved a good bad movie. Maybe I could go over to Hunter’s because she had a better TV and we could invite Reid and make a whole thing out of it.

“Knock yourself out,” she said. Eloise really was unbothered about a lot of things. Guess that’s what happened when you’d been in a career as long as she had.

“What else did you do with your weekend, other than reading my backlist?” she asked.

“Went out with my friend Hunter on Friday. Thought about going out on Saturday

but wasn't feeling it. Did a lot of reading and trying to clean out my closet. Very exciting. What about you? Other than the alien books." Now was my chance to find out all the exciting adventures she was probably having on weekends.

"It was my nephew's birthday on Saturday. Camille's son, Noah. That kind of wore me out. Hence the reading for the rest of the time."

A kid's birthday party was the last thing I expected. My assumptions about Eloise and her life were constantly rearranging and changing.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

We finished up lunch and I took the plates to the kitchen and stacked the dishwasher. Some of my tasks felt incredibly domestic, and I had to keep reminding myself that I was working in someone else's home. If I survived this month, I wouldn't be here as often, but right now I was in her space.

That afternoon passed without any further conversation, but I kept having to stop myself from blurting something out randomly.

Working for Eloise wasn't getting any easier.

\* \* \*

The massive boxes of hardcovers arrived on Wednesday, and I was relieved that someone actually unloaded them off the truck and into the basement for us. I'd have to use the dolly from the garage to wheel them out for pickup, but at least I only had to handle them going one way.

I set up the tables that were stacked against the wall and started unpacking. There were just so many of them, it was daunting. Once I'd gotten them all out of their boxes and set up for Eloise to sign, I got her from the office and handed her a Sharpie.

Eloise let out a long breath. "Once more unto the breach." She rolled her shoulders like she was getting ready for a workout, and I guess she kind of was.

For each book, I would hold the book open to the right page and slide it to her. She'd sign and then slide the book to the empty side of the table. It took a few minutes for

us to get the hang of it, but once we got a rhythm going, we were on a roll. This woman had signed this way for a long time. Every now and then I might fumble, but I quickly caught back up and we moved through one entire table of books until Eloise stopped and set the Sharpie down.

“Break time,” she announced, doing her wrist stretches. I’d seen her do them several times a day at this point. I should probably get into the habit too. I was doing a lot of typing too, and sitting so much all day was starting to make my legs ache in the evenings. I might, horrifyingly, have to start exercising on a regular basis. Or get like a walking pad or something.

“Why don’t you have a standing desk with a walking pad?” I asked as she took a few laps around the room, rolling her shoulders.

She pivoted to face me.

“Because I like my desk. And the idea of trying to walk while trying to think sounds like a tripping hazard.”

“They go really slow, but I still get your point,” I said.

“Why do you ask? Do you want a standing desk with a walking pad?” She leaned against the table, kicking her legs out in front of her. She wore flats today, but she still looked incredibly polished. I was running out of nice clothes to wear and was going to have to start repeating and I didn’t know how to feel about that. It was inevitable, and the chances that she was even noticing what I was wearing were slim, but still. Being in this house was doing something to my brain. When I got home to my apartment it was like crawling back into the gutter. I’d never been so aware of my financial status in my life. Even being around Hunter, Princess Trust Fund, hadn’t messed with my head this badly.

“No, I don’t need a standing desk and a walking pad, but I’ll let you know if I do,” I said.

“Good. Let’s get this done,” Eloise said, interrupting my ruminating.

“Yeah, definitely,” I said, going to the second table full of books.

\* \* \*

We finished before the end of the day, and I was relieved. But tomorrow I had to put all the books back in boxes and get them ready for the pickup. Wasn’t looking forward to that. A problem for Tomorrow Cade.

Tonight, Hunter was dragging me out to an art gallery because one of her friends was showing some photography. It wasn’t necessarily my thing, but there was free food and alcohol, so I wasn’t going to turn that down. And it might give me some culture or something. I bet Eloise knew a lot about art. She had plenty of it in her house. Mostly soft paintings and landscapes, but she also had some lovely black-and-white photography that I sometimes caught myself staring at.

Hunter met me at my apartment, and we took a car to the gallery since it was too far to walk. Reid had said she was busy, so it was just me and Hunter and then a bunch of people that Hunter knew that I didn’t. Like a good friend, though, she didn’t abandon me and instead introduced me and made sure to include me in the conversations. When they asked what I did, I said I was a personal assistant and they did ask for further clarification, but I just deflected. I didn’t really know how to tell people what my job was without things getting weird or them asking too many questions. If they knew who I worked for, would they ask for free books or want to meet her or something?

It was something I just didn’t want to deal with, so I danced around the subject until

something else came up. Hunter helped, for which I was grateful. She came back to my place with me after and we sat on my couch and talked about the art and her friends.

“You’ve got to come up with a better line about your job. Are you ashamed of it?” she asked, kicking her feet up onto the coffee table.

“No. I just don’t know what to say. Eloise Roth is famous, and I feel like I’m, I don’t know, famous adjacent now? What if people start asking me for stuff?”

Hunter gave me a perplexed look. “Why would people do that? And why would it be a big deal?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It still doesn’t feel real to me. Going into her house every day and managing things I should absolutely not be managing.”

Hunter put her arm around me. “But you are managing, so who cares? You have some of the worst impostor syndrome in another human I’ve ever seen.”

“I know, I know.” I didn’t want to be this way. I didn’t always want to think the worst about myself before thinking of anything else.

“She signed like a million books today. It was wild. She can swoop that signature in two seconds. It was kind of amazing.”

I bet Eloise never had impostor syndrome. She was good at everything, and I bet she had never doubted herself. People like her floated through life on a cloud of confidence.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

But she had asked me for help with a chapter. I mean, she hadn't begged me or anything, but she had asked. Thinking about one of my ideas actually making it into her book was kind of astonishing. Even if this job didn't work out, my idea might be in print for who knows how many years. Thousands of copies. The idea of that was kind of intoxicating.

"I'd really like to meet her. I've watched some of her interviews, but I'd like to see if that matches up with who she is outside of her public persona," Hunter said.

I made a face. I didn't like the idea of my work life and my personal life crossing over. Eloise didn't need to see my life and my messy apartment and my friends. I was just a person who sorted her emails and made her coffee. She didn't need to see all the corners of my life.

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen. I might be able to get you a signed copy of a book though," I said, reaching for a handful of popcorn.

"I thought you didn't want to do that?" she asked.

Snuggling into her shoulder, I pulled the bowl of popcorn onto my lap. "Not for random people, but you're different."

"Aw, I love you too," she said, kissing my temple.

\* \* \*

My second week with Eloise ended and finally it was another weekend. Hunter was

away at some bullshit event with her parents (charity polo match), so I begged Reid to do something with me. Unfortunately, her idea of “doing something” involved hiking, so I had to get out my boots and backpack and wash my water bottle.

We drove further inland and hit one of the state parks, which had several really nice hikes with mountain views. I agreed to go on the condition that she took me to one of the best diners in the state after. Friendship was all about give and take.

“You good?” Reid asked when we made it to the top.

“Yeah,” I wheezed, both hands on my knees. “I’m good.” I gave her a thumbs up and then kind of collapsed onto the ground. Sweat had dripped down my back and had collected in my ass crack and I was regretting every decision that brought me to this moment. The view was kind of spectacular though.

“Buck up, kid. You did good,” Reid said, fresh as a daisy, barely even winded, as she sat down next to me.

“Show off,” I said with a glare, sucking down some water in hopes that it would revive me.

“Don’t be a hater,” she said, zipping open her pack and handing me a granola bar. Thankfully it was covered in chocolate.

I took a huge bite. “But being a hater is so much fun.”

Reid snorted and then we posed for a few selfies that we shared and posted on our social media pages. Hunter sent us a picture of lounging on a blanket at the polo match with a glass of expensive champagne.

“The least she could have done was invite us,” Reid said when we both saw the

picture in our group chat.

“I didn’t know people who weren’t like, royalty, played polo,” I said, asking Hunter to take a video so I could see how the hell they played polo. “I think she’s probably having a better day.”

Reid made a scoffing sound. “No way. She’s not getting this.” She waved at the view just as a bald eagle flew by and we scrambled to take pictures and video.

“You planned that,” I said.

Reid nodded, her face serious. “Yes, me and the eagle coordinated ahead of time. We’re besties.”

I shoved her shoulder and she cackled. The two of us took some more pictures and sat there until I felt like I was ready to move again, which took longer than it should have.

“Oh, shit,” I said when Reid pulled me to my feet. “I should have demanded a massage instead of a meal at the diner.”

My body was going to hate me tomorrow. I really was out of shape.

“It’s all that sitting, I’m telling you. Can’t your boss get you a standing desk with a walking pad?”

We turned and headed back down the trail, waving to a few people who passed us on their way to the summit.

“I don’t think it would work for me. I’m just going to have to take more breaks and start walking more or something. I can’t let my body calcify into a hunched-over

husk before I turn thirty.” Although, Eloise had been writing for many years and she wasn’t a husk. Should I try Pilates? Was that the secret?

Reid skipped on ahead of me down the trail. “Or you could just come hiking with me more often.”

I huffed and puffed behind her, going slow so I didn’t twist an ankle. “Let me see how I feel after this one.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

She laughed and kept moving faster.

\* \* \*

Sunday I was completely useless after the hike. Reid had sent me a video for stretching and I'd done that, as well as taking a long bath and used some of the CBD lotion that cost an arm and a leg. That kind of knocked me out into an unexpected nap and when I woke up there were a bunch of messages I'd missed. Hunter was still with her parents and Reid had had a wild night at work and Danica had made up with Gavin and they were happy again.

Everyone was happy and I was... Well. I was.

I wasn't unhappy. No, I'd been unhappy, and I'd dealt with a few bouts of depression here and there, but I wasn't mentally there right now.

I was fine. Yeah, I was fine. Totally fine. Just...fine.

"Fuck," I told myself, getting up off the couch. That nap had messed me up. Needing to reset my brain, I grabbed my ereader and scrolled through my options. I did have a few more of Eloise's books, so I read a few blurbs and then picked one.

She really was a talented writer. Her books were written to appeal to a mass audience, but they had these little turns of phrase that were so unique and charming. I liked her style.

They were also funnier than they should be. Her humor in her books made me

wonder if she was hiding her inner comedian, or if she was one of those people who was the opposite of her work. Not that I really knew much about authors, but there were some that I followed whose personality appeared to be on the other side of the spectrum from their work. Like dark romance authors who were always posting pictures of rescued kittens and loved to collect stuffed animals.

I spent the rest of my day off with the book and it was my favorite one yet. Sure, it wasn't a queer romance, but it was still working for me. The guy was great and such a dirty talker. More so than her other books. I wanted to ask her about it, but that would probably be weird. What was the protocol in asking your boss about her writing dirty talk?

Yeah, that was something I shouldn't touch with a ten-foot-pole. That would definitely be a reason to fire me.

I guess I'd just hold onto those wonderings and never know the truth.

## Chapter Nine

Eloise

I was behind on my deadline and it stressed me out that weekend. Usually my rule was that I didn't do any writing unless absolutely necessary on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes I had admin work that would spill over but writing rarely did. When it did, my stress level ratcheted up and I knew I was close to triggering one of my migraines.

Camille had invited me to go to the children's museum with her and the kids, but I declined and said I had to work. I did do some writing, but I also went into the city and brought my laptop to my favorite bar and parked myself to work and people watch and chat with my favorite bartender, Dom. She was such an important part of

my life that I'd thanked her in several of my books for providing sustenance and gossip during my writing sessions.

Dom was in her late thirties and managed the bar with an iron fist and didn't suffer fools. She was my favorite kind of no-nonsense person who could silence anyone with a look.

"You writing about me this time?" she asked when I sat down in my usual spot at the end of the bar and opened my laptop.

I rolled my eyes. Dom had been asking me to write a character based on her since the first night that I'd met her.

"I've told you, I don't write about real people. Gets too messy." That wasn't entirely true. I would take pieces of real people that I'd met and incorporate them in my characters, but never a whole person with how they looked and everything.

Dom put a hand to her heart. "You wound me. Does our friendship mean nothing to you?"

I rolled my eyes. Dom was seriously gorgeous with tan skin and dark hair that she kept up in a messy bun that was never actually that messy and blunt-cut bangs across her forehead.

She also had the kind of aura that you didn't want to mess with her, but you also wanted to confess every single secret and sin to her. Spending any length of time with her was like being bewitched. Made her incredible at her job.

"What can I get for you, my favorite author?" she asked, even though she knew.

"Oh, I don't know. I think I'll try something new. An old fashioned, if you have it."

Dom grinned and slapped one hand down on the bar.

“You got it.”

While she made my drink, I pretended to look at the menu, even though I already knew what I wanted.

Dom presented my drink and I ordered my favorite bourbon barbecue burger with bacon and fries. There was no sense in coming to a place like this and not indulging myself. Normally I wouldn't let myself be caught dead in public eating a burger that would inevitably leave my face covered in sauce, but this place was different, and Dom was always giving me a million napkins, and always loaded me up with extra fries.

It was still early for the dinner rush, and also Sunday, so the place was pretty quiet, which meant Dom would come and chat with me about work and I'd ask her about customers as I let the alcohol warm my blood and ate the perfectly crispy fries and did my best not to inhale my burger too quickly.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

A group of guys wandered in and ordered drinks and one attempted to hit on Dom while I pretended to be looking at my laptop while watching. I'd seen this so many times before and it was satisfying every time. Since she did work on tips, she knew how to reject people in the smoothest way and they weren't even aware it was happening. This time the guy didn't take the hint (sometimes they didn't) and kept going and then Dom broke out her stare and before I knew it, the guy was apologizing and moving away from the bar with the drinks and going back to his table.

"One of these days you're really going to have to teach me how to do that," I said when she came over to my side of the bar to see if I wanted another drink.

"It's all in the attitude. And I've seen you hold your own. You don't need my help." That was true. Every now and then a man would try a line on me and I'd have to rebuff him. I almost never got recognized by men, which said a lot about their reading habits. The conversation never got far enough where I disclosed my identity, so I didn't get to see their reaction to who I was.

"What is it about a woman alone in public that is such a magnet for certain kinds of guys?" I asked.

Dom laughed and leaned back against the counter. "When I figure that out, I'll let you know."

I huffed out a laugh and went back to my manuscript. I'd ended up using Cadence's butterfly idea. I hadn't told her yet, because who knew if it would make it into the final manuscript. A lot of things could change from the first draft to the last. Hell, I'd

had to change character names before and that was a nightmare. You'd think you could just find and replace, but that didn't always work.

The bar started to fill up and that was my cue to call a car and head home.

Dom said goodbye and told me not to be a stranger before I left. Not a bad Sunday night. I'd gotten a few words and I'd had a fantastic burger.

Not for the first time that weekend, I wondered what Cadence was doing. Was she reading more of my books? What did she think?

I rarely wondered what other people thought of my books, other than my team. It wasn't productive and it didn't serve any purpose. Reviews from readers were not for me. That wasn't my space. Besides, I had so many of them at this point that they ran the gamut from glowing to brutal and what did that matter?

Cadence had said that she liked the ones she had read already. Her praise had thrilled me a little. The way that getting a good trade review still got to me. Even after this many years, having someone who mattered tell me that my books were good, that my writing was good, still gave me a rush.

Realizing that I wanted Cadence to like my books wasn't pleasant. I didn't want her opinions to matter to me that much. At least not her opinions on my books. She was a woman I'd met less than three weeks ago, and she did not get to have that kind of influence on me. No. That was not happening.

Thinking about Cadence was absolutely not allowed outside of work hours. And during work hours it was going to be strictly professional. Whatever she thought about my work didn't matter.

It couldn't matter.

\* \* \*

Cadence's third week passed quickly. It was a busy one for me, with podcast interviews, a virtual meeting with my publishing team and a million other things. I had a book coming out in five months, and things were going to start getting busy for the promotion. Tour and interviews and TV appearances and all that. I'd done it before, but the idea of doing all of that for two and a half weeks was making me pre-exhausted.

If Cadence was still working for me, she would be going with me. I had her book travel and tickets and everything, just in case. Her eyes had gone wide when I'd mentioned it, but I'd told her it was not for months and that she didn't need to worry about it.

"A tour," she said, when she'd seen the schedule. "I don't...that's a huge commitment."

"I know," I said when I could sense her panic. "It's just in case. You don't need to think about it now." My voice was firmer than I intended, but it seemed to do the trick. She took a breath and nodded.

"Okay. Okay. Um, sorry. I'll get back to work." She put her headphones on and went back to her laptop, but I had the feeling our conversation wasn't over.

\* \* \*

Cadence

She had me book tickets. To go on tour with her. Like that was a thing that was completely fucking normal. I guess in her world, it was.

Not for me, though. Things like that didn't happen to people like me. And I didn't think that this job was going to work out. Five months was a long time and booking tickets with my name on them now seemed like a wild expense.

She assured me it was just in case, but shit. Even if she canceled everything, she might still have to pay fees.

Fuck. That unexpected situation threw me all off and made my head spin. What the fuck did I even know about going on a tour? Eloise was going to have her team with her, and I was going to be trailing behind looking lost. I wasn't a total barbarian, but she had booked some really nice hotels and we would be flying first class. I'd wanted to argue with her about the plane tickets, but who was I to argue with her about how she spent her money?

The idea of the tour ignited a level of panic in my chest that hadn't been this bad in a long time. I texted Hunter and Reid and told them that the three of us should hang out. Hunter offered her place and Reid said she'd be there since she had the night off.

I made it through the rest of the day with Eloise and then went immediately home to put on regular clothes and then walked to Hunter's. My energy was frantic, and I needed to burn some of it off before I saw anyone.

"Hey, babe. What's up?" Hunter asked when I walked in.

"She wants me to go on tour with her," I said, holding up two bags with cake in them. I was going to need it.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Wait, like a book tour?” Reid asked from the kitchen where she was mixing drinks already. You’d think that she’d want to take a night off from being a bartender, but apparently not. She liked to experiment and then try her creations on us. They were always delicious.

Sometimes she’d come over to my place and see what she could do with whatever was leftover in my fridge. She said she liked the challenge.

“Yeah. A book tour. For two and a half weeks, all over the US. She’s doing TV interviews and signings and I guess I’m going? Because I booked tickets. But I haven’t even gotten the job yet, so you can see where I might be a little freaked out,” I said as Hunter took the bags of cake from me and started opening them.

Reid handed me a drink and I gulped at it.

“Isn’t that a good sign, though? That she wants you to go with her?” Reid asked, making another drink for Hunter. She knew each of our preferences for our drinks. Mine were always sweeter.

“I mean, I guess. But fuck. I guess it just hit me that this is a woman who is famous who gets invited on TV shows that the whole country watches. It’s just been the two of us in her house up until now and I forgot.”

I downed the rest of the drink and Reid made me another as Hunter passed me a fork. I went for the red velvet slice first.

“She became a regular person,” Hunter said.

“I mean, yeah.”

“You knew this might happen when you had the interview, though, right?” Hunter asked, going for the *trés leches* slice that I’d gotten specifically for her. Reid was going to town on the chocolate slice with chocolate frosting.

I waved my fork in the air. “I mean, hypothetically. None of it felt real at the time and it still doesn’t. But I guess I had kind of gotten comfortable and this threw me off. Maybe I’m making a bigger deal out of it than it needs to be.”

I was absolutely doing that. Anyone else would have been excited about the traveling. New York, Texas, California, and a few other places and cities in between. The schedule was grueling, but Eloise had done this shit a million times. This was normal for her.

“No, I think it’s fine to be a little thrown by something like that,” Hunter said. “And like you said, it’s in the future. So no need to stress about it now. Plus, have you considered that it could be fabulous? You’re getting access to things that other people would kill for.”

That was a good point.

“You’re like that assistant from that fashion movie. Except your boss is much nicer,” Reid said, her mouth full of cake.

“Yeah, at least she hasn’t asked me to fly her home during a hurricane.”

My freakout was starting to wind down, thanks to talking things out with my friends, the cake, and the drinks.

“Fuck, I’m sorry I acted like this was an emergency.”

Both Hunter and Reid shook their heads at me.

“We’re here for you, kid,” Reid said. “That means good and bad.”

“We love you and I’d be pissed if you had stayed home and were all alone in this. So shut up and eat your cake.”

That was exactly what I’d needed to hear.

\* \* \*

On Friday, I showed up at Eloise’s house with the usual coffee and egg and cheese sandwiches this time. I’d been running late, so I got breakfast at the expensive café instead of having nothing. When I unpacked the sandwiches and offered one to Eloise, I saw her preparing to say no. Every single day I asked and every single day up until now, she’d said no.

She let out a long breath and took the plate from me. “Fine.”

“Don’t get too excited,” I said, smothering a laugh as she sat down in the breakfast nook in the kitchen with her coffee and the sandwich. This was new.

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” she said as she looked down at the sandwich. Now that she’d mentioned it, she did look slightly tired, her face a little pale and pinched. She still looked incredible, obviously, but I’d seen her face enough by now to notice small differences.

“I’m sorry. Was there a reason?”

She sighed and then took a tentative bite of the sandwich, chewing delicately and swallowing before she answered.

“Migraine,” she finally said.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“You get migraines?” She hadn’t said a thing, but I had caught her rubbing her forehead every now and then and taking pills from her desk.

“Yes. Normally I can take my medication in time to prevent them, but this one hit me just as I was going to bed and I was too tired, but then it came back with a vengeance.”

“Are you okay now? Do you need to take the day off?” I’d sat down in the chair next to her, but I made to stand up, as if I was going to physically send her to bed or something.

“No, no. It’s gone now. But they wipe me out when I have them. My brain is always a little foggy and my energy is shot for the next day. I’ll rally.”

She gripped her coffee cup like it contained the elixir of life. Today I guess it did.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked, still concerned.

“No. Your job. That’s what I need. And don’t hover or ask me how I am too much.” She frowned and I almost wanted to laugh.

Eloise Roth was grumpy. Who would have thought?

She was grumpy and tired and finally showing me that she was human.

“I can do that,” I said, going back to my own sandwich. We ate in silence and I tried not to watch her too much. Fuck, the idea of grumpy Eloise was doing something to

me. Low flutters in my stomach distracted me from my breakfast and my fingers tingled with...something.

Nothing I needed to think about. Nope. No way. Push that aside and do your fucking job.

Eloise did her work, but I kept catching her frowning and sighing. In general, she wasn't a person who made a lot of noise, but I kept catching her when I pulled off my headphones to ask her something.

After lunch, I heard her curse under her breath. I'd been turning my music off and moving one-half of my headphones so I could hear her every now and then.

I swallowed a laugh and then heard another frustrated sound as she pushed her chair back and stood up.

"Not a word," she said when I opened my mouth to ask if she was okay. Right. I wasn't supposed to do that.

Figuring she was just going to the bathroom or taking a quick break, I went back to deleting comments on social media.

When she didn't come back for at least twenty minutes, I wondered if I should go find her. Looking at her desk, I saw that she hadn't taken her phone with her, or else I would have just sent her a message.

What to do, what to do. I sat there for another five minutes and then decided that I had to seek her out. What if she'd, I don't know, fallen down or something? She could be bleeding out right now. Or maybe she was fine, and I'd just watched too many shows about first responders and medical emergencies.

She was probably going to be pissed, but I couldn't take the risk that something was really wrong, so I left the office and hit the kitchen. No Eloise. The library. No Eloise. The backyard. No Eloise.

I tried the rest of the rooms downstairs. I'd never actually been upstairs, which was where her bedroom and the rest of the bedrooms and who knew what else were. This house was so large for one person, but she had the money to afford it so she could do what she wanted. I'd feel lost and small in a house this big alone. Even if I'd had the money, I would want something much smaller and cozier. I'd always thought a townhome might be the perfect kind of place. I'd have my own house, technically, but I'd be close to other people so I wouldn't feel isolated. I liked being around people.

At a loss for what to do, I stood at the bottom of one of the staircases (there were two on either side of the first floor), and called, hesitantly, "Eloise? Just checking to see if you're okay. You've been gone for a while and you didn't take your phone." And now I was babbling.

A few beats of silence passed and then Eloise appeared at the top of the stairs.

"I'm fine. You didn't need to come get me. You're not a nurse."

She crossed her arms and the glare she gave me was frosty enough to freeze a glass of water solid.

"I know. But I am your assistant and I wanted to check on you. I'll go back to work now."

I didn't move right away, letting her stare me down.

Eventually she uncrossed her arms and her shoulders dropped. "Fine. I'm fine. Just

needed a minute. My mind isn't cooperating with me and it's frustrating."

I nodded. "I can imagine it would be."

"I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Yeah, take your time. Do you want some coffee? I know caffeine can help with migraines." My mom had migraines growing up off and on and I remembered bringing her coffee to drink while she lay in the bedroom with the windows blocked out and an ice pack over her eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Yes, thank you Cadence,” she said. I still hadn’t asked her to call me Cade and at this point, it was too late. Here, I was Cadence. The little rush I got from her calling me by my full name had nothing at all to do with it.

Eloise appeared just as I was pouring sugar into her coffee and stirring it in.

She still looked a little wrecked, like she’d had a fun night, but she accepted the cup with a little smile.

“Do you ever take a day off?” I asked, washing out the French press and cleaning up.

“I take weekends off, as if I’m working a nine-to-five, but that doesn’t always work out. In the early days, I worked way too many hours. I’ve had to work at doing less and setting a rigid schedule so I don’t burn out. But I rarely take days off during the week. I can’t afford to.”

She drank the coffee and closed her eyes.

“Maybe you could take a half day? I mean, if the work you’re doing isn’t up to your standards, then wouldn’t it be better to come back when you’re feeling better?”

Her eyes snapped open and I prepared for her to glare at me, but she just sighed.

“I hate that you’re right.”

I grinned. “Wait, what was that? Can you say that again?”

Eloise rolled her eyes. “I said you’re right. Don’t look so smug. It’s not cute.”

I laughed. “On the contrary, I think I’m very cute.”

She cracked a smile. “You’re a menace.”

The fluttering I’d felt this morning appeared again and got a little more frantic in my stomach. Like the butterflies had multiplied.

“Shoulda figured that out in the job interview,” I said, taking a risk. Talking with her like this was walking a fine line, but she huffed out something like a laugh and then finished her coffee.

“Sylvia and Camille were pressuring me to get an assistant for years. Especially for the upcoming tour. And I haven’t had anyone since Mary.” She had spoken a little about her previous assistant, Mary, who had passed away. It was clear that they’d been extremely close, and it explained why she wanted to keep me at arm’s length.

“Mary left big shoes to fill,” I said. “I know I didn’t meet her, but she sounded like a wonderful person and an amazing friend.”

Eloise’s smile was soft and sad. “She was. She really was.” There were pictures of Mary in the office. I’d asked Eloise about them in my second week.

“You’ve convinced me.” She brought her cup to the sink and rinsed it out before putting it in the dishwasher. “I’m taking the rest of the day off.” There were only a few more hours in the day, so it wasn’t that much time in the grand scheme of things, but I could tell this was a big deal for her.

“Great,” I said. “I’ll let you have your time and I’ll finish up my day.”

I went to leave the kitchen to do just that when her voice stopped me.

“If you were to recommend me another romance book or series, what would you recommend? Apart from the alien books.”

Interesting. She was asking for book recs. From me.

“What are you in the mood for? Fantasy? Contemporary? Sci-fi? Short? Long?”

She blinked at me for a few seconds. “I want to read something beautiful that will teach me something new about the world.”

Now I was the stunned one. That was a tall order.

“Give me a minute,” I said, digging out my phone. I scrolled through my ebook app and searched for something that would give her that. I discarded a few options and then settled on one that was an out-of-the-box choice, especially for Eloise, and decided to go for it.

I told her the title and she looked it up. “Well, it certainly has a lot of awards. Time travel? I’m not sure about that.”

“Just...give it a chance. It’s one of those books that has to be experienced instead of just read. If that makes sense. Promise me that you’ll try it.” I shouldn’t have told her about that one. I should have picked something else. Why was it so important to me that she read this book and understood it? No use analyzing all of the complicated emotions firing in my brain right now at the prospect of Eloise reading a book that I had loved.

She gazed at my face for a long moment. “I’ll try it.”

\* \* \*

Being in the office without Eloise was strange and I didn't like it. Even though I had my headphones on, the lack of her presence was like hearing my name called and looking up to find there was no one there.

I also kept wondering what she was doing in the house with her afternoon off. I might have thought she would leave or go do something, but her car was still parked in front of the garage.

I'd gotten the distinct impression, over these few weeks, that though Eloise did have friends and went out, at heart, she was a homebody. It made sense with the career she'd chosen. Not a lot of people would be able to stomach sitting alone and typing for hours on end in solitude for year after year. Definitely wouldn't be me, no matter how much I got paid. My sanity would crack after a few days.

Eventually I made it to the end of the day, and I didn't want to just leave without saying goodbye, so I sent Eloise a message that I was heading out and she told me to come and find her in the gym.

First I was hearing about her having a gym, so I tentatively went to the second floor and stepped down the hallway.

The second door on my right was open, and I heard sounds of a woman's voice coming from a TV.

"Knock, knock," I said while also rapping on the doorframe with my knuckles. Like a



weirdo.

Peering in, I saw something that I didn't expect, and that almost made me wish I was sitting down.

Eloise sat up from a yoga mat and hit pause on the workout that was playing on the large TV mounted to the wall above a line of mirrors.

And there she was, wearing a black sports bra and matching skintight yoga pants with her hair pulled back and looking up at me as if she hadn't expected to see me standing there.

Fuck. I needed to say something. Right now. Anything. Anything at all.

Say.

Something.

"I..."

Eloise got herself together before I did. She shook her head and sat back on her mat, stretching her legs out in front of her.

"I was just doing a gentle class. My neck and back get all stiff when I have my migraines and it can help to stretch."

"Oh," I managed to say. There. That was something. Now that I had regained the power of speech, I had to get control of my eyes, because allllll I was doing was staring. And staring.

It wasn't like I hadn't noticed Eloise's body before, but she'd never been this dressed

down in front of me and it was causing my brain to misfire and think all kinds of terrible, dangerous things.

I would not, I would not let myself look at that strip of skin between the hem of her sports bra and the waist of her pants. That was a no-go zone. A blaring red warning light.

“Are you on your way out?” Eloise finally asked.

“Yeah,” I said, gluing my eyes to her face so they didn’t venture anywhere else. “Yeah, I’m going home.”

She nodded and got to her feet, grabbing a bottle of water as she stood.

This was worse. This was so much worse. Skin. So much skin. Too much skin.

I stumbled backwards and banged my back on the doorway.

“See you tomorrow,” I gasped out before I turned around and basically bolted down the stairs so I didn’t say or do anything to get myself seriously fired.

## Chapter Ten

Eloise

I hadn’t expected her reaction to seeing me in my workout gear. It hadn’t occurred to me that I should change or cover up. I went to Pilates class in the same outfit. Many people had seen me like this, so why would it matter if my assistant did?

It shouldn’t have mattered.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

And then she was looking at me in a way that I didn't understand, but that wasn't unpleasant. Her gaze was intense, and I should have told her to stop staring, but I didn't. No. I let her look. Why had I let her look?

Cadence was a lesbian, this I knew. She'd had it listed in her social media bio and she'd had pictures at Pride with her friends with a flag draped around her shoulders.

But she probably wasn't even looking at me like that. Firstly, I was her boss, and second, I was much older. Cadence would go for someone younger and prettier and much more interesting and exciting.

It didn't matter. She was just surprised to see me not in my work clothes. That was probably it. I was reading too much into some staring because I couldn't really remember the last time I'd been stared at, other than by a guy who was trying to bother me at Dom's bar while I was working.

After she left, I admonished myself for believing, even for a few moments, that she was checking me out. Yeah, right.

I shook my head at myself and turned my yoga class back on and finished before changing and then going to make myself some dinner. I thought about ordering delivery, but I wanted to feel like I'd accomplished something today, so I made a really delicious steak with Gruyère mashed potatoes and a salad with vegetables from my garden and a lemon vinaigrette I put together.

The meal fortified me, and my brain felt less like it was functioning below fifty percent by the time I was cleaning up the kitchen and getting started on the rest of my

evening.

I hadn't ended up reading the book that Cadence recommended to me yet. No idea why not, but I'd pulled up another alien book instead. I was still blazing through them at an alarming rate. They were pretty addicting.

Something about the way she'd talked about the book had told me that it mattered to her. A lot. She cared what I thought about this book and if I didn't like it, then what? I guess I could lie.

Maybe it would be good? I'd just have to take a risk and find out. The book was short, so I could finish it tonight if I wanted.

I made up a snack plate and a pot of tea and ventured to my library to find out.

Less than four hours later, I was crying and staring at the wall, unable to figure out what to do with myself. This book wasn't just good. It was a masterpiece. Every single award was deserved. A strange, wonderful book that made me question my own writing ability, because I'd never be able to do something like that.

I wiped my tears and let out a long breath. Cadence should have warned me that I might question my entire life after reading this book, but I guess she kind of did.

"Dammit," I said, swiping at more tears.

This was ridiculous. I got up and went to do my nightly skincare to get myself back together. I looked awful in the mirror, so I tried to ignore my reflection as I washed my face and did the regimen my aesthetician had created for me.

Once I was done, I headed to bed, but my thoughts wouldn't quiet. Instead, I pulled up my ereader and read over my favorite parts of the book again until I was finally

too exhausted to keep my eyes open.

\* \* \*

This was Cadence's fourth week with me, and it was almost time to decide whether or not she could continue as my assistant. Her work was good, for the most part. She did things in her own way, which I had to adjust to. In our little morning meetings, she would always ask how I wanted something done, and then the next day I'd find out that she'd done the task, but in a completely different way. At first, I was frustrated, because she hadn't followed my directions, but if the task was completed, did it really matter? She was a mess, though. I caught her spilling crumbs on her keyboard and coffee on her shirt and pants so often that it was like she was trying to spill.

Her hair was done beautifully some days and some days just thrown into a haphazard ponytail. Often, I'd catch her digging through her bag and muttering to herself. She lost things constantly. One night she'd even run back in because she'd lost her keys. I found them in the fridge next to her container of creamer. She couldn't explain how or why that had happened.

There were days she was laser focused and days when she spun in her chair and asked me a million questions and couldn't seem to stay on track. It all evened out, though, and everything got done.

I'd spoken to Sylvia and Camille about Cadence many times and they told me all of my issues with her were too nitpicky. I supposed they were right.

Cadence brought me another breakfast sandwich again, and we sat together in the breakfast nook.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked after a little bit of tense silence.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m fine.”

She nodded down at her plate.

“Did, um, did you read the book? It’s fine if you didn’t. I was just wondering.” She did care. She absolutely cared.

“I did read it.” Cadence couldn’t know how much I loved it. How much I wanted to take that book and somehow swallow it and let the words dissolve into my bones.

“You hated it,” she said with a little sigh and a slump against the chair. “It’s fine if you did. It’s one of those books that isn’t for everyone.”

“I loved it.”

Her head flew up and she stared at me. Every day when I saw her, I wanted to ask her if her freckles had multiplied overnight. I seemed to find new ones on her face every day.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“You did?”

“I did. It was incredible. I don’t even know how to put it into words.”

She smiled at me and there was an expansive feeling in my chest that made it hard to breathe. Everything in my chest was too tight and too warm.

“I knew you would,” she said, her voice soft. “I just had a feeling.”

We ate our sandwiches in almost silence. Cadence seemed happy. She was bouncing a little in her seat and randomly humming a tune to herself. One of these days I was going to have to ask her about the playlist she listened to during work.

She cleaned up and we went to the office and sat down for our morning check-in. Cadence pulled out her trusty notebook and flipped the pages.

“I’ve got the social media all done and scheduled for the audiobook launch next week, as well as the promo sent out to everyone who’s supposed to be posting. The contest is also ready to launch.” As I listened to her, I kept drifting off, not listening to her individual words, but the tone of her voice.

I liked listening to her talk, I realized. Somewhere along the line I’d gotten used to hearing her voice every day and I decided that I liked it. Liked hearing her voice in my office.

Once I set out her priorities for the day, she was back at her desk and I had to face copy edits for my next book. I was always working on multiple books at once in

various stages. Where one was at first draft stage, another was in edits, and another might be in the proposal stage. I'd learned long ago how to juggle, but each time I added another manuscript, I questioned what the hell I was thinking.

I could slow down. I didn't need to write this fast, financially, but I also didn't want to slow down. I liked going fast. I liked this pace and it had worked for me for this long. Slowing down wasn't in my blood. Vacations were rare, and I felt useless during them. Camille practically had to kidnap me to get me to stop working.

If I wasn't working, I didn't know what to do with myself. My main hobby was reading. What else was I supposed to do with myself?

Whenever I'd pictured my life, I'd never dreamed of marriage or kids or anything like that. All I'd wanted was a house like this and a career like this. Success and money that would never go away. That couldn't be taken from me. How many people could say they had what I had? Very very few. And I wasn't going to sacrifice it for something that might not even work out.

If I wanted to satisfy my urge to hang out with some kids, Camille's were right there. I showered them with all the love and affection I could. That was enough.

It was absolutely enough.

It had always been enough.

\* \* \*

"So now that you've liked two of the books I've recommended, I think I should tell you to read more books. And you can tell me to read things too. You've probably read more than I have anyway." It had started to rain, so we were eating in the kitchen at the breakfast table like we had this morning.



I'd made chicken Caesar salad wraps because Cadence liked them. Mine were a little more upscale with homemade dressing and I'd even grated the parmesan fresh for her. I didn't know why I'd made such an effort when I could have easily just made a regular salad, but when she made satisfied noises as she ate, I decided it was worth it.

"Is that a joke about my age?" I asked, raising one eyebrow.

Her eyes went wide. "No, it wasn't. I promise. I mean, you have had more years on the planet than me. That's just a fact. So you've had more reading time."

I huffed out a sound. Couldn't argue with that.

"Were you always a reader?" she asked, diverting my attention away from thinking about my age.

"Yes, always. Books were my escape when I was young. When everything in the world was falling apart, I could escape to a world that didn't seem so bad. Or sometimes it was worse than mine and that was comforting too."

She nodded. "Yeah, I get that. I mean, nothing truly terrible has happened to me in my life. Other than my grandmother dying. My parents are..." she trailed off and collected her thoughts before she continued. "They're not good at dealing with the hard parts of life. When something goes south, they just kind of ignore it or pretend it isn't happening. Since I was the oldest, someone had to step up and, like, deal with shit." Cadence lifted one shoulder in a shrug and looked at her wrap before taking another bite, crunching through the croutons that I'd added. Also homemade.

"That sounds difficult," I said, because I knew what that was like.

"Eh, it was fine. Someone had to do it. I wasn't the best at it, but somehow we muddled through."

She licked a drop of dressing off the side of her hand and I had to force myself not to stare.

“Uh, are you still close with them?”

She nodded. “I mean, yes. I just can’t tell them everything, but that’s always been the case. So we keep things light and whenever I have a problem I lean on my friends instead of my family.”

I had noticed Cadence did talk more about her friends than her family.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

She let out a little laugh. “It’s weird that I’ve worked for you for almost a month and I’m just now talking about my parents. Normally I’m a yapper and I would have told you everything about me in the first day.”

“I have noticed that you like to talk,” I said, but it wasn’t a criticism. Just an observation.

“Wow, ouch. The truth comes out. How have you managed to put up with me this long?” She was still laughing though.

“You do your job. And sometimes it’s nice to have someone to talk to,” I admitted.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, like she was trying to hide another smile.

“I really didn’t think I was going to work out. I mean, I thought I was going to crash and burn right away.” That wasn’t a surprise to hear. I’d learned a lot about Cadence during our acquaintance. That probably meant that she had learned a lot about me too and I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“You didn’t. You haven’t.”

“Not yet,” she said. “I know my trial period isn’t over, but I just...I’d really like to know if I’m going to need to find another job. Because trying to find a new job is really difficult.”

I could imagine, and I was grateful that I didn’t have to do any of that. Working for myself and my publishers wasn’t easy, but it was what I excelled at.

Guess we were doing this now.

“Well. I think we should sit down and talk more formally about what you do well, and what you can improve upon. How about tomorrow?”

She gulped her iced tea and her hand shook a little as she reached for the other half of her wrap.

“Sure,” she said. “That works.”

“Don’t worry, Cadence. It’s nothing bad. Promise.”

She was still for a second and then stuck out her hand with her pinky pointing toward me. “Swear.”

“Are you seriously asking me, your boss, to pinky swear that I won’t tell you something awful about your job performance at your review?”

This had to be a joke.

“Yup, totally serious. Come on, it won’t hurt.”

She stayed there with her hand up and I knew that she wasn’t going to back down. Cadence was stubborn to a fault. She’d brought food for me every day with my coffee until I finally gave in and ate with her.

I rolled my eyes. “This is so childish.”

“Who cares,” she said, and I linked my pinky with hers, but then she clamped around mine and wouldn’t let go.

“Wait! We have to do it right.” I struggled to break free. She had a freakishly strong pinky.

I glared at her. “Cadence, let go of my hand.”

“Not until you do it right.”

I was unaware there was a correct way to do a pinky swear, but she wasn’t letting go.

With a sigh, I stopped fighting. “Fine. Show me what to do so I can have my hand back.”

“Okay, so the pinky linking is important, but we also have to boop thumbs three times to seal it in.”

This was utterly ridiculous, but I did what she asked, tapping my thumb against hers three times and then she uncurled her pinky from mine.

“That was completely unnecessary, Cadence.”

She grinned at me. “You loved it.”

“I did not.”

\* \* \*

Cadence was so nervous the next day about our meeting that I grabbed the coffees from her shaky hands, along with the bag with our sandwiches, and pointed toward the office.

“We’re talking now and then we can move on,” I said. Cadence marched into the office and pulled her chair in front of my desk like she did every day.

I pushed a stack of paper across the surface that I’d printed out last night. It was a new contract, for one year with the option for renewal.

“Since we’re doing this now, I’d like to formally offer you the position as my full-time assistant, Cadence. Congratulations.”

She let out a squealing sound and surged to her feet, doing a little dance that almost knocked the chair over.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she said when she realized where she was and that I was watching.

“It’s all right,” I said, fighting to hide a smile. That little dance had been adorable.

She sat back down and let out a breath. “I’m sorry, I’m just really relieved. I’ve enjoyed working for you and I’m learning so much and I just...I really appreciate you

giving me a shot at this. It was completely unexpected, but I don't regret it."

I didn't either. Working with her had been strange and unsettling and silly and she had definitely disrupted my normal routines. But at the end of the day, I liked having her here.

"I'm glad you're here too. Here's your new contract, if you want to take it home and have a look before you sign it."

She grabbed the papers and flipped through them. There was no way she was reading all of that with how fast she was going.

Without another word, she grabbed a pen from the cup on my desk and scribbled her signature.

"You should have looked that over. Never sign anything that you haven't had a lawyer look over." I had one, in addition to my literary agent. Publishing lawyers had stopped me from being scammed by tricky wording several times.

"Send me a copy tonight."

That wouldn't help with the fact that she'd already signed it, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Great, now you can scan that and add it to my files."

Cadence set it on her desk, and she was still vibrating with excitement.

Now it was the fun part of telling her what she was doing well and what she could improve on. I kept it short and to the point and she didn't scream or cry or argue with me. We were both adults, and she took it well. Another point in her favor.

“Cool, yeah, I can do all of that.” She’d taken notes even though I told her that I was sending her a document with all my points that I’d written up.

My criticisms were small in the scheme of things. Once that was out of the way, we both moved on to our tasks for the day.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said, remembering the note I’d scribbled to myself late last night when I’d had an idea. “Can you go ahead and do some research on lighthouses in New England that you can stay at? It’s part of the plot for my next book and I want to work out the logistics now so I can go and take a trip there.”

Cadence wrote it down. “Absolutely. Hey, if you need more help researching things, I’m pretty good at it.”

There wasn’t a need for someone all the time for research, and often I liked to do it myself, but having Cadence do some of the legwork would save me time, and wasn’t that what I paid her for? She’d barely even asked about her salary, which surprised me. I’d raised it from what she was making now. Her work had demonstrated a need for higher compensation.

We settled into our days and that afternoon Cadence had sent me an email with a few links of potential lighthouses. I checked them all out and picked the one that was closest. Many of my books were set in Maine, which made research trips easier. Being able to travel to locations and see everything firsthand was one of the best parts of my job.

I replied to Cadence and told her to contact the lighthouse and see when I could book a visit.

Then I had to immerse myself back in my edits until the words were swimming in front of my eyes. My phone buzzed with my scheduled break.



I got up and went to make some tea. I couldn't have caffeine too late in the afternoon or else I didn't sleep. In my youth, I'd been able to drink coffee all hours of the day and night and still pass out, but I'd been working so much that my body just sort of collapsed into sleep instead of me falling into it.

Cadence had followed me into the kitchen.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Would you like a cup?” I asked her as she fidgeted behind me. Cadence was rarely ever still, even when she was in deep focus.

She hadn’t told me outright, but I’d read enough between the lines to know that she might have some form of neurodivergence. I was guessing that it had made finding jobs difficult for her in the past, but she was doing well with me, and I didn’t see any reason to bring it up or call attention to it at all. If she wanted to tell me, she could tell me.

I poured cups for us both as we lingered together, each lost in our thoughts.

“Are you going to celebrate your new job?” I asked her as she leaned her elbows on the island and stared out the window.

“You read my mind. I was just thinking about what I might do. My friends will probably take me out this weekend. One of my friends, Reid, works at Sapph, so we go there a lot.” I had heard of the place, but it wasn’t anywhere I’d venture, due to it being for queer women only. I knew that they wouldn’t turn me away, but I wasn’t going to invade a space that wasn’t created for me.

“Sounds fun,” I said. “You should be proud of yourself, Cadence.”

She nodded and then set her tea down, clasping her hands in front of her on the counter.

“Why don’t you ever call me Cade?” she asked.

I'd wondered if she was ever going to ask me that.

"I will. If you want me to," I said. "But Cadence is such a pretty name to chop into a nickname."

She looked down at her hands. "Yeah, my mom is responsible for that one. My dad was the one who decided to call me Cade and I just went with it."

"I can call you Cade," I said. "I have no problem with that."

She stood up. "No, it's fine. No one else in my life calls me Cadence now, except my mom when she's scolding me."

I leaned back against the counter and sipped my tea. She seemed lost in thought about something.

"Cadence, then," I said, and she looked at me as if she forgot I was there.

She saluted me and went back to the office.

## Chapter Eleven

### Cade

Holy shit. HOLY SHIT. I got the job. Even though she'd promised that things would go well, I hadn't trusted it until she'd given me the contract. And then I'd signed it before she could take it back. I mean, she probably still could, but I had done my best to keep this job.

It wasn't until she sent me the document later that I realized she had raised my hourly rate. By a lot. This was the most I had ever made at a job by a lot. This job was going

to make a lot of my financial issues go away, and I burst into tears when I realized that.

Immediately I sent Eloise a message to thank her.

I was just looking over the contract and realized you raised my pay. What can I say except thank you? Unless it was a typo. In which case, I never sent this message.

She and I talked all day, but this was one of the first times I'd sent her a message outside of work hours. It felt strange.

Eloise responded quicker than I thought she would. You're welcome Cadence. It's been a pleasure to work with you and I look forward to it in the future.

The message felt formal, as if she should have written it in ink on vellum and sent it to me in the mail or something. Guess I shouldn't have sent her a message outside of work hours. She was probably sick of me by the end of the day.

Originally when I'd started the trial period, she had said that if I got hired, I wouldn't need to work from her house the whole time, but when we'd had our chat today, she hadn't mentioned anything about me working remotely. I guess I could have brought it up, but I was still too jazzed about getting the job that I hadn't thought about it until later. I'd ask tomorrow.

After I freaked out about the pay increase, I sent messages to my group chat and announced that I had officially signed on and had a full-time job. A decent, full-time job. I guess I was going to have to start telling people what I did now. My parents were going to be thrilled. I'd scheduled a call with them for this weekend so I could tell them the good news.

Immediately Hunter and Reid said they were taking me out on Friday to Sapph. Reid

would be working, but she could sneak away for a little bit to celebrate, which was all I wanted.

Tonight, I'd decided instead of buying a cake for myself, I was going to make one. Sure, it was from a box, and the frosting was from a can, but I hadn't baked anything in a really long time. I had gone online and found a recipe that used pudding mix to make the cake taste better. I followed the recipe exactly and the smell in my apartment was intoxicating.

Another message came in as I was waiting for the cake pans to cool so I could stack them on top of each other and frost everything before covering the whole thing in sprinkles.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Have you read this? It was accompanied by a screenshot of a book cover.

Eloise had sent it to me. Huh.

I had read the book ages ago. Hadn't everyone? It wasn't my favorite.

Overhyped, in my opinion. I don't know if I would have liked it more if I'd read it without seeing everyone else rave about it, you know? I responded.

Hmmm. I've been putting it off because of that. Okay, I think I'll skip it. What about this?

She sent me another book cover. I hadn't read that one and told her so.

The author is a friend and I haven't liked any of her other books, but I haven't told her. She replied.

Oh yes, give me this TEA. I want to know everything about all these famous authors you know. I sent.

Don't you dare tell anyone about that. I can still rip up this contract She fired back.

NOOOOOO, you're stuck with me. It's too late. And don't worry, I won't say anything. But I would like to know more details about other people you know. I don't have any good gossip.

The cake finally cooled, and I realized I'd been talking back and forth with Eloise for

a while. We'd come a long way since those first days when I was literally terrified of her. I still got a twinge in my stomach when I reminded myself that Eloise Roth was a famous author. Probably the most famous person I'd ever come into contact with. That was weird to think about. It was easier to think of her as the woman who made me lunch every day. Who didn't like to accept the food I brought her in the morning, but finally did. Who worked her ass off and wanted to have her say over every aspect of her career.

In between frosting the cake, I joked with Eloise. Her sense of humor had come out a little more and I liked seeing it. Made her more human.

My frosting job on the cake wasn't that great, but sprinkles covered up the worst sins and I took a picture anyway and sent it to Eloise.

Made my own cake. Should I save you a slice? She's not pretty, but she's going to be delicious.

I had cut myself a massive piece and started shoving it into my mouth before she answered.

Looks good to me. Camille sent me home with this. She sent with a picture of a tiny little lemon bundt cake with glaze dripping down the sides. It looked pretty damn good to me.

Cake really does make every day a little bit brighter, doesn't it? I sent.

Yes, it does. Goodnight, Cadence. I'll see you tomorrow.

I finished my first piece of cake and cut myself another.

\* \* \*

Everyone at Sapph was happy to celebrate and most of their jaws dropped when I told them who I was working for. Then the questions started, but I'd practiced what to say. No, I couldn't get them free books. No, I didn't know what she was working on. No, I wasn't helping her write the books. No, I didn't know where she got her ideas from.

Reid kept the drinks flowing and the appetizer plates full and pretty soon I was losing it to the music and having a great time. The only thing I had to do tonight was get back to Hunter's in one piece. She had demanded that I crash with her, and it wasn't a bad idea for both of us to watch over each other. She'd stayed mostly sober, but I was on a mission to get smashed.

I must have succeeded because the next thing I knew, I had a rager of a headache and I was peeling my eyes open in Hunter's guest room.

"Oh motherfucker," I moaned as I covered my eyes. Too much light. The apartment was quiet, but I could hear Hunter moving around somewhere.

Very carefully, I rolled to my side and found a bottle of Gatorade and some aspirin. Yeah, this wasn't that kind of hangover. The movement instantly triggered nausea, so I bolted to the bathroom and hurled up my guts. Hunter must have planned ahead because my hair was pulled back in braids that I definitely didn't have last night. Such a good friend.

I rinsed out my disgusting mouth and then staggered back to bed.

"Having a rough one?" Hunter asked softly as I groaned and laid on my back.

"Little bit. It was fun last night and it's not so much fun right now." Even talking hurt.



“Please have something to drink at least,” she said, pushing the bottle of Gatorade into my hand. I didn’t think it was smart to put anything else in my stomach, but Hunter refused to let me argue with her.

It took several hours, but eventually I managed to keep something down and Hunter force-fed me a greasy breakfast sandwich before allowing me to think about my phone.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I caught you sending something last night, but I couldn’t stop you, so you might want to see if you did something foolish,” she said, giving it to me from where she’d been charging it.

Well, shit. I hoped I hadn’t done anything embarrassing.

I unlocked my screen and checked my messages.

Looks like someone is having a good time the message read. From Eloise. I’d sent a blurry, drunken picture of myself to Eloise last night.

As far as pictures went, it was fine. My tits weren’t out, and I was smiling. Actually, I looked pretty good, arm raised as I laughed at something while dancing.

I’d only sent her the one picture without a message. What had I been trying to do? No idea, but not nearly as bad as it could have been.

Sorry about that! Hope I didn’t wake you I typed out and Sent.

No problem. See you on Monday.

That sounded like a dismissal, but I sat there with my thumbs preparing to type something out. To ask her if she’d done anything fun on Friday night. If she was doing anything in particular today. I knew the rest of her schedule during the week, but her weekends were still mostly a mystery. She was probably with Camille and the kids. Maybe at the park or the zoo or something. Eloise absolutely adored those kids. They were pretty damn lucky, in my opinion. How cool was it that your godmother

was a famous author? Not too shabby.

Hunter dragged me out of the house and to the antiques market. We liked to go on weekends and see the most ridiculous thing we could find that was likely to be haunted. Sometimes one of us would buy it and bring it home and sometimes the item was just too terrifying, and we left it alone.

“What do you think?” Hunter asked when she showed me a tarnished ring with a huge black stone.

“Oh, definitely haunted,” I said.

“But how haunted?” she asked, peering at it and turning the ring in the light.

“Not as haunted as that,” I said, pointing to a vintage doll that was missing one eye and half of its hair.

“Oh yeah, that’s much better.” Hunter put down the ring and went to pick up the doll before we discarded that and moved on, but not before taking pictures and sending them to Reid for her assessment. She’d had a dance class earlier and said she needed some alone time today. Neither of us minding when Reid asked for space. Her job drained her so much that it was a wonder that she was able to talk to anyone in her off time.

Besides, she was seeing us tomorrow for brunch.

On an impulse, I sent Eloise a picture with the words Haunted or not haunted? of a painting that Hunter and I had been staring at. It was a painting of a little girl holding a doll, which wasn’t so bad, except that the little girl’s face was off, and the doll had no eyes. It was also painted poorly (maybe on purpose?), which added to the unsettling quality.

I sent it to Reid, too.

Reid wrote back begging for us to stop sending her creepy pictures. Eloise responded after we'd moved on from the painting.

Oh definitely haunted. You going to buy it?

I snorted. Not this time. I already have a few haunted paintings and don't want to press my luck too much. What about you? It would look lovely in your foyer.

If you bring that abomination into my home, I will put your employment contract in the shredder and incinerate your computer. she sent, and I burst out laughing.

"What's funny?" Hunter asked, poking my shoulder.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head.

I sent her more haunted items and she kept making more and more hilarious threats and Hunter was getting annoyed at me being distracted.

"Okay, this is it," she said, stopping in front of an old photograph of a house that had a threatening aura. The house itself was run down, but there was something I couldn't put my finger on that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"Yup, definitely," I said. The picture was fifty bucks, way out of our agreed-upon price range of thirty bucks max.

So instead, we took pictures and then Hunter dropped me off at my place.

I didn't send you the most haunted thing we found today. You're welcome. I sent to Eloise.

I appreciate that. You may keep your job.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Getting silly messages from her on a weekend was lighting me up inside and I knew it wasn't right, but I couldn't stop it. Talking to her brought me joy. You would have thought I'd be sick of her by the weekend, but not exactly. When she was working, the last thing I was going to do was talk her ear off. But now that I had the chance, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

The only downside was that I couldn't hear her voice. See her face. Watch her expression when I said something outrageous. It was my new favorite hobby. To say something she didn't expect and watch her reaction.

But sending messages was better than nothing.

Eloise and I went back and forth the rest of the day. She told me she'd been with the kids and sent me pictures of them running through the sprinklers at Camille's house.

Three little kids, two girls, one boy. The girls had blonde hair and the little boy was dark. Cute. So cute.

She also sent me a picture of hugging all of them that must have been taken by Camille or her husband.

It made me happy that Eloise had them. That there was someone to love her that way. Eloise hadn't told me much about her family, other than that she'd grown up poor, and I got the impression she'd cut off contact with her parents. Or maybe they had died. I wasn't going to be an asshole and ask if she didn't want to talk about it.

Eventually we both went to bed, but we kept firing messages at each other until pretty

late.

Sunday was brunch and nonsense and more messages with Eloise. Nothing serious. I told her about what I'd been like in high school, and she told me about her favorite music as a teen. She asked about my favorite movies, and I went on a long tangent about one of my favorites that I got a little too enthusiastic about, but she didn't seem to mind. I didn't get that she was bored, or that I was showing her too much.

My brain still told me to pull back, but I couldn't seem to. As if she'd opened a door and I'd walked through and couldn't close it again.

If I wasn't careful, I was going to hurl myself so completely into talking with her that I wouldn't be able to do anything else, so I forced myself to take regular breaks. Getting addicted to things that gave me dopamine was a real problem that I fought with all the time. I hadn't lost myself in a while, but there was always a chance that I'd encounter some new show or book or thing to research that would plunge me into a hole that excluded everything else. When I'd been younger, it had been worse. Summers were bad when I was in school, due to all the free time I had on my hands. If I wanted to barely sleep for three days while I marathoned online videos and articles about the sinking of the Titanic, I could. And had.

The thing that really got me the most about Eloise is that even when I'd sent her a wall of text about bullshit, she didn't tell me to stop or ignore me or be like hey, thanks but no thanks. She responded and asked more questions. Seemed to want to keep things going.

Curiosity was soooo fucking sexy to me, specifically. When someone said, "that's so interesting, tell me more," they might as well have said "take your clothes off." It smashed all of my buttons at once, and Eloise kept doing it. Plus, she was hot as fuck. Working with her had only made her more attractive to me.

I knew from the first few messages that I was in deep fucking shit. That the feelings I was having in my chest and stomach and between my legs and making my nipples hard were wrong, wrong, wrong.

Wrong and bad and inappropriate. Not the kind of feelings an employee should have for their boss.

Instead of what I should have done, shut it down, I...didn't. In fact, I did the opposite. I sent her more messages and gorged myself on her attention and let it run through my veins, setting me on fire and then when it got to be too much, well, I took myself somewhere private and fucked myself quick and hard. I'd never been so goddamn horny in my whole life and getting myself off just seemed to make it worse.

There was something seriously wrong with me and I needed to get a handle on it because I could not sneak off to masturbate during work hours. In my boss's house. While thinking about my boss.

That was just crossing too many lines.

## Chapter Twelve

Eloise

Things had changed between us this weekend, and I was still deciding if it was a good thing or a bad thing. She'd been the one to message me first, but I'd been the one to ask her about the book. And when she'd sent me that drunken selfie on Saturday night, I'd responded. I couldn't help myself.

She looked so happy and gorgeous and free and honestly, it took my breath away. When was the last time I'd let myself go like that? Danced in a group of people and not cared what I looked like? Sure, I'd gone to author conventions and had gotten a



little tipsy at the bar, but I'd always been too conscious of my image to allow myself to let loose.

Nowadays, the only wild dancing I did was when my nieces were trying to teach me the latest moves they'd learned online and I usually failed spectacularly.

The kind of dancing that Cadence had photographed at the club was in my past. Except, it wasn't even in my past because I'd never been the kind of girl who went to a club, not even in college. It was a waste of time, in my opinion at the time. People got drunk and sloppy and silly and I'd rather spend my time honing my craft and getting as many words out of my brain and onto a computer document than do anything else. Words meant a future. Getting drunk and dancing meant nothing.

I always told myself that I hadn't missed out on anything, but that picture of Cadence hit me like a high-speed train. Her joy was radiant and mesmerizing. I'd pulled up the picture and looked at it so many times over the weekend. Camille almost caught me on Saturday and I had to quickly swipe away and pretend that I'd been reading an email or something.

And then there were the messages. So. Many. Messages. I'd known from that first interview that Cadence was a talker, but she had obviously been holding back. A lot.

No sooner had I asked something than she'd sent me an answer with near excruciating detail. How in the hell did she type so fast? The way she answered was interesting, though. She might say a lot, but I liked knowing what she had to say. Her mind was a twisting, complicated place. She'd start a sentence somewhere and end up somewhere completely different and it would take me a few read-throughs to find the common thread that connected everything. Sometimes I didn't, but that didn't matter.

Cadence was interesting. More interesting than I'd given her credit for. It felt like we'd unlocked something new between us with these messages and I wasn't sure if it

was a good thing or not.

“Who are you talking to?” Camille asked me for the fourth time on Sunday as we sat in the sun and sipped on bellinis by the water. John had apparently taken the kids out to the trampoline park and told Camille to invite me out for a day off. Drinks and appetizers were first up, then shopping and strolling, and finally back to Camille’s to sit in the quiet of the house and enjoy the silence.

“No one,” I said, turning my phone over so I wouldn’t be tempted to respond to Cadence.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“You’re talking to someone,” she sang as she sipped her drink and smirked at me. “You forget that I know you, El. I know your face and I know when you’re distracted. And I know when you’re happy. Whatever you’re looking at, whoever you’re talking to, is making you happy. I’m not trying to give you a hard time about it. I just want to know what’s going on in your life.”

Being friends with someone nearly your whole life was wonderful at times, and it was not so wonderful at times. Camille knew the exact words to use to get me to confide in her. Like she had a key to unlocking me.

“I can’t tell you,” I said. I absolutely could not tell her that I was talking with my much younger assistant with a goofy grin on my face that had no business being there.

“Eloise Irene Roth. Are you online dating?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said immediately, grabbing onto the suggestion like a life raft. “Yes, I’m online dating. Sort of. I’m trying it out.”

Camille let out an excited squeal and clapped her hands together. “I knew making you a profile on that famous people site was going to pay off,” she said. I wanted to roll my eyes. She’d forced me to make it, with her input, two years ago on my birthday and had been pestering me about it off and on ever since. I’d gone on a few times and had looked at the potential guys, but it seemed like such an artificial way to meet someone. I didn’t want to get to know someone that way. I guess it worked for some people, but it wasn’t for me.

But now, it was the perfect excuse.

“Well, whoever he is, I can’t wait to meet him.” She tapped her glass against mine and then drained it just as our server came over and asked if we wanted refills.

“We just started talking,” I said, feeling a little ball of shame settle into my stomach for lying to my best friend. “I don’t even know what it is at this point.”

Nothing. It was nothing, because it had to be nothing. And it wasn’t even flirting. It was just talking. And I couldn’t help it that Cadence was funny. Her making me laugh had nothing to do with flirting. I was straight.

“Well, I am going to need allll the details once you figure it out.” Camille reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “This is going to be good for you. Trust me.”

\* \* \*

“You know what I hate?” Cadence said when she walked in the next day with coffee and our usual breakfast sandwiches. Not even a hello.

“Good morning to you, too,” I said, pulling out plates.

“Right, good morning, yeah,” she said, handing me my coffee. “I hate it when someone acts like they have never ordered coffee at a café before. They stand in line for like, ten minutes and then when the barista asks what they want, they act like they’re brand new and don’t know what the procedure is. It’s ridiculous, and it’s just plain rude to everyone else standing in line behind them while they figure out what the fuck they want, you know?”

The words flew out of her and I saw that her hair was extra messy today, pulled back into a bun with wisps going everywhere.

“Wow,” I said when she stopped to take a breath. “Tell me how you really feel.”

Her eyes flew wide, as if she realized belatedly how many words she’d just throw at me. I couldn’t fight back a laugh.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her cheeks and face and ears and upper chest blooming red with embarrassment.

“You don’t have to apologize, Cadence. You can talk to me. I don’t mind.” It was true. Anyone else saying all of that would have made me beg for mercy and silence, but Cadence doing it was different. I didn’t know why.

“And it is annoying, I agree,” I said as I unwrapped my sandwich. She sat down with me and there were a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, and I could feel her holding back across the table.

“You didn’t bring me anything haunted, did you?” I asked, looping back to our previous conversation from Saturday.

She looked up and her face broke into a smile. “No. Thought about it. I will next time. Sneak it into your house and hide it somewhere and you’ll have to find it.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared. “You wouldn’t dare.”

There was that rapport we’d created this weekend. I’d wondered if it would translate to seeing each other in person, or if it was just a weekend messaging thing.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” she said with a smirk and something warm started to expand in my chest, like a balloon inflating.

“I can still fire you, you know.”

“No, you wouldn’t. I’ve made myself invaluable to you now. Who would bring you your sandwiches every day and make sure that everything you read is in the right font and correct size?”

I rolled my eyes. “I could find someone else to do that for me.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Could you now? Then why were you so desperate that you hired me?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I wasn’t desperate,” I said immediately. “You were simply the best candidate for the job.”

She let out a snort. “We both know that’s not true. I was definitely not qualified for this job.”

That was true. She hadn’t been completely qualified. But then I had been desperate enough to give her an interview and something about her had made me say yes.

I waved my hand. “A moot point. You’re hired now.”

“You’re stuck with me, Eloise Roth,” she said, picking up her coffee. My stomach did a slow somersault when she used my first and last name together like that.

My sandwich was getting cold, but I couldn’t stop looking at her. “Seems that way, Cadence.”

\* \* \*

I pushed myself back from my desk with a groan.

“What is it?” Cadence yanked off her headphones. I didn’t know how she always heard me with those things on and her music up.

“They sent me the cover concepts for the next book and I can’t decide which one I like. I’m not normally this indecisive, but I think I’ve looked at them so long that my brain can’t even see them anymore. They all look the same.”

I rubbed my eyes and sighed.

“Well, I don’t know much about anything, but I do have a new set of eyeballs. Want me to take a look?”

It wasn’t the worst idea.

“Sure,” I said. Instead of just forwarding her the email, I moved my laptop a little, gesturing for her to come to me.

Cadence popped up from her desk and leaned down next to me, bracing her arms on the surface. I caught a hint of her shampoo, which was something sweet like coconut and vanilla. It made me think of desserts and my mouth started to water a little bit.

I remembered what the hell we were supposed to be doing when she tilted the computer closer so she could see and then started scrolling. There were four options, all pretty similar, but with different fonts and slightly different images and colors.

As I watched her, Cadence squinted at the covers and minimized the window so she could see all four at once.

“What’s the book about?” she asked, and I told her.

She took that information in and then clicked the button to print the page.

“We’re going to try this a few different ways,” she said, going to the printer to get the pages. She’d put one cover on each page. Before I knew what was happening, she had taped each one to my wall, all in a row.

“Okay, close your eyes.” I did as she said and waited.



“Now, open.” I did and the covers were still there, with Cadence standing beside them.

I blew out a breath. “I still don’t know.”

She nodded, unperturbed. “Close your eyes again.”

I did for a second time, except there was a bunch of rustling. She told me to open and I found that all but one of the covers had been removed.

“Tell me the first three things you think of when you see this cover. Don’t think too much.”

She had her notepad and pen ready.

“Ah, okay,” I said, squinting at the cover. “Um, vacation, soft, elegant.”

Cadence nodded and then repeated the process with the other three covers. It was immediately obvious that I did not prefer the third cover, so Cadence dramatically ripped it up and threw it on the floor.

“Now tell me the thing you like the most about each of these.” For one it was the font style and color, for another it was the composition, for the other it was the colors.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Question: is there a way to combine these three and make something new?”

I nodded. “I have more control over my covers than other authors. If I tell Sylvia what I want, she can get them to make it happen.”

Cadence squinted at the covers. “I wish I had the raw files because I could do a mockup for you in a few minutes.”

“I can see if they’ll send them to me.”

She waved me off.

“No, I’ll ask them and see what happens.” I hit Reply on the email and typed out what Cadence and I had come up with, asking if Sylvia could do her shark thing and get them to at least do a mockup for me.

Email sent, I looked back at Cadence, who was still looking at the covers with her head tilted to the side.

“I miss when they used to have those romance covers with the shirtless guys and the women in ball gowns and like, a horse rearing in the background.”

I snorted. “I don’t exactly write those kinds of books. And those covers are kind of out of style for this era. But...” I trailed off. “Hold that thought.”

I headed to the library and it took a few minutes to find the books I was looking for and I brought back a stack in my arms.

“Whoa, what’s that?” she asked, and I deposited them on my desk. A few of the paperbacks fell onto the floor.

“Oh my god,” she said, holding up a book with a shirtless man on the cover holding a woman in a gown. There was a horse in the background, but it wasn’t rearing. Just there. “This is majestic.”

Her eyes lit up as she went through the rest of the books.

“These are all incredible. I’m in love.”

Cadence stacked them back up on the desk in two neat piles.

“Those are treasures.”

“They are,” I agreed, leaning back against my desk. There were about five thousand things I should be doing right now, but here I was, looking at book covers with Cadence.

“I’ve been collecting them here and there. I watch auctions and wait for my favorites to come up.”

Cadence perched on my desk, swinging her legs back and forth.

“That’s so cool. I collect foreign editions of my favorites.”

“Show me,” I said, instead of telling her that we should get back to work.

Hopping up, she got her phone and did a few searches before showing me.

“So often the US covers are just so boring and then you see what Poland gets and it’s

like oh shit, should I move to Poland?” she said, leaning over my shoulder as she flipped through different lovely covers. Many of them were for sapphic romances and featured two women in various positions.

“Book covers are so subjective, but I’ve had to fight to not have some really bad ones. Especially at the beginning. They’d give me these bad stock image couples that didn’t look anything like my characters, and I couldn’t understand what they were thinking.”

Cadence leaned away and I almost missed the smell of her immediately. She tucked her phone away and went to sit at her chair, but she pushed it over to my desk.

“Have you ever thought about not working with a publisher? Doing it on your own? That’s a whole thing now.”

I shook my head. “Not really. I mean, I would, if I didn’t have such a good team behind me.” Sylvia would still work with me if I decided to publish on my own, but then I’d need editors and cover designers and a publicist and even thinking about hiring all those people made me feel like I was bringing on a migraine.

“Makes sense. You’d probably have to do even more work than you do now, and that’s already a lot.”

It was. Some days I wondered if it wouldn’t be easier to quit and volunteer at the library or something. But then I started to panic, thinking about giving up the money from those advances and the royalty checks and I knew that wasn’t for me. I could barely go on vacation as it was, let alone have my entire life be a vacation.

“Speaking of that.” She twisted back and forth in her chair. “I should probably get back to what I was doing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Cadence was right. We had wasted far too much time already.

She went back to her work and I went back to mine, but I was having an impossible time focusing.

\* \* \*

“Have any of your books changed dramatically from when you started writing them to when you turned the last draft in?” she asked while we had lunch. I’d gotten some gorgeous heirloom tomatoes at the farmers’ market when I’d stopped by with Camille yesterday and had made them into a lovely salad, along with turkey sandwiches.

“They did when I was still learning how to write books. I’d have a million drafts and I’d change names and all kinds of things. My editors also had to rein me in a lot more than they do now. I was young and all over the place. I’d try to do too many things at once, convinced each one was going to be my last, so I’d better put in everything I wanted to say in case it was.” I shook my head at myself.

Cadence fired more and more questions at me, and I answered them all, giving her more detail than I normally would. I hadn’t talked this much about my career outside of an interview, and when I did do interviews, those were very controlled, and I had practiced my answers ahead of time. With Cadence, I didn’t worry about any of that. I said the first thing that came to mind, something I only did with a select few people.

I hadn’t even known Cadence for two months, and here I was confiding in her how hard those first few years had been. How the low advances had made paying my bills nearly impossible. The hours and the endless peanut butter and jam sandwiches I’d

eaten because I couldn't afford that many groceries and the awful apartments I'd shared with strange or awful roommates.

"It was all part of getting to where I am now." I gestured at the house.

"Yeah, I'd say it all paid off," she said with a snort. "Did you ever wish—" she stopped herself and shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, what were you going to say?" I had a feeling I knew.

"I was going to ask if you feel like you missed out on anything, but you don't have to answer that. I shouldn't have asked."

We'd finished eating a while ago and now we were just lounging in the sun. The light set her hair aflame.

All of my tasks were calling my name, but she was sitting there, and we were talking, and it was so easy, and she looked...

She was beautiful. She really was. I'd noticed it right away. She was impossible not to notice. The hair and the freckles and those eyes. It was more than that, though. She was stunning when she was talking about her favorite books or telling me about some article she'd read or when she was listening to me tell her about those early days. The way she could focus on me was almost jarring. Like she was taking in every single word I was saying, but watching every movement of my face while I said it. Looking at my expressions. As if how I said something mattered just as much as what I was saying.

I wrenched my gaze away from her face and looked down at our empty plates. "We should go back in. I need to work on edits, and I need you to work on next week's social media."

Cadence stood up and saluted me. “I’ll get right on top of that, Eloise,” she said before she gathered up our plates and took them to the kitchen. I took another moment to myself before joining her back in the house again.

\* \* \*

“Fun plans tonight?” I asked as she shut down everything for the day.

“Mmmm, probably not. I mean, nothing exciting. Probably just making dinner and reading.” She shoved her headphones in her bag, and I watched as she checked her desk for anything else that she needed to bring home with her. “You? Not getting on your private jet to go out to dinner with someone famous?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is that what you think I do after I’m done writing?”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

I let out a snort. “No, I do not have a private jet. You know this. You’ve booked plane tickets for us.”

“You could always charter one. That’s a thing. I looked it up.” She was relentless.

“I’ve flown in a private jet once, and it was only because I was invited.” Her eyes got big and she sat back down in her chair.

“You have to tell me.”

Didn’t she want to get home?

She was so eager that I had to laugh as I told her about my one private jet trip with a very rich woman who was apparently a fan of mine and had invited me to her home

in LA for the weekend, along with a bunch of other artists and writers and cultural icons.

“I’m shocked you don’t get invited to that stuff all the time.”

“I mean, not all the time, but I’ve been invited to things before, but it’s not my scene. Hobnobbing with wealthy people who expect you to be impressed by them isn’t my favorite. I’d much rather spend my time with other writers talking about craft and trends in the industry and so forth.”

She nodded. “Yeah, me too. I mean, not that I know all that much, but the more I learn the more I want to know.”



## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I could see that. There were times when she would send me copies of emails from my agent or publisher and ask me to break down what the terms meant, or what this process was like, or how things worked. She was relentless in her thirst for information. I'd never met anyone who soaked so much of it up so eagerly. Reminded me of myself when I was in college, but I'd been wanting to know so I could use it to build my career. So I could have a leg up on everyone else. Cadence wanted to know just because she was curious and that was something...remarkable.

Cadence's phone went off, startling both of us.

"Shit. It's later than I thought. I should get out of your hair. You're probably sick of me." She stood up and let out a little laugh.

The thing was...I wasn't sick of her. I didn't want her to go. For a moment, I wondered what she would say if I asked her to stay for dinner. If she sat at the breakfast table while I cooked for us. Asked her to set the table. Poured her a glass of wine and asked her how her day was. Except I already knew because her day had been spent with me. Perhaps she'd say something about her mean boss and I'd play along. Later on, I'd let her eat all my fancy ice cream while we sat on the couch and then...

"Have a good night," Cadence said, slamming my racing thoughts to a screeching halt.

What the fuck had I been thinking? It all started normal and then got...strange. Uncomfortable.

“Good night, Cadence,” I managed to say. She waved and headed out the door while I stayed glued in my chair.

What. Was. That.

## Chapter Thirteen

Cadence

I told myself that I wasn’t going to send her any more messages unless she sent me one first, but I couldn’t help myself.

If I were a worm, would you still let me be your assistant?

Sending her shit like that was always fun because I liked getting her responses.

Why would you be a worm, and why would I have a worm working for me? Is this like the cockroach book? She responded.

It’s just a silly thing. But would you? I asked.

Cadence. A worm could not be my assistant. How would you type. I could almost hear the impatience in her message, and it made me giggle.

I’d scoot along the keys. Or I’d hop on them. I’d make it work. I responded.

This is an utterly ridiculous conversation, Cadence. She sent.

Eloise had been saying my name more and more lately, and it was doing all kinds of things to me. Alllll kinds of things. Good things that were actually bad things.

She didn't know I was flirting with her, but I was absolutely flirting with her. There was no other way to look at it. I was flirting relentlessly and shamelessly with my boss, and only the fact that she was straight and oblivious to queer flirting was saving my ass.

If she knew, I was absolutely going to get fired.

I had to stop. Had to stop flying too close to the sun.

And then she'd call me Cadence, with her voice or in her messages and I would completely fucking melt.

She was going to destroy me, and I was absolutely going to let her.

This could only end one way and it was going to end with me losing this job.

\* \* \*

"Does anyone call you El?" I asked her at the end of our morning meeting. We'd kept them up, and after we went over business, I distracted her from getting to work with usually inane questions.

"Camille does. Sylvia does sometimes. Why?"

I shrugged. "Just wondering. I know you don't like my nickname, but I was wondering how you felt about nicknames in general."

She studied me for a beat. "I'm not against nicknames."

I grinned. “Just against mine.”

She straightened her laptop on her desk. “I’ve told you that I’ll call you Cade if you want me to.”

No. I didn’t want her to. I liked that she was the only one who called me by my full name. My initial annoyance had morphed into something else that warmed my insides like eating a chocolate chip cookie right out of the oven.

“I like being Cadence with you,” I said and then realized how that sounded. I coughed and wished every embarrassing thought I’d ever had wasn’t instantly written on my skin for all to see.

Part of me almost lifted my notebook to hide my face. But then that would have drawn even more attention.

Across the desk from me, Eloise was quiet for a moment, those eyes lasering into me. Our gazes caught and held and if I didn’t know better, I would have said she was looking at me in the way that you look at someone you’re attracted to.

She wasn’t. I was just hoping that she would, creating fantasies in my mind that weren’t real.

Eloise was straight, first of all. And she was a glamorous bestselling romance goddess. Compared to her, I was nothing.

Her phone went off with a notification, making us both jump.

“We should—” I said at the same time she said, “I should—”

Both of us let out little trembling laughs and I rolled my chair back over to my desk and wished she couldn’t see how my blush had covered the back of my neck too.

\* \* \*

“How about we go out for lunch today?” Eloise said during our morning break.

This was new, and completely unexpected.

“Oh, uh, sure,” I said, unable to figure out what was happening here. “Is there a special reason?”

She seemed hesitant to answer, ducking her head with the first hint of shyness I’d ever seen.

Adorable. It was adorable.

She held up one hand, as if she was trying to stall me from asking more questions. A pause. “Technically, it’s my birthday.”

I jumped up and almost knocked my chair over. “It’s your birthday? Wait, how did I not know this already? I should have known this already.”

Why hadn’t I known? This was very basic information about her.

Eloise rolled her eyes. “Because I don’t really celebrate my birthday. Never have. No one in my life makes a big deal out of it because I asked them not to. So don’t make a big deal out of it.” She pointed her finger at me, as if that was going to do something.

I sat back down and had to collect my thoughts so I didn't immediately start arguing with her about it.

Of course she didn't have to celebrate her birthday if she didn't want to, but to just let it go was intolerable.

"Fine. I won't make a fuss. But you're letting me buy you lunch. It's the very least I can do. And we're getting dessert. I know I have no grounds to order you to do anything, but, Eloise Roth, I am ordering you to let me treat you to lunch and dessert."

I had no idea where my confidence had come from, but the minute her mouth dropped open in shock, it was worth it.

Eloise snapped her jaw closed and shook her head slowly.

"I knew you were trouble from the start."

I grinned at her. "And yet you still hired me. And then gave me a contract. My only other rule about this lunch is that you get to pick where we go."

That was probably going to cost me. I bet Eloise went to expensive places with executive chefs that had competed on TV shows and had won awards.

It was so obvious that she wanted to argue with me. That she wanted to say no. I stared at her with what I hoped was rigid determination. I wasn't backing down from this.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Fine,” she said at last. “But I’m driving.”

“Deal,” I said, sticking my pinky out at her.

“Not this again.”

“Yup. Gotta seal it. Come on.”

She huffed but linked her pinky with mine and booped my thumb three times.

“Am I allowed to say ‘happy birthday’? Or is that against the rules?”

Eloise let out a groaning noise. “You are allowed to say it that once and not again after that. And if you sing, you’re fired immediately.”

I snorted. Seeing her horror at me singing to her might be worth getting fired in the moment.

“Fine, fine, I won’t sing. I’ll just hum quietly to myself.” I hummed the Happy Birthday song and the look Eloise cut me was glacial.

“Gotta get back to work,” I called as I all but sprinted back to the office.

\* \* \*

Eloise’s car was so much cleaner than mine. It was a relief she’d wanted to drive so she didn’t see how bad mine was.

I buckled up as Eloise backed out of the driveway and adjusted the air. Her car smelled like it was fresh from the dealership. I knew she got it detailed regularly, since dropping it off and picking it up was one of my tasks.

“Where are we going?” I asked after several moments of silence. Eloise had put on a pair of designer sunglasses as I pulled down the visor and shaded my eyes if I needed to.

“One of my favorite places,” she said.

“It’s in this country, I hope. I didn’t bring my passport.” Come to think of it, was my passport even current? I should probably figure that out. If I continued to work for Eloise, international travel wasn’t out of the question, which was wild.

“Yes, it’s in this country. We’re not even leaving the state.”

“Bummer,” I said.

“You said to pick where I wanted to go, and this is where I want to go.” Eloise didn’t drive with music or anything, which wasn’t a surprise. When you turned my car on, my playlist would just start blasting.

“If you won’t tell me where we’re going, can I ask why you don’t like to celebrate your birthdays? Has that always been the case, or is it a new thing?” Was she ashamed of her age? She’d brought it up a few times with me. Most of the time how old she was wasn’t something that I thought about. Sure, she was older than me, but I bet she’d been like this her whole life. Even if we’d been the same age, she would have acted more mature.

“I think it’s a childish thing to do. What’s the point? I don’t understand it. And I don’t like the reminder that one more year of my life is gone.”



Well. That was a strange way of putting it.

“I suppose,” I said, not wanting to rock the boat.

“You don’t agree,” she said as we sat at a light.

“I think birthdays are fun as hell. Sure, you have to think about getting another year older, but you get presents and there’s cake. I’ll take any excuse to have cake.”

Eloise glanced over at me from behind her sunglasses.

“You feel that way now, but come back to me when you’re getting closer to forty and tell me if you feel the same way.”

“I mean, I can’t predict the future, but I don’t think I’m going to change my mind about a day when I get to eat as much cake as I want.”

She snorted as the light turned green.

\* \* \*

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Eloise took me to a nice bar that was bright but atmospheric with leather chairs and a dark wood bar and warm golden lighting. A surprising choice, but I realized why she'd picked it when she went up to the bar and started chatting animatedly with the bartender. They clearly knew each other.

I fought back little stabs of jealousy. There was nothing to be jealous about, yet here I was wondering who the hell this other woman was.

The place was pretty quiet, and a hostess brought us to a cozy table in the back and handed us menus. I was relieved when I saw the prices weren't too outrageous, and the food actually looked good.

"Come here a lot?" I asked Eloise when the hostess had left us to ourselves.

"Pretty often. I'm friends with the bartender, Dom. Known her for years."

Why did that make me want to throw myself off a cliff? Get it together.

"How nice," I said, wondering why this was the first time I was hearing of this Dom that she was so close with. Had she been hiding her from me?

From this angle, I could see Dom as she worked behind the bar. She was stunning. Truly stunning.

Fuck.

"She's a good one. Makes my drinks just how I like them. And I like watching her

work and talk to people.” Now we were both looking at Dom, who was trading banter with one of the other bartenders, both of them laughing together.

“So, uh, what’s good here?” I asked, wanting to stop talking about Dom. Wishing we’d gone anywhere else. This lunch idea had really blown up in my face. At least they had cake.

“My favorite is the bourbon barbecue burger and fries. It’s my go-to. But the spicy chicken sandwich is good, too. Honestly, you can’t go wrong. The food here is better than it has to be.”

I thought back to when I was telling Hunter about Eloise and thinking that I couldn’t picture her eating pizza. Yet here she was, eating burgers covered in barbecue sauce.

This I had to see.

\* \* \*

Eloise did order the burger, and I watched her eat it with relish, somehow managing not to get her face covered. It was incredible. I’d gotten the same thing after she’d told me how good it was. Of course, I ended up covered in sauce. My face, my hair, my clothes. The table.

Eloise kept trying to hide a smile as I struggled to wipe myself down.

“You did this on purpose,” I said, rubbing at a spot on my chest.

She sighed and opened her purse, handing me a stain-removing wipe.

“You got any more of those in there?” I asked. One wasn’t going to do it.

“Probably not enough,” she said with a smirk, handing me two more.

The burger had been delicious. I just wish I wasn’t wearing so much of it while Eloise still looked perfect.

“It’s a good thing I always have a change of clothes in my car,” I said. There was no way I could get through the rest of the day like this.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Eloise said, still eating her fries. I’d demolished mine already and was ready to devour some cake.

“Did I not put that on my resume?” I asked.

She laughed. “No, but I figured it out the first few times I ate with you. I don’t even know how you do it.”

I went scarlet with embarrassment. “Just unlucky, I guess. I have other talents.”

Eloise tilted her head to the side and picked up her iced tea.

“I know you do,” she said and, if I didn’t know better, I would have said that was a flirty comment. But it wasn’t. Eloise was just messing with me. Making fun of me because she could do that and I’d let her.

Our server came back and asked us about dessert. Eloise ordered the chocolate cake and I did the same.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I’m not sharing,” I told her.

“Didn’t ask you to,” she said. “And I’m not sharing either.”

### Chapter Fourteen

Eloise

It was remarkable how much sauce she’d managed to get on herself. Even with the help of the wipes, she was going to have to change.

She hadn’t threatened to mention my birthday again or sung or done anything else to embarrass me. In fact, she hadn’t talked about it at all. She’d told me about a book she was reading which had led to a podcast which had led to a bunch of articles. In between getting covered in sauce and eating, she kept speaking and I just let her, enjoying her enthusiasm and the tone of her voice.

I liked hearing her. I liked hearing what she had to say. I really did.

The slices of cake arrived with two forks and zero candles.

“You should at least make a wish, even if you’re not going to blow out a candle,” she said. “Make a wish with your first bite.”

What a ridiculous thing to do. I wasn’t going to do that.

But then I met her eyes and looked at her freckles and I couldn’t say no.

I cut a bite with my fork and raised it to my mouth, tasting it as I made a wish and then swallowed.

“There. Happy?” I asked.

“I know you said I could only say it the once but,” she said in a low voice and leaned in, “happy birthday.” Her voice was barely above a whisper and there was no one nearby to hear her. Even still, I looked around to make sure.

“Does Dom know?” Cadence said, and there was an edge in her voice that I didn’t understand.

“She probably doesn’t remember. Only a handful of people even know and I’ve sworn them to secrecy.” Finding my date of birth online shouldn’t have been difficult, but I’d managed to have it mostly scrubbed.

“Are you? Going to swear me to secrecy? This wasn’t covered in the NDA.” She ate her cake slowly, as if savoring every bite.

“Yes, I’m going to swear you to secrecy. I paid a lot of money for that information not to get out. It’s a privacy concern.” Her eyes went wide as that realization hit her. We didn’t have the same security issues.

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. You have my word.”

Feeling giddy, maybe from the cake, I stuck out my pinky and her eyes lit up as she beamed, and we did that silly little swear with our fingers.

When the bill came, Cadence snatched it away and insisted on paying.

“I didn’t get you anything, so this is your gift. I might still get you a gift. I don’t think

I can let your big day pass without doing something. It just wouldn't be right."

I scowled at her, but she was undeterred. We'd taken quite a long lunch and for the first time in ages, I wasn't eager to get back to my office and my inbox.

Dom waved goodbye to me as we headed out and into the sunshine.

"I've got it," Cadence said, looking up and down the street and nodding. "This way."

She started walking in the opposite direction of the parking garage.

"Cadence," I called to her, and she spun around.

"This way, come on." I hurried to keep up.

"Where are you going? The garage is over there."

She just kept walking. "I know. We're stopping somewhere else first."

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

This was an unexpected turn of events and I didn't like it. But I didn't grab her arm and make her stop and turn around.

No, I walked next to her until she opened a door for me.

"Here we are," she said as I looked up at the sign and the windows. Candles and bath products.

A lovely smell emerged from the interior that wasn't too overpowering. I did love using candles sometimes when I took a bath.

Cadence motioned me to go in, so I did, and she closed the door behind me.

We were greeted and asked if we needed any help.

"No, thank you. We'll let you know," Cadence said. She steered me toward jars and jars of bath salts and soaks and products and then grabbed a basket.

"You can make your own spa set. You get to choose one of each." She pointed to the sign that advertised the deal. One container of bath salts, one candle, one scrub, and one little stone from a bowl. The stones had words carved into them.

"No, Cadence," I said, pushing against the basket.

"Yes, Eloise," she said, taking a jar of bath salts off the shelf and sniffing at it. "What do you think?"



This was ridiculous, but I could see the determination in her eyes. I'd spent enough time with her to know what happened when she set her mind to something. And really, was this the worst thing that had ever happened to me? No.

Cadence helped as I selected some bath salts and a candle and a scrub and closed my eyes while I reached into the bowl of stones.

"What did you get?" Cadence asked, leaning close to see.

I opened my hand and showed her.

"'Peace' is fine. But it's not great. Pick another one," Cadence said, taking the stone from me and putting it back in the bowl.

"You're supposed to go with the first choice," I said as she mixed the stones around.

"Try again."

Cadence made me choose again and again until I got a stone she approved of. This one said "Bliss" on it.

"There. You can't get much better than that."

She marched to the counter and paid for everything and told them it was a gift so they needed to wrap it up.

Once again, she stopped me from arguing.

"Can we go now?" I asked after she handed me the bag with my gift in it.

"Sure. Unless you want to take the rest of the day off and wander around pretending

to be tourists. You could even go into the bookshop and see if anyone recognizes you.” Her eyes were lit up and there was mischief in them.

Instead of annoying me, I felt swept away with her. Wanting to do something silly. Something foolish.

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” I said.

Cadence grinned. “Just terrible enough to be fun, though, right?”

I let out a long sigh.

“Fine,” I said, pretending I wasn’t hiding a smile deep down inside. “If anyone gets too close, you’ll need to be my bodyguard.”

Cadence raised one arm and flexed her bicep while I watched. Her shirt had short sleeves today and her arms were on display. How had I not noticed her arms before? A muscle popped, drawing my attention.

“Not bad. I think I can handle it.” She beamed at me and kept walking while I struggled to regain my footing again and stumbled a little behind her.

\* \* \*

I put my sunglasses down outside the bookshop.

“I wish we would have thought about this ahead of time and you could have worn a wig and a better disguise. I’d dress you up as a tourist. Can you do any accents?” Cadence asked, fully into this little scheme.

I opened my bag and pulled out a scarf that I used to cover my hair and tuck it away. That and the sunglasses were as good as it was going to get.

I did get recognized every now and then in the city, and going to a bookshop was the place most likely for it to happen.

“How do I look?” I asked.

“Mysterious,” Cadence said, adjusting the scarf a little, her fingers brushing along my forehead to secure any stray hairs. Her fingers were gentle and warm, and I found myself leaning closer to her without even knowing why.

She was shorter than me by about five inches. If I leaned forward, my lips would meet her freckled forehead.

Stepping back, I put space between us again.

“Let’s go. If this goes south, I’m blaming you,” I said.

“Fair enough.” She nodded and held the door open for me.

I entered reluctantly, expecting someone to immediately call me out. This was a risk in the era of everyone having a camera in their phone, but my heart was pounding in a way it hadn’t in a while.

“Excuse me,” Cadence said in an overly loud voice as I slunk further into the little bookshop, “do you have any of those Elizabeth Roth books?”

I refused to look at her.

“Did you mean Eloise Roth?” the bookseller asked. “We have many of her books, including some that are signed.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Eloise. That’s who I meant. Are her books any good?” Her voice was still too loud, and I was regretting going along with this. Why had I agreed to go along with this? She was going to get us banned.

“They’re some of our most popular titles,” the bookseller said. Very diplomatic.

I pretended to browse the shelves while my ears were glued on the interaction between Cadence and the bookseller.

Cadence wouldn’t stop being completely over the top and I could tell she was enjoying herself. She could have had a career on the stage with the way she was carrying on.

“What do you think?” she said, and I realized she was talking to me. “Have you read any of these books?”

Her eyes were bright, and it hit me how stunning she was like I’d been struck by

lightning. I never had, obviously, but I imagined it was like this. Hot and intense and tingly and hazardous to my health.

“No, I can’t say that I have,” I said, pitching my voice lower, as if anyone would recognize my voice.

The bookseller looked back and forth between us, but I didn’t see a flicker of recognition.

“If I were to start, which one should I start with?” I asked the bookseller, stepping closer. This was a little reckless, but it felt good.

The bookseller put on a bright smile and held up the first book in my latest series. “This is a good one to start with.”

“Hmm,” I said, taking the book and pretending to read the blurb on the back even though I already knew what it said.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, putting the book back. The longer I fooled around in here, the more likely it was that I’d be recognized. And I also needed to get some work done today. This little detour had already taken too long.

“Thank you for your time,” I told the bookseller as I edged toward the door. Cadence had been pretending to look at more of the books, but she followed me.

“Have a nice day,” the bookseller called just as we walked through the door. I didn’t take a deep breath until we had made it down the street and I collapsed on a bench, unable to stop laughing.

“That was ridiculous,” I said through laughs that I couldn’t control. Cadence sat next to me, also laughing. I pulled the scarf off and looked at her giggling face and that

only made me laugh harder. It hadn't been that funny, but it didn't matter.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Cadence reached out and held onto me as we gasped for air, tears on our faces.

“We’re going to have to work on a script and better costumes for next time,” Cadence said, wiping her eyes.

“Oh, next time? You think there’s going to be a next time?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Cadence said, getting to her feet. “That was fun. Didn’t you have fun?”

I did. It was fun.

Instead, I shook my head and got up. “We need to get back to work.”

Cadence huffed out a sigh. “Come on, admit it. You’ve had fun today.”

She skipped next to me as we walked to the parking garage.

“You had funnnnn,” she kept saying.

“Fine,” I said. “I had fun.”

“Ha! I knew it. Eloise Roth does like fun.”

We reached the garage and started walking around to get to my car. “I like fun. What are you talking about?”

Cadence didn’t speak for a few steps. “I know you’re fun, El. I just meant that I don’t

think you leave enough space in your life for it. Especially for the spontaneous kind. Like today.”

El. She’d called me El. I glanced over at her face and she didn’t even seem to realize that she’d done it.

We reached my car and I unlocked it. “I’m not sure how offended I should be right now.”

Cadence rolled her eyes and got into the passenger seat. I set my present in the back and slid into the driver’s side.

“It was good to see you laugh like that today,” she finally said.

I turned the car on, and we were mostly quiet for the drive back to my house.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day was normal, at least for Cadence. She went back to working on her laptop (after she’d changed out of her stained clothes) and put her headphones on as if it was business as usual.

I, on the other hand, was having a crisis.

Today had been completely out of my routine and I wasn’t coping very well.

Things that I had put aside and buried and ignored were bubbling to the surface and I didn’t know if I could push them back again. Those moments and feelings from the past that I’d tried to hide, even from myself.

I wasn’t...



Attempting to work right now was a losing task, but I went through the motions and did my best until it was finally the end of the day.

“Hey,” Cadence said when she was packing up her bag. I gratefully shut down my laptop. I was tired, but I’d promised to go over to Camille’s tonight for dinner. She’d pretend it wasn’t my birthday and then surprise me with a little gift and the kids would sing and give me homemade cards and I’d act like I hated it. We did it every year.

“I hope it was a good birthday. And that you reevaluate your stance on celebrating birthdays.” Her voice was soft as she slung her bag over her shoulder and came around the side of my desk.

“I don’t think I will, but thank you for today anyway,” I said, tilting my face up to look at her.

She smiled at me and nodded. “You’re welcome.”

I expected her to turn and leave, but she paused and before I knew what was happening, she had leaned down and kissed my cheek.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“See you tomorrow.” Cadence was walking out of my office before it hit me what she’d done.

She...she kissed me. On the cheek, but still. What was that?

I sat in my chair for ages, trying to figure out if I’d imagined the whole thing and touching my cheek where her lips had been.

### Chapter Fifteen

Cadence

What the actual fuck had I done? I started hyperventilating when I got to my car, but I had to drive away from the house. From the scene of the crime.

Unless you were European or something, kissing your boss on the cheek was absolutely a no no.

What had possessed me? No idea, except I’d been staring at her all day and especially at her lips and when we’d laughed together it had taken every single ounce of self-control I’d ever cultivated not to pull her close and kiss the hell out of her.

The crush I’d barely attempted to put a lid on had boiled over and she was going to fire me. I was absolutely and totally getting fired.

Somehow, I made it home in one piece and up to my apartment. My phone was silent, but I was waiting. It was coming. The email terminating my contract. You couldn’t

just kiss your boss and get away with it.

“Fuck!” I screamed into the couch pillows. I was spiraling and it was going to be bad. First I ran around the apartment a bunch of times and then ordered a bunch of food that I probably wasn’t going to eat and then sent panicky messages to my friends and then thought about calling my parents even though that would have only made things worse.

Eventually I started crashing from my energy spike and that was when Hunter and Reid arrived.

“You didn’t have to come over,” I said, when they walked in and found me lying on the floor and staring at the ceiling while surrounded by takeout.

“Yeah, we did. We had to come help you with this,” Reid said, folding gracefully to the floor. Hunter joined us a moment later.

“I kissed my boss,” I repeated.

“On the cheek, Cade. On the cheek. It’s not even that bad,” Hunter said. “Have you heard from her?”

I checked my phone. Nothing.

“Nope.”

“Then maybe she doesn’t care. Or it’s not a big deal to her. It was only a little peck, right?” Reid said, digging into one of the bags and pulling out an eggroll.

“It was a peck, I promise,” I said.

“It’s going to be okay, Cade,” Hunter said, stroking my hair.

“I really like this job. I really, really do. And I like...her.” I could barely say it out loud. Hunter and Reid shared a look.

“We know,” Reid said. “We know you like her.”

“Shit,” I breathed out. “I thought I was hiding it so well.”

Hunter snorted. “You’re a lot of things, babe, but subtle is not one of them. Your eyes light up every time you talk about her, and I saw your face in that job interview. You were gone from day one.”

“Fuck,” I said, my voice dull.

“Are you gonna eat this?” Reid asked, pulling out a burrito.

“Go for it,” I said. “I want the pizza. And an eggroll. And some rice. And at least one taco.”

Hunter made me a plate and the three of us camped on the floor and demolished the food I’d ordered and I started feeling better.

“Why is it that I’m always having some kind of disaster? Can’t either of you have a major meltdown to even things out?” I said, once I was so full that I could barely move. Still no message from Eloise.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I'd called her El today. I'd been doing it in my head randomly, but that was the first time that I'd done it out loud. I know she noticed. That, coupled with the cheek kiss, was what was going to end up with me being unemployed again.

Of course, I would blow up the best job I'd ever had over my inability to control my horniness.

Hunter and Reid said that they'd promise to have breakdowns soon to take the heat off me. I appreciated that.

\* \* \*

Eloise didn't contact me that night. Her silence weighed on me. In the short time we'd been messaging outside of work hours, I'd gotten used to hearing from her. Having her ask me what I was thinking about and being interested in the answers. She'd told me more about what it was like to be famous as a person who grew up as a regular person.

I hated what I'd done. I'd wrecked one of the best things that I'd ever had in the past few years, maybe ever. It wasn't just the job. It was the way that Eloise trusted me with so much responsibility. And yes, I made mistakes, but she didn't make me feel bad about them. She didn't make me feel like I couldn't be better, do better. She'd never said the words out loud, but I knew she believed in me.

Now that was all done. Finished. In spite of Hunter and Reid saying that things were going to be okay, how could they be? How could I go to her house every day and look at her and want what I wanted and survive? It had only gotten worse and soon

enough it was going to destroy me. Falling for a straight woman never ended well. Falling for a straight woman who was also your boss was just about as bad as it could get.

\* \* \*

Eloise

I sat in my chair for a long, long time wondering what the hell I was going to do now. Cadence probably hadn't meant anything by it, but that didn't stop my mind from going in all kinds of wild and dangerous directions.

In the past, those slippery, tricky feelings I'd had that lived deep down inside me had been much easier to shove away. Not always. Not at night when I was alone and wondering about that girl in my class who had looked at me a certain way, or the author who had bought me a drink at the convention, or the woman who'd met my eyes across the room. It had happened so many times in my life and every single one of those times, I'd looked away. Recoiled. It had been a reflex, to retract from those feelings. If I didn't let them happen, then they couldn't hurt me. Change me. Change what I knew about myself.

I wouldn't let them.

Not because I had any problem with women loving women or men loving men, or someone of any gender loving someone of any gender. It was all fine for other people. That just wasn't me.

I purposefully took myself out of situations where those things might arise, and it had worked for the most part. I'd moved on and stopped thinking about those things. I was attracted to men, so I dated men when I wanted to date someone, which wasn't often. There was that one brief time when I'd been engaged, but when that had ended,

I'd been relieved. Being a wife, the way that society told me I should be, wasn't something I could do after all.

Yes, I knew there were many, many romance authors who were married. And then I knew some whose husbands had left when the women started to see success. And dealing with my demanding work and publicity schedule, along with the scrutiny, wasn't something I thought a lot of people could handle, no matter their gender.

I had my house, and I had my career, what more did I need? Camille, John, and the kids loved me. If I wanted to have sex, I could literally pay for it. I hadn't, contenting myself with erotic literature, my hands, and a wide array of toys I'd collected over the years. I was satisfied.

I was.

Everything was going well, and then my pretty assistant with the red hair and freckles and the laugh that made me smile had called me El and kissed me on the cheek and I was reduced to a complete and utter mess.

She hadn't even done anything! Not really.

How was I going to face her tomorrow? How could I go on like nothing had changed? That she hadn't flipped everything upside down.

I'd simply have to act like it hadn't happened. Like I had imagined it. Otherwise, my only option was to fire her, and that was wrong. It wasn't her fault that I couldn't control myself.

The only course of action was to go on as normal. She deserved to keep her job and for me to act like a goddamn professional.

Eventually, I got up and headed to Camille's and put on a smile and let them sing to me and feed me cake. Camille gifted me with a set of framed watercolor paintings, one from her, John, and each of the kids. They were all beautiful and I ended up crying at how sweet the gesture was before Camille drove me home and I was alone again with my dangerous thoughts.

\* \* \*

I barely slept that night and only passed out when weak sunlight started to fill the room. My alarm still went off and I had to get up and do my job. Without having romantic and/or sexual thoughts about my much younger assistant.

Cadence's car arrived on time and I peered out the window to watch her walking to the front door before I took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen and started getting plates out for us to eat. As if I could function normally today with my stomach all in knots.

I'd have to do my best to act like this was any other day, because it was, to her. I was the one with the problem and it was on me to get my act together.

"Good morning," I said when she walked in, her steps tentative.

"Good morning," she said, purposefully not looking at me as she took the plates and set out our sandwiches and coffee.

Both of us were quiet, and Cadence was wound tight. Her fidgeting was at an all-time high and I didn't realize, until I'd gotten out of my own head, that she might be feeling weird about the cheek kiss. That maybe she thought she'd crossed a line.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“You know—” I started to say at the same time as she said, “So—”

We laughed nervously together.

“You go first,” I said, but she shook her head.

“No, you go.”

“I just wanted to know if you’re okay? You seem a little...” I trailed off, unsure of how to put it.

“Shit,” she said under her breath. “I...” She twisted her fingers together and gave me an anguished look.

“Cadence, what is it?” I leaned over the table toward her, wanting to reach for her hands so she wouldn’t hurt herself. I managed to stop myself just in time.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry about the cheek kiss thing from yesterday. I don’t know what I was thinking, and I know I made things weird, but can we pretend that it didn’t happen and just go back to how things were before? I know that’s trying to put the horse back in the barn or whatever, but I really love this job and I don’t want to lose it.”

Her words were all strung together in one breath and it was clear she was distraught.

I hadn’t considered that she would feel strange about the kiss. I’d assumed that it was completely silly and platonic on her side because why wouldn’t it be? The idea of

Cadence harboring any kind of attraction to me was so far out of the realm of possibility that it was as likely as unicorns appearing in my garden.

“Cadence,” I said, and she finally looked up at me. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sniffing. “You’ve been so amazing to give me this job and I messed up. I’m so, so sorry.”

This was awful. I got to my feet immediately and went over to pull her into my arms before I even knew what I was doing.

“Shhh, it’s okay. It’s okay, Cade.”

Tucking her into my arms was so easy. Her body fit into mine as if we’d done this dozens of times. Hundreds. I wrapped her in my arms and leaned down to hold her.

Her body was stiff from shock for a moment, but after trembling for a few seconds, her arms circled me, her fingers lightly brushing my back.

Cadence’s hair still smelled like coconut and vanilla and I couldn’t help pulling it into my lungs.

She breathed deeply and sank just a little bit closer.

“You called me Cade,” she said, her voice muffled in my shirt.

“I did,” I breathed. “I don’t know why. It’s not a good nickname.”

She laughed softly but didn’t let go. Slowly, she fluttered her fingers on my back and I knew that I should let her go, that this hug was going on far longer than was

appropriate, but I didn't want to let her go.

Holding Cadence was incredible. My skin buzzed everywhere that she touched, and the heat from her body seeped through the fabric between us and I had to stop myself from stroking her hair.

That was definitely not allowed.

Cadence froze again and then nearly pushed me back, stumbling into her chair.

"Wait. What was that?" she asked, pointing to me with one hand and bracing herself on the back of the chair with the other. "Eloise, what was that."

I opened my mouth and closed it, mentally screaming every single profanity I'd ever heard until I allowed myself to speak.

"A hug. It was a hug, Cadence."

She shook her head. "No. Hugs aren't like that. I mean, casual hugs aren't like that."

No, they weren't. I'd hugged her in a way I shouldn't have.

Now it was my turn to apologize. "I'm sorry."

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Cadence blinked several times in succession. “Hold on. Can we... What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said immediately. “You were upset and I hugged you. That was it.”

Her eyes narrowed and she glared at me. “You and I both know that’s not the truth.”

No, it wasn’t.

“I’m not...you...” I had never had so much trouble with words in my life.

“El,” she said softly. “Is there something going on?”

It was her calling me El that did it.

“It doesn’t matter.” I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. I can be professional. This doesn’t have to affect anything.”

“I think I need to sit down,” she said, her voice detached. She pulled out the chair and sat heavily on it, staring off into space. “I think I’m going to need you to be a little more specific. What doesn’t matter?”

Now I wanted to sit down. I grabbed another chair and pulled it around so we were facing each other. My palms had started to sweat, so I wiped them on my dress. I’d picked out my favorite to wear today, hoping she would notice. Hoping she would see that I’d worn something nice for her.

“I don’t think we should talk about this. Because if we do, we can’t go back. Once the

words are said, they can't be unsaid. Are you sure you want to go down that road?" I asked.

Cadence was cracking her knuckles and the sounds made me wince.

"I don't even know what road we're on because you haven't said anything. Jesus, Eloise. Can you give me a straight answer?" She was frustrated, but I was scared.

"Why did you kiss me on the cheek?" I asked. "Was it just to wish me happy birthday?"

Cadence sighed. "I think we both know that it wasn't. I just didn't know until today that I wasn't the only one who might feel something."

Our eyes met and locked and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

"You feel something," I said.

"Yes," she breathed. "I do. And you?"

I paused before I spoke the word that was going to change everything. "Yes."

"Holy shit," Cadence said. "You're serious right now?"

"Yes," I repeated. "Yes, I feel something."

Cadence's eyes went wide and I watched about seven different expressions pass across her face in quick succession, landing on disbelief as she burst to her feet and pointed at me. Accusatory.

"But you're straight! What is happening right now? Is this even real?"

She looked around, as if she was waiting for someone else to pop up and declare all of this a joke.

“I’m not, necessarily. Straight, I mean,” I said, nearly choking on the words that I’d held back for most of my life.

Cadence gaped at me. “Are you fucking serious? Since when?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Since always. I just never... I never did anything about it. I put it aside and got on with my life. That part of me wasn’t important. It didn’t matter.” Until now. Until her.

Cadence opened and closed her mouth a few times before shaking her head.

“I don’t even know what’s happening right now,” she said, walking a few feet away and then starting to pace. Like I did when I needed to work through a difficult chapter.

“You’re telling me that you’re bi, or pan, or not straight, and you hugged me like...” She trailed off.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Hugged you like what?” I asked, wanting to know what she had to say about it.

“You hugged me like you wanted to hold me,” she said, and that wasn’t entirely accurate. I’d hugged her like I wanted her, because I did. There was no putting that away or ignoring it anymore.

We’d crossed a line and couldn’t go back.

“I did. I do, but I understand if you don’t want to work for me anymore. I understand if you want to leave and never speak to me again.” The very idea that she would walk out of my life and I’d never see her again was unbearable.

Cadence stopped pacing and spun to face me. “No, you can’t say shit like that. You can’t tell me that you feel something for me and then act like my boss.”

Someone had to say it. “I am your boss, Cadence.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, people have fallen for their superiors before. It’s like a whole romance trope for a reason. Just didn’t know I’d be one of them.”

“I didn’t plan for this to happen either,” I said.

Cadence held both hands up to stop me. “Just so I’m absolutely fucking clear, you like me.”

I bit back a laugh. “Yes, Cade. I like you. Too much.”

She grinned at me and she was so cute that I wanted to pull her onto my lap and nuzzle that smile.

“I like you too. Also too much. I think I lost my mind during that interview.” She shook her head. “I don’t even remember half of what I said.”

“I wasn’t exactly in top form either.”

Cadence did a little twirl. “So what the hell does this mean?”

That was the question. “I don’t know.”

“Conundrum,” Cadence said, stepping close to me.

I looked up at her and saw that twinkle in her eyes.

“What do you want?” Cadence asked. “From me? What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

She moved closer, forcing me to look up. “I don’t believe that.”

For the first time ever, I didn’t hold myself back. I pushed to my feet and now she was the one looking up at me.

“I want...I want to see,” I said, stroking her cheek. She leaned into my touch and I waited before inching closer by fractions until our mouths were a whisper away and I knew she could feel my lips trembling.

I’d never kissed a woman before. Had never gotten this close. Had never allowed it or pursued it.



Cadence didn't wait for me to cross that last bit of space between us. No, she dug her fingers into the back of my hair and pulled me down. To her mouth.

I'd kissed men before. And been kissed. It had always been nice, sometimes it had even been great. Before now, I would have said that kissing was a pleasant way to spend time.

Kissing Cadence changed everything in the way that a tornado ripping through a landscape changed everything.

This was a kiss.

Hesitant at first, a gentle press of mouths as her fingers dug into my skin and I cradled her face. So gentle, until it wasn't. Inhaling sharply through my nose, I angled her face to give me better access and gave in. Let her have it.

She let out a little gasp that ended in a moan and kissed me back. Before I knew it, she had jammed me up against the table, her hips pushing into mine as she utterly devoured my mouth. Cadence kissed like she did just about everything. With wild enthusiasm.

She wasn't sloppy, though. Oh no. She knew exactly what she was doing. Nibbling and sucking and using her tongue in ways that I didn't know had been invented yet. She kissed as if she'd written the manual on kissing. As if she toured the country giving kissing lectures.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Heat built under my skin and between my eyes and pooled in all sorts of other places and before I knew what was happening, Cadence was pushing her hips against mine and I was rising to meet her as our bodies collided in multiple ways.

The hand that wasn't on my neck gripped my waist and then tried to pull at my dress to get at my skin. I did the same, forcing my way under her shirt so I could touch her. Fuck, I needed to touch her so much that I ached.

I would have kissed her until the end of time, but I felt her drawing back, pressing little soft kisses against my mouth and laughing when I tried to yank her back.

My eyes opened and met her face, which was so close that she appeared blurry.

“Holy shit,” she breathed out. “I guess you do like me.”

### Chapter Sixteen

Cade

When I'd driven to work with a brick of terror sitting in my stomach, I hadn't known that things would change so dramatically. One minute I was apologizing and trying not to cry and the next minute I was making out with my boss and wanting to fuck her so bad that I couldn't even breathe.

What. The. Hell.

Eloise brushed some of my hair out of my face. I'd just put it in a ponytail today and

hadn't done a very good job of it.

I felt myself shaking as she continued to hold me, her thumb stroking my stomach under my shirt and making me think I was going to lose my mind.

"Yes, Cade. I like you," she said, smiling. "I've liked you for a while. I just didn't realize it."

She was calling me Cade now and I wanted to hate it, but I didn't.

I stroked my fingers through the back of her hair. I'd had a death grip on her neck, but she wasn't complaining.

"Is this really happening?" I whispered.

"I think so," she said, her voice unsteady. "I didn't think that it would. I didn't... I've never let myself have this, Cadence."

Did that mean what I thought it meant?

"You've never?" I asked.

She shook her head slowly. "I've never done anything with a woman before."

"Why?" I asked, still distracted by the patterns her fingers were drawing on my skin. How many times had I dreamt of her fingers against my bare skin?

She exhaled and leaned back a little bit more, but her hand didn't leave my side.

"Because it was too complicated? Because I didn't want to add one more thing in my life? A lot of reasons, I guess. It seemed like too much to deal with so I just...didn't.

Most of the time it was easy enough to ignore. I do like men, just so you know. Life was simpler if I just went out with men I was attracted to and ignored the women that gave me those same feelings.”

That was a lot of information to process. I guess we were really getting into it.

“I’m a lesbian. In case that wasn’t clear from my social media,” I said.

She smirked and my heart thumped harder. “Yes, I noticed. Why haven’t you ever worn that scissoring shirt to work?”

And now I was choking on my tongue. I coughed a few times as she laughed.

“I was afraid you’d seen too much on my social and I was right,” I groaned.

“Don’t worry, I thought it was funny,” she said with a smile. Fuck, she was beautiful. So damn beautiful. Her eyes weren’t violet right now, but they were blue and that was disarming enough.

“So, you’re bi. Or pan?” I asked.

She lifted one shoulder. “Bi, I guess. But does the distinction really matter?”

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Not right now it didn't. Maybe not ever, as long as she was touching me and I got to touch her.

"You're really good at pretending to be straight. Like, you could teach a class," I said, and she snorted.

"It's not something I'd recommend."

Eloise's phone startled both of us. "Shit. I have a call scheduled with Sylvia in fifteen minutes."

Right. Work. The thing we were supposed to be doing before we'd kissed.

We looked at each other at the same time.

"Am I still your assistant?" I asked.

She nodded and her hand left me. I wanted to yank it back, but I stepped away to put some breathing room between us.

"You're my assistant as long as you want to be. I know this complicates things, but I don't want this to affect your job."

For the one who was older, that sounded spectacularly naive to me.

"El, it's going to affect us. But I think we can make this work. Can we at least...try it? See what happens? I'll look for something else, but I really don't want to lose this."

I like working for you and with you.”

If working with her meant we made out during our breaks instead of drinking tea or coffee then that was fine with me.

Eloise let out a long breath and nodded. “Okay. We’ll try it. But if things get difficult, or you decide you want to be done, I’m not going to stop you.”

I didn’t want to talk about doom and gloom. I just wanted to enjoy what was happening right now.

“I understand,” I said, leaning forward and kissing her once. “Now eat your breakfast so you have something in your stomach before your call.”

\* \* \*

After her call, we had our usual meeting, but this time I ended up flirting with her a lot more than figuring out what I was supposed to be doing today.

“You have to stop,” Eloise said the third time I made her blush. She threw a pen at me and I used my notebook to deflect it.

“No way. You signed up for this, Eloise Roth. You get all of me or none of me,” I said, and she sat back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“Fine. I’ll take all of you.”

The way she said it shocked me. So easy. As if she hadn’t been having a crisis about me earlier.

“Is it weird how easy this is?” I asked. “It feels easy.”

She nodded slowly. “It does feel easy. I’m not sure why that is, but I’m trying not to question it. Maybe that makes me a bad person.”

“No,” I said immediately. “It doesn’t.”

Eloise groaned and laid her head down on her desk. “You’re making it so hard to focus right now.” Her voice was muffled.

“I’m sorry?” I said, my stomach a riot of butterflies that felt like they were going to flap so hard that I was going to levitate right out of my chair.

Eloise lifted her head. “No, you’re not. You’re not sorry at all.”

I grinned and pushed my chair back to my desk. “You’re right. I’m not.”

\* \* \*

Eloise

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Trying to work while your assistant that you had made out with sat in the same room was an exercise in torture. All I wanted to do was get up and kiss her and straddle her in that chair and do all kinds of unspeakable things but instead I had to look at copy edits and marketing plans and spreadsheets of sales numbers. None of that was remotely as interesting as Cadence.

She was happy. Practically buzzing with it. She hummed more and moved in her chair and kept throwing me flirtatious looks that stopped my heart and made me forget what the hell I'd been doing.

Cadence had taken over part of my brain and I had to use the little there was left to continue to function and it wasn't going well. I kept making typos in my emails and forgetting things and my schedule was all off and it should have had me panicking, but instead I kept thinking about the wisps of hair on Cadence's neck and what the hollow of her throat would taste like and what sounds she made when she came.

Lunchtime came and I ordered in instead of making sandwiches.

"Does this mean I can raid your fridge now?" Cadence asked when I fetched the takeout bags.

"You've been able to take anything from my fridge for a while, Cade," I said. I liked the way her nickname tasted when I said it now. It was growing on me. Guess I'd have to keep saying it over and over.

"Is that so?" she asked. "Well, I didn't know that. So you're telling me, if I were to say, take this ice cream and eat the whole pint, that would be allowed?"



She held the pint up and peeled off the top.

“If you eat all my ice cream without sharing with me, I’m not going to be thrilled,” I said, moving closer to her.

“Oh, I’ll share. A bite.”

I pushed her up against the fridge, pinning her with my hips and my hands on either side of her face.

She let out a little gasp and bit her bottom lip as I crowded her.

“Don’t you dare eat all my ice cream, Cade.”

“God, you’re so sexy,” she said in a soft voice.

“Am I?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Yeah, you are. Completely and totally. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that before?”

I plucked the ice cream from her fingers and set it on the counter, not caring if it melted.

“Yes, but I guess I never really believed them,” I said.

“Shit, El. That’s bleak.”

Cadence ran her hands through my hair and then grabbed my chin, pulling me down for a searing kiss that made my head spin and forget whatever the hell we’d been talking about.

“I’ll just have to remind you every day.”

Remind me of what?

\* \* \*

We somehow made it through the day without any major distractions, but the sense of dread that pooled in my stomach got more and more intense as the time ticked closer to when she would leave. Sure, she’d be here tomorrow, but I didn’t want her to leave. The house would be too quiet without her in it.

“I know that technically I’m not on the clock anymore, so does that mean I can take off my assistant hat and put on a different one?” Cadence asked as she packed up her bag.

“You can wear whatever kind of hat you want,” I said. “I bet you look great in hats.”

She snorted and set her bag on the floor. “Oh, I do.”

“Do you want to stay for dinner?” I blurted out.

Her face broke into a gorgeous smile. “I was going to ask but I didn’t want to be presumptuous. This is uncharted territory for me.”

It was uncharted for both of us.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“I didn’t want to pressure you, but if you want to stay, then you’re welcome.”

Cadence looked down at her clothes. “I wish I’d brought something more casual to change into. I didn’t know what was going to happen when I was packing my bag for today.”

I got up from my chair. “I can find you something if you don’t mind wearing my clothes.”

Cadence followed me out of the office. “I wouldn’t mind at all.”

\* \* \*

An hour later I was plating some salmon and rice and asparagus for both of us and couldn’t stop looking at Cadence wearing a pair of my old sweatpants that I wore when I was on my period and needed to be comfortable and a T-shirt that I’d gotten in a gift bag at a romance convention.

Both items were big on her, but she’d rolled up the pants and had tied a knot in the T-shirt and she looked so good that I had to stop myself from picking her up and setting her on the counter and kissing the hell out of her.

I also didn’t miss that she kept tucking her chin into the shoulder and smelling the shirt. As if she was smelling my scent on it.

“This is perfect, thanks. I can cook too, if you ever want to let me destroy your kitchen. I can be a bit of a mess.”

“You? Messy? No,” I said, setting a plate in front of her.

“Hey, come on now,” she said, but she was grinning as she set her napkin in her lap and picked up a fork. I’d also changed into yoga pants and a tank to be more comfortable with her, and I might have chosen a shirt that showed a little skin and fit me well to see if she’d notice.

She noticed.

“You don’t mind my mess, though, right?” she asked, cutting a bite of salmon very carefully with her fork as I poured us each a glass of wine.

She looked up and I saw the question in her eyes.

“No, Cade. I don’t mind your mess. I don’t mind any part of you.”

It took a second, but she smiled and then her face got serious. “I, um, have ADHD. It’s part of the reason for the mess and for me forgetting things and needing so many lists and all that.”

I nodded after having a bite of salmon. I’d seasoned it just right, even with Cadence distracting me by wearing my clothes.

“I figured you had something going on. When were you diagnosed?”

She told me that she’d gotten her diagnosis as a kid and how difficult it could be to get consistent medication.

“I’m not on anything right now. Is that a problem for you?” I could tell this was something she’d worried a lot about.

“I like you as you are, Cade. Exactly as you are. You’ve been working for me for a month and a half, and you’ve been doing a great job. Do you feel like you need something? Because if you want to make a change that will make your life better, I support that. Whatever you need.”

She was silent for a moment before getting up from her chair and walking over to give me an unexpected kiss.

“Thank you,” she said before going back to her seat and pulling one of her knees up to get more comfortable on the chair.

\* \* \*

Dinner together was easy. We tumbled into conversation, me telling her about my first book tour and how overwhelming it had been, and her giving a rundown of all her worst jobs. She’d had many.

“I’m not good at staying with one thing. I get bored, or the company ‘restructures,’ or something else goes wrong and I end up filling out applications again. At this point, I feel like I could coach people on cover letters. Thank you for not making me write one, by the way.”

I stood and took the plates to the dishwasher and Cadence rose to help.

“It seemed more important to find out if my potential assistant was a reader instead,” I told her, washing my hands.

Cadence nodded. “Makes sense.” She leaned her back on the counter next to me. “Shall we have dessert?”

“I don’t have any cake, but we can share the ice cream you almost melted earlier.”

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I brushed my hand along her stomach as I walked to the freezer to get the ice cream and was satisfied when she inhaled sharply.

Being able to touch her like this was intoxicating.

I started to open the door, but a hand darted out to push it closed as Cadence pressed up against me.

This time it was my breath that caught.

“For someone who’s never done this kind of thing, you’re very good at it,” she said against the back of my neck as goosebumps broke out on my skin. Warm lips brushed the top of my spine as I let out an involuntary noise and she laughed against me.

Before I could say a thing, she had wrenched me around and pressed my back against the fridge.

“What if I told you I was less interested in dessert and more interested in you?” she asked.

Why was it so hard to breathe? I couldn’t seem to pull enough oxygen into my lungs. I had never felt like this.

Wrapping my fingers in her shirt, I dragged her even closer.

“I’d say that I agree with you. They were out of my favorite ice cream at the store so I had to get my second choice anyway.”

“Oh, so you like me more than second-choice ice cream?” she said, brushing my hair back.

“I like you more than first-choice ice cream,” I said, and it was the truth. I liked her, maybe more than I’d liked anyone before. I sifted through my romantic past trying to remember if any connection before had been this electric. No. Not even close.

Was it because she was a woman, or was it because of who she was? Did it matter?

“Such flattery,” Cadence said, and I reached back to pull the elastic out of her ponytail. I’d been desperate to get my hands in her hair since the day we’d met.

“I’m obsessed with your hair,” I blurted out. I seemed to lose all of my composure when I was with her. Wrapping my fingers around a few strands, I watched how they shone in the light.

“What other parts of me are you obsessed with?” she asked.

“Your freckles, definitely. Completely.”

She grinned. “Which ones? Do you have any favorites?”

I tilted my head to the side, looking her over. “Well, I haven’t seen all of them yet, so I can’t truly make a decision.”

She blushed. Cadence was so cute when her emotions showed all over her face and chest and ears. There was something glorious about a person who couldn’t possibly hide what she was thinking.

“That’s a very forward thing to say for someone you just admitted liking this morning.” Her fingers stroked the sides of my waist, messing with the fabric of my

shirt.

“Well, I do have some practice writing romantic lines, you know,” I said, and she burst out laughing.

“Yeah, you’re right. I forgot who I was dealing with. You’re actually a pro.”

I shook my head. “Not really.” The heat of her body was seeping through my clothes and making me feel like I was sinking into a warm bath.

“Cade?” I said and I wasn’t even sure why I said her name or what I was asking.

“Yes, Eloise,” she said, a smirk in her voice. She was good at this. She’d done this before. It made me feel a shiver of uncertainty.

“I’d really like to kiss you,” I said.

Her smile was slow and sweet. “Go ahead, El.”

Taking her chin, I tilted her head up and captured her mouth. It was even better than earlier. Her lips were hot and insistent as she plastered me to the fridge and devoured me. I kept making sounds that I’d never heard myself make and reaching and demanding and needing more of her.

I was out of my mind from a kiss. From her kiss.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

There was a fine line to walk between just a kiss and a kiss that was leading to something else, and I could feel Cadence rushing toward the second, so I grabbed the back of her neck and sought control. We didn't need to burn through everything at once. There was something to be said for sinking into the moment and appreciating where you were.

"Slow," I said into her mouth. "There's no rush, Cade."

Her eyes flew open as she panted. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. I just think that whatever this is, we should savor it. We have time," I said, still playing with her hair and massaging the back of her neck. Why did I love holding her there?

She blinked a few times and licked her lips, which made me want to kiss her all over again.

"None of this feels real, I guess," she said. "So I want to grab onto it with both hands and just... I don't want to wake up tomorrow and have this be a really good dream I had."

I stroked her face. "It's real, Cadence. I don't know how, but it is."

### Chapter Seventeen

Cade

In less than twenty-four hours, everything had changed. Eloise and I kissed in her kitchen for what felt like forever and I almost asked if she wanted to take things upstairs, but every time things got more heated, she took control and I melted and let her. It made sense that she would want to take things slower, since this was the first time she'd done anything with a woman.

I was known for being impulsive, and that extended to going further than I might have in the moment because things felt so damn good and I lost all my rules and common sense.

"Aren't you sick of me yet?" I asked as we sat on the couch together. I should go home, and she should tell me to go home, but here I was. Still in her house and still wearing her clothes.

We'd eventually gotten out the ice cream and were sharing the pint back and forth. It was the expensive shit, and I really did want to eat the whole thing myself.

"No," Eloise said, her feet tucked up on the couch as we leaned into each other. "It's nice having you here without work standing between us."

That was true. This unstructured time where there were no rules or responsibilities and we could just have time together to talk about anything. So much better than sending silly messages back and forth.

"When did you come out?" she asked as she combed her fingers through my hair. I had quickly gotten the impression that she liked my hair, so I was going to start wearing it down more often for her.

"Junior high. My friends were just starting to get boyfriends and talk about crushes and I realized that I didn't have any of those kinds of thoughts about boys, but I sure did about girls. I ended up having a huge crush for like two years on one of my

straight friends. I only got over it after she moved away. Sometimes I think about looking her up online and seeing what she's doing now."

Eloise set the empty ice cream container aside and took my spoon from me, moving closer until she was almost in my lap.

"And your family was good with it?" she asked.

I leaned my head against the couch. "Yeah, they were. It wasn't very dramatic. And then I had my first girlfriend and took her to prom and we were in a pretty progressive town, even though it was small."

Eloise frowned. "It was different. When I was growing up. I know you don't like to think about the years between us, but things were different. I only knew one or two people out at my high school and they were pariahs. Even if I'd been able to figure out my feelings back then, coming out would have been a huge mistake."

I took her hand and squeezed it. "That sucks. I'm sorry it wasn't safe for you."

She shrugged, but I could feel the pain radiating off her.

"You don't talk about your family," I said, trying to keep my voice gentle.

"We're not really in contact. I kind of...let that part of my past go when I became Eloise Roth."

I sat up. "Wait, is Eloise Roth not your real name?" That was quite the revelation.

"Eloise is my real first name, but my last name was Ross until I changed it to Roth."

I gaped at her. "For real?"

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Huh. Yeah, Eloise Roth is much better.” I couldn’t believe she had told me that.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“So now I know your birthday and your original last name. You’re giving me all kinds of secrets here, El,” I said.

She leaned close and crowded me, scrambling my thoughts.

“Maybe you could give me some of your secrets in return,” she said.

I snorted. “Honestly, I’m not good at secrets. I’ll tell people anything.” It was true. Sometimes when I got going, words would just fall out of my mouth and I’d end up telling a complete stranger I’d just met about something they definitely didn’t need to know.

“You must have some secrets,” she said, her fingers dipping to stroke the collar of my shirt.

“Mmmmm, maybe. What are you going to do to get me to tell?” I asked. Fuck, I loved being able to talk to her like this. To not hold back on all the dirty and horny things I wanted to say to her.

Eloise groaned and rested her head on my shoulder. “It’s getting late. You should go. Don’t want to keep my assistant up too late.”

She was right, but I hated it.

“I’ll bring your clothes back after I’ve washed them,” I lied. She was never getting these back. I was keeping them.

I had to get my bag from the office and slung it over my shoulder as she followed me to the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, playing with the strap on my bag and my keys.

“Until tomorrow, Cade,” she said, leaning down and giving me the softest kiss that was more like a brush of her lips against mine. A quick flutter before she pulled back. “Drive safe. Let me know when you get home.”

“I will,” I said, licking my lips so I could have one last taste of her. “See you tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

Made it home in one piece, but I’m not happy about it. Your house is nicer I sent when I made it back to my place. Saying that Eloise’s house was nicer was like saying a five-star resort was nicer than a shady motel off the highway that may or may not be a front for something illegal.

But my apartment did have more haunted items than her house did, so that was something.

I’m glad you’re safe, but not glad you’re not here. The house is too quiet without you. I hate it. She sent. The fact that someone missed my noise was almost hilarious, but she’d told me that plenty of times before. That she liked the way I was.

But does your house have this? I asked, sending her a picture of an unsettling pottery vase that I’d bought and was definitely haunted.

I certainly hope not! That’s the ugliest vase I’ve ever seen. No offense. She responded.

I could always bring it with me tomorrow I replied. I wouldn't, but I liked riling her up. It was too much fun.

Eloise and I continued to argue and flirt back and forth until I had to take a shower and get ready for bed.

Her last message to me was a voice note and I played it over and over so I could hear her voice.

"I know it's silly to say this, but I miss you and I can't wait to see you tomorrow, Cade. Sleep well."

\* \* \*

Getting ready the next morning made me giddy, and going to pick up our breakfast made me giddy, and by the time I pulled into her driveway I was practically vibrating with the need to see her.

Sickening behavior.

The minute her door opened, I almost flung the coffee and bag to the floor so I could grab her, but then I remembered that would make a mess and ruin our breakfast.

"Hi," I said, smiling so hard that it made my cheeks hurt.

"Hi," she said, holding the door open. "I was, um, waiting for you."

Usually I let myself in, but today she'd met me at the door, and it was nice I wasn't the only one who was a complete disaster about someone.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I just rushed past her to the kitchen, dropping everything and then pulling her into my arms and kissing her before she could say anything else.

Eloise let out a little sound of surprise before wrapping her arms around me and moaning into my mouth. Desire buzzed in my veins and all I wanted was to push her down on the couch and show her how much I'd missed her, but that wasn't what a good assistant would do. No, I had to show some restraint. I couldn't be completely hands off, but I could at least not ravish her before she'd had her morning coffee.

"Cade," she said, but her voice was a groan. "We can't spend the whole day making out."

"Why not?" I said and she gave me a look and then I was the one groaning.

"Okay, I know." She could have made a rule that we weren't allowed to kiss at all during work hours and she hadn't, so that was something.

"Your coffee, my dear," I said, presenting her with the cup.

"Thank you, Cadence," she said as we both sat together, but I yanked my chair closer.

"Decided to wear your hair down today?" she asked, and I was pleased that she'd noticed.

"I did. Someone seems to have a thing for my hair," I said, flipping some of it over my shoulder.



“I might. A little bit,” she said, holding her thumb and forefinger a little bit apart.

“I think it’s more than a little bit,” I said.

She exhaled and twisted a few strands between her fingers. “You caught me. Apparently I have a weakness for women with red hair. One in particular.”

“Is it me? I hope it’s me.”

She glared and I laughed as I unwrapped my sandwich.

“Yes, Cade, it’s you.”

\* \* \*

“I can’t work under these conditions,” Eloise said a few hours later when I’d gotten up to ask her something and instead had started massaging and kissing the back of her neck.

“Sorry not sorry,” I said, placing a kiss on the side of her neck and stopping myself before I took it too far. Hickeys during work hours were definitely not allowed.

“Cadeeeeee,” she said, drawing my name out. “I’m not going to get anything done if you keep doing that.”

I stood up and forced myself to take a step back. “Okay, okay. I’ll behave. I’ll be good.”

She let out a sound of disbelief and swiveled her chair around and faced me.

“I don’t believe that for a second, but, I think we need to put up some boundaries.”

Shit. That was what I was afraid of.

“No kissing during work hours, I get it,” I said, mad at myself for pushing too far.

Eloise put her hands on the arms of her chair.

“I didn’t say not kissing during work hours. Do you want to not kiss during work hours?”

“No, I definitely want to kiss during work hours. But maybe we can keep the kisses brief? And no neck stuff. Or removing clothing,” I said, hating every word but knowing that having some boundaries was a good thing.

Eloise nodded slowly. “That’s wise.”

“It is.”

I stepped between her legs and looked down at her gorgeous face. “Your eyes are amazing. I’m sure everyone has told you that already.”

She blinked. “People have mentioned it. I’ve been called Elizabeth Taylor once or twice.”

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Who?” I said, pretending not to know.

Eloise glared and I laughed.

“I know who that is, El. I was just messing with you.”

Unable to stop, I stroked my fingers through her dark hair as she leaned into me.

“You’re a menace,” she said.

“You’ve told me that before.”

Eloise sighed. “You’re going to have to stop doing that. I need to get this chapter finished.”

I also had a million things to do. My libido couldn’t get in the way of doing my job.

“You’re right.” I let her go and went back to my chair and put my headphones on.

\* \* \*

For the first time ever, Eloise let me make lunch. It was just a basic chopped salad with some leftover chicken and dressing she’d already made, but I was still pretty proud of myself when I dished it up.

“This is nice,” Eloise said as we ate on the porch. I really did love eating lunch with her every day.

“Hopefully it’s okay,” I said, getting nervous.

Eloise filled her plate and took a bite and I waited as she chewed. She didn’t choke or spit anything out or make a face when she swallowed.

“Very good,” she said, and I thought she was overselling it a bit but I’d take it.

“So,” I said as I added more salad to my plate, “what are your plans this weekend?”

Eloise sipped her iced tea and looked at me over the rim of her glass.

“I was thinking we could go on a date. If that’s something you might be interested in?” Her voice was hesitant, as if she wasn’t sure she should be asking.

“Hell yeah, I want to go on a date,” I said. “I was going to ask you, but you did it first.”

I’d thought about what we could do together, and I didn’t have any good ideas, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to ask her.

“Would you like me to plan it?” she asked. “Or you could. Sorry, I’m out of my depth.”

I reached my hand out and stroked her arm. “You’re doing pretty well so far. And you can absolutely plan this one. I’ll do the next one.”

Eloise nodded. “That seems fair. Is there anything you want to do in particular?”

I wanted to say “you,” but it was absolutely too early for that, so I didn’t.

“I’m cool with anything. As long as you’re there and there’s food. And cake. There

has to be cake.”

Eloise put up one finger. “Me, food, cake.” She added two more fingers. “I think we can handle that.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Eloise

A date. I was taking Cadence on a date. I’d planned to hang out with Camille and the family this weekend, so on Friday I went over for dinner and had to tell her that my Saturday was booked. I’d wanted to stay with Cadence, but she already had plans with her friends and we were new to navigating this whole thing together.

We’d decided not to tell people yet, since it was so fresh.

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“You are glowing,” Camille said when I arrived at the house. “Are you doing something new?”

Somehow I held back a hysterical laugh. “Sort of?”

Her eyes lit up. “Ohhh, tell me.” Now that I had an assistant, I’d been hanging out with Camille less during the day and I had missed her so much.

“I’m going on a date this weekend,” I said, and she hugged me so hard that I could barely breathe.

“You met someone! Tell me, tell me. I want to know everything about him,” she said, and I hesitated. It was one thing to not tell Camille who I was dating, but I couldn’t hide that I was dating a woman.

“Where are the kids?” I asked instead of answering her.

“John took them to grab dinner. They’ll be here in a few. Is everything okay?”

“Yes?” I said, and it sounded like a question. “Yes. Everything is okay. I just have to tell you something.”

I couldn’t meet Camille’s eyes as she led me to the living room and sat me down on the couch, taking both my hands in hers. Her concern was palpable and it made me feel a little sick.

“It’s nothing bad, I promise,” I said. “Just something new, I guess?”

“You can tell me anything, El. Anything.” Her grip on my hands was almost painful.

“I’m not going out with a man. It’s a woman.” I braced for a reaction and gasped when Camille hugged me so hard that I couldn’t inhale fully.

“Camille,” I managed to say, “too tight.”

“Sorry!” She let me go and sat back, tears sparkling in her eyes. “I’m just...I’m so happy and proud and I love you and I knew this day was coming, but I feel like I’m saying all the wrong things.”

“What?” I said, surprised at her words. “What are you talking about?”

“El, I know you.” She stared into my eyes and I felt myself blushing.

“You knew I’m...” I trailed off. The word bisexual stuck in my throat. Still too difficult to say out loud.

“Yeah, I knew.” I wasn’t sure what to do with this information.

“And you never said anything?”

Camille gave me one of her warm smiles. “I didn’t want to say anything. I mean, should I have? I guess I just...thought you’d figure it out. Eventually.”

She had the grace to look a little sheepish.

“Cam, I’m literally forty-one. When was I going to figure this out?”

She was about to say something when the door opened and there were the kids and John, and Camille said, “we are talking about this later.”

\* \* \*

It wasn't until the kids were in bed and Camille had given John a look that he left us in the living room again and said he was going to go do laundry.

"Finally," Camille said, scooting closer with a glass of wine in her hand. "Tell me how it happened."

I blew out a long breath. "I met someone. She's...interesting and funny and gorgeous and I guess I couldn't hold back those feelings anymore. Everything hit me so hard and most of the time it doesn't feel real and it's new and I'm terrified and Cam, I've never felt this way before."

The words tumbled out of my mouth one after the other and I couldn't stop them. Somehow I managed to shut up before I told her that the woman was my incredible assistant that was also several years younger.

"Oh, El," she said, hugging me more gently this time. "I love this for you."

"You do?"



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

She nodded and set her wine down. “I do. I’ve always known that you were hiding that part of yourself and I wondered if you’d ever act on it. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

I’d never been this way before.

“I have no idea what I’m doing here, Camille. It’s uncharted territory. We’re going on a date tomorrow and I don’t even know what to do with her.” All of my insecurities came spilling out and Camille talked me through all of it and told me everything I needed to hear. She knew all the right words to say and even helped me come up with what to do with Cadence.

It was on the edge of my tongue to tell her who the woman I was going on a date with was, but I couldn’t make the words come out. I didn’t want her to judge me or tell me it was a bad idea.

By the time I went home, I felt much better, but even more nervous for my first date with Cadence.

\* \* \*

I insisted on picking her up, since I was the one who had planned the day. We’d been talking all morning, but my heart thumped a little faster when she appeared from behind the door to her building as I waited in the car.

“Hello, gorgeous,” she said, getting in and kissing me until I forgot whatever the hell we were supposed to be doing.

“Hi,” I said, and she grinned at me.

“You look amazing.”

I’d put on a casual yellow flowered dress that I usually wore when I hung out with Camille and the kids.

She’d asked what she should wear, and I told her that she might be warm, so she’d put on a pair of shorts and the scissoring T-shirt that I’d seen on her social media.

“Thought this was appropriate now,” she said, looking down at it.

“You are shameless,” I said, laughing as someone honked behind me. I pulled out of the spot and onto the street, heading for the highway.

“Just a little bit. So hey, where are we going?” She dumped her bag in the backseat and turned in her seat to face me.

“It’s a surprise. Are you okay with it being a surprise?”

I glanced over while we sat at a red light.

“I suppose,” she said, but I could feel her tense energy.

After looking over again, I realized she was not so down with the surprises, judging by how many times she’d cracked her knuckles already.

“We’re going to the place that inspired my first book. It’s a cute little town that I’d hang out in on the weekends sometimes in college. I wanted to show you around and take you to lunch. Does that work?” I asked.

I could hear her smiling next to me.

“Yeah, that sounds amazing. I’m honored that you’d want to share that with me.”

Cadence reached over and stroked my arm and I flashed her a smile. “Check the glovebox.”

She pulled it open and found the snacks that I’d stashed in there.

“It’s not cake, but I figured it would do in a pinch,” I said as I took the exit to go North. We were actually going to the town where I’d gone to college, but Cadence didn’t know that part yet. I hadn’t been back in ages, but it would be fun to show her around. Even if it might make me feel ancient compared to her. She’d graduated college not that long ago and for me it felt like two lifetimes had passed since then.

Cadence fed me snacks and insisted that I put on the radio at least, and pumped gas when we stopped and kept me entertained with her wild and creative mind.

We reached the campus of the college and it was almost like stepping back in time. It was a small school, but prestigious. I’d gone here on a full scholarship, but I’d had to pay for my housing after freshman year, and all my other expenses. It had been a frantic, uncertain time in my life and while I did have some good memories, like those times spent writing, a lot of it was a blur.

I parked in the little downtown area and got out.

“It’s so cute,” Cadence said. “Did you go to school here?”

I nodded. “I did. Long time ago.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Cadence rolled her eyes and got her bag out of the backseat. “You’re not that old, El. Stop acting like you have one foot in the grave.”

My age really didn’t seem to bother her. I thought about arguing, but that wasn’t how I wanted to spend our time together.

We started walking and before I knew what was happening, Cadence had slipped her hand into mine as if it was something we had always done. I braided my fingers with hers and it was like nearly everything else we had done so far together: easy.

Cadence listened as I took her around campus and pointed out the buildings where I’d had my classes, and I took her to the apartments I’d lived in, and then to the café where I’d sat to do my homework or write sometimes. It had changed hands since then, but it still looked the same inside.

“Hungry?” I asked her.

“Yeah, definitely.”

We sat in a booth together and after a moment of sitting on the opposite side, Cadence got up and slid in next to me.

“You were too far away,” she said, reaching up and stroking the side of my face.

For a second, my heart leapt to my throat and I worried about people saying something about us being together.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Cadence said, stroking me again.

After a quick visual sweep of the café, I realized she was right. No one was paying attention to us.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. I know this is new. You’re going to be a little jumpy. Plus, you have that added layer of worrying if anyone is going to recognize you.”

Shit. I hadn’t even been thinking about that until she’d said it.

A server interrupted us and we ended up ordering. The place did have cake, which Cadence ordered, along with her chicken sandwich and fries. I stuck to the huge chef’s salad. It wasn’t the same as the one I’d eaten in college, but I didn’t expect it to be. It was still delicious.

After we ate, we walked around and ducked into some of the shops.

“How did you get the courage to write your first book?” Cadence asked. We’d taken a detour through the park and I couldn’t let go of her hand.

“It wasn’t courage so much as delusion?” I said, and she laughed and pulled me up the steps into the little gazebo that sat at the center of the grass.

“Eloise Roth, I think you’re pretty fucking brave,” she said, pressing up on her toes and kissing me.

I didn’t feel brave, but it was nice to hear from her. Maybe if she said it enough times I’d believe it.

## Chapter Nineteen

Cade

I hadn't expected her to show me so much of her past so soon, but the way things had gone with us was anything but ordinary. We seemed to be forging our own path.

After we'd walked around some more, Eloise drove us to a bakery so I could get whatever cake I wanted. They actually had a cake tasting plate, like people do for weddings that you could order, and I was all over that.

As usual, the red velvet was my favorite. Eloise adored the carrot cake, which I liked, but wasn't the best.

I hadn't taken any pictures of the two of us until now, but I held my phone out as I kissed her cheek and snapped a few. I'd also snuck a few shots when she wasn't looking. She was beautiful today in her dress, and I had to keep reminding myself that she was with me. She had chosen me.

If I let myself think about that too much, I feared that I would float away, too full of happiness.

Being with her made my pulse race and my skin ache and everything was brighter and better, and it was almost too much but I wanted to drown in it.

Drown in her.

"Stop looking at me like that," she said when we left the bakery with more cake packaged to go.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I pushed her up against the door of the car, careful not to let the cake drop.

“Never,” I said before I brought my mouth to hers and kissed her until we were both gasping and short of breath.

\* \* \*

“I have an idea,” I said as we were driving back.

“What’s that?” she asked, turning the radio down. I simply could not ride in silence and she’d tolerated the music so far.

“Since this is your first time dating a woman, I was wondering if you wanted to do all the classic kinds of dates. The movies, bowling, mini golf, arcade. What do you think?” I asked, looking up from my phone.

“Oh,” she said.

“It’s a silly idea,” I said, wishing I hadn’t opened my mouth.

“No, it’s not a silly idea at all, Cade.” She reached across and squeezed my leg.  
“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, there just so happens to be a community movie night a few miles from here. You have to bring your own blanket and chairs and so forth, but they have a huge screen and they sell popcorn and snacks and there’s a food truck.”

Eloise smiled. “What movie is playing?”

“Sleepless in Seattle. A classic.” It was also about a reporter, I remembered. I’d seen it ages ago at a sleepover.

Eloise let out a sigh. “I really love that movie.”

“You want to go?” I asked. “I know you planned this date, but...”

Eloise beamed at me. “Yes, I want to go. What’s the address?”

\* \* \*

The movie wasn’t for another hour, so we had time to kill. Eloise took us to the nearest big box store to get chairs and blankets and more snacks in addition to the cake we already had.

“They always raise the prices. I’ve been sneaking my own candy and popcorn into movie theaters forever.” Her frugality made me laugh, but they did have a good selection of candy and Eloise told me to get anything and everything I wanted, filling a reusable bag.

“This seems like a lot of stuff for one date,” I said when we arrived at the venue to find our spot.

There were already tons of people who had laid out blankets and set out chairs, and kids running around and chasing each other. The night was warm, but not muggy. Eloise had got us bug spray and insisted on dousing me when we got out of the car. It was sweet, so I let her do it.

We carried our stuff and found a spot that wasn’t too far from the screen but gave us



a little more privacy.

“I wouldn’t have thought to do this,” Eloise said, setting up her chair. I put mine right next to hers and wished that we had a bigger one so we could share. “You’ve got all kinds of good ideas, Cade.”

“Sometimes I do. Sometimes they blow up in my face.” That happened a lot.

I laid one of the blankets on her lap even though it wasn’t chilly yet. I didn’t want her to get cold.

Eloise reached up and pulled me down to kiss me quickly. “Thank you for this. I know I’m not good with spontaneous things, but this is good.”

I kissed her again, wishing I could crawl into her lap and wrap her arms around me so we could snuggle together.

Eloise made a little grumpy sound and pulled back. “I thought these chairs were a good idea, but I think if we both try to use one they’ll break.”

Had she read my mind?

Eloise stood and helped me make a nest of the blankets instead, laying back and patting the spot next to her. I lay down, and she put her arm around me, pulling me closer.

“Is this better?” I asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I felt her lips against my hair. “Much better.”

\* \* \*

We did try to watch the movie. We really did. But then one of us would kiss the other one and before we knew it, we were making out and having to stop so we didn’t get arrested or yelled at for doing anything to traumatize the people around us.

“You have to stop doing that,” Eloise said in a low voice that punched every single one of my buttons.

“Doing what?” I asked, nuzzling her nose with mine. My hand had been creeping her dress higher and higher on her leg under the blanket.

“You know what,” Eloise said, putting her hand on mine to make me stop. “We can’t. Not here.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. This idea had been good at first and now it was biting me in the ass. I wish she were biting my ass instead.

“I know,” I said, looking up at the sky. I’d absolutely lost the plot of the movie. This would have been a much better date idea if I wasn’t so goddamn horny for her, but that was a feeling that wasn’t going away and had only increased to unbearable levels.

She was so fucking sexy and I wanted her so much that I could feel it in my teeth. The ache that had taken up residence between my legs was so distracting that I didn’t

know what to do about it.

“The movie is almost over,” she said. But then we had to drive back, and it was at least a half an hour. Would I last that long? Could you die from being too horny? Certainly felt like I could right now.

Eloise got out her phone and I wondered what she was doing.

She tapped a few times and then turned to me, grinning at me in the dark.

“I just booked us a room at a hotel nearby. Is that okay?”

“Oh my god, you are amazing.” I kissed her again, but yanked myself back from full-on making out with her.

“I know you didn’t plan for this to be an overnight,” she said, and I could tell she was nervous.

“I don’t care. I just want to be with you,” I said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it.

“As much as I love this movie, I’d rather be with you more,” she said in a low voice.

I closed my eyes and thanked whatever lucky stars or fates had led me to this moment.

“Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Eloise

The night had taken a completely unexpected turn, but it felt right. Walking into the hotel after we'd bailed on the movie with Cadence's hand in mine was so right that I didn't know what I'd been doing with my life until this point.

I checked us in, got two keys and the minute the doors in the elevator closed and we were alone, I pushed her up against the wall and started kissing her the way I'd wanted to during the movie.

It was only for a moment, because the doors opened on our floor and I'd rather be alone in our room with her than in an elevator. I pulled her by the hand down the hall as she followed me, a little dazed. I guess I was better at this than I'd thought.

Swiping the room key with a shaking hand, I shoved the door open and did a quick scan of the room before turning and locking the door.

"El," Cadence said, putting a hand on my arm and squeezing it. "I know this is all happening really fast, but I just want to make sure that you know we don't have to do anything."

I nodded. "I know. And the same goes for you. This is a two-way street. I don't have any expectations either."

She nodded and walked over to the large bed, sitting down on the edge.

I put my bag down and joined her. By this point I knew her well enough to know when her thoughts were spinning, and she needed to let them settle before she spoke.

"I just need to get this out there," she said, turning so she was facing me. "I want you. Like, really want you. But I'm willing to wait. Or not wait. Or whatever you need. I'm on board for this. For all of it. Today has been absolutely amazing and I want to keep it going. I want... God, I want everything. I want you to meet my friends and

see my awful apartment and I want to tell my parents and my sister about you. Whatever this is, El, I'm in. I'm all in."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

I reeled from her words. They were so much more than I thought she would say.

“Wow, Cadence.”

She went completely red and hid her head in her hands. “I’m sorry. That was too much. I said too much.”

I reached up to pull her hands away from her face. “No, Cade. No. It wasn’t too much. I feel the same way. I had dinner with Camille on Friday and I told her I was dating a woman and I had to stop myself from telling her about you, because I want to tell everyone about you and how wonderful you are. Before I met you, my life had been this lifeless, boring routine. I controlled every minute out of fear and it was working for me. At least I thought it was. But then you showed up and it was like opening my eyes and seeing everything in technicolor. You’re so bright and sweet and wild and unexpected and it’s exactly what I needed. You’re what I want, Cadence.”

Her smile was so radiant that I thought it was going to break my heart.

“How is this real?” she asked, voice full of awe.

“I don’t know. But I’m glad that it is. That you are.” I pulled her face to me and kissed her gently. Slowly. We had all night. We had the time.

It took me a moment to notice that she was trembling.

“Cade? Are you okay?” I searched her eyes.

She swallowed and nodded. “Yeah. I just...I want you. So much. It’s killing me.”

Her voice was unsteady.

I wasn’t feeling all that steady myself. Desire had set up camp in certain parts of my body in a way that I hadn’t felt for a long time. Maybe never.

“I don’t... I don’t know what I’m doing,” I said.

Cadence shook her head. “It’s okay. You’ll figure it out. And I’ll help you.”

Suddenly the idea of Cadence teaching me erotic lessons was something I very much wanted.

I stood up and took off my shoes. She kicked hers off and moved back on the bed, watching me the whole time.

“Um, just so you know, I’m kind of...a switch? I guess? If you want me to take the lead, I can. Or I can let you explore. Either way, I’m good with what we do.”

I nodded. I’d done a very small bit of internet research, but none of that could tell you how you’d feel in the moment.

“I think,” I said, licking my lips. “I think I’d like to explore you.”

Cadence looked up at me with eyes glowing with desire. “Yeah, you can definitely do that. Fuck, yes.”

I crawled onto the bed and looked down at her.

“You’re truly beautiful, Cade. And I want to see all of your freckles.”

With one hand, I pushed at her shirt and she sat up so I could pull it over her head. She had a basic bra on underneath, and I traced the outline of it.

So many freckles. It would be impossible to count them all.

“Want me to?” she asked, and I nodded as she reached behind and undid the clasp in back.

I slid the straps down her arms and then the bra was falling away from her and revealing so much glorious skin that it made my mouth water.

“Mmmmm,” I breathed out, taking her in. “So perfect.”

I seized her mouth and kissed her hard, pressing her back into the bed as I straddled her legs. She was already pushing up into me, seeking more friction and contact.

Her skin was blazing hot as I kissed and licked and tasted my way down her throat and neck and collarbone, veering directly to her breasts, which were full and lush and exactly right.

“Perfect,” I moaned as I landed little kisses on her breasts, avoiding her nipples as she held my head and tried to steer me toward them.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

“Cadence,” I said in a chiding tone. “You said I could explore.” She let out a little whimpering noise. “Are you going to be a good girl and let me do that?”

Where had that come from? I didn’t know, but watching and hearing Cadence’s response was electric.

She arched into me and let out such a sweet desperate noise that I decided it would be my mission to get her to make that sound as many times as possible.

Cadence didn’t release her grip on my head, but she did stop trying to control me, so I took my time. I wanted to make this last. Tease her and torture her until she was absolutely begging. There was still an edge of uncertainty, but I knew I’d find my way. I’d find what she liked and then I’d hesitate to give it to her until she screamed for it.

“You’re so gorgeous. Wanted you from the moment I saw you,” I said, flicking one of her nipples with my tongue. The tiniest touch, but it made her whole body jerk. Her eyes were dilated, and she was restless beneath me.

“Harder,” she gasped out.

“I will, Cade. I will. But not yet,” I said, and she groaned. “It will be worth the wait.” Big words to live up to, but I was determined. This was going to be good for her. Good for both of us.

So gently, I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, barely touching it with my tongue. Her nails dug into my scalp and she tried to buck her hips into mine, but I had

her pressed down into the bed.

“Mmmmm, you taste so good, Cade,” I said, flicking her nipple harder and then sucking it back into my mouth with a little more force.

“Fuck, El,” she said, her words barely coherent. “Feels good.”

I laughed. “I’m glad.”

Taking my time, I alternated what kind of contact I gave her nipple before giving the same attention to the other, making her curse and writhe and beg me to touch her.

I still hadn’t taken my dress off and it was starting to feel like it was strangling me, so I sat up.

“Want me to take my dress off?” I asked her.

“Yeah. Fuck, yeah,” Cadence said, licking her lips.

I lifted the hem and then pulled it over my head. I hadn’t been wearing a bra underneath and her eyes went wide when she saw me.

I had insecurities as much as the next person, especially since my body had a few more miles on it, but when Cadence looked up at me with fire in her eyes, I felt beautiful.

“I’ve been dreaming about this,” she said, fluttering her fingers across my belly.

“And how does reality stack up to the dream?” I asked, trying not to worry about the answer.

“Better. This is better,” she said, nodding emphatically. “Fuck, you’re so hot, El. Can I see the rest of you?”

We both only wore our bottoms.

I rolled onto my back beside her and hooked my fingers in the waistband of my bottoms.

“Take them off at the same time?” I asked, feeling a little silly. But then Cadence grinned and copied me.

“One, two, three,” she said and we both yanked our bottoms off, tugging them down and then over our feet. I let mine drop beside the bed. Cadence flung hers across the room where they landed on top of the dresser next to the TV.

I turned on my side to see her and she did the same.

“You okay?” Cadence asked when I was silent for a few moments.

“Yes,” I said, my throat choked with unexpected emotion. “I just...I want you so much, Cade. You’re so beautiful.”

If I didn’t get my act together, I was going to cry and ruin the moment, so instead I rolled on top of her, both of us gasping at the contact of skin on skin. She was hot and desperate, and I needed to touch all of her at once, but that wasn’t possible.

I kissed her again until my head spun as her hands reached and grabbed and tried to get as much of me in her hands as she could.

On an instinct, I clasped both of her wrists and pushed them over her head.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:59 pm*

Her eyes flew open as she stared at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said immediately letting go.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t be. You can...that’s okay.”

She kept her arms above her head, crossing her wrists over each other.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I said and then wanted to hide under the bed.

Cadence smirked. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I think you’ve got good instincts. If there’s anything you don’t want or don’t like, just say stop and we can stop. And I’ll do the same.”

I nodded. “Yes. Okay.”

Sex had never felt this monumental before. Not even my first time. Being here with Cadence mattered, and I didn’t want to do the wrong thing.

“Do you want to stop?” Cadence asked, her arms still above her head. Fuck, I liked seeing her like that. There was something about it that sent a pulse of lust between my legs.

“No,” I said. The last thing in the world I wanted was to stop. “No, I don’t want to stop.”

“Do you want me to keep my arms like this?” she asked.

“Yes. Until I tell you otherwise,” I said, in a voice that didn’t seem to belong to me. It was new. This was new.

Cadence nodded.

Now that she wasn’t touching me, I could focus on her. Sitting back, I dragged my hand down her body from her shoulder to her hip.

“Freckles, freckles, everywhere,” I said. “So lovely.”

Her body was absolutely perfect, with breasts I could fill my hands with, a little curved belly and hips that I wanted to sink my fingers into. All kinds of fantasies I’d never let myself have burst in my brain like fireworks. Too many to count. Lurid and so intense that they made my hands shake.

“Want you,” I said, stroking her outer hips. “Want you so much, Cade.”

“You have me. Take me,” she said, and it was like she lit a match inside me.

## Chapter Twenty

Cade

Eloise in bed wasn’t what I’d expected. Since I knew about her inexperience, I’d assumed she would be shy. Maybe a little reluctant. I’d prepared myself to do a lot of handholding and explaining.

That wasn’t what happened. From the minute she called me “good girl” (what the fuck was THAT), I was completely surprised. This wasn’t an unsure woman. She might not know exactly what to do, but she knew what she wanted.

Me, apparently.

I kept my arms above my head with my wrists crossed. Hopefully my arms wouldn't fall asleep, but that wasn't my focus at the moment.

No, that was Eloise, who was kissing and licking her way down my body with such focus that it was like she was following a map.

I'd told her she didn't have to do anything she wasn't ready for and I kept waiting for her to pull back or say she wasn't ready to go forward or ask me what to do, but then she kept going and before I understood what was happening, she was spreading my thighs apart.

"I'm going to taste you, Cadence," she said. "I've been thinking about it and I've decided that's what I want."

Well, fuck.

"Yeah, absolutely. Go for it."

She was diving right in and I didn't know what I'd done to deserve this, but I wanted to fold this night up and store it in my memory forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm*

Eloise paused, as if she was assessing the situation before grabbing a pillow and then putting it under my hips to prop me up.

She scraped her nails up and down the tops of my thighs, meeting my eyes.

“El, please,” I begged, my legs trembling from anticipation.

That seemed to spur her into action. I was fully shaking when she settled herself between my spread legs and kissed the inside of one of my thighs and then sprinkled little light kisses closer and closer to where I needed her mouth, but she refused to get there and all kinds of words came tumbling out of my mouth. Words and pleas that I’d never heard from myself before. I was so horny it was actually painful and if I didn’t come soon, it would kill me. I was sure. She was killing me by not letting me come.

“Shhhh,” she said, her voice irritatingly calm. “I’ll take care of you, Cade. I’m going to give you what you need. I’m going to fuck you with my fingers and my tongue and you’re going to come for me.”

Jesus fuck. Who was this woman?

Eloise nuzzled me right above my clit and even that soft contact sizzled through me like electricity. I was so swollen and tight and ready, and I just needed her to touch me. Just touch me a little and I’d be right there.

I told her as much and she finally, finally gently kissed my clit. Just a little kiss, but it made me curse and hope that no one had heard me.

Eloise was the master at soft torture and I had no idea.

Gently, she spread me open and then made eye contact with me.

“You’re so lovely, Cade,” she said and then licked me fully and I almost cried in relief.

Eloise looked at me and there was a moment of hesitation where I thought she was going to say that she couldn’t do this, but then she moaned and fucking devoured me.

She went from never touching a woman before to absolutely eating me with a ferocious desperation that had me gasping and thrusting into her face and I forgot about keeping my hands above my head because I had to hold onto something, so I settled for one hand in her hair and the other clutching the blankets on the bed and if there was such a thing as beginners luck with eating pussy, she had gotten all of it.

I’d never come just from oral stimulation, but I was already so fucking close, but then she shifted and I felt a finger fluttering at my entrance and my eyes rolled back in my head and my body clenched, hard, as if it was trying to pull her inside.

“Need you,” I gasped.

“You need me to fuck you with my fingers? Gonna be good and come for me if I give you my fingers, Cade?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be good,” I said. Why was that so fucking hot? It was like she’d discovered a button she could push that I didn’t know I had.

“You’re so wet for me, Cade. So ready. You taste so fucking good, so sweet. I want you to come all over my face.” She kept talking as she thrust one finger inside me, but it wasn’t enough. I needed more, so I told her.



“You need more, Cade?”

“Harder,” I begged. “More.”

She thrust two fingers inside me, hard, and somehow she’d angled just right.

“There! Right there.”

Eloise was a quick study. She pounded into me with two fingers as she ravished my clit with her teeth and her tongue and suction, and I didn’t even know what else.

“Come,” I warned her. “Gonna come.”

“That’s my girl. Let go, Cadence. I want to watch you fall apart. Want to feel this beautiful pussy clench and watch your gorgeous face.”

Her string of filthy words along with everything else she was doing detonated an orgasm that started intense and only increased until my vision went black and then exploded with stars as I let out all kinds of noises, including her name. She kept talking and fucking me, drawing everything out even longer as I lost myself to the abyss.

“Fuuuuuuu,” I said as I trembled and winced as she withdrew her fingers. I couldn’t even get out a whole word.

Eloise climbed up the bed and lay next to me. Her hair was a disaster and her face was covered in me, glistening in the light.

She’d never looked so goddamn gorgeous.

Slowly, I tilted my head to the side so I could stare at her.

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm*

“How did I do for my first time?” she asked, propping her head on her hand.

“Pretty good,” I said, still coming back into my body. “There’s room for improvement.”

Eloise gasped and hit me gently on the arm as I laughed.

“Give me a few minutes to rest and I’ll show you how it’s done,” I said, flopping my hand around. Didn’t have full motor control yet. She’d fucked me senseless.

“Show me how it’s done, Cade,” she said, twirling some of my hair.

I was going to.

\* \* \*

Eloise

I knew it was better than “pretty good.” Something had come over me and it was like I’d become someone I didn’t know I could be. Confident and assured and in control. I liked it. A lot.

Cadence kissed my messy mouth when she had recovered and rolled until she was on top of me, thrusting her hips into mine.

I’d nearly come when she had, and I was still so close that I was scared she’d touch me once and set me off.

“So,” she said, after kissing me deeply, “it seems like you like being in charge here as well. Would you like me to be the lead? Or you could tell me what to do. Give me instructions. You know I’m excellent at following instructions.”

That was true and the very idea of it made me moan.

“Yes. That. I want to do that.”

Cadence laughed softly. “Okay, El. What do you want me to do?”

A heady power flooded my veins as she looked down at me, expectant.

“I want you to bite my nipples,” I said. It was the first thing that came to mind. Maybe I should have told her to kiss me, but I was so ready to come that I was past teasing.

To her credit, Cade didn’t laugh. She did raise one eyebrow.

“Bossy,” she said.

“That’s what you told me to do,” I said as she leaned down and grinned up at me.

“I know.”

Cadence followed my directions, softly sinking her teeth into one of my nipples, making me whimper. She was testing me, seeing how much I could take.

“Harder,” I told her. “I need more. And pinch the other one while you do it.”

Giving her instructions came easily and soon I was bucking my hips up.

“I need you to suck in my clit and flick the sides with your tongue while you fuck me with two fingers. Maybe three. I’ll let you know.”

She let out a startled laugh.

“I don’t know why that’s so hot, but it is. Fuck, who knew sex instructions would be one of my turn ons?” she said as she took her place between my legs. Cadence knew what she was doing, so not much instruction was required, but I gave it to her anyway. Fine-tuned her suction and pressure and speed of thrust and it was exactly what I needed and wanted and I couldn’t stop praising her and telling her how good she made me feel and how much I wanted her and how close I was until...

“Cadence!” I called as she tipped me over the edge of a mind-shattering climax that swept through me with such ferocity, I blacked out for a moment, utterly losing myself until I rushed back into my body and felt every single cell scream with pleasure until I utterly collapsed, unable to move or think or speak.

“I think you killed me,” I said as Cadence draped herself on top of my body, both of us sticky from sweat and sex. I could still taste her in my mouth and down my throat.

“Oh, I would never. Might get you close, though,” she said, drawing little patterns on my upper chest.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm*

“That was...” I was unable to find the words.

Cadence grinned, propping her chin on her hand. “Pretty great, right?”

“Little better than that,” I said, stroking her back with a clumsy hand.

We lay together in silence and this might have been my favorite part. Maybe more so than the life-altering climax she’d given me.

“You need some more time or are you going to be ready to go again? Because I’m going to need more of that,” she said, and I saw she’d snuck her hand between her legs.

“Stop that,” I said, my voice sharp. Her eyes went wide and then her breathing got shallow.

“Fuck, you’re so hot.”

Even though I was still recovering, I shoved her onto her back and made her come again while she chanted my name.

\* \* \*

Eventually, we wore ourselves out and Cadence dragged me to the shower. I cringed at using the awful hotel shampoo and conditioner and soap, but she silenced me with a kiss and washed my hair for me, which felt amazing.

She wrapped me in a fluffy robe and sat me on the bed that still smelled of the two of us coming together.

Cadence checked her phone and then winced as she put a hand on her stomach. “Shit, I’m so hungry. Do you think there’s still room service?”

I smiled and handed her the menu from the table next to the bed. “It’s open until two a.m.”

Her eyes lit up as she sat down next to me and we decided what to order. She picked up the phone and called down.

“Thank you. For all this. And I don’t just mean the incredible sex. For being spontaneous with me and for just...being you.”

I took her hand and squeezed her fingers.

“You’re welcome, Cadence. This has all been... Completely unexpected, but I wouldn’t change any of it. Not for the world.” She leaned over and kissed me, pushing me back on the mangled pillows. We didn’t come up for air until there was a knock at the door to deliver the food.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Cade

Things were hazy and warm when I woke up the next morning. Or was it still morning? Hard to tell. Eloise and I had passed out at some point after we’d eaten our way through a room service tray of cake and nachos and sliders. We’d kept the robes on but sometime during the night I must have taken mine off, due to the fact that I woke up completely naked with her arms wrapped around me and her hair in my face.

“Mmmm,” I said, stretching and rolling so I could stare at her. She blinked her eyes open and smiled slowly.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice a little rough from sleep. Fuck. She was even more gorgeous this morning than she’d been last night.

“Morning,” I said, feeling like I couldn’t stop smiling. She was here, with me. We’d spent the night together. Something I never could have imagined actually happening.

Eloise had been a revelation last night. Obviously, the steamy scenes in her books had come from somewhere. Those dirty-talking men? Yeah, that was all Eloise. She didn’t stop talking and it was exactly what I wanted. Exactly what I needed. Sometimes I could get distracted during sex, or simply get so caught up that I couldn’t even think, and having Eloise telling me what she wanted, her telling me what she was going to do and how I was going to feel rooted me in the moment. Grounded me to her and what we were doing. I’d never been that completely focused during sex, ever.

It was like magic. She’d given me what I needed without me having to ask. Eloise just knew.

She seemed to have figured me out and that little revelation probably should have freaked me out, but it didn’t. Having someone know me, understand me, made me want to fall on the floor and cry.

I didn’t, thankfully, but I did have to excuse myself to visit the bathroom to compose myself.

When I got it together, Eloise was looking through the room service menu again.

“I was thinking French toast. How about you?”

She still wore the robe, but it was falling off one of her creamy shoulders as the sun streamed in through a crack in the curtains and it hit me all at once.



## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm*

I loved this woman. I loved Eloise Roth. I loved my boss. I'd loved her for longer than this moment, I just hadn't been able to see it. I loved her in all the big ways, and all the small ways. I loved the way she typed. I loved her eyebrows and her eyes and her nose and god, I loved her fingers. Her expressions and her laugh and the way she held her fork and told me what to do and clung to her schedules but was willing to throw them out for me.

"Cade?" she asked, when I didn't answer her. I had no idea what the hell my face looked like, but I hoped my thoughts weren't written all over it.

"Oh, uh, let me look," I said, walking toward her like my entire world hadn't fucking changed.

With numb fingers I took the menu and looked down, but I couldn't make my eyes focus on the words.

"Whatever you're getting is fine," I said.

"And cake? Do you like breakfast cake?"

She really did know me.

"Yeah, definitely breakfast cake."

After we ate in bed and made each other come with thrusting fingers, we realized that we had to check out of the room. A rush of terror swept through me. What if last night was an only once kind of thing? What would happen when we got back to the

real world? Would she still want me?

I was quiet as we got dressed and checked out.

“We still need to try that,” Eloise said when I put my seatbelt on in her car.

“What?” I asked.

She pointed to my shirt. “We still need to try that.”

It took me a moment to understand that she meant scissoring.

I choked on my own saliva for a second.

“Uh, yeah. We can definitely do that. If you want.”

She gave me a heated look that raised the temperature of the air a few degrees.

“I want,” she said. “I definitely want.”

Well, shit.

\* \* \*

“You probably want to go home to change and so forth,” Eloise said when we got closer to the city.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, dread churning in my stomach.

“I should go home too. I need to start figuring out how to replace you,” she said with a sigh.

“What?” I asked, my heart actually stopping and my body turning to ice.

“Cadence. We can’t keep working together like this. It’s untenable, and it’s not something I can do. Morally. Things have changed and if we’re going to be together, you can’t be my assistant.”

Too many thoughts. I was having far too many thoughts. Thoughts piling on top of each other and all screaming at once and all I could hear was noise.

“You want... You want to be with me?” I asked, finally latching onto the most important part of what she’d said.

Eloise put on her blinker and turned into the parking lot of a gas station and turned to me.

“Yes, Cadence. I want to be with you. I thought that should be obvious?”

I shook my head a little violently. “Nope, not obvious. I fully thought you were going to tell me that last night was fun, but we should probably forget about it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm*

“Cade,” she said, her voice soft as she stroked her fingers along my cheek. “I could never forget about last night. Ever. Last night was...it was everything.” Her voice hitched and I saw tears in her eyes.

“I know this is new. I know I’m probably rushing. I know logically, that none of this makes sense or was in my plan. But I have to tell you. Cadence, I love you. I think I have for a while, but I wouldn’t let myself. You’re in my thoughts, constantly. It’s been nearly impossible to focus on work when you’re there, and even when you’re not. You make me laugh and you made my world bright and I can’t imagine life without you in it. I want you. With me. I want us.”

Yeah, my heart definitely stopped and then started pounding double time as if to catch up.

“This can’t be fucking real,” I said. “How are you saying these things right now?” The tears that I’d managed to hold back earlier spilled out and rolled down my face.

“Oh, Cade,” Eloise said, pulling me closer. It was a bit awkward with the console between us. It dug into my hip, but I didn’t care.

“El, I love you. I do. I realized it this morning when I looked at you and I was so scared that this was all going to be over. I’ve loved being your assistant. I love the work, but I love being with you. If I have to give it up to have us, then I’ll do it. I’ll do it. I love you, Eloise.”

She shushed me with a kiss.

“No, no. You don’t have to give up being an assistant. I’m not sure if you know this, but I happen to know a lot of authors. You have skills and you’re excellent at your job. I’ll find you another. I promise. I owe you at least that much.”

Our faces were so close that she was blurry, but that might have been a fresh wave of tears.

“You’re so wonderful. I can’t believe it,” I said.

“Believe it, Cadence,” she said, pressing her forehead. “And I’m the one who is grateful. You set me free, Cade.”

Well, now I was really crying. She didn’t seem to mind as she kissed me and kissed me in a gas station parking lot. Not the most romantic of venues, but it was right for us.

“Do you want to see my apartment?” I asked when we parted.

She smiled. “I’d love to.”

## Epilogue

### Eloise

“Cade. You’re not going to need that many shoes,” I said as I went through her suitcase. We were packing for my tour, except this time she wasn’t coming as my assistant. She was coming as my plus one. My girlfriend.

“Yeah, but what if I get blisters from all the walking? What if I lose a pair? What if I don’t have the right shoes for the right occasion?”

She was pacing and cracking her knuckles. Not a good sign.

“Cade. If you need more shoes? We can buy you more shoes. I happen to have a lot of money,” I said and she stopped.

Initially, Cade had been reluctant to let me spend certain amounts of money on her. She was fine with some things and balked at others. I couldn’t figure it out, so I usually just kissed her until she gave in. That strategy had worked well so far.

“Okay, fine. Okay.” She let me remove half the superfluous shoes from her suitcase and then I went through her clothes. She wanted me to assure her that everything was appropriate. I loved everything she wore, but I pretended to go through it all and scrutinize her wardrobe.

“Just so you know, when you unpack everything, I’ve made you room in the closet,” I said, looking up to get her reaction. She loved doing the same to me, so I relished the opportunity to turn things around.

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking up from where she’d been fiddling with some of my skincare on my nightstand. Most nights she chose to stay with me over her own apartment. I’d been there many times to stay with her, but we both knew that my bed was bigger and more comfortable. And I didn’t have to worry about neighbors banging on the wall when she wouldn’t stop screaming my name.

“When we come back from tour, I think you should move in with me,” I said, enjoying the little squeak of surprise she let out before she covered her mouth in shock.

“You want me to move in with you,” she said. “Are you sure about that?”

I nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Oh, yes. I’ve wanted it for a long

time.”

Cadence stepped toward me and I widened my legs so she could stand close.

“You want me to move in with you. Me and all my stuff. Does that include my haunted shit?” she asked, grinning down at me.

“We’ll negotiate the haunted shit,” I said, tilting my face up as she leaned down to kiss me.

Her phone went off.

“They’re here.”

I grabbed her ass and squeezed, wishing we hadn’t invited her friends over this afternoon. I wanted her all to myself.

“El, you can’t do that,” Cadence moaned. “You gotta stop.”

Groaning and pressing my face into her belly, I removed my hands and placed them on the bed.

“Fine. I’ll be good.”

Cadence gave me a devilish grin. “I like it better when you’re bad.”

She stepped away and went downstairs to greet Hunter and Reid. After some initial reluctance, and a first meeting that was more like an interrogation, they had warmed up to me when they saw how much I truly loved and cared for their friend. I think I’d also gained points when I found Cadence a job as a virtual assistant for a romance author friend of mine. I was still looking to find someone new to work for me, but I was considering renting an office instead of having them come to my house. Or even having someone virtually so Cadence could work with me every day. Now that she wasn’t my employee, there was no rule saying I couldn’t grab her in the middle of the day and fuck her senseless on my desk.

We would figure it out. Cadence and I would figure everything out.



“El?” Cadence asked from the doorway.

“I’m coming,” I said, getting to my feet.

She grinned. “Not yet, but you could be later.”

I laughed and pulled her into my arms. “You’re a menace.”

\* \* \*