



Vineyard Dreams

Author: *Carol Wyatt*

Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: At 38, Harper Reeves is an accomplished actress, but after pouring her heart and soul into portraying the late cultural icon and activist Lena Matthews, she is haunted by the emotional weight of the role. The intense scenes depicting Lena's fight for LGBTQ+ rights and the tragic loss of her girlfriend leave Harper grappling with nightmares and deep-seated feelings of inadequacy. As she seeks solace in her family's neglected vineyard, Harper is forced to confront the shadows of her past and the profound impact of Lena's story on her own life.

Amidst the stunning backdrop of the Sierra Foothills, Harper's life takes an unexpected turn when she encounters Elle, the captivating and confident 54-year-old owner of a neighboring vineyard. Known for her bold approach to modern winemaking and her unwavering commitment to sustainability, Elle embodies a passion that ignites something deep within Harper.

As their shared dreams collide and they collaborate to revitalize the vineyard, an intense and undeniable attraction blossoms between Harper and Elle. This fiery connection pulls Harper into a whirlwind of desire and newfound love, challenging her to redefine what fulfillment truly means beyond the bright lights of Hollywood.

Just as Harper begins to embrace this new path, her past resurfaces in the form of Caroline, her charismatic ex-partner from Hollywood, intent on luring Harper back to the glamorous life she sought to escape.

As the pressure mounts, Harper finds herself torn between the glittering allure of her former life and the profound, authentic bond she's building with Elle.

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Harper's pulse quickened, her breath catching in her throat as the presenter slowly drew the card from the envelope. Beads of sweat formed on her palms, the cool silk of her gown providing little comfort against the heat rising within her. The room seemed to narrow, all eyes fixed on the stage, waiting for the words that would change someone's life forever.

Harper's mind raced, flashing back to the countless auditions, the long hours on set, and the sacrifices she'd made to pursue her passion. Every choice, every risk, had led her to this moment, and now, as the seconds stretched into an eternity, she found herself on the precipice of destiny.

As the presenter's lips curled into a smile, Harper's skin prickled with goosebumps. She'd spent so many hours dreaming of this moment, wondering if would even happen when she turned thirty-eight last month, but nothing could have prepared her for the intensity of this moment.

The presenter's voice sliced through the anticipation, a clarity that cut like a knife. "And the Oscar goes to... Harper Reeves."

In that moment, time froze.

The thunderous applause brought her back to the present. A wave of disbelief washed over her, an exhilarating rush that left her breathless. She blinked, struggling to grasp the reality of it. Her legs felt heavy as she rose from her seat, the world narrowing down to the aisle stretching before her. The white dress clung elegantly to her form,

and she pushed her wavy black hair over her shoulder as she made her way toward the steps that led up to the stage.

The spotlight bore down on her as she climbed the steps and came onto the stage. She spotted the presenter—an icon in his own right—waiting with a warm smile and outstretched arms. They shared a brief hug, his familiar scent enveloping her like a comforting blanket.

“Congratulations,” he murmured.

Harper’s fingers brushed against the cool, metallic surface of the Oscar. It felt strangely heavy, and she offered a small, shaky smile to the presenter.

“Thank you,” she managed, her voice barely audible above the applause still ringing out.

Harper accepted the award, her grip tightening. The gold gleamed under the stage lights, a symbol of achievement, a testament to years of relentless work.

She cleared her throat as the noise subsided, and the vast auditorium fell silent in anticipation. The presenter stepped back, his smile warm and encouraging.

The moment was hers.

As Harper stepped up to the microphone, the bright lights of the theater nearly blinded her. The applause was deafening, a roar that filled her ears and made her heart race. She blinked, trying to adjust to the glare, her hands trembling slightly as she held the Oscar statuette. It felt heavy in her hands, the weight of the moment bearing down on her.

She looked out at the sea of faces, a blur of tuxedos and glittering gowns. In the third

row, a familiar face caught her eye—Evelyn Coleman, an actress she'd worked with a few years ago. Evelyn smiled and gave her an encouraging nod.

In a moment that Harper had spent the last twenty years dreaming of, she was taken aback by the thought that she wished she had someone out there in the audience who would have kissed her when she won, who would be out there right now looking up at her with a proud smile. Someone who Harper could have told that she loved.

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. Now was not the time to be wondering if she would ever meet the right woman.

“Thank you,” she began, her voice clear and strong. “I’m not sure where to begin.”

The words felt inadequate, insufficient to express the depth of what she was feeling. She glanced down at the Oscar in her hands, the gold glinting under the lights. It was a symbol of everything she'd worked for, everything she'd dreamed of. And yet, in this moment, it felt secondary to the story she needed to tell.

“When I first read the script for Lena,” she continued, “I couldn’t believe that this was a biopic. I had never heard the name Lena Matthews before.”

“It was 1969, a time when being gay was not just stigmatized, but dangerous. And yet, there was Lena, a woman who fought so fiercely for LGBTQ+ rights, a woman who endured so much, a woman whose name we should all know. And yet, her story has remained largely untold. Until now.”

Harper’s hands were steady now, her voice filled with conviction. “Playing Lena was more than just a role. It was a journey into the heart of a woman who dared to love fiercely and fight tirelessly for a better world in a time when it was revolutionary to do so.”

As she spoke, memories of filming flashed through her mind—the long hours, the emotional scenes, the moments when she'd felt so connected to Lena that the line between acting and reality had blurred.

“Lena taught me that sometimes the loudest voices are born from the deepest silences, the strongest spirits from the most profound losses. She showed me that courage isn't the absence of fear, but the strength to find your voice even when you're at your lowest point.”

Harper paused, letting the words sink in. The audience was silent, hanging on her every word. She could feel the emotions welling up inside her, but she channeled them into her words.

“As a gay woman, I thought I understood the struggles, the quiet battles fought every single day. But Lena's story, her life in the context of the late 60s and early 70s... it brought a new level of understanding. I learned that true liberation comes when you live authentically.”

Harper's voice was powerful, resonating through the theater. “Living her life, even on-screen—the constant threats, the hate, the systemic injustices she faced just for loving who she loved—it was a stark reminder of how far we've come, and how far we still have to go. This was, without a doubt, the most challenging and transformative role I've ever taken on.”

She could feel the passion burning in her chest, the fierce pride she felt in telling Lena's story. “This award... it's not just for me. It's for Lena. It's for all the unsung heroes, for those who fight on even under impossible amounts of pressure. It's for everyone who dares to be themselves, regardless of the cost. It's a symbol of hope for a future where love is celebrated, not condemned.”

As she neared the end of her speech, knowing that the music would come on at any

moment, Harper's voice grew even stronger, each word ringing with truth.

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“I’m honored to receive this award. It’s something I’ve dreamt of all my life, but getting the chance to bring Lena’s story to the world, to shed light on a heroine from a time when it meant risking everything... that, more than any award, is the greatest honor of all. Thank you.”

A roar of applause erupted, the crowd rising to its feet. Harper stood tall, basking in the moment, hoping that she would never forget it.

As she stepped back from the microphone, she caught Evelyn’s eye again. Evelyn was on her feet, applauding, her face filled with emotion.

Harper smiled down at her. When she thought of what Hollywood looked like when she’d arrived twenty years ago, she could hardly believe all of the women who had come out since, including herself, including Evelyn, and she had a feeling that Lena would be remembered as a classic.

If she never acted another day in her life, she could be happy, because she was almost certain that another performance, another script like that, would never come her way. It had truly been a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and even though she felt like she lost a bit of herself to that movie, it was the proudest she’d ever been as an actress.

2

Elle eased her pickup truck to a stop, the gravel crunching beneath its wheels. Her eyes narrowed as she surveyed the unfamiliar vehicles lining her normally quiet road. Sleek sedans and vans with tinted windows stood out like sore thumbs against the rural backdrop. As she climbed out of her truck, the unmistakable glint of lowered

camera lenses caught her attention.

A knot of tension formed in her stomach as Elle unlocked the front door and stepped inside. She moved to the living room window, peering out from behind the gauzy curtains. The men lounged against their vehicles, an air of boredom about them. Expensive cameras dangled from their necks.

As she watched, one of them glanced toward her house, and Elle instinctively took a step back. Were they paparazzi? But why here, in this quiet corner of wine country?

After spending another few minutes watching them, her stomach rumbled, reminding her of why she was home. She moved to the kitchen and made a quick sandwich.

But after she'd eaten, Elle was back in her living room. They were still there. An hour had passed since she'd first spotted the strangers, yet their presence continued to gnaw at her. It was more of a nagging curiosity now.

Unable to resist, she found herself drawn back to the window. Her fingers drummed against the windowsill as she weighed her options. The urge to confront them warred with her desire for privacy. But as the minutes ticked by, Elle realized she couldn't ignore them any longer. She had to get back to work, and she wanted to make sure that they would be gone by the time she got back in the evening.

With a determined set to her shoulders, Elle marched out to her truck. The engine roared to life, and she drove down the winding driveway. She pulled up alongside the parked vehicles.

Elle took a deep breath, steeling herself before she stepped out. Her boots hit the ground with purpose, her demeanor outwardly calm despite the irritation simmering beneath the surface. She approached the group, her eyes scanning their faces and the expensive camera equipment slung around their necks.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” Elle asked, her tone polite but firm. She met their gazes steadily, refusing to be intimidated.

The older of the photographers shrugged, his nonchalance grating on Elle’s nerves. “Just parked alongside the road, ma’am. Not bothering anyone.”

Elle’s eyebrow arched as she gestured to their cameras. “Sightseeing?” The sarcasm in her voice was hard to miss.

A younger photographer shifted nervously, avoiding her gaze. “Hoping to get a few photos of Harper Reeves,” he mumbled.

Surprise flickered across Elle’s face. “The actress?” she asked, her mind racing. What connection could the Hollywood star possibly have here?

The older photographer nodded, a smug smile playing at his lips.

Elle’s patience thinned. “I’m afraid I can’t help you. Ms. Reeves isn’t here.”

“We’ll take our chances,” the man replied, his tone dismissive. “Just waiting a while longer.”

Elle’s jaw clenched. “This is private property. I’d appreciate it if you moved along.”

The photographer’s smirk widened, setting Elle’s teeth on edge. “We’re on the road, ma’am. Perfectly legal.”

Elle felt her frustration mounting. She had hoped they would simply pack up and leave, but it was becoming clear that a more forceful approach was needed.

Taking a deep breath, Elle fixed the lead photographer with a steady gaze. “Would

you like to debate that with my husband? He's a local police officer, and I'm sure he'd be more than happy to explain the finer points of trespassing laws."

The effect was immediate.

Elle watched as uncertainty flickered across their faces, replacing the previous cockiness. The photographers exchanged glances, their bravado visibly deflating. Without another word, they began packing up their equipment, casting wary looks in her direction.

Elle stood her ground, arms crossed, as they climbed into their vehicles. The sound of engines starting filled the air, and one by one, they pulled away from the roadside. She didn't move until the last car disappeared around the bend, leaving only a trail of dust in its wake.

As silence settled back over her property, Elle felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She shook her head, amused by her own deception.

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There was no husband, no local police officer waiting to come to her rescue.

But they didn't need to know that.

Her thoughts drifted to Stephanie, the wife she had lost years ago. Stephanie would have appreciated the bluff, would have laughed at Elle's quick thinking. The memory brought a bittersweet ache to her chest, a familiar mix of love and loss that never quite faded.

Elle climbed back into her truck, a wry smile playing on her lips. As she settled into the worn leather seat, her mind buzzed with curiosity.

How on earth had those photographers gotten the idea that Harper Reeves would be here, of all places? It was absurd, really. Her quiet corner of wine country was about as far from the glitz and glamour of Hollywood as you could get.

3

Harper pulled into the long windy driveway that lead to Rustic Foothills Vineyard. She stepped out of her sleek black Mercedes, the California sun warm on her skin as she surveyed the sprawling property before her. Rows of grapevines stretched out toward the horizon, but it didn't take an expert's eye to realize how unkempt the property was.

Two weeks had passed since she'd stood on that stage, clutching her Oscar, pouring her heart out to the world about the importance of Lena's story and living authentically. The applause, the accolades, the media frenzy—it had all been a

whirlwind, and Harper had found herself longing for a moment of peace, a chance to catch her breath.

She had been ready to escape, to lose herself in the streets of Europe for weeks, maybe even months, when her uncle's call had changed everything. Three checks had already been written, desperate attempts to keep the vineyard afloat after her father's passing all those years ago. But in a moment of impulsiveness, Harper had offered to buy it outright.

And so, she had come here, ready to turn her father's business around. But as she took in the weathered buildings and the overgrown vines, Harper realized the enormity of the task ahead.

The tasting room, once a hub of activity and laughter, now stood silent and dated. The production facilities, too, bore the marks of time and neglect, crying out for modernization and care.

But amidst the challenges, Harper saw potential. She envisioned the vineyard coming back to life, the grapevines heavy with fruit, the tasting room bustling with visitors eager to sample the fruits of her labor. It would take work, dedication, and a willingness to embrace change, but Harper was ready.

She pushed down the urge to call her uncle and demand an explanation. How could he have let this place waste away? How could he have left out those details when she'd offer to buy it? But at the end of the day, it was her fault for not coming out here first, for not asking more questions.

Harper made her way back to the main house, her mind still reeling from the enormity of the task she had taken on. The vineyard now lay in disrepair, a shadow of its former self.

As she stepped into the quiet stillness of the house, Harper felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her. The familiar scent of aged wood and the views from the kitchen overlooking the vineyard transported her back to childhood summers spent running through the vineyard, her laughter echoing through the rows of grapevines. She could almost hear her father's voice, deep and warm, guiding her through the intricacies of winemaking.

Lost in her memories, Harper nearly jumped when a sudden knock shattered the silence. Her heart raced as she stared at the door, wondering who could possibly be visiting the secluded property. She hesitated for a second. Hopefully, it was just a curious neighbor, drawn by the sight of an unfamiliar car parked outside.

Curiosity getting the better of her, Harper moved towards the door, her footsteps echoing on the hardwood floor. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for whatever lay on the other side.

With a soft click, Harper turned the knob and pulled the door open, her eyes widening as they fell upon the person standing before her.

Harper's breath caught in her throat as she took in the sight of the woman before her. Chestnut hair cascaded over her shoulders, framing a face that radiated warmth and confidence. Hazel green eyes locked onto Harper's, and she felt a flutter of recognition in her chest. This woman knew who she was.

Before Harper could find her voice, the stranger spoke. "I'm looking for Daniel."

Harper blinked, caught off guard. "He's not here. He actually left."

The woman's eyebrows rose. "Well, I guess that explains things."

Confusion swirled in Harper's mind. She tilted her head, studying the woman's face.

“What do you mean?”

“My name’s Elle,” the woman said, her voice smooth. “I own the neighboring vineyard. There were paparazzi parked outside my property yesterday. Looking for Harper Reeves.”

Harper’s stomach dropped. She’d hoped to keep a low profile, to escape the relentless attention that had followed her since the Oscar win. But it seemed her presence had already caused a stir. She swallowed hard, guilt and embarrassment mingling in her chest.

“I’m so sorry,” Harper said, her voice barely above a whisper. “How did they find me so quickly?” she asked, thinking out loud.

Elle’s expression softened when Harper met her eyes. “They seemed to think that they’d find you at my house, but I told them that you weren’t here. I couldn’t understand why they thought that, but it turns out they weren’t too far off. They just had to drive another few hundred yards up the road.”

Harper raked a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry you had to deal with them.”

“It’s fine. I think I might have convinced them not to come back, but we’ll just have to wait and see.” Elle’s gaze flickered past Harper to the house behind her. “Did you say Daniel left, as in... Moved?”

Harper nodded. “I’m his niece.”

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Elle's eyebrows rose. "Oh. I had no idea. I mean, we weren't close, but we've still been neighbors for the past fifteen years."

"He didn't say goodbye?"

"No." Elle slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "Well, like I said, I'm just down the road, so if you need anything, just ask."

Harper smiled. "Thanks. I'll do my best not to bother you, but I imagine I'll have a question about how to run a vineyard that Google won't be able to answer for me."

Elle stared at her. "You're going to run the business?"

Harper sucked in a breath. "I'm going to attempt to. I hadn't realized how far gone things had gotten here, but I'm willing to put the work in so..."

Elle's expression turned serious as she considered Harper's determination. "You do realize that this vineyard has been out of business for almost three years, right? That's a lot of ground to cover. It's not just about getting the grapevines back in shape. There's a whole world of regulations, equipment, and market trends to navigate. It's a monumental task."

Harper blinked. "Three years?" She felt the blood drain from her face as Elle's words sank in.

Three years.

The vineyard had been out of business for three years, and she'd had no idea. The realization hit her like a punch to the gut, leaving her breathless and dizzy.

Her mind raced, piecing together the implications. Those checks she'd sent her uncle, the ones she'd thought were keeping the vineyard afloat - they'd never been used for the business. He'd kept the money, all while letting her father's legacy crumble into dust.

Shame and anger warred within her. How could she have been so naive? So trusting? She'd bought this place sight unseen, driven by nostalgia and a desperate need to escape her own life. Now she stood here, facing a neighbor who clearly knew more about her family's business than she did.

Harper's cheeks burned hot with embarrassment. She wanted to sink into the floor, to disappear from Elle's knowing gaze. But there was nowhere to hide. She stood exposed, her ignorance laid bare for this stranger to see.

"I... I didn't know," Harper managed to choke out, her voice barely above a whisper. The words tasted bitter on her tongue, an admission of her own foolishness.

She looked away from Elle, unable to bear the weight of her gaze any longer. The overgrown vines, the dilapidated equipment, the air of abandonment that hung over everything - it all screamed of years of neglect, not just a few months of hard times. How had she not realized this?

Harper's stomach churned with the magnitude of what she'd gotten herself into.

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Elle watched Harper's face fall, the realization of the vineyard's true state sinking in. The actress's eyes widened, her lips parting in disbelief. Elle couldn't miss the shock

and disappointment etched across Harper's features.

"I... I had no idea," Harper whispered, her voice barely audible.

Elle hesitated, torn between offering comfort and being honest about the daunting task ahead. She settled on a practical approach. "Would you like to walk the grounds? It might help you get a better sense of what needs to be done."

Harper's gaze snapped to Elle's face, a flicker of uncertainty passing through her eyes. For a moment, Elle thought she might refuse, perhaps too embarrassed to face the extent of her uncle's neglect. But then Harper squared her shoulders and gave a small nod.

As they set off, Elle's boots crunched on the dry, cracked earth. The once-lush rows of vines now stood barren and lifeless, a reminder of years of abandonment. Elle glanced at Harper.

"I won't sugarcoat it," Elle said, her voice gentle but firm. "This is a massive project. The soil's depleted, the irrigation system's shot, and the vines... well, they've seen better days."

They paused at the edge of the property, overlooking the valley below. Elle watched as Harper took in the view, her expression a mix of determination and uncertainty. The sunlight caught in Harper's dark hair, and Elle found herself captivated by the play of emotions across the younger woman's face.

Elle studied Harper's face, recognizing the overwhelming despair that threatened to engulf the younger woman. She took a deep breath, her own memories of struggle bubbling to the surface.

"When I moved here fifteen years ago, my vineyard needed a lot of work too," Elle

said softly. “But it wasn’t this bad, and I had help. My wife and I tackled it together.”

Harper nodded, her shoulders slumping. “I came here to take a break from acting,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought I’d be relaxing, not... not facing this.”

Elle’s heart ached for Harper. The actress looked so lost, so far from the confident woman Elle had seen on screen. She wracked her brain for a solution, wanting to offer some glimmer of hope.

“You know,” Elle began, careful to keep her tone gentle, “you could start with the house and garden first. Get those in order before tackling the vineyard. There’s no rush.”

Harper’s eyes met Elle’s, a flicker of relief passing through them. “That... that makes sense,” she agreed. But then her gaze drifted back to the withered vines, and her expression fell again. “I just hate that my father’s vineyard has turned into this.”

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The words hung heavy in the air between them. Elle felt a pang of curiosity, wondering about the history etched into this land. “Did you grow up here?” she asked softly.

Harper nodded, a wistful smile tugging at her lips. “I did,” she replied, her eyes taking on a faraway look.

Elle found herself captivated by the shift in Harper’s demeanor. The actress’s face softened, years seeming to meltaway as she gazed out over the neglected fields. Elle could almost see the ghosts of Harper’s memories dancing among the vines, echoes of a childhood spent running through rows of grapes under the warm California sun.

Elle felt a pang of sympathy as she watched Harper’s face. The actress’s eyes were distant, lost in her own memories. Elle hesitated, unsure if she should pry, but her curiosity got the better of her.

“When did your father pass away?” she asked softly.

Harper blinked, coming back to the present. “Sixteen years ago,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elle inhaled sharply, realizing the timing. “That’s... that’s just before I moved here,” she said, her mind reeling with the coincidence.

Harper’s gaze reached Elle’s face, surprise etched across her features. “Really?”

Elle nodded, her throat suddenly tight. She remembered her own excitement when

she and Stephanie had first discovered this property, the dreams they'd shared of building a life here together. It was strange to think that while they were starting their new chapter, Harper had been closing one of her own.

"I haven't been back since," Harper admitted, her voice thick with emotion.

Elle's heart ached for the younger woman. She could see the pain in Harper's eyes, the weight of regret heavy on her shoulders. Elle wanted to reach out, to offer some comfort, but she held back, unsure if it would be welcome.

Instead, she looked out over the vineyard, trying to see it through Harper's eyes. The neglected vines and crumbling structures weren't just a business opportunity or a challenging project. They were remnants of a life left behind, of a relationship cut short too soon.

Elle felt a lump forming in her throat as she thought of Stephanie, of the future they'd planned together that had been ripped away. She understood all too well the pain of losing someone you loved, of having to face a world that kept turning even when your own had stopped.

Elle marveled at how quickly her perception of Harper had shifted. Just minutes ago, when she'd knocked on Daniel's door, irritation had simmered beneath her skin. The moment Harper answered, recognition had sparked, and Elle's frustration had flared. This was the woman responsible for those paparazzi lurking outside her house.

But now, standing beside Harper in the neglected vineyard, Elle felt an overwhelming urge to comfort her. She wrestled with the impulse to pull Harper into a hug, to offer the comfort of human touch. But Elle held back, unsure if such a gesture would be welcome from a virtual stranger.

Elle had no idea why she wasn't more starstruck, but it wasn't the first time she'd met

someone famous. She might not run the largest vineyard, but they'd won awards and had a reputation that had brought a few musicians and actors to her doorstep in the last five years.

Still, that had been in a professional setting. This was different though, and Elle had no idea why she hadn't stumbled over her words when Harper Reeves had answered the door. Elle would have recognized her immediately even if she hadn't met those photographers.

"I'm so sorry your uncle never let on how bad things had gotten here," Elle said softly. The words felt inadequate, but she pressed on. "It must be a shock, seeing it like this."

Harper's eyes, glistening with unshed tears, met Elle's. The vulnerability in that gaze made Elle's chest tighten.

Elle took a deep breath and continued, "But you know, it's not beyond saving. It'll take work, a lot of it, but this land... it has good bones." She gestured to the rolling hills around them. "The soil here is rich, Harper. It just needs some love and attention."

Elle watched as Harper's gaze followed her outstretched hand, taking in the beauty that still existed beneath the neglect.

"When I started my vineyard," Elle continued, "I had no idea what I was doing. But I learned. And you can too." She paused, considering her next words carefully. "If you want, I'd be happy to share what I know. Help you get started on the right foot."

The offer surprised Elle as much as it seemed to surprise Harper. She hadn't planned on getting involved, but something about Harper's determination, her willingness to take on this massive task, stirred something in Elle. It reminded her of herself, all

those years ago, facing her own daunting challenge.

Harper's eyes widened, a mix of gratitude and uncertainty playing across her features. "Aren't we direct competitors?"

Elle chuckled softly, shaking her head. "I suppose we are, in a way. But this community... it's small. We all help each other out when we can." She met Harper's gaze, her own eyes earnest. "Your success doesn't have to come at the cost of mine. There's room for both of us."

Harper seemed to consider this, her brow furrowing slightly. Elle could practically see the gears turning in the actress's mind, weighing the offer, the implications.

"I... I don't know what to say," Harper finally managed, her voice thick with emotion. "That's incredibly generous of you."

Elle shrugged, trying to downplay the significance of the moment. "It's what neighbors do," she said simply.

Harper's eyes shone with gratitude, a tentative smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Thank you, Elle. "

Elle felt a warmth blooming in her chest, a sense of connection she hadn't felt in a long time.

Two weeks had passed since Harper first arrived at the vineyard, and she had thrown herself into the task of breathing new life into the neglected property that had once been her childhood home. With the help of her friend's brother, an interior designer with a wealth of connections, she managed to transform the aging house into a space that truly reflected her style and personality.

Harper hung a framed photo of her with her parents in the hallway and stood back, checking to make sure it was straight. She'd had a relaxing day, admiring the freshly painted walls and the carefully curated furniture that now filled the rooms, not quite believing how much they'd gotten done. Her arms and back ached from painting, and today was the first day she hadn't painted a wall or moved furniture.

Instead, she'd spent the morning in the kitchen, completely giving into the nostalgia of being back here, even though so much of the house was different now. Harper had made her mother's famous pancakes and eaten them outside on her new deck. Then she'd gone on a long walk around the property, still trying to process how her uncle had let the place go like this. Of course, he hadn't answered any of her calls. And now, as the sun was starting to dip in the sky, she was thinking about what she'd make for dinner later. Whatever it was, it was going to be accompanied by a very large glass of red wine. At least, her uncle had left her father's wine cellar untouched.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts, and she opened it to find Elle standing on the porch, a bottle of wine in her hand.

"Hi," Harper said, taking Elle in. She wore a crisp white button-down with the

sleeves rolled up, revealing tanned forearms that spoke of long days working in the vineyard, and a pair of well-worn jeans. Her chestnut hair fell across her shoulders in loose waves, the lighter tones catching in the golden light.

“Hi.” Elle lifted the bottle, and Harper noticed the label - it was one of Elle’s own wines. “I just wanted to officially say, welcome, and to see how you were doing.”

“Thanks.” Harper’s fingers brushed Elle’s as she accepted the bottle. “Would you like to stay for a glass?” Harper asked.

Elle hesitated slightly, but then her lips were tugging into a smile. “Sure.”

Harper stepped back to let her new neighbor in. The movement caused Elle’s perfume to drift past - something earthy with hints of the ocean that reminded Harper of summer evenings.

“Wow. The place looks amazing,” Elle said as she took in the transformed space.

“Thanks. I tried to make it my own while still keeping a few things that reminded me of the past.”

As Elle stepped into the hallway, her gaze fell on the framed photo Harper had just hung up. “Your parents?” she asked, her tone gentle and curious.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I was only up here once probably about two and a half years ago, when I started to notice a change in the traffic coming up and down this road. I wanted to check in on Daniel, but he wasn’t the most friendly neighbor. I remember what it was like then, the bit of the house that I saw, and I can’t believe this is the same place.”

Harper nodded as they moved into the kitchen. She watched Elle take in the new cabinets and counters, and the island that was now in the middle of the room. It had a cozy chic finish, nothing too modern. She took down two wine glasses, still not quite believing that her uncle had been so careless. If he hadn't wanted to run the vineyard, he should have said so, and Harper would have thought about buying it off him years ago. Even after two weeks, her anger threatened to bubble up every now and then, but she pushed it down and focused on her guest.

Harper opened the bottle and poured them each a glass. "Will we sit outside and catch the sunset?"

"Sure." Elle thanked her as Harper handed her a glass, and Harper led the way outside to the back deck.

"This is new?"

"Yeah," Harper said as she took a seat on the outdoor sofa, the gray cushions surprisingly comfortable.

"I can't believe how much you got done in what? Two weeks?"

Harper smiled as Elle sat down beside her. "I just know a lot of people and called in a lot of favors."

Harper took a sip of her wine. It was rich and complex with a hint of cherries and maybe blackberries. "This is excellent," she said, swirling the deep red liquid in her glass.

"Thanks. It's our 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon. That was a good year." Elle turned toward her. "So, what's your plan for the vineyard?"

Harper's stomach tightened. She'd been avoiding thinking too deeply about that particular challenge. "Honestly? I'm not sure yet. I thought I'd be picking up where my uncle left off. I never imagined that there would be this much work to do. I've been so focused on the house that I haven't thought too much about the business side of things."

"Well, if you're interested, I could show you around my place sometime. Give you an idea of what's possible."

"I'd like that." Harper found herself studying Elle's profile, the way her lips curved into a slight smile as she gazed out at the vineyard. There was something magnetic about her presence, a quiet confidence that drew Harper in.

"You know, when I first started, I made every mistake in the book," Elle said. "Planted the wrong varieties in the wrong soil, fought with nature instead of working with it." She chuckled. "But eventually, I figured it out."

The admission made Harper feel better. "How long did it take you?"

"To feel like I knew what I was doing? About five years." Elle turned to face her. "But that was before I really understood sustainable practices. Now, it's like starting over sometimes, but in the best way possible."

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“How did you get into this? Is it something you always wanted to do?”

Elle smiled as she shook her head. “Absolutely not. It was my wife’s dream, and I went along with it. Sure, I liked wine. Who doesn’t? But running a vineyard?” Elle laughed softly. “If I could tell my twenty-one-year-old self that’s what I’d be doing, she would never believe it. Not in a million years.”

“What were you doing before then?”

“I was a wedding photographer.”

“Really?” Harper asked as she took a sip, but then as she lowered her glass she remembered what she’d told Piper. “Shit,” she muttered to herself.

“Is everything okay?” Elle was looking at her with an arched eyebrow.

Harper blew out a breath. “I just remembered that when one of my best friends, another actress, Piper, proposed to her girlfriend a few weeks ago, I said she could use this place as a venue. They won’t have too many guests, and privacy will be the main concern, but that was before I got here and saw what this place actually looked like.”

“Hey, don’t knock it just yet. If you managed to do so much with the house, I’m sure you can bring that same work ethic to the vineyard. You don’t have to be producing wine to host a wedding. You still have the amazing setting. The views.”

Harper swallowed. “I know I’ve been distracting myself for the last two weeks with

painting and picking furniture and all that, but I'm starting to wonder if I'm in over my head." Harper took another drink. "Not only do I know nothing about this business, but being here, and seeing all of the land and the scale of this business, of what it could be... I'd have to hire people." Harper shook her head. "You probably think I'm crazy for not thinking of this before buying the vineyard, but my privacy is the most important thing to me, and I can't see myself having much of it here if this vineyard is back up and running."

Elle nodded. "I get that."

"How many people do you have working for you?"

"I have six full-time employees, and from time to time, I'll hire some college students to fill in the gaps when we're at our busiest."

Harper sucked in a breath. She couldn't see herself finding so many people she could trust. It had taken her years to build the team she had around her.

Harper watched Elle take another sip of wine, struck by how at ease she seemed. The fading sunlight caught in her hair, and she forced her gaze away, focusing instead on the sprawling vineyard before them.

"How do you handle it?" Harper asked. "The employees, I mean. How do you know who to trust?"

"You develop a sense for people. Plus, most of my workers have been with me for years. They're like family now." Elle shifted on the cushion, her knee brushing against Harper's for a brief moment. "And honestly? People around here aren't that interested in celebrity gossip. They care more about whether their grapes will survive an early frost."

Harper let out a small laugh, but her mind wandered to the photographers Elle had chased away. “Tell that to the paparazzi you scared off.”

“Those vultures?” Elle’s face darkened. “They’re not from around here. Trust me, the locals would’ve run them off themselves if they’d stuck around.”

The conviction in Elle’s voice made something warm bloom in Harper’s chest. She took another sip of wine, savoring its rich complexity. The taste reminded her of her last few years here, before she’d left for Hollywood, when her father used to explain the subtle notes while they ate dinner.

“You know,” Elle said, “running a vineyard doesn’t mean you have to be here all the time. You could hire a manager, someone you trust to oversee the day-to-day operations.”

Harper considered this. It wasn’t something she’d thought about before. “Maybe, but I kind of liked the idea of being here for a while.”

“You’re looking to take a break from acting?”

Harper pressed her lips together for a second. She shouldn’t be talking to a stranger about her life. She was never normally this open with someone she didn’t know well, but there was something about Elle that made Harper feel like she could trust her, and she had no idea what it was.

“It’s okay,” Elle said after a second. “I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

“No. It’s a fair question, and I think I am. I uh... The last movie I did really took a toll on me, and I’ve been turning down everything that’s come my way since. I don’t know when I’ll be able to go back and give another movie my full attention.”

Elle looked like she wanted to ask her what she meant, but thankfully she didn't. Harper didn't want to bring down the mood by telling Elle that she'd been waking up in the middle of the night sweating, her heart racing after yet another nightmare.

"So," Harper continued, "I plan on being here for a while."

"In that case," Elle said as she slid her phone out of her pocket, "You should have my number." She handed it to Harper.

Harper stared at Elle's phone for a second before taking it from her. This was another line she rarely crossed. Very few people had her real phone number, but at the same time, this was new for Harper, being so far from all of the people she trusted. Her agent, her manager, her friends were all several hours away now. She entered in her number and handed the phone back to Elle.

Elle rang it, and Harper let her phone buzz in her pocket. "If you ever run into any problems or you have any questions, just call me."

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“Your wife isn’t the jealous type?” Harper asked as she took a drink, a hint of a smile on her lips.

Elle held her gaze for a second. “Stephanie passed away just a little over ten years ago.”

Harper slowly lowered her glass, her eyes closed as she silently swore. She could feel the warmth hitting her cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the wine. “I’m so sorry,” Harper said, but it was barely above a whisper.

The mention of Elle’s late wife hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken grief. Harper wanted to ask more, to understand the pain that flickered across Elle’s face, but she held back. Instead, she watched as the sun dipped lower, painting the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks.

After a few moments Elle spoke. “It was a car accident. It was instant. That’s about the only saving grace. That she didn’t suffer.”

Harper swallowed down the lump in her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Elle said softly, her eyes on the sunset now.

Harper watched Elle’s profile in the fading light, struck by the weight of loss etched in the other woman’s features. The admission about Stephanie had shifted something between them, creating a vulnerability that made Harper’s chest tighten.

“The sunsets here are incredible,” Elle said, breaking the silence. Her voice had

regained its steady strength. “Different from what you’re used to in L.A., I imagine.”

“They are.” Harper welcomed the change in topic. “In L.A., everything’s filtered through smog and city lights. Here it’s...” She gestured at the sky’s canvas of deep oranges and purples stretching over the vineyard. “Stunning.”

Elle nodded, taking another sip of wine. The glass was nearly empty now, and Harper noticed how the evening had crept up on them, the air growing cooler against her skin.

“I should probably head back,” Elle said, setting her glass down.

“Right, of course.” Harper stood with her, suddenly aware of how much she’d enjoyed the company. “Thank you for the wine. And for...” She paused, searching for the right words. “For being so welcoming.”

Elle smiled, and this time it reached her eyes, warming them to a deep honey color in the twilight. “Anytime. And I meant what I said about calling if you need anything.”

Harper walked Elle to her truck. The evening air had cooled significantly since they’d first sat down. A gentle breeze stirred Harper’s hair, and she tucked a wayward strand behind her ear as they approached Elle’s weathered blue pickup.

“Thanks again for stopping by,” Harper said.

“Of course.” Elle pulled her keys from her pocket. “Don’t forget what I said about showing you around my place. Seeing a working vineyard might help you figure out what you want to do with this one.”

Harper crossed her arms against the chill, watching as Elle opened her truck door. As Elle’s truck pulled away, Harper stood in the driveway, following the red taillights

until they disappeared around the bend. The rumble of the engine faded into the distance, leaving her alone with the chorus of crickets and her thoughts.

Harper returned to the deck to catch the last of the sunset. She sank back down onto the plush outdoor sofa, her wine glass cradled in her hands.

The sky was now a mix of brilliant hues of orange and pink. Harper took a slow sip, savoring the rich, complex flavors that danced across her tongue.

Today had been one of the most relaxing days she'd had in a long time, and it had been so different than what she was used to. In Los Angeles, she often found herself recharging rather than relaxing, and her social circle was limited to other actors, producers, and industry insiders - a carefully curated bubble that shielded her from the outside world. But here, with Elle, Harper had felt a sense of ease and openness that was foreign to her.

Harper's gaze drifted to the empty wine glass Elle had left behind, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She was struck by how natural their conversation had felt, although she couldn't believe she'd stuck her foot in it like that by assuming Elle's wife was alive. Although, why wouldn't she? Elle was around fifty Harper guessed, and as far as she could remember, Elle hadn't used the past tense when talking about her.

But it had been a long time since Harper had allowed herself to be so unguarded with someone new. The demands of her career had made her cautious, wary of letting people too close. There was something about Elle's presence that had put Harper at ease, inviting her to lower her defenses.

As the last of the sunset faded into twilight, Harper took another sip of wine, savoring the moment of solitude. In the distance, the faint sound of crickets and the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze created a soothing backdrop.

She could get used to this.

6

Elle stood at her kitchen window, drying the last lunch dish when the purr of a car engine caught her attention. The sleek vehicle curved into her driveway, sunlight glinting off its polished surface. Her breath caught as Harper stepped out.

The actress moved with natural grace, her long dark hair catching the afternoon light. She wore faded jeans that hugged her curves and a simple tank top under an open flannel shirt. The casual outfit somehow made her even more striking than her red carpet photos.

Elle's hand trembled slightly as she set down the dish towel. "Get it together," she muttered to herself. "You've already met her twice."

But something felt different now. Maybe it was seeing Harper in the warm summer light, or the way she moved with such easy confidence.

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Elle watched Harper approach her front door through the window. Her fingers raked through her hair as memories of last night's internet search flooded back. Awards show clips, red carpet interviews, that powerful Oscar acceptance speech about Lena Matthews.

The reality of who Harper was hit Elle with fresh impact. Not just some actress taking a break, but an Oscar winner at the height of her career. The kind of person who graced magazine covers and commanded rooms full of Hollywood elite.

The doorbell chimed, and Elle made her way to the front door, trying to shake off this new awareness. It was ridiculous. Harper was still the same person who she'd shared a glass of wine with the other evening, who'd shared genuine vulnerability about her father's vineyard.

And yet... Elle couldn't quite forget the image of Harper in that white dress, clutching her Oscar, commanding the attention of millions. The contrast between that woman and the one standing on her porch in worn jeans was striking.

Elle reached for the door handle, her usual confidence wavering. She'd texted Harper this morning offering to show her around, expecting maybe a response later in the week. Instead, Harper had immediately asked if today worked. Now here she was, and Elle's usual self-assurance had vanished.

Elle took a steadying breath before opening the door. "Harper, hi." She managed to keep her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest.

"Hey. Thanks for doing this." Harper's smile lit up her face. "For taking time out of

your day.”

“Of course.” Elle grabbed the keys to her truck. “Will we start the tour?”

She couldn’t understand why she felt so off-balance. They’d already spent time together at Harper’s vineyard. Yet something had shifted, leaving Elle feeling strangely nervous around this woman she’d been perfectly comfortable with just days ago.

“Let’s go,” Harper said, and Elle locked the door behind her, willing herself to get it together as she hopped into her truck and Harper opened the passenger’s door.

Elle reversed and drove down the windy road that led to her vineyard.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Elle said softly, following Harper’s gaze out across the rows of grapevines and the backdrop of rolling hills.

“It’s even more breathtaking than I remembered.”

Elle felt a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips as they approached the main buildings, Elle glanced sideways at Harper, who was taking it all in.

“Welcome to Cherry Lane Vineyards,” Elle announced, pulling the truck to a stop in front of the tasting room. “Come on, I’ll give you the grand tour,” she said as they got out of the truck.

Elle guided Harper through the vineyards, indicating the various types of grapes and detailing her eco-friendly cultivation methods. Harper listened intently, her gaze never wavering from Elle’s face.

The tasting room’s heavy oak door creaked open to reveal polished wooden counters

and walls lined with bottles, each one carefully positioned to catch the light just so. Sunlight streamed through tall windows, casting a warm glow across the hand-crafted furniture Elle had commissioned from local artisans years ago. The familiar scent of oak and wine welcomed them.

“This is beautiful,” Harper said, running her fingers along the smooth counter.

“Wait until you see the rest.” Elle led her through to the processing area, where steel tanks stretched toward the ceiling. The space held the lingering scent of last season’s harvest - notes of fermented fruit and oak.

Elle watched Harper, entranced by the way the actress seemed to absorb every detail. The easy rapport they’d developed at Harper’s vineyard still lingered, and Elle’s nerves finally settled.

Elle cleared her throat, breaking the spell. “Shall we try a few wines?”

“I’d love to.”

Elle led Harper back to the tasting room, gesturing for her to take a seat at the polished oak bar. She moved behind the counter, selecting a few bottles from the racks.

She handed a glass to Harper, their fingers brushing briefly. Elle felt a spark of electricity at the contact, and she quickly withdrew her hand.

She poured a deep red into the next set of glasses. “This is our Pinot Noir. It’s my personal favorite. We use grapes from the oldest block of the vineyard.”

Harper took a sip, closing her eyes as she savored it. “Wow. That’s incredible. The complexity, the depth of flavor...”

Elle found herself staring at Harper's lips, stained a deeper red by the wine. She quickly looked away, focusing on pouring the next sample.

They worked their way through the lineup, Harper offering insightful comments on each one. Elle was impressed by her palate. For someone who claimed not to know much about wine, she had a keen sense of the nuances in each glass.

Elle reached beneath the counter and pulled out an old brass key. "I have one last thing to show you." She gestured toward a heavy wooden door at the far end of the tasting room. "Our wine cellar."

The key turned with a satisfying click, and Elle pushed open the door to reveal worn stone steps descending into darkness. She flipped a switch, and warm light flooded the stairwell.

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“Watch your step,” Elle said, leading the way down. The temperature dropped as they descended, the air growing cool and thick with the scent of aged wood and earth. Their footsteps echoed against the stone walls.

The cellar air wrapped around them - cool, dense, earthy. Shadows danced across the curved ceiling as Elle switched on another light, revealing rows of bottles sleeping in their wooden racks.

A handful of dusty bulbs cast pools of amber light between the shadows, barely illuminating the labels on the bottles. The cellar opened up before them - rows of wooden racks stretched into the shadows. Some labels had faded with age, their dates barely visible in the dim light.

“This is where we keep our library wines,” Elle explained, moving deeper into the cellar.

Harper stepped closer, her shoulder brushing against Elle’s as she leaned in to examine the labels. Elle’s breath caught at the contact, and she forced herself to focus on the wine rather than the warmth radiating from Harper’s proximity.

“The cellar’s my favorite place,” Elle admitted softly. “It holds so much history, so many stories. Each bottle represents a specific year, a specific harvest.” She turned to face Harper, finding herself caught in those warm brown eyes. “Every vintage tells its own tale.”

The air felt charged between them. Harper’s gaze held hers, and Elle found herself aware of how close they were standing in the intimate space of the cellar.

Elle led Harper through a narrow archway into one of the smaller storage rooms. Ancient stones curved overhead in a low ceiling, and the space felt more confined than the main cellar. Bottles lined the walls in neat rows, their labels barely visible in the dim light from the single bulb overhead.

“These are some special reserves we...” Elle’s voice trailed off as she noticed Harper’s breathing had changed. The actress had gone very still, her eyes fixed on a point on the wall, but not really seeing it. Her chest rose and fell in quick, shallow movements.

The change was subtle at first, but as Elle watched, Harper’s hand crept up to her throat, fingers splaying across her collarbone. Her other hand pressed against the stone wall, as if seeking support.

A bead of sweat traced down Harper’s temple despite the cellar’s cool temperature. The confident, engaging woman from moments ago had vanished, replaced by someone fighting for control. Harper’s lips parted slightly, trying to draw in more air in the confined space.

Elle recognized the signs - she’d seen similar reactions in visitors who discovered their claustrophobia in the cellar’s tight quarters. The way Harper’s gaze darted to the archway, how her fingers trembled against the wall, the slight sway in her stance - all pointed to rising panic.

“Harper?” Elle kept her voice soft, gentle. She noticed Harper’s knuckles had gone white where they pressed against the stone. The actress’s breathing grew more labored, each inhale shorter than the last.

The single bulb cast harsh shadows across Harper’s face, highlighting the fear that had crept into her expression.

Harper must be claustrophobic, and the small room was triggering a panic attack.

7

The first thing Harper noticed was how the walls seemed to press inward. Her fingertips brushed against the rough stone, seeking an anchor point as the cellar's shadows deepened.

Her heart skipped, then thundered against her ribs. The cool air turned thick, heavy, and it felt impossible to draw into her lungs. The space contracted, squeezing tighter with each passing second.

Dark. Small. Trapped.

The set had been like this. The prop closet they'd used to film Lena's captivity scene. Hours crouched in that tiny space, take after take, until Harper had inhabited Lena's terror so completely she'd forgotten where reality ended.

Her legs weakened. The stone wall scraped against her palm as she sagged against it. Sweat beaded along her hairline despite the cellar's chill. The single light bulb blurred, doubled, tripled - just like the harsh production lights that had burned into her retinas that day.

The floor tilted beneath her feet. Her chest constricted, each breath more shallow than the last. She heard Elle's voice, distant and muffled, as if filtering through water. But Harper couldn't respond, couldn't focus on anything except the crushing weight of the walls closing in.

Her throat closed. The darkness at the edges of her vision crept inward, bringing with it the phantom smell of musty wood and rope from the set. The same suffocating panic that had gripped her during filming now clawed its way up from her chest, raw

and primal.

She needed air. Space. Light. But her muscles had locked, pinning her against the wall as the room spun and compressed around her.

Harper felt Elle's warm fingers slide between her own, the touch cutting through the panic like a lifeline. Without a word, Elle guided her forward, each step pulling Harper away from the suffocating darkness.

The stone walls blurred past as they moved. Harper's feet stumbled over the uneven floor, but Elle's grip remained steady, anchoring her to the present. The sensation of skin against skin gave her something real to focus on beyond the crushing weight in her chest.

Cool air brushed Harper's face as they reached the stairs. Light filtered down from above, growing stronger with each step. Elle's hand never left hers as they climbed, their footsteps echoing in the narrow stairwell.

The pressure in Harper's chest began to ease as they emerged into the sunlight. A breeze swept across her damp skin, and her racing heart started to slow as she recognized the vineyard's familiar landscape spreading out before them.

Harper blinked against the sunlight, her legs moving on autopilot as Elle steered her toward a weathered wooden bench. The world tilted, then righted itself as she sank onto the seat. Her hands trembled in her lap, fingers curling into her palms.

The warmth of Elle's presence disappeared. Harper's chest tightened again until footsteps crunched across gravel, and Elle pressed a cold bottle of water into her hands. The plastic crinkled beneath her grip.

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Heat crept up Harper's neck and into her cheeks. Of all the people to witness her falling apart, it had to be Elle - composed, capable Elle who probably never lost control like this. She took a sip of water, letting the cool liquid wash away the metallic taste in her mouth.

"I'm sorry." Harper's voice came out rough. She kept her eyes fixed on the bottle, watching droplets of condensation roll down the sides. "I don't usually... this hasn't happened since-" The words stuck in her throat.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Elle's voice carried a gentleness that made Harper's chest ache. "I should have asked first if you were claustrophobic before taking you down there."

Harper's fingers traced the condensation on the water bottle. The truth hovered on her lips - that she'd never been claustrophobic before, that it was only after filming that scene as Lena. That this was the first time she'd felt that crushing panic since then. But the words wouldn't come. They lodged in her throat, heavy and uncomfortable. Instead, she took another sip of water, letting the cool liquid wash away the unspoken confession.

Elle settled beside her on the bench, close enough that Harper could feel her warmth, but not so close as to crowd her. Harper took a deep, steadying breath, letting the fresh air fill her lungs. The panic had subsided, leaving her feeling raw and exposed, but thankfully the crushing weight on her chest had lifted. She glanced at Elle, who sat beside her in patient silence and felt a surge of gratitude.

"Thank you," Harper murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "For getting me

out of there so quickly. I...” She paused, searching for the right words. “I didn’t mean to...I don’t usually...”

Elle placed a gentle hand on Harper’s forearm, stopping her. “You don’t need to explain. I’m just glad I could help.”

Harper nodded, her gaze dropping to Elle’s hand on her arm. The touch sent a tiny spark of electricity through her, but Elle’s hand was gone before Harper could think any more about it.

Something about Elle’s quiet presence made her want to explain.

“I’ve never had anything like that happen before.” The words tumbled out before she could stop them. “But I’m not surprised, really. The last movie I did...” Harper drew in a shaky breath. “There was this scene we had to film in this tiny, dark room. Being down in the cellar just...” Her voice caught. “It took me right back there, to being in that room in this basement and everything that happened to Lena.”

She glanced down at her hand, still trembling slightly, and an image of her wrists tied tight with rough rope flashed across her mind.

Harper shook her head. “I’ve never been haunted by a movie like this. I can’t get it out of my head. All the things she went through.” A weak laugh escaped her lips. “At least that Oscar was well-earned.”

The attempt at humor fell flat, even to her own ears. She couldn’t quite meet Elle’s eyes, afraid of what she might find there - pity, judgment.

“I haven’t seen it yet,” Elle said. “But I can imagine how something like that stays with you.”

Every actor friend she knew had their own stories of difficult roles, challenging scenes that pushed their limits. She'd listened to them talk about it over drinks at industry parties, comparing war stories like badges of honor.

But this felt different. Lena's story had burrowed under her skin, taken root in places she couldn't reach. The thought of discussing it with her actor friends made her stomach twist. They'd understand too well, offer advice on technique and compartmentalization, tell her about their own breakthrough roles. She didn't want to be another actor who couldn't separate themselves from a character.

But here, sitting beside Elle, the words had spilled out naturally. Elle's quiet presence and lack of industry knowledge made it easier somehow. No judgment, no comparisons, no well-meaning advice about method acting and emotional boundaries.

"Thank you," Harper said, meaning it for more than just the rescue from the cellar. "It helps, talking about it with someone who isn't..." She waved her hand vaguely. "You know, in that world."

Elle's eyes held a depth of understanding that made Harper's chest tighten. "I can only imagine how difficult it must be, to inhabit a role like that so fully. I might not have seen the movie, but I did watch your acceptance speech, and it's obvious how much you cared about telling her story, about doing it justice."

Harper felt a flush creep up her neck at the compliment. She was used to praise from directors, producers, other actors - but coming from Elle, the words carried a different weight. A sincerity that caught her off guard.

"But anyway, I'm here, if you ever need to talk about it more. Or not talk about it at all." A hint of a smile played at the corners of Elle's mouth. "I've been told I'm an excellent listener."

Harper found herself returning the smile, a real one this time. “I might just take you up on that.” Harper pushed herself to her feet, relieved to find her legs steady beneath her. The panic had faded, leaving behind a bone-deep exhaustion in its wake.

“I can drive you up, if you’d like,” Elle offered, gesturing towards her truck.

Harper hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. “Thanks, but I think I’m okay now.”

Elle nodded, understanding in her eyes. “Of course.” She reached out, giving Harper’s arm a gentle squeeze before walking away.

Harper watched as Elle headed back towards the vineyard, her figure slowly receding into the distance. She took a deep breath, letting the fresh air fill her lungs and the warm sun soak into her skin.

The memory of the panic still lingered, but for some reason, she felt lighter, relieved almost that Elle knew.

Although Elle didn’t know about the rest of it, about how Harper didn’t necessarily need to be in a tiny, dark place to relive some of the most intense scenes she’d ever filmed.

Elle didn’t know that sleep had now become a luxury. That even on nights when she was exhausted and fell asleep quickly, she almost always woke up with her heart racing, a nightmare fading into the background.

Harper wasn’t sure why she couldn’t tell Piper. A part of her was embarrassed, maybe. They did this for a living, embodying other people’s life experiences, real or fictitious, and part of that job was being able to walk away from those scenes.

Why couldn't Harper just walk away?

8

Elle descended the stairs into the cool cellar, her footsteps echoing against the stone walls. The dim light cast shadows across the rows of closely packed barrels as she navigated the narrow space, searching for the perfect bottle for the upcoming wine tasting.

As her fingers traced the dusty labels, her thoughts drifted to Harper. Elle could still picture the intense, anxious look in her deep brown eyes as the panic had overtaken her. In that moment of vulnerability, Elle had witnessed a side of Harper that few others had likely seen.

Elle hoped that Harper was okay. She hadn't spoken to her since that day in the cellar, which was almost a week ago now, and she knew how much Harper valued her privacy, her space. Elle had already wandered up to her house and knocked on her door to officially welcome her. She didn't want to keep reaching out. Harper had her number if she wanted to spend any more time together, and Elle smiled to herself as she thought about how crazy that idea was.

Why would Harper Reeves want to spend more time with her? She was one of the world's most famous actresses. Elle had offered to show her around, and that's what she'd done. It was an offer she made to help Harper figure out what she wanted to do with the business side of things.

Harper wasn't looking for a friend. Elle might have found her easy to talk to, but

Harper had said she was here to relax, and to Elle that meant being left alone.

Elle's hands moved on autopilot, selecting a bottle she knew her guests would appreciate. Her mind, however, was far from the task at hand. She was still thinking about Harper. Elle couldn't imagine what it must be like for her to think that she was coming back to her childhood home, to take over her father's vineyard, and then to find it abandoned.

Clearly, money was not an issue. Elle would never spend any kind of money without carefully considering it, and it sounded like Harper had offered to buy her uncle out on a whim. Elle didn't even want to think about the kind of money Harper must have spent and to get so little in return for it... Even if money wasn't a problem, it still would be a blow, especially when it was her own uncle who had essentially swindled her.

As she made her way back up the stairs, she shook her head, but then a thought began to take shape. If Harper felt like she was in over her head... Elle paused at the top of the stairs, the idea quickly coming together in her mind.

What if she rented Harper's vineyard? She could use the space to expand her own operations. It would be a mutually beneficial arrangement, allowing Harper to see her father's vineyard thriving again, but without all of the stress of actually making it happen.

Elle hesitated, her thumb hovering over Harper's contact in her phone. She had just convinced herself that Harper wouldn't want to keep spending time with her, that she was here for solitude and relaxation. But this was different. This was a business proposition, an opportunity to take some of the pressure off Harper's shoulders.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Elle typed out a message.

Hey. I had an idea I wanted to run by you. Would you be interested in coming over for dinner tonight?

Elle hit send, her heart racing as she wondered if she was crazy for even thinking this would work. She knew it was a long shot, but when Stephanie was alive, she'd dreamed of expanding someday. They were only starting to see their first signs of success back then, but Stephanie was already thinking ahead, wondering how they could grow their business.

Elle clutched the bottle in her hand as she closed the cellar door behind her, swallowing down the grief that bubbled up every so often. The last ten years had gone by in a blur. She'd worked harder than she ever had. Life went on and it was just her running the vineyard without Stephanie by her side.

The second year had been the hardest. The first, she couldn't even remember. She'd hardly slept, always the first to arrive here and the last to leave, almost afraid to go back to her empty home, knowing that everything around her would remind her of Stephanie.

But the second year was when it really hit her that Stephanie was gone.

And now, with the prospect of expanding the vineyard right there in front of her, Elle felt that burning in her chest, that feeling that life wasn't fair hitting her harder than it had in years.

9

The perfectly seared ribeye melted in Harper's mouth, its peppery crust giving way to a tender, medium-rare center that needed barely any pressure from her knife. The homemade red wine sauce drizzled across the plate added a rich depth that brought everything together. Harper savored the last bite of the meal Elle had prepared.

The conversation had flowed effortlessly between them all evening, but she kept thinking about Elle's text from just a few hours ago, telling her that she had an idea she wanted to run by her, but Harper was still waiting to find out what that idea was.

As Elle cleared the plates, Harper tried to help, but Elle insisted on taking care of it. So, Harper leaned back in her chair, sipping the last of the wine Elle had paired with their dinner.

The curiosity had been building throughout the evening, but Harper had patiently waited, enjoying the company and the delicious food, and just as she was about to bring it up, Elle returned to the table, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Harper, I've been thinking," she began, her hazel eyes meeting her gaze. "I have an idea I'd like to discuss with you."

Harper set her wine glass down, giving Elle her full attention. "I'm all ears," she said, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She tilted her head as she tried to figure out why Elle suddenly seemed a little nervous as she sat down across from her again.

Elle took a deep breath, as if gathering her thoughts. "I'm not sure if this is something you'd be open to or not, but I'm just going to say it." Elle's fingers slowly slid up and down the stem of her wine glass before she looked up and held Harper's gaze. "I was wondering if you'd consider renting your vineyard to me," she said. "It would allow me to expand my business while honoring your father's legacy. We could work out an arrangement that benefits us both."

Harper blinked. She hadn't expected this, but as the idea sank in, she found herself intrigued. Elle's expertise and passion for winemaking were undeniable, and the thought of her father's vineyard thriving under Elle's care was appealing.

"When did you think of this?" Harper asked, leaning forward, her elbows resting on

the table.

Elle shook her head, a tiny smile coming to her lips. “About two minutes before I texted you.”

“What?” Harper asked, her own smile widening.

Elle looked away, her cheeks rosy. “I... Well, there had always been plans to expand someday, but it never really made sense, because it would mean picking up and starting over again somewhere else, somewhere that had more land. But now... Your land is there, unused. It was a dream of Stephanie’s, and I think it could work out nicely for both of us.”

Harper suddenly found herself blinking back tears. She’d already kind of come to terms with the idea that her father’s vineyard would never return to the way it was when Harper had grown up here. It was too much work for someone who had no idea what she was doing. But with Elle in charge? Now it was a possibility.

Elle reached across the table, her hand gently covering Harper’s. The warmth of her touch sent a shiver down Harper’s spine. “I know it must have been hard for you, coming back here and finding your family’s vineyard like this,” Elle said softly, her eyes filled with empathy. “I want to help, Harper. I believe we can make this work. We can work out the details, but I was thinking that we could sign a lease. It’ll be official.”

Harper pressed her lips together. Elle was right to think that Harper would be apprehensive to put her trust in someone again. It wouldn’t hurt to have it all in writing.

Elle’s hand slid away from her own. “You can take some time to think about it. I just wanted to put the idea out there.”

Harper leaned back in her chair, contemplating Elle's proposal. The idea of renting the vineyard to Elle seemed like a perfect solution, allowing her to honor her father's legacy while entrusting the property to someone with the knowledge and passion to make it thrive.

For the first time since returning to the vineyard, Harper felt a glimmer of hope. "It sounds almost too good to be true," she admitted, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

"I understand your hesitation, but I promise you, this is a genuine offer. I want to help, not just for the sake of expanding my business, but because I think it'll make your life easier too. You could come and go, without worrying about more than your house. And I know I don't know you that well, but if your vineyard was back up and running, I think you'd be able to let go of some of that guilt that you're holding onto."

Harper exhaled softly. "That really is how I've felt most days since I've been here. Guilty. Guilty for not coming back here sooner. For not being able to fix this mess."

Elle's expression softened, her eyes filled with understanding. "And I think this might be the solution."

"I think it might be too."

"There is one thing I need to mention," Elle said gently. "In order to get the vineyard back to where it needs to be, there will be some initial costs involved. I would need you to fund those expenses, but my team and I would handle all the work."

Harper considered this for a moment, knowing that investing in the vineyard was a necessary step. She had the means to do so, thankfully, and the thought of seeing her father's vineyard flourish once more made the decision easy.

“I’m willing to do that,” Harper said. “I want to see the vineyard thrive again, and I trust you to make it happen.”

“I’ll draw up some estimates and speak to my lawyer about drafting a document.”

“Let me know as soon as you have them and maybe I can cook dinner for you while we look over it?”

Elle smiled, the lines around her eyes fanning out. “That sounds perfect.”

Harper followed Elle into the living room, a glass of wine in hand. The cozy space was adorned with personal touches, photographs, and mementos that told the story of Elle’s life. As they settled onto the plush couch, Harper’s eyes were drawn to a particular photograph on the bookshelf. It captured a much younger Elle, her chestnut hair tousled by the wind, and a stunning blond-haired woman by her side. They were on a beach, their smiles radiant and carefree.

Elle must have noticed Harper’s gaze lingering on the photograph because she spoke softly, “That was taken in Portugal, on our first trip together.” A wistful smile played on her lips as she added, “That was nearly thirty years ago.”

Harper turned to Elle, curiosity piqued. “Is that Stephanie?” she asked gently.

Elle nodded, her hazel eyes filled with a mixture of love and nostalgia. “Yes, that’s her. We were so young and in love back then. Portugal was where we truly fell for each other, away from the demands of everyday life.”

“She was beautiful,” Harper said softly, her gaze returning to the photograph. “You both look so happy.”

Elle’s smile widened, a glimmer of joy in her eyes. “We were. Stephanie had a way

of making every moment feel like an adventure. She taught me to embrace life fully, to take risks and follow my heart.”

Harper sipped her wine, the rich flavor complementing the warmth of the moment. She admired Elle’s strength and resilience.

“Losing someone you love is never easy.”

Elle met Harper’s gaze, a flicker of understanding passing between them. “It’s been ten years, but there are still moments when the absence feels so raw.”

Harper reached out, placing a comforting hand on Elle’s arm. “I’m so sorry, Elle. I can’t even begin to imagine what you went through.”

Although even as she said those words, another heart-wrenching scene flashed across her mind. Harper had never loved someone like Lena had loved Clara or like Elle had loved her wife.

She’d never had that connection, but Harper had poured herself into Lena when she’d cradled Clara in her arms, both of them exhausted, bloodied, and bruised after they’d fought off the intruders that had stormed into their home in the middle of the night. But Clara had fallen backwards as one of the intruders elbowed her when she’d tried to attack him. Blood poured from the side of Clara’s head, and she was gone before the ambulance had arrived.

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Harper swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. She might not know what that kind of loss was like, but that scene was the one that woke her up in the middle of the night more than any of the others. The tears had streaked down Harper's face, the ragged sobs echoing around the set. How Lena could have gone on after that, knowing that the reason the intruders had attacked their home was because they'd been looking for her, Harper would never understand.

And Clara had paid the price for Lena's fight.

If Lena hadn't been so outspoken, Clara would still be alive.

Harper blinked, Elle's voice cutting through the haunting memories of filming Lena's darkest moments.

"I'm sorry," Elle said. "I didn't mean to bring down the mood with old memories."

"No." Harper shook her head, her dark hair falling across her face. "Please don't apologize. Memories are important, even the painful ones." She brushed her hair back, grateful for the distraction from her own memories. "Besides, this evening has been one of the best I've had in a long time. Your idea about renting the vineyard..." A smile spread across her face. "It feels right like the perfection solution to my problems, and I feel like it's something my father would have wanted. I wish you two had met."

Elle reached for her wine glass, the deep red liquid catching the warm light. "I was worried you might think I was being presumptuous."

“Presumptuous?” Harper laughed softly. “Elle, you’re offering to save my father’s legacy. I’d be crazy not to consider it.” She leaned back against the couch cushions, feeling lighter than she had in months. “Your experience, your passion for the land... It’s exactly what the vineyard needs.”

Elle’s eyes crinkled at the corners, and Harper found herself drawn to the warmth in that expression. Harper’s gaze lingered on Elle’s smile, and the way it softened her features.

As they sat together on the couch, Harper found herself noticing the little things about Elle—the way her chestnut hair fell in soft waves around her face, the elegance of her hands as she held her wine glass, and the subtle scent of her perfume.

A flutter of attraction stirred within Harper, catching her off guard. She dismissed it immediately, but there was no denying the pull she felt towards Elle. If Harper really thought about it, she could admit to herself that she felt something when Elle had helped her get out of the wine cellar, when they’d been sitting on that bench together, and Harper slowly started to gain control of her breathing again.

But Harper pushed those thoughts aside, a twinge of guilt settling in her stomach. She couldn’t help but think of the paparazzi that had followed her to Elle’s doorstep, the unwanted attention she had inadvertently brought into Elle’s life before she’d even met Elle.

And then Harper really pushed those thoughts completely out of her head. The pain of Elle’s loss still lingered, and Harper got the feeling that Elle hadn’t dated since and maybe never would.

No, it was best to focus on their professional partnership, on the shared goal of revitalizing the vineyard.

As Elle spoke, Harper found herself drawn in, captivated by the tone of her voice. She loved the way Elle talked about her vineyard, her voice tinged with passion as she gave an overview of what would be involved and how long it would take.

Harper tried to focus on Elle's words, but her mind kept drifting to the way Elle's lips moved as she spoke, the way her eyes shone with enthusiasm. She took another sip of wine, hoping the rich liquid would help her regain her composure, but it only seemed to amplify the attraction she felt.

It's just the wine. That's all that's going on here.

But deep down, she knew that wasn't true. She'd only had two glasses, hardly enough to cloud her judgment. No, this attraction was real, and it terrified her.

She couldn't be interested in Elle. It was a terrible idea on so many levels. They were about to enter into a business partnership, and the last thing Harper needed was to complicate things with romantic feelings. Elle was still grieving the loss of her wife, and Harper had no right to even entertain the thought of pursuing something more than friendship.

Besides, Harper's life was a mess. She'd come to the vineyard to escape the chaos of Hollywood, to find some semblance of peace after the most intense role of her career.

Harper tried to push the thoughts aside, to focus on the present moment. Elle was offering her a chance to save her father's legacy, to bring the vineyard back to life. That was what mattered, not the way Elle's smile made Harper's heart skip a beat or the way her gentle touch sent shivers down Harper's spine.

But as Elle continued to speak, her passion for the vineyard evident in every word, Harper found it increasingly difficult to ignore the pull she felt towards her.

Elle settled into the plush theater seat, and the scent of buttered popcorn wafted through the air. As the lights dimmed, a hush fell over the audience, and the movie began.

The opening scene of *Lena* unfolded before her, transporting Elle to the streets of 1960s New York, and it wasn't long before Elle was transfixed as she watched Lena navigate the challenges of being an LGBTQ+ activist in an era of rampant discrimination.

In a particularly poignant scene, Lena stood before a crowded rally, her voice ringing out with passion and conviction. Harper's performance was mesmerizing, capturing the essence of Lena's unwavering commitment to the cause. Elle found herself leaning forward, hanging on every word as Lena spoke of the need for change, for equality, and for love.

Elle became increasingly immersed in Lena's world as the story unfolded. She felt the weight of this woman's struggles, the joy of her triumphs, and the profound love she shared with her partner, Clara. Harper's portrayal was so authentic, so raw, that Elle found herself forgetting she was watching an actress on screen. In those moments, Harper was Lena.

As the movie progressed, Lena seemed to face one struggle after another. In a heart-pounding sequence, Lena was ambushed on a dimly lit street, a rough hand clamping over her mouth as she was dragged into a waiting car.

Elle's chest tightened, her heart racing as she watched the scene unfold. The camera cut to a dark, cramped room in a basement, where Lena lay on a bare mattress, her wrists bound tightly with coarse rope. Harper's performance was gut-wrenching, her eyes wide with fear and desperation as Lena struggled against her bonds. Elle could

almost feel the rough fibers biting into her own skin. The room seemed to close in around her, the walls pressing in on all sides.

As Lena's captors entered the room, their faces obscured by shadows, Elle's breath caught in her throat. The menace in their voices was palpable, their threats hanging heavy in the air.

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With each passing second, Elle's emotions mirrored Lena's – the suffocating fear, the desperate need to escape, the overwhelming sense of being trapped. In that moment, Elle understood with startling clarity why Harper had experienced such a visceral reaction in the wine cellar.

Later, Elle watched as Lena's activism gained momentum, her impassioned speeches and unyielding determination inspiring a growing movement. The love between Lena and Clara remained a constant despite all of the challenges they faced.

But danger always loomed, and Elle's heart raced as she witnessed the escalating threats against Lena, the hateful slurs hurled at her during rallies. The tension built to a crescendo, and a loud noise shattered the stillness of the theater, causing Elle to jump in her seat.

The scene unfolded in horrifying detail. Masked men burst into Lena and Clara's home in the middle of the night. Glass shattered. Furniture was overturned, and Clara's screams pierced the air. Elle felt sick to her stomach as the scene unfolded.

But nothing could have prepared Elle for what followed.

In the chaos of the attack, Clara fell, her body crumpling to the ground as the men scrambled out the door with the sounds of sirens in the distance. Lena rushed to her side, gathering her in her arms as crimson bloomed across Clara's shirt. Elle watched, transfixed, as Lena cradled her love, her anguished cries reverberating through the theater.

Clara's head lolled against Lena's shoulder, her eyes fluttering closed. Blood seeped

between Lena's fingers as she desperately tried to stem the flow, her tears mingling with the scarlet stains. Elle's heart shattered, the raw agony of the moment searing itself into her memory.

Lena's sobs filled the air, a primal, guttural sound that spoke of a pain beyond words. She rocked Clara's lifeless body, her fingers tangling in her hair, her lips pressing against her cooling skin. The camera lingered on the scene, unflinching in its portrayal of the depths of Lena's grief.

Elle sat motionless, her own tears flowing freely. The brutality of the moment, the senseless cruelty that had ripped Clara from Lena's arms, left her reeling. She couldn't look away.

As Lena's world crumbled, so too did Elle's composure. The reality of the sacrifices made, the lives lost in the fight for equality, hit her hard in that moment. Elle's heart ached for Lena, for the love she had lost.

The final scenes of the movie had followed the rest of Lena's short life, and the words on the screen now alongside a picture of Lena brought fresh tears.

Lena Matthews spent all of her life, fighting for her love to be recognized as equal, as worthy of celebration, as worthy of dignity. She knew that oneday it would be. But she never lived to see it. In 1999, Lena died after battling a short illness.

When the credits rolled, Elle remained in her seat, her cheeks stained with tears. The theater emptied around her, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Her mind was reeling from the powerful story she had just witnessed, the raw emotions that Harper had so masterfully portrayed on screen.

Elle had never heard of Lena Matthews before she'd watched Harper's acceptance speech, but now she felt an inexplicable connection to her. The courage and resilience

that Lena had displayed in the face of unimaginable adversity had left Elle in awe, and she couldn't shake the image of Lena cradling Clara's lifeless body, the anguish etched into every line of her face.

As the last of the credits faded from the screen, Elle finally gathered the strength to stand. She made her way out of the theater, her steps heavy. The cool evening air hit her face as she stepped outside.

Elle climbed into her truck, settling into the driver's seat. As she sat there, her mind drifted to Harper. The actress's performance had been nothing short of extraordinary. To inhabit a character like Lena, to delve into the depths of her pain and her love, must have been an emotionally exhausting experience. Elle could only imagine the weight that Harper had carried with her long after the cameras stopped rolling.

It was no wonder that she was struggling to move on.

11

The knock at the door startled Harper, her book slipping from her fingers and thumping on the carpet. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was just past 10 PM. Frowning, she rose from the couch and padded to the window. She pushed the curtain aside, peering out into the darkness. The porch light illuminated a familiar blue truck in her driveway.

What was Elle doing here so late?

Harper made her way to the front door and pulled it open. Elle stood on her porch, but even in the dim lighting, Harper could see that Elle had been crying.

"Elle? What happened? Are you alright?"

“I’m fine. I’m sorry. I know it’s late,” she said in a rush. “I just...” She exhaled as she ran a hand through her hair. “I needed to see you.”

Before Harper could respond, Elle stepped forward, closing the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around Harper.

Harper stiffened for a moment, taken aback by the suddenness of the embrace. But as Elle’s arms tightened around her, Harper melted into the hug. The warmth of Elle’s body seeped through Harper’s thin cotton shirt, and she caught the faint scent of her perfume. Harper’s hands found their way to Elle’s back, settling on her waist as Elle pulled back.

“I... I just saw your movie.” Elle’s voice cracked, her hands lingering on Harper’s shoulders. Tears glistened in her eyes. “The scene where Clara—” She broke off, shaking her head. “God, Harper. The way you captured Lena’s pain, her loss. I felt every moment of it.”

Harper’s throat tightened. She’d lived with Lena’s story for so long, carried the weight of it through months of filming, but seeing Elle’s raw reaction brought it all rushing back.

“Come sit down.” Harper gestured toward the living room, her hand finding the small of Elle’s back. But Elle hesitated at the threshold, running her fingers through her disheveled hair.

“I must look awful,” Elle said, wiping at her cheeks. “I didn’t even stop at home first. I just... I had to come straight here.”

Harper shook her head, a reassuring smile tugging at her lips. The words “you look beautiful” were the tip of her tongue, but she caught herself, swallowing them back. “I’m just glad you’re here,” she said instead. She gestured towards the living room.

“Why don’t you go sit down? I’ll grab us a bottle of wine.”

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In the kitchen, Harper took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She couldn't deny the growing attraction she felt towards Elle. It had happened enough times and clearly, it wasn't going away, but she also knew that Elle was here seeking comfort, a friend to talk to, so Harper had to find a way to forget about it.

Harper selected a bottle of pinot noir from the wine rack, the smooth glass cool against her palm. She grabbed two glasses and made her way back to the living room, her heart beating a little faster with each step. As she entered, her gaze fell upon Elle, who was sitting on the couch, one hand absentmindedly running through her chestnut hair. The sight made Harper's breath slow.

There was something undeniably alluring about Elle. Before, Harper might have put it down to the confidence Elle had when it came to her knowledge of wine and running her business, but this version of Elle that was in front of her now was almost the opposite of that. Her hair was slightly mussed, and she looked a little on edge, her foot tapping against the floor. There was none of that confidence, yet Harper could barely take her eyes off her.

Harper approached the couch, setting the glasses on the coffee table with a soft clink. Elle looked up, her hazel eyes still glistening with the remnants of tears. A flicker of something passed between them, but maybe Harper was just seeing what she wanted to see.

Harper poured the wine, the rich burgundy liquid swirling in the glasses. She handed one to Elle, their fingers brushing briefly in the exchange. The contact sent a shiver through her, and she found herself wondering if Elle felt it too.

Harper settled onto the couch beside Elle, her heart racing as their thighs brushed. She tried to focus on the wine in her hand, on the weight of the glass, the coolness of the stem against her fingers. Anything to distract from the warmth of Elle's body so close to hers.

Elle took a sip of her wine, her gaze fixed on the dark liquid. "Harper, I... I'm so sorry about the other day. In the wine cellar. I had no idea..." Her voice trailed off, and she shook her head.

Harper swallowed. She'd been trying not to think about that moment, the way the walls had seemed to close in on her, the way her lungs had refused to fill with air. "You have nothing to apologize for, Elle. Really. You couldn't have known."

Elle met her gaze then, and Harper felt her breath catch in her throat. Elle was beautiful. The way her hair fell softly around her face, the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes.

Harper took a sip of her wine, trying to push those thoughts aside. This wasn't the time.

"After seeing the movie," Elle said softly, "I can understand why it affected you like that." She took a sip of wine. "The way you portrayed Lena's pain, her grief... it was so raw, so real. It was absolutely mesmerizing."

Harper swallowed hard, her fingers tightening around the stem of her glass. "It felt real," she admitted. "Every take, every scene. I've had the chance to play some amazing characters over the years, work with some of the best directors, with great scripts, but there was just something special about this part. And I lost myself in it like I never have before."

Elle reached out, her hand finding Harper's. Her skin was soft, her touch gentle. "I

can't even imagine what that must have been like. To immerse yourself in that kind of pain, that kind of loss."

Harper's heart stuttered at the contact. She wanted to turn her hand over, to intertwine her fingers with Elle's. But she resisted, instead offering a small smile. "It was... intense. But it was important to me to get it right. To honor Lena's story."

Elle nodded, her thumb brushing over the back of Harper's hand. The small gesture sent a tingling sensation up her arm, and she found herself noticing the little things about Elle that she'd been trying to ignore. The tiny freckle just below her left eye. The softness of her skin. The way her lips...

Harper took another sip of wine, trying to steady herself. She couldn't let herself get carried away. Not now. Probably not ever.

"I'm so sorry for just showing up like this," Elle said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's late, I know. I just... I had this overwhelming need to see you as soon as I left the theater."

Harper's heart fluttered. The sincerity in Elle's eyes, the vulnerability in her voice, it was intoxicating. She wanted to reach out, to touch her, to reassure her. But she stopped herself. She wasn't about to cross a line she wasn't sure Elle wanted to cross.

"It's okay," Harper managed, her voice a little shaky. "Really. I'm glad you're here." And she was. Despite the late hour, despite the unexpected visit. Despite this new problem of finding it impossible to look at Elle without thinking that she was stunning.

"I knew what the movie was about but it just... it hit me hard. And I couldn't stop thinking about it as I drove back. About Lena, about Clara. About everything they went through."

Harper nodded, a lump forming in her throat. She knew exactly what Elle meant.

“It’s hard to imagine,” Elle continued, “what it must have been like back then. The fear, the prejudice. The constant threat of violence.”

Harper took a sip of her wine. “It was a different time,” she said quietly.

Elle’s gaze met hers. “I just can’t believe that I didn’t know her name before.”

“There are so many stories like Lena’s,” Harper said softly. “Stories of courage, of resilience, of love in the face of adversity. Stories that deserve to be told.”

Elle nodded, her eyes still glistening with unshed tears. “You told her story beautifully, Harper.”

A warmth spread through Harper’s chest at Elle’s words. It wasn’t the praise itself that moved her, but the genuine emotion behind it. The way Elle’s voice softened when she spoke Harper’s name, the way her hand lingered on Harper’s, the way her gaze held a depth of understanding that Harper had rarely encountered before.

“It was important to me,” Harper admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elle squeezed Harper’s hand, her touch sending a ripple of something electric through her. “You did more than that, Harper. You made me feel. You made me think.”

Harper’s heart skipped a beat. She wanted to lean in, to close the distance between them, to feel the warmth of Elle’s body against hers. But she hesitated, unsure if she was reading the signals right. Was this just the aftermath of a powerful movie? Or was there something more?

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Harper broke their eye contact and topped up their glasses. She had no idea how this had happened. She'd admired Elle from the first time they'd met, but now, Harper felt like she couldn't go back to that. She was already falling for Elle, someone who had been nothing but friendly, welcoming.

She couldn't mess this up with Elle. She just couldn't.

The second bottle of Pinot Noir breathed on the coffee table. Harper watched as Elle swirled the wine in her glass. They'd polished off the first bottle with surprising ease, the conversation flowing as smoothly as the wine. The initial heaviness that Elle had carried into the house had dissipated, replaced by a relaxed warmth that Harper found utterly captivating. They'd talked about Lena for a while longer, but then the conversation drifted away from the film, and Elle had steered it towards Harper's personal life.

"So," Elle had asked, "is there anyone special in your life?"

Harper had hesitated, swirling the wine in her own glass, the question hanging in the air between them.

Elle had filled the silence. "What struck me about your performance the most was that scene with Clara and the raw grief that you captured so well. Thinking about it now, I guess, I just assumed that you had somewhere to pull that from, that you'd loved someone like that before."

"No," Harper admitted finally, her voice soft. "I never have. I've had meaningful relationships, but nothing like that. Nothing that lasted more than a year."

“Really?” Elle raised an eyebrow, a hint of surprise in her voice.

Harper had laughed. “Relationships in Hollywood are... complicated.”

Now, Harper was topping up their glasses again. She was buzzed but nicely so. She wasn’t at the point yet of worrying about saying something she shouldn’t, although if she wasn’t careful, that could easily happen.

Harper asked the question that had been on her lips since Elle had asked her if she was seeing anyone. “So... You asked me earlier if I was seeing anyone.”

Elle’s eyes met hers for a few seconds before she looked away. She took a sip of her wine, her gaze lingering on the glass for a moment before returning to Harper.

Harper kept going, her heart tapping a quick rhythm against her ribs. “What about you? Have you... Have you dated anyone since...?” She trailed off, unsure how to phrase the question. Since Stephanie.

A shadow passed over Elle’s face before a small, almost wistful smile came to her lips. “No,” she answered, her voice soft.

Harper nodded before taking a sip of her own wine. She wasn’t sure why she felt so nervous. It was just a question, after all. A simple one.

“It’s hard,” Elle continued. “Putting yourself out there again. After such a long time.” Elle met her gaze. “It’s not that I haven’t wanted to,” she admitted. “But there’s a part of me that’s still... Afraid, I guess.”

Harper reached out, her hand hovering over Elle’s for a moment before gently resting on top of it.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” Harper said softly, her thumb brushing over Elle’s knuckles.

Elle squeezed her hand, her gaze holding Harper’s with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat. “It’s just... it’s been so long since I’ve felt... this.”

“This?” Harper echoed, her heart pounding in her chest. She barely broke their eye contact as she put her glass on the coffee table and faced Elle fully. Surely, she’d misheard her.

Elle’s eyes searched hers, her gaze filled with both vulnerability and desire. “This spark” she said, her voice husky.

A warmth spread through Harper, a slow burn that started in her chest and radiated outwards. Spark. The word hung in the air between them, charged with an unspoken energy. She felt it too, a pull towards Elle that she hadn’t felt in... well, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt anything like it. Not since Caroline, but Harper pushed her ex out of her mind just as quickly as she’d entered it. Elle was nothing like Caroline. Well, they were probably about the same age, but that was where the similarities ended.

Elle’s hand tightened around hers, her thumb stroking the back of Harper’s hand in a slow, deliberate caress. The simple gesture sent a wave of goosebumps rippling across Harper’s skin. The air crackled with anticipation.

Harper’s gaze dropped to their intertwined hands, her thumb tracing the delicate lines of Elle’s palm. She wanted to look up, to meet Elle’s eyes, but she was almost afraid to.

“I...” Harper started, her voice barely above a whisper. She cleared her throat, trying to find the right words. “I feel it too.”

Elle's thumb continued its slow, rhythmic caress. Harper's gaze finally lifted, meeting Elle's. The intensity in Elle's eyes, the raw emotion that shimmered just beneath the surface, took Harper's breath away.

Elle's hand moved from Harper's, her fingers gently cupping Harper's cheek. The warmth of her touch sent a wave of heat through Harper's body, a fluttering sensation that centered in the pit of her stomach. Her breath hitched, her gaze locked on Elle's.

The space between them closed, their lips brushing in a feather-light touch that sent a shockwave through Harper's system. Her heart raced as Elle's lips pressed against hers, soft and tentative. She responded instinctively, her own lips moving in a gentle caress. The kiss was slow, exploratory, a delicate dance of give and take.

Elle's hand slid from Harper's cheek to the nape of her neck, sliding beneath her hair. Harper's own hands found their way to Elle's waist, her fingers curling into the fabric of her shirt.

The world around them faded away, and Harper's mind went blissfully blank, all thoughts of the vineyard, of her career, of the expectations weighing on her shoulders, melting away.

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Elle's tongue brushed against Harper's lower lip, a silent request for permission. Harper granted it willingly, parting her lips to allow Elle to deepen the kiss. A soft moan escaped her throat as their tongues met, a slow, sensual slide that sent a shiver through her.

Time seemed to stand still, the seconds stretching into minutes as they lost themselves in the kiss. Harper's fingers tightened on Elle's waist, pulling her closer, needing to feel the warmth of her body against her own.

When they finally parted, both breathless, Harper rested her forehead against Elle's. Her heart was pounding, her skin tingling. She opened her eyes slowly, meeting Elle's gaze as she pulled back.

In the depths of those hazel eyes, Harper saw a reflection of her own emotions - desire, uncertainty, and a vulnerability that made her heartache. She wanted to say something, to put into words the feelings swirling inside her, but she couldn't find the words.

Instead, she leaned in again, capturing Elle's lips in another soft, lingering kiss, but it wasn't long before Harper was deepening the kiss, her fingers sliding into Elle's soft hair. A low moan escaped Elle's lips, and that only urged her on.

Then, just as quickly as it began, Elle pulled away. Harper's hands fell to her sides, a sense of disorientation washing over her.

"I'm so sorry," Elle breathed, her voice thick with emotion. "I can't... I just offered to get into a business arrangement with you. I can't believe I just kissed you." She ran

a hand through her hair.

“Hey...” Harper reached out, her hand hovering hesitantly before settling on Elle’s arm. The warmth of Elle’s skin beneath her fingertips sent a small jolt through her. “It’s okay.”

12

A warm touch on her arm brought Elle back to the present. Harper’s fingers, hesitant at first, settled gently against her skin. The contact sent a pleasant through her.

“Hey...” Harper’s voice was gentle, laced with concern. “It’s okay,” she murmured.

Elle lifted her gaze, searching Harper’s warm brown eyes. She saw a flicker of the same desire in Harper’s eyes, and the realization sent a thrill through her, but it was quickly followed by a wave of panic.

This was unexpected, unplanned, and utterly intoxicating.

Elle took a shaky breath. The memory of Harper’s hands on her waist, the heat that pulsed through the thin fabric of her shirt, threatened to undo her.

How had this happened?

One minute they were talking and the next she was leaning in, her lips pressing against Harper’s. Elle swallowed the lump in her throat. It was hard to enjoy the way she’d just felt when she knew that she shouldn’t have acted so impulsively. She barely knew Harper, and more importantly, they were going to be entering into a business arrangement any day now.

This was crazy, reckless, and so unlike her.

“I should go,” Elle said, her voice barely a whisper. She pushed herself away from the couch, a nervous energy coursing through her veins. Before Harper could respond, Elle was already on her feet.

Harper reacted swiftly. Her hand shot out as she stood up, grasping Elle’s wrist before she was out of reach. The touch, light yet firm, sent a pulse of electricity up her arm. Elle exhaled, a slow, unsteady release of breath, and turned to face Harper.

“Elle,” Harper said. “Wait.” The intensity in Harper’s eyes held her captive, making it impossible to look away.

“This...” Elle started, then hesitated. “This complicates things.” The words hung in the air between them.

“Does it?” Harper asked, tilting her head slightly. A strand of dark hair fell across her cheek, and Elle resisted the urge to reach out and tuck it behind her ear. The close proximity, the electricity that crackled between them, made it hard to think clearly.

Elle pulled her hand away gently, stepping back. “We’re about to sign an agreement.”

“I know,” Harper said as she held Elle’s gaze. “But I felt something tonight, Elle. Something... real.”

Elle’s heart pounded in her chest. It had been so long since she’d felt this way, since she’d allowed herself to be vulnerable with someone.

A knot formed in her stomach, a sudden, sharp pang of guilt twisting inside her. It wasn’t rational. She knew that, but it didn’t make that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach go away.

Stephanie would have wanted her to be happy, to find love again. But the thought of

moving on, of sharing that intimacy with someone else, felt like a betrayal, even though she wanted it more than she cared to admit.

“I...” Elle hesitated, unsure of what to say. She wanted to believe Harper, wanted to embrace the possibility of something new.

“Don’t say anything,” Harper said softly, reaching out and taking Elle’s hand in hers. “Just... think about it.”

Elle nodded slowly, her gaze locked on Harper’s. She brought her hand to Harper’s cheek, the soft skin warm beneath her fingertips. “I’m going to go.” She wanted to explain, to tell Harper that she might just be too broken, that she might have spent too many years alone for this to ever have a chance. But the words wouldn’t come. Instead, she let her hand fall away, the warmth of Harper’s skin lingering on her fingertips, and turned to leave.

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“Are you driving?” Harper asked as she followed her to the door.

“No,” Elle said. “I’ll walk.” She needed time to process, to untangle the mess of feelings that were threatening to overwhelm her. As she reached the door, she pulled out her phone, the bright beam of the flashlight cutting through the darkness as she pulled the door open.

“Goodnight, Harper,” she said as she stepped outside, throwing one last look over her shoulder before she started down the driveway.

Each step away from Harper’s house felt heavier than the last. It was impossible not to replay the kiss in her mind. She could still feel the sensation of Harper’s lips pressed against hers. It had been so long since she’d experienced that kind of intimacy, that electric connection with another person.

Why had she pulled away?

The beam of her flashlight bounced along the dark road. It would have been so easy to give in, to let herself get swept away by the moment, but it was hard to shake away that guilty feeling.

And then there was the vineyard.

Mixing business with pleasure was never a good idea, especially when so much was at stake. If she wanted to make this venture work, she needed to keep things professional, although Elle had no idea how she would forget about that kiss.

If Elle brought Harper the paperwork in the next few days, how could Elle sit down on the couch beside her again and pretend that that kiss hadn't happened?

The worst thing was, Elle had started this. She'd had a feeling that Harper was attracted to her. There'd been something in her eyes when Elle had invited her over for dinner. It wasn't obvious, but Elle hadn't missed the way Harper's eyes had lingered on her.

Elle's steps slowed as the thought of their age difference crept into her mind. She knew Harper was younger, but by how much? She'd avoided thinking about it earlier, but now, walking alone in the dark with the memory of their kiss still fresh in her mind, she needed to know.

She unlocked her phone, hesitating for a moment before typing Harper's name into the search bar. Her heart beat faster as she scanned over the words.

Harper had turned thirty-eight at the start of the year.

Elle stopped walking. Sixteen years. She stared at the number on the screen, her earlier warmth from their kiss fading. How had she let herself get carried away like this?

She was fifty-four. She was too old for a complicated situation like this. The business arrangement, their age gap, her grief - everything pointed to why that kiss had been a mistake.

Did Harper even know how old she was? Elle thought she looked good for her age, that she could easily pass for her late forties. She kept herself fit from the physical demands of running the vineyard, her body strong and toned from countless hours pruning vines and hauling equipment.

But looking younger didn't change the reality of those sixteen years between them. Harper was in her prime, a successful actress with her whole life ahead of her. Elle had already lived through so much - marriage, loss, rebuilding her life. They were at completely different stages.

A wave of exhaustion washed over her. She was being ridiculous. This was Harper Reeves, for God's sake. An Oscar-winning actress, a glamorous Hollywood star. What could she possibly see in someone like her? A middle-aged vineyard owner, still grieving the loss of her wife after all these years.

Elle started walking again, her pace quicker now. She needed to put this behind her, to focus on what was important. The vineyard. That was what mattered, not some fleeting infatuation with a woman she barely knew.

She needed to forget about Harper, to compartmentalize that kiss and move on. They would go ahead with the plan for Elle to rent the vineyard. It was a good business decision, a way to honor Harper's father's legacy and expand her own operation. But that was it. Nothing more.

She wouldn't let herself get caught up in some fantasy, some impossible dream of a relationship with a woman who was clearly out of her league.

13

Harper Reeves stood beside her living room window, cradling a mug of coffee as she gazed out across the sun-dappled vineyard. The morning light painted the rolling hills in soft hues. She was starting to develop a routine of watching the sun rise from the living room and in the evenings, she liked to pour herself a glass of wine and sit out on the deck in the back to watch it set.

Just then, movement caught her eye, and she watched as Elle walked up her

driveway, heading straight for her truck. Harper's brow furrowed, and without hesitation, she set down her mug and hurried out the front door.

"Elle!"

Elle paused, her hand on the truck's door handle, and turned to face Harper, her hair blowing in the gentle breeze.

"Hey." Harper's voice came out breathier than intended. "Were you going to leave without saying anything?"

Elle sighed. Her usual warmth was absent, and she crossed her arms over her chest as she spoke. "I just came to get my truck."

"How are you?" Harper searched Elle's face, trying to catch her eye. "I mean, after last night-"

"I'm fine." Elle's clipped tone cut through the morning air.

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“Really? Because you’re acting like you can’t get away from here fast enough.” Harper’s chest tightened. She’d expected some awkwardness after their kiss, but this cold shoulder felt like a slap. “I thought we could at least talk about what happened.”

Elle could barely look at her. Her gaze fixed straight ahead, deliberately avoiding Harper’s. “I have a busy day ahead of me. Meetings with suppliers, a tour...”

The distance in Elle’s voice stung more than Harper expected. This wasn’t the same woman who’d shared a bottle of wine with her last night, who’d been so moved by Harper’s movie, whose lips had been so soft against hers.

Elle’s expression shifted as her hands rested on her hips. “Harper, I...” She paused as if she was trying to find the right words. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

Harper felt like she’d been punched in the gut. Elle regretted their kiss? Harper swallowed hard, trying to push down the lump that had formed in her throat. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

Elle kept talking, but Harper barely registered the words. Something about still wanting to rent the vineyard if Harper was agreeable. Harper nodded, not trusting her voice. Of course, she was still agreeable.

But there was so much more Harper wanted to say. She wanted to ask why Elle regretted the kiss, why she was pushing her away.

“Okay,” Elle said. “I’ll drop off the paperwork as soon as I can.”

Harper wanted to reach out, to close the distance between them, but Elle's body language was clear. She was putting up walls, shutting Harper out. So Harper shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

"Sounds good," Harper managed, hating how strained her voice sounded.

Elle hesitated for a moment, as if she wanted to say something more. But then she shook her head slightly and turned back to her truck.

Harper watched as Elle climbed into the driver's seat, started the engine, and drove away.

Harper walked slowly back to the house, her legs feeling like lead. A sigh escaped her lips. She was disappointed even though she'd tried not to get her hopes up, not after the way Elle couldn't wait to get out of here last night.

But beneath the disappointment there was a reluctant acceptance. She hadn't wanted to admit it, not even to herself, but a part of her had known something like this would happen. Elle's grief, the way she'd poured herself into her work, the careful walls she'd built around herself – it all pointed to someone who wasn't ready to open her heart.

Maybe Elle would never be ready. Maybe the pain of losing her wife was a wound that would never fully heal. And Harper had to find a way to accept that.

Elle pulled up to Harper's house just after seven o'clock, the rental agreement tucked under her arm. She was tired after a long day at work, and she'd hoped to drop the envelope off quickly, avoiding any awkward encounters, but as she approached the door, it swung open.

Harper stood there in black leggings, her hair pulled back in a pony tail with her face free of any makeup. Her eyes met Elle's just as she'd started to bend to put the envelope on her doormat.

"Elle, if we're going to work together, we need to be able to talk to each other." Harper's voice was firm, but not unkind.

Elle stood up fully, the contract feeling heavy in her hands. She knew Harper was right, but she didn't trust herself around Harper anymore, not after what happened the other night. And the only way to avoid another kiss that she'd only end up regretting was to keep her distance from Harper.

Elle held out the paperwork. "Here's the rental agreement."

Harper took the contract, her fingers brushing against Elle's. The brief contact sent a jolt through Elle, and she pulled her hand back quickly.

Harper's eyes softened. "Why don't you come inside for a glass of wine?"

Elle's first instinct was to decline, to maintain the professional distance she'd tried to establish. But as she looked at Harper, Elle found herself nodding. "Okay, just one glass."

Harper stepped aside, allowing Elle to enter. As she crossed the threshold, Elle took a steadying breath. She knew they needed to talk, to clear the air, but the prospect of confronting their feelings terrified her. Harper led her to the kitchen, where she poured two glasses of red wine.

As Elle accepted the glass, their fingers touched again, lingering a moment longer than necessary. She met Harper's gaze, seeing a reflection of her own conflicted emotions.

Harper spoke first. “Is it okay if I have my lawyer look over the contract? It’s not that I don’t trust you?—”

Elle cut her off. “Of course. There’s no rush. Take all the time you need.”

Harper held her gaze. “What if I cooked us dinner on Friday? Everything should be in order by then.”

Elle once again found herself hesitating before she agreed. As Harper said, they did need to be able to talk. Dinner was harmless, and then Elle could leave with the signed contract.

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“Great,” Harper said, flashing her a charming smile. “Do you want to move into the living room?”

Again, Elle hesitated. “I uh...”

Harper’s lips curved into a smirk. “Elle, I’m not going to bite. And if I remember correctly... I know I had a few glasses of wine, but I’m pretty sure that you kissed me.”

Elle closed her eyes for a second.

“I’m not blaming you for what happened,” Harper said when Elle stayed silent. “Clearly, I wanted it too. But I’m also perfectly capable of sitting beside you and enjoying this glass of wine without anything else happening.”

Elle wanted to return Harper’s smile, to be able to joke around about this, but she couldn’t. Instead, she gently set her glass on the kitchen counter. “I think I should go,” she said, although it came out so softly that she wondered if she’d even said it out loud.

Harper left her glass down beside Elle’s as she took a step closer, her hands sliding down Elle’s forearms to find her hands.

Harper took a deep breath. “As much as I’m attracted to you, I’ve assumed that nothing’s ever going to happen between us, so I promise that I will leave whatever happened between us the other night in the past. We can forget it ever happened.”

Elle bit the inside of her cheek as she tried not to say what she was thinking, but the words tumbled out of her. “I don’t want to forget that it happened,” she said, holding Harper’s gaze.

Harper stared at her for a second, her eyebrow lifting ever so slightly.

“I don’t want to forget it either,” Harper admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. Her thumbs gently caressed the back of Elle’s hands. “But I’m trying to respect your boundaries.”

“Boundaries?” Elle echoed, a wry smile playing on her lips. “I haven’t exactly been clear about those, have I?”

Harper’s grip tightened slightly. “You left,” she said softly, her eyes searching Elle’s.

Elle’s smile faded. “I left because I was scared,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “Scared of what I was feeling, scared of what it meant.” Elle hesitated, the words catching in her throat. “Of... of letting myself feel something again,” she confessed, her gaze dropping to their intertwined hands. “After Stephanie... after losing her, I built walls around myself. I told myself I didn’t need anyone, that I was better off alone.”

Harper’s thumbs continued their soothing caress. “And now?”

Elle met her gaze. “Now... now I’m not so sure,” she admitted, the words a fragile whisper in the quiet kitchen. “I’m scared of the age difference, scared of what people will think, scared of getting hurt again.”

Harper’s expression softened. “I don’t care about whatever age difference there is between us,” she murmured, her eyes holding Elle’s with a warmth that sent a shiver down her spine. “And who cares what other people think? This is about us, Elle. No

one else.”

Elle’s heart ached at Harper’s words, a mixture of longing and fear swirling within her. She wanted to believe her, wanted to throw caution to the wind and embrace the connection they shared, but the doubts lingered.

“You don’t even know how old I am,” Elle said.

“I still don’t care.”

“And if I do?”

Harper searched her eyes. “I’m thirty-eight years old. You’re not going to take advantage of me,” she added with a hint of a smile.

Elle suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. “Okay, but I’m sixteen years older than you. I just need to say that in case?—”

“In case, what?” Harper reached up to brush a lock of hair behind Elle’s ear. “I’m crazy about you, Elle. I don’t care how old you are.”

“What about the vineyard?” Elle asked, her voice laced with uncertainty, knowing she sounded desperate at this point. “This... us... it could complicate things.”

“It doesn’t have to.” Harper looked away for a second. “The only thing I’m worried about is what happened the day we met.”

“Those photographers?”

Harper nodded. “Not so much them, but bringing you into the chaos of my world. It’s not for the faint of heart. I know I’m thinking too far ahead, but it’s an unavoidable

part of my life.”

“I know you’re worried about that, but I can’t think that far ahead. I’m not even sure that I’m capable of being in?—”

“Hey,” Harper said, her hand caressing Elle’s cheek. “Let’s just take this slow and let it be whatever it’s going to be.”

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Elle got lost in Harper's eyes.

"Can I kiss you?" Harper asked after a moment.

The warmth of Harper's hand on her cheek sent a wave of longing through Elle.
"Yes."

Harper's eyes, dark and intense, drew her in, and she leaned in, her lips brushing against Elle's, a feather-light touch that sent a rush of desire through her.

Elle's heart raced as Harper's lips gently pressed against hers. It was a gentle kiss, a questioning exploration, as if Harper was giving her a chance to pull away, but Elle found herself leaning in, her hands resting lightly on Harper's hips.

The hesitation from the other night was gone as Elle's lips parted against Harper's, and a low moan escaped Elle's lips when Harper's tongue glided over her own. Elle gave in this time, her hand slipping under the hem of Harper's tank top, her palm splayed across her back as they deepened the kiss.

Elle had thought about it when she couldn't fall asleep after their first kiss, but it had shocked her how well they had kissed. It was nothing like her other first kisses had been. There was something so intense about being around Harper that it shouldn't have surprised her that this was happening again tonight.

Elle couldn't get enough of her. Her other hand slid up the outside of Harper's thigh, and then before she even realized what she was doing, Elle had backed Harper up as they kissed until her legs bumped against the kitchen table. A small sound escaped

Harper's lips, a soft gasp that Elle felt against her own mouth.

With a gentle nudge, Elle guided Harper up onto the table. She wanted Harper to know, without a doubt, that this was real, that Elle wasn't going to run away this time. She deepened the kiss again, parting her lips, her tongue searching, eliciting a soft moan from deep within Harper's throat.

Harper's hands found their way to Elle's hair, pulling her closer, and Elle's entire body hummed with desire. She broke the kiss for a moment, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. Her eyes met Harper's, searching for any sign of hesitation, any hint of doubt. But there was none, only a reflection of her own burning need.

She kissed Harper again, this time with a fierceness that surprised even herself. She wanted to erase the uncertainty, the fear, the years of holding herself back. She wanted to lose herself in this moment.

Harper's fingers tightened in her hair until she broke the kiss, her lips pressing kisses along Elle's neck and up to her jaw.

A moan left Elle's lips, and then Elle was guiding Harper's lips back to her own, hungrily kissing her as her palm slid up Elle's thigh, moving over the smooth fabric of her leggings.

Harper pulled away. Her fingertips traced Elle's jawline, her light touch sending a delicious shiver through her. Their eyes met, and Elle could barely think over the pounding of her heart and the intensity with which she wanted Harper.

"Are you okay?" Harper asked, her voice husky with desire.

"Yes." Elle was more okay than she'd been in a long time, and she wasn't going to let her own doubts and fears get in the way of feeling something for the first time in so

many years.

Harper's touch was electric, sparking a flame within Elle that threatened to consume her. Elle's hands trembled as they rested on Harper's hips, the warmth of Harper's skin seeping through the thin fabric of her tank top.

Harper leaned in again, her lips capturing Elle's in a kiss that was both tender and fierce. Elle's fears melted away as she surrendered to the moment, and Harper groaned as Elle deepened the kiss again. Their tongues danced together, and Elle's heart raced as she lost herself in the kiss, her body pulsing with desire.

Harper's hands slid down from Elle's hair, her fingertips tracing the curve of Elle's neck. Harper's hands lingered a moment longer, then she pulled away.

Elle's eyes fluttered open as she met Harper's gaze. A playful smile curved Harper's lips as she took in Elle's flustered state.

"How about we take our wine into the living room and talk for a while?" Harper suggested.

Elle's brain struggled to process Harper's words. She wanted to kiss her again, wanted to tear her clothes off, and feel the warmth of her skin against her own. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Amusement danced in Harper's eyes. "I can see what you're thinking."

Elle's cheeks flushed, and she took a steadying breath, trying to gather her scattered thoughts. She stepped back, and Harper slid off the table.

"I was thinking," Harper continued, her voice soft and reassuring, "Maybe on Friday, after dinner, you could stay over if you wanted."

Elle pressed her lips together, her heart still racing. “I’d like that.”

Elle picked up her wine glass and followed Harper into her living room, wondering why they’d ever agreed to take it slow.

15

Harper stacked the last plate onto the small pile and glanced at Elle.

“So,” Elle began, her voice hesitant, “about tonight...”

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Harper turned, a dishcloth in her hand. “What about tonight?” she asked, feigning ignorance, though her heart thumped against her ribs.

Harper thought that tonight couldn’t have gone any better. Elle had arrived with a bottle of wine almost two hours ago, and they’d taken their time, talking while Harper cooked. The signed contract was on the kitchen counter. Everything about tonight had been perfect so far, but Harper would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous about what was ahead.

Elle leaned against the counter, her gaze fixed on Harper. “You said... about me staying.” A faint blush crept up her neck.

Harper leaned back against the sink, mirroring Elle’s posture. “And?” she prompted, a playful lilt in her voice. She wanted to draw it out, savor the anticipation.

Elle pushed off the counter and crossed the small space between them. “And I was wondering if you still meant it.” Her voice was a breathy whisper.

Harper tossed the dishcloth onto the counter, her hand reaching out to brush a stray strand of hair from Elle’s face. “I meant it,” she murmured, her gaze locking onto Elle’s. She could feel the warmth radiating from Elle’s body, the subtle scent of her perfume filling the air.

Harper’s breath caught as Elle’s lips found hers. As amazing as the other night had been, this was off the charts. The hesitation was gone, and Elle was kissing her like her life depended on it.

Harper backed Elle against the kitchen counter, hands sliding beneath Elle's shirt to find warm skin. Elle made a sound, half gasp and half moan, that sent electricity through Harper's veins.

"Bedroom?" Harper breathed against Elle's neck.

Elle nodded, pulling Harper closer. They stumbled toward the hallway, neither wanting to break contact. Harper's fingers fumbled with the buttons of Elle's shirt.

Gravel crunched outside. They both froze. Headlights swept across the front door and the hallway, just reaching the kitchen.

"Are you expecting someone?" Elle whispered, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Harper shook her head, heart hammering for an entirely different reason now. "No. No one knows I'm here." Harper wondered if they could just ignore it. "Oh, well my manager does. I doubt she'd just show up here though." Her eyes landed on the clock on the oven. "And this late?"

A car door slammed.

Harper pulled away from Elle, her lips still tingling. "Let me see who it is." She smoothed down her shirt and went into the living room, peeking through the gap in the curtains. Her stomach dropped.

Caroline strode up the porch steps, her blonde hair catching the porch light. Her heels clicked against the wooden boards- designer shoes that had no business being anywhere near a vineyard.

Harper's mouth went dry. Six months of ignored texts, six months of distance, and now Caroline showed up at her door? The universe had a sick sense of timing.

“Everything okay?” Elle’s voice carried from the kitchen.

“I-” Harper’s response cut short as knuckles rapped against the door.

She opened it, ready to send Caroline away, but her ex slipped past her into the house.

“Harper, I wish you’d answer my texts. That wasn’t exactly a short drive.” Caroline smiled. “But that’s how good this script is.”

“Caroline, what are you-”

“And thankfully, your manager told me where to find you.” Caroline’s gaze swept over her. “I tried calling, texting. When you disappeared after the Oscars, I got worried. But I wasn’t going to give up that easily. Not when I’ve got a script that would be perfect. For both of us.”

Heat crept up Harper’s neck. She shifted her weight, positioning herself between Caroline and the kitchen where Elle waited. All she could think about was getting Caroline out the door, getting back to Elle’s kisses, Elle’s touch.

“I’m taking some time off,” Harper said, hoping that would end the conversation. She had no interest in reading this script, especially if it involved working with Caroline.

“You’re not serious,” Caroline said, her hands sliding into the pockets of her white pants. “You just won an Oscar. Everyone wants to work with you.”

“Well, I’m taking a break, whether it’s the smartest career move or not.” Harper’s hands were on her waist. She didn’t know what else she could say. She couldn’t just throw Caroline out, but she might just have to.

“We need to talk, Harper.” Caroline’s voice turned serious. “About us.”

Elle’s throat clearing sliced through the tension. Harper’s head whipped around. Elle stood in the hallway, her expression carefully neutral. “I’m going,” she said, her voice low. Her eyes flicked to Caroline, then back to Harper. A flicker of something, hurt maybe, crossed her face before she smoothed it away.

Panic flared in Harper’s chest. She opened her mouth to stop Elle, but the words caught in her throat. Caroline stood there, radiating a smug self-assurance that stole Harper’s voice. All she could manage was a weak, “Elle...”

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Elle's gaze lingered on Harper for a beat, a silent conversation passing between them. Then, with a small nod, she turned and walked out the door. The sound of her truck starting up echoed in the sudden silence.

Harper wanted to run after her, explain, apologize, anything to erase the hurt she'd seen in Elle's eyes, but she couldn't. Not with Caroline still here.

"You moved on quickly," Caroline said, her voice laced with amusement, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched. "Still chasing after older women, I see."

"Don't." Harper's voice came out sharper than intended. "You don't get to comment on my life anymore."

Caroline's smile faltered. "Come on, Harper. We both know you're just hiding out here. This isn't you - playing farmer in the middle of nowhere?"

"You never did understand me." Harper moved toward the door, holding it open. "It's late, and you should go."

"I'll go but I'm leaving you with this. You need to read this." Caroline pulled a thick script from her designer bag. "It's brilliant. The kind of role that could make history."

"I said no." Harper's grip tightened on the door handle. "I'm not interested in any scripts right now, especially not one with you."

Caroline placed the script on the small table by the door. "Read it, Harper. For me? Please?" Her voice softened, a familiar tactic that used to make Harper's heart melt.

Now, it just tightened her resolve.

“No.” Harper’s voice was firm. “It’s not happening.” She opened the door.

Caroline sighed dramatically, then turned toward the door. “Fine. Have it your way. But don’t come crying to me when you’re bored out of your mind picking grapes.” She paused at the threshold, glancing back. “Although, I might be persuaded to rescue you. Think about it, Harper. This quiet life... it’s not you.”

The door clicked shut, leaving Harper alone with the silence and the unwanted script. She leaned against the door, closing her eyes.

She pushed off the door and walked back to the kitchen. Harper picked up her phone, staring at Elle’s name. She started to type a message, then deleted it. What could she say? Sorry my glamorous ex showed up and ruined everything? It sounded pathetic, even to her own ears. She set the phone down.

This was not how tonight was supposed to go.

16

Elle’s hands shook as she unlocked her front door. The image of Caroline Ashford’s perfectly styled blonde hair and designer outfit burned in her mind. She kicked off her shoes and dropped onto her couch, pulling her phone from her pocket.

Her fingers moved across the screen, searching Harper’s name alongside Caroline Ashford’s. Article after article popped up, most from last year. Photos of Harper and Caroline at red carpet events, holding hands, sharing intimate dinners.

“Fifty-one.” Elle stared at Caroline’s age listed in her bio. Her chest tightened. All those times she’d worried about the sixteen-year gap between her and Harper seemed

ridiculous now.

Elle clicked on another photo - Caroline and Harper at the premiere for Lena, Caroline's arm wrapped possessively around Harper's waist.

A sharp knock on her front door startled Elle. Setting her phone aside, she crossed the room.

Elle opened the door to find Harper standing there, her eyes searching Elle's face.

"Hey," Harper's voice was soft, hesitant. "Is it too late? Can I come in?"

Elle stepped back, holding the door open wider. "Sure."

Harper slipped inside, the silence broken only by the click of the latch as Elle closed the door behind her.

"I'm so sorry about that," Harper said, her gaze fixed on the floor. "She just... showed up."

Elle watched her, a knot tightening in her stomach. "She drove all the way from Los Angeles?"

Harper nodded, her eyes finally meeting Elle's. "Yeah. She had a script she wanted me to see."

"She mentioned wanting to talk to you. About us." Elle watched Harper's reaction, bracing herself. "If you're getting back together with her," she said, the words catching in her throat. "I'd understand."

"Elle, stop." Harper reached out, her hand warm against Elle's arm. "That's not..."

that's not what this is about."

Elle pulled away, wrapping her arms around herself. "Then what is it about, Harper? She shows up out of the blue, after all this time... She wants you back," Elle pressed, unable to shake the image of Caroline's confident smile. "She wants you to go back to Hollywood with her."

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Harper sighed, running a hand through her hair. “She wants a lot of things. That doesn’t mean she gets them.”

Elle studied her, a sliver of hope piercing through the anxiety. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I told her I’m staying here.” Harper’s gaze held Elle’s. “I told her I’m not going back.”

Elle exhaled slowly, the tension easing slightly. “And the movie?”

“I told her I’m taking a break.” Harper pressed her lips together. “I would never work with her again anyway.”

Elle took a step closer, her hand reaching out to brush a stray strand of hair from Harper’s face. “And what about... us?”

Elle’s heart thundered in her chest as Harper moved closer, closing the distance between them.

“I want this,” Harper whispered, her fingers trailing down Elle’s arm. “I want you.”

The words sent a shiver through Elle’s body, but doubt crept in. “You had something real with her.”

“What Caroline and I had was...” Harper shook her head. “It was theater. Every moment caught on camera, every gesture calculated. I wanted a normal relationship,

and she wanted a performance. I might have asked her out, but it took me almost a year to realize that she was only interested in me as a means to breathe life back into her career. She wanted those headlines. With you..." Harper's lips slid into a smile. "With you, I can just be me."

Elle studied Harper's face, searching for any hint of uncertainty, but there was none.

"When I'm with you," Harper continued, "I don't have to be anyone but myself. Do you know how rare that is?"

Elle's hand found Harper's waist, drawing her closer. The warmth of Harper's body against hers felt right, felt real. "And what about when she comes back? Because she will."

"Let her." Harper's fingers traced Elle's jawline. "I'm not going anywhere."

The conviction in Harper's voice melted the last of Elle's resistance.

Elle's heart pounded in her chest as she led Harper down the hall and into her bedroom. The room was dimly lit, the only source of light coming from the moonlight filtering through the partially drawn curtains.

Harper's eyes widened as they entered the room, taking in the soft, earthy tones of the decor. Elle watched her, her eyes lingering on Harper's face, her pulse quickening as she caught the slightest hint of a smile playing at the corners of Harper's lips.

Without a word, Elle crossed the room, her eyes locked on Harper's as she reached out, her fingers brushing against the soft fabric of Harper's shirt.

Harper's breath hitched as Elle's fingers traced the curve of her collarbone, her touch leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Elle's eyes never left Harper's as she slowly

unbuttoned the shirt, her fingers deftly working their way down the row of buttons.

As the shirt fell open, revealing Harper's toned, sun-kissed skin, Elle felt a wave of desire wash over her. She reached out, her hands sliding over Harper's shoulders, pushing the shirt off her arms and letting it fall to the floor.

Harper's eyes met Elle's, her gaze filled with a mixture of desire and vulnerability. Elle felt a shiver of anticipation run down her spine as she took a step closer, her hands finding their way to Harper's hips.

As their bodies pressed together, Elle felt a surge of emotion well up inside her. She knew that this moment, this connection with Harper, was something special. Something that she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Elle's lips grazed Harper's neck, a soft, lingering kiss that sent a shiver through Harper's body. She could feel Harper's pulse quicken beneath her lips, a rhythm that matched her own racing heart. Her hands, firm yet gentle, held Harper's hips, pulling her closer, eliminating any space between them.

Harper let out a low moan, the sound resonating deep within Elle's chest. It was a sound of surrender, of desire, and it fueled Elle's own need. Harper's hands moved to the hem of Elle's shirt, her fingers grazing the skin beneath, sending waves of heat coursing through Elle's veins.

Elle lifted her head, capturing Harper's mouth in a searing kiss as Harper's hands continued their ascent, lifting Elle's shirt up and over her head. The fabric fell to the floor, forgotten, as their bodies pressed together, skin against skin.

Their kiss deepened, a dance of tongues and teeth, each movement a testament to the connection that was growing between them. Elle's hands explored the contours of Harper's body, tracing the lines of her muscles, the softness of her skin. Harper's own

hands were equally adventurous, mapping out the landscape of Elle's back, her fingers leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

Elle's breath hitched as Harper's fingers found the clasp of her bra, deftly undoing it with a practiced ease that spoke of experience, yet there was a tenderness in her touch that made it clear this moment was different, special. The bra joined the shirt on the floor, and Harper's hands were on her once more, this time with nothing between them.

They broke the kiss, both women gasping for air, their foreheads resting against each other as they struggled to regain control of their breathing. Harper's eyes met Elle's, and in that moment, there was a silent acknowledgment of the depth of their connection, a shared understanding that this was about more than just physical desire.

With renewed urgency, Elle's lips found Harper's once more, the kiss filled with a desperate hunger. Elle guided Harper towards the bed, their lips never parting as they tumbled onto the soft, cool sheets.

Elle's fingers grazed Harper's skin, the coolness of the air sending a shiver through both of them. She felt Harper's body tremble slightly beneath her touch, a nervous anticipation that mirrored her own.

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With a slow, deliberate movement, Elle unhooked Harper's bra, the delicate fabric falling away to reveal the soft skin beneath. Elle's heart thudded in her chest as she explored the contours of Harper's body. Elle's lips traveled down the slender column of Harper's neck, her tongue darting out to taste the salt on her skin. Harper's breath hitched as Elle's mouth found the hollow at the base of her throat, the sound sending a jolt of desire straight to Elle's core.

Elle's hands moved with a mind of their own, tracing the outline of Harper's ribcage before finally coming to rest on the soft swell of her breasts.

Elle cupped Harper's breasts, her thumbs brushing over the hardened peaks of her nipples. Harper arched into the touch with a soft moan, her body instinctively seeking more. Elle obliged, her fingers teasing and tweaking the sensitive buds until Harper was writhing beneath her.

Elle's own jeans felt unbearably tight as she ground her hips against Harper's, the friction sending waves of pleasure coursing through her veins. She slipped her leg between Harper's, the denim-clad thigh pressing against the heat of Harper's center.

Their kisses grew more fervent, more demanding, as they began to move against each other. The rhythm was slow at first, a gentle rocking motion that soon gave way to a more urgent grind. Harper's hands clutched at Elle's back, her fingers digging into the muscles as she met each thrust with one of her own.

Elle could feel the tension building within her. She shifted her position, adding more pressure with her leg, eliciting a gasp from Harper.

The sound of their ragged breathing filled the room. Elle unbuttoned Harper's jeans, and she slipped her hand beneath the waistband. Harper's body bucked at the contact, her hips moving in a silent plea for more, and Elle moaned into the kiss when she discovered how wet Harper was.

"Oh god," Harper groaned, breaking the kiss as Elle's fingers slowly circled Harper's clit.

Elle's lips traveled down her body, between Harper's breasts. She took one rosy nipple into her mouth, sucking and nipping at the sensitive flesh while her hand continued its exploration below.

Harper's moans grew louder, her body moving in sync with Elle's as they chased the release that hovered just out of reach.

"Elle, I can't wait." Harper's dark hair was splayed across the pillow, her eyes pleading with Elle as she brought her hand up to Elle's cheek. "I need to feel you inside me."

Elle nearly groaned when she heard those words. She sat up, taking a moment to drink in the sight before her—Harper's dark hair fanned out against the pillow, her brown eyes heavy with desire, her chest rising and falling with each ragged breath, and then Elle hooked her fingers into the waistband of Harper's jeans, her gaze never leaving Harper's. She watched Harper's lips part slightly as Elle began to slide the denim down her legs, along with the silky fabric of Harper's underwear. Harper lifted her hips to help, her eyes locked on Elle's.

Elle returned to her previous position, her body hovering over Harper's as she settled between her parted thighs. She placed a gentle kiss on Harper's stomach, her lips lingering on the warm skin as Harper shivered beneath her. She took one of Harper's nipples into her mouth, her tongue flicking over it, and a ragged moan left Harper's

lips.

Elle reached down, her fingers exploring the slick heat that awaited her. Harper moaned at the contact, her hips bucking slightly as Elle's fingers teased her entrance.

"You're so wet," Elle murmured, her voice thick with desire.

Harper responded with a whimper, her hands fisting the sheets beside her as Elle slowly pushed two fingers inside her. Elle began to move her hand, her fingers gliding in and out of Harper with a steady rhythm. Harper's breathing grew more erratic, her body arching off the bed as she matched Elle's movements with her own.

"Faster, please," Harper begged, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elle obliged, increasing the pace of her hand as she continued to drive Harper closer and closer to the edge. Harper's cries of pleasure filled the room, her body writhing beneath Elle as she chased her release.

Elle shifted slightly, allowing her to thrust deeper, to hit that sweet spot that would send Harper over the edge.

With a final, desperate cry, Harper's body convulsed, her inner walls clamping down on Elle's fingers as she came. Elle continued to move her hand, drawing out Harper's orgasm until she finally collapsed onto the bed, her body limp and sated.

Elle carefully withdrew her fingers, bringing them to her lips as she tasted the essence of Harper's release. The intimacy of the moment was not lost on her.

She moved to lie beside Harper, pulling her into a tender embrace. Harper nuzzled against Elle's chest, her breathing gradually returning to normal as she came down from her high.

For a long while, they lay in silence, the only sound the soft ticking of the clock on the wall. Elle stroked Harper's hair, her mind replaying the events of the evening. As they held each other, Elle realized that she was falling for Harper in a way she had never expected.

Harper stirred, lifting her head to meet Elle's gaze. Her eyes held a softness that Elle had come to cherish, a look that told her that this connection was not one-sided.

Harper's lips brushed against Elle's, and it didn't take long for things to build up again, the heat between them growing with each kiss.

Harper pulled away and sat up, her fingers popping open the button of Elle's jeans. Her eyes never left Elle's, and the sound of the zipper lowering was almost lost in the pounding of Elle's heart. Harper hooked her fingers into the waistband of Elle's jeans and underwear, her gaze questioning.

"Is this okay?" Harper's voice was husky, her own need evident in the tremor that ran through her words.

Elle nodded, and Harper began to tug the clothing down her legs. Elle lifted her hips, helping Harper remove the last piece of clothing between them.

Harper's gaze raked over her, appreciation clear in her heavy-lidded eyes. The desire Elle saw there was intoxicating, empowering. It had been years since she'd felt this wanted, this alive.

Harper leaned down, her lips finding Elle's once more. The kiss was deeper this time, more demanding. Harper's hands roamed over Elle's body, exploring the curve of her hips, her waist, the swell of her breasts.

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Elle's own hands were not idle. She slid them down her toned back until she was clutching Harper's ass.

Harper shifted, one hand planted beside Elle's shoulder while the other slid up Elle's thigh.

Elle's breath caught in her throat as Harper's fingers grazed her folds. Harper's touch was light, teasing, and it drove Elle wild with anticipation.

"Please," Elle moaned, her hips bucking in search of more contact.

Harper didn't make her wait. Her fingers found Elle's clit with just the right amount of pressure. She moved in slow, deliberate circles, each stroke bringing Elle closer to the edge.

The sensation was overwhelming, and Elle found herself already on the edge. Hearing Harper come just a few minutes ago nearly did it for her, never mind this. Now, she held onto Harper's thigh and arm as Harper slowly slipped her fingers inside.

A low moan escaped Elle's lips.

Harper's mouth moved to Elle's ear, her breath hot against her skin. "You feel so good," she whispered, her voice sultry.

Elle's fingers dug into Harper's skin as Harper picked up the pace. Elle knew it wouldn't take much to make her come. She'd been thinking about this for days, and

nothing could have prepared her for how amazing this felt.

Harper shifted lower, her lips wrapping around Elle's nipple, and with that, Elle felt herself tumbling over the edge, her body shuddering as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her.

A ragged moan left Elle's lips as she clung to Harper, her hips pushing back against Harper's hand, riding out every last bit of her orgasm until she was completely spent.

As Elle's body finally stilled, Harper withdrew her hand, and moved to lie beside Elle, pulling her into a tender embrace. Elle nestled against her, her head resting on Harper's chest. The steady beat of Harper's heart was a soothing rhythm, lulling Elle into a state of blissful contentment.

None of this felt real.

17

Harper jolted awake, her heart hammering against her ribs. Sweat dampened her skin, the sheets tangled around her legs. Blood stained her mind's eye, Clara's blood pooling across the floor, her own anguished screams echoing in her mind as she held Clara's lifeless body.

"You're okay. I've got you." Elle's arms encircled her, solid and warm. The mattress dipped as Elle pulled her closer.

Harper's breath came in ragged gasps. The darkness pressed in, but Elle's presence anchored her to reality. She didn't even remember falling asleep. It must have been nearly four o'clock in the morning when they'd finally given into the exhaustion.

"I keep seeing it." Harper's voice cracked. "Every detail. The way Clara's hand went

limp. How Lena wouldn't let go even after..." She pressed her face into Elle's shoulder.

"That scene destroyed me when I watched it." Elle's fingers traced soothing circles on Harper's back. "You're okay," Elle whispered after a moment, kissing her head, her fingers slowly gliding up and down her back.

The nightmare's grip began to loosen. Harper concentrated on Elle's steady heartbeat, the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Slowly, her own breathing settled into a matching rhythm.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Harper whispered into the darkness.

"I'm glad I was here." Elle's lips brushed Harper's forehead. "You don't have to carry this alone anymore."

Harper traced her fingers along Elle's collarbone, her throat tight with emotion. "Sometimes I feel like such a fraud. Lena fought so hard, risked everything. And what have I done? Made some movies, gave some speeches?"

"Stop." Elle's hand cupped Harper's cheek. Even in the darkness, Harper could feel the intensity of Elle's gaze. "You stood on that Oscar stage and spoke about Lena to millions. Do you know how many young people heard your words? Saw themselves represented?"

Harper shook her head, tears threatening. "But I'm just an actress. I pretended to be brave. Lena actually was."

"You're out in Hollywood. You know how rare that still is? How many actors stay closeted because they're afraid?" Elle's thumb brushed away a tear from Harper's cheek. "And you didn't just play Lena - you brought her story to life. I'd never even

heard of her before your film. Now I understand what she fought for, what she lost. What our community went through.”

Harper took a deep breath. “Thank you,” she whispered as she brushed Elle’s hair away from her face. “For seeing me. The real me. Not just the actress.”

“I see you.” Elle’s lips found hers in a tender kiss.

The lingering fear from her nightmare dissolved, replaced by a sense of peace Harper hadn’t felt since before filming began. She settled back against Elle’s shoulder.

“Try to sleep,” Elle murmured, pulling the covers over them both.

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Harper closed her eyes, letting Elle's steady presence lull her back toward sleep.

For the first time in months, she felt truly safe. Protected. Understood.

18

Elle stepped out of the cool interior of the winery, squinting against the bright midday sun. As her eyes adjusted, she spotted a familiar figure striding towards her, dark hair gleaming under the cloudless sky.

Harper.

Elle's heart skipped a beat, a smile tugging at her lips as she moved to meet her.

As Harper drew closer, Elle reached out, taking her hand and gently pulling her around the corner of the building, out of sight of prying eyes. Harper raised an eyebrow, a playful smile on her face.

"There's five people working today," Elle explained, her voice low, "and all of them are coming and going from these buildings."

Harper's smile widened, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "You can't hide me forever."

Elle sighed, her thumb absently tracing circles on the back of Harper's hand. "I just don't want you to lose your privacy."

In response, Harper gently pushed Elle against the stone wall of the building, her body pressing close. Elle's breath caught in her throat, her skin tingling at the contact. Harper leaned in, her lips brushing against Elle's in a soft, lingering kiss that made Elle want more of everything that had happened last night.

As they parted, Elle looked into Harper's eyes, a hopeful smile on her face. "And are you?" she asked softly. "Going to be sticking around?"

Elle held her breath, watching Harper's face for any sign of doubt or hesitation.

"I'm not going anywhere," Harper said with a smile.

The knot in Elle's chest loosened. She hadn't realized how tense she'd been until that moment, how much she'd feared Harper would choose the glittering world of Hollywood over her.

Elle leaned in, capturing Harper's lips in a gentle kiss. The world seemed to fall away as they lost themselves in the moment, the sun-warmed stone at Elle's back and the soft press of Harper's body against hers.

As they parted, Elle looked into Harper's eyes, a question forming on her lips. "Are Piper and Audrey still coming by tomorrow to tour the winery?"

Harper nodded, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "They are. Piper's really excited about the possibility of having her wedding here." Harper tucked a strand of hair behind Elle's ear. "I should let you get back to work. But I was thinking, would you like to come over for dinner tonight?"

"I'd love to."

"Perfect." Harper's fingers trailed down Elle's arm before letting go. "I'll see you later then."

Elle watched her walk away, struck by how natural it felt now - this thing between them. The age difference that had once seemed like such an insurmountable obstacle had faded into insignificance against the reality of who they were together. Harper brought out a lightness in her that Elle hadn't felt in years, while Elle gave Harper the grounding she needed.

As Harper disappeared around the corner, Elle touched her lips, still feeling the ghost of their kiss. She had found love again, unexpectedly, and although she would never forget Stephanie and everything that they'd shared together, Elle felt like she was starting a new chapter in her life, and that there was somehow room for both stories. Stephanie was her past, and Harper was her future.

EPILOGUE

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow across Cherry Lane Vineyards. Harper leaned against the rustic wooden bar, watching Elle chat with Piper and Audrey near the dance floor. The newlyweds radiated joy, their white dresses catching the light filtering through the cherry trees.

"You look different." Evelyn Coleman stepped beside her, champagne in hand. "Happier."

"I am." Harper's gaze lingered on Elle, who threw her head back laughing at something Audrey said. "A year ago, I thought I was losing myself in Lena's story. Now I realize it led me exactly where I needed to be."

"Love looks good on you," Evelyn said, leaning closer to clink their champagne flutes together. "Far better than any designer gown."

Harper's chest tightened with emotion. A year ago, she'd been drowning in Lena's story, losing herself in the weight of portraying such profound grief and courage. Now, standing here watching Elle, she understood something fundamental about both

herself and Lena - love wasn't just about grand gestures or tragic sacrifices. Sometimes it was about finding someone who made you feel perfectly, wonderfully yourself.

As if sensing Harper's thoughts, Elle looked up, her hazel eyes finding Harper's across the crowd. A warm smile spread across her face as she excused herself from the newlyweds and made her way over.

"There you are," Elle said, sliding an arm around Harper's waist. She glanced at the dancing couples, then back at Elle. "Dance with me?"

Harper smiled. "Always."