



When You Say I Do

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: What's worse than lying about your life to the man you're falling for? Having your lies unravel in the most embarrassingly public way possible.

Emily: I'm just a small-town girl who told a teensy, tiny fib. I let William, my hot, British client and gallery owner, believe I come from a wealthy New England family. Seemed harmless at the time. Until my little lie spirals out of control!

Enter William: Part James Bond, part Darcy, and 100% falling for my lie. He's got secrets of his own, but who doesn't, right? Well, the Universe decides to one-up us both.

Just as I think I've got it all under control, BAM! We run into someone from William's secretive past. And get this—the intruder is someone I know. My childhood bully to be exact. Drama? That's an understatement.

Now I'm juggling lies like a circus performer, and my relationship is dangling by a thread. Are we a rom-com in the making, or a tragedy waiting to happen?

Set your bets and grab your popcorn. We're on a roller coaster ride filled with laughs, gasps, and "Oh no, she didn't!" moments.

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EMILY

The drizzle taps a rhythmic pattern against my window, a soft reminder of the city's penchant for rain, while I'm cradling the phone between my shoulder and ear, listening to my brother's teasing drawl from an ocean away.

"So, Emily, has any dashing Brit in a top hat offered to share his umbrella with you yet?"

I let out a chuckle, picturing his teasing grin. "The day that happens, I'll ship him straight to you for Christmas, how's that?" I counter, watching the rain blur the bustling London street below.

He snorts, his laughter crackling through the speaker. "Well, you know I don't swing that way, but make sure he's got that Hugh Grant charm, and maybe I'll be persuaded to change teams."

"Yeah, because charm's what I'm knee-deep in," I say with an eye roll. "No, it's more like spreadsheets and coffee runs at the moment. Thank goodness for Sasha, she's keeping me sane."

"Ah, the glamorous art world," he mocks gently.

I can almost see him shaking his head in our small-town kitchen, half a world away.

I sigh, my breath fogging up the glass. "It's not all glamor, but it's a start. I'm learning the ropes, making connections. And who knows? Maybe one day I'll move from

fetching coffee to creating the art that hangs on these walls."

There's a brief silence on the line, and my words hang in the air, taunting me. But then my brother's voice breaks it with his usual burst of optimism. "You'll get there, Em. Just don't forget us little people when you do."

I smile, warmed by the support that I can always count on from him. "Never."

His voice drops a notch, a hint of mischief returning. "So, this best friend of yours, Sasha, she's the Art Queen's granddaughter, right? Is she hot?"

And just like that, the brotherly concern flips back to typical male curiosity.

I'm about to chastise him for his shallowness when my bedroom door bursts open with a bang.

Sasha whirls into the room, a frenzy of brown curls and bohemian flair. Her eyes are wide, her freckled cheeks flushed with what looks like sheer panic.

"Emily, you will not believe—"

I hold up a finger to pause both her and my brother, who's still yammering in my ear. "Hold that thought, Sash," I say quickly, then to my brother, "I gotta go. Duty calls."

"Wait, Emily! Hook a brother up—"

I end the call before he can finish his sentence, turning to face Sasha. "Okay, what's the crisis this time?"

She paces, her gypsy skirt swishing with every step. "The Willoughby Gallery," she starts, and that's enough to make me perk up.

The Willoughby name is synonymous with prestige in the London art scene.

"They agreed to showcase Grandma's art," Sasha continues, practically vibrating with anxiety, "but they want to meet her. And also, her granddaughter."

I arch an eyebrow. "And that's bad because...?"

Sasha flops onto my bed, the picture of despair. "Because they'll expect me to know about art, Emily, and I don't know a Dali from a donut!"

I can't help but laugh at that, though I try to keep it sympathetic. "You're not giving yourself enough credit," I say, though we both know it's a stretch.

"No, you don't understand. Remember last week, I told that couple that the Monet was painted by Chopin. It was awful!"

I snort at the memory. "Didn't they offer a million bucks because they had never seen a Chopin painting before and figured it was a one-of-a-kind?"

After all, Chopin is known for classical music, not abstract paintings.

I frown. "Why do they want to meet you anyway?"

Sasha puffs out her cheeks, her energy is jittery as she looks around the room all jumpy. Like she's half-expecting a camera crew to jump out and expose her.

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“Last weekend, I downed a bottle of Prosecco and sent out some overly confident emails... I never expected to actually hear back.”

I snort. “Why wasn’t I invited to this Prosecco party of one?”

Sasha ignores my question and picks up her pace around the room. “I couldn’t believe it when I got a call, and it was from William Willoughby. My drunken charm and photos of my grandmother’s work seemed to pique his interest. He’s coming into the office today to meet me and set something up with my grandmother.”

I shrug. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Sasha’s big brown eyes water as she pouts at me. Her bottom lip begins to tremble. “He’s going to ask questions, Emily! I’ll look like an idiot, and—”

I hold up my hands, cutting her off. "Sasha, breathe. We'll figure this out."

She gazes at me, hope dawning in her eyes. "You could go in my place. You know about art. You could pretend to be me!"

I open and close my mouth in silence as the crazy idea washes over me. “I can’t do that...”

Sasha hops onto my bed, bouncing me with her renewed hope. “Yes. Yes, you can! Your hair is like mine, you’re always stealing my clothes anyway. No one would know.”

She's not wrong. Strangers often think that Sasha and I are sisters, and I do steal her clothes. But that's only because I'm so freaking poor I can hardly make the rent, let alone buy clothes.

I cock a skeptical brow at my friend. "Are you forgetting I'm American and you're British?"

"Maybe you can try putting on an accent..." Sasha suggests, her smile faltering even as she says the words.

I give her a look. Then I suck in a breath. "Good gosh, I do believe it is raining cats and dogs outside, would the Gov'ner like a cuppa tea?" I say, doing my best impression of a Downton Abbey accent.

Sasha's face pales. "On second thought, you don't need to do an accent. Besides... these people don't know me. Let's say I went to college at Harvard and picked up an accent."

I laugh fully now. "You want me to pretend I went to Harvard... and majored in art? Why not make it more believable and say it was...any other college but Harvard."

Sasha grabs my hands, and her palms are clammy and cold against my skin. "See! You can do this! It's only one meeting. And I'll pay you..."

Her eyes are welling up, and she's looking at me like a puppy dog.

Curse my compassionate heart! I can never say no to a friend in need. Especially if said friend is offering me cash to solve her problems.

The idea is ludicrous, risky... and utterly thrilling.

I hesitate for a heartbeat before the adventure of it all sinks its hooks into me.

I guess the idea of pretending to be the Art Queen's granddaughter would be fun. For one day, I could fool everyone—even myself—that I'm not just the assistant.

Instead, I'm someone important. Valuable.

"I'll do it," I say. "On one condition."

"Anything," Sasha says eagerly, nodding.

"If I pull this off, I want my own exhibit next to the Art Queen. That could really open doors for me."

Sasha leaps up, grabbing my hands and squeezing tight. "Deal! Oh, my goodness, Emily. Thank you!"

WILLIAM

The fabric of the suit feels stiff on my shoulders, a constant reminder of the day's significance—or rather, its potential futility.

I'm standing before the mirror, adjusting my tie, when the door to my room bursts open.

Father never did care much for knocking.

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"William," he begins, his tone laced with a mixture of exasperation and expectation. "I still don't understand why you won't consider Madeline Lonelle. The alliance could redefine our presence in the European art scene."

Father stands with an imposing stature, his height accentuated by the slim cut of his pinstripe suit that speaks of tradition and power. His hair, though thinning at the crown, seems to matter little to his commanding presence.

Beneath furrowed brows, his eyes retain their sharp, clear gaze—windows to a shrewd and calculating mind. A thin mustache sits meticulously above his lip, each whisker trimmed to precision, not a hair daring to stray from its appointed place.

In his appearance, as in his life, every detail is controlled, a testament to the discipline with which he governs the family and the gallery alike.

I meet his gaze in the reflection of the mirror, my hands pausing on the silk of my tie. "Because, Father, I intend to marry for love, not leverage," I say firmly, my voice steady despite the tension.

He scoffs. "Love? You're a romantic in a world that no longer values such fancies. Look around, William. Marriages crumble every day. What we need is a union that fortifies our legacy, not a love that may fade."

I slip into my jacket, the tailored fabric a shield against his antiquated views.

"And yet, without love, what's the point of any of it?" I challenge. "To propose to Madeline would be a performance, a lie. That's not who I am. It's not who I will be."

Father's eyes harden, and for a moment, the air between us is as sharp as a blade. "If your mother were here—"

"She'd be appalled," the words leave a bitter taste in my mouth. "She believed in love, in truth. And I am my mother's son."

The silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating, a tangible presence in the room.

I can feel the weight of my father's unvoiced expectations pressing down on me, an ever-present demand for obedience and conformity.

With a firm grip on the handle of my umbrella, I walk past him, the rapid beat of my heart echoing the steps that carry me away from his cold scrutiny.

I am determined to honor myself, to uphold the promise I made to my mother. She, with her ever-present smile and laughter that used to fill the halls of our home, was the heart of our family. Even as cancer drained the life from her, she remained the beacon of warmth against the chill of my father's ambition.

It's been two years since she passed, and without her gentle influence, Father's demeanor has turned even icier, his expectations for me, the sole heir to his empire, ever more oppressive.

I remember her words, whispered in the quiet of her final days, urging me to remain true to who I am and to forgive my father's stern ways.

"He loves you," she had said, "in his own way. It's his manner of coping with the grief."

It's a thought that offers little comfort when I feel the crushing weight of the legacy

I'm expected to continue.

My father's attempts to shape and control my life are his way of dealing with his pain, but they are suffocating me, threatening to quench the fire she kindled within my soul.

As another birthday approaches—the milestone of thirty-five—her absence is felt more acutely than ever.

Despite my achievements, my father's gaze still reduces me to that wayward boy from years ago, his reprimands echoing through the grand corridors of our family estate.

It's a battle, constantly proving my worth, struggling to maintain a semblance of the relationship she so dearly wished for us.

With every step I take, I strive to balance the act of honoring her memory and keeping the peace, all while the ghost of my youthful defiance flickers in the back of my mind, urging me not to lose myself in the vast shadow of the Willoughby legacy.

My heart is yearning for adventure.

London greets me with its signature drizzle, a million droplets reflecting the complexity of my thoughts.

I weave through the crowd, the press of bodies and the din of voices a stark contrast to the solitude of my mind. I can't help but wonder, will I ever escape the shadow of my father's expectations?

I pass an elderly couple, huddled under an umbrella, walking arm in arm.

The sight makes my heart pang.

I want to have someone in my life when I'm old and gray. Someone to share my umbrella.

Businesses come and go, but that kind of love? The kind that transcends through time, withstanding loss of beauty and vitality... that's the kind of love I'm looking for.

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And I know for certain I shall not find it in Madeline.

She's cold and pretentious, far too in love with the mirror and her own art, to have any room in her heart to care for someone other than herself.

Yet, Father will not let it rest. He and Madeline's father have agreed some kind of archaic deal. One that I didn't think could happen in 2024.

I shake off the umbrella as I reach the office building.

As I enter, I'm met with an array of pictures.

The familiar scent of oil paint and varnish does little to soothe my turmoil.

But then I see her.

She's unlike anyone I've encountered—a whirlwind of curls and eclectic fabric, standing awkwardly amidst the austere elegance of the gallery.

She turns, her hand mistakenly clasping my umbrella instead of mine.

"Good morning, Mr. Willoughby. It's great to meet you," she says, her accent a curious blend that I can't quite place.

"The Art Queen's granddaughter, I presume?" I inquire, observing her hand still gripping my umbrella.

Her eyes widen, and she retracts her hand as if it's been burned. "Oh! Sorry. I guess I'm a bit nervous." She chuckles, a sound that's unexpectedly endearing.

I place my umbrella in the stand, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"Shall we?" I gesture towards my office, intrigued by her presence.

As we walk, I sense my earlier concerns begin to fade, like shadows at the approach of light. There's something about her—an authenticity, a spark—that's refreshingly different from the world I'm so accustomed to.

And for the first time in a long while, I find myself genuinely curious, eager to step away from the expectations and into the unknown.

EMILY

Sasha's makeover has transformed me—a chrysalis spun from silk and chiffon—but beneath it all, I'm still the girl with curves that don't quite mirror Sasha's lithe silhouette.

I tug self-consciously at the hem of my dress, willing myself to embody the confidence I sorely need.

Today isn't about me, it's about the Art Queen, and more importantly, about seizing the opportunity that could redefine my future.

So, I guess today is a little bit about me.

I swallow nervously as I follow the businessman who is giving me serious Mr. Darcy vibes.

His dark hair is the perfect mix of thick and bouncy, making him look like one of those hot guys in a shampoo commercial.

And he's the kind of guy who was made for a suit. It's tailored to his physique, and he walks with his shoulders pulled back.

He takes me through an exhibit, and as we cross the paintings, he casually remarks on them.

William Willoughby is the epitome of what an art curator should be—suave, attentive, with an air of knowing exactly where every piece in his gallery belongs.

As we weave through the corridors lined with canvases and sculptures, William pauses before a vibrant abstract painting, his eyes reflecting its myriad of colors.

"What's your take on this?" he inquires, gesturing to the chaotic swirls on the canvas.

Sasha was right. If she was put on the spot like this, there's no telling what kind of foolish thing she'd come out with.

But that said, I don't exactly think of myself as a total pro at discussing art. After all, it's so personal.

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I lean in, pretending to scrutinize it with an expert eye. "It's... visceral," I venture, hoping the vagueness of my response sounds thoughtful. "It evokes a sense of organized chaos, don't you think?"

William's lips curve into a knowing smile. "Ah, chaos with a hint of order. A bit like life, wouldn't you say?" His gaze meets mine, and there's a spark there that goes beyond our conversation about art.

I nod, emboldened by his warm demeanor. "Exactly. And isn't that what art is all about? Reflecting our experiences back at us?"

We move on, stopping before a classic Renaissance piece. "Now, this," William says, his voice filled with reverence, "is the pinnacle of technique. Every brushstroke is deliberate, each detail meticulously crafted. Look at the way the eyes... even the horses' eyes follow you no matter where you stand."

I find myself drawn into William's passion, his love for art making it all the more captivating. "It's beautiful," I agree, "but I must admit, I have a soft spot for the Impressionists. There's something about the way they capture light and movement that feels so... alive."

"Do you paint?" he asks suddenly, turning to face me with genuine curiosity in his eyes.

I hesitate, then decide there's no harm in sharing this small truth.

"I guess you could say I dabble with the paint brush," I confess with a modest shrug.

"But nothing as grand as this."

"Art is not defined by the grandeur of the exhibition," William counters. "It's the expression that counts, the emotion conveyed. Would you show me some of your work?"

The question catches me off guard, a flutter of nervous excitement stirring in my chest.

William Willoughby wants to see my work! This could be a total game changer.

But then I snap out of it, this day is not about me. It's about the Art Queen.

"Perhaps one day," I say, the words laced with a promise I hope I can keep.

William nods. "I was impressed by your grandmother's work. It's surprising we haven't included her in our exhibitions before."

Our exchange is cut short as he points to a piece by a contemporary artist, a bold contrast to the classical works we've been discussing. "Now this artist," he says with a hint of excitement, "challenges our perceptions. She blurs the lines between the digital and the physical world."

I follow his lead, engaging in the back and forth about art, feeling the connection between us strengthen with each shared opinion and laugh. It's a dance of dialogue, a verbal sparring that's both exhilarating and enlightening.

Soon enough, my nerves are settled, and I'm not even thinking about the fact I grabbed his soggy umbrella instead of his hand.

And hopefully, he's forgot about that too.

We tour the gallery, and I find myself swept up in William's enthusiasm for the art that surrounds us.

His knowledge is extensive, and every explanation he offers is punctuated by a smile that reaches his eyes.

It's easy to laugh with him, to engage in playful debates about the meaning behind abstract pieces, and to forget for a moment that I am here under false pretenses. There's an easiness between us, a flirtatious dance of words and glances that makes the day fly by in a blur of color and light.

As we round another corner, William's tone turns serious.

"The reason why we insist on meeting our artists in person is we've been stung in the past," he says. "And I wanted to meet you, to be sure you are not some forty-something guy in his mother's basement playing a prank."

I force a smile as a sickly sense of dread floods my veins.

He speaks of the art world's darker side—frauds, lawsuits, and the ceaseless battle against those who would steal the creations of others.

"Honesty," he says, "is the most valuable currency we have. Now I insist on meeting every artist in person, and it's a rule that's never steered me wrong."

The weight of his gaze holds me captive, and I swallow hard.

"Of course," I reply, trying to keep my voice level. "That's entirely understandable."

He nods, satisfied with my response, then lays out his terms.

“Only after we arrange this meeting with the Art Queen,” he continues, the softness gone from his voice, “will I consider including her works in all Willoughby establishments.”

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The finality of his statement leaves no room for argument.

I excuse myself, finding a quiet corner to call Sasha.

She hoped that William would be satisfied with just meeting the Art Queen's charming granddaughter. So, I'm less than thrilled about having to burst her bubble.

My voice is a hurried whisper as I explain the situation.

"He's not backing down. We have to get your grandmother to meet him."

But the Art Queen is elusive. I've not seen her for years, not since Sasha started to take over her grandmother's business dealings.

Sasha is quick to offer a solution, her words tumbling out in a breathless rush. "Take him to the estate, the one in your hometown. It's empty right now; then you can stall him while I arrange for my grandmother to be there."

"Can't she meet him here in London?" I whisper, not liking the idea at all.

The speaker crackles before Sasha replies with one word. "No."

I clench the phone tighter, my gaze darting around the gallery as if the walls themselves might close in on me.

The estate she's referring to—our supposed haven—is nestled in the heart of Snowdrop Valley, a name as quaint and picturesque as the gossip-hungry townsfolk

who inhabit it.

It's where my life's canvas was first stretched and primed, where childhood memories intertwine with the scent of pine and woodsmoke.

Sasha and I had first crossed paths there, two kids from different worlds finding common ground each summer in the sprawling gardens of her family's retreat.

But bringing William there?

The thought sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with the London chill.

Snowdrop Valley might be a dot on the map, but it's a dot made up of interwoven lives and sharp eyes, where news travels faster than the wind through the valley.

Everyone knows everyone, and an unfamiliar face—especially one attached to a Willoughby—is bound to stir up more whispers than a winter storm.

Yet, as I run my other hand through my hair in frustration, a strategy begins to form like a sketch on a blank page.

If we stay within the confines of the estate, a beautiful cage of luxury and privacy, we might avoid the curious glances of the town.

I could keep William secluded, away from prying eyes and questioning looks.

It's risky, sure, as precarious as a tightrope walk above the valley itself, but it's a risk that comes with the reward of keeping Sasha's secret—and my own—safe a little longer.

"I'll take him there," I whisper into the phone, my decision firming up with each word. "We'll just have to lay low, stay out of Snowdrop's center. It'll be fine," I assure Sasha, though I suspect I'm trying to convince myself more than her.

But what choice do I have? With a shaky breath, I agree to Sasha's plan.

I return to William, plastering on a smile that I hope looks more confident than I feel.

"Let's arrange that meeting," I say, and the deal is set.

As we make our way out of the gallery, I can't help but feel the thrill of excitement mixed with fear. This is my big break, or my big breakdown.

Only time will tell.

EMILY

After a journey that felt like a mini-odyssey—first the transatlantic leap to New York, then squeezing into a plane barely bigger than a family car to hop to the tiny airport outside Snowdrop Valley—I'm more than ready to collapse.

But the universe, it seems, has other plans.

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Stepping into the quaint arrival hall, I'm met with a sight that nearly sends me into a tailspin.

Evan, my younger brother, is leaning against a wall with a sign that reads 'William Willoughby.' He's wearing a suit that is obviously borrowed from our dad's closet because it's faded and two sizes too big.

He's also slicked his hair to the side with far too much gel.

It's like walking into a bizarre, parallel universe—one where Evan is suddenly a chauffeur in a storyline that's veering off script.

I toss my bag to the left of me, and smile at William. "Oops. I'm such a klutz. Do you mind getting that for me?"

While William heads for the bag, I take the opportunity to confront my brother.

"Evan? What in the world are you doing here?" I hiss.

He grins, the kind of grin that's seen him through every scrape since he was five. "Sasha's idea," he says, waving the sign like it's a flag of victory. "I'm your driver. Don't worry, I've watched enough James Bond to nail this."

"You look like a joke," I whisper, frowning at him, but my words do nothing to quash Evan's excitement.

I glance at William, hoping he's going to buy this impromptu act. "You do realize this

isn't a movie, right? We're trying to be low-key here, not auditioning for a spy thriller."

Evan winks. "Relax, sis. I've been going to improv night for the last five years, and it's all lead me up to this moment. Plus, I need this gig. It beats explaining to Mom why I'm still job hunting."

His words do little to ease the knot in my stomach, but there's no time to argue.

William arrives and hands me my bag, it feels a million times heavier than before. "Thanks."

"Hi there, you're our driver?" William says, holding out his hand to Evan.

My brother flashes a charming smile and gives William an enthusiastic handshake. "I am indeed. Evan Barnes, at your service. Come this way, sir."

We pile into a Tesla, which I recognize is our dad's car, and set off for the estate.

As we drive, William's curiosity about Snowdrop Valley becomes apparent.

He peers out the window at the passing scenery with the kind of interest one usually reserves for exotic locations, not sleepy small towns.

"So, Evan, what's the most exciting thing that ever happened here in Snowdrop Valley?" William asks, his tone suggesting he's expecting tales of quaint, country charm.

Evan's eyes light up, and I brace myself for whatever tall tale is about to unfold. "Well, Mr. Willoughby, there's the legendary story of the Snowdrop Phantom," he begins, and I mentally facepalm.

"The Snowdrop Phantom?" William echoes, intrigued.

"Oh yes," Evan continues, barely containing a mischievous grin. "A mysterious figure who roams the woods at night. Legend says it's the ghost of a farmer who lost his favorite cow and still searches for her."

I shoot Evan a glare that I hope conveys a mix of 'stop talking' and 'I can't believe you,' but he's on a roll.

William chuckles. "A ghostly farmer, huh? That's certainly unique."

"And then there's the Great Pudding Incident of '08," Evan adds, not missing a beat.

I groan, "Oh, please—"

But he plows on. "The town's annual bake-off. Mrs. Henderson's pudding exploded, splattering the mayor. They say his suit was never the same."

William's laughter fills the car, and I slump in my seat, torn between embarrassment and begrudging amusement at Evan's antics. It's clear he's enjoying himself far too much.

"You are quite the storyteller," William remarks, still chuckling.

I muster a smile, though it feels more like a grimace. "I prefer 'local embellisher of mundane events'."

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Evan winks at me from the rearview mirror. "Ma'am, I'm just providing some local flavor. Snowdrop Valley's unofficial historian, at your service."

I shake my head, resigning myself to the fact that this trip is going to be anything but dull.

With Evan's tales and William's amusement, we're turning what should have been a covert operation into a comedy tour of Snowdrop Valley.

The estate at the end of the quiet road is like something out of a fairy tale, hidden from the world by a veil of trees and an air of tranquility.

I can't help but feel a flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, we won't bump into anyone I know. The thought is comforting, but my nerves are still doing a jittery dance.

As we pull up, the estate reveals itself in all its glory—a beautiful manor house with ivy-clad walls and windows that sparkle in the afternoon sun. It's the kind of place that makes you think of grand balls and secret gardens, a stark contrast to the modest homes dotting the rest of Snowdrop Valley.

Evan, ever the helpful little brother, jumps out and starts unloading our bags with a flourish.

I watch him, partly grateful and partly anxious for him to leave before he can do any more damage with his stories.

I fumble with the keys at the front door, cursing under my breath as the lock proves to be more temperamental than I remember.

Evan sidles up, a smirk playing on his lips. "Need a hand there, sis?"

I shoot him a pointed look. "Thank you, driver," I emphasize the last word. "You may go."

William, picking up on our sibling dynamic, hands Evan a wad of twenty-dollar bills. "Thanks for the entertaining drive," he says, his British charm not missing a beat.

Evan's grin widens as he waves the cash at me, a silent 'I win' in our unspoken contest. With a mock salute, he hops back into the car and drives off, leaving a cloud of dust and a sense of relief in his wake.

Meanwhile, I'm still wrestling with the lock.

William steps closer, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "May I?"

Just as he reaches out, the lock finally gives way.

The door swings open unexpectedly, sending both of us tumbling inside. I end up sprawled on top of him in a heap, my face burning with embarrassment.

"Sorry!" I blurt out, scrambling to get up, but William just laughs—a rich, warm sound that eases some of my mortification.

"No harm done," he assures me, the perfect gentleman even as he lies on the floor of an estate he believes belongs to my grandmother.

He helps me to my feet, his hand warm and steady. For a moment, our eyes meet, and

there's a flicker of something—amusement, connection, maybe a hint of something deeper.

I quickly look away, my cheeks still hot.

"Well," I say, trying to regain some composure, "welcome to the estate. Mind the door—it's trickier than it looks."

William stands, brushing himself off with a chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind. Lead the way, Miss... Art Queen's granddaughter, you never did sign off your email."

That makes sense. Sasha did say she was drunk, she probably sent them from her work email.

I can't help but smile at his teasing tone and before I can scramble another thought, I blurt out, "It's Emily."

"Emily," William repeats as though he's trying out my name for the first time.

Something flutters in my stomach.

I shouldn't have given him my real name, but to him, I'm just the granddaughter of the Art Queen. Maybe it won't be a big deal.

Although, I can't help but wonder if that's going to come back and bite me one day.

Knowing my luck... I'm doomed.

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With a confident step that I absolutely do not feel, I lead William through the estate, my mind racing to concoct a tour that would befit the granddaughter of the Art Queen.

The house is as unfamiliar to me as a foreign country, each turn a guess, each explanation a fabrication spun on the spot.

"And here we have..." I pause dramatically, opening a door with a flourish, expecting to reveal a grand room. Instead, it's a closet. "The... winter coat storage. Essential for the unpredictable weather we have here in New England," I add, trying to mask my surprise.

William raises an eyebrow, a playful smirk on his lips. "Fascinating. And where might we find the kitchen?"

I laugh nervously. "Ah, the kitchen. Of course. Right this way." I lead him down another hallway, praying I'm heading in the right direction this time.

It's been two decades since I've stepped foot in this house. And even then, I only came a few times in the summers.

Sasha and I used to play in the woods, instead.

Now, if William wanted a grand tour of the Snowdrop Valley woods, I'd be in a pro.

As we wander through the estate, William's questions come as naturally as if we were strolling through one of his galleries. "So, where is your grandmother currently?" His

tone is casual but his eyes are keen.

He looks around, as if expecting to see a sweet old lady apparate in front of us.

I feel a flicker of panic. "Oh, she's... um, I'll give her a call, and check in on her," I say, steering him toward one of the guest rooms. "In the meantime, please, make yourself at home here."

Once William is settled, I hurry away, dialing Sasha with trembling fingers. "He's asking about your grandmother," I hiss into the phone as soon as she answers.

Sasha's voice is annoyingly calm. "Tell him she got held up in Paris or something. You just need to entertain him for a few days."

"Entertain him?" I squeak. "Sasha, we're in my hometown! What if someone recognizes me?"

Stupid question. Everyone will recognize me if I leave the house. This small town raised me. There's not a soul that lives here that doesn't know me better than I know myself.

She laughs, her voice light and teasing. "I'm sure you'll think of something to keep him satisfied at the estate. You're creative, Em."

I end the call, my mind a whirlwind of stress and exasperation.

"Fine. I'll think of something," I mutter to myself, though my confidence is as thin as the walls of our deception.

Taking a deep breath, I knock on William's door, then push it open without waiting for a reply.

The sight that greets me has my heart leaping into my throat.

William, fresh out of the shower, stands in the center of the room, his completely naked body steaming while he dries his hair with a towel that should absolutely be around his waist.

He hasn't heard me enter, and I silently thank every deity I can think of.

My face burns as I quietly close the door, leaning against the wall outside, my heart pounding like a drum solo.

How on earth am I supposed to spend the next few days with him now? Every time I close my eyes, I'm going to see...that.

I press a hand to my racing heart, trying to calm down.

This is going to be a lot harder than I thought.

WILLIAM

I find Emily in the kitchen, her gaze fixed on a stack of bananas as if they hold the secrets of the universe.

She jumps slightly when I speak.

"Did you manage to get hold of your grandmother?"

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Her cheeks flush a deeper shade of red, and she can't seem to meet my eyes. Then, she launches into a string of explanations that would rival the driver's tales for sheer improbability.

Tornados, plane crashes, fashion disasters, a sick two-legged-dog—it's a dizzying array of excuses that leaves me more puzzled than enlightened.

"You're trembling, and you're not making any sense," I say, concern edging into my voice as I reach out and touch her hand. "Tell me the truth, what's wrong?"

Finally, she looks up at me, her eyes wide and glistening.

She's undeniably beautiful, even more so in her flustered state, with cheeks pink like strawberries and pouty lips. But it's the vulnerability in her big, brown eyes that truly captures me.

She exhales, a long, shaky breath. "My grandmother has been delayed. She won't be back for a few days," she admits, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh," is all I manage to say.

I can't help but feel a twinge of relief. Being stuck here gives me a legitimate reason to avoid my father's insistence on meeting the Lonelles for a discussion that's bound to include engagement talk.

"I'm so sorry, I know your time is valuable and you must have places to be..." Emily trails off, then nips her bottom lip in a way that makes my stomach do flips.

"Well, I could use a break," I suggest, hoping to ease her apparent distress. "If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here while we wait for her to arrive."

Her relief is palpable, and she nods. "Great. Are you hungry?" she asks, changing the subject.

I reach for a banana from the stack that had so captivated her attention earlier and offer one to her.

Her mouth opens in surprise, and for a fleeting moment, I'm almost certain her gaze darts down to my crotch.

It takes a second for realization to dawn on me.

"Did you come by my room earlier?" I ask, a smile tugging at my lips. "I'm sorry I didn't hear you. I always like to shower after a long flight."

Emily's face turns a spectacular shade of red, and she opens and closes her mouth without making a sound.

I can't suppress a chuckle, finding her embarrassment both endearing and amusing.

"I'm pretty jet-lagged," she stammers, her words tripping over each other. "I think I need to go to bed. It's been a big—I mean, long, no. I... It's hard... oh my gosh."

With that, she practically flees the kitchen, leaving me alone with a banana in my hand and a smile I can't shake off.

EMILY

I'm pacing in my room, still reeling from last night's mortifying encounter, when my

phone rings. It's Evan, and without thinking, I blurt out the whole naked escapade.

He bursts into laughter. "Wow, Em, you don't hang around, do you? But don't you think you should wait until he knows who you really are before you jump into bed with him?"

I'm aghast. "No one is jumping into bed, Evan," I say, my face heating up all over again.

"Don't sweat it," he assures me, still chuckling. "Guys don't get embarrassed about that sort of thing. Sounds like you gave him multiple compliments about his manhood. At least you didn't say, 'it's nothing, tiny, not a big problem'."

I groan, sinking onto the bed. "You're nothelping. I need ideas, Evan. How do I keep him entertained here?"

"Well, apart from the obvious..." Evan starts, and I can practically hear the grin in his voice. "You could tell him you've never seen The Godfather. That estate has an epic movie room."

His suggestions spiral from there—some hilarious, some bizarre. "You could have a sock puppet theater night," he says, and I can't tell if he's serious or not. "Or a hide-and-seek championship."

I end the call exasperated but determined to face the new day with some semblance of coolness.

In the kitchen, I find William, flipping pancakes. "I found the mix in your pantry and thought I'd give it a go."

I can't help but be impressed. "I don't mind at all," I reply, taking a seat at the table.

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As we sit down to the impromptu pancake breakfast, a sense of ease settles over the room.

William, usually so composed and collected, takes on a softer edge as he speaks of his childhood, his eyes lighting up with fond memories.

"You know, my mother used to make pancakes every year on my birthday," he begins, his voice tinged with nostalgia. "She had this special recipe — light and fluffy, almost like eating clouds. She said it was a family secret."

His eyes, usually sharp and assessing when appraising art, now gleam with a childlike warmth.

The morning light catches in his tousled hair, giving it a golden hue that adds to the almost idyllic picture he paints with his words.

I smile, captivated by this new side of him. "That's cute. Do you still make them on your birthday?" I ask, intrigued by the glimpse into his personal life.

William chuckles, a sound that's surprisingly light and easy. "I try, but they never turn out quite like hers. I guess some things are just irreplaceable."

There's a hint of melancholy in his voice now, a soft note of longing that makes me see him not just as the suave art curator, but as someone who holds dear the simple, heartfelt moments of life.

"It's nice to have those traditions," I say.

He nods, a gentle smile playing on his lips. “Exactly. Every time I flip a pancake, I’m right back in her kitchen, covered in flour, trying to sneak bites of batter when she wasn’t looking.”

I laugh, picturing a young William, mischief in his eyes, in a kitchen filled with love and laughter. It’s a far cry from the polished, professional demeanor he usually exhibits, and it endears him to me even more.

He pauses and gives me a look I cannot read. “You know, you’re the first person I’ve told about that memory.”

My heart skips a beat as he gives me a dashing smile, his left cheek dimpling.

“Your mother sounds like she’s a wonderful person,” I say sincerely. “Are you still close?”

His expression changes, the light in his eyes dimming slightly. “She passed away a couple of years ago,” he admits.

I immediately regret my question, feeling like I’ve intruded on a private sorrow. “I’m so sorry, William. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s alright,” he cuts in, offering a small, albeit sad, smile. “It’s part of who I am now.”

The room falls into an awkward silence, the air heavy with unspoken words.

I’m about to suggest we clean up when William surprises me with a proposal of his own.

“How about we explore the estate grounds today? I saw a greenhouse out back. Could

be interesting."

The idea is a welcome one, and it promises an escape from the confines of the house and the complex web of lies I'm tangled in. "That sounds great," I say. "I'd love to show you around."

We finish our breakfast, and as we head out to the greenhouse, I feel a sense of relief.

The open space, the fresh air, and the simple act of walking side by side with William offer a reprieve from the chaos of my own making.

WILLIAM

I can't help but marvel at how natural it feels to be around Emily. It's as if we're not two strangers navigating a business deal, but old friends catching up after years apart.

As we stroll along the grounds, the conversation flows easily, and I find myself more relaxed than I've been in ages.

We step into the greenhouse, and I'm immediately struck by the lushness of it all.

The air is warm and moist, filled with the earthy scent of growing things. Rows of vegetables spread out in front of us like a living tapestry, each leaf and vine meticulously cared for.

Tomatoes hang ripe and red, while lettuce and herbs form a verdant carpet beneath our feet.

It's a serene oasis, a world away from the structured, muted tones of London's urban landscape.

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As we walk, I can't help but observe Emily.

There's a softness in her step, a grace in her movements that's almost ethereal. She moves with an ease that belies the tension of our situation, her hands lightly brushing against the leaves as we pass.

She's poised, yet there's a sweetness about her, a gentleness that's incredibly endearing.

In her simple elegance, she reminds me of a character straight out of a Jane Austen novel.

I find myself drawn to her, the way she seems to glide rather than walk, her every gesture imbued with a natural, unassuming charm.

It's a stark contrast to the high-strung energy of the city, and for a moment, I'm transported to a simpler, more romantic time.

I'm suddenly aware of a desire to be her Mr. Darcy, to embody that same timeless elegance and strength.

There's a part of me that yearns to match her poise with an equal measure of gallantry, to be the kind of man who would fit seamlessly into the pages of her story.

It's a surprising realization, one that catches me off guard, but as we wander through the greenhouse, surrounded by the quiet beauty of nature, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

Then, out of nowhere, a spider descends from the greenhouse roof, landing gracefully on Emily's shoulder.

Her reaction is instantaneous and dramatic. She screams at a pitch that would rival a banshee; her eyes wide with terror.

"Oh my gosh, get it off me! It's the end of the world!" she exclaims, half-serious. "We have to burn down the estate to save humanity!"

Suppressing a chuckle, I step closer and carefully scoop the spider into my hands. "Allow me to introduce you to our little friend," I say, holding the spider up for her to see. "Once upon a time, this brave little explorer was just minding his own business when suddenly he landed on a woman who screamed so loudly, he's been traumatized for life. Now, he suffers from night terrors, replaying that awful moment over and over."

Emily laughs, the sound light and infectious, as I gently place the spider on a nearby tomato plant. "See, he's not so scary now, is he? Can't help having all those legs."

She looks at him, then back at me, a smile playing on her lips. "I suppose you're right," she concedes. "But I think I need to change my clothes. I can still feel him crawling on me."

As we walk back to the house, Emily turns to me, a playful glint in her eye. "So, are you scared of anything?"

I shake my head. "No, nothing ever really scares me."

"Not even the dark as a kid?" she probes.

"Nope, nothing. Always been this way," I reply, a bit of pride creeping into my voice.

Emily laughs. "I wish I could say the same. I'm scared of my own shadow, thanks to growing up with a prankster brother." She regales me with tales of her brother's pranks, each more elaborate than the last.

"There was this one prank," she starts, a nervous giggle escaping her lips, "where I found a fake snake in my bed. I screamed so loud, I think I woke up the entire neighborhood. It felt so real, and now every time I feel something brush against my leg, I jump."

I chuckle. "That's quite a scare. I can see why you'd be a bit jumpy."

She nods, her eyes reflecting the memory. "And it's not just snakes. Once, I opened the fridge and a fake spider fell right into my hair. I was finding imaginary cobwebs on me for days."

I can't help but laugh, though there's a part of me that sympathizes with the lingering effects of such a prank. "Your family seems to have a talent for theatrics," I comment.

"Oh, they do. My dad would join in," she says, her tone growing serious. "The worst was waking up to the sound of ghostly whispers and eerie lights. It turned out to be a speaker hidden under my bed and some clever lighting. I didn't sleep well for weeks."

I snort, picturing the scene. "That's an elaborate prank. I can imagine our driver pulling something like that."

Her laughter is a bit nervous, perhaps she's uneasy reliving the memory.

"I might be scared of life too if I had grown up like that," I add. "But sadly, I'm an only child."

“Well, I better go and destroy these clothes and change into something else,” Emily announces as we head back to the house.

As Emily excuses herself to change, I find myself alone with my thoughts.

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There's an undeniable connection between us, one that's been growing since we met.

And for the first time in years, my cheeks ache from smiling.

On a whim, I decide to ask her on a proper date to explore this budding attraction.

When she returns, I muster up my courage.

"Emily, may I take you out for dinner tonight?"

To my utter surprise, she looks horrified.

"Absolutely not!" she blurts out, her expression one of sheer panic.

I'm taken aback, a mix of confusion and disappointment washing over me.

Did I misread the situation entirely?

"I'm sorry? Is the thought of joining me for dinner so terrible?" I ask.

Emily starts waving her hands in the air and shaking her head like she's mentally screaming, mayday, mayday, mayday.

"No, I mean... Yes! I... Um."

Her face is red again, but this time it's not so cute. I frown at her, wondering why she's so worked up over a simple question.

“I guess we could order pizza...” she suggests.

I lift a brow. “So, you will join me for dinner... so long as it’s...”

“Here,” Emily says, her face flushing once more.

She beams at me. “Yes. I mean...this is a tiny town, there’s really only one place to eat, and the last time I was there I was sick for days.”

“Oh, really?” I ask, observing her closely. Her nostrils flare, and she’s scratching her arm, guilt written all over her body. “What did you eat?”

“What did I eat?” she parrots, her voice higher than usual.

I take a step toward her. “Yes. That made you sick...”

She chews her bottom lip, and her gaze moves all over the place, like she’s hoping to find answers somewhere in the room. “The, um, shrimp—no, lobster lasagna. With a side of... crab fries.”

“Crab fries?” I repeat.

I take another step toward this enigmatic woman, wondering why she keeps lying to me. “You’re not very good at this, you know?”

Emily jumps, her eyes wide as she meets my stare. “Not good at.... what?”

“Lying,” I say. “Do not forget, I value honesty more than anything. Do not lie to me, Emily. If you don’t want to go on a date with me, then just say it.”

Her breaths are coming short and fast now, as she blinks rapidly while I tower over

her.

Then her shoulders drop in defeat. “You know what, I’d love to go for dinner with you.”

I grin. “Wonderful. I’ll be sure to avoid any seafood... just in case.”

Emily flashes me a nervous smile. “Good idea.”

EMILY

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The evening air is crisp as I prepare for dinner with William.

I'm a bundle of nerves, fussing over my outfit, my hair, my everything.

The sound of my phone ringing breaks through my anxious reverie. It's Sasha.

"I have a date with William tonight," I blurt out as soon as I answer, my voice a cocktail of excitement and nerves.

"No way! That's amazing, Em!" Sasha's enthusiasm is infectious, even through the phone. "He must really like you."

I pace around, phone pressed to my ear. "I'm a mess, Sasha. What if I say something stupid? Or spill something on him?"

Sasha laughs. "Just be yourself, Em. He's clearly into you. And remember, you've got a whole fake identity to maintain. No pressure!"

I can't help but laugh at her attempt to lighten the mood. "Thanks for the pep talk," I say, my nerves easing slightly.

"Just remember, Emily, keep William sweet. Grandma will be back soon enough, and we need him happy and charmed."

I sigh, half out of amusement, half out of anxiety. "No small task, keeping a man like William sweet. He's not exactly your average Joe."

Sasha's laughter rings through the phone. "Come on, Em. You've got this. You're smart, funny, and hey, you've convinced him you're the Art Queen's granddaughter. That's no small feat."

I twirl a strand of hair around my finger, pondering her words. "I just hope I can keep up the act."

"You're a natural," Sasha insists. "Just throw in some art lingo, but those pretty eyes of yours, and he'll be eating out of your hand."

I can't help but chuckle at her depiction. "I'll do my best. Maybe I should start practicing my mysterious, enigmatic look."

"There you go!" Sasha exclaims. "Channel your inner Mona Lisa. And hey, if all else fails, just distract him with your charm and wit."

"Or run for the hills," I joke.

"No hills running," Sasha chides. "Keep him interested, Em. It's crucial for Grandma's art deal. Plus, who knows, you might actually enjoy yourself."

As William and I step outside, Evan pulls up to the curb, his role as our driver resumed. The look on William's face is a mix of amusement and surprise as he recognizes my brother.

"It's you again!" William exclaims with a playful tone. "Any more town stories for me this time?"

Evan glances at me, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, but his smile is as polished as a salesman's. "Just one," he says, leaning into his role. "You see, it's my aunt and uncle's wedding anniversary tonight, and all of the family are going to be there... at

the same place you're dining tonight."

I let out an involuntary squeaked, "Oh!" I'm not sure if it's more of a shock or a plea for help.

William, ever the gentleman, makes a polite comment. "That sounds like a wonderful family gathering. It's nice to have such occasions to look forward to."

As we drive to the restaurant, I'm unusually quiet, my mind racing with the impending complications of avoiding my family and enjoying my evening with William.

The restaurant is quaint and cozy, nestled in the heart of the small town. It's the kind of place that's brimming with charm and character, its walls adorned with vintage decorations and soft, warm lighting that creates an inviting atmosphere.

The air is filled with the aroma of home-cooked meals, and a gentle buzz of conversation provides a comforting background hum.

We're led to a small table near the window, the perfect spot for an intimate dinner. But my attention is divided, my eyes darting around the room, scanning for familiar faces.

The weight of the evening ahead sits heavy on my shoulders, and I can feel William's gaze on me, his curiosity piqued by my sudden change in demeanor.

"I see they've taken the crab fries off the menu," William says, winking at me.

I let out a nervous laugh, glancing at the big table across the other side of the room, bursting with my family members. "Well, it's a small town. One rumor of food poisoning can shut a place down..." I say, turning back to him.

I down a glass of water while William takes his time looking at the menu.

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“Will you excuse me? I just need to go to the restroom.”

I don't wait for William to respond before jumping up and shuffling to the ladies'.

I lean over the sink and look at my reflection in the silver frame mirror.

Beads of sweat have collected at my temples, and when I dab my face with a tissue, the door swings open and my mom walks in.

“Emily!” she cries out, startled.

My heart races.

“I just got into town! Wanted to surprise everyone,” I lie as she pulls me in for a hug.

For the first time ever, her familiar scent brings me no comfort.

“We'll get you a seat at our table,” she says. “It's so great to see you.”

I nod with a fake smile and wave as she disappears in the stall. “I'll see you in there.”

I dart back to the small table where William is waiting for me.

He's ordered us drinks already, and I grab mine and gulp it down.

“It's okay, you don't need to be nervous around me,” William said, watching as I breathe through a panic attack.

I flash him a charming smile as I glance at my loud family, who thankfully hasn't noticed me yet.

"You're cute when you're jittery," William says, eyeing me with amusement.

I twirl my hair with a giggle. "I'm glad you think so, because I'm going to be real cute all evening..." I say through my smile.

William, starting to lean in for a more intimate conversation, reaches for my clammy hands. "Emily, I'm glad we're doing this. I've been meaning to say—"

But he pauses when I pull my hands back.

"Sorry, just give me a moment," I interrupt, dashing off before he can finish.

I weave through the tables, reaching my family just in time to see my uncle, glass in hand, gesturing animatedly in my direction.

I'm immediately engulfed in the familiar chaos of my relatives. My uncle, a little unsteady from his celebrations, is the first to spot me.

"Emily! There she is, the world traveler!" he exclaims, sloshing his drink slightly. "Tell us about your adventures!"

Before I can respond, Evan chimes in with a grin. "Oh, did Emily tell you about the time she wrestled a shark in Bournemouth?"

My eyes widen in disbelief at Evan's outrageous claim, but my family's faces light up with intrigue. "A shark?" my cousin gasps, leaning in.

I laugh nervously, playing along. "Well, it was more like a very aggressive goldfish at

the Aquarium, but you know how stories grow."

The table erupts in laughter, and I'm bombarded with questions about my 'British escapades.'

I spin a tale so ridiculous it borders on the absurd, involving a lost map in an antique store, a treasure hunt that took me to Stonehenge, and a three-legged dog named Rolf.

My mother shakes her head, chuckling. "Only you, Emily, could find such adventures. Or have them find you!"

As the laughter continues, I glance back at William's table, seeing him engaged in a conversation with the waiter. "Excuse me, I need to... go to the restroom," I say, seizing the opportunity to escape.

"Easy on the wine, love. It's going right through you," my mom warns.

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Returning to William, I find him patiently waiting, a curious look in his eyes.

"I'm back... you were saying..."

He nods. "I took the liberty of ordering the house platter for us to share."

"That's great," I say, picking up my glass and taking a greedy gulp. But I fear that no measure of alcohol is going to be enough to calm my nerves.

He takes my hand, his words warming the air between us. "Emily, I just wanted to say that I really enjoy spending time with—"

But then, my cousin starts a conga line, and they're heading in my direction. "One second, I just gotta fix my contact."

Each time I return, William attempts to restart our conversation, but fate—or rather, my family—intervenes. From rescuing a niece from a broken heel to responding to an impromptu karaoke challenge, my evening becomes a carousel of chaos.

"Oh, I just got an email from my financial advisor, I really should call him..." I say, rising to my feet again.

This time the room spins, and I eye the empty glass beside my dish, wondering just how many drinks I've had.

William makes a huffing sound. "Emily, I'm trying to tell you—" he starts once more, only for me to spot my aunt signaling me frantically from across the room.

"I'll be right back!" I promise, leaving William mid-sentence yet again.

As the evening progresses, William's patience wears thin. His attempts at a heartfelt conversation are constantly thwarted by my increasingly absurd departures – from helping the waiter fix a wobbly table to investigating a fictional issue with the restaurant's aquarium.

Finally, as we're about to leave, William, looking both amused and exasperated, says, "I feel like I've been on a date with a ghost tonight, Emily. You're here one minute and gone the next."

I offer an apologetic smile, my heart sinking. "I know, it's been a crazy night. I promise it's not usually like this."

But as we return to the estate, I stagger into the hall and fall into William's chest.

"Whoops," I say.

"You're drunk," he says, his voice flat.

He carefully picks me up in his arms. "I see now, why you didn't want to go out tonight. You seem to know everyone in this town," he said.

"I did grow up here," I confess as he scales the staircase.

I clasp my hands around his neck and inhale his woody scent. "That's a nice cologne you've got on... is it Calvin Kline?"

"I'm not wearing cologne," William replies.

I gasp. "That delicious smell is you?"

For the first time all evening, William cracks a genuine smile at me.

When he opens my door and carries me into my room, the alcohol running in my veins gives me a crazy idea. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you my undivided attention tonight but let me make it up to you now.”

In an attempt to appear sultry, I try to kick off a heel. But it’s glued to my foot.

William sets me down near the bed and watches with amusement as I huff and kick with frustration.

“Allow me,” he says, lowering to his knees.

I hold my breath as his warm hands slide down my calf and find my shoe, then he carefully takes it off.

“I feel like Cinderella,” I blurt.

William rises to a stand and gives me a penetrating stare for a moment. “I have to admit it feels like you’ve been hiding something. Is there anything you want to tell me, Emily?”

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I bite my lip.

I want to tell him the truth.

I want to tell him the whole truth and nothing but the freaking truth.

But I can't betray Sasha. Not now, we've come this far.

So, my hazy mind brings me another truth to declare.

"I keep thinking about you naked, and now I can't look at a banana the same ever again."

William snorts. "So that's what this is all about... Come on, then. Let's sober you up. Climb into bed, and I'll make a pot of coffee."

I grumble to him as I crawl in. "Don't leave now... the party is only getting started."

William's soft chuckle fades as he walks out.

Meanwhile, I close my heavy eyelids and sigh as a wave of nausea rushes over me.

I can't help but feel I've missed an opportunity to connect with William.

The night, with all its interruptions and missed chances, weighs heavily on me as I pull the covers to my chin, wondering what could have been if only the evening had gone differently.

Now, I'm too drunk and exhausted to save it.

Before William can return with the coffee I'm out like a light.

WILLIAM

Emily's behavior at the restaurant was erratic, a stark contrast to the serene woman I'd wandered through the greenhouse with.

There, she was calm, collected, almost ethereal.

Tonight, she was like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower, never staying long enough to be truly known.

As I lie in bed, I can't help but think of how endearing she was, despite the chaos.

There's a vulnerability to Emily, a genuine quality that becomes even more apparent when she's flustered. The memory of her slightly tipsy laughter, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, brings a smile to my face.

Under the blanket of darkness, my mind plays tricks on me.

This is no longer a business deal, there could be something more there.

Emily fit so nicely in my arms as I carried her to bed, holding her felt like the most normal thing to do. Like breathing.

Perhaps I'm being too harsh, I muse. Maybe she just had an off night.

The thought is comforting, and I decide to give her the benefit of the doubt, to try for another date.

My phone rings, slicing through the silence.

It's my father, and his tone is anything but comforting. "William, why are you gallivanting in that small American town? You should be in Paris, meeting with Madeline Lonelle!"

I sit up, rubbing my temple. "Dad, we've been over this. I'm not interested in Madeline that way. I'm following up on something important here."

"Important? More important than securing our family's legacy in the art world?" His voice is a mix of incredulity and irritation.

"A meeting with the Art Queen, actually. And I'm staying with her granddaughter."

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"Oh, good heavens, don't tell me you're mixing business with pleasure again," my father says, and I can mentally picture him dragging a hand over his face.

My father would not approve of Emily. She is everything he is not. Fun, spontaneous, sweet...

The thought that he'd not like her only makes her more attractive.

"William, you're being irrational. This dalliance, or whatever it is, can wait. The Lonelle connection is crucial for our gallery's expansion in Europe. You know this."

I stand, pacing the room, my frustration mounting. "Dad, I understand the importance of the Lonelle deal, but I can't just manipulate relationships for business gains. I've met someone here, someone... different."

"Different?" he scoffs. "What could possibly be so special about this small-town encounter that it derails our plans? William, be sensible. You have a responsibility to the family, to the gallery."

I stop by the window, looking out into the stillness of the night. "It's not about being sensible all the time. Emily, she's...she's real, authentic. It's refreshing, and I need to see where this leads."

There's a heavy sigh from the other end of the line. "Your mother was the same, always chasing after what felt 'authentic.' But she understood the importance of our legacy, of making sacrifices for the greater good. I expect you to do the same."

I clench my jaw, the mention of my mother hitting a nerve. "This isn't about Mom. It's about me making my own choices. I'm staying here a bit longer. I need to figure things out, for myself."

The line goes silent for a moment, a battlefield of wills stretching across the distance. "Very well, William," he finally says, his voice icy with resignation. "But remember, the clock is ticking. Don't let a fleeting fancy cost us our future."

As the call ends, I'm left staring at the phone, my heart racing with a mixture of rebellion and uncertainty.

My father's words echo in my mind, a stark reminder of the life I'm expected to lead. But there's something about Emily, something that urges me to defy expectations and explore the unknown.

The next morning, weak light filters softly through the curtains as I make my way to the living room.

There, nestled in an armchair with a book, is Emily.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, creating a serene, almost picturesque scene.

She's so absorbed in her reading that she doesn't notice me at first.

I clear my throat gently. "Good morning."

Startled, she looks up, a slight flush on her cheeks. "William! Good morning. I didn't hear you come in."

I gesture to the book in her hands, an art book I recognize. "Ah, Monet. His series on

water lilies is one of my favorites."

Emily's eyes light up. "Mine too. There's something so calming about his use of color. And the painting looks different depending on which light you look at it."

We delve into a conversation about Monet, discussing our favorite pieces and the emotions they evoke. It's a comfortable exchange, one that reminds me of the connection we shared in the greenhouse.

It's almost enough to make me forget all about the chaos of last night.

Almost.

After a moment, I ask, "How are you feeling this morning? Last night was quite eventful."

She winces slightly, setting the book aside. "My head is sore. And I'm embarrassed about all the running around I did. I hope I didn't come off too... scatterbrained."

I shake my head, smiling. "Not at all. It was... interesting. Don't worry about it."

There's a pause, and then I remember the reason for my extended stay. "Any update on the Art Queen? I assume she's still tied up with her commitments?"

Emily jumps slightly, as if she'd forgotten the entire pretense of her grandmother's visit. "Oh, right, the Art Queen. I should call her for an update."

She stands up quickly, a little too quickly, and steadies herself. "I'll just make that call now."

As she hurries out of the room, I can't help but feel a twinge of concern.

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The inconsistencies in her behavior, the evasion... something doesn't quite add up.

EMILY

I find a quiet corner and dial Sasha, my heart pounding with a mix of anxiety and desperation. "Sasha, when is your grandmother coming? I can't keep this up much longer," I whisper into the phone.

"Tomorrow," Sasha replies cheerily. "Just one more day, Em. You're doing great!"

I pace the room. "Great? Sasha, it was a disaster. Last night, we went out to dinner, and I was bouncing between tables like a pinball. And William... I think he's getting suspicious."

Sasha's laughter rings through the phone, light and carefree. "Oh, come on, it sounds like you had fun. A little adventure never hurt anyone."

I sigh, leaning against the wall. "It's not just an adventure, Sasha. This is stressful. I'm lying to a guy who's starting to mean something to me."

There's a pause, and then Sasha's tone softens. "Just hang in there, Em. It'll all be over soon. And who knows, maybe something real will come out of this."

I end the call with a heavy heart, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

I rejoin William, who is looking at the various portraits hanging in the dining room. "Where is your art, Emily? I'd love to see it."

I freeze up under the question. “Oh, you won’t find any here,” I say, with a fake laugh.

William gives me a look that I can’t place. It’s a mix between disapproval and concern.

“Your grandmother does not have any of your artwork? Is she unsupportive of your passion?”

I gulp. The last thing I want to do is paint the Art Queen as a bad grandmother. Of course, a loving one would proudly hang her granddaughter’s work in her home.

“Well, this is just her vacation home. She keeps my paintings in her penthouse suite back in London. Of course.”

William gives me a slow nod, and after a tense beat, he says, “That makes sense.”

I exhale with relief.

Then I glance out of the tall windows at the line of trees at the bottom of the yard, and an idea strikes me. "How about we spend the day in the woods? I could use some fresh air after last night, and there’s a brook just a couple of miles from here."

William smiles. "That sounds perfect. A bit of nature might be just what we need."

We pack a picnic basket, filling it with sandwiches, fruit, and a flask of coffee.

As we walk through the woods, the tension from the previous night begins to melt away. The sunlight filters through the leaves, casting dappled shadows on our path.

We settle comfortably on the blanket, surrounded by the tranquility of the woods and

talk about frivolous things, like we're a pair of high schoolers.

The playful banter between us feels like a breath of fresh air, easing the tension that's been building up.

"What woodland creature do you think you'd be?"

William's question catches me off guard, but in a good way. It's refreshing not having to pretend or stress over the Art Queen.

"A fox, maybe? Cunning and free-spirited," I reply, my mind painting a picture of a clever, agile creature darting through the forest.

He laughs, the sound mingling with the rustle of leaves. "A fox suits you. Smart, elusive, with a hint of mystery."

I playfully roll my eyes. "Elusive, huh? Is that a polite way of saying I'm hard to pin down?"

"Perhaps," he says, his eyes sparkling with humor. "But there's something intriguing about a little mystery. Keeps life interesting."

I reach for a grape, popping it into my mouth. "What about you, William? What woodland creature would you be?"

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He seems to ponder for a moment, then grins. "I'd like to think of myself as a wolf. Loyal, a bit of a lone wanderer, but part of a pack."

I smile, finding the analogy fitting. "A lone wolf with a heart of gold?"

He chuckles, nodding. "Something like that. Though I can't say I've howled at the moon recently."

Our laughter echoes through the clearing, and for a moment, all the complications fade away.

It's just William and me, two people enjoying each other's company in the simplicity of nature.

"Okay, tell me something you haven't told anyone," I say, before taking a bite out of my sandwich. William looks startled for a moment but grows thoughtful.

Finally, he tilts his head with a shrug. "I'm supposed to be engaged."

I almost choke on the bread. I beat my chest and cough. "Excuse me?"

William looks away with a faint smile. "My father expects me to marry someone in the business who would open doors for us in Europe."

I frown but stay silent, expecting more.

After a heavy sigh, William looks back at me with a lop-sided grin. "Call me a

romantic, but I can't be stuck in a loveless marriage. Even if it's breaking my father's heart."

I put the rest of my sandwich down and wipe my hands with a wet wipe as I chew on the information. "Wait, so your dad wants you to marry someone just to grow your business? You're telling me that kind of thing still happens?"

William smirks. "Apparently so. But I refuse to do it."

"Wow." I puff out my cheeks and exhale the heavy news.

Suddenly, William sets down the flask. "You've got a little something..." he begins, reaching toward me.

I get flashbacks of the spider in the greenhouse and freeze. "Oh my gosh, what is it?" I say in a horrified whisper.

William snorts and pulls out a dandelion seed from my hair. "Nothing to worry about."

Holding the seed between his fingers, he brings it close to my face. "Make a wish?"

I look into his eyes, their depth making my heart flutter. I close mine and wish that this guy won't hate me when he finds out the truth. That maybe we could start something real when all of this is over.

Hey, he said to make a wish. No one said it had to be realistic.

I open my eyes and blow gently on the seed, sending it dancing into the air. "Wish made," I say.

Then I hold my breath, blinking at William's huge glistening eyes.

They're dark blue with flecks of yellow, like constellations in the sky.

I trace the stress lines on his brow with my gaze and try to memorize every contour of his face. You know, for the time I inevitably end up alone, never to see this man again in my life.

My gaze drops to his lips, the bottom one is larger than the top, it calls to me, and I find myself licking my lips like a starving traveler in the Sahara desert.

The air between us is charged, filled with unspoken words and growing tension.

He leans in closer, his gaze fixed on my lips.

My breath hitches, and for a moment, the world falls away.

It's just us, surrounded by the beauty of nature, on the cusp of something new and exciting.

Our faces are inches apart, the anticipation building.

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I can feel the warmth of his breath, the magnetic pull drawing us closer. My heart pounds in my chest, a mix of excitement and nerves.

Just as our lips are about to meet, a cacophony of voices and the rustling of leaves shatter the silence.

We pull back abruptly, turning toward the source of the commotion.

A troop of boy scouts bursts into the clearing, their chatter and laughter filling the space that moments ago had been reserved for our almost-kiss.

"The compass says this way is north, but..." a young boy with a mop of blonde hair and a pair of knobby knees trails off. He stares at me and William with a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

One of the scouts, a freckle-faced kid with untied shoelaces, points excitedly. "Look, people!"

The rest of the troop turns to us, a chorus of "Hi!" and "What are you doing here?" raining down upon us.

William and I exchange bemused glances. "We were just enjoying the... scenery," William explains, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"Are you on a date?" another scout asks with an air of innocence. "Are you gonna ask her to marry you?"

My cheeks flush a brighter shade of red, and I stammer, "We're just... um, friends."

Suddenly, there's a rustle of leaves and approaching footsteps. "Troop! What is the hold up? We've got badges to earn..."

As the leader of Boy Scouts enters the clearing, I'm struck by a pang of recognition at a frizzy mess of red hair.

The leader is none other than Jake Turner, someone I went to school with, known for his brash demeanor and lack of a filter.

Dang. This means trouble.

His beady eyes dance, then his gaze settles on me before flitting to William for a moment. His bushy brows lift.

"Emily? Emily Barnes? Is that you?" Jake exclaims, a smirk spreading across his face. "Wow, look at you out here. Still trying to be the outdoorsy type, huh?"

William and I exchange a glance, and I offer a tight-lipped smile. "Hi, Jake. Just enjoying a day out."

On the outside, I'm as serene as a Japanese garden, but on the inside, I'm having one million panic attacks.

Okay, Emily. Relax. There's no reason Jake could ever know that you're lying to William.

Thank goodness I told him my true name. At least that avoids an awkward conversation.

Jake leans against a tree, his smirk widening. "I remember you from school. Always with paint on your hands...do you still make those creepy pictures? Never thought I'd see you on a date, especially with a guy who isn't a total psychopath."

His tone takes on a teasing edge, but there's something in his words, a hint of condescension that makes me uncomfortable.

Before I can respond, Jake fires off another comment, this one is aimed at William.

"Don't get your hopes up, bro. Last I heard, she's a lousy kisser and even worse in..."

"That's enough," William barks.

Jake chuckles, undeterred. "Oh, come on, I'm just having a bit of fun. Besides, I find it hard to believe a guy like you could settle for this piece of—"

Without warning, William's fist connects with Jake's face.

Jake stumbles back, shock and anger flashing in his eyes.

There's a collective gasp, while I stand frozen, too stunned to move.

The scouts, witnessing the altercation, aim their slingshots at William, their youthful faces a mix of confusion and protectiveness.

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"Back off!" one of them yells.

Jake, nursing his jaw, raises a hand to stop his troop. "That's enough, boys. Let's go."

He glares at William one last time. "I stand corrected. Looks like you deserve each other."

After he disappears with his troop, I fly up to William raising my finger at him in an accusatory fashion. "What the heck was that?"

William is panting, his knuckles red. "Someone needed to put him in his place. He had no right to talk about you like that."

"Jake is a jerk... but you didn't have to hit him," I shoot back, trying to ignore the teeny tiny version of myself doing the conga in my head.

There's just something about a macho man fighting for a woman's honor that gets me all excited.

Now I can't decide whether to slap him or grab his jacket and pull him in for a kiss.

William drags his hands through his hair as he tries to catch his breath. "Well, I'm going to call the Boy Scouts. Parents will not be impressed to find out their troop leader goes around insulting women in the woods."

I open my mouth to argue but notice the light reflecting off the red droplets now dripping from William's hand.

“You’re bleeding!” I announce in horror.

“It’s nothing,” William says, but he winces when I take his hand.

I grab a stack of napkins and press them on his messed-up knuckles. “Come on, I’m sure there’s a first aid kit back at the house.”

Back at the estate, I lead William into the kitchen, where the fading sunlight casts long shadows across the room.

His hand is still bleeding slightly, and I can't help but feel a pang of worry as I clean his knuckles with gentle precision.

"It's just a scratch," he insists.

I finish wrapping the bandage round his hand and without thinking, I lift his knuckles to my lips.

“My mom swears that if you kiss it better, you heal extra fast,” I say, before a wave of sheepishness enters my soul and part of me wants the ground to swallow me up.

But William’s eyes twinkle at me in the dim kitchen. “Thank you.”

Suddenly, a chill enters the house as the sun disappears behind the trees.

"We should light a fire in the living room," I suggest, eager to bring some warmth back into the day.

William nods in agreement.

I lead the way to the fireplace, determined to show some competence.

William watches with a mixture of amusement and admiration as I grapple with the fireplace.

I'm crouched down, poking at the kindling with a determination that's starting to wane. I strike another match, but it fizzles out as quickly as my hope of getting a fire started.

"Maybe it needs some encouragement," I mutter, blowing on the unlit wood as if my breath could ignite it.

William chuckles from behind me. "Perhaps it responds to positive affirmations?"

I glance back, shooting him a playful glare. "Dear fire, you are hot, strong, and some would say... smokin'."

William snorts behind me, but I ignore him.

Despite my best efforts, the fireplace remains cold and unresponsive.

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With a sigh, I'm about to stand up when suddenly, the logs burst into flames, bathing the room in a warm glow.

I turn, a look of triumph on my face, only to see William holding a remote control, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"You knew how to work it this whole time?" I exclaim, half exasperated, half amused.

"Yes, I have the same model at home. I just thought I'd let you have your moment with nature," he replies, trying to stifle his laughter.

I roll my eyes as I join him at the couch. "I think I've had my fill of nature for one day."

We settle in silence, blinking at each other with matching grins.

William's hand rests on my knee and a zing shoots through me.

He leans in.

Oh my gosh, he's going to kiss me!

My heart is thumping, and I'm doing a happy dance in my head.

But then I break out into a nervous sweat and start to worry obsessively over what all of this means.

I can't kiss William! He's supposed to be meeting Sasha's grandmother and doing an art deal. I'm not here to play house and be his girlfriend.

Besides... our story has started out on a lie. And William made it very clear that he values honesty above all.

His hot breath mists my cheeks, and his beautiful, velvet lips brush mine for a split second, when I make a screeching sound and jolt backward.

"I'm sorry. I have to go to bed..."and scream into a pillow, I add silently.

William clears his throat and nods. "My apologies, I must have misread the signs..."

"Oh. No," I wave my hands, backing away now.

"I would love to do that with you." I touch my lips. "You're great. I'm... totally into it. But I just... can't."

Oh, my heck I sound like an idiot right now.

I wince as I give him an apologetic smile. "I'm so sorry, my grandmother will be here tomorrow, and we should get an early night. In separate beds. Far. Far away from each other."

William's left brow lifts, but he recovers himself and gives me a professional nod. "You're right. Of course. We can't forget why we're here."

As I retreat to my room, I'm trying to remember the last time I was kissed.

I flop onto the bed, staring at the ceiling as I mentally scroll through my history, which feels as patchy as my own grandmother's quilt.

It's a bit like trying to remember the last time I had a piece of really juicy watermelon – it's been a while, and the more I think about it, the more I crave it.

I can't help but chuckle, realizing I'm comparing romance to ripe fruit.

"Classic Emily," I mutter to myself.

The last kiss that comes to mind was with Derek, the barista who thought cappuccino art was a gateway to profound emotional connections.

I shudder at the memory of his coffee-scented beard and his insistence on reading coffee grounds like tarot cards.

Then there was that blind date with Tom, who had the unfortunate habit of talking exclusively about his pet iguana. The date ended with a peck on the cheek and me feigning an allergic reaction to avoid a second date.

I sigh, rolling over on the bed.

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My love life seems to be a series of romantic missteps, akin to a Bridget Jones montage, minus the endearing British accent.

I think about William's near kiss in the woods today, and the zing I felt sitting on the couch with him by the fire.

His soothing masculine scent was more intoxicating than a shot of vodka. And the warmth of his body so close to mine had me melting.

If I hadn't chickened out of it, I think it would have been the kind of kiss worth waiting for.

WILLIAM

Pacing back and forth in my room, the clock ticking away the late hours, I find myself caught in a tumult of thoughts.

The events of the evening replay in my mind, especially the moment by the fire – so close to a kiss, so close to crossing a line I've been cautiously toeing since meeting Emily.

I should be getting some rest, preparing for the Art Queen's arrival tomorrow.

Yet, all I can think about is Emily – her laughter, her nervousness, the way she looked in the firelight.

Her soulful eyes glowed at me, speaking to my soul. And it took all of my resolve not

to reach out and caress her cheek.

This was supposed to be a business trip and a momentary escape from my father.

But I couldn't care less about meeting the Art Queen, and I want this short trip to turn into something more long-term.

After I meet with Emily's grandmother, I will return to London, but I'd like to go back to my father with Emily on my arm and squash any dream of his regarding me and Madeline Lonelle.

My father's stern voice echoes in my head, admonishing me to forget this distraction and return home. "Focus on what's important, William. Don't let a fleeting fancy derail your responsibilities."

In his eyes, getting involved with Emily would be putting the family business at risk.

After all, if I don't marry Madeline, how else will our company expand into Europe?

But then, there's another voice, softer, more intuitive – my mother's. "Follow your heart, William. You deserve to experience true love."

I stop pacing, standing still in the quiet of my room.

I like Emily, more than I've allowed myself to admit. This could be my only chance to explore what's brewing between us, to see if this connection is real or just a product of circumstance.

Before I can second-guess myself, I decide to go to her. I need to know if she feels this too, if there's a possibility for something more.

I step out of my room, my heart racing with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

As I turn the corner in the hallway, I almost bump into Emily, who's standing there as if she's been wrestling with a similar decision.

"What are you doing?" we ask simultaneously, our voices a mix of surprise and curiosity.

There's a moment of awkward silence as we both take in the serendipity of the encounter.

Emily looks as conflicted as I feel, her eyes searching mine for an answer.

"I couldn't sleep," I finally say, trying to gauge her reaction.

"Me neither," she replies, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

We stand there in the dimly lit hallway, the tension and anticipation palpable between us.

It feels like a pivotal moment, one that could change everything or nothing at all.

"Emily," I begin, my voice barely above a whisper, "about earlier by the fire..."

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She nods, her expression open, expectant.

My heart pounds in my chest, urging me to close the distance between us, to take the leap.

“I’m an idiot,” Emily says, laughing. But her laugh sounds forced and her eyes are misty.

“Sorry?” I say, trying to read her and failing.

She begins to pace the hall, wafting the scent of her berry shampoo. “I shouldn’t have freaked out. I mean, it’s a kiss. If you want to kiss me, what’s the big deal? People kiss all the time. The French kiss twice! I heard the Hungarians like to kiss three times! Okay... on the cheeks but still...”

Her face is flushing while she rambles, and a rush of delight soars through me as I watch her mentally spiral.

“Right, it doesn’t have to mean anything...” I say, even though it’s a lie. Because if I kiss Emily right now in this hall, it will absolutely mean something. And depending on how it goes and the feelings that come from it, the kiss could take us to a different place.

A place where there’s no coming back without heartache.

“...friends kiss. You could argue that doctor’s kiss some patients... they call mouth-to-mouth the kiss of life, right?” She’s still rambling, getting worked up now. Her

shoulders are raised, and she's got her arms folded while she paces harder.

My heart hammers like a war drum while my body, unable to stand the tension any longer, works on autopilot, and I grab her arm.

With a yelp, Emily swivels to face me as I gently back her up until her back is pressed to the wall. Then I cage her between my arms and hover, enjoying the sensation of her body heat flooding me.

The air between us is charged so much, I swear the second I touch her we'll both feel a shock.

"So, you're saying that if I try to kiss you this time, you won't run away?" I say in a low voice, my gaze trailing her face and landing on her beautiful, pouty lips.

She exhales, and I suck in her minty breath and lick my lips.

She's apparently lost for words and just gives me a slight nod.

It's enough.

I lean in, cupping her face and give her the kiss of all kisses.

She freezes when our lips touch, but then I let my hands roam to her waist, and she melts into me.

Then, she kisses me back, wrapping her arms around my neck.

Her nails graze my scalp as she runs her hands through my hair, and she presses into my body, fitting like a glove against me.

“Oh. My. Gosh,” she whispers when we break apart to catch our breath.

My lips tingle, and every part of me is buzzing as I grip her waist.

“My sentiments exactly,” I reply, smirking at her before going in for more.

As I succumb to my desires and make out with Emily, flashes of images cross my mind.

From the moment she grabbed my soggy umbrella instead of my hand, or when her face lit up as she talked about art. Then her slightly insecure grin in the woods, the flash of annoyance when I hit that Scouts leader.

All of the moments leading up to this come together like a tapestry and the kiss seals the deal.

There is no way in hell I’m marrying Madeline.

Or anyone else.

Father can take the business and have someone else break into Europe.

I’m only interested in seeing just where this goes with Emily.

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Judging by how heated things are getting between us now, I'd guess they're going to get hotter.

Her fingers run down my neck, and she grips my shoulders as if to stop herself from buckling.

I lift her up and she wraps her legs around my waist. Then I press her against the wall again, moaning into her mouth as I taste her.

It's the oddest thing. There's a sense of déjà vu as I nip her bottom lip, and yet when she squeals and nuzzles her nose against mine, it feels entirely new and refreshing.

At the same time, her scent, her heat, her heart beating against my chest... it all feels so familiar, like coming home.

It's like I've been walking around my whole life, forgetting who I am and where I belong.

Emily's kiss of life has awoken in me something long buried.

When we finally tear ourselves apart, we're both grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Reluctantly, I let her down and she backs away, resting her fingers to her bottom lip.

"Good night," she whispers.

I whisper it back.

Then I return to my room with my hand placed over my chest. My heart is racing.

Kissing Emily has made me feel something I haven't felt since before my mother passed away.

Happiness.

EMILY

Oh. My. Gosh. Yes.

That was a kiss worth waiting for.

I lay in my bed, with a pillow clamped over my face to stifle my giggles, and I'm kicking the covers like a little girl.

William's mouth, his hands, his body... I've had a taste, and now I'm addicted.

I want to run back to his room and jump on his bed, eager to taste more.

But he's too much of a gentleman for those kinds of shenanigans.

And I'm too much of a lady. Right?

I mean, we've known each other for days. It's too soon.

Right?

Right!

I swoon and sigh, letting my body relax into the bed. Forgetting all about my worries

for a moment. That is, until they all come flooding back.

I sit up bolt right with a gasp and take fistfuls of my hair in horror.

“I just made out with William,” I whisper in the dark like I’m at confession.

Just great. The first guy I really connect with for years, is the same guy I’m lying to.

He’s the one person I can’t have a future with.

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When he finds out I'm not who I say I am, he's going to freak.

I stare at my phone, watching the minutes roll by until it's almost four in the morning.

I've jumped from elation, to devastation, back to false hope, before I finally resign myself to my fate. There's no use letting things go any further without doing the right thing.

It just sucks that the right thing is going to make my best friend hate me.

On cue, Sasha's face appears on my phone as it rings.

Good old time difference. It's nearly afternoon for her in London. I answer the call.

"Sasha. I have to—"

"I have a confession to make," Sasha blurts, cutting me off.

I frown. "Okay..."

Sasha sniffs, and my frown deepens. "Are you crying?"

The speaker crackles as a tense moment passes, and I picture Sasha marching around, her face screwed up as she starts to ramble. "My grandmother isn't coming. She can't. I'm so sorry, I thought I could make it happen, but she doesn't travel well and..."

“Wait. What?” I say, suddenly unable to feel my arms.

My breaths come out hard and shallow, and my brain begins to spin.

Oh. This must be what a panic attack feels like.

“I’m so sorry, Emily. I’ve been trying to think of ways to break the news, and I should have waited until it’s morning for you, but if I don’t tell you the truth I’m going to burst!”

“I get it,” I say, hoping that if I can soothe Sasha, it’ll calm me down too. “It’s okay. We’ll figure something out.”

“Are you serious?” Sasha says in a squeaky voice. “Emily, oh my gosh. You are amazing.”

“Don’t praise me just yet,” I warn. “Sasha, I have to tell William the truth.”

“No, you can’t!” she almost screams into the phone. “Emily, if William doesn’t showcase Grandma’s art, she’ll lose everything. We need this visibility.”

I’m torn, caught between honesty and loyalty. “Sasha, I can’t keep lying. It’s not fair to him or to me. Tonight... we kissed, and now things are complicated.”

She’s pleading now. “Please, Emily. You said he values honesty more than anything. You really think he’ll want to do business with us after this stunt? My grandmother is going to be at the charity event in London later this week. Just keep up the act a little longer. I’ll be there too, and I’ll explain everything.”

I’m not going to lie, the idea of Sasha taking the brunt of the confession is appealing. But I don’t know how I can face William again under such a big lie.

Sasha vents to me about how much this means to her, how I can't let her down.

Reluctantly, I agree to her plan, feeling the weight of my decision like a stone in my stomach.

The morning light filters softly through the kitchen windows, casting a gentle glow over the room.

I find William there, his back to me as he pours a cup of coffee.

My heart is pounding in my chest, a tumultuous mix of nerves and resolve. This is it – the moment I have to bend the truth once more, but with a promise to myself that it will be the last time.

"William," I begin, my voice barely above a whisper.

He turns, and his smile fades slightly as he sees the seriousness in my face.

"Emily? Is everything okay?" he asks, setting down the coffee pot. "Oh no. Are you having regrets about last night?"

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My cheeks flush at the question. “No.”

William’s face breaks into a broad smile, and he walks over to me, planting his big hands on my waist. “Good, I have no regrets either,” he murmurs before he plants a soft kiss on my mouth. “In fact, I was rather hoping for an encore.”

He nuzzles my neck and roams his hands up and down my back in the most delicious way.

The knots in my body loosen under his touch.

I inhale his scent and shut my eyes.

Why does he have to smell so good?

Why does he make me feel so good?

Lying to him is torturous, but I cling to my promise to Sasha. I just have to keep lying for a little longer.

But there’s one hard truth I do need to tell, and I need to rip the band-aid off.

"I need to talk to you about the Art Queen," I say, meeting his gaze. "There's been a change of plan."

He frowns, a hint of concern in his eyes. "What kind of change?"

I hesitate, the words heavy on my tongue. "She can't travel to meet us here. Her health has declined, at her age... it's not feasible right now. But there's an opportunity to meet her in London at a charity event. The Potter's gala on Trafalgar square. Do you know it?"

William nods. "My father and I are booked to attend," he said, looking thoughtful at the floor, like there's something very interesting written by my feet.

William's expression shifts from concern to understanding. He nods, slowly. "That's unfortunate about your grandmother, but these things happen."

I'm relieved by his response but still feel the weight of my ongoing deceit. "I'm so sorry, William. I know how important this was to you, and I didn't mean to mess you around like this."

He steps closer, his gaze softening. "Emily, it's not your fault. These things are out of our control."

I cringe. "It's all my fault. I brought you here for nothing, it's just been a big waste of time."

William gives me a strange smile that I can't quite read. He takes my hand. "I wouldn't call it a waste of time."

The air between us is thick with unspoken words, a dance of truth and pretense.

I want to tell him everything, to confess the tangled web I've woven, but Sasha's plea echoes in my mind, holding me back.

"Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?" I ask, desperate to ease the tension.

William considers for a moment, then a small smile plays on his lips. "Well, since we're both here, maybe we could spend a little more time together?"

The thought of spending more time alone with William makes me giddy. I grin. "What do you have in mind?"

WILLIAM

Shadows of the tall trees dance across the wall as the sunshine beams through the open blinds of my room.

I can't stop grinning, my heart beating faster than a jackhammer at what I have planned for the day.

To be brutally honest, I'm relieved the Art Queen couldn't make it to the house. I'm having far too much fun spending time with Emily, and now that I know her grandmother isn't coming, I can compartmentalize all of the stress waiting for me in England and escape in this American small town with the most fascinating woman on earth.

A soft knock on the door draws me out of my head, and I turn to see Emily standing at the entrance of my room, a playful glint in her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what evil plan is brewing in that head, yet?" she asks, her lips curled into a mischievous grin.

Her eyes shimmer in the sunlight, casting her in an ethereal glow.

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For a moment, I'm speechless, caught up in the simple beauty of her presence.

Regaining my composure, I answer, "I thought a massage might be just what you need after all the effort of entertaining me these past few days."

A hint of surprise crosses her face. "A massage? Here?"

Emily's left brow, perfectly trimmed and shaped, lifts ever so slightly, and her gaze hovers to my freshly made bed. Then her cheeks become stained as she meets my eyes again.

Following her line of thought, I quickly add, "I just got off the phone with a company. They're sending a team over."

Emily's whole face is red now, and her mouth forms an O.

"Gotcha. So, a spa day at the house? That's a...surprise. Are there any other surprises I should know about?"

I sense the hesitation in her voice, and it brings me back to an earlier conversation. "Oh, I'm sorry. That's right, you're not the biggest fan of surprises, are you?"

Emily snorts and tosses her hair over her shoulder as she walks to the bed and perches on the end. "Well, thanks to my prankster brother, surprises usually mean something jumps out at me."

"I guess that might give you some trust issues..." I muse aloud.

Emily's eyes flash as a look of concern crosses her face. Her brows pull together as she frowns. "I never thought about it, but I guess you're right..."

Her shoulders slump, and she has a faraway look on her face, as though my words just conjured a painful memory.

The sight of her in this state has my stomach in knots. Getting her more tense was not my intention.

I take her moment of vulnerability as an invitation and join her on the bed.

The mattress shifts under my weight, and she falls into my shoulder slightly.

She corrects herself, red staining her cheeks again. Then looks away.

I sigh as my own mind paints a canvas of many unsavory memories. But I shake them away and take Emily's hand in both of mine.

The touch has her turning to look at me again, her brows lifted.

"Well, I promise that you will only ever have pleasant surprises from me," I vow, making sure to sound as genuine as possible.

Emily's eyes twinkle for a moment but then her face falls.

"I wish I could promise the same thing..." then she grins again and nudges my bicep with her elbow. "But I like to keep a guy guessing."

Her eyes glint as she sneaks a glance at my mouth and without hesitation, I take the opportunity to reach for her hair and lean in.

Her minty breath fogs my face and floods me with a pleasant sensation that ripples through my senses.

My fingers tangle in the soft tresses of her dark curls, and I plant my hand on the back of her head while I capture her in a cheeky kiss.

Emily clutches my shoulders, her nails digging into me, giving me a soft pinch that tells me I'm not dreaming.

She kisses me back, and the way her lips move with mine is so natural, it's like we've done this a million times before.

I hadn't planned to kiss her again so soon, but her lips are too tempting.

Her scent is floral and warm, like sunshine in spring, and I want to bask in it all day.

The kiss is surprisingly chaste, and tender.

When we slowly break apart, and I open my eyes again, the room seems brighter, lighter somehow.

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Emily's face is flushed with color as she nibbles her bottom lip and pulls back. "What was that for?" She gives me a coy smile, her lashes fluttering.

I rise to my feet to resist any more temptations. "I thought you were thinking about kissing me, so I took the liberty of kissing you first."

"How gallant," Emily quips back.

She leans in and leaves a soft peck on my lips.

I want to reach for her and explore her face and neck. To memorize every contour and freckle. But just as I zone in on her buttery lips, the doorbell breaks the moment.

"That'll be the spa," I say, straightening up again. I hold out my hand. "Ready?"

Emily's eyes sparkle as she takes it. "I guess so."

EMILY

As William and I make our way to the front door, exchanging quick, stolen kisses, I feel like I've hit the romantic jackpot.

He's charming, considerate, and, let's be honest, easy on the eyes.

I'm grinning like an absolute fool, a spring in my step that I can't seem to control.

But, as is the way with my life, which often feels like a scene straight out of a Bridget

Jones diary entry, my bubble of bliss is about to be burst.

We open the front door, and there, standing in the doorway, is my brother Evan.

William looks genuinely surprised. "Oh it's you again! Aren't you a driver?"

Evan, in his infinite wisdom, announces with theatrical flair, "Ah, yes. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I am a driver, but on Wednesdays, I transform into a masseur and cosmetologist."

I stand there, mortified.

Of all the people in the world to show up as our spa treatment specialist, it had to be my brother.

"Oops!" I say, knocking my hip against a vase and knocking it off the small table.

The glass shatters on the hard floor.

I pretend to look mortified. "I'm such a klutz! William, there's a dustpan and brush in the closet under the stairs... do you mind?"

William launches into action. "Of course, nobody move. I'll be right back."

A little part of me sighs at his response. Of course, he's the kind of guy who will come to the rescue even when you purposefully break something.

I want to weep. Things could have been great between us if I wasn't such a fraud.

I pull Evan aside, whispering frantically, "Evan, you can't be serious. You're here to give us spa treatments?"

He nods, completely unfazed. "William found my ad online. I'm the only one in town who offers a full spa experience. What are the odds, right?"

"Are you even qualified?" I hiss.

Evan gives me a frank smile, puffing out his chest. "Got my certification in the Summer from Joe."

"Joe? The townhandyman?" I ask, knowing there is only one Joe in town and unable to fathom the idea of the bald, middle-aged guy teaching Evan the art of massage therapy.

Evan tilts his head. "He's got seven side-businesses."

"What's one of them issuing fake certifications?"

Evan's ears grow red.

I groan internally, my mind racing. "Evan, if you stay, you're going to ruin everything. Just tell William you've got food poisoning and have to go home."

He pats my shoulder in a mock-reassuring manner. "Relax, Emily. I'm a professional. William's in good hands." He lifts his palms and wriggles his fingers. "Myhands."

"You don't even know what you're—" I begin, but William's arrival back into the room has me dropping my tense stance and smiling at him.

William, seemingly unaware of the tension in the room, says, "Well, I must say, Evan, you're full of surprises."

"They are my specialty," Evan replies with a grin, "I used to torture my sister with mysurpriseswhen we were growing up." He gives me a pointed look with the kind of smile that tells me he is having far too much fun with this.

I smile back but glare with my eyes.

You're so dead.

"No doubt, you're still driving her crazy, and that thanks to you, she's cursed with trust issues for life," I shoot back through gritted teeth. But as soon as the words leave my mouth, I'm flooded with regret, and my blood rushes to my ears.

William looks curious, like an amateur sleuth at the end of a cozy mystery novel

when he's just about to crack a case.

He looks from Evan to me, then back at Evan.

Finally, his brows lift.

"This is your prankster brother?"

For the first time, Evan looks sheepish. He attempts to make an I'm sorry, face, but it's too late.

The damage is already done.

I glare at him, wishing my eyes could shoot laser beams as I wonder if this is the part when all of my lies begin to unravel.

And from now on, the only kissing I'll be doing is kissing goodbye to the thought of spending more time with William. And getting a step up in my art career. Or ever seeing my best friend again.

I might as well come clean now, and then move back home, where I'm destined to live in my parents' basement until this town sends me to an early grave from boredom.

William turns to me again. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I am like a mute parrot, opening my mouth and closing it soundlessly while flapping my arms. Man, I wish I could just fly out the window and get far, far away from this situation.

But it's time. I've got to tell him, there's no point keeping up the act now.

Evan is too much of a loose cannon, and William is too smart to fall for my lies.

My mouth fills with spit while my stomach churns.

I've let Sasha down. I've let her grandmother down. All because Evan let me down.

I drop my shoulders in defeat and let out a stressed sigh.

But before I can utter a word of my confession, my brother jumps in.

"It's my fault. I begged her not to tell you, work has been slow for me lately, and she thought that if you knew the truth, you'd think it was awkward. And I really need this."

Evan and I wait with bated breath as we watch William digest the new information.

"I'm afraid you've misjudged me," he says, resting a hand on Evan's shoulder with a smile that makes the corners of his gorgeous eyes crease. "I understand the importance of being there for family. Knowing that you are Emily's brother would make me all the more inclined to hire you."

Evan's mouth drops open, and for a split second, his mask slips.

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“That’s... super cool of you.”

But then William’s brows knit together as a sudden thought crosses his mind.

“Is this weird for you? Having your brother massage you?”

Yes. Yes, it is weird.

But Evan’s giving me a look like he’s the last dog at the pound looking at his last chance of adoption before having to take his final walk to the vet.

Please. I need this, he mouths.

I shrug. “No. He rubs me all the time,” I lie in a voice that does not even sound like my own.

As Evan begins to set up his massage table, I wonder how a day that started so perfectly could take such an absurd turn.

But then again, with my luck and a brother like Evan, I should have expected nothing less.

WILLIAM

“Thanks for the generous tip! Here’s my card, and if you are happy with my services, please give me a five-star review on Yelp... And if you aren’t, please just keep that to yourself.”

I force a smile as I shake Evan's hand, and I wait until Emily closes the door before I rub the new ache in my lower back.

"Your brother is...heavy-handed, isn't he?" I'm trying and failing to be diplomatic.

The couple's massage experience was not exactly what I imagined it would be. I thought it would be romantic, relaxing...maybe leading to something more.

But then I discover that our masseur is Emily's mischievous brother.

I can't think of anything that could be more of a mood killer.

Emily folds her arms, her cheeks are rosy, and she's pulled in her lips. "I'm so sorry," she demurs. "Are you okay?"

I twist until something cracks. "Fine, fine. I just... I swear at one point Evan was digging his elbow into my spine."

Emily buries her face in her hands. "Gosh. I'm sorry," she says, her voice muffled. "I should have told you the truth about Evan. I'm pretty sure he's not properly qualified. I should have sent his sorry butt away."

I chuckle, and carefully take her hands away from her face to look into her misty eyes.

Her lips are pouting at me, and her big soulful eyes are shimmering like the surface of the ocean at sunset. She's cute when she's feeling guilty.

"I'm glad you opted for a foot rub. Otherwise, he might have sent you to the hospital," I tease.

The sentiment only prompts a faint smile that disappears as quickly as it appears.

“What is it?” I ask.

"I just... I've been feeling guilty," Emily confesses, her gaze dropping. "I should've told you Evan was my brother. And now I've let him practically assault you."

I laugh lightly, trying to ease her concern. "Emily, it's okay. I survived. And you don't owe me an explanation. I came here for business, remember?"

She doesn't seem reassured, her brow furrows with worry. "Look, William, I need to..." she starts, her tone suggesting she's about to distance herself from me.

But before she can finish, my phone rings, slicing through the tension.

I glance at the screen to see it's my father. Knowing he's likely to pressure me about Madeline Lonelle, I quickly reject the call, slipping the phone back into my pocket.

"Don't speak," I say gently, holding up a hand. "Whatever it is, it can wait. I have something planned for us."

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Emily looks at me, curiosity replacing her earlier concern.

"I hope it's a good surprise." A hint of a smile tugs at her lips.

I take her hand, bringing it to my lips for a soft kiss. "Trust me," I assure her, my own heart beating faster at the thought of spending more time with her.

She gives me a small, tentative smile, and I can sense her internal turmoil.

I'm determined to show her that whatever fears or secrets she's holding onto, they don't have to define what's growing between us.

We step out into the evening, the setting sun casting a golden glow over the estate.

I sense Emily's tension beside me, her earlier confession about Evan still hanging in the air. But I'm determined to shift the mood, to turn this evening into a memory we'll both cherish.

"Emily," I say, breaking the silence. "I meant what I said about good surprises."

I guide her toward the gardens, where I've set up something special.

As we walk, I steal glances at her, trying to read her thoughts.

She's a puzzle, one I'm increasingly eager to solve. Her earlier vulnerability, the guilt in her eyes over something as trivial as her brother's identity, it speaks volumes about her character.

We reach the gardens, and her eyes widen in surprise.

I've arranged a small, intimate setup under the stars, complete with a cozy blanket, soft cushions, and a basket filled with her favorite treats.

"William, this is...it's beautiful." Her voice is laced with genuine wonder.

"I thought we could stargaze. Relax a bit after... well, after everything." I carefully pull off the cloth hiding the table laden with paints and brushes. Then I set up a canvas. "And I thought you could paint something for me."

To my relief, Emily's face lights up like a kid on Christmas.

"I'd be honored!"

Pouring over the paints like she's choosing a fine wine, she waves a paint brush at me, her expression stern. "But don't expect Monet. And you're not allowed to peek until I'm done."

"Until you're done? Won't that take days...?" I lift a brow.

Emily gives me a playful nudge with a laugh, and she sets to work. "No, my style of art is unique..."

She shoos me to the other side of the canvas and moves around happy and animated.

She's in her own world now, pulling her curly hair back into a bun.

Minutes fly by, and I reject three more calls from my father as I watch, swirling the wine in my glass, as Emily sets to work creating her masterpiece.

I cannot pull my gaze from her, admiring the way she bites her lip in concentration, her eyes shining with a mix of determination and creativity.

The anticipation of seeing her work builds within me, a pleasant counter to the growing unease about my father's relentless calls.

Finally, Emily steps back, a satisfied yet slightly nervous look on her face.

"Okay, it's done. Remember, no grand expectations," she warns with a playful smile.

I stand up, eager to see her creation.

As she turns the canvas toward me, I'm taken aback.

It's an abstract representation of me, sitting beneath a blanket of stars, the colors vibrant and alive with emotion. The painting captures not just my physical form but something deeper, a part of my essence that I hadn't realized was visible to her.

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She's put most of her emphasis and time on my eyes, they look bright, beaming.

"Emily, this is... incredible," I say, genuinely amazed. "Your style, it's unique, captivating."

Her cheeks flush with pride. "Thank you. I wasn't sure if you'd like it."

"Like it? I love it. This would be a hit in my gallery," I reply earnestly, still absorbed in the details of her work.

Her smile widens, and for a moment, we're lost in a world of our own, surrounded by the beauty of her art and the connection that's grown between us.

I set my glass down, and cup her beautiful face.

Her skin is soft under my calloused fingertips, and I graze my thumb over her plump lips.

"You enchanted me in a way that I haven't yet decided if it will lead to my destruction... or my salvation."

Emily's breaths come out short and fast, misting my cheeks. "I know exactly what you mean."

Her gaze dips to my mouth, and I take that as an invitation to close the gap.

We throw ourselves into a kiss.

Kissing Emily feels like coming home.

I wrap her up in my arms for a full body hug and savor every second of our kiss.

She rests her hands on my chest, and I wonder if she can feel my heart racing for her. The way it always seems to when she's around.

My body is charged and hungry, a biological need to connect with her becomes all-consuming. And it's only when my phone vibrates in my pocket that I finally let her go.

I pull it out to see my father's face flashing on the screen once again.

"Everything okay?" Emily asks, stepping back, her face flushed.

She's straightening out her blouse and smoothing her hair, and the sight of her conjures all kinds of impulses.

I want to squeeze her. Caress her. Worship her.

I turn my phone off.

My father would make my life a living nightmare if he knew the way I feel about Emily.

And I'm not ready to face that kind of drama.

There are many things I am not sure about. Whether I want to stay in the art industry, taking over my father's business. If I want to stay in England or move somewhere more exciting.

But I am sure of one thing: her.

Emily's magnetizing personality has me drawn to her like I've got no choice in the matter.

Despite the short time we've been in each other's world, I've made up my mind.

Being with her. Kissing her. Unravelling her mysteries. They all make sense, and I'll be damned if I have to let her go.

The logical side of my brain is switched off, like my phone, as I find myself lowering to one knee and grasping her hands.

"What are you doing?" she whispers, the moonlight makes her eyes glow like two orbs.

"I know this might come across a bit crazy," I confess. "But I haven't felt this way about anyone before, and all of my instincts are telling me something."

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“William, what are you saying?” Emily asks.

I squeeze her hands. “I cannot go back to England unless I have you with me... as my wife.”

EMILY

Standing there under the moonlight, with William on one knee before me, I feel like I've stumbled into some sort of alternate reality.

A part of me wants to laugh – this is the kind of over-the-top romantic gesture you'd find in a cheesy movie, not in my usually uneventful life.

"No. Are you crazy? You don't even know me!" I blurt out, my mind racing.

William looks up, his eyes earnest. "I know that I want to devote the rest of my life to getting to know you," he says, squeezing my hands. “And that’s enough.”

"Why now? Why marriage?" I stammer, still reeling from the shock.

He runs a hand through his hair, looking slightly flustered. "I have my reasons."

My skepticism must show on my face because he quickly adds, "It's not some shady visa deal, if that's what you're thinking."

I can't help but raise an eyebrow. "Really? Because this is all a bit sudden, William."

He stands up, brushing my hair away from my face and leaning in for another kiss.

His lips are soft and persuasive, making my heart flutter despite the chaos in my mind.

"You're warm and witty," he says as he pulls back. "I love the passion you have for art. And being with you feels like the most natural thing in the world. Like taking a breath. I'm worried that if I'm ever apart from you, I'll forget how and suffocate."

His words are so sincere, so heartfelt, that for a moment, I allow myself to get lost in the fantasy.

But then reality crashes back in.

The lies, the deceit – it's like a dark cloud looming over us.

I step back, needing space to think. "William, I... this is all so fast. And there's something you should know."

He looks at me, concern etching his features. "What is it, Emily?"

I open my mouth to confess everything – about not being the Art Queen's granddaughter, about the web of lies I've been weaving since we met. But the words catch in my throat.

Fear grips me.

Fear of losing him, of watching this magical connection crumble under the weight of my deceit.

Instead, I find myself hesitating, caught between honesty and the desire to hold onto

the happiness we've found. "I... I need time to think about this," I finally say, my voice barely above a whisper.

William nods, a look of understanding in his eyes, but I can see the disappointment there too. "Take all the time you need, Emily. I'll be waiting."

As I retreat to my room, my mind is a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

Part of me is elated, swept up in the romance of his proposal. Another part is terrified, knowing that the truth about my identity is a ticking time bomb.

I flop onto the bed, a mix of exhilaration and dread coursing through me.

"Emily Barnes, what have you gotten yourself into?" I mutter to myself, staring up at the ceiling.

The absurdity of the situation isn't lost on me. I've just been proposed to by a man who thinks I'm someone I'm not. And part of me, the part that's been swept off her feet by William's charm and sincerity, is tempted to say yes. I inwardly squeal at the thought.

If I say I do, I'll become Mrs. Willoughby.

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But then there's the reality of the situation.

At our first meeting, William told me that he values honesty more than anything. It's the very fabric of his existence. Once he discovers that I've been fooling him this whole time, he's going to be so angry. Or worse: disappointed.

I turn onto my side, hugging a pillow to my chest.

William's words echo in my mind – his talk of passion, warmth, and a natural connection.

Apart from the grand lie about my grandmother, I've been myself with him.

Maybe this isn't as crazy as it seems.

But can a relationship built on a foundation of lies ever really survive? Can I live with the guilt, the constant fear of being found out?

I sigh, the weight of my decision heavy on my shoulders.

I need to come clean, to tell William the truth. But the thought of losing him, of watching the light in his eyes dim when he learns who I really am, is almost too much to bear.

Because who am I? I'm just a wannabe artist working as an assistant, hiding from my whacky family and nosy town. Pretending that I'm somebody I'm not.

If he knew the truth, would he find me so adorable? Unlikely.

Even if he could bring himself to forgive me for the ruse, there's no telling that he'd accept me as I am. We're worlds apart.

He's filthy rich, coming from old money, I'm so poor that I get excited when I get detergent coupons in the mail.

Lying awake in my bed, the moon casting a soft glow through the window, I find myself tangled in a web of my own making.

The room is silent, but my mind is anything but. Restlessness grips me, an unshakable need to talk to someone, to sort through this whirlwind of emotions.

I reach for my phone, dialing Sasha, my best friend and unwitting accomplice in this ever-complicating saga. She answers with a sleepy, "Hello?"

It's probably stupid-o'clock in London, but I don't care. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Sasha, it's me. I... William proposed."

There's a moment of silence before Sasha's voice perks up, "He what? Proposed? That's... amazing news!"

I sit up, hugging my knees to my chest. "Is it? I mean, he doesn't really know me, not the real me. He thinks I'm the Art Queen's granddaughter, Sasha. What have I done?"

Sasha's tone shifts from sleepy to excited. "Who cares how you find Mr. Right, Emily? This could be your happy ending."

"But what about the lie?" My voice is a whisper, laden with guilt.

Sasha's reply is quick, dismissive. "What lie? All you've said is you're the Art Queen's granddaughter. Everything else is true, right? I mean, does it really matter who our grandparents are? I mean, come on. That's such a tiny lie."

I pause, considering her words. "But bringing him to this house... telling him the Art Queen is coming... all the messing around. He'll feel like a joke. He'll never trust me again."

Sasha brushes off my concerns. "You're blowing this out of proportion, Em. Just go with it."

My mind races, torn between elation and dread. "And your grandmother, will she really be at the charity event in London?"

There's a brief pause, then Sasha confirms, "Yes! And if you bring William there, he'll meet her, and everything will fall into place. Trust me, we'll all be laughing over this one day."

I lie back down, the phone still pressed to my ear, staring at the ceiling.

Sasha's words are meant to reassure, but they only add to the turmoil inside me.

"You think I should marry him? It's literally only been a few days..."

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“Hey, Atlantic City is just a stone’s throw away from where you are, and he’s a hot rich guy who treats you like a princess. Why would you say no?”

“Because I’m not a princess in a fairy tale,” I shoot back.

Sasha’s huff makes me smile. I can totally picture her puffing her curly bangs out of her eyes and folding her arms with frustration.

“Listen, my grandmother married my grandpa three days after they met. And they were happily married for 47 years!”

My smile widens as I pluck a feather sticking out of my pillow while Sasha rabbits on about all of the people she’s heard about in history who found true love and got married super quick.

Finding a husband back in the old days was so much simpler.

But then my mind draws a picture of William, standing in his sharp suit, his dark eyes boring into mine.

He’s got his hands in his pockets and a look about him that is traditional. Maybe he’s Cary Grant incarnate.

Maybe the idea of waiting to marry someone is the truly crazy choice. I mean, if you know, you know. Right?

But what do I know?

I know that when he takes my hand, I'm basking in a warmth that makes my heart race and knees buckle. I could bottle his scent and smother myself in it every day because it soothes me.

And I can't stop thinking about how wrong it feels to be sleeping in separate beds.

All logic and reason aside... I kind of want to do this.

But a worry tugs my mouth into a frown.

A marriage proposal based on a half-truth. It's a fairy tale beginning with a questionable foundation that could quickly turn into a nightmare.

I end the call with a heavy heart, my mind a battlefield of what-ifs and maybes.

Sasha might believe in happy endings, but I know that every story has its complexities, its challenges.

I think about my own parents. Both were divorced when they met, with a no-nonsense attitude and high expectations of each other. They are about as romantic as doing taxes on Valentine's Day.

But if I say no to his proposal, will that make things super awkward? He might not want to show his face again and call off his meeting with Sasha's grandmother.

Then I'd go back to London hurt, alone, with no future prospects, and Sasha's grandmother will miss the only opportunity she has left to get massive exposure for her work.

As the night deepens, I'm left wondering about the future, about what lies ahead for William and me.

I know that he will be expecting an answer in the morning... unless the sunrise brings a heavy dose of logic that brings him to his senses.

Who knows, maybe he'll make his excuses and withdraw his proposal?

My stomach knots, and I frown, wondering why I'm upset by the idea.

I remind myself that this isn't who I am. I don't fall for guys this fast.

Sasha is the romantic, not me.

But here I am. Palms sweaty, heart fluttering, all while I'm seriously considering William's rash proposal.

I fall asleep with one question running through my head on repeat: what do I tell him in the morning?

WILLIAM

I'm up early, pacing the floor of my bedroom.

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Two luggage bags are packed by the door, reminding me that my time at the estate is drawing to a close.

My phone lies on the bed, still switched off, a deliberate barrier to the outside world, to the pressures awaiting me.

As I pace, my mind races with thoughts of Emily, of the proposal I made under the starlit sky.

Today, we fly back to London, and I've envisioned arriving at the charity event with her on my arm, introducing her as my wife.

The thought both excites and terrifies me.

It would be a bold move, one that would surely derail my father's plans for me to marry Madeline. But it's more than that – it's a statement, a declaration of my independence, my choices.

Yet, there's a twinge of guilt that nips at me.

Am I using Emily for my own gain? I've always valued honesty, transparency. But the thought of revealing my true motivations to Emily, of admitting how much my father's influence weighs on me, leaves me feeling vulnerable, exposed.

I find Emily in the kitchen, lost in thought as she sips her coffee, gazing at the painting she completed last night.

The morning light bathes her in a warm, ethereal glow, highlighting the soft contours of her face.

She's gorgeous.

I clear my throat, and she jumps, startled.

Seeing her like this, so deep in thought, I realize it's not fair to pressure her into a decision. If I push her into this marriage, I'm no better than my father.

I steel myself, ready to take back the proposal.

But before I can speak, Emily turns to me, determination in her eyes.

"I've been up all night thinking about you. And I'm just going to say this before I regret it..." She takes a deep breath. "Yes."

I'm taken aback. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'll marry you."

My heart soars, a rush of elation coursing through me. But almost immediately, it's tempered by a pang of conscience.

Can I really go through with this, knowing the truth remains hidden?

As I stand there, looking at Emily, her decision laid bare before me, I'm torn between the joy of her acceptance and the weight of the secret I'm keeping.

I take a step toward her, my mind a whirlwind of emotions.

"Are you sure? It's a big move, and I understand if you think we're taking things too fast..."

She gives me the warmest smile. "I know..."

Emily lowers her coffee mug to the counter and crosses the kitchen on tip toes, shuffling to me with her arms reaching out.

I catch her as she tumbles into me, pressing her body up against mine and craning her neck to steal a kiss. I grip her waist and close my eyes, savoring her touch. Her scent. Her warmth.

After several tender kisses, Emily grips my shoulders and pulls back and blinks up at me.

"Everyone is going to think we're crazy. But I don't care. Let's do it, let's get married."

Her words solidify something within me, a resolve to make this right, to be the man she believes I am.

As I wrap her up in my arms and lift her off the floor, I make a silent vow to myself.

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I will tell her everything, come clean about my reasons for the proposal. The pressures from my father.

But not now, not yet.

For now, I'll hold on to this happiness, to the promise of a future with Emily, and I'll deal with the consequences when the time comes.

Emily looks out the window of the cab, her eyes reflecting the passing scenery. "So, Atlantic City, huh? Are we going to hit the casinos after our nuptials?" she asks with a playful smirk.

I laugh, glancing at her. "Only if you promise not to spend all our honeymoon funds on the slot machines."

She giggles, a sound that's quickly become my favorite melody. "No promises. I might have a secret gambling talent you're not aware of."

I snort, but she's not wrong. There's still so much we don't know about each other.

"And I could be a drug lord," I shoot back.

Emily cackles. "Yeah, right."

We arrive in Atlantic City, and everything feels surreal.

We find a small chapel, quaint and charming in its own way.

The ceremony is simple, but I'm relieved that there isn't a single Elvis impersonator anywhere.

As we exchange vows, I'm acutely aware of the weight of the moment, the commitment we're making under such unusual circumstances.

Afterward, we wander along the boardwalk, hand in hand, lost in our own little world.

The sea breeze is fresh and invigorating, and the sounds of the city provide a vibrant backdrop to our conversations.

"I can't believe we just did that, we just got married," Emily says, her eyes shining with a mixture of joy and disbelief. "My family is going to freak."

"I know. It's a bit crazy, isn't it? But then, where's the fun in doing everything by the book?" I reply, squeezing her hand.

We stop at a photo booth, capturing the moment in a series of silly snapshots.

Emily pulls faces, sticks out her tongue, and I join in, both of us laughing like children.

"Wait, we need a serious one," she says between giggles, pulling me in close.

The camera clicks, and we have our first official portrait as husband and wife – her head resting on my shoulder, both of us smiling genuinely, happy.

As we wait for the prints, I lift her chin with my index finger and lose myself in the pools of her eyes.

“I don’t care what people will think,” I murmur. “I think I’ve wanted you from the very moment I first laid eyes on you at the gallery. And everything I discover about you makes me love you more.”

Emily squeaks. “You love me?”

I cradle her face and dip my forehead to press against hers. “It’s impossible not to.”

EMILY

As our plane ascends into the sky, bound for London, the excitement of our recent nuptials still lingers in the air.

We're seated in first class, surrounded by the quiet hum of the aircraft and the occasional clink of glasses.

William, ever the charmer, leans closer with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Ever thought about joining the Mile High Club?" he whispers, his lips quirking up in a playful smile.

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I can't help but laugh, rolling my eyes at his suggestion. "In those tiny, unsanitary bathrooms? Hard pass."

He feigns disappointment, then winks at me. "I suppose we'll have to find other ways to pass the time."

As he leans in for a kiss, the moment is abruptly interrupted by a flight attendant offering us champagne.

We both sit back, trying to stifle our laughter. It seems like every time we get close, something or someone gets in the way.

"Are we on Candid Camera or something?" I mutter, accepting a glass.

"Seems like it," William replies, taking a sip. "Maybe it's the universe telling us to behave."

I lean back in my seat, enjoying the comfortable silence between us, when William tries again. This time, he's barely brushed his lips against mine when another attendant walks by, asking if we need anything.

William sighs, a look of mock frustration on his face. "I'm beginning to think this is some sort of cosmic joke."

I giggle, leaning my head on his shoulder. "Maybe we're just not meant to have any privacy up here."

The rest of the flight passes with playful banter and shared laughter, the easy chemistry between us a constant comfort. But as we land in London, a sense of apprehension starts to build.

We're about to face the reality of our impulsive decision to marry, and the consequences it might bring.

William insists on carrying me over the threshold of his apartment, a romantic gesture that has me blushing and giggling. "You know this is completely unnecessary, right?" I say, holding onto his neck for dear life. "Don't you dare drop me."

"I'm just following tradition," he replies with a grin. "And I'm not going to drop you."

He kicks the bedroom door, but as it swings open and he and steps inside, the scene before us wipes the smiles off our faces.

There, standing in the middle of his bedroom, is a mature man in a pinstripe suit, his expression thunderous and latched on William.

Caught off guard, William stumbles, accidentally dropping me onto the floor in his shock.

I land with an 'oomph,' but it's like I've disappeared in a puff of smoke to these two men, as they get into a heated debate.

"So, this is why you've not been returning my calls?" the man asks, in a tone that can only mean he's William's father.

William quickly recovers, helping me to my feet before turning to face the man in the room. "Dad, this isn't what it looks like," he begins, his voice steady despite the

tension.

His father's gaze is stern, unwavering. "I've been calling you repeatedly, William. There's an important dinner at the manor tonight. I expect you to be there."

I stand quietly beside William, feeling like an intruder in this family drama.

William glances at me, then back at his father. "I'll be there, Dad. But I won't be alone."

His father raises an eyebrow, a hint of impatience in his tone. "And who, pray tell, will be accompanying you?"

William takes my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "This is Emily," he says, his gaze shifting to me with an apologetic look. "My wife."

The word 'wife' hangs in the air, heavy with shock and unspoken questions.

His father's eyes finally land on me, his expression a mix of surprise and skepticism.

"Your wife?" His father's voice is laced with disbelief. "Since when?"

William stands taller, a protective edge to his posture. "We were married in Atlantic City. Emily is my wife, and she will be at the dinner with me tonight."

I can feel the weight of his father's scrutiny, a critical assessment that leaves me feeling exposed and vulnerable. His eyes dim as he looks me up and down like I'm a stray cat that just walked in.

Yet, standing there with William, his hand firmly holding mine, I find a strength I didn't know I had and keep my head held high.

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His father finally breaks the silence, his voice cold. "Very well. We shall see how this plays out. Be at the manor on time." He raises a finger. "But keep this news to yourself until after dinner. There are...protocols to observe."

William gives a curt nod, while I keep holding my breath. Worried that if I let it out, I'll make his father snap.

With that, he turns and leaves, the tension lingering in the air long after he's gone.

William turns to me, concern etching his features. "Emily, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt? I can't believe I dropped you," he says, gripping my arms and looking me over, presumably looking for injuries.

"I didn't expect my father to be here."

I manage a shaky smile, trying to brush off the discomfort. "It's okay. I guess this is just part of being married to you, right?"

I glance at the perfectly made bed, with white sheets stretched taut across it. The plush pillows look like marshmallows and had the father not ruined the moment, I'll bet that right now, I'd have my face buried in one of them. Grinning like a fool.

But now, nothing can muster a smile out of me.

William's heavy sigh draws me back to the present. "I'll call a locksmith. We can't have my father waltzing in on us whenever he pleases," he mutters, while picking up his phone.

“That would be good,” I confess. Then my heart jolts. “Us? You want me to live here?”

William looks up from his phone to give me an incredulous smile. “That is usually what happens after one gets married. One moves in with one’s husband.”

His voice and tone are giving me major Mr. Darcy vibes now. It’s almost enough to make me forget about our awkward encounter and jump into his arms.

It’s in that moment, I realize I’ll never win an argument with this man. Or stay mad at him for long.

Not with that accent, or the dimple that creases on his left cheek when he grins.

“So, you want me to move in with you?” I whisper.

William sets his phone down and steps toward me, his body and presence are commanding and heat the air between us. “Move in with me? I want you to do more than that...”

He looks into my eye with so much intensity, I swear I’m going to turn into steam and cease to exist altogether.

Oh my heck. Somebody get me a towel. I’m sweating.

His huge hands reach for my hips, and he pulls me close until I bump into him. The connection sends a flash of heat and tingles through my body. Everything begins to vibrate in me.

I’ve completely forgotten all about his father. The lies. Sasha.

His eyes zoom, and his familiar scent washes over me. Then his lips touch mine, and I swear my soul leaves my body.

All of my thoughts scatter as I wrap my arms around his neck and succumb to his kiss.

He walks me back until my butt hits the bed.

He lifts me up and plops me down.

I bounce with a slight giggle and my heart is doing the Cha-Cha while I watch him shed his clothes until he's standing in a pair of black silk boxers.

The blue tinge light from outside dances over William's finely sculpted torso, and I inhale sharply as he leans in for another kiss.

My fingertips snake up the contours of his back, roaming over his muscular shoulders.

He is like a Greek statue of Alexander the great. Bulges in all of the right places.

I fly back with a gasp as he pushes me on my back. And he pauses to just look at me for a moment.

The way his gaze roams my body is a stark contrast to the judging way his father observed me just moments earlier.

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I relax into the bed, nestled between the arms of my new husband.

Husband!

Oh my gosh. The reality is only just sinking in.

I haven't even told my family, yet. This is all so unlike me.

William's calloused hand is sliding under my shirt, and his grazing touch makes me pant.

Sweat clings to my temples, and I lick my lips while he sets me on fire with need.

But when he reaches my bra, I jerk back.

William frowns. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," I blurt, scrambling out from under him, to sit by the pillows.

William is frozen at the edge of the bed, looking at me like I've sprouted another head. His body is all dewy and desirable. There's no question of the fact he's ready to go.

But anxiety courses through me, dousing my desire in ice cold water.

"Doesn't this feel a little fast?" I ask. "I feel like you don't know me. And I know hardly anything about you...I mean, you could be a serial killer for all I know."

William smirks and scratches the back of his neck as he seems to be lost in thought.

“That’s what a honeymoon is all about. Getting to know each other...”

He crawls to me, reaching for my face. “Mentally,” he whispers, planting a soft kiss on my mouth. He tips my head back with the pad of his index finger, then leaves a sensual trail of kisses down my neck. “Physically. Spiritually.” He says between kisses.

My eyes roll back before I shut them with a delighted shudder.

“I guess when you put it that way... we are on our honeymoon. And as we both know, you’re a man of tradition,” I purr, while he does something to my earlobe that has me curling my toes.

Maybe we can just pretend that the outside world does not exist.

In this room, it’s just William and me. Husband and wife. And now, it’s my job to apportion all of my focus on my new husband.

While he uses all of his energy, exploring me.

I melt under him as he hovers over my body like a tanning bed. The heat of him is radiating, sending me into a spin.

I trace patterns along his pectorals, letting all of my doubts and fears evaporate.

“Fine. You win,” I say, trying to sound mad about the fact, but my smile gives me away.

William lifts his head from my neck to give me a lop-sided grin. “No, my darling...”

he murmurs, lifting my wrists and planting them on the pillow above my head with one hand. “When I’m done with you, you will realize that you won.”

When he kisses me again, he lowers his body to mine, nearly crushing me.

My soul leaves my body and I swear the man has sent me straight to Heaven.

Well, there’s worse ways to die.

WILLIAM

Emily’s body has the kind of curves that bring any red-blooded male to his knees.

She’s soft and squeezable in all of the right places, which is amusing because her softness is making me hard.

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She squirms as I lift her shirt over her head, and she won't look me in the eye as a flash of red stains her cheeks.

"Don't tell me you're self-conscious?" I ask, watching her trying to hide her gorgeous stomach with her hands. She blushes crimson.

"I'm not," she insists, but her voice is too high to sound convincing.

She glances at the open blinds of the window, letting in the cool afternoon London daylight.

The light is different compared to Snowdrop Valley. The absence of actual sunshine casts everything in a blue tinge.

It bathes Emily in a cool light, making her look fresh and youthful on my bed.

Her giggles are endless as I wrestle her out of her clothes, then she lay like a goddess, in her naked form. All mine for the taking.

Small lines snake around her shapely hips.

I trace one before I scoop her up in my hands and give her a squeeze. "You are exquisite," I say. "As your husband, I forbid you from feeling bad about your gorgeous body."

Emily hisses with a grin. "You forbid me? That's not really something I can control, is it? Besides, I'm no model."

I shake my head and press my finger to her buttery lips. “You are not to say anything bad about yourself. I won’t hear it.”

She pouts at me, her pretty brows pinched.

I caress her cheek. “In any case, I will make it my mission to worship every part of your body until you begin to believe that you are the perfect embodiment of art.”

Emily snorts. “You’ll be working on me for a long time, then.”

I pick her up and plant her on my lap with a happy grin. “Well, we’ve only got a few hours. So, I suggest we stop talking and get started.”

Two hours later, I am standing in the shower, resting my palm against the tile wall and willing myself not to faint.

My lips are numb. The rest of me is tingling. And I cannot stop grinning.

I don’t care what happens next. Being with Emily is the antidote to any poisonous situation I face myself in. I can still taste her, and now I’m addicted.

The look on my father’s face when I introduced her as my wife was priceless. It was the first time he looked at me like I was not something he can control.

The door opens with a squeal, and Emily walks in. “Room for one more?” she asks, holding a towel to keep her modest.

I step aside, letting Emily join me, and we settle into a comfortable silence, washing each other between tender kisses.

My heart swells as her curls fall out, and she grins up at me with water droplets

clinging to her body like diamonds.

“You’re adorable,” I murmur, before caressing her cheeks with my thumbs. “I’m going to cherish you forever, you know that, right?”

Emily shuts her eyes with a sigh. “I don’t know what I did in a past life to deserve this, but I will take it.” She looks at me again with a laugh. “But I can’t help this is all too good to be true. You haven’t got any skeletons in your closet, do you?”

I force a smile, then pull her in for a hug.

You have no idea, I think to myself, as I plant a kiss on the top of her head and hoping that nothing will ruin what we have.

EMILY

The car ride to the Willoughby Manor is a mix of silence and soft whispers.

Wrapped in William's warm embrace earlier, I felt invincible, cherished. Now, as the lush countryside of the outskirts of London passes by our window, a sense of trepidation settles in my stomach.

The Manor itself is like something out of an old English novel, its grandeur both imposing and impressive. Its ancient stones hold stories of generations, and its sprawling gardens are meticulously maintained, a testament to the family's wealth and status.

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As we pull up the long, gravel driveway, my heart races with a mix of awe and anxiety.

William squeezes my hand, a silent reassurance as we step out of the car. "Remember, I'm right here with you," he whispers.

The interior of the Manor is as grand as its exterior, with high ceilings, antique furnishings, and portraits of stern-looking ancestors lining the walls.

It's like stepping back in time, each room rich with history and opulence.

As we enter the entrance hall, a grand room lit by an elaborate chandelier, the atmosphere is thick with expectation.

Then I see her - Madeline.

She's as I remember her, only more refined now. Slender, with an air of French sophistication, her dark hair styled perfectly, her dress chic and elegant. She turns as we enter, and our eyes meet. Recognition flickers in her eyes, quickly masked by a polite smile.

"Emily, darling! What are you doing here?" She glides across the room, a glass of champagne in her hand, and gives me two fake kisses hovering near my cheeks. "It's been years... you've grown." She looks at my hips, and I want to recoil and hide.

But William's hand squeezes mine, and a flash of memories flood my mind that fill me with confidence.

Sure, to Madeline, I'm not a runway model, but in William's eyes, I'm the most gorgeous woman in the world.

"And you are..." I hesitate, trying to find a compliment, but it gets lost somewhere between my brain and my mouth. I suck on my tongue for a moment. "What are you doing here?" I ask, trying to divert the conversation.

Madeline's dark eyes glint in the warm lighting, as she hovers next to William and reaches for his arm. "Oh. Just visiting an old friend," she purrs.

William stiffens, but to my annoyance, he does nothing to stop the woman from clinging to his arm like a leech.

"You're all here, marvelous."

We all turn to find Mr. Willoughby waltzing in, his teeth flashing and eyes sharp. He claps.

"Please come through to the dining room."

We enter a room filled with well-dressed guests, who are already deep in their conversations. Several of them look up as we enter, and when I take my seat next to William, the elderlyman on my other side offers me a smile so big, his face breaks out in wrinkles.

"Kevin Blackwood, nice to meet you," he says, offering his hand.

I offer a shy reply and look around the sea of people across the vast dining table.

The dining room of the Willoughby Manor is a testament to old-world elegance, its high ceilings adorned with intricate moldings.

The long table is beautifully set, silverware gleaming against the white tablecloth, and fine china plates waiting to be filled with an array of exquisite dishes.

Servers, poised and discreet, move gracefully around the table, topping off glasses with vintage wine.

The air is filled with the soft melodies of string music playing from speakers artfully hidden in the room's corners.

Mr. Willoughby, at the head of the table, commands the room with an air of authority and pride. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us this evening," he began, his voice resonating with a sense of occasion. "Tonight is a special occasion, indeed."

Beside me, William shifts slightly, his hand finding mine under the table in a comforting gesture. Madeline, sitting across from us, wears a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"I am particularly pleased to announce we have a distinguished guest amongst us tonight," Mr. Willoughby continues, gesturing toward Madeline.

She rises gracefully, acknowledging the room with a nod, and her red chiffon blouses waves like flames with her movements.

"The Willoughby's and the Lonelles have a long-standing relationship," Mr. Willoughby says, and I sense the significance of his words. "And tonight, we are here to celebrate and strengthen that bond."

I glance at William, my eyes wide with curiosity.

His face is a mask of polite interest, but I can feel the tension in his grip.

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"A merger," Mr. Willoughby declares, "that will not only benefit our enterprises but also bring our families closer together in ways we have only imagined."

A murmur of surprise and polite applause ripples through the room.

"To new beginnings."

Everyone clinks their glasses, and Madeline lowers to her seat once more.

I feel a growing unease, my gaze flitting between Mr. Willoughby and Madeline.

"Do you know anything about this? What is he talking about?" I whisper to William.

He shook his head slightly. "Not exactly. I mean, I knew he wanted me to"..."

He stops and looks warily around him as though he just remembered we aren't alone.

"Later," he murmurs into my ear.

I nod and start cutting my steak.

I try to process the implications of this announcement, but my thoughts are a whirlwind.

The room seemed to close in around me, the clatter of cutlery and murmurs of the other guests merging into a distant hum.

Madeline's sickly sweet voice cuts through my reverie. "It's such a small world, isn't it, Emily? To think our paths would cross again like this."

I force a polite smile, my mind racing. "Yes, the Universe sure has a sense of humor," I say through gritted teeth.

Madeline acts like she doesn't know that she was the meanest girl on the planet. Her parents are old friends with Sasha's grandmother. So, every summer when they came to SnowdropValley to stay in their vacation home, Sasha would come with Madeline.

She made my life miserable.

One year, she cut off one of my bunches with a pair of shears. My mom was forced to give me a short bob that made me look like a scarecrow all through sixth grade.

Another summer, she pulled my skirt down and pushed me into a cow pat. Right in front of my middle school crush.

At first, I wonder why Sasha didn't tell me that Madeline is trying to get her claws into William's company. But then, how could Sasha have known? She hates Madeline as much as I do, I doubt they keep in touch.

I feel a sudden chill, despite the warm ambiance of the room.

I stroke William's fingers, seeking comfort, but he pulls away, his discomfort clear.

Madeline, undeterred, continues her reminiscing. "I remember you and your friend running around that old house in that silly little town...what was it called again? Sun drop something?"

"Snowdrop Valley," William and I reply in unison, our voices laced with a shared

irritation.

I sense his annoyance, mirroring my own, at Madeline's calculated words.

The rest of dinner passes by in a blur of graces and small talk.

My shoulders ache from the tension, and the food is surprisingly bland. It sits in my stomach like a rock, and even a sip of the finest champagne does nothing to lift my mood.

So, this is William's world.

I'm no stranger to the sophisticated, wealthy world of art. But I usually hang out with the actual artists - who are much more fun at parties than the gallery owners. That's for sure.

So far, all I've heard are conversations about the stock market and political right-wing debates. And not one person has cracked a joke. Not even a genuine smile.

Is this my life now? And just how entwined are the Willoughbys getting with the Lonnelles?

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I am not super excited by the idea of spending more time with my childhood bully.

As the evening draws on, people begin to leave. Until finally, it's just Madeline left.

"Madeline, William. Can I speak to you both in my office. I'd like to go over the details of this merger," Mr. Willoughby says, putting down his napkin and gesturing to the doors.

His gaze lands on me, and his expression is stern despite the smile on his face.

"We won't be long, Emily. Please, allow my staff to bring you another glass of wine."

William's jaw is bulging, and he gives me an apologetic look before he rises to his feet. "I'll be back," he murmurs, before planting a kiss on my temple. "Then I'll take you far away from here, and we're going straight to bed."

I smile to myself, but it fades as I watch William following his father and Madeline out of the room. What I would give to be a fly on the wall for whatever conversation they might have.

WILLIAM

As I follow my father and Madeline into his office, a sense of foreboding gnaws at me.

The office, a room steeped in history and power, is lined with dark wood paneling

and shelves of leather-bound books. My father's desk, a massive piece of polished mahogany, sits imposingly at the center, a symbol of his authority.

He takes his seat behind the desk, his mood palpably elated. "William, Madeline," he begins, his voice brimming with enthusiasm, "I've just got off the phone with Madeline's father. We've agreed to a merger."

I listen, my heart sinking with every word. "That's not all," he continues, his eyes gleaming with what he clearly sees as a masterstroke. "The merger will proceed under one condition – that you, William, and Madeline marry before the winter. It will secure our assets and keep them in the family."

My anger flares. "Marry? I'm already married, Dad."

Madeline, standing beside me, looks horrified, her composure slipping for the first time.

But my father waves a dismissive hand. "That foolish night in Atlantic City? I've already called the lawyer. It'll be annulled before you can say matrimony."

I stand my ground, my voice firm. "No. I won't do it. I love Emily, and I refuse to be a pawn in this ridiculous deal."

Madeline touches my arm, her voice soft but insistent. "William, can we have a moment alone, please?"

My father, looking displeased but resigned, leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Once alone, Madeline turns to me, her usual poise replaced by a hint of desperation. "William, please understand. This merger, it's important for our families."

I begin to pace the room, shaking my head at the absurdity. “I can’t believe we’re still talking about this.”

“Think about it logically, Will,” Madeline says, softening her voice.

The last word strikes me deep, and I halt. “Don’t call me that.”

She cocks her head to the side. “You used to love me calling you Will. Remember the summer of 2009?”

Her red lips curl upward while I ball my hands into fists. “No. I’ve blocked it out of my mind. Forever.”

Madeline’s smile falls, but she recovers herself with a flick of the wrist. “You and I have our fathers’ legacy to think about. We have houses. Company assets. All of that is at risk if we marry just anybody.”

I rake a hand through my hair in disbelief. “That’s no way to live, Madeline. Agreeing to a loveless marriage just to avoid the risk of losing some cash.”

“It’s not just cash,” Madeline snaps, her eyes flashing. “It’s our inheritance. Our reputation.”

I press my lips together. “I don’t recall you giving your reputation a second thought when you hopped into bed with Hank when we were together.” My college roommate and best mate.

Ex-best mate now.

Madeline shuts her mouth and sets down her glass. “I see it now. Emily. You married her to hurt me and flip the bird to your father. This is about revenge.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 4:15 am

“Don’t bring Emily into this,” I warn as she approaches me like a tiger on the prowl.

“But don’t you see, Will? You brought Emily into this. The moment you said ‘I do’ in some tacky casino.”

She slinks up to me and places her palms on my chest. Her fingertips graze over my shirt, but the touch does nothing but bring a chill up my spine.

“But I forgive you. You’ll get the annulment, we’ll get married. And our businesses will be in safe hands.”

I stand rigid and rooted on the spot, while I try to scramble words.

But Madeline is in no mood to wait. The next thing I know, her blouse is ripped open and she’s grabbing my collar and pressing up to me, with a forceful kiss.

Her performance overwhelms me, and the cold sensation spreads throughout my whole body, freezing me in place.

I’ve left my body, and I’m standing in the corner of the room shouting at myself to wake up and throw the woman off!

But I can’t move. It’s like she has me under a curse, and I’m forever destined to be frozen in place.

That’s when the office door opens, and on the inside of my head, I’m screaming louder than Luke Skywalker when he found out Darth Vader is his father.

Emily stands, her eyes wide and hollow, as she takes in the scene.

Madeline stops kissing me and touches the corner of her mouth as she smacks her lips together. Then she makes the most wicked smile that fills me with such intense rage, it thaws the ice in me, and I launch into action.

I jump back and lift my palms.

“I did not consent to that,” I begin to say.

But Emily’s eyes are misty as she looks from Madeline to me again.

“It’s, uh... well. You know what. I don’t want to get in the way of whatever this is... I’m done.”

Emily circles around and flies out of the room. I go for her, but Madeline grabs my bicep. “Let her go, Will. You’ll only hurt her even more if you don’t. You and I both know that.”

I finally look at Madeline, as she buttons up her blouse, looking far too pleased with herself.

And I can’t decide who I hate more. Her for putting me in this situation, or me.

For doing nothing.

EMILY

The cold air bites at my cheeks as I step out of the cab, the stars above London seeming distant and uncaring.

My heart feels heavy, the image of William and Madeline kissing in his father's study replaying in my mind like a cruel loop.

I pull my coat tighter around me, seeking some small comfort in its warmth.

I hurry up the steps to my apartment, a desperate need to find solace in Sasha's presence driving me.

I imagine us curled up on the couch, a tub of ice cream between us, as I pour out my heart about the whole twisted situation. The thought is a small beacon in the turmoil of my emotions.

But as I unlock the door and step inside, the scene before me stops me in my tracks.

Sasha and Evan are entangled on the couch, thankfully they're both fully dressed, looking up in surprise as I enter.

The comforting scenario I had envisioned shatters, replaced by the unexpected reality of their presence.

"Evan?" I ask through a gasp. "Get off my best friend!"

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Evan scrambles away, his ears red, while Sasha wipes off the smudged lipstick from the corners of her mouth.

Sasha stands up, concern etched on her face. "What are you doing here, Emily?"

I slam the door behind me and toss my bag on the kitchen counter.

"It's a busy night. First, I find my husband making out with a French woman, now I find my brother making out with my best friend, how did you get here so fast, anyway?"

Evan, looking awkward and out of place, gives me a small, sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, Em. I called Sasha because you weren't answering mom's texts, and you were leaving so I got a ticket and thought I'd meet you back at the apartment. When I got there, you were gone, then Sasha said you got married and...wait. Did you just say your husband made out with a French woman?"

Sasha gasps, and her hands fly to her open mouth.

Part of me wonders if the exaggerated reaction is her attempt to move my focus away from the fact she's been playing tonsil tennis with my brother.

Gross.

"Em. Talk to us," Sasha says, rising to her feet. "What happened?"

She walks over, opening her arms, and despite being irritated with her, I crumble and

sob into her shoulder. "It was Madeline Lonnelle."

There's another gasp and Sasha stiffens. She mutters to Evan. "Put on a pot of coffee. It's going to be a long night."

Then she walks me to the couch and covers me with a blanket. "Okay, sweetie. Tell us everything."

As I finish recounting the events of the dinner to Sasha and Evan, the reality of the situation sinks in deeper. "So, William is apparently supposed to marry Madeline. It's all part of some business deal between their families," I say, the words tasting bitter.

"And to think, just after we... I really thought I was falling for him," I confess, a lump forming in my throat. "Why are the best guys in bed always the biggest jerks?"

Evan, always the protective type, jumps up, his face a mix of anger and determination. "That's it, I'm going over there. I'll give him a piece of my mind."

Sasha quickly grabs his arm, pulling him back down. "No, Evan. That's not going to help. I have a better idea."

A mischievous glint appears in her eyes. "We're going shopping in the morning, Emily. It's time for a revenge makeover. You're going to that charity event, and you're going to show William exactly what he's missing."

I can't help but feel a twinge of excitement at the idea.

A revenge makeover. I like the sound of that.

But then doubt creeps in, and I shake my head. "I can't face everyone there. You should go instead, Sasha."

Sasha looks at me, horror-stricken. "Emily, I know things have gotten really complicated, and it's awkward, but you need to see this through. For my grandmother's sake. She's counting on you."

I sit there, torn between the desire to hide away and the need to face this head-on.

I let out a sigh, feeling the weight of responsibility. "Okay, I'll go to the charity event."

After a moment of silence, I add firmly, "But after tomorrow night, we are never mentioning William Willoughby ever again."

WILLIAM

After a sleepless night, I finally give up trying to block out the world and try to figure out what to do.

One thing is certain: there's no way I'm breaking things off with Emily.

And after that little stunt, Madeline's dead to me.

Emily's phone is either switched off, or she's blocked my number.

I sincerely hope it's the former.

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After failing to reach her all morning, I let out a heavy sigh and call my father.

“I’m sure you’re quite happy with yourself,” I say when he picks up the call.

“Happy? Do you realize the strings I had to pull to make last night happen?” he replies, his stern voice crackling in the speaker.

I press my tongue to the back of my teeth for a moment.

“You manipulative swine. How much did you pay Madeline to do that?”

My father doesn’t reply right away, and a twinge of guilt nips at me for disrespecting my father. But after years of him disrespecting me, I guess his ways are finally beginning to rub onto me.

My mother would hate the idea of us fighting. Especially because we only have each other.

“William, are you even listening to me?”

I jolt out of my head, only just realizing that my father’s voice had been droning in the background while I was thinking.

“I’m not getting an annulment. I’m in love with Emily.”

“You’ve known Emily for five minutes,” my father snaps. “And it’s not your choice. Emily was more than happy to sign the papers last night before she left.”

“You had papers?” I say, sinking to my bed in shock. “And she signed them?”

“Do you blame her? She’s a smart woman, William. She knows when she’s a fly in the ointment.”

I grind my teeth, furious. “Dad. That’s it. I’ll go to this event tonight and meet with the Art Queen. But after that, I’m done. I’ll sign whatever paperwork you want. But I’m done. We’re done. Do you understand?”

“What are you talking about, son?” my father says, adding the last word as though it’ll stir up any feeling of loyalty in me. But it has the opposite effect.

“I’m sick and tired of your toxic, controlling behavior. I’m leaving the business. You can keep it. I’ll set up my own gallery far away from here, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

“You’re being unreasonable, William. But I understand you’re hurting. We’ll talk at the event tonight.”

“No. We won’t,” I snap. “I’ll be civil in public spaces, yes. But you and I will not be talking.”

Before he can argue, I shut off the call, feeling simultaneously freer and heavier.

I lean over and bury my face in my hands. Not at the fact I’ve finally stood up to my father and cut him out of my life. But at one heart-jolting fact that makes me want to sink to my knees and weep.

Emily signed the annulment papers and won’t take my calls.

Which means she’s just carved me out of hers.

The charity event at the Willoughby Gallery is nothing short of spectacular.

The grand event hall, usually echoing with the hushed tones of art connoisseurs, tonight resonates with the hum of London's elite. The chandeliers cast a warm glow over the well-dressed guests, their laughter mingling with the soft melody of a string quartet playing in the background.

The air is thick with anticipation, and I find myself scanning the crowd, a part of me still hoping to see her.

I adjust my black tie, feeling slightly out of place despite being in my element.

The art pieces around us are mere backdrops tonight, as the who's who of the city engage in hushed conversations and polite applause.

Then, the crowd parts, and several guests murmur, "Who is that?"

My eyes follow the collective gaze and land on the top of the grand staircase.

There stands Emily, looking like a vision out of a dream.

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She's wearing a long, glittering red gown that hugs her figure, accentuating her grace and elegance. The dress sparkles under the hall's lights, making her seem as if she's stepped out of a fairy tale.

Her usually curly hair is long and sleek, falling to her waist.

The gown hugs her like a second skin, and she has the most gorgeous hour-glass shape that has every man in the room looking at her with desire.

I want to cry out in anguish at how stunning she is.

Just yesterday, I had her... like putty in my hands.

I can still taste her on my tongue. My bedsheets smell of her perfume.

Now, she's within arms' reach, but also a million miles away.

For a moment, time stands still. All eyes are on her, and a hush falls over the room.

Emily looks down the staircase, her eyes searching until they meet mine.

There's a strength in her posture, a confidence that I've never seen before.

She's breathtaking, and in this instant, she's not just Emily, the girl I fell for – she's a woman commanding the attention of everyone present.

As she descends the staircase, the crowd parts for her, their whispers a testament to

her stunning transformation.

I can't help but feel a surge of pride, mixed with a sense of awe.

This is Emily, the woman who turned my world upside down, the woman I love.

She reaches the bottom of the stairs, and the guests around us begin to resume their conversations, but the energy has shifted.

Emily has left an indelible mark on the evening.

I make my way through the crowd, each step bringing me closer to her.

As I approach, her eyes lock onto mine, a myriad of emotions flickering within them.

In this sea of people, in the midst of this opulent event, it's as if we're the only two people in the room.

"Emily," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "You look incredible."

She offers a small, confident smile, one that speaks volumes of the journey she's been on. She's a far cry from the woman who grabbed my soggy umbrella.

"Thank you, William. I'm glad I caught your eye."

Her tone is civil. Polite.

She's behaving in the way I planned to be around my father, and her aloofness hurts me deeper than I can bear.

"Listen, I'm so sorry about..." I begin, but she shuts me off with a look. It's the kind

of murderous glare that only appears on her face for a split second before she smiles again, her eyes twinkling.

“Not here,” she mumbles through a smile. “I’m just waiting for the Art Queen.”

Before I can try to persuade her to step outside with me, or go somewhere private, Madeline marches in between us.

She’s taller than Emily, and her yellow lace gown makes her look like a candlestick. “Your father called,” she said, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

Emily watches with apparently interest. Although her gaze moves away from us, I know she’s listening to every word Madeline has to say.

“You’re giving up your shares? Your inheritance? You’re walking away from everything, all for what - for her?” Madeline jabs her thumb in Emily’s direction, and I catch her wrist.

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“Don’t you dare talk about my wife like that,” I growl at her.

“I’m not your wife,” Emily snaps, her nostrils flaring. “Not anymore.”

I drop Madeline’s hand and turn to her. “Actually, you may have been quick to sign those papers, but I have no interest in doing so. Therefore, we’re still married, darling.”

I turn back to Madeline to give her a piece of my mind, but my face meets a fist instead.

Smack.

I rub my jaw as a thumping ache spreads across it. “What the-”

Madeline’s blotchy face comes into view, and there’s a hush.

Everyone has stopped talking and is looking. But Madeline is not bothered about making a scene. She’s never cared about anyone other than herself, so I shouldn’t be surprised.

Yet, I still am.

“Your father says you’re here to meet the Art Queen,” she hisses.

I glance at Emily before I frown at Madeline. “So?”

Madeline lifts her chin and marches forward, a smug smile on her face. “The Art Queen, the most well-known artist in the 70s, who hasn’t produced a new piece of art for at least thirty years... who hasn’t been seen for at least ten.”

She tilts her head at me, like she’s looking at a child who believes wholly in the magic of Father Christmas. “What makes you think she’ll be here?”

“Emily is her granddaughter, and she said-”

Madeline’s howling laugh stops me mid-sentence. “I’m sorry,” she said, sounding anything but. “Did you just say Emily is the Art Queen’s granddaughter?”

“Oh no,” Emily mutters from my left.

My face tugs into a deep frown. “What...”

Madeline snorts and pokes Emily’s shoulder. “You stand there, judging me, while you’re swanning around pretending to be someone you’re not.”

She scoffs then turns back to meet my puzzled stare. “The Art Queen is Gloria Knowles. She has one granddaughter, who happened to be my friend for many years. We grew up together.” She makes dramatic pause and points at Emily, looking out at the sea of curious faces. “And that, is not her granddaughter.”

As the revelation sinks in, the room falls into a stunned silence.

Emily stands there, her face a mixture of shock and shame. A brown-haired woman steps forward, her expression apologetic.

"I'm so sorry Mr. Willoughby," she begins.

She's wearing the same skirt Emily wore the day we met. And if I hadn't known any better, I'd think this woman was Emily's sister.

"My name is Sasha. If there's anyone you should be mad at, it's me. I forced Emily to pose as me. You see, I am Gloria Knowles' granddaughter, and I'm afraid she won't be making an appearance tonight."

"Again? What's this all about?" I ask, searching her face for answers. But Sasha bites her lip and looks around, her face an expression of fear and insecurity.

Madeline's laughter echoes through the hall, a sound filled with triumph and mockery.

Emily, her face pale, turns to me, her eyes pleading for understanding. "William, I never meant for it to go this far. I'm so sorry I lied to you."

But the words, the stares, the revelation – it's all too much.

Then I see my father standing to the side, his cold stare slices me to the bone.

Numbness settles over me as I look at Emily. The woman I thought I knew, the woman I married.

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Was she just a façade?

I turn away, my steps heavy, leaving her standing there amidst the murmurs of the crowd.

But then I stop, the weight of the situation pulling my shoulders down.

Turning back, I face Emily. "What I can't figure out," I say, my voice laced with confusion and hurt, "is what you get out of this?"

Emily's reply is barely audible, lost in the hush of the room. Her face crumples as she tries to explain, but the words seem to stick in her throat.

Then a thought comes back to me.

The painting she made of me, while we spent the evening under the stars.

She's a struggling artist.

I start to connect the dots.

"So, you seduced me... so I'd get your work into my galleries?" The realization hits me like a physical blow.

The connection, the intimacy – was it all just a means to an end?

Are there any honest people left in this world?

Emily starts to argue, but I can't hear it over the roar in my ears.

I raise my hands, a sign of surrender, of defeat.

"I'm out," I say, my voice echoing in the now silent hall.

EMILY

I stand there, frozen, as William storms out of the event, each step echoing the shattering of what I had foolishly believed was real.

The room spins around me, a whirlwind of whispered gossip and curious stares.

Madeline's smug face looms in my vision, but it's William's cold, incredulous look that burns into my memory.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see Sasha, her eyes filled with worry and regret.

Back at the apartment, the atmosphere is heavy with tension.

Sasha, Evan, and I sit in a strained silence, the weight of the evening's disaster hanging over us like a dark cloud.

"Evan, we're going home," I say abruptly, my voice breaking the silence. "Back to Snowdrop Valley."

Evan looks up, surprise etching his features. "Emily, are you sure?"

I nod, my decision firm despite the turmoil inside me. "I can't stay here, not after tonight. Everything's just... fallen apart."

Sasha's eyes fill with tears, her voice a whisper of regret. "Emily, I'm so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen."

I turn to her, my own frustration and hurt spilling over.

"Why, Sasha? Why did you send me on this wild goose chase? Why does your grandmother keep blowing us off?"

Sasha shakes her head, her tears now freely flowing. "I don't know, Emily. I thought she would come, I really did. I thought this would be our chance to... to make things right."

Her words do little to soothe the sting of betrayal and disappointment.

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I get up, my movements mechanical as I start packing my bags. The walls of the apartment, once a sanctuary, now feel like they're closing in on me.

Evan stands, his expression one of concern. "Emily, let me help you."

I shake my head, my focus solely on the task at hand. "No, I've got it."

As I zip up my bag, the reality of what I'm leaving behind hits me.

William, the gallery, the life I had started to build here – it all seems like a distant dream now, one that's slipped like water between my fingers.

"Emily, please," Sasha pleads, her voice trembling. "Don't do this. We can fix this, somehow."

But her words fall on deaf ears. The trust is broken, the hurt too deep.

I sling my bag over my shoulder, taking one last look at the apartment – at Sasha and Evan, who look as lost and broken as I feel.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, more to myself than to them. "I just need to go home."

And with that, I walk out, leaving behind the chaos, the lies, and a love that was never meant to be.

As I step into the night, the cold air embraces me, a stark contrast to the warmth I once felt in this city. Snowdrop Valley, with its familiar streets and simpler life, calls

to me – a balm for my wounded heart.

Evan follows me out, his footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. "Emily, wait. I'm coming with you," he calls out, but I don't slow down.

The need to escape, to retreat to something familiar and safe, is overwhelming.

As we ride in silence to the train station, the lights of London blur past the window, each one a reminder of a dream that turned into a nightmare.

I lean my head against the cold glass, the tears I've been holding back finally escaping. They stream down my face, unrestrained, each one a silent testament to the pain and confusion swirling inside me.

Evan doesn't speak, but his presence is a quiet comfort. He's always been there, a steady, unassuming friend in the background.

But right now, his presence is everything – a lifeline in the storm that's upended my life.

When we arrive at the station, the emptiness of the night feels like a mirror of my heart.

The platform is deserted, the only sound our footsteps on the pavement.

"I can't believe I let this happen," I whisper, more to myself than to Evan. "I let myself get swept up in a fantasy, and now... now I'm paying the price."

Evan stops, turning to face me. "Emily, you can't blame yourself. You were doing the best to help Sasha, and you fell for the guy. No one blames you for that."

I look up at him, his earnest expression a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me. "But it was all built on lies, Evan. My lie, Sasha's lie... William's lie. How could anything real come from that?"

He reaches out, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Maybe it wasn't all a lie. Maybe there was something real, something worth holding onto."

I shake my head, unable to accept his words. "It's too late for that now. I've lost him, and I've lost myself in the process."

We board the train in silence, the rhythmic clacking of the wheels a steady backdrop to my racing thoughts.

As the city fades into the distance, I close my eyes, trying to find some peace in the darkness. But the image of William's cold look, of Madeline's triumphant smile, haunts me, a reminder of the love I thought I had and the reality that shattered it.

Snowdrop Valley, with its quiet streets and simple life, awaits me.

Maybe there, among the familiar, I can find a way to heal, to start over.

But as the train carries me away from London, from William, I know a part of me will always remain behind, lost in the glittering world that was never truly mine.

WILLIAM

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 4:15 am

It's been a week since the charity event, a week since my world imploded.

Holed up in my apartment, my existence is reduced to a series of sleepless nights and endless days.

I've barely eaten, my appetite a casualty of the chaos that's become my life.

I've blocked my father's number, the constant calls and messages only serving as a reminder of the betrayal and hurt I'm trying to escape.

My only solace has been my work, focusing on a new business plan, a way to rebuild what's been lost. But even that is a mere distraction, a way to avoid dealing with the gaping hole left by Emily's departure.

A soft knock on the door breaks me out of my reverie. I'm not expecting anyone.

Reluctantly, I get up and open the door. It's Sasha.

"Can I come in?" she asks, her voice hesitant.

I nod, stepping aside to let her in. "Sure."

I pour her a coffee, the familiar routine a welcome break from the turmoil in my head.

Sasha takes a seat, her hands wrapped around the warm mug.

"William, I need to explain something to you," she begins, her eyes meeting mine.

"About why I asked Emily to pretend to be me."

I listen, my interest piqued despite the weariness that's settled deep in my bones.

"I don't know a thing about art," Sasha confesses. "And I've recently had to take over my Grandmother's estate. I'm totally out of my depth."

She pauses, taking a sip of her coffee. "My parents are dead. It's just me. I needed the deal with the Willoughby Gallery so much. I was running out of money and didn't want to mess it up. There was just too much riding on it."

I lean back, processing her words. It's a lot to take in.

"When I heard that Emily fell for you, that was never part of the plan. It just... happened," she adds.

I run a hand through my hair, a mix of frustration and understanding swirling within me.

"Where's your grandmother now?" I ask, the question that's been haunting me since that night.

Sasha hesitates, then sets down her mug. "Grab your coat, William. We're going for a drive."

Intrigued and with nothing left to lose, I follow her lead.

We drive in silence, the cityscape giving way to the open countryside.

The journey feels like a metaphor for my own life - leaving behind the familiar, venturing into the unknown.

After what seems like hours, Sasha pulls up to a modest cottage, nestled among rolling hills. It's a far cry from the grandeur of Willoughby Manor, a peaceful retreat from the world.

"This is where she's been all these years," Sasha says softly, getting out of the car.

I follow, my heart racing with a mix of apprehension and curiosity.

The cottage, with its quaint charm, stands in stark contrast to the imposing grandeur of the manor. It's a haven of tranquility, a world away from the high society chaos I've been embroiled in.

We step inside, greeted by the cozy warmth of the living room.

The walls are adorned with paintings, each a testament to a lifetime of artistic mastery. There are nicknacks and memorabilia scattered around, each piece telling a story of a life rich with experience and creativity.

In the corner, I notice medical equipment, a silent reminder of the reality of Gloria Knowles' condition.

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A nurse, with a kind and professional demeanor, greets us. "Good afternoon," she says. "Gloria is in the sitting room."

As we move into the sitting room, the sight that greets us is both heartwarming and heartbreaking. Gloria, frail and aged, sits before an easel, her hands delicately moving across a canvas. She's painting a bowl of fruit, her strokes confident despite her frailty.

She doesn't respond to our presence, her eyes dim and hazy.

It's a painful reminder of the impermanence of life, of the cruel hand fate can deal.

Sasha stands beside me, her voice filled with a mix of love and sorrow. "She was diagnosed with dementia recently. It's been hard. We thought she might get better enough for a visit, but she's deteriorated rapidly. Now, all she wants to do is sit by the window and paint."

I watch Gloria, a legend in her own right, now lost in her own world. Even in her frail state, the talent that made her famous is unmistakable.

Sasha looks at me teary-eyed. "Please don't be mad at Emily. She kept calling me to say she was going to tell you the truth. But I begged her not to. And she doesn't even know about Gloria's condition. I lied to her too."

I place a hand over Sasha's, offering what comfort I can. "Thank you for telling me truth."

A peace settles over me.

As we walk back to the car, Sasha's revelations weigh heavily on me.

I tell her about my decision to walk away from the family business, to start anew.

Her face lights up when I offer to showcase Gloria's work in my new gallery. "That would be wonderful, I honestly don't know how to thank you," she says, her eyes gleaming with gratitude.

The drive back is contemplative.

Sasha's story, Gloria's condition, Emily's betrayal – it all blends into a narrative of love, loss, and the complexities of human relationships.

"Where's Emily?" I finally ask, the question that's been burning in my mind.

Sasha looks out the window, her expression somber. "She's gone. Back to Snowdrop Valley. She's not speaking to me."

I'm silent, the news hitting me harder than I expected.

Snowdrop Valley – the place where it all began, and perhaps where it all ends.

I cast my eyes around the English countryside, a bittersweet happiness pours through my body.

As a young boy, I'd run through the woods, hopping over the fences on the farmer's land and chasing sheep. The only blissful memories I have of my home country, are of times when my mother was alive.

Now, my homeland feels cold and unwelcoming, and another land calls my heart.

After all, now I see that everything Emily did was out of love.

She was just being a good friend.

And if Sasha is telling me the truth, she fell for me. And if that's the case, I don't even know what I'm doing here in England.

As I part ways with Sasha, a plan starts forming in my mind.

If I'm going to see Emily again, I need to do something big, something to show her how much she means to me.

I stand alone, looking out at the city that's been my home, my battleground.

But now, my heart is set on a small town, on a chance to mend what's broken, to reclaim a love that, despite everything, I still believe in.

EMILY

Sitting in my mother's kitchen, the familiar scents of bacon and pancakes fill the air, a bittersweet reminder of simpler times.

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My mom's eyes are full of concern and curiosity as she peppers me with questions about my whirlwind romance with William.

"Evan says you eloped!" she exclaims, her eyebrows raised in a mixture of shock and amusement.

I shoot Evan a glare, and he has the decency to look sheepish, turning his attention back to the sizzling bacon on the stove.

Despite the warmth of the kitchen and the comfort of being home, my heart feels heavy, burdened by the tangled mess I've left behind in London.

I take a deep breath and start from the beginning, recounting the entire story to my mom. The deception, the whirlwind romance, the highs and lows, and finally, the chaotic end at the charity event.

As I speak, my emotions swirl - anger, sadness, confusion, and, though I'm reluctant to admit it, a lingering sense of loss.

My mom listens intently, her expression a mix of sympathy and wisdom. "Love is messy. That's for sure," she says, flipping a pancake with practiced ease.

I frown, my arms crossed defensively. "It's not love. It's lies."

She pauses, stopping her mixing to place her warm hands on my cheeks. Her touch is gentle, grounding. "Oh, my sweetheart. You've just spent the last hour ranting about William this, William that. It's bleeding obvious you've fallen for him. And you've

even exchanged wedding vows."

I shrug, a knot forming in my throat. "I signed the annulment papers."

"But he didn't. So, you're still married," Evan chimes in from across the kitchen.

I shoot him another glare, but his words linger in my mind, unbidden and unsettling.

"Listen, honey," my mom says, her voice soft but firm. "When you say 'I do', it means something. It means you take that person and will love them through the good and the bad. Marriage takes work. Being in love is messy and hard, and complicated. But at the root of it all, you stick together because when you truly find the one, nothing changes the fact that no matter how mad you get at that person, you can't stop thinking about them. Worrying about them. Hoping they are happy."

Her words strike a chord deep within me.

I think of William, of the moments we shared, the connection that felt so real amidst the chaos. Despite everything, despite the lies and the hurt, he's constantly on my mind.

In the early hours of the morning, I lie in bed at night wondering where he is. What he's up to. Is he safe? Is he happy?

Tears prickle my eyes.

"Oh my gosh. I do love him," I say with a sniff.

My mom pulls me in for a hug. "Why don't you give him a call and clear the air? I'm sure all of this can be straightened out. Besides, I want to meet my son-in-law!"

I blink at the worn-out patch of the hardwood floor for a few moments. Then my mood dampens.

“No,” I say, looking at my mom with resolution. “He told me he values honesty more than anything. I blew it. Big time. So, all that’s left for me to do is let him find someone who deserves him and wait until I fall out of love with him.”

My mom and Evan exchange unimpressed looks.

But then my mom pats my hand. “Well, honey. I think you’re making a mistake, but I’m not going to tell you how to live your life.”

Her words pinch my heart, and I look at her, tears brimming in my eyes.

I think about the way William’s father was so determined to control every aspect of his life.

“I love you so much, mom.” I pull her in for a tight hug. “I’m so sorry.”

My mom startles and pulls back to look at me. “Well, what was that for?”

I shake my head, smiling as tears roll down my cheeks. “I’m just so grateful that you’ve always been supportive. You’ve never put me down or tried to control me.”

My mom’s eyes sparkle as she pinches my cheek. “Oh, my sweet baby. No one could ever control you. There’s no point in even trying.”

“Hello, this is Evan, your friendly neighborhood realtor.”

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I break from my mom to see Evan on the phone. Then I look back at her with my brows lifted. “Realtor?”

She chuckles and returns to the pancake batter. “Evan has more jobs than anyone in town,” she says.

“Are you serious?” Evan says.

His eyes flick up to me for a minute, then he switches off the stove and marches out of the kitchen. “Well, that’s exciting news. Let me just...” his voice trails off.

“I wonder what that’s all about?” I ask my mom.

She shrugs, not meeting my inquisitive stare.

“Evan has been behaving a bit odd lately, elusive and mysterious. Who knows what he’s up to.”

In the quiet serenity of Snowdrop Valley, I find myself helping Dad with chores around the house, a welcome distraction from the whirlwind of emotions I’ve been grappling with.

We tidy up the yard, cutting the grass and spraying the plants.

I place logs onto the chopping block for my dad to split in two with just a swing of the axe.

The familiar tasks, the smell of fresh-cut grass, and the soft chirping of birds bring a sense of peace, a respite from the chaos of my recent life.

“I have to admit, it’s nice to have you around, kiddo,” my dad says. His warmth like a soothing balm on my wounds.

“It’s good to be back,” I say, truthfully.

I thought I’d be depressed coming back to my folks, jobless and single. But it turns out, that sometimes you need to return to the nest to regroup and heal.

When we’re done chopping wood, my dad rummages through his toolbox, looking for something with a frown. “Dang it. I’m all out of Duct tape. I want to fix the bumper on my car.”

I drop a stack of chopped wood into the pile and pat myself down. “No worries, I’ll go to the store and get some.”

My dad grins. “Great.” He hands me a twenty-dollar bill. “Get yourself a Hershey bar, too.”

I roll my eyes, feeling like I’m twelve years old again.

As I head into town to pick up some supplies, I can’t help but notice the curious glances and whispered conversations all around me.

Word travels fast in a small town, and it seems my sudden return, along with the rumors of my whirlwind romance and elopement, have become the latest topic of gossip.

In the local store, while browsing through the aisles, I overhear a conversation

between two townsfolk. And to my surprise, they're not talking about my scandalous relationship.

"Did you hear? The estate on Rose Road has sold," one of them says, her voice tinged with excitement.

"I heard it was a cash offer," the other replies. "Saw a fancy car on the driveway just the other day."

Returning home, I find Evan speaking animatedly on the phone. He looks up as I enter, a wide grin spreading across his face.

"Is it true about the estate on Rose Road?" I ask, unable to contain my curiosity. I figure that as the town realtor, he'll have some intel.

He runs both hands through his sandy hair and grins at me.

"Okay, I wasn't going to say anything, but forget it. This is the biggest paycheck I've ever had!" He kisses my cheek and pumps his fist in the air.

Bewildered, I stand frozen on the spot, holding a candy bar in one hand and a roll of Duct tape in the other. "What was that for?"

But then there's a knock on the door, and Evan runs upstairs shouting, "We're going out for dinner tonight, it's on me."

Confused and mind spinning, I shuffle to the door and yank it open.

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Then my heart stops, and I'm totally numb.

Part of me wonders if I've just looked at Medusa and turned to stone. Because I can no longer feel my hands, even though they remain in the air, firmly holding my spoils from the store.

William Willoughby stands on my parents' porch, dressed in a clean white shirt, with the arms rolled up to his elbows, and a pair of tan-colored suit pants.

His hair is slightly messy, waving in the wind, and his eyes are boring into my soul.

In his hands is a huge bunch of red roses.

I hold my breath, unable to speak.

"Hi," William says, his voice careful, as though he's testing that it won't set me off.

I come to life and glance at the strange objects in my hands and stuff them in the drawer beside me. Then I stumble out of the house and close the door behind me.

"What are you doing here?"

William offers me the flowers. "I owe you an apology. A big one," he says.

I shake my head and begin to argue, but William shuts me up with a look.

"Just listen for a second, okay?"

I nod, with my mouth clamped shut and hold the roses like a trophy. They're heavy in my arms, and my brain won't stop spinning.

Of all of the people I expected to see today, William was at the bottom of the list.

He begins to pace the front yard and, judging by the tone of his voice, recite a speech he's prepared in advance.

"Emily. I have made a million mistakes in my lifetime, but the biggest one of all was letting you go. You consume me. I think about you when I'm brushing my teeth and then can't figure out if I actually did brush my teeth. So, I do it again. I worry about you while I'm trying to sleep. I wonder if you're thinking about me while I'm cooking my food. And I'm so consumed by all of these thoughts about you, that I'm burning my food and seriously running out of toothpaste."

I watch William with a mixture of disbelief and amusement. "Okay..."

William stops and looks at me, his eyes big and sad like a puppy. "Sasha told me everything. And now I see that you were just trying to help a friend. But there's a question that I have to ask you, and please, for the love of all things holy, be honest."

I swallow. "Okay," I say again. Apparently, it's the only word I'm capable of saying right now.

William looks at the grass and stuffs his hands in his pocket as he clears his throat. Finally, he looks at me again.

"Was everything between us fake?"

I lower the flowers and slowly shake my head. "Not for me, it wasn't," I whisper, tears brimming my eyes.

William's face breaks into a broad smile, one that radiates true joy and relief.

"Then Emily Barnes, I vow to cherish you. To protect you. To love you with all my heart, for the rest of my life," he says, lowering to his knees. "I have cut off my father and given up all of my inheritance. But I do have a house for you, and all of the love in my heart. Do you take me as your husband?"

I suck in a breath.

He bought the house.

For me. For us.

I glance at the kitchen window to see my family's faces beaming in my direction. Evan is nodding, mouthing the words, "Say I do."

I turn back to William's glowing face, my heart soaring.

We still have so much to learn about each other. And it looks like we both need to figure out how we're going to make a living. But we'll figure it all out. Together.

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I bite my lip as the silence hovers over us until breaking point.

Then I lower to my knees and after putting the flowers on the ground, I reach for William's cheek and smile as I whisper two words. "I do."

Cheers explode from the house as William drapes me over his arm and kisses me, in broad daylight. Right in front of all the neighbors.

People gather on the street, and there's a round of applause.

But I don't care.

I wrap my arms around William's neck, and he picks me up.

"I never signed the papers," he says in my ear.

I can't stop beaming.

"Would you like to see your new home, Mrs. Willoughby?"

I kick my legs with a laugh. "Our new home," I say, correcting him. "And yes, please. Take me away!"

As William bundles me in the dark car, I can't help but think about Sasha.

I owe her a million favors now. Because thanks to her crazy idea, I'm driving into the sunset with Mr. Darcy into a horizon full of newfound possibilities.

My mom's advice echoes in my mind as we sit hand in hand, and William cruises.

Love is messy. Love is complicated. Marriage is hard and sometimes it can be ugly. But one thing is certain: nothing is as beautiful as the promise you make when you say I do.

THE END