



# Always Yours (Love & Wine #1)

**Author:** *Claire Raye*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Always Yours is a laugh out loud steamy romance filled with insta-love, a hilarious meet-cute and one stinky little skunk!

Some things are just meant to be

Ellen Somerville and Will McIntyre met by accident and under unusual circumstances. Getting sprayed by a skunk in a parking lot wouldn't normally be the greatest way to start a relationship, but somehow it was the catalyst to what was always meant to be.

While Ellen's sister is at home trying to navigate the perils of first love, Ellen and Will are building an intense bond that will span decades.

But when years later her sister's love life fails to materialize, Ellen knows its time to step up and take matters into her own hands.

And you know what they say about fate

Always Yours is the first book in the Love Wine new adult romance series. While each book can be read as a standalone, it offers so much more if read as a series. Happily ever after guaranteed with each book!

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

Fourteen Years Ago

I'm literally doing the one thing I told myself I would never do... the walk of shame. I mean it's five o'clock in the morning, so I guess the likelihood of me being seen by anyone in this sleepy college town is what I have going for me, but it's still clichéd as fuck.

I'm a disheveled mess, my shoes in my hands and my hair piled high on top of my head as I stealthily move across the parking lot toward where I left my car last night.

That too was another poor decision in a long line of shitty choices I've made over the last few hours.

While I wasn't exactly crazy shitfaced, I was drunk and I probably never should have been driving, but the apartment was only minutes from the bar and I wasn't super keen on leaving my car there overnight.

If my parents found out I was at a bar underage and I left my car there to be towed away, broken into or pilfered through, I'd be back in California before I could say undergraduate.

So ultimately the decision was made to drive the speed of an old lady on her way to church on Sunday than risk my parents finding out.

The guy I ended up hooking up with passed out about a quarter of the way into our

make out session, which was somewhere around three a.m., and then I subsequently fell asleep. Only to wake up at five disoriented, hungover and wondering where the hell I was.

Not wanting to wake him for several reasons, the main one being he was not nearly as attractive as he was four hours ago, I grabbed my things, and I am now tip-toeing through the parking lot in the dim light of the sun as it peeks over the horizon.

“Fuck,” I mumble as I step on a piece of gravel only steps from my car. “Why the fuck would I have ever thought this was a good idea?” I again mutter, questioning myself and my stupidity.

My head is throbbing and all I want to do is get home. I’m currently making a mental list of things I will never again do in my life. The number one being driving drunk, number two being hooking up with a guy while drunk, and number three, doing the walk of shame while hungover.

When I finally do reach my car, I take a quick look around, scanning the parking lot and surrounding balconies for people, making sure no one has seen my stupid ass.

By now I’m freezing because no self respecting college girl would think to wear a coat to a bar despite it being winter in Michigan. That would hide the halter top and low-slung jeans that I’m inappropriately wearing in the dead of fucking winter.

Add that shit to my endless list of poor choices and again I mutter shamelessly to myself.

Just as I’m about to find solace in my slightly warmer car, it’s all blown to shit. I hit the unlock button on my key fob, grab the door handle and just as I fling open the door, a skunk crawls out from under my car .

“What the fuck!” I yell out, again not my finest decision, because I of course startle the little fucker and he sprays me.

Holy hell, in that instant my eyes start burning, and that hangover that was like a railroad spike in my forehead is now making me puke violently on the asphalt.

All of this clouds my ability to notice that the skunk has now taken up residence in my car, and when I finally stop puking and see his Pepé Le Pew ass in the backseat of my little coupe, I cry out. “Fuck, no! No, no no!” I scream, now sobbing and wondering how the fuck I got myself into this mess.

“Hey!” I hear a voice call out as I listen to the sound of feet crunching along the gravel in the parking lot and making their way toward me.

“Fuck me,” I mumble, that feeling of nausea hitting me like a giant wave when I suck in a breath. The smell of the skunk fully embedded in my nose makes me retch once again just as a tall brown-haired stranger makes his way over to me.

“You okay?” he yells to me, his distance just far enough that the smell of the skunk mixed with my Long Island Iced Tea vomit hasn’t hit him yet.

This is not how my walk of shame was supposed to go down and I really want to tell this guy to fuck off, but when I look into my car, I can see that stinky fucker pacing back and forth on the floorboard.

The guy walks closer and I can tell he’s not sober, but he’s my only chance at making it out of this without too much more embarrassment.

I swipe at my raccoon eyes, now made worse by my fantastic gastro Olympics and the continuous flood of tears coming from my overactive tear ducts.

“No,” I whimper, as the guy approaches my car.

But when he’s within a couple of feet, he recoils and vomits spectacularly on the ground only a few inches from his own feet .

“Holy fucking shit,” he says, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. “What is that fucking smell?”

“It’s a skunk,” I tell him, motioning at my car, and not wanting to admit that it’s probably more likely the smell of my own puke too. “It’s in my car,” I moan, the tears once again starting up.

My parents are going to fucking kill me.

“A skunk?” he questions. “Fuck, I thought you were being attacked.”

“I was attacked! A skunk attacked me. Why the hell was it under my car? Shouldn’t the fucker be sleeping?”

I don’t have any idea why I’m blaming the skunk for my own poor choices, but I gotta blame someone.

“It’s a crepuscular animal,” the guy says and I look at him, my glare practically deadly.

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“It means, it’s an animal that comes out at dawn and dusk,” he replies like this is a known fact.

“Listen, Steve Irwin, are you here to help me or just question my stupidity?”

I'm now standing with my hands on my hips, my eyes shooting daggers in his direction, wondering if I should just call someone to help me.

"Fine," he says, holding his hands up as if he's going to walk away.

"Wait, please. I'm sorry. I can't call the police because I'm eighteen years old, probably still a little drunk from the night before, I've thrown up more Long Island Iced Teas than I should have ever been able to fit in my stomach and I'm obviously leaving..."

He cuts me off, a smile crossing his face and it's then that I notice he's far more attractive than I would've expected. His brown hair is tousled slightly and he looks to be about the same age as me, but with an athletic build and striking blue eyes.

"Yeah I'll help you, even though you smell fucking terrible," he says, and I smile gratefully in return.

But I don't miss the opportunity to give him just as much shit back. "Dude, you puked in the parking lot too. I think that kinda ruins your street cred."

"So what's the plan here?" he asks, cupping his hands around his eyes and pressing his face to the window of my car.

"Get it out of my car," I respond, an attitude in my voice that is directed more at the skunk than the guy.

Without waiting for any more direction, the guy flings open my car door, levers the seat as both of us stand in the opening of the car door and wait.

In hopes that skunk will vacate the car on its own, the guy grabs hold of my wrist and pulls me away from the car, while the two of us stand waiting.

My body is practically pressed against his side as I shake in the freezing cold air and he runs a warm hand up and down my arm.

“Here,” he says, slipping out of his jacket and handing it to me.

“Thank you,” I tell him, his arms now folding across his body and it’s me who runs a hand over his arm now.

“Let’s do this,” he asserts, and I can’t help but laugh as he strides over to my car and thrusts his body through the small opening that is meant to allow access to the backseat.

But as he reaches in to grab the skunk it sprays again, dousing the poor guy and the interior of my car.

“Fuck,” he cries out, retreating from the car with his eyes clenched shut as the smell hits both of us and we puke in unison .

“If we call someone they’re going to send the police and we’re fucked,” he says, as we debate exactly how we are going to get this skunk out of the car.

It’s obvious that we aren’t thinking clearly, but I get what he’s saying. Ann Arbor has been cracking down on underage drinking and right now we are the poster children for why it’s illegal.

I pop the trunk of my car, remembering that my gym bag is still in there from the spin class I took yesterday afternoon.

I toss him a pair of leggings and I grab the tank I was wearing.

“Here, wrap these around your face,” I tell him as I tie my tank around mine and I

watch as he presses the ass of my pants to his face and wraps the legs around, securing them at his neck like a scarf.

Like this whole thing couldn't get any more embarrassing, but of course it just did, because this guy now has my sweaty crotch leggings covering his mouth and nose. And all I can do is pray that the smell of the skunk is worse than my leggings.

It's either the smell of my leggings or smell of the skunk or something else, but this guy grows far braver and reaches back into the car.

He grabs the skunk by the neck and despite the continuous spray, the guy doesn't ease up his grip. Dragging the skunk from the backseat of my car, he gently tosses the creature of the night into the grassy field that adjoins the parking lot.

I watch him thrust his clenched fist into the air and give a hearty shout of accomplishment. Enjoying the fact that this guy has finally freed my car of all its skunk-filled glory, I throw my arms around his neck in appreciation.

"Thank you so much," I croon, pulling back so I'm now looking at him. "You're my hero."

We stand suspended in this moment of smelly skunk and vomit, our lips practically touching as he pulls back a little and says, "Do you want to come upstairs?"

His hand slides to my hip and a small smile crosses my lips, but it's almost a smile of a shameful reminder as to how I got myself into this whole mess.

Yet as I stand here contemplating my answer, I realize I smell horrible and eventually I have to get back in my car, so I just delay the inevitable.

"I don't even know your name," I shoot back at him, trying my hand at playing hard

to get since clearly going home with someone I met at the bar went so well.

“It’s Will McIntyre and I swear I’m harmless despite my amazing skunk wrestling skills.”

I giggle a little at his joke and introduce myself, extending a hand.

“I’m Ellen Somerville and I’ve never been more grateful you came along when you did.”

“So is that yes then?” he asks, his tone filled with eagerness as he cocks his eyebrow slightly at his question.

“I guess it is, but only so I can clean up.”

“Only so you can clean up and I can make you breakfast,” he adds, a smirk on his chiseled face.

“I should be the one making you breakfast,” I reply, knowing I owe him even if my car is ruined.

We make our way toward his apartment, which is luckily not in the same building as the one I just vacated, when my phone chimes out.

“Your boyfriend?” Will asks, glancing back over his shoulder as he takes the stairs to his apartment.

“No, my sister,” I reply. “She’s back home dealing with the first boy she’s ever really had a crush on. It’s pretty brutal.”

“Where’s home?”

“California. Napa area. My parents own a winery and vineyard there. ”

“And what’s the deal with your sister?” he asks, slipping the key into the lock and opening the door to an outdated but spotlessly clean apartment.

“Long story, but she’s found herself crushing on this boy who is visiting the vineyard from Australia. It’s that whole love/hate thing and she has no idea how to handle it.”

I speak like I’m an old pro at crushes and relationships, but in all honesty, I’ve had one boyfriend, who I did sleep with back in high school, but if I had to label myself now it would be “lip slut” since all I’ve done since going away to college is make out with boys in bars.

Today was my first attempt at a one night stand that literally landed me in the stinker.

Will walks to the fridge leaving me standing in the entryway and appears a few seconds later holding a bottle of Bloody Mary mix.

“I don’t have any tomato juice. You think this will work?” He gives the bottle a hearty shake and we both laugh out loud.

He’s far more endearing and cute and funny than I would have expected, and I’m finding myself questioning if maybe this whole thing was meant to be.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Will

She's hot. Seriously hot.

I mean, yeah, she looks like a total train wreck right now, with the smudged makeup all over her face, dried puke on her top and a stench coming from her like something rolled over and died. But she's still hot.

She's eyeing the Blood Mary mix I'm holding, as though she's actually thinking about my suggestion of using it. I'm now wondering if she's going to take those clothes off or leave them on if she does.

I'm hoping for off. I mean, of course I'm hoping for off.

I'm also hoping she lets me pour the pseudo tomato juice all over her too.

"You serious?" she asks, giggling and breaking my tomato-juice-strip-tease fantasies.

I shrug. "Why not?" I say. "It's supposed to kill the stink, isn't it?"

Ellen laughs. "Right now, I'm not sure anything could kill this stink."

I grin. "You might be right. Pretty sure these clothes are toast," I add, waving my hand in her direction.

Ellen cocks an eyebrow at me. "So what, you're suggesting I should take them off? "

My grin widens. “Well?” I reply. “The little fucker did nail you pretty good.”

Ellen reaches over and grabs the mix. “Fuck it,” she says, laughing. “Where’s your bathroom?”

I gesture down the hall toward a small bathroom at the back of the apartment, grateful my roommate is staying at his girlfriend’s place. Ellen walks in, turning as I stop in the doorway.

“Need some help?” I offer, grinning as I give her an exaggerated once over.

“Get out of here,” she says, laughing as she shoves me out the door. “And get me some clean clothes!”

My smile doesn’t disappear even as I turn and walk into my room, grabbing a clean t-shirt and boxers for her. I can hear the shower running and already my mind is filled with images of her standing naked under the water.

“Jesus, Will,” I say, shaking my head. “Get a fucking grip.”

Eventually the water stops and in a lame ass attempt to make it look like I’m not totally creeping on her, I move into the kitchen and start to make us some coffee.

When she walks in, I turn and see she’s wrapped in a towel that barely covers her ass, her hair wet and hanging down her back and dripping water onto the floor.

“I saved you some of the mix,” she says, meeting my eyes before quickly looking away.

I swallow hard, unable to take my eyes off her and that amazing body of hers that’s barely hidden beneath what has got to be the luckiest towel ever. “Did it work?” I

eventually force out.

Ellen shrugs, sniffing her arm a little. "I don't know, I think so."

She still won't look at me as I walk toward her, and without thinking, I lean right in and smell her neck, that soft curve where it meets her shoulder.

Her skin is still warm, ever so slightly damp and as I brush my nose against it, I feel Ellen stiffen a little, I'd even swear she lets out a soft groan.

My body on the other hand, goes fucking haywire, as though every single nerve kicks to life beneath my skin. My hands itch with wanting to pull her into my arms and I feel my dick start to get hard.

"You're all good," I say, forcing myself to pull back. "I'm gonna go jump in the shower," I add, not looking at her. "I left you some clothes in my room, second door on the right."

I walk quickly into the bathroom, slamming the door shut before I do something stupid like rip that towel off her body and get her all dirty again. Turning on the water, I strip off my clothes, throwing them onto the floor with hers before getting into the shower.

Half a bottle of Bloody Mary mix is left, and I pick up the bottle, pouring it right over me, the cold liquid doing absolutely nothing to calm down the raging lust that's now coursing through me.

By the time I'm done, I no longer stink of skunk, but I've barely managed to get my body back under control.

I contemplate jerking off, just so I don't walk out there with my dick at full salute.

But something about that feels weird, so instead, I turn the water to cold and force myself to stand under it until my hormones and my dick decide to calm the fuck down.

Eventually they do and I switch off the water and get dry.

“Wow, something smells good,” I say, as I wander into the kitchen, now dressed in sweats and a t-shirt.

Ellen turns and gives me a smile. “Breakfast,” she says, gesturing to the toast and eggs that’s waiting for me. “It was the least I could do.”

I grin as I take a seat at the table. We eat, and the conversation is easy and light, mostly about our studies and where we’re from.

I discover Ellen is a freshman majoring in business and accounting, the total opposite to me.

I’m majoring in engineering and it’s my sophomore year, which explains why we’ve never crossed paths.

We’re also from opposite sides of the country, California for her and Rhode Island for me.

“Kinda weird we met somewhere in the middle, huh?” I say as I finish up the breakfast she’s made me.

“Yeah,” she says, just as her phone chimes out with a message. I watch as she picks it up, reads the message before rolling her eyes.

“Your sister again?” I ask.

Ellen chuckles. “Yeah, apparently our parents forced her to take this Aussie boy to her school dance last night, which of course was absolute hell for her even though she’s now bitching about all the other girls wanting to dance with him all night.”

I laugh, clearing up our plates. “Sounds like she’s jealous.”

“Oh, she’s jealous alright,” Ellen says, standing to help. “Jealous and stubborn and refusing to admit she actually likes him.” She throws her phone on the counter.

I laugh, knowing I’ve seen my two younger sisters go through the exact same hell with a guy they each liked.

“What are we going to do about our clothes?” Ellen asks, a hip propped against the counter.

“I think the bigger question is what are you going to do about your car?”

“Fuck,” she cries, burying her face in her hands. “I don’t know. I can’t think about that right now. It’s too much, far too much.”

I laugh. “Okay, first things first, the clothes. Should we try washing them?” I suggest, having no idea if laundry detergent can possibly kill skunk smell.

Ellen lifts her face from her hands, glances down at what she’s wearing, the boxers that are clearly not hers, the oversized t-shirt that does nothing to hide the fact that she isn’t wearing a bra.

“You realize that means I’m staying here for a bit, don’t you?” she says. “Because there’s not a chance in hell I’m walking home dressed like this.”

I grin. “That’s okay. I don’t mind if you stay and hang out.”

Ellen meets my stare. “What are we going to do while we wait?” she asks, a look on her face that I can’t read.

I can’t take my eyes from her, don’t move a single muscle as I look at her and she stares back at me. If I thought she looked hot before, it’s got nothing on how she looks now. Her face is clear, completely free of make-up and surrounded by long, dark blonde hair.

But it’s her eyes that really get me. Huge, chocolate brown eyes that feel like they’re pulling me in, pulling me closer.

And then I realize that they are, that I’m standing right in front of her, our faces now only inches apart, my hands somehow on her hips, fingers dipping beneath my t-shirt and brushing against her warm skin.

“We could do this,” I hear myself whisper, before closing the last of that distance and pressing my lips against hers.

She doesn’t push me away like I expect her to. Instead, she steps closer, her hands sliding around my neck and holding me to her as she deepens the kiss.

And fuck me, can she kiss.

Our mouths move hungrily against each other, lips parting ever so slightly as I feel the tip of her tongue, teasing me, tasting me as she pushes her whole body so it’s flush against mine.

My hands tighten at her hips, holding her against me as I say fuck it and just go with it, whatever this thing is that’s happening between us right now.

Turning, I walk her backward toward my room and up against my bed .

Ellen pulls back a little, her eyes searching mine as she says, “You don’t have a girlfriend or anything, do you?”

I grin, an eyebrow cocked. “No,” I tell her. “Not yet anyway.”

Ellen smiles back at me, a laugh escaping as she pulls me to her and we both fall backward onto my bed.

My hands slide under the t-shirt she wears and up to her breasts, her body bowing beneath me as I pinch her nipple, teasing it with my fingers.

“Oh god, Will,” she says, her own hands shoving my t-shirt up and over my head.

I repeat the action with hers, throwing it across the room before lowering my mouth to her breast this time, sucking her nipple, teasing it with my teeth while she moans and writhes beneath me.

Her hands are in my sweats now, shoving them down my hips as she asks, “Condoms?”

I lift my head, find her mouth with mine as my hands now push my boxers down her hips. “Patience,” I say, sucking her bottom lip.

“Ugh,” she says, nails digging into my back. “Fuck patience. “Condoms, now.”

I laugh, pulling back as I take her hands in mine, lifting her arms above her head and pinning them there as I hover over her. “Has anyone ever told you, you’re bossy?” I ask, my eyes raking over her body as it lies naked beneath me.

“No,” she says, biting her bottom lip.

I shake my head, laughing. “You’re so full of shit,” I whisper, lips brushing against hers.

“No, I’m not,” she says, pouting.

“Yes,” I say, biting her bottom lip this time. “You are. But don’t worry, I think it’s kinda cute,” I add, before covering her mouth with mine, and silencing anymore of her protests .

I kiss my way along her jaw, nibbling her earlobe before making my way down her body, along her collarbone, between her breasts, over her hipbone and between her thighs.

“Will,” she moans, fingers sliding into my hair as though to guide me back up to her.

“Shhh,” I murmur, not moving as I brush my mouth against her.

I curl my hands under her thighs, pulling her closer as I start to tease her with my lips, my tongue.

Ellen moans, her fingers tightening in my hair as she lifts her hips, pushing herself against me.

I can’t stop the smile, even as I continue to taste her, at how impatient she is.

Sliding a finger inside her, I feel her body tense, her thighs as they clench around me and she groans again. I add a second finger, slowly sliding them both in and out as I continue to tease and taste her with my mouth.

“Oh god,” she says. “Oh fuck, I’m...I’m...”

And then I feel it, her body as it arches off the bed and she comes against me. I ride it out for her, watching her as she comes against me a second time before I slide my fingers out of her, stopping only to grab a condom from the drawer in my side table.

“Shit,” Ellen breathes, her chest heaving as she struggles to take in air. “That was, that...was...”

I grin, leaning in to kiss her. “Amazing,” I say, finishing her sentence.

“Yeah,” she breathes out. “It...it was,” she adds, pushing me off her.

I fall onto my back, watch as she grabs the condom from my hand and rips the packet open.

She fumbles a little, getting it on, making me wonder how many times she’s done this.

But before I have a chance to ask, she’s straddling my hips, my dick in her hand as she positions me and slowly lowers herself.

“Oh fuck, god, yes,” I groan .

Ellen stares down at me, a smile on her face, hands planted on my chest as she lifts herself up and repeats the move.

“Oh god,” I breathe. “Do that again, please.”

Her smile widens. “Now who’s the impatient one?” she asks, not moving.

I grin up at her, my hands moving to her hips. “Can you blame me?” I ask, fingers tightening as I guide her, and she slowly starts to ride me.

I don't know how long we fuck for, but it feels like forever and not long enough. I watch her the whole time, her body as she moves against me, my hands as they move all over her skin.

She's only the fourth girl I've ever slept with but fuck me if none of those previous attempts had anything on this.

Eventually, I know I'm not going to last much longer, and wanting to watch her come apart again, I move my hand to where we're joined, my thumb finding that sweet spot my tongue was teasing earlier. The spot that has Ellen's head falling back and a low curse falling from her lips.

I circle my thumb, working her, pushing her closer and closer, all the while she continues to ride me.

"Oh fuck, Ellen," I say, pushing my hips up to meet hers, our bodies moving with a rapid urgency now.

"Yes, yes," she cries and then it happens, we both come hard, our bodies exploding with release as I thrust up into her one last time.

"Holy fuck," she says as she collapses on my chest, her now dry hair falling onto my face.

I brush it back, my heart pounding beneath her as I struggle to take in enough air. "You okay?" I finally manage to get out.

"God yes," she says, her mouth against my skin.

I chuckle. "Yeah, that was pretty damn amazing," I tell her. "Even if I do say so myself. "

Ellen lifts her head, her chin resting on my chest as she looks at me. “It was,” she admits, almost shyly. “Seems you’re not just a superhero when it comes to pulling skunks from a girl’s car.”

I burst out laughing. “Is that so?” I ask, brushing the hair back from her face.

“Hmmm,” she says, biting her bottom lip as she stares up at me. “Shit, our clothes!” she suddenly says, scrambling on top of me.

“Hey, hey, come here,” I say, pulling her back against me. “I’ll take care of it,” I add, gently easing her off me as I sit up.

Ellen watches as I pull the condom off, wrapping it in a tissue and throwing in the trash can beside my desk. I grab my sweats, pulling them back on before turning back to the bed.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I tell her, smiling.

Ellen smiles up at me, pulling the duvet around her naked body. “Yeah, I think you might be stuck with me for a while longer,” she says. “I’m hardly in a position to walk home like this.”

I chuckle, leaning down to press a kiss to her lips. “Good,” I whisper. “’Cause I wouldn’t mind being stuck with you for a long time.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

My heart is hammering in my chest, banging so loudly off my ribs that I can hear it thumping in my ears.

I suck in a deep breath hoping that while Will is retrieving our clothes from the laundry room, I can pull myself together.

I've already broken the rule I had made for myself nearly five seconds ago about no one night stands or walks of shame ever again.

Yet I'm in some stranger's bed, and I think I might be falling for him.

Ugh... I can't be one of those stupid girls who confuse sex for love.

This is definitely lust and nothing more because I just met him after being blasted by a skunk.

Or maybe that means it's something more?

Maybe the fact that he invited me up to his apartment, smelling like skunk spray and puke, looking like the girl on the cover of Hole's Live Through This album, has some merit to it.

Or fuck my life and maybe he just thought he'd get laid, which he did.

I have absolutely no right to mock my sister Lauren and her confusion over boys

because at this moment I'm naked in the bed of a stranger wondering if he really likes me or if he just really likes vaginas.

Will walks back into the bedroom empty-handed and shrugs his shoulders. "They still smell like shit," he says matter of factly. "Because I never put them in the washer. They're in there now, but it doesn't seem like soaking them in the Bloody Mary mix has done anything."

"Maybe I should just go," I say, pulling the sheet up a little higher as if that will suddenly erase the memory of my boobs from his mind. "Just come by later and pick up my clothes."

It's not like he's creepy or anything like that so I have no idea why I'm suddenly hit with this overwhelming sense of self-consciousness.

"Why?" Will asks, a confused look crossing his face.

"I don't know," I reply. "Maybe..." I trail off not knowing what to say or how any of this even works.

"This wasn't a pity invite. This wasn't a scam to get you in my bed.

And if we're being honest here, this wasn't even a one time thing for me.

"He pauses a second and calls me to him with a hook of his finger, and I crawl to the edge of the bed.

"I like you, Ellen. I like your confidence and your smart mouth, and I want to get to know you better."

"Okay," I say, my voice shaky as I try to control the blush I feel inching up my

cheeks.

He leans down and presses a soft kiss to my lips and I feel like I'm floating, butterflies fill my stomach and I giggle a little too teenage girl-like.

“Why don't you throw on the clothes I gave you and we can get to know each other a little better.”

I nod my head in response, but I stay firmly rooted in the cocoon of sheets wondering if I should just drop it and climb out of the bed, or ask him to leave the room.

His hands literally just explored every inch of my body, did things to me that made me come more times than I ever have, and now I'm embarrassed that he might see my naked ass.

Fuck it .

I drop the sheet and he smiles at me, his eyes raking over my bare skin, so instead of rushing to get dressed, I take this opportunity to enjoy the fact that someone is interested in me.

Bending at the waist I pick up the boxers and pull them on and as I do, I look over at Will who is now leaning against his dresser taking me in.

“You trying to kill me?” he asks and I bite down on my bottom lip

“I don't know. Is it working?” I ask, smiling back at him.

“Fuck yes.”

We spend the rest of the day fully clothed and lounging around Will's apartment. It

sure beats the hell out of the cramped dorm room I share with my roommate, and even though we've been snacking on microwave popcorn and pizza rolls, it also hands down beats the cafeteria food.

Our clothes ended up being toast, and after two washings the smell was still embedded into every fiber, stinking like hell. We tossed them and I borrowed a sweatshirt and a pair of socks and figured it would be enough to get me home.

By the time we decide to end our day together it's almost eight p.m. and Will walks me out to my car. But as we approach it, both of us realize that leaving the windows open did nothing to dissipate the smell.

We're about ten feet from the car when Will says, "I think your car is toast right along with our clothes."

I scrub my hands over my face and wonder just how I'm going to get back to my dorm let alone explain this to my parents.

"My parents are going to kill me. Like seriously kill me. I'm glad we spent the day together because tomorrow I'm going to be dead."

Right now, it's five o'clock in California and the vineyard is probably just beginning to wind down for the day, so if I call now, I might catch them just as they're closing up. Hopefully they'll be too busy to question me on what happened and just tell me what I need to do.

Will laughs, slipping his arm around my waist and pulling me against him. My head falls to his shoulder and I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. This is not the phone call I want to have with my parents during my first semester away at school.

"They're not going to kill you," Will says, guiding me away from the offending car

and back up to his apartment. “Why don’t you call them from upstairs and then I’ll drive you home.”

“Okay,” I reply the defeat in my voice masking the tears I feel forming. I thought the whole incident this morning was a nightmare, but I’m pretty sure this phone call is going to top it.

I flop down on Will’s couch grabbing my cell phone from my purse and instead of calling my parents I call my sister.

It barely rings once when Lauren answers with a whiny, “What the hell, Ellen?” I roll my eyes already annoyed with her and this Aussie boy drama since I’m dealing with something far more serious.

“I texted you like a million times yesterday and in the fucking middle of the night. Mom made me take the skinny version of Arnold Schwarzenegger to my school dance with me.” Her voice is high and loud and it takes everything in me not to bust out laughing.

“Dude, that’s Austria. Jack is from Australia. Two different geographical locations.”

“Stop correcting me and just listen,” she wails back. “All the girls at the dance were obsessed with him, and then he danced with that bitch Katy Miller and left me standing in the corner.”

“I thought you didn’t like him?” I shoot, knowing I’m pushing her buttons, but with my pending demise hot on my heels I better have some fun while I still have the chance.

“I don’t!” she yells and moans loudly into the receiver. “Maybe I do. I don’t know. Do you think he likes me? ”

“Yes, Lauren. I do think he likes you, but if you keep being a shithead to him he’s going to hook up with Katy Miller, and from what you’ve said, she puts out. That’s a lot to compete with.”

“Ellen you aren’t helping and right now I hate you!” she screams, and Will widens his eyes at her shrill voice coming through the phone.

I slip my hand over the phone and whisper, “See I told you. Boy drama.”

Will smirks at me as if I didn’t just do the same thing a few hours ago. The stupid stressing over a boy and look how mine turned out. While I know it’s only been twelve hours since I met Will, things seem to be going better than most hook ups.

“Sorry, Lauren,” I say, placating her because I know the worst of this conversation is yet to come.

“I do think Jack likes you. Just be nice to him. Maybe show him where we host weddings. You love the willow tree and the swing.” I suggest this to her in the hopes of calming her down so she can tell me if Mom and Dad are in a good mood.

“Okay,” she says after a few second pause, letting my words sink in and settling herself down.

“Is he cute?” I ask and Lauren giggles a little down the phone.

“Yeah, he is. But he’s skinny and wears glasses. Ugh...” she exhales hard. “I’m not having this conversation with you. It’s too embarrassing.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter, and the conversation dies there.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Listen are Mom and Dad around? I need to talk to them, but if they’re crabby I’ll call back later.”

“Just Dad is here. You wanna talk to him?” she asks and before I can answer she’s calling out his name and I hear her feet plodding against the floor .

I hear her give out a muffled “It’s Ellen,” before my Dad’s cheerful voice comes on the line.

It’s not unusual for me to call on a Sunday night, because it tends to be when I have the most downtime. I’m sure he thinks this is my normal, I miss home, I miss you, the weather sucks and so does the food convo, but I’m about to hit him with something I don’t even know how to go about explaining.

“Hey, El,” my dad says, switching over to speakerphone and I hear my mom shout a hello from a distance, adding that she just walked in. “How’s it going?”

“It’s okay,” I say stalling, and Will rolls a hand in my direction as if to tell me to get on to it. He’s been telling me to just come out with it because shooting the shit with them will only make it worse.

I suck in a deep breath and start, “So, Dad, something happened.” And that’s when the line goes silent. Whatever my mom was doing in the background has been halted and they’re both in panic mode at my words.

“Are you okay?” my mom asks, and I can hear the concern in her voice, so maybe this is good.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m totally fine... But my car isn’t,” I say, and I realize as the words leave my mouth I’ve made it sound like I’ve been in a car accident.

Will slaps a hand to his face and shakes his head, swatting at him, I stand and start to pace the small living room.

“What do you mean the car isn’t okay?” my dad asks, this time all cheerfulness is gone.

“It got sprayed by a skunk,” I blurt out knowing that isn’t exactly the truth.

“Oh Jesus, Ellen,” my mom admonishes. “Take the damn thing through a carwash.”

I can picture her running her hand through her hair and shaking her head. I’m sure Lauren is standing by eavesdropping on the entire conversation and making mental notes of all the stupid shit I say so she can remind my parents later.

“It sprayed the inside,” I admit, my whole face wrinkling up at my words.

“How in the hell did it get inside your car?” my dad asks, his voice booming and when I look right at Will, he widens his eyes at me.

“It was under my car...” I start but the tears start to fall and my voice becomes shaky. “And I...I opened my car door and scared it. Instead of running away, it jumped in my car.”

“Goddamnit, Ellen. I never pegged you for the village idiot, but you let a damn skunk into your car?”

“I didn’t let it in my car!” I cry, my words strangled by my sobs. “It just got in there.”

“Is it still in there?” my dad questions and I shake my head even though he can’t see me, because right now I’m having a hard time getting the words out.

“No,” I sputter out. “This boy helped me get it out of there.”

“Oh christ. This was about a boy, wasn’t it? Were you drunk?” I can hear the annoyance in my father’s voice, but I also hear my mother whispering to him in an attempt to quell his overzealous responses.

Obviously I was drunk because a sober person wouldn’t have happened upon a skunk, let it in their car and then closed the door.

“What?” I say, the fake appalled tone in my voice isn’t fooling anyone and when Will starts laughing, I have to look away from him.

“Whatever. I can see this is going nowhere, but this conversation isn’t over. We’ll talk about it when you’re home in February. I’ll call the insurance company and get someone out there to take a look at it,” my dad goes on, letting out an annoyed huff at the end.

“Thanks, Dad.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Will

By the time I get back to my apartment, it's cold and dark. When I walk inside, the residual smell of skunk hits me, somehow making me smile.

"Why the fuck does our apartment stink?" Greg calls out as he walks out of the kitchen.

I grin. "Hi to you, too," I reply sarcastically. "And it's from the skunk."

"What?" he says, a shocked look on his face. "There was a fucking skunk in our apartment?"

I laugh. "No, in the car, but it sprayed us good and I guess when we came inside, it also made the apartment stink."

His shock turns to curiosity now. "Who and what is this we business?" he asks, waving a hand in my direction.

I head into the kitchen and grab a beer, stalling as I try and figure out how much I want to tell Greg.

"Will," he says, the tone in his voice suggesting he's not letting me get away with saying nothing.

"What?" I ask, turning to face him.

He stares at me, a confused look on his face that suddenly breaks into a huge smile. “Oh my fucking god, you got laid,” he says, pointing at me.

“What?” I repeat, even as I feel my cheeks start to heat .

“You totally did,” he says, a wide grin plastered on his face. “Wait,” he stops, his smile disappearing. “How the hell does getting sprayed by a skunk equate to you getting laid? This wasn’t some weird ass fetish thing, was it?”

“Oh my fucking god,” I say, repeating his words back as I roll my eyes at him. “You’re an idiot, you know that, right?”

Greg shrugs, following me out to the living room. “Whatever. Tell me about the getting laid part.”

I flop onto the couch as my mind wanders back to the last eight or so hours.

When I’d woken up this morning at my buddy’s house, hungover as all hell and sporting an even bigger headache courtesy of the blade from the ceiling fan that flew off and clocked me in the head, I’d never in my wildest dreams expected to meet a girl, get sprayed by a skunk, get laid and then find myself falling for said girl.

But as the day had worn on, that’s exactly what had happened.

Ellen was just so easy to be around, funny and a total smart ass, she just ticked all the boxes.

Of course being hot and not at all opposed to putting out on the first date or whatever, was a huge bonus.

But it wasn’t just about that. I actually really liked her.

“Will,” Greg says, interrupting my trip down memory lane. “What the fuck happened here today?”

I turn. “Got sprayed by a skunk,” I say, shrugging. “Met a girl too.”

“And got laid.”

I smile this time, but say nothing.

The next day, I find myself loitering around the business school even though it’s on the other side of campus to the labs I’ve just spent all afternoon in. I feel like a bit of a dick, but whatever, I want to see her.

Last night we’d texted back and forth a bit, mostly about her car and my clothes, Ellen promising she’d take care of getting the car towed and returning my stuff. I hadn’t really cared about either, was more interested in when I could see her again, but for some reason, hadn’t brought that up.

“You stalking me?” a familiar voice suddenly says.

I turn and find Ellen behind me, a grin on her face as she looks up at me. She looks fucking adorable, bundled up in a jacket, a beanie on her head and scarf wrapped around her neck.

I grin. “Maybe,” I say, rocking on my heels, hands shoved in my pockets.

She smiles at me for a few seconds before turning and waving goodbye to some friends hovering behind her. I watch as they all eye me off before turning to Ellen and shouting their goodbyes.

“So,” she says, turning to face me again.

“So,” I repeat. Her grin widens and I find myself smiling back at her. “You wanna go grab something to eat?” I suggest.

Ellen cocks an eyebrow. “Like a date or something?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, like a date.”

She stares up at me, her eyes shining in the cold air. “Okay,” she eventually says, biting her bottom lip.

My eyes drop to her mouth and I find myself stepping closer, my hand sliding around her waist as I lower my head and put my mouth against hers. Ellen pushes up on her toes, her lips pressing against mine as they open and I feel the warmth of her breath, her tongue as it slips into my mouth.

“Fuck,” I groan, pulling her even closer.

I feel her smile against my mouth as her arms wrap around me. I don’t know how long we stand here kissing for, but when we pull back, both of us are breathing hard, our breath coming out in white puffs.

“You’re an evil temptress, you know that,” I whisper, my forehead against hers.

Ellen giggles. “You started it. ”

I grin, grabbing her hand. “Come on, let’s eat,” I say. “Before I’m distracted by thoughts of getting you naked.”

We head back to my car on the other side of campus, both of us freezing by the time we get there. Inside, I blast the heater to full and we sit for a couple of minutes warming our hands.

“What’s the verdict on your car?” I ask, glancing over at Ellen.

She rolls her eyes, shaking her head as she says, “The insurance company is coming to look at it this week. I’m pretty sure it’s gonna be a write-off with that stink inside.”

I laugh. “Yeah my roommate noticed the smell inside the apartment straightaway.”

“Shit, really?” she asks, eyes wide.

I grin, nodding as I start the car and head toward a diner near my apartment. “Yep, it’s not too bad though, don’t worry.”

“I feel like I’m going to be inhaling skunk for days,” she replies. “It’s fucking gross.”

Laughing again, I reply. “It wasn’t our finest hour.”

We pull up to the diner and head inside to grab a booth by the window. As we look over the menu, I can’t help sneaking a couple of glances at Ellen. She’s pulled the beanie off her head, several strands of her hair sticking straight up as though charged with static electricity.

Her cheeks are still flushed from the cold, although she’s taken her jacket off now, revealing a tight sweater underneath that’s doing nothing to stop those thoughts of her naked.

“Are you staring at me?”

I glance up at her face, see her watching me over the top of her menu. “Maybe,” I say, an eyebrow raised.

She grins at me, but says nothing as she shuts her menu, folds her arms on the table

and looks at me.

“What’s the latest with your sister and her Aussie boyfriend?” I ask, mirroring her pose .

Ellen rolls her eyes. “Ugh god, she’s such a drama queen about it all,” she says. “You’d think the world was ending the way she’s going on and on about Jack getting all this attention from the girls in her class.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I’ve seen my sisters go through that shit too. It’s pretty dramatic.”

“How many sisters do you have?”

I smile. “Two, twins, younger than me.”

Ellen’s eyebrows lift. “Wow, so you know all about this then?”

I nod. “Yep. Just be grateful you’ve only got the one. It was like hell on the earth the day my sisters decided they both liked the same boy. Fuck me.”

Our conversation stops for a few minutes while the waitress takes our order before disappearing again.

“I think Lauren’s problem is that she can’t believe Jack likes her when all he does is tease her,” Ellen continues. “I keep trying to tell her that boys are stupid and that’s how they roll.”

I burst out laughing. “Boys are stupid, huh?”

“Well,” she says, smiling back at me, “some are,” she continues. “And then some are just skunk-rescuing superheroes.”

I beam, even as I shake my head at this girl sitting across from me. “Good thing I fall into the latter category then, isn’t it?” I tease.

After we’ve finished dinner, we grab our things and head outside, the cold hitting us in an icy blast that has us both running for my car.

Inside, I switch on the ignition and crank up the heat again, realizing I have no idea what comes next.

“So, uh...” I start, hand on the wheel. “Do you want to come over?”

Ellen looks at me, a sideways glance that has me wondering if she too wasn’t sure what happens next.

“I mean I can drive you back to your dorm if you want, or you could come over and...”

“I’ll come over,” she says, cutting me off.

I nod and pull out of the parking lot to head back to my apartment. The drive doesn’t take long and when we reach the building, we head upstairs. Unlocking the front door, I find the apartment is in darkness, Greg apparently out.

“You want a beer?” I ask.

“Sure,” Ellen replies and we move into the kitchen.

I grab a couple from the fridge, handing one to her and we both stand around in awkward silence, as though neither of us quite knows what happens now.

“How old are you?” Ellen suddenly asks, lifting the beer as though in explanation.

I smile, taking a sip before answering. “Twenty, but my brother got me a good fake ID.”

“God, how many siblings do you have?”

I grin. “Three,” I reply. “Younger twin sisters and an older brother. You?”

Ellen shrugs. “Just me and Lauren, although it may be just Lauren if this whole thing with my car goes to shit.”

I burst out laughing. “What, you really think your parents will kill you because a skunk got in your car and sprayed the shit out of it?” I ask. “It’s hardly your fault, is it?”

She takes another sip of beer before giving the bottle a dirty look. “Well, it kinda is,” she says. “And beer’s fault, and gin and vodka’s. Rum too, fuck even triple sec is to blame,” she says, shaking her head.

I grin, stepping toward her as I slide a hand on her hip. “What, so getting drunk is what caused the skunk to get in your car? ”

“Yep,” she says, nodding her head. “If I hadn’t been so wasted, I never would have gone back to that guy’s place or...”

“Whoa, wait, hold up,” I say, stepping back a little. “What guy’s place?”

Ellen blushes, ducking her head a little. “Shit,” she mutters.

“Ellen,” I say. “Were you doing the walk of shame when I ran into you?”

“Um,” she says, lifting her head to look at me, bottom lip between her teeth. “Does it

count if we never actually slept together?” she asks, her blush deepening.

I chuckle, even though I’m not exactly liking the idea of her being with some other guy hours before she was with me. “I don’t know,” I offer. “I guess not.”

Ellen exhales before taking another long pull of beer. I watch as she runs a hand through her long hair, which hangs loose around her shoulders, before finally meeting my gaze.

“Look, I’m sorry, I’m really not...I’m... Fuck,” she breathes out. “I just don’t normally do this kind of thing, okay?”

“What kind of thing?” I ask, taking a sip of beer.

She shrugs. “Get shitface drunk and go home with random guys,” she offers. “Or get sprayed in a fucking parking lot by a skunk and go home with a guy.”

I nod, taking another sip of beer. “So, what you’re saying is it was a mistake?”

“No!” she cries, stepping toward me. “Well, the first guy was,” she adds, a sheepish look on her face. “But nothing happened with him. We made out, he passed out, end of story.”

I set my beer on the counter. “And me?” I ask, my hands moving to her hips. “What am I?”

Ellen stares up at me, a mix of anxiety and confusion on her face. “My superhero?” she offers.

I smile, leaning in to press a kiss to her lips. “This isn’t a mistake for me, Ellen,” I whisper, my mouth against hers. “I like you, a lot and I’m kinda glad you got sprayed

by that skunk so I had to come save you.”

Ellen giggles a little, but it's almost shy. “I like you too,” she says, her eyes meeting mine.

I cock an eyebrow at her. “So, you wanna go fool around?”

She giggles again, her blush deepening as she doesn't say anything, just presses her mouth hard against mine in an answer.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

It's been a few weeks since the skunk incident and as much as I didn't want to be all-in with Will like one of those girls who falls in love with a guy the second she meets him, I totally am.

Despite the fact that mine and Will's classes are nowhere near each other, he never fails to meet me after my last class. It's been weeks since I've spent the night in my dorm room and I have to say I don't even miss it.

As I walk out of my last class with a small skip in my step and a smile plastered on my face, I find that Will isn't in his usual spot. Actually, he isn't anywhere outside the building.

I wish I could say I'm not having a moment of panic as I pace around checking my watch and wondering why he suddenly has failed to show up.

After what feels like an hour of waiting when in actuality it's only about ten minutes, I head back to my dorm. Seeing as I'm still without a car and it's absolutely freezing, I can't just walk to Will's apartment and see if he's there. Even though that's exactly what I want to do.

As I wait for the elevator I pull my phone from my purse checking to see if Will texted me and I just missed it. But there's nothing .

I'm starting to get worried so I text Will as the elevator takes me up to my floor and by the time I reach my room I still haven't heard from him.

Opening the door, I find my roommate Alice sprawled out on her bed, and when she takes a look at my face, she knows something's wrong.

"You okay?" she asks, dropping the book she's reading onto the floor. "You look like shit. And why are you back here?"

Alice and I were placed together by the fabulous dorm room lottery system, and unlike most college roommates, we hit it off immediately, bonding over our old school names and love of the movie *Clueless*.

I totally take no offense to her telling me I look like shit and asking why I've suddenly made an appearance after my constant absence.

"Will didn't meet me after class," I say, but it's more a desperate whiny complaint.

"That is weird since he's been up your ass since the skunk incident."

I'm still standing in the doorway, phone in my hand, checking it for the millionth time just in case I missed something when it rings startling Alice and me. I actually toss it on my bed and scream out loud making Alice laugh hysterically.

"You better answer that," she says through hiccupping laughs. "If it's him you're going to be pissed you missed his call."

I scramble over to the bed and flip my phone open, answering quickly and far too out of breath.

"Ellen!" my sister Lauren shrieks and I let out a loud exhale making my annoyance fully known.

"Lauren, what?"

“When are you coming home again? I need you to come home,” she wails and I know this has nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the cute Aussie boy who has been giving her a hard time since his arrival.

“Soon. I promise. I have to pick up my new skunk-free car and Dad said he’d book me a ticket when he gets it,” I say trying to placate her and distract myself. “But you’ve got me on the phone now so what’s the deal?”

“You’re never going to believe what he did.” And as bothered as she sounds I know she loves this attention. She’s fifteen and he’s the first boy to pay an active interest in her. It might all be out of convenience since they’re pretty much trapped at our parents’ vineyard, but it’s still cute.

“What happened?” I ask, an attempt to show I’m fully invested in this coming of age love story she’s got going on.

She proceeds to fill me in on how Jack found a bucket of old grapes in one of the sheds and when she wasn’t paying attention he came up behind her and dumped them on her.

She goes through all the emotions she felt and how Jack apologized and offered to take her to a movie to make up for it.

Yet somehow through all of this she has completely missed the point that Jack is head over heels crushing on her.

“What do you think I should do?” Lauren asks just as my phone begins beeping, alerting me that someone is calling on the other line.

“I think you should make out with him,” I quickly splutter out, trying to rush her off the phone as I hope the incoming call is Will.

“Ellen, no! He’s...”

I cut her off. “He’s cute and he likes you so at least kiss him.” I hang up before she can say another word and switch over to the other line. “Hello,” I answer, but of course I sound desperate.

“El, hey, sorry about today,” Will’s voice says and as soon as I hear his voice a smile pulls at my lips and relief washes over me. When I catch a glimpse of Alice’s face she rolls her eyes and pretends to make out with herself, her arms wrapping around her body as she opens her mouth.

“Hey, Will. No problem. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I had an exam today that I totally forgot about. It ran a little long and I meant to text you.”

“How’d your test go?” I ask, genuinely interested.

“Mmmm, I don’t know. Probably not so great,” Will admits and I find this hard to believe. In the short time we’ve been together I’ve noticed most everything comes naturally to him, especially school.

“Why would you say that?”

“Well,” he says, pausing a second and then he laughs a little and adds, “I’ve spent all my time with this insanely hot and very distracting girl. Not much studying going on.”

“Will,” I practically shout, suddenly feeling terribly guilty that I’ve monopolized his time. “You need to study. You can tell me to shove off...”

“Never,” Will interrupts and as much as I want to spend time with him, I don’t want to be the reason he fails a class. “How about you and me have dinner tonight?”

“Only if you don’t have any exams coming up that you need to study for.”

“Nothing coming up so your ass better be here soon.”

It takes me about two seconds to slip into my boots and bundle up for my walk to Will’s apartment. It’s freezing outside, but that doesn’t stop me from walking several blocks to get there and doing it in record time.

Before I even have a chance to knock on the door, Will’s opening it and dragging me inside, his arms slipped around my waist, his lips connecting with mine.

“It was weird not meeting you after class,” he murmurs between kisses .

I nod my head in response unable to form a coherent thought as Will’s fingers slide under my shirt and begin to unhook my bra. With our bodies still connected, we walk together to the bedroom, our hands groping at the clothes that still cover the skin we both long to touch.

We finally separate, both of us tugging off our clothes and I lay back on the bed.

Will stands in front of me and removes his shirt and I take him in.

His body is perfection, all well defined muscles of his chest and stomach and arms; all of it created by his time spent in the pool.

Something I learned about him our first night together, and although he no longer swims competitively, he still finds himself in the pool on a regular basis.

Suddenly, he's on top of me, sliding his hands underneath me.

Will's lips return to mine as his tongue slowly slips into my mouth.

I move against him, but he slows everything down, kissing every part of me, my lips, my neck, my breasts.

I need him inside me. Reaching between us, sliding my hand around him.

"Will," I plead. "I want you now." I'm desperate for him especially after the panic I felt when he didn't show up after my last class. It's only been a short time, but I can't imagine my life without him.

His touch is driving me crazy in ways I never imagined.

I shift against him until he's between my legs and for a moment I find relief.

But within seconds the need returns. "Will, please," I beg again, my arms pulling him against me.

Will stops, his fingers tracing down my cheek to my neck and between my breasts.

His eyes are heavy, his lips swollen and when I open my mouth in one last attempt, he silences me with a kiss.

He pulls away, smiling softly. "You're all I want right now. I've wanted you since the moment I saw you." His words make me smile because I'm sure I was a total wreck the night we met. I guess he could see through all of that.

He leans down and kisses me again, trailing his lips along my cheek, he stops at my ear. "I need to feel you. I need to hear you moan when I'm inside you."

“Holy shit,” I mutter as Will’s mouth returns to my body. Will kisses his way down my body, stopping occasionally along the way and his fingers brush against me, yet never entering. I’m squirming again. I’ve never been so turned on like this.

He runs his tongue where his fingers just touched. My body is burning and the coolness of his tongue only makes the ache worse. He traces his tongue up my body, his teeth grazing my breast. I gasp, burying my hands in his hair and practically begging him to fuck me.

Reaching into the nightstand, he pulls out a condom and positions himself between my legs.

He waits and I want to cry out.

“Will, please,” I beg, grinding against him attempting to ease the need, and in that moment his hips move and he’s inside me.

He’s quick and deliberate and neither of us can hold out, coming together our labored breathing the only sound filling the room.

We’re lying together in his bed, both of us sated and exhausted, and knowing we can’t always go on like this, but enjoying the fact that we’re both so into each other.

Will’s hand is running up and down my back as I rest my head on his chest, the sound of his heartbeat slowly playing in my ear.

Seemingly out of nowhere Will says, “Tell me about where you grew up.”

“What do you want to know?” I ask, not even sure where to start.

“Everything. ”

“I grew up on a vineyard outside of Napa, California. It’s been in our family for generations. I learned how to make wine when I was like five years old and when I’m done here, I’ll more than likely go back there to take over for my parents.”

“What about your sister?”

“She’ll go to school too, but she’s always had more of an active interest in the winery and vineyard than I have. As of right now, I’ll work the admin side of things. Do payroll, bookkeeping. I’ll be the accountant.”

“It must be nice to know exactly what you’ll do when you finish school,” Will comments, but it’s not the usual snide remark about already being set up by my family.

“It is, but at times people make comments about not having to worry about finding a job. I don’t think they understand the reputation I have to live up to, all the people I could possibly disappoint.”

“I can’t see you ever disappointing anyone,” Will says, and my face grows warm, his compliment making me realize how much he doesn’t know about me.

“Have you ever been to California?” I ask, knowing Rhode Island is basically as far away from California you can get within the continental U.S.

“Just once when I was a little. We went to Disneyland. It’s a long way from Rhode Island.”

I know I need to go home soon to pick up my new car, and as much as I want to ask Will to come with me, it might be too soon. Take him home to meet my family? Drive across the country with me?

While it might be too soon, and it might just fuck up everything I've started with Will, I still ask the question that has been swirling in my head the second he started asking about my family. Sucking in deep breath, I let it fly .

“Hey Will, would you want to fly home with me to pick up my car? We'd fly to Cali and then drive my car back to Ann Arbor.”

There's a lull in the conversation, a silence that stills in the air and hangs heavy between us, and all I can think is, why the fuck would I have asked him this?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Will

It's been two weeks since Ellen invited me home with her and even though it was her who was nervous back then, as the plane descends into San Francisco, I feel my own stomach start to churn with nerves.

This feels like a big step, meeting her family and while I don't doubt my feelings for Ellen, I do wonder what they will all think of me.

"You okay?" she asks, as we grab our bags from the overhead compartment.

I offer her a smile. "Yep."

Ellen stares at me for a second. "You sure?"

I force my smile wider. "Definitely."

She laughs. "You're so full of shit."

"What?" I reply, laughing as I gently nudge her down the aisle.

"You are totally nervous about meeting my family, aren't you?" she says.

"Not at all," I lie. "I already know they'll love me."

Ellen gives me a funny look as I grab her hand and we walk off the plane.

The terminal is filled with people and we traverse the crowd, heading to the baggage claim.

As we are riding the escalator down, Ellen soon waves to a lady that looks like an older version of her, waiting at the bottom with a huge smile on her face.

“Mom, this is Will,” she says, hand on my back. “Will, my mom, Cathy.”

We say our hellos and then we are collecting our bags and heading toward the parking garage, Ellen and her mom chatting the entire time.

Not long after we start driving, her mom shoots me a look before saying, “So, Will, you’re the one who saved my daughter from a deadly skunk?”

Ellen immediately blushes even as a laugh escapes me. “Yeah,” I reply. “Something like that.”

Cathy smiles in the rearview mirror, a knowing look on her face as she continues. “And it’s safe to assume the whole incident was alcohol related?” she asks.

“Well,” I say, stalling a little as I glance at Ellen. “I’m not sure I’d say that.”

“Ugh,” Ellen groans, shaking her head. “Of course it was,” she admits. “The hangover part anyway,” she adds.

Ellen’s mom laughs, seemingly cool with the fact that her daughter has just admitted to underage drinking. “Well, we won’t be telling the insurance company that part,” she says.

The rest of the drive is filled with talk about college and how our courses are going. Her mom asks a few questions about my family and where I’m from and everything

about it feels relaxed and friendly, and nothing like the interrogation I was half expecting.

By the time we pull into a winery, driving past a sign indicating Somerville's , I'm feeling completely relaxed about the idea of meeting my girlfriend's family.

We eventually pull into a drive that takes us to the back of the property, stopping in front of a pair of cottages. On the steps of the larger one, a young girl sits, waiting for us .

Cathy chuckles. "Just to warn you," she says, motioning to the girl, "she's been in a terrible mood ever since Jack left."

Ellen smiles. "Misses him, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Cathy replies. "Won't admit it of course, but she definitely misses him."

Ellen laughs as she hops out of the car, the grin on her face only getting bigger as she walks toward her younger sister.

"Hey Lauren," she says, tugging on her sister's hair as she sits down beside her. Their mom just laughs, as she walks past them and disappears inside the house.

"Hey," Lauren answers.

"What's up?" Ellen asks.

"Nothing," Lauren replies, shaking her head.

"You sure about that? You seem a little sad?"

“No,” Lauren replies, a stubborn tone in her response.

“You sure?” Ellen repeats. “Maybe you actually miss him?”

“I don’t!” she shouts, standing, hands on her hips.

Ellen laughs again, reaching for her sister as she pulls her back onto the step. “It’s alright if you do, you know? I get it,” she adds, gesturing toward me.

Lauren glances up now, seemingly noticing me for the first time.

“Hey,” I say, offering her a smile.

“Hi,” she replies.

“I’m Will.” I step over to her, hand out.

Lauren stares at my hand before looking back up at me. “Lauren,” she finally says, shaking my hand.

“You want to give me a tour of the place?” I ask.

Lauren glances at her sister now, who shrugs at her before she turns back to me. “Okay,” she replies.

I nod, glancing at Ellen who gives me a strange look. I wink before pulling them both up.

Lauren leads the way, taking us back up to the sheds we passed on the drive into the property.

I grab Ellen's hand as we follow her, smiling when she squeezes it in thanks.

Our tour is filled with references to Jack, the boy from Australia and all the annoying things he apparently did to her at each location we walk past. It makes Ellen and me smile, even if we both try to put on a serious face for Lauren's sake.

Ultimately we end up in the grapevines, Lauren scowling as she points out the huge puddle of mud that Jack pushed her into only days ago.

"You know," I say, hands on her shoulders. "It actually kinda sounds like he likes you."

Lauren shakes her head. "No," she says, stubbornness back. "He was a jerk. All he did was annoy me."

I laugh. "Yeah, but that's what boys do," I tell her. "We act like jerks when we like someone."

Lauren looks up at me, a questioning look on her face as though she's trying to figure out if I'm being serious or if I'm really just giving her shit like her sister's been doing.

"Seriously," I add. "I mean, I totally gave your sister shit when we first met."

Lauren cocks an eyebrow now, glancing sideways at Ellen before looking back at me. "How?" she asks skeptically.

I grin. "Well, she did totally get nailed by a skunk, remember?" I say, giving Ellen's side a pinch, teasing her a little. "While she was completely hungover and doing the walk of shame back to her car. I mean there was so much material to work with."

Ellen shakes her head, a smile on her face even as she buries her face in her hands in mock embarrassment.

Lauren turns to her. “Is that true?” she asks.

“Yep,” Ellen says, looking up. “It is. He still doesn’t let me live it down, even now.”

“And you’re okay with that?” she asks, still doubtful .

Ellen looks over at me and I grin, winking as she stares at me as if seriously contemplating her answer. “I am,” she eventually says.

“Why?” Lauren asks.

My grin widens as I step closer and pull Ellen into my arms. “Because she’s crazy about me,” I say, kissing her cheek. “Like I am about her,” I add. “And, like Jack is about you.”

Lauren blushes now, turning on her heel as she stares off into the distance, watching the sun slowly setting over rows and rows of grapevines.

“You know, you could write to him,” I suggest. Lauren glances at me over her shoulder and I smile. “I’ll bet you anything he’s missing you just as much as you’re missing him right now.”

She swallows hard, her face a mix of confusion and embarrassment as she takes in my words.

“Go on,” I tell her. “What’s the worst that could happen? He never writes back? So what, it’s not like you’ll ever have to see him again.”

Lauren says nothing as Ellen and I stand here watching her. Eventually she nods once, before turning and walking back toward the cottages.

I turn to follow her, but Ellen grabs my hand, stopping me. “You okay?” I ask.

She stares up at me, a look on her face that I can’t read. I reach out and brush a strand of hair back from her face and she smiles, pushing up on her toes to press her lips to mine.

“Yeah,” she whispers, mouth against mine. “I’m really great.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon and evening chatting with her parents on the back deck of their house over dinner. It’s easy and relaxed, just like it was on the drive home from the airport and both of her parents get a good laugh out of my version of events regarding the skunk and Ellen’s car.

Despite Ellen’s worries and the apparently difficult phone call she made explaining it all to them, they seem remarkably chill about the fact their daughter was drinking. I guess growing up at a winery makes you a little more casual and open about alcohol.

By the time we all go to bed, it’s late, her parents bidding me goodnight as Ellen walks me next door to the guest cottage, because there’s not a chance in hell I’m sharing a bedroom with her in her family’s house.

“Your family are great,” I say, pulling her into my arms.

Ellen smiles up at me. “They really like you,” she says, arms around my waist. “And Lauren clearly thinks the sun shines out of your ass,” she adds, chuckling. “Thanks for being so nice to her today, even if she was a total grump.”

I laugh. “She’s sad and depressed,” I say. “Her true love has left her.”

“Pfft,” Ellen says, swatting my chest. “She’s being kinda melodramatic,” she adds. “I mean I know she’s totally crushing on him, but she did nothing but complain when he was here.”

I shrug, leaning in to kiss her lips. “Like I said before, that’s how it works. He drives her crazy with his teasing and then she misses it when he’s gone. In the meantime, he’s smug as shit because he knows she can’t stop thinking about him.”

Ellen laughs now. “Oh, is that so, is it?”

“Yep,” I tell her. “Just like,” I add, kissing a slow trail down her neck to her shoulder, “you’re not going to be able to stop thinking about me when you’re lying all alone in your bed tonight,” I whisper, pulling her hips hard against mine.

“Will,” she murmurs, fingers tightening at my hips as she presses her chest against mine .

“Good night, El,” I whisper, nibbling on her ear lobe. “Sleep well,” I add before turning and walking inside the guest cottage and closing the door.

I’m woken by a noise, what sounds like a door closing. Staring into the darkness of the house, I will my eyes to focus as the sound of a creaking floor board has me sitting up in bed.

“Hello?” I whisper-shout, my eyes on the open door to the bedroom I’m sleeping in.

“Hey,” comes Ellen’s voice as she creeps into the room.

I smile as she walks over to the bed and climbs in beside me. “What are you doing here?” I ask, pulling her against me.

I feel her lips against mine, her hand as it slides around my waist and into my boxers.  
“You were right,” she whispers against my mouth.

“About what?” I ask, smiling as I slip my hand beneath her tank.

Ellen pushes her body against mine, her fingers digging into my skin. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” she murmurs.

I grin now, rolling her beneath me as I say, “I knew it,” before kissing her hard.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

It's five a.m. as I creep across the yard to my parents' house, and knowing they will be up any second now, I'm trying to be as discreet as possible. I didn't intend to stay the night with Will, but after basically living together at school, I find it hard to sleep without him.

I have no idea what my parents' response would be if they knew I'd snuck over there and I'm not sure I want to find out. But like everything else in life that I've tried to keep from my parents, this one is blown to shit too.

As I walk up the back steps to the house, the kitchen light flips on and I stop in my tracks. There's not a chance either of them will check to see if I'm in my bed; we moved beyond that years ago, but my issue now, is how the hell I'm going to get back in the house?

I rack my brain for ideas and know the only logical option at this point is to hightail it back to the guest cottage and wait until my parents leave for work. That in itself will be a challenge because they work where we live.

Just as I'm tiptoeing down the steps, the backdoor swings open and I hear my dad's deep voice .

"Ellen? What the hell are you doing out here?" he asks, and despite his attempts to quiet his deep voice, it still resonates loudly.

My eyes are scrunched closed as if this will make this all disappear, and I run a hand

over my face as I try to gather my thoughts.

“I...I... was...” I stutter out and almost immediately give up knowing it’s useless to try to lie my way out of this. “I snuck over to the guest cottage and spent the night with Will,” I spit out quickly and suck in a deep breath as I wait for the backlash.

My dad walks over to the table and chairs that take up a portion of the deck and sits down. Setting his bowl of oatmeal and his cup of coffee down, he pulls out a second chair for me and tells me to sit.

I’m fucked.

Will’s fucked.

I do it though, because at this point, there’s no sense in arguing with him. My parents have always been lenient in regards to underage drinking with the whole growing up on a vineyard thing, but I’m not sure sleeping with a boy fits in there as easily.

I am eighteen and they can’t possibly believe I’m a virgin, but it’s probably a similar situation to me not wanting to think about my parents having sex. They definitely don’t want to think about their kid doing it.

“El, we’re not stupid,” my dad starts and I smirk a little because I know they’re not, and I do realize that most of the time they let things go to avoid the conflict. They knew alcohol had been involved in the skunk incident, but they also knew I was safe and in the end that’s what mattered.

He continues, “I obviously know you stay at Will’s apartment while you’re at school.

I was your age once. But, when you’re here, I would like you to respect our rules, and while they may be unspoken, sleeping with Will under our roof,” he says, his hand

flitting between my parents' house and the guest cottage, "is off limits."

I nod my head in agreement, because I know this is something my dad will stand firm on. I get it. He wants to set an example for Lauren, he wants me to be safe, he doesn't want me pregnant. The list is pretty endless, honestly.

"I want you in your bed before midnight," he states firmly and I chuckle a little, but quell it quickly. I had no idea it would be this awkward when I returned from school. Somehow living as an adult and then returning to what it was like when I lived here as a kid.

"I can do that," I tell him and I can. There's no reason why for a few days I can't go without sleeping with Will.

"We like Will, El," my dad says, now smiling at me. "Don't make me not like him."

"I like him too," I admit, feeling my cheeks grow warm at my confession. I wouldn't have even considered bringing him home to meet my family if I didn't. I even think I'm falling in love with him, but like hell if I'm going to tell my dad that.

"I just want you to keep one thing in mind," my dad starts and I have no idea where he's heading with this. "Will is from Rhode Island and you're from California. Your life is here at the vineyard, but it doesn't have to be."

"I want it to be," I say, my words firm.

I chose to go to school in Michigan because that's where my dad is from.

We have family there, he went to school there, my mom went to school there, they met there; there's history there.

But I guess I never really gave much thought to the fact that Will might want to return to Rhode Island when he graduates.

My life is here at the vineyard. This will be my career, and while I've told Will this, I didn't even think about how that would affect him. We haven't even talked about the future; both of us living in the present and so consumed with the newness of our relationship.

"You need to discuss this with Will," my dad presses and again I nod my head. This conversation has led somewhere I didn't expect it to. I was gearing up for a lecture on being responsible and not sleeping around and it's now suddenly making me take a serious look at my future—my future with Will.

"The vineyard will always be here, whether you decide to work here or not. The same goes for your sister. We, your mom and I, want you both to make your own decisions and sometimes those decisions come with complications."

The complication he's talking about is Will, someone I never thought would be a complication.

"But you work here. You've always worked here," I say, reminding my dad that this is where I was born, this is where he's worked long before I even came into the picture.

"Your mom came with the vineyard," my dad says, smiling and I know he's thinking about something that happened long ago. "She made it clear that if I wanted to be with her, that the vineyard and living in California were part of the package."

"And you just up and left your family because Mom told you to?"

"Not exactly," my dad says, this time laughing a little at the boldness of my question.

“Your mom told me the day we started dating that she was going back to her family’s vineyard when she graduated. She actually never asked me if I wanted to join her.”

“So you followed her? Like a stalker?”

“No, El,” my dad responds, rolling his eyes.

“We’d been dating for three years at that point and I knew I wanted to marry your mom, but the distance was an issue.

I got a job in Michigan when I graduated and we did the long-distance thing for about a year, and it was hard as hell.

I knew one of us would have to sacrifice something, and with me not really loving my job and not really tied to anything specific in Michigan, I found a job in San Francisco. ”

“You haven’t always worked at the vineyard?

” I ask, shocked by this turn of events.

I’ve never really had a conversation with my parents like this.

I guess it’s part of growing up. You become an adult and suddenly you have adult conversations with them, and you learn things about them that you never knew.

“Nope. This is your mom’s legacy, and it’s the same reason why you and your sister’s last name is Somerville.

We agreed to give our children her last name because of the vineyard.

We both wanted to continue her family name.

I never wanted to make it look like I was trying to slide in here for an easy job and I still don't. ”

“When did you start working here?”

“I spent about two years living in San Fran and your mom and I would make the long drive to see each other, and while it was better than the Michigan/Cali commute, it was still long. Eventually I proposed and we got married and that's when I started working here.

It wasn't like I hadn't worked at the vineyard though.

I'd spend weekends helping out and learning things from your grandpa, but until we were married, your mom ran this whole place. ”

“I had no idea,” I tell my dad, loving the story of how he ended up here.

“Just keep that all in mind as you make decisions about your relationship with Will. Someone will have to give something up. I have never once regretted leaving Michigan and that's why this all works.”

“I will,” I say contemplatively. He's given me a lot to think about .

“Now get your ass in the house before your mom wakes up and I have to explain to her why I didn't ground you for sneaking over to the cottage.”

“I'm eighteen years old, Dad.”

“I know you are, Ellen, but that never matters. You'll be forty and I'll still think of

you as my kid.”

Several hours later the vineyard is bustling with tourists and workers as Will, Lauren and I stroll around the property. There isn't a ton of stuff to do, but Lauren and I find ourselves taking Will to some of the places we missed yesterday.

We're currently maneuvering our way through the barrel room as Will takes it all in. It is quite a sight with all the oak barrels piled together on pallets, and stacked on top of each other.

“So you guys know how to do all this?” Will asks and I can hear the amazement in his voice.

“Yep, and we've been doing it for years now,” my sister says, knowing it has become like second nature for both of us. “It was kinda nice having that annoying Australian boy around because he could help me with all the stupid crap I had to do here.”

Will and I both chuckle a little at Lauren's words, knowing as much as she'd like to keep up this ruse that she doesn't like him, we know differently.

“Most of the time we get assigned the tasks that no one wants to do, but from doing all the menial shit, we learned a lot too.”

“So this is where you'll work when you graduate then?” Will asks, but there's more of an awe in his tone than anything.

“Yeah, probably, but since I'm going to school for business and accounting, I'll take over the books and administrative side of things and Lauren will run the place .

I take a look at Lauren, who is now climbing a stack of barrels, and I wonder if there will ever be a time that she runs anything but her mouth. I can't even picture it.

Just as we're about to leave, Lauren and I both hear the sound of barrels being shifted and we tug Will in that direction.

"Come on," Lauren calls, looking over her shoulder at Will and me. "They're moving barrels around, you're going to want to see this. You have to rotate them and spray them with a little water..."

"Really?" Will says, shooting me a questioning look.

"Yeah, it's pretty cool. They're huge and heavy. It's just something the public doesn't normally get to see. And sometimes, they break and wine fucking floods the room. Sixty gallons of wine, everywhere."

Lauren nods her head and her eyes light up. This is actually why she wants to check it out.

"So how long do these barrels stay in here?" Will asks as we make our way to the back of the large shed.

"It depends," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "Some are in here for only like six weeks, but those are the mediocre wines, the less expensive shit. Others can be in here for years. But in this shed, they're in here for about six to eight months."

"And someone keeps track of all this?" he asks, again looking around at the massive quantity of barrels.

"Of course. My parents do and they have employees who do. It's a process."

Just as Will opens his mouth to ask me another question, I hear someone call out my name.

“Ellen! Holy shit! I didn’t know you were coming home?”

It’s Tommy and the sound of his voice makes me smile. When I reach him, he pulls me in for a hug and I return it, squeezing him hard .

“It’s so good to see you. Lauren didn’t tell me you were still working here,” I say as we separate.

“Yeah, in between classes and that I pick up shifts. Your parents always welcome me back.”

“I thought you were going to school in Seattle?” I ask, wondering why he’s back here in February.

“Yeah, things didn’t go so well...”

“He means he flunked out,” Lauren interjects. “Smoked a lot of weed.”

I burst out laughing and I hear Will chuckle from behind me.

“Oh, Tommy, this is my boyfriend Will, and Will this is Tommy. His parents manage the restaurant and café on site and Tommy works around the vineyard doing all the shit Lauren and I can’t do.”

Will and Tommy shake hands, but I can’t help but notice a strange look on Will’s face, and suddenly the air around us seems to be buzzing.

I look over at Lauren but she clearly doesn’t notice and goes back to scaling another wall of barrels.

“We grew up together, went to school together, but he’s a year older than me...” I’m

rambling awkwardly and I know it. Luckily Lauren cuts in and saves me.

“Will, you want to learn how to rotate barrels?” Lauren asks and Will nods his head.

While the tension has faded I can’t help but wonder if Will’s a little jealous.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Will

I wander off with Lauren to watch her rotate the wine barrels. I'm not really paying attention though, instead half listening to Ellen and Tommy as they catch up, their laughter echoing all the way to the back of the shed.

I'm not usually a jealous guy but there's something about this Tommy guy that's got me worked up for some reason.

The way his eyes lit up when he saw Ellen, the way he hugged her, his arms lingering a bit too long for my liking.

“Will?”

Lauren's voice cuts through my obsessive thoughts. “Yeah, what?”

She smiles at me as she indicates the rows of wine barrels that must be stacked about ten high on some sort of wooden rack. “Did you wanna learn?”

I shrug as I walk over to her.

“You okay?”

I let out a long exhale, not sure why I'm about to ask this question, but apparently unable to stop myself. “What's the deal with Tommy?”

Now it's Lauren who's shrugging. “Nothing,” she says. “We've known him forever. ”

“So, Ellen and him,” I start, forcing myself to try and act casual as though I’m only asking to make conversation, not because I’m jealous. “Did they ever...you know, date?”

Lauren laughs, shaking her head as she grabs some sort of remote control panel and starts punching the buttons. The low hum of an engine starts up and I look up, watch as the mechanism that’s linked to the rack starts slowly rotating the wine barrels one by one.

“Wow,” I murmur, my nerdy engineer side impressed at how the whole thing works.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Lauren says just as the sound of laughter rings out.

I turn and even though it’s dark in the back of the shed, the light streaming through the open door shows Tommy and Ellen in silhouette. I watch as they both laugh at something, Tommy extending his arm as his hand falls on Ellen’s shoulder.

She doesn’t move, instead, her own hand reaches out and lands on Tommy’s chest as they both continue to laugh at whatever it is that both of them finds funny.

I feel my chest tighten as I watch them, a weird surge of possessive jealousy coursing through me. It’s not that I don’t trust Ellen, I do. I guess I’ve just never had to see her with another guy. Especially not one she’s so...so familiar with.

“He’s just a friend,” Lauren says and when I turn, I see her standing beside me, watching her sister and Tommy.

“Uh huh,” I reply, as I walk back toward the front of the shed.

Neither of them notices my approach and it’s not until I slide my arm around Ellen’s shoulders that she even realizes I’m there.

“Hey,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “We were gonna go into Napa and grab some lunch,” I remind her. “We should get going? ”

Ellen turns and smiles at me. “Yes,” she replies, before turning back to Tommy. “Do you want to come?”

Tommy immediately answers, “Yes,” with Lauren chiming in that she wants to come and before I know it, my day spent hanging out with my girlfriend has quickly turned into something else.

Tommy drives us into Napa, and we spend an hour or so wandering around, checking out the shops before grabbing some lunch. Despite my earlier reservations, we have a good day and as much as I wish I was spending it alone with Ellen, it’s actually kinda fun having both Tommy and Lauren around.

I learn that Tommy didn’t exactly flunk out of school, but is currently taking an extended leave of absence courtesy of the weed-induced high failure rate of some of his classes.

“Truth be told, I’m not even sure I want to go back,” he admits as the waiter drops off the three huge pizzas we’ve all decided to share.

“You don’t like it?” I ask, confused because I’d always known what I wanted to do, ever since I was a kid and my dad took me to the robotics lab he worked at. It might sound totally nerdy, but to me it was cool as fuck.

Tommy shrugs. “Nah, not really. I actually prefer being outside, working with my hands. Kinda only went to make my mom and dad happy, but that backfired big time.”

“In what way?” I ask.

Tommy chuckles. “In the way where I got paired up on my first day with the biggest stoner gamer there is this side of Colorado. I don’t think he ever went to class and as a result neither did I.”

I nod. “Yeah I remember that feeling of being away from home, no parents watching over you and no one caring whether you went to class or not. I nearly failed a couple of classes in my first year too. ”

“You did?” Ellen asks, surprised.

I nod, smiling at her. “Yeah, although not for smoking weed or anything, although we did do a bit of that. It was more the pranks we used to play on the TA, all the hours spent planning that shit instead of studying or paying attention in class.”

Tommy grins now, elbows on the table as he leans forward. “Oh yeah, do tell?”

I shake my head, laughing a little. “Is this a good idea, given the company,” I ask, gesturing toward Lauren. “Young impressionable minds and all?”

Lauren scoffs as she flips me off and says, “Please, I’m a grown ass adult.”

Ellen bursts out laughing as she all but collapses against me. “Right,” she gets out between chuckles. “Which is why you’re pining over some guy you pretended to hate but actually are secretly in love with and now totally miss the shit out of?”

Lauren blushes and we all laugh as she grabs a slice of pizza and angrily begins to eat it.

“Alright, I’ll spill,” I say, in an attempt to make peace with her. “We did a lot of shit to torment the poor guy,” I start. “It was probably a bit harsh, but to be fair, he did make our lives a living hell a lot of the time. Running the class like he was on some

mega power trip or whatever.”

“Wait, was Greg involved in all of this too?” Ellen asks, knowing exactly what my roommate is like.

I laugh. “God, of course, he was the ringleader of it all,” I say, knowing he hated our TA more than anyone. “Anyway, apart from the usual shit like barricading him in the restrooms or slipping laxatives into his coffee, the final straw came when we sort of stole his car.”

Tommy chuckles. “Sort of?”

I glance at him, an eyebrow cocked as I say, “Well, we moved it...without his knowledge.”

Tommy nods slowly as though he’s trying to put the pieces together. “Okay, elaborate,” he adds, moving his hand as though to hurry me up.

My grin widens. “He used to drive one of those tiny cars, some sort of Fiat or whatever, I don’t know,” I start. “All I know is that it was little and we’d been jokingly saying how it was so tiny we could practically lift it up. Then one day a bunch of us decided to see if we could move it.”

Tommy lets out a loud laugh. “What?”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding as I continue to explain. “We picked it up and actually moved it.”

“To where?” Ellen asks, her eyes wide.

I slip my arm around her shoulders as I grin at each of them. “Well, the first time...”

“The first?” Tommy asks, shocked.

My grin widens. “Yeah, the first time, we managed to wedge his car between two others,” I explain. “It was jammed in so tight, you could not open any of the doors and the only way he’d be able to get in was if one of the other cars drove away.”

“What happened?” Ellen asks, reaching for another slice of pizza.

“Well, we chose wisely,” I say. “Because we knew both those cars belonged to the members of the track team...who were at a meet and not due back for hours,” I continue, chuckling a little at the memory of our asshole TA desperately trying to work out how to get into his car, which was jammed between two SUVs, a wall at the back, preventing him from opening the trunk and just climbing through.

He hadn’t noticed us all laughing our asses off from the lab, two floors up, which was why we’d been able to get away with it.

“Pretty sure his car was stuck there until like midnight or something. ”

Ellen swats at me, but she’s laughing as she says, “You guys are assholes.”

“Yeah,” I admit, shrugging.

“And you never got caught?” Lauren asks, her eyes wide in amazement.

I shake my head. “Nope, not that time. Were pretty close the next time though, which is why we called it quits before we got ourselves thrown out.”

Tommy smiles as he shakes his head. “What’d you do the second time?”

My brows raise as though to say, this one was good, even as I stall a little by reaching

for another slice of pizza.

“Will...” Lauren whines. “What did you do?”

I chuckle. “Next time, we dumped his car in the middle of the football field,” I say.

Nobody says anything, the shock seemingly rendering them all speechless. Eventually Tommy speaks. “How the hell did you manage that?”

“That was some ninja stealth moves, I’m telling you,” I say, remembering how close we came to getting caught. And even though we were all dressed in black, dark ski masks pulled over our faces, we knew that if anyone had seen us, we’d be toast.

“It was winter,” I continue, by way of explanation. “So it got dark early. I don’t know where he thought his car had gone, but I did hear the football coach went totally apeshit when the team met for practice and this TA’s car is sitting in the middle of the field.”

Everyone collapses with laughter now as we finish off our lunch, Tommy and I continuing our stories of shit we did that almost got us kicked out of school.

By the time we’re heading back to the vineyard, my earlier jealousy has disappeared and been replaced with a genuine like for the guy that I can now see is more like a brother to Ellen and Lauren.

Later that night, I’m lying in bed when I hear the sound of the front door to the cottage I’m staying in open and then close. I smile as the sound of footsteps gets closer and by the time Ellen appears in my doorway, there’s a huge grin on my face.

“Thought you weren’t supposed to be over here,” I ask, hands behind my head as I lean back against the headboard.

Ellen bites her bottom lip as she stares over at me. "I'm not," she says.

A soft laugh escapes me. "So, what, you're gonna sneak back in before you get caught, are you?"

She smiles now, twisting a strand of hair around her finger as she stares across at me. "Maybe," she says, walking toward me. "Maybe you could teach me some of those ninja moves you were talking about."

I chuckle as I pull back the covers and Ellen climbs into bed, straddling my hips. My hands move to her thighs instinctively, because even after only one night, it already feels like too long since I've had her.

"I might be able to do that," I say, slipping my hands higher.

She stops them, all playfulness gone as she looks down at me. "Thank you," she whispers.

"For what?" I ask, confused.

"For coming here like this, for today," she says. "For...for being understanding about Tommy and not being weird about him."

"Well," I start, as a tiny stab of guilt lurches through me. "To be fair, this morning, I wasn't exactly thrilled about him, but actually, he's not that bad."

Ellen nods, her hands lifting off mine now as she cups my face in her fingers. "He's like a brother to me," she whispers, leaning in to kiss my lips. "Nothing more."

I nod, pulling her closer as I deepen the kiss. "Good," I breathe out.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

As much as it was great to be home with my family, it's nice to be back at school enjoying my independence once again.

Taking Will home has given me a totally different perspective on our relationship, and while it's only been a few months, I know now that I'm falling in love with him.

And judging by his response to Tommy, I'm going to go out on limb and say he's feeling the same way.

I've been dancing around saying it to him for a week now, it lingering on the tip of my tongue, but never finding the courage to just spit it out. But tonight is going to be different.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about my sister and her moping around the vineyard without Jack.

It was a missed opportunity, and something I think she's going to think about the rest of her life.

She may only be fifteen years old, but that doesn't mean what she feels for Jack is any less real.

I'm using her experience as a reminder to myself to not let things remain unsaid.

My heart also breaks for her and a part of me is tempted to contact him and confess

her deepest, darkest secret to him.

She'd kill me though, like murder me in my sleep.

I guess all I can do is encourage her to reach out to him.

Even Will suggested it, and maybe she'd be more likely to take his advice .

I'm pulling on my boots when my phone rings letting me know that Will is downstairs waiting for me so we can hit up some bars.

I tuck my hair behind my ears and give myself a quick once-over in the mirror before turning to Alice and asking, "How do I look?"

"You look like you're going to freeze your ass off." She looks me up and down and rolls her eyes.

Alice and I get along far better than most roommates who were thrust together by the random lottery system, but we're still quite different. She's not interested in crowds or bars or impressing boys with tube tops in the frigid Michigan winters.

"Shut up. Do I look good enough to tell Will I love him?" I ask, but this time it's me rolling my eyes.

"You look hot, so yeah," she replies nodding her head and shrugging her shoulders. "But hold on."

Alice hops off her bed and begins to rummage through her closet, sliding a clump of hangers to the side as she pulls out a black jacket from the back.

"Here," she says, thrusting the jacket at me. "Take this so when you're standing in the

freezing cold and you tell Will you love him, he isn't focusing on your glass-cutting nips and you're not about to piss yourself from hypothermia."

I'm laughing so hard at Alice's honest interpretation of what could happen that tears are streaming down my face. I hate to break it to her that I don't plan to be standing out in the cold, but I let it go. I guess anything could happen.

"Thanks, Mom," I reply, sweetly as I take the black trench coat from her and slip it on, pecking her on the cheek as I head for the door.

"Have fun and good luck," she calls, as the door closes behind me.

I take one last deep breath and push the button for the elevator. It's now or never .

When the doors slide open, Will is waiting for me and clearly he didn't get the non-existent memo about this being a big night, because he's dressed in jeans and a hoodie.

"Wow, you look amazing," he says, stumbling over his words slightly.

It's been a while since I dressed up to go out with Will and now I'm sorta starting to regret it.

I've made it way too obvious that I'm planning or expecting something out of tonight, and if it all goes to shit it's going to be embarrassing as fuck.

Will leans in and slips his arms around my waist, pulling me close, he presses his lips to mine softly.

"Maybe we should just go back to my apartment," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear and his fingers sliding under my top.

A jolt of electricity shoots through when his fingers connect with my skin and I suddenly want to agree with him.

Fuck going out drinking; let's just take a few shots in his kitchen and hop in bed.

No matter how this plays out, I'm going to need a little liquid courage to get the whole thing rolling.

"Why don't we at least get something to eat and have a few drinks," I suggest, my nervousness taking over. I'm not sure why I'm trying to schedule an I love you. It should be spontaneous, organic and well, not this shit.

My hands are shaking when Will threads his fingers into mine and begins to lead the way out of the building. Before we can reach the street, he turns to me and says, "You're being kinda weird. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I mutter back, feeling a knot tightening in my stomach at the idea that I've made this night into something it shouldn't be.

"You're not going to break up with me, are you?" Will asks, pulling me so we are now standing face to face .

"God, no," I reply, an exasperated sigh falling from my lips when I realize I've made him think the worst. I throw my arms around his neck and pull him in close, kissing his lips and telling myself when it happens, it happens.

The night continues uneventfully with us meeting up with a few friends and doing a little bar hopping before we head back to Will's apartment.

We step out of the bar and a light dusting of snow has fallen and the sky is dark and blanketed in a heavy gray clouds.

The snow is still falling lightly and Will takes my hand in his as we walk.

We're both drunk and I giggle at everything he says as he talks incessantly about absolutely nothing.

We stop off at a burrito joint, and grab some to go and continue our walk home.

I shudder in the cold air, wrapping my arms around myself and silently thanking Alice for her jacket.

"Are you cold?" Will asks as he stops to throw away the wrapper from his burrito. We're standing outside the stadium with only a few blocks left to go before we reach his apartment.

"Of course I'm cold," I respond, my teeth practically chattering.

It might be March, but in Michigan that can mean any number of things: snow, rain, extreme cold, oddly warm temperatures.

My California-raised ass is just not cut out for this kind of weather.

"I just want you to know that I'm moving back to California when I graduate," I blurt out with no warning.

"Can't handle the cold, huh?" Will says, running his hands up and down my arms trying to warm me up.

"No," I whine, but I feel the moment fall serious. "I love California and my parents' vineyard and the winery."

"I know you do," Will says, nodding his head, but I don't think he understands what

I'm saying.

Maybe I don't even understand it. I'm drunk and suddenly feeling emotional about the possibility of losing Will over something as simple as wanting to move back home after graduation; a graduation that is so far into the future that it doesn't even matter right now.

It's a decision that doesn't need to be made right now, and I can't predict the future, but the prospect of it scares the shit out of me.

"No," I say again, but this time Will pulls back a little, his hands now on my face, cupping it. "I'm going back to California when I graduate and..." I trail off not knowing how to finish my drunken ramblings or how to make myself not sound desperate and needy.

"And I'm going with you," Will says, firmly.

"What?" I cry out, a feeling of tears forming in my eyes. "You can't go with me. You have a family in Rhode Island and a life there and..."

"Ellen, I know it's only been a few months, but you are my life now.

I want to be wherever you are and if that means moving to California then that's what I'm going to do.

" He pauses and his lips press against my forehead, remaining there for a few seconds.

"I don't have a plan. I have no idea how it will work, but I hope you trust me when I say, I want to be with you. "

I nod my head in response, unable to form a coherent thought, because I'm so overcome by his willingness to support me, and his understanding of knowing exactly what I need.

"I love you, Ellen," Will says, his breath coming out in small white puffs of air as the words fall from his lips.

He took a moment that I stressed about, a moment that I felt needed to be perfect and he made it exactly what I hoped it would be.

It was simple and organic and everything about it has me reeling.

My heart is hammering in my chest, thumping hard and fast, and right now, in this moment I know I love him too .

"Oh Will," I murmur, my words quiet, but audible in the silence of this normally noisy college town, this normally overwhelming loud stadium venue. "I love you too."

We barely make it back to Will's apartment with our clothes on. Our confession has only added fuel to an already raging fire between us.

Will pushes the door open, and we tumble inside, a laugh falling from both our mouths as our lips connect.

We separate for a split second as Will looks around and listens for his roommate.

When he turns back to face me, his eyes are dark, his pupils wide and I can see all the want and need I feel reflected in his face.

My hands begin to shake as I step closer to him, closing the distance between us, my

heartbeat drumming loud in my ears, as I'm flooded with warmth.

I need to touch him, to be close to him, and this can't be like all the other times we've done this. There is so much more meaning in it now than there ever was before.

I love him.

And he loves me.

I've said these three words before, to my parents, my sister, old boyfriends, but the intensity of it has never been like this. This is what an intense, all-consuming love feels like; it's real and honest and raw.

My hands are on his chest, his heartbeat matching mine, a fast and rhythmic feeling; the anticipation intense and when his mouth meets mine again, I grow weak.

I feel him turn me around and we walk clumsy toward the bedroom, both of us groping at each other's clothes, desperate to feel the warmth of our skin.

I push his jeans to the floor and he slips off his boots, kicking his jeans off too as he backs me up against the bed.

My legs brush the comforter and I lay back.

I feel dizzy, lightheaded as if I'm spinning and I watch his eyes rake over my body and when he lies down, feeling the weight of his body on me, I gasp out loud .

He begins kissing me again, his lips soft and slow. Taking his time, he kisses my face and my neck, my shoulders and my lips as his fingers run down my arms. Each touch brings a shiver to my skin, but I need more. I need him.

Will kisses a line up my neck until he reaches my ear. I can hear his breath coming fast and ragged as he whispers, "I love you, Ellen."

"Don't stop, please," I beg, and I feel like I'm melting. His words, his touch, the way he kisses me; it's all more than I ever thought I would experience in my lifetime. It's perfect.

My fingers trail up his arms, caressing the tight muscles in his biceps, and when I reach his neck, I cradle his face in my hands. Bringing his mouth to mine, I exhale slowly as I whisper, "I love you, Will."

His hands slip around and undo my bra, but he's slow and deliberate, taking his time as he slides the straps down each of my arms. Each brush of his fingers causes my body to respond.

My pulse rapid, my breathing labored, as my body tingles.

And when his lips press against mine, his tongue urging my lips apart, I open to him and feel the warmth of his mouth meet mine.

I'm ready for him.

And then it's just us as I feel him push inside me.

Just once though, one simple action, one simple movement that shows our trust in each other and how much falling in love can change a person.

I moan when he pulls out and slides on a condom quickly.

I feel him enter me again and this time we both respond letting out a soft moan of desire.

His body moves faster, my hips matching the rhythm of his as he moves in and out.

Will pulls my nipple into his mouth, biting and sucking, and I call out as pleasure radiates through me.

I feel his lips trail along my overly sensitive skin, leaving a burning path everywhere they touch as he makes his way over my neck.

He bites and sucks, marking me and making me moan for more.

When he reaches my ear, his voice deep and sexy, he growls out, “One day I’m going to marry you and we’ll fuck like this every single night of our lives. ”

There’s nothing I want more than to marry him and to feel like this and to be this connected to him for the rest of my life.

Will

Present Day

“Where are you going?” I mumble, as Ellen stirs beside me.

“Getting up,” she whispers, even as she rolls into my side.

“Bullshit,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “Do you remember what day it is today?”

I feel her mouth smile against my ribs before she rolls her body onto mine, her smiling face looking down at me. I reach up and brush the hair back from her face.

“I do,” she whispers.

I grin up at her. “Ever think we’d get this far?”

Her smile widens. “Yep,” she says with a nod. “Any man crazy enough to want to sleep with me after getting drowned in skunk spray was always going to be a keeper.”

I burst out laughing. “And here we are, fourteen amazing years later.”

“Happy anniversary, babe,” she whispers, leaning down to kiss me.

“Mmmm,” I reply, rolling us over so she lies beneath me now.

I slide my hands down her arms, my fingers locking with hers as I lift her arms, pinning them above her head.

Ellen's smile gets bigger as I kiss a path across her jaw to her ear.

"You remember what I promised you?" I growl, the words low.

"Uh huh," she says, already breathless as her body arches beneath mine.

I suck her earlobe into my mouth, gently nibbling before saying, "That's why you can't get out of bed just yet."

Ellen groans and I continue a path of kisses down her neck to her shoulder, along her collarbone and down to her breast. I slide my body lower as I take her nipple in my mouth, smiling at the whispered, "Fuck," that falls from Ellen's mouth.

I tease her nipple, sucking and gently biting, before kissing a path across to her other breast and doing the same thing.

"Oh god, Will," she murmurs, squirming beneath me because she knows exactly where I'm going next.

"Patience, babe," I whisper against her skin, kissing a trail down her side to her hip.

Ellen's legs fall open in invitation and I settle my body between them, kissing a path up her inner thigh until I reach the top.

"Is this what you want," I whisper before slowly pushing a finger inside her. "God, you're so wet," I groan, as I lower my mouth to her.

Ellen's groan is louder now as I start to tease her with my tongue, my finger slowly

sliding in and out of her. She writhes against me, working herself against my mouth and finger as I suck and lick, pushing her closer and closer to the point of release.

I feel her fingers as they slide into my hair, pulling me closer, gripping me as though to tell me what she wants. What she needs more of.

I up the tempo of my finger, sliding a second one inside her as I continue to suck and lick her. Eventually I feel her fingers pulling at my hair, her hips pushing off the bed as she calls out my name and comes, her body tensing around me as the waves roll over her.

I don't move, only slow down my movements as I ride out her orgasm with my tongue and fingers until eventually her whole body relaxes.

Smiling, I kiss my way back up her body to her mouth, slowly pushing inside her as I lean down and kiss her lips.

"Fuck, we've always been good at this," I whisper against her mouth.

"Yeah," comes her breathless reply. "I think we actually get better with age."

I chuckle. "Better with practice, maybe?" I suggest, my mind flashing back through the past fourteen years and all the different ways and times we'd done this.

It's never gotten boring or old. Every time with Ellen has driven me wild with lust and desire and love, and today is no different. I don't need it to be our ten-year wedding anniversary for me to get all hot and worked up for this woman. I've felt this way since the second I saw her.

I slide my hands up her arms, our fingers locking together over her head as I slowly start to move inside her, my movements long and deep. Her mouth finds mine again

and she kisses me with a hunger that hasn't stopped for her either.

I slide one of my hands down her body, slipping it under her waist as I pull her closer, holding her against me as I continue to push inside her, my hips moving faster now.

"Ellen," I moan as she wraps her legs around me, her heels digging into my ass and urging me deeper. "God, babe, I'm gonna come."

"Yes," she whispers as she pushes her hips up to meet mine. "Yes."

And then I do, unable to hold back any longer as I push inside her one last time and come hard .

I collapse against her, my body sated, my limbs feeling heavy and lax. I let go of her hands and she wraps her arms around me, holding me against her as both of us try to get our breathing under control.

"Promise me we'll be doing this for another fourteen years," she whispers, her mouth at my ear.

I lift my head, my eyes finding hers. She looks up at me with so much love I actually feel my heart shift in my chest with how much this woman means to me. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I smile at her. "Fourteen, how about the next forty?"

Ellen chuckles, a hand slapping my ass as she teases, "Oh, think you'll still be going like this when you're in your seventies, huh?"

I grin. "Please," I reply, pulling out a little before pushing back inside her, loving the moan that she lets out when I do. "I could be a hundred and still get it up for you."

She bursts out laughing, her hands gripping my ass as she holds me inside her. I lean

down and suck her nipple into my mouth again, her body arching beneath me and just like that, I'm ready to go again.

So I do.

"Coffee?" Ellen asks, as I walk into the kitchen.

"Thank you," I reply, taking the cup she offers me before leaning in to kiss her.

"So, what's the plan for today?" she asks.

I grin, sliding an arm around her waist as I take a seat on the stool and pull her against me. "How about we go back to bed and just stay there for the day?" I whisper, nuzzling her neck.

Ellen sighs, her arms sliding around my neck. "That sounds like a plan," she murmurs. "After we eat though? I'm starving. "

I pull back, grinning at her as I lean in to press a kiss to her lips. "Pretty sure I've eaten once already," I say against her mouth. "But I'm more than happy to have seconds...and thirds...and..."

Ellen silences my words with another deep kiss and I'm ready to say fuck it with breakfast and just have my way with her right here on the kitchen counter when her phone chimes out with a text message.

We both pull back, knowing who it will be from and why.

"Sorry," Ellen says, her arms still around my neck.

I smile. "Don't be, seriously, check she's okay. I'm worried about her too."

“See,” she whispers, kissing me again. “Just another reason why I love you.”

I chuckle. “The main one being the size of my cock and how good I am in bed though, right?”

Ellen giggles, even as she swats at my chest before reaching for her phone. When she reads the message, she smiles, turning the phone so I can see it.

Lauren: happy anniversary guys – hope you have an amazing day xx

“Shit, that’s sweet of her,” I say, knowing how hard it must be for her to see us this happy after all this time, given everything that’s happened with her.

“Yeah,” Ellen says, typing out a quick response. “What are we going to do about her?” she asks, as she puts her phone on the counter.

I shrug. “I don’t know,” I reply. “Sign her up to Tinder for some no-strings-attached sex?”

Ellen laughs out loud even as she shakes her head. “You think that’s the solution? ”

I shrug. “You know what they say, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.”

“Of course it is,” she mumbles, still shaking her head at me. “But somehow I don’t think that’s the kind of thing Lauren’s after.”

“So what is?”

Ellen takes a sip of coffee, her thoughts now whirling as she steps towards me and stands between my legs again, half sitting on my lap as she contemplates what we can

do.

“I think it’s gonna need to be something big,” she starts, still working her way through whatever plan it is she’s thinking about putting in motion. “Something that she least expects, but which is capable of causing the biggest reaction.”

“A gigolo?” I suggest, slipping my arms around her waist.

Ellen laughs even as she reaches for her phone again. “No, Will. No gigolos, no prostitutes, no anonymous sex courtesy of Tinder,” she says, fingers typing away at something on her phone.

“So, what then?” I ask.

“This,” she says, grinning proudly as she turns her phone to me.

My eyes move over the screen, trying to make sense of what she’s showing me. “An Australian hook-up?” I ask, confused.

“No!” Ellen says, laughing again. “Well yes, actually, but not just any Australian hook-up,” she continues. “I’m talking her first love, her one true love, the boy she’s never forgotten about, even when she claimed she despised him.”

“Ohhh,” I say as it dawns on me whose Facebook profile I’m currently looking at. “Jack?” I ask.

Ellen nods. “Yep, little Jack Wilson, the boy who tormented my baby sister because he had a huge crush on her,” she says. “And just quietly, little Jack Wilson grew up to be big hot Jack Wilson. ”

“Hey,” I say, smacking her butt.

“Oh don’t worry, baby,” she says, leaning into me. “You’ll always be my big hot stud.”

“You bet your ass I will,” I murmur, as I look over this guy’s profile. “You think he still has a crush on her?” I ask. “What if he’s with someone?”

“Look,” she says, tapping on the About icon. “It doesn’t say he’s in a relationship,” she says.

“Okay,” I reply. “Assuming he updates his Facebook status regularly, which I’m guessing as a guy, he doesn’t. How exactly are you planning to make this work? The guy lives in Australia.”

Ellen puts the phone down and turns so she’s facing me. “Oh, don’t you worry, I’ve got a plan,” she says, a devious smile on her face now. “And I know exactly how we’re going to get Jack and Lauren back together again.”

My smile widens as I slide my hands down her back to her ass. “So sneaky,” I whisper.

She grins, leaning in to kiss me. “I learned my stealth moves from one of the best,” she whispers. “And I’ve got no problem with resorting to sneaky tactics to get this boy from Down Under back Stateside.”

I smile against her mouth. “Speaking of down under,” I murmur, slipping my fingers inside her panties. “What do you say I take another trip down there?” I whisper, pressing my fingers against her.

“Will,” Ellen groans, her head falling backward even as she widens her stance a little.

“Yeah?”

“God, I love you,” she whispers, her breath hitching as I now slide a finger inside her.

I chuckle, pulling her closer as I put my mouth against her ear. “Right, so it’s not just my cock you love, is it? It’s my fingers too,” I murmur, slowly pumping them inside her .

“Mmmm.”

I grin, turning us so Ellen is backed up against the kitchen counter. She whimpers as I pull my fingers out, but I smile at her, my hands on her ass now as I lift her so she’s sitting on the counter.

My eyes on hers, I slowly pull off her panties, my grin widening as she pulls off her t-shirt and sends it flying across the kitchen.

My hands on her thighs, I push her legs apart, leaning in to kiss her deeply before whispering, “Think I’ll spend a little time down under right now.”

Then I ease her back onto the counter and lower my mouth to her.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am*

Ellen

The kids come running out of the house to greet us when our car pulls up. I truly believe they're the only things keeping her going at this point and my heart breaks a little just thinking about it.

"Come here!" Oscar shouts, jumping up and down as Olivia takes my hand and begins dragging me up the steps and into the house. Oscar is practically shoving Will as we both enter the house at a rushed pace.

"Look," he says with flourish as his hand floats out in front of him, motioning to the massive expanse of Legos. "We built the Golden Gate Bridge."

"You absolutely did," I say with more enthusiasm than necessary, but the kids thrive on that.

Will shoots me a look from across the room and I smile back at him.

We're both thinking the same thing. It feels like it's been forever since Lauren built something out of Lego with the kids.

And as much as this is progress, I know it's still not enough.

I leave Will with the kids and slip into the kitchen to find Lauren at the sink scrubbing at her hands.

She's always been prettier than me; tall and leggy with brighter blonde hair and

deeper blue eyes, an interesting contrast with her tanned skin.

She's curvy and toned, where I've always been a little slimmer and less, well, Playboy Bunny. I'm the plain version.

But none of that really matters. What matters is the kind of person she is and she's amazing, but I haven't seen that person in a while.

She hears me come in and shuts off the water, turning to face me she says, "Happy anniversary." She wears a fake smile that masks the pain she feels as the words leave her mouth.

"Thanks. Looks like you had a good time out there," I say, my head tipping toward the living room.

"Yeah, we did, and we spent the morning cleaning out that damn crusher again." Lauren shakes her head and returns to the sink, scrubbing her hands, but the deep purple remains.

"Windex," I say and Lauren glares at me. She hates it when I tell her what to do, but we both know I'm right. You don't grow up on a vineyard and not know what removes wine stains.

"You sound like Mom," she replies, her tone lacking inflection, but she does give me a small smile.

"Because Mom is always right," I quip back and we both roll our eyes. "Any luck with the crusher?" I ask, knowing full well the answer is no. She had someone out here this morning to take a look at it and despite it being my anniversary, she would have interrupted my quiet morning with that news.

"No, and he was a total moron too. Kept claiming that there's no one who's going to

be able to fix it.

After that he decided then would be a great time to hand me his card so we can purchase the best machine on the market from him.

” Lauren lets it all out in one breath, her voice growing more and more annoyed as she relays the story to me.

“We own the best machine on the market, even if it is nearly fifteen years old.”

She’s intense when she talks about getting a new machine.

It’s possible it may even save us some money if we do decide to replace it, but I know that won’t ever happen.

It’s Lauren’s connection to Jack Wilson, the last one she has left.

Memories only last so long and I imagine hers are beginning to fade.

It’s been fourteen years, fourteen years of not speaking to him, of pretending she hates him, of her learning to live with the fact that she can never replace him. I even thought she was over him, but this latest incident has really taken its toll and now she needs a distraction more than ever.

“What if I told you I think I have someone who can fix it?” I say, my expression turning sneaky as I narrow my eyes at her, knowing she will have her suspicions.

“Bullshit,” she replies, her tone snarky, because she’s had more people here to repair it than the number of people who visit the Golden Gate Bridge each year.

I’m the one who hunts them down, talks with them about the repairs, which they always insist they can fix, and then I schedule the visit.

And it's only that, a visit, because no one and I mean no one can fix the machine.

It's Australian, and it's as difficult to decipher as Lauren's feelings for Jack.

But I'm the lucky one because my involvement ends there. It's Lauren who deals with their stupid jokes, their sales pitches, and sometimes the random pick up line.

"The guy I found is Australian, so I think it's going to work this time."

"Do whatever you gotta do," Lauren says, indifferently as she pumps an insane amount of soap into her hands and begins scrubbing.

Without saying a word, I open the cabinet under the sink and pull out the Windex. Grabbing her hands, I spray them and watch as the deep purple fades almost instantly.

The side eye she hits me with is comical and I laugh out loud as I give her a quick peck on the cheek and a swat on the ass, leaving her to clean up her hands .

I've spent the last week trying to locate Jack Wilson to no avail.

He has suddenly disappeared from Facebook as if he doesn't want to be found.

But I think I'm on to something now...finally.

Even though Lauren and I don't involve our parents in the day to day running of the vineyard and winery, I've called our father and he's put me in touch with someone who used to work with Tony Wilson, Jack's dad.

It was Tony who initially installed the de-stemmer and crusher machine on the property years ago.

It was how Lauren met Jack.

It's a long shot, but I need to get him back here.

I sent an email to a guy named Mike Anderson, who my father says is a friend of Tony Wilson, and despite the time difference, I hear back from him in only minutes.

While I've changed my last name after marrying Will, my email still bears the domain name of Somerville Vineyard which I know carries enough weight for this guy to not think I'm crazy for contacting him.

He gives me an email address for Tony and asks a little bit about my mom and dad, chatting briefly about how the business is going and if we have anything new in the works. He's cordial and I thank him for Tony's contact information.

Without waiting, I send an email to Tony and keep my fingers crossed that he's as prompt in responding, but just as I go to check my email again, Lauren walks into my office.

"What are you doing?" she asks, obviously aware of the weird smile plastered on my face as I sit alone in my office. "You watching cat videos again?"

"No, but that cat video I tagged you in yesterday was really funny."

"I watched it like a hundred times," Laurens says. "It gets funnier each time."

"How's it going?" I ask, as if it's a casual question, but there's more to it than either of us will admit to .

"I'm good. Kids are good," she says, looking out my office window at the twins as they chase each other up and down the rows of grapevines. "What time's Will leaving?" The abrupt change of subject doesn't go unnoticed by me, but I don't push it.

“Flight leaves at six, so I think I’ll come by and stay with you tonight. What do you think?”

“Sucks that he’s gotta leave for a business trip on your anniversary.”

I shrug my shoulders, knowing it isn’t really a big deal. He never had much interest in the wine industry and I’m eternally grateful for the sacrifice he made in moving out to the west coast to be with me.

“We had dinner together last night and there was this morning,” I say, winking at Lauren and she makes a gagging noise.

“I don’t want to know what you and Will did this morning,” she says feigning disgust. “But yeah, you can come by and stay the night. The kids will like that and we can all watch a movie together and stay up late.”

She sounds natural and normal, like she isn’t still a complete mess, and maybe she is getting better. Maybe things are settling down.

But it doesn’t stop me from opening my inbox the second she walks out the door.

And there it is, the email I’ve been waiting for.

Hi Ellen.

So wonderful to hear from you. I’m so sorry to hear that your crusher is acting up, and had you contacted me a few years earlier I would’ve been happy to help you.

I’m now retired from the wine industry, but I can put you in contact with my assistant.

She handles all inquiries and forwards them on to a list of contacts I have in place for

situations like this.

These people have all been hand selected by me and are quite capable of helping you.

Just a word of warning, because you live in The States most will decline the offer to help you because of the travel and the expense, but I'm sure someone will be able to assist you.

Please pass my contact info along to your father. I'd love to catch up with him.

The email goes on to share his contact information and the information of how to reach his assistant.

It's my last ditch effort to pull Lauren out of this funk, either that or she'll hate me for the rest of our lives.

I immediately shoot off an email to Tony's assistant and again with the punctuality, the woman gets back to me right away. She asks for my contact details, all the information on the machine, when we need it fixed by and how much we are willing to pay to retain someone for their services.

I want to tell her I'll pay anything and that I'm not looking for someone off the list Tony has left her, but that I'm looking specifically for Jack. Yet something about that feels like it will come across rather stalker-ish, so I decide to wait to hear back from her.

I'm hitting refreshing on my inbox for the millionth time when Will appears in the doorway to my office.

"What are you up to, beautiful?" he asks and my heart flutters at his words. After all this time he still makes me weak.

“I’m trying to find Jack,” I reply, the determination evident in my tone.

“But?”

“But nothing. It’s just not happening as quickly as I would like, and when I say quickly, I mean instantly. ”

“You’ve never been the most patient person,” Wills says, winking at me.

“Me, impatient? I distinctly remember someone being rather impatient this morning.”

“I’m always that way when it comes to you,” Will murmurs as he leans down to kiss me.

His lips are soft against mine and I stand, slipping my arms around his waist. “It will happen,” he adds, and I cock my head to one side, confused by his comment.

“You’ll find Jack and if you don’t, something will come along for Lauren.

I know it feels like it won’t right now, but it will. Time will help.”

“You’ve always been so wise,” I say, teasing him with a pinch to his side and his arms tighten around me just as my computer chimes out indicating I’ve received a new email.

I shove Will away and nearly collide with my desk chair as I scramble to read the message that is waiting for me.

“Yes!” I shout out loud and throw a fist up in the air when I see Tony’s assistant’s name on my screen.

“It’s him?” Will asks, equally as excited.

I open the email and quickly scan her words only to find my shoulders sagging and my excitement dwindling fast.

“No, but she has someone who says they can fix the crusher and can be here in the next three weeks.”

“Well, I know that’s not what you were hoping for, but hopefully one positive will come out of this. You’ll finally get that fucking crusher fixed.”

“Yeah,” I say, feeling defeated.

Will walks over to me and presses a kiss to the top of my head as he runs a hand over my hair.

“Why don’t you just tell Jack’s dad you’re looking for him. Tell him about Lauren and everything that’s happened and how she still holds onto Jack’s memory after all these years. I’m sure he’d tell you how to contact him. ”

“Lauren would kill me!” I whisper-shout, hoping she can’t hear this conversation through the wall our offices share. “It needs to be sorta... It needs to not be a set up.”

“It is a set up, Ellen,” Will says, nodding his head at me and giving me a look that says any idiot can see it is.

“It’s not.”

“It kinda is.”

“Whatever. It was a bust anyway,” I tell him, as I reply to Tony’s assistant letting her know we’d like to move forward with having this person fix our crusher.

It doesn’t take her long to send me all the information I need to secure a work visa

and when I see the name it stops me in my tracks.

John Wilson

“Will, Will,” I call, jumping up from my chair and knocking on the window outside my office as I throw my hands back and forth, trying to get his attention as he plays with Oscar and Olivia.

“What?” he calls back, his hands thrown up in the air almost in annoyance.

I motion for him to come in here, as the excitement explodes inside me. Just seeing the name on the screen has given me hope that maybe it could be Jack.

“What?” Will says as he enters my office for a second time in just a few minutes.

“She emailed me back, and the guy’s name is John Wilson.”

“So? You’re looking for Jack Wilson.” For a smart guy, he can be really dense sometimes.

“What if it’s actually Jack? What if his real name isn’t Jack? Like your name isn’t Will, it’s William.”

“Um, Ellen, I think you’re losing it. Will is a nickname for William. Jack being a nickname for John is a bit of a stretch. ”

“JFK’s nickname was Jack and his real name was John,” I defend, my hands on my hips, hating that Will is raining on my parade.

“Still seems like a long shot.”

“It is, but it’s all I’ve got.”