



# I Wish I Would've Warned You (Forbidden Wishes #3)

**Author:** *Whitney G.*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Truth or dare?

I dare you to stop pretending that you still want to be a virgin when you're around me...

As much as I wanted to say those words to Emily OHara after the night we first met, I never did.

Instead, I dared myself to leave her alone.

But I lost that game.

I gave up trying to win.

She was the first girl who didn't run when she found out how damaged I was.

I was the first guy who could read through her sexy sarcasm with ease.

Our connection was toxic and fiery, but we had to douse the flames before getting any closer.

We realized she could never be mine, and I could never be hers.

I was days away from becoming her stepbrother.

**Total Pages (Source):** 68

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

I've always envisioned losing my virginity someplace special.

Somewhere like Paris or London, in the love of my life's bedroom, or on a balcony that overlooks a wonderland.

Tonight's location was definitely not on that list...

Maybe if I pretend hard enough, the yellow glare from the Waffle House billboard will look more like a backdrop of mountains. After I trick my brain into thinking that, maybe I can forget that my legs are spread in the back of a messy Toyota Camry.

"Pull down the zipper on your shorts a bit further for me, babe," Sean—my boyfriend of four weeks—whispers against my lips.

I oblige and stare up at his car's ceiling.

How the hell did those brown stains get there?

"You're about to have the best sex of your life with me tonight." He slides a hand between my thighs. "Did you notice the vanilla air freshener I sprayed just for you?"

"Yeah," I say, even though his car reeks of musty gym socks and abandoned takeout.

"That's how much I care about you," he says. "That's why I—whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on here?"

“Huh?” I sit up. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought you said you wanted to have sex with me tonight.”

“I do.” I notice him gawking at my panties like they’re from another planet. They’re his favorite color—crimson red—and the sooner we get this over with, the quicker I can feel like everyone else feels after they’ve done it, and I can move on with my life.

“Do you not like the color or something?” I ask.

“No, I love the color, but...” He lets out a long sigh. “I only fuck bare pussies. I should’ve told you that, too.”

“What?”

“Your little bush is neat and all, but if you want a ride on this dick, you’ll need to clear the runway.” He zips up my shorts. “There’s a CVS around the corner. You can buy a razor and some shaving cream and go in the bathroom to handle that, and then we can pick up where we left off.”

I blink.

Huge red flags have appeared all week, begging me to abort Mission: Lose Virginity , and this latest one is a blasting siren I can’t ignore.

“Just take me home,” I say, moving on the seat. “I just... can’t.”

“Oh, come on, babe.” He smiles. “Part of sex is being honest about turn-ons and turn-offs. Your face is stunning, your body is amazing, but I can’t get hard to bear fur.”

I’m not your ‘babe’... I pull a hoodie over my head as he continues to shatter what’s

left of our thinly-constructed relationship.

“I’m more than willing to eat your pussy,” he says. “But I don’t need the pubic hair all in my teeth, you know?”

“I got it.” I pick up my purse and make sure my phone is tucked inside. “Bottom line: I changed my mind, and I think I’d rather wait until things are different to have sex.”

“‘Things’ like being with a different guy?”

That’s obvious. “I meant like, the right time.” I slide a hand under the passenger seat, rummaging for my umbrella, but my fingers get caught on something sticky.

What the... I pull it out and nearly gag. It’s a used condom. Flattened, crusted, and streaked with something dark.

“That’s not mine,” Sean says with a straight face. Then he snatches it away and rolls down the window, flinging it outside.

Completely turned off, I grab the handle of my umbrella and try to measure my words carefully.

“I think it’s best if we end our night here and go home,” I say.

“How the hell do you expect to get home if I don’t drive you?”

I tilt my head to the side. “What are you saying?”

“If you don’t want to fuck tonight, that’s fine.” He shrugs, unzipping his jeans. “But you could at least do something for me for a while. I could’ve been hanging with my friends, but instead I decided to spend time with you.”

“Okay, you’re right, Sean.”

“I know.” He unzips his pants even further and pushes down his jeans. As he’s pulling out his cock, I step out of the car and into the rain.

Popping open my umbrella, I slam the door shut and walk away.

Far away.

Cold, angry raindrops find their way under my hoodie, between my shoulder blades, down into my socks. Every step is wetter than the last, each one soaking me deeper in regret.

When I’m halfway across the empty parking lot, Sean pulls up next to me.

“Stop being dramatic and get back in the car, Emily.”

“I’ll pass.”

“There’s only highway for the next eight miles.”

“I’ll still pass.”

“When I read the news tomorrow, I’ll hate to see that you got run over by a semi-truck.” He doesn’t look remotely sympathetic. “What a shame it would be when the reporters are wondering why you didn’t have any ID or your phone.”

I stop walking and see him holding my purse and phone.

I reach out for it, but he pulls it back.

“Why can’t you just stop being a jerk and take me home?”

“Suck me off and I will.”

I don’t say anything. Just reach out again. “Give me my stuff.”

He tosses the purse, but he keeps my phone.

“Sean, really?” I ask. “Stop being so immature.”

“Immature is making me stop talking to other girls just for you to lead me on.” He scoffs. “Especially since you just moved to town and I had plenty of other options.”

I roll my eyes. I’m not sure if this is his attempt at gaslighting or guilt, but it’s not working.

“How would you feel if you were me, Emily?”

“I would feel like the asshole I’ve always been.” I glare at him. “Give. Me. My. Phone.”

“Sure thing.” He tosses it out the window and speeds away.

Gasping, I rush over to where it fell, picking it up and noticing that the screen is shattered. The signal is weak and the battery is clinging to life support.

I’m screwed.

I hold back a scream as his car eases onto the highway, as his lights join the red sea of traffic far ahead.

I didn't think this out far enough, and with every sheet of rain that falls over me, I'm thinking about how I'll have to write about this in my next poem.

How no other title except "Foolish, Foolish Girl" will fit.

I gave up a night at the writing café for this, a night with a warm latte, my playlist, and words...

Holding onto my umbrella, I start walking and envision Sean getting hit with a Mack truck.

It's not until I reach an "Upcoming Food and Gas Stations" sign, when I see that they're all three miles away, that I let out a pent-up scream.

I pull out my phone and it flashes the dead battery icon.

Okay. Now, I'm fucked.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

The first place I reach is called Fuel-Land—a rest stop with a diner, a gas station, and a stale, burnt coffee smell that hits me the second I walk in. My soaked hoodie clings to me, my socks squish in my shoes, and the lights overhead buzz like they're seconds from dying.

A row of truckers slouches at the counter, all hunched over their mugs like they're waiting for the will to live. I head straight to the bathroom, dry my face with sandpaper paper towels, and try not to cry.

When I return, one of the truckers—mid-forties, scruffy, semi-decent smile—gives me a once-over.

“Outlets are over there.” He points behind him to the bar. All taken.

“Here,” he says, handing me a cup. “Get a coffee on the house.”

I nod in thanks and move to the self-serve machine, pretending I'm not shaking. As I add cream, a guy in a green flannel approaches with a long cord.

“Phone looks dead.” He hands me the charger.

“Thanks.” I plug it in, but an alert pops up.

Liquid detected! Dry port before charging.



Of course. “Actually... I could use some help,” I say.

“Where you headed?”

“Teaneck. New Jersey.”

“That’s not far. I’m passing through there now, actually.” He smiles. “I can give you a lift.”

He doesn’t seem threatening, but I’ve seen enough movies to know that means absolutely nothing. Still... I have twenty-six bucks and no working phone. A cab would laugh in my face.

“My truck’s the red Kenworth out front. I’m pulling out in twenty. Get some snacks if you need ’em, and meet me there.”

I nod and murmur a thank you, though his eyes linger on me a beat too long.

As he leaves, I turn back toward the gadget aisle for a mini cloth and power bank. I grab a bag of chips, a Sprite, and make a beeline for the cooler to check for ice cream.

Then I’m grabbed from behind.

I’m slammed gently—but firmly—against the cold glass of the freezer. A hand pins itself beside my head, and my breath catches.

“Are you seriously this na?ve?”

The voice is gravel and steel. Low. Rough. Furious. The kind that rips through silence like a knife.

I look up and everything slows.

He's beautiful.

Not pretty-boy, clean-cut beautiful. No, he's rugged and sharp—tall and broad-shouldered in a black henley and dark jeans that cling like sin. His jaw is cut from stone, dusted in stubble. A thin scar curves at the corner of his lip like it has a story, and his eyes?—

They're a shade of blue I didn't know existed. Cold. Wild. Intense.

And they're locked on me like I've committed a crime.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you not to get into trucks with strangers?" he growls.

"I'm sorry—who the hell are you?" I snap, even though my heart's about to break a rib.

"Someone trying to keep you from winding up chopped into pieces and dumped behind a dumpster."

"I don't need your help." I try to twist away, but he's already turning my face toward the window with two fingers under my chin.

His touch is rough, but not cruel. Still—my pulse jumps anyway.

"See that?" he says quietly.

Out by the pumps, a group of women in stilettos and short skirts linger near the rigs, laughing with a handful of truckers.

“You don’t know what a lot lizard is, do you?”

“A what?”

He huffs. “You’re following one of their scripts. Pretend to be lost. Ask for a ride. Blowjob. Cash.”

My stomach flips. “That’s not what I was doing. I didn’t know—he didn’t seem?—”

“No, thank you.” He quotes the guy from earlier, and now I want to hurl.

He finally steps back, gaze raking over me like he’s still deciding whether to call the cops.

“You’re welcome,” he mutters.

I blink. “Thank you.”

He pulls open the cooler, grabs a bottle of sweet tea like nothing happened. “How’d you even get out here?”

“I was ditched.” I exhale. “My boyfriend left me.”

“He should be your ex-boyfriend now.”

“I doubt he cares.”

“I do.” He looks at me again, long and hard. Then he pulls a worn leather wallet from his back pocket and hands it to me. “Hold this.”

“What for?”

“You’re getting in my car. Best case, you make it home. Worst case, your fingerprints are all over my ID and I get caught before I even finish burying you.”

“Charming.”

“Realistic. Don’t you watch Dateline ?”

“SVU .”

He smirks—just slightly. “Same shit. Open it.”

I do. And then pause.

Two driver’s licenses fall out.

One says Cole Dawson – New York. The other: Cole Banks – Pennsylvania.

“What the hell...” I look up at him. “This screams sketchy. Do you know how many heroines in horror movies die because they ignore things like this? I’m pretty sure I just became one of them.”

“Possibly.” He shrugs. “You’ve got about thirty seconds to decide.”

My instincts scream at me to run. But the truth is, if this guy wanted to hurt me, I’d already be in the trunk. And there’s something about him—something dangerous and dark, yeah—but also something... genuine.

He grabs a pack of gum and a protein bar and moves to the counter, paying for my things too.

Outside, his car waits. It’s not a truck like I expected—it’s a jet-black vintage Dodge

Charger, sleek and deadly-looking, like something out of a movie.

He opens the passenger door for me and doesn't say a word until we're both inside. He doesn't even ask me for my name.

As he pulls onto the road, I exhale for the first time in minutes and mutter under my breath:

"I hope my Dateline episode gets good ratings."

He glances over, eyes flicking to my mouth. "You always this dramatic?"

"No," I say. "Usually I'm worse."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

The girl in my passenger seat is humming something soft and slow. Dark lyrics fall from her lips between breaths like she doesn't realize she's saying them out loud.

"Strangle you until your last breath..."

"Death looks good on you..."

If I were smarter, I'd turn the car around.

But I've never been good at listening to my gut—especially when someone looks like they need help. This? This exact moment is the kind of shit that's gotten me into trouble for most of my life.

She's curled into the passenger seat, soaked through in a clingy pink hoodie and cutoff jean shorts. Every few seconds, I catch her glancing over at me. Not shy. More like cautious curiosity—like she's debating whether to thank me or claw the door open and roll.

Her eyes are unreal. Green like old glass in sunlight—fractured, sharp around the edges. Her mouth is full and slightly chapped, her lashes thick and wet.

She doesn't look soft. She looks like something I'd want to paint in charcoal and oil—moody lighting, dripping water, tension in every line of her body.

"Can I ask you something?" she says.

I nod once.

“I was out there because I was planning to lose my virginity.”

I blink.

“That’s a hell of an opening line.”

“You always tell that to the guys who save you from murderers?”

“No. Just the ones who look like they could use something to think about while they’re driving.”

I don’t respond. If I do, I’ll say something I shouldn’t.

“I was with my boyfriend,” she mutters. “Or... I guess he’s not anymore.”

I keep my focus on the road. “You’re either incredibly brave or incredibly reckless.”

“Can’t I be both?”

“Depends. You still planning to climb into cars with strangers?”

“No.”

“Then maybe you’re learning.”

She glances over again. “You haven’t asked for my name.”

“I figured if you wanted me to have it, you’d offer it.”

She goes quiet after that. Then shifts her attention to my left arm, watching the ink that wraps around my wrist and vanishes under my sleeve.

Her gaze lingers. I let it.

“You always make it a habit of rescuing girls from gas stations and buying them snacks?”

“Not usually.”

“But you gave me your wallet.”

“I did.”

“And the condoms?”

“You gonna hold that against me?”

“Not yet.” She pauses. “You have two licenses.”

She caught that. Interesting.

“I move around a lot,” I say. “And I don’t always use the same last name.”

She snorts. “Yeah, no red flags there.”

“I could’ve left you in the rain.”

“You still could.”

I glance over. “Planning to report me when you get home?”



“I’m planning to survive the night. After that? We’ll see.”

We ride in silence for a while, rain tapping against the windshield. Then I catch her staring again—this time at my hands, my jaw, my ink. She’s not even pretending to be subtle.

“You always stare that hard, or am I just lucky?”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t look away.

“I was trying to figure out what your tattoos mean.”

“They mean I don’t always make great choices.”

“Any better than picking me up?”

“No.”

She tucks her arms tighter around herself and looks out the window again. We don’t speak for the rest of the ride.

Not until I pull off the exit she calls out, leading to a run-down strip of a motel that’s falling apart at the seams.

She straightens in her seat.

“You sure this is it?” I ask.

“It’s temporary.”

I kill the engine. She hands me back my wallet.

“Thank you for not being a serial killer.”

“You’re welcome.”

She unbuckles, then pauses. “I know you said you don’t usually help people like this...”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, I don’t want to owe you.”

“You don’t.”

She opens the door, then looks at me again.

“What if I did want to give you my name now?”

I stare at her a second too long.

“Don’t,” I say. “Not yet.”

She nods and steps out of the car. At the motel door, she pauses and glances back.

I reach into the glovebox, tear off a crumpled receipt, and scrawl my number. I get out, walk over, and press it into her hand.

“Call me in a few days,” I say. “If you’re still alive.”

She stands still, blushing and staring at me like she’s not going to go inside, like she’s going to tempt me to end this night differently.

“Please go inside now, ”I say, taking one last look at her, “before I ruin you.”

I turn around and leave first before I do something even dumber.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

My fingers hover over the send button for what has to be the millionth time.

Hey, Cole. It's Emily. (The 'not' a lot lizard from weeks ago)

No, no.

I delete it and try again.

Still alive? That makes one of us.

Delete.

I don't know why, but... I honestly can't stop thinking about you.

Hard no.

I shut down my text messages altogether.

I'm sure that a guy like him has met plenty of other girls in the three weeks since we met and has options stacked like poker chips.

I toss my phone into my bag, pissed at myself for even trying. Then I turn off the dryer at the laundromat and stuff my clothes into a bag.

Tucking the wash card into my pocket, I lug the bag over my shoulder and head

across the street to my shared motel room.

The moment I near our door, the scent of waffles and coffee smacks me in the face, which can only mean one thing:

We're moving... again.

I groan and unlock the door, coming face-to-face with a scene I know all too well.

My mom is setting up our Waffle House order on the desk that doubles as our dining table. She's even placed a treat on the TV stand for me: chocolate strawberries.

That's always the "please don't hate me" cherry on top.

I join her at the table, saying nothing.

"You haven't brought up Sean to me in a while," she says. "Did something happen between you two?"

"He showed me his awful true colors. It's over."

"Aw, well, hon, he seemed like a really nice guy to me. Don't write him off after one bad date, if that's what you're saying."

I take a gulp of coffee to stop myself from elaborating.

"I have a surprise for us!" She clasps her hands together. "Guess what?"

"We're getting a puppy."

"Ha! No. Try again."

“We’re getting a new car?”

“Oh, Emily.” She laughs harder. “We’re moving!” She jumps up and does a little dance, like this is the first—and not the sixteenth—time we’ve moved in the last four years.

“That’s amazing.” I feign excitement.

“Right? So after you eat breakfast, go ahead and get packed.”

I nod, even though I never really unpacked.

“Where are we going now?” I ask.

“Across the bridge to a suburb right outside New York,” she says. “It’s about an hour away, but it’s a beautiful place you can invite your friends to see, so you won’t lose complete touch.”

Right... “Is it a hotel or a motel?”

“Neither.”

“An apartment?”

“Nope, it’s not that either.” She pauses for several seconds. “It’s a house!”

“Really?” My eyes widen. “How big is it?”

“Huge.” She stretches her arms wide. “It has an outdoor pool, a garden, and a library!”

“How?” I arch a brow.

“What do you mean ‘how,’ Emily?”

There’s no nice way to say: Your credit is shot to hell, mine is too because of you, we don’t have money, and we can barely afford an apartment complex with a shared pool, so how the hell are we affording a HOUSE?

“I mean...” I clear my throat and go with the softer option. “It just sounds too good to be true.”

“Well, it’s not.” She beams. “It’s all our dreams coming true, because it’s a real house... My boyfriend asked us to move in with him!”

So, it is too good to be true.

“The ‘Aidan’ guy you just started seeing?”

“I’ve been seeing him since we first moved here, Emily.” She clasps my hand. “He came into the diner every day for two weeks just to see me. I told you he’s taken me on the best dates of my life.”

A lump rises in my throat.

My mom falls hard and fast, and our lives always revolve around whoever she’s dating—or not dating. It’s been like this since I was born—since she was barely older than I am now.

“I’ve been to his place tons of times and you’re going to love it.” She’s still talking. “When he found out where we were staying, he said no woman he loves should live in a motel. He demanded that we move in with him.”

“How thoughtful.” I swallow the lump and mentally repeat the lines that keep me grounded.

Your gap year will be over soon. You’ll be going to college. You’ll be somewhere safe, somewhere semi-permanent.

Her phone suddenly buzzes, and she drops my hands.

“This is him!” she squeals, darting into the bathroom like a teenager. She slams the door, and just like that, my appetite vanishes.

I reach into my purse and pull out my “Forever Moving Checklist” notepad.

Stuffing shirts into one of my duffel bags, I double-check my sweaters and make a mental note to buy new bras and panties.

“He’s so excited to meet you.” My mom steps out of the bathroom, her whole face glowing. “This is going to be amazing!”

I can’t fake another smile, so I remain focused on packing and count out my pairs of jeans.

“So, Emily,” she says, plopping down on my bed with stars in her eyes, “I know you haven’t had sex yet—and you should totally wait until you’re ready with the right guy—but when you do... try to find a guy who fucks you like Aidan fucks me.”

What the hell? “Eww!” I smack her with a pillow. “I do not want to hear about your sex life, Mom. Ever.”

“There’s this thing he does with his tongue when I’m riding him?—”



“If you actually finish that sentence, I’m calling Child Protective Services and telling them the real reason I had to miss my senior year of high school.”

“Fine.” She laughs, hands raised in mock surrender. “I’ll go move our car.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

“Continue on this road for sixty miles,” the GPS chirps.

I knew it.

We’ve been driving for two and a half hours already, and there’s still no end in sight. My mom swore this would be a quick trip, but her sense of direction has never been reliable.

I flip through my phone, pretending to scroll, but my thumb hovers over a draft I left open last night. A poem that’s now tangled with someone I haven’t been able to stop thinking about.

I open my messages and finally type:

Hey, it’s me. How have you been?

A reply comes quickly.

Depends on who you are, “me”...

I hesitate. He still doesn’t know my real name. I’m not ready to give it yet.

Amy. The girl who was almost a lot lizard.

Cole

I was beginning to worry about you, Amy...

I watched the news and hadn't seen "Sexy as hell woman found dead on highway."

Good to know you're alive.

My cheeks heat. I'm still trying to think of a reply when he beats me to it.

If I'd known it would take you this long to text me, I would've just taken your number instead...

I was busy.

We're moving again.

Where?

When I trust you, I'll tell you.

Good answer. You're learning.

I have a poetry reading coming up in NYC in a few weeks. If you'd like to see me again...

I would. Send me the details when you have them.

You'll really show up?

I would show up for you now if you told me where you lived...

My cheeks flush deeper. I set the phone down, needing to think.

That's when I see the sign.

Welcome to Southampton

Yeah... we definitely can't afford anything near here.

My mom pulls us past a stretch of beachfront homes that look like they belong to retired celebrities or fictional billionaires. We take a turn down a private road lined with trees and crushed gravel, and just when I think she's lost again, the house appears.

A massive, ocean-blue estate rises like something out of a dream—white pillars, wraparound porch, and a second-story balcony that seems to float over the dune grass. The Atlantic sparkles just behind it, close enough to hear the waves.

She pulls into the drive and cuts the engine.

“Welcome home!” she says, grinning like she just won a prize she didn't pay for.

My jaw tightens. This can't be real.

As we get out, a man steps onto the porch wearing a pale-blue dress shirt, sleeves rolled, tan slacks. Clean-cut. Smiling. But something about him gives me pause. I've seen him before. Maybe on TV. Maybe in a movie. I'm not sure.

Then he speaks.

“Well, hello there, Emily.”

And I know that voice. Not the name. Not the face. The voice .

“I’ve been wanting to meet you for a while now,” he says. “Your mom brags nonstop about your writing talent.”

I shake his hand. “Nice to meet you too. You have a beautiful home.”

“Wait until you see the inside,” he says. “I’ll give you the full tour—and I’ll have my son grab your bags.”

“Oh, that’s right,” my mom says. “He has a son who’s a little older than you. So you’ll have a live-in friend until school starts.”

“Son!” Aidan calls through an open window. “Hey, son?”

Silence.

“Warning,” he sighs. “My son’s a fuckin’ hardhead. Hold on...”

He pulls out his phone and dials.

“Haul your ass to the front,” he says. “My girlfriend and her daughter are here.”

A deep, lazy voice crackles through the speaker:

“What does that have to do with me?”

Something in my stomach flips. My skin tightens.

“Don’t start this shit with me today,” Aidan mutters. “Just come grab their stuff.”

The call ends.

He turns back to us, gesturing toward the beach. “Make sure you take advantage of the sand and water every day. It keeps me grounded.”

I barely hear him. I’m still staring at the door.

Because a second later, it swings open.

And there he is.

Cole.

He steps onto the porch in gray sweatpants and a white muscle shirt, his hair messy, his jaw tight. He stops cold when he sees me, his expression unreadable.

I feel like I’m falling through the earth.

He blinks once. Slowly. Then starts walking.

My pulse spikes.

“Thank you for blessing us with your presence, Cole,” Aidan says.

“You’re welcome.”

“This is Hannah’s daughter, Emily,” he says. “Emily, this is my son, Cole.”

Cole’s eyes stay locked on me. “Your name is Emily?” He smirks. “That’s funny. You strike me more as an ‘Amy.’ I feel like that’s what you’d tell me if we’d met before, isn’t it?”

My cheeks burn.

“You’ll get used to his rudeness,” Aidan says, laughing. “Come on in, let me give you a tour.”

I follow him inside, my mind spinning. But just before I step over the threshold, I glance back.

Cole is still there.

Still watching me.

But the smirk is gone—replaced by something hotter, darker, and far more dangerous.

The house is gorgeous. I’ll give it that. But something about it feels... off.

Warm-toned walls, curated furniture, and just enough coastal charm—driftwood sculptures, pale linen curtains, seashell vases—to look like someone tried to make it feel lived in. But it doesn’t.

It feels like a model home. Pretty, perfect, and soulless.

“Babe, we’ll be in here,” Aidan says, guiding my mom toward the master suite. “And if you ever get mad at me, there’s a guest suite down the hall.”

She giggles like a teenager and stands on her toes to kiss his cheek.

“Is the guest suite where I’ll be staying?” I ask, keeping my tone even.

“Absolutely not.” Aidan shakes his head. “Come on, let me show you upstairs.”

The staircase creaks under our steps. He stops at a white door and pulls out a key like

he's revealing a prize on a game show.

"This is your room." He flips on the lights. "I told the designer you're a writer, so she tried to reflect that."

I step inside.

And stop.

A queen bed sits against a navy accent wall, ivory bedding tucked tight.

A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf spans one wall, already filled with titles I've read and loved—and some I've never seen before.

A writing desk with gold trim glints in the corner.

There's a tufted chaise by the window, a soft throw tossed over the edge, and a glass lamp shaped like a wave.

"Is something wrong?" Aidan asks. "If you hate it, I can have it redone tomorrow."

"No, I—" I shake my head. "I get this whole room to myself?"

"You do," he says, grinning. "And you even have—" he opens a set of doors, "your own private balcony that overlooks the garden. Well, and the beach, of course."

Tears sting, but I blink them back.

Even if this doesn't last—and deep down, I know it won't—I'll remember this. A room that's mine. A door I can lock.



“The only thing you do have to share is the bathroom suite,” he adds, gesturing to a door. “HOA won’t let me rework the plumbing, but your private bath at the main house will be ready after renovations.”

“You have another house?”

“This is just the summer place,” my mom says proudly as she steps in. “They’re remodeling his real one until autumn.”

Aidan pulls out his phone and shows her something. I go invisible. Again.

“Dinner will be around six,” Aidan says over his shoulder. “You’re welcome to join us—and get a better impression of Cole. If not, no pressure.”

The moment they’re gone, I close the door and lock it.

Shoes off. Straight to the bed. Face-down into the comforter.

I repeat it again and again:

This isn’t real.

This won’t last.

Don’t get attached.

Eventually, I move to the balcony. I pull open the doors and step out, letting the breeze roll over me.

The garden stretches into pale dunes, and beyond that, the ocean sparkles like it was ordered off a dream board.

And then I see him.

Cole.

He's on the next balcony over, legs stretched out, jaw tilted toward the sky.

"Staring's rude, Emily," he says, not looking over. "Do I need to teach you a lesson about that, too?"

"I'm not staring," I say. "I'm absorbing the sights."

That gets a small laugh. Then he turns to face me.

"My mom said you're a little older than me," I say, folding my arms. "I can't blame you for not wanting to move out of your dad's beach mansion."

"You're making one hell of an assumption there." His smirk returns—slow, crooked, maddening. "I'm only here temporarily."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two. You?"

"Nineteen."

His eyes roam over me, slow and deliberate. "So... still hanging on to that thing I almost ruined?"

I blink. "What?"

He leans back in his chair. "Your virginity. Or do I have to pretend we never met?"

My mouth opens, then shuts. The heat in my face spreads down my neck.

“That’s none of your business.”

“That’s not a no.”

“Do you talk to all your future stepsisters like this?”

“I don’t have any others.”

I spin on my heel and slam the doors shut, locking them fast.

There’s no way this is really happening.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

I draw my drapes shut to block out any glimpses of my new floor mate. Then I set up an easel against the wall and tear off the first online commission request from today:

I want you to paint a pic of me lying on my back in the ocean against the tide with some starfish and turtles. Can you make me look thinner plz? And then can you make my eyebrows look less bushy and make my swimsuit black instead of pink? Thanx!

I mutter a curse under my breath.

The price of being an artist is painting other people's fantasies until I can afford to create my own. That—and surviving my father one more goddamn summer.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I don't move. I prep my mixing bowls instead.

"Cole?" My dad steps in, shutting the door behind him. "I know you heard me knocking."

"I did."

"So, why didn't you answer?"

"I was going to call you later."

“What I want,” he says, narrowing his eyes, “is for you to come down to the garden and have dinner with me and everyone else.”

“Not happening.”

“Cole—”

“We made a deal,” I cut him off. “One summer of pretending to play your perfect son in exchange for a lifetime of bullshit and what you pulled last fall. I show up to your fake events, smile for your fake friends, and in return, you leave me the hell alone.”

He says nothing. Just stands there like he’s got something to say, but knows it won’t hold weight.

“You can close the door on your way out,” I say. “Thanks.”

“It would mean a lot to me if you came to dinner.”

“Still not an incentive.”

“I like Heather,” he says. “It’s serious.”

“You just met her.”

“When you know, you know.”

Right. That’s his whole brand— Family Over Everything. Irony.

“Is this one new?” he asks, nodding toward a canvas I finished last week.

“No.”

“It’s good,” he mutters. Then after a beat: “Think about how you’d feel if you were Emily. New place. New people. Potential stepbrother being an ass for no reason.”

The word stepbrother makes me drop one of my brushes. Just hearing it should kill any thought I’ve had about her.

It doesn’t.

“I give up,” he says, throwing up his hands and storming out.

I close the door behind him and repeat that word a few times in my head.

Stepbrother.

An hour later

I set a timer on my phone and head to the garden.

Once, it used to be the only place I liked on this property. Now? It’s just another set for my father’s fiction.

I drop into a seat directly across from Emily.

“Oh my god, Cole!” Taylor’s voice hits before I even register she’s here. She plops down beside me, all smiles and cleavage. “I can’t believe you’re actually here this summer!”

“That makes two of us.”

“Cole and I used to spend every summer here,” she says to Emily. “Everyone thought we were gonna get married someday.”

“You need a Wall Street guy to afford your habits,” my dad says. “And you’re not even into Cole.”

The table laughs. I don’t.

Taylor’s never been into anyone who wanted her back. I’ve lost count of how many times she’s ‘accidentally’ flashed me or tried grinding her drunk ass into my lap.

“I’m giving Heather a tour of the town tomorrow,” My dad says to Emily, smiling. “Want to come with?”

“Sure,” Emily says. “That sounds nice.”

“Heather tells me you two do everything together,” my dad adds. “Just want you to know you’re included in anything we do.”

“We definitely do everything together,” Emily says coolly, sipping her water.

Something in her tone flicks a switch. There’s tension there. I don’t know if her mom catches it—but I do.

“Dinner is served,” Ramen, the part-time chef, announces, placing down the first of many trays.

While my dad launches into his favorite story—how he bought this house—I watch Emily, trying to read the undercurrent between her and her mom.

“You’re the Family Values guy,” Emily says suddenly. “From the Family Over Everything podcast.”

“Shhh,” Heather blushes. “He doesn’t like to talk about that.”

Bullshit.

“I don’t mind.” He beams. “Are you a fan?”

“I’ve seen a few clips,” she says, polite but neutral. “You’ve published a lot.”

“I’ll show you my library later,” he says. “There’s a new release I’ve been teasing. Going to be a surprise drop later this season. It’s about?—”

I tune out.

If his followers knew half the shit he’s pulled behind the scenes, they’d drop him overnight.

“There’s a big beach fest this weekend,” Taylor says as dessert lands. “Bonfires, music, a ridiculous pie-eating contest. You should come with me.”

“I’m not really into parties...”

“Oh, come on. You’ll love it.” Taylor leans closer to me. “Cole, tell her how much fun it is.”

I meet Emily’s gaze for the first time all night.

“I think you’d have more fun staying home.”

Taylor groans. “Ignore him. All the hottest guys will be there. Maybe even some celebs. The vibes are unreal.”

“Can I go?” Heather asks.



Taylor wrinkles her nose. “It’s not really for the... older crowd. No offense.”

Heather laughs like it’s cute. It’s not.

I check the timer on my phone. Four minutes left.

When I glance back, Emily’s staring at me—like she wants to say something but won’t.

“Thank you for dinner, Mr. Dawson.” Taylor rises, linking her arm with Emily’s. “Since Cole’s going to keep being rude, let’s go test out your new heated pool.”

Emily shoots her mom a look. Her mom mouths, A new friend. Go.

She stands, and that’s when I notice.

She’s changed.

The jeans she had on earlier are gone. Now it’s tiny white shorts that cling to her thighs like they were painted on. They peek out beneath a loose, flowy blue shirt—but they’re barely there.

“You’re welcome to join us, Cole,” Taylor says, lowering her voice as she passes. “I’ll skinny dip just for you...”

“I’m good,” I say without moving. “Thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” She tugs Emily along like a prize.

My dad rises with Heather and claps me on the shoulder.

“Thanks for coming down, Cole. I appreciate it.”

I nod, eyes locked on Emily’s disappearing legs.

I stay seated. Because the sight of those shorts just made my cock stiff—and there’s no way I’m standing up right now.

This is going to be a long-ass summer.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

The following night

I 'm confused as to why Taylor is still here.

She spent the night in the guest room after we swam, took up my entire day by showing me around town, and now... we're back in the pool.

It's almost like she lives here whenever she wants, and no one else cares to tell her otherwise.

"I'm inviting your new besties over to join us," she says. "You're going to love them, and they'll love you."

Right. "I need to work on writing at some point today."

"What college do you go to?"

"I start at Pitt in the fall."

"And they already are asking you to do work?" She scoffs. "That's B.S."

I bite my tongue before I can explain. I've learned in our short time together that she's not a good listener—but she's not trying to be rude. She just lives in her own orbit.

“AHHHH!” “Taylorry!” “I brought beer!”

Her three friends step out onto the concrete like they’re on a catwalk—each of them in a different neon bikini, sleek topknot buns glinting under the pool lights. They’re not clones, not exactly, but they talk and move like girls who’ve been growing up in each other’s shadows their whole lives.

“This is our new friend, Emily,” Taylor announces. “She’s the daughter of Mr. Aidan’s fiancée.”

“Nice to meet you,” they say in unison. Then, like rehearsed roll call:

“I’m Sarah.”

“I’m Ashley.”

“I’m Ashley, too, but you can call me Ash-leigh so we don’t get confused.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I say, stuck on the word fiancé e . “My mom’s not his fiancée, though...”

“Where’s Cole?” one of the Ashleys asks, immediately glancing toward the house.

“He’s really living here?”

“He is.” Taylor nods, cracking a beer. “Hopefully he’ll come to his senses and join us.”

“He’s so fucking hot.”

“Sooo hot.”

“What are you wearing to the beach fest?”

“Something cute.”

“Me too.”

“Let me see.”

“Let me see, too.”

I lean back against the jets and let their conversation swirl around me like warm chlorine fog. They’re harmless. Loud, shallow, silly. But this is their world—a safe, glossy bubble of outfits and weekend plans and someone’s cousin Clive in L.A. who once dated a B-lister.

Eventually, I slip out of the pool and wrap myself in a towel.

“I’m going to shower and head to bed,” I say. “It was nice meeting you all.”

“I swear her Hermès bag was fake,” Sarah says, flipping her hair. “The clasp was completely off.”

“But Clive bought her that Prada one last year, remember?” Ashley says. “So maybe this one’s real, too.”

“I still don’t trust it.”

I duck inside and leave their voices fading behind me.

My mom and Aidan are laughing down the hall as I climb the stairs. Something about this house still doesn’t feel real—heated floors, towel warmers, entire rooms just for

showering.

I switch on the warmer and slip into the private shower, sighing the moment hot water hits my skin.

It's decadent.

The pressure is perfect. The lights can change color. The scent of the eucalyptus steam floods my senses like I've stepped into a spa. I tilt my face into the stream and close my eyes, letting the warmth sink into my shoulders, down my spine.

When I've soaked up enough of the heat, I reach for the warmer?—

But my towel's gone.

Frowning, I open the linen closet. Empty.

I crack open the door and peek toward my room, but just as I step forward, the bathroom door opens.

Cole steps in.

He's shirtless, damp, a towel slung low around his hips— my towel.

His gaze lands on me, and everything in the room stills.

My breath catches. He doesn't look away.

He doesn't even blink.

His eyes rake down my body—neck, breasts, stomach, thighs—and the burn of his

attention makes my skin pulse.

“Why would you take that towel when you knew someone was in here?” I manage, holding the door with one hand and my pride with the other. “Didn’t you hear the shower?”

“No.” His voice is unhurried. “It’s soundproof. I didn’t know this suite was occupied.”

“Give me the towel.”

“Okay.” He smirks.

He drops it.

My lips part.

He steps closer, completely bare. All lean muscle and sculpted heat, not the least bit shy. My eyes betray me—dragging down his chest, his abdomen, his hips... lower.

God.

I can't breathe.

He picks up the towel again and closes the space between us.

“You sure you want it?” he murmurs.

I say nothing.

He slips it over my shoulders, slow, like he’s draping silk.

His fingers linger, brushing my pierced nipple through the fabric.

“A virgin with a nipple piercing,” he says, voice dark. “That’s new.”

“It was a dare.”

“I like dares.”

He presses the towel tighter around me, gaze locked on mine.

“Anything else pierced I should know about?”

I blink. “Are you done?”

“Almost.”

His hand trails down the edge of the towel. Then he steps back—just enough to let the air cool where his body heat had been.

“I’ll check next time,” he says. “Wouldn’t want to interrupt again.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Good.” His voice dips lower. “Then I can leave without feeling bad.”

He finally steps out of my way, but not before letting his gaze linger on me one last time—slow, unhurried, like he’s taking mental notes for later.

“Goodnight, Emily,” he says, voice low.

Then he walks out, stark-ass naked, like nothing about this moment has rattled him at



all.

The door shuts behind him with a soft click.

And with it, any last illusion that I'm going to survive this summer untouched.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

There's no point in trying to sleep.

My cock's still hard and I've taken three cold showers back-to-back-to-back. Nothing helps. Nothing dims the image of her—flushed all over, standing there in my towel, not even pretending not to stare.

I roll out of bed and throw on sweats, cracking the window for air. The ocean breeze does nothing.

I set up my easel, flip on the lamp, and tell myself I'll paint the need out of my system.

I log into my site and pull the next order.

Can you paint me a picture of me and this girl [attached] kissing under the moonlight? And then in the skies or the clouds, add the words in a messy cursive, "I wanted to fuck you on day one?" as like a cheeky joke?

Oh and can you make sure that our work name tags show? Hers is kinda blurry in that photo, but her name is Emily.

I freeze.

It's not her. It's not even close.

But that name hits me like a punch to the chest.

Emily.

I run a hand down my face, jaw clenched, silently admitting something I've been neglecting.

I went back to that rest stop a week after I dropped her off. Didn't even tell myself why at the time. Just sat in the parking lot like a damn fool, hoping she'd show up.

I refreshed my messages every day. Every. Single. Day.

And now she's here. In my house. Sleeping right next door, and serving as punchline to fate's twisted sense of humor.

I stare at the order one more time.

Then I toss the request onto the floor and grab a fresh canvas.

And I start painting her walking into the rest stop. Again...

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

“Better to be hurt by the truth than comforted with a lie.”

Actually, some lies are more than necessary, and certain truths need to go to the grave...

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

Two days later

The strip-mall rehab center looks even worse in daylight. No windows, flickering lights, and a front door that sticks if you don't yank it just right.

I park in the far corner, kill the engine, and take my time heading inside. No use pretending I'm in a rush to be here.

A clipboard guy is already waiting near the reception desk, scanning the list of names like he's hoping someone doesn't show.

"Cole Dawson?" he calls.

I raise a hand and follow him down a hallway that smells like old coffee and cheap floor wax. Third door on the right—same as always.

The room hasn't changed either. Same sagging chair, same scratched-up table, same attempt at pretending this is about "recovery" and not surveillance.

"You know the drill," he says, sliding a cup toward me.

I take it, step into the bathroom, and try not to think about how many people have stood in this exact spot doing the same thing. The mirror's cracked. The tile's worse.

I've lost count of how many times I've done this by now—piss in a cup, recite the

right answers, nod like I'm grateful for a second chance. All while pretending that one mistake didn't reroute my entire life down a track I never chose.

When I hand the cup back, he types something on his tablet and reads through my file.

"You're still clean," he says, barely looking at me. "Zero contact violations. No missed check-ins."

I nod.

"No incidents tied to art commissions either." He pauses, clicking his tongue. "Although that mural proposal in Bushwick did raise a few eyebrows."

"They asked for realism."

"They got soft porn."

"They got female form studies in correct proportions." I shrug. "It's not my fault the committee's got fragile sensibilities."

He doesn't smile, but I see it in his eyes—he's used to worse.

"I see you still list your father as your former guardian," he says. "No change to the legal record?"

"No change."

He flips the tablet shut and leans back like he's waiting for something.

"You know, most people distance themselves from the person who set off the

explosion,” he says. “They don’t volunteer to absorb the shrapnel.”

“I never said I volunteered.”

“Right.”

He looks like he wants to say more, but he doesn’t. Just scribbles a final note and nods at the door.

“You’re good for the month. Same time next.”

I push to my feet and walk out without another word.

Outside, the air is thick and humid, but it’s still easier to breathe than it is in there. I climb into my car, grip the wheel, and sit there for a minute before starting the engine.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I expect to feel that familiar weight—the bitterness, the regret—but instead, what surfaces is her.

Emily.

She’s nothing like the girls I’ve known. No fake giggle, no easy flattery, no smooth attempt at making herself fit.

She doesn’t fit anything.

And maybe that’s what I can’t stop thinking about.

The look on her face when I stepped into that bathroom. The flush climbing up her throat. The way she didn’t look away until the very last second.

“Shit,” I mutter, hitting the gas.

I didn’t expect to want her this badly.

I didn’t expect to feel anything at all if I saw her again.

But I sure as hell know one thing:

No matter what my dad does with her mom—no matter how many rooms we share under the same roof—I’ll never be able to look at Emily like she’s family.

I step into the garage, still tasting the stale coffee from the center on my tongue.

Inside the house, the lights are low and the mood is too cheerful for this late.

“Hey there, Cole.” Heather smiles at me from the living room. “Want to watch a movie with us?”

“I’ll pass, thank you.”

“He’s not into hanging out with me,” my dad says, kissing her cheek. “If it was just you, he might consider.”

“Right.” I move past them and head to the fridge, pulling out a chocolate bar.

“Cole, can I talk to you about something?” my dad asks, knowing damn well I never speak to him on testing days.

“Later.” I walk away and up the stairs before he can follow.

I go straight to my balcony, needing quiet. Just a minute to breathe. But familiar



humming cuts through the stillness.

Emily's sitting near the railing, a pen in her mouth, notepad on her thighs.

"You deny what I can see with my own eyes..." she murmurs. "The judge and jury can't determine your lies... because..."

She pauses. "'The judge and jury can't determine your lies... because they don't believe what you've done to me is a..."

"What you've done to me is a..." She taps the paper a few times, sighs. "Is a?—"

"Crime." I say it before I can stop myself. Her head snaps up, cheeks coloring as her eyes meet mine.

"Thank you..."

"You're welcome."

She jots the word down and hums again.

"Is that the whole poem?" I ask.

"No, just a draft." Her voice is soft. "Want to hear a really short one I actually finished today?"

"Sure."

She flips a few pages and takes a breath before reading, voice smooth, steady:

Your loyalty to me is one-sided,

So I've finally decided

To bide my time

Just a little while

And then I'll leave you, like you leave me

In pieces, in pain, an emotional tragedy

You'll come searching for me, after I'm long gone

But it'll be too late for me to hear your sorries, I'll be penning new songs

About how blood isn't really any thicker than water

It's just a title—like mother, like daughter.

She exhales and looks at me. "Does it sound okay?"

It sounds like she reached inside my chest and pulled the words straight out.

"It sounds very good," I say. Even though I should lie. I should say nothing at all. I should turn around and walk inside.

"So um..." she clears her throat. "I've been meaning to catch you so we could talk."

"About what?"

"What happened the other day in the shower."

“That was two days ago.”

“Yeah, well... I want you to know that I wiped it out of my mind completely and I’m hoping you did too so we can make this temporary living situation way less awkward.”

I say nothing. She stands and steps closer to the railing that separates our balconies.

Then she extends her hand. “Do we have a deal?”

“A deal on what, Emily?”

“What I just said... Forgetting about—you know, and just... you know.”

“The only thing I know is that I’ve woken up and gone to bed thinking about how your pussy would taste in my mouth, and how I’d kiss your tits until you begged me to stop teasing and just let me fuck you...”

Her jaw drops as slowly as her hand, her cheeks flushing deep pink.

“I was looking forward to seeing you in New York at your performance in a few weeks, and now I have to deal with the idea that that may be impossible, so... no.” I shake my head. “No deal on forgetting a goddamn thing.”

I leave her standing there and close the door to my room.

Then I head to the shower.

EMILY

My heart won't stop pounding.

Not in a cute, butterflies-in-my-stomach way—more like I'm trapped in a loop, stuck reliving the moment Cole said those things on the balcony. That voice. Those eyes.

I barely know him. We've shared maybe twenty minutes of actual conversation. But the way my body reacts when he looks at me like that—like he knows exactly what I'm thinking, and exactly what I want—it's messing with my head.

I open a new notebook and scribble the title: Feelings I Can't Reveal.

Before I can get past the first line, there's a knock at my door.

I smooth down my hair, pulse racing, and crack it open.

My mom stands there, smiling with two mugs in hand. "Feel like talking?"

"Sure..."

She steps inside like she's been waiting for the invitation all day. "I figured it's been, what, a week since we had some girl time?"

I take the mug. One sip in, I wrinkle my nose. "Mom. There's alcohol in this."

"Of course there is." She flops onto my bed. "No sane person drinks hot cocoa in the

middle of summer unless it's spiked."

She's in a good mood. That's either a sign of something going very right, or about to go very wrong.

"This place is unreal, isn't it?" she says, glancing around the room. "Can you believe we're living like this?"

Not really. "Yeah... It's beautiful."

"If only my mother could see me now. She'd lose her mind."

"Let's not talk about Grandma," I say quickly, steering us away from that familiar detour to disaster. "Tell me what you did this week."

"Oh, the usual. Walks with Aidan along the shore, brunch with his team. We even popped into the city for something special." She pulls a slim, silk box from her purse and places it in my lap. "This is for you."

I blink. "What is it?"

"Open it."

Inside, resting on a velvet cushion, is a single silver key.

I look up.

"It's for your cabin at the Steinbeck Writers' Retreat," she says softly. "I saved up and grabbed the last slot."

My throat tightens. "You... remembered I wanted that?"

“Of course I did.” She pulls me into a hug. “I started putting aside tips over a year ago. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to afford it, but I made it happen.”

For a moment, I can’t speak. I just hold on to her and let myself feel it—that quiet, unfamiliar warmth. Gratitude. Hope.

“I don’t even know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything, sweetie. Just promise me you’ll go. Even if everything else falls apart—go.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “I will.”

She pulls back and cups my face like she’s memorizing it. “Now tell me everything I’ve missed. All the juicy details.”

“About what?”

“About this week. About you.” She leans in. “And don’t pretend nothing’s going on. You’ve been floating around like your feet barely touch the floor.”

I hesitate. Just long enough to weigh the truth.

Then I smile and reach for her thermos. “Only if there’s more where this came from.”

Her eyes light up. “Always. Now spill.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

O n Sunday night, a rock flies through my open balcony door, landing right on my desk.

“I know you’re up there, Emily!” Taylor squeals from outside. “Hey! Hey! Come to the balcony, damnit!”

I hold back a groan.

I turned my phone off hours ago, right when she texted, “What time should I pick you up for Beach Fest?” Okay, well, it was after I said, “Can I have a rain check?” and she replied, “Hell no. Give me the time NOW.”

I tried to back out the easy way...

“You know there’s a ladder down here, right?”

I remain in my chair, choosing to call her bluff.

Hearing nothing but waves and wind for several moments, I assume she got the hint, so I pick up my pen and keep writing.

You and I should make an alliance...

But if we keep it quiet ? —

“Seriously, bitch?” Taylor yells, glaring at me from the balcony. “You didn’t hear me calling you?”

“I…” I have no words.

She walks toward me, grabbing my hands and pulling me to my feet.

“We’ll only stay for a few hours,” she says, “and it’s good to make friends around here. I’m sure there are plenty of other lames who love to sit in their room and write just dying to meet someone like you.”

I hold back a laugh. “Fine. I’ll just grab my purse and follow you out.”

“You mean, after you also change clothes, right?”

“No, this is—” I wave over my jeans and tank top “—good enough for a bonfire.”

“Um, no the hell it isn’t.” She shakes her head. “Let me confirm just in case you think I’m kidding.”

She grabs my hand and pulls me out the door and into the hallway. Cole’s door is wide open, exposing him mid-painting with the canvas hanging on his wall.

“Be honest, Cole.” Taylor gestures toward me like I’m Exhibit A. “Tell your friend here that this outfit won’t work at Beach Fest.”

Cole glances toward us, and his gaze moves over me—slow and unapologetic.

“Your outfit’s fine,” he says, voice low.

“Whatever.” Taylor scoffs and pulls me into my room. “Take it from me. The people



around here are a bit—oh, I don't know—high on themselves? You'll stick out instantly in that. And... are you opposed to eye shadow? You have the most beautiful eyes.”

“I thought this was just a bonfire and a party.”

“Yeah, okay. Where are your clothes?”

“In the closet.”

She opens it, and I try not to stare too hard at the sight of everything hung up on actual hangers for the first time in years.

The housekeeper didn't give me a chance to explain that she could simply stack the boxes in a corner. She ironed every item and hung them up by style and color code, like they all belonged.

“You have tons of nice dresses, so let's see...” She pulls out a vintage short-sleeve blue dress—one my mom stole from Chanel years ago. “Um, hello? This!”

“It still has the tag on it.”

“Do you plan on taking it back or something?”

“I'm just holding onto it, just in case we get charged years down the line...”

“Funny.” She rips off the tag and tosses the dress to me. “That, plus sandals, will be perfect. We'll have our shoes off most of the time anyway. Oh, and do you have any designer bags?”

“My mom does.”

“I’ll go ask to borrow one, then.” She’s already halfway out the door. “Be dressed when I come back so I can help you with your hair and makeup.”

She disappears without another word, and I slip off my clothes, pulling the dress over my head. The fabric falls like water over my skin. Cool. Soft. A little dangerous.

I turn to the full-length mirror and smooth the hem—just as Cole appears behind me in the reflection.

His mouth parts slightly, but he just stares.

Not in a passing glance kind of way. He really looks at me. Like I’ve caught him completely off guard.

And I stare right back—equally breathless, equally frozen.

His gaze dips down, then lifts to meet mine again. Something in my stomach twists, heat blooming low in my spine.

“Sooo much better!” Taylor bursts back in, waving one of my mom’s stolen Versace bags over her head. “This will match perfectly, and when I’m done with you, every guy there is going to beg for our new Hamptonite to look their way!”

Cole’s jaw tightens, and without a word, he disappears from the doorway.

I drop into the desk chair and try not to look like I’m unraveling while Taylor pulls out her makeup bag.

She gets to work, chattering about what kind of highlighter I need while my heart finds yet another unfamiliar rhythm to perform.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

MOM

I didn't get to see you before you left! Send pics!

[IMG] [IMG] [IMG]

MOM

OOOHHH! You look like a STAR! Have tons of FUN! :-)

“F un” doesn't begin to describe whatever dimension of hell I've currently slipped into.

We've been at Beach Fest for nearly two hours, and it already feels like a fever dream.

Everything glows—the bonfire, the sand, the tangled bodies swaying in rhythm.

Smoke threads through the air like perfume, and string lights zigzag above our heads, pulsing in time with the bass-heavy music.

The ocean hums in the distance, just beyond the reach of the fire.

If it weren't for the girls I came with, I might actually be enjoying this.

We're tucked inside one of the private tents near the back, surrounded by coolers of beer, trays of weed brownies, and enough gossip to fill a blog.

Taylor and her friends have cycled through every name in their social circle twice.

Their laughter is too sharp, too fast, and the air inside is thick with sugar, sunscreen, and someone's spilled tequila.

I glance toward the bonfire, wondering if I can slip away without Taylor noticing. I'm halfway through planning my exit when one of the Ashleys gasps.

"Oh my god," she whispers. "Is that Michael Hanson?"

"Wait, don't look yet—okay, now."

I follow their gaze.

He's tall, golden-brown, with dark curls and a white T-shirt clinging to his chest like it's been custom-tailored. He's carrying two beers and walking like he owns every set of eyes on the beach—including mine.

"Hey, Taylor," he says, smooth as silk. Then he looks at me. "Who's your friend?"

Before she can answer, he extends one of the beers. "Want to get out of here for a bit?"

Yes. Desperately.

"Sure," I say, grabbing the drink and a few brownies from the tray. "Let's go."

We walk down the beach, weaving past couples half-lost in each other. I eat the first

brownie before we even reach the fire pits. The second one lingers on my tongue longer—warm and soft, with a bitter aftertaste that sticks to the back of my throat.

By the time we hit the third, I'm starting to float. My limbs feel slow, like they're moving through water. The sugar's hitting, and so is the weed. My skin buzzes, and my vision softens at the edges.

Michael leads me to a tent strung with Edison bulbs, half-filled with casually beautiful guys who nod at me like I'm another accessory to the night.

"You're staying with the Dawsons?" one of them asks.

"Technically."

"Cole's around here somewhere. He doesn't really do parties."

They say his name like it means nothing. Like he's just another local ghost.

Michael leads me back into the sand as the music shifts—deeper now, slower. A low pulse that sinks into your chest and drags your hips into motion whether you want to move or not.

"Dance with me," he says, already pulling me closer.

"I'm not really a dancer."

"Dancing's just like sex," he murmurs, voice at my ear. "Find the rhythm. Let go."

I know I should slow down.

I don't.

I'm too warm, too dizzy. His hands are already at my waist, guiding me in slow circles. My body moves before I can argue with it.

And then—I see him.

Cole.

He's just beyond the fire, his body pressed against a girl I've never seen.

Her fingers tangle in his hair, her mouth finds the hollow of his throat.

He's got one hand locked around her waist, the other gliding over the curve of her back as they move in time with the beat.

It's intimate. Possessive. Addictive to watch.

Something tightens in my chest.

Because I want it to be me.

I want to be the one he's pulling close like that, the one whose dress is riding up as he presses in harder, slower. I want his hands on my body. I want his mouth on my neck. I want whatever that girl is getting, and I want it so badly I almost forget how to breathe.

Michael spins me, pulling me closer.

When I turn back around—Cole is staring at me.

His expression is unreadable, but his eyes are locked on mine. Like he sees every thought I'm trying not to have. Like he knows.

Michael's hand slides down, trailing beneath the hem of my dress—and then, with a quick tug, he yanks my panties off.

My body jolts.

Before I can say anything, he stuffs them into his pocket and leans in.

“I’ll keep these,” he whispers, breath hot against my ear. “For later.”

The words make my skin crawl. My body tries to step back, but my limbs aren’t listening.

And then the air shifts.

Heat radiates to my left. I look up?—

—and see Cole.

His jaw is set, his eyes dark, but it’s the way he moves that catches me. Deliberate. Controlled. Like every step is holding back something he could unleash in a second if he wanted to.

He cuts through the crowd like it isn’t even there. Straight toward me.

Michael notices too late.

“Emily?” Cole’s voice is low, tight, quiet—but dangerous.

Michael straightens. “We were just dancing.”

“She’s done dancing.”

“She can speak for herself.”

Cole’s eyes don’t leave mine. “Emily?”

I open my mouth to answer, but everything tilts. The lights blur. My balance slips for half a second, and suddenly I can’t tell if I’m standing on sand or cloud.

Cole sees it.

He steps in, wrapping one arm around my waist, steadying me with a grip that’s all muscle and heat. The scent of him—soap, salt, something darker—cuts through the fog in my head.

He holds me close and starts walking me away from the fire.

I don’t resist.

I can’t.

He doesn’t let go of my waist until he has the passenger door open. His hand brushes my thigh as I climb in, and the contact sparks through me like a match head.

I sink into the seat, breathing hard, the night pressing in around me like wet fabric.

The car is cool, dim, and quiet.

He blasts the A/C and presses a chilled bottle of water to my neck. I shiver, then sigh. My head is spinning, and I can feel the outline of his fingers still pressed into my skin.

Everything slows.



And then everything goes dark.

When I wake up, my throat is dry and my stomach is heavy. I shift under the blankets, blinking hard against the light.

I'm in my bed.

My head pounds softly, but the worst of the spin is gone.

"I would ask you to help me into pajama pants," I mumble, voice rough. "But that guy took my panties."

Cole's across the room, quiet.

He walks to my dresser and pulls out a T-shirt and clean underwear. Doesn't say a word. Just sets them gently beside me on the bed.

"Here."

I change slowly, each movement careful. I can still feel the heat of the beach in my skin. The noise of the crowd echoes faintly in my ears. But everything feels muted now. Sharpened.

He tugs the blanket over me once I'm dressed, his hands careful, almost reverent.

I watch him. The way his jaw shifts. The way he avoids my eyes.

"Why did you step in?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He doesn't answer.

“Were you jealous?”

Nothing.

“I need pajama pants,” I say softly, curling deeper into the bed.

He stands. Moves to the door.

At the threshold, he looks back, eyes unreadable in the dark.

“Sober up, Emily.”

He pauses.

“Oh—and I was jealous.”

The door clicks shut behind him.

And I stare at the ceiling, my heart still thudding in a rhythm that has nothing to do with weed, or sugar, or alcohol.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

I wake to a headache blooming behind my eyes, the kind that feels stitched into my skull.

The room is too bright, and everything tastes like stale sugar and regret.

My mom is sitting on the edge of my bed, brushing hair away from my face.

“Hey, sweetie,” she whispers. “You okay?”

I try to nod, but even that takes effort.

“Taylor said you had a little too much to drink. That’s my girl, getting her tolerance started early.” She lifts a glass of water to my lips. “Sip slowly.”

I do. The water is cold and blissfully clean. It cuts through the fuzz in my head like a knife.

“Cole set up everything on the nightstand,” she adds. “He got you into bed, gave you Tylenol, made you drink a bottle of water first. I think he even swapped out the ice packs.”

I blink. “Wait—he... took care of me?”

“Well, I was already asleep,” she says, amused. “And Cole’s good under pressure. He didn’t say much. Just showed up, scooped you into his arms, and disappeared

upstairs.”

Her words sink in slowly, like syrup through cotton.

“Anyway,” she continues, “you should know your night wasn’t a total disaster. You looked amazing.” She beams. “I wish I had gone to more parties before I got pregnant. College would’ve been wild.”

I close my eyes and beg my body to fall asleep long enough to dodge this rerun of the sixteen-and-pregnant monologue I’ve heard a dozen times.

When I open them next, she’s gone.

The sun has already started its descent when I drag myself to the shower.

The hot water helps. So does the clean air.

I dress slowly—jeans, a soft T-shirt—and head downstairs in search of food or a pulse of life.

The house is too quiet. Every room feels like it’s holding its breath.

As I wander down the hall, I catch the scent of old cologne and something sterile—leather, maybe.

Aidan’s office door is slightly ajar.

I shouldn’t, but I push it open anyway.

The first thing I notice is how perfect everything is. Not in a tidy or lived-in way—more like someone staged it for a press shoot. The books are alphabetized. The

magazines lined up like soldiers. A single pen rests on a leather blotter like it's afraid to be used.

And the photos...

They're everywhere. Aidan shaking hands with senators. At press events. Flanked by celebrities, athletes, CEOs.

But Cole?

Two photos.

Both decades old.

One shows Aidan holding a toddler on a beach—probably for a Christmas card. The other's so tightly cropped, Cole's face is half lost in the frame.

I move closer.

I've heard Aidan's podcast before. Years ago, I used to cling to it like gospel.

Back when we were far more destitute and bouncing between the worst motels, I'd play episodes to fall asleep.

His voice felt like stability. His advice—stories about fatherhood, forgiveness, healing—felt like something I could believe in.

Until it started to hurt.

Because whatever version of fatherhood he was selling? I'd never have it.

So I stopped listening.

But now, even after just a few days in this house, I'm starting to wonder if he ever had it either.

Because whatever he claimed to have with Cole back then?

I don't feel it now.

They barely speak. They never laugh. Cole doesn't flinch when Aidan walks into a room. It's not hate. It's distance. Like the bond Aidan sold to the world doesn't exist anymore—if it ever did.

A soft knock.

I spin to see the housekeeper in the doorway, her expression polite but firm.

"I'm sorry, miss. Mr. Dawson doesn't allow guests in his office without permission."

"I got turned around," I lie. "Was looking for the kitchen."

"It's just down the hall." She pauses. "Let me know if you'd like me to walk you there."

"No need," I say quickly, already moving.

I make it halfway before I spot Cole through the front windows—hoodie on, keys spinning in one hand as he slips out the front door.

No goodbye. No explanation.

And maybe I shouldn't care.

But my feet move before my brain decides anything.

I grab my mom's keys from the hook and trail him, keeping just far enough behind.

He weaves through quiet roads and storefronts until he pulls into a brick strip mall.

Hollow & Ink, the sign reads.

He disappears inside.

I park and wait a while before following.

Inside, the shop hums with low music and the hiss of tattoo machines. Amber light glows overhead, casting a soft sheen over black walls, framed art, and gold-detailed mirrors.

It smells like antiseptic, ink, and something faintly smoky.

Cole's at the back, gloved up, hunched over a woman's back. His focus is absolute. The design—an intricate geometric piece—curls down her spine in bold, precise lines.

He doesn't see me yet.

The girl glances over her shoulder. "So... are you seeing anyone?"

"No."

"You should let me take you out."

“I don’t date clients.”

“Don’t,” she echoes, “or won’t?”

“Both.”

She giggles. “You’re too hot to be single.”

Cole doesn’t answer. Just peels off his gloves and tosses them in the bin.

That’s when he sees me.

No surprise. No alarm. Just... knowing.

Like he expected me.

“Emily,” he says, low and amused. “Are you stalking me?”

“Yes.”

He walks toward me, slow and easy. “Why?”

“I needed to get out of the house.”

“There’s plenty to do back there.”

“Unless you think I came here because I didn’t want to be alone.”

His eyes hold mine. “Did you?”

I don’t answer.



But I don't look away, either.

"I should probably go," I say, suddenly aware of how long I've been standing here.

He glances at the girl still adjusting her shirt. Then steps closer.

"I've got another client in twenty minutes," he says. "But I'll walk you out."

I nod, trying not to let my pulse show on my face.

He leads me through a side hallway that smells like old cedar and faint smoke. The air feels heavier here, like the walls are keeping secrets.

"Nice place," I murmur.

He shrugs. "Pays for the next stage of my life."

"Is it weird? People offering up their bodies like blank canvas?"

"Not weird," he says, pushing the door open. "Most of them just want something permanent when everything else feels temporary."

Outside, the sun is nearly gone. The air is crisp. His car waits nearby, but he doesn't move toward it. Just lingers beside me, hands in the front pocket of his hoodie.

"You didn't answer me earlier."

"About?"

"Why you stepped in last night."

“I told you.”

“You said you were jealous.”

“That’s an answer.”

I smile softly. “It’s a deflection.”

“Would it be so bad if I was?”

“No,” I say. Then, quieter: “I think I liked it.”

His gaze dips to my mouth, then back up.

“I should go,” I say again. But I don’t move.

“You keep saying that,” he murmurs.

Then he steps back, just slightly, letting the tension fold back between us.

“I’ll see you back at the house,” he says.

I nod.

But as I walk to the car, it feels less like I escaped something... and more like I stepped into something I’m nowhere near ready for.

EMILY

By the time I get back to the house, the light outside has thinned into that moody gray-blue that makes the trees look like silhouettes. The whole world feels paused—too late for afternoon, not quite night.

My mom's voice floats up from downstairs, sing-song and too bright. That tone always means one thing: she wants something.

“We're going out for dinner, Em! Aidan made reservations—get dressed!”

I stare at my closet like it personally offended me.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in the backseat of Aidan's SUV, squeezed between my mother and her cloud of perfume, wearing a fitted black dress that feels too formal for whatever casual upscale seafood is supposed to mean.

Cole is already at the restaurant when we arrive—alone, of course. No one thought to tell him we were coming. Typical.

He looks up from the bar as we walk in, eyes flicking over us. There's a pause—like he's weighing whether or not to care—then he nods once and turns back to his drink.

He doesn't stand when Aidan approaches. Doesn't smile. Doesn't say a word until someone forces one out of him.

“Did you drive here?” Aidan asks, like he's catching him in something.

“Yeah.”

“Where’s your car?”

“In the lot.”

Aidan shakes his head, clearly annoyed but trying to keep it under wraps. “You know this place has valet.”

“I don’t need valet.”

I catch the look my mom gives Aidan—tight-lipped and sharp. For once, I’m with her. He’s not even pretending to be civil.

We sit, and conversation starts to drip like a leaky faucet.

Aidan launches into his upcoming book tour, full of vague references to keynote speeches and “high-level conversations.” My mom hangs on every word like he’s reading poetry.

Cole stays quiet, flipping his water glass in slow, steady circles.

I watch the condensation bead on his fingers, trailing down his knuckles, collecting at his wrist.

Under the table, his knee brushes mine.

I stay still.

A minute later, it happens again—slower this time. His leg shifts against mine and doesn’t pull back. Just rests there, solid and warm. Intentional.

He's not playing. He's letting me feel him. And he knows exactly what he's doing.

Aidan leans across his plate, oblivious. "The CEO of Gryphon Media's supposed to be at the party next month," he says to Cole. "Might not hurt to show your face. Make some real connections."

Cole doesn't look up. "I have connections."

"Professional ones."

"I have those too."

"I'm talking about the kind that actually help your future. You don't want to be inking girls' lower backs at thirty-five."

A flicker of something cold flashes in Cole's eyes, but he doesn't take the bait.

The server appears just in time, saving us all. I order the salmon. My mom gets a salad she'll barely touch. Aidan picks something with saffron, probably to prove he knows what saffron is. Cole doesn't even look at the menu. "Burger, medium rare," he tells the waiter without hesitation.

While they talk about wedding venues and backyard renovations—as if their relationship actually has a future, I tune it all out and watch Cole instead.

He eats with one hand. The other never stops moving—spinning his glass, tapping the table, brushing condensation from the base of the cup. His foot taps once under the table, then stills.

Then his fingers graze my thigh. Just the edge of them. Just long enough to make me suck in a breath I hope no one hears.

He doesn't look at me. Doesn't smirk. Just goes on sipping his drink like nothing happened.

His leg is still pressed against mine.

This time, I press back—just a little. A test. A yes.

That's when he looks up.

His gaze finds mine across the flickering candlelight. His eyes are unreadable, but his focus is absolute.

My pulse stutters.

I look away first, but only because I have to. Because if I don't, I'm going to forget we're not alone. That this boy—this man—could potentially be “family.”

And that what I want is the furthest thing from allowed.

But God, I want to know what his hands would feel like on me if they weren't holding tattoo needles. I want to know what his mouth would taste like if it stopped being so unreadable and finally gave something away.

I stab my salmon with more force than necessary.

His fingers find my thigh again. A slow pass. No higher, no deeper—just enough.

I sit still for the rest of dinner, quiet and burning, letting myself feel every stolen touch he gives me under the table. Pretending it's nothing. Pretending I'm not unraveling one brush at a time.

And when Aidan flags down a passing server and says, “Would you mind snapping a quick photo of the family?”

—I almost choke.

The camera flash hits like a slap. Too bright, too sudden.

The light fades, but the performance clings to my skin like smoke—hollow, weightless, and nothing close to real.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

S unlight cuts across the balcony in long, slanted bands, painting the floorboards in gold and gray.

I layer cobalt onto the canvas, dragging the brush through the waterline of a narrow two-lane road that stretches between mirrored lakes.

It's nearly finished—deceptively calm, deliberately still.

But underneath the surface, the whole thing hums with tension.

Footsteps cross behind me.

She enters without a word, the sound of a tray settling onto the table cutting through the quiet. When I glance over my shoulder, she's already moving past me—bare legs visible beneath one of my shirts, hair twisted into a knot, a few strands curling along her jaw like they belong there.

No performance, no nerves. She's just here.

“For the record,” she says, her voice rough with sleep, “I don’t usually stalk people.”

“I didn’t mind,” I say, setting the brush down.

Her gaze meets mine for a second, then drops.



There's a pause as she adjusts the mug in her hands. Her grip is a little too careful, like she's holding more than just coffee.

"And another correction," she adds, quieter. "I'm not trying to give my virginity away to just anyone. Not anymore."

I study her for a moment. There's no teasing in her voice. Just truth—stated plainly, like she's trying to level the ground between us.

"Good to know," I say. "You should know there are plenty of guys who'd take it."

Color creeps into her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. She just presses her lips to the edge of the mug and takes a sip.

"I just want to feel what everyone claims to feel," she says. "That's all."

There's more beneath that, but she doesn't offer it.

She reaches for a croissant, tears off a corner, and places it on my side of the tray. "Figured you'd skip breakfast again."

I nod toward the empty chair across from me. "Sit."

"I should finish a poem."

"You're lying."

Her smile is brief, but it softens the tension in her shoulders. She sits, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and I slice into one of the croissants, handing her half.

“What’s the turnaround time for one of your poems?” I ask.

“For you?”

“For anyone.”

“If I’m focused, a few days.”

I nod again. “I’ll wait.”

Her lips press together like she’s trying not to smile. I watch the way she moves—small shifts, subtle tells. She’s not guarded, exactly. She’s bracing. Like she’s waiting to see if she can really settle into this moment or if it’s going to vanish the second she does.

“You’re not wearing a shirt again,” she says, and there’s a hint of deflection in her tone.

“I paint shirtless.”

“It’s distracting.”

“Don’t look.”

“I dare you to wear one tomorrow.”

“You suck at dares.”

“You suck at focus.”

“I’m focused right now.”

“Not in the ways that matter.”

I tilt my head, considering her. “So a shirt would help your creative process?”

“It would help my sanity.”

“You hum when you write,” I say. “And talk to yourself.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You do. It’s distracting.”

“Then maybe I’ll wear duct tape and you’ll wear a raggedy old shirt and we’ll call it even.”

“I don’t own raggedy old shirts.”

“I’m sure you can paint one into existence.”

I let the silence stretch, watching her mouth twitch as she tries not to smile again.

“I’ve got a delivery to make,” I say, standing. “Out of town. I’ll be back late.”

She doesn’t respond, but something shifts in her expression. Barely a flicker, like she’s not sure if she’s supposed to care.

I shouldn’t say anything else. I’ve already touched her too much. Let her in too far. This thing between us—whatever it is—is already closer to the edge than it should be. I should keep my distance. I should leave it there.

But the words are out before I can stop them.

“Want to come with me?”

Her head tilts slightly, surprise flickering across her face.

I don't move. Don't try to take it back.

She doesn't answer right away, but her eyes stay locked on mine. Searching. Considering.

And in the quiet that follows, I know she's already said yes.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

A few afternoons later

I 'm rushing down the stairs with a poetry binder tucked under my arm. My “performing poet” badge is swinging from the lanyard around my neck, and my pale pink dress is fluttering with every step.

“Mom?” I call out. “ Mom ! How much longer do you need to get ready?”

“Huh?” She looks up from her phone when I reach the living room. “Ready to go where?”

“Funny.” I roll my eyes. “My poetry reading. We need to leave now if we’re going to make it to New York in time.”

“That’s ... today ?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“I am so sorry.” Her voice softens. “I did forget.”

“Well, I’ll forgive you if you hurry up get dressed. We can be a little late.”

“Well, I...” She shoots me a sympathetic smile. “I promised Aidan I’d go somewhere with him this evening.”

“He’s more than welcome to come, too.”

“We’re sightseeing on his yacht,” she says. “He left to go pick up the captain.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.” I cross my arms. “This has been scheduled for months and you promised.”

“Won’t there be other readings?”

Behind me, I hear the fridge open, a bottle clinking.

Cole.

“Perfect!” my mom says, overly bright. “Cole, would you mind taking Emily to her reading in the city?”

He shuts the fridge and leans against the counter. “Not at all.”

My hands tighten around the binder. My throat is full of words I can’t say without screaming.

I storm off to the garage.

COLE

Emily hasn't uttered a word in fifty miles.

Staring straight ahead, she's clenching her jaw and shaking her head every few minutes. It looks like she's fighting between the urge to cry and the urge to scream.

As much as I want to ask her what happened between her and her mother, I hold back.

It's none of my business.

The windshield wipers swatting the rain serve as the only sound between us.

When we arrive at the café—Petals & Notes—I have to circle the block five times. The lack of parking in New York is always a reminder why I'll never take the bait and build my art gallery here.

"You don't have to come in," Emily says, finally speaking. "I'm sure you'd rather do something else than watch a bunch of writers read poems, so... maybe just drop me off and then come back in a few hours?"

"No." I look over at her. "I want to see."

"Okay." She nods, staring straight ahead.

I spot a delivery truck pulling out of the alley and steer into his spot.

“They’ll tow your car if you park here,” Emily finally makes eye contact. “The sign says ‘for deliveries only.’”

“I’ve got that covered,” I say, stepping out. “Hold on.”

I walk to my trunk and pull out an “Art Delivery” sign I made years ago for situations like this. I snap it on the center of my hood before lifting an umbrella and opening Emily’s door.

When she steps out, she looks at my sign and laughs.

“How often does that come in handy?”

“You’d be surprised.” I smile at her. “I’ve yet to get a single ticket. Speaking of which, do I need to pay for anything when we go inside?”

“No, I have this for you.” She rummages in her purse and pulls out a lanyard that reads: Guest Who Loves Good Poetry.

“You really don’t have to come to this, Cole. There are a lot of weird writers, and some of the poems?—”

“Stop.” I press a finger against her lips. “Isn’t this the original event you invited me to when we first met?”

“Yeah...”

“Then why would you ask me to walk away now?”

She blushes in response and I press my hand against the small of her back as we walk down the alley. There’s a faintly lit sign reading: Pour out your soul...



Inside, tables draped in light blue and candle centerpieces surround an elevated stage.

The host immediately smiles at Emily and leads us to a booth in the back.

“May I interest either of you in a drink?” a server steps in front of us. “If so, I just need to see your IDs.”

“I’ll have a cranberry vodka,” Emily says, pulling out what is definitely a fake driver’s license. “Oh, and can you ask the bartender to crush sugar on the rim?”

“Absolutely.” He glances at her card without catching a thing. Then he reaches for mine. “And you, sir?”

“Whatever IPA beer you have on tap is fine.”

“Be right back.”

He walks away, and I stare at Emily—waiting for her eyes to meet mine.

“Where the hell did you get that driver’s license?”

“Some guy made it for me when we lived in Oregon,” she says. “My mom paid for it.”

“Let me see it.”

She presses it into my palm and I’m immediately impressed. The art is perfectly aligned, as is her picture, and the only flaw is her listed height.

This license claims she’s five foot nine, but she’s five foot five—at best.

Handing it back to her, I wait until the server steps away from our table to speak again.

“Your mom might be a half-decent match for my dad after all,” I say. “At least in one department.”

“Reckless parenting?” She presses her glass to her lips. “Child endangerment? Or negligence?”

All of the above...

A microphone suddenly squeals before I can answer, and we both look toward the stage.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” The host smiles at the crowd. “We’re picking up with our next poet, Grant Malone, who is going to read ‘Her Lost Innocence.’”

The crowd applauds, and a guy in a jean jacket takes to the stage.

He looks up at the ceiling for several seconds before stretching—actually stretching like he’s about to run a marathon.

Then he paces the stage, not saying a word.

Okay, Emily might’ve had a point about the weirdness...

“I am now ready to perform my future bestselling poem of all time,” he finally speaks into the mic.

“I slide my cock against her hymen, but it’s tough like a diamond.”

What the fuck...

“She feels warm, wet, and tight.” He snaps his fingers. “The sensations are hard to fight...”

“As my heart aches, the condom breaks...”

I take a long sip of my beer.

“When the rubber stretched,” he looks way too confident about his words, “my cock compressed.”

He snaps his fingers again. “The end.”

Silence.

“I said ‘the end,’” he speaks a bit louder. “You may all bask in my greatness now.”

The crowd applauds softly, and I look over at Emily.

She’s smiling and looking happy for the first time tonight.

“Okay, then...” The host returns to the mic. “Next up, we have Emily O’Hara, performing her original piece, Inheritance: A Love Letter to My Mother...”

Emily downs the rest of her drink and whispers, “Wish me luck,” before heading to the stage.

She makes it to the mic and pulls a sheet from her pocket. Unfolding it, she stares at it for a few seconds and shakes her head.

“Correction,” Emily says, opening her purse and pulling out a different sheet. “I’ll be performing a different piece tonight. This one is titled Words Left Unsaid.”

A few polite murmurs ripple through the audience.

She grips the mic and takes a breath before glancing at the page. Then she begins:

You taught me love with fingers crossed,

A lullaby of gain and loss.

Your voice was sweet, your smile divine,

But lies were laced in every line.

You said I mattered, said I shone ? —

But left me crying, all alone.

I watched you chase a thousand men,

Each time you swore, “It’s different then.”

You traded hugs for empty praise,

For silks and rings and brighter days.

I begged for crumbs of what you gave

To strangers you would bend to save.

You dressed my wounds, then made them bleed,

Fed off my silence, cloaked in need.

Now all I have are shards and shame,

A mother's love—a twisted game.

You birthed a girl, then left a ghost,

And I still ache for you the most.

She steps back, finished, and loud applause fills the café.

I stare at her amidst the clapping—holding back my hands because it feels wrong.  
Like applauding someone for bleeding in front of strangers.

She steps down, and her eyes find mine, but she doesn't return to the table. Instead,  
she makes a beeline for the exit.

Confused, I set a few bills on our table before following her into a light rain.

I find her turning toward the alley, and I grab her from behind, pushing her against  
the bricks.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I ask. “Am I missing something?”

“I'm ready to go home.”

“That's not what I asked you.” I look into her eyes. “What the hell is wrong with  
you?”

“I hate that I met you this way.” She hisses. “I hate it so much.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if it were any other way, I would want you to kiss me and tell me I’m not a fucking psychopath for feeling the way I do about my mom.” Tears fall down her face. “I’d want you and I to have a potential future, but that’s not possible, so—I’m ready to go home.”

Silence.

“Do you mind unlocking your car now?” she asks. “I would really like to?”

I press my lips against hers before she can complete her sentence.

She parts her lips like she’s been waiting, like this is what the poem was really building toward. Her mouth is hot, soft, hungry. She rises on her toes, pressing harder, fingers curling in the fabric at my chest.

I tilt my head, deepen the kiss. Slide my hand to the back of her neck, the other gripping her hip tight enough to bruise.

She moans against me—quiet but unfiltered—and that’s all it takes.

I pin her hips against the brick wall, careful but firm, never breaking contact. Her spine arches slightly, chest brushing mine, rain hitting her arms as her hands climb to my shoulders.

Her thighs shift, brushing mine, and her body presses harder.

She slides a hand into my pants, catching me slightly off guard, but the taste of her

mouth is too sweet for me to let go just yet.

My cock hardens in her hand, and for a moment I try to remember why I shouldn't be doing this. Why this is the exact line I promised myself not to cross.

But that moment passes fast. She says my name, and everything else drops away.

“Emily...” I bite down on her bottom lip and she gasps.

But her hand doesn't stop.

I shouldn't be touching her again. I shouldn't be letting this happen. I already know this is the point of no return—but I can't stop. I don't want to.

I slide a hand under her dress, caressing her thighs.

Pushing her panties to the side, I rub my fingers against her clit—stalling when I feel how soaking wet she is.

“Fuck...” I slowly slide a finger inside her, and she sucks in a breath as I push it as far as it can go, then slip in another.

She's gripping me, pulsing, hips moving against my hand like we're not pressed up against a wall in the middle of a city we don't belong to.

“Is this what you want?” I whisper.

She moans as I thrust my fingers in and out of her, as I bite her skin while she moans against me.

My cock is rock hard, and the feel of her hand trailing up the shaft, combined with

the way she clenches around my fingers, has me fighting not to lose it too soon.

“Move your hand away from me, Emily,” I manage. “Now.”

She slowly obeys, and I rub my thumb against her clit before plunging my fingers back inside.

“Show me how you’d ride my dick,” I whisper against her lips. “Fucking show me.”

Staring into my eyes, she moves her hips against me, slow and deliberate. Teasing. Testing.

She tightens around my fingers, and when I feel her legs tremble, when I hear her say my name like it means something?—

I kiss her hard and let her fall apart.

She comes with a stuttered breath, her body shaking, and her hand slides back down my jeans.

She strokes me as I press kisses along her jaw.

“I’m about to come,” I say, breathless. “Let go for a second...”

She doesn’t.

Instead, she unzips my pants and slides her mouth over the head of my cock.

She takes me down her throat, slow and confident, and I tangle my fingers in her hair as everything breaks apart inside me.



I come hard. Harder than I should. Harder than I have in a long time.

And I know it's because of her.

We stare at each other through the rainfall, neither of us speaking.

I've never wanted someone more.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Emily asks. "Did I do something wrong?"

I shake my head. "I think we both did."

"Do you care?"

"No."

"Me either..." She lets out a breath and zips my jeans.

I smooth her dress. She picks up her purse.

I walk to my car and open the door for her.

She falls asleep after I've driven a few miles, her hand entwined in mine over the gear shift.

Every stoplight I reach flashes red as we leave the city, warning me to stop whatever this is while I still have the chance.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

“Hey.” Cole nudges my shoulder, jolting me awake.

I sit up and realize we’re back at home, in the garage.

My lips still feel swollen and heavy, and as I turn to look at him, flashes of him making me orgasm for the first time cloud my mind.

“Thank you for the ride,” I say. “I appreciate it.”

“Anytime.” He steps out and, like the gentleman he is, walks over to my side and opens my door.

When we step inside, I spot a bouquet of pink and white balloons floating from a vase on the kitchen island. A small silver envelope hangs from their strings.

To Emily

From Mom.

I don’t bother grabbing it.

From where I’m standing, I can see through the glass doors on the other side of the kitchen; my mom is curled next to Aidan, her head resting on his shoulder.

“She told me your dad was taking her yachting overnight...” I mutter.

“Hmmm,” Cole says. “My dad never boats in weather like this. He might’ve told her he wanted to take her on a tour of it, though.”

No, I heard exactly what she said...

I nod, accepting that my mom is now deeply entrenched in the infatuation phase of her relationship. It’s the stage where she’ll tell little lies to me about where she’s been and where she’s gone, all to make herself endlessly available to her new man.

She never apologizes for this phase; in her mind, I gain something from it, too. Whether it’s her casting a blind eye to the cups of vodka I pour while I write, or the extra desserts she slips me from her dinner dates, in her mind, the new guy is good for me, too.

Ignoring the pain in my chest, I head upstairs with Cole behind me. He waits for me to slip into my room before slipping into his.

I head straight for the balcony, and Cole is stepping onto his landing at the same time.

We stare at each other for several moments, and then he unlocks the gate that connects his balcony to mine, and I move to his side.

Without saying a word, he grabs my hand and pulls me into his room.

He leads me toward the bed, and I sleep against him for the rest of the night.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

O ur kiss and the way Cole came have gone unmentioned.

Even though the memories loop through my mind every few hours, neither of us say a word about them.

We've slipped into a rhythm instead—quiet, delicate, and dangerous.

I write on the balcony in the morning while he paints on his.

He brings up breakfast and lunch without asking, a silent barrier between me and my mother's endless questions.

In the afternoon, I nap against his chest. At night, we sit beneath the moonlight, creating art like it's the only thing holding us together.

This afternoon breaks the rhythm.

It's too hot for the balcony, and neither of us wanted to retreat to our bedrooms. So we're in the downstairs living room, sprawled on the couch.

I'm stretched out across Cole's lap, his sketch pad balanced on my bare back like a second skin.

One of my legs dangles over the cushion, a napkin of half-finished verses crushed in my fist. He sketches slowly, dragging his pencil down my spine, then replaces it with

his fingers—threading them through my hair, slow and deliberate, like he’s anchoring me to the moment.

The moment fractures when Ramen clears his throat.

“Dinner,” he announces, then freezes.

I sit up. Cole doesn’t move.

The chef brings us a tray with two bowls of soup and lingers for half a second longer than necessary. Then he glances toward the front hall.

“Your parents are heading back from the beach,” he says, like he’s trying to make sense of what he walked in on. “They should be back in about ten minutes.”

We both nod. He leaves.

I force my hands around the bowl. The warmth is a welcome distraction. If I meet Cole’s eyes right now, I’ll remember too much—his mouth on mine, the sound he made when I touched him, the moment everything tipped past the point of no return.

Then the door opens.

“Oh, great—you’re both here,” Aidan says, his voice a little too cheerful. My mother’s beside him, wind-tousled and glowing.

“We were thinking we’d have to chase you down to share today’s great news,” she beams.

“What is it?” I ask, spoon halfway to my mouth.

“We eloped!”

“We’re married!”

They speak at the same time.

Everything inside me stops.

My hand slips. The glass of water beside the soup tips and crashes to the floor, shattering loud and sharp. My fingers twitch, useless. My heart is hammering too fast, too loud, and for a second I feel it—hot, rising nausea climbing up the back of my throat.

Cole goes still beside me.

He doesn’t breathe. Doesn’t blink. His jaw locks so tight I can see the veins in his neck strain. Then he sets his bowl down on the tray with slow, deliberate care.

“Look at my ring!” my mom squeals, thrusting her hand out like it’s the crown jewel. The diamond nearly blinds me. “Isn’t it perfect, Emily?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Cole stands.

“Can I talk to you?” he says, looking directly at Aidan. His voice is even, but underneath it is a quake.

“Now?” Aidan chuckles. “Can it wait?”

“No.” Cole’s tone sharpens. “It can’t.”

My mom doesn't notice. She's still spinning, still glowing, already halfway into her next sentence.

"We wanted to wait for a big wedding next year," she says, "but then we realized—why wait? Why not just do it now and let everything else fall into place?"

Everything else.

Like us.

"We'll have a ceremony for everyone next spring," Aidan adds. "That gives us time to gel. Emily will be in college by then, and Cole's moving out, so there's no need to make this feel rushed."

Cole lets out a single, humorless breath. Almost a laugh. But not quite.

"I said it can't wait," Cole says, tense.

"Son, we can step outside a little?—"

"Now ," Cole demands.

He stalks past the tray, through the living room, and down the hallway. The door slams shut behind him. Loud. Final.

My mom barely flinches.

"He figured that would happen," she says, like it's no big deal. "Cole's never really wanted his dad to remarry. We can't take it personally."

I try to breathe, but the air feels too thick.

“I’ll tell you the whole proposal story!” she chirps, already pulling out her phone.  
“It’ll make you feel better, I promise.”

I don’t want the story. I want to be anywhere but here.

But I can’t leave.

I can’t run—not with Cole storming out first.

Not without making this whole thing collapse.

So I stay.

I smile like I’m not unraveling.

She props up her phone and FaceTimes Samantha, squealing as she shows off the ring and launches into a story I’ll never forget, no matter how hard I try.

Dinner by the water. A dance on the sand. A trio of musicians. A perfect sunset. Aidan kneeling. Saying things like “You make me whole” and “I want to do forever with you.”

By the end of it, I’m not even listening.

All I hear is the echo of glass on tile. The sound of Cole walking away.

And the roar in my chest that feels too much like heartbreak to be anything else.



EMILY

I t's been an hour.

The house is quiet, except for the soft hum of my mother's voice drifting in and out of the dining room.

She's still admiring her ring under different lights, tilting her hand this way and that like she's in a jewelry commercial, each sparkle confirming some new chapter in the fantasy she's built for herself.

In another life—maybe even just a year ago—I would've been happy for her. I would've leaned in, asked for the full proposal story again, held her hand and gushed about the dress. But now, all I can feel is resentment. Because she got everything she wanted.

And I might've just lost the one thing I didn't know I needed.

I haven't moved from the couch. The soup has gone cold on the tray beside me, untouched. My fingers are still curled around the cushion like I'm bracing for impact.

Down the hall, a door slams.

Then—voices.

They start low, sharp around the edges. Cole's voice carries first, hot and strained.

“...you didn’t even think to tell me?—”

Aidan answers, too calm. That measured, press-ready tone he always uses when he’s trying to win a crowd.

“It’s not about you, Cole. This is bigger than your?—”

“You don’t get to talk to me about bigger.”

The volume rises, both of them pushing over each other now. It’s impossible to make out everything, but fragments slice through the quiet like shrapnel.

“...years of pretending...”

“...always your image—never the truth?—”

“...you should be grateful.”

Then a loud thud, the sharp crack of something heavy colliding with the wall or floor. My body jerks. My pulse skids out.

I want it to end. I want Cole to walk out of that room, climb the stairs two at a time, and knock on my door like he’s done every night since that first kiss. I want him to look at me—really look—and say something, anything, that makes this make sense.

But instead, the house goes still again.

Seconds pass.

Then I hear it—the snarl of an engine starting outside.

I rush to the window, breath caught in my throat, and pull back the curtain just in time to see the blur of Cole's car tearing down the drive. His tires kick up gravel, red taillights flashing once before they vanish into the dusk.

He's gone.

Without me.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

Hey...

Are you coming back?

Truth or dare? (I picked dare for you)

I dare you to answer my texts.

Can you at least answer one?

What about calling me back...

Cole?

No reply. No read receipts. Just silence.

Cole's absence is everywhere. In the echo of the balcony doors that stay shut. In the cold side of my bed where his warmth used to linger. In the mug I keep reaching for, then setting back down, pretending I'm not waiting.

I really need to talk to you...

Just say something.

Please.

EMILY

The Steinbeck Writers' Retreat comes at exactly the right time.

I haven't written anything in over a week—nothing I'd keep, anyway—and maybe a new location will force the words out. Maybe if I stare at a different ceiling, sleep in a different bed, I'll stop replaying the silence.

Aidan stayed back in the Hamptons to give me and my mom "time to talk," but the drive to Sag Harbor is quiet, save for old Mariah Carey songs.

Usually, when the first notes of Emotions come on, we look at each other and belt the chorus like we're in on some inside joke. This time, I left it open for her to have a solo, but she never took to the stage.

When we pull in front of the cabins that overlook the harbor, I nearly jump out of the car.

"It's number twelve," I say, pointing to the one where I'm hoping I'll finally find some peace. She pulls up to the front and I climb out with the key.

The moment I open the door, a small breath of relief slips from my mouth.

It's beautiful. Simple. A queen-sized bed pressed against the far wall, two writing desks, a chaise, and a window that frames the sea like a painting. The bathroom has a clawfoot tub and a copper sink, with a quote etched on the mirror:

We spend our time searching for security and hate it when we get it.

I drape a towel over the rack and return to the room, setting my purse on the bed just as my mom rolls in my suitcase.

“Okay, here.” She hands me a black card with Aidan’s name on it. “He said you can use this for whatever you want while you’re here.”

“I think everything’s already covered,” I say, not reaching for it.

“You might need it in case of an emergency. Or if your fellow writers get too pretentious.” She places it gently on the desk. “I’ll be a nervous wreck while you’re awake this week, but?—”

“Does Aidan know the real you?” I interrupt.

She freezes. “What?”

“Your new fiancé,” I say. “Does he actually know who you are?”

“He wouldn’t have asked to marry me if he didn’t.”

“People rush into marriages all the time.” I shrug. “You’ve said that yourself.”

“Yeah, about reality TV show couples.” She laughs, too lightly. “Not us.”

I lift an eyebrow, not bothering to hide it.

“I’m telling you the truth, Emily,” she says. “I knew the moment he walked into that diner and smiled at me and said, ‘Mind if I stay and help you clean up so I can talk to you?’—I just knew there was something there.”

“So, the answer is no.” I keep my voice calm, but firm. “He doesn’t know you. Not really.”

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“That you’ve been chasing an exit strategy for years. Always looking for someone to fix everything. And now it seems like you’ve found it in someone rich and convenient—not someone you love.”

“Watch it,” she hisses. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you this week, but I don’t like it. I love him. He loves me. End of discussion. And if I didn’t love you so much, I’d slap that last sentence right out of your mouth so hard you’d never question me again. Clear?”

“Clear.”

She pulls me into a hug anyway, arms wrapping tight.

“I know why you’re saying this,” she whispers.

“You do?”

She nods, letting go slowly. “You’re looking out for me, and I appreciate that. But your new stepbrother...” She shakes her head. “I don’t think we should count on him being at the wedding. He doesn’t approve.”

“Has he said why?”

“Aidan still can’t reach him,” she sighs. “But I’m sure he’ll come around. His dad is all he has—just like you’re all I have.”

I nod and give her one last hug.

“Thanks for saving up and working hard for me to come here,” I say. “This is the nicest and most selfless thing you’ve ever done for me, and I appreciate it.”

“I love you, Emily.”

“I love you, too.”



EMILY

Cool winds whistle through the trees as I join the other writers around a fire.

There are thirteen of us, and there must be some unwritten code about a writer's uniform because we're all wearing variations of plaid shirts and jeans. Only one girl is wearing heels to complete the look; the rest of us have opted for beige loafers or tennis shoes.

The lead instructor stands near the fire pit, clutching a thermos and going over the orientation.

"This year's theme is focusing on yourself in isolation," she says, gesturing toward our cabins.

"All the amenities—the waterfront, the canoes, the meditation deck—are open 24/7. Free writing happens early mornings and evenings, and we'll meet here every afternoon for prompts and craft discussion.

Please be respectful of the quiet hours and the curfew, which is strictly midnight. "

"Now, let's go around and get to know each other." She smiles. "Let's start with your first name, favorite book, and the name of the person you're killing off in your current work-in-progress."

We laugh, and she points to the girl in heels to start.

My phone vibrates in my jacket pocket once she utters her name.

Cole.

I hit ignore.

He calls again.

I serve him another ignore.

Cole

I'm home now.

We need to talk.

Where are you?

I stare at his words and scroll up to where he'd earlier ignored all of mine. As much as I want to talk to him, he doesn't get to pick and choose when he talks to me.

Placing my phone on silent, I tuck it back into my pocket.

Hours after the social hour, I return to my room and hit the lights.

Then I freeze.

Cole is sitting on my bed, elbows on his knees, his reflection in the mirror before I even see his face. When I step in, he lifts his eyes to mine, sharp and unreadable.

"You weren't going to tell me where you were?" he asks.

“I’ll only be here a week.” I cross my arms. “I figured you’d still be ignoring me by then.”

“I’m not ignoring you.” He rises slowly, towering, but controlled. “I’m processing things.”

“And what makes you think I’m not?”

“You seemed to be quite thrilled about our parents’ marriage from what I recall.”

“Because I stood around listening to how your dad proposed?” I scoff. “That’s not being ‘thrilled.’ That’s being fucking polite. Then again, from the way you’ve been acting, you clearly know nothing about that.”

“There’s a dictionary on the bookshelf behind you,” he says. “I think the word you meant to say instead of ‘polite’ is ‘fake.’ Maybe you should look that up.”

“Get out.” My voice cracks. “I didn’t ask you to come here, and visitors aren’t allowed.”

“I need to talk to you.” He moves closer, and as he nears, the pain in his eyes is clearer. “I hate that it has to be here, but you’ve left me no choice.”

“I’m glad I’m here, because I refuse to let you stay.” I drop my arms. “I’m also glad that I got to see the truest part of you this early. Makes it real damn clear that whatever the hell I feel for you is dead-ass wrong, because you’re a fucking runner.”

“A what?”

“A. Fucking. Runner.” I spit the words. “You run away and leave me hanging when I need you. And I needed you, Cole. So fuck off and go back where you came from.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.” I reach behind me, hand fumbling for the doorknob.

He reaches past me and clicks the lock shut.

And then his hand just hovers there, pressed against the door, while we both breathe hard.

“I hated every second of being away from you,” he says, voice low, frayed. “I couldn’t paint. I couldn’t sleep. I thought leaving would make it easier. It didn’t. So if you need to hit me, scream at me—do it. But I’m not leaving you alone.”

“You already did,” I whisper.

He leans in. “Then let me prove I won’t.”

I expect the kiss to come fast, but it doesn’t. He just looks at me. And that pause—his restraint—sets my whole body on fire.

I grab his collar and kiss him first.

He groans against my mouth, catching me off guard as I push him back, flipping the power between us. I guide him to the edge of the desk, facing the mirror.

I can see us in the mirror, the truth of this pressed between glass and shadow.

His hands tighten on my hips, but he lets me take over. I shove his jacket off his shoulders, then roll my hips against him slowly, deliberately.

“This doesn’t fix anything,” I murmur.

“Tell me you still feel that way once I’m done with you,” he breathes.

He spins me around, kissing me harder, and lifts me onto the desk. The mirror reflects everything—my flushed skin, his mouth trailing down. He slides my shirt over my head, unclasps my bra, and runs his tongue along my collarbone, then lower.

When he reaches my breasts, he cups them both in his hands and groans.

“God, you’re perfect,” he whispers. “I’ve never wanted someone the way I want you.”

He takes the right nipple in his mouth first, then shifts—slowly, reverently—to the left. His tongue circles the metal of the piercing before pulling it between his lips, warm and wet. I arch my back, gasping, and he does it again, slower this time, his eyes never leaving mine in the mirror.

“Does that feel good?” he murmurs, flicking the tip of his tongue against the ring.

“Yes—fuck—yes.”

He kisses a trail down my stomach, his fingers hooking into the waistband of my shorts and tugging them down, along with my panties. He drags me to the edge of the desk again, kneels between my thighs, and grips my hips like he needs them to breathe.

“Spread your legs wider,” he says, his voice guttural.

When I do, he lowers his mouth to me, tongue flicking over my clit in one slow, teasing pass. Then another. Then deeper. His tongue moves with maddening precision—flicking, circling, flattening—until my whole body’s trembling.

He grips my thighs tighter, holding me open, and buries his mouth in me. The sounds he makes—needy, unfiltered—match my own. I buck against his face, moaning his name, and he groans into me, sending vibrations up my spine.

“Look at me,” he says roughly.

I force my eyes open, meeting his through the mirror just as he sucks hard on my clit. My hips jerk. I cry out. My hands grip the edge of the desk like it’s the only thing holding me to Earth.

When the orgasm hits, it’s shattering.

I fall apart on his mouth, calling his name, legs clenching around his head. He doesn’t stop. He keeps licking through it, drinking every last second of it down.

By the time I collapse backward, boneless and gasping, I feel him rise to his feet.

He presses a soft kiss to the inside of my knee, then my hip, then back to my pierced nipple, sucking gently as if in apology.

Then he disappears into the bathroom. I hear the water running.

When he returns, he’s holding a warm towel. He kneels again, cleaning me carefully, tenderly. Then he lifts me from the desk and carries me to the bed.

He tucks the blanket around me and curls his body around mine.

“I’ll leave before sunrise,” he murmurs, pressing his lips to my temple. “But I don’t want to.”

I close my eyes, but I don’t sleep. Not yet.

Not while his arms are still around me.

COLE

Emily's still asleep when I slip out.

Her fingers twitch once as I pull away, like some part of her knows I'm leaving. I pause at the door, just long enough to memorize the way her breath lifts the blanket, the way her hair fans over the pillow like a question she's still waiting for me to answer.

Outside, the hallway is cold and dim. I coast past the other cabins in silence, careful not to wake the others. My phone buzzes in my back pocket— Dad flashing across the screen.

I don't answer.

I step outside instead, the night air curling sharp against my skin.

Above me, the sky is a dark smear of stars. Wind moves through the trees, and for a second—just one—I think I can pretend that my dad actually gives a damn about where I've been.

But the quiet won't let me.

The night feels too much like a certain night between us that I always try to forget.

The one I never talk about.



Don't think about it, Cole.

Don't fucking think about it.

I climb into my car, the door shutting with a heavy click. The engine hums beneath my hand as I shift into drive. I'm finally heading home—but only because Emily will be there in a few days. That's the only part that feels solid. The only thing I trust to keep me moving.

I ease out of the retreat parking lot and turn onto the highway.

The road is empty, quiet. For a while, I let myself think about the future. About the gallery spaces I've been circling in Ohio and West Virginia. The commissions I've lined up. The possibility of a place of my own.

Piece by piece, it's all falling into place.

And then?—

Honk! Honk! Honkkkkk!

The truck behind me blares its horn. A man shouts something from a rolled-down window, but I don't hear it.

Because I can't move.

I'm frozen at the green light, foot locked against the brake, pulse thudding behind my eyes.

“Come on, man!”

“Move!”

“Let’s go!”

I try to will myself to push on the gas, but it’s no use. Whenever this happens, I just have to wait it out—to let it pass.

My grip tightens on the wheel as the flashbacks start.

A blood-splattered windshield.

Shards of glass embedded in my arms.

The stink of warm beer.

Rain.

So much fucking rain.

I can still feel it. Still see the red and blue lights bouncing across the road. The EMTs. My dad’s voice screaming my name in the ER like he actually gave a shit.

Cole, please. Please be okay.

Then the courtroom. The judge. His forced smile.

“Don’t worry, we won’t let this affect your father’s legacy. We’ll erase it after a few years...”

As awful as the night of the DUI was—and as brutal as juvie turned out to be—that line is what stuck.

Affect your father's legacy.

That was always the priority. Not the truth. Not me.

I don't hide what happened because I'm ashamed.

I hide it because none of it had to happen.

Because if people knew what really went down that night?—

If they knew who else was in that car?—

Everything would change.

I pop open the glovebox and pull out the prescription bottle I never use unless I have to. It's supposed to help with anxiety, but the side effects kill my creative focus. And most of the time, I convince myself I don't need it.

Tonight, I do.

I swallow a dose dry, shut my eyes, and wait for the red light to cycle again.

It flashes green.

A second chance.

And still, the memories won't let go.

This time, I see myself in the back of a cop car, hands cuffed behind me. Hear the buzz of the tattoo gun I ran on scrap paper in juvie. Smell the bleach in the cellblock showers.

I grip the steering wheel tighter.

Pick up my phone.

Scroll to Emily's name.

Dial.

"Hey." Her voice is a whisper. "Something wrong?"

"I only made it two miles away from your retreat," I say. "I need to come back."

"You left something?"

"I can't drive all the way home like this..." I hesitate. "Can I sleep on your couch?"

"Yeah, sure. Are you having a migraine?"

"No. Worse. I'll try to explain when I?—"

Tap. Tap.

A police officer knocks on my window.

I lower it halfway as he shines a flashlight in my face.

"Sir, you need to move out of traffic," he says. "Now."

"I'm having an episode," I say. "I will in a minute."

"License and registration, please."

I flip down the visor. The paper registration drops into my lap. I open the center console, flipping between my “Dawson” and “Banks” licenses, and hand him the Dawson one.

He walks toward his patrol car, but halfway there, he stops.

“Are you by any chance related to Aidan Dawson?” he asks, back at my window now. “From the Family Values podcast?”

“He’s my father.”

“Oh my—wow.” His face lights up like it’s a meet-and-greet. “I thought you looked familiar. My son’s doing the same thing—taking a gap year to do art. You’re kind of an inspiration in our house.”

I nod, jaw tight. “I wish him all the best.”

“What were you saying earlier—an episode?” His tone shifts to concern. “Want me to call EMTs?”

“No, it’s pretty much passed.”

“I’m sorry you’re still dealing with the trauma from that boat accident long ago,” he says. “Your father talked about that in one of his episodes. Said it changed everything for you two.”

I arch a brow.

Right.

Another lie.

My father has spun so many versions of our life, I can't even keep up anymore. I make a mental note to listen to whatever clip this guy heard—just so I know what story we're in now.

"Your dad should've sued that other boater," the officer adds. "He's a better man than me."

No. You're probably ten times better than he is.

"Where are you headed?" he asks.

"Steinbeck Retreat."

"That's the other direction." He gestures behind me. "Tell you what—I'll follow you there. Make sure you're good to drive."

"Thanks, Officer."

He walks back to his car.

I stare at him in the rearview mirror until my phone buzzes against my thigh.

"Cole?" Emily's voice again. "Are you alright?"

"No."

"Are you still coming?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

The officer waves at me as I step out of the car, probably already imagining how he'll

tell his friends he helped the son of The Great Aidan Dawson tonight.

I push open the door to the retreat building and move down the hall, steps heavier than I want them to be. My body's functioning, but barely. My mind hasn't caught up.

Emily's waiting in the doorway.

She's wearing one of those soft oversized shirts again, sleeves swallowed up around her hands. She still looks flushed from earlier—like her skin hasn't quite settled from the memory of us.

She doesn't ask questions. Just steps aside and lets me in.

"Thank you," I murmur, voice low.

"I made tea," she says. "And I've got extra blankets, if you want them." Her voice is careful, but her eyes linger on mine. "If you don't feel like talking, I totally understand."

I sit on the edge of her sofa, my head falling into my hands for a beat before I lean back. She walks to the desk and picks something up.

"My mom said your dad's card might come in handy," she says, holding up the black credit card. "Do you want me to order you something?"

I blink, slow. Her words float toward me like they're underwater.

"Your dad wouldn't mind if I actually used this, would he? I'm sure he?"

"My father is a fucking fraud."

The words come out harder than I intend, but I don't pull them back.

"He's a terrible-ass person, Emily. And you need to find a way to tell your mom she deserves better. Before she forgets what that even looks like."

She stares at me, stunned. Then drops the card. It hits the floor with a sharp, soft sound.

"I'm not trying to ruin your retreat," I add, rubbing the back of my neck. "I've distracted you enough already. I'll crash here for a bit and head out. Unless ... you want me to leave now?"

She shakes her head. Quiet.

I sink deeper into the cushions, exhausted but wired. "Pretend I'm not here," I say. "I won't bother you."

She lingers, like she wants to say something else. Instead, she walks to the window and lowers herself into the desk chair. She clicks her pen and stares at the blank page in front of her.

I watch her for a moment—how the candlelight paints gold across her cheeks, how the hem of her shirt barely brushes the tops of her thighs—and then I close my eyes.

When I wake up, the lights are low and Emily is curled against my lap, her book resting against her stomach. My thigh is her pillow. One of her hands is tangled in the fabric of my hoodie.

For a second, I don't move. I just watch her.

She's barefoot. Quiet. Still wearing that shirt.



She looks like she belongs here.

She looks like home.

I run my fingers gently through her hair, and her eyes flutter open.

“Thanks for letting me crash,” I murmur. “I think I’m capable of driving now.”

“What made you incapable?”

“Lingering effects from an old car accident,” I say. “I was lucky to come out alive, but the effects still find me a few times a year... usually when I’m exhausted or sleeping.”

Her gaze softens.

“Did you mean what you said? About my mom staying away from Aidan? Or was that just the... episode talking?”

“Both.” I lean in and kiss her forehead, brushing her hair back. “We’ll talk when you’re home.”

She watches me for a beat, then glances toward the clock.

“It’s only midnight,” she says softly. “You should stay.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she leans in and kisses me.

Slow. Lingering. Her lips barely move at first, just press and stay there. Like she’s holding me in place. Like she knows I need this more than I’ll ever say.

Her hand curls at the back of my neck, and the kiss deepens.

My hands move instinctively—sliding up her thighs, settling at her waist—but I stop myself before I take it any further. Not tonight. Not like this.

She pulls back just enough to whisper, “Please.”

And that one word—just that—undoes whatever defense I had left.

I let her guide me toward the bed, her fingers still wrapped in my shirt. The mattress dips beneath us and we fall together, limbs tangling like we’ve done this a hundred times.

She presses her face to my chest and sighs. I breathe her in and pull her closer.

We don’t speak.

We don’t need to.

We just stay like that until sunrise—twisted in sheets, hearts pressed together, bodies clinging to something neither of us will dare define.

When the sky turns pale blue, I slip out of bed, careful not to wake her.

Not because I want to leave.

But because if I stay another second, I’ll never go home.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

EMILY

The house I left is not the house I came back to.

Downstairs is now a maze of editors, PR staff, and Aidan's podcast team. There's a full espresso bar on the marble island and two different assistants sorting through lighting equipment in the living room.

Someone asked me if I could step out of frame when I was walking out of the bathroom.

Apparently, this is a normal thing whenever Aidan is gearing up to release a new book and plan a countrywide book tour.

Not the slightest bit interested in asking questions about it, I toss my luggage into my room and shut the door. Then I slip into Cole's room and undress before plopping onto his bed.

The sheets still smell like him. Musk, mint, something darker.

I scroll through his texts again, hoping he'll show up soon like he said.

Cole

Running late. Don't wait up.

Ugh...

I slip out of his bed and grab my clothes, barely getting my shorts on before I pull the door open—and nearly collide with Taylor in the hallway.

She jumps, blinking. “Why were you coming out of Cole’s room?”

I smooth my shirt like it matters. “Uh... just looking at his art.”

Her brows lift. “You went inside? He never lets anyone in there.”

“Well, he wasn’t there, so I didn’t really ask.” I start to move, but she plants herself in front of me like a puppy who thinks we’re still playing.

She squints at me. “You look different...”

“I just got back from a writer’s retreat,” I say. “Still readjusting.”

“Let’s get coffee and walk to the beach.” She loops her arm through mine and leads me downstairs.

I don’t bother protesting because I don’t want to spend time in an empty room.

After grabbing custom lattes from a staff tray, we take the path behind the garden that cuts through the trees toward the beach. The wind’s lighter than I expected, but the air smells like salt and sunscreen.

“It’s so cool that your mom is about to be a multimillionaire,” Taylor says, voice light as sea foam. “She’ll probably never have to work another day in her life.”

“Um hmmm...” I sip my drink. I’m slowly accepting that she’s an amenity that comes with this house.

“Did you meet any famous writers at the retreat?” she asks. “Take any amazing pictures?”

“No, not really. Everyone pretty much kept to themselves.”

“I meant hot guys, Emily. Brooding, tortured, reading-something-by-the-fireplace guys. Isn’t that, like, a thing?”

“Not exactly.”

“So you just went up there to write?”

I nod.

“Ugh. Bo-ring!”

I can’t help but laugh at her.

“Your luck is about to change tonight,” she says. “Trust me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll find out later.” She winks.

“I hate surprises.”

“Oh wow.” Her voice goes sly. “You sounded just like Cole when you said that. You two are becoming more like family every day, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that...”

“Can I ask you something personal?”

“Sure...”

“Well, it’s really like three things.” She bites her bottom lip. “Has Cole ever talked about me? Like intimately?”

Huh? “Not that I recall.”

“I guess that makes sense since you just met him, but...” She leans closer. “Do you ever notice the way he looks at me when I walk into the room?”

I blink slowly. “I’ve only been around you two a few times.”

“Focus, Miss Poetic Writer. I need you to help me write a few texts—letters, really—to tell him I’m ready. Like, officially ready. No more games. I want to be exclusive.”

“Wait... what?”

“We’ve been dancing around each other for years,” she says, dead serious. “First, you show up and get in the way of my big return message, and now that his cousin Matt is coming to stay here for a few weeks, it’s like the universe is testing us. Throwing blockades in our path.”

My brain stutters. “How much have you had to drink today?”

“A lot.” She grins. “Clearly too much because I ruined the Matt surprise.”

I exhale, grateful—for once—that it’s not another nuclear bomb from my mother and Aidan.

“Can you help me by tomorrow night?” she asks. “I want to tell Matt that I was right about Cole being into me.”

“Sure,” I lie. “How does Cole have a cousin if Aidan’s an only child?”

“From his late mom’s side.” She shrugs. “Oh—and whatever you do, don’t bring up the DUI thing in front of Matt. He gets really pissed about it as if Cole wasn’t in the wrong or something.”

“What?” My heart skips. “What DUI?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her voice drops. “Cole got charged with one a few years ago. He even served a little time in prison for it, but it’s a family secret. I can’t even tell my friends.”

“But you’re telling me...”

“You’re family now.” She smiles unevenly. “Trust me, if people knew Mr. Aidan Dawson’s son had a DUI charge, and just how bad that ‘accident’ was, that would totally tarnish his brand. I’m one for a good gossip, but not when it comes to family, you know?”

A sharp, cold prickle creeps up the back of my neck.

Like I’m being sized up for something I never signed up for.

Cole shouldn’t be upset with his dad about anything. He should be upset with himself...

“How do people not know if he went to prison?” I ask. “Isn’t that public record?”

“It’s a really long and complicated story.” She makes a zipped-lips motion as a few tourists walk behind us. “Just don’t tell Cole I said anything about it, okay? I’m sure he’s long over it by now, and I’m trying to focus on being his girlfriend, remember?”

She twirls once in the sand and heads back toward the house, humming to herself.

I don’t follow.

I just stand there, realizing just how little I know the real Cole...



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

COLE

“ And that, dear friends, is how I knew that I was ready for a new relationship, how I knew that it was time to give love a second chance...” My dad’s voice sifts through my headphones via his latest podcast.

“I also got a bonus daughter out of my new relationship, and —” I immediately pause the episode.

I have no idea why I still put myself through this. Maybe it’s masochism. Or maybe—deep down—I still want him to say something real. Something human. But he never does. Not when it counts.

Emily

When were you going to tell me that the “CRASH” you were in was actually a DUI?

Actually, don’t worry about it. Seems like you have a criminal mind just like my mom. And supposedly your dad, too...

I clench my jaw and step out onto the balcony in search of Emily, but she isn’t there. I call her and it goes straight to voicemail.

Opening my door, I rush downstairs and stop when I see her sitting at the table. My dad, her mom, Taylor, and... my cousin Matt are sharing a charcuterie board.

What the hell is he doing here?

“Look who’s awake!” Matt says, smiling. “I was beginning to think you would miss my first night here.”

“When’s your last night here?”

“Four weeks give or take,” he says. “Just stopping through since I got evicted again. You know how it is.”

I smile and resist the urge to call him on his bluff. My cousin is the ultimate con artist, and he has apartment skipping down to a science.

“Care to join us, Cole?” my father asks. “We saved a seat for you.” He points to the seat next to Taylor, and she’s batting her eyes at me like a Disney princess.

“I’ve got acrylic setting on a canvas upstairs,” I say. “I can’t stay longer than ten minutes.”

“We’ll take it.” My dad stands and gestures for me to come closer.

I make my way toward the table, but my attention is pinned to Emily. She doesn’t look at me once. Doesn’t need to. The way her hand trembles slightly when she cuts into her food says more than any glare ever could.

The conversation is filled with wedding chatter and fake laughter, none of it worth holding onto. I leave as soon as I can.

Back upstairs, I wrap up a painting—brushes cleaned, canvas covered—and I glance in the mirror to find Matt leaning against my doorframe.

“So...” He shuts the door. “Your stepsister is pretty hot.”

“I noticed.”

“Is she dating anyone around here?”

“I would hope not.”

“So, you’re saying?—”

“Touch her and die.”

“Okay, then...” He steps back. “I see. Getting all territorial big brother already.”

“Let’s change the subject.”

“Fine.” He rolls his eyes. “Are you still on track with your gallery plans next year?”

“I believe so. Why?”

“Because I made a pact with you years ago.” He smiles. “I’ll help you for free for the first two years.”

“In exchange for a place to stay, correct?”

“Uh, duh.”

“Of course.” I smile. “Glad to see someone in my life knows how to keep their word...”

“And you’re serious about never speaking to your father again once you leave this summer, or are things softening? Feels like there’s been some resolutions since I last saw you two.”

I tap my fingers on the windowsill, the same way I used to as a kid when I'd wait for my dad to show up and he wouldn't. Some habits never die, even when the hope behind them does.

"Cole?"

"I fucking despise him." I turn to face him. "I'm just better at hiding it now."

"Noted." He nods, knowing the truth all too well.

"Can I say one nice thing about your stepsister for just a moment?"

"No."

"Please? I really need to get this off my chest."

"She's fucking beautiful," I say. "There. I said it."

"That wasn't what I was going to say at all."

"Oh. What was it?"

"She has some really nice tits..."

EMILY

Cole is waiting for me on the balcony that night.

Shirtless and in sweatpants, he glares at me as I approach the railing with my notebook.

“If you want to know something about me, you could just ask, Emily,” he says.

“Hey. Have you committed any crimes before?” I ask. “Surely you’d think that’s a terrible conversation starter.”

“It’s one of your better ones.” He stands and unlocks the gate, motioning for me to join him.

I show up with my notebook like it’s a shield, but we both know I didn’t come here to write.

I left dinner early to see him.

“Why would you ever drink and drive?” I ask. “Doesn’t seem like you.”

“It’s a long story.”

“But you admit that you did it?”

“That’s what I told the judge.”

I sigh. “Have you ever been drinking when you were driving me somewhere?”

“Never.”

“Have you ever?—”

“Stop.” He cuts me off, pulling me into his arms. “I’ll explain how the fuck that happened—how it never should’ve happened—but... just not now. I can only take so many surprises in a day.”

“Does that mean you don’t want me to tell you that Taylor got you a gift to prove how much you belong together?”

“Not exactly.” His lips curve into a smirk. “What is it?”

“A custom trunk for all your brushes.”

“That actually sounds nice.”

“She superglued photos of herself all over the top of it.”

“Don’t tell me anything else.”

I laugh, and he lets me go.

“Do you have a lot of orders to handle this week?”

“Not really, just four. Why?”

“I was hoping to cash in on your offer for a painting.”

“Sure,” he says. “What do you want?”

“Myself.”

“Okay.” He looks me up and down. “I can do the base sketch now if you sit on the window chaise.”

I take a few steps back until my knees hit the cushion, watching him pull out an extensive pencil collection.

He positions a stool in front of a blank easel, then looks at me like I’ve grown two heads.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m waiting for you to get into the right position for me to paint you.”

“This is it.” I push my hair away from my forehead. “Should I lean back a bit further?”

“You should take off your clothes.”

“What?”

“I already have pictures of you with them on.”

He hands me a sketchpad and flips it open—images of the night we met, the dinner that changed everything, the moment he caught me crying. This past weekend.

“Like I was saying...” He tugs at my tank top strap. “Take this off.”

I hesitate.

He softens. “You should consider turning some of your poems into country songs. Best genre for storytelling.”

“I thought that was pop.”

“You’re joking.”

“Yes.” I smile.

“Good.”

I peel off my tank top and slide my shorts down. I’m naked on his balcony—bare under the moonlight—and I try to laugh it off.

The night air prickles across my skin, and for a second, I almost reach for the blanket. Not because I’m cold—but because I’m suddenly aware of every inch of me he can now see.

“I feel like I should apologize in advance for the reality of me,” I murmur. “The lighting was kinder a second ago.”

“Don’t.” His voice drops. “You’re perfect like this. Every inch.”

He crosses to me slowly, like a lion who’s waited too long to pounce. He presses his hands to my hips, heat pouring into my skin. Then he leans forward and sucks my nipple into his mouth.

I gasp as it tightens under his tongue, a spark shooting straight between my legs.



Then—without warning—he lifts me into his arms and carries me inside. Not to a bed. Not to a chaise. But straight to the floor.

Soft pillows scatter as he lays me out beneath him, warm skin to warm skin, his sweatpants low and his desire unmistakable.

He trails his mouth down my stomach, lips brushing my navel before settling between my thighs.

Then he licks me—slow, deliberate, devastating. Like he’s making art of me. Like this is how he worships.

“I want you to be my first,” I whisper, breathless.

“That’s not happening...”

“Why not?”

“You know why.” He breathes hot against my skin. “Stop talking.”

“No.” I push up on my elbows, chest rising fast. “I... I can’t do this, Cole.”

“Do what?”

“Play a fucking edging game with you every time I’m around you.”

“I’m shocked you even know what that means.”

“Truth or dare?”

“This isn’t the time to play games.”

“Truth or dare, Cole.”

He studies me. “Truth.”

“Do you have feelings for me like I have feelings for you?”

“Yes.”

“So—”

“You don’t get another turn,” he says, voice hoarse. “It’s my turn.”

“You sounded like you didn’t want to play.”

“I changed my mind.” He drags a finger along my bottom lip. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“I dare you not to blame me for ruining you if we cross the line.”

“That doesn’t seem like a real dare.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

His mouth crashes into mine.

He kisses me like he’s starving. Like this is the last night on Earth and I’m the only thing left worth touching.

He presses me into the floor, hand gliding down my thigh, teasing the edge of where I ache the most. Then I feel the press of the condom wrapper tear between us, and he's already sliding it on.

He sinks into me slow—inch by inch—watching my face, reading my every breath.

I arch against him, and the stretch makes my eyes sting, but I don't stop him.

“Do you want me to stop?” he whispers.

I shake my head. “No.”

His lips brush mine, and he pushes deeper.

My fingers claw at his back as he finds a rhythm—slow, deep, devastating.

Every thrust is a vow he won't say out loud. Every sound I make, he drinks in like oxygen.

Then he shifts, hooks one of my legs over his shoulder, and hits a spot that makes me cry out—loud, sharp, raw.

“Fuck, Emily...” His voice is broken. “You feel like—like everything.”

He lowers again, wraps his arms under me and lifts my hips off the ground, grinding into me until my body trembles.

I come hard—shaking, gasping, unraveling in his arms.

And he doesn't stop.

He rolls us, pulling me on top of him, guiding my hips until I find the rhythm again. This time I take control—riding him slow, deliberate, lost in the feeling of having all of him.

He watches me like I'm the only thing he'll ever need to see again.

“Say it,” he growls.

“What?”

“That you're mine.”

“I'm yours.”

And that's when he lets go.

He spills into the condom with a curse and a gasp, his hands gripping my hips as if I'll disappear.

After, I collapse against his chest, and we just lie there. Tangled. Quiet. Everything slowed down to the sound of our breathing.

When I glance up, he's already looking at me. Like he never stopped.

“You okay?” he asks.

I nod. “Better than okay.”

He runs a hand down my spine. “I wasn't gentle.”

“You didn't need to be.”

He kisses my temple. Then my jaw. Then the corner of my mouth.

“You ruined me,” I whisper.

“You promised not to blame me.”

“I lied.”

He smiles, and I know I’ll never be the same.

EMILY

The days that follow are a blur of heat, skin, and stolen time.

Cole and I can't seem to stop.

We sneak into rooms like fugitives on borrowed time, like the whole house might catch fire if anyone ever found out.

The laundry room. The art studio. Once, the outdoor shower behind the pool house.

We nearly get caught leaving the laundry room when the housekeeper walked in early to sort towels.

Another time, we had to freeze behind a wall of hedges while a staffer ate lunch on the far side of the garden, completely oblivious to how breathless we were—how flushed.

It's dangerous.

And addictive.

At night, we walk down to the beach barefoot, the wind turning everything soft and silver. He lays me in the sand and kisses me like we have forever. I kiss him back like we don't.

There's something unspoken in every touch. Like we know it can't last. Like that

knowledge is the exact reason we keep coming back for more.

He's good for my writing in ways I didn't expect.

My poems are fuller, sharper, soaked in feeling I'd forgotten how to name.

He reads my new pages without flinching—asks questions no one else would think to ask.

And I can see it in him, too. The way he holds his brush like it matters again.

The way his canvases are less restrained, more alive.

I understand why people say this kind of thing drives them crazy.

But I think it only feels this intense because it's Cole.

I've never wanted anyone like this. Not just his body—but his breath, his thoughts, his silences. I want all of it.

And I never, ever want this to end.

EMILY

O n Sunday night, I'm in Cole's lap, riding him as he holds my hips.

The windows are cracked just enough for the sound of distant thunder to slip in, mixing with the soft creak of the bed frame.

His palms are warm and steady, fingers digging into the curve of my waist like he's afraid I'll disappear.

Every time I roll my hips, he breathes harder, eyes locked on mine like he's trying to memorize the way I look coming apart for him.

We collapse naked and sweating, tangled in sheets that smell like laundry detergent and rain. My hair sticks to his chest, damp with effort, and I curl into the solid line of his body, ready to do it all over again.

"I wish I'd met you earlier." He runs his fingers through my hair.

"How much earlier?"

"Six months or so."

"I would've been living somewhere else then," I say. "It wouldn't have been possible."

"In that case, I wish our parents never met."



“Me too...” I look at him. “You think it’ll last?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “That’s the scariest part... I can usually read my dad’s every move long before he makes it, but this one feels off.”

“What makes him a fraud, Cole?” I’ve been holding back that question since he uttered that line, and I need to know.

“He’s just not a good person, Emily.” He kisses my forehead. “Trust me.”

“Surely you can elaborate better than that.”

“I will,” he says. “I promise.”

He tightens his grip around me, silently asking me to drop it and go to sleep until sunrise.

I start to drift as he places a few final kisses on my lips, but then the bed begins vibrating.

Confused, my eyes flutter open.

“Did I accidentally hit a remote or something?” I ask.

Cole doesn’t answer, and the bed vibrates faster.

Sitting up, I realize the bed isn’t shaking.

It’s him.

He’s having a seizure.

“Cole?” I turn him on his side. “Cole!”

His arm jerks up and smacks the headboard, a sound that echoes in my skull. His breath comes in shallow gasps, wet and uneven, and the smell of sweat and something metallic floods the room.

Panicking, I dial 9-1-1 and pull on his T-shirt before rushing down the hallway. My hands are shaking so badly I nearly drop the phone, and my lungs can’t seem to fill with air. Everything feels too loud and too far away at once.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” the operator asks as I’m knocking on his cousin’s door.

“My boyfriend—I mean, my stepbrother is having a seizure. He’s?—”

“Cole is having a seizure?” Matt swings the door open and rushes past me.

He runs to his room and I follow.

I push my crumpled panties under the bed with my foot as he presses Cole’s chest.

“Miss? Are you there?” the operator asks. “Miss?”

“Keep him on his side,” Matt says. “I’m going to get his dad.”

Cole shakes under my hands, and his eyes roll backward. My chest aches seeing him like this.

“No, Dad...” he mutters harshly. “Dad, please...”

“Miss, your location is showing as the Dawson Estate,” the operator says. “Is that

correct?”

“Goddammit.” Aidan is suddenly pushing me out of the way, sliding a hand under Cole to position him slightly off the bed.

His seizing slows, and then his eyes shut as he stops.

My mom grabs my shoulders from behind, and I lean against her, still in shock. Her arms wrap around me, gentle and warm, but my shoulders stay stiff. I don’t lean in. I don’t move. If I do, I might crack open entirely.

“Is 9-1-1 still there?” Aidan reaches for my phone, his face ghostly white.

“Yes, please send them here.” He speaks to the operator. “I’m not sure if—” He pauses as the bed shakes once more. “Hurry the fuck up. He’s seizing again.”

He tosses my phone to Matt. “Stay on the line with them, please...”

Through the chaos, I hang on to the bits and pieces said, the way Aidan looks more ashamed than concerned.

Like he’s embarrassed...

The medics rush in and place Cole on a stretcher, hooking him up to various tubes, and then they rush him down to the ambulance.

“We’ll follow,” his dad says to my mom, but it comes off like an order to all of us.

“Who discovered Cole seizing?” an officer asks. “I just need to know for my report.”

“I did,” I say.

“How?”

“I just... I heard it.”

“From where?” He clicks his pen. “Were you here with him or just happened to be in the hallway?”

“No, I...” my cheeks flush red. “It wasn’t that. I just... I just heard him.”

It feels like the lie is sitting on my tongue like a hot stone. One wrong word and it all crumbles.

“It’s okay, Emily.” Aidan looks at me. “It’s a lingering effect from—” He cuts off his own sentence. “He has these occasionally, and they’re actually getting better than they were before.”

“So, where were you?” The officer steers us back on track. “Miss?”

I was lying in his arms after he fucked me... “I was on my balcony,” I say. “His balcony is next to mine.”

He walks toward the doors, glancing outside. “And you heard him seizing from in here, out there?”

“Yes.” I swallow. “I just heard something weird while I was out there writing.”

Matt walks behind the officer, as if he’s not convinced, and he looks between the balcony and the bed, mentally calculating the distance.

His eyes slide from the door to the hem of my borrowed shirt. He doesn’t say a word, but the silence stretches between us like a thread pulled too tight.

His hand brushes mine when he returns my phone, and his fingers hesitate for just a second too long. His jaw ticks slightly, like he's swallowing something he doesn't want to say.

"You've got some supersonic hearing." The officer smiles. "Glad you heard him."

"Me too..." Matt says, narrowing his eyes. "Quick question, though. It's raining outside. You have waterproof paper?"

Silence.

"It's the weirdest thing." My mom hugs me from behind again. "This girl will literally sit outside in any weather until she finishes an idea."

"Interesting." Matt hands me my phone, and the officer taps his tablet a few times to finish the report.

"You've got five minutes to get dressed," Aidan says to everyone. "I'll be in the car."

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

In the waiting room, Matt paces the other side of the room while he talks on the phone. I can hear Taylor's distinctive voice on the line.

My mom is sipping coffee, and Aidan is the only person allowed back to see Cole.

For now.

"Give me a distraction," my mom whispers to me. "Tell me anything."

"I think I might be in love."

"Oh?" She smiles. "Who is he and what's he like?"

"He's..." currently down the hall from us. "He has a way of reading my mind when we're having conversations, and he's an artist like me."

"He writes, too?"

"More like creates," I say. "He can draw the most beautiful imagery with just a pencil, and when he paints?—"

"He's going to be fine." Aidan steps into the doorway, and my mom rushes toward him, abandoning our conversation.

"Come here, Matt and Emily." He motions for us to move nearer.

I oblige, expecting him to lead the way to Cole's room so I can see him for myself, but he merely clears his throat.

"Life is too short to hold on to big moments," Aidan says, and I can't tell if he's talking to us or testing out a podcast special for his fans. "If you'll have me, Heather... I'd like to have a wedding this summer after all."

"I would love nothing more." She smiles, hugging him.

No, no, no. "Wait," I say, a lump rising in my throat. "What about giving us time to gel? Isn't that what you said before?"

"What gels a family faster than a close call?" He offers a small smile. "I mean, someone will probably slip this incident to the media, and I have to show strength in my reaction, right?"

I stare at him, mouth dry. There's still the echo of Cole's voice in my ears—"No, Dad... please"—and now we're celebrating? Proposing? My skin crawls at the whiplash.

"I'm glad you were there for him tonight, Emily," he says. "Shows you care for him a lot."

If only you knew...

EMILY

I stare at Cole as he lies in the hospital bed for another night.

I have a feeling this was more than just a seizure , but the nurses never leave his charts in the room.

Swallowing, I move closer and slide my hand into his.

“I wish I’d gotten to you sooner,” I whisper. “I think their wedding is my fault...”

He remains still, only breathing.

“I feel like we were just starting to?—”

Tears prick at my eyes, and I can’t even finish the sentence.

I kiss his lips and leave before Matt or his father returns.



COLE

Not really sure how much time has passed...

The oxygen tube feels like a leash, pinning me here beneath the weight of scratchy sheets and the stale tang of disinfectant. That smell hits first—bleach, latex, something sour beneath it all. Hospitals always smell like they're trying too hard to scrub away the truth.

My eyes stay fixed on the ceiling. Pale gray. Cracked near the vent. The kind of detail I never used to notice until the last time I woke up in a place like this—slumped in a hospital bed after the DUI, my jaw bruised and hands trembling from what I hadn't yet admitted.

He was there that night too. Same overpriced cologne, same tight-lipped expression that made him look like a disappointed father instead of one who was proud of him. He sat beside me with this calm, quiet grief, the kind that only appears when there's an audience.

Now there's no audience. Just him and me, and the hum of machines that won't stop.

He leans forward, elbows on his knees like we're about to have a heart-to-heart.

"You gave us a scare, son," he says, and the word son makes something in me twist.

"You're probably the last to know, but—" he says. "Heather and I are pushing up the wedding."

My jaw tightens, useless against the tape and tubing.

“It’s going to be this summer at the estate, because life’s too short to wait.”

He says it like it’s noble. Like he’s just been through something tragic and come out enlightened. Like my seizure was his seizure.

I turn my head—slow, deliberate—until I’m staring directly at him.

His eyes light up like he thinks it’s affection.

“I knew you’d understand.”

Understand? I try to glare at him, but it hurts too much.

I want to tear the IV out of my arm and rip the mask off just to tell him how wrong he is. To tell him to get the hell out and send in Emily.

I want to feel her hand in mine. I want to hear her voice, the one that doesn’t change for a microphone.

But he keeps talking.

Some joke about cake or centerpieces or how it’s the “right thing at the right time.” He stands and squeezes my shoulder like we’ve sealed some pact.

Then he leaves.

The room feels colder the second the door clicks shut.

And for reasons I can’t explain, the wedding announcement hurts more than any other

promise he's broken with me before. Maybe because this time, he didn't even try to hide the choice he made.

He chose himself.

He always does.

EMILY

The doors of the White Magnolia Bridal Shop are pink with frosted glass. Their company slogan, “First Comes Love, Then Comes Your Dress,” is etched in tiny cursive that makes the word “dress” look like “mess.”

Any other time, I’d laugh about that, but I haven’t eaten in four days, and I haven’t been able to sleep.

All week, silk-wrapped boxes and designer wardrobes have arrived at the estate for my mother, all bearing well wishes for the marriage. I’ve tried to tune out as much of the planning as possible, but remnants of the inevitable find me.

I’d even feigned a headache for today’s dress appointment, but Mr. Dawson’s butler put together a box of frozen juices and medicine. So here I am—trapped in pink walls and perfume, flinching at the faint sound of champagne flutes clinking behind closed doors.

Everything here smells like roses and dreams. None of it smells like reality.

“Why are you being so quiet out there, Emily?” my mom calls from the other side of the door. “Talk to me while I’m finagling this lace!”

I swallow.

I honestly have nothing to say.

“She shared her vows when you arrived,” one attendant whispers and points to the envelope in my lap. “She probably wants to know what you think.”

“Good idea.” I tear the flap and pull out the handwritten sheet.

My Dear Sweet Aidan,

I knew you were the one when we stayed up ‘til sunrise for our first phone call. Every day has been a dream, and I’ve never felt this happy. I wish I’d met you sooner, and I promise never to let you go.

I love you forever and always, and I’ll never let you go.

I flip the sheet over, looking for the rest, but it’s blank.

“I just read your vows,” I call out to her. “Um, they’re pretty short and to the point.”

“Exactly!” She steps out in an off-shoulder gown that takes my breath away.

“This is going to be a tough one to beat.” Her voice cracks. “What do you think, Emily?”

“I…” I stand up and move closer. “You look beautiful.”

She arches a brow. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “Can you ladies excuse me and my daughter for a moment, please?”

The attendants oblige, and she steps down. Then she places her hands on my shoulders.

“You’ve been distant with me lately.” She pauses. “You think I’m moving too fast, don’t you? It’s too soon to try on dresses to you?”

“You try on wedding dresses every time we move to a new town.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s to de-stress.” She smooths the veil, smiling. “What’s wrong with the vows?”

“Nothing, they’re just bare.”

“Well, they’re just a draft. I’m going to add more about the way he makes me feel, like...” She stares into the distance as if she’s waiting for the words to meet her halfway.

“It’s like suddenly you’re the only two people on the planet?” I ask. “Like, the world could end right then and there, and you’d be fine dying in his arms.”

“Well, I would never want to die, Emily.” She shoots me a look. “That’s quite macabre of you.”

“I just mean that when you’re with him, it feels like no one else will ever matter, and that no one else you were with before ever compared. You were meant to find him, and he was meant to find you.”

“Yes.” Her lips curve into a smile. “That.”

“Have you ever gotten bad vibes from him?” Her eyes beg me to keep quiet about anything that might ruin this. “Did he say something that makes you think I should

reconsider?”

“I was simply asking a question,” I say. “Just making sure this is true love.”

“Oh. Well, it is!” She smiles. “You know, whenever you think you’ve found the love of your life, I’ll be there every step of the way. Speaking of which, tell me about that guy you met.”

“It’s not going to work out,” I say. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Already? How do you know?”

I just know... “Let me see the next dress.”

“Gladly!”

She turns, floating back into the dressing room without a care in the world.

Without any regard for how her life decisions continue to affect me...

I sit down slowly, fingers clenched in my lap, and stare at the discarded envelope like it might offer a way out. I don’t know how to breathe in this room. Not when I can already see what’s coming.

Because she’s choosing him .

And if I choose Cole, I know I’ll lose her.

A relationship with him wouldn’t just strain what we have—it would obliterate it. It would stain everything this wedding is pretending to be.

She's building her whole future on him, stitching it into lace and satin, pinning it with gold-plated hair combs. And I'm the one standing here with scissors.

There is no version of this story where I get to keep them both.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

Where are you?

We need to talk, Emily. Now.

Are you avoiding me?

Please, Emily. Come to my room...

She's answering my messages hours later, in short staccato replies—"sorry. just saw this." Or bullshit like, "Sorry, been writing."

But I know she's not writing. I know she can't write, especially not with the weight of everything clouding her mind.

She hasn't been on the balcony in days, and she's spending nights in the guest suite downstairs—across from Matt instead of me.

She spends her free time with Taylor now—laughing, texting, tucked in close like I'm not right down the hall.

She's showing me better than she can tell me.

She's pulling away and picking sides.

COLE

O n the night of the wedding rehearsal, Emily steps into the restaurant wearing a white silk dress that reveals the curve of her breasts, her hair pulled up in large curls. Her skin catches the light, and for a second, the entire room stills.

“Jesus...” someone on my left mutters. “How can anyone ever focus when she’s around?”

You can’t. My jaw locks, breath tight.

She shakes hands with guests and smiles for photos. Other men in the wedding party take long, lingering stares, and no one bothers to hide it.

They look at her like she’s available. Like she isn’t mine—wasn’t mine—weeks ago, skin on skin, swearing it would always be us.

She glances at me once. Barely. Then takes a seat a few chairs down like it doesn’t cost her anything.

I can’t do this shit...

“Are you planning to give a toast to your father and the future Mrs. Dawson, Cole?” Frank, my father’s business manager, nudges me with a grin.

“A toast to what ?”

Everyone at the table laughs like I've made a joke.

There's nothing funny about this shit.

"That's alright." Frank pats my shoulder. "I'll try to work on something with you tonight, or we'll do a joint toast together. Yeah?"

"I'll think about it."

"You'll do it." He lowers his voice. "Your father has given you everything and more in this life, and a journalist from every major network and newspaper is here to cover this wedding, so the son of Aidan Dawson will be giving a toast."

I ignore his empty threat and keep my eyes on Emily.

"It's such a wonderful idea to have the wedding at the estate," the woman across from me says to her. "I bet every woman in the county will be itching to rent it out for her own happily-ever-after the moment the pictures hit all the magazines."

"I'm sure..." Emily pushes a lump of potatoes across her plate.

Without looking my way, she laughs politely at all the wrong moments and thanks guests who barely listen.

She says "I'm fine" like she's done it a thousand times before, like it's part of her DNA whenever someone asks if she's alright.

She twists her napkin around one finger again and again, slow and tight, like she's barely holding herself together.

All around us, the table glows with golden light and curated floral arrangements. Jazz

hums softly from overhead, and crystal glasses gleam under chandeliers. It's perfect. It's picturesque.

It's suffocating.

And I sit there, counting every second I can't touch her.

Every breath I can't take without it hurting.

When the desserts start circulating and the chatter thickens, she excuses herself with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. Her chair barely makes a sound as she slips away from the table, heading toward the back entrance alone.

She brushes past my shoulder as she goes, and I almost reach out—almost grab her wrist just to make her see me again.

But I don't.

And that restraint burns like acid.

Frank says something else—probably a joke, definitely not worth remembering—but I don't hear it.

I push back my chair and leave.

Because if I sit here one more minute pretending like this is okay, I will come undone.

EMILY

Tap! Tap! Tap!

I sit up in bed and glance toward the window. The forecast didn't call for rain, but maybe the universe is sending a hailstorm on my behalf.

Slipping off the mattress, I knot my robe and move toward the glass.

There's no sign of a storm—no clouds, no rainfall, no trace of hail on the landing.

Tap! Tap! Tappp!

The sound pulls me toward the other end of the balcony, toward the side I usually avoid this time of night.

I scan the beach, and then I see him.

Cole.

He's standing on the grass below, pale as moonlight, a handful of pebbles clenched in one fist. His eyes are bloodshot red, face blank except for the kind of quiet devastation you can't fake.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask, leaning just far enough over the railing. "Is everything okay?"

His eyes drift past me like I'm not fully real, like he's not sure I'll still be there when he blinks.

I push open the gate and descend the iron steps slowly, the chill of the metal seeping through the soles of my feet. The night air wraps around my legs, sharp and biting. He doesn't move. Not even as I rush to him and press my hands to his cheeks.

His skin is cold. Damp with effort or panic—I can't tell which.

“What's going on, Cole?”

“He told me no,” he says, voice low and ragged. “I asked my dad to call off the wedding, and he had the audacity to tell me no.”

He can't be serious.

“Cole...” I bite down a sigh, holding it like glass between my teeth. “Please tell me that wasn't your Hail Mary to get him to reconsider.”

The hollow flash in his eyes says everything.

“Okay, look.” I rub his shoulders, slow and steady. “Did you really think he'd cancel the entire weekend because you asked him to?”

“Yes,” he says, his jaw locking tight. “That's exactly what I thought. I said ‘warned you’ and everything.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he owes me, and the least he could do is call off the wedding because I asked.”

“You didn’t—” I pause. “You didn’t tell him about us, did you?”

“I probably should’ve,” he says. “Maybe that would’ve worked better.”

I sigh. “If someone asked you to let me go, for no logical reason at all, would you?”

“No, but our situation is not the same, and you know it.”

He kisses me before I can argue—hard and bruising—and then he pulls me down into the grass like the ground’s the only place solid enough to hold us.

His lips crush mine, desperate and angry, his hands trembling against my spine. The wet earth presses through the thin fabric of my robe, but I don’t care.

His breath is uneven. His fingers trace the inside of my thigh like he’s trying to memorize grief.

“Leave with me,” he breathes. “Let’s get out of here and start over. Somewhere no one knows our names. Somewhere we don’t have to lie.”

Tears spill down my cheeks before I can stop them.

He kisses them away like he’s trying to erase the decision already forming in my chest.

“Please...” he murmurs again. “Screw both of them. Their love isn’t ours. You know that, Emily. You feel it—you know.”

I shake my head—not out of defiance, but exhaustion. “I don’t want to hurt my mom.”

“She’s happy to hurt you.”

“She’s still my mom.”

I close my eyes for a beat, but his voice drags me back.

“You’re more loyal to her than she is to you,” he says.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I open my eyes and stare at him, eyes shining with more than just grief. I push gently against his chest, but he kisses me again—this time with a tremble in his mouth like something inside him is splintering.

“I don’t hate her the way you hate your dad,” I whisper. “Then again, I’m not sure you hate him enough to ruin what’s left of your relationship over me. Do you?”

“I would ruin everything in my life just to be with you, Emily,” he whispers. “You’re the only genuine person I’ve ever met...”

Instead, he unties the knot of my robe—not roughly this time, but like it means something.

Like every inch of me is sacred and vanishing at once.

His hands move as though he’s memorizing me one last time.

His mouth follows, slow and reverent, like he’s writing apologies across my skin in every place he’s ever made a promise.

We don’t speak.



We just fall into each other, into the grass, into the kind of silence that holds more pain than words ever could.

We make love like people trying to forget the future. Like we can still outrun it if we move fast enough, breathe hard enough, pretend long enough.

I kiss him like I want to disappear into him. Like if I hold on tight enough, nothing else can reach us.

We don't say goodbye.

We just let our bodies lie for a little while, pretending this was ever going to be enough.

Eventually, Cole moves first.

He pulls his shirt back on without meeting my eyes, then helps me to my feet with a gentleness that only makes it harder to stand. His hands linger at my waist like he doesn't trust himself to let go.

Neither of us says anything as he walks me back to the ladder.

He steadies it with one hand while I climb, the iron slick beneath my feet, the night colder than it was before.

At the top, I pause.

My fingers tighten around the railing. I almost call his name. Almost tell him to wait.

But I already made my choice the second I said nothing.

I turn to look back.

But he's already gone.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

I n the morning, I meander through the motions in third person; it's the only way I can force myself through this farce of a wedding.

I put on the suit, but it feels like I'm dressing someone else. I smile in photos I won't keep, stand next to people I wouldn't miss. None of this belongs to me—not the day, not the name, not her.

The tailor fawns over the stitching, marvels at how perfect “the Dawson family” will look in magazines. I tune him out. I nod when I'm supposed to. I stand where I'm told.

Per my father's request, I pose with the groomsmen and best man, and then—just to drive the point home—with my parole officer who came incognito as “Mr. Dawson's Number One Stalker Fan.”

Everyone laughed.

Except me.

As the ceremony unfolds, I look at the love of my life standing across from him. I study her angles—cheekbone, shoulder, the soft line of her mouth—committing them to memory so I can paint her later exactly as she is in this moment.

She's smiling. But it's pained.

The tears she keeps wiping away aren't for this love.

They're for the love she just found—and can't keep.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

The pastor's words snap me back to my own body, just in time to feel my chest cave in. My heart nearly combusts as I watch my father kiss the new Mrs. Dawson.

Emily doesn't look my way. Not once.

We take an obnoxious amount of family pictures by the beach. Her hand grazes mine only once, briefly, and it's cold. Empty.

After our parents finish their “first dance,” I retreat to the balcony with a bottle of vodka.

“Hey, man.” Matt steps out to join me. “You do know your parole officer is here, right?”

“I'm highly aware of that.”

“You don't think he'll try to give you a test or anything?”

“Doubt it, since I'm not driving anywhere tonight.” I take a swig from the bottle. He sits next to me.

“How long has it been going on?” he asks.

“Ever since I was released,” I say. “He checks on me a lot more than legally necessary, but I doubt he'll hold today against me. He's here to meet celebrities.”

“I’m talking about the relationship between you and your stepsister.”

“What?” I turn to face him.

“It’s obvious as hell,” he says. “I mean, maybe not to anyone who doesn’t know you like I do, but...”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I say. “I think she’s breaking up with me.”

“How do you know?”

I know her better than she knows herself. I chase the thought with vodka.

“Ask me about something else, anything else...”

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

I return to my suite around midnight, long after the guests have toasted their final well-wishes.

As I remove my shoes, I spot a turquoise envelope under my door. I assume it's yet another event invitation for this never-ending weekend, but the Please read me is in Emily's curly handwriting.

I hesitate before opening it, pulling out my phone instead.

You know I don't like surprises, Emily.

What's in this envelope?

Just read it.

Come over and read it to me in my bed...

I can't.

Can't or won't?

Both.

Sighing, I crack open a beer and tear open the flap.

There's no "Dear Cole" or a letter.

It's one of her poems...

You gave me a warning the night that we met?—

A look full of fire and quiet regret.

I should've known it was doomed from the start?—

Two borrowed names, one reckless heart.

Strangers then, now bound by blood,

A flame that flickered through the flood.

We had no shelter, no place to stand?—

Just trembling hope and trembling hands.

The spotlight's rising—it cuts like a knife.

And I'm so close to reclaiming my life.

We'd need new ways just to hide our truth,

But why keep chasing a stolen youth?

I want a love that can stand in the light,

Not something buried, blurred by night.

And truthfully, we barely began?—

Just heat and ache and a fragile plan.

I won't betray the one who bore me,

Even if she no longer knows me.

She's all I have—and I'm her spine.

Some debts are paid in blood, not time.

So I'm asking you—please let me go,

As I let go of what we'll never know.

If it was real, then let it rest.

If not, then wish me all the best.

If you love me, don't call. Don't try.

Just let this be our last goodbye.

—Emily



COLE

It takes Matt and me four hours to pack up everything in my room.

I've arranged to move into my new place early. To start my next chapter sooner than planned.

I can't stand to breathe the same air or share any space with Emily if I can't have her.

And I love her enough to give her what she wants.

For now.

I lock the balcony door. Then the door to my room—for the last time.

And with that, I leave the Hamptons behind.

Hopefully for good.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

Months later

There's something surreal about pulling up the hill to Lothrop Hall. The sun catches the glass of the hospital nearby, throwing gold streaks over the city skyline. The trees around the University of Pittsburgh feel greener, taller—like they've grown up with the students who've come and gone.

And now I'm one of them.

Lothrop's the only dorm with single rooms, and I couldn't be more grateful. My lucky streak of never having to share a space with anyone is still going strong. The only things we share are the bathrooms. Just like at home.

I try not to think about home.

My mom's here. So is Aidan. And I'm more than ready to escape them both. The past few weeks have been unbearable—their constant wedding glow, their loud planning sessions for a future I was never invited into. I've never felt more alone. Not with Cole.

Especially not with Cole.

I've cried myself to sleep too many nights to count. My notebooks are filled with words I'll never say, filled with things I'll never let him read. But deep down, I keep telling myself I did the right thing.

At least...I hope I did.

While Aidan poses in the hallway—signing autographs and taking selfies with swooning fans—my mom helps me tape up photos along the wall like nothing's wrong. Like she hasn't shattered a hundred small things and called it motherhood.

"I'll send you pictures of our real house for whenever you're on fall break," she says.

I don't respond.

I'm not going home for fall break.

I make a mental note to look up part-time jobs and sublets—anywhere I can go for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Anywhere but there.

"I'll be back out in a second," Aidan calls to the girls in the hallway. "Just need to grab a new Sharpie." He steps inside and closes the door gently behind him, then glances at me. "You got one by chance, Emily?"

"Yeah." I open my desk drawer and hand him one.

He lingers by the wall, pointing at a row of photos from the Steinbeck Retreat.

"I like how this wall's coming together," he says.

"I'll have to tell my friend it was worth it to skip you to the front of the line since you enjoyed it so much.

Shame some girl got bumped for it, but hey, that's how connections work, right? "

Wait. What?

Before I can respond, he leans over, presses a light kiss to my mom's cheek, and slips back into the hallway.

"Oooh!" My mom holds up a framed photo of us outside a Hilton. "I didn't know you framed this one!"

"What did Aidan mean by skipping me to the front of the line for the Steinbeck Retreat?" I ask, cold.

"Since you're clearly doing a hotel-motel-hotel pattern on this row..." She stands, holding the photo at arm's length. "This one works here, right?"

"What the fuck was Aidan talking about, Mother?" I snatch the photo out of her hands. "I know you heard me."

"I didn't hear him say anything." Her poker face is so bad it's laughable. "All I heard was that he liked your wall."

"You told me you saved up to pay for that retreat," I say, voice low. "You said it was your money."

"I know."

"So...were you lying?"

She shrugs. "What does it matter? You went to a place you've been dreaming about. I just got a little help, that's all."

"You didn't just get help—you used Aidan to rig the system. Someone else didn't get to go because of me. Do you get that?"

“I don’t see why this matters, Emily. At this point?—”

“It matters,” I cut her off. “Because it wasn’t just a lie. It was another scheme to make yourself feel like the perfect parent. Like you sacrificed something. But it was never about me. It’s never been about me. It’s always about what makes you look good.”

“Of course you belonged there.” She scoffs. “I bet your writing was some of the best in the group.”

“Did you pay for it,” I ask, “or did you use your boyfriend to pull strings and pay for it?”

“Emily...”

“Did you lie to my face, knowing the whole time?”

She offers a weak smile. “I did save up for you to go. But...I didn’t budget well. I had to spend that money on a few other things. When I brought it up with Aidan, he said he knew someone. That someone knew someone else, and...it all worked out.”

Silence.

“Can you leave now?” I ask.

“I thought we were going on the campus tour...”

“I’m sure you’re used to canceling plans with me. Let’s just add that to the list.”

“Emily, you’re making a huge deal out of?—”

“Nothing?” I snap. “You think it’s nothing?”

She leans back.

“I have always told you the truth,” she says quietly. “And I’ve always looked out for us.”

“No,” I say. “You’ve only ever looked out for me when it didn’t come at a cost to you.

You lie and manipulate and call it love.

But it’s just control. It always has been.

You’re selfish as fuck. Unfit to be a mother.

And I’m done. I’m done making excuses for how fucking terrible you are.

I’m done sacrificing my life for a pedestal you never deserved.”

“Emily—”

“Get the fuck out of my room.”

She doesn’t move.

“Fine.” I grab my purse and sling it over my shoulder. “When I come back, I don’t want to see you or Aidan. I’ll call ‘home’ if there’s an emergency. And I hope you’ll do the same.”

I step into the hallway and walk right past the fangirls and their questions, past the smiling photos and autographs and performance. I keep walking.

Severing off another branch of my life.

COLE

“Y ou sure you want these frames in silver instead of bronze?” the contractor asks, nodding toward my collection of Hampton stills.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ve already got enough bronze and gold. I don’t want to overdo it.”

He measures the wall with a practiced eye, holding his tape measure steady against the molding before snapping a few reference photos on his phone. “I’ll have them ready by the weekend.”

I give a distracted nod, barely paying attention.

Somehow, I’ve managed to settle in Morgantown, West Virginia—a city just two hours from Pittsburgh—without ever crossing the bridge into the city that holds Emily’s university. Without ever once venturing near her.

I haven’t spoken to my father since I left.

But I still listen to his podcast.

Still listen to the lies he spins with that syrupy voice, always polished, always camera-ready. Like nothing ever cracked. Like there was never any rot beneath the veneer.

And today—against my better judgment—I accepted a package at the door.



A signed copy of his newest book: Taking Responsibility: A Successful Father's Guide.

I peel back the dust jacket and flip to the back cover.

There it is. A fake, glowing quote from me, printed in bold italics beneath my name:

"My dad has been the main anchor of my life since the day I was born, and I wish everyone had a father like him!"

I stare at it for a long, silent beat.

Then I laugh—but nothing about it feels funny.

I toss the book across the room. It hits the far wall with a thud and lands spine-up, like it's watching me.

I should be painting.

Should be building out the upstairs gallery or sending out invites for the small showing I promised Matt.

Instead, I sink onto the arm of the couch, elbow on my knee, and rub my temples.

The truth is: I hate this house.

It's too clean. Too quiet. Too far from everything that matters.

I thought distance would help. That putting miles between me and Pittsburgh would keep my chest from caving in every time I thought about her.

It hasn't.

I still see her in every detail of my day.

And I still hear his voice in every corner of my life.

So, no. The silver frames won't fix it.

But at least it's one more thing I can choose for myself.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

Campus shifts with the season—green giving way to gold, gold to fire. By mid-September, the breeze carries that first bite of cold, and students start layering their hoodies over T-shirts, clutching coffee cups like anchors.

I walk the same paths every day: to class, to the library, to the bus stop, to nowhere. Leaves crunch beneath my boots, and I start to like the quiet. I start to crave it.

The texts from my mom come like clockwork.

Long blocks of over-explaining. Passive-aggressive updates. Photos of the backyard swing set she thinks I care about. I stop reading them after a while. Stop opening them altogether. One day, I hold down her contact and press mute .

No sound. No buzz. No reminder.

Just silence.

The occasional “I’m sorry” arrives through snail mail—printed on floral stationery with just enough faux elegance to feel performative. But I get the feeling they’re from Aidan’s staff and not her.

My mother has never spelled out the word your . She always writes UR , even in birthday cards. She hates writing anything longer than a paragraph by hand. Always has. She says pens make her fingers “cramp up.”

So no, I don't buy the sudden surge of heartfelt effort. I don't believe in her ability to change.

I've done that too many times before.

And every time, I've been wrong.

Sometimes—just for a second—I check my inbox.

Not for her.

Just to see if anyone else remembered I still exist.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

I only agreed to go to Hoboken for Thanksgiving because Taylor wore me down. Somewhere between late-night phone calls and shared playlists, she managed to become an actual friend—like, a real one. The kind that doesn't push when you're quiet but always knows when to nudge anyway.

She dropped out of college last month to pursue songwriting full-time, and, to my surprise, she's actually good at it. Really good. The kind of good that makes me think, maybe, I'll follow her to Nashville this summer if I don't burn out first.

Coming along for the trip is Justin—a guy I met in my essay writing class.

He's what you'd call Cole-lite. All the surface-level charm without the emotional weight, without the knots and shadows.

He lives in Hoboken too, so we're riding up together.

He's stopping by to say a polite hello to my mom and Aidan.

Me? I'm not staying for dinner. I'm not spending the evening pretending.

Just a quick "Hi. I'm still alive. Bye."

The sooner I get to Justin's family's place, the sooner I can disappear into the holidays and back to the bubble I've built for myself in Pittsburgh.

When we arrive at the house, I feel the same kind of stunned awe I did the first time I saw the place in the Hamptons. Except this house is even bigger—and somehow warmer. More rustic. Less like a magazine spread and more like a very rich person's attempt at pretending they're grounded.

Stacks of Aidan's newest book are everywhere. Arranged with sticky notes: Signed, Not Signed, For Giveaways. His smiling face on every glossy cover.

As the butler leads us through the kitchen, Cole walks in.

My heart kicks the inside of my ribs like it's trying to escape.

His hair's longer now, brushing the tops of his ears. The sleeves of his gray shirt are rolled to the elbows, revealing new ink winding down his forearm—ink I've never seen before, and yet it feels familiar.

"Oh, Mister Cole!" the butler says with a wide grin. "We weren't expecting to see you this holiday season."

"That makes two of us." His voice is flat. Then his eyes find mine. "I was just dropping Matt off and grabbing a few things."

"Well, I hope you'll stay," the butler says brightly. "Emily's been delighting us with stories from her first semester—and she even brought a boyfriend."

Cole arches a brow. His gaze flicks between me and Justin.

"If you need me," the butler continues, "you know where to find me, Cole." He gestures for us to follow, but we linger.

"So, you're Cole," Justin says, offering his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

“I highly doubt that.” Cole doesn’t move. Doesn’t even blink. “How long have you been dating my stepsister?”

“Oh, I see what this is.” Justin laughs like it’s funny. “We’ve been dating since October. But I can assure you, I only have the best intentions.” He presses a kiss to my cheek and drapes his arm around my shoulder like he’s claiming a prize.

Cole’s jaw tightens.

“Come on, lovebirds!” the butler calls from the hall. “I’ve got to show you the wine room!”

I move to follow Justin, but Cole steps in my path.

“I need to borrow her for a minute,” he says, looking directly at Justin. “I’ll have her back in a second.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. Just grabs my hand and pulls me down the hallway. We move past gilded frames and flickering sconces until he throws open a set of double doors and drags me into the indoor pool room.

The door slams shut behind us.

“We need to fucking talk,” he says, crowding me back until my shoulders hit the paneled wall.

“What if someone sees us here?”

“Sees us doing what, Emily?” He plants his hands on either side of my head. “Talking?”

“You don’t need to be this close just to talk.”

“I don’t like you pretending you don’t fucking know me.”

“Cole—”

“Don’t let your boyfriend ever kiss you in front of me again.” His eyes darken. “I don’t appreciate that shit.”

“You and I aren’t together.”

“That doesn’t mean you get to fuck other people.”

“I heard you’ve been fucking other girls.”

“From who?”

“Taylor.”

“Fucking really?” He laughs, but it’s sharp and bitter. “You sound jealous.”

“And you sound like a fucking hypocrite.”

“I haven’t touched anyone since the day you decided to abandon me for no good reason.”

“I gave you all the reasons.”

“Name one that actually holds up.” He traces a slow line along my bottom lip, and I swallow hard.



“Exactly,” he says quietly. “I don’t plan on being with anyone else. And last time I checked, your mouth—break or not—belongs to me.”

“Cole...”

“Your boyfriend has shady eyes,” he says, stepping back. “He can’t be trusted. And he doesn’t like you the way I do.”

“Like?”

“I’d say love, but that doesn’t seem to mean anything to you.”

He turns and walks out, leaving me with the echo of his words, the pounding in my chest, and the scent of chlorine hanging in the air.

EMILY

The night starts off pretending to be normal.

Thanksgiving dinner, hosted not at a home but in the middle of a sprawling bookstore in Tribeca—one of those glossy, curated spaces with floor-to-ceiling shelves, a skylight dome, and string lights laced through rafters.

The long harvest table runs down the center of the poetry section, absurdly elegant for a space meant for quiet readers.

But this isn't a quiet night.

Aidan's team has rebranded the holiday as a "Thankful Reflections Book Launch Experience." There's a printed menu.

Branded wine glasses. Organic turkey with truffle stuffing.

Half the guests are industry contacts, the other half are press—and every last one of them is here to see a man pretend he's someone he's not.

I didn't want to come. I told myself I wouldn't.

But Justin's a fan—a real fan—and asked me, just once, to come with him. To let him get a book signed. I said yes. I thought I could slip in, smile politely, get through one drink and leave.

Instead, I ended up two seats from my mother, three seats from Aidan, and directly across from Cole.

He hasn't looked at me once since I sat down. Not even when Justin reached for my hand beneath the table. Not even when Aidan stood up, clinked his glass, and began to read.

It starts like this:

“Children don't need perfect fathers. They need honest ones. My son, Cole, once told me that my strength was the compass that guided him through the worst moments of his life. That he hoped one day to be half the man I was.”

—Chapter 6, Father First, Always

I hear the breath catch in Cole's throat before I see his jaw tighten.

Then comes the first question.

A voice rises from the end of the table, firm and sharp. A reporter.

“Mr. Dawson,” she says, “if you pride yourself on family values, why haven't you ever publicly addressed the DUI your son received a few years ago?”

The entire table stiffens. Even the silverware seems to pause.

Aidan blinks. Stunned. But only for a second.

He smiles. “We all make mistakes. What matters is how we learn from them. I believe in redemption and moving forward.”

The reporter doesn't relent. "So why didn't you include that in any of your books?" she asks. "Especially since that would imply Cole was drinking underage. Doesn't that clash with the values you sell to your readers?"

My eyes flick to Cole. He's not flinching. He's watching.

He looks like he's expecting an answer. Maybe even hoping for one.

But Aidan, ever the performer, keeps his smile. "I focus on what will help others. Not every personal detail needs to be published to make an impact."

He raises his glass. A signal to move on. And the room begins to shift again.

But Cole doesn't.

He stands slowly and walks out without a word.

I wait five seconds, then excuse myself and follow.

He's halfway down the hall, pacing. I catch up.

"Cole," I say.

He spins. "Why are you following me?"

"Because I?—"

"We're not together anymore. Why bother?"

"Because I'll always love you."

He laughs bitterly. “Okay. Go put that in one of your poems. I don’t want to hear that right now.”

“Cole, stop.”

“No, you fucking stop. You’re here, I can’t have you, can’t talk to you, and I’m tired.”

“You act like we were in a long-term relationship,” I hiss. “I barely know you.”

“Didn’t stop you from fucking me.”

“Seriously?”

“Walk away from me, Emily.”

“Or what?”

We glare at each other, tension stretched thin. Then suddenly, it breaks.

We collide in a kiss—angry, hungry, desperate. Hands gripping, mouths crushed, nothing soft or sweet. Just pain and want and three years of ache.

“I miss you,” he breathes.

“I never stopped loving you,” I whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Then: the unmistakable sound of glass clinking. Crates shifting. Murmurs.

We pull apart.

Turn.

People from the event are standing just outside the open doorway. Phones out. Jaw dropped. Recording.

“You’re sleeping with your stepsister?” someone says.

“So Aidan Dawson covered up a DUI and incest?” another voice whispers.

The murmurs grow louder. Buzzing. Snapping photos. Filming.

I let go of Cole’s hand.

But he grabs it right back and pulls me down the hall, away from the crowd.

As we disappear around the corner, I hear one final question—loud and cutting like a knife through the noise:

“Mr. Dawson! How long has your son been screwing his stepsister? Is that your idea of family values?”

EMILY

“Can you believe the gall of this man?” the blonde anchor sneers from the flatscreen. Her perfectly curled hair doesn’t move as she gestures emphatically. “Lecturing us all on the importance of family values, bragging about how his blended family is a model for the nation?—”

“Hold on, Kelly,” her cohost interrupts. He’s wearing a pinstriped suit and a smirk that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Do you think there’s a chance he didn’t know? That maybe the kids had their own thing going on without his knowledge?”

“Oh, they definitely had more than one thing going on,” she fires back with a roll of her eyes.

“But okay, James, let’s play devil’s advocate.

Let’s say he had no idea his son was sleeping with his stepdaughter—under his own roof.

Is that really the kind of man we want speaking at our town hall? Leading book clubs on moral integrity?”

“Point taken,” James says smoothly, turning to the camera. “Let’s check in with Amanda, who’s live in The Square with public reactions to the news.”

The broadcast cuts to a reporter standing in front of a massive digital billboard looping Aidan Dawson’s book promo—his face still smug, still untouchable.

Below it, a crowd.

Real people. Furious voices.

“Disgusting.”

“Can’t believe this is happening here.”

“How did the parents not know?”

“When is he suspending his show?”

I can’t breathe.

Tears slip down my cheeks before I even realize I’ve started crying. The remote sits uselessly in my lap, but I don’t reach for it. I should turn it off. Should stop listening to the headlines dissecting my life like it’s entertainment.

But I can’t look away.

It’s like watching a car crash I caused. One I tried to swerve around, but couldn’t. One I never walked away from.

This was supposed to blow over quietly. Fade into the background like every other scandal. But now it’s on every screen, in every living room. Now strangers say my name like a punchline, like a warning.

And worst of all, there’s no way to correct the story without making it worse.

I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders and stare at the screen, heart pounding, face hot with shame. Every second feels like an hour. Every word like a slap.



I should be angry.

But all I feel is exposed.

EMILY

Justin

Delete my number.

Don't ever contact me again.

The stares come from every direction when I walk into my usual campus café on Thursday. Even the Uber driver who dropped me off kept giving me confused looks through the rearview mirror at every stoplight.

"What can I get for you this morning?" the waitress asks, pen poised.

"I'll have two cinnamon lattes."

She raises a brow. "Is one of those for your stepbrother?"

I roll my eyes. "I'll also have two plain bagels with honey almond butter."

"I'm just asking."

"I'd also appreciate a side of syrup," I add, glancing around as the entire café dips into an awkward silence. The two women at the table next to me are practically leaning over their plates to catch every word.

"You know what?" I shake my head. "I'll take everything to go."

COLE

The damage from a scandal burns in layers.

First comes the initial hit—the public fallout, the headlines, the gut-punch humiliation. Then the second wave: silence, shame, the replay of every choice that led to this. But the worst part—the deepest part—is how long it takes to heal.

Because the healing process isn't quick. It isn't clean.

And somewhere in the middle of all of it, I forgot to insulate me and Emily from the burns first.

I let the fire touch everything.

And now I don't know what's left to salvage.

COLE

The apartment smells like fresh primer and open windows.

Sunlight cuts across the hardwood floors, scattered with drop cloths, paint trays, and half-finished canvases. It's the only kind of mess I don't mind living in—the kind that makes silence feel earned.

I'm standing in front of a five-foot canvas when the front door swings open without a knock.

“So—” Taylor steps inside like she owns the place. “Are any of the rumors true?”

I almost ask how the hell she found me—but I already know. It's all over the news.

She's dressed in expensive athleisure, her hair twisted up in a too-perfect bun, face flushed like she power-walked her rage across the city just to get here.

“The ones about my dad are facts,” I say flatly. “At least, most of the ones I've seen.”

“I'm talking about the one where you're fucking Emily—your stepsister.” She folds her arms across her chest. “Is that true?”

I pour another shot of bourbon and toss it back without flinching.

“It's a simple yes or no, Cole.” Her voice hardens. “Are you having incest sex?”

“No,” I say. Then I pause. “Not like that.”

Her shoulders drop, just slightly.

“Okay. Good. I know the rumor mill gets wild as hell, but that one’s a bit?—”

“I’m in love with my stepsister,” I interrupt. Quiet. Unshaken. “But I loved her before our parents ever got married.”

She blinks. Takes a full step back.

“Would you like to join me for a shot?” I ask, already pouring another.

“There was never a chance of you and me?” she asks. Her voice has thinned.

“No, Taylor.” I glance at her. “I don’t see you like that. You’re like family.”

“Then shouldn’t you see me like that?” she snaps.

“Get out.”

“I told you I was falling for you.”

“I never said it back.”

“You made me think you liked me.”

“How?” I finally turn to her. “I’ve never returned a single advance. Never touched you. Never kissed you. Never misled you.”

“I told Emily I liked you.”

“She told me.”

“She was supposed to be my friend.”

“She still is,” I say gently. “That’s why she didn’t have the heart to say anything. None of this was about hurting you, Taylor. I promise. There was no malice in it.”

She glares at me. Anger, then something else—something hollow—passes through her expression.

“Okay,” she says, voice low. “Taking me out of it... why would you do this to your dad? After everything he’s done for you?”

I don’t answer.

Instead, I turn back to the canvas and dip my brush into a muted blue. My strokes are controlled, deliberate. Because right now, this is the only thing I know how to hold.

When I finally look over my shoulder, she’s gone.

And for the first time all day, I let myself breathe.

EMILY

My mother is sitting on the edge of my dorm room bed with her arms crossed like a judge ready to hand down a sentence.

I have no idea how the hell she got in—or who let her in—but I’m already bracing for the inevitable crowd that’ll gather outside my door. Drama spreads fast in shared hallways.

I drop my bag to the floor and close the door behind me. No words. Just a stare. I wait for her to draw first.

“From here,” she says, eyes dragging over me like I’m a dress she regrets buying, “you almost look like a woman I was proud to call my daughter.”

I bite my tongue so hard I taste blood.

“I don’t know if you were dating him just to spite me, or if you actually slipped and fell on his dick and decided to keep riding it, but I am utterly ashamed of you.”

“You knew how much he meant to me,” she hisses. “He was the love of my life. My one.”

“Every guy is your one,” I snap, the words out before I can stop them. “Like, be fucking for real.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“He was number twenty-one.” My voice cracks. “Twenty. Fucking. One. And I guess I should be grateful we’ve only moved half as many times, right? Small wins.”

“Emily—”

“You want to talk about betrayal?” My breath shakes. “You want to ask me how I could do this to you ?”

Her mouth twitches. Defensive. Ready to twist the story in her favor, like always.

“It wasn’t about you.” My voice rises. “Everything isn’t always about you and whatever new guy makes you feel twenty again. I didn’t betray you—I chose you.”

She blinks.

“I loved him.” The words scrape out of me, ragged and raw.

“Before you ever got your hands on him, I loved him. And when you moved in, when the wedding happened, when you paraded him around like he was some prize—I let it all go. For you . I gave him up. I swallowed it and I smiled through every family dinner and every fake holiday photo and every time you called him baby.”

I step forward, my throat tight with everything I’ve never said.

“But I don’t owe you silence forever. And I won’t pretend you didn’t bulldoze your way through my life and call it love.”

“If you keep speaking to me like this, you won’t like the consequences.”

“Go ahead.” I shrug. “Tell me what they’ll be. I’m not coming home again for you to enforce them anyway.”



Her expression flickers. For a second, just one, she looks like she's trying to process what I said. Trying to spin it into something forgivable. But I won't let her.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she demands.

"It's not a metaphor." My voice is quiet. Final. "It's pretty fucking direct. You and I do not have a relationship anymore. We're done."

COLE

Manhattan, New York

I shouldn't have come here.

I knew the moment I saw my dad on the news—sweaty, slurring, spinning another version of the truth to a crowd of clueless fans—that this would end badly. But part of me still showed up. Not to fix things. Not to forgive.

Just to keep the whole empire from going up in flames.

His Manhattan penthouse looks smaller than I remember. More hollow. The kind of place that used to feel untouchable and now feels like a museum no one wants to visit.

He's already drunk when I walk in.

"If you came up here to apologize," he mutters, not looking at me, "you can fucking save it." He sips from a crystal glass, the amber whiskey clinging to the rim. "I told you I'll talk to you when I don't have the urge to stomp my foot into your face."

"I came to give you these." I toss a manila envelope onto the table between us. My old arrest papers. "To save you from getting behind the wheel drunk again tonight."

"Don't act like you give a fuck about what's best for me now, Cole." He scoffs, bitter. "That ship sailed a long time ago."

“Noted.” I walk to the liquor cabinet, open it, and shut it hard enough for the bottles to rattle. I twist the lock and pocket the key.

“Have a good night.”

I turn for the door—but a glass explodes against the wall, just inches from my head.

“Hate that I missed.” His laugh is low and mean. He settles back into his chair like it was nothing, lifting a decanter I hadn’t noticed and pouring another shot.

I don’t stop him this time.

If he wants to drink himself into oblivion, let him.

“I’m going to do you a favor,” I say. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just try to assault me and never bring it up again.”

“Step closer so I can succeed this time.” His eyes narrow. “We both know I hardly ever miss twice.”

“Okay.” I move into his lane. I shouldn’t. I know how this ends. But I go anyway.

“You ruined my career to get revenge for that night, didn’t you?” His voice is sharp now. “This was your grand finale.”

“You ruined your own fucking career.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not stuttering.” I glare. “You made mistake after mistake, and I’m not to blame for this one. I told you how I felt about Emily, and you decided it meant nothing.”

He laughs—harsh, slurred. “Emily? You’re still stuck on her?”

“I loved her. And I lost her. Because of you.”

“Oh, please ?—”

“No.” My voice cuts through him. “You let me lose three years of my life. You made me sacrifice everything I had. And when I asked you for one thing —Emily, after everything you did—you still couldn’t not be selfish for once in your life.”

His second swing lands hard—right across my jaw. I stumble, then shove him back across the room. He hits the wall but finds his footing fast, breathing hard.

And suddenly we’re back in the car, outside that bar.

Him begging me to take the fall.

Telling me he’d “handle it,” that he’d make it disappear. That he couldn’t afford a scandal. Not right now. Not him.

“Please help me, son... Please...”

I release my grip on his collar and let him slide to the floor.

“I won by not having to lie for you anymore,” I say. “That’s the only prize I’ve ever needed.”

“You’re so fucking inconsiderate.” He spits the words out. “After everything I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me?”

“You only do things for yourself.” My voice is steel. “There always had to be

something in it for you, or you wouldn't lift a finger."

He rolls his eyes and stumbles forward to grab the bottle again—but I step in front of it.

"Miss O'Hara was just a convenient spouse for you," I say. "You might've really liked her?—"

"Might've?" His voice spikes. "I married her."

"But you didn't love her." I don't blink. "Did you?"

Silence.

I glare at him. "Tell me. Did you?"

He stares at the floor.

"You loved Laurelin Hanes," I say, quietly. "But you couldn't be with a twice-divorced woman with three kids because it didn't look good for your brand."

"Stop talking."

"Because people would've asked questions. People would've wondered what someone like you saw in someone like her."

"I'm not going to tell you to shut the fuck up again?—"

"You've spent your entire life caring what everyone else thinks," I say. "Everyone but the people closest to you. But don't worry. You don't have to anymore."

“Yes, you’ve made sure of that.”

“Goodbye.”

I head for the door again. Another glass shatters behind me—closer this time.

But I don’t turn around.

There’s no point.

It’s long past time to leave him behind for good.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

Back Then

That Night

When I realized the type of “family” man my father really was.

The acrid stench of burning rubber yanks me out of sleep before I even realize I was drifting.

The world is sideways.

I'm crumpled against the passenger side door, earbuds still in, music muffled beneath the high-pitched screech of tires against pavement. My favorite band is still playing. A love song—totally wrong for this moment.

But the noise that cuts through it is real.

It's the sound of metal, speed, chaos. It's him .

I jerk upright and scan the cabin. My father is gripping the wheel with one hand, the other raised like a conductor in a symphony he's too drunk to lead.

His mouth moves to the words of some old country song, eyes glassy, distant, unbothered.

The car veers wildly between lanes, a pinball bouncing off imaginary rails.

Cold air blasts from the vents like a freezer door left open, but the scent inside the car is warm. Thick with overpriced cologne. Sweat. Whiskey.

He jerks the wheel around a minivan, laughing.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I shove my seatbelt off and launch forward, climbing into the front seat. My pulse is everywhere at once—neck, chest, ears.

“Oh, son,” he drawls, like we’re having a road trip moment. “Don’t you just love this song? Gotye really nailed it. Somebody that I used to know...”

“Pull over. Now.”

“Lila’s not answering my calls anymore,” he slurs, ignoring me. “Says she deserves more than a relationship behind closed doors.”

“Brake!” I grab the wheel as we skim the shoulder. “Hit the fucking brakes!”

“Okay, okay,” he mutters, like I’m being dramatic. He taps the pedal.

The car lurches.

Forward.

Faster.

“Shit,” I whisper. “Dad—please—pull over.”

“I am slowing down.” He sounds hurt. “You’ve got to stop yelling and just listen.”



Eighty. Ninety. One-ten.

Up ahead, the road curves. Too sharp to make at this speed. Headlights flash in the opposite lane. Someone honks. The wheel jerks.

“She says she wants more,” he says dreamily. “But I want her. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

Then the sirens start. Blue and white strobe through the rearview mirror. A cruiser’s closing in.

Time stretches.

Then shatters.

The car flips—metal screams, glass bursts, gravity disappears. My head cracks against something hard. The roof caves. My vision blacks out, then snaps back in.

We slam to the pavement. Right side up.

The windshield’s a spiderweb. My door is empty glass. I’m bleeding. Shirt soaked. Chest sticky.

Mine?

I move my fingers. My arms. My legs. Pain flares, but I can move.

Smoke rises from the hood. Gasoline stings my eyes.

“Dad,” I croak, throat raw. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, son,” he coughs. “You?”

“Yeah.”

We’re outside the vehicle now. Sitting on the shoulder, slumped in gravel and glass. Someone must’ve pulled us out.

A voice calls out, distant but growing. “Is anyone else in the car?”

A flashlight slices through the smoke. A uniformed officer approaches.

My father lifts a hand. “We’re it. Just me and my son.”

The cop nods. “Who was driving tonight?”

Silence.

I stare at my father. Blood in my mouth. On my hands. On his shirt.

He stares at the cop, then back at me.

“I need one of you to take a Breathalyzer,” the officer says calmly.

“My son was drinking,” my father says, voice low and rehearsed. “I know he has to face the consequences... but as a courtesy, can you book him later this morning?”

My lungs stop working.

I wait for the cop to ask anything . To use his eyes. To see the bruises, the bleeding, the placement. But instead, the man squints at me.

“You know,” he mutters, “usually the drunk driver walks away clean. Nice to see karma give someone a bruise for once.”

He turns to my father. “Let me call my supervisor. Hold tight, Mr. Dawson.”

As the officer walks away, my father leans in, breath still laced with whiskey.

“I owe you,” he says. “Whenever you need a favor—whatever it is—you just say the phrase: Warned You . I won’t ask questions. I’ll do it.”

I say nothing.

“Son, did you hear me? I owe you. This was my wake-up call. I swear.”

Still nothing.

EMTs arrive and wrap gauze around my head, take my vitals, draw blood. One of them whispers that I’m lucky.

But luck doesn’t explain the seizures that follow. The blackouts. The years I lose to a truth no one believed.

Later, a doctor clears me. “Just a gash,” he says.

Just.

A police officer drives us home. I shower blood from my skin before the sun rises. Then sit in a holding cell for six hours.

My father posts bond without a word.

The charges stick to my name.

And if I hadn't met Emily the night I came back to Nashville—if she hadn't looked at me like I was worth knowing, worth saving —maybe my version of Warned You would've been simple:

Don't ever speak to me again.

But instead, he whispered:

“You know I've got a lot at stake. If I go down for something like this... you'll lose out too. You'll lose me. ”

I looked him in the eye.

“What the hell are you saying?”

He smiled, confident. Delusional.

“Come on, son... You don't really need me to spell it out for you, do you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

Back Then

Cole Banks.

I stare at the name as the detention officer presses the label onto my prison badge. Black letters on laminated plastic. Like it belongs to someone else.

Technically, I'm supposed to be placed in adult general population, but they're letting me serve my sentence in the transitional juvenile wing. A "compromise," they called it. Because I'm eighteen—but barely.

I've never been more grateful for my mother's laziness.

She never corrected the typo on my birth certificate.

Never filed the change after she married him.

All my records—from school to court to hospital paperwork—have always read Cole Banks .

It was a running family joke. Something they teased about at dinner tables and laughed over when official mail showed up addressed to the wrong last name.

I was supposed to fix it. Supposed to change everything to Dawson before heading off to art school. Tie the name to the family. To the brand. To him .

But now?

Now it's the only thing protecting him.

The only thing separating his public legacy from my criminal record.

This name—the one I never meant to keep—saves his . Keeps him clean. Lets him go on with his podcast, his book tour, his carefully curated public apologies.

No one will ever know.

Not unless I tell them.

And I won't.

Because somewhere in the twisted part of me that still wants to believe he's capable of love, I keep thinking: maybe he'll use the chance I gave him to become better.

Even if I know he won't.

COLE

Back Then

My father doesn't visit me while I'm here.

He barely even calls.

His preferred method of communication is snail mail—long, neatly typed letters printed on thick cream-colored paper.

He includes motivational quotes at the top of every one, like I'm enrolled in some self-help course instead of serving time.

He always signs them the same way: "With love and faith—Dad."

There's always money in my commissary. Always an extra twenty slipped in when the week rolls over. As if that somehow makes up for everything else.

His letters talk about forgiveness. Over and over again. Like if he says the word enough times, it'll eventually sink in. Like I'll stop remembering what actually happened and just let it all wash away.

I don't write back.

What would I even say?

The guards are huge fans of his.

They pass around his paperbacks during downtime and nod along to his podcast in the breakroom like it's gospel. They call him "a good man," a "truth-teller," someone who "owns his mistakes and lifts others up."

And all I can think is— if only they knew my real name.

If they knew the son he was always bragging about, the one who supposedly "decided to take a year to focus on himself," was sitting right here—right in front of them—eating state-issued cereal and folding his laundry with trembling hands.

Maybe then they'd understand who he really is.

Then again, probably not.

People see what they want to see. And my father's been selling the fantasy for so long, they wouldn't recognize the truth if it punched them in the face.



COLE

Back Then

Weeks after my release—armed with a padded bank account courtesy of my father—I take a trip to New York.

It's supposed to be a fresh start. A way to channel the chaos into something cleaner. Legal. Strategic.

But the city doesn't let me forget him.

I walk out of every law firm the second I see one of his books sitting on a shelf. Hardcover reminders of the man I took the fall for. Of the lie I let bury me alive.

By the time I reach the last name on my list, I'm ready to give up. Ready to take the silence as a sign that I should just deal with the hand life gave me—the one I played poorly—and walk away.

But something stops me.

It's the most expensive firm in Manhattan.

Hamilton & Associates.

I know I can't afford it. Not really. But I remember my father bragging about being one of their clients once. Loudly. Publicly.

He isn't. I checked.

That makes this the perfect place to start.

The building is all glass and silence. Modern art on the walls. Security that doesn't smile. The receptionist offers me a cup of fresh coffee and escorts me to the elevator with the efficiency of a five-star hotel.

"Mr. Carter will see you in three minutes," another assistant says, guiding me into an empty boardroom with panoramic views of the city.

The door clicks shut behind her.

Then a man walks in—sharp suit, calm energy, practiced confidence.

"Cole Dawson?" he asks, his voice smooth and deliberate.

I stand. "Yes."

"Nice to meet you." He extends a hand. "I'm Damien Carter. How may I help you?"

"I sent a confidential letter a few weeks ago. The tracking confirmed it arrived. I was hoping you'd read it."

"I don't read anything for free," he says.

I set my coffee down. "So, you're one of those asshole lawyers."

"The biggest one you'll ever meet."

"Alright, then." I stand. "Thanks for your time."

“I don’t typically do revenge plots, Mr. Dawson,” he says before I reach the door. “But I read every word of your letter. I’m just pretending I didn’t—because you said, and I quote, ‘sometimes I feel like harming my father.’”

I blink.

He studies my face. “Is he still alive?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I don’t represent murderers.”

He walks to the head of the table, casually clicking his pen. “How much is his empire worth these days?”

“I’m not going after his money.”

“I’m calculating my fee.”

I sigh. “Thirty million. Give or take.”

“There are really that many people buying his bullshit?”

“He gains more fans every day.”

He smiles. “Tell you what—don’t burn the house down just yet. Something like this needs a slow fire.”

“What does that mean?”

“Can you prove he was the one driving that night?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Phone records,” I say. “He called me to come get him. And... they never took my blood. I just...”

“Admitted to a crime you didn’t commit to protect him,” he finishes.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“I’m going to send you a plan,” he says, his tone shifting from casual to clinical. “You’ll follow it to the letter.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Worst case,” he says, “the truth doesn’t come out for another four years.

He pays you four million and two of whichever properties you want.

Best case? He self-destructs trying to cover it up, tells the truth himself, and...

I don’t know what you’ll get, but I’ll make a million either way. So I’ll be happy.”

I stare at him. “Has anyone ever told you you’re shady as fuck for a lawyer?”

He smirks. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He slides a card across the table. It’s blank, except for one sentence:

Welcome to the firm.

“I’ll be in touch,” he says. “Bide your time. And trust me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

Six Months Later

The “time heals all wounds” philosopher should be excavated and stoned for having the audacity to ever publish such a lie.

My heart is still beating in pieces, and every second that passes is just a cruel reminder that I’ve lost everything.

And everyone.

Despite changing my number and moving away for the umpteenth time, all my nights end the same:

Crying on the phone to an online therapist.

Even though she must be weary of my endless tear-stained sessions, she still picks up. Every time.

She even offered to help track down that lying philosopher.

Apparently, he’s buried somewhere in Virginia.

COLE

When I open the door to my studio gallery, Matt is sitting on the chaise.

I avoid his gaze as I move through the space, shutting all the blinds one by one.

“Did you come here to talk shit and judge me, too?” I ask.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I would never.”

“Well, in that case, I’m not accepting commissions at this time, but you’re free to look around and see if there’s something you like.”

“I came here to check on you, Cole,” he says gently. “You haven’t answered any of my texts or calls.”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

I sigh, too numb to argue. “Want some coffee or something?”

He stands and walks toward me—no hesitation, no words—just pulls me into a hug.

“It’s alright, man,” he says, patting my back. “It’s alright...”

## Page 58

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

Dear Cole,

I 'm sitting on the floor of my new apartment, where the rent is so cheap the heat only sputters out in uneven waves. It's freezing in here, and I'm shaking—but I'm not sure it's from the cold.

It's taking everything in me not to break down and call you.

Not to beg you to come find me. To save me one last time.

But I won't.

Because I can't.

I love you, Cole. God, I love you more than I know what to do with.

But you were right.

You warned me about what this path would cost. About how it would take real courage to live loud, to live honestly, to stop hiding behind what's comfortable or expected.

You said I'd need strength to stop pretending. To let the world burn and not run to put out the flames.



And I swore I could do it.

I lied.

I wasn't strong enough to hold you the way you needed me to.

I wasn't brave enough to choose us.

And if I ever find someone who loves me half as hard, half as recklessly as you did...  
I'll know I've settled.

Also, you were right about something else:

My poems were never meant to be whispered in dim-lit cafés.

They've always belonged on stages, in melodies, with twangy guitars and voices that bleed.

They've always been country love songs.

You saw it before I did.

I wish I would've warned you?—

That I'd miss you like this.

That it would hurt this much.

Always,

Emily

I reread the letter. Redraft it ten more times.

But no matter how I rearrange the words, they never hold the weight of what I feel.

Not fully.

So I hold it over the flame of my lighter.

Watch the edges curl, blacken, and disappear.

And I don't dare write it again.

COLE

My first gallery is sold out, and I have a feeling the only reason most people bought tickets is to catch a glimpse of “the disgraced Mr. Dawson’s son” —to see how I’m holding up after all the scandals.

But I don’t care.

A ticket sold is a ticket sold.

While I’m making sure there’s enough space in the bar area, a knock sounds at the front door.

“Coming!” I push a table into line and rush over.

It’s Frank.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask.

“I heard you were hosting your first gallery this weekend.”

“I am.” I cross my arms. “Doors don’t open until Saturday night.”

“Right, well, if it’s alright with you, can I get a sneak peek today?”

“No.” I shut the door and walk over to my first piece.

As I'm realigning the title pad, the side door creaks open, and Frank strolls in.

"I'm friends with the city engineer," he says, like it's no big deal. "I had a feeling you wouldn't let me in the front."

"So why even try?"

"Because you deserve to slam the door in my face a million times after the way I've treated you." His voice cracks. "Cole, I had no idea your father was the driver that night. And I didn't know how terrible he's been to you all your life."

"A lot of people would've flipped on him a long time ago..."

"I had to play the long game," I say, echoing something I haven't admitted aloud in a long time. "Plus, I wanted to believe he'd changed. That he'd keep his word and repay the favor."

"I owe you a lot of favors, too." He steps closer and pulls me into a quick, tight hug. "Need any help with your opening?"

"Is there any way you could get Emily here?"

"I've been trying to do that for weeks." His face softens. "I'll keep working on it. But in the meantime, let me help you make this the best debut art show these people have ever seen."

"It's already sold out."

"Just the first night." He winks, wagging his finger in that mischievous way that always led to something crazy and unforgettable. "Allow me to work my magic and make sure every night hits that metric."

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

It never ceases to amaze me how men simply do not read.

Since posting my new dating profile, I've received at least twenty private messages from strangers asking me out.

I've gone back on my intentions twice and joined two of them for a beer, but I regret it enough to never try again.

I need to take the advice I once gave my mother and learn how to be alone.

Even though Gatlinburg doesn't have the star power of Nashville—aside from Dolly Parton's theme park—it's beautiful enough to inspire me. And close enough for aspiring songstresses to meet me halfway.

As I'm tapping my pen against a coffee cup to measure syllables, a stranger stops by my table.

"Is someone sitting here?" a deep voice asks.

"Not at all." I keep writing. "You can take it."

He obliges, unwrapping a bagel. "It's a beautiful day out, huh?"

I nod. "Best day yet."

“I’ve always loved the mountain views in this town,” he says, clearly missing the hint. “It’s the perfect backdrop for date nights.”

“Okay, look.” I set down my pen and finally meet his eyes. “I’ve seen you here all week, and you seem like a really nice guy, but I don’t want you to waste any of your time on me.” I cut through whatever soft pitch he was about to serve. “I’m single, but I’m far from ready.”

He arches a brow. “Ready for what?”

“Anything more than a friendship.”

“Um... I’ve seen you here plenty of times, too. But I only came over because your table is the only one with chairs.” He smiles, warm and amused. “Oh, and for what it’s worth, you’re a really nice girl—but I’m engaged.”

“Oh...” I exhale. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. What’s his name?” he asks.

“Who?”

“The guy you’re still in love with.”

“Cole.”

“How bad was the breakup?”

“I doubt I’ll ever get over it.”

“I know the feeling.” He slides his laptop into his bag and stands, extending a hand.

“Come on. You’ve been crying here all week. You need a shoulder. Come tell me and my fiancée about it over dinner.”

“I couldn’t possibly impose.”

“You’re actually doing me a favor,” he says. “She’s a terrible cook, and we’re picking up pizza on the way home just in case.”

I laugh as he pulls me to my feet.

And for the first time since I moved to this town, my night doesn’t end in tears.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

Cole Dawson Makes a Name for Himself with Stunning Art Debut

Son of Disgraced Aidan Dawson Ignores All Questions About Father's Legal Issues & Stepsister Romance

Plenty of Influencers and A-Listers Attend Dawson Event, No Known Family Members Spotted



## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

The sun is just beginning to dip behind the trees as I walk down my quiet block, the evening air crisp against my skin.

For once, there's silence—no horns, no blaring televisions through cracked apartment windows.

Just the rhythmic crunch of my boots on the sidewalk and the soft rustle of wind through the bare branches.

Until I hear it.

“Emily?”

The voice freezes me mid-step.

Familiar. Frayed. The last voice I ever wanted to hear.

I think about pretending I didn't hear it. About walking faster. But she says my name again, softer this time, and the ache in it makes me pause.

“I know you hate me,” my mother says, stopping a few feet behind. “I promise I won't take up too much of your time.”

I don't turn around.

Instead, I slide my key into the lock and push open the door to my apartment. I leave it open—not as an invitation, but an inevitability.

Her heels click slowly against the pavement, echoing too loudly in the stillness. When she steps inside and crosses into the light, I barely recognize her. The woman who used to be all glam and gloss—blond curls teased high, lipstick like war paint—is gone.

She's in gray sweatpants and a faded purple T-shirt. No makeup. No armor.

“Where's Mr. Dawson?” I ask flatly, not moving from where I stand.

“I've told you—we're not together anymore,” she says. “I came here alone.”

“You can leave alone, too.” I nod toward the door. “Please lock it on your way out.”

“No.” Her voice is firmer now. “I came here to talk.”

“I don't want to listen.”

“I couldn't care less how you feel about me,” she says, breath catching, “but you're going to give me the chance to say that I'm sorry.”

I stay quiet, arms crossed.

“I know I made a lot of mistakes as your mother,” she continues. “And honestly, I'll probably make more. But I want to start over. I want to try being the mom you deserve. Please... give me one last chance.”

I say nothing. Her eyes are glassy. Her hands tremble.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about things. Months, actually. Alone,” she whispers. “No boyfriends. No distractions. Just me and my mess. I started therapy. Real therapy. The kind where they don’t let you lie to yourself.”

She wipes at her eyes. “Turns out I hurt you because I never knew how to love anyone properly—not even myself. That’s not an excuse, but... it’s the truth.”

“I moved into a little apartment two counties over,” she adds, her voice growing smaller. “I got a job at an event center that hosts weddings and concerts and birthday parties. I’m trying, Emily.”

“Stop, Mom.” My voice cracks. “Please, just... stop talking.”

She takes a breath, nods. Her face crumples with regret.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I’ll go. I’ll come back some other time and try again.”

“There’s no need to,” I say, stepping forward.

She freezes.

“I just needed to hear ‘all alone.’”

She opens her arms, and I walk into them. No more distance. No more pretending.

And for the first time in years, something inside me begins to shift. Not into forgiveness, not yet, but into something that feels possible.

Like maybe this is where healing starts.

Like maybe, just maybe, we can try again.

EMILY

The bell above the door chimes as I follow Taylor into the third bridal boutique of the day. She walks in like she owns the place—head high, eyes glittering with the thrill of being in love.

With Matt.

Yes, that Matt—Cole’s cousin.

I’m still not sure how that happened, but here we are. She’s getting married, and I’m her reluctant maid of honor, nursing a bruised heart in a room full of tulle.

She flips through racks of dresses like she’s swiping on a dating app. “Why does every bridal shop assume the bride wants to wear a basic white dress?”

“Because that’s usually the case.” I try to smile, try to sound normal. “The place next door has red and black prom dresses.”

She stares at me like I’ve grown two heads. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m just trying to help...”

Taylor sets down a hanger and steps in front of me, gripping my shoulders. “Okay, I am going to set aside this day of me for a second and ask—what the hell is wrong with you? You’ve been moping all morning.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m just... thinking about Cole.”

“Obviously.” Her voice softens. “What about him?”

“If you were in my shoes, you would’ve dumped him too, right?”

She blinks. “Not a chance in hell.”

“Why not?”

“Because despite the ‘friends’ you’ve met of mine, I’ve been a loner all my life, and I’m used to people not liking me.” She shrugs. “So I wouldn’t waste time trying to win their approval. Especially not when I already had something real.”

“Why didn’t you say this before?”

“Because deep down, you’ve always wanted to fit in.”

“That’s not true.”

“Of course it is,” she says gently. “You didn’t like moving all the time, but you didn’t fight it either—because you never had real friends to leave behind. And now that you finally have something, you’re scared of losing it because of what people think.”

“That has nothing to do with?—”

“It has everything to do with it.” Her voice cuts through mine. “You ended things with Cole because you were scared. Even after the truth came out and people moved on, you still let fear win. But him?” She smiles sadly. “Cole didn’t give two fucks, and you know it.”

She's right.

And what hurts more is that she forgave me.

After everything fell apart, I sat on her floor and told her everything. I apologized for not being honest sooner—told her I'd kept my feelings for Cole hidden because I didn't want to hurt her. I begged her to forgive me.

Surprisingly, it didn't take much.

Maybe it had something to do with the new love in her life.

Or maybe Taylor just knew better than anyone how rare something real really is.

Her phone chimes with a loud alarm, breaking the tension. "Okay! Back to me time."  
She grins. "Help me find my reception dress, please."

Later that night...

Taylor

Promise you won't hate me if I tell you something.

I will. Don't tell me.

Eh. I'll risk it.

Cole's going to be on Artist Spotlight tonight at 11 p.m. You're welcome.

I don't bother replying.

Instead, I set down my notebook and pour myself a glass of wine, heart already stammering. I have a full hour before it airs, but I refuse to miss a single second.

When the show begins, he steps onto the stage in ash-blue jeans and a white V-neck shirt. His hair's a little longer, his eyes a little sharper. The crowd roars. The camera pans across rows of women in the front—some smiling, others screaming his name.

The host leans forward. “For those at home who may not know your work, where would you suggest they start?”

“The Lost Moments Collection,” he says. “It’s being released at midnight, so you should definitely start there.”

The screen fades into a gallery space.

The words “The Lost Moments Collection” appear, followed by a slideshow of his work.

It’s us .

Him and me in a pool. In a garden. Chasing each other through a gallery in slow motion.

Moments we never got to live.

Dreams we painted in stolen hours.

Memories we never had—but somehow, he captured them anyway.

Each frame feels like a breath I never took.

A confession I never gave.

A promise I never kept.

And just when I think I might survive this?—

She walks onstage.

A blonde in heels and an easy smile. She loops her hand through his, and he leans in to kiss her cheek. The crowd cheers.

But all I hear is silence.

My wine glass is still in my hand, full and untouched.

My cheeks are wet, and I don't remember crying.

When the credits roll, I don't turn off the television.

I just sit there.

Heart splitting in my chest.

Watching a blank screen, refusing to blink.

He's moved on.

And I have no one to blame but myself.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

COLE

My father is facing six new federal charges—serious ones that could finally put him behind bars.

Not just the DUI.

Fraud. Obstruction. Tax evasion. Things that were buried under hush money and campaign favors until recently. Things I always suspected but could never prove.

Part of me wonders if he'll survive in prison. If he'll manage without tailored suits, private jets, and five-star dinners served on demand.

The other part of me—the louder, colder part—thinks he's getting exactly what he deserves.

I unlock the front door of my gallery and step into the dark, preparing for another week of sold-out shows. My phone buzzes with RSVP updates and a waiting list that's somehow still growing.

But when I flick on the lights, the devil himself is sitting on my main sofa.

"If you hurry and leave, I won't call the police and have you arrested for breaking and entering," I say, my voice flat.

"I need to talk to you before I have to prepare for trial."

“They have phones in prison,” I reply, setting down my bag. “Try not to use all three hundred of your monthly minutes on pointless calls.”

“Any other advice?” he asks.

“Yeah. Keep to yourself. Don’t pull any of your manipulative bullshit in there. Your new roommates are way out of your league.”

He almost smiles. “I’ll remember that. Thank you.”

“You can leave the same way you came in.” I walk toward the back wall, ready to start re-centering frames.

But instead of standing, he stays seated, voice softer now. “Cole, I came here to apologize. For real. Not to play mind games, not to spin my side of the story—I just want to say I’m sorry.”

I don’t say anything.

“I know I’ve hurt you more times than I can count.

I spent years prioritizing optics and strangers over my own son.

I let my ego, my career, and my image come before your safety, your truth, your future.

” His voice catches. “And the worst part is, I let you take the fall for my mistake. I watched you get swallowed by a system I should’ve protected you from. ”

Still, I say nothing.

“I can’t undo it. I wish to God I could,” he continues. “But I want to spend whatever time I have left—on this side of the bars or the other—trying to make things right. Not because I expect your forgiveness. Just because you deserve that much.”

I glance at him, trying to gauge if this is just another performance.

“I haven’t touched a drink since the night you walked out,” he adds, like he can feel my doubt. “No rehab center yet, but I’ve started individual therapy, and I’ve already asked the court to allow me into group sessions once I’m in custody.”

He shifts forward on the couch, elbows on his knees. “You were right about me and Heather.”

That catches me off guard.

“We’ve been over for a long time,” he says. “We just kept pretending. Playing house. Smiling for cameras, throwing parties, posting anniversary photos like it meant something.” His jaw tightens. “We were living in a fairytale that didn’t exist. And I dragged you into it.”

I don’t know what to say to that. I don’t know what to say to any of this.

I’m not ready to forgive him. Not completely. But maybe—just maybe—I can stop hating him enough to see if he means it this time.

Before I can open my mouth, he clears his throat.

“I hired a few private investigators to help me find Emily.”

My chest tightens. “You did what?”

“I figured if you weren’t going to look for her, I could at least try. I know what she meant to you. What she still means.”

I clench my jaw. “And?”

“They found her,” he says. “She’s staying off-grid, but I know where she’ll be this weekend.”

“You knew this whole time and led with a speech?”

“I had to say the hard things first,” he says. “But I’m saying this now: if you still love her, don’t waste another second.”

He stands and hands me a folded slip of paper, his eyes bloodshot, but clearer than I’ve seen in years.

“She’s your real fresh start,” he says. “Not your art. Not these shows. Her.”

And with that, he walks out the front door, leaving it open behind him.

Letting the choice be mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

Taylor's wedding weekend is at a lavish estate in The Hamptons, the kind of place where the air smells like roses and old money.

Ivy climbs the whitewashed columns of the main house, and a fountain gurgles beside a winding cobblestone drive.

Inside, the chandeliers gleam like starlight, and the air-conditioned halls echo with the hush of polished heels and practiced charm.

Everything smells faintly of gardenias and champagne.

There's a full orchestra tuning in the distance.

I've helped her plan every detail—from the signature cocktails to the custom linens—but there's one person on the guest list I never quite prepared for.

The best man.

Please don't be here early. Please don't be here early...

I heard Cole might skip the rehearsal entirely.

Just breeze in for the ceremony and vanish again like he always does.

So I braced myself—smoothed on foundation like armor, practiced my smile in the

mirror, laughed when I didn't mean it.

Tried to build a version of myself that wouldn't shatter at the sight of him.

The hallway leading to the rehearsal dinner is hushed, the scent of candle wax and white roses drifting in from the banquet room. My heels click too loud on the glossy floor. I tug at the hem of my dress, breathe through the nerves.

Then he steps into my path.

Tuxedo. Shirt slightly open at the collar. His hair tousled like he ran a hand through it in frustration—or on purpose. His jaw is sharp, his eyes sharpest of all.

He takes my breath away like it's still his to steal.

"Hello, Emily."

My heart stutters. "Mr. Dawson."

I try to move around him, keep walking, pretend I didn't just fall apart inside. But he shifts, not letting me pass—just a subtle shift of weight, like he always knew how to block my escape.

"I think we should still be on a first-name basis," he says gently, voice low and warm. "After all, I came here tonight to play a game with an old friend."

I raise a brow. "Truth or dare?"

"I was just stating the name of the game." He smiles, and the air tilts. "Nice to see you're still jumping to conclusions."

His presence feels too big for the hallway. His body's too close. And then he steps in—closer—and I swear my lungs forget how to work.

“Are you going to pretend you feel nothing?” he murmurs, eyes locked on mine.

“That you haven't thought about me... missed me?”

“Cole—”

“You don't have to lie.” His voice dips, a little rougher now. “I can see it all over you. The way you're looking at me. The way your hands won't stop trembling.”

I cross my arms, trying to still them. “This isn't the time.”

“I don't care about the time. Or the place. I just care about you.” He leans in, his breath brushing my cheek. “And whether you're brave enough to admit what you still want.”

My pulse is a snare drum. “We shouldn't be doing this here.”

“Then come with me.” His fingers skim mine. “Let's go somewhere private. Just you and me. Say the word, and I'll have you alone in sixty seconds.”

He's still watching me like he knows exactly what he's doing to my body. Like he's cataloging every reaction, every heartbeat.

“You're impossible,” I whisper.

His smile deepens—dark, familiar, devastating. “Only for you.”

And then—God—he pulls me into him.

No warning. No hesitation.

His mouth crashes into mine like no time has passed at all. I fall against him with a broken sound, my fingers curling into the lapels of his tux like I never let go. His arms wrap around me, sure and strong, one at my waist, the other cradling my head as if I might vanish if he lets go.

I kiss him like it's the first time and the last. Like every lonely night and half-formed prayer has led back here. Tears slide down my cheeks, but I don't even try to stop them.

He draws back just barely, lips brushing mine. "Why are you crying?"

"I thought you'd moved on," I breathe. "I thought you found someone else..."

He wipes a tear away with the pad of his thumb, slow and steady. "You don't honestly believe that."

"I saw pictures from your gallery opening," I whisper. "There was a blonde on your arm in every one."

"She was a fangirl." His eyes don't waver. "She wanted a picture. That's all."

"She looked at you like you hung the stars."

"Exactly," he murmurs. "Like a fangirl."

I hesitate. "You haven't... tried to move on?"

"I haven't even wanted to," he says. "No one else has ever been you."



A shaky breath escapes me. “I tried to date.”

“And you clearly failed.” His hand slides down to the small of my back, pulling me tighter. “You’re holding on to me like you never let go.”

“I didn’t sleep with anyone else,” I confess, the words slipping out like a secret too long buried.

He looks at me like he already knew.

“Did you?” I ask, barely breathing.

“No, Emily,” he says, steady and certain. “Anything else?”

My voice catches. There’s too much I want to say.

So I don’t say anything at all.

He kisses me again—slower this time, deeper, achingly tender. A kiss that wipes away the ache and the distance and the time.

I melt into him like coming home.

He presses me flush against his chest, like he’s trying to rewrite all the lost time with the press of his body and the heat of his mouth. His lips graze mine again, soft and breathless.

“I’ve missed you so fucking much,” he whispers. “You have no idea.”

And for the first time in forever, I feel whole again.

Like maybe this time, we'll finally stay.

EMILY

Cole's gallery sits on a bluff above the Gulf Shores, tucked into the white dunes like it was always meant to be there. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the crashing waves, flooding the space with light that dances across polished concrete floors and canvas after canvas of his work.

Today is the grand opening.

The salty air hums with voices. Tourists wander in from the beach, still smelling of sunscreen and sea breeze, tracking sand across the rug-lined walkways. Some linger over each piece, admiring the brushstrokes. Others move quickly, asking about prices, the artist, us .

His bestsellers—unsurprisingly—are the ones that feature us.

A silhouetted kiss on a rooftop. A garden wrapped in laughter. A girl looking out to sea, painted in soft blues and gold.

Each one feels like a secret we once whispered in the dark.

But when people ask about the inspiration, Cole just smiles. Quiet. Evasive.

“Just a muse,” he says. “A story that painted itself.”

He doesn't have to say more.

I'm here, leaning against the back wall, sipping lemonade and pretending not to watch him.

He still takes my breath away. Even in a paint-flecked white shirt and dark jeans, he's more captivating than anything on the walls.

"You're staring," he murmurs, suddenly at my side.

"Am not," I lie, cheeks flushing.

He leans in and kisses my temple. "You're in every frame, you know."

"Not every one," I say, pointing to a still life near the bar. "That's just fruit."

"I was thinking of you when I painted that too." He grins.

I roll my eyes.

As sunset spills amber light across the gallery, the crowd thins. Cole slides his hand into mine, fingers lacing like he never plans to let go.

"Ready to leave them wondering?" he asks.

"Always."

We step outside into the breeze, the ocean rising to meet us.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm not running from anything.

I'm walking toward something that's ours.

Something lasting.

Something true.

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

EMILY

It took countless late nights, more tears than I'd like to admit, and hours of brutal rewrites—but my first official song collection is finally finished.

And today... it's published.

Morning light spills through our kitchen windows, warm and golden. I'm barefoot on the tile floor, coffee in one hand, phone in the other, refreshing the link again and again just to make sure it's real.

It is.

My name— Emily O'Hara —is right there beneath the title in bold serif font. I scroll slowly, heart pounding, until I reach the cover.

It stops me cold.

It's a painting Cole did years ago—me on a hotel balcony, hair wild in the wind, notebook clutched to my chest, the Gulf of Mexico behind me like a promise. He's softened it into dusky purples and twilight blues. Around the edges, faint music notes swirl like smoke.

I didn't even know he remembered that moment.

Tears prick my eyes. I press a hand to my mouth.

Behind me, I hear his footsteps. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me close.

“You kept that painting,” I whisper.

“I never stopped looking at it,” he says into my hair. “You said you didn’t want to see the cover until today, so I picked the moment I knew was your beginning.”

I turn to face him, hands on his chest. He looks nervous. Hopeful.

“I love you, Emily,” he says, cupping my face. “Will you marry me?”

My breath catches. The tears spill anyway.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes. Always.”

He kisses me slow—like we have all the time in the world.

Like every promise we ever made is already coming true.

### Prologue

I swear I didn't mean to send him that letter.

Yes, I revised it fifty-seven times, spent eighteen days fretting over which envelope to buy, and paid for first-class postage, but I didn't really intend to drop it into a postal box.

It was supposed to be a simple "cathartic exercise" to heal old wounds. Yet, after penning letters to every person I'd ever hurt, I set aside several blank pages for him.

I wrote down all the ways I missed him and asked if he missed me, too. I told him that whenever I'm lying in bed at night—despite whatever guy may be sharing my sheets—I can't help but remember all the times he handled me better.

So much better.

He bent me over our high school bleachers after the home games. Made love to me in the backseat of an old-school Mustang. Devoured me in his father's office while the mistress cooked in the kitchen downstairs.

I penned rambling paragraphs of things I never wanted to forget and others that were better left unsaid. On page seven, my teardrops marred the lines so terribly that the sentence "I was so lonely," read like "I was so horny."

Then again, page eight featured nothing more than a drunken drawing of the time we were thousands of miles apart during one summer, so he'll probably interpret it the



proper way.

None of those things concern me, though.

The problem is on page eleven.

Sixteen lines down, in the second to last paragraph, is a sentence that unravels every lie I've ever told him. It's the one thing that will obliterate 'us' the moment he reads it.

The post office sent me a delivery confirmation minutes ago, so I'm standing outside our old meetup spot with gasoline and matches.

It's almost time.

I'm prepared to set our world on fire before my words can beat me to it...

One click I Wish I Would've Told You

SYNOPSIS

WARNING: DO NOT READ THE BLURB FOR THIS BOOK .

It's better if you go in BLIND , trust me...

But if you *\*have\** to know what you're getting yourself into, you can read the synopsis below.

She lied to me.

Not once, not twice.

This entire time.

To her, I was the "cliche Mr. Popular," the star quarterback who owned Friday nights.

To me, she was the goth geek in the bleachers, playing clarinet in the band.

Despite our differences, I climbed through her window every night.

Even when we started college.

She was the only person who truly understood me, and I couldn't stay away from her if I tried.

Our connection was hot and toxic, but we never dared to put out the flames.

We fell too hard, too fast...

And this wouldn't have been a problem except for the fact that I was already dating someone else.

Her sister .

**\*\*See? That's why you shouldn't have read this blurb and went in blind.**

Alas, this is an emotional ride of a romance with toxic undertones that will drive you to some unexpected places.

The author just felt like writing this story one day, so don't say you weren't warned about what you were getting into. \*

One click I Wish I Would've Told You