







# Monsters, Vows, and Growls (Monster Bride Romance #39)

**Author:** *Bella Blair*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Sometimes fate gives you a second chance

In a town built for monsters, two broken hearts get one more shot at forever.

Ella: I never wanted to be a successful businesswoman. I wanted to be Mrs. McCloud.

I wanted a house full of little Patricks, a garden, a porch, and a man who looked at me like I was his whole world.

But then Patrick broke my heart and vanished from my life like I never mattered at all.

Now I'm a successful chef, and the last thing I expect is to be lured into a mysterious new town for a business opportunity only to find him there.

The boy who left me is now a man with secrets in his eyes and a bear shifter curled beneath his skin. He says he wants a second chance.

Too bad I'm still not good at saying no.

PATRICK: After the accident, I thought pushing Ella away was the right thing to do. I wasn't whole anymore—not a man, not a shifter.

I built Cedar Hollow to prove I could still create something meaningful. But it's missing one thing: her.

When fate (and a scheming best friend) brings Ella back into my life, I know I only have one shot.

To win her trust. To earn her forgiveness.

And to prove that this time, I'm not going anywhere.

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

After I broke my neck, my life changed, maybe not in the dramatic way people might expect, but it was still a turning point. I had to learn to navigate the world differently, both physically and mentally.

During those long months of recovery, I had to let go of parts of myself I had always before counted on to carry me through. The driven competitor, singularly focused on the next win. The proud alpha, determined to provide and protect. The stubborn man, resistant to showing any weakness.

Lying in that hospital bed, I was forced to be still.

To accept help. To let others see me at my lowest point.

It was humbling and terrifying, especially in the beginning.

Thorne, my inner bear, had gone dead silent after the accident.

For months. My whole life, I'd always felt him just under the surface—grumbling, pacing, protective.

But when I was laid up in a hospital bed, tubes in my arm and pain meds dulling my instincts, he'd retreated.

I thought I'd lost him, too. It wasn't until one night, somewhere between physical therapy hell and my fifth meltdown, that he came back.

Get up, he'd growled . You're not dead. You're just pissed about the detour.

It was a transformative moment; too bad it came a couple of months too late.

By then, I had lost the most important thing to me, and stubbornly, I refused to ask for her forgiveness.

I did not want to cripple her life with well, a cripple.

Instead, I walked away, vowing to refocus my life and find a new purpose, a way to channel my energy and ambition into something meaningful.

A purpose I found, years later, in Cedar Hollow.

Today, as I walked through the bustling construction site, filled with pride, I couldn't help but smile at the progress we'd made.

The community center was nearly complete, its large windows reflecting the surrounding forest. Homes in various stages of construction dotted the landscape, each one designed to blend seamlessly with the natural environment.

I paused to chat with a few of the workers, their laughter and easy camaraderie a testament to the inclusive atmosphere we'd cultivated. This was more than just a housing development; it was a safe haven for those who often felt like outsiders in the human world.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down to see a message from Carol.

Carol

Don't forget, big meeting at 2 pm. Wear that blue button-down I got you for Christmas. It brings out your eyes.

Me: Yes, Mother!

I chuckled, shaking my head at her not-so-subtle style advice. Carol was my best friend, my rock through everything, always ready with a sarcastic quip or a shoulder to lean on. She saved my life. I don't know what I would've done without her friendship.

Unfortunately, I had to drive into the city for this meeting, something I avoided like the plague.

Moodily, I made my way to the office trailer that served as our temporary headquarters to grab my keys.

I couldn't shake the feeling that Carol was up to something. Her idea to open a top-notch restaurant in Cedar Hollow was a good one, but she was being unusually insistent about it. She'd even taken me to a place called Salt her irreverent humor had been a welcome respite from the pitying looks and awkward silences I'd grown accustomed to. She never treated me differently, never acted like I was broken or fragile. To her, I was still just Patrick, her goofy, overprotective best friend. Even Thorne looked forward to her visits—though he'd never admit it. She brought donuts and didn't flinch when he snarled through me.

That earned her permanent honorary pack status in his eyes.

The drive into the city was always a bit jarring, the dense trees giving way to towering skyscrapers and congested streets.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, feeling out of place amidst the chaos.

Give me the tranquility of the forest any day.

Thorne growled low in my chest. Too many walls.

Too much noise. No escape routes. This place is a trap.

For some reason, that made me think of my dead football career and my brother Gabe.

Both of our dreams had been that one day we would be the Football Brothers.

Two brothers making it into the big league, getting rich by doing what we loved, and chasing women.

Well, at least the dream came true for one of us.

I didn't know how many times I had bemoaned the loss of my football career over the years. Too many to count. How many years had I wasted, not begrudging Gabe's football career, but feeling envious of it? Envious of the dream that died after that fateful game.

But today, driving into the city and realizing that cities like this would have been my future, not wild rivers, forests, and mountains, it struck me differently.

I slowed the truck to take in the cement jungle spread out ahead of me and, for the first time, really thought about it.

Really considered how I would have never known the joy of walking or running down an overgrown path, or waking up in the morning to the smell of cedars and rain instead of smog.

I probably wouldn't have known what I was missing, but now, knowing the choices, I realized that I didn't want Gabe's life anymore.

I liked mine. I liked building something different, being out in nature.

I pulled up inside a dreary parking garage, drove up all the way to the top floor to find a spot, and gave thanks that I was the lucky one.

The meeting Carol had set up with Chef E was set to start in ten minutes.

I took the elevator down the parking garage and walked the two blocks to the bistro where we'd agreed to meet.

I had no idea why Carol was being this cryptic about the whole thing.

Chef E ? Had this not been Carol, I would have wondered if I was being set up for a kidnapping.

I didn't have a physical description; I didn't even know if Chef E was a man or a woman.

I scanned over the large crowd inside the bistro, having no clue what or who I was looking for, when a set of wild blond curls caught my attention and set my heart into jackhammer mode.

I hadn't seen Ella in ten years, but this was unmistakably her.

She didn't look like she had changed one bit.

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the sight of her.

Ella was just as beautiful as I remembered; her wild, untamable, golden curls framed her delicate face, falling over green eyes that sparkled with the same fierce intelligence and determination that had first drawn me to her all those years ago.



She was dressed smartly in a white blouse, keeping just the right balance between business and sexy.

She was busy, scrunching up her nose while scrutinizing her phone as if it were giving her a state exam.

I stood ramrod still. She hadn't noticed me yet, giving me a chance to fully take her in.

To fully experience the pain of losing her all over again.

Years ago, when I pushed her out of my life, I hadn't realized how bad it would hurt.

For a few months, it had been okay. My mind had refused to acknowledge that she was really gone.

But when it finally did, it had hit me with an intensity that had robbed me of my breath. Kind of like right now.

Ah, hell no! I told you it was a trap. Abort, abort, abort! Thorne reared inside me so hard, I nearly lost my footing.

As if sensing my gaze, she turned. Our eyes locked across the crowded bistro.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still, and the noise of the restaurant faded away until it was just the two of us.

I saw the flicker of surprise in her expression, followed by a myriad of emotions I couldn't quite decipher, followed by one lone escaping tear.

Impatiently and with an annoyed huff, she wiped it away.

She got up so abruptly, the chair scraped across the floor, but she didn't even notice it. Her hand flew to her chest like she was trying to keep her heart inside. Her head shook slightly from left to right as if in denial of who she was seeing. She looked ready to flee.

That realization got me into motion. I strode forward, ignoring the slight limp that was now a permanent part of my life, to stop her from running away.

"Ella," I said when I was close enough to box her in.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

He wasn't exactly late. Not by normal standards.

By normal standards, it was still two minutes before two o'clock.

But by mine, he was late, which set my inner time freak off.

I liked to be at least ten minutes early and, when making plans, always took into account several possibilities of how my arrival could be delayed.

Yes, even on foot in the city. A broken heel, a car accident that attracted a group of onlookers I would have to fight my way through, a ruined blouse from a bird dropping...

You name the scenario, my mind has been through it.

I hated meetings for this exact reason. It was only a matter of seconds before my inner time freak would trigger my anxieties.

Meetings were the culmination of everything I couldn't control.

Other people's schedules. Other people's attention spans.

Other people's loose, sloppy interpretation of time, as if two o'clock were a vague suggestion and not a contractual obligation.

I didn't know why it stressed me out so much; it was just a simple business meeting, not a set time for an open-heart surgery, but ever since...

nope, I wasn't going to go there again. I didn't even know why Pat entered my mind.

I had successfully pushed him from any real estate in my brain for...

I checked my phone again, one fifty-nine, so exactly seven hours.

Ever since I woke up this morning from that disturbing dream.

Ten years. Ten years had gone by since he dumped me. We were in high school, for crying out loud. It wasn't like he left me standing at the altar. We were seventeen. It had been a stupid high school crush. Nothing more!

Right, Ella, which is exactly why you haven't given another man the time of the day, my inner bitch chimed in, and I told her to take a walk.

In those ten years, I managed to build a life for myself.

A successful life. I owned two restaurants outright.

Salt I impatiently wiped at it and stood up, fanning the flames of anger that flared inside me.

He didn't have any right to make me feel this way any longer.

None! We were both adults now. Adults with our own lives.

Well, at least I had one, and I assumed he did, too, standing there in an expensive business suit.

I mentally rambled until my fight-or-flight instinct kicked in and decided on flight.

Forget about the business meeting, he was late anyway.

I grabbed my stuff, set on making a beeline out of the bistro.

But before I was able to make a clean escape, he positioned himself right in front of me.

"Hi, Ella?"

It wasn't really a question of whether it was really me; it sounded more as if he was hoping I had miraculously sprouted a twin sister.

"Uhm, hey, Pat—rick." I gulped out, refusing to call him by the nickname I gave him so many years ago, hoping it would help my stupid heart distinguish between now and then. It didn't seem to work, though, because the traitorous organ was beating pretty heavily in my chest.

His eyes softened, and a flicker of pain crossed his features before he schooled them into a neutral expression. "It's been a long time," he said.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. Ten years, and yet standing here in front of him, it felt like no time had passed at all. The same magnetic pull was there; the same electric charge sizzled in the air between us. I shook my head, trying to clear the memories that threatened to overwhelm me.

"What are you doing here?" I managed to ask, my voice sounding strained even to my own ears.

He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture so familiar it made my chest ache. "I'm here for a business meeting. Carol set it up."

My eyes widened. Carol. Of course.

"Carol," I heard myself echo, and watched the same realization that was shooting through me reflect in his expression. She set this up. Set us up. I felt a sudden flash of betrayal, followed by a wave of confusion. Why would she do this? Why now, after all these years?

"Ella, I... I didn't know you'd be here. If I had..." He trailed off, and I felt a sudden surge of anger. If he had, then what? He would have avoided me? Pretended I didn't exist, like he had for the past decade? I straightened my spine, lifting my chin defiantly.

"Well, I'm here. And apparently, we have a meeting to attend." I thanked my inner strength for making me sound far more confident than I felt. I gestured towards the table where I had sat waiting a few short minutes ago.

Patrick hesitated, looking like he wanted to say something more, but then he nodded. "After you," he agreed in a tight voice.

I brushed past him, ignoring the way my skin tingled at the brief contact, and retook my seat. He waited until I was settled before he sat down across from me, his large frame making the bistro chair look impossibly small.

For a moment, we just stared at each other, a decade's worth of unspoken words hung heavily in the air between us.

I tried to reconcile the man in front of me with the boy I had loved so fiercely, so completely, all those years ago.

He was different now—broader, more imposing, with a gravitas that spoke of hard-earned life lessons.

But his eyes, those whiskey-colored eyes that had always seen straight into my soul, they were the same.

"So," I began, needing to break the suffocating silence, "Carol mentioned you were looking to open a restaurant in Cedar Hollow." Once again, I was thankful that at least my voice didn't suffer from sitting across from Patrick. It was, however, the only part of me that didn't tremble.

Patrick nodded, seeming grateful to keep this all business.

"Yes, it's ready, too. Mostly. It's just waiting for the right owner," he said, keeping his eyes trained on me.

Ten years ago, I had gotten lost in those eyes.

I don't think I ever found myself again.

I had reinvented myself, become a successful businesswoman, but the girl who loved this man so long ago had never truly moved on.

As I stared at him now, it felt like I was still trapped in there, unable to come out.

I wanted to scream at him: Why? How could you do this to me? To us? That question had been driving me crazy for years. Why? Not getting an answer for it had doubled my OCD. But I had my pride, too, and I would not beg this man now, ten years later, for an answer. I would not!

This was a business deal, plain and simple.

To be honest, every chef in this city was clambering to get a spot in Cedar Hollow.

Not because of the money. No, this was strictly a matter of prestige.

Being able to brag that I had a restaurant in Cedar Hollow would triple my credibility in every food magazine that still tried to pretend that monsters didn't eat foie gras.

It wasn't about profit—although that too would triple from the other restaurants—it was about the bragging rights that came with it.

I had fought tooth and nail to get where I was, to prove that a human chef could cater to the supernatural palate just as well, if not better, than any shifter or vampire chef out there.

This was my chance to solidify my reputation once and for all.

I took a deep breath, pushing down the swirl of emotions threatening to overwhelm me, and focused on the task at hand. "Tell me more about your vision for the restaurant. What kind of cuisine are you looking for? What atmosphere do you want to create?"

Patrick leaned forward, his eyes sparking with excitement.

"I want it to be a place where the community can gather, where they can feel at home.

A mix of comfort food and elevated dishes using local, seasonal ingredients.

Lots of game, of course, but also vegetarian options.

And a bar with craft cocktails and local beers. "

I liked the sound of it. His vision fit with mine, but that didn't mean I actually wanted to do it.



Cedar Hollow was beautiful, sure. Idyllic, even.

And as I said, it would put me on the map, career-wise.

But I wasn't sure if it was me. Not anymore.

I'd worked hard to build my life inside a bustling city, full of lights and people, filled with noise and smog.

Not on pine-scented breezes, beautiful creeks, idyllic views, and neighbors who turned into bears on the weekends.

Still... the idea wouldn't leave me alone. Like a scab that needed to be picked at.

Even if it was two-minutes-late Patrick Mc-fucking-Cloud—golden boy of shifter suburbia— who I had to deal with. I mentally shook myself. No. I couldn't let old feelings cloud my judgment. This was business, and I needed to treat it as such.

"It sounds like you have a clear vision," I said, still proud of my steady voice. "But I'll need more details. What's the square footage? The seating capacity? Have you thought about the kitchen layout and equipment needs?"

Patrick blinked, seemingly taken aback by my rapid-fire questions. "I, uh. It's ready, mostly. I kept it as a shell building. We could go over there together, if you'd like. Then you can decide what kind of equipment you need and furniture."

I hesitated. The thought of being alone with him, walking through a shell building, planning a future endeavor, felt dangerous. Too intimate. But this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I couldn't let my personal history with Patrick stand in the way of my professional goals.

"That would be helpful." I tried hard to sound businesslike.

The waitress arrived. "What can I get you?"

"I think we're good," I told her, more coldly than I usually would, but Patrick had me all befuddled. "Ready?" I turned to him. "I can clear my schedule for tomorrow afternoon, if that works for you."

Patrick nodded, and a small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Tomorrow works great. I'll text you the address."

We finalized a few more details on the way out of the bistro.

Our conversation went more smoothly now that we had a clear purpose.

But underneath the professional veneer, I still felt the undercurrent of tension, the weight of all the things left unsaid.

Outside, just as we were about to go off in different directions, Patrick's hand brushed mine, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm.

I jerked back, startled by the intensity of the sensation.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with a mix of longing and regret.

"Ella, I..." He paused, seeming to search for the right words.

Whatever he was about to say, no matter how much the question Why ? still burned a hole in my stomach, I didn't want to hear it. "This is just business, Patrick. Business between two adults. Nothing else."

"Right," he nodded with a hint of sadness in his eyes, the same eyes in which I could still see my younger, teenage self.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

The few minutes of sleep I managed to get were filled with wild and vivid dreams that left me drenched every time I woke up. The last one, around two in the morning, was the worst of them all. It was a slideshow of Ella and me, of our nearly four years as high school sweethearts.

Carol and I had been friends since we were babies.

Our moms were best friends, had been since their childhood.

So, Carol and I grew up like cousins or brother and sister.

We spent vacations and holidays together and met up at least once or twice a week the rest of the time.

We went to different grammar and middle schools, and it was sometime over those eight years that Carol met Ella, and they became best friends.

I heard Ella's name mentioned countless times, but as life would have it, I didn't meet her until the first day of high school. In our small town, there was only one.

The moment I finally did meet Ella, I knew she was the one . People laughed at that. They called it puppy love, said we were fourteen, that there was no way I could know that one day I would marry her. But I knew. Thorne, my inner bear... not so much.

He took one look at her, narrowed his big, fuzzy, judgmental eyes, and muttered something like, You imprinted on a girl who smells like bubblegum ?

I ignored him because, at his words, my stomach did something I was pretty sure wasn't medically normal. He didn't let up, though. No fur, no claws, smells like fruit snacks and nervous energy, he grumbled . We're not doing this.

But I was already doing it. I was all in. Thorne growled something about poor decision-making and went quiet—for a few hours. Then he came back with opinions. So many opinions. He hasn't shut up since.

I mostly ignored him and his barbs. He and Ella never officially met.

She knew I was a bear shifter; it wasn't a secret, but there was no reason for Thorne to come out when Ella and I were alone.

Especially since I got the impression that she was nervous about my other side , as she called it.

So when we were together, we pretended to be normal teenagers, doing normal teenage things.

An arrangement that suited all three of us just fine.

I took a long, cold shower— we're doing that again?

Thorne growled—to chase the ghosts of my dreams off.

Then I brewed a pot of coffee and went into my office, knowing that sleep wouldn't come again tonight, or maybe I was turning it away, trepidatious of what else I might dream of.

I turned on the computer and watched four screens come to life.

The first one showed me where I had left off on drawing the newest model house to be added to Cedar Hollow.

A two-story, five-bedroom, four-bathroom house, larger than the others, meant for a big family.

Something bothered me about it. I didn't like the way the entrance looked.

I lost myself in my work, erasing and drawing until the entire building was enclosed by a wrap-around porch.

There. When I reached for my coffee cup to take another sip and found it empty, I realized that it was already four in the morning.

I must have zonked out in front of the screen, like I often did when a project pulled me in.

And this one had. I realized that, at some point, I added a gas fireplace.

One built right into the wall between the master bed and bathroom.

Can you imagine a fireplace right there ?

Ella's voice echoed in my head. The memory was like a dagger stabbing my heart. She had just turned eighteen—six months after me—and we celebrated it by losing our virginities to each other. We had always known the day would come; we had planned for it. I booked a hotel room, and we told our parents we were sleeping over at Carol's, who was fully onboard with our plan.

It was the most magical night of my life.

The hotel room had a fireplace in the bedroom, but at some point, in the middle of the night, Ella and I took a bath, and she pointed at the wall between the two rooms and said, Can you imagine a fireplace right there ?

And now I had just drawn one into the plans for a house. Shit, I was losing it. You think ? Thorne muttered inside me, his voice thick with disdain and something else I didn't want to name . Next thing you know, we'll be picking throw pillows and journaling about closure .

I rubbed a hand down my face.

You're not subtle, by the way , he went on. You built her a fireplace. A fireplace. In a house you designed before sunrise. Might as well tattoo her name across the blueprints and howl about it.

I didn't answer him. Mostly because he wasn't wrong.

You ran into her yesterday , he added, his voice quieting some. And we haven't slept since. That's not nothing , Patrick .

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the chair, the weight of memories pressing down on me like a second skin. No. It wasn't nothing . But Thorne was in one of his moods, and I didn't feel up to analyzing my feelings right then, so I let it go.

A quick glimpse at the clock told me it was nearing five; well, okay, it was four fifteen in the morning. I decided I had given Carol enough time to sleep like a baby after the stunt she pulled on me yesterday, and I picked up my phone.

"Hmm, hello?" A sleepy voice answered.

I didn't waste time. "Rise and shine, puppet master. I figured if I'm awake replaying

the trauma you inflicted on me, the least you can do is suffer with me.”

There was a beat of silence. Then a long sigh. “Patrick, it’s four-fifteen in the morning.”

“Exactly. You should be asleep. Like I would be, if I hadn’t spent the night designing a damn house based on a girl I haven’t seen in ten years because you decided to play matchmaker-slash-developer-slash-life meddler.”

She groaned. “Okay, first of all: rude. Second, you make it sound like I tricked you into a murder-suicide pact. You’re opening a restaurant. Not marrying her.”

“You set me up.”

“I arranged a meeting,” she said calmly. “That you agreed to.”

“You didn’t tell me it was with Ella.”

“And would you have gone if I had?”

I wasn’t sure how to reply to that one. Carol always had a way of twisting words to make me feel like the villain. Which was annoying.

She didn’t fill the silence. She never did. She just waited until I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “It’s not your place to get involved in my life like this.”

“The hell it isn’t.” Her voice sharpened, as any trace of sleepy haze vanished like mist. “Patrick, I’ve been your best friend since before you had teeth. Don’t pull the boundaries card with me now.”

“Carol—”



“No. You listen.” She was fully awake now, and I could hear her sitting up in bed, probably pushing her tangled curls out of her face like she always did when she was gearing up to deliver a verbal spanking.

“Thorne has been a pain in the ass for years. Grouchy. Snappy. Restless. And don’t pretend you don’t know why. ”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

“You pushed her away,” she said. “And since then, you haven’t had a real relationship.

You haven’t let anyone get close. You’ve buried yourself in Cedar Hollow like it’s a mission from God, and sure, it’s a beautiful town.

You’ve done something amazing. But you’re building a place for families, Patrick.

Families . Not single shifter hermits with complicated emotional baggage. ”

Thorne let out a low snort inside me. That’s rich, coming from the woman who can’t commit .

I ignored him.

“I’m not saying you need to marry her,” Carol continued, her tone a little softer now. “But you deserve a family, too. You deserve to be happy.”

“You don’t know what’s best for me.”

“No,” she said. “But I know what happened the last time I didn’t interfere in your life. After the injury. When you needed someone to push you, and I didn’t. I let you

spiral.”

“That was different?—”

“It wasn’t.” Her voice cracked. “I’ve been blessed with two best friends.

And both of you are miserable. Ella pretends she’s fine, and you act like you’re married to your floor plans.

I’m not saying you have to fix it, Patrick; I’m not even saying you can.

But I am saying you owe it to both of you to try. ”

I swallowed hard, and the silence turned thick between us.

“I’ll meet with her,” I muttered.

Carol sighed. “Don’t do it for me. Do it because the bear inside you hasn’t shut up since she walked back into your life.”

There was a long pause, and then?—

She’s got some nerve , Thorne grumbled, grudging admiration coloring his tone. She's still my favorite, though .

I rolled my eyes. “You say that about everyone who feeds you.”

She’s the only one who gets away with bossing you around , he replied, and then a bit quieter, besides, she’s not wrong.

I didn’t respond to that.

Instead, I wished Carol a good morning, rest of the night , whatever, then stared at the empty coffee mug in my hand and wondered how I'd gotten here—sleep-deprived, haunted by memories I hadn't thought about in years, and having a heart-to-heart with the grumpy creature living in my chest.

I pulled my phone closer, opened my messages, and stared at Ella's name, still sitting in my contacts like it belonged.

I hadn't texted her since high school. Even yesterday's meeting had been a Carol-mediated ambush with business folders and not-so-subtle matchmaking tension. With a heavy sigh, I began typing:

Let me know when you're free to look at the site.

I stared at it.

Deleted it.

Rewrote it.

The build is ready for a walk-through if you're still interested. Let me know what works.

Still too stiff.

I deleted it again.

I can meet you in Cedar Hollow this week if you want to go over the layout in person.

Better.

I stared at the blinking cursor, thumb hovering over send.

Oh my God , Thorne groaned. Just send it. You're not proposing. You're scheduling a meeting. You used to fight wild boars without flinching, and now you're afraid of punctuation.

"I'm trying to be professional," I muttered.

You're trying not to feel anything , he said. Big difference .

I hit send before I could second-guess myself again. The message whooshed away.

Too late now.

I tossed the phone on the desk and pushed away from the computer, heart thudding harder than it should have been for a simple text. Thorne was quiet for once—watchful, like he was bracing for something.

I was, too, I just wasn't sure what I was bracing for.

But I had a feeling Ella Lambert was going to tear through whatever walls I had up like she'd never even left.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

I ignored the ding of a message. My hands were elbow deep in yeast dough, and sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

It was four-thirty in the morning, but I hadn't slept a wink.

At three, I finally gave up and drove to Salt he should know what I was planning.

"I might have an opportunity to open another location in Cedar Hollow," I filled him in.

"Oh, wow!" His face lit up. He was instantly aware of the opportunity offered to me and, by extension, to him.

Cedar Hollow was an exclusive shifter community; nobody who wasn't family was even allowed to visit.

The town had everything—boutiques, grocery stores, pharmacies, you name it.

Opening a restaurant there would be an honor, especially for a non-shifter.

New people would flock in droves to my other restaurants just because they were affiliated with Cedar Hollow.

And like I said yesterday, magazines like Cuisine Chef would be sure to want an interview, maybe even do a feature.

There was no way I was going to let Patrick ruin this for me. Damn him anyway.

"Damn, boss, I'm proud of you." Evan moved in like he was going to give me a hug, but I evaded him with an apologetic smile, pointing at my floury apron and hands.

I quickly made a beeline to the bathroom to get washed up.

I was a mess. My eyes were glassy, my lips turned into a perpetual frown, flour graced my hair and my face, and of course, there were the undereye circles from lack of sleep.

Great, you're a mess, Ella , I congratulated myself.

I sighed, because I couldn't go meet Patrick looking like this.

I needed to get back to my apartment, take a shower, wash my hair, and put on layers upon layers of makeup.

I checked my phone and saw a message from Patrick, or Pats, according to my high-school-era contact info, flanked by one of the last pictures I took of him when he was eighteen.

My heart even did that stupid little lurch it used to do when I got a message from him.

Over the years, he moved down my contact list far enough that it was no longer a constant reminder of what I had lost, of how deeply he had hurt me, but one look was enough to bring it all back.

The love and the joy, the pain and the heartbreak.

How many months had I sat there holding my phone—not this one, an older version—in my hand, hoping and wishing for it to ring?

I skipped by the message he just sent, ignoring it for now, and moved up. The last ones were all from me.

Can we talk?

I miss you.

Please call me

I don't understand

One from Patrick.

Pats

It's over Ells

Ells , I sighed. That's who we had been to each other, Pats and Ells.

Yeah, yeah, I know, stupid Hallmark and all that.

But we liked it. In his last message, he had called me Ells .

Just like we always had. New tears filled my vision, and I wiped at them impatiently.

How could he still do this? How could he still hurt me after all these years?

Pats

It's better this way, trust me

Please, let's just talk about this

Shit, I wiped my eyes again. You're a grown woman. An adult. He doesn't get to hurt you anymore, Ella ! I pep-talked myself before I finally scrolled to his newest message.

Pats

I can meet you at Cedar Hollow this week if you want to go over the layout in person.

I stared at the message like it might explain itself if I glared hard enough. What was he talking about?

If I want to go over the layout in person...

Like we didn't already have a meeting planned today.

Like he hadn't ambushed me yesterday under the guise of a business deal.

Like my heart wasn't already twisted up in knots because of the look in his eyes when we stood across that table pretending to be strangers.

I scoffed out loud. "Pats, you idiot."

I typed.

You forgot our meeting today? Seriously?

But I deleted it. It sounded too obvious that I cared.

Then I tried.



We already have plans, remember?

I deleted that, too, tapping my nails against my teeth, until eventually, I settled on.

Still planning to be there today. Let me know if that still works for you. I need the address too.

It was neutral. Cool. The kind of thing you'd send to a contractor or a business contact. Not your first love, who once told you your laugh could wake the dead—and that he liked it better than silence.

I hit send before I could regret it, then dropped the phone face-down on the bathroom counter like that might stop the emotional whiplash.

Behind me, the mirror didn't lie. I still looked like someone who'd seen a ghost. I began taking my clothes off and nearly jumped out of my skin when the phone dinged with an incoming text.

Pats

I'll be there. Take the road past the main gate—gravel path, third turnoff. You'll see the sign. Can't miss it. No need to dress up.

I stared at the screen, towel clutched in one hand, heart thudding.

You don't need to dress up ?

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Did he think I was dressing up for him ? That I was still the girl who used to steal his hoodies and pretend not to care that her mascara ran when she cried? Because I

wasn't. Not anymore. And yet... he still managed to hit a nerve I didn't know was exposed.

I wanted to reply with.

It's a business meeting, not a date.

I wasn't.

You don't get to say things like that anymore.

Instead I simply typed.

What time?

There, totally business. I turned on the shower because the water took forever in this building to heat up, especially in the winter and spring, oh, and the fall. In the summer, it was even harder to get it cold. Okay, I was rambling again.

The phone dinged.

Pats

—I really needed to change his name:

How about 1pm?

Perfect

Good, no need to further this conversation. I dropped the towel and was just about to finally step into the shower when the phone dinged again. Now what?

Pats

Bring a jacket. It's colder out at the site than in town

I stared at it. That was it. No emoji. No extra punctuation. Just... thoughtful?

I stood there, the cold slowly settling in, giving me goosebumps, just as steam was beginning to rise from the shower, warming the room.

But the cold inside me only grew. He remembered how I always underestimated the temperatures.

How I used to forget jackets and pretend I wasn't freezing.

How I used to shiver against him on purpose, just to have an excuse to be close.

I reminded myself that I wasn't that girl anymore.

I wasn't.

But that didn't stop me from standing there like a fool, heart stuttering, wondering if he'd typed that last message and thought of those moments too.

I didn't reply.

What would I even say?

Instead, I stepped into the shower and let the water wash over me—hot, cleansing, and utterly useless against the way Patrick McCloud could still get under my skin without even trying.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

Bring a jacket. It's colder out at the site than in town ?

Why the hell had I typed this last part? Because she would always steal your jacket , Thorne piped up. This way, you won't feel obligated to let her do so again. Just a precaution .

For the first time, he and I finally agreed on something concerning the feminine part of the world's population.

Still, the way I had just typed those words bothered me more than I was willing to admit.

Just like I wasn't willing to admit that I missed Ella.

Had been missing her for the last ten years.

Even though I was the one who pushed her away, I had loved her.

She was my mate. I knew when I ended things between us that I would never have a family, but I wanted that for her.

We had talked about it, dreamed about it.

Before... before the damn accident that took everything.

My dream of a football career and Ella. I was supposed to make big money, like my brother Gabe, right out of the gate.

Colleges had been recruiting me, offering scholarships and money, enough of it to buy a house, marry Ella, and start a family.

But that dream ended for me with a broken neck.

I suppose I should have been grateful that I didn't die that day, but it was hard to be grateful for something that ended your life in a different way.

Suddenly, I was looking at months and months of painful rehabilitation instead of my happily ever after.

This wasn't what Ella had signed up for when she said yes after I popped the question, holding out my mom's wedding ring.

I ended things before she could. Before she had a chance to realize what it really meant to bind herself to a cripple.

Of course, Ella hadn't agreed with that assessment. I love you, Pats, no matter what , she'd cried. I'm sure she meant it; she just didn't know what she was saying. How could she? She wasn't the broken one.

At that time, I hadn't known if I would be wheelchair bound for the rest of my life or if, best-case scenario, according to my therapists, I might one day use crutches. Two years later, I needed neither, but that's probably only thanks to my bear shifter genes.

You're welcome , Thorne piped up, ever the thorn in my side. But it wasn't just genes.

It took two years and hard work to get there.

It took pain, dedication, and suffering.

None of which I would have wanted Ella to see.

It was bad enough that Carol refused to leave my side.

For her, though, it was easier; my broken body didn't represent her broken dreams. Even then, she could work from wherever she wanted.

She started writing stupid love stories on those short story apps and was making good money by our junior year of high school.

She'd planned to pursue an English degree after graduation, but she was already making a hundred grand a year by then.

So instead of college, she just kept plugging away at her keyboard, moving up from pay-by-chapter to full-blown books and making more money than she knew what to do with.

I never asked about Ella. Never looked her up.

And Carol, realizing I wasn't ever going to be in the mood to talk about my ex-fiancée, never mentioned her again either.

It was easier for me to assume Ella had moved on, that I had done the right thing by freeing her.

I told myself she went to college, met her future husband, and started the family we had dreamed of.

I'm not going to lie, once I was on my feet again—no pun intended—I was tempted to look her up.

To call her. But I didn't. It was one of the few times Thorne and I agreed about Ella.

Let her live her life. She's probably happy , he said, and I believed him because I wanted to.

Because I had created this fantasy life for her in my mind, and I wasn't going to mess it up for her.

She was different than me. She wasn't a shifter.

She didn't mate for life. She was a regular human, and humans had the capability to move on.

Besides, I was sure that if something bad had happened to Ella, Carol would have told me.

I still didn't know if Ella was married with a family or not.

I didn't see a ring on her finger, and yes, I looked.

I knew that didn't mean she wasn't, but my gut was telling me she was as alone as I was.

Why else would Carol have tried to set us up again?

Carol wasn't cruel like that. As mad as I was at her right now, deep down I knew that she only had my best interests at heart, just like I did for her.

It was ironic that, as a romance writer, she hadn't found any romance herself, but whenever I brought that subject up, she waved me off.

As much as she liked to pry into my life, I wasn't allowed in her romantasies.

I gathered my courage one time and asked her, filled with trepidation, if she had feelings for me, and that was why she wouldn't find a steady boyfriend.

I was relieved when she laughed in my face and told me no, that I was like a little brother to her, nothing else.

She did, however, have a faraway look in her eyes, like she was in love with someone she couldn't have, but I figured I had already spent all my goodwill for the day and didn't dig any deeper.

My curiosity won out, and I typed Ella's name into the Google search engine. I'd been to her restaurant, so I wasn't all that surprised to see several mentions of her.

I picked the most recent, a write-up in Forbes Food , of all places, and stared at the screen, scrolling through the article with a hand half-curved into a fist on the desk.

Front and center: Ella Lambert, the woman behind Salt & Flame .

She'd gone to ICE in New York. Not the flashiest culinary school, but the kind of place that produced real chefs—the ones who could handle a 14-hour shift on their feet, break down a whole animal, and still plate risotto that made grown critics cry.

She started out working under some hotshot celebrity chef in Brooklyn, then moved upstate to open Salt & Flame in our hometown, helping it grow. Pride for her settled in my chest.

Her original menu had been pure fine dining.

Tasting menus. Smoke domes. Foams. Caviar on things that didn't need caviar.



Critics ate it up, but locals, not so much.

She was close to losing the restaurant when she turned her focus and simplified the menu.

Instead of lobster and caviar, she leaned into seasonal comfort food.

Venison stew with roasted wild onions. Cast iron mac and cheese with three cheeses and a crust of herbed breadcrumbs.

Local trout with brown butter. Stuff people at home would actually eat—and still talk about for weeks.

She also owned another restaurant, this one in the city, Ash & Velvet .

Thorne piped up, The food there was really good . It was. Good enough to make me want to offer her the opportunity to open a third location here. I still wanted that. Despite knowing who I was inviting back into my life. Or maybe because of it?

Well, keep sitting here thinking, and the decision will be taken from you.

If my memory serves, Sparkles hates it when you're late , Thorne reminded me.

Only he and I knew the nickname he'd given her, and only I knew that Thorne had a soft spot for her despite his grouchiness.

Which he had just proven, again. Had he not reminded me, I would have been late.

As it was, I was Ella-Late, a nickname I had given her obsession with punctuality. In her world, anybody who wasn't ten minutes early was late.

"Patrick," she greeted me, standing in front of the restaurant shell. It kind of hurt, hearing her call me by my full name. Just as much as seeing her standing there did, like a time warp had sucked me in and spat me out ten years ago. She was still breathtakingly beautiful.

"Ella," I moved to embrace her, but she stepped to the side.

"Business, remember?"

"We've known each other for over fourteen years, I think a hug would be even business appropriate," I replied.

She arched an eyebrow in the way only she could, a way that made Thorne recoil inside me. I was sure that was the real reason he pretended not to like her: he was afraid of her.

She raised a hand, "I'd rather not."

Yeah, that hurt. I forced a smile to my lips and moved to unlock the door. "Well, come on in, then, and tell me what you think."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

God, I hated seeing him. It hurt like hundreds of little pushpins being stabbed into my heart.

Watching him drive up in that big, show-off truck of his and climbing out...

it had been a special, torturous kind of déjà vu.

The truck was different. Patrick was different.

He had filled out. He wasn't fat, but he looked like a man now, not like the boy I remembered. Just like his brother Gabe—whom I enjoyed watching playing football on TV—Patrick McCloud had grown into the kind of man women daydreamed about—or like one of those men Carol liked to write about. Broad shoulders that stretched the limits of his flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up over forearms corded with muscle, jeans faded in the way that came from actual work, not fashion. His hair was longer than I remembered, brushing the back of his neck in soft, dark waves he clearly hadn't bothered to style.

Still running his hand through it like it might hold answers, I noticed. It didn't. It only made it worse.

And then there were his eyes. Whiskey brown, just like they'd always been. A little tired now, maybe. A little guarded. But still impossibly warm. Still the same eyes that once looked at me like I eclipsed every sunrise he'd ever seen.

My heart did that stupid thing again. The lurch.

The flutter. The traitorous ache. I told it to shut up.

Patrick opened the door, turned back to me, and God help me, flashed that damn smile at me.

The one that showed off the dimple on his left cheek, the one that still made my knees go weak.

And just like that, I felt myself unraveling all over again.

"What do you think?" Patrick's voice penetrated my mind enough to help me call up my game face again. Business. Right.

I stepped past him into the shell of the restaurant, brushing too close—not on purpose, not really—but my arm still grazed his, and it was like being shocked by memory.

My breath hitched, traitorously and loudly in my own ears, but I kept walking.

Pretending not to notice his small wince and refusing to wonder what that meant. Did he feel it too? Or did he recoil?

The inside was raw. Bare studs. Exposed beams. Concrete floor, still dusty and uneven. But the bones were good—really good. High ceilings. Great natural light. The kind of space a chef could mold into something extraordinary.

“You designed this?” I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

He nodded. “Every inch.”

Of course he did.

Of course he built me a cathedral. It was ironic that he hadn't even known it was for me while he did it. Some might call this divine justice.

“It’s just a shell right now,” he said. “Waiting for the right person to bring it to life.”

My fingers curled slightly as I walked farther in, brushing the unfinished wall. I tried to picture it with my ovens, my line. I tried to imagine noise and heat and life in this space. And I could. I could see it all so easily, it made my throat tighten.

“This space has potential,” I said, trying to sound detached, as if my heart wasn’t beating too hard and my palms weren’t starting to sweat.

“I thought you might like it,” he said quietly.

I turned to face him. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” His voice was gentle.

“That tone.” My voice wavered. “That I remember the exact way you take your coffee tone.”

He didn’t answer right away. Then, softly, “Still more sugar and cream than actual coffee?”

I swallowed hard and looked away, pretending to study the support beams so I didn’t have to see the expression on his face.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. I was supposed to walk in here, critique the layout, nod politely, and walk away untouched.

But my chest ached. My hands trembled. My stupid heart kept catching in my throat.

“What made you think of me for this?” I asked, finally turning back to him.

He was watching me—really watching me, like he used to, like nothing about me had ever stopped mattering.

"It was your food. Carol took me to Salt my blood rushed through my veins so hard and furious I thought I would pass out.

His nearness forced me to tilt my chin to look up at him.

He was close enough to feel his warmth and the weight of every word we weren't saying.

His scent invaded my nostrils. He was wearing a different eau de cologne, of course.

It had been ten years, after all, but his scent, the one that was his very own, was still there.

The scent I had been running away from. Pines, rain, and manly musk.

“I never stopped knowing you,” he said quietly.

I hated how much I wanted to believe him.

The space between us buzzed like it had its own pulse. Like the foundation we were standing on was made of something electric and old, but still too alive to bury.

I backed up a step.

“I need to think,” I said, not trusting my voice to say anything else.

Patrick didn't argue.

He just nodded, once. "Take all the time you need, Ells."

God. Ells. Why did he have to do that?

It broke something open in me, and I had to get out before it spilled all over the dusty concrete floor.

"Why the hell did you do that to me?" I demanded of Carol the moment she opened the door.

I had driven straight from the restaurant to her place, set on giving her a piece of my mind.

The drive took forty-five minutes. Forty-five minutes of me alternately wiping my eyes because they were welling over and hitting the damn steering wheel so hard I might have broken it.

Forty-five minutes of enduring a pain lodged so deeply into my heart, it made it hard to breathe.

I never stopped knowing you . Not I never stopped missing you. Not I never stopped loving you. No! Damn him. Why did he have to say the words that hurt so much more than the others would have?

"Oh my God, Ella, what happened?" Carol opened the door fully and pulled me into her arms. She was so much taller that my head pressed right into her warm chest, and I began crying. Not like I had in the car, where a tear had escaped me here or there. No, this was ugly crying at its worst. This was sobbing and snotting and shoulders shaking so hard I thought I might come apart completely. And Carol—bless her

meddling, over-involved, wonderful soul—just held me. She didn't say I shouldn't have pushed you , or I'm sorry , or I thought this would help , even though she probably should have said at least one of those.

She just held me, like she knew her meddling had opened a wound she couldn't close—but she'd be damned if she let me bleed alone. She just stood there in her doorway, holding me like a big sister who wasn't going to let the world swallow me whole, no matter how hard it tried.

After what felt like a century, she gently pulled me inside, sat me on the couch, and handed me a box of tissues and a throw blanket that smelled like lavender and dryer sheets. The weight of it grounded me a little, giving me a chance to ride out the next wave of emotion without floating away.

She waited until I blew my nose and wiped my eyes—twice—before speaking.

“So,” she said carefully. “I take it the site visit didn't go great.”

“I hate you,” I croaked.

She grinned. “No, you don't.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

I glared at her through swollen eyes. "You knew what seeing him again would do to me."

And when she didn't answer right away, I accused, "You tricked me."

"I nudged you."

"Carol."

"Okay, fine!" She threw up her hands. "Yes, I tricked you. Because you weren't going to go unless I did, and I was tired of watching both of you circle the same emotional drain without ever facing what's still between you."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Between us? There's nothing between us except a decade of silence and the worst breakup in the history of lovers."

"I thought that honor belonged to Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII," Carol smirked, and I glared at her. "Alright," she lifted her hands in surrender. "Then riddle me this: tell me, why are you crying like he just left you again?"

Ouch. That hit.

She said it gently. But it still hit like a punch to the sternum.

I wiped at my cheeks again as fresh tears slipped out despite my best efforts. "Because he remembered my coffee order," I sobbed. "Because he smiled at me like I still meant something. Because he called me Ells." The last part was broken by

another sob.

Carol's expression softened. "Because you never stopped being in love with him."

I shook my head. "No. That part of me died a long time ago."

But even as I said it, the lie caught in my throat and tasted bitter on my tongue.

Carol tilted her head, her eyes quietly scolding me for the lie. She curled up next to me, handed me a second box of tissues, and said, "Then cry it out. And when you're done, we can talk about what you're going to do. Because I have a feeling this isn't over."

I sigh-sobbed, because I shared that feeling. "For the record, I'm still mad at you."

She took a deep breath and my hand. "How many times have we sat right like this, with you crying because he broke your heart? How many times have you told me that there will never be another man?"

"There won't be," I doubled down. "Not after what he did to me."

"Look, I'm not saying it was right or wrong what he did," Carol lifted a finger to stop me from interrupting. This wasn't the first time she'd defended him on this.

I managed to get a quick mutter in. "Some friend you are."

She ignored it. "He had his reasons, and we both know it. But the four years the two of you were together were some of the best of my life," Carol said softly. "You two are my family. And when it ended, it gutted me too."

I pressed a tissue to my eyes, but it didn't help.

The tears kept coming, hot and exhausting.

Carol took a deep breath, and her thumb brushed over the back of my hand.

“He pushed you away because he was hurting, El. And yeah, it was cruel, and yeah, I told him he was an idiot. Loudly. More than once. But he didn’t do it because he stopped loving you. ”

I shook my head. “He could’ve told me that. He could’ve trusted me enough to talk to me. ”

“I know,” she whispered. “But he was eighteen, and looking at a life in a wheelchair. He was scared out of his mind. Scared of being a burden. Scared of tying you down to a life you didn’t choose. He thought letting you go would give you a better one.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Because part of me remembered that boy. The one who’d cried in my arms the night before another surgery. The one who held me like he was drowning.

“I didn’t want a better life,” I finally said. “I wanted him. ”

Carol smiled sadly. “I know, and I knew it then. And I think—deep down—he did too. But he also thought he was doing the right thing. And I... I kind of understood. I didn’t like it, but I got it. At eighteen, none of us knew what we were doing.”

I stared at her. “And now? Ten years later?”

She shrugged. “Now, you’re both standing in the same place again. Only this time, you’ve got something to lose if you don’t try.”

I scoffed. “He could’ve called. After two years. Three. Four. He could’ve tried.”

Carol leaned back, her voice quieter. “You want the truth?”

“Always.”

She hesitated for a moment. “I thought one of you would come to your senses. But neither of you did. And I get it—life moved on. You built something incredible. So did he. But ten years, Ella? That’s long enough.”

I shook my head and felt the damn tears returning with vengeance. “I’m not ready to open that door.”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “But you might want to ask yourself why it’s still unlocked.”

Damn Carol and her stupid writer's metaphors and her sharp mind. She managed once again to shut me up.

She gave a dry laugh. “Besides, it’s not like I’m the one to talk.”

I glanced at her, narrowing my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She gave a shrug that tried to look casual and failed. “Let’s just say... there will never be another man for me, either.”

“Oh no.” I blinked. “You’re not still hung up on Gabe?”

“Guilty,” she muttered, and reached for the box of tissues. “But unlike you and Patrick, he hates me. So, I’m officially doomed to live the rest of my life alone, bitter, and writing romance novels, because that’s the only way I can get off.”

“Carol!”

She grinned through her own tears. “I’m serious. If you and Patrick don’t fix this, I swear to God, I’m turning your story into my next series. I’ll change the names, but not enough that anyone who knows you won’t recognize the emotional carnage.”

I groaned. “Don’t you dare use my breakdown as book fodder.”

“Too late.” She smirked. “Working title: The Dish That Got Away. ”

I rolled my eyes, but a smile pulled at my lips anyway.

And just like that, we were friends again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

How torturous can a day be?

A question I'd obviously asked myself before, but never had the answer been so painfully obvious as it was with every hour I spent in Ella's presence.

For the past three days, we'd been together at least four hours at a stretch.

Four hours of breathing in her sweet scent, listening to her melodic voice, watching strands of her unruly blonde hair escape her haphazardly put up bun and brush against her long neck or the swell of her breasts; four hours of fighting a rising yearning in me and my cock that turned walking into a challenge.

Every passing minute with her made it clearer to me that I not only wanted her, I needed her.

A physical need, like breathing air. I had willfully cut her from my mind ten years ago.

The first year had been the hardest; the pain in my heart had rivaled the physical pain from surgeries and rehabilitation, but as that hurt had helped distract me, I'd almost welcomed it.

After that, I simply hadn't allowed myself to think about her, or when I did, I'd told myself that she was happily married with a soccer team of kids running around.

But now?

Now that I knew none of the fairy tale scenarios my mind had concocted for her were true, I couldn't lie to myself any longer. I didn't care that Thorne still stubbornly refused to accept that she was our mate. I knew it, as sure as I knew the sun would come up in the morning.

"So what'cha gonna do about it?" Carol asked over the phone.

I'd called her, because... I needed a distraction.

Ella was inside the restaurant, putting paint samples on the walls.

She didn't know I was talking to Carol; I told her I had a business call to make.

I just had to get out of there, away from her tempting company.

If I had to watch her breasts strain against the tight material of her blouse one more time while she stretched to put color on the beams, I would have screamed.

Or grabbed her. Neither option was appropriate.

"I don't know." I brushed my free hand through my hair, staring through the window at Ella as she adoringly scrunched up her face to take in the different shades of beige—they all looked the same to me—she had decorated the walls with.

Angling her head this way and that, stepping back and forward, leaning to the side.

Damn it, my cock was hard as a rock. She bent over to pick up a tile sample, and her ass stretched the material of her skirt...

shit. Those hips. I remembered how they felt underneath my palms. They were a little wider now, more enticing than when she had been a teen, and oh, so fucking alluring.

"Just ask her out," Carol said, oblivious to where my mind was.

"Just?" My sarcastic chuckle sounded choked.

"Patrick," Carol sighed loudly, "you are a grown man. Ask. Her. Out."

"Fine. You're in a mood today."

"Yes. Yes, I am, and you want to know why?"

Since I had a suspicion that it had something to do with me, I tried to ward her off,  
"Not particularly."

"Fine, I'll tell you."

Yeah, no such luck with Carol.

"I'm in a damn crappy mood because my two best friends are too stubborn to admit to themselves that they're still in love with each other. Always have been. Now, one of you is going to have to man up and make that happen. Are you a man, Patrick?"

She sounded exactly like my old football coach. "I take offense to that line of questioning."

"Quit stalling. Ask her out. And Patrick?"

I was almost afraid to utter a sound, "Yeah?"

"Grow the fuck up and grovel."

She hung up on me. I wasn't sure what exactly I had expected from her when I called,



but it sure as hell wasn't to have my ass handed to me.

Grovel ? I stared at the phone like it had betrayed me.

Finally , Thorne growled from inside me. Someone said it .

I flinched. “Oh, great. You’re awake.”

Awake? I’ve been wide awake for three days while you’ve been walking around like a horny teenager in a lumberjack costume. Watching you trip over your own thoughts is physically painful. You almost knocked over a paint ladder yesterday because her sweater slipped off her shoulder .

“I did not.”

You absolutely did. And if I have to sit through one more hour of your inner monologue about her neck, I swear to the moon, I’m going feral and dragging you both into the nearest closet .

“You're not helping,” I muttered, glancing at Ella again through the window. She was frowning now—adorably, infuriatingly—at two nearly identical beige swatches, like the fate of the universe depended on her decision.

You're right. I'm not helping. You need professional help. Possibly sedation.

“Shut up.”

You shut up, he huffed . You’ve been walking around with a hard-on and a broken heart for three!

days. You’re one apology and a well-timed kiss away from fixing both, and instead,

you called Carol.

Carol , Patrick. The woman who once threatened to burn your house down if you ever made Ella cry again .

“She was right to,” I muttered.

Of course, she was. And she’ll be right again when she rewrites this whole disaster into a romance novel called Chef’s Kiss of Death.

I dragged a hand down my face. “She told me to grovel.”

Good. Start groveling. And maybe take your shirt off while you’re at it. You look like you belong on a damn romance cover. Might as well weaponize it.

“You are not in charge of my love life.”

You clearly aren’t either .

I opened my mouth to argue, but then Ella stood up, brushed dust off her skirt, and smiled—softly, thoughtfully; she looked proud of what she'd done. Like she was at home in a place I’d built from the ground up. I felt something twist hard in my chest.

There it is again , Thorne murmured, quieter now. That thing you pretend isn’t real .

I swallowed.

“I’m going to screw this up,” I whispered.

Not if you start talking. Not if you stop hiding .

Inside the window, Ella turned, reaching for her coffee, completely unaware that I was standing there trying to breathe through the weight of ten years. I exhaled once, hard, like that might steady my hands. Then I shoved the phone into my pocket and walked back inside the restaurant.

The air smelled of dust and coffee and her perfume, and something about it hit me square in the chest. She was still standing by the wall, brush dangling from her fingers, deep in concentration.

I cleared my throat.

She looked over, startled. “That was fast.”

I nodded, stepping inside. “Yeah. It was... brief.”

Ella arched an eyebrow and turned back to the wall, lifting the brush again. “Everything okay?”

Now or never.

“Ella,” I said, voice lower than I meant it to be.

She paused but didn’t turn. “Mmhmm?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, swallowed, and went for it. “Do you want to go to dinner with me?”

The brush froze mid-stroke. She turned to look at me slowly, as if unsure she'd heard me correctly. Her face wasn't confused, though—it was stricken. Pale. Her eyes were wide and stunned. She looked like I'd slapped her. Or stabbed her. She looked hurt.

My stomach dropped.

She didn't speak right away. Just stared at me with that unreadable expression and something flickering behind her eyes that looked a lot like pain.

"I—" she began, then stopped. Her throat moved as she swallowed. "Why would you ask me that?"

I blinked. "Because I want to take you out."

A pause.

"You want to take me out?" she echoed, voice quieter now. "After all this time? After everything?"

I shifted, caught off guard by the sharp edge in her voice.

"Ella, I know it's been a long time, and I know?—"

She cut me off, eyes flashing. "Ten years, Patrick. Ten years of nothing. And now you want to take me out like we're picking up where we left off?"

Okay. This was going sideways.

Thorne winced inside me. Abort. Abort. Grovel harder, idiot.

"I'm not trying to pick up where we left off," I said quickly. "I just... I want a chance to get to know you again."

She stared at me, her lips parted slightly, and for a second, I thought I saw her crack. A flicker of something softer—hope, maybe—before the wall came right back up.

“I need to get back to work,” she said stiffly, and turned back to the wall.

Thorne groaned. This is what happens when you lead with dinner instead of an apology .

I stood there for a moment, stunned. My feet felt like concrete.

“I’ll be in the truck,” I muttered, and turned around.

As I walked out, Thorne’s voice followed me, bone dry and unimpressed. Good job, Romeo. You went in for dinner and walked out with emotional frostbite. What’s next? Gonna offer her a Groupon for closure ?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

How torturous can a day be?

Apparently, the answer was: immeasurably, if seeing Patrick McCloud for three days in a row.

Three days of working beside him. Of breathing the same air, hearing his voice. Watching those big, calloused hands of his move through blueprints and beams like they were sacred texts. Three days of trying not to drown in the scent of pine and earth and memories.

And God, he looked good. Better than good.

He looked like a man grown from everything I used to dream about.

Broad-shouldered, flannel-wrapped, jeans worn in all the right places.

His jaw carried the soft scruff of someone too busy to shave.

His eyes—those whiskey eyes I'd once adored—had new shadows beneath them, giving the impression he'd seen hard things and survived them.

Just my type.

Still my type.

Which was a problem.

Because every time I looked at him, I remembered.

Not just the pain, but the love. The kind that gutted you when it ended because it had been real.

True. Untouched by cynicism or adulthood.

The kind that made you believe you were the luckiest girl in the world and, when lost, left you wondering if you'd ever feel whole again.

Two nights ago, I dreamed we were married.

We had a house with cedar siding and a wraparound porch. Two kids. A dog that liked to sleep on Patrick's feet while he read bedtime stories in that warm, low voice of his. It was so vivid, I could still hear the sound of our daughter laughing as she ran through the kitchen barefoot.

I woke up to a soaking wet pillow and a pain in my chest that felt like something sharp had been left behind and twisted. I hated that I dreamed about a life with him. Hated that I wanted it. Hated that part of me still believed it was possible.

I heard him return and glanced up. After three days of being in his company, I let my guard down around him somewhat. We'd managed to be civil around each other, which was why I was utterly unprepared for what happened next.

I watched him rub the back of my neck, so like Pats when we were younger. "Do you want to go to dinner with me?"

My brush froze mid-stroke. At first, I thought I had misheard him, but then I realized I hadn't. This was just so like him. No buildup. No apology. No explanation. Just a straight-up question that pulled the rug out from underneath my feet.

As if we were normal people working together on a project with no history. Or as if he hadn't ghosted me for a decade. Hadn't ripped my heart out and buried it somewhere under a hospital parking lot. Said heart seized, and for a second, I couldn't breathe.

Say yes , my heart whispered.

Run , my mind screamed.

I looked at him and wanted to cry. Not because I didn't want it, but because I wanted it so much that it was choking me. Why would he do this? Now?

He was looking at me, waiting for an answer, "I—" I managed to get out, my mind was feverishly working, fighting with my heart, but then, thankfully, common sense prevailed, and I demanded, "Why would you ask me that?"

He looked confused, so much like my Pats when he was lost for words. So much it hurt.

"Because I want to take you out."

"You want to take me out?" I echoed, my pain erupting from inside. "After all this time? After everything ?"

He looked uncomfortable, "Ella, I know it's been a long time, and I know?—"

Oh no, I wasn't going to let him get away that easily. "Ten years, Patrick. Ten years of nothing. And now you want to take me out like we're picking up where we left off?"

"I'm not trying to pick up where we left off," he said quickly. "I just... I want a



chance to get to know you again.”

Oof, that felt like a punch to the gut. I wanted to believe him.

Badly. But I couldn't. Not if I wanted to keep my sanity intact.

I had barely survived teenage Patrick McCloud leaving me; I knew I wouldn't be able to do that again with the grown version.

He already shattered my heart once. What pieces I managed to glue back together were too fragile to withstand another emotional tornado.

“I need to get back to work,” I said, unable to look at him any longer. He stood there like a beaten puppy dog, pulling at all my heartstrings to comfort him. Comfort him! For crying out loud, I was the injured party here. Not him.

I listened to his retreating footsteps. Each step felt like someone carving into me.

The door opening made the biggest slash, or so I thought, until I heard it click back in place.

That was the final blow, like a hot iron being poked into my soul.

My knees buckled, but I held on to a column.

Instead of slumping down to the ground, I only folded over myself.

My eyes burned from pain and anger. Anger at him for being able to still hurt me, and anger at myself for allowing it. Why couldn't I just cut him out of me?

A sob shook my body. I tried to hold it in, but it only made it worse.

So much worse. I tried to take a breath, but I couldn't force the air past my choked throat.

I was so absorbed in my misery and panic, I didn't hear the door opening again.

Suddenly, a pair of strong arms were around me, holding me.

"Ells, what's wrong?" his voice sounded so concerned and so far away.

My knees buckled for real this time, but I didn't fall; he held me and lowered us both to the ground, pulling me against his hard, massive chest. My fingers latched onto his shirt, balled it.

I wanted to pummel him, but instead, a second sob escaped me, then another.

"I'm sorry, Ells. So, so sorry," he said, his mouth close to my ear while he pressed me against his chest, and I let him. All the pain and heartache came flooding back, and I sobbed like I had ten years ago. But this time, he was holding me, like I'd needed him to ten years ago.

He didn't say another word. He just held me, let me cry myself out.

The worst part was that my traitorous heart screamed, he came back. He came back!

It shouldn't have meant everything, but it did.

His arms were wrapped around me like they never left.

Like they remembered how to hold me, even when I didn't know how to hold myself together.

His chest rose and fell beneath my cheek, steady and strong, and I could feel the rumble of his voice in his body when he whispered, “I should’ve called.

I should’ve come back a thousand times, and I didn’t, and I have no excuse.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. There was nothing to say. He should have.

My sobs had quieted, but the ache hadn’t. It was still sitting there, thick and jagged, like it had carved out a permanent space in my chest.

“I was broken,” he continued, voice raw. “I didn’t know how to be the man you needed. And I thought if I let you go, you’d find someone better—someone whole. You deserved that. You still do.”

His fingers curled into the back of my shirt like he couldn’t bear to let me go. “But I didn’t stop loving you, Ells. Not for a second. Not ever.”

I flinched. That word. Love. It landed like a spark on dry grass—dangerous and impossible to ignore. I sat up slowly, wiping at my face, forcing myself to look at him.

His eyes were red-rimmed. There was pain in them. But no pity. No guilt-game or manipulation. Just truth. Honest, devastating truth.

“You don’t get to say that to me,” I whispered. “Not after all this time.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“And what, you say you’re sorry, and we just... pick up again? Like it didn’t take me years to even look at another man without comparing him to you?”

“No,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to pick up again. I want to start over. From the ground up.”

“Why now?” I asked, and it came out more broken than I meant. “Why not five years ago? Or two? Or last week?”

His jaw tightened. “Because I was a coward,” he said simply. “Because I didn’t believe I deserved you. Because I built an entire town trying to create something good, but it still felt empty without you in it.”

I stared at him, stunned. My chest trembled with every breath.

“And after our meeting at the Bistro, I sat in my truck and thought about when Carol dragged me to Salt those still and always had belonged to Pats.

A scary question rose inside me. A dangerous question. What is the sense of surviving if there is no real life after?

"You ambushed me with your question," I told him honestly. "Let me think about it."

"Whatever you need, Ells. I'm here. I'll be waiting."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

She didn't say no. She didn't say yes either, but she didn't say no . It wasn't much. But I knew it was more than I deserved. Shit, seeing her cry. It hurt.

I had never seen her break down like this.

I take full responsibility for that. Yes, she cried when I broke things off, but it hadn't been like this.

Not these gut-wrenching sobs as if I'd torn the soul from her.

Was that how she had cried when I wasn't there?

Alone? Was anybody there to comfort her?

Carol, I hoped, because her mother... let's just say Lisa was different. And I'd been a fucking coward.

I hid behind the nurses, telling them not to let Ella back into my room.

I worried that seeing her upset would make me change my mind, and I couldn't risk that.

Back then, I thought I was doing the right thing—protecting her, setting her free.

She had a future ahead of her. I had a list of spinal surgeries and a wheelchair with my name on it.

She wasn't meant for hospital rooms and endless PT.

She wasn't meant for a man who couldn't shift anymore—at least not then.

At least not without pain and complications.

And she'd never asked about that part of me, not really.

She knew I was a shifter. She accepted it, sure.

But there was always a hesitancy when the subject came up. A pause. A nervous flick of her eyes.

I told myself it was better not to push. That maybe she'd come around. But when I lost the use of my legs for that year, that pause haunted me. I couldn't imagine asking her to live with a crippled man who turned into a bear—one she seemed a little afraid to meet in the first place.

So I ended things.

I let her believe I didn't love her enough to stay.

Watching her cry like that again—folded in on herself, choking on sobs she tried to muffle—nearly broke me in half. I wanted to take it all back. Every year of silence. Every excuse I made in the dark. Every time I told myself she was better off.

Unfortunately, I couldn't rewrite the past. So I did the only thing I could.

I showed up now.

Every day since, I've shown up early. Made sure her favorite coffee was waiting

when she walked in—four creams, five sugars, extra hot, just the way she used to drink it when we crammed for finals and she stole half my thermos.

I didn't mention the coffee. Just left it near her sketches and acted like I had no idea what kind of magic that cup held. She never said a word about it. But she drank it.

That was enough.

She'd asked for time, so I gave it to her.

I helped her carry tile samples even though she stubbornly insisted she didn't need help.

I followed her around the kitchen space, listening while she debated counter heights and stove placements like the fate of the world depended on it.

I took notes. Actual notes. Me, Patrick McCloud, who once forgot an entire final paper in high school because I'd been too busy trying to impress her with grilled cheese experiments.

I listened. And I learned.

And I waited.

That day, I picked her up for our supplier run. She said she could drive herself, but I offered, holding my breath. When she hesitated for just a second too long, I knew I had a yes.

Gracefully, as usual, she slid into the passenger seat of my truck. The set of her stiff shoulders told me that she was still guarded around me. Not that I faulted her for it. No, this was on me. All of this was on me. Her lips pressed into a line as she buckled

in.

Thorne stirred the second she shut the door. There she is. Sparkles in all her stubborn glory. She smells like lemons and judgment.

Ignore him , I told myself.

“Seat warmers still work,” I said casually, adjusting the dial for her. “But the air’s a little weird in here lately. Might smell like sawdust and regret.”

Her lips twitched slightly, and I congratulated myself for small progress. The drive was quiet at first. Until she started asking about hood vents and fire suppression systems. I felt myself smiling just listening to her. I had forgotten how fired up she could get about something she cared about.

I parked the truck outside the industrial supply warehouse, rushing around the front to open the door for her. When she was out, I passed her a folded paper bag I had grabbed from the center console.

She looked at it warily. “What’s this?”

“Breakfast. We’ve got a few minutes to kill before they open.”

“You made me food?”

“Technically, my dad did. I just stole it from his kitchen before he could eat it. But it’s that egg sandwich you like. The one with the spicy aioli?”

Her eyes flicked to mine, surprised. It was a thirty-minute drive from Cedar Hollow to the town we grew up in, and she knew that my dad usually left for work around five.



I could see when she worked out that I must have left my place at four, just to drive there and stalk around long enough to snag the sandwich.

The smallest smile danced around the edges of her lips.

I used to do this a lot for her, steal my dad's egg sandwich.

It had been a bit harder this morning, but her little smile made the inconvenience all worthwhile.

I didn't say anything else. Just let her open it. Her fingers paused briefly on the warm wax paper. "Did your dad ever find out it was you who took all his lunches?"

I chuckled. Dad would get all wound up about it, accusing the dog, mom, Gabe, me.

Sometimes he even went on a search, looking behind the fridge, in the garbage.

It had been fun. I chuckled even more when I imagined the look on his face when he returned from the bathroom this morning, only to find his sandwich gone, once again. For the first time in ten years.

"He has no idea," I confessed, watching, mesmerized, as she took her first bite and moaned. It was enough to make my blood thrum, and Thorne grunted in appreciation. If she moans like that over a sandwich, we are so back in.

Shut up , I growled.

"I need to put this on my menu. I never did figure out how he makes this." Ella said between bites.

"Just say the word, and I'll install a spy camera, then we can eat popcorn while we

watch him make it."

Ella cough-snickered, "Oh my God."

I petted her back with a grin on my face. This was us . We used to always have so much fun together. We would laugh at the silliest things. Why hadn't I remembered that in the hospital bed? God, I could have used her laughter then.

"Remember when I tried to make my own version of that sandwich junior year, and I nearly set my mom's toaster oven on fire?" She grinned. "The whole kitchen smelled like burnt sriracha for two days."

I chuckled, "How could I forget that? You blamed it on me."

"I did, didn't I?" she replied, laughing as she chewed. "I maintain the instructions were unclear. Also, that toaster was already on death's door."

"You put the aioli in the oven," I said, chuckling. " In a paper bowl. "

"I was experimenting ! " she said through another bite, eyes sparkling now. "That's how great recipes are born."

"That's also how kitchen fires start."

She nudged my arm with her elbow, like she had done a hundred times before.

A jolt moved through me, part nostalgia, part electric shock from the contact with her.

She was still grinning; it was a good grin.

A real one. The kind I hadn't seen in too long.

But then her eyes clouded over, and I watched reality sink back in.

I didn't want to ruin the moment completely, so I asked, "Ready? "

I placed my hand on the small of her back and led her toward the large entryway.

She walked a bit stiffly, and silence enveloped us once again while we wandered the aisles together.

Soon, however, her excitement took back over, and she started pointing at things that caught her eye.

I made bad jokes about stove brands and groaned when she spent twenty solid minutes comparing two mixers that looked exactly the same to me.

I liked the way she lit up when she talked about prep flow and walk-in coolers. And when she nearly crawled into an industrial-sized oven. God, I could've stood there all day, just watching her. Wondering what the hell was wrong with me to have given her up.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

Two days passed during which neither one of us could come up with an excuse to meet up at the restaurant.

Tiles were picked, as well as paint, countertops, and so on.

Patrick's workers were at the restaurant, painting, tiling, and whatever else needed to be done.

There was no reason for Patrick and me to be there.

Well, he might have to because he was the boss, but as much as I wracked my brain, I had nothing.

I busied myself at my restaurants or sat behind the computer working on a menu for the new place.

I caught myself smiling more often, so much so that my staff was getting suspicious.

Besides Evan, nobody knew about the coming restaurant in Cedar Hollow.

And when he asked me about my good mood lately, I told him it was because of that.

It wasn't really fibbing. I was excited about it.

I only left the part out where I was falling—again—for the man who was building it.

I was. Hard.

And all it took was a fucking egg sandwich!

Way to go, Ella .

It wasn't just the sandwich, though. It was the coffee he brought, the way he looked at me, the way he picked things up when he thought they were too heavy for me.

The way he let me have free rein in picking colors, tablecloths, accessories, everything.

Not to mention the memories. The memories were a big part of it.

Poor Henry. I didn't even want to think about all the lunches Patrick's dad had lost because of me.

Every time I thought about the damn sandwiches, I laughed.

Even more so when I remembered another incident, where Patrick discovered an entire case of whiskey in his parents' basement.

It was the summer of our junior year, and boy, did we ever have a summer!

At that time, there were eleven in our group.

Eleven seventeen-year-olds and a case of whiskey.

One night, about a month and a half after summer break, we were at Patrick's parents' place.

His parents were big on throwing parties.

Any occasion they could think of to invite their friends and the neighbors.

This one was for their wedding anniversary.

Henry went down into the basement. It took him a long time before he returned, all fired up. "Gabriel!" he yelled through the house.

Gabe had just graduated from college as the number one draft pick, starting his football career with a bang.

He'd come home for the anniversary party, much to Carol's dismay.

The two never got along. Thankfully, we didn't get together with Gabe very often.

The five-year age gap between the brothers kept them relatively apart, aside from their shared football love.

Anyway, Henry came out of the basement, yelling.

He accused Gabe of stealing his whiskey.

I smiled, remembering how I buried my face in Patrick's chest with a small cry. I was the worst liar in the world, and I knew that the guilt of what Patrick and the rest of us had done with the whiskey had to be written all over my face.

Gabe didn't flinch. He just raised an eyebrow, like the idea of him sneaking booze was too stupid to dignify. "You really think I'd hide whiskey in the wheel well of my car instead of just drinking it in your recliner while watching the Packers game?"

Henry huffed and muttered something about entitled football brats with no respect.

Then he stormed back down into the basement, probably to make sure the shelves hadn't grown legs. When he returned, Gabe added dryly, "Maybe the dog stole it. Like your sandwiches?"

From the kitchen, Patrick's mom chimed in without missing a beat, "Or maybe you're just getting senile, Henry. You probably drank it and forgot."

None of us ever confessed. Though every time Patrick's dad had a drink after that, he would narrow his eyes at Gabe like he was waiting for a confession. Did I feel guilty? Definitely not. Not after the way Gabe treated Carol. Plus, damn, it was worth every shot.

I giggled to myself. We did have a lot of fun times.

Funny, over the last ten years, I hadn't really thought about those. When I thought about Patrick, it centered around the accident, the hospital, and the hurt of his breaking up with me.

We were eighteen ... I reminded myself. Eighteen!

So young. So idealistic. And so in love.

For the first time, I tried to see the events, not through the eyes of a young, hurt girl, but with those of a mature woman.

Patrick had been eighteen. His entire life had come to a complete standstill, changed in the blink of an eye.

From an aspiring pro football player to a man facing life in a wheelchair.

As I thought about it now, my heart went out to that boy.

Years of pain and hurt had clouded not only my memories, but my judgment.

Patrick did what he thought was right at the time.

In retrospect, it was quite a mature decision.

Sure, at eighteen, I wouldn't have blinked twice at the prospect of living with a man in a wheelchair, but ten-year-old me realized it wouldn't have been that simple.

How would I have handled a man in a wheelchair?

Had children? What if Patrick had been unable to work?

Could I have worked, raised a family, and cared for Patrick?

I don't know. I know I loved him enough that I would have given it my best shot, but realistically speaking?

The chances of us still being together after ten hard years like that would have been slim.

Looking at it from his perspective, I understood his decision. Did I agree with it? Absolutely not. But I also had the benefit of hindsight now. I knew Patrick didn't end up in a wheelchair. He moved forward, became an architect.

But what about me? I went to culinary school in the city and opened two, soon to be three, restaurants.

I don't know what the future would have looked like if we'd stayed together, but I knew for certain I wouldn't have gone to school in the city or opened restaurants.



I probably would have gone to college wherever Patrick went and, maybe, gotten a pro forma degree, then we would have started a family.

I wasn't averse to the idea of being a stay-at-home mom; that had always been my dream before. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like the turn my life had taken.

I loved having built something. And I could still have that white-picket-fence family.

I still wanted it. The problem was that no man had ever measured up to Patrick Mc-fucking-Cloud, and no man ever would.

So, if I wanted family, it would have to be with Patrick.

But the pain was still there, the hurt, the betrayal, no matter how much I understood his intentions. He didn't give me a choice. He made a choice for me. Was I willing to give him the chance to do that to me again?

The phone rang, thankfully interrupting my deep musings. One look at the screen told me it was Carol. Just the person I needed.

"You don't know that he will leave you again," Carol said when I filled her in.

"I don't know," I agreed, "but I didn't know it last time either. Had someone asked me, I would have told them I was certain he would never do anything to hurt me."

"Ella," Carol sounded exasperated.

"I know, I know," I waved my hand even though she couldn't see it, and started pacing my living room floor. "I'm willing to forgive. I am. I understand now. Well, at least better than before."

"But you're scared." Carol knew me.

"Yes. Scared to death."

"Look, there are no guarantees. No matter who you're with. Do you think, what's her face... thought she was dating a serial killer?"

"Oh, you mean Ted Bundy's girlfriend?"

"Yeah, her."

I tried to think, but her name eluded me. Until I realized that wasn't the issue. "Well, I'm not about to date a serial killer . If anything, I'm about to date a serial heartbreaker ."

"Haha, you're funny, Ella," Carol replied humorlessly.

"Alright." I huffed. "Fine, you win. I'll do it."

"Go on a date with him?" She clarified.

"Yes," I capitulated. She was right. I owed it to myself to give this a shot. I had tried the dating thing with other men, and it hadn't worked out. Now it was Patrick's turn to prove that he had changed.

"What's with you anyway? You're in a bad mood." I'd talked so much about myself that I had nearly neglected the fact that she had called me .

"I ran into Gabe," her voice sounded resigned.

"Oh shit. Wait, how did you run into Gabe?" It was football season. Gabe was

supposed to be out there playing somewhere.

"I brought Henry some books, and he was there," Carol explained.

Oh God, how Carol could bring her semi-erotic books to the man who was like a dad to her was as much a mystery to me as how he could read them.

I shuddered. Not that I could write any of that stuff, or anything, but having my friends and family read it? Another shudder moved through me.

"Oh no, what did he do?" I focused on Gabe instead of the semi-erotic books Carol wrote. Ironically, they were sports romances. Many of them centered on star football players.

"What didn't he do?" she groaned. "He was shirtless, for one."

My jaw dropped. "Why?"

"I don't know, Ella. Maybe because gravity stopped applying to him and he just floated out of a sunbeam like a smug, six-foot-five Roman god? I think Henry had him moving furniture or something."

"Oh, of course. Gabe McCloud, future Hall of Famer and part-time furniture mover."

Carol ignored me. "He looked at me like I was the punchline to a joke he hadn't finished telling."

"What did you do?"

"I dropped a box of books on his foot. Then told him I hoped his deltoid tore in slow motion."

I burst out laughing. “You’re such a disaster.”

“Oh, I’m the disaster?” she snapped. “He’s the one who’s treated me all my life like an annoying ferret that wandered into his gym bag. You know what he called me this time? Sassquatch. Sassquatch!” She rolled the double ss .

"What?"

"That's what I said, you know what he said?" She didn't give me time to reply. "And I quote, Half sass, half cryptid. Seen rarely, always loud!"

There was a beat of silence. Her entire life, Carol had been relentlessly made fun of because of her height. She was very sensitive about it.

"I'm sorry." I offered. Meaning it.

"It's fine, we all know he's a dick. Like a giant, enormous dick."

“Did you at least tell him to buy one of your books this time?” I teased. “Maybe he’ll recognize himself.”

Carol made a strangled sound. “Ella, if he finds out that I’ve written nine bestsellers with quarterbacks named Gage who all have tragic backstories and glistening abs— I will have to fake my own death . ”

“I’ll help you pick a new name,” I said helpfully. “Something low-key, like Chesty LaRue.”

“Ella.”

“Yes?”

“Stop talking.”

After we hung up, I not only felt better, but I had a plan.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

The shift came easily. I was still grateful for it. It had scared me when I hadn't been able to shift for over a year after the accident, and I never took it for granted now, like I had before.

I hadn't done it in weeks—months, really. Not since the last run up north, where I'd needed to scare off a rogue that got too close to the Hollow's edge. But today, the need wasn't about safety.

It was about escape and getting some clarity.

I walked out past the edge of Cedar Hollow, just where the tree line dipped and the air grew quieter. I stripped off my clothes, folded them the way I always did, and let the bear come.

It rushed up from somewhere deep, bone-deep, as natural as breathing.

One moment, I was a man.

The next, I was Thorne.

Massive and full of fur. My breath steamed in the cold.

The ground felt different under my paws—solid and right.

The air was full of scent, full of life .

My vision sharpened and narrowed; my mind split into something simpler, rawer.

The ache in my chest didn't go away, but it dulled under instinct.

The bear didn't think in full sentences. He didn't need to.

He only knew she was back and that we weren't whole without her. So I let him run. Through trees that parted around our shoulders. Over creeks still frozen at the edges. Up slopes and down again, until our lungs pulled clean air and the world blurred past.

This was what we were made for—running, surviving, being. No talking. No thinking. Most of all, no guilt.

No ten years of silence unraveling every time she looked at me like I'd never left, like she wanted to scream and sob and kiss me all at once. The bear didn't know how to fix that. But he knew what he felt when her scent was near. Home.

We slowed only when the sun began to dip, casting long golden fingers through the branches. Thorne snorted once, pawing at a moss-covered stump before settling beside it. He didn't want to go back.

He didn't want to shift again and be forced to remember the way she cried, the way she whispered I don't trust you, even as her fingers clung to me.

He laid his head on his paws to think of her.

Not in memories, not like humans. He thought of her in scent and images.

In sound. In that little huff she made when she was annoyed and trying not to smile.

In the way she tasted when she kissed us—something the bear remembered too well.

She's still ours.

This was the part I could never quite figure out. The bear Thorne loved Ella as much as I did, but when I was in my human form, Thorne tried everything to make it clear that he didn't like her.

When the cold began to settle deep into our joints, I rose, shook out the ache, and padded back toward the line of trees where I had left my clothes. It was time to go back to work.

Smoke it could have overwhelmed the place with darkness, but the lighter furnishings and lighting broke the shadows off enough to make it look intimate, not oppressive.

My crew was in full swing when I entered. Loud music blared from a boom speaker, trying hard to compete with the sound of a nail gun, a tile cutter, and a chainsaw. After the stillness of the forest, the noise was especially overpowering to my sensitive ears. A headache was unavoidable.

"Hey, boss," Adam yelled. Adam was my superintendent and a gargoyle, who didn't care for his human form too much. He abhorred touch, and his human emotions were too much for him. He preferred to stay in his gargoyle form.

"Hey Adam, how are we coming along?" I shook his cold, stony hand.

"Good, the bathrooms are done, want to see?"

I didn't. I wanted to get the hell away from all the noise.

But I put on my game face, nodded, and followed him.

In front of the bathrooms stood a wooden divider wall, designed to mimic the look of a forest outhouse.



When Ella first brought it up, I thought she was out of her mind.

Who would want to feel like they were using a public restroom in the woods? In a restaurant ?

Now, though—I could see the vision. The first strands of faux ivy had been draped over the beams, adding to the illusion of being tucked deep in the forest.

This place might not appeal to humans in the traditional sense, but shifters? Shifters would love it. I was sure of it. It gave just the right sense of exclusivity without the stuffy feel of luxury.

Inside, the bathroom looked nothing like a restroom.

It felt like a clearing in the woods—dim lighting, reclaimed wood walls, soft pine scent in the air.

The stalls were framed with rough-hewn logs, the sinks carved from smooth river stone.

Faux ivy hung from the beams, and soft forest sounds played from hidden speakers—birdsong, rustling leaves, the occasional distant owl.

Ella had somehow made it feel... natural. Private. Safe.

Shifters would eat this up. It wasn't about showing off. It was about creating a space that made people feel like they belonged.

And damn if she hadn't nailed it.

There was no denying she was an excellent chef, but I saw her potential as a

decorator, as well. Just the right kind of person I needed for my various projects. So far, I hadn't found a single person to decorate the spec houses the way I envisioned them.

"It's perfect," I nodded at Adam.

His rough hand moved over the wide-mouthed faucet. "I don't know who you hired for this, but he or she is a genius."

I couldn't have agreed more. Now I just needed to find out if Ella would be open to the idea of a side job. She probably had enough work to do with her restaurants, but I wasn't above begging if I had to.

As if thinking about her had conjured her up, she was standing right in the middle of the restaurant when Adam and I left the bathroom.

She looked good. Too good. Blonde hair up in one of those messy buns she always wore when she meant business, cheeks a little flushed, fingers dusted with something—plaster maybe, or flour.

Hell if I knew. She always made a mess look like art.

Thorne stirred immediately. Ugh. She's here.

Again. In the middle of a half-finished construction zone.

One loose tile, and she'll twist an ankle.

Or slip. Or trip over her own damn bootlaces.

Clumsy human. You should've made her wear a hard hat.

You don't like her, remember? I silently reminded him.

I don't. But if she falls, I swear I'm eating Adam.

I sighed, already bracing myself. "Ella, what a nice surprise," I said, stepping toward her. I didn't touch her—still keeping to her rules, her pace—but God, I wanted to. Just a hand on her waist. Just for a moment.

Adam squinted at her, his rocky brows rising slightly. "This your secret weapon?"

"She's the designer of the bathrooms," I confirmed.

He nodded slowly, tilting his head in that way he did when he was sizing someone up. "That so? I don't usually notice things like sinks and... foliage, but that setup made me rethink a few centuries of aesthetic standards."

For a moment, Ella looked thrown off, but she caught herself and smiled politely. "Thanks, I think."

Adam's stony features didn't shift, but he leaned in just enough to drop his voice a note. "You do interior design on the side? Might have a few clients that could use that kind of eye."

Thorne snarled so loudly in my head, I staggered. Oh hell no. That's your woman, Patrick. Your woman. You let Gargoyle Ken try to poach her with compliments about sinks? What's next, a date to the quarry?!

He's being nice, I muttered inwardly. Back off.

Nice? He just mentally measured her for a wedding dress made of stone dust and bad decisions.

Adam glanced at me. “You good?”

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth.

Ella blinked. “You sure? You look like you just swallowed a drywall screw.”

“I’m great,” I bit out. “Perfect.”

Thorne was still pacing inside me like a bear denied dinner. Touch her arm. Say something smooth. Growl. Do something. Why aren’t we growling?

Because we’re functioning adults .

Barely.

I cleared my throat. “You wanted to check out the kitchen updates?”

"Actually," she bit her lower lip, looking like she had decided something and regretted it now.

"I was thinking... I brought a picnic... if you like..."

what I mean is... I put together a menu for the restaurant.

And I brought some sample foods. I thought we might try them.

Outside. Not in here. It's stuffy and dusty and... "

I always loved put-together, functioning Ella, but this version of her, showing some insecurity and rambling?

It nearly threw me off my rocker. She was drop-dead gorgeous when she was flustered.

I took the first moment she took a deep breath to assure her, "That sounds like a great idea.

Why don't we go outside? I know just the place. "

"Okay." She looked relieved and nodded at Adam, "It was nice meeting you."

Thorne growled. If Gargoyle Ken winks at her one more time, I'm digging a trench.

What's with you? I asked, amused. A jealous Thorne was something new. Just like a flustered Ella. It looked like today was my lucky day.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

This was a bad idea. I didn't like how I had stuttered—that wasn't me—I didn't like the way my heart was thumping in my chest—or maybe palpitating—I liked least of all the way I'd just let Patrick McCloud lift the picnic basket out of my hands and say, “Come on. I want to show you something.”

He made it seem so normal, as if the past ten years hadn't happened. For a moment, I considered saying, I'm sorry, I changed my mind. This was a bad idea. But then he turned and smiled that smile at me, and I followed him like a complete idiot.

Now we were walking through a narrow trail that cut behind the east side of Cedar Hollow. His truck was parked under a cluster of pine trees. I kept two steps behind him, surreptitiously taking in the way his shoulders flexed while he carried the basket, making it look easy.

The forest was quiet, except for a breeze rustling the leaves overhead and the occasional crunch of twigs beneath our boots—oh, and the absolute chaos happening inside my ribcage.

I was hyper-aware of everything. The warmth of the sun on the back of my neck.

The soft piney smell of the woods. The fact that I hadn't put on enough lip balm.

The way Patrick had looked at me when he said, “Let me.” Not bossy.

Not pushy. Just... that soft kind of firm he used to reserve for when I was being particularly stubborn.

Which, according to several sources, I was—quite frequently.

We came to a small and private clearing, with a little rise that overlooked a field of late-blooming wildflowers and offered a view of the Hollow below. It was breathtaking. The spot reminded me of the cover of a romance novel.

Which was probably why I started panicking.

I didn't mean to. I wasn't even sure what exactly set it off.

The dappled light? The quiet? The stupid way he crouched down to spread the blanket?

Or maybe it was the way he looked up at me when he finished.

With that soft, quiet look. The one I had seen a million times in my dreams. The one that said I was his favorite person in the entire world.

I forced a breath in through my nose and told myself, You're fine, Ella. It's just a picnic. With a man. Who shattered your entire belief in love. No big deal .

“Sit?” he asked, gesturing to the blanket.

My legs obeyed before my brain could vote.

Traitorous knees. I watched him unpack the basket with the same kind of care he used to spread the blanket and arrange the dishes.

It was supposed to be a menu test, not a date.

A professional, curated, field-tasting opportunity for Patrick to sample potential

dishes for the Cedar Hollow opening.

It was. That's what I'd told myself when I'd carefully folded the napkins and packed the lemon-rosemary chicken salad, the roasted pear and arugula sandwiches, the hand-rolled oatcakes with blackberry compote.

I had poured sparkling elderflower water into reusable glass bottles and made a mental list of feedback questions.

"You made all this?" he asked, lifting the lid on the basket.

I nodded, already regretting the menu cards I'd handwritten and slipped in beside each container. "It's part of the new concept. I wanted your feedback."

He pulled out a sandwich and raised a brow. "Roasted pear and goat cheese?"

"With arugula. And fig jam." I specified.

He took a bite, and I swear to God, his eyes fluttered shut. Just for a second. Causing my stomach to do something I'm not legally allowed to describe.

"I think I just fell in love with a sandwich," he said.

"That's good," I replied, trying not to show how much it meant to hear him say it. "Because that sandwich took three test runs and a two-hour debate with Evan over whether figs are pretentious."

"They're incredible, " he said, already reaching for the little container of oatcakes. "What is this one?"

"Oats, honey, lemon zest, and some grated hazelnut. The blackberry compote is in the



jar.”

“You did all this for me?” he asked quietly.

I flinched. This line of questioning was becoming too intimate. “I did it for the restaurant.”

His eyes bored into me, telling me that he didn't believe a word I just said, but he didn't press. He just poured us each a glass of sparkling water and said, “Well, the restaurant's going to be unreal .”

The silence that followed was warm, wrapped in sunlight and a pine-scented breeze.

“This is my favorite spot in the Hollow,” he said after a while, glancing out at the view. “I used to come here after PT, when I needed to breathe.”

I glanced at him, caught off guard. “Why here?”

He looked over at me, his smile gentler now. “Because it's where I came when I missed you the most.”

Oh, hell. There it was again. That feeling .

My pulse stuttered, and all the carefully balanced professional boundaries I'd set unraveled like the edge of the napkin flapping in the breeze.

This was no longer a menu test. This was me, sitting on a blanket, falling— again—for a man who once broke my heart so completely, I hadn't known where to find the pieces.

And worse?

This time, I was doing it willingly, fully aware of what he was capable of.

I picked a crumb off my napkin, forced my voice to stay neutral, and said, “So... PT seems to have been successful for you.”

The moment of silence that followed was thick.

Way to go, Ella, way to break the ice . I hadn't been looking at him when I asked, but now I chanced a glance up—just a flick of the eyes—and found him watching me.

He didn't look surprised or angry. Maybe a bit startled.

Quietly, he said, “Yeah. Eventually. It took some time, though.”

My fingers still played with the poor napkin, pulling on it, balling it. “Your mobility—it’s... I mean, you move really well now.”

His smile was faint, a little sad. “That’s the nice way of asking if I’m still broken.”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not—I didn’t mean?”

“I know,” he said, cutting me off gently. “I’m not offended.”

I let out a slow breath and watched a breeze stir the hem of the blanket, stalling for time while I made up my mind to continue on this dangerous path or change the subject. Well, in for a dime and all that ...

“I wasn’t there,” I whispered, before I could talk myself out of it. “When it happened. I should’ve been, but I wasn’t.”

His brow furrowed. “Ells...”

“My mom had one of her mental fits,” I rushed out.

“It was nothing, really, just her usual bullshit. It was the only time I ever missed a game. I thought—God, I thought I had time. I thought there would be so many more games. I missed one. Just one.” The old guilt assaulted me.

How could I not have been there when he needed me the most?

Patrick was silent, and I read it like an accusation, so I kept going, “I found out when Carol called me. I picked up the phone, and she was screaming so loud I didn’t understand what she was saying at first.”

He nodded slowly. “She saved my life.”

I already knew that, but it seemed like this was something he needed to get off his chest.

“She was in the stands,” he said. “She saw me go down and knew something was wrong before the medics even got to me. She jumped the fence, screaming at the trainers to check my spine. The first guy thought I was just winded. Carol made sure they didn’t move me.

” He smiled wistfully. “I watched the recordings, later...

much later. She tackled Coach.” Now he was chuckling, but I was willing to bet it had taken him years before he could chuckle about it.

I had seen the same videos. Everybody had been there.

Everybody had their cameras trained on the star football player.

My stomach still turned, the memory of watching Patrick go down too fresh to join in his chuckles over Carol tackling Coach to the ground to stop him from removing Patrick's helmet.

A feat that was later hailed as having saved his life.

“She called you and my dad from the ambulance,” he added.

The amusement in his eyes from a second ago had been replaced by torment.

We both knew he had left one fact out. Carol had called his dad because Patrick's mom was already dead at that point. Had been dead for three months. She and Patrick had been at the gym when she had suddenly keeled over. An aneurysm had ruptured in her brain. An aneurysm nobody knew about. A ticking time bomb in her head, a reminder of how fragile life could be. Patrick had taken it hard. He'd talked her into going to the gym with him, watched her collapse, and held her as she died.

That night, the family hadn't even recovered from the sudden shock of losing her.

And they were all back at the hospital. Waiting for news on Patrick this time.

Henry had been my rock when I should have been the one holding him up.

Gabe and Carol had bickered as usual. At that memory, I couldn't stop myself—a small giggle escaped me, and Patrick looked at me, brows lifted in question.

“Gabe called Carol an Encyclopain, ” I said, wiping under my eye as I tried to hold back another laugh.

“What?” Patrick's laughter still sounded a bit forced, his mind still on past tragedies.

“They never told me. What happened?”

“Oh, it was in the waiting room. Everyone was on edge, as you can probably imagine. We were waiting to hear from the doctors, assuming the worst. Tense doesn't even come close to how it was. Carol kept grilling the nurses, demanding updates, quoting spinal injury stats like a walking med journal. Gabe was pacing like a caged tiger, and she told him to sit down before he wore a hole in the linoleum . He snapped back, Why don't you shut it, Encyclopain ?”

Patrick barked a laugh, hand over his mouth. “ Encyclopain? ”

I nodded, grinning now. “Yeah. Carol turned bright red and called him an emotionally stunted meathead, which, to be fair, wasn't entirely inaccurate.”

“Sounds like Carol.”

“Right? And then Henry told them both to shut up or take it outside. Meanwhile, I sat there, holding onto a paper cup of cold coffee like it was holy water, wondering if anyone in that waiting room was not slowly losing their mind.”

He shook his head, smiling that soft, nostalgic smile I hadn't seen in a decade. “Nobody ever told me.”

“You didn't miss much,” I said. “Except for Carol threatening to stab Gabe with a thermometer.”

Patrick laughed again, and this time the sound was warm and full. It rolled through me like sunshine.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

Our eyes met, the air sizzled heavily between us, and I felt myself leaning forward, ready to cup her chin and kiss her, but she turned away. And I let her.

"We should probably get back," Ella suggested.

As much as I wanted to stay here and talk more with her, I knew she was right.

This was a good step forward in our relationship, but that's all it was.

There was still a canyon between us, filled with old memories and pain we needed to navigate.

Her more than me. I got that. So with a sigh, I followed her lead, and we put the empty dishes back into the basket. I shook out the blanket and folded it.

"This was nice," I said. "Thank you."

Her smile was almost shy—so not like the go-getter Ella I had known so long ago. Not even like the business Ella I was getting to know now. It was sweet and heartfelt, and it did things to my insides I didn't know I still had the capacity to feel.

It also made me feel like an ass. Like a huge, steaming, unforgivable ass.

I had broken this woman's heart. Torn it right out, stomped on it, and left it bleeding at the foot of a hospital bed.

For the first time, the full reality of that landed.

Not the abstract guilt I'd carried around like background noise.

No—this was sharp, deep, and consuming. If someone else had done to her what I'd done? I'd beat the living shit out of them.

Thorne stirred deep in my chest, low and growling. There it is. Guilt. Shame. Long overdue, genius. You broke our mate, and now you're surprised she flinches when you get too close?

She flinched, I admitted, the unspoken words burning in my throat.

Damn right she did, Thorne snapped. You earned it. Don't act shocked now, just because you want her back.

I clenched my jaw as I folded the blanket, trying to ignore the way my hands trembled just slightly.

She used to lean into us, Thorne went on, his voice quiet now. Almost mournful. Remember? She'd tuck under your chin like she belonged there. She did belong there. You threw that away.

I know.

Fix it.

I'm trying.

Ella looked back at me then, catching me mid-thought. Her brows lifted like she could tell I was a million miles away.

"Need help with that?" she asked, nodding at the basket.

“No,” I said quickly. “I got it.”

She nodded, brushing her fingers on her jeans, then started toward the trail.

I fell into step beside her. We didn’t talk much on the walk back.

But it wasn’t the uncomfortable kind of silence.

It was... thoughtful. Measured. The kind of quiet that said we were both working through the weight of what had just passed between us.

When we reached the truck, I opened the door for her like always. She paused, looked up at me like she wanted to say something—but didn’t. Just slid into the seat with a little exhale.

“Thank you,” she said softly, after I got in and started the truck.

“For what?”

“For not pushing.”

I looked over at her. “You’re worth the wait.”

Thorne grumbled. Oh, now you decide to say something right. Maybe tomorrow you can grow a spine and actually ask for a second picnic before we die of old age.

She blinked fast, and I watched her throat as she swallowed before she turned her head away. Was she crying? I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I worried I’d overstep the fragile bridge we were building and fall down into the canyon between us.



After a while, I said. "This was nice."

Her head turned toward me, and I was glad not to find any tears in her eyes. "Yes, it was. So you liked the food?"

"Liked?" I forced a laugh to get back to our easy conversation style from earlier, "I freaking loved it."

"Patrick?"

"Yes."

"We're grown ups now; you can say the word fuck ."

I laughed again, and this one wasn't forced at all. Ella had always had the ability to make me laugh.

"Alright. I fucking loved your food."

This time, there were no barriers in her smile; it was all Ella, open, wide, and honest. And God, did I want to kiss her. I would have given everything to pull her against me and devour her mouth, to feel her body pressed against mine again.

You will , I promised myself. Soon . You will make this right .

Soon after, I pulled into the gravel parking lot in front of Smoke & Ember , where her car was still parked.

She unbuckled her seatbelt, and I raced around the truck to open the door for her.

That was when Thorne kicked me. Not metaphorically.

Not gently. A full mental shove like a freight train, all teeth and demand.

Say it.

What ?

Say it. Ask her again. I liked her food. I want more. And I want her to look at us like that again. Like we're hers.

You're impossible, I shot at him.

So are you. Ask the damn question.

I opened the door and cleared my throat, feeling like a teenager again. "Ella?"

She paused, half-turned toward me, one foot midway out of the truck. "Yeah?"

"I know I said I'd wait... and I meant it. But I want to say it again. Just once. So it's out there."

I could see her guard returning, so I hurried and said, "Will you have dinner with me? Not for the restaurant. Not for feedback. Just... us."

With bated breath, I watched the turmoil in her eyes. Say yes, say yes, say yes, my mind repeated like a prayer, as if my silent cheering would sway her mind. She set her chin, and I prepared myself for a rejection. "Yes, I would like that."

I hid the deep breath I was taking and let out slowly, while Thorne let out a satisfied rumble that echoed through my chest like a promise.

Finally.

"Yes?" I checked.

She smiled, "Yes. Pick me up tomorrow night at six."

I put the picnic basket into the trunk of her car, unable to believe she was actually giving me another chance.

"And Patrick," she called while I held her door open for her.

"Yes?" I looked up, still grinning like a man who'd just been handed oxygen after ten years underwater.

She slid into the driver's seat, met my eyes, and added, "This dinner? It better be damn good. Redemption-grade good."

I chuckled. "I'll bring appetizers and groveling."

Her smile widened. "Don't forget dessert. I hold grudges, but I'm also highly susceptible to chocolate."

She shut the door before I could respond, leaving me outside the car—stunned, hopeful, and more determined than ever not to screw this up.

Thorne muttered, Wear the shirt that makes our arms look big.

I'm not wearing that shirt.

Wear. The. Shirt .

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

This was a bad idea. A terrible idea. The worst idea.

“Tell me again why I agreed to this,” I said, holding up a dress like it personally offended me. “And if you say closure, I’ll throw this hanger at your head.”

Carol, comfortably perched on the edge of my bed with a glass of wine and a bag of pretzels, barely looked up. “You didn’t agree to this for closure . You agreed to this because you’re still wildly in love with him and your soul lights on fire every time he breathes near you.”

I blinked. “How much wine have you had?”

“Not enough to make your drama any more tolerable.”

I groaned and flopped face-first onto the bed. “This is a disaster. I haven’t had a real date in years. I don’t even know what people talk about anymore. Do I ask about his health insurance? His five-year plan? If he’s emotionally stable enough to date someone he ghosted for ten years?”

Carol took another sip. “Breathe, Marshmallow.”

I lifted my head and glared at her. “Don’t call me that. That’s Gabe’s name for you .”

“Oh, sorry. Princess of Panic. Better?”

I threw a pillow at her. She ducked and smirked.

“You look great, by the way,” she added. “Even in sweatpants.”

“Not helpful.”

She stood and took the dress from my hand. “Okay, this one is a no. Try the black one. The one with the halter neckline.”

“The one that makes me look like I’m trying too hard?”

“No, the one that makes you look like a woman who might finally be ready to stop hiding behind menu tastings and sarcasm and just say she still wants the guy.”

I sighed. “You’re insufferable.”

“That's why you love me so much.”

I slipped into the black dress and turned to the mirror. It was... good. Flattering, in a simple way. A little soft around the waist, but nothing a posture adjustment couldn’t fix.

Carol appeared behind me and gave a nod of approval. “Light makeup. Barely-there gloss. Tiny earrings. You’re going for I’m effortlessly thriving, not I cried into my salad last week. ”

“I did cry into my salad last week.”

“And now you’re going to eat bread with the man who made you do it. Full circle.”

I exhaled slowly, reaching for my lip balm. “This still feels dangerous.”

She stepped behind me, put both hands on my shoulders, and squeezed. “That’s

because it is. Love is always a risk. But you're a grown woman now, El. You can handle a little fire."

I stared at my reflection; my hair was a mess as always, but the dress did make me look a little thinner—my hips had started flaring during my éclair recipe exploration period. The makeup was soft, but didn't hide how nervous I looked.

I whispered, "What if he hurts me again?"

Carol didn't miss a beat. "Then we kill him. Together. I know where Henry keeps the shovels."

That got a laugh out of me—small, but real.

I stood up straighter, "Okay. Let's do this."

Carol grinned. "Go get your bear, baby."

Just then, the doorbell chimed, and I nearly dropped the clutch I had just picked up. My heart startled out of my chest, and the glimpse I caught of myself in the mirror reminded me of the proverbial deer in the headlights.

"He's early," I exclaimed with a loud exhale.

"He has a lot of ground to make up, now go," Carol pushed me into the living room and retreated back into the bedroom, only partially closing the door so she could watch the show Patrick and I were about to put on.

I threw one last glance at her as I grabbed the door handle in a death grip, and she made a zipping motion in front of her lips.

She didn't want Patrick to know that she was here.

She worried we would feel obligated to invite her to come with us, and she wasn't wrong; a twinge of guilt already gnawed at my insides.

That guilt vanished, however, the moment I opened the door and looked at Patrick. Hell, I had noticed before how much more handsome he had gotten, but wearing a suit and tie, he was a real knockout.

"You look beautiful," he said, holding out a bouquet of lilies—my favorites, oh heart, be still, don't beat a mile a minute just because he remembered!

"Thank you. You remembered," I exclaimed.

"It's hard to forget any details about you, Ells," he said, so smoothly that my heart decided to skip a few beats of its wild pounding.

"Come on in. I'll just put them in a vase," I waved him in, pretending I hadn't spent the entire day cleaning. Not that I was a messy person or anything, but flour does have a way of getting into the weirdest spots, especially when you use it a lot.

"This is nice." Patrick looked around the spacious area. It was an open concept with a kitchen, dining, and living room. I could have afforded something more than just an apartment these days, but it was just me, and I didn't need a lot of room.

Most days, I worked for ten hours at the restaurants anyway.

I opened a cupboard and was about to climb up on the counter—yes, I'm that short—to reach a vase, when I felt his presence behind me. Like right behind me. Like his body pressing into my back.

"Allow me," his voice was deep and seductive, although he was only trying to help. I couldn't stop myself. I leaned into him; it was as if my body was magically pulled. The moment only lasted a second, but the intense emotions he inflamed in me were there to stay.

"Thank you." I took the vase with shaking hands and filled it with water, while he took the plastic wrapper off the flowers, cut the rubber band around the stems, and poured the contents of a little packet of flower food into the water.

The sound of a low thump from the bedroom caught our attention.

"What was that?" Patrick asked, already making a move to the bedroom.

I caught the back of his jacket and pulled him back, well, not really pulled, because there was no way for me to pull that massive man anywhere, but he stopped. "Nothing, are you ready to go?"

His entire posture screamed he wasn't. He wanted to know who or what was in my bedroom, but he seemed to realize that he had no rights here. He sighed, and I had mercy on him. I whispered, "Carol is hiding in there. She didn't want to end up being the third wheel."

His expression eased, and a quiet chuckle escaped him. "Then we'd better go."

He offered me his arm, and I took it. We stepped out into the early evening light, where he led me to his truck, opening the door for me like a gentleman.

He had always been thoughtful that way. Except when he broke your heart, real gentlemanly like, my mind snarked, and I told it to shut up, because this was a fresh start.



We drove in silence for a bit, and I realized he wasn't taking us back into town. Instead, we were driving toward Cedar Hollow. My curiosity grew when he took a little side road that led deeper into the woods.

"It's not a long walk," Pats said when he stopped the truck and came around to help me out. "I'm sorry, I should have warned you," he pointed at my shoes.

"It's alright," I waved his concern off, unless we were going on a mile-long hike, it would be okay.

He took my hand and led me down a surprisingly paved path that wound through the trees and dipped into the western edge of the Hollow.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see."

Patrick smiled like a man with a secret, and I hated how much I wanted to know what it was. My heels clicked softly on the gravel, but he slowed his pace without my asking—like he always used to when I wore shoes that made me two inches taller and thirty percent clumsier.

After a few minutes of walking, I saw lights. Tiny, warm fairy lights strung between trees, their soft glow flickered through branches like fireflies caught mid-dance. They lit a narrow wooden bridge that stretched over a stream and led to a small open-air structure on the other side.

It was... magical.

Rustic wood beams formed a frame overhead, draped in ivy and more lights. A table stood at the center, already set with linen napkins, mismatched vintage plates, and

flickering candles inside glass jars. The scent of fresh herbs and something baking drifted faintly in the breeze. My breath caught.

“You did this?” I asked.

He nodded. “It’s part of a future event space for the Hollow. It's not open to the public yet, so I figured...” He scratched the back of his neck, suddenly boyish. “Might as well put it to good use.”

I turned in a slow circle, taking in the firepit off to one side, the stack of handmade blankets, the bottle of wine chilling in a tin pail.

“Did Carol help you plan this?” I asked, trying not to get emotional over a patch of fairy lights and a very well-positioned bouquet of wildflowers.

“Nope.” His grin widened. “Carol’s better at threats. This was all me.”

I turned back to him.

“You’ve changed.”

“Yeah.” He said, stepping closer, voice low. “But the important parts? The ones that always loved you?” He reached up and tucked a curl behind my ear, his fingers barely brushing my skin. “Those never went anywhere.”

I was about to make a joke. Deflect. Redirect. Anything to stop the feelings from surging so fast, they left me lightheaded. Instead, I said, “Then you better sit me down and feed me something spectacular . Because if I’m letting you try again... it better be damn worth it.”

Patrick’s smile turned roguish. “Oh, don’t worry, Chef. I’ve got appetizers, a main

course, and at least three kinds of dessert.”

“Ambitious.”

“I’m trying to earn my second chance.” He replied with an expression on his face that was hard to describe.

It was rueful, guilty, hopeful, and so insecure, it nearly tripped me.

Thankfully, he offered me a chair, and as I sat, the candles flickered just enough to light the quiet hope behind his eyes.

The first bite shut me up. I blamed the bread. It was warm, soft in the center, with a perfect golden crust and a whisper of garlic and herbs. I didn’t even like garlic bread that much. But this—this was homemade. And it was perfect .

I stared down at the slice in my hand like it had personally betrayed me. “You made this?”

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Patrick grinned across the table, hands folded as if he were in court awaiting a verdict. “I did.”

“From scratch?”

“Three tries. The first one could’ve doubled as a brick. Second one almost caught fire. Third one... well, that’s what you’re eating now.”

“Who even are you?” I asked, reaching for another piece before I finished the first.

“Someone who paid very close attention to your face the first time I took you to Giardanno's Pizza place.”

My heart clenched so hard I nearly dropped the plate.

Giardanno had been our favorite restaurant.

Maybe because it was the only one that worked within our teenage budget, or maybe because the food was delicious.

I took a sip of wine to cover up how much his words affected me.

How much he affected me. We moved through the courses slowly.

Every dish—from bruschetta al pomodoro to lasagna—wasn't anything overly fancy, but it was thoughtful, perfect, and delicious. Each plate tasted like memory and longing and quiet apologies. He wasn't trying to impress me with extravagance. He

was trying to show me he remembered.

By the time we got to dessert, I was full. He poured me another glass of wine—Chianti—and placed a little ramekin in front of me. Molten chocolate cake. I stared at it for a full ten seconds. “You remembered this?”

He grinned, "How could I forget? You had it every time!"

I laughed softly; it slipped out before I could stop it.

But he didn't smile this time. He just looked at me.

Really looked at me. Like he was looking at the girl sitting next to him in that tacky, red plastic booth.

But also, like he saw something more—much more.

I didn't know what to say. So instead, I reached for the spoon and took a bite.

The moment the chocolate hit my tongue, rich and melty and painfully familiar, I closed my eyes and whispered, “Okay, fine. This was a damn good dinner.”

Patrick chuckled, making me realize that I wanted to hear that sound again.

Maybe a thousand more times. Gently, I set the spoon down, trying not to let my fingers shake.

The night had slipped into that golden quiet—the kind where time didn't matter and every glance felt like a question waiting to be answered.

He leaned back in his chair, wineglass cradled in one hand, and looked at me in a way

that said he could look at me forever. And I... I kind of wanted him to. Which was a terrifying thought.

“So,” he said, voice soft now, “was it worth it?”

I tilted my head, pretending to think. “The bread, yes. The lasagna, absolutely. The chocolate cake sealed the deal.”

“But?”

I hesitated. “But... it’s not the food that scares me.”

He didn’t say anything, just waited—steady and quiet, like he knew not to push this time. I took another sip of wine. “It’s how easy it is to be here with you. How comfortable. How familiar. Like no time has passed. Like I never had to stitch myself back together.”

His jaw tightened slightly. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Silence fell again, but it didn’t feel empty.

It felt full.

“I’ve missed you,” he said finally. “Every version of you. But especially this one.”

My throat tightened. Before I could respond, a breeze stirred the candle flames, and one flickered out, plunging half the table in shadow.

Patrick stood and stepped around the table, grabbing a lighter from the basket.

He lit it again, but didn't sit back down.

Instead, he offered me a hand. "Come on."

I stared at it. "Where?"

He grinned. "Over there."

He gestured toward the firepit in the clearing's corner. It was already glowing, low and warm, throwing soft amber light over the little stack of folded blankets.

"I'm not slow dancing in the woods," I said, even as my hand moved toward his.

"I didn't say anything about dancing," he replied. "But for the record, I have it on good authority that I'm excellent at it."

"Who told you that?"

"You. Junior prom. Two glasses of sparkling apple cider and a slow song later, you told me I was shockingly coordinated."

"God, that dress was hideous."

"You wore it like it was couture."

"You kissed me behind the bleachers."

"Best three minutes of my life."

I rolled my eyes, laughing as I stood. "You really haven't changed that much."

He tugged me gently closer. “No. Just enough.”

We walked to the fire, and, from out of nowhere, soft music started to play.

You Are the Reason by Calum Scott . Our song.

Tears stung my eyes, and as if in a trance, I allowed Patrick to pull me into his strong arms. So different from ten years ago, and yet so achingly familiar.

I leaned into his chest, listened to the soft drum of his heart, felt his strength surrounding me, and it was as if time had reversed.

It was us.

Then.

Now.

My arms moved around his wide chest; my fingers dug into his hair, longer now but still the same.

I breathed in his familiar scent: pine, smoke, and his own musk.

My chest filled and constricted at the same time.

I closed my eyes and let myself go to the gentle sway of him and the music.

I allowed myself to float. To be swept away by my emotions, by being here, back in his arms. After all this time.

I felt his lips softly brushing my forehead, his kiss felt sweet and guilt-filled on my



skin. I clung to him, thinking I could never let him go again.

And realized with a start that yes, he had shattered my heart when I was a teenager, but I'd put it back together, a bit crooked, a bit broken still, but back together.

I'd already suspected that I wouldn't survive if it happened a second time, but in that moment, I knew with absolute certainty that if I gave it back to him, and he did it again, there would be nothing left to rebuild.

It wouldn't simply kill me. He would rip me into millions of pieces.

There were fates worse than dying, and he had the power to completely obliterate me.

With a cry, I pulled back, staring up at him.

"Ells?"

I started shaking my head, "I can't, Pats. I'm sorry. I just can't!"

The last bit, I screamed. Then I ripped out of his hold and started running.

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Her body in my arms felt like something sacred. So achingly familiar and...

MINE!

We swayed together beneath the soft glow of the firelight, her cheek pressed to my chest, the way it had always belonged there.

She fit perfectly against me like we were carved from the same piece of time, like the ten years that had torn us apart were nothing more than a long breath between heartbeats.

And God help me, I was hard.

Not just aroused. Not just wanting her—that was a given.

She'd always wrecked me. Always lit my blood on fire with just a look, a laugh, a touch.

This— this —was more than physical. It was soul deep.

Every inhale she took pressed her body tighter to mine, and every pass of her fingers through my hair undid another piece of my composure.

Her scent—lemon, sugar, and something warm I could never name—wrapped around me, and I wanted to drown in it.

I wanted to pick her up, carry her to the blankets by the fire, and worship every inch

of her.

And then beg.

Beg her to stay.

To forgive me.

To let me be hers again.

Because I missed her. Every version of her.

Every single breath of her presence that I had lived without for far too long.

The girl she was, the woman she'd become—they both lived in my blood now.

I buried my face in her hair, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and let my guilt seep into that small act of tenderness like a prayer.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

She held me tighter, fingers in my hair, soft sounds in her throat that could've been sighs or sobs. I didn't know. I only knew I never wanted to let her go. So when she did—when she pulled back and looked up at me, tears glittering in her eyes—I felt it even before it happened.

"Ells?" I asked, heart cracking.

Her voice shook. "I can't, Pats. I'm sorry. I just can't!"

She ripped away from me like my touch burned her, and then—she ran. Just like that.

Spun on her heel, dress flowing, hair wild, gone into the trees. For a second, I was too stunned to move. But then?—

Thorne roared, Go! Move. She's running. Our mate is running.

I froze.

We can't chase her, I thought, even as adrenaline lit up every nerve in my body.

Thorne didn't care. Yes. We can. We will. You let her get away once. Never again.

She needs space?—

No, she needs US.

My hands clenched. My body vibrated with the pull of the shift. It was the first time in my life Thorne had tried to force-take possession, and I didn't like it. Not one bit. And then I heard it—Ella's cry from somewhere in the woods. Not in pain. Not in fear. Just raw and wrecked.

And that was it.

My body broke.

The clothes tore first—shirt splitting down the back, jeans ripping at the seams. I dropped to my knees with a growl as fur burst across my skin and bone, teeth lengthened, and muscles expanded.

Thorne took over.

And we ran. Through pine and dirt, over rocks and fallen branches, lungs heaving,

paws pounding.

Not because she was prey. No, because she was everything and so much more.

But there was something else. Something deep and primal inside both of us, Thorne and me.

The urge to chase our mate. To chase her down and make her ours.

I had never felt that urge before. I heard about it.

I had seen it happen at the reunions, but I would have never believed that it could take me over so utterly and completely that it reduced me to a primal being I didn't recognize.

I felt Thorne's arousal as much as mine, but I was in control of mine.

I wasn't so sure about him. I needed to stop him, but I wasn't sure how or if I would even be able to. In this form, he was the alpha.

She was fast. Much faster than I remembered. Branches caught in her hair, the hem of her dress snagged and tore, but she didn't stop. Didn't even glance back. Her heart was pounding—I could hear it. Wild and erratic like mine—like ours.

The scent of her was everywhere—fear, adrenaline, heat. She wasn't afraid of me. She was afraid of what this was. Of what we were.

Thorne howled inside me. She's challenging us. She wants this. She needs to be caught.

She's not prey! I tried to set him straight.

She's ours. It's different.

The line between instinct and control blurred with every bound. Trees flashed past; the earth gave way under the thunder of our massive paws. I was vaguely aware of what I was doing—what Thorne was doing—but my control was fading. This wasn't just about catching her. It was about claiming her.

Every cell in my body ached for her. For her scent, her skin, the sound of her breath catching when I touched her. We'd been slow, gentle, and careful as teenagers. We barely knew what we were doing. Both virgins.

Not anymore.

That part of me was gone.

There was only fire now.

Only need.

And her.

Up ahead, she stumbled, catching herself on a tree.

She turned just enough for me to see her face—flushed, wide-eyed, lips parted.

Fear emanated from every cell of her body.

I tried to see what she saw: a massive bear bearing down on her.

She had never seen me in my bear form. She didn't know anything about Thorne. She had never wanted to talk about the shifter in me, and now I was—we were—chasing

her down. She wasn't screaming or crying, just appeared frozen in utter terror.

Thorne bared his teeth in a grin. Now. Pounce. Take her.

No, I thought, clawing for control. Not like this. I won't hurt her.

Make her yours.

We broke into the clearing at the same moment she slipped behind another tree.

All I saw was a glimpse of her bare feet.

She must have shaken off her shoes along the way.

I noticed the torn fabric of her dress. But it was her scent that undid me completely.

Sweet and sharp and hers. I couldn't stop.

I didn't want to.

With a snarl, I launched forward and shifted mid-lunge. Fur peeled away. Muscle reformed. Skin returned just in time to hit the ground as a man, not a bear—but bare, chest heaving, lungs burning, completely wrecked.

I landed behind her, my arms caging her between the tree and me.

“Ella,” I rasped.

She froze. Panic showed on her features, the way her body trembled, her voice was a blur of words, “What—what the hell was that? Was that... a bear?”

We were both breathing like we'd been drowning. Her back pressed against the tree, my hands pressed flat to the bark beside her shoulders, not touching, but surrounding her .

"Don't run from me," I said, voice hoarse. "Not ever."

She turned slowly, eyes brimming with something wild and alive. "I didn't mean to run. I just—I couldn't?—"

"I know," I said. "I know."

"Was that... that bear... there was a bear... why are you naked? Patrick?"

"That was me Ells, in bear form," I said lowly, afraid if I spoke too loudly or harshly, she would bolt again.

"You?"

I nodded, giving her time to process.

"Oh."



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I didn't think. I just ran. My dress caught on branches, my shoes slipped off—I didn't even notice when. All I knew was that I had to move, to get away , before I fell completely apart in his arms. Again.

The tears came fast. I didn't sob, didn't scream—just ran like my lungs were on fire and the forest floor was chasing me.

Needing to get away. From him. From the memories.

From the present. It was all too much. I wasn't ready for this kind of emotional turmoil.

I wasn't ready to give myself to Patrick again.

I wasn't sure I ever would be. At the same time, my heart was breaking harder with every step that took me further away from him. I couldn't be without him either.

And then I heard it. A loud sound like... crashing. It was heavy and fast and oh, so wrong. I turned just enough to see it— a bear! A massive, hulking, fur-covered beast, charging through the trees like the forest itself was nothing.

I couldn't breathe.

A bear. A real bear. His eyes were wild, his snout snarled, his head was as big as a damn truck, and he was coming for me.

Terror rooted me where I stood. I was utterly frozen, all I could do was stare as he

thundered toward me—and then, right as he launched into the air, right as I knew I was about to die?—

He shifted.

Fur peeled back into skin, fangs into teeth, eyes into eyes I recognized?—

Patrick.

Naked. Wild. On his knees behind me, chest heaving like he'd been running for a hundred years.

“Ella,” he rasped.

My mind could not keep up. I stared at him, frozen, my body too caught between primal terror and raw relief to move. First, there was a bear, then there was a man . There was a... both?

“What—what the hell was that?” I whispered, voice shaking. “Was that... a bear?”

Patrick's hands were on either side of me, caging me in—but not touching. Like he knew I might shatter, and that he would be the reason for it. His voice was breathless, "Don't run from me. Not ever."

"I didn't mean to run," I tried to explain my panic, "I just..." I didn't know how to form the words, my heart was racing a hundred miles an hour, and my mind didn't seem like it wanted to work and explain all the jumbled emotions that went through my head. "I couldn't."

He closed his eyes, his voice was deep and filled with empathy, "I know." He swallowed hard and repeated, "I know."

I was still having a hard time understanding what just happened; that had been a bear chasing me, right?

Where did he go? I looked around wildly, he could still be out there.

Patrick must have seen him. "Was that... that bear, there was a bear...

" While I was turning my head this way and that, my eyes landed on Patrick.

A completely naked Patrick. What the hell? "Why are you naked? Patrick?"

He swallowed hard, eyes still wild but... there. "That was me, Ells. In bear form."

I blinked. "You ? " I repeated.

He nodded once, slow and careful, as if any sudden movement might send me bolting again. I stared at him for a long moment.

"Oh," was all I could get out. It didn't make any sense. A bear! Patrick was a bear .

I had known he was a shifter . I had thought I'd known what it meant, too.

I'd been wrong. This entire time, I'd thought it meant bloodlines.

A family history. Something that might have made him faster and more agile, given him an above-average sense of smell, and maybe even made his bones ache at the full moon.

But not this. Not an actual bear-charging-through-the-woods-and-stripping-out-of-his-body shifter. This stuff only happened in books.

Yeah, denial is a bitch , my inner bitch chimed in.

Unfortunately, she was right. I had been in denial.

All my life, my mom had told me how horrendous shifters were, how dangerous.

Not that I had given my mom's words much thought, because my mother is, to put it nicely, certifiably crazy.

But somewhere over the years, I must have internalized it, enough so that when I actually fell for a shifter, I never dared talk about it with him. Did that make me a bad person?

I sank back against the tree and slid to the ground, still breathing hard.

“Okay,” I whispered again, more to myself than him. “Okay. So you’re a bear.”

He crouched in front of me, still giving me space. Still naked. “Yes.”

I tried to laugh. It came out halfway between a sob and a wheeze. “And I thought I had emotional baggage.”

He smiled faintly, just enough to break my heart a little more. “You always did have a way of deflecting at high speed.”

“I’m trying,” I muttered. “But it’s hard to crack jokes when there’s literal bear fur still stuck to the tree behind me.”

Patrick chuckled softly, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

He remained crouched in front of me, bare knees pressed into the mossy forest floor,

arms resting loosely on his thighs.

His body—his human body—was familiar, and yet not.

Broader. Older. Marked with new scars. He looked like a man who'd fought to earn every breath he took.

Suddenly, all I could feel was the weight of everything we hadn't said.

"I didn't know," I whispered.

His brows drew together. "Didn't know what?"

"That it was like that . That you were like that. That this"—I gestured vaguely at him, at the claw marks still fresh in the earth—"was real."

He tilted his head. "I tried to talk to you about it. Back then."

"I know." I winced. "I just... never knew what to say."

Patrick nodded slowly. "I noticed." He flinched. "It hurt. And it made it too easy."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

He looked down, drawing a small line in the dirt with his finger before answering. "It made me think you didn't like that part of me. That you didn't accept it. You never asked about it. Never even said the word, shifter. I figured you loved me in spite of it, not with it."

"That's not—" I started, then stopped. Because...

I didn't know how to finish that sentence.

I'd always prided myself on being a tolerant person.

But what good is tolerance when you close your eyes and willfully refuse to see the truth?

That was on me. Acceptance doesn't matter much when it's offered by a person who denies your very existence. The truth... hurt.

He nodded again. "Yeah. I know. You were seventeen. So was I. And you weren't exactly raised to think of people like me as a safe bet."

I swallowed. "My mom?—"

"I know." He gave me a small, sad smile. "Lisa isn't... subtle. She looked at me like I was a bomb waiting to go off."

"She's not exactly a shining example of sanity."

"No. But you still absorbed it."

Oof. That hit. Not because he was trying to hurt me, but because he wasn't wrong. I looked away, guilt slamming into my gut. "So you broke up with me because of that?"

"No," he said. "I broke up with you because I thought I was broken. Because I was broken. Literally. I couldn't walk."

I couldn't shift. I didn't want you to spend your life taking care of someone who might never be whole again.

And yeah, part of the reason was because the girl I loved didn't love all of me.

Not the part that was already... different.

I thought if you hadn't accepted me as a shifter, you wouldn't as a cripple either. "

My chest clenched as his words hit home.

I looked up at him. His eyes were so open and raw. Pain and anguish were written in them, and once again, I saw my teenage self in them, but this time, she beckoned me forward. It was then that I realized how wrong I'd been.

"I didn't know how to love that part of you," I whispered. "But I wanted to. I wanted to understand. I just... I was afraid."

He nodded once. "I get that now."

"I'm not afraid of you," I added quickly, meeting his gaze. "I mean, yeah, okay, the bear thing startled me . But I'm not scared of you. Not anymore."

Patrick exhaled, something easing in his shoulders.

"Good," he said. "Because the man and the bear? They're the same. And both of them are still in love with you."

My breath caught.

There was no dramatic music. No movie lighting. Just the quiet of the woods around us, the hush after the storm, and the bare-chested man in front of me, covered in dirt, breathing like he was still halfway between human and beast.

And somehow, those words hit harder than the chase. Both of them. Man and bear. Still in love with me.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I whispered.

“I don’t either,” he said, without hesitation. “But I want to try. If you’ll let me.”

I stared at him, at the sweat on his brow, the tensed line of his jaw, the curve of his throat where his pulse thudded. So hard and real. That's when I realized I wasn't scared anymore. Not of the bear, not even of Patrick.

I was scared of me.

Of the fact that I still loved him . So completely it was terrifying.

I didn't think I had ever stopped loving him—it had just gone underground and waited, coiled and patient, until the moment he reappeared and everything cracked open. Slowly, giving myself time to stop, I lifted a trembling hand and touched his chest. Just the center, right over his heart. Tears welled in my eyes—tears I didn't want to shed, not here, not now—but they came anyway. Hot and silent and stupid.

“I tried so hard to move on,” I whispered. “I dated. I worked. I built everything. But it always came back to you.”

He didn't move. Didn't push. He just stayed there, still and waiting, while I collapsed slowly forward into him.

He was ready for me; his arms wrapped around me, careful at first. Then tighter.

This time, I didn't sob. Not like before.



I just let go. Of all the years I'd been angry.

Of all the things I hadn't said. Of all the pieces of myself I'd buried to survive without him.

And for the first time in ten years, I felt whole.

Not fixed.

Not perfect.

Just... held .

"I don't forgive you yet," I said softly.

"I don't expect you to."

"But I think I want to."

He nodded, pressing his forehead to mine. "That's enough."

We stayed like that for a long time. Long enough for my pulse to slow. For my breathing to return to normal. For the forest to remember we were just two people again, not a storm tearing through the trees. Finally, I pulled back enough to look at him. "You're still naked."

He grinned. "Didn't hear you complaining."

I wiped my face. "Trust me. I will if we get ticks."

He laughed, kissed my forehead, and said, "I'll shift back, let Thorne cool off. He's...

dramatic.”

“I gathered,” I muttered.

He stood, and I immediately averted my eyes. “Blanket. Now. Before you scar me forever.”

“Ells?”

“Yeah?”

His voice was soft. “Thank you for staying. For giving me, us, another chance.”

He didn't give me a chance to reply before he changed back into a bear, Thorne. And yeah, I won't lie. It was terrifying. Seeing this massive beast appear in front of me... but something in his eyes caught my attention. There was a hint of Patrick in there.

Tentatively, I moved a step forward, holding my hand out. "Good bear... I mean, Thorne. Hello."

I felt stupid. Incredibly stupid.

Have you ever thought you would die one day because you petted something you weren't supposed to? I did, a lot of times. A lion at the zoo, a jaguar on TV, even a peacock at an outdoor wedding once—don't ask, it looked smug, and I took it personally.

There was also a goat at a farm fair who tried to headbutt me after I complimented his beard, a parrot who lunged at my finger like it owed him money, and a raccoon I briefly considered adopting until I realized it was trying to steal my sandwich and my soul.

I had a lifelong problem with trying to touch beautiful, dangerous things. Apparently, that included emotionally complicated bear shifters with carved jawlines and abs that could trigger a national emergency. And a shaggy bear, who, incredibly, patiently, let me step closer.

His snout moved forward. God, it was big.

Huge. And his fangs? Yeah, I saw those. A shiver moved through me—equal parts holy hell and please let me live .

His breath puffed warm across my fingers.

It smelled like moss and wildness and something oddly sweet.

Like clover, maybe. Or like something ancient pretending to be gentle.

"Okay," I whispered. "You're not mauling me. That's a good sign."

Thorne blinked—slowly, thoughtfully. Then, to my complete surprise, he leaned his head down and nudged his snout into my palm.

I froze and forgot completely how to breathe.

Because, holy shit, there was a bear right in front of me.

And not just any bear, this was Patrick.

This was Thorne. This was trust, laid bare in teeth and fur and restraint.

"Oh my God," I murmured. "You're... real."

The bear made a sound. Not quite a growl, but something deeper.

More like a huff. Like he was offended it had taken me this long to catch up.

And then— oh no —he leaned his full weight into me.

All four hundred something pounds of him.

I yelped and stumbled back, but not fast enough.

I ended up half-wedged between a tree and a literal bear hug.

His massive head was pressed into my shoulder, and I could swear— swear —he was purring. Or something close to it.

“Oh no,” I whispered. “You’re a cuddler .”

His ears twitched.

“Don’t you dare look smug about this,” I muttered, trapped and probably covered in leaf bits and bear drool. “I already gave a raccoon too much power in my life. I’m not letting you join that list.”

Still, I didn’t push him away. I let myself stay there, one hand resting on the thick fur of his back, the other buried somewhere under his chin. His eyes stayed on mine—watching and waiting.

And something in me... cracked. Not in a painful way. Not like before. It felt... it felt as if the pieces of my shredded heart were realigning.

“Okay,” I whispered, softer now, fully leaning into his embrace. “You win.”

Thorne chuffed again, content

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

I was going to make this weekend special. Magical.

After our almost disastrous first date—the crying, the running, the bear transformation—Ella had still agreed to go away with me.

For a weekend. Not far, just to another part of the Rim where we didn't know anybody.

No family. No friends. No history walking around in human form, giving us sad or hopeful looks. Just us.

A lot was still left unsaid between us. She hadn't told me she loved me or promised me a future.

She still looked at me sometimes like she was waiting for the next disaster to drop from the sky.

Not that I blamed her. I knew I had hurt her deeply, and that it would take time for her to heal.

But I was here for it. I would do whatever necessary to make her trust me again, to make her love me again.

The fact that she came, that she packed a bag and got in my truck, that alone was more than I deserved.

We were driving through winding roads now, my hands gripping the wheel tighter

than necessary, mostly so I wouldn't reach over and touch her every five minutes like some love-sick idiot.

She was staring out the window, looking devastatingly beautiful with her loose hair and a slight smile playing around her luscious lips.

Her hand, which I knew was stronger than it looked, rested on the armrest between us, like an invitation.

Touch her, Thorne murmured. She came with us. That means something.

She needs space.

She needs us.

I tuned him out. Barely.

I was doing my best not to screw this up.

Which, historically, was not my strong suit.

So instead of giving in to the bear pacing inside my chest, I focused on the cabin up ahead.

A place I'd picked out specifically—secluded, tucked in the trees, overlooking a lake that turned silver at dusk.

It had a wraparound porch, a fireplace, and one of those massive clawfoot tubs I'd seen her look at when we were at the wholesaler warehouse.

I even bought bubble bath. I didn't know if we'd use it, but I had my hopes up.

Whatever she wanted to do, whatever she needed, I was game.

We pulled up the long gravel driveway. As the tires crunched over the rocks, I snuck a glance at her. She was still quiet, but her lips parted just slightly when she saw the cabin. Her eyes softened.

“I didn’t expect this,” she said.

“No bears in sight,” I offered with a dry smile. “Unless I get really excited about breakfast.”

That earned me the smallest laugh. Just a breath. But I caught it and clutched it in my ribs like a trophy. I parked and came around to open her door before she could stop me.

“This place is...” she trailed off, stepping up onto the porch. “It’s beautiful.”

“You haven’t seen the inside yet,” I said, unlocking the door.

She looked at me then—really looked. “You did all this for me?”

“No,” I said. “I did it for us. ”

Another smile tugged at the corners of her lips, raising my hopes that after ten years, we might finally have another shot at us.

I let her go inside first, while I grabbed our bags and the grocery items. I hadn’t expected her to cook, but she had smiled and asked me what would be the sense in dating a chef if I didn’t take advantage of it.

She also wanted to test more recipes for Smoke I ignored him.



"No, but I want to." She looked up at me with those deep blue eyes of hers, and I lost myself.

Carefully, I put my arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

Then I brought my face towards her, watching intently for any sign she might change her mind.

But she didn't. Her eyes closed, and then my lips brushed hers.

It was the softest, most barely there touch, but it still hit me like a shockwave, straight through my chest. Every cell inside me came alive.

Her lips moved against mine, slow and tentative, as if she was savoring the moment as much as I.

I knew it in every nerve ending, every thrum of blood under my skin, every ache that had lived in my chest since the moment I let her go ten years ago.

Kissing her wasn't just familiar—it was right .

Her mouth was soft, a little hesitant at first, but then I felt her hands slide up my chest, curling into my shirt, and that hesitation melted like sugar on the tongue.

She wanted this.

God, I wanted this .

The kiss deepened, not rushed, but no longer unsure.

I tilted my head, letting myself sink into it, into her .

My arm curled tighter around her waist, and she pressed into me, breath catching in the back of her throat in that way it used to when she was trying not to moan.

My entire body tightened. Thorne rumbled in my chest like a purr of approval. Mate. Finally. Let me in.

You're in enough, I told him, but I didn't push him back. For once, we were aligned.

I felt her nails dig lightly into my shoulders.

I didn't think she even realized she was doing it.

She tasted like peppermint and wine and something warm—something that made me feel nineteen again and still scared shitless I'd mess this up.

I pulled back slightly, breathing hard, leaving our foreheads touching.

Her eyes fluttered open, dazed. Pink bloomed across her cheeks, down her neck.

"You okay?" I asked, brushing my knuckles against her jaw.

She nodded, then laughed—breathy and beautiful. "I think my brain rebooted somewhere in the middle of that."

"Should I be worried it short-circuited?"

"Maybe." She leaned in, head resting briefly against my chest. "Definitely. Yeah."

I wrapped my arms around her. Just held her. Felt her heartbeat against mine. She didn't pull away. After a long, quiet moment, she murmured, "I don't know where this is going, Patrick."

“I don’t either,” I admitted. “But I know where I want it to go.”

She didn’t reply, but I felt the way she exhaled against my collarbone—in a slow surrender.

“I’m still mad at you,” she whispered.

“I’m still sorry.”

She leaned back and looked up at me, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “Good. Just so we’re clear.”

And then— God help me —she smiled. Neither guarded nor polite, just Ella. Real and present and warm.

“Let’s cook,” she said, slipping out of my arms and heading toward the kitchen. “I have a new recipe to test, and if you’re lucky, I won’t throw a spoon at you.”

Thorne rumbled with laughter. She kissed us. She forgave us. And now she’s feeding us. She’s ours.

Easy , I warned him, and followed after her with a stupid, lovestruck, idiotic grin on my face that made me shake my head at myself when I passed a mirror. Yeah, I had it bad.

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The water was still warm, though the bubbles were starting to fade, leaving little clusters clinging to the sides of the clawfoot tub like memories that refused to rinse away.

Which was very fitting. Because that kiss?

It was still very much clinging to my mind.

I sank a little deeper, water sloshing against the porcelain as I let out a low groan and covered my face with one wet hand.

Why the hell did I kiss him? Not just kissed him . I initiated it.

It wasn't a bad kiss. Obviously. It was, in fact, one of the best kisses I'd ever had—which was also part of the problem. It was soft. Careful. The kind of kiss that tiptoed up to the edge of something huge and dangerous and whispered jump .

So yeah. Definitely not just some let's get this tension over with kiss.

I blew out a breath, my skin flushed from the heat of the water and... let's be honest, the memory of his heat. The way he'd pulled me in like I was something precious. The way his lips had moved against mine—tentative at first, then hungry, like he'd been starving for the taste of me.

And me?

I gave in like I hadn't spent the last decade learning how to say no to that exact

mouth. I stared up at the ceiling. Watched steam curl toward the wood beams.

“I’m in so much trouble,” I muttered.

Because the more I thought about it—the kiss, the dinner, the damn lavender bubble bath he remembered I loved—the more I realized something I wasn’t ready to say out loud.

I wanted to give this another shot. Not because of the kiss.

Not because of the cabin or the dinner or even his stupid, perfect memory that made me feel more seen than I had in years.

I wanted to try again because... he came back .

He chased me—not just through the woods like a feral bear with an emotional support complex—but with everything else. His eyes. His effort. His awkward, hopeful silence when I didn’t know what to say. He could’ve walked away again. It would’ve been easier. And let’s face it, much, much safer.

But he didn’t. He stayed and he tried.

And somehow, even though the hurt was still there, I was ready to try, too.

I sat up slowly, water dripping from my skin as I reached for the towel beside the tub.

Absentmindedly, I toweled the water off my skin, still deep in thought, because what I’d realized during the bath was that neither the kiss, nor spending this weekend here with him, nor opening that third restaurant, had anything to do with finishing what we started.

This was about deciding if we had a new beginning. Although I already knew the answer to that, too. Had, from the moment he walked into that bistro.

I wanted it.

I wanted him.

I'd always wanted him.

I wrapped the towel around myself, padded to the mirror, and caught sight of my own reflection—flushed cheeks, soft eyes, hair pinned up messily.

I was a nervous wreck, and it showed. What are you doing ?

I wondered. What was I doing? Was I about to go out into the living room like this? Was I about to seduce my ex?

My nerves fluttered in my tummy, but I also felt a delicious ache spread through my pussy.

What would sex be like with Patrick? Pats had been sweet and careful.

We had both been the other's first, and we'd explored all sides of sex, equally curious.

This new version of him was a wildcard. One I was more than enthused to get to know better.

"Are you okay in there?" Patrick called from the other side of the door. I must have taken a long time standing here, debating.

"Actually... " Was I really going to do this? "I need your help for a second." I guess I was.

The door opened. Patrick stared at me. "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you said..."

His whiskey eyes moved up and down my towel-clad body. He was about to close the door when I dropped the towel. I wasn't the adventurous type, or the seducing type, but standing there, naked in front of him, while his pupils dilated gave me a never-before-experienced thrill.

"Have I changed?" Who was this woman?

"I'd say so," he rasped hoarsely, clearing his throat.

I cocked my head to the side, "For better, or worse?"

He stepped forward, holding his hands out, "Better. Always for the better." His voice was deep, laced with emotions. "Ells?"

I nodded, and he closed the distance between us in record time, one hand buried in my wet hair, the other slung around my waist. His lips hovered barely an inch from mine. "Are you sure about this?"

I answered truthfully, "Yes." Because I wanted this. I wanted to give us another shot, and I prayed I wouldn't end up regretting it.

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She looked like a goddess reincarnated. I had never seen a more beautiful woman in my life.

Her hair clung wetly to her head and shoulders, her eyes were wide with insecurity, but her entire demeanor screamed that she was in charge.

The contradictory nature of this woman got to me like no other.

I didn't think I would ever forget the moment she dropped that towel to let me look my fill.

No, not my fill. I would never get enough of staring at her.

My cock was instantly hard; I had to make sure though, before I kissed her. "Are you sure?"

Her voice was just as sweet as her simple answer.

She barely got the yes out before I pressed my lips down on hers, unable to wait another second.

I reveled in the softness of her lips, the warmth of her skin beneath my palm, and the silky slide of her hair tangled in my other hand.

The kiss moved from sweet to desperate in the span of a heartbeat.

It was like both our bodies needed to make up for lost time, like if we pressed hard



enough, deep enough, close enough—we could erase ten years of silence and regret.

Her fingers clutched at my shirt, pulling me closer with a rawness that undid me.

She kissed me like she was starved for it.

Like her body had waited, frozen in time, and was only now waking back up.

I backed her gently against the bedroom wall, one hand still tangled in her hair, the other sliding down to her waist—drawing her against me, feeling the unmistakable arch of her hips press into mine.

My blood roared. My cock throbbed, hard and eager, straining with the kind of need I hadn't felt since I was eighteen and utterly wrecked by her.

“God, Ells,” I murmured against her mouth. “You’re killing me.”

Her laugh was breathless as her hands slipped under my shirt. "Ditto."

Thorne was growling low and steady inside me, a sound of satisfaction and possession. She wants us. She's ours. She said yes. She said yes!

She did, I thought, even as my mouth trailed to the hollow of her throat. And I'm not letting her go again.

I lifted her effortlessly, wrapping her legs around my waist like I had done a thousand times before.

She gasped—soft and surprised—and I grinned against her skin.

Gently, I laid her down on the bed, slowly, reverently, as if I was placing something

sacred on an altar.

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, everything paused.

“You sure?” I asked, chest heaving, every muscle in my body tight with restraint. Her fingers curled around the collar of my shirt and tugged me down.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” She replied huskily.

I slipped from her grasp and quickly got undressed, then climbed between her legs. Her essence had already reached my oversensitive olfactory receptors, and she smelled delicious. Ready for me to feast on.

"Pats," she moaned when I lowered my head between her legs.

"You are so beautiful." I breathed against her sensitive skin.

A low hiss escaped her when I moved my tongue over her slit, tasting the sweet ambrosia she presented to me like a gift.

And I treated it as such. I lapped at her wetness with all the reverence she deserved.

Driven by her sweet moans. Her clit was swollen and sensitive, she nearly came undone the moment I put my lips around it.

Her hips rocked, her legs closed around my head, and that was all the encouragement I needed.

I sucked at her delicate bud, rolled it with my tongue and listened to her little mewls.

My hands clasped around her ass, lifting her and holding her in place.

My tongue moved to her entrance, and I felt her flutter around it.

It felt so incredibly good, I nearly came.

My cock was harder than it had ever been; precum leaked from the tip, and my balls pulsed, ready to unload my seed into her.

I felt her come around me, and she screamed my name in her passion.

I gave her a moment to collect her senses before I asked, "Do you want me to use a rubber? "

"What?" She panted. Then shook her head. "I'm good. I'm on the pill. And I'm clean."

"Me too. I mean, I'm clean." I clarified.

She stretched her head up, and her eyes were clouded with the after-waves of her orgasm when they locked with mine. Her hands reached for my arms, inviting me up. We were both ready.

I lined my cock up with her entrance, the anticipation of entering her again after all these years nearly killing me.

I wanted her so much, I worried I would come the moment I was fully sheathed.

I was right to be worried, too. She was so tight.

She fit around me like a warm glove, and it took all I had to hold back.

Her hips rose until I was all the way in, and my eyes rolled back; it felt so damn good.

"Pats," she moaned. Her head arched back, exposing her exquisite throat, and I latched on.

I nibbled at the pulse on her neck while I rolled my hips to move in and out of her.

She reciprocated each thrust and each pulling back, arching and stretching under me in sync with my hips, until we danced the most beautiful dance together.

All the while, my pleasure was growing. It wasn't just in my cock; I felt it everywhere.

On my skin where she touched it, under my palms where I touched her.

Anywhere our bodies touched, it felt like they were fused together.

A dam seemed to burst inside me. Waves of pleasure moved through me when her walls began to milk my cock mercilessly, massaging it the way only she could. I couldn't hold back a moment longer. "Fuck, Ells, I love you. I fucking love you!"

She arched into me, moaning and panting, her expression one of utter bliss as her thighs pressed around mine like a vise. I came inside her with an abundance that robbed me of my breath; I saw stars.

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It took me a few minutes to catch my breath and return to my body, which I swore I had left for a moment or two.

Bar none, this was the most incredible sex I had ever had.

What Pats and I had done when we were teenagers didn't even come close to comparing.

Nor did anything I had experienced with one of my other handful of boyfriends.

The orgasms—yes, plural—Patrick had wrung from me had even outdone any of my solo handjobs.

When I finally came to my senses, I remembered him screaming not only my name, but also, I love you. I fucking love you. It had been ten years since I had last heard him say those words.

"I love you too, Pats," I admitted, opening my eyes to look at his sweat-soaked face. His black pupils were so large, they had pushed all the whiskey color out, leaving only a tiny amber halo. They were so deep black, I could see my reflection.

My hand moved up to cup his rough cheek, watching his face descend on mine until our foreheads met. We pursed our lips and exchanged soft little kisses. "I love you so much, Ells, it hurts."

"I know," I admitted. There was still the shadow of an ache in my chest, but it didn't hurt anymore.

We stayed like that for a while. Breathing. Touching. Lips brushing, skin still humming from everything we'd just given each other. His arm tightened around me as if he thought I might slip away again. I wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Patrick pulled back just enough to look at me, brow furrowed. "For what?"

"For... back then. For never asking about Thorne. For acting like the bear in you wasn't part of you.

"My fingers traced the edge of his jaw, slow and reverent.

"You always made space for me to be everything I was—messy, anxious, overly ambitious—and I didn't make room for you to be whole.

I just pretended like the parts I didn't understand weren't there."

He was quiet for a beat, his hand smoothing down my back.

"You were seventeen," he said finally.

"So were you."

"Yeah, but I still could've tried harder to explain. I could've fought harder to show you all of me, instead of just the parts I thought you could handle."

Tears welled unexpectedly, but I didn't try to blink them away. "I didn't mean to make you feel like you had to hide."

"You didn't make me," he said gently. "But you not asking? It made it easier to

believe that if I showed you the rest of me, I'd lose you."

I shook my head. "You didn't lose me because of the bear, Patrick. You lost me because you broke up with me."

His jaw tightened. "I know."

"But I get it now. I really do." I cupped his cheek again, thumb brushing just under his eye. "And I promise, from now on, I want all of it. You. Thorne. Everything."

He leaned in, pressing a kiss to my forehead that felt more like a vow than anything either of us had said out loud.

"I'm yours, Ells," he said against my skin. "Always was. Always will be. And I swear that I will prove it to you for the rest of our lives."

My throat clenched. My chest felt too full. Like there wasn't enough room inside me for everything I was feeling.

"I'm yours too," I whispered. "Even when I didn't want to be. Even when I tried not to be."

He kissed me again. This time it was slow and lingering, just as tender as it always used to be.

Then we just lay there, tangled in each other, wrapped in a blanket of promises, sweat, and heartbeats trying to find their rhythm again.

For the first time in a decade, I wasn't holding anything back.

Patrick's fingers drifted lazily over my bare shoulder.

“I missed you every damn day,” he murmured. “Even when I tried not to.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I missed you, too. Even when I was pretending to be over it.”

He smiled softly, eyes still closed. “You did a good job pretending.”

I scoffed. “I cried into a salad once because the dressing reminded me of you. So let’s not pretend I was emotionally stable.”

He laughed, warm and low, his chest shaking against mine. “Caesar?”

“Lemon vinaigrette. Which is insulting, honestly. You weren’t even a vinaigrette guy.”

“I’m whatever the hell you need me to be,” he said. “Even lemony and suspiciously healthy.”

I laughed so hard I had to bury my face in his chest again, tears slipping out for an entirely different reason now.

“I love you,” I said into his skin.

“I love you more,” he said without missing a beat.

“Impossible.”

“Watch me.”

We lay there for a while longer, our legs tangled, his fingers drifting through my hair like he couldn’t quite believe I was real. Eventually, I pulled the sheet up a little higher, just to keep the moment cocooned between us.



“You know what we should do tomorrow?” I asked.

“Don’t say hike,” he groaned.

“I was going to say make waffles, but now that you’ve insulted me, I am saying hike.”

Something rumbled so hard inside him, I felt it. "What was that?"

“Thorne objects,” Patrick answered dryly.

“Tell Thorne he can have an extra waffle.”

He grinned. “He says we have a deal.”

I smiled into his skin and let myself close my eyes.

This bear shifter thing was still weird, like we had a ménage à trois going or something like that, but strangely, it didn't bother me. Thorne was part of Patrick, and I loved him. For the first time in years, the future didn’t look like a cliff.

It looked like a trail. And maybe—just maybe—we were finally walking it together.

Suddenly, he sat up, with a serious expression painted on his face, "Marry me."

I blinked, "What?"

"Marry me, Ella. Let us continue this. Let me give you everything. Let me spend the rest of my life making up for the pain I caused. For every day I wasn’t there.

For every night I should have been holding you.

Let me give you a hundred slow dances, a thousand mornings with waffles, every stupid little thing I remember about you—and all the things I still want to learn. ”

I stared at him with a heavy thudding heart.

He was serious. This wasn't a dreamy, planned proposal.

There was no ring box. No candlelight choreography.

He was still naked under the sheets, his hair a mess, his lips red from kissing me too hard.

His chest rose and fell like he was bracing for me to rebuke him.

But I wasn't sure I wanted to.

You're not seriously considering this ?

I am! I think I am!

And the more I thought about it, the more the idea made sense.

Not in a whirlwind-romance, swept-off-my-feet kind of way—but in a quiet, inevitable way.

Like something that had always been meant to happen.

I used to imagine it, back when we were young and stupid and thought forever was just something you said when you kissed someone on a football field.

I had dreamed of being Mrs. McCloud long before I knew how much that name

would come to mean.

Sure, on paper it might look fast. But paper didn't know what we'd been through. Paper didn't know how many nights I'd cried over him, or how many times I'd rehearsed what I'd say if I ever saw him again. We'd already lost ten years. I wasn't willing to waste any more.

Still, the old habits crept in. The need to justify. To defend. To prepare a list of bulletproof reasons for people who might not even be listening.

Was it fast? I guess it depended on how you looked at it. We certainly hadn't just met. We'd known each other for half our lives. We'd loved each other for longer than we'd ever admit out loud. And if love was the measuring stick, we were already late.

But then I caught myself. Justify? Why was I even thinking like that? Who was I trying to convince?

It was my life. His life. Our life. No one else's.

And truthfully, I already knew what the people who mattered would say. Carol would cry and then threaten to strangle him if he ever hurt me again. Henry would do a happy dance and probably ask us when we were having grandkids before we even cut the cake.

My mother... well. My mother was her own category. An unpredictable one. But her opinion didn't get to dictate my happiness anymore.

And Gabe?

I paused there, unsure. We'd never been close.

When Patrick and I were together the first time, Gabe had been off chasing football and building a life that took him far from family dinners and awkward family parties.

We'd exchanged polite small talk at holidays and smiled for a few group photos, but I wasn't even sure he knew how serious it had been between me and Patrick back then.

So what was I waiting for?

"I—" I started, then stopped, because my voice was all tangled up in my chest.

His expression faltered, just a crack around the edges. "Too soon?"

"Yes," I said softly. "And also... no."

His brow furrowed. I reached out and rested my palm over his heart. "You're asking me to marry you naked, after bear-chasing me through the woods and wrecking me in a cabin bed, Pats."

He gave a half-smile. "When you say it like that, it sounds romantic."

"It sounds like something Carol would write," I muttered, but I was already grinning.

"Then say yes," he murmured. "And let's write the rest together."

I stared at him, at this man who knew every part of me—my ambition, my fear, my need for control, my inability to function if I showed up somewhere two minutes late—and still wanted me. All of me. And maybe that was what finally made me whisper, "Okay."

His whole body stilled. "Okay?"

“Yes,” I said, a little louder, a little braver. “I’ll marry you.”

Patrick’s grin was instant, boyish, and suffused with relief . He hauled me back into his arms, pressing kisses to my cheeks, my mouth, my neck—anywhere he could reach. Thorne rumbled low in his chest like a bear version of a wedding march.

"I can't believe you said yes. Ells, I swear I will never, ever hurt you again. I?—"

I put a finger on his lips. "Let's let the past be just that, Pats. Let's concentrate only on the future."

“We need a ring,” Patrick said, laughing into my hair.

“Yeah,” I said, breathless. “And clothes. Maybe start with clothes.”

“Right,” he agreed. “Clothes. Ring. Cake. Officiant. Tiny woodland creatures as flower girls?—”

“ No woodland creatures ,” I warned, shoving him back into the pillows. "And you better know now. I want a big wedding. I want the whole fairy tale thing."

"You got it." He said, eyes alight with happiness. "How soon do you think we can pull this off?"

Judging by the look on his face, I was pretty sure he wouldn't want to wait the year it normally took to plan a big wedding.

Hell, I didn't want to wait a year. I had waited ten years.

It was insane. I was insane. I knew it with every beat of my heart, but I also knew that I wanted this.

More than I had ever wanted anything before. "How about this fall?"

"That's what?" He scrunched up his face, "Six months, seven?"

"Something like that," I nodded.

"Any chance you'll elope with me to Vegas?"

Grinning, I shook my head.

"I didn't think so. A fall wedding it will be." Then his face lit up even more. "That will give me just enough time to build you that house."

"What house?"

"The one you always dreamed of, the one with the fireplace in the bed and bathroom.

The one with the white picket fence and the wrap-around veranda.

With a large park, a pond, and a swimming pool.

Indoor and out. With the huge kitchen with two islands, two double ovens, and two dishwashers.

The one with a living room big enough to hold a ten-foot Christmas tree. "

Oh my God, I couldn't believe he remembered all that. "You remembered?"

"I told you. I didn't forget a single thing you ever said," he replied seriously. Taking my hands in his, he continued, "I will make you the happiest woman on Earth, I swear."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat. All this sounded... too good to be true. So much so, I wanted to cry.

"Don't cry," he said, kissing me. He really did know me all too well.

"Can you really do that in seven months?"

"Can you pull off a wedding and open a restaurant?" He challenged.

We grinned at each other and simultaneously said, "I can."

We laughed, and suddenly we were Pats and Ells again. Two teenagers so in love with each other that it gave the world pause.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

A month passed by in the blink of an eye.

Thirty days, give or take, of waking up to the scent of her shampoo on my pillow, her sleepy groans when the sun hit her face through the windows she still hadn't let me cover, and the steady, surreal reality that the woman I'd been aching for all these years was now brushing her teeth in my bathroom and stealing my hoodies like it was her constitutional right.

We hadn't even been trying to rush it. It just...

happened. Her lease ended. The new restaurant build got delayed.

She brought over a few things for a few nights .

Then more things. Then a stand mixer. Then she rearranged the spice rack.

And somehow, in that slow, steady accumulation of Ella-sized chaos, my house became our home.

It was different now. Fuller. Louder. Way more flour in the air than any architect's kitchen should legally allow.

I found cinnamon sugar on blueprints, kitchen towels in the laundry room that weren't mine, and Thorne had officially stopped pretending to be annoyed by her classical music while she cooked.

There were still growing pains. I learned not to mention her time management quirks



unless I wanted a twenty-minute dissertation on punctuality. She learned not to touch my truck keys unless she wanted to hear the tragic saga of the first dent I ever got at sixteen.

But the rest?

The rest was easy.

She fit here. With me. Like she always had.

And now she was curled up on the couch, wearing my old university hoodie and nothing else, flipping through my updated house plans with a look I recognized all too well: mischievous architectural sabotage.

“No,” I said, walking in with a fresh mug of coffee.

She looked up, trying way too hard to look innocent. “No what? I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. You’ve got that scheming architect destroyer look on your face again.”

“It’s a mudroom-slash-massage room, Patrick,” she said, like I was the unreasonable one. “You can’t tell me a foot rub station after a muddy hike isn’t a good investment.”

I stared. “You want me to design a spa corridor attached to the laundry room.”

“Exactly! For wellness. And feet.”

Thorne grunted in the back of my head, amused. She wants a foot room. Give her the

whole damn spa.

“Fine,” I said, sighing dramatically. “But I’m naming it the Toes it wasn’t locked,” Carol called as she breezed in, wearing oversized sunglasses and yoga pants, with an energy that screamed I brought drama and sugar.

“Carol?” Ella peeked around the corner. “What are you?—”

“Donuts,” she announced, holding up a pink bakery box like a trophy. “Also, congratulations on being book-confirmed and engaged. I brought maple bacon and emotional damage.”

She breezed past my father, kissed him on the offered cheek, and dropped the donuts next to his already opened box. Ella froze.

“Seriously?” she said, glaring between the two boxes. “You guys realize I’m a chef, right? I can make donuts.”

Dad grinned. “Yeah, but yours have weird stuff like cardamom and sea salt. We wanted the trashy kind.”

Ella laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, “Alright, next time I’ll make a batch of trashy donuts, deal?”

“Uh, can you make the ones with that almond paste filling?” Carol asked around a large mouthful of raspberry donut.

“You mean bear claws ?” Ella checked.

“Yeah, but the way you make them, big, huge,” she stretched her hands out, reminding me of an angler fibbing about a caught fish, “with lots and lots of that

almond filling! And lots and lots of icing."

Ella shook her head in mock disgust. "I have no idea where you put all those calories."

Carol grinned, "The only good perk about being a giant! You can eat to your heart's delight." She looked at dad, who had developed a small pouch after the chemo treatments that had saved his life. "Well, some of us can."

"Hey, don't mock the old man," Dad said, rubbing his slightly protruding stomach. "A near-death experience is a real appetite stimulator."

"I heard your appetite isn't the only thing that's been stimulated lately," Carol winked at him.

I was all ears. If Dad was looking for a new wife, it was news to me, but I couldn't fault him; it had been a decade since... Mom died.

"Why, what did you hear?" he narrowed his eyes at Carol.

"Hmm, me?" Carol dug out another donut and bit in, looking innocently at my father and grinning from ear to ear.

"Carol," Ella warned.

"What, you know too?" I asked, a little hurt. "And you didn't tell me?"

"It's nothing but rumors," he shook his head.

"I don't think it's a rumor that widow Dowell had to go get her hair cut after Minnie Lester pulled out enough strands to make a wig from," Carol grinned.

"What are you talking about?" I had an idea, but the notion of two older women getting into a catfight over my father was... a bit distressing.

"I heard Minnie had to get two stitches from a scratch on her face," Ella added.

"What did you do?" I turned to my dad.

"Oh, look, a squirrel." He pointed out the window.

"He's playing the field, is what he is," Carol snickered.

"If that's anybody's fault, it's yours for supplying an old man with your books." He pouted.

"You're reading her books?" I asked flabbergasted. "I don't even read her books."

"That's because you're a prude," Ella boxed me good-naturedly. Then she looked sternly at Dad. "No nonsense like that at our wedding, though, okay?"

He pretended to look insulted, and Carol sat down on the recliner's armrest and put her arm around him. "No worries, I'll keep an eye on the old lecher."

My father cleared his throat and leaned back in the recliner like he hadn't just set off a small nuclear flirt-bomb. "Anyway. Ella's locked down this idiot, which means I can stop pretending I wasn't hoping you'd be the next daughter-in-law."

Carol's eyes widened. "What?"

"I mean, just imagine it," dad doubled down, a bit too casual. "Two amazing women, both smarter than the boys they picked, running this family. Holidays would be great. And the grandkids would have excellent genes."

"And who would I be getting knocked up by, you?" Carol's eyelashes fluttered at him.

My ears were ringing. "I'm not listening to this, I'm?—"

"As much as I'm flattered, Carol, I was thinking about Gabe."

For some reason, the way he dropped my brother's name detonated like a bomb between the women, who stared at him like he had said something more outrageous than Carol suggesting... nope, I still wasn't thinking about that.

"You'll have to take that up with Gabe," Carol said icily. "That man hates me."

"Hate's a bit strong, don't you think?" I asserted, now that we were back on safer ground.

"I'm sure you could win him over," Dad suggested.

Carol's mouth pressed into a tight smile, but her eyes... they flickered, just briefly, making me wonder if maybe she wasn't as unaffected as she pretended.

"You think so?" she asked, folding her arms.

"I've seen how he looks at you," he said, biting into another donut. "It's not hate. It's fear. That's different."

"Your son once called me an Encyclopain, " Carol snapped. "And said my voice makes his ears bleed." She held up two fingers, adding more as she kept ranting. "He calls me marshmallow and Tinker Bell. He says I'm a giant pain in the ass."

Well, since she put it that way, maybe she was right. I had never given her and Gabe's relationship much thought. They were like cats and dogs, like fire and ice. Before I

could say anything, Henry said, “That’s because you were right, and he hated it.”

I coughed loudly. “Dad, maybe we don’t?—”

Carol cut in. “You think setting me up with Gabe is a good idea?”

“I think,” my father said, licking powdered sugar off his thumb, “that it would be the greatest decision either of you ever made. You just would have to survive each other long enough to realize it.”

Ella, who had left to make more coffee, returned. Sensing the tension, she asked carefully. “What’s happening?”

“Your future father-in-law is matchmaking again,” I muttered.

“With your future brother-in-law,” Carol added flatly.

Ella blinked. “Oh my God. No one let Henry or Gabe talk to Carol after the cake tastings. Or near knives.”

Dad grinned and raised his donut. “To family.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

Three months later, and somehow, we'd made it.

The restaurant was done.

Smoke I loved every little detail, like how the napkins were bound in twigs, how the mugs were made out of wood, the little wildflower arrangements on the tables—fresh every day, and the last guests got to take them home.

The patrons seemed to love it as much as I did; the place was booked out already for three months.

It had been keeping me busy, but Evan was a gem and handled the other two as if they were his own.

I was contemplating offering him a partnership; that way, I could fully focus on Smoke & Ember .

I'd talk to him about it soon. Today, though, instead of considering my staff, pacing the dining room, or double-checking the line cooks, I was waiting for Carol to pick me up.

My wedding dress had needed a few alterations, as had her maid of honor dress, and we were headed to a final fitting session.

She showed up precisely on time, because of course she did, blasting Lizzo through her car speakers and waving a half-empty coffee like she'd just won the lottery. I slid into the passenger seat. "Hey."

“You ready to cry over fabric?” she asked. “Because I’m emotionally prepped, and my boobs look amazing.”

I grinned. “You do look like you’re about to pose for a fantasy football bridal calendar.”

“Thanks. That’s the look I was going for. Bride adjacent with a hint of dominates the bachelorette scavenger hunt. ”

We took off down the road toward the boutique, and she launched right into talking about Ben. Ben , the new guy she’d been seeing for the past few weeks. A paramedic with a rescue dog, an irrational fear of ducks, and a body that came straight out of a fireman calendar.

“He’s funny. He listens. And he does this thing with his hands when he’s thinking where he rubs the inside of his wrist, and I swear to God, it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I gave her a side-eye. “You are absolutely using that poor man as a shield.”

Carol blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Against Gabe.”

Her mouth snapped shut.

“I know you,” I said. “You talk about Ben like he’s great—and maybe he is—but every time someone even breathes Gabe’s name, you lock up like a raccoon caught with a glitter pen.”

“I do not,” she said, adjusting her sunglasses unnecessarily.



“You do. And now you’re dating a hot paramedic, just in time to have a plus-one at my wedding. Where Gabe will be. Looking very single. Probably in a suit.”

She muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “This is why I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“I do. And I hate you. It’s a delicate balance.”

I smiled and leaned back in my seat. “You realize I’m putting you two at the same table, right?”

Carol groaned. “You are not .”

“Oh, but I am.”

“You’re evil.”

“And you look amazing,” I said sweetly. “Now let’s go cry over tulle and talk about how you’re going to survive sitting next to the man who calls you Tinker Bell and says your voice makes his ears bleed.”

Carol flipped me off, but her cheeks were pink, and her lips were twitching, fighting hard to hold back a smile.

I didn’t say anything right away. I just watched her out of the corner of my eye as we pulled into the boutique parking lot.

Her sunglasses were still on, but her body language had shifted.

She was tapping her fingers against her thigh, not in time to the music, but to some

anxious thoughts in her head.

Which meant the Gabe comment had hit home.

I might be getting married, but I wasn't about to let my maid of honor hide behind an emotionally safe fireman with an adorable rescue pit bull if what she really wanted was a six-foot-four emotionally constipated linebacker who called her Marshmallow and couldn't make eye contact without insulting her height.

We walked into the boutique, and the manager greeted us like we were celebrities.

Which, to be fair, in this town we kind of were—especially now that Smoke & Ember had made the Top Ten Most Anticipated Openings list for the region and Carol's latest book had featured a football-playing bear shifter who was definitely not inspired by my future brother-in-law.

Don't think I didn't notice the character was named Gavin.

Carol disappeared into her fitting room, and I stood in mine, staring at the dress that had made me cry in front of three strangers and a very concerned Carol the first time I tried it on.

It still fit like magic. Even better now that they had let the seam around my chest out enough for me to be able to breathe.

Creamy silk, lace around the bodice and arms, a deep cut on the back, and a square cut on the front.

It hugged me around my hips like a glove before it opened into a wide skirt with layers of petticoats underneath. It was a dream come true.

I stepped out onto the platform in front of the mirror, smoothing the bodice as I turned.

“Oh my God,” Carol said from behind me. I turned to see her in a sleek emerald dress that hit just above her knee with a high slit that practically screamed try me, I dare you .

“You look incredible,” I said.

“You look like a fairytale ending,” she replied, voice softer now. “You really do.”

I met her eyes in the mirror. “You okay?”

She hesitated. “Yeah.”

“You sure?”

A beat passed.

Then she sighed. “I just... I used to think it would be me up there one day. Not necessarily first, but—eventually. And now it’s you, and I’m so happy for you, but also, I’m terrified I’m going to ugly cry through your vows and choke on cake in front of someone who once called me an Encyclopain .”

I laughed. “You won’t choke. I trained you better than that.”

“And Ben’s sweet,” she added. “He really is.”

I turned to face her. “But?”

“But he doesn’t make me want to scream and stab a throw pillow and kiss someone at

the same time.”

“So, Gabe.”

“So Gabe,” she admitted, finally.

We stood there for a moment. Bridesmaid and bride. Best friends and chaos magnets. After a beat, she rolled her shoulders back. “Well, at least my dress will look amazing when I inevitably storm out of the reception in emotionally confused rage.”

“Or,” I said gently, “when you don’t.”

She didn’t answer. Just adjusted her neckline, and produced a donut she must have smuggled in from the snack table the boutique had provided, bless them, and shoved it in her mouth to fill the silence. In her eyes, I read the hope that maybe, just maybe, she wouldn’t have to storm off at all.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

“Okay,” Ella said, tapping her pen against the kitchen table. “Let’s talk invitations.”

I looked up from my notes, where I’d just finished sketching an entryway arch for the new build. “You mean the ones we should’ve sent out, like, last week?”

She ignored me, flipping open a page in her wedding planner notebook. It had tabs. Color-coded ones. God, I loved her. I loved every detail about this wonderful woman.

“Guests. We’re finalizing today. No more maybes, no more we’ll-sees. This is it.”

“Alright,” I said, pushing my sketchpad aside. “Hit me.”

She started rattling off names, and I nodded along—Evan, the entire kitchen crew at Smoke & Ember , my dad, half the neighborhood, two elderly sisters from her favorite pastry shop, and someone named Uncle Ron who wasn’t technically her uncle but used to sneak her chocolate croissants.

And then she said it.

“My mom.”

I blinked. “Lisa?”

“Yes,” she said, too evenly. “She’s my mother. I can’t not invite her.”

I took a breath. “Ella...”

“I know,” she cut in. “But she’s still my mom.”

“She’s also the woman who told me last time we visited that she hoped our kids wouldn’t inherit my shifter problem,” I said, proud that I kept my voice tension-free.

My future mother-in-law really got to me.

Always. I knew she was different, to put it nicely, but still.

“And then she offered you an old charm bracelet to remind you of who you used to be.”

“It’s a family heirloom.”

“It was a passive-aggressive guilt bomb wrapped in tarnished silver,” I snapped.

Ella flinched, and I regretted it immediately.

“She’s difficult,” she said tightly. “But she’s my family.”

“And I’m not?” I asked, hating how harsh it sounded.

“You are!” she said. “God, Patrick. You’re my everything. But I can’t cut her out of my life just because it makes things easier for us.”

I leaned back in my chair, running a hand through my hair. “I’m not asking you to cut her out. I’m asking if we really need her at the wedding .”

The silence that followed stretched long and thin, the tension still crackled in the air between us like a summer storm that hadn’t quite passed yet. Ella didn’t answer right away. She just stared at the floor, chewing her lip like it might give her better words.

Eventually, she let out a breath that sounded like surrender—maybe not to me, but to the ache between us.

She strode over and sat down on my lap, I welcomed her by putting my arms around her, while her cheek rested against my shoulder, both of us stayed quiet in the afterglow of our near-argument.

But I could feel it—the hum beneath her skin. The vibe of not done yet.

“Can I ask you something?” she said softly.

I tipped my chin toward her. “Always.”

She sat up just enough to meet my eyes. “How would you feel... if I asked you not to invite Gabe?”

I blinked. “What?”

“If I said I didn’t want him at the wedding. Because of Carol. Because they don’t get along. Because he makes her feel like garbage every time he opens his mouth.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to stay calm. “That’s not the same, Ells.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No.” My voice came out sharper than I meant, but I didn’t take it back. “Gabe might be a pain in the ass, and yeah, he and Carol have history—weird, slightly terrifying history—but my brother doesn’t look at half the guest list like they’re second-class citizens.”

Her face tightened. “You think I don’t get that?”

“I don’t know.” I stood, setting her gently on the floor. I needed space—not a lot, just enough to think without her heartbeat pressed against mine. “Because you’re comparing your mom’s prejudice to a mutual grudge match between two people who could win Olympic medals in passive aggression.”

“That’s not fair,” she said, crossing her arms. “Carol doesn’t just grudge match . Gabe goes after her. Every. Time. He mocks her, undermines her, and acts like she’s a punchline. It’s not some petty rivalry. It’s personal. And you know it.”

“She can hold her own,” I said, instantly regretting it.

Ella’s eyes flashed. “Wow. So because she’s loud and snarky, that makes it okay?”

“No. Damn it, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean, Patrick?”

I let out a slow breath. “I meant... your mom makes me feel like I’m wrong for existing. Gabe makes Carol feel like she’s annoying.”

“He’s not just annoying to her,” she said tightly. “He hurts her.”

That pulled me up short.

“Hurts her how?”

Ella shook her head. “I don’t know. But it’s there. Every time he looks at her. Like something happened and neither of them will talk about it, so they just keep cutting each other down.”

I stayed quiet for a second, letting that sink in. Because she wasn’t wrong. And that



made it harder.

“I’m sorry,” I said finally. “I know this is complicated.”

She nodded. “It is.”

“But Gabe’s still coming.”

“And so is my mom.”

We stared at each other—both stubborn, both unwilling to back down, both silently daring the other to blink first.

Then, slowly, Ella sighed and reached for my hand.

“This doesn’t have to be a fight,” she said softly. “We’re not our families.”

“No,” I agreed. “We’re better .”

She smiled, just a little. “Still going to sit them next to each other?”

I barked a laugh. “God, no. I want to survive the wedding.”

She tugged me close again, resting her forehead against mine. “So we’re okay?”

I kissed her gently. “We’re always okay.”

Even when we weren’t.

We’d get back here. Every time. I would prove to her that I would never push her away, and if that meant having her harpy of a mother there, then I would put up with

it. Somehow. Because I loved Ella with all my heart, and I would do anything for her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

My hands wouldn't stop shaking. I'd iced a thousand cakes. Caramelized sugar to glass. Deboned a duck under pressure. But somehow, trying to attach a tiny pearl pin to the back of my hair felt like brain surgery in a hurricane .

"Deep breaths, bridezilla," Carol said behind me, gently plucking the pin from my trembling fingers and doing it herself in three seconds flat.

"I'm not a bridezilla," I muttered, staring at my reflection. "I'm just emotionally compromised and sweating through my silk."

Carol gave me a look in the mirror. "You're glowing. And if you call that sweating, I'd like to introduce you to what happened under my boobs during your last cake tasting."

That made me laugh, just a little, which helped.

The bridal suite at the venue smelled like fresh peonies and hairspray. The old barn-turned-event-space had been transformed into a forest fairy tale — soft string lights, pine-scented candles, rich autumn blooms in every corner. It was perfect .

Giddiness shook through me; I was about to walk down that aisle and marry the love of my life. And I could hardly wait.

Carol stood behind me in her deep emerald gown — the one that showed just enough leg to make every man in attendance forget their names—twisting my veil into place.

"You ready?" she asked softly.

“Yes. No. Yes.”

She smiled. “That’s normal.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Can I come in?” my mom’s voice said through the door.

I stiffened. So did Carol.

It had taken three months to thaw our relationship into something resembling civil.

She’d been invited, of course. I’d always known I couldn’t get married without at least trying to make peace.

And today, to her credit, she’d shown up on time, dressed in navy chiffon, and had only made two comments about how fast things were moving .

“Come in,” I said after a breath.

The door opened. Lisa Meade stepped inside, clutching a tissue and wearing a borrowed-for-the-day kind of smile.

“You look...” She blinked, tearing up. “Beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

We stood there for a beat, the silence awkward and heavy, until she stepped forward and took my hand. “I know we don’t... always agree. On a lot. But I’m proud of you. And I’m happy for you. Truly.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Thanks.”

“And if he ever hurts you, I will hit him with my car.”

Carol snorted behind me.

“Noted,” I said, blinking fast. “Let’s... not say that during the ceremony.”

“I brought something,” Mom added, reaching into her clutch. She pulled out a small, worn gold bracelet. “It was mine. My mother’s before me. I know we have different ideas about things... but I want you to have this. If you want it.”

I stared at it. It was simple. Understated. Not the passive-aggressive heirloom I’d feared. Just something... honest.

“I do,” I said, letting her fasten it to my wrist. “Thank you.”

She kissed my cheek—light, quick, gone in a breath—and then turned to leave. After the door clicked shut, Carol leaned in. “Did I just witness actual progress?”

“You did.”

“Should we celebrate or call in an exorcist?”

I laughed again—properly this time—and let out a long breath. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Carol squeezed my hand. “Then let’s go marry your bear.”

The first chords of *You Are the Reason* drifted through the autumn air, slow and aching and perfect.

The soft strings echoed through the trees lining the aisle, and every note reverberated inside my chest. Carol slipped out ahead of me, taking her place at the front.

She didn't look back, but I saw the way she squared her shoulders—saw the way Gabe's jaw clenched when he saw her.

Their eyes locked for maybe half a second, enough for the air between them to turn twenty degrees colder and ten times more electric.

I almost laughed.

But then Henry stepped into view, standing just outside the barn doors. A lump formed in my throat at the sight of him. He was one of the best parts of getting married to Patrick. I finally got the dad I always yearned for.

He looked... proud and strong in his dark gray suit with the tie I'd picked out because it matched the fall leaves. Just like what I needed right then. He held out his arm, and when I looped mine through it, he leaned close and whispered, "You ready, sweetheart?"

I blinked against the tears. "I think so."

He looked straight ahead. "I always wanted a daughter."

My throat clenched.

"I know," I whispered.

"And I always wanted you to be her."

Oh, hell. Not now, tears.

I swallowed hard. “Henry?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for loving me like that. Always. And I always wanted a dad.”

He patted my hand once, then cleared his throat. “Let’s go before I ruin your mascara.”

The barn doors opened wide, and in that second, I forgot everything else. I didn't see any of the guests who had risen from their chairs and turned their heads toward me, only him.

Patrick.

My bear. My heart. My impossible miracle.

He stood at the end of the aisle in a black suit that made his eyes look molten gold, his hair combed back with just enough mess to remind me he was still the same man who’d once kissed me behind the bleachers like we were the last two people on Earth.

Next to him, Gabe stood like a sentinel, stoic and resolute.

As if ready to ward off anybody daring to tackle his quarterback.

His jaw twitched when Carol shifted on her feet.

Their mutual glare could’ve lit dry grass on fire.

But they said nothing. Because even in their mutual dislike for each other, they recognized that this moment wasn’t about them.

Patrick's eyes never left mine. Not once. Not when the breeze tugged at my veil. Not even when I tripped just slightly on a pinecone some kid probably dropped earlier. Strangely, all my nerves disappeared, just like the guests and the past.

It all fell away. Nothing else existed now.

Just him.

And me.

Henry placed my hand in Patrick's and gave him a firm nod—one of those silent, meaningful, you hurt her, you die kind of gestures that only Henry could pull off with both warmth and threat. Patrick nodded back, eyes locked on mine like the rest of his world had faded to fog, too.

The officiant stepped forward, smiling gently at us. "We're gathered here today to witness something rare and beautiful. A bond forged not just by time, but by choice. By falling, and by rising again."

The breeze shifted softly around us. The trees seemed to hush, as if even nature knew to be quiet for this part.

Carol handed me my bouquet with surprising grace, though her eyes did flick sideways to Gabe just long enough to say Don't ruin this, or I'll strangle you with a centerpiece. He arched a brow in return.

Patrick gave my hands a little squeeze, just enough to anchor me back in the moment. I mouthed, I love you. He mouthed back, Love you more.

And then?—



Somewhere behind us, a whisper.

“Alex. Now. Go.”

A pause, followed by a very small growl. Then came the thunder of little dress shoes on packed earth, followed by a slight hiss, “Don’t drop the rings, Alex.”

A tiny blur of brown and beige barreled into view, Alex, our ring bearer—a six-year-old bear shifter whose mom was something like a second or third cousin of Patrick's.

He was dressed in a miniature three-piece suit, complete with a burgundy bow tie, and holding a little moss-lined pillow as if it contained the secrets of the universe.

He stopped halfway down the aisle.

Sniffed.

Dropped to all fours.

And promptly growled at a squirrel.

Everyone froze.

The squirrel, to its credit, launched into a tree with Olympic-level grace.

Alex bared his tiny milk teeth, grumbled something unintelligible, then stood up again, brushing off his knees like nothing had happened and continuing down the aisle like a professional .

Chuckles rippled through the guests. Patrick’s lips twitched from trying hard not to laugh.

Alex reached us with his chest puffed out, holding the ring pillow like a knight might a sacred relic.

He offered it up with two hands and a very serious expression.

“I didn’t even maul the squirrel.”

Patrick nodded gravely. “That’s very noble of you, Alex.”

“Thanks. I practiced.”

Then he wandered off to find his mom, who immediately crouched and hugged him like he’d just returned from war.

The rest of the ceremony went by in a blur.

Patrick kissed me, that's all I remember, that, and the loud cheers of our guests.

Then we were ushered away for some pictures.

We opted out of the congratulatory part; it seemed silly for people to line up just to shake our hands.

Instead, they approached us when we made our way to the tables where food would be served shortly.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

She looked like magic walking down that aisle.

I'd imagined it a hundred times over the years. Wondered how it would feel to have her walk toward me. What kind of dress she'd wear. Whether she'd smile, or cry, or trip on her veil and blame me somehow.

But I'd never imagined this.

Not the way her eyes locked on mine, filled with love and trust. Not the way the sunlight caught on her veil like it had been dipped in stardust. Not the way I actually forgot to breathe until dad placed her hand in mine and my lungs remembered how to work.

She was radiant. Untouchable. Mine.

Thorne rumbled low and satisfied in my chest. We did good. Mate looks like something out of a forest myth. We are not worthy.

Speak for yourself, I muttered silently, even though I agreed with him. We were not worthy of this vision of a bride. But I would do my damndest trying.

Oh, I am. But you? You're just lucky she didn't wise up and marry a lion shifter.

I choked on a laugh I had to swallow, because the officiant had just asked us to repeat our vows. Somewhere between in sickness and in health and 'til death do us part, I remembered every reason I ever loved her.

Now we were seated at the long, candlelit harvest table on the reception lawn.

Ella was beside me, still glowing, her dress somehow more beautiful in the golden haze of early evening.

Everything smelled like peonies and roasted garlic and cedarwood.

I reached for her hand again. I still had a hard time accepting that I could do this.

Anytime. She was the only person in the world who could revoke that right, and I would do everything to never give her a reason to.

“Mrs. McCloud,” I said, for the fifth time in ten minutes.

She rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched. “You going to say that all night?”

“I’m thinking of having it tattooed.”

She snorted into her wine.

“My wife,” I added, with the same kind of reverence people usually reserve for miracle healings and chocolate lava cake.

“I was there , Patrick.” She reminded me with a slight jab and a smile that rocked my heart.

“You looked like something I wasn’t sure I’d earned.”

Her hand squeezed mine.

“You did,” she said softly. “You do.”

The caterers brought out our plates — Ella's custom menu, of course, down to the handmade sourdough rolls and thyme butter carved into tiny pinecones.

We'd barely started eating when a fork clinked against a glass.

Dad stood up, brushing nonexistent crumbs off his vest. He adjusted his glasses—which he didn't need but insisted on wearing because they made him look more emotionally available .

He cleared his throat and held up his glass. "Most of you know me," he began. "I'm Henry McCloud. Father of the groom. Grand slayer of bad jokes. Provider of donuts and unsolicited life advice."

Laughter rippled through the tables. Henry looked at me, then at Ella, and the grin softened into something almost too tender to look at head-on.

"I've known Patrick a long time, you'd hope so—I was there when he was born.

But even before that, I knew the kind of man he could be.

Smart. Loyal. Stubborn as a grizzly. And when he fell in love with Ella Meade in high school, I thought, well, that's it. He's found her. "

I saw Ella blink fast. I squeezed her hand again.

"But life," Henry went on, "isn't a straight line. Sometimes it's a forest path. Sometimes it's a cliff. And sometimes it's a damn maze made of regrets and learning the hard way."

He looked directly at me. "I watched my son fight through that maze. I watched him come back stronger. Kinder. More of a man than I could've ever hoped for."

Then he turned to Ella. “And I watched this incredible woman—this force of nature—take him back. Not because she had to. But because she loved him enough to try again. And that, right there, is the kind of love most people spend their lives looking for.”

He lifted his glass. “To Ella and Patrick. May your life together be full of laughter, full of forgiveness, and just a little bit of chaos. Because that’s where the good stuff happens.”

The room erupted in applause, glasses clinking, silverware tapping on glassware as Ella wiped her eyes and leaned into me, whispering, “Your dad just made me cry into my thyme butter.”

“Yeah, he's got a knack for that,” I whispered back.

I wasn’t nervous until I saw Gabe stand up. Don’t get me wrong, I love my brother—even when he’s a brooding, emotionally constipated linebacker with a god complex. But handing him a microphone in a sentimental setting was risky.

Still, he rose from his seat with the same game-day presence he brought to the football field. Measured and stoic, more like a warrior from a thousand years ago than a football player. He cleared his throat, glanced at Ella, then looked at me, and my stomach clenched. Here we go.

“Right,” he started, lifting his glass halfway. “For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Gabe. Patrick’s older brother.”

A few polite chuckles rolled through the guests.

Everybody knew who Gabe McCloud was. The darling of the NFL, the hero of our town...

blablabla. He shifted his gaze around before his eyes landed back on Ella.

And for a moment, I saw it. Real emotion.

The kind that snuck up on you. The kind my brother usually dodged with sarcasm and protein shakes.

“I didn’t know he was in love with Ella,” Gabe said.

I blinked in surprise. How could he not have? Ella and I had dated for four years in High School. Heavily dated. Then again, that's when his career took off, so he might have been just a bit too preoccupied with himself.

“That first time, I mean. In high school. I just thought he was weirdly into baking bread and sighing at cloud formations.”

Laughter. Ella let out a snort beside me and covered it with her napkin.

“I get it now,” Gabe went on. “The sighing. The pacing. The mood swings that made me think he was maybe turning into a bear early.”

Even Thorne gave a low snort inside me. He’s not wrong.

My face burned, but I couldn’t stop smiling. Gabe’s tone was dry, his delivery awkward—but he meant it. Every word.

“I didn’t get it then,” he said, his eyes back on Ella. “But I do now. It’s her. It’s always been her.”

Ella looked like someone had punched her heart. I watched her eyes shimmer. Her grip on my hand tightened under the table.

“I’ve seen a lot of teams,” Gabe continued. “But this? This is the real deal. The long game. The one where you fall and you get back up—not because you have to, but because you want to win together. ”

My chest went tight. That was the thing about Gabe. He didn’t say much. But when he did, it hit like a linebacker to the ribs. He lifted his glass again. “I wish you both all the love in the world. And the strength to keep choosing each other. Even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard.”

A quiet murmur of agreement swept through the guests. It was warm. Honest.

And then... disaster.

Ben leaned in toward Carol—who was seated directly across from Gabe, because apparently, somehow, the nametags got moved—and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

Gabe froze.

He didn’t blink. He didn’t breathe.

He simply stared at the exact spot Ben’s lips had landed, like he was calculating the tactical risk of launching himself across the centerpiece.

Oh no, I thought. Here we go.

I looked at Ella. She looked at me. We both looked at Gabe.

He sat down very slowly, very stiffly, reminding me of a robot entering low-power mode. Carol didn’t glance at him. Not even once. But she smiled. The small, infuriating kind. The kind that probably kept Gabe up at night.



Gabe cleared his throat, voice tight. “And Ella...”

She turned to him, kind as ever.

“I’ve always wanted a sister,” he said. “I’m glad it’s you.”

Ella's sweet smile lit up her face. “Thank you.”

I let out a long breath. That was it. I felt like I just dodged a bullet. He sat back, picked up his drink like nothing had happened, and stared directly into his whiskey glass like he was trying to astral project out of his body.

Thorne groaned. This is going to explode eventually. Not tonight, I hoped. Because tonight wasn’t about whatever mess was still simmering between Gabe and Carol. Tonight was about Ella.

I leaned over to Ella and murmured, “Okay, that was a really good speech.”

She nodded. “He meant it.”

I looked across the table at my brother—my stone-faced, emotionally armored, potentially imploding brother—and smiled. “Yeah, he really did.”

The dinner was perfect and the speeches heartfelt.

The wine flowed, and we took a small break before cutting the cake, which, surprisingly, hadn’t collapsed yet; also, surprisingly, Gabe hadn’t tackled anyone—yet.

I was just starting to believe we might actually pull off the perfect wedding day when I noticed Carol slipping away with a mission in her heels.

“Where’s she going?” I murmured to Ella, who was laughing with her head on my shoulder, mid-sway.

“I don’t know,” she said, without much concern. “She said something earlier about changing shoes.”

That explanation was normal enough. Until three minutes later, when Carol came barreling out of the barn doors looking like she’d seen a ghost.

“Uh-oh,” Ella said instantly.

“Uh-oh is right,” Carol announced. “So... funny story.”

That alone was enough to make half the guests turn.

“I was going to change shoes, but I accidentally opened the wrong closet and—” She stopped, biting her lip, her expression somewhere between horror and laughter.

“Okay, so you know how you guys asked everyone not to bring gifts?”

“Yeah?” I said slowly.

“Well, someone didn’t listen. ”

Carol jerked her thumb toward the barn, and that’s when we heard it. A buzzing. Low at first. Then louder. And then...

“Oh God,” Ella whispered. “No.”

“Yep,” Carol said, barely holding back a snort. “There’s a gift basket. Unlabeled. Wrapped in white satin. Containing what can only be described as... marital aids.”

The guests were catching on now. Heads turned. A collective ripple of curious murmurs moved through the ranks.

“Someone left us a sex basket?” I asked too loudly.

“Oh, I haven’t even gotten to the best part,” Carol said brightly. “It’s... animatronic.”

“What?!”

“I think it’s voice-activated? Or motion-activated? Either way, something triggered it.”

The buzzing grew louder. And then, from inside the barn, a moaning sound echoed out across the reception. Everyone froze.

And then: OH YEAH, BABY. SHOW ME THAT HONEYMOON ENERGY.

Laughter mixed with shocked gasps. An elderly relative dropped a fork. Ella buried her face in her hands. “I swear to God, if this is from Henry...”

“I didn’t say it was from Henry,” Carol said quickly.

“You didn’t say it wasn’t.”

“I think it’s from the bakery girls,” Carol whispered, “but I didn’t open the card.”

At that moment, the moaning automaton in the barn let out a mechanical giggle and shouted: “SWEETEN THAT DESSERT, CHEF.”

Ella groaned and slid down into a chair. “I’m going to die. Right here. I’m going to pass away in my wedding dress, and they’re going to write death by vibrator basket

on my grave.”

“I’ll carve it in,” I promised.

Thorne was cackling inside my chest. Best wedding ever.

I pulled Ella up and kissed her cheek. “Come on, Mrs. McCloud. Let’s go shut up the robot sex elf in our barn.”

She gave me a look that said she was reconsidering everything, then slipped her hand into mine. Together we walked toward the barn, faces burning, guests still laughing behind us.

“On the plus side,” I muttered, “at least no one’s going to forget our wedding.”

“Oh no,” Ella agreed dryly in prophetic words. “This is going down in history.”

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

The cake was gorgeous. Three tiers of vanilla bean sponge with dark cherry compote and lemon mascarpone buttercream.

Hand-piped flowers. Subtle gold leaf. I hadn't let the bakery handle it.

I'd made it myself, of course, and forced Patrick to promise not to drop it, poke it, or touch it unnecessarily.

He'd solemnly sworn, like a man going to war. We stood behind it now, surrounded by friends and family, all eyes on us as the photographer gave a soft, encouraging nod.

"Ready?" Patrick asked, the knife already in hand.

"I was born ready," I muttered, posing for the photo like I hadn't just been warned by three separate aunts not to savage the cake .

We sliced. We smiled. We posed.

Then came the real test: the feeding.

I turned to Patrick, holding a forkful of cake like a peace offering. "This is a sacred trust," I whispered. "Do not smear this on my face."

He grinned, that damn dimple flashing. "Of course not. What kind of monster would do that?"

“I swear to God, Patrick McCloud?—”

I didn't get to finish. Because that's when he gently , lovingly , and with extreme premeditation , smeared a perfect arc of lemon buttercream across my cheek .

The crowd lost it. Applause. Screams. Someone, it sounded like my mom, shouted, “Oh no he didn't!”

I blinked at him. He was grinning like a kid who just stole a cookie and knew he was still getting dessert.

“You have exactly five seconds to run,” I said calmly.

“You look delicious,” he replied, absolutely unrepentant.

I turned to Carol. “Bathroom. Now. Before I commit a felony.”

The barn bathroom had been stocked with everything from hairspray to bobby pins to an entire emergency sewing kit. Carol called it over the top ; I called it being prepared. With a grin, she handed me a towel and a bottle of micellar water like we were in a triage unit.

“I told you he was going to do it,” she said, gently dabbing the side of my face. “You've been asking for it since you made him wear those embroidered socks.”

“They said Husband of the Year. That's not a punishment, that's a branding opportunity.”

She raised a brow. “They were glittery.”

“So? Glitter is timeless.”

Carol snorted, reaching for a clean towel. “You really going to punish him on your wedding night?”

“I’m going to haunt him.”

“You say that, but I saw how you looked at him during the ceremony. You looked like a woman ready to die of happy exhaustion.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hate you.”

“You love me.”

I smiled, finally feeling the sting of betrayal give way to amusement. “So much it physically hurts.”

We laughed, the kind of deep belly laugh that only comes after years of chaos and forgiveness and knowing someone all the way down to their nerve endings.

“Better?” she asked, holding out a mirror.

I looked. The frosting was gone. My makeup was... mostly intact. My dignity was limping, but recovering.

“Better,” I said.

“Good,” Carol said. “Now let’s go get revenge.”

I paused. “You have a plan?”

She smirked. “Oh, honey. You married a bear. But I raised a beast. ”

We reentered the reception like queens reentering battle, with clean cheeks and calm smiles plastered over our faces.

Patrick was still at the head table, chatting with Henry and watching the dance floor like he was king of the forest and not a frosting-smearing menace.

When he spotted me, his whole face lit up—pure sunshine, unaware that a storm was brewing behind my perfectly touched-up lipstick.

“You’re back,” he said as I approached.

“I am,” I replied sweetly, picking up a forkful of cake from the spare plate in front of him.

“I missed you.”

I smiled. “That’s good.”

Then, casually— very casually—I leaned in like I was going to whisper something sultry in his ear... and smeared the cake over his cheek. The people around us snickered; calls of payback ended in giggles.

Patrick's eyes were filled with love and amusement.

“Mrs. McCloud,” he said, fake stern. “You’ve broken the terms of the dessert treaty.”

“I was never briefed on the terms,” I said, lifting my chin. “That sounds like a you problem.”

He grabbed a napkin and wiped at the mess, then gave me a slow, promising grin. “You know this means war.”



I leaned in, just enough for only him to hear. “Not war. Surrender. Later. Upstairs.”

His pupils dilated like I’d injected him with hormones.

The sound of the DJ tapping his mic stopped our flirting banter, “Next up, a few words from the maid of honor... Carol Jameson.”

A few words. Yeah, sure. Patrick and I shared a concerned glance.

Carol was a writer. A writer of erotic fiction...

one never knew what to expect with her. Come to think of it...

I made a mental note to sneak a peek at her credit card statement the next time I was over.

The gift basket... it sounded just like her kind of idea.

Carol rose from her chair like she was taking the stage at the Oscars.

She looked stunning, wearing a wicked smile and with a gleam in her eyes that told me she was about to emotionally sucker-punch everyone at once.

She took the mic, raised her champagne glass just slightly, and began, “So. I’ve known Patrick since we were born. ”

A few heads turned. Even Patrick looked mildly concerned.

“I’ve seen this man with a bowl cut. I’ve seen him get bit by a goat at a petting zoo.

I’ve seen him cry when his favorite action figure broke.

I've seen him throw his first football—I still say it was way too soft of a throw, Henry.

" She raised her glass at him, and he laughed. "So, when I say I know him—I know him."

Laughter rolled through the room. Patrick covered his face with one hand and muttered something about betrayal .

Carol pressed on. "And then, in high school, he fell in love with a girl I've known since kindergarten. A girl with big eyes, bigger dreams, and no idea she was about to turn Patrick McCloud into a simpering werebear . "

I groaned. "Oh God."

Carol winked at me. "She didn't see it, not at first. Because Ella was too busy pretending she wasn't also falling. Which was cute. And also excruciating, because my two best friends shared a love that put every YA movie to shame."

More laughter. A few people clapped. Henry cheered from the back.

"But then life happened," she said, softer now. "The kind of life that breaks things. That stretches you. That forces you to grow in the dark and decide if it's worth trying again when the light finally comes back."

She looked at Patrick. "You did the bravest thing I've ever seen, McCloud. You let her go because you thought it was the right thing. And then you did something even braver: you came back and proved her heart was worth earning again."

Then she turned to me, and her voice went all wobbly.

“And you, El? You said yes. Even after all the hurt. Even after all the time. Because that’s what love is. It’s not perfect. It’s not easy. It’s showing up —again and again—and choosing each other even when it’s messy.”

I bit my lip. Hard, because damn it, the tears were about to spill.

Carol raised her glass, her smile turning fierce and a little misty. “To my two best friends. The boy I grew up with, and the woman I would set the world on fire for. To love, to stubbornness, and to second chances. And also to me—for not wearing white and stealing the show. You’re welcome.”

Laughter roared. People clapped. I was crying and laughing at the same time as I stood and hugged her hard.

“I love you,” I whispered.

She smirked. “Obviously. I’m fantastic.”

The lights dimmed, and the crowd hushed as the DJ announced our first dance.

"Shall we?"

Patrick held out his hand to me, and I felt like he was picking me up for the prom again.

My heart stuttered in my chest, and my knees went weak.

His hand was calloused and warm and gave me just the support I needed.

We walked to the center of the wooden dance floor, surrounded by candles and string lights that looked like stars had fallen just for us.

Patrick stepped forward, hand out, eyes warm. My husband. God, that still didn't feel real. The first soft notes of *Turning Page* by *Sleeping At Last* floated through the air, and everything else—the guests, the clinking glasses, the remains of the cake war—faded away.

He pulled me into his strong arms like he'd been waiting his whole life to do it, even though we'd done it a thousand times before. Every sway of his body, every pass of his hand over the small of my back, told me one thing loud and clear: This man was mine. And I was his.

"You're glowing," he whispered against my temple.

"Stop it," I whispered back, already fighting tears. "If I cry, I'm blaming you and the damn lighting."

He laughed softly, then leaned in closer. "Mrs. McCloud."

"Still not over it, huh?"

"Never. You're stuck with me."

I leaned my head against his chest. "Good. I like stuck."

We moved together in slow, lazy circles. It wasn't choreographed or polished. We weren't performers. We were us. And somehow, that made it perfect.

Carol caught my eye once from the side of the dance floor—grinning, swaying, already pulling Ben toward her with one hand and reaching for another glass of champagne with the other. I noticed Gabe look away fast. Henry clinked glasses with... my mom? at the bar, teary-eyed but smiling.

But all I saw was Patrick. My bear. My safe place. My forever.

He leaned down, brushed his lips over my ear. “You know what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

“I think we should leave.”

I raised an eyebrow. “It’s barely nine.”

“I know.”

“You’re about to ditch your own wedding party.”

“They’ve had cake. They’ll forgive us.”

I laughed softly, heart full. “One more dance?”

He tightened his arms around me. “A hundred more. Starting now.”

So we kept dancing.

As husband and wife.

And the rest of the world spun quietly around us.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

The reception was winding down. People were full, tipsy, happy — the kind of happy that gets hazy around the edges and makes everyone a little more honest than they meant to be.

Ella had been whisked away for a round of photos with the last of the extended family.

I was chatting with Henry and one of Ella's cousins about the house remodel when I heard Carol's laugh, her fake one.

The one she used when she was about two seconds from lighting someone on fire.

I turned, and sure enough—there it was. The storm cloud gathering at the bar.

Gabe was sitting on a stool, casually nursing a whiskey, looking like a magazine ad for emotionally repressed athletes. Carol stood beside Ben, stiff as a statue. Ben, for his part, looked cheerful and completely unaware that he was stepping into a minefield.

“So wait,” Ben was saying, pointing a finger at Gabe, “you’re that Gabe McCloud?”

Gabe blinked. “I... guess? Depends who’s asking.”

“Man, that’s wild,” Ben said, practically glowing. “I used to watch you in college. Number 92, right? You had that brutal tackle in the semifinals—dude, you were a beast.”

Carol's expression went flat .

“You want an autograph, maybe a beer coaster signed?” Gabe asked dryly.

Ben laughed, clearly thinking this was all friendly banter . “Seriously, it's so cool meeting you in person. I had your jersey, man. You were insane out there.”

“Still is,” Carol muttered, barely audible. I heard it. Gabe definitely heard it. Ben, unfortunately, did not.

“I didn't even realize you guys were related,” Ben said, turning to me. “You and Gabe. Brothers, huh? That's crazy. Total legacy family.”

Carol's shoulders tightened so fast I could practically hear the thread in her dress cry for help.

Gabe looked like he was trying very hard not to roll his eyes into the next dimension.

Then Ben turned back to Carol, all proud of himself, and said, “You didn't tell me you knew Gabe McCloud.

That's badass.” The poor guy was clueless that Carol was one word away from a slow-burning detonation.

“So, you two know each other well, huh?”

Carol gave Gabe a look. “You could say that.”

Gabe didn't blink. “She used to braid my hair when she was in fourth grade. Then weaponized it in fifth.”

“I was nine,” she said through clenched teeth. “And you deserved it.”

“You told everyone I had lice.”

“You called me a Tinker Bell lookalike with bad bangs.”

Thorne huffed. He wasn’t wrong. Her bangs were an abomination.

I coughed into my drink. Ben, still smiling like a Labrador at a dinner party, said, “That’s adorable. Childhood rivals turned friends?”

Carol turned her head so slowly I thought I heard vertebrae crack. “Friends?”

“Well—sure,” Ben said, glancing between them. “I mean, right?”

Gabe raised a brow. “You think we’re friends, man?”

Ben blinked. “Aren’t you?”

Carol made a noise. I don’t know how to describe it. It was feral . Like someone had crossed a jungle cat with a microwave about to explode.

“I once put Icy Hot in his jockstrap,” she said casually, sipping her champagne.

Ben choked on his beer. “What?”

“Right before my first pro game,” Gabe added.

"You didn't." Ben's head swiveled to Carol, torn between admiration and horror.

Curiously, I leaned closer, not wanting to miss this. Thorne snorted .



He's dead. She's going to eat him. I want a front row seat.

Carol shrugged. "Oh," she said slowly, "don't clam up now, McCloud. Tell him what you did. You cracked my login, scrolled through a minimum of twenty chapters , and quoted my fake mafia dom character on local television. Why?"

Gabe sipped his drink with the casual air of a man trying not to look like he was drowning. "It was research."

Carol barked a laugh. "Oh my God. That's what you're going with?"

"You were a public figure."

"I was a teenager hiding under a pen name called S.J. Flame."

Ben let out a squeaky sound. "Wait. You're S.J. Flame?! The one with the mafia chef who?—"

Carol whipped around so fast, he choked on his own voice. "Finish that sentence, Ben, and I swear to God I will file for a restraining order before dessert."

He held up both hands. "Nope. All good. Love your work."

Thorne was wheezing inside me now. She's going to bite someone. Maybe two someones. This is better than cake.

Gabe leaned back with an unreadable expression. "It wasn't personal. I recognized the dialogue. That's all."

Carol narrowed her eyes. "Recognized it from what ? "

Silence followed. Gabe, honest to God, looked like a man who was backed into a corner and knew it. Carol noticed it too. Her pointer finger went straight into his face, her eyes squinting. “From what, Gabriel?”

“I don’t remember,” he said too quickly.

“Oh, now you don’t remember?” she said, eyebrows launching into the stratosphere. “Was it the line about a girl getting hot with the mafia boss's son out at the lake?”

Ben leaned toward me and whispered, “I don’t know what’s happening, but I think I need to sit down.”

“You are sitting,” I muttered.

“I need to sit deeper.”

Carol crossed her arms, eyes still locked on Gabe. “Say it. Admit it. You were reading it for fun. ”

Gabe’s mouth twitched. “The prose was passable.”

Thorne groaned with glee. He’s dead. We’re having roasted linebacker tonight.

Carol gasped like she’d just been personally assaulted by a thesaurus. “Passable?”

“I liked the line about her screaming his name while he made her?—”

“I’m going to kill you,” Carol snapped.

I stepped between them, hands raised. “Okay. This has been... enlightening. But maybe we don’t need to reenact your entire enemies-to-lovers subplot at my

wedding?”

Carol was still glaring.

Gabe stood. “I need another drink.”

“You need a muzzle.” Carol hissed.

Ben nodded sagely. “Or a safe word.”

Carol spun on him so fast he dropped his drink.

“I take it back,” he said. “No talking.”

Gabe was already ordering another drink, and Carol turned on her heel and stormed off in the opposite direction, muttering something about passable prose and one day I’m writing you into a book as a roach.

I stared at the swaying string lights overhead and sighed.

Ella appeared beside me, eyebrows raised. “Everything okay?”

“Just the usual,” I said. “Gabe being a menace. Carol being Carol. Ben possibly developing a stress ulcer.”

She took my arm, smirking. “So... normal.”

I smiled and kissed her forehead. “God, I love our family.”

The moment I’d finished declaring my undying love for our twisted little family, the DJ’s voice came over the speaker with too much enthusiasm and way too much

volume.

“Alright, folks, it’s time for the garter toss! Gentlemen, make your way to the dance floor!”

I turned toward Ella, a wicked grin on my face. She shook her head.

“Don’t make it weird,” she said, already backing away a step as I approached.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I grinned, “I am the weird.”

“You make one innuendo, and I’m calling Carol back over.”

I held up both hands like I was negotiating a hostage release. “Understood. No jokes about what’s under the dress.”

“Also, no teeth.”

“You wound me.”

She narrowed her eyes, then slowly lifted the hem of her gown and put one foot on the chair the DJ had pulled out like some kind of ritual sacrifice. The crowd whistled. Henry shouted something about keeping it PG, and Carol yelled, “I swear to God, if you use your teeth?—”

“I heard you,” I called back, crouching in front of Ella like a man about to perform open-heart surgery.

Her garter was pale gold lace, delicate as spun sugar.

I slid it off slowly and reverently, wishing I could keep it.

Then I turned to the dance floor. A cluster of guys had assembled: some groomsmen, a few brave friends, and Ben, who looked like he was praying he didn't catch it, but also like he wanted to impress Carol. The duality of man.

Gabe, of course, was at the back of the group, drink in hand, very much Not Participating .

I grinned. Then I launched that sucker. High arc.

Good spiral. Straight out of the NFL playbook.

Born from muscle memory and instinct, Gabe caught it.

He stared at it as if it were roadkill. Laughter erupted.

Gabe held it up with two fingers, like it was a contaminated lab sample, and said, "Not it."

Carol raised her glass from across the room. "Coward."

Gabe smirked. "Felony prevention."

Ella had doubled over laughing by now, and I took the moment to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her close.

"You know," I murmured against her temple, "it's possible we just cursed my brother with a romantic subplot."

"Good," she whispered back. "It's time."

Thorne purred inside me. The chaos has spoken.

The reception had begun to drift into that golden lull — that slow, honeyed part of the night when the music is softer, the shoes come off, and even the rowdiest guests are two drinks away from taking nap selfies on the nearest hay bale.

Ella was glowing, flushed from laughter, hair a little messy in the way I loved most—the way that meant she'd lived in the moment. Our moment.

She tossed the bouquet not long after the garter incident. It flew in a perfect arc and—of course—Carol caught it, purely out of reflex. She stared at the flowers in stunned betrayal, as if they'd personally violated her five-year plan.

Ben tried to high-five her. She handed him the bouquet and walked away.

And that was our cue.

I found Ella at the edge of the barn, her back to the lights, arms folded as she stared out at the moonlit field beyond. She heard me coming. I saw the way her shoulders softened the moment I was close.

“Too much?” she asked without turning.

“Never,” I said, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

She leaned back into me, warm and perfect. “The lights, the cake, your brother catching a garter—this whole night has been ridiculous.”

“And somehow still less dramatic than our first date.”

She laughed, low and sleepy. “Fair point.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

It was time to send everyone home. The music had faded. The lights had dimmed. The last of the champagne had gone warm in half-empty glasses, and most of the guests had slipped into the night on waves of laughter and exhaustion.

But we had stragglers.

Carol was trying to fish a drunk groomsman out of a haystack. Gabe was nowhere to be found, which likely meant he was emotionally spiraling in a parking lot somewhere. And I couldn't find my mother.

Or Henry.

Which was deeply concerning.

"Aunt Hatty wants her coat," Patrick said, rubbing his temple as he joined me by the entrance. "She's very insistent. Something about no one needs to see her knees in this weather."

"I'll help look," I muttered, already marching toward the coat closet.

Carol tagged along. "You sure she didn't already leave?"

"She wouldn't leave without making a point of it."

"Touché."

We reached the closet. It was technically a small room off the barn foyer, dark and

full of faux-fur wraps, rental tux bags, and way too much cologne. I opened the door and immediately regretted every decision that had ever led me to this moment.

Because there, in the dim light of a low-watt bulb, pressed against the back wall like horny teenagers at prom, were?—

“Oh my God!”

Henry spun.

My mother gasped.

Everyone froze. Including me .

“Oh, sweet suffering hell,” Carol said flatly, turning right around and walking back out. Patrick stepped forward, blinked like he couldn’t quite trust his vision, then threw an arm in front of me like he could physically shield my brain from the image.

“Mom?” I choked out. “Henry?”

“Sweetheart,” Henry said, trying to straighten his shirt. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“I think it’s exactly what it looks like!” I squeaked.

Patrick made a noise beside me. It was halfway between a laugh and a wheeze. “Dad?”

"He's banging my mother," I cried out.

Aunt Hatty, still waiting behind us, peered in and said, “Well. That’s one way to keep warm.”



Patrick chuckled behind me. That's when I lost it. I turned on him without thinking. "That's your father! Do something."

"Like what?"

"Get him off my mother, get him out of the closet!" I screeched.

He closed the door. "Ells, they're both adults, consenting adults?—"

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry, for a moment I forgot that Saint Henry can't do anything wrong. Like banging my mentally impaired mother."

"She's not mentally impaired," he said gently. "Maybe a bit... crazy," he added, wincing. "But you and I both know—she doesn't do anything she doesn't want to."

Both of my hands pushed against his chest; of course, it didn't do anything, damn this man.

He didn't even stumble. He was right, too, but I wasn't in the mood to discuss my mother's mental state while she was...

was... fucking someone in the fucking closet.

The door was so thin that I could still hear their moans.

They hadn't even stopped. They were still going!

Patrick stood there like the world wasn't burning down behind the door.

"Are you seriously defending them?" I hissed. "Right now? Today of all days?"

“I’m not defending anyone, and of course I’m horrified, Ells. But I can’t go kicking down a door over something I can’t control,” he said calmly, and God, that made me want to scream. “I’m just saying—this isn’t about them. It’s about you. And me. And how we deal with stuff when it goes sideways.”

“No, Patrick, this is about your dad having sex with my mother at our wedding. In a coat closet.”

“You think I’m not horrified?”

“You don’t look horrified.”

“Well, excuse me if I’ve had a little more practice than you in pretending things are fine when they’re not.”

That stopped me cold. Patrick exhaled and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Sorry. That came out wrong.”

“No,” I said, heart thudding. “It didn’t.”

We stared at each other. For the first time in months, I didn’t see the man I trusted with everything. I saw the boy who’d walked away ten years ago because pretending to be fine was easier than bleeding out in front of someone.

“You still do this,” I whispered. “You still act like keeping your cool makes you better at handling things.”

He flinched. “Ella?—”

“Well, newsflash, Patrick: I don’t want calm. I don’t want cool and steady. I want someone who will yell with me. Cry with me. Feel with me.”

“I do feel,” he said, voice tight. “I’m just not great at performing it for everyone’s benefit.”

“It’s not a performance! It’s a relationship! You don’t get to opt out of the ugly parts just because they make you uncomfortable.”

He looked down then, jaw working, eyes dark. “This isn’t about them,” he finally said. “This is about you needing everything around you to be predictable , and the second it’s not, you throw it back at me like it’s my fault.”

His words hit me. Hard. But he wasn't done. "I get it, with a mother like Lisa, I might have been the same way, needing to control everything in my life. But life isn't predictable, Ella."

We were spiraling. Fast. My throat hurt. My chest ached. His hits just kept coming, so I said the one thing I knew would hit him too, “Maybe we rushed this.”

Patrick’s head snapped up. The words hung there. Too sharp, too reckless, and I regretted them the second they hit the air.

“I didn’t mean?—”

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “You did.”

Then he stepped back. One step. Two. And turned away. I watched him walk out of the barn without looking back. My heart cracked like ice in boiling water. Because this time he wasn't just walking away from me, he was walking out on our wedding.

Carol appeared at my side seconds later, eyes wide, obviously having caught enough of it to get the gist. “Let’s get you out of here.”

She hooked her arm through mine and steered me through the last of the lingering guests, through the barn doors, down the moonlit path toward the little stone cottage that was supposed to be our wedding night suite.

I let her guide me, too stunned and too hurt to do anything but move.

When we reached the porch, I finally spoke. “I’m such an idiot.”

“No,” Carol said.

“I am.” My voice cracked. “I let myself believe that everything would be perfect. That I could trust his family. That I could just... slot into their golden, shiny, unbreakable legacy, and it would all work out.”

Carol didn’t reply; she just let me vent.

And vent I did. I kept going, words spilling out like a slow bleed.

“But of course not. Because I’m the girl with the broken family.

With the cold mother and the complicated past. He’s the saint.

They’re all saints. Saint Henry. Saint Gabe. Even Thorne, the fluffy martyr.”

Carol snorted. “Don’t give Thorne sainthood. That bear would set a church on fire for a cinnamon roll.”

I barked a laugh, then immediately pressed my fist to my mouth to keep from sobbing.

“And Patrick,” I said bitterly, “he’ll never admit they’re flawed. He’ll never say one

bad thing about his perfect dad or his misunderstood brother. I was humiliated, Carol. My mother and his father . And I was the one who ended up looking crazy for reacting.”

Carol’s jaw tightened. “You’re not crazy.”

“He walked away from me.”

“He stormed away from you,” she corrected. “Big difference. Walking implies dignity. That man stomped like Thorne was driving.”

Another laugh slipped out. A weak one. But it helped.

She squeezed my hand. “You’re allowed to be mad. You’re allowed to want more than endless patience and silence from someone who promised to stand beside you. Even saints screw up.”

“I just thought he’d fight for me. Not with me.”

Carol didn’t answer right away. When she did, her voice was low.

“I love Patrick. You know I do. He’s one of my oldest friends. But he’s stubborn. And he’s spent his whole life being the glue for that family. He doesn’t know how to be the guy who questions them.”

I nodded, my throat raw. “And I’m not glue. I’m glass.”

“No,” she said. “You’re fire. And if he can’t learn how to meet you in the middle, he’s going to get burned.”

We stepped into the cottage. The room was beautiful. Candles flickered on the

nightstand. The bed was turned down. Rose petals dusted the floor. The sight made me want to scream.

“This was supposed to be our night,” I said, my voice breaking.

Carol closed the door behind us. “Then maybe it still can be. Just not in the way you thought.”

I didn’t answer. I walked over to the bed, sat down in a pile of tulle and flowers, buried my face in my hands, and let myself cry.

I don’t know how long I cried. I only stopped when I realized I was gasping more than sobbing, and my cheeks hurt from the salt.

Carol sat beside me in the big chair by the fireplace, legs tucked under her, champagne abandoned on the side table.

She hadn’t said anything in a while, which I appreciated.

She was letting me unravel at my own pace.

Eventually, I wiped at my face with the hem of my dress—elegantly—and said, “He left.”

“He did.”

“On our wedding night.”

“Technically, you told him you might’ve rushed the whole thing.”

I flinched. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I know.”

Silence again.

Then she asked, gently, “Do you think maybe... he wasn’t entirely wrong?”

I stared at her. “About what? About me being an emotionally unstable lunatic with a god complex?”

She didn’t blink. “About control.”

I pressed the heel of my hand into my forehead. “God. Don’t start psychoanalyzing me.”

“I’m not,” she said. “I’m reminding you of things you already know but don’t want to say out loud.”

When I didn’t respond, she waited. And then, softly continued, “Remember in sixth grade, when you had to switch schools in the middle of the semester because your mom said the house had bad vibes ?”

I groaned. “Ugh. The energy shift . She saged the couch.”

“And when she made you pack everything in one day so you could leave before Mercury retrograded?”

“I missed finals. I had to retake math in summer school.” I remembered.

“How many times did the school office have to call her and remind her to pick you up?”

I winced. Carol was right. Mom would say she'd pick me up at two thirty, but at least twice a month, she never showed. "She said the cat wouldn't eat. So she had to make chicken and rice and couldn't get there in time.

" I responded weakly with one of her excuses.

Another had been a bird that had been hit by a car, and she had to take it home first before she could come and get me.

Carol's voice was quiet now. "Remember what you said to me one time?"

I laughed dryly, because over the many years of our friendship, I had said a lot of things to Carol.

"You said, It's okay. She loves the animals more than me ."

The words hit harder now than they did when I said them. Because back then, I'd said it like it was a joke. I had felt like it for a long time, and they just had to come out, but it was easier to make them sound like I was making light of it than to fully deal with it.

Carol reached over, took my hand. "You're not broken, El. But you've been carrying around this deep, bone-level fear for a long time. That if you're not on time, on task, on top of every little thing—someone will forget you. Or choose something else over you. Even a bird. Or a hungry cat."

The air left my lungs in a slow, stunned breath.

"And Patrick," she continued, "he's not your mom. He doesn't need a ten-minute buffer to remember you matter. He's... always known."



“I know,” I whispered, voice cracking.

“And yeah, okay, Screwing Saint Henry in the coat closet isn’t ideal. But your mom didn’t leave you this time. She showed up. She stayed. And she found someone she likes. That’s not on you to fix.”

I gave her words a moment to sink in. Slowly... ever so slowly... something shifted inside me. It wasn't a psychological breakthrough or anything like that, but I sat back against the pillows, tears still drying, and whispered, “It’s not normal, is it?”

“What?”

“To think people are late unless they’re ten minutes early. To panic if things don’t go according to plan. To immediately assume that if someone doesn’t answer their phone, it means they’ve forgotten me. Or left.”

Carol gave a half-smile. “No. That’s not normal. That’s trauma dressed up like scheduling.”

Another silence passed. Then I let out a long, unsteady breath. “If my mom wants to bang Henry in a closet... she can bang Henry.”

Carol blinked. “That is... surprisingly evolved.”

I laughed, hiccupped, and said, “Don’t get used to it.”

She patted my knee. “I’ll write it on a mug.”

Then she reached for her phone. “Now. Want me to text your husband and tell him he’s a moron for walking out?”

I paused. Then shook my head. “Not yet.”

She nodded, understanding. “Okay. But give me the green light, and I’ll put him in the emotional ICU.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“For being here. For staying. For... knowing me.”

She smiled. “Always. Even when you’re fire.”

I leaned my head against her shoulder.

And, for the first time since the fight, I let myself think: Maybe I could fix this.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

I didn't stop walking until I reached the furthest edge of the venue—a little outdoor bar tucked under an overhang of twinkling lights.

I wasn't sure if it was open or just abandoned, but the bottles were still lined up neatly on the shelves like they were waiting for me.

I grabbed a tumbler and poured myself two fingers of whiskey, neat.

My tie was already loose. My pulse hadn't been right since Ella said maybe we'd rushed it.

God, that hurt more than any hit I'd ever taken on a field. I leaned on the bar, drink in hand, staring at the distant trees like they might offer a solution. Thorne growled low and slow inside me. She didn't mean it.

You don't know that.

I know her. You're just being soft and self-pitying.

"Thanks for the support," I muttered aloud.

I'm a bear. Not a therapist. But even I know you're not supposed to let your mate cry alone on her wedding night.

"Didn't expect to find you sulking out here." A familiar voice behind me interrupted my heart-to-heart with my bear. Gabe stood a few feet away, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a beer. His tie was gone, his hair messy, and he was trying, way too

hard, for a neutral expression.

“What do you want?” I asked tiredly.

“Beer. And maybe to make sure you didn’t wander into the woods to be eaten by a moose.”

I sighed and turned back to my glass. “I’m fine.”

“You’re at a bar,” he said, “alone. On your wedding night. ”

I didn’t answer.

Gabe came closer and leaned against the bar beside me. For a long moment, we just stood there—like two ghosts haunting a party we weren’t invited to. Finally, I commented, "Well, you don't look all that happy either."

He sat down next to me. "Yeah, but it's not my wedding night."

Surprised at the tone in his voice, I looked up. It suggested... regret? "You almost sound like you wish it were."

"Would that be so strange? You're not the only romantic in the family," he brushed his hand through his unruly hair.

I arched an eyebrow, "Romance? You? You've been living the dream we both had since we were kids and chasing tail all over the United States."

"Not by choice..." he trailed off. Something was different about him. Something that didn't add up with all the parties he had been attending over the years, or all the pretty girls hanging off his arms.

"What are you talking about?"

"I messed up," he confided, getting up and pouring himself a glass of whiskey. Silence enveloped us. My curiosity was aroused, but I knew better than to press him. Over the past ten years, we hadn't spoken much.

"We used to talk all the time," I said finally.

Gabe glanced at me. "Yeah. When we were kids."

That made me think. He was right. For some reason, I had associated our silence with my injury, but now, thinking about it, I realized it had been longer. "I thought... I thought it was the accident that tore us apart."

He frowned. "You thought I bailed because of your legs?"

I shrugged. "You disappeared. You got drafted. I was in rehab. I figured..."

He shook his head. "Jesus, Pat. No. That's not it."

I studied his face. "So what was it?"

Gabe swallowed the contents of his whiskey glass. "Carol."

I blinked. That was the last thing I had expected. "What?"

"I thought you two would end up together. You were close. Everyone said so. And I..." he trailed off, then let out a harsh breath. "I've always known she was mine. My mate. I felt it. But I didn't want to stand in the way of whatever was happening between you two. So I stepped back."

Thorne huffed. That makes two of us. I figured we were just down one brother. Glad to know it was over a girl. Less tragic.

“You’re not helping,” I whispered under my breath.

You’re not asking me to.

I stared at my brother, stunned. “You thought I was in love with Carol?”

“You weren’t?”

“No! I mean—not like that. Carol’s... Carol. She’s like a sister.”

He let out a dry laugh. “Well, that’s just great. Cheers.”

He raised his glass and drank it dry before pouring another, nodding at me in question, and I held mine up for him to refill in answer. “I think I need a bit more of an explanation here.”

He sighed, “I imprinted on her the first time I saw her. Admittedly, I was five and didn’t understand what the hell I was feeling, but that’s why... it doesn’t matter. She hates me anyway.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I muttered. “She just... wants to set you on fire most days.”

He raised a brow. “That’s comforting.”

I sipped my drink and shook my head. “All this time, I thought you stopped talking to me because I was broken.”

“You were never broken,” Gabe said. “You were just quiet. And I didn’t know how

to be loud for both of us.”

We sat there a minute longer, the air between us slowly starting to thaw.

Then he asked, casually, “So why are you out here? You and Ella get in a fight?”

I let out a breath. “Yeah.”

He nodded. “What about?”

“Her mom and our dad... closet.” I stopped myself.

"Wait." He made the sign for time out. "Her mom and our dad? Closet?"

I chuckled because, honestly, the entire situation was just ridiculous. "Yeah, Lisa and Henry were fucking in the coat closet, and we caught them."

"Well," he rubbed his chin, refilled his glass, and smirked. "Good for Dad."

I laughed, "At least someone got laid on my wedding night."

"What happened? Between you and Ella?"

"I didn't handle the situation well," I admitted, still feeling some anger, but more pain. Pain over her saying our marriage might have been a mistake.

“You mean you were you.”

I shot him a look.

He held up a hand. “I’m not judging. You’re the still-lake-to-my-hurricane type. But

Ella? She's lightning in a glass bottle. You don't put a lid on that. You let it strike."

"She told me I didn't feel anything."

"Then she's an idiot," Gabe said. "But you're a bigger one for letting her believe it."

That hit harder than I expected.

"You think she'll forgive me?" I asked quietly.

"I think," Gabe said, finishing his whiskey and setting the glass down, "you need to stop sitting out here stewing and go home and grovel. Start there."

I hesitated.

He added, "You waited ten years for her. Don't blow it now because you can't stand being uncomfortable ."

He was right. I pushed her away once. Now she was doing the same thing.

Maybe not on purpose, but I knew her and her insecurities, and I knew she didn't handle unpredictability very well.

If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that I wouldn't allow her to push me away like I had her and wait ten more years.

We would clear this up tonight. Neither of us said anything unforgivable; we could still work things out.

I would grovel, just like Gabe told me. I would do anything for this woman.



Thorne rumbled with satisfaction . Finally. Took you long enough .

“What, no advice on how to grovel?”

Just show up. Smell like regret. Bring snacks, he snarked.

I made my way up toward the cabin where Ella and I were supposed to—where we would —spend our wedding night.

Nobody could have been more surprised than I was when Ella came walking down the path toward me.

Even in the dim moonlight, I could see that she had been crying, and my heart cracked. I had done this. To her. Again.

You're an idiot , Thorne advised. Step aside and let me handle this .

"Ella," I called, ignoring Thorne.

When I called her, she looked up, her face filled with hope, and then we were flying toward each other. I hadn't run this fast since I got hurt. She crashed into my arms like a tornado, and I wrapped them around her, determined never to let her go again.

"I'm sorry," we said simultaneously. Then we stared at each other and laughed.

"You were right, and I was an idiot," she said hastily, as if she were afraid I would say something first. "And I didn't mean what I said. I really didn't. I'm so happy to be Mrs. McCloud and?—"

I didn't let her finish. I sealed her lips with mine and kissed her with the hunger of a man who had just gotten married to the girl of his dreams.

"I'm sorry," I said when we came up for air. "I didn't handle the situation right either. I will talk to my dad, this?—"

She pressed her finger to my lips and shook her head. "No, whatever is going on between the two of them, that's their business, not ours."

I smiled at her, "My wise wife."

"You don't know the half of it yet." She grinned, taking my hand, but I shook it loose and instead pulled her up in my arms to carry her to the cabin we had rented for the next few days, set on finally starting our honeymoon and then the rest of our lives together.

Whatever it took, I would show this woman how much I loved her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

Patrick carried me bridal style over the threshold of the cabin.

"Let's start over," he murmured, his whiskey-tinged breath warm against my ear, before he deposited me on the bed. I kicked off my heels, feeling the soft rug under my feet. The room flickered with the light of a dozen candles, and the rose petals still decorated the bed.

He leaned over and his lips once again sealed mine with a passionate kiss. His hands moved to the back of my dress. I felt him hesitate before we broke our kiss, and he stared at me dumbfounded, "How many buttons are there?"

I giggled, "Twenty-five."

I had counted them, because I could be anal like that. Twenty-five pearl buttons, with tiny little holes to fit into, way too small for his large hands.

"Hold on," I rose from the bed and grabbed the dress' hem, pulling it up and over my head while bending like a pretzel here and there, wiggling my hips out of the tight fit.

His hands helped lift it over my head; all I wore now was a lacy, white bra and a gazillion petticoats.

Oh, and the white stockings and white panties.

"God, Ella, you're beautiful," he said in a husky voice.

"Only for you," I replied, reaching up to unbutton his shirt, revealing the familiar

landscape of his chest. My fingers traced the hard contours of his chiseled muscles, committing every inch to memory on this night that was supposed to be a celebration of our union.

The world shrank to the space between us, to the heat of his skin against mine, as we moved together toward the bed, shedding the remnants of our fancy attire and, with each piece, the remnants of our quarrel.

There was a gentleness in his touch, a reverence as he explored my body, igniting fires along the paths his fingers traced.

Reverently, he cupped my breasts, then leaned forward and began to suck on first one and then the other nipple, igniting a fire in my belly and a deep ache in my pussy.

His lips trailed lower, kissing a path down my stomach as his hands slid the lace panties down my thighs.

I shivered in anticipation, my fingers threaded through his hair.

He nudged my legs apart, settling between them; his warm breath teased me right before his mouth was on me.

A deep moan escaped me; I didn't think I would ever get enough of him doing this.

Expertly, he swirled his tongue around my sensitive bud, lapping at my slick folds.

I gasped and arched into him, while pleasure coiled tighter inside me with each stroke.

His fingers joined his mouth, sliding inside me, curling just right to hit that spot that made me see stars. I was climbing higher and higher; my body trembled with the

need for release. But then he pulled back, his eyes dark with desire as they met mine.

"I want to be inside you when you come," he rasped.

I bit my lips, nodding, because I wanted that too.

I wanted to feel him everywhere, around me, inside me.

I needed to feel his closeness. I needed him.

He positioned himself at my entrance, teasing it with the top of his velvety cock's head, before he smoothed himself inside me.

I cried out as my walls stretched to accommodate him.

My hands grabbed for his hard biceps, while he cradled my head with one arm and used the other to keep most of his weight off me.

"God Ella, I love you so fucking much," he groaned.

"I love you too," I leaned up to kiss him, tasting myself on his lips.

He set a steady rhythm, each stroke stoking the flames higher, while I wrapped my legs around his hips, urging him deeper. Our bodies moved as one, like a sensual dance we had perfected. Sweat slicked our skin as we chased our pleasure together.

"Patrick," I moaned his name like a prayer. "I'm so close..."

"Let go, baby," he panted. "I've got you. I'll always have you."

With those words, those perfect words, I did let go. I let go of everything, except him

and me. I would never let go of that.

My inner muscles clenched around him as waves of ecstasy crashed over me.

I cried out his name, clinging to him desperately as I shattered into a million blissful pieces.

He thrust into me harder, faster, chasing his own release until, with a guttural groan, he joined me over the edge.

His hips stuttered as he spilled himself deep inside me, and his face reflected a mask of pure rapture.

We stayed like that for a long moment. Our hearts pounded and our chests heaved as we savored the intimacy of our joining. Finally, he rolled off of me and gathered me into his arms. I snuggled against his chest, utterly sated and content.

"I meant what I said," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my hair. "I'll always be here for you, Ella. No matter what happens, it's you and me against the world."

"Hmm," I purred, "I like that."

"You and me, Mrs. McCloud," he grabbed my hand, intertwining our fingers before he gently kissed them.

"You and me," I agreed. "Forever."

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:04 pm*

The scent of cinnamon rolls and pine filled the air, and not even the mild chaos of the morning could dent my mood. For once, I wasn't obsessing over the timing of the oven. Or the guest list. Or the fact that Carol was now officially twenty-three minutes late.

I noticed. Of course I noticed.

But I didn't care.

Or at least, not enough to say anything. That was progress. Right?

"Do you want me to text her again?" Patrick called from the kitchen, already wearing the world's most ridiculous apron— Here comes Santa , because of course—and balancing a tray of hot cider in one hand. I smiled from my place on the couch, a plaid throw wrapped around my legs. "Nope. She'll be here."

He gave me a look, and I knew he was testing the waters. The Old Me would've had a backup plan, a backup to the backup plan, and at least two laminated spreadsheets. The New Me?

Was still kind of twitchy. But I was trying.

And it helped that Patrick, my husband— God, I loved that word —was watching me like I was the only thing that mattered in the world.

"You're sure?" he asked again, setting the tray down and coming over to drop a kiss to my temple. "Because if you say the word, I'll call her and guilt-trip her with a

dramatic story about Christmas cheer and cinnamon deprivation.”

I laughed softly, tipping my head toward him. “It’s fine. Really.”

He gave me one more once-over, then nodded and walked back toward the kitchen. I watched him go, still amazed sometimes that I got to keep this one. That after all the mess and heartbreak, after all the drama and dancing around each other, we’d found our way back. And we’d built this— together.

The house was done. Our house.

With its fireplace between the bedroom and bathroom.

The kitchen with double ovens, the wraparound porch where Thorne liked to sit in bear form and grumble at the wind.

Our dream home. Built not just from blueprints, but from years of wanting and learning and forgiving.

I looked around the living room— twinkling lights on the tree, mismatched ornaments, presents tucked underneath the tree, lovingly wrapped.

The smell of cookies, and fresh wood, and Patrick’s cedar soap still lingering in the air. This was it. Peace.

The door burst open, breaking the moment. "Don't yell at me for being late," Carol shouted before even stepping over the threshold. “Some idiot didn’t salt the driveway, and I slipped, and the only thing that broke my fall was a literal reindeer statue with a bell on its tail—don’t ask.”

Patrick popped his head out of the kitchen. “Did you break it?”



“The reindeer or my ass?”

“Yes,” we both said in unison.

Carol groaned, kicked off her boots, and walked in with cheeks flushed from the cold.

"Hot cider?" Patrick offered.

“If there isn’t rum in it, I’m leaving.”

I snorted into my blanket. “You’re not even wearing your giant puffer coat of doom. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine ,” she said pointedly, then pulled a tiny piece of mistletoe from her pocket and held it up with two fingers. “But I am going to hang this thing. Somewhere strategic.”

Patrick laughed. “Please not above the coat closet.”

“Oh, I have much better plans.” Her eyes sparkled dangerously. “Now where’s that bear of yours?”

As if summoned, Thorne rumbled deep in Patrick’s chest. She brought more donuts, didn’t she?

I grinned. “You’re getting predictable.”

She smells like sugar and chaos. I like her.

Patrick kissed my temple again. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. McCloud.”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. McCloud.”

I leaned into him, heart full, eyes a little misty, and whispered, “We did it. We made it through the crazy.”

He smiled against my hair. “Yeah. And we’ve got forever to enjoy the quiet. Well... mostly quiet.”

From the foyer, Carol shouted, “Where is the damned ladder?!”

Patrick chuckled. “She's on a mission, isn't she?”

I nodded and snuggled deeper into his side. “Let her hang it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Thorne sighed. Famous last words.

"We don't have one, use the footstool," Patrick advised, then rightened himself. "The other guests should arrive soon."

And just like that, the chaos of our life rolled on... but this time, I was ready for it. Because I wasn’t facing it alone.

Not anymore.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading Monsters, Vows & Growls !