



To Her

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Category: Romance

Description: She's spent years learning how to be unbreakable.

But what happens when someone finally sees the cracks?

Geri has built her life around control. Of her image, her past, and the secrets that could unravel her. She keeps people at arm's length, safe behind sarcasm and strength. Letting someone in was never part of the plan.

Until one wiggles through.

In a coastal town where nothing was meant to change, To Her is a quiet storm of heartbreak and healing, a story of two people, trying to believe in something more. Something safe. Something real.

For anyone who's ever loved with fear in their chest.

This is for you.

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"Thank you all for coming. I can see new faces here today. Would anyone like to introduce themselves?"

My hand instantly shoots into the air. This is why I was here, after all.

"Hi, everyone. My name is Oleander," I say. It wasn't good, it wasn't bad, but I never used my real name. I liked to think I could keep this as my secret.

"I'm a victim of both sexual assault, abuse, and most recently, drug addiction.

"The words come easier now, after so many meetings in so many different towns.

"When I was fourteen, I fell in love with a man who thought it was his life mission to break me—every bone in my body and my mind. He succeeded on both."

I pause, taking in the familiar expressions of the group. Some nod in understanding, others look down at their hands. No one interrupts.

"I turned to drugs to become numb, and again, that worked well for me.

Then, when I was eighteen, I was sexually assaulted by three men.

"My voice doesn't waver anymore when I say this part.

I've practiced it enough. "This was the one that broke the camel's back, or so they say.

I went down the rabbit hole and nearly killed myself.

Well, I attempted to kill myself and didn't succeed. "

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of my next words.

"I have kept most of this private from my home life, my boyfriends, and even my friends since. I now attend these meetings simply to have someone to talk to who won't judge me, won't blame me, or look at me with pity, because that's what happens when people know the truth about someone."

The room is silent, save for the occasional shifting in seats or clearing of throats. These strangers, these anonymous faces, are the only ones who know the real me.

"I also don't tell anyone because I never want to give someone the power to know me, truly know me. No matter who they are, no one can break me again if they don't know the real me."

I look around the circle, making brief eye contact with a few people before continuing.

"I've been sober for six months now. I still drink occasionally, but alcohol was never an issue for me."

I nod and take my seat, and the group claps and smiles at me.

Because at the end of the day, this is the only place I feel safe.

With total strangers that I will never see again, and who will not judge me, because that would mean they would have to judge themselves, and frankly, no one likes to look at themselves too closely.

As the meeting continues, I listen to other stories—tales of addiction, of rock bottom,

of slow and painful recovery. Some are worse than mine, some not as bad, but all are valid. All are real. All are human.

I wonder, sometimes, what it would be like to tell someone in my real life these things. To let someone see the scars, both visible and invisible, that I carry. To trust someone enough to show them the broken pieces I've spent years gluing back together.

But then I remember the look in his eyes when he realized how much power he had over me. I remember the feeling of being completely at someone else's mercy. I remember the shame, the fear, the helplessness.

And I know I can never go back to that place again.

So I compartmentalize. Geraldine "Geri" Zhang is the waitress, the skin therapist, the friend, the girlfriend. She's sarcastic and tough and doesn't take shit from anyone. She's the person everyone sees.

Oleander is the broken one, the survivor, the addict. She's the one who comes to these meetings, who speaks her truth to strangers, who allows herself to be vulnerable in controlled environments. She's the person no one knows.

And as long as I keep these two versions of myself separate, as long as I never let anyone close enough to see both sides, I'll be safe.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself.

The meeting ends, and people begin to disperse, some lingering to chat, others hurrying out the door. I gather my things, nodding goodbye to a few familiar faces. I won't be back to this particular meeting—I never go to the same one twice. It's safer that way.

As I step out into the cool evening air, I take a deep breath and let Oleander slip away. By the time I reach my car, I'm Geri again—confident, untouchable Geri, who doesn't need anyone and doesn't let anyone need her.

It's exhausting, this double life. But it's the only way I know how to survive.

And survival, after all, is what I do best.

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Geri

"Should've woken me when you got home," I muttered to myself, pushing my long black hair away from my face.

Six months into this relationship, and I still wasn't used to his schedule—or the way he'd slip into bed in the early hours, smelling of other people's perfume and cigarettes and the sticky sweetness of spilled drinks.

I stretched, feeling the familiar pop in my lower back, and contemplated joining him in the shower. The thought was interrupted by the buzzing of Ben's phone on the nightstand. Once, twice, three times in quick succession.

I glanced at it with mild annoyance. Who the hell was texting so frantically this early? Probably one of his DJ friends with some crisis about tonight's gig. Ben was always getting dragged into other people's drama.

The phone buzzed again, and I reached for it, mostly to stop the irritating sound. The name "Jess" flashed on the screen with a little heart emoji next to it.

Jess? I didn't know a Jess. At least, not one that Ben had ever mentioned.

I hesitated for a moment, my finger hovering over the notification.

I wasn't the type to snoop through my boyfriend's phone.

Trust issues? Sure, I had them by the truckload, but I'd been working on that.

Six months with Ben had been good for me.

Stable. Almost boring sometimes, but in a way that felt safe.

The phone buzzed again. Five messages now.

"Fuck it," I whispered, swiping to open the conversation. I told myself I was just going to reply that Ben was in the shower and would text back soon. That's what a normal, secure girlfriend would do, right?

But as the message thread loaded, my stomach dropped to somewhere around my ankles.

I had so much fun last night thanks for 3 awesome orgasms

The words blurred as my vision tunnelled. I blinked hard, certain I'd misread. But no, there it was, followed by:

Still feel you inside me

When can I see you again?

Ben?

You up yet?

Time seemed to slow down and speed up simultaneously. I scrolled up, my thumb moving of its own accord, revealing weeks of messages. Flirty at first, then explicit. Pictures. Plans to meet. Last night's plans.

While I'd been home waiting, nursing that extra glass of wine.

The shower was still running. Steam billowed from under the bathroom door, and suddenly all I could think about was how hot water feels on skin. On her skin. On his. Together.

I didn't remember standing up. Didn't remember walking to the bathroom. But suddenly I was there, his phone clutched so tightly in my hand that my knuckles had gone white.

I pushed the door open without knocking. The bathroom was a sauna, mirror fogged, Ben's silhouette visible through the frosted glass of the shower door. He was humming something—one of the tracks he'd played last night, probably.

"Having a good morning?" My voice sounded strange to my own ears. Too calm. Too controlled.

Ben's humming stopped. "Babe? That you?"

I looked down at the phone in my hand, then back at his shadowy figure. "Who's Jess?"

The silence that followed was all the confirmation I needed.

"Geri, I can explain?—"

"Explain what?" The calm was evaporating rapidly, replaced by a heat that had nothing to do with the steam filling the bathroom. "Explain how you fucked someone else last night while I was waiting for you to come home?"

"It's not?—"

I yanked the shower door open. Ben stood there, water streaming down his body,

eyes wide with shock and something else. Guilt. Unmistakable guilt.

"Not what? Not what it looks like?" I thrust the phone toward his face, screen first. "Because it looks like you gave some girl named Jess three—her words—'awesome orgasms' last night instead of coming home to me."

He reached for a towel, as if modesty was somehow relevant now. "Geri, please, just let me?—"

The rage that had been building exploded through me like a tsunami. I didn't think. Didn't plan. My arm just moved, smashing the phone against his face with all the strength I could muster.

"Six months!" I screamed as he stumbled backward, hand flying to his cheek where the phone had connected. "Six fucking months I trusted you!"

"Jesus Christ, Geri!" Blood trickled from a small cut below his eye. "You're fucking crazy!"

"I'm crazy? I'M CRAZY?" My voice echoed off the bathroom tiles. "You're the one who couldn't keep your dick in your pants for six goddamn months!"

I hurled the phone into the shower where it clattered against the tiles and slid down the drain end. Water splashed everywhere—on the floor, on my pyjamas, on the bathmat.

"That's my phone!" Ben lunged for it, slipping slightly.

"Good luck explaining to Jess why it doesn't work anymore," I spat, backing toward the door. "I'm sure she'll understand. She sounds very accommodating."

"Where are you going?" He was out of the shower now, towel hastily wrapped around his waist, water and blood dripping onto the floor.

"Away from you." I turned and stormed out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, and toward the front door.

"Geri, wait! You can't just—you're in your pyjamas!"

I didn't care. I grabbed my keys and phone from the entry table and yanked the front door open.

"Geri!"

I slammed the door behind me, cutting off whatever pathetic excuse he was about to offer.

The concrete of the apartment walkway was cold and wet against my bare feet—we'd had rain overnight—but I barely noticed.

All I could feel was the white-hot rage coursing through my veins, propelling me forward, away from the apartment, away from Ben, away from the shattered remains of what I'd stupidly thought was a good relationship.

Six months. Six months of my life wasted on another lying, cheating asshole.

I made it halfway down the block before I realized I was crying, hot tears streaming down my face to match the water dripping from my pyjama bottoms. I had nowhere to go, no plan, just the keys in one hand and my phone in the other, and the absolute certainty that I was never going back.

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Geri

"If you try to set me up with one more of Jake's 'awesome mates,' I swear I'll shave your eyebrows off while you sleep."

I glared at Haley through the mirror as she stood behind me, attempting to tame my hair into something resembling a sophisticated updo. Two months of living together in her parents' mansion had taught me that threats were the only language she truly respected.

"You wouldn't dare," she replied, completely unfazed as she twisted another section of my hair. "Besides, this one's different. Matt's actually decent—not like that finance bro Jake tried to hook you up with at Christmas."

I rolled my eyes. "You mean the one who spent forty-five minutes explaining cryptocurrency to me? Yeah, real winner there."

From across the massive bedroom that had become our collective getting-ready space, Anna snorted with laughter. "God, that guy was the worst. But Haley's right about Matt. He's not like Jake's usual crowd."

The bedroom itself was a testament to Haley's parents' wealth—cream-colored walls adorned with original artwork, plush carpet that felt like walking on clouds, and a bathroom bigger than my entire previous apartment.

We'd transformed it into a war zone of beauty products, discarded outfits, and half-empty champagne flutes.

"What makes this Matt so special?" I asked, wincing as Haley secured another hairpin with unnecessary force.

"Well, for starters, he's not a douche," Anna said, holding up two different pairs of earrings to her ears. "He's Jake's cousin from up North. Visiting for a few weeks before he ships out."

"Ships out?" I raised an eyebrow, meeting Anna's eyes in the mirror.

"He joined the army," Haley explained. "Finished his basic training or whatever they call it. He's got some leave before his first deployment."

Great. A military guy. Probably all "yes ma'am, no ma'am" with a buzzcut and protein shakes.

"So he's only here temporarily," I said, trying to find the silver lining. "That means when this inevitably crashes and burns, I won't have to worry about running into him around town."

Haley tugged at my hair a little harder than necessary. "Would it kill you to be optimistic for once? It's been two months since the Ben disaster. You can't hide in this house forever."

The mention of Ben's name still sent an uncomfortable jolt through me. Two months wasn't nearly enough time to forget walking out of his apartment in my pyjamas, barefoot and broken-hearted. Or the three weeks of him blowing up my phone afterward, alternating between apologies and accusations.

I'm sorry, baby, it was a mistake. It didn't mean anything.

You're overreacting. It was just sex.

You're crazy, you know that? Breaking my phone? You need help.

I'd blocked his number eventually, but sometimes I still caught myself checking to see if he'd found another way to contact me. The last I'd heard, he and Jess were officially dating. Good for them. I hoped they'd be very happy together until he inevitably cheated on her too.

"I'm not hiding," I said, reaching for the glass of champagne on the vanity. "I'm regrouping."

"In my parents' guest room," Haley pointed out.

"In your parents' mansion," I corrected her. "There's a difference."

And what a mansion it was. Five bedrooms, six bathrooms, a pool that overlooked the ocean, and enough square footage that the three of us could go entire days without running into each other if we wanted to.

The kitchen alone was bigger than most apartments, with marble countertops and appliances that looked like they belonged in a restaurant.

The living room featured floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the Pacific like a living painting.

Haley's parents had "downsized" to a beachfront condo two towns over, leaving their daughter and her two best friends to house-sit indefinitely.

It was the kind of ridiculous privilege that only old money could afford, but I wasn't about to complain.

Not when the alternative was moving back in with my father and enduring his daily

reminders that I'd be settled by now if I'd just followed his plan for my life.

Business school, Geraldine. A proper career. Not this... skin therapy nonsense.

I took another sip of champagne, letting the bubbles wash away the echo of my father's disappointment.

"There," Haley said, stepping back to admire her handiwork. "You look hot. Ben would eat his heart out if he saw you."

"That's not the goal," I lied, examining my reflection.

She wasn't wrong, though. My long black hair was artfully arranged in a way that looked effortlessly tousled while still showing off the multiple piercings along my ear.

The dark makeup around my eyes made the brown irises look almost black, intense against my pale skin.

The cherry blossom tattoo peeked out from beneath the strap of my dress, a splash of delicate pink against my shoulder.

The red dress I'd splurged on—one month's tips from the restaurant where I'd picked up waitressing shifts—hugged every curve.

It was shorter than I usually wore, with a neckline that dipped just low enough to be interesting without veering into desperate territory.

The fabric caught the light when I moved, shimmering slightly.

"The goal," Anna said, finally selecting a pair of dangling silver earrings, "is to have

fun. To dance. To drink expensive champagne that Jake's parents are providing. And maybe, just maybe, to kiss someone hot at midnight."

Anna was the peacemaker of our trio—always finding the middle ground between Haley's relentless optimism and my cynicism.

Tonight she looked like a disco ball personified in her silver sequined top and white jeans so tight they might have been painted on.

Her blonde hair fell in perfect waves around her shoulders, the product of an expensive blowout earlier that day.

"Exactly," Haley agreed, moving on to her own hair. "No pressure. If you hate Matt, you never have to see him again. But at least give the guy a chance before you write him off."

Haley, in contrast to both of us, had gone for classic elegance—a black dress that skimmed her curves, her dark hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail, red lipstick the only pop of colour. She looked like she'd stepped out of a vintage Hollywood film.

I sighed, reaching for the bottle to refill my glass. We'd been pregaming for the past hour, and the champagne was doing its job, softening the edges of my perpetual wariness. "Fine. But if he starts talking about push-ups or protein powder or whatever, I'm out."

"Deal." Haley grinned triumphantly. "Now help me decide—hair up or down?"

"Down," Anna and I said in unison.

"You always say down," Haley complained, but she was already pulling the elastic from her ponytail.

"Because it always looks better down," I replied, standing up to stretch. My feet were already protesting the four-inch heels I'd chosen, but beauty is pain, or so they say. "Where is this party again?"

"Jake's parents' beach house," Anna said, applying another coat of lip gloss. "About twenty minutes from here."

"Another mansion?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"More like a really nice vacation home," Haley clarified. "But yes, it's gorgeous. Right on the water, with a deck that wraps around the whole house. That's where they'll do the fireworks at midnight."

I tried to picture it—standing on a deck overlooking the ocean, the sky exploding with colour as the clock struck twelve. Would I be alone? Would this Matt person be beside me? Would he try to kiss me?

The thought sent an unexpected flutter through my stomach. It had been two months since I'd kissed anyone. Two months since I'd felt desired. Two months of rebuilding the walls Ben had managed to break through, only to prove they hadn't been high enough in the first place.

"Earth to Geri," Anna waved her hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go just now?"

I blinked, realizing I'd been staring into space. "Nowhere. Just thinking about how much my feet are going to hurt by midnight."

"That's what the champagne is for," Haley said, handing me the bottle. "Liquid painkillers."

I topped off my glass, then passed the bottle to Anna. "Tell me more about this Matt person. What does he look like? What's he into besides serving his country or whatever?"

Haley and Anna exchanged a glance that I couldn't quite interpret.

"What?" I demanded. "What was that look?"

"Nothing," Anna said too quickly. "He's... nice-looking."

"Nice-looking," I repeated flatly. "That's the best you can do? Is he hideous? Is that why you're being weird?"

"He's not hideous," Haley assured me. "He's actually really hot, in a... rugged sort of way."

"Rugged," I echoed. "So he's a lumberjack? Or just hasn't discovered personal grooming?"

Anna laughed. "No, he's clean-cut. Especially now with the military thing. He's just... masculine. Strong jaw, broad shoulders. You know."

I didn't know, but I nodded anyway. "And personality-wise? Please tell me he can hold a conversation about something other than guns and war."

"He's smart," Haley said. "Studied engineering before joining up. And he's funny—not in a loud, centre-of-attention way, but he's got this dry wit that sneaks up on you."

That didn't sound terrible, actually. I took another sip of champagne, feeling it warm my chest on the way down. "And why exactly is he single? What's the catch?"

Another one of those looks between my friends.

"Seriously, what?" I demanded.

"He got out of a long-term relationship about six months ago," Anna admitted. "His ex cheated on him with his best friend."

I nearly choked on my champagne. "Oh, for fuck's sake. You're setting me up with the male version of me? Two bitter, recently-cheated-on people? That's your brilliant plan?"

"We prefer to think of it as two people who might understand each other's trust issues," Haley said primly. "Besides, it's been six months for him. He's had more time to process than you have."

"Great, so he can give me tips on how to get over being betrayed," I muttered. "Can't wait."

"Just give him a chance," Anna pleaded. "One conversation. If you hate him, I'll personally create a diversion so you can escape."

"What kind of diversion?" I asked, momentarily distracted.

"I'll fake an asthma attack," she offered. "Or spill a drink on Jake's mom. Something dramatic."

That made me laugh despite myself. "Fine. One conversation. But I'm holding you to that asthma attack."

The next hour passed in a blur of outfit changes (Anna), makeup adjustments (me), and increasingly ridiculous toasts (Haley). By the time our Uber arrived, we were all

pleasantly buzzed and laughing at nothing in particular.

I checked my reflection one last time before we headed out. The girl staring back at me looked confident, sexy even. No one would guess that beneath the perfect makeup and figure-hugging dress was someone still piecing herself back together.

"To new beginnings," Haley declared as we clinked glasses one final time before heading out.

"To rich friends with empty mansions," Anna countered.

I raised my glass, the champagne bubbles tickling my nose. "To low expectations and high alcohol content."

They both groaned, but I meant it. Two months ago, I'd walked away from what I thought was a good relationship with nothing but my phone, my keys, and my shattered trust. Tonight, I was walking into a new year with no expectations beyond having a good time with my friends.

And if this Matt guy turned out to be yet another disappointment? Well, at least there would be expensive champagne to drown my sorrows in.

I drained my glass, slipped my feet into heels that would definitely hurt by midnight, and followed my friends out the door.

The night air was warm for December, carrying the salt scent of the ocean.

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear early fireworks popping, celebratory and bright against the darkening sky.

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Geri

Jake's parents' beach house turned out to be exactly what Haley had described—not quite a mansion, but definitely not what normal people would call a "vacation home.

"It was a sprawling two-story structure with weathered cedar siding and massive windows that reflected the moonlight bouncing off the ocean.

Music pulsed from inside, and the wraparound deck was already dotted with people holding drinks and laughing.

"Told you it was gorgeous," Haley said as our Uber pulled up to the circular driveway.

"Jesus," I muttered. "Is everyone we know secretly loaded?"

Anna laughed. "Not everyone. Just Haley and Jake."

We made our way inside, where the party was already in full swing.

The interior was all polished wood and nautical touches—rope railings, driftwood sculptures, and framed vintage maps.

A massive stone fireplace dominated one wall of the living room, though it wasn't lit; the night was unseasonably warm.

Jake's mother, a willowy blonde woman who looked like an older version of a luxury

skincare advertisement, greeted us with air kisses and compliments on our outfits.

His father, a silver-haired man with the confident stance of someone who'd never worried about money a day in his life, handed us each a glass of champagne from a tray.

"The boys aren't here yet," Mrs. Reynolds told Haley. "Jake texted that they're running late. Something about picking up Matt from the hotel."

I caught the meaningful glance she shot my way and resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Great. Even Jake's parents knew I was being set up.

"We'll just get settled then," Haley said smoothly, steering us toward a cluster of empty seats near the windows.

For the next hour, we mingled with the other early arrivals—mostly Jake's parents' friends and their adult children, all dressed in expensive casual wear that probably cost more than my monthly rent.

I nursed my champagne, letting the conversation flow around me, occasionally chiming in when directly addressed but mostly people-watching.

It was nearly ten when a burst of louder laughter announced the arrival of Jake and his friends. They tumbled in like a pack of overgrown puppies—five guys in various states of dressy casual, all talking over each other and making a beeline for the bar.

"There they are," Anna said unnecessarily, her eyes fixed on Jake.

I followed her gaze, trying to figure out which one might be Matt.

Jake I recognized—tall, sandy-haired, with the easy confidence of someone who'd

never been told no.

Beside him was a shorter guy with glasses who I vaguely remembered from some previous gathering.

Then there was a redhead, a blond with a man-bun, and?—

Oh.

The last guy in the group stood slightly apart from the others, surveying the room with an intensity that was almost predatory.

He was tall—taller than Jake by several inches—with broad shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist. His dark hair was cut short on the sides but longer on top, styled in a way that looked effortlessly messy.

But what caught my attention were the tattoos.

They covered his arms completely, disappearing under the rolled-up sleeves of his button-down shirt and reappearing at his collar, hinting at more coverage beneath.

Even from across the room, I could see the intricate designs—not the scattered, random pieces that some people collected, but a cohesive artwork that flowed across his skin.

"That's Matt," Haley whispered, following my gaze. "The one with the tattoos."

"I figured," I said, trying to sound unimpressed even as I felt a flutter of interest. I had a weakness for tattoos—both getting them and admiring them on others. And these were clearly quality work.

"Should we go say hi?" Anna asked, already half-rising from her seat.

"Let them get drinks first," I suggested, not quite ready to make my approach. I needed another moment to compose myself, to shore up my defences. Because despite my determination to remain aloof, there was something about this guy that made my pulse quicken.

I watched as Jake's mother greeted the newcomers, her smile slightly strained when she hugged Matt. I could practically hear her thoughts: Such a shame about those tattoos on such a handsome boy.

Matt seemed to sense it too, his smile turning wry as he accepted her embrace. He said something that made her laugh, the tension dissolving, and I found myself curious about what words had that effect.

"Okay, they've got drinks," Haley said after a few minutes. "Let's go."

I stood, smoothing down my dress and taking a fortifying sip of champagne. "Remember," I said to Anna, "asthma attack if I give the signal."

"What's the signal?" she asked.

"I'll sneeze three times in a row."

"That's a terrible signal," Haley protested. "What if you actually have to sneeze?"

"I don't have allergies," I pointed out. "If I sneeze three times, it's deliberate."

Before she could argue further, Jake spotted us and waved enthusiastically. "Ladies! You made it!"

We made our way over to the group, exchanging hugs and greetings. Jake introduced his friends—the guy with glasses was Ethan, the redhead was Connor, and the blond was Liam. And then, with a barely concealed smirk in my direction, he turned to the tattooed one.

"And this is my cousin Matt. Matt, this is Haley, my girlfriend; Anna, who you met at Christmas; and Geri, who you haven't met yet."

Matt's eyes—a startling shade of green that reminded me of sea glass—locked onto mine. "Geri," he repeated, as if testing the name. His voice was deeper than I expected, with a slight roughness to it. "Short for Geraldine?"

I nodded, bracing myself for the usual "that's an old lady name" comment.

Instead, he smiled—a slow, genuine smile that transformed his serious face. "It suits you."

"Thanks," I said, surprised. "Matt suits you too."

He laughed, the sound rich and warm. "Better than Matthew, anyway. Too many syllables."

"God forbid you have to say two whole syllables," I replied, the sarcasm slipping out before I could stop it.

Instead of being offended, his smile widened. "Exactly. Exhausting."

And just like that, the ice was broken. We fell into conversation as naturally as if we'd known each other for years.

The group migrated to a cluster of couches and chairs in a corner of the living room,

but somehow Matt and I ended up slightly apart from the others, perched on the wide windowsill overlooking the ocean.

"So," he said, taking a sip of his whiskey, "Jake tells me you're a skin therapist and a waitress. That's a lot of hours on your feet."

I shrugged. "Bills don't pay themselves. And I like being busy."

"Where do you work? The restaurant, I mean."

"The Harborview. It's down by?—"

"The harbor?" he suggested, eyes twinkling.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help smiling. "Original name, I know. My friend James is the sous chef there. He got me the job when I moved back to town a couple months ago."

"Moved back from where?"

"Seabreeze Haven. I was living with..." I hesitated, not wanting to bring up Ben so early in the conversation. "With a roommate. It didn't work out."

Something in his expression told me he caught the evasion but was choosing not to press. "And the day spa? You like that too?"

I wrinkled my nose. "It pays well. The clients are mostly rich women who want to complain about their husbands while I exfoliate their skin."

"Sounds thrilling."

"It's a living. What about you? Haley mentioned engineering and the army?"

He nodded, rotating his glass between his hands. "Studied civil engineering at uni. Joined up after graduation. Just finished my initial training."

"Why the career change?" I asked, genuinely curious.

He was quiet for a moment, his eyes drifting to the window. "Needed something different. A challenge. A purpose."

There was more to that story—I could feel it—but it wasn't my place to dig. Not yet, anyway.

"And the tattoos?" I asked instead, gesturing to his arms. "They don't mind those in the army?"

He smiled, extending one arm for my inspection. "They're not thrilled, but as long as they can be covered by the uniform, they don't care much."

I leaned closer, examining the intricate designs. They were primarily black and grey, with occasional splashes of colour—a full sleeve of geometric patterns interwoven with more organic elements. Waves, mountains, what looked like star charts.

"These are beautiful," I said honestly. "Who's your artist?"

"Different people for different pieces. The main work was done by a guy up north." He studied me with renewed interest. "You have ink too, right? I noticed the cherry blossoms."

I touched my shoulder where the tattoo peeked out from my dress. "Yeah, and a few others. Nothing as extensive as yours, though."

"Yet," he said with a smile that made something warm unfurl in my stomach.

The conversation flowed easily after that.

We talked about tattoos, then music (we had similar taste), then books (he read more than I expected), then travel (he'd been to places I'd only dreamed of).

He was funny in an understated way, dropping dry observations that made me laugh despite myself.

And he listened—really listened—when I spoke, his eyes never leaving my face.

I was so engrossed in our conversation that I barely noticed the time passing until Jake appeared beside us, champagne bottles in hand.

"Midnight in ten minutes, people! To the deck for fireworks!"

Matt stood, offering me his hand. "Shall we?"

I hesitated only briefly before taking it. His palm was warm and calloused against mine, his grip firm but gentle. A shiver ran up my arm at the contact, and I found myself wondering what those hands would feel like elsewhere on my body.

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The thought sent a rush of heat to my core, and I had to clench my thighs together as I stood. It had been too long since I'd felt this kind of attraction—this immediate, visceral response to someone.

We followed the crowd onto the deck, where the air was cool and salt-scented.

The ocean stretched out before us, a vast expanse of darkness broken only by the reflection of stars and the distant lights of boats.

Someone had set up speakers outside, and music mingled with the sound of waves and laughter.

Matt led me to a spot at the railing, slightly removed from the main group. "Better view from here," he explained, though I suspected he, like me, preferred a little distance from the crowd.

As we waited for midnight, he told me about growing up north, about his parents and how he liked it better down here. I found myself sharing more than I intended—about my half-Chinese heritage, my complicated relationship with my father, my love of art that I rarely indulged anymore.

"You should make time for it," he said when I mentioned neglecting my drawing. "If it's something you love."

"Maybe," I said noncommittally. "When life settles down."

He gave me a look that suggested he knew that time might never come unless I made

it happen, but he didn't push.

Around us, people began counting down the final seconds of the year. Matt turned to face me fully, his expression suddenly serious.

"I'm glad Jake introduced us," he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear it over the countdown.

"Me too," I admitted, surprising myself with my honesty.

"TEN! NINE! EIGHT!" the crowd chanted.

"I'd like to kiss you at midnight," Matt said, his eyes searching mine. "If that's okay."

My heart hammered against my ribs. "It's okay," I managed.

"SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!"

He stepped closer, one hand coming to rest lightly on my waist. I could smell him now—a mix of clean laundry, whiskey, and something uniquely him.

"FOUR! THREE! TWO!"

I tilted my face up to his, my lips parting slightly in anticipation.

"ONE! HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

As fireworks exploded over the ocean, Matt's mouth found mine. The kiss was gentle at first, almost tentative—a question rather than a demand. But when I responded, leaning into him, his arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer.

His lips were soft but insistent, moving against mine with a confidence that made my knees weak. When his tongue traced the seam of my lips, I opened for him without hesitation, a small sound of pleasure escaping me as the kiss deepened.

One of his hands came up to cup my face, his thumb stroking my cheek with a tenderness that contrasted with the growing intensity of the kiss. I found myself pressing against him, my body seeking more contact, more friction, more of whatever he was willing to give.

Around us, fireworks continued to burst in brilliant colours, but I barely noticed them.

All I could focus on was the feel of Matt's body against mine, the taste of whiskey on his tongue, the way his hand at my waist had slipped lower, fingers splayed across my hip in a possessive grip that sent sparks of desire shooting through me.

When we finally broke apart, both breathing harder than normal, I felt dizzy with want. A pulsing heat had settled between my thighs, and I had to resist the urge to press them together for relief.

"Happy New Year," Matt murmured, his forehead resting against mine.

"Happy New Year," I echoed, my voice huskier than usual.

He smiled, the expression softer than any I'd seen from him yet. "That was..."

"Yeah," I agreed, knowing exactly what he meant.

We stayed on the deck long after the fireworks ended, talking and stealing kisses as the party continued around us. His hand rarely left mine, our fingers intertwined as if we'd been doing this for years instead of hours.

It was nearly two in the morning when Haley found us, her eyes slightly glassy from champagne but her smile knowing.

"We're heading back to the house," she said. "Jake's arranged for Ubers. You coming?"

I looked at Matt, suddenly uncertain. We'd been in our own little bubble for hours, but the real world was intruding now, bringing with it all my usual doubts and fears.

As if sensing my hesitation, he squeezed my hand. "I should get back to my hotel," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Haley interjected before I could respond. "We have like 2 spare bedrooms. You can stay with us."

Matt looked at me, a question in his eyes. I knew what he was asking—was I comfortable with him coming back to the house? Was this moving too fast?

Part of me wanted to say yes, it was too fast. The cautious part that had been building walls since Ben's betrayal. But another part—the part that still remembered how to hope—wanted more time with him.

"She's right," I said finally. "No point paying for a hotel when there's plenty of room."

The smile he gave me was worth the risk. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

The Uber ride back to Haley's parents' mansion was a blur of stolen glances and not-so-accidental touches.

Matt sat beside me in the backseat, his thigh pressed against mine, his hand finding excuses to brush my arm, my knee, my hand.

Each contact sent a fresh wave of heat through me, until I was practically squirming in my seat.

By the time we arrived, I was a mess of conflicting emotions—desire warring with caution, excitement with fear. I wanted him with an intensity that shocked me, but I was also terrified of making another mistake, of trusting too quickly.

Haley, ever the perfect hostess despite her tipsy state, showed Matt to one of the guest rooms on the opposite side of the house from mine. I stood awkwardly in the hallway as she pointed out the bathroom, the linen closet, where to find extra towels.

"Thanks," Matt said when she finally finished her tour. "This is very generous of you."

"Our pleasure," Haley said with a wink that was about as subtle as a foghorn. "Sleep well, you two. Or don't. Whatever."

With that, she disappeared down the hall, leaving Matt and me alone in the doorway of his temporary bedroom.

"Your friend is..."

"Subtle as a brick?" I suggested. "Yeah, that's Haley."

He laughed, then grew serious, his eyes searching mine. "I had a really good time tonight."

"Me too," I admitted.

"I'd like to see you again. Before I ship out."

The reminder of his impending departure was like a bucket of cold water. I'd almost forgotten that he wasn't staying, that whatever this was had an expiration date.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"Two weeks."

Two weeks. Not long enough to build anything real, but plenty of time to get hurt if I wasn't careful.

"I'd like that," I said anyway, because despite everything, I meant it.

He smiled, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. The simple gesture shouldn't have affected me as much as it did, but I found myself leaning into his touch like a cat seeking affection.

"Can I kiss you goodnight?" he asked, his voice low.

In answer, I stepped closer, tilting my face up to his. This kiss was different from our midnight one—slower, more deliberate, but with an underlying heat that promised more. His hands stayed respectfully at my waist, but I could feel the restraint in his touch, the careful control.

When we broke apart, I was breathless again, my body humming with a need I hadn't felt in months. It would be so easy to invite him to my room, to lose myself in the physical and worry about the consequences later.

But I wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

"Goodnight, Matt," I said, stepping back before I could change my mind.

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Goodnight, Geri. Sweet dreams."

I turned and walked to my room before I could do something stupid like change my mind. Behind me, I heard his door close with a soft click.

Alone in my room, I leaned against the closed door, my heart still racing. What was I doing? Getting involved with someone who was leaving in two weeks seemed like a recipe for heartbreak. And yet...

I couldn't remember the last time I'd connected with someone so quickly, so completely. There was something about Matt that cut through my defences, that made me want to take risks I'd sworn off after Ben.

As I changed out of my dress and removed my makeup, I replayed the night in my mind—our conversations, the way he listened, the feel of his lips on mine. My body still thrummed with unfulfilled desire, a persistent ache between my thighs that made me press them together as I climbed into bed.

Two weeks wasn't long. But maybe it was enough for whatever this was. A rebound. A fling. A way to remember that I was still alive, still capable of wanting and being wanted.

Or maybe—and this was the thought that scared me most as I drifted toward sleep—maybe it was the beginning of something I wasn't ready to name yet.

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Geri

I was just drifting off to sleep, my mind still replaying the events of the night—Matt's smile, his hands, the way his lips felt against mine—when a soft knock on my door pulled me back to consciousness.

For a moment, I thought I'd imagined it. But then it came again, slightly more insistent this time.

I sat up, pushing my hair out of my face. "Who is it?" I called softly, though I already had a suspicion.

"It's Matt," came the reply, his voice low and slightly hesitant. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

My heart immediately kicked into overdrive. I glanced down at myself—I'd changed into sleep shorts and a tank top, not exactly what I'd choose for entertaining a guy I'd just met, but not embarrassingly bad either.

"Just a second," I said, climbing out of bed and padding to the door.

When I opened it, I nearly swallowed my tongue.

Matt stood in the hallway wearing nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs that left very little to the imagination.

The tattoos I'd admired earlier continued across his chest and down his torso, intricate

designs flowing over the contours of his muscles.

And there were a lot of muscles. The man clearly worked out religiously—broad shoulders, defined pecs, abs you could grate cheese on, and thighs that strained against the fabric of his underwear.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, seemingly unaware of the effect his near-nakedness was having on me. "I, uh... I couldn't sleep."

"Scared of the dark?" I teased, finding my voice.

A slow smile spread across his face. "Terrified. Can I come in?"

I hesitated for only a second before stepping aside. Fuck it, I thought. Why the hell not? It had been two months of celibacy after Ben, and here was this gorgeous man practically gift-wrapped on my doorstep. Two weeks and he'd be gone—what harm could one night do?

"Nice room," he said as he stepped inside, though his eyes never left mine.

"It's not mine," I reminded him, closing the door softly. "Just borrowing it."

"Still." He glanced around at the plush furnishings, the king-sized bed with its rumpled sheets. "Better than a hotel."

We stood there for a moment, the air between us charged with possibility. I was acutely aware of my body's reaction to his presence—the quickening of my pulse, the heat pooling low in my belly, the way my skin seemed hypersensitive even though he wasn't touching me.

"I should probably apologize," Matt said finally, running a hand through his already-

tousled hair. "This is... I don't usually do this. Show up at a woman's door in the middle of the night."

"And yet here you are," I said, crossing my arms over my chest, partly to appear nonchalant and partly to hide the fact that my nipples had hardened against the thin fabric of my tank top.

"Here I am," he agreed. His eyes darkened as they dropped briefly to my crossed arms before returning to my face. "I can go if you want."

"Do I look like I want you to go?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "Hard to tell. You're a bit of a mystery, Geri."

"Says the guy who showed up at my door in his underwear."

He laughed, the sound sending a pleasant shiver down my spine. "Fair point."

Another moment of silence stretched between us, but this one was different—less uncertain, more anticipatory.

"You're possibly the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Matt said suddenly, his voice dropping to a register that made my stomach flip.

Before I could respond—before I could even process the sincerity in his eyes—he closed the distance between us, one hand coming up to cup my face. "Can I kiss you again?"

In answer, I rose onto my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

The kiss was different from our earlier ones—more urgent, less restrained.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me flush against his body, and I could feel every hard plane of muscle against my softer curves.

My hands explored the expanse of his back, tracing the lines of his tattoos, feeling the way his muscles shifted beneath my touch.

When his tongue swept into my mouth, I moaned, the sound swallowed by our kiss.

His hands slid down to my hips, gripping firmly before one ventured lower to cup my ass.

The move pulled me even closer, and I could feel his arousal pressing against my stomach, impressive even through the barrier of his boxers.

"Bed," I gasped when we broke apart for air. "Now."

He didn't need to be told twice. In one fluid motion, he lifted me, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist as he carried me the few steps to the bed. He laid me down gently, following me down but supporting his weight on his forearms.

"You're sure about this?" he asked, his eyes searching mine.

"I'm sure," I said, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw. "Are you?"

His answer was another kiss, this one slower but no less intense.

His body covered mine, a delicious weight that made me feel both protected and desired.

I ran my hands over his shoulders, down his arms, marvelling at the strength there, at the contrast between his hard body and the gentleness of his touch.

When his lips left mine to trail down my neck, I tilted my head back, giving him better access. He took full advantage, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin, finding spots that made my breath catch and lingering there.

"You smell amazing," he murmured against my collarbone. "Like vanilla and something else... something just you."

His hands slid under my tank top, calloused palms rough against my smooth skin. When his thumbs brushed the undersides of my breasts, I arched into his touch, silently begging for more.

"Can I take this off?" he asked, tugging gently at the hem of my top.

I nodded, sitting up slightly to help him remove it. The cool air of the room pebbled my nipples further, and Matt's sharp intake of breath was gratifyingly ego-boosting.

"Fuck," he breathed, his eyes roaming over my exposed chest. "You're perfect."

Before I could protest—I was far from perfect, with my small breasts and the scar on my ribs from a childhood accident—he lowered his head and took one nipple into his mouth. The wet heat of his tongue sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my core, and I couldn't help the moan that escaped me.

He lavished attention on one breast and then the other, alternating between gentle suction and teasing flicks of his tongue. His hand came up to caress whichever breast wasn't receiving the attention of his mouth, ensuring neither was neglected.

I was writhing beneath him, my hips seeking friction against his, when he suddenly pulled back. For a moment, I thought he'd changed his mind, but then he looked at me with such intensity that my breath caught.

"I'm not going to fuck you tonight," he said, his voice rough with desire.

Disappointment flooded me, followed quickly by confusion. "You're not?"

He shook his head, a small smile playing at his lips. "No. But I am going to make you feel good." His hand trailed down my stomach, fingers dipping just beneath the waistband of my shorts. "If that's okay with you?"

The heat in his gaze made his intentions clear, and a fresh wave of arousal washed over me. "Yes," I managed, my voice barely above a whisper. "That's... yes."

His smile widened as he began to move down my body, pressing kisses to my sternum, my ribs, the soft skin of my stomach. When he reached the waistband of my shorts, he looked up at me, seeking final confirmation.

I lifted my hips in answer, and he slowly pulled both my shorts and underwear down my legs, his eyes never leaving mine. I should have felt exposed, vulnerable, but the appreciation—the hunger—in his gaze made me feel powerful instead.

"Gorgeous," he murmured, settling between my thighs. His broad shoulders pushed my legs further apart, and I felt a moment of nervousness. It had been a while since anyone had been this... close.

As if sensing my hesitation, Matt pressed a gentle kiss to the inside of my thigh. "We can stop anytime," he said. "Just say the word."

I shook my head. "Don't stop."

He smiled against my skin, then continued his path of kisses up my inner thigh, getting closer and closer to where I was aching for him. When he finally reached his destination, he paused, his warm breath teasing me.

"I've been wanting to taste you since the moment I saw you," he said, his voice low and intimate.

And then his mouth was on me, his tongue making a long, slow sweep that had me gasping and clutching at the sheets. He hummed in appreciation, the vibration adding another layer of sensation.

"You taste even better than I imagined," he murmured, before diving back in with renewed enthusiasm.

What followed was the most thorough, attentive oral sex I'd ever experienced.

Matt seemed to genuinely enjoy what he was doing, making appreciative noises that sent vibrations through my core.

He alternated between broad strokes of his tongue and focused attention on my clit, reading my body's responses and adjusting accordingly.

When he slid one finger inside me, curling it to hit exactly the right spot, I nearly came off the bed. "Oh god," I gasped, my hips bucking involuntarily.

He added a second finger, maintaining the perfect rhythm as he continued to work me with his tongue. "That's it," he encouraged between licks. "So responsive... so fucking sexy."

The combination of his skilled mouth, his fingers, and his words was pushing me rapidly toward the edge. I could feel the tension building, my thighs beginning to tremble on either side of his head.

"Matt," I warned, one hand tangling in his hair. "I'm close."

He redoubled his efforts, his fingers pumping steadily as his tongue circled my clit with increasing pressure. "Come for me," he urged. "Let me feel you come on my tongue."

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That was all it took. The orgasm crashed over me in waves, my back arching as pleasure radiated outward from my core. Matt didn't let up, working me through every aftershock until I had to push weakly at his shoulders, too sensitive for more.

He pressed one final kiss to my inner thigh before moving back up my body, looking entirely too pleased with himself. His lips were wet, his hair mussed from my hands, and I'd never seen anything sexier.

I reached for the waistband of his boxers, eager to return the favour, but he caught my hand, bringing it to his lips instead.

"That was just for you," he said, pressing a kiss to my palm.

"But..." I glanced down at the obvious bulge in his underwear. "Don't you want...?"

"Of course I want," he said with a small laugh. "But that's not why I came here tonight."

"Then why did you?"

He settled beside me, pulling the covers up over both of us. "I wasn't going to be able to sleep unless I knew what you tasted like."

The bluntness of his statement, delivered with such casual confidence, sent another pulse of heat through me despite my recent orgasm.

"And now that you know?" I asked, turning to face him.

He smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Now I'll definitely need to taste you again. But for tonight..." He pulled me closer, arranging us so that my head rested on his chest, his arm around my shoulders. "For tonight, this is perfect."

I should have felt awkward—I wasn't usually a cuddler, especially with someone I'd just met. But there was something about Matt that felt... safe. Comfortable. As if we'd known each other much longer than a few hours.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my bare shoulder.

"It's okay," I confirmed, letting myself relax against him.

We lay in comfortable silence for a while, his steady heartbeat under my ear gradually slowing as we both began to drift toward sleep.

"Geri?" he murmured, his voice already thick with approaching slumber.

"Hmm?"

"Happy New Year."

I smiled against his chest. "Happy New Year, Matt."

The insistent beeping of my alarm dragged me from a deep, dreamless sleep. I groaned, fumbling for my phone to silence it, then froze as my hand encountered warm skin instead.

The events of the night before came rushing back as I opened my eyes to find Matt still asleep beside me, one arm flung over his head, the other still wrapped loosely around my waist. In the soft morning light filtering through the curtains, I could see more details of his tattoos—the way they told a story across his skin, images and

words flowing together in a personal narrative.

For a moment, I allowed myself to simply look at him, to appreciate the strong line of his jaw, the dark sweep of his lashes against his cheeks, the slight part of his lips as he breathed deeply in sleep.

Then reality intruded in the form of my alarm starting up again. I silenced it quickly, but Matt stirred, his eyes blinking open slowly.

"Morning," he said, his voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," I replied, suddenly self-conscious of my morning breath and raccoon eyes from not removing my makeup.

He didn't seem to notice or care, pulling me closer for a lazy kiss. "What time is it?"

I glanced at my phone. "Six-thirty."

He groaned. "Why are we awake at six-thirty on New Year's Day?"

"Because I have to open the restaurant for the morning coffee rush," I explained, reluctantly extracting myself from his embrace. "I agreed to cover for someone weeks ago..."

Matt propped himself up on one elbow, watching as I gathered clothes for the day. "Need any help?"

I shook my head. "You should go back to sleep. I won't be back till later tonight."

"I could come by the restaurant," he suggested. "Have lunch, keep you company."

The offer was tempting—more tempting than it should have been. "You don't have to do that."

"I know. I want to."

I paused, clean underwear and jeans in hand. "Why?"

He looked genuinely puzzled by the question. "Because I like you. Because I want to spend more time with you before I ship out."

The reminder of his impending departure was like a splash of cold water. Two weeks. That was all this could ever be.

"Okay," I said, pushing aside the twinge of disappointment. "The Harborview. I'll be there until two, then I'll be at the day spa for a few hours, then back at Harbourview till ten."

His smile was worth the risk of getting more attached than I should. "I'll be there."

As I headed for the shower, I couldn't help but wish I hadn't agreed to work today. The thought of spending the morning serving coffee to hungover patrons instead of staying in bed with Matt seemed like a particularly cruel twist of fate.

But maybe it was for the best. A little distance, a little time to think about what exactly I was getting myself into with a man who would be gone in fourteen days.

Two weeks wasn't long. But as I stepped under the hot spray of the shower, I couldn't help but wonder if it might be just long enough to break my heart all over again.

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Geri

The morning coffee rush at the Harborview was exactly as brutal as I'd expected.

Hungover revellers stumbled in seeking caffeine salvation, bleary-eyed families with cranky children demanded pancakes, and the occasional bright-eyed morning person bounced in with entirely too much New Year's Day enthusiasm.

By eleven, I'd been on my feet for four hours straight, and my lower back was starting to protest.

"Two more cappuccinos and an avocado toast for table seven," I called to James as I pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

"Coming right up," he replied, not looking up from the grill where he was flipping a perfect row of hash browns.

Despite being the sous chef, James had volunteered to help with the breakfast shift when our regular morning cook called in sick.

That was James—always reliable, always there when you needed him.

I leaned against the counter for a moment, taking the brief respite to check my phone. No messages. No missed calls. No sign of Matt.

He'd said he would come by. He'd seemed sincere about it. But it was already past eleven, and the lunch crowd would start arriving soon. I tried to ignore the sinking

feeling in my stomach. It wasn't like we had concrete plans. It wasn't like he owed me anything after one night.

One incredible night.

I shoved my phone back in my apron pocket and grabbed the fresh coffee pot. No time for disappointment when there were tables to serve.

By one-thirty, the rush had finally died down. I was wiping down tables when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I nearly dropped the spray bottle in my haste to check it.

Hey, it's Matt. Got your number from Anna. Sorry I wasn't able to make it down, something came up. I'll call you tonight.

I stared at the message, conflicting emotions washing over me. Relief that he'd reached out. Disappointment that he hadn't shown up. Annoyance that he hadn't bothered to text earlier. Hope that he still wanted to talk.

"Earth to Geri," James said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You planning on cleaning that table or just staring at it until the crumbs get scared and run away?"

I blinked, realizing I'd been standing frozen with the cloth in my hand. "Sorry. Just got a text."

"From tall, dark, and tattooed?" James asked, his eyebrows waggling suggestively. News travelled fast in our friend group, apparently.

"Maybe," I said, resuming my wiping with renewed vigour.

"Ooh, details please. Haley said he stayed over last night."

I shot him a look. "Don't you have some chef-ing to do?"

"Kitchen's clean, prep for dinner is done, and I'm officially off the clock until tonight," he said, dropping into a chair at the freshly cleaned table. "So spill."

I sighed, knowing he wouldn't let it go. "Yes, he stayed over. Yes, it was nice. No, I'm not giving you the play-by-play."

"Nice?" James repeated incredulously. "That's all I get? Nice?"

"What do you want me to say? That he rocked my world? That I'm already planning our wedding? He's shipping out in two weeks, James. It's not exactly the foundation for a lasting relationship."

James's expression softened. "Hey, not every connection has to be forever to be meaningful. Sometimes a good fling is exactly what you need."

"I know," I said, moving to the next table. "It's just... I don't know if I'm built for casual."

"Says the girl who just had a one-night stand with a guy she met yesterday."

I flicked the cloth at him, spraying him with a few drops of cleaner. "It wasn't a one-night stand. We didn't even... you know."

James's eyebrows shot up. "You didn't? Then what did you—actually, no, don't tell me. I'll just use my imagination."

"Please don't," I groaned.

He laughed, then checked his watch. "Aren't you supposed to be at the spa soon?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall and cursed. "Shit. Yeah, I need to go." I untied my apron and tossed it in the laundry bin. "See you back here at six?"

"I'll be the handsome one in the chef's coat," he called after me as I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of facials, waxing, and listening to wealthy women complain about their husbands' golf habits. By the time I made it back to the Harborview for the dinner shift, I was running on fumes and caffeine.

"You look like hell," James greeted me cheerfully as I tied on a fresh apron.

"Thanks. Just what every girl wants to hear."

"Did Prince Charming call?"

I checked my phone for what felt like the hundredth time that day. Still nothing. "Not yet."

James gave me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "His loss. Now help me plate these salads before Marco has an aneurysm."

The dinner rush kept me too busy to dwell on Matt's silence. By the time we closed at ten, I was dead on my feet and emotionally drained. All I wanted was a hot shower and my bed.

The mansion was quiet when I got home. Haley and Anna had both texted earlier to say they were staying at Jake's for the night, which meant I had the place to myself. Under different circumstances, I might have invited Matt over. Now, I was just grateful for the solitude.

I took a long shower, letting the hot water soothe my aching muscles and wash away the day's disappointments. As I dried off, I caught a glimpse of myself in the steamy mirror—the faint marks on my neck from Matt's stubble, the memory of his touch still lingering on my skin.

"Stop it," I told my reflection sternly. "He's just a guy. One of many who will disappoint you."

But even as I said it, I knew Matt wasn't just any guy. There had been something different about him, something that had gotten under my skin in a way no one had since... well, since Ben. And look how that turned out.

I pulled on an oversized t-shirt and crawled into bed, grabbing my phone from the nightstand. Still no call. It was after eleven now—late, but not too late. Maybe he'd been busy. Maybe something really had come up.

Or maybe he'd gotten what he wanted and was already moving on.

I tossed the phone aside and reached for my headphones instead. If there was one thing guaranteed to match my mood right now, it was Five Finger Death Punch. Grabbing my phone again I scrolled to my favourite album, cranked up the volume, and let the aggressive guitars and raw vocals wash over me.

I must have fallen asleep like that, because the next thing I knew, my alarm was blaring and sunlight was streaming through the windows. I groaned, fumbling to silence the noise, my head pounding and my stomach growling in protest.

Right. I'd forgotten to eat dinner. Again.

I checked my phone out of habit, but there were no missed calls. No texts. No explanation for why Matt hadn't called as promised.

"Whatever," I muttered, dragging myself out of bed. I didn't have time to dwell on it anyway. I had to pick up James in forty-five minutes, then open the restaurant, work a shift at the spa, and come back for another dinner service. The glamorous life of the perpetually broke.

I showered quickly, threw on jeans and a sweater, and managed to scarf down a bowl of cereal before heading out. The morning was crisp and clear, the kind of winter day that reminded you why people paid ridiculous amounts of money to live near the coast.

James was waiting on his front step when I pulled up, looking about as awake as I felt.

"You look like hell," I greeted him, echoing his words from the day before.

"Bite me," he grumbled, sliding into the passenger seat. "Not all of us got to sleep through the night. Some of us were up late texting hot guys."

That got my attention. "Oh? Do tell."

"After I hear about Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Did he call?"

I kept my eyes fixed on the road. "Nope."

"Really? That's weird. Anna said he was really into you."

"Apparently not enough to keep his word," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's fine. I knew it wasn't going anywhere."

James studied me for a moment. "You're disappointed."

"I'm tired," I corrected him. "And hungry. And not in the mood to dissect my non-existent love life. Now tell me about this guy you were texting."

He hesitated, clearly wanting to push the Matt issue, but then seemed to think better of it. "His name's Liam. We matched on Tinder last week, and we've been talking ever since. We're meeting for drinks on Friday."

"Liam," I repeated. "Wait, was he at the new year party? Blond guy with a man-bun?"

James's eyes widened. "You know him?"

"I met him briefly. He's friends with Jake." I grinned. "Small world."

"Is he hot in person? His pictures are insane, but you know how that goes."

"Pics or it didn't happen, I didn't get a good look at him at the party," I said, holding out my hand for his phone at the next red light.

James unlocked it and pulled up Liam's profile. I scrolled through the photos—Liam at the beach, Liam hiking, Liam with a dog. He was undeniably attractive, with the kind of symmetrical features and easy smile that belonged in commercials.

"Damn," I said, handing the phone back as the light turned green. "He's hot as fuck."

"I know, right?" James sighed dramatically. "All the good-looking ones are gay."

I laughed. "That's what I was just thinking."

"They are," he agreed with a smug smile. "And I'm glad, because I get them all to myself. I don't have to share."

We were still laughing as we pulled into the restaurant's parking lot. Despite my exhaustion and the lingering disappointment over Matt, I felt my mood lifting. James had that effect on people—he could make you forget your problems, at least for a little while.

As we set up for the morning, James connected his phone to the kitchen speakers. "What are we feeling today? Upbeat to match our sleep deprivation?"

"Surprise me," I said, counting out the register.

A moment later, the unmistakable opening notes of "Crank That (Soulja Boy)" filled the kitchen. I looked up to find James already doing the dance, complete with exaggerated movements and a completely serious expression.

"Oh my god," I laughed. "What are you, twelve?"

"Don't pretend you don't know every move," he challenged, continuing to dance as he checked the prep list.

He was right, of course. The song had been inescapable during our high school years, and we'd spent countless hours perfecting the dance at parties.

"Come on," he urged. "You know you want to."

And because it was James, and because sometimes you just needed to be ridiculous to forget your problems, I joined in. There we were, two sleep-deprived adults, dancing to Soulja Boy in an empty restaurant kitchen at 6:30 in the morning.

"Superman that ho!" James sang at the top of his lungs, nearly knocking over a stack of plates with his enthusiastic movements.

I was laughing so hard I could barely keep up with the dance, but it didn't matter. For those few minutes, I wasn't thinking about Matt or Ben or my exhausting schedule or my uncertain future. I was just having fun with my best friend, being completely and utterly silly.

As the song ended, we collapsed against the counter, still giggling.

"Feel better?" James asked, his eyes knowing.

I nodded, catching my breath. "Much."

"Good. Now help me prep these muffins before the caffeine-deprived hordes descend."

As we fell into our familiar routine, I found myself grateful for the constants in my life—James's friendship, the rhythm of the restaurant, the comfort of knowing exactly what was expected of me. Maybe Matt would call today. Maybe he wouldn't. Either way, life would go on.

And if he didn't? Well, his loss. I had muffins to bake and dances to perfect.

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Geri

By the time I finished my shift at the day spa, my shoulders were knotted with tension and my fake customer-service smile had been plastered on for so long my cheeks hurt.

Six back-to-back appointments with Seabreeze Haven's wealthiest women had left me mentally drained and physically exhausted.

All I wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for about twelve hours straight.

Instead, I had a dinner shift at the Harborview to get through.

At least I had an hour break before I needed to be on the floor. Small mercies.

I trudged through the restaurant's back entrance, waving half-heartedly at Marco, the head chef, who was in the middle of what looked like an intense argument with one of the line cooks about the proper way to reduce a sauce.

James spotted me from across the kitchen and immediately abandoned whatever he was doing to intercept me before I could collapse at the small break table in the corner.

"You look like you've been through war," he said, steering me toward a stool. "Sit. I'm feeding you."

"I'm not hungry," I lied, just as my stomach betrayed me with an audible growl.

James raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. When's the last time you ate?"

I tried to remember. The cereal this morning? Had I actually finished it, or just pushed it around the bowl while checking my phone for messages that weren't there?

"That's what I thought," James said, interpreting my silence correctly. "Give me five minutes."

True to his word, he returned shortly with a plate that made my mouth water instantly.

Baby octopus salad—my absolute favourite, and something that wasn't even on the menu.

James had created it specifically for me after I'd mentioned once, in passing, how much I loved the dish at a restaurant in Sydney.

"You're too good to me," I said, already digging in.

"I know." He pulled up a stool across from me, watching with satisfaction as I devoured the food. "Someone has to make sure you don't waste away."

Between bites, I noticed he was scrolling through my phone. "Hey! What are you doing?"

"Checking your social media presence," he said casually. "Which is, by the way, pathetically outdated. I was scrolling on my lunch break and noticed how sad your Facebook looked."

I rolled my eyes. "Some of us have actual jobs and don't have time to curate our online personas."

"Excuses, excuses." He turned the phone toward me. "Your bio still says you have a boyfriend, which you don't, and your location is still set to Sydney. Let's update this, baby, shall we? Let's reel in some men who decide to stalk you."

I laughed despite myself. "Update to what?"

"Well, for starters, let's delete this bio." He was already tapping away. "What should we put instead?"

"I don't know. 'Single woman seeks peace and quiet'?"

"Boring." He made a dismissive noise. "How about 'I like long walks on the beach'?"

"Generic."

"Fine. 'I like long walks on the beach and hiding in caves with big scary brown bears.'"

I nearly choked on a piece of octopus. "What?"

"Too much?" He grinned. "How about we add 'I hate the colour yellow and love to dance while wearing a tutu'?"

We went back and forth, suggesting increasingly ridiculous bio lines, each one more absurd than the last. By the time we settled on a final version, I was laughing so hard my sides hurt.

"There," James said triumphantly, showing me the result. "Perfect."

The bio now read: "Professional mermaid by day, ninja by night. I collect vintage spoons and can communicate with squirrels. If you can't handle me at my weirdest,

you don't deserve me at my slightly less weird."

"I look insane," I protested, though I was still grinning.

"You are insane. This is truth in advertising." He saved the changes before I could object further. "Now, on to phase two of Operation Get Geri a Life."

"I have a life!"

"You have jobs, plural. That's not the same thing." He opened the app store on my phone. "Time to join the twenty-first century dating scene."

I watched in horror as he downloaded Tinder. "Oh no. Absolutely not."

"Oh yes, absolutely yes." He was already setting up my profile, using one of the few decent photos of me from Haley's Instagram. "Trust me, this is for your own good."

"How is having strange men send me dick pics for my own good?"

"You need to chase new men," he said, ignoring my question. "Right now, you like boys. You need ones who will treat you like a lady."

I snorted. "So I need a sixty-year-old man who'll still open the door for me?"

"Exactly!" He nodded enthusiastically. "That's exactly what you need."

"Oh, maybe a rich one," I played along. "With a mansion of his own."

"Now you're getting it."

Before I could stop him, he started swiping right on profiles, moving so quickly I

could barely see the men he was selecting.

"James!" I snatched the phone back. "What are you doing? They're all—" I paused, looking at the most recent match. "Actually, he's kind of cute."

"See? Trust the process." He stood up, checking his watch. "Break time's over. Marco needs me to prep for the dinner rush, and you need to get changed for your shift."

I glanced down at my spa uniform—black pants and a polo shirt with the spa's logo—and sighed. "Thanks for the food. And the... whatever that was."

"Social intervention," he supplied. "You're welcome."

The dinner shift passed in a blur of orders, spilled drinks, and a particularly obnoxious table of businessmen who seemed to think their generous tips entitled them to comment on my appearance. By the time we closed at ten, I was running on fumes and autopilot.

"You good to get home?" James asked as we finished closing duties.

I nodded, stifling a yawn. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired."

"Text me when you get there," he said, giving me a quick hug. "And check your Tinder. You already had three matches when I last looked."

"Goodnight, James," I said pointedly, but I was smiling as I headed out to my car.

The drive back to Haley's parents' mansion was short, but I still found myself checking my phone at red lights. Not for Tinder matches, but for messages from Matt. Still nothing.

I'd almost managed to push him from my mind during my busy day, but now, in the quiet of my car, the disappointment crept back in.

It was stupid to feel this way about someone I barely knew, someone who was leaving in less than two weeks.

But I couldn't help it. There had been something there, something real—or so I'd thought.

As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed several unfamiliar cars parked outside. Great. Haley and Anna must have people over. All I wanted was a hot shower and my bed, not small talk with strangers.

I slipped in through the side door, hoping to make it to my room unnoticed, but voices from the living room carried down the hall.

"Geri? Is that you?" Haley called.

Busted.

"Yeah, just got off work," I replied, reluctantly changing course toward the living room.

I stepped into the spacious room to find Haley and Anna lounging on the sectional with Jake and his friends. My heart did a stupid little flip when I spotted Matt among them, sitting in an armchair with a beer in hand.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, neither of us seemed to know what to say.

"Hey," I finally managed, aiming for casual but landing somewhere closer to awkward.

"Hey," he replied, his expression unreadable.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room, broken only when Anna, bless her, jumped in with, "How was work?"

"Long," I said, grateful for the distraction. "I'm actually going to grab a shower. I smell like work and need to get clean."

"We ordered pizza," Haley offered. "There's still some left in the kitchen if you're hungry."

"Thanks, maybe after." I was already backing toward the door, desperate to escape the weight of Matt's gaze. "Nice to see you all."

I fled to my room, heart pounding inexplicably. The last thing I'd wanted was to see Matt tonight, especially not surrounded by our friends, with no chance to talk about why he'd disappeared on me.

I took my time in the shower, letting the hot water wash away the day's stress and giving myself a pep talk. So what if he ghosted me? So what if he was sitting in the living room right now, looking unfairly good in a simple t-shirt and jeans? I was a grown woman. I could handle this.

By the time I stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel with my hair dripping down my back, I'd almost convinced myself I was over it.

Until I opened the door to find Matt leaning against the wall in the hallway, arms crossed, looking distinctly unhappy.

"What?" I asked, clutching my towel tighter.

"You made a Tinder account," he said, his voice low and accusatory.

I blinked, momentarily thrown. Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that wasn't even on the list. "Um, maybe?"

"I saw it today."

"So?" I was starting to get annoyed now. What right did he have to question me about anything?

"I thought this was something," he said, gesturing between us.

The audacity nearly took my breath away. "You ghosted me," I pointed out.

"No, I was busy. I said that to you."

"You also said you would call," I countered, "and that didn't happen."

Something shifted in his expression then, the anger giving way to confusion, then realization. "Did I?"

"Yes." The word came out sharper than I intended, all my disappointment and hurt condensed into a single syllable.

Matt's shoulders slumped slightly. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture I was starting to recognize as a sign of his discomfort. "Shit," he muttered, then took a step toward me. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

I stayed where I was, not trusting myself to move closer to him while wearing only a towel and a thin veneer of indignation.

"So this whole time," he continued, moving closer still, "I thought you would call me, and you thought I would call you?"

"That's generally how it works when someone says 'I'll call you tonight,'" I said, but the bite had gone out of my words.

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He was right in front of me now, close enough that I could smell his cologne and see the genuine regret in his eyes. "Shit, babe, I'm sorry," he said softly. "I was so busy I forgot and then blamed you."

Before I could respond, he wrapped his arms around me, towel and all. I stood rigid for a moment, torn between the desire to push him away and the equally strong urge to melt into his embrace.

The latter won out. I relaxed against him, letting my head rest on his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart.

"I'm sorry," he murmured into my damp hair. "I fucked up."

"Yeah, you did," I agreed, but there was no heat in it.

He pulled back slightly to look at me, his hands coming up to cup my face. "Can I make it up to you?"

The sincerity in his eyes made my stomach flip. "You can try," I said, trying to sound stern but failing miserably.

A slow smile spread across his face, the kind that made his eyes crinkle at the corners and sent a flutter of warmth through my chest. "Challenge accepted."

And then he was kissing me, his lips soft but insistent against mine, and I was kissing him back, all my anger and hurt dissolving under the heat of his touch. My hands found their way to his shoulders, then his neck, then his hair, while his slid down to

my waist, pulling me closer.

I was acutely aware of how little separated us—just a towel and his clothes—and from the way his breath hitched when my body pressed against his, he was thinking the same thing.

"Your room or the spare?" he murmured against my lips.

"Mine's closer," I replied, already backing toward my door, unwilling to break contact for even a second.

We stumbled into my room, a tangle of limbs and increasingly urgent kisses. The towel was becoming a problem, threatening to slip with every movement, but before I could worry about it, Matt had me pressed against the closed door, his hands sliding down to grip my thighs.

"Jump," he commanded softly, and I did, wrapping my legs around his waist as he lifted me effortlessly.

The new position brought us into perfect alignment, and I couldn't help the small gasp that escaped me when I felt his arousal pressing against me through his jeans.

He groaned in response, his lips leaving mine to trail down my neck, finding the sensitive spot just below my ear that made my toes curl.

"Matt," I breathed, not even sure what I was asking for.

He seemed to understand anyway, carrying me to the bed and laying me down with surprising gentleness given the urgency of our kisses. He stood back for a moment, his eyes dark with desire as they roamed over me.

The towel had come loose in our journey to the bed, leaving me exposed to his gaze. In any other circumstance, with any other man, I might have felt self-conscious. But the way Matt looked at me—like I was something precious, something to be savoured—made me feel powerful instead.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice rough with want. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

"Then why didn't you call?" The question slipped out before I could stop it, vulnerability bleeding through despite my best efforts.

He sat on the edge of the bed, reaching out to brush a strand of wet hair from my face. "Because I'm an idiot," he said simply. "Because I got caught up in army stuff and lost track of time, and then I convinced myself you weren't interested because you hadn't called me."

"I was waiting for you to call," I admitted. "And when you didn't, I thought..."

"What?" he prompted when I trailed off.

"I thought maybe you'd gotten what you wanted and moved on." The words felt small and pathetic as they left my mouth, but they were honest.

Matt's expression softened. "Geri, what happened between us the other night? That was just the beginning of what I want from you."

The sincerity in his voice made my chest tight. "What do you want from me?"

"Everything you're willing to give," he said, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to my lips. "For as long as we have."

The reminder of his impending departure hung between us, unspoken but impossible to ignore. Two weeks. That was all we had. Two weeks to explore whatever this was, to satisfy the hunger that had been building since the moment we met.

"Then you better stop wasting time," I said, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt.

He grinned, helping me pull it over his head to reveal the tattooed expanse of his chest and abs. I ran my hands over his skin, tracing the lines of ink, marvelling at the contrast between the hard planes of muscle and the softness of his lips as they returned to mine.

His jeans followed quickly, then his boxers, until there was nothing between us but skin and heat and the electric current of desire that had been building since New Year's Eve.

This time, when his mouth moved down my body, I knew what to expect—and yet the reality still exceeded my memory. He took his time, exploring every inch of me with lips and tongue and gentle teeth, finding spots that made me gasp and arch and beg for more.

But unlike our first night together, this wasn't one-sided. This time, when I reached for him, he didn't stop me. This time, when I pushed him onto his back and straddled his hips, he let me take control, his eyes never leaving mine as I positioned myself above him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his hands steady on my waist.

In answer, I sank down onto him, taking him inside me in one slow, deliberate movement that had us both moaning. The feeling of fullness, of connection, was almost overwhelming after so long without.

"Fuck," Matt breathed, his fingers digging into my hips. "You feel amazing."

I couldn't form words, could only nod as I began to move, finding a rhythm that had him hitting just the right spot with every thrust. His hands roamed my body, cupping my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples in a way that sent sparks of pleasure straight to my core.

When he sat up, changing the angle and bringing us chest to chest, I gasped at the new sensation. His arms wrapped around me, supporting me as I continued to ride him, our bodies moving together as if we'd been doing this for years instead of minutes.

"Look at me," he murmured, and I did, our eyes locking as the tension built. "I want to see you come."

His words, combined with the way he was touching me, pushed me closer to the edge. I could feel it building, that familiar tightening, that crescendo of pleasure.

"Matt," I warned, my voice barely recognizable to my own ears.

"Let go," he urged, one hand sliding between us to where we were joined, his thumb finding my clit with unerring accuracy. "I've got you."

The orgasm hit me like a tidal wave, intense and all-consuming. I cried out, my body clenching around him as waves of pleasure washed over me. He held me through it, murmuring encouragement, his own movements becoming more urgent as he chased his release.

When he came moments later, my name on his lips like a prayer, I felt a different kind of connection—something beyond the physical, something that scared me with its intensity.

We collapsed together onto the bed, a tangle of sweaty limbs and satisfied sighs. Matt pulled me close, arranging us so that my head rested on his chest, his heartbeat gradually slowing beneath my ear.

"Worth the wait?" he asked after a while, his voice tinged with amusement.

I laughed softly. "Maybe. But let's not wait so long next time."

"Deal." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Though for the record, I still don't like that you made a Tinder account."

"For the record, I didn't make it. James did." I propped myself up on one elbow to look at him. "And you have no right to be jealous. We barely know each other."

"I know enough," he said, his expression suddenly serious. "I know that I like you, Geri. More than I should, given the circumstances."

The circumstances. Right. His departure, looming over us like a shadow.

"So what do we do?" I asked, voicing the question that had been nagging at me since New Year's Eve. "What is this?"

He was quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing patterns on my bare shoulder. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "I just know I want to spend as much time with you as possible before I go."

It wasn't a declaration of love. It wasn't a promise of forever. But it was honest, and right now, that was all I could ask for.

"Okay," I said, settling back against his chest. "But you have to actually call when you say you will."

I felt rather than saw his smile. "I promise."

As we lay there in the quiet of my room, I tried not to think about the countdown clock ticking away in the back of my mind. Twelve days left. Twelve days to explore whatever this was between us, to satisfy the hunger that seemed to grow rather than diminish with each touch.

Twelve days until goodbye.

But for now, in the warmth of Matt's arms, with the pleasant ache of satisfaction still humming through my body, I decided that was a problem for future Geri. Present Geri was going to enjoy every moment she could get.

Geri

Matt had ghosted me. Again.

It had been three days since our reconciliation—three days since he'd promised to call, since we'd spent the night tangled in my sheets, since I'd foolishly let myself believe this might actually be something worth pursuing.

Three days of silence.

"You're stabbing that octopus like it personally offended you," James observed, watching me from across the break table.

I glanced down at my plate, where I'd been aggressively spearing pieces of baby octopus salad without actually eating them. "Sorry. Just thinking."

"About Tattoo Boy?" James asked, though it wasn't really a question. He knew me too well.

"I don't want to talk about it," I muttered, finally taking a bite of food.

James shrugged, returning his attention to my phone, which he'd commandeered as soon as we sat down for our break. "Fine by me. I'm busy finding you a replacement anyway."

I should have protested, should have snatched my phone back and told him to mind his own business. But the truth was, I didn't have the energy to care anymore. If

James wanted to swipe right on every man in a fifty-mile radius, let him. It wasn't like any of them would measure up to?—

No. I wasn't going to think about Matt. Not now. Not when I was finally starting to feel like myself again after the emotional whiplash of the past few days.

"How was your date with Liam?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject.

James's face lit up instantly. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect. We went to that new place on Harbor Street—you know, the one with the rooftop garden? He had reservations, which was impressive because that place is booked solid for months."

I smiled, genuinely happy to see him so excited. "And? Details, please."

"He was a perfect gentleman. Pulled out my chair, ordered wine that cost more than my rent, knew exactly what to say to make me laugh." James sighed dreamily. "And then he walked me home and kissed me goodnight at my door. Just a kiss—nothing more. Said he wanted to take things slow, do it right."

"Wow. He sounds too good to be true."

"I know, right? I keep waiting for the catch. Like maybe he's secretly married, or he has a collection of human teeth in his basement." James laughed, but there was a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. "But so far, he seems... real. Like, genuinely nice."

"You deserve that," I said, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "I'm happy for you."

And I was. James was one of the best people I knew, and if anyone deserved a fairy-tale romance, it was him.

I was an empath at heart—when my friends were happy, I was happy.

When they were sad, I felt that too. Right now, I was leaching off James's happiness, letting it brighten my own mood despite the Matt-shaped cloud hanging over me.

"Oh!" James exclaimed suddenly, his eyes fixed on my phone. "You've got a Facebook message."

Before I could respond, he'd already opened it, his smile growing wider as he read. "Well, well, well," he murmured, typing something in response.

"What? Who is it?" My curiosity was piqued despite myself.

James turned the phone around, showing me a profile I didn't recognize. The name read "Alexander 'Alex' Williams," and the profile picture showed a good-looking guy with blonde hair and a crooked smile that seemed both confident and a little shy.

The message read:

Hey, I saw your Tinder profile, and well, I'm better at social media detective work than I am at talking to someone on there, so I thought I'd find your profile, stalk you a bit, then message you. By the way, your bio is so funny—I must say you have my attention.

I laughed, remembering the ridiculous bio James had written for me. "What did you say back?"

"I asked if he was a merman," James said proudly.

As if on cue, a new message appeared:

No, but I can hold my breath for a very, very long time. Would you like to see how long I can be smothered for?

I felt my cheeks heat at the innuendo, and James burst out laughing. "Oh, I like him already," he said, typing a response before I could stop him.

I leaned over to read what he'd written:

If you can hold your breath for as long as my gag reflex can last, then yes, I might hold you to that.

"James!" I exclaimed, laughing despite myself. "You can't just?—"

"What? It's not like you're going to respond to him anyway. You're too hung up on Tattoo Boy."

He wasn't wrong, but I still felt a flutter of interest as I read Alex's messages.

There was something appealing about the easy banter, the confidence it took to track me down on Facebook rather than just swiping right and hoping for a match.

And it was so much easier to be witty and flirtatious online, where there was no risk of stumbling over my words or revealing how much of a mess I was in real life.

Reality, however, had a way of humbling me. Just as I was about to take my phone back and respond to Alex myself, it started ringing in James's hand. The screen displayed a name that made my stomach drop: Matt.

I reached out and snatched the phone from James, staring at the screen as if it might bite me.

"Don't answer it," James said immediately. "He ghosted you, babe. You deserve so much better." He paused, then added with a smirk, "Plus, Alex can hold his breath..."

I took a deep breath and answered the call, putting it on speaker. I didn't trust myself to hold the phone to my ear without giving away how much his silence had affected me.

"Hello?" I said, aiming for casual but landing somewhere closer to tense.

"Hey, babe," Matt's voice came through, warm and familiar as if he hadn't disappeared for three days. "You working tonight? Wanna grab dinner at my place? My mom is cooking and wants to meet you."

I blinked, momentarily speechless. His mom wanted to meet me? After three days of radio silence, he was inviting me to a family dinner like nothing had happened?

James was making frantic cutting motions across his throat, silently urging me to hang up or say no. But my heart—my stupid, hopeful heart—was already racing at the sound of Matt's voice.

"Sure," I heard myself say, before my brain could formulate the response I should have given.

"Great! I'll text you the address. 6 PM okay? You can stay over."

I sighed, resignation settling over me like a heavy blanket. "Sure."

"See you then," he said, and then he was gone, leaving me staring at my phone in confusion.

James was looking at me with a mixture of disbelief and concern. "Please tell me

you're not actually going."

I didn't answer, my attention caught by a new Facebook message from Alex.

I'm free all week, so I'm happy to take you out to dinner anytime you're free.

"Fuck," I muttered, dropping my head into my hands.

"What's it going to be, Geri?" James asked softly. "The guy who keeps disappearing on you, or the one who's actually making an effort?"

It was a good question. A fair question. And I had no idea how to answer it.

On one hand, there was Matt—intense, passionate, complicated Matt, who made my heart race and my body sing, but who couldn't seem to remember I existed when we weren't physically in the same room.

On the other hand, there was Alex—a complete stranger who'd gone out of his way to find me, who was funny and forward in a way that intrigued rather than repelled me, who was offering a fresh start with no emotional baggage.

"I already said yes to Matt," I said finally, though the words felt hollow even to my own ears.

James sighed. "You can cancel. Say you're sick. Say you have to work. Say anything."

"And then what? Go out with some guy I've never met, who might be a complete psychopath for all I know?"

"As opposed to the guy who's definitely an emotional terrorist?" James countered.

"At least give Alex a chance. Talk to him a bit more, see if there's something there."

I glanced at my phone, where Alex's message still waited for a response. It would be so easy to say yes, to explore this new possibility, to see if there was something—anything—that could help me forget about Matt.

But even as I considered it, I knew I wouldn't. Because despite everything, despite the ghosting and the confusion and the inevitable heartbreak looming on the horizon, I couldn't get Matt out of my system. Not yet.

"I'll go to dinner," I said, more to myself than to James. "I'll hear what he has to say. And if he can't give me a good explanation for disappearing again, then... then I'll consider my options."

James looked sceptical but didn't push. "Your funeral," he said, standing up and checking his watch. "Break's over. Try not to stab any customers with your fork."

I managed a weak smile. "No promises."

As James headed back to the kitchen, I looked down at my phone again. Two messages, two very different men, two potential paths forward.

I typed a quick response to Alex.

Thanks for the offer. I'm actually pretty busy this week, but I'll let you know if that changes.

It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either. It was a maybe—a lifeline I could grab if tonight went as badly as part of me expected it to.

Then I opened Matt's text with the address, staring at it for a long moment before

finally typing:

See you at 6.

Three little words that felt like signing my own emotional death warrant. But I'd made my choice, for better or worse. Now I just had to live with it.

I pocketed my phone and stood up, gathering my barely-touched lunch. Whatever happened tonight, at least I'd get some answers. And maybe, just maybe, I'd finally figure out if Matt was worth all this emotional turmoil, or if I was just setting myself up for an even bigger fall.

Either way, I had a feeling this dinner was going to be a turning point. I just wasn't sure which direction it would turn me in.

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Geri

It was a housing commission style place, small but well-maintained, with a neatly trimmed lawn and freshly painted exterior.

I hadn't known what to expect of Matt's family home, but this wasn't it.

I'd pictured something different—though I couldn't have said exactly what.

Maybe something that matched the intensity of the man himself.

Taking a deep breath, I climbed out of my car and made my way up the small concrete steps to the front door. Before I could even knock, it swung open, revealing a petite woman with bleached blonde hair and striking eyes—eyes that I immediately recognized as the same as Matt's.

"You must be Geri," she said warmly, her smile genuine and welcoming. "Please come in."

I stepped inside, immediately enveloped by the comforting aroma of home cooking. The house was small but immaculate, with family photos lining the narrow hallway.

"Matt!" she called down the hall. "Geri is here!"

I handed her the flowers, feeling suddenly shy. "These are for you, Mrs.—"

"Oh, call me Linda," she interrupted, beaming at me as she accepted the bouquet. "I

love you already, coming with flowers. Take a seat, honey. You want a beer?"

"Sure," I replied, grateful for anything that might take the edge off my nerves. I was anxious as hell, my mind still racing with questions about Matt's three-day disappearance and what this dinner invitation really meant.

Before I could dwell on it further, Matt emerged from what I assumed was his bedroom.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, his tattooed chest on full display as he casually pulled a t-shirt over his head.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of him—it was unfair how good he looked, how easily he could make me forget all my reservations with just his presence.

He dropped a kiss on his mother's head as he passed her, then made his way to me, pressing his lips to mine as if three days of radio silence was the most normal thing in the world. My heart fluttered traitorously, even as my brain screamed at me to demand an explanation.

"Come sit," he said, gesturing toward the small dining table. "Dinner's nearly ready. Mom's making her famous pot roast."

I followed him to the table, hyperaware of his hand on the small of my back, guiding me. The casual intimacy of it made my skin tingle, even as I tried to maintain some emotional distance. Just as we sat down, an older man entered the room, his face lighting up when he saw me.

"You must be Geri," he said, extending his hand. "Hi, girl. I'm George."

Linda handed him a beer as he joined us at the table, and soon we were all engaged in

conversation.

They asked about my work, how long I'd lived in the area.

I explained that I was originally from a small town called Riverdale but had moved to Seabreeze when I was fourteen and had been there ever since.

Throughout the meal, I found myself relaxing despite my earlier reservations.

Linda and George were warm and unpretentious, treating me like I was already part of the family.

The pot roast was delicious, the conversation easy, and for a while, I almost forgot about the emotional turmoil of the past few days.

Almost.

Because every time Matt smiled at me across the table, every time his hand casually brushed mine as he passed the salt, I felt that familiar pull toward him warring with the hurt and confusion of his disappearance.

How could someone who seemed so genuine, whose family was so welcoming, be so inconsiderate of my feelings?

After dinner, Matt stood up and touched my shoulder. "Come out back with me. I need a smoke."

I blinked in surprise. Smoke? I hadn't seen him smoke once, hadn't even caught the scent of cigarettes on him.

But then again, I realized with a pang, I hadn't actually spent that much time with

him.

What did I really know about Matt beyond the physical attraction and the emotional rollercoaster he'd put me on?

He led me outside to a small patio area next to an above-ground pool. The night air was cool against my skin as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and then offered the pack to me.

I hesitated only briefly before taking one.

I wasn't a regular smoker, but I wasn't opposed to the occasional cigarette, especially when my nerves were as frayed as they were tonight.

The nicotine hit my system with a familiar buzz, helping to settle the anxiety that had been simmering beneath the surface all evening.

"I'm sorry I haven't called," Matt said after a moment, exhaling a stream of smoke into the night air. "I've had so much army stuff to do before I leave, and Mom's been pretty sad about me going, so I've been spending time with her."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak yet. Part of me wanted to confront him, to demand a better explanation for his disappearance, but another part—the part that was still captivated by him despite everything—just wanted to accept his apology and move on.

"She was jobless when we got this place," he continued, gesturing toward the house.

"After she left my father. She found work, raised me and my brothers on her own.

Even managed to buy this place from the government eventually, though it was a

struggle to make the payments until she met George.

He loves her, treats her like gold. Treats me like his own, too. "

As he spoke, I found myself softening toward him.

There was a vulnerability in his voice that I hadn't heard before, a glimpse into the complex person behind the tattooed exterior and inconsistent behaviour.

Maybe he wasn't deliberately ghosting me.

Maybe he was just someone who got caught up in his own world, who didn't realize how his actions affected others.

Or maybe I was making excuses for him because I didn't want to admit that I'd fallen for someone who couldn't give me what I needed.

"When I go, I'll be gone for three months," he said, turning to face me directly. "But I was wondering... once I'm back and given a base, would you like to join me there? I'm suspecting it'll be up the top of the country, probably somewhere shit, but I would love to get a place with you."

The question caught me completely off-guard. Join him? Move to wherever the army stationed him? After knowing him for barely a week? After he'd already shown he could disappear without a word for days at a time?

"I—" I started, not sure what to say.

But something in his eyes—hope, vulnerability, a genuine desire for me to be part of his future—made me nod instead of voicing the doubts swirling in my mind.

What harm would it be to agree at this stage?

Life was all about choices, each one leading to new ones.

I could always change my mind later if I needed to.

And yet, as the words left my mouth, I felt a strange mix of excitement and dread. Was I setting myself up for heartbreak, or was this the beginning of something real?

After finishing our cigarettes, Matt led me back inside and to his bedroom—a small space dominated by a double bed, with a TV mounted on the wall.

We settled onto the bed, his arm around me as he put on some movie that I couldn't focus on.

I snuggled into his chest, breathing in his scent, trying to reconcile the man who'd invited me into his family home, who'd asked me to follow him across the country, with the one who could go days without contacting me.

Before long, his breathing had slowed and deepened. He'd fallen asleep, his chest rising and falling steadily beneath my head. I lay there for a while, listening to his heartbeat, feeling both connected to him and strangely distant.

The buzz of my phone from the floor where I'd left it broke the silence. Carefully, so as not to wake Matt, I slipped out of his embrace and retrieved it.

A message from Alex lit up the screen:

I hope you had a fantastic day. I thought about you all afternoon. Your picture is so stunning, and I bet you look even more beautiful in real life.

A wave of guilt washed over me. Here I was, in another man's bed, having just agreed to potentially move across the country with him, while someone else was thinking about me, complimenting me, making an effort to connect.

I stared at the message for a long moment, my thumb hovering over the reply button. It would be so easy to respond, to keep that door open, to have a backup plan for when Matt inevitably disappeared again. Alex seemed attentive, interested, consistent—all the things Matt wasn't.

But something stopped me. Maybe it was the memory of Linda's warm welcome, or the way Matt had opened up about his family, or the fact that despite everything, I still felt drawn to him in a way I couldn't explain. A way that scared me with its intensity.

With a sigh, I locked my phone and placed it back on the floor. Then I climbed back onto the bed, settling against Matt's chest once more. His arm instinctively tightened around me, even in sleep.

I decided not to message Alex back at all. Not yet, anyway. First, I needed to see this thing with Matt through to its conclusion—whatever that might be. I owed myself that much, at least.

As I drifted toward sleep, cradled in the arms of a man who was still largely a mystery to me, I couldn't help but wonder if I was making the right choice. But then again, when had I ever been good at making the right choices when it came to men?

The last thought that crossed my mind before sleep claimed me was that I was playing with fire—and I wasn't sure if I was more afraid of getting burned or of missing out on the warmth.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

Geri

Misery loves company, and I was drowning in it. Matt had ghosted me again—two days of silence, this time after I'd spent the night at his family home, after I'd agreed to potentially move across the country with him, after I'd chosen him.

I'd messaged him. Called him. Left voicemails that grew increasingly desperate, then increasingly angry. Nothing. Radio silence. As if he'd vanished into thin air, taking all his promises with him.

So I did what I shouldn't have done—I messaged Alex back.

"You're doing the right thing," James assured me during our break at the restaurant, sliding a plate of baby octopus salad in front of me. "Matt is a dead end. That man knows the art of gaslighting a woman, and you've been gaslighted your whole life, so you don't see it for what it is."

I knew he was right. It was why I'd messaged Alex in the first place. But part of me—the stupid, hopeful part that never seemed to learn—desperately wanted to be wrong about Matt.

Alex had asked me to meet up, suggesting dinner, but I didn't want to be seen in town with someone else. Not when things with Matt were so... undefined. Not when I still held out hope that he'd call, that he'd have a reasonable explanation, that this time would be different.

Over the past few days, a few things had started to dawn on me.

How did Matt know I had opened a Tinder account?

Was it because he had his own account? I'd taken to doing some internet detective work of my own, checking out his Facebook account, but found nothing revealing.

The man was a ghost online—his account hadn't been updated in over two years, as if he wasn't connected to the digital world at all.

I both loved and hated it. How was I supposed to snoop?

It was 11 PM, and I was lying in bed after an exhausting day at work, when a message from Alex came through:

I was thinking, I need to see your face in real life. Can I drive down and pick you up, and we can go for a drive around town?

I was exhausted. But also unable to sleep, my brain a whirlwind that wouldn't stop spinning, taking me down rabbit holes of doubt and insecurity. So I did what I shouldn't do—I said yes.

He replied that he lived in Riverdale, so he'd be at my place in 45 minutes.

I hadn't realized how far away he was, but I gave him my address anyway.

After waiting 30 minutes in my room, I tiptoed down the hall and out the door, feeling like a teenager sneaking out past curfew.

I didn't want to face Haley or Anna's questions about where I was going or who I was meeting.

I walked down the long driveway, dressed in my pyjamas and Ugg boots, no makeup

and my hair in a messy bun.

I even had my nighttime glasses on because this bitch was blind in the dark.

I wasn't going to get dressed up for a man I barely knew.

Sure, I'd done it in the past, but I just didn't have the same motivation when it came to Alex.

It was as if my brain knew this wasn't going anywhere serious.

A loud black pickup truck came down the street and stopped in front of me. I rounded to the passenger side and slid in, finally getting a good look at Alex.

My jaw nearly hit the floor.

He was tall—his head almost touched the roof of the truck—with a lean, muscular body, messy blond hair, and the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen. His arms had those veins that stood out prominently, making you want to run your fingers along them. Why the fuck was I in my pyjamas?

Gods, I was an idiot.

Alex pressed his lips together, looked me up and down, then laughed. "Get in the car, Geri," he said, and I did what I was told, because fuck me, why would anyone say no to this Adonis?

Once I was buckled up, he took off down the road, following signs to what was called Seabreeze Haven Blowhole—a section of the coastline where water would spout up through a hole in the rocks, creating a spectacular spray.

He found a spot in the parking lot, turned off the engine, and turned to look at me.

His face was so happy and lit up as he said, "You're a lot more beautiful in real life than in your photos."

I was shocked, certain that was bullshit, but he genuinely looked like he meant it. The sincerity in his eyes made my stomach flutter in a way I hadn't expected.

We sat there talking for what felt like hours.

He told me he was a doorman at a hotel in Riverdale and had been there for four years.

He worked with his ex and was trying to find a new hotel to take him so he didn't have to see her face anymore.

They'd been broken up for seven months, and he just couldn't stand being around her.

He asked about me, and I explained that I was currently being ghosted, again. He laughed and said, "Men can be so cruel. But I'm glad you decided to come out with me."

Then he leaned in to kiss me.

His mouth was warm, and I was hungry for affection, for connection, for something that felt real and present.

I wasn't one to cheat, so as I climbed into his lap in the driver's seat, I was shocked at myself.

But I'd convinced myself that I wasn't actually in a relationship with Matt.

It had been a week of knowing him, and he hadn't truly committed to me anyway.

If he had, I would be in his lap right now, not Alex's.

Alex was gentle and sweet, but his mouth wasn't. As his hand went under my top to brush my braless breasts, he groaned and said, "Fuck me, darling. I want to taste you."

And that was it—we went for it. Hands, teeth, and mouths explored each other as he pushed me back into my seat, then climbed over me, sliding the seat as far back as it would go. He pulled down my sleep pants, exposing me to him, and ran his fingers through my wet centre.

"Can I fuck you?" he asked, his voice rough with desire.

I nodded, and that was all he needed. He pulled his jeans down and freed himself. Gods, he was big—his cock was like his arms, thick and veiny. I wanted to feel the weight of it on my tongue, but the confined space of the truck wasn't allowing anything too adventurous to happen.

He grabbed a condom from the centre console, rolled it on, and pushed into me, stretching me. I loved the burn it gave me. There was no foreplay involved, just quick and dirty as he slid in and out of me, setting a rhythm that had the truck rocking with each thrust.

He kissed me deeply as he told me how beautiful I was, how tight I felt, how much he was loving this, how he would never get enough. And I gobbled it up, ate all the words he gave me, because I was starved for affection, starved for love, starved for someone to truly want me, and only me.

He picked up his tempo as I neared the edge, my body tightening around him as he

swelled inside me.

His hand came under my butt and lifted me, changing the angle so that I saw stars as he hit that spot that made me lose control.

I came, clamping down on him, and he fucked me harder, harder, until he came himself.

Gods, it felt good. The release, the connection, the momentary escape from my thoughts.

Once we had come down from our high, he slid out of me, rolled the condom off, got out, and walked to the closest bin outside to dispose of it. When he came back to the truck, it was only then that the guilt started to set in. Only then did I realize what I had done.

But alongside the guilt came a realization—I deserved better than what I was getting from Matt. I deserved someone who wouldn't disappear for days at a time, who wouldn't leave me wondering and waiting. I deserved consistency, honesty, presence.

In that moment, I made a decision. I wouldn't answer Matt's calls anymore, if he ever bothered to make them. I would move on and chase something better. Something that didn't make me feel like I was constantly walking on emotional quicksand.

As Alex started the truck and began the drive back to my place, his hand resting casually on my thigh, I felt a strange mix of emotions—guilt, yes, but also relief.

Relief that I'd finally taken a step toward breaking the cycle, toward choosing myself over someone who couldn't be bothered to choose me.

"You okay?" Alex asked, glancing over at me.

I nodded, offering him a small smile. "Yeah. I'm good."

And for the first time in days, I actually meant it.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

Geri

Alex wasn't like Matt at all. Where Matt would disappear for days at a time, Alex called and messaged me daily—all day, in fact.

It was sweet, almost overwhelming after the emotional drought I'd been stuck in.

He stalked the shit out of me online, liking all my posts, including ones from years ago, and commenting on how good I looked in each one.

I ate it up, basking in the attention. It was nice to have someone want me for once, to have someone who wasn't afraid to show it.

Matt hadn't called at all. Not once since our night at his parents' house.

I tried to ignore the pull I still felt toward him, the way my heart would skip when my phone rang, only to crash when it wasn't his name on the screen.

I told myself it was for the best. That I was moving on to something healthier, something more consistent.

When the weekend arrived, Alex invited me to go out to a club up in Riverdale.

I said yes, but I also invited two girlfriends of mine who didn't know Matt or Haley or anyone from my Seabreeze Haven life.

Why? I wasn't entirely sure. Maybe because deep down, I knew if Matt came running

back, I would allow it, and I needed witnesses to my shame.

Kelly and Louise were excited to go out.

I met them at their place in Riverdale, ready for a night of distraction.

Louise was a girl I'd met back when I was with Ben.

She had, in fact, told me two days after I found out about Jess that she had hooked up with Ben one night, but when she discovered he had a girlfriend, she told him to go to hell.

Then, when we broke up, she hunted me down to be friends.

I didn't hold it against her. In the two months after Ben and I split, I'd come to realize that Jess and Louise were just two of many girls he'd hooked up with.

It was sad how blind I'd been, how I hadn't even noticed the signs.

"So, this new guy," Louise said as she applied another coat of mascara, "is he as hot as you say, or are you just desperate after the last disaster?"

I laughed, flipping her off. "He's hot. Like, unfairly hot. And his friends aren't bad either, from what I've seen in photos."

"Single friends?" Kelly perked up, suddenly more interested in the night ahead.

"Two of them coming tonight. Both single, as far as I know."

"Thank fuck," Louise sighed dramatically. "I haven't gotten laid in months. Mama needs some attention."

We got dressed up, and I put in a lot more effort than I had for our first meeting.

No pyjamas and Ugg boots this time. I wore a tight black dress that hugged every curve, heels that made my legs look a mile long, and makeup that made my eyes pop.

If I was going to do this—really move on from Matt—I was going to do it looking my absolute best.

We met Alex and his two mates at the club, the bass already thumping through the walls as we approached. Alex's face lit up when he saw me, his eyes traveling appreciatively down my body before he pulled me in for a kiss that left no doubt about his intentions for later.

"You look incredible," he murmured against my ear, his hand resting possessively on my lower back.

I introduced him to Kelly and Louise, who were both eyeing him with approval. Then he introduced his friends—Nick and Arjun.

Nick was shorter than Alex and Arjun, but still cute, with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Louise zeroed in on him immediately, her predatory smile making her intentions clear.

Alex's other mate, Arjun, was hot as sin but seemed to have eyes for no one.

He was taller than Alex, with tanned skin, dark eyes, and a body that made me want to climb him like a tree.

I had never seen so many good-looking men in my life as I had in the last two weeks. I was totally hooked.

I wished life was a "why choose" novel because those two would make great bread in a girl sandwich. Cooling myself off with that thought, I got to dancing, only to discover that Arjun and Alex could dance like Michael Jackson, while I danced like a frog having a fit. Great.

But I wasn't ashamed. I just rolled with it, deciding to do my best lawn mower dance and fishing line. Hey, if you can't beat them, then just make a fool of yourself, right?

"What the hell is that supposed to be?" Alex laughed, watching me mime reeling in a fish.

"It's called talent," I shot back, exaggerating the movement. "You're just jealous you didn't think of it first."

He grabbed my hand and twirled me, pulling me close. "You're ridiculous," he said, but his eyes were warm with affection.

"You like it," I challenged.

"I do," he admitted, pressing a kiss to my temple. "I really do."

The night had been so much fun—drinks flowing, laughter constant, the six of us clicking in a way that felt surprisingly natural.

Louise and Nick were practically attached at the hip by the end of the night, while Kelly had managed to draw Arjun out of his shell enough that they were deep in conversation at a corner table.

It wasn't until the club ended and we spilled out into the night that we realized the car park we'd parked in was locked for the night, and we couldn't get home.

"Fuck," Louise groaned. "I am not sleeping in the car in this dress."

Alex suggested we go stay at his place and come back for the car in the morning. It was the logical solution, so we piled into an Uber and headed to his apartment. Once there, he set Louise and Kelly up on the floor of his living room with blankets and pillows, then led me to his bedroom.

The second we crossed the threshold, he pounced, wrapping himself around me and throwing me onto his bed.

He climbed on top and started to devour me, his mouth hungry against mine, his hands everywhere at once.

He spread my thighs, pulling down my underwear as he settled between my legs and started to eat me out with an enthusiasm that made my toes curl.

Fuck me, I was a goner as he licked and sucked. The bed was noisy, creaking and groaning under us, prompting me to say, "Let's move to the floor. The last thing I need is Kelly and Louise to hear us."

He nodded, helping me off the bed. I stripped off my dress as he pulled his shirt over his head, revealing that tattooed torso that had first caught my attention. His jeans followed, and then we were both naked, drinking in the sight of each other in the dim light filtering through his curtains.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he murmured, pulling me against him for another kiss.

I could taste myself on his lips, and it sent a fresh wave of arousal through me. "So are you," I breathed, running my hands over his chest, tracing the lines of his tattoos.

We sank to the floor, and Alex grabbed a condom from his nightstand, settling

between my thighs as he slowly pushed into me. The stretch was delicious, my body still getting used to his size. He started with gentle, measured thrusts, his eyes locked on mine, one hand cupping my face tenderly.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his voice rough with desire but his eyes searching mine for confirmation.

I nodded, wrapping my legs around his waist to pull him deeper. "More than okay."

He smiled, that crooked smile that had first caught my attention in his profile picture, and then he began to move in earnest. His thrusts grew harder, faster, the tenderness giving way to raw passion as we found our rhythm together.

I arched beneath him, feeling the carpet rubbing against my back with each thrust, the slight burn adding to the intensity of the sensation. His hands gripped my hips, lifting me slightly to change the angle, hitting that spot inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

"Alex," I gasped, my nails digging into his shoulders. "Don't stop."

"Wasn't planning on it," he grunted, his pace increasing as he drove into me relentlessly.

I could feel the tension building, that familiar coiling in my lower belly that signalled I was close. Alex seemed to sense it too, one hand sliding between us to find my clit, circling it with just the right pressure.

"Come for me, Geri," he urged, his voice a husky command that sent shivers down my spine. "Let me feel you."

And I did, my body clenching around him as waves of pleasure crashed over me, my

back arching off the floor as I tried to muffle my cries against his shoulder. He continued to thrust through my orgasm, prolonging it, drawing it out until I was trembling beneath him.

Then he was on his knees, his hands gripping my thighs as he fucked me hard and fast, the new position allowing him to go even deeper.

The carpet burned against my back, but I didn't care—the pleasure far outweighed the discomfort.

I watched his face, captivated by the intensity in his eyes, the way his jaw clenched with each thrust, the sheen of sweat on his brow.

Just as I felt another orgasm building, he pulled out, quickly rolling the condom off. With a few strokes of his hand, he came on my belly, his release hot against my skin. I watched, fascinated, as he caught his breath, then looked down at me with a mischievous smile.

To my surprise, he began to draw with his fingers, using his come to trace patterns on my stomach. Heart shapes, I realized with a mixture of amusement and tenderness. He was drawing love hearts on my belly with his come.

"What are you doing?" I asked, laughing softly.

"Art," he replied with a grin. "Beautiful canvas deserves beautiful art."

It was ridiculous and sweet and strangely intimate all at once. I pulled him down for a kiss, not caring about the mess between us.

"You're weird," I told him, but I was smiling.

"You like it," he countered, echoing our earlier exchange on the dance floor.

And I did. I liked his weirdness, his openness, his consistency. I liked the way he looked at me like I was something precious, something worth pursuing. I liked that he called when he said he would, that he didn't disappear for days at a time, that he wasn't afraid to show his interest.

As we lay there on his floor, sticky and satisfied, I wondered if this was what it felt like to be with someone who actually valued you. Someone who didn't make you question your worth with every unanswered call or text.

It felt good. It felt right.

And yet, as Alex got up to fetch a towel to clean us off, a small part of me—a part I was trying desperately to silence—still wondered what Matt was doing, if he was thinking of me, if he'd ever call again.

I pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the man in front of me, the one who was here, the one who was present. The one who drew hearts on my belly and made me laugh and looked at me like I hung the moon.

Maybe this was what moving on looked like. Maybe this was what I deserved all along.

Geri

The next few days passed quietly. Alex called and texted every day, his attention constant and unwavering. Matt remained absent, a ghost in my life that I was trying desperately to exorcise.

I walked into the Harborview for the afternoon shift, having just finished at the day spa.

My feet ached, my back was tight, and all I wanted was to sit down for five minutes before the dinner rush began.

I spotted James and Marco at the bar, drinking beers before the night got busy.

There was someone with them I hadn't seen before—a tall guy with styled brown hair and what looked like chef's pants.

I walked over, placed my bag under the bench, and tied my apron on. James, bless him, pulled a plate from the fridge with octopus salad already prepared. I smiled and grabbed a fork, kissing his cheek in gratitude.

"Thank you," I said, already digging in.

"I knew you hadn't eaten," he replied, watching me with that knowing look he always had when he was right.

Marco gestured to the stranger. "Geri, this is Con—or Constantine for long. He works

next door at the café."

Con extended his hand, his green eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiled. "Nice to meet you."

"Con and I did our apprenticeships together when we were younger," Marco explained. "He just applied to work at Alpine Ridge for the winter."

That perked me up. "Oh, seasonal job? You've worked there before?"

"Yes, I go every year, in fact," Con said, taking a sip of his beer. "The pay is decent, but the real perk is getting to ski every day."

"I grew up in Riverdale," I told him, "which is about twenty minutes from Lakeview. That's another ski resort just down the mountain from Alpine Ridge."

"No way! Small world." His smile widened. "You should totally do the season too. They need waitresses there, and they supply accommodation to all workers."

I paused, fork halfway to my mouth, as the idea took root. Get away from all this mess for a few months? Escape to the mountains, far from the drama, and just be someone else for a while? It seemed appealing—more than appealing, it seemed like exactly what I needed.

"I might actually consider that," I said, surprising myself with how much I meant it.

We sat and talked while I ate my salad. Con was easy to talk to, with a laid-back energy that felt refreshing after the emotional rollercoaster of the past few weeks.

He told me about the ski resort, the staff parties, the breathtaking views from the mountain.

I found myself genuinely interested, mentally calculating how much notice I'd need to give at both jobs, whether I could afford to leave Seabreeze Haven for a few months.

Then someone cleared their throat, and I looked toward the doorway. The restaurant wasn't open yet—we still had another forty minutes—but Matt stood there, looking angry.

My stomach dropped. James pressed his lips together, his face hardening as he recognized who it was. I cleared my throat, put my salad down, and said, "Excuse me," before walking over to Matt.

I looked at him, confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Why aren't you answering your phone?" he demanded, his voice tight.

I blinked, genuinely bewildered. "What?"

"I've called you four times in the last twenty minutes. Not once did you answer."

Something snapped inside me. All the hurt, all the confusion, all the nights spent staring at my phone willing it to ring—it all came rushing to the surface in a wave of white-hot anger.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I exploded, right there in the doorway. "You ghost me for days at a time, ignore my calls, my messages, and then you have the audacity to show up here and demand to know why I didn't answer my phone for twenty minutes?"

His eyes widened at my outburst, but I was just getting started.

"You disappeared for six days, Matt. Six days after I spent the night at your parents'

house, after you asked me to move across the country with you. And now you're mad because I didn't pick up my phone while I was working?"

He slowly deflated as I yelled, but he still stood his ground. "Don't be mad at me when you're busy fucking other men," he shot back. "Kelly rang me and told me all about Alex. So don't play that card. I thought we had something. I thought we were together."

James's voice came from behind me, calm but cutting. "You would actually have to call someone, be around them, show some interest to be able to claim that card, mate."

And James wasn't wrong. I was done with feeling guilty, done with being the one who waited and wondered and made excuses.

"Yes, I did that," I admitted, my voice steadier now. "And I'm not even sorry about it."

Matt just looked sad. "Bye, then," he said, turning and leaving as abruptly as he'd arrived.

I felt hot tears in my eyes as I walked back to the bar and sat down. I downed my beer in one go, the bitter liquid doing nothing to wash away the bitter taste in my mouth.

Con, who was still sitting there, looked at me with a mixture of sympathy and hesitation.

"If it helps," he said carefully, "he has a girlfriend."

Her name is Jamie. She lives just out of town.

They've been together for three months now.

She has a kid, which is why I'm assuming he ghosts her all the time too. "

I looked at him, struck dumb. "What?"

"Yeah," Con nodded. "Jamie is a friend of mine. Her best friend used to date my brother a few years back. She's super nice and sweet, but he ghosts her all the time, gives her no explanation as to where he is."

My stomach dropped as the realization hit me. "He's playing both of us," I said, my voice hollow. "And I'm here feeling guilty about moving on..."

Con looked at me with a sweet smile and held his hand out. "Hi, I'm Con. I'm not mean to women at all. In fact, most of my friends are girls. Let's be friends."

I smiled at him because I needed another friend, someone who wasn't tangled up in all this mess, someone who could offer a fresh perspective.

James laughed at us. "Come on, let's pour a quick shot of tequila and move on from this mess. The afternoon shift is about to start, and I refuse to allow dickheads like that to kill our vibe."

Con nodded enthusiastically. "Shots!"

Marco, who'd been quietly observing the whole scene, pulled out a bottle of tequila and four shot glasses. "To new friends and leaving assholes in the past," he toasted, raising his glass.

"To new friends," I echoed, clinking my glass against theirs before throwing back the shot.

The tequila burned its way down my throat, but it was a good burn—cleansing, clarifying.

In that moment, I felt something shift inside me.

The weight of guilt and confusion I'd been carrying around lifted slightly.

Matt had a girlfriend—had had one the entire time we were whatever we were.

I wasn't the other woman; I was just another woman he was stringing along.

And suddenly, the idea of escaping to Alpine Ridge for the winter season seemed even more appealing. A fresh start, away from the drama, in a place where I could reinvent myself. Maybe I'd even make some new friends, like Con, who seemed genuinely kind and straightforward.

"So, about that job at Alpine Ridge," I said to Con as James and Marco moved away to prepare for opening. "Tell me more."

His face lit up. "Seriously? You're interested?"

I nodded, surprising myself with how certain I felt. "Yeah, I think I am."

As Con launched into details about the application process and what life was like at the resort, I felt a strange mix of emotions—anger at Matt for his deception, relief at finally having clarity, excitement about the possibility of a new adventure, and a lingering sadness for what might have been if things had been different.

But mostly, I felt free. Free from the cycle of hope and disappointment that had defined my relationship with Matt. Free from the guilt of moving on with Alex. Free to make choices based on what I wanted, not what someone else might think or feel.

It was a heady feeling, that freedom. And as I listened to Con talk about snowboarding and staff parties and the breathtaking sunrises over the mountains, I allowed myself to imagine a future that looked nothing like my past. A future where I was in control, where I didn't wait for anyone's call, where I didn't make myself small to fit into someone else's life.

Maybe this was what growing up felt like. Maybe this was what it meant to truly move on.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

Geri

Two months later, my car slid into the parking lot designated for workers at Alpine Ridge. It was still a massive walk to the resort where I'd be working, but I couldn't contain my excitement. This was it—my fresh start, my escape, my chance to figure out who I really was away from all the drama.

I climbed from my little car and grabbed my suitcase, sending off a quick text to Con to let him know I'd arrived.

Con had become a fast friend who slipped into my life easily.

He reminded me a lot of James—super dependable, didn't want anything from me, and genuinely gave a shit about me.

He was also not into me, or so I thought.

I mean, one can't speak for someone truly, but he always had some girl he was currently talking to.

He wasn't a man-whore, but he took women out to dinner a lot, and it never went further than that.

They would go out, eat, then he would drop them home and explain to me the next day that the spark wasn't there, so why bother stringing them along?

He was always super upfront with them too, and honest. I loved that about him.

James always teased me, telling me that Con was super into me, but I didn't see it. Our friendship was easy, uncomplicated—exactly what I needed after the mess with Matt and the intensity with Alex.

I started to pull my suitcase from the trunk and grabbed my skis and poles, all of which were brand new. I'd hadn't been skiing since I was 12, but Con had assured me I'd pick it back up quickly. I wasn't so sure, but I was excited to try.

I had applied for the job here the second I'd gotten home from work the same night Con had told me about it.

And I'd managed to get a job at one of the local hotels.

I was given a room to sleep in and held the position of waitress and daily cleaner.

The pay was better than I was getting in Seabreeze Haven and would give me two shifts a day in the same building, so I was happy with that.

Just as I closed the trunk, I looked up to see Con walking down the hill toward me, with a huge smile on his face.

He was in shorts and a t-shirt, which made me cold just looking at him.

He ran hot 24/7 and never once complained it was cold; he was a walking furnace.

I wasn't shocked at the clothing choice even though there was a thick blanket of snow on the ground around me.

He scooped me up in a bear hug that lifted me off my feet. "Come on, let's get you up to the hotel," he said, grabbing my suitcase and bag, leaving me to just carry my skis and poles.

I followed along after him, having no idea where I was going, but he did. This was his third year up here, so he knew the area well. He was working at the same hotel he had worked at for years now, and it was next door to mine, which was good. We'd be able to see each other often.

We had walked about halfway when I said, "Hold on, I need to stop." I was huffing and puffing like an elephant made to run, and I looked at Con, who wasn't even breathing heavily even though he was carrying my suitcase and bag.

"Fuck me, this is a long walk," I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

He just laughed at me and said, "It's the altitude here. We're higher up, so the air is thinner. You get used to it after a while. When you go back at the end of the season, you'll find you can walk and run further than before. You'll be a lot fitter without having done much at all."

Well, shit. Okay, now I didn't feel so bad looking like an out-of-shape mammoth.

The rest of the walk was hard, not gonna lie. By the time we walked in, I was a mess—sweaty and ready to vomit—but the staff were so nice and just laughed and said it's a shit walk the first one back for the season. Then they showed me to my room.

Con carried my stuff and helped me unpack. I had a small room with two beds; I would, in fact, be sharing with someone, which wasn't on the list, but I wasn't fussy. As long as they didn't snore, I'd be alright.

"Let's go get a drink," Con said once we'd finished unpacking. "You look like you need one."

I scowled at him, but I couldn't deny he was right. He took me out to the local pub

they had in town and bought me a beer. We played a game of pool, where he introduced me to the people here—other seasonal workers, locals who ran businesses in town, ski instructors who'd been coming back for years.

My phone pinged with a message from Alex:

You having fun?

I shot back a message saying;

Did you know the air here is different? I just walked up a hill that would normally be fine, but it was like walking in mud.

To that, I got a whole message back on altitude and what it does to the body. Shaking my head, I looked up, and Con was smiling at me.

"That Alex?" he asked.

I smiled back, saying, "Yep. He's telling me how the air is different," making Con laugh.

I hadn't cut things off with Alex when I decided to come here.

I just told him I wanted to do the season, and he said it sounded fun and he couldn't wait to see me when it was over.

Then he continued to message me non-stop, acting like long distance wasn't an issue, even though we weren't actually together.

I was scared to even consider settling down again. I was burned—I wasn't gonna shy away from that. I was very, very burned. But I was also ready to find myself in this

mess I had made, find out who I was, and take these three months I had here to just discover who I was inside.

After our drinks, Con showed me around the small town that surrounded the resort.

There wasn't much—a few restaurants, some shops selling ski gear and souvenirs, a small grocery store, and the pub we'd just left.

But it had a charm to it, nestled in the mountains with snow-covered peaks visible in every direction.

"So, what do you think?" Con asked as we walked back toward the hotels. The sun was setting, casting a golden glow over the snow that took my breath away.

"I think I'm going to love it here," I said honestly.

And I meant it. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Not waiting for someone else's call, not trying to fit myself into someone else's life, not wondering if I was enough.

Just me, in this beautiful place, with a friend who wanted nothing from me but my company.

That night, as I settled into my new bed, I thought about how much had changed in just a few months.

From finding Ben with another woman, to the rollercoaster with Matt, to the passionate but undefined thing with Alex, and now here—starting fresh in a place where no one knew my history, where I could be whoever I wanted to be.

My roommate hadn't arrived yet, so I had the room to myself for now. I lay there, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the hotel—distant laughter from the bar downstairs, the occasional creak of the old building settling, the soft whoosh of wind outside my window.

I felt a sense of peace wash over me. This was good. This was right. This was what I needed.

Tomorrow, I would start my new job. I would meet new people. I would relearn to ski. I would begin the process of discovering who Geri really was, underneath all the layers of hurt and disappointment and fear.

For the first time in a long time, I was excited about the future. Not because of a man, not because of what someone else might bring to my life, but because of what I might find within myself.

I fell asleep with a smile on my face, dreaming of snow-covered mountains and endless possibilities.

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Geri

The next few days passed in a blur. I had to learn how to clean, which I thought I knew how to do, but apparently, I didn't. I had to learn to make a bed again—I thought mine was good, but it turned out I had been doing it wrong my whole life.

There was this thing called "hospital corners," and it made me think of the army.

In fact, the lady who owned the resort reminded me of a drill sergeant and ran the place a lot like an army camp.

The thought brought Matt to my mind, and I secretly wondered how he was doing.

I had wondered about him a lot and had stalked his socials a few times.

Con told me that Jamie had broken it off with Matt after he had told her about me, and that Jake had seen him at a going-away party at his parents' place without a girl on his arm.

It had, in fact, felt good to think he had ended up leaving without anyone to string along.

I hadn't heard from him at all, and I liked it that way. Or so I thought.

Waitressing in the restaurant that was in this hotel was also hard, nothing like what I was used to.

I had waitressed in cafés and high-end restaurants before, but this place was mean and nasty.

The owner was horrible, and the staff were just as bad.

It had brought me down a little at the start, being surrounded by people who were a bit cruel, but my roommate was a gem.

She was one of the chefs in the restaurant and was super nice.

She told me it was like this every year and to just give it some time—half the staff would leave by halfway through the season, and we would be left with only the good ones. I was holding out for that.

Con had taken me up the mountain to ski every day since I got here, and I had, in fact, skied without any issues.

It had been over a decade since I had done it, but I had taken back to it like a duck to water and was having a blast. Con was brilliant at snowboarding—he could do jumps and tricks—but he never rode off on me.

He always went slower so I could catch up and even hung back to make sure I was good.

His brother had arrived yesterday, and Con had introduced us.

His brother was mean; not gonna lie, he had intimidated me from the moment I met him.

They looked a bit alike, but his brother had this "I'm better than you" aura that just put me off.

I knew I would avoid him in the future. I liked Con's aura—he was so easy to talk to and get along with, and I trusted him.

I, in fact, trusted him more than anyone I had in the past, except for James. I loved that man more than life.

"You're getting better," Con said as we rode the chairlift back up the mountain for our third run of the day. It was my day off, and we were making the most of it. The sky was a perfect blue, the snow was pristine, and for once, the biting cold didn't seem to bother me as much.

"You think?" I asked, adjusting my goggles. "I still feel like I'm going to face-plant every time I hit a bump."

He laughed, the sound carrying across the mountain air. "That's part of the fun. Besides, you haven't fallen once today. That's progress."

I smiled, feeling a sense of accomplishment. It was a small thing, making it down a beginner slope without falling, but it felt good to be improving at something. To be learning and growing.

"So," Con said, breaking into my thoughts, "how's the job going? Still dealing with the dragon lady?"

I groaned. Mrs. Harrington, the hotel owner, had earned that nickname among the staff for her fiery temper and impossible standards. "She made me remake a bed three times yesterday because the corners weren't tight enough. Three times! I swear she gets off on making people miserable."

"She's like that with everyone," Con assured me. "Last year, she made one of the housekeepers cry because there was a single hair in a bathroom she'd just cleaned."

"Charming," I muttered.

"But the tips are good, right?" he asked, nudging my shoulder with his.

I had to admit they were. The guests at the resort were mostly wealthy families or couples on romantic getaways, and they tipped generously. "Yeah, the money's decent. And my roommate, Lily, is cool. She's been showing me the ropes in the kitchen when Mrs. Harrington isn't around."

"See? Not all bad," Con said with a grin.

We reached the top of the lift and slid off, making our way to the start of the run.

The view never failed to take my breath away—mountains stretching as far as the eye could see, the valley below dotted with tiny buildings, the world quiet except for the occasional shout of joy from a fellow skier.

"Race you to the bottom?" Con challenged, his eyes twinkling behind his goggles.

"You'll win," I pointed out.

"Probably," he agreed with a shrug. "But it'll be fun watching you try to keep up."

I laughed and pushed off, feeling the exhilaration of speed as I carved my way down the slope. Con stayed beside me for a while, offering tips on my form, before shooting ahead with a whoop of joy. I watched him go, admiring the fluid way he moved, the confidence in every turn.

By the time I reached the bottom, he was waiting for me, a steaming cup of hot chocolate in each hand.

"You're getting faster," he said, handing me a cup.

"Or you're getting slower," I teased, taking a grateful sip. The rich, sweet liquid warmed me from the inside out.

"Keep dreaming," he replied with a laugh.

We found a bench and sat, watching other skiers and snowboarders make their way down the mountain. It was peaceful, sitting there with Con, no pressure to talk or be anything other than who I was.

"Heard from Alex lately?" Con asked after a while, his tone casual.

I nodded. "He texts every day. Wants to know when I'm coming back, if I'm having fun, if I miss him."

"And do you? Miss him?"

I considered the question. Did I miss Alex? The sex had been great, and he had been attentive in a way Matt never was. But did I miss him as a person? The truth was, I hadn't thought about him much since arriving here.

"Not really," I admitted. "Is that bad?"

Con shook his head. "Nah. Just means you're living in the moment. That's a good thing."

I smiled, grateful for his understanding. "What about you? Any prospects up here this season?"

He laughed. "There's a new ski instructor who's pretty cute. Might ask her out for

drinks next week."

"Just drinks?" I teased. "Not dinner?"

"Hey, I'm evolving," he protested with a grin. "Baby steps."

We finished our hot chocolate and headed back to the lift for another run. As we waited in line, I found myself studying Con's profile—the strong line of his jaw, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, the easy confidence in his posture. He caught me looking and raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous pastime," he quipped.

"I'm just glad you're here," I said honestly. "Makes this whole adventure less scary."

His expression softened. "I'm glad you're here too, Geri. Resort life is better with friends."

Friends. The word settled comfortably between us. That's what we were—good friends. And for now, that was exactly what I needed.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of skiing, laughter, and more hot chocolate. By the time we headed back to the hotels, the sun was setting, casting a golden glow over the snow-covered landscape.

"Dinner at the pub tonight?" Con suggested as we parted ways at my hotel entrance. "A bunch of us are meeting up around eight."

"Sounds good," I agreed. "I'll shower and meet you there."

Back in my room, I found Lily already getting ready to go out. "Con invited me to the pub," I told her as I peeled off my ski gear. "You coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," she replied, applying mascara in the small mirror above our shared dresser. "His brother's going to be there too."

I made a face. "Great."

Lily laughed. "Not a fan of the elder Mitchell, huh?"

"He seems... intense," I said diplomatically.

"That's one word for it," she agreed. "But he's not so bad once you get to know him. Just takes himself very seriously."

I wasn't convinced but decided to keep an open mind. After a hot shower that eased my aching muscles—skiing was more of a workout than I remembered—I dressed in jeans and a sweater, applied minimal makeup, and headed out with Lily.

The pub was already crowded when we arrived, the warmth and noise a stark contrast to the quiet, cold night outside. I spotted Con at a table in the corner, surrounded by a group of people I recognized from the resort. His brother sat beside him, nursing a beer and looking as serious as ever.

Con waved us over, his face lighting up when he saw me. "Geri! Lily! Over here!"

As I made my way through the crowd, I felt a lightness in my chest that had been absent for too long. This was good. This was where I was supposed to be. Not pining over Matt, not trying to force something with Alex, but here, in this moment,

surrounded by new friends and new experiences.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn't defined by who I was dating or who had hurt me. I was just Geri—waitress, novice skier, friend. And that felt like the most authentic version of myself I had been in years.

I slid into the seat Con had saved for me, accepting the beer he pushed my way with a smile.

As the conversation flowed around me—talk of the day's skiing conditions, gossip about guests at the resort, plans for the weekend—I felt a sense of belonging that had nothing to do with romantic relationships and everything to do with finding my place in this small mountain community.

Maybe that's what I had been searching for all along—not someone to complete me, but somewhere I could be completely myself.

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Geri

I had been at the resort for well over four weeks now, and Alex's texts had started to dwindle.

I knew they would—distance wasn't for everyone, and I was forgetting him quicker than he was forgetting me.

I had, in fact, gotten a text from Matt yesterday asking how I was and if I would like to come see him.

I was yet to reply. Did I want to see him?

I had been doing really well when I wasn't allowing my brain to think of him, so I had decided to just ignore it for now and assess it later.

I had been asked to cover a shift at the bar—one I hadn't yet worked in—but I liked money and had started a nice savings since I arrived here. Not paying for city living was good.

I settled into working in the bar easily, pouring drinks and talking to patrons.

The atmosphere was lively, with skiers coming in after a day on the slopes, their faces flushed from cold and exertion.

The tips were flowing as freely as the alcohol, and I found myself enjoying the change of pace from the restaurant.

I walked over to serve the next group of people when I realized it was Con's brother, Cam. Dammit.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, and he said, "Hey."

I said "hey" back and asked what he wanted. I had managed to avoid him at all costs the past few weeks. He was just as cruel to others as he was to me, and I'd decided he was just that type of person.

"Whiskey, neat. And two beers," he said, his gaze never leaving my face.

I grabbed his drinks, then walked them back over to him, handing them off when he said, "Can I ask you something?"

I looked at the twinkle in his eyes and knew he was up to something, but I said, "Sure, why not."

He leaned forward, lowering his voice slightly. "When are you going to date my brother?"

I looked at him and said, "What?"

"You know he likes you, right?" Cam continued, taking a sip of his whiskey. "You're the first girl he has actually liked in a long time."

I laughed at that and said, "He goes on dates all the time. I'm sure that's not true."

"He only goes on dates to try to get over you," Cam replied, "because he knows you don't feel the same."

I stopped and stared at him. "What? That can't be true."

Cam leaned in again and said, "Listen here, girl.

I've known him my whole life. He doesn't just like you—my brother is madly in love with you, and you're just stringing him along at every turn you get.

So stop. Tell him you don't like him so I can mend his broken heart now, not later when it will hurt more. "

I was struck dumb. Con loves me? What the fuck?

The revelation hit me like an avalanche, sudden and overwhelming. Con—my friend, my confidant, the person who had made this whole transition bearable—was in love with me? How had I missed it? And more importantly, how did I feel about it?

"I... I need to get back to work," I stammered, turning away from Cam's knowing smirk.

For the rest of my shift, I moved on autopilot, pouring drinks and making small talk while my mind raced.

Every interaction I'd had with Con over the past weeks played back in my head, now tinged with this new knowledge.

The way he always made time for me, how he'd taught me to ski again with endless patience, the hot chocolate waiting for me at the bottom of every run, the seat he always saved for me at the pub.

Had it been obvious to everyone but me? Was I really that blind?

By the time my shift ended, I was a mess of conflicting emotions.

Part of me was flattered—Con was kind, attractive, stable.

Everything I should want in a man. But another part of me was terrified.

I'd come here to find myself, not to jump into another relationship.

And what if Cam was wrong? What if this was just his way of messing with me?

I stepped out into the cold night air, pulling my jacket tighter around me. The sky was clear with stars scattered like diamonds across the darkness. I decided to take walk before heading to bed, needing the time to clear my head.

"Geri!"

I froze at the sound of Con's voice. Of course he would be here now, when I was least prepared to face him.

"Hey," I said, turning to see him jogging toward me, his breath visible in the cold air.

"How was your shift?" he asked, falling into step beside me. "Cam said he saw you at the bar."

My heart skipped. "Did he say anything else?"

Con gave me a curious look. "No, should he have?"

"No," I said quickly. "It was just a normal shift."

We walked in silence for a moment, the snow crunching beneath our boots. I stole glances at him, trying to see if what Cam had said was true. Did Con look at me differently than he looked at other people? Did his eyes linger a second too long? Did

his smile hold a secret meaning?

"You okay?" Con asked, breaking into my thoughts. "You seem... distracted."

"I got a text from Matt yesterday," I blurted out, immediately regretting bringing it up. But I needed to talk about something, anything other than what Cam had told me.

Con's expression darkened slightly. "What did he want?"

"To see me," I said with a shrug. "I haven't replied."

"Are you going to?"

I looked at Con, really looked at him. Was that concern in his eyes? Or something deeper?

"I don't know," I admitted. "Part of me is curious, but... I've been doing so well here. I don't want to go backward."

Con nodded, his expression unreadable in the dim light of the street lamps. "You deserve better than him, Geri."

"Do I?" I asked, the question slipping out before I could stop it.

He stopped walking and turned to face me. "Yes," he said firmly. "You deserve someone who sees how amazing you are. Someone who wouldn't dream of ghosting you or playing games with your heart. Someone who would choose you every single day."

My breath caught in my throat. The intensity in his eyes, the conviction in his voice—was this what Cam was talking about?

"Someone like you?" I whispered, the words hanging in the frosty air between us.

Con's eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, I thought I'd made a terrible mistake. But then his expression softened, and he reached out, his gloved hand gently brushing a strand of hair from my face.

"I would never hurt you, Geri," he said softly. "Not if I could help it."

It wasn't a declaration of love, but it wasn't a denial either. My heart pounded in my chest as we stood there, the moment stretching between us like a thread pulled taut.

"I should get back," I said finally, breaking the spell. "Early shift tomorrow."

Con nodded, dropping his hand. "I'll walk you."

We continued in silence, the tension between us palpable. When we reached my hotel, I turned to say goodnight, but the words died on my lips as I saw the look in his eyes—a mixture of hope and fear that mirrored my own conflicted feelings.

"Goodnight, Geri," he said, his voice low.

"Goodnight, Con," I replied, slipping inside before I could do something impulsive, like kiss him or run away.

Back in my room, I found Lily already asleep, her soft snores filling the small space. I changed into my pyjamas and climbed into bed, but sleep eluded me. My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

If Con did love me, what did that mean for our friendship? Could I risk losing that for something more? And did I even feel the same way? I cared for him deeply, trusted him more than almost anyone, enjoyed his company... but was that love?

And then there was Matt's text, sitting unanswered on my phone.

A part of me—a small, stubborn part that refused to learn its lesson—still wondered what could have been if things had been different.

If he hadn't ghosted me, if he hadn't had another girlfriend, if he had been the person I initially thought he was.

And Alex, whose texts were becoming less frequent but still arrived daily, a reminder of the passionate but ultimately shallow connection we'd shared.

Three men, three different types of relationships, three different versions of myself reflected back at me.

The girl who fell for the wrong guy and got her heart broken.

The woman who sought physical comfort and validation.

And now, potentially, someone new—someone who might be ready for something real, something lasting.

But was I ready? Had I found enough of myself here in the mountains to know what I truly wanted?

I stared at the ceiling, watching shadows play across it as clouds passed over the moon outside.

The revelation about Con's feelings had shaken me more than I wanted to admit.

It was one thing to come here and find myself, to build a life independent of romantic entanglements.

It was another thing entirely to discover that someone I genuinely cared about might want more from me than friendship.

The question wasn't just whether Con loved me, or whether I could love him back. The question was whether I was ready to risk my heart again, with anyone.

As I finally drifted toward sleep, one thought kept circling in my mind: What if Cam was wrong? What if this was all a misunderstanding, or worse, a deliberate attempt to create drama?

I needed to know the truth, but I was terrified of what that truth might be—and what it might mean for the fragile peace I'd found here in the mountains.

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Geri

The next few days passed with me doing what I did best: avoiding anything that might make me feel things.

I had messaged Matt back saying sure, I would love to visit, but I was away working the snow season. Was I going to visit him? Probably not, but I also had an issue with being attached to things I shouldn't be.

I had slid back into the easy friendship I had with Con.

I had three days off coming up, mostly because Louise and Jenny were coming for a ski trip.

They had a place in Lakeview for the three days with Nick, Alex's friend.

Louise had hit it off with Nick and they were now seeing each other.

Jenny had tagged along as the third wheel, so I had volunteered as tribute to be her date for the three days they were here.

Getting the three days off had been hard, but I had managed.

Con told me he would take one off too and come to ski down in Lakeview with us.

I was both happy and sad. I had sort of avoided him a little bit since that night, not fully, but I had been a little bit more aloof than I normally am.

Work had been busy as I had agreed to do double shifts so I could get ahead of time for the days off, and Cam hadn't spoken to me since that night in the bar.

Alex had messaged me saying he wished he had come with Louise and Nick, but he wasn't able to get off work, and I was severely glad.

My life was complicated enough. Honestly, I needed time away from all men before I did anything silly, but I was a sucker for punishment.

I knew I had an issue, but refused to address it.

"You look like death warmed over," Lily commented as I dragged myself into our room after my third double shift in a row.

"Thanks," I muttered, collapsing face-first onto my bed. Every muscle in my body ached, and my feet felt like they might actually fall off. "Just what a girl wants to hear."

"I'm serious," she said, setting aside the book she'd been reading. "You're working yourself into the ground. What are you running from?"

I turned my head just enough to glare at her with one eye. "I'm not running from anything. I'm running toward three days off."

Lily snorted. "Sure. And it has nothing to do with Con's brother telling you that Con's in love with you."

I sat up so fast my head spun. "How do you know about that?"

She gave me a pitying look. "Geri, everyone knows. Cam isn't exactly subtle, and he told like half the staff."

"Great," I groaned, flopping back down. "Just what I need—everyone thinking I'm some heartless bitch stringing Con along."

"Is that what you're doing?" Lily asked, her tone neutral.

"No!" I protested. "I didn't even know he felt that way until Cam told me. And I'm still not sure I believe it."

"Why not? Con's a great guy, and you two are practically joined at the hip."

"We're friends," I insisted. "Good friends."

"Mmhmm," Lily hummed, clearly unconvinced. "And that's why you've been avoiding him since Cam spilled the beans."

I sighed, rolling onto my back to stare at the ceiling. "I haven't been avoiding him. I've been working."

"You volunteered for those shifts, Geri. You could have spent that time with him."

She wasn't wrong, and we both knew it. I had been using work as an excuse to put some distance between Con and me while I figured out how I felt. The problem was, I still had no idea.

"It's complicated," I said finally.

"It always is," Lily agreed. "But sometimes, it's only complicated because we make it that way."

I didn't have a response to that, so I changed the subject. "My friends are coming tomorrow. We're going to Lakeview for a few days."

"I know," she said. "Con mentioned it. He seems excited."

Of course he did. And of course he was. Because despite my attempts to create some space, we were still friends, and he still cared about me. And I still cared about him. That was the problem.

"Yeah, it should be fun," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Louise and Jenny are great, and I haven't seen them in ages."

"And Con's going too?"

"For one day, yeah. He couldn't get more time off."

Lily nodded, a knowing smile playing at her lips. "Well, have fun. And maybe use the time to figure out what you actually want, instead of just running from what scares you."

I threw a pillow at her, which she caught with a laugh.

"I'm going to shower," I announced, grabbing my toiletry bag. "I smell like the restaurant."

"Can't argue with that," she teased.

Under the hot spray of the shower, I let my mind wander. What did I want? It was a question I'd been avoiding since Cam's revelation. Did I want Con? Did I want to risk our friendship for something more? Did I even believe what Cam had said?

And then there was Matt's text, and my noncommittal reply. Part of me still wondered about him, still felt that pull despite everything. And Alex, who was thankfully not coming on this trip, but who still messaged me daily as if we were in a relationship,

which we definitely weren't.

My love life was a mess, and I knew it. But addressing it meant facing feelings I wasn't ready to face, meant making decisions I wasn't ready to make.

So instead, I focused on the immediate future: three days in Lakeview with my friends, skiing, drinking, and hopefully not thinking too much about any of this.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, Lily was already asleep. I packed quietly for my trip, laying out clothes for the morning, and set my alarm. Despite my exhaustion, sleep was elusive, my mind racing with thoughts of Con, of the tangled web I'd somehow woven for myself.

When I finally drifted off, my dreams were a confused jumble of faces and feelings, leaving me restless and unrested when my alarm blared at 6 AM.

I dragged myself out of bed, dressed in the outfit I'd laid out—jeans, a warm sweater, and my heaviest boots—and grabbed my pre-packed bag. Lily stirred as I moved around the room.

"Have fun," she mumbled sleepily. "And talk to Con."

"Go back to sleep," I replied, ignoring her advice.

Outside, the morning was crisp and clear, the sun just beginning to peek over the mountains. I made my way to the meeting point we'd agreed on, a coffee shop in the center of town. Con was already there, nursing a large cup and looking annoyingly awake and cheerful.

"Morning, sunshine," he greeted me with a grin. "You look like you could use this."

He pushed a second cup toward me—coffee, milk and sugar, just how I liked it. The gesture was so thoughtful, so typically Con, that I felt a pang of guilt for avoiding him.

"You're a lifesaver," I said, taking a grateful sip.

"I know," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "Ready for three days of freedom?"

"God, yes," I sighed. "If I have to remake one more bed with hospital corners, I might actually commit murder."

Con laughed, the sound warming me more than the coffee. "Mrs. Harrington would be your first victim, I assume?"

"Without question," I confirmed, finding myself smiling despite my exhaustion and conflicted feelings.

This was why I valued our friendship so much—the easy banter, the way he could make me laugh even when I was determined to be in a bad mood. If what Cam said was true, if Con did have deeper feelings for me, would we lose this? Would everything become complicated and awkward?

"Earth to Geri," Con said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You still with me?"

"Sorry," I said, shaking off my thoughts. "Just tired. Three double shifts in a row was maybe not my best idea."

"You think?" he teased. "But hey, now you've got three days to recover. And I hear Lakeview is beautiful this time of year."

"You've never been?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Always meant to, but never got around to it. I'm glad I get to see it with you—I mean, with all of you."

The slight stumble in his words made my heart skip a beat. Was that a sign? Or was I just hyperaware now, looking for confirmation of Cam's claims?

Before I could overthink it further, the door to the coffee shop burst open, and Louise and Jenny tumbled in, bringing with them a wave of cold air and exuberant energy.

"Geri!" Louise squealed, throwing her arms around me. "God, I've missed you!"

"Me too," I said, hugging her back tightly. It was true—I had missed my friends, missed the uncomplicated relationships we had.

Jenny hugged me next, then both of them turned curious eyes to Con.

"And you must be the famous Con," Louise said, extending a hand. "Geri's told us so much about you."

Con raised an eyebrow at me as he shook her hand. "Has she now? All good things, I hope."

"The best," Jenny assured him with a wink in my direction that made me want to sink through the floor.

Great. Just what I needed—my friends playing matchmaker.

"Where's Nick?" I asked, desperate to change the subject.

"Waiting in the car," Louise replied. "We should get going if we want to make it to Lakeview before the morning rush."

We gathered our things and headed out to where a large SUV was idling at the curb. Nick was behind the wheel, waiting for us. After a round of introductions and some Tetris-like manoeuvring to fit all our bags in the trunk, we were on our way.

I ended up in the middle row between Jenny and Con, with Louise up front with Nick.

As we pulled away from Alpine Ridge and headed toward Lakeview, I felt a mix of relief and anxiety.

Relief to be away from the resort, from work, from the knowing looks of the staff who apparently all knew about Con's feelings.

Anxiety about what the next three days might bring, about being in close quarters with Con, about my friends' obvious attempts to push us together.

"So, Con," Louise called from the front seat, turning to face us. "Geri tells us you're quite the snowboarder."

Con shrugged modestly. "I'm alright. Been doing it since I was a kid."

"He's being humble," I said, surprising myself by jumping in. "He's amazing. Does all these jumps and tricks that make me nervous just watching."

Con looked at me, a soft smile playing at his lips. "And Geri's a natural on skis. Picked it right back up after years away."

"You two ski together a lot?" Jenny asked innocently, though I could hear the subtext in her question.

"When we can," Con replied. "Our schedules don't always line up, but we try to get

out there a few times a week."

"That's nice," Louise said, her tone suggestive. "Having someone to share your passions with."

I shot her a warning look, which she pretended not to see.

The conversation moved on to plans for our stay in Lakeview—which slopes we wanted to hit, where we'd eat, what we'd do in the evenings.

I let the chatter wash over me, contributing occasionally but mostly just enjoying the familiar dynamic of my friends and the beautiful scenery passing by outside.

Con's leg pressed against mine in the cramped backseat, a constant reminder of his presence. I didn't move away, telling myself it was because there was nowhere to go, but part of me knew that wasn't the whole truth.

As we wound our way down the mountain toward Lakeview, I found myself stealing glances at him—the strong line of his jaw, the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed at something Nick said, the casual confidence in his posture.

He was attractive, there was no denying that. And kind, and funny, and supportive.

So why was I so afraid to consider the possibility of something more between us?

The answer came unbidden, rising from the depths of my mind where I kept all the things I didn't want to think about: because everyone I've ever loved has hurt me.

Because trusting someone means giving them the power to destroy you.

Because I've been broken before, and I'm not sure I could survive being broken again.

I turned to look out the window, blinking back unexpected tears. The mountains blurred before me, their snow-capped peaks hazy through my watery vision.

"You okay?" Con asked quietly, his voice pitched low enough that only I could hear.

I nodded without looking at him, not trusting myself to speak.

He didn't push, didn't demand an explanation. He just reached over and squeezed my hand briefly, a gesture of support and understanding that made my heart ache in a way I couldn't quite define.

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Geri

Con gave me a hug and a kiss on the top of my head as he said, "I gotta get to the bus station to catch the bus back up the mountain to get back in time for the dinner run."

I was sad he was going and also a little relieved to just have some time away. These emotions of mine were starting to bother me a little bit.

There was no anonymous meeting out here that I could go to and pour my feelings out into, so I had to deal with them myself for the three months I was here, unless I headed down to the closest city which was two hours away on my day off and attended one.

But then I would have to tell Con where I was going, and that wasn't happening.

I smiled at him as he grabbed his board and waved at us all as he left, walking to the closest bus station to catch the shuttle that would take him back up the mountain to Alpine Ridge. Nick had offered to drive him many times, but he had shot them all down saying it's okay, he liked the bus.

I waved goodbye and walked into the resort that Louise had booked and into the room that we would all stay in like sardines. I collapsed on the closest bed as Louise said, "Let's go get dinner and drinks. I feel like dancing."

I looked at her like she was insane. My body was wrecked—three days of double shifts and now a whole day on the slopes. But I smiled and said, "Sure," and grabbed my bag and headed to the bathroom to change out of my ski gear and put on some

jeans, a shirt, and a jumper.

I wasn't a huge makeup-wearing person, but I did throw on some foundation and mascara, and we headed out to the local pub, where they had a local band currently jamming away. We ordered some food and drinks.

It was actually relaxing, and I was enjoying myself until Louise and Jenny jumped up to dance, and Nick leaned in saying, "So, you and Alex. What is happening there?"

I smiled at him because I knew this was gonna come sooner or later—they were, in fact, friends.

"What do you mean?" I asked innocently. "We are friends, are we not?"

Nick gave me a knowing look. "Sure, but Alex likes you, and you seem to like him?"

I smiled at Nick and said, "Honestly, Nick, you know as well as I do that Alex isn't looking for something serious.

If he had been, he would have cared when I said I was coming here for the season.

" I took a sip of my drink before continuing.

"I'm also not silly. I know he is talking to other girls.

I mean, seriously, the man is an Adonis, and his Tinder profile is still active. Trust me, I checked."

Nick laughed and said, "Well, the man has to keep his options open. You seem to keep your interactions more on the physical side than anything else."

I knew Nick was right, but I wasn't going to say that. The truth was, Alex had been a distraction, a way to forget Matt, a way to feel wanted without the risk of real emotional investment. But that wasn't something I was ready to admit, even to myself.

I just shrugged and said, "Honestly, I'm not looking for anything with anyone at the moment. I need to sort myself out before I run and jump into any relationships."

Nick then said, "So Con is in love with you too."

I shook my head and said, "Stop. Just stop. Con is my best friend, nothing more." I paused, swirling the ice in my drink. "And yes, I have been made aware of this new development, one I'm not sure how to deal with yet."

Nick leaned back in his chair, studying me. "You're lucky, you know. You have men to choose from. You're not having to settle for the only thing in front of you." He stated this as he looked at Louise dancing with Jenny.

"What, you're settling?" I asked, surprised.

"Not me, no," he said quickly.

I looked at Louise, her face flushed with exertion and joy as she danced.

"She isn't settling with you either, you know.

She has more men who chase her than pairs of shoes, and trust me, that's a lot.

" I laughed, then added more seriously, "She likes you.

Trust me, she wouldn't be with you if she didn't."

He smiled. "I hope so, 'cause I really like her."

The vulnerability in his voice caught me off-guard. Nick, who always seemed so confident and carefree, was worried about Louise's feelings for him. It made me wonder if everyone, no matter how put-together they seemed, had these same insecurities lurking beneath the surface.

"She talks about you all the time," I assured him. "It's actually kind of annoying."

That made him laugh, and the tension eased. We watched Louise and Jenny for a while, both lost in our own thoughts.

"Can I ask you something?" Nick said finally, his voice serious again.

"Sure," I replied, though I had a feeling I wasn't going to like whatever was coming.

"What are you so afraid of?"

The question hit me like a physical blow. What was I afraid of? Everything. Trusting someone. Being vulnerable. Getting hurt again. Losing control. The list was endless.

"I'm not afraid," I lied, not meeting his eyes.

"Bullshit," Nick said, but his tone was gentle. "You've got two great guys interested in you, and you're running from both of them. There's gotta be a reason."

I took a long drink, buying myself time. "It's complicated."

"It always is," he agreed. "But sometimes, the things we're most afraid of are the things we need the most."

I didn't have a response to that. Nick, apparently satisfied that he'd given me something to think about, changed the subject to safer territory—the band, the quality of the beer, plans for tomorrow's skiing.

But his words lingered in my mind, an uncomfortable truth I wasn't ready to face. What was I so afraid of? And was I letting that fear keep me from something—or someone—that could actually make me happy?

Louise and Jenny returned to the table, breathless and laughing, breaking into my thoughts.

"You two look serious," Louise commented, sliding back into her seat beside Nick. "What are we talking about?"

"Nothing important," I said quickly, forcing a smile. "Just catching up."

Louise looked sceptical but didn't push it. "Well, come dance with us next time. The band is actually pretty good."

"Maybe after another drink," I promised, though I had no intention of dancing. My body was too tired, and my mind was too full.

The conversation shifted to lighter topics, and I let myself be carried along with it, laughing at Jenny's stories about her latest dating disasters. But underneath it all, Nick's question echoed in my mind: What are you so afraid of?

As the night wore on, I found myself checking my phone more frequently.

No messages from Con, which was unusual.

He usually texted when he got back to places, just to let me know he'd made it safely.

I told myself I wasn't worried, that the bus ride was routine and he was probably just busy with his shift, but a small knot of anxiety formed in my stomach.

"Expecting a call?" Louise asked, catching me glancing at my phone for the third time in as many minutes.

"No," I said, putting it away. "Just checking the time."

She gave me a knowing look but didn't comment further.

By the time we left the pub, it was past midnight, and I was dead on my feet. The walk back to the resort was short but felt like miles in my exhausted state. The others were still energetic, talking and laughing, but I trailed slightly behind, lost in my own thoughts.

Back in our cramped room, I claimed the shower first, needing a moment of solitude.

Under the hot spray, I let my guard down, let the emotions I'd been holding at bay wash over me.

Confusion about Con, ambivalence about Alex, lingering hurt over Matt, and beneath it all, a deep-seated fear that Nick had somehow managed to identify in just one conversation.

What was I so afraid of?

The answer came to me unbidden, rising from the depths of my mind where I kept all the things I didn't want to think about: I was afraid of being Oleander again.

Afraid of being that broken, vulnerable girl who had trusted and been betrayed, who had loved and been hurt, who had opened herself up only to be shattered.

Geri was strong. Geri was independent. Geri didn't need anyone.

But Oleander... Oleander had needed someone, and look where that had gotten her.

I stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around myself, and wiped the steam from the mirror. The face that looked back at me was tired, the eyes holding a sadness I usually managed to hide.

"Get it together," I whispered to my reflection. "You're fine. You're always fine."

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, the others were getting ready for bed, arranging sleeping bags and pillows on the floor since the room only had two single beds. I claimed a spot near the window, away from the door, a habit from years of needing to know my escape routes.

As I settled into my sleeping bag, my phone finally buzzed with a message from Con:

Made it back. Hope you're having fun. Miss you.

Three simple sentences that shouldn't have made my heart race, but did. I stared at the screen, unsure how to respond. Before Cam's revelation, I would have replied without thinking, something casual and friendly. Now, every word seemed loaded with potential meaning.

In the end, I kept it simple:

Glad you're back safe. We're just turning in. See you in a couple days.

I hesitated over adding "miss you too" but decided against it. It felt too much like an

admission of something I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

As I drifted toward sleep, surrounded by the soft breathing and occasional snores of my friends, Nick's question followed me into my dreams: What are you so afraid of?

And in the vulnerable space between wakefulness and sleep, I allowed myself to consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, what I was most afraid of wasn't getting hurt again.

Maybe what I was most afraid of was missing out on something real because I was too scared to take the risk.

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Geri

The next two days passed with skiing, drinking, dancing, and just letting go. I allowed myself to get lost in what we were doing. I left my phone back at the hotel and just lived in the moment for two days. It was nice to not think, to not worry for once.

Maybe this is what I needed more—to just be alone, be with friends, and to be without any complications in my life.

But that was vacation life, that was just moment living, and even though we need to live in the moment to have happy memories, we also need to remember that life is long, and we need to prepare for the future.

No one ever told me how hard it was to be an adult, how hard it was to live with feelings and have to consider others along the way.

The days blurred together in a haze of snow and laughter.

We hit the slopes early each morning, skiing until our legs burned and our cheeks were numb from the cold.

Afternoons were spent in cozy bars, warming up with hot drinks that gradually gave way to cold beers and shots as the day progressed.

Evenings found us at the local pub, where the same band played each night, their familiar tunes becoming the soundtrack to our little escape from reality.

I didn't think about Con. I didn't think about Alex.

I didn't think about Matt. I didn't think about my job or my future or my past. I just existed, present in each moment as it came, letting the sensations wash over me—the bite of cold air in my lungs, the rush of speed as I carved down a slope, the burn of alcohol in my throat, the vibration of bass through the floorboards as we danced.

It was freeing in a way I hadn't experienced in years. Maybe ever.

"You seem different," Jenny commented on our second night, as we sat at the bar waiting for drinks. "Lighter somehow."

I shrugged, not wanting to analyse it too deeply. "Just having fun."

"No, it's more than that," she insisted. "You're always so... I don't know, guarded? But these past couple days, it's like you've let your walls down a bit."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Had I let my walls down? I didn't feel particularly vulnerable or exposed. If anything, I felt more in control than I had in weeks—precisely because I wasn't thinking about all the complicated emotions and relationships waiting for me back in Alpine Ridge.

"Maybe I'm just drunk," I deflected with a laugh.

Jenny rolled her eyes but let it drop, accepting our drinks from the bartender and leading the way back to our table.

But her words stayed with me, an uncomfortable observation I wasn't quite ready to examine. Was I really that guarded all the time? Did people notice? Did it make me seem cold or unapproachable?

I pushed the thoughts away, determined not to let them intrude on my brief vacation from reality. There would be time enough for self-reflection later.

And then, suddenly, it was our last day. I had left my bags in Nick's SUV while we hit the slopes one final time. The day was perfect—blue skies, fresh powder from an overnight snowfall, temperatures just cold enough to keep the snow pristine without freezing us solid.

I pushed myself harder than I had the previous days, tackling more challenging runs, seeking that rush of adrenaline that came with speed and risk. It was as if I was trying to store up enough sensation, enough living, to carry me through whatever waited back in Alpine Ridge.

By late afternoon, we were all exhausted but satisfied, that particular bone-deep weariness that comes from a day well spent in physical exertion. I changed out of my ski gear in the lodge bathrooms, and jumped back into Nick's SUV with damp hair and flushed cheeks.

"Ready?" Nick asked as I climbed into the passenger seat.

"As I'll ever be," I replied, settling in for the drive up the mountain.

Nick was going to drive me back up the mountain to Alpine Ridge because I had to get back for the morning shift the next day. They were leaving in the morning themselves, but no one wanted to get up at 4 AM to drive me back up the hill.

We took the drive in silence, like Nick knew I needed a moment to just breathe. I liked Nick; Nick was a sweet guy, and kind. Louise had snagged a good one there, and I was so happy for them.

It wasn't until the sign said "Welcome to Alpine Ridge" that Nick opened his mouth

and said, "Geri..."

I answered, "Yes?"

He said, "Can you do me a favour and just let Alex know that you guys are in the fuck buddy category? Because I think he might be wondering that question a little too hard."

I suddenly felt guilty, like I was in fact leading Alex along. "Yes, I think you're right."

Nick pulled up to the front of the hotel I worked at, and I climbed out, grabbed my bag and skis, and thanked him for taking me back up the hill. And though I thought, fuck it, seeing as we are just talking feelings, I said, "Nick... can you do me a favour?"

He said, "Sure."

I said, "Don't question yourself with Louise. She is a free spirit who loves to live moment to moment. Make sure you create a lot of moments for her; she will love that."

He smiled and said, "I can do that."

Then I closed the car door and headed inside. Tonight I would sleep; tomorrow I would plan.

The hotel was quiet when I entered, the evening shift well underway. A few guests milled about in the lobby, but none of the staff I knew well were on duty. I made my way to my room, hoping Lily would be there—I had missed her more than I expected during my three days away.

But the room was empty when I unlocked the door. Lily's bed was neatly made, her side of the room tidy as always. I dropped my bags on the floor and collapsed onto my own bed, the exhaustion of the past few days catching up to me all at once.

I should shower, I thought. I should unpack. I should check my phone for messages.

Instead, I lay there, staring at the ceiling, letting the silence envelop me after days of constant noise and activity. The quiet felt both welcome and oppressive, a reminder that I was back in my real life, with all its complications and uncertainties.

Nick's words echoed in my mind. Was I leading Alex on? We had never defined what we were to each other, had never had "the talk" about exclusivity or expectations. But maybe that was the problem—the lack of clarity left room for misinterpretation, for hope where there shouldn't be any.

I liked Alex. The sex was great, and he was fun to be around. But I didn't love him, didn't see a future with him. And if he was starting to want more, to expect more, then I owed it to him to be honest about where I stood.

With a sigh, I reached for my phone. It powered on slowly, and then notifications began flooding in—texts, emails, social media alerts. I ignored most of them, scrolling through my messages.

Several from Alex, of course, asking how my trip was going, telling me he missed me, sending a shirtless selfie from the gym that made me roll my eyes despite the flutter of appreciation for his admittedly impressive physique.

A few from James, checking in and sharing gossip from back home.

And one from Con, sent just that morning:

Hope you're having a great time. Can't wait to hear all about it when you get back.

Simple, friendly, no pressure. Yet it made my heart beat a little faster in a way Alex's more explicit messages didn't.

I set the phone aside without replying to any of them. I was too tired, too emotionally drained to navigate those waters tonight. Tomorrow, I would face it all—work, Alex, Con, the future. Tonight, I just needed to rest.

As I drifted toward sleep, still fully clothed on top of my covers, I found myself thinking about what Jenny had said—that I seemed lighter, less guarded during our trip. Was that who I could be, if I wasn't constantly on alert, constantly protecting myself from potential hurt?

And if so, was there a way to carry that version of myself back into my real life? Or was she only possible in those brief escapes from reality, those moments out of time where nothing really mattered because nothing was really at stake?

The questions followed me into my dreams, unanswered but insistent, like a melody I couldn't quite place but couldn't stop humming either.

Tomorrow, I would plan. Tomorrow, I would figure it all out.

But as I slipped deeper into sleep, a small voice in the back of my mind whispered that maybe, just maybe, not everything could be planned. Maybe some things—the most important things—had to be felt, experienced, risked.

Maybe that was the hardest part of being an adult that no one had warned me about: knowing when to plan and when to simply leap.

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Geri

After I had finished my shift, I went and changed.

I had two hours until I was needed in the restaurant for a shift, but on my way to my room, I ran into Mrs. Harrington, who told me I wasn't needed in the restaurant tonight.

She wanted me in the bar—a birthday was booked down there, and it was going to be busy, so I now had four hours of free time but would be working until well after midnight.

I just smiled and agreed because I was a chicken shit who did what scary bosses told them.

I went back to my room and finally messaged Alex back. I started with a simple:”

Hey

and received a

Hey

back instantly. Then my phone rang, Alex's name on the screen. I pulled on my big girl pants, said "fuck it," and answered the call.

It was a nice call at first—all sweet hellos, missed you's, etc.—until I finally bit the

bullet and said, "Hey, I think we need to talk."

Alex groaned and said, "I knew this was coming."

"What?" I asked, confused by his reaction.

"I knew you would put a label on this," he said, sounding resigned.

I smiled and said, "Sorry. I mean, it's time, right?"

"Yes, it's time," Alex agreed. "I mean, I had hoped we could just keep going the way it is. I like it this way."

"I do too," I admitted, "but I don't want to get your hopes up for more."

He sighed and said, "I know, I know. I had guessed it from the start, and I don't want to lose this. Can we keep messaging? I love having someone to talk to daily. I like the feeling of having a girlfriend without actually having one."

I laughed because I could relate to that. It was nice to have someone there without actually having the fear of losing it.

"Sure," I said, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. "Just make sure if you ever meet a woman, you tell me so I can change my texts from 'fuck buddies' to 'friends.'"

He laughed and said, "I want the same, okay?"

"But I will want dick pics. They make me smile," I added, grinning to myself.

My phone instantly pinged with a fresh dick pic of Alex, which again made me laugh.

"Did you have that one at the ready?" I asked, amused.

"Sure did," he replied. "I had pulled this afternoon thinking of your pussy, so I thought I would snap it to send to you."

I laughed again because damn, he had a good-looking dick, and I told him so.

Then he asked if I wanted to fool around on the phone. I looked at the time and groaned.

"I can't," I said reluctantly. "I've got a shift soon, and I want to grab some food beforehand. I've not eaten today."

Alex laughed and said, "No James to feed you daily there?"

I sighed and said, "No. You have no idea how much I relied on him feeding me."

The call ended shortly after, with promises to keep in touch and no hard feelings on either side.

I tossed my phone onto the bed and flopped down beside it, a smile playing at my lips.

That had gone so much better than I'd expected.

No drama, no hurt feelings, just two adults agreeing on what they wanted—and didn't want—from each other.

Relief washed over me in waves. One complicated relationship simplified. One source of anxiety neutralized. One less thing to worry about.

I lay there for a moment, savouring the feeling. It was nice to have something in my life feel uncomplicated for once. Alex and I understood each other. We wanted the same things. We were honest about our expectations. Why couldn't all relationships be this straightforward?

My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since the night before. I needed food, and with four hours to kill before my shift, I had time to actually sit down and enjoy a meal rather than scarfing something down between duties.

I changed into jeans and a comfortable sweater, grabbed my wallet and phone, and headed out.

The day was clear and cold, the sun bright in a cloudless sky.

The snow sparkled like diamonds, and the air was so crisp it almost hurt to breathe.

I filled my lungs anyway, enjoying the clean, sharp sensation.

Alpine Ridge had a small but decent selection of cafés and restaurants catering to the tourists.

I chose a cozy café I'd been meaning to try, one that advertised "The Best Hot Chocolate in the Mountains" in its window.

After the morning's housekeeping shift and the emotional relief of my conversation with Alex, I felt like I deserved a treat.

The café was warm and inviting, with wooden tables, soft lighting, and the rich aroma of coffee and chocolate in the air. I found a small table by the window and settled in, ordering a hot chocolate and a hearty sandwich when the server came by.

As I waited for my food, I people-watched through the window.

Tourists in brightly coloured ski gear trudged by, some looking exhilarated from a day on the slopes, others looking exhausted.

Locals moved with more purpose, familiar with the terrain and the cold, dressed practically rather than fashionably.

My hot chocolate arrived, topped with whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon.

I took a sip and nearly moaned aloud—it was rich and velvety, not too sweet, with a hint of something that might have been chilli or cardamom.

The café's claim wasn't an exaggeration; it might indeed be the best hot chocolate in the mountains.

I was halfway through my drink when the door opened, bringing with it a blast of cold air and a familiar figure.

Con.

He spotted me immediately, his face lighting up with a smile that made my stomach do a little flip. He said something to the server, then made his way over to my table.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, gesturing to the empty chair across from me.

"Not at all," I replied, surprised by how genuinely pleased I was to see him. "I thought you'd be working."

"Day off," he explained, shrugging out of his jacket and hanging it on the back of his chair. "I was going to text you later, see if you wanted to grab dinner or something."

How was the rest of your trip?"

"Good," I said, smiling at the memory. "Really good, actually. I needed that break more than I realized."

"You look... different," Con observed, studying my face. "Relaxed, maybe?"

I laughed, reminded of Jenny's similar comment. "That's what Jenny said too. Apparently, I'm normally a tense mess."

"I wouldn't say that," Con protested with a grin. "Just... guarded, sometimes."

There was that word again. Guarded. Was I really so transparent in my defences?

"Well, three days of skiing and drinking will loosen anyone up," I deflected, taking another sip of my hot chocolate.

Con ordered a coffee when the server returned with my sandwich, and we fell into easy conversation.

He told me about his shifts while I was gone, about a particularly demanding guest who had complained about everything from the temperature of the room to the firmness of the pillows.

I told him about the perfect conditions at Lakeview, about Louise and Nick's obvious infatuation with each other, about the band at the pub that played the same set list every night.

It was so easy, talking to Con. There was none of the tension or uncertainty I'd felt before leaving for Lakeview. Maybe it was the lingering effect of my mini-vacation, or maybe it was the relief of having sorted things out with Alex, but I felt lighter,

more open.

"So," Con said, stirring his coffee with a thoughtful expression, "I met someone while you were gone."

My stomach dropped instantly, the warm contentment I'd been feeling suddenly replaced by a cold, hollow sensation. I forced my face to remain neutral, though I could feel my fingers tightening around my mug.

"Oh?" I managed, trying to sound casual. "That's... nice."

Con nodded, seemingly oblivious to my reaction. "Yeah, I arranged a date with one of the workers here. She's really nice and super pretty."

Each word felt like a tiny needle piercing my skin. I took a bite of my sandwich to buy time, but it tasted like cardboard in my suddenly dry mouth.

"I'm going out tonight with her," he continued. "Her name's Hilary."

I knew exactly who he was talking about. Hilary was a blonde, tall woman with blue eyes and legs for days. She worked at the front desk and was, indeed, super nice. Nicer than me, certainly. Everyone liked Hilary.

"That's great," I said, the words feeling mechanical. "She seems... lovely."

"She is," Con agreed, his eyes lighting up in a way that made my chest ache. "We've been talking a lot during shifts, and I finally got the courage to ask her out."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The jealousy that surged through me was as unexpected as it was powerful.

I had no right to feel this way. Con was my friend.

I'd been actively avoiding any deeper connection with him.

I'd just clarified things with Alex. I was supposed to be feeling relieved, uncomplicated.

Instead, I felt like someone had pulled the rug out from under me.

"You okay?" Con asked, finally noticing my discomfort. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing a smile. "Just tired. Long day."

He nodded, accepting my explanation. "Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. Since we're friends and all."

Friends. Right. That's what we were. Friends who skied together, ate together, talked for hours. Friends who made each other laugh, who understood each other's moods, who had inside jokes and shared secrets.

Just friends.

"Of course," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "I hope you have a great time."

Con smiled, and for a moment, I thought I saw something flicker in his eyes—uncertainty, maybe, or disappointment. But it was gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

"Thanks," he said. "So, what are your plans for your free hours before your shift?"

I was grateful for the change of subject, for the chance to talk about

something—anything—other than Con's date with perfect Hilary.

"Nothing exciting," I replied, trying to recapture the easy tone of our earlier conversation. "Probably just relax, maybe take a nap before the chaos of the bar shift."

We finished our drinks, the conversation flowing less easily now, at least on my part. Con paid for both our orders despite my protests, saying it was his treat.

As we stepped outside into the cold afternoon air, Con turned to me. "I should let you get some rest before your shift. But I'm glad I ran into you."

"Me too," I said, and despite everything, I meant it.

We parted ways at the corner, Con heading toward the centre of town, me back toward the hotel. As I walked, I tried to make sense of the emotions churning inside me. Why did I care so much that Con was going on a date? Wasn't this what I wanted—for things to stay uncomplicated between us?

But the hollow feeling in my chest told a different story. A story I wasn't ready to read.

Back in my room, I collapsed onto my bed, staring at the ceiling. The relief I'd felt after my conversation with Alex had evaporated, replaced by a confusing mix of jealousy, regret, and self-recrimination.

I closed my eyes, trying to quiet my racing thoughts. I needed to get it together before my shift. I couldn't spend the night serving drinks while dwelling on Con and Hilary and what they might be doing on their date.

But as I drifted into an uneasy nap, one thought kept circling in my mind: maybe I

wasn't as ready for uncomplicated as I thought I was.

Geri

The bar shift started like it always did—the owner's son poured us all a round of shots to lighten the mood, and off we went, pouring drinks and handing out orders, picking up glasses and running them through the glass cleaner.

I had no rights to him and I hadn't ever thought of him in any manner other than friends, so why was I now jealous? Was it because he moved on? I was a sucker for punishment and only liked men who didn't like me.

It was then that Con's brother Cam sidled up to the bar as the room started to cheer "Happy Birthday" and toast to the birthday person.

"Thank you for letting my brother move on," he said. "I didn't think you had it in you to allow him the chance to be happy."

I frowned at him. "What do you mean now, Cam?"

"He actually likes Hilary and deserves someone who will actually love him back, you know."

I was mad, and I had enough of his meanness, and I blurted back, "I do love him, you know."

And I did love him. No one had been there for me like he had been. No one sat there and listened to me ramble on and on for hours about crap just for the fun of it, but he did. I appreciated my friendship with Con. I loved having him around. I craved his

face and his laughter all the time.

Cam said to me, "No, you don't, because if you did, you would be at the restaurant right now making sure he knew that."

And he was right, you know. I would be, if I loved him.

I looked at the owner's son and said, "I need a break," and pulled my apron off, and I ran.

I ran in the snow to the restaurant. There was only one in town open at this hour, one that wasn't in my hotel or in Con's, and I ran in the front door and spotted him at dinner with Hilary.

She was leaning in toward him, smiling; his head was thrown back in laughter.

They looked good together. They looked happy. And they both deserved to be that way.

But my feet carried me forward on their own accord. It was then Con's eyes flicked to me as he said, "You OK?"

No, I wasn't OK, but I didn't say anything at all.

I just kept walking to him. He quickly stood from his seat as he opened his arms, and I stepped into them, my face buried into his front as I felt tears run down my face.

Tears that came without my permission. I never showed emotions.

I never showed anyone what was underneath, but here I was, crying in the restaurant while his date sat there confused.

He pulled me away and placed one hand on each of my cheeks and said, "Are you OK? What happened?"

I sniffled and looked him dead in those green eyes and said, "I was jealous."

He beamed at me and said, "There's no need to be," then kissed my forehead and said, "Go back to work, Geri. I'm sure your boss is about to kill you if you don't go back."

He was right, of course. I had run out of there like a cat with its tail on fire.

I nodded and turned and left the restaurant and headed back to work, wiping myself, trying to hide what I knew would be mascara runs down my face. As I came back up to the bar door, Cam stood there with his arms crossed and smirked at me as he said, "You break his heart, and I'll break your face."

Smug bastard. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I pushed past him and back into the bar, where the birthday celebration was in full swing. The owner's son—Mike—gave me a questioning look, but I just shook my head and tied my apron back on. I wasn't about to explain my emotional meltdown to my boss.

For the next hour, I moved on autopilot, pouring drinks, making small talk, collecting empties.

My mind was elsewhere, replaying those moments in the restaurant over and over.

The look on Con's face when he saw me. The warmth of his arms around me.

The way he'd said "There's no need to be jealous" with such certainty.

What did that mean? Was he just being kind? Or was there something more to it?

And what about Hilary? I'd left her sitting there, probably confused and hurt. I wasn't normally the type to interfere with someone else's date. That wasn't me. I didn't do dramatic scenes or emotional outbursts.

Except, apparently, I did now.

Around 10 PM, the bar door opened, and my heart skipped when I saw Con walk in. Alone. He scanned the room until his eyes found mine, and then he made his way to the bar, weaving through the crowd of birthday revellers.

"Hey," he said, sliding onto a stool.

"Hey," I replied, suddenly shy. "Um, can I get you something?"

"Just water for now," he said.

I filled a glass and placed it in front of him, very aware of Mike watching us from the other end of the bar.

"Where's Hilary?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"I walked her to her room," Con said simply.

"Oh." I busied myself wiping down the already clean counter. "I'm sorry about earlier. I don't know what came over me."

"I think you do," Con said, his voice gentle but firm.

I looked up, meeting his eyes. There was something there—warmth, understanding,

and something else I couldn't quite name.

"I meant what I said," I admitted quietly. "I was jealous. I didn't realize until I saw you with her that I... that I care about you. More than I've let myself admit."

Con's smile was slow and sweet. "I know."

"You know?"

"Geri, I've been waiting for you to figure it out for months."

I stared at him, processing his words. "But... you asked Hilary out."

He had the grace to look a bit sheepish. "I did. And she's great. But..."

"But what?"

"But she's not you."

The simple statement hit me with unexpected force. A warmth spread through my chest, a feeling so foreign and yet so welcome that I almost didn't recognize it as happiness.

"What about your date?" I asked.

"We had a nice dinner, and I explained that there was someone else I couldn't get out of my head. She was very understanding."

"I bet," I muttered, thinking of how nice Hilary was. It was hard to even dislike her properly.

Con laughed. "Are you still jealous?"

"Maybe a little," I admitted.

"Don't be," he said, reaching across the bar to take my hand. "There's only one person I want to be with, and she just ran through the snow in her work clothes to tell me she was jealous."

I felt my cheeks heat. "That was... not my finest moment."

"I disagree. I thought it was pretty spectacular."

Mike cleared his throat loudly from nearby, reminding me I was still on the clock. "I should get back to work," I said reluctantly.

"What time do you finish?" Con asked.

"Midnight."

"I'll wait."

"You don't have to?—"

"I want to," he interrupted. "We have a lot to talk about, don't you think?"

I nodded, a smile tugging at my lips. "Yeah, I guess we do."

Con moved to a table in the corner, nursing his water and occasionally catching my eye across the room. Each time our gazes met, I felt that same warm flutter in my chest. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

The rest of my shift passed in a blur. I was hyperaware of Con's presence, of the conversation waiting for us, of the possibilities suddenly opening up before me.

For once, the prospect of vulnerability didn't fill me with dread.

Instead, I felt something like anticipation, like standing at the top of a ski run—nervous but eager for the rush that would follow.

At midnight, I hung up my apron and collected my tips. Con was waiting by the door, his jacket already on.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, suddenly shy again. We stepped out into the cold night air, the snow crunching beneath our boots. Con reached for my hand, his fingers warm against mine despite the chill.

"So," he said as we walked slowly through the quiet streets, "you love me, huh?"

I groaned, burying my face in my free hand. "Cam told you that?"

"He might have mentioned it," Con admitted, his tone teasing. "Right after he threatened to break your face if you broke my heart."

"Your brother is..."

"A pain in the ass? Yeah, I know. But he means well."

We walked in silence for a moment, our breath forming clouds in the cold air.

"I do, you know," I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper. "Love you, I mean."

I think I have for a while. I just thought it was friendly."

Con stopped walking, turning to face me. His eyes were serious now, searching mine. "Friendly, ha. Is that why you looked so scared tonight?"

I shrugged, looking down at our joined hands. "Yes. Because everyone I've ever loved has hurt me or left me or both. Because you're my friend, and I didn't want to lose that."

"You won't lose me," Con said, his voice firm. "And I won't hurt you. Not if I can help it."

"You can't promise that," I said, the old fear creeping back in.

"No, I can't," he agreed. "But I can promise to try. To be honest with you. To talk things through instead of running away. To be there for you, the way I have been, but more."

I looked up at him, at his earnest expression, at the way the moonlight caught in his hair and made his eyes shine. And I felt it again—that unfamiliar warmth, that lightness in my chest.

Happiness. That's what it was. Pure, simple happiness.

"I'd like that," I said softly.

Con smiled, and then he was leaning in, his lips finding mine in a kiss that was gentle at first, then deeper, more urgent. I melted into him, my arms winding around his neck, his hands at my waist pulling me closer.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard, our foreheads pressed

together.

"I've been wanting to do that for a very long time," Con murmured.

"Me too," I admitted. "I just didn't know it."

He laughed, the sound warm and rich in the quiet night. "Better late than never."

We continued walking, hand in hand, talking about everything and nothing. About when he first realized he had feelings for me. About my confusion and denial. About Cam's not-so-subtle attempts to push us together.

"He's been insufferable," Con said, rolling his eyes. "Telling me I should just move on, then turning around and telling me to be patient. I think he was getting tired of watching me pine."

"Is that what you were doing? Pining?" I teased.

"Pathetically," Con confirmed with a grin. "Ask anyone."

We reached the staff entrance to the hotel, pausing outside the entrance. I wasn't ready for the night to end, for this bubble of happiness to burst.

"Do you want to come up?" I asked impulsively. "Lily's staying at Lakeview tonight."

Con's eyes darkened, but he shook his head. "Not tonight."

I tried not to let my disappointment show. "Oh. Okay."

"Hey," he said, tilting my chin up so I had to meet his gaze. "It's not that I don't want to. Believe me, I do. But I've waited this long for you. I can wait a little longer to do

this right."

Relief and something like gratitude washed over me. He understood, without me having to explain, that I needed time. That this—us—was too important to rush.

"Tomorrow?" I suggested. "Dinner? A proper date this time?"

Con's smile was radiant. "I'd like that."

He kissed me again, slower this time, a promise of things to come. When we parted, I felt light-headed, giddy with a happiness I hadn't felt in years, maybe ever.

"Goodnight, Geri," he whispered against my lips.

"Goodnight, Con."

I watched him walk away, turning once to wave before disappearing around a corner. Then I headed inside, my steps lighter than they had been in months.

Geri

How had I missed this? How had I missed the fact that he had been looking at me like this the whole time?

I had to admit doubt had started to creep in. That old "shit, what have you done" in the back of my mind. What if this didn't work out? I would lose him as my friend, and I cherished that.

I knew he would never know the real me—Oleander, the me who I keep hidden—but maybe he didn't need to know her. Maybe he only needed to know me now. I could leave the past where it belonged and just be who I was today.

We had skied all morning, until it was 2 PM, then headed back to our hotels.

Con had carried my skis the whole way, showing off those muscular arms of his, which again, I never truly noticed.

I mean, sure, I knew the guy was good looking, but when you stopped and looked, you saw the things I had been overlooking.

The green of his eyes was like a forest in summer, bright and open.

He was quite pale-skinned and blushed pink easily.

He always had a five o'clock shadow, like he was too lazy to shave daily but remembered every 2-3 days.

His hair was always styled, always, and he always smelled like cinnamon and food, like that lingering smell of the kitchens just stuck to him.

He was always in shorts or jeans and a t-shirt.

Even when we went up for slopes, he would wear baggy ski pants and a t-shirt that was just a little too tight, showing off that broad chest and muscular arms and abs that led down to the V that disappeared under his pants.

How did I know this? Easy—he always wiped the sweat off his face after runs on the snow with the bottom of his top, leaving all that creamy skin on display.

It was just now that I was really taking it in, enjoying the view as they say.

He told me he booked dinner at his hotel for us and laughed, saying his brother would have to cook our dinner, like it was an inside joke. I wasn't sure what it meant, but hey, if it was funny to him, then I would laugh along too.

Con's brother Cam was also a chef, and they both worked at the same restaurant.

Cam was head chef and Con sous chef, which means Cam was Con's boss in the kitchen, a relationship I wouldn't be able to muster with my own brother and I.

We didn't get along at all; in fact, I hadn't heard a word from him in over 8 months now.

He lived overseas with my mom. She I heard from—she called me weekly just to check in.

It was never long, just a simple "Hey, you alive?"

Good," and "I hope you have a good week.

" My father called once a month to check in, again the same conversation: "You alive?

Good. Bye." I liked it this way. I'm sure they would have been closer if I had allowed it, but we all knew that wasn't me.

Emotionally closed off was my thing, and I liked it that way.

We arrived for dinner at 7 PM. The restaurant at Con's hotel was more upscale than I expected, with white tablecloths and candles on each table.

The hostess greeted Con by name and led us to a corner table with a view of the mountains.

It was the kind of spot you'd reserve for a special occasion, and the thought that he'd gone to the trouble made a warm feeling spread through my chest.

"You clean up nice," Con said as we sat down, his eyes taking in my outfit—a simple black dress I'd borrowed from Lily, paired with the only heels I'd brought to Alpine Ridge.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I replied, and it was true. He'd traded his usual casual wear for dark jeans and a button-down shirt that brought out the green in his eyes. His hair was styled as always, but with a bit more care than usual.

A waiter appeared with menus and a wine list, but Con waved them away. "We've got something special arranged," he told me with a smile that held a hint of mischief.

"Should I be worried?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Depends. How do you feel about surprises?"

"Generally suspicious," I admitted, which made him laugh.

"Fair enough. But I think you'll like this one."

Before I could press him further, the waiter returned with two glasses of champagne.

"Compliments of the chef," he said with a knowing smile at Con.

I took a sip, the bubbles tickling my nose. "Cam's doing this, isn't he?"

Con nodded, looking both amused and slightly embarrassed. "He insisted. Said something about making sure our first official date was 'worthy of the effort it took to get here.'"

I snorted. "Your brother has a weird way of being supportive."

"Tell me about it. But he means well."

"I know." I reached across the table and took his hand, a gesture that felt both new and somehow familiar. "It's nice, actually. That he cares so much."

Con's thumb traced circles on the back of my hand, sending little shivers up my arm. "He likes you, you know. Even when he was giving you a hard time, he was just looking out for me."

"I get it. If I had a brother who wasn't a complete ass, I'd probably be the same way."

Con's expression turned curious. "You don't talk about your family much."

I shrugged, taking another sip of champagne. "Not much to tell. Mom's in England with my brother. Dad's in Seabreeze Haven. We're not close."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's fine. It's just how it is."

Con seemed to sense my discomfort and changed the subject. "So, how are your legs feeling after all that skiing?"

"Like jelly," I admitted with a laugh. "I'm going to be so sore tomorrow."

"Worth it though, right?"

I thought about the morning—the crisp air, the rush of speed, the way Con had whooped with joy as he carved down a particularly challenging run. The way he'd waited for me at the bottom, his face lit up with a smile that made my heart skip.

"Definitely worth it," I said softly.

The first course arrived then—a delicate seafood appetizer that wasn't on the regular menu.

It was followed by a parade of dishes, each more impressive than the last, all specially prepared by Cam.

By the time dessert arrived—a decadent chocolate creation that made me groan with pleasure—I was full and slightly tipsy from the wine that had accompanied each course.

"Your brother is showing off," I said, scraping the last bit of chocolate from my plate.

"He is," Con agreed. "But admit it, you're impressed."

"Thoroughly," I conceded. "I might have to be nice to him from now on."

Con laughed. "Don't do that. He'll think something's wrong."

After dinner, we decided to take a walk despite the cold. The night was clear with stars scattered across the sky like diamonds on black velvet. Con held my hand as we strolled through the quiet streets of Alpine Ridge, our breath forming clouds in the frigid air.

"I keep waiting for this to feel weird," I admitted after a while.

"And does it?"

I thought about it, about the way his hand felt in mine, about the easy conversation over dinner, about the way he looked at me now—like I was something precious.

"No," I said, surprised by the realization. "It feels... right."

Con stopped walking and turned to face me, his expression serious in the moonlight. "It does, doesn't it?"

And then he was kissing me, his lips warm despite the cold air, his hands gentle on my face. I melted into him, all the tension and doubt I'd been carrying dissolving like snow in sunshine.

When we broke apart, I was breathless and giddy, like I'd had too much champagne. But this intoxication had nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with the man standing before me, his eyes reflecting the starlight.

"I've wanted to do that all day," Con murmured, his forehead resting against mine.

"What stopped you?" I teased.

"I was trying to be a gentleman. Take things slow."

I laughed softly. "Since when have I ever done anything slow?"

His answering smile was wicked. "Is that an invitation?"

Heat pooled in my belly at his tone. "Maybe."

We made it back to my hotel in record time, barely keeping our hands off each other. As soon as the door to my room closed behind us, Con had me pressed against it, his mouth hungry on mine, his hands exploring with a confidence that made me gasp.

"Lily?" he asked between kisses, his voice rough.

"Night shift," I managed to reply, already tugging at his shirt buttons.

"Good."

What followed was far from a blur. Every moment etched itself into my memory with crystal clarity.

Con's hands moved to the zipper of my dress, but instead of pulling it down immediately, his fingers traced the line of my spine, sending shivers across my skin.

"May I?" he asked, his voice low and reverent.

I nodded, suddenly shy despite my earlier boldness. The sound of the zipper sliding

down seemed impossibly loud in the quiet room. Con eased the fabric off my shoulders, letting it fall to my waist before his hands returned to my newly exposed skin.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, pressing his lips to the curve where my neck met my shoulder.

I closed my eyes as his mouth travelled along my collarbone, his hands sliding the dress down over my hips until it pooled at my feet. Standing before him in just my black lace bra and matching underwear, I felt both vulnerable and powerful as his eyes darkened with desire.

"Your turn," I said, reaching for his shirt buttons again.

Con caught my hands. "Not yet. I've been dreaming about this for too long to rush."

He guided me backward toward the bed, his lips never leaving mine. When my legs hit the mattress, he lowered me gently onto it, following me down but supporting his weight on his forearms.

"I want to see all of you," he murmured against my lips. "I want to taste every inch."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

His words sent heat flooding through me, settling low in my belly and between my thighs.

I arched up as his mouth travelled down my neck to the swell of my breasts above my bra.

His fingers slipped beneath me, finding the clasp with practiced ease, and then the lace was gone and his warm palms were cupping me.

"Perfect," he breathed, before taking one nipple into his mouth.

I gasped, my back arching off the bed as pleasure shot through me. His tongue circled the sensitive peak before he sucked gently, then more firmly as my reactions told him what I liked. His hand attended to my other breast, thumb brushing across the nipple in rhythm with his mouth.

When he switched sides, I threaded my fingers through his hair, holding him to me. The dual sensation of his hot mouth and the cool air on my wet skin had me squirming beneath him.

Con took his time, lavishing attention on my breasts until I was panting and restless. Only then did his mouth begin to travel lower, pressing open-mouthed kisses down my ribcage, across my stomach, lingering at the sensitive spot just below my navel.

His hands slid down my sides to my hips, fingers hooking into the waistband of my underwear. He looked up at me, a question in his eyes.

"Yes," I whispered, lifting my hips to help him.

He slid the lace down my legs with agonizing slowness, his lips following the path of the fabric, kissing down one thigh and then up the other. By the time he tossed my underwear aside, I was trembling with anticipation.

Con settled between my legs, his broad shoulders gently pushing my thighs wider. The first touch of his mouth against my core made me cry out, my hands fisting in the sheets.

"You taste even better than I imagined," he murmured against me, the vibration of his words adding to the sensation.

His tongue explored me with the same thoroughness he'd shown the rest of my body, learning what made me gasp, what made me moan, what made my thighs tighten around his head. When he found the perfect spot, he focused there, alternating between firm strokes and gentle circles.

I felt myself climbing higher, the tension building with each pass of his tongue.

When he slid one finger inside me, then two, curling them forward to hit exactly the right spot while his mouth continued its relentless attention, I shattered.

Waves of pleasure crashed over me as I called out his name, my body arching off the bed.

Con stayed with me through every aftershock, gentling his touch but not stopping until I tugged weakly at his hair, oversensitive and boneless.

He kissed his way back up my body, taking his time, letting me recover. When he reached my mouth, I could taste myself on his lips, and it rekindled the fire inside me.

"Your turn," I said again, reaching for his shirt.

This time he let me, sitting back on his heels as I unbuttoned it and pushed it off his shoulders. My hands explored the broad expanse of his chest, the defined muscles of his abdomen, the trail of hair that disappeared into his jeans.

I fumbled with his belt, suddenly impatient, and Con laughed softly, helping me. Together we rid him of his remaining clothes until he was gloriously naked above me.

"Condom?" he asked, his voice strained with the effort of control.

I gestured toward the nightstand. "Top drawer."

He reached over, found what he needed, and rolled it on with practiced efficiency. Then he was settling between my thighs again, his weight supported on his forearms, his eyes locked on mine.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and the tenderness in his voice made my heart squeeze.

In answer, I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him closer until I could feel him pressing against my entrance.

Con kissed me deeply as he pushed forward, entering me with exquisite slowness. I gasped against his mouth as he filled me, the stretch and fullness overwhelming in the best way.

When he was fully seated, he paused, his forehead resting against mine, our breath mingling. "Okay?" he whispered.

"More than okay," I assured him, rolling my hips to urge him on.

He began to move, setting a languid pace that built the pleasure gradually. Each thrust was deliberate, his eyes never leaving mine, his mouth returning to mine again and again for deep, consuming kisses.

I ran my hands down his back, feeling the muscles flex and release with each movement. His skin was hot beneath my palms, a fine sheen of sweat making it slick.

"You feel incredible," Con murmured against my neck, his voice rough with restraint. "So perfect."

His words, combined with the steady rhythm of his hips and the way he was hitting just the right spot inside me, had me climbing toward another peak. I wrapped my legs tighter around him, changing the angle slightly, and gasped as the pleasure intensified.

Con sensed the change, one hand sliding between us to where we were joined, his thumb finding the bundle of nerves that would send me over the edge again. The dual stimulation was too much, and I came with a cry, my inner muscles clenching around him.

My release triggered his own. Con's rhythm faltered, his thrusts becoming deeper, more urgent, before he stilled deep inside me with a groan, his face buried in my neck.

For several long moments, we lay tangled together, our hearts racing in tandem, our breathing gradually slowing. Con's weight was heavy on me, but I didn't want him to move, not yet. I wanted to hold onto this moment, this connection, for as long as possible.

Eventually, he shifted to the side, disposing of the condom before pulling me against his chest. His fingers traced lazy patterns on my back as I nestled my head in the

crook of his shoulder, feeling utterly content.

And afterward, as we lay tangled in the sheets, my head on his chest and his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my back, I felt a peace I hadn't known in years. Maybe ever.

"You're quiet," Con said softly. "Having regrets?"

I propped myself up on an elbow to look at him, surprised by the hint of vulnerability in his question. "None," I assured him. "Just... processing."

"Processing what?"

I struggled to put it into words, this unfamiliar feeling of contentment, of rightness.

"I'm not used to things working out," I said finally. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Con's expression softened. He reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch gentle. "Not everything has to end badly, Geri."

"I know that. Logically, I know that. But..."

"But experience has taught you otherwise," he finished for me.

I nodded, grateful for his understanding.

"I can't promise we won't have problems," Con said, his eyes serious. "But I can promise I won't run at the first sign of trouble. I'm in this, Geri. All the way."

The sincerity in his voice made my throat tight. I wasn't used to this—to someone seeing my fears and meeting them head-on instead of using them against me or running from them.

"I'm trying to be in it too," I whispered. "It's just... hard sometimes."

"I know." He pulled me back down to him, his arms wrapping around me securely. "We'll figure it out together, okay? Day by day."

I nodded against his chest, letting his steady heartbeat soothe me. Day by day. I could do that.

We fell asleep like that, wrapped in each other, and for once, I didn't dream of the past or worry about the future. I was simply present, in this moment, with this man who somehow saw through all my defences and wanted me anyway.

Morning came too soon, sunlight streaming through the curtains I'd forgotten to close. I blinked awake to find Con already up, sitting on the edge of the bed pulling on his jeans.

"Sneaking out?" I asked, my voice husky with sleep.

He turned, his face breaking into a smile that made my heart flip. "Never. Just didn't want to wake you. I've got an early shift."

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

I groaned and buried my face in the pillow. "That's not morning. That's still night."

Con laughed and leaned over to press a kiss to my shoulder. "Some of us have to work for a living, princess."

I turned my head to glare at him, but there was no heat in it. "Call me princess again

and see what happens."

"Noted." He stood and finished dressing, then sat back down beside me. "Dinner again tonight? My place this time? We have a pretty good staff kitchen."

The casual invitation, the assumption that we'd want to spend another evening together, filled me with a warm glow. This was what normal people did, wasn't it? Made plans, spent time together, built something day by day.

"I'd like that," I said. "But fair warning, I have high standards. I've been spoiled by a certain chef who feeds me regularly."

"James?" Con asked with mock outrage. "I'll have you know I'm a much better cook than he is."

I laughed and pulled him down for a kiss. "Prove it."

Geri

The next four weeks passed like Groundhog Day, really. We worked, and we spent time together. Con would always cook for me at his place or take me to dinner in town. He was right—he did cook better than James, and he made a killer grilled cheese sandwich, which was a staple in staff accommodation.

We had to share rooms with others. Con had two boys in his room: his brother and his best friend.

Con had explained they had gone to school together, and even though they were super close, they didn't hang around each other all that much.

I mean, sure, men were strange like that with their mates, but I had wondered if maybe it was because he gave me all his spare time and not his mates.

It was during that fourth week that something in me changed. What it was, I wasn't sure. I would later come to find out it was fear, but it was there all the same.

We had gone to the pub for dinner and drinks, a rare night when a lot of us had off at the same time.

We had drunk and danced, and the one and only small nightclub under the pub had opened, and we had travelled down there to continue.

I had gotten a lot drunker than I was used to, and one of the guys had asked if we wanted to get high.

I thought, fuck it. I had been sober now for nearly three years. I had my head on right, and I was even allowing someone into my life again.

I had swallowed that pill without much thought. I wasn't sure if maybe the alcohol had loosened me up enough for me to believe that I could do a one-and-done type of thing, but it had been a great night.

Until I had woken up naked in the arms of Con, with no memory of how I had gotten here or the sex we had clearly had.

Con's room was two sets of bunk beds, and Con had this sheet tucked around the bottom one where he slept so it was like a cocoon in there—you couldn't see in or out.

But I was naked, and it triggered something in me.

I wasn't sure why that of all things had done it, but it had.

I crawled out, found my clothes, dressed, and ran back to my hotel.

I had packed nearly all my things by the time Con had woken up and found me.

He was confused, asking me what was wrong. I, of course, gave him nothing. Just that I'd gotten a call and needed to go back home. I would call him.

He was hurt. I could see it in his eyes, but I had nothing for him—no reason for this rush, no reason for the running.

All I knew was I had overstayed my welcome, and I needed to go now.

I walked my stuff to the car, handed in my instant resignation, which I was told didn't

work that way, but I didn't care, and left.

I left Con standing there with tears in his eyes. I left Con standing there in a cloud of exhaust fumes from my car. I left Con standing there with no explanation as to why I ran or what was happening.

Then I drove all the way to Seabreeze Haven to James, where I knocked on his door at 1 PM with tears in my eyes and a sob held in my chest. James didn't say a word, just opened the door and said, "The spare room is empty.

Go throw your things in there. I've already messaged the boss to tell him you're back early, and he said, 'Can you start back tomorrow?

" I was thankful to James, I really was.

Con must have messaged him to say I had left.

The drive from Alpine Ridge to Seabreeze Haven had been a blur.

Four hours of mountain roads and highways, my knuckles white on the steering wheel, my mind racing faster than my car.

I hadn't stopped—not for food, not for bathroom breaks, not even when my gas light came on and I had to pull into a service station.

I'd pumped the gas, paid, and gotten back on the road in under five minutes, as if Con might materialize behind me if I lingered too long.

Now, standing in James's spare room, the adrenaline was finally wearing off, leaving me hollow and shaking. I sat heavily on the edge of the bed, my unpacked bags scattered around me, and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

What the fuck had I just done?

My phone buzzed for what felt like the hundredth time. I didn't need to look to know it was Con. He'd been calling and texting since I'd peeled out of the resort parking lot, his messages growing increasingly desperate.

Geri, please talk to me.

What happened? Did I do something wrong?

Just tell me you're okay.

Please.

I couldn't bring myself to respond. What would I even say? Sorry I freaked out and ran away because I woke up naked in your arms and no memory as to how I got there, and it triggered some deep-seated fear I have buried deep? Yeah, that would go over well.

A soft knock at the door made me jump.

"You alive in there?" James's voice was gentle but probing.

"Define 'alive,'" I replied, trying for humour but landing somewhere closer to pathetic.

The door cracked open, and James peered in, his expression a mixture of concern and exasperation. "You look like shit."

"Thanks. Always the charmer."

He came in and sat beside me on the bed, close enough that our shoulders touched. It was a small comfort, but I leaned into it.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked after a moment.

I shook my head, then changed my mind and nodded, then shrugged. "I don't even know where to start."

"How about with why you're here and not in Alpine Ridge with the hot chef who's apparently been blowing up my phone asking if you're okay?"

I winced. "He called you?"

"Texted. About twenty times. He's worried sick, Geri."

Guilt twisted in my stomach, sharp and nauseating. "I know."

"So?"

I took a deep breath, trying to organize my thoughts. How could I explain something I didn't understand myself?

"We were at this club last night," I started slowly. "I got drunk. Really drunk. And then someone offered us pills, and I... I took one."

James's eyebrows shot up. "You what?" James was one of the very, very few who know of my addiction issues, and only because he was my oldest friend, and had been the one to drop me to rehab 3 years ago.

"I know, I know. It was stupid. Three years sober down the drain because I thought I could handle it." I laughed bitterly. "Spoiler alert: I couldn't."

"Shit, Geri." James ran a hand through his hair. "Are you okay? Physically, I mean?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It wasn't... it wasn't like before. I didn't spiral or anything. It was just one pill, one night." I paused. "But then I woke up this morning, and I was naked in Con's bed, and no memory of it at all I just... I panicked."

"Did he...?" James's voice hardened.

"No! God, no. Con would never." I was quick to defend him, even now. "It was consensual. At least, I think it was. I don't remember anything, but I know Con. He wouldn't take advantage."

James relaxed slightly. "Okay. So you had sex, and then what? You decided to drive four hours and show up at my door instead of talking to him?"

Put like that, it sounded ridiculous. Childish, even. But the fear that had gripped me that morning hadn't been rational.

"I don't know what happened," I admitted, my voice small. "I just woke up, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. It was like... like everything was closing in on me. Like I was trapped. And all I could think was that I needed to get out, get away."

James was quiet for a moment, processing. "From Con?"

"From... everything. The situation. The feelings. The fact that I'd let someone get that close again." I swallowed hard. "The fact that I broke my sobriety for him."

"Did he ask you to take the pill?"

"No. He didn't even know until after I'd done it."

"So that's on you, not him."

I glared at him. "Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, always. But that doesn't mean I won't call you on your bullshit." James's voice was firm but kind. "You're running, Geri. Same as you always do when things get real."

"I'm not?—"

"You are. The minute someone gets too close, you bolt."

His words hit me like a physical blow. I wanted to argue, to defend myself, but the truth of it was undeniable. I had kept Alex at arm's length, making sure our relationship stayed firmly in the "casual" category. And now Con...

"He loves you, you know," James said quietly.

I closed my eyes, pain lancing through me. "Don't."

"It's true. He told me, in one of his many texts. Said he was in love with you and didn't understand what had happened."

"Stop."

"He said he'd drive down here himself if I didn't let him know you were safe."

"James, please." My voice cracked.

"Why are you so afraid of being loved, Geri?"

The question hung in the air between us, heavy and unavoidable. I had no answer—at least, not one I was ready to face.

My phone buzzed again. This time, I looked. It was a simple text, just three words:

I miss you.

Something inside me broke. The tears I'd been holding back all day spilled over, hot and relentless. James put his arm around me, pulling me against his side as I sobbed.

"I don't deserve him," I managed between gasps. "I'm a mess, James. A complete fucking disaster. I can't even stay sober for one night out. I can't even wake up next to someone without having a panic attack. What kind of relationship is that?"

"A human one," James said simply. "We're all messes, Geri. Every single one of us. The trick is finding someone who's willing to help you clean up yours while you help them with theirs."

I shook my head, unconvinced. "You don't understand. There are things about me, things in my past..."

"That Con doesn't know about?"

I nodded.

"Then tell him. Give him the chance to decide for himself if he can handle it."

"What if he can't?"

James squeezed my shoulder. "What if he can?"

We sat in silence for a while, my tears gradually subsiding. The weight in my chest hadn't lifted, but it had shifted somehow, become more bearable.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted finally.

"Yes, you do." James stood up, stretching. "But first, you need to eat something and get some sleep. You look like you're about to pass out."

As if on cue, my stomach growled loudly. I realized I hadn't eaten since dinner the night before.

"I'll make you a sandwich," James said, heading for the door. "Then you're going to take a shower, because frankly, you stink, and then you're going to sleep. We can figure out the rest tomorrow."

I managed a weak smile. "Thanks, James."

He paused at the door, his expression serious. "One more thing. You should at least let Con know you're safe. He's worried sick."

The guilt returned, sharper than before. "I will."

After James left, I picked up my phone and stared at Con's messages. There were so many, each one more concerned than the last. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, unsure what to say.

Finally, I typed:

I'm at James's. I'm safe. I'm sorry.

It wasn't enough—not nearly enough—but it was all I could manage right now. I hit

send before I could change my mind, then turned off my phone and set it aside.

The sandwich James brought me tasted like cardboard, but I forced it down anyway. The shower helped a little, washing away the sweat and grime of the drive, if not the shame and confusion.

By the time I crawled into James's couch, exhaustion had overtaken everything else. My last thought before sleep claimed me was of Con's face as I'd driven away—hurt, confused, and so, so sad.

I'd done that to him. I'd taken something beautiful and broken it because I was too afraid to let it grow.

Geri

It had been two weeks since I'd been back in Seabreeze Haven, working at the same old restaurant and staying at James's place.

I was close to having reached my limit there, and I knew it was time to find somewhere else to live.

James hadn't said it, but I knew it. James had told me daily now to call Con, but all I had mustered was to text him saying I needed space, it wasn't him, it was me—the age-old excuse of someone wanting to run away from you.

Con had messaged and called me daily, but I had ignored them all or written back simple replies of "I need space" or "I need time."

I was a horrible person. I knew it. I knew it deep in my soul.

It was why I was driving up to Riverside to meet someone who had a room to rent.

Why I had chosen Riverside, I wasn't sure.

It would mean I would have to drive 45 minutes to work each day, but I also wanted to go where I didn't know anyone.

Well, Alex lived there, and so did Louise, but that was it, and it was massive, so I would be fine to walk the shops and not run into people.

The guy I was meeting seemed well enough on the phone. He said he worked at the airport in customs and was never home, was renting the room out because he liked the idea of having someone at the house when he wasn't.

The drive there was easy, solidifying the fact that I would, in fact, be able to drive it daily, and I was right—he was nice enough, a little strange, but who wasn't these days? And the room itself was only \$200 a week, easy cash for me to afford.

I had signed the legal paperwork with him for three months, and we would resign every three months from then.

Simple and easy contracts were my sort of thing.

Not a big commitment, because let's face it, commitment wasn't my thing.

And I had driven back to James and told him the news.

James seemed worried and told me I could rent his spare room, but I didn't want that.

I loved James more than anything, but I needed to just be alone.

I had fucked up things with Con, and James knew too much about me—not all, but enough that when he looked at me, I knew he looked at me with pity, and I hated that.

I had started back at my meetings and hopping from one to another—no old faces, just all new ones—and I was finally feeling a bit better mentally.

The morning I was set to move to Riverside dawned grey and drizzly, matching my mood perfectly.

I'd packed my meagre belongings into three suitcases and a couple of boxes—the sum

total of my life fitting easily into the trunk of my car.

It was depressing how little I had to show for twenty-two years on this planet.

James stood in the doorway of his apartment, arms crossed, watching me load the last box. His expression was a mixture of concern and resignation.

"You know you don't have to do this," he said for what felt like the hundredth time.

I slammed the trunk shut with more force than necessary. "Yes, I do."

"Why? Because you're scared? Because it's easier to run than to face your feelings?"

I turned to face him, irritation flaring. "Because I need my own space, James. Because I can't keep crashing on your couch forever. Because I'm an adult who should be able to live on her own without a babysitter."

"Is that what you think I am? Your babysitter?" Hurt flashed across his face.

I immediately regretted my words. "No. Of course not. You're my best friend. But that's exactly why I need to go. I can't keep leaning on you every time my life falls apart."

James's expression softened. "That's what friends are for, Geri."

"Not like this. Not when I'm using you as a crutch to avoid dealing with my own shit." I leaned against my car, suddenly exhausted despite the early hour. "I need to figure out who I am without... without anyone else defining me."

"Even Con?"

Especially Con. The thought of him sent a familiar pang through my chest—a mixture of longing, guilt, and fear that had become my constant companion these past two weeks.

"He called again last night," James said when I didn't respond.

I closed my eyes briefly. "I know."

"He's coming down next weekend."

My eyes snapped open. "What?"

"He said he's tired of being ignored. He's coming to talk to you in person."

Panic clawed at my throat. "You told him where I'm going to be living?"

"No. I told him you were moving, but not where. I figured that was your information to share if you wanted to."

Relief washed over me, followed immediately by shame. What kind of person was I, hiding from someone who only wanted to talk to me? Someone who had done nothing wrong except care about me too much?

"Thanks," I said quietly.

James pushed off from the doorway and came to stand in front of me. "Look, I get that you're scared. I do. But Con is a good guy, Geri. One of the best I've met. And he loves you."

"That's the problem," I whispered.

"Why? Why is that a problem?"

I couldn't meet his eyes. "Because I don't know how to be loved like that. I don't know how to let someone in that far without... without destroying everything."

"Like you did with the pill?"

I flinched. James had been surprisingly understanding about my relapse, but it still stung to hear it spoken aloud.

"That was just a symptom," I said. "The real problem is me. I'm broken, James. I've been broken for a long time, and I don't know if I can be fixed."

"You're not a fucking vase, Geri. You're a person. People don't get 'fixed.' They heal. They grow. They learn." James's voice was firm but gentle. "But they can't do it alone. Not really."

I wanted to believe him. God, how I wanted to. But the evidence of my life suggested otherwise.

"I need to try," I said finally. "I need to at least try to stand on my own two feet before I can even think about letting someone else hold me up."

James studied me for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Okay. I get that. But promise me something?"

"What?"

"Don't shut him out completely. At least talk to him when he comes down. Hear what he has to say."

The thought made my stomach twist with anxiety, but I nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking." James pulled me into a tight hug. "And call me, okay? Not just when you're in crisis. Call me just because."

I hugged him back, blinking away unexpected tears. "I will."

We broke apart, and I climbed into my car before I could change my mind. As I pulled away from the curb, I watched James in my rearview mirror, standing in the rain, getting smaller and smaller until he disappeared around a corner.

The drive to Riverside was quiet, just me and my thoughts and the rhythmic swish of the windshield wipers.

I tried to focus on practical matters—what groceries I needed to buy, whether I should unpack everything today or spread it out over the weekend, if I should tell my boss about my new commute—but my mind kept circling back to Con.

What would I say to him when he came? What could I say that wouldn't sound like a pathetic excuse for my behaviour?

Sorry I freaked out and ran away because I'm terrified of how much I care about you?

Sorry I broke three years of sobriety because I'm self-destructive when things get too real?

Sorry I'm such a mess that I can't even handle waking up in your arms without having a full-blown panic attack?

None of it sounded good. None of it sounded like enough.

My new housemate, Derek, was out when I arrived, which was a relief.

I wasn't in the mood for small talk or the awkward dance of two strangers figuring out how to share a space.

He'd left a key under the mat as promised, along with a note welcoming me and explaining a few house rules—nothing unreasonable, just basic courtesy stuff about noise levels and cleaning up after myself.

The room was small but clean, with a double bed, a desk, and a small closet. The window overlooked a quiet street lined with jacaranda trees, their purple blossoms scattered across the sidewalk like confetti. It was... fine. Not homey, not yet, but it would do.

I unpacked methodically, hanging my clothes in the closet, arranging my toiletries in the bathroom, setting up my laptop on the desk. The routine of it was soothing, giving my hands something to do while my mind continued its endless loop of worry and regret.

When everything was put away, I sat on the edge of the bed, suddenly at a loss. The silence of the house pressed in on me, broken only by the occasional car passing outside and the distant sound of a neighbour's dog barking.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my messages. There were several from James, checking that I'd arrived safely. One from my boss confirming my shift tomorrow. And, of course, a string of unanswered texts from Con.

I opened his thread, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. What could I say? What words could possibly bridge the chasm I'd created between us?

In the end, I settled for simple honesty:

I moved today. New place in Riverside. James says you're coming down next weekend. I'll be working Saturday morning, but I'm free after 2.

I hit send before I could overthink it, then tossed my phone onto the bed as if it had burned me. My heart was racing, palms sweaty. It was ridiculous how much anxiety a simple text could cause.

To my surprise, my phone buzzed almost immediately with a response:

Thank you for letting me know. I'll see you Saturday at 2. Where should I meet you?

His formality stung. Gone was the warmth, the easy banter, the affection that had coloured all our previous communications. I had done that. I had stripped all that away with my cowardice.

I suggested a coffee shop near the restaurant, neutral ground where we could talk without the pressure of privacy. His response was a simple "Sounds good."

And that was it. No declarations of missing me, no questions about why I'd run, no anger or hurt or anything that might give me a clue as to what he was thinking. Just polite, distant agreement.

I flopped back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. What had I expected? That he'd pour his heart out via text after two weeks of me ignoring him? That he'd make it easy for me?

No, I'd forfeited the right to easy when I'd driven away from Alpine Ridge without a backward glance.

My phone buzzed again, and I snatched it up, hoping irrationally that it was Con with more to say. But it was James:

Did you make it? How's the new place?

I sent him a quick update, assuring him I was fine and the room was adequate. Then, almost as an afterthought, I added:

I texted Con. We're meeting Saturday.

His response was immediate:

Proud of you. That took guts.

Did it, though? Or was it just the bare minimum of human decency to agree to face someone I'd hurt?

I spent the rest of the day in a fog, going through the motions of settling in but not really present.

I ran into Derek briefly when he came home from work—he was a tall, lanky guy in his thirties with a receding hairline and an awkward smile.

He seemed nice enough, if a bit socially uncomfortable, and he retreated to his room after our brief hello, which suited me fine.

That night, I lay awake in the unfamiliar bed, listening to the strange creaks and sighs of a new house, my mind racing with thoughts of Saturday.

What would Con say? What would I say? Would he be angry?

Hurt? Would he have moved on already? The thought sent a spike of jealousy through me, which was rich considering I was the one who had run away.

When sleep finally came, it was fitful and filled with dreams of running down endless corridors, always pursued, never quite caught.

The next few days passed in a blur of work, commuting, and anxiety.

I threw myself into my shifts at the restaurant, taking extra hours when I could, anything to keep my mind occupied.

The long drive to and from Riverside became a kind of meditation, a space where I could be alone with my thoughts without having to face them head-on.

I went to meetings every night, different ones each time, never staying long enough to form connections.

I spoke sometimes, sharing sanitized versions of my struggles, careful never to reveal too much.

It helped, in a way, to hear my own voice articulating my fears, even if I couldn't bring myself to be fully honest.

By the time Saturday rolled around, I was a bundle of nerves.

I'd barely slept the night before, and my shift at the restaurant was a disaster of dropped plates and mixed-up orders.

James finally took pity on me and sent me home an hour early, telling me to get my head straight before I came back on Monday.

I changed clothes before heading to the coffee shop, finally settling on jeans and a simple blue top—casual but not sloppy. I arrived fifteen minutes early and claimed a table in the corner, my back to the wall so I could see the door.

And then I waited, my heart in my throat, for the man I'd run from to find me again.

Geri

The meeting didn't go to plan at all. Con was quiet, distant, and formal, telling me it was okay, he understood, and that I should call him once I got my shit together.

He knew I wasn't going to call just as much as I did.

I had now lost my friend, and the only person who cared enough about me, even when I was being a dick.

But I took it on the chin, promised myself I would do better, I would stay away from anything meaningful in the future, but that no one deserved for me to treat them this way, and that I was better off alone.

Con stopped messaging me. And I hated it. I missed my friend more than I was able to explain. James told me I should have just opened up to him, told him what happened, but I knew I wouldn't. No way would I open up to anyone ever. It was my cross to bear.

The coffee shop felt too warm, too crowded, too everything as I watched Con walk away. His shoulders were straight, his stride purposeful—the picture of someone who had said what they needed to say and was now moving on with their life. Moving on from me.

I remained frozen at the table, my coffee untouched and cooling rapidly, replaying the last twenty minutes in my head like a horror movie I couldn't look away from.

He'd arrived exactly on time, not a minute early or late. I'd watched him scan the café, his expression carefully neutral when he spotted me. No smile. No warmth. Just a slight nod of acknowledgment before he ordered his drink and joined me.

"Thanks for meeting me," he'd said, his voice so formal it made my chest ache.

"Of course," I'd replied, as if I hadn't spent two weeks avoiding his calls and messages. As if this was just a casual catch-up between friends.

We'd made small talk for a few excruciating minutes—how was work, how was the new place, had I heard about the late-season snowfall at Alpine Ridge.

The kind of conversation you'd have with an acquaintance, not someone who had seen you naked, who had held you through the night, who had told you he was falling in love with you.

And then, when the pleasantries had been exhausted, he'd gotten to the point.

"I think I understand what happened," he'd said, his green eyes steady on mine. "You got scared. Things got too real, too fast, and you ran. It's what you do."

I'd opened my mouth to protest, but what could I say? He was right.

"I'm not angry," he continued. "I was, at first. But now I'm just... tired. Tired of chasing someone who doesn't want to be caught."

"That's not—" I'd started, but he cut me off with a gentle shake of his head.

"It is. And that's okay. You're allowed to not be ready. You're allowed to need space or time or whatever it is you're looking for. But I can't keep doing this dance, Geri. I can't keep investing in someone who runs at the first sign of depth."

His words had hit me like physical blows, each one landing with perfect accuracy. Because he was right. Of course he was right. I did run. I always ran. It was the one thing I was consistently good at.

"I'm sorry," I'd whispered, the words feeling wholly inadequate.

"I know you are." His expression had softened slightly. "And I believe you mean it. But being sorry doesn't change anything if you're just going to do the same thing next time you get scared."

I'd looked down at my hands, unable to meet his gaze. "I don't know how to be different."

"Yes, you do." His voice had been gentle but firm. "You just choose not to be. And that's your right. But it's also my right to step back and protect myself."

And that was when he'd said it—the words that were now echoing in my head as I sat alone in the café.

"Call me when you get your shit together, Geri. Not before. Because I care about you too much to keep watching you self-destruct."

Then he'd stood, nodded once, and walked out of the café and, I suspected, out of my life.

I finally forced myself to move, gathering my things and leaving the untouched coffee behind. The spring air outside felt too sharp, too bright, too alive for the hollowness inside me.

I drove back to my new place on autopilot, barely registering the familiar landmarks I passed. Derek was out, thank God. I couldn't have handled small talk right now, not

with the weight of Con's words pressing down on me.

I collapsed onto my bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling the emptiness of the room around me. This was what I'd chosen— this solitude, this distance, this safety. So why did it feel so much like punishment?

My phone buzzed with a text from James:

How did it go?

I considered lying, considered not responding at all, but in the end, I went with the truth:

He told me to call him when I get my shit together.

James's response was quick:

And?

And what?

Are you going to?

I stared at the question for a long time. Was I? Could I? What would "getting my shit together" even look like for someone as fundamentally broken as me?

I don't know how

Yes, you do

Came James's immediate response, echoing Con's words so perfectly it made me

wonder if they'd been talking about me. You just don't want to do the work.

The accusation stung, all the more because I knew it was true. I'd spent years in therapy, in meetings, in self-help groups. I knew the steps. I knew what healing looked like, in theory. I just couldn't

seem to make myself take the leap from knowledge to action.

It's not that simple

Never said it was simple. Just said you know how.

I didn't respond to that. What could I say? That he was wrong? That I was trying? Both would be lies, and James deserved better than my lies.

I spent the rest of the day in a fog, moving through the motions of existence without really being present. I showered. I ate something, though I couldn't have told you what. I stared at the TV without absorbing anything that happened on screen.

And all the while, Con's words played on repeat in my head: Call me when you get your shit together. Not before.

By evening, the apartment felt like it was closing in on me. The walls seemed to pulse with my restlessness, my regret, my self-loathing. I needed to get out, needed air, needed... something.

I grabbed my keys and headed for my car without any clear destination in mind.

I just drove, windows down, music loud enough to drown out my thoughts.

I ended up at a beach I didn't recognize, somewhere north of Seabreeze Haven.

The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink that seemed obscenely beautiful for how hollow I felt inside.

I parked and walked down to the sand, sitting just beyond where the waves could reach me. The beach was nearly empty—just a few die-hard surfers catching the last waves of the day and a couple walking hand-in-hand in the distance.

I pulled my knees to my chest and watched the horizon, trying to make sense of the chaos in my head. Why was I like this? Why did I sabotage every good thing that came into my life? Why couldn't I just be normal, just once?

The questions had no answers, or at least none that I was willing to face. So instead, I sat and watched the sun sink into the ocean, feeling smaller and more alone with each passing minute.

My phone buzzed in my pocket—probably James checking on me again. I ignored it. I couldn't handle his concern right now, his well-meaning but pointed questions. I couldn't handle anyone caring about me when I was so determined to prove I wasn't worth caring about.

As darkness fell, I finally stood and brushed the sand from my jeans. The drive back to Riverside was long and quiet, the roads emptier now, the night pressing in around my car like a physical presence.

Derek was home when I returned, watching something on his laptop in the living room.

He glanced up when I came in, offering a brief nod before returning to his screen.

I appreciated his lack of interest in my comings and goings.

It was exactly the kind of roommate relationship I needed right now—distant, undemanding, uncomplicated.

"There's pizza in the kitchen if you want some," he said without looking up.

"Thanks," I replied, though food was the last thing on my mind.

I retreated to my room, closing the door firmly behind me. The space felt even emptier now, even less like home. I hadn't bothered to decorate, to put up pictures or posters or anything that might make it feel like mine. What was the point? It was just a place to sleep, a place to hide.

I finally checked my phone, expecting a message from James. Instead, I found a text from an unknown number:

Hey, it's Alex. Got a new phone. Just checking in. How's life treating you?

The timing was so perfect it was almost laughable. Of course Alex would reach out now, when I was at my lowest, when I was most vulnerable to making bad decisions just to feel something other than this emptiness.

I stared at the message, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. It would be so easy to fall back into old patterns, to use Alex as a distraction, a bandage over the wound Con had left. So easy, and so predictable.

Life's shit right now, actually, I typed, then deleted it. I'm fine, I wrote instead, then deleted that too.

In the end, I put the phone down without responding. It was a small victory, but it felt important somehow. A tiny step toward not being the person who always took the easy way out.

I lay on my bed, fully clothed, staring at the ceiling. Sleep seemed impossible, but I didn't have the energy to do anything else. So I just existed, suspended in the limbo between wakefulness and rest, my mind cycling through the day's events like a broken record.

Con's face when he'd said goodbye. Not angry, not hurt, just... resigned. Like he'd finally accepted what I'd known all along—that I wasn't worth the effort. That I was too damaged, too difficult, too much and not enough all at once.

The worst part was, I couldn't even blame him. If our positions were reversed, I would have given up on me long ago.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

I must have drifted off eventually, because I woke to sunlight streaming through the window I'd forgotten to close. My clothes were twisted uncomfortably around me, and my mouth tasted like something had died in it.

For a blissful moment, I didn't remember. And then it all came crashing back—the café, Con's words, the beach, Alex's text. The reality of my life, the consequences of my choices.

I reached for my phone, squinting at the screen. It was just past nine. I had a shift at the restaurant at noon. Three hours to pull myself together enough to function in public.

There were two new messages—one from James asking if I was okay, and another from Alex asking if I'd gotten his text. I ignored both, dropping the phone onto the bed beside me.

I forced myself to get up, to shower, to brush my teeth.

Basic human functions that suddenly seemed like monumental tasks.

The hot water helped a little, washing away the grit of the beach and the stiffness from sleeping in my clothes.

But it couldn't touch the heaviness in my chest, the sense of loss that seemed to have taken up permanent residence there.

As I dressed for work, I caught sight of myself in the mirror—pale, hollow-eyed, the

ghost of the person I'd been just a few weeks ago. When had I gotten so thin? When had these shadows appeared under my eyes? When had I started looking so... defeated?

The drive to work was a blur, my body on autopilot while my mind continued its endless loop of self-recrimination. I arrived at the restaurant with ten minutes to spare, plastering on a fake smile as I pushed through the door.

"You look like shit," James said by way of greeting, his eyes scanning my face with concern.

"Thanks. Just what every girl wants to hear."

He ignored my sarcasm. "I take it the talk with Con is affecting you more than you thought?"

I busied myself with tying my apron, avoiding his gaze. "I already told you. He's done with me. Can't say I blame him."

James sighed, leaning against the counter. "What happened, exactly?"

"He told me to get my shit together. Said he was tired of watching me self-destruct." I shrugged, aiming for nonchalance and not even within cooee. "Standard breakup stuff."

"That's not a breakup, Geri. That's someone who cares about you setting a boundary."

I finally looked at him, irritation flaring. "What's the difference? The end result is the same—he's gone."

"The difference is that he left the door open. He didn't say 'never call me again.' He

said call when you're ready to stop running." James's voice was gentle but firm. "That's not someone who's given up on you. That's someone who's refusing to enable you."

His words hit too close to home, piercing the armour of indifference I was trying so hard to maintain. I turned away, blinking back unexpected tears.

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. I'm better off alone anyway."

James made a sound of frustration. "That's bullshit and you know it. You're not better off alone. You're just safer alone. There's a difference."

Before I could respond, the first customers of the day walked in, forcing us to table the conversation. I threw myself into work, grateful for the distraction of taking orders, carrying plates, making small talk with strangers. For a few hours, I could pretend to be normal, to be okay.

But as the shift wore on, exhaustion set in—not just physical tiredness, but a bone-deep weariness that made every smile, every "How can I help you?" feel like lifting a weight.

By the time my shift ended, I was running on fumes. James tried to convince me to stay for a coffee, to talk more about what had happened with Con, but I begged off, claiming I needed to get home to rest before my early shift the next day.

The truth was, I couldn't bear any more of his well-meaning advice, his gentle prodding at wounds that were still too raw to touch. I knew he was right—about Con, about me, about all of it. But knowing and accepting were two very different things.

The drive back to Riverside stretched before me like a metaphor for my life—long, solitary, with no clear destination in sight. I turned the radio up loud, trying to drown

out the voice in my head that kept asking the same question over and over: What now?

What happened when you'd burned all your bridges? When you'd pushed away the one person who had seen all your jagged edges and wanted you anyway? When you'd finally proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you were exactly as unlovable as you'd always feared?

The answer, it seemed, was this: You kept going.

You woke up each day and put one foot in front of the other.

You worked. You ate. You slept. You existed in the spaces between moments, never fully present, never fully absent.

You survived, even when survival felt like the cruellest punishment of all.

And maybe, just maybe, you started to wonder if there might be more to life than just surviving. If there might be a way back from the wasteland you'd created. If "getting your shit together" might actually be worth the pain it would surely entail.

But that was a thought for another day. For now, I just needed to make it home, to crawl into my bed in my empty room, and to hope that tomorrow would hurt just a little bit less than today.

It wouldn't, of course. I knew that. But hope was all I had left, and I was clinging to it with everything I had.

Geri

The next four weeks passed without any issues.

I had started to text Alex again, falling back into the easy banter we had.

Just like having a boyfriend without having one.

My phone would buzz with his messages throughout the day, little pings of connection that required nothing of me emotionally.

Sometimes they were flirty, sometimes just checking in, but they never demanded anything I wasn't willing to give. It was comfortable, predictable—exactly

what I needed right now.

How's your day going, beautiful?

He'd text, and I'd respond with something witty or sarcastic, depending on my mood.

Just survived another shift without murdering anyone. Gold star for me

I'd reply, and he'd send back a laughing emoji or some equally non-committal response.

It was perfect in its simplicity. No expectations, no promises, no potential for disappointment. Just words on a screen that made me feel a little less alone without

the risk of actually connecting.

My friends had invited me out a lot for drinks, and I had taken them up time and again, finding myself getting wasted more and more.

Louise would call on Thursday nights, planning our weekend, and I'd agree to whatever she suggested.

Clubs, house parties, bars—the venue didn't matter as long as there was alcohol and noise to drown out the thoughts in my head.

"You're coming out Friday, right?" Louise would ask, her voice bright with anticipation. "Nick's friend is having a thing at his place in Rivervale. Should be epic."

"Wouldn't miss it," I'd say, already calculating how many drinks it would take to reach that perfect state of numbness where I could exist without feeling.

Alcohol had never been an issue to me, just pills.

But here I was leaning into getting blind as a bat every single Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night.

The routine was comforting in its predictability: pre-drinks at someone's place, then out to wherever the night took us, drinking until the world blurred at the edges and my thoughts quieted to a manageable hum.

I'd wake up the next morning with a pounding head and fragmented memories of the night before—dancing on tables, laughing too loudly at jokes that weren't funny, flirting with strangers whose faces I couldn't quite recall.

The details didn't matter. What mattered was the escape, the temporary reprieve from the weight of my own existence.

I was, thankfully, the hangover queen, and was able to just function in a state of death at work without any issues.

Years of practice had taught me the perfect combination of painkillers, caffeine, and greasy food to keep me upright and semi-functional.

I'd arrive at the restaurant with sunglasses hiding my bloodshot eyes, a large coffee clutched in my trembling hands, and somehow make it through my shift on autopilot.

"Rough night?" James would ask, his voice carefully neutral, and I'd grunt in response, not inviting further conversation.

The customers never seemed to notice or care that their waitress was operating at half capacity. I'd smile and take orders and deliver food with mechanical efficiency, counting down the minutes until I could go home and collapse into bed, only to repeat the cycle the next day.

Con had still not messaged me, and I told myself I was glad.

His silence was a relief, really. One less complication in my life.

One less person expecting things from me that I couldn't give.

But sometimes, in the quiet moments between sleep and wakefulness, I'd find myself reaching for my phone, scrolling to his name in my contacts, my thumb hovering over the call button before I'd come to my senses and toss the phone aside.

I had finally gained the courage to message Matt back and tell him that I would not

be coming to see him, that I was in fact not going to message him at all, and that I would like it if he didn't message me too.

It had taken nearly half a bottle of tequila for that message to have happened, but I was proud of myself nonetheless.

I'd sat on my bed that night, the room spinning slightly around me, the bottle of tequila nestled between my crossed legs like a trusted friend. My phone had lit up with another message from Matt—the

third that week, each one more insistent than the last.

Come on, Geri. Just one visit. I miss you.

The words had blurred on the screen, my vision swimming with tequila and something that might have been tears if I were the type of person who still cried. I'd taken another swig directly from the bottle, the burn in my throat giving me the courage I needed.

I'd typed, my fingers clumsy on the keyboard:

Matt, I'm not coming to see you. Not now, not ever. Please stop messaging me. I don't want to hear from you again.

I'd hit send before I could second-guess myself, then immediately turned off my phone, afraid of his response.

When I'd turned it back on the next morning, there was nothing—no angry tirade, no pleading messages, just silence.

It was what I'd asked for, but the finality of it had settled in my chest like a stone.

One more bridge burned. One more person excised from my life. It should have felt like freedom, but instead, it just felt like another step toward some inevitable, lonely conclusion.

I had also started to look for a new job, not because my job sucked—I loved my job—but because I was tired of James giving me that look, the look of pity, like he knew I was spiralling and he wasn't going to stop me because he knew he wouldn't be able to, and now he just felt sad for the way my life was headed.

I'd catch him watching me sometimes, when he thought I wasn't looking.

His eyes would follow me as I moved around the restaurant, his expression a mixture of concern and resignation that made my skin crawl.

He never said anything directly—not after our last confrontation had ended with me snapping at him to mind his own business—but his silence was almost worse than any lecture could have been.

"You're better than this, Geri," his eyes seemed to say, and I'd turn away, unable to bear the weight of his disappointment.

So I'd started browsing job listings on my breaks, scrolling through endless postings for positions I was either overqualified or underqualified for, looking for something, anything, that would take me away from James's knowing gaze.

I had an interview in the city near my house with a company taking calls for doctors.

It was simple, and it was five days a week.

The job itself sounded mind-numbingly boring—answering phones, scheduling appointments, dealing with irate patients—but that was part of its appeal.

I didn't want excitement or challenge. I wanted predictability, routine, a job I could do on autopilot while my mind remained safely disengaged.

The office was in a nondescript building in the business district, all glass and steel and anonymous efficiency.

I'd put on my interview outfit—black pants, blue blouse, sensible shoes—and practiced my professional smile in the mirror before heading out.

The woman who interviewed me, a middle-aged HR manager with a forgettable face and a firm handshake, had seemed neither impressed nor unimpressed by my responses to her standard questions.

"Why do you want to work here?"

"I'm looking for a new challenge."

"Where do you see yourself in five years?"

"Growing with the company, taking on more responsibility."

"What are your strengths?"

"I'm reliable, organized, and good with people."

Lies, all of them, but the kind of lies everyone tells in interviews. The kind that are expected, even appreciated. The truth—that I wanted this job precisely because it demanded nothing of me emotionally, because I could do it without caring or connecting—would hardly have been a selling point.

It was paying a little more than I was getting now, but that would be spent on the

commute to and from work, so I wasn't better off, but I wasn't worse off either.

The financial aspect was almost irrelevant.

Money had never been my primary concern; I made enough to pay rent, buy food, and fund my increasingly frequent nights out. What more did I need?

The real appeal of the job was that I would also not know anyone and be able to just do my job without having to feel guilty.

No James watching me with those knowing eyes.

No regular customers asking why I looked so tired, if I was feeling okay, if there was anything they could do to help.

No one who knew me well enough to see through the facade of functionality I'd constructed.

Just me, a phone, and a computer. Anonymous voices on the other end of the line who wouldn't care if I was hungover or heartbroken or slowly self-destructing. Who wouldn't look at me with pity or concern or disappointment. Who wouldn't expect me to be better than I was.

As I drove home from the interview, I found myself hoping I'd get the job, not because I wanted it, but because it represented a kind of escape.

A clean slate. A place where no one knew about Con or Matt or my history of bad decisions and worse coping mechanisms. A place where I could just exist without the weight of other people's expectations or concerns.

The thought should have been comforting, but instead, it left me feeling hollow. Was

this really what my life had come to? Running from anyone who cared enough to worry about me? Seeking out anonymity and disconnection as if they were virtues rather than warnings?

I pushed the thought away as I pulled into Derek's driveway.

It was too heavy, too real, too much like the kind of self-reflection I'd been so carefully avoiding these past weeks.

Better to focus on the practical aspects—the commute, the hours, the pay.

Better to think about what I'd wear on my first day if I got the job, rather than why I wanted it in the first place.

Derek was out, as usual. Our paths rarely crossed these days, which suited me fine.

He'd leave notes on the fridge about bills or maintenance issues, and I'd respond in kind, but we'd managed to coexist for weeks now with minimal actual interaction.

It was the perfect roommate situation for someone who wanted to be left alone.

I changed out of my interview clothes and into sweatpants and a t-shirt, then flopped onto my bed, staring at the ceiling. My phone buzzed with a text from Alex:

How'd the interview go?

I found myself smiling despite everything. At least there was one person in my life who didn't make me feel like I was failing at being human.

Fine

Should hear by next week.

His response was immediate:

Fingers crossed! Drinks Friday to celebrate?

I hesitated, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. More drinks. More nights blurring into mornings. More temporary escapes that solved nothing. But what was the alternative? Staying home alone with my thoughts? That seemed far worse.

Definitely, Can't wait.

And I meant it, in a way. I couldn't wait for Friday, for the noise and the crowd and the blessed numbness that came with enough alcohol.

I couldn't wait to forget, just for a few hours, that I was a person who had run away from the only man who had ever really seen me, who was avoiding her best friend because he cared too much, who was seeking out a job specifically because no one there would know or care about her.

I couldn't wait to forget that I was me.

The thought should have been alarming, a red flag waving frantically in my mind.

But instead, it settled over me with a strange sort of resignation.

This was my life now. This was who I was.

And maybe that was okay. Maybe not everyone got a happy ending.

Maybe some of us were just meant to exist in the spaces between, never quite finding

our place, never quite belonging anywhere or to anyone.

The thought was both terrifying and oddly comforting. If I expected nothing, I couldn't be disappointed. If I connected with no one, I couldn't be hurt. If I never tried to be better, I couldn't fail.

It was a philosophy of sorts, a way of navigating the world that required minimal effort and promised minimal pain.

And right now, minimal seemed like the best I could hope for.

Minimal pain, minimal joy, minimal everything.

Just enough to keep going, one day at a time, without having to face the mess I'd made of my life or the person I'd become.

Tomorrow would be another day of going through the motions, of pretending to be a person who had goals and dreams and a future worth working toward. And I would do it, because what other choice did I have?

None. There were no other choices, no other paths. Just this one, stretching out before me like a long, empty road with no end in sight.

Geri

The day Friday rolled around, I had gotten the call I was waiting for. I had gotten the job, and it started on Monday. Now I just had to tell my boss I was leaving. Not something I looked forward to, but finally being able to be alone was hopeful.

"Hello, is this Geraldine?" The crisp, efficient voice of the HR manager from my interview.

"Yes, this is she," I'd replied, sitting up straighter as if she could see me.

"I'm pleased to inform you that we'd like to offer you the position. We were impressed with your experience and think you'd be a great fit for our team."

A strange mix of emotions had washed over me—relief, satisfaction, and something that might have been dread if I'd allowed myself to examine it too closely.

But I didn't. Instead, I'd accepted the offer with practiced enthusiasm, agreed to the starting date of Monday two weeks from now, and hung up with a promise to come in early to complete paperwork.

I had to hand in my resignation to my boss, who was mad I was leaving. He didn't want to find someone to replace me, but he said he thought it was coming. He had thought it was due to my commute and didn't fight me on that. I mean, he could think what he wanted.

I'd walked into his office during the mid-afternoon lull, my resignation letter clutched

in sweaty fingers. He'd looked up from his computer, his expression shifting from distraction to wariness as he registered my unusual seriousness.

"Got a minute?" I'd asked, hovering in the doorway.

"Sure, Geri. What's up?" He'd gestured to the chair across from his desk, and I'd sat, placing the folded letter in front of him.

"I'm resigning," I'd said, the words coming out more abruptly than I'd intended. "I've accepted a position closer to home."

He'd stared at the letter for a long moment before picking it up, unfolding it with deliberate slowness. His eyes had scanned the contents, his expression hardening.

"Two weeks' notice?" he'd asked, looking up at me.

"Yes. My last day would be Friday next."

He'd sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I can't say I'm surprised, but I am disappointed. You're one of our best servers."

"Thank you," I'd replied, unsure what else to say.

"Is it just the commute, or is there something else? Something we could address to keep you?"

The question had caught me off-guard. I'd prepared for anger, for accusations, for guilt trips—not for this reasonable inquiry that suggested he actually valued me.

"Just the commute," I'd lied, avoiding his eyes. "And the hours. I found something with a more regular schedule."

He'd nodded, though I could tell he didn't entirely believe me. "Well, if you change your mind in the next two weeks, the door's open. Finding someone with your experience won't be easy."

I'd mumbled something about being sorry for the inconvenience and escaped his office as quickly as possible, the weight of his disappointment following me like a shadow.

The rest of my shift had passed in a blur of awkward interactions with James, who'd clearly been told about my resignation and was oscillating between hurt silence and pointed questions about my new job.

I'd deflected as best I could, keeping my answers vague and my tone light, but I could feel his eyes on me throughout the day, searching for the real reason behind my departure.

By the time I'd clocked out, I was exhausted from the emotional gymnastics of pretending everything was fine, that this was just a practical career move and not another step in my ongoing effort to isolate myself from anyone who cared about me.

I had gone home and gotten changed for tonight. Alex had chosen a nightclub right in the city, one that was meant to be seedy but was also a crowd favourite. I hadn't been there yet, so I was a little interested. It was there that my life went down the rabbit hole.

The anticipation of the night ahead had hummed through me as I'd stood in front of my closet, deliberating.

This wasn't just any Friday night out—this was a celebration of sorts, a marking of my transition from one life to another.

It called for something special, something that would make me feel powerful and desirable and in control.

My fingers had trailed over the hangers until they'd landed on a dress I rarely wore—a tight, black number that hugged every curve and left little to the imagination.

I'd bought it on a whim months ago but had never quite had the courage to wear it out.

Tonight felt like the perfect occasion to debut it.

I had turned up wearing a skimpy black dress that hardly covered my ass, with 4-inch heels and painted red lips. I had gone for the skanky look tonight. Why, I wasn't sure—the mood maybe—but I did it.

The transformation had been almost magical.

As I'd applied my makeup—heavy on the eyes, bold on the lips—I'd watched a different version of myself emerge in the mirror.

Gone was the tired, conflicted woman who'd handed in her resignation earlier that day.

In her place stood someone confident, someone who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to take it.

Someone who didn't care what anyone thought of her.

The dress had clung to my body like a second skin, the hemline barely skimming the tops of my thighs.

I'd paired it with my highest heels—strappy black sandals that added four inches to my height and made my legs look endless.

My hair I'd left loose, letting it fall in tousled waves around my shoulders.

The final touch had been my lips, painted a deep, provocative red that demanded attention.

Looking at my reflection, I'd barely recognized myself.

But that was the point, wasn't it? Tonight, I didn't want to be me.

I wanted to be someone else entirely—someone without baggage or regrets or a nagging sense of emptiness.

Someone who lived purely in the moment, taking pleasure where she found it without worrying about consequences.

The Uber had dropped me off in front of the club just after 10.

The line had already stretched down the block, but I'd bypassed it, walking straight to the entrance with the confidence of someone who expected to be let in.

The bouncer's eyes had raked over me appreciatively before he'd stepped aside, unhooking the velvet rope without a word.

I walked up the stairs, and there was a sign on the desk that said "looking for staff," so naturally, I asked about it.

They were looking for someone to do nights—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday—door work, from 9 PM to 1 AM.

Simply standing there and taking the \$10 entry fee from all the patrons.

I could easily slot that into my life, and it would mean I would have an excuse to always be out.

I gave them my number and arranged another interview.

The woman behind the desk had been striking—tall and lean, with a sleeve of tattoos running down one arm and a septum piercing that glinted in the dim light. She'd looked me up and down with an appraising eye that felt different from the bouncer's—less sexual, more evaluative.

"You ever worked the door before?" she'd asked, her voice husky and confident.

"No, but I've been in customer service for years," I'd replied, gesturing vaguely toward my current job. "I'm good with people."

She'd nodded, seeming to consider this. "It's not rocket science. You take the money, stamp hands, keep the line moving. But you gotta be firm—people try to pull all kinds of shit to get in without paying or to jump the queue."

"I can be firm," I'd assured her, thinking of the times I'd had to deal with difficult customers at the restaurant.

"I bet you can," she'd said with a small smile that suggested she was seeing something in me that I wasn't fully aware of myself. "Give me your number. We can set up a proper interview next week."

I'd recited my number as she'd typed it into her phone, then added, "I'm Geri, by the way."

"Tasha," she'd replied, extending a hand with nails painted black and filed to points. "Welcome to The Underground."

The handshake had lingered a beat longer than necessary, her fingers warm against mine, before she'd released me with another enigmatic smile. "Enjoy your night. Maybe I'll see you around later."

The interaction had left me feeling oddly energized, a buzz of anticipation that had nothing to do with the job prospect and everything to do with the way Tasha had looked at me—like she could see past the facade to the person underneath, and found that person interesting.

I'd pushed the thought aside as I'd made my way into the main area of the club, the bass already thrumming through my body, the air thick with the scent of perfume, sweat, and alcohol.

The space was larger than it had appeared from outside, with a sprawling dance floor surrounded by elevated platforms where dancers in minimal clothing moved with practiced sensuality.

The lighting was low and pulsing, casting everything in alternating shadows and flashes of colour.

Then I headed into the club to find Alex and his friends. They had secured one of the booths in the back. It was Alex, Arjun, and Nick. Nick said Louise and Kelly were coming. Grrr, Kelly was the last person I wanted to see. I hadn't spoken to her since she had the audacity to tell Matt about Alex.

I'd spotted them in a corner booth, Alex's arm raised in a wave as he caught sight of me. I'd made my way over, conscious of the eyes that followed me—men and women alike, their gazes drawn to the confident sway of my hips, the flash of thigh with each

step, the bold red of my lips.

Alex had stood as I approached, his eyes widening appreciatively as they'd travelled the length of my body. "Damn, Geri," he'd said, leaning in to kiss my cheek. "You look incredible."

"Thanks," I'd replied, sliding into the booth beside him, acutely aware of the way my dress rode up as I sat. "Felt like making an effort tonight."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

Arjun and Nick had greeted me with similar appreciation, their eyes lingering a beat too long on my cleavage before meeting my gaze. I hadn't minded. In fact, I'd revelled in it—in the power of being desired, of knowing I could affect people with just my presence.

"Louise and Kelly should be here soon," Nick had said, and I'd felt my mood darken at the mention of Kelly's name.

"Great," I'd replied, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in my voice.

Alex had shot me a questioning look, but I'd ignored it, reaching for the bottle of vodka on the table and pouring myself a generous shot. "Let's get this party started, shall we?"

The shots had burned a path down my throat, the alcohol hitting my bloodstream with a familiar warmth that had loosened my limbs and quieted the nagging voice in the back of my mind—the one that sounded suspiciously like Con, telling me to get my shit together.

I'd pulled Alex onto the dance floor, losing myself in the pounding rhythm of the music, in the press of bodies around us, in the heat that built between us as we'd moved together.

His hands had found my waist, then slid lower, cupping my ass through the thin fabric of my dress.

I'd pressed closer, grinding against him, feeling him harden in response.

"You're driving me crazy," he'd murmured in my ear, his breath hot against my skin.

"That's the idea," I'd replied, turning in his arms so my back was to his chest, my ass pressed firmly against his groin as I'd continued to move to the music.

We'd danced like that for what felt like hours, the alcohol and the music and the sensation of Alex's body against mine creating a heady cocktail of arousal and abandon.

When Louise and Kelly had finally arrived, I'd been too buzzed to care much about Kelly's presence—until she'd approached me directly, her expression a mixture of contrition and determination.

"Geri, can we talk?" she'd asked, having to shout to be heard over the music.

I'd stared at her, taking in her carefully applied makeup, her trendy outfit, her hopeful expression. And I'd felt... nothing. No anger, no hurt, just a vast emptiness where those emotions should have been.

"Fuck you," I'd said, my voice flat despite the volume. "We're not friends. Do me a favour and avoid me all night."

She'd flinched as if I'd slapped her, her eyes widening with hurt.

For a brief moment, I'd felt a flicker of guilt—Kelly and I had been friends for years, after all.

But then I'd remembered how she'd gone behind my back to Matt, how she'd interfered in my life under the guise of "helping," and the guilt had evaporated.

She'd nodded once, her lips pressed into a thin line, before turning and disappearing

into the crowd. Louise had given me a reproachful look but hadn't said anything, instead following Kelly to wherever she'd gone.

I'd turned back to Alex, pushing the interaction from my mind. "Another drink?" I'd suggested, already leading him back to the bar.

Around 1 AM, a few more of Louise's mates had arrived, and along with them, the drugs had also. And this is where the rabbit hole started. I thought, fuck it, and took one pill and spent the night in a state of blissful harmony. It had been the happiest I had been in weeks, and I loved it.

The pill had been small and white, innocuous-looking in the palm of the guy offering it—one of Louise's friends whose name I couldn't remember or maybe had never known. He'd held it out to me with a knowing smile, as if he could see the battle playing out in my head.

"It's clean," he'd assured me. "Tested it myself."

I'd hesitated, memories of my past struggles with pills flashing through my mind. I'd been down this road before, knew exactly where it led—to a place of temporary bliss followed by crushing lows, to a cycle of dependency that had taken me years to break.

But then I'd thought of the emptiness that had become my constant companion, of the effort it took just to get through each day pretending to be okay, of the new job waiting for me on Monday that represented nothing more than another form of escape.

Fuck it.

I'd taken the pill from his palm and swallowed it dry, ignoring the voice in the back

of my mind that whispered this was a mistake. I didn't want to be careful or responsible or mindful of consequences. I wanted to feel good, just for one night. Was that so wrong?

The effects had taken about thirty minutes to kick in—a gradual warming that had started in my core and spread outward, a lightening of my limbs, a softening of the edges of reality.

Colours had become more vibrant, sounds more textured, sensations more intense.

The music had seemed to flow through me rather than around me, each beat matching the rhythm of my heart.

I'd found myself back on the dance floor, moving with a freedom I hadn't felt in months, maybe years.

Every touch had been electric—Alex's hands on my waist, a stranger's arm brushing against mine, the fabric of my dress against my skin.

I'd thrown my head back, laughing at nothing and everything, feeling truly alive for the first time since. .. since Con.

The thought of him had flitted through my mind without the usual accompanying pain. In my altered state, even memories of Con had seemed benign, just another part of my story rather than an open wound.

Alex had noticed the change in me, his eyes questioning as he'd watched me dance with abandoned joy. "You OK?" he'd shouted over the music, concern evident despite the volume.

"I'm perfect," I'd replied, and in that moment, it had been true. I'd pulled him closer,

pressing my body against his, feeling the hard length of him through his jeans. "Take me home," I'd whispered in his ear, my tongue darting out to trace its shell.

He hadn't needed to be asked twice.

The taxi ride to his place had been a blur of wandering hands and hungry kisses, my dress hiked up around my waist as his fingers had found their way beneath my thong, stroking me to a state of desperate need.

I'd reciprocated, palming him through his jeans, feeling him throb against my hand as I'd whispered all the things I wanted him to do to me.

By the time we'd stumbled through his door, we'd been half-undressed already, clothes discarded in a frantic trail from the entrance to his bedroom.

He'd pushed me onto the bed, his eyes dark with desire as he'd taken in the sight of me—sprawled across his sheets in nothing but my heels and thong, my lipstick smeared, my pupils dilated from both arousal and chemicals.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he'd murmured, stripping off the last of his clothes to reveal his body—lean and toned, his cock standing proud against his stomach.

I'd spread my legs in invitation, too far gone to play coy. "Show me how much you want me."

He'd knelt between my thighs, his hands sliding up to cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples until they'd hardened to sensitive peaks. Then he'd lowered his head, replacing his thumbs with his mouth, sucking and licking until I'd been arching off the bed, my hands tangled in his hair.

"Please," I'd gasped, not even sure what I was begging for—just more, more of

everything.

He'd understood, trailing kisses down my stomach, over my hip bones, to the edge of my thong. With a wicked grin, he'd hooked his fingers into the sides and pulled it down my legs, leaving me completely exposed to his gaze.

"So wet for me," he'd murmured, his breath hot against my most sensitive flesh. And then his mouth had been on me, his tongue exploring every fold, every crevice, finding the bundle of nerves at my centre and focusing his attention there.

The combination of the drug and his skilled mouth had sent me spiralling toward orgasm embarrassingly quickly. I'd cried out, my thighs clamping around his head as waves of pleasure had crashed over me, leaving me trembling and gasping for breath.

But he hadn't given me time to recover. Before the aftershocks had even subsided, he'd been reaching for a condom, rolling it on with practiced ease before positioning himself at my entrance.

"Tell me you want this," he'd said, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

"I want this," I'd replied, wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. "I want you. Now."

He'd entered me in one smooth thrust, filling me completely, the sensation so intense in my heightened state that I'd nearly come again right then. He'd set a relentless pace, each thrust driving me higher, my nails raking down his back as I'd urged him on.

"Harder," I'd demanded, meeting him thrust for thrust. "Make me feel it."

He'd complied, his movements becoming more forceful, the headboard banging

against the wall with each impact. I'd revelled in the roughness, in the pure physical sensation that drowned out all thought, all emotion except the building pressure of another orgasm.

When it had hit, it had been even more intense than the first—a full-body experience that had left me seeing stars, my inner walls clenching around him, pulling him deeper.

He'd followed shortly after, his rhythm faltering as he'd groaned my name, his body tensing above me before collapsing onto my chest.

We'd lain there for a moment, both catching our breath, before he'd rolled off me and disposed of the condom. Then he'd pulled me against him, my back to his chest, his arm draped possessively over my waist.

"That was..." he'd started, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Yeah," I'd agreed, still floating on a cloud of chemical bliss and post-orgasmic glow.

We'd dozed for a while, but the night had been far from over. As the initial effects of the pill had begun to wane, I'd found myself craving more—more touch, more pleasure, more of the oblivion that came with losing myself in physical sensation.

I'd woken him with my mouth, taking him from soft to rock hard in minutes, enjoying the way he'd moaned and cursed as I'd worked him with lips and tongue.

Then I'd straddled him, sinking down onto his length with a satisfied sigh, setting a pace that suited my needs—slow at first, savouring the fullness, then faster as my desire had built again.

He'd watched me with hooded eyes, his hands on my hips guiding my movements,

occasionally reaching up to pinch my nipples or pull me down for a deep, messy kiss.

I'd taken my pleasure from him again and again, riding him until my thighs had burned with the effort, until we'd both been slick with sweat and gasping for breath.

When we'd finally exhausted ourselves, the sky outside his window had been lightening with the first hints of dawn. We'd fallen asleep tangled together, my head on his chest, his heartbeat a steady rhythm beneath my ear.

I'd woken hours later to sunlight streaming through the blinds, my head surprisingly clear given the night's excesses. Alex had still been asleep beside me, his face relaxed in slumber, looking younger and more vulnerable than he ever did awake.

For a moment, panic had threatened to rise—the familiar urge to flee before he woke, to avoid the morning-after awkwardness, the potential for expectations or attachments.

But then I'd remembered: this was Alex. Uncomplicated, undemanding Alex, who wanted from me exactly what I was willing to give—no more, no less.

So I'd stayed, watching the rise and fall of his chest, cataloguing the sensations in my body—the pleasant soreness between my thighs, the slight dryness in my mouth, the lingering warmth in my veins that had nothing to do with the drug and everything to do with the satisfaction of a night well spent.

When he'd finally stirred, blinking sleepily at me, I'd been prepared for awkwardness, for regret, for the usual morning-after dance of pretending the night meant more or less than it did. Instead, he'd simply smiled, a lazy, contented curve of his lips.

"Morning," he'd murmured, his voice rough with sleep. "Coffee?"

"God, yes," I'd replied, grateful for his easy acceptance of the situation.

He'd pulled on a pair of boxers and padded to the kitchen, leaving me to use the bathroom and collect my scattered clothing. By the time I'd emerged, dressed in last night's outfit and with my makeup somewhat salvaged, he'd had two mugs of coffee waiting on the counter.

We'd sipped in companionable silence for a while, neither of us feeling the need to dissect what had happened or define what it meant. It was refreshing, this lack of pressure, this mutual understanding that what we shared was physical, temporary, and uncomplicated.

"So," he'd said eventually, "excited for the new job?"

"Yeah," I'd replied, grateful for the neutral topic. "Nine to five, Monday to Friday. Like a real adult."

He'd chuckled at that. "Congratulations. We should celebrate properly next weekend."

The invitation had hung in the air between us, and I'd found myself nodding without hesitation. "Definitely. Same place?"

"If you want. Or we could try somewhere new."

"Let's go back to The Underground," I'd suggested, thinking of the job opportunity, of Tasha with her tattoos and knowing smile, of the way the music and the crowd and the atmosphere had made me feel alive in a way I hadn't in too long. "I liked it there."

"Underground it is," he'd agreed easily. "Friday night?"

"Friday night," I'd confirmed, already looking forward to it—to the escape, to the possibility of another pill, to the promise of more nights like the one we'd just shared.

As I'd left his apartment later that morning, stepping into the bright sunlight of a Saturday in the city, I'd felt.

.. not happy, exactly, but something close to it.

A contentment born not of genuine fulfillment but of acceptance—acceptance that this was my life now, that I was choosing this path with eyes wide open, that I was embracing the descent rather than fighting it.

I wasn't sure if it was because I had resigned myself to the fact that I was okay slipping up, or because I knew I was about to slide back into old habits and just allowed myself to tag along for the ride, but in that moment, I was happy and blissfully unaware of where I was heading.

Or maybe I was aware, and I just didn't care anymore.

Either way, as I'd hailed a taxi to take me home, I'd felt lighter than I had in weeks. The weight of Con's absence, of James's disappointment, of my own self-loathing—all of it had seemed distant, manageable, almost irrelevant in the face of this new direction I was taking.

The rabbit hole beckoned, dark and deep and promising oblivion. And I was jumping in with both feet, eyes closed, arms spread wide, welcoming whatever waited at the bottom.

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Geri

"Hey, it's Tasha from the Underground. Got a minute?"

"Yeah, of course," I'd replied, stepping away from my workstation at the restaurant, ignoring James's questioning glance.

I'd felt a smile spread across my face, the first genuine one in days. "Definitely interested. When do I start?"

"This Friday work for you? I can show you the ropes before we open."

"Perfect," I'd said, already mentally planning my outfit, calculating how this would fit with my new day job that started Monday. "I'll be there at eight-thirty."

"Looking forward to it," she'd replied, and I could hear the smile in her voice. "See you Friday, Geri."

I'd hung up feeling a strange mix of excitement and relief. The Underground job wasn't just extra money—it was an anchor, a guaranteed reason to be out three nights a week, surrounded by noise and people and distractions. It was exactly what I needed.

I'd texted Alex immediately:

Got the door job at Underground. Start Friday. Meet me there when my shift ends at 1?

His response had been immediate:

Hell yes. Congrats! I'll bring the celebration.

I'd known exactly what kind of "celebration" he meant, and the thought had sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. More pills, more dancing, more mindless pleasure to drown out the emptiness. I couldn't wait.

Friday had arrived with agonizing slowness.

My last few shifts at the restaurant had been exercises in avoidance—ducking James's concerned glances, deflecting questions about my new jobs, keeping conversations superficial and brief.

By the time I'd clocked out on Friday afternoon, the tension between us had been thick enough to cut with a knife.

"So, tonight's your first night at that club?" he'd asked as I'd untied my apron, his tone carefully neutral.

"Yeah," I'd replied, not meeting his eyes. "Just working the door, taking money. Easy stuff."

He'd been quiet for a moment, and I'd felt his eyes on me, searching for something—what, I wasn't sure. "Be careful, Geri," he'd finally said, his voice soft. "That scene can get... intense."

I'd looked up then, irritation flaring. "I'm not a child, James. I can handle myself."

"I know you're not a child," he'd said, echoing our conversation from weeks before. "But I also know you're not in a great place right now."

"I'm fine," I'd snapped, the lie so familiar it had rolled off my tongue without thought. "And even if I wasn't, it's not your problem."

He'd flinched slightly at that, hurt flashing across his face before he'd schooled his expression back to neutral. "Right. Well, have fun tonight."

"I will," I'd replied, grabbing my bag and heading for the door without a backward glance.

The guilt had hit me halfway home—a brief, sharp pang that I'd quickly suppressed. James meant well, I knew that. But his concern felt like a weight, a responsibility I hadn't asked for and didn't want. It was easier to push him away, to burn that bridge like I'd burned so many others.

I'd arrived at The Underground at exactly 8:30, dressed in tight black jeans and a low-cut top that showed just enough cleavage to be distracting but not enough to be unprofessional.

My makeup had been heavier than usual, my hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail that emphasized my cheekbones and the long line of my neck.

Tasha had been waiting at the entrance, looking effortlessly cool in ripped jeans and a vintage band t-shirt, her tattoos on full display. She'd given me an appreciative once-over before nodding in approval.

"You'll do," she'd said with a small smile. "Come on, I'll show you around."

The tour had been brief—the main floor I'd already seen, plus a small office in the back where the night's take was counted, a staff room with lockers for personal belongings, and the VIP area upstairs that was only open on special occasions.

Then she'd walked me through my duties: taking the cover charge, stamping hands, checking IDs, keeping the line moving, and radioing security if there was any trouble.

"Most nights are pretty smooth," she'd explained as we'd set up the cash box at the entrance. "But some can get rowdy, especially around holidays. Don't be afraid to call for backup if someone gives you shit."

"Got it," I'd said, feeling a flutter of nervousness mixed with excitement. This was real—a new job, a new scene, a new version of myself taking shape.

"Oh, and one more thing," Tasha had added, her expression turning serious. "I know what goes on in clubs like this. I'm not naive. But keep your own shit under control, okay? I don't care what you do on your own time, but when you're on the clock, you're representing The Underground."

I'd nodded, understanding the unspoken warning. "Absolutely. I'm here to work."

She'd held my gaze for a moment longer, then nodded, apparently satisfied. "Good. Let's open up."

The first night had passed in a blur of faces and cash and the steady thump of bass from inside. I'd fallen into a rhythm quickly—take money, stamp hand, check ID, next. The hours had flown by, and before I knew it, it was 1 am and Tasha was coming to relieve me.

"Not bad for your first night," she'd said, counting the cash in the box. "You're a natural."

"Thanks," I'd replied, feeling a glow of satisfaction that had nothing to do with the job itself and everything to do with the approval in her eyes.

"Go have fun," she'd said, nodding toward the club's interior. "You've earned it."

I'd spotted Alex immediately, lounging at the bar with a drink in hand, his eyes scanning the crowd. When he'd seen me, his face had lit up with a smile that had sent a jolt of desire straight to my core.

"Look at you, all professional," he'd teased as I'd approached, his eyes roaming appreciatively over my body. "How was it?"

"Good," I'd replied, sliding onto the stool beside him. "But I'm ready for that celebration now."

His smile had turned knowing, and he'd reached into his pocket, discreetly pressing a small pill into my palm. "Happy first day."

I'd swallowed it without hesitation, chasing it with the drink he'd ordered for me. The familiar warmth had started to spread through my veins within minutes, the edges of reality softening, colours becoming more vibrant, sounds more textured.

"Dance with me," I'd said, pulling him toward the crowded floor, already feeling the music pulsing through me like a second heartbeat.

We'd moved together in the press of bodies, his hands on my hips, my arms around his neck, the space between us charged with electricity.

The drug had heightened every sensation—the slide of his hands down my back, the brush of his lips against my ear, the hardness of him pressing against me through our clothes.

"God, you're beautiful," he'd murmured, his breath hot against my skin. "Want to get out of here?"

I'd nodded, too far gone to form words, desire coursing through me like liquid fire. We'd stumbled out of the club and into a waiting taxi, hands wandering, mouths hungry, the ride to his place a blur of sensation and need.

The sex had been frantic, desperate—clothes torn off and discarded, bodies colliding with bruising force, pleasure so intense it had bordered on pain. I'd lost myself in it, in the pure physical sensation that drowned out all thought, all emotion except the building pressure of release.

When it had finally come, it had been explosive, leaving me trembling and gasping for breath, my body slick with sweat, my mind blissfully, temporarily empty of everything except the afterglow of pleasure.

I'd fallen asleep in his arms, the drug still humming through my system, and for once, I hadn't dreamed of Con.

I started taking more drugs, and had finished up working with James at the restaurant. I started my new job in the city and worked Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at The Underground, where I got on pills after work and danced all night long.

The pattern had established itself quickly—weekdays at the medical call centre, taking appointments and fielding complaints with mechanical efficiency, weekends at The Underground, collecting cover charges and stamping hands before diving into a night of chemical bliss and physical abandon.

The call centre job had been exactly as mind-numbing as I'd hoped—a steady stream of irritated patients and harried doctors, all wanting something immediately, none of them caring about the person on the other end of the line.

I'd excelled at it precisely because it required nothing of me emotionally.

I'd show up, do my job, go home. No attachments, no expectations, no one looking at me with concern or disappointment.

My coworkers had been pleasant enough, in a distant sort of way.

We'd exchanged pleasantries in the break room, complained about difficult callers, occasionally shared lunch orders.

But none of them had tried to get close, to really know me, and I'd kept it that way deliberately—answering personal questions with vague generalities, declining invitations to after-work drinks, keeping my weekends to myself.

"You're so mysterious," one of the receptionists, a bubbly blonde named Megan, had commented one day. "Always rushing off on Fridays. Hot date?"

"Something like that," I'd replied with a noncommittal smile, not bothering to correct her assumption.

The truth—that I spent my weekends in a haze of drugs and anonymous sex—would have shocked her, I was sure.

Sweet, proper Megan with her engagement ring and her weekend plans with her fiancé.

She lived in a different world than I did, one where people made plans and kept promises and built futures together.

My world had narrowed to the cycle of work and escape, each day bleeding into the next with little to distinguish them except the intensity of the high, the face of the stranger in my bed, the depth of the emptiness that followed.

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The drugs had become a constant, not just on weekends but increasingly during the week as well.

A pill to get through a particularly tedious day at work.

A line in the bathroom of a bar on a Wednesday night.

Whatever it took to keep the numbness at bay, to feel something, anything, even if it was artificial and fleeting.

I started to hook up with strangers and started to drink more, waking up in random places and just not caring, getting Ubers home the next day and pretending that life was fine.

The faces had blurred together after a while—the guy from the VIP section with the expensive watch and the cocaine; the girl with the tongue piercing who'd taken me home to her loft and fucked me until I'd seen stars; the couple who'd invited me back to their hotel room for a night I still couldn't fully remember.

Names had become optional, backstories irrelevant. All that had mattered was the moment, the connection, the temporary filling of the void inside me.

"What's your name?" a man had asked one night, his hand already sliding up my thigh in the dark corner of a club I didn't recognize.

"Does it matter?" I'd replied, pulling him closer, my lips finding his in a kiss that tasted of whiskey and desperation.

It hadn't mattered to him, just as it hadn't mattered to the countless others who'd shared my bed, my body, but never my thoughts, my fears, my true self. That part of me had remained locked away, protected behind walls of chemical haze and physical pleasure.

The drinking had escalated alongside the drugs and the sex—no longer just weekend binges but daily necessity.

A flask in my desk drawer at work. A bottle of wine with dinner, followed by shots of whatever was available.

Mornings had become exercises in functioning through hangovers, in piecing together the fragments of nights I couldn't fully recall.

I'd wake up in strange apartments, in hotel rooms I didn't remember checking into, occasionally in my own bed with no memory of how I'd gotten there.

The panic that should have accompanied these blackouts had been conspicuously absent, replaced by a dull acceptance, a resignation to the chaos I'd created.

"You need to be more careful," Alex had said one morning after I'd shown up at his door at 5 AM, dishevelled and disoriented, having lost my phone and my purse somewhere between the club and his apartment.

"I'm fine," I'd insisted, the words slurring slightly despite my best efforts.

He'd looked at me for a long moment, concern evident in his eyes. "This isn't sustainable, Geri."

"Since when are you my keeper?" I'd snapped, irritation flaring. "I thought we had an understanding. No strings, no judgments."

"No strings doesn't mean I don't care if you self-destruct," he'd replied quietly.

I'd laughed at that, a harsh, bitter sound that had seemed to surprise even me. "That's exactly what it means, Alex. That's the whole point."

He hadn't argued further, just let me crash in his bed until noon, then called me an Uber when I'd insisted on going home. But something had shifted between us after that—a distance that hadn't been there before, a wariness in his eyes when we'd meet at The Underground.

I hadn't cared. Or at least, I'd told myself I didn't. Alex had been just one of many distractions, easily replaced by the next willing body, the next chemical high, the next temporary escape from the reality of my existence.

Life had continued in this vein for weeks, a blur of work and drugs and sex and alcohol. Each day indistinguishable from the last except for the growing emptiness inside me, the increasing difficulty in pretending that everything was fine.

It wasn't until New Year's Eve, and The Underground had a work Christmas party that I made a mistake. It was a massive party in the city, and I got wasted and took too many drugs.

The Underground had closed to the public for the occasion, transformed into a winter wonderland of silver and blue decorations, ice sculptures, and an open bar that had been flowing freely since 8 PM.

The staff—normally a disparate group of individuals working different shifts—had come together for the night, a rare opportunity to socialize without the pressure of work.

I'd arrived already buzzed, having pre-gamed at home with a bottle of vodka and a

pill from my dwindling stash. The world had been pleasantly fuzzy around the edges, my body light, my mind mercifully quiet.

"Geri!" Tasha had called, waving me over to the bar where she'd been standing with a group of bouncers and bartenders. "You made it!"

"Wouldn't miss it," I'd replied, accepting the shot she'd handed me and downing it in one smooth motion.

"Pace yourself," she'd warned with a knowing smile. "Night's still young."

I'd ignored the advice, as I'd ignored all warnings and cautions in recent weeks.

One shot had become two, had become three, had become too many to count.

Someone had passed me a pill, then another, and I'd taken them without question, chasing them with more alcohol, riding the wave of chemical euphoria as it had crashed over me.

The night had fragmented after that—flashes of dancing on the bar, of kissing someone whose face I couldn't recall, of stumbling to the bathroom to snort a line off the sink with a bartender whose name escaped me.

At some point, the party had spilled out of The Underground and into the streets of the city, a roving band of intoxicated revellers moving from club to club as midnight had approached. I'd followed, swept along in the current, too far gone to make decisions of my own.

We'd ended up at a massive club in the heart of downtown, the bass so loud it had made my teeth vibrate, the crowd so dense it had been hard to move. I'd lost track of Tasha and the others from The Underground, finding myself alone in a sea of

strangers as the countdown to midnight had begun.

TEN, NINE, EIGHT...

I'd pushed my way toward the bar, desperate for another drink, for something to dull the sudden, inexplicable panic that had begun to rise in my chest.

SEVEN, SIX, FIVE...

A hand had grabbed my ass, hard enough to hurt even through the haze of drugs and alcohol. I'd whirled around, coming face to face with a man I didn't recognize—tall, broad-shouldered, with a predatory smile that had sent a chill down my spine despite my intoxicated state.

FOUR, THREE, TWO...

"How about a New Year's kiss, beautiful?" he'd slurred, his hand moving from my ass to my waist, pulling me against him with bruising force.

ONE...

"Get off me," I'd growled, trying to push him away, but he'd held tight, his other hand coming up to grab my breast roughly.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

The crowd had erupted in cheers and whistles, the sound deafening as the man had tried to force his lips on mine. Something had snapped inside me—a surge of rage so pure and hot it had cut through the chemical fog like a knife.

I'd pulled back my fist and punched him square in the face, feeling a sick satisfaction

as his nose had crunched under my knuckles, blood spraying in a crimson arc.

"You fucking bitch!" he'd howled, clutching his face, blood seeping between his fingers.

Security had materialized almost instantly, alerted by the commotion. "What's going on here?" a bouncer had demanded, looking between me and the bleeding man.

"She broke my fucking nose!" the man had shouted, pointing at me accusingly.

"He grabbed my ass and my tit," I'd retorted, swaying slightly on my feet, the adrenaline of the moment mixing dangerously with the cocktail of substances in my system.

The bouncer had sighed, clearly used to dealing with New Year's Eve drama. "Both of you, out. Now."

"But she?—"

"I don't care who started it. Out."

I'd been escorted to the door, the bouncer's hand firm but not unkind on my elbow. "You okay to get home?" he'd asked as we'd reached the street, genuine concern in his voice.

"Fine," I'd mumbled, though the world had been spinning alarmingly around me, the cold night air doing nothing to clear my head.

"Maybe call a friend," he'd suggested before turning back to the club, leaving me alone on the sidewalk, the sounds of celebration continuing unabated behind the closed doors.

I'd fumbled for my phone, squinting at the screen that seemed to blur and double before my eyes. I needed to get home, but where was home? The address escaped me, my mind a jumble of disconnected thoughts and sensations.

I'd managed to flag down a passing taxi, and slide into the back seat.

"Address?" the driver had asked, eyeing me warily in the rearview mirror.

I'd stared at him blankly, panic rising as I'd realized I couldn't remember where I lived. The drugs, the alcohol, the adrenaline crash—all of it had combined to wipe my mind clean of such basic information.

"I... I don't know," I'd admitted, my voice small and frightened in a way I hadn't heard since I was a child.

The driver had sighed heavily. "Look, lady, I can't just drive around all night. You need to give me an address."

Desperation had clawed at me, tears threatening to spill over.

Who could I call? Alex? No, we'd barely spoken in weeks.

Louise? She'd made it clear she was done with my shit after I'd cut Kelly out.

James? The thought had been laughable—he'd be asleep, and even if he wasn't, I couldn't bear the thought of him seeing me like this.

Con.

The name had surfaced from the depths of my mind, unbidden but undeniable. Con would help. Con always helped, even when I didn't deserve it.

With shaking fingers, I'd scrolled through my contacts, finding his name and hitting call before I could second-guess myself.

He'd answered on the third ring, his voice thick with sleep. "Geri? It's 1 in the morning."

"Con," I'd choked out, tears finally spilling over. "I need help. I don't know where I am. I don't know where I live. I'm in a taxi and I can't remember my address."

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There had been a pause, and I'd held my breath, terrified he'd hang up, that he'd finally had enough of my chaos.

"Put the driver on," he'd said instead, his voice calm and steady.

I'd handed my phone to the driver, who'd had a brief conversation with Con before handing it back to me.

"He's taking you to my place," Con had said. "I'll be waiting outside. Just stay in the car until you get here, okay?"

"Okay," I'd whispered, relief washing over me in a wave so powerful it had left me dizzy.

"And, Geri? It's going to be okay."

I'd wanted to believe him, but the darkness had been closing in, my consciousness slipping away despite my best efforts to stay awake. The last thing I'd remembered was the gentle sway of the car as it had turned a corner, and then nothing.

Consciousness had returned slowly, painfully, like swimming up from the bottom of a murky lake.

My head had felt like it was being split open with an axe, my mouth dry as sandpaper, my stomach rolling with nausea.

I'd become aware of softness beneath me—a bed, not my own—and the gentle sound

of breathing nearby.

I'd forced my eyes open, wincing at the light streaming through unfamiliar curtains. The room had come into focus gradually—minimalist decor, neutral colours, a bookshelf filled with titles I couldn't make out from the bed. And there, in an armchair pulled up beside the bed, Con.

He'd been asleep, his head tilted at an uncomfortable angle, dark circles under his eyes suggesting he'd been there for hours. He'd looked thinner than I remembered, his cheekbones more pronounced, but still undeniably Con—the man I'd run from, the man I'd called in my darkest hour.

I'd shifted slightly, trying to sit up, and realized with a jolt of panic that I was naked beneath the sheets. My clothes were nowhere to be seen, and my memory of the previous night ended abruptly at the Taxi ride.

The movement had roused Con, his eyes fluttering open, focusing on me with a mixture of relief and wariness.

"You're awake," he'd said simply, his voice rough with sleep.

"What happened?" I'd croaked, clutching the sheet to my chest, suddenly, intensely vulnerable. "Why am I naked? Did we...?"

He'd shaken his head quickly, understanding my unfinished question. "No. God, no. You were in no state to consent to anything, and I'm not that kind of man."

Relief had washed over me, followed immediately by shame. Of course Con wouldn't take advantage of me. The fact that I'd even considered it said more about the company I'd been keeping lately than it did about him.

"You don't remember?" he'd asked, studying my face.

I'd shaken my head, immediately regretting the movement as pain had lanced through my skull. "Last thing I remember is being in the taxi... Calling you."

He'd sighed, running a hand through his hair—longer now than when I'd last seen him, curling slightly at the ends.

"You passed out in the car. When you got here, the driver helped me get you inside, but as soon as we got you to the bathroom, you started throwing up.

A lot. All over yourself, the floor, everywhere. "

I'd closed my eyes, mortification burning through me. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," he'd said, his voice gentle. "It happens. Anyway, you were covered in vomit, so I had to get you cleaned up. I tried to keep you as covered as possible, but... well, there was a lot of vomit."

The mental image had been humiliating—Con stripping off my soiled clothes, cleaning me up, putting me to bed like a child. And yet, there had been something deeply touching about it too—that he would do that for me, after everything.

"Why did you stay in the chair?" I'd asked, noticing the blanket that had fallen to the floor beside it, evidence of his night-long vigil.

"I was worried you might throw up again in your sleep," he'd explained. "Didn't want you to choke. It happens more often than you'd think."

The matter-of-fact way he'd said it had made my heart ache. He'd stayed up all night, watching over me, making sure I was safe. After I'd run from him, ignored his

messages, cut him out of my life without explanation.

"Thank you," I'd whispered, the words wholly inadequate for what I was feeling.

He'd nodded, his expression unreadable. "Your clothes are in the wash. Should be done soon. There's water and painkillers on the nightstand. You should drink as much as you can keep down."

I'd reached for the glass with shaking hands, downing the pills gratefully. "What time is it?"

"Just past noon," he'd replied, standing up and stretching, his joints popping audibly. "I'll give you some privacy to get dressed once your clothes are dry. There's a spare toothbrush in the bathroom cabinet if you want to freshen up."

He'd moved toward the door, his back to me, and I'd been struck by how formal he was being, how careful to maintain distance between us. It had hurt, but I'd understood it. I'd hurt him, and now he was protecting himself.

"Con," I'd called as he'd reached the doorway. He'd paused but hadn't turned around. "I really am sorry. Not just for last night, but for... everything."

He'd been silent for a long moment, his shoulders tense. "I know," he'd finally said, so quietly I'd almost missed it. Then he'd left, closing the door softly behind him.

I'd sat there in his bed, naked and hungover and more ashamed than I'd ever been in my life.

The past months had flashed before my eyes—the drinking, the drugs, the meaningless sex, the bridges burned, the people hurt.

All of it in service of what? Avoiding pain? Creating distance? Punishing myself?

For the first time in months, I'd allowed myself to really feel the weight of what I'd done, of who I'd become. And it had been crushing.

I'd made it to the bathroom just in time, emptying the meagre contents of my stomach into the toilet, tears streaming down my face as I'd heaved and sobbed, the physical purge mirroring the emotional one.

When I'd finally finished, I'd rinsed my mouth and stared at my reflection in the mirror—pale, hollow-eyed, a ghost of the person I used to be. And in that moment, I'd made a decision.

I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep running, couldn't keep destroying myself and hurting the people who cared about me. Something had to change.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:31 am

Geri

I was heading to my mother and brother, where I would go back to rehab, and I would get my life back in order. I wasn't running away this time; I was heading to a destination.

The two weeks since New Year's had passed in a blur of difficult conversations and painful decisions.

After that morning at Con's apartment—waking up naked and hungover, with no memory of how I'd gotten there—something had finally broken inside me.

Or maybe it had been fixed. Either way, I couldn't keep going as I had been.

We'd talked for hours that day, Con and I.

Really talked, for the first time since I'd walked away from him months ago.

I'd told him everything—about the drugs, the drinking, the meaningless hookups, the blackouts.

About how I'd been spiralling since before I met him, how I'd gotten clean once before but had never addressed the underlying issues that had driven me to use in the first place.

"I think I need help," I'd admitted, my voice small and frightened. "Real help this time."

He hadn't judged me, hadn't lectured me. He'd just nodded, his eyes full of a compassion I didn't deserve, and said, "Then let's get you help."

We'd spent the rest of the day researching options. Con had suggested I go to England, to be near my family while I went through rehab. He'd even offered to come with me, to put his life on hold to support me through this.

"I can't let you do that," I'd told him, touched beyond words but determined not to drag him down with me. "You've got the season in Canada."

"You're more important than a season snowboarding," he'd said simply.

But I'd insisted. This was my mess to clean up, my journey to make. And deep down, I knew I needed to do this on my own—to prove to myself that I could, that I was strong enough.

In the end, we'd compromised. He would go to Canada as planned, and I would go to England for rehab. We would stay in touch—calls, texts, Skype—and see where we stood when we were both back.

"No pressure," he'd said. "Just... don't disappear on me again, okay?"

I'd promised I wouldn't. And for once, I intended to keep that promise.

The next day, I'd called my mother. It had been the hardest phone call of my life—admitting to her that I'd relapsed, that I was in trouble again, that I needed help.

She'd cried, of course. But then she'd rallied, my strong, practical mother, and started making arrangements.

There was a good facility near them, she'd said. They could get me in within two

weeks.

"Just come here, Geri," she'd said, her voice thick with tears. "We'll sort this out together."

After that, everything had happened quickly.

I'd given notice at both jobs, packed up my stuff, started the process of detoxing on my own as much as I could before the flight.

Con had helped, staying with me through the worst of the initial withdrawal, holding my hair back as I'd vomited, bringing me water and bland food when I could keep it down, distracting me with bad movies and worse jokes when the cravings got too intense.

And then there had been James. Sweet, loyal James, who'd stuck by me despite how terribly I'd treated him. I'd gone to see him at the restaurant, a week before my flight.

"I'm leaving," I'd told him without preamble, sliding into a booth during his break. "Going to England. To rehab."

He'd looked at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he'd reached across the table and taken my hand. "I'm proud of you," he'd said simply.

I'd burst into tears then, ugly, heaving sobs that had drawn concerned looks from nearby diners. James had just moved to sit beside me, his arm around my shoulders, letting me cry it out.

"I don't deserve a friend like you," I'd choked out when I could finally speak again. "After everything I've done, the way I've treated you..."

"When you love someone, you love them and their flaws," he'd said, echoing words he'd said to me before.

"I knew you before you were this person.

I know the person you can be, and I loved that person.

And I love this broken version too. Just go get your shit together, and I'll see you in six months. "

He'd insisted on driving me to the airport, helping me check my bags, waiting with me until it was time to go through security. We'd hugged for a long time, neither of us wanting to let go.

"Thank you," I'd whispered against his shoulder. "For not giving up on me."

"Never," he'd replied, his voice fierce. "Now go catch your plane. And text me when you land, okay? Both times."

I'd nodded, wiping away tears, and then forced myself to walk away, through security and toward my gate, not looking back because I knew if I did, I might lose my nerve.

And now here I was, boarding pass in hand, about to embark on a journey that terrified me more than anything I'd ever done. Because this time, I wasn't running away from my problems—I was running straight toward them, with nowhere to hide.

The line moved slowly as passengers filed onto the plane.

I clutched my carry-on tighter, fighting the familiar urge to bolt, to find the nearest bar and drown the anxiety in alcohol.

But I'd made it fourteen days sober now—the longest stretch in months—and I was determined not to break that streak.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. A text from Con:

You've got this. Call me when you land in Tokyo. Proud of you.

A lump formed in my throat. He'd been sending me these little messages of encouragement all week, as if he could sense when my resolve was wavering. And somehow, they always came at exactly the right moment.

I typed back a quick:

Thank you. Will do.

Before switching my phone to airplane mode and shuffling forward with the line.

Twenty-three hours is a long time to be trapped with your thoughts. The first leg to Tokyo had been the hardest—thirteen hours of fighting cravings, of replaying every bad decision I'd made over the past year, of wondering if I was strong enough to see this through.

I'd tried to distract myself with movies, with the book Con had given me for the journey, with fitful attempts at sleep. But my mind had kept circling back to the same questions: How had I let things get so bad? Would I ever truly be okay? Was I beyond fixing?

By the time we'd landed in Tokyo, I'd been a jittery mess, my body aching for a drink, for a pill, for anything to take the edge off. I'd called Con from the airport lounge as promised, the sound of his voice a lifeline in the storm of my anxiety.

"How are you holding up?" he'd asked, concern evident even through the patchy connection.

"I'm here," I'd replied, which was the most honest answer I could give. "Not great, but here."

"That's all you need to be right now," he'd said. "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other."

After we'd hung up, I'd wandered the terminal, eventually finding a sushi restaurant where I'd ordered without really thinking. The food had looked beautiful, artfully arranged on a wooden board, but after a few bites, my stomach had rebelled.

I'd barely made it to the bathroom in time, heaving into the toilet as my body rejected the meal. But it hadn't just been the sushi—it had been days of this now, waves of nausea and sweating and trembling as my system struggled to adjust to the absence of the chemicals I'd been flooding it with.

Detox. Such a clinical word for such a messy, humiliating process.

I'd rinsed my mouth, splashed water on my face, and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

The woman looking back at me had been pale and drawn, dark circles under her eyes, cheekbones too sharp from weeks of barely eating.

But her eyes had been clear for the first time in months, not glazed or dilated or bloodshot.

Progress, I'd told myself. Small, painful progress.

The second leg of the journey had been marginally easier, exhaustion finally winning out over anxiety, allowing me to sleep for a few hours. I'd woken as we'd begun our descent into Heathrow, the landscape of England spread out below us—green and grey and comforting.

My new home for the next six months.

As the plane touched down with a jolt, I thought about what awaited me—my mother's worried face, my brother's cautious support, the sterile halls of the rehab facility where I'd spend the next three months.

It wasn't an appealing prospect. But it was necessary.

It was the consequence of my choices, the price I had to pay for a chance at a better future.

James's word echoed in my mind, "When you love someone, you love them and their flaws. I knew you before you were this person, I know the person you can be, and I loved that person, and I love this broken version too. Just go get your shit together, and I'll see you in six months."

Maybe he was right. Maybe love wasn't something you earned or deserved—maybe it just was, as fundamental and unquestionable as gravity.

And maybe the people who truly loved you didn't do so despite your flaws, but with full knowledge of them, accepting the whole messy, complicated reality of who you were.

The thought was both comforting and terrifying. Because if that was true—if Con and James and my family loved me not because they were blind to my faults, but because they saw me clearly and loved me anyway—then I had been running from something

real and precious. Something worth fighting for.

As the plane taxied to the gate and passengers around me began gathering their belongings, I took a deep breath and made myself a promise.

This time would be different. This time, I wouldn't just go through the motions of recovery, ticking boxes and saying what the counsellors wanted to hear.

This time, I would do the real work—the hard, painful work of facing my demons, of understanding why I kept running, why I kept sabotaging myself, why I was so afraid of being loved.

Because I was tired of running. Tired of hurting people. Tired of hurting myself.

The seatbelt sign dinged off, and passengers began standing, retrieving bags from overhead compartments, forming the usual impatient queue in the aisle. I remained seated for a moment longer, gathering my courage.

Then I stood, pulled my carry-on from under the seat in front of me, and joined the line. One step at a time. That's all I could do—all anyone could do, really. And for now, that had to be enough.

As I walked through the jet bridge toward the terminal, toward whatever came next, I felt something unfamiliar stirring in my chest. Not happiness, exactly—I was still too raw, too sick, too scared for that. But something adjacent to it. Something that felt, cautiously, like hope.

I wasn't running away this time. I was heading to a destination. And for the first time in longer than I could remember, I was facing forward instead of looking back.

Geri

Rehab passed in tears, vomit, and lots of painful therapy sessions. One thing people don't talk about is the struggle you go through when you're in there. The questions you get asked, the things you have to pull up from the depths where they need to stay.

The facility my mother had found was nestled in the English countryside, all exposed beams and stone walls, trying desperately to look like a quaint country retreat rather than what it was—a place where broken people came to be put back together.

My room was small but private, with a narrow bed, a desk by the window overlooking the gardens, and a bathroom so compact I could barely turn around in the shower.

But it was clean and quiet, and after the chaos of the past few months, that alone felt like a luxury.

The first week was purely physical—my body purging itself of the last traces of chemicals, rebelling against their absence with a vengeance that left me weak and hollow.

I'd thought I'd done most of the detoxing before I left, but apparently my system had other ideas.

The nurses were kind but firm, bringing me water and clean sheets when I soaked mine through with sweat, checking my vitals with practiced efficiency, assuring me that this would pass.

And it did, eventually. The shaking subsided, the nausea became manageable, the headaches dulled from splitting to merely throbbing. But as my body began to heal, the real work started—the work I'd been dreading since I agreed to come here.

Therapy.

I found therapy wasn't my friend. When I pulled up things, it made me spiral, but I did it anyway for the sake of being in here. But I knew I wouldn't attend again once I was out.

Dr. Winters was my primary therapist—a woman in her fifties with silver-streaked dark hair and eyes that seemed to see right through my bullshit. Our first session had set the tone for what was to come.

"So, Geraldine," she'd said, consulting the file in her lap. "This isn't your first time in recovery."

It hadn't been a question, but I'd answered anyway. "No."

"And what do you think was different about this relapse?"

I'd shrugged, already uncomfortable. "I don't know. It just happened."

She'd looked at me for a long moment, her expression neutral. "Things don't 'just happen,' Geraldine. Especially not relapses. They're the culmination of choices, of patterns, of unresolved issues."

"Fine," I'd snapped. "I made bad choices. I know that. That's why I'm here."

"Why are you here?" she'd asked, ignoring my tone.

"To get clean."

"You could get clean anywhere. Lock yourself in a room for a few weeks, and physically, you'd achieve the same result. Why are you here, specifically?"

The question had caught me off-guard. Why was I here? Because my mother had arranged it? Because Con had encouraged it? Because I'd hit rock bottom on New Year's Eve?

"I don't want to be that person anymore," I'd finally said, my voice small. "The one who runs. The one who hurts people. The one who's always looking for the next escape."

She'd nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer. "Good. That's something we can work with."

And work we did. Three times a week, one-on-one sessions where she'd probe and push and question, forcing me to examine parts of myself I'd spent years burying.

Group therapy daily, where I'd listen to other people's stories—some so similar to mine it was eerie, others so different I could barely comprehend them—and gradually, reluctantly, share my own.

The questions were relentless. Why did I run from intimacy? Why did I sabotage relationships? What was I so afraid of? What was I trying to numb with the drugs and alcohol? What had happened to make me believe I wasn't worthy of love?

That last one had been the hardest. Because the answer wasn't one big, dramatic event—it was a thousand tiny moments, a lifetime of feeling like I was never quite enough, of believing that if people really knew me, they wouldn't stay.

"But that's not true, is it?" Dr. Winters had challenged during our fourth week. "You have people who know you—really know you—and they're still there. Your mother. Your brother. Your friend James. Con."

I'd flinched at Con's name, as I always did. "They don't know everything."

"Then tell them," she'd said simply. "Start with one truth you've been hiding, and see what happens."

So I had. Not all at once, and not to everyone. But bit by bit, I'd started to open up—first in my calls to James, then in conversations with my mother during her visits.

My mum visited me weekly and always brought me a bag of lollies.

She was my biggest cheerleader. We might not have gotten along throughout the years, and she might have only called me to check in, but I had come to understand that wasn't her fault—it was mine.

I had pushed everyone away, and the fact that she called me weekly to check in was the only way I allowed her to show that she cared, not how she wanted to, but it had been me.

So I had started to open up with her more and allowed her in more.

Our relationship had started to flourish, to grow.

The first time she'd visited, a week after I'd arrived, had been awkward. We'd sat in the visitors' lounge, making stilted small talk, both of us dancing around the elephant in the room—the fact that I was back in rehab, that I'd failed again.

"I brought you these," she'd said, handing me a paper bag filled with boiled sweets—the same kind she used to give me as a child when I was sick.

"Thanks, Mum," I'd replied, touched by the gesture despite myself.

We'd lapsed into silence again, the only sound the crinkling of the sweet wrapper as I'd unwrapped one and popped it in my mouth.

"I'm sorry," I'd finally said, the words feeling inadequate but necessary.

She'd reached across the table and taken my hand, her own cool and dry against my clammy palm. "I know, love. I know."

And somehow, that simple acknowledgment had broken something open between us.

I'd started to cry, quiet tears at first, then heaving sobs that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside me.

She'd moved to sit beside me, her arm around my shoulders, letting me cry it out just as James had done at the airport.

"I've made such a mess of everything," I'd choked out when I could speak again.

"Yes," she'd agreed, her honesty startling me. "But you're here now. You're trying to fix it. That's what matters."

After that, her visits had become the highlight of my weeks. She'd bring me sweets and news from home, and I'd gradually share more with her—about my life back home, about the friends I'd made and lost, about Con. Not everything, not yet. But more than I ever had before.

"He sounds like a good man," she'd said one day, after I'd told her about how Con had helped me through the initial detox, how he'd stayed with me despite everything.

"He is," I'd agreed, a lump forming in my throat. "Too good for me."

She'd frowned at that. "Don't say that, Geraldine. You're worthy of love. You always have been."

I'd wanted to believe her. But there was still so much she didn't know, so much I hadn't told anyone except Dr. Winters. And even with her, I'd only scratched the surface.

The deeper work came in the quiet hours, alone in my room, when I'd sit at the desk and write.

Dr. Winters had suggested journaling as a way to process my thoughts, to practice being honest with myself before I could be honest with others.

At first, I'd resisted—writing had never been my thing, and the idea of putting my darkest thoughts on paper seemed terrifying.

But one night, unable to sleep, I'd picked up the notebook she'd given me and started to write. Not about my day or my feelings, but a letter to Con.

Dear Con,

I don't know if I'll ever send this. Probably not. But I need to write it anyway.

I'm sorry. For everything. For running away when things got real between us. For not explaining why. For disappearing and then showing up again only when I needed something. For making you watch me self-destruct. For calling you on New Year's

Eve and putting you in that position.

You deserve better than what I've given you. You deserve someone whole, someone who doesn't run, someone who can love you without fear.

The truth is, I do love you. I think I have since that first day at the restaurant, when you looked at me like I was the most fascinating person you'd ever met.

No one had ever looked at me like that before.

It terrified me. Because I knew if you really knew me—all of me—you wouldn't look at me that way anymore.

So here's the truth, or part of it anyway...

And then I'd written it all down—the things I'd never told anyone, the reasons I ran, the darkness I carried inside me. It had poured out of me, page after page, until my hand cramped and tears blurred my vision.

When I'd finished, I'd read it over once, then torn the pages from the notebook and burned them in the small metal trash can in my bathroom, watching the flames consume my confessions, my secrets, my shame.

But something had shifted in me after that night. As if the act of writing it all down, of admitting it even just to myself, had loosened something that had been knotted tight inside me for years.

The next day in therapy, I'd told Dr. Winters one of the things I'd written in that letter—not the worst thing, but a start. She hadn't looked shocked or disgusted. She'd just nodded and asked, "How does it feel to say that out loud?"

"Terrifying," I'd admitted. "But also... I don't know. Like maybe it doesn't have as much power over me when it's not a secret anymore."

She'd smiled then, the first real smile I'd seen from her. "Exactly."

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After that, I'd started writing more letters—to Con, to James, to my mother, to myself.

Most of them I burned after writing, the act of destruction somehow as cathartic as the writing itself.

But as the weeks passed and I grew stronger, more stable, I began to consider the possibility of actually sending one.

Not the raw, unfiltered confessions of those first letters. But something honest, something real. Something that acknowledged the past but also looked toward the future.

The idea had come to me during a group session in my eighth week. One of the other patients, a woman named Eliza who was recovering from alcohol addiction, had been talking about her husband.

"I wrote him a letter," she'd said. "Explaining why I drank, what I was trying to escape. Things I could never say to his face. It helped him understand, I think. And it helped me to write it."

I'd thought about Con then, about how much he still didn't know, about how I'd promised to stay in touch but had been sending him only the most superficial updates. And I'd thought about something else too—something Dr. Winters had been pushing me to consider.

That maybe, just maybe, I needed to let him go.

Not because I didn't love him. But because I did. Because he deserved someone who could love him without the baggage I carried, without the damage I was still working to repair.

That night, I'd started two letters. One to Con, telling him everything I should have told him months ago. And one to a woman I'd never meet—the woman Con would love after me, the woman who would give him what I couldn't.

I had written a letter to her while I had been in rehab, a letter to the woman that Con would marry one day.

The woman who would love him and truly adore him.

And I had sent it to him in the post. One for him, telling him how I was going, and the letter addressed to her.

It simply said, "Please give this to the woman you marry one day.

I want her to know how beautiful you are. "

It had taken me days to write them both, draft after draft, trying to find the right words, the right balance between honesty and kindness.

The letter to Con's future wife had been particularly challenging—how do you write to someone you'll never meet, about a man you love but are choosing to let go?

In the end, I'd kept it simple.

In the letter to him, I told him how I was letting him go.

How grateful I was to him. How much I loved him and how I wanted him to be

happy.

That I was sorry about it all. I put into that letter my past, what had happened to me, and why I was the way I was.

How I never told people about me because I was scared they would know who I was really inside and didn't like that idea at all.

But I was telling him, because I wanted him to know why I did what I did, and why I was letting him go now, how I would stalk his Facebook account in the future to make sure he was happy and living a life he deserved.

That letter had been harder, more painful to write. Because it wasn't just about telling Con who I was—it was about releasing him from any obligation he might feel toward me, any hope he might still harbor for us.

Dear Constantine,

By the time you read this, I'll be in my final weeks of rehab. The program is three months, and I'm sticking it out to the end this time. Not just going through the motions, but really doing the work. It's the hardest thing I've ever done, but I think it's working. I think I'm getting better.

I've been thinking a lot about us—about what we had, what we could have had if I'd been braver, healthier, less afraid. And I've realized something that I need to tell you.

I love you. I think I've loved you from the beginning, though I was too scared to admit it even to myself. You saw something in me that I couldn't see—something worth loving, worth fighting for. And for a while, you made me believe it might be true.

But the truth is, Con, I'm not ready. I might not be for a long time. The things I'm working through here—they're deep and old and tangled up with who I am in ways I'm only beginning to understand.

I've never told anyone the whole story. Not even my therapist knows everything yet. But I want to tell you, because you deserve to know why I ran, why I kept running.

When I was fifteen, I met my first boyfriend...

And then I'd told him. Everything. The secret I'd carried for over a decade, the one that had shaped every relationship I'd had since, the reason I couldn't bear to be truly seen, truly known.

I'd written it all down, my hand shaking but determined, forcing myself to be honest in a way I never had been before.

I'm not telling you this for sympathy, or as an excuse for how I've treated you. There is no excuse for that. I'm telling you because I want you to understand that it wasn't about you—it was never about you. It was about me, and my fear, and my shame.

And that's why I'm letting you go, Con. Not because I don't love you, but because I do. Because you deserve someone whole, someone who can love you without reservation, without fear. Someone better than I can be right now, maybe better than I can ever be.

I know we said we'd stay in touch, see where things stand when we're both back. But I think that was unfair of me—to ask you to wait, to put your life on hold while I try to put myself back together. I can't ask that of you. I won't.

So this is me, releasing you from any promise, any obligation. Go live your life, Con. Be brilliant. Fall in love. Be happy. That's all I want for you now.

I'll be okay. I'm getting stronger every day. And maybe someday, when I'm truly better, truly whole, our paths will cross again. But I won't expect it, and neither should you.

Thank you for everything. For seeing me when I was invisible, for loving me when I was unlovable, for being the kind of man who would sit up all night to make sure a drunk, vomit-covered ex didn't choke in her sleep.

You are the best person I know. And I will always, always love you.

Geri

P.S. I've enclosed another letter, addressed to someone you haven't met yet.

Please keep it, and if the day comes when you find the woman you want to spend your life with, give it to her.

It's nothing bad, I promise. Just something I needed to write, something I hope might help her understand how lucky she is.

I'd sealed both letters in separate envelopes, then placed the one addressed to Con's future wife inside the larger envelope with his letter. I'd given them to my mother to post, not trusting myself not to change my mind if I held onto them any longer.

I was proud of myself for those letters, and I knew I was doing the right thing. Because one day, that man would find the woman he deserved, and she would be beautiful and everything he ever needed.

The day after I'd sent the letters, I'd had a session with Dr. Winters. She'd noticed something different about me immediately.

"You seem lighter today," she'd observed. "Did something happen?"

I'd told her about the letters then, about my decision to let Con go, to give him the freedom to move on without feeling responsible for me.

"That sounds like a significant step," she'd said carefully. "How do you feel about it?"

"Sad," I'd admitted. "But also... I don't know. Like I've done something right for once. Something unselfish."

She'd nodded, her expression thoughtful. "It can be both, you know. You can feel grief for what might have been, and still know you've made the right choice."

"Is it the right choice?" I'd asked, suddenly uncertain. "Letting him go?"

"I can't answer that for you, Geraldine. But I can ask you this: Are you letting him go because you truly believe it's best for him? Or are you pushing him away because you're afraid of what might happen if you let him stay?"

The question had hit me like a physical blow. Was I being selfless, or was this just another form of running? Another way to protect myself from the vulnerability of being loved?

I hadn't had an answer then. I'm not sure I have one now, two weeks later, as I approach the end of my time here.

But I do know this: For the first time in my life, I'm not running from my problems. I'm facing them, one painful therapy session at a time.

I'm building a relationship with my mother that feels real and honest. I'm ninety days sober and counting.

And maybe that's enough for now. Maybe I don't need to have all the answers yet. Maybe it's okay to just keep putting one foot in front of the other, to keep doing the next right thing, and trust that eventually, the path will become clear.

I still don't think I'll continue with therapy once I leave here.

The process of dredging up the past, of examining every painful memory under the harsh light of analysis—it's exhausting, and I'm not convinced it's helping.

But I can't deny that I'm different now than I was when I arrived.

Stronger, maybe. More honest, definitely. Less afraid of being seen.

As I sit at my desk, watching the sunset paint the gardens in gold and shadow, I think about the letter I sent to Con.

I wonder if he's received it yet, if he's read it.

I wonder what he thought, what he felt. If he was relieved to be released, or hurt to be pushed away.

If he understood what I was trying to say, or if I just caused more pain.

I wonder if I did the right thing.

But that's the thing about recovery, I'm learning. There are no guarantees, no certainties. Just choices, made one day at a time, with the best intentions and the clearest mind you can manage. And the hope that somehow, it will be enough.

For now, that has to be enough.

Geri

One year later.

My flight back home had come and gone nearly a whole year ago.

I stood at the kitchen window of my mother's cottage, watching the spring rain pattern the glass, and marvelled at how much had changed.

The woman who had boarded that plane in a state of fragile sobriety, terrified of what lay ahead, seemed like a stranger to me now.

I had done the time, and I had put in the hard work.

I had settled into a life in England with my mother, who had been my biggest rock throughout the whole thing.

She had held me when I had come close to relapsing, she had blocked the door from my need to go out and find things to numb the pain, and she had held me through the night when I had received a letter back from Con.

The letter had arrived three weeks after I'd left rehab. I'd recognized his handwriting immediately—the slightly messy scrawl that somehow managed to look both careless and deliberate at the same time. My hands had trembled as I'd opened it, my mother hovering nearby, ready to catch me if I fell.

He hadn't written much, but he had said this:

Thank you for the letter, and you are right, once people know someone's secrets they do look at them differently, but your secrets will always be safe with me.

I now see why life was a struggle for you, and I'm proud of the person you became after it, and I'm proud of the person you're finally allowing yourself to become.

I understand you need to leave, I understand you need to let me go.

I also need to let you go. I need to be able to have love and happiness in my future and again you're right that person right now isn't you.

But that doesn't mean that person won't be you, it just means that right now you and I are not meant to be.

Please stalk my Facebook, please keep me updated on your own future as I know I will be doing the same.

Thank you for the other letter. If I ever end up standing at the end of an aisle, I will give it to her.

She will need to know the path I took to get where I was, she will need to know the path I crossed to become the person I am today, and you are a big part of that.

So thank you, Geri. I love you. You will forever hold a place in my heart.

But I release you from the promise we made, and I hope you have the future you deserve too.

That had broken my heart and put it back together all at the same time. Because he had been right; Con had always been right.

I'd cried for hours after reading it, curled up on my bed with my mother stroking my hair, not trying to fix it or make it better, just being there. It had been the kind of grief that feels like it might never end, waves of it crashing over me until I was exhausted and hollow.

But then, gradually, something else had emerged from the wreckage—a sense of peace, of rightness. We had both acknowledged the truth: that we loved each other, but that love wasn't enough, not when I was still putting myself back together, not when he deserved someone whole.

The months that followed had been a strange mix of pain and progress. Some days I'd wake up feeling strong, capable, ready to face whatever came my way. Other days, the weight of everything I'd lost—Con, my life back home, my sense of who I was—would press down on me until it was hard to breathe.

On those days, my mother would gently coax me out of bed, make me tea, sit with me in silence or talk about nothing important until the darkness receded. She never pushed, never demanded, just steadily reminded me with her presence that I wasn't alone.

"You're allowed to grieve, love," she'd told me one particularly bad morning, when I'd apologized for being such a mess. "You've lost things that matter. But you haven't lost everything, and you haven't lost yourself. Not anymore."

She'd been right about that. Slowly, painfully, I'd started to rebuild. Not the person I'd been before—she was gone, and maybe that was for the best—but someone new. Someone who could look in the mirror and not flinch away from her own reflection.

I had gotten a job in a local oil and vinegar shop where I had worked, and I even went back to school for adults.

I'd dived into literature and studied writing.

The job had come first, a small step toward independence.

The shop was tucked away on a cobblestone side street in the village near my mother's house, the kind of place that attracted tourists and locals alike with its rows of gleaming bottles and the rich, complex scents that filled the air.

The owner, a woman named Eleanor with silver-streaked auburn hair and laugh lines around her eyes, had hired me despite my spotty work history and the gaps I couldn't fully explain.

"Everyone deserves a second chance," she'd said simply when I'd thanked her, and I'd wondered if she could somehow see my history written on my face, or if she just believed that about everyone.

The work was straightforward—stocking shelves, helping customers find the perfect olive oil for their salad or the right balsamic for their strawberries, keeping the books balanced.

But there was something soothing about it, about the routine and the sensory experience of the shop, the way customers' faces would light up when they found exactly what they were looking for.

And Eleanor had become more than just a boss. She'd become a friend, someone who saw me as I was now, not as who I'd been or what I'd done. She didn't know my whole story—few people did—but she knew enough to understand that I was rebuilding, and she gave me the space and support to do it.

The writing classes had come later, a suggestion from my mother after she'd found me scribbling in notebooks late at night.

"You've always had a way with words," she'd said. "Even as a little girl, you were always making up stories. Maybe it's time to see where that could go."

I'd been sceptical at first. What did I have to say that anyone would want to read? But the local community college had offered evening courses in creative writing, and on a whim, I'd signed up.

The first class had been terrifying. I'd sat in the back, barely speaking, certain that everyone else belonged there more than I did.

But then the instructor, a retired professor with kind eyes and a gentle voice, had asked us to write about a moment of transformation, and the words had poured out of me.

I hadn't shared what I'd written that day—it was too raw, too personal—but I'd gone back the next week, and the week after that. And gradually, I'd found my voice. Not just on the page, but in the classroom, in discussions about character and plot and the power of storytelling.

Within the twelve months I had spent in England, I had drafted my first ever book, and I had called it "To Her.

" I'm still not sure if I will ever publish it, or send it off to see if anyone else would like to publish it, but I did it.

I had become the version of myself I was meant to be, and I wouldn't have become that way without the path I had walked.

The book had started as a series of letters—to Con, to the woman he might love someday, to my younger self, to the people I'd hurt along the way.

But as I'd written, it had evolved into something else: a story about a woman learning to face her demons, to stop running, to believe that she was worthy of love even with all her flaws and failures.

It wasn't my story, not exactly. I'd changed names, places, circumstances. But the emotional truth of it was mine, the journey from self-destruction to self-acceptance, the painful process of letting go of someone you love because you know it's the right thing for both of you.

Writing it had been its own form of therapy, more effective in some ways than the sessions I'd endured in rehab. Because this time, I was the one asking the hard questions, the one digging into the painful places, the one deciding what to reveal and what to keep hidden.

My mother had been the first to read it, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, turning pages with careful fingers as I'd paced nervously around the cottage.

"It's beautiful, Geraldine," she'd said when she'd finished, tears in her eyes. "It's honest and raw and hopeful. It's you."

I wasn't sure about that last part. The protagonist of my book was braver than I felt, more resilient, more certain of her path forward. But maybe that was the point of fiction—to imagine possibilities, to create versions of ourselves that we could aspire to become.

Or maybe she was right, and I just couldn't see it yet. Maybe I was stronger than I knew.

I thought about Con often, wondering where he was, what he was doing. True to my word, I'd checked his Facebook occasionally, careful not to like or comment on anything, just watching from a distance as his life unfolded without me.

He'd done well in the season in Canada. There were photos of him with new faces, grinning widely, looking happy and fulfilled. No sign of a serious relationship, at least not one he was sharing publicly, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone.

I hoped there was. I hoped he'd found someone who could love him the way he deserved, without reservation or fear. Someone who could give him what I couldn't.

And yet, a small, selfish part of me was relieved each time I checked and saw no evidence of that someone special. It was a contradiction I lived with, wanting him to be happy but not quite ready to see him happy with someone else.

Dr. Winters would have had a field day with that, I thought with a wry smile. She'd have seen it as proof that I was still holding on, still not fully committed to letting go.

Maybe she'd have been right. But I was working on it, day by day, choice by choice. And I was getting better at recognizing the difference between loving someone and needing them, between holding them in your heart and holding onto them.

My sobriety had held firm through it all—the grief, the uncertainty, the slow process of rebuilding.

There had been close calls, moments of temptation so strong I could taste it.

A particularly bad day when I'd found myself standing outside a pub, the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses calling to me like a siren song.

A night when memories had crashed over me in waves, and all I'd wanted was the oblivion of chemicals coursing through my veins.

But I hadn't given in. Each time, I'd called my mother, or James, or one of the few friends I'd made in my writing class. I'd talked it through, ridden out the craving,

reminded myself of how far I'd come and what I stood to lose.

One year sober. It felt like both an eternity and the blink of an eye.

As I stood at the window, watching the rain turn from a drizzle to a downpour, I thought about the letter Con had sent, about his words that had both wounded and healed me. About how he'd said that the person he needed wasn't me—not now, maybe not ever.

But he'd also said something else, something that had lodged in my heart and refused to leave: But that doesn't mean that person won't be you.

It wasn't a promise. It wasn't even really hope. It was just an acknowledgment that people change, that futures aren't fixed, that doors closed now might someday open again.

I didn't know if that would ever happen for us.

I didn't know if I wanted it to, or if it would be right for either of us.

But I knew that I was changing, growing, becoming someone I could be proud of.

Someone who didn't run from pain or numb it with chemicals.

Someone who could face her past without being defined by it.

And for now, that was enough.

I turned away from the window as I heard my mother's key in the lock, her voice calling out a greeting as she shook rain from her umbrella. I moved to help her with the groceries, smiling at her cheerful complaints about the weather, the easy

domesticity of our life together.

This wasn't where I'd expected to be a year ago. It wasn't the life I'd planned or the future I'd imagined. But it was real, and it was mine, and I was grateful for it in a way I'd never been grateful for anything before.

One day at a time. That's what they'd taught us in rehab, the mantra of recovery. Don't worry about forever, just focus on today. Make it through this hour, this minute, this breath.

I'd thought it was a platitude then, a simplistic answer to the complex problem of addiction.

But I understood it better now. It wasn't about avoiding the future; it was about being present in the now.

About recognizing that life is built in moments, in choices, in small acts of courage or kindness or perseverance.

And in this moment, rain drumming on the roof, my mother's laughter filling the kitchen, the weight of my completed manuscript sitting on my desk upstairs, I was okay. More than okay.

Geri

Another year later

I closed my laptop on my final draft with a satisfying click.

The sound echoed in my new small room, still mostly empty except for stacks of cardboard boxes and a desk.

I had just finished my third book, a milestone that still felt surreal when I allowed myself to dwell on it.

Writing had become second nature now—as essential and automatic as breathing.

Every day I sat and wrote, and every day I felt more certain that I had finally found my path.

Three weeks ago, I'd given my notice at the oil and vinegar shop. Eleanor had hugged me tightly, her eyes bright with unshed tears but her smile genuine.

"You were never meant to stay here forever," she'd said, squeezing my hands in hers. "Some people are just passing through on their way to somewhere else. I'm just glad I got to be part of your journey."

Now my life was packed in boxes, ready for the next chapter.

I had decided to move back home. It was snow season again, and I had found a cute

little cottage to rent in Lakeview for the season.

The rental agent had emailed me photos—a small A-frame with wooden beams and a stone fireplace, nestled among pine trees that would soon be heavy with snow.

It was perfect, just enough space for me and my books and the quiet life I'd built for myself.

I'd secured a job at one of the ski hire places in town.

I would be fitting boots, selling skis, and handling rentals.

The work would be straightforward, social without being overwhelming, and—most importantly—it would give me structure while still leaving plenty of time for writing.

I could have chosen to go back to Alpine Ridge, but it had been two years since I'd spoken to Con, and I had no idea if he had signed up to work there again.

I had Facebook-stalked him enough to know he had gone back last year, and he had also gotten a girlfriend.

That first photo of them together had pulled at my heart a little too much, a sharp ache that had taken me by surprise with its intensity.

I hadn't had the courage to check again since.

The truth was, I didn't even need to work full-time anymore, which still amazed me when I thought about it.

I had published my second book six months ago, and it had been a success beyond anything I could have imagined.

The royalty checks that arrived in my account each month were enough to support a modest lifestyle, leaving me free to work at the ski shop more for the human connection than the paycheck.

I still hadn't published my first book—"To Her.

" It sat in a digital folder, occasionally opened and tweaked but never sent out into the world.

The timing just didn't feel right yet. Some part of me knew I would recognize the right moment when it came, and now wasn't it.

I had chosen to go down the path of self-publishing for my other works, and I was glad I did.

It was hard but so rewarding at the same time, giving me control over every aspect of the process from cover design to marketing.

I was looking forward to the three days a week I would be spending at the shop in town.

Since leaving England and the oil and vinegar shop, I hadn't really had much chance to be social.

Having my mum around had helped me through the past two years.

Since I had gotten sober again, I had become somewhat of a recluse, but I had also become okay with it.

I enjoyed my own company in a way I never had before—the quiet evenings with a book, the mornings spent writing, the afternoons walking through the countryside

near my mother's cottage.

Solitude no longer felt like loneliness; it felt like peace.

But I still had my family. I had even started a better relationship with my brother, who had moved two streets away from Mum's with his girlfriend when I had first gone to England.

Mum had started a weekly dinner for us all when I had gotten out of rehab, a tradition that had become sacred.

We now talked weekly and had promised to call each other regularly now that I was heading back to Australia.

I had stayed with my grandparents when I had first returned, deciding to bypass all my old friends.

I had cut them from my life when I had gone to England, and they hadn't reached out to me either—except for Alex.

He had called me about a year ago to tell me he had started a relationship with Louise, asking if that would affect our friendship.

I had smiled and said it was fine, because it was.

I had no bad feelings on the matter; I hadn't even known that she and Nick had broken up.

That relationship hadn't worked out either.

Alex was now with someone new, a woman who seemed promising from the few

photos I'd seen—tall and blonde with bright blue eyes.

He had stopped posting on social media for the past six months, which I took to mean he was happy and thoroughly distracted with his new life.

I was glad for him. Alex had always been searching for something, though I don't think he knew what. Maybe he'd finally found it.

The only person who knew I was home was James.

He had picked me up from the airport and driven me to my grandparents', then helped me go car shopping as I had sold my old one before moving to England.

His face when he'd spotted me coming through the arrivals gate had been worth the twenty-three-hour flight—pure joy, no complications, no expectations. Just happiness to see me.

He had some of the best news I had ever heard: he and Liam had hit it off so well that they had bought a house together and were looking at getting married.

Seeing James so happy, so settled, had filled me with a warmth that had nothing to do with envy and everything to do with genuine happiness for someone who deserved every good thing.

Life was moving forward, and everyone was slowly heading in the directions that the universe had planned for us.

It was messy and it was perfect, and I was happy.

Not the frantic, chemical-induced euphoria I had once chased, but something steadier and more sustainable—a quiet contentment that came from within rather than from

external sources.

As I untaped a box of books, I thought about the journey that had brought me here. Two years sober. Three books written. Countless hours of self-reflection. A relationship with my mother that was stronger than it had ever been. A future that, while uncertain, no longer terrified me.

I thought about Con sometimes, though less often than I once had.

I wondered if he was happy with a girlfriend, if she understood how lucky she was, if she knew all the little things about him that I had catalogued in my heart—the way he hummed under his breath when he was cooking, the particular furrow between his brows when he was concentrating, the sound of his laugh when something genuinely surprised him.

I hoped she did. I hoped she appreciated every part of him, even the difficult parts. I hoped she had read my letter, the one I'd written to Con's future love, and understood what a gift she had been given.

But mostly, I hoped he was happy. That was the difference between now and two years ago—I could wish him happiness without that wish being tangled up in my own needs and desires. I could love him from a distance without that love consuming me.

In two weeks, I would start my new job at the ski shop.

And in between, I would write, because that's what I did now—I wrote stories about broken people finding their way back to themselves, about love that transforms even when it doesn't last, about the beauty that can emerge from the wreckage of a life shattered and carefully rebuilt.

My life hadn't turned out the way I'd planned. Not even close. But as I looked around

at the boxes containing everything I owned—a lot more possessions than I'd had two years ago, but so much more of what mattered—I felt a sense of rightness, of belonging to myself in a way I never had before.

Geri

I grabbed a set of purple skis, kids' ones, so tiny and cute they made my heart squish with unexpected tenderness. The morning rush at Mountain Gear Rentals was in full swing, with families eager to hit the slopes before the sun climbed too high and softened the pristine overnight powder.

"These should be perfect for you," I said, kneeling down to the little girl waiting patiently beside her mother.

She had strawberry blonde curls that bounced with every slight movement and deep green eyes that sparkled with excitement.

Her bright pink ski jumpsuit made her look like a tiny flamingo against the white and blue décor of the shop.

Something about her reminded me of myself at that age, before life had gotten complicated—that pure, unfiltered enthusiasm for adventure.

"Can I go fast?" she asked, her words tumbling together in that endearing way small children have when excitement outpaces their ability to articulate.

I smiled, adjusting the bindings to match her boot size. "You sure can, but first we need to make sure these fit you just right."

Her mother, a woman with the same strawberry blonde hair but pulled back in a sensible ponytail, gave me a grateful look. "It's her first time on real skis. She's been

talking about nothing else for weeks."

"Well, she's going to have an amazing time," I assured her, then turned back to the little girl. "Let me show you how these work, okay?"

I demonstrated how to click her little boots into the bindings and how to release them, guiding her tiny feet through the motions. She was the last of about ten kids I'd helped outfit that morning, all part of the beginner's ski school group heading out with Mark, our resident instructor.

"Like this?" she asked, stomping her foot down with more enthusiasm than precision.

"Almost," I laughed, helping her adjust. "There you go, perfect!"

Her face lit up with accomplishment, and I felt that familiar warmth spread through my chest—the simple joy of helping someone else find their footing, literally and figuratively. It was moments like these that made me grateful for this job, for this new chapter of my life.

The little girl was so excited to hit the slopes, and I couldn't blame her.

I'd managed to get out of bed early enough this morning to get three runs in myself before skiing right up to the front door of the shop.

The snow had been perfect—crisp and powdery, the kind that makes a satisfying shush under your skis and sparkles in the early morning light like scattered diamonds.

One advantage of this shop was its location on the edge of town at the bottom of one of the gentler slopes.

You could ski right up to it, which made for a spectacular commute on powder days.

The disadvantage was that I spent half my time sweeping snow from the entrance where it was trampled in by excited customers all day long.

A small price to pay for paradise, I figured.

"All set, sweetie," I said, helping her stand up with her new skis in her arms. "Mark is going to teach you everything you need to know."

She nodded solemnly, then broke into a gap-toothed grin. "I'm gonna be the fastest!"

"I bet you will," I agreed, standing up and handing her mother a claim ticket. "They'll be back around noon. We'll have her gear ready for tomorrow if you decide to continue."

"Thank you so much," her mother said. "She's been impossible to contain since we booked this trip. My husband's taking the older one on the intermediate slopes, so I'm hoping this gives her something to be proud of too."

I watched as the little girl joined the cluster of similarly outfitted children gathering around Mark, our twenty-something instructor with perpetual bedhead and the patience of a saint. He caught my eye and gave me a thumbs up as he began herding his colourful flock toward the door.

It had been three weeks since I'd started working at Mountain Gear, and I'd fallen into the rhythm of the place as easily as I'd fallen in love with my little cottage in Lakeview.

The work was straightforward but satisfying—fitting people with the right equipment, offering advice on the best runs for their skill level, occasionally repairing minor gear issues.

But more than the work itself, I'd found a community here that accepted me without question or expectation.

Particularly Diane and Mei, two women who worked the same shift rotation as me.

They'd invited me for coffee my first week, and somehow we'd clicked immediately.

Both were in their thirties, both avid skiers, both refreshingly straightforward.

They understood why I never went out to the pub with the rest of the staff after closing, because I'd had the power and confidence to tell them outright: "Sorry, I don't go out.

I'm two years sober, so I don't go near anything that might trigger me. "

Instead of awkwardness or prying questions, they'd simply nodded and suggested the local pizza place instead.

Now our Thursday night dinners had become a highlight of my week—hours of conversation and laughter over wood-fired pizzas and sparkling water with lemon.

No pressure, no expectations, just genuine connection.

I watched the last of the ski school kids file out the door behind Mark, their excitement palpable even through layers of winter gear. The shop fell momentarily quiet, that brief lull between the morning rush and the midday crowd.

I stood dusting invisible dirt off my pants, a habit I'd picked up from Eleanor at the oil and vinegar shop and never quite shaken. The morning had flown by in a blur of boot fittings and rental forms, but now I had a chance to catch up on the inventory work I'd started yesterday.

Moving back to the counter, I pulled out the clipboard with the pricing sheets for the new clothing line we'd received.

Winter was just getting started, tourists would be looking for souvenirs and last-minute gear for weeks to come.

I'd just started entering figures into the computer when the bell above the door chimed.

"Be right with you," I called without looking up, finishing the entry I was working on.

"No rush," came the reply, a voice that stopped my fingers mid-keystroke.

A voice I hadn't heard in years but would recognize anywhere—low and warm with that slight musical lilt that had always made even the most mundane statements sound like the beginning of a story.

I looked up slowly, my heart suddenly hammering against my ribs, and found myself staring into deep green eyes that I'd once known better than my own.

"Geri?" he said, his voice softer now, uncertain.

The clipboard slipped from my suddenly nerveless fingers and clattered onto the counter. Two years of carefully constructed peace, of measured healing, of learning to live with the absence of him—all of it seemed to compress into this single, impossible moment.

"Con?" I said.

Geri

I stood there while my mother laced up my dress from the back, the intricate pattern of holes and ribbon making me shift impatiently.

What had seemed so perfect on the rack now felt like an exercise in endurance as she threaded the black satin ribbon through what must have been a hundred tiny eyelets.

"Will you just take a breath and relax?" My mother's voice was gentle with amusement. "You're meant to be happy, not jittery and stressed out."

She was right, of course. She had always been right, especially in these last few years as we'd rebuilt our relationship into something stronger and more honest than it had ever been. I caught her eye in the mirror and tried to slow my breathing, which only made her smile wider.

"That's better," she said, her fingers never pausing in their work. "Though I'm not sure why you chose a dress that requires an engineering degree to put on."

"Because it's perfect," I replied, and it was.

The black lace bodice gave way to layers of midnight tulle that seemed to float around my legs.

Not the traditional white—I'd never wanted white.

It wouldn't have felt authentic, and if there was one thing I'd learned in my journey, it

was the importance of authenticity.

My father had dropped by earlier, his eyes suspiciously bright as he'd pressed something into my palm—an old gold pin with a small pearl at its centre.

"This is for something borrowed," he'd said gruffly. "Your grandmother wore it on her wedding day."

I'd smiled at him and kissed his cheek; another relationship healed in the years since I'd come home. I'd made it my mission to fix what I'd broken, and fix it I had—not perfectly, not without setbacks, but with a persistence I hadn't known I possessed.

"Right, all threaded," my mother announced, breaking into my thoughts. "Now let's do this up so tight you can't breathe, and we'll be ready."

I smiled at her in the mirror as she did, in fact, lace it up so tight I was gasping, but the end result was perfect. The dress hugged my curves before flowing outward, making me look like something from a fairy tale—albeit a slightly darker one than most.

My arms were now covered in tattoos, the cherry blossoms still there but joined by so many others.

Every time something significant happened in my life—even the ugly times—I had gotten a tattoo to remember it by.

They were my reminders of who I was and who I was becoming, a visual history of my journey etched permanently into my skin.

As my mother tied the ribbon in a knot, she pulled a letter from her bag and handed it to me.

"Con asked me to give this to you today," she said softly.

Tears pricked in my eyes as I stared down at my own handwriting. The envelope simply said "To Her."

My hands trembled as I opened it, finding inside the original letter I had given him years ago, the one addressed to his future wife. I unfolded it carefully, noting he had added more to the bottom of the letter. I began to read, my heart in my throat.

To the woman Con loves,

You don't know me, and by the time you read this (if you ever do), I'll be a distant memory in Con's life. But I wanted to write to you anyway, to tell you what I know about the man you love.

Con is the kindest person I've ever known. Not in a showy way, but in the quiet moments when it would be easier to walk away. He stays. He helps. He cares, deeply and without reservation.

He loves with his whole heart. I know this because he loved me once, even when I was at my worst, even when I gave him every reason not to.

He's funny in a way that sneaks up on you—dry humour delivered with such perfect timing that you find yourself laughing days later at something he said.

He's talented, though he'll downplay it if you mention it. Watch him when he doesn't know you're looking—when he's lost in his music or his cooking. That's when you'll see it, love cause Con knows exactly how to love someone.

He's stubborn about the strangest things—he'll argue for hours about the "correct" way to make tea but concede major life decisions with a shrug and a smile.

He snores, but only when he sleeps on his back. He remembers birthdays and anniversaries without being reminded, and he always, always calls when he says he will.

I'm writing this because I want you to know how lucky you are. Not in a bitter way—I had my chance with Con, and I wasn't ready for it. But you are. You must be, for him to have chosen you.

Love him well. Love him better than I could. He deserves nothing less.

Geri

Then the section he had added at the bottom:

To Her

Yes, you, Geri, because how could it ever be anyone else? I knew you were broken when I met you. It was why I waited, it was why I became your friend, it was why I allowed you to be who you were and still loved you anyway.

I knew the day you sent this to me that I would simply be handing it back to you.

I knew in that moment that you were just becoming this version of yourself, that you were putting in the hard work to sort your shit out.

I knew that the person who was described in this letter was you, 'cause I knew I would never marry anyone but you.

So please hurry up and meet me at the end of this aisle. I've been standing here waiting for you for years, and I'm starting to get impatient.

Come and bother me some more, come and sweep me off my feet again, come and

make me chase you around town, come and show me the person you are today, 'cause I loved you when I met you, I loved you when you broke my heart, and I'm going to love this new version even more.

'Cause you're mine, baby. All mine. And I'm ready for you.

The tears I'd been holding back spilled over, tracking down my cheeks in hot rivulets. My mother was at my side instantly, dabbing at them with a tissue.

"Don't ruin your makeup," she chided gently, but her own eyes were wet. "What did he write that's got you in such a state?"

I couldn't speak, could only hand her the letter. She read it quickly, then pulled me into a careful hug, mindful of the dress.

"He always knew, didn't he?" she said. "Even when you didn't."

I nodded, still unable to form words around the emotion swelling in my chest. It had been three years since that day in the ski shop when Con had walked back into my life.

Three years of careful rebuilding, of learning to trust not just him but myself, of discovering that love wasn't something to run from but something to run toward.

The day he'd appeared in Mountain Gear Rentals had been the beginning of a new chapter—tentative coffee dates that turned into long walks, conversations that stretched into the night, a slow and deliberate courtship that honoured both our history and our growth.

We'd taken our time, both of us wary of repeating old patterns, both of us determined to get it right.

And now here we were.

"Ready?" my mother asked, adjusting my veil one last time.

I took a deep breath, feeling the constriction of the corset, the weight of the moment, the fullness of my heart.

"Ready," I said, and I meant it in a way I never had before.

My father was waiting outside the door, his eyes widening when he saw me.

"You look beautiful, Geraldine," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

I took his arm, steadying myself on the unfamiliar heels. The music had started, floating up from the garden below where we'd chosen to hold the ceremony—nothing grand, just our closest friends and family gathered under a canopy of fairy lights and flowers.

As we descended the stairs and stepped out into the garden, I felt a moment of pure clarity wash over me. This was right. This was where I was meant to be. All the running, all the pain, all the mistakes—they had led me here, to this moment, to this man.

I saw him then, standing at the end of the aisle, tall and handsome in his black suit, his eyes finding mine immediately.

The look on his face—a mixture of awe and joy and love so pure it took my breath away—was worth every tear I'd ever cried, every dark night I'd endured, every step of the long journey back to myself.

My father squeezed my arm gently, and we began to walk. The guests turned to watch, but I barely noticed them. My focus was entirely on Con, on the way his eyes

never left mine, on the slight tremble in his hands as he clasped them in front of him.

With each step, memories washed over me—that first night at the bar when he'd looked at me like I was the most fascinating person he'd ever met; the mornings waking up beside him, terrified by the intensity of what I felt; the pain in his eyes when I'd pushed him away; the shock and joy of seeing him again in the ski shop; the slow, careful rebuilding of trust between us.

And now this—the culmination of a journey I'd never imagined possible when I was at my lowest, when I'd believed myself unworthy of love, when I'd run from anything that threatened to pierce the armour I'd built around my heart.

As we reached the end of the aisle, my father placed my hand in Con's, the symbolism of the gesture not lost on me. Con's fingers were warm and steady around mine, anchoring me in the moment.

"Hi," he whispered, his eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Hi," I whispered back, my voice catching. "I got your letter."

A smile broke across his face, transforming it with joy. "And?"

"And I'm here," I said simply. "I'm all yours."

The ceremony passed in a blur of emotion—vows we'd written ourselves, promises made with full awareness of their weight, rings exchanged with hands that trembled with the significance of the moment.

When the celebrant pronounced us husband and wife, Con pulled me into a kiss that felt like coming home after a long, difficult journey.

The reception was a celebration of not just our love but of the community that had

supported us both—James and Liam, now married themselves; my mother and father, tentatively rekindling their own relationship; my brother and his wife, expecting their first child; Diane and Mei from the ski shop; Eleanor from the oil and vinegar shop who had flown in from England; even Alex, who had finally found happiness with someone who loved him for exactly who he was.

As the night wore on, Con pulled me away from the dancing and laughter, leading me to a quiet corner of the garden where fairy lights twinkled overhead like stars.

"Happy?" he asked, his arms encircling my waist.

"More than I knew was possible," I admitted, resting my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. "I never thought I'd have this. Never thought I deserved it."

"You always deserved it," he said firmly. "You just needed to believe it yourself."

I looked up at him, this man who had seen the best and worst of me, who had loved me through it all, who had waited with a patience I still found astonishing.

"I love you," I said, the words simple but carrying the weight of everything we'd been through to reach this point. "I've always loved you, even when I was running away from it."

"I know," he said, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Why do you think I kept chasing you?"

I laughed, the sound bubbling up from a place of pure joy. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

"Never," he said, his expression turning serious. "Not then, not now, not ever."

He pulled me closer, his lips finding mine in a kiss that promised a lifetime of moments like this—quiet, honest, filled with a love that had been tested by fire and emerged stronger for it.

As we rejoined the celebration, I caught sight of my book on the gift table—my first book, "To Her," finally published after years of hesitation. It had felt right to release it now, as we began this new chapter together. The dedication page simply read: "To Con, who always knew."

The night stretched on, a tapestry of laughter and tears, dancing and quiet conversations, the beginning of a life I'd once thought impossible. And through it all, Con's hand remained firmly in mine, a tangible reminder that I was no longer running—I was home.

Later, as we prepared to leave, Con pulled me aside one more time.

"I have something for you," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small, wrapped package.

I opened it carefully to find a delicate charm bracelet with a single charm—a tiny silver pen.

"For your stories," he explained. "The ones you've written and the ones you've yet to tell. Our story."

Tears filled my eyes again—happy tears, healing tears, tears of a woman who had finally learned that vulnerability wasn't weakness but strength.

"Our story," I echoed, letting him fasten the bracelet around my wrist. "I like the sound of that."

As we walked out together, hand in hand, into the night and the future that awaited

us, I felt a sense of completion that went beyond the ceremony, beyond the celebration.

This wasn't an ending but a beginning—the start of a new chapter in a story that had taken unexpected turns but had ultimately led exactly where it was meant to go.

To him. To us. To a love that had survived the worst of me and promised to celebrate the best.

To her—the woman I had become, the woman who had finally learned to stay .

The End