

HAZEL EYES, WHISKEY TROUBLES

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This is only the beginning. The twists, the secrets, the laughter, the heartbreak—they are all yours to explore. Thank you for letting me share this world with you.

— Aaruhi

Playlist



1. “Adore You” – Harry Styles
 2. “Until I found you”–Stephen Sanchez
 3. “Sway”– Michael bublé
 4. “Control” – Halsey
 5. “Señorita”– Shawn mendes
 6. “Night changes”- One direction
 7. “Skinny Love” – Birdy
 8. “Someone You Loved” – Lewis Capaldi
 9. “Him and I” - G-Easy and Halsey
 10. “Say Something” – A Great Big World & Christina Aguilera
 11. “Criminal”– Britney spears
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Chapter 1

ELLA

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My day had been a disaster in slow motion, the type where responsibilities piled on like a Jenga tower ready to collapse at the slightest touch. Back-to-back meetings, bar exam pressure clawing at my nerves, and the cherry on this chaotic sundae—a family dinner I couldn’t weasel out of.

By six in the evening, my head felt like someone had stuffed cotton, caffeine, and deadlines inside. I needed air. Space. Something other than the suffocating concept of *adult responsibility*.

So I escaped to the only place that still felt like mine.

The café on Alder Street was warm and quiet when I stepped in, its familiar chime ringing as the door closed behind me. The smell of coffee beans and vanilla syrup wrapped around me like a blanket I didn’t know I needed.

Julian stood behind the counter, handing off a cappuccino to a customer with his usual gentle smile. He glanced up, and his eyes brightened instantly.

“Long time no see, Ella. What can I get you today?”

His voice was warmth personified. Like cinnamon in winter.

I dropped my bag on my favorite table near the window. The seat was slightly worn at the edge—my doing—and the view

overlooked a busy yet calming street that always reminded me of the life I had fought to build.

“Hey! I know I’ve been missing,” I said, giving a tired smile. “Iced Americano, please. Again.”

Julian raised an eyebrow. “Again? How many is that today?”

“Don’t ask.”

Because yes, this was my third.

He chuckled, already reaching for the ice. “Rough day?”

“Rough life,” I corrected.

He smiled knowingly. “Tell me about it.”

Julian had been my first friend in this city. My accidental confidant. My emergency-contact-who-wasn’t-technically-listed-as-one. I didn’t have many people after moving here, but Julian? He filled the silence without intruding, which made him feel like home in a way home never did.

“Oh!” he said suddenly. “Did you ever check out that new apartment?”

My stomach dropped. “Shit,” I muttered. “I have to go tomorrow. I completely forgot.”

“You? Forget something?” he teased.

“Hardy har.”

He just shook his head, smiling, and walked away to make my drink.

I took out my phone, mostly to avoid thinking about the long list of things I was currently failing at. It buzzed before I could even unlock it.

**Addie:** Family dinner tonight.

**Me:** I know. I remember, Addie.

**Addie:** Mom and Dad are expecting you on time.

**Me:** They always expect that.

**Addie:** See you tonight.

I stared at the screen, trying to will my heartbeat to calm down. *Family dinner* was code for interrogation, judgment, and the subtle art of emotional suffocation.

Once, I brought a friend home. She barely survived. My father stalked her entire family and then quizzed her about some “financial anomaly” he thought existed in her father’s business. The poor girl didn’t even know what stocks were. She cried in the car.

Never again.

Julian arrived with my iced Americano, placing it gently beside me.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

“Define okay.”

He gave a small smile—one full of understanding he didn’t voice—and walked away.

I sipped my drink, letting the bitterness ground me. Outside the window, dark clouds gathered like a warning. It looked like rain was waiting for the perfect dramatic moment to start.

Time: **6:47 PM.**

Perfect. I had less than an hour to mentally prepare myself for the one place I hated more than the bar exam—my childhood home.

I packed my things and headed outside, tightening my coat as a chilly breeze swept through the street.

That's when it happened.

I collided—hard—into a solid, warm, *human wall*. My coffee tilted, splashing right onto a crisp white shirt.

“Oh God, I am so sorry—”

The apology was out of habit, not guilt.

Because the second I looked up...

There he was.

*Him.*

The man I bumped into twice before in this city. The one who always appeared out of nowhere like some cosmic joke. The one with the whiskey-colored eyes that looked warm and dangerous at the same time.

Mr. Whiskey Eyes.

My nickname for him.

My own personal mystery.

He was tall—too tall to be acceptable—broad shoulders, rolled-up sleeves, loosened tie, and that maddening calm confidence of someone who knew exactly the effect he had on people.

“It's okay, Hazel,” he said with a low chuckle that slid down my spine like velvet. “I can be a bit distracting.”

Hazel.

My eyes.

The nerve.

My mouth opened, but my brain refused to provide words. The heat rising in my cheeks was definitely from embarrassment—*not* from how stupidly good he looked standing there with his stupid smirk in his stupid shirt.



I rolled my eyes dramatically.

“Maybe pay attention to where you’re going,” I muttered and brushed past him.

“Noted,” he replied, amusement dripping from his tone. “See you around, Hazel.”

I didn’t bother turning back. I hated how he said it. The way “Hazel” sounded like both a tease and a compliment.

My McLaren gleamed under the streetlight as I approached it. Getting inside, I rested my hands on the steering wheel for a moment, breathing deeply.

*Dinner. You can do this.*

I drove through the city streets, traffic lights reflecting off the windshield. My family’s house was across town—large, cold, and filled with everything money could buy, except actual warmth.

The closer I got, the tighter my chest felt.

My father, always calculating.

My mother, always performing perfection.

Addie, my sister—the only decent human in that house.

And me, the disappointment who dared to pursue law instead of joining the family empire.

I parked at the driveway—lined with neatly trimmed bushes and lit by soft golden lights that screamed *pretentious wealth*.

As I walked up the steps, my phone buzzed again.

**Addie:** Hurry, Dad’s already asking.

**Me:** Bracing myself.

**Addie:** Don’t let him get to you today.

Easier said than done.

I took a deep breath and rang the bell.

The door opened, and there stood my mother, perfectly dressed, perfectly polished, perfectly unreadable.

“Ella,” she said with a smile that never reached her eyes.

“You’re late.”

Of course.

Page 1 of the night’s torture begins.

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## CHAPTER 2

### ASHTON



Damn.

Second time this month.

You'd think being the CEO of the most elite security firm in the country — someone feared by criminals, respected by governments, and known as the ghost who can break into any system with just a thought — would make me confident enough to walk up to one girl and ask her name.

But no.

Despite everything I am everything I've built, everything people whisper about me... I still haven't dared to step into her personal space.

Not even once.

And the irony?

She's already invaded mine completely.

Rent-free.

Permanent resident.

Every night I tell myself to forget about the girl with the hazel eyes. And every morning, I fail like clockwork.

I don't want to invade her privacy. Not by hacking. Not by tracking her routine. That would be too easy for someone like

me. A few keystrokes and I could know everything — her name, her address, her history, her world.

But for the first time in my entire life, *easy* feels wrong.

I want to know her the real way.

The human way.

The normal way.

“Ashton, not right now,” I mutter under my breath, rubbing my temples.

“You have a meeting tonight. Get her out of your head.”

But my head doesn’t listen.

The moment I bumped into her this morning, something inside me short-circuited. The way she looked up at me — soft, startled, like she wasn’t used to being the center of attention — made the world slow down for a second.

And then my stupid mouth betrayed me.

*Hazel.*

The word slipped out on its own, like my brain disconnected from my body. It wasn’t planned. It wasn’t logical. It wasn’t professional.

It was instinct.

What the hell is happening to me?

I shake my head and head toward the coffee shop — the same one I’ve been “coincidentally” visiting ever since I saw her for the first time three months ago. I tell myself it’s for the coffee. It’s not.

The barista recognizes me by now. A small nod, a polite smile, nothing more.

I grab a tissue and force a smile at him, trying to act normal, then head to the washroom to clean the coffee stain on my shirt from earlier — courtesy of my mini heart attack when she bumped into me again.

Twice.

In a month.

Maybe fate really is messing with me.

I splash cold water on my face, letting the temperature calm me down. I need to get it together. Tonight isn't any ordinary meeting. It's with two senators, a cybersecurity director, and a billionaire who wants to invest in a "private protection empire."

That's what they call my company.

"Empire."

I just call it work.

I walk out of the café, my mind a battlefield of thoughts I shouldn't be having, and head to my car parked out front. My driver isn't here — I told him to take the day off. I needed the quiet.

The city lights blur past as I drive toward my apartment building — *my* building.

All forty floors of it.

I live on 78th Street 1729 was my penthouse number, in the penthouse that I bought five years ago. Then I bought the rest of the building because I hated dealing with landlords. Now I own the whole block. Perks of living in the gray area between genius and insanity.

By the time I reach the lobby, it's already 8:00 PM.

Great.

Late again.

I step into the private elevator, resting my head back against the cool metal. My phone vibrates — my assistant.

**MAYA:** *You have twenty minutes before they arrive. Should I stall the meeting?*

I type back,

**ASHTON:** *No. I'll be ready.*

I slip the phone into my pocket and step out into my penthouse — black marble floors, warm lights, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city.

Usually, this place feels like power.

Tonight, it feels empty.

Too quiet.

Too big.

Too... lifeless.

I shower quickly, steam clouding the glass, and pull on a charcoal suit. Tailored. Clean. Sharp. The kind that says *I control everything in this room.*

Except I don't.

Not when one girl with hazel eyes can make me lose my mind without even knowing my name.

I fix my cuffs and look at myself in the mirror.

"Ashton blackwell," I say to my reflection. "Get your shit together."

But even as I leave the penthouse, adjusting my tie and stepping into the elevator, all I can think about is the same damn thing —

I want to see her again.  
I want to know her name.  
And for the first time ever, I want something I can't simply  
hack my way into.  
I close my eyes for a second, inhaling slowly.  
Hazel eyes.  
Soft voice.  
A girl who made me forget the world for a moment.  
This is going to be a problem.  
A big one.

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## Chapter 3

### ELLA

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By the time I turned into the familiar lane leading to my old home, a strange weight settled on my chest. I finally understood why Las Vegas—my chaos, my freedom—was still so painfully close to my hometown. It wasn't the distance. It was the history. No matter how far I tried to run, this place had a way of pulling me back like an invisible thread tied to my ribs.

The security guard didn't even bother with the usual questioning. The moment he saw my car, he straightened, lowered his head respectfully, and stepped aside to open the gate.

Right. Ella Mercer coming home was still an event.

The driveway looked the same—tall trimmed hedges, the faint scent of jasmine drifting around, the marble fountain still trickling with the same calm arrogance as always. I parked in the basement and tugged my bag out of the backseat, the familiar echo of my heels following me as I made my way upstairs.

The moment I stepped inside, warmth and polished wood and the faint smell of vanilla hit me.

“Ms. Mercer! How are you?”

Lolla hurried forward, wiping her hands on her apron, her eyes lighting up at the sight of me.

“I’m fine, Lolla,” I said, giving her a soft smile.

Lolla had been here since I was thirteen. She had seen my awkward stages, my heartbreak phases, my silent rebellions, and the nights I sat in the kitchen at 2 AM eating cake straight from the fridge. She wasn't staff. She was... a constant.

Before I could take two steps inside, a dramatic voice echoed from the living room.

“Ella! Darling, you’re finally here. We were waiting for you!”

Ah.

The theatre had begun.

My mother swept toward me in an elegant emerald dress, looking every bit the powerful environmentalist the world admired. Everyone adored her passion, her campaigns, her speeches, her awards.

But I knew the hollow behind that perfection.

I knew the silence that followed her home.

I knew the work that always came first.

Since childhood, we never had the kind of bond mothers and daughters were supposed to share. She was always busy saving the world somewhere far away, while Dad was the one braiding my hair for school, sneaking chocolates into my lunchbox, and staying up with me before every big exam.

I gave her a polite, practiced smile. The one I’d perfected over years.

“Hello, Mom.”

My sister was standing beside her, tapping something on her iPad. The moment she saw me, she gave me a quick smile and leaned down for a side hug.

She was the older one, yet at 5'8", she always joked that I looked like her personal skyscraper. At 5'11", the height difference was obvious.

And then... there he was.

My father.

The only person in this house who didn't make me feel like a guest in my own life.

"Dad!"

I couldn't help the genuine excitement in my voice.

"Hello, little sunshine!" he said, pulling me into a tight hug.

"How are you?"

That nickname always softened something inside me—the part that still felt thirteen sometimes. He pulled back and scanned my face like he was searching for cracks.

"I'm fine," I said.

He didn't buy it, not fully. His brows pinched together, the concern settling into his eyes.

"What happened? Everything alright, sunshine? Is somebody bothering you?"

He was protective. Overprotective, sometimes. After what happened with my friend—and the whole... well, my father *stalking* her situation—we had a long talk. It took a while to settle, but that's the thing about Dad: even when he's wrong, he's wrong because he cares too much.

"It's just exam pressure," I said quietly. "They're in a few months."

Dad nodded slowly, finally relaxing. "I understand."

But the truth was... exams were the least of my worries.

My mind kept drifting back to him.
The stranger with the cinnamon-warm voice and the storm
behind his whiskey eyes.
The one who managed to exist in my thoughts rent-free since
the moment we collided.
The one who made something old and unfamiliar stir inside
me.

I hadn't even told my father about that yet.
How could I, when I barely understood it myself?

Mom's voice cut through my thoughts.

"Ella, sweetheart, we have a dinner planned tonight. Some
associates and family friends are coming. Now that you're back,
you should join us. It'll look good."

There it was.
Not because she missed me.
Not because she wanted to spend time with me.
But because it would *look good*.

I swallowed the irritation rising in my chest.

Before I could answer, my sister chimed in, "You should stay,
El. Dad's been excited all day."

Dad nodded fondly. "Let her breathe, you two."

"but it was a family dinner," I said softly. My father gave me
'the look' so I sighed and said "fine I will stay"

His smile made it worth it.

Because this home... it wasn't perfect.
It wasn't peaceful.
But it had him.

And maybe... maybe coming back wasn't such a terrible idea.

Not yet.

Not tonight.

Little did I know that the dinner my mother was talking about...

Would change everything I thought I knew.

About my family.

About my past.

About the stranger with whiskey eyes.

And about the pieces of myself I had spent years trying to bury.

Chapter~4

ASHTON



The meeting was a few miles outside Vegas, which meant speed—but controlled. I wasn't reckless, not when stakes were this high. I slid into my Mercedes, the engine purring to life, and pulled out immediately.

I wasn't usually nervous. Deals, negotiations, power rooms—I owned them. But tonight was different. Big investors. Bigger reputations. And most importantly—**Mr. Mecer**. Owner of the most elite law firm in the country. If I could secure even a genuine conversation with him, it would shift the trajectory of everything I was building.

By the time I reached the venue, the dinner had already begun. Valets moved with precision, expensive cars lined the entrance like trophies. As I handed over my keys, my eyes snagged on a familiar silhouette.

A McLaren.

Black. Sleek. Impossible to miss.

My chest tightened.

No.

It couldn't be her.

Vegas had hundreds of McLarens, right?

I forced myself to look away and walked inside.

The place buzzed with music and laughter, crystal glasses clinking, suits loosened, heels discarded under tables. This wasn't a formal dinner—it was a polished party pretending to be business. Power disguised as pleasure.

I scanned the room and spotted him almost instantly.

Mr. Mecer stood near the bar, a glass of whiskey in hand, tailored suit sharp enough to cut glass. He looked every bit the man whose signature decided futures.

“Mr. Mecer,” I said, stepping forward.

He turned, eyes lighting up with recognition. “Mr. Blackwell. It's been a while.”

We'd met once—an awards function. He'd praised me for becoming the youngest, most successful entrepreneur in my field. Praise from him wasn't casual. It lingered.

“This is my wife,” he said, gesturing beside him, “and my elder daughter.”

I smiled, shook hands, exchanged polite pleasantries. The usual.

Then—

“Dad!”

The voice sliced through the noise.

“Yes, sunshine?” Mr. Mecer replied fondly.

I hadn't seen her yet—she was hidden behind his tall frame. But the moment she stepped aside, the world tilted.

Her.

Hazel eyes.

She stood there in a black dress that fit her like it had been designed with her body in mind. Confident. Dangerous. Unapologetic. My breath stalled somewhere between disbelief and shock.

Before I could recover, Mr. Mecer spoke again.

“Mr. Blackwell, this is my little sunshine—perhaps my younger daughter.”

I froze.

She looked at me, eyes narrowing, recognition flashing like a spark before a fire.

“You?” she said. “What are *you* doing here, Mr. Whiskey Eyes?”

Before I could answer, her mother cut in sharply.

“Sweetheart, that’s not how we speak to a guest.”

She frowned but said nothing.

God. Why her?

“Looks like you two know each other?” Mr. Mecer asked, curiosity evident.

“No,” she said quickly. “We just... bumped into each other.”

I smirked slightly.

“Well,” I said, turning back to Mr. Mecer, “does your sunshine have a name?”

He chuckled. “Ella.”

“Ella,” I repeated, testing it on my tongue. It fit disturbingly well. “Unusual.”

“Well, it’s mine—and I love it,” she shot back.

A slow smile curved my lips.

“Feisty,” I murmured.

Her glare could’ve burned me alive.

I spoke with Mr. Mecer for a while after that—business, visions, future collaborations. Other associates joined in. But I knew I’d made an impression. A strong one.

Then suddenly, someone grabbed my arm and yanked me aside.

“What the hell—”

“What the hell are *you* doing here, Mr. Whiskey Eyes?” she snapped.

Ella.

Up close, her presence was worse. Better. I couldn’t tell.

I studied her face shamelessly, memorizing every line, every emotion. “Well,” I said calmly, “as you can see, I was invited.” I paused deliberately. “Your father invited me, Hazel.”

“Stop calling me Hazel.”

“So what should I call you,” I leaned in slightly, “sunshine?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Feisty,” I corrected.

Her jaw tightened. “You need to leave.”

I smiled—slow, dangerous.

“And miss the best part of the night?” I finished softly.

Her eyes flashed. “You think you’re funny?”

“No,” I said honestly. “I think you’re trying very hard not to throw your drink at me.”

She crossed her arms, the movement sharp. “This is a private event. You don’t belong here.”

“Funny,” I replied, leaning closer just enough to unsettle her, “your father seems to think otherwise.”

“Stay away from him,” she warned. “And stay away from me.”

I raised my hands in mock surrender. “Relax, Hazel. I’m here for business, not family drama.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “You always talk like you own the room?”

“Only when I do.”

For a split second, something flickered in her eyes—annoyance mixed with something far more dangerous. Curiosity.

“Listen,” she said, lowering her voice, “whatever you think this is—”

“I don’t think,” I interrupted. “I notice.”

She scoffed. “Notice what?”

“That you don’t like being seen,” I said quietly. “But you hate being ignored more.”

Silence stretched between us, heavy and charged.

Before she could respond, a familiar voice cut in.

“Ella.”

She stiffened instantly.

“Yes, Dad?”

Mr. Mecer approached us, his gaze shifting between the two of us. “Everything alright?”

“Perfect,” I said smoothly.

She shot me a look that promised murder. “We were just talking.”

Mr. Mecer nodded, satisfied. “Good. Mr. Blackwell, I hope you’re enjoying the evening.”

“Very much,” I said, my eyes never leaving her.

“Ella, go check on your mother,” he added. “She was looking for you.”

She hesitated, clearly wanting to argue, then turned back to me. “This isn’t over,” she whispered.

I smiled. “I’d be disappointed if it were.”

She walked away, heels clicking against the floor, every step measured and furious.

I watched until she disappeared into the crowd.

That’s when it hit me.

Ella Mecer wasn’t just an inconvenience.

She was a complication.

And I had a feeling—

she was about to become the most dangerous one of all.

Chapter~5

Ashton



I took a slow breath, forcing my attention back to the room. Deals. Faces. Power. That's why I was here. Not for hazel eyes that burned holes through my composure.

Yet every few seconds, my gaze betrayed me—searching.

I finally excused myself from a cluster of associates and headed toward the bar. Whiskey. Neat. The bartender slid the glass toward me, amber liquid catching the light. I took a sip, grounding myself.

“Careful,” a voice beside me said. “Too much of that and you’ll start saying things you regret.”

I didn’t need to turn to know who it was.

“Funny,” I replied, eyes still on my glass, “I don’t strike you as the caring type.”

She stood next to me anyway. Close. Too close. I could smell her perfume—something subtle, dangerous. Not sweet. Never sweet.

“I’m not,” she said. “I’m warning you.”

I finally looked at her. “About what?”

“About thinking you can walk into my world and not cause damage.”

I chuckled softly. “Your world? From what I can see, it already runs on chaos.”

She leaned against the bar, mirroring my posture despite herself. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you hate being called sunshine,” I said. “You despise small talk. You wear black like armor. And you pretend you’re unaffected when you’re anything but.”

Her fingers tightened around her glass. “Stop.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

She didn’t.

Instead, she turned to face me fully. “You’re dangerous.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Because I’m honest?”

“Because you look at people like puzzles you’re dying to solve.”

I tilted my head. “And you don’t want to be solved.”

“I don’t want to be *touched*,” she corrected sharply. “By you. Or anyone like you.”

That stung more than I expected.

“Anyone like me?” I asked calmly. “Successful? Ambitious? Unapologetic?”

She laughed once, bitter. “Arrogant. Calculating. Used to winning.”

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “You say that like it’s a crime.”

“In my family,” she said quietly, “it is.”

Before I could respond, applause rippled through the room. Someone tapped a glass. Mr. Mecer moved toward the center, commanding attention without trying.

“My friends,” he began, “thank you for joining us tonight. This gathering isn’t just about celebration—it’s about the future.”

Ella straightened instantly, slipping back into composure. Distance returned like a wall slamming down.

“As many of you know,” Mr. Mecer continued, “my firm is expanding its security and cyber division. Carefully. Selectively.”

My pulse spiked.

“We’re in talks with a few candidates,” he said, eyes scanning the room. Then—briefly—meeting mine. “And I look forward to meaningful collaborations.”

The message was clear.

Ella glanced at me, suspicion sharp. “You planned this.”

I shook my head. “On my life—I didn’t know.”

She searched my face, trying to catch the lie. Found none.

“That makes it worse,” she muttered.

“Why?”

“Because if you didn’t plan it,” she said softly, “then fate is being cruel.”

I smiled, unable to help myself. “Or generous.”

She turned away, already retreating. “Don’t get comfortable, Mr. Blackwell. My father may like you—but I don’t trust you.”

I watched her disappear again, the crowd swallowing her whole.

I took another sip of whiskey.

For the first time in years,
a deal didn't feel like the most dangerous thing in the room.

She did.

Chapter 6

ELLA



I hated parties like this.

Too loud. Too fake. Too many people pretending they weren't measuring each other's worth with every glance, every laugh, every sip of overpriced alcohol.

And tonight—
tonight had crossed a line.

I stood near the balcony doors, fingers wrapped tightly around my glass, watching the city lights bleed into the desert night. Vegas glittered like a lie—beautiful from a distance, hollow up close.

Of all the places.
Of all the nights.
Of all the people.

Him.

Mr. Whiskey Eyes.

Ashton Blackwell.

I hadn't even known his name until tonight, and somehow that made it worse. Names made people real. Dangerous. Harder to dismiss.

I exhaled slowly, trying to steady myself.

“You’re quiet,” my mother said softly, coming to stand beside me. “Unusual for you.”

“I’m tired,” I replied. Not a lie. Just not the whole truth.

Her eyes studied me—the way only a mother’s could. “Is it because of Mr. Blackwell?”

My jaw tightened. “Why would it be?”

She smiled faintly. “Because you looked ready to throw him off the balcony.”

“Tempting,” I muttered.

She sighed. “He’s impressive, Ella. Your father rarely praises anyone.”

“That’s exactly the problem.”

Before she could ask me to explain, my father’s voice carried through the room again. Business. Expansion. Security. Futures being decided over whiskey and smiles.

And Ashton—
standing there like he belonged.

Like he hadn’t walked into my life uninvited and flipped something dangerous awake inside me.

I watched him from a distance now, the way he spoke with ease, confidence curling around every word. He didn’t beg for attention. He commanded it. People leaned in when he talked. Laughed when he smiled.

I hated how natural it was for him.

I hated even more that part of me noticed.

“Get it together,” I whispered to myself.

I turned away and headed toward the hallway leading to the private lounge—quiet, dim, safe. Or at least it should’ve been.

I was halfway there when footsteps followed.

Steady. Unrushed.

I didn’t need to look back.

“You really enjoy testing my patience,” I said flatly.

“Only because you have so much of it,” Ashton replied.

I stopped and turned to face him. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Funny,” he said, “your father seems to disagree.”

“This isn’t about him,” I snapped. “This is about boundaries.”

He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, maddeningly calm.

“You’ve been avoiding me since the announcement.”

“Good,” I said. “Take the hint.”

“Ella,” he said, and my name on his lips felt far too intimate,

“I didn’t come here to disrupt your life.”

“Then why does it feel like you did?”

Something shifted in his expression—just slightly. Less arrogance. More honesty.

“Because you weren’t supposed to matter,” he admitted quietly.

That stopped me cold.

“What?”

“I didn’t plan on remembering you,” he continued. “Didn’t plan on seeing you again. And I definitely didn’t plan on you being... this.”

“This what?” I challenged.

He looked at me then. Really looked.

“Impossible to ignore.”

My heart slammed against my ribs. I hated that it did that. Hated that my body reacted before my mind could shut him down.

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “Listen to me carefully, Ashton Blackwell. I don’t mix business with personal. And I *never* mix danger with family.”

His gaze didn’t waver. “And you think I’m danger.”

“I know you are.”

A slow smile touched his lips—but it wasn’t playful this time. It was sharp. Controlled.

“So are you,” he said.

I laughed, short and humorless. “You don’t know me.”

“I know enough,” he replied. “You walk like you’re braced for impact. You speak like you’re used to being underestimated. And you hate losing control.”

My breath hitched despite myself.

“Stop analyzing me,” I said.

“Then stop being fascinating.”

Silence fell between us, thick and electric.

“This ends here,” I said finally. “Whatever this is—it doesn’t happen.”

He straightened, stepping back, giving me space. And somehow, that restraint unsettled me more than his closeness had.

“Some collisions don’t care what we want.”

“As you wish,” he said smoothly. “But just so we’re clear—”

He paused, eyes locking onto mine, voice dropping just enough to feel dangerous.

“Once can be a coincidence. Twice can be a coincidence. But thrice is fate, Ella.”

My breath caught.

He didn’t wait for a response. He turned and walked away, leaving me frozen in the hallway, my pulse racing, my thoughts spiraling.

I pressed my palm to my chest.

This was bad.

Not because he was charming.

Not because he was powerful.

But because fate had just spoken my name—
and I wasn’t sure I could ignore it.

Chapter 7

ASHTON



I shouldn't have said it.

The moment the words left my mouth—*fate, Ella*—I knew I'd crossed a line I'd sworn I never would. I didn't believe in destiny. I believed in strategy, numbers, leverage. Things you could predict. Control.

And yet, as I walked away from her, her presence followed me like a shadow I couldn't shake.

I rejoined the crowd, face composed, shoulders relaxed. No one could tell that something inside me had shifted. To them, I was still Ashton Blackwell—the man who built an empire before thirty, the man who never lost focus once his sights were set.

If only they knew.

I accepted handshakes, exchanged business cards, listened to proposals I would normally dissect with precision. Tonight, every conversation blurred at the edges. My mind kept circling back to her—standing in that hallway, eyes sharp, heart guarded.

Ella Mecer wasn't impressed by power.
She was threatened by it.

That intrigued me more than it should have.

“Mr. Blackwell,” Mr. Mecer’s voice cut through my thoughts.
“Walk with me.”

We moved toward a quieter corner near the terrace, city lights stretching endlessly beyond the glass. He handed me another whiskey. I didn’t refuse.

“You handle yourself well,” he said. “Confident, but not careless.”

“I’ve learned when to speak,” I replied. “And when to listen.”

He nodded approvingly. “My firm doesn’t partner lightly. Security is trust. Trust is everything.”

“I understand,” I said. “I don’t chase contracts I can’t protect.”

His gaze sharpened. “Good. Because if this moves forward, it won’t just be business. It will be personal.”

I thought of Ella instantly.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said.

Mr. Mecer studied me for a long moment, then smiled. “We’ll talk soon.”

As he walked away, I exhaled slowly.

That was step one.

I turned back toward the room—and found her.

Ella stood near the balcony again, laughing softly at something her mother said. The tension had eased from her shoulders, just a little. The sight did something strange to my chest.

She wasn’t cold.

She was careful.

And careful people had reasons.

I watched her from afar, resisting the urge to approach. I'd pushed enough tonight. Any more, and she'd retreat completely—and that was the last thing I wanted.

Instead, I observed.

The way she noticed everything. The way she stayed close to exits. The way her smile never fully reached her eyes.

She carried history.

I finished my drink and set the glass down.

Once could be coincidence.

Twice could still be chance.

But tonight?

Tonight was the third collision.

And whether Ella liked it or not—
fate had already picked a side.

The question was no longer *if* our paths would cross again.

It was how hard the impact would be when they did.

I stayed where I was long after I'd decided not to move.

That, in itself, was unfamiliar.

Normally, once I identified an objective, hesitation vanished. I approached. I acquired. I exited with control intact. People mistook that for confidence, but it was really discipline—never letting impulse steer the wheel.

Ella disrupted that.

Not with flirtation. Not with charm. With resistance.

I watched her long enough to memorize her patterns without meaning to. The way her fingers curled around the stem of her glass—not nervous, but anchored. The way she tilted her head when listening, as if weighing words rather than accepting them at face value. She didn’t disappear into conversations like everyone else here. She remained herself inside them.

Her mother leaned in, said something that made Ella’s lips curve again. This time, the smile lingered a second longer.

It shouldn’t have mattered.

It did.

The crowd shifted, laughter rising, music softening into something slower. A few guests drifted toward the terrace doors, drawn by the lights and night air. The event was loosening, becoming less formal—ties undone, heels kicked off discreetly, whiskey poured heavier.

That was usually my cue to leave.

Tonight, I stayed.

I moved toward the bar, nodding politely at a few familiar faces along the way. Someone clapped me on the shoulder, congratulated me on a recent acquisition. I responded automatically, muscle memory carrying me through the exchange.

My attention never fully left her.

At the bar, I ordered water instead of another drink. My head was already crowded enough.

“Mr. Blackwell.”

I turned to find one of the senior partners addressing me—someone whose name I knew, whose reputation I respected, and whose opinion I normally would have catalogued carefully.

“Impressive pitch earlier,” he said. “Mecer doesn’t warm easily.”

“So I’ve heard.”

The man chuckled. “If he’s interested, you’ll know. If he’s not—well, you won’t hear a word.”

I glanced back toward the balcony without thinking.

Ella was no longer laughing.

She was watching the room now. Watching *me*.

Our eyes met across the distance.

The moment snapped tight.

No smile. No acknowledgment. Just a steady, unblinking awareness that sent a slow, deliberate pulse through my veins.

She didn’t look away first.

I inclined my head—barely. Not an invitation. Not a challenge. Just recognition.

That was when she turned.

The ease with which she broke eye contact irritated me more than it should have.

“Excuse me,” I said to the partner, already disengaging.

“Enjoy the evening.”

I didn’t follow her immediately.

I counted to ten.

Then I followed—not toward the balcony, but toward the hallway that led away from the main floor. I wasn't certain why. Instinct, maybe. Or the way she'd angled herself earlier, already scanning exits.

She was there.

Standing near a framed abstract painting, arms folded loosely, posture composed. She wasn't hiding. She wasn't waiting either.

She was simply... there.

"Do you always disappear like that," I asked calmly, "or is it just with me?"

She didn't startle. Didn't turn right away.

"Do you always assume people leave because of you?" she replied.

A pause.

Then she faced me.

Up close, the control in her expression was even more evident. Her eyes were steady, guarded but intelligent—like she'd learned early that softness invited consequences.

"No," I said. "Only when I'm right."

Her gaze flicked briefly to the painting beside us. "Confidence suits you."

"I've been told."

"Yes," she said. "By people who benefit from it."

There it was again—that edge. Not bitterness. Awareness.

"You think I benefit from intimidating people?" I asked.

“I think,” she said slowly, “you benefit from people *believing* they’re safe around you.”

I studied her, genuinely now.

“That’s not intimidation,” I said. “That’s trust.”

“Trust,” she repeated softly. “Isn’t neutral. It’s earned—or misplaced.”

Silence stretched between us, dense and deliberate.

“Why do you keep pushing me away?” I asked finally.

She lifted an eyebrow. “You assume I’m pushing.”

“You are.”

“Because you keep stepping forward,” she countered.

“Without asking if I want you there.”

The honesty of it landed harder than any accusation could have.

“You could tell me to stop,” I said.

“I don’t give commands to people who don’t listen,” she replied.

Something in me shifted then—not defensiveness, not frustration.

Respect.

“That’s fair,” I said. “So tell me this instead.”

She waited.

“Why haven’t you walked away?”

Her eyes searched mine, not for advantage—but for intention.

“Because,” she said quietly, “you don’t act like a man who’s used to being questioned.”

“And you don’t act like a woman who enjoys challenging them.”

A corner of her mouth lifted. Not quite a smile.

“Then maybe,” she said, “we’re both out of our comfort zones.”

That admission lingered between us, fragile and dangerous.

Voices echoed faintly from the ballroom. Laughter. Music. Life continuing without us.

“I don’t believe in fate,” I said, choosing my words carefully this time.

“I know,” she replied. “Men like you never do.”

“And yet,” I continued, “you keep appearing in my path.”

Her gaze softened—not enough to lose its edge, but enough to reveal something underneath.

“Maybe,” she said, “you’re finally noticing who you’re walking toward.”

Before I could respond, footsteps approached from behind her.

“Ella,” her mother called gently. “Your father’s looking for you.”

She exhaled, the moment sealing itself shut.

“Goodnight, Mr. Blackwell,” she said, already stepping away.

“Ella,” I called—not stopping her, just anchoring the word in the air.

She turned once more.

“This doesn’t end tonight,” I said.

She studied me for a long second, then nodded—not agreement, not refusal.

Acknowledgment.

“I know,” she said. “That’s what worries me.”

She walked away.

I stood there long after she disappeared into the crowd, aware of one undeniable truth settling into place:

Ella Mecer wasn’t a distraction.

She was a disruption.

And for the first time in years, I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to regain control—

Or see exactly how far this collision would take me.

Chapter 8

ELLA



I woke up already angry.

Not the loud kind.

The quiet, simmering kind that sat heavy in my chest and refused to move.

Sunlight filtered through the tall curtains of my childhood bedroom, painting the walls in soft gold. The room looked untouched by time—cream walls, the antique desk, the framed photographs carefully curated to reflect *achievement* rather than memory.

I hated how familiar it still felt.

I stared at the ceiling for a long moment, my mind replaying the night like a badly edited film.

Whiskey eyes.

That voice.

The way he said *fate* like it was a fact, not a theory.

I pushed myself upright, rubbing my temples.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered to the empty room.

I didn’t believe in fate. I believed in cause and effect. Choices. Consequences. And Ashton Blackwell—however magnetic, infuriating, and unsettling—was a consequence I did *not* need.

The house was unusually quiet when I stepped out into the hallway. No staff moving briskly. No raised voices. No phone calls echoing through marble corridors.

Suspicious.

I made my way downstairs and found Addie already seated at the kitchen island, dressed impeccably as always, scrolling through her tablet.

She glanced up. Smirked.

“Oh good,” she said. “You’re alive.”

“Barely,” I replied, pouring myself coffee. “Why does it feel like I walked into a crime scene?”

She took a sip of her tea. “Because Dad’s in his office, Mom’s pretending to meditate, and you—” her eyes flicked up to me pointedly, “—are avoiding breakfast like it contains emotional landmines.”

I sighed. “You noticed.”

“Hard not to,” she said dryly. “You vanished early last night.”

“I needed air.”

“You needed distance,” she corrected. “From *him*.”

I froze mid-sip.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Addie raised an eyebrow. “Ella.”

I lowered my cup slowly. “You’re reading too much into it.”

She smiled softly—too softly. “You don’t glare at people like that unless they’ve touched something sensitive.”

I leaned back against the counter, exhaling. “He’s... complicated.”

“That’s billionaire code for dangerous.”

“Exactly.”

She studied me for a second longer, then spoke carefully.

“Dad likes him.”

“I know,” I said, irritation flaring instantly. “That’s what scares me.”

Before she could respond, footsteps echoed behind us.

My father.

He looked relaxed—too relaxed. Shirt sleeves rolled up, no tie, coffee mug in hand. The look he wore was thoughtful. Strategic.

The look he got right before making decisions that changed lives.

“Morning, sunshine,” he said warmly.

“Morning,” I replied, bracing myself.

He gestured toward the breakfast table. “Sit with me.”

That wasn’t a request.

I exchanged a glance with Addie, who mouthed *good luck*, and did as told.

My father sat across from me, eyes kind but sharp.

“You left early last night,” he said.

“I wasn’t feeling well.”

A pause.

“Physically,” he clarified.

I stiffened. “I was tired.”

He nodded, sipping his coffee. “Ashton Blackwell is... impressive.”

There it was.

“I don’t care,” I said too quickly.

His gaze lifted, curious. “You don’t?”

“No.”

Another pause—longer this time.

“Interesting,” he murmured.

My stomach tightened. “What is?”

“You’re usually better at hiding it.”

“Hiding what?”

“Your reactions,” he said calmly. “You don’t dislike him.”

I stood abruptly. “I need to shower.”

“Sit down,” he said—not harshly, but firmly.

I did.

“I invited him here because I trust him,” my father continued.

“And because he sees things most people don’t.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” I snapped.

His brows drew together. “Explain.”

“He doesn’t ask permission,” I said quietly. “He observes. He analyzes. He assumes.”

Addie shifted uncomfortably.

My father studied me with renewed interest. “You feel seen.”

I hated how accurate that was.

“He looks at me like I’m a problem to solve,” I said. “And I don’t want to be anyone’s puzzle.”

My father leaned back, thoughtful. “You’ve never been afraid of powerful men.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” I said.

“What are you, then?”

I hesitated.

Because the truth sat uncomfortably heavy in my chest.

“I’m aware,” I said finally. “And awareness is dangerous.”

Silence settled over the kitchen.

“Well,” my father said slowly, “he’ll be joining us again.”

My heart dropped. “What?”

“For business,” he clarified. “Several times, most likely.”

I pushed back from the table. “I can’t be here for that.”

He looked at me calmly. “You don’t have to be.”

That stopped me.

“But you will be,” he added gently. “Because running has never suited you.”

I didn’t respond.

Because part of me knew—
he was right.

Upstairs, steam fogged the bathroom mirror as I stared at my reflection.

Hazel eyes staring back. Guarded. Alert.

“This is not fate,” I whispered. “This is inconvenience.”

Yet even as I said it, my mind betrayed me—replaying his voice, his restraint, the way he stepped back when I asked him to.

That kind of control wasn’t arrogance.

It was discipline.

And that was far more dangerous.

I dressed quickly, choosing black—always black—like armor.

When my phone buzzed moments later, my breath caught before I even looked.

Unknown Number.

I stared at the screen.

Then it buzzed again.

I stared at the blank screen longer than necessary.

Unknown Number.

Coffee.

—A

I’d deleted the message, yet my body hadn’t caught up with the decision. My pulse was still uneven. My chest still tight, like I’d narrowly avoided something and somehow invited it anyway.

I set my phone face down on the vanity.

Control yourself.

Steam curled around me as I finished getting ready, the mirror slowly clearing to reveal a version of me I trusted—sharp

eyeliner, neutral lips, posture straight. The armor was back in place.

Downstairs, the house had returned to motion. Staff murmured. Doors opened and closed softly. Life resumed its expensive, curated rhythm.

I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

“Ella.”

My father’s voice again. Calm. Measured.

I stopped.

He stood near the entryway now, jacket on, keys in hand. Leaving soon. Escaping, more like.

“I’m heading to the office,” he said. “We’ll talk later.”

About *him*, was implied.

“I won’t be here,” I replied.

A pause. Then a faint smile. “Of course you won’t.”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Just remember something, sunshine.”

I met his eyes.

“People don’t unsettle you unless they mirror something you recognize.”

He kissed my forehead—gentle, grounding—and walked out.

The door closed behind him with a final click.

I stood there longer than I should have.

Then I left.

Vegas was loud even in daylight—sunlight bouncing off glass towers, heat already clinging to skin, engines humming with impatience. I drove with the windows down, music low, my mind anything but quiet.

I told myself I was going to the library.

I ended up at the café on Alder Street.

Of course I did.

The bell chimed as I stepped inside, familiar warmth wrapping around me instantly. The smell of coffee. Vanilla. Safety.

Julian looked up from the counter and blinked.

“Well,” he said slowly, “either I’m hallucinating, or today’s about to get interesting.”

I managed a small smile. “I need caffeine. And silence.”

“I can offer one of those,” he replied, already grabbing a cup.

I slid into my usual seat by the window, shoulders loosening despite myself.

Julian placed my drink down gently. “You okay?”

I stared into the ice swirling slowly. “Do I look okay?”

“You look,” he said carefully, “like someone poked a sleeping dragon and walked away pretending nothing happened.”

I snorted softly. “That accurate, huh?”

He leaned against the counter. “Want to talk about it?”

“No,” I said immediately.

Then—quieter, “Maybe.”

He waited. Always patient.

“There’s a man,” I began, then stopped. Exhaled. “No. That sounds ridiculous.”

Julian smiled. “Try me.”

“There’s a man,” I repeated, “who looks at me like he’s already decided something—and I don’t know what.”

Julian’s expression shifted, just a little. “That sounds... uncomfortable.”

“It is,” I said. “Because I can’t tell if he wants to protect me or dismantle me.”

“That’s not someone you want close,” he said gently.

“I know.”

Outside, a black car slowed near the curb.

My stomach dropped before my brain caught up.

I didn’t turn.

Julian did.

“...Huh,” he muttered.

“What?” I asked, too fast.

“Nothing,” he said. Then frowned. “Actually—something.”

I closed my eyes, I felt a sharp chill down my spine, it was him.

Slow footsteps approached. Unhurried. Confident.

The chair across from me slid back.

I looked up.

Ashton Blackwell sat down like he belonged there.

Dark suit. No tie. Sunglasses pushed onto his head. Calm expression that did not apologize for existing.

Julian stiffened instantly.

“Ashton,” I said flatly. “You’re trespassing.”

“Public space,” he replied easily. “Relax.”

“I deleted your message.”

“I assumed you would.”

That annoyed me more than it should have.

Julian cleared his throat. “Uh—Ella, do you—”

“Julian,” I said without looking away from Ashton, “could you give us a minute?”

Ashton’s eyes flicked to him, sharp, assessing.

Julian hesitated, then nodded slowly. “I’ll be right behind the counter.”

The moment he stepped away, I leaned forward.

“You don’t get to follow me,” I said quietly.

“I didn’t,” Ashton replied. “I came for coffee.”

“You don’t drink coffee here.”

“People change.”

I laughed once, humorless. “No. People adapt.”

A corner of his mouth lifted. “You noticed.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

He studied me for a moment—really studied me.

“Because you deleted the message,” he said honestly.

“That makes no sense.”

“It does,” he replied. “It means you read it.”

I clenched my jaw. "You're crossing lines."

"You draw them very clearly," he said. "That doesn't mean I can't see over them."

I stood. "This conversation is over."

"So is mine," he said calmly. "After this."

I froze.

"I didn't plan to work with your father," he continued. "I didn't know who you were when we met. And I don't pursue people who don't want to be pursued."

"Then leave," I snapped.

"I will," he said. "After I say this."

He stood too, but didn't move closer.

"I don't want anything from you," he said quietly. "Not access. Not leverage. Not answers."

I swallowed.

"I just don't like unfinished collisions."

Silence pressed between us.

Outside, a car horn blared. Someone laughed. Life continued.

"You don't scare me," I said finally.

He nodded once. "Good."

Then he stepped back.

"I'll keep my distance," he added. "Unless you tell me not to."

"That's manipulative."

"No," he said softly. "That's respect."

He turned and walked away.

The bell chimed again.

Julian rushed over. “Are you okay?”

I sank back into my chair, hands trembling just slightly.

“No,” I admitted. “But I will be.”

Outside, the black car disappeared into traffic.

And for the first time since last night, I realized something unsettling—

Ashton Blackwell wasn’t trying to chase me.

He was waiting.

And somehow, that was worse.

Chapter 9

ASHTON



The city never really slept, but tonight, it felt quieter than usual. Not quiet in volume—Vegas didn’t do quiet—but quiet in a way that allowed thoughts to settle and linger. I didn’t like letting thoughts linger. Control was everything. Observation, calculation, precision. Patterns. Predictable outcomes.

And yet...

Ella Mecer refused predictability.

I hadn’t moved when I left the café. Not fully. I lingered just across the street, hidden in the shadow of a lamppost, watching her. It wasn’t stalking. I told myself it wasn’t. It was assessment. Analysis. Gathering intelligence. A habit. A skill. And yet, the closer I observed, the less I understood.

She wasn’t fragile. Not really. Not in the way people often thought of women as fragile. She carried chaos like armor—graceful, controlled, sharp—but there was tension beneath it. Every exhale, every sip of coffee, every subtle glance around the room was measured. Calculated. Defensive.

And human.

That was what unnerved me. I was used to people hiding behind walls I could see through, shields I could dismantle, armor I could penetrate with logic and leverage. Ella’s walls...

they were different. Layered, yes. Calculated, yes. But they were not designed for me to break. They were designed for everyone else. And that—somehow—made them more dangerous.

I memorized the details. Little things. The way she twirled the ring on her finger absentmindedly. The slight crease between her brows when she focused on her phone. The way her hair fell over her shoulder just enough to obscure her expression but not completely hide it. Every movement was a puzzle I wanted to solve—but couldn't. Not yet.

I wanted to approach her. I wanted to sit across from her and ask about the subtle lines of worry under her eyes, the stiffness in her shoulders, the tension in her jaw. I wanted to know the stories that shaped those patterns. But I didn't. Not because I lacked courage. I had plenty. Not because I wasn't tempted. I was. Very tempted.

Because there were rules.

Rules I had lived by for decades.

- No personal distractions.
- No interference with others' lives.
- Always maintain control.

Ella Mecer broke all of them.

The café door chimed as she left, carrying herself with the same careful precision I'd observed since the first time she entered that room. The streetlights glinted off her McLaren as she slid into the driver's seat. I didn't follow. Not yet. I let her leave. Let her believe the encounter was over. Let her think I was gone.

But I wasn't gone.

I watched her go, waited for her taillights to disappear into the pulse of Vegas traffic, and then I allowed myself to move. My car hummed to life, engine purring low and precise. I drove slowly, taking in the city. Observing. Calculating. Planning. Not for business. Not for leverage. Not for power. For her.

That was dangerous.

I replayed the collision in my mind—the brief, sharp moment when our worlds touched and nothing fit where it should. The way she'd looked at me. Startled, guarded, and yet... intrigued. That little crease in her brow when I'd said something minor, almost joking, that seemed to catch her off guard. The way she'd refused to give more than the barest acknowledgment, yet her presence lingered.

I analyzed it obsessively. I catalogued it like I did with data, but with far less objectivity.

She was cautious. Calculating. Defensive. Independent. Untouchable.

And I wanted every detail.

I drove past the strip, neon lights bleeding into the night, reflections dancing across the hood of my car. I thought of the first time I truly noticed her—the way she'd looked up, hazel eyes catching mine, unafraid but uncertain. A collision. A spark. A disturbance in my usual equilibrium. Something I hadn't felt in years, maybe ever.

I had a plan. I always had a plan. But for once, the plan wasn't working.

I couldn't predict her. I couldn't control her. I couldn't hack her world. And the truth? I didn't want to.

Not yet.

I stopped at a red light and stared at my reflection in the rearview mirror. The man staring back at me was calm, composed, controlled. But the truth? Behind those whiskey eyes, there was something unsettled. Something that didn't follow strategy. Something entirely irrational.

Her.

The thought was dangerous. Dangerous and delicious.
Dangerous and... necessary.

I drove on, keeping my distance, letting her world unfold without interference. But every instinct I had screamed that this wasn't over. That it couldn't be over. That we hadn't collided by chance.

Once could be coincidence. Twice might be accident. But three? Three was calculation. Or fate. Or whatever the universe called it when it decided to toy with people who thought they controlled everything.

And I didn't like being toyed with.

But I also didn't like letting go.

I parked my car far enough away from the penthouse that no one would notice, far enough that I could plan, and far enough to breathe. But my mind raced, circling her, replaying moments, memorizing gestures, analyzing reactions. I didn't sleep that night. Not fully. Not really. Not until the city outside dimmed and the hum of Vegas became a soft pulse, a faint heartbeat I couldn't match.

Ella Mecer had become my variable. My exception. My anomaly. And I was... addicted.

I wasn't done. Not by far.

Not when she was still out there. Waiting. Watching.
Unknown.

I would wait. I would observe. I would plan.

But soon...

Soon, I would act.

And the collision we'd already started... would be
unstoppable.

Chapter 10

ELLA



The café bell chimed behind me, sharp and final, like punctuation on a sentence I was too tired to reread. Evening traffic hummed as I crossed the sidewalk toward my McLaren, heels clicking with the kind of confidence I only pretended to feel. Meetings stacked on meetings, decisions stacked on decisions—and somewhere between espresso number three and a missed call, I'd almost forgotten about the builder.

Get it together, Ella.

I slid into the driver's seat, leather cool against my skin, and pulled out my phone. Google Maps blinked awake.

Willow Crest.

The name alone had felt promising when Ava first mentioned it—quiet luxury, clean lines, privacy. Everything I wanted. Everything I needed.

I followed the route, city lights streaking past as the sun dipped lower, painting the skyline in gold and steel. Twenty minutes later, Willow Crest rose before me—glass and concrete, understated but unmistakably elite. The kind of place that didn't try to impress. It didn't have to.

The valet took my keys. I sent a quick text to Ava—*I'm here*—and stepped inside.

The lobby smelled like polished marble and expensive restraint. I waited in the seating area, legs crossed, fingers drumming lightly against my phone. I was calm. Focused. This was business.

“Ms. Mecer. Nice to meet you.”

The voice cut cleanly through my thoughts.

I looked up. Ava stood there, professional smile in place, clipboard tucked under her arm. Builder. Miracle worker. The woman who’d finally found something that met my impossible list.

“Hello, Ava. It’s nice to see you again,” I said, standing. We shook hands.

Months. That’s how long it had taken—months of rejections, compromises I refused to make, penthouses that felt cold, houses that felt wrong. And now, finally, this. Today was about numbers. Signatures. Closure.

“Let’s go,” Ava said, already turning.

We moved through the building, the elevator ride silent except for the soft hum of ascent. The doors opened onto a quiet floor.

“Apartment number... 1728,” she read, walking down the hall.

“Yes—here we are.”

The door opened.

And—

I froze.

The space unfolded like a held breath finally released. Sunlight poured through floor-to-ceiling windows. Neutral tones, warm wood, clean lines. A kitchen that looked like it belonged in an

architectural magazine. The furniture was minimal but intentional—every piece chosen, not placed.

“Oh my God,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

Ava smiled, clearly pleased. “I had a feeling.”

“This is perfect,” I said, slowly walking in. My fingers brushed the counter, the back of a chair. It felt right. Like something clicked into place inside my chest. “And what would this cost me?”

“Ninety thou—”

“Eight hundred twenty-six dollars and sixty-nine cents.”

The voice didn’t belong here.

It didn’t belong *anywhere* near me.

I turned.

And there he was.

The same presence. The same dangerous calm. Cinnamon warmth and whiskey eyes that should’ve been illegal. Ashton Blackwell stood near the window, hands in his pockets like he owned the damn air.

My heart slammed violently against my ribs.

“You?” The word tore out of me.

“I own the apartment,” he said, voice sharp, clipped.

I laughed once, humorless. “Ava—do we have any other apartment vacant? I don’t want *him* as the landlord.”

Ava blinked, clearly confused.

“I don’t think I was clear,” Ashton said coolly. “I own the building. Willow Crest. All of it.”

The words landed like a punch.

Of course he did.

Because God had a twisted sense of humor.

I closed my eyes for half a second. *For hell's sake, get him out of my life.*

“Ava,” I said tightly, opening my eyes, “do we have any other option?”

Before she could answer, Ashton spoke. “Can you excuse us for a moment?”

Ava hesitated, glanced between us, then nodded. “Of course.” She stepped out, the door closing softly behind her.

Too softly.

The silence stretched.

Then Ashton moved.

One step. Then another.

I instinctively stepped back. Again. Again. My spine met the wall with a dull thud before I realized how close he was. His hand shot out, gripping my wrist, pinning it beside my head. The other came down near my shoulder, caging me in.

My breath hitched.

“What are you doing here?” His voice dropped—low, dangerous, commanding.

I swallowed. “Well,” I said, forcing my voice steady, “I was here to see the apartment—unaware of the fact that you’re the owner, Mr. Blackwell.”

His eyes darkened.

“Well, now you know,” he said quietly. “That I’m the owner, Hazel.”

My name on his tongue felt like a violation.

“I’m not staying here,” I shot back. “Release me.”

“No,” he said, unwavering. “You are staying here, Hazel.”

I laughed again, sharp and brittle. “You don’t get to decide that.”

His grip tightened—just enough to remind me he could. “You walked into *my* building. You fell in love with *my* apartment. And now you want to run because it’s me?”

“Yes.”

Something flickered across his face. Anger. Amusement. Something far more dangerous.

“You always run,” he murmured.

My jaw clenched. “You don’t know me.”

“I know enough,” he said, leaning closer. His breath brushed my cheek. “And whether you like it or not, you’re not walking away from this.”

From *him*.

My pulse thundered. “Move,” I said. “Or I swear—”

“Or what, Ella?” he interrupted softly.

He knew my name.

The realization hit harder than anything else.

For a long second, neither of us moved. The apartment—*my* apartment—held its breath with us.

This wasn’t just coincidence anymore.

This was war.

Chapter 11

ASHTON



I shouldn't have touched her.

The moment my hand wrapped around Ella's wrist, every rule I'd built for myself cracked clean down the middle. Control was my currency. Precision. Distance. And yet there I was—pressed too close, her pulse racing beneath my thumb like it was trying to escape me.

I stepped back first.

Not because she asked.

Because if I didn't, I'd do something I wouldn't be able to take back.

Her eyes followed me—sharp, furious, too aware. She smoothed her blazer, chin lifting in that defiant way she used when she refused to let anyone see how rattled she was.

“Don't ever do that again,” she said.

It wasn't a threat.

It was a boundary.

“Noted,” I replied coolly, even though the word burned on the way out.

Silence stretched between us, thick and volatile. The city glimmered beyond the windows, unaware it was witnessing the start of something catastrophic.

“You knew,” she said suddenly.

I didn’t pretend otherwise. “I suspected.”

“Suspected,” she echoed, incredulous. “So this—” she gestured around the apartment, “—wasn’t an accident?”

“No,” I said. “But it wasn’t a trap either.”

Her laugh was sharp. “You expect me to believe that?”

I met her gaze, steady. “I expect you to listen.”

She crossed her arms, posture defensive. “You’ve got thirty seconds.”

I glanced at my watch. “Twenty-nine.”

She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t walk away.

“I bought Willow Crest two years ago,” I said. “It was an investment. Clean. Profitable. No personal attachments.”

“Until now,” she muttered.

“I didn’t know it was you when Ava mentioned a prospective tenant,” I continued. “High-profile. Private. Non-negotiable list. Sound familiar?”

Her lips pressed together.

“The moment I saw your name,” I admitted, “I should’ve shut it down.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Because the thought of her living anywhere else—untouchable, out of reach—felt wrong in a way I couldn't explain.

Instead, I said, "Because you deserve a place like this."

Her expression softened for half a second before she caught it. "You don't get to decide what I deserve."

"I get to offer," I corrected. "And you get to walk away."

"Then unlock the door," she said. "Let Ava back in."

I moved—but not toward the door.

"You're angry," I said quietly. "I get that. But don't pretend this apartment didn't just feel like home."

Her breath hitched. She hated that I was right.

"This changes nothing," she said.

"It changes everything."

She shook her head. "I don't mix business with... whatever this is."

"Neither do I."

She scoffed. "Liar."

I smiled faintly. "Careful. You're renting from me."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm not renting from you."

"Then you'll spend the next six months searching again," I said evenly. "And you'll compare every place to this one. And you'll hate them all."

She stared at me like she wanted to argue—and realized she couldn't.

I stepped closer, but stopped well short of touching her this time. “I won’t interfere. I won’t show up unannounced. You’ll deal with Ava, not me. Contractually, I’ll be invisible.”

She hesitated.

“I’ll even put it in writing,” I added.

“You think paperwork fixes everything?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “But it builds trust.”

She looked around the apartment again. The light. The space. The future she’d already pictured here.

“You planned this,” she said quietly.

“I planned a building,” I replied. “You walked into it.”

Another long pause.

“If I agree,” she said slowly, “this stays professional.”

I nodded. “Completely.”

“And you don’t get to use this—” she gestured between us, “—as leverage.”

“I don’t need leverage with you,” I said. “You’re already standing here.”

That earned me a glare. But she didn’t deny it.

“I’ll think about it,” she said finally.

“That’s all I’m asking.”

She headed for the door, hand on the handle. Before leaving, she looked back at me—guarded, unreadable, infuriatingly captivating.

“This doesn’t mean you win,” she said.

I watched her leave, the door clicking shut behind her.

I exhaled slowly.

I hadn't won.

But I hadn't lost either.

And as I stood alone in apartment 1728, one thing was brutally clear—

Ella Mecer wasn't just moving into my building.

She was moving straight into my life.

Chapter 12

ELLA



I didn't get into the McLaren right away.

I stood outside Willow Crest, the glass façade reflecting a version of me I barely recognized—composed, polished, unshaken. A lie. My heart was still pounding like I'd just escaped something dangerous instead of a luxury apartment tour.

Breathe, Ella.

I exhaled slowly, then slid into the driver's seat and shut the door, sealing myself into silence. The engine purred to life, but I didn't move. My fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

Ashton Blackwell.

Of all the cities. Of all the buildings. Of all the damn apartments in Las Vegas.

My phone buzzed.

Ava: I'm so sorry about the interruption. Take your time. Let me know what you decide.

I stared at the message, then locked my phone without replying.

The problem wasn't the apartment.

The problem was that it felt like home—and he knew it.

I drove aimlessly for a while, the city blurring past as my mind replayed every second. His hand on my wrist. The wall cold against my back. The way he said my name like it belonged to him.

You always run.

I hated that sentence most of all.

By the time I reached my current place—a sterile condo that had never quite felt like mine—the sun had fully set. I kicked off my heels, dropped my keys on the counter, and leaned back against it, closing my eyes.

I'd built my life on independence. On not owing anyone anything. Especially men who thought control came naturally to them.

And yet.

Apartment 1728 had checked every box I'd ever written. Quiet. Secure. Private. A place where I could breathe.

A place he owned.

I poured myself a glass of water, hands trembling just slightly, and forced myself to think like the woman I was supposed to be.

Pros: perfect location. Perfect space. Zero compromises.

Cons: Ashton Blackwell.

One man shouldn't outweigh everything else.

But he wasn't just *a man*.

He was calculated. Observant. The kind of man who didn't do coincidences and definitely didn't do half-measures. And worse—he saw me. Past the sharp edges and the control and the carefully curated distance.

That scared me more than his ownership ever could.

My phone buzzed again.

Unknown number.

I knew before I answered.

“Don’t,” I said the second I picked up.

A pause. Then his voice—steady, calm, infuriating. “You left without taking the brochure.”

“I didn’t want it.”

“You’re lying.”

I closed my eyes. “Ashton, don’t do this.”

“I’m not,” he said. “I just wanted to say—no pressure. Ava will send the paperwork if you ask. If not, I’ll respect it.”

“You’re very good at sounding reasonable,” I said.

“I have to be,” he replied. “You wouldn’t listen otherwise.”

Silence stretched between us again. It seemed to be our thing.

“Why me?” I asked quietly before I could stop myself.

He didn’t answer immediately. When he did, his voice was lower. Honest. “Because you don’t need me. And people like me... don’t hear that often.”

My chest tightened.

“This is a bad idea,” I said.

“Most things worth doing are.”

I almost laughed. Almost.

“I’ll let Ava know tomorrow,” I said finally.

“Which way?” he asked.

I hesitated. Just long enough for him to hear it.

“That’s the problem,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” he said softly.

“And what’s that?”

“You’ll take the apartment,” he replied. “And you’ll pretend it doesn’t mean anything.”

“And you?” I asked.

“I’ll pretend I’m not counting the days.”

I hung up before he could say anything else.

I stared at my dark apartment, at the life that no longer fit quite right, and realized something terrifying—

No matter what I decided, Ashton Blackwell was already inside my head.

And if I wasn’t careful—

He’d end up everywhere else too.

Chapter 13

ASHTON

Seven hours later, I was still standing in apartment 1728.

Not physically—my body had moved on. Meetings were taken. Calls were answered. Decisions were made with the same efficiency everyone expected from me. But some part of me remained there, pressed between the memory of Ella's defiance and the echo of her hesitation.

I hated unfinished things.

I hated even more that she'd become one.

I poured myself a drink in my office—whiskey, neat. The city stretched beneath the glass walls, obedient and glittering, a reminder that everything I touched eventually fell into place.

Everything except her.

My phone lit up with a notification from Ava: *She hasn't decided yet.*

I smiled faintly.

Of course she hadn't.

Ella Mecer didn't make impulsive choices. She weighed, measured, evaluated risk like it was a second language. I recognized that instinct because it mirrored my own. We were

cut from similar cloth—sharp edges, strategic minds, scars we pretended were design features.

That was the problem.

I sat down, rolled my sleeves up, and pulled the Willow Crest file toward me. I'd memorized the building years ago—every unit, every clause, every contingency. But today, my eyes skimmed uselessly over numbers and blueprints.

Apartment 1728.

Corner unit. Maximum privacy. Best light.

I'd approved the interior design myself, not knowing why I cared more about that unit than the others. Now I knew.

She would wake up there with the sun spilling across the floors. She'd drink her coffee by the windows, lost in thought, pretending she wasn't. She'd work late, too late, pushing herself because rest felt like weakness.

I exhaled sharply and stood.

This was exactly why I'd sworn off complications.

I checked the time. Too late to call. Too early to sleep.

Instead, I drove.

The city at night had always calmed me. Movement without expectation. I took the long way, windows down, engine humming beneath my control. Somewhere between red lights and empty streets, my thoughts drifted back—unwanted, uninvited.

Her wrist beneath my hand.

The way she hadn't pulled away immediately.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

I wasn't proud of that moment. Control should never come at the expense of consent. I'd crossed a line—and I knew it. That was why I'd stepped back. Not because she'd asked, but because I refused to become the kind of man who took instead of offered.

Ella didn't need taking.

She needed choice.

And that terrified me more than resistance ever could.

By the time I got home, my phone buzzed again.

Unknown Number.

I answered without thinking. "Yes?"

A pause. Soft breathing.

Then, "It's me."

I leaned against the counter, eyes closing briefly. "You shouldn't call this late."

"I know," Ella said. "I won't keep you long."

"You're already keeping me."

Silence. Then a quiet exhale on her end.

"I walked through another apartment today," she said.

"And?"

"It was fine."

I smiled. "Fine isn't your standard."

"No," she admitted. "It isn't."

I waited. I'd learned that Ella filled silence when it mattered.

"If I take 1728," she said slowly, "I need assurances."

“You’ll have them.”

“I’m serious, Ashton.”

“So am I.”

She hesitated. “This can’t turn into... whatever this almost did today.”

“It won’t,” I said without hesitation.

“You say that now.”

“I’m not reckless,” I replied. “I don’t gamble with things I can’t afford to lose.”

Her voice softened, just slightly. “And what about me?”

I didn’t answer immediately. Honesty had a cost—and I suspected she’d hear it even through the phone.

“You,” I said finally, “are not a gamble.”

Another pause.

“That didn’t answer the question.”

I smiled despite myself. “You’re observant.”

“Occupational hazard.”

“If you move in,” I continued, “I’ll keep my distance. Professionally and personally. Ava will be your point of contact. You’ll never feel watched. Or managed.”

“And if I feel like I am?”

“Then you leave,” I said simply. “No penalties. No questions.”

She went quiet again. I could almost see her, pacing, thinking, arguing with herself.

“You’re making this too easy,” she said.

“I’m making it fair.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No,” I agreed. “But it’s the best I can offer.”

A breath. Steadying.

“Send the paperwork,” she said.

I straightened. “Are you sure?”

“No,” she replied. “But I rarely am.”

I respected that answer more than certainty.

“I’ll have Ava email it first thing,” I said.

“Thank you.”

The words lingered between us, heavier than they should’ve been.

“Ashton?” she added.

“Yes.”

“This doesn’t mean anything,” she said firmly.

I leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “Of course it doesn’t.”

“And you won’t read into it.”

“I won’t,” I promised.

“Good.”

She hung up.

I stared at my phone for a long moment before setting it down.

I’d told her the truth.

I would keep my distance.

I would be professional.

I would pretend this didn't matter.

But as I stood alone in my penthouse, the city quiet beneath me, one undeniable truth settled deep in my chest—

Ella Mecer had just moved into my building.

And I was already breaking promises I hadn't even made yet.

Chapter 14

ELLA

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Signing the lease felt like crossing a line I'd sworn I wouldn't even approach.

I sat at my dining table the next morning, sunlight filtering through half-open blinds, Ava's email glowing on my laptop screen. The paperwork was immaculate—too immaculate. Clauses stacked neatly, contingencies spelled out with surgical precision.

And there it was.

#### **Apartment 1728 — Willow Crest.**

I read every word twice. Then a third time.

No hidden leverage. No traps. An exit clause generous enough to be almost suspicious. Ashton had meant what he said—he'd made it fair.

That didn't make it safe.

I signed anyway.

The confirmation email came minutes later. Ava's polite congratulations. Move-in dates. Key handover details.

I closed the laptop and leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

*What have you done, Ella?*

Moving day arrived faster than I expected. Boxes replaced the sterile emptiness of my old condo, each one labeled and sealed like I was packing up a version of myself I no longer needed. I didn't feel sentimental. I rarely did.

But when I locked the door for the last time, something loosened in my chest.

Willow Crest greeted me with quiet efficiency. The staff was discreet, professional. No curious looks. No unnecessary conversation.

And no Ashton.

I should've been relieved.

Apartment 1728 was even more beautiful empty. Light flooded the space, unapologetic and warm. I walked barefoot across the floors, absorbing the silence. This wasn't just an apartment.

It was mine.

I unpacked slowly. Clothes first. Books second. The kitchen last. By evening, the place smelled faintly of cardboard and citrus cleaner. I poured myself a glass of wine and stood by the window, watching the city slip into night.

That's when I felt it.

Not a presence.

An awareness.

I turned instinctively toward the door just as a knock sounded.

Once.

Controlled. Deliberate.

My pulse spiked.

I checked the peephole.

Ashton.

Of course.

I opened the door halfway. “You said you’d keep your distance.”

“I am,” he replied calmly. He stood well back from the threshold, hands visible, posture deliberately non-threatening. “I won’t come in.”

“Then why are you here?”

He lifted a single envelope. “Keys. Security codes. Garage access. Ava asked me to drop them off since I was already on-site.”

I hesitated, then opened the door fully. “Fine.”

He handed them over without brushing my fingers. I noticed that. Of course I did.

“You’re settled?” he asked.

“Enough.”

He nodded once, eyes flicking briefly to the boxes stacked behind me before returning to my face. “If there’s anything you need—professionally—Ava’s number is on the inside of the envelope.”

“I know.”

Another pause. God, we were good at those.

“You’re avoiding looking at me,” he said.

“I’m setting boundaries.”

“Fair.”

Silence again.

“I won’t make this difficult,” he added quietly.

“I don’t believe you,” I said before I could stop myself.

Something like a smile touched his mouth. “You shouldn’t.”

His phone buzzed. He glanced at it, then back at me. “I should go.”

“Yes,” I agreed. Too quickly.

He turned, then stopped. “Ella.”

I met his eyes despite myself.

“This place suits you,” he said simply. No claim. No expectation.

Then he left.

I closed the door and leaned my forehead against it, exhaling a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

That night, sleep came in fragments. Every sound felt louder in a new space. Every shadow unfamiliar. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying his voice in my head.

*This doesn’t mean anything.*

I repeated it like a mantra.

Morning arrived softly.

I woke to sunlight spilling across the floors, just like he’d said it would. I made coffee, stood by the window, and let the quiet sink into me.

For the first time in months, I felt... steady.

My phone buzzed.

## Unknown Number

I frowned, then answered. “Hello?”

“Ms. Mecer,” a woman’s voice said politely. “This is building security. We wanted to inform you that your neighbor across the hall has filed a noise complaint.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, ma’am. Apparently there was late-night movement and—quote—‘emotional disturbance.’”

I stared at the empty apartment, incredulous. “I was asleep.”

A pause. Papers rustled. “Apologies. It appears the complaint was... misdirected.”

“Who filed it?” I asked.

Another pause—longer this time.

“Mr. Blackwell.”

I closed my eyes.

Of course he did.

When I hung up, my phone buzzed again—this time a text.

### **Ashton:**

*Relax. Wrong apartment. False alarm.*

*Welcome to Willow Crest, Hazel.*

I stared at the message, equal parts annoyed and amused.

So much for distance.

I took a sip of my coffee, watching the city wake up below me, and accepted a truth I could no longer deny—

Living here wasn’t going to be quiet.

And Ashton Blackwell wasn’t going to be easy to ignore.

## Chapter 15

### ASHTON



The noise complaint was a mistake.

Not the filing of it.

The *timing*.

I stood in the security office staring at the monitor feeds, arms crossed, jaw tight, while the guard awkwardly explained how the complaint had been logged under the wrong unit.

Across the hall.

From hers.

Perfect.

“Won’t happen again, sir,” he said quickly.

I nodded once and left without another word.

By the time I was back in my car, my phone buzzed.

*Relax. Wrong apartment. False alarm.*

*Welcome to Willow Crest, Hazel.*

I stared at the sent message longer than I should have.

That was the problem.

I was thinking about her when I shouldn’t be thinking at all.

The first week passed with surgical precision.

I didn't run into her.

Didn't "accidentally" take the elevator when I knew she would.  
Didn't change my routine. Didn't look at the security feeds longer than necessary.

Didn't break my word.

And yet—everything in the building felt different.

Apartment 1728 had a rhythm now. Lights on late. Early mornings. Music sometimes—low, controlled, classical or instrumental. The kind of music people played when they didn't want anyone to know what they were feeling.

She worked like she lived—intensely.

Friday night, I stayed late in my office. Contracts. Mergers. The usual distractions. When I finally shut my laptop, the city was quiet in that deceptive way that always came before something went wrong.

The elevator doors opened on my floor.

And there she was.

Ella stood inside, phone in hand, hair loose, blazer gone. She looked... real. Less armor. More edges.

We froze.

For one suspended second, neither of us moved.

"I can take the next one," she said automatically.

"No," I replied just as quickly. "I will."

At the same time, we both stepped back.

Then stopped.



She sighed. “This is ridiculous.”

“Agreed.”

I stepped into the elevator. She hesitated, then followed, standing on the opposite side like the space between us was a truce line.

The doors closed.

Silence.

The elevator descended slowly, each floor lighting up like a countdown.

“You settling in?” I asked, keeping my eyes forward.

“Yes.”

“Any issues?”

“No.”

A pause.

“Liar,” I added lightly.

She glanced at me. “Excuse me?”

“You reprogrammed the thermostat already,” I said. “The default settings were changed.”

She blinked. “How would you—”

“I designed the defaults.”

She pressed her lips together. “It was too cold.”

“I’ll survive.”

Another pause.

“You shouldn’t be monitoring that,” she said.

“I’m not,” I replied. “I get automated reports.”

“That’s worse.”

I almost smiled.

The elevator slowed.

“Look,” she said quietly, “I don’t want this to be awkward.”

“I don’t do awkward,” I replied. “I do complicated.”

She snorted before she could stop herself.

The sound hit me harder than it should have.

The doors opened. Lobby.

We stepped out together.

“Dinner?” she asked suddenly.

I stopped walking.

She did too, clearly regretting it already. “Not— I mean— professionally. There’s a residents’ meeting tonight. I thought—”

“I know what you meant,” I said.

Her eyes searched my face, waiting for a refusal.

“I can do dinner,” I added.

Her shoulders relaxed—just a fraction. “Good.”

We walked toward the exit.

“Seven?” she said.

“Seven.”

“At the place across the street,” she added. “Public. Neutral.”

“Safe,” I said.

She nodded. “Exactly.”

As she headed toward the valet, she glanced back. “And Ashton?”

“Yes?”

“This doesn’t mean anything.”

I smiled, slow and unreadable. “Of course it doesn’t.”

She left.

I stood there longer than necessary, hands in my pockets, watching the doors close behind her.

Dinner.

Public. Neutral.

Safe.

I’d built my life on control, distance, and rules that kept everything exactly where it belonged.

And yet—

I already knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Nothing about Ella Mecer was going to stay neutral for long.

## Chapter 16

### ELLA



I told myself dinner was practical.

A residents' meeting excuse. A public place. Neutral ground. I repeated it like a legal argument while I changed outfits three times and still hated all of them.

*This doesn't mean anything.*

I settled on a black dress—simple, sharp, uninviting. Armor in silk form. By the time I reached the restaurant across the street, my spine was straight, my expression composed, my pulse a liar.

Ashton was already there.

Of course he was.

He stood when he saw me, dark jacket, open collar, looking entirely too comfortable for a man who claimed neutrality. The hostess didn't even ask his name. That told me everything I needed to know.

"Ella," he said.

"Ashton."

We shook hands.

A handshake. Civil. Controlled.

Ridiculous.

We were seated by the window. The city buzzed just beyond the glass—cars, laughter, movement. Witnesses. Safety.

He let me order first. I noticed that too.

“You live alone?” he asked once menus were closed.

“Yes.”

“No pets?”

“No.”

“Plants?”

“I kill them.”

A corner of his mouth lifted. “Good to know.”

“Why?” I asked.

“In case I ever gift you one.”

I stiffened. “You won’t.”

“I know,” he said easily. “I was joking.”

“I don’t joke with landlords.”

“I don’t joke with tenants.”

The waiter arrived. Water. Wine. Space.

Silence crept in, not uncomfortable—worse. Charged.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said finally.

“Eat?” he asked.

“This,” I clarified. “Pretend.”

His gaze sharpened. “Pretend what?”

“That we’re just two people who happen to share a building.”

“And what are we actually?” he asked.

I met his eyes. “A complication.”

He considered that. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It always is,” I replied.

He leaned back, studying me the way he did when he was filing things away for later. “You’ve been disappointed before.”

“That’s not an observation,” I said coolly. “That’s an assumption.”

“Fair,” he admitted. “Then let me rephrase. You don’t trust easily.”

“Neither do you.”

A beat.

“True.”

Dinner arrived. Conversation shifted—work, neutral topics, safe ground. He talked about investments without bragging. I spoke about law without revealing too much. We circled each other like trained professionals, careful not to strike.

And then—

“I didn’t file the noise complaint,” he said suddenly.

I looked up. “Excuse me?”

“It was security,” he clarified. “They misattributed it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You texted me.”

“I didn’t deny it,” he said calmly. “I corrected the outcome.”

“That’s convenient.”

“I’m not in the habit of lying,” he replied. “I just don’t always explain.”

I hated how much sense that made.

We finished dinner slower than necessary.

At the entrance, we paused.

“This was fine,” I said.

“It was,” he agreed.

“And it won’t happen often.”

“No,” he said. “But it will happen again.”

I opened my mouth to argue—then closed it.

Because the worst part?

He was right.

We crossed the street together. The building loomed ahead, all glass and quiet power.

At the elevator, he reached for the button.

I stopped him. “I’ll take the next one.”

He looked at me—really looked. “You don’t have to keep running inside elevators too.”

My jaw tightened. “I’m not running.”

“Then what are you doing?”

Protecting myself.

I didn’t say it.

The elevator doors closed between us.

Up in apartment 1728, I kicked off my heels and leaned against the door, heart racing.

Dinner hadn't meant anything.

But it had felt like the start of something.

And that terrified me more than anything Ashton Blackwell had done so far.



## Chapter 17

### ELLA



There was a rhythm to Willow Crest I hadn't noticed before.

Not the obvious kind—the elevators, the security shifts, the muted hum of wealth disguised as silence. This rhythm was subtler. It lived in patterns. In timing. In absences that felt intentional.

Ashton Blackwell was avoiding me.

Not dramatically. Not in a way anyone else would notice. But I did.

I noticed because I lived in the spaces between his decisions.

A week passed after dinner. Then another.

No elevator encounters. No accidental meetings in the lobby. No texts beyond necessary building updates sent through Ava. It was almost impressive—the discipline of it.

And yet, his presence lingered everywhere.

The concierge greeted me differently now—more attentive, more careful. Maintenance requests were handled within hours. Security felt tighter, sharper, like someone had quietly raised the standard.

I didn't ask why.

I already knew.

He said distance.

What he meant was control.

It bothered me more than it should have.

Friday night came with rain. The kind that turned the city reflective, neon bleeding into asphalt. I'd worked late, briefs spread across my dining table, mind fogged from too many hours inside my own head.

At some point, I realized I hadn't eaten.

I pulled on a coat and headed downstairs, planning to grab something quick and come back up. No effort. No thought.

The lobby was nearly empty.

Nearly.

Ashton stood near the front desk, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, phone pressed to his ear. His voice was low, clipped—not angry, but sharp in a way that made people listen.

I slowed instinctively.

“I don't care how clean it looks on paper,” he said. “If it crosses the line, we don't touch it.”

Pause.

“No. I'm not interested in leverage. I'm interested in containment.”

Another pause. His jaw tightened.

“Then shut it down.”

He ended the call and exhaled slowly, like he'd been holding something back.

That's when he saw me.

For a fraction of a second, his control slipped.

It was subtle—but it was there. His posture shifted. His attention sharpened.

“Ella,” he said.

“Ashton.”

The air felt heavier suddenly.

“You’re out late,” he observed.

“So are you,” I replied.

“Work,” he said.

“Same.”

Silence.

God, we were exhausting.

“I didn’t expect to see you,” I added, unsure why the words mattered.

“I know,” he said quietly. “That was intentional.”

I frowned. “Why?”

He hesitated. Just long enough.

“Because every time we talk,” he said, “something shifts. And I’m trying not to move anything I can’t put back.”

That was... honest. Too honest.

My pulse picked up. “You think I’m fragile.”

“No,” he said immediately. “I think you’re precise. And precise things break cleanly.”

I should’ve laughed it off.

I didn't.

The rain intensified outside, thunder rolling distantly.

"I'm getting food," I said. "You want something?"

The offer surprised both of us.

He studied my face, weighing consequences. "That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether this is still neutral."

I considered him. The tension. The space between us. The fact that neutrality had already cracked.

"It's just food," I said finally.

He nodded once. "Then yes."

We walked out together into the rain.

The café down the street was quiet, warm, dimly lit. We sat in a booth this time—not across from each other. Side by side, a calculated distance that somehow felt more dangerous.

Conversation came easier here.

About nothing. About work in abstract terms. About the city. About how strange it was to live somewhere that felt temporary even when it wasn't.

At one point, our knees brushed under the table.

Neither of us moved away.

That was the mistake.

I became acutely aware of him—the heat, the steadiness, the restraint that felt practiced. Not absence of desire. Control over it.

“You don’t let yourself slip,” I said softly.

He turned to me. “Neither do you.”

“What happens,” I asked, “when you do?”

Something dark crossed his expression.

“You don’t want that answer.”

I should’ve stopped there.

Instead, I said, “Try me.”

He leaned back, gaze fixed on the table. “People get hurt.”

My chest tightened. “Including you?”

Especially me, he didn’t say.

The food arrived. The moment broke—but the tension didn’t.

When we stood to leave, thunder cracked overhead, close enough to vibrate the glass.

“You can come upstairs,” he said suddenly. “Wait out the storm.”

I looked at him, heart pounding. “That’s not neutral.”

“No,” he agreed. “It’s not.”

I searched his face—for pressure, expectation, intent.

There was none.

Only an invitation. And restraint.

“I trust you,” I said quietly.

The words surprised me.

They surprised him too.

We stood there, rain pounding outside, something fragile and dangerous forming between us.

And I knew—deep in my bones—

Whatever Ashton Blackwell was hiding,  
whatever darkness sat beneath that control,

I was already standing too close to walk away untouched.

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## Chapter 18

### ASHTON



I didn't invite her upstairs.

That mattered.

The fact that the thought crossed my mind—and that I stopped it—mattered more.

I watched Ella walk back toward Willow Crest through the rain, her coat pulled tighter around herself, her steps steady even as the storm tried to claim her. She didn't look back. She never did. Not because she didn't care—but because she refused to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing when she did.

I respected that about her.

I hated how much I wanted to break it.

By the time I reached my apartment, the city was quiet again, rain rinsing the streets clean like it could erase intent as easily as dust. I poured a drink I didn't want and stood by the window I rarely used, glass untouched in my hand.

Control.

People mistook it for strength. Discipline. Power.

They didn't understand the cost.

The problem wasn't Ella.

The problem was what proximity did to me.

I'd built my life around systems—predictable, measured, safe. Buildings, investments, security protocols. Even relationships, back when I still bothered with them, followed rules: limited access, limited exposure, clean exits.

Because when I let things in too deeply, something shifted.

And when that happened, I lost time.

Not in the dramatic sense. No blackouts. No chaos.

Just... gaps.

Moments where emotion outran restraint. Where instinct overrode calculation. Where my body remembered things my mind had buried for a reason.

People got hurt.

Not violently. Not visibly.

But damage didn't need bruises to be permanent. Sometimes it lived in words said too sharply. Touch held too tightly. Distance imposed too suddenly.

I set the glass down without drinking.

Ella had looked at me tonight like she was trying to read a language I refused to translate.

*What happens when you slip?*

She didn't want the answer.

And I didn't want to give it.

Sleep came in fragments. The kind that never fully took hold, that left my body resting while my mind circled the same unresolved thought.



By morning, I was already exhausted.

Work helped.

Numbers didn't care about emotion. They behaved when handled correctly. I buried myself in meetings, approvals, strategic calls. By noon, I'd almost convinced myself I was fine.

Almost.

Then Ava knocked.

"Five minutes?" she asked, already stepping inside.

"Two," I replied.

She sat anyway.

"You've been distant," she said carefully.

"I've been busy."

"With her," Ava said.

I stilled. "Be careful."

"I am," she replied. "That's why I'm talking to you."

I turned to face her. Ava had been with me long enough to know when not to push. The fact that she was now meant something had shifted.

"She's asking questions," Ava continued. "Not about you. About the building. About security. About protocols."

"She's a lawyer," I said. "That's not unusual."

"No," Ava agreed. "But the way she asks is."

I didn't respond.

"She's trying to understand patterns," Ava said gently. "Yours."

I closed my eyes briefly. That was the danger.

Ella didn't observe passively. She analyzed. Connected. Noticed absence as much as presence.

"She deserves transparency," Ava added.

I laughed once, humorless. "No. She deserves safety."

"And you think those are different things?"

In my world, they were.

After Ava left, I canceled my afternoon appointments and drove without direction. Movement helped when thoughts became too sharp. I ended up parked near the edge of the city, engine off, hands resting uselessly on the wheel.

I thought about Ella's knee brushing mine under the table.

The way she hadn't pulled away.

The trust in her voice when she said my name.

That was the most dangerous part.

Trust demanded consistency.

And I wasn't sure I could offer that—not without hurting her.

My phone buzzed.

**Ella:**

*Did I do something wrong?*

The message hit harder than any accusation could have.

I stared at it for a long time.

Then I typed.

**Ashton:**

*No.*

Three minutes passed.

**Ella:**

*Then why do I feel like you're disappearing?*

Because if I don't, I might cross a line I can't uncross.

Because you make me forget the rules that keep people safe.

Because I don't trust myself when I want something this much.

I didn't send any of that.

Instead:

**Ashton:**

*I'm just recalibrating.*

Her reply came slower this time.

**Ella:**

*That sounds like something people say right before they shut a door.*

I closed my eyes.

She wasn't wrong.

The truth was, I was terrified—not of her, but of what closeness did to me. Of the part of myself that woke up when control loosened. Of the version of me I'd spent years locking away because it didn't know how to stop once it started.

And Ella was already standing too close to the lock.

I put my phone down without replying.

That night, I didn't sleep at all.

And for the first time in years, I admitted something I'd never allowed myself to think fully—

If I didn't confront what was broken inside me,

I was going to lose her.

Not because she'd walk away.

But because I would push her out first.

## Chapter 19

### ELLA



Being ignored hurt more than being rejected.

Rejection was clean. Sharp. It cut and then it healed. Ignoring, on the other hand, lingered—like a bruise you didn’t remember earning but felt every time you moved.

Ashton didn’t vanish completely.

He still existed in the ways that mattered least.

The building ran flawlessly. My packages arrived on time. Security greeted me by name. Maintenance fixed a flickering light within the hour. Professionally, everything was impeccable.

Personally, he was gone.

No texts. No accidental meetings. No quiet pauses in elevators because he made sure not to be in them with me. When I saw him from a distance—across the lobby, reflected faintly in glass—he looked composed. Controlled.

Untouched.

I hated that most of all.

By the third day, I stopped pretending it didn’t bother me.

By the fifth, I started paying attention.

People like Ashton didn't withdraw randomly. They recalculated. They retreated when something didn't fit inside the structure they'd built to survive. I recognized the instinct because I'd done it myself—just not this abruptly.

So I did what I always did when something didn't make sense.

I analyzed.

It started small. Patterns. Timing.

He pulled away after closeness. After dinner. After rain and shared space and a question he didn't want to answer. Not after conflict. Not after tension.

After vulnerability.

That wasn't avoidance.

That was fear.

The realization settled heavily in my chest.

Late one evening, I sat on my couch, laptop open but unread, city lights flickering like restless thoughts. I replayed our conversations—not the words, but the pauses. The moments where his control tightened instead of loosened.

*People get hurt.*

He'd said it like a warning. Not a threat.

A confession disguised as restraint.

My phone buzzed.

**Unknown Number**

I didn't hesitate this time.

"Talk to me," I said the second I answered.

A long silence followed. I could hear his breathing—measured, careful.

“That’s not fair,” Ashton said finally.

“No,” I agreed. “It’s honest.”

Another pause.

“You shouldn’t be involved in this,” he said.

“This?” I asked. “You?”

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes. “You don’t get to decide what I can handle.”

“You don’t know what you’re stepping into.”

“Then tell me,” I said softly. “Because right now, you’re hurting me by pretending I don’t exist.”

That landed.

I heard it in the way his breath caught—not dramatically, but enough.

“I’m trying to protect you,” he said.

“From what?”

“From me.”

The words sent a chill through me.

“Ashton,” I said carefully, “people who are dangerous don’t usually warn you first.”

He laughed quietly. Bitter. “You’d be surprised.”

I stood, pacing slowly across the apartment. “You don’t scare me.”

“You should be smarter than that.”

“I am,” I replied. “That’s why I know this isn’t about control. It’s about trust.”

Silence stretched again. When he spoke, his voice was lower.

“I don’t trust what happens when I let go.”

There it was.

Not the secret—but the edge of it.

I leaned against the counter, grounding myself. “What happens?”

“I change,” he said simply.

“How?”

Another pause. Longer this time.

“I become... less careful.”

I swallowed. “With me?”

“With anyone,” he corrected quickly. Too quickly.

“That doesn’t sound dangerous,” I said.

“It is,” he replied. “When you don’t know how to stop.”

The line made my chest tighten.

This wasn’t manipulation. This wasn’t arrogance.

This was a man terrified of his own limits.

“Have you hurt someone before?” I asked quietly.

The silence that followed was answer enough.

Not physically. I knew that instinctively.

Emotionally.

Irreversibly.



“I’m not asking you to be perfect,” I said. “I’m asking you not to disappear.”

“I don’t know how to stay,” he admitted.

I closed my eyes.

“Then learn,” I said. “Like the rest of us.”

He didn’t answer.

When the call ended, I sat there for a long time, phone pressed to my ear even after the line went dead.

I wasn’t in love with Ashton Blackwell.

But I was standing at the edge of something just as dangerous.

Because now I knew—

He wasn’t pulling away because he didn’t care.

He was pulling away because he did.

And if I kept moving closer,

I’d have to decide whether his darkness was something I could stand beside—

Or something that would eventually consume us both.

## Chapter 20

### ELLA

The first time Ashton touched me without meaning to, it was almost nothing.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't intentional. It wasn't even romantic in the way movies try to convince you romance begins. It was a fraction of a second in a dim hallway, the kind of moment you could easily miss if you weren't paying attention.

But I was paying attention.

The bells over the café door echoed faintly in my mind even though I'd been home for hours, their sound replaced by the muted quiet of Willow Crest after ten. The building settled at night like it was holding its breath—lights dimmed, elevators slowed, voices softened out of respect for money and privacy.

I hadn't expected him.

The knock was controlled. Firm, but not demanding.

When I opened the door, Ashton stood there like he wasn't sure whether he was allowed to exist in the space outside my apartment. One hand held a book. My book. The one I'd left downstairs earlier that week.

"I think you forgot this," he said.

“I didn’t realize it was gone.”

“I noticed,” he replied. “You were reading it the other night.”

Of course he had.

I stepped aside without thinking. “You could’ve left it at the desk.”

“I could’ve,” he agreed.

We both understood what that meant.

The hallway lights cast soft shadows instead of clarity, catching the sharp lines of his face and blurring them just enough to make him look human rather than controlled. He handed me the book.

Our fingers brushed.

It was barely there. Skin against skin. Nothing more than a shared second.

But his hand froze.

Not mid-air—mid-decision.

I felt it immediately, the tension rippling through him like he’d crossed a line he hadn’t known was there.

“I’m sorry,” he said, too quickly.

“For what?” I asked.

“For that.”

I glanced down. Our hands weren’t touching anymore, but the space between them felt heavy, aware.

“You don’t need to apologize for being human,” I said quietly.

His jaw tightened. “You don’t know what that costs me.”

Something in his voice made my chest ache—not with fear, but recognition. I stepped back, opening the door wider.

“Then come in,” I said.

He hesitated.

Not because he was playing games. Not because he wanted control.

Because he was scared.

“I won’t stay long,” he said.

“That’s fine,” I replied. “Just don’t stand in the hallway like you’re waiting for permission to exist.”

That broke something.

He exhaled slowly, like he’d been holding his breath longer than he realized, and stepped inside.

The door closed behind him with a soft click that felt louder than it should have.

My apartment smelled faintly of citrus cleaner and the tea I’d forgotten to drink. The lamps were on low, casting warm light instead of harsh truth. He took it all in silently, his gaze moving over shelves, furniture, details—always observing, never commenting.

We sat on opposite ends of the couch at first.

The space between us was deliberate. Measured. Safe.

Conversation filled the distance before we realized it was happening.

We talked about the building. About how Willow Crest felt more like a hotel than a home. About cities that never slept and people who never rested. About work—the kind that drained

instead of fulfilled, the kind that demanded precision and punished weakness.

He spoke carefully. Always choosing words like they might betray him if he wasn't vigilant.

At some point, his shoulders dropped.

Just a fraction.

"You're tired," I said.

"Yes," he admitted. "But not in the way sleep fixes."

I turned toward him slightly. "Then what kind?"

He didn't answer right away. His gaze fixed on the space in front of him, jaw tight, hands clasped loosely like he didn't trust them.

"The kind that comes from holding yourself together too tightly for too long," he said finally.

Something twisted in my chest.

Without thinking, I shifted closer.

Not touching. Not invading.

Just closer.

He noticed instantly. His breathing changed—subtle, but uneven.

"I'm not asking you to fix me," he said.

"I know," I replied. "I'm just here."

That seemed to confuse him more than anything else I'd said.

His hand rested on the couch between us, palm up. Not reaching. Not demanding.

An offering.

I stared at it longer than I should have. My mind raced with reasons not to. With warnings. With consequences.

Then I placed my fingers into his.

He didn't close his hand.

He just let them stay there.

The warmth was grounding. Real. Not urgent. Not consuming.

Time stretched.

Minutes passed. Maybe more.

No words. No movement.

Just shared presence.

His thumb brushed lightly against my finger once—instinctive, unconscious—and then stopped, like he'd realized what he'd done.

He pulled away first.

"I should go," he said, standing too fast.

"Okay," I replied, even though something inside me resisted the distance.

At the door, he paused.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"For what?"

"For not asking me to be more than I can be tonight."

After he left, I sat back down on the couch and stared at the place where his hand had been.

That night, I didn't feel lonely.

I felt close.

And I knew—deep in my bones—that this was how it would happen.

Not with fireworks.

But with quiet moments that softened restraint just enough to let something dangerous in.

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## Chapter 21

### ASHTON



I didn't want to be there.

I didn't want to sit so close on that couch. I didn't want her fingers resting against mine. I didn't want to feel the warmth radiating from her presence.

And yet... I stayed.

Her hand in mine was heavier than it looked. Not with weight, but with intention. With trust. With something fragile that I wasn't allowed to break.

I tried to focus on the details around me—the soft glow of her lamp, the faint smell of citrus from the kitchen, the neatness of her living room. I catalogued everything, pretending it mattered more than her touch.

It didn't.

Every slight movement she made brushed against my awareness. The way she leaned slightly forward while talking. The small incline of her shoulder when she laughed softly. The quiet way she let her fingers rest over mine, as if testing the water.

I wanted to pull back. I wanted to run.

But I couldn't.



I had spent years building walls. Thick, unbreakable walls. And somehow, in the span of a few hours, she had already found the cracks.

“Are you cold?” she asked, quietly.

Her voice was soft. Concerned. The kind of voice that invited honesty without demanding it.

“No,” I said automatically. “I’m fine.”

“You’re lying,” she said. She had a way of saying things plainly, as if facts alone could pierce through the pretense.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

She shifted slightly closer, her leg brushing mine this time. Not forcefully, not seductively—just... close. Comfortable. Safe.

My heart betrayed me. It jumped, hammered, but I kept still. I could not betray the restraint I had spent years cultivating.

“You can rest,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Even just a little.”

The words were dangerous. Simple. Domestic. Innocent.

I let my head fall back against the couch, careful not to lean toward her. But my shoulder touched hers, just barely. And when she adjusted slightly, our knees pressed lightly together.

I wanted to pull away. I wanted to say, *stop*.

I didn’t.

She noticed, of course. She always noticed. And she didn’t flinch. Didn’t move away.

We sat like that for long minutes. Breathing. Almost synchronized.

I felt the weight of her presence, the soft warmth that was neither intrusive nor demanding. It was... grounding. Safe. Dangerous, yes, because it made me feel things I had trained myself to avoid.

Finally, she reached out, gently brushing a strand of hair from my forehead.

“Better?” she asked, quietly.

I almost said yes.

Almost.

Instead, I closed my eyes, letting the contact linger. Just a fleeting touch. But enough to set something inside me off—a warmth I wasn’t used to letting exist.

“You know,” she whispered, leaning just slightly closer, “you don’t have to pretend you’re always okay with me here.”

I swallowed hard. My throat was tight.

“I have to,” I said, almost inaudible.

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t...” My voice trailed. I didn’t want to finish. Didn’t want to say what came next: *I might lose control.*

She understood anyway. I could see it in her quiet nod. She didn’t need the words. She accepted the silence. She accepted me.

We stayed there like that. Close. Fingers touching. Knees brushing. Foreheads almost aligning when I leaned back slightly.

Not intimate in the way people expect. Not sexual. But intimate in the way that mattered far more: human, fragile, raw, and honest.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed me.

I didn't move away when I fell asleep. My head rested lightly against the back of the couch. Our hands still brushed occasionally. Our knees still pressed lightly together.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt... safe.

Not fully. Not entirely.

But enough to let a shadow of trust in.

And that scared me more than anything else.

Because once I let it in, I didn't know how to keep it from spilling out.

## Chapter 22

### ELLA

The apartment was quiet after Ashton left the first time. Quiet in a way that felt heavier than silence should, like the air itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen that wasn't coming. The city outside hummed faintly—the occasional distant car, the soft whisper of wind brushing the glass windows—but inside, it was a sanctuary, a pause from everything outside our small bubble of light and warmth.

But when he returned—later that evening—everything shifted. Not dramatically, not in a way anyone else would notice, but for me, it was like the space itself had recognized him. The faint creak of the door, the soft shuffle of his steps, even the muted sigh that accompanied his entry—it all felt deliberate, and yet tentative. He was careful, cautious, yet undeniably present.

I didn't move to greet him. I didn't need to. He walked in like he belonged, carrying the same controlled grace that made him so unnervingly... Ashton.

"I didn't want to be gone," he said quietly, almost apologetically. Not for leaving, not for staying, not for the moments that had passed between us—but for being there at all.

"I didn't want you gone either," I said softly, letting the words hang between us. They felt heavy in a good way, a shared

acknowledgment that we were both skirting boundaries we didn't fully understand.

We didn't sit immediately. We lingered, standing a few feet apart, just observing each other like two people who both knew the other could break at any moment. It wasn't a challenge. It wasn't a test. It was awareness. Recognition. Presence.

"I brought something," he said, holding a folded blanket against his chest.

"For...?" I asked.

"For this," he said simply, spreading it across the couch. "It's not much, but you shouldn't have to feel cold when I'm here."

It was thoughtful. Incredibly human. Slightly awkward. But that made it better.

I hesitated, then sat down. He joined me, still careful to leave space, but close enough that our shoulders brushed. Just barely. Subtle. Safe.

We didn't speak for a few moments. The silence was full, not empty. Full of unspoken words, tension, relief, and something I couldn't quite name yet.

Finally, he spoke. "You're quiet."

"I'm... thinking," I replied, keeping my tone calm.

"About?"

"About you," I admitted softly. "About this... all of this."

He exhaled, low and rough. A breath that could have been a laugh or a sigh. I didn't ask which.

"I don't know how to... not be myself," he said finally. "Not here, not now. I don't know how to exist in this space without pushing you away, without... hurting you."

“You haven’t hurt me,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “Not intentionally. And even if you did, I’d still... want to be here.”

His fingers twitched slightly over the blanket between us. Almost unconsciously, he reached for mine. I let him. We didn’t interlace our fingers. We just rested side by side, fingers brushing, the occasional thumb tracing a line too fleeting to count.

The touch was simple, mundane. And yet, it carried weight. Awareness. Comfort. Intimacy without demand.

“I’ve spent years building walls,” he said, voice low, careful, like admitting this would make him vulnerable in a way he wasn’t sure he could survive. “Thick, unbreakable walls. And somehow... you found the cracks already.”

I smiled faintly. “Maybe I’m good at noticing cracks.”

“You’re... dangerous,” he murmured, almost a confession.

“Why?” I asked softly.

“Because I trust you,” he admitted. “And I don’t trust what that makes me do.”

My chest tightened. Trust. Him admitting that was bigger than almost anything else he could have said.

I shifted closer, slowly, almost imperceptibly. Just a few inches. Our shoulders aligned better now, brushing comfortably. We didn’t move past that line, but the proximity was new, tangible, and disorienting.

His head tilted slightly, almost instinctively, toward mine. Just slightly. Not enough to touch, not enough to cross boundaries. But close.

We stayed like that for long minutes. Breathing. Fingers brushing lightly on the blanket between us. Knees occasionally pressing together. Shoulders aligned just enough to create contact.

The intimacy wasn't about passion. It wasn't about desire. It wasn't about urgency. It was about proximity, presence, and permission to exist in each other's space.

I noticed everything. The way he blinked slowly, deliberately. The small rise and fall of his chest. The way his hand twitched occasionally as if he wanted to pull back but didn't. The quiet exhale that signaled he was letting himself stay.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed him.

I watched him settle into the couch, careful not to fully relax, careful not to lean into me. I didn't move. I didn't prompt him. I simply stayed close enough for the warmth to reach me.

Our hands occasionally brushed. Knees pressed lightly. Shoulders maintained contact. Not intentionally intimate. Just... human. Alive. Safe.

"Rest," I whispered after a long silence.

"I... don't want to," he said quietly.

"You can," I said softly. "Even just a little."

He finally allowed himself to lean back, closer this time, just a fraction. Still careful, still deliberate. I rested my head lightly against his shoulder, careful not to press too firmly. Just enough to feel him, to feel warmth, to feel presence.

We stayed like that, watching the faint city lights through the windows. Listening to the soft hum of the world outside. Occasionally, our hands brushed, fingers interlacing for just a moment. Occasional warmth. Occasional trust.

I realized, quietly, painfully, that this was how it would happen. Not with fireworks. Not with dramatic gestures or declarations. But with small, intimate moments where restraint softened just enough to let something dangerous in.

When sleep finally claimed him, I didn't move. I didn't speak. I didn't let the moment end. I stayed there, shoulder against his, hand lightly brushing his, knowing that in the quiet of this night, we had built something fragile but real.

Something worth protecting.

Something worth letting exist.

And that scared me more than anything else in the world.

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## Chapter 23

### ASHTON



I didn't want to be there.

I didn't want to feel this. The warmth that lingered where her shoulder had brushed mine. The faint scent of citrus that clung to her apartment, sharp, alive, and unsettling. The sound of her breathing when she had spoken quietly, the way it had changed when my fingers had brushed hers.

And yet... I stayed.

Every instinct screamed at me to leave. My body, my mind, every careful layer of walls I had built over the years was yelling, **run, retreat, disappear**. But something in me—some part of me I hadn't acknowledged in years—refused. Couldn't.

Her presence was a tether I wasn't allowed to sever. And in some foolish, frightening way, I didn't want to.

The city outside hummed faintly—the distant sound of cars, the occasional shout of someone in a street far below, the hum of a light that never fully slept. But inside, the apartment was calm. Empty of distractions. Full of her.

I sat on the edge of the couch, careful to leave enough space between us that it didn't feel intrusive. But I didn't want to leave the space empty either. Every time I glanced at her, I noticed a detail, a nuance I had never allowed myself to see

before. The curve of her shoulder. The way her hair fell in soft waves across the lamp's glow. The way her fingers fidgeted slightly when she wasn't speaking.

"I'm... quiet tonight," she said softly, breaking the silence.

"I'm thinking," I replied, forcing my voice to sound calm, controlled, like I had rehearsed it a thousand times.

"About?" she asked, tilting her head ever so slightly.

I hesitated. To admit what I was thinking—to confess it even internally—felt like exposing a wound I had spent years covering with armor.

"About you," I finally said, my voice lower than I expected. The words hung in the air, and I knew she felt them as much as I did.

Her eyes softened, and I wanted to look away. I wanted to hide the storm inside me. But I couldn't. Not now.

"You're dangerous," I murmured.

"Why?" she asked quietly, almost as if she didn't need to know the answer.

"Because I trust you," I admitted. And the second part, the part I didn't say aloud, screamed silently in my mind: *and I don't know what that makes me want to do.*

Her hand moved slightly over the blanket between us, brushing mine almost unconsciously. I noticed. Of course I noticed. My fingers twitched, almost reaching for hers, almost defying my own carefully constructed restraint. But I didn't. Not yet.

The room felt smaller, heavier. Her presence pressed against me in ways I couldn't control. Her warmth seeped into the space around me. And I realized that I was letting her in. Not

entirely, not completely. But enough to feel her, enough to let her existence touch mine without resistance.

“I don’t know how to... not push people away,” I confessed finally, letting the words tumble out in the quiet.

“You haven’t pushed me away,” she said softly. “And I don’t think you ever will.”

The simplicity of the words disarmed me. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I could only let myself exist in the moment, letting the warmth of her shoulder brush mine lightly, letting the faint scent of citrus and warmth fill my senses, grounding me in a reality I hadn’t allowed myself to inhabit in years.

We sat together like that for long minutes, perhaps hours, fingers brushing lightly on the blanket, knees occasionally pressing together, shoulders aligned just enough to feel contact without crossing boundaries. The intimacy wasn’t dramatic. It wasn’t sexual. It wasn’t meant to be. It was human, raw, and fragile.

I noticed every detail. The subtle rise and fall of her chest. The faint crease in her brow when she focused. The softness of her lips even when closed. Each small detail anchored me to the present, forcing me to acknowledge something I hadn’t dared before: that I could care, and care deeply, without losing control entirely.

“Have you always been like this?” I asked, voice barely audible.

“Like what?”

“Like... careful. Like you don’t just let anyone in.”

She didn’t answer immediately. Just shifted slightly, shoulder brushing mine a fraction more. “Maybe I am,” she said finally.

“But I’m learning to let people in when it matters. When it’s worth it.”

I felt the weight of her words. Worth it. The idea that someone could be worth the chaos I tried so desperately to avoid. Worth the risk. Worth the vulnerability.

I exhaled slowly, letting myself relax fractionally. Just fractionally. My hands rested lightly on the blanket, fingertips occasionally brushing hers. No pressure. No demand. Just... presence.

“Do you... let people see this side of you often?” she asked softly.

I wanted to say no. Wanted to say I don’t let anyone see anything. But that would be a lie. Because now she had seen it. And I couldn’t take it back.

“Not often,” I admitted, voice low. “Not like this.”

“Then maybe it’s good you’re here,” she said, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Her words, her smile, the soft, steady awareness of her presence—everything about her broke down a piece of me I had thought was permanent. And I liked it. Terrifying as it was, I liked it.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed me. My body, so used to rigid control, finally allowed itself to relax. I leaned slightly closer, careful not to overstep, letting my shoulder touch hers just a fraction. She didn’t move. She didn’t flinch.

I exhaled again. Quietly. Slowly.

“Rest,” she whispered, voice soft and warm.

“I... don’t want to,” I admitted.

“You can,” she said simply. “Even just a little.”

And for the first time in years, I let myself. Leaned just slightly closer. Allowed the warmth of her shoulder, the faint pressure of her presence, to seep into me. To remind me that vulnerability could exist without destruction.

Minutes passed. Hours passed. Fingers brushed again, shoulders pressed lightly together, knees occasionally touching. Words were unnecessary. The intimacy existed in the simple presence, the shared breathing, the unspoken trust.

I studied her quietly. Every detail. The curve of her lips. The way her eyelashes caught the lamplight. The slight furrow of her brow as she focused. I wanted to memorize her, not in a possessive way, but in a way that anchored me to the present, tethered me to something real and undeniable.

I realized, with a jolt that shook me more than I expected, that I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to retreat. I didn’t want to escape this. Not fully. Not tonight. Not ever, perhaps.

And the terrifying part? I couldn’t control the pull she had on me. Not entirely. Not yet.

When sleep finally claimed me, I didn’t move. Shoulder brushing hers, hand resting lightly on the blanket between us, breathing steady. I allowed myself to be vulnerable. Not fully, not completely. But enough to know that I trusted her. That I wanted her presence.

And in that quiet, subtle, utterly human intimacy, I understood: control was optional. Presence was necessary. Trust, fragile though it was, mattered more than perfection.

And I realized, with an intensity I hadn’t expected, that I wanted this. I wanted her.

And that terrified me more than anything else I had ever faced.

## Chapter 24

### ELLA



The first light of morning crept through the thin curtains of my apartment, casting a pale, golden glow across the room. It was the kind of light that made everything soft, forgiving, and deceptively calm. I lay in bed, half-awake, listening to the faint hum of the city outside. Cars drove past, voices of early risers carried faintly through the open windows, and somewhere far off, a dog barked. Life moved relentlessly, as if nothing could stop it—and yet, in that moment, I felt suspended.

I was alone.

At least physically.

But his presence lingered. The faint warmth of him, the way his shoulder had brushed mine last night, the subtle weight of his hand on mine—it all haunted me in the quiet. I could still feel the ghost of his touch on my skin, a tingling that made me almost shiver. It was maddening and comforting all at once.

I rolled onto my side, hugging my pillow, trying to push the thoughts away. I didn't want to think about him. I didn't want to dwell on the way my chest had tightened every time he leaned closer, even slightly. Every time our fingers had brushed. Every time our knees had pressed together without intention.

And yet, I couldn't stop.

I replayed last night in my mind, frame by frame. The blanket he had brought. The way he had sat on the couch with that careful, measured control, leaving space but refusing to retreat. The way he had exhaled, a low, almost inaudible sigh that I knew had been him acknowledging the tension between us—and maybe, acknowledging me.

I remembered his voice, low and rough, as he admitted he didn't know how to be himself without pushing people away. I remembered the almost imperceptible tremor in his hands when our fingers touched again, and the way his head had tilted toward mine, ever so slightly, when he allowed our shoulders to align.

I lay back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling, trying to convince myself that it was just a moment. Just a fleeting connection. Just a night where proximity had blurred the edges of the walls he always built around himself.

But it wasn't just a moment.

I knew it.

I could feel it deep inside, like a slow, insistent pulse that refused to be ignored. It was the same pulse I felt when I caught sight of him unexpectedly, or when our gazes met across a room. That quiet, dangerous pull that made me aware of every detail, every movement, every breath.

I sat up slowly, letting the morning light wash over me. My apartment was still quiet. The kitchen smelled faintly of the coffee I had brewed last night but left untouched, a reminder of routines that had been interrupted by unexpected intimacy. I padded softly across the floor, barefoot, my mind still tethered to the memory of him.

Every step I took felt louder than it should have. The soft patter of my feet on the polished wood echoed slightly, a rhythm that somehow mirrored the faint, irregular beating of my heart. I poured a glass of water and sipped it slowly, savoring the cool relief against my tongue, trying to ground myself in something tangible.

But grounding was impossible.

Because even in his absence, he was everywhere. In the way the couch sagged slightly where he had rested. In the faint imprint of warmth he had left on the blanket. In the quiet hum of the city that seemed impossibly still compared to the storm inside me.

I went to the window, brushing my fingers along the glass. The streets below were slowly waking. People moving in routines I barely noticed anymore. And yet, despite the mundane, despite the predictable, I felt a tension in me that refused to dissipate.

I sat on the window ledge, hugging my knees to my chest, and let myself think about the touch of his fingers again. The faint brush, the deliberate closeness, the way he had allowed himself to lean toward me without truly collapsing. The way he had trusted me with his vulnerability. And that trust... God, it was terrifying.

I wanted to pull away. I wanted to retreat into the safety of my own solitude. But I couldn't. Not fully. Not after last night. Not after feeling him so close and yet restrained, so warm and yet cautious, so present and yet untouchable in ways that made my heart ache.

The morning sun rose higher, spilling gold across the room, and I realized I had been sitting there for an hour, lost in thought, lost in memory, lost in the echo of his presence. My



body ached in small, unfamiliar ways—longing, tension, anticipation—all coiled tight beneath my skin.

I moved toward the couch, sitting down carefully, almost reverently. I brushed the blanket he had left, smoothing it over the cushions, letting my fingers linger where his had touched. The intimacy of it—the family-friendly, subtle, grounding kind—was almost maddening. It was a tether and a torment all at once.

I rested my head against the back of the couch and closed my eyes, letting my mind wander further. I pictured him sitting there again, the weight of his presence pressing against my awareness. I imagined our fingers brushing, the way his thumb might trace the edge of mine without consciously realizing it. I imagined the faint exhale, the slight tilt of his head, the way his shoulder would lean ever so slightly toward mine.

I wanted that.

I wanted it more than I had wanted anything in months.

And yet, fear gripped me.

Because intimacy—real intimacy—was dangerous. Emotional proximity was dangerous. Letting someone in, even subtly, even gently, opened doors I wasn't sure I could close. And he... he had the ability to leave, to disappear, to retreat behind walls that I couldn't breach.

My chest tightened. I closed my eyes, pressing my palm lightly over it, trying to calm the rapid pulse of my heart. I couldn't let this consume me. I couldn't let him consume me. Not fully.

I opened my eyes, staring at the window again. The streets below were alive now. People moving, going about their lives. And somehow, despite the chaos I felt inside, I envied them. They were safe. Predictable. Controlled.

I wasn't.

Because he existed.

And I couldn't erase him.

I got up slowly and moved to the kitchen, preparing coffee this time, more mindfully. I measured the beans, ground them carefully, and poured hot water over them, inhaling the aroma deeply. It was mundane, ordinary—but grounding. And yet, my mind wandered constantly, imagining him there, leaning casually against the counter, fingers brushing mine over the coffee mug, hair falling into his eyes, eyes catching the light in a way that made everything else vanish.

I sat at the table, coffee steaming in my hands, and let myself imagine him moving through my apartment, his presence filling every corner, every shadow. I imagined sitting together, knees brushing lightly, shoulders aligned just enough to create warmth, fingers resting on the blanket between us.

And then... I realized I had been imagining this for hours, caught in the web of his absence and presence all at once.

The door clicked behind me—though I wasn't sure if it was real or imagined—and my heart jumped. My pulse raced. My mind leapt to him, the possibility of him standing there, casual, commanding, unshakable as ever.

I shook my head slightly, trying to dismiss the thought. But the thrill of possibility, the pull of proximity, lingered. And I knew, deep down, that I wanted it. That I crave

I was sitting at the small kitchen table, hands wrapped around the warm mug of coffee, when I heard it—the faintest click at the door. My heart jumped. The sound was subtle, almost easily missed, but in the quiet of my apartment, it resonated like a warning bell.

I froze, mid-sip, listening.

A shadow moved across the floor. Not a creak of the floorboard. Not a gust of wind. Something deliberate. Deliberate and controlled.

I turned slightly, trying to steady my breath, and my stomach flipped. He was there. Ashton. Leaning casually against the doorframe, the corner of his mouth curved slightly—not quite a smile, but something close. His eyes caught mine immediately, dark, intense, and unnervingly warm.

“Good morning,” he said, voice low, calm, almost teasing in a way that made my chest tighten.

I swallowed hard, setting the mug down, my fingers brushing the rim. “Good morning,” I managed to reply. My voice sounded smaller than I wanted it to, almost like a whisper in a cathedral.

He stepped inside, slow, deliberate. Every movement measured. Every step controlled. And yet... he was relaxed. Casual. Like this—being here—was something he had done a hundred times before. But I knew better. I knew he had never let anyone in like this before.

“I didn’t think I’d find you awake,” he said softly, moving closer to the counter where I sat.

“I... woke up early,” I admitted, trying to keep my voice steady. My hands rested lightly over my mug, gripping it as if it could anchor me to reality. “Coffee.”

He raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment. Instead, he moved closer, resting one hand lightly against the counter near mine. Not touching, not demanding, but close enough that our hands were almost within reach. My pulse quickened.

I realized how much I was noticing every detail. The way the morning sunlight hit his hair, making it almost golden in the streaks. The way his jacket hung casually over his shoulders, the faint crease at the elbow where he had folded his arms. The way his eyes lingered—not in judgment, not in calculation—but with that faint, almost imperceptible warmth that made me feel... seen.

“Do you want breakfast?” I asked, trying to shift focus, to steady the nerves racing through me.

“I’m fine,” he said, voice calm. But I could see the way he scanned the kitchen, the way he let his gaze drift over the coffee, the table, the apartment. A silent assessment. A subtle claiming of the space, not forceful, but unmistakable.

I tried not to flinch at it. Tried not to let my awareness of his presence dominate every thought. But it did. My chest tightened. My hands felt warmer than usual. Every subtle movement he made seemed amplified.

We sat together in a quiet rhythm. Not touching. Not speaking much. But the air between us was charged. Charged with anticipation, with awareness, with something neither of us dared name.

Finally, I broke the silence. “You stayed... last night.”

“Yes,” he replied simply, without embellishment. And yet, that single word carried weight. Weight that filled the room. Weight that reminded me of the shoulder brushing, the fingers touching, the shared space we had inhabited without a word.

“I... wasn’t sure what to think,” I admitted, my voice quieter than I intended. “About us. About... this.”

He looked at me then, truly looked, and I felt it—the weight of his gaze, heavy and intense, not overbearing, not demanding,

but fully present. “Neither was I,” he said finally. “But... I don’t regret it.”

My chest tightened. Not with fear. Not entirely. But with something else. Something dangerous in its simplicity. Vulnerability. Trust. Possibility.

We spoke then, slowly. Carefully. About nothing, about everything. About mundane routines. About coffee. About the city waking outside. But every word was loaded, every pause charged with unspoken understanding.

At one point, his hand brushed mine—lightly, fleetingly, almost accidental. My stomach flipped. My fingers twitched in response, almost reaching for his, but I didn’t. Not yet.

He noticed. Of course he noticed. His eyes caught mine immediately, dark and intent, and then he leaned back slightly, just enough to let me recover from the shock of awareness.

I realized then that intimacy didn’t have to be explosive or passionate. It could exist in subtle touches, in shared silence, in awareness of proximity. In knowing that someone else’s presence could change the rhythm of your heartbeat without a single word spoken.

We moved to the small couch then, carrying mugs of coffee. We didn’t sit together immediately. We left a few inches of space. But as I stirred my coffee, I felt it—his presence, close, warm, comforting.

I took a sip, glancing at him. He was studying me, carefully, deliberately, but with that faint warmth, that faint softness in his eyes. And I realized something terrifying: I wanted him to notice. I wanted him to care.

And then he did something subtle. Something dangerous. He shifted slightly, aligning his shoulder with mine. Just slightly.

Not enough to demand contact. Not enough to cross boundaries. Just enough.

I didn't move. I didn't pull away. I didn't allow my awareness to fully consume me. But my chest tightened. My fingers twitched. My thoughts raced.

We stayed like that for a long time, just breathing. Occasionally, our knees brushed lightly. Our hands rested near each other. And every subtle interaction, every slight alignment of space, every unspoken glance, felt like a declaration of trust.

I wanted to speak. To say something. But words were inadequate. They couldn't capture the weight of his presence, the lingering warmth, the subtle intimacy of shared space.

Finally, I spoke softly. "Stay... for a while."

He looked at me then, his dark eyes unreadable for a moment. And then, slowly, he nodded. Just a small nod. Not a promise. Not a declaration. But enough to let me know he understood.

We spent the rest of the morning like that. In silence. In subtle awareness. In small gestures and fleeting touches. In mild, family-friendly intimacy that felt more powerful than any kiss, any confession, any act of passion could ever have been.

And in that quiet, gentle proximity, I realized that trust could exist without words. Intimacy could exist without overt gestures. Connection could exist without possession.

It was terrifying. And it was beautiful.

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The smell of toasted bread mixed with freshly brewed coffee, filling the small kitchen in a comforting warmth. I moved deliberately, spreading butter with care, savoring the small motions of domestic routine—slicing the bread evenly,

watching it brown just right, listening to the faint hiss of coffee percolating. Each sound was amplified in the quiet of the apartment, and I noticed how my mind automatically searched for him, for any sign that he was watching me.

I didn't have to look.

He was already there, leaning lightly against the counter, one hand resting on the edge, the other holding his own mug of coffee. The morning light framed him, highlighting the sharp lines of his jaw, the soft curve of his hair falling into his eyes. The way he observed me was almost maddening—attentive, quiet, yet filled with an intensity I couldn't ignore.

I felt my chest tighten. The warmth that radiated from him, subtle and contained, made every muscle in my body tense. And yet, it was soothing at the same time.

"You make coffee... very seriously," he said finally, his voice low, teasing, but with a calm undertone that made my stomach flutter.

I gave a small, dry laugh. "I take it seriously. It has to be perfect."

"Like you," he said, with a faint smile that tugged at the corners of his lips.

My heart skipped. I almost dropped the butter knife. Almost. I forced myself to focus, placing it carefully back on the counter. "I'm not perfect," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

"No," he said, raising his mug slightly, "but you're close enough that it's annoying."

I blinked, caught off guard by the mixture of teasing and admiration in his tone. He sipped his coffee, eyes never leaving mine. I felt exposed, yet strangely safe. It was as if his gaze was

both a test and a reassurance—he could see everything I tried to hide, and yet he didn’t judge.

I moved to set plates on the small table, deliberately leaving enough space between us, though every step I took was influenced by his presence. He followed me with his eyes, silent and patient. I wondered what he was thinking, what he noticed, and if he was as aware of the tension, the subtle heat between us, as I was.

We sat across from each other, breakfast between us. The table was small; the space intimate. I noticed how our knees occasionally brushed, how his arm occasionally rested just a fraction closer than necessary, without deliberately touching me. Every small gesture was laden with meaning, though we didn’t speak of it.

“Toast looks good,” he said finally, gesturing toward my plate.

“Thanks,” I murmured, feeling my fingers twitch slightly, reaching for a piece, then stopping halfway. His presence made every small motion feel monumental, deliberate, like it was amplified by some invisible lens.

He leaned back slightly, still observing me. I noticed the faint crease at the corner of his eyes, the subtle tension in his jaw that hinted at the effort of self-control. He didn’t need to speak to make his feelings clear. His attention, contained yet unwavering, communicated more than words could.

“You think too much,” he said softly, as if reading my thoughts.

I laughed nervously. “I... maybe I do.”

“You always do,” he said, a statement more than an accusation. And then, almost casually, he shifted, letting his knee brush mine for the briefest moment. Just a touch. Nothing more. But



my stomach flipped. I felt a warmth spreading through me, subtle but undeniable.

I wanted to move closer. I wanted to feel the full weight of him, to let the boundaries dissolve. But caution held me back. I didn't want to overwhelm him—or myself.

Instead, I focused on breakfast. Toast. Butter. Coffee. Normalcy. Mundanity. The attempt to ground myself while my mind swirled with thoughts of him, with images of last night, with the lingering heat of proximity.

He took a sip of his coffee, watching me. And then, in the gentlest way possible, he shifted slightly closer again. This time, a fraction more deliberate. Our shoulders nearly touched. He didn't look at me. He didn't speak. He just existed.

I realized I was holding my breath. And when I exhaled, it was a small, conscious act, an acknowledgment of the tension building between us. Intimacy, I realized, wasn't always about touch. Sometimes it was about presence, about trust, about allowing someone else into the quiet corners of your life without fear.

We ate slowly. Not hurriedly. Not rushed by schedules. Each bite, each sip, each glance was deliberate. We didn't speak much, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. It was intimate. Safe. Dangerous, in its own quiet way.

At one point, he reached for the salt. His fingers brushed mine again—accidental, I assumed, though I knew better. Our eyes met. His gaze held mine, steady, unflinching. I felt heat rise in my cheeks, warmth spreading through my chest. And yet, there was no pressure. No demand. Just presence.

I realized then how much I wanted him to stay. To linger. To continue this slow dance of subtle intimacy. To exist in these

small moments, where trust and awareness replaced words and grand gestures.

“You know,” I said softly, trying to break the tension without breaking the intimacy, “you could stay for longer.”

He looked at me, dark eyes unreadable for a moment. Then a faint smile appeared, almost imperceptible. “I know,” he said quietly. And that was enough.

We finished breakfast slowly. The city outside had come alive, but inside, time felt suspended. The warmth of his presence, the subtle touches, the psychological tension—all coiled tight beneath the calm surface—made every second stretch, rich and full of unspoken meaning.

And as I cleared the plates, I realized that intimacy didn’t have to be explosive. It didn’t have to be overt. It could exist in subtle touches, in shared silence, in awareness of another’s presence. It could exist in trust. In patience. In allowing someone else to enter your space without fear.

I felt him behind me for a moment, silent. Watching. Present. And I shivered—not from cold, but from awareness. From desire. From the terrifying, thrilling knowledge that he had the ability to unsettle me completely—and yet, I wanted it.

I wanted him.

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## Chapter 25

### ASHTON



The city had a rhythm I had learned to ignore, or maybe I had trained myself to move above it. The cars, the honks, the distant chatter of pedestrians—all of it usually blurred into background noise. But today, everything felt sharper. Focused. Defined. Because she was on my mind.

Ella.

Even the thought of her name felt heavy. Weighty. Dangerous. Like a tether I didn't want to cut, but one I also feared would bind me too tightly.

I had left her apartment hours ago—or at least I had tried. But the images of her sitting at that small kitchen table, fingers curling lightly around her mug, shoulders subtly tensed, eyes caught somewhere between calm and chaos, haunted me. I had driven in silence, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity, rehearsing every interaction I could remember from last night and this morning. Every subtle brush of fingers. Every alignment of shoulders. Every fleeting glance.

And now, sitting in my car outside a small café I frequented when I needed solitude, I realized the truth: I couldn't stop thinking about her. Couldn't stop wanting to be near her. Couldn't stop imagining the small touches, the subtle intimacies that were not overt, yet undeniably intimate.

I ran a hand over my face, rubbing my jaw. I didn't allow anyone into my personal space. Never. Not like this. But she—God, she had broken through a crack in the armor I had built over years. A crack I didn't even know existed.

I thought about last night again. The quiet intimacy. The presence. The subtle, slow-burning tension that made every heartbeat feel like a drum, every breath an invitation. It had been mild, almost imperceptible to anyone else, but I had felt it in every fiber of my being. And now, thinking about it, I wanted more. Not reckless. Not urgent. Just... more.

And so I found myself walking toward her apartment. Not calling. Not texting. Just... showing up. The kind of bold, calculated move I rarely allowed myself. The kind of move that made my pulse quicken with anticipation, with possibility, with fear.

When I arrived, I lingered for a moment outside, hands in pockets, just observing. The city moved around me, oblivious to the storm of thoughts, anticipation, and desire that churned inside me. I took a deep breath, steadying myself. Every instinct screamed to turn around, to retreat, to maintain control. But some part of me—a part I had been suppressing for years—pushed me forward.

I pressed the buzzer lightly, heart thundering in my chest.

"Hello?" Her voice. Soft. Slightly cautious. Familiar.

"It's me," I said simply, and that was enough.

The door clicked open, and I stepped inside. Her apartment smelled faintly of citrus and coffee. Warm. Inviting. Unsettling. All at once.

Ella was there, standing in the small living area, hands tucked lightly in the pockets of her sweater, eyes assessing me,

guarded. But there was no fear. Just curiosity. A faint tension in the air, the kind that made you aware of every subtle movement, every tiny shift in posture.

“You came back,” she said softly.

“Yes,” I replied, stepping fully inside. “I couldn’t... stop thinking.”

Her eyes widened just slightly. She didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Just watched me. And I realized that the same storm of feelings I felt—uncertainty, desire, trust, caution—was mirrored in her gaze.

I moved closer, careful. Calculated. Every step measured, controlled, intentional. I stopped a few feet away, respecting the space between us. But the proximity was electric. Each breath I took felt heavier. Each shift in stance made my heart beat faster.

“You... you don’t have to stay,” she said, voice soft, a mixture of invitation and warning.

“I know,” I replied, eyes darkening slightly. “But I want to.”

The words hung in the air between us. They weren’t dramatic. They weren’t grandiose. But they were heavy. Intimate. Unavoidable.

She shifted slightly, allowing her shoulder to align almost imperceptibly with mine. Not touching. Not demanding. But present. Warm. Anchored.

We stayed like that for a moment. Breathing. Present. Tension curling around us like smoke, soft, slow, lingering. I wanted to reach out, to let my fingers brush hers. But I didn’t. Not yet.

Instead, I let my gaze linger. Let her presence fill the room. Let the subtle intimacy—so gentle, so mild, so quiet—anchor me to the reality of her.

And I realized, with a start that almost made me choke, that I didn't want to leave. Not fully. Not yet.

Because she had become a part of me I didn't want to ignore. A part I didn't want to lose.

And the terrifying, thrilling part? She wanted it too.

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The apartment was quiet, but the silence was heavy, thick with unspoken awareness. Ella moved around the kitchen almost mechanically, yet with a grace that seemed effortless. I watched her. Every movement was precise, deliberate—pouring water into the kettle, measuring coffee grounds, spreading butter over bread. And yet, even in the simplicity of her routine, there was an intimacy I couldn't ignore.

I leaned against the counter, arms crossed, studying her. She was oblivious to my gaze—or perhaps choosing to ignore it. Either way, it made my chest tighten in a way that was equal parts frustrating and intoxicating.

“You make it look too easy,” I said finally, voice low, teasing.

She paused, glancing over her shoulder with a faint smirk. “Is that a complaint?”

“Not at all,” I replied, allowing my eyes to linger on her profile. The curve of her jaw, the slope of her neck, the way sunlight caught strands of her hair, turning them golden. “Just... observing. Appreciating.”

She laughed softly, shaking her head. “You're ridiculous sometimes.”

I smiled faintly, a ghost of humor in the corners of my mouth. “I know.”

There was a pause, and then she moved closer, reaching for the sugar container on the counter. Our hands brushed—lightly, almost imperceptibly—but it was enough. Enough to make my pulse spike. Enough to make me aware of the warmth radiating from her. Enough to make me want to hold her hand just to prolong the contact.

I didn’t. Not yet.

Instead, I shifted slightly, leaning just a fraction closer, letting my shoulder almost touch hers. She noticed, of course. Her eyes flicked toward me for the briefest moment, a tiny spark of curiosity and amusement there. She didn’t move away. She didn’t flinch. And that, more than anything, made my chest tighten.

“You’re... insatiable this morning,” she said softly, turning to face me fully. “Even before coffee.”

I chuckled, though the sound was low, rougher than intended. “And you’re... irresistible.”

Her cheeks tinged slightly pink, a faint warmth creeping across her skin. She smiled softly, not in response to my words, but in acknowledgment of the tension, the proximity, the awareness that hung between us like a tangible thread.

We moved to the small kitchen table together, carrying our mugs. She sat first, careful to leave a little distance, a little buffer. I sat across from her, the space intimate yet respectful, allowing for subtle touches without crossing boundaries.

We ate slowly, deliberately. Every bite, every sip, every glance was weighted with meaning, yet mundane enough to appear normal to anyone else. My eyes frequently drifted to her hands,

the way she held her mug, the slight tension in her fingers. I noticed how her shoulders moved as she leaned slightly forward to take a bite of toast. How her hair fell softly across one side of her face. How her lips pressed together unconsciously when she was thinking.

I wanted to reach across the table, to let my fingers brush hers lightly, to anchor myself to the warmth I felt radiating from her. But restraint was necessary. Control was necessary. And yet... desire pulsed under my skin, raw and insistent.

“You know,” she said softly, breaking the quiet, “you don’t have to just watch me.”

I raised an eyebrow, letting a faint smile tug at the corners of my mouth. “Oh? And what would you have me do?”

She leaned slightly forward, her eyes glinting with mischief and curiosity. “Maybe... talk to me. Share a little of yourself. Stop observing like I’m some... experiment.”

I chuckled, taking a slow sip of my coffee, letting the warmth fill me. “Fair enough. But only if you promise to do the same.”

“I will,” she replied, voice soft but firm, a promise layered in subtle intimacy.

We began to talk then. Slowly, deliberately, about mundane things—coffee, toast, the weather outside, the small rhythm of city life. But beneath the words, there was something unspoken, something tethering us together. The conversation was punctuated with small touches: a knee brushing mine lightly, fingers near enough to almost touch, shoulders aligning in silent acknowledgment.

At one point, she reached for the butter again, and our hands brushed. I held my breath, letting the moment linger. She didn’t



flinch. Didn't pull away. Just continued, aware of the contact, comfortable in its subtle intimacy.

"You're... persistent," she said, a faint teasing lilt in her voice.

I leaned forward slightly, letting my eyes catch hers fully. "And you're... tempting."

Her lips curved into a soft smile, cheeks tinged with pink. The air between us pulsed, thick with possibility, heavy with awareness. And yet, we didn't cross the line. Not yet. The intimacy existed in presence, in awareness, in subtle touch, in psychological proximity rather than physical possession.

Time seemed to stretch as we talked, as we ate, as we lingered. The world outside moved, cars honked, pedestrians passed, but inside, there was only this. Only us. Only the slow, careful dance of awareness and restraint, desire and caution, vulnerability and trust.

And when she finally stood to clear the dishes, I realized that even in her movement, even in her absence of deliberate touch, she had left an imprint on me. Every glance, every smile, every subtle brush of fingers had anchored me in ways I had never experienced before.

I knew then, with an intensity that made my chest ache, that this—this slow, careful intimacy—was more powerful than anything overt or dramatic. More dangerous, more consuming, more real.

And I wanted it.

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The sun was higher now, spilling warm, golden light over the city. I followed Ella down the quiet streets near her apartment, our footsteps echoing lightly on the pavement. The city was

alive, yet oddly subdued compared to the storm of thoughts swirling inside me. Every glance she threw my way, every slight tilt of her head, every subtle brush of our shoulders as we walked—the tension between us was like a thread pulling taut, ready to snap with just the slightest touch.

I let her lead the way, my hands tucked casually in my pockets, though my awareness was heightened to every movement, every breath, every shift in her posture. I could feel the rhythm of her steps, the sway of her hair in the breeze, the occasional glance over her shoulder to see if I was keeping up.

“You’re... unusually quiet,” she said softly, her voice barely above the hum of the city.

I smirked faintly. “I’m always quiet until you give me a reason not to be.”

She glanced at me, one eyebrow arched, lips tugging into a faint smile. “Do I really have that effect on you?”

“You have that effect on me,” I admitted, letting the words hang in the air between us. Not loud, not showy, but heavy. Real.

Her cheeks tinged slightly pink, and I noticed the subtle way she adjusted the strap of her bag, perhaps unconsciously. The faint warmth that radiated from her presence made every nerve in my body hum with awareness.

We walked in silence for a few moments, side by side, the proximity almost suffocating in its intensity. Not because it was overt, not because we touched, but because we existed in each other’s orbit with an intimacy that didn’t need words.

At one point, her arm brushed mine lightly—accidental, I assumed. But the spark it sent through me was undeniable. I didn’t pull away. I didn’t flinch. I let the warmth linger, letting

my fingers twitch slightly as if they wanted to reach for hers, to anchor the moment, but restraint held me back.

She noticed, of course. I could see it in the way her eyes flicked toward mine briefly, a mixture of curiosity and amusement. And yet, she didn't speak. She didn't move away. She just walked, her presence grounding me, stirring me, challenging me all at once.

"Do you... always analyze everything this much?" she asked suddenly, voice soft, teasing.

I chuckled, low and deliberate. "Only the things worth analyzing."

"And I'm worth analyzing?" she asked, a faint lilt of playfulness in her tone.

"Yes," I said simply. "More than anything."

Her lips curved into a soft smile, and I felt a warmth rise in my chest. It wasn't passion, not yet. It wasn't reckless desire. It was something subtler, more dangerous—the quiet, simmering awareness of two people on the edge of trust and connection, letting the world fall away while the small, intimate moments stretched infinitely.

We continued walking, and I let my attention drift to the little details. The way the sunlight caught in her hair, making strands glimmer like spun gold. The faint crease at the corner of her eyes when she smiled. The rhythm of her breathing as she moved. Every detail anchored me, made me aware, made me ache with a desire that was controlled yet insistent.

We reached a small park, shaded by tall trees whose leaves whispered with the breeze. She stopped, looking down at a patch of flowers, their colors vibrant in the sunlight. I noticed

the way her fingers hovered just above the petals, as if afraid to touch but longing to.

I moved slightly closer, letting my shoulder almost brush hers—enough to feel the warmth radiating from her, enough to make her aware of my presence, but not enough to cross the boundary.

“You’re... close,” she murmured, not accusing, just noting.

“I know,” I said quietly, matching her tone. “I want to be.”

Her eyes flicked to mine, dark, searching, full of unspoken questions. And in that glance, I realized she felt it too—the pull, the tension, the intimacy of proximity. It was mild, almost teasing, yet loaded with meaning.

We walked slowly through the park, shoulders nearly touching, each step deliberate, each breath shared silently. The city noise faded, replaced by the rustle of leaves and the faint chirping of birds. And in that quiet, in that subtle closeness, we found something fragile and profound—trust, awareness, the beginning of connection that didn’t need words to exist.

I wanted to reach out. I wanted to take her hand, to anchor her to me in a way that was unmistakable. But I waited. Patience, I reminded myself. Let her decide. Let her want it too.

And she did. I could feel it in the way she didn’t pull away. In the faint warmth of her presence. In the subtle alignment of her movements with mine. In the small, psychological intimacies that we had cultivated—quiet, restrained, powerful.

As we approached a small bench beneath the shade of a sprawling oak, she sat first, glancing back at me with a faint, almost imperceptible smile. I sat beside her, careful to leave space, but close enough that the brush of our knees sent sparks through me.

We didn't speak. We didn't need to. The silence was intimate. Comfortable. Dangerous in its subtlety. And in that shared quiet, I realized the truth: intimacy didn't need grand gestures. It didn't need declarations or overt passion. It could exist in shared space, in proximity, in awareness, in subtle touch, in psychological closeness that tethered two people without demanding anything more.

And I wanted that with her. I wanted it in every way, slowly, deliberately, completely.

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## Chapter 26

### ELLA

The city lights flickered outside the tall apartment windows, casting long, warm shadows across the room. I sat curled up on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, the soft hum of the air conditioner blending with the distant sound of traffic. Even in the mundane comfort of my own space, I felt his presence lingering in my thoughts like a tangible weight, a warmth I couldn't quite place.

The knock on the door was soft but deliberate. My pulse jumped. I wasn't sure why I was surprised—I had invited him in earlier, after all—but still, the sound made my stomach flutter.

“Ella,” he said, voice calm, low, deliberate. The familiar weight of that tone, the same one that could command attention without force, made my heart skip.

“Yes?” I replied, my voice quiet, soft.

He stepped inside, casually leaning against the doorframe for a moment, surveying the apartment with a calm, almost predatory awareness. Not in a threatening way, but in a way that made the space feel... anchored. Owned. And yet, I didn't feel threatened. I felt... tethered.

“You didn’t answer my last text,” he said softly, stepping fully inside, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

“I... was busy,” I replied, trying to steady my breathing. “And I... wanted to think.”

He nodded, taking a few deliberate steps toward the sofa. “I understand,” he said. And then, after a pause, softer, “But I like being here. With you. Even if you don’t realize it.”

My cheeks warmed at the words. Not a declaration of love. Not a promise. Just... presence. Awareness. Attention. And somehow, that mattered more than I could admit.

He moved to sit beside me. Not too close. Not invasive. Just... aligned. Shoulder to shoulder, careful space maintained, yet every inch of proximity charged with unspoken meaning.

I felt it in the subtle brush of his leg against mine, in the warmth radiating from his side, in the deliberate calm of his movements. My fingers twitched slightly under the blanket, aching to touch, to feel, to anchor.

“I was thinking,” he said finally, voice low, deliberate, “about yesterday. About the walk. About this... us.”

I looked at him, catching the intensity in his eyes. “And?” I asked softly, careful not to let my curiosity betray me.

He smiled faintly, almost imperceptibly. “And I want more. Not rushed. Not reckless. Just... more.”

The words hung between us. Heavy. Charged. True.

“I want that too,” I admitted, voice soft, almost a whisper. “But... I’m afraid.”

He turned slightly, so his shoulder lightly pressed against mine, just enough to make me aware of the warmth. “Afraid?” His

voice was soft, teasing, but not judgmental. Encouraging. “Of what?”

“Of... letting someone in. Of letting someone see... all of me,” I confessed, the words trembling slightly.

He remained quiet, patient. Just presence. Just awareness. And that, I realized, was enough. The silence spoke louder than any words could.

After a long pause, he reached out slowly—not touching, just hovering, close enough that I could feel the air shift between us. “You don’t have to be afraid,” he said softly. “Not with me. Not here. Not now.”

I swallowed hard, heart racing. The simple act of being near him, of feeling his proximity, made me ache with a desire that was controlled, patient, restrained—but undeniable.

I shifted slightly, letting my knee brush his. A test, tentative, almost imperceptible. His eyes caught mine immediately. And then, a small smile, approving, quiet. Encouraging.

We sat in that position for what felt like hours. Not talking much. Not moving much. But the room was alive with subtle, psychological intimacy. Awareness. Presence. Mild, family-friendly touches that meant more than words could ever convey.

Finally, he spoke again, softly, almost hesitant: “I like this... quiet. Us. Like this.”

I nodded, voice barely above a whisper. “Me too.”

And for the first time, I realized: intimacy didn’t have to be explosive or dramatic. It could be subtle. Safe. Slow. And in that subtlety, in that presence, there was more trust, more



connection, more danger, and more beauty than I had ever known.

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The soft hum of the refrigerator, the faint clink of utensils, and the low city noise outside created a quiet rhythm in the apartment. I moved around the kitchen, preparing a simple dinner—pasta with fresh vegetables, nothing fancy—but the act itself felt intimate. Each slice of tomato, each sprinkle of cheese, each careful stir of the sauce seemed somehow heightened by his presence just a few steps away.

Ashton leaned casually against the counter, arms folded, watching me. Not judging. Not demanding. Just present. The warmth of his proximity made my chest tighten subtly. Every small gesture he made—shifting his weight, raising his eyebrows slightly, the faint curl of his lips when he found something amusing—felt deliberate, controlled, and somehow designed to unsettle me just enough.

“You really take cooking seriously,” he said, voice low and calm, teasing just slightly.

“I do,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. “It has to be good. Otherwise, it’s a waste of time.”

He smiled faintly, dark eyes catching the light. “You’re obsessive about everything, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” I admitted, smirking. “But only the things that matter.”

“And I matter?” His voice softened, carrying a subtle warmth that made me shiver.

“Yes,” I said, without hesitation. “More than you know.”

For a moment, we didn't speak. The air was charged with the kind of tension that was both safe and dangerous at the same time—like walking along the edge of a cliff, aware of the drop, but drawn to it anyway.

I set the last plate on the small dining table and turned to pour water into our glasses. As I did, our hands brushed briefly. Just a touch. Not intentional, not demanding, but enough to make my stomach flip.

He noticed. Of course he noticed. His eyes caught mine immediately, dark, assessing, and then softened. He didn't move away. Didn't pull back. He let the moment linger, the subtle electricity between us threading through the room.

"Careful," he murmured, voice low, teasing. "You might start a fire with those hands of yours."

I laughed softly, brushing my hair behind my ear. "You're ridiculous."

"Only for you," he said, and the faint smile tugging at his lips made my heart race.

We sat across from each other at the table, the small space between us charged with unspoken understanding. Each bite, each sip of water, each glance carried weight. The city outside moved on, oblivious to the quiet intimacy unfolding in the apartment.

"You think too much," he said suddenly, breaking the silence, but not with judgment—more with observation.

"I can't help it," I admitted softly. "It's... who I am."

"And you're worth thinking about," he replied simply, letting the words hang between us.

My chest tightened. It wasn't a declaration of love. Not yet. But it was... acknowledgment. Recognition. Something deeper than words could express.

After dinner, we lingered at the table, neither of us rushing. I noticed the subtle ways we adjusted ourselves, the gentle lean toward each other, the occasional brush of legs under the table. Small, family-friendly touches that carried weight far beyond their size.

"You always notice everything, don't you?" I asked softly, testing him, curious how aware he truly was.

"All of it," he said quietly. "Every detail. Every movement. Every glance."

I felt a warmth spread through me. The awareness, the attention, the patience he showed—it was intoxicating. Dangerous, even. And yet, safe. Because he didn't force anything. Didn't demand anything. He simply... observed, and let me exist alongside him without judgment.

He reached across the table, just slightly, letting his fingers brush mine as he passed the bread. Not holding. Not claiming. Just... connecting. My fingers twitched, wanting more, but I held back.

Instead, I smiled softly. "You're infuriating," I said, teasing, though my voice carried an undertone of affection.

"And you love it," he replied, smirking, eyes glinting with that faint warmth that made me ache inside.

The rest of the evening passed in quiet conversation, shared laughter, and lingering touches that never crossed the line, but were intimate in every subtle, psychological way. Every glance, every brush of fingers, every proximity, carried meaning.

When we finally moved to the sofa with mugs of tea, I realized just how much the day—and the presence of him—had affected me. Not with passion, not with drama, but with gentle, undeniable intimacy that grounded me, tethered me, and yet left me achingly aware of desire restrained.

I leaned slightly toward him, not fully, just enough that our shoulders brushed. He didn't move away. He let the contact linger. Safe. Comfortable. Charged.

And I knew, in that moment, that intimacy didn't need to be loud, explosive, or dramatic. It could exist in quiet presence, in mild touches, in shared space, and in trust.

And I wanted more.

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## Chapter 27

### ASHTON

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The first light of morning spilled through the tall windows of Willow Crest, soft and golden, painting the apartment in hues that made everything feel warmer, calmer, but somehow more intense. I sat at the edge of the sofa, coffee in hand, observing her as she moved around the kitchen with effortless precision. Every motion was deliberate, yet natural, and I couldn't stop myself from noticing: the way her fingers curved around the mug, the subtle tension in her shoulders as she focused on pouring water, the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

She didn't notice me. She shouldn't have. Not yet. Not until I allowed her to. I had spent months learning to read people, to observe without being seen. Yet with her... I wasn't just observing. I was tethered.

"You're staring again," she said softly, breaking my thoughts.

I looked up, raising an eyebrow, pretending casualness. "Am I?"

Her lips tugged into a faint, amused smile, a mixture of challenge and curiosity. "Yes."

I took a slow sip of coffee, letting the warmth ground me. "And what's wrong with that?"

“Nothing,” she said, voice soft but deliberate. “I just... notice it.”

Her awareness intrigued me. Subtle. Psychological. She wasn’t naive, wasn’t oblivious. She noticed the almost imperceptible things—the way I lingered, the slight tension in my posture, the calculated calm I carried. And that made her dangerous. Challenging. Worth my attention.

I moved closer to the kitchen island, keeping my distance casual but aware. She turned to stir the eggs on the stove, sunlight catching the strands of hair that fell across her face. I couldn’t stop the pull in my chest. I wanted to reach out, to touch, to anchor this moment. But restraint was necessary. I let my presence linger instead.

“You’re too quiet this morning,” she teased, glancing at me over her shoulder. “Plotting, I assume?”

I smirked faintly. “Always. Observing. Calculating.”

Her laughter was soft, melodic, warming the room. “You’re impossible.”

“I know,” I said, letting the words hang between us. And then softer, almost a whisper: “And you... are irresistible.”

Her cheeks tinged with pink. She didn’t respond verbally, just shifted slightly, subtly leaning closer while pretending to focus on the eggs. A deliberate, unconscious test of proximity. I felt the brush of her warmth, subtle, enough to ignite awareness without crossing any line.

We ate breakfast together, each of us stealing glances, testing boundaries, letting tension grow naturally. The conversation was light—coffee, toast, city sounds—but underneath, a psychological dance was unfolding. She tested me, I tested her.

Neither fully aware, perhaps, but every gesture, every glance, every pause was loaded with meaning.

I noticed how she paused occasionally, her fingers brushing against the edge of the plate, or how her eyes flicked to mine when she thought I wasn't looking. She was aware. She was calculating in her own way. And that made her... fascinating.

After breakfast, she suggested a walk to a nearby bookstore, a mundane activity in appearance, but perfect for observing, reading micro-reactions, and deepening subtle psychological intimacy. I agreed.

As we stepped out into the crisp morning air, the world seemed quieter, softer, almost pausing around us. The city moved, but we existed in our own rhythm. Side by side, our steps almost synchronized, shoulders brushing lightly with each turn, glances stolen across the space between us.

"You really watch everything, don't you?" she asked suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence.

"All the things that matter," I replied, voice low, calm.

"And do I... matter?"

"Yes," I said simply. "More than you realize."

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she smiled, almost imperceptibly. That small acknowledgment, subtle yet intimate, made my chest tighten. The tension was no longer just psychological—it was embodied. Awareness, presence, subtle physicality: all elements working together.

We passed familiar streets, people moving past, oblivious to the quiet connection forming between us. A pigeon flitted across the sidewalk, and she laughed softly at its awkward landing. I watched her smile, the small joy, the way her eyes

crinkled. And I realized: intimacy wasn't about passion or possession. It was about presence, trust, and shared experience.

The bookstore arrived, quiet and welcoming, a haven in the hum of the city. She wandered the aisles, fingertips grazing spines of books, absorbed in thought. I followed closely, careful to maintain space, yet aware of every subtle gesture she made.

A book slipped slightly from the shelf. I caught it, handing it to her. Our fingers brushed, light, almost accidental—but deliberate enough to make both of us pause.

“You’re so aware of everything,” she murmured, meeting my gaze.

“I told you,” I said, voice low. “All the things that matter.”

The small moment stretched, charged, intimate. Mild, family-friendly, but undeniably personal. The psychological tension grew: neither moved overtly, yet both understood the depth of awareness and care in the gesture.

As she tucked the book under her arm, I noticed a slight crease in her brow—thoughtful, wary, perhaps noticing patterns, noticing *me*. And I smiled faintly inside. The twist, my secret, the orchestrated awareness I carried, was slowly being sensed. She was perceptive enough to notice, aware enough to respond, and careful enough to test me in return.

This walk, this mundane morning, was anything but ordinary. It was the stage for subtle psychological interplay, slow-burn intimacy, and a careful exploration of boundaries. And I was already anticipating the next move.



## Chapter 28

### ELLA



I woke up to the dull ache of a morning I wasn't ready for. The kind of ache that isn't physical but lodges itself in your chest and stomach, twisting every thought into knots. My phone lay on the bedside table, buzzing quietly. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to deal. But the name on the screen made me freeze—Ashton.

*"We need to talk."*

Three words. That's all it took. And suddenly my chest felt too tight, my hands too small, my heart too loud. I debated ignoring it, deleting it, pretending I hadn't seen it. But a tiny, irrational part of me—a part that had been quietly hoping all along—knew I couldn't. Not today.

Coffee couldn't fix me, but I made it anyway, letting the bitter liquid burn down my throat, grounding me to something real. My fingers hovered over my phone, trembling slightly. Call him? Text back? Wait? I didn't know what the right move was, and the indecision made the room feel smaller, more suffocating.

So I left.

I drove without a destination, the city around me blurring into streaks of color and light. Horns honked, people shouted, dogs

barked—but none of it reached me. My mind replayed our moments together: his quiet glances, the way he always seemed to know what I was thinking before I did, the nights we spent in silence that was too loaded to be comfortable.

I ended up at the park. Our park. Hidden behind tall oaks, a little world where only we existed. I sat on the bench, hugging myself, listening to the wind rustle through the branches. Memories hit me in sharp flashes—the first time we had laughed together without caution, the first time our hands brushed, the first time I realized I couldn't stop thinking about him.

And then I noticed him. He had been standing there, calm but deliberate, watching me. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"Ella," he said, his voice low, steady, but with that underlying tension that made my chest tighten.

I laughed, sharp and bitter. "Figure what out, Ashton? That we're impossible together? That I can't even decide if I want you in my life or out of it?"

He took a slow step closer, his eyes never leaving mine. "I don't think we're impossible," he said. "I think we're scared. Both of us. And maybe that's the point. Maybe this... whatever this is... isn't about being perfect. It's about being real."

Real. The word cut through my fear. But fear still clawed at my chest. "What if we hurt each other too much? What if it's not enough?"

He sat down next to me, close but careful. There was an electricity in the space between us, a tension that made my pulse jump. "Ella..." His voice softened, trembled slightly, enough to show he wasn't hiding anything. "I don't want 'enough.' I want you. Hazel."

Time stopped.

Hazel. That single word carried the weight of everything unspoken. Every confession he had never said, every quiet longing, every moment of hesitation—it was all in that word. My heart slammed against my ribs, desperate to escape but grateful for the feeling.

“I... Hazel?” My voice was barely above a whisper, fragile, uncertain.

“Yes,” he said, reaching for my hand. His fingers brushed mine, light, reverent, like he was afraid I might disappear if he held too tight. “I want us... officially. No running, no hiding. Just... Hazel and me. Together.”

The leaves whispered above us, the city faded into distant hums, and I felt the weight of all my doubts and fears lift, just slightly. I wanted to say everything—the fears, the past, the insecurities—but words failed me. So I leaned slightly toward him, letting the space between us collapse. His hand found mine, fingers entwining, warm and firm, anchoring me in the moment.

“We’ll figure this out,” he murmured again, voice low, steady, as if speaking it aloud made it real. “No pretending, no hiding. Just... us.”

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to believe it. To trust it. The knot in my chest eased, replaced by a cautious warmth, a fragile hope. Maybe, just maybe, this was the start of something real. Something permanent. Something worth risking everything for.

I squeezed his hand back, a silent promise in return, letting the quiet intimacy settle between us like a fragile, beautiful truth.

“I want you too Ashton, I want just you and me”, the next moment he crushed his mouth into mine, it was deep it was like he was trying to claim me.

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## Chapter 29

### ELLA / ASHTON



The morning sunlight filtered through the leaves outside, spilling golden patterns across the wooden floor of my apartment. I woke with a faint ache in my chest—a mixture of anticipation, relief, and nerves that I couldn't quite name. My hand brushed over my nightstand where my phone lay, silent now. Yesterday's conversation, his words, the way he had said **Hazel**, replayed in my mind like a loop I didn't want to escape.

Even as I tried to focus on the mundane—coffee, emails, my never-ending to-do list—my thoughts kept drifting back to him. The way his voice, calm yet loaded with emotion, could make my chest tighten and my stomach flutter at the same time. The faint scent of him that seemed to cling to everything he touched. And that single word—**Hazel**—spoken with such care, such intimacy.

By mid-morning, I couldn't take it anymore. I needed him. My fingers trembled slightly as I typed a reply to his earlier message: *"I'll be there in twenty."*

When I arrived, Ashton was already pacing, hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, eyes tracing every corner of the apartment as if he couldn't sit still. When he saw me, his expression softened, and for the first time, I noticed the slight

tension in his jaw, the small lines of worry around his eyes. He wasn't as composed as he pretended to be.

"Hazel," he said, and my chest flipped in the familiar, maddening way it always did. The name felt different on his lips now—intentional, heavy with meaning, like a key unlocking a door I hadn't dared open.

I smiled, the tension in my shoulders loosening slightly. We didn't speak at first, letting the quiet settle over us. The room smelled faintly of coffee and the lingering aroma of his cologne. His presence was magnetic, pulling me in despite every rational thought screaming to be cautious.

Finally, he broke the silence. "I've been thinking," he began, voice low, hesitant. "About... everything. About us. About before, about now... I don't want to lose this. I don't want to lose you, Hazel."

The lump in my throat made my voice catch. "I don't want that either," I whispered, barely audible, but the honesty was raw, unfiltered.

He turned slightly to face me, eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made my pulse spike. "I'm not asking for perfection. I'm asking for honesty. For us to try. Fully. No walls, no holding back."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Honesty had always scared me more than anything—especially with him. Letting someone see your weaknesses, your fears, your unfiltered self... it felt dangerous. But with Ashton, danger had always felt like home, like fire I wanted to touch even though I knew it might burn me.

So I leaned closer, just slightly, letting the gap between us shrink. He noticed instantly, the faintest curve of a smile

tugging at his lips. His hand found mine, fingers threading together like they were made to fit. The warmth of him, the solidity of his touch, grounded me in a way nothing else could.

We spent the morning and early afternoon like that—close, talking softly, sharing things we'd never voiced before. He told me about his childhood—the fears, the moments of loneliness he had hidden behind arrogance and control. I spoke of the insecurities I buried behind humor and sarcasm, the nights I had cried alone, the times I doubted myself completely.

There were moments of laughter, too. Little teasing remarks, sarcastic exchanges that reminded me that beneath the serious, intense man he sometimes projected, Ashton was still the person who could make me forget my own fears for just a second.

Every now and then, our hands would squeeze each other's tightly, small gestures loaded with meaning. Every time he said **Hazel**, it felt like he was sealing a promise, each syllable imprinting itself onto my heart.

By late afternoon, the room was painted in golden sunlight, shadows stretching long across the floor. I leaned my head against his shoulder, letting the quiet intimacy wash over me. It wasn't just attraction anymore. It wasn't just desire. It was connection, deep and undeniable.

I realized then, fully and without doubt, that I didn't just want him close. I wanted him fully—in my life, in my thoughts, in every little piece of me I had reserved for someone brave enough to handle it.

As he tightened his arm around me, murmuring something about how much he cared, I let out a quiet sigh, surrendering to the moment. There was no rush, no need for words beyond

what our hands and hearts were already saying. We were building something slowly, carefully, but undeniably real.

And every time he said **Hazel**, every time he held me just a little longer, every time his eyes lingered on mine like he could see everything I was afraid to show, I knew this wasn't fleeting. It wasn't a momentary spark. It was the beginning of something lasting. Something worth every risk, every fear, every past heartbreak that had led me here.

For the first time in a long time, I felt it—the fragile, exhilarating, terrifying certainty that maybe... just maybe... we were meant to find each other.

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## ASHTON

I watched her from the doorway, every small movement etched into my mind like I'd memorized it a thousand times over. The way she absentmindedly tugged at her sleeve, the slight crease of her brow when she thought I wasn't looking, the faint flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. Hazel—no, Ella, but I'd been allowed the permission of calling her **Hazel**, and it felt like a key turning in a lock I hadn't dared touch before.

She hadn't noticed me yet, and I didn't move. Part of me wanted to let her keep believing I was just another complication she could ignore. But the larger part—the part that had been shouting at me for weeks—wanted her close. Needed her close.

When she finally looked up and met my eyes, the tension in her shoulders made my chest tighten. "Hazel," I said, softly, letting the word linger, letting it carry everything I hadn't voiced yet. It wasn't just a name anymore. It was an acknowledgment, a claim, a promise.



She froze for a second, and I could see the shift in her expression—the flicker of surprise, the blush threatening at the edge of her cheeks, the silent question: *is this real?*

We didn't speak immediately. I let the silence stretch, feeling her pulse in the brush of her hand against mine, the warmth radiating from her when she leaned slightly closer.

"I've been thinking," I finally said, keeping my voice low, careful. "About... everything. About before, about now. I don't want to lose this, Hazel. I don't want to lose you."

Her response was a whisper, almost fragile. "I don't want that either."

The words hit me harder than I expected. Part of me had feared she'd pull back, retreat behind the walls she was so good at building. But here she was, leaning into me, sharing her vulnerability without hesitation. My chest tightened, and I had to swallow to keep my voice steady.

"I'm not asking for perfection," I continued, turning slightly so she could see my face. "I'm asking for honesty. For us to try. Fully. No walls, no holding back. Just us. You and me."

The way she shifted closer, letting her head rest lightly against my shoulder, was both terrifying and exhilarating. She trusted me enough to let me in, and it was a responsibility I didn't take lightly. My hand found hers, fingers intertwining, holding her like I'd been holding onto the thought of her for months.

I told her about the parts of me I never shared—my fears, the loneliness, the times I'd pretended to be fine when I wasn't. Every confession felt lighter when she was there, listening without judgment, letting me be fully me.

And then it was her turn. She told me about her insecurities, the nights she had cried alone, the moments she had doubted

herself completely. Each word made my chest ache, because I recognized the courage it took for her to say it aloud. I wanted to promise her the world, but more than that, I wanted to promise I'd always be there.

Hours passed. Laughter mingled with tears, teasing with confessions. Her hand in mine felt like an anchor in the storm of my mind. And every time I said her name—**Hazel**—it was a reminder that this was real, that she was real, that we were finally allowing ourselves to exist in the same space without pretense or fear.

By the time the sun dipped low, painting the room in gold, I realized something crucial. I didn't just want her close in fleeting moments. I wanted her fully, entirely, for as long as she'd let me. I wanted her fears, her doubts, her humor, her warmth, all of it. And more than anything, I wanted her to trust me with it.

As I tightened my arm around her, feeling her lean into me, I made a silent vow. I would protect this. Protect her. Protect us. Whatever it took. Hazel and me—this was worth every risk, every past mistake, every fear I had ever carried.

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## Chapter 30

### ELLA



Six months. Six months of mornings with him curled beside me, late-night talks, stolen coffee, laughter that made my chest ache. Six months of **Hazel and Ashton**. And yet, tonight, the rooftop felt colder than usual. The city lights below shimmered like nothing had changed, but I could feel the tension thick between us.

Ashton was unusually quiet, leaning against the railing with his jaw tight, hands shoved in his pockets. I tried nudging him, teasing like I always did. “You’re acting weird. What’s going on?”

His gaze shifted to me, sharp, serious, almost haunted. “Hazel... there’s something I haven’t told you. Something... you need to know.”

I laughed nervously, trying to hide the sudden flutter of anxiety in my chest. “Uh-oh. That sounds ominous.”

He didn’t smile. He stepped closer, voice low, steady. “I didn’t tell you before because I didn’t want to scare you. Or ruin us. But... it’s time.”

My stomach dropped. Every instinct screamed at me that whatever he was about to say, it wasn’t small. My mind raced

through possibilities—someone from his past, a danger, a secret that could change everything.

“I... Hazel, I’ve been keeping something from you,” he said finally, exhaling slowly. “It’s not just about my past... it’s about who I really am. About my life before you.”

I frowned, heart hammering. “Before me? Ashton... you’ve told me almost everything. What could it be?”

His eyes darted away briefly, then back to me, serious, intense. “Hazel... the truth is, I wasn’t entirely honest about my work. About the company you think I run. About me. It’s... bigger. Dangerous. And you... you’re connected to it. Whether you know it or not.”

My breath caught. “Connected to it?” I repeated, voice trembling. “What do you mean?”

He took a step closer, his hand hovering near mine. “Hazel... the people I protect, the enemies I fight... they’ve been watching you. Not because of me, not because you’re in danger on your own, but because of what you represent. Your family, your past... it’s linked to everything I’ve tried to hide from you.”

The world tilted. My pulse raced. My mind screamed, **linked? enemies? my family?** I felt the ground shift beneath me. Six months of trust, of laughter, of love—was it all built on a lie I hadn’t even known existed?

“Wait... wait, slow down,” I gasped. “Are you saying... I’m in danger? Because of you?”

His gaze softened, but the seriousness never left his eyes. “Not because of me. Because of what I didn’t tell you. Because of the people from your past, Hazel... they’re still out there. And

now, they know about us. They know about you. They know everything.”

My heart froze. Everything.

I stumbled back slightly, gripping the railing. “Everything?” I whispered, my voice breaking. “Ashton... what do you mean? Who?”

He reached out, taking my hands in his, grounding me. “I’m sorry, Hazel. I should have told you sooner. I wanted to protect you, but... the truth is, your family—your father, your mother—they’re not who you think they are. And some people who’ve been after them... they’ve been following you, watching you, using me as a shield.”

I shook my head, disbelief cutting through me like a knife. “That... that can’t be real. My parents... my life... everything I know?”

“It’s real,” he said softly, almost painfully. “And it changes everything. Hazel, I love you. That hasn’t changed. But right now, we have to face it together. And you need to know—nothing about your life has been simple. Not your family, not your history... not even your choices. You’re part of something much bigger than you realize. And someone out there will do anything to control it.”

I backed up, hands trembling. “I... I don’t understand. This... this can’t be happening. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I wanted to keep you safe,” he admitted, voice raw. “Because I couldn’t risk losing you before you were ready. And now... Hazel, you have to trust me. More than ever.”

I sank onto the rooftop bench, head in my hands, trying to process. Six months of love, of stability, of trust... and

suddenly, my world had been pulled out from under me. **My past, my family, my life—everything was a lie.**

And the worst part? The person I trusted most, the person I loved more than anything, was the only one who could protect me now.

I looked up at Ashton, seeing the worry, the guilt, the love in his eyes. My chest tightened. **Could I trust him with this secret? Could we survive it together?**

Before I could answer, his hand found mine again, warm and firm. “Hazel,” he whispered, “we’ll face this. Together. Whatever it takes.”

But even as I felt the comfort of his touch, the fear in my chest whispered a terrifying truth: **nothing would ever be simple again.**

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