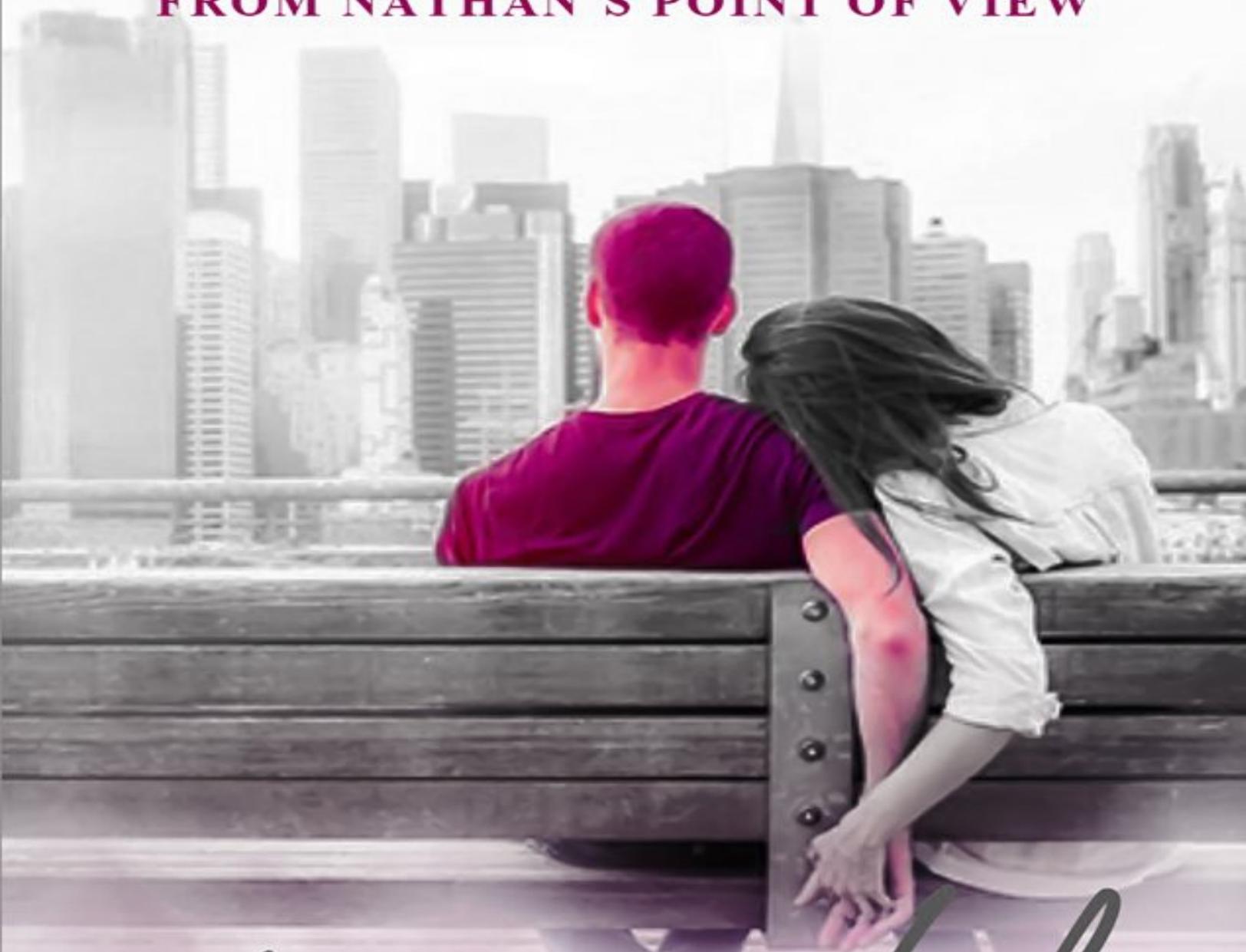


NOVELLA
FROM NATHAN'S POINT OF VIEW



Lovable


R.G.ANGEL

Lovable

Nathan's POV

Note: Don't read this novella unless you've read Lovable because it covers some key chapters from Nathan's point of view, and it will completely spoil the book.

Thank you,

R.G. Angel

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The First Meeting

I sat at the bar, looking at the clock. The client and her best friend would be there soon.

I sighed, ordering a beer. I didn't really like what I was doing here. It was a first, a first I didn't intend to ever repeat.

This Angela called me to help her best friend gain some confidence, to help her understand that she was just as worthy of being romanced and loved as any other woman.

I scowled at my beer, my issue here was not being hired by a third party – it had happened a lot in my career – but what I hated was the girl not knowing who I was, thinking it was all genuine. It made me feel a guilt I'd never felt before.

I had initially refused when this woman called, no way was I deceiving anyone! But then I realised she was not going to give up and I knew a few men in the industry, a couple of them were my friends and most didn't have the ethics and scruples I had. If that girl was sweet and had a fragile self-esteem, she didn't need a guy taking advantage of her, especially since her friend made a point to say that sex was absolutely off the table.

I didn't promise the friend I would do it; I was still very uncomfortable with the idea of deceiving this woman, but I promised to come and see.

I was not this type of escort anyway, I didn't sell sex, I sold companionship. I'm not saying I never had sex with any of my clients because that wasn't true, but it was not a service I offered and it was something I did only if I felt like it, as on a date.

I looked at the clock again and around the room, they were late – maybe she'd changed her mind.

I felt both relieved and a little disappointed. Disappointed because I wanted to see that woman... Alessandra. I wanted to see if she was just as amazing as her friend made her out to be. And relieved because I wouldn't have to lie and be Mark the, whatever job I wanted to give myself, instead of Nathan Prescott – architect by day, part-time escort at night.

I didn't like doing that anymore and accepted fewer and fewer jobs – I started off in college both out of financial necessity and to spite my youth-chasing mother, and then I just kept on going because it was strangely interesting to meet all these women, to hear their stories, but in the past couple of years it got

more tedious than fun and, if I recalled correctly, this job was the first one I'd accepted in over two months. Yes, it was time to stop.

A woman's laugh took me out of my dark thoughts and I swivelled on my chair toward that sound – it made me want to laugh along and my breathing stopped when my eyes fell on the voluptuous brunette laughing without restriction. Her hazel eyes were full of tears that she tried to wipe as carefully as she could and part of me prayed this was Alessandra – it had to be her.

How could she have no confidence? She was absolutely divine with her porcelain skin, straight nose, pink button lips. She was curvy and soft and feminine and especially clueless at the interest of the men surrounding her. I couldn't help but glare at the man sitting at the table beside hers, his leery eyes locked on her heavy breasts.

Her friend came to stand beside me, hailing the barman. No doubt she was absolutely gorgeous, all blonde and leggy, and yet she didn't make me feel half the effect that her little brunette friend had with just a laugh.

"I'll do it." I confirmed as she ordered two Blue Hawaiians.

"Thank you," she whispered with a small smile before going back to the table.

I waited a couple of minutes, grabbed my beer and walked to the table, my best smile on.

"May I buy you a drink?" I asked, but Alessandra didn't respond.

I threw a questioning side glance to her friend who rolled her eyes and visibly kicked her under the table.

Alessandra looked up at me, frowning as if me standing here was an anomaly, as if she couldn't believe I was standing there for her.

"What?" she asked, and I had to do my best to stop my laughter when she winced, most likely kicked by her friend again.

"Why?"

I chuckled; this was going to be quite entertaining. "Why not?"

"There is no space," she insisted. I was not sure why she was so reluctant to have a drink with me. I saw her detail me from head to toe, I saw her pupils dilate with approval. I was her type, and yet...

Her friend left her seat and I gladly took it.

"You know, if you're trying to get friendly with me to get with Angela, you're wasting your time. I'm not easy to befriend, and Angela is happily married."

I shrugged, leaning back in my chair, her voice was low and deep, like a blues singer. It was the kind of voice I could listen to all day.

"I'm sure you're easier to befriend than you're giving yourself credit for. As for your friend, it's a good thing I'm not sitting here for her, because she just got into a taxi."

She turned around briskly, panicking, muttering to herself. I wanted to reassure her, show her comfort. I was angry at whomever turned this beautiful woman into such an insecure person.

I couldn't help detailing her face, the architect in me detailing her lines, her dimpled chin, straight nose, hazel eyes with a speck of gold.

She looked up and blushed under my gaze. Lord, she was even more beautiful with rosy cheeks.

"Are you a sociopath?" she blurted.

I chuckled; of all the questions that could have come I never expected this one. "I must admit I've never been asked before. Well no, I'm not, at least I don't think so. Are you?"

She shook her head, her blush deepening.

"Okay, now that we've got that out of the way, maybe we try to get to know each other better, don't you think? What's your name?" I quickly changed the subject to help her out of her embarrassment.

"Ale- Alessandra but my friends call me Al or Ale. Well, some call me Sandra but I'm not a fan and..." she rambled.

I extended my hand to her "Well, nice to meet you, Alessandra." And I meant it.

She looked at my hand, somehow reluctant to take it. She looked like touching me was commitment, was she also a germaphobe?

"We already established I'm not a sociopath," I encouraged, keeping my hand up but starting to feel a little ridiculous

She finally shook my hand. Hers looked so small and delicate in mine, her skin just as soft as it looked, a beautiful porcelain skin. I couldn't help but wonder if her skin was so perfect everywhere and then wanted to kick myself.
Sex is off the table, Nathan!

"And what's your name?" she asked, her voice a little less defensive than before. I took that as a victory.

I opened my mouth to answer 'Mark' but I couldn't. I wanted her to use my real name and this was the first mistake I made, the first step of my downfall. "Nathan... my name is Nathan."

I enjoyed the rest of the time with her, for one I almost forgot it was a job – maybe because she wasn't aware it was one or maybe because of the person she was, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that all my smiles, my laughter, my compliments, my flirting... it was all natural, genuine.

She was guarded and suspicious, there was no denying, but the more she relaxed the more interesting and enticing she became.

I was even regretful when the night came to an end and I had to let her go. I

was not supposed to ask her for another date so soon and yet I couldn't let her get into an Uber without a promise she would see me again.

Later that night, when she replied to my text, my satisfaction was not professional but 100% man. I'd got through to her and I couldn't wait to discover more about her.

The Emporium:

I hated the Emporium, I hated taking her there and what I hated even more were the reasons why I was taking her there. I'd fucked up, I knew I had – I'd started falling for her. I think I'd started from the first day. Hell, I introduced her to my only family, I'd never done that with anyone and yet I didn't even realize it then.

I think I understood I was getting addicted to her when I went to the park like a psycho, risking scaring her just because I missed her. I'd loved seeing her with the kid, their relationship... She was going to be an amazing mom one day.

I knew I shouldn't have done this and Angela's call on Sunday was clear enough. I'd delayed the 'surprise' meeting with the stupid colleague Ale used to have a crush on. I'm saying 'used to' because I could see my feelings for her were reciprocal and it angered me when Angela said he was starting to show her interest. But I was on a contract – I had to do my job.

As agreed, I left her alone at the bar to go get her a drink, to give that stupid man the chance to come on to her.

I glared at the clueless redhead talking to her. She smiled at him and the feelings engulfing me were once again new – jealousy, possessiveness and most of all pain.

She shook her head, leaning back, and I smiled. *Fuck it!* I couldn't get through to it. I was falling for this woman and wanted to build something, it was not a job anymore, it hadn't been for a long time. It was real, she was mine. If that man had been stupid enough not to notice the treasure he'd had just under his nose for the past few years it was his mistake, not mine. I would not let her go, I couldn't, not like that. Not without a fight.

I approached discreetly to eavesdrop because if she'd seemed responsive, I might have had to rethink my strategy.

I smiled and puffed my chest with pride as I reached her. I growled and rested my torso against her back in a caveman gesture I was not ashamed of.

"She told you 'no' more than once and I think ignoring her wishes is disrespectful to her, and to me," I barked, throwing him my best threatening look. I knew I was imposing, and that I could look scary, something I was more than grateful for right now.

I wrapped my arm around her as she leaned against my chest. How much had things changed in the past few weeks? She was now leaning against me, seeking

comfort, safety, in my arms when she had been pushing me away in every way she could at the start, terrified of what this relationship could do to her.

I'd never felt more like a man as I did right then, with her seeking my warmth. I tightened my hold around her, looking at that clueless man even colder than before.

“But you didn't bother asking because this date is serious, these two people are serious about each other.” I prayed it was true.

I smiled ever so slightly as I felt her nod against my shoulder. I actually wanted to squash him for trying to steal my girl and also wanted to thank him for being a clueless bastard and letting her go unnoticed. He'd had a chance and he'd blown it, whereas I was smart enough to know what I'd found and how to fight to keep it.

I would fight everyone – this guy, Angela, Ale's own fears – I would fight fate if I needed to.

The Barbecue

I felt stressed from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning, firstly because I knew it was a crucial step forward in our relationship and secondly because I wasn't sure how Angela would react to my visit.

As expected, she had been livid with what happened at the Emporium and that I had accepted the barbecue invitation, but I ignored her voicemails – this was not something I wanted to discuss with her on the phone. I wanted to tell her in person that it was no longer a job for me, I wanted to tell her that everything was real and that Ale mattered a lot to me, too much... and it was terrifying.

As Tom, Angela's husband, interrogated me I couldn't help but wonder how much he knew of the whole situation and when the chance came to be alone with Angela by getting drinks, I jumped on it. I wanted to clear the air now and enjoy my time with Ale. I felt like a prisoner waiting for my execution and it was putting me on edge. I needed to know where I stood with Angela.

She glared at me as soon as I walked into the kitchen, where she was setting some plastic plates aside.

"I told you I didn't want you to come," she spat coldly, pursing her lips.

"I know, but I couldn't do that," I replied, standing on the other side of the kitchen island. "It's real now."

She crossed her arms on her chest. "Real? As real as \$2,000?"

I frowned, getting my phone out. "I gave you the money back on Wednesday," I argued, logging onto my bank account.

She snorted, reaching for her own phone for what I suspected was to check her account. After a moment she looked up; doubt written all over her face, before setting it back down on the countertop. "Doesn't matter, we had a deal."

I nodded. "Yes, I know, but Ale changed everything. I like her, I like her a lot. It's real for me, as real as it always was for her."

Angela arched her eyebrows. "Oh yeah? I'm sure she will enjoy it when you leave her alone to go to your night job." She nodded. "Sure, she will enjoy dating an escort."

I rolled my eyes. "She won't be dating an escort and you know that. I told you I was an architect; I'm done with the escort thing. Ale, Ale is-"

"It's not going to work." She shook her head. "This is too big of a secret. When it was to boost her confidence for just a few dates it was one thing, but you can't start a relationship on that – I mean, even you must know that."

I opened my mouth to argue but closed it again. I couldn't deny that it was

true. No matter what she would never take it well.

“I’m telling her today,” Angela insisted. “I made a mistake, it just can’t continue.”

“Please don’t. Give me time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for her to know it’s real, for her to realize that it’s genuine.”

Angela shook her head. “No, I have to tell her before she grows too attached, before it’s too late – before it hurts.”

I tightened my hands into fists, anger and fear mixing into one. I was not ready to tell her goodbye yet. “We both know if you say something she will hurt, we both know she is attached. We both know she is falling too.”

“Too?” she asked. How could she be surprised? She was the one who told me how unique her friend was.

“I never stood a chance,” I replied. “Don’t do this, please Angela, don’t. I will make her happy, like no other man ever could.”

She didn’t get to answer as Ale came in, clearly unhappy at the tension.

I gave up the charade, Angela had my... no, *our* happiness in her hands, she could decide to destroy us and there was nothing I could do.

I spent the rest of the afternoon expecting Angela to drag Ale somewhere and tell her the truth about our beginning and I tensed at every look Angela threw me while I was fixating on Ale, trying to memorize her face, her smile, the way her eyes lit up when Georgie sought her.

Once the guests started to leave, I could see the end of the line.

“Just go home, Nate,” Ale demanded, and my heart squeezed painfully in my chest.

“I just...” I stopped, looking at Angela for a second, trying to beg her with my eyes again to reconsider telling her. I looked back at my Ale and pulled her into a tight hug, kissing the crown of her head, smelling her coconut shampoo, which I was now addicted to. It was hard to say goodbye to someone who didn’t know they were going to leave you. “I’ll see you later, right?” I asked, my face still buried in her hair; I was trying to memorize her smell just as I tried to memorize every line of her face.

She leaned back, resting her small hands on my arms, rubbing them soothingly. I didn’t think she knew how every touch affected me. “Wasn’t this a bit dramatic for a ‘see you later?’”

I tightened my hold around her waist. I had half a mind to put her over my shoulder and run away, keeping her with me just a little while longer. “I thought

women liked dramatic, over-the-top gestures,” I replied, trying to joke but my heart was not in it and I knew she didn’t buy it as the worry began to show on her face. She was always so attuned to me.

She shook her head, nudging my shoulder playfully. “I’m not like the other women.”

My smile faltered, if only she knew how accurate she was. If only she knew how she’d wrecked all my beliefs about women and all the stupid mistakes you could make in the name of love.

“I know,” I whispered. I detailed her face again, the gold specks in her hazel eyes, the few faint freckles dusting the bridge of her nose. I leaned down, kissing the tip of her nose, trying to convey all the feelings I had for her in one innocent kiss. “Lord knows I wasn’t ready for you,” I admitted truthfully.

I looked over to Angela. “Thank you again for the invitation. I really had a good time,” I told her. *Please don’t ruin my life*, I begged silently before turning my attention back to Ale. “I’ll call you later.”

“Of course.” She squeezed my hand and left before I had a chance to reconsider my plan of dragging her away.

The next few hours were the longest and not even spending time working on the plans helped me get my mind off the call I both wanted and dreaded, the call that would let me know if I’d lost her or if I’d won a temporary reprieve.

I shook my head, dropping my pencil on the drawing desk. Love was much more complicated than I anticipated, much more consuming. I wasn’t sure if there would be an ‘after-Ale’ where my heart remained intact, and the sad part was I wasn’t sure I even wanted it to.

The Gala Aftermath

I looked at my keys on the coffee table, hers much newer, shiner, taunting me. I had half a brain to just go there, barge in and wait until she had no other choice but to talk and give me a chance to fix this.

I scoffed at my caveman instincts. The impulses she caused in me were so unfamiliar. She might have been new to the whole dating scene but I was just as new, as inexperienced and all the feelings she caused me to feel were just as novel to me.

I hated the distance she'd put between us, how cold she looked. My Ale was so warm and fun and quirky, she wore her heart on her sleeve no matter how much she tried to hide it.

I stripped down to my boxers and laid on top of the covers looking at the ceiling, willing my phone to beep, for her to reply to my text.

I ran my hand on my neck in a stupid attempt to sooth the ache I felt in my heart. It was irrational and yet I felt deep down as if her goodbye as she got out of the limo was permanent.

"Don't do this to us, Ale." I whispered in the darkness. "You promised to never leave me." I closed my eyes as the weight on my chest got heavier, to the point it was hard for me to breathe.

How peculiar, I'd never known to what extent your emotional state could hurt you physically.

I must have dozed off because I jerked awake to my ringtone.

"Ale?" I tried my voice full of sleep.

I blinked at the alarm by my bed. *6:32am.*

"She knows."

My heart jumped in my chest.

"Angela?" I tried shaking the sleep fog from my head which replaced it with a dread I'd never felt before.

A dread that felt like ice was growing inside my chest.

"She knows" she repeated, her voice cracking.

"How? Where is she?" I asked jumping from my spot on the bed looking for clothes.

"I don't know, I..." She let out a sob. "I knew I should have told her; she'll never forgive me."

I huffed, wedging the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I jumped

into a pair of sweatpants. “I’ll go talk to her now. She’ll listen, she’ll understand.” I set the phone to hands-free and let it drop on the bed so I could put on the first shirt I grabbed in the dark. *She loves me, she promised to never leave me*, I added to myself.

“I don’t think she is home, there were noises behind her. I... I think she’s gone.”

I froze, one leg up, sneaker in hand, looking at the phone like I’d misunderstood.

“Nathan? Nathan are you there?” she asked, or rather snapped.

“She wouldn’t do that.” I asserted, voice breaking. “She promised,” I added, not sure why – Angela didn’t know the promises Ale made.

“Yeah?” she barked back. “Because we’ve been so honest ourselves?! It’s all your fault.”

I rolled my eyes, picking up the phone, the car keys and leaving the apartment running down the stairs to the car park.

“Blame me as much as you want, Angela, I’ll fix it,” I stated, with much more confidence than I felt.

I hung up before getting behind the wheel. Hearing her accusation was not productive.

I drove like a mad man to her apartment, dialling her number repeatedly but getting her voicemail every time.

I was angry, furious actually – with myself and with her. Myself because I’d known from the moment she came back from the restroom at the gala that something was wrong. I knew it when she shivered at my touch but not with her usual desire. I should’ve got out of the limo; I never should have let her walk away without making her talk.

I was also furious with her, she made promises too and just ignoring the problem and ghosting me wasn’t a solution, it was just childish.

I parked halfway on the pavement and took the stairs two at a time and stood in front of her door.

I raised my hand to knock but stopped, taking a couple of deep breaths to calm myself. I had so many conflicted impulses. I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless, I wanted to fall on my knees and beg her to forgive me, I wanted to shake and scold her for acting like a child and ignoring me. But all in all, I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t broken beyond repair.

I looked down at her door key in my hand, running my thumb along the serrated edge. I just wanted to go in, join her in bed and remind her how good we were together, but I also needed her to act as an adult and face me.

I knocked sharply on the door.

“Ale it’s me. I called.” *Please Ale open the door.* I glared at the door, willing it to open.

I knocked again, harder this time. “Ale, I’m not going anywhere!”

I waited another minute. “Fine,” I grumbled. “If it’s how you want to play it” I put my key into the lock except... I frowned looking at the key. Yes, it was the correct one.

I tried again but the key refused to go in.

“You changed the lock?” I asked, now offended. “You think that –” I shook my head. “Fine it’s okay.” I sat on the floor across from her door. “You’ll have to come out eventually.”

Three hours I waited in front of her door, cursing silently. I went through all possible feelings before I heard someone come up the steps heavily.

I didn’t expect it to be Nazalie, the blue-haired girl, dragging a gigantic suitcase behind her.

I stood up with a wince. Yes, three hours on the floor could do some damage. She looked up and glared. Ale had talked to her alright.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not even trying to hide her animosity.

“I need to talk to her.”

She shook her head. “She’s not here.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She snorted. “Like I care... oh wait, no I don’t.”

I scowled. “I’m going in.”

She looked at me with a narrow gaze, I was sure she could see herself kicking me in the balls.

“Fine,” she sighed, opening the door and gesturing me in. “Be my guest.”

I stormed in, going into every room and finding nothing. All her things were there and yet they were not.

I opened the first drawer of her chest of drawers; her small jewellery box was missing. I turned around briskly, the picture of her and Georgie was missing from her night table.

I opened her wardrobe; half of her clothes were missing.

I walked into the living room, her laptop, her favourite cup... all gone.

“Where is she?” I asked Nazalie as she was waiting by the entrance, her arms crossed on her chest.

She gestured toward the door. “You did your assessment, now I want you to go. It’s my place now.”

I stayed in the middle of the room – if she wanted me to move, she would have to call the authorities because I was not going down without a fight. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“Ex,” she corrected me. “I don’t know where she is.” I didn’t need to be an expert in this girl to know I wouldn’t get anything more from her.

“When is she coming back?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think she will – at least not for a while. She gave me her place and said I could live here.” She pointed at the box on the floor. “She told me there was a box upstairs for the trash.”

I looked down at the box and if I thought I was hurting before it was nothing compared to what I felt now. In the box was my tee shirt, my toothbrush, our photo from the park, the DVD I bought her... basically everything that could remind her of us.

“She’s gone?” I tried, keeping my eyes locked on the box. “I’ll take that.” I reached for the box before she had a chance to even say anything.

I walked out of the apartment and down the stairs in a daze, putting the box on the passenger seat of my car.

I sat in the driver’s seat and looked out the windshield. She was gone, she left without even a look back – without giving me a chance to explain.

I took the photo out of the box. “How could you do that?” I whispered angrily. “How?”

I took a deep breath, I’d find her and I’ll make her listen even if it was the last thing I did, even if she still wanted to walk away after this, she had to listen.

I would fight for both of us again because I lived enough to know a love like ours was not common.

“I’ll find you, Ale.” I vowed as I started the car, dialling Jude’s number.

Finding Her

I let out a sigh of relief when I saw her sitting on the beach, immediately the pain in my chest lessened as if just looking at her soothed my heart, my pain. I felt whole again.

I removed my jacket, shoes, socks and rolled the legs of my pants up, never letting my gaze drift from her. I had the innate fear that, should I lose sight of her for just a second, she would disappear.

Three months it took me to find her, three months of going crazy – imagining the worst, going through a myriad of emotions that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

I took a deep breath, staying by the house a little while longer, looking at her all bundled up in her cardigan, her brown hair flowing around with the unforgiving wind, a black Lab playing around her.

I chuckled with relief and at the ineptitude of that dog in failing to spot me. *Talk about a guard dog.*

I took a step toward her but stopped again, my heart hammering in my chest. I wanted to hear her, to see her face again, but I sort of liked the uncertainty I was in now. As things stood, there was still a chance she loved me, still a chance she would forgive me. Right at this second, I could still believe there would be an 'us' again.

I took slow steps toward her, burying my hands in my pockets.

Angela and I went to great lengths to find her and the more we looked the more we realized she didn't want to be found – she'd taken all possible steps to disappear and it was taking a toll on me... on us.

Jude even went borderline unlawful when he realized the extent of my despair and asked a few favors at the Bar Association. Nothing came of it until two days ago when he received a call informing him that the New York Bar recently received an Admission by Reciprocity of the North Carolina Bar Association for an Alessandra Ridley with an address in Treefort.

I booked holidays and jumped in my car, only stopping for gas during the 10 hours it took me to come here. I didn't tell Angela I'd found her, I wasn't sure it was accurate, and I wanted her to myself for starters – I wanted to save us before giving Angela the opportunity to do the same.

"Come on, Lucky! Go get the stick." I closed my eyes at the low tone, my memory of her voice didn't do her justice.

“I can’t blame the dog, once we find you, it’s almost impossible to leave your side.”

I hated how she tensed at the tone of my voice, how she brought her legs up and tightened her cardigan around herself as if she wanted to protect herself from me.

“You were hard to find,” I continued when it was clear she would reply.

“It’s usually what happens when someone doesn’t want to be found.”

Ouch, it hurt. I stared at her, but she kept looking straight ahead. Would looking at me hurt her? Would it hurt her as much as it hurt me *not* to see her?

“I missed you, so much.”

“I’m sorry to report the feeling is not mutual,” she replied placidly, too placidly actually to be real. My girl wore her heart on her sleeve. I looked at her, trying to find any sign of her previous feelings for me.

“How did you find me?” she asked, finally glancing up at me.

“I know you.”

“God knows I wish I could say the same.” I couldn’t help but wince at the jab. She was the person who knew me best, but she wouldn’t believe that, not in the state she was now.

The explanation didn’t help and I noticed I was losing her.

I sat down as close as I could and tried a different tactic.

I looked at her profile, the soft porcelain skin I craved. I raised my hand, almost as if it had a mind of its own, was her skin as soft as it was in my memory. I saw her tense at my approaching fingers and stop, letting my hand fall with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“For lying or getting caught?”

I winced at the fresh wave of pain. “For everything.” I took a deep breath.

She gave a sharp nod. “I grant you absolution,” she exclaimed. “Please leave now.”

I looked at her with incredulity. Did she really think I would give up that easily? After doing everything I did to be with her?

“You promised to never leave me,” I whispered, more talking to myself than to her.

“You promised to never lie,”

“Angela and Tom – he left her,” I confessed. “They’re taking it hard.”

That was an understatement. Once I found out Ale was gone, I looked around, tried to get leads. After a few days I went to Angela’s house unannounced, thinking that two brains were always better than one. When I arrived I saw Tom exiting the house and Angela begging him to stay. When he saw me standing there he had walked straight toward me, dropping his bag as he

reached me before punching me so hard that I fell on the floor. I winced, still feeling the phantom pain in my jaw.

“Did she pay you extra to plead her case or was it always part of the package deal?”

I was startled by how cold and mean she sounded, it was so unlike her.

“Ale, please, it’s not what happened. It wasn’t like that.” There was so much more to this story. It wasn’t all black and white.

“So, she didn’t pay you to date me?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yes or no?” She insisted.

“I love you.” I replied because this was the only absolute truth in this story.

“Yes... or no?”

I cursed inwardly. “Yes,” I breathed shamefully. I wanted to do it all over again.

A small smile played on her lips. “Our relationship has been rigged from the start, we were on borrowed time, it was like playing a losing game at the local fair. I don’t think anything needs to be added.”

I pivoted toward her briskly when I realized she actually giving up on us. “Oh, that’s where you’re wrong, love. There’s so much to be added.” It was not the ideal place and she was not in the ideal frame of mind, but I had to explain to her once I had the chance.

I pressed on. “Contrary to what you might think, I’m not in the market of deceiving people. I’ve never had a date with a woman who didn’t know who I was. You might not believe it, but I’ve never been paid to have intercourse with these women. I was a companion, not your usual escort. Does it mean I’ve never slept with one of them? No. But I only did it because I wanted to, no different to a Tinder date.”

She sighed and I could see in her eyes that she was not going to give in.

“I had no illusions about your past life, and it was never an issue. I might have been a virgin, but I wasn’t clueless, I knew I wasn’t your first.”

She broke eye contact again and I hated that.

I cleared my throat, trying to get past the emotions which made it hard for me to swallow. “In a sense, you were my first... and only. In so many ways you are but we’ll get to that later.” She had to understand how unexpected she had been, how truly I was not ready for her.

“Angela contacted me through the agency box,” I resumed. “I was already thinking about quitting. It wasn’t fun anymore, but her request intrigued me. She was clear there wouldn’t be any physicality involved and that she just wanted you to get the self-confidence you needed. She said you needed to see

yourself just as beautiful as you really are.” I looked up at the grey sky, trying to control my emotions, I couldn’t force forgiveness on her, no matter how much I wanted to. “I didn’t know at the time that you’d end up being the most beautiful woman in the world. I was intrigued, but yet, still not comfortable with the idea.”

“So why did you do it?” she asked, and the pain in her voice cut deep but at least she was engaging with me.

“Because I wanted to find out who this spectacular woman was. I also knew your friend wouldn’t stop with me and, believe it or not, I’m a good one. I’m an architect, I did this in college mostly –” I stopped, unsure how to convey how intrigued I felt. “The way she talked about you... I didn’t want a guy like Wayne to be the one she picked next.” Wayne was one of the most successful escorts in *Date To Be*. I loved him, he was a great friend, but he enjoyed the more salacious aspects of the business and I knew he would have gone to great lengths to corrupt Ale of any innocence free of charge. I almost shivered at the thought.

I looked down, feeling defeated, I grabbed a fistful of sand, letting it trickle through my fingers slowly realizing that by holding on to what we had I lost her, maybe Angela had been right from the start. Maybe I should have told her the truth when I had the chance. “I’ve tried to hold too tight...”

“Are you done?” she asked, so coldly I couldn’t believe she was my Ale.

My emotions were all over the place, how was it that she didn’t seem affected?

I turned to her, not able to conceal how badly I hurt right now, how much I hated myself for losing the only thing that made sense.

Looking at her and not touching her, not kissing her was almost as painful as not seeing her. I looked away. “I told her I’d come to the bar and look. I didn’t promise I’d do it and she said she understood. I saw you both come in and I didn’t understand why you needed a boost of self-confidence. You were beautiful and then, I’m not sure what she said to you, but you laughed. It was an unrestrained laugh and, oh Ale...” My heart ached at the memory of first meeting her, I had the feeling she would be different, I just hadn’t expected her to wreck me that thoroughly that quickly.

“Your laugh, it took my breath away,” I continued. “You probably didn’t notice, but I wasn’t the only man affected by it and I hated the looks you were getting. I needed to know you, and for a minute I forgot it wasn’t real, I just had to know the girl behind that laugh.”

I smiled at the memory. “The more time I spent with you, the more I forgot this was something that started wrong. I thought about it and realized how early I fell in love with you. It was probably that day in the park, that photo we took –

it made me ache for something I never wanted before, a family, and not a generic family, but one with you. The confidence I had felt before was fading, it was all real, the feelings were there, and it was overwhelming.”

I took a deep breath and turned toward her, even if the doubt and pain I could read on her face hurt me. She needed to know I meant every word.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

Damn, she had to go there. “I’m not sure what I should say. I want you back so badly, you can’t even comprehend how much...” I shook my head. I’d thought about this a lot, ever since the barbecue and I was not any clearer on the answer now than I was then. “Hell, I can’t even comprehend how losing you affected me. I just, I just don’t know.”

“Maybe you should try the truth,” she countered. “I know it’s a new concept to you but maybe you should try it.”

I flinched at her words, but kept my eyes locked with hers. She had always been so kind to me, I didn’t know she had it in her, this bitterness, this sharp tongue – but I didn’t deserve less, not after what I did.

“I’d like to say yes; I had every intention to do it... I even promised Angela to tell you the truth on the day of the barbecue, but the more days passed, the more I grew attached and the more I had to lose. I thought I’d tell you once we married, maybe with a kid or two.” I laughed but it lacked humor, I even pictured those kids – I pictured our life.

“Marriage?”

The surprise in her voice made me smile wearily. Wasn’t she as deep into me as I was into her?

“I don’t think you understand,” I replied. “You’re it for me – the corny definition of ‘The One’. From the moment in the park, with your butterfly-painted face, I knew you were the love of my life. I just can’t bear the thought of you hating me, of you hurting because of me, when all I want is to make you happy, as happy as your love made me. I want you to look at me like you used to and not think of me as the worst thing that ever happened to you.” I even had a ring, a beautiful ring which was now in my duffle bag in the trunk of my car.

“You’re not the worst thing that ever happened to me.” She stood up “Honestly, if I’d known then what I know now – I would have done the same things.”

I looked up at her, disbelieving. Did she actually say that? “You... don’t regret us?”

“No, I don’t.” She took a couple of steps backward toward her house, my time was running out. “You want to make it up to me? Ease the hurt?”

I stood up. “Yes – more than anything.” I couldn’t believe she was giving me a way to redeem myself, maybe I could still save this. “Ask, I’ll give you anything in the world,” I extended my hand toward her. *Please Ale take it, please soothe the pain, please let me feel your skin on mine again. I’ll beg, I’ll crawl.* When it came to her I had no shame.

“Let me forget you,” she begged, letting go of her mask for just a minute – showing me a devastation that mirrored mine.

I recoiled at the inflow of pain. “What? I don’t...” my voice cracked, as a lump formed in my throat.

“I want you to leave and never come back. Let me go,” she said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

She turned around and started to walk away. I was frozen there – no, it was not possible, it could not finish like that. Not us. We were the real deal. I had to fight more.

Within seconds I had my arms around her, my face buried in her neck, taking a long breath of the scent I missed so much. I’d slept with the tee-shirt she had left at my place, I smelled it until it stopped smelling like her and started smelling like me.

“Ask me anything but not that please, Ale – don’t ask me to walk away.” I brushed my lip against the shell of her ear. “You’re the love of my life, I-” I let my hand slide down her body but I stopped when I reached her stomach, it was rounder, firmer... unmistakably there, unmistakably...

“Ale?” I asked, almost too scared to hope.

She slapped my hands away before turning around briskly and pointing an accusing finger at me. “Just get in your car.”

I looked down at her stomach, despite the fact that I couldn’t see anything with her loose clothes. I’d known it was a risk every time we had unprotected sex, but I hadn’t worried, maybe subconsciously I’d wanted this family.

“You’re – you’re pregnant?” I asked, both terrified and elated. She was expecting a little piece of us, a proof that it was real, that *we* were real. This was our little creation of love. *Our* child.

That was it now, fate had decided for me, there was no turning back – I would fight for us, I would make her mine again and I would never, ever let her go.