Elise - Holding on to Love

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Summary

Still at the beginning of their relationship, Elise and Oscar try to find a balance between busy schedules, public life, and living on opposite ends of the country; that balance always on a tipping point. Will their relationship last or shatter with each new challenge thrown their way.

Notes

This is the sequel to Elise.
The chapters for this part are quite long [as I've grown to like writing and sometimes I don't seem to be able to stop]
Chapter 1

Elise - Holding on to Love

She woke to a gentle nudge against her shoulder and slowly opened her eyes, blinking. She turned her head and found the flight attendant looking at her. “I’m sorry Mademoiselle, but we’re landing soon. I need you to put your seat into an upright position and buckle your belt, s’il vous plaît,” the young woman instructed with a French accent.

Elise rubbed her eyes and yawned. She had no clue when she had fallen asleep. All she was able to recall was the beginning of the in-flight movie and then… nothing. She shook her head and put her seat up, closing the buckle.

She glanced out the window and saw the lights of a large city in the distance. “How much longer ’til we land?” she asked the flight attendant, her voice dry with sleep.

“Twenty minutes, Mademoiselle,” the flight attendant smiled before continuing down the aisle. Elise couldn’t help but chuckle. No one had called her mademoiselle since her twenties. Maybe the flight attendant was being friendly. After all, it’s part of the job requirement. Regardless, she thought it rather nice to be called a young woman.

Elise inhaled sharply, her mind recalling the last five weeks. She’d been looking forward to this day since the day she’d left Seattle: reuniting with her companion, falling asleep in his arms, talking at odd hours about out of the blue ideas, and … making passionate love whenever the mood struck. A smile grew on her face when she thought about the latter.

“Mari ou petit ami?” a deep voice asked next to her. Elise jerked her head around. For a moment she had forgotten about her seat neighbors, an older couple traveling back home from their 40th anniversary trip to London. The gentleman, who had asked the question, smiled at her, waiting for the reply.

“Je préfère le mot compagnon,” Elise returned the smile, her eyes sparkling with excitement. The couple nodded at each other, chuckling. “Entre deux coeurs qui s’aime, nul besoin de paroles. [Two hearts in love need no words.]” The man’s smile widened.

“Ah. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore,” Elise grinned. The gentleman raised his brow, surprised by the fact that she had recognized the quote and its
author, then laughed. “Not many foreigners know French poetry, eh? Will he pick you up. At the airport?” he continued in English with a thick French accent. “I’m not sure. I hope so. But he might be busy,” Elise sighed, her eyes losing some of that initial sparkle.

“Eh, if he does not, deny him a welcome back kiss once you do see him. Make him wait a little. Then give him a passionate kiss and he’ll never forget to pick you up again,” the woman said this time, smirking. She gave Elise an encouraging nod before leaning her head against her husband. Elise laughed. If only she could tell them why her companion might not have time, but she always told herself she would not reveal that he was an actor. A famous one at that. She never thought she’d date someone in the movie industry in the first place. So Elise just nodded in agreement and went back to memory lane.

She had only met him a little over five weeks ago. Oscar. How she loved saying his name in her mind. Oscar. How it traveled smoothly over her tongue across her lips and into the air when she did whisper it aloud. She was definitely falling for him, even though she'd only known him for a week before she'd left for her business trip. She was falling, and he? He was catching her with every phone call, text message, email, and Skype session they had had once she'd arrived in India four weeks ago. She was sure her next phone bill was going to have four digits before the decimal point, but she didn’t care.

Her colleagues had noted Elise’s absentmindedness as well, especially when talking to the clients for which the whole team had traveled to Sikkim. There'd been a few times when her boss had to snap her out of that foggy state of mind; each time using a brash tone and shaking his head before finally laughing. To Richard, seeing his number one this love-drunk was amusing. That much Elise knew.

He didn’t seem to mind, though. After all, he'd been young once and very much in love. He did, however, insist to at least try while negotiations were in the red phase, and she'd obliged to the best of her abilities to keep her head in the game. The reward to stay focused was the approval from government and locals alike to move ahead with the project, and a three-day party that had left the team with blisters on their feet and new people to call friends.

The four weeks had definitely passed by quickly. The days had been filled with twelve-hour shifts, non-stop traveling between hotel and construction sites, and a few sightseeing trips to notable locations. The four-day journey back had been nearly as eventful, from the long bus ride back to Bagdogra to lost and found luggage along the way. Half the team had contracted last minute illnesses, probably food poisoning of some sort from contaminated water which Elise had highly advised against drinking; and the other half had forgotten one or the other item at the hotels they’d stayed at.

Clean water, medicine, and two turnarounds later, everyone was finally ready to leave only to have the adventures round off with flight delays, missed connections, and sleeping on airport floors. At least no one had forgotten their passport. That would’ve probably been Elise’s breaking point. She would've likely bid everyone a happy farewell before traveling onward because no way on earth would she have missed the opportunity to visit her companion during her week off.

Even now, she was surprised that she had made it back a night before the planned return date. One extra night with Oscar, which she didn’t mind at all. And clearly, neither did he as suggested by his response to her text when she had reached London: a message that was filled with rows upon rows of smiley faces, hearts, and the smirking emoticon.
Elise was exhausted, to say the least, and maybe it was for the best if Oscar didn’t have time to pick her up. She looked disheveled. A huge coffee stain stretched across her shirt, which had happened to be the last clean one in her carry-on when she’d changed at Heathrow Airport. Her hair was a frizzy mess, and she was sure she smelled like she’d been working out at the gym and not taken a shower for a week after. A sight, she was sure, Oscar would be amused by, the smell probably not so much.

An overhead voice called Elise back to the now. It instructed the flight attendants to take their seats for the final descent. Elise gripped on to her armrests. Exploring the world was her favorite thing. Flying, however, was her least favorite mode of transportation. A tingling sensation went up her body when the wheels of the jumbo jet touched the ground. She held her breath and only exhaled when the plane came to a crawling stop on the runway.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Montreal. To help you set your watches, the local time is 18:43 hrs or 6:43 p.m. It is Sunday, May 17. The skies are clear and temperature measurements show 14°C or 57°F. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us. If you have a connecting flight, please be aware that you still need to go through passport control and customs. For those of you who call Montreal your final destination, we hope you enjoy your stay in this beautiful city. Please remain seated and keep your cell phones off until we reach the gate. Ensure to check all pockets and overhead compartments before your departure. Thank you and until next time,” the captain’s voice crackled through the speakers. He repeated the same message in French while the plane crawled towards the gate.

Elise looked through the pocket in the seat in front of her, retrieving her phone while waiting for the seatbelt light to turn off. When it finally did, she helped her seat neighbors get their stuff from the overhead storage before getting her own, and then sat back down, holding on to her carry-on and purse. She turned on her cell and waited. A few seconds later, turquoise highlighted messages flashed across the screen.

“I’m sorry, mi Linda. I won’t be able to pick you up. This scene took a lot longer than anticipated. Sending James to the airport. Let him know what gate you’ll be at. Muchos besos, Oscar. xoxoxo,” the first text message read. Elise sighed. She had had a feeling he might not have time. She looked down on herself, sniffed her shirt, and agreed with her earlier notion that it was for the best that he not see her in this disastrous manner.

“I’m at the airport. Baggage claim. Let me know which one you’ll be at. J.” her brother-in-law had texted. At least it wasn’t some stranger picking her up. In fact, Elise was glad it was a familiar face she’d see first. Other than Oscar, James had been her lifeline to everything that had been going on. He had kept her up to date with pictures of Oscar attending interviews and independent movie premieres. That is all the way up to the day Oscar had started shooting for X-Men, sometime during the second week of May. She wondered what Oscar looked like now because in the last pictures she’d received from either, James and Oscar, her companion had grown out his stubble to a short beard and his curls had seemed fuller than ever.

Elise snapped back to the present and continued reading her texts. “Welcome home, Sis. Chloé misses you,” her sister had messaged; a picture of her laughing niece in purple attire attached. Elise chuckled. Maybe Berenjena Pequeñita wasn’t such a bad nickname after all. She quickly texted her sister back, letting her know she’d arrived safe and sound.

“So did you and Oscar have sexy times yet, or what? I mean a month without. I want all the details!” Mikki’s message went straight to the point. No shame whatsoever.

“Literally just landed,” Elise texted back.
“Oh well, then all the details tomorrow!” Mikki replied, the devil emoticon attached.
“I don’t know if I’ll have enough energy!” Elise wisecracked.
“Oh my god. In that case, definitely ALL THE DETAILS!!!”

Elise shook her head laughing. “You first this time!” she countered.
“All I will say for now is pillow fort and Superman costume.”
“Oh dear god? What the fuck are you getting that poor man into?” Elise laughed, again.
“Who says it was my idea?” Mikki signed that text with a raised brow emoticon.
“Well, did he at least fill out the suit?”
All Mikki texted back was the aubergine (eggplant) emoticon.
Elise buried her face in her hand, laughing. “I’ll chat later, they’re about to open the doors,” she
replied, to which Mikki returned a thumbs up.

Elise looked around and saw people fidgeting and inching forward into the aisles. “Au revoir,” the
couple that had sat next to her said. She nodded a goodbye back and dreamily gazed after them,
wondering if she’d ever reach that stage in her life. Married for a long time and still very much in
love, or at least to be with someone for as long as they have. She let out a sigh, placed her carry-on
and purse in the empty seat next to her, and put on her shoes at last.

Slowly, one by one, people started clearing the plane. Elise waited until almost everyone had left.
It was the first time in four days that she didn’t have to rush to catch a connecting flight, so she
took her time. She grabbed her things and made her way to passport control, then customs, and
lastly baggage claim. James was already waiting for her, waving her way when he saw her. Elise
quickly walked up to him and hugged him. It was nice to see a familiar face other than her
colleagues'.

“You need a shower,” he scrunched his nose, laughing when he saw Elise’s annoyed stare. “I’m
ejoking,” he retracted with half-raised hands.
“No, you’re right. I do. I’m just tired I guess,” Elise shrugged. She walked to the baggage carousel
and waited for her suitcase.

James followed and stood beside her, glancing down on her. She had changed a bit. Her hair was a
little longer, her face a little more weathered, her eyes tired but happy. She also looked quite a bit
thinner, but he refrained from bringing it up. He just side-hugged Elise, kissing her on top of her
hair. The older couple, who'd sat next to her on the plane, stood across the carousel and winked at
her, and Elise laughed.

“What’s that about?” James asked, scratching his forehead.
“I think they think you’re my companion,” Elise grinned.
“Oh, no. No no no!!!” James took three steps to the left and shook his head at the older couple.
“Il est mon beau-frère,” Elise called out, and the couple nodded back, still giggling.
“I don’t think they believe us,” James shook his head.
“Eh, just let em walk away with the illusion I guess,” Elise shrugged as she watched the couple
stroll to the exit.

A short silence followed, then she side-eyed James. “So how is my sister coping with you being
gone?”
“Not too bad. Mom is helping while I’m here,” James disclosed.
“Hmmm. That’s good,” Elise’s mouth twisted into a half-smile. Elise and her mother-in-law were
still on shaky ground but at least they had opened up conversation this past month. To this day, it
was shocking that Sandra had reached out first, but Elise took this step forward, if somewhat
reluctantly. Elise sighed and James took notice.
“I heard you and mom are emailing each other,” he stated. Of course, he’d know. There were no secrets in his family.
“Of course, he’d know. No secrets in his family.”
“Of course. We are. Just hellos and how are yous for now,” Elise nodded, looking up at James. He returned her reply with an approving smile, then waited quietly alongside her for her suitcase.

Elise didn’t talk much on the way to Oscar’s temporary place. She gazed out the window and took in the city’s scenery instead. She’d been to Montreal a few times before but never for vacation. She’d finally have some time to check out the many things she’d always wanted to see, from finding hidden bookstores to going to museums, maybe buy a thing or two. Or she could try to catch up on sleep. Not that the journey back had lacked that, but it had been more or less a string of interrupted REM cycles, a type of exhaustion that was starting to catch up with her by the time they arrived at an apartment complex on Lorne Crescent, north-east of Mount Royal Park, some thirty minutes later.

Elise yawned and looked up a multi-story brick-front. “I thought he was staying at a hotel,” she pointed out when she saw the building.

“Too many tourists. This is more private for them. Plus this is actually less expensive, and pretty close the soundstages,” James explained. He opened the door for her then heaved her suitcases from the trunk.

Elise looked around to get her bearings. The apartment complex seemed in a decent part of town, not far from the city’s center. A perfect location to get anywhere and everywhere on foot. “Oscar’s studio is almost all the way at the top. They rented out pretty much the entire floor for the cast,” James added before taking lead to the lobby.

Once inside, they were greeted by a security guard.


Dominic nodded and shook Elise’s hand then handed her a key card. “Américain?” he asked, his face looking a little grumpy.


Dominic’s expression changed to a wide smile. In a chivalrous move, he recaptured Elise's hand and placed a short kiss on the back, and she snickered. He explained how and where to use the key card along with some other rules of the apartment complex, and she nodded in understanding.

“Merci beaucoup.” Elise snickered again when Dominic left another kiss on her hand, then she finally made her way to the elevator where James was waiting.

They went up to the ninth floor, took a right, and walked all the way down the hallway, stopping in front of a black walnut door bearing the number 937 in dull silver. James unlocked the door then handed the key to Elise.

“You’re not coming in?”

“No can do. I have to get back to my hotel and start packing. Going home tomorrow,” James explained.

“Oh? Ok. I thought you were staying until Oscar is finished filming his parts,” Elise was surprised. She always assumed James stayed around.

“I have other people under my contract that need me. He doesn’t need me to babysit him twenty-four seven. Plus there’s an on-set P.A. for the cast, and my P.R. will stay here as well.”

James looked down at Elise who seemed worried. Other than Oscar she didn’t know anyone in town; only the few work-related acquaintances she had made while she’d been here on business, and even so, she never really stayed in contact past finalization of contracts. James could read Elise pretty well. After all, he had known her over two-thirds of his life. “You’ll
be fine. Stay safe ok. Cause if you don’t, you know your sister, aka my wife, will kick my ass,” James laughed.
Elise returned his deep laugh with a chuckle. The idea of her sister kicking James' ass was a rather humorous image. Christine, despite being taller than Elise, was quite a bit thinner, not to mention a lot quieter, and James, at six foot tall, towered over them both.

For a moment, after hearing James laugh, Elise’s mind drifted. It was as though Joe was standing in front of her right then. The brothers shared so many things. Looks, mannerisms, intonation... Sometimes, it was difficult to look past her memories of Joe. She missed him. And having James in her life the way he was... It hurt.

Elise wasn’t jealous. She was glad her sister was happy, but from time to time it hurt to see someone so similar to her first love with someone close to her. She shook her head, pulling herself out of her melancholic state. “Thank you,” she whispered and gave James a quick hug goodbye then rolled her luggage into the small studio.

“Oh and by the way: your phone bill has been paid,” James blurted out, grinning, before Elise had had a chance to close the door all the way.
“Ohhmmm, Oscar?” James grimaced, his voice reaching a never before heard high pitch.
“Why?” Elise furrowed her brows, her expression between anger and confusion.
“I may have let it slip that those international calls are expensive. Look… Uhhmmm… just….uh… He means well. And he was feeling guilty that he has cost you quite some money,” James disclosed, looking to the floor.
“Oh mein Gott! Aber mal ehrlich...” Elise threw her hands in the air. She shook her head. She had trouble accepting gifts as is, and Oscar knew this full well. And yet, he once again had taken it upon himself to help her out without being asked.
“Don’t be mad at him. Please? I would’ve done the same.” James searched for Elise’s eyes. She huffed furiously, arms crossed at the chest, foot tapping.
“Please?” James reiterated.
“I’ll try,” she finally conceded when she saw James waiting for her reply.
“Good. Because you know, that man, he’s got the hots for you,” James laughed throwing his whole body into it.

Elise punched her brother-in-law in the arm, then gave him a final hug goodbye. She closed the door, took a deep breath in and finally walked into Oscar’s place. She looked around. The studio wasn’t big, but the sleek, dark-walnut furniture and contrasting beech-wood floors and off-white walls made it look a lot bigger than it was. The entrance opened into the living and kitchen area. To the left was a door and a little further down from that an open arch that led to the bedroom.

The living area was big enough for a large two-seat sofa, a sofa chair, an oval coffee table, a couple of side tables, and a decently sized entertainment system with a flat screen TV mounted to the wall. A large area rug in shades of the living room tied the place together. The kitchen corner was furnished with sleek cabinets, stainless steel appliances, and a small table with two chairs, just big enough for a couple to have breakfast in the morning. Oscar had definitely cleaned up for her as there weren’t any signs of stray items laying around.

Elise rolled her luggage into the bedroom, looking around. The room held a queen sized bed in one corner, a nightstand next to it, and another, smaller, TV on top of a dark walnut dresser opposite the end of the bed. She opened the closet to the right of the bed to see if Oscar had made space. A big smile grew on her face. A turquoise note was hanging loosely from a few empty hangers.
“Make yourself at home.
Washer and dryer are in the bathroom if you need to use them.
I emptied out a drawer for you as well.
See you soon, mi Linda.
Muchos besos,
Oscar
*row of smiley faces*”

Elise giggled. Oscar’s drawing skills were improving.

She glanced at her watch. It was shortly after 8 p.m. Elise quickly sorted through her clothes as almost all of them needed washing. She carried the first load along with her hygiene bag to the bathroom, but as soon as she opened the door she dropped everything to the floor, gaping at the scene in front of her.

The bathroom was small with white tiles on the walls and black sheetrock tiles on the floor. There was only enough space for the tub, the toilet, a single sink set into a cabinet, and set-in-wall washer and dryer combo. Despite the minuscule size, Oscar had somehow managed to have several bouquets of differently sized sunflowers stand in vases throughout the room without using up too much space. On the tub was a tray displaying Elise’s favorite soap, shampoo, and bath-oils along with a new shower pouf. Elise was scanning from one bouquet to another when a second note caught her eye.

“*row of smiley faces*”

Elise laughed. She knew he’d never let that go. She quickly gathered up her clothes and threw them in the washer to start the first load, then got her phone, snapped a picture, and sent it in a text to Oscar.

“*row of smiley faces*”

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“I figured you might need a bath after your flights.
Sorry that your ‘buzzing friends’ couldn’t join you this time.
I’ll make up for it when I get back.
Muchos besos,
Oscar
*a devilish smiley face drawn at the bottom*”

Elise laughed. She knew he’d never let that go. She quickly gathered up her clothes and threw them in the washer to start the first load, then got her phone, snapped a picture, and sent it in a text to Oscar.

“*row of smiley faces*”

“Hey, mi Linda. Glad to read that. I should be back in a couple of hours. Taking off prosthetics now.”

Elise sent a smiley face back.

She started the water, and when the tub was filled, she slowly submerged into the lavender-smelling topped-with-bubbles liquid. She let out a deep sigh. After four days of non-stop travel, the hot bath felt like heaven. Usually, she liked to linger in warm heavenly bliss, but she hadn’t gone through certain routines since she had left for India, and now was the time to shave, trim, and soften whatever needed shaving, trimming, and softening. Half an hour later, she stood in the kitchen, dressed in blue silk panties and one of Oscar’s shirts; her legs smooth, her feet soft, and other parts neatly trimmed.

She snooped around, opening doors to see what was stored inside. The pantry was filled with various snacks. A bag of Cheetos made her laugh. The last time she’d seen Oscar eat those, he ate them out of the bag with chopsticks. His claim was to avoid spicy crumbs in case he had to pick up Chloé; Elise’s now seven-month-old niece.

Elise didn’t realize how hungry she was until she had opened the pantry. She made her way to the fridge, opened the large contraption, and found another note waiting for her.
“Strawberries for my strawberry.
You carnivore!
Xoxo Oscar
*drawings of scared strawberries running away from a stick figure*”

Elise laughed. Maybe her earlier observation of improved drawing skills was misplaced. She took the strawberries from the fridge and walked over to the sofa, placing the strawberries on top of the coffee table. She looked around and saw Oscar’s guitar leaning on the wall behind the sofa. She walked over and gently strummed the strings before turning her attention to the floor-length windows, realizing that one was a door that led to a small balcony.

She opened the door and stepped out. It was a little chilly, but she didn’t mind. She looked around, smiling at the view in front of her. The apartment overlooked the skyline of Montreal. In the distance, Elise saw a few small cafés bustling with last-minute customers. A happy couple here or there walked back to wherever it was they were heading to. Oscar hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said that he loved it here.

Elise took a deep breath in then paced back into the studio, plopping down on the sofa and wrapping herself into the blanket that was hanging over the armrest. She turned on the TV, mindlessly watching whatever was on, nibbling on strawberries during commercial breaks. Her mind slowly drifted, the exhaustion of the last four days completely overwhelming her, she fell asleep.

A couple of hours later, Oscar was back at his place, glancing down on a snoozing Elise. She looked so adorable wrapped up in the blanket with her strawberry blond hair sticking out that he didn’t want to wake her just yet. He opted to take a shower to scrub away the remaining prosthetic glue first. When he was finished, he found Elise still snoozing on the sofa. He knelt down next to her, lightly stroking her shoulder. Elise inhaled sharply; fluttering her eyes open, she saw Oscar smiling at her.

“Hi,” he said softly.
“Hi,” Elise returned his smile sleepy-eyed and yawning.
“Long trip, huh?” his voice was soothing to her ears. Elise inhaled again before slowly sitting up. She stretched her arms, looking up at Oscar who was now standing in front of her. She let her eyes travel up and down his body. He only wore black boxer briefs. His abs and chest were more defined. He had shaved off his beard and had had a haircut: short on the sides and long curls on the top. A suave undercut and Elise already loved it.

“Come here.” He reached out to Elise, pulling her up to himself and giving her a lasting kiss. “I missed you,” he whispered into her ear before nuzzling her neck, taking in her scent as he hugged her tightly.
“I missed you, too.” Elise ran her hands over his curls before sinking her face into his shoulder. He smelled like a forest after some rain. Just like she remembered. “Love the cut,” she grinned.
“Yeah? It’s different huh?” Oscar stepped back, running his hands through his hair. He looked over Elise, and like James, he noticed her thinner frame. Elise looked at least fifteen pounds lighter, making her curves less prominent.

“Sweetie, did you eat anything while over there?” he asked with a raised brow.
“The effects of a business trip like this.” She spun around, putting her hand on her hip, tilting her head when she came to a stop. “You don’t like it?” she asked, brow raised and fingers tapping against her hip.
“If I say I do, you’ll think you weighed too much before. If I say I don’t, you’ll be offended?” he asked with an awkward-cautious stare.
“Hmmm. Well, I feel great,” Elise smiled confidently. “Not that I didn’t before,” she quickly added when she saw Oscar’s concerned expression.

“Then that’s all that matters.” Oscar scrunched his nose. “But just so you know, I love you no matter what,” he added, caressing her face. “And please don’t ever lose weight for me, promise?” he queried.

“Promise,” Elise smiled, reaching for the last strawberry on top of the coffee table.

Oscar chuckled. Elise did notice him looking as tired as she still felt. She snuck a peek at her watch, the hands displaying 11 p.m.

“What time do you need to go back,” she asked.

“Five,” he sighed.

“Off to bed then,” Elise commanded.

“Yes ma'am,” Oscar chuckled, his eyes tired. He leaned in for a kiss but Elise moved backward.

“Awe,” Oscar frowned.

“No! You’re tired. And you need to be up in less than 6 hours. Bedtime, now!” She pointed towards the arch leading to the bedroom.

Oscar huffed, then dragged his tired self towards his bed. He crawled under the blanket, patting the vacant spot next to him when he saw Elise waiting under the arch. She didn’t have to be asked twice, still, she restrained her excitement to be back in his presence. She knew he’d been having long days since filming had started and didn’t want him yawning through his takes. She took off the shirt and snuggled up next to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his chest.

“Tell me about your journey,” he requested, his voice sleepier than before.

“You need to sleep. We can talk tomorrow,” Elise replied, gently drawing small circles on his chest.

“But I missed you,” he whispered, his eyes closed.

“I missed you, too… Sleep,” Elise played with his curls.

“I love you,” he breathed.

“Te amo,” Elise closed her eyes listening to Oscar’s steady breathing and heartbeat. How good it felt to be back in his arms. Slowly, she dozed off, dreams carrying her away into faraway lands.

“Are you awake?” she heard Oscar’s voice. It sounded dull and distant. She felt soft kisses down her neck to her collarbone. She couldn’t tell if she was sleeping or if she was awake, so she let herself drift back into the dream that was clinging on to her mind. “Mi Linda?” she heard Oscar’s voice again, clearer this time. She felt his lips brushing over her stomach. “Wake up,” his voice resonated off her skin, his tongue traveling over her stomach back up to her neck. “Wake up,” he whispered into her ear as he placed a soft kiss behind her lobe.

With her eyes closed, her hands searched for his curls and when she found them, she lightly tugged on them. “I’m awake,” she smiled. She could feel one of Oscar’s hands exploring her body, caressing her from her shoulders to her breasts, down her stomach to in between her legs. Oscar slipped his hand underneath the delicate silk of her panties and gently started playing with her folds, ever so often sliding one finger in and then out.

Elise let out a gasp, opening her eyes. Oscar was on his side next to her, kissing her shoulder. When he caught her gaze he smiled at her then leaned in for a kiss while his hand continued massaging her in her most sensitive area. Elise loved this tenderness. She never wanted it to end. She pulled Oscar on top of herself and wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him in for lasting French kisses while taking off his briefs. When she let go, Oscar sat up, pulled off her panties, then dropped his body back on top of her, kissing her neck as he slowly pushed inside of her.
Soft, gentle movements and tender kisses were all either of them wanted right then. Oscar brushed his lips so gingerly against Elise’s skin that she gasped every time he stopped. He knew exactly how to make her body tingle with the slightest touch. He kept his movement steady, exploring her breasts with soft kisses, blowing gently against her nipples each time he got close to them. It was hypnotizing to hear his soft moans; electrifying to hear the sound his lips made when he kissed her skin.

Oscar could feel Elise’s heart rate jump. He saw her breaths shorten. He guided his hand back to in between her legs and massaged her clit as he continued to gently thrust into her, a little faster each time he pushed back in. Elise breathed an oh my god into Oscar’s shoulder. Feeling his fingers circling her clit, his cock deep within her, his lips brushing against her neck, she could feel the orgasm building in her core.

“Are you close?” Oscar whispered. Elise managed to breathe a yes. Oscar wrapped his arms tightly around her, trapping her arms between their bodies. He started moving faster, feeling her hips roll into him. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist, then she felt her core snap. Oscar flexed his arms around her; he moved faster, deeper, harder, kissing Elise’s shoulder. She could feel that tingling sensation build up again at lightning speed, her muscles aching as she was close to climaxing a second time. She bit into Oscar’s arm, moaning onto his skin. He could feel her body tensing up, her insides tightening around him. Just a couple more thrusts and he got there, too. He let out a gravelly moan, releasing into her, his body dropping exhausted on top of her.

“Can you wake me up like this every day?” Elise breathed, wheezing under Oscar’s weight. He laughed onto her skin, kissing her gently before pulling out of her and dropping on his side. “Sure,” he grinned sheepishly.


Elise buried her face inside her palms, laughing, then shaking her head.

“I’m teasing of course,” Oscar laughed, kissing her shoulder. He gingerly let his fingertips wander across her naked body, circling his favorite spots to kiss her. “I really missed you,” he repeated.

“Are you sure you didn’t just miss the sex?” Elise raised her brow, smirking at her companion. “No! I mean, yes and no. I missed making love to you,” he corrected her, his expression offended. “Now, I’m just teasing,” Elise smiled. “I know you missed me, handsome. And I missed you, you have no idea,” she continued. “I think I wore out your cardigan,” she stated.

Oscar smiled at the image of Elise wrapped in his cardigan. He knew exactly how much she’d missed him. She had called, texted, emailed, or Skyped with him almost every day while she’d been in India, sending him pictures of her in front of interesting buildings, from markets, and hidden bookstores.

“Tell me about your trip back,” he requested. He hadn’t forgotten. He wanted to hear it all, mostly to hear her voice, especially now that she was right next to him. “You don’t want to know,” she laughed.

“I do,” he nudged on. “Well, on the day we left, half the crew came down with stomach illnesses. It wasn’t pretty,” she giggled.

Oscar listened intently, laughing when she did, raising his brow at some of the more disgusting details. Before they knew it, it was 4:30 in the morning and Oscar had to get up to get ready for the
“Will you come visit me on set today?” he asked carefully while he was getting dressed. He knew Elise was a little apprehensive about interfering with his work.

“I rather spend the day settling in. Finish my laundry. Maybe explore the area close by, if you don’t mind,” she admitted, watching Oscar from the bed as he pulled on his pants.

“Awe alright,” Oscar frowned. He wanted Elise around. At the same time, he was glad that she didn’t push to tag along. Elise just wasn’t that type of woman. Still, he wanted her around so he could steal a kiss or two between takes.

“I’ll come by the set tomorrow if that’s ok,” Elise offered after she saw Oscar’s frown.

His face instantly lit up. “Great,” he beamed from ear to ear. “The cast is looking forward to meeting you,” he smiled.

“Oh boy, what did you tell them?” Elise asked, a little scared that he may have made her into this perfect being in front of his co-stars. Not that Elise hadn’t done the same about him.

“Not much,” he fibbed. “I have to get going,” he sighed, disappointed. “Try to get some more sleep, ok? I should be back around eight today,” he added, his eyes a little sad.

“Ok,” Elise got up, and, in her birthday suit, pulled him in for a goodbye kiss.

“Oh god, woman! If I wasn’t already running late...” he glanced down at Elise’s naked body, seductively biting his lips.

“Hmmmm, I know,” Elise confidently walked off to the bathroom, slapping her own ass before she turned the corner, leaving a gaping Oscar standing there.

“GO TO WORK!” she yelled.

“Alright. Alright! I’m leaving.” He shook his head, exhaling sharply, his mind still in the gutter.

“See you later, sexy,” he called out before he closed the door.

“Sexy huh?” a male voice behind him asked.

Oscar spun around to find Michael Fassbender was waiting for him at his door. “Shut up,” Oscar turned red.

“I take it, your girlfriend is here,” Michael looked over his shoulder to Oscar’s studio door on their way to the elevator.

“Yes,” Oscar turned even redder.

“And?” Michael egged on.

“You know, I don’t kiss and tell,” Oscar shook his head before getting into the elevator.

Elise was wide awake after her sensual morning. She was also still adjusting to the time change. After all, the State of Sikkim was nine and a half hours ahead of Montreal. She decided to take a shower then finished her laundry while watching some news. She gathered up the sunflower bouquets and displayed them by the living room windows, smiling at the fact that Oscar had remembered her favorite flower. Around eight, she felt her phone vibrate in the pocket of her sports pants. She retrieved her phone and saw a new turquoise highlighted message.

“I forgot to tell you that there is a bakery right around the corner. They make the best pastries. There’s some cash in the nightstand if you haven’t had time to exchange money. I’ll call you later.” Oscar had messaged. “PS: I love you, mi Linda,” he added in a second message shortly after.

“Te amo,” Elise replied with blushing smiley faces.

She changed into what she dubbed street clothes and got her purse and some of the cash from the nightstand then made her way downstairs where a different security guard greeted her. When she got to the entrance of the apartment complex, she looked around and decided to follow her nose. The scent of fresh baked goods crawling into her nostrils and guiding her, she quickly discovered the small bakery Oscar had mentioned. Since the weather was nice, she bought a couple of strawberry pastries and a coffee to go and decided to explore the area around the complex.
Just as she figured the night before, she found that the place wasn’t too far from the city’s busy center. And like most big cities, Monday seemed to be the busiest day with people walking past her left and right, hurrying to their jobs or dropping off children at schools nearby. Elise walked a couple of miles towards the center, taking in the architecture of the buildings before looping back around, this time walking north and right next to Mount Royal Park. She noticed that the area seemed to be busy with a lot of young, out of high school people. She soon discovered that McGill University’s campus was spread out over several bigger and smaller buildings near where Oscar was staying.

She continued down Rue University to take in the architecture when someone bumped into her, nearly knocking her off her feet.

“Excusez-moi,” a tall, dark-haired man said; blushing when he realized he was holding on to Elise. In the haste of the moment, he somehow had managed to prevent her from falling by grabbing her waist.

“Pas de problème.” Elise quickly stood up, pushing the stranger back a few inches, and straightening out her clothes.

“Parlez-vous anglais?” the man asked, his brows furrowed in concern.

“Yes, I do.” Elise spun around to see if she had dropped anything.

“Oh thank god. Could you tell me where to find the McConnell Engineering building?” the man asked with a grateful expression on his face.

“Sorry, no. I’m not actually from here,” Elise explained.

“Oh, you’re not a student?” the stranger glanced once over Elise, raising his brow. Elise started laughing so hard she actually snorted.

“What’s so funny?” the stranger asked, puzzled.

“How old do you think I am?” she raised her brow trying to oppress another laugh.

“Well you’re not old enough to be a professor, that’s for sure,” the man chuckled awkwardly.

“Oh, really?” Elise replied, putting her hand to her hip with an attitude.

“I’m messing with you,” Elise laughed again.

She stopped one of the young people that was just about to pass the odd pair, asking for directions in perfect French. “She said it’s not far from here. It might be easier if I just showed you,” she instructed and started walking towards the building. The stranger, stunned by Elise’s easy going nature, followed.

“Thank you,” he wheezed, trying to keep up with Elise’s fast pace. “So, where are you from?” he queried.

“Why do you ask?” Elise countered.

“Just making small talk,” he explained.

“Hmmmm, Seattle,” she revealed with some hesitation. “And you?”

“New York,” he disclosed.

Elise should’ve known. His accent sounded quite the part. “And you study or teach here?” she asked.

“I’m teaching as a guest lecturer,” he replied.

“Really? You don’t look old enough to be a professor,” she repeated his words back to him, smirking when she saw his ears turn fire red. “Never judge a book by its cover,” Elise said sternly, stopping in front of a rectangular building with a large grey block center.

“Hmmmm,” the stranger hummed, stretching out his hand towards Elise. She shook it with her usual confident handshake.

“Leon,” he said.
“What?” Elise looked confused. “My name. It’s Leon,” he held on to her hand a little longer than Elise found comfortable. It dawned on her that he maybe thought that there was a spark which was nonexistent to her. “Uhm, Elise,” she revealed, freeing her hand from his grasp. “So same place tomorrow? Without the falling. I’ll bring coffee,” Leon asked. “Oh. What? No. I’m sorry. I’m here with someone. Just the building,” she chuckled awkwardly turning on her heel to walk back to Oscar’s place. Leon stood there perplexed for a second, then ran after her.

“I’m sorry. I… Could you please slow down?” he called after her. Elise stopped dead in her tracks. Her fist clenched to her side. Him following her wasn’t her idea of romantic. She turned around, ready to throw a punch should he step too close. Leon sensed the tension and stopped a few feet in front of her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you or sound creepy. I understand. I… I promise it’s just a thank you coffee. Nothing more! I swear,” he looked at Elise who had her arms crossed in defensive mode.

“I don’t know if I’ll have time. Have a lot planned.” she tapped her fingers on top of her arm. “I tell you what. I’ll buy two coffees, and…” Leon looked at his watch. “I’ll wait for you where I bumped into you until one o’clock. If you don’t show, that’s ok. If you do, I’ll give you the thank you coffee and we can talk about boring stuff like the weather,” he waited. Elise nodded. “That’s not a yes,” she clarified. “So it’s a no?” Leon called after her when she started walking. “I didn’t say that either,” she yelled back. “So it’s a maybe?” Leon shouted back. Elise waved her hand without looking back, leaving a confused Leon behind.

When she arrived back at Oscar’s place a few minutes later, the jet lag set in. It was almost 11 p.m. in Sikkim. Elise tried her best to stay awake, but as soon as she sat down on the sofa, she was out. She woke up a few hours later to her ringing cell. Without looking she answered.


“Can I ask you something,” Elise sighed. “Spit it out,” Mikki almost immediately demanded. “If a guy approached you, like just talking, offering a cup of coffee, while you’re with someone, would you accept?” Elise stammered through the question. “Does he know you have a guy?” Mikki inquired.
“Yes. I told him I’m here with someone,” Elise disclosed.
“But did you say Oscar is your boyfriend or companion or whatever word you use?” Mikki narrowed down.
“I don’t think I did,” Elise tried to recall.
“Then no. But if you do, make it clear cut from the start. Tell him right away you’re exclusive with someone, so he doesn’t think you’re leading him on,” Mikki suggested.
“I wasn’t anyways,” Elise sounded insulted.
“I know. I know you’d never lead on, but you know how it is. Mixed signals and all, and then things get kind of foggy,” Mikki explained.
“Thank you,” Elise sighed.

“So is he cute?” Mikki quickly asked.
“What?” Elise was stunned.
“Come on girl. You’ve got a man, but you’re not dead! Was. He. Cute?” Mikki repeated, drawing out each word from the question.
“Yes. Kind of. I didn’t really pay attention,” Elise fibbed. She did think Leon was cute, but her heart was Oscar’s.
“Liar. That cute huh? It might be best if you don’t take him up on his offer,” Mikki was right on point.
“Should I tell Oscar?” Elise asked.
“No. Hmmm. Wait. I don’t know. Maybe tell him someone approached you but don’t tell him about the coffee thing?” her friend half stated, half asked.
“Hmmm. I’ll think about it,” Elise mumbled.

“I have to run. David is taking me to see a movie. And I plan on wearing my favorite coat,” Mikki said.
“To the movies?” Elise was now the curious one.
“Yes, and only my coat,” Mikki’s voice was devious.
“Do you guys ever have a day of rest?” Elise laughed.
“Chat later, ok? Luv you,” Mikki replied, avoiding to answer the question directly.
“Luv you, too,” Elise hung up the phone, laughing as she ran her hands across her face. Her friend Mikki was something else.

She was definitely right about how to approach the whole Leon issue. Elise decided she’d tell Oscar about the stranger but not the offer for a cup of coffee.
She looked around the studio. It was already six in the evening. A couple more hours until Oscar was supposed to come back.
“Do you want me to pick up dinner?” she texted Oscar.
“I’ll pick something up, mi Linda,” he replied. “I’ll be home around 7. We finished a little earlier than anticipated. Taking off prosthetics now. * smiley faces attached*” he added in a second message.
“Can’t wait,” Elise replied, adding a string of happy emoticons to her message.

Oscar kept his word and was back an hour later, pizza in one hand and wine in the other, dressed in dark pants, a bluish striped sweater, and his trademark leather jacket, and boots. “I know this isn’t exactly a romantic dinner, but the pizza from this place is delicious,” he smiled when he saw Elise’s confused face about the combination. And he was right. The pizza was one of the best she’d ever tasted. Almost as great as the ones she used to get in Italy. Wine was a great choice for a drink in this case.

“So how was your day?” Oscar asked after he’d finished his first slice.
“Pretty good. I checked out downtown. Found a few bookstores I want to check out. Met someone
peculiar,” she disclosed.  
“Oh? Peculiar how?” Oscar raised his brow. 
“Just some random guy that bumped into me,” Elise revealed, cautious to leave out the coffee detail.  
“Some random guy, huh?” Oscar scrunched his nose.  
“Yeah. He was lost. Asked me if I knew where the engineering building was. We talked when I showed him the way,” Elise said.  
“And? Did he give you his number?” Oscar queried.  
“No. But he did give me his name,” she stopped eating. She could see Oscar tensing up, staring at her with questioning eyes. “He… he offered to bring me a cup of coffee as a thank you for helping him find the place,” she tacked on quickly. Why did she do that? She wasn’t going to tell him that little detail.  
“And? Did you accept?” Oscar crossed his arms and shifted in his chair.  
“No. But I didn’t say no either. I did tell him I’m here with someone,” her defenses went up, her voice elevated slightly, annoyed by Oscar’s pose. Like she had done something wrong.  
“I didn’t mean it that way, Sweetie. I’m just worried because you know there are a few strange people out there,” Oscar defended.  
“I’m very well aware of that. I did have self-defense training after Frank,” she sounded irritated.  
“Sweetie. I want you to go out and meet people, but you know how it is with crossed signals, and people taking things the wrong way, and then getting upset and doing stupid shit,” his pose softened.  
“Funny, Mikki said something similar,” Elise gabbed.  
“You told her before me?” Oscar was taken aback.  
“She’s my best friend. Plus she called earlier,” Elise felt even tenser. She took a deep breath in. “I hate this. I don’t want to argue about something trivial. He gave me his name, asked if I wanted to have a cup of coffee tomorrow, as a thank you for showing him to the right building. I didn’t lead him on, and I DID let him know I’m here with someone” she crossed her arms tightly. This was what Frank had done to her. She always felt the need to have to explain herself, defending her actions, and scared of the repercussions. And her family responded to Frank abusing her by hovering over her like she was a toddler that needed protecting at every corner, crossing, and stoplight.  
Oscar took a deep breath in. “Sweetie, I didn’t insinuate that you were leading him on.” He got up and walked over to her and caressed her arm.  
“I know. I just. I don’t know why this is getting to me,” she fibbed. She knew exactly why.  
“Yes you do,” Oscar searched for her eyes with his. He waited. And waited.  
“I guess,” she looked up at Oscar. “Frank. He was always so jealous. And he always got so upset and it was worse when he found out through some other source. I just. I want us to be honest with each other. I want to be able to tell you things without being scared that you get angry or jealous. And it sucks because I know you’d never be like that. Maybe a little jealous. But never like Frank. Never. And it’s so difficult to let go of that. And I don’t want you to worry about me. My family is already doing this for me. I mean, I know why, and I appreciate the concern, but I’m a grown woman,” she exhaled sharply.  
“Sweetie. Mi Linda. I want the same thing. The honesty. I want that. I’ll get a little jealous, yes. It’s human. I’ve got some trust issues, you know that. The whole thing with Lorraine. It kind of broke me, you know,” he disclosed. “And I am going to be worried. I know you can handle yourself, but it doesn’t mean I won’t be worried when you walk around alone in a big city like this.” Oscar ran his hands through his curls, sighing. “I don’t want to argue either.” He lifted Elise’s face by her chin, leaning in for a kiss. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that people are
enthralled by you,” he smiled softly when his lips left hers.  
“Enthralled, huh?” Elise uncrossed her arms.  
“Yeah, you know, drawn to you,” Oscar kissed her eyebrows.  
“Hmmm hmmmm,” Elise hummed.  
“Because you’re smart,” he kissed her left eyelid. “And beautiful,” he kissed her right eyelid. “And funny,” he kissed her left cheek. “And honest,” he kissed her right cheek. “And you’re smart,” he kissed her nose.  
“You already said that,” Elise grinned.  
“I know, but I have to make sure you know that,” he kissed her upper lip. “And I have to make sure you believe that,” he kissed her lower lip then cradled her face, pulling her up for an endearing kiss. 

Elise gasped when he pulled away.  
“I want to try something,” he whispered in her ear.  
“Hmmm what?” Elise asked, a little bewildered at his statement.  
“Wait here,” he instructed. She did as told, watching him disappear into the bedroom.

A few seconds later Oscar reappeared with a black silk scarf in his hand. He motioned for Elise to turn around, kissing the back of her neck when she did so. “It’s about to get dark,” he chuckled. Elise could feel her heart pounding through her chest. “Did you plan this?” she asked.  
“Yes, kind of. I won’t blindfold you if you don’t want to,” he waited for her response. She took Oscar’s hand that held the scarf and guided it up to her face. "I guess it’ll be great make-up sex?” she giggled.  
“Hmmm. More like relaxing meditation after a tense moment,” Oscar kissed her shoulder.  
“So this wasn’t an argument?” she raised her brow.  
“I don’t think we’ve reached passionate, throw-plates-on-the-floor level arguments, yet.” Oscar laughed. Elise agreed, joining his laugh.

“If you want to stop at any time, tell me ok,” Oscar whispered into her ear. Elise grabbed his hand, halting him blindfolding her. “You’re not tying me up as well, are you? I mean I don’t mind but not at the same time,” she asked anxiously.  
“No. Just the blindfold,” he kissed her shoulder again.  
“Ok,” she nodded, letting him drape the smooth fabric across her eyes before tying it gently at the back of her head. “Don’t move,” he whispered in that honey-smooth voice of his. 

Elise could hear him stepping away. It sounded like he was going back to the bedroom to get something else. Then she heard the clattering of a glass, maybe ice cubes, then silence. Elise only heard her own breathing now, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She could feel a simultaneous rise of anxiety and arousal, and he hadn’t even touched her, yet.  

“Oscar?” she called into the room. Nothing. Elise felt her pulse rising to new heights. Where the hell did he meander off to? Then out of nowhere, she heard soft piano music playing in the background. A piece she’d never heard before. Soothing, even rhythm, almost like a very slow waltz.

“Stretch out your arms,” she heard Oscar’s voice right in front of her. If acting didn't work out for him, he'd certainly make it as a ninja. She chuckled at the thought and stretched out her arms, and he took her hands, guiding them into position for slow dancing. Elise realized that Oscar had taken off his shirt. She wondered if he was completely undressed or if this was his way of teasing her mind. He pulled her closer to himself, keeping a firm grasp on her hand and arm. Slowly, very slowly, they waltzed towards the living room. He kissed her neck a few times, then he stopped leading. He took her hands, guiding them to her sides.
"You're so beautiful," he whispered as he slowly started undressing her, kissing her gently every time he took off a piece of clothing. She was down to her bra and panties when she felt him wrap his arms around her lower back and head. “Lie down,” he whispered, kissing her neck.

Elise did as told, and with Oscar’s help, she guided herself down on the rug of the living room floor. He must have moved the coffee table out of the way. How he did so without much noise was a mystery to her.

She was lying there, waiting for his next move, and he seemed to have disappeared again. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, her heart rate dropping back to a somewhat normal speed. "Oscar?" she called out again. Sneaky bas... "Ahhhh. God...," she gasped at the light touch of something moving down her stomach, the sudden sensation making her heart race again. Then she felt his lips traveling up her left leg. Slow lingering kisses, he was careful no other part of his body touched her skin. He repeated the same on her right leg, always careful that only his lips were touching her skin.

Elise arched her back a few times. Not knowing where he might kiss her next sent her mind into overdrive. She had never been this turned on. She could feel her panties getting wetter as the moisture between her legs increased. Her breaths shortened to heated gasps. She wondered if she should let her hands roam and search for him, but at the same time, she loved the mystery, and he could tell.

He kept placing long, hot kisses across her body then he stopped. “Sit up for a minute,” he requested, and Elise did as told. He opened her bra and slowly pulled it off, one strap at a time, kissing her shoulders with open-mouthed, tongue-pressed-against-skin kisses. “You ok?” he asked, tenuously kissing behind her ear.

"Yes," Elise whispered.

“You want to go on?” he asked.

“Yes,” Elise whispered again.

“Lie back down,” he said, helping her back to the floor.

Elise focused on her breathing. Her whole body was tingling with anticipation. She was sure whatever he had planned next would send her completely over the edge. She heard Oscar messing with a glass nearby, sending heart rate all over the place. Her breathing heavy, she felt her temperature rise with every second. And then… “Oh God! FUCK!” she screamed out. The shock of ice touching her inner thigh made her jolt up.

“You ok?” Oscar reached for her blindfold.

“Yes. Yes. I’m fine,” she panted heavily, stopping him from trying to take off the silky fabric as she returned to the floor.

Oscar carefully watched her for a moment, snickering under his breath.

"I heard that," Elise smiled with a pant, and he laughed.

He took the melting ice cube between his teeth and slowly dragged it across her stomach all the way up to her breasts, leaving behind a trail of icy liquid on her skin. She gasped loudly, trying to control involuntary twitches underneath his touch.

By the time Oscar reached her mouth, the cube had melted, but his mouth and tongue were freezing cold when they met Elise’s lips. Oscar was ready to pull away, but she grabbed blindly at his curls, making the kiss last until his lips and tongue were fiery hot again. What a sensation. She wondered what it would feel like between her legs.

Oscar got another ice cube, this time dragging it across her legs, always stopping right before her
panties. After hearing her cuss out a "goddammit", he finally took them off, spreading Elise’s legs as far as she let him, a few moans falling from her mouth when he placed icy kisses on the inside of her thighs. He retrieved another ice cube, dragging it between his teeth across her inner thighs. He could hear her breathing getting more erratic each time he moved closer to her folds, saw her fingertips digging into her own thighs as she moaned loudly.

Oscar let her rest for a minute. Just one minute to let her catch her breath. Elise’s mind raced. She knew what he might do next. She could feel the wetness between her legs increasing just by thinking about it. “Hmmm, beautiful,” Oscar smiled, gazing down at Elise’s naked body. He placed the last ice cube in his mouth and without warning closed his lips tightly around Elise’s clit. She jerked upright, her moan almost a scream, grabbing on tightly to Oscar’s curls as he slowly circled the melting ice cube around her. That preparedness she thought she had built up to slipping her mind in less than the blink of an eye.

“God, fuck. ISAAC!!” Elise screamed, when he slipped two fingers inside her, gently massaging her as the ice cube melted around her clit and over her folds. The fact that she had just called out his middle name made him smile against her peak. So he sucked just a little harder, moved his fingers just a little faster. He could feel her tighten around him, the remaining cold water dripping over her folds as she came. Elise crashed back onto the carpet, her spine and stomach aching from holding her body upright so long. Oscar’s tongue still icy, he licked over her stomach to between her breasts and up to her jawline. Elise could feel his erection brushing against her stomach when he slowly started removing the silk scarf from her face.

“No one’s ever yelled out my middle name,” he smiled into her neck.

“Really?” Elise was surprised.

“Hmmm, really,” he confirmed. He propped himself against the sofa, stretching out his legs.

“Come here,” he smiled.

Elise did as requested, straddling him. She teased his tip with her entrance a few times. “Payback,” she whispered in his ear before ever so slowly letting herself drop down on his cock. Oscar groaned, grabbing her behind, squeezing her as she started to move up and down. This was becoming his favorite position. Him sitting up, her on top, he was able to bite and kiss her breasts with ease. And he knew she liked that. Those little nips and tugs on her skin.

Elise steadied herself by holding on to his shoulders. Her hips writhing fast against Oscar, she threw her head back when he started circling her clit with his thumb. Oscar gazed up at her, nipping on her neck, kissing her throat, he gently wrapped his free hand around her neck squeezing lightly as she continued to move faster. “Liz, fuck, I’m close,” he breathed.

She looked down into his eyes, pressing a kiss against his lips when she felt his body tensing up, and he moaned into her mouth before sinking his head between her breasts. That warmth filling her a welcome finish to that "icy" start. They stayed like this, giving each other passionate kisses, trying to catch their breath as their heart rates slowed down.

“I missed you,” Oscar said again.

Elise smiled into his shoulder. “Can we just go to sleep like this?” she asked.

“Hmmm, if we want to be really sore in the morning, sure,” Oscar wisecracked.

Elise got up, helping Oscar to a stand. The two kissed each other all the way to the bedroom. They crawled into bed, still kissing. They curled up next to each other, still kissing, and fell asleep while kissing each other’s bodies.
Chapter 2

Oscar's alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. He groaned into Elise's shoulder, not wanting to get up. He had missed her too much and wanted to spend what little time they had that week with her.
"You need to get up," he heard Elise whisper.
"Oh, I didn't mean to wake you, mi Linda," he sighed onto her shoulder, placing tenuous kisses on her soft skin.
"I was already awake, handsome. Time change. Still adjusting." She stroked his arm that was loosely wrapped around her body.
"Do I have to?" Oscar breathed.
"Yes. You know you love your job. Besides, I AM going to visit you this afternoon. Remember?"
Elise pulled herself out from underneath his arm and got up, trying to lure him out of bed with a seductive raise of her brow as she stood there with a blanket wrapped around her body.

"Hmmm," Oscar hummed, licking his lips.
"Come on! Up!" she commanded, dropping the blanket to the floor, hoping she'd coax him to the edge and out of bed that way.
"Something is about to be up," Oscar wiggled his brows, suggestively looking up and down Elise and then himself.
"Oh dear lord," Elise laughed. "No time. You need to get ready for work," she leaned over and slapped his naked derrière.
"OHHH! You shouldn't do that," Oscar moaned, biting his lips this time.
"Hmmmm. Really? You mean,... this?" she slapped him again, a bit harder this time, leaving an imprint on his skin.
"Liz!" Oscar groaned.

"Alright, I'll stop. But you need to get out of bed. Now!" she commanded again, giggling and quickly putting on some panties and his shirt she had worn Sunday night.
"You wearing that doesn't help," he bit his lips again. He loved how his shirt sat loosely on her body, subtly hinting at her curves whenever she moved, her panties only showing whenever she lifted her arms.
"Fine," Elise squinted at Oscar, taking off his shirt and putting on one of her oversized sweaters and pants before walking out of the room.
"Noooooo! Come back." Oscar hastily rolled out of bed, dashing after her.

"Come back," he said again when he got to the kitchen area.
Elise stood by the kitchen counter, arms crossed, foot tapping. "That got you out of bed real quick, huh?" she laughed, looking at a naked Oscar who stared at her with a frown.
"Ugh. Just one kiss," he inched closer, leaning in only to be stopped by Elise's index on his lips.
"You'll get a kiss!" she told him. "Once you put on your clothes," she smirked, reaching for an apple from a bowl nearby and biting into it.
"But..." Oscar started, giving her sulking puppy dog eyes as he tried to inch even closer.

Elise shook her head and pointed her hand towards the bedroom. Oscar dragged his feet, looking back over his shoulder at Elise who took another bite from the apple, almost choking trying to suppress a laugh when she saw Oscar's overly dramatic, quivering lips. She finished the apple and quickly set the table for a small breakfast.

A few minutes later, Oscar stood in the arch of the bedroom wearing his signature dark clothes; leather jacket and boots in one hand and his cell and keys in the other. He walked towards Elise -
who was sitting by the dining room table, chowing down on some cereal-, leaned in, and kissed her strawberry-coconut scented hair, inhaling deeply as to hold on to the scent as long as he could. "You want some," Elise smiled, looking up at him.
"Yes, please," Oscar plopped down on the empty chair. At least he had time for a quick breakfast. "It's very mean," Elise laughed, hinting at the conversation they had had back in April when Oscar had asked how she survived without cooking skills. "I bet," Oscar chuckled.

He loved these little inside jokes they shared. Over the last four weeks, a few more stories had been added to their mental memory libraries - from embarrassing food fails to cultural exchange disasters that ended in unlikely friendships - but this particular memory was one of Oscar's favorite. It was his, and his alone.

He side-eyed Elise who mouthed some words as she was reading over the headlines from yesterday's paper, nodding every so often or furrowing her brows when she deemed something interesting or disturbing. Oscar noted her tousled hair and smudged makeup, and the fact that she didn't seem to care to be seen all undone. He let out a silent chuckle and reached for the milk.

"So what's on your agenda this morning?" he asked as he poured some milk over his cereal. "Well, if the weather is nice, I'll be going for a run," Elise looked over her shoulder towards the window. It was still dark, but the absence of raindrops against the glass seemed convincing enough for her.
"I didn't know you like to run," Oscar focused on her, again. His mind was taking in her every movement. How he had missed the way she twirled her hair when she was thinking. How he had missed the way her lips curled when she smiled, or how she still blushed when her eyes met his, just like at this very moment.

"Have to keep my weight at bay somehow. You don't really think this...," she elegantly swooped her hand down her body. "... stays taut without help," she wrinkled her nose. "I've just never seen you exercise before," Oscar grinned.
"Well, that week with you was an exception," Elise disclosed. "Besides, I think I got plenty of exercise," she tilted her head, a mischievous smile growing across her face while she wiggled her brows.
"You and me both," Oscar agreed, running his hands through his curls, laughing when his mind went back to that first week; from the first electrifying touch too long nights of passionate love. Oscar shook his head, trying to pull his mind out of the gutter.

"Are you going to meet up with mister peculiar?" he asked, redirecting his focus as he started to eat his cereal. He took a big spoonful of the sugary flakes, crunching down on them as he looked at his companion. "What?" Elise looked confused.
"Coffee dude," Oscar stated, still chewing on that first spoonful of cereal. "Oh! Leon! I don't know," she shrugged.
"So that's his name," Oscar stopped chewing, his lips forming into a thin frown. "Oscar, please. Not at breakfast," Elise suddenly became serious. His voice had carried a hint of jealousy, and she was not in the mood to start her day like that.
"I'm just wondering," he raised his brows, his lips still thin and thought lines deep.
"I won't go if you don't want me to. Not that I had planned to," Elise explained, her body language tense as though she was bracing herself for the situation to blow out of proportions.

"Hmmm," Oscar inhaled deeply. "I think you should go," he stated as he resumed eating. "What?" Elise was utterly surprised by this suggestion.
"I'm sure he'll be waiting for you, coffee in hand. Besides,..." he took another bite. "I want you to make friends. Talk to people while I'm busy. I don't want you sitting here bored to death because you're waiting for me to come home. Just be sure it's in a public place? So he won't try stupid things," Oscar suggested. "And if he does, you know, kick him where it hurts."

Elise shook her head in disbelief, sorting through the information. She wasn't sure if she should laugh or take Oscar seriously. Frank, her abusive ex, would've never let her go out by herself like this. He'd have followed her, or plain and simple forbidden her to go. This was something she had to get used to. This mutual trust.

"Mi Linda, you know I trust you, right?" Oscar asked when he saw Elise still looking confused by his statement. His stomach twisted a bit, knowing some stranger had talked to her, but he would never hold Elise back from meeting new people. She'd never doubted him whenever he'd gone out to cast parties while she'd been in India, so why would he doubt her now? Mutual trust was a work in progress for both, that much he knew.

"Sweetie?" he asked cautiously.

"I know," Elise finally managed a soft smile. "If I go, I'll let you know," she added.

"Thank you," Oscar replied, smiling. He got up and poured himself some coffee, then started putting on his boots.

"What time do you want me to drop by the set?" Elise asked, eating some more of her cereal while she waited for an answer.

"Three'ish," Oscar still smiled. "Kevin will come by and pick you up. He will take you to meet up with Charlene first. She needs you to sign some papers before they'll let you on set," he went on.

"Sounds like a plan," Elise returned Oscar's smile.

She loved this. Mornings like this. Sitting at the same table for breakfast, exchanging glances, talking about daily plans, watching each other get ready for the day. She never knew how much she had truly missed these moments until Oscar had stepped into her life. There was an existing comfort from the get-go like they had known each other far longer than five weeks. Only one man had ever made her feel this way. She tried not to compare, but occasionally Joe slipped into her mind.

Oscar could always tell when her mind drifted that way. She would get quiet and look down to avoid his eyes. He didn't mind as it didn't happen often. He let her go back to her memories, always glad when she returned with a sparkle in her eye that was reserved only for him. And Elise was thankful that he didn't try to take these moments from her. She was grateful Oscar had remained open to her occasional talk about Joe. She closed her eyes for a second, letting this morning sink in. It was mundane and most likely boring to an outsider, but for her, it was as close to perfection as it could get. She only hoped Oscar felt the same way.

"I have to get going," he said softly after looking at his watch. It was already 5:30 a.m., and he was sure him being late was going to be met with menacing stares by the makeup crew. He always had trouble being on time, even though he got up early enough.

"K." Elise opened her eyes when she felt him kiss her hair.

"Be careful if you go running." He gently cradled her face.

"Promise." Elise leaned into the palm of his hand, the warmth of his skin making her smile even more. Oscar stood there for a moment, lost in a dreamy gaze.

"Go already!" Elise pushed him back at his stomach. "You can stare at my beautiful face when I come by later," she giggled. Oscar hesitantly backed away, running his hands over the back of his neck and keeping an eye on her. She had him completely under her spell, but he doubted she realized just how much. And that he had longed for these small moments: when time seemed to
stand still and mere seconds became eternity.

"Wait!" Elise shot to a stand. "I almost forgot," she paced over to him before he had a chance to reach for his jacket, wrapping her arms around his neck as she leaned in for a soft, lingering kiss. It was Oscar who gasped this time. "I love you," Elise whispered when she pulled away.
"Te amo," Oscar's voice was almost inaudible as he let this moment wrap around his mind.
"Go!" Elise gently punched him on his shoulder, shaking her head, laughing as she started to clean off the table, and Oscar gave her one more fleeting look before he left for the day.

After quickly stowing away clean dishes and fixing the bed, Elise changed into black leggings, a grey t-shirt, and pink running shoes. She pulled up a map of Montreal on her cell to see the best route for a two-mile jog before grabbing a baseball cap, her keys, and a light sports jacket. When she reached the lobby, Dominic, the security guard she had met Sunday evening, greeted her. She stopped for a quick chat before taking off for her run.

The sun was just coming up behind Montreal's skyline, tickling Elise's face as she held a steady pace running on stone-slab sidewalks, past coffee shops, bakeries, and increasing crowds of people rushing to their jobs or school. When she returned to the studio fifteen minutes later, she took a quick shower and changed into dark-blue skinny jeans, a soft turquoise button down over a white tank top, and her brown sandals. She added some turquoise fashion jewelry before peeking at her watch. It was only 8 a.m., so she decided to go back outside to check out a bookstore in the downtown area.

On the way there, she grabbed a strawberry pastry to-go from the bakery around the corner. The young woman behind the counter smiled at her when she recognized Elise from the day before. Elise nibbled on the pastry while taking in more of the architecture as she leisurely walked towards the intended store. In her mind, she compared the city to Seattle. How there were small cafés hidden between shops or at the corners of tall buildings. How there were people from various jobs walking past her; some wearing uniforms, others dressed in professional white-collared attire; and the occasional tourist taking pictures here or there. How there were vintage clothing stores and art galleries tucked into small buildings between the tall, glass covered high rises. She loved seeing the city from a non-work related perspective.

When Elise finally reached the bookstore on Rue Bishop, it was almost 11 a.m. She entered the store, immediately getting drawn into a world of her own. She loved the way the books smelled, the way they felt when she held them, and the way the titles graced the covers in various colors and fonts. She gingerly led her fingertips over the spines of a few books in the poetry section of the store, smiling when she found a collective works book by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. She pulled the book from the shelf, flipping through the pages, smiling as she read through a few of the romantic poems.

"That's a good book," a man next to her stated. Thrown from dreamland, Elise looked up to see who'd interrupted the moment. "Leon?" she stood there, flabbergasted, to say the least. Leon sure was handsome. He smiled down on her, his eyes sparkling blue, hair jet black and perfectly styled. He wore a crisp, blue button-down with a dark blue tie and dark grey slacks. He definitely looked more the professor today than yesterday. Elise, on the other hand, felt like some haunting figure from a horror movie. She had forgone makeup and her hair was in a messy ponytail, which, she was sure, was falling out of shape by the second.

"What are you doing here?" she finally managed to speak.
"Buying these," Leon continued to smile. Elise only just now noticed that he held a stack of textbooks under his right arm. "Mathematical
Theories. My kind of poetry," Elise nodded with a hint of sass. They both started laughing. "The world doesn't survive on liberal arts alone," Leon raised his brow, still laughing. When he stopped, he dragged a glance over Elise. "Since you're here, how about that coffee?" he asked. Elise took lead to pay for her book and Leon followed. "Uhm... Oh. I don't know if that's such a good idea..." she started. "It's only coffee. I promise," Leon smiled warmly when the clerk handed them their bags with their purchases.

"Leon. Look. I'm usually not this blunt, but... I've got someone," Elise blurted out after they left the store and when she saw that he held out his elbow for her to hook in. "I know. You told me so yesterday," he replied, still holding out his elbow. "And if you had waited a few more minutes, I would've had the chance to tell you that I have someone as well. Back in New York," he added. "You do?" Elise was a little shocked. "And your wife doesn't mind you talking to strange women?" Elise assumed. "Who says I have a wife?" Leon wiggled his elbow but Elise remained hesitant. "Girlfriend?" she tried to narrow down. Leon shook his head. "Are you going to hook in or what?" he waited, shimmying his shoulder side to side. Elise took a deep breath in, finally hooking her arm into his.

"So lover, then?" she was curious. "Husband," Leon beamed ear to ear. "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't... But yesterday... Wait, what?" Elise looked up and down Leon. "Never judge a book by its cover," he grinned, looking down on her. Elise's face flushed. Her own words thrown back at her, she was definitely embarrassed that it was her who had read more into yesterday's handshake. "I never thought, I'd be this narrow-minded because you don't...," she started, tilting her head as she glanced over Leon again. "What?" Leon wiggled his brows.

Elise shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm a jerk," she muttered. "Nah, it's ok. I get that quite often. I don't exactly advertise if you get my drift." Leon stopped in front of a small café not far from the bookstore. He pulled out a chair for Elise before seating himself. "So that someone you're with. Husband? Boyfriend? Judging by your reaction, I'm guessing it's a man?" he asked. "Companion, for now. And yes, him," Elise's face was still slightly flushed. "Ah, not enough to be married but more than a simple relationship, huh?" Leon looked over the small menu that was on the table. "Well, I've only known him for five weeks, so..." Elise's eyes crinkled at the corners when a wide smile started gracing her face. "Ah. Love. I can see it. Right. There." Leon pointed to the outside corner of her left eye, causing Elise to turn a deep red.

A young waitress walked over to their table, taking their orders. Leon's French was very broken, making the waitress giggle. Elise, on the other hand, ordered her food speaking perfect French with a Normandy accent. "How are you surviving here?" she asked Leon after he stammered out a merci beaucoup. "Well, the class is in English. For the rest, I use this little book," he pulled a pocket dictionary from his briefcase and Elise let out a snorting laugh. She hadn't seen one of those since her teens.

"Practice makes perfect, you know," she laughed. "Well maybe you could teach me a few words," Leon suggested. "I won't be here long enough," Elise still giggled.
"That's too bad," Leon shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sure you'll make more friends once I leave. How long have you been here anyways?" Elise inquired after the waitress brought them their coffees. "Since beginning of this month. I'll be here for a couple of semesters," Leon took a sip from his coffee. The way he held his cup was rather elegant.

The two continued to talk about their lives. Leon revealed that he had been married for nearly two years. A big smile danced across his face whenever he mentioned his husband. That was usually followed by a sad sigh. He clearly missed him. Elise talked a little about her past, where she came from, and what she was doing now, careful not to reveal Oscar's name or his job in the conversation.

"I figured you'd be from some European country," Leon stated smugly. "Why's that?" Elise raised her brow. "Europeans are a bit different. The way they hold themselves. How they talk. And then there's your accent," he laughed. "That noticeable?" Elise queried. "No, but it's there. Hinting when you throw out those sharp s's and t-h sounds," he specified. Elise's face flushed again. This time she thought of Oscar. He had mentioned something similar to her during a Skype session. She didn't notice the accent herself of course, but she did know Oscar loved it.

"Well, I had better get going," Leon said after a glance at his watch. "Class is starting in twenty minutes," he added. "I can walk with you to your building," Elise offered. "So you don't get lost, again," she smirked. "Ah, well it's back in my regular building. Yesterday was more like an emergency relocation because they double booked my classroom somehow," Leon nodded. "Oh, ok. Well, then. Maybe we'll run into each other again," Elise stretched out her hand. Leon took it and placed a swift kiss on the back of it, making Elise giggle like some teenage school girl. "My number is on the napkin," he grinned as let go of her hand. Elise quickly grabbed the napkin before the waitress walked off with their plates. She ripped off a section, wrote her number on it, and handed it to Leon.

"Swell," Leon carefully folded the thin piece of tissue and put it in his wallet before he walked off, looking over his shoulder once to see Elise waving at him.

This was nice, Elise thought to herself. She hadn't made new friends in a while. She had Mikki and Patricia, and her sister and her brother-in-law of course, but the few friendships she did have before Frank slowly faded once she withdrew more and more from social life.

Elise slowly walked back to Oscar's place, taking a different route to look at more buildings. Montreal was beautiful. She could envision herself living in this city with Oscar. She noticed that thoughts like that had slowly started creeping into her mind. Living with Oscar would be wonderful, but she wasn't sure if she was ready to give up her life in Seattle for anyone. Right now, she was content that he had invited her to stay.

Back at Oscar's studio, Elise decided to change the water in the vases that held the sunflowers. She wondered how much he had spent on them. "Shit," she cursed at herself, remembering that she still hadn't thanked him for paying her phone bill. She made a mental note to thank him after he was finished filming for the day, then he looked around the small studio, scanning over the papers and pictures hanging on the fridge. She hadn't noticed until now, but every picture was of her. Oscar had printed out the photographs she had sent via text, including the ones where she looked rather tired. She hoped his co-stars hadn't seen these.
Elise had sat down by the kitchen table, scanning through the poetry book she had bought that morning when the doorbell rang. A bit perplexed, she got up and hit the intercom button. "Hello?" she asked cautiously, looking at her watch. It was only 2:30 p.m. Oscar had said three if she recalled correctly.

"Votre chauffeur est là, mademoiselle," she heard Dominic's voice crackle through the speaker. "Je serai en bas dans quelques minutes," she replied. She rushed to get her keys, purse, and a jacket, her stomach tingling at the idea that she was about to see Oscar at work. On the elevator ride down, she wondered if he would be in full costume or if he was just standing in for the day. The thought left her when she reached the lobby where Kevin, the driver, was waiting for her.

"Ah. Good afternoon Misses Redfield," he stretched out his hand, gently shaking Elise's. She returned the handshake with a strong grip. "Uhm, Elise is fine," she smiled. She wasn't used to being called by her last name unless it was work related.

"Very well. Ready?" Kevin asked as he held the door open for her to step outside. A dark SUV with tinted windows idled in front of the building, and Elise paused.

"Right," she looked at Kevin.

"I promise, I am who I say I am," Kevin showed her his set ID when he realized that she was anxious about getting in the car.

"Sorry. I didn't... This is all new to me," she explained.

"I know. Oscar mentioned you might be a little nervous. You'll get used to the high-security star treatment," Kevin chuckled before he closed the door. Elise had buckled up, and Kevin got in on the driver's side and started driving east, then south.

"You'll be meeting up with one of our confidentiality agents before you're given a pass," he explained as they pulled up in front of a large complex with massive hangar type buildings. Elise just nodded in agreement. She knew she'd have to sign a confidentiality contract, so she was somewhat prepared, but she was definitely not prepared for this. She felt like she was entering some secret military complex. Guards stood at the entrances, some actually armed with tasers, and only waving them through after they'd double-checked IDs.

Kevin finally pulled up to an office type building with large glass fronts. A woman, a little older than Elise and dressed in a gray blazer-skirt combo, waved at the car. "That's the agent right there," Kevin clarified, letting out a deep laugh when he noticed the energetic wave. He put the SUV in park, got out, and opened the door for Elise before she even had a chance to reach for the handle.

"Thank you," she smiled as Kevin held her hand to step out.

"See you later," he got back in the car and drove off.

"Elise. It's so nice to finally meet you," the woman grabbed Elise's hand and frantically shook it. Her accent had a southern twang to it that made Elise giggle.

"Charlene, right?" Elise grinned. The woman in front of her was shorter than her but she had spunk.

"That's my name, darling. You can call me Char for short. No one uses my actual name. Let's go, get those papers signed," Charlene finally let go of Elise's hand. She walked quickly towards the office building, opening the door, then swiftly led an astonished Elise towards an airy office space down a long hallway. Elise was trying to take in her surroundings. Film posters, autographed photographs, and awards were displayed throughout the hall towards and in the office, something she found in common with the agency her brother-in-law worked at.

"I know it's a lot but if you could just read through it," the agent pushed a small stack of papers across her desk. "Basically, the contract states that you cannot talk about anything you see here. You may not post pictures to your social media accounts... Do you have social media accounts? If
you do, I need to know... Anyways you may not post pictures to your social media accounts unless they've been approved by me or one of the other two agents," Charlene talked fast, some of the words getting lost in her accent.

"I have a couple of accounts but it's mostly to stay in contact with family when I travel," Elise disclosed. "I don't really post a lot of pictures," she added.
"Ah, yes. Oscar mentioned you travel a lot. Well, read through the contract. You may take pictures for personal use of course, and only in between takes. No filming! And make sure your phone is off when the cameras are rolling," Charlene explained further, scuttling around the office, gathering a few items in the process.

Elise slowly read through the contract. She was pretty good at deciphering the wordings as she worked in a field that constantly required her to talk in and translate contract lingo. She whipped out her pen from her purse and signed at the indicated lines in large, elegantly swung letters. When she finished she realized that Charlene was staring at her. Elise gave her a nervous smile. Despite her short stature, Charlene was intimidating, especially with those fierce eyes of hers.

"Uhm..., all done," Elise twisted her lips into an unconvincing but warm smile.
"I apologize dear. I didn't mean to stare. Oscar had said you're pretty. I need to have a talk with him because he undersold you, darling," Charlene laughed, her eyes still twinkling with an intense feistiness. "Let's go take your picture for the pass," Charlene led Elise to a second room with a camera.

"Oh, I didn't know... I don't have makeup on," Elise blushed. She was sure she looked awful.
"You look fine, hon. One, two, three," Charlene quickly snapped the picture, blinding Elise with the bright flash. She was hoping she didn't blink. A thumbs up from Charlene indicated that the picture was ok to be used but when Elise saw her pass she wanted to vanish. She looked pale and imperfections on her skin were definitely enhanced in the photograph, making her look like a grotesque, dappled creature version of herself. She forced a smile through gritted teeth.

"Let me show you around. The pass is good for all doors with green and yellow entry points. Red is off limits. Make sure it's visible at all times when you walk around," Charlene explained. Elise just nodded her head in agreement as she followed a fast-paced Charlene. The complex sure was busy, people walking around with props, lights, cables, and coffee trays. A golf cart honked behind the two women, and Charlene pulled Elise to the side.

"You have to be on the lookout. Some of those execs think they're royalty and will run you over," Charlene smirked. "I'm only joking of course. They might nudge you, though," she laughed wholeheartedly. Elise let out a relieved but horrified chuckle. She was only going to drop by the set today, maybe a second time later on during the week. She found all this simultaneously fascinating, overwhelming, and a little amusing, especially when she saw a few extras walking around in full makeup. She had visited sets before as James occasionally would invite her along, but it had always been small scale.

"See the orange light blinking? That means they're filming. We have to wait before we can enter that particular soundstage. There is a cafeteria in the second building to the left. They make the best sandwiches. And right across are the trailers for the cast. I'll show you Oscar's," Charlene pulled Elise by her arm towards the trailers. They quickly found Oscar's, and Charlene impatiently and loudly knocked on the door. After there was no answer, she swung the door wide open, yelling his name. "I hope you have pants on," Charlene shouted.

Elise stared at the agent, not sure if she was supposed to laugh or be terrified by that statement.
"Don't worry, darling. He always has his pants on. He tends to nap if the reset takes longer than an hour," Charlene explained when she caught Elise's mixed expression. "You can put your purse in here if you want and go to the cafeteria to grab some food, or you can wait here. Once they're finished with the take, you'll know." Charlene held out her hand. "Have to run, darling." She again vigorously shook Elise's hand, then dashed off, disappearing somewhere between the caravan of trailers.

Elise stood there, flabbergasted at everything that had just happened, then laughed. She took a few minutes to look around Oscar's trailer. The small space was cramped with furniture and personal items. His clothes were strewn across a small sofa. Pictures of his family and friends as well as of Elise were tucked in the mirror next to it. Controllers from two different gaming consoles lay atop a small table, a few game discs sitting carelessly next to them. This was a side of Oscar that Elise had never quite seen. When he'd stayed at her apartment the week they'd met, he'd always cleaned up after himself. Even his studio was nothing like this: messy but somehow very comfortable, and she already knew, she preferred this over pretended organization.

A bout of tiredness washed over Elise. She was slowly getting over the jet lag from her trip back. Still, her inner clock was off. She contemplated to sit down for a few minutes but was afraid she'd fall asleep. So she opted to head to the cafeteria to see if they had some strong coffee. The place was almost as busy as the lots between the sound-stages; people chatting and laughing or looking over scripts. Elise looked around nervously. She didn't know a single face here but she was sure everyone knew Oscar. She got in line for a cup of caffeine-laden liquid and grabbed a blueberry bagel as well as some strawberries. Maybe some more food would help her get over this drowsiness that was now hitting her hard. She looked around the busy room and found an empty seat at a nearly empty table all the way in the back.

"Hallo, schöne Frau," she heard a voice with Hessian accent from across the table. She stopped mid-bite into one of the strawberries and looked to her left, spotting Michael Fassbender grinning her way as he waited for a reply. "Sie sprechen doch Deutsch, oder?" he scooted closer to Elise who sat there a bit star struck and confused by the fact that he knew she could speak German. "Unless you're not Elise. Then I'm terribly sorry," he continued in English with a thick German Irish accent.

"Doch, doch. Ich spreche Deutsch. Woher wissen Sie wer ich bin?" Elise finally managed to say with a shaky voice and ears turning crimson; her body was tense and her mind anxious.

Michael stared at her with his piercing blue eyes, a signature wide smile gracing his face when he heard her reply. "Sie können ruhig Du sagen. Oder Michael," he stretched out his hand from across the table and when Elise offered hers, he placed a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. "Küss die Hand, gnä' Frau," Michael grinned, causing Elise to let out an airy giggle that sounded more like a squeal from some tortured creature.

"How kind of you," she replied, her face still flushed.

Michael returned her statement with a deep, throw-the-entire-body-in laugh. "I know. I'm quite perfect," his grin didn't wane. He was cocky just like Oscar.

"You don't have to use the formal you when you speak German with me either," Elise finally relaxed, returning to nibbling on the strawberries. "So how did you know who I am?" she queried with a raised brow, munching on her third strawberry.

"Oscar has told us all about you. And he's shown us pictures," Michael admitted. "Us! Who is us?" Elise's brow raised even higher.

"Pretty much the entire cast and crew," Michael laughed.

"Oh god." Elise hid her face in her hands, laughing but also looking absolutely terrified.

"Don't worry, he kept the sexy pictures to himself," Michael laughed even harder.
"Well considering that those don't exist..." Elise took a sip from her coffee, trying hard to suppress another laugh.

"You're not filming today?" she asked after she finished the last of her berries.
"Just standing in so they can get a few close up reactions of your boyfriend," Michael disclosed.
"So Oscar is in full costume today then?" Elise asked. She wondered what he looked like; if she would even recognize Oscar if the makeup crew had stayed close to the comics.
"Yes. And quite intimidating," Michael still smiled that toothy smile of his.
"Is there something on my face?" Elise asked.
"No," Michael relaxed back into his chair. "It's just since you've shown up, Oscar has been less grouchy," he explained.
"What? Ahahahahahahaha..." Elise let out a loud laugh. She couldn't fathom the idea of her companion being grouchy.

"Ja. I'm telling you, that poor man was getting all love deprived. Mentally and physically," Michael continued. There it was. The liberal natured way she was so accustomed to from her fellow European kin. It shouldn't have surprised her that Michael was so at ease talking about rolling in the hay and sexual innuendos but her face turned the deepest shade of red regardless of that. Elise shook her head laughing.

A loud beeping noise interrupted the conversation.
"Sounds like they're taking a break," Michael got up, waiting for Elise to follow suit. "You should take that with you. Once they reset and start filming again it might be a while before you can leave," he pointed at the blueberry bagel and the coffee.
Elise grabbed her food, then walked with Michael to the previously closed-off soundstage.

Michael casually strolled by the security guard, greeting the guard as he walked past. Elise froze in place. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to show her pass or scan it somewhere. "You coming along?" Michael craned his neck to look out the door. Elise hesitantly followed. The guard, who took a fleeting glance at her pass, smiled at her when she walked past.

"Never been on a set before?" Michael queried as he looked around.
"I have, but nothing like THIS," Elise's eyes widened, her mouth agape. She had stepped into a completely different world. Outside, the hangar-sized soundstage looked like a huge washed-out box, surrounded by concrete parking lots where trucks and trailers took up most of the space. Inside, it looked like a tornado had twisted its way through a city. Fake streets, building facades, and even some leaking fire hydrants were set in center between massive green walls. Different people walked in all sorts of directions, resetting some pieces here and there.

Elise looked around some more and recognized Olivia Munn from The Newsroom. She set her food on a small table and kept scanning the stage to see if Oscar was nearby. Michael had left her side and was talking to a man who had his back turned towards Elise. She kept staring at Michael, her hands digging deep into the tiny pockets of her skinny jeans, unsure if she was allowed to just walk around or if she was supposed to find a seat somewhere nearby.

Michael caught her looking his way and waved her to come over. Her heart pounded a bit. Despite her brother-in-law working in show business and having met a few celebrities, she still got nervous whenever she met someone new in the field. She supposed it was because she was scared she'd say something awkward or insulting.

Elise slowly, and with her shoulders a bit slumped, walked over to Michael.
"Bryan, this is Elise. Oscar's girlfriend," Michael introduced her. "Elise, this is Bryan Singer. He's
the director," he gave Elise an encouraging nod. She couldn't really feel her hands as she had clenched them tightly in her pockets, but she was sure they felt clammy and freezing cold when she reached for Bryan's hand.

"Hi," Bryan lightly shook her hand. "So you're Elise," he gave her a warm, welcoming smile, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Elise just nodded.
"Do you speak English?" Bryan asked with caution. Elise only nodded again.
"She speaks like a million different languages," a warm familiar voice resonated from behind Elise. She let out a sigh of relief. Oscar was standing right behind her. She turned around and jumped backward, letting out a small scream. Oscar had been standing behind her alright, clad in blue armor, prosthetics, blue face paint, and white contacts, and at least three inches taller than usual. He truly was intimidating, and Elise had a hard time believing that it was her warmhearted companion hiding underneath all that makeup and costume.

"Is it the eyes? It's the eyes, isn't it?" Oscar grinned, or at least he tried to. Whatever he had on his face prevented him from giving her his signature cocky smirk.
"Don't you realize, you're scaring the poor girl," Olivia chimed in. She had joined the group after getting some water. "Don't let him scare you, he's really a cuddly, little Ewok underneath all that," Olivia elbowed Oscar. Elise giggled at that comparison.

"Yeah, no kidding, Oscar. Look at her face," another young actress pointed out. She had white hair and, like Oscar and Olivia, was dressed in a blue-hued costume. She was most certainly playing a young version of Storm. "I'm Alexandra," the young actress smiled. Elise once again only nodded, nervously shaking Alexandra's hand. She was a bit overwhelmed meeting all these people.

"You totally scared her voice away," Olivia raised her brow and crossed her arms, giving Oscar a stern frown.
"Awe, I'm sorry, mi Linda," Oscar looked gloomily to the floor.
Elise shook her head in response and started laughing. "It's just... you're so blue!" she finally managed, throwing a cocky smirk back at him. Despite Oscar's smug attitude, it didn't go unnoticed that he was incredibly warm and uncomfortable, sweating, causing some of the blue paint to trickle down his face. Elise tilted her head, trying not to laugh at the sight in front of her.

"You should come here and give me a kiss," Oscar tried to wiggle his brows, again failing when his armor looking helmet didn't give way.
"I think I'm good," Elise snickered, looking around at the group of people now staring at her.
"I am a god! I command you to give me a kiss!" he said with a deep, booming voice.
Everyone started laughing. Elise walked over, holding on to her stomach as she tried to control her laughter. She placed a feather-light kiss on his nose; the only feature in his face that seemed nearly unchanged. A collective awe made Elise bury her face in her palms, blushing and laughing.
"That's right. Listen to your god," Oscar grinned as he returned the favor, pressing a wispy kiss on her nose.

"Wow. I didn't know Oscar could be this... Wow," Bryan stood there flabbergasted, looking at the studio's and his choice for the villain, shaking his head and smirking as he walked off to talk to some of the set designers. The rest of the group broke away to take a break or get some water.

"I see you met Michael," Oscar said as he patiently waited for his makeup artist to take off his helmet for time being. Elise hummed a yes. "And?" Oscar sat down on a bench nearby, letting out a deep huff of air.
"He's nice," Elise grinned.
"Did he flirt with you?" Oscar tilted his upper body, trying to look past Elise at Michael who was
now talking to Olivia, ever so often looking in Oscar's and Elise's direction. "What's considered flirting with Michael?" Elise asked, smirking when she looked over her shoulder to see what Oscar was looking at. Michael was winking at her, smiling his wide smile and crinkling his nose.

"Whatever he just did right there," Oscar squinted at Michael, then looked up at his companion. Elise couldn't help but laugh. A sliver of unwarranted jealousy danced across Oscar's face. "Well, if that's flirting, then you and I have telepathic sex all the time," Elise wisecracked.

"Ah yeah? Hmmmmm," Oscar wiggled his brows. "Is it working?" he wiggled his brows some more.

"You know what, it is the eyes. The eyes just..." Elise couldn't even finish the sentence before returning to another loud laugh. Oscar was trying so hard to be seductive but he looked rather silly in his get up, barely able to move underneath the weight of his costume.

"So, what do you think?" Oscar opened his arms as much as the armor allowed him to move, looking left and right across the set.

"It's insane. I didn't think it would be so .... so .... amazing," Elise stammered, scanning across the set again, taking in more details.

"I know, right? And this is maybe five minutes in the movie," Oscar placed his hands on his thighs, stretching his spine and then his neck side to side.

"I'm so glad you're here," he reached for Elise's hand, giving her a soft appreciative smile, glad that she was here.

It wasn't like his ex had never visited him on sets while filming. In fact, Lorraine would come to sets quite often. The problem was that she would always cause a stir of some kind, like she was the only person of importance. He didn't mind at first, because somehow he'd been able to play it off as humorous, even when she hung out more with his co-stars than with him. But as the relationship went on, an annoyance with his now ex grew within the depths of his stomach, and soon he stopped inviting her along, even begged his P.R. to make up excuses why it wouldn't be a good idea to come to set.

Elise, on the other hand, seemed the opposite. At least, that was how Oscar had her pegged. She had had many opportunities to interrogate about the movie and the people he worked with while they'd talked across oceans, but she never did. Not that she wasn't interested. She'd often ask how his day had gone on. And if he was happy with what they'd filmed. The difference was that, with Elise, the focus was on how he felt and not what big name celebrity was slated to work with him at any given day.

And now that Elise was actually here and by his side, her actions seemed to solidify this observation. Especially when she decided to stay by his side during the break. She took a seat next to him and wrapped a hand around one of his, squeezing it lightly as she watched people buzz by left and right to reset the stage or to touch up the cast members' makeup and costumes.

A woman would come by now and then, bringing some water for Oscar, touching up his blue face paint, and looking over the glue that held the prosthetics in place. Oscar took notice of Elise's subtle smiles towards the makeup artist or any crew member that walked by. She acknowledged everyone equally, never asked for anything but always said thank you when someone offered her water.

"Looks like we're about to start up again," Oscar heaved his chest.

"Yeah," Elise stared into the distance.

"Are you staying? It could be a while. And it will be loud," Oscar pointed out. The same woman that had come by earlier was back to help him back into his helmet.
"I'll stay as long it doesn't distract," Elise got to her feet. "Perfect," Oscar managed a small but tired smile. His day had been long.

"I'm off tomorrow because they're fixing up the second stage and taking all this down for a new set. We can go check out the city. Or sleep in. Or do whatever you want," Oscar held on to Elise's hand, squeezing it gently. He wanted to kiss her so badly it ached his mind. "We'll figure it out later," Elise squeezed his hand back with a smile, and again, he was glad she was here.

"Places guys," Bryan's voice echoed loudly through the megaphone. "Cells off, absolute silence," he added; his voice thundering even louder through the cone-shaped device. Oscar took his position, winked at Elise, and waited. Elise quietly took a seat in the far back, out of his line of sight as not to distract him. The sound of the slate board clacking reverberated through the room followed by Bryan calling "action".

Everything just kind of tumbled across the stage. Loud but small explosions, wind machines, and lighting effects created a jumble of sounds and visual sensations. Elise had no idea how anyone could sort through everything that was going on. All she saw was three or four different cameras rolling at once from different angles; Oscar, Olivia, and Alexandra keeping their focus as they worked through what looked like the end of a fight scene; and Michael standing behind Camera One to call out his lines towards Oscar whenever he looked down a certain way.

This went on for a while. The cameras kept rolling and the cast repeated the same dialogue multiple times, but slightly different each time. Elise was amazed that everyone was able to keep up, and for the first time in her life, she truly did not envy the chaotic process it took to film what would later on probably be a thirty second clip in the movie. When Bryan finally called cut, Oscar and other members of the cast, along with the extras, looked exhausted and ready to call it a day.

Elise glanced at her watch. It was almost six in the evening. She patiently waited as Oscar and Bryan looked over the takes, discussing which ones they liked best; Michael, Alexandra, and Olivia standing behind them, nodding in agreement. "Alright, let's try this one more time. Quick reset everyone. Let's go. LET'S GO!" Bryan shouted through the megaphone. Oscar dragged himself towards Elise. He was definitely exhausted and looked like he needed a nap.

"Everything ok?" she asked when he sat back down on the bench. "Yeah. Just need to try a little harder," Oscar frowned. "I thought you were great, handsome," Elise smiled at him. "Hmmm, thank you, mi Linda," Oscar didn't sound too convincing. "Do you want me to leave? I feel like I might be distracting you," Elise asked carefully. "No, it's not you, Sweetie. It's me. I'm kind of a perfectionist," Oscar sighed, still frowning like he was afraid to tell her something else. "What? Tell me. Remember, honesty," Elise tried to coax his thought out of him.

"I... This...," he inhaled sharply. "This is me. Those late nights. It's mostly me. Repeating the same thing over and over. That's me. People sometimes have to stay longer because of me. Because I have to get it perfect," he looked at Elise, his eyes sad and tired. "Ok. And?" Elise replied with an almost apathetic undertone, but her eyes communicated empathy. "It doesn't bother you?" Oscar asked, taken aback by her reaction. "Why would it? It's your work, right? I mean, isn't this how this works anyways? You do take after take until you have the perfect one? Or different ones to choose from?" Elise queried. "I guess. I just... I can be very compulsive. I want you to know that. I will do the same thing over and over and over. And it does... sometimes... it does interfere with my life. So I need you to know
"what you're getting into," Oscar explained, reaching for her hand, worry lines creating deep creases in his forehead.

"Ok," Elise repeated. "How about, we take it one day at a time? Like you do with me. If it gets too much we can always take a break from each other," she explained.


"I see," his face softened, his eyes gaining a little sparkle. "That sounds like a good idea," he accepted. "I just need you to know, it's never personal when I go into that trance of repetition. I've been known to shut people out," he explained.

"I understand. I can be quite similar," Elise admitted.

"Ok," Oscar nodded. "Ok," he repeated, letting out a soft sigh.

The two sat next to each other for a short while, watching on as people scrambled to reset the stage once again. "Places," Bryan's voice boomed through the building. Oscar turned towards Elise, nudging her with his shoulder. She looked as tired as he felt, the jet lag still tugging away at her inner clock. "I love you," Oscar smiled.

"Te amo," Elise replied, a mischievous grin forming on her face. "Now go and be a god!" she commanded with a seductive raise of her brow, giggling when Oscar replied with a "yes, ma'am".

She watched on as Oscar and his co-stars repeated the same scene. He was in his element, that was for sure. Each time giving a better performance than before. When Bryan called cut for the last time for the night, it was already nine o'clock. Elise sat on the bench, her head heavy and her mind drowsy, she felt herself slip into sleep a few times during takes only to be woken up by her body jerking upright. Oscar gently pushed against her shoulder when she was about to doze off again. "Don't fall asleep, mi Linda," he smiled wearily. He pulled Elise up and led her to the makeup trailer so he could get the prosthetics removed.

Elise sat in a chair behind Oscar, trying her best to stay awake. A gentle snore resonated through the trailer after the makeup artist had removed some of the rubbery prosthetics from Oscar's face. "Is he...," Elise got up to look at Oscar. Sure enough, he was out.

"He tends to do that," his makeup artist chuckled. "I don't blame him. Long days like this are tiring for all of us," the woman explained as she continued to take off the rest of the glued on pieces, wiping away the blue face paint in the process. "At least he snores quietly. You should hear some of the other cast," the artist laughed out loud, waking Oscar in the process.

"Finished?" he asked sleepy-eyed and a little confused.


It took nearly two hours to take off all the prosthetics and costume, some deep indentations on Oscar's skin revealing where the bulk of the weight had been sitting.

"Let's go, so you can tell me about the rest of your day," Oscar smiled after he put his street clothes on. He yawned a few times waiting for the driver to come by and pick them up. Michael and Olivia joined them on the ride back, also looking incredibly tired. By the time they reached the apartment complex, Oscar had fallen asleep on Elise's shoulder, Michael was scrolling on his cell, and Olivia was just about to lull into sleep.

"A whole day off," Olivia stretched her arms as she got out of the SUV. "Sleep!" she mumbled before she took off to the elevators. She waved at Elise who was still waking up Oscar.

Oscar woke up coughing. "Very funny," he grumbled. Elise thought it amusing. She had never seen him this tired.

When they reached the studio, Michael bid his farewell and took off to his place. Elise let out a deep sigh. She too was fatigued beyond reason.
"What else did you do?" Oscar asked while sluggishly taking off his shirt and throwing it on the floor.
"I went for a run. Took a shower. Checked out more of the architecture. I really like this city," Elise replied softly, taking off her sandals and pants.
"That's good," Oscar half sleepily agreed, taking off his jeans.
"I bought a book. And bumped into Leon," Elise pulled off her shirt.
"Oh?" Oscar was suddenly wide awake.

"I was going to text you, but we ran into each other by total accident. At the bookstore," Elise divulged.
"Really?" Oscar felt his stomach churn a little. He poured himself a glass of water and sat down by the kitchen table, wearing only his briefs.
"Yes, really," Elise walked up to him, now only wearing her bra and panties. She ran her hands through his curls and placed a soft kiss between his brows where his thought lines were deepest.
"What did you talk about?" Oscar asked, still a little grumpy.
"This and that. Where we're from. What we're doing career-wise. How we like spending time with our companions," Elise caressed Oscar's face.
"So he's married? And he's talking to you?" Oscar raised his brow.
"Hmmm. Yes," Elise ran her index down Oscar's nose.

"His husband is probably thinking the same about me if he tells him about me," Elise pressed a small kiss against Oscar's nose.
"His husb... What?" Oscar looked puzzled.
"Leon's husband," Elise clarified.
"Oh. So he's ..." Oscar tilted his head.
"Happily married to the man of his dreams," Elise finished his sentence, pinching his cheek.
"That's good," Oscar smiled.
"Now, go take off your briefs, lie down on the bed, and keep the blanket off," Elise commanded. Oscar blinked at Elise. "What?" he asked as though he hadn't heard right.
"Do as I say. If you're a god then I'm a goddess. The goddess always has the last word," Elise disappeared into the bathroom.

Oscar looked after her, a little unsure if he was dreaming. He did as requested, taking off his briefs before crawling onto his bed, grinning at Elise when she returned.
"You didn't specify how to lie down," he smirked, looking down at himself and then at Elise.
"Roll to your stomach," she giggled in response.
"Awe," Oscar frowned.
"Do as I command!" Elise tried her best impression of a theatrical drama voice.

Oscar obeyed and rolled over. Elise crawled on top of the bed and then knelt above Oscar, his derrière between her legs. She leaned down, her weight on her hands. "This might get really warm. If it does, let me know so I can wipe it off," Elise whispered into his right ear, placing a languid kiss right behind his lobe. Oscar let out a deep moan into the pillow in front of him.

Elise sat back up and squeezed a small amount of oil into her hand, rubbing her hands together, then slowly started gliding her palms up and down Oscar's back, pressing down a little harder each
time she returned to the small of his back. "Oh my god, Liz. That feels sooooooo good," Oscar moaned into the pillow. Elise started using her fingertips, kneading up and down his back, then using her thumbs to massage over his spine, listening intently to Oscar's breathing and moaning.

She pulled herself off and stood on the edge behind his legs. She squeezed some more oil into her hands and repeated the process on Oscar’s legs, slowly moving from his thighs to his calves and back up. When she finished, she wiped off his body with a clean towel, placing tenuous kisses up and down his body at the same time.

“Thank you,” Oscar smiled at Elise when she finally curled up next to him, pulling the blanket over them. She had taken off her bra and panties so she could feel his skin on hers against her entire body.

“No. Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” Oscar started playing with her strawberry blond locks.

“Everything.” Elise circled a spot on his shoulder over and over.

“Everything?” Oscar propped up his head on his free hand.

“Everything,” she repeated. “Letting me visit,… paying my phone bill,… trusting me,” her eyes drifted into a dreamy gaze.

Oscar kissed her nose, then her brows, then her eyelids, and lastly her lips.

“Come here,” he whispered as he pulled her on top of him.

Soft kisses trailing over Elise’s neck, Oscar ran his hands down her back. Both were tired, but it didn’t stop them from making love in a most tenuous way. Oscar ran his hands through Elise’s hair and down her back, gently lifting her so he could push his way in between her legs and into her folds. Elise let her upper body rest on top of Oscar’s chest as he moved in and out of her; holding her gently against himself, he placed long lasting kisses behind her lobes. Tender touch, gentle thrusts, and soft moans put both of them into a trance, and when Oscar released, Elise remained on top of him, falling asleep in his arms before she could hear his whispered “I love you.”
Chapter 3

Oscar rolled to his side, missing the warmth of his companion next to him. His hand searched over the soft fabric of his bedding. Half asleep and eyes closed, he finally became aware that the spot next to him was vacant. He was slow to open his eyes, even slower when he sat up and looked around. "Liz?" he rasped. "Mi Linda?"

It was barely six in the morning; Wednesday. Oscar's first day off since he had started working on X-Men and his companion, who was visiting him for only a week, was nowhere to be seen.

He dragged himself out of bed and wrapped the blanket around his body like a cloak, starting towards the living room of his temporary abode. Still waking up from a rather odd dream, he looked around. A soft glow hit the ground by the balcony door, the curtain moving in a cool, gentle breeze. He walked over and found Elise standing on the balcony, her body wrapped tightly in his old cardigan.

Oscar watched her for a while. She was taking in big breaths, looking down on the for-now calm streets of Montreal. She gazed across the buildings and up into the sky, stretching her neck side to side to get rid of the morning tension. The city, enveloped in silence and on the brink of dawn, had a sense of mystery hidden away in its little corners and darkened alleyways, something Elise seemed to enjoy. Something Oscar didn't want to interrupt, so he left her be for another moment or two.

She stretched again and Oscar smiled. "What are you doing up so early?" he whispered to keep the tranquility of the moment.

Elise turned to face a sleepy-faced Oscar blinking at her. "Waiting for the sun to rise," she whispered, smiling at him. He looked like a panda bear, cloaked in his puffy off-white blanket, only his face and a couple of errand curls exposed.

"What?" Oscar drew in the cool morning air. "Nothing," Elise wrinkled her nose. She loved seeing him like this first thing in the mornings: sleepy-eyed and mind still hazy between dream and waking state.

Oscar blinked his eyes again, only just now realizing that Elise was clinging on to her cell with one of her hands. She returned her attention to the city, looking at her cell for a second to see what time the sun was supposed to come up. "I don't think, I've seen the sunrise here before," Oscar whispered, slowly inching closer to Elise.

He could hear her mutter a surprised "oh" under her breath. "A shame really," he added, nuzzling Elise's neck, pressing a warm, lingering kiss against her skin. He had been getting up early for two weeks, always before sunrise, and generally snoozing on his way to the studio. The fact that his companion looked almost ethereal in the low light was more than enough incentive to stay outside with her and pay attention to the city's slowly increasing heartbeat.

"Aren't you cold, mi Linda?" he breathed onto her skin. He pressed another warm kiss on her, tasting her in the process. She always tasted sweet in the mornings. And her smell was but her own. She didn't wear perfume, and the strawberry-coconut fragrance from her shampoo usually dissipated over night, leaving her in her own, sweet scent; something Oscar couldn't get enough of.

"A little." Elise didn't break her gaze from between the buildings, waiting intently for the first soothing ray of sunlight. Oscar scooted as close as he could, opening and wrapping the blanket
around Elise. It was just big enough to envelop them both and leaving enough freedom for her to move the hand that held the cell. The close contact made her sigh in content. Oscar's body radiated heat, carrying with it the trademark spicy, after-the-rain scent, infused with his own fragrances.

"I thought, you've worn this old thing out," he chuckled lightly against the cardigan. "Amazing what a good wash can do, huh?" Elise smiled, keeping her attention on the clear sky behind the buildings. A promise for a beautiful and imminent sunrise. "Almost," she whispered as she opened her camera app and set it to video. She steadied her hand on the railing, switching attention between screen and buildings. Oscar kissed her skin yet again. And then... there it was... A strong, golden glow just behind the high-rises of the city, already cresting over the edges of smaller buildings in between.

Oscar heard Elise take in deep breaths, as though the sun mixed with the cool morning air was helping her regain her strength. "You're so beautiful," he breathed into the back of her neck, making her spine tingle.

She turned slowly, staying in Oscar's warm embrace, an abashed thank you escaping her lips before she gave him a kiss. "Are you naked?" She glanced down, trying to spy beyond the shadow the blanket was throwing. "Hmmm," Oscar bit his lips, brow raising mischievously as he glanced down Elise.

The cardigan was open just enough to reveal the valley between her breasts. It was clear that she wasn't wearing a bra. Oscar slid one hand down her back over the woven fabric of his cardigan, somehow simultaneously clinging on to the blanket with his other hand. A wide, almost devious smile grew in the corners of his mouth. "Feels like I'm not the only one." He licked his lips in that seductive way he knew would get to her. But she resisted. She raised her brow, turned back around, and stared into the distance.

The city was slowly waking up: shop owners rolled up the security grills of their stores; cafés were setting up outside, and restaurant trucks returned from the piers and markets with fresh groceries to stow away. The first teenage looking students slowly emerged from nearby apartment buildings, yawning, carrying heavy book bags, dragging their feet to nearby bus stops, waiting to be picked up for the day, and talking to their friends about -what Elise assumed- homework and daily events. Some white-collared professional looking adults also made their way out of buildings and to offices nearby, sipping on coffees and buying newspapers from small stands on the sidewalks.

Elise let her eyes wander to the neighboring buildings, noticing some apartments with lights on, people moving around in them. "I wonder if those people over there know we can see them." She gestured with her face to another apartment complex to the left. A raspy, deep laugh escaped from Oscar's chest, his hold on her tightening slightly.

"See those tall, rounded windows in the reddish building next to that one?" He guided Elise's face by her chin to look at the windows he just described. She nodded into his fingertips. "Last week, I was sitting out here in the evening, lights off, just...uhm... I may have smoked." He hissed a small guilt-filled breath through his teeth at the admission. Elise looked at him over her shoulder, brow raised. "Hmmmmm... Anyways... Uhm. Some couple was having a lot of fun against that middle window right there." He guided her face back to look at the window.

Elise started laughing. "You're making that up," she snickered when she turned back around to face him. "I'm not!" Oscar grinned, his ears on the verge of turning red. "Did you watch until they were finished?" she asked trying to suppress a rather obvious smirk. "Uhm, no?" Oscar screwed his face into something between denial and guilt, looking down
on the street over Elise's shoulder.
"Liar," she leaned in, giving him a giggling kiss on his cheek.
"Well, I don't think they finished, you know, standing up, but that man had moves," Oscar
scrunched his nose, looking into Elise's eyes.
"Kind of like Shame, huh?" She nodded in confidence. "Michael had some moves as well," she
added, trying hard to withhold a laugh when she saw Oscar's rather shocked face.

"You've seen that movie!? And Michael naked? Full frontal?!" Oscar waited to see if Elise would
blush, but when she didn't his eyes widened into an even bigger shocked stare.
"Hmmm hmmm. Nice goods. Too big for my taste." She bit her lips, her eyes trailing down
Oscar, coming to a rest just below his waist.
"Really?" Oscar replied, a doubtful undertone in his voice.
"Yup, really." Elise's eyes traveled back up, still confident. "It's rather uncomfortable when a guy
is... well... really long." She bit her lips, her eyes locked on his.

Elise offered an angled, soft smile and inched as close to Oscar as she could. She let go of the
cardigan, the garment opening up just enough so that her naked front brushed against his, and he
ventured where this might lead.

Her fingertips traced the ridges of his collarbone, then down the center of his chest, over his
stomach to his waistline. Her eyes still trained on his, she leaned in for a kiss while her hand
wrapped around him. Gently stroking him, he became hard quickly under her touch.
Oscar gulped. Beyond the smile, he saw a sudden, hungry flicker in her eyes.

"Is anyone watching?" Elise whispered, her eyes still fixed on his when she took a half-step
backward.
Oscar shook his head.
"Hmmm," she hummed, looking down to her hand that was wrapped around him. A quick,
naughty smile danced across her lips, and she leaned in and started kissing down Oscar's neck to
the front of his chest.
"Liz! I don't... Hmmm... Ok..." he barely managed to say. He felt her hot breath fan his stomach
before her lips wrapped around the tip. A chuckle and he closed the blanket around his shoulders
and over Elise, hiding her away. He closed his eyes, drawing in short, erratic breaths, biting his lips
hard to cut off any noises he wanted to make.

Elise knew exactly how to tease him. Her tongue skillfully circled around the tip before moving
firmly down the shaft, sucking hard on her way back up, always teasing that small spot at the back.
She kept the pace slow at first, adding her hand, stroking and sucking at the same time. Whispers
filled with cuss words trickled from his mouth as he held on tightly to the blanket with one hand,
the fingertips of his free hand twisting into her strawberry-blond hair when she picked up the pace
even more. A few times, she released her hold on him, gently blowing against. She could hear him
oppressing a moan whenever she did so.

"Liz!" Oscar's voice carried a pleading timbre. He was getting close, his cock throbbing hot, he dug
his fingers deep into Elise's hair as she returned to masterfully suck and stroke his erection, faster
and faster. "Liz! Good god, stop! Before..." Oscar begged.
She ignored him. He was so close his legs started trembling and he struggled to stand up. When
the signature tension surged through his body, and just before he released, she pulled her lips away.

She stayed put and heard Oscar mumble an "unbelievable" as his breathing slowed down to normal
speed. "Is it safe to come up?" Her voice muffled from under the blanket, and he laughed.
He looked around to make sure no one was spying on them. "Yup," he laughed, running his free
hand across his face.
Elise crawled out from underneath the blanket, holding on tightly to the front of the cardigan, and a very mischievous grin on her lips. "Good morning," she smiled, looking somewhat proud.
"Good morning," Oscar's face was flushed deep red. "That was,... that was a first for me. ... On a balcony, I mean..." he bit his bottom lip in a shy yet satisfied way, his eyes now wide awake.
"Same," Elise nodded nonchalantly before returning back into the studio.
"What?" Oscar walked after her, his steps wobbly.
"That's as public as I've ever done it," she laughed.

Oscar closed the balcony door, pulling the curtains in the living area shut before dropping the blanket to the floor. He was warm, to say the least. He watched as his companion emerged completely naked from the bathroom, drying off her cleavage with a small towel. She dropped it on a chair by the dining room table then went to the fridge to grab a vanilla yogurt. She leaned against the kitchen counter and smiled his way. "You want some?" she asked, holding out a spoonful of yogurt.
"Sure," Oscar strolled towards Elise, placing his hands on the counter behind her as he leaned in. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth, waiting for her to guide the spoon towards him.

He waited... and waited... but she denied him the treat, eating the yogurt herself, an impish giggle escaping her lips as she licked off the spoon. Oscar let out a scoffing huff and Elise snickered. She filled the spoon again. "Come and get it," she grinned, holding out the silver utensil in front of his mouth. He tried but she denied him again when she pulled the spoon away quickly.
"OK! You wanna play games. Let's play games," he grabbed the spoon from her hand, holding it high above his head, those few inches he had on her coming in handy now.
"I could just get another one," she smirked, but he was faster than her, blocking her way to the utensil drawer.

"Fine. I'll use this then," she held out her right index, slowly backing up towards the dining area table. She dipped her finger into the yogurt, gazing at him while she slowly sucked the thick liquid off her index. Oscar started biting his lower lip which prompted Elise to repeat the whole thing, this time sucking the sweet liquid off even slower. She kept her eyes fixated on him, and he stood mouth agape and eyes slightly glazed over like he was in a trance. She decided to dip her finger into the yogurt again and he started toward her.

"Don't do it!" Oscar warned playfully.
"What? You mean. This..." Elise coiled her tongue around her finger before closing her mouth around her digit, slowly sucking upwards, releasing a little pop when her lips pulled away from her index.
"Is that how you practice what you did out there?" Oscar was dangerously close to her, a lusting pant in his breath, but she didn't falter.
"Wouldn't you like to know!" She bit her lip, raising her left brow.

She was about to dip her finger into the yogurt again but halted just before she reached the rim of the cup. She saw Oscar tilting his head, running his tongue across the inside of his teeth, squinting at her, slowly shaking his head. She leaned closer and noticed his held breath. "Try and stop me," she whispered. A skipped breath then she dashed off towards the living room, laughing, and he followed. Elise was fast, running around the coffee table a few times. She changed her tactic and rushed for the bedroom when she thought Oscar had dropped his guard, but he captured her halfway there.

"Give me that." He flexed his right arm around her waist, stealing the yogurt out of her left hand with his left. This time it was Oscar who dipped his finger into the yogurt, teasing Elise as he
licked the liquid off his own index. "How do you like that? Huh?" he taunted her, and she crossed her arms and tapped her foot.
"Might as well, it was almost empty anyways."
"Really?" Oscar shifted closer to Elise, trapping her between his body and the wall between bathroom door and bedroom arch. He scraped some yogurt from the walls of the cup, gazing at her neck before he smudged a small amount on her pulsing vein. When she didn't protest, he licked it off extra slow, and a quiet gasp skipped across her lips. He looked inside the cup. Only a little bit of yogurt was left. He knelt down, scraping the rest out of the cup, spreading the small amount across her stomach, gradually licking it off her skin right after, and she gasped again.

Her fingertips reached for his curls. She took a fistful of his hair and pulled on it, making him gaze up at her. Her breaths short and unsteady, she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall, releasing her hold on him. She felt his hands wander up and down her legs as he started kissing her over her hips to between her legs. He grabbed one leg behind the knee, guiding it to rest on his shoulder. Closing his lips around her, he gently started circling his tongue, slowly sliding his right middle and ring finger inside.

Tiny moans left her lips whenever he sucked on her clit, his fingers massaging her insides firmly but carefully, wetness seeping from her as he increased the speed. He let go of her swollen bud when she started rolling her hips, kissing his way up to her neck, occasionally leaving stinging love bites on her skin. She wrapped one leg around his waist, and he bit and sucked on her neck, his fingers moving sinfully inside of her, his thumb circling her clit, faster and faster.

Her moans grew louder and her nails dug into his back. He bit her lobe, then kissed across her jawline; pressing his lips onto hers, he could feel her insides tightening more and more, her stomach flexing. She felt that familiar tug from her core; ready to snap any second, it pulled on her entire body as though the edges of her body were about to recoil into her.

He gazed as she gasped loudly for air, looking up to the ceiling. "Come on, Sweetie. Let it out," he whispered into her ear, then bit into the inside of her neck. That was it. The stinging pain of the bite put her over the edge. Elise let out a loud, almost tortured moan as she came, sinking her head onto Oscar's shoulder to catch her breath.

Goosebumps formed on her breasts, and she started shivering as the cold of the wall she was pressed against, and the thin sheet of sweat evaporating from her skin, cooled her down quickly. Oscar felt her trembling against his skin. "You ok," he breathed into her neck.
"Cold," she whispered.
"Let's take a warm shower," Oscar stepped back, letting Elise take lead towards the bathroom.

She started the water, pulling on the lever to activate the shower head, holding her hand under the liquid as she waited for it to warm up. Oscar held Elise's hand as she stepped into the tub. He followed and the two helped each other washing each other's bodies, each savoring the other's touch.

Oscar loved taking showers with Elise, washing her hair, massaging her body, listening to satisfied moans as she let the water run over her face. He loved how she washed his hair, sometimes hugging him from behind, just standing under the running water, her forehead resting on his back, and her fingertips drawing small circles on his abs. Elise was much the same, loving every little kiss Oscar pressed against her wet skin, or when he ran his hands over back down to her derrière, squeezing her cheeks ever so gently.

"What do you want to do today?" Oscar asked, helping Elise step out of the tub, handing her a
towel to dry off.  
"We can stay in, so you can rest." She helped Oscar dry off. He wrapped the towel around his waist, pulled Elise towards himself by her hips, inhaling deeply as he teased her hair. "I can sleep later," he smiled. "Go get dressed. I'll make breakfast while you fix up your hair," he caressed her face. As much as he wanted to stay in and sleep, he wasn't about to have Elise stay inside, knowing full well she wanted to explore the city. "Ok, but if I catch you yawning, we're coming back here," she stated firmly. She was aware his days had been long, and a rest day would've been better for him.

Oscar nodded in agreement. He quickly put on black jeans and a dark olive-grey button-down shirt. He side-eyed Elise, watching her get dressed in skinny jeans and a soft, white, slouchy sweater. She plugged in her hair dryer, tousling her hair in the hot stream of air rushing from the small appliance. Oscar couldn't steer his gaze away. Elise had this easy-going nature about her, always looking well put together without trying too hard.

"I thought you were going to make breakfast." Elise pulled her mouth into an abashed, crooked smile when she realized he was still standing there, watching her get ready. "I will," he nodded, stepping behind her, resting his arms around her waist, hugging her lightly. "Just trying to enjoy this moment." He nuzzled her hair, kissing her behind her ear before he took off to the kitchen. Elise looked into the mirror hanging on the wall, tracing the skin where he'd just kissed. Her stomach tingled as though a thousand butterflies were flapping their wings all at once.

She traced her lips, still tasting Oscar's breath upon them. She was in love. A smile grew on her face. She was in love and for the first time since she had met Oscar, it didn't scare her. Not in this very moment. She pulled herself from cloud nine, applying some mascara, and minty lip balm. She put on a chocolate colored fashion necklace, pulled on brown leather boots over her turquoise polka dot socks, stepped back, and looked at her reflection. She spun around once and shrugged out an "eh" before she paced to the living area of the tiny studio.

Oscar had set the table, now pouring fresh coffee into mismatched mugs. His curls were tamed and he already wore his boots. He was humming a soft melody under his breath. When he saw Elise, he pulled out a chair, gesturing for her to take a seat as he continued to hum, mumbling a word here or there whenever he returned to the table, serving up eggs over easy, toast, and cut up watermelon.

"What are you singing?" Elise asked; a little confused that she didn't recognize the melody even though it sounded vaguely familiar. "Cucurrucucú paloma," Oscar smiled as he started nibbling on his toast. Elise raised her brows, her expression still confused. "You don't know it?" Oscar asked, a little taken aback. "Hmmm, I don't think so." Elise nibbled on some watermelon. "It's a sad song about a man who is so lovesick he dies of a broken heart." Oscar had propped his head on his hand atop the table. "Sing it for me." Elise caressed Oscar's cheek, her heart rate elevating slightly. He had sung before. At her sister's promotion party. And again when she had held her then six-month-old niece, slowly rocking the baby to sleep while Oscar had played ukulele. But she had never asked him to sing just for her.

Oscar pulled up the chair next to her, narrowing his eyes, trying to recall the lyrics of one of his favorite songs. He took Elise's hand, placing a small kiss on the back of it. He inhaled a couple of times and then the words smoothly rolled across his tongue and out of his mouth.

"Dicen que por las noches
Nomas se le iba en puro llorar
Dicen que no comía
Nomas se le iba en puro tomar
Juran que el mismo cielo
Se estremecía al oír su llanto
Como sufrió por ella
Que hasta en su muerte la fue llamando
Ay, ay, ay, ay, cantaba
Ay, ay, ay, ay, gemía
Ay, ay, ay, ay, cantaba
De pasión mortal, morí..."

Elise let him finish. She closed her eyes for a moment then felt her cheeks flush when Oscar placed a tenuous kiss on her forehead. "That's a sad song alright," she whispered before he returned to his chair.

"That's how I feel when you're not here." His ears turned slightly crimson. He smiled across the rim of his coffee cup and watched Elise get lost in her own thoughts.

"Thank you," she said softly, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

"You ok?" Oscar furrowed his brows, a look of genuine concern crossing his face.

"Yes. Yes, I am. Let's get ready to go." Elise wiped away the tear, finishing her breakfast.

A short while later, they stood in the lobby of the apartment complex. Elise talked to Dominic, the guard, while Oscar was on his cell. Every so often, he glanced toward Elise who laughed at whatever Dominic was saying. Oscar smiled at his companion, a sense of pride overcoming him. He loved the way she talked to people, always looking beyond the uniform they were wearing. She greeted the janitor passing by, waved at a couple of maids getting ready for the day.

Elise caught Oscar's gaze. She quickly turned back to Dominic who handed her a piece of paper on which he circled a few things. She bid a cheery "merci beaucoup" and "au revoir", walking towards Oscar, almost skipping across the marble floors.

"Where to, my lady," Oscar grinned, holding out his elbow when they exited the building, waiting for Elise to hook in. He took a swift peek at his watch. It was only eight o'clock, but the streets were busy with people.

"To Rue Crescent, my good sir," she chuckled, swinging her arm into Oscar's.

"What are we doing today, mi Linda?" he asked as Elise took lead towards said destination.

"There are a few art galleries I want to check out. I also saw a couple of antique stores, and a music store," Elise smiled.

"Are we looking for anything specific?" He pulled Elise closer to his side to avoid her bumping into a group of students.

"Just looking. Although, I might buy a CD or two," she squeezed Oscar's arm when they stopped at a red light.

He wanted to lean in to give her a kiss on her temple, but Elise shook her head. "What? I don't see any photographers." Oscar looked around, scanning the busy intersection.

"I know, but you know how I feel about PDA. Please, just for now," Elise kept her eyes straight ahead.

Oscar let out a disappointed sigh. She was right. Both wanted to keep the relationship under the radar for now. It was quite often the case that as soon the Hollywood press found out about some celeb's new flame, paparazzi weren't far behind, hounding people, asking too many questions, invading personal space to get some kind of reaction.

"I guess I'll be counting the times I want to kiss you today and make it up to you later," he wiggled
his brows. Elise bit her lip to cut off a laugh. He always made her laugh with things like that, even when she’d been in India. One day, he had sent her a text with rows and rows of hearts. "I thought about you two 237 times today," the message attached had read. How he’d been able to focus on counting those thoughts, she had no idea, but she didn’t care, even if the numbers seemed a little exaggerated.

The pair reached the first gallery. Beautiful paintings of the harbor took up most of the space. Elise definitely had an affinity for blue hues, always examining paintings with her favorite colors just a little longer than the others. The second gallery had a mix of works from various artists. A painting of a field of sunflowers held Elise captivated. She examined the picture for a long time, mentally tracing over each flower.

"You like that one?" Oscar asked cautiously. He knew if he offered to buy it, she’d get upset. "It's beautiful," Elise tilted her head as though to get a slightly different perspective. "You should ask how much it costs," Oscar encouraged her. "Hmmm... Maybe... I might come back for it. Not today," she gave Oscar a warm smile with a hint of "don't even think about buying this for me" hidden in the corner of her eye. "Ok," Oscar conceded.

They left the store and Elise pulled out the piece of paper Dominic had given her. It was a map of the downtown area. She examined the streets, looking around to get her bearings. A group of maybe five teenage girls stood nearby, giggling, whispering into each other's ears, blushing when Oscar nodded at them. Elise was fully aware that they might be fans of his, trying to ignore their giggles and glances.

One of the girls finally built up the courage to walk up to Oscar, asking if he was who she thought he was, and when he nodded a confident yes, the girl ran back to her group. "You should say hello," Elise was fixated on the paper, pretending to be busy with figuring out where they were. "Hmmm," Oscar hummed. "You sure you don't mind?" he asked, looking for some kind of approval, and Elise finally peeled her eyes off the paper. "Handsome, I get it. Say hello, or else they might follow us all day. They have since the previous gallery." She folded the paper and stashed it in her pocket.

Just in that moment, the group of girls flocked around Oscar asking for pictures. Elise stepped aside, grinning at Oscar. He was patient, asking the girls' names, taking several selfies with their phones before telling them that he had to move on. The girls giggled when he looked back over his shoulder, giving them a short wave of his hand.

"Best be moving fast," he suggested and Elise agreed. She knew once someone was aware that a celebrity was in the area, people might try to find or bump into them. They reached the record store Elise wanted to check out a few minutes later. To their luck, the store was nearly empty, only a few customers searching through vinyl and CDs. Elise aimed straight for a box labeled new vinyl and started skimming through.

Oscar stood behind her, gently placing his palm on the small of her back. "Which one are you looking for?"

"The new Mumford record." Elise kept searching with a content smile on face. The warmth of Oscar's hand seeped through her shirt. It felt nice to feel his hand resting right there.

After a few minutes, Elise gave up. The store didn't have the vinyl, or at least it wasn't in the box. She strolled over to the CDs and immediately found what she was looking for: a cardboard style
case with a bench overlooking a city was printed dead center; the words "Wilder Mind" and "Mumford & Sons" printed in slender white letters at the top edge of the case. Elise flipped the case over to read the titles of the songs, her fingertips languidly tracing each word.

It was as though she had found a treasure of some sort. She looked up at Oscar, smiling and biting her lips. "I might be slightly obsessed with their music," she confessed.

Oscar chuckled. "I know. I saw your collection at your place," he scrunched his nose. He knew she loved Mumford & Sons' music. He also knew she owned whatever format was available for each album and EP.

He walked up to a small window and asked the man behind it a question. Elise couldn't hear what he was asking, but a few seconds later Oscar stood back next to her, sliding a record in front of her face while placing a tender kiss on her temple. Elise blushed and leaned into the kiss.

"Let's go pay," Oscar whispered and Elise quietly agreed.

"I need some coffee," Oscar inhaled sharply once they exited the store. Elise side-eyed him and noted his eyes were a little sleepier than usual. "Do you want to go back?"

"No. I want to check out the antique shops with you," he countered.

"Mi Lindo, if you're tired, we should go back," Elise squeezed his arm, trying to convince him but Oscar didn't give in.

"There's a café close by. We can sit in the back. I just really need coffee and a short break," he insisted.

Elise sighed, but she didn't want to argue him on this. Oscar could be quite determined to get his way to make her feel happy. While she'd been in India, Oscar would Skype with her late into the night, often falling asleep mid-sentence as he was tired from his days. It had made her chuckle then, but she wished he'd gotten more sleep. At times she had to be strict, almost mean, scolding him for not listening. This wasn't one of those times. Especially out in public.

They soon found the small café Oscar had mentioned. He was clearly a regular. The manager immediately recognized Oscar and offered him his usual table. "Oh, is that her?" the short stout man inquired as he gave Elise a swift once-over. He introduced himself as Javi, vigorously shaking Elise's hand while giving her a warm smile.

"Hmmm," Oscar winked at Elise as the manager led them to a small table out back, almost entirely secluded from prying eyes and surrounded by tall green plants and fresh cut flowers.

"Will your friends join you as well?" Javi asked in a French-Quebec accent.

"Not today. Today, it's just me and Elise," Oscar pulled out a chair for his companion to sit down, then he seated himself across.

"A triple, please?" Oscar requested without pause, and Javi turned on his heel and took off, knowing exactly what Oscar meant. "The cast and crew sometimes hang out here," he explained when he saw Elise looking after a hastily paced Javi, and she smiled, relaxing into her chair.

Somber music echoed through some hidden speakers into the area and Oscar rested his head on his propped up hand. His head swayed side to side to the rhythm of the music; eyes closed, lips smiling.

"Handsome?" Elise asked when his movement slowed down. He seemed on the cusp of falling asleep.

"Yup?" He smiled even wider.

"Maybe we should go back." Elise reached for his hand that was resting on the table.

"I'm good. Just checking the insides of my eyelids," he chuckled softly.

"You're so stubborn." Elise retracted her hand and retrieved her phone instead, snapping a picture
Just then, Javi returned with a strong cup of espresso. The smell wrapped around Oscar's nose and he almost instantly seemed revitalized by that alone. "You're my hero, Javi," Oscar smiled. Elise buried her face into her palms, laughing at the sight of a tired Oscar gazing dreamily at Javi. "Long nights, Monsieur?" Javi asked to which Oscar replied with an almost drunk-like nod, and this time Javi laughed. He winked at Elise and she giggled. "What can I get you, Mademoiselle?" "I'll have a regular coffee," Elise requested, and Javi rushed, yet again. "And two strawberry pastries," Oscar called after Javi before he was out of earshot. He downed the espresso and, a few minutes later, was definitely more lively.

Oscar studied Elise who peered around now and then, taking in the ambiance of the café. Her attention returned to him and he seemed to have thoughts waiting. "What?" "Why do you like them so much?" He pointed to the bag from the record store which Elise had carefully placed on the table. Her gaze dropped while she collected her thoughts. That was a very personal question. Usually, she shrugged it off and gave the short "because they make great music" version of her story. But with Oscar, she felt she needed to be more open. He patiently waited for her eyes to level with his as he reached for her hand that was resting on the table, his index circling her wrist right above her scar.

"Tell me," he requested softly when she still hadn't answered. Elise took a deep breath in, looking at Oscar's hand that was holding on to hers. "I don't want you to think....," she started. She thought for breath. "... That I'm ... weak." Her face lost that gleeful sparkle that had been with her all morning. "I won't." Oscar reassuringly brushed his index across her scar. "Their music, ... it saved me," she paused. "And that's all I'll say." She tilted her head ever so lightly, raising her brow. Her eyes had started welling up with tears but she managed to hold them back. She heaved her chest and exhaled, hoping he would accept her answer as was for now. "That's good." Oscar lifted her hand, pulling it towards his face, placing soft kisses on her fingertips. He didn't push on. The choice to talk about her past was hers, after all.

The two quietly ate the strawberry pastries then went to the antique shops Elise had seen the day before. There were some nice pieces of furniture in the second shop. "I really think David would love these," Elise stated. "Mikki's boyfriend?" Oscar looked at some lamps set on a table next to the dressers Elise was inspecting. "Mmmmm hmmm. He's into restoration and all that. I should send her a picture and see what she says," Elise said, taking a picture before she had even finished her statement.

"Mikki and David are close?" Oscar inquired. "Uhhhhm... Yes." Elise seemed unsure. "Aren't you best friends?" Oscar looked confused. "We are, but it's kind of complicated. Suffice to say, he's good for her," Elise smiled. "You guys aren't talking about... You know... Roar....," Oscar had stopped looking at the lamps and was now devoting all his attention to Elise, curious for the answer. "Uhhhhmm... Tss...." Elise gritted through her teeth. Oscar shook his head. He wasn't surprised, yet he was.

"I don't go into details. It's mostly just fluffy talk, and girl issues," Elise scrunched her nose when she caught Oscar's expression turn between horrified and disbelief with a hint of disapproval. "I promise. No details... Lo prometo," she reiterated, placing a quick peck on his nose. "K," Oscar managed a thin-lipped smile, squinting at Elise, then laughed. "I figured you guys
might talk," he conceded. He looked around the store some more, picking up an antique chess-checkers table that still had all the original pieces in the drawers.

On their way out, Elise caught him yawning. "That's it. We're going back, and you're taking a nap." She hailed for a cab, putting her foot down when Oscar resisted, and he caved. The way back was a mere five-minute cab ride. Even so, by the time they reached the front doors of the apartment complex, Oscar was out, snoring into Elise's shoulder. Elise shook his shoulder and he jolted up, almost hitting his head on the roof of the cab. "Sorry," he muttered. On the elevator ride up, Oscar kept dozing off while standing up.

Carrying the small table, her records, and her purse, it was a miracle that Elise was able to open the studio's door while at the same time making sure that Oscar didn't fall over, hitting his head on the ground. She placed all the stuff in the tiny nook to the right of the door, then pushed Oscar towards his bed, taking off his boots when he dropped down and backwards onto the mattress.

"Come cuddle with me," he begged, holding on to Elise. "I will. Gotta use the restroom first," she freed herself from his already loosening grip. When she returned, Oscar had fallen asleep, his body spread diagonally across the bed. Elise took another picture. It was too adorable to pass up the opportunity. She glanced at her watch. It was only noon. She set the alarm on her cell to 3 p.m., figuring that three hours of sleep should be enough rest.

She took off her boots and jeans and curled up next to Oscar, relaxing into his side, letting her mind drift into sleep as she listened to his steady breaths. When the alarm went off a few hours later, Oscar was still asleep. Elise reached for her cell, hitting the snooze button. When the alarm went off a few minutes later, she turned it off altogether.

A gentle squeeze against her shoulder some time later woke her up. "Oh shit, what time is it?" she looked around in a daze; Oscar next to her, smiling at her while he held her in his arm. "Five-ish," he replied with a satisfied sigh. It felt good to be rested. He kissed Elise's hair, twirling some fabric of her sweater between his fingers. "This is nice," he whispered. "Yes," Elise replied, breathing into the side of his chest.

Oscar's cell rang. He ignored it at first, hitting the forward to voicemail button. Then it rang again, and again, and again. Ten or so ignored calls in, he finally checked to see who could possibly not live without a response.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Oscar!!! Didn't you get my messages? I've been trying to reach you for over four hours," an annoyed male voice hissed into the receiver. "James? What's up?" Oscar played with Elise's hair, watching her body gently rise and fall with each breath, her face still buried into his side.

"Is she with you?" James asked, a definite agitation underlining his question. "What's wrong?" Oscar looked down at Elise who had fallen back asleep by his side. "Are you able to turn on the TV without her knowing?" James was growing impatient.

"Uhm... kind of in bed... together.....," Oscar joked, trying to make it sound more than it was, but a frustrated sigh from his agent signaled that it wasn't time for funny games. "Hold on." Oscar carefully pulled his arm out from underneath Elise. Scooting to the edge of his bed, he got up and snuck out to the living room. "What's going on?" he whispered.

"Turn on your TV. E-News," James instructed and Oscar did as told. "Congratulations! You're on TV," the agent stated with a voice so sarcastic and cold that it startled Oscar. "Fuck!" He cussed.

Oscar's face was plastered across the screen, and so was Elise's. There they were at the
intersection. And at the gallery. And at the record store. And exiting the café. And lastly exiting the antique shop. "Ok it's not too bad," Oscar thought out loud. "Wait for it!" James almost yelled this time.

Oscar flinched at the tone and watched on.

Fast paced music played. The two moderators' faces beamed with big, trained smiles in the corner of the screen. "New couple alert. Who is Oscar Isaac dating?" the female moderator asked with a high-pitched voice, the fake excitement almost nauseating. "The up and coming was spotted today in Montreal, holding hands and getting cozy with a strawberry-blond woman. Kissing and doe-eyed, they were seen shopping for furniture together. Maybe for their new apartment?" the male co-moderator chimed in.

"Oh god, please. Tell me they don't know who she is," Oscar implored. "Keep watching. This is a repeat. For the third time now," James' tone was terrifying.

"It turns out that she's no stranger to E-News. The young woman by his side is none other than Elise Redfield, a close friend of Craig Parker whom she was rumored to have dated in 2008. That rumor turned out to be oh so false when Parker came out publicly later on during that same year," the woman continued, a photograph of a vaguely familiar face popping up in the frame. Oscar recognized the actor from a couple of movies.

"Shit," Oscar cussed as he plopped down on the sofa. "It gets better," James' voice remained dangerously menacing.

"The young woman who works for a Seattle based contracting company has had her share of tragedy. In 2005, Elise's husband of six years tragically died in a car accident, leaving behind a distraught and mentally unstable..." Oscar turned down the sound before he could hear how the moderator finished the sentence. Old newspaper clippings and old photographs flashed across the screen.

There was a picture from the crash site, Elise's wedding picture, and a photograph of Joe in his uniform; and another picture of Elise with a man he'd never seen before: tall and in a tux, arm wrapped tightly around a half-smiling, empty-eyed Elise. It was all stuff from Elise's past Oscar was sure she didn't need reminding of.

"Where did they find all this stuff?" he breathed into the receiver. "They had all of this from way back when the whole Parker thing surfaced," James exhaled, his voice finally settling into a calmer tone. "Look, this isn't going to go away, at least not as quick as we want it to. You know, once they sink their teeth into something like this, they'll ask questions until they either get bored or one of us gets annoyed and bashes out," James sounded exhausted. "Lenny is going to come by later to talk to you. For now, we're going with the whole no comment thing, but you know sooner or later it'll be best to just confirm to make them back off. It really depends how well Liz is going to handle all this," he added, sighing.

Oscar looked to the bedroom arch, his heart dropping when he caught Elise staring at him. She had changed into her oversized baggy sweater and sweatpants, maybe to gain some kind of comfort. She was holding her cell to her chest, just standing there, her expression vacant and all color drained from her face.

"I'm gonna call you back," Oscar told James who agreed with a tired o.k. "My sister is on the phone," Elise's voice carried an indifferent tone to it. Oscar got up, walked over to Elise, and took the phone from her hand. "Christine?" he asked
carefully. He was more terrified of James' wife than his agent.
"Is she ok?... Oscar?... Is she ok? Don't lie to me if she isn't... Is she ok?" Christine's voice
 trembled, asking the same question over and over.
"Uhhhh. I'm not sure," Oscar answered. He should've chosen different words.
"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU'RE NOT SURE!" Christine shouted into her end.
"I mean, she's here with me but, uhmmm, really quiet?" Oscar tried to remain calm. It wouldn't
 have helped if he lost it as well.
"Ok. OK. That's good. Don't let her leave. Promise. Don't let her go!" Christine implored.
"I'll do my best," Oscar sighed before hanging up the phone.

Elise's phone kept ringing, sounds from different people's texts chiming and echoing through the
room. She was still under the arch, staring at nothing. Oscar glanced at the screen. Mikki had left
at least thirty messages, her boss had also called and messaged. Patricia kept sending rows of
question marks, and Helen, Elise's P.A., kept calling.

"Do you want me to answer any of these?" Oscar asked softly.
Elise shook her head. She walked to the fridge and poured herself a glass of water from the built-in
dispenser then paced towards the sofa, gradually lowering herself while staring at the screen, the
gossip show still flickering on. Elise turned up the volume. For a while the show had changed
topic, talking about other celebs, fashion police, and upcoming movies. And then the photographs
of her and Oscar flashed across the screen again, the moderators interpreting their own ideas into
what they saw. But it wasn't the new photographs that made Elise's stomach churn.

She looked up at Oscar, hauntingly calm, her past dug up and displayed for the world to see. "I'm
sorry I ruined your week," she stated like that was the problem.
"No. No, Sweetie, you didn't." Oscar sat down next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.
Elise leaned in, resting her head on the side of his chest. He squeezed her closer then felt her
trembling against himself. She'd started crying into his shirt; everything she was feeling crushing
down on her. Oscar kissed her hair and just held her. He didn't know what to say because he had no
idea what was going through her mind. He could only guess, so instead, he continued to console
her with gentle kisses on her hair. When she calmed down, she wiped away her tears and changed
the channel on the TV to some mindless cartoon, pulling her legs up on the sofa as Oscar continued
to hold her.

A loud knock on the door startled them both. "Must be Lenny," Oscar exhaled sharply as he pulled
himself to a stand. He got to the door, pausing when he looked through the peephole.
"We know you're in there," a female voice called out.
Oscar glanced back at Elise who was focused on the TV. He slowly opened the door to a foot-wide
gap."It's not a good time," he whispered.
"Yeah, we know," Olivia Munn stared at him, brow raised. Behind her stood Michael Fassbender
and Alexandra Shipp.
"You going to let us in or what?" Alexandra asked impatiently.

"Guys, really. It's not a good time," Oscar tried to hold the door in place.
"Well, you don't get to decide that," Olivia squeezed through the gap and past Oscar. He let go of
the door, gesturing for the rest of the group to come in.
"Wait," James McAvoy yelled from down the hallway. He ran towards Oscar's studio, grinning, a
bottle of some strong spirited alcohol in one hand, a bag of small plastic shot glasses in the other.
"I do have glasses," Oscar scoffed.
"Yeah, well yer never know. Best to come prepared," James patted Oscar on the back as he entered
the place.
"How are you?" Olivia had dropped down next to a perplexed Elise.
"I'm ok," she fibbed, looking up at Oscar who mouthed a sorry.
"Right. Well, you don't look ok," Olivia pointed out the obvious.
Elise let out a mocking huff of air, looking at the group of people standing and waiting in the kitchen area. Clearly, they were all aware of what was going on. Elise heaved her chest.

"It's ok girly, we've got yer covered," James arranged some plastic shot glasses on the dining room table, filling the cups halfway with whatever it was he had brought along.
"Come on," Olivia stood up, a sympathetic smile on face, hand stretched out.
"I don't really do shots," Elise held back a wave of new tears. It dawned on her that they all had dropped in to offer their support.

Oscar started laughing. "Do you want me to show them the picture of you singing," he teased Elise.
"That... had been a very long week." She crossed her arms in defense.
Oscar got out his cell, scrolling to find the picture when she still hadn't joined the group.
"Ok, ok. I'm coming," she shot up, darting towards Oscar who quickly stashed his phone back in his pocket.
"That's what she said," Michael blurted out.
"Michael!" the whole group gasped in shock, their mouths agape, except Elise who tilted her head, narrowing her eyes.
"Well he's not entirely wrong," Elise raised her brow, suggestively looking at Oscar. "But he said it too," she quickly added, looking around into the shocked faces of Oscar's co-stars.

The whole group started laughing loudly. Olivia hid her reddened face inside her hands. Michael leaned on James who in turn was leaning on the table, trying to catch his breath, little tears streaming down his face. Alexandra shook her head, holding up her hand for a high five towards Elise who gladly accepted, slapping her hand into Alexandra's as she watched Oscar shaking his head. His ears deep read, he bit his lips in disbelief. Maybe Elise was a lot more resilient than her family gave her credit for.

"Come here," he beamed, pulling Elise towards himself, planting a passionate kiss on her lips.
"Oh god, get a room," Alexandra wisecracked.
"We have one, right there," Oscar countered as he nonchalantly gestured towards the bedroom.
"Alright! Live action theatre," Michael wiggled his brows, his face deep crimson as he tried to hold back another laugh.
"Sorry, but I don't think you have enough money for that play," Elise shot back.

The entire group sunk into joined laughter.
"Oscar, you better keep an eye on that one. With that kind of wit, some other guy might try and steal her from you," Michael chuckled.
"Hmmm," Oscar squinted fiercely at Michael.
"Don't worry, Oscar. I wouldn't dare," Michael added swiftly.

"Alright, let's drink already," James strongly rolled his r's, his Scottish accent shining through. It made Elise giggle. She raised her glass, looking around.
"Don't let em get to yer," James said.
Elise thought for a second. "Fuck em," she said, throwing back the shot. The spicy liquid burned in the back of her throat, and her face twisted into an agonizing expression as she gasped for some air.
"Holy fuck, that's some strong shit," she exhaled sharply.
Everyone just sort of gaped at her, especially Oscar who didn't expect her to be this bold, drinking the shot without smelling it first.
"To new friends," Elise raised her glass, the effects of the first shot washing over her, making her feel warm and a little tipsy.
"New friends," they all reiterated, throwing back the shots, hissing through their teeth.
"Good god man, you trying to kill us?" Michael rasped.
"Good stuff, huh?" James grinned sheepishly.
"Let's play a game," Olivia grinned. She had brought along Sorry!
"About time," Alexandra smirked. "I hope you all brought tissues because I'm queen at this game and I will bring you all down."

"Oh boy. Mensch, ärgere Dich nicht!" Elise blurted out.
"Mensch what now?" James looked a little puzzled.
"Oh, that's right! You haven't met Elise until now. She speaks German," Michael beamed.
"I see. Well, I'm glad to finally get to meet ya. Oscar doesn't shut up about yer, ever," James held out his hand. "It's James McAvoy by the way," he wrinkled his nose.
"I know who you are," Elise said with confidence. "I saw you in the U.K. version of Shameless," she divulged.
"You've seen him naked, too?" Oscar assumed, looking offended.
"Well, he wasn't completely naked. It's not my fault European filmmakers are more liberal," she shrugged. James and Michael nodded in agreement. They didn't seem bothered that Oscar's companion had seen them without clothes.
"So let me get this straight, you've seen these guys' movies, nudity included, but you haven't seen any of my work?" Oscar pulled his lips into an overdramatic quivering frown like he was about to lose it.
"Actually, I have seen a couple of your movies. I'm just trying to pace myself, mi Lindo," she walked up to Oscar, pressing a fleeting kiss on his nose.
"Hmmm, nice save," Oscar's face softened into a smile, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, placing a kiss on her neck.

"Mi what?" James interrupted the tender moment. For a fraction of a second, the two lovebirds had clearly forgotten that they weren't alone.
"Lindo. It's Spanish. It has a few meanings. Cute, handsome, beautiful, gorgeous," Elise explained, gazing into Oscar's eyes as he was still holding on to her.
"Riiight... Break it off you two," Olivia wriggled her way between Elise and Oscar.

"She speaks like a million languages," Olivia recalled as she cleared the coffee table next to the sofa, putting blankets on the floor. The studio was small and seating was limited, but they all somehow made it work. The group divided into three teams of two: Oscar teamed up with Elise, Michael with Alexandra, and Olivia with James. An all-out war ensued, the teams playing furiously against each other. Oscar occasionally placed a tenuous kiss on Elise, squeezing her hand, nodding at her to make sure she was ok before she returned her attention to the board.

Elise and Alexandra went head to head, battling for their respective teams to finish first; both women strategically taking out the other team's pawns, leaving behind a metaphorical trail of frustrated devastation. Olivia got more and more into the spirit as the game progressed, and soon the men sat back, watching on as the women threw heated words at each other whenever one of them moved a game piece back to another team's starting point. Dice flying across the table, more exchanging of passionate cuss words, the game came to an end when Alexandra was the first to bring all four of her team's pawns home.
"I think, I may have met my match," Elise admitted defeat, shaking Alexandra's hand in good sportsmanship. "We should team up next time," Alexandra suggested. "Oh no, no, no, no, NO! None of us stand a chance if you do," Oscar chimed in. "Oh, cry me a river," Alexandra countered, laughing. "He's a sore loser," she revealed. "Really?" Elise was surprised. She didn't know that little fact. "Don't worry, mi Lindo. We'll go easy on you," she smirked.

When Lenny showed up, pizza boxes and beer in tow, they all took a break. Lenny pulled Oscar aside, talking about what James (Redfield, Oscar's agent), had already brought up: no comment for now, laying low, ignoring paparazzo's questions, smiling through the whole thing when confronted.

Elise stepped out on the balcony, taking in the city's lights, needing a break from the things she overheard Lenny and Oscar say. She glanced at her phone. It was almost 9 p.m. She rubbed her shoulders, the cold mid-Spring air piercing through the fabric of her sweater, she closed her eyes, reflecting on the day. Anger grew inside the depths of her stomach, churning, simmering, on the verge of boiling over. Why did people have to invade her privacy like that? She never asked for that. No one would willingly ask for that no matter how recognizable a person was. She didn't want to be known as some tragedy, always getting reminded about Joe. She didn't want to be known as distraught and unstable. And she definitely didn't want to be reminded of Frank. She had no idea how the station had gotten that picture of her and her ex.

She scrolled through the messages from her friends and family, finally replying to them. "I'm ok," she texted to everyone that had messaged her. A mix of "are you sure" and "good, see you when you get back" messages flashed across the tiny screen in response. She was grateful her friends and family were there for her but she was worried if she were to call any of them now, they'd all ask too many questions causing her to fall apart, unraveling at the seams which she had so carefully sewn back together.

She took a deep breath in, screaming out a loud "Fuck you" into the air. "Fuck you, too," some random person replied in the distance. "Sorry," Elise yelled back. "Same," the stranger yelled back. Elise laughed, her breath foggy as the air temperature dropped a few more degrees.

"Feeling better?" she heard Oscar's voice and spun around. He'd been watching her through the door after he'd finished talking to Lenny. "Actually, yes," she admitted. "Let's go back inside," Oscar reached for her, wrapping his hand tightly around her frozen fingers. Elise leaned in, her forehead on his chest, she hugged him in an endearing embrace, inhaling his scent, letting the warmth of his body envelop her.

When they stepped back into the studio, James (McAvoy) was cleaning up the shot glasses while Olivia folded the blankets. "Michael already left. But he said to ask you guys if you wanted to go out on Friday. Since we're going into a long weekend?" Alexandra asked while scanning through some messages on her phone. "Can I get back to him on that?" Oscar asked as he stored away the leftover pizza. "Of course," Alexandra nodded as she slipped on her sandals, hugging first Elise then Oscar goodnight.
"I better turn in too," Olivia stated, hugging Elise tightly and whispering an "all will be ok" into her ear before leaving.

"Listen," James looked at Elise while gathering up his things. "It'll go away. Hollywood gets bored fairly quickly once they realize they can't get a rise out of you. Ok?" he leaned in, leaving a small peck on Elise's cheek. "See you tomorrow, mate," he patted Oscar's back on his way out.
"They're good people," Elise smiled softly.

"I know," Oscar stroked her face and Elise looked up. His eyes were heavy with worry. He opened his mouth a few times, looking as though he was rephrasing whatever he wanted to say to her. He took a deep breath in, clinging on to whatever little courage he had left. "If you don't...," he gulped. "If you don't want to stay with me, I understand," the words dragged heavily as he spoke, and his eyes started to fill with tears.

Elise had seen him nervous before, downright anxious. This was more. He was scared. Elise felt the same. She wanted to think about it. All of this was a lot to digest. But as she stood there, a sudden calmness overcame her. "I hate to break it to you, but it looks like you're going to be stuck with me for a while," she bit her bottom lip, suppressing a tender smile.
Oscar closed his eyes, letting the words sink into his mind. A tear rolled down his cheek. Elise leaned in and kissed it away. "Thank you," Oscar mumbled, his heart racing.

"We should probably try and get some sleep," Elise whispered.
"Hmmm," Oscar hummed. "I have a better idea," he gingerly kissed her hair before walking to the tiny nook by the door. He rummaged through the bag from the record store and got out the CD. He stuck it into the player by the TV, and skipped forward to the twelfth song, keeping it on hold.
"I may have listened to this album before on Pandora," he smiled.
"A secret fan, I see," Elise smirked.
"Something like that," Oscar admitted, biting his tongue to not mention that he knew the lead singer of the band personally.

"Come here," he held out his hand, the song still on hold. He didn't want it to start until Elise was in his arms. He delayed playback for a few seconds, wrapping his left arm around her waist, holding her left hand against his chest with his right, fingers intertwining with hers as a somber piano chord resonated through the studio, followed by the familiar raspy voice of the lead singer.

"There is no great thing, to stop and sing
Waiting for the rain
And this perfect pill, it's all too much
On the edge again

Don't look away...

Oscar sunk his head into the corner of Elise's neck and inhaled. "I love you," he whispered as he slowly led Elise around the living room in small circles.

"And I can't be for you all of the things you want me to
But I will love you constantly
There's precious little else to me
And though we cry, we must stay alive...

Oscar felt silent but hot tears seeping through his shirt. He lifted Elise's face by the chin, wiping away her tears, kissing her gently on her forehead before letting her face return into his shirt. He
tightened his grip as they continued to dance, the song on repeat a few times, Elise eventually
stopped moving, her arms hanging loosely around Oscar's neck. "Liz?" he looked down on her, his
question met with steady small breaths. She had fallen asleep dancing in his arms.

Oscar lifted Elise as carefully as possible as to not wake her and carried her to the bedroom, where
he laid her on the mattress. He tucked her in and took off his clothes, curling up next to her and
letting out a soft smile before dozing off into dreams of his own.
Elise woke up late on Thursday. Or at least what she considered to be late. It was nine in the morning and the sunlight was tickling her skin. She imagined it was Oscar brushing his lips against her warm body, waking her with tantalizing kisses and tiny love bites.

She had dreamed a lot about mornings like that when she’d been traveling. His warm skin against hers, him playing with her hair, his nose circling the same spot against her shoulder over and over again… and more.
She'd always woken up with flushed cheeks, and Helen, with whom she had shared a room in India, had teased her relentlessly. The term love-struck had definitely been thrown around a few times. Not that Elise’s P.A. had acted any differently. She had seen Helen sneak off with Matt a few times during the business trip, and soon, the whole crew was very much aware of the two lovers’ relationship.

Elise inhaled and exhaled sharply, slowly opening her eyes. Her head was throbbing from whatever that sinful delicious concoction had been that James McAvoy had been serving up all evening. On top of being hung-over, she hadn't slept too well last night. Daunting nightmares had her up in cold sweats every few hours. Not even her meds had helped her stay asleep.

Oscar had been sweet of course, holding her quietly whenever she returned to bed, but Elise was upset that she had kept him awake this way. She didn’t want him to slur through his dialogue or fall asleep mid-take, which, according to some of his co-stars, had happened at least twice, both times it seemed after a long night of chatting with Elise while she had been in India.

She rolled herself into the blanket, enjoying the comforting warmth just a little while longer. Last night had been emotionally draining, and despite receiving kind words of support from her family and friends - and Oscar’s co-stars -, the whole situation had left Elise dreading her future with him. She knew she wanted to stay with him, letting the relationship grow into whatever it was growing into.

Maybe it would last only a few months, maybe a few years. She hadn’t thought that far ahead, even though they teased one another with hypothetic anniversaries and children. Playful banter between two people who were at the beginning of their relationship, seeing the world through pink love goggles with little hearts fluttering around their heads.

But now, that the press was aware and the rumor mill had begun to churn out its own interpretations, she wasn’t sure how long all this would last. For all she knew, Oscar might soon find it annoying having her past thrown into his face at every interview or public outing. And she might very well grow tired of the same thing. Then again, from the interviews her brother-in-law had sent her, Oscar appeared adamant about talking work only, and often quickly, but kindly, shut down anyone probing into his private life.

Something else that plagued Elise’s mind was how someone had taken pictures without either of them knowing. She hadn’t seen anyone with a camera. Tourists, sure, but nothing like she imagined paparazzi in Hollywood walked around. There wasn’t anyone with a large camera and telescopic lens. What baffled her even more was the picture of Frank and her. How did the media get their hands on that picture? Anger and frustration started building up inside of her.

A low vibrating hum resonated through the room, distracting Elise from digging further into what
ifs and hows. She sighed. Maybe it was for the best that she let go of the thread. Too much negativity was clouding her mind. She slowly unrolled herself out of the blanket, reaching for her cell on the nightstand, an unknown number flashing across the screen.

“Hello?” She was suddenly unsure if it was the right thing to answer the phone after what had happened last night.
“Hi. Is this Elise?” a deep voice asked. It had a familiarity to it but Elise couldn’t place the caller.
“This is her. Who’s this?” she bit her tongue, realizing she sounded a bit rude.
“Hey. It’s Leon,” the familiar voice replied, his tone upbeat.

“Oh! Hi, Leon…,” Elise paused. To hear a friendly voice in the morning lifted her mood almost instantly. Still, Elise was surprised he called this early. “Shouldn’t you be in class or something? Torturing some poor souls with mathematical theorems?” she sounded almost like she was scolding him. Her inquiry was met with a booming laugh. Clearly, her new friend didn’t take offense, and his infectious laughter put a smile on Elise’s face.

“I don’t have a class until the afternoon,” Leon revealed, his voice still carrying a chipper tone. “I’m calling because… Well, I don’t really have any friends here and my colleagues are all holding lectures right now. I was wondering if you wanted to go grab some brunch?” he asked confidently. “Or we can go shopping if you want. I saw some dresses that would look absolutely stunning on you,” Leon added, and Elise giggled.

“What?” Leon asked.
“Nothing. It’s just… Isn’t that stereotypical? The shopping buddy thing?” she smirked. “Oh! I can go all stereotypical on you, honey. If that’s what you need,” he replied with a tinge of drama.
“Please don’t. I mean wouldn’t mind. You know what… This is the second time I sound like a narrow-minded jerk,” Elise scuffled out of bed, huffing.
“You’re not,” Leon assured. “I’m assuming you’ve been exposed to only one extreme, and that’s ok,” he clarified. Leon wasn’t completely wrong in that regard. Elise had a few friends who seemed to fit the stereotype of what the world saw as gay. It didn’t bother her, it did, however, skew her perspective a little. “So, you have time?”

“Yes. Give me about thirty minutes?” Elise requested. They agreed to meet in front of the physics building before Leon hung up the phone. Elise quickly took a shower, put her hair in a ponytail, applied some mascara, and hastily put on dark jeans, a white t-shirt, and black ballet flats. She threw on an old, thin, blue cardigan and a fashion scarf before grabbing her purse and dashing out the door.

The physics building was only a five-minute walk away, and when she arrived, Leon was already waiting for her. He looked modelesque for sure, his hair neatly styled, face clean shaven, and perfect brows, much nicer than Elise’s. He had his hands tucked into his dark-washed jeans, wearing a grayish button-down with dark shades hanging loosely on the front, and probably the nicest leather shoes Elise had ever seen anyone wear.

She glanced at her reflection in the glass doors. Compared to Leon she looked quite disheveled, her clothes not as crisp as her new friend’s, her hair already drooping out of her ponytail, and her ballet flats looking rather dull and worn out. She huffed out a quiet “great”, what little confidence she initially had evaporating into thin air.

“There you are. Thought you changed your mind,” Leon beamed, his eyes looking even bluer today than a couple of days ago. He threw on his shades, extending his elbow towards Elise,
looking over the rim of his sunglasses when she hesitated. “Come on,” he shimmied his elbow back and forth. Elise scrunched her nose, hooked into Leon’s arm, and let him take lead.

This time it was Elise who had difficulty keeping up as Leon walked in long strides towards a tiny Italian restaurant close to Christ Church Cathedral. “Gotta be here early… before the students go to lunch or else there’s no space,” he explained. They patiently waited to be seated in a small booth tucked away in a corner in the back of the restaurant. Leon, ever the gentleman, pulled out a chair, gesturing a “my lady” with a cocky smirk before seating himself. The waiter brought them their menus, pouring both some water, rattling down the chef’s choices in French before disappearing to the kitchen.

“I have no clue what he said,” Leon whispered, reading over his menu and looking even more confused by what was offered on the card. “You haven’t been here before?” Elise snickered, having no issues deciphering her menu.

“It came recommended by a student,” Leon twisted his mouth. He pulled out his French-English dictionary, trying to translate most of the words. “I give up! Could you just tell me? Please?” he pleaded at a snickering Elise. She leaned in closely, translating the menu for Leon, and when the waiter returned she ordered both their meals.

“You really should learn to speak French,” Elise raised her brow, pretending to be condescending; a pretense she couldn’t hold for long as she started laughing almost right away. “I should. And I always start, but my brain is all math,” Leon laughed. He took a sip from his water, studying Elise. She looked around the restaurant, scanning each person sitting at tables nearby, her body language anxious, her face covered in worry lines. “Something wrong?” Leon queried.

“No. Just… Uhmm… Nothing…,” Elise fibbed. She was subconsciously tapping her index on the table, still looking around the restaurant, biting her lip, and twirling a strand of her strawberry-blond hair. Leon reached over, placing his hand on top of hers, stopping the thudding sound of her finger against the surface of the table.

“Sorry,” Elise took a deep breath in. “I didn’t sleep too well last night,” she explained, taking a sip from her water when Leon released her hand. He looked at her with a certain calmness, it was almost haunting. “Look…” Elise started. “I had a crappy evening yesterday and a crappy night. I’m a little on edge. Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” she remained cryptic, trying hard not to give away why she wasn’t in the best of moods. Last night was more than just nightmares. It was a rollercoaster ride of emotions, between frustration and anger, crying on and off, mentally withdrawing only to return to wanting to be held.

“Well. I don’t blame you. I’d be on edge too if pictures of my past were all over the news.” Leon took another sip from his water, leaning back into his chair, crossing one leg over the other. Elise shook her head, her mouth agape. So he knew! She was unsure if she should be furious, or surprised, or grateful; contemplating if she should just get up and leave or stay and explain; after all, she’d only known Leon for a few days. In essence, he was still a complete stranger to her.

A rush of questions wrapped around Elise’s mind. Was he here to get the gossip from the source? Or as a caring friend? Or because of Oscar, maybe? She bit her tongue, trying to suppress the doubt that was scratching at the back of her mind, sinking it’s little teeth sharply into her brain. “Did you really have no classes this morning?” she asked; the question almost sounding like an accusation towards his intentions. Leon inhaled sharply. Elise’s doubt was insulting, to say the least.

“You didn’t answer your phone. I was a little worried,” he stated in a rather cold and hurt tone. “So
I canceled my lectures for the morning,” he let out a huff of air. An awkward silence settled between them, interrupted by the waiter bringing them their food. Elise just stared at her plate, moving the same piece of pasta back and forth.

“Thank you,” she mumbled before finally taking a bite.
“No problem,” Leon’s timbre warmed up.
“Whoever recommended this restaurant should receive a good noodle star,” Elise suggested after taking another bite, and Leon chuckled in agreement.

The pasta was excellent, the desert more so. They didn’t talk much during the meal, but it was a definite comfort knowing that Leon had taken the morning off to make sure Elise was ok. She went into her usual trance, getting lost in her thoughts, her gaze trailing off to some distant imaginary point in nothingness.

“Earth to Elise,” Leon’s voice was far away.
“What?” she looked up puzzled.
Leon was standing up, holding out his right hand towards her and her purse in his left. “Let’s go do the stereotypical shopping thing,” he smiled, wiggling his fingertips to encourage her to get up and tag along.
“Oh right. I should… I should probably let Oscar know,” she stammered. The thoughts of more pictures of her with another man suddenly popped into her head. She’d rather Oscar know from her than some second source gossip site.

“Alright, mi Linda. Tell him to keep his hands to himself,” Oscar replied, raised brow emoji attached. Elise looked at her watch. It was almost noon. He must be on lunch break.
“Really? *frowny face*” Elise sent back.
“I’m joking, mi Linda. I know you’re not his type. You have fun. I’ll see you this evening. I love you.” Oscar responded, hearts and kissing emoticons attached.
“Te amo.” Elise texted back.

Despite this response, she couldn’t bring herself to smile, her doubts from earlier nagging and digging deeper into her brain. Leon took notice and nudged her shoulder. She returned the gesture with a weary twisted smile, remaining quiet as they strolled through downtown Montreal. Walking in short, fast-paced steps, they reached a little boutique selling high-end evening wear. Leon immediately aimed for a rack with various little black dresses. He glanced up and down Elise and picked out three LBDs for her to try on.

“Don’t look at the prices,” he chuckled. Elise responded with a tiny smirk. “Tell me what’s on your mind,” Leon said cautiously when Elise’s expression returned to deep thought lines and a tired frown.
“I don’t know if I should talk to you about it…” she took the dresses from his hand, pacing towards the changing room.
“Look. I promise, whatever you say, will stay between us. Unless I get some outrageous offer, then I might falter,” Leon laughed. Elise glared, un-amused, over the edge of the dressing room door, tossing one of the dresses into Leon’s face. “I’m kidding,” his laugh deeper and louder.

“It’s just… It’s something I should be discussing with Oscar and not some stranger I’ve only known for what? …. Three days?” Elise’s voice muffled through the dressing room door. She looked in the mirror, questioning Leon’s taste; the first dress looking like an asymmetrical cutout catastrophe, hugging her in all the wrong places.
“Consider it practice then. Whatever you want to tell him, tell me,” Leon suggested as he waited
“Good idea,” she stepped out of the dressing room.
Leon gasped in shock. “Oh god! That dress… No! … Honey, no!” Leon raised his brow, astonished and appalled at the disaster he had chosen. “I’m so sorry. It looked great on the hanger,” his brows narrowed into an apologetic stare. “Wow. That’s pretty bad,” he added as Elise spun around, his eyes widening.

“You don’t say,” she raised her brow, crossing her arms and tapping her foot.
“I don’t … I don’t even know…” Leon walked up to her, pinching the dress, tugging on it to see if it was sitting wrong, checking to see if the label was in the back. Elise’s lips grew tighter and her eyes wider as she looked in the mirror. Leon just shook his head in disbelief. Both gawked into the mirror for a few seconds, eyeballing each other from the side. “Yeah….hmmm,” Leon hummed, clenching his jaw.

A loud, heartfelt, and snorting laugh started to fill the air. Elise’s face crimson and little tears forming in the corners of her eyes, she buried her face in her hands trying to catch her breath. “This is so bad.” She spun around a few more times to get a different angle of the dress. “I should buy this one just to see what Oscar might say,” she cracked, pinching her exposed hips and muttering an astonished “why”.

“You should. And a second dress to change into once you get to your destination,” Leon proposed, still trying to catch his breath as he ran his hands across his face. He side-eyed Elise who seemed in a much better disposition.

“Glad I could make you laugh,” he nudged her shoulder.
“Yeah… I really needed that,” she agreed, inhaling deeply and smiling a crooked smile. “But maybe I should pick my own dresses,” she started laughing again as she returned to the dressing room.
“Oh, come on. You haven’t even tried the other ones,” Leon pouted in fake insult.

Elise tried on the second dress, he had picked. It sat much better but wasn’t her style, the hemline too high and the fabric stiff and scratchy. The third dress, however, was a hit, and when she showed Leon, he let out an approving “va va voom”. “If that one doesn’t turn Oscar’s head,” he added.

“I don’t know. It’s very risqué…” Elise smoothed out the fabric of the dress. It was satin and lace, the hem of the pencil skirt stopping just above her knees. It had a deep v-neck that reached halfway down her stomach, showing off her taut upper abs; the v held together by a sheer fabric, propping up her breasts in such a way that it created the perfect cleavage.

“I won’t be able to wear a bra with this,” Elise pointed out.
“Then don’t. Don’t wear anything underneath at all. Make him wonder,” Leon winked at her in the mirror, fixing her hair into a loose French twist.
“I can’t… I could never…,” she blushed, her face an even deeper shade of red than before.
“Come on, honey. Be bold! You have fantastic curves and nice abs. I’d die for abs like that, and that ass,” Leon grinned. “Buy it. BUY IT!” he pushed on.
“You’re a bad influence on me, you know that?” Elise snickered.
“I know. Buy it. BUY IT. BUY IT. BUY IT!” Leon chanted, bobbing his head side to side, bouncing on his heels.
“Oh, alright,” she gave in, hissing out a “tsssss” when she saw the price tag. “Oh well, I guess I can splurge now and then,” she conceded.
“Now… talk to me. What do you want to tell your man?” Leon prodded on their way out, and after they had spent a sufficient amount of time finding some new slacks for him. Elise glanced at her watch. It was already three in the afternoon. “Don’t you have a lecture to get to,” she chuckled.

“Eh, they know what to study,” Leon shrugged. “I’ll make up for lost time tomorrow… Tell me,” he gently elbowed Elise.

“You sure you have time? This could take a while,” she scoffed. Leon just nodded.

The two spent the rest of the afternoon exploring more shops; talking, trying on more clothes, more talking, more shopping. Elise confessed all of her fears to Leon, on top of her life story. She was at times perplexed that he didn’t mind. Like it was nothing. Like they had been friends for an eternity and then some. Before she knew it, it was almost dinner time. After texting Oscar and finding out that he wasn’t going to be back until later that evening, Elise decided to accompany Leon to his classroom to pick up some materials.

“Wow! This isn’t a room. It’s a hall!” she exclaimed, her voice echoing through the emptiness. The classroom was covered in light wood panels, had at least ten descending rows of seats in a crescent shape, and a massive oak desk at the center of the floor. Six chalkboards took up the back wall, equations scribbled all over them. “Amazing,” Elise gasped, dropping her shopping bags to the floor. She didn’t understand all of it, but the writings clearly had dealings with the dimension theory. Leon watched as she air-traced some of the numbers on the board.

“You know what this is?” he asked, side-eyeing her as they both stood in front of one of the colossal boards.

“I think… I think it has to do with topology. Dimension theory?” she guessed.

“Yes. That’s right,” Leon was impressed. “You studied math?”

“No… I studied languages, but math is…. It’s just another language. Universal, actually,” Elise nodded.

“Is Oscar aware that you’re like… a smart cookie?” Leon grinned.

“Hmmmmm. Yup,” Elise wrinkled her nose, looking around the vast room some more.

She walked over to a smaller desk in a corner of the room, picking up a frame with a picture of Leon kissing the temple of another man, both grinning. “Is that your husband?” she asked, turning the frame for Leon to see.

“Yep,” he blushed, a warm smile dancing across his lips.

“He’s handsome,” Elise glanced up and down Leon. He looked happy but also a little sad. Being separated by distance wasn’t easy. Elise had first-hand experience with that. She saw- for the first time really saw- the loneliness Leon was feeling. It was hidden in the wrinkles around his eyes, the few grays in his hair, and the way he sighed when he thought about his husband.

“He is… handsome,” Leon blushed a little more. “He’s my everything,” he wrinkled his nose, taking the frame from Elise’s hand.

She smiled, her mind drifting to Oscar. She wanted that too. Happy, content, being missed and missing someone. And she had that with Oscar, but she was unsure about how she’d handle everything that would come with his life. After all the talking, she was still on the fence about the relationship, making her head hurt that she was this torn between what ifs and what she had now.

“Do you love him?” Leon asked when he noted the pondering look on Elise’s face.

She looked up at Leon, heaving her chest. “I do,” she sighed. “I really do!” she repeated more confidently.

“Then… it will work out. Tell him everything you’ve told me. And it will all work out,” Leon assured with a soft tone.
“Hmmmm,” Elise patted Leon’s arm, a tiny chuckle crossing her lips. “Thank you,” she sighed. “I really should get back,” she added after glancing at her watch. She collected her bags, tilting her head towards the door.

“Ok. Let me walk you out. The hallways are haunted in the evenings,” Leon wisecracked. It made Elise laugh. “You think I’m kidding? There are ghosts in this place,” Leon smirked, winking when Elise didn’t buy into his attempt to frighten her. She gently punched his arm, giving him a fast-obstructed by shopping bags-hug goodbye when they reached the exit, grateful that he had stepped into her life. “Let’s stay connected, ok?” Leon offered to which Elise responded with an approving “ok” before parting ways.

Back at Oscar’s place, Elise abandoned the ten or so bags filled with clothes, gifts for family, and other goodies in the tiny nook by the door. Exhaustion was hitting her hard. She’d been walking almost all day, and her feet were aching. She cussed at herself for not wearing better shoes. She changed into some loungewear, and after a quick glance into the fridge, opted for some cut up fruits for dinner.

A chime echoing through the silent apartment had her searching for her phone. “Lo siento, mi Linda. Going to be home very late. Don’t wait up for me and get some rest. Muchos besos.” Oscar’s text read. Elise let out a sad sigh. She wasn’t surprised, still, she wished Oscar would come back soon so she could talk to him. She had much to tell him, and was worried by the time they could talk, she’ll have forgotten half of what needed saying.

Elise crawled onto the bed, turning on the small TV that sat on top of the dresser. She skipped through the channels, avoiding E-News at all costs. Oscar and her brother-in-law had told her that Lenny was going to take care of it all. Still! Nagging curiosity got the better of her and eventually, she ended up watching the gossip shows she so very much despised.

A couple of times, their relationship flashed across the screen, pictures from her past always mingled into the mix. She let out a scoffing huff. What did they know anyways? This wasn’t who she was now. She wasn’t unstable or distraught. Upset, yes. Who wouldn’t be? But nothing like back then.

And yes, Joe’s accident was tragic, but it had been almost ten years. She missed him for sure, but she knew it was time to move on. Why did the press have to make it look like her happiness was somehow wrong? To finally move on and love again? Elise switched channels to BBC America, watching Star Trek TNG until she lulled into sleep.

The rattling of keys followed by a quiet “fuck” woke her a few hours later. Oscar was home. Elise peeked at her watch. It was almost one in the morning. She rolled out of bed to see if he was ok. When she walked into the kitchen, Oscar was standing by the fridge, the light of the appliance the only thing illuminating the room. He was standing there for a few minutes, like he couldn’t decide what to eat or to eat at all. He inhaled sharply, closing the fridge as quietly as possible.

“Long day?” Elise whispered as she switched on the light. “Oh fuck, Liz. …,” Oscar clutched his chest. “Talk about sneaking up. Did I wake you?” he strolled over to her, grabbing her by her waist, pulling her in for a languid and tender kiss. “No,” she fibbed when he released his hold on her. “Liar,” Oscar smiled drowsily. This was probably the most tired Elise had ever seen him.

“Bed time!” she whispered back. Oscar refused the soft command, plopping on a chair by the table, pulling her to sit on his lap. “I
havent seen you all day,” he rested his forehead on her. “I want to talk to you. Tell me about your
day,” he mumbled into the fabric of her sweater.
“Mi Lindo, it can wait. You need to sleep. You have to be back on set in a few hours, right?” Elise
threaded her fingers through his dense curls, teasing his cheek with her nose.

Oscar didn’t budge. He held on tightly to Elise, kissing into the fabric of the sweater. He whispered
a “please” under his breath, waiting for her to talk. “I don’t have to be back until 10. I’ll be
standing in this time. So please, tell me about your day,” he pleaded. “I missed you so much. Tell
me. How did shopping with Leon go? I saw the bags. It looks like you guys cleared out the stores,”
he chuckled. “Tell me,” he implored again, softly.

“I bought a dress for when we’re all going out,” she started.
“Ah yeah. Will you model it for me?” Oscar asked sheepishly, wiggling his brows.
“No. I want it to be a surprise,” Elise stroked his face, tracing over the creases in his cheeks.
“What else did you get?” he asked.
“Stuff for the family. Some toys for Chloé. Chocolates,” she gazed into Oscar’s eyes, leaving a
wispy kiss on his nose. She got up and poured herself some water, letting out sad sighs as she stared
at the pictures on the fridge. It was late, and she wanted to talk but she didn’t want to keep her
companion up.

“What’s on your mind, Sweetie?” Oscar felt groggy, but he was aware that Elise’s mind was
wrapped in bothersome thoughts. He usually let her linger and reflect, but after yesterday, he was
worried. He was worried that her thoughts weren’t just memories of Joe. That it was about them.
That she was holding back, scared of what he might say. He could feel it in his stomach and in his
heart.

“Mi Linda?” he got up, walking up behind Elise, kissing her shoulder, waiting.
“I don’t… I don’t know if I can do this,” she breathed.
“Do what?” he kissed her shoulder again.
Elise turned around, shaking her head, looking at the floor. “Us. This…,” she paused. “I mean…”
her eyes began to fill with tears. This wasn’t what she meant to say. She didn’t mean to make it
sound like he was the problem because he wasn’t.

“You mean … my life?” Oscar quested for her eyes, but she kept averting his searching gaze.
“Yes. And no!” silent tears started rolling down Elise’s cheeks. She was trying hard to stay
composed, to find the right words without breaking his heart. “I can handle you being gone for
long periods of time. I can deal with long hours. I just don’t know if I can handle…,” she sighed.
That was too much. She let her face fall into her hands, sobbing.
Oscar wrapped his arms tightly around her, kissing the top of her hair. “Tell me, Sweetie,” he
mumbled into the strawberry scented locks. “Tell me. Remember… Honesty,” he whispered.

“I’m scared it will turn you away. What they’re saying about me. I’m scared you will grow tired of
that. I’m scared you’ll think you’re second to a memory,” her voice broke up by heavy sobs
between words. “I’m scared because what if they’re right? What if I am everything they say I am?”
she dropped her hands to her sides, sinking her face into Oscar’s chest.

“Don’t you think that’s for me to decide?” he asked, caressing her arms.
“I know. I just… I cannot shake this feeling that that’s what will break us,” she sobbed, finally
looking up at Oscar, her eyes red and swollen from crying.
Oscar took a heavy breath in. This was truly their first test. He never meant to have her dragged
into the spotlight like this, not with painful memories at least. He always hoped that at some point
in the future he’d introduce her to the world as his S.O.; maybe at some red carpet premiere,
everyone smiling and happy, laughing through interviews. This -this sorrow, this pain- this was not
what he wanted.

“I’m so sorry, Sweetie. I know this is getting to you. Let’s ignore them… Ok?… Let’s ignore them
because that’s the only way to deal with gossip.” He cradled her face with his fingertips. “I love
you. You know that, right?” He traced over her jawline, and she nodded. “You’ve never, ever
made me feel second to Joe. Ever.” He traced her brows with his thumbs.
“I haven’t?” Elise whispered, stunned.

“Never…” Oscar traced her nose with his index. “I know you miss him. I know. But I’ve never felt
second to him. And they, the press, the rumor mill, they’ll never make me feel this way either…
Ever… Ok?” He pulled her in, pressing a soft kiss against her lips.
“Ok.” Elise returned her head into his chest, letting out a deep sigh.

“You’re really not going to model the new dress for me?” Oscar asked with a gentle chuckle, trying
to redirect both their thoughts.
“No!” Elise snickered faintly into his chest.
“Awe. But… Wait! Did Leon see you in the dress?” Oscar stepped back, raising his brow in a
questioning angle.
“Yes. And he was jealous,” Elise sniffle-smirked, wiping away the last of her tears.
“Reeeeeeally?” Oscar squinted.
“Yeah. He was jealous of my ass,” Elise looked down her derrière, giving herself an approving
nod. Oscar let out a rumbling laugh. There it was, the self-confidence that had made his heart jump
the first time he'd met her.

“He might get jealous if he ever sees your backside,” Elise grinned.
“What?” Oscar gaped.
“Yeah. He’s got a thing for nice booty. Especially… Well yours,” Elise wiggled her brows.
“Hmmmm, so I should wear skinny jeans to enhance these, huh?” Oscar turned around, lifting his
loose fitting shirt to show off him shaking his ass.
“What?” Elise gaped this time before losing herself in a heartfelt laugh.
“Hey. Nothing wrong with displaying my goods. Right?” He scrunched his nose.
“Hmmmmm… Well, I can’t say I blame anyone ogling your ass,” she agreed. “Just as long they
know that’s mine.”

“You want me to get a tattoo? This ass belongs to… with an arrow,” he asked, laughing.
“What? Ahahahahaha. Please don’t. Especially that…,” Elise hid her face in her palms, laughing
loudly. “Don’t ever get a tattoo for anyone.” She playfully pushed Oscar back at his chest when he
tried to sneak a kiss.
“Why? Do you regret yours?” He grabbed her hands, pulling her close to himself.
“No. But I also got them for myself. So…,” she bit her lips, leaning in for a kiss. “Let’s get some
rest.” A heavy sigh escaped Elise’s lips when she pulled away. She ran her fingertips over his
brows. She loved how they arched. She loved how they enhanced his eyes. Those warm, caring
eyes.
“Let’s,” Oscar agreed calmly.

They kissed each other to sleep, the warmth of their bodies soothing their tired minds. Elise slept
much better this time around, only waking up once. When the alarm woke her again at eight on
Friday morning, Oscar was already up, talking on his cell in the living room. Elise snuck up behind
him, startling him with a hug from behind.

“Hey, you’re awake. Good…. Hang on a second,” Oscar instructed whoever was on the phone.
“What time is your flight going out on Sunday, mi Linda?” He looked over his shoulder at Elise who was still clinging on to Oscar, trying to savor his warmth.

“Five in the afternoon.” She kissed his shoulder, releasing her grasp and getting herself some water.

“K, that’s plenty of time then,” Oscar smiled, returning his attention to the caller on the other end.

“Ok… Can you book it last minute?… Uh huh…. Uh huh… Ok…. And the car? … Nice… Ok… I promise… No shenanigans… Thank you, Lenny,” he hung up the phone, a big smile on his face.

“Pack a change of clothes. And a bathing suit. For tomorrow,” Oscar said with a cheery tone.

“Where are we going?” Elise smiled, Oscar’s good mood rubbing off on her.

“A little escape. From the city.” He inched closer to her, playing with a strand of her hair, tucking it behind her ear before kissing her. “I’m going to pick up some breakfast. Are you coming to the set today?” he asked, grabbing his keys, waiting for Elise’s reply.

“Yes. I was going to go with you if you don’t mind,” she beamed.

“Ok,” Oscar stole a kiss. “Good,” he stole another kiss. “Good,” he mumbled into her neck, placing a languid kiss on Elise’s skin that made her gasp and left her body trembling.

“Get breakfast,” she breathed, her sight becoming blurry. “Before…” she gasped, a tingling sensation plunging to her core. Oscar had pressed another lingering kiss on her neck, his hands wandering gently down her spine.

“I’ll be back,” he smiled mischievously before taking off whistling.

“Oh… Oh kay,” Elise replied in a dizzy daze after he had already closed the door. She had to force herself out of the foggy minded state he left her in, whispering a “fuck” under her breath when she finally made her way to the bathroom to take a shower. Elise stood under the running water for quite some time, washing away the stress and negative thoughts from the last two days, letting the calming scent of the lavender soap hypnotize her into serenity.

“You ok in there, Sweetie?” Oscar carefully stuck his head in the door. Clearly, she hadn’t heard him return.

“Yes,” Elise shut off the water, reaching for her towel to dry off.

“Shame that it’s almost time to go,” he grinned, casually leaning against the doorframe, one leg swung in front of the other.

“Hmmm,” Elise hummed. “No time for a quickie, huh?” she smirked, slowly undressing Oscar with her eyes. There it was again, that tingling feeling that seemed to drop from her chest to her core to between her legs.

“Mmmmhhmmmm… I’ll keep that in mind when you have to leave on Sunday,” Oscar let out an airy chuckle.

“Awe,” Elise pouted.

“To be honest. I want more than five minutes,” his eyes started trailing down her body. It took every ounce of self-control not to give in to the urge that was building up inside his body. Elise dropping her towel, standing there with her skin still drying, water dripping from her hair and running down her breasts, and goose-bumps forming on her skin didn’t help his attempt to suppress his carnal instincts. He closed his eyes, inhaling sharply. “Think of it as… delayed gratification,” he said, his voice deliciously deep. Elise threw him a fierce, frustrated look, muttering “fuck delayed gratification” when she passed him on the way to the bedroom. Oscar choked on his laugh when he heard what she’d said.

“Keep laughing. I’ve got something for you. Tonight! We’ll see who can handle delayed gratification then,” Elise huffed as she put on her clothes, her body still tingling. She wanted him to
push her over the edge of the bed, and fuck her right there. Elise ran her hands through her hair, frustrated. Why was she so damn horny? It’s not like they hadn’t been at it since she'd gotten back. Tender and slow mostly, but she was longing for rough, make her body ache sex.

“Damn it,” she cussed, trying to compose herself.
“Awe. My little grouchy strawberry,” Oscar called out from the kitchen, plates clanking on the table as he sat up for breakfast. “It’ll be so much better tonight, though.” He winked when Elise took her seat by the table, wearing her signature go to look: skinny jeans and a turquoise shirt, her band converse, and turquoise jewelry.

“What makes you think you’ll be getting any of this tonight?” she let her hand glide down her body, raising her brow as Oscar gawked at her, scrunching her nose when he muttered a “damn” under his breath.
“Better get going,” he redirected after he received a text on his cell.
“Yup! Better,” Elise smiled deviously, stealing the last of the waffles and stuffing it into her cheeks while running out the door.

The drive to the set was stop-and-go. Morning traffic was still jamming up most of the highway to the sound-stages. Oscar played with Elise’s hand while she looked out the window to take in the scenery. He kissed her fingertips, gingerly massaging the back of her hand between each kiss. Why did he have to do that? Either he was oblivious to her needing some release, or he was taunting her on purpose.

“Stop it,” she hissed.
“Why?” Oscar leaned in, aiming to kiss her neck from the side, but Elise pushed him back at his chest.
“Because if you don’t, I’ll have Kevin pull over and have him get out of the car so I can….” her eyes trailed to below Oscar’s waist. “Attack… No, wait… Fuck you,” she whispered through her teeth, flustered, her pupils wide, breaths short.

“Oh, wow. … I…. Hmmmm…” Oscar squeezed her hand, speechless, his eyes a little terrified.
“Uhm… I know this is going to sound insensitive and all, but are you close… You know… To that time of month?” He immediately scooted to the opposite end of the backseat.
Elise shot him an annoyed look. She got out her cell, pulling up the calendar app, and sure enough, he was right. It was less than a week out. “I’m sorry,” she sighed. “I am and I’m not. I kind of… I really… It might explain my crying….” she looked out the window again, the SUV picking up speed as traffic was clearing up.
“Don’t be sorry, Sweetie,” Oscar kissed the back of her hand. “And I doubt the crying is related to that,” he sighed into her skin.

“Maybe. Just know that you might be in for some back-breaking sex,” she said in a nonchalant way, instantly jerking her head around when she registered what she’d said, turning the deepest shade of crimson Oscar had ever seen on her. “Can I just disappear?” she groaned, embarrassed.

Women’s issues hadn’t come up last time they’d spent time together, and she hadn’t brought it up while she’d been traveling since it didn’t matter, but now she was a tad bit embarrassed that it had come up the way it did.

“I can live with that,” Oscar nodded. “Ouch,” he yelped when Elise punched him on his arm. “I didn’t mean you disappearing. I meant the hmmmmm… hmmmmmmmmm … Sexy times part….” he wiggled his brows.
“I know what you meant,” Elise stuck out her tongue at him, shaking her head in disapproval, simultaneously trying to disguise the smirk hiding on the corner of her mouth.
“We’re here guys,” Kevin croaked from the driver’s seat. Elise caught his smirk in the rearview mirror. “I’m guessing you heard every word,” she huffed when Kevin helped her out of the large vehicle. “Don’t worry. Your secrets are safe with me,” Kevin grinned. “Good, because if not, I’ll have to punch your arm, too,” Elise squinted, trying to look as menacing as possible. Kevin didn’t buy her act, chuckling at her before driving off.

“Guten Morgen ihr zwei,” a familiar hessian accent echoed from across the lot where the trailers were parked. “Michael. Oh… Wow. Kostüm steht dir aber gut,” Elise walked up to Michael Fassbender, who was in full Magneto costume, and hugged him carefully as to not mess up his clothes. “Seh ich besser als Apokalypse aus?” the German-Irish actor asked, wiggling his brows at her. “Ok, I know he said my character’s name,” Oscar chimed in, standing behind Elise and squinting fiercely at Michael who quickly took two steps back. “I said he looks great in costume and he asked if he looks better than your get up,” Elise translated. “Mmmmhhmmmm,” Oscar still stared at Michael, arms crossed. “Wow, talk about testosterone,” Elise tilted her head at Oscar. “He’s a flirt! He knows he’s a flirt,” Oscar squeaked, dramatically pointing at his co-star. “And you’re not?” Michael countered with furrowed brows, or at least it looked like it. The helmet was hiding part of his face. “Excuse me?” Elise shot a fierce, gaping glare at both men before stomping off to the cafeteria. “We’re teasing. Elise. Warte…. Wir machen nur Spaß,” Michael scuffled after her, wheezing when he caught up with her. It was warm in the costume.

“I can be pretty convincing, huh?” she stopped, smirking at the two flabbergasted actors. “I know you weren’t being for real. Nice try though!” she wrinkled her nose, entering the cafeteria to get some coffee. When she returned to the lot, Michael and Oscar were rehearsing some lines. She watched as Bryan (Singer) joined them to explain what he wanted to see on camera. Elise sat down in a chair nearby as the two actors went back and forth a few more times, each time the performance gaining intensity in its presentation.

“What do you think?” Oscar turned towards Elise. She was caught off guard, speechless that he’d ask for her opinion. “I don’t know. I don’t know what the scene is about,” she stammered. “But you just watched,” Oscar raised his brow, baffled. “Yes. I did. And I think it’s great but I… I can’t… I don’t know the whole picture, so it’s difficult to judge,” she explained.

“I see!” Oscar slowly paced towards her, script in hand, looking determined. “Forget about that. Just think about this moment. Nothing else. Your mind blank, void of all the back-story you think you know. My character is telling Magneto that he’ll rebuild the world…the way he thinks it should be. What do I need to do to convince him? To make him see my truth,” Oscar looked at her with a fire in his eyes that was new to her. This was his. His passion. The thing that breathed life into his lungs, that made his heart pound, and his mind expand. There was a rawness in the way he looked at her, waiting for her response like he needed some kind of approval. There was conviction, a belief in what he was portraying. He must be aware of that she thought.

Elise walked up to Oscar and gave him a tender kiss on his cheek. “I wish I had a mirror right now,” she whispered. “Because the way you’re looking at me … right now… trying to convince me what Apocalypse believes in, digging for that truth he believes in even though it’s wrong.
That’s it. That’s all you need to get the reaction you want,” she smiled softly, blushing, unsure if that’s what he needed or wanted to hear.

Oscar stared at Elise, smiling, nodding in approval of her observation. “When we’re old, I’m telling our grandkids how each day I fell more and more in love with you. And when they ask how I knew for sure, I’ll tell them about this moment,” he leaned in, placing a tender kiss on Elise’s temple.

“I’m going to go lie down for a bit,” she whispered, looking to the concrete ground, puzzled by what Oscar had just told her. She wasn’t sure exactly what he meant, but she had a hunch. All that teasing about hypothetical situations didn’t seem as farfetched all for sudden.

“Ok.” He kissed her again. “Make sure to turn the AC on, in the trailer. It gets hot when the sun is out like this.” Oscar kissed her again before strolling towards one of the hangars.

The rest of the afternoon was spent between Oscar’s trailer, the two main soundstages, and the cafeteria. Everyone was rushing everywhere, trying to get things done as quickly as possible. The cast and crew were looking forward to a long weekend before plunging back into seven days of nonstop work. Elise took the chance to get to know some of the crew members from the different departments. The movie industry, the behind the scenes world, was fascinating.

She had no idea the number of people involved in making such a movie. As she went through different departments, she met one of the accent and language experts. A slender, middle-aged woman who kept jokingly offering Elise a job in the department when she found out about her profession. Elise denied gracefully but teasingly asked to keep a recommendation on the table should the time ever come. “With your skills, you can write your own ticket, dear,” the woman laughed before she took off for the day.

“Looks like we’re done for the day,” Oscar side-hugged Elise when he found her in the makeup trailer. “Time to get ready to party, huh?” Oscar beamed.

“Hmmmm,” Elise hummed. The stresses of the last two days seemed to have finally vanished and she felt happy like she belonged into this group.

“Bis später,” Michael yelled out, waving at Elise and Oscar from a different SUV.

“Man sieht sich,” Elise shouted back, giggling into the fabric of Oscar’s shirt when she noticed a questioning expression on his face.

“Did Michael not teach you any German?” she asked, still giggling.

“He did. A few words,” Oscar divulged, helping Elise into their SUV.

“I hope he didn’t just teach you bad words,” she raised her brow. She was well aware that that’s what people usually wanted to learn first.

“Eh,” he wiggled his hand.

“Oh geez,” she laughed.

“He taught me some important words, too,” Oscar side-eyed her, a hint of pride on his face.

“Ah yeah, like what?” Elise wanted to hear this.

Oscar reached for her hand, kissing the back of it ever so tenderly. “Like… Ich liebe Dich,” he smiled into her skin.

Elise’s face turned a rosy hue. She loved how he pronounced those three little words with a strong American accent, completely ignoring the fact that Oscar, like so many English speakers, transformed the ch sound into a k. She’d teach him the proper way later for sure.

When they arrived back at the studio, Elise made it a point to get ready without interruption, kicking Oscar out of the bathroom when he tried to sneak a peek for the third time. “It’s not like it’s our wedding day,” he huffed, adding a whispered “yet” when he heard the hairdryer roaring through the door.
“What did you say?” Elise opened the door twenty minutes later.
Oscar’s jaw dropped to the floor. Her hair was up in a soft French twist, her eyes smoky, brows perfectly shaped, lips red. She wore simple but bold black earnings, a matching, dangling bracelet, and thin, black, strappy heels. But it wasn’t the small details that had Oscar agape.

“Holy fuck, …. Liz,” he stared at her in a trance, his heart rate up, pupils dilated, and brows raised, his stare trailed up and down her body.
“What do you think?” she spun around with confidence. The dress had the desired effect.
“I might have to rethink…,” Oscar gulped.
“Yes?” Elise leisurely paced towards him, smiling a knowing, crooked smile.
“…delayed…. gratification,” Oscar took in a deep breath before and after each word.
“Hmmmmmm,” Elise hummed, tracing his lips with her right index, feeling his lusting breath on her fingertip. “It’s a shame that it’s almost time to go,” she teased, throwing his own words back at him.
“We have five minutes,” he gulped.
“Hmmm sorry, but I want more than five minutes,” she whispered into his ear. It made Oscar shudder an aching groan into her neck.

A knock on the door pulled them out of their little game.
“Hey… Ready?… Woahhhhh… Elise!” Michael gaped when she opened the door.
“Yup, ready to go,” she grabbed her shrug, starting towards the elevator. “Vámonos,” she yelled when neither Oscar nor Michael was following.
“Coming,” Oscar shouted back then cringed. “Don’t…. Don’t say it, Michael,” he shook his head.
“Come on, man. I have to…” Michael grinned.
Oscar hung his head on his white button down. “Go ahead,” he sighed while putting on a charcoal blazer.
“That’s what she’ll say…” Michael laughed.
“She’s driving me nuts,” Oscar sharply drew in a deep breath through his nostrils.
“I can see how,” Michael countered.

“Is she… Is she wearing any underwear?” Michael squinted.
“Dude, that’s my girlfriend,” Oscar now squinted too. He already noted her not wearing a bra, but no panties? He couldn’t tell for sure. “Stay at eye level,” Oscar warned.
“I’m not going to touch, man. I know she’s off limits,” Michel sounded offended. “But I have to give credit where credit is due. She’s got confidence. And that’s a very sexy thing,” Michael grinned.
“It sure is,” Oscar chuckled.

“If you guys walk any slower, we’ll ring in the new year,” Elise wisecracked.
Michael gave Oscar a nudge. “She’s a keeper for sure,” he whispered into Oscar’s ear.
“I know,” Oscar side-hugged Elise when they reached her, giving her wispy kiss on her cheek.

The bar was already buzzing when the three arrived ten minutes later, people lining up to get in. It must have been a popular spot, as Elise had never seen a bar with security detail. Elise, Oscar, and Michael made their way to the front of the queue, hearing some people booing when the bouncer let them in after checking the VIP list. “The perks of being an actor,” Michael grinned.
Elise looked around before she entered the bar. Luckily, there weren’t any paparazzi in sight. Oscar noticed her short moment of tension. “Don’t worry, mi Linda. If photographers show up, we’ll exit through the back,” he assured her in his soothing voice.

The inside of the bar was a lot bigger than it appeared on the outside. Modern and sleek decor with
bold statement pieces scattered throughout. A live band and dim lighting softened the atmosphere. It was loud and busy. Elise recognized most of the faces from the crews, saying hello and shaking hands as they squeezed through groups towards the back of the bar. Oscar stopped occasionally, introducing her to some of the cast she hadn’t met yet, always side-eyeing her as she eased into various topics about world issues, sports, and movie trivia.

Olivia and Alexandra hugged Elise tightly when they saw her, complimenting her on the dress. “Be good to her,” Olivia raised her brow at Oscar. “I am,” he gasped in shock. Like he’d be anything but. “Just saying,” Olivia winked at Elise. “How are you holding up?” she asked. “Not too bad,” Elise smiled. They talked a little bit about Hollywood life, this and that, cracking up at innuendos from Michael and Oscar. “Such children,” Olivia shook her head before moving on to talk to some of the other cast.


Elise found a seat at a table nearby. “You want a drink?” Oscar smiled. She just nodded yes. She watched on as people talked and laughed, alcohol flowing almost freely. She’d been out a few times with her best friend Mikki while living in L.A., but this was something else. “Next time I visit my companion on set, you’re traveling along. No excuses,” she texted her BFF to which Mikki responded with several thumbs up.

Oscar returned a few minutes later with some mixers. “No clue what this is, but it’s a madhouse, so I kind of ordered whatever,” he laughed. Elise chuckled into his arm. “Not bad,” she licked her lips after tasting her drink. “Kind of a lot, huh?” Oscar kissed her shoulder. “A little,” she smiled. A familiar song started to play in the background.

“No. OH NOOO. He didn’t,” Elise panicked. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Michael grinning her way, slowly shuffling towards her, shimmying his shoulders side to side as a female sounding voice started to sing.

“Hast Du etwas Zeit für mich
Dann singe ich ein Lied für Dich
Von 99 Luftballons
Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont

Denkst Du vielleicht g’rad an mich
Dann singe ich einen Lied für Dich
Von 99 Luftballons
Und dass so was von so was kommt…”

The beat picked up and Elise couldn't help to tap her foot.
“I’m sorry, Oscar, but if you’re not dancing with this beautiful woman, I have to kidnap her,”
Michael beamed.
“I don’t dance,” Elise shook her head, denying Michael, or at least trying.
“Yes you do,” he nudged on and pointing to her foot.
“You had to pick a German song?” she laughed.
“Yes. Because. No one else speaks the language. Come on. It’ll be fun. I promise, I’ll bring her
back after a few songs,” Michael looked at Oscar.
“Go dance, Sweetie,” Oscar encouraged her. He had never seen her dance before, at least not to
German pop, so this might be a sight worth seeing.

After some hesitation, Elise gave in, stretching her hand out towards Michael who pulled her up
swiftly towards himself, guiding her to the dance floor. She laughed abashed through the first song,
but she warmed up when “Major Tom” started, and was definitely into it when the DJ played “Der
Kommissar”, at which point most of the cast was dancing along. Oscar finished his drink, joining
his laughing friends and companion on the dance floor, jumping along when the DJ called for it.

“Weil Ich Dich Liebe” played next; a slow song that had Elise and Oscar gazing into each other’s
eyes.
“What’s he saying,” Oscar whisper-asked when he didn’t understand the lyrics.
“It’s about a man who’s been looking for the love of his life, and when he finds her, he begs her to
forgive him for his ways, his looks, his promiscuity. He promises to change for her because he
loves her, he needs her, yearns for her, begs her to stay,” she softly explained.
yearn for you when you’re not around,” he whispered. “I love you,” he breathed into her neck,
closing his eyes when the song transcended into the saxophone solo, running his hands over her
derrière when the song was almost over.

“Oh my god,” he moaned into her shoulder. “You’re not wearing…,” his words stopped by Elise’s
index on his lips, a mischievous smile dancing across her lips. He bit her earlobe, exhaling sharply
into her neck. “You’re mean,” he whispered.
“No. Just teaching you a lesson… about delayed gratification,” she smirked, softly tilting her head
while biting her lower lip.

“Elise, come here. I got something for you,” Michael hollered, interrupting their building sexual
tension. Oscar let out a frustrated sigh.
“What were you going to do anyways? Take me right here on the floor?” she whispered into
Oscar’s ear, winking at him as she broke away, leaving him mouth wide open on the dance floor.
“What you got for me?” she grinned at Michael who was placing a large bag on the table he was
seated next to.

Elise looked inside and started laughing.
“What is it?” a few cast members had gathered around her.
Oscar walked up behind her, resting his hands on her hips as he watched Elise pull out an egg
carton from the bag.
“Eggs?” Jennifer gave Michael a confused look. Elise laughed. She had a hunch what it might be, and when she opened the egg carton, a dozen eggs, wrapped in foil reading Kinder Surprise, came to light.

“Eggs wrapped in foil?” Oscar was flummoxed. Elise kept giggling. “They’re chocolate eggs with a small plastic egg inside. There’s a toy inside the plastic egg. They’re illegal in the States,” she explained, snickering. “Thank you.” She hugged Michael. “I didn’t know they sell them here,” she added. “You don’t mind if I hand these out, do you?” she asked Michael.

“They’re yours. You can do whatever you want,” he grinned.

The cast and crew who were American watched on as Elise opened one of the eggs. She ate the chocolate then opened the small, yellow, plastic egg inside, building the toy that was inside of that. “What?” she side-eyed Oscar, who was smiling at her. “This is cute,” he scrunched his nose, his eyes wrinkling at the corners.

“So Oscar, have you asked yer girl, yet?” James casually asked as he built his toy. Him being drunk somehow made the whole thing a lot more entertaining. “Ask me what?” Elise turned towards her companion. “Yeah Oscar, ask her what?” James egged on, literally throwing a yellow plastic egg at Oscar. “Guys…” Oscar furrowed his brows. “Ask me what?” Elise stopped messing with her toy; a tiny car that had a minuscule driver going up and down when pushed.

“I wasn’t going to ask until tomorrow,” Oscar bit his lip, reaching for her left hand, going down on one knee. “What are you doing?” Elise breathed, a tinge of panic in her voice, her heart rate rising quickly. “Sweetie, mi Linda,” he started, looking down on the floor, gulping. “Oscar? What are you doing?” she repeated, her voice squeaky high. “Would you do me the honor…,” he reached in his back pocket of his dark jeans, keeping his hand hidden inside.

Elise looked around the bar. All eyes were on them. She felt hot, the air getting thin. She thought about darting towards the exit, but she was frozen in place. The warmth of Oscar’s hand tethering her like that.

Michael hugged James, grinning over the edge of James’ shoulder. Clearly, they were in on this whole thing. There was a painful, long silence. Oscar gulped again, hand still in his pocket, smiling softly when he finally looked up…
Chapter 5

Anticipating silence hung in the air. The only sounds echoing between the walls were those of shocked gasps and thin whispers. "Omg, what is he doing?" "Wow, I didn't even know he had a girlfriend." "He can't be for real!"

Elise stood in front of a kneeling Oscar, completely spaced out, mouth agape, breaths shallow. He held her left hand with his right, his free hand still hidden in the back pocket of his jeans. She couldn't decide if this was some dream or reality, her mind torn between wanting to escape through the nearest exit or staying to actually hear what Oscar wanted to ask.

"He can't be for real!" was repeating in her mind. He can't be! He cannot be for real! They'd been dating less than two months. Sure they teased one another with hypothetic scenarios: anniversaries, pets, house, kids, trips. It was a comfortable kind of teasing but they'd only edged upon the topics on a more serious note maybe once since they'd met.

The air was getting alarmingly thin. It was as though Elise forgot how to breathe, her lungs filling with less and less much-needed oxygen. Oscar looked up at her, his warm smile waning quickly when he saw her face. He had seen that paleness before, the difference now being that Elise was hauntingly calm. "Uhm... Guys...?" He searched for his actor friends who were standing behind a table and waiting like the rest of the establishment. "Maybe this wasn't such a great idea," he conceded.

"What?" Elise whispered under her breath.
Oscar rubbed the back of her left hand. She felt cool to the touch. "Uhm... This is not what you think it might be," he explained nervously, his gaze apologetic when he registered that this whole thing was about to backfire. He bit his lips.

Lenny, with arms crossed and an all-hell-is-about-to-freeze-over stare, was standing a few tables over, shaking his head, mouthing a "what the fuck, dude" Oscar's way. A couple of flashes went off, temporarily blinding the couple at the center of attention. People not part of the cast or crew were taking pictures, their hushed whispers intensifying with each passing millisecond. This was evolving into a disaster, and Oscar could almost hear the category ten gossip hurricane rattling towards the presses.

"It's... It's not?" Elise inhaled flatly; lethargically closing and opening her eyes. She struggled to stand upright, her body suddenly feeling like it was getting crushed under a truckload of bricks, her own weight too much to carry on her feet. She searched for some support, grasping the back of a chair right next to her. Everything seemed to move in slow motion after that.

She saw Oscar's mouth moving, spied Olivia Munn drifting towards them from the corner of her eye, and noted the fading grins -which had just graced James' and Michael's faces- turn into deeply creased worry lines. Sophie appeared behind them with a stern frown on her face. Olivia was somehow right next to them now, slapping Oscar across the back of his head, her movement going from slow-motion back to real-time speed.

"You asshole!" the tall, dark-haired actress yelled.
"What is wrong with you guys?" Sophie Turner shouted behind James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender, pinching deep into the crooks of their necks to bring them down to their knees hissing. Their grins had given them away in aiding this whole situation.
"What? ... What is going on? ... What?" Elise stammered in confusion.
"Your boyfriend asked you to go San Diego Comic Con!" Olivia snapped at Oscar, tugging on his ear, causing him to whimper as she pulled him to a stand.

"Oh? Ohh... Ok... Uhm... He asked what?" Elise was still in somewhat of a daze. Her heart rate erratic, she felt her ears burning. So it was some type of prank. An ill-executed prank to say the least.
"You don't do that! Oscar Isaac Hernández Estrada! Especially with what she's been through the last couple of days! Your mother... Ohhhhh YOUR MOTHER...!" Olivia hissed through her clenched jaw, implying that he'd been raised better than that.

"It was supposed to be funny," Oscar winced in pain. Olivia still hadn't let go of his ear. People snickered at the sight. A few "serves you rights" chuckled his way when people became aware what all this was about. The live band, which had been on break, returned to stage, perplexed at the whole scene, asking guests what the hell was going on.

"Say you're sorry. SAY IT!" Olivia released her hold, crossing her arms.
"Sweetie. Mi Linda," Oscar stood up, rubbing his left arm with his right hand. "It was supposed to be funny..., and cute," he made the biggest puppy dog eyes Elise had ever seen on him. She stared at him vacantly and speechless. "I really am an asshole. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you... Are you upset?" he asked nervously. "I mean if you are... I mean, of course, you are... I really... am an ass...," he jittered.

Elise was still trying to process everything that had just happened, a disbelieving huff of air escaping her lips. She covered her face with her hands, shaking into them. It wasn't like she really believed he'd ask her that question. Still, her heart had jumped at the irrational thought of that very notion. What was she thinking? No, of course, it wasn't a proposal! For that, she thought she knew Oscar too well.

"Sweetie?" Oscar's stomach churned, making him feel nauseated. What had he done? He knew Elise was sorting through a mountain of emotions from the last two days. The cast and crew were fully aware of her back-story, but now everyone else knew as well, at least everyone who watched gossip news...

So maybe this was a jerk move. Not to mention a careless one. He scolded himself, cussing weary "fucks" and "shits" under his breath. How could he have ever thought this was a great idea? Elise still had her face buried in her palms. He couldn't tell if she was crying. It sounded like she was. "Sweetie?" he cautiously asked again.

Elise dropped her hands to her sides. A big laugh filled the room. "You really are an asshole!" she laugh-yelled. She playfully punched Oscar in his shoulder, the people around them falling into laughter when they realized that Elise was taking this whole thing in strides. "I need a drink," her laugh faltered into a semi-relieved chuckle, a deep sigh pushing out of her chest. "I need a drink," she repeated, her mouth twisting into a thin smile, her brow raised, she sunk onto the chair next to her and stared at the floor for a few seconds.

"Alright, folks. Looks like the lady has a great sense of humor. Better hang on to that one," the band's lead singer's voice echoed through the room. "Let's just hope she doesn't put you in the doghouse tonight," the singer added sheepishly while grinning at Oscar. Elise shook an embarrassed laugh at the band. He wasn't entirely wrong.

"So are you going to go with him to Comic Con or what?" some guest called from the back of the
room. That timbre was all too familiar to Elise. She looked around to find the owner of the voice. It came from the right-hand side; that much she was sure. "Well, are ya?" the same person repeated with a New York twang. Elise narrowed her eyes, scanning over the different faces, and there, at the end of the bar's counter, she found the person the voice belonged to. Leon. He stood there, lazily leaning against one of the bar stools, brow raised, a grin from ear to ear, and eyes sparkling blue.

Elise chuckled shyly into her palm, her heart rate dropping back to normal as the tension started to fall away. Seeing her friend stand there gave her a bit of a confidence boost, something she really needed right about now. "I ought to say no," she inhaled sharply. The statement was followed by a collective "ooooooh". Of course, she should.

"BUT," she retracted loudly, getting out of the chair, crossing her arms, and a mischievous smile on her face. The whole bar went silent again. "I'm going to have to say yes, ESPECIALLY...," her tone sharp and clear. "ESPECIALLY since YOU are going to dress up incognito to walk around with me. In a costume I choose," she grinned. Everyone started laughing.

Oscar bit his lip, scrunching his nose. "I deserve that, huh?" his eyes crinkled at the corners. Elise chuckled, humming a "yup" under her breath.

"I still need a drink," she smiled, her eyes a little tired after all this when she sat back down. "Ok," Oscar kissed her cheek, holding his lips just a little longer on her skin.

"Well!" Olivia snapped, a hazardous glare in her eyes. Oscar jumped backward, scuttling quickly towards the bar. His co-star wasn't as fast at forgiving. "It was supposed to be funny," he tried to justify towards the scolding stares boring into his skin towards the large wooden counter. Lenny, who had been on the phone, joined Oscar.

"What did I tell you about shenanigans, dude?" he ordered himself a double on the rocks, shooting Oscar a glare from the side. "Her brother-in-law will pick you apart if you're not careful," Lenny added, putting his cell in the pocket of his slacks.

"You think, I don't know that," Oscar sighed, looking around as people slowly returned to their little group conversations.

"There's some paparazzi outside already. I suggest you guys leave that way," Lenny pointed towards the back door. "I'll take care of people in here. Damage control here I come," he let out a husky grumble before disappearing -glass in hand- into the crowd.

Oscar ordered a couple of drinks, watching Elise from the distance while waiting. She was surrounded by some of the cast, trading smiles as they talked to her. Oscar occasionally caught death stares from his female co-stars and pleading glances for help from James and Michael. He ignored the pleas, for now, his gaze traveling back to Elise. She had become friends quickly with all of his co-stars, but the scene in front of him was quite different from what he had endured with his ex. Lorraine had always been the center of attention, the loudest at the table, and sometimes the drunkest.

Elise was a stark contrast. She wasn't exactly shy, just reserved, always observing before she talked, always waiting for people to finish their stories, always asking about them rather than talking about herself. Oscar's stomach tingled. It always did when she entered the room, but it was a growing, more urging feeling; something he had become more aware of this afternoon when she'd accompanied him to the set.

"Men!" some woman standing behind Elise scoffed when she caught Oscar's glance. "Big children they are!" the woman said with a deep sigh before chugging back a shot of tequila.
Elise couldn't help but chuckle. Oscar sat on a barstool looking like a little lost puppy, sulking at himself as he twiddled his thumbs.

It was an ill-executed prank that was meant to be cute and funny, and it would have been, had there not been so many people. She realized that. The little mess sitting on the chair now was anything but her usually confident companion. The sight made her chuckle, and when Oscar gave her another fleeting look, she returned his "I'm so sorry" frown with an empathetic smile which in turn made his face light up.

She couldn't stay angry for long, nor did she want to, especially when she recalled her on-set conversation with Oscar that day. "How I knew for sure," rung through her mind repeatedly. Maybe she had read too much into that phrase, making her assumptions look rather silly. Then again, the way he'd said it... The way he'd held her in that moment. This felt more and more long term.

Or maybe he always talked to women like that. He was the welcoming, make people laugh and like him fast kind of person, sometimes unaware that his ways could be interpreted as flirtatious. Not to mention that he seemed to move on fast, having met Elise only a month or so after he broke up with Lorraine. Elise's heart dropped to her stomach. Maybe she was a rebound. Maybe all this was just fun for him right now and his inflated declarations of love meant little to nothing. But then why would he care to tread carefully on her past? Why would he make mental notes of her favorite flower, her favorite shampoo, and her favorite food?

Doubt was gnawing at the back of Elise's mind, and she despised it. She tried to lay the thoughts to rest, to live in the now because the now was what she'd been yearning for so very long: to be with someone who didn't mind her past, who made her laugh, made her think, and didn't judge. Someone who wanted her in their life just because, and who was honest even if it made her upset for a second, a minute, or even an hour. She had longed for this and if it was meant to be a short-lived fling, so be it. At least it made her heart and mind smile. Or so she told herself.

"You ok, girl?" Alexandra Shipp, who had joined the group, swooped a few loose tendrils of Elise's hair out of her face.
"I will be once I get my drink," Elise smiled.
"We need to get them back," Olivia stated, throwing Michael and James a menacing stare. The two actors scuffled bit by bit towards Elise, huge puppy dog eyes and quivering, apologetic smiles in tow.

"We're sorry. I mean... Yer know... Ya can punch us if yer want," James offered his shoulder, his accent driven, rolled r's a little softer than usual.
"Elise. Es tut uns echt leid. Das war echt Scheisse von uns!" Michael apologized.
"It was our idea. Oscar sort of... Well, he just sort of went along. I mean, he usually doesn't, yer know, so we never thought he'd do it, yer know. Really. We planted the idea in his head. We're sorry," James had inched closer to Elise sticking out his shoulder more, one eye closed, waiting for the punch.

"I'm not going to hit you," she chuckle-scoffed.
"Alright, but yer got an I owe you, ok?" James looked down on her with his big, blue eyes. Elise's mouth twisted into a half smile as she nodded in agreement.
"You guys should make it up to everyone by paying for the tab," Alexandra tilted her head.
"Good idea," Olivia concurred.
"Hmmm," Elise hummed inattentively in agreement, her mind sidetracking back to those thoughts; what ifs grappling and winding through her mind.
"Let's go check why Oscar is taking so long," Sophie gestured for everyone to head towards the bar, realizing that Elise might need a moment alone.

Michael stayed behind, side-eyeing a deep in her own thoughts Elise. "Hättest du ja gesagt?" he asked when she sighed. Elise shrugged, thinly muttering a "wahrscheinlich". Michael looked at Oscar, then back at Elise. "Wo die Liebe hinfällt," he nodded softly, placing a tender kiss on her right side temple. Elise smiled abashed into the kiss. He wasn't wrong. Love falls and envelops one wholly when it feels like it, without judgment and almost always unexpected. Her stomach tingled, her heart jumped, but her mind..., her mind sent her different signals. She was wary of her own interpretations, trying hard to shut off her overthinking mind. Michael nodded an assuring smile before joining his co-stars for some more drinks.

"You let them off too easy," a deep voice behind her quipped.

Elise snapped out of her thoughts. "Leon," she beamed, a sigh of relief escaping her lips, ready to pull herself to a stand. 

"Don't get up. You look like you need some time to recover," Leon quickly pulled up a chair next to her, plopping down with a deep, dramatic sigh. "So that's him, huh. Oscar Isaac. The man who owns your heart... He's a lot shorter than I thought," Leon teased, quickly checking out the actor. 

"Compared to you maybe," Elise chuckled. "And maybe compared to the rest of the cast," she laughed wholeheartedly. Not like she should talk. She was shorter than any of them.

"Well you guys make a cute couple," Leon revealed, sipping on his drink. 

"How long have you been here?" Elise turned towards Leon. 

"An hour or so," he sipped on his drink again. 

"And you couldn't say hello?" Elise was taken aback, almost hurt.

"I didn't want to interfere. You looked quite happy laughing and dancing with your friends," he explained, smiling down softly on Elise.

"So! I see you're wearing the dress. Kudos to you to forgo the boob cradles," Leon smirked. 

"The what?" Elise laughed again.

Leon wrinkled his nose like it was his intention to cheer her up, a victorious smile plastered on his face. "So did you go... You know... Commando..." Leon grinned.

Elise bit her lip, nodding.

"Alright! High five!" he held up his hand, waiting for Elise. She just chuckled, shaking her head in disbelief, before slapping her hand into his. "You really are a bad influence," she conceded, laughing. 

"I know," Leon beamed with wiggling brows.

"I don't know if he'll get some of that tonight, though," Elise lifted her chin towards Oscar who was staring at them from across the dance floor. She had some idea what he might be thinking. Here she was, clad in a steamy dress, no silky undergarments, of which Oscar was fully aware, and she was talking to a handsome, tall stranger. She felt like she was stoking a fire and Oscar's jealous, raised brow glare was somehow turning her on. Leon caught Oscar's irritated stare and chuckled.

"Well... I hate to side with him, but...," Leon side-eyed Elise. "Give him a break. Hmmmm? I think he meant well," he nudged Elise. 

"Really?" Elise was surprised, to say the least. "Really!?" she repeated.

"Yeah, really!" Leon shot back. He wasn't afraid to be a little mean. "The whole thing reminds me of Ned," Leon then chuckled.

"Who?" Elise asked, caught off guard. She had tracked Oscar's eyes which kept wandering off to between her tightly closed legs. 

"My husband," Leon explained.
Elise only just now became aware that she had never asked Leon's husband's name. She muttered an apology to which Leon replied with a scrunched nose and wrinkled eyes, his dreamy smile growing bigger and wider.

Oscar finally made his way back to Elise, two drinks in hand. He squinted at Leon; no clue who the tall stranger was, he felt his stomach twist with each heavy step towards his companion and the blue-eyed handsome someone who stood just a little too close to his beautiful girlfriend.

"Uhmmm... Hi?" Oscar glared, a hint of jealousy in his tone.

Elise wouldn't have any of it, shutting down his suspicion with an icy curl of her lip. "Oscar... This," she gestured towards Leon. "...is Leon aka Coffee dude," she smiled thinly.

"Leon? Leon... Ohhhh. Leon!" Oscar's expression changed to a big smile. He set the drinks on the table, shaking Leon's hand with vigor after. "It's nice to finally meet you," Oscar went on. "She's told me all about you," he continued cheerily, not even trying to hide the relief he felt that this tall, dark-haired, piercing blue-eyed man was his companion's new friend.

"She has?" Leon raised his brow at Elise who turned red. "She has, huh? Well, it's nice meeting you as well," Leon made himself tall, ready to make his exit. "I best let you two talk," he excused himself, winking at Oscar and placing a swift kiss on Elise's hand like he always did when he left. "He's really handsome," Oscar stared at Elise. "Is he really...." Oscar started, that tinge of jealousy returning to his voice.

"Oscar!" Elise warned as he sat down next to her.

He pushed the strawberry martini he had gotten for her carefully towards her. "I really am sorry," he bit his lip, taking a sip from his mixer, staring at his glass, a glimmer of shame in his eyes.

"I don't want you to be sorry," Elise smiled softly.

"Then you're not upset?" he looked up, a tiny smile hiding at the corner of his mouth. He reached for her hand, his fingertips stroking hers at first, then intertwining.

"I can't stay angry. The comic con proposal was funny, I have to admit to that," she wrinkled her nose. "It was just... The wrong timing to do it, I guess?" she half stated, half asked.

"Yeah. It was!" Oscar pulled her hand towards his lips, kissing and sighing into the back of it.

"And the jealousy thing," Elise frowned slightly. "As long as it doesn't go overboard," she sighed.

Oscar nodded in agreement. "I love you," he whispered into her skin.


Sweet Dreams started playing. The band must have gone for another break. And like before, it was Michael who encouraged dancing; nudging and coaxing both, Elise and Oscar, to the dance floor. A few drinks, songs, and some very frisky, hidden-in-dark-corners kissing sessions later, Elise was ready to call it a night, the hands of the clock on one of the walls almost pointing to midnight. But time wasn't what made her want to leave.

Oscar had teased her with feathery kisses and wandering hands, whispering sweet nothings into her ear for the rest of the night. She could barely hold it together. He had this effect on her. The sexual tension -the urge to have his breath scorching her skin, his lips dragging across and between her legs- rose to new heights. They quickly bid their farewells, dodging the paparazzi by leaving through the back.

Their cab ride back was a heated backseat make-out session that left Elise aching as she tried to hold back a from-the-core-to-her-peak orgasm. Oscar laughed into the crook of her neck when he felt her twitching and panting.
"You're in so much trouble," she breathed into his ear. "Really? How much?" he whispered back, his hand sliding up between her legs. "Oscar!" she warned when his fingers came dangerously close to where she needed them most. He licked his lips, his gaze traveling seductively down her body. How she hated that gaze right now, this very second. The cab ride seemed to take an eternity.

"Twenty-four sixty-seven," the cabbie said when they finally pulled up to the apartment complex. Oscar had never paid faster, handing over two twenties, not waiting for the change. He grabbed Elise's hand, pulling her out of the cab behind him, both dashing towards the elevator, throwing an acknowledging nod goodnight towards Dominic, the security guard. Oscar impatiently pushed the going up button over and over, and Elise gave him a glaring, raised brow.

"What? It goes faster, right?" he asked, a primal flicker in his eyes. "Control yourself," Elise chuckled when the elevator finally arrived. "Delayed gratification," she breathed teasingly into his ear after they stepped into the elevator; and just before the doors closed. His reply was a "fuck delayed gratification" hissed through his teeth as he pressed her against the elevator's mirrored side, leaning into her, and biting her neck.

Elise's vision became blurry for a second. The orgasm she had been holding back flooded through her body and unraveled between her folds. "Oh my god, Oscar....," she panted. "Hmmmm hmmmnnmm," his voice trembled against her skin. "I just...," she couldn't finish the sentence, gasping when Oscar squeezed her breasts, his lips lingering on her neck. The ding of the elevator reaching their floor barely pulled them out of their lust. Elise could feel her cheeks flush even more when they were greeted by an elderly couple staring at them.

"Right. Uhmmmm... Bonne nuite?" she stammered when Oscar pulled her past the couple. They controlled their pace until they heard the doors close, picking up speed towards Oscar's studio when the elevator left. "Damn keys....," he huffed. "Oh my god, give me those," Elise was just as impatient.

As soon as the door swung open they lost themselves in deep, passionate kisses, stumbling haphazardly into the small hallway, almost tripping over each other. Oscar managed to shut the door with a hard kick, not once losing his grip on Elise. He pushed her against the wall by the bedroom arch, biting and sucking her neck, aggressively pushing the skirt of her dress up to her hips, his hands working quickly to find her folds. "Oh... Liz... You really....," he stopped kissing her, gaping at her when he felt how wet she was. "I told you, back-breaking," she bit her lip, wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a heated French kiss. "I'm almost scared," Oscar laughed onto Elise's cleavage when she released him from the kiss. He bit through the sheer fabric of her dress and into her flesh causing Elise to let out a pleased whimper. "Only almost," he grinned when he gazed up at her, nipping the skin of her neck, gradually sliding two fingers inside her, gently massaging her clit with his thumb.

Elise's vision became blurry again. Oscar's heated breath against her neck, the subtle bites that turned into stinging nips, him smelling of the sweet drinks from earlier, his fingers working faster and faster inside of her, she felt her body falling into another orgasm..., and another..., and one more. It was as though euphoria went through the cycles of ebb and flow, her body temperature rising as each climax crashed against the edges of her core.
"Oh my god, Liz," Oscar gaped at her when she came again, breathing an astonished "wow" into her mouth when she pulled him in for another kiss. He had managed to make her cum twice, maybe three times during some nights. This was a new record. "You want more?" he asked cautiously when Elise's legs began to tremble from exhaustion. A "yes" shivered across her lips, her eyes wandering up and down Oscar's body with an urging desire. He had never seen this intensity on her face. It flickered between sweet innocence and fuck me till I scream, please. She wrapped one leg around his waist, hinting for him to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. And he did; hissing out a groan when the heels of her strappy sandals dug into his back.

Lips sealed against lips, their tongues seemed in a dance of their own as they circled to the queen sized bed. Oscar tossed her on the mattress then his head disappeared between her legs, his hands grasping her thighs firmly to keep them apart while he skillfully teased her with his tongue. Elise arched into the languid licks from her folds to her clit and back to her folds, satisfied moans escaping her lips whenever he sucked on her as though he was trying to drink her dry.

She reached for his curls, threading her hands into them, tugging pleadingly to keep his mouth on her peak; and he complied, sucking fiercely, licking faster, devouring her until she came twice more while yelling out to God; the heels of her sandals once again digging into his back.

"We need to get these off," Oscar growled; ferociously throwing her legs over his shoulders. He didn't waste a second, his tongue spiraling from the inside of Elise's thighs to her knees and over the sides of her calves. He hurriedly undid the straps that held the heels around her ankles, licking back up her legs, leaving behind an erratic trail of scathing love bites.

"Where are you going?" he asked when he stood up to grant her a tiny break.

Elise moved back towards the center of the mattress, catching her breath. "Nowhere?!" she panted heavily.

"Good, because we're not quite done," he smirked, that primal flicker now a fire. "You better come back here," he laughed, capturing Elise by her ankles, pulling her to the edge of the bed, and tickling her feet.

"No.. Don't..." she laugh-squealed, her body squirming against his grasp, trying to escape him tickling her as she was still attempting to catch her breath. "Let go!" she yelled, laughing, panting when he finally stopped.

Oscar dragged her off the bed and up towards himself, giving her a tender kiss that turned into wet, open-mouthed circles down her front and back up as he finally pulled off her dress over her arms. Elise stood completely naked. Her skin flushed, red marks from his bites all over her legs and neck. Oscar, on the other hand, was still fully clothed, something she intended to change fairly soon. Elise bit her lips. She usually felt vulnerable like this: naked and raw, completely exposed; but not today. Her lust was at an all-time high and all she wanted was his body against hers.

Oscar caught her gaze. He slowly pulled off his charcoal blazer, keeping his eyes trained on hers while he did so, teasing her by licking his lips and raising his brow. Elise grabbed his hands before he could reach to unbutton his shirt. She wanted to be the one to undress him. Her breath slowed as she set a new, unhurried pace. He had made her climax more than she could count; she needed to recover. One by one she opened the shirt's buttons, never breaking her gaze into his eyes. When she finally reached under the fabric to pull off the shirt, her palms touching his heated skin caused him to release a gravelly moan.

She tugged on the t-shirt he wore underneath, kissing his stomach, biting into his muscles as she pulled it off. Her fingertips teased the edges of his pants that sat loosely on his hips; slowly unbuckling his belt, popping open the button, and pulling down the zipper whenever she returned
to his front. A wide grin grew on her face when she saw his erection trying to escape his boxer briefs. "My turn," she bit her lip again, dropping to her knees, pulling down Oscar's pants and briefs as she went down.

Oscar heaved his chest when he felt her tease his tip with her tongue. Slow, soft circles coiling around over and over again. "Fuck," he cussed under his breath, running his hands across his face. Elise knew how to tease him, how to bring him to that edge, her lips slowly squeezing down his cock, and slowly squeezing back up, her tongue circling over the back of his shaft at the same time.

"Liz," he breathed. He could feel his core tighten. He loved watching her, playing with her hair while she toyed with him but it was almost too much right then. He wasn't ready to call it a night. He was hungry for more of her, so he tugged fiercely on her hair to make her stop.

Elise stood up, a devious smile on her face. She knew how close she had brought him, licking off some pre-cum from her lips.

"You think this is funny?" Oscar raised his brow.

"Hmmmmm," Elise hummed, tilting her head in a cocky way. "I do," she whispered into his ear, biting his earlobe, tethering it between her teeth until the tension became too much.

"I'll show you funny," he brushed his lips across her jaw, a devilish smile forming on them when he pulled away. Before Elise knew it, Oscar had pushed her back on the bed, flipped her over, her feet on the floor, legs closed, his hands pinning her down by the small of her back. He dropped his weight on her, biting her shoulder, teasing her folds with the tip of his cock.

"I know which spots make you whimper," his voice reverberated sinfully deep off her skin. "I know what moves make you beg for more," he licked down her spine from the back of her neck to the dip right above her ass. "I know what makes you call out my middle name," his breath grazed back up her spine. "And I know that this is your favorite position," he bit her lobe, still teasing her entrance with his tip.

"Oscar!" Elise winced when she felt his erection pulsing right at her entrance.

"Yes?" he asked innocently like he didn't know this was turning her on.

"Don't tease me like that!" her voice frustrated.

"Then ... Beg!" he commanded.

"Please!" she pleaded. She wanted him inside her now, desperate for that tight feeling of him filling her out.

"Louder!" Oscar stood up, still pinning her down, still teasing her.

"PLEASE!" Elise pleaded again, whimpering.

Oscar could feel her entrance twitching for him. "AGAIN!" he demanded in his lowest timbre; squeezing her ass with one hand while continuing to hold her down with the other.

"Oh god! PLEASE! PLEASE! POR FAVOR!" she yelled into the mattress, bucking her hips back as far as she was able to under his grasp.

Oscar dropped his weight back on her. "As you wish," he whispered then drove into her, hard. Elise moaned into the mattress, her fingers twisting into the sheets as Oscar set a fast pace. He reached for her hands with his, fingers intertwining as he bit into her skin, leaving bite marks all over her shoulders. Elise's breathing heavy, her heart pounding fast, she could feel herself falling towards another climax. She looked forward, catching a glimpse of herself and Oscar in the mirror on the wall.

Their skin was flushed red, a sheen cover of sweat covering both. The vein on Oscar's forehead was prominent. His eyes were closed as he bit savagely into her flesh over and over again. His
muscles relaxed each time he pushed in and flexed whenever he pulled almost all the way out. Oscar stood back up, his movements shortened into sharper, aching thrusts. He grabbed her ass, squeezing firmly as he lost himself in his pace, hitting her spot harder each time. The image in the mirror became a hazy blur.

"Oh god! ISAAC!" Elise yelled when he grabbed her shoulders to pull her into his thrusts. She felt the imaginary rope that held her together tear away strand by strand. "Oscar! ...God fuck, yesssss!" she hissed through her teeth as she barreled towards release, wetness increasing as her insides clenched tightly around his cock.

Oscar returned this with a primal groan. He was close. So close. Elise watched the hazy imagine in the mirror. She couldn't steer away. There was something so sensual, so sinfully delicious watching her companion as he lost himself in the ecstasy of passionate love. She held on to her own orgasm for as long as she could, rolling her hips into his movement whenever he returned his full length into her. A few more deep thrusts, his body flexed and he threw his head back, moaning out a raspy "fuck" towards the ceiling as he spilled inside of her.

Deep, satisfied breaths in and out, Oscar slowly brought his forehead to Elise's shoulder, resting it there as his heart rate slowed. He tenderly kissed her back, his lips clinging on to her skin a fraction of a second longer each time he pulled away. "Good god," he panted; exhausted "fucks" escaping through his relaxing breaths. Elise felt his sweat dripping onto her spine, the tiny beads evaporating quickly off her heated skin.

"You ok, mi Linda?" He asked when she remained quiet.
"Hmmmmm... Yes," she hummed softly.
"I wasn't too rough, was I?" he placed a tender kiss between her shoulder blades.
"No... I'm just thinking," Elise breathed.
"About?" Oscar kissed the edges of her shoulders.
"Everything and nothing," she whispered, her mind recalling the day.
"Tell me," Oscar slowly pulled out, helping Elise crawl towards the center of the bed. She laid on her side and he on his. Oscar teased a strand of her hair, smelling it, brushing the ends over his cheek. "Tell me," he requested again, and Elise inhaled slowly, swallowing a breath or two.

"Would you have asked her to marry you? If she hadn't lied?" she asked. She had been curious about this for a while now. After all, Oscar had been with Lorraine for three years. She was curious especially after everything that happened at the bar. She had so many questions to ask. She wanted to explore this relationship as far as love would carry it, so she needed to know at least a hint of what went wrong. Not to fix him, not to fix herself, but to understand at least where all this might be leading. If this was truly more than a fling.

"I don't know. I mean we talked about it but ... I don't know," Oscar propped his head on his hand. "Why do you ask?" he teased her skin with his fingertips.
"I'm just wondering. I mean how do you know someone is the one?" Elise traced the groove between his chest muscles.
"How did you know Joe was the one?" Oscar pulled a pillow close to himself.

Elise dug through an avalanche of memories, trying to pinpoint a particular moment. An abashed smile formed on her face.
"What?" Oscar smiled softly. "Tell me," he kissed her left shoulder.
"It's boring." Elise chuckled.
"It's making you blush. So it can't be boring," Oscar pressed on.
"I should say it's gross," she laughed.
Oscar raised his brow. It was his "I'm waiting" brow raise. Elise had learned to distinguish between most of those raises. It took a few encouraging nods from Oscar to make her share something she had held onto for so long. The memory had been hers but she realized if she wanted more than a fling, if she truly wanted to move on, she'd have to share some intimate parts of her past.

"I got really sick one time. I don't know. The flu maybe. Or food poisoning," Elise snickered softly. "Anyways, Joe insisted to visit me. I was 14, I think," she tried to recall. "He brought along some chicken soup and crackers and made me eat the food because I hadn't eaten in a few days. Well...," she paused, chuckling softly. "It went ok for about five minutes... And then... It was something out of The Exorcist," she laughed, rolling to her back and covering her face with her hands. Oscar loved when she did that. It was her way of hiding embarrassment.

"Nice," Oscar joined her laugh. He loved her laugh. It was the kind of laugh that stemmed from her tummy. Genuine and warm.
"Yeah, well. He ran out the door," Elise laughed even louder.
"He left you by yourself?!!" Oscar raised his brow, laughing with her.
"No! I mean yes. Just for a little while. Just the look on his face. Anyways," Elise rolled back to her side to face Oscar.

"He came back ten minutes later, dressed in my dad's welding goggles, my mother's kitchen apron, and kitchen gloves. And he was wearing a mask, like the ones they use for spray painting," she laughed again, needing some time to compose herself after that image popped into her head. "He collected all the dirty sheets in a trash bag with a pair of tongs, and then cleaned my floor while I went to change in the bathroom," Elise chuckled, her gaze drifting to an imaginary point. It took her a few minutes to return.

"He stayed the night," she continued in a more serious tone. "I was having another temperature spike and he insisted on staying. He made cold compresses for my head and read Schiller's "Song of the Bell" to me. I woke up the next day, and he was holding my hand, sleeping... He'd stayed all night." Elise bit her lip, a silent tear rolling over her cheek. "It's silly looking back, I guess, because we were both so young. But I knew, he'd be in my life for some time," she smiled a crooked sad smile as she wiped away the tear.

"So it really was love," Oscar confirmed softly, circling the spherical Gallifreyan tattoo on her ribcage. He knew it was based on Schiller's poem. He even knew the line it translated to. He figured she had gotten it because of Joe, but he never asked why this particular poem. And now he knew.
"I think so," Elise's brows narrowed.

"What about you? If not Lorraine, was there someone else you would've asked?" she questioned carefully, not expecting an answer. Oscar was always respectful of his past relationships, only ever hinting that some relationships meant more than others. And even when talking about Lorraine, he was careful with his words, despite the anger that at times laced his tone.
"Hmmm... Once," he revealed.
"And?" Elise pressed on softly.

"I don't know. I think the woman I was with wanted it more than me, so I got the ring, got down on one knee and asked. And then it just fell apart because it went all so fast. And I was young and just starting to see the world," he sighed. "And Lorraine... It felt like it was an entitlement towards the end," Oscar swept some hair out of Elise's face. "Like she was entitled to a ring because of how
long we'd been together. That's how she put it. So, I started avoiding the M word ... Maybe... Maybe I wasn't as honest with her either," Oscar confided. "What do you mean?" Elise asked, somewhat perplexed.

"I thought I loved her. I mean... I'm not so sure anymore. I don't want to drag her through the mud. You know," Oscar explained, brows furrowed and eyes stern. Elise nodded in understanding. "There was a spark between us. At one point. It was fun. She was fun. A little too much fun as it turned out. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I think it was lust," he clarified. "Lust to be a little crazy, to have fun whenever, and do .... other things whenever," he chuckled with a mischievous timbre.

"But it got old. And it got tiresome. It was like a game all the time and we both played into it," he frowned. "In the end, I think, I was waiting for an excuse to get out, and when she gave me an excuse, I was happy to call it quits," he heaved his chest, playing with Elise's hair as she repaid him with a small smile.

"So, we're not lust?" Elise asked.
"Tonight maybe," Oscar laughed softly. "But no, we're not lust. I don't think we are. It feels, more," he paused. He had to think. He wanted to be careful about how to word the next sentence. "But not in a possessive way. Not in a "I need to have you all to myself" way," Oscar quickly added. "I just feel like I can let my guard down.... and you won't take it and play it out somewhere," he exhaled. Then he sighed. And sighed again. And again.

"What?" Elise traced his lips with her fingertips.
"If I.... hypothetically, ok?" he started, waiting for confirmation.
"Ok. Hypothetically..." Elise repeated his words.
"If I asked you to marry me, in three years, and we're still together, would you say yes," he asked, twirling a strand of her hair between his fingers.
"I might. Probably. Three years is a long time," she admitted.
"And what if I asked in a year?" he asked.
"Maybe," Elise bit her lip.
"What about a month?" his voice stayed steady.
"I don't know," Elise furrowed her brows.
"What about a week?" he whispered.
"I'm not sure," Elise took a deep breath in. "A lot happens in a week," she whisper-replied.
"A lot happens in a day. Or in an hour, or a minute, even a second," Oscar caressed her face, leaning in for a tender kiss.
"That's true," she smiled.

Oscar pondered some more, the wheels spinning fast. "If I had asked you today, what would you have said?" he asked.

Elise thought for a minute, looking into Oscar's eyes. How she loved his eyes. How she loved getting lost in them. And the way they always looked right through and into her soul. And now they converged patience. Patience and tranquility. Would he be this patient further down the path? She collected her thoughts.

"I wouldn't have said no," she admitted softly. Oscar raised his brow in surprise. "But I wouldn't have said yes, either," she traced his lips again. "I would've said that we needed some time to see the worst of us. Time to have a few throw-expensive-china-on-the-floor, yell-explicit-cusswords-at-each-other arguments. Time to see how we'd make it work," she smiled.
"I see. Well, we have as much time as you need, as we both need," Oscar kissed Elise's nose, pulling the blanket over them, and she curled into the side of his chest.
"Oscar?" she waited.
"Mm hmmm?" he hummed in response.
"I love you," she whispered.
Nothing.

Instead, a faint snore echoed through the room. He had fallen asleep on his back, his arm tucked under his head. Elise listened to his breathing and his heartbeat. They sounded steady. And steady is what she wanted. One day at a time; one week at a time; one month, one year, one decade. She could only hope. But for now, this very moment was her new happiness. And she took it and wrapped in a delicate layer of memories from this day. Maybe she'd look back on it one day and recognize it as the moment she knew for sure, just like Oscar had picked his moment earlier during the day. Her thoughts started to become a jumble as she lulled into sleep.

The warmth of the sun teased Oscar's skin, waking him a lot earlier than intended. He looked down and next to him, still curled into his chest, was Elise, her strawberry-blond hair the only thing sticking out of the blanket. His watch read 7 a.m., Saturday morning, the last full day he'd get to spend with Elise before she would have to leave for Seattle.

He contemplated if he should wake her up so they could leave early for their country escape, or if he should let her sleep. He opted for the latter, gently playing with her hair as he took in deep breaths. The air in the bedroom was infused with scents of perfume and passionate love from the night prior. An almost inaudible snore muffled through the blanket. The occasional twitch of Elise's body indicated her still dreaming of whatever it was she was dreaming about.

Mornings like this is what he had longed for. Lazily snuggling under the sheets, enveloped by the morning warmth of their bodies, with the sun slowly kissing them into a new day, and sounds of a waking city in the background; the smell of fresh coffee and freshly baked bread the only thing missing from this idyllic picture. He reached for his cell on the nightstand, and silently took a snapshot of this moment.

"God, you're like a heater," Elise mumbled into Oscar's side, kicking the blanket off her legs.
"You should talk with your frozen toes," Oscar chuckled. "I thought you were sleeping," he inhaled her scent sharply.
"I was and I wasn't. I was holding on to a dream," she breathed.
"Ah yeah? What kind of dream?" Oscar twirled her hair.

"I met a handsome man," she giggled.
"Handsome, huh?" Oscar caressed her arm.
"Hmmm hmmm. He said he was from Guatemala." She kissed his side.
"Really? And what did you guys do?" Oscar pulled the blanket off her face, letting out an amused chuckle at the sight in front of him. Elise's hair was a mess, her makeup smudged, and her cheeks rosy.

"Oh, you know, this and that," she fluttered her eyes open, a wide grin on her lips; the green slivers in her irises prominent when the sun hit her eyes.
"This and that huh?" Oscar nudged on.
"Hmmm... He showed me around his country. Taught me some traditional songs," she beamed. "It ended in passionate lovemaking on a picnic blanket by the beach," she snickered.

"Yeah?" Oscar rolled to his side. "And? Was he any good?" he wiggled his brows sheepishly.
"Oh yeah! He knew how to use his mouth,...and his tongue,... and his fingers,..." she kissed his chest between the words. "And..." she blushed.
"And?" Oscar bit his lips, raising his brow, trying to look innocent like he didn't know the answer already.
"... His dick..." Elise nodded nonchalantly before losing herself in red-faced laughter.

"Really? You mean like this?" Oscar shimmied downward, chuckling a kiss into her neck.
"Hmhmhm hmmm..." Elise hummed.
"And this?" he jetted his tongue over her breasts.
"Yes," she gasped when he left tiny bites across her cleavage.
"And... this," he gently circled her clit with his index.

Elise just moaned in response. Oscar crawled on top of her, pulling the blanket tightly over them, kissing her neck while continuing to massage her peak. Tender, languid kisses, skin on skin, and gentle finger play led to a tender and languid lovemaking session that ended in whispered moans of release.

"We should get up," Elise smiled.
"We should," Oscar teased her nose with his.
Elise looked up, arching her head back as she stretched away the sleepy, morning feeling underneath Oscar's body, a shocked gasp escaping her lips when she noted the tilted window above the headboard. "Oh my god. You think the neighbors heard us last night?" Elise asked wide-eyed.

"I'm sure Michael will let me know on Monday," Oscar replied casually while grazing her collarbone with his breath.
"What?" Elise's eyes grew to a mortified stare.
"Yeah, his studio is right next to mine. Well, I should say diagonally because the balconies are staggered," Oscar revealed calmly.
"No. Nooooooooo!" Elise hid her face in her palms, continuing with abashed, muffled "NOs".

"What? Not like he doesn't know what we've been up to," Oscar chuckled.
"Yeah, but now he's probably heard what we've been up to," Elise shot him an annoyed squint.
"Sweetie, we don't talk about it. I mean he gets loud, too. Well, his girlfriend does. I mean who can blame her. Have you seen his... Well, you have, so you know," Oscar grinned cheekily.
"Oh geez, I don't..., why did you tell me that," she laughed shyly into the edge of the blanket. Oscar loved that abashed laugh. Despite her European roots, pillow talk, especially of the naughty kind, got to her and he took full advantage of the fact.

"We do need to get up, though. I need to get a few things for the cabin," he kissed over her brows to her eyelids, then to her cheeks, then over the bridge of her nose to the tip, always ending at her lips where he usually left a parted kiss, tracing the edges of her mouth with his tongue. Elise gasped. How she loved him kissing her like that. Like he was painting a map on her face, and his lips were the brush and her face was the canvas, but each time the map was slightly different. She wondered how many paths he remembered, how many paths he still wanted to explore.

"I should probably pack my things so I don't have to worry about it tomorrow," she sighed when Oscar pulled away to get out of bed.
"Sounds like a plan. I still have to pick up the car, too. So I'll be gone for about an hour or so? When I get back we'll head out. So.. Nine-ish. Make it 9:30," he explained before grabbing a clean pair of boxer briefs on his way to the bathroom.

Elise giggled into her pillow when she caught him shaking his ass right when he disappeared around the corner. She could've followed him but decided to let him shower alone. As much as she wanted to join him, she was afraid it would end in another roll in the hay and then they'd never
leave. A day in the countryside, away from prying eyes and sneaky paparazzi was just what they needed to round this week off; the image of Oscar clad only in swim shorts in Elise's head the more likely culprit why this getaway seemed more and more enticing.

She lazily rolled out of bed, putting on a pair of cotton boy-short undies and a t-shirt as she started gathering most of her things. She couldn't believe how fast these past days had gone by. It felt shorter than when they'd first met, although, the roles were reversed this time. Oscar was the one working and she was the one enjoying much needed time away from her colleagues.

She was wondering what everyone was up to. She had avoided texting and calling since Wednesday, ever since E-News had made a big spectacle of her and Oscar's life. She sent out a quick text to the people that mattered the most to her; a string of thumbs up, doing okays, and see you soons thrown back in response. It was a mild comfort knowing that none of her colleagues asked too many questions right now, but she knew that wouldn't last.

Just about done packing, Elise let out a startled gasp when Oscar captured her in a tight embrace from behind. "You're so sexy," he smiled into her neck.
"I know," she grinned confidently, grabbing some fresh clothes on her way to the bathroom, catching a glimpse in the mirror of Oscar getting dressed in his trademark dark clothing: black shirt, black jeans, and his charcoal blazer.

She started the shower, letting the warm water run over her skin for a while to relax her aching muscles before lathering up some soap. A satisfied smile grew on her face as she recounted every touch, kiss, and bite, lulling her into a trance as she fantasized about Oscar's lips on all her favorite spots.

A knock on the door made her jerk around.
"You ok in there?" Oscar's voice echoed into the bathroom.
"Yes," Elise called back.
"You need anything, Sweetie? From the store?" he waited.
"Motrin maybe. I'm sore," she chuckled.
"Alright," he chuckled back, his laugh carrying a mischievous undertone. He knew full well why she was sore.

An hour later, Oscar returned to cheery music resonating through his studio. He quietly placed the shopping bags in the nook. Some rattling noises coming from the kitchen indicated that his companion must be cooking something. Since there was no smoke, he figured he'd sneak in as quietly as possible just to take in the scene.

Elise cooking wasn't an everyday thing, and from the stories told by her brother-in-law, not to mention some firsthand experience, the endeavor could mean at best an unidentifiable charcoaled meal, or at worst a kitchen set ablaze due to burnt water. Oscar clenched his jaw. He prayed for the former before tiptoeing to the edge of the wall of the kitchen area.

He had guessed right. Elise, dressed in a little yellow lace number and looking at the screen of her phone while singing along to Norah Jones' Sunrise, was just about to empty a ladle filled with what looked like pancake batter into a pan. She checked the temperature by hovering her hand above the heated steel, turning the stovetop dial to medium before she proceeded. A low hiss made her jump backwards, but from what Oscar could see, she was doing just fine after that.

He kept watching her as she went back and forth between counter, fridge, and stovetop. Every so often, she would stop and stare at the photographs stuck on the fridge, rearranging them to hide the
less flattering ones beneath nicer ones. Oscar had written tiny notes at the corners of each picture, some reading "mi Linda" or "mi novia hermosa".

A particular picture made her snicker. The photograph, printed out in a larger format, showed her standing in front of a waterfall in Sikkim, her wearing a turquoise dress. Tiny scribbles next to her read "besa aquí [kiss here]" with arrows to Oscar's favorite parts of her body, an arrow pointing to her neck and attached to a squiggly "lugar favorito [favorite spot]". Elise traced the picture with her fingertips.

She took the pen hanging from the magnetic clip on the fridge and added a few "besa aquí 's", some rather suggestive, then hid the picture behind a postcard she had sent him. She noted the frayed edges and bent surface. Oscar must have read this card a thousand times. She flipped it over, only vaguely remembering what she had written. A single sentence scribbled in a hurry: "I miss you." Elise's stomach tingled. He was hanging on to little things from her.

Elise flipped another pancake, then reached for the cupboard, standing on her tippy toes as she gathered two plates and two cups.

"I thought you don't know how to cook," Oscar grinned when she finally turned around, dishes in hand to set the table.
"How long have you been standing there?" she squinted, setting the plates on the counter.
"Long enough to know that you've been fooling us all," he chuckled.
"Ha! Well, YouTube... It works, I guess," she showed him the screen of her phone.
"Ah, well, you're doing great. Are these from scratch?" he looked into the pan, getting a spatula to flip another pancake. Elise swatted him away, jerking the spatula from his hand.

"The guy in the video said to wait until small bubbles form," she quipped with one hand on her hip. "You're right. Forgive me, mi Reina," Oscar snickered as he grabbed and set the table with the bright, mismatched dishes.
"Queen, huh? Hmmm... I like the sound of that," she snickered and Oscar responded with a wink. "I guess it's time to toss those," he pointed to the wilted sunflowers by the windows.
"Oh no, I forgot to change the water yesterday," Elise frowned.

"It's ok, mi Linda. I mean you're wearing sunflowers," he gestured at the lace flowers of her dress. He already loved this particular dress on her. The length mid-thigh, the dress was a nice contrast to her sun-kissed skin. Oscar noted her tan being a bit uneven, staggered but gradient shading across arms and legs. Probably from her wearing different length clothing when traveling. He loved it nonetheless. Her tan wasn't Hollywood. It wasn't a fake or cheap looking orange tint. It was a healthy having-been-outside-all-day kind of tan, and he loved to kiss the uneven edges more and more each day.

"Pancake," Oscar raised his brow towards the pan. Elise rushed over, letting out a relieved huff of air that the soft brown disc wasn't charred. He watched intently as she cooked pancake after pancake, chuckling faintly whenever she gasped a hushed "ohhh" under her breath. A few minutes later, she had created the most perfect stack of flapjacks ever seen, a hint of pride gracing her face when she served them up with butter, syrup, and a side of fresh fruits.

"Alright. Dig in, I guess?" she chuckled anxiously, watching Oscar intently as he cut into his stack with his fork.
"Right....." Oscar's face went from a wide smile to twisted confusion after he took his first bite. It was almost like he was in pain when he swallowed.
"What's wrong?" Elise dug into her stack.
"Sweetie, I wouldn't..." Oscar started; shaking his head, coughing lightly, and washing down the rest of his bite with big gulps of two percent milk.

Too late. Elise had already stuffed a huge chunk into her cheeks. Her mouth twisted as she tried to chew on her bite. 
"You ok?" Oscar's eyes widened, his mouth agape. 
"Ex... Excuse me..." Elise managed to mumble before dashing to the counter, spitting the food into the sink. 
"Those are fucking awful. What the hell...," she scanned through the ingredients she had used. 
"Dammit, I must have mixed up the sugar and salt," she pouted.

Oscar started laughing when he saw her disappointed frown. 
"It's not funny." She threw an oven mitt at him when he paced over to her to give her a kiss for trying. "Stop laughing," she huffed when he managed to capture her by her hips. "No!" she crossed her arms, denying Oscar a kiss. 
He aimed for her temple instead, laughing softly against her skin as he coaxed her out of her defensive pose. "You tried, Sweetie. That's all that matters," he smiled down on her.

"I graduated with honors. I traveled around the world like twenty times. I'm a damn smart woman. And yet,... here I am. Unable to cook something as simple as a pancake." She hung her head, the poutiest of pouty frowns on her lips.

"Awe... Sweetie. I love you regardless of your cooking skills," Oscar kissed her on her forehead. 
"Besides you know how to shake and bake in other places," he wiggled his brows towards the bedroom, his lips curling as he tried to suppress another laugh. 
"I do, huh?" Elise snickered, glancing up and down his body. "Ditto," she wrinkled her nose. 
"Hmmm...Now, let me take over. Go relax on the sofa. Watch some TV. No gossip channel, though!" he shooed her into the living room area. 
"I should at least clean...," she began. 
"I am Apocalypse! I command you to relax!" He tried his most dramatic deep voice. 
"Yeah, yeah. We'll see how scary you are if I ever meet your mother," Elise shot him down with a wave of her hand.
She had no idea that this made his heart skip a few beats. He couldn't wait for her to meet his family.

Oscar threw the inedible pancakes into the trash, whipping up a new batch in record time. Elise sunk her teeth into the first bite; the sweet, fluffy texture giving her senses a tiny climax. "You know, food and sex go pretty well together," she toyed. 
"I know. And if you don't hurry up, I'll cover you in syrup and lick you till you're done ten times over," Oscar teasingly countered as he got up. He inched closer to Elise, pressing a syrup sweetened kiss on her lips.

"I'm going to change real quick," he whispered as he teased her brow with his nose. 
"Why? You look great," Elise argued, getting up to clear the table. 
"Well this is kind of my incognito look," he admitted, spinning around like he was trying to prove that it somehow worked like camouflage. 
"Oh, alright," Elise scrunched her nose. 

She swiftly cleaned the dishes while Oscar changed. She was about to toss the wilted sunflowers into the garbage can when Oscar's phone rang. Elise peeked at the screen, unknown number flashing across a few times. She let it ring, figuring it wasn't her place to answer his phone. The phone stopped and began ringing several times.
"Sweetie, could you get that, please. I'm packing my bag real quick," Oscar called out from the bedroom.
"Is he there?" a slurred, female voice asked.
"I'm sorry, Mr. Isaac is currently unavailable. May I take a message?" she asked, trying her best to conceal the surprise in her voice.
"I know he's there. Just hand him the phone!" the woman on the other end blew up angrily.
"I apologize but he really cannot talk at the moment. Just give me your name and number and I'll forward the message," Elise was growing impatient, her tone carrying an annoyed edge to it.
"Just tell him Lorraine called. He knows how to get a hold of me," the woman sassed back, leaving a stunned Elise hanging on the line.

Oscar finally made his way back to the kitchen, a large backpack in one hand and car keys in the other. "Who was it?" He asked, waiting, and Elise looked up, a mix of surprise and confusion behind her eyes.
"Your ex."
Elise stood frozen in place, mouth parted and eyes locked on the screen of Oscar's cell. "What did she want?" Oscar sounded as surprised as Elise looked. "I'm not sure. She said to tell you to call her back," she replied rather calmly, a little taken aback by her own apathy. Then again, she didn't know Lorraine personally, and despite what Oscar had told Elise, she didn't have an opinion about his ex.

"I'll call her when we get back. We should get going. It's already ten." Oscar fidgeted towards the door but Elise didn't move. His cell still in her hand, she bit her bottom lip for what she was about to say. "You should... call her. You know.... now." Elise apprehensively handed the cell back.

"It can wait," Oscar countered, pushing his cell in the back pocket of his utility style shorts; his usually warm and welcoming posture annoyed and rather cold. The day had started off so great: a lofty coziness had draped them both in warm afterglow. But now the air was icy and thick, and the glow had changed into an ashen hue.

"Look, it's not in my place. She's your ex, but I really think you should call her now. She sounded like she had a few. I'll wait on the balcony," Elise spoke quickly, spinning on her heel towards the living room.

"Is this one of those taking a break moments?" Oscar narrowed his brows. Elise froze halfway into her spin. "No. This is one of those "we each have a past and we should deal with it" moments," she argued back coldly.

"Like you dealt with yours?" Oscar snapped back bitterly, shutting his eyes instantly, mumbling out a hushed "fuck" after he heard his own remark out loud.

Elise shot him the deadliest glare he'd ever seen on her. That was definitely a twin-bladed dagger thrown her way, and it hit her right in the heart. She tried her best not to lose herself right then. Whatever Oscar had said, was out of annoyance, no matter how hurtful it was. Lips tight, vein on neck pulsating rapidly, she spun towards the balcony door.

"Sweetie, I'm sorry. That was unfair of me." Oscar started after her. He swore he saw the anger in her eyes turn to agonizing sorrow, and this is not how he wanted to spend the last day with her. "Call her!" Elise repeated with a quiver in her voice, eyes fixed on the handle of the balcony door before finally stepping out and shutting it loudly behind her.

The second the door shut, hot, anger-filled tears started streaming silently down her face. She took a few deep breaths in, trying to compose herself. She looked at the scar on her wrist, rubbing her index across it. Her mind went back to India, to Hungary, to her best friend Mikki. Oscar wasn't entirely wrong and yet, he was. Her head started throbbing. Here it was again: her past in her way of being happy. And Oscar had unknowingly pinned down her greatest fear: regret; the overwhelming feeling of guilt for the choices she had made.

She contemplated how things would've been had she dealt with everything differently, had she dealt with things head on and strong. Would she live in the States if she hadn't felt the need to escape this earth after Joe passed away? Christine wouldn't have needed to take her in. Maybe James and she would've moved in together sooner, gotten married sooner, had kids sooner. Or
maybe never reunited at all? Somehow the latter felt ... wrong, but the notion of fate, that Elise's tragedy was needed to lay out their path felt just as wrong. Or at least, cruel.

She, too, wondered where she'd be had she dealt differently with the whole Frank situation. If she had gone to the cops instead of running away, he might have gone to prison a lot longer than a couple of years. Instead, he's out, roaming wherever he's roaming, the constant fear of retaliation in the back of her mind. But she'd grown tired of running away, so returning home -to get her life back and to be there for her sister- felt like the first right thing she had done in a decade. Still, had she dealt differently, would she even be here? With Oscar?

She took another deep breath in, trying her best to let go of what-ifs.

"Alles in Ordnung?" a voice queried from her left. Elise hadn't noticed it before, but there was a balcony diagonally behind Oscar's that led into another studio, and sure enough, Michael Fassbender was the current occupant. She quickly wiped away her tears, like that would instantly make her look less flushed and more confident. "Ja. Ja. Alles klar." She gradually pivoted around, forcing out a smile.

Michael stood relaxed against the railing of his balcony, dressed in a tight-fitting, white t-shirt and sweatpants, his hair looking as though he had just rolled out of bed and exhaling a cloud of menthol smelling smoke. "What happened?" he asked with a rasp in his voice as he dragged in another huff, the thin paper of the cigarette crackling faintly through the slow burn. "Nothing," Elise fibbed, her eyes still red.

"He isn't mean to you, is he?" Michael prodded on, narrowing his brows. Elise granted that question with a soft chuckle. She couldn't imagine Oscar being mean, at least not in the way how she defined mean. "No. Just a lot of stuff. It's all a little overwhelming," she confessed.

"Well shit, yeah! I'd be overwhelmed, too. It's one thing to choose this life, another to get thrown into it," Michael stated bluntly, flexing his arms against the railing as he stretched the rest of his body. "It's not that." Elise paced to the corner closest to Michael's balcony.

"Then what?" He took another puff from his cigarette before squishing the filter into an ashtray nearby. He pulled a new cig from a pack on a table next to him, offering Elise one as well. She shook her head, denying the offer, then watched as Michael lit up the stick dangling from his mouth; his chest expanding greatly as he inhaled that first cloud of smoke sharply through his teeth. Although she didn't smoke herself, there was something tranquil about watching someone else do it, and somehow that aided in calming her own nerves.

"I don't know. Love stuff, I suppose," she started, her thought-lines deep. "It's all moving so fast. I mean it's funny because I don't mind but I do and yet I don't."

"As I said, wherever love falls," Michael nodded. A female voice called for him from his studio. He looked over his shoulder, yelling out a "bin gleich da", inhaling sharply before returning his attention to Elise. "Whatever happened is between the two of you," he paused, taking in another drag, staring at the dwindling tobacco leaves of the cigarette between his fingers. "Just know," he exhaled, attempting to direct the smoke away from Elise's face. "That man never shuts up about you. Never. And I've known Oscar for a couple of years now, through some other friends. He never spoke about his ex the same way he talks about you," Michael revealed.

Elise scoffed lightly and shook her head. "Really?"

"Yeah, really! I mean he's talking kids for crying out loud," he laughed.
"He's never done that?" Elise was caught off guard by that statement, but it definitely piqued her interest.
"Not in a serious way, he hasn't," Michael gave her a soft smile when he noted her surprise.
Elise raised her brow, humming out a soft and disbelieving "hmmm".

The female voice called out to Michael again, this time carrying an impatient and whiny undertone.
"Ja ja. Mein Gott. Bin gleich da." He shook his head, rolling his eyes in dramatic annoyance as he pressed the filter into the ashtray. "Well, I better get back in there or else she'll torture me with orgasm denial," he smirked.
"What?" Elise's eyes widened.
"Sounded to me like Oscar was trying that on you last night," he winked at her.
Elise choked on a gasp. "Were we really that loud?" she muttered embarrassed into her hand.

Michael responded with a sheepish wide grin. "Have a great weekend," he beamed, slowly shifting towards his balcony door. "And remember, if you're trying for a boy, you should be the one on top," he wiggled his brows as he closed the door.

Elise snickered into the palms of her hand, letting out another sigh, finally pulling herself together.
She looked down on the streets of Montreal. The sun was high, the city bustling with weekenders, and the shops below were filled with people enjoying their free Saturday.

Elise's attention trailed to a young woman in a navy polka-dot dress. She was gripping the handle of a blue stroller with one hand and holding on to a toddler of maybe four or five years of age with the other. A man dressed in khaki shorts and a light-blue button-down soon appeared next to them, three ice cream cones in both hands. He handed one to the woman, another to the toddler, and kept one for himself. An idyllic family portrait and Elise envisioned herself in the woman's place with Oscar by her side.

A gentle embrace from behind made her heart rate jump. Oscar had snuck up on her again. He kissed into the curve of her neck while looking down to see what had his companion so enthralled.

"That's a beautiful family," he whispered into her ear.
"It is," Elise conceded, turning around, looking into Oscar's soft, dark eyes. "Is she ok? Your ex?" she asked with genuine concern.
"Hmm... She'll be alright. I called a friend of hers to check up on her after I finished talking with her," Oscar replied with some reservation, surprised Elise cared so much.
"That's good. Did she say why she called?"
"She saw us on TV. Kind of pissed that I moved on," he cringed.

"Hmm. Well. I would be too if I saw a new couple alert with an ex." Elise returned her gaze to the street. The couple had taken a seat on a bench near the ice cream shop. Dad was helping the toddler hold the cone, while mom held their second child, maybe a year old, in her lap, sharing the ice cream with the tiny being, all of them laughing when some of the cold treat ended up all over baby's face instead.

"I guess that's true, huh?" Oscar sighed into the fabric of Elise's dress. "Was she rude to you? On the phone?" he worried, knowing that Lorraine could be brash at times.
"Intoxicated rudeness, yes," Elise nodded. "Again, I would probably be upset as well," she admitted.
"I really didn't expect her to call, Sweetie. I kind of left things hanging after I left. I did say it's over. I don't know. I didn't wait for her to get the rest of her stuff either. I just left. I guess that was a shitty thing of me to do," he sighed again, gently pushing Elise's shoulder to make her face him again.
"I'm sorry. About what I said earlier. That wasn't fair," he apologized, gingerly playing with a strand of her hair; looping the soft tendril around his finger and releasing it over and over again. "I know you didn't mean it," Elise smiled thinly. "I'm still sorry because it's incomparable," he whispered. "And maybe I shouldn't have become so agitated, because I knew you were right. About calling her back." He traced over Elise's brows.

"You weren't all wrong," she bit her lip. "I mean,... I've made my choices. I don't... I should say, I'm trying not to regret because if I do, I go to this dark place," she gulped. "I wish I had been stronger sometimes. For the sake of my family. But it's done. It's in the past," she sighed, rubbing her thumb over her wrist. "And your past, well, Lorraine. It's still kind of recent. I overstepped, telling you to talk to her, but I know what it's like to run away, and I don't want you to have any regrets," Elise closed her eyes for a second.

"Regrets about what? Leaving her? Or being with you?" Oscar narrowed his brows tightly. "Both. And jumping into another relationship quickly," she added. "Well, that's my decision, don't you think?" Oscar scanned Elise's face, trying to gauge her expressions, no matter how minuscule the changes. "It takes two...I just... I don't want to be a rebound, but I also don't want you to feel obligated to drag it out if that's how you view it... you know, just because I'm looking for something long-term. And I want something long-term," Elise's cheeks flushed. Her heart pounded wildly.

She had never said it aloud like that. They had teased each other so many times with possible long-lasting ideas, but she had never actually vocalized this particular need; at least not like this, not this concrete. She felt like she was standing on the threshold of something and nothing at the same time, this very moment the deciding factor over their relationship: fun and games whenever they had time and while it lasted, or serious investment into making this work with their busy lives, compromising to find that perfect balance.

"You're not a rebound. I don't know where that is coming from, but you're not. I thought I made that clear last night," Oscar hinted at their talk about marriage and taking as much time as they both needed, surprised and somewhat offended that Elise thought she was some kind of short-term relationship. "I know what you said. And it's not about marriage being the end result, either. I mean the whole stint at the bar has definitely got me thinking, but I don't want you to think that that's all I'm after. It'd be nice but it's not a checklist kind of thing for me," Elise gulped. "I know. And that's ok. I promise," he assured. "I'm still trying to figure all this out myself. I mean, fuck..." Oscar ran his hands up his face and through his curls as he heaved his chest like he needed courage to speak his mind.

"I honestly didn't expect to fall in love head over heels, but I did," he bit his lip. "I didn't expect it to be so soon after my breakup, but it happened," he swallowed a breath or two. "I just know... that I am in love... with you. And it's so damn cliché, but I've never really felt like this before. My phone rings, and I hope it's you... And when I see your name, my heart, my stomach... I get so nervous, I don't want to say the wrong thing. And when it's someone else, I hurry to finish the conversation because I'm afraid I might miss your call," Oscar's eyes were wide, passion sparkling through from behind.

"And it takes everything to restrain myself because I don't want to scare you away. And after Wednesday, I thought this is it. This is it! She'll leave for sure. Because I know that's not something you wanted, the drama and the press and all that shit. And then on set yesterday," Oscar paused again. He had to catch his breath from talking so fast. "The way you saw right through me.
You get me. And last night. Your sense of humor... because honestly, I thought you were going to bolt, but you didn't. Or at least I thought you were going to knock me the fuck out because I was an ass," Oscar chuckled awkwardly.

"I'm not saying this to make you stay, you know, but I am glad... I'm glad that after all the shit that happened this last week, you're still here. And if you want long-term, I'm in. And we'll make it work," he finished, waiting for Elise's response. She had returned her gaze to the street below where the young couple with the children was getting back to their walk, checking out window displays while slowly strolling down the sidewalk.

"And if you want that," Oscar gazed at the couple, pulling Elise close to his side by her hip. "If you want that, then... We'll have that. At some point down the road. And if not, I'll be just as happy. As long as I get to share my mornings and evenings with you whenever we're together and for as long as it lasts," he kissed her cheek.

Elise sighed, eyes closing for a moment."One day at a time?" She asked from the side.

"One day at a time," Oscar assured.

"And if you want that," Elise redirected her attention to Oscar once the young family had disappeared into the crowded sidewalks of Montreal.

"You feel like?" he asked carefully. She bit her lip and he whispered "tell me".

"It's all so fast. And at the same time, I want to skip forward already. I want to skip through the whole courting bull crap, and already celebrate our twenty-fifth. Just skip past all those awkward first family meetings, and the press invading our privacy, and just be old together already, with or without a ring. It's not that I'm running out of time or anything but I just feel like I'm past the play and fun stage, and I was never really in it to begin with...That doesn't sound very romantic, does it?" she frowned thinly when she noticed Oscar gaping at her.

"It doesn't," he chuckled. "But all the courting bull crap, as you call it,... it's so worth it. It's what will make us, us. Those will be our stories to tell when we do make it to the twenty-fifth." He paused and traced her face with his fingers. "I don't want to rush things either. But truth be told if I had asked yesterday and if you had said yes, I'd have taken you to the nearest chapel so we could elope." He gazed out on the city, grabbing Elise's hand.

"But...," he retracted, exhaling slowly. "In my mind, I know all this is more lust than love right now. It's not balanced out yet. So let's slow down. Let's take it one day at a time." He kissed the back of her hand. "Because, I'm afraid if we rush, we'll both end up unhappy, maybe even hate each other. And I couldn't... I'd never want that." He held her hand to his face, his two-day stubble tickle-scratching her skin.

"And there's still so much we don't know about each other. I don't want to know everything. It keeps the mystery alive. But the basics would be nice. Like what's your favorite movie, your favorite time of year, your favorite word? What places do you want to see? What languages do you still want to learn? And how many puppies do you want to get? And what would you name them?" Oscar chuckled into her fingertips as he kissed each one between the questions.

"I know," Elise freed her hand from his grasp, nervously rubbing her other arm while thinking for a minute. "I've just never been this impatient before," she revealed with a frightened undertone. "And I think it's because for once I know what I want. I mean, I've known before," she paused.

"With Joe?" Oscar recaptured her hand, squeezing it tightly, gazing at her and ready to listen to what she needed to say.

"Yes. With Joe," she mumbled with a sad sigh. "It wasn't like we had planned everything out, you
know," she looked into Oscar's eyes. "But we had a pretty decent outline and we both knew what we wanted. And then it all came toppling down in a single night, and I lost track of myself," she explained, gulping, her heart still racing as she laid the cards on the table.

"It may seem like I have it all together, but really, I didn't know what I wanted until recently. And I was angry at the world, and I was angry at myself," she paused. "Did I tell you that Richard had to force the promotions on me?" she asked nervously. Oscar just shook his head no. That was definitely news to him. "I didn't want them. I just wanted to stay hidden in my little cubicle. Angry and keeping people away. And I don't know, dating was such a failure, too. I mean look at my last relationship," she let out a mocking chuckle. "I was so desperate not to be alone. I just didn't care about what I wanted..."

"...but now I know what I want," she finished her last sentence with flushed cheeks and a raised brow, chewing on her bottom lip, her body trembling ever so slightly as she waited for Oscar to say something back. He stood there, smiling, squeezing her hand over and over again.

"And what do you want?" he asked, his heart now racing as well, scared and excited at the same time.

Elise closed her eyes, an overwhelming rush of contradicting feelings crashing down on her. It was the same rush she'd felt last night at the bar. She felt Oscar squeeze her hand again, and again. And then... calmness, absolute serenity. She opened her eyes, finding herself lost in the warmth of Oscar's gaze, the sun hitting his irises in such a way that his pupils contracted to tiny specks of black, the usually dark brown color of his irises now a deep, almost glowing caramel. So beautiful. So soothing. "I want to move forward... Preferably with you," she blushed.

Oscar nodded with relief. He bit his lower lip and pulled her hand towards his lips, smiling a kiss onto her skin as he continued to nod, closing his eyes as he whispered "te amo" under his breath. "Let's get going," he suggested softly and still smiling.

"Let's," Elise blushed even more. It felt as though a big weight had been lifted off her shoulders, knowing that they both wanted the same thing. Something lasting, but moving at a slow pace.

By the time they left the tiny studio and packed up the car, it was almost noon, so Oscar pulled into some fast food place, ordered some burgers, fries, and shakes to go, and then slowly drove west towards the sun. Elise sat quietly in the passenger seat taking in the scenery as they drove out of the city and into the country. She opened her window and held out her hand over the edge of the door, inhaling the sweet spring air as it tousled her hair.

Oscar side-eyed her now and then. She looked deep in thought but content, the sun kissing her skin as they drove on. He fiddled with the radio, setting it to his MP3 player when he found the device menu, then he hit play.

Elise's face went from a thoughtful to a surprised but wide grin when she heard the first chords followed by the familiar voices of her favorite band. Oscar glanced over and caught her lip-synching the words to the song as she continued to stare out and across the fields. He reached for her free hand next to the gear shift, intertwining his fingers with hers, kissing the back of her hand before he started singing along.

"So come out of your cave walking on your hands
And see the world hanging upside down
You can understand dependence
When you know the maker's hand...

Elise scrunched her nose, blushing.
"Come on Sweetie, I know you know the lyrics. Sing with me," Oscar encouraged.
Elise bit her bottom lip. Oscar just kind of shout-sang along as the song picked up speed again.
And before she knew it, Elise had joined in, singing her heart out with the last chorus.

"And I will hold on hope
And I won't let you choke
On the noose around your neck

And I'll find strength in pain
And I will change my ways
I'll know my name as it's called again."

She laughed abashed into her free hand. She was sure she sounded awful with the wind carrying
the sound in all sorts of direction, but she didn't care. She closed her window, taking a deep breath
in.

"Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country," she said out of the blue.
"What?" Oscar threw her a fleeting, puzzled look.
"So you're a sci-fi nerd?" Oscar chuckled.
"You got a problem with that?" Elise squinted fiercely at Oscar.
He couldn't help but laugh. He didn't have any issues with it, in fact, he was as big a nerd as they
came, but he bit his tongue. The one little detail he hadn't told her yet and one of the reasons he'd
invited her to Comic Con was very much sci-fi related.

"Not at all, Sweetie. I think it's great," he quipped.
"What's yours?" Elise blinked her eyes at Oscar.
"Dog Day Afternoon," Oscar nodded in confidence.
"Pacino, eh? Hmmm... interesting," she scanned up and down Oscar. "You look a little like him,
you know that?"
"Really? You too?" Oscar shook his head in denial. "Jessica has said something similar a while
back," he added, blushing.

"Jessica? Jessica Chastain?" Elise queried carefully. It wasn't like she was unaware of Oscar having
famous friends but she didn't like asking for specific names unless the conversation led that way,
just like it did now.
"Mmmm hmmm yes. Kind of hoping you'll meet her one day. She's a good friend," Oscar
explained with a glimmer of pride in his smile.
"That would be nice. I like her. From the interviews I've seen she comes across as my kind of
funny," Elise smirked.

She kept watching Oscar as he kept focusing on the road ahead, mentally tracing his outline, taking
in the tiniest movements of his body, her glance always returning to his lips. She couldn't ever get
enough of his lips. She loved how they always felt soft and warm on her skin. She loved how
Oscar consciously and subconsciously licked them whenever he thought of something. She loved
the way they arched or curled when he smiled. And she loved the way they moved whenever he
talked.

"What?" he raised his brow when he caught Elise's stare from the side as he turned the car left into
a dusty road that led into a pine forest.
"Nothing," she wrinkled her nose.
"Come on. I can see the wheels turning," he smirked.
"You're handsome is all," Elise redirected her gaze to the road ahead, catching Oscar blushing from the corner of her eye.

A few minutes later, he pulled up in front of a large wooden lodge. "I'll be right back. Checking in and getting the map to our cabin. There's a small shop, I think... if you need to get anything," he offered but Elise declined, waiting in the car instead, looking around through the passenger window. The place looked quite empty. Maybe it was the beginning of the season, she thought to herself.

"Alright. The cabin isn't far from here. We have to park in a lot and then walk the rest of the way. It's only maybe a five-minute walk?" Oscar explained when he got back in the car, staring at a tiny paper map, turning it several times to figure out where they were.
"Give me that!" Elise demanded, an amused tinge in her voice. She looked at the lodge and the street then looked on the map. "We have to go down this street, then turn left at the second path, go down a little further and the parking lot will be to the right," she prompted.

"Former Girl Scout?" Oscar smirked.
"Former military spouse," she sighed.
"I keep forgetting," Oscar flinched. "Did Joe teach you how to make a fire, too?" he asked while slowly driving down the off beaten path.
"He taught me a ton of survival skills. I won't eat worms though. Turn left here," she instructed.

"Here?" Oscar looked down an even less maintained path.
"Yes, here!" Elise sounded a little irritated.
"Ok, but if we get lost..." Oscar drove on.
"Do we have to do trust exercises? Like where you catch me?" Elise laugh-scoffed. "Trust me and keep driving!" she raised her brow. Oscar did as told, and sure enough, they soon saw the small parking lot off to the right.

"So, the worms thing," Oscar grinned while getting their stuff from the trunk.
"You didn't bring food?" Elise gaped, grabbing a couple of the bags and her backpack.
"I'm just teasing, Sweetie," he laughed. "I brought some snacks. I'm taking you out to a small restaurant for dinner later. I had a lot planned, but I don't know if we'll have enough time for everything," he dropped his bags to the ground, pulling Elise close for a soft kiss. "But this is pretty much it. There are bikes at the cabin, and we can bike to the shore, and to the restaurant. It's a little further down the shoreline," he continued, picking the bags back up and starting in one direction.

"Where are you going? The cabin is this way," Elise started towards another direction.
"Oh? Ok then. Lead the way, mi Reina," Oscar chuckled. He liked Elise's authoritative confidence most, her taking charge when others were likely to either give up or panic. He'd noted this trait early on at her sister's promotion party. He also knew that as fast as this attitude appeared, it disappeared even faster if the wrong fires were stoked, so he always treaded a little more careful when she took on this leading role.

"Admit it, you'd get lost even if there were neon lights pointing right at the cabin," she laughed, trekking up a small but steep hill.
"I would. But now I have you. So, I'll never get lost again," he smiled while checking out Elise's derrière.
"Awe. That's sweet, Lindo. Now stop staring at my ass!" she glared over her shoulder, laughing
"Can't help it. It's a nice view," he grinned mischievously, especially after he caught a glimpse of Elise's panties under her yellow, lace dress: turquoise and silk, her favorite - and more and more his favorite- combination.  
"Well, you better pay attention to markers, so in case we do get lost we know how to get back," Elise stopped, turning around to see what took Oscar so long. He huffed up the last of the small hill they had to climb, the log cabin coming into view when they reached the top.  
"There is no way you're that out of shape," she raised her brow as Oscar opened the cabin door, still a little out of breath.  
"Bedroom and outdoors are two different animals," he teased.  
"Hmmmm. Really? Do you think we should test that theory?" she countered nonchalantly. Oscar was expecting her to break character any second but Elise wouldn't give him that satisfaction. There was a growing confidence in how she responded to his innuendoes and he loved it.  
"I think we should. There's all sorts of hidden meadows around here," he wiggled his brows, dropping the bags he had carried by the entrance of the cabin before shutting the door. They looked around, taking in the size. The cabin was small with an open layout and was sparsely furnished. There was a tiny kitchenette in one front corner, a small wooden table with two chairs in the other front corner, and a queen-sized bed in the left back corner and that was for the moment strapped against one of the cabin's side walls. A small but neat pile of pillows and blankets stacked on top of a cozy old chair stood right next to it. An open door in the right, back corner led to a small restroom with a minuscule shower with barely enough space for two people. There was no TV, no radio, no outside distraction. Just the scent of pine needles and sounds of nature.  
"Hidden meadows, hmmmm? Didn't you just say we might not have enough time for everything you had planned?" Elise smirked back after she dropped her bags on the table. She pulled her bathing suit from one bag and waited.  
"We can skip dinner," Oscar grinned sheepishly. "Or we can be each other's appetizers," he inched closer to Elise, leaning in to kiss her neck.  
"Hmmmm. Maybe. Or..." She looked at her watch, tossing her bathing suit on her backpack. It was just past one o'clock. "We can have early afternoon tea and dessert," she bit her lips, stepping back before Oscar could place that kiss on his favorite spot, causing him to let out a frustrated rumble. Elise reached to her back, slowly unzipping her dress, slipping the lacy garment off her shoulders with a seductive spark in her eyes. One hand on hip, she showed off her taut curves in a matching silk bra and panty set once her dress hit the floor and again waited.  
"I can live with that," Oscar gaped as he glanced up and down her body. Elise kept stepping backward, her eyes fixated on Oscar's gaze. Captivated, in a trance, he followed her, kicking off his shoes, stripping off his black t-shirt and dark utility style shorts along the way. "I had so much planned," he whispered as he skimmed over the edges of her bra with his fingertips, his breaths short and shallow.  
"Then we better hurry," she whispered, unhooking her bra, pulling it off as languidly as possible. "Well?" she raised her brow, a cocky smirk hiding in the corner of her mouth as she waited for his move. Oscar didn't have to be asked twice. He dropped his boxer briefs hastily to the ground, lifting Elise against the wooden wall, nipping up and down her neck, pushing her panties aside when she wrapped her legs around his waist.  
Foreplay was short but intense, almost aggressive, making Elise moan out Oscar's name several
times before he pushed into her, filling her with that familiar pressure of his cock. Deep, sharp thrusts had her digging her nails fiercely into his back, scratching him whenever he decided to bite her breasts and nipples, each bite clinging on a little longer, piercing a little harder than the last. He pressed his body tightly against hers, holding her body up against the wall by her thighs, and she bit into his neck, weaving her hands eagerly into his curls when he moved faster, yet.

She was still aching from the night before, her legs tired, and other areas still quite raw. She could feel her strength to hold on crumble. Still, she didn't want him to stop. She wanted those angry bites, that pleasurable pain jolting to her core. She didn't want soft and tame. She wanted rough and primal. And Oscar, face buried in the curve of her neck and moaning as loudly as her, was giving her just that.

His movements wild, he could feel her legs shaking under his grasp, her body gradually slipping down the wall, so he tightened his grip to trap her in place; pressing a heated, open-mouthed kiss against her lips, and releasing a tortured moan when she bit his bottom lip as he pulled away. She started gasping for air; each time holding her breath just a little longer whenever he pushed back into her.

He was hitting that spot over and over and over again. Fierce thrusts had her aching so much that she bit into his shoulder, muffling a scream into his flesh, sending him over the edge right as she barreled towards her own climax, his essence slowly trickling out and over them both as they hung on to their orgasms for as long as possible.

"Fucking Christ, Liz...." Oscar breathed heavily, sweat dripping down his nose as he rested his forehead on Elise's shoulder.
"I'm ... So... Sore..." she gasped in shallow breaths, and wheezed a laugh into her neck.
"I'm sorry, Sweetie. Where does it hurt?" He tenderly kissed the marks he had left on her neck.
"Everywhere," Elise winced when he slowly dropped her to the ground. She could barely stand.

"Oh shit! I'm sorry, mi Linda. I didn't realize... Oh man, did I hurt you? Don't fib!" Oscar quickly pulled down the bed, pulling a sheet on the mattress, so Elise could lie down.
"Maybe a quickie against a log cabin wall isn't such a great idea," she laughed while tumbling face forward into the mattress.
"Shit. Sweetie, you got some scratches on your back. Let me check to make sure there aren't any splinters," he panicked.
"I'm fine. I just... My legs... My insides...," she moaned.

"Your... Your insides? You mean... Oh... Ohhhh... Oh well, why didn't you say... Oh man, I would've stopped, Sweetie. Like seriously, you have to tell me these things," Oscar soaked a washcloth with cold water, kneeling down next to the bed, rubbing the wet cloth down Elise's back before applying some Neosporin to a few of the scratches.
"Well, I was horny, so..." She flipped to her side when he finished.
"I still wish you would've told me. I mean, I get the whole pleasure from pain thing. That's why I've been going a bit rougher. Testing my limits you know. But if it's hurting when it shouldn't, you have to tell me. Ok?" Oscar pleaded. "OK??" he repeated more urgently.

"I promise," Elise sighed, rolling back to her stomach.
"I'm serious, Linda. Don't be afraid to tell me to stop. It's supposed to be fun for both of us," he gently kissed a few of the raw spots on her back, and she groaned into the mattress. "Liz, please?" He nudged her shoulder to get her attention.
"I promise," she propped her head on her hand. "I will tell you to stop if you're going too rough," she agreed. "But I was... You know.... really horny," she scrunched her nose.
"Hmmm. I noticed," Oscar chuckled softly. "I just want to be clear. I don't want to hurt you, ever. Not on purpose. Physically or mentally. So if this is something... I don't know....," he sighed apprehensively, tensing up at the thought. "If this is something Frank had you do. It's wrong. And I would never ask this of you," he looked into Elise's eyes, his brows furrowed with seriousness. "I know," Elise traced over Oscar's face. "And I promise," she repeated. "Good," he kissed her shoulder. "Good," he kissed her ear.

"Let's go to the lake. I think some cooling off is in order," Elise grinned. "You sure? We don't have to," Oscar stood up, pacing to his bag to get his swim trunks, his body still gleaming from sweating. He always seemed to work up quite a sweat when making love, or as he called it "the act of fornication". "Yes. Plus the water might help relax my muscles," Elise sat up, getting off the bed, reaching for her bathing-suit: a red with white polka dots vintage two piece number. Oscar watched attentively as she put it on.

"What?" Elise squinted from the side. "I don't know if I should let you leave the cabin like that," Oscar gawked. Elise looked like a sixties pin-up girl straight out of one of those sixties vintage posters. "Really? You're that kind of guy?" She crossed her arms, tapping her fingers on her bicep. "No!... But I don't know. You're so... Sexy. And other guys...," Oscar stammered as he pulled on his blue swim shorts, keeping his eyes fixed on Elise. "I didn't know you're that shallow," Elise gasped in overly dramatic fashion. "I'm not," Oscar widened his eyes to which Elise responded with a disbelieving raise of her brow. "Ok, maybe I am, but so are you. Admit it!" he mirrowed her raised brow when he caught her eyes wandering down his body while she bit her bottom lip.

"Ok, so we're both a little shallow. Everyone is. I'm still wearing this. And if other people gawk, well, too bad, right? Cause this fine looking body," she pivoted on her heel, hand on hip when she came to a stop, "is only yours to kiss," she smirked as she inchted closer to Oscar. "And only yours to taste," she swung her arms around his neck. "And only yours to explore," she bit her bottom lip again. "Hmmmmm. Ditto," Oscar grazed her lips with his, closing his eyes as he waited for a kiss, and waited, and waited...

He could feel her teasing his lips with her breath, but she didn't give in the temptation of feeling his soft lips against hers. Not this time. Instead, she nibbled his nose, laughing as she let go of his neck to get her towel. Oscar let out a disappointed huff, capturing her with a growl from behind, and nipping her ear. "Such a tease," he whispered, kissing her shoulder at first before gently biting into it.

"I know, but you love it," Elise chuckled as she turned around in his hold. "I do. Now give me a kiss," he pulled her close, gazing seductively into her eyes; and she gave in, placing a soft, open-mouthed kiss on him, carefully skimming the edges of his lips with her tongue before gently massaging his tongue with hers. "Dios mío, woman, I love it when you kiss me like that," he confessed, his cheeks turning red.

"I know," Elise breathed. "Let's go!" she squeezed out from his hold, throwing on a white, lacy, cotton cover-up over her bathing-suit and grabbing her beach tote before speeding outside to the bikes. She peeked at her watch again. Only two o'clock. Since the sun was up high, no clouds far and wide, she pulled on her shades, waiting for Oscar as he locked the cabin's door.
The shoreline wasn't far from their place. Maybe a five-minute bike ride. They could hear people laughing and jumping into the water as they got closer. "We can go further down, if you want," Oscar suggested when Elise stopped to look around. "No, I think here is good. I like that it's open and lots of sun," she smiled. "You sure, Sweetie? It's a lot of people," Oscar queried. He wanted to be absolutely certain that Elise was comfortable. She scanned the area again, looking for anyone out of place, anyone with a large camera, anyone that didn't seem to be there to enjoy a day by the water.

"I think we're good," she inhaled deeply, getting off her bike, locking it in a stand close to the floating, wooden pier. "Plus this looks more fun. They have a slide out in the water," she beamed. "And I see a few volleyball nets up. If you're up for it," she giggled, watching as Oscar locked up his bike. "Alright. But if you want to leave, make sure to let me know, ok, Sweetie?" Oscar smiled back softly in response, happy that Elise wasn't afraid to stay in such a public place where they could be seen together.

They quickly found a nice open space to put down their towels, helping each other slathering on some sunscreen while observing others play in the sand and the water. Elise plopped down on her towel while waiting for the sunscreen to settle. Oscar sat down next to her, digging his toes into the rough sand as he gazed across the water, basking in the sun while running his hand up and down Elise's leg. They didn't talk, just enjoyed each other's company for a little while.

Just then, a soccer ball flew by their faces, nearly missing them. "Je suis vraiment désolé," a young woman yelled while grabbing some ten year old or so boy's arm. Elise heard the young woman scolding the boy for not being careful. Clearly, they were family. "Nous sommes ok. Vraiment, pas de problème," Elise got up and walked towards the woman while Oscar dashed after the soccer ball. The boy, fidgeting side to side, looked embarrassed to the ground.

Oscar ran over to them, soccer ball in hand, he huffed out a "want to play soccer?" at the confused boy. "Veux tu jouer au football?" Elise translated. The boy's face instantly lit up. He looked at his mother for approval, and when she nodded ok, Oscar kicked the ball towards the boy. Elise sat back down, watching on as Oscar joined a mixed team of teens and kids to play soccer in the sand; makeshift goals on opposing ends, and small rocks doubling as counters to keep score.

A few times Oscar came close to scoring a goal, but more often than not, he had to stop to catch his breath, jerking upright whenever he caught Elise staring and waving at him like he didn't want her to see him even more out of shape than she already thought he was. Elise was amused, to say the least, but she was also getting lost in her mind palace. Seeing how Oscar acted around the kids, how he adjusted his game-play depending on the age of the opponent, and how he helped some five-year-old score a goal during a penalty kick... Her heart certainly skipped a few beats this afternoon, little what-ifs crawling not just into her mind but also into the depths of her heart and soul.

She didn't remain in that fuzzy state for long, quickly snapping out of her dreamy gaze when she noticed some women nearby exchanging hushed whispers as they watched the game from the sidelines. Soon, some of those women shyly waved towards Oscar, something he politely acknowledged with a smiling nod. She couldn't quite tell if they recognized him for who he was, or if they just thought that he was some suave looking guy who happened to be there that day.

She tried not to let it get to her, but it was difficult to ignore the growing giggles. And she couldn't blame them for looking either. Oscar was quite attractive; especially now, while running around
without a shirt on and working up a sweat, that shiny gleam enhancing the ridges of his muscles. He must be aware, Elise thought as she drew in a deep breath through her parted lips; but if he wasn't, then him being oblivious to his effect on the adults around him was a turn on in itself.

When the boy's mother finally called for a break, Elise got up and leisurely strolled towards Oscar who was trying to catch his breath by steadying himself with his hands on his upper thighs, looking as though he was on the verge of passing out. She was just about to reach him, when the boy dashed past her, offering Oscar a cold bottle of Gatorade before running back to his mother. "Merci," Oscar called out to the mom before chugging the entire content of the bottle in what seemed like a fraction of a second.

"Thirsty much," Elise laughed. "They're fast,... And it's hot," he chuckle-huffed when he saw his companion approaching him, wiping some sweat from his face with his forearm. "I'm sure they are," Elise snickered, swinging her arms around his neck, giving Oscar a quick peck on his cheek, the taste of his sweat clinging to her lips. "Why, thank you, mi Reina," he beamed. "Is that my new pet name," she smirked. Oscar just hummed a yes.

"I think, we're being watched," Elise whispered, gesturing with her eyes to the five or six women who now seemed in a hushed gossip frenzy. "You want to go?" Oscar clenched his jaw, forcing out another polite smile when he saw the same group of women giggling his way.

"We haven't gone in the water, yet," Elise frowned. "Unless you want to go," she backtracked, realizing that maybe Oscar was now out of his comfort zone. "That's true, huh?" he stated, his breathing finally relaxing. "I'm good," he smiled softly. "And,... I really do want to see that little bathing suit all soaking wet and clinging to your skin," he smirked, wiggling his brows suggestively. "Well, then! Let's get in," Elise crinkled her nose. "But first," Oscar leaned in, mischievously biting his lips. His hands wandered to her derrière, softly squeezing her as he pulled her against his chest while placing a languid kiss on her neck. The small group of women, who had been gaping at them, disbursed, some letting out angry huffs as they stomped back to their towels.

"You had to antagonize them, huh?" Elise asked with a raised brow when Oscar let go of her. "Actually, it's because of them," Oscar bobbed his head towards a couple of men who were gawking at Elise. She shook her head in disapproval and walked off towards the pier. "You mad at me?" Oscar sped after her. "No and yes. Ugh both, at you and them," she rolled her eyes at the men who had been staring at her. "It only confirms what I said earlier," Oscar huffed. "That men gawk?" Elise stopped dead in her tracks, crossing her arms at her chest. "That you're sexy," Oscar blurted out. "I am huh?" Elise tilted her head, blowing some hair out of her face. "Yes," Oscar grinned as he coaxed her out of her pose, taking her hand and strolling towards the end of the floating pier. "Plus women gawk, too," he chuckled. "Not that I mind, I guess... It is a bit of an ego boost," he raised his brow with cocky pretense. "Don't get me started on them," Elise's grip tensed.

"You know those ladies were just a bit jealous, right?" he asked. "Sooner or later we'll get scorning
glares, no matter how careful we are. Or how polite we are, you know," he explained, holding on tightly to Elise's hand. "I suppose, I'm just used to it. I know it will take a little time to adjust. And as long as you don't take it personally, it'll be ok. And as long as they...," he pointed his chin towards where the women had been standing, "... don't make it personal, it'll be ok," Oscar went on calmly. "Most fans are nice, though. Just have to be on your toes when it gets too close and personal. And most will back off if I ask nicely," he assured when he saw her eyes a bit warry.

"I guess, I'll have to somewhat get used to it," she sighed. "Not that I mind," she added quickly. "I know this is part of your life, I just... You know," she smiled a crooked smile, shrugging her shoulders.
"I know, Sweetie. And trust me, it seems to happen a lot more here than back home because you know in Brooklyn, no one cares. Over there, I'm just another face. In fact, whenever I get too full of myself, my neighbors will make sure I don't stay too long on that high horse," he laughed wholeheartedly.

"That's good to know," Elise laughed. "And just to make sure, let me help you stay off the high horse for now," she deviously tilted her head as she quickly pushed against Oscar's chest, causing him to tumble backward into the water with a loud splash.

"Wooooo... God damn! It's a lot colder than it looks!" he gasped as he shot back to the surface. Elise stood on the edge, holding on to her stomach while laughing. Oscar squinted at her through his wet curls, swimming to the edge of the pier. "I'm going to get you," he shivered. "Just you wait," he pulled himself up on the edge and out of the water, sprinting after Elise who was trying to make a run for it.

The floating pier, a little unsteady and wobbling, slowed Elise down, and soon Oscar had caught up with her. He threw her over his shoulder, carrying her towards the same edge; all her kicking and squirming of little help, when he tossed her into the cold water.
"Meanie," she pouted with trembling lips, sticking out her tongue as she swam out into the open.
"Wait," Oscar yelled, jumping in after her.

"Good god, you're a fast swimmer, too?" He scrambled to catch up with her.
"And a fast biker," Elise grinned as she splashed him with water.
"Let me guess, triathlon participant," Oscar huffed as he tried to stay afloat.
"Yup," she snickered, submerging and re-emerging a few times over.
"Come here," he gasped, his hands finding their way to her hips to hold her in place and close to himself. They both treaded gently in the water to stay afloat, teasing each other with soft kisses for a while.

"How are your muscles?" Oscar inquired after a few minutes of water play, teasing her nose with his.
"We should get back to the cabin then; so you can get a little bit of rest. Then go eat dinner a bit early and then back to the cabin for dessert," Oscar chuckled.
"What kind of dessert?" Elise snicker-asked.
"Whatever ends with you in my arms," Oscar teased confidently.
"I'd like that," She smiled then swam closer to him, giving him another, gentle kiss. "Thank you," she whispered.
"For what?" Oscar gazed.
"For taking me here. I like this. Maybe we can do this again, sometime?" she suggested.

"Hmmmm... Maybe for an anniversary. How about, the seventh?" Oscar smiled.
"Ok." Elise bit her lip. "Ok." She swam closer again. "Ok," she whispered as she kissed him, her hands wandering over his spine to the back of his neck and into his wet curls. She hummed into the kiss,... smiling right before dunking his head under the water and swimming back to the shore.

Oscar shot back up, looking around to where Elise had taken off to, swimming after her. He paused for a second to watch her, taking a mental picture of this moment. "One day," he whispered before starting to the shore again.

They made it back to the cabin a quarter past four, taking quick, separate showers to get ready for dinner. Elise was first to finish, so she sprawled out on the bed, relaxing while waiting for Oscar. She skipped through the fabric-covered, turquoise diary he had bought her before her trip to India, adding some notes from the day.

"What' you doing, mi Linda?" Oscar asked when he knelt next to Elise on the bed, wearing just a pair of dark-gray briefs while rubbing a towel over his curls to dry them off.
"Just writing some notes for the day," she smirked over the edge of the journal, her gaze trailing between his abs and his chest.
"My eyes are up here," he chuckled, and she stuck out her tongue in defiance. "Wow, is that the diary I bought you?" Oscar skimmed over the fraying fabric of the cover.
"It is. It's almost full. Just four or five more pages," she smiled.
"That's good. I'm glad you made use of it." He got up and finished putting on his clothes, her eyes following him. She beamed ear to ear when she saw his outfit, and he caught her smile.

"Something wrong with my clothes?" He looked down on himself then back to her.
"It's the same outfit you wore at my sister's promotion party," Elise pointed out, blushing at her observation.
"I know," Oscar's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Thought you might like this," he beamed. "Are you going to wear the sunflower dress?" he asked softly when he pulled Elise to a stand, the question sounding more like a request really.
"Do you want me to?"
"I do. I like that dress. It's very... You!" He kissed the tip of her nose and she bit her lip, abashed.

"Then that's what I'll wear," she whispered. She got ready while he watched, this time wearing Oscar's old gray cardigan over the dress as the evenings were still chilly. "Don't worry, I washed it after our little balcony session," she smirked when his eyes widened.
"That's not why. It's just... Such an odd...," he paused.
"Yes?" Elise tilted her head.
"You have nicer clothes than that, Sweetie," he chuckled.
"I know. But I like this one," she winked at Oscar as she wrapped herself into the cardigan.
"I'll never get this one back, huh?" he mumbled.
"I told you, on the thirtieth," she nodded, reminding him of their first week conversations.
"Can't wait," Oscar beamed ear to ear.

Looking at the map, Elise figured out that the restaurant was about a fifteen-minute walk from their cabin. It was only six in the evening, and with the sun still out, the two lovebirds opted to walk there. Oscar held on tight to Elise's hand, intertwining his fingers with hers, occasionally kissing her knuckles or grazing her fingertips with his lips while strolling along the path towards their destination. It was a comforting silence, unquestionably love because every time one caught the fleeting glances of the other, they blushed and giggled like two teenagers on their first date.

The restaurant was a mid-sized brick and wood building with low arches leading to several different dining areas; some holding large round tables to seat parties of eight or more, others leading to a few quieter rooms with cozy tables for two. There was an outside patio to the back,
illuminated by soft string lights and candles on the tables, and with a small dance floor off to the left center. Spring flowers, warm-hued table cloths, and old cracked tile floors rounded off the rustic look.

Oscar had called ahead of time to ensure that there was space, and the hostess, who greeted them at the door, promptly seated them at an outside corner table overlooking the water. Since it was fairly early in the evening, hardly any guests were around, making it easy to hear each other during conversation while watching the sun setting slowly and with a strong orange glow between the mountains across the lake.

Oscar glanced over the menu, which to his surprise was in Portuguese and French, of which he spoke neither. He recognized a few of the words as they were similar to Spanish but was still somewhat lost in translation when he couldn't figure out the other words.

"Hmmm," he hummed, twisting his mouth, scratching the back of his head as he tried to interpret what the menu said. "The only things I recognize on here are arroz. And fiambre, and that's...," he raised his brow in surprise. "...a Guatemalan dish."
"Oh, really? Hmmm. Interesting. Looks like a cold salad with... meat?" Elise questioned.
"Mm hmmm. It's different for each region, and each family actually. Usually, we only make it on Día de Muertos and on All Saints Day," he kept scanning over the menu.
"Then we should pick something different," Elise smiled.

"You already know what you're having, don't you?" Oscar grumbled. Elise snickered out a yes. She leaned over, translating from French the various options in front of him.
"Ok, what's this one again?" Oscar pointed to a dish on the paper.
"Bacalhau à minhota. It's fried cod with caramelized onions and sliced potatoes, also fried," Elise reminded him, slightly amused by Oscar trying to figure out what he wanted to eat.
"I am such a steak person, but I guess I'll go with that, and whatever you choose as your appetizer." He put the menu down, winking at Elise.

When the waitress returned with some water, Elise ordered their food in French: the bacalhau for Oscar, arroz de marisco for herself, and caldo verde as their starters. Oscar chuckled.
"What?" Elise responded with an abashed sip from her water.
"Eh," Elise shrugged. "It's a good thing we're not actually in Portugal. I haven't learned that language, yet."
"You plan on studying more languages, huh?" Oscar smirked.
"Well. You know. It helps," she blushed again, taking another sip from her water.

"You should teach," Oscar proposed.
"I could never," Elise laughed loudly.
"Why not? You just taught me more Portuguese words in five minutes than I learned in five years of living next to someone from Brazil," he grinned.
"And do you remember the words? Hmmm," Elise pondered with a raised brow, resting her chin between her left thumb and index. He did not. "I just wouldn't have the patience to teach someone else. Adults maybe, but definitely not kids," she opposed the idea.

"That's too bad. You'd teach our kids though, right?" Oscar winked. Elise's stomach tickled at the thought, and she hummed out a gentle yes after a few seconds, her mind getting lost in what-ifs again.
"So are you actually going to come along, to Comic Con?" Oscar redirected.
"Yes. I did say yes, right? That is still all kind of a blur," Elise replied, chewing on her bottom lip. 
"I just want to make sure you have time," Oscar reassured.
"Hmmmm. I was thinking of emailing you my calendar. So maybe we can sync our schedules," she suggested with some hesitation.

"Sounds like a good plan," Oscar gave her a soft smile.
"This is all still so crazy," Elise mumbled into her palm while getting lost in the now almost reddish tint of the sunset. Oscar reached for her free hand, playing with her fingers.
"We'll make it work, Sweetie. You might even get annoyed by how much I'll be around," he chuckled awkwardly.
"I doubt that," Elise countered. "It's just quite a lot. I mean with the promotion, I'll have a little more flexibility because I get to choose more freely and delegate a lot more," she raised her chin with pretended arrogance. "But sooner or later, one of us has to sacrifice," she sighed. "Or more like an unequal compromise," she added quietly.

"I know, and we'll talk about that when we get to that point," Oscar pulled her fingertips to his lips, brushing over them lightly with tiny kisses. "Let's just see how we'll work out the next few months, hmmmm? One day at a time, remember?" Oscar clarified to which Elise responded with an approving nod. She exhaled sharply, hiding her face in her palms, then smiled at Oscar shaking her head at her worries and disbelief that he still wanted to be with her.
"I love you," she bit her lip, playing with her napkin, twirling a corner of the fabric around her finger.

And then a song echoing through hidden speakers had them both looking up and around, laughing as they simultaneously raised their brows in surprise.
"I haven't heard that one, in... Forever," Oscar chuckle-quipped as he finished the last of his potatoes.
"For 'Two Faces of January'?" Elise asked, biting into a shrimp.

The manager, a tall but roundish man who was actually from Portugal, brought them their food when they sat back down at their table, always returning for small talk, and always a bottle of Medronho under his arm, offering a shot or two to people who had finished their meals.
"That's right. ...I thought you've only watched a couple of my movies?" Oscar squinted in surprise.
"I did have to look up which movies to get, though," Elise revealed.
"What else did you look up?" he queried with a slightly worried timbre.
"Nothing. Just your movie history. I made a list in which order I want to watch the movies. 'Two Faces' kind of stood out in the description, you know because of Greece. I love Greece," Elise gulped.

Oscar's thoughts shot back to their first week together, remembering why that country held a special place in her heart. "Well, I won't give anything away then," he smiled, acknowledging her fondness of Greece with a soft kiss on the back of her hand.
"At least tell me you're not going to die in this movie," Elise chuckled.
"I am not," Oscar wrinkled his nose.
"Good, because you know. I know it's acting, but... uhmmm yeah..." she bit her lip.

"So you really haven't looked anything else up? About me?" Oscar queried.
"No. Why? Are you hiding a dark and mysterious past?" Elise chuckled.
"Maybe I am! Maybe I'm doing this to hide the fact that I'm a wanted jewel thief," Oscar said sternly.
"Oh kay," Elise laughed.
"It's good to know that you're taking me seriously," he sulked.

"Mi Lindo. I love you, but... You're too nice to be in that kind of life," she chuckled.
"Alright, sure... In that case, I want in. Fifty-fifty split," she raised her brow, crossing her arms as she relaxed back into her chair.
"Now you scare me," Oscar laughed when she didn't break character.

Plates cleaned, Oscar ordered a couple of shots of Medronho, the manager filling their glasses a second time on the house just because. By the time they finally left the restaurant, it was almost ten at night, the manager bidding them a loud and cheery farewell as they took off.

"You still want dessert?" Oscar grinned when they reached their cabin.
"Actual dessert, or de-serryerrr," Elise snickered, a little tipsy from the fruit brandy.
Oscar disappeared into the cabin, returning with a large wool blanket and a couple of bags in his arms. "Actual dessert," his grin even wider. He filled the small, fixed grill next to the cabin with charcoal, kindling a piece of paper, but to his dismay, it kept going out. Elise laughed.

"That's why you asked if I knew how to make a fire, huh?" she laughed.
"I kind of forgot the starter, but it said the coals don't need one, so..." Oscar tried again, and again to no avail, the tiny flame always extinguishing in a rather pitiful poof before even igniting a single piece of coal. Elise scuffled closer, taking the papers and lighter from Oscar's hands. She looked around and found some dry tree bark next to some trees. She re-stacked the coals, some paper and tree bark in between, leaving some space for air to move through, and started the flames with ease.

Oscar brought out the chairs, putting them close to each other and fairly close to the still high-burning coals. He retrieved some marshmallows, chocolate bars, and graham crackers out of another bag, grinning sheepishly at Elise from the side when she sat down in the empty chair next to him.
"S'mores, huh?" she scrunched her nose. "Are you trying to fatten me up?" she snickered.
"No. Although, I do like a little extra squishy-ness," he wrinkled his nose back at her.

They sat there for a while, huddled under the blanket, quietly making s'mores. They laughed at
melting-off-the-skewers disasters and inedible-charred-puff catastrophes while trying to make the perfect sweet treat. They looked up at the stars now and then, seeing the moon hanging in the sky only in its first quarter of the new phase. Elise rested her head on Oscar's shoulder when the coals slowly diminished to a low glow within the grill, the stars adding a romantic coziness as they stole tiny kisses from each other. Once the coals were almost out, Elise poured some sand onto them to suffocate even the smallest spark still remaining in the pit.

The cabin, illuminated only by the quarter moon and the stars, was a perfect refuge for soft kissing sessions that lasted well past midnight. Oscar gently teased his favorite spots on Elise's body while drawing invisible lines with his fingertips from freckle to freckle on her skin. He kissed her what felt like a thousand times over, gently massaging her along the way. And when she was once again on her back, angled against a pillow, gingerly weaving her hands through his curls, Oscar sighed onto her stomach, resting his head right above her belly button while gazing up into Elise's eyes.

She liked feeling the warmth of his breath hitting her skin, his head rising and falling each time she inhaled and exhaled.

"Tell me about my sister's pregnancy," Elise requested out of the blue. "What?" Oscar raised his brow. "She said you were there for part of it. That you even dropped them off at the hospital," Elise went on. "She was pretty. Had the whole glow to her," Oscar smiled. He remembered that Elise hadn't been there during that time, missing a pivotal event in her sister's life.

"Did she eat a lot?" Elise queried. "Oh god, yes. All the time. And the weirdest foods. One time she stuck a pickle into some Nutella. Like she scooped the Nutella out of the jar with the pickle," Oscar laughed. "So she was big?" Elise furrowed her brows, trying to look serious, but she laughed at the image in her head. "No. Not really. Not until the last month," Oscar revealed, still laughing but softer.

"Was she happy? I mean even though I wasn't there. Was she happy?" Elise stopped playing with Oscar's curls. "Very much. And so was James," he kissed Elise's stomach. "She did almost break his hand though, and mine," Oscar laughed again. "You were in the delivery room?" Elise was flabbergasted. "Yeah. Not so much by choice. It went really fast actually. Your sister went into labor I think around midnight, and by four in the morning, Chloé was here. Screaming on top of her lungs. She looked like a purple alien," Oscar snickered. "Hey now, that's my niece you're talking about," Elise tugged on his curls. "I'm just teasing," he pleaded when she didn't let go. "Chloé was beautiful. Really tiny which was a little surprising," Oscar shared, sighing as he recalled the event. "But she was healthy, right?" Elise wondered. "Oh yeah," Oscar assured, kissing Elise's stomach again. "And James? Did he cry or was he just reserved like always?" Elise prodded on. "He was crying his eyeballs out. I gotta say, it's quite a sight when a six foot, two hundred pound guy cries, but you know, it was emotional. I cried, too," Oscar confessed, gritting his teeth a little.

"Awe," Elise snickered. "Well I'm glad you were there for them," she sighed. "Hmmm. I'm sure you wanted to be there, Sweetie," Oscar kissed her stomach one more time then crawled up and laid down next to her, closing his arms around her as he kissed her neck. "And
I'm sure you'll be there when the next baby arrives," he sighed into her shoulder. Elise held a breath and squeezed his arm. "Do you know something, I don't?" She looked back over her shoulder at him.

"No. I was just saying, you'll be there for the next baby, I'm sure," he bit his lip.

"Oscar?" Elise hadn't known Oscar for too long, but she could tell when he was trying to hold something back. It was in how he was trying to avert her eyes. He'd done the same thing a few times over while she'd been in India and they'd Skyped, and she'd always been able to call him out for it.

"Ok, but please, don't tell Christine you know because James wasn't supposed to blab either," Oscar clenched his jaw.

"Oh my god, really? She's... But... Chloe is only seven months," Elise stammered, excited and shocked at the same time.

"I told you, those two have a lot of sex. I think as soon as she was cleared, they were at it again," Oscar snickered.

"Oh god... I don't... Wow," Elise's eyes widened.

"Yeah, when I was staying over, you know,..." Oscar wiggled his brows.

"I don't want to know. Just, I don't want to know!" Elise laugh-exclaimed as she dramatically tried to cover her ears. "But omg, I'm going to be an aunt again," she beamed, but as fast as the joy danced across her face it vanished, a vacant stare taking its place.

"Sweetie, you ok?" Oscar asked cautiously.

"Yeah,... Yeah. I am," Elise fibbed, her thoughts tracking to Joe, a rush of what-ifs washing over her. She pushed the thoughts out of her mind as she rested her head on her pillow.

"One day. If not with me, I'm sure with someone," he kissed the back of her shoulder, knowing where her mind -if only briefly- had taken her.

Sunday morning was cozy and warm. Elise could feel Oscar's breath against the skin of her shoulder. He hadn't let go of her once during the night, but now she really had to get up and go. "Mi Lindo. Are you awake?" she asked, trying to free herself from his tight grip.

" Barely," he rasped.

"I gotta go," she fidgeted.

"Go where?" Oscar breathed softly. He was clearly still half asleep.

"Potty," Elise squirmed.

"Ok," he held on tighter, subconsciously kissing her back.

"Babe, I really gotta go," Elise pinched his arm.

"Oh... Oh you gotta go, go," he huffed, smacking his lips as he let go, still lost in a dreamy daze. They had clearly stayed up way past his bedtime.

Elise rushed to the bathroom, Oscar staring bewildered after her before dropping his head back on his pillow and lulling back to sleep. When Elise returned, she was dressed in skinny jeans and a white shirt. "Didn't you just get up?" Oscar asked confused when he realized that she had taken a shower.

"That was an hour ago, Lindo," she snickered when she saw his tired eyes blinking at her.

"Oh shit, what time is it? We gotta go, right? Airport," Oscar shot up in a panic.

"We're good, handsome. It's only eight," Elise stated calmly. "Enough time to pack, and get some breakfast," she said.

"How are you not tired?" Oscar lazily sat up, looking around the cabin. Elise had already gathered most of their stuff.

"I am, but I can sleep some more on the plane," she explained as she put on her converse. "I'm
going to grab some pastries from the shop. You want anything else? Coffee?" she started toward the door.
"No. I brought coffee. I'll make some while you're gone," he smiled before she took off. He looked out the window, watching as Elise rode off on the bike towards the parking lot. He shuffled out of bed, took a shower, and packed the rest of the stuff while waiting for Elise to return.

When he packed his backpack, he saw Elise's journal sitting on the table. He peeked out the window, making sure she wasn't on her way, gingerly opening the journal to a random page. There were postcards and ticket stubs glued on the pages, some scribbles describing the town she had visited that day. He skipped to a different page, and this time a poem was taking up most of the space. It was in German, so he didn't understand. He flipped to another page at random, looking down on a portrait of himself, little notes describing his features.

"What are you doing?" Elise stood in the door, holding a paper bag.
"I'm sorry," Oscar quickly shut the journal. "I was curious," he stammered in embarrassment.
"Ok. I don't mind you reading my diary." She put the pastries on the table next to it. "I just wish you'd waited until I filled in the last two pages," she frowned.
"You were going to let me read it?" Oscar was perplexed.
"Yes. Of course. I've got nothing to hide." She set out some napkins.
"Then I'll wait," Oscar gulped, astonished that she'd share what looked like a collection of very intimate thoughts.
"Let's eat," she blushed when Oscar didn't steer his gaze away from her. He paced over to her, placing a soft kiss at her temple, a hint of gratitude in the way he held the kiss just a little longer than usual.

When they finished, they quickly cleaned up and loaded the car, driving off east, back to Montreal. Elise was quiet, scribbling and sketching into her journal. She flipped through the pages, adding a few more notes to past entries. Before she knew it, they were back at Lorne Crescent to pack the rest of her suitcase. Oscar stood in the arch, watching as Elise checked the drawer, the closet, and the bathroom one last time to make sure she had everything.

He realized that she was trying to draw out the last moments before they had to leave for the airport. Goodbyes weren't her favorite thing, and she tended to withdraw a little more as it got closer to departure.

"I'll drop you off at check-in again," Oscar smiled as they pulled into the parking garage next to the terminals. Elise stayed quiet. They made their way to the counter, checking in her suitcases, then strolled towards the security line to say their goodbyes.

"At least it's not a month again," Oscar searched for Elise's eyes.
"I know," she scrunched her nose, holding back tears. Why did goodbyes always make her want to cry?
"I'll be there in a week," Oscar pulled her into a tight embrace, kissing her hair.
"I know," she heaved her chest.
"And I'll be there for your birthday," Oscar cradled her chin.
"I know," Elise chuckled softly. "It's just different," she smiled with a sad sigh.
"How?" Oscar asked softly.
"I got spoiled, and now my bed will be empty," she sniffled.
"Not for long," Oscar pointed out, wiggling his brows to cheer her up.
"I know," Elise scrunched her nose again. "It's not a bad thing. That I'm sad," she added.
"It's not?" Oscar narrowed his brows.
"No. It's not. That's because... now I got you, and I don't know. It's nice to know you'll be cuddling with me again very soon," she shrugged, a tiny abashed smile hiding behind her eyes.
"That is nice, huh? Well. I'll see you soon," Oscar pulled her in for another tight embrace. "Don't wear out your friends while I'm gone," he laughed. Elise punched his arm, shaking her head. "You'll really never....," she started, but she couldn't finish the sentence. Oscar had shut her up with an endearing kiss.

After waving his last goodbye, Oscar paced back to the garage, got in the car and put the key in the ignition. He was about to start the car when he saw the fabric-covered, turquoise journal in the passenger seat, a green sticky note instructing him to "open here" when he picked it up. He opened the book, which was now almost four times as thick as it originally had been. Elise had stuffed the pages with pictures, cards, and tiny flat trinkets, and there on the last page was a sketch of a sunflower hanging its head over a hastily scribbled poem titled Oscar:

"And you kissed me as you whispered goodnight
Pulling a blanket of stars around
Our tired bodies and our tired minds.
Holding me closely as our hearts reached out
For a newer and much greater adventure
Than the ones we decided to leave behind.
One I would only dare to with you
For you are my map without which
I'd get lost in a world of tomorrow."

Oscar let out a wisp of air, reading the poem again and again and again, tracing the words with his fingertips each time he reread the lines. He got out his cell, scrolling through his contacts, hitting the strawberry icon to dial his companion's number.

"Miss me already," Elise snickered on the other end.
"Oh... Eh it's ok," Elise's voice crackled through the speaker.
"It's perfect," Oscar gulped. "So tell me, mi Reina, what do you want for your birthday?" he asked as he started to skip through the pages of the journal, realizing that almost all the entries were addressed to him. Like she had been writing one long letter while on her business trip.
"You, with nothing but a bow," Elise giggled.
It took a few seconds before Oscar registered what she had said. "Ah yeah? Well, I think that can be arranged," he replied confidently, laughing when he heard Elise's signature abashed giggle on the other end.

Chapter End Notes

Elise- The Journal Entries
"There you are!" A familiar deep voice hollered towards Elise. She craned her neck to the left and saw her brother-in-law waving at her from behind the baggage claim. "I was getting worried. Everything ok?" he asked, Elise's suitcase already in his hand, ready to roll out to drive home.

It was shortly after midnight, and she had been held up by customs. "Random bag check," as they'd explained to which she'd surrendered with a tired frown, knowing the agent was just doing their job. James lifted his brow. "Did you try to smuggle Kinder Eggs into the country?" he joked condescendingly when he heard what had happened. "Maybe!" Elise mirrored his raised brow with equal arrogance.

"Oscar is rubbing off on you, I see," James presumed before letting out one of his booming signature laughs, the people around him glaring at him, some jumping backward from a tired, having-traveled-all-day trance. "Maybe I knew you'd be here to lawyer me out if I got caught," Elise countered with a sarcastic tinge.

"I wouldn't be of much help. Not too familiar with international trade laws," he laughed again, and again people glared at him like there was some unspoken noise-control policy in place and he had just broken every sub-rule on it.


They found their way to his SUV, driving north toward Seattle shortly after. "So. How was it?" he queried when he couldn't bear Elise's silence much longer. "Like you don't know?" she sighed, her voice carrying a peved undertone as she continued to stare out into the night. James exhaled a long sigh through his teeth. He knew what had happened. After all, he had called Oscar that very day. And Lenny, his East Coast P.R. rep, had kept him up to date as well. James refrained from asking more questions for the remainder of the drive. It was late and he wasn't in the mood for an escalating argument.

An hour later, they arrived at Elise's apartment complex. The sound of the key clicking into the lock echoed through the empty and somewhat stale smelling one-bedroom abode. James waited on the threshold of the entrance as Elise rolled her suitcase with loud clacks across, watching her as she heaved her chest towards the darkness of the hallway.

"You want to talk about it?" he queried with caution, his eyes detailing her face. She looked tired and sad, but mostly deep in thought. The week with Oscar was meant to be a relaxing vacation, but from what James had gathered, through all the info he'd received, Elise's week had been an emotional roller coaster ride, to say the least.

"I don't want to keep you," she declined wearily. "I also have to be at work in...", she peeked at her watch. "....ffffuck... I have to be at work in less than eight hours. I need some sleep," she sighed. "Ok, but we'll talk later," James insisted.
Elise agreed with a heavy and tired nod, giving her brother-in-law an impassive hug before closing the door.

After getting some water, brushing her teeth, and changing her clothes, she tumbled face forward
onto her bed, letting out an involuntary moan when her body hit the sheets. How great it felt to lie down on her own mattress, to use her own blanket, to feel the softness of her own sheets against her skin. The only thing missing was the warmth of Oscar next to her, the catch being that she found the longing for him still somewhat odd; always torn between denial that Oscar was exclusive with her and that head-over-heel buzz in her core that was clearly a sign of love.

She peered to her right, stroking the empty space next to her. She'd been single for so long after Frank, that she had never truly noticed it. That was, until now.

Until six weeks ago, it had been a normalcy to come home to silence and vacancy. In fact, there was comfort in knowing that she didn't have to share her bed with anyone, especially anyone like Frank. She had grown accustomed to the loneliness within her own, four walls, and that wasn't always a bad thing. She liked the refuge her small apartment offered: away from anyone prying into her past; away from anyone trying to crawl under her skin with unwanted advice.

But now things were different. They had been since the day she'd met Oscar. They had been since he'd first stepped foot into her apartment. And they especially had been since the evening they'd made love for the first time.

There was an instant connection that was more than just some short-lived fling, more than just lust. Being around Oscar for the sake of being near him came before the need to feel his breath graze her skin, but once it did, it was like she'd been pushed out of some long, dark dream. Like she needed that push to feel alive but without being pressured to follow the newly illuminated path.

Elise dug further into her thoughts, her mind flooding with images of a soft smiling Oscar, and how he didn't try so hard to make her like him and how he didn't play around to impress her. He didn't throw his achievements in her face or compare successes. He didn't throw names around nor did he shower her with expensive and unnecessary gifts. The little things he had done for her, however, had always been without pomp and circumstance, and almost always out of the blue. They came from kindness without expecting a reward, a concept Elise needed some time to adjust to.

Her mind drifted further. This time to the little ticks that Oscar seemed to reserve only for her. How he ran his hand nervously over the back of his curls when he brought up some new idea he thought she might like; how he subconsciously tapped his finger when he talked about the future; how he glanced at her when he thought she wasn't paying attention, always with a shy smile in his eyes, like he was the one who couldn't believe that she was with him.

But the thing she loved most, the thing that made her stomach tingle, and what she missed above anything else right now, was how Oscar always hitched his breath before any languid kiss. It was like he was waiting to see if the moment was real; if she was real; if they were real. But then, when his lips finally touched hers, after a fraction of seeming eternity, he would always let himself fall into the moment; often with such passion that Elise ended up being the one questioning reality.

Elise gingerly brushed her lips with her fingertips. She missed Oscar, and they'd only been apart for half a day. But she missed him. After three years of romantic solitude, Oscar had been the first man she had allowed into her life. The first man whom she felt save to welcome into her tiny new haven, other than her brother-in-law, and now the place felt curiously empty and quiet; devoid of the comfort and safety her companion unknowingly bestowed upon her whenever he was around.

She dropped her head onto one of the pillows Oscar had used while he'd stayed with her before her trip to India, drawing in a deep breath when she realized that the pillow still smelled of his cologne: like a forest after the rain with a hint of spice. She wrapped her arms around it, cradling the pillow...
as though it was one of her most prized possessions, and before she knew it, her mind had drifted into much-needed sleep.

The alarm clock went off sharp at 7 a.m. on Monday morning. A pillow chucked across the nightstand sent the damning device flying with a loud thud against the wall. A grumpy groan followed the toss. Elise was awake, but jet lag had her inner clock once again askew. She slowly opened her eyes, spying over her shoulder, hoping Oscar had magically appeared overnight. But the spot next to her was still very much vacant and cold. She propped herself up on her elbows, letting out a sharp huff of air like there would've been a .00001% chance that he'd actually be in her bed.

With an even louder groan, she rolled herself back into her blanket, wanting to go back to sleep, wanting to fall back into the dream that had her captivated and actually stay in bed all night long. But all she could think about was how she would be alone for over a week: no Oscar, no morning snuggles, no heated late-night sessions or languid mornings. Even with a stretched-to-the-limits schedule, she wanted to at least wake up next to him, if only to see his face a few minutes before heading off to work.

Her cell's text tone chimed into the room. She tried to unroll herself from the blanket but like so many times before, she had rolled herself in too tight, and before she managed to wiggle herself free, her cell had chimed five more times.

"Good morning, Sweetie. It should be 7. Time to get up!" the first message read.
"Are you awake?"
"I hope you're awake!"
"If not, I have to get on a plane and tickle-fight you out of bed!"
"Sweetie? Wake up! You can't be late for work!"
"Apocalypse demands you get up!"

Elise laughed as she slammed her head back on the pillow, pressing her cell against her forehead. The last message came attached with a picture of Oscar halfway dressed in his costume, him trying to look as villainous as possible as he skewed his face into a menacing frown. The caramel glow of his eyes, however, - not to mention the incomplete getup- brought down the intensity which left Elise snickering as she typed up her reply.

"I'm awake. *smiley face*" she responded.
"Ah well, good morning, mi Reina *sunshine emoji*. Just making sure you're up. Don't want you in trouble first day back at work *kiss emoji*," he texted back.
"Thank you, Lindo. Do you have time to talk?" Elise asked, the thinking emoji attached in a second message.
"Sadly no. We're about to put the armor on. I will call you tonight, ok? You can tell me all about your day," he messaged back, rows of hearts attached.
"Awe. Alright. *frowny face*," Elise was disappointed. She really wanted to hear his voice, but she knew they were probably in a time crunch, and technically, so was she.

"I don't want to keep you, mi Reina. Get ready for work. I love you," he replied, another row of hearts attached. "But you know, selfies are always appreciated *devil emoji*."
"LOL. I know. Have a great day. Ich liebe Dich," Elise finished, raising her brow and biting her lip as she glanced down her body. She took off her shirt, wrapped a bedsheet around herself barely covering her breasts, and snapped an "I woke up like this selfie", sending it to Oscar before finally hopping off the bed to go take a shower.

"The word you're looking for is auch. Too = auch," Elise giggled as she typed. "Talk to you tonight, Lindo. Drink lots of water. *kisses*," she wrote back, smiling when Oscar sent back a combination of thumbs up, hearts, kisses, and smiley faces.

One word in Oscar's messages got her thinking as she took her shower. Trouble. By now, Richard, her boss, was likely aware that Oscar was the same man that had pretended to be a client to visit her at her office before the trip to India. And while her boss was always up for minor pranks and shenanigans within the office, this particular pretense had probably been taken too far, especially since Elise had played into it. She bit her lip, hoping that Richard didn't think she was trying to play him for a fool, or worse, trying to get him into any kind of trouble with his superiors.

She let the water run over her body a few minutes longer before yanking herself out of what ifs. She needed to get ready. Monday mornings were always the busiest and she had to get her head back into the game.

Clad in a gray pencil skirt, white button-down, and gray heels, and with her turquoise trench slung over one arm and briefcase in the other, Elise had to take a few deep breaths in before entering the office floor; hoping no one would take notice of her on the way to her office.

"Good morning, Misses Redfield." A barley looking legal man behind the assistant's desk shot up, coffee in one hand and a stack of papers in the other.

"Who the hell are you?" Elise tensed up at the stranger jumping towards her.

"I'm... I'm Thom? Your new assistant? I... I..." He cowered backwards, intimidated by Elise's brash tone and commanding stance.

"Are you asking if you're Thom? Or are you Thom?" She took the papers from his hand, transferring her briefcase to his free hand, then grabbed the coffee as she hurried into her office where another stack of papers to be reviewed was already waiting for her on her desk.

She had forgotten that Helen had been moved to the translator team on the floor and was no longer her P.A. She sighed upon realizing her coarse tone, huffing out a "goddammit". She didn't expect someone to replace Helen so soon, especially not without her input, which threw her for a loop.

"I apologize. I didn't mean to scare you. Are you taking over for Helen?" She tossed her trench over the coat rack and started scanning through the stack of papers; taking a seat in her luxurious leather office chair behind her desk.

"Yes, ma'am," Thom replied timidly, placing her briefcase on top of her desk.

Elise glared over the edge of one of the contracts. She hated that term. It made her feel old, despite the polite intentions behind its meaning.

"I... I...." Thom stammered as he lost his train of thoughts.

"You can call me Elise. ... Or Misses Redfield if that makes you more comfortable," she nodded reassuringly, to which Thom replied with a mumbled ok. He stood, shoulders down, opposite Elise's desk, fidgeting in small movements side to side.

"Something else on your mind, Thom." Elise arched her brow high. She was never one for lingering conversations once she commenced her morning routine.

"Uhmm... Mister Danning said he needs to talk to you," Thom mumbled, still looking rather frightened.

Elise let out a soft but mocking chuckle. She had never heard anyone use Richard's last name in the nine years she'd been working at the company. Clearly, Thom was new to the workforce, raised with good manners which she appreciated but even she- and especially despite her north-central
European roots- never called Richard by his last name.

"As soon as you're here," Thom added nervously. Elise released an irritated huff. She was kind of expecting that Richard wanted to talk to her but not with such urgency. "Very well," she pulled herself to a stand. "Please make three copies of all of these. Ask someone near the supply room for the code. I'm certain they've changed it since we've returned. How many languages do you speak?" she interrogated, handing the new and old stack of contracts to Thom. "Four," Thom smiled, or at least he tried to smile. Elise waited, brow raised and unimpressed. "Uhmm... English, French, Spanish, and Arabic," he disclosed, this time a little more confident in his tone.

"Good!" Elise smiled with approval. "That means you understand at least," she flipped through the pages in her new P.A.s' hands. "... two-thirds of these contracts. I need you to set one copy of each aside for yourself and start looking them over for any spelling or grammar mistakes. Highlight them in blue! And if you see outdated terms, that is if you recognize them, underline them in red. There is manual with outdated terms somewhere on your desk. Make use of it. The two other sets of copies go on my desk separated into two piles. The originals get filed into the cabinet behind your desk," she instructed, again waiting for Thom. "Yes, ma... I mean, yes, Misses Redfield," Thom hitched his breath, gulping.

"I suppose this means welcome to the team. We'll talk later." Elise stretched out her hand and Thom accepted, a tight, almost pained smile on his face as he didn't expect such a strong handshake from the woman opposite him.

Elise quietly made her way towards Richard's office on the other side of the vast, cubicle-filled floor. She could feel people staring at her over the edges of their tiny enclosures, the occasional whisper traveling through the air behind her back as she walked past. A few of her closest colleagues gave her encouraging nods. Clearly, everyone was somewhat familiar with the recent events of her private life.

And how could they not be? Word always traveled fast within and between departments, and Elise was fully aware that there were people who watched gossip shows like they were official news outlets for celebrities' lives. She tried not show her aggravation on her face. She hated gossip whether it was about a colleague or the Queen of England. She despised it to the core. But for now, she had to suck it up and let them chatter their little mouths raw. If she ignored those buzzing little bees, she was sure they'd quickly turn their attention back to office related tittle-tattle, not that she approved of that either.

She halted a knock on Richard's office door, gathering up possible counter-arguments in her mind before faintly tapping against the wood. "Yes," Richard's voice echoed sternly from behind the closed door. "It's me," Elise stuck her head between door and frame.

For the first time since she'd started working at this company, she felt on shaky grounds with her boss. He wasn't the type to anger easily, much like her brother-in-law, but once patience wore thin, he could be quite intimidating with a cold and steady-faced demeanor that was a stark contrast to his usually fidgety and warm persona.

"Oh hey," Richard didn't bother with a smile. "Have a seat," he looked down on some paperwork. Elise gulped. She couldn't see what the papers were, but she was hoping it wasn't her contract,
more specifically, the termination section of her contract. She sat down in a chair opposite her boss, her palms sweating and clutching to the armrests, her heart racing so fast she thought it was going to jump out of her chest. He had never been this cold towards her, his disappointment-lined silence crushing down on Elise's mind.

Richard read some more over the papers in front of him, signing off some sections, granting no attention to Elise whatsoever. Then he called for his assistant to run the papers to one of the Mandarin-speaking translators. Clearly, this was a client's contract, but Elise remained uneasy, the tension in the room so thick one would've needed a meat cleaver to cut through.

"Noah," Richard called out before his assistant could pick up the pace. "No calls for an hour!" he instructed firmly. Noah just nodded, gearing a sympathetic smile towards Elise.
"Let's talk," Richard threw his pen on the desk after the door shut with a startling and sharp thud. "Yes! Let's!" Elise gulped again, trying to hang on to what little courage was left within her.

"So... Oscar Isaac is your boyfriend," Richard gave her an icy glare. "I thought his name was Señor Isaac Hernández?" he went straight to the point. No being around the bush, no warning for possible verbal warfare, just boom. Elise hitched a breath in her chest, her hands grasping the armrests of the chair so tightly it hurt her bones. She could feel the panic rising from the pits of her stomach. It was a good thing she hadn't eaten breakfast this morning or else she would've hurled rather than speak.

"Look, Richard, I'm sorry. It wasn't ...", she trembled. "He showed up and pretended to be someone he wasn't. He wanted to visit me, and I let it go on...It will never happen again, I promise," the words spilled out like a waterfall while Elise kept her focus on the desk. She was too scared to look into Richard's eyes.
"I'm not upset about that," Richard countered with a tired sigh.
"You're... You're not?" Elise looked up, perplexed.
"No. Just a little disappointed that you didn't explain after he left." Richard narrowed his brows.
"Not to mention the thought of what would've happened if someone had walked in on you two." He crossed his arms and leaned his body back into his chair.

"You... You know about that?" Elise's cheeks flushed deep red. It really was a good thing she hadn't eaten breakfast. Her stomach churned as she sat there in shock, shaking her head in shame. Richard's face softened to a thin smile."I was young once. So I get it. But this could've been serious trouble if anyone else would've found out. You know how the CEO feels about relationships with clients," Richard explained.
"But Oscar isn't..." Elise started defending.

"Let me finish!" Her boss cut her off with the most commanding tone she'd ever heard him use. "I know he isn't, but the people at the top don't care. Any indiscretion like that could've meant your job. Maybe even mine or Helen's. Next time, rent a hotel room or excuse yourself for the rest of the day," he advised bluntly.

Elise nodded in agreement, gulping and trembling in fear. That loud snappy tone got to her.

"Which brings me to why I actually called you in here," Richard uncrossed his arms when he noted Elise's petrified posture. He took a deep almost despaired breath in, his mouth twisting to a miserable frown. "Your promotion is on... hold," he revealed with apprehension.
Elise sat there for a minute, repeating the words in her mind. She looked at her boss who in turn nodded at her as though to confirm she had heard correctly. "On hold? Why?" she tilted her head. Richard took another deep breath in, the lines on his face settling into a vexed expression. "Look there's no easy way to explain this but the company doesn't feel confident to have you as head of
international communications. At least not for now," he disclosed; nervously scratching the back of his head.

"Because of Oscar and the whole office thing?" Elise assumed with confusion.
"No! They don't know about that. And they never will. It's because of this," Richard pulled out a couple of gossip magazines from his desk. Elise gawked at the covers. The headlines included sensationalistic words like tragedy and unstable next to pictures of her and Joe, her and Frank, and her and Oscar. That was: her and Oscar at the record store, her and Oscar at the bar, and her and Oscar at the beach! The last picture made her feel dizzy. How did they...? Elise drew in a long breath, trying to calm her nerves, but she felt on edge.

"I see! It's an image thing," she clenched her jaw so tightly she thought she heard the mandible bone break.
"Yes," her boss confirmed. "There's a board meeting tomorrow and one of the issues, he used air quotations. "... is your promotion. We both need to be there. Now, I usually don't make a big deal, but I highly recommend you bring your brother-in-law," he divulged.

"Do you think, they'll fire me?" Elise's stomach twisted again. A board meeting over an employee was a rare thing and it usually ended with someone rushing out of the conference room in tears or a vacant look.
"No. They don't have enough for that," Richard assured.
"Then why would I need legal representation," she asked, puzzled.
"Because, they will try and deny you the promotion, using your private life and your mental health as an example. They're claiming interference with business and losing clients to other contracting companies... and some other bullshit I didn't even understand. Your brother-in-law knows how to deal with this stuff, doesn't he?" Richard queried.
"Yes, but he's not a lawyer anymore," Elise gave away. "At least not in that sense!"

"But he still has his license. Bring him! As a power move!" Richard insisted. "Look! I usually don't like pushing my advice on anyone but listen to me on this, Lizzie. Bring James, or some other legal counsel, because if you don't, they'll either shortchange you or try to have you quit without resistance. You've never had to deal with the top level, not like this at least. Trust me when I say that it gets ugly really fast, and you won't even know it because they'll wrap it in shiny paper with a pretty bow. The thing is to resist any offer to keep you out of your position. So bring James!" Richard urged.

Elise nodded in agreement. Richard was right. She figured something would come up. After all, people watched T.V., but Elise was hoping for all of this to be a cliff note at most. People might talk a few days and then move on. Richard being this forward and urging for legal representation, however, confirmed her biggest fear: that her past would catch up with her, and that sooner or later someone would find a way to use it to their advantage. She inhaled sharply.

"If you want, you can take the rest of the day off. Get some rest," her boss suggested with a weary smile.
"No. I need to get back into a routine," Elise declined. "I might go home a little early though. So I can talk to my brother-in-law. Do you mind if I take these with me?" she asked as she rolled up the magazines.
"Go ahead.....," Richard got up and walked over to Elise, giving her a gentle nudge on her shoulder to cheer her up sort of speak. Elise looked up, a tender chuckle escaping her lips. She twisted her mouth to a thin frown, trying her best to hold back the tears that were welling up in the corners of her eyes. How much she needed Oscar right now. Just to hold her.
"It'll be alright, kiddo," Richard smiled softly as he leaned against his desk. "Tell me about your week. Did you at least have a little bit of fun?" he coaxed as he retrieved a can of mint-chocolate covered almonds, offering Elise a few of the treats which he was clearly hiding from prying eyes, or from whenever his wife decided to drop in. Elise chuckled. She took a few almonds, nibbling on one before recounting the events of the last week. Richard listened keenly, chuckling at the love-struck gleam in his number one's eyes.

"Sounds like this is serious," he added when Elise finished talking. "I think... it just might be," she blushed into the back of her left hand, breathing out a happy-in-love sigh onto her skin. "That's good. You deserve happiness," Richard nodded as he wrinkled his nose.

"So. What do you think of Thom?" he inquired as he strolled back to his chair. "I think I scared him," Elise laughed. The tension she had felt earlier had almost completely vanished, her boss's now warmer demeanor putting her at ease. "Well! You can be quite intimidating!" Richard laughed. "Me??" Elise pointed at herself, before shrugging her shoulders in confident agreement. "I better get back to work," she got up.

"Yes, you better," Richard was already lost in another contract. "Big changes coming our way," he hinted.

"Another project?" Elise asked with a hushed voice since she had already opened the door. She saw her boss nod a somewhat tired smile before closing the door. Elise closed her eyes and took another sharp breath in. This went better than expected. At least Richard wasn't upset. In fact, he backed her up. It was a minor relief, for now, knowing that she wasn't completely alone.

"How did it go?" a woman's voice asked shyly from the side. "Helen," Elise beamed, hugging her former assistant. "I actually thought they'd fire me," she chuckled as she released a sigh of relief. "Hmmm. I... I would've felt bad if they had," Helen looked down on her feet. "You told him, I'm guessing," Elise's voice carried a disappointed undertone. "Not directly. Matt and I got in trouble for..., you know, supply room..., and it whirled into that direction, and then the news and Richard saw so he asked further questions," Helen stammered with a pitiful sulk.

"Well, I guess there goes the whole keep it below the radar topic. Water under the bridge?" Elise wrinkled her nose, holding out her hand. "Ok," Helen smiled, accepting the offered hand.

"How's the new department?" Elise queried as they walked down the center of the floor. Unlike earlier, everyone seemed immersed in their work now, only a few people glaring at Elise as she walked past their cubicles with her head held high. "It's nice. But I have so much to learn," Helen admitted, turning into her minuscule office near Elise's room. "It'll get easier. Just pay attention, take lots of notes, and ask questions. Always ask questions when you don't understand," Elise encouraged. "And I'm still here. Just now I'm your boss," she chuckled.

"You sure are," Helen smirked. She raised her brow when she looked over the edge of her cubicle wall. Thom, a stack of papers in his hand and another coffee, was scuttling towards Elise. "It won't be the same," she frowned, looking down on Helen who had taken a seat behind her desk. "It'll get easier," Helen snickered, which Elise acknowledged with a hum.
"I looked over the papers, like you asked," Thom huffed. He seemed eager to please his new boss, holding the corrected contracts under Elise's nose. She grabbed the papers, scanning through the first few pages, mumbling out a "not bad, not bad at all" as she paced towards her office, Thom scuffling after her with the coffee.

"So, Thom. Tell me about yourself. What are your ambitions? Are you studying or is this just temporary for you? How flexible is your schedule? And do you have a passport?" Elise blurted out the questions one after another, gesturing for an anxious Thom to take a seat opposite her desk while she continued to look over the corrected translations.

A few long hours and strong coffees later, Elise stood in front of the skyscraper where her brother-in-law's agency was situated. She checked in at the security desk, then made her way up to the top floor.

The agency's modern appearance always left Elise agape. The front hall was filled with dark, sleek furniture. Bold, surrealistic statues stood on the floors throughout. The twenty-foot floor-to-ceiling walls were covered in massive dark marble slabs with hidden accent lights at the borders to soften the look. Onyx stained reclaimed wood planks sprawled from front to back.

Awards, posters, signed photographs, and other memorabilia were on display in tall, crystal clear shelves set within the walls, making it look as though the items were floating within the enclosures. The staff were dressed in black or gray suits, hair neatly styled and makeup perfectly applied, making Elise's professional get up look almost frazzled in comparison.

"I'm in the wrong profession," Elise whispered when she approached the reception desk.
"I'm sorry?" A young woman behind a desk asked in confusion.
"Nothing. Could you tell Mister Redfield that his sister-in-law is here?" Elise requested. The young woman behind the desk raised her brow with such arrogance that Elise wanted to slap her across the face. Instead, she kept her composure and took a seat on one of the massive, square leather sofas.

"Alright. I'll see you tomorrow," James shook hands with a tall, handsome someone, the stranger winking at Elise as he walked out.
"Is that? Wait, that's not...," she craned her neck to catch another glimpse but the someone had just turned the corner towards the elevators.

"It is," James chuckled which Elise returned with an abashed smile.
"So, what's up?" her brother-in-law didn't waste time. To him time was money and since his pay was often commission-based he tended to rush unscheduled meetings despite Elise being family.
"I need your help. Tomorrow. Well, tonight as well. I need you to look through this," Elise dropped a heavy laws and bylaws binder from her company on James' desk.
"Figured you might ask," he let slip.
"How so?" Elise raised her brow.

"Your boss called me last Friday. He kind of hinted that you might need help keeping your promotion," James explained. "I already read through all that. He emailed me a copy Friday night," he revealed to an astonished Elise. 
"So. Do you have time? The meeting is in the morning. At nine thirty. I'll pay you." Elise cringed when James returned her offer with a scathing glare.
"You know, I wouldn't dare take your money," he scoffed in offense. "Not to mention that your
"I know. I just really need help with this. I mean, I understand most of it but I'm afraid I'll give in to whatever they plan to offer mainly because I'm tired. And you know me. I... I can be quite," Elise halted.

"Brash? Irritating? A jerk?" James perked a brow which earned him a scolding glare from his sister-in-law. Still, she was somewhat relieved to find out that her boss had already asked for James' help, but to her surprise, and she had noted this feeling during the meeting earlier, she didn't care as much as she thought she would which made this whole situation even more gut churning.

"I have another client, and then, I actually have to call your boyfriend," James handed the binder back to Elise. "We'll talk later, ok? Let's make it seven. I'll bring pizza and beer and plenty of legal research papers," he chuckled to soften the mood.

"Ok. Just do me one favor," Elise started.

"Sure, anything," her brother-in-law agreed.

"Don't tell Oscar about this. Or Christine!" Elise pleaded. "And don't tell Mikki, either!" she added. James let out a burdened sigh. "Client lawyer confidentiality, please! I don't mean to play that card, but please, let me settle this without them getting involved. I really don't want to stress any of them out," Elise insisted.

"Alright. But if things do go south tomorrow...," James halted.

"...I'll tell them myself," Elise finished. "I'll see you later. Ham and pineapple, please," she requested.

"I know," James rolled his eyes, shaking his head before playfully flicking his hand towards the door, shooing Elise out of his office just before his next client showed up.

Elise arrived back home a little after five in the afternoon. She kicked off her heels and tossed her briefcase into the corner by the entrance, then changed into some comfortable loungewear and Oscar's cardigan. She wished she had made him wear the garment before she left as it was devoid of his scent. She liked wearing it nonetheless because it was Oscar's and she liked pretending it was him hugging her and not the knitted texture of the cardigan. Not to mention that she needed every bit of comfort she could get.

She unpacked her suitcase, getting ready to do some laundry when she discovered a wrapped turquoise box on her dining room table. She had been so tired and lost in thought when she'd gotten home from the airport that she didn't notice the package until now. There was no note, no hint of who it was from. It just sat there waiting for her. She dropped the first load of laundry into the washer, then shifted to the table, taking a seat as she unwrapped the present.

A loud laugh echoed through the apartment.

Oscar, dressed in an apron—and only in an apron—was beaming at her from the cover of a homemade book, the title reading "Sensual Cooking 101: Necessary Basics".

A handwritten note fell out when she flipped to the first page.

"Hey Sweetie,
I know you're a busy woman so I hope you won't be offended by this how-to-book. It's all step by step. Most of the ingredients are in your pantry, you just need to get the perishable items.
Muchos besos, Oscar."

Elise let out a disbelieving chuckle. She got up and somewhat reluctantly, with the book in hand, paced towards her kitchen. And sure enough, Oscar had filled the pantry and other cabinets with the ingredients listed in the glossary of his homemade book.
Leaning against the edge of the counter, she flipped through the recipes. Each was accompanied by a picture of Oscar in the apron. In some, he showed her how to prep and cook the food, in others he pretended to be scared of whatever kitchen tool he was using. And the titles always included some kind of erotic pun like "Scrambled Friday Night Eggs", hinting at the intense night before they'd parted ways, or the not so subtle "Erotic Strawberry Delights for Saturday Morning Bubble Baths". Damn that man would never let that go, Elise thought to herself.

This must have been what he was writing the Saturday she'd left, when he'd been completely fixated on the screen of his laptop, typing away as though his life depended on it. Elise got her cell and dialed her companion. A few rings in, she heard the familiar crackling of him picking up, making her heart race as though it was the first time she had called him on his phone.

"Qué pasa, mi Linda?" he answered with a cheery tone.
"I just opened your present," Elise giggled as she continued to flip through the pages.
"Ah yeah? It's nothing major, Sweetie. Just a few recipes to get you started. I mean only if you want," he bit his lip.
"It's perfect. Was this supposed to be my birthday present? If it was, I'm sorry, I opened it early. There wasn't a note...," she stammered.
"No. Your birthday present isn't wrapped up, yet. It won't be till I get there," he teased.
Elise let out a heartfelt laugh. She could almost feel his mischievous smile against the receiver.
"You know, I was just kidding, right? About the whole you and only a bow thing," she snickered.
"You were? Awe... But I already bought the ribbon," his voice crackled innocently through the speaker.
"Well in that case..." Elise laughed.

"So how was your day, mi Linda?" Oscar mumbled as he took a sip of a drink.
"Are you still filming? Did I interrupt?" Elise suddenly felt bad. She had forgotten about him having a late call time.
"No, we're about to take the prosthetics off. Don't worry, Sweetie. How was your day?" Oscar took another sip.

Elise nibbled on her bottom lip, recalling how warm Oscar had looked when he'd worn the full suit on set, sweat running down his forehead and into his eyes, with some beads languidly trailing down his nose. She also remembered how heavy the suit must have felt as it had left behind deep indentations on his skin, so he was probably tired. Should she really tell him how her day had gone by when he was likely exhausted?

"Sweetie? You there?"
"What? ... Yes... Uhm, It was good. Just... you know. First day back. It takes a little bit to snap back into routine," she let out a soft sigh as the recollections of a long day crushed down on her. Oscar took immediate notice. "What's wrong?" he queried.
"Nothing, Lindo," Elise fibbed.
"Liz. Please?" Oscar pleaded softly.

"It's just been a long day is all. There's a new project heading our way. Not sure what it is, yet, but Richard was hinting at changes," she replied, doing her best to suppress another sigh. She wasn't quite ready to tell him what had really happened, at least not until tomorrow, after the meeting. Or maybe never. She didn't need Oscar worrying for her when she knew that he had a whole week of filming ahead; each day most likely ten or more hour stretches in the heavy costume.

"Alright. And that's it? Just a long day?" Oscar pushed on.
"I have a new assistant," Elise revealed with some trepidation.
"That's right. Helen got transferred. Is the new P.A. doing a good job?" Oscar sipped more water.
"Hmmm. He's doing ok. He's kind of young. He does speak four languages, though, and he has some administrative skills. Military grown. Lived in a few different places. I just might keep him on after the trial period," Elise explained, another sigh crossing her lips by accident.
"Sweetie. What's wrong?" Oscar wasn't oblivious to the heaviness in her voice.

" Weird? How?" Oscar was perplexed.
"I don't know. I guess, I never truly realized how lonely I was," she mumbled as she continued to read through the cookbook, letting out soft chuckles at the pictures. She couldn't believe he had taken the time to make something specifically for her.

"Oh. Sweetie. I don't think you were lonely. I mean," Oscar hitched his breath. "I don't want you to feel like you were incomplete or anything," he stated softly. "You know it's ok to be alone for a while. I think we all need that now and then," he went on in a soothing-like-honey tone.

"So you don't miss me then?" Elise teased with a sarcastic tinge.
"I do. And I'm happy you miss me. I just don't want you thinking you were lonely. Alone yes, but... I don't know. I mean. I haven't known you long enough, but I think you needed that break," Oscar argued softly.
"Remember what you told me when you were here? How you know what you want now?" Oscar queried cautiously.

"I do," Elise smiled. She always loved how he remembered their conversations.
"Well. Maybe it just took you some time to figure it out," Oscar paused. "And I do miss you. A lot. I can't wait to tease your hair. And tickle your nose while you're sleeping," he chuckled.
"So I wasn't dreaming that?" Elise snickered.
"Nope. It was always me." Oscar paused again when he heard Elise giggle. "Sweetie?" he waited. Elise hummed in reply. "I'm glad that you know what you want. And I'm glad to be part of that. But don't look back, ok? At least not for too long," he waited again. Elise took a few breaths in before whispering an "ok" in response.

"So your new P.A. is a Padawan, huh? Teach him your ways, you must," Oscar mimicked Yoda as best he could, trying to cheer up Elise.
"Did you just make a Star Wars pun?" She laughed.
"You picked up on that, huh?" Oscar returned the laugh, feeling triumphant in his attempt.
"Of course. Mikki is a huge Star Wars nerd. When I lived with her last year she made me watch all the movies ten times over. I was ready to use the force to break her T.V.," Elise confessed, laughing loudly.

"You lived with Mikki?" Oscar queried with pretended surprise. He already knew this fact because James had let it slip that Elise had returned to the States well before November of last year. He remembered the postcards his best friend had shown him after the promotion party; most of which had been sent from California, the state Mikki called home.

"Uhmmm... You know, vacation," Elise quibbled with a gulp. She, on the other hand, didn't know Oscar was aware. She had left out the little detail of her being back in the States a full year before returning to Seattle at the last family dinner.
"Ah. Well, vacation is always a good thing," Oscar instinctively and purposely steered away from...
that path, knowing Elise would eventually come forward on her own terms. For now, her undisclosed secret was his secret to keep.

"So? Me dressing up as Jedi for sexy times might be a bad idea then, huh?" he pondered with a hint of sarcasm as he skillfully changed the subject. "Yes, considering that Jedis aren't allowed to have romantic relationships," Elise countered knowingly. "Ah, yes. Only meaningless and unattached one night stands," he blurted out with a little too much excitement. "That sounds kind of fun actually," Elise taunted with a serious voice, biting down on her tongue to not give away that she was just joking. "What? You wouldn't. Oh...Would you? Wait, you said you don't do one-nighters. Sweetie?" Oscar scrambled. "Hello?" All he heard was loud laughter through his end.

"Lindo. You know. One-nighters... Not for me," Elise tried catching her breath. "Naughty. Don't make me go dark side on you," Oscar laughed. "Hmmm... I don't know. I think there's a kinkiness to the whole dark side, I actually like," Elise implied with a dead-serious tone. "Oh... So... Like what? Tied up? Or the whole leather thing?" Oscar teased. "Mmmm mmm, more like the whole uniform thing," Elise tried her best not to laugh. She indeed did have a thing for uniforms.

"Hmm, I see. I might have a uniform to wear for you," Oscar hinted. This time he bit his tongue. Elise was still very much oblivious of his part in the new Star Wars movie, and he wanted to draw out the surprise as long as he could, begging his agent to keep it hush hush whenever they talked, asking him to steer away from any Star Wars related publicity when around Elise. "Ohhhhh... Hmm well....," she blushed.

Then the doorbell rang and she sighed. "I have to go," she mumbled. "Awe. What? We're just getting to the good part. Send them away," Oscar demanded softly, almost whining. "I can't. It's James," Elise bit her lip. It took all her mental strength to hold back why he was there. "Everything ok?" Oscar asked somewhat surprised. "Yes. It's just pizza and beer and catching up. And talking about you. You know. Because he's curious about the whole bar thing," Elise fibbed with a soft laugh. "Oh boy. Yeah... That...," Oscar cringed to which Elise replied with a warm laugh.

"Talk soon, Lindo?" she opened her front door, raising her index at James who was carrying a couple of heavy bags, his briefcase, and two small pizza boxes. "Talk soon, mi Reina," Oscar sulked. "I love you," Elise said softly, gesturing for James to step into her apartment. "Te amo," Oscar waited. "Are we doing the hang-up game?" Elise laughed. "I can't help it," he snickered. "Well, I have to go, Lindo. I love you," she repeated, then hung up the phone. "Ich liebe Dich auch," Oscar texted, to which she responded with a kiss emoji.

"Ah. Young love," James wisecracked when he saw Elise beaming ear to ear. "Shut up!" she stuck out her tongue at him while taking lead to the dining room. "You're the same age as me," she threw back before disappearing to her kitchen. "That, I am. Anyways. Pizza. Pineapple and ham for you. Pepperoni for me. And German beer? I
think we need something stronger tonight," James jested as he placed the food on the dining room table along with a heavy binder, a stack of folders, and another stack of law books. "Well. Let's get to work. Tell me everything you think they might use in the meeting tomorrow," he asked as he flopped down on a chair, kicking off his shoes, pulling out a ledger and a pen from his briefcase at the same time.

It took a few attempts but Elise finally managed to put her fears into words. James wrote everything down while nibbling on a slice of his pizza, occasionally sipping on his beer between taking notes. He then proceeded to look through some files and his law books, explaining his strategy to Elise.

She, in turn, took her own notes, asking questions about why and how and what ifs. But there was something else she saw. A spark in James' eyes. He had not actively practiced law for a while, but this definitely fired up his thinking gears, and she could tell he got some enjoyment out of this whole situation.

"What?" he looked up from one of the books, wiping his mouth with a napkin.
"You miss this, don't you?" Elise smirked.
James closed the book and leaned back into his chair. "Sometimes," he confirmed with a solemn nod. Elise got up and opened another bottle of beer for him. They sat there in silence for a minute, each studying the other's body language. There was an unexplainable curiosity in the air and Elise took the chance to speak first.

"Why did you quit?" she asked. "Law, I mean," she clarified. She couldn't remember if James had ever told her. All she did remember was that a few months after she'd moved to the States, her brother-in-law suddenly left the firm that had hired him right after he'd been admitted to the bar. It was an out of character move for James who had been an ambitious student, graduating high school two years early, fast-tracking his bachelor's in accounting by squeezing four years into three before almost relentlessly pursuing a degree in law.

An amused smile grew on Elise's face. The day her brother-in-law had walked across the stage to accept his diploma, Joe was hiding behind the stage. He'd just returned for some R&R, almost missing graduation when one of the flights got delayed. When Joe jumped out, James released a squeaky scream causing people around them to fall into loud laughter. Endearing hugs and pride-filled grins followed. Caring words of support and talks of future endeavors too, along with set-in-stone goals to be reached by the time they all hit their thirties. So when James quit, it took Elise by surprise; but she didn't ask questions at the time as everyone was still grieving Joe.

An assumption of hers, however, had always stuck with her: maybe James had quit because of how big of a burden she had become. Not that she had been completely unable to do things, but her hospital stay and her long grieving time had been taxing on all of them. So she always thought, his shift in career had been mainly because of her.

"Christine never told you?" James took a swig from his beer.
"I'm not sure. If she did, I can't remember. I mean everything from that year right after...," Elise gulped. "It's all a bit of a haze," she cringed. "I just..., You quit so soon after you took me in. I don't know. Was it because...?"

"No," James cut her off before she had a chance to finish the question, shaking his head as he profiled Elise's face, noting the fine lines that always seemed much deeper whenever they talked about his brother. Elise waited patiently as James took another sip from his beer.

"Do you know what kind of work I did?" he began as he lightly squinted at Elise.
She shook her head no. All she was aware of was that the law-firm was well known. And that it paid well. So well so, James had been able to afford a new two-bedroom apartment in downtown Seattle right after he'd gotten hired in 2003. It had been spacious enough to house the three of them - Elise, James, and Christine - once he moved the sisters over to the States in 2006.

"The thing your company is trying to pull on you, intimidating you with empty threats to deny you fair compensation or worse get you fired or bully you to quit," he paused, "I used to be on their side of the table. I was one of those corporate lawyers that will be there tomorrow. The type that will find every tiny loophole so that corporations don't have to pay up. And if there isn't a loophole, to twist things to the corporation's favor." James held his gaze on Elise's widening eyes.

"I guess someone has to do that job," she stated matter-of-factly, eyes wide as ever. "I guess, but...," James clenched his jaw. "... when do you draw the line between making a living and greed?" He asked with an unsettling tone. "I don't know," Elise replied softly.

She looked at her brother-in-law who sat quietly in his chair, rolling the bottle of beer between the palms of his hands before chugging down the rest of its contents. Like he had to wash away some deep-seated sin. He looked down and then back up at Elise, the wheels spinning behind his eyes as though he wanted to confess something horrible and was waiting for approval to go ahead. He opened his mouth to talk.

"You don't have to tell me," Elise assured quickly. "I know," he acknowledged rather apathetically. "I'll just say this. I quit because the line between making money and greed became very sharp one day," his glance trailed to Elise's wrist. He took her hand, and ran his thumb across the faded, indented line, looking up at Elise to see if she understood what he meant. And she replied with a knowing and somewhat shocked look.

"Joe would've been so disappointed," he gulped as he let go. "Maybe. Or he would've been glad that you got out when you did," Elise pointed out, her voice carrying an I-forgive-you tone to it. It sounded like James needed to hear that very line as the words were followed by a deep-from-the-core lift-all-burdens-from-my-shoulders breath. "Christine knows all this?" Elise asked when she opened the last bottle of beer for her brother-in-law.

"Hmmm. Why do you think she moved out?" James disclosed with a small but tired smile as he slowly sipped on the last beer. Elise sorted through her memories. Those years truly were a bit of a haze. She remembered Christine packing her bags one day, but she couldn't recall a big fight or disagreement when her sister decided to move into her own place a few months after they had taken Elise in.

Again, she had assumed it was because of her. She couldn't decide if she should or shouldn't be relieved to know it wasn't her fault. It all made sense to her now though. Her sister despised large corporations and their tactics, especially how they handled any kind of possible uproar by the employees.

"Man. We really have a fucked up past," Elise chuckled with a wheezy huff. "Hmmm. Well, I'm glad your sister decided to give me a second chance. And now... I tell her everything up front. Well almost everything," James raised his brow towards his sister-in-law. "Hmmm. I never thanked you for that. For not letting it slip that you knew where I was," Elise poured herself some water. "Yeah, that...," James pulled his lips to a thin line.
"You told her?" Elise gaped.

"No. She'd probably kick me out of the house for a while if she ever found out," James cringed at the thought. "Or maybe divorce me. And I wouldn't blame her," he grabbed the last piece of pizza, nibbling away on the crust, taking sips of beer in between.  
"But???" Elise waited, mouth still agape.

"I may have told Oscar?" James hissed through his teeth, a terrified look forming on his face.  
"You what?.. Why?" Elise gasped.  
"It may have come up after the promotion party," James flinched. He was waiting for Elise to lose her composure any second, possibly throwing her glass against a wall.  
She stood opposite him, just staring at him with raised brows and eyes wide open.

"What did he say?" She asked with a skewed squeak.  
"Nothing really. I think, he needed to let it settle in," James chuckle-huffed. "Look, I told him because he was really upset. He thought he had offended you somehow. And he liked you. From the first day. You should've seen his face the day he met you. I mean when we went back home. He started asking all sorts of questions," James wrinkled his nose, then rolled his eyes.

"Like what?" now Elise was curious.  
"Like if you were single? If I would be ok if he asked you out. Like why we never talked about you, when I know for a fact that we had mentioned your name more than once," James disclosed.

"I guess Lorraine really did have him under a spell, huh?" Elise supposed, remembering how Oscar had told her how charming his ex had been in the beginning.  
"Ehhhh..." James wiggled his hand.  
"What does that mean?" She mirrored his movement.  
"She was manipulative. Had him wrapped around her little finger. So I guess, yes, spellbound... I mean, I didn't think he'd actually go out with her on a second date," James explained.  

"No, seriously. I didn't get it. She treated him like crap. Not like Frank treated you but man she was demanding all these things from the start. Which there is nothing wrong with it to a degree. But she wanted more and more, and Oscar gave her more and more. He spoiled her and she took advantage. It was always about her. Always," James started bagging up the books and folders.

"You spoil Christine," Elise suggested.  
"I do. But you know, it goes two ways in a relationship. And always without expectation. I'm not saying getting spoiled is a bad thing. But when someone starts expecting rewards for every time they whisper an empty I love you, that's just wrong," James finished his beer, then threw the bottle in the trash.

"You mean she only said it to get stuff?" Elise was perplexed by that.  
"Pretty much. And fame. And connections. You know, her fifteen minutes." James put on his shoes.  
"Yeah. Well, she can have mine if she wants," Elise twisted her lips to a scrunched frown.  
"You know, I did try to keep all this out of the tabloids, but once it was out there..." James playfully nudged Elise's chin.  
"I know," she rolled her eyes, letting out a pitiful huff of air.  
James fixed his jacket then kissed Elise against the side of her head. "I'll see you tomorrow, ok? Don't worry too much and get some sleep," he prompted and she nodded. It was almost midnight by the time he left.
Getting sleep that night was easier said than done. Elise kept tossing and turning, getting up more than once to pace around her apartment. Tuesday morning came way too fast, and she felt groggy, almost numb by the time she had to get ready for work. She yawned through the shower this morning, walking back and forth a between kitchen and bathroom while getting ready.

She chose a simple gray but body-hugging office dress, put her hair in the neatest French twist she'd ever worn, and applied her makeup in such a way that it looked like it had been done by a pro. She added golden yellow accessories, bold jewelry, and opted to wear four-inch heels that matched her dress. If she was going to get fired, she wanted to go out looking like a million dollars.

A string of text messages waited for her when she made her way back to the kitchen to finish her coffee.

"Good morning, mi Reina. I hope you're having a great start."
"Did you have a chance to try any of the recipes?"
"You should make the pancakes first. Make sure to read the labels. *winky face*"
"Also, the cast says hello and are wondering how you are."
"Olivia and Alexandra asked for your number. But I haven't given it to them because I wanted to ask first."
"Michael taught me some more German."

Elise snickered. Oscar sure was chatty this morning. Not that she minded.
"Good morning, Lindo. I don't have much time."
"Didn't try the recipes just yet. Will do so later. Still need to shop."
"Tell the cast hello back from me. You can give my number to the ladies."
"What did he teach you?"

Elise sipped on her coffee while waiting for the reply.
"Just some Star Wars related words, so I can taunt you with the movies in German. *side-eye emoji*." he texted back.
"Fantastic. I might have to have a word with Michael." she messaged back. "I have to go. Early kind of day. I'll call you later. Te amo." she added with lightning speed.

"AWE. But... Star Wars words... Die Macht! Die Macht!!!" Oscar tried to convince with sulking emojis attached.
"Ich weiß, ich weiß!" Elise countered with winky faces.
"What the hell kind of letter is that squiggly thing?" Oscar queried with a few rows of question marks.
"That, my dear, is an s-z and I'll teach you all about it when you visit. *kissy face*. Gotta run. *heart*," Elise hit sent while gathering up her briefcase and trench coat, noting the string of kisses and hearts flashing across the screen in response.

When she arrived a little earlier than usual at work, she hastily and somewhat unfocused went through her morning routine, scanning quickly through contracts, talking to the translator team about the newest changes in terminology before assigning new tasks; Thom always scuttling behind her to get a sense of how mornings around the offices worked.

Sharp at nine' o'clock, James stood in Elise's office. Hair neatly combed, he was dressed in his best suit. His shoes shone like a new penny, and he had a brand-new looking briefcase in hand. His warm demeanor was left at the door, replaced with a he-means-business stance and stern face. Right behind him stood a short but slender young woman, dressed equally sharp, face equally determined.
After a quick introduction to his secretary and run-through of strategies, Elise led her brother-in-law to the conference room, each of her steps getting dauntingly heavier the closer they got to the door.

"James Redfield? Holy shit man. I haven't seen you in ages," a tall man held out his hand towards James.
"Henry? Wow. Let me guess. You're their legal rep?" James smugly raised his brow. Elise gulped. Henry was intimating with a cold pose and condescending stare.

"I sure am. I had no idea you worked individual cases now," Henry was arrogant, and completely ignoring Elise, not once granting her an acknowledging smile or offering his hand. She felt irritated, to say the least.
"I'm working this one," James returned the arrogance. Testosterone flying high, Elise thought. "See you inside," Henry scoffed, hinting a mocking smile at Elise as he disappeared into the conference room.

"Oh my god," she managed to mumble out in terrified angst.
"Don't worry. Henry is all bark and no bite." James squeezed her hand. "Now listen to me!" He lifted Elise's face by her chin. "Let me do the talking. Trust me. And try to keep a straight face. No frowning, no smirking, no shocked gasps!" he instructed firmly before opening the door to the conference room. "Ready?" He waited.

Elise gulped again. She could feel the vein on her neck hitting against the fabric of her scarf.

"Good morning, Misses Redfield. This is just a re-evaluation meeting. No need for legal counsel," the CEO smiled with a wide, toothy grin as he gestured towards some empty chairs, ten other pairs of eyes staring at Elise who in turn looked up at James, the only warm pair in the mix her immediate supervisor's.

"Really? Then your legal rep isn't needed, either?" James queried with icy confidence as he pulled out a chair for Elise. "I'll be speaking on Misses Redfield's behalf. You don't mind if my secretary records this meeting, do you?" He gestured for the young woman who had accompanied him to take a seat. The young secretary, in turn, retrieved a ledger and a tape recorder from her briefcase, waiting to take notes after she sat down.

"Very well. Let's get started then," the CEO gritted his teeth when it became clear to him that James wasn't there to play games. At least not the sugar-coated, be around the bush, fake smiles types of games. "It has come to our attention that a complete re-evaluation of Misses Redfield's performance scores is in order..." the CEO began.
"Why? I looked over her scores. She's rated at a hundred twenty-fifth percentile. Always turning in work on time, more often than not two days before the deadline. So you can't argue low performance," James cut off the CEO.

He didn't have the patience to be around the bush with drawn out excuses and bullshit tactics. It was a trait Elise usually appreciated but she tensed up. Why was he trying to infuriate the person that held the pen to end her career?
"It's more than just performance scores," the CEO countered with irritated impatience.
"Do tell," James cocked his head like he didn't understand. The game was on.

A verbal battle of reasons for re-evaluation to hold back Elise's promotion ensued. Sentences like "loss of business", "clients turning away", and "interference with regular business" were dropped which James swiftly counter-argued with research he'd done prior to coming to the meeting.
proving that decline in business wasn't recent but due to the company not being competitive enough in their own field. He was prepared, to say the least, and when the reason "defamation through bad publicity due to involvement with a celebrity" dropped, James tossed his pen with triumphant arrogance on the table.

"Tell me something. Why aren't you going after the tabloids instead of pinning the blame on someone who has absolutely no control over free press? You are carrying on an invasion of privacy if you plan on using the relationship as your argument. Not to mention that all this actually put your company back in the spotlight?" James narrowed his eyes. No answer. In fact, the room had gotten so quiet, Elise could hear the faint hum of the refrigerator from one room over.

"Unless you have another reason?" James prodded on.
"The media has broadly displayed Misses Redfield's mental instability, something our company...," one of the board members started. A loud cough cut him off.

"Well, thank you," James smiled victoriously. "Looks like you just gave me enough reason for a lawsuit," he threatened with a calm voice.
"We're not implying...." the same board member sounded off.
"Shut up!" The CEO warned with a hazardous glare.

"See, if your legal rep had paid attention instead of scrolling on his cell, he would've advised you prior to this meeting what words to avoid," James smirked, his fingers producing galloping thuds on the table. "Using my client's medical history is ... What's the term, Henry?... Illegal? Against the law? Won't hold up in court? So I see this with two possible outcomes. You either give my client the promotion she was promised, or we walk out with a settlement in hand," he proposed.

Elise nearly choked on a held back gasp. Her brother-in-law clearly hadn't shared all his strategies last night. Usually, she found these types of mental chess games intriguing but now her career was on the line and she couldn't tell if her legal counsel was bluffing or if he was being for real, and it made her stomach twist and pull into a million different directions.

"She won't qualify for a settlement if she quits," Henry chimed in.
"Rulon-Miller versus IBM, Henry," James witted back.
"That was based on an in-office romance," Henry mocked.
"Hmmmmm. The claim was invasion of privacy and intentional distress. Denying Misses Redfield her promotion using her relationship as front is the cause of the distress and considered invasion of privacy," James shot back.
"You're walking on thin ice. Who says she would win if you take this to court? All we have to do is prove that her life interferes with business," Henry retorted looking rather nervous.

"She will once the press gets wind of this. And then you will definitely have an image problem on your hand," James remained confident in timbre.
"You can't take this to the press," Henry countered, angry creases appearing on his forehead.
"And I won't. But the photographers following my client will. And you know how much those busy little gossip reporters love digging up dirt, don't you Henry?" James threw his former colleague a devious smirk. Elise could almost hear the mental chess board cracking as her brother-in-law grinned a knowing check-mate.

"Could you give us a few minutes," the CEO interrupted with a gulp.
"Sure. We'll wait outside," James got up, gesturing for Elise and his secretary to follow.

"Oh my god, what are you doing?" Elise gasped as all color suddenly drained from her face. There
were quite a few moves that she had anticipated but to threaten her quitting while insisting on a payout wasn't one of them.
"Don't panic. You need to trust me," James whispered. Unlike his sister-in-law, he was steady-faced and calm. A few infinity-felt minutes later, one of the board members waved them back into the conference room. All eyes were trained on Elise, James, and his secretary as they sat back down into their seats.

"Let's talk compromise," Henry clenched his jaw.
"What do you have in mind?" James sat back with crossed arms.
"We have a new client. It's an international contract. High profile. We're willing to give Misses Redfield the promotion if she sidesteps this particular project," Henry offered.
"So my client won't receive an incentive if she agrees?" James elucidated.
"Future incentives are always fickle, James. She wouldn't miss out if the contract doesn't go through." Henry explained.

James turned to Elise. "What do you think? Sounds like a pretty great deal to me," he encouraged with a take-this-deal nod and perked brow. Elise managed a somber "ok". "Looks like we're taking the deal. I expect a written agreement by tomorrow ... just to be on the safe side," James pulled himself to a stand, stretching out his hand to the CEO who accepted his hand with a tremble.

"Holy shit, that was intense," Elise sunk into her office chair after they'd gone over the details what the agreement had to include. "Do you think they'll hate me?" She asked warily.
"No. Well, maybe Henry. But he's pissed at me. If he starts harassing you, let me know," James gestured for his secretary to leave, the young woman gearing a goodbye towards Elise when she left. "Don't sign anything until I get here tomorrow, ok?" James implored which was returned with tired acknowledgment by Elise.

"And tell Oscar," he added bluntly.
"Why?" Elise flabbergasted at the somewhat unwanted advise.
"Because he loves you. And because he'd want to know. I mean it does somewhat involve him. I know you can get very distant, so don't cut him out. Not now. Especially since July is just one month away," James paced towards Elise, placing a small kiss on top of her hair, and she returned the act with an endearing embrace, whispering out a "thank you" into the fabric of her brother-in-law's suit.

Since it was lunch and Elise didn't feel hungry, she decided to get out her phone to call Oscar. "Hey, mi Reina. Wie gehts?" Oscar bustled out with excitement.
"Do you have time?" Elise asked, her mood lifting almost instantly when she heard her companion's warm and cheery voice.
"For you, always," Oscar assured.
"Hmmmm...," Elise hummed.
"What's wrong, mi Linda?" Oscar waited.
"Well... It's a long story." Elise bit her bottom lip.
"Well... I have time. Tell me, Sweetie," Oscar requested softly, and Elise did, pouring out her heart and soul while he listened with muted "okays" and quiet "I sees".
"Fuck! Isaac!" Elise gasped. She fiercely wrapped her fingers around the top edge of her mission-style headboard, trying not to fall over. She was out of breath, her body trembling and sinking onto Oscar's chest as the climax washing over her slowly faded into exhaustion.

"Sweetie..." Oscar's voice muffled from between her thighs. "You're kinda crushing me," he chuckled as he playfully nipped the inside of one of her thighs. With a twitch and a gasped sorry she pulled herself off him, crashing onto the vacant spot next to him.

He'd been back a mere hour or so, but in that short amount of time, he'd already managed to get her there twice, unraveling her with heated licks against every inch of her skin, and undoing her with skillful finger play and lusting bites into her flesh before they got into this particular position. And Elise didn't feel guilty one bit.

When he'd arrived at her apartment a few hours before he was due back, just to surprise her-dressed in a simple white t-shirt, black jeans, and a knee-length onyx trench, and with his curls slicked back, his undercut still apparent, and a three-day-stubble-graced face-all intentions to take things slow instantly fell away.

She had missed him emotionally and mentally but also physically. And she wanted him on her, sweating and moaning and definitely writhing against her body. So that first tight embrace quickly turned into pleading whispers of "I need yous" as they hastily peeled off each other's clothing while dancing in haphazard circles towards Elise's queen-sized bed; navigating around the edges of the mattress before tumbling clumsily into the pile of pillows laying atop.

Oscar didn't disappoint either answering those whispered pleas; letting Elise take lead, letting her command her desires; leaving himself to be the obedient and passionate lover that fulfilled her every request without a second thought.

So when she demanded to have his lips on her while sitting on his face, Oscar - with a surprised chuckle first; mouth agape and eyes wide open second - had granted her wish with languid licks and spiraling taunts, digging his fingers deep into her thighs to keep her legs apart while working her over twice more.

"You ok, Sweetie?" he asked with a soft laugh against her shoulder.

Elise- head buried in a pillow, lying on her stomach, and still trying to catch her breath - managed a worn out yes.

"You want me to stop?" He nipped the edges of her arm, gliding his hand up and down the length of her back. He inhaled her scent between each nip, noting her smelling of strawberry-coconut delight with a hint of French vanilla.

"No. I want more," Elise exhaled heavily as she curved and stretched her body like a cat before crashing back down on the mattress.

"You sure? You look tired," Oscar chuckled into the corner of her neck.

"I just need a minute. Just a minute. Just. --- One. --- Minute." she gasped between each word at the third repeat; still feeling that last climax unfurl in her core. She had never felt anything like it. It just didn't seem to stop, the tingling sensation cresting and abating in fading intervals.
"Let's slow down then," Oscar suggested softly. He crawled over the back of Elise's thighs and positioned himself with one leg on each side of her body as he relaxed into a kneeling position just below her derrière. "Let's slow down," he whisper-repeated into her ear when he dropped to his elbows.

His weight on all fours, his chest hovered just above her back while he gently kissed across her shoulders: left to right ..., and right to left ..., and back, each kiss preceded by a small, wet circle of his tongue. That alone had Elise's recently sedated pulse quicken again, making her body twitch involuntarily each time Oscar's lips grazed her skin.

"Please," she pleaded softly. "Please," she whimpered when she rolled her hips towards him, feeling his excitement brushing up against her ass each time she moved backward.

"What's gotten into you?" he smirked while gingerly resting his forehead against her shoulder.

"You're seriously asking me that now???" Elise despair with a high-pitched, whiny voice.

"I've seen you horny before, mi Reina, but this..., even for you, this is...," Oscar chuckled as he growled a playful bite into the back of her shoulder.

"I can't help it. I mis... Ohhhhhhh god! Fffffuck! Isaac!" She muffled a loud moan into a pillow, unable to finish the first part of the sentence. Oscar had done the very thing she loved the most. The thing that almost always sent her over the edge. The thing he knew would shut her up and send her biting whatever was in front of her: him, languidly and with just enough pressure, dragging his index from her clit to the wetness between her folds before slowly teasing that same index into her, following that move with his middle finger a few moments later.

He'd discovered during her stay in Montreal that he loved teasing her like that: coaxing out airy moans and whimpered cusses in between, watching her squirm against his hand as he massaged gently against her walls, pulling his fingers out to drag his index over her tender bud again, only to return them back into her with a faster, greedier pace.

When he combined that sinful finger play with increasingly ravenous bites and scorching open-mouthed kisses across her back, it was no surprise that she let the tingling sensation from earlier grow anew. And grow it did. With sweltering heat it sprawled into all directions inside her body: from the center of her core to the four outermost corners, causing her to cry out a few more "Fuck! Isaacs!" along the way.

"I love it when you yell out my middle name," Oscar smirked against her spine when he felt her tremble into his hand. He gently let his fingers slide out, nudging Elise to roll to her back below him. "I know that was your favorite position," he whispered when he traced her facial features with delicate kisses while coaxing her legs wide open with the palms of his hands. "Let me show you mine," he breathed over her jawline down to her neck, then to her collarbone and down to the valley between her breasts; teasing her nipples with wet flicks of his tongue and scrapes of his teeth before kneeling back onto his heels.

"You really are breathtaking, mi Reina," Oscar smiled with a heavy-lidded gaze; mentally outlining the spherical tattoo on her ribcage below her left breast; his hands sliding from her hips over the sides of her thighs to her knees, and back up: once, twice, three times, and more.

He loved gazing at her like that: her lying in front of him, fully naked with her skin red from love bites and gentle scratches. And he loved that she seemed completely content and relaxed, not a trace of nervousness or discomfort that usually came with such raw exposure. She felt safe in his gaze and he was very much aware.

"Just perfect," Oscar leaned down; setting a new, much slower pace when he teased her breasts.
again, blowing gently against the tender skin, occasionally teasing her nipples with languid, coiling licks.
"Hmmm...That feels good," Elise breathed, threading her hands through his hair.
"Yeah? Hmmm. How about this?" He started drawing wet lines with his tongue from the valley between her breasts over her stomach down to her navel...
And back up...
And back down...
And back up..., always ending each journey with a soft kiss on her mouth; always massaging her breasts with his hands whenever he went back down.

Elise returned this tenderness with approving moans, dropping her head into the pillow whenever he went down, and dreamy-eyed smiles and teasing tugs at his unruly curls when he journeyed back up. Now and then, she cradled his face, brushing her palms over his three-day stubble, her thumbs always tracing the edges of his lips before pulling him in for a passionate French kiss.

"That definitely feels good," she smiled when she felt him include tiny bites between the languid licks down her body. She ran her hands over his arms, her fingertips outlining the muscle-defining creases with feathery touches whenever he returned to her for another kiss; starting to keep her eyes trained on his throughout his extending journeys south before the point of return.

That is until Oscar decided not to return at all. Instead, he gave her a devious little smirk and she knew what he'd planned next. He licked his lips then disappeared between her legs. Fiery breath, he locked his lips around her clit, sucking and lapping in blazing circles. Around and around... and around, until she started arching her back and wrapping her legs over his shoulders, digging her toes into the muscles of his back while he, with a firm aching grasp, held on to her thighs to keep her legs apart, bringing her close to the edge of yet another orgasm only to pull away before she had a chance for release.

"Mmmmm... Sweet," Oscar hummed when he licked his lips again; this time in mischievous triumph for having brought her this close; chuckling after he heard Elise mutter a frustrated "dammit" and "why" under her breath while he held on to her legs. He knew what he had done. Those deep creases on his cheeks and that cocky raised brow gave him away. Just like Elise starting to touch her own body, scratching across her own stomach, reaching between her legs to guide him how fast she wanted him to go gave her away.

"Damn you," she huffed with a frustrated glare, trying to wiggle her legs free from his hold. Oscar just chuckled soft kisses onto her calves before slowly guiding her legs off his shoulders, another knowing and taunting smirk on his face when he did so. That smirk earned him a flying pillow against his head.

With a laugh, Oscar relaxed back on his heels, bringing Elise close to himself by tugging on her thighs. He lined up with her, teasing her swollen folds with little jolts of his cock. Again..., and again..., and one more time. Only when Elise cried out an angry but pleading "fuck you"- which included his full name - did Oscar grant her what she wanted most.

So with one hand on her stomach and the other clutching to her side, he slowly pushed his length into her, causing her eyes to roll back into her head as she gasped out another plea to god while arching her back high off the mattress and twisting her fingers into the fitted sheet of her bed at the same time.

Oscar grasped on tightly, calloused fingertips digging deep into the flesh of her thighs as he pressed into her with slow, gentle thrusts; opening her legs a little wider with each push as to sink in deeper,
not wanting to waste whatever space she allowed. And Elise loved it, savoring each languid push with a roll of her hips towards him, as though she couldn't get enough of him, greedy for him to expand her insides just a tiny bit more with each gradual, gentle, growing thrust.

And then, without warning, Oscar pulled Elise up towards his chest, kissing into the curve of her neck when her breasts crashed against him, wrapping his arms around the midsection of her back, squeezing her close to himself as he began to help her move up and down.

He loved this position above all: sitting upright, having her in his arms, her legs wrapping around him, her fingernails scratching erratic lines over his back, her insides clenching and relaxing as he guided her up and down his length, the rhythm steady as their bodies' temperatures increased, both sweating into the tight embrace.

And he loved feeling the swelling wetness seeping from her folds over his cock; reducing raw friction to pleasurable silky glides, helping him to hold on just a little bit longer. Gravelly moans escaped Oscar's lips when he felt Elise squeeze around him a little harder each time she sunk back down. It was her way of taunting him while he kept her trapped in his embrace.

Those little taunts were repaid with him jetting his tongue towards his favorite spot on her body: that tiny corner in the bend of her neck; just above the left-side collarbone. The spot that made her moan louder and longer when he teased it just right. So he teased it with gentle bites and feathery licks and lasting sucks. And she reciprocated with whimpered cries of pleasure and intensified scratches across the width of his back and sharp tugs on his unruly curls.

Heavy, almost wheezing breathing set in when they picked up the pace, him hitting her spot just right..., right there..., Again... And again... And again... And again! He held on. He held on because he wanted this to last. He held on because he wanted synchronous euphoria. "I missed you so much," he mumbled into her neck. "So much," he repeated as he held on tight.

So tight so that she had difficulty catching her breath, drawing in wisps of air when her body rose up; wheezing out little gasped moans whenever she dropped back down. And he loved it, savoring her every expression as their breaths shortened and their pulses quickened to new heights. He cherished every raised brow, every satisfied smile, every bite of her lip, and every fleeting glance into his eyes. He loved her flushed cheeks and her exhausted gasps as she neared another unraveling moment.

He wanted that last orgasm out of her. Just one more. He wanted it, but not with primal roughness or aching thrusts against her core like that Saturday afternoon at the cabin in the woods. No. He wanted gentle ecstasy, blissful feel-the-universe-wrap-around-their-bodies release. And just when he felt his own core tighten, just before he wanted to bury his face in his favorite spot and bite down into the corner of her neck, she gave him just that, her entire body flexing as she held back a moan on his lips, waiting for him to let go.

So he did; --- halting first, then trembling as he released his orgasm into her, filling her with warmth when he felt her relax around him with a relieving exhale at the same time.

Oscar- exhausted and beads of sweat running down his face- let his forehead drop onto Elise's
cleavage. "God, I missed you," he said again with a drawn-out breath. They held on to each other, breathing in the other's breath, leaving both foggy minded for a while.

"I think...," Elise exhaled a long breath. "I think I'm done." She exhaled again onto, wearily teasing one of his sweat-drenched curls.

"I hope so because I can't do another round like this," he wheezed. "At least not for a few hours," he joked which earned him a pinch in his arm. "I'm teasing. I'll give it twelve hours," he laughed which earned him another playful pinch, and a muted laugh into the edge of his shoulder.

"I missed you," Elise whispered; her breath and heart slowly settling back into a normal, steady pace.

"Really? I couldn't tell with all the moaning and cussing to god," Oscar wisecracked with a wheezy chuckle. That remark earned him another pinch.

"Smart-ass." She pulled his head back by his curls, gazing down into his eyes as she did so.

"I know. But you love it," he smirked with wiggling brows followed by a bite on his lower lip.

"I do." She teased his nose with hers.

"I do." She tickled his cheeks with tiny pecks.

"I do." She smiled a kiss onto his lips.

"You do, huh?" Oscar kissed over her jawline to her neck; licking short licks behind her earlobe, tethering the lobe between his teeth with a mischievous snicker when he heard Elise gasp a raspy "fuck" under her breath. "I'm gonna get some water. You want some?" He released her lobe and slowly guided her backwards to lie down as he gently pulled out.

"Yes, please," she inhaled deeply; an abashed laugh crossing her lips when Oscar walked away while throwing a cocky smirk over his shoulder and showing off his ass in a dramatic, swayed walk.

Elise rolled to her stomach, laughing first then resting her head on her arms while she inhaled the love infused air that blanketed the room; a hint of forest after the rain with spice cutting through the sweet scent of sex and sweat. She didn't care that the agreed upon notion of taking it slow had evaporated the second she saw those caramel browns smiling straight into her soul. And Oscar didn't seem to mind either. Why else would he have bothered to move up his flight to surprise her? Why else would he have given in to her whispered pleas?

She reached for her cell to check if she had received any messages, the illuminated display showing, Tuesday, June 2, 2015; 8:37 p.m. No messages. No missed calls. Why would there be? Oscar was here. Evenings spent skyping and texting now replaced with real one-on-one face time.

"Nice view," Oscar stated smugly, a glass of water in one hand and a bowl of cubed honeydew melon in the other.

"Thanks," Elise rolled to her side, propping her head on her hand as she outlined a grinning Oscar.

He appeared fitter and more defined than last time, his arms and shoulders more muscular than the day she’d left Montreal. She bit her lip. That thin sheet of sweat still clinging to his body enhanced every single feature on him.

"Like what you see?" He tilted his head to which Elise responded with a hum and a raised finger, motioning for him to slowly spin around. And he obliged with the most hotshot attitude ever, shaking his ass side to side whenever he turned his backside towards her, sending her into a fit of laughter.

"Not bad," she barely managed to say.
"I have a feeling you're mocking me. I'm trying my best to model my goods," Oscar huffed with pretended offense. "Maybe you should call Mikki's boyfriend. He knows how to shake it," Elise suggested with a mischievous grin before losing herself in laughter again. "He has a lot to shake with." Oscar's face skewed into something between disdain and impressed acknowledgment.

David, Mikki's boyfriend, wasn't just some random guy, after all. He was the face of Marks & Spencer, often only referred to as the white pants guy: a six foot something British model with Caribbean blue eyes, dark hair, and the body of an Olympic god. Things Oscar honestly didn't mind so much if he didn't know one teeny detail: Elise had seen David naked in person at least once, albeit that being before Oscar had met her, and albeit it being completely accidental.

Stuff like this usually didn't get to him, but David was a different breed and Oscar always felt a minuscule, jealous tug in his stomach when Elise brought him up, wondering why she was with him when she could probably have someone like David. Little did Oscar know that Elise felt just the same, wondering why he was with her and not some top model look alike.

"Awe. Come here. Let me stroke your ego," Elise wiggled her brows as she patted the empty spot next to her. "Sure. If you can handle another round of stroking my ego." Oscar scrunched his nose before finally giving into a laugh.

"Smart-ass," Elise threw a pillow his way, narrowly missing the glass of water he was holding. She sat up, shuffling towards the edge of her bed, taking the glass from his hand. "Oh, so much better," she sighed after hurriedly drinking the much-needed cold drink; handing the glass back to Oscar who in turn placed it on top of the dresser. "If I had known you were that thirsty...," Oscar quirked a brow, gesturing down his body with a tilt of his head. "You're the worst," Elise laughed into her palms, falling backward onto the mattress, her eyes grinning over the edges of her hands while her cheeks turned the darkest hue of pink. "I'm not! I'm the best!" Oscar countered confidently, trying to draw out Elise's laugh for as long as he could. He loved hearing her laugh. He loved making her laugh, but he especially loved charming out those abashed moments: those flustered but honest and heartfelt laughs that made her eyes sparkle and her skin flush.

"Melón dulce para mi Reina!" Oscar elegantly balanced the bowl filled with cubed honeydew melon in his hand as he climbed back onto the bed. "Gracias," Elise accepted with a giggle, the pink on her cheeks slowly fading. "That's a very interesting painting in the dining room. Haven't seen that color in any of your other paintings," Oscar brought up while nibbling on a piece of melon. "Ah yes. I call it my raging red period. Double pun intended. I'll probably throw it out or maybe paint over it." Elise shrugged nonchalantly before biting into a piece of the sweet fruit.

"Tsss... That bad of a week, huh?" Oscar's brows contracted with some concern. He knew that painting was her way to get her mind off things. Even so, her paintings were usually kept in hues of blue and green, her favorite colors. "Mmmm hmmmm...." Elise hummed, munching on another cube of melon. "No wonder you were so horny. Too much bottled up stress," Oscar smirked.

"I guess you could say that I really needed a stress-relieving lust-fuck," Elise stated bluntly.
"Oh geez, thanks, Sweetie," Oscar gaped, somewhat shocked at the straightforwardness. "I'm kidding. I really did miss you. I'm actually surprised at myself. Cause usually, well... usually...," Elise blushed again.

"Usually women don't like going at it so shortly after their periods end?" Oscar blabbed while chewing on the last piece of melon.

"Not sure about other women. I know that I usually don't. Not that I won't, but usually not like this," Elise nodded with some astonishment. This amount of physical urge was new to her. Certainly, Oscar had an effect on her. There was an easygoing comfort about him, sensual innuendoes without being pushy, an openness to pillow talk without it feeling forced. All that made him pretty much irresistible. Still, she was surprised.

"Well. Do you at least feel a little more relaxed? Or, eh," Oscar shimmied his hand to motion a so-so.

"Definitely more relaxed," Elise grinned before letting out a long sigh. It was a heavy exhale, the kind Oscar knew pretty well by now.

"Sweetie?" He moved up next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong?" He nudged on, kissing her shoulder.

"Just a very long week," she smiled a tired smile. It was supposed to be self-convincing but instead ended in a frown.

"I wish I had been here to help you. It really sucks that you were put through all that stress." Oscar rubbed down her back, kissing her right-side temple before placing the empty fruit bowl on the dresser opposite her bed. He got to his feet, pulled the rest of the pillows off the bed, then gestured for Elise to get up so he could straighten the fitted sheet.

"You wouldn't have liked me last week." Elise raised her brow as she helped Oscar. They certainly had undone the bed, the fitted sheet hanging on to a single corner and about to drop to the floor before he fixed it back into place.

"Why is that?" He started fluffing pillows and arranging them on the bed.

"I turn into a ferocious eating machine when I'm on my period," Elise stated matter-of-factly.

"Ferocious huh?" Oscar chuckled; the tiny laugh carrying an unintended mocking tone to it.

"Yeah, ferocious," she repeated back with a cross-armed glare.

"Awe. I didn't mean it like that. I'd make sure you have all the food you need. Chocolates, ice cream, chips, cookies, you know whatever. And heating pads, and water or tea. And I would draw you warm bubble baths." He inched closer to her, trying to persuade her out of her stance with lofty kisses across her brows and down her nose.

"Great. So I can get fat on top of being bloated?" she gaped with some irritation.

"Awe. Sweetie. I'm sure you look the same as any other day," he tried to assure.

"Yeah right," Elise perked her brow high. "I can't wait for you to witness me during that time of month just so I can say I told you so," she scoffed with a light chuckle.

"Sweetie. I'd love you no matter what. It takes quite a bit for me to run away," he pulled her close, still trying to coax her to uncross her arms by running his fingertips across her forearms.

"Really?" she questioned, relaxing her stance a little.

"Really," he teased her nose with his. Success! Elise let her arms fall to her sides as Oscar pulled her even closer for a gentle, reassuring kiss.

"And if all else fails, I'll go hide at your brother-in-law's," he nipped her nose.

"Oh you...," Elise smacked a pillow against his chest, but Oscar stood strong, grinning mischievously when he confiscated the pillow before Elise could throw another blow, all while
capturing her in a tight embrace. "You better let me go," she groaned, trying to wiggle free from his arms.
"I want a kiss first!" Oscar demanded, tightening the embrace by flexing his muscles.

"Pfft... For what?" Elise grumbled.
"For the best stress-relieving lust-fuck ever," Oscar wiggled his brows.
"As if," she countered with a mocking tone.
"What?" He squeaked, letting go of his companion in shock.
"I'm teasing," she laughed, attacking him with a jump that had both falling back onto the bed. "I'm just teasing," she reiterated when she saw Oscar's dramatic frown while straddling him. "It was the best," she smiled, leaning down. "You're the best," she traced over his lips with her index. "I love you," she leaned in for a soft kiss.
"Mmmmmmm... I know." He played with her hair. "I know." He kissed across her cheekbones. "I know." He nipped her nose, chuckling as he propped himself up on his elbows.

"I better pick all those up," Oscar softly gestured to the erratic trail of clothes they had left behind.
"Don't want you tripping if you need to get up," he scrunched his nose.
"Just throw it all in the hamper," Elise suggested. She peeled herself off him and headed to the bathroom, showing off her own assets with a swayed walk before turning the corner.

She stared into the mirror hanging above the sink, smiling while she traced the marks on her cleavage and neck. He definitely had an effect on her. But it wasn't the physical aspect that had her mind drifting. It was those little moments before, between, and beyond. Those little moments when he paused to see if she was ready. Those little moments when he asked if she was ok. Those little moments when relaxation made her feel as though she could tell him everything and anything and she knew he took her serious, albeit the little teases and surprised chuckles from him.

Elise washed off her face, still smiling at the now paling marks on her skin. When she returned to the bedroom, Oscar was waiting for her, wrapped in the top sheet with his legs crossed while leaning his back against a pile of pillows towards the headboard, his laptop open on a tray in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asked while searching for some sleepwear in her dresser, choosing turquoise cotton hipsters and a plain white tank top for the night.
"Looking over the schedule you sent me. ... Those are cute," Oscar smiled when he saw her panties.
"You think all my underwear is cute," she wrinkled her nose before climbing onto the bed next to his left.
"Actually! I do differentiate," he countered with a lift of his brow.
"Ah yeah? Like how?" Elise was curious.

"The cotton ones are cute, the silk ones are sexy, and the lace ones...hmmmm the lace ones ...," he seductively stared into Elise's eyes.
"Yes?" She waited, chewing on her bottom lip with anticipation, his smoldering brown eyes boring right into her soul. It was the exact same stare that had her tearing off his clothes earlier.
"The lace ones make me want to forget where we are. That's if I know you're wearing them," he grinned, leaning in for a kiss, his lips almost touching hers..., making Elise wait...
And wait...
And wait...

Another nibble on the tip of her nose and a soft chuckle came her way instead.
"Meany," she sulked. "I shall wear lace underwear all the time now just to taunt you," she joked
with a pretended arrogant lift of her left brow and nose high in the air. That idea had Oscar's mouth agape.

"So, schedules...," she diverted with a smirk, gingerly leaning her head on his left shoulder. "Hmmm. Trying to see how to make this work. I mean, traveling back and forth and all. I still have to take care of my place as well. I'm renovating right now. I'd like to get that done sometime before November or December, especially since I'll be traveling a lot then, too," Oscar explained as he scrolled through the schedules in side by side windows; a third window open to combine them into a new file.

"Ok, so one thing at a time. Let's plan until ...," Elise hover-traced over the screen. "The end of August? That's how far I've planned. Then we take it from there," she suggested as she looked over all the dates.

Oscar's calendar sure was packed. He was off -but not really off- until mid-June; some photo shoots and interviews scheduled in while he stayed in Seattle until a few days past Elise's departure for Bonnaroo. Then it was back to the set of X-Men from mid-June until July 2nd. Then a week off, then San Diego Comic Con right before mid-July. After that, he was scheduled back to Montreal until the first week of August. Sporadic events- bouncing back and forth between East and West coast- were notated in uppercase acronyms for the second to third weeks of that month.

"Oh man," Elise sighed. Seeing his schedule sure was discouraging towards any relationship efforts, making her heart sink. Not that her schedule was any less filled. She had two major music festivals she wanted to attend, several short business trips, and other family-related obligations. Elise was used to separation for long blocks here and there. This hacked up mess flickering across the screen was a different level.

"Look! Don't worry. We'll make it work. I'll come here on my days off," Oscar nudged her. "But your apartment," Elise sighed again. "It's just a place, Sweetie. It'll get done when it gets done. I have more flexibility than you, so I'll come here," he offered again.

"I wish my job was more flexible like that, though. I feel bad. You've been here twice and I haven't even made an effort to see your place," she sulked. "Sweetie, it's ok. You don't want to see my place right now. It's a disaster," he chuckled. "Like Home Alone Two disaster but not as big a place."

"Hmmmm," she still wasn't convinced.

"If you want you can come visit me over the July 4th weekend. You can help me paint the living room. Paint a mural if you want," he suggested with a wide, encouraging smile. "I can't. Those dates on there aren't accurate," she pointed to the three days after July 4th on her schedule. "I had to switch those around so I can go to Comic Con with you," she frowned. "Oh. Shit. Sweetie, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about your schedule at that time. Did you guys have anything planned?" he asked, his forehead contracting to worried lines, "you guys" indicating Elise, her brother-in-law, her sister, and her niece.

"Not really. I don't travel around the 4th," she suddenly sounded distant. "I was just going ...," she stopped. Elise looked over the schedule again, subconsciously tracing over her left ring finger. That's when it dawned on Oscar what she was referring to. "I'll come here. If you want me to. I understand if you don't. I mean, I can stay with James and Christine for that week," he proposed with some apprehension. "I prefer to stay here but if you don't want me to, I understand....," he paused. "And maybe... Maybe I can go with you?" He side-
eyed a rather withdrawn Elise.

"Hmmm... I have to think about that," she inhaled wearily. "You can stay here. I want you to stay here. But I don't know. I don't know if I'm ready to take you there," she gulped.

"That's ok, Sweetie. I understand," he kissed the top of Elise's hair and she kissed a "thank you" against his arm.

"July is difficult for me. I... I...," she stammered. "I want you to know that it's not you but I do need room. Not so much personal space. More like room to think. Just quiet, no talking, maybe listening to music, maybe painting, maybe taking long walks kind of room," she bit her bottom lip as though she was afraid that she had just turned him away.

"It's ok, mi Linda. I get it. I do," Oscar squeezed her right hand with his left, pulling her hand close to his face, tickling the back with his stubble. A tiny, but very grateful smile formed in the corner of Elise's mouth. "And if you do want to talk, I'll be here," he smiled.

"Hmmm...," Elise went back to scanning through the schedule. She only just now realized that her birthday was marked with a big virtual cake sticker. "Does my sister have anything planned for Saturday?" she asked with a smirk.

"If I tell you, will you act surprised?"

"Of course. I figured she might plan something. It'll be my first birthday party since I got back. So who's going to be there?" she prodded on as she pulled her legs to her chest.

"Let's see. You, me, Tricia and her kids, Mikki and David, Edgar, Sandra, your sister, and James. And little Chloé, of course," Oscar beamed. "I think Christine said she's inviting a few acquaintances. Colleagues. But I don't know who," he explained further as he pulled up the schedule for June 6th. "I'm supposed to lure you out for a shopping trip and make it seem like we have to get something for your sister, and then drop it off at her place," he laughed as he revealed the plan.

"You're not good at keeping secrets, you know that?" Elise teased.

"I am, too! Go ahead, ask me something!" Oscar dared.

Elise sat there for a moment, glancing over Oscar's schedule. Everything was well mapped out with specific event names. However, December showed only abbreviated events, most bearing the acronyms SW or TFA. She recognized the same shorthand for some of the mid-August events.

"Why does my brother-in-law keep avoiding me when I ask about plans for December?" she queried. Bingo! Oscar's eyes widened in shock, his jaw clenched as he gritted his teeth. "I can't tell you. It's a secret," he stated with failing confidence.

"Is it something big?" she nudged on.

"Secret." Oscar pressed his lips into a thin line.

"I could just look it up on the Internet," Elise smugly pointed out.

"But you won't, will you?" Oscar was almost certain she wouldn't.

He was actually surprised that she hadn't seen his upcoming roles when she'd searched for some of his movies. Maybe she'd forgotten, or maybe she didn't see or pay attention.

"You know me too well," she admitted. Oscar let out an audible sigh of relief. "Besides, I like some mystery. Makes getting to know you a little more fun, don't you think?" she asked reassuringly.

Oscar agreed. It was nice that Elise didn't venture into the depths of internet gossip hell even for minor fact checking. He thought it nice that there were things left for her to discover, things to surprise her with, or else this would've already turned into a one-sided kind of thing, like it had been with Lorraine who seemed to know everything about Oscar from the get-go, even though a lot
of it was exaggerated or fabricated by fifteen minute fame seekers. Whatever did he see in her always ran through his mind whenever he recalled those days. He realized that her knowing everything kept the focus on her.

Elise brushed her index across Oscar's brow, the dainty touch snapping him out of his temporary loss of the now. "May I tell you a secret?" she whispered with a serious tinge, her index profiling up and down his face while she waited for his reply. "Sure," Oscar nodded in agreement and Elise took a deep breath in.

"I know that you know that James was aware where I've been hiding. And I know that you know that I came back to the States way before last November," she disclosed. "James told you shortly after you met me," she added, her index drawing delicate lines down his cheeks between each statement. "I didn't ask him. He just...," Oscar started.

"I know," she cut him off softly. "This was a big burden on him. And it still is. I had my reasons. He had his. Don't tell Christine, please?" She pleaded softly knowing full well her brother-in-law had asked the same thing. Oscar nodded an ok. "I'll tell her one day," Elise divulged and Oscar nodded another ok. "I am glad though... that James told you," Elise traced over Oscar's lips. "Along with some other stuff. I know he told you. About how sad I was."

"He did. Although... it didn't take much to figure that out," Oscar gently grasped her hand before she could draw more lines on his face, his thumb tracing across her wrist. He pulled her wrist toward himself, gently kissing the faded line on her skin. "I love you," he whispered.

Elise closed her eyes, treasuring his words, his tenderness, his presence. A relieved smile grew on her face. "I love you," Oscar whispered again when he saw her slowly opening her eyes. Elise nodded an "I know". They silently sat next to each other while Oscar typed up the combined schedule.

"Holy fuck, is that the time?" he shouted after he caught a glimpse of the alarm clock, ripping both out of the tranquility that had spanned a good hour or so. It was nearly midnight. He closed his laptop, putting everything on the nightstand to his right. He got up, shook out the sheet, and fixed up the blanket so they could both curl up underneath. It didn't take long before Elise's mind drifted into sleep, especially now that he was right there next to her, keeping her safe and warm. Oscar stayed awake a few minutes longer than her, whispering a "te amo" into her shoulder before falling asleep himself.

Rustling noises and faint jazz music woke him the next morning; the spot next to him empty but still somewhat warm. Elise must've gotten up not too long ago. He snuck a peek at the alarm clock on her nightstand, the numbers blinking a reddish 5:15 a.m.

Sleepy-eyed, curls erratic, and dressed only in gray boxer briefs he quietly made his way to the kitchen, observing Elise when he got there. She was pouring herself some coffee while softly singing along to Hozier's "Angel of Small Death and Codeine Scene", dressed in her signature professional look: turquoise blouse, gray slacks, and dark gray flats; bright jewelry, simple makeup, and soft wavy styled hair rounding off her look.

"You're my Angel of Small Death," Oscar rasped with a squint, his eyes still adjusting to the kitchen's bright overhead lights. Elise, a bit startled at first, was quite amused at the sight in front of her. "Did I wake you?" she snickered.
"Maybe. It's ok," he inhaled sharply through his nose. "Why are you up so early?" he queried with some confusion.

"It's Wednesday. Remember? Wednesdays are early days," she reminded him.

"Shit. I forgot. I kept you up too long again," he smacked his lips. Elise poured him a tall glass of water and handed it to him. "Thanks, mi Reina," he accepted, pulling her in for a teasing kiss on her neck.

"Don't. I have to leave soon," she tried to escape but Oscar's lips were already detailing her neck. He felt her pulse increase with each small brush of his mouth.

"I can't... I...," she gasped when he repeated the move. "Oh god," she breathed, her eyes screwing upwards as though she was begging for help. "Oscar!!!" she pushed against his chest, her hands shaking. Him smelling of his cologne infused with scents of sweat and sex didn't help the situation.

"What?" he smiled innocently.

"You know what!" Elise bit her bottom lip.

Oscar winked at her, his gaze trailing up and down her body.

"Stop that!" she warned more sternly, having to turn around to break free of his gaze.

"Did you eat breakfast?" he snickered, amused by her reaction. He was wide awake now.

"I had some cereal," she took a sip from her coffee while reading over a paper. The reading was a fake attempt to distract herself from an almost naked Oscar standing in her kitchen.

"Sweetie! I mean real food!" he frowned.

"Cereal is real food," she stated with a raised brow.

Oscar gave her a disapproving curl of his lip.

"Cereal is real food," she stated with a raised brow.

Oscar gave her a disapproving curl of his lip.

"What? It is! Look! This one has ... Well, this one isn't a good example." She put a box of cocoa puffs back on the counter, and Oscar shook his head laughing.

"I don't have time anyways. I need to get going. I can't be late," she started gathering her things.

"You want me to bring you some brunch then?" Oscar offered.

"No. I rather you not. Richard wouldn't mind I'm sure, but the CEO has been making frequent visits to the offices lately. I don't think he'd be happy," she declined. "It's just a bad time right now. Maybe when this project goes through and everyone is more relaxed, you can come visit me?" she proposed after seeing Oscar's frown.

"Awe, alright. I'll miss you," he pulled her in for another leg-trembling, breath-hitching, pulse-quickening kiss on her neck.

"God. Damn. You," Elise gasped between each word as she battled against thoughts for a quickie right then and there in the kitchen. Just five minutes of heated, cuss-inducing, rough sex. "Nope. Nope... I have to go," she shook her head after Oscar gave her one of those seductive, lip-licking, knowing-his-effect-on-her, and mentally-undressing-her-with-his-eyes stares. He wasn't thinking quickie with that kind of fire behind those deep caramel browns.

Elise grabbed her briefcase and dashed for the door.

"I'll see you later," Oscar laughed when he heard her cuss a "fuck" under her breath when she rushed past him.

"You better be naked and ready!" she yelled out.

"Don't tempt me!" he called back, laughing loudly when he heard the door shut with an extra noisy bang.

Oscar heard his phone chime.

"I wasn't kidding!" a text next to a strawberry icon displayed.

"Really? *surprised emoticon*," Oscar texted back.

"Yes, really! I'll be back by 1:30 p.m. That should be enough time for your break, right? *devil
emoji*" she replied. "I better eat a healthy breakfast then. Build up my strength. *winky face*" he messaged back, laughing when Elise replied with a rolling eye emoji.

Oscar poured himself some coffee. Him being wide awake was also due to him still adjusting to the time difference. So, like last time he'd stayed over, he made himself useful by fixing the bed and cleaning the dishes; but also, and unlike last time, he unpacked his suitcase, smiling when he realized that Elise had made space for him in almost every room of her tiny one-bedroom apartment. She'd even moved the sofa to open a corner for his guitar.

And in the pantry, right next to all the ingredients he had bought for her, he found a bag of Spicy Jalapeño Cheetos with a pair of chopsticks and a note attached.

"Don't eat them all at once.
I had to battle some old lady for the last bag,
Ich liebe Dich,
Liz"

Oscar got his phone and took a selfie with the chopsticks and bag of Cheetos, sending it to Elise with a thank you attached. And she replied with kisses and "Remember! 1:30 p.m.!

The morning at the office wasn't as tranquil as Oscar's. At least not for Elise's colleagues. The new client turned out to be an eccentric billionaire from Japan who was partnering with a Chinese subcontractor for a major international project. Constant changes to existing blueprints, timeframe adjustments, and compensation negotiations with local construction workers had everyone running wild.

This was India to the power of three and - despite losing out on the incentive for having to sidestep this particular project- Elise was grateful she wasn't involved this time around, the first break being evidence of everyone's ready-to-snap nerves. Most of the staff looked like they'd been through the ringer with annoyed expressions on their faces and strong coffees in hand.

"I bet they wish they hadn't made you sit this one out," Thom, Elise's new P.A., stated with calculated apathy.
"I'm sure," Elise agreed, equally indifferent at the scene in front of them. They stood in the doorway to her office, both observing people rushing between cubicles as another set of changes had just been announced.

"Coffee?" Thom nonchalantly held out a cup towards Elise while keeping his focus on the maddening crowd.
"Thanks," Elise accepted before pivoting into her office, and Thom followed with a stack of papers in hand.

"Same like yesterday. Just minor changes." He placed the stack in front of Elise before returning to his desk right outside her office. Since Elise had to sidestep the new project, she'd been left to take care of all the minor side contracts. It was entry level work that was finished within a couple of hours, leaving her with enough time to check in on the panicking translator and interpreter teams throughout the day or have casual conversations with Thom.

She had quickly grown fond of the young man chosen to be her new P.A. Like Helen, he was a fast study, and by Friday it became clear that he was equally as quick on his feet when he proved his wit by confronting Henry, the company's corporate lawyer, within the
James had warned Elise that his former colleague was a sore loser. "I'm surprised he's still a lawyer," her brother-in-law had stated after witnessing the signing of the promotion agreement on Wednesday of last week.

And sure enough, as soon as James had left the building, Henry had felt it necessary to gear passive-aggressive remarks towards Elise whenever he saw her near. It was the pinnacle of unprofessionalism and usually, she wouldn't have had any of it, but she decided to grit her teeth and smile through the subtle but offensive verbal attacks. She didn't want to feed the troll anything more than he already knew or assumed he knew.

Ignoring him, however, seemed to have the opposite effect, fueling his spiteful behavior rather than turning him away; and by Friday afternoon of last week, his subtle remarks had turned into harsh and direct attacks; not just towards Elise but Thom as well.

Little did Henry know that when he walked passed her office again for the fifth time that day, another crude remark rolling off his tongue, the CEO had been standing behind the angled door, discussing Elise's temporary tasks while she sat out the China-Japan project barreling their way.

So Thom -who was fully aware that the CEO was right around the corner- threw Henry a menacing glare first and then loudly proclaimed that "If all corporate lawyers of this company have this much time on their hands, humiliating employees and such, then maybe HR needs to do some research to see if this place can make do with four instead of five of your insult-spewing, money-wasting, rumor-producing pricks."

Henry - stepping dangerously close to Thom and probably ready to grab the young P.A. by the tie around his neck - nearly fainted when the CEO stepped out from behind the door; brow raised, arms crossed, and nodding in agreement with Thom's observation. It took all mental and physical strength on Elise's part not to high-five her new assistant right then and there that day, and even today, the incident provoked the occasional laugh whenever she thought about it.

"Heya boss. Still laughing about last Friday, I see," Thom peeked his head in the door. "I can't help it. That was ... pretty good," Elise nodded, still chuckling at the image of Henry's mortified face.

"Thank you," Thom bowed in self-acknowledgment. "During one of my summer internships, I had a colleague like that. Total asshole. So I had to do one of two things. Either roll with it or stand up against that kind of shit. Guess which one I chose?" Thom opened the door all the way, relaxing against the frame. Elise let out a heartfelt laugh at his statement; and his pose. The timid demeanor from the first day was long gone, his true persona constantly shining through during casual conversations.

Despite the new comfort between them, Thom insisted on calling Elise by her last name. "Feels kind of weird. I don't know. You're almost old enough to be my mom," he shrugged, no ill intent behind the statement. It still earned him a hazardous glare to which he cringed a "sorry".

"I didn't mean it that way. My mom was really young when she had me?" he squeaked. Like that was any better. Elise shook her head laughing. He wasn't completely wrong. A recent high school graduate, Thom was definitely young enough to pass as her son.

"I'm going to take it as a compliment," she snickered. "What's in the bag?" she wondered, gesturing towards the green tote in Thom's left hand. "Oh, almost forgot. This was dropped off by messenger for you. I think it's from your boyfriend.
Smells like fresh-baked bread," Thom strolled towards Elise's desk, placing the tote in front of her.

A printed note attached had her beaming ear to ear.
"So you get through the day and have energy to spare.
See you at 1:30.
Muchos besos.
Oscar."
Little hearts printed after her companion's name.

Elise searched through the bag and sure enough, there were freshly baked croissants inside. And a tray of chocolate dipped strawberries, a couple of yogurts - one cherry and one blueberry-, and some cheese bites, too.
"I better let you eat," Thom was ready to turn on his heel.
"Grab some water from the lunchroom and join me. It's enough food for two people," Elise instructed.
"I don't want to impose," Thom countered.

"You're not. Besides. It'll give me a chance to talk possible future here, and discuss this," Elise held a thin envelope towards Thom. He took it from her hand, the back taped shut firmly with "do not break this seal" stickers, only a single word on the front: recommendation.
"Oh. Wow. Thanks," he smiled.
"Don't open it. Colleges prefer if you don't know what it says. Hence the stickers," she smiled as she started to distribute the food on the included napkins. "Go get some water," she repeated while opening the tray with the strawberries.

A few hours later, Elise stood in front of her apartment. Big smile on her face, tingling anticipation in her core, she unlocked the door. "Hey, Lindo. I'm home!" she called out with a giggle as she paced towards the living room, gradually unbuttoning her turquoise blouse along the way. "Thanks for brunch. I definitely had to refuel. Plenty of energy to go around now," she waited. No reply. Maybe he didn't hear.

"Oscar? You better be naked and rea....ohhhh hey!!!!" Elise exclaimed, nearly choking on the last part of the sentence in shock. Eyes wide and blushing, she quickly pulled her blouse shut. There on the sofa, big grin on his face, sat- instead of her companion- her brother-in-law. And in his arms was little Chloé, cooing and blowing raspberries, dressed in a purple summer dress and purple socks.

"Did I ruin your afternoon?" James smirked, trying his best not to break out in laughter.
"Go ahead! Let it out!" Elise encouraged with a frustrated huff. Her face felt like it was on fire. She was sure she had turned the deepest hue of red.
"Let what out?" James kept grinning, holding back the laugh with all his might.
"You're lucky Chloé is here, or else!" Elise clenched her right hand into a fist, swinging a right hook into the air.

"You see that, Chloé? That's what we call intentional intimidation and would be considered a criminal offense. Can you say criminal offense?" James teased his daughter's nose. Chloé just cooed, her tiny fingers wrapping around her father's index.
"Oh geez. Do not encourage her to go into law," Elise rolled her eyes, fumbling with the buttons of her blouse.
"I wouldn't dream of it. But you never know. If she's anything like her mother or her aunt, she might just hold a seat in the Supreme Court one day," James laughed at last.
"So?... What's up? Where's Oscar?" Elise closed the last button of her blouse, looking around first, then throwing her brother-in-law a threatening glance when he kept chuckling.

"He's in your office. Talking to his brother, I think." James gestured towards the closed door behind the dining room. "Anyways. I need you to babysit Chloé for a few hours," he requested, some apprehension in his voice.

"What happened to the nanny?" Elise pinched her nieces' chubby little cheeks, taking a seat next to James in the process.

"She gets off work early on Wednesdays," he explained, gently rocking his daughter on his knee. Chloé was energetic, her cooing turning more vocal with each second.

"Christine isn't home, yet?" Elise started making silly faces at Chloé causing her niece to let out tiny baby giggles.

"She is. But I'm taking her to the clinic." James passed Chloé to Elise as he got up, surprised that his sister-in-law wasn't fighting him on handing her the baby. Then again, since meeting Oscar, Elise seemed quite a changed woman, laughing more, coming over more often, even offering to watch Chloé a couple of times since she got back from Montreal.

"Everything ok?" Elise asked with some worry; gently swaying Chloé side to side, counting out the baby's pudgy little fingers in German.

"Yes. It's just a check-up," James assured as he pulled on his suit jacket.

"Check-up, huh?" Elise prodded on with a raised brow. "You usually don't go with her for check-ups," she stated with a knowing nod, grinning when she saw James freeze for a second like he had been caught.

"Ok! How long have you known?" he asked while intensely squinting at Elise.

"A little over a week...," she confided. "That's right. You're going to be a big sister. Yup...," she beamed while teasing her niece's nose.

James glared towards Elise's office, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Don't be mad at him. I kind of coerced it out of him," Elise chuckled while getting to her feet.

"So? How far along is she?" she asked.

"Two months. We wanted to wait with the news, but...," James heaved his chest.

"You just couldn't contain your excitement," Elise paced towards her brother-in-law, giving him a tiny peck on his cheek. "Congratulations," she whispered with a warm smile.

"Hmmm... Thank you. Do me a favor though. Please don't mention it to anyone else, ok? A lot can happen during the first three months," James quietly tickled his daughter's feet, getting lost in some random though that painted a weary expression on his face.

"You sure, everything is ok?" Elise queried softly.


"James?" Elise implored a little firmer this time.

"She's fine. I promise," he nodded, his timbre still a little unconvincing.

"Well... I'm here. This time. If you guys need me," she assured before deciding to let the issue go for now.

"I know." James closed his arms around his sister-in-law and Chloé, giving both a tight hug. "I have to get going," he stated after glancing at his watch. "Everything you need is in the bag, including a couple of changes of clothes," he pointed to the large baby-bag on the cherry-wood chest. "Oscar put the formula in the fridge. And she just had a diaper change," he chuckled.
"Got it!" Elise assured confidently.
"OK. I'll see you all later," James tickled his daughter's feet again. "Oh and there's teething rings. But you have to wash them first. We dropped them on the floor earlier. And her blanket is in her stroller. So is her favorite toy," James started towards the stroller in the corner of the dining room.

"James, I got it," Elise scoffed, a little offended that her brother-in-law thought she couldn't handle a seven and a half-month-old baby for a few hours.
"Ok. Ok. Oscar knows what to do if she cries," James went on, stumbling backward when Elise started pushing him through the hallway with one arm while holding on to her niece with the other.
"I know. And thanks for not trusting me," she frowned.
"I trust you," James squeaked. "I do. I trust you. Just usually, you're at our place and everything is there. And she's never been here," he tried to justify his sudden overbearing behavior.

"Oh my god. James! Oscar is one room away. I got it. Go! Get out!" she pushed against a resisting James. "In fact, why don't you take the chance and go out tonight. We have everything under control," she suggested.
"Uhm...." James nervously glanced at his watch.
"Really?" Elise gaped in shock.
"Uhm... Ok. You have our numbers. Oscar has our numbers, right? So, I'll pick her up nine-ish, ten-ish?" he croaked.

"Ten-ish. Really. You're worse than my sister. I know I haven't been there as much, but really. We'll be ok. Go!" Elise sternly pointed towards the door behind James.
"Ok. Daddy loves you, Chloé. Bye...," he waved anxiously.
"Bye!" Elise shut the door before her brother-in-law had a chance to say something else. "Your dad," she chuckled with a disbelieving shake of her head, strolling back to the living room after.

"Hey! There you are," Oscar beamed when he emerged from Elise's office.
"You could've warned me," she huffed, rocking Chloé on her hip.
"Awe, mi Linda. I was going to, but he showed up a few minutes before you were supposed to be back," Oscar gently kissed Elise's hair, then Chloé's.
"Yeah? Well, a short text would've been nice. I was ready to rip my blouse off," Elise blurted out. Oscar's response: a loud laugh.

"I see," she disapproved with a shocked lift of her brow.
"Sweetie. It's cute. I mean... At least you weren't fully undressed. Unlike me," he disappeared into the kitchen.
"Wait!" Elise followed. "You were actually...," she tried to cover Chloé's ears and turn the baby's head away from Oscar. "...naked?" she whisper-asked.
"Of course!" he smirked. "And ready!" he admitted, twisting his lips in agony.
"Baby in room!" Elise gasped in shock, blushing as she glanced down to Oscar's pants. He returned her reaction with a mischievous smirk, sneaking closer to her to steal a kiss. "Baby!" Elise repeated, snickering when she gave in.
"She doesn't know," Oscar grinned. "Do you?" He tickled Chloé's nose.

"So now what? I had planned on... You know. And maybe nap. And maybe another round," Elise confided blushing.
"The weather is nice. We should go for a walk. Down to the waterfront," Oscar suggested with a wink. Elise couldn't tell if it was geared towards her or Chloé. She didn't care. All she knew was that she was glad he was here.
"We can. Although, we might have to keep the PDA to a minimum. Did you see the gossip papers last week?" she asked, still rocking Chloé on her hip. 
"Please tell me you didn't start reading those," Oscar frowned. 
"No. I saw the covers though. Did you know someone took pictures of us during our little getaway?" she inquired with an elevated voice. The Hollywood press was definitely one of her do-not-push-this-button triggers.

"James mentioned it. Sweetie. Ignore them. If you don't, they'll throw out more bait, and if you bite, they'll chase," he reminded her. 
"I know. I mean. Doesn't it get to you though? Even a little?" Elise stared at Oscar, mouth agape, pulse still rising. 
"It does. Sometimes," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "Usually, it's not this wild. I've been in this business for a little while now. Ignore them. Ok? I mean we can't hide all the time. Stay holed up inside the apartment. People, well normal people, know celebrities have lives. Those are the ones that let us go on without much interruption," Oscar ran his index down Elise's cheek, inching closer to her to tease a tender kiss into her hair.

"Besides, if we don't go outside, how is this Berenjena Pequeñita supposed to grow," he chuckled, lifting Chloé out of Elise's arms, gently swaying her side to side as he hummed a melody to her. 
"She'll probably fall asleep if we go now," he pointed out when he saw his goddaughter yawn a few times. 
"Alright. I'm going to change first," Elise agreed.

Twenty minutes later -Elise dressed in skinny jeans and a thin, gray sweater while Oscar opted for a gray button down and black jeans, hiding his curls under a baseball cap and his eyes behind a pair of shades- they stood in front of the apartment complex, heading down 1st Avenue towards Pike's Place Market before walking down to Waterfront Park.

They took their time pacing down the sidewalks, checking out window displays along the way while taking turns pushing the stroller with little Chloé inside; the baby happily snoozing away the early afternoon. It was a tranquil picture, to say the least, interrupted maybe twice by people who recognized Oscar and wanted pictures with him.

When Chloé woke an hour later, they were in line for the Great Wheel. 
"I thought this was reserved for our twenty-fifth," Elise joked. 
"Doesn't hurt to check it out. Make sure we actually like it," Oscar replied with a wink. He loved that she always remembered that text. Lucky for them, the line was short enough that the person manning the entrances to the gondolas granted them a private cabin.

"Can I tell you another secret?" Elise tensed up when the gondola swayed as they entered. 
"Always," Oscar smiled. He took Chloé out of her stroller, propping her on his lap while taking a seat next to Elise. 
"I'm scared of heights," she whispered, gripping on to Oscar's knee. 
"You are? We can..." Oscar looked to the gondola's door. Too late. The door was shut, the Great Wheel already rotating upwards.

"Why didn't you say something?" He narrowed his brows in confusion. 
"Because... You wanted to come here." She shrugged, biting her lip. Oscar gave her a soft kiss on her hair, gently shaking his head in disbelief into her soft tresses. 
"You don't have to do that. You know. Stuff you're not comfortable with. To please me." He nudged her shoulder while he continued to nuzzle her hair.
"I know. I'll survive." She let out a flimsy chuckle. "Hmmm. Thank you," Oscar exhaled into her hair; leaving another dainty kiss on her right temple.

Chloé certainly seemed to have a great time, craning her neck to look out the windows, babbling and cooing, blowing raspberries, stretching her arms towards the glass. Oscar reciprocated the excitement with encouraging words, muttering out "I know, right" and "wow, so amazing, look at that sky" whenever his goddaughter returned her attention to his face, always staring at him in awe with her big, gray eyes. He sure had a way with kids, something that always sent warm fuzzy jolts into Elise's heart, making her wonder if all this was a dream. Someone like him, can't be real. And yet, he was. Right next to her. Living, breathing, laughing, making silly faces at her niece.

"May I ask you something?" Elise spoke softly after they exited The Great Wheel. "Always, Sweetie," Oscar assured while strapping Chloé back into the stroller, attaching a little dinosaur by Velcro straps to the handle so his goddaughter remained entertained. "You were there throughout most of my sister's pregnancy, right?" Elise queried as they started walking towards the Waterfront Park shops. "Somewhat. She came to visit sets now and then. Sometimes I visited them. Why do you ask?" He slowly opened the door to a souvenir shop.

"Was she ok? During most of it?" Elise pushed the stroller inside the shop. Oscar curled one side of his lip. "Just tell me," Elise pressed on as she absentmindedly checked out some key chains. "She was in the hospital a couple of times for a few days. But other than that I don't know," he disclosed.

Elise's heart dropped a little. She felt guilty for not being there for her sister during such an important time. Looking at Chloé, she always assumed everything went great.

"She'll be ok." Oscar ran his hand over Elise's free hand, grabbing hold and squeezing it tightly. Elise let out a heavy sigh. "She'll be ok. James will make sure of it. I know that much," Oscar pulled her hand to his face, leaving an endearing kiss on the back of it. "You're probably right," Elise nodded. Oscar nudged her shoulder with his. "Ok. You're right," Elise repeated with more certainty, laughing when Chloé let out a high pitched giggling laugh.

"Oh, she likes that one," Oscar laughed, aiming for a soft hat in the shape of a shark. "You can't get her that," Elise countered. "Why not? It fits. Look..." Oscar put the hat on Chloé who in turn immediately pulled it off, squeezing and pulling the hat with excitement. "We're buying that one. And one for me," Oscar decided with a wide toothy grin. "You're such a child," Elise playfully pushed against his shoulder. "I know. You need one as well. There's three? I think there are three sharks in Finding Nemo?" he half-stated half-asked, grabbing another shark hat.

"I am not wearing that!" Elise placed her hands on her head in defiance; refusing Oscar trying to put the shark hat on her hair. "Come on. Don't be a Spielverderber," Oscar tried again. "Who taught you that word?" Elise laughed when she tried to steer her head away, dodging all of Oscar's attempts.

"Michael," Oscar nodded with pride. "I have to have a talk with that man," Elise snickered. "Not until you wear this. Aha... Gottcha," Oscar beamed; victory written all over his face when he finally managed to put the shark hat on Elise, her niece once again amused by the unfolding events. "Alright. You guys win. I'll wear it. AT HOME!" she declared in defeat with a pretended frown;
her laugh lines around her eyes telling a different story.

They spent the late afternoon strolling back up 1st Avenue, stopping by and checking out a couple of antique shops but not buying anything this time around. They didn't get back home until shortly after six. Oscar ordered a pizza while Elise gave her niece a bath. Chloé, at one point or another, had gotten frozen yogurt all over her clothes, and subsequently all over her arms, face, and somehow her feet.

"Let's not tell your mom that you had some frozen yogurt," Elise whisper-chuckled when she put a new outfit on Chloé. "And next time, I'm taking you clothes shopping. Going to get you some different colors," she tickled her niece's tummy when she pulled on a purple onesie.
"Good luck with that," Oscar walked up behind Elise, giving her a tenuous kiss behind her ear. "I tried getting different clothes. I'm pretty sure they're still in the closet with all tags attached," he snickered.

"She hasn't spent enough time with me, yet. We'll convert her, you'll see," Elise picked up her niece, kissing her hair. "The scent of fresh washed baby," Elise snickered when she saw Oscar smiling at the sight.
"I know, right?" he agreed. "Can you imagine having one?" he asked softly.

The doorbell rang a little after seven, the pizza delivery guy looking flabbergasted when Oscar opened the door. "Dude, you're in the new St..." Elise heard the delivery person jabber before she heard a hissing "shhhhh" from Oscar.

"You're in the new?" she asked when he walked into the living room, pizza box in hand.
"X-Men Movie," Oscar smiled.
"Hmmmm..." Elise squinted first, then shrugged. That was probably it, so she dropped the thought.

Oscar got some plates from the kitchen and prepped a bottle of formula for Chloé, feeding her while Elise started a movie. He let out a chuckle when he saw that she had picked "Finding Nemo". Elise disappeared for a few seconds and when she returned, she plopped down next to Oscar, sporting the shark-hat he had bought earlier with fake annoyance. "If I'm wearing mine...", she pulled out Oscar's shark hat from the bag. "...then you're wearing yours," she placed the soft hat on his curls, smirking. Oscar gently bit Elise's shoulder, before she pressed play.

So they sat there, watching "Finding Nemo" while wearing shark hats and eating pizza. And when the movie was over, they snuggled on the sofa; quietly watching the news while Chloé was snoozing on Oscar's chest, Elise curling up next to him with her head on his shoulder. The day hadn't panned out the way she'd wanted it to, but this, this right here, was equally as great. So she basked in the moment: satisfied, happy, dreamy-eyed, until she fell asleep in Oscar's arm, just like her niece had some time earlier.
"Crap... Son of a bitch!... Fuck!"
Elise jerked upright on the sofa. She looked around and vaguely spied Oscar stumble towards the living room - him still cursing under his breath.

"What's wrong, Lindo?" she asked in a confused and sleepy daze.
"Ah, crap. I didn't mean to wake you, Sweetie," Oscar plopped down on one of the ottomans nearby, rubbing the ball of one of his feet. "Stepped on Chloé's rattle. She must've dropped it when I carried her to the door," he added, his mouth twisting into a thin line while examining the bottom of his right foot. "Ah well, could be worse, huh?" He clenched his jaw, his attention slowly trailing towards Elise. An airy chuckle followed.

"What?" Elise blinked her eyes a few times to adjust to the glare of the TV illuminating the living room. The news were long over and some talk show was now flickering across the screen. The sound was almost inaudible, only the audience's laughter seemed to echo through the room now and then.

Oscar reached over to a still somewhat puzzled Elise, pulling off the shark hat that she was still wearing, and revealing a disheveled, strawberry-blond mess of a hairdo in the process. Oscar couldn't help but laugh.

"What??" Elise asked again, reaching up to her hair, rolling her eyes when she realized that she must be looking like some frizzy catastrophe.
"You're so cute," Oscar snickered again. "You and Chloé both," he continued.
Elise stuck out her tongue in defying annoyance. "What time is it?" She lapped her lips, thirsty for some water and still very much tired. The day had been much longer than anticipated.

Volunteering to watch her niece late into the evening had been quite fun but the baby had the energy of three people and then some, and had kept both -Oscar and Elise - on their toes until they started watching "Finding Nemo".

"Ten twenty-three," Oscar smirked, picking up the plates and the empty pizza box when he got up.
"Ugh. Fuck. I am sooo tired," Elise rasped while running her hands down her face.
"Well, off to bed then, mi Linda!" Oscar commanded softly while leaning down and pressing a tenuous kiss right above her left brow.
"I should help clean..." she started, but Oscar shooed her towards the bedroom, assuring her that he had everything under control.

Elise went to brush her teeth, then changed into gray, cotton shorts and a turquoise tank top; crawling onto her bed after setting her alarm to 7 a.m. She was exhausted and ready to fall back asleep but tried hard to stay awake while waiting for Oscar.

Ten minutes later, he joined her, giving her a mint-cinnamon infused kiss while placing a glass of water on her nightstand. Elise sat up, slowly sipping on the water while watching Oscar take off his clothes. She loved watching him undress, outlining his body with a lingering gaze, taking mental notes of the way his muscles flexed and relaxed, not the least bit ashamed when Oscar caught her gawking.

"Liking the view, I see," he smirked while crawling atop the bed, relaxing onto his back and
stretching out his left arm so Elise could roll into his left side and rest her head on his left shoulder.

"Who picked up Chloé?" she whispered into his side after he pulled the blanket over them.
"Your sister," he gently twirled a strand of her hair around his left index.
"Is she ok? Did she look ok?" Elise asked, looking up into Oscar's eyes.
"She looked fine, Sweetie," he brushed up and down her left arm with his fingertips. "She asked me to come over tomorrow," he added while continuing to softly tease his companion's skin with tiny circles.
"Oh? Did she say why?" Elise ran her fingertips across Oscar's chest, every so often drawing invisible shapes onto his warm skin.

"No. She was a little upset that I haven't come by yet. I mean usually, I drop by their place first, because... Well usually I stay with them," he stated matter of factly. He teased a kiss onto Elise's hair who in turn yawned into the side of his chest. "You should get some sleep, Sweetie," he kissed her hair again.

"Awe, but..." Elise began trailing tiny, wet kisses down Oscar's side - each kiss more tenuous than the previous until they stopped altogether.
"Liz?" Oscar whisper-asked. No reply. He looked down and sure enough - and unsurprisingly- Elise had fallen asleep mid-kissing spree and was now weakly snoring against his side, the small vibrations from her snoozing almost a purr rather than a snore.

Oscar let out a breathy laugh. As much as he would have enjoyed a languid and tender lovemaking session between the sheets, he knew Elise needed to sleep. So he kept playing with her hair instead, every so often leaning down to place a gentle kiss on her tresses or running his fingertips across her cheek. "I love you," he hummed, his eyelids getting heavier with each passing second. Ten minutes later, he was out, too.

"Sweetie. Time to get up," Oscar's voice sounded distant and dry. The alarm had just gone off, ripping Elise out of her dream and throwing her into Thursday morning reality.

The sun was already cresting over the edges of the city, giving the bedroom a golden glow; the soothing light only broken by the vertical blinds hanging on the window. Car noises and people's conversations echoed dull into the space as the window had been left partially open to circulate air.

"Aaaarghhh... I don't want to," Elise groaned into the side of Oscar's chest, clamping her arm around him like a Koala. If she held on tight enough, maybe she wouldn't have to get up.
"I know." He kissed her hair. "I wish we could stay in bed all day, but you have work. Get up and get ready." Oscar slid his left arm out from under her neck, reaching for the alarm clock on her nightstand to turn off the nuisance of a device, then trying to get up and out of bed--- but Elise hung on tight. "Sweetie. You know you have to get up. If you get up, I'll go and make breakfast," he coaxed while trying to loosen her grip.

"Breakfast is already here," Elise rasped, refusing to release her hold.
"What?" Oscar furrowed his brows. "I think you're still dreaming, Liz," he chuckled while lightly squeezing her arm.
"No, I'm not," she lifted her head just enough to look over the edge of Oscar's chest; a devous spark behind her gray eyes; the green slivers in her irises more prominent this morning. Maybe it was those naughty thoughts that made the green glow more, or maybe it was the morning light. Either way, that mischievous little smirk hiding in the corners of her eyes got Oscar's attention.
"Ah yeah? Hmm," he chewed on his bottom lip, thinking. "Wait? --- So you would? --- Really? -- - You would, you know?" Oscar gestured down to below his waist with his eyes. His brow raised, his eyes wandering back and forth between Elise and to below his waist until his gaze settled on her. He was simultaneously taken aback and turned on by the fact that she didn't blush.

"You mean,--- swallow? I so would," Elise bit her lip, grinning while walking her left fingertips down the groove of his chest. It was a deliciously confident grin to which Oscar replied with an airy hum.

Elise was definitely awake now. And her mind? In the gutter of course - the very bottom of the gutter that is. The very bottom from which the only escape was sensual release.

She watched Oscar closely as she continued to playfully dance her fingertips across his chest and down his stomach. His heart rate almost doubled, the vein on his neck pulsating faster and faster each time she traced the edges of his abs towards his waist. His breath grew shorter whenever she teased her index below the waistband of his briefs, lifting the elastic band just enough to release it with a short and sharp snap against his skin.

"You need to get ready for work," Oscar reiterated with a gulp when he saw Elise biting her lip again. He tried to stay steady-faced and calm, but other parts of his body didn't seem to get that message.

"Hmmmmm," Elise hummed after glancing down. The blanket was loosely covering Oscar's lower half, but even so, it couldn't hide his growing excitement beneath. She returned and held her gaze into his eyes while slowly - very slowly - snaking down his body, disappearing under the blanket while leaving soft kisses on his skin.

"Sweetie!" Oscar barely managed the warning under his breath. "Damn!" he gritted through his teeth, his breaths sounding more and more like despaired gasps while Elise gradually pulled off his briefs, gingerly kissing upwards his legs after. She noted him clenching his hands into tight fists by his sides. The anticipation of her lips squeezing around him was almost too much for him to handle as evident by his stifled breaths. She knew full well how to make the suspense last: teasing him with her indexes by tracing thin lines up and down his thighs before finally dragging the most tenuous and languid touch down his erection.

She loved tormenting him like that: drawing feathery lines up and down his shaft for a while, then slowly trailing the same path with the tip of her tongue- leaving behind a heated wet line in the process. Oscar's stifled moans, him lightly thrusting his hips upwards, and his hands twisting into sheet below him indicated that he loved it just as much.

So she carried on, hearing him wheeze out a few "fucks" and "damn its" while she continued to work him over in this languid and tender fashion. Only when he started to weave his hands into her hair did she start taking the tip into her mouth, spiraling her tongue around a couple of times before releasing him over and over and over again; always leaving him aching for more, begging for her to keep her lips around him a little longer each time.

"Fuck, Liz!!!!" Oscar moaned in agony when she pulled away again. He aggressively swept the blanket off their bodies and stared down at her.

"Hey!" Elise stopped mid-lick, giving Oscar a disapproving frown.

"You don't like it when I watch?" He breathed in agitation.

"You can watch next time," She pulled the blanket back over herself.

"Such a tease." Oscar growled. A loud moan followed. "Ai, dios mío! Mi Linda!" He hitched a hard breath, and a quiet snicker muffled through the blanket.
Elise, living up to his observation of her being a tease, had first taunted Oscar with more spiraling licks before finally, and languidly, squeezing her lips around and down his cock, all the way down --- and back up --- and back down --- and back up, keeping the pace painstakingly slow.

"Liz! Oh --- my --- fucking --- god!" Oscar moaned through gritted teeth; weaving his hands back through her hair, pleading for her to pick up the pace. So she did: faster and faster, causing him to writhe his hips upwards in erratic movements. Elise responded by sucking harder. "Ffffuck...!" Oscar darted upright, his arms and legs trembling while flexing his abs as he came. He pulled the blanket back off Elise, watching her in disbelief as she slowly released his hold on him, only a tiny drop of cum rolling down the center of her lips.

"Hmmm... Tasty." She raised her brow nonchalantly, smirking deviously before licking away the remaining drop while crawling back up next to Oscar's side.

"Holy shit! I had no idea you were so... so...," Oscar gulped, his eyes still wide.

"Yes?" Elise waited, seductively licking the edges of her lips.

"I think, I might be a bad influence on you," Oscar chuckled with a wheeze, his eyes glazing over a bit when Elise continued to taste her own lips with the tip of her tongue.

"Maybe. Or maybe this is the true me," she raised her brow again, scrunching her nose after. "I guess I better get up, huh?" She peeked at the alarm clock, the red numbers blinking 7:30 a.m.

"So I don't get to have breakfast?" Oscar frowned. "I don't think so." He quickly rolled on top of her before she had a chance to rush off the bed, pinning her arms above her head while sucking on her neck. She laughed wheezily under his weight; her body tingling, her mouth releasing an involuntary moan when he kissed and nipped his favorite spot in the curve of her neck.

"Better make it quick," she gasped, her vision losing focus when Oscar started biting his way down through the fabric of her tank top while quickly pulling off her cotton shorts and silk panties at the same time. He didn't disappoint. Tantalizing licks, tormenting finger play, and stinging love bites into the taut flesh of her inner thighs had her tugging hard on his curls. He worked her over twice before the clock even showed 7:40 a.m.; the second climax relentlessly surging through her body, making her entire body tense up so much that she let out a whimpering cry.

"Tasty," Oscar laughed onto her heated skin when he kissed his way back up her still trembling body, pushing her tank top over her breasts to her neck, teasing her with tiny love bites into the soft flesh. "Very tasty," he repeated as he pressed a tender kiss against her lips. Elise slowly fluttered her eyes open, drawing in deep breaths to slow her heart down. Oscar kept pressing gentle kisses down her neck and across her breasts, inhaling her sweetened with sex scent along the way while she played with his dense curls.

"Next time, we should eat breakfast at the same time," she smiled mischievously when she finally found the strength to get up, her step a little wobbly at first. "Now go and make me some real breakfast while I'm getting ready!" she wisecracked; laughing when she saw Oscar gawking at her before she turned the corner towards the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, Elise stood in her dining room, watching Oscar serve up some pancakes, laughing when she looked down on her plate. He somehow had managed to bake a blueberry sixty-nine into the fluffy discs.

"Now who's teasing," she giggled, blushing when she caught his fleeting glance as she took a seat by the table. The fact that he was walking around the apartment once again only dressed in his underwear didn't help the situation.
"Wait! So now you're embarrassed?" he mocked with a wide grin as he took a seat opposite her.
"It's because... I'm dressed and ready to go to work and I don't know. Sexual confidence comes and
 goes," she snickered as she took a bite of her food. As usual, it tasted heavenly. Sometimes she
 wondered if Oscar had missed his calling.

"Better hurry up. Don't want you getting in trouble," he teased when he saw Elise taking her sweet
time.
"Eh..." she shrugged while sipping on some coffee.
"Eh? What does eh mean?" Oscar was surprised.
"I don't know," Elise sighed.
"Yes you do," Oscar chewed on some scrambled eggs.
"I love my job, my career really, but also... I don't know...," Elise peeked at her watch. It was 8:30
a.m. If she didn't leave now, she'd definitely be late, but she didn't care. That same apathy she had
felt at the beginning of last week was now churning in the pit of her stomach.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Oscar queried, his face quite serious.
Elise rarely ever saw that expression on him. It was like he was a different person: his usually soft
eyes a little sharper, his jawline a little more chiseled, his lips a little straighter. She let out a weak
sigh. "No. I just... It's one of those "I'm not sure about certain things" moments," she stated bluntly.
"But I assure you, it's not because of you or about you," she added quickly when she saw worry
lines form on Oscar's face.

She walked over to him, running her hand down his cheek before leaning in for a soft kiss. He
smelled of a forest after the rain with a hint of spice and sex and sweat, a deliciously enticing scent
that she couldn't get enough off. And today, it seemed to keep her tethered even more. "I'm just
trying to figure things out. I know what I want in the long run. My goals, you know.... but I think
my path has changed a little. So, I'm just trying to figure a few things out, that's all," she explained
calmly while taking a step back.
"Hmmm... Ok," Oscar stood up, tracing over her facial features. He knew she liked it when he
did that. She'd always close her eyes, savoring his touch. So he'd give her those tender moments
whenever time allowed.
"I should go," she smiled, somewhat wearily.

"Ok," Oscar trailed soft kisses from her brows to her cheeks to her nose to the edges of her lips.
"Ok," he smiled, pulling her in for a soft, open-mouthed, draw-her-lips-into-his, tongue-searching
kiss that left her agape and out of breath.
She ran her thumb over his mouth, losing herself in his eyes - those big, soft, caramel-brown eyes.
"I love you," she whispered.
Elise grabbed her briefcase and her coat - just in case, Seattle's weather still changed quickly
during spring- giving Oscar a quick peck on his cheek before taking off for the day.

Oscar shook his head, a tender chuckle escaping his lips. He cleaned up the dining room, fixed the
bed, and took a shower. When he was done, he looked around the apartment, taking some mental
notes for a quick trip to the grocery store. He plopped down on the sofa, pulling on his boots,
when he noticed that the once empty bookshelves next to the TV weren't so empty anymore.

On the top left shelf, all the way in the left corner, stood the leather-bound poetry book Oscar had
bought Elise before her trip to India. And next to that was the book she had bought while she had
visited him in Montreal, and right next to that was another book, one he had not seen yet. He got
up, walked over, and took the book from the shelf. It was a European travel guide, quite heavy for
Oscar looked to the door, as though to make sure Elise wasn't about to come back and catch him snooping. He opened the guide, gently skimming through the pages; a few of which had tiny creased down corners. He flipped through the book more thoroughly, stopping at one of the pages with a creased down corner. The page was about the Swiss Alps, a few photographs depicting the landscape. Oscar brushed his index across the page, tracing the highlighted sections of the text: the names of cities worth visiting.

He flipped through the guide one more time, this time stopping at a page about Germany, the photographs showing a heavily snowed-in market with wooden booths and warm lights. "Christkindlesmarkt Nuernberg" was the title on top of the page, and right under it- in tiny scribbles that Oscar recognized as Elise's handwriting - it said "Christmas 2015 with Oscar?". A big smile grew on his face when he realized that Elise had started planning for possible trips with him. He wanted to scan through the book some more, but a quick glance at his watch made him put the book back. It was nearly 10 a.m. and he had promised Christine that he'd drop by her place today.

"Hey! There you are!" Christine greeted him with wide, almost glowing beam ten minutes later. Oscar leaned in for a gentle hug. He knew why his companion's sister was glowing, but he bit his tongue, trying not to out the secret, one he had promised Elise and James he'd keep for now. "You look great. Love the haircut," Christine said cheerily. "Come on, come on!" She opened the door wider, pulling Oscar into the apartment by his arm; an uncharacteristic move for the usually reserved Christine.

"You don't have work today?" He kicked off his boots. "I do, but I had to take the morning off for some medical screening," Christine explained, stopping in her tracks to the fridge. "Everything ok?" Oscar asked carefully. "Uhmmm yeah! Yes!" Christine gulped. Oscar noticed that she had the same look in her eyes as Elise when she was holding something back. "That's good," he nodded, careful not to press on.

"So what's new with you?" Christine poured him some coffee, setting the cup on the steel counter of the kitchen island and gesturing for Oscar to take a seat on one of the barstool type chairs. "Same old, same old. Acting stuff, research for roles, photo shoots." He welcomed the change of topic as he was unsure whether or not he would let it slip that he knew Christine was pregnant. "Where's Tiny?" Oscar looked around for his goddaughter.

"With her nanny. They're going to baby gymnastics. Don't roll your eyes at me!" Christine warned when she caught Oscar snickering. "Did you buy Elise a present, yet?" she asked as she got some strawberry cheesecake pastries from the counter next to the fridge, setting one pastry on a plate in front of Oscar.

"No. I was going to get something today, after the photo shoot." He took the pastry and started nibbling on one of the corners. "Ah! Well. Hold on. I got something for you." Christine disappeared to James' den, returning with what looked like an antique ledger and a clipboard a few minutes later. She took a seat opposite Oscar, gripping on tightly to the thin, leather-bound, gilded-spine book.

"James told you where we're from, right?" Christine asked, still clinging on to the ledger. "Yes. He did," Oscar smiled. He realized that the book must be of great sentimental value to
Christine. Like Elise, she was apprehensive sharing such personal items. Christine had always been this way, only ever revealing something about herself when she deemed it necessary, careful about who she offered her past to.

"And did Elise ever tell you what happened to her books?" She narrowed her brows, waiting and still holding on tightly to the ledger. Oscar nodded yes, his lips skewing to a painfully thin line as he recalled what Elise had told him some time ago.

"Hmmmm," Christine hummed, noting Oscar's clenched fist on top of the steel counter of the kitchen island. She reached for his hand, gently stroking the back of it to soothe him out of the thought. She took a deep breath in, finally sliding the ledger towards Oscar, but keeping her hand on top.

"When we were little..." Christine started while looking down on the ledger. "...we moved around a lot. Even before the wall came down. We always lost a lot of stuff. The move from East Germany to West Germany however...," she paused for a minute, lost in her thoughts. "...we had to leave everything behind. The East German government was still somewhat in control you know. We were allowed a suitcase and a backpack each when we left, filled only with clothes and a few toys. That was it. So, when we finally settled, I ..., I ...," she looked up at Oscar to gauge his reaction, appearing worried, almost scared.

Oscar returned Christine's worry with a gentle smile, not judging, just waiting.

"...I became obsessed with keeping track of things. Not just mine, but everyone's things in the family. I used to have a lot more of these," she chuckled somewhat embarrassed, her eyes wandering back to the ledger. "This is one of the few records I kept. It made sense, I suppose," she gulped while slowly sliding her hand off the ledger. She nodded towards Oscar, granting him access to the book.

He carefully opened the ledger to the first page, revealing a yellowed sheet with only one word in elegant letters at the center of the page: Bücher. He looked up at Christine before continuing to the next page. She nodded, encouraging him to continue. So he carefully turned to the next page and the next and the next, his eyes getting wider with each page.

"Holy wow!" he gasped in quiet astonishment as he lightly traced the pages. The ledger was an extensive, chronological record of all the books the family owned or had owned over the years, starting in 1991 all the way to now. Each page had fifty lines. Each line showed the title of a book, the author's name, translator's name, the ISBN number if it was available, the language it had been printed in, the year it had been printed in, which edition it was, and lastly who the book belonged to.

Elise's name was attached to over half the books in the ledger. Oscar wasn't sure, but it looked like at one point or another Elise had owned more than two thousand books in at least ten languages. "Where did she keep all of these?" he asked, flabbergasted as he continued to scan through the pages.

"In her apartment," Christine stated like that was the obvious answer.

"There's no way those two shelves in her living room held that many books," Oscar chuckled lightly.

"Hold on," Christine got up again, this time walking towards the china cabinet in the dining room. She opened one of the heavy doors, rummaging through what looked like a stack of shoe boxes. She grabbed one of the boxes and set it on the kitchen island. The box was filled to the brim with
old photographs, some of which were singed at the edges.

"I'm still sorting through all of this. These are some of the pictures we saved from the dumpster after Frank set her collection ablaze," Christine explained; keeping her focus on the pictures as she searched through them for a specific set.
"He burned her pictures, too?" Oscar was shocked. It didn't keep him from peeking into the box, curious, while Christine kept searching.
"Mmmmm hmmmm. Pretty much anything that looked like a book, so her photo books, too. --- Ah, I knew I had seen these in here!" Christine handed Oscar a few of the photographs.

"That's Elise's and Joe's old apartment in Germany. See the hallway?" Christine pointed to one of the pictures. Oscar nodded. "Those shelves right there... They were all filled with books. The same kind of shelves she has in her living room now. I think...," Christine let out a heartfelt laugh. "... I think in the end Joe had made her twelve or thirteen shelves. They all stood scattered throughout the apartment. Even in their bedroom. And it still wasn't enough. She had books stacked to the ceiling in some corners," Christine grinned.

"Most of Elise's books were bought after she got married. See?" Christine opened to one of the pages in the ledger. Oscar scanned through the pages, and indeed, Elise's library had expanded immensely during her marriage, her name appearing sparsely in the ledger after 2005, the year Joe had passed.

"And she had all these shipped here?" Oscar asked in amazement, his focus back on the pictures. In one of them, Elise was curled up on a big, comfortable looking chair; wrapped in a knitted, red-yellow striped blanket while reading a blue and silver bound book; a cup of tea or coffee standing on a side table next to the chair. She looked completely enthralled by what she was reading like she was worlds away.

"Joe took that picture," Christine smiled when she saw Oscar's continued gaze at the photograph. "You can keep it if you want," she offered.
"I shouldn't. It's not ... It's not my memory." He handed the stack of photos back to Christine. Silence settled between them. A silence that came with an understanding that some things weren't meant to be shared.

"So, wait a minute? Elise had twelve of them shelves? Where's the rest?" Oscar queried after some thinking. Christine's face changed to a vexed expression. "In pieces. On a landfill," she disclosed. "Along with all her other stuff," she drew in a heavy breath. Oscar narrowed his brows. He took a sip from his coffee and waited, almost certain of the explanation that would follow.

"When Elise left Frank, James and I went back to her apartment. Frank had destroyed almost everything. Spray painted some stuff, split other things with god knows what tools, shattered her wedding plates, cut up her clothes..., her wedding dress...," Christine sighed as she returned the box of photographs to the china cabinet. "If I hadn't borrowed her CD collection, he'd have probably destroyed that too. Did she tell you that she used to have a pretty big vinyl collection?" Christine queried with a sad undertone while closing the cabinet.
Oscar shook his head no.

"Hmmm. Well... Anyways. The two shelves we managed to take from the apartment were in pretty bad shape, but James had them fixed. The rest of her stuff --- well, there wasn't much left to recover. A few boxes maybe." She sat back down opposite Oscar, this time pushing the clipboard
his way. A stack of papers was attached. Like before, Christine held her hand on top, unwilling to let go just yet.

"I know James talked to you. The big brother kind of talk," she half asked, half stated.
"He did," Oscar confirmed with a warm smile.
"And Mikki gave you the best friend talk. If not her, probably Patricia?" Christine guessed.
"Mikki," Oscar chuckled, recalling the night he had met Elise's best friend.
"Well, this would be the big sister kind of talk. I know, I'm younger, but let's just pretend for a minute." Christine's usually warm demeanor had faded to a serious posture and tone.
"Let's," Oscar agreed.

Christine took a deep breath in, her focus trailing to the clipboard and back to Oscar.
"I know you guys are happy right now. The beginning of love and all. And that's good. But I also know that there will be tears, and arguments, and disagreements, because that's how it goes," she paused, thinking. "I love both of you. You're my friend and she's my sister. And she's been through so much. There'll be tough times with her. Really tough times! She'll faze in and out of her thoughts. Like she'll get very distant, and you have to be ready for that," Christine paused again, resting her cheek in the palm of her propped up hand.

"I don't know if you guys will stay together. The idea is a nice thought, I guess... As long you make the best of it. Both of you," she finished.
"I'll try." Oscar reached for Christine's hand on top of the clipboard.
"Good, because if not... I heard a rumor that you're not the fastest runner," she laughed, finally letting go of the clipboard. "Anyways. While Elise was gone, I transferred the ledger to a digital record. These are all her books. Now, the green ones, she bought. The blue highlighted ones are from family members and friends. The red ones..."

"... Are from Joe," Oscar finished the sentence.
"Mmm hmmmm. I'm not... You don't have to get her anything from this list but, I don't know. It might be a good start. Don't get the red highlighted ones, unless she ... I don't know. I'm being silly," Christine reverted back into her metaphorical shell, embarrassed that she had brought up the idea.

"No. No, this is... This is great. I bought her a book a while back, but only after I knew she wanted it," Oscar beamed.
"I know," Christine smirked, flipping to the last page of the stack of papers still attached to the clipboard. Right there, at the very bottom, was the title of the poetry book Oscar had bought her, his name in the column with the header "bought by".

"Geez. You really do keep track of everything. Should I be worried?" he teased.
"Oh shut up," Christine snickered embarrassed into the palm of her hand, and Oscar chuckled. Christine and Elise were quite similar in that. When they were embarrassed, they'd always laugh shyly into the palms of their hands, hiding their smiles, but their eyes always gave them away. They loved when someone made them laugh.

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" Christine got up, gearing towards the fridge. Oscar looked at his plate. He hadn't even finished the pastry, yet. "I'm good," he grinned while watching Christine as she got some pickles from the fridge. "Nutella would go great with those," he jested, hissing out a silent "fuck" when he backtracked to what he had just said.

Christine stopped mid-bite into a pickle, coughing, her eyes widening in shock. "What makesh you shay dat?" She spit out the bite she'd just taken, the piece of pickle landing on the counter with a
tiny thud. Oscar's eyes involuntarily shot to Christine's lower half and then quickly back up. "WHO TOLD YOU?" she croaked.

"Uhhmmm," Oscar fidgeted in his chair; looking down on his plate he decided to quickly take the pastry and scarf it down in two big bites. "Like that's going to help you get out of it!? Who?" Christine demanded. Flustered, she paced towards Oscar who in turn was quick to finish his coffee before escaping to the front door.

"Whooooa dude, slow down!" James exclaimed as he entered the apartment, a few shopping bags in hand. He always did have impeccable timing, showing up at some of the most awkward moments just in time. "No can. Your wife knows I know," Oscar huffed as he hastily crammed his feet into his boots, ready to turn on his heel towards the door a second later. "STOP!" Christine yelled, and Oscar flinched, freezing mid-turn. "Shit!" James clenched his jaw, sheer terror on his face. "Yeah, shit!" Christine squinted at both men, crossing her arms.

James rummaged swiftly through one of the bags; anxiety written all over his face, he pulled out a container. "Chocolate ice cream?" he squeaked. Christine threw him a hazardous squint. "Uhm... I picked up peanut butter cup ice cream as well," James hurriedly looked through another bag, his voice even higher in pitch. An awkward silence followed.

"Oh, peanut butter cup ice cream sounds great," Oscar cut in. "James... You weren't supposed to... I don't...," Christine started angrily. She tapped her fingers on her forearm, looking down, frowning. "Why'd you tell him?" she gulped, disappointed; her lips trembling, she slowly dropped her arms to her sides as she started crying.

"Oh, darling. No. Please. Please don't cry. Look. I got snacks." James rushed to his wife's side. "Ah, man. Christine. I'm sorry. James was just excited." Oscar dashed over to them. "Awe crap. I'm an asshole, aren't I?" He lightly stroked Christine's arm, gearing a shrug towards James, unsure what to do or say. "No. No, you're not. It's the hormones. It's bad this time," she sighed, wiping away her tears. "Let's go eat," she sniffled, taking the container with the ice cream from James' hand.

James and Oscar traded perplexed stares before timidly following Christine back to the kitchen. "Does Elise know?" She started eating the chocolate ice cream right out of the container while James put the rest of the food away.

"Uhmmm..." Oscar twisted his lips to one side. "Ok, so she knows," Christine sighed as she scooped out more chocolate ice cream. "Oh god, I'm going to be so fat." She started crying again. Oscar started laughing. He couldn't help it. Christine's expression was something between despair and self pity and hunger for more ice cream; her emotions all over the place like it was some insane roller coaster ride. "Stop it!" she squeaked as she took another bite of the ice cream. "James, make him stop!" she commanded, but her husband was just as lost in laughter, tiny tears trickling out from the corners of his eyes. "You guys are terrible. Just terrible," Christine frowned before she joined the infectious laughter.

James shifted towards her, side-hugging her while teasing a kiss onto his wife's cheek. "It's going to be a long year," he snorted when Christine took another, very large scoop of ice cream from the container. He shut up fast when she flung a sharp punch against her husband's chest.
"I wonder if your sister will be like that." Oscar slowly calmed down, smirking at the thought. "Why? Oh my god, is she? Oscar!" Christine stopped eating.

"No! NOOOO! Definitely not..." Oscar threw up his hands, motioning no.

"Then why would you say that?" Christine returned to eating the ice cream.

"Yeah, Oscar. Why would you?" James smirked.

Oscar heaved his chest, groaning, running his hands through his curls while clenching his jaw. "Awe, you really love her don't you?" Christine shuffled towards Oscar, placing a cold, chocolate infused peck on his cheek, and Oscar responded with an abashed smile. "Well, I'm glad," Christine beamed.

"Hmm," Oscar hummed. "So, do you guys need anything? For the baby?" he diverted. He wasn't quite ready to reveal that he'd been thinking more and more about future adventures. Future adventures with Elise that is. Future adventures with Elise being more than just his companion, more than just his girlfriend. Future adventures that included the pitter patter of tiny feet running across wooden floors while little, squeaked laughs echoed through the space.

"No. We're good for now. I'm not due for a while," Christine revealed.

"When are you due anyways?" Oscar grabbed a spoon from a drawer and joined the ice cream frenzy.

"You're not going to believe if I told you," Christine bit her lip.

"Come on! Please?" Oscar begged.

"December 25," James blurted out, excited; now also helping to devour the chocolate ice cream.

"He asked me!" Christine frowned.

"Sorry, darling," James kissed her temple, snickering against her.

"Oh. A Christmas baby. Oh wait, that means you won't be able to travel with us to the premieres," Oscar pouted.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" James glared.

"I know you'll be there, but still," Oscar shrugged.

"Isn't Elise coming along?" Christine wondered.

"I haven't asked her, yet! I will, soon. I promise!" Oscar smiled.

"You better ask her. She usually travels to Germany in December," Christine disclosed with a lifted brow.

That explained the travel guide, Oscar thought to himself. He promised another "soon" while eating more ice cream, watching as James lovingly rubbed his wife's tummy every few minutes. His best friend could barely contain his happiness now that the secret was out between the three of them.

"Elise is really excited for you," Oscar explained as he got ready to leave.

"Yeah?" Christine questioned, beaming ear to ear at the revelation.

"I think she's happy because she gets to be around this time. I wouldn't be surprised if she starts buying you guys baby stuff. She's already researching what's safe around pregnant women," Oscar chuckled before gently hugging his companion's sister goodbye.

The scheduled afternoon photo shoot extended into the early evening, leaving no time for Oscar to go shopping for presents, forcing him to rush through getting groceries for Elise. It was almost eight in the evening when he left the supermarket, way past any desire to cook dinner. So on his way back, he picked up some Cuban food and a bottle of low budget, white wine.

When he got to the apartment, Elise was in her office typing away.
"Hey, mi Linda! I picked up food," he called out from the kitchen while putting away the groceries and setting up plates for dinner.
"Ok. I'll be out in a minute," she called back. Oscar heard her typing at lightning speed.
"Lots of work, huh?" he asked when she finally emerged from her office.
"Somewhat. Helping out where I can. I don't think the company was prepared for the magnitude of this project," she explained while rubbing her eyes with her left index and thumb, the stress of looking at a computer screen all day apparent on her face.

"Come, sit down. Time for dinner!" Oscar commanded softly, pouring Elise some wine while she took a seat on one of the mismatched chairs.
"How was your day?" she asked, sipping slowly on the wine.
"Pretty good. Talked to your sister. Had a photo shoot," he poured himself some wine.

"How is she?" Elise took a bite from the pulled pork sandwich, letting out a deep from the core sigh and squeezing her eyes shut while savoring the taste. "Oh god, this is so good," she chewed slowly.
"Did you eat lunch?" Oscar queried with wide eyes.
"No. Didn't have time," she tried to justify while nibbling on a fry.
"Sweetie!" Oscar disapproved, pulling down his brows sternly.
"Please, no lectures!" Elise snapped, her lips curling into a tired frown.

Oscar shook his head. "I love you, Sweetie." He reached for her hand, giving her a warm but worried smile. It was one of those slow, tense, and tired moments. Regular life sort of speak. Long hours had exhaustion setting in, patience wearing thin with each ticking minute as the day came to an end.

"I'm sorry," Elise heaved her chest. "I'm not used to having someone around.--- Worrying about me. Waiting on me. Weird, huh?" she asked, her voice heavy with concern.
"You don't have to apologize to me. I get it," Oscar smiled, lifting her hand to his face, skimming her fingertips with his lips. "I just want to make sure you're ok. That means eating lunch." He pressed and rubbed the back of her hand against his stubble, causing Elise to giggle at the sandpapery sound and prickly feeling the action produced.

"You wanna watch a movie?" she asked after they finished their dinner.
"It's up to you, Sweetie," Oscar got up, cleaning off the table.
"Hmmm, yeah. Let's watch a movie," Elise smiled. "How about Return of the Jedi?" she called towards the kitchen while searching through her collection in the cherry-wood chest.
"Oscar?" she turned around, letting out a shriek. Oscar had snuck up behind her and was staring at her, mouth agape. "What?" she bit her lip.
"That's my favorite Star Wars movie," he confided, mouth still agape.
"Perfect, then?" She granted a half smile, unsure if he was teasing her or if he was being for real.

"Yes. Perfect. I just thought you didn't want to watch the movies again because Mikki made you watch them on repeat," Oscar pulled her close by her hips, looking down into her eyes with warm but questioning eyes.
"It's been a few months. I think I can handle a rerun," she laughed. "Tell you what. You start the movie and I'll make popcorn. It's about the only thing I know how to make to perfection," she grinned before disappearing to the kitchen.

Oscar shook his head again, chuckling this time. This was a slow evening. A slow moment, but he wouldn't want it any other way. He loved that she wanted to spend time with him, despite her being tired, despite her being a little moody after a long day of work. He loved that she had allowed him
into her life, that she let him be around for those slow, regular life moments between the craziness of his schedule and the insanity that was her schedule. Those mundane, boring evenings that might well turn into the glue that holds them together.

So he cherished this evening, watching Return of the Jedi, eating microwave popcorn, and drinking low budget, white wine that was now warm. And he cherished the evening even more when Elise dozed off halfway into the movie, leaning against his chest, almost dropping the bowl of popcorn from her hands as the long hours of the day slowly overwhelmed her. He cherished it because she fell asleep in his arms, whispering his name just before she passed out.

After the movie, Oscar carried a groggy, half-sleeping Elise to the bedroom, tucking her in as he snuggled up against her, snickering at her confused mumbles about some memory of the day. Her rhythmic breathing soon had him lull into sleep as well.

Friday morning came way too fast for both of them, neither wanting to get up after spending the morning in a tender make out session that left their lips swollen and their hearts racing.
"God, I wish we could stay in bed all day," Oscar groaned when Elise pulled away to get ready for the day.
"We'll have the weekend," she raised her brow suggestively.
"True. Which reminds me. Do you want your present in the morning or when we get back?" Oscar rose to his knees, scooting to the edge of the mattress, twirling some of Elise's hair around his right index while seductively licking his lips.
"Surprise me," she giggled.

"Hmnnnn... Alright. Remember you said that." He leaned forward, aiming for his favorite spot while closing his eyes. Closer. Closer. Closer. He should’ve been there by now. Instead, he tumbled backward on the bed. Elise had let him approach just close enough only to playfully push him back by his chest, denying him the chance to place the kiss.

"Oh, you!" he growled, jumping off the bed, dashing after a running Elise, capturing her just before she reached the bathroom. His arms wrapped tightly around her as he kissed his favorite spot in the curve of her neck from behind while gently squeezing her breasts in the process, leaving Elise weak in the knees and gasping for air.

"God fuck. I might die of a heart attack if you keep messing with my pulse like that," she breathed.
"You and me both," he joked, lightly pinching her derrière before taking off to the kitchen, whistling some cheery tune on his way there. Elise lost herself in a fit of laughter for a few minutes before finally being able to get ready for work.

Since her birthday was the next day, and no one worked on the weekends, her boss had hinted at a small office surprise birthday party for her. After some internal debating, Elise decided to wear the yellow dress Oscar had bought for her before the trip to India. She threw on some matching shoes and black jewelry and put her hair into a loose French twist.

Since her birthday was the next day, and no one worked on the weekends, her boss had hinted at a small office surprise birthday party for her. After some internal debating, Elise decided to wear the yellow dress Oscar had bought for her before the trip to India. She threw on some matching shoes and black jewelry and put her hair into a loose French twist.

She glanced in the mirror that was hanging on the back of her bedroom door, twirling around a few times, blushing.
"Sweetie, are you going to come eat breakfast?" Oscar yelled from the dining room.
Elise spun around again. This dress meant a lot to her but it also made her wary. What if Oscar had bought it for her just to have it but not actually wear it? After all, it was a sweet sixteen lookalike. "Sweetie?" Oscar's voice was getting closer. "Mi Linda?" he slowly opened the bedroom door.
"Oh," he gave Elise a once-over, mouth slightly ajar. "It's weird isn't it?" she asked with apprehension.
"Why?" Oscar countered.
"Well, I know you've seen the picture, of Joe and me... It's weird. I'll take it off." She reached for the zipper.

"Sweetie, don't worry so much. You look great. I know the dress means a lot to you. Where's your necklace? With the rings?" Oscar queried. He had noticed her not wearing it; not while she was in Montreal, and not since he'd arrived in Seattle on Tuesday. "In the dresser," she replied, tilting her head towards the black dresser opposite the bed.

Oscar walked over, opening the top drawer. He found her necklace almost immediately as it was laying in its own box atop a few folded shirts. "You know, I'd never ask you not to wear this, right?" He pulled the long silver chain from the box, the weight of the two rings making the necklace swing side to side. "You don't have to hide it from me, either." He walked up behind Elise, draping the necklace around her.

Elise stopped Oscar before he could close the chain, grasping his hand firmly, but he gently pushed her hand away. "You should wear it. With this dress, you should wear it, Sweetie," he encouraged. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing a languid kiss on the back of her neck.

Elise squeezed her eyes shut, gulping, whispering out a thin "thank you". How has she ever gone through life without him? The question ran deep tracks into her mind and for a moment she felt doubt gnawing its way back into her head.

"Let's eat," Oscar softly gestured in the direction of the dining room. "Let's," Elise agreed with gentle smile. They didn't talk much that morning. Instead, Oscar gave Elise warm glances over the edge of his laptop while eating his breakfast and typing up a storm.

"You're not writing another cookbook, are you?" she snickered when his typing sped up. "No. Just an email to my sister. Telling her how you used Amortentia on me," he winked at Elise. "Did you seriously just use the Harry Potter love potion as an excuse for your infatuation?" she started laughing.

"Ah, you got that reference, huh?" He perked a brow. He shouldn't have been surprised.

"I used to read the books. So often so, the pages started falling out," she laughed. "You are the biggest nerd," Oscar got up and pulled her to a stand. "And I love it. My little nerd." He placed a tender kiss atop her hair, snickering under his breath. "You better get ready for work," he pushed on after glancing at his watch.

"I better," Elise smiled. She quickly gathered her things, ready to leave, but just before she turned the corner to the hallway, she stopped, turned back, paced towards Oscar, and hugged him from behind - him just about to start clearing the table. She took a deep breath in, squeezing her arms tightly around him, whispering a thank you onto his skin because, like the last two mornings, Oscar was once again only walking around with minimal clothing.

"Get going, mi Linda," he repeated, sweeping his fingertips across her arms. So she did, slowly walking backward, not breaking line of sight until she reached the hallway.

Friday mornings at the office were always busy, people rushing to get everything signed and turned over before the weekend. Elise sitting out the project was a blessing in disguise. So she and Thom
once again watched on as people seemed in a constant race against time.

"Crazy," Thom huffed when he saw the same architect scuffle back to her table for the nth time that morning.
"You haven't seen the half of it. If you think this is crazy, wait until it gets closer to finalization," Elise shrugged somewhat apathetically while sipping on some tea.
"No coffee this morning?" Thom side-eyed her.
"Eh. I don't need it today," she chuckled.

"That's a nice dress by the way," Thom pointed out when they walked into Elise's office. "Thanks," she smiled, taking a seat behind her desk.
"What's the occasion?" her P.A. prodded on.
"Just wanted to look stunning today," Elise chuckled, easing into the day by reading over some minor translations.
"Right. So it has nothing to do with that big birthday cake waiting in the fridge of the break room, huh?" Thom grinned a wide, toothy grin while raising a knowing brow.
"Did you snoop around or did Richard tell you?" Elise read over another translation, trying to hide her amusement.

"He made me get the cake," Thom smirked. "So how many candles is it? Forty? Fifty?" he wisecracked.
"Keep it up!" Elise dared with a perked brow.
"Come on. I have to make sure I bought enough candles," Thom joked. "I mean there's twelve in a box, so four or five boxes should be enough, right?" he pushed on.
"If you were my son," Elise laughed, shaking her head.
"Well, actually I know three packs are enough. So thirty-five or thirty-six?" Thom started towards the office door.
"Thirty-five," Elise called after him.
"Ok so fifty it is," her P.A. laughed before shutting the door.

The morning was going fairly slow for Elise, that is until Richard sent for her. After a few frustrating and unsuccessful Skype sessions, her boss got fed up and called for her to help out with synchronized translation. He was in complete panic mode when she finally made it to his office, cursing under his breath while scrambling through a pile of papers.

"What are you looking for?" Elise remained calm.
"The amendments. They're in Japanese. You'd think they'd be easy to find," Richard barked. He was clearly on edge.
"You mean these?" Elise went straight for a stack of papers on top of one of the chairs, flipping through the pages.
"Let me see," Richard tore the pages from her hand. Only the addresses in the upper corners were in English. "I think... Yes, yes these are the ones," he sighed. "I'm sorry. Everything is kind of... Kind of...shitty." He crashed on his chair behind his desk, looking exhausted and quite disheveled, his tie undone, his suit jacket wrinkled.

"No need to say sorry. Let me read over them real quick, and then I'll help you with the next video call." Elise took the amendments from Richard's hand, taking a seat opposite his desk.
"Hmmmm, where's Amanda? I thought she was helping you with this project," she wondered, her brows furrowing sternly.

"She's sick. We have some freelancer helping us for now. Why? What's wrong?" Richard asked anxiously.
"Just a few minor grammar mistakes, nothing major. But you know me. I'm a perfectionist. I can fix it if you want me to. It'll take maybe thirty minutes," Elise offered.

"I can't let you continue to help us if you're not getting an incentive out of this," Richard scowled. Elise pulled her forehead into deep creases. "I don't mind. I don't care about the money, you know that," she frowned.

"Just the recognition, then," her boss smirked.

"Hmmm," Elise got up, ready to head back to her office.

"Thank you," Richard called after her. Elise just waved her hand not looking back, already whispering the corrections under her breath. When she returned, she had Thom and Helen in tow, insisting they needed to sit in. "Learning opportunity," Elise explained, and Richard - with little to no resistance - agreed.

Elise fixed her boss's tie, smoothing out his suit jacket after, her calmness rubbing off on him. When the next video call commenced Richard was cool and collected, and with Elise's help, both parties quickly came to much needed, push-the-project-forward agreements.

"Man, those people were intense," Thom pointed out.

"I think we've dealt with worse," Helen smirked.

"I think we all deserve some cake," Richard smiled, his voice tired.

"Yes, we do," Elise nudge his shoulder with her fist.

"Alright! Time to set up the candles," Thom cheered. "What was it again? Fifty?" he grinned, quickly taking off towards the break-room when Elise shot him a warning glare.

"That boy!" Richard laughed. "So, how are things at home?" he diverted with his brow raised and a knowing smile. Richard wasn't oblivious to the effect Oscar had on Elise. She'd become softer around the edges, more forgiving towards certain behavior, and every so often, he'd catch her with a dreamy stare into nothingness.

"Pretty good," she scrunched her nose, her eyes wrinkling at the corners.

"Oh come on, just good?" Richard egged on.

"They're great. Really great," her eyes wrinkled even more.

"I can tell," Richard side nudged Elise. "Let's go, before they dig into the cake without us!" he laughed.

The birthday party at the office was kept short but sweet. Elise's colleagues sang her Happy Birthday, and after serving cake and drinks, she opened the gifts collectively bought by the different teams. Some were office related items, others were prank-gifts hinting at her slow crawl towards the big four-O.

"Alright, alright. I get it. Five more years and I'll be joining all of your guys' club." She swung her hand in a broad gesture, laughing, pointing out that at least half the crew had already reached that dreaded number. "You guys have nothing better to do, huh?" She raised her brow with pretended offense when she opened the last gift: this one an aged photograph of her official company portrait.

"You age pretty well," Thom wisecracked.

"You are on your last straw, young man," Elise warned jokingly.

"Yes, mother!" Thom jested back. The whole room filled with laughter.

A few thank yous and a quick clean up later, Elise was back in her office where a bouquet of sunflowers was waiting for her on her desk.

"Those came by courier earlier," Thom explained, helping Elise carry her presents. "From your boyfriend," he added.

Elise went over to read the attached card. All the message said was "Happy Birthday"; a bit out of
character for Oscar, who usually included his name and strings of hearts and smiley faces. She didn't think much of it. Maybe he was short on time. She snapped a picture, attaching a "thank you" in a message to Oscar. Three minutes later her cell chimed, a turquoise highlighted message flashing across her screen.

"I can't take credit, mi Reina. I didn't send you those. Had interviews all morning." Oscar replied, following up with a questioning emoticon.

"Oh? But my P.A. said they're from my boyfriend," she messaged back, feeling somewhat alarmed.
"I see. I see. So you've got a lover on the side," Oscar responded, raised brow and broken heart emojis attached.

Elise hit the dial button next to his name. A few rings in, Oscar picked up.
"I don't have anyone on the side," she said with some annoyance.
"I was kidding, mi Linda," Oscar's voice crackled through the speaker. "Maybe they're from James. You know how he likes to play small pranks now and then," he hypothesized.
"Maybe," Elise read the card again. The message was just "Happy Birthday". Even if it had been a joke, James would've at least included his trademark string of toothy smiley faces.

"What's wrong?" Oscar asked after the crackling silence on his side of the phone call lasted a little too long for his liking.
"I don't know. Maybe it was someone from the office," Elise kept tinkering with the card, flipping and turning it as though that would magically reveal the truth if she did it long enough.
"Do you want me to call James, mi Linda?" Oscar asked in a soothing tone.
"No. I'll go ask my P.A. first. Maybe he heard wrong," she assumed.
"Maybe you have a secret admirer," Oscar quipped with a husky chuckle.
"Maybe I do. You should be worried. Very worried," Elise laughed, the uneasiness she had felt after his initial reply slowly fading.

Maybe she was blowing all of this out of proportion. Maybe the flowers were from someone in the office, maybe even Thom. He seemed to like jollying around. Or maybe the flowers were from a client. The thought that some malicious intention was behind this gesture was quickly buried the longer Elise talked to Oscar.

"So how was the party?" Oscar queried.
"It was nice. Small of course, because we do have work that needs to get done. I can't wait to show you the presents I got," Elise snickered while looking at the aged portrait of herself.
"Did you have cake?" he asked with a teasing timbre.
"Yes. I'm pretty sure I gained two pounds today. I'm going to be so fat by the time this weekend is over," she replied withjesteds misery.

Oscar let out a booming laugh. It was so loud, Elise had to hold her cell at a distance. "Why is that funny?" she huffed in irritation.
"Because your sister said something similar yesterday, while she kept eating, mind I say," he continued laughing, barely able to speak when he recalled the day.
"Oh well, she has an excuse. I don't," Elise replied, her tone feisty.
"Awe, Sweetie. You don't have to have an excuse. I'd love you just the same," he chuckled, calming down.

"Really? So if I gained like thirty or so pounds during pregnancy, you'd still love me just the same? Oh kay!" she mocked condescendingly.
"Yes. You'd be round and cute and would probably need help getting up from the couch," his laugh picked up again.
"And what if I wasn't pregnant, just getting potato-ish," Elise questioned.
"I'd still help you off the couch," Oscar laughed.
"Oh, shut up," Elise joined his laughter.

"I do need to exercise though. I haven't since you got here," she sighed.
"But... We've been... fornicating," Oscar snickered. Elise could almost see him wiggling his brows in frisky mischievousness.
"Hmmm, true. My thighs are still hurting from Tuesday night," she agreed, trying her best to suppress a surging laugh. The way he said fornicating. The way he often spun things into a sexual pun, the innuendos falling smoothly out of his mouth. An involuntary hum crossed Elise's lips while she imagined his eyes. They probably had a devilish spark behind them after his last statement.

"What?" Oscar asked.
"Nothing. You just... You made my day," she sighed happily, her cheeks turning rosy.
"Awe. Thank you, mi Linda," he replied. "The building has a gym, right? We can go run a few miles on the treadmill if you want. Or go for a run outside," he suggested.
"That sounds like a great idea," Elise agreed.
"And after that, we can shower together and you know, roar," Oscar laughed again, his voice breaking up a little. It sounded like he was outside, walking, a breeze blowing in the background.

"You're impossible!" Elise snickered.
"I'm not!" he refuted with a chuckle. "I better let you get back to work, Sweetie. I'm about to head to Pike's Place. You need anything?"
"Your lips on my neck?" Elise quipped.
"Hmmm, ok. I'll get you a massage while I'm at it," he witted back.
"That sounds very nice actually," she sighed.
"K, a massage it is. I'll see you later, Sweetie," he waited.
"Ok. See you later. I love you," Elise exhaled softly.
"Te amo," Oscar replied softly before hanging up the phone.

She looked at the sunflowers again, the question of who sent them to her lost in the back of her mind as she kept snickering about Oscar's innuendos.
Chapter 10

An earsplitting crack echoed through the room. Elise shot upright, trying to catch her breath, but the air felt heavy. Too heavy breathe in. Sweat pooled between the edges of her fingertips when she ran her hand across her face. She looked around, still panting, unable to make anything out. The place had never been this dark; completely devoid of any light.

Granted, it was the middle of the night. But even so, there was usually some source of light illuminating her bedroom; a soft glow, sort of speak, that highlighted the sharp edges of her furniture while throwing faded shadows on the walls. She looked around again, squinting hard, trying to force her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Still. Nothing.

She ran her right hand across the mattress, searching for that familiar warmth she'd grown accustomed to, but the spot next to her was empty and cold. "Oscar?" No reply. Absolute silence. Maybe he'd gone off to watch TV when she had fallen asleep. Or maybe he was getting some water. After all, the place felt insanely hot and humid. Quite unusual for this time of year. Quite unusual for a city like Seattle.

Still hazy from getting ripped out of sleep so suddenly, she looked around again. She searched for her cell on the nightstand, pressing the home button when she found it. The screen lit up so brightly, it hurt her eyes. She vaguely made out the numbers, the display showing her a fuzzy Friday, 10:41 p.m. She couldn't remember when she had fallen asleep. All she recalled was the evening ending with a soothing, lavender bath, followed by a tranquil, whole body massage with Oscar sneaking in soft kisses down her spine now and then.

They had talked and laughed about the birthday party at her office - *Oscar teasing her about the computer aged portrait* - when the conversation slowly trailed to weekend plans and birthday wishes, and then... Nothing. She couldn't even remember if she had been dreaming. All she knew for certain right now was that the humidity was getting to her. "Oscar?" she called again after setting her cell back on the nightstand. Still, no reply.

Elise slowly dragged her legs off the bed, her feet hitting the wooden floor with a dull thud. Wrapped in the top sheet, she stood by the bedroom window, fumbling with the blinds to peek through. Her gaze searched for the streets below. Pitch black nothingness. Not even the streetlights were on. A fleeting glance up to the sky was just as devoid of light, the stars hidden from view by a veil of dark clouds. If it hadn't been for laws of gravity, Elise was sure she wouldn't have been able to tell which way was up and which way was down.

She continued to search for any hint of light, peering towards the waterfront, or what she assumed was the waterfront. Usually, she would have been able to see the edges of the boardwalk; or the ripples in the water caused by low sweeping trades. But there was nothing. Just darkness.

She listened carefully as she stared into nothingness. For a city as big as Seattle, it seemed odd that there wasn't a single sound echoing through the streets; not even whispered hints of rain or wind, or the sirens of the FD or PD in the distance. Absolute darkness. And absolute silence. There was an eeriness she couldn't quite place. It made her whole body feel on edge.

Elise looked across the city again. Nothing. How was that even possible? She should've been able to see some light from neighboring buildings. If the power was out, the reddish-orange glow of emergency lights would've kicked in by now to help navigate the city if one needed to.
So maybe this was an all-out blackout? Elise had only ever been through one, and even then there'd been signs of civilization: people talking, sirens wailing, crackling of two-way radios even. But there was nothing. She turned her head, focusing her hearing; muting her own breathing as much as possible, drawing in shallow, almost silent breaths. Why was it so damn quiet?

She closed her eyes for a second.

Just one second.

Only a moment.

"Liz." A feathery touch on her spine had her jump and turn around. She reached forward. Nothing. "Oscar?" she whispered. No reply. Someone had just said her name. She was sure.

"Liz." There it was again. She croaked out a "Stop it!", hitching her breath after. "Liz." Something brushed against the back of her legs. She jumped and spun around again, slowly stepping backward. Her heart was pounding a million beats per minute. "Oscar?! This isn't funny!" she warned with a tremble. How cruel of him. She expected his signature snicker. Nothing. Absolute silence again.

She frantically searched for her cell on the nightstand behind her, terrified when she couldn't find it. Where did it go? She was sure she had put it there. Right there. Back in the same spot. She searched again. The nightstand had disappeared. She reached to her right. Her bed: gone!

"Liz." The voice was in front of her. She flung one arm forward, hoping to hit something or someone. Nothing. Silence and darkness and emptiness. If someone was there, she would've at least seen the white of the eyes. But there was nothing. She should've hit the wall on her left. But that, too, was gone.

"Liz." Something brushed against her arm. The touch cold this time. Almost like ice. "Forget the cell, make a run for it!" was going through her mind. But she couldn't. She was stuck in place, unable to lift her legs no matter how hard she tried. She swung her arm again, the other hand clutching to the top sheet. There was nothing there. Just emptiness. An emptiness that seemed to have expanded infinitely into all directions.

"Liz." Something grazed her neck. The touch so cold, it stung this time. She could feel her mouth move, calling for Oscar in a panic but no sound came out. "Liz." She felt her name breathed into her ear. She squeezed her eyes shut. Whatever it was, whoever it was, was right next to her. Right there. Less than an inch away. Enveloping her in coldness, gripping her face by her jaw, forcing her to move her head to the left. "Liz." She kept her eyes closed, feeling something wrap around her throat from the right. Her whole body was paralyzed with fear. "Look at me!" the voice agitated. "LOOK. AT. ME!" she yelled. She refused.

"Look at me, or I will break you," the voice breathed into her ear, the coldness as prominent in the tone as it was in the touch. She kept her eyes shut. This wasn't real. It was not real. Whatever it was, was not real. "LOOK. AT. ME!" the voice yelled again, the thing holding her in place squeezing tighter around her neck. She refused again, gasping for air; the air around her so cold now that what little she was able to draw in froze her lungs. "Fine! Just remember...." an icy tongue behind the voice licked her ear. "...you're mine," the voice hissed.

Elise shot upright with a stifled scream, clutching her neck, drawing in panicked breaths.
Incoherent words fell from her lips. She drew in wheezy breaths, still feeling around her neck. She could've sworn she felt it snap. Right there at the third cervical vertebrae. She looked around, panting heavily, trembling, hazy sight, her heart pounding so hard it ached.

Somehow she was back in her bed, back under her blanket. It was a dream. Just a dream. A nightmare. She squeezed her eyes shut again, a few, hot tears running down her cheek. "It was just a dream," she cried quietly to herself. "Just a dream." She opened her eyes. Why the hell was it still so dark? She reached to her right, the spot next to her still empty. She could feel the panic rise again. Was she awake or not?

Just then, heavy footsteps rushed towards her bedroom. She searched for her cell, gripping it tightly when she found it, but ready to throw it at anything coming through that door. "Shit... Fuck...Ow...," a familiar voice cussed. It was Oscar's, that light-gravely yet caramel timbre a soothing relief to her ears. He slowly opened the door, his cell in flashlight mode.

"Hey. You ok, Sweetie?" he asked as he rushed with a slight limp to her side. Elise stared at Oscar, somewhat confused. "Mi Linda? You alright?" he asked again, taking a seat opposite her while gently running his hand down her face; cold sweat collecting at the edges of his fingers. Elise reached for his hand, pressing it in place against her cheek, the warmth emanating from his skin calming her down. She'd never been more relieved that he was here.

"Sweetie? What is it?" he urged softly when he saw silent tears rolling down her cheeks. She looked completely out of it, that slight tremble in her hand not escaping him either. "Just a nightmare," Elise sobbed lightly. "You wanna talk about it?" Oscar queried softly. She shook her head no. "You sure?" he worried. She nodded into the palm of his hand. Her eyes closed, she held on for a while as she calmed herself down with slow, deep breaths.

"Why is it so warm in here?" Elise mumbled when she finally let go. "The power is out. So central air is off as well. I was actually looking for some flashlights," Oscar got up. Elise followed suit. She wrapped the top sheet around herself - one hand clutching the sheet, the other her cell - then looked out the window. The power was indeed out, but unlike in her dream, lights here and there proved that there was, in fact, a city outside. She let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Sweetie, you sure you're ok?" Oscar walked up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed a soft kiss against her shoulder, mentally outlining her face from the side while he rested his hands on her hips and his head on her shoulder. Her focus was on the sky, her eyes searching for whatever. "Elise?" he asked again. It was the first time he had to use her actual name to get her attention.

"I'm ok. I promise," she assured with a lopsided smile towards him. It wasn't very convincing but Oscar decided not to push on. By now he knew when it was best to back off.

Elise looked back out the window. The darkness wasn't as eerie as in her dream with a few lights here and there and sounds in the distance. Sirens. Most likely the fire department. She could never quite tell the difference. She was just glad Oscar was around to comfort her. She tried to let go of the dream, not wanting to overanalyze the meaning, especially her calling out for Oscar. She had never called for him in her dreams. It had always been Joe. Always. She angled a fleeting look to her side. Oscar was still there. Right next to her. His head on her shoulder. His attention on the city outside.

An electrifying but almost inaudible hum rose. And then --- several short flashes struck down, all
instantly followed by roaring thunder that left the ground shaking. It left both a bit startled. The first thunderstorm of the season was here, rolling into Seattle with an entrance so grand it would've put even the most elaborate fireworks to shame.

Storms weren't unusual in the PNW [Pacific North West], but Elise had never witnessed one like this. It was a dry thunderstorm, one that seemed to have the most terrifying lightning bolts she'd ever seen; the bolts branching and twisting downward in erratic patterns, almost like they were searching for some target to hit.

Elise glanced at her cell. A message blinked across the screen. A warning from the National Weather Association: flash floods and severe weather with high winds ahead. She looked outside again. Other than lightning dancing across the skies and through thick clouds, there was no indication of what the message warned about. The air was still, not a drop of rain in sight. It didn't even smell of imminent rain.

She pulled the sheet a little tighter around herself, watching the free light show the storm offered, some bolts touching ground across the water. It was captivating, to say the least. The way nature could be so beautiful yet devastating at the same time. Hypnotizing for sure.

A tiny creak broke that hypnosis. She spun around to find that Oscar had let go of her and was looking through her closet, his cell still in flashlight mode as he pushed clothes from left to right and back. She only now became aware that he was wearing nothing but a pair of gray boxers.

"Ok, I give up. Where are you hiding them?" He scratched the back of his head as he turned towards Elise. She was lost in a dreamy stare, her gaze slowly traveling from his feet up to his waist, then his chest. "Elise? Hello?" He waved his hand in front of her. This was the second time he had to use her name to get her attention.

"What?" She furrowed her brows.


"Come here." Oscar pulled her close, pressing a soft kiss on her lips, his nose squishing hers. "You sure, you're ok?" he asked once more while cradling her face. Elise responded with a more convincing smile this time around. "Ok. But let me know if you want to talk." Oscar pressed a kiss on her left brow. She agreed, nodding into the kiss. He noticed she was still sweating profusely.

"Let me get you some water," he turned on his heel, starting towards the kitchen.

"Wait!" Elise commanded. "I'll go with you. Just let me get some clothes on," she requested; the thought of not wanting to be alone right now in the back of her mind. Oscar obliged. Standing by the bedroom door, he flipped his cell over to illuminate the bedroom so Elise could get dressed; a sly grin on his face when she let go of the top sheet so she could pull on her clothes.

He watched on as she dropped to the floor, pulling out a large box from underneath her bed and procuring two flashlights, a bag of tealight candles, and a lighter from within.

"Oh! So that's where you hide your emergency gear," he chuckled. He should've known to look in places he'd never think to look.

"Here! Turn off your cell to save your battery." She handed Oscar one of the flashlights, then took lead to the kitchen. "I saw that by the way." She pointed her light at his face while pacing down the hallway.

"Saw what?" Oscar tried to look innocent, but really, he couldn't hide that mischievous little smirk still lingering behind his eyes. That tiny grin from when she'd gotten dressed. Elise just shook her
head, chuckling. Boy, was she glad he was around, even if his thoughts had skipped to the naughty kind.

"How long has the power been out?" she asked while getting some bottled water from the pantry. "An hour or so. I was listening to the news when it went out. They said that it might get pretty stormy. And to stay inside. You know, the usual disaster warnings," he explained while setting up the candles on the dining room table. He flicked the lighter a few times, the wicks of the candles barely holding a flame at first as they had never been used before. It took a few minutes for the glow to strengthen. Once it did, the romantic tinge it provided was undeniable.

"Oh? Why didn't you wake me?" Elise raised a surprised brow, observing Oscar as he distributed the candles throughout the kitchen, dining-, and living room. A quick scan around the rooms, he nodded in self-approval of a job well done. That mischievous smirk still dancing behind his eyes when he caught her stare. Not that Elise minded. Her thoughts were slowly getting there as well, now that her mind had calmed, and especially with the way the candlelight outlined his body, the grooves and creases that defined his muscles looking deeper and sharper in the low light.

"Because you were tired," Oscar finally replied. He paced her way, pulling her close to himself by her hips. "And you looked cute, snoring and all," he teased her nose with his.
"I don't snore!" Elise gaped, her mouth forming a shocked O while she pushed Oscar back by his chest, offended by this statement. "Yeah, you do. It's not a loud snore. It's more like a little purr. It's even cuter in the mornings. You know. When you start drooling on the pillow." He cocked his head to the side, pulling her back close to himself, trying hard to oppress a laugh. Unsuccessfully! "I don't drool!" Elise defended, her mouth even more ajar. How dare him!

"It's ok, Sweetie. Everyone does. Well most of us do. I think it's cute," he grinned, the flames of the candles ever more enhancing that mischievous smirk in his eyes. Elise tried to push Oscar away again, but he wouldn't have any of it. He held on tight, pressing a laughing kiss on Elise's left cheek, then on her nose, and lastly on her lips. She couldn't resist his soft lips for long, giving in after some minor protesting about his smart-assery.

She always loved the way he kissed her; especially when he started cradling her face like he did now. The warmth of his hands always putting her at ease while he detailed her features with soft kisses. Like he was on some adventurous trip before reaching the final destination. The final destination being her mint-balm softened lips. Something he couldn't get enough of once he started exploring the delicate curvatures of her mouth with tiny kisses; each small kiss barely skimming the edges of her lips; his breath often lingering on her mouth for a fraction of felt eternity before finally drawing her lips into his.

And she let him. Especially whenever he offered a little more of his tongue each time he pulled her back in after a short release to catch some air. Almost always leaving behind a taste of cinnamon and mint. The taste sometimes infused with hints of coffee or maple syrup. Usually in the mornings. Usually after breakfast.

"Oh... God. What are you doing to me?" Elise whispered while she tried to refocus; the last kiss leaving her quite weak in the knees.
"Kissing you," Oscar chuckled, pressing another gentle kiss against her lips before taking a step back. Elise just stood there, dreamy-eyed and mouth agape, staring at Oscar's naked chest. His breathing was steady; the gentle rise and fall of his chest putting her into an even deeper trance.
"You ok, mi Linda?" he teased with a light chuckle, running his hands up and down her arms. He noticed that she still felt quite warm, but blamed the humidity for that state. Elise had mentioned a few times over that she didn't do well in humid conditions, which always left him somewhat surprised. When he asked how she survived in India, she'd nonchalantly replied with "drinking an ocean's worth of water, and fifty million popsicles", making him smirk at her exaggeration.

"Sweetie?" Oscar repeated when she still hadn't answered.

"Huh? ... Uhm, yeah. Yes! I'm good," she gulped, still trying to refocus.

The sound of rain starting against the windows pushed Elise out of that enthralled state of mind. She looked up and found Oscar smiling at her. One of those knowing smiles. The kind that revealed his awareness that he had gotten to her with a very simple yet intimate gesture: a kiss so gentle and endearing that it made her want to forget the existence of space and time, longing to live in that moment forever. She shook her head to break the gaze.

"I wonder how long the power is going to be out," she diverted, trying to hide the fact that she was still very much distracted just thinking about that last kiss.

"Not sure. Could be a while or not long at all." Oscar walked to the balcony door, looking across the buildings. "Should we open a window?" he asked after glimpsing Elise wipe away some sweat from her cleavage.

"I don't know. I guess. But you should probably step away from the windows once you do," she suggested while getting another bottle of water.

Oscar agreed, tilting the living room and dining room windows before taking a seat by the dining room table. There was immediate relief. Not only had it started to rain, but the air, which seemed completely still just moments before, was finally moving as the storm picked up speed; strong winds now howling between the buildings outside, making the rain crash hard against the city's surfaces, and creating an eerie white noise in the process. One that Elise preferred over dead silence.

Every so often, lightning flashed across the skies, highlighting the perimeters of the skyscrapers nearby, thunder always rumbling shortly after. For a moment it seemed like the center of the storm had finally passed through, but another massive lightning bolt and simultaneous boom changed that observation, the loud noise inadvertently making Oscar flinch.

"You ok?" Elise asked carefully when she caught his reaction.

"Yeah. Just not too fond of storms." He looked around, a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. You want to go sit on the sofa instead?" Elise proposed. She glanced over Oscar, recalling a Skype session they had had while she'd been in India. He had told her all about how he and his family had been trapped in their house during a hurricane when he was younger. Nature's fury not only leveling the neighboring houses but the school he was supposed to attend as well. There may or may not have been a hint of satisfaction when he told her that little fact.

"Sounds like a great idea," Oscar wiggled his brows sheepishly.

"Yeah?" Elise perked her brow, knowing full well what he was thinking about that very moment.

"Mmmmm hmmm," Oscar got back up, shuffling towards her, and placing his hands on her hips. He chewed on his lower lip while glancing down her body. For a moment Elise was lost in that foggy minded state again. How did he keep doing that? With a single glance of all things.

Flickering candlelight, the sound of fast rain rushing against the windows, and wind whipping through the city was hypnotizing enough, but Oscar adding that lingering gaze - like he was not only undressing her with his eyes but also imagining all the spots he wanted to kiss on her - left Elise once again mouth agape and barely breathing.
So when Oscar ever so lightly ran his hands up her sides, she couldn't help but shiver out an audible moan, making him laugh. He knew! He knew his effect and didn't even try to hide it. "Oh, you! Meanie!" Elise playfully pushed his hands away, shaking her head. "I can't help myself. I love teasing you," Oscar grinned while leaning in. "And I really love where teasing you leads to," he whispered into her ear, leaving a languid, wet kiss in the left curve of her neck. Right above her left collarbone. Right on the spot he knew would unravel her if he remained there.

But he didn't. Instead, he stepped back, smiling a devilish little smile before taking off towards the living room, another candle in his hand to set on the cherry-wood chest. "But you know,..." he continued with a more serious tone. "... we don't always have to end up like that. You know that right?" he queried while pulling the quilt off the top of the sofa, stopping mid-way to see if Elise had heard him. She stood there, staring at him, back in a kiss induced trance. That wet little kiss he had left behind still clinging to her skin.

"Sweetie?" He walked over to her. "You know you can always say no, and I won't be upset, right?" He gently lifted her face by her chin so he could look into her eyes. "I know," she whispered. "I know!" she repeated louder when she saw some doubt in his eyes. "Ok. Good," Oscar smiled, the naughty smirk behind his eyes gone and replaced with genuine warmth.

"Go sit down. I'll be right back," he demanded softly, kissing her nose before strolling to the kitchen. Elise did as told, curling up into the right corner of the sofa, waiting. She heard Oscar searching through some drawers and cabinets, hissing out a few cuss words after he dropped -what sounded like- some silverware. A dull thud indicated that he had pulled something from the fridge or the freezer. The muffled "perfecto" that followed made Elise snicker into the palm of her hand.

"I heard that!" Oscar called from the kitchen. "What are you doing?" Elise called back, still snickering when Oscar huffed out a "dammit".

"Hold on. Almost--- finished," he paused between words. There was tearing of plastic and metallic rustling. Then a sharp pressured sound. And then silence. Elise craned her neck lightly when she spotted a moving shadow on the wall, spying Oscar from the corner of her eye walking towards her. In his hands a large bowl and two long spoons.

"I figured we might as well eat this," he quipped, placing the bowl on the cherry-wood chest. It was filled to the brim with double-chocolate-chip ice cream; a mountain of whipped cream atop, ready to tumble any second.

"I didn't even know, I had ice cream," Elise grinned widely when Oscar sat down next to her. She turned around to face him, crisscrossing her legs before she pulled the quilt over their legs. Oscar reached for the bowl and placed it between them, steadying the bowl with his left hand. "Do you actually ever check your fridge? Or your freezer?" he mocked. "I got it on Thursday," he almost sounded offended. "I do. Just not as often," Elise shrugged. Oscar shook his head in disbelief. "Don't judge, ok!? I've got a busy life," she defended with a squint. His reaction: a scrunched nose.

"Are those... Are those Oreos in there?" Elise carefully poked the whipped cream laden bowl. "Maybe!" Oscar grinned with pride. "And... And peanut butter cups?" she poked some more. Again with great care. The whipped cream was already losing shape, some of it drooping dangerously close to the edges of the bowl. "You don't have to eat it you know!" Oscar pouted.
"The hell I won't. I call dibs on the peanut butter cups," Elise laughed, stealing the first peanut butter cup in sight. Oscar beamed victoriously. He always loved how his companion didn't hold back when it came to food.

They sat quietly for some time, stuffing their faces with ice cream and cookies and peanut butter cups, trading mischievous smiles every so often, like they were doing something naughty and were waiting for their parents to barge in on them, scolding them. The advantages of being adults, of course, being that no one could stop them.

The only interruption to this ice cream bliss was the storm itself. It howled angry through the city; lightning and thunder making the ground shake a few times over. Oscar gazed at Elise whenever lightning brightened the room. She didn't flinch once. Considering how jumpy she got whenever he snuck up on her, he found that fact a little surprising.

"You like storms, huh?" he asked, still chewing on an Oreo but putting the now almost empty bowl back on top of the cherry-wood chest; releasing a husky groan when he returned to his previous position. He held his stomach, letting out tiny grumbled huffs.

"I think they're beautiful," Elise replied when another flash zipped through the sky; snickering when she saw that Oscar had started rubbing his own tummy. Unlike Elise - who had stopped eating a while back-, Oscar had been determined to finish the entire bowl of ice cream, ignoring her warnings that he might get sick if he ate too much of the sweet treat.

"Maybe I ate a little too much," he admitted with a low grumble, realizing his mistake. He was clearly in agony. His expression: a plea for help, or at least some pity from her.

"You think?" Elise replied, serious and wide-eyed first, then losing herself in a fit of laughter; those pleading puppy-dog eyes of his having the opposite effect than intended. She wanted to feel sorry for him but at the same time, the sight in front of her was too much. Especially when Oscar tried to get comfortable by angling his body against the armrest on his side of the sofa.

"You want me to rub your belly?" Elise jested, still laughing and falling backward against her side's armrest.

"This is serious! You should've stopped me! Now look at me. I'm a bowling ball," Oscar expanded his stomach as much as possible, jiggling it and releasing little distraught grumbles in between.

"Awe. You poor, poor baby," Elise egged on, lightly poking his tummy. "You remind me of Winnie the Pooh after he had too much honey," she laughed, still poking his tummy.

"StooooOOOOp!" Oscar whined, but even he couldn't help but laugh. "My trainer is going to be so pissed. I let myself go. Look at this. A month of torturous training gone!" he added under a wheezing laugh, releasing more huffs of air when he tried to catch his breath.

This sure was a sight Elise didn't ever want to forget. She grabbed her flashlight and dashed to the bedroom, nearly hitting the wall on her way back.

"Smile," she snorted, quickly taking a picture of Oscar with her cell. He just skewed his lips into an overdramatic pout. No matter. His rebellious expression made for a better memory.

"Are you done?" he huffed, sticking out his tongue. Elise couldn't help herself. She kept taking picture after picture of his distraught state, losing herself in more laughter whenever she reviewed them.

Only when Oscar threw a pillow her way, did she stop to rejoin him on the sofa. But not before she got him a bucket. Just in case. After all, he had eaten over a pint of ice cream, and god knows how many Oreo's. Not to mention the peanut butter cups he kept sneaking when he thought Elise wasn't
paying attention. A feat, she was sure, he'd always be proud of, despite the agonizing tummy ache it caused.

Careful not to put too much weight on his stomach, she curled into the right side of Oscar's sprawled out body, pulling the quilt over them at the same time, occasionally snickering onto his chest when he let out another grumbly groan.

They stayed like that for a while, enjoying each other's company. Both dancing their fingers over each other's skin, letting out gentle sighs as they listened to the storm; lightning and thunder slowly disappearing into the distance. Eventually, only the sound of rain tapping against windows remained.

"I love you," Oscar whispered out of the blue, teasing a tiny kiss into Elise's hair. She tilted her head up to look into his eyes, returning his words with a soft smile. She pulled her body over Oscar's, carefully straddling him at his waist while weaving her fingers through his hair. Her face took on a deep in thought but warm expression, little smiles occasionally traveling across her lips as she continued to run her fingers through his hair.

"What?" Oscar offered a gentle smile of his own.
"Nothing." Elise granted a dreamy half-smile.
"Liar," Oscar chuckled, leaning up, pressing a kiss against the edge of her jaw. "Tell me," he whispered, returning to lie at an angle against the armrest while gently running his hands up and down Elise's sides.
"I just like looking at your face," she blushed.
"My face?" Oscar lifted a brow. "Pft. You'll grow tired of it," he joked.
"Never." She leaned down and kissed his nose, then sat back up.

There was an unspoken request for silence on her part when she started detailing his face with her index. Light, feathery exploration like she had done so many times before. She paid close attention to how his brows felt under her fingertip. And the way they arched. She made sure to trace every line at the corners of his eyes; most of them caused through laughter, she was sure.

She tickled his nose, detailed the deep creases in his cheeks, outlined his jawline, reserving his lips for last. She always loved leaving his lips for last. Just thinking about how they felt on her, how they sometimes clung onto her skin before distance broke the bond, made her smile. She swung her index over his mouth in feathery motions until it came to rest at the center. Oscar chanced a playful nibble at her index causing Elise to respond with a muted snicker.

Every small detail was important to her. Every tiny freckle, every crease. Even that tiny scar on his left cheek. They had been important since the day she'd met him. But now it seemed more pressing. She couldn't place that feeling. It was something and yet nothing. Love for sure. She knew that much. But there was something else.

"Sweetie?" Oscar had tracked her every movement and her every expression, wondering what she was thinking about. "Talk to me," he requested softly.
"I---, I---," Elise heaved her chest, her hands falling onto Oscar's chest.
"You?" he nudged on, caressing her back.
"I can't believe how lucky I am...," she paused. "...to have you," she smiled, blushing even more while nibbling on her lip.
"I think, it's the other way around," Oscar countered, running his fingertips down her arms now.

He stopped, took hold, and pulled Elise close to his chest, pressing soft kisses across her face when
she was near. Just then, a low hum surged through the city. Elise could feel Oscar tensing up as though he was bracing himself for another lightning strike. Instead, the hum reached its peak and just like that, power was back, taking both by surprise.

Oscar had clearly tried to flip a few switches earlier, as evident by some of the lights being on and some being off.

"Yay. Electricity," he sighed, sounding disappointed. He pulled himself out from underneath Elise, collecting bowl and spoons from the cherry-wood chest. "You wanna go back to bed?"
"No. I want to stay right here. You don't mind, do you?" she asked.
"Not at all," he smiled, quickly taking the dish and spoons to the kitchen, and returning with a couple of glasses and a small bottle of champagne a minute later; turning off most of the lights in the process.

"Did you plan this?" Elise snickered.
"The power outage?" he teased.
Elise rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean," she wrinkled her nose.
"Maybe," Oscar winked. "Actually, I wanted to surprise you with this after the party, but since it's past midnight...," he popped the bottle, quickly aiming for the glasses, "... might as well huh?"

Oscar sat back down next to Elise, handing her a glass, causing her to do the thing he loved the most: her, blushing and smiling into the palm of her hand.
"Happy birthday, Sweetie," he whispered, raising his glass, waiting for Elise to gently clink hers against his.
"Thank you," she smiled, tilting her glass towards his, the chime that followed almost inaudible.
"Now you're old, like me," Oscar wisecracked.
"Gee. Thanks," Elise laughed, leaning into his side.
"You wanna watch a movie?" Oscar whispered into her hair.

Oscar got up, shifting candles around so he could open one side of the cherry-wood chest. "Wrong side," he mumbled when he found nothing but a yoga mat and few light weights. He shifted the candles again, opening the other side. He searched through the movies, hiding his choice when he put the DVD into the player.

It wasn't until he sat down that he turned on the rest of the system, a triumphant smile on his face when he saw Elise's eyes widen in surprise.
"Good choice," she scrunched her nose again, 'Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country' flickering in bold letters across the screen. Her favorite movie.

Oscar angled his body back against the armrest of the sofa, this time a large pillow behind his back. He shimmied his shoulders for Elise to curl up with him. So she did, squishing herself between his right side and the back of the sofa while pulling the quilt over them at the same time. She wished she had bigger living room seating that very moment. At the same time, the sofa offered a closeness that sometimes got lost in the bed.

Elise lazily draped her arm over Oscar's chest, watching the movie over his edges, closing her eyes now and then to take in his scent and sound. Forest after the rain. Steady heartbeat. Grazing breath. She didn't last ten minutes before falling asleep.
Her eyes fluttered open, the chorus of *Little Lion Man* echoing through the room. Hadn't she just fallen asleep? Her mind felt a bit foggy.
"Let it go to voicemail," Oscar mumbled still half asleep. He wrapped his arms tightly around Elise, trapping her in place.
"Let me at least turn off the sound," she breathed.

Oscar loosened his grip, and Elise reached over to the cherry-wood chest, aimlessly patting the top in search for her cell. When she found it, she set it to silent, sneaking a quick peak to see who had woken her up so early on a Saturday.

Sure, it was her birthday, so it was most likely someone who wanted to wish her well, but she didn't recognize the number. She dropped her cell back onto the square box and returned to her previous position: face buried in Oscar's right side, her right arm lazily swung across his chest. He felt warm and comfortable, his steady breathing a soothing thing to wake up to.

Lazy weekend mornings was something they both enjoyed, the warmth of their bodies relaxing them into absolute bliss.

Oscar, eyes still closed, started caressing Elise's arm. He drew in the occasional deep breath, humming out satisfied sighs in a half-dreamy state. "Can we stay like this? Forever, I mean," he mumbled.
"I wish. But I know you'd get bored," Elise smiled. Her eyes still closed as well, she subconsciously circled some spot on his chest with her right index.
"Of you? Never!" Oscar inhaled and exhaled sharply. He opened his eyes to look down on Elise. Her hair was a tousled morning mess. With a snicker, he carefully started separating the strawberry-blond tresses between his fingers.

"I heard that," Elise pinched his chest. She rolled on top of him, folding her arms over his chest, inhaling his scent before lifting her head and resting her chin on her folded arms. The focus of her grays tracked to his caramel browns. "So, where's my present?" she perked a brow, a mischievous smile on her lips.
"You want it now?" Oscar wiggled his brows. "I haven't had time to wrap it up yet," his glance moved down to between their bodies.

Elise pulled herself up, straddling Oscar at his waist, gently guiding his face with her fingertips to look at her. She slowly pulled off her tank top, dropping it without care where it landed. Their gaze didn't break, except for that fraction of a second when the fabric of her top hindered the view. Oscar's lips parted, drawing in long but shallow breaths. "You sure you want your present now?" he repeated softly.

"Maybe a preview?" she bit her lip, sliding her hands up and down his chest.
"Hmmm. A preview, huh?" Oscar lightly slid his tongue across his lips. "I think --- that can be arranged," he smirked, quickly grabbing Elise by her hips to lift her up just enough so he could change positions, dropping the quilt to the floor in the process as he flipped her to her back. He was now on top, his weight on his hands and knees, and Elise trapped below, squeezed between his limbs.

"You're something else, you know that?" he asked while caressing her face.
"I do now," she smiled, chuckling when Oscar closed the already small gap between their bodies to tease kisses down her neck. He quickly pulled off her shorts and panties, losing his own underwear right after. He picked up the quilt and pulled it over their bodies, creating a cozy enclosure that for time being made the outside world disappear.
And just like that, he gave her what she'd asked for. A preview. A tenuous, body-pressed-against-body, taking-each-other's-scents-and-sounds-in kind of lovemaking session that lasted just long enough for both to reach that tension snapping moment of release; the soft kisses that followed extending their bliss.

"You sure we can't stay like this?" Oscar mumbled into Elise's neck, leaving behind another trail of wet kisses. "I wish," she exhaled softly, playing with his hair. Just then, several chimes interrupted them. "I think that's yours," Elise mumbled. Oscar groaned into her neck, resisting every urge to reach for his cell and toss it against some random wall. "Come on. I have to use the bathroom anyways," she tried to push Oscar off but he made himself like lead, squishing Elise underneath himself. "Oscaaaaaarrrrr," she huffed, feeling him smirk against her skin. A pinch made him shoot upright.

"Alright, alright!" he grumbled, quickly checking his cell while Elise grabbed her clothes before making a dash for the bathroom. When she returned, Oscar was in the kitchen prepping breakfast. He'd put on a pair of sweats and a plain, white t, and was singing and dancing along to "She's Got Skillz", completely oblivious that Elise was watching him. The way he moved his hips, Elise thought it a shame that he had so much clothing on when the whole week he'd been making breakfast in nothing but his underwear.

"Oh. Hey there, sexy," he grinned, wiggling his brows when he finally noticed her. Elise - arms crossed and eyes wide and trying her best not to laugh - resisted his advances to dance with him. "Come on, mi Linda. ... Dance with me," he encouraged as he turned around, grinding his backside towards a still resisting Elise. "You can spank me if you want," he jested. That was it. That cockiness right there had Elise lose her composure and fall into heartfelt laughter.

"Come on...She's got the potion in the motion to cure my illz. She's got skillz," he shimmied his shoulders side to side, turning back around, coaxing Elise to hang her arms around his neck while gently wedging his right leg between her legs, his hands finding their way to her waist. "There you go. I knew you wanted to dance," he beamed in triumph when Elise relaxed into his movements. "Whoaaaaa ha ha, dirty dancing moves right there, babe," he laughed when Elise proved to be just as good at moving her hips as he did his. "You haven't seen the half of it," she snickered. Oscar raised a brow and his lip curled upward. "I have to remember that," he whispered into her neck before dipping her back.

When the song ended, Oscar shooed Elise out of the kitchen, proclaiming he had to prep her first actual present. "What do you mean by first?" Elise queried. No response. Oscar was shuffling around the kitchen. He probably hadn't heard what she'd said over the noise of the radio and him cooking, so she decided to scroll through her texts.

Sure enough, her sister, her brother-in-law, and her best friends had all sent Happy Birthday messages, all with strings of party emoticons attached. It took her a while to reply, messages going back and forth as people were curious about her plans. She responded with "a relaxed day down at the boardwalk", knowing full well that her sister had planned a party. She didn't let it slip that Oscar had told her. A party, after having been gone for so long, was a sweet gesture for sure, hopes being that the guest list had been kept short.

A few voicemails popped up in the notifications as well, the first one from Leon. "Bonjour. That's how you pronounce it, right? I guess you're out. Or... Oh shit. Oh man, crap. I'm
sorry. I forgot about the time difference. Shit. I hope I didn't wake you. Anyways, a little birdy told me that it's your birthday. So Happy Birthday. Let me know when you get back to Montreal so I can take you out to lunch, and take you dress-shopping. Tell Oscar hi from me. Oh, and pictures of the cake. I somehow need proof that you're really turning thirty-five. It's just not fair to look as great as you." The candid tinge in Leon's voice made her snicker. She sent a text back, thanking Leon, promising she'd call later. He replied with thumbs up and a smiley face.

The second voicemail was from Olivia [Munn]. Bright and cheery, she wished Elise well and offered a plan to get back at Oscar and "the boys", as she called them, for the night at the bar. It included the possibility of a hangover-style evening that should end with them in banana suits dancing to some eighties songs. Elise replied with thumbs up and "We need to discuss this when I come back to visit."

"Oh, when are you coming back?" Olivia texted back.

"Not sure, yet. Maybe the end of July. Trying to work around our schedules," Elise responded. "Alright. In that case, we need to get together so we can plot *devil emoticon*" Olivia suggested. Elise agreed.

The last voicemail was from a number Elise didn't recognize. It was less than three seconds long. She listened to the message but it was only white noise. She glanced towards the kitchen. Oscar was still busy. Judging by the sizzling noises and strong smell of bacon, he was going all out for breakfast. She pondered over calling the number back or just deleting it. It was probably a wrong number. It happens. But then again. Maybe it was... The dream. Now the phone call. And the sunflowers. She had completely forgotten about the sunflowers. Dammit! Why? Out of all the days, why did her ex have to pop into her mind today? She pondered, her index going back forth between call back and delete.

"Birthday messages?" Oscar finally emerged from the kitchen, big smile on his face and ready to set the table.

"Yup," Elise smiled. She hit delete. It was most likely a wrong number. And even if it wasn't, this was her day and she didn't want anything or anyone ruining it, especially with Oscar being a sweet little Ewok. A description that had stuck since she'd met Olivia. Oscar wasn't too fond whenever she teased him with it via text. If she was to call him a Star Wars nickname, he thought Ferocious Wookie more fitting, to which Elise usually responded with a roll of the eye and a "sure sure".

"You ok? You look a little pale," Oscar set down some napkins and glasses filled with orange juice.


"Awe. We can go back to bed if you want," Oscar suggested. "Just snuggling," he threw up his hands when he was met with a fierce glare.

"No. I rather get ready," Elise declined. "So, what's this first present thing?" she diverted, distracting him from asking more questions and herself from lingering thoughts.

"Oh. Yeah. First, you have to tell me if you want a mean bowl or a nice one," Oscar scrunched his nose.

"Uhhmm... What?" Elise chuckled.

"Mean or nice? Quick!" Oscar disappeared back to the kitchen.

"Uhhhhhh mean?" Elise was unsure what he was getting at.

"Alright, close your eyes," Oscar called out. Elise did as told. A tiny clank against the table a few seconds later hinted that Oscar had placed something in front of her. "Ok, open your eyes," he snickered.

"What? Oh... Ahahahahahahaha." There in front of her was a gray bowl; big triangular eyes, sharp
teeth, and claws painted on it. The bowl looked like a hungry little monster. Like a hungry and
mean little monster that is.
"Glad you like it," Oscar pressed a chuckled kiss on her left side temple. "I have the nice one," he
smirked. He indeed had the nice bowl; his monster looking timid and cute with a turquoise body,
round eyes, pouty smile, and soft paws. This was their thing. Their little inside joke.

"This is great," Elise played with her bowl, tracing over the eyes, mouth, and claws, before finally
digging into her cereal. "Uhmmm... Did you...," she spit the first bite back into the bowl, her face
twisting like she was about to hurl. "... You didn't happen to check if the milk was still good?" she
asked, gulping down some orange juice. That wasn't the best thing either. Somehow the juice had a
sour tinge to it as well.

"What? Why?" Oscar sniffed at his own cereal bowl. "Oh.. Crap... I forgot," he frowned. The
power outage - combined with the humid heat - had lasted long enough for the milk to turn. "I don't
think we should eat any of the food," he suggested. Elise agreed with an agonized nod, trying to
wash the taste away with some water.

"Well, this just sucks. All that work for nothing. Quite the way to start your birthday, huh?" he
grumbled as he tossed the food into the trash.
"Lindo. It's ok. I, for one, liked how we started my birthday." Elise surprised Oscar with a hug
from behind, kissing his shoulder. "We should take a shower and head to the market."

Oscar turned in her embrace. "Sounds like a great idea," he agreed with wiggling brows and
fleeting looks down her body.
"You and your dirty mind," Elise teasingly pushed him away.
"I can't help it," he smirked. That was met with a disapproving squint. "Ok, maybe I can. I just....," he
paused. "...I love making love to you," he turned red at the ears and cheeks. It was the deepest
hue of red Elise had ever seen on him. She couldn't recall him ever getting embarrassed talking
about sex.

"Really? What do you like most?" She loosely swung her arms around his neck, a confident smile
on her as she waited for an answer.
"Everything," he bit his lower lip.
"Everything?" Elise prodded on.
"Yes. Everything. The way you moan," he stepped closer to Elise. "The way you roll your hips," he
caressed over her ass to her waist. "The way you feel," he pulled her close to himself. "Everything,"
he whispered into her ear, leaving a tender kiss behind her lobe.
"Oh...," Elise gulped. She felt like she was about to pass out. He'd done it again. Gotten to her.
"My heart," she gasped. They both fell into laughter at that remark.

The shower took a while, as always slowed by kissing games and wandering hands. If it hadn't been
for grumbling tummies, they probably would have ended up rolling between the sheets. But now
they were standing in front of the apartment complex, ready to head down 1st Avenue, towards
Pike's. The sun was out. A light breeze the only reminder of last night's storm.

Elise's outfit matched the sunny and breezy disposition of the day. She'd chosen a yellow, no-
sleeve top, and a gray-black, taffeta skirt, rounding off her outfit with bold jewelry and a yellow
hat. "My hipster outfit," as she called it. Oscar thought it adorable, telling her that she'd fit in quite
nicely in Brooklyn. Elise countered with a simple but true "you should talk", reminding Oscar that
if it wasn't for his stylist, he'd dress hipster twenty-four seven, maybe even to red carpet events.
Not that she minded. She quite liked the look. She just didn't want to admit it. It was like an
Right now, she just took in his look of the day. He was dressed in a blue-gray, checkered button down, dark denim jeans, and a pair of old, scuffed up boots. She knew he had the money to buy some new ones, nicer ones even. But she also knew that Oscar was the type of person that would wear the same three sets of clothing in rotation until something fell apart before he'd buy something new, and this included his boots.

"Where to, my fair lady," Oscar jested after they had walked for a while.
"Whoever is still serving breakfast," Elise groaned after peeking at her watch. It was almost 10:30 a.m., brunch time really.

She wasn't kidding though, targeting the first eatery on their way to the market, ordering two egg sandwiches and a bowl of fruit before asking Oscar what he wanted to have. He stared in disbelief when she bit into the first sandwich like she hadn't eaten in days.

"Where do you keep putting all that food," he joked.
"My ass, hips, and thighs," she shrugged nonchalantly. "Just like you."
"What?" Oscar gaped.
"I don't mind it," Elise scrunched her nose. "In fact, I love it," she grinned.

"You don't know the half of it," she threw back.
"Really? Like what?" Oscar's interest was piqued.
"Flashlights and candles aren't the only things under that bed," Elise raised her brow. Score for her.
Oscar's eyes widened. "That's where they're hidden," he whispered under his breath. He'd been wondering what Elise had done with her shiny, red friend and whatever other toys she owned. A widening grin hinted that his gears were turning.

"So, what else did you get me?" Elise diverted. She was quite aware where his mind had drifted off to.
"It's a surprise." Oscar sipped on some coffee.
"I hope it's nothing too big." Elise ate the last bite of her second sandwich.
"Not right now it's not, but it does grow to a decent size," he winked.
Elise choked on her bite. It took a few pats on her back before she caught her breath.
"You ok, Sweetie?" Oscar chuckled while handing her some water.

"You know exactly what I meant," Elise wheezed.
"You started it," Oscar side hugged her. "But seriously, it's a surprise." Elise just hummed - a tinge of disapproval in there. "I promise, it's nothing outrageous and within a fair range," Oscar assured.
"What's a fair range?" Elise lifted a questioning brow.
Oscar heaved his chest. He knew exactly what she was worried about. "I made sure your friends won't feel bad if you open the presents in front of everyone." He kissed the side of her brow.

Elise let out a relieved sigh. That's what she wanted to hear. She shouldn't have doubted Oscar in this. He was fully aware that not everyone in her circle was as well of as him, or her for that matter. And events like birthdays were always the kind of thing where these differences became apparent. So a while back, she had set a firm expenditure limit for all her friends when it came to getting her presents. Oscar, of course, didn't know about the limit, so she hoped whatever else he'd gotten her wasn't way over.
"You wanna go check out the shops?" he asked when they finished the rest of their food.
"So you can get me more stuff?" Elise curled her lip into a half-frown.
"Mi Linda, it's your birthday. Let me spoil you. Just a little," he stated, some annoyance in his
voice.
"You don't have to buy me stuff. You know that right? Like, I get the whole spoil someone thing.
But really. It's not a requirement," Elise clarified calmly when she felt some tension building as
they started back towards the market.

"I know." Oscar slid his hand into hers. "I know." He pulled her hand towards his face, press an
soft kiss against the back. "Just for today, please?" He gave her blinking, puppy dog eyes over
the edge of her hand. Elise rolled her eyes but gave in with an agreeing nod. This wasn't worth arguing
over. "And maybe Christmas," Oscar added with a quick wink. Before Elise had a chance to
protest, he pulled her close and pressed a parted kiss against her lips. One of those kisses. Like the
one from last night. Just without the foreplay of feature exploration.

Once Oscar's lips left hers, Elise immediately scanned the area for anyone looking their way, only
relaxing when she realized that no one was watching them. Oscar, on the other hand, stood as
confident as ever, his eyes fixed on her. Elise bit her lips, blushing. His attention was only on her.
"Stop worrying about them," he whispered when he pulled her in for another kiss. There it was
again. That urging feeling she couldn't quite place.

"Let's go check out the shops," she gulped, feeling dizzy after that last kiss.
"Yes, let's," Oscar nodded in agreement, his hand firmly wrapped around hers.

They spent the early afternoon exploring vinyl shops and bookstores, along with some vintage
stores; some of which sold clothes, others furniture. One store held Elise's interest. Hidden in the
back corner of the store stood a large, antique chair. Red velvet with a heavy wooden frame that
was gold plated; some of the gold cracking due to lack of care. It was the type of chair she'd seen in
old castles and museums in Europe. Luxurious, pompous almost.

She explored the store but kept returning to the chair; lightly running her hand down the fabric of it
whenever she passed it. Oscar stood by some shelf, checking out some antique music boxes while
simultaneously observing Elise. Her interest in the chair was quite obvious. She finally got the
courage to look at the price tag, her face twisting to a disappointed frown when she saw the
number.

"Let's go," she mumbled.
"You don't want the chair, Sweetie?" Oscar queried.
"It's too big for the apartment," she fibbed. Well not entirely. The chair would have definitely taken
up a good section of her living room.
"You sure?" Oscar caught the disappointment in her timbre.
"Yeah," Elise sighed. "Let's go back. I want to change. What time are we supposed to be there
again?" she diverted.
"Five-ish, six-ish. I'm supposed to call before we head over, so they can all take their places,"
Oscar chuckled. Elise snickered.

By the time they got home, it was three in the afternoon. While Elise changed, Oscar quickly, and
quietly went through his suitcase in the hallway closet. It was his hiding spot for her other presents
since he was sure she would've seen them had he put them anywhere else. He pulled out a blue-
silver wrapped box and tiptoed to the living room, setting the present on one of the shelves. He
kicked off his boots and decided to watch some T.V. while waiting for Elise.
"You know, you can play video games if you want," Elise suggested when she saw him flipping through the channels, the back of his head pointing towards her as he laid sprawled out over the sofa, relaxing.

"It's ok. I don't want to mess up your scores. Besides, it's almost time to... Ohhhh," Oscar gaped when she came into his line of sight. Elise had chosen to wear the lacy, sunflower number he liked so much. The one she'd worn on their weekend getaway while she had visited him in Montreal. Except now her tan looked more evened out like she'd been hitting the beach a few times over the week they'd been separated.

Oscar sat up straight, pulling Elise close to himself. "I really like this dress." He looked up into her eyes, his hands caressing down the back of her legs.

"I know you do," she smiled.

Oscar kept running his hands up and down her legs. He loved how soft her skin felt beneath his touch. He pulled her closer, yet, kissing her on her stomach through the fabric of her dress, his hands wandering up underneath the dress. Elise stopped him before he could reach his intended target.

"Awe. Not even a feel?" he frowned.

"Nope. Not even a feel," she smirked.

"Awe... Alright." He pulled himself to a stand, biting his lower lip as he ran his fingertips down her arms. "You did say to surprise you, though," he countered with a smirk after some thinking.

"Hmmmm. I did. But did you actually wrap it up?" Elise grinned as she tugged on his pants.

"Dammit. Got me there," Oscar laughed a kiss against her left temple.

Elise glanced at her watch. Almost five. "Should we go?" she wondered.

"Let me call," Oscar got his cell from his pocket and walked towards the dining room.

Elise watched him for a moment. The way he talked on the phone. The way he gave her knowing winks and smiles. How his eyes sparkled when he laughed. Another wink, he mouthed a mute "I love you" her way while replying with "uh huh's" and "ok's" to the person on the other side of the call.

Elise shook her head, smiling. She turned off the system and fixed her quilt, adjusting the cherry-wood chest while collecting the empty tealight tins from last night. She was about to turn towards the dining room when she spotted the blue-silver wrapped present on her shelf. She went over to get a closer look.

"Go ahead, open it," Oscar encouraged softly behind her. He had hoped that she would find the present before they had to leave. He held out his hands for the tealight tins. Elise was almost hesitant in handing them over. Oscar went and tossed the tins while she waited on the sofa for him to return.

When he did, she carefully pulled off the tape holding the wrapper in place, leaving the paper in almost pristine condition. A gray, cardboard box came to light when she peeled the paper away. She shook the box very carefully. There was more than one thing in there. She looked at Oscar who in turn kept smiling at her with anticipation. If this was anything like the cereal bowls, the gifts, she was sure, were well thought out. She took a deep breath in, finally opening the gray box.

"Oscar," Elise gasped, looking into the box. "This... This is..." she gulped, trying her best to hold back the tears collecting at the corners of her eyes. "Where did you find this?" she asked as she gently took the present out of the box, careful not to bend or scratch it up.

"Does it matter?" he asked softly, finally taking a seat next to her.
"I don't... I don't even know....," she sighed, in her hand a first-edition paperback of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. A true first edition that included the ten to one sequencing and the double printing mistake on page fifty-three. She was well aware of the worth of this book. Monetary worth that is. It didn't matter because somehow she also knew that Oscar knew how much sentimental value this book had.

"I used to have a copy just like it," she whispered with a sniffle, inspecting the book over and over again. She read the title page again. And the copyright page. And page fifty-three. "I know," Oscar side-eyed her. "You bought it on a trip to London. On a hunch that it might be the next bestselling novel. At least that's what your sister said," he spoke softly. "I did," Elise chuckled lightly in disbelief, wiping away a tear. "Thank you," she smiled, leaning into him. "And what's this?" she asked when she saw a small, velvet box at the bottom. "Something to go with it," Oscar smiled. "Open it," he wrinkled his nose. Elise let out a soft laugh. The box held a golden snitch necklace and matching earrings.

"For my little nerd," Oscar snickered a kiss into her hair. "I love you," he whispered. "Let's go. I'm sure your sister is waiting," Oscar got to his feet and held out his hand. "This is it though, right? No more big surprises," Elise geared a questioning look up to Oscar. He heaved his chest. "I make no promises," he smiled. "Oscar!" Elise tried to look upset, but she couldn't help smiling. He got her. He understood what she was about. He liked pushing his limits for sure, but he knew when to stop and when to prod on. Her birthday was his excuse to stretch the boundaries a little, considering the fact that he was at least somewhat aware that she didn't like getting expensive gifts, at least not if it was done out of charity. But this was different.

And there it was again. That feeling. That feeling that had crept up on her since Montreal, his words "how I knew for sure" ringing in the back of her mind. She couldn't place the meaning. Or maybe she didn't want to. Not yet. But thing is, she knew for sure as well. In fact, she could almost pinpoint the exact moment she knew, and it was way before Oscar had chosen his. But up until now, she'd denied it. This was still new, after all.

"Sweetie?" Oscar was still holding out his hand. Elise took a deep breath in and stretched out her hand. And Oscar took it, pulling Elise towards himself. "Cielo," she whispered. "What?" Oscar asked, confused. "You asked me what my favorite word is. A while back. It's cielo," she spoke more clearly. "It is? That's perfect," Oscar smiled. "You know my favorite word?" he asked, his hands on her hips now. She shook her head no. She couldn't even venture a guess. "It used to be frijol," he snickered. Elise laughed too. "But now," he leaned in. "It's Liebe," he kissed her lobe.
Chapter 11

"What time is it?"
"Five past five."
"He said they'd be here by now!"
"Shhhh!"
"Be quiet!"
"You're standing on my foot."
"You guys! Shut up! I can hear them."

"SURPRISE!"

The cheery faces of some forty people beaming her way took Elise by complete surprise. Well --- complete pretended surprise really. After all, she'd known about the party for a few days now, practicing her "oh wow, for me?" face in secret since she'd found out. The traitor of the scheme? None other than her companion.

It didn't take much to get him to spill the beans. A charming smile and questioning eyes, a couple of flutters of the lashes, et voilà. In reality, she'd probably have figured it out on her own, considering that people had kept asking her about her plans for Saturday all day yesterday and today.

Now she stood there, big smile on face, covered in confetti and paper streamers; turquoise and yellow balloons littering the living room floor of her sister's apartment, her family and best friends darting towards her to give her endless hugs and kisses and well wishes.

From the looks of it, Christine had decided to invite everyone Elise had known since they'd moved to Seattle: her boss, a few of her colleagues, her new and old P.A.s, her best friends, and a few acquaintances she was vaguely familiar with. Including Margaret; a tall, blond, modelesque woman who always looked like she'd just returned from some tropical vacation.

There was an immediate tug in Elise's stomach. Margaret was a fan-girl for Oscar. It had been apparent since the promotion party. Not that fawning over him was unusual. In fact, Elise had somewhat gotten used to the muffled giggles whenever someone would recognize him on the street. He had that effect. He'd probably have it even if he wasn't working in show business.

But Margaret was different. She didn't hold back. She was the handsy, laugh out loud at everything, ask invasive - and often inappropriate- questions type of fan-girl. The type that wasn't afraid to make her intentions clear from the get-go. And Oscar wasn't the first she'd slithered up to just so she could say she knew so and so, or even dated so and so. Why did her sister have to invite her? They'd never really been friends. More like associates of convenience. They'd lived in the same apartment complex before Frank, watching each other's place when one was out of town. Watering plants. Feeding the fish. Picking up the mail type of thing.

Elise let out a small sigh. She reached to her right, searching for Oscar's hand, and when she couldn't find it, looked around. He'd taken off and was chatting up a storm with David and Mikki, their resonant laughter a sign of growing friendship. It made Elise chuckle. There was a hint of
mischief in the air, the way they kept sneaking glances over to her. Oscar was definitely in on it. She pondered if another bet was on the drawing table. Why else would they return to whispering whenever they caught her stare? She let it slide for now and just revelled in the fact that her best friend and Oscar were getting along so well. Anything other would've been a problem. She was certain she'd never pick a guy over her best friend again, or over family for that matter.

Focus shifted when her in-laws made their way towards her. Chloé in his left arm, Edgar immediately gave Elise a warm hug with his right. He'd always been an affectionate person. Quite contrary to what Elise always assumed about military men. She was grateful because that warm demeanor reflected in his parenting, and now his grand-parenting. Chloé was at ease in her grandfather's arm, playing with his tie, cooing and giggling. And he returned her little baby babbles with affectionate smiles and words of encouragement. That baby would know nothing but love and kindness. Especially with people like her grandfather.

Sandra was a bit cooler in her embrace. But it was an embrace nonetheless. Elise couldn't remember the last time her mother-in-law had hugged her. No matter. This was a new beginning for both of them; the glacier-sized coldness slowly melting away the more they talked. There were still moments of shutting each other out of course. Moments of anger. Moments of grief. And they let it out when they needed to. It was a slow process; but overall, they had been able to keep it civil since that Thursday family dinner in April. The one right before Elise's trip to Sikkim.

During the trip, communication through emails opened a new door, and before long, said emails became text messages, and text messages turned into phone calls, then Skype sessions. And now they both stood face to face, and for the first time in ten years, they held a proper conversation. One that wasn't about Joe or Frank or Elise's career, but genuine how are yous and well wishes, interests in hobbies, even exchanges of travel tips. Future visits to Edgar's and Sandra's place in Corvallis came up as well.

The conversation was interrupted when Chloé started whining. Sandra quickly swooped the baby from Edgar's arms, and Chloé once again seemed pacified for she had different things she could tug on; namely, Sandra's earrings. Elise had never quite witnessed her mother-in-law as the doting grandmother, or nana as she preferred to be called, but seeing Sandra play with Chloé, it took Elise back to when she was younger. To when Sandra was the loving and caring parent who'd invited the girls and their parents over any chance she could get just so she could cook for them and spoil them with American candies and chocolates. Especially around Halloween. And especially on Christmas.

"You'll be my daughters one day," Elise recounted Sandra jesting at one of the many family dinners they had had. Maybe it had been a joke, or maybe it had been a prediction to a certain outcome. Either way, Sandra was correct in an "I told you so way" that made Elise chuckle to this day, despite the heartache it caused. She shook her head and took a deep breath in, glancing over her mother-in-law again. The way she was holding Chloé. How she kept booping the baby's nose with hers. How she sang little nursery rhymes to her.

Sandra looked happy, smiling ear to ear, but even so, that smile couldn't quite hide a mother's heartbreak. The type that had settled into deep creases around her eyes and mouth. The type that had her irises duller and her hair whiter. Elise never quite registered the strength it must've taken to procure a smile after having lost a child. How difficult it must have been to go on and not succumb to lasting grief. She walked over to her mother-in-law, hugging her and Chloé in a tight embrace, an unspoken "I love you" on her face. And Sandra just nodded in understanding. Another step forward in their still-fragile relationship.
"Smile!" The flash went off before either woman had a chance to collect themselves. "We should get Christine in here, too," James beamed. He was clearly happy that Elise and his mother were on talking terms again. He called for his wife and Christine was all too happy to squeeze into the frame, taking Chloé into her arms for the picture. Three generations of women. Perfect portrait. Definitely an "awe" moment.

I want a copy of that!" Sandra requested firmly.

"Of course, mom." James kissed his mother on the left side temple. "And one for you, too." He pressed a kiss onto Elise's right cheek before moving on and taking more pictures of the other guests.

Elise looked around to see if she'd forgotten to say hello to anyone, noting the absence of her friend Patricia and her kids. She was wondering why, despite all the people, it was rather quiet. Patricia's kids usually added an energetic want-to-know-everything vibe to events. Who could blame them? At seven and nine, the world was still exciting.

"She'll be here a little later. I think she had to work," Christine assured. Elise just hummed in response. She looked around some more, finally taking in all the decorations in the two-way split living room.

In the music section stood a rustic looking bar; the bartender standing behind it whipping up some fancy cocktails for Mikki, David, and Oscar while they laughed about whatever shenanigans they were plotting. A warm smile and subtle nod from Oscar was enough to let her know he was thinking about her.

Next to the bar was the D.J. station, the D.J. just setting up as she'd arrived late. A short, young woman with brightly dyed hair and full sleeve tattoos. Quite the opposite of the crowd she was going to play music for. Elise saw James handing her a piece of paper. Some song requests for sure. The young woman just nodded going down the list. Looked like she had everything James asked for.

Furniture in the T.V. and lounge section had been shifted around to make space for two long tables, one of which held food, the other a mountain of presents. The corners of both sections were filled with massive sunflower and Gerber daisy bouquets ranging from bright yellow to deep orange. Tablecloths, napkins, and window decorations were all in hues of yellow and turquoise with white lacy accents throughout, a true reflection of Elise's keenness to bright colors.

Xavier, James' go-to caterer, was setting up the finishing touches on the buffet. Mostly German food and desserts that made Elise's mouth water. She could hardly wait to try some of the food. For now, the couple of chocolate-dipped strawberries she'd stolen a few minutes earlier would have to make do. Xavier gave her a knowing smirk and she scrunched her nose in response. "Feliz cumpleaños," he smiled, and Elise replied with a kind "gracias".

"So? What do you think?" Oscar whispered from behind, hugging Elise, pressing a soft kiss on her neck in the process. She'd been so focused on taking everything in, she hadn't noticed him pacing towards her.

"Did you help plan this?" She turned in his embrace, looping her arms around his neck, wanting to look into those big brown eyes of his.

"Maybe." Oscar nuzzled her hair. He loved that she'd left it open. He loved the defiance of her hair to stay styled straight, her tresses often turning wavy by late afternoon just like they did now. And as usual, her hair smelled of strawberry-coconut delight. He wanted to nibble Elise right then and there. But he restrained himself. For now.

"It's lovely." Elise chanced a quick peck on his lips. That took him by surprise. Usually, she was the reluctant one when it came to kissing in front of
others. She seemed to have gotten bolder lately. And he quite loved that.

A few people gave them fleeting smiles and surprised stares. Not like it was a secret that they were dating. Still, Oscar was a celebrity - as much as he hated that term - and that made their relationship somehow more enticing to outsiders. Since the tabloid hurricane had somewhat calmed, some had assumed that they were on the fence or were keeping it under the radar.

Neither of them cared today though, both ignoring any whisper gabbed their way. Instead, they chanced a few more kisses without going overboard, taking note of their closest friends' brow-wiggling smiles geared their way.

Elise always ended each kiss with a tiny snicker. Not so bold after all. Or maybe it was the butterflies in her stomach, knowing that Oscar kissed far better than those little pecks he was giving her now. No matter. She took what she got and was grateful he was here.

The couple was chatting, Oscar sneaking another kiss onto her temple, when - out of the corner of her eye, diagonally behind Oscar - Elise spied someone she hadn't seen in a long time. Three years and eight months and five days to be exact. She let go of Oscar, her hands falling to her sides like lead. All her focus shifted to the person standing at the center between the two living room sections. She hastily peered around just to return her perplexed stare. The whole room seemed to have fallen into a temporal flux. No one moved, no one said a word. A few seconds passed before the truth that her eyes weren't deceiving her settled in.

And when it finally hit her - the fact that the person standing there, smiling at her was indeed really there - she dashed towards the center, the someone catching her in an elegant spin, hugging her tightly before dropping her back to a stand on the floor.

"Oh. Papa. Was machst du denn hier? [Oh daddy, whatever are you doing here?]" Elise asked as she began to cry happy tears, hanging on tightly to her dad.

"Na deinen Geburtstag feiern, was denn sonst? [Celebrating your birthday of course, what else?]" Elise's dad smiled as he kissed the top of her hair. "Hey. Hey. Warum weinst du denn, meine Große? [Hey. Hey. Why are you crying, my Eldest [more lit. tall one]?]" he asked when his daughter continued to cry into the fabric of his suit jacket. She didn't want to let go. This was overwhelming her on so many levels. An avalanche of emotions, mixed with memories from the last four years, had instantly crashed over her the moment he'd caught her.

The last time she'd seen her dad, she'd been with Frank. They had had an argument and it had come down to a choice, and Elise foolishly had picked Frank. He wasn't quite the monster he later on turned out to be. She wished she had listened to her father's heeded warnings. That Frank was nothing but bad news and would end up breaking her heart. She never quite understood how her dad was able to see through the bullshit lies Frank offered when he wasn't alone with her.

But all that didn't matter now. Her dad was here. At her birthday party. And she had so much to tell him, so much to ask, so much catching up to do, and yet, words escaped her in that very moment - or maybe there were too many words racing to be said - and instead, hot tears spilled out. Elise's father could do little to console her. He just stood there, gearing a questioning look towards his other daughter, Christine, who was waiting a few feet away. She wasn't of much help, caught up in her own happy tears when she paced over to hug her dad.

"Na das ist ja eine tolle Party. Meine Töchter weinen und das Bier ist warm, [Well this is a great party. My daughters are crying and the beer is warm,]" Elise's dad huffed sarcastically. That certainly did the trick. Elise let out a heartfelt but sniffled laugh, wiping away her tears on her
"Oh. Jetzt schaust du aus wie ein Waschbärchen," he jested with a husky laugh when he saw that Elise's mascara was all messed up. Elise just playfully pushed her father back. She didn't care how she looked.

"Raimund. It's good to see you," Edgar chimed in, hugging Elise's dad in that typical guy hug. Strong pats on the back and acknowledging huffs. Like bears, if bears hugged that was.
"Mein Gott, you're slowly turning gray," Raimund wisecracked back, his German accent so thick, it was difficult to understand him, even for Elise.
"I see you haven't lost your sense of humor, you old geyser," Edgar raised an amused brow.

They always jested at each other like that, making jokes about turning old, talking in "when I was young" code, their stories often involving the universal dad tale of walking twenty miles in three feet of snow to get to school. Like they didn't have a single spring, summer, or fall in the sixties and seventies. Elise was already rolling her eyes, and she could've sworn she saw her sister AND her mother-in-law do the same. But it was a light-hearted roll of the eye. One that was followed by a cheery chuckle.

"I'll grab a beer from the fridge. You guys catch up!" Edgar ordered rather rigidly, those thirty years of military hinting through. But only for a second. He took off with a tender smile in his eyes, signaling the D.J. to start up the music. So she did, and people started mingling again. Some started grabbing food and drinks, others just lounged and talked. Richard and his wife even danced. So did Matt and Helen.

Elise still stood there. Still flabbergasted that her dad was here. How much she'd missed him. He'd changed a little of course. Things that came with age. A few more wrinkles here and there. His hair a little thinner, a little grayer. His midsection a little fuller. But all in all, he was still the same: tall, quite formal in his movements, confident yet warm.

Oscar, who'd watched quietly from the sidelines, slowly geared towards them; tissue box in hand, quite self-assured in posture.
"Oh... Hey, Oscar," Elise sniffle-smiled, her eyes beaming with joy despite the raccoon style smudges under her eyes. Waterproof mascara would have been a good choice. "This is my dad," she beamed proudly.
"Yeah. I know. Hace tiempo que no te veía. ¿Cómo estás, Raimund?" Oscar stretched out his hand, a confident grin on his face.
Elise's dad went straight for a hug, squeezing Oscar so tightly, he let out an audible grunt. "Estoy bien. ¿y tú?" Raimund smirked after releasing his hold on Oscar.

Elise, perplexed again, looked back and forth between her father and her companion. Firstly, she had no idea that her dad understood Spanish, let alone spoke it. Secondly, Raimund and Oscar knew each other?
Oscar handed her a tissue, chuckling at her confusion, and the racoonish eyes. "We met at the wedding," he explained.

Of course! Why did she keep forgetting about that? Oscar had attended her sister's wedding. He had been James' best man. She felt a tiny tug in her stomach. Guilt.
Oscar leaned in, pressing a tiny kiss close to her ear, but hidden from Raimund's view. "Don't worry about it, Sweetie," he whispered. He knew exactly where her thoughts had wandered off to.
"I'll tell you all about it one day," he added before stepping back.

She was sure he would. She had seen a few pictures of the wedding of course. James had sent her some while she'd been in hiding. A particular picture popped into her head. A snapshot of the
wedding party: groomsmen, the happy couple, bridesmaids. She tried and tried but couldn't remember if she'd seen Oscar's face. She was sure his was there. In the midst of family and friends. Beaming ear to ear.

She made a mental note to ask to see the wedding pictures again at some other time. For now, she let it go. Oscar was right. She really should stop worrying about having missed some events. She was here now. There'd be other events equally as important.

"I'll let you guys catch up," Oscar smiled, ready to turn on his heel.
"No! Stay, please. Dad speaks English. Well... A little broken here and there, but I'm sure he can keep up," Elise implored, smiling up at her dad who in turn just nodded.
"It's ok, Liz. You guys have a lot to talk about. I actually have to go back to the apartment. I forgot your present," Oscar grinned. Elise rolled her eyes. Another one? He truly was out to set a "spoil your sweetheart" record, but she couldn't be mad. She had agreed to letting him spoil her, and truthfully, she needed it. "I'll see you later, Raimund." Oscar patted Elise's dad on the arm before making his exit.

"So. Oscar, hmmmm?" Raimund wasn't oblivious to the little tête-à-tête. Elise's face turned the deepest hue of pink. She wiped away her mascara, giggling a "so in love" giggle. Raimund just heaved his chest, like he was bracing himself for the untold truth he'd already spotted when he had made his entrance. A lifted brow on his part was all it took and Elise spilled like a waterfall; with Christine as a bystander who just occasionally nodded in concession.

There was so much joy in Elise's voice when she talked about Oscar, neither her dad nor her sister dared to interrupt. She edged upon the problem named Frank a few times during their conversation though, always breaking away with a burdened sigh. Raimund just gave Elise an encouraging nod whenever she did so, telling her that it's in the past. He'd always been the "what's done is done" kind of person. It didn't stop him from hinting at broken bones should her ex ever cross his path. Elise just replied with a thin "Oh, Papa.", leaning into his side.

"Helen, Matt, come here. I want you guys to meet my dad," Elise beamed after they had talked a little while longer, the conversation ending on a cheery note when Edgar rejoined them with chilled bottles of beer in his hands. German beer that is. Raimund accepted with a wide grin and "excellent choice!"

Helen and Matt were greeted with formal handshakes by Elise's dad, the formality quickly peeling away when Helen started speaking to him in German - a little broken here and there, strong American accent of course, but proficient enough for a fast pace. Matt didn't speak the language, so he looked a bit like a lost puppy when Helen and Raimund delved into political issues and the social complexities of Europe.

"I think, I've lost her," Matt pouted.
"Don't worry. My dad isn't the girlfriend stealing type," Elise laughed.
"Oh good. Because that would be bad with the wedding plans and all," Matt smirked.
"What?" Elise choked on some wine. Penny in the air! Did she just hear that right? "When did... What? Oh my god..." the Penny dropped and her glance fell to Helen's left hand, and sure enough, there was a ring on her finger. Emerald stone set in black gold.

"We didn't want to tell you until next week. It's your day, but yeah," Matt smiled bashfully.
Elise went in for a hug, whispering congrats into his ear. "... and you better make sure she stays on track. Finishes school! You hear me!" Elise nudged Matt's shoulder, her expression quite stern. He smiled an "I promise" with his hand over his heart. "Good! Because if you don't," Elise clenched
her right hand into a tight fist, squinting her eyes before falling back into laughter.

Her cheery disposition definitely set the tone for the evening. Her smile, her laugh: both quite infectious. How did she ever think she'd be miserable? Sure; people asked where she'd been, what had happened, and how she was handling the whole E-News situation. But to her surprise, she wasn't as uncomfortable discussing these things as she'd thought she'd be. She kept the answers short of course, but honest, and people quickly moved on to other topics.

And now her father was here, and things seemed even less daunting with his relaxed demeanor rubbing off on her. She definitely made sure everyone met him though. The poor guy was dragging his feet by the time she was done introducing him.


"Oh. Ja. Ok. Ok, warte. Ich hol dir 'nen Stuhl, [Oh. Yes. Ok, wait. I'll get you a chair,]" Elise looked around for a free seating accommodation, but there weren't any. At least not the easy to move kind.

"Ich möchte mich eigentlich etwas zurückziehen, [I'd like to actually retreat a little,] " Raimund smiled wearily. "Zu viele Leute, [Too many people,]" he added. Elise let out a deep sigh. "Ich bleib ja. Nur 'ne Pause, [I'm staying. Just a break,]" he assured.

Elise nodded in agreement. She had missed her father quite a bit and really didn't want to leave his side. It was like she was back to being little, to when his protective and warm demeanor were a comfort in scary situations. Not that this was one, but she was certainly daddy's girl, and it showed right now.

"Edgar, let's take a break," Raimund suggested.

"Mind if I join you guys," Richard, Elise's boss, chimed in. He looked as exhausted as the other two. His wife had kept him on his toes, dancing. "Young party hoppers," he smirked towards Elise when she perked her brow in surprise.

"It's only six 'o' clock," she mocked after glancing at her watch. But who could blame them?

Out of all the guests, the three were the oldest. All three still working long hours. They deserved any break they could get. Elise was pretty sure that they also wanted to talk like men their age did, recounting "the good old days" when things cost a nickel and their only way of getting food was hunting for it in the wild. With arrows and bows, or better yet, sticks and stones. An exaggeration, of course.

Knowing them rather well, Elise was sure her dad, her boss, and her father-in-law were going to discuss economic-politic discourse and import laws on alcohol; all while sipping on German beer. The discussion probably turning into a heated argument as soon they would reach the complexities of political systems and their advantages. That image alone made Elise snicker. She couldn't help but think that Oscar would fit in rather nicely into that group, albeit the age difference.

She looked around again, making sure all the guests were entertained before grabbing some food for herself. She shouldn't have worried. People were still mingling, laughing at jokes; drinks and food in hand. Thom, her new P.A., looked a bit out of place. Poor lad was too young to drink alcohol. Too young to anything really. Most people had kids and a steadfast career. His adult life was just starting out.

"I understand if you want to leave," Elise nodded while nibbling on a ham and cheese filled pretzel, one of her favorite party foods from back home.

"Nah, I'm good. Just weird. I usually don't get invited to things like this," Thom peered around, his usually confident posture more of a slouch. Elise was taken aback a little. He seemed a sweet kid.
How could people not invite him? Then again, she also got it. She'd moved around quite a bit when she'd been younger. It was something they had in common. With all the moves came a bit of a disconnect. It was difficult building friendships when imminent relocation loomed over one's head.

"We have video games. PS4, X-Box, ...uhmm... I think James also has an Atari that he can hook up," Elise chuckled.
"Really?" Thom's face lit up. Kid in the candy store type of deal.
"I'll go ask him," Elise searched for her brother-in-law, spotting him across the room, rocking Chloé back and forth in his arms. From the looks of it, Berenjena Pequeñita was getting tired. Elise made a beeline for them.

"Hey, can you set up one of the game systems for Thom. He's feeling a bit left out. Since he can't drink," she requested.
"Sure can," James grinned. He was probably waiting for that cue anyways, avid gamer he was. So they traded. Elise handed James her pretzel, and James handed over Chloé. No hesitation from either. Her niece was quite comfortable in her aunty's arms; yawning, slowly lulling to sleep despite the constant noise around her. Only occasionally did the baby jerk upright. A reaction to sudden loud sounds too close for her liking.

A couple more of those noise-induced tweaks from Chloé and Elise opted to retreat to the apartment's hallway. She sat down on a bench usually cluttered with grab-and-go items, about the only disorganized corner in this place if there ever was one. The retreat was to give Chloé the quiet she needed to completely doze off. There was something quite tranquil about watching a baby fall asleep. Absolute relaxation and absolute unawareness of all the turmoil in the world. How nice it must be to be this unaware.

"Ich hab meine Enkelin ja noch gar nicht kennengelernt, [I haven't even met my granddaughter, yet,]" Raimund's voice whispered from the side. He'd seen Elise stroll past the kitchen door in her search for some silence. He carefully seated himself next to her, looking down on his granddaughter in his daughter's arms. "Sie schaut aus wie ihre Mutter, [She looks like her mother,]" he pointed out.
"Außer der Mund. Schmollt wie der Papa, [Except the mouth. Pouty like her dad's,]" Elise snickered.
Raimund agreed with a muted chuckle, side-eying his daughter. That sparkle in Elise's eye. He knew exactly what it meant. Oscar had put it there, he was certain. There was no denying it.

"Hast du eigentlich den Strauss Sonnenblumen bekommen? Ich hab dir einen zur deiner Arbeit geschickt. [Did you ever receive the bouquet of sunflowers? I sent you one to work.]" Raimund asked softly after some prolonged silence.
Elise's eyes perked up. She'd once again forgotten. Kind of a good thing, really. She gave her dad a relieved smile. He countered with a confused expression. "Du hast deinen Namen vergessen, [You forgot to include your name,]" she explained while gently swaying her niece side to side, the baby cooing in its sleep.
"Oh? Na du weißt ja wie das ist. Ich und das Internet, wir kommen nicht miteinander aus, [Oh? Well, you know how it is. Me and the internet, we don't get along.]" Raimund chuckled. There was no greater relief than to find out that the bouquet of sunflowers had been from him. Elise leaned into her dad's side, planting a chuckled kiss on the fabric of his suit jacket. "Thank you," she whispered.

"There you are," Christine got their attention, James standing right behind her. He gave his wife a kiss before gearing towards the kitchen to talk to his dad. "Here. Let me take her to her room," Christine gently lifted Chloé from Elise's arms and started towards the private rooms of the
apartment. Raimund followed upon request. He'd arrived only a few hours before the party, waiting at his hotel room for his cue to make his way over. So now, Christine, of course, was eager to show him the nursery, and the rest of the apartment as there had been quite a few changes.

Elise went the opposite way, back towards the living room, chuckling at the thought of her dad's reaction to all the purple in his granddaughter's room. She could already predict her father's next move: him sneaking in a different color somehow before his return to Germany. A toy or a blanket maybe. Most likely in green or red. And he'd probably hide it just to confuse Christine for when she'd find whatever he'd sneak in.

"Look whom I found in the elevator," that familiar honey-smooth tone called from behind. Elise spun around and saw Oscar beaming her way, side-hugging Patricia in a tight squeeze. Elise glanced at her watch again. 7 p.m. He'd been gone over an hour. Considering that the apartment was only three streets over, a mere five-minute stroll, she wondered what he'd been up to all this time. Patricia grinning her way quickly made her lose that thread.

"Hey Tricia," Elise almost jogged towards her friend, hugging her in a tight embrace when she reached her. Usually, she would have visited Patricia right away after a prolonged trip. The whole Hollywood press debacle, however, had kept her busy. She felt a bit guilty.

Patricia, of course, shrugged it off with a "don't worry about it" and "I get it" face. She was always gracious like that.

"Hey, aunty Elise," Patricia's kids called out in unison as they hugged Elise. Donnie and Danielle seemed to have grown a bit since she'd seen them last. If they kept it up, they'd tower over her before they even hit their tweens.

"Hey, you guys. I got something for you," Oscar grinned towards the kids.

"Oscar. No! Really. They got plenty of stuff yesterday," Patricia interjected.

Too late. Oscar had already pulled something from one of the bags he was holding.

"You guys like X-Men?" he wiggled his brows. They nodded in excitement. Danielle a little more energetic than Donnie. "Don't ask how, but I got these cool belts. Totally --- official --- X-Men gear," Oscar held out the belts with the X-Men logo towards the kids. They grabbed hold, excitedly running their fingers across the logo. "And pins. Don't tell anyone, but you're now part of the X-Men. We'll train later," he whispered with a wide grin while kneeling.

"Oscar!" Patricia frowned in disapproval.

"What? Come on. I don't get to share this stuff often," Oscar stood up. Patricia just shook her head. It took a few side-hugs and shimmies to coax out a smile. "You guys better say thank you," Patricia waited with a stern brow.

"Thank you, uncle Oscar," her kids replied in unison.

"No problem. Hey, you guys wanna go play some video games?" Oscar asked. Like they were going to say anything other than yes.

"Go ahead. James already set something up for Thom. I think he actually brought out the Atari," Elise laughed.

"No way! Seriously? I didn't even know he had that. And I've stayed here plenty of times. Sneaky ba...," Oscar came to a stop mid-word, Patricia's kids staring at him. "Uhmm. Sneaky bat. Yeah sneaky bat," he caught himself before he had a chance to say some bad word. "I wonder if he has Gauntlet? Or Space Invaders! Oh yesssssss! Spa-ce In-va-ders " he drew out the words, squinting, craning his neck towards the T.V.

"What's an Atari?" Donnie asked. He was too young to know of course.

eyes widened. Now he was like a kid in the candy store.

"Oh boy. I've done it, haven't I? I've turned this evening into a video game battle," Elise squeezed her lips to a thin line, but there was a smirk in her eyes.
"Awe, Sweetie. I'll stay," Oscar teased a smiling kiss onto her temple.
She pretended to be offended, with crossed arms and raised brow. But only for a second. If she hadn't wanted to catch up with people, she'd been the first one to play a game. "No, go. I want to talk to Patricia," Elise snickered.

"You sure?" Oscar hesitated. Elise just nodded towards the T.V. "Alright. Come on kids. Prepare to be amazed. Just so you know, I'm a video game champion," Oscar proclaimed.
"No, you're not. I am!" Danielle countered with sass.
"Oh really? Well then, it's on! I won't hold back now," Oscar laughed as he took Danielle and Donnie by their hands, gearing towards the T.V. system. There it was, that energy the party was still missing.

Elise looked after them as they made their way to towards the enormous leather couch. Thom was already playing a game, so the three took a seat next to him, cheering him on.
"So what's this about yesterday?" Elise hadn't forgotten.
"Oscar didn't tell you?" Patricia glanced over to her kids, wanting to make sure they weren't too loud.
"Tell me what?" Elise waited.

"He took us shopping. Right after lunch. Under the condition that I'd help him find gifts for you," Patricia laughed, and Elise's focus went straight towards Oscar. "We're stocked up for another month. And he got them new bedding and pillows..." Patricia continued, but Elise only heard half the words. She managed an "unbelievable" under her breath, getting all dreamy-eyed. Oscar turned around for a second, catching her gaze. He just nodded and winked, like he knew Patricia had spilled the beans. There was a tug in Elise's stomach. That know for sure feeling, yelling "let me out" in the back of her mind.

"..., I haven't had fresh spices in a long time," Patricia finished.
"What?" Elise snapped out of her trance.
"He took us to Pike's as well. For fresh spices and fresh salmon." Patricia repeated, a bit of an impish grin growing on her face when she saw Elise's eyes. "You really got yourself a good one, honey," she pointed out.
"I did, huh?" Elise smiled, still distracted by that know for sure feeling.
"Yup," Patricia hitched a breath, then shrugged.

"Heya, stranger," Mikki had snuck in from the side, giving Patricia a hug. "Sorry David, this is girl talk. Go sit with the boys," she shooed her boyfriend away with a flick of the hand. Mikki was all sass today. David, like the British gentleman he was, agreed with a smile and a kiss on his girlfriend's hand. "Soooooo..... Bonnaroo," Mikki smiled ear to ear.
"What about it? You're ... You're still going, right?" Elise stammered somewhat anxiously. They had planned that trip since January. Ever since Elise became aware that her favorite band was headlining one of the days.

"Oh yeah. Of course. In fact, I wanted to check up and make sure you guys have your wristbands," Mikki swiftly calmed down.
"I got mine, plus the press pass," Patricia beamed. For her, this trip was a chance. If things went right, one of the leading music magazines might hire her as a regular columnist; a break she'd been chasing after ever since she'd started writing movie reviews for the local paper.
"I got my wristband," Elise smiled.

"Suuuuperrr!" Mikki drew out that word. It always left Elise snickering. "I got mine, plus my photo pass. I'm really sorry I couldn't get you one as well. The whole assistant thing just didn't fly with them," Mikki frowned.

"No worries. I'll still get to hang with you guys. Plus we got VIP," Elise shimmied her shoulders side to side before hanging her arms around her friends' waists.

"Yeah but that's not all access," Mikki specified.

"Really. It's ok! I'm just glad to get to go with you. And we'll be meeting a few other people," Elise's smile didn't waver.

"Yeah. Plus---You know. Maybe we can sneak you in. Inattentive personnel or sweet talk," Patricia wiggled her brows. That was a side that didn't come out often when it came to Patricia. Then again, the three of them together usually meant shenanigans, Mikki and Elise being the main culprits, and that rubbed off on Patricia. They had their stories. Stories best left untold. Definitely not for their significant others to ever find out.

"Let's grab a drink," Mikki bobbed her head side to side. Sort of her signal to get this party started. Really started.

"Yes, let's. I need a margarita," Patricia scrunched her nose.

"Looks like my mother-in-law is ahead of the game," Elise laughed as the three women made their way to the bar. Helen and Sandra were in deep conversation, Sandra marveling at the engagement ring on Helen's finger while sipping on a drink.

"Have you seen this ring?" Sandra jerked Helen's hand up, the poor girl almost losing her balance. The three BFFs let out a synchronized, despaired sigh. Unintentionally. They quickly apologized for their reaction.

"No worries, ladies," Helen smiled. Nothing was going to curb her cheery mood. "So, Mikki. David Gandy, hmmm?" Helen smirked, nudging Mikki. There was a heavy sigh in response. From Mikki!

"What's that for? Are you guys ok?" Elise worried.

"What? Oh... Yes. Yes, we are! Just...." Mikki paused. The other women moved in closer. Like they were ready for some big reveal. Long pause. Super long pause. Mikki sipped on her drink, glance fixed on her boyfriend.

"Oh come on!" Patricia prodded impatiently. "Spill it!"

"He asked me to move to London with him," Mikki hitched a breath.

The rest of the group gawked at Mikki, still waiting. All of them holding their breaths.

"AND?" Elise was the impatient one this time.

Another pause. Another sip on that damn Long Island Iced Tea.

"Good god, woman! Stop it with the suspense!" Patricia squeaked.

"I may have agreed," Mikki nodded. Shocked gasps. "But only part-time," she added.

"What does part-time mean?" Sandra perplexed.

"I'll keep my apartment in L.A. It's a bit of a trial really," Mikki offered a half-smile.

"Hmmm. I get that," Elise conceded, her eyes steering towards Oscar. Sooner or later they might end up in that situation. A gray, metaphorical cloud hung in the air.

"Why is everyone so gloomy?" Judith chimed in. Richard's wife - an average height but curvy woman with soft, white curls and permanent rosy cheeks; dressed in a body-hugging, red number and matching killer heels, a ringer for Marilyn Monroe, really - ordered herself a Vesper.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, a what?" the bartender was puzzled, and Judith perked her brow.

Patricia laughed. She knew exactly what Judith had meant. The young man behind the counter was clearly not a Bond aficionado. Even so, he should've known the name at least. Maybe he was new
"Do you mind if I?" Patricia offered her help.
"I could get in trouble," the young man resisted, but Patricia was already behind the counter, searching through the various hard liquors.
"Do any of us look under twenty-one?" she lifted an annoyed brow when the bartender was reluctant to give up his space.

The young man -surrounded by waiting stares- just gulped. Either answer would've been insulting. The women were all quite aware.
"We won't tell if you won't," Judith quipped, sliding a twenty his way.
He hesitated. Another twenty slithered his way. This time from Sandra.
"Just this one drink," the bartender took the bills and stepped to the side, letting Patricia do her thing, paying close attention to what she was mixing up.

"Mixology one-o-one, darlin'!" Judith stated bluntly as she took a sip from the drink, complimenting Patricia on a job well done. Judith was certainly something else. She exuded confidence and power, quite the opposite of her husband. How Richard had ever convinced her to go out with him remained a mystery to Elise. One of these days, she'd coax the story out them. Still, Elise couldn't help but snicker at her own imagination. She ventured that it was Judith who had done the asking and Richard who had timidly agreed. There was no other explanation in Elise's mind.

"Yes ma'am," the bartender twisted his mouth in embarrassment.
Judith cocked her head, displeased by that term as much as Elise was. He gulped, looking anxious.
"We're just teasin' ya, darlin'," Judith laughed when she saw that the bartender was ready to make a run for it. He shook his head, laughing in relief.

"So, Elise. How's your dad?" Judith shifted her attention.
"He's doing alright. He's retiring next year. We might consider moving him to the States. Just so he's not so alone," Elise explained.
"Ah. Good, good. Rich and him seem to get along well," Judith pointed out, explaining that she saw the men laughing in the kitchen earlier, both joking with Xavier and Edgar about some memory from way-back-when while drinking their beer and eating roasted potatoes.

"And how's everything with your actor boyfriend?" Judith grinned.
"I'd like an answer to that as well. You've been pretty quiet since you got back from Montreal," Patricia took over, grinning just as widely. The women stared again. This time at Elise. All of them waiting.
"Pretty good," she offered, steady-faced.
"Pretty good?" Mikki interjected with wide eyes and wrinkled forehead. She twirled her hand. The universal gesture for "And???????????".

Elise took a deep breath in, her gaze trailing towards Oscar. He'd given her a glance here and there this evening, making sure that she was aware he knew she was around. But he had kept his distance. It was clear to him that Elise needed some space to catch up with friends and family. Him hovering would've most likely been a distraction. A welcome one on her part, a distraction nonetheless in his mind. This was her night. Focus should be on her and not their relationship.

She took a sip from her drink, making the small group of women surrounding her wait. And wait. And wait. She couldn't help it. Her mind had drifted. Not far. Just to this morning. To their little wake-up session on the sofa in her living room. And she couldn't help but smile at the thought of
how he had made her feel.

Especially with those velvety lips of his. How they had clung on to her skin while his hands had slowly found their way to between her legs. How he had whisper-moaned her name when he'd felt how wet she'd been just for him, and how his fingers had slipped in with ease because of that. And how the involuntary gasp that had escaped her lips in that very moment had made him chuckle against her skin.

Elise subconsciously started playing with her new necklace, trying to ignore the lingering stares from her friends while they waited; the images from their session flashing before her eyes one after another. Images so vivid, she could almost taste the cinnamon on her lips; smell the forest-after-the-rain-laced-with-spice scent.

Images like how his body had pressed into hers when he'd finally pushed in, that first feel of him inside her a little overwhelming to her this morning. How he had clamped down on her hip with his left hand while his right had urgently searched for her wrists to pin her arms above her head to prevent her from covering her mouth to suffocate a moan. How his hips had fit perfectly into hers when they'd finally found their rhythm that morning. And god, he knew how to roll those hips. And he knew how to multitask with heated kisses and searching hands while he'd kept rolling into her.

There was a light pant in Elise's breathing now. She'd forgotten that she had a drink in her hand that could've easily alleviated some of the heat crawling up her body. And she'd clearly forgotten about the women still waiting and gawking at her. Her mind was in the gutter, and it was there for all the right reasons, all of which pointed to Oscar.

Her thoughts just didn't want to steer away. Like she needed that mental orgasm. And thinking about the way his back had curved underneath her hands, from his shoulders to the dip right above his ass, didn't make it easier. Or the way his muscles had flexed when he'd started thrusting faster and harder. Or how his moans had progressed to desperation, always going from soft to hollow breaths that ended up scorching her skin.

And it always led to one moment. Where else would it lead? But the thing she truly loved most about this morning, the thing that had her mind tethered to this particular session, was his change in tactic. Not that it has been an extreme change but to her, it mattered. Usually, he would bury his face in her neck when he'd get close. Today, however, he had chosen to give her a kiss. One with so much passion and urgency, she thought she was going to pass out. The fact that he had once again squeezed his arms tightly around her - so tightly, she could hardly breathe - the more likely reason for running out of air. It was as though he'd been afraid she'd float away if he didn't lock her in place; with his arms and with his lips.

Elise let out an audible gasp, completely oblivious of her audience.

"That good, huh?" Mikki's voice slowly reeled her back to the present. There was a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

"Uhhmmmm... Hmmmmm. What were we talking about?" Elise stammered, taking a sip from her drink. Like that would divert her friend's attention somehow.

"Wow. Super WOW!" Mikki shook her head. Like she should talk. David had her mind drifting to all sorts of places, some of which Elise was sure they'd go to hell for whenever they talked about their men. Their men and sex that is.

"You should've seen her face when he came to visit her at the office," Helen quipped. "Well, more like --- after," she added with a mischievous grin.
"Helen!" Elise exclaimed, sheer terror on her face. She was definitely present now. "Office sex?" Patricia gaped. Elise wasn't as open talking about sex with her, primarily because Patricia was a little more conservative in those regards. Or so she assumed.

But it was Sandra's response that had Elise choke on her own breath. Her mother-in-law's eyes were wide and her mouth agape. Surprise? "Oh my god, Sandra. I'm... I... Uhhmm..." Elise stuttered, looking from face to face. She was certain her mother-in-law didn't need that image. But before she could say anything else, Sandra's face settled to a wide grin. "Kind of impressed," she nodded nonchalantly. "Office sex is pretty great!"
"It sure is," Judith agreed while tipping her glass on Sandra's.

There was a moment of horror on Elise's face. Or maybe it was confusion. Or maybe disbelief. Or maybe it was desperation as she attempted to block certain images popping into her head, namely Sandra and Judith doing the office sex thing with their husbands. "I have to agree," Patricia tilted her head.
"You too?" Elise was shocked. Patricia just shrugged. Still waters. Still waters, indeed.
"Here's to great office sex," Judith wisecracked. Roaring laughter and glasses clinking the result. "Barkeep, six more of these," Judith pointed to her glass, testing to see if the bartender truly had paid attention. A satisfied smile meant that he had; another twenty the reward for learning quickly; this time from Mikki.

The group of women chatted away while moving to some ottomans near the bar; some rather steamy subjects thrown in here and there. The bartender's ears turned red at least once. Pour soul had made the mistake to eavesdrop when the topic of choosing the right vibrator came up. His shocked stare was met with another roaring laugh. Of course, this type of behavior soon had the attention of their significant others, all of which were back in the living room now. In the TV and lounge section. All huddled around the gaming system to either cheer team Oscar or team Danielle.

Elise spied Oscar whispering something towards Edgar and Matt when he paused the game. Edgar then said something to David and Richard. Shortly after, David meandered towards the bar in long, modelesque strides, like he was on the catwalk in Paris or Milan. The other guests definitely took notice of the tall, blue-eyed, dark-haired Brit. Olympic god may have been whispered.

He ordered a few whiskeys on the rocks, asking for a tray to carry the drinks back. Naturally, the women went all hush hush while David waited. Maybe the men thought they were being sneaky, sending over the least talkative of the bunch and all. A silent stare-off was all he got from the women. He took the drinks, tilting a "Ladies" towards the group, his British accent making them giggle. Once he made his way back, they all lost themselves in laughter again. Such juvenile behavior was a dead giveaway.

"They're talking about us, alright," David confirmed with a low gravelly timbre, handing out the drinks.
"Anything specific?" Matt squinted towards the women.
"Probably s-e-x," Oscar spelled out the last word. There were a couple of kids in the room after all. "What's sex?" Danielle asked from the side while playing Gauntlet. Oscar nearly choked on a piece of ice.

"Oh boy... Is that the cake?" he coughed. "I think we're getting ready for cake," Oscar tried to divert in a snap, mouthing a "shit" towards the other men. He was sure he was done for, should Danielle mention the word to her mother. Unhappy friends meant an unhappy companion. To his luck, David came to the rescue with cute pictures of dogs he sponsored at a shelter in London,
making Danielle forget all about Oscar's slip of the tongue. "Thanks, man," he let out a huff of air.

Just then, Oscar spotted Elise heading his way from the corner of his eye. She grinned at the group of men. "Did the kids actually get a chance to play?" she quirked her brow when she reached them, hands on her hips.
"Uhmmmm....," Oscar stalled.
Elise hung her arms loosely around his neck from behind, moving close to his ear. "Why don't you take a break?" she whispered, a tinge of urgency in her tone.
"But I'm winning," Oscar replied with a bit of a whine.
"Take a break," Elise repeated, her breath grazing the back of his ear.
"But..." Oscar gulped. He had noted the firmer tone.
"I need another preview." Elise pressed a kiss right behind his ear. Then she took off.
"Donnie, why don't you take over," Oscar handed the controller to Patricia's son.

He shot up, looking around the living room. The group of women had disbanded, all of them now mingling with the other guests. Christine, James, and Raimund were back as well, chatting with Margaret. Oscar noticed Margaret's hand crawling up and down Raimund's arm, but Raimund ignored the touch, keeping his own hands folded around a bottle of beer. Good man. Raimund wasn't the type to go for women half his age no matter how charming they were. Christine looked a bit tired. The pregnancy a likely cause. James had his arm tightly around his wife. Oscar could almost feel the amount of restraint it took to not rub Christine's tummy.

He went back to scanning the living rooms, but Elise had disappeared. His cell chimed in his pocket. "Guest room." A text displayed next to a strawberry icon. He looked around again. Everyone was busy talking to someone. His chance to slip away. Clearly, Elise had managed to do so without anyone noticing. He'd probably be able to do the same. If someone were to stop him, he'd probably throw out the "need to go to the restroom excuse" anyways.

He ambled towards the hallway as to not raise suspicion that he suddenly felt the need to leave, picking up the pace once he was past the dining room. He opened the door to the guest suite but the room was empty.
"Liz?" he whispered. No reply.
"Come and find me." Another text message flashed across his cell's display.
He sent a message back, hoping a chime would give her away. Elise was smarter than that of course.

So now his instinct had him gear towards the bathroom. He craned his neck around the door to see if Elise was hiding there when he didn't see her by the tub. Nothing. The bathroom was empty.
Another glance at the tub made him snicker. Red, shiny toy popped into his head.

The balcony was next. It was fairly warm outside. There was a chaise that easily could've hidden them behind the panels of the balcony. The apartment was at top level. Absence of tall buildings on either side meant no one would've been able to spy on them from above. There was no Elise on the balcony, however. Oscar closed the door and pivoted on his heel.

"I wonder where she could be hiding," he smirked as his glance tracked to the walk-in closet. It was the only other option. Unless she'd crawled under the bed. He actually checked real fast. Nope. The closet it was.

And sure enough, there she was, waiting for him, leaning against one of the walls. Her cell in flashlight mode, sitting on an empty shelf. The closet had a light of course but it would've given her away from the get-go had she flipped the switch.
"Another preview, hmmmm?" Oscar skimmed her arms with his fingertips. Elise chewed on her bottom lip. There was a spark in her eyes. A bit devilish really. Deliciously devilish.

"Your family and friends are just down the hallway," Oscar whispered with a smug smile. "I know," Elise replied quietly; playing with the top button of his shirt. Just the top button. Opening and closing it while she focused on his breathing. "Naughty," he reached back for the closet door, closing and locking it quietly behind him. "Very naughty," he breathed when Elise's hands fell to his belt. His breath remained steady but the vein on his neck told a different story. "You don't know the half of it," she smiled deviously when she unbuckled the belt.

Oscar's focus went down to her hands. She'd already popped open the button. Now she worked on the zipper. Slowly pulling it down. The sound of the slider passing each tooth was enhanced by the echo of the empty closet. The only barrier now his briefs. She reached into the waistband, her hand going straight to where she knew he liked it most. That picked up his breathing real fast.

"Liz," Oscar moaned softly, looking down on her face. "Yes?" she looked up into his eyes. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes quite lust-filled. Her hand stayed inside his briefs. But she'd stopped stroking him. "Oh... Oh kay. But we have to be quiet," he breathed. "Were you actually going to say no?" she asked. "To taunt you, maybe," he chuckled. "Agh... Fuck," he clenched his jaw. Elise had repaid that sassy tone with a squeeze. She let go right after.

"Now you're in trouble," he licked the back of his teeth. "Prove it," Elise leaned in to whisper. Oscar didn't have to be told twice. He quickly pushed her back against the far wall of the closet, lifting her up by her thighs. "So much trouble," he breathed down her neck while nipping at her skin.

Elise reached up to the clothing rod right above her head, keeping her legs tightly around Oscar's waist. Her holding on, meant he could let go of her. His hands stayed busy though, sliding up her outer thighs and below her dress. "Oh god," he breathed. "You're wearing lace," he moaned onto her cleavage. He lifted the skirt of her dress a little higher so he could get a better look. "White lace. Fuck! --- That's sexy," he bit her neck again. Quite desperately. Elise just gasped. Her mind was pretty much gone the second he'd lifted her up. But especially after she'd felt his cock press against her through the fabric of his briefs.

Oscar didn't waste any more time. To her favor. She was ready, and she wanted him now! He let her drop to the floor for a second so he could push his pants and briefs down, the metal of his belt buckle hitting the ground with a loud clank. He lifted her up again, his right arm looping tightly around her lower back, his left hand pushing her panties to the side, playing with her entrance just a little. Just enough to distribute some of her wetness over her folds so he could push in with ease.

"God... Fuck... How are you always this hot?" he gasped after that first thrust. Elise just moaned. "Shhhhh!" Oscar warned. "I'm sorry, I can't help it. You feel so good," she gasped, the pressure of him sliding in and out making her want to yell out his name. The added friction of the lace pressing against her clit didn't help. She could feel herself plunging towards her climax at lightning speed as she held on to the clothing rod above her head with all her might. "Oscar... Kiss me!" she begged. "Quick!" she pleaded, her core ready to snap.
He obliged. With one of those kisses that drew in her lips while searching for her tongue. The type that was orgasm inducing all on its own. And now he tasted of whiskey and for whatever reason spearmint.

Elise moaned loudly into the kiss, the climax washing over her without mercy. Oscar had to catch his breath.

"Oh god," Elise bit her lip to cut off a moan. She gazed down into his eyes. He was struggling to hold back his own noises, the veins on his forehead and neck prominent.

"Liz," Oscar groaned in agony. He started trembling, a sign that his own climax was imminent. Elise let go of the clothing rod, her hands fiercely kneading into his curls, she crashed a forceful kiss onto his lips to smother his moan.

"Fuck," Oscar breathed. His head dropped into Elise's neck and she kept playing with his curls. She was amazed he still had strength to hold her up.

"I don't know how many more previews I can give," he mumbled onto her skin. It had both fall into a wheezy laugh.

"Shhhhh!" Elise warned this time. Oscar finally, and very carefully, dropped her to the ground.

"We should probably go clean up," he smirked when he pulled up his briefs and pants, slowly buckling his belt. He wasn't wrong. Elise felt a bit sticky between her legs, mixed fluid slowly trickling out and into her panties that she'd already fixed in place.

"I agree. But only because we have to go back out there," she grinned.

"That's kind of sexy, actually," he admitted, resting his forehead on hers before kissing her.

"You think they'll notice if we take a quick shower?" Elise whisper-asked when they snuck towards the suite's bathroom. "The shower head comes off since it's attached to a hose. It even adjusts in height. That way we don't get our hair wet," she suggested.

"Sure. Whatever you want, Sweetie," Oscar smiled. He helped in unzipping her dress, taking off her necklace, watching as she stripped out of her bra and panties. He loved watching her undress in this nonchalant way. It was a little different from whenever he peeled away her clothes. Like it revealed a different type of naked. He quite loved both. The abashed naked and the confident naked. Sometimes they intermingled. Sometimes they were reversed.

"You going to join me, or what?" Elise caught his gawk.

"Yes, ma'am," he cocked his head. Elise fiercely lifted her index to warn him, but he just nibbled on it with an impish chuckle. He quickly stripped out of his clothes, joining Elise in the sectioned off shower. The warm water was a bit of a hazard really, soothing them into a trance as they washed each other's bodies with body wash, making them forget time.

"Oscar? Elise?" Christine's voice echoed into the guest suite.

"Shit," Elise quickly shut off the water. Maybe her sister hadn't heard. This bathroom was cursed she was sure. First, Oscar nearly walking in on her when she had first met him. Now her sister. Why the fuck didn't he lock the door to the suite? Why hadn't she when she'd first met him? Oscar suppressed a laugh.

"Shhhhh," Elise's index shot to her mouth, then his. Oscar hid his face in her hair, still trying to suppress that laugh. Elise strained to hear if her sister had left.

"Looks like they're out on the balcony for a snogging session," Christine's voice echoed, a very knowing tinge in her tone.

"Dammit," Elise mouthed.

The laugh Oscar had tried to hold back wheezily escaped his lips. Elise shot him a fierce
glance. "I'm sorry, Sweetie. I think she knows," he whisper-laughed, playfully biting into her shoulder. Still laughing. Elise listened again.

"So if you two could wrap it up in there, we're getting ready to cut the cake," Christine's voice was right outside the bathroom door.
Silence.
Waiting.
Silence.
Waiting.
"Ok," Elise squeaked, and Oscar finally lost it, his laugh echoing through the bathroom. "We'll be out soon," he snickered with a tear in his eye.
"Such juveniles," they heard Christine laugh before they heard the door close.

"Great. Just great," Elise was so red in the face, she looked like a lobster.
"Sweetie, this is nothing. Trust me. Try walking in on them with whipped cream everywhere," he joked.
"Oh dear god. Why? Why did you...," Elise threw her hands over her face, laughing. There it was. His favorite thing.
"I'm actually convinced the second baby was conceived that day," Oscar laughed. He just had to add that little bit of info. If only to make Elise laugh even harder.

Elise shook her head, laughing, nibbling on her bottom lip. She took a deep breath in, hanging her arms loosely around Oscar's neck. "You're something else, Oscar --- Isaac --- Hernández --- Estrada," she kissed him between each part of his name. Might as well take advantage of the situation to make out. Oscar reciprocated with wandering hands down her back and derrière, squeezing her playfully between kisses. He turned the water back on to wash away the remainder of the soap, still kissing Elise when he did so.

"Let's go. Your cake awaits," he whispered after another languid kiss. Elise glanced at her watch. It was just past 9:30 p.m. She let out a soft sigh. How much she wanted to be alone with Oscar right now. Alone, alone. Not in an apartment filled with people while they'd snuck away for some privacy.

"We were about to send a rescue team," James jested when the couple finally found their way back to the living room, handing them each a glass of champagne. He tapped a spoon against his glass to get everyone's attention, and when all eyes were on him, he turned towards Elise and Oscar.

"I shall keep this short and sweet?!" James grinned at them.
"He knows, too," Elise whispered into Oscar's arm, blushing again.
"Of course he knows," Oscar whispered back, smirking towards Christine who winked back at them. She had told her husband. Probably not in detail but most likely enough so he got the idea what the two had been up to.

"Elise. You ray of sunshine. Quite literally with that dress," James started. People laughed, of course, their attention on Elise. She wanted to sink into the ground. She had this feeling that at least her best friends were aware of her absence and why.

"We love you," James' timbre became serious. "We'll always love you," he nodded towards his parents who in turn smiled towards Elise. She could feel the tears building up. "And we hope you're happy," James' focus now on Oscar. He, in turn, teased a tender kiss into her hair. "We're so glad you're back. Gives me an excuse to throw more parties," James joked. That was met with a "Ha! Ha!" from Elise, a single tear rolling down her cheek now.
"I mean you all know we like to party," he laughed towards the guests. So Gatsby of him. That laugh waned into a soft smile. "Here's to your thirty-fifth," James raised his glass. "And many more --- until you're gray and old and wrinkly. Sorry, I may have just turned Oscar away from you," James laughed again, his composure buckling. Elise gave her brother-in-law a "keep it up" brow. "Seriously, now," he straightened himself out. A short pause. A soft, acknowledging smile. "Happy Birthday, Liz," he lightly tilted his glass towards Elise, the cue for everyone to repeat those words.

"And now the obligatory birthday song. Oscar, you have to excuse us. We all can't be blessed with a voice like yours," James grinned. He always had to make a joke. It was better that way anyways, or else Elise would've started crying crying for sure. So the group sang happy birthday to her as Xavier rolled in the cake, the caterer looking rather proud as he'd made the decorations by hand. Sunflowers and Gerber daisies. Elise gave Xavier a quick hug, looking at her cake. There were definitely more than thirty-five candles on there, slowly burning away. She searched for the mischievous eyes that thought this to be funny. And of course, they belonged to Thom, her new P.A.

"Sorry, boss. Couldn't resist," he smirked from behind Richard and Judith. "Make a wish," Oscar whispered from the side before stepping back for a photo op. Elise actually had to think for a minute. She'd never quite taken the wish thing seriously. But now - with Oscar close by, her dad smiling at her from across the room, her sister and her brother-in-law giving her encouraging nods as she noted James slipping up when he rubbed his wife's tummy, and her best friends waiting with eager smiles - she had an idea what she wanted to wish for. So she did. With closed eyes. Releasing her wish when she blew out the candles.

Oscar swiftly took a picture before her breath hit the last flame. And another one when she smiled a wide smile his way. He winked at her, deciding not to close the gap between them. He knew people would once again take her away for a few minutes to ask the always so obvious "What did you wish for?" question. But Elise didn't let it slip. If she did, it wouldn't come true, right? Oscar was glad. He guessed of course. But for all he knew, she may have asked for a new pair of ice skates.

"Can I have the first piece?" Danielle asked before Elise even had a chance to cut into the cake. "Danielle!!" Patricia shook her head at her daughter. "It's ok. You can. And Donnie, you get the second piece," Elise scrunched her nose at her friend's kids. She was fast, cutting the cake into even sections, handing each person who desired a piece. Her sister declined.


"Geez! James! Did you take enough pictures today?" Christine huffed. "Nope. Elise still needs to open her presents," James grinned. "Oh yes. I forgot. Presents!" Christine wiggled her brows. "I hope all of you stuck to the limit!" Elise was stern. "What if we didn't?" Oscar swooped in from the right.
Elise gave him a fierce stare. He threw up his hands in defense. "Well. Is everyone here?" Elise looked around. "Alright," she heaved her chest. This could be awesome or awkward, depending on the giver. She made her way to the table, pulling up a chair to sit down on. "Hey, Danielle. Donnie. You guys want to help me unwrap these," she called out. The kids happily agreed, taking turns in opening gifts.

Most of the gifts were related to her hobbies: drawing and painting materials, a few books, band merchandise. Her friends, even the ones she wasn't close to, knew her pretty well. Other gifts were food related. Mostly imported chocolates and candies from Europe. Raimund, of course, blew that one out of the house. Beside himself, he'd brought along a huge box of Kinder Chocolate and Milka from Germany. A year's supply really. "Danke, Papa," Elise snickered. "Too bad I couldn't bring Kinder Eggs," he pouted.

"Oh, Papa," Elise leaned into his side. Him being here would've been enough.

Mikki and David also gifted imported items. Elise's favorite shampoo, lotion, and perfume from Germany. She immediately sprayed some perfume onto her wrists, spying Mikki elbow David from the corner of her eye. The beauty items were most likely Mikki's idea judging by her "I told you so" jab into David's ribs. She mouthed a thank you to the couple. They lifted their glasses.

There were also a few gift cards to coffee shops and restaurants Elise loved. A couple of spa certificates as well. Those were always welcome of course. Elise made a mental note, though, to give half of them to Patricia. Her friend needed them more than she did as high-end treats were rarely on the shopping list.

Donnie and Danielle were eager to give Elise their present. Judging by the sparkly stickers and unevenly folded ends around a cardboard tube, the kids had wrapped the present themselves. They watched intently while Elise ever so carefully opened the tube, even more so when she saw what the present was. They had drawn her a big poster of her favorite spots in Seattle. She guessed that their mom had helped them. "I'll hang this in my dining room," Elise proclaimed, and the kids' eyes sparkled with pride.

Then they gave Elise their mom's gift. It was a pretty big box. Quite heavy. Elise sighed. She worried Patricia had spent over her limit, not just money but time as well. The kids' eyes getting wider by the second was another clue that this was rather special. Elise opened the box very slowly.

"Oh Patricia, this.. This.. This is fucking amazing," Elise gasped, quickly throwing an apologetic look towards her friend when she realized she'd cussed in front of the kids. "Did you make this?" Elise asked as she pulled a large Harry-Potter-themed crocheted blanket from the box. Of course, Patricia had made this. Like duh. Elise had never seen one like it at a store.

She started detailing the blanket with her fingertips. At the center was a shield divided into four equal parts; each part with a different background color and house mascot on top, the parts representing the four houses of Hogwarts. At the center of the shield itself was a giant H, gold interlaced yarn sprawling from its edges to frame the shield as a whole. The remainder of the blanket was light blue, with a thick border that switched between the houses' colors, black yarn, and gold interlaced fibers.

"Holy crap, *sorry face* Patricia... I can't accept this. How long did you work on this?" Elise gaped. Patricia always gave her homemade gifts, so that in itself wasn't a surprise. But this blanket
was massive. At least eighty inches by eighty inches. Elise started counting the rows. Too many to count. Infinite stitches. Countless hours. "I don't even know what to say," she was still amazed. Patricia just shrugged shyly. "I had a lot of time to make it," she hinted at Elise's hiatus.

"Amazing. Oscar! Look at this," Elise showed off the blanket to her companion who had waited a little to the side. Again leaving space to keep focus on her. "Wow. Fits in with the whole theme," he smiled, brushing over Elise's necklace. Right at the clasp sitting on the back of her neck. It made her tingle. No time for gutter thoughts. "Thank you," Elise hugged Patricia. "All of you, thank you so much," she walked around thanking everyone for the presents.

"You haven't opened Oscar's." Danielle stretched a box towards Elise when she returned to the table. It was the last present. The young girl was right. But Elise was kind of, sort of hoping that no one would notice her not opening it. She was a bit hesitant about receiving another present from her companion. He'd already showered her with amazing gifts before the party, so now she stalled. "Open it!" Danielle insisted. She was a feisty one.

Elise glanced at Oscar. He winked at her. Why did he have to keep doing that? Like he was encouraging her but also asking not to be upset at the same time. Just an assuring, knowing wink. But it got to her. In a good way. Elise, like earlier, peeled the tape and paper away with great care. The sigh of relief that followed was quite audible. Oscar had kept it within a fair range, at least for this particular present.

The box held two more fabric covered, turquoise journals like the one he'd gotten her before her business trip. She flipped through the pages. This time the journals were completely empty.

"You filled the other one so fast, I figured I'd get you two this time," he explained, scratching the back of his head shyly. His trademark move when he thought of something she might like, hoping the something added to their future somehow.
"It's perfect," Elise smiled. She already had ideas about how to fill the journals. "Thank you," she hugged Oscar tightly. Over his shoulder, she saw Margaret rolling her eyes at them. But Elise didn't care. She buried her face into the fabric of Oscar's shirt, ignoring Margaret's blatant stare.

"Alright, you two. Break it off. Break it off! Don't make me get the spray bottle!" Mikki cut in when the hug lasted long enough that some of the guests started whispering. "Time for more drinks," she grinned mischievously.
"I know that smirk," Elise squinted.
"Huh? What smirk?" Mikki fluttered her lashes, trying to look innocent.
"Ok, what's the bet?" Elise loosely crossed her arms.

"No bet, we promise," David chimed in.
"He talks," Elise jested.
"You'd be surprised how much David talks once he gets started," Mikki laughed.
"Really? So, David. What's the bet?" Elise crossed her arms tighter, raising her brow.
"There's no bet," David said calmly towards Elise, perking his brow at Mikki. They were up to something for sure. That gut feeling from earlier in the afternoon that Oscar was in on it returned.

The rest of the night was spent dancing and talking. A back and forth between friends and family and colleagues. The party getting smaller as time went on. People slowly started heading home. In the end, only Elise's closest friends and family stayed behind, sitting divided into two distinct groups: the men, all of them watching football on T.V., and the women, all of them lounging near the bar.
When the hands of the clock crawled past midnight, the D.J. packed up her gear. The bartender, too, was getting ready to leave. He began taking inventory, packing up some of his stuff, when Judith requested one last round of Vespers for the ladies. "On the house," the young man grinned as he brought over seven glasses, foregoing the usual rapid input into his little liquor tracking device.

"Good man," Judith laughed with a wink. That confidence of hers even more steadfast now. She'd had a few drinks.

"You're not drinking, Christine?" Sandra was a keen observer.

"Nope. I can't," Christine's mouth twisted. There was a secret on her lips.

"Of course not!" Patricia quirked her brow. "So when are you due?" she asked nonchalantly. Everyone's heads jerked towards Christine. Elise of course knew. But Mikki, Sandra, Helen, and Judith didn't. At least not for sure.

"December 25," Christine hitched a breath. There was an unidentifiable noise from the group. Something like a seal barking and chickens chattering at the same time.

"I knew it," Sandra squinted at Christine. "You have that glow mixed with morning sickness look to you," she added. The group of women fell into laughter.

"I wonder if they're talking about us again?" Matt peered over to the bar.

"Hmmm... No. That's not about us," James lifted his brow. The way the women all huddled around Christine, he knew the secret was out.

"How do you know?" Matt was flummoxed.

"Those are congratulatory laughs," James' lips got quite thin, a light grumble vibrating through.

"Congratulatory for what?" Edgar's interest was piqued. Raimund showed equal interest.

Long pause on James' part.

"Dude, just tell them," Oscar grinned ear to ear.

James heaved his chest. Another pause. "Christine is expecting," he chugged the last of his whiskey. Another unidentifiable noise. More like grumbling bears this time.

"I think they know," Elise stated with a hefty side of sarcasm.

"Might as well, I guess," Christine conceded as she got up. "It was nice seeing you all again. I know it's rude and all as I'm the hostess, but you ladies don't mind if I go to bed, do you?" she said wearily. The group nodded a synchronous ok. Christine slowly paced towards the hallway, waving a tired goodbye to the men who were now slowly pacing towards the women.

"We had better head home," Patricia finished her drink. Her kids were already sleeping on a sofa nearby. The daunting task of waking them a bit of a horror to her. They could be rather grouchy.

"Let me help you," Oscar offered when he heard Patricia. David followed suit. "We'll be back," he smiled as he carried Danielle towards the hallway. David carried Donnie. Seeing their men helping with the kids made Mikki and Elise fall into a dreamy gaze.

"When can we expect the invitations?" Judith joked.

"What?" Mikki and Elise called out in unison.

"Wedding invitations," Judith leaned in, wiggling her brows.

"Not any time soon," Mikki and Elise replied in perfect union.

"Well if either of you needs a planner, I know a few people," Judith beamed.

"Are you planting ideas again," Richard cut in. A feisty glance had him jump back.

By the time everyone had left, it was almost one in the morning.

"I'll pick those up tomorrow," Elise gestured towards the presents.

"Ok," James agreed, worn out but happy looking.
"Thank you. For the party," Elise hugged her brother-in-law. "Anytime," he grinned. "So, should I start planning your engagement party?" he jested with a wink. Elise pretended she didn't hear. He was the second person to bring up wedding bells.

"I should've taken your cardigan," Elise shivered on her walk over to her place. Mid-spring nights were always a bit chilly in the PNW. "Awe, I'm sorry, Sweetie," Oscar pulled her into his side to keep her warm for the short stroll. Unlike the night from Friday to Saturday, Saturday to Sunday offered clear skies. Clear enough to see the stars. Oscar stopped near a streetlight. This moment was too perfect to not make use of it. He pulled Elise close to himself, wrapping his arms around her as he gave her one of those kisses that made her melt into his arms. The taste of sweet whiskey still on his lips. This time mixed with a hint of vanilla and strawberry, the choice for her birthday cake.

"You need me to carry you home," he chuckled when she got all dreamy eyed. Or maybe it was dizziness. They both had had a few drinks. "Smart-ass," she nudged his shoulder. A short while later they stood in Elise's apartment.

"Stay right there," Oscar wrinkled his nose, stopping Elise before she could enter her bedroom. "Why?" she perked her brow. She was tired. All she wanted was to change her clothes and maybe sneak kisses here and there. "Because," Oscar squeezed through a small gap between door and frame into the bedroom, making sure Elise couldn't peek past him. "Can I at least go to the bathroom?" she frowned. "Uhh... Yeah....," Oscar called through the closed bedroom door. Elise could've sworn she heard him snicker a few times.

Elise hurried, quickly freshening up. She sort of had an idea what was going on behind her bedroom door. Oscar, on the other hand, seemed to take his sweet time. Elise waited patiently by the bedroom door. It was awfully quiet in there. Maybe Oscar had fallen asleep.

"Uhmmm... Lindo? You ok in there?" she asked after another five minutes of silence. Nothing. "Oscar?" "Shit. Hold on," he sounded frustrated. "Where the hell is it?" he was definitely frustrated. "Ok, I'm coming in," Elise reached for the door handle. "No, wait..." Elise heard Oscar rush for the door but she was faster.

She was unsure at the sight in front of her. Oscar stood there, down to his underwear, a turquoise ribbon tied around his waist, his left hand tapping on the dresser, his right hidden behind his back. He had decorated the headboard with fairy lights, had placed blue roses in vases on each nightstand, and sprinkled white rose petals on the bed. "Are those real?" Elise walked over to the blue roses, distracted by their beauty. They indeed were.

"The florists dye them," Oscar's voice was a bit squeaky. "What's going on?" Elise squinted at Oscar. "Uhmmmm....," Oscar blushed, still hiding his right hand behind his back. "Did you break something?" Elise looked around. Everything seemed in order. Oscar hung his head. There was no being around the bush. Not like he could hide his right hand forever. He exhaled sharply, flicking his right hand up and towards Elise.

Eyes wide first then she lost herself in a fit of laughter shortly after the revelation. Oscar must've
searched through the other box beneath her bed. The evidence: a pair of satin covered handcuffs hanging from his right wrist. Elise kept laughing.
"I'm glad you're so amused," Oscar frowned with big puppy dog eyes.
"What were you trying to do?" Elise barely managed the question, choking up from laughing so hard. He was usually this smooth talking, moving effortlessly kind of lover. Like sex was a dance for him. This was--- really---rather---awkward.

"Well," Oscar gestured towards the bed with his chin. His idea became clear quickly. He had planned to cuff himself to the mission style headboard, and when he was ready, he would have called for her. "I had everything set up too," he pouted.
"Set what up?" Elise stopped laughing, a wide, questioning stare on her face.
"This," Oscar stepped to the side. Atop her dresser a brand new turntable. A Crosley Cruiser in turquoise. She inched closer to Oscar, switching on the turntable, lifting the needle onto the vinyl waiting to be played.

"Right," Elise's eyes got even wider. Marvin Gaye's "Let's get it on" echoed into the bedroom. Oscar's eyes were equally wide now. "I... Uhmmm... I don't even know why I chose this song," Oscar pressed his lips together.
"Really? You don't know why you chose this song?" Elise perked a brow, staring down to his waist then to his wrist. "Really?"

They both lost themselves in laughter.
"Please tell me you have a spare." Oscar had little tears streaming down the corner of his eyes. Elise, still laughing, went to her nightstand, quickly finding the other key. She unlocked the cuff, releasing his wrist. Oscar had clearly put it on too tight. Despite the satin, there was an indentation where the exposed metal had clamped down.
"Let me change that," Oscar chuckled, rubbing his wrist. He pulled another vinyl from a box nearby, quickly replacing the one on the player with the new one. He set the needle onto the new vinyl, the crackling noise a sign that the thin piece of metal was setting into the groove.

"Better?" Oscar asked.
"Yeah, so much better," Elise smiled. Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight [live at Madison Square Garden]" was now resonating through the room. Oscar turned off the ceiling light, leaving the room only illuminated by the fairy lights. He pulled Elise close to himself, slow dancing with her for a little while. She sunk her face into his chest, taking in his scent, listening to his breathing, noting how soft his skin felt against her cheek.

Her hands fell to the turquoise ribbon. She looked up into his eyes, waiting. "Go ahead," Oscar whispered, his lips arching into a warm smile. She didn't have to be told twice. She pulled on the bow, the ribbon billowing to the floor without a sound.

Oscar did some unwrapping of his own, slowly unzipping her lacy, sunflower dress before sliding it off over her shoulders. He lifted her onto the bed, pushing her back towards the pillows before making away with his boxers. "You're so beautiful," he breathed as he gazed up and down her body, finally pulling the comforter over them.

The music, the lights, the smell of roses put them both into a trance. The pace languid. Just gentle exploration of each other's bodies with soft kisses and feathery touches. The feeling of lace whenever he closed the gap between their bodies made Oscar moan more than once. He loved it so much, he didn't bother with taking off her panties when he found his way to between her legs. He just carefully moved the fabric aside.
Those gentle thrusts with the added friction, not to mention velvet kisses, definitely had an effect on Elise. She let out moans Oscar never quite heard before. Soft, trembled, almost despaired. He propped himself onto his elbows taking in her reaction, stopping when her typically pleased expression became rather serious like she wasn't quite in it.

"What's wrong?" He ran his hands through her hair, resting his upper body weight on his elbows. How he loved feeling her hair between his fingers. It was soft to the touch, a little longer since he'd met her. Always a little defiant when she tried to style it a certain way.
"Because you're not here." Oscar kissed her brows.
"I am... I'm just....," she paused.
"Just what? Tell me," Oscar urged softly. Elise cradled his face, her thumbs skimming his lips.
"Tell me," Oscar waited.

"I love you," Elise whispered.
"I know." Oscar pressed a tender kiss on her lips.
"No. I mean... I - love - you," she repeated. There was something in her tone. Something different. A hint of urgency. A hint of letting go of something. A hint of relief. Oscar realized that she'd never said those words while they'd made love. He couldn't recount if he ever had.
"I love you, too," he caressed her face.

Elise wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. She closed her eyes again, her hips begging for Oscar to start moving again. So he did. Gently. Languidly. His lips focused on hers the whole time while he explored her body with his fingertips, always teasing the edges of her lacy bra and panties.

"You're so beautiful," Oscar whispered under his breath, leaving more kisses on her lips. Elise smiled into them, especially whenever she felt his lashes tickle her cheeks. Oscar's breathing became heavier. His movement more erratic. His exploration of her body more desperate.
"Fuck....," he breathed as he came. No warning this time. No trademark trembling of his body. One too many previews had him tired. It didn't matter to Elise.

"Sorry, mi Reina, I thought I'd last longer," he chuckled, his nose coming to a rest on her cheek when he remained on top of her.
"I'm surprised you lasted this long," Elise snickered softly with closed eyes, gently running her hands up and down his back. That statement earned her a playful nip on her nose.
"Happy Birthday," Oscar smirked.
"Hmm, thank you... This is it though, right? No more surprises!" Elise whispered under shallow, even breaths. Her hands fell down Oscar's sides.
"I can't make any promises," he whispered. No reply. Elise had fallen asleep underneath him.

He carefully pulled himself off her body, lying down next to her on his left side, his head propped on his hand while he played with her hair. Quiet purred snores soon escaped Elise's lips. Oscar chuckled at the image in front of him. He tucked one of the pillows underneath his head, his gaze settling on her face while he continued to play with her hair. And then, just like that, the words "marry me" slipped out with a whisper.
Gentle shift in position. Subconscious tug at the blanket. Oscar glanced over. Elise had rolled to her left side and pulled the blanket over her shoulder. All that stuck out was her strawberry blond hair, and as usual, it was a glorious mess. She was still out, caught up in her dreams.

He, on the other hand, had been awake a couple of hours now. At least since 5:13 a.m.; the precise moment the sun had greeted Seattle with a bright promise to a warm day. He had watched the sunlight crest over the edge of the windowsill, the light creating a soft play through the blinds, speckling Elise's skin with fractured reflections of glassy surfaces. He usually welcomed placid mornings like this but he felt too groggy to fully enjoy the beauty of it all.

Last night's sleep had been intermittent for him. He'd kept tossing and turning, thinking about the words Elise had whispered in her sleep. "Marry me," had trickled out with such ease and softness, he thought she'd been awake all along. He'd whispered her name a couple of times after, but she didn't reply. Just purred snores came in response. She'd been talking in her sleep. So those words may not have been for him.

He shifted closer to Elise as her rolling over had created a gap between their bodies. He was careful in his movement. He didn't want to wake her this early. It was Sunday after all, and he knew she loved sleeping in. Her breathing remained steady. That purred snore now muffled into the side of her pillow. He played with her hair a little, the softness of her tresses tickling against his palm. He was glad she didn't dye it. He did wonder if she ever had. He imagined she'd kept it natural colors if anything.

He shifted closer, yet; closing whatever minuscule space had remained between them. He wrapped his right arm around her, kissing her shoulder, his nose coming to a rest on her skin right after. Faded scent of strawberry-coconut delight was all that mattered to him.

He remained next to her a little while longer, but he couldn't go back to sleep. His mind was busy, drifting back to the words. And to the way she had said "I love you" last night. He hadn't really thought about the timbre until her dreamed proposal. So now, his mind was analyzing every little detail. Over analyzing to be specific.

He slowly rolled back towards the other end of the bed, stopping a couple of inches short of the edge when he felt Elise move. She had rolled over again.
"Where are you going?" she whispered, her eyes peeking drowsily over the edge of the blanket.
"Bathroom," Oscar whispered back.
"Ok. I'll see you in a few hours," Elise breathed. A few hours? How long did she think a bathroom run was going to take?

Oscar sat up, glancing over his shoulder. Elise's eyes were closed again, her head resting on her awkwardly angled arms. She had fallen back to sleep. Her hair was an even bigger mess than a few minutes ago. That little purred snore also more audible. It was an amusing sight to him. He could see himself waking up to her like this every day. He stretched his feet to the floor, finally rising to a stand as quietly as possible. "I'll see you later," he whisper-snickered towards his companion.

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Elise woke up to her phone vibrating on her nightstand. She counted the vibrations. Seven, eight,
nine, ten. Pause. Another vibration. Someone had called her, but she was too lazy to check. Not to mention a bit hungover, those three Vespers, champagne, and the glass of wine a lot more effective now than last night. She hadn't felt drunk. Or maybe people had been kind enough not to point it out.

No matter. She was awake now thanks to whoever had called:- but still too lazy to check who it was. Her family knew it was best not to call until noon on Sundays. Her friends knew, too. There had been grouchy morning calls, and they had figured out quickly not to call before she had had that first sip of coffee. On a Sunday, that usually meant sometime around noon. Even Oscar knew this.

She opened her eyes, the hazy outlines of her pillows slowly coming into focus. She'd expected to see Oscar's curls or his chest. Either would've been fine. But the space was empty. Elise rolled to her left, squinting at the reddish 8:43 a.m. on her alarm clock. She groaned into her pillow. That typical, "not wanting to get up, ever again" type of groan. But she knew she should. If she remained in bed, she'd be sore later. They hadn't made concrete plans for the afternoon or anything, but getting outside was on the agenda and she'd rather not have sore muscles. Plus she was thirsty.

She got up with a grumbled sigh in tow, checking her phone at last. Unknown number. She checked the voicemail. Like yesterday, just three seconds long. She shrugged it off as wrong number. Maybe an automated system for solicitors. She smelled the air. Absent scent of fresh coffee had her wondering what Oscar was up to. She wrapped the top sheet around herself, and -quiet like a mouse- tiptoed to the living room. Nothing. Just silence. No Oscar on the sofa, no Oscar in the office, and no Oscar in the kitchen. She was sure she was awake. A pinch proved she was right.

She checked the fridge but it was bare. She'd forgotten that they had to toss most of the perishables after the power outage. A single lettuce head and a couple of tomatoes, along with condiments, was pretty much all that was left. So maybe he was getting breakfast.

Elise grabbed a bottle of water, shrugging out a disappointed sigh. Not like Oscar wasn't going to be back, but she'd grown to dislike lonely mornings ever since she'd met him, that feeling still a bit of an oddity to her. She thought about last night. Big smile on her face when she thought about his failed attempt to spice it up a few notches in the bedroom. More like from fairly timid to "hot damn, no idea he was into that" notches. She would have been game, too, but that languid session she'd gotten instead had been a fair trade in. Quite perfect, actually.

She finished her water and opted to get ready for the day. Her Sunday routine before Oscar usually consisted of changing from one set of PJs into another. Then maybe a book, or Netflix binge. Maybe a quick, uneventful run to the store.

Now that he was in her life, she decided to go with a shower and at least wear sweats and a nice t-shirt. Not entirely ready to go somewhere but at least dressed enough so she didn't look completely sloth-like. She even fixed her hair up a little. Just blow dried and finger tousled really. Still better than her typical frizz ball disaster.

She then proceeded to skim through the box of vinyls next to the dresser, wondering how much Oscar had actually spent on her. There were rarities in that box. Pink Floyd's "The Wall" pressed on orange one of them. She crossed her fingers that those were borrowed. She remembered James having some of these records in his collection. Yeah. That had to be it. They were most likely borrowed.
She was about to set Queen's "Rock Montreal" on the turntable when she heard the clicks of the key in her front door. Oscar was back, and from the sound of his huffed shuffles, he clearly needed help.

"Hey, Sweetie." His eyes were barely visible over the edges of two brown paper bags. "Good morning. Could you?" he heaved. Looped around his forearms were three or four more green totes with the paper bags resting atop and angled against his chest; all of it looking like it was about to fall.
"Why didn't you tell me you were going shopping? I'd have helped." Elise hastily grabbed the paper bags.
"Because you were sleeping, Sweetie. Looked like you needed it." Oscar kicked the front door shut.

He looked great this morning. Dark-blue faded jeans. Denim shirt. Those scuffed up boots. His hair neatly styled. Freshly shaven. Elise exhaled a sharp puff of air, catching her reflection in one of the picture frames on the hallway wall, whispering out a thin "great" under her breath.

"What's wrong?" Oscar asked as he started putting the cold items away. "Nothing," Elise huffed. She set the paper bags on the counter, starting to help stash away the food. He'd gotten her favorite bread and her favorite cold cereal. She opened the cereal and nibbled on a few of the chocolaty flakes.
"I hate it when you do that." He closed the fridge with an annoyed thud. That was the first time he'd used that word. Hate. It was the first time he'd ever told her he hated something she did.

"Hate what?" Elise perked a brow.
Oscar folded the totes, letting out a sharp sigh. "When you say "nothing" when I ask. Like I don't care to hear what you have to say," he snapped, furrowing his brows in annoyance. That stern thought line wasn't something he showed often. He looked at Elise, waiting. Still annoyed.
"I'm sorry," timid timbre from her. "It really is nothing. Just caught myself looking like a sloth potato while you look Sunday school perfect," Elise frowned. Why the hell was he so pissed?

Oscar drew in a deep breath, an angled smile somewhat softening his face. "No...," He heaved his chest. "I'm sorry, Sweetie." He inched closer to Elise, running his hands down her arms, his eyes tracking his own movement. "I'm just tired. Didn't sleep well last night," he sighed.
"Oh? Did I move around too much?" Elise worried.
"No. Just one of those nights. Probably the alcohol. Whenever I drink too much, I get restless. It happens," he fibbed. He knew full well why he hadn't had much sleep.

"You wanna go back to bed?" She grabbed hold of his hands.
"No. I'll be alright. Just need some coffee. And food." He finally offered a warm smile.
"I'll make the coffee." Elise leaned in and gave him a soft kiss.

She chose a dark roast this morning. Extra dark, extra strong. They both needed that caffeine boost. Elise offered her help in making breakfast, but Oscar insisted that he'd cook. "Making up for yesterday," he smirked. Elise agreed. She had to check her emails anyways. So she shuffled to her office and booted up her laptop.

There was an abundance of messages to go through. A few birthday wishes, plenty of work-related emails, some spam here and there. She read the birthday wishes first.

Amongst the well-wishers were the X-Men cast. They'd sent her a short video, singing happy birthday to her in German. She was sure Michael had taught them. Clearly, they all needed more
practice as the words were half mumbled and half mispronounced. Their laughter and beaming smiles made up for that. She wondered when Oscar had asked them to do this since he was in the video as well. In his blue suit of all things. Quite amusing since he looked like he couldn't move.

Another email showed M. B. Hernández as the sender. Oscar's brother. Elise chuckled. She liked Mike. She'd been in contact with him since her third week into her business trip. He had called, interrupting one of their Skype sessions. After some muddling, Oscar had figured out how to do a three-way call, and just like that, Elise had met Mike. Granted, it was just via video calls for now, but from what she could tell, he was a great guy with similar humor to Oscar's.

There'd been quite a few interesting conversations though, namely Oscar's shenanigans at school..., and maybe hers too. Turns out she wasn't as innocent as Oscar always assumed, dipping chalk in glue to make it unusable or resetting classroom clocks to make the teachers think they were late.

They both playfully questioned their choice of companionship a few times over. With their luck, their kids - should they ever get to that point - were most likely going to be rebellious little punks. The thought left her sighing. With a snicker, though. She finished reading the email. An attached PS stated that Mike looked forward to meeting her at SDCC. Elise quickly replied; a thank you and ditto squeezed into the short answer.

She then skimmed through the work emails but decided to leave them for Monday morning. She'd deal with them before heading to work. If she got up early enough that is.

That was another routine she had broken ever since she had met Oscar. During her workweek, she would typically spend a good hour checking emails before heading out. Now, she spent her mornings curled into his side, and when he wasn't around, texting or Skyping him.

The post-work, early-evening routines suffered just as much. She had hit the gym once since Oscar had arrived this time around; not at all during the week when she had met him. She used to go every evening. But now...

It actually didn't bother her. She just thought it funny how quickly her life had turned topsy-turvy. She was sure some of that routine would come back once they would find their rhythm. For now, she took it one day at a time.

"Breakfast is ready," Oscar popped his head between door and frame, smiling. The apartment smelled of bacon, eggs, and something sugary. Heavenly scent to her. One of these days, she'd cook breakfast for him, she told herself. One, where she got things right, at least. She chuckled, then hit delete, sending the spam mails she was just skimming through to digital shredding hell.

"This is nice," she smiled when she discovered the setup. She'd wondered what the clattering a little earlier was all about. And now she saw why. He'd moved the table and two of the chairs out to the balcony. He'd combined the roses from last night into a single vase, the vase now sitting off-center on the table. He'd already served up the eggs, bacon, and French toast and was now scurrying to get some O.J. from the kitchen.

"Your brother says hi," Elise smiled when Oscar sunk into the chair opposite her.
"Yeah? I should call him today," Oscar dug into his pile of scrambled eggs.
"You don't talk to him every day?" Elise started with the bacon.
"Well, he's busy. You don't talk to your sister every day," his tone was a bit snippy. Oscar, the Grouch. Or maybe this was his regular morning persona and she hadn't noticed it until now. He always claimed to be more of a night owl. Elise let it go. She blamed him being tired. He certainly
looked the part: dark circles under his eyes, his heavy-lidded gaze a bit heavier than usual.

He ran his hand across his forehead when he registered his tone, settling his chin into the palm of his propped up hand. "Sorry," he sighed heavily.
"No need to apologize." She caressed his face. Everyone had one of those days now and then. He wouldn't be an exception. Elise was sure she'd been short with him a few times over, he was just too kind to point it out.

"Did you like your party, Sweetie?" his tone softened. He knew, she sometimes got uncomfortable in large, social settings.
"Yeah. It was fun. I still cannot believe my dad is here. Considering he hates flying as much as I do," she smiled.
"Well, I think he'd do anything for his daughters. Like parents should," Oscar nibbled on some bacon.
Elise just hummed in response, also nibbling on some bacon. She watched Oscar closely. He seemed a bit distant this morning. Lost in thought. Or maybe it was just that lack of sleep.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for taking Tricia shopping." She finally tried the scrambled eggs, a satisfied moan slipping out. Good god, that man knew how to cook.
"No biggie," Oscar shrugged with an amused chuckle at her reaction.
"Well. From what she told me, you got her a lot of stuff. Like the good stuff. I'm sure the kids were happy. But it's not something you have to do. You know that, right? I don't want you to feel that you have to impress me or my friends." She took a sip of orange juice, glancing over the Seattle skyline. What a beautiful day it was.

"I didn't do it to impress you," he was offended. "I did it 'cause that's what friends do. Help each other out. She's your friend. She needed help. Besides, it wasn't entirely without motive," he chanced a snapshot. Elise caught him this time. He'd forgotten to turn off the shutter sound of his cell. She scrunched her nose.

"I know, she told me. Which brings me to something else. --- I loved the gifts. All of them. The bowls, the book, the necklace..." she played with the Golden Snitch around her neck. "...the journals, the record player, the roses. You!" She blushed with a giggle. "I loved all of it. I just... You don't have to get me a lot. I would've been happy with just the journals because you actually put thought into why you got them. Not that you didn't put thought into the other gifts. I really think you did. I just... It doesn't take much." She took another sip of her orange juice.

"Ok," Oscar nodded. "Ok," he smiled as he reached for her left hand, kissing over her knuckles.
"Next year, we'll keep it simple," he promised.
"I like the sound of that. Although, maybe we can try the whole handcuff thing again," she smirked, and he laughed into the back of her hand.
"You're never going to let that one go, huh," he chuckled.
"Just like you'll never let that shiny, red friend story go," she grinned. He nodded in agreement, finally releasing her hand.

"So. Thom is interesting. Good kid. Funny," Oscar finished his bacon.
"Mmmm hmmmm. I'll tell you this. That kid has potential. I really hope he goes into international communication. He's a natural. He just started learning Italian. He's already got the syntax down and everything." Elise lifted an impressed brow.
"Well, he's brainy. Like you. Are you thinking about mentoring him?" Oscar started on his French toast at last.
"I guess... In a sense, I already am. He's eager. I'll see where it goes, if he sticks around," Elise also
started on the French toast. She could've sworn her taste buds just had an orgasm. Oscar grinned. She had let out another moan. Almost like the ones when they were wrestling between the sheets.

"Also met your boss last night. Again." Oscar curled his lips to a skewed smile. It was more of an attempt to suppress a laugh.
"Oh, dear god. I'm sorry. I should've probably warned you," Elise clenched her jaw.
"Nah. It's all good," Oscar chuckled as he recalled the encounter. Elise's boss had pulled Oscar to the side; first complaining that the actor had his number one distracted, then thanking him because according to Richard, Elise had mellowed out a little since Oscar had stepped into her life.
"Whatever mellowed out means," Oscar added with a wink.

Elise ventured a guess that her boss meant her having a short fuse under certain circumstances. Like when she felt cornered or when common sense things weren't taken care of in a common sense way. Richard wasn't entirely wrong. She recalled a few situations that usually would've set the fuse ablaze, but she had handled the issues with a shrug and with an "it is what it is" attitude, actually making some of her co-workers gasp in shock.

"He didn't bring up... You know?" Elise's eyes widened.
"Oh, he did! He suggested we get a room next time," Oscar wiggled his brows as he finished his toast.
"Richard should talk," Elise scoffed with a snicker.
"What does that mean?" Oscar quirked a brow. He was about to head inside but that statement made him stop dead in his tracks.
"According to his wife he's not innocent regarding issues involving sex at the workplace," Elise leaned into the back of her chair, sipping on her orange juice while squinting into the distance.
"Is that what you guys were laughing about last night?" Oscar prodded.
"Maybe?" Elise squinted more.
"I thought you don't like gossip," Oscar lifted his brow before taking off to the kitchen with an airy chuckle.

It took a good ten minutes before he returned with two more cups of coffee in his hands. By now he knew how she liked hers: quarter cup milk, no sugar. He set her cup on the table, holding on to his own as he leaned against the balcony's railing.

There was another heavy sigh coming from his direction as he scanned across the city. There was that distance again. The lost in thought thing. He took a sip from his coffee, then turned to face a still seated Elise while remaining leaned against the railing. He smiled, but it wasn't his usual warm smile. Something was gnawing at the back of his mind and Elise was aware. She opened her mouth...

"So what time do you need to leave on Wednesday?" he beat her to the chase.
"Uhmmm..." Elise had to re-sort her thoughts. "Three in the morning. I have to pick up Tricia before heading to the airport. The flight leaves at six."
"And Mikki will pick you up in Nashville, right?" Oscar queried.

"Mmmmm hmmm," Elise confirmed. Mikki was already on her way to Tennessee. She'd arranged a few photo shoots with some of the bands that would arrive early for Bonnaroo. She was also in charge of getting supplies. If things worked out to plan, she'd pick them up Wednesday afternoon at Nashville International, and then the group would head out directly to Manchester. Since they had VIP passes this time around, getting through that particular line should be fast.

"I'll drop you off," Oscar offered. But it was more of a statement really.
"Lindo. You don't have to," Elise countered. "I won't see you for three weeks. Please?" he pleaded softly, a serious tinge hanging onto his voice. "Ok," Elise pulled herself to a stand, wrapping her arms around his waist, leaning her head onto his chest. Forest --- after the rain --- with a hint of spice.

"You know, I was thinking," she inhaled deeply. "If you want, and only if you want," she paused, stepping back but keeping her arms around his waist. "You can leave a couple of changes of clothes here. And your bathroom stuff. So when you come back, you have something on hand. Just in case your luggage is late or gets lost, you know," she bit her lip. "Or if you ever just, you know, wanna do the whole quick weekend thing," she snickered, a mischievous spark in her eye.

Oscar stood there, looking a bit like a deer caught in the headlights. She'd somehow expected him to jump at the idea. Maybe coax out a smile. But Oscar's tired gaze hinted that maybe he wasn't ready. Or maybe it really was just his lack of sleep. Or maybe he was sad because they'd part ways soon. She couldn't tell for sure. She had had difficulty gauging his reactions all morning. He was here, but not really. He was distant but not necessarily cold. Drifting thoughts. Back to the now. More drifting thoughts. Back to here.

"Did I do something? Or say something? You seem... I don't know... somewhere else, or maybe annoyed?" Elise's hands slipped off his waist. Oscar glanced over her, his focus settling on her hair. How much he loved her hair. How much he loved feeling it between his fingertips. How much he loved burying his face in her soft tresses. The words "marry me" slipped back into his mind.

"What did you dream about last night?" he asked, his eyelids heavier. Elise didn't like the wrinkles that came with that look. He looked weary. Top it off, this question was completely out of the blue. Diversion like. "Uhhm... I don't know," she tried to recall. She tried pretty hard. She shrugged her shoulders, shaking her head. "I actually don't know. Why?" "Just asking," Oscar sighed. "No. Come on now. That's like the //nothing// thing." Elise pointed out, using air quotations. "Tell me," she nudged on as she hung her arms around his neck. Just like he usually did when she held back.

Oscar heaved his chest. He could feel the anxiety rising as he tried to find the right words. Should he repeat her words? Or just tell a little white lie? If he had to be honest with himself, he loved the idea that she was dreaming about it.

Elise looked up at him with those beautiful grays of hers, the green slivers shining through quite prominently today. How he loved that. How much he loved her. "You said...," he paused. "... "Marry me". In your sleep." His mouth twisted askew. "I did?" Elise furrowed her brows. ---Thinking. ---Thinking. ---Nothing.

"Lindo. Sorry. I seriously don't remember," she stated. "That's just how it goes with dreams, I guess. I don't always remember them." She searched for his eyes. There was something else. She could tell. So she waited. And waited. And waited.
"Ok?" she sighed as she raised her chest. A hint of disappointment quite apparent. She'd always answer him but he didn't grant her that same openness. It tugged on her mind. "I usually don't push but... What's on your mind?" she asked after a few breaths of silence. Oscar exhaled. Just one, long, soft yet burdened exhale. He closed his eyes for a second, gathering courage.

"It's the way you said 'I love you' last night. I know, it's probably nothing but... Do you remember our first night together?" he asked, pulling his brows together. Why couldn't he just let it go? Why did he always have to mull over things? That over analyzing nature of his a detrimental part of his obsessive behavior.
"Of course I do," Elise loosened her arms.

Oscar held back again. He was afraid to ask the question. So maybe he shouldn't. "Why do you ask?" Elise took a step back, her arms dropping to her sides. Oscar disliked the distance just created. At the same time, he was unsure if he should close it. He could see her defenses going up already, that foot wide gap feeling larger than it really was. "Oscar. Why are you asking?" she repeated more firmly. There was this gut feeling on her part. She had a sense of what was coming, but she could be wrong. She hoped she was wrong.

"Sometimes I wonder --- not often, just sometimes --- I wonder if you're really ready to move on," Oscar chewed on his bottom lip. He didn't expect the words to roll over his tongue this easily. But it was the truth. The way she'd said "I love you" made him wonder if she was truly ready, or if she'd ever been for that matter. Elise stepped back again, a rising disbelief on her face now.

"I see...." she moved her jaw side to side while looking to the ground. A sign of growing anger. "You're wondering if I'm thinking of Joe when I'm with you. When we're doing it," she looked back up. Her jaw settled to a stiff clench. That was anger alright.
"That's not what I said!" Oscar's lips became thin. His own defenses were circling upwards. Not as fast as hers but still.

"But that's what you actually mean." She gave him a hazardous stare, the kind that came with a twitch right below the left eye. "I suppose. I mean. --- Do you? ---- I mean, the way you said it, like you....," he bit his tongue. Literally.
"Like what, Oscar? Go on!" her voice trembled.
"I don't know. Kind of like you were sad that he wasn't on your mind. But also, like you only just started not thinking about him when... Ugh... Fuck," Oscar stammered. He knew he was walking on thin ice. He could hear the cracks yelling for him to stop down that path.

He ran his hands through his hair, messing up his curls, desperate to find the right words. "It doesn't bother me if you do. Because he's part of your life --- But at the same time it does. Shit. No, wait... --- Fffuuuuck. Anything I say now will make me sound like I'm an asshole. So maybe I should stop," he exhaled sharply. That vein on his neck. One million beats per minute!

"Yeah, maybe you should! Because.....," Elise chuckled furiously and sharply through gritted teeth as she looked to the ground. "I've never, NEVER thought about him while I've been with you. In fact, I actually thought it was weird. Because---," her voice elevated to a fierce level. Fierce enough to make the neighbor's dog bark. "---I'll be honest here. In the past, with other guys, I did think of Joe. In the beginning at least. And not that there were many, ok? But I never did that with you!" Elise's breathing became heavy. "Never! Not since the day I met you," she took in deep breaths. Oscar had seen this once before. That panic. That anger. At the Space Needle. Right before she'd fainted.
"Liz," he reached forward.

"Let me finish, dammit!" she snapped even louder. He withdrew his hand. She drew in one breath after another, trying to calm herself down. It seemed to somewhat work. "I haven't thought of him, not with you," her voice took on an eerie calmness. "And to be really honest, it scares me. Not the fact that I don't think of him when we're fucking!" She threw Oscar an icy glare when she said that. It actually made him hold his breath for a second. He'd never seen that look on her. Frigid rage was an understatement. "I'm glad that I don't... What scares me is that he's slipped my mind ever since I've met you." She bit her lip, letting out a disbelieving scoff, focusing back on the floor. The silence that followed was quite agonizing.

"He's fading," she whispered this time. "And I feel like I'm losing part of my life. He's not even in my dreams anymore," she gulped, silent tears rolling down her cheeks now. "I've always fought so hard to hold on. But I haven't. Not since I've met you," she looked back up at Oscar. Her whole body was shaking. Anger. Frustration. Fear. And - Oscar could've sworn- heartbreak. Yesterday had gone so well. So much joy. So much love. And now this.

"This ... This sucks because I knew this day would come. It always does. Eventually. That somehow always comes up." She bit her bottom lip. "Always."

"Sweetie. I didn't mean to..." Oscar started.

"Yes you did," she cut him off coldly. "Or else you wouldn't have mentioned it. Or thought about it. I'm glad you said something now and not --- I don't know --- A year from now? I get it. It's not easy. That compete against a memory shit," Elise looked across the skyline, her composure crumbling more and more by the second. "But just so you know, I said I love you the way I did because I really am ready to move on. I thought that was rather obvious by now!" She clutched the Golden Snitch necklace.

"But I guess it wasn't," Elise wiped away as many of the tears as she could. Oscar wasn't sure what to do. Why hadn't he just let it go?

"I'm gonna go for a walk," Elise gulped.

"Sweetie. Don't walk away. Please. Stay. Please?" Oscar reached for her hand but she swiftly moved past him and into her apartment. This. This was one of those taking a break moments.

He had always feared the day they would need one. He started clearing the table, mouthing a "fuck" when he heard the front door shut with a rather loud bang. He could've ran after her, but he knew if he did, it'd be over for sure. Right now, he felt that there was still a chance. However minuscule. Cornering her would've been bad.

He dropped the plates into the sink - cussing out another "fuck"- and got his cell from his back pocket, hitting the speed dial. Four rings in, the person on the other end picked up. "Hey. Listen. Can I come over? I think I fucked up. Like really fucked up," he started as he ran his hands through his hair over and over again. His breathing in panic mode, he broke down, waiting for the person on the other end to reply.

"Ok. Give me about thirty minutes," crackled through the speaker.

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A couple of hours later, Elise returned. Eyes still red, but at least she'd stopped crying. She kicked off her walking shoes, not caring where they landed. The apartment was quiet. She looked around. Oscar had cleaned up. He'd put the table back, cleaned the kitchen, fixed the bed, even cleaned the bathroom. But he was gone. The only hint that he might return was his suitcase in the hallway closet.

Elise checked her cell. She had turned it off during her walk. She secretly hoped he'd texted of
course. Nothing. She looked around again, hoping to spy a note. Nothing. Maybe he was on a walk of his own. Or maybe he'd decided to rent a hotel room for the remainder of his stay and he'd be back later to get his suitcase. Or maybe not until after she would leave for Tennessee.

Elise bit her bottom lip, the tears she thought she'd walked away starting up again. She sank down on her sofa, crying as she pulled the quilt over herself. She curled herself into a little ball and just sobbed. The silence of her apartment the least comforting thing right now.

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"Sweetie?" She felt a nudge against her shoulder, the voice distant. "Mi Linda?" She heard that familiar soothing tone. She slowly opened her eyes, a little disoriented. When had she fallen asleep? She couldn't remember.

"Hey," Oscar whispered, looking down on her as he caressed her face.
"You're back," Elise whispered as he slowly came into focus.
"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" he continued in a low voice, his brows pulled down in concern.

"I thought you left. I don't know. Maybe went to a hotel. Or my sister's." She sat up slowly.
"You didn't actually think it was that easy to get rid of me?" Oscar chuckled softly. His eyes looked tired, still. A little redder than earlier. His hair still a mess.
"You look like ... Like crap," Elise whispered.
"You should talk," he chuckled again, still caressing her face. Her eyes were still swollen and red from crying.

"I'm sorry," Elise started crying again. "I'm so sorry."
"For what, Sweetie? Hey. Hey... Come here." Oscar pulled her up to a stand. "What are you sorry for?" He closed his arms around her. "I'm the one who should be sorry. And I am." He kissed the top of her hair. "I really am sorry." He held her close.
"Ugh... I don't know. For just walking out. For blaming you for shit you have no control over. For yelling at you." She stepped back, those tears still rolling fast.
"That was yelling?" Oscar wiped away her tears. Another chuckle. Those wrinkles at the outside corners of his eyes curving upwards. At least they weren't the weary ones.
"What time is it?" Elise looked around after she'd calmed down a little. She'd lost track the moment she'd stepped outside.

"Two o'clock." Oscar pressed a kiss onto her forehead. "I got something for you," he whispered as he pulled back, gesturing to the sofa for her to sit back down. Elise plopped down, noticing a small, purple bag on the cherry-wood chest. A small sigh escaping her lips a sign that there had better not be anything expensive in there.

Oscar didn't waste time, retrieving a disc from the bag and sticking it into the DVD player. "I went to your sister's. I... Uhhmmmm,... I told her what happened. She. Uhhmmmm... I think she was ready to snap me in half." An awkward chuckle slipped out of his mouth. He paced back to the sofa, carefully sitting down next to Elise. He reached for her left hand, squeezing it tightly before pulling it towards his face, leaving behind a tender kiss and warm sigh.

He heaved his chest, hitching a breath, then finally focused his eyes on hers. Elise just stared at him, her glance drifting up and down now and then. He was back. He came back. He could've just said "fuck this" and left. But he was back.

"I love you," Oscar started with a cautious smile as he dropped her hand to his chest, still holding on tightly. "I know you love me. And I know you want to move on. I shouldn't have second-guessed that," he paused.
"And I want you to know, I would never, ever ask you to forget Joe. I'd never ask to take his place in your heart. Or your mind. I'm sorry he's slowly slipping from your memory. It can be scary..., thinking of losing that final piece that keeps someone present. But you know as much as I do..., Well, probably more than I do... He'll always be. Right. There." Oscar pointed to her heart.
"Always."

"And I know," his voice trembled. "I'll never get the same kind of love you gave him because we're different people. He and I, I mean. And that's actually a good thing because..., I don't want to be his replacement. And I know that I'm not. I can only hope that you love me with equal passion. That's all I ask for. And when we're ready...." Oscar smiled, a little more confident now. "When we're ready, we'll have our day...." he started up the rest of the system, letting go of Elise's hand in the process.

It took a few moments for the screen and system to boot, but once it did, Elise couldn't help but gape. The movie flickering across the screen was the last thing she'd expected to see. The last thing she'd expected Oscar to choose. Especially today.
"Where did you find this?" she asked, not steering away from the screen.
"Your sister had it. She still has a couple of boxes of stuff from your old place," Oscar side-eyed Elise. She stared at the screen, mouth ajar. Her expression between disbelief and a smile, another tear rolling down her cheek. A happy tear, he hoped.

"I remember the day I found that dress. I think I'd been to... Ten different stores? When we hit the last shop, I was ready to wear a potato bag. I didn't care," she chuckled as she watched herself on the screen. She was wearing a flowing, blue, chiffon dress with dainty, flowery accents. Her mom was fixing her hair, shooing away the videographer who kept interfering with her getting ready. A mirror revealed Christine being the person behind the camera. Then the video cut to the judge's chambers.

Beaming smiles across the board, but the widest was Joe's as he waited for Elise. The song "Kiss Me" by Sixpence None The Richer played in the background. Somehow, it fit their personalities. More Elise's than Joe's, really, but it fit. Joe was wearing his dress greens, of course, and the shiniest shoes Oscar had probably ever seen on anyone. Next to him stood James, grinning ear to ear, patting his brother on the back. A few seconds into the song, Raimund stepped through the door. On his left arm, a snickering Elise who was barely holding it together as her dad kept whispering something into her ear.

"He kept asking me if I was sure about this," Elise laughed as she watched her dad "hand" her over.
"He tried to make excuses. Like he heard a rumor that Joe was secretly collecting weird things, like Troll dolls or Furbies. Or that his hair would fall out. Or that he'd make me drink American beer for the rest of my life. My dad hates American beer," she snickered. The video cut out after the judge announced Joe and Elise as husband and wife, right after the kiss. Joe didn't wait for the judge to finish the sentence and just dove right in, taking Elise a bit by surprise. But it was a sweet kiss, one that ended in laughter.

"You didn't have a reception?" Oscar asked from the side. Elise was still staring at the screen.
"We did. I think Christine forgot the second battery pack. Or maybe it was dad. I did have pictures. I'm guessing Christine has those as well?" Elise turned her attention to Oscar.
"I think she does. She has a shoe box filled with pictures. She said she's sorting through them," Oscar smiled softly, and Elise drew in a self-soothing breath.
"Thank you," she leaned into his side, smiling.

"I've got one more for you," Oscar whispered into her hair.
"Ok," Elise chuckled, waiting for him as he changed the discs. He sat back down next to her, this time pulling her into his side before starting the movie. Christine's wedding video flickered across the screen now. This time it was Sandra who was helping the bride get ready.

Christine looked gorgeous, to say the least. Perfect hair, perfect makeup, perfect smile. Heartwarming. The fact that it took four women to get her into her wedding dress was quite amusing to Elise. She'd seen a few photographs of course, but it didn't stop Elise from thinking that she'd always pictured her sister in a simple A-line or empire dress. Traditional, sort of speak.

Instead, her sister had chosen a dress with a full skirt that looked and moved like a massive cumulonimbus cloud. The bodice, in contrast, was simple with delicate flower details on the straps. A deep-cut, open back another surprise to Elise as Christine had always been the more conservative of the two. But this was way better, the dress just adding to the loftiness of cloud nine smiles.

Purple hues were the dominant theme colors, from the luscious hydrangeas decorating the sides of the aisles to the accents in the groom's and groomsmen's suits. The bridesmaids surprisingly all wore dark, silver-gray dresses. Their bouquets, however, were in purple, making the color pop.

Elise paid close attention, wanting to catch that familiar smile. And sure enough, as the camera panned over the groomsmen's faces, there was Oscar's. Right next to James'. He had been the best man, after all. Clean shaven. Bright-eyed. His hair was quite different, though. Longer, all black, and straightened? Oscar must've felt Elise snicker because he lightly squeezed her arm in response.

Christine's walk down the aisle was a little more dramatic than Elise's, mainly because there had been more people at her sister's wedding. But Elise didn't care. She was focused on her sister now, and her dad. Their smiles overshadowed all. And her dad, of course, whispered something into his daughter's ear. Elise ventured it was the same things he'd told her.
"She looks so happy," Elise smiled. "She was," Oscar teased a kiss onto Elise's hair.

The rest of the video was the reception. People eating their food, the cutting of the cake, the first dance, which was surprisingly elegant. James must've taken lessons because, in reality, he was a bit of a klutz when it came to dancing. Two left feet kinda thing. But the video showed him graceful. He even dipped Christine. A relieved smile the only thing hinting that Christine was grateful for not getting dropped to the floor.

Elise spotted Oscar a few more times in the video. A beautiful woman on his side each time, except when he gave his speech. The woman was tall, taller than Oscar, which he didn't seem to mind. She had long, perfectly styled, bleach-blonde hair, a golden tan, perfect teeth, and clearly a perfect 90-60-90 figure [36-24-36 American equivalent of model standard]. A modelesque ringer for Margaret.

"That's Lorraine," Oscar revealed with a gloomy tone. Elise figured as much. She could also see why Christine had mentioned that Margaret was his type. Jealousy was a dangerous thing, and she felt it tugging. Not today. Not after the morning they had had.

She switched off the T.V., sinking into Oscar as he shifted towards the armrest. She nestled her head on his chest, and Oscar played with her hair. Gently twirling strands around his fingers, over and over.
"Tell me about the type of wedding you want. If ever..." he whispered as he continued to play with
her hair. "I don't know. I haven't really thought about it," Elise replied with a sigh. "If ever? ... Something small again. Maybe outside. In the fall. What about you?" She tilted her head so she could look into his eyes.

"Not sure. Small. Simple. Closest family and friends. It gets a little difficult with my family in that regard. I'm sure if I ever announced plans, my mom will probably invite the midwife that helped her bring me into this world," he chuckled.

"Awe. Your mom loves you, I'm sure," Elise giggled.

"Oh I know, she does. She's just waiting for the day," Oscar smiled, then got silent for a few minutes. "You know..., I don't think I ever asked you, or your sister. Whatever happened to your mom?"

"She passed a couple of years after Joe and I got married. Cancer," Elise returned her head to his chest. The warmth of his body felt so lovely against her. Soothing.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sweetie," Oscar replied as he ran his hand up and down her arm. Elise didn't respond. She just listened to Oscar's breathing. She was glad he'd come back. They stayed snuggled up a little while longer. Letting everything sink in.

"Do you... Do you want to go for walk? We can go check out the science museum. I didn't have time to see all the displays last time," Oscar asked cautiously. It had been a long morning.

"Mmmmm. No. They close in two hours," Elise explained after a quick glance at her cell. It was already four in the afternoon. "We can go take a stroll down the boardwalk if you want." She sat up, but Oscar stayed leaned against the armrest.

"I'd love that. Maybe we can pick up some beer for your dad," he smiled. "For dinner. Remember?"

"I know. I can't wait. We still have so much catching up to do," Elise beamed.

"I bet," Oscar chuckled when he saw a spark in Elise's eyes.

"Mmmmm hmmm. He said he had some big news as well," her smile grew even wider. "And I think I know what it is," she snickered.

"Ah yeah?" Oscar was curious. "Care to tell?"

"Mmmmm... Nope," Elise scrunched her nose and got up. Oscar immediately followed suit. He reached for her just when she was about to turn towards the hallway, pulling her close in a tight embrace.

"I really am sorry," he whispered.

"I know. So am I," she hugged him back.

"Are we... Are we ok?" Oscar stepped back, just a half pace.

"Yeah. Yes. We are. Just...," Elise heaved her chest.

"I know. --- I know," Oscar cradled her face. Elise held his hands in place, taking in the warmth of his skin against her cheeks. How good it felt to have him in her life. For little moments like this, especially. She granted him a smile, then took off to the bedroom to change.

It took her less than ten minutes to get ready this time. Even so, there was mad rustling coming from the bedroom. Oscar couldn't resist a chuckle when he heard her dashing back forth, a few cuss words under her breath when she deemed an outfit unworthy.

"Sweetie. Whatever you pick, I'm sure you'll look great," he offered when he heard her cringe at another choice.

"Yeah, well, it's dinner with my dad. And the in-laws. And it's Sunday. I kind of want to look... I don't know, presentable?" She huffed towards the living room.
"What do you think?" she spun around a couple of times waiting for a quick and honest answer but Oscar just stared with a dreamy smile. "Hello? Earth to Oscar." Elise playfully snapped her fingers.

"You look beautiful," Oscar breathed. She'd chosen a sea-green, knee-length, chiffon dress; the hue edging close to turquoise. Her favorite color. There were soft ruffles in the front that moved with every little step she took, and a thin belt cinching the dress just enough to show off her hourglass figure.

She wore a thin, white cardigan over the dress; dark tan boots and green-gold jewelry rounding off the look. Oscar had a difficult time categorizing the look - it was not business nor was it casual, not quite boho, not quite hipster, something in between - but it was so her and he loved it. And he loved that she'd chosen her favorite hue, or at least close to it. She'd been wearing a lot of yellow lately. And he liked that color on her just as much. Bright and cheery. In fact, the yellow, lacy, sunflower number was his new favorite on her. The turquoise hues, however..., well those just simply were her. He heaved a sigh, smiling a "Perfecto!" her way.

Elise stepped close to Oscar. His eyes were still a little sad. His smile a little guilt-filled. She knew he never meant to hurt her feelings. Not on purpose at least. She didn't blame him for those thoughts. She'd probably have wondered the same. Who wouldn't?

She hung her arms around his neck, waiting for his gaze to fix on hers. He was distracted by the fact that she was wearing the Golden Snitch necklace. "I love you, Oscar Isaac Hernández Estrada," she smiled with a nod, that reassuring timbre something he really needed.

"I know," he smiled as he traced over the necklace. "I know," he repeated, finally looking into her eyes. And then... A kiss. At last. A soft, reassuring, mutual kiss to move forward.

"Let's go," Oscar whispered.

"Hmmm... Fix your hair first," Elise chuckled. His curls were a mess, still. So he quickly fixed them up and back before heading out.

They spent the late afternoon by the waterfront, just strolling, looking out on the water. Oscar grabbed hold of Elise's hand, squeezing it tightly while they walked. The firmest grasp she'd ever felt like he was afraid she'd vanish. She squeezed back with equal pressure. No one stopped them today, but there were a few whispers, and Oscar's response was always a kind smile, but he never stopped. He had a look about him today that he'd rather not be interrupted while out and about with his companion and people seemed to understand.

The couple stopped by a few specialty shops before turning into a convenience store. Elise kept pacing back towards the baby aisle of the store, messing with the baby shampoos and lotions. She picked a few bottles with the words gentle and organic printed across the labels. "For Christine," she smiled shyly. Oscar knew she would keep at least one of those bottles for herself. He had spotted the small bottle of baby wash under the bathroom sink. Elise had secretly kept it from when her niece had stayed over on Wednesday.

"Should we get flowers? For Christine and Sandra?" he gestured towards a flower stand on the way out.

"Sure," Elise beamed. She picked a couple of mixed bouquets: one heavy on purple tulips, the other full of pink carnations.

Sharp at 6 p.m. they stood in front of James' and Christine's apartment door, Oscar holding on to the shopping bags while Elise chanced a sniff at the flowers before ringing the bell. Rushed
footsteps a few seconds later, and a glowing Christine greeted them.

"Hey. Come on. Come on. I have to finish peeling the potatoes before dad gets here," she beamed. Elise was already gearing towards the kitchen. The scent of German-style pot roast the likely reason she was quick on her heels. Oscar just laughed. Good food was about the only thing that made her forget he was around.

"So. You two! All good or what?" Christine side-eyed Oscar as they followed Elise to the kitchen. "Yes," Oscar smiled a somewhat scrunched smile. "Good. Because you wouldn't want to fuck up this weekend. Not while dad is here," Christine chuckled.

Oscar agreed. But with a shocked and wide-eyed nod. Shocked first at the fact that Christine had thrown in a swear word, and second at the thought of Raimund heaving a punch at him. The sisters' father wasn't as muscular as James and Edgar, but he stood a tall six-foot-two. Arm-length would've been in his favor.

"Get your hands away from that crock-pot!" Christine yelled. "A nibble. Please? Just a nibble?" Elise begged as Christine shooed her away. "No. Go away. It'll dry out if you keep opening the lid," Christine huffed, snatching the lid from Elise and replacing it on the crock-pot. "Oscar. Get your girlfriend and start setting up the table! The good dinnerware tonight!" Christine turned and pointed towards the china cabinet. That authoritative timbre was rare but Oscar knew that he better scurry and do what Christine demanded when she took on that tone.

Elise didn't seem as frightened. As evident by her trying to sneak another peek into the crock-pot while her sister was distracted. "Oh. My. God. I will restrain you if I have to." Christine lifted her brow when she turned back around, her voice elevating in annoyance. "You wouldn't dare," Elise countered. Brow lifting equally as high. Voice resonating equally as loud, her hand spidering to the lid of the crock-pot in defiance. "Watch me," Christine dared as she squinted at Elise's hand. Elise didn't back off. Two inches, one inch, half an inch, quarter inch, less than one-sixteenth. "Elise!!" Christine warned with a hiss, ready to dart towards her sister.

"Hey. Stop! None of that!" James' voice boomed. Once again, he'd managed to be around just on time, returning from picking up his parents and his father-in-law when he heard the quarreling voices. Now he stood between the sisters, arms stretched out to keep them from closing in on each other. A warning glance towards his sister-in-law to withdraw her hand from the crock-pot. A warning glance towards his pregnant wife to not do anything dangerous that might get her hurt.

"We're just joking," Christine rolled her eyes. "Riiiight. So, I can just walk away then, hmm?" James held his position. That tone was a little too condescending for the sisters, as proven by the threatening glares darting towards James. "Tsssss. Oh kay ...," he bowed his head; hastily shuffling backward to the dining room table.

Oscar, of course, thought it quite amusing how a six-foot-tall, two-hundred-pound man faltered so quickly when his opponents were merely five-foot-six and five-foot-nine lightweights. But he got it. There's nothing more threatening than when siblings teamed up. And those glares were definitely a team move.

"Are they always like that?" Oscar whispered while he set the plates. "You should see them on Christmas when they're decorating the tree," James whispered back while
rolling the napkins.
"Did you guys say something?" Christine squinted at them.
"Nope!" shot out in unison, both men trying their best to hide impish smirks.

"You should've let them scuffle," Edgar laughed when he got to the kitchen.
"Don't encourage them, dad," James shook his head. He geared towards the fridge and got his dad a beer.
"Christine would've won, and you know it," Edgar chuckled as he took a seat by the kitchen island.
"Dad!" James warned, still not amused. His worry was of course valid. His wife was barely two months pregnant and if it was up to him, he would dress her in a million layers of bubble wrap to protect her from whatever.

"Where's dad?" Christine peered to the hallway.
"Mom and he are checking in on Chloé," James explained as he helped peel the potatoes. "Darling, I can finish the rest. Go talk to your dad," he gently pushed Christine out of the kitchen.
"Ok, but keep her away from the crock-pot," Christine tilted her head towards Elise.
Elise rolled her eyes at her sister, sticking out her tongue before finally meandering towards Oscar to help with the table.

Oscar, being a bit of a non-caring nature where items belonged, just placed the forks, knives, and spoons wherever. Elise watched him from the side. Oscar, of course, caught her eyeballing him. He was about to place another fork when he halted, staring at Elise from the side. She shook her head. So he moved the fork over to the other side. She shook her head again. Second from the left, farthest left, far right? "Ok, Sweetie, could you just ... Show me," he huffed in desperation.

Elise giggled, pressing a soft kiss on his cheek when she took the fork from his hand. She set up a sample so Oscar could repeat, then she fixed the disastrous napkin rolls James had created. Other than the repetitive noises from dinnerware getting set and potatoes getting peeled it was quite silent in the kitchen.

Oscar gave Elise a few once-overs, smiling at her subconscious little quirks, like the way she bit her lips when she was focused on some delicate task or the way she checked the silverware numerous times to make sure there weren't any smudges.

Of course - more subconsciously than not really - his glance trailed other places, too, outlining her from top to bottom. Not so much undressing her as noticing certain things. Like how her fingers were rather dainty and how he loved them being so. They fit perfectly into his hands. How her legs were a little thick but trained. She loved walking and biking and swimming and it showed. How her hair always looked a bit bead-head but in a perfect way.

Oscar glanced down her legs again, only just now noticing the Star-Trek-themed science-blue socks. He let out a snicker. His little nerd.
"When's the wedding?" Raimund jested behind Oscar. He, in turn, jumped at the fact that Elise's dad was standing not even a foot away. He should've noticed the tall shadow lurking from behind but he'd been in "what if" land. Oscar turned quite red at the ears.

"Papa. Benimm dich, [Dad, behave yourself,]" Elise scolded with a snicker.
"I can't ask?" Raimund queried. His accent thick as ever.
Oscar gulped. Why were all the men in this family so damn tall? He'd not stand a chance should he say something wrong.
"What? First, you're the best man at Jim's and Tina's wedding. And now you're courting Liz," Raimund's face had a curious expression. Something between protective mode and knowing
"Uhhhm...," Oscar gulped again. Elise's dad was a lot more intimidating when he didn't smile. "Papa!" Elise warned.

"Just making conversation," Raimund laughed, at last, trapping Oscar with his right arm. Oscar just sort of squeezed out a wheezy chuckle. Somehow being in a side hug didn't ease the tension. He felt an interrogation coming his way. And sure enough, as soon as Elise excused herself to check on Christine and Sandra, Raimund bombarded Oscar with questions.

Of course, Raimund knew the basics. He'd met Oscar a few times over. But now the actor was dating one of his daughters. So Oscar took a nervous seat by the kitchen island, Edgar and James silently peeling potatoes and prepping salads as the interrogation went on. The questions really not that unusual, just a little early into the relationship - at least for a father to ask. Like what Oscar's goals were; if he was financially stable; if he was ok with her being a career woman; if he'd be willing to move for her, or help her move should they get to that point; and if he wanted kids, the latter opening a discussion of her right to say no if she didn't. In the end, it came down to the one question any parent would and should ask: was Oscar treating her right?

"It's a simple yes or no," Raimund waited with a stern face. Oscar hitched a breath. To his surprise, the nervousness he'd felt earlier was long gone. "You'd have to ask her, sir," he answered with honesty and confidence.

Raimund smiled, patting Oscar on the back. "Good answer," he smirked. "So, another grandchild?" Raimund shifted his attention to James. Another interrogation imminent. Questions of financial stability of course. If they'd finally move into a house in the suburbs. And how Christine was doing. "We're good." "If we find something close by, yes." "She's alright. Just severe morning sickness. Like last time." James knew to keep his answers short and to the point with Raimund. Oscar took note.

"This is a nice view," Sandra joked as she joined the men. Despite conversation, they'd been rather quiet, so Christine had sent her mother-in-law to check in.

"We promise, nothing is burned," Edgar chuckled.

"I didn't ask. But maybe you should let Oscar cook. He knows his way around the kitchen better than any of you," Sandra grinned. It was the first time she'd been warm towards Oscar. He, of course, took immediate notice.

"Uhmmm... Thank you?" he stammered in surprise.

"I still don't quite approve," Sandra raised her brow. "But I guess, Elise is happy," she sighed.

What a leap for her. Oscar gratefully accepted what little progress they'd just made.

"What are they doing, anyways?" James got his mother a glass of wine.

"Talking. Sister kind of stuff," Sandra smiled as she took the glass to the living room to watch the news.

It was definitely a talk between sisters. They were lying on the king-size bed, Chloé in the middle and snoozing away while they talked about Elise's morning. Christine listened with a few "mmmmmm hmmm's" and "I sees".

"I guess, I should've known the day would come. I just wish Oscar had been..." Elise sighed.

"More tactile about it?" Christine hit the nail on the head.

"Yes. Not that I was much better. Blaming him for Joe slowly disappearing," Elise twisted her mouth. She gently tickled Chloé's feet, her niece kicking her legs in annoyed reflex.

"Well. You know as well as I do that there'll be bad days. You just need to talk it out," Christine
stated while playing with her daughter's hair. Elise just nodded. She ventured they'd be more days like this. Especially with July just around the corner.

"Thank you for the videos by the way," Elise smiled. "Hmmm... It was Oscar's idea to dig up some memories," Christine revealed, still focused on playing with her daughter's wispy hair. "Really?" Elise contracted her brows in surprise. Christine just gave her sister a knowing little smirk before returning her attention back to Chloé.

"God, she's getting so big," Elise snickered. She tickled Chloé's foot again. This time Chloé kicked back hard. "I know, right? And she'll be a big sister," Christine smiled. Her eyes, however, didn't. "You ok?" Elise queried softly.

Christine heaved her chest, looking over her daughter. "I'm scared," she confessed. "Why? I thought everything was ok," Elise perplexed. "I know. And it is. Still. The last time, I was so sick. Severe morning sickness. It was so bad, they kept me in the hospital a few times to feed me through an NG tube," Christine explained. "Oh. I didn't know it was that bad. Oscar had mentioned something but..." Elise started. "We didn't tell him in too many details. I mean, I felt hungry. I just couldn't keep anything down. And it's already started this time around," Christine sighed. "Well, I'm here this time. I'll make sure you'll be ok," Elise smiled, squeezing her sister's hand.

"Unless you move before this one is born," Christine chuckled as she rubbed her tummy. "Why would I move?" Elise was taken aback a little. "Oh come on. You and Oscar. The way it's heading," Christine grinned. "That doesn't mean I'll move soon. Or at all. He can move here," Elise scoffed. "Yeah right. Brooklyn is his home. Besides, I think you'll like it there," Christine scrunched her nose. Unlike Elise, Christine had been to NYC a few times now, visiting whenever James stayed more than two weeks on the East Coast.


"Heya, Ladies," James poked his head into the room. He quietly moved towards the bed. "Dinner is pretty much ready," he whispered while he lifted Chloé from the center of the bed without waking her. "Should we wake her?" he swayed his daughter side to side. "Yes please." Christine got up, and Elise followed suit.

They made their way to the kitchen, the rest of the family already waiting. "Wow, how long were we talking," Christine's eyes got wide when she saw that they'd already set the serving dishes on the table. "Just long enough." James teased a kiss onto Christine's cheek before taking his seat, Chloé in his arm.
Raimund sat at the head of the table. To his left sat Christine, James, then Sandra. To his right were Elise, then Oscar. Opposite end was Edgar. The center of the table was filled with serving trays and wine bottles, a bottle of cider for Christine, who of course couldn't drink alcohol.

The family dinner was a much warmer affair than the last get together. Clanking of trays, bottles, and glasses as they passed the food and wine around. They all laughed at travel adventures and Oscar's on-set stories. He mentioned costume failures and awkward audition tapes. Elise's eyes widened in horror a few times over. "That's showbiz, Sweetie," he laughed.

Raimund did little eating or talking. He was busy holding his granddaughter, feeding her puréed carrots, talking to her in German and Spanish. Christine let him after he'd insisted he take over for James. He'd not been around for his granddaughter until yesterday, and he wanted to spend every minute with her. One would think he'd get tired but his energy didn't waver.

"She'll get confused if you talk to her in too many languages," Sandra raised her brow.
"She'll be fine," Christine countered. If there was one thing she disliked it was her mother-in-law giving unwanted advice regarding raising her child.
"Eh, Berenjena Pequeñita. ¡Estarás bien! Serás un políglota. Al igual que su tía." Oscar squeezed Elise's hand while he talked to Chloé.
"You need to stop calling her that," Christine frowned.
"It fits," Raimund chimed in.
"Papa! Not you, too!" Christine disapproved.

"So dad," Elise started with a big smile on her face. "What's the big news?" she fidgeted on her chair.
The clanking of silverware stopped instantly. All eyes were on Raimund. But he just finished feeding his granddaughter, gently burping her first before placing her in the baby swing.
"PaaaaAAAPPaaa!" Elise extended the word, it was almost whiny.
Raimund heaved his chest, a content smile on his face as he sat back down.

"I met someone." He looked around, the universal "and???” faces peering at him. "We've sort of moved into each other's apartments," he went on. "And??" faces lingering. "I think, she's the one," he beamed.
"Oh, Papa. Das ist ja super!" Elise hopped off her chair, hugging her dad.
"Hast du schon gefragt?" Christine asked after she'd hugged him as well.
"Do you have pictures?" Sandra craned her neck to see if Raimund had heard.
He got out his phone. "I have not asked, yet," he smiled towards Christine. "But maybe... when I go home," his smile so wide now it rivaled a half-moon. "Her name is Mireia. She's from Catalonia." He pulled up a picture and handed his cell around.
"She's very pretty," Elise grinned as she handed the phone back. The picture Raimund had chosen to share was a selfie type snapshot of the couple.

Mireia looked close to Raimund's age. Maybe five or six years younger. Elise just guessed her around fifty-one or fifty-two, the younger range, but she could be wrong. Mireia had quite a few laugh lines, which Elise liked, and big, deep-brown, almost black eyes which seemed to sparkle with intelligence. Long black curly hair framed Mireia's roundish face, and there was a tiny gap between her two front teeth.

"Here's us in Berlin." Raimund sheepishly handed the cell around again. This time it was a touristy picture in front of the Fernsehturm at Alexanderplatz. It must've been middle of winter as they were dressed in heavy jackets and long scarves, both looking quite squishy and rosy-cheeked. Mireia stood a whole head shorter than Raimund. Elise couldn't quite tell, but she looked curvy, not
excessively. Just right.

"She's a chef. Has her own restaurant in Palamós," Raimund just couldn't stop smiling. Elise's glance fell to her dad's tummy. Him dating a chef explained his midsection. "She spoils me," he grinned when he caught his daughter's fleeting glance. Elise just nodded. She was happy for him. He'd had a few relationships since Elise's mom passed away, but it was never "moving in" serious. So this was definitely a big deal. The real thing as he put it. Not that Elise's mother hadn't been. But she knew what he meant.

"Wait, you moved into each other's places. She lives in Spain and you in Germany?" Sandra asked with some confusion.
"For now it's weekends mostly. Eventually, I'm hoping to move to Spain altogether. We're looking into the whole legal process. Immigration and all that," Raimund explained, his voice very hopeful. "So Catalonia, huh?" Oscar rubbed over his chin. "It explains your pronunciation, then. Does she speak both? Spanish and Catalan?" he prodded on.
"Yes. And she's trying to teach me both. I guess the Spanish just sticks easier," Raimund nodded.

"Are we going to meet her? Before you guys tie the knot?" Christine worried.
"Of course. We're not eloping. I had planned on inviting you all," he smiled softly.
"Another wedding," Elise snickered.
"Another?" Christine perked her brow.
"Sounds like there'll be party galore," James chimed in.
"No kidding. Two weddings, one baby shower, maybe an engagement party?" Christine wiggled her brows and shimmied her shoulders towards Oscar and Elise.

They just heaved their chests, Oscar whispering out an "eventually" before he pulled Elise's hand to his lips. They all talked a little while longer. Sandra took over grandparent duty, playing with Chloé, giving her tiny kisses all over her chubby cheeks. Quite amusing to Elise who was still adjusting to the doting grandmother image.

Christine apologized to Oscar that his dream suite likely be converted to the master bedroom, and the current one get changed to Chloé's room while Chloé's room likely become the new nursery. Or maybe they'd reduce the guest suite and restructure the nursery, adding an extra room to the apartment that way. "You can always sleep on the couch while we renovate," James jested.

"Or you guys can move into a bigger house," Raimund and Edgar said in almost perfect synchronization. The men quite eager to point out a few properties they'd researched at some point before dinner. Christine's and James' responses were silent nods and fleeting glances at each other. Most likely a little annoyance that their parents - their fathers more specifically - were really rather forward with wanting them to move out of the city.

It was Elise who decided to call it a night around 10 p.m. She'd been watching her sister go from pale to paler, that pregnancy exhaustion tugging on her already thin frame. "Don't forget your gifts," Christine reminded as she hugged Elise and Oscar goodbye for the night. "And thank you. For the flowers. And the baby shampoo," she smirked with wiggling brows. Elise just replied with a firm "no". She knew exactly where her sister's mind had gone to. Baby talk had come up during their conversation. There was a spark in Elise's eye though. That was undeniable.

"Look at that!" Elise furrowed her brows when they arrived back at her place. She had opened the box of chocolates her father had brought from Germany the second they'd reached the kitchen. The
year supply had been tampered with. The evidence the fact the chocolates were now shifting around a little when last night they'd been packed tightly.

Elise counted silently. "She stole at least two Milka bars and a box of Kinder chocolates" Elise shook her head. "Stop looking at me like that. German chocolate is serious business in my family. It's each woman on her own," she frowned.
"Sweetie, we'll get more in Germany," Oscar laughed, quickly biting his lip when he backtracked. "What makes you say that?" Elise perked her brow.
"Mmmmm... Just a hunch," Oscar pulled her close.

"A hunch, huh?" she peered towards the left-hand bookshelf as she looped her arms around his neck. "Hmmm. Well. It would be nice if we get to go. I'm not sure yet, with Christine being pregnant. I'd love to be there when the baby comes," she played with his curls.
"Well. We can do both. A four day weekend would fit perfectly into my schedule," Oscar smiled, trying his best to hold back that he'd have to go to Europe anyways for movie-related reasons.
"That's where the secret fits in, huh?" Elise tugged a little harder on one of his curls making him tilt his head back.
"Exactly," Oscar smiled. Elise let go of him, ready to head to the bedroom, but Oscar caught her by her arm and pulled her back into his body for a languid kiss.

"Bedtime," Elise wrinkled her nose. They changed, brushed their teeth, then huddled up under the blanket. Elise hadn't noticed until now, but Oscar had left the fairy lights wrapped around the headboard. She switched them on, then snuggled into his side.

"I've been meaning to ask. Why don't you have a TV in your bedroom?" Oscar played with her hair as she listened to his heartbeat.
Elise sighed. "It's something..." she hesitated. "Joe was adamant about," she looked up to see Oscar's reaction. He continued to play with her hair, waiting. "He said that the bedroom was for two things. Sleep and making babies," Elise returned her head into Oscar's side, snickering against his skin.
"I see. Well, that's a good enough reason for me then," he chuckled.
"Might as well, or else I'd watch steamy movies and you'd never get to sleep," Elise wisecracked.
"Ohhhhh ... I see!" Oscar lifted his brow, looking down. Only Elise's eyes were peeking at him over the edge of his chest. "How steamy are we talking?" his expression quite curious.

"Eh... In Secret steamy, maybe a little more. Nothing hardcore," Elise wiggled her brows.
"I keep forgetting that you've seen that movie. Out of all the ones you could've picked," he scrunched his nose.
"Tricia may have had some influence which movies I should watch first," she revealed with a nonchalant tone.
"Oh. Ohhhhhhh? Ohhhhh!" Oscar's ears turned red. "I'll never be able to look at her the same way again," he gritted his teeth.
"Same. I always thought she was conservative but after last night's "sex at the workplace talk", I'm not sure which is the true Tricia" Elise laughed.

"So... Uhhmmm... You're not bothered," Oscar treaded carefully. They'd talked about his movies here and there. But he never got into full detail about the filming processes. He had mentioned he could get quite compulsive. But he never explained his thought process and how he got to the persons he portrayed, or how and why he acted in intimate scenes the way he did. He was certain though that Elise knew a few things, even if she didn't let on.

"By what? That you've done soft porn?" Elise sat up.
"It was close to. But yeah," Oscar was quite surprised by her reaction. He'd expected her to blush. Maybe stutter a little.
"A little maybe. I mean. I haven't thought about it too much," she relaxed back into his side. "It's part of your job, I suppose. I was a little jealous though. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't," she sighed. "You'd tell me, though. If you were making another one like that. Right?" Elise looked up, waiting.

"Of course, Sweetie," he assured.
"Ok good. And when you're finished filming we can try out whatever you take away from it," Elise wiggled her brows. Oscar just stared in response for a minute.
"I... I don't even know how to ... You're something else," he laughed.
"I know," Elise snickered.

Oscar played with her hair a little while longer. Just tender repetition of curling a single strand around his index. The tranquility, of course, had Elise fast asleep. Oscar didn't last much longer after her little purred snores commenced.

Monday morning came way too fast for both. Elise really wanted to stay in bed and snuggle with Oscar, maybe play with his hair while he snoozed away, but she forced herself to get up. She had emails to sift through before heading to work and she was determined to get some of her regular routine back. Oscar, of course, grumbled a little, but even he conceded that he'd fallen out of a regular schedule in favor of Elise. In favor of new love.

Despite the irregularities in his life - film schedules, traveling, research for roles - , he had always made it a point to get up early enough as to look somewhat professional, even on his days off. It came with success. That take life a little more serious attitude, especially if he wanted to stay in the business. He had had his fun of course, but when the roles got bigger he became more determined. More focused. He'd realized some time ago that he was in this for the long haul and not for some one-time, big-payout, fast celebrity kind of break.

The change wasn't as welcome by his ex, and she always whined that he'd stopped doing anything fun when in reality he didn't. In fact, his life was quite the adventure. Somehow, traveling the world to film on location and promoting the movies once post-production was over wasn't Lorraine's idea of fun. She wanted to be either around him twenty-four seven or be around his friends twenty-four seven. That in itself wasn't bad, really. But it was party mode all the time. Reluctant to lift a finger to earn the rewards that were the parties. Oscar pondered for a moment. When did their paths split? Were they even on the same path from the get-go? Lust over love. Fun while it lasted. He sighed then finally got out of bed, too.

He snuck into Elise's office a few times to steal kisses, but a firm "Lindo! I really need to get through these!" had him back off. So he made breakfast and read through his own emails at the dining room table. "Sorry about that. I'm trying to be good before I leave and get as much work done as possible," Elise explained when she sat down to eat her food.
"It's alright Sweetie," Oscar smiled. Somehow, her wanting, and needing, to get back on track was a good sign in his eyes.

"That reminds me, thank you for the birthday video," Elise smiled as she sipped on her coffee. "Oh. I completely forgot we had sent that," Oscar laughed. "They can't wait for you to come back. Olivia already went out and bought a few party games," he huffed out another laugh.
"Great. I'll be teaming up with Alex if she's there," Elise stuck out her tongue. She knew Oscar would likely argue her on that when time came, but he just laughed for now and her heart skipped a beat. "I have to get dressed. Really need to get going," she sighed.
"I know Sweetie. Go get ready. I'll make you some lunch," Oscar offered and Elise accepted with a
Their goodbyes were quick this morning, but a kiss was something neither wanted to skip. "I'll see you later," Oscar smirked when Elise let out that weak-in-the-knees sigh, and she shook her head with an "Oh, you".

Monday mornings. Fast pace. Elise was still stuck taking care of minor side contracts while waiting out the project. When she asked Richard how much longer, he shrugged and said "Could be weeks or months. Or god forbid, years!" There was an annoyed undertone, a heavy cringe at the thought of the whole thing. He looked ready to call it quits, and he'd never looked ready to call it quits. Elise gave him a sympathetic smile. She was sure once the different parties reached an agreement, the project would move forward at lightning speed and a small team would be dispatched to keep an eye on it all. That's how it always worked and they hadn't failed, yet.

One thing was certain this Monday morning: Helen's and Matt's engagement was the talk of the day. People kept asking Helen to show the ring and how the whole thing had gone down. Matt was almost equally interrogated. When? Where? How? Why? "Friday." "At Broadway." "On one knee with a rose." "Obviously love." Elise snickered. They were both still quite young. But oh so in love. She was grateful for the distraction their engagement caused, shifting focus away from Oscar's and her relationship.

"Hey, Sweetie. How was your day?" Oscar greeted her with a warm hug. Elise set her briefcase on the dining room table, peeking into the kitchen. Fresh produce on the counter, cutting board out, something simmering on the stove.

"Boring," she huffed.

"Awe. I'm sorry, mi Linda." Oscar kissed her forehead.

"You're cooking early today?" Elise glanced at her watch. It was only 5:30 p.m.

"Your dad is coming over," he explained.


Elise froze. The way he'd said home. Not "your apartment". Not "back here". But home. As in theirs. "Sometimes I feel you know my family better than I do," Elise sighed. Her heart pounded wildly as she was still clinging on to the way he'd said home.

"Your sister told me," Oscar chuckled. Like it was the most obvious answer.

"You going to change?" Oscar asked while he wiped his hands on a towel. "You ok?" he asked softly when he noted her dreamy gaze.

"Perfect," Elise smiled. She didn't think it possible but she'd just fallen more in love with Oscar. "I think, I'll just stay like this, change after dad leaves," she added. "Ok," Oscar pressed a kiss on her left side temple, squeezing her hips lightly in the process.

Sharp at 6 p.m., Raimund stood at the threshold, holding up a bouquet of sunflowers for his daughter. Elise was quick to show him around the apartment. He'd not been here before. He smiled when he saw the bookcases, running his hands over them, thoughts drifting to memories of his late son-in-law.

"So, what do you think?" Elise beamed after she showed him her office.

"It's nice. A little small for two people," Raimund glanced to Oscar who in turn was setting the table. He'd made pork chops with applesauce, roasted potatoes, and steamed string beans. Simple
enough, but not simplistic. He'd used those terms a few times since he met Elise. "We're not living together, Papa," Elise clarified as she took a seat. "Not in a traditional sense at least. Not yet," she added; her tone very serious. "I know. I was only making an observation," Raimund curled his lips to a smile. "I want to make sure you're happy," he explained.


"Ugh. Fuck it. You're right. We'll work out la... Some other time," Elise - wide-eyed - caught herself before she could say later. Her dad just raised his brow. He wasn't oblivious. Boundaries though. Boundaries! Certain things weren't meant for parents' ears.

The topics shifted, if somewhat awkwardly, to plans in the coming weeks. Raimund sat there, eyes very wide as he listened to their schedules. A busy life was nothing new to him, but even so, he wondered how they'd make it work. Of course travel for fun came up as well. "What's a Bonnaroo?" Raimund asked with drawn in brows.

"It's a music festival. That's why I'm leaving Wednesday," Elise sighed. "I wish I had known you'd be here. I wouldn't have booked the trip."

"It wouldn't have been a surprise if I had," Raimund crinkled his nose. "Papa! You know what I mean," Elise countered.

"We'll see each other more often now. I'm sure. Now that what's his name is out of your life," Raimund stated quite bluntly. Elise threw him a short glare. "I'm not blaming you. But I will not lie at the fact that I'm glad you're not with him anymore," she paused. "Now on to dessert," Raimund winked at Elise. She got up and gathered the plates. The cook shouldn't have to clean was a mindset of hers. But she also took the hint that maybe Raimund wanted a few words with Oscar alone. So she rinsed the dishes while the men talked.

"You'll watch out for her, won't you?" She overheard her dad ask Oscar. "I don't think she needs watching out for. She can handle herself," Oscar countered. "I know she can. But I also know how dangerous Frank is," Raimund pointed out.

"You think he'd hurt her? After she's been gone for so long? Out of his life I mean," Oscar's voice became alarmed.

"I would not put it past him. He's a bitter man. He's going to be even more bitter when he finds out she's happy with someone else. That's how someone like him reacts. I've seen it before. With Elise's father," Raimund revealed.

Elise couldn't see Oscar's reaction as she was getting the dessert dishes ready. But she guessed that he must've looked quite shocked. As was Elise. She'd never heard Raimund mention her biological father. Ever. Her mother had told her that they'd divorced when she was a baby and that was it. And Elise never questioned it. Her mother was happy and Raimund had always treated her as his own. Always. She never thought of him as stepdad. Just as dad.
"There you are," Oscar smiled. But only his mouth. Elise could always tell when it was an acted smile and this was one, and she didn't care for it. "Thought you ate all the desserts by yourself," he jested. "I was contemplating. I love these just as much as strawberry shortcake," her smile just as acted as Oscar's.

The rest of the evening went on with a more somber tone. Elise was itching to ask Raimund about her biological father but she bit her tongue for now. She hadn't seen him for so long. She wanted to hear about the great and the joyful events in his life.

Apparently, he'd been traveling a lot more lately, meeting Mireia on one of his trips to Spain. He seemed keen on the idea of moving there. Another explanation for why he actually tried to learn a new language. He showed a few more pictures. Some of Mireia's restaurant. Some of them together. Some of just Mireia caught in serene moments, like reading a book or looking out the window.

The idea of bringing him stateside, of course, was shot down quickly. "I'm not that old, yet," Raimund let out a husky laugh. "Oh, I know. We didn't want you to be lonely. I mean all this, it changes everything," Elise smiled. "I think you'll love it there, Raimund," Oscar patted Raimund on the arm. "You've been to Spain?" Elise got curious.

"Yes. Checked out some of the locations just for fun. I have a movie scheduled to film there," he divulged with a little hesitation. Elise and he hadn't talked plans past August. He was hoping to ease her into his busy filming schedule that was barreling his way.

"Oh where at?" Raimund was just as curious. "Hmmm, right now... Castilla La-Mancha, Aragón, and I think Andalucía as well. But pretty much across the country the way it was sold to me," he nodded. "Well, if you're ever near Palamós let me know. We'll make space. Liz, you could fly out. Make it a small vacation when Oscar is taking a break from filming," Raimund suggested. They both loved the idea of course. Schedule crunch popped into their minds. "We'll see. Timing and all," Oscar grinned.

"Well. I better get going," Raimund got up. "I'll swing by your office tomorrow, hmmm? For lunch?" he tweaked Elise's nose. She agreed, of course, smiling albeit some sadness in the way she hugged her dad.

"Do you need me to get you anything tomorrow, Sweetie?" Oscar asked while shaving. He'd been comfortable since day one in leaving the bathroom door open when he shaved or showered. "No, I should be good," Elise got her toothbrush and brushed her teeth. That initial shyness of spitting in the sink, long gone.

"You got something... Right --- there," Oscar cleaned her face with a washcloth, then kissed the spot he'd just wiped away some toothpaste from. "Go to bed. You have a long day ahead," he whispered. Elise was out before he even made it to the bedroom.

And he wasn't wrong about the long day thing. Tuesday came in like a hurricane. Elise got ready for the office, multitasking between doing laundry, checking her emails, and gathering her festival must have's for the trip: camera, batteries, extra SD cards, wristbands. Wristbands? Where the hell... In the top drawer of her desk of course!

"I have to get cash before I come home. Or maybe I can just get it at the airport," she huffed as she rushed to fix her hair.
"Get it before you come home. Airports charge horrendous fees," Oscar suggested. To him, this morning was a dance sort of speak as he tried to avoid bumping into his companion. Elise was all over the place, getting things and checking them off a list. A little disorganized. The first time he'd seen her like this.

"Sweetie, you'll be late. You can do the rest later," Oscar pointed to his watch. "I know, I know. I just want to see if I actually do need something from the store," she scurried. "Ok. If you think of something, send me a text, and I'll pick it up after the interview," Oscar offered with a calming tone. "Oh shit. I forgot you had that today," Elise stopped dead in her tracks. "I hope it'll go well. I know sometimes they ask a lot of personal stuff," she added. "Sweetie. Mi Linda. No... Mi Reina," Oscar placed his hands on her hips to stop her from moving around. "Go to work. I'll be ok. Send me texts and I'll pick up whatever you need. And I'll finish your laundry, ok? Go," he nudged her towards the door. "Ok. Ok... Thank you. Make sure to sort..." Elise couldn't finish. Oscar had pretty much crashed a kiss onto her lips. "Go!" He pointed to the door with a chuckle.

When Elise returned in the evening, the excitement seemed tenfold. Lunch with her dad had gone well, but she admitted to crying when telling him bye. "You'll see him again, soon. I'm sure," Oscar consoled her when he saw tears welling up again. "I know. I just. I didn't realize I missed him this much," Elise sniffled. Then she was back to packing and checking off lists and reminding Oscar about her plants and how much water they needed. Christine would know of course.


They stood there, stuck in this moment for a while. But hunger was an interesting thing, and now that Oscar had made her aware, Elise couldn't deny that it was tugging. So they sat down and ate pizza, and Elise spilled like a waterfall, telling him about all the things she was looking forward to on this trip. And he sat there, listening intently as she went on. Not saying a word. Just smiling as he thought "Marry me!"
"It's a good thing you held up that sign or else we would've sprinted right past you," Elise laughed when she hugged her BFF Mikki. "Ha! Ha!" Mikki huffed in Elise's embrace, sarcastic frown on face. She knew that comment was aimed at her elfin-like stature. At five-foot-three, Mikki stood half a head shorter than her friend. Of course, she knew it was just a playful tease, and an eye-rolled smile quickly replaced the frown.

They'd always been like that. Elise and Mikki. Mikki and Elise. Two peas in a pod since the day they had met nearly nine years ago. Their love for concerts the common denominator that had their paths cross at some random encounter during a Justin Timberlake gig. The gig had been one of Mikki's first photo shoots, and for Elise, it had been her first VIP experience and her first night out since Joe. They shook hands with Justin, taking pictures with him at the same time, and afterward, they somehow both ended up at the same Seattle bar, hoisting back drinks with JT's sound crew while singing *Bohemian Rhapsody* on the top of their lungs.

Their conversations that night revealed shared pastimes, identical political views, and a similar need for brutal honesty in a jested way; both knowing when to reel it back a notch and when to go all out. It's kept them both quite sane over the years. That honesty especially important when relationship disasters struck and they both needed someone to be supportive - but also a bit of a pain in the ass so neither would succumb to that post-relationship blues.

"You should use a flagpole next time. So you don't wear out your arms," Patricia chimed in with a laugh. Mikki just rolled her eyes in pretended annoyance, a smirk hiding at the corner of her mouth. Her BFFs were tag-teaming today, but again, Mikki knew it was all in good fun. She, of course, had her own roast style stingers to throw back, poking fun at her friends for arriving severely overdressed to the hundred degree Tennessee heat.

"No kidding. We should change before we hit the road," Patricia huffed when the three finally geared towards the exit. "I should probably call the kids, too. Let them know we landed safe and sound."

"Who's watching them?" Elise asked when they squeezed past a group of teenagers, all of whom seemed to be heading to the same destination as the women; Bonnaroo flags and bandanas giving the young travelers away. One of the teens flipped a thumbs-up their way when he saw Mikki sporting a festival shirt. The women reciprocated the gesture with snickers and a "see you on the farm"; the group of teens loudly dancing off towards what appeared to be their group leader holding up a unicorn piñata.


"Hmmm...," Elise just hummed in response. She'd met Patricia's mom only twice, and both times
it seemed that there was a disdain towards the grandmother image, something Elise didn't quite comprehend, especially since her friend needed all the help she could get.

A mom of two, Patricia had stepped into Elise's and Mikki's lives through mere chance. Basically another random encounter at another Seattle bar. That one six years ago. She'd been close to breaking into tears when she'd gulped out her order: a double on the rocks - jokingly begging the bartender to make it a triple instead. To her surprise, he'd complied with a "one's on the house" chuckle followed by a sympathetic smile. The two BFFs had sat nearby and of course, had overheard the tall order, so they had decided to check out the situation. Like women do at times when there's a feeling of misery in the air. That feeling more of a gut instinct that some guy had done one of their own wrong.

Turned out that they'd been right. Patricia's now-ex had just upped and left a few days prior, leaving the mom of two broke and alone, and definitely stunned. It truly seemed a misery-likes-company kind of stumble as Elise had also been left a few days earlier. Something about her guy being tired of being compared to Joe. So the single ladies both cried while Mikki, who was still married at the time, kept ordering drinks.

At the end of the night though, they had all raised their glasses to "fuck heartache" chants, trading numbers before they parted ways, and just like that, two peas in a pod had become three. Separated only through distance really but always up to date to their lives. And always ready to come to aid if one in the group requested support.

And now all three of them were in Tennessee to attend their second Bonnaroo together. Shenanigans galore scheduled between photo shoots and interviews and stage times. Just what they all needed after felt years of bad luck, heartache, and misery; the last six months somewhat excluded as all three of them had recently experienced an upswing in their lives.

The airport buzzing like a beehive, it took them a good twenty minutes to find a less busy restroom for Patricia and Elise to change before hitting the long crawl to Manchester (Tennessee). The city was only an hour south, but with the festival predictor of some 80,000 people attending, chances were miles of traffic and hours of waiting before even getting close to the gates.

"I don't remember it being this hot last time we were here," Elise huffed as she wrestled on a pair of safari style shorts and a band shirt in one of the tiny stalls.
"I think your memory is playing tricks on you," Patricia called out of another stall. "It was definitely hot. --- I don't remember there being this many people, though."
"That's because the CMA Music Festival is co-scheduled this time," Mikki waited by their luggage outside the stalls.

"Oh, nice. Did you get a chance to meet some of the artists for that, too?" Elise huffed out of her stall, looking like she already needed three showers and a gallon of iced tea to cool down. Mikki found this amusing of course, laughing at the disheveled disaster in front of her.
"Oh shut up," Elise stuck out her tongue as she trotted to the sinks to wash off the sweat streaming down her face.

A woman servicing the restroom shot Elise an annoyed look when she kept dripping water everywhere in an attempt to wash away sweat from her arms. She cringed out a "sorry", quickly handing the woman a ten dollar bill. After all, it didn't go past her that the cleaning crews were struggling to keep up with the masses. And she'd always been the 'support service personnel any which way you can' type of person.
So handing over a few bucks in hopes that it would lift the spirits came easily to her. The woman just smiled out a thank you and let Elise do her thing, gearing another "thank you" at Elise when she wiped away most of her own mess before leaving. Common decency really. Somehow forgotten by a few grumpy travelers along the way.

"There it is!" Mikki shouted when they found the rental. A small, light green, four-door sedan; the hue bright enough to rival Kermit the Frog's amphibious skin. How did they ever keep walking past it? Then again, navigating any airport parking was always a bit of a treasure hunt. Somehow, whistling the *Indiana Jones* theme song didn't aid in the search. At least it kept the mood lofty.

"I'm surprised you didn't mark it with a yellow sign or a big arrow. I mean clearly, it's too low for our field of vision," Elise joked, hinting at Mikki's sign from earlier. And the fact that she'd chosen the smallest sedan available.

"Maybe I'll have David carry me on his shoulders next time," Mikki scrunched her nose.

"You should. I imagine to him you're as light as a feather. He probably picks you up with his pinky," Elise wisecracked as she heaved her carry-on into the trunk.

"Bet he could carry all of us AND Oscar," Patricia laughed, stowing her carry-on.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elise raised her brow, one foot in the backseat door on the passenger side.

"Oh look. She's getting defensive about her man," Mikki elbowed Patricia before getting into the driver's side.

"I am not! He's a lot heavier than he looks," Elise defended.

"Is that so? Well. Not going to doubt you on that," Mikki wiggled her brows.

"We're not going to talk sex the entire trip, are we? Cause seriously. I love you two, but I haven't had any in... When was the last Summer Olympics?" Patricia asked as she manipulated herself into the passenger seat, which - for whatever reason - was crammed all the way to the front. Quick release of the lever below the seat fixed the issue, but now Elise sat crammed like a sardine.

"Of course not. I mean we do need to discuss a few other things. Like level of hotness of our fave band members," Elise grinned as she shifted to the seat behind the driver's side; the seat there pushed to the front so Mikki could reach the pedals. Patricia and Mikki agreed to the last statement with dreamy hums. How juvenile of them. Good thing the men weren't here. Elise imagined Oscar would grumble in agony and David would probably raise his brow in disapproval.

Car in gear, the group finally got on their way. To their surprise, the highways were pretty empty. Just a few cop cars along the way putting up roadblocks to smaller towns so festival-goers wouldn't drive through and be a nuisance to the locals. Naturally, it wouldn't be that easy. Five miles before reaching the gate, traffic went from a steady 60mph to a 5mph crawl, then dead stop.

"I thought we were supposed to go to the VIP turn off," Patricia craned her neck to look around. Three lanes of traffic all at a complete stop. The pace, a few inches every couple or so minutes. Cops directing in the side lanes to have traffic converge into a single file line so truckers and emergency vehicles could move past.

"We are. Except the turn off is further down the road. Literally only three miles out," Mikki explained while fumbling with the GPS of her phone. "You guys should put your wristbands on by the way, because the way I understood this, we only get access to the off ramp if we can prove we have access." She cringed when she saw a cop lifting his brow at her while she held on to her cell. She quickly handed the device to Patricia, mouthing out a sorry, glad when the cop let it slide.

"So are the tents up already? I didn't see any gear in the trunk," Elise wondered. She'd noted the absence earlier but assumed Mikki might have to stop by her hotel to pick up the rest of the stuff.
"It's all taken care of," Mikki explained.
"Really? I thought we still had to bring our own tents?" Elise prodded on with a raised brow.
"Trust me. It's all taken care of," Mikki repeated.
"Hmmm. Ok...," Elise twisted her mouth to the side. What was that woman up to?

"So I heard, Raimund has a girlfriend," Patricia grinned over her shoulder at Elise.
"Ah. Yes. I'm really happy. My dad's been single for far too long," Elise beamed.
"When's the wedding?" Mikki looked in the rearview mirror.
"I don't know. He hasn't asked her, yet. But it's serious. They moved into each other's place. And he's been traveling a lot to see her. Probably sooner than later. Maybe even this year," Elise spilled.
"What about your move to London? This year. Soon. Or nah..." she geared towards Mikki.
"I don't know, yet. We have to figure out schedules first," Mikki sighed, "Sounds familiar," Elise frowned.

"Oh boy. I'd love to have that problem," Patricia heaved her chest.
"Awe. Hon, we're sorry. We love you. We'll find someone for you. You watch. You'll probably end up remarried before either of us," Mikki winked into the rearview mirror.
"Not saying you have to..." Elise clarified when she saw Patricia raising her brow. "But really; with how things are going, you never know," she added a heavy sigh.
"Are you saying you wouldn't marry Oscar if he asked? Or move in with him? I mean you'd move in together first, right?" Mikki lifted her brow. Oscar and Elise seemed quite happy but she also understood the stress that came with a high-profile life.
"I didn't say that. We've barely reached the let's wait and see stage. So let's wait and see, you know." Elise quietly looked out the window, traffic slowly picking up pace.

Wait and see was a good way to put it, though. After all, Oscar and Elise were still finding their rhythm. Still getting used to each other's quirks. Like new couples did. Wait and see came especially handy when "what ifs" and stress-induced compulsions took over her already busy mind. In moments like those, Elise would always have to stop herself. Just take a breath kind of deal, and enjoy whatever was in front of her right then and there.

She had definitely enjoyed the "right then and there" last night. When Oscar had stopped her to sit down and eat dinner. His attention on her not unnoticed while she'd gone on and on about music and her friends and life. "That's great, mi Linda," he'd smiled in between breaks; always rubbing the back of her right hand with his left thumb.

Like he wanted to assure her that he was listening. That he was really there. Not that it was necessary. His eyes never drifted from hers, and his touch only broke when he nibbled on his food; so she was quite aware that he was present. And real.

There was just something about the way he had behaved last night. A small shift in his demeanor. Always smiling. A wink now and then. A spark in his eyes. A new comfort. Not that there hadn't been comfort between them from the get-go; him being the easy going type. But it was different.

It was more.

_Just --- simply --- more..._

In everything. Even in the way he had cleaned up after dinner; completely relaxed around her kitchen and living room: washing, drying, storing dishes, folding blankets, stowing away remotes. As if he'd always been around doing those mundane tasks a partner would do. All of it slightly
imperfect because that was how he did things, but still attentive to certain details because it wasn't his place. It was hers.

He'd done those tasks before of course - here and there-, but now he knew where everything went. And he knew that she didn't like wet sponges sitting on the sink; that some items didn't belong in the dishwasher; and that her favorite coffee mug sat on the counter for the next morning. Right next to the machine.

It was calming that he knew his way around and that she didn't have to "fix" things up after - because that's how she was about items and their places - ; his tranquility rubbing off on her, so much so that she ended up checking over her festival things only once more before dropping the lists.

Although, that may have been the fact that Oscar had snuck up behind her and kissed her neck before she had had a chance to go down said lists again; creating one of those stuck in time moments while he coaxed her with languid kisses and lazy danced circles towards the bedroom for one last roll between the sheets, like the night and hours before her trip to Sikkim.

There was a definite urge this time around though. Exponentially multiplied urge. A feeling of him not getting enough when he kissed her over and over again while he pressed her against the pillows on her bed. Those kisses like heated searches for her most sensitive spots while he peeled away both their clothing. The evening quickly turning into a quest for trying something new before she had to leave. The turquoise ribbon from Saturday night coming into play when Oscar asked if he could tie her wrists to the spokes of her mission style headboard before venturing on for the night.

The new couple shyness was clearly gone when Elise agreed with a sultry yes and he didn't blink twice at her response. Instead, he just bit his lips and gave her a rather hungry gaze, like he was plotting his every move before the ribbon had even touched her skin.

He did, however, take his time in tying her up; making sure the ribbon wasn't too tight and that she was comfortable, all while telling her over and over again that if she wanted to stop, all she had to do was say so. Several repetitions of "I know" from her and he finally trailed wet kisses up and down her body while playing between her legs with his right hand. Soft strokes, gentle circles against radiating heat. He occasionally slipped two fingers in, just the way he knew she liked it. Languid and gentle foreplay. Very languid. And very gentle.

But that gentleness had her on edge fast. She couldn't reach for his curls to tug on them. Let alone, let her fingers wander the plane of his back or explore the creases of his abs. And how much she had wanted to pull on his hair and scratch down his spine and explore the edges of his muscles. Especially whenever he decided to roll his tongue around her nipples, biting down on them while he continued to circle her clit with his right index until her moans went from soft whimpers to nearly screamed pleas to god; her always trying to mute herself by biting her lower lip.

"Stop holding back," he'd whispered. The whispers more like demands. "Let it out." Those words had dripped across his lips like melted caramel. Soft but pressing encouragement to lure out his favorite moans.
"The neighbors might call the cops," Elise recalled wheezing out with a laugh while recovering from another orgasm.
He just chuckled a "let them" into her neck; repeating the words with an even lower voice. Why? Why did he have to bring down his timbre like that? Even now - in her memory - that low reverb caused shivers down her spine.
"You're going to get me into tro... Ohhhh God... ISAAC!" She'd screamed out; his middle name
Just like he loved it best. Quite despaired, and loud. He'd always aim for her to yell out his middle name. This time, he'd accomplished it in the sneakest way possible: kissing her neck while he'd silently guided the shiny, red toy towards her folds; the vibrations taking Elise by complete surprise when he switched the device on; causing her to involuntarily writhe her hips up. She came almost instantly the second the vibrations trembled against her clit. Like she always did whenever she got past the third or fourth time during warm-up.

A whimpered and drawn out "ffftffuck" accompanied a collapse on the mattress; that climax had almost been too intense for her to handle as it had burst from her clit to the outer edges of her fingers and toes; the short three-minute rest Oscar granted her quite welcome in that moment.

Of course, she knew he wanted a chance to observe her. To study her reactions, gauge her overall satisfaction level. He seemed pleased that he'd unraveled her. He seemed pleased that lingering anticipation had her twisting and begging while he kept a minuscule distance between their bodies. Close enough to feel his heat radiate against her. Too far to feel skin when she tried to squirm closer.

He smirked out an "I wonder" and his gaze tracked down her stomach to between her legs. His next move quite obvious as him licking his lips gave him away. And those deviously deep creases on his cheeks. She braced herself of course; tensing against the turquoise ribbon, digging her toes into the mattress when he spread her legs just a little wider.

The attempt of no use really. The second she felt his lips close around her clit and the vibrator against her folds she lost it with a stifled scream. Aching core. Dripping wetness. Instant orgasm. No rest for the wicked. Firm grasp on her hips. More coiling tongue. More velvet lips. More of that damn shiny red toy as he inched it inside her now and then to draw out those orgasmic twitches and moans while her hips remained pinned under his free arm.

How much she had hated that damn red vibrator right then and there. She should've known that he had wanted to see the effects sooner or later. It had been on his mind since he'd found the box under her bed. She just didn't expect it like this: tied up, sweating, goosebumps all across her skin, and unable to reach for him so she could show him where exactly she wanted it.

She hated his tongue just as equally. The way it coiled. The texture a rough greed for her taste. And his lips. Those velvet, heated arches thirsty to drink her dry. And she despised that he had gone from languid and tenuous to desperate and forceful; all because he loved hearing her go from timid to exasperated desperation. She ached with pleasure and he knew it. So he continued because he knew that - despite her cuss-filled screams and pleaded whimper-s she loved everything he did to her as she always followed up with a "harder" or "please, I want more".

That is until a firm "stop" echoed into the room. He'd made her cum too many times to count and she'd hit a breaking point. Close to overstimulation. Definitely less than a second from complete exhaustion. That "stop" neither angry nor a whimper but austere. Definitely a command.

Oscar, of course, obliged - with a naughty laugh though. That earned him a pinch in his shoulder and a slap on his ass right after he gingerly kissed his way up her body to untie her wrists and let her rest beneath him for a few minutes. Just a few minutes of draw-in-lips trademark kisses and whispered sweet talk. His words letting her know how sensual he thought she was in that very moment; how he loved hearing her moan; and how much he'd savored her every last drop; commenting that she tasted like honey peach tea, which for some odd reason made her laugh. Him,
The laugh a comfort, transcending into a few minutes of tender massages. Just a few minutes to loosen her aching muscles before she found herself - in an almost hypnotic trance- wrapped around his body in his favorite position: kneeling, his ass resting on his heels while he - in tight embrace- helped her move up and down, giving her that familiar feeling of swelling and waning pressure in a most languid and tenuous way. That first feel of him so relaxed, so slow, she'd felt the edges of the tip and the couple of veins rubbing against her walls. Feeling the texture of his cock was like heightened sensations, and she wanted to ride him like that forever. The tenderness was short lived though. Feeling her clench around him had him despairsed for her to pick up the pace.

The urgency from when they had started even more prevalent when he tumbled forward and on top of her to take her in a more ravenous, primal way: the inside of his elbows locking with the inside of her knees, almost pushing her legs over his shoulders as he bit into her neck while he gave her short, sharp thrusts against her core. That position not lasting long when she scratched down his back so sharply that it broke skin. That pleasurable ache causing him to release her legs as he bit into her arm with a rumbled hiss.

No matter. He wanted to feel her closer anyways. Feel her whole body wrap around his. Feel her chest expand against him while she gasped for air with each of his jolting thrusts. He wanted to feel her tight, tighter, tightest against him. But not just her arms and legs. Her squeezing around his cock, too. She gave him that of course. And he repaid with gravelly growls into her neck, sinking almost his entire weight on top of her to pin her in place. To feel her even closer, sealing every tiny gap between their bodies. Synchronous, they'd become one moving entity.

Not that she had wanted it any other way in that heated moment of passion. There was a definite mutual need to have one last, ecstatic, body-pressed-against-body climax before they had to part ways. Sexual rapture a fitting term. And it came. With cuss-filled yells to Christ or God or whoever else heard them through the walls of the apartment. Not to mention scorching breath, stinging bites, surging spasms; dripping sweat, and oozing warmth.

Just a few hours before she had to leave, he'd unraveled her. And she'd laid in his arms, completely undone, almost wanting to cry at how great he'd made her feel with that last orgasm. One so intense she needed a good hour or so to regain some sense of her surroundings. Some sense of time and reality. It had been more. Just --- simply --- more.

But it was the after the sex moments that had her mind twisted again in a good way. Those tiny things that had her fazed out. Like how his curls kept falling over his brows and into his eyes; those dark strands drenched with sweat. A complete tousled mess. And how he'd been tired, so very, very tired; barely able to keep his eyes open when he started to cool her skin with tiny but wet kisses; each trailing to raw sections of her skin to soothe said sections with languid gentleness. Little whispered words asking if she was ok. If he'd gone too far. Those whispers so thin she could barely understand what he was saying.

And how -when he was done soothing her skin and asking her questions- he'd returned to her lips for those kinds of kisses. The ones that made her want to forget she'd places to be, deadlines to meet, trips to commence. The types of kisses that turned into scavenger hunts for post-sex moans. Those moans dripping out with ease whenever he looped his left hand around the back of her neck to keep her steady while he slowly trailed off to his favorite spot on her body. Right in the left curve. Right above the left side collarbone.

He had paid little attention this go around. So he made up for it with parted lips, tongue-pressed-
against-heated-skin kisses, ending the session the same way it had begun: tender and languid, and somewhat urgent to keep her as close as possible as he couldn't get enough of her. What a passionate roller coaster ride this had been. And it had her tethered. More than ever before. Just lost in last night's moments.

"You think the neighbors will actually call the cops?" Oscar had asked with a wheezed laugh when he'd finally peeled himself off her. Had they really been that loud? She hadn't been able to tell under his rather primal moans. If anything, there might be a complaint in the mail about unexplained noises at one in the morning. Something hitting the wall in rhythmic increments. Installation of picture frames or shelves maybe, which of course it hadn't been. She hoped her neighbors were oblivious. Or at least were going to avoid eye contact in future, shared elevator rides.

"I'm going to miss you." Gentle kiss against her temple.
"It's only three weeks." Twirled finger play across his chest.
"Almost as long as your trip to India." Frowned sadness.
"Awe. Well, I'll miss you, too, Lindo." Light chuckle against his chest.
"I know. I've read the journal. It looks and sounds like an amazing place. Hidden waterfalls, secret hiking paths. Makes me think about sneaking away to steal kisses. Maybe we can make it an anniversary trip?" Hopeful crinkles at the corners of his eyes.
"Let's wait and see?" Hopeful, lip-bitten smile.
"Of course. Of course, mi Linda. Let's wait and see." Big, hopeful, urgent smile...

"Elise!!! Your wristband!!"
"What?" Elise jerked upright. Had she really fallen asleep? "Oh. Oh... Sorry... Right ---here," she held up her right wrist. The officer nodded, waving them past the barricade towards the VIP queue.
"Must've been some dream, huh?" Mikki jollied.
"No clue what you're talking about." Elise pulled herself up, looking around with some confusion. How long had they been in line? How long had she been out? They'd left the airport around 3 p.m., and now the sun was setting. Confusion quickly subsided when Elise caught Mikki winking at Patricia.

"Oh Oscar. ... Oh... Oscar...Ahhhhh... Isaac... hhhhhhhuhhh," Patricia acted out, lip biting and all, holding her hands to her chest as she pretended to squeeze her own breasts. So now those two were tag-teaming. Those two being Mikki and Patricia.
"Shut up." Elise threw a Payday at Patricia.

"I mean seriously, we nearly missed our flight," Patricia laughed as she caught the candy bar. "We so did not! We arrived with time to spare," Elise countered.
"Yeah right! We were the last ones to arrive," Patricia argued back. "Oh wait, so you and Oscar... before the trip. Nice," Mikki grinned into the rearview mirror.
"Oh yeah. You should've seen them, Mikki. I mean, you *Patricia pointed at Elise* looked like you'd tumbled across a meadow a few times. Cheeks all flushed. Hair total mess. Oscar didn't look any better. Must've been some tumble, with hickeys like that on his neck," Patricia laughed. Elise just shook her head, also laughing.

Her friend wasn't wrong. By the time Elise and Oscar had managed to head out the door, they'd already been twenty minutes late. That last roll in the hay leaving them with maybe five minutes to spare for a shower, and no time to properly style hair or coordinate clothing.

Elise snickered.
They would probably have been faster had they not stopped every three seconds to kiss each other; or heck, even taking separate showers would've helped, but Oscar's need to have her close to the very last second was almost insatiable.

In fact, he had paid little attention to Patricia when the three arrived at the airport to rush to the check-in. Instead, he kept pulling Elise in for "just one more kiss" embraces along the way which added to them falling behind. It wasn't until they had reached the security checkpoint that the couple finally broke contact, a few of the TSA agents rolling their eyes at them when he kissed Elise one last time. And one more last time. And just one more last time.

"Sorry, Tricia," Oscar had apologized with puppy-dog eyes when he saw Elise's best friend shake her head at them. "You ladies have fun. And call me! Or text me. When you land, ok?" He'd winked at them.
"Shit!" Elise huffed, pulling her cell from her purse.

"Made it to Tennessee. In line for campgrounds. Sorry, Lindo. Forgot. Fell asleep. Naughty dreams and such. *kiss emoji, heart emoji, devil emoji*" Elise typed, then hit send.
"Glad you made it. Had me worried for a few." Triple dot typing indicator. "Naughty dreams, huh? ... How naughty? *ten devil emoticons*"
"Naughty enough to be made fun of. Why didn't you tell me, I talk in my dreams?" she replied.
"*row of laughing emojis* You usually don't. More like whispers, really. Incoherent most of the time. --- So how steamy are we talking?" he responded; curious emoticon in a separate message.

"My dream. Everything we did last night. E-VER-Y THING. Can't wait for my turn!" she hit send.
Silence.
Silence.
Typing indicator.
"*raised brow/side smirk emoticon* Me either," he replied. She thought the answer would be longer considering how long those triple dots had bounced across the screen.
"Except... I'm going to keep you tied up until the very end!" She taunted back.
"These three weeks are going to be very, VERY long." He sent back a frownie face.

Elise messaged back a row of laughing emojis. "I miss you already," she added with a crying face. "Oh. Sweetie. I miss you, too. But I know you'll have fun. All your favorite bands are there this time. And your best friends."
"I know. Just. *sigh* Remember to water the plants only a tiny bit." 
"I know, mi Linda. You told me."
"And unplug all the small appliances. Coffee machine, toaster, TV."
"Sweetie. I know."
"Make sure to leave the spares with Tina."
"Liz... I got it. I'll make sure everything is in order."
"I know. I'm still adjusting."
"I'm aware, Sweetie. I promise everything will be in its place after the party."
"What party?"

Long silence.
Long silence.
Absence of triple dots bouncing.
"Oscar?"
Long silence.
"I'm teasing, Sweetie. I'll be playing video games and ordering pizza. Which reminds me. Do you mind if I create a gamer profile on your PS4?"

"Go ahead. No cheating though. Meaning, no messing with my scores."

"Lo prometo. *winky face* One more side note. You think you'll have internet there?"

"Not sure. Last time it was spotty. Why?"

"Just asking."

"For?"

"Because."

"Why do I get the feeling that you, Mikki, and David were plotting at my birthday party?"

"*kiss emojis* I promise, we weren't!"

"*rolling eye emoji* *raised brow emoji* Anyways... Tricia knows."

"Knows what?"

"Roll in the hay."

Oscar sent back another row of laughing emojis. He figured Patricia might know. Not like they had hidden it very well. A few more texts back and forth. Jokes about positions they should try. Other toys they should test. Jokingly complaining about marks they'd left on each other's bodies. But also, firm repeats to stay safe and "wish you where heres", ending their little exchange with a heavy sigh on both ends of the conversation.

Elise really did wish for him to be with her in Tennessee. To be around something she enjoyed. At the same time, this was a much-needed girls' weekend away. Strengthening friendship kind of thing. Something that had been very amiss when Elise had been with Frank. Something, she always felt guilty about.

"Love you, guys," Elise said quietly as she pulled a turquoise, fabric-covered journal from her purse.

"Awe... Honey. We love you, too," Patricia nodded with a smile. And a click of her camera. Elise hadn't noticed though. She was immersed in her journal, drawing the Tennessee sunset, scribbling notes underneath.

It wasn't until after dusk, that the three women finally found their tent. The line hadn't been long in any way but the lot attendants kept guiding their car further and further down the road whenever one of them stopped their car to check wristbands. There'd been a few whispers as well. And understanding nods. Those little murmurs went unnoticed by Elise. She was too busy taking in the surroundings as they continued to snake down the gravelly road. Past general admission lots on the left. Past tent city. Past VIP? Past the "What?" stage?

"Ok. Now I know we didn't pay for that!" Elise exclaimed with wide eyes when they arrived at their site at last. Campground was an understatement. It was glamping for sure. A large, air-conditioned tent with three comfortable beds their temporary abode for their stay. On each bed a large tote with festival gear, food coupons, and posters. There was even a small cooler in one corner, stocked with water, soda, and other small goodies. "What is going on?" Elise squinted at Mikki. So did Patricia.

"Why do you assume it was me?" Mikki shot back with an almost devilish laugh.

"Did Oscar have something to do with this?" Elise squeaked.

"Actually. No. This one's on David." Mikki grinned.

"Wow," Patricia and Elise said in unison, their eyes still wide as they tested the beds for comfort.

"We owe him, huh?" Elise still gaped in astonishment. Last time they' been here, they had a tent alright. Cramped to the seams with two air mattresses. Little space for anything else. Here, they
were able to stand up and move around. Space to play a few rounds of poker while sipping on some wine.

"Eh. He was glad to do this. You know me. I fought till the end for him not to go overboard. And you know him. He insisted. But honestly, this is fucking nice. And I think we all kind of deserve this," Mikki shrugged. A combined hum indicated that Patricia and Elise agreed. They'd definitely have to make sure to call David after the festival was over.

"So do we need earplugs, or?" Mikki wiggled her brows at Elise.  
"Oh shut up. You shouldn't be talking anyways," Elise threw a pillow at Mikki.  
"Oh no. You guys promised!" Patricia twisted her lips.  
"Now wait a minute. It's ok to make fun of me but not her?" Elise pointed at Mikki but her eyes were on Patricia, her voice very high in pitch.  
"Not like Patricia doesn't know everything anyway," Mikki stuck out her tongue.  
"Really? So she knows about the time I walked in on David when he was naked?" Elise crossed her arms. Mikki froze in place, gaping back and forth at Elise and Patricia.  
"At least I didn't do it while my family was partying two rooms over," Mikki countered with a wide grin.  
"Not sure what you're getting at," Elise shrugged.  
"Yeah right!" Unison response. "Oscar was pretty fast on his feet once you talked to him," Patricia smirked. "Was it good at least? I mean it seemed somewhat fast," she added with a raised brow, trying her best to oppress a knowing smirk.  
"Did you time us?" Elise gaped.  
"No. I happened to have caught the time as a distraction when one of your colleagues tried to talk to me. Anyways--- So?--- Was it?" Patricia wiggled her brows.  
"Oh god, yes," Elise sighed. "It always is," she added with a dreamy gaze and rosy cheeks.

That blush was met with an "awe, how sweet" by her friends before they fell back into laughter. This was nice. The three of them. The three peas in a pod. They spent the rest of Wednesday evening settling in, scouting out the immediate surroundings to see where bathrooms and showers were located. VIP definitely had its perks as it turned out. The bathrooms and showers were rather nice. Everything with AC and working lights. No porta potties here, but actual, flushing toilets. Something they'd all learned to appreciate the last time they'd attended the festival.  

The three picked up some food in the VIP tent, enjoying a glass of free wine with their meal before they turned in. The snickering lasted well past midnight though while they told each other more stories. The ladies acting like they were away at summer camp. Talking about things that were
truly only meant to be shared between best friends. Things they'd never tell their significant others. Women's secrets. Best friends' secrets. Kind of juvenile but really very much needed considering their last few years.

Thursday morning sort of lulled in. The sun came up early, tickling them awake before 8 a.m. through the small opening of the tent entrance, but the plan was to take it easy on this first day. Just a lazy festival day as Thursday was the actual opening day at Bonnaroo, with lesser known bands playing the smaller stages and tents, and the main stages remaining closed for that day. So the ladies went for a small breakfast, going over the schedules for the next four days, trying to figure out who to see when, and when to meet up between sets.

Out of the three, Elise had the most flexibility. She was really just there to enjoy great music, great food, and meet new people. Patricia and Mikki, on the other hand, had to work, their schedules pretty much set in stone as they had interviews and photo shoots with quite a few of the bands. The two, of course, assured Elise that they'd be around, encouraging her to tag along now and then as they would try and sneak her past security as an extra to help with gear; but she knew that they'd probably spend more time apart than seeing bands together. Not to mention that she didn't want either of her friends in trouble, no matter how sweet the offer of sneaking her past sounded. At least, they'd spend most of Thursday together as a group. That much they'd promised each other before the trip. And it wasn't going to change now.

"We should start at The Grind, today. It's over by general admission camping if I remember right. Bear's Den just announced they'll be playing there around noon," Mikki scrolled through her Twitter feed.
"Awesome. You think they'll have time for photo ops?" Elise asked with fingers crossed.
"Let me ask," Mikki's fingers flew across the screen of her cell. Not even a minute later her cell chimed back. "Kevin said yes," Mikki grinned. As event and concert photographer she had had a few chances to meet some of the bands face to face. A few of which she became friends with. Not close friends. But a little more than acquaintances for sure. A "drop a line if in town just to hang out" kind of deal and Bear's Den was one of them. Elise knew this of course. Usually, she'd not ask for favors like this, but since they were here, she figured might as well.

"I know you don't have anything scheduled for today but you should do a quick Q&A with them, Patricia. I'm sure they won't mind. They're all quite sweet. Like ten quick questions or something. Nothing too deep. Just light and funny," Mikki suggested.
Patricia nodded with a smile. Grateful for any ideas really. This was her first time doing interviews. She'd only ever written reviews. Now she had to do a review and interview article combined. A profile of Bonnaroo and what makes it worth to the people and the artists alike.

So she was quite nervous. Things could go whichever way. But she was determined to get that job at the music magazine. It would mean almost instant, financial stability, a better life for her and her kids for sure. So Mikki helping out and knowing her way around festival grounds was welcome. Elise could sense her friend's anxiousness, squeezing her hand, winking out a "you've got this girl" towards Patricia, and she nodded with another smile.

They finished their breakfast, jesting at each other for eating nothing but junk food, then slowly made their way towards the offsite venue, the sun beating down on them without mercy. One thing became apparent quickly. They'd be needing a lot of water. The Tennessee heat already at ninety degrees before it was even 10 a.m. Good thing they all had CamelPaks. Elise was sure they'd refill those a few times over. She was also certain, they'd go through sunscreen like it was running out of style. She could already feel her shoulders burn albeit having just slathered on a thick layer of the protective cream.
The gig at The Grind was short and sweet. The shade the café-style venue offered definitely welcome. Bear's Den played four or so songs, stage banter in between, making the audience laugh. The photo op and interview were kept short as well, the band offering genuine answers to Patricia's questions. She kept it light and funny, just like Mikki had suggested, only one question delving into the more serious side of music. The band and they parted ways after a few minutes of off-the-record chatting, their agent whisking them away, but not before Kevin yelled out a "see you later", hinting at the longer set on one of the stages at CenteRoo.

The three women took the opportunity to stick around The Grind little while longer, meeting a few people who'd traveled to the festival from all corners of the country. Or more like from all corners of the world, some from as far away as Japan!

There was another trio of women they talked to. Apparently, they'd just met for the first time right before the festival. Something about being internet friends who shared the same music taste. One of the gals had flown in from Hawai'i, the other had driven down from northern Indiana, and the third had come in from Illinois. A lifelong friendship in the making. Patricia took the chance and asked if she could include a short sidepiece on them in her festival review, and the trio agreed, photo op and all.

Thursday may have started with a lull but it ended in anything but. The three friends spent the afternoon at CenteRoo, getting reacquainted with the setup. It had been a few years since they'd been here last. They took pictures of meeting points they would send each other for whenever they wanted to reassemble, then checked out the various food stands and smaller stages and comedy tent. Elise even agreed to a ride on the ferries wheel, not without clinging to the sides in a death grip that left her hands aching and her friends amused while they took pictures of her. "Any of you send those to Oscar and you're chopped liver," she warned with thin lips as she stumbled out of the gondola.

By the time they reached Bear's Den's second gig for the day, they all had had a few drinks. So they spent the remainder of the night giggling, especially when some fan yelled "You're so fucking cool!" from the sidelines, and Andrew [Davie] humbly replied with a low "Thanks very much. That's very kind. And it's actually inaccurate," making the audience respond with a laughed "awe". After that, the gals dragged back to their tent, laughing about some of the encounters they had had. Sweet people mostly. Some definitely high from whatever they'd smoked or taken.

"David would so disapprove," Mikki laughed as she fell onto her bed, immediately dozing off with her head buried in her pillow.
"Oscar would totally approve," Elise giggled. She knew that he had had his share of Mary Jane induced highs. He had talked about it quite freely when the cast had come over that one evening after the press debacle that had left her in tears. "I'm sure he'd ask if someone would share with him," she chuckled with a yawn.
"I'm surprised you guys are together with such polar opposites. Like really, Liz. I see you with someone like David. And Mikki more with someone like Oscar," Patricia pointed out.

She wasn't entirely wrong. Then again, opposites attract, right? But Patricia was correct in that David and Elise were more alike than Oscar and her. David was always calm and collected. Observe first, then talk. Always very polite. Always very focused when working. Taking his status quite serious. He knew some people looked up to him.

Oscar, on the other hand, was forward with a "speak what comes to mind" and "ease tension by breaking silence first with some innuendo-laced joke" attitude. Sometimes quite loud to draw
attention to himself and away from anyone who didn't wish to be in the spotlight. Confident. Cocky. Most likely aware of his status but uncomfortable being called an idol or celebrity. Never malicious, though. Always respectful. Always dialing it back when needed. "A constant observer though," as he called himself, which Elise thought funny because to her observe meant quiet, not talking. He probably multitasked.

Maybe that's why she was so drawn to him from the get-go. He definitely brought out a different side in her. Left her a little more bold, a little more confident about life each time they were together. Not that Elise was shy or overly self-conscious in new situations. But she definitely played it save in her "think first, speak second" approach. Subsequently always playing the observer before engaging in something new.

Unless her buttons were pushed. Then she'd go off like a short-fused firework. Even that had changed since he'd come around. "It is what it is" attitude softening her. Oscar certainly had this way about him that made her want to change a few things here and there. Consciously and subconsciously. Not so much for him but for herself. And she became more and more aware that this is what being happy must feel like. True happiness. Not just short-term fixes. And he'd achieved it mostly without trying. Supporting her without patronizing. She'd had that once before. And it had seemed lost for the longest time. But now it was back. He was good for her.

That observation made her chuckle. She texted a quick "I love you" to Oscar, and he replied almost instantly with a "te amo", and "hope you're having fun, Sweetie" in a second text shortly after. Elise didn't reply. She'd fallen asleep with her head resting on her awkwardly angled arms, mouth agape and snoring. Her cell in her hand because she'd tried to wait for the reply. That first day overwhelming her in a good way.

Patricia snickered as she took pictures of Elise and Mikki, sending the pictures to their respective boyfriends; David responding with an "Oh dear. I better keep this in private records.", and Oscar with a "Great. Going to print this and hang it on her fridge." replies. Polar opposites for sure.

Friday morning started with a faster pace. Mikki was already off to a photo shoot, and Patricia was just heading out the tent when Elise woke up. Elise acknowledged her friend with a tired nod and a massive bed head. A few too many drinks. She'd pace herself for sure today. Her friends off doing their thing, Elise opted to take a long shower. Not that that clean feeling would last long in the Tennessee heat, but at least she'd start the day refreshed. Then she was off for breakfast, chatting with a few of the people there while she charged her phone at one of the stations.


"I'm not asking for me if you're wonderin'." Kevin threw out with a smirk.
Elise gave him a short squint. She couldn't recall who in the band was taken and who was single. She thought a couple more seconds. Penny in the air. Couple more seconds. Who else was around? "Ohhhh," the penny dropped. "Your agent?" Elise asked carefully. Kevin just smiled, looking over his shoulder back at the young man who'd accompanied them the day before. Elise peered in the same direction.

"He wants to know if you guys are staying the whole four days. If she has time maybe?" Kevin smiled.
"Oh... I don't know if she has time. She's got a whole lot of interviews scheduled. But maybe, he can give me his number? And I can forward it?" Elise offered.
Kevin waved the young man over to the table. He scuttled over, turning red at the cheeks and ears.

"Give 'er your number," Kevin grinned.
"Oh but... I meant the other woman," the agent smiled shyly and confused. Unlike Kevin, he had a North American accent.
"I know. For Patricia, right? Same height as me. Red hair?" Elise bobbed her head up and down.
"Yes, her. Patricia. --- I'm ... I'm Owen, by the way," he stammered as he scribbled his name and number on a piece of paper.
"I'll make sure she gets this," Elise chuckled.
Owen just nodded with a sheepish smile.

"Nothing like playing cupid, huh?" Kevin asked when he watched his agent scuffle off.
"Tell me about it... He's not... weird, is he?" Elise queried with wide eyes. She didn't mean to make it sound offensive but she knew the words sounded kind of rude. "Sorry."
"Nah. He's a good guy. As good as good guys get I suppose, considering we're all arses sometimes," Kevin joked. "Never seen him like this, though." He looked over his shoulder at his agent who was fidgeting side to side. "I better get. Got some interviews." Kevin got up, stretching out his hand to Elise and she accepted with a muted chuckle.

She spent the rest of the morning walking around CenteRoo, getting flowers braided into her hair, spending a horrendous amount of money on band merch, and trying some natural lemonade. She never wanted to drink anything else again. She dropped her stuff off at the tent, ate some lunch, then meandered towards the "What?" stage in the late afternoon, finding a seat in the VIP section to watch Dawes' set. She was singing along to "When My Time Comes" when a security guard approached her, asking her to come along quietly.

"Why? Did I do something wrong?" Elise asked in surprise.
"Please, Miss." The guard pointed towards the exit of the area.
Elise trotted along, huffing out a "what the fuck" along the way. She hadn't been loud. Nor was she drunk. [One of the few reasons someone would get escorted off the grounds.] She didn't want to make a scene though, so she just kept walking along. First past the "What?" stage barrier, then past the stage itself, and lastly into an air-conditioned tent filled with a few tables and chairs. No one else around except a couple of volunteer staff by the entrance.

"Sorry, Miss. It's come to our attention that your wristband isn't valid. I have to ask you to remain here while I get my super," the guard explained with a straight face.
"You're kidding me, right? I paid for this. I have a receipt. In my tent!" Elise pointed to her wrist, getting slightly agitated. "And it's Misses by the way!"
The guard just shrugged his shoulders on his way out, whispering something to a staff volunteer. "Fuck!" Elise scoffed as she got her cell out of her pocket.

"Where are you guys??" she started a group message.
Mikki was the first to respond. "About to head to the //What?// stage for an interview. What's wrong?" she asked.
"They said my wristband isn't valid. I think they're going to kick me out," Elise texted back. There was a definite rising panic.
"That can't be right?!?!??!?!" Patricia responded this time.
"Yeah. That's what I said, too. The guard is getting his super. So I don't know. What should I do?" Elise worried. She could feel the tears starting to well up at the corners of her eyes. But she kept her composure.
"Stay put. I'll be there in a few," Mikki replied.
"Same," Patricia added.

Elise just sat in a chair by a table.

Waiting.
Waiting.
Waiting.

Twenty minutes later, still no super, still no Mikki, and still no Patricia. Elise was getting antsy. What if her friends were in trouble as well? They'd bought the tickets together after all. What if they weren't allowed to see her? "You guys. Where are you?" Elise texted again. No response. She hit the dial button. Neither picked up. Panic still rising. Heart rate through the roof.

"I see, you tried to sneak your way in, too, huh?" a voice behind her asked. There was a gravelly familiarity to it. London accent. Tinge of sarcasm. She'd heard that voice a million times before. Through songs mostly. And through some interviews she'd seen on YouTube.

She slowly turned around, almost choking on a gasp as her stare locked on the person behind her. There, right behind her chair, - all nonchalant, with blinking, smiling eyes, six-foot-two tall, dark messy hair, and a new signature look of dark t-shirt and black jeans - stood one-fourth of her favorite band: Marcus Mumford.

"Uhhmm..." she tried to collect her thoughts. And calm her heart rate. "I actually think they got it wrong," she managed with a gulp.
"I'm sure." Marcus grinned.
"Right," Elise cocked her head. What was going on? He was high profile. People knew who he was. Why'd he be in this tent? A chime knocked her out of her confused, internal interrogation. "That's me. You don't mind, do you?" Marcus kept grinning.
Why would she mind? It was his cell. Marcus turned around, only saying "oks" and "uh huhs" to whoever was on the other end. Probably his wife, Elise thought. A few minutes later he hung up.

Elise just sat there, not knowing what to say or do. Subconsciously tapping her left foot on the floor, twirling a strand of hair between her right index and thumb. It was all a little surreal. She always imagined she'd bump into her favorite musician on the street or maybe at some bar. Have a casual conversation about music and the world. Not like this though.

This was certainly something, though. If she was getting kicked out she could at least say that she'd met Marcus Mumford through some silly mistake. The story most likely turning into some funny anecdote when she got older. He was probably here waiting for someone else, the way he kept pacing. She chanced a quick snapshot with her phone without him knowing. Evidence that he'd been in the same room with her at least.

Where the hell were Mikki and Patricia? Elise was ready to hit the dial button again when Marcus'
phone rang. A different ringtone this time. He held his phone in front of his face. A Skype call by the looks of it. "Hold on just one second," Marcus told the other person before they had a chance to speak. He paced towards Elise, biggest grin on face. "It's for you," he handed the phone to Elise with the back of it pointing towards her.

"Uhmmm... Ok?" Elise hesitated. That was definitely weird. She held the phone for a few seconds, her gaze back and forth between Marcus' wide smile and the phone. "Don't keep him waiting" he nodded. Him? Elise hitched her breath and flipped the phone over to see who it was.


"I don't even know what to say. I knew you were up to something!" she wheezed out, trying to catch her breath.

"Ah yeah? What gave it away?" Oscar smirked. "The way you talked to Mikki at my birthday party," she pointed out, still slowing her breathing. "Well, I promise. This is the last of the surprises. I just... I wanted to make sure you're having a great time, Sweetie," Oscar beamed, victory all over his face.

Just then, Elise heard a few more familiar voices, all laughing and ambling her way. A few seconds later, Mikki and Patricia appeared through the flaps of the tent, the rest of Mumford & Sons and the security guard in tow. "Told you, she'd be surprised," Mikki laughed behind Elise and into the phone's camera at Oscar. "Yeah mate. You should've seen her face. Like this," Marcus overdramatized an imitation of Elise's reaction. Oscar's response was a heartfelt laugh. "Well, you guys be good now. Hands to yourself, Marcus," he added with a lifted brow. "I'm a married man," Marcus held up his left hand to show off his wedding band. "Then tell the others to keep their hands to themselves," Oscar laughed. "We're all quite well behaved, mate," Winston yelled.

Elise was still sorting through everything that had just happened. Somewhat bamboozled, she looked around. This was something else for sure. Mikki and Patricia were talking with the band; Patricia thanking them for a great interview and Mikki taking pictures the whole time. The security guard mouthed a "sorry" towards her. Clearly, he'd been part of the plot. "You ok, mi Linda?" Oscar asked when she seemed to have forgotten that he was still on Skype. "I am. Listen. I'll call you later. If that's ok. So we can talk in private," she smiled, a few happy tears rolling down her cheek. "Ok. Sounds like a plan. You're not upset, are you? Marcus is a friend," Oscar questioned, a worried undertone hidden in there. Short pause.

"No. I'm not. I guess --- maybe I should've known," Elise sighed. "You'll see later. If you have time. You brought your iPad right?" Oscar went on. "I did," Elise confirmed. "Ok. Well. We'll talk later, Sweetie. You enjoy the rest of your evening," Oscar reached for the end-of-call button. "Oscar?" Elise stopped him just before he hit the button. "Yes, Sweetie," he waited with a warm smile behind those big brown eyes. "Thank you," she nibbled her bottom lip. "I love you." "I love you, too. Go. Enjoy your evening." Oscar pushed on softly, then finally hung up.
She held on to the phone a few seconds longer, shaking her head in disbelief. There was a rosy hue to her cheeks. She closed her eyes for a second. Why was it so damn quiet in the tent? She opened her eyes, looking around, finding everyone staring at her. "That's love alright," Marcus grinned sheepishly. Everyone just went "awe" and started laughing. "Shut up," Elise sunk her face into her left palm, laughing, then finally handed the phone back to Marcus.

"Well. We've got to get going. Haney wants to shoot some video tonight," Marcus geared his chin towards a young man who had, what looked like, three or four different cameras hanging around his neck and torso. "We'll see you guys tomorrow. At this stage. I mean the //What?// stage," Marcus waited for Elise to get up. She stretched out her hand but Marcus just simply went for a hug. A bear hug. The rest of the band and her friends joined, squishing a laughing Elise in the embrace.

"Please tell me you're not upset," Mikki asked somewhat timidly when the band left. Uncharacteristic for her. "I'm not. Just a little..." Elise started. "Overwhelmed?" Patricia ended. Elise just nodded.

Her friends filled her in quickly, now that the excitement was over. Mikki, of course, knew that the band would arrive a day before they'd headline, so she had followed Elise to the VIP area without Elise noticing, knowing that she wanted to see Dawes' set; then asked the security guard to see if he'd be willing to play along. It wouldn't have worked without him. A couple of twenties and fluttering lashes was all it took really. "It was too easy," Mikki laughed. Then all Mikki and Patricia had to do was wait until Elise had been escorted to the tent. They, of course, had to pretend to be surprised, intentionally making her wait to draw out suspense.

Mikki couldn't have done this without Oscar though, explaining that Oscar had mentioned to her that he knew Marcus pretty well. So he just called up his friend and asked for a favor the night of Elise's birthday party. According to Mikki, the musician was happy to help out. The fact that Oscar would Skype in was a surprise even Mikki didn't know about. But everything else had been rough-drafted the night of the party. Those mischievous laughs and whispers came to mind. There was a triumphant smile on Mikki's face, knowing that everything had fallen into place the way they had planned it.

"Anyways. Here's your All Access Pass. It's good through Sunday, so you'll be able to go behind the stages as well," Mikki grinned. "And into the artist's den, a little further down from where we're camped. Don't ask. Just accept that you have one," she added with an even wider grin. Elise had wondered why she'd seen a few artists cross paths with the "regular folk" when she'd eaten breakfast this morning. And what those whispers, whenever she returned to the tent, had been all about. "We owe them. You know that right?" Elise snickered while she took the pass from Mikki. "Pssshhhht. Us being awesome is payment enough," Mikki winked. "Besides, we didn't ask for any of this. So. Just enjoy it."

In that, Mikki was right. Neither had asked to get this spoiled. Still, Elise felt a minuscule tug. How'd she ever get this lucky? She fumbled through her pocket to put her cell back when she felt a piece of paper. "Oh crap. Almost forgot. This is for you," she handed the paper to Patricia. "Who's Owen?" Patricia read over the number. "Bear's Den's agent," Elise grinned.
"Awe. He was too shy to give you his number directly," Mikki joked.
"He was even too shy to talk to me. He sent Kevin over first to scope out the situation," Elise laughed.
"Shy is good, I guess?" Patricia chuckled.
"Was Oscar nervous when he met you?" Patricia wondered.
"You know what, I'm actually not sure. He wasn't as cocky as he's now. Actually, he was really quiet. So maybe," Elise snickered.

"You'll have a chance to find out if the shyness is a front," Mikki blurted out. "Kevin said they'd be at the Austin to Boston premiere at the theatre tent. So we're going!" she added with a wide smile, shutting down a "wait a minute" protest from Patricia when the women geared towards the front of the "What?" stage.

They remained a little while longer, watching Alabama Shakes rocking the audience, then paced towards the "This!" tent to watch Tears For Fears, bumping into the trio of women they'd met at The Grind the day prior. After that, they set out to the theatre tent where they watched the Austin To Boston music docu.

Elise spotted Bear's Den in the audience. Taking a seat behind Kevin, she whispered that Patricia was here as well. "Nice. Owen is behind the stage talking to Haney and Lovett," Kevin whispered back. A few back and forths, and she agreed to the idea that they all should hang out at the artists' tent later on. So they did. Laughing, drinking, singing, talking music. Patricia nervous at first, seemed to hit it off pretty well with Owen, who appeared equally as nervous when they first shook hands. They talked and talked, completely ignoring the people and noise around them.

"You think the arrow struck?" Mikki whispered.
"Not sure. Maybe. Too early to tell. He seems nice though," Elise whispered back, noting that Owen kept a discreet distance but his focus was definitely on Patricia, and only Patricia. They'd ask for details later on.
"I think, I'm going to go back to the tent. I promised Oscar, I'd call him," Elise sighed.
"Awe, but it's only... holy shit it's already two in the morning," Mikki yelled. "I better head back, too."

They got up and paced towards Patricia who was still talking to Owen. Patricia glared at her watch, not believing the time either. After some hesitation, she, too, deemed it necessary to call it a night. They had a long day ahead. More photo shoots, more interviews. Owen frowned but nodded out an understanding "alright", his face instantly lighting up when Patricia promised she'd call him after she was done with the interviews.

"He likes you," Mikki side-eyed Patricia.
"I think it's mutual," Elise tacked on.
"Hmmm..." Patricia blushed. A tiny spark in her eyes. Cupid's arrow may have hit the target.

The three were out as soon as their bodies sunk into their beds, Elise completely forgetting her promise to call Oscar.

"Oh my god. I need an aspirin," Mikki groveled into her pillow.
"You and me both," Elise grumbled.
"Me three," Patricia groaned.

Saturday morning came way too fast. Less than five hours of sleep which in festival terms was
simultaneously too long and too short. Too long because there were places to be, and too short because walking all day plus dancing at the venues plus Tennessee heat equaled physical exhaustion. Not to mention the fine dust that seemed to settle everywhere, leaving their eyes burning, and their lungs quite raspy. Good thing they had bandanas to cover their faces.

"Did you call Oscar?" Mikki rasped as she got a bottle of water from the cooler.
"Oh fuck. Shit." Elise cussed. She got her cell, hitting the dial button at lightning speed.

"Hey, mi Linda. How was the evening?" Oscar's voice rasped through the speaker.
"Shit. Did I wake you?" Elise cussed. She'd not only forgotten to call him, but the time difference to Seattle also seemed to have slipped her mind.
"No. I was just getting up, Sweetie. No worries. How was last night?" he repeated.
"It was great. I'm sorry I forgot to call. I pretty much fell asleep as soon as I hit the sheets," Elise apologized with a huffed chuckle.
"Sweetie. Mi Linda. Mi Reina. Don't worry. I get it," Oscar mirrored her laugh. The way he used all three of the pet names reserved for her made her snicker.

"Yeah but still. Thank you. Again. Just... thank you," Elise sighed.
"You don't have to thank me again. Once is enough," Oscar pointed out.
Elise could almost feel him smile through the phone. "You know, I can never make this up to you," she sighed. There was rustling on his end. He was probably rolling out of bed. She imagined he wore minimal clothing. How much she wanted to be next to him right now. Warm skin against warm skin.
"Sweetie. Don't, ok? You don't have to worry about stuff like that. Please?" he implored.
"Hmmm..." she hummed back.

"I'm glad you're calling me now though," Oscar's voice cleared a little more as he took a sip of water or juice or whatever he'd just taken a sip of.
"I just wish you were here," Elise explained. "Or me there. You're leaving today, aren't you?"
"I am. And I'll make sure to unplug all the small appliances. And give the spares to your sister," he chuckled. A little mocked tinge in there.
"I should've left today. So I could spend time with you," she twisted her lips.
"Don't say that, Sweetie. We'll meet up soon. Besides, you know you'd rather be there. With your friends. Ogling Marcus. And Ted. I know you like Ted, too," Oscar laughed wholeheartedly. He knew her almost too well. She laughed. A soothing sound in his ears.

"So do you have internet access?" Oscar continued.
"I do. Surprisingly a strong connection this time around."
"The explanation as to how you know Marcus, I take it." Elise beamed.
"Exactly. If - and only if - you have time, you should download it and watch it. If not, just download the second attachment," he suggested. More background noises. Sounds of zippers. He was opening his suitcase.

"I shall do that," Elise smiled. Pause. Long Pause. Just listening to what he was doing.
"You ok, mi Linda?" Oscar asked in that caring tone of his.
"Yeah. Yes. Hey... I was thinking...," she halted.
"You were thinking?" Oscar nudged on.
"I saw you have some time off in August. I was wondering if you want to come along to Walla Walla. To GOTR. Remember my sister's promotion gift? I have an extra ticket," Elise mentally crossed her fingers. There was a silent plea for him to say yes. She'd wanted to ask him since that
first week she'd met him. Now was as good a time as any. Especially since she really wished he was here, enjoying this festival with her. She assumed of course. She knew he loved music as much as acting. So she hoped an invitation to tag along to a music festival was enticing.

"Hmm... I remember. Christine had mentioned it. I have to check. I have a couple of events that weekend, I think. So maybe, yes. Maybe no. Maybe only part of," he sighed. Elise's heart dropped. She ought to have known. "I'll see what I can do, Sweetie. We'll make it work, ok?" Oscar assured. A whispered ok was all he coaxed out though.

"Sweetie. I know this sucks. We're both so busy, but we'll get there. Our rhythm," he explained. "It's not always this busy. It's just recently gotten to this constant go go go thing. I do wish I had more time off, but it's also a good thing. To be busy."
"Oh, I know. I guess it's just this beginning urge. To be around all the time. I mean, I know we have lives. But yeah," Elise's tone remained somber.
"I know exactly what you mean. But it makes being together so much --- more," Oscar breathed that last word in such a way that it made Elise gasp.
"That's true," her voice a little cheerier this time.

"Look. You go and have fun. Call me when you get home. Ok? Don't worry too much about keeping me up to date every minute. Enjoy yourself. You can tell me all about your trip when you get back," Oscar encouraged. How did he always know what was on her mind? Why did he always have to be like that? Just so easy going. Elise managed a thin "ok". A few "I love yous" later and they finally hung up.

"You ok, girl," Patricia asked, deep creases on her forehead.
"Yeah. The downside of love. Utter sadness when separated," Elise sighed.
"Something I'm glad I'm not missing out on for now," Patricia chuckled.

Elise finally got up and grabbed her towel, waving her friends goodbye before heading to the showers. She knew by the time she'd get back to the tent, they'd be out and about for interviews and photo shoots. So she didn't rush, taking twice as long to wash and rinse this time around.

By the time she got to the food tent, it was almost 10 a.m. At least everyone else was finished. She ordered herself a big plate of food and two lemonades, that Tennessee heat already causing total dehydration. IPad and charger tucked under one arm, she grabbed her tray and aimed for an empty table next to a charging station.

The second she connected to the internet, she scrolled through her emails. Lots of work-related ones, a few from friends peppered in between, of course, spam mail as well. Oscar's email was a third of the way in. Good thing she color coded. His name was highlighted in turquoise.

"Good morning, mi Reina,

You didn't call :-('.
So I'm guessing you fell asleep. ;-)
I miss you. So very much. The last few nights have been so lonely.
Extra long showers weren't much relief either. I'd rather feel you than my own hand. :-P

So now that you know that I know Marcus, go ahead, take advantage. I'm kidding of course. I know you wouldn't dare. But your face was priceless. Marcus sent me a picture he snuck. Your smile... Adorable. I'll be showing it to the cast when I get back to Montreal."
Anyways.

*Remember our talk at the Space Needle? How I met James? How he told you he'd found a guy to be in this movie about a musician? That's how I know Marcus. We met beforehand and recorded the songs, then filmed, then re-recorded some of the songs for the soundtrack.*

*You don't have to watch the movie. It is really quite sad. Funny, too. But mostly sad. I'm glad you haven't seen this movie, yet. It would've worked against my surprising you. But it's also somewhat haunting. The fact that I was supposed to have met you just before I started filming this one. I still cannot believe we missed that chance.*

*Now I'm the one lingering when I told you the exact opposite that night after the Space Needle. After all, maybe timing really had been wrong for us then. We wouldn't be who we are today, I guess. So let's not linger anymore. It's done. I just wish, that your part in this odd tale hadn't been so painful.*

*I love you, Sweetie.  
Mi Linda  
Mi Reina*

*You're my cielo.*

*Muchos besos,  
Oscar*'

Elise sat there for a few minutes. Tears welling at the corners. It was quite agonizing, knowing that they were supposed to have met a little over three years ago. But he was right. To a degree. She wouldn't be who she was today. She just wished it had been without all those things Frank had done to her. But no more. Oscar was in her life now. And Frank, he was the past. The one she wished would fade over Joe. Funny how memories worked like that. How sometimes the bad clings on to the mind with tiny claws while the good just slips away.

Elise hitched a breath, then hit download. She watched the movie, headphones in her ears. She'd never seen Oscar like that. Of course, it was just a movie. But there he was, flickering across her screen with the saddest eyes she'd ever seen on him. She took a bit of comfort that the curls and the beard looked quite marvelous on him. And the cat? Well, the cat deserved an award for sure. She couldn't help but snicker at that thought. She also recognized Marcus' wife playing Jean. All of it so bizarre to her as she had followed Carey's career for a little while.

After that, she listened to some of the soundtrack. *"Fare Thee Well"* came up and she instantly recognized Marcus' voice, and Oscar's. That was quite lovely. Her companion singing with her favorite musician was a treat to her ears. She was just surprised she hadn't heard this sooner. Then again, when she'd ran away three years ago, there'd been a disconnect from it all. At least until she'd returned some eight and half months ago. And even then, she had a lot of catching up to do, barely just now getting around to whatever movies and music she'd missed during her absence.

She hitched another breath, smiling this time though. She gathered her things, dropping them off at the tent, then finally headed to the "What?" stage around 2 p.m. The area was still closed to the general public.

"Where are you guys?" Elise texted Mikki and Patricia in a group text.  
"Left side stage. Go up to the gate, show em your pass, and they'll let you through and up the
stairs," Mikki responded. Elise did as told, finding her friends casually chatting with Mumford & Sons, Hozier, and Ed Helms?
"There she is," Patricia smiled.
Elise immediately noticed Owen's arm around her friend's waist. Cupid was working overtime. She shyly shook Hozier's hand. And Ed's. Then gave into the hugs her favorite band launched at her.
"She's usually not this star-struck," Mikki grinned. "Her brother-in-law is an agent," Mikki explained further when Ed raised his brow.

"I was wondering why your name sounded so familiar," Marcus chimed in with the widest smile ever. "My wife and your boyfriend worked on a couple of movies together. Second time around, your brother-in-law was his agent, I think. Tall dude, man. Scary."
Elise laughed. She'd describe James as anything but scary. Then again, she'd known him almost her entire life. So she knew that sternness was often just a front to get shit done.

"I know. I watched Inside Llewyn Davis this morning," Elise nodded. "What's the other movie?"
"Drive."
"Really? Oscar was in that one?" Elise wrinkled her forehead. She'd seen that movie. How could she not recall Oscar being in that movie? She made a mental note that she'd watch, and rewatch, more of his movies.

"So, I thought we were going to watch the sets from the pit," Elise turned her attention to her friends.
"We will. We just need to flash the passes and they'll let us in before they let people enter the pit again," Mikki wiggled her brows. Ah, VIP perks. VIP perks indeed.
"You guys going to party with us later?" Ted asked, that tenor timbre trembling through.
"Hell yeah," Elise smirked.
Saturday was definitely crazy. The bands that day drew the largest crowds. Elise, Mikki, and Patricia made good use of their passes, walking between the "What?" and "Which?" stages through backstage alleys, watching most sets from the side on the stages, Mikki always in front of the barrier for a few songs as she took a million pictures; Patricia interviewing bands here and there.
Elise did insist to see Mumford & Sons from the pit. "That's the best crowd," her eyes crinkled as she smiled. Patricia and Mikki agreed. And what a crowd it was. Everyone jumped along, sang along, the atmosphere reaching an ecstatic height during "Dust Bowl Dance" and "With A Little Help From My Friends". Elise thought she'd gone deaf for a short while after the set ended, everyone sounding rather dull. She definitely had to talk louder.

A flash of the pass and the three friends were backstage. There were envious stares of course. Who were they to get such access? They didn't seem VIP. Elise let it roll off. She'd been in that same situation many times before.

The concerts were one thing that day. The backstage party was a different level. There seemed to be a lot more people than the night prior. Quite a few more high profile musicians, and actors as well. It was a little daunting at first but once they all went past introductions an easy comfort set in. Could've been the fact that they all had a couple of drinks. Alcohol always a bit of a mood enhancer and inhibition dropper. Ed Helms was another reason the mood was rather lofty. His comedic wit had Elise burst out a few times over.

"Funny how she's all calm around you, mate. And with me she's barely able to spit out three words," Marcus joked. Elise rolled her eyes. "I saw that. Sassy. Oscar's a lucky man," Marcus laughed.
"Careful Marcus. Once she gets comfortable around people, she throws things. Pillows, towels, cups, darts...," Mikki just had to say that.
"You play darts?" Marcus shimmed his shoulders. Elise just nodded.
"Better get all soft targets out of the way," Patricia threw out. Owen's arm once again wrapped around her waist. Elise shook her head.

"Alright, let's see what you got," Marcus wiggled his brows, handing some darts to Elise.
"Why should I try? No incentive," she smirked with a wrinkled nose.
"If you win, you'll get a kiss from your favorite musician. Peck on the cheek only, though," Marcus winked.
"Which cheek?" Elise poked back, also with a wink, trying her best not to laugh.
"I can see why Oscar loves you," Marcus laughed. "Those cheeks," he pointed at Elise's face with another wink. "And if you lose, you'll have to sing a song with us."

Mikki was clearly game the way she shot to her side. Patricia. Well Patricia already seemed to get that peck on the cheek. From the corner of her eye, Elise caught Owen chancing a tiny kiss on her friend's cheek. Sweet angel cupid may have been promised overtime pay.

They played three games, gathering a bit of an audience when the stakes became clear. The first two games had them ending in a tie. There was divisive cheering going during the last game. Team Marcus. Team Elise and Mikki. Elise had the last shot. The scoreboard showed Marcus in the lead, but fifteen points would put the girls in the lead. No pressure. No pressure at all. Especially after having had two more drinks. Aim. Throw. Bull's-eye. The girls won.

"Nice shot!" Hozier yelled out from behind Elise.
"I've got a feeling you were playing us and could've ended us during the first two games," Marcus gaped.
Elise just shrugged, not wanting to admit that she indeed had had her fair share of drunken bar darts practices. "Alright. Time to pay up," she grinned.
"Well, you have to kind of let us know which one of us," Marcus chuckled.
"Hmmm..." Elise gazed back and forth between Marcus and Ted. "Ted."
"What? Awe," Marcus frowned.
"You're married," Elise scrunched her nose.
"And you've got a boyfriend," Marcus countered.
"I know. But I don't know Carey. I do know Oscar," Elise winked.
"Sorry mate, looks like I'm her favorite," Ted laughed with a deep rumble, giving Elise a quick peck on her right cheek.

Mikki chose Hozier. Patricia took a few quick snaps with her cell. "You guys are in so much trouble," she laughed as she sent the pictures to David and Oscar. "Go ahead," Elise and Mikki said in unison.
"What is going on?" David texted back, twenty or so question marks attached. A few seconds later Mikki's cell rang. "We're just kidding," Mikki laughed as she walked off to a quiet corner.

"I always knew, she'd leave me for a better musician," Oscar responded with a string of broken hearts. A row laughing emojis quickly followed after. Elise got out her own cell.
"See, if you'd been here, that wouldn't have happened. *tongue emoji*," she messaged.
"It would've happened. Although that kiss would've been mine. I'd have beaten all of you," he texted back.
"Ah yeah? You know it was a choose your favorite musician kind of deal for the win."
"In that case, I'd ask for a kiss from Marcus. I'm sure Carey wouldn't mind," Oscar was fast to
"I'll keep that in mind if we ever all get together."

"Looks like David isn't as forgiving as you," Elise cringed when she saw Mikki arguing on the phone.
"Really? Oh. You need me to talk to him?" Oscar queried.
"No. Let them work it out on their own. He might text you though," Elise suggested.
"Alright. Miss you. Enjoy the rest of the festival, Sweetie." That message came with an attached photograph of a smiling Oscar. Looked like he was at Montreal's airport already.
"Stay safe. Tell them to go easy on you when filming," Elise sent back.

The night ended with laughs and more singing. Elise had jokingly thrown out for Marcus to sing "Fare Thee Well". To her surprise he did. With Ed no less. A lovely way to end the night. Mikki and Elise were ready to head back, gearing towards Patricia who was once again enthralled by conversation with Owen. This time he held her hands. As sweet as new love was, there was a protective way about this group. They had no reason to distrust Owen but this wasn't their city. They weren't close to their homes. It was preferable if they stuck together. Owen, with a frown again, nodded in understanding, again.

"He seems sweet," Patricia looked back over her shoulder, waving at Owen who looked after them like a little, lost puppy.
"We know. And we're sure you could handle yourself. But you know," Elise shrugged. "Just to be on the safe side."
"Did you tell him about the kids?" Mikki was curious.
"I did," Patricia sighed. And?? faces gaping at her. "He said he doesn't mind. But we all know how that goes. They say they don't mind. But... I don't know. He's nice though. I can't quite explain it. Just...," Patricia pulled up her shoulders. Her cheeks flushed. She was smitten for sure. Mikki and Elise eyeballed each other behind Patricia's back. Unspoken code for "we need to talk to him, see what he's on about."

"Everything ok with David," Elise pondered while taking off her shoes. Festival exhaustion hitting her hard that evening.
"Oh. Yeah. He --- He said he's worried someone might whisk me away," Mikki rolled her eyes.
"Some jealousy is good, though," Elise pointed out.
"True. But I mean, really? I guess, I should be the one worried," Mikki sighed. "There'd always been a little doubt from the get-go. Jealousy was an ugly thing, though. The way it crept into minds. A little was ok. A lot was dangerous. Elise looked at Mikki. There was a little bit of worry in her eyes. But she was sure it wouldn't last.

Sunday hit all three of them like a two-by-four against the head. Festival exhaustion was almost an understatement. Their bodies almost unwilling to do what their minds commanded. Mikki and Patricia groaned through the morning. They had to get up. Last morning of interviews and photo shoots. Elise remained in her bed a while longer while her friends packed up most of their stuff. Just lazy Sunday morning. Oscar by her side would've been quite welcome. She checked her cell, noting he'd messaged her while she'd been asleep.

A few photos attached to random things. Not so random when she scrolled through the descriptions.
*coffee for my queen* Picture of a paper coffee cup.
*strawberry shortcake is mine* Picture of an almost finished pastry.
*the sunrise you missed* Picture of a Montreal sunrise.
*the drive to work, so boring* Picture of the highway there.
"That last one payback for last night?" Elise texted back.
"Break a leg," Elise wrote back.
Smiley face in response.

Elise walked around rather aimlessly on that last festival day. Unlike the previous three days, she opted to take her camera along this time. Taking pictures of random things. Taking pictures of whatever bands she decided to watch. She was perplexed at herself. All that preparation to take the device along, and now she only took pictures on one day. She was sure Mikki had enough photographs to share a few here and there. So it wasn't necessarily a bad thing that she only snapped a few pictures on the last day.

She scrolled through the review now and then, noting that the feeling of exhaustion was almost universal. Festival-goers were on their last bits of energy, wherever they were drawing it from. There were quite a few people that had plopped down on the greens around the stages, snoozing away. If she hadn't promised Ed Helms that she'd come by and see his set in the early evening, she'd probably chance a nap right about now, too. Instead, she went back to the tent for a quick meet up with Mikki and Patricia. Packing everything up except shower essentials and a change of clothes.

Then they split. Last run at the stages for photo shoots and interviews. Bad thing for Elise was that Florence + The Machine had their set almost immediately before Ed's. Choices. Choices. She opted to head to the Bluegrass Superjam, certain she'd see Florence some other time, at some other single venue concert or at another festival.

"Aren't you on soon?" Elise wondered. Ed seemed a bit unprepared. His band nowhere in sight.
"Ah. Not for a while. Wanted you to meet someone," his eyes had a bit of a mischievous sparkle to them. Elise just nodded. "Those guys right here," he pointed his chin at a band that was just getting their instruments ready. "Elise, meet the Punch Brothers," Ed introduced.

Punch Brothers? Punch Brothers... that name sounded vaguely familiar. Mind palace. Why didn't she have one as organized as Sherlock Holmes'. Searching. Searching. "You guys worked on Inside Llewyn Davis?" she asked with some trepidation.
"Sure did," the lead singer, who introduced himself as Chris Thile, held out his hand. Bingo! "Oscar Isaac is her boyfriend," Ed blurted out. Like a five-year-old would when they had a secret so urgent they couldn't hold it in anymore.
"Is that right?" Chris grinned.
"Yup," Elise wrinkled her nose. "Would you guys mind taking a picture with me?" she asked carefully.
"Not at all. Sending it to Oscar?"
"Maybe."

That was certainly a way to end the festival. Another set of musicians who knew Oscar. There was some talk about his singing ability. How he'd picked up Travis picking quickly to play the role accurately. How he was a bit of a perfectionist in that way. Little bits of information that made her see Oscar in a new, somehow even better light. She didn't ask anything too personal, though. She
wanted to get to know him over time, on her own. But those little bits of info were quite interesting.

Elise watched the Bluegrass Superjam from the side of the stage. Mikki and Patricia joining her halfway into the set. Fast paced music had them stomping and clapping along and to Elise's surprise, she knew a few of the songs, singing along on the top of her lungs.

The evening ended with the three women eating fries and burgers from one of the CenteRoo stands, then slowly dragging themselves to watch a couple of songs from Billy Joel's set in the distance. They didn't stick around until the end as they had to get back to their tent. Elise's and Patricia's flight was leaving shortly after midnight, and the drive was at least an hour back. Something they learned last time was if they left before the last set was over, the streets were almost empty. Bit haunting but very, very much appreciated. It still left them in a bit of a time crunch.

Fast showers, faster packing of whatever was left, and they were off, Mikki almost hitting lose-your-license speeds on the way to Nashville International. "Next time, you two need plan an extra day in," Mikki joked as she helped them heave their bags out of the trunk. No time to pull into the parking lot this time. So she idled by the drop-off, promised emails and phone calls once she got home herself.

They were cutting it close. Closer than when Patricia and Elise had left Seattle. Good thing they only had carry-ons and backpacks. Good thing they were pretty prepared and organized. It would've been maddening if they had to search for their credentials. It was still a dash, though. Run. Run. Run as fast as one can, really. They caught their plane with one minute to spare, sinking into their seats with exhausted huffs.

"Best festival ever," Elise grinned.
"That's for sure," Patricia blushed. There was a spark in her eyes. The two were out before the plane even left the gate.
The flight from Nashville International seemed a lot shorter this time around, but five hours of sleep would have to make do. It was a good thing that Elise's brother-in-law was willing to play chauffeur again, but he did grumble that she should get her own car at some point if she continued to travel like this, especially when the arrival time would continue to be in the wee hours of the day.

This time she got back at 4 a.m. on a Monday. In big city terms, this was an hour before traffic became dense with early work commuters, but had the highways already filled with morning truck deliveries. Mostly towards the markets and super chains.

There was no talking while they dropped off Patricia at her place. The women were still exhausted from the festival, and James continued to be a grouchy bear, grumbling insults towards drivers who didn't use their blinkers. A pet peeve he shared with Elise. One she found amusing when she wasn't the driver.

Only before Elise got to the threshold of her apartment did James offer her a wrinkled smile. "Did you have fun?" he smirked when he noticed the substantial amount of dust still clinging to her carry-on.

"I did," Elise's smile was so wide she actually had creases forming in her cheeks this time. "Hmmm... you gonna need some lotion there," James booped her nose with his index, grinning at the redness the Tennessee sun had left behind. "I'll see you tomorrow then. Christine wants to have dinner. She's eager to hear all about your trip," he added before giving her a bear hug and a peck goodbye.

Elise agreed with a soft sigh. She halted before entering her apartment this time. A heaviness crawled into her chest and stomach knowing that Oscar - once again - wasn't there to greet her. Clicks of keys once again echoing into an empty apartment. No stale smell this time. She'd only been gone five days. And he, only one. She could still smell the coffee Oscar must've made when he'd left Saturday morning.

There were two options now: lie down and get a couple more hours of sleep before she had to get ready for work or try and call him. She opted for the latter. Four rings in, his voicemail picked up.

"Good morning, Lindo. I'm guessing you're out on set already or at least in makeup. I just wanted to let you know that I made it back. I should probably try and get a couple of hours of sleep before I have to get ready. I miss you. Stay safe, and stop scaring your co-stars. Chat later." Elise hung up with hitched breath.

She peeked at her watch. 5 a.m. She stripped out of her clothes, set the alarm to 8 a.m. Three hours of sleep sounded better than two. She'd check emails and missed phone calls and text messages once she'd get to work. Not like she had much else to do, still sitting out the China-Japan deal and
She took comfort in that the sheets and pillows had his scent clinging to them. Stronger this time. A shorter gap between when he'd left and she'd come home the reason he was still quite present. The thought of him staying at her place during his off time a comfort that had her fast asleep.

8 a.m. rushed in it seemed, but three hours latched on to a choppy sleep schedule were better than nothing. She took a languid shower, surprised by how much dust was still washing off her body, especially from her hair and ears. Disgusting. That meant she'd have to wash the pillowcases. She groaned at the thought. Lose Oscar's scent for the next two weeks or have clean pillow cases was a serious mental debate, but cleanliness won this case. She was sure there were other things around that had him all over.

Post-festival grogginess was strong this time. Her body just didn't want to move like she wanted it to. It took her way too long to get dressed, her arms almost too weak to style her hair, let alone apply makeup evenly. That tiredness had her skip breakfast, too. Oscar would disapprove on that one. The thought of him scolding her made her snicker, though. She made a mental note to grab an apple on the way out. How lovely of him to have gone shopping before he'd left. Her fridge and fruit bowl was stocked with everything she liked. And a few things he preferred. A few notes telling her to try the foods he'd picked. Maybe also a hint at what to get for when he'd return.

Something else had her smiling as well. It was the fact that he had decided to leave a few things behind. Just like she'd suggested. A couple of sets of clothing, a pair of boots, and his bathroom essentials, including a small bottle of his cologne. Suddenly, washing the pillowcases didn't seem so drab. She could just spritz a few drops of the cologne on them after the wash.

She actually did so now. Just one pump on her wrist, distributing the few drops on her wrists and behind her ears; right behind the lobes. Forrest --- after the rain --- hint of spice. His scent on her was certainly the best way to start the week and for whatever reason, it gave her a much-needed energy boost.

"Morning, boss." Thom held out her coffee the second he saw her exit the elevator. "Morning, Thom." Elise grabbed the cup without taking much notice of the young P.A. It was unintentional. She was immersed in the newspaper she'd grabbed on the way over. Just a little catching up with Seattle news before she'd throw herself back into regular life.

A stack of contracts to be reviewed, a schedule for upcoming appointments and meetings were already in neat symmetry on her desk. Thom had learned quickly that Elise liked things a certain way. From how the contracts had to be sorted to how they had to be placed on her desk. Everything color coded. Everything collated. She didn't like wasting time having to search for things. Elise was sure Helen had helped him figure out a few things here and there, and she was glad that she didn't have to waste any more time on training. Not that it would've taken long anyways. Thom was clever and eager to learn.

She was looking over some minor contract to build a small office complex somewhere in Alaska when the somber tone in the office caught her attention. It was Monday. It should've been almost as noisy as chatter at a rock concert right before the band came out. Where was the morning madness? Where was the scuffling of people rushing between meetings? Where was the yelling between cubicles?

Elise put the contract down and ambled towards the office floor. Whispers between cubicles, muted typing, a few tears of paper were all she heard. Everyone was focused on their work, which of
course was great but also very unusual for a Monday morning. Besides meetings and yells for "bring me this and bring me that", there'd usually be conversations of how weekends had gone by, what movies her colleagues had seen, what shows held everyone's attention. Nothing of that sort this time.

She looked over to Richard's office. The door was closed but the blinds were open. Lights were off, though. She looked around. She should have been able to hear him if he was walking the floor. He was always a little louder than everyone else. Not in a bad way. More like a cheery rumble kind of thing. A laugh here and there. A checking in where everyone was at, and if they understood tasks and deadlines.

But he was nowhere to be seen, and all upper-level meetings didn't happen until noon. She couldn't recall if he'd planned for vacation. If he had, it would've been odd as he never took time off during the beginning stages of a new project, especially one as extensive as this. Odd indeed and it had her stomach askew. Something was very off.

"Helen, where is Richard?" Elise geared towards her former P.A.
"Oh. That's right. You just got back so you haven't heard," Helen hushed. Those words panic-inducing already. "Richard had a heart attack. He's in the hospital."

Elise could feel her breathing getting shorter, as though vices were pinching on her lungs. The room was spinning, too. It was as though someone had pulled the rug out from under her. And the floor. Everything felt free fall. She barely managed a "when?"
"Last night. I think Judith tried to call you but you may have been on your way back already," Helen explained. "If you want to go, go. I'll cover for you."
"I can't. I just got back," Elise scanned around the floor, the CEO nodding at her. She stumbled back to her office, trying her best not to lose her composure, cussing out the word "shit" under her breath on fast repeat. "Thom. No calls, please," she instructed. Her P.A. just nodded an ok.

Elise sunk into her office chair, trying to collect her thoughts. She got out her cell, her vision going blurry from the tears welling up into her eyes. She scrolled through missed calls. And there - between numbers from family, friends, and a few unknown digits - was Judith's. She counted fifteen missed calls. Elise scrolled through her voicemails. Judith had left three. She listened but was barely able to make out any of the words. She hit the call back button. It went straight to voicemail.

"Hey. I'm so sorry I missed your calls. I can't leave just yet but I will come by after work. Hang in there. Ok?" Elise somehow managed with a placid voice but the second she hung up, tears rolled down her cheeks. Richard was like a father to her. From the get-go, he'd treated her like that. Like a daughter. And so did Judith. Mainly because they never had kids and were compensating through her. Not materialistic but definitely advise and care-wise. How could she have been so absentminded about them? Honorary daughter duty bestowed upon her felt like something she didn't deserve right now.

Never had a day felt longer than today. The hours seemed endless. Each minute, a felt eternity. As soon as the minute hand drew past five, she was out the door, nearly knocking Thom off his feet on the way out. She'd never been faster than this. The cab ride to the hospital felt just as long. She wanted to yell at the cabbie to go faster, but she refrained, knowing full well that there were still traffic laws to abide by. The panic was rising though. Her own heart feeling like it was going to give out.

She didn't wait for the elevator once at the hospital. For that, her patience had worn too thin the
short ride over. So she took the stairs, dashing by twos to the floor where Richard had been admitted to. Judith was standing in the hallway talking to one of the surgeons but the second he stepped away Elise rushed over.

"Oh Judith, I'm so sorry." She flung her arms around her boss' wife. "How are you holding up?" Elise searched for Judith's eyes. Her heart beating almost a million beats per minute, her breathing short gasps. Even the most trained athletes would've keeled over after that dash, but somehow, she was still standing up. Breathing and heart rate almost irrelevant to her as she waited for an answer.

Judith just shrugged her shoulders, her face dropping into her hands as she began crying. She took a deep breath in. "They're prepping him for surgery," she sobbed out. A sigh of relief skipped out. He was alive. He. Was. Alive.

"Overnight? That's good. It'll be quiet. Doctors will be focused on him. Plus he'll have a beginning of week team. They'll be well rested." Elise held Judith's hands, amazed she hadn't lost herself in tears as well. Adrenaline the more likely cause she held herself together right now.

She'd never seen her metaphorical adoptive mom like this. Without makeup. Dressed in sweats. Distraught. There were a few lines on her face that had never been visible before. Worry lines. Her eyes swollen and her nose red from crying. Who could blame her? A medical emergency like this would throw anyone for a loop. Would make anyone look years older than they really were.

But Elise saw something else. An expression of sheer terror. Panic. The kind that came with thoughts of "what if things end badly?" She'd been there before. That fear of walking out of the hospital with nothing but a small box of belongings. And she had. Nearly ten years ago. So she recognized it right away. Judith was scared she'd walk out with nothing but a box.

"He'll be ok. He has to be. He's stubborn like that," Elise procured a thin smile. It was unconvincing. Judith looked around. Rising panic again, her face fell back into her palms. Elise just held her for a few minutes. That's all she could do for now, really. "Did you eat anything today?" she asked carefully as concern shifted to the well being of the person in front of her. "No. Did you?" Judith countered. Elise shook her head no. "You're as bad as me," Judith managed a small chuckle, wiping away tears. "You want to go see him before they roll him into the OR," she asked. "I'll get coffee. --- I just... I can't. I...." Judith started, tears welling up again.

"It's ok. I'll go see him. You get coffee. Get a little bit of a scenery change," Elise encouraged. If she had to venture a guess, Judith had been at the hospital all of last night and all of today. No one else here to support her. There'd be no family traveling in as their siblings lived across the country. Most of them older than the couple. Some with medical problems of their own. No kids rushing to their sides either as they didn't have any. But friends... Where were their friends? No matter right now. Elise had no time to play judge, nor did she want to. People had their reasons to stay away she was sure. Hospitals always gave her the shivers and bad memories. So she couldn't blame people for staying away.

She took a deep breath in and quietly opened the door to Richard's room. A nurse was drawing some blood and scribbling down numbers on a chart.

"Hi. May I?" Elise whispered. The nurse nodded an ok, finishing up her tasks, then left. Elise carefully stepped into the room, taken aback by the sight. Richard was on a bed, eyes closed with too many cables to count sprawling out from all over the place; monitors beeping around him; a couple of IVs hanging on a stand. Despite all that, he looked quite peaceful. But it was a haunting peacefulness. Very much a disliked one.

Elise went up to his left side and looked down on his face, the image heartbreaking. Richard
looked a good fifteen years older. His skin quite pale. Dark circles under his eyes. Thinner somehow. Those gray strands in his hair somehow more prominent than before. How had she never noticed his gray hair before? Or those lines around his mouth, his eyes, and in the hollow of his cheeks? Moments from the last few months washed over her. She'd noticed Richard looking tired. Exhausted, really. But she always assumed it was because work had kept him busy. Maybe his smile camouflaged the fatigue. Even so, she should've known better somehow. Just somehow.

She took another deep breath in, curling her right hand around his left, careful not to pull on the IV. That poised composure crumbling the second she felt his rather cold skin against her palm.

"Hey," Richard lethargically opened his eyes. The usually sparkly, sea-green irises a washed out gray now. His voice dry and quiet, missing its typical, rumbling, warm timbre. "I knew you were faking it," Elise chuckled with a whisper, silent tears rolling down her cheeks. "I know, right? Fake heart attacks just don't have the same effect as they used to," he squeezed her hand weakly. "Those tears had better not be for me."
"Oh, you," she chuckled thinly, pulling his hand to her cheek, holding it there for a few seconds while she calmed down.

"How was the festival?" Richard mumbled. "Pretty good," Elise smiled thinly.
"I can see that. Sunscreen helps, you know," he chuckled as he teased her nose. "Shut up!" she chuckled. "I'll torture you with the details after surgery. You just watch. You'll be up and running just to get away from me," she laughed, then drew in a deep breath. "So, what was it? Stress, diet, alcohol --- sex?" she further tried to lift the mood. Lingering thoughts kept her tone somber.

"All of the above," Richard chuckled lightly. "I'm kidding. I wish it had been sex and alcohol. In that combination. But I'm afraid it was diet and stress," he sighed.
"I should've seen it. You've been looking very tired the last few months." Elise squeezed his hand. "Oh, Lizzie. Not even I saw this coming. I guess this is a sign to retire, huh? Where's Judy?"
Richard looked around.
"She's getting some coffee."
"Good. You'll look out for her, won't you? If someth..."
"Don't say that! That's like bad luck or something. So don't."
"Speaking of the devil." Richard chuckled when he saw his wife enter the room.

Elise looked up. "He made me cry. You see that Judith. Such an ass!" she chuckled under some new tears.
"Yeah. He's been doing that a lot the last couple of days," Judith raised her brow as sassy as she could considering how tired she felt and looked. At least she seemed to have found some calmness, again. If only for a few minutes. "I put the coffee on the table by the door."
"K. I'll leave you guys alone. Love you, Richard. You better be ok, or else I'm telling everyone at the office what a big fake you are," Elise warned with a sniffled smile, placing a peck on his forehead.

Elise took the coffee by the door and wandered towards the waiting room.
She got out her cell, dialing Oscar. Four rings in, voicemail. He must be having a long day. She hung up. Dialed again. Voicemail again.
"Hey. I guess you're still on set. I --- I hope I didn't interrupt. --- I --- I just really need to hear your voice. If you can, could you call me back first chance you get, please?" Elise tried her best to keep her voice steady, but everything she said came out with a wobble. She hung up, sinking into a chair, and took a sip from her coffee, subconsciously running her hand over her neck a few times.
That impatience provoked rubbing down tensing muscles because she didn't know what else to do with her free hand. Ten minutes later her phone rang.

"Hey, mi Linda. What's wrong?" Oscar's voice crackled through the speaker. It should've been a soothing comfort, and it somewhat was, but she just lost herself in tears again. Relief that he'd called back fairly soon. Tears nonetheless. "Sweetie. What's the matter?" his voice picked up in pitch. An immediate sense that something was very wrong. It took a few more seconds before Elise spilled that Richard was in the hospital because of a heart attack.
"Oh, Sweetie. I'm so sorry. Do you need me to come back? I can ask. I'm sure they'd understand," he offered.
"No! No... Judith is here for him. And so am I.--- I just needed to hear your voice. I hate hospitals," Elise sniffled.

"I don't know many people that like hospitals," Oscar chuckled softly. There was a pause. Too long for his liking. "Sweetie. Talk to me. What's on your mind?"
"It's just ... All of this today. It took me back. I hate thinking like this, but what if things go wrong? What if it's worst case scenario?" she stammered. She heard Oscar take a deep breath in.
"It won't. He'll be ok. I've met Richard. Well only twice. But he... he'll be ok. He has a lot planned, you know. Taking his wife to Europe. Fixing his motorcycle. Fixing up whatever vacation house they plan on buying," he held an even timbre. His voice was soothing. So soothing to her. So soothing this very minute. The very thing she needed to hold herself together.

"I know. I just. I cannot help thinking about my dad, either. He's only a couple of years older than Richard. And this was kind of out of the blue. I just...," Elise could feel her chest tightening again. Those damn invisible vices around her lungs closing in.
"Sweetie. Listen to me. He'll be ok. I've got a feeling about that. What procedure does he need? Surgery, I mean?" he asked.
"Triple bypass," Elise mumbled out.
"Triple bypass? Pssssh! Most surgeons do that with their right hand tied behind their back while wearing a blindfold. He'll be fine," Oscar stated with confidence. It made Elise snicker. That was followed by another long pause, though.

"Sweetie?" Oscar asked softly.
"I was thinking. --- I know, you're filming in Spain at some point this year. I think --- I think we should take up my dad on his offer and go visit him in Palamós. Whenever you have a break, I mean. I know it's still some time out. So it's only an idea right now," Elise suggested. She heard Oscar take a sip of something. A warm sigh right after.
"I think that sounds great, Sweetie," Oscar agreed. Another long pause. "Sweetie, he'll be ok," he repeated. A heavy sigh on her end a place filler for an "I know."

"Looks like they're ready to get him to the O.R." She got up and paced towards Richard and Judith; Judith telling the nurse to wait just one minute.
"Ok. Keep me up to date. No matter what time. But get some rest, too. And make sure Judith eats and rests as well," Oscar requested.
"Will do," Elise sighed.
"I mean it, Sweetie. You need your energy. And so does Judith. And I know she'll need you to be strong for her. And with her. I'm sure she won't admit it. But she'll need that someone to watch out for her. I know you know how that goes," he paused. "I love you."
"I love you, too."
"I know. Call me later. Ok? No matter the hour!"
"I promise." With that Elise hung up.
"He'll be ok. I love you, my little, nerdy strawberry. *kiss emoji**heart emoji*"
"Oscar?" Richard grinned through a heavy-lidded gaze. Sedatives slowly taking effect. "You know it. He says you'll be ok. So you know. You had better, cause we don't want to make him a liar," Elise chuckled with a clenched fist, then squeezed his hand, again. "We love you," Judith hung on to Richard's other hand until distance broke their bond. One last mouthed "I love you" from Judith. A sleepy thumbs up from Richard. "You should go home. I don't want you in trouble at work for being tired or late," Judith sighed as she sunk onto a double chair in the waiting room. "And who will wait with you?" Elise countered, throwing her purse into the chair next to Judith's. Like she was going to leave her "mom" now. "Thank you," Judith whispered.

Elise looked around. Surprisingly, hunger was tugging at her stomach. "We should get food," she suggested but Judith shot her down. "Ok. Well, I'm getting something anyways, and you can eat if you're hungry," Elise insisted as she pulled her wallet from her purse. Judith nodded with a weak smile.

The cafeteria was already closed, so Elise went across the street to some convenience store, picking up a couple of sandwiches, some sweets, and a few iced teas. When she got back to the waiting room, Judith had fallen asleep on the double chair, clutching to Elise's purse. So she asked the nurse for an extra blanket, gently draping it over Judith as not to wake her before sinking into the chair next to her.

"Picked up food. Judith is sleeping. *snoozing emoji*"
"Good. Make sure you're actually eating some of that. Does your sister know?"
"Oh crap. Thank you. What would I do without you?"
"You'd be dating some musician with a tenor voice. *laughing emoji*"
"True. *thinking emoji*"
"I am shocked. Just shocked. *row of laughing emojis* Get some rest, mi Reina."
"*rolling eye emoji*"
"Don't take that tone with me, young lady!"
"You're only a year older than me. Grumpy old man. *heart emoji*"
"You shouldn't talk about age. *tongue emoji*."
"I'm not the one with salt and pepper hair. *teary laugh emoji*"
"Touché. I love you, mi Reina. Get some rest."
"Te amo. I will." Elise quickly called her sister, explaining everything that had happened. "So that's why she called last night. Oh my god. I feel so bad. I was sick. So we ignored everyone. Please tell her, I'm sorry for ignoring her calls." Christine sighed. "I'm sure she'll understand, sis. Can we postpone family dinner?" Elise asked carefully. "Of course, Hon. Do you need us to bring you guys anything? Food or snacks? Does Judith need anything?" Christine queried softly. A babbling voice revealed that she must've been trying to rock Chloé to sleep. It was, after all, almost 9 p.m. "No. We're good. Just going to wait it out here with her. Probably going to try and get some sleep as well," Elise sighed. "Hmmm. Ok. But if you guys need anything, call us, and I'll have James drop it off," Christine offered.

"Will do," Elise whispered. Once again, there was a long pause. She listened to Chloé's continued babbles. Clearly, the baby wasn't so keen on calling it a night. It made Elise chuckle. An image of
her holding a baby, trying the same, popped into her head. Out of all the times. //What if// scenarios were a funny thing. "Sis?" Elise mumbled.
"Still here," Christine assured.
"Do me a favor."
"Anything, Hon."
"Call dad. Please? Just to tell him we miss him and we love him. And Edgar, too. Please?" Elise could feel the tears welling up again.
"Ok, Hon." Christine agreed.
"And Sandra, too," Elise whispered.
"Ok. I love you, sis," Christine waited.
"Love you, too." Elise hung up.

"You don't have to stay, Honey," Judith's voice rasped.
"Oh. I don't mind. I thought you were sleeping," Elise chuckled at the disheveled mess. If there was ever an excuse to have a massive bed head, it was today. "I got some food. It's in the nurse's fridge. If you want it."
"I think, I just may." Judith got up, grabbed the food, and another cup of coffee. There were a few minutes of silence while she ate. She was lost in her thoughts for sure, the way she peered towards the heavy double door towards the O.R. There was a tired warmness to Judith. Exhaustion of course. But also care.

"How come you two never had kids?" Elise asked cautiously, and somewhat out of the blue.
"What?" Judith was taken off guard.
"Kids. How come you never had any? You and Richard, you seem like you'd have been perfect," Elise explained. Judith thought for a few minutes. A tiny smile crossing her lips now and then. Clearly, her mind had drifted to younger days.
"We wanted. But --- School came first. College. University. Then trying to make a name for ourselves. By the time we were actually ready to have kids, we both had passed a certain age. So, we just never did. It's selfish, huh?" Judith explained.
"No. I don't think it is. You just had different priorities. And that's ok," Elise nodded. "As long there aren't any regrets," she added.

"No regrets. --- What about you? Why didn't you? I mean you and Joe," Judith treaded just as carefully posing that question. For different reasons.
"Kind of like you. School and career came first." Elise twisted her lips.
"Do you think, you would have had kids? If he was still around?" Judith nudged on.
"I'd like to think so. One at least." Elise heaved her chest.
"And what about with Oscar?"
"I don't know. All I know is that I'm approaching that age you mentioned," Elise halted. "I just don't know. Whatever happens. I mean not any time soon, but... I don't know. When we get there, we'll get there. And if not, I can just spoil my niece." Elise smiled.

"That's true, huh? And another one. Or a nephew?" Judith smiled warmly. A few minutes of silence followed again. Elise profiled Judith's face. The redness had subsided a little bit. The lines a little thinner now. A tiny spark in her eyes.
"I gotta ask. How on earth did Richard ever convince you to go out with him? I mean you guys just seem so... so..." Elise chuckled.
"So different?" Judith grinned. "Hmmm... we sure are," she paused. Just a moment to recall those memories. "I worked on campus. At the library," she started.

"You did not!" Elise giggled with a disbelieving tinge. How judgmental. But Elise really did have difficulty picturing Judith as a librarian. Especially with a bubbly personality like hers.
"I did, too. I love reading. Besides. --- Nothing more dangerous than a well-read woman, wouldn't you agree?" Judith countered. Elise just nodded, biting her bottom lip.
"He showed up one day, and at first I thought he was lost. His hair was all tousled. His clothes a mismatched mess. Did you know he wouldn't be able to throw an outfit together if his life depended on it?" Judith laughed. That was true. There'd been a few instances when Judith had been away and Richard had come to work in questionable color and pattern combinations.

"He was quiet. But I soon became aware that he only ever came around when I was there. Today that would be considered creepy, I guess. And it was; a little. But it was also sweet. He'd only stay for thirty minutes reading through whatever he was reading through, and then he'd leave. Now and then, he'd borrow a book but he never got in line when I was at the desk. One day, he came in, and he had an apple in his hand and was about to take a bite. Food was a no-no, so I walked up to him and scolded him - quite loudly, may I add - for bringing food into the library and he just scuttled out," Judith laughed again. Then her expression changed. The laugh wrinkles disappeared for a moment.

"He didn't come back for a week. I'd scared him away," she sighed. "Anyways. A week later, there was a card on the desk addressed to me. And I opened it. He'd written me an apology, promising me he'd never bring food into the library again, and he was wondering if he was allowed back. And I looked up and he was standing there, outside the door, with puppy eyes, slouching down to make himself shorter. So I walked over and teasingly flipped the open sign over so it said closed, and pointed for him to leave. He mouthed out a sad sorry and walked away," Judith let out a heartfelt laugh. Elise joined in. She could picture Richard slouching away, sad frown and all. Some men just had that down to a perfection.

"I ran after him. Telling him I was joking. And he just stutter-yelled out "would you like to go grab some food with me" while looking at his feet. He was beyond shy. --- But I liked that because he wasn't one of those guys. The ones who'd whistle after me. The ones who thought I was easy because of the way I dressed or looked. We dated for a month before he even dared to hold my hand. And it took another month before he kissed me," Judith beamed. Elise shook her head laughing quietly. Judith met that with a "what?" face.

"I don't know. I just always pictured you asking him out," Elise burst out, loud laugh in tow. "Well I may not have asked him out first, but I did ask him to marry me," Judith lifted a brow with some pride.

"See. Now that sounds more like you two," Elise snickered before hitching a breath. She got up and poured herself another cup of coffee at the nurses' station.

Judith tracked Elise's movements with her eyes: from the way she stirred her coffee, to how she lifted her legs to the side and up on a chair a few seats over, to how she glanced out the window now and then. Everything with a somber kind of tone. Then Judith's gaze settled on Elise's face. At thirty-five years old, there were lines on the young interpreter's face that shouldn't have been there. That much Judith knew.

"How did you make it through?" Judith asked quietly. She realized she took Elise a little off guard with that question. "When Joe.." Judith's face settled back into deep creases. "Don't think like that. Richard is going to be ok," Elise cut her off.

"I know. But. If... How?" Judith's eyes filled with tears, again. There was a pleading tinge in her voice.

Elise gulped and pushed a breath through her nose. "I almost didn't," she whispered. "But I had my sister. And my brother-in-law. My dad of course. And when I moved here,--- when I moved here, I
had you guys," she paused. "And it's different for everyone. But those bad days --- they don't last. There are bad days for a long time of course, but then, eventually, a good one sneaks in. And another. And another. And soon the bad are far and few in between. And the good take over. But all of that, overcoming those stages of grief and loss, I know I wouldn't have made it through without the people that mattered."

Judith switched to the chair right next to Elise, taking her hand. "I know you have your quarrels with God. But, if I had asked for a child, it would've been for someone like you."

With that, the two women sat silently, gazing out the window, dozing off now and then. Only the discomfort of the chairs kept rattling them awake. Around 4 a.m., the surgeon finally came out, explaining that Richard had made it through. "He'll be in ICU for two days, then a week in regular care before he gets to go home," the surgeon explained further.

"Can we see him?" Elise croaked out with a dry throat.
"Family only!" the surgeon directed at Elise.
"She's my daughter." Judith jumped up, and the surgeon looked between them.
"Hmmmm. Five minutes. You both should go home and get some rest yourselves," he raised his brow.

This time around, there were even more cables and tubes sprawling out and across. Richard was out. He'd be for quite some time the nurses had explained. Judith left a tiny kiss on his forehead. The tears that followed more a sign of relief. "We'll see you tomorrow, old man," Elise whispered with a chuckle. She could've sworn she saw Richard's index twitch at that remark.

"He's out of surgery. ICU for two days. A week hospital stay after that! Looks good considering. *smiley emoji* **tired emoji**
"Glad to read that, mi Reina. Get some rest. Call in sick to work if you can. Call me later ok? Ich liebe dich. *heart emoji*"

"If you want you can stay at my place," Elise offered Judith. She knew that staying alone at a place surrounded by a loved one that was away could be quite daunting. But Judith declined with a thin and very tired "thank you". "Ok. I'll be heading home. Getting some sleep. And then work. If you need anything, call my sister. She'll pick up for sure this time. She's sorry by the way, for not doing so last night. She said she felt ill," Elise explained as she hailed down a cab.

"That's what I told her. Get some sleep, ok. And eat some food. I'll come by the hospital after work." Elise helped Judith into the cab. Judith nodded in agreement and with that she was off.

Elise hailed herself a cab and finally went home, Tuesday morning already greeting her by the time she got to her apartment; dawn breaking in golden hues and clear skies. Two hours of sleep would have to make do this time.

A heavy gogginess accompanied her throughout the day at work. She texted Oscar in the morning, assuring him she had had some sleep and food; his concern quite notable when she told him she'd be going to work despite being rather sleepy. His "You take it easy, Sweetie" reply more of a command even an "I promise" couldn't appease. More "I promises" and a firm "I'll take a nap at lunch" finally lured out some kiss and heart emojis, though, and he let the issue go.

There was definitely a sense of gratefulness that she had only minor side contracts to look over. Anything too complex would've been too much for her mind; concentration torn between tiredness and wandering thoughts. Even that extra dark roast didn't help, and the lunch hour was definitely spent snoozing.
"How is he?" Helen asked when she dropped off some translations for review in the early afternoon.
"He'll be ok. I don't know if he'll come back to work any time soon, or if at all," Elise wearied. "Hmmm. That's what the CEO said. I think they're looking for a replacement now," Helen revealed.
"I figured. I hope it's not an outside hire. I think that might be weird," Elise pointed out.
"Who knows. Things seem to change quickly right now. Did you know Irene turned in her four week's notice? And Noah quit, too," Helen whispered.

"What? When did that happen?" Elise lifted her brow. She figured Noah would stick around and help the crews in general. He always did even though he was Richard's P.A. And Irene quitting? Well, that took Elise by complete surprise. Irene had been with the company almost as long as Richard. One of the few architects who didn't rotate out after two or three years.

"Last week. I don't know why. She's been mum about it. And Noah just simply walked out. Everyone is so on edge. I thought the whole thing with India was supposed to help us expand, hire more people especially now that we have the non-profit in place," Helen went on.
Elise just hummed out a "hmmm". She didn't like the sound of any of that. Rumors and gossip were a dangerous thing but even she couldn't deny that there had been a shift in mood since they had all returned from India.

It wasn't just the stress of the this new, massive project, either. It was something else. A schedule change in when certain things were due. A slight shift in how things were handled. A lot more oversight and micromanaging. She'd ignored it mostly because she'd been told to step aside and not get involved with the China-Japan contract. Not to mention that sometimes companies went through major overhauls to keep up with competitors or other internal changes. India definitely was a cause for the latter.

Even so, something felt off. And now with Richard out ill, the shift in mood became more apparent. Like he'd been the glue to hold the teams together. Or at least to make it look like it was business as usual. Most likely subconsciously because if there was one thing Elise was certain about, it was that Richard was the last person to screw people over on purpose to please the higher-ups.

Lost in thought for a few seconds, Elise finally looked up and caught Henry smirking her way. There was something quite malicious in the way he looked at her that left her with shivers down her spine. There was a pondering moment. Just a microsecond of doubt of why she'd really been kept out of the project. Suspicion that the whole gossip tornado had been a lucky accident they needed to hold her back.

Elise had to almost force herself away from that thought. But now it was there. All the way in the back. Hanging on by a thread. At least time seemed back at normal speed; five 'o'clock approaching faster than on Monday. It was about the only thing that mattered.

Elise, of course, kept her promise and swung by the hospital after work. Judith was already waiting by Richard's side. This time she was dressed in a red blazer-skirt combo with matching heels; makeup and hair perfect, too, and a smile on her face. The whole look as though Judith was ready to take on whatever, and the whatever had better be ready to run.

"Heya, old man," Elise chuckled when she entered the room. Richard wearily raised his thumb. Clearly, he was still quite weak and on painkillers, the combination making him look like some
sedated loon with a lopsided smile. Cute if the situation wasn't so serious. "You don't mind if I borrow your wife, do you? What? No objections? Ok!" Elise grinned. She couldn't help to playfully take advantage of the fact that he couldn't talk back just yet.

Judith placed a small peck on Richard's cheek and then stepped outside the room with Elise. "What really happened on Sunday?" Elise queried with a curious lift of her brow. Judith's expression faltered to deep thought lines. "He was on the phone. Next thing I know, there was yelling. And you know Rich. It takes a lot to get him there," Judith explained. Not even that perfect makeup could hide her anguish as she recalled that night. "Do you know who he was talking to?"

"I don't know. He never said a name. Just something about roadblocks and how he didn't agree with how the company was suddenly handling things. Money issues came up," Judith halted. "I've never heard him like that. But then again, he's never brought work home. In twenty-five years, that was a first. So I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Just a gut feeling. --- I think, maybe he should really consider retirement. Like turn in the package now. When he gets out of the hospital, I mean. It's just a hunch." Elise looked at Richard through the room's floor-side window. The nurse from yesterday was checking his vitals, jotting down numbers on his chart. "A hunch? About what?" Judith now looked at Richard, too; chuckling at the fact that he was looking at her with a thumbs up. Still with a pain-medication-induced lofty smile.

"I don't want to say," Elise drew her lips into a thin line. "You don't trust I can keep my mouth shut?" Judith gaped.

"I do, but if there's one thing I learned watching my brother-in-law, it's not to say anything until I've got all the facts straight," Elise sighed. "I can't stay long today. Early day tomorrow. And a business trip Thursday to Saturday. But, I'll be checking in Sunday," she turned towards Judith. "If you need anything, call my sister. And if Henry calls, tell him to call back at a better time," she twisted her lips, trying to hold back the notion that she thought it was Henry who'd called. If not him, someone from the board. And even for that, she had a few faces in mind. "I'm guessing that's the hunch you don't want to talk about," Judith frowned. Elise just nodded.

Monday had been a long day, Tuesday seemed even longer, with lingering thoughts all the way home. Elise's place wasn't far from the hospital, but her thoughts had her mind clouded. How much she wanted Oscar by her side right now. Holding her. It took the cabbie three attempts to ask for the fare before she heard him.

She stepped into her one-bedroom abode, her carry-on still waiting to be unpacked. It took forever to sort through the small suitcase, festival memorabilia spilling out onto the floor when she pulled out all the clothes to get washed. On the way to the washer, she paused in the hallway. Staring into her living room, she imagined Oscar sitting on her sofa, playing PS4 games.

She was sure he was an animated player who cussed at the screen and swayed the controller side to side to make the character he was controlling behave his way; as if that actually helped. He'd probably get lost in the game as well, unintentionally ignoring anyone nearby. She'd give anything to watch him lose himself like that. She'd probably snicker and then try to sneak a kiss on his curls.

The imagine didn't last long. Just a few seconds of "what if he was here". Elise hitched a breath, then finally proceeded to do her laundry. She looked at her cell, the display lighting up with a Tuesday, June 16, 2015, 7:23 p.m. It was after ten in Montreal. A hit of the button, three rings in, and Oscar picked up.
"Hey strawberry," crackled through the speaker.
"Are you on set, or at your apartment?" Elise angled the phone against her ear so she could cut some fruit for dinner.
"Still on set. How was your day?" Oscar sipped on something. Most likely water. Heavy suit popped into her mind.
" Weird. Tiring. Too long. How was yours?" Elise poured herself some water.

"He looked good. Better than yesterday. Breathing tube is out already," Elise took a seat by her dining room table. A long pause and a sigh. She always had so much she wanted to say, but when time came, she didn't feel like burdening him with trivial things. She much rather he talk. She loved his voice. She waited. Oscar seemed to do the same. "Can I tell you a secret? But you have to promise not to say anything to anyone," she caved to be the first to break the silence.
"Lo prometo," Oscar drew in a breath.

"It's just a gut feeling, --- but I think --- I think the company is going under," Elise revealed. "And I think, they're trying to save their own skin, doing some under the table shit."
"Wow," was all Oscar managed. He skipped a few breaths even.
"Yeah, wow alright. I actually think, somehow it's the reason Richard had a heart attack. I mean, I'm sure he won't tell me. I just have this feeling. Especially with the way Henry looked at me," Elise gabbed.

"Henry?"
"Corporate lawyer."
"I see. --- This is pretty big, Sweetie. You think they'll try and sell? Or just close down altogether?"
"I don't know. That's why I said it's just a gut feeling. I could be completely wrong. But if they sell, whatever company absorbs us will make changes and I am sure people will lose their jobs. The alternative is even more devastating," Elise divulged with some apathy. A surprise to her. Or maybe not. Her re-evaluation meeting popped into her mind. Her talk with Richard after Montreal did, too.

"You don't seem to be too upset about that," Oscar noticed the indifference right away.
"You're not wrong," she scoffed out a chuckle.
"I'm not, huh? Tell me, mi Linda."
"*long breath in* Thing is. I've been unsure for a little while now. If I should stay or leave. Venture out on my own and have my own startup, or maybe switch to a better, more challenging employer. I mean this is challenging, but I don't know. I need something --- something different. Something where my work matters more. Like on a more human level. I don't know. It's silly. Don't mind me."
"It's not silly, Sweetie. And don't try to shut me out," he took offense. "Let me take a guess. That talk we had. That one breakfast. When you said you needed to figure things out."
"You remember that? I'm impressed!"
"Of course I remember. I remember everything you say."

Pause. Heavy exhale. "I had a feeling before I met you. But then..."
"So it is because of me."
"No. And yes. And no. I think, you stepping in my life just got the ball finally rolling. At least in my mind," Elise confessed.
"Is that a good or a bad thing?" Oscar wondered.
"Right now it's neither. I just don't know. What should I do?" Elise asked. It hit her in that moment that this was the first time she'd asked him for advice. Serious, grand scale advice. And she
actually wanted a genuine answer.

"It's cliché, but what does your heart tell you?" Oscar questioned; his tone quite serious. He waited a couple of seconds. Silence. "Liz? --- I can almost hear your gears turning," he chuckled. "Listen. Don't think... Let your mind go blank. For one minute. Forget everything. And everyone. Even me. As if I wasn't part of the equation. Now. --- What does your heart tell you?" his timbre stayed tranquil as he drew out the question.

"Get out and do my own thing," Elise said almost instantaneously.

"And what does your mind tell you?" Oscar nudged on. Tone still tranquil but faster pace.

"Surprisingly --- the same thing," she once again said almost instantly.

"Then that's what you should do," Oscar stated matter of factly.

"I can't. Too many risks. I mean," Elise sighed.

"You're letting logic take over, Sweetie. Which technically is your mind. But you just said both say the same thing. Why the struggle against it? Be bold. You don't even have to quit our job but you could get started. Look at it as a side venture," Oscar encouraged.

"I just might," Elise chuckled.

"No! Not might. Will. As in: do it! If you say might, you won't," Oscar pressed on. "Look. Why don't you get a business idea together? James knows a little bit about business law, I'm sure. Technically, so do you. Nine years with them, I'm sure something rubbed off. It only has to be a rough draft for now. And then expand from there. Final destination in mind and all. And then so on and so on. And when it's in place and you feel confident, go all in. And if it fails, so what? At least you tried," he finished, catching his breath.

Elise just sat at her table, face buried in her palm, muttering out an "unbelievable."

"You ok, mi Linda?" Oscar asked when he heard her sigh.

"I'm perfect. You're perfect," she chuckled with a huff. "And business savvy," that statement came with a surprised undertone.

"No. I just talk bullshit to make myself look smart," Oscar laughed. Elise laughed, too. He knew she would. "Look, whatever you do, I'm behind you. If things go wrong, I'll be there, ok? Your family will have your back, too. I'm one-hundred-and-ten percent sure about that. And if things go right, I just might borrow money from you."

"Like you need my money!" She giggled.

"Your birthday left me broke," he laughed.

"It did? What?" she squeaked, some panic in her voice.

"I'm kidding, mi Reina. --- But I am behind whatever you decide," he smiled. She could tell.

"Thank you. --- Ditto by the way," she wrinkled her nose.

"You better get some sleep, mi Reina. I'll call tomorrow," he promised.

"Ok. Te amo," she whispered.

"Ich liebe dich," he stumbled out. It made Elise laugh. The way he always chopped up those words. She didn't care. She loved the way he pronounced those three little words in her language but in his accent.

It took a few more minutes before they actually hung up. One always waiting for the other to be the first; last minute things always somehow coming up, neither wanting to go, but knowing the other should. Elise almost dozed off a couple of times. A last, stern "get. some. sleep." had her cave in as she hung up.

The rest of the week went as predicted. Busy. But she did finally manage to catch up on sleep. Although, her workout routine suffered in lieu of. She told herself that the business trip would keep
her on her feet enough that it could technically be counted as exercise. What a sneaky way to trick her mind.

During her trip, they texted and called each other in the evenings, the subject matter a little lighter than usual. Oscar knew exactly how to keep her mind off things. Innuendos and "what are you wearing" chats his choice of diverting her mind. Not that he minded deep conversations, but July was sneaking up, and he'd been told numerous times that she'd get distant, especially during that first week.

So everything that was going on at her work, everything with Richard, was like added weight, and he was worried she'd close off, or go into overdrive. He noticed that there was no in between with her. All he wanted to do was help her keep a balance. Of course, he made sure he listened. After all, her concerns were quite valid. But then, when he felt that all that needed saying was said, he would redirect, just so she wouldn't get trapped in a vicious loop. Sometimes, he was sneaky about the diversion, other times more forward. The end result was always the same: a warm laugh followed by a hummed sigh. Like she knew what he was doing. Whispered thank yous always a skip away when she took the bait.

"I wish I was there right now. We'd never leave the room," he teased Saturday morning after finding out that she was naked in bed.
"A yeah? Hmm... Hotel room shenanigans, huh?" She bit her lip.
"Hell yes. Especially in that Jacuzzi tub. How mean to send me a picture of that," he laughed.
"Hmmm... something has to replace your hands for heavenly massages," she snickered.
"Is that what you did when you came over to the guest suite?" Oscar asked. That smirk in his tone quite obvious.
"You're never going to let that go, huh? But if you must know. Yes. And more. Although, I didn't know your hands back then. At least not like that," she laughed.
"Oh. Hmmm...," he hummed.

"But now, I can imagine you doing all those things to me while I'm in the tub. No more imagining some stranger. I do have to say this, though. --- Now that I get the real thing again, my friends don't quite please me the same anymore," she sighed with a very intentional, dreamy sigh. She heard Oscar cough, choking on some water.
"Wow. Well, I take that compliment for sure," he gulped, then laughed. So did she.

"I really do wish I was there right now. I'd make love to you in that tub. Sitting up, you wrapped around my body, let the water help us move and relax. Just a nice, slow morning," he carried on with a softer voice. Elise only sighed in response, her free hand involuntarily wandering down her breasts. Another heavy sigh dripping from her lips when she pinched her own nipples.
"Please tell me you're touching yourself right now," Oscar breathed out with a low voice.
"I am," she confessed. Those words drawn out to end in a sultry effect.

"Oh my god," he held his breath. "Fuck. --- That is soooo sexy. But damn it. I'm on set. And now I have that image in my head," his breathing became a little heavier. She could hear him trying to stay calm. She imagined the vein on his forehead was prominent in his attempt. Or at least that he bit his lower lip in frustration. She cut off a laugh into a pillow. "I heard that. Evil. I get the feeling you love taunting me?" he interrogated.
"I do. And I love that you have no choice but try and keep yourself under control. So excuse me while I continue down my body," she snickered. "Like you once said. Practice to remain calm under pressure," she said, her voice deliciously slow and sultry.
"Good fffffuuuuck..." That cuss fizzled out. A gulp followed. And a heavy sigh. "I always love it when you start touching yourself. I don't think you know you're doing it sometimes. Which makes
"it even sexier."
"Hmmmm... That's true. Although. I'm very much aware now. Just drawing lines up my thighs to between my legs. I like touching myself --- but I do miss your touch," she breathed.

"Then close your eyes and imagine it's me," he whispered. "Me teasing you. Playing with that wetness a little. Fuck. I love how you always feel so wet before I even have my lips around you."
"Hmm... I definitely miss your lips. The way you suck and then flick your tongue against my clit. I especially love it when you switch up speeds, and then draw me in. That edge of almost too rough and too hard," she shivered out, her index moving in slow, even paced circles around her clit as she thought about him. Her breathing picking up pace.

"Ah yeah? I have to remember that. But I also know, you love it when I just finger fuck you. I know you know that I watch you twitch and roll into my hand. There's almost nothing sexier than watching you do that. And the way you moan. Especially when you reach down and touch yourself, and I just slide my fingers in an out, and you just let yourself go."

"Oh... fffuck. Oscar. Hmmm....," she hitched a breath as she picked up the pace. His voice aiding her to get her there. She definitely felt that tension building up fast when she increased speed even more, imagining it was his hand rather than hers."Almost... there," she gasped.
"Fuck. --- --- I can picture you, you know that. Your index and middle finger circling, now and then slipping into your slit. Your whole body blushing. Your stomach tensing up. --- Damn. If I was there, I'd help you along while I kiss your neck. Right in that corner. Right where it makes you hold your breath and then moan. Especially when I bite down."
She didn't say anything. Just a loud, relieving moan slipped out as she came.

"Fuck," she whispered a few minutes later. "Shut up!" she hissed when she heard him laugh. "I never thought I'd be jealous of your hands. And I love your hands. So soft. So gentle," he chuckled.
"Ah yeah? Well, you can imagine my hands around your dick later on. When you take a shower. Just slow, even strokes. And my tongue. I really love teasing that spot right at the back of the tip," she smirked.
"Oh God. Fuck you!" Oscar gasped.
"I just did fuck myself. What else you got?" Elise countered with a loud laugh.
"I'll definitely need a long shower later on," he husked out.

"Hmmmm... You know, I like it when you touch yourself, too," Elise divulged.
"Really? Ok. I'll remember that for sure."
"And other things," she bit her lower lip.
"Like what?"
"Don't laugh."
"Lo prometo."
"I like the feeling of cum on my stomach."
"Oh. Yeah?" he chuckled. Unintentionally.
"I knew you were going to laugh," she pouted.
"I'm not. I think it's cute. What else do you like?"

The conversation delved into tie-up games and blind folded adventures. What Oscar had tried with her more like the tip of the iceberg. She did make it clear that it's only one or the other. At least for now. And he promised.
She chuckled at the words "ass play" but admitted finger teasing her there was fun, but anything more was off limits.
"Got it. No anal," Oscar laughed.
"Oh my god, aren't there people around," Elise snickered as she blushed, and he laughed at the fact that she worried now, when earlier, he'd dirty-talked to her over the phone. "There are but they're all busy," he explained. "Anything else off limits?"

"Food. I don't mind whip cream on my tits. Or maybe a tiny drop of honey, but food is a no-no anywhere near my vagina," she said with a serious tone, and he laughed again. "Sorry, Sweetie. I didn't mean to burst out like that. It's cute how you go between shy and confident when it comes to sex. I'm pretty sure you blushed when you snickered at the word anal. But then you were all bold when you said tits and vagina," he laughed again.

"Yeah. I'm weird like that," she giggled. "I have to get going. One last meeting before I fly back home," she sighed. "Hmmmm... ok, Sweetie. Have a safe trip and call me when you get home," he sighed with a sad undertone. "Just a little over a week, Lindo," she let out a sigh of her own. "I know. I can't wait to hold you, though. That's the thing I miss the most. Holding you at night. How your body is so warm and soft. And your breathing. And the way you smell," he let out a wisp of air. "Everything. Sometimes I think you put a spell on me. That first time we shook hands. I felt a spark."

"Maybe I did. Or maybe it was just static electricity," she giggled. "I doubt that," Oscar chuckled. "Liz?"

"Hmmmm.. yes?"

"I know, things are a bit crazy right now."

"They sure are."

"I want you to know..."

"Yes?"

"...I can't wait."

"Ditto. --- Soon."

"Soon."

"Te amo."

"Ich liebe dich."

Synchronized hanging up. "*heart emojis* **kiss emoji**"

"Get to your meeting." "PS: Ich vermisste dich."

"*smile emoji* Tell Michael thank you from me for teaching you. Talk later."
"Sweetie."
*deep inhale**muffled grumble**purred snoring*
"Mi Linda."
Shuffling body.
"Wake up, mi Linda." he chuckled, looking down on her.

He couldn't help the tiny laugh. The sight in front of him was too adorable. Elise laid cocooned and scrunched up in the quilt on her sofa. Her strawberry blonde hair sticking out one end, her feet the other. Only tiny purred snores were audible. Oscar shook his head, snapped a picture with his cell, then nudged her shoulder again, whispering out a "hey" when she finally popped her head out of the blanket.

"Hey," she rasped with squinty eyes. "Dammit! I fell asleep." She pushed the quilt off as she sat up. Her expression puzzled, her hair wild, makeup a bit smudged.
"You sure did. I told you not to wait up for me, Sweetie." He caressed her face with a chuckle.
"I know," she sighed. "But..."

Oscar ran his hands through her hair, untangling her messy tresses, smiling at her confused expression while his mind looped around the fact that she'd tried to stay awake for him. He knew she would. Even though he'd told her that he'd not arrive until 1 a.m. on the night from Sunday to Monday.

Initially, him returning three days before schedule was meant to be a surprise. A way to lift her spirits as she'd "been feeling quite blue" as she had put it. That idea was nixed when Olivia spilled the beans by accident before he even had had a chance to book the flight out. The way she found out made him smile, however.

Elise had called his co-star to talk SDCC meetups and late-hour get-togethers. After all, the convention was approaching fast, and the way her brother-in-law explained it, Oscar would be preoccupied with interviews, photo shoots, and panels throughout the days. So the girls were planning a few things here and there. Not that Olivia wasn't going to be busy herself but her schedule was a bit shifted for some of the interviews. Perfect timing to hang out and maybe plot the whole "get back at the boys" idea.

A few laughs in and the secret slipped when Olivia asked what Elise had planned for his early return. So naturally, Elise called him to confirm, and he grumbled out a "Yes", followed by "Olivia told you, didn't she?" But he couldn't stay mad. He was glad she was getting along with his co-stars. Especially his female co-stars. No jealousy there. If there was, Elise hid it well. But he was almost certain, she'd address it if she felt uncomfortable with anyone he called friend.
With Lorraine the getting along with actresses part had often been pretense; jealousy always nagging out through passive-aggressive remarks. Or tasteless jokes. Apologies flowing quickly as she wanted to remain in whoever's circle of fame. It often created friction at post-production events like red carpet premieres and interviews, the initial joy of having his then-girlfriend with him fading over time.

Towards the end, it was an endurance test to smile while walking down the carpets with her at his side; but even so, he ended up looking past that. Almost until the very end. Love. Lust. Love. Lust. Blinded either way. The more he analyzed the relationship, the more he became aware it had been lust. And a definite ego boost. Something he thought he had outgrown by the time he'd turned thirty. A fool in lust a fitting term. Such a fool.

Elise's friendships with his co-stars, however, were different. She had called and talked a few times with Alexandra, Olivia, Michael, and James [McAvoy] since meeting them in Montreal. The conversations - as told by them - always about how they were doing, if they missed their families, and if Oscar played nice or if he was a big, blue menace while on set; always leaving them with a smile on their faces.

And a few German words to tease Oscar with, which Michael, of course, didn't need any help with but gladly forwarded. The comforting fact again that she never hinted for anyone to keep their hands of him. Just an easiness in how she talked to them like they were average Janes and Joes. Completely unimpressed when they threw names around like click bait articles. He was unsure if it was their way to test her or just to tease her. Either way, he was glad she didn't bite.

Of course, he mulled over what-if scenarios as well. Lorraine had left him a bit damaged in that arena. He was certain Elise would not take advantage and ask to tag along to every event. In fact, he would have to be the one doing the asking. The what-ifs came to mind for different reasons. What if she says no when he was finally ready to ask her along? What if she will only say yes to please him? What if asking her along in December was too soon? What if it wasn't soon enough? What if the event was too big, too intimidating? What if? What if? What if?

All he knew for sure was that he wanted her by his side. That urge to introduce her properly gnawing at him way sooner than it had with his ex. And it wasn't to show off either. Neither to the press nor to her. Just the comfort of having her around, knowing she'd fit in with ease without pretending to be someone she was not.

In a sense, Elise had already been introduced as his girlfriend. Those were all speculations for now. He had stayed tight-lipped during interviews upon recommendation by his agent. No comment, next question when anyone pried beyond a simple "how is she doing?". It was funny though. With Lorraine, he had spilled a few beans here and there; freely and without hesitation. Something he'd never done before, even when approved by whoever he was with at the time.

With Elise, he was careful. Very careful. Naturally, her past the main-decider in this. Also, the fact that he'd learned his lesson the hard way with Lorraine. And it definitely stuck. He really did want to do all of this the proper way and without going overexposure on their lives. The main reason: he wanted Elise around for a long time. A very long time! He had never felt that with anyone. Long-term anniversary jokes had definitely been a first with her. And he wanted more of those.

So he was careful and - despite his free-spirited nature - had started calculating steps. Not every step. But the ones that seemed to gap strides wider than he could reach. Asking her to SDCC was one of those. There were a few others since that had him wanting to run and jump to see if he could catch the edge. Like that Saturday when he had called her in Vancouver. His words "I can't wait"
carrying double meaning in his mind; something she had clearly not picked up on, or else she would've asked "for what?"

So he bit his tongue and tucked the thought away that day. But it had come out of hiding whenever he was alone at nights or on set. A warm, tingly thought that had him planning the farthest to reach step ever. He would definitely need a long, run-jump start for that one. Training, preparation, or he would most certainly miss it when time came. But it was definitely the reason he decided - upon hearing they'd get some extra days off - to immediately return to her rather than go back to Brooklyn for a few days to fix up his apartment.

So now, he stood in front of her, playing with her hair while he waited for her to gain some sense of time. Dressed in his signature look of black tee and black jeans, his boots already off, left by the front door, but his carry-on at his side. In contrast, Elise was dressed for comfort in soft, cotton sweats and an old, washed out fan-shirt, and that old cardigan of his.

She let out a huff of air, looking down on herself. If he had to guess it was because she thought he looked perfect, and she more like a little couch potato. His little couch potato. Nerdy, little couch potato who was wearing a shirt with the USS Enterprise (NCC-1701) smack center, with the quote "N-C-C-1-7-0-1. No bloody A - B - C - or D!" right underneath. He snickered.

"What?" Elise asked with furrowed brows.
"Nothing. You're just cute," he chuckled as he tugged on her shirt.
She rolled her eyes, knowing he was hinting at her being a Star Trek nerd. She playfully swatted his hand away, then fumbled with the quilt, tugging out a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel.

"You alright, Sweetie?" Oscar furrowed his brows this time.
"Ugh... period pain," she groaned.
"Oh.. right. You have painkillers?"
"Those don't really work for me. This does." She held up the hot water bottle with the towel. Oscar grabbed it, noting that the whole thing felt lukewarm. She must've fallen asleep some time ago.

"Tell you what. Why don't you go to bed and I'll refill this with some new water. You want a snack or anything?" He helped her to a stand. Elise just shook her head no, closing the gap between them as she hugged him with a heavy sigh, not wanting to let go as her composure crumbled. "Hey. --- Sweetie. What's the matter?" he asked as he ran his hand up and down her upper back. She didn't reply. Just muted sobs and heavy tears that seeped through his shirt.

It had been a long week since she'd returned from her business trip to Vancouver. Heck, it had been two long weeks since she had returned from Bonnaroo. Two, long weeks where "everything just turned to shit," as she had mentioned in a phone call to him a few days before his return. There'd been the whole incident with Richard. A few blood boiling encounters with Henry. But last week really pushed the term "shit hitting the fan" to a new level.

All smaller, non-essential trips since Vancouver had been canceled; the company going over numbers to see where they could cut expenses; some of the smaller projects already getting transferred to other companies within the area. The hint of lawsuits if they didn't come through the likely reason. There was even a hold on opening new client accounts for time being, which left Elise's department - along with a few others - with little to no work in the afternoons.

This development was a bit double-edged. On one side she was glad she didn't have to go anywhere last week, using the extra time to visit Richard at the hospital; even helping Judith when
they picked him up last Friday to go home. The shortened days also offered chances to catch up with Patricia. And of course Christine and James.

On the other side, the sudden dead-stop of almost all projects confirmed Elise's fear. The company was in trouble. It had been for a few years, and even the last big contract didn't cover the losses. So now everyone tried to brace for the worst, some people already putting out their feelers to see who'd be willing to hire from a failing contracting company. Especially when threats of immediate dismissal made the rounds. That turned out to be a rumor, for time being. The question was: for how long?

Everyone tried to go on with business as usual of course, but the increasing tension was undeniable and had even the most chipper people snap back a few times. Apologies always followed. A night at the bar had helped, too. But the waters had been stirred, and now it was basically down to wait-and-see what-and-who the ripple effect would wash out.

What was worse for Elise, however, was that decreased workload came with more time for thoughts to roam and linger. And they did quite often. Not just about her career and side venture ideas, but also Joe. Thoughts about him had snuck in more and more. Unsurprisingly. It was getting close to that day. After ten years though, she had hoped for the heaviness to wane more. That that particular day would eventually be just another day, and that focus would shift only on the good memories.

After all, the months before and after- even the weeks before and after- felt normal. In fact, over the span of ten years said heaviness had dwindled to a week before and a week after. But she wished it was less than that. Not that she wanted to forget him. For that, her love was too strong. But in her mind, she wanted that day to lose power over her. Especially since it came with a truckload of guilt. And now Oscar was in her life, and she didn't want to wear him down, too. At least not intentionally. At least not with that type of sadness.

Oscar, of course, had been nothing but a sweetheart. He'd listen, toss out ideas, console her with soothing words when she needed it; always trying to cheer her up before the phone calls or Skype sessions ended. But even he'd noticed that his innuendo-laced attempts were losing effect. So he switched to just being the listener, always assuring her with "things will be ok" that his mind was still following everything she had to say. And when she didn't have anything to say, when silence took over, he'd tell her about his day; joking about how Michael was teaching him more naughty words in German, and how it pleased him that McAvoy was shorter than him, hinting that the Scottish actor would've made a great hobbit.

"Sweetie. Go lie down. Ok? I'll fix up the bottle. And I'll make you some peppermint tea. You have the decaffeinated one, right?" He cradled her face when she stepped back. Elise just nodded, somewhat vacantly, then walked off. This would've been so much better had he been able to surprise her. She would've smiled for sure, if only for a minute.

Oscar went to the kitchen to boil some water, taking the opportunity to look around. She'd gone shopping. Fresh veggies and fruits. His favorites mixed in. That was a first. He then played with the pictures on the fridge, snickering at the one he'd received via text from Patricia while the girls had been at Bonnaroo. He had made good on his promise that he would print that one out. How could he not? Elise looked too cute the way she had passed out: limbs all tangled, mouth agape, hair all frizzy, a little sun-burnt, and covered in dust. Real festival tiredness. A big, fat "HA! HA!" had been smudged on with a marker since. And next to that picture, she had added one of him from the night of the power outage. The night when he had eaten so much ice
cream, he thought his stomach was going to burst. He took the marker that was sticking to the fridge and scribbled a big, fat "TOUCHE" on his picture. This was turning into another thing of theirs. Pictures of each other on their fridges, tiny notes scribbled to either enhance aspects they loved or teasingly point out quirks. He couldn't wait for these to end up in shared photo albums.

Oscar looked around again. The water would take a little while, so he paced to the office and set up his laptop to charge. Like in all the other rooms of her one-bedroom apartment, Elise had made space for him. She had moved her laptop to the left-hand side on her desk so he could set his on the right. The desk was crammed now, but it worked. He'd be sitting at the dining room table in the mornings anyway, or just shift stuff around.

With his device set up, he peered around the office. The cork-board behind the door was filling up with the notes he kept leaving behind. If she kept collecting them, she'd be able to fill a book at some point. A lovely idea in his mind. So he got out a pen, grabbed a sticky note from the desk, and jotted down another message, this one reading "thank you, my little nerd" as he stuck it on the desk between their laptops; a badly drawn doodle of strawberries kissing in one corner of the note.

He paced to the dining room, chuckling when he remembered how adamant she had been about reminding him that the plants only needed a tiny bit of water. He'd managed to keep them alive while she had been away to Bonnaroo; and as a thank you, she had sent him a picture of the plants with virtual smiley stickers plastered across a few days after she had returned home.

He shifted his view to the wall above the small blue dresser. The poster Patricia's kids had gifted Elise hung proudly displayed in a blue frame, and underneath she had placed a silver plaque with the artists' names, date, and the name of the work. He whispered out an "unbelievable". Anyone else would've probably tacked the poster directly on the wall and taken it down after a while. The way she chose to display the kids' work, it was meant to stay forever. He pondered for a second if she'd be the kind of mom to display her children's work all over the apartment.

The sudden noise of the kettle screeching had him jerk around; the pondering moment gone. He got the hot water bottle ready, and, as promised, made her a cup of peppermint tea. But when he reached the bedroom, Elise seemed already asleep; curled into her blanket, her back towards the door as she laid on her left side. Her bedside lamp was on and his was off. So he switched his on first, then walked over to her side, carefully caressed her face while placing the cup on her nightstand and switching her lamp off. He wrapped the hot water bottle in the towel she had left on top of the blanket, then took off his clothes before finally crawling onto the bed.

He was careful when he shifted closer to her, trying not to wake her. Of course, that didn't work. His weight sinking onto the mattress was all it took to make her roll over. She blinked. Again some confusion in her gaze.

"I got your hot water bottle," he smiled. She took it, rolled back to her left side, placing the hot water bottle close to her lower tummy. "Better?"
"Yes. Thank you," she whispered as she reached back to search for his arm. He shifted as close as possible, stretching his right arm back to switch off his light, then gently wrapped the same arm around her as he kissed her shoulder.
"I missed you," Elise whispered.
"I missed you, too, Sweetie. Go back to sleep. You have work in the morning," he replied with a low voice. Tiny kisses cascading on her shoulder, he waited to hear those telling breaths that she had dozed off before allowing himself to do the same.

Monday morning came with grumbles and groans. She didn't want to adult and he didn't want to let
go of her, even though he knew he should. Twenty minutes of whispering how they wished Mondays didn't exist, Elise finally dragged herself out of bed and to the bathroom.

"I'll make breakfast," Oscar called through the door.
"Don't make too much. I'm not that hungry," Elise called back.

Twenty minutes after that she stood in the dining room, clad in her signature professional look, smelling of strawberry coconut delight and lavender vanilla soap.

"I thought you turn into a ferocious eating machine?" Oscar smirked. He hadn't forgotten that talk about what happens during that time of month.
"Not so much this time," Elise twisted her mouth as she took a seat opposite him. He had kept it small as requested. Just a bowl of oatmeal and strawberries. The chocolate bar next to her coffee put a smile on her face. And so did the fact that he had used the bowls he had gifted her. This time, she had the nice one, and he, the mean one.

"My father would not approve of candy at breakfast," she chuckled lightly.
"He's not here," Oscar grinned from behind the rim of his coffee cup. He gave her a once-over, his smile disappearing when he realized that she looked quite a bit thinner, again. That turquoise blouse looking too loose, her gray slacks bunching at the wrong places as there was too much fabric. "Sweetie. I know, it's really not my place, but --- have you been eating?" he asked carefully as he replaced the cup on the saucer.

Elise, who was just about to take a bite from her oatmeal, put her spoon down. "I have. It's been --- It's been stressful." she sighed. "I don't want a lecture, please."
"Sweetie. I'm not lecturing. I'm worried. I want to make sure you have energy. Hmmm?" He reached over, caressing her face with his hand while he searched for her eyes with his. She looked up, tears building at the corners of her eyes. Those grays so much duller than he was used to. No green shining through at all.

"Sweetie. Mi Linda," Oscar drew in a deep breath. "Let's go out today. Do something to get your mind off things." He dropped his hand back on the table.
Elise just gulped.
"We can do anything you want," he smiled.
She thought for a few minutes. "Anything?"
"Anything."
"I haven't gone bowling in a while," she mumbled before finally taking a bite of her food. She'd held her composure. Barely just.
"Really? Me neither. You think you'll be up for it. Tummy aches and all?" he asked softly as he reached for her hand, squeezing it lightly.

"Yeah. The worst is over. It should only be a couple more days," Elise replied, a little embarrassed, but he didn't seem to be grossed out. Why would he be? He was an adult. He had had girlfriends. He grew up with a doctor in the house, his father holding that title as he had revealed during one of the many phone calls they had had; and even after his parents divorced, he'd been able to talk freely about such things.
"Ok, then bowling it is," he smiled. She returned to silence, but at least she was eating her food. So he didn't push on with more questions.

"What time are you getting off work today?" he asked while clearing the table a little while later.
"One," she grabbed her briefcase from her office.
"I'll pick you up," he offered.
"I don't know if that's..." she started.
"Sweetie. Don't worry about them. If things are really as bad as you say, me being there, won't matter," he pulled her close to himself by her hips. A soft smile danced across her face. He wasn't entirely wrong about that.
"Ok," she whispered. How she'd missed these mornings. With him. Nothing exciting. Just his presence. His warmth. His genuine care. She felt a bit guilty for not being in that peppy morning mood. It wasn't like she didn't recognize he was trying.

"Thank you for breakfast. It was lovely. *heart emoji*"
"No problem. Anything for you, mi Reina. *kiss emoji*"
"Grab some of my socks if we're going directly from work."
"Will do. Anything else you need?"
"Your hugs and kisses."
"Xoxoxo. Make those last. *smile emoji*

One 'o'clock couldn't come soon enough. With all the gloominess hanging over the office, knowing that he'd pick her up put her in a better mood. A little bit of excitement that didn't go unnoticed when she walked the floor.
"You're looking happy today," Helen quipped. "Let me guess, it's because of him." The young woman pointed to Elise's office where Oscar was talking to Thom like he was an old friend he hadn't seen in years. Animated. Laughing. Attentive.

She scanned him up and down. He was wearing a light gray button-down, a green tee underneath, and dark-washed jeans. And surprisingly what looked like a new pair of black, leather boots. She immediately wondered what happened to his old pair. Maybe they'd finally given way considering how often he would wear them. Or maybe he just switched to let the old ones rest.

Oscar was still talking to Thom when she walked up to him. If she was hearing right, the two were discussing video games. Something about defense sequences.
"Hey Sweetie," Oscar smiled the second he became aware of her. He reached for her waist and pulled her close. Professional setting slipping his mind when he kissed her cheek. She didn't care, but she could feel a few stares geared her way. "I was telling Thom about our plans. He asked if he could tag along. What do you think?"

Elise stood a bit flummoxed. This was so him. Just so very him. Relaxed around anyone he barely even knew. Easy going nature. If Thom hadn't asked, she was certain he would've.
"Sure," she nodded with a smile. "I should see if Helen and Matt want to come along."
"There you go. The more the merrier. Anyone else you can think of?" his smile grew wider.
"Irene? So maybe we're evened out," she suggested. A warm tilt of the head and a warm smile meant Oscar was ok with this. She quickly asked her colleagues and they agreed, although it took a little more convincing for Irene to come along. She'd be the oldest in the group, and her bowling experience was - as she explained it - subpar.

Fifteen something minutes later, and two separate cabs, they stood in front of an old looking building west of the business district.
"Is this the right place?" Oscar scratched his head. He'd been to Seattle numerous times but he never really had had the chance to explore much beyond James' place, the agency, and its vicinity as he usually only ever stayed two or three days at a time. And even during his extended stay, before he had met Elise, he didn't venture out much. He had been too caught up with post breakup blues.

Elise caught his nervousness. Scratching the back of his head was always the clue. "My brother-in-
"You guys! Come on!" Thom yelled with an open "what is taking so long?" hands stance.
"What's the matter? Can't wait to lose?" Elise cracked.
"Oh, it's on, boss. You wait and see," Thom squinted.
"Alright. Don't go crying to your mother when I win," Elise threw back with a perked brow.
"Who says you're going to win?" Oscar asked, then confidently pointed at himself.
"Oh now, it's definitely on!" Elise pushed him back by his chest and finally made her way to shoe rental.

The team idea 'guys against gals' was initially countered by Matt and Helen, but Helen decided to rebel when Matt behaved a little too macho like. She had no patience for chauvinistic behavior, and her picking the women's team had him shut up real fast.
The guys went first. Thom bowled a nine, Matt a strike, and Oscar a spare; surprisingly with a seven-ten split. Elise was impressed, to say the least.

Girls second. Irene bowled a six, cussing first, then gearing a sorry to the team.
"No worries, Irene. We've got you covered," Helen smiled as she bowled a washout spare.
"Don't be too confident!" Elise lifted her brow as she picked up a ball.
"Isn't that a little heavy?" Thom wisecracked when he saw her with a twelve-pounder.
"We can't all win with an eight," she countered back, and everyone laughed, including Thom.

Elise was getting ready, taking position to aim, when she felt someone standing behind her. That scent of forest after the rain with a hint of spice giving him away.
"You better sit back down, or else I'll throw this where it hurts," she quipped.
"WOW! So competitive. And here I am, wanting to give you a kiss for good luck," Oscar took a step back.
"I won't need it," she shifted the bowling ball to her right side; her left hand slipping to her left hip, tilting her head in confidence. "But --- since you offered."
"Hmmmm...," Oscar leaned in with a chuckle, pressing a soft kiss against her lips. He was ready for just a tiny bit of tongue when Irene shouted "No alliances!", which had Elise fall into another
laugh. If that's what it took to have her smile, he was glad to step aside.

"You better back off. I might actually throw this the wrong way," she cracked. Oscar -with shocked stare and a gulp - took a few steps back.

Aim. 
Run. 
Swing. 
Down the center. 
Strike.

"Or --- maybe not," Elise shrugged, a mischievous smile growing on her face after. "You like to fool people into thinking you're not good at these games, huh?" Oscar looked at the bowling pins. "I take it you brought your A-game." He then squinted at her. "I sure did. Did you bring yours?" Elise whispered as she placed a small peck on his cheek. "For good luck. You gonna need it," she grinned then walked off with a sway before high-fiving her team.

Oscar managed a flabbergasted "wow" under his breath, then a muted chuckle. Confident and smiling was what he loved most. Confident and smiling is what she gave him. And he wouldn't want it any other way.

The game definitely brought out some interesting little character traits. Irene cussed out a few words none of them had ever heard before. Helen's sweet demeanor somehow seemed a front, too. She was ready to take Matt down with a "no survivors" glare. Thom groaned through missed opportunities, dropping to his knees a few times as he yelled out "Damn you! God damn you all to hell!" Matt did the typical fist pump whenever he bowled a strike. And Oscar danced a little hip dance whenever he threw down all the bowling pins. Something Elise quite enjoyed.

By the third game, each team had won one game. Now it was down to the last frame. Oscar and Elise facing off. Oscar's team needing a spare to stay in the lead; Elise's team a strike to take the win. He bowled a seven-ten split spare, which really seemed his favorite, either by choice or it was just the way he bowled. Definitely a show-off kind of move. With anyone else, this kind of cockiness would've been overboard. With him - always followed by a sweet smile - it was just right.

Elise went up, ready to bowl. "How about we raise the stakes?" Thom grinned. "There weren't any to begin with," Elise halted. "But how about?" Thom smirked. "Alright. What you got?" Elise smiled. "If you win, we have to pay for your dinners. If we win, you ladies have to pay for our dinners. Also, free choice," Thom suggested. "I see. So it's a way to get a fancy meal, huh?" Elise quirked her brow. "Maybe?" Thom's grin grew wider. Who could blame him to try? Beginning salary was meager. "Alright. What do you guys think?" She waited for everyone, and when they agreed she shook hands.

Aim. 
Run. 
Swing. 
Off center.
"So, where to?" Elise looked at Thom. After all, it had been his idea. "Oscar mentioned some Cuban restaurant," Thom beamed.
"Oh, it's Oscar, now. Not Mister Hernández?" Elise peered between the two of them. "He insisted. Plus, he's not my boss." Thom scrunched his nose. And with that, they handed in their shoes and headed out.

Twenty minutes northeast, two cabs again, they reached the little restaurant Oscar had recommended. "This is where I get the sandwiches," he smiled. It would make sense. After gaining her bearings, it turned out the restaurant wasn't too far from Elise's place. Maybe a ten-minute walk at fast pace. Double that for a slow stroll. She was surprised she hadn't noticed it before.

"Ah, Oscar. I have not seen you in a while," a man beamed their way. "Héctor. I've been busy," Oscar smiled as he patted the man on the back. "Can you believe this man comes to my little restaurant," Héctor beamed towards the group. He was fast to give them a secluded booth towards the back, hurriedly bringing them menus, and water to start with; rattling down the day's specialties at lightning speed. "We'll need a few minutes," Oscar chuckled.
"Of course. Of course," Héctor bobbed his head before taking off.

"I take it he knows who you are," Elise grinned. "His son does. He's a fan. Subsequently, he became one. He has a framed picture of me with him and his son on the wall behind the register," Oscar smirked. "Does it bother you when people recognize you?" Helen queried as she skimmed over her menu. "Not really. I mean, I get to continue to work as an actor because of them," Oscar read over his own menu. "I don't know, man. I think it would drive me a little nuts after a while," Matt sipped on his water. Oscar just shrugged. "I'm sure Oscar doesn't want to talk about his work," Irene chimed in. "I don't mind," Oscar closed his menu.

Elise remained mostly quiet. She enjoyed watching her colleagues and friends interact with him. They had before, of course. At her birthday party. But he had kept his distance between her and himself then. Now they sat together, tackling questions as a couple while they ordered their food. Some more blunt than others. How they made their busy lives work. How they handled their busy lives work. How she felt about him kissing other women. How they handled fans invading their personal space. The questions didn't last long, though. Oscar skillfully turned the tables and asked about their lives instead, taking interest in their pastimes as well as their families.

There were quite a few laughs when Thom talked about his many moves, especially when he brought up one to Germany. "My mom almost burned down the house because she didn't understand that the voltage was different. Free firework in the house. She didn't think it was funny," he smirked with mischievous eyes. "Believe it or not, but my mother-in-law did that a few times over," Elise laughed.

Matt and Helen talked about their wedding plans. The aim was for a summer wedding in 2016, but for now it was all still very new and they didn't want to stress. "It'll be small anyway. Twenty
people. Thirty tops. So we might just have it at Saint Edward State Park," Helen disclosed. 
"Oh, at the grotto?" Elise wondered.
"Yeah. You've seen it?" Helen beamed.
"I have. I think it would be really pretty for a summer wedding. They rent out canopies as well. 
You'd need generators, though. There's no direct access to electricity. But the seminar building has 
a small ballroom you can rent. Maybe split it, have the wedding outside and the reception in the 
room," Elise suggested.
"I have to look into that," Helen beamed. Even more so when Matt pulled her in for a kiss on her 
temple.

They went on like this, chatting, the direction changing to favorite music and movies. The 
conversation headed quickly towards passionate arguments about which movie was the best in 
several different franchises. Trivia facts thrown around by some and fact-checked by phone by 
others. Some of Oscar's older works came up as well.

"Dude, that is some stache you've got there," Thom laughed when he pulled up a still of Oscar in 
*Sucker Punch*.
"I've not seen that movie, yet," Elise perked her brow. "Are you --- wearing eyeliner?"
"I am. Dramatic effect, don't you think," Oscar lifted his brow.
"Doesn't look half bad. Sexy actually," Elise stared at the picture some more. The table had fallen 
quiet. "What?" she peered around.
"He looks like a pimp," Helen blurted out.
"In essence, I was," Oscar laughed.
"Oh geez, maybe I'll skip this one," Elise shook her head. The whole table: loud laughter.

"Any plans, in case the company actually folds?" Oscar shot out at some point after they'd received 
their food.
"I think I just might go back to England. I haven't been home in a long time," Irene sighed as she 
took a sip from her wine. "Maybe teach."
"Sounds wonderful, actually. I think you'd make a great teacher. You've always been patient with 
me," Elise smiled.
"I may have to ask my parents if I can move back for now," Thom shrugged.
"Where do you live now?" Elise wondered.
"Fifteen minutes north. I'm sharing an apartment with someone. It's not bad but..." Thom shrugged 
again.

"What about you two?" Oscar geared towards Matt and Helen.
"I have something else lined up. This was supposed to be just an internship anyways. So it won't 
feel too big of a loss. If things go right, I'll have a spot at an architect firm right outside Seattle," 
Matt smiled as he squeezed Helen's hand.
"Freelance translations if I can't find anything," Helen offered a half smile.
"With your skills, you'll find something fast," Elise encouraged. "You, too, Thom. I really think 
you should look into international communication. The U.N. is always looking for people. It would 
require a move, but...," she pulled up her shoulders in a you-know way.

"I'll see. I still have some college applications to turn in. I was actually looking into journalism as 
well. International correspondence." Thom bobbed his head, smiling ear to ear. Some pride in his 
voice. He'd clearly chosen a path but hadn't really told anyone.
"That sounds exciting," Oscar offered a smile back.
"I think you'll do great. You'll have to study abroad for a year, I think," Elise picked at the rest of 
her food.
"Yes. Right now it looks like a choice between Italy and Spain," Thom confirmed.
"Nice. Well. Let me know which one you're going to choose. I have been to both countries. Although, more in Italy than Spain. But I know a few nice places without tourists," she offered. Thom smiled out a "will do, boss".

"What about you?" Helen geared toward Elise. "I might start my own thing. Not quite sure which direction I want to go but it'll be on a more /human/ level, working one on one, you know? Definitely not for another large corporation," she sighed. 

"Whatever you do, it'll be great," Oscar leaned in and kissed her shoulder. All this was followed by a moment of silence. What-ifs were gnawing at everyone's minds.

"Room for dessert?" Héctor smiled when he returned to refill wine glasses. Elise looked around. Matt and Thom grinned widely. Oscar perked his brow. Helen and Irene, a little hesitant at first, caved when Elise threw out a "might as well". Six slices of dulce the leche cheesecake, one each, and they were full. Not just with cake, but laughter. The what-if question had dampened the mood, so Oscar shifted to talk on set shenanigans. He always knew how to lift spirits with his stories. This was no exception. So they laughed at stunt fails and makeup disasters.

"Time to pay up," Elise got to her feet and rushed to the register; snickering when she saw the picture Oscar had described. "Wait," Helen and Irene dashed after her. Or if it could be called dashing, after that much food. "Leave your cards in your wallets. I got it covered," Elise swatted their hands as they reached into their purses. "Why?" Helen and Irene crossed their arms. "Because you *Elise pointed at Helen* have a wedding to plan, and you *she pointed at Irene* might be moving back to England, and I know for a fact that international moves cost a pretty penny," Elise stated matter of factly while she paid the bill. Both women gave her a tight hug, whispering out "thank yous".

"We better get going. I can't believe it's almost eight. We've been hanging out all afternoon and evening," Matt pulled Helen close to his side as he hailed a cab. "Are you complaining?" Helen lifted her brow. "I'm not. But maybe I have other plans," Matt wiggled his brows. "Oh dear. Time to call it a night," Irene gaped at Helen and Matt, then hugged Elise and Oscar goodbye before getting into a cab with the couple.

"I better run, too," Thom twisted his lips. "You need cab money?" Elise wondered. "Nah, I'm good. I'll take the bus. It's not far," Thom gestured towards a station. "You sure?" Elise worried. "I am," Thom grinned then winked at her. "What?" "You're such a mom sometimes," he jested, then took off towards the bus station, leaving behind a perplexed Elise. He always had such statements reserved and always seemed to know when to use them. "He's right," Oscar chuckled with a hug from behind. "He's not!" Elise countered as she stepped out of his hug. "Hmmmmm, we'll see." Oscar grinned. He slid his left hand into her right, and the two slowly started towards her apartment.

"So. Did you lose on purpose? To pay for Thom?" He wondered. "Why do you say that?" She perked her brow.
"Because you could've had that strike. If not, you would've at least had that spare," Oscar stopped, his hand still in hers, which caused her to stop.
"Maybe I did."
"And the bill?"
"What about it?"
"I saw you. You paid the whole thing," Oscar stepped closer to her, playing with a flyaway strand of her hair.
Elise just shrugged. "No big deal," she whispered.
"It is. It is a big deal. To me at least. To them, I'm sure, too. But... to me. --- You're amazing. I want you to know that. And beautiful. Just beautiful." He tilted his head, letting out one of those disbelieving huffs. And then. A kiss. Just one of those soft ones. The ones that meant "I love you" without the need to say it.

They strolled back to the apartment, holding hands. No talking. Just enjoying each other's company on a beautiful, early summer evening. Seattle weather had been kind that way lately. Sunny days, warm but breezy nights, hardly ever a cloud in the sky. It had them both looking up a few times tonight, slowing their walk to snail pace. The stolen kisses may have been aiding in that, too.

By the time they got home, it was past 8:30 p.m. Too late to do any kind of work-related tasks, too early to call it a night. So they changed into whatever was comfortable and watched some T.V., curled into each other's bodies. But the stresses soon washed over her, having her fast asleep before the ten 'o'clock news came on. Oscar carried her to bed, curling up next to her once she found her groove. He chuckled at mumbled words. Just a few here and there. He played with her hair, weaving his fingers through her tresses and watching the strands fall from the spaces between over and over again.

Tonight went well. She had laughed. She had talked something other than career or Joe. Mostly. Not that he minded. But he preferred her smile over her tears. Anyone in love would. He did brace himself though. This week was going to be tough. He knew that much. So he braced himself for words she might not mean or actions she might not recognize as hurtful.

"I love you," he whispered into her shoulder before dozing off.

The rest of the week went by fast. By choice. Oscar thought Monday had gone so well that he decided to keep her occupied just like that: picking her up from work, finding a thing to do, then go out for dinner.

On Tuesday, he took her to the science center with Patricia and her kids. "My chance to see the rest of the displays," he smirked as he took Donnie and Danielle by their hands to gear towards an interactive display about soil erosion. Pride-filled words that his sister was a climate scientist echoed through as he explained to the kids what they were seeing when they pushed various buttons.

"He'll make a great dad one day," Patricia whispered with a smug smile.
"Why do people keep bringing up kids?" Elise hushed back.
"Because. Look at you two. I mean, I know you aren't too fond. Personally I think you're just scared. But I've seen the way you've been looking at your niece since you've met him," Patricia stated, squeezing Elise's arm with a knowing squeeze. Elise just rolled her eyes. Not that her friend was wrong. Just one of those "I get it" rolls.

"So how are things with Owen?" Elise diverted. Patricia blushed at the sound of his name. "That great, huh?"
"Well. We've talked almost every night. He'll be in Seattle in a few weeks. He wants to go out. To a concert," Patricia beamed.
"That's good. Are you going to introduce him to the kids?" Elise lifted her brow.
"Not yet. But... I don't know," Patricia blushed again. "We'll be moving first anyways. I found a two-bedroom not too far from the new job. The kids will each have their own room for the first time. I'll still be sleeping in the living room, but it'll be bigger and I'll be getting a new hideaway bed."
"We have to celebrate. You know that, don't you?" Elise winked. Patricia scrunched her nose.

So they did; that evening. The restaurant choice was left up to the kids. Surprisingly, they didn't pick a fast food chain but some small family-owned Italian place close to their current apartment. Mountains of spaghetti for the kids was a given. Oscar encouraging shenanigans, too. He'd gotten along with Patricia's kids from day one. Definitely brought out his inner kid. At times all three needed scolding to quiet down. Puppy dog eyed sorries were all it took and they were back to "why did the chicken cross the road" jokes and "who could stuff the most pasta in their mouth" shenanigans.

Elise hid her face more than once. Laughing. Grinning over the edge of her hand. He footed the bill this time, though. He insisted. Especially since dessert consisted of one of everything just so the kids could try. Not even an "Oscar, no!" from Patricia had stopped him on that.
"Let us know if you need help moving," Elise said when she hugged Patricia goodbye.
"We just might. If you have time next week that is," Patricia laughed.
"Oscar is off, so..." Elise wiggled her brows at Oscar. He groaned in agony. Just pretended though, stating he'd gladly lend a hand.
"Alright. Remember, you offered," Patricia jested as she walked off to her place, one child on each hand. They looked happy, talking away as they walked.

Wednesday, Oscar took Elise to the waterfront. Since it was an early day for her, he decided to keep it simple. So they just strolled along the boardwalk, stopping at benches now and then to sit down and look across the water. Very little talking. A lot of small PDA. Holding hands, leaning heads on shoulders, hugs, tiny soft kisses. The day ended with Chinese takeout, and a long cuddle session on the sofa while they watched "Die Hard". Oscar always husking out a laugh when she lip-synced the dialogue. She'd clearly seen that movie a few times over. He had to remember that.

Thursday, in contrast, was a long day. It started off with a heavy sorrow that seemed to stretch each minute to twice its length. The night before, she had shot up several times. Cold sweats and fast heart keeping her up far too long between sleep cycles.

Coaxing her to go do something after work took tremendous effort. He promised a slow day, nothing too taxing on the mind. His mind pondered though. A few times.
"Why aren't you going today?" he asked cautiously after breakfast.
"I can't. I've never been able to," she shrugged, a few silent tears rolling down her cheeks as she looked out the balcony door towards the Seattle skyline while she fumbled with the rings on her necklace. It was the first time she had worn the necklace since he had returned. She'd worn the Golden Snitch necklace by itself until today. Now the chains were a bit intermingled as she insisted to wear both. He didn't take offense. Instead, he let her do her thing and be in the moment. He did, however, hug her ever so gently, letting her know he was around if she wanted to talk.

They spent the afternoon at different galleries. Just looking at paintings. A few caught her eyes. But she opted against buying one. "I have hardly any space left," she whispered with a small chuckle. Oscar agreed with an equal laugh and a side hug. He was certain if she had had a more spacious apartment, the walls would already be filled with paintings, photographs, and posters.
Floor to ceiling. Just like they were now in the hallway.
"There's space in the bedroom," he countered with a smile.
"Hmmm... I think I'll keep those walls free for now," she countered back as she looked at another painting.

The outing to the galleries had gone well. Dinner was another story that day. They went out to a quaint, little Greek place at the corner of Pine and First. The atmosphere: warm and cheery. The air filled with scents of roasted potatoes and other spices. It wasn't until Oscar sat down that he realized that this may have been a bad choice, considering her personal memories associated with Greece. He whispered out a "fuck" the second he became aware. It wasn't intentional to bring her here, but still, his stomach twisted.

"Sorry, Sweetie. I wasn't thinking when I chose this place. We can leave if you like?" Oscar suggested.
"It's fine." She pulled her lips to a thin line.
"Don't do that. Please?" He reached for her left hand.
"We can order to go." Elise tinkered with the salt and pepper shakers with her right hand.
"Ok. I'll let them know." Oscar got up, looking down on her. She was still tinkering with the salt and pepper shakers, repeatedly brushing over the Greek words for the spices.

He apologized to the waiter who'd seated them, explaining - without giving away too much detail - that it was just a bad day to have chosen this restaurant, and that they were willing to order of course but not eat here. The waiter craned a glance at Elise who was lost in a vacant stare, then nodded in understanding. Twenty minutes later he brought them their food to go. Oscar thanked him with a warm smile and a generous tip.

It was a good thing that they had opted for to-go. Elise didn't eat one bite that evening. She just pushed the same potato slice around a few times. Oscar didn't dare ask her to eat. He hoped she would. After all, hunger should eventually take over, especially since she hadn't eaten since breakfast. But deep in his heart, he knew she wouldn't.
"I'm sorry," Elise frowned when she stowed the leftovers away.
"Don't be sorry, Sweetie. I understand. Make sure you drink some water at least." Oscar cradled her face, running his thumb over her lips. She just nodded, grabbed a glass of water, then went to bed.

Oscar followed suit a few minutes later. To his surprise, Elise laid on her right side, facing the door. She clung onto a pillow with closed eyes, one leg under the blanket, one on top. Her toes rubbing against the mattress was a hint that she was still awake. So Oscar peeled off his clothes and crawled up next to her, gently teasing her nose with his right index to see if she was actually awake after he had pulled his part of the blanket over himself. She fluttered her eyes open, her grays the dullest he'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.
"You don't have to be sorry, Sweetie. I told you." Oscar played with a strand of her hair, looking down on her. This was the most exhausted he'd ever seen her. Fine lines deepened to aging creases. Her skin paler than usual. Even those few freckles on her nose and cheeks seemed to have disappeared completely.

"I hate seeing you like this," Oscar started. Elise quirked a questioning and tired brow. "I know it's selfish to want you smiling all the time because that's not how life works. But I do hate seeing you this sad. I know why. I just wish.... you'd talk to me. Hmmm?" He caressed her arm. Elise didn't reply. She couldn't. Her head had dropped onto his chest, heavy tears dropping from her eyes onto his skin. It took a while for her to calm down. But eventually, those tears became less.
"You miss him, don't you?" Oscar asked quietly.
"I do," she sniffled as she wiped away her tears. "I just thought, it would be less."
"Less missing him?" He raised his brow in surprise.
"No. I knew I'd miss him. I mean..." she paused.
"You mean?"
"Sadness. Just less sadness," she trembled with lips askew. New tears edging to the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, Sweetie." Oscar inhaled and exhaled a deep breath, pulling her closer to himself with ease.
"Sadness is ok. And you'll have those days. You're allowed, you know. And it's ok to let it wash over you. Cry through it. Let it consume you for just a fraction. But not for too long. Just enough to make you aware what you're feeling. Just enough to let yourself fall to pieces. And then, you pick yourself up. Because you know that life goes on," he smiled wearily down on Elise. Wearily because some of her sadness had rubbed off on him. Seeing a loved one hurt had that effect on him.

"Why are you like this?" Elise mumbled into his side.
"Like what?" He played with a strand of her hair.
"I don't know. Whatever it is you're like," she whispered.
"I don't know. I just --- am?" That last word squeaked out higher than intended. He felt her chuckle against his side. "Was that a laugh?"
"I love you," she whispered.
"I love you, too," he pulled her closer, yet. Gentle breathing and mingled scents of strawberry coconut delight and forest after the rain with a hint of spice had them fast asleep.

Friday morning greeted them with gentle rain against the windows. It would have been too perfect to have a whole week of sun-kissed mornings. The scent the rain carried was refreshing, though, but it had both wanting to stay in bed. At least the sorrow had waned a little. Just enough to have her eat breakfast without being asked. She even stole a slice of bacon from his plate.

"Feeling a little better?" Oscar wrinkled his nose when he caught the theft.
"Yes," Elise smiled. It was a tired smile, but one nonetheless and he accepted it without much argument. She sighed. "I'll be meeting up with James today. It's --- It's something we used to do before...," she stalled.
"Before Frank had you run away?" Oscar carried on.
"Mmm hmm. You don't have to come along. We'll just be looking over pictures and drinking wine and talk old times." She pulled her lips to one side.
"I don't mind. Unless you don't want me there. I'm guessing Christine will be around, right? And Chloë? Have to visit Berenjena Pequeñita," he smiled. And so did she. He knew she would whenever he called his goddaughter that name.
"I want you there. Just like you've been here for me this whole week," Elise bit her bottom lip.
"Then, I'll be there," Oscar smiled.

"We'll meet up there. I want to grab a few things from the store before I head over," Elise requested when she put on her coat.
"Ok. I can pick stuff..." Oscar started.
"It's --- something I want to do myself, please?" she softly cut him off.
"Ok." He pulled her close. "Ok," he repeated as he kissed her temple. "I'll see you later. My little, nerdy strawberry." He scrunched up his nose. "Don't forget your umbrella!"

That afternoon, the heavy sorrow from the previous day returned. Elise and James sat at the dining
room table, talking very little while looking through old pictures and occasionally sipping on a glass of wine. James looked as weary as Elise. Deep creases on forehead and empty, hazel eyes. They passed pictures back and forth, sometimes releasing mocking scoffs. Probably over some awful pose or dreadful clothing choice.

"They always do this," Christine whispered from behind, making Oscar jump. He'd been standing by the kitchen island, peeling some potatoes while watching them go through a shoebox of photographs. Lost in his gaze on them, he hadn't noticed Christine sneaking up on him. Even with a babbling Chloé in her arms.

"And you have to let them," Christine squeezed his arm.

"I know," Oscar side hugged Christine, giving her a small kiss on her hair, then Chloé's.

"How did she do yesterday?" Christine continued with a whispering voice.

"Good. I think? I'm actually not sure," Oscar whispered back, brows drawn in because he truly was unsure.

"You'll learn to know when it's a good day. As long she didn't completely shut you out, it was a good day," Christine smiled with a nod.

"Then it was a good day," Oscar smiled back.

"Look who's awake," Christine ambled towards James and Elise.

The sight of his daughter instantly put a smile on James' face. He took her and placed her into his lap, showing her pictures of Joe. "That's your uncle Joe. See that? Here, he was trying to steal my cupcake," James chuckled. "And in this one, he was chasing me with a water gun. And look at this one. He's a baby here. You look a lot like him," James kept showing different pictures to Chloé. Of course, she didn't understand. She just blew raspberries and squealed at a few of the pictures. Her happy disposition lifted the mood quite a bit, though.

Oscar joined them for a while after he'd finished prepping the potatoes.

"Wow. Joe and you. Almost like twins," he gaped at a picture of the brothers at some summer camp getaway.

"I know, right? Our teachers thought for the longest time that we were twins. It's funny though. He was the older one and yet he grew a bit slower than me. Maybe because he was a preemie. Not sure," James disclosed.

"I didn't know Joe was a preemie," Elise lifted her brow.

"Mmmm hmmm. Almost two months early. He was always a little behind. The way mom told me, the doctors actually thought he had suffered from oxygen deprivation. They told her he might have some damage to the brain. I guess it somewhat explains why he was at times unfocused and a little slow. But he outgrew all that. He was determined, you know? And by the time we met you, he was up to speed," James smiled.

"I would've loved him just the same," Elise sighed, fighting hard against some tears. She looked over to Oscar, trying to gauge his reaction after she'd said those words. For a moment, she'd forgotten he was there. But he just smiled out an "it's ok".

"Well, since you are looking through old photographs, how about these?" Christine wiggled her brows when she brought over another box. A protested "NOOOO" by Elise didn't work. In fact, it had the opposite effect as Oscar became quite curious as to why she was so defensive.

"Wow. Sweetie." Oscar stared at Elise with wide eyes then back at the picture he was holding.

"Go ahead! GO - A - HEAD!" She scoffed.

"You --- You were --- a pudgy baby," Oscar bit his lip but he couldn't hold back the laugh for long.

"I'm sorry, but --- look at you. Those cheeks. What did you hide in those? Baby carrots? Apples?"

"It's ok. When the time comes to meet your mother, first thing I'm asking for are baby pictures,"
Elise crossed her arms. "In fact, I should ask Mike to bring a few to SDCC!" she stuck out her tongue. Her mentioning meeting his family equaled his heart skipping a few beats.

"Our poor mother. I don't know how she managed," Christine tilted so she could look behind Elise's back before mouthing out "ten pounds" towards Oscar. "I heard that!" Elise blurted out.
"Awe, Sweetie. You were cute, though. Look at your smile. It hasn't changed," Oscar nudged her shoulder. Elise just shook her head. There were a few more pictures of course. At least Christine played fair by showing hers as well. Quite a few laughs filled the kitchen before they finished prepping dinner.

"It's a good year," Christine whispered into Oscar's ear when they bid their goodbyes for the night. He agreed.
Friday had certainly ended better than it had begun. Oscar took the chance to pull her in for an endearing kiss on the way back. One of those that left her blushing and with a tiny wobble in her legs. Sleep was better that night, too. Elise only woke up once, and it took far less time for her to fall back asleep. Especially with Oscar by her side comforting her with soothing whispers and soft kisses.

Saturday morning greeted with more rain. A little stronger this time. Good thing she didn't have to work. So they stayed in bed. Lazy Saturday morning with tenuous touch and more soft kisses. No talking. Just breathing as they laid on their left sides, him spooning her, peppering her hair with subconscious kisses while he drew thin lines up and down her arm.

She stirred and rolled over, her face to his. She traced his face with her left index, coaxing out soft smiles from him. It was the first time she'd touched him more intimately this week. Sure, there had been kisses and hugs and holding hands. But it had felt distant emotionally. He had of course not pushed her on that. He wanted to feel her close but he knew she would need some space to work through her feelings. That also meant keeping a bit of a sensual distance.

Elise leaned in for a kiss. And another. And another. Soft kisses across his brows. Down the bridge of his nose. On his cheeks. Lastly his lips. It was a bit surprising. She initiated. He thought it'd be him this time. But he let her. She pushed against his shoulder to hint for him to roll to his back. So he did. And she straddled him, leaving more kisses all across his face. No rush to take off her top. Or his briefs. Or her panties.

It was a languid kissing session and she needed that more than anything. But her rolling her hips, pressing her warmth against him, he couldn't help a growing erection against the fabric of his briefs. She slipped off to the right of him and helped him out of his briefs, teasing just a few, soft kisses on the tip. She returned. Face to face. She wanted more of his velvety lips against hers. So she kissed him. And he kissed her while he made away with her panties. And like her, he only teased her a few times. Just a few languid strokes from her clit to her folds with his index. Just a few times of slipping his finger in and out before she went back to straddle him.

More soft kisses. And some wandering hands from him. Down her back to her ass where he squeezed a few times. It made her giggle. Then back up, over the small of her back to below her top as he pulled it off over her head. More caresses up and down her back when he leaned up to kiss her breasts. Just gentle, traveling kisses back and forth between her left and her right breast. And gentle teasing of her nipples. Just coiling tongue and tender kisses. The effect was the same. Hardened bundle of nerves. Soft moans. How much he'd missed feeling the warmth of her skin against his. The warmth between her legs pressed against his cock. The warmth of her lips on his.
She reached down between them, stroking him a few times before guiding him in. They both moaned. For different reasons. Him, because she felt tight on that first push. And so hot. So very, very hot. And wet. Her, because she loved the way his cock stretched her walls. Just a little more with each gentle push. Just until it went from expansion to silky glides. She loved how easy they moved once they found that rhythm.

"Oh my god," Oscar whispered when she dropped to his chest. She knotted her hands into his curls, tugging a little bit to move his head back so she could kiss his neck. That made him moan out another plea to god. She kept her movements small. Just slow circled hip movement as she breathed onto his skin. She didn't want more than that. Just the feeling of him in her while she circled her hips. Addition of her clenching around him left him moaning into her shoulder. Eyes closed. And that vein on his forehead already pulsing through.

"Liz," Oscar barely managed to breathe out her name. "You're going to make me cum," he gulped. "If you --- keep --- moving like this."
"I know," she whispered a few times over with tiny kisses across his chest.
"What about you?" Oscar grasped on to her hips. He didn't get a reply. Just increased speed of her hips. And a kiss on his lips.
"Liz," he breathed again but he couldn't hold back much longer. Flexed muscles and a stifled moan, and he fell back. Elise let her head drop to his chest.
"Sweetie,..." Oscar started.
"Sssshhh." she cut him off with her left index on his lips.
"But you didn't..." he started again.
"Sssshhh!" She pressed her index firmer on his lips. She didn't care about a climax this time. Just the warmth that filled her, and how it was now seeping out over their skin. To her, that was just enough. Just enough sensation to have those endorphins kick in. Nothing too exhausting to wrap her mind around. She stayed on top, feeling him inside her still. Until - thanks to a laugh - he slipped out.

"Sorry. I was just remembering our first time together," Oscar chuckled, weaving his hands through her hair.
"What about it?" Elise inhaled his scent.
"How you seemed all worried, I'd drop you," he snickered, teasing a kiss on her hair.
"That was a valid concern." She folded her arms over his chest to rest her chin.
"You were so beautiful. Just so very beautiful. A little shy," he smiled a wrinkled smile.
"I'm not now?" Elise wondered.
"Beautiful? Of course, you are. Very much so. Even more now than that first night. Shy? Not so much anymore," he snickered. "I just couldn't believe it." He caressed down her back.

"Believe what?" Her grays tracked to his browns and settled there as she waited for an answer.
"That you let me touch you." Oscar's eyes became quite serious.
"I can't believe that either. Only because, no one's looked at me that way for a long time. And I don't just mean... for sex." Elise twisted her lips. She let her arms slip of his chest, then rested her right ear against his chest. Steady heartbeat and breathing. So much unlike a little while ago. When his heart had raced and his breathing had been erratic. How much she loved both.

"Will you come with me? Tomorrow?" she asked carefully.
"Are you sure?" he asked back equally as careful.
"Yes." She looked up, her grays quite serious.
"Then I'll go," he smiled.

They spent the rest of the day cuddling. Only brunch and dinner had them apart as Oscar had to get
"My trainer would frown," he laughed when he returned with a half and half pizza. Half pepperoni. Half pineapple and ham.

"Hmmmm. He's done a good job getting you back in shape," Elise grinned. His toned abs and chest hadn't gone unnoticed. "I hope that's as far as you have to train, though," she pulled her lips to one side.

"You don't like it? But I mean look at these." Oscar pulled up his shirt and poked his flexed abs. "Hmmmm? HHHHMMMM?" He wiggled his brows, quite some pride sparkling through his eyes. "And look at these." He flexed his biceps, then rounded his arms to show off his shoulders. "Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
"Nothing, Sweetie."
"Tell me."
"Sweetie. It's nothing."
"You think it's Frank?" Elise perked her brow as she sat up.
"I didn't say that, but it could be," Oscar opened his eyes, at last, looking up at her.
"Can't be him. I'm unlisted. And even so. I think they check his phone records or something. To see who he is calling since James has a restraining order against him and Frank is still on probation." She shook her head.
"Do you know where he is, though?" Oscar queried, tone a little agitated.
"No. James probably does," she curled back into his side.

Oscar heaved his chest. That was no way to start a Sunday. At least not this Sunday.
"I'm just worried." He caressed her face.
"Me too. Every day," she sighed. "I heard you and my dad talking. When he came over."
"He's worried. Like me," Oscar skewed his lips.
"I know. I can ask James to see if he can have the calls traced," she suggested.
"Ok. And if he can't, I want you to go to the cops," he urged. "Please?"
"I promise," Elise wrapped her arm tightly around him. "I promise," she repeated.
"Good. --- Let's get ready, hmmmmm?"
"Yes, let's."

The drive was only twenty minutes north-west. The quietest drive Oscar had ever sat through. James played chauffeur, Christine sat in the passenger seat. Elise, Oscar, and Chloé were backseat passengers.

Oscar outlined Elise. She'd chosen a simple, long-sleeved, black dress that hit just below the knee. She wore black tights and black ballerina flats with large, tilted, silver buckles. The necklace with the two rings was draped around her neck, almost hidden away by a soft, gray, infinity scarf. She'd kept her makeup simple, just mascara and lip balm, really. Her hair was open, in soft waves. She didn't bother taming it too much. In her hands, a bouquet of lavender. Joe's favorites as she had explained.

Oscar himself had chosen a black button down and black jeans. He'd shone up his leather boots and fixed his hair as best as he could without a stylist. He'd even shaved. Something he'd foregone since he had arrived on Monday.

"We'll wait here. Give you some time," James explained with a hug.
"I'll be here, Sweetie. When you're ready," Oscar placed a tender kiss on her right side temple. Christine just nodded in encouragement.

With that, Elise took off to Joe's site. It had been over four years since she'd been there. Everything was as neat as ever. The groundskeeper always did do a great job keeping everything free of weeds.

It took a few deep breaths. A few moments to collect thoughts.

"I miss you," she started out, still hanging on to the bouquet. "I'm so sorry, I haven't come around. I made a few mistakes. And things just --- Things were bad." She peered around to where Oscar was waiting. "But now. Now they're good. They're great actually. --- I met someone. That's probably the last thing you want to hear," she chuckled. "But I --- I promise you, he treats me well. Like a queen." She peered around again.

Oscar was still waiting. So was James. Christine had gone off to walk around with Chloé, just to
"Your parents aren't coming by today?" Oscar geared towards James.
"They were here on Thursday," James explained.
"How come you didn't tell us?" Oscar raised his brow.
"Elise knows. It's probably for the best. Sandra and her. Still on shaky grounds." James' lips fell into a frown.

"What do you think she's telling him?" Oscar wondered while he watched Elise talk to Joe's headstone.
"Probably what she's been up to. She hasn't been here in a long time. Not since Frank," James disclosed.
"That is a long time," Oscar conceded. He did the math in his head. Over four years.
"She always talks to him. When she comes here. Just so you know." James side-eyed Oscar, taking in his friend's reactions to the scene in front of him.

"She hasn't told you? --- Did you not pay attention to the video?" James raised his brow.
It took a few minutes. A few minutes of figuring out why she was so adamant about visiting his site on the fifth and not the second. Oscar closed his eyes when it sunk in.
"I think, she's ready," James nudged Oscar. "I'll let you go up by yourself, for now."

Oscar heaved his chest then slowly paced towards Elise. She stood facing him, waiting while he walked up the path, some hesitation in his step. And some more once he reached the site.
"James has never taken you here?" Elise wondered. Her brother-in-law and Oscar had been friends for over four years. A gestured "no" surprised her.
"I am usually busy this time of year," Oscar explained. Not entirely wrong. He usually spent July 4th weekends in Brooklyn with some of his actor friends.
"Well. --- This is so silly," Elise blushed. "But --- Oscar, this is Joe. Joe, this is Oscar." She pointed back and forth. "You can say hi," she chuckled when Oscar paused to think what to do next.

"Hi Joe," he smiled down at the stone. A bit shocked to see how young Joe had really been when he'd passed away; the numbers reading 9/25/1978 - 7/2/2005. Math in head, Oscar came up with twenty-seven. Technically twenty-six, with the way Joe's birthday fell.
"It's your anniversary today, isn't it?" Oscar asked Elise.
"It would've been the sixteenth." She hitched a breath.
"What happened?" Oscar carefully nudged on.
"James didn't tell you?" Elise perked her brow.

"He did. Well only the part he knew," Oscar confided. He slid his hand in hers, squeezing it gently as he waited. Today, they had all the time in the world, and he wouldn't let her walk unless she talked to him. Elise looked down on Joe's stone then knelt, finally placing the bouquet of lavender in front. She knelt a few seconds longer, pondering how to start.

"He was drunk." She pulled herself up. "He had problems dealing with a lot of things. Things that haunted him. So he started drinking. A lot. That evening, he had a few. It went around in circles. We argued that he should get help. It spun into him wanting kids. I told him I didn't want any. Not like this," she gulped.

"He got angry. Not physically. He just shouted. Stumbled against the table. Knocked a few glasses over. Nothing big. But he did step onto the shards. He was clumsy like that when he was drunk." Elise shook her head.
"So he left?" Oscar asked carefully when she paused.
"No. Not right away. I was trying to help him pick out the pieces. But he --- he wanted to do it himself." She hitched another breath. Pause again. "I told him, I had had enough. I was going to pack my things and leave the next day. Move in with Tina. I mean..."

"Christine. I know. I know it's her nickname," Oscar smiled as though he was saying go on. "That's when he left. He just walked out. It wasn't that I told him I hated him, or never wanted to see him again. But, he died thinking I would leave him forever. Three days before our sixth anniversary, and he thought I was done forever." Elise held back tears. "That's why you felt so guilty," Oscar squeezed her hand.

"It was only supposed to be a break. To give him some space. To get him help. Maybe help him rethink. --- I thought, he'd gone to the field behind the house. He always did. He'd hit a few balls. Let off steam. It wasn't until the hospital called that I knew he hadn't," her voice trembled with the last sentence.

Oscar waited for a moment then pulled her close. "I don't think he thought you were leaving him. I've seen the pictures. The way he looked at you. How you looked at him. And I've seen the pictures he took of you. I don't think he thought that way. If anything he probably thought "how can I fix this?". I know, I would. If I had known someone for as long as you two have each other. It would've taken more than an argument," he placed a gentle kiss on her hair.


James ambled their way. Another bouquet of lavender in hand. He smiled thinly when they walked past to give him his space.

"Thank you," Oscar whispered. "For what?" Elise perked a brow. "For letting me come along." He pulled her into a tight embrace. Then they met up with Christine, patiently waiting for James. "What do you think he's saying?" Elise asked this time. "Probably the baseball scores," Christine stated nonchalantly. Elise laughed. It shouldn't have made her laugh, but it did, so she buried her face in her palms. "A very good year," Christine whispered towards Oscar, and he just nodded in agreement.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Let me just say that this chapter went completely different about midway in than I had intended, but I do like the new direction.

"Do you need help?"
"No, we're good."
"Alright. We're four rows ahead."
"I know, sis. Stop worrying so much. I'm pregnant. Not an invalid."
"I know that. I just don't understand why James had to travel ahead. And by only two days. I mean what was so urgent, he couldn't travel with his pregnant wife?"
"That's just how it is sometimes. I think he wanted to make sure everything is prepared. You know how he gets with big events like that. Perfectionist. Always wants to make sure his favorites get pampered. You know, get everything they demand."

That statement had Elise peer towards Oscar. He was heaving their carry-ons in the overhead compartments, helping another passenger do the same. Some older gentleman who thanked him more times than she could count to which he repeatedly replied: "no problem, sir."

She somehow couldn't picture Oscar getting spoiled. Or demand things. Not with the way he was around people. Not in the celebrity kind of way at least. He was the most low maintenance person she'd ever met. Not to mention kind, quite generous with his smiles, often quick to lend a hand just like he did right now.

He was also a nerd. A bit cocky. And at times very intense. Passionate a more fitting term. The only things he ever specifically asked for - according to her brother-in-law - were a PS4 and Gatorade; the blue kind. It did slip that some of the perks were nice now and then, but he quickly strung on - in the same breath - that he could live just fine without most of them. Just a PS4 and blue Gatorade and he was happy as can be.

Of course, she knew that wasn't entirely true. There were a few other things he liked having around but he explained that he never asked because he feared it would inconvenience people. The thought that others would jump to his requests was something he had - again, according to her brother-in-law - a difficult time accepting, so when he wanted one of the other things, he just went out and got those himself. There'd been a few times, he'd explained, where he had been caught in sweats and t-shirt by some random fan, but he had laughed it off with "it always works that way. Dress to the nines, and no one sees. Look like a sloth. The whole world knows."

"Four rows. Ok?" Elise returned her attention to Christine, raised brows and concerned eyes. Her sister just tilted her head, her expression a clear and firm "I know!"

"Are they ok?" Oscar craned to look behind Elise. "Yeah. Yeah. She's fine. Stubborn. And Chloé is tuckered out. Thanks to you," Elise sunk into her seat with a muted laugh. Soft squishiness catching her. Business class was nice. Way nicer than coach. Oscar had wanted to upgrade to first though, for Elise and Christine, but upon hearing
Christine wouldn't be able to do the same, because of the baby, Elise declined. Another muted laugh came with the thought that he wanted to spoil her, yet again.

A minute after she had plopped down, an overhead voice instructed to take seats and fasten seat belts and switch off devices, flight attendants checking if people obliged. Then it was on to the typical safety demonstration while the plane crawled out to the runway. Elise pretended to be focused on what the woman clad in a blue uniform was demonstrating, but Oscar teasingly running his hand up and down her thigh had her twitching more than once. She maybe saw half of half of what was important. The remainder was spent trying to keep her heart rate down.

"Behave yourself," she whispered from the corner of her mouth.
"I am," he whispered back with a smile and a raise of his brow.

Three hours of this might just feel like eternity. The idea of mile high club popped into her head several times, and if it wasn't for her sister sitting four rows behind, with clear view to when they stirred, she'd definitely, definitely consider. The fact that he wore a tight black t-shirt didn't help. Whoever said black disguises clearly has never seen him in that shade. Arms and chest were anything but disguised. He smirked at her gawking, and all she could think was that he was wearing that particular shirt on purpose. Three hours of eternity. Frustrated joy. At least she knew where the emergency exits were located.

This was their first trip together. Well, technically their second. But their first on a plane. A confined space she couldn't just leave if she wanted to. Not that there was that kind of tension. But she did remember that traveling together could at times call out the worst in people. She was no exception. He probably wasn't either. So traveling as part of a couple again might be more interesting than she wanted to admit.

At least they'd started off with a smooth check-in; even with a few bulky take-along baby items. Elise had no idea that babies needed so much stuff. She was amused and horrified at the same time when she helped her sister check in a collapsible crib. Christine's explanation that baby didn't sleep well in hotel-provided cribs was "awe" producing but also a little tease-worthy. That was cut down with a fast "Wait 'til you have kids, you'll understand."

The time between check-in and boarding was bridged with peek-a-boo and tickle tiny toes games. Keeping Chloé happy was a priority. After all, no one liked a crying baby. So Oscar appointed himself to be the person who played peek-a-boo and tickle tiny toes games until she became tired, falling asleep in his arms right after he'd fed her some formula. Tingling stomach sensations were a given, seeing him like that.

A few times people stared at him. Whispers of "Is that who I think it is?" sometimes pushing through. A couple of "Are you sure? He looks so different without a beard." statements were cause for muted snickers. From Elise. He, on the other hand, ignored the whispers but offered a warm smile when he caught people gawking.

His stance - back turned towards the waiting crowd and focus on Elise, Christine, and baby - made it clear to outsiders that he was on a trip with family or friends or at least close acquaintances and didn't wish to be disturbed. And people had kept their distance ---- with the exception of a couple of teenagers. Even that, he had handled with grace. A smile, a short conversation, a couple of pictures before he kindly insisted that he wasn't alone. Tingling stomach again in how he was so relaxed with it all.

Elise did admit - if only to herself - that it was nice to travel with someone other than a colleague. That she could share a bed with him. Maybe shower together. She looked forward to those shared
moments. And the ability to walk around the room without pants. Or a shirt. Or any clothes at all.

"I'm so glad you're coming along," he squeezed Elise's hand. "Have you ever been?"
"Once. With Mikki," she smiled.
Oscar hummed out a "hmmmm" pulling her right hand to his mouth, kissing the edges of her knuckles a few times over.
"You?" she waited for him to let go of her hand.
"Not one like this. Smaller ones. And never as a guest." He placed more kisses. "I think it'll be great, though. I know you will love it."
"I'm sure I will." She offered a half smile; tension on her face when she felt the plane jerk.

"What's wrong?" He tilted his head. Questioning eyes boring right into her soul.
"I don't like flying," she whispered.
"Sometimes, you surprise me, you know that?" He quirked his brow with a laugh.
"How so?" She mirrored his expression.
"I'm not that brave, really." She shrugged; still quite tense.
"Yes you are." He winked. That had her cheeks flush and heart rate speed up.

She knew he was hinting at more than just her trips, or learning new skills, or trying new foods; all of which took a teeny bit of courage of course. But that's definitely not what he meant.

What he meant were those leaps she'd taken when she thought herself at her weakest with no way out. More often than not, those moments of despair forcing change. Sometimes with help. Sometimes without anyone offering a hand. The decision to go a new path ultimately up to the person standing at the fork. To her, this was just how life went at times. To him, it was bravery, and he was bent on reminding her now and then that she was more than she gave herself credit for. Definitely braver than she thought.

The plane picked up on speed, from steady crawl to rumbling roll. Elise's right fingers squeezed around Oscar's left hand. Death grip so tight, he let out a groan. "Sorry," she gulped. He just chuckled in response. She shook her head, then closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing while the plane took off.

"How do you survive on flights when you go on business trips?" He asked with a smirk.
"I claw the armrest." She released an awkward chuckle as she opened her eyes.
"Awe. Sweetie..." He leaned in and teased a kiss on her hair.
She kept the fact that she usually downed a couple of shots beforehand to herself. They certainly would've helped today, but she forewent that tradition solely by the fact that she was a little embarrassed by what she thought were petty fears to outsiders.

As soon as the seatbelt sign turned off, Oscar stood up and stretched, then rubbed over his shoulders, releasing low rumbles now and then.
"Still sore?" Elise curled her lip to one side. A sly kind of curl. She knew why he was sore.
"I gotta say, considering that Tricia only had a one bedroom, she and the kids had a lot of stuff. More than I thought. Or saw," he husked out with a scoff.
"Well. She appreciated all the help." Elise snickered while rubbing up and down his left arm when he sat back down. Considering his recent increase in muscle mass, she was surprised he ached this much. Then again, her BFF's move had been an all-day event.
She closed her eyes and leaned her head on his shoulder, soothing scent of forest after the rain with a hint of spice relaxing her. The last two days had been as couple-esque as ever. There was a routine setting in to how they did things now, and she'd grown quite fond of that. From breakfast to dinner. Well actually from the moment they fell asleep to when they woke up. They spent those - and the moments in between - together as much as possible. Definitely in the same room when she wasn't at work, but always very much aware when the other needed space. Life wasn't just the two of them, after all. It was the two of them and her career, his career, the apartment, their friends, the city, the world.

Monday had been a bit of an exception to that routine. The couple had made good on their promise to help Patricia move house. There was no snoozing past seven and no checking emails. Elise was the one to pick up the moving truck early that morning, something that had Oscar stunned. She had never told him that she was certified a class up of a commercial license. That didn't stop an amused laugh when she hopped out of the driver's cabin. It wasn't like she was short, short, five-foot-six'ish put her at average height. But compared to the truck she looked minuscule, which left him wondering how she had even reached the pedals.

"There are boxes in the back. You and Patricia have to pack without me. But I'll be back after work with reinforcements," was a promise she had made before taking off. The reinforcements for that day weren't much of a surprise: Helen, Matt, and Thom. She had lured them with payment in the form of pizza and beer, and the price of the wedding invitations whenever Helen and Matt were ready to order them. That had Thom sulking a bit. After all, the only payment he was eligible for was pizza. [There may have been a wink of the eye, though; and a "just one, and only one" from someone in the group. But that was a secret, only to be told as some random memory whenever Thom might have kids. ]

Patricia's new apartment wasn't far from the old place. A ten-minute drive without traffic. But it was a few flights up. Grumbles and groans were inevitable that afternoon, especially since the elevator was too small for larger pieces. Helen couldn't let the opportunity to quip out a "sorry boys" slip past. The protested roars heard through closed doors before the contraption rattled upward added to the amusement of it all. The ladies only holding a small box each may also have aided in the men's outcry for unequal labor division.

"Oh my god, Patricia. Wow! Now that's what I call an upgrade!" The yell resonated through the empty apartment. Elise the cause of it. There was a pause before the door opened, though. A way to hype up anticipation. Patricia had kept pretty mum about size and exact location. "The kids will love this place!" Elise couldn't help the excitement. Her friend had worked hard to get to this point. Not just for the upswing in her career but finally, finally a bigger place for herself and the kids.

Clacking footsteps echoed across Birchwood floors once Patricia started showing them around more. A long, narrow hallway past the threshold led to a sizable and bright living room; large windows opening to a view towards the skyline. Turning left at the end of the hallway, the space opened to a large dining room and kitchen; the rooms divided by a bar style counter with an overhanging marble slab. The kitchen cabinets were in beige tones that reminded Elise of Europe's military-style housing of the early nineties, but the appliances were brand-new and stainless steel. Somehow that combo worked rather well.

Another hallway - center and past the open floor-plan rooms - led to the two, large bedrooms on the right-hand side; and a sizable white-tiled bathroom on the left-hand side. There were doors to two spacious walk-in closets in that hallway, and one of the bedrooms connected through another closet directly to the bathroom. Upgrade indeed. Well deserved. And very well chosen as indicated by impressed gasps.
"The dining room is big enough to be the living room," Patricia spilled with a pride-filled voice. "So we'll set up the entertainment system at the wall next to the counter. The counter will double as table. I already bought three chairs to go around and they fit right under the counter to hide away. We'll buy a few folding ones as well. Good thing we have a downstairs storage."

"The living room will be my personal space. I have a divider. The folding type. So the room will be blocked from view when we have guests over. I'll still be getting a hideaway bed, but there's space for my desk and a chair for reading, and I have my own closet, and look, there's a balcony," she beamed when she showed off the tiny outward extension.

It was just big enough for a couple of chairs. A couple of overhanging containers filled with bright pink petunias already added a bit of romance. There was a small but lush fenced-in park right behind the building, with a large playground in the center, and Elise couldn't help but think that this was one of the main reasons Patricia had wanted this place. She had kids, after all. She could already see Patricia sitting on the balcony, crocheting away while watching her kids play below.

"Donnie gets the room right past the first closet. My closet. *Patricia wiggled her brows.* And Danielle the one that connects to the bathroom. The walls are already painted in their favorite colors, and they'll get new desks and beds once we have a little more money saved up." Elise had never seen Patricia like that. Absolute happiness. And an "I've made it" look ever-present on her face. Her BFF shed quite a few happy tears that day; spinning around a few times, a disbelieving gawk shining through now and then that this was indeed her home now.

"Are you ladies going to help or just watch?" Matt pouted when the men finally found their way to the apartment. "We'll be doing the unpacking," Helen perked a brow, one hip on hand. A quick reminder of who had picked up the truck; who had been dealing with two kids as single parent; and who had nursed Matt back to health when he came home sick from India left him with a clenched jaw and gritted teeth.

"You see that, Thom? This should be an eye-opener to you. Don't date. Don't marry. They remember enough to blackmail you but not enough to acknowledge that you indeed took out the trash last Thursday," Matt complained. "We'll see how much you fuss when we have kids. You'll be glad that the only thing you had to worry about was taking out the trash," Helen shot back. "Baby talk, already?" Elise perked her brow that time. "No. NOOOO! Not for a few years!" Matt stood wide-eyed. Almost petrified. Ready to drop a large box as his view shifted back and forth between Elise and Helen.

"I know. Geesh. You don't have to look so scared. Now come here and give me a kiss, you big grump," Helen snickered. Nagging couple was a foreseeable future with those two. Essentially, that was already the case. But it was more passion than anything. An outsider may not see it like that, but Elise knew them better than that. Their love was the kind that would likely come with heated arguments; that was until someone threatens them in some way. Then it would definitely be a stand-as-one-unit kind of thing. And god help those who would dare them like that.

There was a cuteness between those two that rubbed off, though. It had Oscar chance quite a few kisses here and there. He always was a tad more affectionate than Elise when around others. Sure, he held back with PDA when strangers were in the room, just like at her birthday. He had let her initiate all the PDA that day. Even so, she had kept it short and sweet; always ending it just before he reached the cusp of when he wanted a little more. In front of friends, it was different. He was
the initiator. And when he went for a kiss, he went for a **KISS**. And he considered this small circle friends, albeit not knowing them for very long. But kisses kept coming. And hugs. And little nibbles.

Thom and Patricia, of course, were ready to step in whenever it got too fluffy [or steamy] between the two couples. The two singles even threatened spray bottles and complete ban of kissing whenever calling them out didn't work. That was chuckled off with a "yeah, yeah" and "wait until you have someone". The blush that crossed Patricia's face not unnoticed by Elise. Owen was surely on her mind. He had actually called a few times while unpacking. Cupid's arrow had hit the target for sure.

The whole afternoon went on like that. The men ran up and down the stairs, carrying boxes and furniture; yelling the word pivot a few times over. And the women unpacked, laughing at said pivot yells. Now and then, Matt and Oscar stopped for payments in form of kisses from their significant others, Thom always teasing them with loud smooching noises before running off as to not get smacked. And Patricia snuck a few text messages to Owen. Like no one would notice her tinkering with her phone while leaning over a box. A stunned "huh" whenever someone called her name, another dead giveaway.

"I couldn't have done this without you," Patricia whispered after pizza arrived. Elise shrugged that off with a "pssshht.... it was nothing." She teased a hint of dinner, movie, and beauty parlor, though, and of course, Patricia replied with a "well actually...", because that's how they were. Peas in a pod. Besties. BFFs.

"I was kidding!" was the stern, protested yell that shot out when Patricia geared towards a box nearby, pulling a bag from said box. Elise tried to pretend she didn't see by covering her eyes. So Patricia tossed the bag towards Oscar instead. He proved to have great reflexes despite the fact that he was distracted by talking to Thom.

He of course grinned and opened the bag without hesitation. "Nice. They'll fit right in with the theme!" he stated as he pulled out four crocheted pillowcases to match the blanket Patricia had given Elise on her birthday.

"How long did it take to make those?" Elise furrowed her brows.

A shrug was the reply. It was to cut off frustrated sighs and disapproval.

"I'll make you guys something, too," Patricia smiled towards the rest of the group as they took turns inspecting the cases. Once again she'd outdone herself with the details. "Just let me know what you'd like. Doesn't have to be crocheted either. I can sew something if you like. Or knit."


"DUDE!" a unison yell from the rest of the group had him flinch.

"She offered," Thom squealed as he was hit by several pillowcases.

"Poor guy didn't realize that the proper response would've been: "Thank you. But you don't have to." Lack of life experience wasn't exactly at fault here, either. He was like that. Sometimes it was cute. Other times, it had people shake their heads. Patricia, of course, did the shrug thing again. To her, this was her way of repayment. But Elise knew the amount of work it took to make something custom. So she always frowned a little bit. Infinite stitches. Endless hours. Probably a myriad of research and planning. Repayment worth more than all the money in the world. Definitely worth more than the few times she had helped out.

The pizza break didn't last long after that exchange. The day itself however did. Well into the late evening. Since Elise was the one who had rented the moving truck, she was the one to return it. At
some point, while she had done that, Patricia's mother had dropped off the kids. Helen, Matt, and Thom were the trade-in, sort of speak, leaving before Elise had made it back, but not without forwarding messages to Oscar that they would see her Tuesday morning with more payment demands, aka things they wanted her to get while at SDCC.

"I'm serious about not paying me back." Elise insisted when they had finished setting up the rest of the kitchen and living room.
"I know that." Patricia scrunched her nose in reply.
"I know you know that. But I also know how that noggin of yours works." Elise remained serious.
"Pay it forward. I don't care how or when. Just pay it forward to some less fortunate soul. Ok?"
"Ok."
"Ok!"
Tight hugs. And whispered thank yous. And the move was done just before midnight had chimed in.

Elise had learned a few things that day, though. First was that Oscar was an "if it fits, it fits" type of handyman. She hoped that none of the furniture he had put together collapsed due to that. A few leftover screws did have her worried, but Patricia promised she'd check everything over. Second, he could pull a quarter out of anyone's ear. A cliché type of magic trick that had Donnie fooled but not Danielle. She loved it nonetheless. And third, most importantly, he liked talking about living together. All day he had kept tossing out ideas how he'd decorate a shared apartment with her. Those thoughts trickling over into Tuesday morning talks.

It was a peculiar thing still. To have him around like he'd always been there. They were already somewhat living together. She'd invited him like that. Leave stuff at her place kind of deal. And he made use of it more and more. An encroachment into every room. Not by much. But enough to see that she wasn't alone anymore.

She spent most of Tuesday afternoon staring at him in disbelief while packing for their trip. A few laughs here and there as new memories etched into her mind. The silence that afternoon a comfort. Not that it was completely devoid of sound. There was music and shuffling of items. Sliding zippers, wrinkling of plastic bags, shutting of drawers. And the sounds that endearing kisses made when lips pulled away. Those were her favorite.

Elise felt a squeeze on her hand.
"You alright, mi Linda?" she heard him ask.
She slowly opened her eyes and looked up, finding those familiar, deep caramel browns blinking at her. "Hmmm. I was just thinking about Tricia." Elise returned her head to Oscar's shoulder, and he smiled.
"Care to share." He still held her hand, and she thought for a second.
"Just ---Thank you," she mumbled out.
"For what?"
"Helping me help Tricia move. And giving her kids more X-Men gear," Elise raised a knowing brow as she pulled her head off his shoulder again.
"They told you? Little tattletales. It's supposed to be a secret. How the hell am I supposed to train them?" He squinted while rubbing his chin; that sandpapery sound his stubble produced snicker-inducing.
"Shut up," Elise muted another giggle. "Just shut up and give me a kiss."

He did. This time, it was her who kissed in such a way that it left him breathless for a few seconds after. Breathless and speechless. She was getting more comfortable with PDA by the day and he loved it.
"You really care about your friends, don't you?" Oscar smiled warmly. 
"I do. And if it ever comes down to it, I'll choose them." Elise held a serious expression. 
"I know you will. I hope, I'll never give you a reason to choose, though" he whispered; expression equally as serious now. 
"Good to know we're on the same page." Elise's face warmed back up. "And just so you know. I won't make you choose either."

He smiled, pulled both her hands to his mouth this time, kissing across her curled fingers. He lingered over a specific one. Just a fraction of a second longer, really. He lingered nonetheless. That step he needed a long, running, jump start for had just inched closer.

"Gotta say," he pulled away. "Matt and Helen are something else," he laughed. 
"Mmm hmmm. Passionate people for sure," Elise agreed. 
"They'd fit in perfectly with my family," Oscar grinned. 
"Oh yeah? Passionate debaters?"

"Passionate everything." His face twisted a bit. "Including pranksters. Quite opposite of your family. In fact, I'm a little worried they'll overwhelm you because you're so ----." 
"So what?"

"Calm."

Elise let out a loud laugh. "You've not witnessed me at a concert, yet," she laughed more. "Mikki would also disagree." More laughing. 
"Ok. But you'll see ---- when you meet Mike. You've seen his tweets, right? *she nodded* Yeah. That times ten equals real-life Mike. And now multiply that by *he counted on his fingers* at least twenty or so people. That's us," he laughed.

Elise just gaped with wide eyes for a few seconds. "Perfect. That means there'll be more stories on you," her expression changed to a devilish smile. "Can't wait to hear about those awkward years."

"Never went through those," Oscar smirked. His left brow did quiver a little though. A scared kind of quiver. There'd be stories for sure.

Three hours seemed to fly by with how much they talked. More about her friends. Some about his. A few new names came up. People he promised she'd meet one day. Some probably on her first visit to Brooklyn. She had noticed he had been talking more and more about that first visit. Telling her he'd take her to all his favorite spots in the city. Most of them eateries. Surprisingly unsurprising to her. Theatre and music venues came up, too. And touristy sites, at which he cringed a little.

"I'll show you the real New York. The real Brooklyn. Not what you see in the movies." His eyes crinkled at the corners. 
"Ok, how about for every one thing of yours, one of mine?" She negotiated. 
"Hmmm... ok. Anything specific you want to see first? That way I can plan way ahead." He waited. 
"Ellis Island," she blurted out instantly. He somehow knew she would.

"Ellis Island or Liberty Island?" He lifted his brow. A bit of New York arrogance right there. 
"What's the difference?" she asked, her tone so unknowingly oblivious it made him laugh. "What? Come on. Don't laugh at me." She pushed against his arm.

"The immigration building is on Ellis Island. The Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island," he explained. The fact that she didn't know this was adorable to him. 
"Oh. I always assumed it was the same thing. Both then. Please?"

He thought for a moment. "Hmnnnn... Ok. It'll be a day trip. And we have to get on a ferry. You're not scared of ferries are you?" he jested with wiggling brows. 
"Shut up," she squeaked out. Another push on his arm. He defended with a chuckled kiss.
Elise looked over her shoulder and saw Christine with a big grin on her face. There'd been quite a few of those whenever Elise looked back to see if her sister was doing ok. Wiggling brows met squinting eyes. Whatever Christine was thinking was of the naughty kind for sure. Elise just shook her head.

An overhead announcement, buckling belts, shifting seats to upright positions, noises of landing gear extending, screeching tires, and just like that, they landed in San Diego. The captain's voice crackled through the speakers, welcoming passengers with local time and temperature, reminding them that it was "Wednesday, July 8th, 2015" before wishing them a great time and safe connection flights.

"He's never been like that with Lorraine," Christine whispered when they made their way towards baggage claim. Elise managed a hum. She was lost watching Oscar heave their bags onto a cart; the biggest, of course, Christine's. "You guys are planning on leaving the room over the next few days, right?" Christine teasingly poked Elise when she caught her dreamy stare. "Like I have a choice," Elise exhaled sharply. Not that she didn't want to explore San Diego but five days and four nights without leaving the room sounded enticing. But so did exploring the city and meeting up with people.

"What did you guys talk about?" Christine slightly nudged Elise on her shoulder when she saw her gaze drifting again.

"This and that. Everything and nothing. Plans. Dreams. I'll tell you when we're alone. At the hotel. At some point," Elise chuckled with the last sentence. Oscar was clinging to the collapsible crib about to slide off the pile of luggage. He had insisted beforehand that he could handle this on his own. Showoff. She wondered what it would be like to travel with kids of their own. A bout of panic crashed over her when she realized she'd been thinking more and more like that.

The thought of little ones had crossed her mind quite a few times since she had met him, of course. But it had never been pressing. Even that one Saturday in Montreal. It was only ever a thought of "it would be nice." There was also always that gnawing fear that she wasn't great with kids. Chloé was only just now starting to warm up to her. The few moments her niece didn't whine quite lovely, but there were always the other moments when aunty couldn't figure out what was wrong. Like a quest to figure out if baby needed food, sleep, diaper change, or lullabies.

Oscar on the other hand always seemed to know what Chloé needed. And unlike Elise, he never seemed to panic about it. He'd just go "eh, looks like she's hungry" or "looks like she needs a nap." It was this relaxed way that kept pushing thoughts of that nature into her mind. He'd be the relaxed parent, and she probably the panicking mother. It would be interesting, to say the least. Definitely amusing at times, just like right now, when, after another restack of things, he finally admitted defeat and got another cart before making his way to the sisters.

"James texted me. He said there are photographers outside of almost all the claims. Not specifically for us, but you know. For an event like that, they truly come out of the woodwork," Oscar cringed a little. He wouldn't have minded if it had been just him, but it wasn't. "You guys go ahead first. I'll follow a few minutes later. So they won't hound the stroller."

"In that case, I'll take the carts. You take your suitcase with you. No speculations that way," Elise recommended. Oscar agreed with twisted lips and apologetic eyes. "Don't worry, I got this," she smiled. No PDA this time, even though she wanted to kiss him. Badly. And he, her.

"Alright. He's at H. He said for you three to go there. I'm walking out of G, which is a little further down. It should be enough time to get you settled and stow luggage while I walk to the car," Oscar
instructed as he read over a text message. Who knew that leaving an airport would require some kind of battle plan. If it had been any other week, this would've probably been pretty amusing, but the second Elise and Christine stepped through the sliding doors, they saw why Oscar had held a serious tone when he repeated the strategy back to them.

The exit where Oscar came out of went off in a blitz of flashlights and autograph requests. Lenny, - James' number one publicist from the East Coast branch - was already waiting for Oscar. They remained a few minutes, smiling into cameras; Oscar signing pictures, magazines, and whatever else was held in front of his face. A few times he joked around about airplane food but he avoided answering any questions beyond "how are you" and "will you be at SDCC".

James in the meantime had waited in the SUV's passenger side and was now rushing towards Elise and Christine, hurriedly guiding them towards the vehicle. The driver and James stashed suitcases and baby gear while Christine quickly tucked car seat with baby into the second backseat row before disappearing into the SUV.

Elise was just about to follow suit when someone called her name. She turned around, only to be hit by a bright flash. Some paparazzi had recognized her and was now asking questions at lightning speed while still taking pictures. She stood there for a few seconds, a bit blinded, a bit confused. Definitely speechless. The sound of the shutter obnoxiously loud while she tried to find her bearings.

"Don't stall, Liz! Just get in the car!" She heard James closing in from the side, his tone very agitated. She spun back and finally squeezed into the SUV. "Dude, could you please back off. I got my kid in the car," James then directed at the paparazzi while shutting the door. His threatening, tall stance didn't seem to intimidate. Only when the driver - who seemed a mountain of a man himself - came to James' side did the paparazzi back off.

Oscar was less than thirty seconds behind. The door opened and he squished into the first backseat row along with his carry-on and his suitcase; all followed by Lenny.

"Told you we should've taken two cars," Lenny croaked. Poor dude was getting crushed to the side while Oscar tried to move his carry-on to the floor to open up space. "I'll know better next time," James exhaled sharply. With that, they were off to the hotel. Traffic stop and go as they had arrived right before the last morning commuters rushed to work.

"Didn't mean to yell, Liz." James looked over his shoulder with an apologetic expression. "It's ok. I should've ignored him," she sighed. She had no clue why she had stalled. She had been to a few red carpet events with her brother-in-law. Even a few crazy airport arrivals came to mind. She had always managed to snake in or out of the car without much hassle. Unnoticed really. That was the key, though. Unnoticed. Even the debacle a few years back, with one of her actor friends, didn't cause her to stall. Although, back then they didn't know her name. Not for a while at least. Now they did. Damn that such a simple thing had such control.

"What did he ask?" Oscar was curious. He'd witnessed the whole thing but by the time he had reached the SUV, the paparazzi had scurried away to hound some other poor soul. "I honestly have no clue," Elise replied, still somewhat wide-eyed. "It's a bit of a blur. Literally," she laughed at last. That reaction was a surprise to Oscar but he was glad she saw some humor in the whole thing.

"He asked about how long you've been dating Oscar. If you guys are making wedding plans. Where you're staying. And if you were going to go to all the events." James again looked back over
his shoulders; a sly grin on his face. "He asked all that in five seconds?" Elise gaped, in part because she was impressed James had remembered all that.
"You'd be surprised," James snorted.
"Wow. Well. --- I didn't say a thing. --- I think?" Elise pulled in her brows, then laughed again.
"You didn't, Sweetie. You looked like a deer caught in the headlights, though," Oscar rasped out a laugh.
"You saw me?" She perked her brow at her companion.

"Sure did. Quite cute," he laughed again. "So, do you think it'll be like this all over the place? I was hoping we could explore the city a little," he asked James.
"Today isn't as bad. Tomorrow will be //fairly calm// as well. Just the airport is kind of insane. A few big names arriving," James explained.
"Like who?" Elise was the curious one now.
"Peter Capaldi and Jenna Coleman for one. Bill Murray is flying in as well. Jennifer is already here. Fassbender and McAvoy should arrive tonight," James scrolled through his messages. Texts back and forth between him and other agents most likely.

He'd become good friends with quite a few over the years, despite the crazy competitiveness between agencies and individuals. Tension was only ever an issue when some celeb either dropped an agent or someone new came along. Then it was each man or woman on their own. Like players in a winner-takes-it-all survival game. He had learned to play the game quickly. His vast knowledge of contract law and corporate law definitely an advantage when he first started on that path. A charismatic, easy going vibe helped, too. And the fact that he didn't bullshit around when it came to drawing up terms. He knew all the loopholes. Always quick to shut anyone down who tried to sweet-talk him or his clients.

It was definitely not a bad thing to have gone from no-name beginner to highly sought after agent in less than nine years. The biggest reward to date came at the seven-year mark for him. Partner at the agency where he had started right after he had left corporate law. It came with a few perks for sure. Taking his family to big events was one of those. A choice in who he represented, another. Of course, such a thing was also up to the person being represented.

"A little birdie told me Michael is thinking of switching to your agency," Oscar blurted out after James' mind seemed consumed with scrolling through messages. "You're not dropping me for some Irish dude, are you?"
"Only if I get more money out of him," James joked, eyes still glued to his phone.
"You and I both know you're making enough to turn your kids into trust fund babies," Oscar laughed.
"Not gonna happen. I'm going to buy my own island for retirement. Taking all my money with me," James stated with an indifferent timbre.

"I see how it is. Didn't know you were this greedy," Oscar raised a brow.
"I'm kidding. Luxury is nice but really it's more about getting ready for the new bean. Prepared just in case, you know," James smiled back over his shoulder. "And of course paying my parents back."
"Awe, sweet. Heart of gold," Oscar mocked.
"Hey. You did the same," James countered.
"Did what the same?" Elise chimed in. Curiosity quite intense.
"He bought his mom and his sister a house after Inside Llewyn Davis," James winked at Elise. "I mean, we can always renegotiate terms," he then grinned towards Oscar.
"You're costing me too much as is," Oscar laughed wholeheartedly.
"Considering how much other agents take, I've offered my services at a discount. A steep
"You'll get used to it. Events like this always seem a time for renegotiation," Christine explained with a tired roll of her eyes. "It's mostly just joking around."
"Well, I'm sure they can talk about new terms in the privacy of the agency," Elise perked her brow, then looked out the window.

This was an issue she had intentionally been oblivious to. Details like that always avoided - at least publicly - because money wasn't important to her. At least not in the show off kind of way that some people with status displayed. Money was a fickle thing when not handled properly, so anyone showing off success through status symbols was a major turn off for her as she saw it as waste of resources. So was discussing the subject this openly. Not that it should be a secret. There was a difference though between gloating and genuinely making sure things are taken care off.

Finances, she was sure, would come up at some point in their future. She never had issues laying her books on the tables. She was sure Oscar didn't either. There was a bit of a tug in her stomach, though. Her earnings were most likely peanuts compared to his. Of course, her own income was enough for her, and then some. She also knew living together sometimes came with higher or other costs.

She halted, then pondered.

This relationship seemed to move in leaps now. Ideas of shared apartments, talk about kids, and now thoughts about finances. There was a mixture of emotions. Excitement and fear on opposing ends.

"You alright, Sweetie," Oscar's voice pulled her attention to him.
"Yup. Just a little tired," she fibbed.
"Us, too," Christine whispered with a yawn.
"I think we all need a rest huh. It's only ten. We can order some brunch once we get to the room and then take a nap," James smiled over his shoulder towards Christine, chuckling when he realized that his wife had fallen asleep right when they'd pulled up to the first hotel.

"This is the hotel?" Elise gaped. She had expected to stay at some tall glass-front monstrosity; the Marriott or maybe the Hilton. Instead, her brother-in-law had opted for the smaller Hard Rock right across the convention center. It wasn't bad looking. It had character, lots of color, and quirky corners, which was nice considering the clinical look bigger chains had taken on over the years. But it was basically not what James usually booked.

She must've come off as a bit skeptical.
"Trust me. You two are going to like this one way better than our hotel." James smirked then winked at Oscar.
"Wait, you guys aren't staying here?" Elise was perplexed.
"We're staying at the Omni." James pointed at a rounded building right across the street. The glass-front she'd thought of when she'd gotten out of the car. "Trust me. This one is nice. But not really family friendly." James winked again.

Oscar just scratched the back of his head.
"You didn't go overboard, did you?" He worried.
"Dude. Just enjoy the stay. I mean it's what --- your first actual trip together?" James huffed as he pulled Elise's luggage from the trunk. "Besides. With all the long days on set. And everything that's headed your way, it's ok to enjoy some of the rewards before the movies hit the screens." He patted
Oscar on the shoulder. "Also, not like we're not sticking around. We're one street over. And if you guys really don't like it here, we can arrange to switch hotels."
"I'm sure it's great. Just, you know --- Christine. If something happens...," Elise started, hinting at her sister's severe morning sickness.

"She'll be fine. I'm here, now. And you'll be around when we're doing panels and interviews," James assured with a firm voice. "Which reminds me. Mike is flying in on Friday morning, right? At seven?" James geared that inquiry towards Oscar. He responded with a grumbled frown. "I'll send Lenny to the airport." James typed a reminder on his cell. "Don't worry, he'll be here before the panels start."

One last pat and they drove off. Elise chuckled when she realized that her brother-in-law literally meant across the street. She could still see the SUV once it came to a stop and parked. A tired and grumpy looking Christine exited a couple of minutes after with a sleeping Chloé nestled on her shoulder. Elise was a bit surprised that baby seemed to handle everything with such ease. Blissful unawareness of the world around her.

"Holy shit!" Elise gaped when they opened the door to their room ten minutes later. "He did go overboard!" Oscar hitched a breath. A disbelieving chuckle followed. Then a frown. Then a shake of the head. And another chuckle. "I might just get used to this," he raised an impressed brow. Elise laughed out an "I doubt that" while hugging him from behind.

The suite James had booked for them was something else, though. Elise had only ever seen this in movies. Rockstar suite was a perfect description. Dark floors, dark walls, accent lighting throughout. Separated bedroom and living room areas. Enormous marbled bathroom with whirlpool tub and a rain and waterfall type shower. All with an open view onto the bay, but shielded from prying eyes with extended, outward walls, and frosted windows halfway up from the floor. Just in case some ship passed by and someone might ogle with binoculars.

It was glamorous, to say the least, but also very comfortable with cushy seating options, large area rugs, and a king-sized bed so soft, Elise thought she had landed on a cloud when she fell face forward onto the mattress; tired from travel exhaustion.

"I take it, you like it, huh?" Oscar grinned when she rolled over a few times with relieving sighs and comments about how soft the sheets felt.
"I want to steal this bed. And this comforter. And the pillows," she sighed. All those thoughts about disliking status symbols had definitely gone out the window for now. This was one of the nicest rooms she'd ever stayed in. A grand perk. She had to remind herself not to take it for granted when she rolled over the blankets again, messing up the perfect display of pillows.

"How about stealing a kiss?" Oscar wiggled his brows suggestively. She did just that, with a tumble and a laugh after she had edged to the corner and pulled him down onto the bed with her. "Hmmm. Thank you, mi Reina," he smiled, playing with her hair when he slid off her to his left side. "So? Are you hungry? Or do you need a nap? Or..." The creases on his cheeks became dangerously deep when he started teasing her skin with his fingertips. "One of each would be perfect," she snickered.

She rolled into his body, inhaling his scent deeply when her nose came to a rest on his chest. She'd been holding off on grand gesture PDA since before they'd gotten on the plane. The flight already seemed to last forever in that regard. Sure, talking and laughing had made it go by fast. But her skin had been crawling the whole time. Desperate for more than just hand kisses and the occasional
tease onto her hair. The ride to the hotel multiplied that need almost exponentially. She looked up, spark in her eyes, biting her lower lip.

"Hmmmm, then let's start with the or --- and work backward?" He pushed her back on her back, leaned in, and kissed her neck. Tiny soft kisses from behind her right ear to her shoulder. Her clothes didn't stay on for long. Neither did his. Wrapped blanket around their bodies was a must though. Added coziness to make the world disappear around them while they felt each other up skin on skin. He didn't let her get away without an orgasm this time. Fingerplay to part folds and cascading kisses from neck to her breasts sped up her heart fast. Bites on hardened bundles of nerves helped, too. Slipped fingers, though, soft to firm massages against her walls, and his thumb circling her clit. That set her off twice. Back to back.

Heavy breathing, her legs wrapping around him, and nails digging into his back had him follow almost as fast. With rolled thrusts this time. Almost danced. That was different. He'd rolled before. Plenty of times. This was more controlled now. Deeper. Harder. His right hand sliding under her ass, gripping on tightly to help her roll along while his left cupped her head seemed to add to a new intensity. Rolled thrusts until his climax surged through his body.

She dubbed it a passionate quickie. Less than ten minutes from start to finish. He agreed with an exhausted chuckle, his forehead dropping to her breasts as he held on to her. She loved this post-sex closeness. When their bodies were hot and covered in a thin sheet of sweat. When heated breath against even hotter skin felt like cooling relief. It was sweet afterglow. She had to nip his left shoulder to release his hold, though. He always coiled his arms tightly to make those moments after last. Like desperation for her not go anywhere until he had left at least another thousand kisses on her skin. This time, his hold ached beyond pleasurable. He wheezed out a sorry. "You might be right about too much muscle," he chuckled when he loosened his embrace to trail more kisses down her body.

She patted around, searching for her jeans. Somehow they had landed on the pillow above her head. She got her cell and set the alarm to noon, muting a laugh when she noticed that Oscar had already fallen asleep. Mid kissing spree of all things, and with his head on her stomach but his body off to the left side. She'd wondered why he'd stopped where he had. She played with his curls, snickering at rumbled whispers escaping his lips, but the exhaustion from an early morning had her out less than two minutes later.

She woke up to a hearty smell and the sound of Don McLean's "Winterwood". She pulled herself up, a little puzzled, her watch reading 1 p.m.
"Hey. I was about to wake you up," Oscar beamed when he found her awake. "Food is here."
"I figured," she whispered. "I guess, I didn't hear the alarm." She rubbed her eyes.
"You sure didn't," he whispered back, teasing her messy hair. "Come on, Sweetie. Let's eat," he wiggled his fingertips.

She wrapped the top sheet around herself, then grasped his hand. He pulled her in for a kiss, chuckling when she asked for more. Of course, he couldn't say no to that. So another kiss followed, and another, and another, all while they swayed to "Winterwood" playing in the background. At one point Oscar had to insist - although reluctantly - that she get dressed so they could eat. His wandering gaze, however, prompted her to dress as slowly as possible. Panties and t-shirt only, too. Frustrated, heaved breath was his answer. A knowing laugh was hers.

"That looks good." Elise inhaled deeply when she saw the food. The hearty smell from earlier turned out to be carne asada fries, topped with the best guacamole and fresh salsa she had ever tasted. "My hips," she mumbled under the last bite, surprised she ate the whole thing. She was sure
there were at least three servings on her plate. "You'll walk it off this weekend, I'm sure," Oscar wheezed out a laugh. "Your sister called by the way. She wants to know what you want to do this afternoon."

"Mmmmm," Elise curled her lips to one side. She got up and got her cell, scrolling through for sights nearby. "The New Children's Museum is in walking distance. I bet she'd love that. Chloé probably won't remember but it'll be picture worthy?" She perked her brow in a questioning manner. "Sure," Oscar smiled, scrolling through his own cell as he checked out what she was talking about. "Kids of all ages, huh?" He wiggled his brows. "You're not going to turn into a big kid, are you?" Elise squinted. "Why not? It says //Kids of all ages//," he counter-repeated. It was one of those yup moments. Yup, he'd be the kind of dad to embarrass his kids but also do amazing things with them. Why was that clinging to her mind right now?

"Well, if we're going, we should go now. They close at four. I still need to change, and so do you." Her eyes tracked up and down his body. T-shirt and underwear only. Like her. "Did you --- open the door like that?" She gawked. Oscar - a little confused first - looked down on himself. A loud laugh boomed through the suite a second later. "Shit. I just may have. I was wondering why the delivery guy looked at me with a funny face," he kept laughing. "At least I didn't open the door stark naked. That would've been bad."

"You think?" Elise gaped. A hidden behind palm laugh followed. Oscar winked at that.

Half an hour later, the couple stood in front of their hotel waiting for James, Christine, and Berenjena Pequeñita. Oscar glanced up and down Elise, smiling at the fact that she'd chosen a simple turquoise cotton dress. Sleeveless bodice, the length mid-thigh. A dark brown belt added definition; enhancing her hourglass figure. He loved that she'd chosen strappy sandals with tiny flower accents, leaving her toes exposed. And he loved it even more that she'd chosen a simple bracelet and the golden snitch necklace to round off the outfit. The whole outfit was a simple breezy summer style. So her. Even more so because she'd left her hair open in soft waves.

"Stop staring at my legs," she smirked when she caught his traveling gaze a third time. "Why? I love your legs. I love your arms, too." He kissed her shoulder when he pulled her closer for some careful PDA. There were people walking around, after all. She leaned a little closer, tilting her head just a tiny bit when those kisses trailed to her neck. The statement "get a room" had them dart apart fast, though.

James stood a few feet behind them, grinning ear to ear while he pushed the stroller. "So? How do you like your room?" he asked with a continued grin while bobbing his head up and down. "Can't you tell? They like it a lot," Christine shot out from behind James, a grin as wide as her husband's on her face. "Don't know what you're talking about," Elise shrugged. "Mmmmmmm hmmmmm?!" Christine stared, quite bluntly, to the side of Elise's neck where Oscar had left a few hickeys. Nothing too intense. Just a few light marks, but clearly deep enough in hue that Christine had noticed right away.

"Honestly, I don't want to know what you two have already... You know what. --- Let's just pretend you two don't do that." James walked off in the direction of the museum. "Do I need to remind you guys what I've walked in on?" Oscar argued back as he started after James.
"Oscar!!" Elise yelled out, and Christine turned the darkest shade of crimson. "He started it," Oscar pointed at James, mischievous grin in tow. "Besides. Chloé didn't fall from the sky. Did you, Tiny?"

Shaking of heads. What had she agreed to this week was popping into Elise's mind. This was a new level of interaction between her family and him. At least from her perspective. She'd never witnessed them all together more than one afternoon at a time. A kind of mischievous easiness was present from the get-go, but it was intensified now. It was like innuendo-laced Oscar but innuendo-laced Oscar to the power of two or three. And James played into it on purpose. His eyes gave him away with that. He had that same devious sparkle his brother would get whenever he was up to no good.

The New Children's Museum was definitely a great choice as it turned out. The men, of course, acted like grown man-children at times. Especially when the little group discovered the climbing walls. Even Elise couldn't resist. But mostly, the focus stayed on Chloé. So many different sensations. Sand and water boxes. Bubble stations. Indoor/outdoor playgrounds. Of course, she didn't understand everything but it was interesting watching her react. Oscar took quite a few pictures of Berenjena Pequeñita and her aunt that afternoon. Elise took quite a few pictures, too. A review of the last snapshot had her stop abruptly.

"Tina. Are you ok?" Elise dashed for her sister when she saw that Christine was about to keel over. Color drained from her face while she held her upper stomach. "My stomach. --- I need to sit down a few minutes," Christine breathed. "Morning sickness?" Elise worried. "Yes. I'll be ok. Just give me a few minutes," Christine breathed. She tried to get up but nearly fainted again.

"No! You need to go back to the hotel," Elise stated bluntly. No time to be nice. She peered around to see where Oscar and James were, the two preoccupied helping an excited Chloé hold on to a bubble wand. Elise didn't want to yell and draw attention, so she texted them instead. James immediately dashed over. Oscar followed slowly as he was holding his goddaughter.

"What's wrong?" James asked with a low voice, eyes very worried though. "Just morning sickness, Hon." Christine held her stomach, looking more and more like she was about to actually hurl. James carefully picked her up. "Nearest restroom?" he asked one of the volunteers who worked at the museum. The woman just pointed.

It was almost closing time when Christine and James finally emerged from the front lobby restroom. Christine looked even paler. She'd clearly gotten sick. At least she was walking. Still, she looked extremely weak. A different volunteer brought her a bottle of water. She only took a few sips before her face contorted again.

"We're heading back to the hotel. I called a cab, so they should be here soon." James heaved his
"Shouldn't she go to a hospital?" Elise whispered into James' ear.
"Sis. It's only morning sickness. Maybe travel exhaustion. I just really need some rest," Christine answered instead. She had overheard the whispered concern.
"Ok, but maybe you need an IV or something. Or that NG tube. Like last time," Elise persisted.
"Just water. And rest. And maybe some bland food," Christine chuckled weakly.
"You're so stubborn, you know that." Elise furrowed her brows, her voice spiked with anger.
"Look who's talking. Weren't you the one who insisted on finishing a 5k with a twisted ankle," Christine argued back.
"That's different. This is different. You've got a tiny bean in there." Elise pointed to her sister's tummy.
"Who gave the baby that nickname?" Christine squinted.
"James!" Elise and Oscar replied in unison.

"She'll be ok," James assured when he realized his wife wasn't going to give in to pleas. "I promise. She only got sick. No cramps. Or things like that," he whispered into Elise's ear. "I promise," he repeated. Elise shook her head with a heaved breath.
"Ok. Let us at least take Chloé for the rest of the afternoon. So you can get some actual rest," Elise pushed on. She looked at Oscar, a pleading gaze in her eyes. She knew, of course, she should've asked him first if he was ok with it. But in that moment she didn't care.

"We don't mind watching her. Isn't that right Berenjena Pequeñita." Oscar teased his goddaughter's nose with his. Christine tried to protest. Her argument that she didn't want this to interfere with their afternoon. Like that was somehow a problem right now.
"We don't mind. Please, Tina. Please?" Elise remained adamant in tone. She was as stubborn as Christine. A common trait that could draw out arguments forever. Circles of "I won't" and "I will not either". Elise had already budged not insisting her sister go to the hospital. She wasn't giving way a second time. That much she knew.

"Sweetheart, I don't want to take sides, but Liz is right. Let them take Chloé, hm? Besides, Oscar is around, too. You really need to rest," James persuaded now. He knew this type of standoff wouldn't help anyone, least of all his wife. It was a heavy sighed agreement, but Christine finally caved.
"Call me right away if...," Elise started.
"I promise. She just needs to rest some. And eat. If you guys could maybe pick up some rice cakes, crackers, and maybe some bananas on the way back," James requested. Elise mouthed an ok.

She looked after the cab. The hotel was less than a five-minute ride away but there was no way Christine would've been able to walk. Elise stared a few seconds longer. The cab was long out of sight. Then she felt a light squeeze against her hand.
"She'll be ok," Oscar assured with a kiss into her hair.
"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push this on you," she frowned while looking down on Chloé in the stroller. The baby seemed blissfully oblivious; entertained by the dinosaur rattle attached to the stroller's cross guard.

"I don't mind." Oscar lifted her head by her chin. "I know you're worried, Sweetie. But she'll be ok. Hmmm?" He ran his thumb over her lips.
"This might be good training," Elise twisted her lips into a thin smile.
"How do you mean?" Oscar asked with some confusion.
"Parenting, I mean." Elise offered that answer very slowly. Very carefully.
"I think so, too." Oscar squeezed her hand again; his eyes crinkling upward at the corners. "So? --- Where to, mis Reinas?"
"We can go back to the hotel," Elise suggested. "So you can mope? Or be closer to your sister?" Oscar was blunt this time. No sorry followed. "I'm telling you, she'll be ok. Out of all people, you should know that James would never let anything happen to your sister. Chloé doesn't need that type of worry, either," he directed tough love. He shifted closer. "I'm telling you. Your sister is tough as nails. Like you."

Elise chuckled at that statement. "It is a nice day, isn't it?" She looked around. "It sure is," Oscar smiled a kiss against her temple.

After some back forth, they decided to check out Little Italy. Food the driving force behind that choice. It was walking and eating at the same time while checking out shops up and down India Street; the main artery of Little Italy.

At some point, they came across a small but lush, and somewhat hidden, park where some older gentlemen played bocce [ball]. It was perfect for a short break from walking so much. They sat for a while, watching teams take turns. Passionate arguments were cause for muted laughter a few times over. More from Elise really than Oscar.

"What are they saying?" Oscar asked, a little bewildered at another argument ensuing. Most of the conversations the men held were in Italian; a few English words thrown in now and then the only reminder that they were still in the U.S.

"They're calling each other out. Stepping over the line is a no-no," Elise whispered. "Now they're talking about their parents and something about the war. That their parents would be ashamed because that's not what they came to America for. To cheat and argue, I'm assuming," she snickered when the men hugged. Truce came as fast as the argument had started.

"That's like my family. They argue. A lot. And then they do that. The hugging thing. How much you wanna bet they'll be having a beer later on just to argue some more and hug some more?" Oscar smirked. Elise just hummed out a smile. He was probably right.

They continued to watch. The sun slowly disappearing over the edges of the high rises behind them. Elise was rocking Chloé on her lap while Oscar fed baby some tiny, mashed up pieces of banana when one of the men walked over and asked if Oscar could join his team. Something about only having three players left as one had to leave, and they needed four to finish the last game.

"Do I look that old?" Oscar curled his lip. He had agreed of course because he was nice like that. Elise couldn't help but giggle at that question. "It's all that salt growing in," she jested while running her free hand over the sides of his undercut.

"Thanks, Sweetie," Oscar scrunched up his nose with some annoyance. "I like it." She chanced a quick peck on his cheek. "A lot!" She winked. "Now go. And make sure you win. Nothing more embarrassing than losing to a bunch of grandpas," she laughed.

Oscar jogged over, listening to the men explain the rules. The game itself was simple enough. Toss out a white ball into the sectioned off court, then toss larger ones as closely as possible for the win. The placement of the jack [the small ball] was a bit confusing to Oscar. He had to repeat a couple of times, not getting why his toss didn't count. The men just stared at him when he tried one last time, yelling out a "finally" when he tossed into the correct zone.

Elise moved a little closer to see if he was doing ok, snickering at his first bowled bocce, which ended three feet before the jack. "Pitiful." She raised her brow, trying her best to suppress another laugh.

"I dare you to do better." Oscar squinted.

"No, thank you. I remember this game whenever I went to Italy. I rather not get into an argument.
Regardless if it's passionate or not," she laughed.

"Sei stato in Italia?" one of the men asked.
"Sì. Tanto tempo fa," she replied like it was second nature to just slip into Italian.
"Quindi, voi due siete sposati? Il tuo bambina?" someone else in the group asked.
Elise laughed. "No. Questa è mia nipote. È il mio ragazzo," Elise smiled, perking her brow at Oscar. There was a unified "ahhhhhhh" going around while they looked him over.

"E? Il matrimonio presto?" The first man asked.
"I understood that," Oscar blurted out.
"Ah. So he speaks some Italian."
"No. Spanish. But matrimonio is pretty universal." Oscar drew his lips into a thin line. His eyes were wide, though. Elise couldn't quite gauge that expression. Something between "oh shit, I've been caught" and "fuck, I have been thinking about it".

"Well, you'd be a fool not to ask her, eh?" The first man smiled, and Oscar blushed. A rarity.
"Ok. We finish the game, and then we go drink a beer," the second man stated. It wasn't even a question. Not a demand either, though. Just a plain statement of that's what's going to happen so deal with it.
"Oh... We couldn't. We don't want to impose," Elise gently protested.
"If we thought that, we'd not invite you along. Eh. Come, drink. And you tell us all about your trip to Italia. And he will tell us why he has not asked you to marry him. And then we'll judge him for being a fool." The group waited.
Elise couldn't help but laugh. Only people who've lived a long life would be this forward. Absolutely no sugar coating.

She looked to Oscar.
"We'll go if you want to," he wrinkled his nose. Elise nodded. "And only if she can keep up," he looked at Chloé.
"Ah. She'll be fine. Americans coddle too much. But if you're worried she'll get cold, my wife has a blanket at the restaurant. And I'm sure we can cook something up for Bambina Piccola."

They quickly finished the game as the sun was almost set. Surprisingly, Oscar's team won. Elise had a feeling they let him win. Just to be kind.

The restaurant mentioned was small with a rustic feel and welcoming atmosphere and belonged to the three men who'd //invited// them along. Technically to the man who'd first spoken to Elise, as they'd explained on the way there. But the three had been friends for so many years, that friendship and work transcended and they ran the restaurant together while also hanging out together.

"So, I take it you're Toni?" Elise asked upon seeing the sign.
"Ah. Si. Sorry. Actually, it's Anthony, but Toni is what my mother called me," he smiled. "Look, here we go. A blanket for Bambina Piccola. And some fresh apple sauce. I hope this is soft enough. You have a bottle that needs warming up?" Toni asked. Elise looked through the bag, handing over a bottle filled with formula, and Toni rushed to warm it up.

They sat there, quite late into the evening. Talking about visits to Italy, a few jokes that Oscar should take her to Cinque Terre to get married there; the conversations also going back and forth to where everyone was from. Joe came up as well. The questions led that way at one point. He'd been the reason she'd been to Italy, after all. They offered a minute of silence and then a toast. But they didn't linger. Which Elise was grateful for. Toni's wife swerved in and out of the group, serving the food at some point, and insisting on holding Chloé while everyone ate.
It was a family setting. Warm. All first name basis with patrons. Lovely really. Oscar definitely enjoyed himself; keen on the fact that no one recognized him. Even better when the men seemed unimpressed that he was an actor. They were old-school it turned out. Talking about when Sinatra, Astaire, and Kelley were movie stars. Sophia Loren came up, too. An icy glare from Toni's wife at all the men, and a few tugged ears, shut up their juvenile behavior real fast.

"You don't ever compare another woman to the love of your life," Toni's wife directed at Oscar, then winked at Elise. He just gulped, eyes wide. He knew that of course. But Toni's wife had an authority to herself that was a little fear-inducing. Elise, on the other hand, thought it funny.

"You could almost pass as Italian," Toni threw out after they'd finished dinner. "Toni!" his wife disapproved. "I apologize, Oscar. He's rude like that sometimes." Oscar shrugged it off with a laugh. He didn't take offense. Blunt honesty was something he was accustomed to from his own family, and if they'd been here, they'd talk exactly like that.

He looked over to Elise who was once again holding Chloé. Berenjena Pequeñita was lulling off despite all the banter and laughter around her. Oscar must've stared for a while because next thing he knew, Toni was breathing "that's true love" into his ear. "I've got a feeling about you two," he continued, leaning in even closer while wrapping his arm around Oscar. "And it ends with a ring on her finger, and a bambina of your own. Or a bambino," Toni grinned. That last beer was clearly one too many. A cue to call it a night. Not that they had much choice. Toni's wife ordered it. So they made it so.

A short cab ride later, an even shorter elevator ride tacked on, and the three stood in front of James' and Christine's hotel room. Elise had called ahead to let James know that they were on their way. So it only took a faint tap to let him know they were here.

"Hey. Almost thought you guys were kidnapped by some fans or something," James smiled. "No. We went to Little Italy. Hung out at a small family restaurant," Elise whispered, craning her neck to look into the room to see if her sister was awake. "Is she sleeping?"

"Yes. She's been up a few times. But I made sure she got lots of rest. And food," James confirmed with a low voice.

"Crap, I forgot to pick up crackers," Elise cringed.

"Don't worry. I had Lenny pick something up. I figured you guys might forget when you didn't text by dinner time," James smirked.

"Did she eat, though?"

"Yes. Even kept it down."

"Ok. --- I'll be over tomorrow morning. Ten ok?"

"Perfect."

"And I'll bring food."

"Ok. Thank you. For watching Chloé. Looks like she's tuckered out, huh?" James laughed quietly when he saw his daughter snoozing like she'd been busy all day.

"If you need help, again. We'll be here," Oscar smiled. He didn't think twice to offer. Elise felt a tingling sensation crawl up her stomach when he said we. It was in the way he'd said that short, two letter word. She had noted that earlier, too. At the museum. And at the park. We. As in couple we. As in tackle things together we. It had her smile all the way to their hotel. And up the short elevator ride. And to their room.

"I love you," she said softly while he opened the door.

"I know. I love you, too," he replied just as softly.
They paused before stepping into their room. A short pause of soft gazes into each other's eyes.

There was a question on his lips. She could see it forming at the corner of his mouth, curving into that first letter. But she put her index on his mouth. Stopping him.

"I'm not going to say no. But I'm not going to say yes, yet, either." He leaned a kiss on her forehead, then rested his own against hers. "I knew you were going to say that," he chuckled. "So, I'll ask this instead. For now." He closed his eyes for a second, taking a deep breath. The kind that one needed for that extra bit of courage when asking something big.
Chapter 17

She quietly rolled out of his arm to her back. Eyes closed. Breathing soft and even. He rolled to his left and profiled her edges with a lingering gaze. A chuckle caught in his throat. She laid there, top sheet draped loosely across her stomach, breasts exposed. Her left arm pulled over tangled tresses, her right over to where the edge of the sheet had stopped. Her skin looked soothingly warm and soft with gradients sprawling from tan to pale where fabric usually blocked rays. There was tranquility across her face. A few smiles and inaudible gasps. Her mind definitely still caught up in some sweet dream.

The rising sun was a lovely addition to the serenity of it all. Kaleidoscope of stained glass reflections and shadow play scattered across warm skin. Mostly hers for now. How much he loved that she had opted against wearing clothes to bed in that very moment. The temptation to skim her was great. He debated internally. Touch or not to touch. Maybe brush the curve of her breasts. Maybe dance fingertips across her collarbone. There was beauty in the simplicity of a feather-light touch. Just a feel. Just to see what would happen. Temptation was great indeed. But restraint won this round. Watching her sleep like that - blissfully unaware of him watching - was just as satisfying. Mornings like this: utter perfection.

A stream of cold air started from the AC duct above their bed. Tightened buds and goosebumps were the effects. A shiver too. The sudden burst was disliked and she rolled to her left, pulling the top sheet over her shoulder in the process. Tangled hair the only thing that stuck out from under the sheet. He didn't like that at all. The tiny gap from before now wider. Radiating heat too far for his comfort.

He snaked his right arm under the sheet, edged closer to her, and when he found her waist, he pulled her towards himself, spooning her while leaving a trail of tiny wet kisses on her right shoulder. A heaved breath from her. A muted chuckle. A soft gasp.
"You awake, mi Linda?" he whispered, his nose resting on the bend of her shoulder and taking in her scent. Faded strawberry-coconut delight with hint of French vanilla and lavender mixed with her own fragrance. Morning scents and morning warmth always were his favorite thing. Hers, too.

She drew in a breath. And another. And one more, whispering out a "barely" with a smile when his scent wrapped around her nose. Faint traces of forest after the rain with a hint of spice intertwined with specks of musky salt and sugar. The latter his own scent. She could never get enough. So she drew in another breath. A stifled gasp with clenched fingers to the top sheet followed that. And a barely audible "god, fuck." He'd squeezed his right hand between her thighs from the back, bringing his hand close enough so his fingertips could tease her slit. A soft gasp fell from his lips when he felt some wetness already edging out.

"Hmmm... warm --- and wet." He curled his lips against her shoulder. "What were you dreaming about?"

She rolled to her stomach and lazily folded her arms below her head, her face pointing towards him, but eyes still closed. "Our weekend getaway at the cabin," she whispered while she angled her right leg to the side, granting him better access that way. Of course, he didn't turn that chance down. Fingertips dipped into her folds. Parting and rolling between edges. He knew how to tug and pinch just enough to make her twitch but not cause pain.

He watched her from the side for a few minutes. Smiled gasps the sweetest response he could ask for. But he wanted more. Feel more. Hear more. See more. Smell more. Taste more.
Tiny pecks over her shoulders turned into circled tongue kisses over the width of her shoulders. The noises his kisses made whenever he pulled away a soothing sound in her ears. Like tiny, wet clicks whenever the sucked in bond broke. Always followed by a soft inhale and exhale onto her skin. It had her nerves tingling for more. And she hinted with shifting her body a little closer to his.

He draped his right leg over her left, pulling her leg towards him, spreading her a little more that way. Hardness pressed against the back of her thigh when he did that. It made her snicker.
"I heard that," he chuckled a kiss behind her ear before he dipped his nose into her hair, parting strands in his search for the back of her neck.
"Feels like I'm not the only one ready," she bit her lip.
"Never said, I wasn't ready," he moved back up and nipped her lobe.
Another shocked gasp followed. He'd slipped his right ring and middle fingers into her folds and gently massaged against tensing walls. Morning tiredness clung on, though. She reciprocated with gentle hip circles only, the rest of her body still somewhat numb with sleep. At least gasps increased. A few vocal moans dripped here and there. Approving hums and whispered "yes'es" letting him know he was hitting the right spots.

He pulled his whole body on top of hers. Dense heaviness sinking onto her for just a moment before he shifted his weight to legs and elbows. His legs between hers, his arms to her side he kissed slowly down her spine. Open-mouthed kisses. Tasting her with his tongue type of kisses. Slow, savoring, sucking-in-skin kind of kisses. All the way to the small of her back. Always ending each kiss with a pressure releasing pop. Always following that with a soft exhale onto her skin.

He settled his lips and nose in the dip of her back, just breathing her in with closed eyes. He could stay there all day. Like that. Just rubbing up and down the sides of her body while inhaling her scent and listening to her soft moans. It was intoxicating to him. To stimulate her senses stimulated his own.

He pushed his weight up to his knees and tucked on her hips to lift her ass towards himself. She left her upper body pressed against the mattress, only her ass lifted while her legs angled wide to the sides; back of her thighs resting lightly on calves, shins on mattress. The lift was just enough so she could feel the tip of his cock dip into her folds. Such a tease, really. That feeling of him edging in, his tip parting her folds, just for him to retreat.

She always loved the anticipation of his width and length. Sometimes, though, he taunted too much. A frustrated call of his name made him laugh. But he couldn't help himself. He loved the work up to that first tight feel. Watching how her folds twitched while they took on deeper hues of pink and started seeping with wetness greedy for him was as rewarding as that first push. Not like she never teased. Today was his turn, though.

He ran his hands up and down her spine, waiting for the unspoken signal that she really wanted more. Her cussing his name clearly wasn't enough. She bucked back, less than an inch, and he pressed in. Languidly. Inch --- by --- inch. So slow, she felt her insides hug around every imperfection and protrusion. The rim at the end of the head of his cock. Those two veins running down his shaft. One thicker than the other.

All of it not really imperfections to her. She loved the added texture. The added friction. Edges that stroked every, sensitive nerve. Especially whenever he moved this slow. She hid her face on the mattress for a second, a long sigh dripping into the fabric of the fitted sheet when he pulled almost all the way out only to lazily squeeze all the way back in. Unhurried withdrawal, even more unhurried expansion. He dared a laugh at her trembling reaction.
Stroked nerves had her yearning though. She started to speed up her own movement only to meet a firm grasp on her hips slowing her down. He dropped his chest to her back, his lips close to her left ear. A light growl when his skin met hers. "Not so fast, mi Reina. Nice and slow." His words reverberated sinfully deep off her skin. She could feel her heart rate nearly double at the sound of those words. He took notice. The vein on her neck gave it away. He had his reasons to want to go slow this morning. He knelt back up, flat palms up and down her spine as he pushed and pulled even slower; so slowly it qualified as torture in her mind. She couldn't help but sneak her right hand to her clit, adding stimuli, synchronizing with his pace for now.

"I love it when you touch yourself," he smirked. Did she really think, he'd not notice? She didn't care. More even, slow massages up and down her back. His thumbs tracked over every vertebra. She could feel how his digit lifted over each section. Up and down, his hands finally came to a rest on the curve of her ass. He squeezed each cheek a few times. Just gentle grasps that made her giggle. Now and then, she felt the edges of his nails dig into the soft flesh. Stinging bursts that made her hiss in a breath or two. He knew she liked that now and then. That cusp between pleasure and pain. And he liked the marks he left behind. Her skin was already flushed, but those little, deeper hued additions were like temporary paintings revealing how far she was willing to let him go.

He kept a close eye on her. Her head and upper body still rested on the mattress with her face to the left. Her eyes remained closed while she enjoyed the sensations he provided. Her left arm was angled next to her face; her right hand still working her clit. There was complete relaxation that fell into a smooth back and forth motion mostly guided by his determination to keep it slow.

He ran his left palm up her spine to her left shoulder and latched on. His left thumb pressing small circles into her skin. His right hand rubbed over her ass. Slowly. Gently. He started teasing down the line that led between. His right index sliding over that circle of nerves he'd not dared to touch before. He watched her face. Close attention to any small change. Her eyes still closed. Her mouth slightly ajar. Tiny, breathed moans trickled out.

And then ---a stifled gasp. Her movement stopped, her eyes opened. She held her breath. The tip of his index had found its way in. Just the tip. The pressure wasn't entirely new to her. It had been a long time, however. She bit her lip. She ought to have known he was going there. She shuddered at a renewed burst of cool air from the AC duct above the bed. Goosebumps now all over her body. All her nerves were on edge now. All. Of. Them.

"You want me to stop?" he asked softly. He had ceased all his movements as well. He waited. Gaze fixed on her face. Languid opening and closing of her eyes. She shook her head no and closed her eyes, again. A long breath, then she started moving again. A few whimpered moans as she adjusted to the added stimulation. Some of the moans he had not heard before. They had him drop his chest back down to her. "You sure?" he repeated.
"I'm sure. Just a bit chilly," she whisper-replied with a chuckle.

He knelt back up, his gaze dropping to where he could see everything. To how her folds stretched over his cock to how his index teased the other opening. He glimpsed her right hand now and then, too. He wanted to keep watching. He'd never seen her this exposed. Not in this kind of lighting at least. To him, this was the embodiment of sensual and sexy. Her body shivered again, so he decided to draw the top sheet over her. Give her back some of that morning warmth the AC had taken away.

He kept his movement gentle. Deliberately so. His gaze tracked back to her face. Smiled pleasure
greeted him. Who could blame her? She could feel a slow build up from several places. Tightening ropes from several directions. Tearing strands. She reached for the pillow to the left of her face, wanting to bring it close to mute increased moans. But he stopped her. He leaned back down, kissed behind her left lobe while he pushed the pillow out of her reach. "No hiding, mi Reina. Let - it - out. ---- Be loud! --- Moan!" His own breathing picking up in pace with those words. Roused nerves three ways. She couldn't help to quicken the pace even more. This time, no slowing her down on his part, especially when her moans went from timid breaths to louder but whimpered cries of pleasure.

He knelt back up and let her take charge of how fast, how deep, and how hard. If he had to compare it to speed of music, he'd probably say that she went from largo to andante. Maybe a little faster. Andantino came to his mind.

"Fuck. Liz. I wish you could --- oh, fuck..." His head fell back for a second. She'd squeezed her inner muscles around him so hard, he almost lost it. He dropped back down, his left hand searching for her left hand. He found it, wedging his fingers between hers. He dropped his head to her left shoulder. Her name was all he managed before he bit into tensed muscle, sucking in her skin so hard it made her wince out a hollow gasp. That would leave a more permanent mark for sure. "Almost --- there. Just- --," she bit her lower lip and pushed back faster and harder. "Oh god --- fuck... Isaac," she held her breath. So did he.


"You ok?" He carefully pulled out. The hand that had teased her ass rested on her left thigh after he slid off to her left side. He cradled his head on his propped up left hand and just smiled down on her, enjoying the view. Her body the most flushed he'd ever seen. Blotches of red painted across her face. Breathing still a little shaky. Hairline damp from beginning sweat. Had he gone longer, her whole body would likely be covered in a glistening sheet.

"Yes. Just. --- Wow," she breathed with closed eyes. He wheezed a chuckle onto her left shoulder, then nipped her skin. She slowly opened her eyes; her grays tracking to his deep caramel browns. He shifted his body a little closer. His face became enveloped by a streak of light falling through a crevice in the headboard. He squinted at the brightness. For a moment, it looked like there was gold hidden behind his dark lashes. Honey gold, with his pupils contracted to tiny specks of black. She smiled.

"I love the way you make love to me," she whispered, closing her eyes again, that smile spreading to the rest of her face.
"You do? I'm glad." His voice as quiet as hers.
"Hmmmm. So much passion. I love it. But you know...," she paused, fluttering her eyes open, her smile waning just a little. "You don't always have to get me there."
"But I love getting you there," he chuckled. A raised brow hinted at surprise.
"I know. But sometimes, the feeling of you inside of me. Sometimes, that's all I need." She bit her lower lip. Her cheeks flushed to a deeper shade of red. Like added hue to the remainder of lazy, morning sex.

"I have to remember that," he smiled. "Let's go take a shower." He kissed her nose.
"Go start the water, I'll be there in a few." She dropped her forehead to her folded arms.
"You sure, you're ok, mi Linda?" he asked again. Furrowed brows a sign of concern.
"Yes. I just really need to let this orgasm fade out."
"Oh? What? --- Wait? --- You're still. --- ohhh!" His voice went up in pitch. He laughed. He seemed impressed with himself. Cocky attitude was met by her blindly launching a pillow at his
face. He laughed again, then took off to the bathroom.

It took him a few tries to figure out the shower. Three separate levers to three different showerheads. One to the overhead rainfall, one to the off the wall waterfall, one to the regular nozzle. He felt like some experimenting scientist for sure. This was luxury and he was appreciative but he couldn't help but smirk at the fanciness of it all. He preferred simplicity. Or maybe just his own shower, where he knew for sure that if he turned it past seven, he'd get scorched, but less than six and he'd freeze. Showers were fickle like that. Even the grandest of them as it turned out.

His preoccupation with figuring out temperature temperament was amusing to Elise. She'd followed him a couple of minutes after he'd taken off, and was now watching him twitch and flinch at water hitting his skin. She probably could've watched him like that all day. But he caught her of course. Squinting through the glass door at her palm hidden laugh.

"The things I endure for you." His lip curled, half sulking, half smiling when he opened the door for her. She didn't let up with her laugh. His water soaked curls falling out of place added to a pretended puppy-eyed sulk she thought funny. 
"This feels nice," she sighed once she felt the water hit her skin. He'd chosen the rainfall option. Warm rainfall. Like a midsummer shower.

It felt appropriate since morning laziness was still prominent in all their movements and actions. Instead of a mattress and soft sheets, warm beads of water lulled them into a trance. He teased soft kisses onto her neck, gliding hands up and down her back while she started soaping up their bodies; only washing away their sensual morning scents, but not the sensual feeling that came with this type of shower. Nothing else mattered for now anyways. Two lovers lost in their own little world.

At some point, she turned around and waited for him to wash her back. And he did. At first. But gliding, soapy massages turned into gentle kisses across her shoulders while his hands dropped to her sides. Cleansing of bodies was quickly forgotten when his right hand found its way back between her thighs from behind.

"You do that, you better make sure you finish," she gasped while leaning forward. Elbows against the marble wall, her legs spreading apart was almost automatic. Him already slipping his right middle and ring fingers inside, too.
"I thought you said, I don't always have to get you there," he smirked onto her spine.
"Today, you do," she gasped, again. Her right hand dropped to her front, her index and middle finger circling her clit.
"So greedy," he laughed when he felt her fingertips brush against his immersed fingers now and then.
"You started it." She bucked her hips back. A way to beg for him to move deeper.
"And how do you want to finish?" he asked, nipping her skin. She looked over her left shoulder, back at him. A stare he dubbed sultry frustration because he had a hunch at what she wanted and she knew that he knew.
"Like you did earlier," she breathed heavily. He bit into her left shoulder with closed eyes, rumbling a moan onto her skin. That's exactly what he'd hoped she'd say.

She turned her head right this time, resting it on her angled, left arm against cold marble. A fogged up reflection in the mirror opposite the shower had her hitch a breath. In a fuzzy outline, she saw him finger fuck her while he stroked himself with his free hand, his head resting between her shoulders. It didn't take him long to get hard again. Her willingness for more play between her ass was a turn on for him.
He pressed his cock into her folds, this time his thumb slipping into the circle between her cheeks. Her legs trembled a bit. He'd dared more than the tip.
"If I had known you like this so much, I'd have done this way sooner," he husked out with a heavy breath. She just hummed, pushing backward into him. She desperately wanted to hold something. Clench her left fingers around some inanimate object. The shower offered no such thing. Why the fuck wasn't there a damn handle in this shower?

She reached her left arm up and behind, searching for his curls. She tugged hard and he groaned in response. He reached his left arm around to her breasts, twisting her nipples, flicking at the tender collection of nerves. She moaned out a "harder", and when he asked "what" and "where", she almost screamed out the "everything".

He squeezed his left arm around her stomach to pull her back to his chest, helping her to keep balance. Closed eyed bites. Hard thrusts. Rumbled moans. She came before him this time, catching her upper body on angled elbows against hard marble. His moans went from hollowed to despaired. Hard, trembled thrust. Filling pressure replaced by filling warmth. He rested his forehead on the back of her neck for a few seconds, his gaze falling to her folds when he pulled out. He watched his cum drip out of her. Tiny, milky beads rolling down slowly on the inside and back of her thighs before washing away down the drain.

He moved into a soft embrace from behind, kissing her shoulders. Left to right and back. "Pffffffffuck...," he hissed softly, then laughed. She laughed and turned in his embrace, teasing his drenched curls when he met her with a heavy-lidded but smiled gaze. Sounds of soft kisses mixed with sounds of rainfall. So soothing. So tranquil. So sensual.

Edges of lips against edges of lips. Teasing tongues. Shared breaths. Shared sighs. Shared relaxation. Until a loud, rasped moan cut through. This time it was him who was surprised. She smirked a devious smirk. Triumphant, really. Her right hand had slipped to his front and wrapped around his cock. Firm but gentle strokes left him with blurred vision for a second.

"You are very greedy, today," he chuckled.
"Is that a problem?" She raised her brow with a mischievous grin in tow.
"No... I won't last long a third time, though." He softly lifted his brow, a mischievous smile spreading across his face a second after.
"I don't need you to." She ran her tongue over the back of her teeth. His cocky expression faltered to a "god, fuck" stare. She hummed, biting her lips. Exactly the reaction she'd aimed for.

He debated if he should protest her willingness to go down on him like it was some kind of repayment; but before he could do so, she'd already kissed down the center of his chest; dropping to her knees while kissing down his abs. He hitched a breath when he felt her lips kiss the tip. Soft, languid kisses while she skimmed the shallow grooves between hips and legs with her fingertips, the grooves that had shaped to a perfect V since he'd started working out more. The touch was so light that it made him twitch. She couldn't help a laugh at that reaction. She kissed a few more times, her fingertips brushing over the grooves to his cock, tenuously teasing his balls in the process. Just gentle back and forth to lure out her own favorite moans from him.

"Hhhhhhhhhhh... Liz." He gulped. He looked down, mouth agape, vision out of focus for a moment. She'd taken him into her mouth, her lips stretching a little more as he stiffened up for a third time. She looked up, a devilish flicker when her grays met his deep caramels. She didn't steer away either. "Oh... Fffuuuccc... ¡Dios mío!" he gasped. Damn her sexual confidence in that very moment. What happened to sweet "don't look at me while I'm giving you a blowjob" innocence?
She added her right hand. Gentle strokes, gentle sucks, her tongue always circling that spot at the back of the tip. He moaned, his eyes rolling into the back of his head while he weaved his hands into her hair. Tangled, wet mess. His fingers flexed against the back of her head. His way of begging to pick up the pace. So she did. Faster. And faster. Flexing muscles, fast, heavy breathing a sign that he was getting close. He pushed a breath through his nose, pressing his lips to a thin line, letting out a loud moan when he let go. It took a few seconds for him to catch his breath.

He looked down and was met with a lip-bitten smile. She kissed the tip again, then pulled herself to a stand. A tilted smile, she glanced down on her breasts. His gaze followed suit. "Sexy," he smirked while watching the water wash away what he'd left behind. She heaved her chest, closing the gap between them while loosely hanging her arms around his neck. More soft kisses. More gentle massages. A few laughs about how they'd had enough to last the whole week while they finally rinsed off.

"Remind me to send my trainer a thank you note," he jested while drying himself off. "You and me both," she agreed with a laugh when she wrapped a towel around herself. "Aha! So you do like it when I work out more." He raised a brow. "I like the benefit of more stamina," she grinned. "But I can live with less. Not the end of the world," she shrugged. "Really?"

"Hmmm hmm... I like sex. And I love making love. But like I said, it's not always about getting me there, or how long it lasts. Even if it's tender and languid, like earlier. It's also not about how often. I can go weeks without any release and I'm just as ok." "That's good to know, cause I'm sure I have nothing else left to give this week," he laughed. "Ass!" She pushed back at his chest and walked out of the bathroom.

"I'm kidding. Sweetie. Wait." He dashed after her. She yelled out a laughed "no" and threw her towel at him, turning on her heel to grab her clothes from the chair next to the bed. He was faster though, catching the towel, then capturing her in a tight embrace from behind while tumbling onto the bed. "I was kidding," he trapped her below his body, then kissed her nose. "I know what you meant, mi Reina." He caressed her face. "As long as there's cuddling and soft kisses," he paused and she nodded. "I can't wait to have that every day. With you. I love you so much. So much." He leaned a kiss on her lips. "I can't wait either," she smiled, teasing her index down his nose to his lips. "Let's eat breakfast. And then we have to go see your sister. Remember," he smiled. "Yup," she scrunched her nose.

He ordered while she got ready. Eggs over easy, bacon, cut up strawberries, extra toast, extra jam, and two strong coffees. A Sunday style breakfast on a Thursday morning. And they both needed it. This time he made sure he wore clothes. His usual choice of dark on dark. He might as well have opened the door in his underwear.

"How many of those shirts do you own?" Elise perked a brow when she saw him wearing the same style shirt he had worn on the plane. Tight hugging and enhancing every line. "A few." "How many is a few?" "Bhhrawsheven..." he mumbled while he set the plates from the food trolley on the table.

She laughed. It sounded like seven. She didn't mind. But she also knew, bright colors looked great on him. If worn in the right combination. His stylist, however, insisted he keep it simple like that.
Polished image thing she knew he left at the door when he wasn't scheduled for interviews or photo shoots. She'd seen pictures of him wearing bright colored tees and shorts. Odd combinations at times. Mike had been gracious enough to send a few when she'd asked if Oscar always dressed so fancy; a note attached explaining "that's the real Oscar, I'll bring other gems to SDCC" with a winky face.

She'd also seen his own style shine through whenever he felt a need to defy image standards. A scarf here, a hat there, shirts that didn't match anything, those damn scuffed-up leather boots she thought he'd traded in for a new pair. Right now she was glad he didn't defy. That shirt just clung in all the right places. Eye candy alert and she loved it. So much so, she didn't even attempt to hide her lingering stare when he spun around to see why she'd gotten so quiet.

"You look cute," he smirked, looking her over. She'd chosen a white button down, dark brown, skinny pants, and combat style boots. A brown, tweed jacket, red suspenders, and a red bow tie a bit out of the norm, he thought at first.
"Thank you," she smirked back.
"Very...," he tilted his head, squinting at the red bow tie around her neck, "Doctor Who?"
"Yup," she giggled.
"Eleven?"
"Right again."
"Doesn't he wear a red hat thingy?"
"A fez? Yeah. I don't have one of those. And even if I did, I would probably not wear it."
"Why?"
"Too much complicated history attached." She shrugged. That was just her opinion.

"You're loving this, don't you?" he grinned.
"I don't get to dress like this often, so yeah. I'm fully embracing this week."
"Do I wanna know what other outfits you'll be nerding out in?" He closed in to pull her towards himself, and he laughed.
"They're all surprises. But, I think you'll love at least one of em," she winked.
"Hmmmm... I see." He teased a kiss on her left brow, chuckling. His nerd. His nerdy little strawberry.

He let go and she finally took a seat by the table, looking over the food with wide eyes. Everything was perfectly displayed. She almost thought it a shame to disturb the butter shaped like music notes. Hunger won though and they started digging in, silently enjoying the food and each other's company.

A string of chimes echoed through the room. Messages for Oscar. He frowned and tried to ignore, but another string of chimes meant he'd better check. So he got up, got his cell, and scrolled through while she continued eating. He remained standing while reading over the messages. Occasionally he snuck a peek at her. She didn't seem offended. She knew that this was part of a week like this.

"Sorry." He sat back down, practically inhaling his portion of eggs.
"Everything ok?" She took a sip from her coffee.
"Yes. Just interview reminders. Schedule changes. Showbiz stuff," he smiled, the sorry remaining glued to the corners of his eyes.
"Don't worry. I know you'll be busy. You're still free today, right?" She paused a nibble on some bacon.
"I am. That I made sure of." The corners of his eyes lifted.
"Good. Almost thought I got the costume for nothing." A toothy grin spread across her face.
Oscar's expression changed to a wide-eyed gape. He was hoping she'd forgotten. Then again, she seemed a forgive but never forget kind of person. 

"Let me double check to see if...," he scurried through his messages. "Don't bother." She got up. "I already asked James. And Lenny." She paced to his chair. "You're 100% mine today." She pressed a devilish, smiled kiss on his temple, then took off to the bedroom. "At least let me know what it is," he called after her. "You'll find out soon enough," she laughed.

She returned five minutes later with a backpack in the style of the T.A.R.D.I.S. slung over her shoulder, her eyes on her watch. "Geez, when did we wake up?" she perked a brow, surprised it was only 9 a.m. "Pretty early," Oscar smirked. He pulled himself off his chair and ambled towards her to place a kiss on her hair. "Well. We might as well get going. I promised, I'd pick up some food. I saw a market right around the corner. You don't mind, do you? I can go by myself..." She checked her backpack to make sure she had her wallet.

He just pulled her closer, hugging her tightly against his body. It made her halt her search. A stuck in time moment. A calm second before they'd tackle the next few days. Together today and Sunday, but most of Friday and Saturday separated as his obligations cut into shared time. The latter worried him. Not so much about her being bored. He knew she wouldn't be. Ton of stuff to do at such things. But he knew a slew of photographers would be around, and if the airport was any indication, at least one or two might recognize her. And since she didn't want to hide backstage, she'd likely have a few brazen encounters. He preferred if she wasn't hounded. Especially if he wasn't around to skillfully distract. Or her brother-in-law or Lenny. He exhaled sharply and let go of her.

"You'll probably forget that I am here," he joked to pull himself out of those thoughts. "Probably. Especially since I just found out that some of the Games of Thrones cast will be here," she smiled, zipping up the T.A.R.D.I.S. backpack. "That's a pretty gruesome show. I'm --- I'm surprised you watch that." He raised his left brow. "Sporadically since I got back. Still so much to catch up on. I do like the ladies though. I mean, Brienne kicks ass. I wonder if Gwen is here. It'd be awesome to ask her for a picture." She squinted, thinking. "Really?" Oscar gulped. Biting tongue. "Who told you anyways?"

"Sophie texted me."

"Really?" Oscar cussed internally. His co-stars knew to keep mum about certain events this week. So far they'd kept up with his plan. Just one more day. He crossed his fingers that nothing else might tip her off or send her searching for clues.

"Hmmmm. Olivia texted too. She wanted to know if we'll have time later. She said she's lonely. I thought some of the cast was supposed to be here already?" Elise geared towards the door. "I think Michael and James have interviews this morning. And Jennifer has a photo shoot," he smiled, looking after his companion.

There it went. The calm. It slowly subsided as craziness of the next few days already trickled into their conversations. It was nice though. To see her excited to spend time with his co-stars. Not in a show off way. But in a genuine care how they were doing way which was solidified by the fact that she bought snacks she knew his co-stars liked. And a small bag of Cheetos for him at which
point she jokingly asked if he needed chopsticks with those.

By 10 a.m. they stood in front of James' and Christine's hotel room, a couple of bags in tow. To Elise's surprise, the market sold her sister's favorite brand of zwieback, so she grabbed a couple of boxes along with a load of other bland food she was hoping wouldn't cause upset tummies.

"We're only staying 'til Sunday. You do know that, right?" James chuckled when he opened the door.
"Shut up and let me see my sister." Elise stuffed the bags into James' arms and just walked right in. Oscar gave James a "don't look at me" shrug. Not like either would've been able to stop Elise.

"Hey. How you feelin'?" Elise whispered after she slowly poked her head into the bedroom door.
Christine, on bed, laid on her side, watching over a sleeping Berenjena Pequeñita. She still looked pale, but better than yesterday. A plate with some crumbs and a half-empty tea glass hinted that she'd eaten some food at least.
"Better," Christine whispered back.
Elise tiptoed to the edge of the bed and carefully pulled herself on top, trying her best not cause a big distribution shift in the mattress.

"You ate?"
"I did."
"I found Zwieback."
"Oh? Lovely. Thank you."
"I take it you're staying in today?"
Christine let out a sigh. She played with Chloé's hair, twirling a wispy lock around her index. "I want to go. But I do think it'd be better if I stayed in. One more day of rest. I was mostly tired, yesterday, but the smells sort of made it all worse."
"You get heightened sense of smell during pregnancy?" Elise perplexed.
"Smell, taste, hunger, --- everything. Sex drive goes up too," Christine chuckled weakly.
"That has to be frustrating," Elise smirked.
"It is if you're horny and feeling terribly ill at the same time," Christine laughed. Then her expression fell back to fatigue. She almost dozed off.

Elise gazed back and forth between baby and Christine. The exhaustion hung around. Worry inducing. A few strands of hair fell into Christine's face. Elise reached over and swooped the strands back in place, keeping her hand on her sister's cheek.
"Promise me, you'll be ok. Please?" she asked with a serious tinge.
"Of course. It's really only morning sickness," Christine smiled, still weakly. She looked up, into Elise's eyes. Grays meeting grays. No slivers of green today. Just dull shades revealing long weeks, each for their own reasons. But there was something. Christine saw it. The something hidden in a minuscule lift of Elise's left brow. A thought she didn't want to say out loud. Maybe out of fear that it was the wrong time to speak up. Or maybe to spare feelings. "Why do you ask?" Christine drew in her brows.

Elise inhaled and exhaled. Heavy breath. She leaned over baby, close to Christine's ear, whispering about what Oscar had asked the night before. She leaned back. Twisting her mouth to one side. Like she was trying to hide something else. "You already gave him an answer, didn't you?"
Elise bit her lower lip. "I did."
"Then what's the problem?"
"Nothing. I'm just letting it sink in. I feel like my life is falling apart and falling together at the
same time. It's overwhelming." Elise looked down and skimmed Chloé's fingers.
"Overwhelming is good if it feels right," Christine smiled. Elise agreed with a hum.

"I wonder what they're whispering about." James looked towards the bedroom door. "And what is up with you? You're uncharacteristically quiet," he gared at Oscar.
Oscar just shrugged, sipping on more coffee to disguise his urge to spill the beans. He wanted to tell his friend but Elise had insisted to talk to Christine first. Gauge her sister's reaction. Christine - he was sure - would probably convey the plan to James. Ease him into the fact that things were getting serious enough that if they didn't work out, sides would likely need to be taken. It was funny. Oscar was in theory more terrified of Christine's reaction than James'. But threat of big brother[-in-law] complex was a little more terrifying right now.

"I've known you for four years. I know when you're trying to hide something." James perked a brow. Nothing. Oscar stayed tight-lipped. Quivering tight-lipped, though. "Alright. --- I can take a hint. At least tell me you two aren't fighting."
"We're not," Oscar promised. Soft smile now.
James stared at Oscar for a few seconds, ending the stare off with a squint and a hum. "She's not...you know," he eyed Oscar's stomach.
"No! Dude. Why? Why do you keep bringing that up?" Oscar gaped.
"I don't know. Because you won't shut up about it?" James threw back. "That's right! I know! Your friends ratted you out, man. And so has your brother."
"I'm going to kick his ass tomorrow," Oscar huffed. "And then Fassbender's and McAvoy's," he tacked on.
James laughed. "That, I'd like to see!" he boomed.

"What's so funny?" Christine stepped into the living area to return plate and tea glass. Oscar glanced her up and down, trying to figure out if Elise had told.
"Why are you up? I could've gotten it," James scolded.
"I need to move now and then. Now what's so damn funny." Christine shot her husband a fierce look. He flinched. Oscar laughed.

"Oscar is going to kick ass tomorrow," James divulged with a condescending head wobble.
"Oh yeah?" Christine gave Oscar a doubting, perked brow once-over.
"Why else would you hire someone like me?" James made himself tall.
"You know there are advantages to being small," Oscar raised his brow.
"You might reconsider that statement," James laughed.
"Liz hasn't complained, yet," Christine shrugged when she geared to the mini fridge. "Excuse me?" a unison response shot out from James and Oscar.

"What? You know that women talk. Don't even pretend like you don't." Christine grabbed a bottle of water, winked at Oscar, then disappeared back into the bedroom.
The men just gawked for a few seconds, Oscar still unsure if Elise had told. Then his view shifted to James. Wide eyes, thin lips.
"I don't want to know!" James stated firmly, holding up his hand. "Like --- ever!"
"I hadn't planned on telling anyways." Oscar shook his head.
"Usually you talk, a little. But... Liz," James motioned his head to a warning no. A moment of more wide-eyed stares. Then a heaved groan before they went over tomorrow's schedules. Again.

"Look who is joining us," Elise beamed when she stepped into the living area a little while later with her niece in her arms. Baby looked rested and ready to explore in a purple dress with matching hat and socks.
"You two don't have to keep taking her," James shook his head.
"We don't mind. Unless it's a problem to take her over to the convention center." Elise rocked Chloé. Surprisingly, Berenjena Pequeñita stayed calm in her arms.
"No problem. I just didn't think you two wanted to be caught with a baby," James smirked.
"No one will recognize us anyways. At least not him." Elise gestured with her chin towards Oscar, then winked at her brother-in-law.
"Oh, right. Let me get the thing."

James strolled to the sofa, aiming for a small bag. "I hope it fits. Good thing you're wearing dark jeans. Actually matches this," he tossed a reddish leather jacket at Oscar. And a mask. And a walkman.
"Nice," Oscar grinned.
"If it had been up to me, I'd chosen the ugliest costume I could think of. But Liz insisted on some dignity. You think Chris would be amused?" James lifted a questioning brow.
"He'll ask me to wear this to our movie reunion," Oscar laughed.
"Wait. You know Chris Pratt?" Elise quirked a brow. Why was she surprised? She shouldn't have been. But Oscar was like her in that regard, only ever disclosing names of whom he knew when he deemed it necessary.

"You still haven't caught up with his movies?" James gasped in pretended shock. Elise slumped her shoulders. James had pinpointed that flaw almost too well.
"Awe, Sweetie. It's ok. We'll watch them when you have more time. But yes. I know Chris. We've worked on a movie together. In fact, ---" Oscar paused for a second, then chuckled. "This is going to sound weird, but --- my love interest in that movie. Her name, well the character's name, is Elise."
Elise looked between James and Oscar. Expressions a bit difficult to gauge. "Ok... You're pulling my leg," she doubted at the steady faced gazes.
"Nope," Oscar smiled.
"He's not," James confirmed.
Elise shook her head. She really should catch up on his movies.

"Well, you three have fun. Everything you need for Chloé is in the bag. These are today's passes. All access. You'll get new ones for tomorrow. It's a security thing. Lenny will take you guys across and show you to the side entrance so you don't have to deal with lines. Call me if you need me to pick her up." James stowed bag and baby in the stroller, kissing his daughter on top of her hair.
"I promise." "And you better call, if..." "I promise!"

It was a good thing they were able to skip lines. First events had already started and afternoon crowds were lining up for miles it seemed. They stood in a hallway behind the vendor hall. A few familiar faces already squeezing by. Lenny explained that he'd be close by in case, then he broke away, cell attached to his ear. He was always busy like that.

"You want to walk around first or go backstage first," Oscar asked while pulling on the jacket. He held on to the mask and walkman, waiting.
"Hmmm... Let's walk around first so you don't have to worry about wearing that all day," Elise giggled.
"Alright. Time limit?" Oscar scrunched his nose.
"An hour? Two tops, depending how heavy traffic is," Elise nodded.
"Ok." Oscar pulled on the mask, clipped the walkman to the side pocket of his jeans, then they
were off to check out the vendors and displays.

Booths and tables lined the floor. Everything and anything a fan could dream of seemed for sale. People squished and squeezed past as they checked out merchandise. Some asked for pictures of them. Elise agreed, but only when she got a nod of approval from Oscar, and only if she could somewhat hide her face in an angled view. She always made sure Chloé stayed out of the frame, as well. Her niece wasn't old enough to agree. Although her happy squeals may have proven otherwise.

A few times Elise pondered how people would react if they knew who was hiding behind the cosplay. She giggled after the last photo op, whispering a "thank you, Starlord" into Oscar's ear. And he replied with a hidden squeeze on her derrière. "I wish, I could kiss you right now," he mumbled.

"Ditto," she whispered into his ear, then actually kissed right behind his lobe. It made him shudder and her laugh. "You keep this up, you'll get us into trouble," his voice muffled through the mask.

"If you can for a fourth time today, I'll be seriously impressed. So much so, next time you tie me up, I'll let you blindfold me at the same time," she bit her lip. She couldn't see for sure but she was fairly certain that Oscar nearly choked on a breath.

Two hours of walking was exhausting, though. It was getting warmer the more people filled the halls. Hunger was gnawing, too. A few more picture requests and they snuck to a backstage entry point so Oscar could finally take off the mask. His curls were a bit messy and a few drops of sweat ran down his temples. A mischievous grin and he leaned in for a kiss, then rubbed the side of his face on Elise's, making her yell out an "ew, gross."

"Gross alright. You two need to get a room for Christ's sake." Accent heavy rolled r's gave that voice away. Elise pivoted on her heel and saw James McAvoy beaming her way. Behind him, quite a bit taller, stood Michael Fassbender. Equally wide grin on his face. "Mein Gott, ihr zwei seit aber schnell, [My god, you two are fast,]" that Hessian accent of his was stronger than ever.

"Also du sollest aber schon wissen, das dies mathematisch unmöglich ist! [Even you should know that this is mathematically impossible!]" Elise rolled her eyes, then playfully pushed against Michael's chest. "Dies ist meine Nichte. [This is my niece.]" she beamed.


"Cutie. She's got yer eyes," James quickly observed.

"But dark hair. She could almost be mistaken as yours," Michael egged on.

"Guys," Oscar shook his head. "So is this the payback thing? Starlord, eh? Are you trying to send him a message?" James wiggled his brows.

"I just thought, it'd be funny," Elise smirked.

"Yeah? So it's not a leather uniform thing?" Michael shimmied against her. Elise turned pink at the ears. "Ohhhhh... It is!" Michael grinned. Oscar stood wide-eyed.

"Maybe? I mean. He does get to keep the jacket. And this weekend isn't over. --- Yet," Elise bit her lip while she - quite suggestively - gazed her companion up and down. Oscar still stood wide-eyed.

"Something tells me you two haven't gotten around to all your kinks, yet." Michael laughed when he glimpsed Oscar's shocked stare.

"I had no clue. I didn't see anything leather related in the box," Oscar geared towards Elise with a grin. Two could play at that game.

"Not my fault you don't know all my hiding places." She lifted her brow with pretended arrogance.
"This is fun. Also, what box?" James budged softly against Elise's shoulder. "That's for Oscar to know. And only for Oscar to know. --- And --- maybe for drunk conversations." Elise lifted her nose, pivoted on her heel, then walked off with the stroller towards the food court. She did laugh when she looked back over her shoulder. She never was great at holding an arrogant attitude.

"Looks like we're getting drunk tonight," Michael laughed. "Not a chance in hell!" Oscar warned. "At least not today. Not while watching the nugget," he explained further. A sly smirk did slip across his face, however. She'd be able to hold her own against his co-stars. European confidence type of thing that called out her European confidence, especially in matters of liberal sex talk. He already looked forward to more cast parties with her by his side. He ventured it'd be her to make them blush next time.

Elise found a free table to sit by and waited for the men. She got out her cell, sending a mass text of her location to whoever else she knew was in town. Olivia replied with a "be right there"; Alexandra with an "already spied you earlier". Jennifer declined with a frowny face and a "stuck in photo shoot". Sophie, too, declined but sent a "tomorrow" a second after.

Oscar took over baby duty while Elise got in line for food. He watched as she joked with Michael and James, enjoying the easiness of their conversations. They peered over to him a few times, a few sly smirks always following. Clearly, they edged upon topics that involved him. He just shook his head, trying to refocus on entertaining Chloé. Elise had taken her bottle and a glass of puréed carrots along and was now asking the woman behind the glass counter if she was allowed to warm up outside food. Oscar saw Elise pointing to the stroller and the woman agreed with a smiled nod.

It took a little while but they returned to the table with loaded trays. It looked like they had ordered one of everything on the menu. Definitely way more than they could finish. Elise handed the bottle and glass of puréed carrots to Oscar, and he just nonchalantly accepted his fate of possible food warfare if baby didn't like what was being served. The question of what everyone had been up to the last few days kept them talking until Alexandra and Olivia arrived.

"Hey! Look at you! Eleven," Olivia approved of Elise's outfit when she moved in for a hug. "And you?" she tilted her head at Oscar. He lifted the mask. "Starlord. Nice! I should take a picture of you two. Post it to my Instagram," Olivia beamed. Elise hitched a nervous breath. "Don't worry, girl. I won't mention names. But maybe a guess who's behind the mask comment?" Olivia's voice picked up in pitch. She shimmied her shoulders side to side. "Come on, Sweetie. They already know, we're here," Oscar encouraged. Elise lifted her brow. Considering his dislike for overexposure via social media that statement came as a surprise.

"Who's they?" Michael raised a brow. "Paparazzi." A unified "ahhhh" shot out. A few more nudges and she agreed to a picture if her face remained hidden. So they posed, him facing the camera in the mask, her turned into a side embrace from him, her face resting on his shoulder, a hint of a smile from the angled view because he'd whispered something dirty.

The rest of the group let out an "awe" when they reviewed the post on Instagram; Elise noticing people already guessing who was hidden behind this particular Starlord. A few followers mentioned that they had seen the couple on the floor. She gulped. It was such a split feeling.

She felt safe in the group surrounding her now, mainly because they knew how to deal with this. She felt safe with her brother-in-law and her sister as well. They knew what came with such a public life, albeit them staying in the background. Usually, only James appeared in photographs.
now and then. Stern-faced advisor along with Lenny. Her closest friends gave her that security, too. None of them ever blabbed about encounters.

But she also felt a little uncomfortable because this was indirect confirmation of their relationship. She liked that they still had some invisibility, especially where she lived, but she also knew sooner or later, that cloak would drop and she'd stand in gossip's scrutinizing spotlight. She heaved a breath looking at herself, then Oscar. They'd lose their jackets for sure. Distract with minor changes like that. Especially if they wanted to return to the floors.

"Should I take a reveal picture for later?" Olivia quirked a brow.
Oscar smiled at Elise, waiting for her to respond. "I guess. It would be mean not to, right?"
"We can do the same pose. Your face hidden, mine without the mask," Oscar winked.
"Ok," Elise bit her lip. Another awe at the picture review followed.
"I'm posting this after they close for the night," Olivia assured.

"How are you holding up with the whole gossip thing anyways?" James geared at Elise.
"Uhmmm...," she shrugged. "I haven't really kept up. Work was a bit of a pain because of it. But other than that," she shrugged again.
"There you go. Best to ignore them. Ninety-five percent is made up anyways," Alexandra stole some fries from one of the trays.
A tired smile settled on Elise's face. Just for a moment. But Olivia immediately picked up on it.

"Is he being mean to you, again?" she squinted fiercely at Oscar, pulling up a warning, clenched fist.
"No," Elise chuckled. "It's just been a long, few weeks. Lots of changes. And just... Things." She curled her lips to one side.
"Past kind of things?" James queried with soft eyes.
"Hmmm hmmm," Elise hummed. They knew about her past. Oscar had told them. Not all the details, but quite a bit. Especially after that Wednesday in Montreal.

James leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her temple. A friendship kind of move that had Oscar smile. Michael doing the same had him squint, though. He mouthed a teased "I'm watching you" at the German-Irish actor. That was met with an open "just being friendly" hand gesture.

"Why are you picking at me, and letting McAvoy off easy?" Michael croaked.
"Because you're a flirt. And you speaking her language, knowing I don't understand, makes you even more dangerous," Oscar puffed up his chest.
"Boys. --- Such children," Alexandra shook her head. "You two do know that that is not sexy, right? I mean she's sitting right here."
"It's ok, Alex. Would you two like some boxing gloves? You can take it outside. Just so you know, though. If you do that, you'll both walk away empty-handed," Elise warned with a fierce glance.
"We're just playing," Oscar pulled Elise into his side. She arched her brow in a "you better" way, but internally she was a little glad he was concerned, no matter how uncalled for.

"I'll be right back. Going to go change Berenjena Pequeñita." Oscar teased a tender kiss on Elise's hair, then lifted Chloë out of the stroller.
"What did he call her?" James raised a brow.
"Tiny eggplant." Elise giggled.
"Makes sense. Purple everything," Michael peered to the stroller. The whole group laughed.

"So tell us. How serious are you two getting?" Olivia grinned widely. Elise hitched another breath. She looked in the direction Oscar had taken off to. A "very serious" slipped out involuntarily. That
was met with quiet nods and a few "sounds about rights."
"What's that supposed to mean?" Elise leaned back into her chair, peering face to face.
"You'll see," Olivia smiled. And that's all she said. Especially since it looked like James had
pinched her thigh.

They finished their late lunch then talked a bit. A few laughs about on set disasters. Almost deadly
falls. Elise threw a worried stare at Oscar at that revelation. He assured it wasn't him. Then they
chatted about who and what they all wanted to see this week, Michael and James breaking away as
they had more scheduled interviews. Alexandra did, too. She wanted to show family around San
Diego. Olivia remained for a little while longer.

"So are we getting back at them, or?" she grinned.
"Uhhmmm. Yeah. Sure. I'm going to fly out to Montreal end of this month," Elise chuckled.
"More time on your hands?" Olivia nudging her shoulder.
"Somewhat." Elise gazed at Oscar. "Big changes." She drew in a deep breath.
"Must be a very big change. He hasn't stopped smiling once, today," Olivia whispered.
"Hmmmmm." Elise twisted her lips to a knowing smile.

The girls bid their farewells a few minutes later and a promise to see each other on Saturday, Olivia
throwing out a hint that Elise likely be busy on Friday. A hazardous squint shut down any further
info, though, and Olivia finched out a "sorry." She was always a bit of an accidental blabbermouth,
and right now, Oscar cussed at the friendship. Just for a fraction of a second though.

Oscar finally took off the jacket, threw on some shades and a baseball cap, then asked which way.
Elise of course had a few things in mind. Doctor Who panel was first. Thanks to an all access pass,
she had a chance to meet Peter and Jenna backstage; the two graciously agreeing to a quick photo
op with her, Oscar, and Chloé.
"I'm going to print this one out," Oscar chuckled. "Look at your smile. You're such a nerd."
"You weren't any better. Gushing about Daleks," Elise countered.
"Interesting species, really. If you think about it," Oscar argued back.
"Nerd!" Elise stuck out her tongue while peeling off her jacket.

They checked out a few Marvel and DC related discussions. Star Trek presentations were a must as
well. Oscar quietly eyeballed Elise from the side during those. That was her thing. Star Trek. Her
reactions were adorable to him. Gasped oohs and nodded ahhhs. Then they went back to the
vendor floor, Elise going down the list of requested goodies for her colleagues. A Lord of the
Rings print for Richard. Matching Pokémon hats for Helen and Matt. Harry Potter themed items
for Patricia and her kids [some for Elise herself]. Various comic books for Thom, some which he'd
specifically asked for, others Elise thought he might enjoy.

"Look at this onesie," Elise chuckled while pivoting around. She held up the baby item printed to
look like Wookie fur, but was met with silence. Oscar stood a few booths over, looking at a some
plush animals Chloé seemed excited about.
"There's an awful lot of new Star Wars stuff out," she quipped towards the seller when she turned
back around.
"There sure is. With the new movie coming out," the man behind the sales table smiled.
"There's a new movie? Really?" Elise stared back.
"Yes. In December," the man nodded.
"I really have been living under a rock," Elise chuckled. "I'll take this." She handed the Wookie
style onesie to the man, along with a few other Star Wars printed baby clothes.

She looked around again. Oscar was still a few booths over. He held one of the plush animals as he
handed over some money. She paced over, taking in the sight. Oscar made roaring noises while moving the plushie towards her niece. Chloé stretched her little arms forward, gripping on tightly to the new toy, making typical excited baby noises as she thrashed the plushy around like a tiny shark. Elise gaped at her niece. She'd likely grow into a fierce, take no bullshit from anyone woman. Elise wondered if she'd been like that.

"There she is. Look, Chloé. Tante Elise bought more stuff," Oscar smirked.
"Check this out," Elise beamed, holding up one of the onesies she'd just bought.
"R two D two. Nice!" Oscar grinned.
"Right? The guy at the booth told me there's a new Star Wars movie coming out. So I got like five different onesies. Look at this one. What do you think this one is? I've never seen these colors. Looks like a droid print. It even comes with a hat. Look at this," she held up another onesie with orange and black circles printed across and a matching beanie.
"No clue," Oscar fibbed. Good thing his eyes were hidden behind shades. A shocked stare would've given him away.

"Where to next, mis Reinas?" he diverted.
"Ugh. It's already eight. I can't believe we spent almost all day here and still haven't seen everything," Elise looked down on Chloé. Her niece had done surprisingly well. But pudgy fingers rubbing across tiny eyes was a clear sign to call it a day. "We should probably drop her off. We can rent a movie for tonight. I know you have an early day tomorrow," Elise suggested.
"Sounds like a plan. How about I rent the movie and order food while you drop off Tiny? So by the time you get back, we'll be set?" Oscar smiled.

"Alright," Elise beamed. Oscar pulled her close and chanced an enduring kiss. He needed that. He hadn't been able to kiss her all afternoon. Minimum PDA. It came with this life but he disliked it this afternoon. It was a family type of setting, but to him, it felt almost like the real thing. So he needed that kiss, just to have a perfect end of day kind of feeling. And especially since he'd not see much of her the next two days, despite being in the same city, the same area, the same damn buildings.

He looked after her while she went one way before making his way back to the hotel the opposite direction. He ordered pizza for the night. A quick call to the concierge and he had access to several streaming services. He scrolled through different lists and picked a movie. A few minutes after food was delivered, he heard the electric lock hum.

"That baby has way too much energy," Elise called from the door while she kicked off her boots. "How so?" Oscar chuckled.
Elise wandered into the living area of the suite, dropping shopping bags on one of the chairs. The loot of the day.

"She had us all fooled. The second I dropped her off, she was wide awake again," Elise huffed, plopping down on the sofa and pulling her legs up to angle to the side. She rubbed the balls of her feet. The feeling of walking all day finally hitting the nerves of her soles. "I have no clue how my sister is going to handle two like that. I mean since they're so close in age."
"You and Christine are close in age," Oscar pointed out.
"I know. And I also know, we weren't easy," she gaped.
Oscar let out a loud laugh. "I'm sorry, Sweetie. I just have a difficult time picturing you as... well... difficult," he continued laughing.

"I told you about my school years." She crossed her arms.
"Oh yeah. I know. But still. And Christine?" He shook his head in disbelief
"Oh... ok. She was worse than me, ok? One time, she got a hold of mom's makeup bag. Expensive mascara and lipstick all over the walls. It was a permanent masterpiece because the colors shone through three layers of paint. Another time, and please don't ask me how because I honestly don't know how, my sister launched plates into a tree without breaking a single one. The good ones too. Like frisbees. *she motioned a frisbee toss* And then there was the time, she shaved the cat. And it wasn't like she took off all the fur. Just down the center of the back. She claimed it was a reversed mohawk. I think, she just wanted to try out dad's new razor," Elise twisted her lips. 

Oscar eyeballed her from the side, trying his best to suppress more laughter. She squinted, trying to hold back as well. It didn't work. They both laughed.

"Well. Good thing she has us," Oscar squeezed Elise into his side, smirking a kiss onto her hair.  "So, what movie did you rent?" she asked, leaning forward to grab a piece of pizza on a paper plate. "10 Years. It's a bit narcissistic, I suppose. But since we talked about watching some of the movies I've been in," he smiled.

"Two questions before you hit the play button." Elise lifted a brow.  "I don't die and sensuality is at absolute minimum."  "Good. I mean, I like sensual, but...," she stopped.  "But?"

"I just want to cuddle. And maybe see a movie with you where things end well." "I promise, this is one of those movies," he winked, then hit play.

"I like that leather jacket," Elise commented once Oscar was on the screen.  "You and me both. I have one like it. They gave me an extra one," he smiled. Oscar didn't pay much attention to the movie. He'd been part of it and seen it a couple of times. Once at the premiere. Once with his family. He leaned back and watched Elise watch the movie. Taking in her reactions especially when the song "Never Had" came on.

She smiled, got the remote, hit rewind, and watched the song again. She turned up the sound a little the second time. Oscar knew she was mentally analyzing the lyrics. He noticed this about her before. Whenever she listened to music, and it was a new song, she'd listen to it again with the volume up just a little. Just so she could hear the words better.

"Did you write that song?" she paused the movie and turned towards him.  "I did. I had a little help. Remember Robin Hood? *Elise nodded.* One of the actors, well actually he's a musician first, helped me with this," Oscar explained.  Elise didn't ask anything else. She hit play and watched the rest of the movie. She held a soft smile, though. Until the end.  "That was a good movie," she leaned into his side.  "It was. It was fun filming this one, too," his lips curled up, creating deep creases in his cheeks.

"Ah yeah. How so?"

"Well, we shot most of it at the hotel we stayed at. It was a relaxed atmosphere," he started. Elise listened to his recollections. He explained that action movies were fun but a movie like this was nice too, now and then. Show up for work, not worrying too much about makeup. Friendships forming on set definitely transcended into the movie as well. "I've made a lot of great friends through this movie. Although, Chris isn't an ass. He's a good guy in real life," he added with a laugh. "And a damn good chess player!" He raised an impressed brow, then switched to the news.

Elise didn't last much longer after that. Ten minutes and she was out. Like a few times before, he carried her to the bed. She woke up long enough to strip out of her clothes, but the second she tumbled back on the sheets, she was out. Oscar laughed at this. He peeled his clothes away, tossing them wherever and snuggled up next to her. Skin on skin. Soothing warmth. And he was out.
Friday morning started way too early. Rustling noises and pulled zippers woke Elise. 
"Sorry, Sweetie. Didn't mean to wake you," Oscar smiled at a disheveled Elise. 
"I knew you were going to leave early, but six in the morning?" She squinted at her cell then at Oscar. He looked like he'd already taken a shower and was now scrounging through his suitcase to find a proper outfit. 
"Going to pick up Mike at the airport. I haven't seen him since April. Well, not in person. Sending Lenny is just --- wrong." Oscar pulled on a pair of black jeans, then a black button down. He flicked his thumbs up with a questioning face. Elise responded with a thumbs up of her own. 

"Do you want me to come along?" she lapped her lips, still waking up. Her tired squinted morning confusion made Oscar laugh. She tossed a pillow his way. Pitiful toss, though. The pillow barely made it to the end of the bed. 
"No. It would be lovely, but no. It's going to be a long day. We're dropping him off so he can freshen up, then we're off doing interviews all morning. He has one with me, and then he's interviewing others for an article about SDCC," Oscar explained while crouching down to pull on his boots. 

"I keep forgetting your brother is a journalist. The way he talks sometimes, I keep thinking he's a gaming tester or writer or... I don't know. Nintendo expert." Elise drew in a breath, then yawned. Oscar laughed at that statement. She wasn't completely wrong. The way he and his brother battled through early home console games, it was a little surprising neither ventured in that direction. Then again, gaming was for fun only really. Stress relief for sure. Not a passion, though. Not like acting was. Or music. 

"Go back to sleep, mi Linda. We'll meet up this afternoon, ok?" He'd paced to her side of the bed and was now caressing her face. "And make sure you eat some breakfast." 
"I will," she smiled. 
"I'll text between interviews." He tucked his cell in his back pocket. "Make sure you and your sister stay safe, ok? If anyone bugs you, ---." 
"We'll be ok. We probably won't go anywhere until noon," Elise assured. "Probably hang out behind the scenes for a little while. Then go check out some events. Just a lazy day. The most exciting thing today will probably be the Game of Thrones panel," she smiled. "And a few Star Trek discussions," she smiled even wider, and Oscar chuckled a kiss on her forehead. 

"I love you, my little, nerdy strawberry." He ran his index down her nose. 
"Love you, too. Be nice. God complex is frowned upon. Even Apocalypse's," she snickered while leaning into his touch. He dropped his index to her lips, tracing the arches several times over. There was a faint tap at the door, but he ignored it, wanting to stay in this moment for a while longer. Another tap. 
"Go already," she whispered. 
He leaned down and gave her a tender kiss. "I'll be texting you. All day." His eyes crinkled at the corners. 
"K. But not 'til nine, please. Need my beauty sleep." She dropped back into the pillows, hugging the one Oscar had used, letting out a long sigh. He laughed at the sight, then finally paced to the door. 

Lenny, somewhat annoyed, greeted him with arms crossed and right fingers tapping on left bicep. 
"You need to get your hair fixed before the photo shoot." He pointed at Oscar's unruly curls hanging over the sides of his undercut section. 
"Never getting this haircut, again," Oscar grumbled on the elevator ride down. 
"At least you didn't have to shave it all off," Lenny huffed. 
"I don't mind that. I just like easy to take care of cuts, man. This one requires work."
"Two minutes of kneading gel into your hair counts as work?"
"No. Keeping it in place counts as work."

"Is your brother like this?" Lenny opened the door to the idling SUV.
"Like what?" Oscar raised his brow.
"Like you." Lenny got in the front passenger seat, gesturing for the driver to head out.
"He's worse."
"Great. Two of you in one car. The joy."
"Geez, thanks man. Why are you so grouchy this morning? I mean, you always are a little. But even for you, it's a bit much," Oscar queried.

"Olivia's Instagram pictures made E-News." Lenny handed a tablet over his shoulder back at Oscar.

"Oh, shit! I totally forgot about that. At least it's not as cruel as last time," he scanned through to see what gossip was getting circulated. He usually didn't care. For Elise however, he did. If only to ensure it wasn't a personal attack. "Oh look, the picture from the airport," he frowned. A not so flattering shot of an annoyed looking James and a flabbergasted Elise stretched across one corner of the screen, a small article beside. He skimmed through further. The words widow and tired stood out, along with "joined couple getaway". At least it didn't reveal what hotel they were staying at. "Geez. They don't let anything go past." Oscar handed the tablet back to Lenny, not wanting to read more. "I'm guessing, Jim knows."
Lenny confirmed with a nod.
"Should I tell her?" Oscar nudged on.

"That's up to you. I guess it's nice to live in blissful ignorance. I do know this much. She doesn't care, and yet, she does. To her, it's more about protecting her friends, really. And Joe's past, you know? Which is understandable. But if you won't tell her, she'll find out from Tina, who of course will know from Jim. If she was my girl, I'd tell her before anyone else does. And that's only because I rather hear bad news from someone I loved," Lenny explained, grouchy undertone softened to an honest advice kind of timbre. Oscar mumbled out a "guess you're right", then got out his cell.

Elise enjoyed the quiet morning as much as she could. She had indeed dozed off and by the time she got up, it was almost 10 a.m. She ordered brunch, then got ready for the day. It wasn't until she was dressed and ready to head out the door that she noticed the texts waiting for her. Scrolling from recent to oldest, most were about him missing her, until she reached the first one of the day.

"Sorry, Sweetie. Looks like we made E-News. *frowny face*. Not as bad as last time. Still. I'd prefer you not watch it because it's sensationalist. *angry emoji*. I just wanted to let you know. There'll probably be paparazzi looking for you. Lenny suggests to mostly stay backstage between events. I know that sucks, but I agree."

"*frowny face* There goes lazy/relaxed day. You think a disguise will help?" Elise texted back. No reply. He was most likely in an interview. She grabbed her purse and trotted to the door. Just before she reached the handle, she heard a knock. She peered through the peephole, a chuckle escaping her lips.

"I heard that. Might as well open the door," a female voice chatted from the other side.
Elise opened the door. "How did you know I was here?" she queried with a raised brow, hand on hip, trying her best to not look so surprised.
Heya Lovelies,

I know that I don't have to explain myself for not having posted a new chapter in such a long time, but I'm going to anyways.

It's safe to say that 2016 has been a shitty year for most, if not all of us. Besides being busy during December, the end of that particular month just had to throw the heaviest jab at us.

I am, of course, talking about Carrie passing away. I know that with her faith, we ought to remember her through happy thoughts and talk about her in nothing but great memories. And I agree. However, it doesn't change the fact that her death has affected me greatly, and that I felt and still feel very heartbroken.

I debated, whether or not to a) post a new chapter for a while, and b) continue writing at all. Of course, I wouldn't just let you guys hanging, and if I had decided to stop, I would've written an epilogue at least; but for anyone who has read the story, you were probably aware that Carrie would make an appearance sooner or later.

I had Chapter 18 outlined, written, and almost fully edited, but when Carrie passed, I felt it necessary to wait and to do a full re-write.

I didn't want to write a smutty chapter. Somehow that felt wrong. So I decided to give you guys a sweet, full of cute surprises kind of chapter. And I hope I was able to write Carrie in such a way that respects her memory.

That said, I want to thank you guys for your continued support and feedback, and for reading this RPF.

Much love,

GermanLadybug1980

KyberHearts_And_StardustSouls

"Did you really think I wouldn't recognize that 11th Doctor outfit. Especially since I helped you find the boots?"
"Ok. So you saw the Instagram picture. Still doesn't explain how you knew I was here. At this hotel."
"A little bee named Oscar buzzed. Your sister confirmed," Mikki smiled widely. "Right. Of course, they did." Elise pursed her lips. "But I'm guessing we're not the only reason you're here." She perked a smiling brow as she pinched Mikki's shirt. The classic Star Wars print a giveaway why her BFF wouldn't miss out on this particular year.

"You know about the new movie then, huh?" Mikki wrinkled her nose as she moved past Elise and into the suite. "Holy shit! Nice! I see you've adjusted well to the new lifestyle, eh... eh?" She elbowed Elise from the side before wandering to check out bedroom and bathroom.
"Actually, James booked this room. Took us by surprise... But I have to admit---," Elise let herself fall on one of the big, cushy chairs, waiting for Mikki to join her in the living room section. "--- this is really nice," she laughed, then sighed. "Anyways. I found out about the new movie yesterday. One of the vendors had a whole bunch of new stuff. Surprised you haven't mentioned it."

"Figured I'd give you break." Mikki wiggled her brows when she came around the corner. "Bet Oscar is excited. Hmmmm? HMMMMM?"
" Eh... He didn't seem to care. Then again, it was packed and we were busy keeping my niece entertained, so he may not have noticed. At least not until I showed him the clothes I got for Chloé. Even then, he was sorta eh." Elise shrugged.
"Really? Wow! That's surprising considering that he's a huge fan." Mikki raised a brow.
"How do you know about that?" Elise mirrored the expression.
"He told me at the party." Mikki nodded with a skewed smile.

The party. Of course. Elise pondered for a moment what else Oscar had been telling her BFF. Or what Mikki had been telling him. Not that she minded. He'd find out a few things here and there. Eventually.
Besides. She'd done the same to Mikki. Letting a few lighthearted stories slip whenever David was around. Some were laughed over, others - *Elise was sure* - made David question a few things.

Then, for a fraction of a second, mischievous laughter popped back into Elise's mind. Just a fraction of a second that made her wonder what else they'd been up to at the party. There'd been way too many whispers. Too many twinkled stares. Too many hushed laughs...

"So..." Mikki searched through the mini fridge. She grabbed a P3, then flopped down into the second large chair while giving Elise a very knowing once-over.

"I heard a rumor," Mikki started while nibbling on a cheese cube.
"A rumor?" Elise lifted a brow.
"About you and Oscar. Tell me. --- Are you really prepared to turn your life upside down for him?"
Mikki drew out the question with a challenging undertone.
"I see. So who told you? I mean, technically, only three people know. Me, Oscar, and my sister. Since Tina has been a bit under the weather, I'm guessing Oscar." Elise squinted at Mikki.

"Hmmmm hmm. He's been very chatty for the last couple of weeks," Mikki confirmed as she continued to eat; switching from cheese cubes to almonds.
"Really?"
"Yes. Really! He's been asking a whole bunch of questions."
"Like what?"
"How you'd feel about moving in together. What your dad thinks about him. And if your dad is traditional. You know, ask for permission stuff... I actually thought he was going to propose, the way he talked." Mikki finished the rest of the P3 with another nodded smirk.
"Funny you mention that. He wanted to, I think." Elise offered a tired smile.

"Let me guess. You shut him down before he could ask." Mikki traded the smirk for a quirked brow.
"I did. I don't think we're ready. I just want to make sure about a few things." Elise bit her bottom lip.
"About what? You told me this feels right with him. So why... why not take the leap? I mean, we're not spring chickens." Mikki got up and got herself a soda.
"That's just it. I know we're not young. I mean relatively speaking. But I also know that at this age, it might be that biological clock. Mine more than his, obviously. And I want to make sure that it's not." Elise pulled herself to a more upright position, sighing.

"Well... I could come up with at least a dozen clichéd responses to that but I don't think it is. Not in your case. I think if it was, you'd have dated around more. Or settled way sooner." Mikki pointed out.
"Or maybe he's the reason I hear the clock ticking now," Elise countered.
"Wouldn't that be a good thing? I mean think about it. If you haven't heard it with your ex - and let me just say thank god you didn't hear it with Frank - doesn't that mean he's the right guy?" Mikki sipped on her soda. Silence. Dull grays meeting feisty ambers. Mikki set the soda on the table and paced towards Elise.

"Look. I know you get scared. I know why. I also know Joe is still in your head. And I don't blame you for hanging on. I mean --- love like that doesn't just go away, neither does pain." Mikki's brows furrowed. "And I know it's not easy to let go of a shitty relationship --- but really, it's time you moved on. Not saying forget what happened, but... no more tears over Frank. He doesn't deserve them. He doesn't deserve a single one of your thoughts. And Joe... the cliché of he'd want you to be happy. You know that's true."

"I'm not saying race to the altar. I'm saying that sometimes you have to trust your heart over your head. Let him propose if he wants to. No one says you have to get married in a week from that. Or a month. Let him. --- And when he does, forget about everything. Just for a second. And then let your heart answer the question." Mikki played with a strand of Elise's strawberry-blonde hair. Elise blinked a few times. Calmly. The gears turning behind her grays, though. "Personally --- I think you already know the answer," Mikki guessed.

"How do you figure?" Elise asked, mouth slightly agape.
"Because if you didn't, you wouldn't have agreed to go to Spain with him. Even if it's just for a couple of months. For that, I know you too well," Mikki explained.
"#long breath in# It's funny. Someone told me something similar. ---Forgetting everything for a second. And just letting the answer fall out, sort of speak," Elise curled her lips to the left, watching as Mikki went to finish her soda.
"Really? Who?" Mikki quirked a brow.
"Oscar." "Not surprised."

Both chuckled.

Not that Mikki was wrong. Elise knew the answer. The way her life was going at the moment, though, - everything falling to pieces while simultaneously falling into place,- there were many thoughts to sort through. Still, she could hear her heart whispering a little louder every day. Yes. Yes! YES!

She sighed again.

"Well, I better get going. And you, too. I know I caught you on your way out." Mikki scrunched
her nose. A tiny twinkle in her eye a sign that she knew she was right about her assumption. "Awe. But you just got here," Elise frowned.
"I know. But I actually have to work this time around," Mikki beamed.

Only now did Elise notice that the large case her friend had hauled past her was marked with an orange //camera gear// sign, a media pass dangling from one of the handles. She couldn't help a laugh. "Tell me, you've hired an assistant to help you lug that around all day," she snickered.
"Nope. But I did rent a locker for the day so I have several cameras nearby if my favorite ones give out on me." Mikki paced to the case.
"Do you need help carrying that monstrosity to the center?" Another snicker.
"Nah. It has wheels. I didn't roll it in the hallway 'cause it's loud."

"Ok. Well, I'm going to hang out with Christine and baby. What time do you want to meet up? You do want to meet up, right?" Elise pulled her cell from her bag and opened the alarm app, waiting with drawn in brows.
"Hell yes! How about five? In Hall H. You remember where that is, right?"
"Sure do." Elise set the alarm, a reminder next to it reading Hall H. "I'll head down with you. Where are you staying anyways?"
"The Omni."
"Oh. My family is over there, too."

The door shut and the BFFs made their way to the lobby. They continued chatting a little while longer. It was a slow-paced ten minutes between elevator ride down and the walk to the intersection where they had to part ways. Mikki updated Elise with moving plans to England. All of it sounding a bit more complicated than Elise thought. Visa related issues her friend might encounter. After all, this wasn't a short business trip for Mikki, but living there for months at a time, possibly forever, and preferably while working. "I'm sure we'll figure it out somehow. If not, taking a bit of a sabbatical sounds kind of nice," Mikki admitted if with twisted lips.
"As long as you and David are on the same page, then yes," Elise agreed.

Five minutes after that, Elise stood in front of her sister's suite, tapping lightly. Christine opened the door looking more radiant than the previous two days, but also a bit annoyed. "You're late."
She dashed to get Berenjena Pequenita and whatever else she needed. Chloé, unlike her mother, was in a great mood, giggling while playing with the plushy Oscar had gotten her the day prior. Once again, Tiny was dressed in a purple get up.

"Sorry. Mikki dropped by." Elise startled. Christine had tossed the day's passes her way, almost hitting Elise in the face, while buckling Chloé into the stroller.
"Oh. Right. Right. She called. She wants to meet up," Christine huffed, checking over everything one more time before shutting the door and speed walking towards the elevators.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Elise scurried after her sister.
"Want to see The Walking Dead panel!" Christine pushed the button.
"Please tell me you don't watch that show with my niece in the room," Elise inquired wide-eyed.
"No! She's usually asleep by that time." Christine pushed the button again with growing impatience. "Grrrr... the one day. The one day this week I want to be somewhere, everything slows to a crawl." Grouchy was almost an understatement the way Christine sounded. "Ugh... sorry. I'm all over the place today. Hormones." She apologized.

"Got it. Nice outfit by the way," Elise grinned.
"Ditto," Christine grinned back.
They each looked over the other again, laughing at the coordinated coincidence. Christine, like Elise, was a bit of a *Harry Potter* fan, and today she proudly externalized her nerdiness by sporting garb related to her chosen house: a blue Quidditch Ravenclaw sweater; grey skinny jeans; and blue boots; a Hogwarts bag hanging from the stroller handle holding some baby items.

Elise wore her chosen house attire with equal pride: black sweater with yellow Quidditch Hufflepuff lettering; black, washed-out skinny jeans; and yellow boots, the style similar to Christine’s. A yellow bag with the Hufflepuff shield displaying a badger was slung over her arm.

"What's with the fake glasses though?" Christine quirked a brow.
"Eh. Trying the Clark Kent thing. Kinda hoping, certain people won't recognize me." Elise shrugged. Christine laughed wholeheartedly. Ding of the elevator and they finally made their way downstairs.

"I don't blame you. James told me you guys made the news. --- Again." She quirked her brow again. Smugly this time.
"Yeah. Oscar sent me a message. I haven't looked it up. He suggested to stay mostly backstage, but really. I don't want to. We don't do this often. Plus ---- it wouldn't be fair to you to hide all day. So glasses it is." Elise pushed the frame up the bridge of her nose. Besides the glasses, she also chose to wear her hair differently. Up in a ponytail. Bit teased to make it look disheveled. Something to throw people for a loop.

Not like any of the regular folks knew who she was anyway. And if yesterday was any indication about attendance, most photographers were going to be too busy keeping up between the different panels. Still, the style of the day helped ease some of the anxiety, and she felt like she could move freely and unnoticed.

The three reached the side door that Lenny had shown Elise the day before. The crowded sidewalks on the way over, and the noise level before they entered VIP alley, already an indicator that the convention center was going to be as busy as a beehive. "Holy shit. There's a lot more people here today than yesterday!" Elise exclaimed when she got a glimpse through one of the backstage doors while hurrying towards the panel. "Do you think Chloé will be ok? It's pretty loud," she worried, looking at her niece.

"Good thing I brought earmuffs." Christine stopped walking, putting some high speed looking ear protection over Chloé's little ears. Baby, of course, was not happy and kept pulling the contraption off. It was a bit of a battle. Irritated child versus even more irritated parent. In the end, mom won with a bit of a cheat: Christine handed baby a bottle with diluted apple juice, distracting from the ear muffs. A few minutes later, Tiny didn't even realize she had them on, and the problem was solved.

Elise took mental notes of the whole scene, chuckling at the stubbornness of both: her sister and her niece. At a little over eight-and-a-half months old, Chloé already had a mind of her own. Elise pondered what it would be like once her niece started talking. She predicted a lot of NOs. And a lot of baby babbled arguments. The thought made her laugh.
"What's so funny?" Christine stood up and picked up the pace, almost running people over a few times.
"You. --- And her." Elise scrunched her nose at Chloé who was looking up at her aunt with a big smile while slurping away on her bottle.

They reached the panel in Hall H with ten minutes to spare. Flash of the passes and they were granted access to a sectioned off portion towards the left side front. Chloé- *tummy full with juice*
and graham crackers - was dozing off. Elise couldn't help but gaze at her niece. There was something very enchanting in watching a baby fall asleep. How little twitches because of rattling noises turned into even breaths and blissful unawareness. Fuzzy feelings crawled into Elise's stomach again. Then she felt a nudge against her arm. Christine perked a sheepish brow.

"If you want, you can come along to the next ultrasound," she offered.
"What? No. That's something for you and James." Elise wrinkled her nose.
"I'm serious. I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Besides, he's done this before. So he'll probably get bored," Christine encouraged.
"He better not!" Elise replied, her eyes wide.
Christine laughed loudly. "I'm only assuming. Seriously, come with me," she nudged on.
"Are you throwing out hints? Like seeing a tiny bean on the monitor might urge me to have kids?" Elise squinted.

Christine laughed again. "No. It just would be nice if you could come along. Having you here this time and all." Her face changed to a serious expression. Elise knew what her sister meant, of course. She just nodded. "Great. It's scheduled right before Walla Walla. Might even find out if it's a boy or a girl," Christine beamed.
"You don't want it to be a surprise?" Elise gaped.
"We did the surprise thing the first time around. I think this time, I want to know. Be a little bit more prepared."
"You weren't prepared last time?"
"Oh, we were. Mostly."
"But?"

"It's more like thinking ahead. Prepare for the future. If it's another girl, we might consider one more. But if it's a boy. I think that'd be it. I mean it shouldn't really matter but somehow, it does." "What if you never have a boy?"
"I guess, then we'll be having a lot of girls. Not like there's anything wrong with that. Girl power and all," Christine laughed. Elise looked a bit shocked. "I'm kidding," Christine snickered. "James doesn't really care. And the plan had always been two or three. So, if we decide for a third one and it is another girl, then that's what it is."
"Awe. Well, now I can't wait to come along." Elise squeezed her sister's hand.

Just then the room went dark and the noise level went up. Cheering crowd as the intro to "The Walking Dead" flickered across a large screen. Christine's giddy smile when Andrew Lincoln walked on stage didn't go unnoticed. "Good thing James is busy," she giggled. Elise agreed. She got out her cell and took a snapshot of a dreamy-eyed Christine, sending it to Oscar.

"Is this what I looked like when I met the X-Men cast? *
"No. You looked more like this. *attached picture of a rosy-cheeked Elise shaking Bryan Singer's hand while on set in Montreal for the first time*
"When did you even take that picture? *
"I have my ways. *toothy smile emoji* How was your day so far, mi Reina?*
"Pretty good. Mikki came by. Meeting up in Hall H at 5. Do you think you'll be finished with interviews by then?"
"Sorry, no. *frowny emoji* I'm swamped until 10ish 11ish."
"Oh. *surprised emoji* Ok. I'll see you at the hotel then. *heart emoji, kiss emoji*"
"Ok, mi Reina. I'll see you then. Ich liebe dich. *heart emoji*"
"Te amo. *attached selfie*"

"Nerd."
"Empollón incógnito!"  
*row of laughing emojis* I suppose if it works for Superman. *more laughing emojis* Stay safe! Remember that Lenny and James are around. So if you guys need help, we're a phone call away."  
*rolling eye emoji* I know! I better get back to ogling Andrew Lincoln with my sister."  
"What's it with you and British guys?"  
"It's an accent thing."  
"I see. *thinking emoji* Well I can do that for you if that turns you on."  
"Dear god, please don't. I love your accent just fine."  
*blushing emoji* Thank you, mi Reina. Gotta run. *sad emoji* See you later, my little nerdy strawberry."  
"Bis später."

Elise let out a sigh. She knew Oscar was going to be busy. But ten? Maybe even eleven? She shook it off, knowing she'd be spending some much needed time with her sister. Still. Busy schedules. She felt a tug in her stomach. This balancing thing of their schedules would take a lot of hard work. A lot! For the first time, that challenge scared her a little. She looked at Chloé again. How would that even work if they ever had children? She envied her niece a little in that moment. The baby still asleep, still blissfully unaware of the world around her.

The panel itself took almost two hours. One hour blocks back to back as the cast from the spin-off joined the discussion. Once it was done, Christine shot up, pushing the stroller and dragging Elise by her arm at the same time.

Elise was surprised that her sister was this strong, considering how sick Christine had felt the last couple of days. A beeline for the backstage area was a given, and after a couple of shy smiles - and a few //go for it//s-, Christine got up the courage and ambled towards Andrew Lincoln and Steven Yeun who were talking with some of the backstage staff.

A few minutes went by when Christine - cheeks the deepest hue of pink - waved Elise over to take a picture. Hand-shaken introductions and a couple more minutes of chatting, Andrew took it upon himself to call the rest of the cast over.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Christine stammered shyly.

"It's no problem. You two should be in the photograph as well." Andrew pointed at Elise and Chloé. Christine handed her camera to one of the staffers and took a giggling pose next to Elise. A few thank yous and the girls went for a break near the cafeteria.

"You're worse than me," Elise snickered.

"Oh, shut up." Christine - cheeks still quite rosy - stuck out her tongue. More giggles, then she took her daughter to get changed while Elise grabbed a snack.

Up next was the Games of Thrones panel. Again in Hall H. Elise definitely didn't want to miss out. Her niece, however, didn't seem to want to play along this time. Chloé had slept through two hours of TWD talk and was now wide awake. With squealing baby talk because Tiny just had to talk about her day, or whatever was in front of her, or maybe it was because her mom kept playing peek-a-boo with her. Either way, there was no way she'd be quiet throughout the discussions, and Elise didn't want to put anyone through baby babble. No matter how cute baby was.

"You can go without me," Christine encouraged when she caught her sister looking towards the hall again.

"No. I can't leave you guys alone," Elise countered, a sincere undertone in her voice.

"I can look after myself. We'll stay right back here and if anything, I can ask the staff for help,"
Christine insisted with a serious expression. The beginning of a stubborn //you do - no I won't// kind of talk. Something Elise was not in the mood for. She took a deep breath in.
"Alright, but the second you feel ill or need to go back, call me. I'll have my cell on vibrate but it'll be in my hands at all times. So, no playing tough! You hear me!"
"I promise."

Squinted stare. Drawn in nose breaths. More squinted stares. "Go already! We'll be fine!" Christine commanded. Austere through and through. So Elise scurried, but not without looking back over her shoulder a few times. That of course was returned with pointed //you better get moving// hand gestures and thin-lipped head shaking. One last look and Elise let out a laugh. Christine had propped up Chloé on her lap, helping baby to make pointing finger hand gestures.

By the time Elise got back to the hall, the panel had already started. It was a good thing she had VIP access or else she'd been locked out. This time she was guided to a seat by the right front side, two rows behind front row. That's the price for being late, but she didn't care. She was mostly there to listen.

It was all interesting talk about the show and female badassery. But Elise was unfocused this time around. For one, because she worried about her sister. And second, because her thoughts kept drifting to Oscar. She had texted him during her break but no reply meant he was still busy with whatever. She didn't mind the separation so much if only he'd been in a different city at least. Knowing he was within the same area was almost torture. She wanted a hug and a kiss. Just a couple of minutes of tenderness. A couple of minutes to feel his warmth envelop her and take in his scent.

The good thing so far though, she thought, was that no one had recognized her. There were plenty of photographers, all of them focused on celebrities. Some stayed for the length of the panel; others took a few snapshots then bustled away, probably to another panel or to take pictures of celebs for magazines. Her mind drifted a few times more. Just a few thoughts of how people dealt with this almost every day of their lives.

Of course, she knew, it wasn't always like this. Event craziness. Flashlight thunderstorms. Questions upon questions. But she also knew, the more high profile someone was, the less privacy they had; even when doing the most mundane of tasks like shopping for last minute items, or attending events like this from the audience's perspective.

Elise scanned over her cell to make sure she hadn't missed any calls or messages, then she looked up and noticed Sophie Turner waving her way. Clearly, the incognito getup didn't work as proven by Sophie curling her indexes and thumbs into the shape of glasses and giving Elise a thumbs up, probably thinking the specs were real. It made her snicker. She waved back, and Sophie signaled to meet backstage in ten. That little exchange drew some attention from people sitting nearby. Whispers and giggles, all of which Elise ignored. Most of it was excitement that they sat close to someone who knew someone sitting on the stage.

The ten minutes up, another flash of the pass and Elise was backstage again. She sent a text to her sister, and Christine replied with a//be there in a few//. Then she stood on the sidelines a bit, waiting patiently for Sophie to finish chatting with some of her co-stars; after all, she didn't want to interrupt. Sophie, however, didn't seem to mind. The tall redhead waved Elise over, and when Elise stood a couple of feet away, Sophie pulled her in for a hug before even bidding the other people she'd just been talking to farewell.
"Long time no see. What's new?" Sophie grinned.
"Oh. This and that. Work. Traveling." Elise smiled.
"Nice. Nice. And Oscar?" Sophie grinned wider.
"Oh. Uhm. He's busy with interviews today," Elise frowned a bit.
"Awe. Well. I'm sure you'll meet up soon," Sophie winked.

Elise caught the wink but quickly forgot about it when Sophie called for Gwen to join them.
"Oscar said you wanted to meet her," Sophie whispered. Elise squeezed her eyes shut, lips pressing to a thin line. Of course, he did. "Don't worry, Gwen is really nice," Sophie assured as they waited.

Gwen stood as tall as Elise thought. Everything else was different. Naturally, she didn't expect the actress to wear armor but she'd only ever seen Gwen on television, so seeing the tall blonde in an off-white dress, wearing makeup, and with a soft hairstyle left Elise a little speechless. Not to mention that Gwen moved rather elegantly without heavy armor, adding to looking quite different than the character she played.

"I'm sorry." Elise blushed. "Didn't mean to stare, but you... you look so different. I mean not completely. But... uhm."
"It's the absence of armor and dirt, isn't it?" Gwen laughed.
"Yeah. Kind of," Elise laughed as well. That eased the tension.
"Don't worry. People always seem surprised that I don't wear it at all times of the day, so I'm used to the reaction," Gwen winked, her eyes sparkling. "I mean could you imagine. Women wearing armor all day."

"I think it'd be badass. There'd be way less drama and shit would actually get done," Elise nodded nonchalantly. She backtracked for a second. Had she really just cussed. She looked around, mouth agape, ready to apologize, but before her brain could send the message to her mouth, Gwen and Sophie had fallen into laughter. "Anyways. I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Elise." She stretched her hand to Gwen.
"I know. Sophie told me after we got off stage. You're Oscar's girlfriend," Gwen smiled, squeezing Elise's hand.
"Uhm... yeah. I prefer the word companion. It's silly...," Elise stammered.
"No need to explain." Gwen winked.

"So you know Oscar, then?" Elise wondered.
"I do. I worked with him not too long ago. Well, not so much with him really. We're in the same movie," Gwen explained.
"Oh. Really? Neat. Can't wait to see the movie then. What's it called?" Elise looked up.
"It's just a tiny film without a title for now," Sophie cut in. She shot a look at Gwen. Unnoticed by Elise.
"Ah. Not even a working title?" Elise nudged on.
"Foodles." Gwen said with a serious face.
"What?" Elise gaped. Another round of laughter. "Is it a comedy?" She held her tummy. "It's a bit of everything." Gwen scrunched her nose.

They chatted a little while longer. Mostly about Game of Thrones. And mostly about stunts, sword fights, and disadvantages of wearing layers of armor; laughing at design ideas to make it easier to go to the bathroom. Gwen eventually had to break away. "Another panel," she explained. Sophie also headed out. More interviews. But she promised to meet up Saturday.

Elise managed a //see you around// at both of the actresses before a high pitched squeal diverted her attention. Christine and Chloé had found their way to her, the baby wailing her tiny arms towards aunty and wearing a different outfit. Elise looked over her niece a few times, then
squinted at her sister. "Is she..... is she Princess Leia?" Elise started laughing.

Christine had changed Tiny into a white dress with a sewn on, silver belt, the baby swishing around a plush lightsaber. That alone was snicker-worthy, but it was the ear protection that had Elise in stitches. Enormous fake hair buns now covered Chloé's tiny ears, the rest of her actual hair combed in such a way that the bridge between muffs was barely noticeable. Elise snapped a picture of her niece and sent it to Oscar.

"I never thought I'd see the day when my sister turns out to be a bigger nerd than me," she added to the picture.

"*row of laughing emojis* Adorable. You know, you'd do the same. In fact, I can already see you dressing our babies in nothing but Star Trek blues and coddling them in Hogwarts blankets. *winky face*

"So we're definitely having more than one?"

Triple dot indicator bouncing across the screen.

"Yes. Three is a good number, don't you think? *toothy smile emoji*"

"And you expect me to push them out? *perked brow emoji*"

"*laughing emoji* Isn't that how it works?"

No reply.

"I'm kidding, mi Reina. We'll talk about it when we get there."

"Yes. When we get there."

"Gotta run, mi Reina. Ich liebe dich."

"Te amo."

Elise held her cell to her chest.

"You ok, sis?" Christine asked from the side.

"Yeah." Elise smiled.

She peeked at her watch and noticed that they had a good ninety minutes before they had to be back at Hall H to meet up with Mikki. A short back and forth and they decided to head towards the exhibit hall to look at some fan creations. Now and then, Elise would lift Chloé from the stroller so baby could get a better look. A few times, tiny hands tried to grab at the displays, but Elise stayed vigilant and displays stayed safe. Christine chanced a few snapshots whenever Elise wasn't looking, grinning sheepishly once Elise caught her. "Memories." was the explanation.

Some more walking and the three of them ended up with a couple of shopping bags filled with freebies and a few purchases. Mostly stuff they claimed was for Chloé, but the sisters knew all too well that the Sci-Fi and Fantasy related items would end up decorating shelves and desks in their respective apartments. The Rex plush from *Toy Story* was definitely Chloé's though. Her pudgy little hands had a tight grip. If toys truly could come to life, Elise was sure Rex would gasp for air by now.

Sharp at five, they were back in Hall H; entering through a door from the right-hand side, they were guided to sectioned off seats that this time displayed their names. And right next to Elise's reserved spot was Mikki's name. It had Elise a little perplexed but she figured that maybe her friend had stopped by ahead of time and put a hold on the seats. Mikki, after all, had a few connections, so it wouldn't be surprising.

Elise scanned the hall, wondering where her BFF was hiding. She texted, and Mikki replied with "I'll be ten minutes late." That was a bit typical really. She should've known five meant ten past five. Another quick look around and Elise realized that Mikki had chosen this particular panel for personal reasons. *Star Wars*. People in the audience were dressed in all sorts of movie-related cosplays; some were waving lightsabers; some even hummed the movie's theme song.
Elise glanced over her clothes and suddenly felt a bit out of place. A fish out of water—a fitting term. Then again, this was Comic Con. People often belonged to more than one fandom, so not wearing *Star Wars* gear wasn't the end of the world. She hoped. ---Fish out of water thoughts again.

The out of place feeling was pushed aside when she saw Mikki waving her way from another entrance to the hall. Her BFF beamed ear to ear, camera slung around her left shoulder, while a security member checked access and media passes. And tucked under her right arm were three lightsabers in different colors.

Elise laughed. She was certain one of those was for her. Her guess was confirmed when Mikki made it over to them, handing Elise a blue lightsaber. "And a purple one for you," Mikki smiled when she handed Christine one, keeping the green one for herself. "Wish they had orange. Oh well."
"You're such a nerd," Elise laughed. "I should've known it was going to be a *Star Wars* panel."

"First of all, talk about nerd. Did you guys coordinate?" Mikki smirked at the sisters' *Harry Potter* outfits. "And second... yes you should have. I mean come on. Most of the money they make off the merch comes from moi." The photographer pointed at herself, laughing.
"Accurate." Elise nodded, a bit of a smug undertone in her voice.

Elise looked around again. There were way more people than at the other two panels. The hall was definitely at capacity with every seat filled and some people standing by the walls. It shouldn't have surprised her. *Star Wars* was a big thing. One of, if not the biggest franchise. Even so, she was flabbergasted by the turnout. She took a panorama picture of the audience, then asked one of the staffers, who was pacing up and down front row, if he could take a picture of the three women and baby, each holding a lightsaber.

"We're at the *Star Wars* panel. And wow. So many people. Also, look what Mikki got us," she texted Oscar, attaching the two pictures.
"Awe, you guys look so cute. And yes, wow. I heard there might be a lot. --- Still wearing the glasses, I see. *winky emoji*"
"Yeah. Might as well stick with the incognito nerd look. Although, didn't work. Sophie recognized me at the GOT panel."
" HA! HA!"
"So are your sister and Berenjena Pequeñita alright?"
"They are. Better than alright. I think my sister is getting a kick out of dressing up my niece."
"*laugh emoji* That's good though. You both needed some fun. Did you have fun, btw, at the GOT panel?"
"I did. Met Gwen. Got to talking. She said she's in a movie with you."
"She did? What else did she say?"
"Just that the working title is //Foodles//."
"*laughing emojis* It is. --- I'm glad you're having fun, mi Reina."
"I really am. I just wish you were here. I need a kiss. And a hug. And a few ass squeezes. *devil emoji*"
"Ah yeah? Hmmmm? Well, not much longer."
"5 HOURS!"
"Awe. You're counting down."
"I sure am. 4:59 now."
"Sweet. *grinning emoji* Gotta run again, mi Reina. See you soon. *row of hearts*"
"See you soon. *row of kisses*"

"Good god,... how many times does it take to call Elise back to reality," Mikki quipped. "What?" Elise was caught off guard. "Oscar has a hold over you," Mikki stated quite bluntly. "Like you were any different with David," Elise shot back. "Young love. I was once like that," Christine said with a dramatic flair. "Considering the stories Oscar has told me about you and Jim..." Elise started. Shocked stares. Loud laughter. "Anyways, they're about to start. I can see the host getting ready. I'm going to take some pictures but I'll be back," Mikki pulled herself to a stand. Elise nodded at her friend.

Mikki motioned for her friends to move closer so she could snap a few pictures of them before taking off. They did; Berenjena Pequeñita sitting on her mother's lap. "I'll send you a copy of these," Mikki smiled then made her way to the right side of the stage.

Elise waved a few times whenever her friend looked back, then relaxed into her seat, finally taking in the set up of the stage. Considering how big this franchise was, she was surprised there wasn't more fanfare or decoration. Granted, this wasn't the only discussion scheduled in this hall. Still, she thought there'd be a little more. A few raised signs, maybe. A different lighting scheme. A few props.

Instead, it was a minimalist set up consisting of a podium and several tables with microphones, a walkway leading to the immediate right-hand backstage area. Only the three mics right next to the podium had place cards right in front of them, but Elise only recognized J.J. Abrams' name from the distance. A big screen behind the tables showed the title: Star Wars - The Force Awakens; the only hint that this was indeed the Star Wars panel.

Minimalist wasn't always bad. A simple setup would surely keep focus on the guests. Not to mention that the audience made up for lack of grandeur. Excited faces all around. Swaying lightsabers now and then. And loud cheering when the host of the panel was finally introduced.

Chris Hardwick joked around for a few minutes, then introduced the producer, the director, and the writer of the new Star Wars film. Twenty-five or so minutes of how they approached the filming, behind the scenes teasers, and fan questions followed. Elise snuck a few pictures, which according to one of the staffers was a big no-no. She cringed a sorry when she got caught a third time before finally tucking her phone away.

Just then Chris got ready to introduce part of the cast. Elise looked over to Mikki who gesticulated with hands and chin for her to pay attention to the stage. She felt her sister squeeze her hand. Maybe it was out of excitement. It wouldn't be the first time today. That giddiness vibe. But looking at her sister, Elise saw no trace of said giddiness. Instead, her sister looked calm as can be. Grays meeting grays for a sliver of a second. And a raised, knowing brow with the tiniest of knowing smiles; from Christine. Barely noticeable but it was there.

"What's going on?" Elise whispered. "Nothing." Christine tried her best to keep a poker face. But she was failing. That raised brow a little higher. That smile a little wider. "Tina. What..." Elise couldn't finish the question.

A jolt went through her body, and for a moment all noise fell away. Time slowed to a crawl. Did she really just hear the words //Oscar Isaac//? She chuckled. No, she didn't. Wait? Did she?
In slow motion, she looked to the right of the backstage entrance, and sure enough, ---there he was, --- speeding to the table. A big grin on face, he winked at Elise, then took a seat. She, on the other hand, sat mouth slightly askew, his name still on a loop in her mind. She gulped a few times, the noise around her slowly returning. Real-time kicking in.

The acronym SW: TFA on his schedule flashed by in her mind. Suddenly, it all made sense. //How could I be so dense?// was running tracks into her mind. It's been there all along, in whispers, twinkled smiles, and topic diversion. She felt her cheeks flush and her heart rate speed up.

"Don't be mad at him. He made us promise not to tell you since the day he met you," Christine whispered from the side when she saw Elise's face. Anyone not knowing her would see calmness. But her sister knew there was panic behind that stoic face, and most likely a bit of anger. This wasn't a small movie. This was STAR WARS. Bigger than X-Men. Bigger than any other franchise Elise could think of in that very moment. She drew in a few calming breaths, but she couldn't help the continued feeling of rising panic.

"I'll be back," she breathed as she got up. She had to get out. She needed some air. Some space. Anything to calm her mind as she could feel the questions crashing already.

"You ok?" Christine held on to Elise's hand.


"Liar." Christine brows furrowed. She knew her sister better than that. But she also knew it was best to let Elise go... As long as there was a promise of return. Elise nodded an "of course".

Oscar didn't notice right away that Elise had left. He was focused on the questions geared at him. Only when the next three cast members were introduced did he become aware. He mouthed a surprised "where'd she go" towards Christine, and Christine mouthed back "restroom". A sinking heart vibe settled on his face, to which Christine mouthed "she'll be back". There was little else they could do for now. Oscar couldn't just up and leave, and Christine knew it was best to leave Elise alone for a few minutes.

The backstage restrooms were calm. Much appreciated by Elise. She needed this moment alone so she could let herself fall apart. She trembled as reality set in, tears collecting at the edges of her eyes. Questions upon questions ran through her mind. This was big. Oscar was already well known, so how would this affect his career? His fame? How often would he need to travel? Was there more than one movie? What would happen to their privacy? What would happen to their relationship? This wasn't some little indie film. This was worldwide phenomenon level. People often became attached to the characters; sometimes to the people portraying them. Everyone would know who he was after this. Even people who hardly paid attention would know. The whole thing in Montreal seemed trivial all for sudden. A minor inconvenience almost. Her mind went back to the conversation on the plane. How he'd pointed out that she was brave. She felt anything but right now. A pile of misery, really. A pile of terrified misery.

She took off her fake glasses, tears silently running down her face. This was big. This was BIG. THIS. WAS. BIG. This was so fucking big! She splashed some cold water on her face; squeezing her eyes shut; taking in several deep breaths. Soothing breaths. Relaxing breaths.

THIS. WAS. BIG. This was BIG. This was big. Just out of this world big. She should be happy for him. Proud. Supportive. What was she thinking??? She was happy for him! And proud! And supportive! This was his thing, after all. The thing that breathed life into his lungs, that had his
heart fast with passion, and his eyes fierce with determination. Still, --- this was --- BIG!

Breathe. Breathe. Breeeeeeeathe. Deep, closed-eyed breathing. And then - quite suddenly - calmness washed over her. Just like that evening in Montreal when he thought she'd leave. Time to reset her thoughts. Time to be brave. "We got this," she whispered. "We got this!" she repeated more firmly, slowly opening her eyes. "WE GOT THIS!" she yelled, looking in the mirror. "Yes, we do." She heard a voice.

She spun around with a gasp and found Oscar looking at her. How long had she been away? And how long had he been standing there?

"Oh Sweetie, I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd get upset. I mean a little, maybe. But not like this." He ambled towards her.
"I'm not," Elise whispered thinly, her face a little blotchy from crying, and from the shock of cold water hitting heated skin.
"You're not?" He now stood right in front of her. He took her hands and pulled her closer. He chuckled at her ponytail falling out of place, and at the glasses sitting on the counter behind her. His nerd. His adorable, nerdy strawberry.
"I'm terrified." Her lips fell into a frown.
He pulled her into a hug, exhaling softly into the left curve of her neck. He kissed right behind her lobe. Velvet lips. Velvet but trembling lips. "So am I," he whispered, then he took a step back.

Elise gaped at him. She had not expected that response. Like a confession. She managed to breathe out a "why".
"Because, like you said --- this is big." His forehead and cheeks settled into deep worry creases.

She'd never seen him this way. His usual confidence had fallen away, replaced by a raw, all cards on the table, vulnerable posture. And he shared it with her. Without prompt. Without being cornered. And almost without hesitation. She ventured only his immediate family knew that side to him. And as much as she hated seeing him like this - quite scared - she was glad he shared that little bit of himself with her.

She shook her head and collected her thoughts. "I said that out loud?"
"You sure did," he chuckled, the crinkles around his eyes now turning upwards. A sight she preferred for sure. She shook her head again.
"One day at a time?" She looked into his eyes. Those big, deep caramel, browns sparkling again.
"One day at a time," he smiled; even more so when he noticed a sliver of green in her grays. How much he'd missed seeing those hints of green. He pulled her close again, hugging her even tighter.

"You do know that this is the ladies' room, right?" Elise muffled into his shirt.
He laughed. "I'm aware." He leaned a kiss on her forehead. "Now. Time to get going. There are a few people who are eager to meet you before we have to head over to the music stage. That is if you're ready," he stated calmly.
She took another breath in. "Just give me five more minutes." Her lips twisted.
"Ok." He aimed for a hug but she pushed him back.
"No. I actually need you to leave." Elise pushed a little harder, fidgeting.
"Awe. Why?" Oscar frowned.
"This is the ladies room." She hinted with her eyes to one of the stalls.
"Ok?" He titled his head. He didn't get the hint.
"I gotta go!" she stated bluntly.
"Oh... Oh! Okay. Sorry," he snickered as he scurried out.
"Grow up," she yelled after him.
A few minutes later, she returned to backstage alley, once again waiting on the sideline while people talked. Oscar was in deep conversation, laughing at whatever snarky comment Harrison Ford had made. Next to him stood her brother-in-law and Lenny. Also laughing. It was good that he didn't look terrified that very moment. Like a boost for her own confidence.

Maybe it was because he knew she'd stay by his side. Or maybe it was because he was able to share his fear with her, knowing she'd not tell anyone about this. Ever. Or maybe he needed a break from his usual confidence. Quite a few maybes. All she knew for certain right now, was that she was relieved that she wasn't alone about feeling terrified. Knowing he felt like her eased some of the fear away. He was human after all, and a big budget film like *Star Wars* wouldn't change that.

Elise looked around, spotting Mikki and Christine bee-lining for her; questions instantly but quietly falling out once they reached her. "Are you ok?" "What happened?" "Are you and Oscar ok?" "Oh god, did you guys have an argument?" "You guys aren't splitting up are you?"

Elise heaved a breath. Answers shot out equally as fast and equally as quiet. "I'm ok." "You know me. I panicked." "We're good." "We did not argue." "And no, we're not splitting up."

There was a collective sigh of relief.

"There you are," Oscar beamed when he realized that she'd joined them at last. "No glasses this time, hm?" he smirked. Elise stuck out her tongue. Smart ass. He glanced at his watch when he noticed that agents and event organizers were getting a little restless. No time for lengthy introductions now. She'd taken a little too long to return. For now, a general "Cast, this is Elise. Elise, meet the cast" had to make do. Elise snickered shyly at a unison "Heyyyyyy", then apologized for keeping them waiting.

Then she felt a hand slide into hers from the side. She jerked her head right and saw Carrie Fisher smiling up at her; the actress insisting for Elise to sit in the same six-seater golf cart on the way to the music stage; along with Harrison [Ford] and Mark [Hamill]. The only golf cart in fact. She looked at Oscar, gesturing a //what should I do// with her shoulders his way; her companion laughing a "just roll with it" back when the group started following the fairly slow moving cart.

"Oscar was worried about you," Carrie started warmly, squeezing Elise's hand. Just like that. Like she'd known Elise far longer than a few seconds.

"Yeah. He... he's sweet like that?" Elise was unsure in her tone.

"He is." Carrie smiled at Elise from the side. There was a twinkle; definitely some wisdom hidden behind those eyes. And also a size-her-up vibe. If she had to be honest with herself, Elise didn't expect anything less. The X-Men cast had done the same. Although, they'd been subtler about it. It was basically to see if she was after her fifteen minutes or money or whatever someone would get out of dating an actor.

"So tell us, what makes you special?" Mark asked over one the rear-facing seats, confirming the size-her-up vibe.

"I don't know," Elise gulped.

"Oh come on! You can do better than that!" Carrie blurted out.

Elise chuckled awkwardly. "Uhm... I...," she pulled her shoulders up. She seriously had no idea how to answer the question. She always was a bit self-deprecating, but right now she was intimidated. It wasn't necessarily that the three interrogators were some of the most famous people she'd ever met, but the fact that they all had years on her. And she knew that with age came a certain amount of wisdom. And a certain amount of take-no-bullshit attitude. That, and a trained radar for truth or lie.
"Really? I'm surprised. Oscar kept going on and on about all the languages you speak. That you love traveling. That you're smart. That you like to paint. God, what else did he say? I lost track," Harrison chimed in, also sitting on a rear-facing seat.

"Yes to all those things," Elise nodded.
"Then why didn't you say that?" Carrie took over again.
"Because it's boasting?" Elise drew in her brows.
"Is it true?" Carrie asked. Elise nodded again. "Then it's not boasting. You should be proud. Own it. Don't be cocky, but be honest."
"Humble," Harrison shot out. "He said humble."
"She definitely just proved that," a voice came from the front.

Elise squeezed her lips to a thin, smiled line, squinting in the direction of the voice. The timbre was all too familiar. She even had a face to go with the voice. She had, after all, heard it a few times over Skype sessions and phone calls. But now, there was a body to go with the face and the voice, and the whole of it sat in the passenger seat in the front, smirking back at her.

"Hey, Mike." Elise scrunched her nose at Oscar's brother, trying to hold back an abashed smile.
"Heya." Mike lowered his shades and winked at her. That mischievous sparkle was all too familiar as well. The brothers shared that. "So we got smart, multilingual, travels a lot, and loves to paint. And also humble. Give us some flaws." Mike wiggled his brows.

Elise hung her head to hide a smirk. She knew where this was going.
"Come ooooooooon," Mike drew out the words.
"I don't know how to cook," she mumbled.
"What?" Mark called out.

Pursed lips, wrinkled nose, rolled eyes. "I don't know how to cook," she repeated. Louder this time.
"Oh. I thought it was something bad. Like you don't know how to hang a picture frame," Harrison sassed this time.
"That, I know how to do. And how to fix a squeaky door. And a leaky faucet. And how to refinish furniture," she threw back with a smug, raised brow.
"Oscar did mention humble goes away once you get comfortable," Mike quipped. There was a unified response of laughter.

"That's pretty good. That means you're handy," Harrison smiled. The first smile he'd granted her since they'd gotten on the golf cart.

"I am. Dad taught me. He was a construction worker. Started as a welder before he became a carpenter. Like you," Elise smiled back. There was a spark in Harrison's eyes.

"He's not anymore?" Mark carried on the conversation.

"No. Well he is, but he's a foreman now. So it's more of a bureaucratic job for time being. I'm sure once he retires, he'll go back to hands-on projects. I know he's itching to help fix up his girlfriend's house," Elise smiled.

"Once a carpenter, always a carpenter," Harrison nodded.

Elise agreed with another smile.

"Uhm... I'm stubborn. And sometimes, I lose my temper," Elise felt more and more at ease.

"Eh, we all are at times," Carrie shrugged.

"There has to be more. You're too perfect for my brother," Mike quipped.

"Is that so?" Elise laughed.

"Yeah. Come on. One more flaw and then you're off the hook. --- For the day," Mike dared.

Elise laughed. So this is what Oscar had hinted at. Mike's tweets times ten equaled real-life Mike.

"I'm behind on pop culture," she twisted her lips and scrunched her nose.

"Is that why you looked like a deer caught in the headlights when Oscar walked on stage?" Mike
"Winked. "Basically." Elise blushed with embarrassment.

"Ah, Honey. Don't worry about it. It's a good thing you didn't know," Carrie cut in, and Elise quirked a //how so// brow. "It means you like him for him and not for dollar signs. Or whatever the fuck Lo liked him for," Carrie added. The fact that she'd just said the word fuck only took Elise by surprise.

"You know his ex?" Elise furrowed her brows. There was a unified, heaved sigh. Almost like a //don't get us started// sigh. "Got it," Elise nodded.

"Looks like we're here. Don't disappear on us now," Carrie smiled as she - for whatever reason - cupped Elise's face with her right hand before they got off the golf cart.

"Promise," Elise replied with a chuckle.

Carrie, Harrison, and Mark broke away to talk to their agents. Elise peered around. The rest of the cast was busy as well, talking to their respective agents or P.R. reps. James was coddling Chloé while Christine was readying a bottle. And Mikki was taking picture after picture. This was probably the best day of her life, considering her love for the franchise. Beaming smile was pretty much an understatement. A few more snapshots and she was off to the photographers' den by the stage.

"Do I have to ask for a hug, or is that only reserved for my brother?" Mike asked smugly from Elise's left side, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and shades now hanging from his shirt collar.

"I don't know. He warned me about you. Said you cause mischief and mayhem," she smirked.

"Pfftttt... Says the guy who graffitied our old school's stairs with cuss words," Mike huffed. Elise laughed into her palm. Sounded like Mike was ready for story time, and there were hints he'd not be holding back.

She turned to face Mike, and he pulled her in for a hug. A bear hug that nearly knocked the breath out of her. She stepped back and gave him a once-over. Mike was a little shorter than Oscar, fuller overall. He had a beard, his nose was narrower, his hair fully black and curly, and a bit fluffier than Oscar's. If it hadn't been for the wide smile and the mischief in the eyes - that same, damn mischievous sparkle-, she would've never guessed Oscar and him were related.

"He's nice to you, right?" Mike raised a brow.

"Yes."

"And? Are you nice to him?" Mike blinked.

"Eh..." Elise wiggled her hand. "I'm kidding. I think, I am."

"Don't be too nice. He needs someone to keep his ass humble," Mike laughed, then pulled her in for a side hug and a peck on her hair.

That easiness around people was another thing the brothers shared. Oscar had mentioned at some point that she might have to get used to hugs. The kiss, on the other hand, was unexpected, but she ventured Mike wouldn't just casually kiss anyone on top of the hair. It felt a bit like a family move.

"I saw that!" Oscar squinted on his way over.

"So?" Mike shrugged, smirking at his brother. Oscar shook his head, chuckling, then shifted focus to Elise. He pulled her hips to his and kissed her cheek, keeping his arm wrapped around her waist.

"We'll be on stage for a few minutes, talking about the music of Star Wars. More like props really." He lightly rolled his eyes. "The concert itself should only take thirty minutes. We can stay and watch from the side or we can go to the hotel and rest a little before I have to go to a cast party.
It's sort of contracted," he explained.
"Uhm. It's up to you." Elise leaned her head on his chest. From the corner of her eye, she could see James and Christine grinning at them. She rolled her eyes at them, then snickered.
"We should stay," Mike suggested. "Heard, there'd be fireworks. Also, free beer for me," he smirked. Oscar rolled his eyes with a chuckle.
"Then, let's stay. Let me check with my sister if she wants to stay as well," Elise pivoted out of Oscar's arm and ambled towards Christine.

Oscar looked after her, chuckling again. This time at her yellow boots. His nerd. His sweet, adorable, little, nerdy strawberry.
"I like her." Mike jabbed Oscar with his elbow to throw his brother out of doe-eyed thoughts. "And I think mom would like her," he went on.
Oscar inhaled deeply. He was hoping for those words. "I think so, too... because..." Oscar leaned into Mike's side, whispering.
"Dude. That's great. What will she do while there, though? I mean essentially you're asking her to quit her job. For you." Mike drew in his brows.
"I didn't ask her to quit. She'd planned to at some point anyway." Oscar looked slightly offended.
"She'll be working on her start-up. And visiting her dad. Since we're going to be in the same country as him. Maybe visit Germany a few times," he explained.

"Whatever works for you guys. Just make sure you pay attention. This type of life wears people down." Mike raised a brow.
"Are you saying I didn't pay attention to Lorraine?" Oscar was annoyed.
"No. You did. But Lorraine was... Lorraine. You guys were poison to each other. You enabled and she gobbled it up, and soon she knew how to get what she wanted just by snapping her fingers," Mike clarified. "But you see Elise? How she's not forcing herself onto your friends? How she's not laughing at them or judging them? She's --- sweet. The good kind of sweet. Genuine. And you know that sweet in show business means vulnerable. People will be assholes. And sweet people like her... they can usually only take so much before they wear down. So pay attention and don't fuck this up."
"When did you become an expert on people?" Oscar chuckled.
"Eh... I have a big brother," Mike shrugged nonchalantly.

Oscar sighed. Mike was right. Elise was sweet. And adorable. And a nerd. Of course, he knew there was more to her than what his brother had observed. There was strength behind the sweet facade. A lot more than she gave herself credit for. A lot more than Mike had seen so far. But Mike was right. Showbiz was a bitch when hanging out with the wrong people. So far, Oscar had been able to steer clear of the wrong circles, even though Lorraine had tried to drag him in a few times over. "Well, we better get on the stage. I'll see you in a few," Oscar patted his brother on the back.

When the rest of the group broke to get ready for the concert, Elise meandered back towards Mike; Christine by her side, holding Tiny; her brother-in-law pushing the stroller. Mike shook hands then pulled James in for a hug, greeting James like an old friend. Quick explanation that they knew each other through Oscar. Of course. Mike had been to sets before. So naturally, he'd met people close to his brother. Little facts like this became less surprising to Elise. Somehow it always led back to Oscar.

The small group wandered to the VIP section and watched on from the side. Each time a cast member was called to stage, the crowd responded with cheers and swayed lightsabers. Elise couldn't help a laugh. Somehow everyone seemed in the possession of one now, and with the sun setting, the glow of the lightsabers added to the grandeur she had expected when they had all been in Hall H. Oscar caught her warm smile, winking at her. She waved back with her lightsaber, which
made him laugh. He waved back with his, which kind of made the crowd cheer, and made Elise laugh into the palm of her hand.

Oscar wasn't kidding when he'd said "a few minutes". The cast basically stood on stage while J.J. Abrams talked. Ten minutes tops. Then they bid their farewells. Oscar hugged his fellow cast members, calling a "see you later" after them, then joined Elise and family at VIP. They listened to the music, him sneaking tiny kisses on the back of her neck when he embraced her from behind. This is what they'd both longed for all day. Casual PDA without going overboard. Closeness without clingingness. One on one attention without forgetting people close by.

Now and then she caught Christine smirking at her. Mike did, too. Only James didn't seem to notice. He was busy holding Berenjena Pequeñita who in turn babbled and squealed at the colorful fireworks in the sky. To Elise's surprise, Tiny was still wearing the Leia earmuffs, which made the baby's excitement even more endearing to watch. "I definitely want one," Oscar whispered from the back into Elise's ear while watching his best friend lift Tiny up and down, pretending Chloé was flying. "Me too," Elise whispered back. "But let's talk again when we get there." She squeezed his arm. "Yes. When we get there." He kissed the back of her neck again.

"So, Harrison seems to like you," Mike brought up when the small group walked backstage. James and Christine walked ahead, while Mike, Oscar, and Elise walked behind, her between the brothers. "He doesn't just smile at anyone."
"I know," Elise wrinkled her nose. She may be ignorant towards Hollywood gossip by choice, but she wasn't completely oblivious.

"What did you think of Carrie?" Oscar asked, one arm around Elise's waist to keep her closer to his side. "I like her. She reminds me of someone," Elise snickered.
"Your mom?" Oscar perked an almost amused brow.
"Straightforward?" Mike grinned.
"Yes!" Laughter.
"Well you might have to get used to that," Oscar smiled. "Because..."
"There'll be more Star Wars movies?" Elise asked, holding a soft gaze into his eyes.

He just heaved his chest with a deep inhale and sharp exhale. There it was, that tiny sliver of //I'm terrified//. Right there, behind those deep, caramel browns. She squeezed his hand, leaned up to his ear, kissed his lobe and whispered "we got this." And he repaid by pulling her even closer to his side.

He glanced at his watch. I was nearly 9 p.m. "Mandatory party time," he chuckled. "Oh come on, you know it'll be fun," Mike wiggled his brows.
"What will be fun?" James asked, eyes on the screen of his cell. He'd stopped walking, waiting for them while Christine had gone on a few more paces.
"Cast party." Oscar's lips curved downward.
"Oh right. Yes. You know where it is, right?" James looked up.
"Yes. You're not tagging along?" Oscar drew in his brows.
"No. Christine is ready to call it a night." James looked over his shoulder towards his wife. "It's been a bit much," he added.

"Is she ok?" Elise immediately worried. They had been on the go since noon, having fun. Christine even ate a few bites here and there; crackers mostly, and a banana. Plain food, basically. But now,
that there was a moment to actually observe without the distraction of hundreds of people around, Elise realized that her sister once again looked quite pale and very tired.
"She is. It's just regular exhaustion this time," James assured.
"It had better be!" Elise pulled out of Oscar's hold and sped to her sister to make absolutely sure.

"You better get used to that stubbornness." James furrowed his brows.
"What's that supposed to mean?" Oscar mirrored the expression.
"Let me counter with another question. Are you planning on eloping while in Spain?" James' face even more serious than it already was.
"No. Why would you ask that?" Oscar gulped.
"Because my wife tells me practically everything. --- Let me repeat what I said when you first started dating: you're both adults, but I still prefer not to have to choose between my best friend and family. So should that day ever come, you better make sure you both are truly ready." James' eyes fixed on Oscar's. He didn't have to say more. This wasn't advice but a firm statement.

Oscar knew his friend was right. Funny what love does to one's mind, though. He was ready to ask. It wasn't that he was impatient. He was willing to wait. And if she wanted long-term without the papers, he'd be ok with that, too. But somehow, this felt right with her. Since the day he had met her, he felt drawn to her like that. And when she'd returned from India, he knew with one-hundred percent certainty that he didn't want a life without her.

"Not to mention that Tina wants to be around if you guys take that step." James' expression softened when he saw Oscar's glance towards Elise.
"I figured. I'll make sure. I don't want her to miss out, either. I think they've had their share of missing important events." Oscar nodded.
"They sure did," James agreed, then slowly made his way back to his wife.

"Boy, I wouldn't want to be on his bad side." Mike looked after James walking away.
"Yeah, me neither." Oscar exhaled a long breath.
Mike started laughing.
"What's so funny?" Oscar quirked a brow.
"You've never been afraid of anyone! Not like // ready to make a run for it// afraid at least. This is quite serious." Mike kept laughing: a little softer now.
"He's a tall dude. He could deck me in less than a second," Oscar's voice squeaked.
"Who could?" Elise asked from a few feet away when she rejoined the brothers.
"Jim." Unison reply.
Elise laughed this time. "Don't be fooled. He's a teddy bear," she snickered.

Oscar's expression changed to a //yeah right//. Unbeknownst to Elise, he'd witnessed what happens when James was pushed that way. Granted it was only ever to defend family and friends, sometimes to protect actors under his wing, but teddy bear was definitely not a term Oscar would use to describe James in such moments. Neither would the guy that had been caught breaking into set trailers while filming TFA. Twisted arm and a swift kick in the back of the knees had that dude on the floor fast. Oscar shook his head. He'd better not push that way, ever, was a good mindset.

"So, do I need to change or is this ok?" Elise smiled.
Oscar looked her up and down, chuckling. "No. I love the outfit. I love you." He leaned in for a kiss.
"Awe. So sweet," Mike just had to bud in; including smooching noises.
"Dude, way to kill the mood." Oscar slapped his brother across the back of the head.
"Seriously?" Mike drew his lightsaber.
"It's on." Oscar drew his. Duel time.
"Men children," Elise rolled her eyes and walked off. "Wait!" The brothers sped after her, both a little out of breath. At least they were met with laughter.

The walk to the venue took a good ten minutes. They could've asked for a ride. After all, now there were plenty of golf carts available. But walking hand in hand through backstage alley and then a short distance in public was much more welcome by both, Oscar and Elise. Even if it meant a few stops by passersbys who recognized Oscar.

"You're late," Lenny grumbled. Oscar peeked at his watch. "By five minutes." He pointed to the face. "Still late," Lenny frowned. "Don't be so grouchy." Oscar's brow lifted. "I'm not." That was met with an all-around whatever by Mike, Elise, and Oscar. "All right, maybe a little. Only because sometimes it's like watching after kindergarteners," Lenny huffed, looking into the crowded venue. Most of the cast members were already there, huddled in small groups and chatting away with executive type looking people.

"It wasn't me this time, that much I know." Oscar raised his hands in defense. "I know. In fact, you're the model student this time around." Lenny shook his head. "So does he get a gold star for that?" Mike chimed in. "Awe, a golden, good noodle star sounds like a great idea," Elise snickered. "Don't encourage him," Lenny grumbled. "Actually, I should get a good noodle star," Oscar stated smugly. "Haven't made any innuendo-laced comments today," he grinned.

"That's why you don't encourage him." Lenny looked back and forth between Elise and Mike who were both laughing. "I knew something was amiss today," an Irish accent driven voice cut in from the side. Tall, lanky, and with the reddest hair, Domhnall Gleeson had snuck up on the group. He winked at Elise, then nudged Oscar from the side.

"Oh boy, here we go." Lenny rolled his eyes. "Look, BE-HAVE, both of you. No drop to knee stunts. *Lenny glared at Oscar.* No erotic wordplay. *Again a glare at Oscar.* No encouraging erotic wordplay! *This time Domhnall got a stern glare.* And please, for the love of god, no aiming Wookie noises at the staff. *Shifted glare between Domhnall and Oscar.* Please?

PLEASE?* Lenny's face changed to a pleading, wide-eyed stare. "Awe. Alright. But, I mean... Erotic and awkward..." Oscar started.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's your forte. Don't remind me. I can still hear that statement in my head," Lenny scoffed before he walked off, ear once again attached to his cell.

"Is he always like that?" Elise wondered. "Eh... yes. But I think it's because he deals with the press all the time. He does smile. Now and then," Oscar winked at Elise. "I heard a rumor he even knows how to laugh," Domhnall smirked. "So. Are yer going to introduce us to her or what? I mean, yer haven't shut up all day, and now you're keeping her from us. Not nice," the lanky actor grinned.


"Right then. Bit of a smartass, aren't we? Time to meet the rest of our little group," Domhnall held out his hand for Elise to take hold. She looked at Oscar, wrinkled her nose, then slid her hand into Domhnall's. "Don't worry, we won't talk behind yer back," Domhnall grinned at Oscar, then pulled..."
Elise towards the back of the venue.

Introduction was fast. They already knew who she was. It came down to their names. "John. Daisy. Adam. Gwen. And you already know Carrie," Domhnall shot out at lightning speed.
"Already know Gwen, too," Elise smirked. "So this is //Foodles//, eh?" she wiggled her brows. Gwen let out a loud laugh. "I didn't deceive if that's what you're asking. That was the actual working title for a while," Gwen winked.
"For a movie like this, I'm not surprised. It had to be all hush-hush, I'm guessing," Elise returned.
"Pretty much. We're still a bit baffled that you didn't know," John took over, smiling widely.
"Please don't hate on me, but uhm ... My friend Mikki is the bigger fan," Elise went the diplomatic route. Unison "Ahhhhhh."

And a flash of light. "I sure am," Mikki smiled. "Thank you for letting me take the group pictures today," she geared at the small circle; amber eyes sparkling. This was definitely one of the best days of her life. "I have to make a few more rounds, and then go through and start editing already. It is a job after all," she explained towards Elise.
"Awe. Alright. Are you here all weekend?" Elise asked with a frown.
"I am. I'll be busy tomorrow as well, but I have time in the morning. Breakfast?" Mikki offered.
"Ok. nine-ish?" Elise perks up.

Mikki agreed with a thumbs up before speeding away. Elise chuckled at the sight. Mikki hopped from person to person, taking a few more posed pictures of them, a few uninterrupted ones in between. Then she saw Mikki talking to Oscar, them darting a glance at Elise before Mikki leaned up to whisper something into his ear. He shook his head at whatever her BFF had said. Elise could've sworn she saw Mikki rolling her eyes before the photographer took off.

"What are you plotting now?" Elise asked before Oscar had even reached her. He pointed innocently at himself, mouthing "nothing" with pulled up shoulders.
"Yeah right," Daisy laughed. "Sometimes, it's difficult to tell, because he acts like a child, but Oscar is actually older than us," she added with a smirk.
"Oh boy." Elise stood wide-eyed. "Did you graffiti more stairs?"
"Who told you that?" Oscar squeaked. Elise didn't have to tilt her head the way her grays flashed towards Mike. "Dude. What else have you told her?" Oscar pulled in his brows.

"That's what we would like to know, too." Carrie leaned in, mischievous smile and an even more mischievous wink of the eye in tow.
"Don't do it, man!" Oscar warned his brother.
"I gotta. You, know that right?" Mike couldn't hide the fact that he was ready to spill the beans. Another warning glare. Not that it mattered. "One time Oscar skipped school because he wanted to go pet bunnies," Mike started.

"What kind of bunnies?" Elise egged on; innuendo-laced timbre to her voice.
"Not those kind!" Oscar quirked a brow.
"If he had, he'd been in so much trouble. Our parents were strict like that," Mike laughed. "He didn't pet those kind of bunnies until he graduated high school."
"Really?" Elise scrunched her nose.
"I was a good kid," Oscar stated matter of factly.
Mike's laugh almost drowned out the music. "So good in fact, they put a barrier around his desk so he wouldn't distract other students with his goodness." Mike held his stomach. "But yes. In that regard, he was a good kid," he winked. It was one of those assuring winks. The kind that came with a warm smile.
Oscar shook his head, chuckling. "You had to encourage him, didn't you?" he whispered into Elise's ear.
"I did. Kind of need to know what to expect if we want Berenjenas Pequeñita," she whispered back. Oscar pulled her close, and Elise was sure she felt him smile against her neck.

The rest of the night went on like that. More stories from Mike, some stories from the cast. Casual PDA now and then from Oscar. Just tiny kisses and squeezed hands and sweet whispers. The smiles his actor colleagues offered at the PDA didn't go unnoticed by Elise. Unspoken words of "he looks genuinely happy, so we're happy for you".

There were also plenty of questions aimed at her. Nothing mean. Just more basic fact searching. More sizing up kind of inquiries. Most of it lighthearted stuff. But also some serious topics, the big one being "Are you prepared for the storm?"

To her own surprise, Elise answered with an honest "No". If she'd said yes, people would've noticed the quiver in her voice anyways. So she preferred an honest "no", and, it seemed, so did the cast. They all looked a little scared themselves even if they didn't say so. Grateful but a little scared. And who could blame them or anyone? The words "this is big" came to mind more than once.

Oscar occasionally broke away to get drinks. It was during those moments that Carrie would whisk Elise away to sit down at a table nearby. The first two times, Carrie just sat and observed. And Elise welcomed it somehow. Just quiet time sort of speak. And when Oscar returned with drinks in hand, Carrie just nodded for Elise to go rejoin group conversations.

The third time, though, Carrie held on to Elise's hand. Like she wanted to make sure the young woman stuck around just a little longer that time.
"I know that look," Carrie smiled warmly. "Too many new faces. Too many new and exciting things in a single day. It's all a little exhausting, isn't it?"
Elise heaved her chest and let out a sigh. "It is. And a little terrifying," she admitted with a serious expression.
"It's a good thing you recognize that. It'll keep you grounded," Carrie laughed softly. "And it'll keep him grounded." The actress's gaze shifted to the bar.
"I don't think I have to worry about that," Elise smiled when she saw Oscar heading back their way, drinks in hand.

He was about to turn around a table when one of the waiters tripped and dropped a tray with empty glasses to the floor. Oscar stopped, placed the drinks he was holding on the table, and helped pick up the shattered mess. He wasn't at fault in any way but he still helped pick up the mess, patting the startled waiter on the back, offering a "shit happens" when he saw the waiter gulping. The glasses were probably coming out of the paycheck.

Oscar picked up the drinks and rushed towards Elise's and Carrie's table. "Be right back," he smiled. He rushed back, the waiter now clearing the rest of the area with broom and dustpan, slumping his shoulders at the mishap. Oscar waited patiently, and before the waiter could scurry away, Elise saw Oscar slip the poor guy some money. With a wink and another pat on the back.

She turned to face Carrie, and Carrie leaned in, whispering "You're right," with a smile. Oscar rejoined them and for the rest of the night, the three sat somewhat quietly; observing people.

Shortly after midnight, Oscar and Elise were back at their hotel room, Elise still snickering about some story John had told her, and at the fact that Carrie had dusted her cheeks with glitter. She
ambled to the mini fridge to get a bottle of water, letting this evening settle in, when she felt something brush against her foot

"What the fuck is that?" she screeched with a jump, clutching her chest. She looked around but Oscar had disappeared. On the floor was a sphere looking robot thing. White with circled orange marks. She'd seen the pattern before. The day before, when she'd bought her niece a onesie with the same style print. She picked up the sphere looking figure, inspecting it, and there -on one of the white panels, scribbled with a sharpie - was a //follow me//.

She heard Oscar snicker from the bedroom and rolled her eyes with a chuckle. For whatever reason, the whole birthday handcuff snafu popped into her head. Maybe he was naked and waiting for her. She snickered again.

She put the sphere-like robot down and did as the scribbles requested, laughing at the erratic path. Clearly, Oscar was controlling it somehow; blindly that is, so the little figure kept bumping into walls or furniture.

"What's this?" Elise smiled when she reached the bedroom. The sight in front of her not what she had expected. Oscar was still fully dressed, focusing on the screen of his cell until the little white-orange sphere stopped in front of him. He looked up and smiled. Elise peered around again. He'd placed candles on dresser and nightstands. A few sunflowers stood individually in vases around the room. She gulped.

"Don't worry, Sweetie. I promise it's not that. As much as I want to ask," he started. He picked up the sphere and shifted closer to Elise. "But what I want to ask is pretty big."
"Does it have to do with December?" Elise perked a brow.
"It does." He moved even closer.
"With this ... this little... whatever that is?" She laughed softly.
"Droid. Yup," he smiled widely. "Its name is beebee-eight."
"It's cute," she whispered, looking down.

He stroked her right cheek with the back of his left hand, coaxing her to look at him. He skipped a few breaths. A sign that he was building up courage. "Will you come to the premiere with me?" he asked softly.
"That is pretty big," she gulped, again.
"It is. For both of us." He cradled her face. How soothingly warm his hand felt, right there. Against her cheek.
"What about my sister?" Elise curled her right hand around his hand on her cheek.
"I promise, we'll be back before she has the baby. And, if she goes into labor, we'll fly back right then and there, dressed to the nines if we have to. I promise." He held his breath, waiting.

Elise nibbled on her bottom lip, looking down again. This was big. So, out of this world big. And quite terrifying. She hitched a breath. And one more for courage. "We got this," she whispered, shifting her grays back to his deep, caramel browns. "So... yes," she smiled.
He pulled her as close as he could, closing whatever minuscule gap had remained. A sweet, endearing kiss, then he rested his forehead on hers. "I love you."
"I know."
On Saturday, Elise woke before Oscar. A noise from the streets below was to blame. Some car that clearly needed its brakes fixed. She tried to go back to sleep but her mind was wide awake now, especially when she heard the muffled voices of morning commuters walking up and down the sidewalks.

She opened her eyes, sunlight falling through a crevice in the headboard temporarily blinding her. She shifted carefully to escape the light, then rubbed her fingertips over her lips, smiling at the memories from last night; all of them giving her butterflies.

Last night had ended with sweet whispers and even sweeter kisses. Just tender closeness and soft laughter while they'd talked about possible adventures while he'd be working in Spain. She was definitely looking forward. And so was he. The excitement in his voice had been quite notable like that.

Of course, they didn't plan to be around each other twenty-four seven. He'd be busy filming and she'd be busy with her startup, and also traveling to see country and family. But it would be a more even paced rhythm of being together and being apart. That was the main thing. Times apart would be days at most and hours at minimum. She couldn't wait for those days when schedules would finally allow them a semi-normal life.

The plan to quit her job at some point in the near future helped with the sudden flexibility. She hadn't quite figured out yet how to approach that situation. She only had half a plan so far, of which half was a basic business model and the other rehearsed conversations of how she'd break the news to James and Richard, especially after they'd been the primary support for her to stay with the company. She mentally crossed her fingers that they'd understand. The failing of the company might actually soften the blow in that regard.

The issue of keeping her place in Seattle came up as well last night. It would be good to have a fall back plan if things weren't going to work out. Something Oscar actually agreed with while simultaneously offering to help pay rent. After all, he had asked her to come along, so in his mind, the decent thing to do was to offer financial help.

But what if absolutely everything went wrong? Them. Her startup. Whatever else. She'd definitely not be able to keep the place. Not in Seattle. Not in the area where she lived. And especially not without a steady income. Sure, her sister would likely help, but she didn't want to be in the way, especially with another baby on the way.

She sighed at the what ifs, her mind staying with last night; butterflies replaced with twisting stomach. There was still so much to figure out. So much. Even with him promising full support, she was worried. She didn't want to be a burden like that. Not financially at least. She hated that idea. She'd always been independent, even when she had been married. Well almost always. Discounting the year after Joe had passed.

There had been a grumbled response from Oscar when she had brought it up. "You're not going to be a burden," had been his response while counting out all the reasons why she wouldn't be. "You're smart. You're prepared. And you're young." were some of them. The last one she had chuckled over, which had earned her a nibble on her shoulder, right before they had fallen asleep.
She sighed again, pulling herself out of those thoughts; and rolling to her right to watch him sleep. She snickered at the tiny twitches of his left brow and the purred snores because he was on his back. He always snored a little when he slept on his back. It was such an endearing image really. Purred snores, mouth slightly agape, deep slumber, a content look on his face.

She propped her head on her right hand and took the rest of him in. The blanket was slanted halfway up his chest, his right arm tucked under his pillow for extra support of his head, and his left stretched lazily over her pillow. His whole body was still relaxed, one leg angled, the other long. Deep slumber looked good on him, especially in the way he seemed to emanate warmth.

That was something she'd noted since she'd met him. He always always seemed to exude warmth. Not just physically either. And even when his face carried a serious expression; a hint of warmness remained. And to her, warmth equaled comfort. He was her comfort.

She wanted to reach up and skim his lips but a burst of cold air denied her that chance. The A/C had started back up and the cold air had his whole body flex for a second. For a moment, she actually thought he'd woken up because of it.

She watched on, chuckling. His body settled back into deep sleep. Serenity was a good word to describe this moment. Despite not waking up in his arms. She'd fallen asleep in them, though; but at some point during the night they had shifted apart. Probably because they both felt a little too warm. As long as they fell asleep curled into each other, they were ok with waking up at a distance. Not that that ever lasted. Whoever woke up first usually cuddled up to the other. Today was no exception.

She wiggled closer, careful not to wake him; teasing some of his curls right above his left ear. She clearly tugged a little too hard on one because he reacted by rolling to his right with a sleepy grovel, his back to her, leaving a new gap between their bodies. She wiggled closer again, placing a soft kiss on his shoulder, inhaling his scent. Then she tried to roll the opposite way to get up, but he reached back, haphazardly yet quickly, captured her hand, and lazily pulled her back towards himself.

"Where are you going?" he rasped drowsily. "It's almost seven thirty. I have to get ready to meet Mikki. Remember?" she whispered into the back of his neck. "Oh right," he mumbled. He released his grip and she tried to roll out of bed again, but he recaptured her. "Lindo, I have to get up." She bit away a snicker. "No. Mikki can wait," he rasped, still drowsy. "No, she can't. She has to work," she countered quietly; trying her best to suppress her amusement at his sleepiness.

Conversations last night really meant conversations to the earliest hour of the new day. Considering how early he'd gotten up on Friday, she was surprised he was able to stay awake past 2 a.m. the night to Saturday.

"Awe. But... I want to snuggle." He breathed tiny kisses on her captured hand. "Ok. But only ten minutes, then I have to get ready," she whispered, cascading tenuous kisses over his shoulders. He left a few more kisses on her hand, each wispier than the previous, then he was out again; his hold on her hand slowly loosening as his body relaxed back into full sleep. She watched a few more minutes after that, then she finally got up.
Quiet like a ninja, she got ready for another long day, smiling at the sunflowers from the day before. He must've snuck back to the hotel to receive them as the flowers had been sent by messenger; and, of course, to set up the bedroom. Or maybe he had one of the P.A.s do it. Either way, she adored the sweet gesture because she loved that he remembered the small things. The sunflowers one of them. And candles smelling of lavender another.

She ambled back to the bedroom to check if he was still sleeping. And sure enough, he was still out, flipped to his left side and hugging her pillow, looking like a Koala the way he clutched on and the way his curls fell. She smirked, then lifted her brow, surprised the sound of the hairdryer echoing hadn't woken him up. She paced closer, ghosting a kiss on his right temple and he responded with a gravelly snore. So sleepy. So adorable.

She'd miss him for sure, but unlike Friday -when they had been apart almost the entire day-, she'd be by his side from lunchtime on. She looked forward to that. And to seeing a few familiar faces. Not that she minded all the new people she had met on Friday. In fact, the cast of *Star Wars* had been nothing but kind and welcoming. Especially John, Daisy, Domhnall, and Carrie. She still chuckled at the stories they had told her. And at the mischievous rapport Domhnall and Oscar had displayed. There were definitely promised see you agains/after tight hugs.

But there was comfort in seeing people she'd known a bit longer. People whom she'd become friends with over the last two months. People whom she had talked to almost every day since she had left Montreal. Not everyone in a single day, but one person one day, one the next. It was a good balance of catching up and leaving distance. Today, there'd be plenty to catch up on from both sides, so it was a good thing that she'd see all of the familiar faces at once.

She peered back one more time, then she was off for breakfast at the Omni. And as usual, she was early. Way early. Nine-ish with Mikki usually meant nine-twenty-ish. And nine-ish with Elise usually meant fifteen or twenty to. Today, she was twenty minutes early. She chuckled over that. Her punctuality was a trained European thing. Miki's lax, a bit of the American way. She doubted that they had ever actually met up on an agreed time. Regardless, Elise was here now, so she asked for a table.

The hostess guided her to one close to a back window with a view on the street. The second Elise dropped onto the chair, she ordered a tall cup of coffee. She wasn't hung-over, which was kind of a surprise to her. Considering how many drinks she had had last night. Social exhaustion was the culprit for the need of a strong cup. All the excitement from the day prior had her feeling like that. And maybe talking past 2 a.m., which - once again - made her chuckle.

"Good morning." A voice snuck in from behind. Snuck in because her mind had drifted and she sat dreamy-eyed and distant.

"Oh... hey... you're up early?" she smiled; a bit of confusion on her face, which made the owner of the voice laugh.

"Yeah, well, unlike my brother, I like getting up early on weekends," Mike continued to laugh. "Really?" Elise mocked with a slight squeak.

"Oh... alright. Caught me. I have to work," Mike frowned. "So, may I, or are you expecting company?"

"Go ahead. Mikki is joining me, but that might be a while." Elise gestured for Oscar's brother to take a seat.

He ordered himself a cup of coffee, then scanned up and down Elise. "Is my brother aware you're wearing that?" he raised his brow at her outfit.

She'd chosen a snug fitting red-and-black block dress, showing off her curves. Black leather, ankle
boots, a black leather cuff-like bracelet, and black accented jewelry tied the look together. And a neat French twist. The whole outfit was almost professional if only it hadn't been for the Deadpool pin on the neckline. And the very smoky eyeshadow and extra deep red lipstick she usually only reserved for nights out.

"Didn't know I needed his approval. --- Or yours." Elise mirrored Mike's expression with slight annoyance.

"You don't. But I know him. He won't be able to keep his hands off you." Mike winked.

"In that case, this outfit is perfect, don't you think?" She winked back. Mike boomed out another laugh.

Their coffees arrived and the two sat quietly for a few minutes, Mike still sizing her up. He had talked to her on and off since May, but now she was sitting in front of him and he was able to get a clearer picture. This woman was important. Oscar had made that clear more than once.

"Is there something on my face?" She smirked after another gaze lasted a little too long.

"No. I'm just trying to figure out why you're dating my brother," Mike stated quite bluntly.

"Excuse me?" Elise gaped. That candid honesty clearly ran in the family. Nonetheless, it left her a bit stunned.

"Don't misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with you. In fact, I envy him a little. But he's... he's well, he's my brother. I know all his flaws. All - of - them! Which makes me wonder --- what the hell are you thinking?" Mike squinted.

Elise laughed at the sincerity in his voice. "Is he really that bad?" Her eyes widened.

"You haven't lived with him long enough, yet," Mike pointed out.


Mike nodded in agreement. They sat in silence, again. She looked out the window, smiling at the crowds passing by. A lot of them were clearly here for SDCC, wearing cosplays of characters they admired, or - if not that - fan-based attire. She lost herself in memories past. Things she had wanted to do. What ifs.

She sighed and Mike took immediate notice. Not just of the sigh but her expression as well. The warmth on her face was there, but it was a sad one. One that came with added creases around eyes, mouth, and forehead. Oscar had mentioned slivers of green in her eyes, but if there were any, Mike didn't seem to be able to find them. Instead, he saw grays and an ocean's worth of thoughts behind them. And then he remembered a few other details Oscar had told him. A fleeting glance to her wrists and Mike caught a glimpse of what caused her sudden drift.

"Tell me about him," Mike requested softly.

"What?" Elise shook her head in confusion for a second. She hadn't forgotten that he was there, but her mind had been very far away.

"Tell me about him," Mike repeated.

"Your brother? I thought you knew all of his flaws," Elise chuckled awkwardly.

"I'm not talking about my brother." A warm smile settled across Mike's face. Genuine care behind dark eyes. That same genuine care, just like Oscar's.

Elise took a sip from her coffee, looking down on the table when she set the cup back on the saucer. She flexed her fingertips on the table. Then relaxed them. She suddenly felt tense. "What do you want to know?" She skewed her mouth right, still looking at the table. It took a few more seconds to look back up. A request to talk about Joe was rare. Oscar asked now and then. Not too much in detail. Usually, small things when he felt her thoughts stray. People she hardly knew, however, usually didn't.
"Anything. --- What were his hobbies? What was his favorite food? His favorite movie? Stuff," Mike gently nudged on.
Elise scrunched her nose. She hesitated for a minute. She didn't want to come across as damaged good or clinging on to past love. Yet, this invitation to talk about Joe was quite welcome. It had a warm curiosity vibe to it. Still, she halted.

The hesitation was noted by Mike. He sipped on his coffee then leaned into the back of his chair. He kept his left hand on the table, anticipation growing behind blinking eyes, which Elise reciprocated with a soft, memory-stricken laugh.

"His favorite movie...," she started while searching through memories. "Superman, ---with Christopher Reeves. He would've loved this place today," she chuckled. "He loved Italian food. Especially seafood pizza and lemon gelato," she smiled. "And he loved working with his hands. My dad took him under his wing for a while --- When all of Joe's family was still in Germany. Showed him everything there is to know about carpentry. If he hadn't joined the military, he'd be a carpenter for sure."
"I see," Mike smiled softly. Another pause by both. Mike waited because he was hoping she'd offer a little more, and Elise waited because she was hoping he'd see that's all she was willing to share for now.

"Did Oscar ever tell you, he wanted to join the Marines?" Mike's lips became thin.
"No. I don't think he did," Elise furrowed her brows. She would've remembered that. "Hmmmmm... Mom and dad talked him out of that idea. Not that there's anything wrong with serving the country but I'm glad he never joined," Mike remained serious in tone and posture. And Elise knew why. Considering Oscar's age, it would've put him in the middle of quite a few awful things. She couldn't imagine his face fatigued by war. Especially his eyes. She didn't want to imagine. Not that she really had to. She knew what such a life looked like on someone's face. Especially in someone's eyes. Detached pain because reality offered no space for understanding or comfort. She took a deep breath in. "Well,--- I'm glad, too," she whispered. Silence again.

"I have to admit --- he probably would've looked really sharp in that uniform," Mike grinned; breaking the lingering seriousness of the moment. "No one would've stood a chance." Elise laughed at that. A palm hidden laugh through which a hummed sigh reflected her agreement. "He's something else." She wrinkled her nose and curled her mouth right, again. This time it was an abashed sort of thing. Like she'd been caught in a secret of the heart.

It wasn't a secret to Mike of course. "He is. And so are you. If you weren't, he'd not talk about wanting to introduce you to mom," Mike revealed.
"What?" Elise sat flummoxed. So much so, she nearly dropped her coffee cup when she tried to take another sip.

She and Oscar had joked about family introductions, but it had never been a fixed idea; at least not when it came to meeting his mom. Of course, she knew she'd meet his mom eventually. Still; it was always more like a //one day// kind of deal. Not a fixed point. Mike's statement, however, meant that there was an idea of when that day might be.

"Should I be worried?" Elise chuckled nervously.
"Nah... Unless you're hiding something. Then maybe. Mom is pretty good at finding things out," Mike laughed.
"Aren't all mothers?" Elise joined the laugh. Mike agreed.
"You know, --- he didn't introduce Lorraine for nearly two years. Nicole and I knew her, but he waited with mom," Mike explained; his voice taking on a serious timbre again. "Is that good or bad?" Elise wondered.

A heavy exhale from Mike was all the answer she really needed.

"She was the only woman he'd ever brought home, and only after she'd insisted." Mike scratched the back of his head. "Mom, of course, smiled through it but really, his ex was --- you know what, I shouldn't talk bad because I don't know everything. All you need to know is that him wanting to introduce you without pressure from anyone, especially you... well, that makes you something else. Not to mention that he looks happy around you. At ease, really. He trusts you. He needs that you know. Knowing he can come home to someone he trusts," Mike stated, that honesty and sincerity very obvious in the pitch of his voice.

Elise shook her head. "If he was miserable, why did he stay?" she asked, a great deal of caution in her voice. The question was a bit double-edged considering her last relationship, and she was very much aware.

Mike sighed again. "You'd have to ask him," he mumbled.

There was a gut feeling that Mike knew the answer. It was in the way he skewed his lips and in how he scratched the back of his head, again. And in how he tried to hide his changing expression behind his cup of coffee. Elise decided not to prod on. That would've been crossing the line. She'd rather hear that explanation from Oscar directly; if conversation ever led that way that is.

All she was certain about in this very moment was that Oscar's explanation of them playing off each other's egos didn't seem to fit. Not entirely. He just didn't seem the type to try to make it work when there was no connection. Even if he deemed it beneficial in some way. She knew him better than that. She'd observed that he needed strong emotional and mental connections, and physical, too. But the two former were most important, and if he didn't get those, he became bored quite easily. She buried the thought for now. This was too gossipy in her mind and she hated herself for even probing into the issue.

"Let's talk about you," she suggested.

"Yes. Let's." Mike raised a smug brow. The mischievous flicker she'd grown accustomed to since she met him online in May was back.


"Uh... Hell yeah. Love asking questions. And so are you," he shot back as he pointed at her pin.

Elise laughed, again. "Met any interesting people through your career?" She wiggled her brows. "Are you interviewing me?"

"Maybe."

"Ehhh... A few here and there. The president," he nonchalantly tossed out.

"Wow. Impressed. Did you get to interview him?" Elise lifted a brow.

"Sadly no. It was Nicole's day. Talking about climate change," Mike smiled.

The same kind of pride-filled smile when Oscar talked of his sister. Clearly, this family was tight-knit, despite their parents' divorce. Or maybe it was because of it. Either way, there was a caring vibe to how the brothers talked about family, and Elise couldn't help thinking how lovely it would be to be part of that. To have them extend her own family. Flashes of both families having dinners and spending holidays together crossed her mind.

They continued to talk about this and that. Mike's life; Oscar's influence on him; the brothers' sister; and near future plans. Mike egged on for a match of *Street Fighter* at some point. Elise
accepted with a bit of an arrogant hint that she was pretty good, which had Mike busting out another laugh. "Oscar is pretty good, too. Doesn't change the fact that I'm the champion," he smirked with twinkling eyes.

"Champion at what?" Another voice had snuck up. They shifted their attention to the owner; seeing Mikki grinning at them; large gear case in tow; several passes dangling from her neck.
"Street Fighter," Mike offered a toothy smile.
"Pft... we'll see. Last time we played, I kicked your ass," Mikki quipped; finger-gunning Elise. "Only because I was sick," Elise disagreed.

"Ah yeah? Interesting." Mike rubbed over his beard; gears clicking behind his eyes. "We all need to get together sometime then," he suggested with an even wider smile. Elise nodded with a snicker. "Well. I guess this is my cue. Time to face reality," he added with a pretended grumble; putting a five on the table.
"First of all. I'm paying! Second: You know you love your work," Elise smiled. He responded with a dramatic but smiled eye-roll; stuffing the five back in his wallet.

Mike got up and Elise followed suit, stretching out her hand. Mike wouldn't have any of that. Like the day before, he drew her into a bear hug, and like the day before, she nearly had the wind knocked out of her. He gave her another once-over, wiggling his brows with a mischievous smile. "Oscar will definitely like this one," he hinted at her outfit with a wink then bid his farewell, but not before leaving another peck on her hair. And she, without a second thought, planted one on his cheek.

"He's worse than Oscar," Mikki pushed her case behind the chair before seating herself. "But a sweetheart," she grinned.
"True," Elise agreed as she flopped back into her chair. "So... Nine fifteen," she glanced at her cell. "Not bad. What's the plan for the day?"
"DC panel first. Then a bunch of backstage meetings. Photo ops with Stan Lee. Then Marvel panels. Cast party, if I have time. Then packing. Flying out early tomorrow. You?" Mikki scrolled through her schedule.

"Nice!" Mikki smiled while they synched timelines. The crossovers were welcome. They could see each other throughout the day. With all the changes barreling both their ways, who could blame them for taking every chance to hang out, even if it was a chopped up kind of day.

"Where's the waiter? I need waffles." Mikki fidgeted after she finished highlighting a few more reminders, tacking on a grumbled "I'm starving!" to that.
Elise snickered. The first thing she had learned about Mikki - when they had initially met - was when Mikki was hungry, it was best not leave her waiting; sweet-natured shenanigans and sharp wit always giving way to grouchy gremlin type of grumbles. Today was no exception.

The waiters all seemed preoccupied with other tables, so Elise reached into her purse and tossed a PayDay across the table; laughing at the satisfied moans her friend made; like her BFF hadn't eaten in three days straight. It would have to make do until they could order //real// food.

"Anyways..." Mikki squinted at Elise, stuffing the last of the candy bar into her mouth. "I was actually trying to be on time for once, but David called," she crunched through the words with chipmunk cheeks.
"Everything alright?" Elise perked her brow.
"Yes. He's just missing me. He's a grown man but sometimes... I really wonder," Mikki huffed, stealing the rest of Elise's coffee.
"I hear you there. A little clinginess is good though," Elise pointed out.
"Yes, a little. But he's been... I don't know. I feel like he's up to something," Mikki fixated at some distant, imaginary point.

"Like you and Oscar are always up to something?" Elise's voice went up in pitch.
"I don't know what you mean," Mikki denied with a shrug. And a gulp.
"Right. So you didn't know, he's in the new *Star Wars* movie, just like you didn't know he'd ask me to the premiere? Tell me, did you recognize him at the bar or did he tell you at the party?" Elise interrogated. There was a bit of an accusatory edge to her voice. Unintentional, but it was there. It was mainly because Elise hadn't been able to read her friend.

Usually, there were hints when one of the BFFs had a secret; so secrets never stayed such for long. Elise blamed her preoccupation with new love for missing said hints. Even so, she felt like she should've known something was up; especially with the way they had all acted yesterday. Hindsight truly was twenty-twenty.

"I didn't recognize him at the bar. Even when I asked James about your new flame, the name didn't click. It wasn't until after you left for India that I made a connection," Mikki explained in defensive mode, attention split as she tried to waive one of the waiters over.
"Really? How?" Elise wondered, reeling back the edge to her voice.
"He was at the *Star Wars Celebration* in Anaheim the Monday after you left. I mean, ---I had seen teasers. And even interviews. And he was in some of them - the interviews I mean. But he looked different. Had a beard, hair was longer, way curlier, and he looked a bit paler. --- Anyways. He bumped into me at the celebration, and..."
"...he asked you to not say a word," Elise finished the sentence with a disapproving huff.

"Yup," Mikki confirmed, then paused, full focus back on Elise. "Look, don't be upset. He was worried, you know. I mean shit, it's *Star Wars!*"
"Worried about what? That I care about fame and fortune?" Elise assumed.
"No! I think he knows you better than that. He was worried that you didn't want to see him anymore; considering your reaction to the whole *X-Men* thing --- *Yeah, he told me about that, too!*" Mikki shot out with wide eyes. "I mean, if you'd known ahead of time, would you have continued dating him?!!" She asked sternly; those fierce ambers of hers tracking Elise's grays, locking on, and waiting.

Elise shook her head. "Probably not," she admitted quietly, looking down on the table, almost ashamed of her admission.
"See... that's what I figured. And after what he told me at the bar, I thought it best you didn't know." Mikki's expression softened.
"Told you at the bar? What did he tell you?" Elise raised a curious brow.

Mikki hitched a breath. She wanted to bite her own tongue. Damn those slipped thoughts. "He said he loved you. Like, from day one," she paused. "And I could tell --- I could tell he really meant it. It's the way he looked at you. Like he could already see the house with the picket fence, and the fricking minivan, and kids playing in the yard. I mean, damn --- you don't see those kinds of looks often..." Mikki's attention fizzled as she waived for a waiter, again; one of them finally sauntering their way.

Elise sat a bit perplexed. Oscar had told her that. At the airport. On the day she had left for India. That he'd been falling since the day he'd met her. But hearing this from her BFF - another point of
Maybe she should've let him ask. Why was she such a chicken? What if he grew tired of asking? Or tired of trying to ask? What if, when she was finally ready...? Damn what ifs! Damn all those things that still needed figuring out. And damn the whole life falling to pieces while falling in place feeling.

"Waffles with extra whip cream, scrambled eggs, two - no three slices of bacon, .... ooohhhh you guys have Greek yogurt. I'll take one of those as well, with blueberries. And a large coffee. What ch'ya having?" Mikki geared at a deeply lost in thoughts Elise.

Elise shook her head. "Uhhhm...Waffles with strawberries, and another coffee," she directed at the waiter. There was an awkward second before the waiter walked off with a chuckled "alrighty then". And an awkward second between the BFFs before they laughed over revelations and red-tinged ears. Mostly Elise's.
"You're so transparently in love. Just go for the whole thing already!" Mikki laughed.
"Transparency in love, huh? Don't even get me started on you and David," Elise countered.
"Cheap shot."
"Blunt honesty."

There was little time left to chat once food arrived, so the friends chowed down at lightning speed. Elise dropped two twenties and dashed to her sister's suite to pick up the day's passes; Mikki waiting for her downstairs. Speed walking with a heavy case in tow, and Elise wearing heels, had them out of breath by the time they reached the DC Panel.

"Next time, we'll get breakfast to go," Elise wheezed as she fell onto a reserved chair, rubbing over her calves.
"No kidding. ---- Ugh. I better get my gear ready. Five minutes," Mikki huffed as she scrambled through the case. Lens attached to her favorite camera, and she was off to the photographer's pit on the right-hand side of the stage.

Afterwards, they headed backstage for quick photo ops, which had both a bit giddy. Who wouldn't be when standing next to the Man of Steel and Gotham's Dark Knight? Then it was time to part ways, Mikki rushing to her meetings, and Elise to her hotel. After all, Oscar had promised the best food she'd ever tasted. While that was a great lure, it was more about some alone time with him. Some one-on-one before his attention would be split with interviews and panels, again.

She was almost at their suite's door when she heard muffled yelling. Cuss words scattered between rage-filled words. She flinched. The voice doing the yelling was Oscar's, only she'd never heard him this aggravated. Her first instinct was to turn around and walk away. She'd been conditioned like that by Frank. Fear of whatever caused such anger. Fear it might get taken out on her.

But this was Oscar. She mentally bit her tongue for even hinting at the comparison. She slid the key card into the lock, opening and closing the door as quietly as possible, waiting in the entrance area of the suite. A few more cuss words. An angry fist hitting a wooden surface. She flinched again, holding her breath. Maybe she should leave, but for whatever reason, she stood frozen.

"I owe you? I OWE YOU? What the fuck do I owe you? A thanks for being a complete bitch?"

Oscar's voice cracked with the last word while he stared in shock out of the living room. He was met with mirrored expression. He had caught Elise waiting, and clearly he didn't mean to be seen or heard like this, and clearly, she was completely taken aback by his choice of yelled words.
The person on the other side of the call was now doing the yelling, and by what Elise could hear, it sounded like a woman. She didn't even have to guess who it was. She knew it was Lorraine. Oscar's face gave that one away somehow. His stare shifted to the floor before he turned his back to her, walking back into the living room.

Elise gulped and snuck to the bathroom, locking the door behind herself. Again, as quietly as possible. She turned on the water, her hands shaking, and heart rate way up. The running water was a guise to make Oscar think that she was freshening up. In reality, she wanted to drown out whatever was left of the conversation. A few more shouted words, then it got quiet. She heard a door open, muffled but calm voices. Then a thud, indicating the door had closed.

She remained in the bathroom longer than was necessary. It was her way to create a buffer. To let him collect his thoughts, cool off sort of speak, which he clearly needed or else he'd have knocked on the bathroom door by now. And she needed to calm herself, and to prepare herself for whatever.

She'd never seen him angry. Truly angry. Never heard him call anyone a name either. It terrified her to know that he could reach such a level. She looked in the mirror; her heart settling back to a normal speed as she listened to the soothing sound of running water. White noise always seemed to help her like that.

She cut off the water, taking in a deep breath. She didn't know the whole story. Didn't know which of his buttons had been pushed to make him react like that. She didn't want to play judge without knowing all the facts. Still, this was frightening. Mostly because it was a side she'd not seen on him.

She took in a few more breaths, finally pacing to the living room where Oscar was setting up for lunch; whatever he'd ordered hidden under a couple of silver plated domes. Oscar must've heard her because for a fraction of a second he stopped all his movements. A clenched jaw and a hitched breath without looking at her was all he offered in that very moment, then he returned to setting the table.

An uneasy silence remained, only interrupted by chimes of metal and glass. A few more seconds skipped without talking. Just a few beats, but it felt like eternity. "I didn't mean to scare you," he muttered, eyes on the table.
"I ... I know," Elise stammered. "Are you ... are you ok?" she asked carefully.
"Yes..." Oscar furrowed his brows; his eyes fixed on placing utensils as neatly as possible.

Elise was unsure what to do. He still seemed tense. His whole body on alert. Asking him anything might bring him to an edge again. Pretending like nothing happened wasn't the right thing either. She watched while he kept setting the table.

He stayed silent. And he stayed fixed on the task. Intense precision of how napkins were folded and placed. Perfection down to a millimeter. He had never cared before. Not to perfection, at least. Him caring now, not looking up once, was a trick to distract his mind. He wandered to the fridge and got a bottle of Merlot, ready to open it, but Elise swiftly interjected the second he turned around, taking the bottle from his hands, setting it on the table instead. She took his hands into hers, her grays searching for his deep, caramel browns.

There was a slight tremble in her hands, but she tried to cover that by squeezing and releasing his. "Talk to me," she whispered.
"There's nothing...." he started, but she quickly shook her head in disapproval.
"I don't need details. But I do need you to talk to me. You're upset. Don't close off. Talk to me," she repeated with growing confidence.

He heaved his chest. "It was Lorraine," he mumbled, trying to pull his hands out of Elise's, but she held on tight.
"I gathered as much," she stated.
"I don't want her to come between us," Oscar's voice gained some volume.
"Why would she?" Elise drew in her brows.
"Because she's pissed off. About how we broke it off. That I'm happy." His eyes finally found hers; tensing hands, and an angry flicker behind his irises, his blood pressure rising again. In part because of Lorraine. And in part, because he was met with an unsettling expression.

He may not have felt the tremble in Elise's hands earlier, but he saw the remnants of fear behind her grays now, and a held, shaking breath. He felt his heart drop. Out of all the things he disliked, all the things that made his stomach churn, scaring her had to be on top of the list of things he hated. So his pulse quickened. Anger, however, slowly replaced by fear.

"I take it she saw something on the news?" Elise asked, careful in her tone again.
"Yes. Pictures of us from last night at the concert. And the night before. Olivia's Instagram. And one with Chloé at the park. I don't even know..."
"Was she drunk again?" Elise cut off. Right now, she didn't care about how someone had taken pictures of them at the park.
"Yes."

Elise's mind went in all sorts of directions. So many questions. So many things she wanted to say. But she felt like it wasn't her place, and yet, it was. "Why does she keep calling you? Why not her friends?" She queried, eyes locked on his.
"It's complicated," Oscar gulped, then he looked away again.
"Complicated like --- a complicated explanation of why you stayed with her for so long? Or --- complicated because you still care about her after being with her for so long?"
"What makes you think I still care about her?" He gaped.

"Because if you didn't give off that vibe, she wouldn't keep calling. I'm not saying it's intentional. But nothing is stopping you from hanging up or from getting a new number," Elise stated quite forwardly. Her hands slipped from Oscar's. She reached for the Merlot, opening the bottle and pouring herself a glass; taking a sip before pacing to the sofa where she slumped down. She pulled her legs up at an angle, her back turned towards him.

Oscar ran his hands through his curls a few times over. Getting a cold shoulder from Elise was the last thing he wanted this weekend. He pulled in a few deep breaths before following her, opting to sit on the coffee table in front of the sofa instead of next to her. He scanned over her. Just a slow, take in all her reactions kind of scan. There was a cold distance that seemed to have spread to her whole body and he disliked it.

"It's complicated like --- a complicated explanation of why I stayed with her for so long," he started. Elise turned to face him, placing her glass on the side table next to the sofa. This time, she did the scanning.

He looked exhausted. Tired of whatever was gnawing at the back of his mind. It made him look older. A good ten years older. Deep creases on his forehead indicated his search in how he should begin. He ran his left hand over the back of his neck, his gaze settling to a point on the floor. A forced breath out, his gaze tilted to meet hers; an unspoken request for Let me explain without
"When I met her, it was fun. Just --- casual," he disclosed in a low voice. "It was mutual. Get together when both of us were in town. No strings attached," he continued. "But casual became serious ---," he halted, gaze falling to his hands. Him playing with his fingers, another nervous tick of his. "It became serious because we weren't careful, and she --- she got pregnant." He scratched the left side of his undercut. An anxious gulp followed, and a long pause. A very long, anxiety-filled pause during which the pulsing vein on his neck picked up speed.

"She was almost five months when things went wrong. We don't know what. Thing is," he clenched his jaw, focusing eyes back up, "I was relieved. --- I mean, I was looking forward to the baby. It was going to be a boy. I would've taken care of him. Done everything for him. But --- I couldn't see myself with her, so --- I was relieved," his voice became shaky. Another pause. "There's nothing wrong with raising a child without being together," Elise whispered to drive the conversation forward.

"No.. you're right. But --- it wouldn't have been right, I guess. I felt guilty for feeling that way. For feeling relieved. So I stayed. I thought I could make it work somehow. And there were moments when I really thought, I was in love. But I think, it was all denial, and lust, and guilt, maybe a little bit of love, but not --- not in love. The miscarriage was difficult on her. I think it would be on anyone. It added to the guilt and the whole not walking out on her situation.

So, --- it's complicated because I stayed with her out of guilt. And she learned to use it. Against me. And then the whole press thing happened with her. She'd been tipping off paparazzi. It escalated when my family got involved. I said some fucktup shit when I found out. Some really fucktup shit. And now I feel guilty when she calls me and she's drunk. I feel responsible. In part at least. I never intended to leave her broken like that. And I didn't mean to call her .....," Oscar paused.

"A bitch?" Elise perked her brow. Oscar nodded. "Hmmm... That seemed to have slipped out in anger," Elise paused, searching for something else to say, but she came up empty. A paralyzed silence draped over them. Neither sure what to say. Both thinking how to proceed.

"Are you... Are you upset?" Oscar asked warily.
"I don't know what I am." Elise shook her head; gears turning. "I'm not... upset. For that, I'd have to know her too, I think. I'm just... stunned." She drew in a long breath. "I feel like..." Her mind drifted.
"Feel like?"
"Like I should be asking questions, but at the same time I shouldn't because it's none of my business. I don't know much about breakups. I only had three. Two sort of... it ended mutually. And Frank... well, you know how I dealt with that. But I always felt like a break up shouldn't affect a current relationship. But this one - Lorraine's and yours - it does. So..." she halted.
"So ask," Oscar encouraged.

There were several questions running through Elise's mind. Quite a few, actually. She kept rewording, rephrasing, reorganizing. She wanted to be careful, not only about how she asked but what. Initially, she didn't want details, but now she felt like she needed them.
"Who else knows? About the pregnancy, I mean."
"Mike, James, Lenny. Maybe Christine, but I never told her directly."
"So, not that many, then?"
"No."
"Why?"
"She wanted to keep it quiet until she showed. Like really showed."
"Do you think, she'll use this against you somehow?"
"You mean talk to the press? No. Her parents don't know. I don't think she ever wants them to find out."
That answer was a bit of a surprise to Elise, but she didn't want to linger on that.

"How many times has she called you since Montreal?"
"Six or seven times."
Elise hitched a breath. Stinging pain. In her heart. She looked to the floor. "So quite a few times then?" She managed that question barely just.
Oscar just nodded.
"Has she called while you stayed with me?" was next.
"Yes. Once. While you were working."
"Does she want you back?"
"Sweetie. I promise you, there's nothing left for her. Nothing."
"You didn't answer the question."
"She brought it up once. Yes. But I told her it's over."
Silence again. Oscar waited. It felt like Elise had at least one more question but he couldn't tell for sure. Her gaze had drifted to a vacant stare like she needed to let all this settle in, but also like she was thinking about something else.
"Liz?" he whispered, reaching for her hands. She shook her head lightly. "Tell me what's on your mind, please?" he pleaded softly. She shook her head again.
There was a thought clinging on. Scratching at the back. A worry, really. Something she hadn't thought of before. But now, it was there because she saw things from a different angle. She took a deep breath in. The next thing would come off like an accusation no matter how careful she organized the words.

"Do you really want to have kids? Or is it out of guilt?" she trembled out. "I mean, we're not even there, yet. But I did notice, it seems to have come up before we even joked about marriage. So ---- Tell me. Tell me it's not a guilt thing."
"It's not." The answer came instantaneously. "I can't explain it. With her --- I couldn't see myself like that. I woke up every day, looking at her, scared. And it wasn't the excited kind of scared. It was the //what the fuck am I doing// kind of scared. I would've taken care of him of course. He was my child, after all. My baby. I just couldn't see her in that picture. I think it would've been awful raising a child like that. Not caring for the person I would have had the child with. Loathing her almost. And children, --- they pick up on that," he gulped.

"But with you, I care. I mean... I can see myself waking up next to you. Not just with what we have now. But you --- with a baby tummy. And it doesn't scare me. I can see you holding our child. And messy mornings because he or she spilled juice or painted on the walls. And you rushing to pick up after. Or me hiding the evidence," Oscar chuckled at the thought. "I don't know why I didn't see it with Lorraine, but I do see it with you. And I'm one hundred percent sure that it's not a guilt thing. I really do want kids, but I want them with the right person. I can't tell you why, but I know, in my heart, I know that that's you." He squeezed Elise's hands.

Elise hitched a breath. She pulled her hands out of his, palming his face, chuckling at the stubble tickling her skin. She closed her eyes for a second. Just one second. "You can really see yourself waking up next to me when I'm all big and potato like?" she asked with a raised brow.
"Yes. And helping you roll out of bed to go to the bathroom," he chuckled as he curled his hands over hers, pulling her palms to his lips, leaving behind soft kisses. "I love you so much. So much. I don't want this to come between us," he mumbled into her left palm.
Another moment of silence. Skipped breaths. Turning gears. "Then... set some boundaries for her. I don't mind if she calls. I understand there's history. I recognize that. You two shared something quite special. Even if you didn't love her, it was something special. But she needs boundaries. A set time. And help. Real help," Elise suggested. Oscar agreed with nodded silence. "And as for the guilt thing. You have to let that go. You have to talk it out and then let it go. Or it'll eat you up."

Elise glanced at the scar on her wrist. Just for a fraction of a second, but Oscar caught the fast glance.

"You're right," he sighed, leaving another kiss on one of her palms. He pulled himself to a stand, ready to wander to the dining table, but Elise held firmly to his hands. She guided his arms around her waist, sliding hers over his shoulders after, hugging him tightly. And he reciprocated with equal embrace.

"You would've been a great dad. You will be a great dad. One day," she whispered.
"You think so?" He nuzzled her neck.
"I know so," she reassured. She stepped back, palming his face again. There was sadness clinging on to his eyes. But there was also some relief. Relief that he'd told her and that she wasn't angry. "Let's eat," she suggested.
"It's probably cold by now," he sighed.
"I don't care. Let's eat," she smiled, trying to pivot out of his arms. This time he held on.

He sunk his face into her neck, hugging her tightly. She could feel his brows contract a few times. Hear him draw in deep, soothing breaths. Then she felt a tear against her neck. A few tears actually. He pulled her as close as he could, squeezing her against himself. And she let him hold on and cry.

He mumbled a thank you against her neck a few minutes later.
"For what, Lindo?" She asked, puzzled.
"For ... listening. For being here. For being you," he whispered.
"You'd do the same," she whispered back. "And you have, already."
"I know. But still. --- I can't believe how lucky I am," he mumbled into her ear, then finally stepped back.
"Neither can I," she smiled, again; thumbing away the remainder of the tears on his cheeks.

Lunch was quiet. He kept gazing at her. Softly tracking her movements like he'd never seen her eat food before. Small details were important to him today. They always had been, but today more so than ever. He paid attention to how she cut her vegetables. How she rested fork and knife on the rim of her plate when she paused for some wine. And to how she smiled reassuringly when she caught his gaze.

She did some detailing of her own. Noting how he heaved a breath now and then like he was still trying to let go of the call, still trying to let go of guilt. The latter would take time. But she also saw how his lips curled upward now and then, into a small smile, like he was thinking of the future again. And how he rested his left hand on the table when he paused for wine, inching it closer to her side in hopes she'd reach back. And she did. A few times. Intertwining her fingertips with his.

"I haven't even had a chance to tell you how beautiful you look today." His lips twisted. "Sexy, actually," he corrected himself with a light chuckle; reaching over and skimming the edge of the neckline of her dress.
"Yeah. Your brother said you might like this one." She nibbled her bottom lip.
"It's not just the dress. It's all of you." He caressed her cheek.
She blushed. It had been a while since he'd made her blush like that. With a soft, lasting gaze, and honey, smooth words, and a feather-light touch.

She got up and ambled to his side. She pulled his hands, tugging for him to get up. He did, and she leaned a soft kiss on his lips.
"Ich liebe dich," she whispered.
"Ich weiss," he smiled, running his index over her brows down the bridge of her nose to her lips. She smiled at his reply. He'd pronounced the words correctly which had her stomach fill with butterflies.
"Going to check my email before we're heading over," she explained when she let go to get her laptop from the bedroom.

He responded with another nodded smile; starting up his own laptop. How lucky he was.

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"Woahhhhh, girl! Look at you! Smoking hot," Olivia Munn shouted when she spotted Elise backstage before the //Women Who Kick Ass// panel in Hall H an hour later.
"Thank you," Elise grinned. She spun around a couple of times, showing off dress, shoes, and her oversized purse. Hand on hip and model strut included. Now and then, it felt nice to show off like that. "So are you sitting in or watching?" she wondered when she stopped spinning.
"Watching," Olivia pulled Elise into a hug.
Out of the entire X-Men cast, Olivia was the one Elise talked to the most. It was an easy going kind of friendship. There wasn't anything specific they had in common but somehow, they clicked. Maybe it was Olivia's mischievous nature. Always up for small pranks. Or maybe it was because Elise didn't talk show business and diets around the actress. Always aware that without cameras rolling, most celebs had a regular life. Either way, they hit it off. And with that came a comfort; both knowing that they could confide in each other whenever either had a rough day. And both quite able to read the other by now; knowing when one had a rough day.

Today was no exception. Olivia hugged tightly, but Elise's embrace was almost feeble. "Is he being mean?" Olivia quirked a brow, looking over Elise's shoulder. Oscar was busy talking with James [Redfield] and Lenny. He caught Olivia leering and cringed.
"No. It's just been a long week," Elise sighed.
"Right! Come on, girl. What's up?" Olivia elbowed Elise.
"His ex called," Elise whispered.
"Yikes. What was that like?" Olivia prodded on.
"Loud." Elise's eyes widened.
"That bad, huh? What did she call about?" Olivia prodded on.
"I guess she saw some pictures." Elise shrugged with a shake of her head.

"I don't think it was your picture that ticked him off," Elise assured; recalling the picture Oscar had mentioned earlier. "Anyways. We talked it out, but ugh... blah. I don't want to talk about it anymore. The rest is really just a looooong week. How do you guys keep up with all this?" Elise redirected skillfully.

"Lots of help," Olivia laughed. "See that girl over there. My agent hired her as my P.A. Honestly. Not sure how I ever dealt without one. And that woman over there, she's here to make sure my hair doesn't go flat, and that my makeup stays sparkly fresh. She's a convention hire, though, so I
probably won't see her again. And that guy, he's my P.R. rep. He's a little grumpy. Like Lenny," Olivia snickered as she pointed to a short-statured man in a deep charcoal suit. "And look, Oscar has a hair tamer, too. He needs it more than me," she added.

Elise laughed at the last statement. Oscar's hair really did need help to stay in place. The stylist tried to tuck and twist misbehaving curls, but it was almost like battling a defying child, not just the hair but the way Oscar tried to duck away. One stern glare from Lenny, though, and Oscar behaved, but not without a huff and big frown.

Looking at the rest of the group surrounding Oscar, Elise never really knew that it took so many people to keep him on top of his game. James, of course, was a given for big events around the West Coast, and of course, negotiating for auditions. Lenny being around was also the norm; although he usually worked on the East Coast and was primarily responsible for press related issues which he usually handled via phone calls.

But now, there were also a P.A., the stylist, a bodyguard, and some other person handing Oscar a stack of papers. Most likely interview questions so he could prepare. Bryan Singer and a few executive looking people hovered as well. All of them looked deeply immersed in schedules or contracts or whatever they were running over; Oscar occasionally nodding at whatever Bryan told him.

Elise laughed again. This time at the pleading //get me out of here// puppy dog eyes Oscar gave her. She just shrugged, suppressing another laugh. "I'm glad you two talked it out," Olivia's lips curled into a smile when she caught the exchange. "But you know, if you ever need to talk, I'm here. Not just about Oscar either. But --- you know. Anything," she encouraged.

"I know. And I appreciate that. Just some things..." Elise scrunched her nose. "Got it," Olivia acknowledged. "Panel is about to start. You coming along, right?" She nudged Elise's shoulder with hers in a //let's get going// way. Elise threw out a "yes" with a request to give her a few minutes and reserving a chair, and Olivia replied with two thumbs up.

Elise pivoted, her focus back on Oscar, seeing if she could catch him alone. Just for a minute. Just a minute of closeness. Like the closeness he'd given her on the way over when he'd held on to her hand as though his life depended on it, and she'd squeezed back to assure him that she wasn't going to let go.

The quiet minute came when he stepped away to get some water. She bee-lined his way, brushing her right fingertips over his free, left hand. He grasped on and pulled her hand to his lips for a lasting kiss. No words. Just a tender moment of being in each other's company. The moment was short lived when a whistle interrupted them.

"Also so würde ich dich nicht rumlaufen lassen, [Well well - I wouldn't let you walk around like that,] " Michael Fassbender smirked behind them. "Chauvinist! Als ob ich deine Genehmigung bräuchte, [Chauvinist! As if I need your permission,] " Elise lifted her brow while crossing her arms. Michael quickly shot out an "Ich mach ja nur Spaß [I'm only joking]", and she caved for a laughed hug. A squinted disapproval, however, had Michael throw his hands in the air. "I wasn't flirting," his voice cracked.

Oscar just stood wide-eyed. "Tuck that away, Lindo. Or else you won't get to peel this off," Elise hinted at the stare, then blew Oscar a kiss before making her way to the front of the Hall H stage. Oscar gawked after her. So did
"What a woman!" Michael husked out. "I'm aware!" Oscar warned with a squint. Michael just laughed it off. "So how did she do? Star Wars?" he diverted, gesturing with his chin to were Elise had disappeared to. Oscar hitched a breath. "She's scared. But --- better than expected," he disclosed. "I don't blame 'er," James McAvoy cut in from the side. "Shit... Marvel is big. But Star Wars --- it's a fucking universe."

"Yeah. That's how she sees it, too," Oscar chuckled. "I just hope she doesn't grow tired." He stared vacantly towards the stage. "I doubt it," Michael patted Oscar on the back. "I don't know her like you, but... I'm venturing she's a lot more resilient than even she knows. Or else... she'd have left, or at least not shown up today. Especially in that dress."
"Dude," Oscar opened his hands to a what the fuck gesture, then laughed. Michael wasn't entirely wrong. About both: her still being here, and her wearing that dress.

"So, mate?" A wide, almost impish grin grew on James' [McAvoy's] face as he picked up the thread. A wide, impish, and very knowing grin. "Did you ask 'er, yet, or what?"
Chapter 20

"To Star Wars? Yeah... yesterday," Oscar wisecracked.
"That's not what I meant, and you know that. But --- since I didn't see a ring when she walked away, I'm guessing you didn't," James McAvoy prodded on with a raised brow, grin still plastered across his face.
"I wanted to. But she stopped me." Oscar drew in a long breath.
"Does her dad know you want to ask?" Michael took over.
"He does. He sounded quite happy when he gave me his blessing." Oscar's eyes crinkled at the corners.
"Well fuck! I taught you the words. Try again!" Michael egged on.

"After today, I think... I'm going to wait a little longer." Oscar's jaw clenched.
"Why? What happened?" A unison question.
"My ex called."
"Shit." Unison response.
"Hmmmm. Plus. I did some more thinking... it's too close to, you know --- Joe." Oscar scratched over the back of his neck.
"Ah, crap. I forgot about that. Hmmmmm... Might be best to wait," Michael agreed with drawn in brows.
"You should ask 'er when she visits again," James suggested. "I understand the whole wait a decent amount of time after the date. But, is there ever a good time? When it comes to ... yer know... There's always a special day or occasion. A memory... I mean, it's been ten years, right?"
"It has," Oscar confirmed. "But...," he cut himself off. Heaved sigh and lost gaze.

"Well. I think you'll know when the moment is right. I wouldn't know for myself, but I think you'll know. It's a feeling, I'm sure," Michael explained.
"Of course he will. --- Show us the ring, at least." James wiggled his brows, the blue of his eyes brighter than usual.
"Are you insane?" Oscar gaped.
"A little, maybe. Only because I know you have it with yer," James smirked knowingly, his eyes shifting to Oscar's jeans.

Oscar squeezed his lips to a thin line, looking around, trying to deflect lingering stares, but wide
//show us already// hand gestures from Fassbender and McAvoy and Oscar - very reluctantly-reached into the back pocket of his jeans, procuring a slim case that opened in such a way that the ring seemed to spin upward.
"Silver?" James raised a surprised brow.
"Platinum. She doesn't really like gold," Oscar pointed out.
"Turquoise diamond?" Michael inspected the ring closer.
"It's a tourmaline. Turquoise is her favorite color," Oscar beamed.
"When did you get it?" Michael wondered.
"The day after she left Montreal." Oscar blushed at the ears.
"My god. This is serious," James stated with wide eyes and the sharpest rolled r.

"That's a pretty ring." A voice behind the group of men whispered.
"Shit!" Oscar jumped. "Scared me for a second, Mike." He elbowed his brother.
"You should be scared. Don't you think you should introduce her to mom first?" Mike gaped.
"We never needed mom's approval!" Oscar countered sternly.
"I know that. But I think, Elise would want that," Mike argued back.
"Elise would want what?" A female voice cut in this time. Oscar squeezed his eyes shut. He knew that voice. It came with amber eyes and dark brown hair and an elfin-like stature. He spun around, and sure enough, Elise's BFF was grinning up at him. "Meet my mom," Oscar said with thin lips and a tremble. "Hmmmm... I'd say that's a good idea if you want to put that rock on Liz's finger," Mikki scrunched her nose.

"Please. Do. Not...." Oscar drew out a pause between each word. ".I... tell her? Yeah. Yeah. Don't worry. She does know you want to ask. But I don't think she knows you have a ring --- and my god, how much did you pay for that?" Mikki gasped when she got a closer look. Devilish smile meeting pleading puppy dog eyes. "Mikki. Please? PLEASE? I'm begging." Oscar's voice went up in pitch. "I promise front row photo opportunity at the premiere. Please?" He started bribing. Wide grin on face, Mikki twisted thumb and index over her lips. Secret locked away.

"Why is everyone huddled up like that?" another female voice swerved in. Oscar quickly shut the case, returning it to the back pocket of his jeans before facing the new voice, trying his best not to choke on a startled breath. "Just talking about your sister," Mikki grinned mischievously before dashing to take some pictures of some of the other X-Men cast. "Really? About what?" Christine poked.

There was a forced, thin smile from Oscar and wide-eyed stares from Fassbender, McAvoy, and Mike. Christine held an interrogating stare. One of them would break sooner or later, that much she knew. All she needed was a hint of whom to pursue with questions. Eyes grew wider and wider; the smile slowly faltered. 

"Alright guys, you're up. We need a group picture. This will be a combined panel, by the way. Ryan is going to join us a little later, so is Hugh, and Stan," one of the executives interrupted. Christine doubted she'd ever seen a group disband this fast, all scurrying to take places. Except for Mike, and that was only because Christine had hooked her left arm into his right just before the stare off was broken.

"So. Mike. Mikey. Michael. ... Oscar's little brother." Christine kept her arm hooked as she flattened the palm of her free hand against his chest. "We're almost family, aren't we?" She smiled with a voice so seductively smooth and sweet it sent a prickling sensation down Mike's spine.

"Yup. Almost. Definitely close," Mike nodded in agreement. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Oscar gawking at them. More like a glared warning of /dude, don't/. "And, well... family ---- they tell each other everything, don't they?" Christine gently rubbed Mike's chest like he was some kind of cat. She had caught Oscar's stare and knew full well he couldn't leave his spot to interfere, so she just had to egg on. Devilish, sweet smile and all.

"I ... yes. I... uhm... I think," Mike stammered. "And... My big sister and Oscar. They're really close. In fact, I know he wants to ask her to marry him." Christine lifted a brow, the hooked arm snaking tighter around Mike's trapped arm. No way to escape now. "Uhm.... Maybe?" Mike's eyes went wide, voice up in pitch. "And? Does he have a ring? Or is he just... talk?" Christine narrowed down. "Why do you have to do this to me? He's going to kick my ass," Mike winced in her hold. For a woman with such a thin frame, Christine was exceedingly strong. When she wanted to be that is.
She didn't say anything else. She just geared a wicked grin towards Oscar, kissing Mike's cheek, then ambled back towards James who was watching Berenjena Pequeñita while his wife was getting the four-one-one. She leaned up and whispered into her husband's ear, and James just heaved his chest, twitching an eye at Oscar.

Oscar, who had caught the whole scene from a distance, balled his right hand into a fist and smacked it with a twist against his left palm. The universal sign of //I'm going to kick your ass// in sibling lingo, which he geared at Mike. Mike, of course, scuttled to hide; behind James and Christine that is, both of which gave him stares as well.

"Don't ... kill... the messenger?" he squeaked out.
"Oh. I wasn't planning on it, especially since you have to get a message back to your brother," James leaned down, whispering.
"Yup. OK. I think, uhhmmm... he knows that but I'll let him know," Mike stuttered.
"Good." James squeezed Mike's shoulder with a steely //I mean what I said// face and a tall //I mean business// stance that would've sent even the most confident person running. Cold lawyer poker face was, after all, one of his fortes.

The panel itself lasted a good hour and a half. Elise sat front row, left-hand side, joined by her family, Mike, and her BFF. Now and then, Oscar caught Christine whispering into Elise's ear. Mikki, too. All three laughing at whatever. He aimed a pleading look towards Christine at some point, fully aware she knew what he was worried about. Elise's sister mouthed a //don't worry// his way, then crossed her heart when Elise wasn't looking. Christine could almost feel the relieved sigh that crossed Oscar's lips.

One more interview backstage, then it was time for another, contracted cast party; Christine and James tagging along this time while Lenny agreed to watch Tiny. That was definitely a surprise.
"Wow. Didn't know he could be so... paternal," Elise craned her neck to look after Lenny.
"You do know, he has kids, right?" James laughed.
"He does? Since when?" Elise gaped.
"Yup. His oldest is almost twelve. And his youngest, five," James said matter of factly.
"How many does he have?" Elise wondered as they started towards the party venue.
James held up his open, left hand.

"FIVE? Five? Like one, two, three, four, five? You're kidding, right?" Elise counted on her own hand, looking back, but Lenny must've already turned a corner somewhere as he was nowhere to be seen.
"Nope. Not kidding. Twelve, ten, eight, eight, and five. You know, when he's on the phone, if he's not talking to press or agency, he's usually talking to his kids," James smiled.
"That explains why he's always attached. But FIVE?" Elise repeated, completely shocked.

Granted, she only knew Lenny from a few encounters, during which he always seemed busy chatting on the phone, so she never interrupted; but the fact that she didn't know he had kids -five kids- caught her a bit off guard. She shook her head at her own unawareness.

"And no end in sight," Oscar swooped in from Elise's left, wrapping his arm around her waist to pull her close, almost making her trip over her own heels.
"You mean to tell me, his wife or ... significant other is willing to have more?" Elise gaped. Oscar boomed out a laugh.
"His wife. And she is. But I think he said seven is the limit," Oscar smirked.
Elise just shook her head. "You're not getting that many from me."
"I told you. Three," Oscar winked.

"How about you guys move in together first. Maybe get married,... adopt some puppies,... buy a house. You know... A,B,C,..." James suggested with a raised brow and a fleeting glance to Oscar's jeans' back pocket.

Oscar nearly choked on a piece of gum. "I thought Tina was the conservative one," he coughed. "She is a lot more liberal than you think," James countered with a smirk.

"Really? That explains a few things," Oscar lifted his left brow, whispering "whip cream".

James just responded with a //don't start//.

"Personally, I don't think marriage is necessary to raise a child," Elise chimed back in. "But living together... I do agree that should come first," she added softly.

"Well, whatever you two decide, you know," James smiled at Elise, then leered at Oscar.

They reached the venue; Mikki, Mike, and Christine already chatting with some of the cast as they had walked ahead. James strolled towards his wife, swung his arm around her waist, and pulled her in for a passionate kiss. A slightly dipped, passionate kiss. Christine, of course, blushed at the unified //awe// that followed, then shyly pushed her husband back by his chest; but he held on, pressing a snickered kiss against Christine's temple. Elise chuckled at the scene, sighing softly.

That didn't go past Oscar. So when she was ready to head towards the crowd, he stopped her. He pulled her close, then ran his hands over her shoulders down her arms.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered while tinkering with the Deadpool pin on the neckline. His nerd.

"You already said that today. You only have to say it once a day, you know," she smirked.

"Preferably in the morning," she wiggled her brows.

"Ah yeah? Is that a rule?" he laughed softly, still tinkering with the pin, occasionally skimming over the neckline of the dress. His sexy nerd.

"Yes," she replied with confidence.

He chuckled, again; fingertips now detailing her collarbone towards the left curve of her neck. How much he wanted to kiss her there. Right now. Softly. Just enough pressure to let her know how much he loved kissing her there. Just enough pressure to hear his favorite, stifled gasp from her. Just enough to feel emotional and sensual connection through tenuous touch.

"Liz," he whispered. "I want you to know, there's only you."

"Really? I see other people here," she jested.

He laughed, then heaved his chest. "That's not what I meant." He swallowed a breath. "I meant earlier. I don't think, I made it clear enough. There is no one..."

"Stop," she cut him off softly. "I know. I get it. You don't have to repeat. And you don't have to be sorry or feel guilty. I know, there is no one else. I know it's just me."

He pulled her left hand to his face, leaving a kiss on the back, then rested his nose on the same spot where he'd left the kiss, pushing a few breaths against her skin. "Let's go have fun. Fassbender is already waiting, and by the looks of it, he wants to dance. How much you want to bet he's requested German pop music?" Oscar scrunched his nose, deep crinkles turning upwards at the corners of his eyes.

Elise laughed when she glimpsed Michael shimmying his shoulders their way. "I'm pretty sure, I'm going to lose if I bet against that, but.... if you're right...," she leaned to Oscar's ear. "... you get to undress me --- back at the hotel. And trust me. You really, really want to undress me tonight." She placed a languid kiss behind his lobe before walking off with a very notable sway of her hips,
laughing when Michael hooked his arm into hers as she steered towards the cast.

Oscar peered after them, mouth agape, chuckling when he saw her glance back to see if he was following. He winked, then waited. He needed a minute to let this moment settle in. Not just because she had given him goosebumps but because he felt like the luckiest man alive. And because he loved watching her from afar now and then.

Like the way she talked to his friends and co-stars. At ease, smiling, with welcoming posture, and listening intently. Why wouldn't she? After all, they were her friends now, too, and she cared deeply about people close to her. It showed in how she asked them about their lives. How she knew about whose kids had been sick, who had attended school recitals, and who was still planning the whole family thing.

He loved that she was adamant about keeping focus like that. She knew they had talked movie and filming and character development all day and probably needed whatever distraction they could get. And when a few hunger laden grumbles arose - because food wasn't ready, yet - he laughed at the fact that she'd brought along their favorite snacks, because somehow she knew they'd need them.

"I love your girlfriend," Olivia snickered while nibbling on some licorice. "You do huh?" Oscar laughed when he reached the group.

"Yup. --- Heyyyyy... get your own." Olivia swatted at James McAvoy's hand. "Don't worry, James. I have enough for everyone," Elise laughed, setting her oversized purse on a table nearby, handing James curry flavored pretzels. The actor's eyes grew wide. "You like curry-flavored foods, right? I never tried these, but...," Elise smiled. "I love these. Where'd yer find 'em?" James wrinkled his nose.

"It's a secret." Elise mirrored the expression. "Anyways. Alex, jelly beans for you. Sophie, I got pizza flavored Pringles for you. After Eight for Michael. I didn't want the peanut butter cups to melt, so I got you peanut butter pieces *she handed a small bag to Oscar*..."

"Holy shit girl. You're like a dealer. I was wondering why you were carrying such a big ass bag. Is there a vending machine in there?" Mikki quipped when Elise kept procuring snack after snack.

"Oh shut up," Elise stuck out her tongue at her friend. "You're just upset because you didn't think of it first. Anyways, some Cheetos for you, of course. And Mike, I made Rummy Bears for you. Don't ask. Just make sure you don't get caught, and don't hand any to people under twenty-one!" Elise warned, handing a small container with rum soaked gummy bears to Oscar's brother, which he accepted; with a mischievous smile of course.

"Oh shut up," Elise stuck out her tongue at her friend. "You're just upset because you didn't think of it first. Anyways, some Cheetos for you, of course. And Mike, I made Rummy Bears for you. Don't ask. Just make sure you don't get caught, and don't hand any to people under twenty-one!" Elise warned, handing a small container with rum soaked gummy bears to Oscar's brother, which he accepted; with a mischievous smile of course.

"Wait a minute! How come he got the good stuff and we're left with...," Fassbender frowned. "Awe. Don't worry. I brought enough for everyone." Elise procured another, small container. "Yup. I love her," Olivia laughed, stealing the container and taking off with it; Fassbender and McAvoy chasing after her.

"Oh my god. You're... you're a troublemaker." Oscar eyeballed Elise from the side. "I never said, I wasn't." Her lips curled right, a mischievous flicker in her eyes. "When did you even make those?" Oscar wondered with an impressed yet stunned, raised brow. "This morning. While you were sleeping." She winked. "I used the Zacapa. You don't mind, do you?"

Oscar shook his head, laughing. "You're something else," he chuckled a kiss on her forehead.

"Ach nein, wie süß, [Awe, no, how cute,]" Michael mocked when he returned. "Hört auf zu küssen
und kommt tanzen! [Stop kissing and come dance!]
"It's only eight. A little too early to dance," Elise countered.
"Never too early to dance to Nena." Michael held out his hand; the intro to "Irgendwie, Irgendwo, Irgendwann" already playing in the background. Elise raised a brow towards Oscar and he reciprocated with an //I told you so/ nod. She laughed and slid her hand into Michael's who led her to a still fairly empty dance floor.

Like last time the cast was out together, it took Elise a couple of songs before she got into the whole //I don't care that people are watching// mode. And like last time, Oscar joined after watching her for a while. He thought it endearing how she went from shy side to side steps to more daring slides and spins. And once again, by the time he joined, most of the cast was on the floor; Christine, James, and Mike being part of the group this time.

All that dancing, of course, burned energy. Hunger grumbles rose again. "Sorry, all out," Elise laughed when she saw Michael's pleading look for more goodies. "Och menno [awe man]," Michael frowned.
"Let me go find out what's going on," Oscar aimed for one of the venue's staff. A few minutes passed and he returned with news that the catering team was late. That didn't sit well with some. "We should go to Toni's," Elise suggested.
"You think he'll have space for ..." Oscar took headcount. "Eleven? --- At this hour?" He glanced at his watch; the face already showing 9 p.m.
"Let me call. How long do you guys have to stay anyways?" Elise held off on dialing. "We could've left ten minutes ago," Michael stated, scratching the face of his watch.

Fast fingers over glowing numbers. Some back and forth in Italian. A smile when she hung up. "He said they're open till midnight. So, we can head over now or wait a little while longer."
"Let's go now," McAvoy pushed on.

Elise laughed at the impatience. She dialed Toni's again, securing two tables. Then it was all about getting there. They could've walked, but she feared that growing hunger grumbles would lead to mutiny halfway there; especially at this hour, and especially with some of them being tipsy already. Damn Rummy Bears.

After some back and forth, they decided on three cabs; something her agent brother-in-law groveled about. Lack of security his biggest concern not even the //you're with us// counter argument could ease.
"They're adults. I'm sure they can handle themselves without their agents for one night. Besides, today's obligations are up, right?" Elise pointed out.
"They are. But..."

"Look. I asked Toni for private tables and he assured that that's what we'll get. Besides. The restaurant is hidden. You'll like it. And I know they will. They're not prisoners, you know? They need to have some fun. Away from all those money hungry people." Elise rubbed over her brother-in-law's arm before getting in the cab they shared with Oscar and Christine.

James paused for a moment before he got in as well. He had caught a twinkle in Elise's eye. A glimmer of joy he'd not seen in a long time. She was having fun. Genuine, loving life fun. He shook his head with a smirk, squeezing into the front passenger seat, then directed the driver to the address Elise had given him. The other two cabs followed.

"Signorina Elise! Bentornata! Come vanno le cose? [Miss Elise! Welcome back! How's it going?]"
Toni greeted with open arms. "Speravo, che saresti tornata.[ I was hoping that you'd come back.]"
Prima di tutto. Io non sono stato chiamato signorina in un lungo periodo di tempo. E, Certamente! Non possiamo vivere senza il buon cibo, [ First of all. I have not been called Miss in a long time. And, of course! We cannot live without good food,]" Elise snickered. Toni blushed. "E Oscar. Avete le chiese, già? [And Oscar. You have asked, already?]" Toni directed at Oscar with open hands. Oscar just spit out a "¿Qué?".

Toni leaned to Oscar's ear, whispering "Matrimonio". Oscar just shook his head no, which earned him an eye roll and a smack against his shoulder. The rest of the group just stood with semi-confused expressions on face; except Christine. She was the only one who'd completely understood this little tète-à-tête, which explained the sly smirk that danced across her face. "I'll explain inside." Christine squished past everyone, taking lead into the restaurant.

Oscar heaved his chest, then hung his head while flicking his hand towards the door for the rest of the group to follow. He'd not hear the end of it tonight, that much was sure. He waited until only Elise was left outside with him, pulling her close by her waist, again.  
"This group of people is going to drive me nuts," he pushed a breath through his nose. "They love you. Well, Mike, Tina, and Jim do for sure. The rest of them --- I'm sure, they do, too," Elise palmed his face. "And, I love you. But you know that don't you?" Her grays tracked over his face. He managed a whispered "yes" before he felt her lips on his. It was a slow kiss. The type where thin skin stuck together until distance gently broke the bond. He needed that. She needed that. "I'm hungry." She scrunched her nose, then pivoted towards the door, leaving him standing.

He ran his hand over the back of his jeans, wanting to make sure the case was still there. He'd not left it out of his sight since he got it. There was always a bit of fear she'd find it. Not through snooping. She didn't really do that. But by accident, like when she did his laundry. He smiled at that. She always washed his clothes with hers now, whenever he visited her that is. Like she'd always done that. He felt over his jeans again. The case was indeed still there. "Dude. We're waiting on you," Mike's voice echoed. "Yup. Right behind you," Oscar snapped out of his trance.

"Wow. Nice," Oscar smiled when he joined the group. Toni had reserved two, private tables, as promised. Secluded. Out back. On a patio filled with cascading flowers and lit by outdoor string lights. Candles, red-white checkered tablecloths on harvest style tables, and intricately carved chairs added to soft romance. "You like," Toni side-eyed. "I do," Oscar smiled. "She does, too," Toni tilted his chin towards Elise who in turn was chatting with Olivia and Alexandra, all three laughing at whatever Olivia had just said. There was that easiness again. And that getting along without a flicker of jealousy.

Late night dinner was definitely welcome by everyone in the group. Tuscan soup, seafood-laden pasta, thin crust pizza, fruit and cheese plates, tiramisu, and gelato soon had rumbling tummies satisfied. Wine aided with high spirits. Although, a request for apple cider had a few people stop. "Expecting," Christine blushed. Raised glass congratulations followed. And Toni scrambling for a blanket and a pillow because he wanted to make sure Christine was comfortable. Elise laughed. This was the same man who'd claimed -when she'd first met him - American's coddled their kids too much.

Throughout the different courses, people chatted about their families, travels, and other side ventures. Then it spun to work. Fassbender, McAvoy, and Olivia were the chatiest. It was clear
who ruled the set with shenanigans when they were around. Costume malfunctions and interrupted
takes were mostly their doing. Sophie and Alexandra weren't exactly innocent either as it turned
out. Talks about missing props that reappeared in the oddest of places had their faces flushed.

"Bryan is going to replace all of you if he ever finds out," Mike laughed.
"He's not going to. And you better not tell him." Alex squinted at Oscar's brother.
"Don't worry. He won't tell. If he ever wants to come back to set." Oscar raised a warning brow.
"I'll just ask Jim or Lenny," Mike shrugged with a smirk towards Elise's brother-in-law.
"Siding with Oscar on this. Besides, somehow nothing good comes when you guys are in the same
area," James elucidated.

Mike frowned.
"Awe. Don't worry. You can call me now," Elise snickered.
"Taking advantage already," Oscar gasped.
"He's your brother." Elise winked at Mike. "Family. You know."
Oscar gulped. The way she had said that. Softly. Caring. It had his heart skip a few beats.

"So Elise," Fassbender called from his spot. "Did you know Ryan was going to be here today or
was it coincidence?" he hinted at her dress.
"Pure coincidence," Elise blushed.
"Didn't know you liked Deadpool." Oscar raised a brow again. "It's a violent comic."
"You know, Oscar, you need to check the box in her bedroom closet," Mikki cut in. "You'd be very
surprised," she laughed.
"Ah yeah? And what would I find in said box?" Oscar's left brow lifted even higher.
Elise shot a fierce glance at Mikki.

"It has to be naughty," Fassbender wiggled his brows.
"How naughty?" McAvoy egged on.
Elise kept mum. But there was a spark in her eyes. Devilish almost.
"It's leather related." Fassbender picked up on the spark.
Elise just pulled up her shoulders in a //maybe/maybe not// way.
"Ahhhhhh, yes it is!" McAvoy exclaimed.
Elise just pulled her shoulders up again, reaching for her almost full wineglass, which she emptied
as slowly as humanly possible. In one sitting.

Toni occasionally joined the group, recounting vividly how his parents had built the restaurant
from nothing, and how eventually he and his friends had taken over. His wife swerved around
tables, serving up food, scolding him from time to time. Sharp-tongued reminders that other
customers were hungry, too, and that he'd better get back in the kitchen. He scuttled out, always
muttering something in Italian under his breath, which had Elise hide her face behind her hand a
few times over. Snickering. And blushing.

"Don't ask," she laughed when she caught Oscar raise a perplexed brow while looking after Toni.
"I get passionate arguments. And passionate ... I don't even know what to call this thing they're
doing, but ..." Oscar gaped.
"Don't worry. He loves her. A lot! Or else he wouldn't whisper about passionate nights and
yearning hearts," Elise hinted.
"I think, for once I'm glad I only speak two languages," Oscar's eyes grew wide.
"I told you not to ponder," Elise laughed.

More wine. More talk. At some point, high school experiences came up. That seemed to be Mike's
cue. Toothy smile, he pulled a yearbook from his backpack. And a large envelope that seemed to
burst at the seams. "Picture time," he proclaimed. Oscar just sipped on his glass of wine, squinting at his brother. It was a good thing Mike had chosen a seat on the opposite end. For now, he was at a safe distance. Free from immediate retaliation.

"Oh my god. Oscar, look at you," Alexandra busted out laughing when the first pictures made the round. "Blue hair. Bleached beard? Skinny arms. How old were you?"
"Let me see." Elise craned her neck. "Holy fuck. And look at this one. Who dressed you?" She quirked a brow after seeing a picture of him in silver pants and a light blue t-shirt.
"Laugh while you can," he stated confidently and a little annoyed.

"It's ok, Oscar. I've got you covered," Christine grinned widely, also pulling an envelope from her purse, ready to level the playing field.
"No! NOOOOOO!" Elise shouted, trying to reach for the envelope, but Christine was faster; quickly handing off small stacks in all directions.
"You didn't actually think, I'd be the only one getting exposed," Oscar smugly licked the back of his teeth.
"You knew your brother was bringing pictures?" Elise gaped at Oscar, then glared at Mike.

"He made me tell," Mike's voice cracked.
"He made you. How did he make you?" Elise gawked.
"He blackmailed me," Mike frowned.
"How?"
Oscar relaxed back into his chair, smuggest face in tow, but not saying a word. That's how blackmail worked after all. Mike had done his part, so Oscar kept the secret. For now. Typical sibling behavior and Elise wished she had thought of that.

"Ok. --- Okay. --- I've got nothing to hide." Elise squeezed her lips to a thin line, head high.
"Really? So... this picture of you with green hair and orange shirt..." Christine's eyes twinkled, handing out the last stack of pictures.
"Were you aiming to look like a carrot? Or was that accidental?" Mikki laughed.
"It's ok. I'm going to get back at every. single. one. of. you!" Elise held her composure. With severely red ears that is. A few more laughs at fashion choices and bad haircuts, then Oscar pulled Elise's chair close to him. Close enough so he could lean against her, resting his chin on her shoulder. Close enough so he could run a hand down her arm or her back and sneak kisses onto her hair, and inhale her scent. Close enough for everyone else to see that they were a pair.

Goodbyes were shortened by the fact that at least half of them had to head back and pack immediately, and the other half was ... well, beyond tipsy. It didn't stop Mikki from demanding a group picture; including Toni, his wife, and the restaurant's staff. A self-timer and tripod ensured the photographer was in a second take after everyone had pointed out that she hadn't been in the first.

"You better be nice to her or else?" Mikki whispered into Oscar's ear with a clenched fist when she pulled him to the side for a second.
"I know." Oscar raised a brow.
Short stature didn't take away from Mikki's fierceness. "I know you know. Just reminding you," she smirked. "And let me know when to book vacation," she added.
"Vacation for what?" Oscar drew in his brows.
"You know exactly what." Mikki's eyes shot to Oscar's jeans. The back pocket of his jeans to be precise.
"You talk, no premiere," he squinted. Then they hugged with a laugh.
"What a night," Elise sighed happily on the elevator ride up to their suite. "I know. I especially loved the picture of you ... what was the look again? Carrot?" Oscar smirked. "Shut up." She teasingly rolled her eyes at him. "I always wondered if you'd dyed your hair before. And now I know. But green. Wow," he egged on. "How do you know it's not dyed now?" She folded her arms. "Do I really need to explain?" His glance fell to below her waistline. "I walked right into that one," she laughed. "Yeah. You did!" He joined the laugh, pulling her hip to his so he could sneak a kiss on her temple.

The elevator reached their floor, both swaying a little when it stopped. She was ready to slide the keycard into the lock, but he stopped her. Arm around her waist, he drew her close, resting his nose in the left curve of her neck. He kissed a thin line from there to behind her ear. "I love you," he whispered. She just gasped. He'd kissed her again. Right on that pressure point that caused tingling stomach and blurry vision when kissed the right way. "Tell me what's in the box," he asked with a seductively low timbre.

"Are you serious?" Elise pushed him back by his chest. She slid the keycard into the lock, opening the suite's door with a shaking head, wandering to the living room, flipping on the light, and dropping her purse on the sofa. "I'm kidding," He followed quickly. "Mi Reina, I'm kidding," he laughed into the back of her neck when he caught her in a tight embrace from behind. "I'm kidding." He drew in her scent. "No you're not." She curled her fingers around his forearms. "But since you're eager to find out..." She pushed herself out of his hold, turning to face him, reaching for the zipper at the back of her dress.

Oscar stood like he was in a trance, again. Frozen in place while she -very languidly- slid the dress off her shoulders. He chuckled out a hollow breath. He had wanted to be the one to take off that dress. He'd been thinking about it on the way back to the hotel. If he had to be honest with himself, he'd been thinking about it since the cast party. A whole map of kisses planned in his mind: gone out the window. But he didn't mind the view in front of him now. A fair trade for his smart-assery. He managed a thin "Dios mío", and she smiled a sultry smile.

Bandaged, caged style bra and panties in midnight black had come to light; sheer, mesh fabric offering little coverage of the most intimate areas. It was just see-through enough to know what was there but dark enough to leave space for imagination. A very fair trade, indeed. The set clinging on curves in all the right places. Her curves.

He didn't know what he wanted to do first. Skim the exposed sections between the layers with his lips, or feel against the sheer fabric with his fingertips. Her standing there - quite confident and one hand on hip - waiting for his move, didn't make it easier.

He shifted closer to her, brushing a kiss onto her shoulder. Right on the edge where bra strap met skin. "I like this," he breathed with a lingering gaze. A lingering, wanting gaze. "I knew you would." She bit her bottom lip, her hands falling to his belt. He stood frozen again. She worked away the belt, throwing it to the floor, then worked on button and zipper of his jeans; eyes trained on his the whole time.

He gasped at her touch through his briefs when she reached in. "Make love to me," she whispered against his neck while teasing him to full erection. Not that he needed much more help. "Here?" He looked around the living room of the suite.
"Right here," she bit her lip again.
"With the lights on?"
"Yes."
He loved her confidence in that very moment.

He pushed off his boots, then his jeans, kicking them wherever. He pulled his shirt forward off his body and threw it behind him, toeing off socks at the same time. Briefs were last.

He stood there for a minute, light throwing shadows over the ridges of his muscles. Perfect tan. Full excitement. He smirked because she smirked. Her gaze just as wanting as his. Then focus was back on her. Careful focus. Almost timid in the way he closed in and touched her. Like to check she was really there.

Kisses over edges of shoulders. Gentle kisses while he took off her jewelry. Traveling fingertips over her spine while he kissed down her front. Caresses down her legs while he knelt to help her out of her boots. He was much more careful with her stuff than his own, neatly placing her items next to her dress which he'd folded before setting it to the side.

"Come here." He pulled her closer; him still kneeling, her still standing; hands caressing up and down the back of her legs while he kissed over exposed edges. He hooked his fingers into layers now and then, pulling fabric up and away from heated skin. Just long enough to kiss below. Sweetened sighs were her answer to that.

He rested his forehead on her stomach for a moment which cued her to rake her fingers through his hair. He looked up and was met with a lip-bitten smile. He pulled himself to a stand, fingertips skimming the edges of her bra this time. "I really like this," he repeated. "I think... We should leave it on," he smirked, his mind already mapping out the next move.

He thumbed lightly against the sheer fabric of her bra. Right where sheer fabric hid her nipples. Tightened buds the response. "Yup. Going to leave this on," he chuckled, then bit her through the fabric. He knew she loved that. Stinging pain and added friction from the bra had her shoot out an audible moan. So he knew.

"Let's see what happens when I do that down there," he smirked against her neck.
She laughed. "I might scream, if you bite me there," she whispered.
"I know." He lifted a brow, eyes darkening as he looked her over.
"You wouldn't dare bite that!" She stepped back, eyes wide.
He laughed and leaned into her. "I *kiss against her neck* wouldn't *kiss on her collarbone* dare *kiss between her breasts* think *kiss on her tensed stomach* of *kiss right above destination* hurting you." He knelt again, this time resting the back of his thighs against his calves, shins pressing into carpet.

She trembled at the kisses. And how his fingers brushed over her skin. A little calloused because guitarist's fingers always were. He laughed again, then pulled her down by her wrists; her knees falling at an angle on top of his thighs, which made him groan. He slipped his hands under her ass, giving her enough lift so she could move her legs around his waist.

He held her in place, kissing her neck over and over; hands rubbing up and down her back. He loved holding her like this. Cradled into his lap, her legs around his waist; her upper body higher than his so he could bite into her breasts with ease. Coax out sweet, gasped moans with long licks from collarbone up her neck to behind her lobes.
He loved holding her like this because her body's response was almost always the same: tightening legs, breasts closer to his face, fingers threading into his hair. All that, and --- soft, rolling hips. A sign that she wanted more. Have him touch her there. Kiss her there. Lick her there.

He leaned her back, strong arms to make sure she didn't crash against the floor. Legs falling to sides an invitation to disappear there. And he did. With heated kisses down her body. He liked being there. Sucking, licking, holding her down until she got there at least twice. Drinking away sweetened wetness. He liked being there; but today, --- he had other plans.

He stayed. But not for long. Just long enough to suck her clit through sheer fabric while his fingers worked over wet edges below the fabric. Until they disappeared to massage tensing walls. Until he brought her to an edge so close she started roaming her own hands down her body and into dense curls, trying to keep him there while he worked her up. She was getting there. He could tell by the way her stomach flexed. And by the way she scratched deeply into her own skin while lifting her hips off the floor.

This time, the edge was all he permitted. He stopped and she cussed in frustration. He laughed against her skin on his way up. "F*ck you," she breathed; that frustration very obvious in the way her brows contorted, almost like she was in pain, and in the tone of her voice. "You are. Well, I am, you," he laughed against her neck.

She scratched down his back for that comment. Sharply and deeply. He moaned at the aggression. He pulled the fabric of her panties to the side again and teased her again. Not just with his fingers. Also his lips. Right there. In the left curve of her neck. Irritated moans, she dug her nails into the flesh of his ass.

"Rowar," he laughed. This was the kind of anger he liked on her. Sweet frustration because he knew that on one hand she wanted more, and on the other, she was close to //I've had enough//. Today it was the latter. She tried to wiggle out from beneath him but he held her in place by her right hip. He stopped teasing, pulling the fabric a little further to the side. Him as ready as her when he pushed in; throbbing hardness meeting slick and tensing warmth. She moaned at the feeling. The way he always filled her out. Almost too much. Only almost.

Gentle and slow. Languid kisses over jawline and neck. She gasped. The fabric of her panties rubbed then strained against her clit when he picked up speed. Arms wrapped around her back now, squeezing her close to him. Her own arms over his shoulders, hands up and down the plane of his back; raking, scratching angry red lines into his skin with her nails.

Heaved breaths. Rasped breaths while his lips explored her neck even more. Nipping at her skin, leaving behind his own marks. Gentle and slow replaced with rough and fast as he fell out of synch. Just hard thrusts. And stinging bites. Both of which had her coil legs and arms around his body or else he'd have pushed her across rough carpet. More stinging bites. And loud moans when he released them. Until... familiar warmth replaced hard pressure.

"Fuck," she whimpered. "What's wrong?" he breathed, forehead resting on her right shoulder, sweat dripping from his curls onto her skin. "So close," she cried with continued rolling hips.

"You didn't? Oh shit. Sorry, mi Reina. Wait," he pulled out, replacing his cock with middle and ring finger of his right hand, his thumb on her clit. He didn't care about his own cum lacing his fingers.
Heavy-lidded gaze, he paid close attention to her moans. And to her body. The way she writhed up, almost in agony. He slid off to her right, staying close, snaking his right leg over her right to keep her open while he worked her over with his hand.

"Almost... almost," she whined. She pushed his hand away, circling herself. "God ffffffffuckkkkk," she pushed a breath through clenched jaw; rolling left to her stomach; a liberating moan falling from her lips when the orgasm washed over her. She reached her arms up, legs wide, her whole body relaxing when the surging waves waned.

"Fuck... that was sexy." He rolled on top of her, legs between hers as he kissed over her shoulders. "So sexy." He slid his right hand down her back. "So sexy," he repeated for a third time; fingers slipping back into warmth, teasing her for a short moment.

Watching her make herself cum had an effect. And she felt it pressed against her ass. He was halfway ready again. She bucked back, letting him know she wanted to again. He moaned, closed-eyed, into her shoulder. Haphazard kisses down her spine when he shifted his weight to arms and knees. He pulled at her hips for her to shift weight to elbows and knees as well. She did, and he slipped back in.

Halfway there didn't stay like that for long. Growing pressure every time he pushed back in. Until he was fully there, again. He shifted all his weight to his knees, grasping tight to hips and the fabric of her panties while his gaze fell there. He loved watching her stretch over him. Wet and tight. Darkest pink. A turn on because it felt forbidden to look there; seeing his own cock disappear into her folds. But he loved watching because he could see how much she liked it. Twitching muscles. Seeping wetness. And today the added friction of that little number wrapped around her heightened his arousal to new heights.

Attention shifted when she picked up speed. He let go of her hips, letting her dictate angle and pace. Exhaustion tugging, she dropped her forehead to folded arms, bringing her hips a little higher. His hands went to her shoulders, thumbs curling around bra straps. He pulled her back up, keeping his hands latched to her shoulders. He remembered the moans he got whenever he did that. She didn't disappoint.

"Fuck, Isaac. Just a little harder!" she begged. He did as told. Pushing a little harder. Pulling her shoulders a little harder. Biting her skin a little harder whenever he leaned in. "Yes... yes... god... fuck, yes," she moaned, trembling legs when she halted because the rope had snapped, again. That sent him over the edge. With a loud moan and a cuss to God.

She swayed, slowly relaxing her body forward which made him slip out. His gaze fell there again, between her legs, where he could see cloudy, white beads dripping out. Thick, cloudy, white beads.

He leaned down, resting his forehead in the dip of her back, rubbing his hands up down her sides. Silence to calm breathing, to steady heartbeats, to take in post-love scents and sounds. Especially post-love moans. Those were his favorite. Sweet and relaxed. Satisfied.

He kissed up her spine, then slipped off to her left this time because her face was pointing that way. His head supported on his propped up left arm while his right hand massaged up and down her back. "You ok?" he whisper-asked.

"Yes," she smiled with eyes closed.

"Do you think, it's too late for a bath?"
She laughed. Her whole body laughed.

"I mean since we're both so..."
"... dirty?" she laughed again.  
"I really want to try out that tub." He kept rubbing up and down her back. "I think we both need a relaxing massage." He leaned a kiss against her shoulder.  
"Ok," she whispered. "I'll be there in a few."  
He got up, snickering at her dreamy smirk. "Don't fall asleep." He tickled her foot with his.  
"I won't," she promised.  

He left and she stayed on the floor, stretching now and then. Hazy feeling setting in. Cusp of dozing off --- through which she heard the ringtone of her cell. "Fucking kidding me?" she whispered. She rolled towards the sofa, padding up the side in search for her purse, and when she found it she pulled the whole thing down. Good thing the snacks were all gone. It would've left a littered mess. The ringtone was still going. She dug into her bag. Searching.... searching... searching... By the time her hands found her cell, the ringing had stopped. She blinked at the screen, unknown number glowing back at her.  

Then she felt a push against her shoulder.  
"What?" she smacked her lips.  
"Snoozed off there for a minute, mi Reina," Oscar laughed at her confusion.  
"Shit... too much wine." She blinked.  
"Definitely," he agreed. "Looks like you had a call." He glanced at the cell in her hand.  
"Yeah. Unknown number." She sat up; hair a frizzy, half French twist now. Makeup smudged. The undergarments out of place. Elegance was definitely gone, but he adored that just as much. If not more.  
"They left a message?" he wondered.  
"I'll check it later, Lindo. If it's important they'll call back." She looked around, still somewhat confused.  

He laughed again. "You still want to take a bath? The tub is filled but you look. ---," he chuckled.  
"Exhausted."  
"Oh god, yes. I'm so sore." She reached her hand up and he met her halfway, helping her to a wobbling stand. He side-eyed her with a smirk. And she just rolled her eyes, taking lead to the bathroom where he helped her out of bandaged mess.  
"How did you even get this on?" he snickered.  
"You know what, I don't know. I guess being sober helps," she chuckled. He agreed.  

Tub full, Oscar stepped in first, helping Elise after. Soothing warmth and soothing scent had them both moaning when they settled into the water. Side by side, because the tub was big enough to have them sit like that. She leaned her head against his chest, and he played with her hair.  
"You have pins in there?" he chuckled.  
"Yup," she smirked.  
"Sit up. I'll take 'em out," he prompted, and she did as asked. It took a good five minutes, with her hair looking even worse than before. He couldn't help the laugh.  

"Shut up and start the jets." She elbowed his chest.  
He did as asked. Roaring bubbles soothing them into further relaxation.  
"You think the people downstairs will be upset at the noise?" she wondered, sitting up.  
"If they didn't hear us moan, I doubt they'll hear this," he laughed.  
"Oh my god. Were we really that loud?" she gaped at him over her shoulder. He just nodded, deep creases around his eyes, and in his cheeks. Upward creases. Smiled creases. Like his face had been chiseled like that.  

She leaned back into his chest, closing her eyes, listening to the jets, feeling kisses against her right
shoulder. No talking. Just comfortable presence. He kissed her shoulder again, pulling her closer, swiping loosened hair towards the left side of her neck so he could kiss the right. He took a few breaths in. She still smelled of strawberry and coconut with hints of lavender and vanilla. His favorite scents.

"I want you to meet my mom," he whispered.
She stirred, turning to face him, pulling herself over his legs to straddle him. "I know. Your brother told me," she smiled.
"Of course he did," he chuckled. "It's just... I figured meeting her whenever would be ok. But I want... I think... Mike mentioned," he stammered to find the right words.
"That I might want to meet her before you propose?" she guessed.
"Yes. Mike thinks you're traditional like that."

"I wouldn't say traditional," she caressed his face. "But I think it would be the decent thing to do. No... wait! The right thing to do. You're her son. The older one at that. I think, the right thing would be to introduce me first. I know approval seeking seems archaic. And I'm not asking for that. But, I'd be more comfortable if she knew me beforehand ... you know."

He nodded in agreement. "I think, she'll love you," he smiled.
"I'd be happy with like," she countered. "So --- when..."
"...do I want you to meet her? I was thinking before we go to Spain. Before Walla Walla, even. Maybe..." he paused "...when you come visit me again at the end of this month?"
"That soon?" Her lips parted in shock.
"Or not," he chuckled awkwardly.

She closed her eyes, //let it all fall away// crossing her mind. She opened her eyes, grays on caramel browns. "I didn't mean no. Just... Yes... Yes... End of this month. It's still two, three weeks away. I won't be able to learn to cook by then, but..." she chuckled back, just as awkwardly. He laughed. "Sweetie. You don't have to learn if you don't want to. My mom might be traditional but she knows times are different," he explained.
"She does?" She quirked a brow.
"You'll see," he chuckled, playing with some of her flyaway hairs.
"Hmmmmm... I still think I should learn to cook at least one dish." She squinted.

He laughed again, and she splashed his face with water. "Ass!"
"I'm your ass." He pulled her close to himself again, kissing up and down her neck. Languid kisses. Open-mouthed kisses. Tongue pressed against skin to taste her kisses. That's how they spent a good twenty minutes before finally getting out and circling towards the bedroom.

More kisses on the way there. And more post-love moans. And more tenuous kisses that turned wispier by the minute until they both fell asleep. Bodies entangled in the most peculiar way. Her draped diagonally across his chest from left to right, face buried into his right side. Him, left arm around her right leg, and right hand intertwined with her right. Peculiar, indeed.

Sunday morning came with grumbles and groans. Their sleeping positions had them sore. A hangover left them both with a bit of a headache.
"I want to switch off the sun," she rasped.
"You and me both," he groaned.
She shifted so he could spoon her.
"We have to get up and pack," his voice dry.
"Noooooo..." She pulled a pillow over head. "I need more kisses," she mumbled.
"Ah yeah? Where?"
"Right here," she pointed to her neck. "And here," she pointed to her shoulder. "And here," she pointed to her side. And he kissed all of those spots.

"I love waking up next to you," he smiled into her shoulder when he returned from a prolonged kissing spree.

"Me, too," she whispered.

"Especially when you're naked," he snickered, squeezing her close.

"Me, too," she whispered, again.

"I love your body," he breathed into her neck.

"Really? What parts?" She rolled to her back and locked her eyes on his.

"Everything." He outlined her with a glance first, then started circling his right index to different spots. "Your neck. Just the right length. Your arms. Also the right length," he snickered. So did she.


"Shut up." She pushed his hand away.


"But not my ears?" she quipped with a soft voice.

"Nah. They're too loopy for my taste." He wrinkled his nose. She pinched his arm. "I'm kidding... ouch... come on, I'm kidding," he captured her hand. "I love your ears. I told you. Everything. Most importantly --- your brain." He kissed her right brow.

"Ditto," she smiled.

"Ditto? Ditto! I spill my heart and all I get is ditto?" he gasped. "Come here. Where are you wiggling off, too?" he laughed, snaking his arm around her waist to prevent escape.

"You said we have to get up," she squeaked, writhing her body in his grasp.

"Nope. Nope... not until you tell me what you love about my body. Or about me." He rolled on top of her and pinned her in place.

"Truthfully?" she wheezed under him with a laugh.

"Yes. Truthfully." He loosened his hold, shifting most of his weight to elbows and legs.

"Your eyes. Because ... when it comes down to it, all I need is a look. And I know things will be ok," she smiled. So did he.

"And you know: your ass, your arms, your abs... other things." She glanced below his waist.

"I knew it. I knew it was a front." He held her in place, chuckling a kiss against her neck.

"I'm kidding. Stop. No... no more. I'm aching." She wheezed out another laugh because he'd dropped his weight back on top of her.

"So am I." He cocked his head.

"Not my fault you went back to back," she smirked.

"I can't help it." He let go of her and rolled to his back. "I love kissing you. And I love where kissing you leads to. And I love watching where kissing leads to."

"Then kiss me. I need --- therapy." She straddled him and wiggled a brow.

"Therapy for what?" His hands fell to her hips.

"My soul."
"And?"
"My mind."
"And?"
"My body."
"Hmmmm... I can give you some therapy. Might have just enough energy..." He leaned up to kiss her neck.
"I can tell," she rubbed over his chest.
"That obvious, huh?" He bucked his hips up.
"Mmmmmmm hmmmm." She wiggled her brows, again; laughing when he flipped her so he could be on top, again. He pulled the covers over their bodies, and the real world disappeared for a while. Long enough for a lazy morning lovemaking session that had them both beam ear to ear by the time they were ready to pack their bags.

He smiled at her outfit for the last day. Gray tank top, slim, black pants, black, two-inch boots. Her hair had him beam as well. Open, in soft waves, framing her face, and beginning to fall over her shoulders. Not so much out of the norm, really. Casual if anything. But the science blue cardigan and the Star Trek pendant dangling from a silver chain around her neck; - he couldn't help a chuckle. Such a nerd. His nerd. He ventured, he'd not see outfits like that on her again. At least not for a while. He did hope the dress would make a reappearance now and then. And what she'd worn beneath. Especially what she'd worn beneath.

"Stop gawking and help ... me... close... this... damn suitcase," she huffed while trying to squish spilling clothes between tight edges so she could close the zipper.
"Sweetie, it's not going to fit. Just take an extra bag. I'll pay for it." He stood amused.
"Maybe Tina has space." She folded her arms in a thinking manner.
He laughed softly. "Sweetie. I think if anything, she's having the same problem," he chuckled, hinting at the fact that Christine had bought nearly as much as them.

"You're right. Darn. Well, I guess..." She gave up.
"Or you can put some of your clothes in my suitcase. I have space. And you'd have some stuff in Montreal," he suggested with a quirked brow.
"Did you see the outfits I was wearing? It's all..."
"... nerd stuff. I know. And so what? No one says you have to wear the clothes in those combinations." He inched closer to her and pulled on her waist.
"Hmm... ok... but... I'll wash all that when I get to Montreal." She swung her arms around his neck.

"You don't trust that I know how to wash these," he gaped.
"Do you? I've seen the way you sort clothes. There's not just bleach whites and the rest," she countered.
"Ok. Ok... here we go..." he laughed at her bickering way, nipping the tip of her nose. That was going to happen sooner or later. "I promise, I won't wash the clothes you give me to take along. Although, you know, it's kinda gross."
"Smart ass."
"I'm your smart ass."
"Yes, you are," she smirked, leaning in for a kiss.

Her cell ringing ruined the moment.
"Where is it?" She dug through a pile of carry-on items. "Damn it," she cussed as the ringing had once again stopped before she could find the damming device.
"Right here." He pulled her cell from underneath a turquoise fabric covered journal, smiling because it was one of the two he'd given her on her birthday. "Unknown number. Again. And a message." He raised a brow, handing the cell to her.
"I'll check it later." She clenched her jaw.
"It looked like whoever it was, left a longer message, Sweetie. You should check it to make sure it's not important," he nudged on with a more serious timbre.

She paused, clenched her jaw again, then hit the voicemail button. Whatever the message was, it had her face go from fairly tanned to pale to white like a sheet. Oscar knew that look too well. Panic and fear in a single expression.
"Who was it?" he asked.
"Nobody," she fibbed, stuffing her cell into her back pocket, going back to packing.
"Liz. Who was it?" he repeated, stopping her from gathering up books and magazines by holding her arm. "Sweetie? Was it him? Was it Frank?"

There was a twitch. A tremble really. It surged through her whole body. "Yes," she whispered.
"What did he say?" Oscar's grasp on her arm tightened. Unintentionally.
"It's not important." She granted a fleeting look into his eyes. Timid because she'd felt his grasp closing.
"Did you tell James?"
Nothing. Silence from her.
"Liz... Sweetie. Did you tell James about the calls?" His grip tightened more, his voice picking up. Still unintentionally. He didn't see the red flags going up in her mind. The red flags and the fear. Not even when she tried to gently twist out of his hold. He didn't see it, not even when she paused for a simple yes or no answer.

"No," she whispered so softly it was almost inaudible.
"Dammit!" he yelled, letting go of her. "Are you kidding me? Why the fuck not?" voice still rising. She flinched. Heart rate up. "I don't know. I ... I forgot," she breathed, startled, tears welling up as she hung her head and turned her back towards him.

"Fuck. Liz. These aren't prank calls. HE'S FUCKING STALKING YOU!" Oscar's voice reached peak level.
Another flinch. Shaky hands. "Don't... don't yell at me," she whispered, silent tears slowly rolling down her cheeks; still looking down, back still to him.
"I'm not yelling!" His brows pulled tight in anger, voice indeed quite loud, upset because he assumed she didn't want to hear him out. Why didn't she see his concern?

Then he saw a tear drop to the floor. Almost like a diamond had fallen from her face. The sunlight, as beautiful as it was, had enhanced her pain like that. And he froze. Heavy breath. Realization setting in. Full awareness. How could he not see?
"Fuck. Shit... Liz... I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please. Please come here, please. I'm sorry." He approached her slowly, one hand carefully stretched out and aiming for her shoulder. The fact that she flinched at his touch broke his heart. "Liz... Liz, please look at me. Sweetie? --- God. Fuck. I'm sorry." He ran a hand over the back of his neck, panicking.

She just stood there, face falling into her hands, crying.
He reached for her shoulder again. This time she didn't flinch. Slowly, very slowly he wrapped his arm around her as he pulled her into his body. "Sweetie, I'm so sorry," he whispered while she trembled in his arms. "I didn't pay attention. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you like that," he kissed against her forehead.
"I am scared," she sobbed into his shirt.
"I know. I know... I'm sorry," he kissed her again.

"No. No... not of you." She looked up, eyes red.
"Sweetie." He wiped away her tears as best as he could. He hitched a breath, pulling her back towards his chest. "That's why I need you to tell James. Promise me you'll tell him. Today. Please. I know you don't want the cops involved. I get it. You're afraid he'll lash out. But please. Please. I'm worried." He stepped back. "He's not going to keep it at phone calls. Your dad is right. Men like that, people like that, they're dangerous."

Elise just agreed with a nod.

Oscar held her a little while longer, whispering more sorries, then helped pack the rest. He was quiet for the rest of the morning. Careful in every move he made. Careful in his stance. Careful in the way he touched her when he did.


"Hey, Tiny. Look at you. In a beebee-eight onesie. Why don't we go to the balcony? I'm sure uncle Mike would love some sunlight, huh?" Oscar cracked at his brother wearing sunglasses inside. He was clearly hung-over. "Come on, Tina. Mike hasn't seen much of Berenjena Pequeñita and I'm sure she has stories to tell, don't you? Yeah, you do!" He swept Chloé from Christine's arms who in turn shook her head, flabbergasted, following Oscar and baby to tease Mike.

James looked after his wife for a moment, amused how she and Oscar teased Mike, then turned to face Elise, his brows pulling tight when he looked over his sister-in-law. "What's going on?"
Chapter 21

This chapter is really long, but I'm really proud of it because it took a lot of writing and editing and some research. The chapter itself is Elise/Family weighted, so very little Oscar. Still, it's quite important for the story. Enjoy.

Elise fell into her seat, Sunday on replay in her mind. She weighed the good vs. the bad. Overall, it hadn't been a bad day. The early morning sweet, the afternoon busy. They'd all gone to the last day of SDCC in the early to late afternoon, hanging out with whoever had stayed behind from the casts.

There'd been laughter and last minute shopping because why not, Oscar spoiling his goddaughter and his brother with last-minute gifts because that's what godfathers and big brothers do. Nothing outrageous. Just small things he proclaimed fit their personalities: a gaming t-shirt for Mike, and some oversized Star Wars character blocks for Tiny.

Goodbyes at the airport were a different story. Three weeks without him, again, had Elise's heart heavy. She sighed at the thought of the last kiss. He'd held it quite long. Just lips pressed against lips, trying to take her mind off mid-morning arguments before they had to part ways. Repeated words to call him as soon she got home and no matter the hour, reminding her how much he cared and how much he'd miss her.

She sighed again, looking out the window. The ground crew was readying the empty luggage cart to head back to the gate. Across from that, another plane was getting prepped for takeoff. She chuckled at a couple of baggage handlers dancing while heaving large suitcases onto a belt for the other plane.

A brush against her arm and a pushed sigh drew her attention to the left shortly after. Her brother-in-law the cause of it. He searched through the seat pocket in front of him, pulling the flight safety card from it. There was tension between the two. James staring into the flight safety card, pretending to read over whatever, couldn't hide the fact that he was annoyed; angry almost. And she didn't blame him. His reaction to finding out about the calls was similar to Oscar's: elevated voice, frustration, and fear.

James clenched his jaw, stashing the flight safety card back into the seat pocket in front of him. He got out his phone, scrolling through messages, texting whoever before flight personnel instructed to fasten belts and turn off devices. So he traded his cell for a magazine, still not talking to Elise.

Elise was unsure if she could stand three hours of the silent treatment. If it had been a stranger next to her, she wouldn't have cared. But she'd known James for twenty-five years. He wasn't just her brother-in-law. He was one of her best friends. Someone she'd grown up with. Someone who knew her almost as well as her sister or her dad. And the fact that he didn't even look at her, cut deep. But she didn't blame him. She'd likely be just as angry if the roles were reversed.
She heaved a breath and looked back out the window, the plane dragging from a slow crawl to the runway to fast speed for takeoff. Clinging to armrests was painful this time. Fear of flying mixed with family worries. She wanted to sleep but her mind was too busy sorting through mid-morning memories.

A chime and movement a few minutes later had her look left again. James had gotten up. Most likely to check on Christine and baby, both of who sat a row diagonally ahead of them. Elise heard baby giggles. Chloé in a good mood was a bit of a relief. She hoped that it would take the edge off when James returned. At least for the duration of the flight.

Elise unbuckled her belt and pulled her purse from underneath the front seat, searching for some gum. More movement to her left, and she peered around again. This time she was met with worried grays and a tired, yet warm smile.

"He's not mad at you, you know?" Christine spoke softly. Elise scoffed at that, shaking her head. "Ok. So he's a little upset. And he'll be a little upset, but not for long. You know that."
Elise nodded. "I know." She looked out the window again, the sky tinted in strong hues of orange, pink, and hints of cerulean blue, a few cotton candy clouds scattered between as though they'd been painted like that; night kissing day goodbye.

Christine squeezed her sister's hand, but Elise kept focus on the window. "Why didn't you tell us?" Christine asked carefully. "I mean as soon as you suspected, why not reach out?"
Elise shook her head again, still looking out the window, thinking, and Christine waited. She was adamant about getting an answer. Mainly because she felt like she should've asked these same questions three years and a few months ago. When Elise had come over to stay with them for a few days before she had disappeared.

It wasn't like Christine didn't know something was off before then, but whenever she'd pushed on about some bruise she had caught a glimpse of, or Frank holding on to phones and keys whenever they had been out for dinner -him often answering for Elise instead of letting her talk-, Elise had shrugged it off. And even when James had voiced his concerns -quite blunt and loud at times-, it didn't deter Elise from the relationship.

Looking back now, Christine knew that all that was because Frank knew how to twist things to his favor; to confuse Elise; to make her think everything he did was her fault somehow. Not to mention that he'd made her feel like she had nowhere to turn. That her own family was jealous of her; of them. That they didn't love her like he did. It was classic abusive behavior, gaslighting, and to this day Christine couldn't fully comprehend why Elise hadn't been able to see through the lies. Elise was smart, so why had she not seen what James, her dad, her best friends, and her sister had seen? Why?

Then again, Christine had read about smart women -some brilliant beyond genius-, a lot of whom had also fallen to the traps of charm and promises of eternal love only to discover webs of lies and threats. Some of those women, Christine recalled, had met an early end. And some had walked away so broken, she doubted they ever lived a normal life again.

Elise had barely gotten away on that cusp of forever shattered, suspicious of everyone, and near death. That much Christine knew. She was grateful of course. But those last three years were time lost. And that ached.
Christine sighed, still squeezing Elise's hand, still waiting. She scanned over her sister's face. At least the part she could see. Elise's face was worn beyond her physical age. Stress, fear, loss. --- Having lived what felt like two or three lives in the span of not even half a life... Well, that showed today. Quite prominently. Looking at Elise, Christine knew that she'd never, ever let anyone hurt her sister like that again, even if it meant that she had to push and shove to make Elise talk to her. And even if it meant that Elise might get mad.

"Tell me why?" Christine repeated a little more sternly.
"The same reason I didn't tell you where I was hiding." Elise turned her head, somewhat annoyed that Christine indeed kept pushing on. "I was scared. --- I am scared now. You don't know Frank like I do..."
"You're right. I don't. But --- we're family. And we love you. If anything, it's a little disappointing that you think we'd not be there for you, --- after everything he's done to you --- after everything you've been through --- we wouldn't just leave you to fend for yourself. Ever. Do you understand?"
Christine squeezed Elise's hand tighter.
"I know that now," Elise gulped. She looked back out the window, silent tears rolling over her cheeks.
Christine slipped her right hand under Elise's chin to turn her sister's head back. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and sighed again. "Oscar loves you, too. So very, very much," Christine smiled thinly. "He... he told me, he yelled at you. And that he grabbed you."
"He did," Elise confirmed. Christine raised her brow in concern. "He didn't hurt me. He just wanted to get my attention. I'm not making excuses for him but I promise he didn't have hurting me in mind. He really just held on to get my attention," Elise explained.
Christine hitched a breath. "Ok... because you know, I thought, I might have to beat his ass."

Elise laughed at that statement. "I actually think, he'd let you. He felt bad, really bad."
"Well --- I think he's scared as much as we all are. He gets very protective, you know?" Christine twisted her lips. Elise knew that. Oscar had made that clear more than once. Even Mike had made that clear.

"So... what did Frank actually say?" Christine's brows pulled tight. It was clear that that question had been on her mind since mid-morning. After all, none of them were hard of hearing when they had heard James' yelling through the balcony door. Accidental eavesdropping because his voice had reached never heard before decibel levels for a short moment. So of course, they all knew that it was more than just a few hang-up types of calls.

Elise pressed into her seat, clutching the armrests. "He said he was glad I was back. And that he looked forward to seeing me," she gulped.
Christine squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, red flags going up fast. "We'll get through this. Jim will make sure," she stated after some silence. She looked into the aisle and saw James rocking Chloé on his legs, holding up Tiny so it looked like she was standing. A few more months, and baby might actually stand up without help.

"You know, he really isn't that upset. If anything, he's worried. Terrified, actually. It's not just us anymore." Christine rubbed over her own tummy; sighing first, then chuckling at the fact that Chloé kicked her chubby, little legs whenever daddy stopped rocking her. Strong kicks that made James groan a couple of times. Such a feisty, little girl.

Elise glanced up and down Christine, her gaze settling on Christine's lower half. There was a tiny bump. Christine was slowly starting to show. Very slowly. Flowing and loose fitting tops had her tummy camouflaged most of the time. But now - leaned back into the seat, the fabric of the shirt...
falling the way it did-, there definitely was a tiny bump, and there was no mistaking it for anything other than a baby bump. Terrified was the proper term alright, Elise thought.

"I know. And I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be selfish like that." This time Elise squeezed Christine's hand.

"Oh, Hon. I don't think you're selfish. I really do think you want to protect us as much as we want to protect you. But it's not going to work if we don't communicate," Christine smiled reassuringly. Elise nodded in agreement then looked at the small bump under Christine's shirt. "You want to touch my tummy, don't you?" Christine chuckled.


"Well. You won't feel much. Not until I'm about four or five months. Right now it's just ... a bean," Christine laughed. "But go ahead."

Elise held her hand on Christine's lower stomach, looking up at her sister. "I can't believe there's a baby in there," she smiled.

"Me either." Christine scrunched her nose. "And soon it'll be one of those." She gestured with her chin to Chloë who in turn was still entertained by her dad. This time, she was trying to find daddy's face.

The rest of the flight went by fast, the sisters talking about the last few days. There were giggles of star-struck encounters. And reviews of pictures. Elise already knew which ones she wanted to print out to paste into her journal. So many new memories. Memories she actually wanted to hang on to.

Her favorite snapshots were of Oscar. She'd managed to sneak a few candid photos without him knowing. Like when he was talking to his brother backstage, laughing at something Mike had said. Or him checking out comics at the vendor hall, getting lost in reading. Even one of him playing Bocce at the park. She loved that one the most. It showed him carefree and at his most genuine; a little confused by instructions from Toni but definitely without that actor mask of himself...

Getting home was almost a record this time. No waiting for a car because they'd parked the SUV at the airport. No traffic since they'd arrived late at night. It pushed the usual hour and a half to less than sixty minutes.

James dropped off Christine and Tiny first because Tiny needed food, a bath, and sleep. Then he dropped off Elise. A change in how took her by surprise. The difference this time that he pulled into the garage entryway of the apartment complex where she lived. Usually, he parked in a guest spot outside because he didn't have a pass, but after a quick chat with the night guard, he came back with a chip card to grant access to the locked garage.

"Just to be on the safe side," James explained with a cold tone when he pulled into an empty stall. "You think he knows where I live?" Elise perked a brow.

"I don't know. He did get your number somehow. Which means he has his resources." James heaved Elise's suitcase out of the trunk. "I'm coming upstairs with you." He held on to the suitcase. No hint of request. It was a statement.

Elise shook her head.

"Look. Technically, he's on probation and he's not allowed to travel outside the city limits where he lives. But..." James' brows pulled tight, so much so they nearly met at the center, a little annoyed because it appeared that Elise wasn't as alarmed as him; as alarmed as any of them. He dragged her suitcase to the elevator and she followed quietly. No talking on the way up.

"Keys." James held out his hand. Elise shook her head again but relinquished her keys without
argument. He opened the door and took lead into the apartment, flipping all the light switches; checking windows, balcony, and closets. When James was satisfied that no one else was in the apartment except them, he handed the keys back to Elise. "You still have pepper spray?" he asked sternly.
"Yes."
"And the bat?"
"Yes."
"Mobile alarm?"
"Yes, James. And I know all the emergency exits, and I have you on speed dial, and I know who the neighborhood watch super is in this building, and I... I..." She started breathing heavily.

It was as though it suddenly hit her. Not that she wasn't aware before. But she'd been numb somehow. Maybe it was because she'd been away from home. Or maybe it was because Oscar had been around, a calming presence, but now she'd be alone in her apartment. A place she'd deemed a safe haven until this very second; until her brother-in-law had made her aware of possibilities she'd not thought of before.

"Oh my god. Oh my god.....," she panicked, her whole body shaking.
"Ok... ok... look... I didn't mean to make it seem like immediate danger," James spoke softly. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

Elise kept heaving breaths. Too late for that warmness. Now her mind was there. What if...? What if Frank already knew where she lived? What if he'd been doing more than just calling her? What if he'd actually been following her everywhere? What if the pictures when they thought there was no one around had been taken by Frank somehow? What if...?

"Liz. Slow breaths. Slow. Lizzie... slow.... breaths..."
She heard the words, but they seemed at a distance. The room spun. It hurt to breathe. She couldn't focus. Her pulse so fast, it stung.
"Liz. Sit down. Come on. Over here. Sit. Where's your medication?" James guided Elise to the sofa. She gestured to her carry-on and he hurried to get what she needed and a glass of water. "Ok. One? One." He placed a pill into Elise's trembling hand. It took a good minute before she downed it with a gulp of water. Another minute to catch her breath. And then... tears.

James sat down next to her on the sofa. "Come here." He pulled her close to himself and held on, every so often kissing Elise's hair. Panicked tears turned to sniffled sobs. "I won't let him get to you," James whispered. "None of us will," he added. Elise looked up at her brother-in-law, barely managing a smile. He skimmed over her forehead to move wavy tresses and kissed right above the center of her brows. Then he leaned back.

"I'm going to pick you up and drop you off at work tomorrow. When you're done, I'm going to pick you up and we're going to get you a new phone, and a new number. Hold on to the phone you have. I'll be needing that one, along with any statements you have. And don't erase anything, especially the call list and messages. Do you understand?" James cupped Elise's face by her chin.
"Yes," she replied with a whisper.
"Good. Do you have to go anywhere else tomorrow?"
"I was going to visit Richard." Elise sat up straight.
"I'll take you." James got up.

"I don't want you to turn your life upside down for..." Elise started while looking towards her front door.
"Liz. Look at me, please?"
She did as requested. With a gasp because James' face was like worn stone, the rest of his body tall and quite stiff. No softness behind hazel eyes. No warmth whatsoever. Take no bullshit lawyer pose. A rare expression for him. And she knew whatever he was about to say, she'd better pay attention because she knew his patience was wearing thin. She knew because despite different careers Joe would get that same look whenever his patience wore thin.

James sighed, softening his posture a little. He recognized he came across as threatening when he stood tall and austere. "You know --- I'm not upset." His lips curled in one corner. "You know that, right? *she nodded* I love you. Like a sister. Because...," he chuckled lightly, more warmth returning to his face. "...that's what you are. To me. My sister," he smiled for a short second. Then his face returned to a fatigued rigidity.

"But I fucking hate seeing you scared. I hate seeing you in pain. I'm tired of seeing that. --- Your sister looked much the same when you ran away. I can't do another three years of agony and worry. I can't. And neither can she. And I doubt you could. So --- I'm not upset. I understand that you're scared. But unlike last time, I'm not going to stand by quietly. I'm not going to let some abusive, low-level scum dictate our lives with fear. He won last time. He didn't hurt us physically. Tina and me at least. Although, I'm not sure that he wouldn't have when he broke into Tina's apartment. But you running away, it was like a win for him because he knew we'd all hurt somehow. So, I won't fucking stand by. Not this time!" James finished; pushing a breath through his nose.

Elise nodded quietly. He was right. Frank had won. Maybe not in a way he'd envisioned. A win nonetheless, and she, too, didn't want to grant her ex such satisfaction again. She didn't want a repeat, especially now that her life was finally, finally going right. Maybe not everything, but most of it was going right. There was no way she'd let anyone take this away from her again.

"Eight o'clock?" James asked softly.
"Yup." Elise nodded.
"And half day?"
"Yes."
"Call Oscar." James kissed Elise on the forehead. 
"Will do," she smiled.
"And double lock and chain your door." James got out his car keys. 
"Ok," Elise agreed, watching while James slowly paced down the hallway. "James," she called out. He stopped and turned. She sped towards him, paused, then hugged him. Tightly. "Thank you," she whispered into his shirt. He hugged back, kissing the top of her hair. "Anytime, Shorty. --- Lock your door," he reminded before finally leaving.

Elise did as James asked, double bolting the door and securing the chain. She hadn't done that in a long time. She got out her cell and called Oscar. Straight to voicemail, which meant his phone was off. He was probably still on his flight back to Montreal. She hung up and dialed again.

"Hey. I finally made it home. I miss you already. I'll call tomorrow." She hung up. A quick glance at the display and she sighed. It was nearly one in the morning and she had to be up in less than six hours. She was supposed to feel relaxed and happy after this trip, instead it left her exhausted. At least she fell asleep fairly quickly this time. Mainly because she opted for a sleep aid this time.

Monday morning arrived fast and with a throbbing headache. First day back to work would be a drag for sure. Tiredness only one reason for it. However, a quick glance at her cell perked her up. Oscar had messaged at some point during the night, pictures attached. Once again of things she
was missing out on: Montreal sunrise; a mean bowl of cereal; McAvoy snoozing in the car ride over to set, and Fassbender drawing little hearts with Olivia's lipstick on McAvoy's face.

She snickered and took a picture of her //nice bowl// filled to the brim with chocolate flavored cereal. "Glad to see you're eating, mi Reina *smiling emoji*. Sorry I missed your call. Did you get some sleep?"
"Yes. But it was lonely. Pillows aren't a great replacement for your body. *frowny face*"
"Awe. Only two weeks and three days until you get to cuddle with my perfect body again. *smirking emoji*"
"Hmmm... perfect bits for sure."
"I see. So only some parts matter?"
"You know it."
"*laughing emoji* I miss you, too."

The doorbell rang and she hurried to finish breakfast. James made good on his promise to pick her up and drop her off. Although, he did have to wait. She had to gather SDCC goodies for her friends. And the only way to get to the goodies was to spill the contents of her suitcase and carry-on across her living room floor. Something that made James laugh and her throw out an "oh, shut up".

Returning to work was bittersweet this particular Monday. She was glad to see familiar faces of course; Matt and Helen looking as lovey-dovey as ever. Thom was also a welcome sight, especially since he'd readied her office exactly how she liked it: contracts neatly aligned and color-coded, fresh coffee waiting, and a recap of meetings she'd missed out on.
"Are you aiming for a raise?" Elise asked half-jokingly.
"Are you offering?" Thom witted back; trading a schedule of upcoming events with the comics Elise had bought for him at SDCC.
"Hmmmm... we'll have to wait and see how things are going," she frowned, hinting at the current limbo everyone was in.

There was still no word if the company would fold completely, but recent changes already came with a string of casualties. On the elevator ride up, Elise had unintentionally overheard that two more architects had quit. One of the full-time translators had also left. And when she had looked over to Irene's cubicle before entering her own office, she noticed the plants Irene had so meticulously cared for were already missing; all of which left her stomach churning.

"Well... I can't offer a raise but how about a nice dinner again. With Matt and Helen. And Irene. No Oscar this time though," Elise half-smiled.
"Awe man. I was hoping to hang out with someone famous," Thom smirked. "I'm joking," he retracted when he was met with a disapproving brow raise. "Dinner sounds nice. --- I take it, Oscar is back to filming?"
"Hmmmm... he is. He won't be back here until August. When I get back from my festival trip," Elise explained while skimming over the schedule.

"Geez. I don't know if I could handle a relationship like that. Stop and go," Thom's eyes widened. "If you're truly thinking about a career in international journalism, you might not have a choice," Elise reminded of the talk they had had after they'd all gone out bowling.
"Good point. Then again, I won't settle down for a while." Thom wiggled his brows.
"You never know," Elise laughed. "Get to work. I need copies of these two. And call in a confirmation for these. Make sure the clients still want to meet." She handed over a couple of
contracts and a sticky note, then started looking over contracts. Thom's cue to scurry, so he did.

The mid-morning break was the bitter part of the day and it had Elise's heart heavy. For one, the absence of people who'd already left was quite notable in that there was less chatter and way less laughter in the break room. Richard not being here meant a missing, warm undertone as well. To top it off, it was Irene's last day and goodbyes always sucked, despite attempted cheeriness.

Everyone had chipped in for a cake and a photo book of all of Irene's accomplishments while at the company. The sweetness of cake couldn't lift the gloomy feeling that a longtime fixture was leaving. And Irene really was that. One of the longtime employees who everyone knew and everyone was fond of.

At least the book seemed to somewhat lift spirits with memory evoked laughs. It made the rounds and finally found its way into Elise's hands. She couldn't help a chuckle at a picture of a younger looking Irene. It depicted the architect wearing a hard hat; clad in a blazer and knee-length-skirt combo, wearing heels, and breaking ground at a site somewhere in Seattle. The Space Needle gave that much away.

"The first project I've led," Irene smiled.
"I figured," Elise returned the smile. It was, after all, the lead architect's prerogative to break ground first. "Look at you. All smiles. ---- Who is that?" Elise pointed at a face she didn't recognize. Just the eyes looked somewhat familiar.

"No way. Wait. What? --- No WAY!" Elise laughed; doing a double take. She read the description below. Some housing project in the university district. Spring of 1991. Names and job titles from left to right let her know who everyone was; and indeed, right there, next to Irene, it said Richard Danning: assistant to the supervising engineer.

"Wow. Richard looks so ---." 
"Built? He certainly was."
"And the beard. And a checkered shirt. He looks like a lumberjack. Like the ones you see in commercials," Elise laughed wholeheartedly.
"He was rather dashing. Well, he still is. Without the beard, he looks like Gene Nelson. And he was quite --- strong," Irene sighed dreamily.
"Is that so?" Elise side-eyed Irene.

"It's not what you think. I admit I had a crush. I even flirted with him when I first started working here. --- I was cheeky like that," Irene giggled when she saw Elise's mouth agape. "But goodness, was he ever handsome. Wavy hair. And those green eyes with a warm smile. Tall. And so...." 
"Buff?" Elise cut in, looking at the picture again.

Irene laughed "Yes. He had women in giggles wherever he went. Not on purpose because -- well you know Richard. He's not the cocky type about his looks. Completely oblivious of his charm, too. Which is quite attractive if I may say so. But he did set boundaries the second he became aware. Always held up his ring if anyone asked him for his number." Irene lifted her brow.

"Some men... when they look like that and have careers like this, where they travel a lot, they take advantage. Richard never did. Besides, --- you know Judith. She's a ringer for Marilyn Monroe," Irene giggled again.
"That, she is," Elise agreed; not just about the looks either. "I'm going to miss you," she added softly while closing the book.
"Oh no. Don't. It's already difficult enough," Irene held back some tears, but it didn't stop Elise
from closing in for an embrace. "Don't become a stranger. And let me know when you're moving," Elise offered a tired smile.

The couple of hours after mid-morning break seemed to fly by. Almost everyone was still at half-day schedule despite the China-Japan project picking up on pace. So people rushed to get things done. Today, the extra time was welcome, though.

James, once again, kept true to his word and picked up Elise from work. They stopped by a cellular shop, just like he had said they would. Elise groveled a little about having to transfer all her contacts and having to call or text everyone. But a new number somewhat put her mind at ease.

First person she texted, of course, was Oscar. "Got a new number, Lindo. And a new phone." "Good. James mentioned you'd be getting a new one. *smiley face*"
Elise rolled her eyes. Of course, her brother-in-law would tell. "I feel like my life is turning upside down. *frowny face*"
"I know, mi Reina. But it's for your own safety. I wish I was there to help out as well."
"Well, Jim is helping plenty. Dropped me off and picked me up from work. *frowny face, again*

No reply. Which wasn't surprising to Elise. She was sure she'd interrupted Oscar during a break. So he was probably back to filming. She tucked the phone into her briefcase, looking out the passenger window of James' SUV. "I could get used to this," she chuckled, shifting attention to her brother-in-law.
"Used to what?" James focused on traffic.
"You being my chauffeur." Elise raised an amused brow.
"I don't think you could afford me." James winked at her. She laughed at that, then agreed with a nod.

"I keep forgetting how big their place is," Elise gaped while they walked up the stone stairs leading to the front door.
"Hmmmm... they did well for themselves." James nodded.
"Tell me about it." Elise peered around.

The house was nestled privately between patches of tall trees. Despite the forestry feel, the grounds were in perfect design and pristine condition. Rose bushes were in full bloom and in the brightest colors. Stone paths in elegant waves stretched across the greens. The grass was so perfect, Elise wondered if anyone ever walked on it.

She, of course, knew that people did. She had spent quite a few summer evenings here. Some were private get-togethers. Some were company parties hosted by Judith because that was what she did. On the side that is, and only when she had time since a career in realty kept Judith busy. Elise smirked. "You should get a place out here. For Tina and the kids," she directed at James. "Hmmmm... I agree." He winked again. A spark behind that wink.
"What does that mean?" Elise squinted.
"Just that I agree." James rang the doorbell at last.
"Whatever," Elise chuckled at the hunch that it was more than agreement.

Judith greeted them with open arms, immediately hooking her arm into James' and pulling him to the kitchen. "Getting some coffee and tea, Darlin'," she called out to Elise. "Richard is in his office."
Elise snickered. She ambled towards Richard's office, examining large paintings hanging in the
hallway there. Nothing new added this time around. Still, all this grandeur always left Elise a bit speechless.

She reached the office. The door was wide open, so she tapped lightly against the frame. Richard was sitting by his desk, reading over some papers, occasionally signing off on something. He looked good considering the recent heart surgery. Relaxed actually. At least that's what Elise thought. She tapped again and he perked up, a smile his approval for her to enter.

"Have a seat," he beamed.
Elise looked around with wide eyes. His space was a stark contrast to the rest of the house. Organized mess was the proper term. Not really new to Elise. But the space was cluttered more than usual, meaning that she did have to move a few heavy folders to make space for herself. Usually, the chairs were empty.

"Are you working?" Elise asked with a scolding undertone.
"No. Just looking over a few things before my replacement arrives," Richard peeked over the edge of his reading glasses then signed another form.
"So you're not coming back then?" Elise felt her heart sink.
"No. Not like I'm the only one leaving." Richard stopped. He set the pen aside and took off his glasses, holding a glance at Elise.

She sighed. She should've known he'd know already. "James?"
"James," Richard confirmed with a nod. "But also a gut feeling."
"Gut feeling?"
Richard sighed, closing the folders spread out on his desk.
Elise knew him quite well, so she knew when something troubled his mind. Her own mind went back to the day she had rushed to the hospital. And to conversations that week. "Did you know the company was in trouble?" she asked carefully.
"Yes."

"So what James had brought up at my //re-evaluation// wasn't news to you."
"No. I knew they'd try to use loss of business. They needed a scapegoat, I guess. I couldn't tell you then. Not without risking a lawsuit. That's why I insisted on James coming along. And there was nothing they would've been able to do. Since you're allowed legal representation. All I had to do was tip your brother-in-law off in the right direction. Dig a little deeper in some areas. I knew he'd find something. Although, the fact that he found undisclosed numbers was pretty impressive," Richard chuckled.

"I take it even after the meeting you couldn't tell the teams?" Elise drew in her brows. Not surprised but a little peeved that he hadn't even hinted at trouble.
Richard shook his head, hitching a breath. A lot of the pieces were falling in place. The whole thing in Montreal really was a lucky coincidence. If they'd not had that, they wouldn't have been able to have her step aside. It wasn't just about the promotion itself. It was about keeping her out of upper-level meetings because in her new position, overseeing all international communication, she'd have been able to sit in.

"I guess they were scared, I would talk, huh?" Elise frowned.
"Yes. Somewhat. You're smart, Lizzie. They don't like smart. And they especially don't like smart people who might ask questions. And I know you. You'd have asked," Richard confirmed.
"Is that why Henry called you? The night of your heart attack. Scared you might talk?" Elise inquired. She'd been wanting an answer to who'd called him for a while now.
"Who told you it was Henry?" Richard lifted his brow in surprise.
"Gut feeling," Elise frowned, again.

"I was getting antsy. There's still a lot of stuff you don't know. I'm glad you don't. But, they sure were scared. So they gagged me, threatening me with lawsuits." Richard became pale.
"You mean they blackmailed you. What do they even have on you?" Elise became alarmed.
"Nothing that can be physically backtracked to me. Mainly because I didn't sign off on anything. At least not officially. But it's enough to know that I agreed to cut corners --- to save money," Richard clenched his jaw.

"What kind of corners?"
"The type that would not pass inspection if people actually took a closer look."
Elise covered her mouth in shock. "Tell me it wasn't the hospital," she gaped.
"No. In fact, --- the building, I'm talking about doesn't even exist, yet. Only the blueprints. Which I looked over with eyes shut. And the officials approved, despite the obvious safety flaws in the design."
"That's why Irene quit," Elise deduced.
Richard just nodded in confirmation.
Elise shook her head, mouth still agape. "What are you going to do?"
"What is right. Point out the flaws. And if officials won't listen, leak it to the press."
"It'll be the end of the company. --- And you."
"Well, I rather be in the poor house than have people's lives on my conscience."

Elise sat silent for a minute.
"Look. Don't worry about me. I can handle myself," Richard chuckled.
"Yeah. I can see that." Elise gestured with her chin to his chest.
"That was mostly diet. Anyways --- are you prepared? For whatever you have planned?" Richard redirected.
"I don't know. I have a business plan, but honestly. I'm stuck. There's so much more to being self-employed than I thought," Elise confessed.
"You should talk to Judith. She started out self-employed. And now look at her. Twenty or so employees. Still small but way more than I think she ever anticipated," Richard advised.
"I will," Elise smiled then sat silent again. Another minute.

"I got your print by the way." She got up and pulled a scroll from her briefcase. She walked around the desk and placed the scroll on top then ran her hand over Richard's face. It was a caring gesture. Something a worried daughter might do to hint at a "take it easy". And Richard seemed to understand with a quiet nod.
"You look much better without a beard," Elise scrunched her nose.
Richard boomed out a laugh. "I thought I had destroyed that picture," he kept laughing.
"Nope," Elise smirked. "Come on old man. Your wife said she's making coffee and tea. And I'm venturing there'll be cheesecake," Elise wiggled her brows.
"Yeah. For you, maybe. For me it's dried cardboard and rabbit food," Richard frowned and Elise laughed.

Richard got up and she hooked into his arm. "Slow now. Don't want you to overexert yourself," she wisecracked. Richard just shrugged it off with another laugh. They met up with Judith and James in the kitchen. Conversations lighter as they recapped the previous week while eating cheesecake. Judith allowed a sliver for Richard. He groaned at the minuscule size but accepted with a sheepish grin.

Another so-so day and Elise was glad that she'd been busy throughout. Especially when she got home. Emptiness greeted her. Absence of Oscar was very much disliked. She cleaned up the living
room, displaying new found treasures on wall-mounted shelves opposite the entertainment system, and stowing new books in her shelves. The latter made her smile. The top left of the left shelf was almost full now. Filled with books Oscar had gotten her and the ones she had bought, including the book from India, which she'd finally finished reading.

She sighed and then opted to make dinner while doing laundry. Oscar would frown because she decided on cocoa puffs instead of a warm meal. She laughed at the thought, pulling her new cell from her briefcase to text Oscar.
"Cocoa puffs for dinner. Yum."
"*frowning emoji* There's food in the freezer, mi Reina."
She laughed. She was right about the frown.
"Are you still on set?"
"Yes. Hold on."

Two minutes later her cell rang.
"Didn't you say you wanted to learn to cook?" Oscar's voice rasped.
"You said, I don't have to," Elise countered.
"Coco puffs are not real food, though," he scolded.
"Neither are Cheetos," she countered again. He laughed.
"Tell me about your day," he requested, so she did. Shortened versions of long conversations.
"I'm sure Richard will be fine. He's a good guy. The fact that he's willing to put it all on the line proves that," Oscar stated when she voiced concern for her boss.

"I know," Elise paused, deciding it was time to change topic. "I still have so much to do. The startup thing is insane. I'm questioning if I should really go for it," she sighed.
"Don't think like that, Sweetie. What's left to do?"
"Well, I have to join more associations. I'm already part of two, but to get seen, I need to join more. I actually have to write a resume," she chuckled.
"For?"
"Translation agency. I don't have my own clients, yet. So I need to work whatever jobs I can get."
"I see."

"Mmmmm hmmm... Then there's the whole tax issue. Self-employment insurance. Health insurance. Upgrading my laptop. Probably should get a second one anyways," she explained.
"Do you need money for that?" Oscar wondered.
The fact that he had asked with such ease left Elise a little stumped. "Uhhmm... no," she stammered.
"Are you sure? I mean you know, it's not a big deal," Oscar nudged on.
"I know, but I'm good money wise," she paused. "This... This is going to sound like weird. Maybe a little cold but... well, when Joe passed, I... I...", she didn't know how to continue.
"You received life insurance," Oscar assumed.

"Yes. I never spent it all. I mean, a good chunk went towards the time I was in the hospital. Like for my rent. And then some went towards the move. And this place when I came back. But I made sure I had some money tucked away for rainy days. An account not even Frank knew about." Elise chewed on her lip.
"That's good, Sweetie. But if it's for rainy days, you should keep it for rainy days." Oscar advised.
"True. But... Well... I also put money into savings. I don't spend all that much on myself, you know. And the last three years, I didn't have reasons to spend at all," she hinted at her hiatus. "I spent a little, of course. But yeah..."

"Ah. Ok. I still think you should leave whatever you've saved for really rainy days. But if not,
maybe set up a business account? Transfer some money from each account. Maybe twenty-five percent of all your assets. I don't want to pry in how much it is because that's none of my business, but if it's not enough, I'll match whatever you're putting into the business account, ok?" he offered, then waited. Elise had gone silent. "Liz. You ok?"
"Yeah. Yup," she sighed. "I'll let you know when I get to that point. If I need any money, it'll be a loan."
"Sweetie..."

"No!" she cut him off. "I'm serious! If you invest, it'll either be a loan and I'll pay you back, or... I'll make you a partner."
"You're so stubborn. But --- it's a deal," he agreed with a chuckle.
"Glad to know you're taking me seriously," she pouted.
"I am taking you seriously. I'm glad you're working towards this. I just need you to stop resisting now and then. Let me help. Let us help. And I'm not just talking about your startup, Sweetie," he sounded annoyed.

Elise went mute again. He wasn't wrong and she knew that. "I'll try," she whispered.
"Good. I don't mean to be mean, you know. I just want you to be happy," he clarified.
"I know. And I am. I'm just so used to doing things by myself," she explained.
"And that's good. Independence is good. But it's also ok to ask for help. And I'm here. If you need it. Ok?"
"Got it."

They went over some more of her day, then his. He grumbled about his trainer planning on whipping him into even better shape. And she laughed because she knew he'd rather sleep in or at least eat whatever he liked. "On the upside, that means more energy," he wisecracked. She could almost feel the wide grin through the speaker.
"Ah yeah? Hmmmmm...," she pondered, which had him bust out a laugh.

"I knew, you'd like that," he snickered.
"Well too bad you won't get to use that when I visit again," she sighed.
"What? Why?" he gasped, sounding almost heartbroken.
"You're still not doing the math, huh? Looking at my calendar, it'll be that time of month," she frowned.
"Oh... awe man. Good to know, though. I'll make sure to buy you all the snacks you need," he chuckled.
"And heating pads," she bit her lips again. Slightly embarrassed.
"I'll make a list, Sweetie," he promised.

Some more back and forth, then they finally hung up. Only two weeks and two days to go. She finished her laundry, then set her alarm. Six in the morning. Without Oscar being around, she figured now was the time to get back into routine. An early morning guaranteed such for her. She double checked the alarm. Then started drawing in her journal. An island, surrounded by water. Stone buildings.

She sighed.
"I can't. Oh god... ." She sighed again.
He moaned into her neck, trembling a kiss onto her skin.
"Oh my god," she wheezed out under his body. "How many times is that today?"
"Three," he wheezed a laugh into her neck, pushing his weight to his elbows, but keeping his face in her neck. "My god, I love making love to you," he mumbled.
They both laughed.
He rolled off her and heaved his breaths. "You're so fucking beautiful, Baby." He skimmed over her
breasts.
She just hummed.

She closed her eyes for a second then she stood on the whitewashed, stone balcony attached to their hotel room. The sun rising over the Aegean Sea the perfect backdrop to this morning. She felt him squeeze around her from behind while he gently brushed a kiss onto her shoulder.

"Looks like we're finally going to have some sunshine," he chuckled. "We should go to the market and get stuff for the family, that way our parents don't accuse us of only having sex while here." She laughed wholeheartedly at that, then hummed again, and he nudged her shoulder for her to turn around.

"Then again..." Bright hazels sparked with naughty thoughts when he closed in to trail kisses down her neck. She moaned softly. "We just got up," she breathed at more kisses. Warm kisses. Lingering kisses. "I know," he pushed her against the edge of the iron wrought table; his hands pushing her skirt up and her panties to the side. Fingers quickly finding their way into warmth.
"They'll see us," she gasped.
"No they won't," he breathed, letting his fingers fall out. He palmed her thighs open, pushed the front of his shorts down just enough, then pressed into her.
"Maybe not see us, but they'll definitely hear us," she gasped out a moan, losing focus.
"Then let's go back inside," he slipped his hands from her hips over her ass and lifted her closer towards his body, remaining inside of her while he carried her back to the bed.

He nearly crushed her under himself when he tumbled forward into the heap of twisted sheets and messed up pillows. They laughed at that. He halted to graze her lips with his, then he started rocking into her body, pushing her top up so he could swirl wet kisses onto her breasts. "God fuck," she breathed. She was almost there again. With an ache because he switched to hard thrusts against her insides and stinging bites into soft flesh.

A knock on the door. "Room service." He groaned. "Fuck, are you kidding me..." his voice rasped. "One minute," he called out. "You better get that," she breathed with a chuckle.
"No, they can wait." He furrowed his brows, burying his face into her shoulder and holding on tight.
"You said a minute," she moaned.
"I don't need a minute." He moved faster, then bit into her skin with a growl.

"Sir."
"Just a minute," he called out again, face still buried in her shoulder. They both laughed, him finally standing up. "You better cover yourself, Misses Redfield."
"You, too, Private First Class," she snickered. He looked down and laughed, fixing up his shorts, winking at her. He straightened his shirt, ran his hands through his hair, then pushed out a breath, finally opening the door.
"Breakfast, sir."
"Ευχαριστώ πολύ [Efcharistó polý] [Thank you very much]," he smiled and took the tray from the bellboy's hands. "Let me get some change."
"No, sir. You tipped last night," the bellboy grinned sheepishly, then walked off.

He closed the door and smirked her way. And she smiled over the edge of the sheet, green slivers shining through in mischief. "I'm pretty sure that kid knows what we were doing." He set the tray on the nightstand, then
crawled back into bed. She hummed at that.
"So. Two more days. The sun is finally out. We really should go explore," he smiled, tracing over her collarbone with his fingertips.
"We've been exploring," she giggled.
"Oh, I know." He tugged dreamily on a long wave of strawberry blond hair. "I'm pretty sure, I didn't miss a single inch." His hand slowly wandered down her body and between her legs.

She sighed, then closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself on a wooden balcony. Cherry blossom trees adding pink hues to a rising sun highlighting Mount Iwake.

She was lost in thought when she heard the shutter. "Don't you have enough pictures of me?" She scrunched her nose.

"Of you? Never." He set the camera on the table, then embraced her from behind.
"I wanted to take you here for our fifth. But I had to push it forward," he exhaled a long breath.

"You're deploying again?" She turned in his embrace. Dulled grays meeting worn hazels.
"Yes, Baby. I'm sorry. Not much longer, then I'm all yours." His lips twisted with those words.
"That's what you said last time, and then you re-enlisted," she frowned, pivoting back to look at the trees again.
He hung his head for a second. "I know. I just want to make sure we have enough money for when I do get out."

She shook her head. It didn't deter him from leaning a kiss onto the back of her neck.
"I was talking to mom today," he changed topic. "She's asking when we're going to give her grandbabies."

Sheuc turned back around and palmed his face. "Once I have my degree and you make Sergeant." She angled a thin smile.

"That's what I told her." His smile was as thin as hers.
"Then what's the problem? I mean you're only one rank away. And I'll be done this summer."
"She is just growing impatient. She thought we'd give her grandbabies right away."
"Yeah, well. She knew I wanted a degree first. And so did you."
"I know, Baby. And I'm glad. Because more education means more money, and more money means a better life, right?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply, nodding in agreement.

"You promised you'd get out if you're not getting better!" she yelled when she opened her eyes, her grays angry with frustration.
"Yeah well, YOU promised we'd try for kids once I got the promotion!" he yelled back, his voice slurry. His hazels just as angry.
"Don't turn this into an argument about kids because it's not. This is about you and your drinking. I can't fucking do this anymore! I can't! I don't want kids like this, dammit! That whiskey isn't your friend. You need help!" she shouted.
"Don't tell me I need help. I'm fucking FINE!" He swayed against the table. A glass fell and shattered and he stumbled onto the shards. "Fuck...."

"Stop walking. I'll get the first aid kit." She rushed to the kitchen cabinet and got the kit. She came back and saw him still standing in the shards. "Dammit. Sit down and let me take a look."
"No. I can do it myself," he swayed again.
"Goddammit. Sit the fuck down!" She tried to force him into a chair.
"I said NO!" He shoved against her shoulder and she fell backward. He stood in shock. "Fuck. I'm sorry, Baby. I'm sorry. Baby, did I hurt you?" he trembled. He reached out but she shifted back.

She pulled herself up on another chair, stunned by what had just happened. "I'm going to stay with
my sister," she whispered while she turned towards the hallway. She got the suitcase from the closet and disappeared to the bedroom. A few minutes later she heard the front door slam shut. She closed her eyes, crying.

"Where am I?" she scanned around confused when she opened her eyes.
"In the hospital."
"Why?"
"I don't know, Baby. You tell me." He stood next to her bed. He looked different. A warm glow only around him when the rest of the room looked cold and gray. "What did you do?" His brows pushed together. Sad hazels fell to her bandaged wrists. One seeping deeper in red than the other.
"I ... I was missing you," she whispered with empty, nearly lifeless grays.
"I miss you, too, Baby. But you can't visit me. Not like this," he spoke softly.
"You left me." Her face twisted in pain. "Why did you leave?"
"Because I was scared I'd hurt you," he whispered.
"You didn't," she shivered out in sobs. "You wouldn't."
"But I did, Baby. I did hurt you. I'm sorry."
"I know. But why did you leave me?" she cried faintly, turning her face away from him.

Silence. She turned her head back. He stood by the window looking out on the skyline of a city. She looked down. Her wrists healed. Mostly. One a scar deeper and wider than the other. She peered around some more. She was in bed. But not in the hospital.
"You'll like Seattle," he smiled, that warm glow still around him.
"Your brother said the same." She didn't smile. She was tired.

A rush of footsteps and banging against the bedroom door left her startled.
"You fucking bitch! Where are you?"
She got up and headed towards the door.
"Don't open it," he whispered.
"I have to or he'll kill me," she whispered back.
"Baby. Please... Don't open the door," he pleaded softly.
"I'm sorry. He broke your book. He destroyed everything of yours, --- including me," she reached for the door handle, avoiding to look back.

She opened the door and entered a lush forest. Animal calls and bug sounds that would be foreign to most westerners echoed in the distance. The sun setting behind Kangchenjunga was a sight to behold. She loved this place. It was peaceful here. She felt at peace.
"Good god. India is beautiful," he gasped, standing next to her. "I should've taken you here before I died. We'd have explored it beyond the hotel room for sure," he chuckled. So did she.

She reached for a flower with purple blooms. "Lavender," she smiled inhaling the scent. "Your favorite."
"It is," he smiled.
"I miss you," she turned to look up at him, back in bed. This time, in her current apartment. And he stood to her left, holding a soft gaze down on her.
"I miss you, too, baby." He sat down on the edge, still holding a gaze on her, warm hazels meeting green slivered grays. "I'm so glad that you're happy," he whispered.

"So am I, but...," she shook her head. "...he's not you," her smile waned.
He held a breath, then smiled softly. "That's a good thing."
"I'm scared."
"Why?"
"I'm scared if I say yes, things will never be the same."
"Awe. Baby. Things haven't been the same. You know that." He caressed her face. How much she had missed his touch. She barely remembered the feeling of his fingertips against her skin. Roughed ridges because he loved working with his hands.


A loud sound and her eyes shot open to red numbers in a hazy outline. It took a moment for the numbers to shift into focus. Silent tears had her vision blurry like that. The sound was still beeping, so she hit the alarm clock hard. It took another minute to truly realize that she was awake. She drew in a breath and smiled at the dream. The good bits at least and despite the tears it had caused. The bad, she skipped over. Who could blame her? The good were warm and sweet. The bad... quite disturbing.

She sat up and found her journal open on top of the blanket, the pen she'd used next to it, and an ink stain on the blanket. She didn't care. She rolled herself into the blanket. Just a few more minutes. Getting back into routine was grumble-worthy. She dragged out of bed to check on emails, then watched the news while twisting into yoga poses. A quick text to Oscar before she hit the shower, then it was almost time to leave for work. James picked her up, again.

"How long are we going to do this?" Elise asked while stuffing her briefcase in front of her feet in the passenger side. "Until I know for sure where he is." James pulled in his brows. "You don't know?" Elise gaped. "I'm not a cop, so I don't keep tabs on him, Liz. I'm waiting for his probation officer to return my call," James explained. "And how long does that take?"
"Hopefully, not long. Again, I'm not a cop. So if the officer calls back it's out of courtesy not because he has to. --- I'm going to pick you up after three. Tuesdays are busy for me, so it might be later. Don't leave here but if you do, let me know, and make sure someone walks with you," James stated. Again, no hint of request. Elise heaved a sigh. For someone who was free, she suddenly had very little freedom to move around. She agreed, then made her way upstairs.

Thom was already waiting by her office. No coffee this time. "The CEO wants to talk to you," he whispered once Elise dropped her briefcase behind her desk. "Did he say why?" She peered towards the floor where she saw the CEO and Henry walking towards the conference room. Thom just shrugged. "This week just keeps getting better," Elise scoffed. She handed off a few papers for Thom to revise, then paced towards the conference room. Surprisingly self-confident.

A knock on the door and she was called in. "You wanted to see me?" Elise kept her eyes on the CEO, completely ignoring Henry. "Yes, Misses Redfield. Have a seat." The CEO gestured towards an empty chair.
"Is this another re-evaluation?" she asked; still surprised at herself by how confident she felt. "No. We're calling everybody in," Henry answered instead, but Elise still didn't spare him a glance.

"I'm sure you're aware of the current situation," the CEO started. There was an accusation in there. Definitely a hint at the close relationship with Richard. "Everyone is," she countered with a smile. "Hmmm... True. We need to make cuts. Save money," the CEO smiled back. "Are you firing me?" Elise didn't hesitate with that question. "No. In fact, --- you're one of the few people we'd like to retain." The CEO's voice was sweet like honey. "But?" She didn't fall for sweetened words.

"The cuts are regarding vacation time and benefits. Now, everyone has already been granted their vacation days this year, so we can't change that. But it looks like we're going to have to truncate leave next year. From four to two weeks. One week for people working here less than five years. Contributions to 401ks will also be reduced. Business expenses will get tightened to as need only, and..."
"Let me stop you before you continue. I'm not an expert, but what you're doing sounds illegal to me..." Elise started.

"It's not. You can ask your brother-in-law about that," Henry cut in. "I wasn't talking to you," Elise glared at Henry then focused back on the CEO. "Again, not an expert. But I do know that many of us have worked hard to earn those benefits you're planning on cutting. I'm sure most of us will agree with minor cuts but what you're doing, isn't minor." She tilted her head. "It isn't. However, all other solutions came down to layoffs. So cutting benefits is the fairest route." The CEO leaned back into his chair. "I see. And how long will that last? Until layoffs start? Cutting benefits is a drop on a hot stone," Elise argued. "You know more about business than I assumed," the CEO patronized. "You'd be surprised." Elise leaned back into her own chair. "Regardless of whatever you may know or not know, this is already decided." "In that case," she paused "I quit." She crossed her arms and lifted a confident brow.

Both, the CEO and Henry, seemed to choke on a breath. "You ... you can't just quit," Henry stammered. "I know. I have to turn in a four weeks' notice because of how long I've worked here." Elise gave Henry a knowing smile. Malicious almost. Just like he had the day after she'd found out about Richard's heart attack. "You'll have it first thing tomorrow morning." She uncrossed her arms.

"You are aware that you cannot work for another contracting company for a year. You signed a non-compete agreement when you started working here," the CEO sounded almost desperate. "I know." Elise got up. She was clearly done. "Don't worry. I know how to keep my mouth shut." She held a steely gaze at Henry then turned to leave. "Misses Redfield. If it's money...," the CEO started negotiating. Elise stopped in her turn and pivoted back. "I know this is a really difficult concept for some people, but --- it's not always about the money." She lifted her brow again, spun back around, and walked out with her head high.

The second the door closed, though, Elise felt nauseated. She'd never been this confident. Or defiant. Not like this at least. Whatever adrenaline rush had her sharp a second ago was wearing off now and wearing off fast. She barely reached the restroom before she hurled.
"Everything alright, boss?" She heard Helen outside the door.
"Yup. I'll be out in a minute," she called back. She splashed some cold water on her face, taking in one deep breath after another then started laughing. Almost hysterically. Then she caught her breath. "Fucking Christ. I just quit my job," she gasped, looking in the mirror, laughing again. "Who are you?" she geared at herself. She washed her hands then finally made her way back to her office.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a few people whispering. Some of them giving her warm nods. Others looking slightly appalled. She didn't care about the latter. She was a bit lost in her own thoughts - the meeting with the CEO on replay - when she bumped into a tall someone coming out of her office.
"Excuse me." She shook her head, still lost in thought. The someone walked on, not looking back once. There was a familiarity to the person.

It took a second. Just a second of penny in the air. "Excuse me," she called after the person before they reached the office floor exit. Again, they didn't look back. Instead, they picked up the pace. Elise, annoyed by being ignored, sped after. With every fast step, the familiarity sunk in. She knew that build. She knew that hair. She knew that walk. She knew HIM!

"Excuse me. Can I help you?" she called out again; this time with a light pant. The man stood by the elevator, still not granting her any attention. The door opened and he got in. She had almost caught up. She picked up more speed, almost tripping over her heels when she came to a sliding stand in front of closing doors. The mirror inside the elevator offering a skewed reflection for a fraction of a second. But it was almost enough. It was HIM! She was sure.

She hurried back towards the floor. Thom stood next to his desk, kind of flabbergasted. He'd watched his boss run after the stranger but opted not to follow.
"Who was that?" Elise breathed. "Did he give you a name? Thom... Did he give you name?" She rushed to her desk looking around.
"No. No, I'm sorry. He said he was a friend dropping off a message from Elliot?"
Elise became as white as a sheet at those words. There were few people who knew that name. Very few. She looked around and found a small piece of paper on her desk. "Who's Elliot?" Thom asked, still perplexed.

Elise sunk into her office chair and read over the note. No signature but she recognized the handwriting right away. If there was a whiter shade than pale, she was it. "Boss. Who's Elliot?" Thom repeated, shifting close to her chair. She looked up, trying to focus. "Joe. I mean --- It's Joe's middle name," she breathed out. "Joe? Oh... Joe," Thom became quiet. "Uhmmm... is there anything I can get for you?"
Elise still sat quietly. The note in her hand. She was completely fazed out.

"Call my brother-in-law," she finally managed to say. "Ok." Thom hurried to his desk and dialed. Elise went from fazed out to back in the now a few times over. The words "your brother-in-law is on line one" had to be repeated at least three times before she fully heard them.
"Hey. What's going on?" James' voice crackled through the speaker.
"I need you to come and pick me up," Elise gulped. "Right now!"
"Why? Did something happen?"
"Frank was just here."
"Be right there."

It only took James twenty minutes to get to Elise's office. He immediately went into interrogation mode. Why didn't Thom make Frank wait by the door? If Elise thought Frank had messed with any of her stuff other than leaving a note? If Frank had spoken with anyone else? If he had spoken to Elise?
"Are you sure you're not a cop?" Elise scoffed.

"Just trying to get answers," James pulled down his brows. His fingers sped over the screen of his cell and when the other person picked up he went straight into legal lingo. "Ok.... ok. I have that. ... Is that enough for a temporary one? Ok... Ok... Yes, she's coming along. ... I don't know. His probation officer hasn't returned my calls. Ok... Thanks, man." James hung up.

"Let's go." He tilted his head to the exit.
"Where are we going?" Elise grabbed her briefcase.
"No need to apologize," Thom smiled sympathetically.

With that James and Elise were off. On the way out, James stopped by the security desk, asking to quickly review security footage. That charm working in his favor since he was granted access. Looking but no taking, though. "Sorry, you'll need a court order for that," the guard explained.
"I know. I just wanted to see. Looks like Frank knew to cover his head. I don't see him for the timeframe. Do you?" James geared at Elise.

She squinted, asked to rewind a few times, but nothing. She wasn't even sure if Frank had used a surveyed exit. For all she knew, he could've gotten off somewhere and used the stairs. Then they'd be out of luck. This wasn't a bank or some high-level military site, so not all corridors and exits had cameras.

"Don't worry, Liz. He must know, you've recognized him. I doubt he'll come back here. But if he does..." James pulled a picture from his bag. "Could you make sure this guy doesn't go upstairs?" He handed the picture to the security guard. The guard nodded and taped the picture behind the desk, and Elise and James hurried to the SUV.

The stint at the courthouse was quick. Elise didn't need much evidence to get a temporary restraining order. But there was a lot of paperwork. It was a good thing James stayed connected to his lawyer friends. Whomever he had called was already waiting with the papers for him at the courthouse, whispering something into James' ear.

"You'll need more than this at the actual hearing," James' friend explained when they walked towards Elise.
"Sorry, Liz. I didn't introduce you first. This is Kyle Campbell. He'll be handling your case," James explained. Kyle stretched out his hand and Elise accepted, albeit a little confused.
"Wait. How come you're not representing me?" she gulped, quite intimidated by Kyle. He was average height and average weight. Five-foot-eight-ish tops. Maybe one-hundred-seventy pounds. But a crisp suit, rigid pose with a steadfast expression, and a very firm grip, he represented the cold, weathered, lawyer stereotype.
"Conflict of interest," Kyle answered for James.
James nodded with a raised brow.
"What do I need?"
"I'll email James a list of things. Now, he said you have a trip planned?" Kyle asked. His eyes fixated on Elise's. Like he was trying to read her.
"Yes. End of this month," she confirmed.
"Alright. Let me see what I can do to have the hearing before then. I won't make promises because usually, it takes two to three weeks. But... I owe Jim a few favors," Kyle chuckled softly, and for a second Elise saw Kyle: human. She instantly felt more comfortable.
"Thank you." Elise looked to the floor, almost like she was ashamed.

And she was. A little. Once again, her brother-in-law came through for her and she was aware of the strain this might put on him and Christine.
"We'll take care of it." Kyle stood confidently again, which in turn gave Elise a bit of a boost. They parted. James and Elise heading towards the garage, Kyle back to work another case.

"He's a good lawyer," James assured.
"I'm sure he is," Elise skewed her lips.
"Let's go home. You're staying with us. I'll pick up some clothes from your place," James stated.
Elise agreed without much resistance. Mainly because she was exhausted.
James dropped her off, Christine already waiting.
"I'll be back." James kissed his wife on the cheek, then Elise on the hair.

"I'm sorry," Elise frowned.
"Why?" Christine rubbed her sister's shoulders on the way to the living room.
"Because. This sucks. For you guys. I don't want you worried. And Oscar... Oh man. I forgot. Please tell me you guys haven't told Oscar." Elise slumped onto the large leather couch.
"I haven't. James, I'm not sure," Christine sat down next to Elise. "You should tell him, though."
"No."
"Why?"
"Because then he'll fly out here. I just... I know that's what he'll do. And I don't want to interfere with his work."

Christine sighed, got up, and got her cell. She dialed and waited. "Hey, Schatz, have you told Oscar about this, yet? --- Not, yet? Ok, good. Don't. --- Yeah, she doesn't want to tell him. --- She's worried he'll try to fly out. --- I know. Ok... See you in a few." She hung up. "See how easy it was to call."
Elise let out a disbelieving huff, shaking her head. "I know it looks easy. But... I'm not like you. I just..." She pulled up her shoulders.

"I know. You over think things. And then make them more complicated than they really are or have to be," Christine pointed out.
Elise shot her a look. "It's not as simple as that." Her defenses were going up.
"Actually it is," Christine countered. "And it should be. Especially between partners."
Elise shook her head again and shut down.
"Alright. I don't want to argue. Going to set up the guest room. James said, you're staying with us until the hearing." Christine got up.
Elise squeezed her eyes shut then followed Christine. "Let me help you."

James returned thirty minutes later, a mid-sized bag in tow. "I think.... uhmmmmm... I got all the essentials. We'll go back tomorrow to pick up more." He placed the bag on the dresser in the guest suite.
"Thank you," Elise sighed. A call for dinner and they made their way to the kitchen. Not that they needed the call. The smell was enticing enough. Schnitzel, mashed potatoes, and roasted veggies.

Elise sat opposite the couple, quietly eating her food. Christine side-eyed James. He heaved his chest, got up, and took a seat next to Elise. "Tell me, why you don't want to tell Oscar?" he went straight to the point. "I don't want this to interfere with his work," she whisper-repeated. "You can't keep things like this from him, you know. Trust him," James made clear. "I know. Just. Please? Until the hearing at least. Please?" Elise pleaded softly.

James ran his left hand over the back of his neck, letting out a frustrated huff of air. He shook his head but didn't press on. He kissed Elise's left side temple and squeezed her left hand then returned to sit next to Christine. Silence again. Until the baby monitor went off. "I'll go," Elise smiled thinly. "At least we'll have a sitter in the evenings now." Christine wrinkled her nose. Elise chuckled.

Wednesday started early for Elise. Chloé was crying in the room next door. Mom and dad were still out. Elise guessed it took a few minutes for them to wake up. Maybe a built up immunity to noise. She got up and tended to her niece; Tiny happy to see her aunty. "Look at you. Sitting up. When are you going to start crawling?" Elise whispered, lifting Chloé from her crib. She changed baby, then got a bottle ready.

Elise was rocking Berenjena Pequeñita when Christine joined them. "I thought, I heard her crying," Christine smiled somewhat sleepily while observing her sister and her daughter. "Stop!" Elise curled her lips into an abashed smile. "I know what you're thinking, and no. So stop." Christine shook her head. Tiny's tummy filled, Christine took over baby duty. "James is in the kitchen, making breakfast." She lifted Chloé from Elise's arms and headed for the bathroom. Morning bath time, she explained.

Elise ambled to the kitchen, the smell of bacon already crawling up her nose. "Need help?" she smiled. James shook his head no. He whipped up pancake batter while keeping an eye on the bacon. "Is Tina eating normally again?" Elise wondered. "On and off. Yesterday was pretty good. Surprised though, she kept dinner down," James chuckled.

He was ready to pour some batter when his cell rang. "Could you... just watch it," he smirked. Elise stuck out her tongue. She knew he was mocking her subpar cooking skills. He disappeared to the den and closed the door. When he didn't return as soon as Elise hoped, she took it upon herself to make pancakes.

The first one was a bit charred. The second one: undercooked. By the third one, though, she got a feeling for when to flip the fluffy discs. She even handled the bacon. Carefully turning slices as to not get burnt. The oil popping had her jump back a few times.

James returned, halting in the doorframe of the kitchen. He shot his index to his lips, hinting for //quiet// when he glimpsed Christine walking up from the side, Chloé in arms. They stood and observed for a few minutes, muting snickers. Elise was in her own little world. Moving back and forth between pans, and if it hadn't been for Chloé cooing, she'd not have known they were all watching her. At least not for a while.
"Feeding baby. And cooking?" Christine gasped wide-eyed, then started laughing. "Don't start!" Elise warned with a squint.
"Oh... not complaining... wow, it actually looks edible." Christine poked one of the pancakes before securing Chloé in the baby swing. "Ha! Ha!" Elise pouted.
"I think she might be getting ready to settle back down, huh?" James stole a few pancakes, drowning his stack in butter and syrup. "Just kidding, Liz. --- Kyle called. Hearing is on the twenty-seventh. I printed a list for you. Things we need to get. Most of it, we have already. The rest might be more complicated."

"Do you think we have a chance?" Elise read over the list. "Hmmm... Kyle said the chances are slim. The main problem is lack of incident reports. And witness statements. Then again, I've seen orders go through on less," James talked while chewing. Elise clenched her jaw. That didn't sound too good in her ears. "He said he has a few cards up his sleeves. Likely trying to get us in with a favorable judge. Either way, we'll get Frank to back off," James explained when he caught the worried expression. "I just don't want to hide again," Elise frowned. "We don't want that either," Christine chimed in, nibbling on a pancake.

Elise checked her watch. Almost seven 'o' clock. She looked at Christine, a little perplexed. "Don't you have work?"
"School's out for summer," Christine wiggled her brows. "No summer school?"
"The vice principal takes care of that. I have board meetings here and there. But mostly off. Which is good because Chloé needs mommy now and then, don't you?" Christine lifted Chloé from the swing. "I'll see you guys later." She kissed James, then Elise.

Elise hitched a breath. "Time to get ready for work," she sighed. "I'll drop you off, again," James cleared the table. "I'm not a prisoner, you know," Elise frowned. "I know that. But they won't arrest him so we need to figure out a plan," James suggested, pulling up his schedule on his cell. Elise hitched another breath. Only two weeks and one day. She did some math in her head. Only twelve days until the hearing. She could do this.

Most of the plan consisted of not going places alone. James would continue to drop her off in the mornings but left the afternoons up to her. She promised she'd call if she didn't have anyone to spend the afternoons with, and he agreed to pick her up if she needed a lift. James remained adamant about her not going back to her apartment, though. At least until the hearing. She agreed, albeit with grumbles. The weekends would be a day by day kind of thing.

Elise definitely stayed busy: mornings at the office, afternoons with friends, evenings with family; and throughout, chats with Oscar. He cheered her up with on-set shenanigans. Drawing on people's faces before or after a long day seemed a favorite. Alex, Olivia, and Sophie sent pictures as well. By the looks of it, hidden props were still an ongoing thing.

"Maybe we should send the boys on a scavenger hunt. You know payback," Elise texted Olivia. "Oh my god. YES. YES!!!! Girl, yesSSSSSS! Which objects should we hide?"
"I'll have to think about it. Something they like but not need on the daily. Definitely not movie props. Don't want Bryan to kick us all off set."
"*row of grinning devil emojis* I might have an idea for James and Michael. As for your boyfriend... let me know."
"*thumbs up* See you guys soon."

Whispers increased by the second Monday after the return from SDCC. More people had been called in to talk with HR and higher-ups. Tension was apparent. Most people agreed to new terms as not everyone could just walk out and leave. Some people with families only had a single income. So it was understandable.


"Did you mark it for my commencement?" Helen snuck into the conversation. "I actually did. May 6, 2016," Elise smirked. "All I need from you guys now is the wedding date." "June 21," Matt swooped in next to Helen. "Summer solstice. Nice," Elise smiled. "So did you pick invitations, yet?" Helen nodded in excitement. "We did. We have it narrowed down to three choices, but I think you should help pick. Since you're paying for them."
"It's your wedding," Elise took a step back.

Helen wouldn't hear of it and insisted on input, so Elise caved. "You should help us pick out flowers and decorations," Elise quipped. "This sounds an awful lot like a maid of honor job," Elise twisted her lips. "It is. Would you? I mean... I don't know anything, and ... well. You've been... and...," Helen stammered.
Elise chuckled softly. "German weddings are quite different, but sure. I'll help. As long--- as long as you promise not to turn into some bridezilla," she laughed. "Good luck with that," Matt's eyes widened. The //oh no you didn't// stares right after made him flinch. "Just saying." He threw up his hands and scurried back to his desk.

Elise squeezed her eyes shut and tilted her head. "Why did you say yes again?" They laughed. A little more back and forth revealed that Matt had been accepted at the architect firm outside Seattle. Helen found a job at a non-profit but explained it was temporary. Both, Helen and Matt, would leave before Elise, though. They only needed to turn in two weeks' notice, which meant they'd be gone by the time Elise would get back from visiting Oscar.

Thom, on the other hand, said he'd stay until Elise's last day. He was an at-will employee and didn't need to file notice. "Going to stay with my parents until I move for school," he explained. "Thought you don't like smooching for money," Elise teased. "They don't mind. Mom's kind of attached. She wasn't happy when I moved one city over," Thom frowned. "I'm sure she'll try to prolong my stay somehow."
"She's your mom." Elise nudged Thom's shoulder. "I know. But..."
"I get it. Trust me."
The rest of the day dragged. Mondays were usually busy, but the somber tone just stretched the minutes to felt infinity. Elise was glad to get off early. She wouldn't have been able to pretend she was busy much longer.

The afternoon was better. Elise met up with Patricia at her apartment. Her BFF had invited her for a fancy home cooked dinner and catch-up conversations.
"That was some good lobster. Living the high life now, huh?" Elise jested while sipping on some wine.
"Only to pay you back," Patricia grinned. She got up and started packing the dishwasher.
"Tricia. I told you not to worry. Besides you already did!" Elise frowned. She helped clear the tables, then the two women sat on the tiny balcony.

"Mom. Can we go outside?" Danielle shouted, already holding a basketball and a jump rope in her hands while cramming her feet into her sneakers.
"Yes. But you stay in the park. If I catch you outside the park other than going to and coming from, you'll be going straight to bed. No movie, no popcorn, no ice cream. Got it?"
"Yes, mom." The girl rolled her eyes.
"And watch your brother!"
"Yes, mom." The door shut.

Elise snickered, flashbacks to her own childhood to when she had to watch Christine whenever they went to the playground making her smile. She watched over the railing of the balcony and saw Danielle holding Donnie's hand, both checking the street twice before crossing to get to the park.
"They're quite independent," Elise chuckled. She peered right and saw Patricia beaming ear to ear. It was more than just watching her kids play.

Patricia caught a knowing stare and smiled abashed into the back of her hand.
"How is Owen?" Elise smiled.
"He's good. He was here while you were in San Diego."
"Ah yeah? And?"
"He invited me for a coffee date. Didn't have much time because of work. But --- he made time for a coffee date. For me." If Patricia's smile could go any wider it would've rivaled a half moon.
"That's good. He really seems to like you. And you him?"
"Very much so."

The two women continued to talk while watching the kids. Patricia mentioned Owen was still going to go on the concert date. Elise shut down an offer to join them and pointed out that they needed time alone together, but that she'd gladly watch the kids that day. Patricia agreeing with a hum an indicator that she and Owen were heading towards love. It was nice to see friends happy like that.

The rest of the week went by like the last -work in the morning, afternoon with friends, evenings with family-, except evenings with family meant evenings with Chloé. Elise staying over meant help with baby, which gave James and Christine some much-needed one on one time. There were constant reminders though to keep doors locked and that they'd only ever be gone a couple of hours at a time.

"Your parents." Elise shook her head after shutting the door in her brother-in-law's and her sister's faces; the couple out for a Friday night movie and dinner.
Elise carried Tiny to the living room, blankets and toys already set up so baby could be entertained. Elise snickered at Chloé rolling over a few times to get to things she wanted. "Let me show you
how to crawl." She got down on her stomach and wiggled then got on all fours to move around. Tiny laughed, amused by her aunty looking like fool really.

A chime interrupted the lesson.
"Hey Lindo, how's it going?" Elise huffed. She'd rolled to get to her phone, which once again had Chloé in stitches.
"Pretty good. What are you doing?" Oscar's voice rasped through the speaker.
"Playing with Berenjena Pequeñita. I think she's getting ready to crawl."
"Awe. Sweet. --- So you're babysitting now?"
"Only in the evenings," Elise laughed.

"You're over there a lot now, huh?" Oscar wondered. Elise hitched a breath. She still hadn't told him about what had happened. And she didn't intend to now. She was nervous enough with the hearing approaching fast. "Gotta waste time somehow while you're not here," she fibbed.
"Right," Oscar chuckled. "So how are you? I mean has it sunk in, yet? That you're leaving work."
"Oh god, yes. Freaking out a little. I still don't know who my target clientele will be," she sighed. "You don't have to fixate on just one area, Sweetie. I mean, translators are always needed," Oscar pointed out.
"I know. But it's usually better to work within a field. Become an expert you know."

"Well, where do you feel you belong?"
"Ugh... that's exactly what I don't know how to answer. I mean, I always liked construction. I think it's because dad made it interesting. So, I felt like I belonged but really, it's all I've ever known."
"I see. So it was more about pleasing your dad?"
"No. No... not really. He never pushed a follow into footsteps kind of agenda. It's just that he took us along to work whenever we were off from school and he wasn't on vacation, yet. So we spent a lot of summers at construction sites helping out."

"Ah. ok. --- Your mom worked, too, then, I'm guessing."
"Mmmmmmm. On and off for a while. She had a more difficult time finding something after we moved West, you know. She eventually went into the service industry. Became a maid at a local hotel in Gießen. At some point, she managed all the cleaning teams and maids for the hotel."
"Oh... that must've been a tough job."

"It was but... she quite loved it. She...," Elise laughed softly at a memory. "She got to know the regulars. There was this one guy. He always stayed at the hotel on the exact same dates, so he had a room booked. For however long. Almost like a standing order. But he was a grumpy, old dude. He always complained when things weren't perfect. My mom learned quickly how to prep his room, though. Like he needed the covers a certain way. The curtains drawn a certain way. The remotes placed a certain way. It was nitpicking to outsiders," Elise paused.

"Anyways. My mom got so good at detailing the room for him that he actually stopped complaining. I mean people quite literally held their breaths whenever he arrived. According to my mother, that is," Elise laughed. "And then one day he stopped showing up. My mom phoned around. Turned out, he'd passed away," Elise sighed. Then went silent. Her mind drifting to the dream she had had the Monday night after she'd returned from SDCC.

"You ok Sweetie," Oscar noted a heaviness in the sigh.
"Yes. Sorry. My mind strayed for a second," she held a breath. "Where was I?"
"You were talking about your mom. And a regular guest."
"Oh right. --- The guy had passed away. My mom received a letter a few months later, stating that
this guy had left her some money. A stranger. She didn't take it - donated it -, even though we really could've used it. But she said it didn't feel right. Turns out, the guy came back to the hotel because that's where he took his wife for anniversaries and birthdays and other celebrations. He'd been alone for a while," Elise paused again.

"Afterwards, once a year, my mom would set up his room just like he'd requested. For him and his wife," Elise finished.

"That's a sweet thing of her to do," Oscar's voice cracked through the speaker.

"Yeah. It was. And she did things like this for all the regulars you know. She always knew what they needed. Always anticipated. And always helped where she could."

"So you feel like helping people."

"I do. Don't get me wrong. Working for this company. It opened up the world to me. More than I ever imagined. I've seen places others can only dream about. For work! And I'm sure I've helped people indirectly. But, --- I need something that's more than just helping some big company make money. More than indirect help."

"Sweetie."

"Yes."

"Have I told you're amazing?"

Elise laughed.

"I mean it. --- I think, you'll find your niche. Once you see where you fit, you'll know."

Elise hitched a breath then hummed. "I better take care of Tiny. I think she needs a change," she chuckled.

"Oh boy. Fun," Oscar laughed. "I'll talk to you soon."

"Ok."

"Sweetie."

"Yes, Lindo?"

"Ich liebe dich."

"Te amo."

They hung up.

The rest of the weekend was somber. James and Elise went over everything they'd gathered. Kyle stopped by to prep for possible questions. The minutes to Monday seemed to speed up which added to the anxiety of it all. She'd be in the same room as her ex. An ex she'd not seen for over three years, except for when he'd crept into her office and left that note.

The Monday after the weekend dragged. Elise was constantly reminded that it was July 27th. Today was the day she'd be facing Frank in court. Her work definitely suffered. Good thing Thom picked up the slack without much complaining. A few jested words of how overworked he was merely an attempt to lift her mood a little. It worked. Occasionally. Still, time dragged. Like the universe knew she wanted to get the afternoon over with.

Then it was time to head to court. Elise was nervous to enter the room. James squeezed her hands.

"It'll be ok. We're here. Don't look at him. Look at your lawyer or the judge when answering. It's not a trial. It's a hearing. So it'll be just him, his lawyer, your lawyer, us, the judge, the court reporter, and a court deputy. You won't even go in the stand, but you do need to answer honestly," James whispered; searching for Elise's eyes. She just nodded. Deep breath in. Then it was time to head inside.

She entered and was sworn in. Frank entered and was also sworn in. Elise tried her best not to grant him any looks but she couldn't help a fleeting side-eye. Frank stood confidently while the judge
explained the issue at hand. Then it was time to present the evidence. The judge looked it over then peered at Elise.

"Misses Redfield, the only evidence you've presented are a phone call, a note, one incident report, and two police reports, both from a little over three years ago, one of which doesn't involve you directly" the judge started.
"Yes your honor," Elise confirmed as she stood up.
"You honor. If I may. The second police report explains the accused breaking into my client's sister's apartment a week after my client left. The incident report is of the accused destroying my client's property after she left. The report was filed by a neighbor who has since passed away," Kyle pointed out.
"Noted." The judge read over the report. "No other incident reports of abuse or stalking. No further witnesses either? Am I reading this correctly?" The judge peered sternly over the edges of the papers at Elise.

"Your honor, if I may add. We believe the unknown numbers were from calls made by the accused," Kyle cut in again.
"Objection. Speculation," Franks lawyer called out.
"Sustained. And I'm aware. Do you have proof that the calls were made by the accused?" the judge interjected.
"No your honor. They came from different pay phones." Kyle slouched a little. A sense of defeat.

"Misses Redfield. I'm trying to understand why there is so little evidence." The judge returned his attention to Elise. "Did the accused stalk you while you were ... where was it... in India, Hungary, and California?"
Elise gulped. She was hoping the judge wouldn't mention the last part.
"Misses Redfield?"
"No. He did not. He was unaware of my whereabouts."
"Did anyone know of your whereabouts?"
Elise gulped.

She looked back over her shoulder towards James and Christine and glimpsed her sister pulling her hand away from James. The truth that Elise had been back stateside beforehand was sinking in. Elise glanced at James and he just nodded a //go ahead//. There was little else they could do.
"Misses Redfield?"
"My brother-in-law knew about my whereabouts."
"But not the accused."
"No, your honor. I mean, yes, your honor. Not the accused."
"Then why now? Why start stalking you now? After three years."
"He saw me on the news, maybe," Elise's voice became thin.

"Objection, your honor. Misses Redfield is throwing out assumptions," Franks lawyer cut in.
"Sustained. --- Misses Redfield?"
"I don't know your honor. He stalked me when we were together. Watched my every move. He burned my books and destroyed my property out of anger. Old habits are hard to break."

"Objection. People change," Franks lawyer cut in again.
"Objection. It is proven time and time again - through studies, if I may add - that stalkers will up the game and that separation through hiatus only halts the process until the victim returns. That in fact, behavior becomes more threatening," Kyle threw out.
"Objection. You honor. Studies show that professional counseling and regular check-ins do indeed diminish stalking behavior as long as counseling is ongoing," Franks lawyer showed signs of
annoyance.
The judge rubbed over the space between the eyes. "Approach."

The lawyers approached the judge and Elise watched as they argued. She started feeling dizzy. Certain questions were unexpected. She peered over her shoulder and noticed that her sister had left. There was this imminent feeling of breaking down. But she couldn't. Not right now. A few more minutes, then the lawyers returned to their respective clients.

"Mister Bennett. Why have you sought out the defendant now?" the judge now directed at Frank.
"I wanted to make sure she was ok, your honor," Frank answered.
"Why?"
"She disappeared without a word. Didn't take anything with her. I was worried she might hurt herself. Like she had a few years prior," Frank explained with a calm voice.
"Objection. Irrelevant. Also, the accused is not an expert in psychology. So speculation," Kyle argued.
"Sustained. --- Mister Bennett. Are you aware that you're not allowed to call anyone other than your employer and your probation officer?"
"Yes, your honor."
"And are you aware that you're not allowed to travel outside of Olympia?"
"Yes, your honor."
"Then why break probation?"
"I only wanted to make sure she was ok. I saw the news and became concerned. It was truly, only to make sure you were ok," Frank geared at Elise with a warm and soft voice, but Elise knew it was anything but. She knew he knew how to play people. Pretend he was warm and caring.
"Then why sneak into the defendant's work? Why not approach her directly?"
Frank stayed quiet.
"Mister Bennett?"

"I don't have an answer, your honor. I should have been more direct."

The judge went quiet and read over the police reports again. Elise looked at Kyle. Those few seconds between the judge reading over statements, reports, and evidence and looking back up felt like an eternity.
"After reviewing the evidence and hearing both sides, it is my decision that the restraining order against Frank Bennett is granted. The order will take effect immediately and expire within a year thereof. Mister Bennett, you are to refrain from contacting the defendant by phone, mail, email, or other forms of communication. You are to stay at least three-hundred yards at distance of the defendant. Any violation and you are to be taken into custody on site and remain in custody until a hearing is granted."

"Furthermore, Mister Bennett, since you are in violation of your probation, you are once again restricted in movement from your current home to work and back only. All phone calls are to be made from your probation officer's office. And you are to report back for a counseling session to determine if you require such in the future."

The judge swung the hammer and that was it; the hearing a lot easier and faster than Elise had envisioned, and somehow a confirmation that Kyle, her lawyer, had been able to arrange the hearing with a favorable judge. So she should've felt a boulder dropping but she didn't. On her way out, she saw Frank clenching jaw and fists. He was angry. And she was worried.

Kyle and James were very much aware.
"A slap on the wrist if you ask me," Kyle drew in his brows when they reached the courthouse's
"Prison would have been better, but we'll take this. Elise, you need to carry the order with you at all times, ok?"

Elise just nodded in understanding, her attention split as she glanced over to where her sister was waiting. Christine looked calm but Elise knew that kind of calmness.

"Thanks again, man," James shook Kyle's hand.

"Meet up at some point," Kyle smiled.

"Why? Do you still owe me a few beers?" James jested. "But yes. I'll give you a call."

"You watch out now, Elise," Kyle reminded. "Just because you have a piece of paper doesn't mean he won't try. So stay vigilant."

Elise nodded again.

The ride home was quiet. Christine looked vacantly out of the passenger window. James stayed focused but Elise could tell he was tense. Worried tense. Elise herself got lost in her own thoughts.

"How did you know where she was?" Christine whispered when they'd entered the apartment. She paced to the dining room and remained standing by the table, back turned to James and Elise.

"She wrote postcards and letters," James gulped.

"Show me," Christine requested softly.

"Darling. I..."

"Show me, goddammit!" Christine demanded. Her voice suddenly elevated. Her back still turned.

James hurried to his den and pulled a black box from his desk, then sat the box on the dining room table and stood next to his wife. Christine opened the box and slowly pulled a stack of cards from it. She read over what Elise had written, dropping each card to the floor after.

"You knew all along and you didn't tell me," Christine whispered, her eyes fixed on the words of the last postcard she was holding.

"I asked him not to tell," Elise tried to roll the blame on herself.

"Why?"

"You were getting married. And Frank... I was worried he'd...," Elise started.

"Hurt us? Like he tried to when he broke into my apartment to find you!" Christine started yelling, eyes fierce and now on Elise. "And you. You knew where she was and you didn't tell me. James. You fucking didn't tell me for three fucking years!" Christine started pushing James at the chest. "Tell me why! TELL ME!!!!" Pushes turned into sobbed hitting. She was angry and he let her take it out on him.

"I didn't want to lose you," he whispered.

"Fuck you! And you, too!" Christine glared at Elise, angry tears rolling down Christine's face. "I can't believe this! I can't believe you didn't trust me to come back to you. I'd have pushed back the wedding but for fuck's sake, James. I'd have never left you!" She pushed harder against James' chest. "And you... I can't believe you didn't trust we'd keep you safe. Right here!" She glared at Elise again then she trudged out of the room.

"Sweetheart. Darling." James ran after her. So did Elise. Christine was heaving a large suitcase from the hallway closet and started throwing clothes inside.

"Where are you going?" James asked, rising panic in his voice.

"Staying with a friend. And I'm taking Chloé with me." Christine kept pushing more clothes into the suitcase. Then she got Chloé's stuff.

"Darling. Please? Please don't leave?! Sweetheart. For god's sake, Elise say something!" James peered desperately at his sister-in-law.

"Tina. Don't leave. Let's talk this out. Please? Let's talk. We're sorry. We're sorry, we underestimated you," Elise now pleaded, shifting herself between baby-closet and Christine.
Christine stopped for a second. "Get out of my way. I will take you down. You fucking know I will!" Her eyes filled with fury. Elise stepped aside and let her pack.

"Darling, Please? Please?! Let's talk." James dropped to his knees, tears welling up in his eyes as he held his hands out to her. "Please?"

"No! I'm going to pick up Chloé from the sitter. And then I'm staying at Arlene's until you leave!" Christine kept packing. Ten minutes later she was out the door, James and Elise standing in the kitchen, not saying a word.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Ugh. I am so sorry that this took so long. My family had back to back emergencies the first three months of this year, so that, of course, was a priority.

"Ugh. 10:34 a.m.. Why does time slow down like that?" Elise muttered after checking her watch for the tenth time in less than five minutes. Time truly seemed to have slowed to a crawl. It always worked like that. She was ready to leave but time wouldn't allow her, just yet.

She peered to her upturned cell on the desk, the display showing Thursday, July 30, 2015 - 10:35 a.m. She had hoped her watch was wrong. She groaned when she saw that only one minute had passed and that her watch was indeed synched to the right time. "Whyyyy?" she whined quite desperately.

"Can't wait to leave, boss?" Thom cracked when he walked in on her.
"Honestly, no. I can't. It's been a shitty week. I need ... hugs," she frowned when she returned to typing up some revised contract.
"Only hugs?" Thom wiggled his brows.
"Don't be smart with me. Short-fused today!" she almost hissed out the words.
Thom flinched, then quietly handed last minute corrections to her.

Little did he know that her bad mood wasn't just about family, but also enhanced due to period pain. Of course, she didn't intend to share that info. TMI for work-related talk. Even friend talk. But definitely for Thom, who was young enough to be her son. She paused typing and pondered how she'd have that talk with her kids one day. She envisioned awkward moments and yelled //ewwwss//.

She chuckled, then sighed. "Sorry, Thom. It's just one of those ... one of those days," she apologized.

"No worries, boss. We all have them," he smiled then grabbed her empty coffee mug on the desk to get a refill.
"Thank you," Elise called after him.

Sharp at noon, James stood in Elise's office. The exhaustion of the last three days laid settled on his face. Warmth replaced with deep worry-creases and dark under-eye circles. Since Christine had walked out, he had barely slept. He had called her a few times over the last few days. Conversations short and shallow but still important. It was to make sure that his wife was ok, that his daughter was ok, that they had everything they needed; but as soon as he started pleading for both to come home, Christine shut him down.

"Ready?" he asked wearily.
"Yes. Let me just turn off my laptop, one... more.. second --- ok, ready. You have my suitcase, right?" Elise grabbed her briefcase and purse, then hurried to lock her office.
"Yes. It's in the car. You had everything packed right?"
Elise double checked her purse at those words. Passport. Phone. Wallet. All the cards... "Yup. Let's
go." She gestured towards the elevator and off they went.

"Did you talk to Tina?" Elise asked on the ride to the airport.
"Yes. I talked to her this morning," James sighed.
"And?"
"She's ok. Chloé is ok, too." James kept it short. Most likely because that's all that had been offered, so Elise didn't push on.

Tension since the day at court wasn't just between James and Christine. It was between all three adults. It wasn't really about pointing fingers. Elise and James knew they were both at fault. Equally. Not like pointing fingers could turn back time. It was more about the disappointment laced feeling that had all three on an edge. And between James and Elise, it was disappointment in themselves plus desperation to figure out how to make things right.

"Some distance might be good," James pointed out with another heavy sigh. He wasn't entirely wrong. Last time he and Christine had taken a break, when one had moved out, it had made them see things from different perspectives. Made them understand why they each had done what they had done. He mentally crossed his fingers that it would be the same this time around; that he hadn't lost his wife for good.

"Whatever works for you two." Elise's lips skewed awkwardly. The last thing she wanted was them breaking up, especially over a choice she had made some three years and a few months ago. A choice she had begged James to be part of. A choice she knew she should have never burdened him with. Hindsight is a funny thing. She hated it being twenty-twenty.

"Alright, time to check in. Have to hurry. Plane leaves in less than an hour," James pulled into the airport garage, then hurried to heave suitcases and carry-ons from the trunk. They ran in large strides, Elise having to take two for every one of James' steps. Good thing they were both organized travelers. They reached their gate with ten minutes to spare. Ten minutes during which James called Christine one more time, letting her know that he was about to get on the plane, and -like all the other calls since Monday- that he was sorry and that he loved her very much. Then it was time to board.

James had booked first class. He chuckled at the self-explanation that he had become spoiled like this since he had made partner at the agency.
"Accurate," Elise agreed with a chuckle of her own.
"If you want, you can fly coach," James cracked while stowing their carry-ons.
"I'm not complaining. Just agreeing with your self-observation." She wrinkled her nose.
"Ah geez. Thanks," he chuckled again.

He dropped into his seat, cell in hand, texting whoever. His attention glued to the screen. Elise watched him from the side for a while. In profile, James looked exactly like Joe when lost in task. The same thought lines, the same movement in hair, the same twitches of the brows. She wondered for a second what Joe would look like now. If he would have the same age wrinkles, the same sporadic gray hairs, the same refined brow lifts.

"I didn't mean for Christine to find out like this," Elise said out of the blue. James stopped typing, sighed, then turned off his cell. "I don't think either of us wanted her to find out this way." He pocketed his cell. "Then again, would there ever have been a right time?"
Elise shook her head. "Probably not."
James agreed.
"May I ask you something?" Elise treaded carefully. "Sure," James shifted all attention to her. "Why did you wait so long to propose to my sister? I mean... you guys have been together since you brought us over here." Elise lifted a brow. "Before then, even," she added with a knowing timbre.

James' eyes cut the ground for a second. He chuckled like he had been caught. "You remember that, huh?" He returned focus on Elise. "I may have been foggy-minded while you stayed with us. But... I wasn't blind," she pointed out. James scrunched his nose. He ran his hand over his face, heavy sigh in tow. "I wanted to take things slow," he whispered. "There's slow and then there's sloooow. Five and a half years is sloooooooooooow," Elise drew out the last word with a mocking snicker.

James offered a half smile. "Tina and I --- our love isn't like yours and Joe's. I liked her, I won't deny that. But we were friends, nothing more. And when we moved back to the States, the distance had us drift. I mean sure, we talked because you and Joe talked, but the friendship cooled, especially when I started college. I put education before everything. Even before family and friends," James paused, his whole face falling into a frown.

"I remember that. Your mom called quite often. She was sad because both her sons were busy," Elise nodded. "Hmmm... I mean, she supported us. Dad did, too, of course. He had an easier time with us being out of the house. Maybe because he knew they could finally be alone and not worry about their sons breaking their shit; especially their furniture," James laughed. "Oh come on. You guys weren't that bad." Elise joined the laugh. "I agree with that. You and Tina were far worse." He continued laughing. "Hey, now! At least we never caused a school shut down." Elise's eyes grew wide. "I swear to this day, I have no idea how Joe got a hold of those garden snakes. All I did was help carry the bag to school." James suppressed another laugh. Total denial that he had helped Joe gather said garden snakes the day prior to the incident.

"I do recognize that I should've paid more attention to everyone. I was ambitious. Hungry, really. You know that." Elise nodded again. "I guess, being that ambitious wasn't attractive. Tina didn't like it when I talked corporate law. And I didn't listen when she told me about her teaching internship. Ethically and morally, we collided," James gulped. "So we each did our own thing. Besides, she seemed happy. Ok, at least with whoever she was dating back then."

"Hmmm... she was," Elise confirmed with a smile. "But were you? I mean before you came back. Were you happy?" she wondered. "I was ok. Things were going well. Lawyer at the number one corporate firm in Seattle, and making more money than anyone at that age should make. So, I was ok." "But not happy?" Elise prodded on. "Is anyone in their twenties ever happy?" James countered. Elise frowned. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you and Joe weren't. I think, maybe the proper word is satisfied?" James retracted. "Hmmm... that is a good word," Elise conceded with a vacant stare out the plane's window.

The plane jolted then started rolling for takeoff. She focused back on James who was fiddling with some papers. Contracts or at least work related stuff. He stopped when he felt her continued gaze and gave Elise an apologetic smile. He never was good with downtime, she knew that.
"Sorry."
"No need. I get it. Keeping the mind busy is a good thing." Elise chuckled then profiled James' face again.

"You look like you have another question," he smiled.
"Mmm... Was there someone? Before Christine? I mean, I'm guessing there was. But, I mean right before you came back?" Elise stammered through the questions.
James heaved his chest, his gaze dropping to the floor for a second. "There was."
"Was it serious?"
James shook his head. "Not really. I dated a paralegal. Kept it under the radar, though. In office romance was frowned upon," he scrunched up his nose. "It was convenience dating really because she had the same hours as me. The same ambitious drive for corporate law. The same cold-blooded greed."

"But?"
"I don't know. I mean, she was smart and beautiful. Just..." James shrugged. "I didn't see her with a ring on her finger, and she never asked for it. Mind I say, we were both young."
"So were Joe and I," Elise drew in her brows.
"Again, I'm not implying anything," James paused.

He studied Elise's face for a moment. Just a moment to understand where her thoughts were drifting to. He squeezed her hand and tracked her eyes. "I know, sometimes, you look at me, and you see him. Or at least you wonder what he'd be like."
Elise gasped.
"I'm right, aren't I?" James nudged on softly, and Elise nodded. "I'm not him," James whispered; his face edged with stern lines.
"I know that. I didn't..." Elise gulped.
"I know you never said it. But I can see it. --- It's ok. --- I'm not upset. --- Neither should you be. I want you to understand, though, Joe and I, we're day and night. Especially when it comes to our conscience. In fact, I know if you and I had dated, you would've ended up hating me."
Elise shook her head in disbelief.
James cupped her chin, holding her for a moment, then leaned a kiss on her forehead.
Elise snickered into the kiss.
"What?" James pulled away.
Elise stalled, sorting through the conversation. "It's just... I can't picture you as..."
"As?"
"This... cold-blooded lawyer type. I'm sorry. I mean, I've seen you being a lawyer. Still, I look at you, and I think of Joe, and you share the same warm eyes. The same warm smile. I don't see what you're trying to convince me to see."
"Isn't that a good thing?" James whisper-asked.
Elise just nodded in agreement.

The rest of the flight went by in silence. James went back to looking over his papers, and Elise opted for a nap, the last week's exhaustion washing over her.
The stopover in Minneapolis was a welcome break to stretch legs and get better food than what the airline offered.

James, of course, took the chance and called Christine. Elise sat in earshot when she overheard him saying how much he missed his wife and his daughter. That he knows she's upset and will be for a while but that they needed to talk it out. More whispered sorries and a quiet "I love you", and he hung up.
"Is she ok?" Elise asked.
"Yes. Well, morning sickness, again. But she's ok. She agreed to talk when I come home," James smiled thinly.
"Good," Elise nodded. "Good."

The second flight was much shorter. James refrained from looking over more papers and talked instead. Surface talk mostly, though. Hoping that the weather would be nice, that the hotel was decent, and that Oscar had everything he needed.
"I'm sure he does. He's not high maintenance," Elise snickered.
"Very true. Most low maintenance client, I've ever had," James chuckled.
"Ah yeah? Who was demanding?" Elise wrinkled her nose.
"I'm not giving you names. That's bad business."
"Come on. You know, I won't say." Elise lightly elbowed James.

He rolled his eyes then caved, telling her about nightmare clients who demanded so much he was surprised they didn't ask for gold leafed toilet paper. "If Oscar ever gets to that point, I expect you to kick him in the ass." James quirked a brow and Elise agreed with a loud laugh that shook the passenger in front of her awake.
"Sorry," she giggled.

Arrival in Montreal was shortly past 1 a.m., Lenny playing chauffeur this time. Grouchy because that wasn't in his job description.
The ride over to Lorne Crescent was quiet. Travel exhaustion along with wandering thoughts the cause. They arrived at the apartment complex, Lenny jumping out first.
Elise was ready to follow suit but James captured her hand and stopped her in her tracks. "Tell Oscar about Frank. Don't put it off. He'd want to know."
"I know," Elise nodded.
"I mean it. He's in love with you... And I know, you're with him. I can see it. How he looks at you when you're not looking at him. And how you do the same. I don't want to compare, but... I've seen it before. That spark between two people from the beginning. Like they've known each other before they even knew the other existed. I've seen it. Once. Twenty-five years ago. When you jumped off that swing and startled my brother. Even though he didn't tell you until you were sixteen. Nor you him," James smiled.

"How did you...?" Elise's mouth fell open. She had never told this to anyone. And she knew Joe hadn't either.
"He was my brother. You really think I didn't know how he felt about you? Or you him?" James chuckled. He looked out the window and saw Lenny lighting up a cigarette then he returned his focus to Elise who in turn sat waiting.

"You asked me if my relationship before Tina was serious. It wasn't. But truth be told if it hadn't been for Joe... If it hadn't been for your sister needing my help, because,..." James skipped a breath, his gaze falling to Elise's wrists. "... I wouldn't have come back. I would probably still work for the same firm. Probably date the same woman. Maybe even have married her because it would have been pragmatic like that. Who knows."

"But that first day, when I came back, that first minute when Christine picked me up at the airport and she hugged me, --- I felt like I had come home to something familiar. To someone who cared about me rather than just seeing me as some profit." James drew in his brows, the conflicting thoughts of pain over losing his brother and realizing that Christine had been more than a friend etching deep creases into his forehead.
"Remember what I told you about when she moved out after you came to the States?" James asked. "Yes," Elise whispered. "I knew she was right. I knew, in my heart, she had always been right. But it took her moving out to realize that I was going to lose the best thing in my life if I didn't stop. If I didn't stand up for the right thing. She gave me back my conscience, and I knew, my life would never be the same without her."

"I decided to wait to ask her to marry me because, after all that, I became careful with all my decisions. I went from a take-it-all-fast, not-caring-about-consequences kind of guy to someone who exhausted all options before taking the next step. But once I asked her, that was it for me. So when you ran away, I knew I should've told her, but I was scared she'd call everything off. I didn't want to wait any longer. I know, that's selfish, but I loved Tina. I loved her more than anything or anyone. And I still do." James hitched a breath.

He looked at Elise. She sat quiet, sorting through everything. "Your dad is going to kick my ass, you know that right? I mean, I'm sure Tina will tell him everything," James chuckled awkwardly.

Elise's eyes widened. "I hadn't even thought about that. How much does he know?"

"Only what Tina knew. That you'd run away, no one knowing where you were. I told him numerous times not to worry, so maybe he knew that I knew but just never said anything to Tina," James sighed. He peered out the window again. Lenny had clearly started another cigarette. "It's funny. --- Relationships like this, where one travels a lot, usually break because of distance and cheating accusations. Mine and Tina's will probably break because I was too scared to lose her to you. Her own sister," James frowned.

Elise's face twisted with guilt. "I don't mean it in an upsetting way, but it is awful. We're family. We shouldn't have made that choice for her. We should have trusted her. I should have trusted her," James explained.

Elise sat silent, again, her thoughts drifting. Like James, she wasn't worried about cheating. Oscar had never given her a reason to feel that way. But distrust by hiding things that could affect them both in some way, that made her stomach churn. She knew that once trust was broken, it was difficult to rebuild. And these last couple of weeks, there had been things she should have told. Things she should have trusted Oscar with but didn't, and now she sat worried that all this might drive a wedge between them.

She felt James squeeze her hand and refocused on the now. "Trust him," James whispered. "I do. It's just difficult. Frank, he... he... it's difficult to share things," Elise frowned. "I know. But you can't be scared forever. And Oscar is not Frank. He'll understand." James furrowed his brows. He squeezed Elise's hand, again, and she drew in a long breath.


Elise sat agape. "How did you...?"

"My wife tells me everything. --- And I regret not having done the same for her. Trust him. Tell him. And then get married and have babies already because you two are driving us insane." James boomed out a laugh. The first genuine laugh in a week.
"I will. When the time is right, I will," Elise agreed, an abashed smile growing on her face. She reached for the handle and finally opened the door.

Lenny was about to start another cigarette when she jumped out of the SUV, followed by James. "About time," the P.R. rep grumbled, handing Elise the keys to Oscar's place. "Oh please. You get overtime for this, so don't even," James grumbled back. "Not enough, man," Lenny chuckled, then made his way back to the driver's side.

Elise grabbed her bags, then turned to James. "You and Tina, you're going to be ok, right? Promise me."
"I'll try my best. We'll talk it through, even if it takes time. That's how it is. It's not always sunshine and lollipops and pink-hued euphoria." He pulled Elise into a hug. "Tell Oscar," he repeated, caressing Elise's cheek, then got into the front passenger seat so Lenny could drop him off at the hotel.

Elise waved after the car, then made her way upstairs. She was quiet in opening the door to Oscar's studio, but couldn't help a laugh when she stepped through the door. Oscar had left the light on in the entrance way, a garland hanging from the ceiling spelling out "Welcome Home, Mi Reina". The letters looked handmade. The fact that he'd invested time like that had her heart skip a few beats.

She bit away another laugh, noting the blue-hued shimmer from the bedroom TV falling through the arch and onto the living room floor. She stowed luggage in the nook by the entrance for now, then quietly paced to the bedroom, trying her best to suppress another laugh at the sight in front of her.

Oscar laid diagonally across his bed, snoring; arms and legs angled somewhat awkwardly, remote in one hand, a pillow in the other, and only in his underwear. Clearly, he had fallen asleep watching TV. She shifted closer and noted another increase in muscle mass.

She chuckled, remembering how Oscar had grumbled about increased workouts. Clearly, his trainer didn't let him get away with anything because Oscar looked more than fit. He nearly looked WWE ready. She sighed and shook her head. Then she noted that he had had another haircut, the undercut trimmed skintight. She hoped he didn't have to do these things much longer. She preferred full curls and a squishier physique. And she knew that he did, too.

Elise snuck back to the nook and pulled fresh clothing from her suitcase, then went to the bathroom to change. Once again, Oscar had gotten her favorite soaps and shampoo and displayed all of it on a tray sitting on the bathtub. This time, however, he had included heating pads and Motrin. She chuckled. He had made good on his promise that he would get her everything she needed for that time of the month.

She took one of the heating pads, then quietly made her way back to the bedroom, Oscar still sleeping in that awkward position she had found him in. She got her cell, turned off the sound, and took a snapshot of the moment. This would make a fine addition to her fridge. After that, she carefully pulled the remote from his hand and turned off the TV, then crawled up next to him, hoping she wouldn't wake him. Of course, weight redistribution and the feeling of someone warm next to him didn't play in her favor.

"Hey, mi Reina," Oscar rasped with a dreamy gaze.
"Hi," Elise smiled back, snickering at his heavy-lidded gaze. He drew in a long breath, then looked around confused. "Awe man. I fell asleep. Sorry about that,"
he mumbled.
"Don't be. You're cute when you sleep like that," she snickered.
"I am? Hm... ok," he grinned, still half sleepy, and it made her laugh. "What's so funny?"
"You clearly had a long day, Lindo." She caressed his cheek, the five 'o'clock shadow tickling her skin. Funny how much she had missed that sandpapery feeling on her skin.

"Yes, but seeing you makes it worth it," he smiled; lazily pulling her close so he could tease kisses onto her neck. He squeezed her stomach a little too hard in doing so and she responded with a groan. "What's wrong?"
"Period pain," Elise frowned.
"Oh shit. Did I hurt you?" Oscar shot up.
"Awe, Sweetie. I'm sorry. I got you heating pads. And there are chocolates in the fridge. And cookies in the pantry," he smiled.
"I'm good. I saw the pads. I have one right here." She held up the still wrapped pad.

Oscar took it and tore away the wrapper. He motioned for her to shift so they could lie down right on the bed, then helped her wrap the pad over her shirt before lying down on his back so she could curl into his side. "I missed you, mi Reina," he let out a satisfied sigh once she was next to him, running his hand up and down her back while kissing into her hair.

"I missed you, too." Elise peeked over his chest, brushing her index over his nose.
He nibbled her finger then opened his eyes and looked down on her. There wasn't much light in the bedroom, but it was enough to see that there were thoughts behind her grays. "What you thinking about, Sweetie?"
"Nothing," she fibbed.
"Liar. Tell me," he nudged on.
Damn him knowing her like that.

"You have work in the morning, don't you?" Elise's brows contracted.
"Not until eight. Tell me," he repeated, his voice taking on a more pressing tone.
Elise sighed a few times. Unsure how to start. If she ever needed courage, it was now. "Frank showed up at my work," she started.

Oscar stopped running his hand over her back. He flexed his upper body off the pillow with an alarmed face. "Did he hurt you?"
Elise shook her head, and he dropped back into the pillow, waiting. "It was all passive-aggressive stuff," she explained. After that, the words spilled easily. How James had helped her get a lawyer. How they got a restraining order. How Frank seemed angry after the hearing.
"Why didn't you tell me?" Oscar whispered. The disappointment in his voice was quite notable.

"I don't know. I was worried. I... I... That last day at Comic Con. --- I was worried. --- I'm sorry," she gulped. "I'm always worried about how someone reacts. I can't help it." She hid her face in Oscar's chest.
He stroked her hair a few times then slipped his hand under to coax her head up. "Don't be sorry, Sweetie. If anything, I'm sorry to have made you feel that way. I promise I won't do that again. I won't ever touch you like that, again. Or yell at you like that, again. I'll pay attention."

"I know that." Elise dropped her face back onto his chest, and he heaved a breath.
"I'm glad you told me, Sweetie. I wish you had done sooner, but I'm glad you told me now," Oscar whispered.
"You're not upset?" Elise lifted her head with surprised and questioning eyes. She bit her bottom lip
when she realized how her doubt may be interpreted. Why did she always have to doubt everything?

"A little, but I understand. I know why you don't share things easily, but when things like that happen, I need you to talk to me. You don't have to go through this alone. And if you're worried that I'll tell someone, know that I won't. Not without permission."

Elise's lips twisted in thought. "I don't know why I have such a difficult time trusting anyone," she whispered.

"Yes you do." He tipped his index on her nose. "I know it's not easy, but you do know that you can trust me, right?"

"Yes."

"Good, because you know, I want us to be able to talk to each other without being scared." He ran his thumb over her chin.

"James said you'd understand," Elise revealed with a sigh.

"He's right." Oscar's left brow lifted.

"Mmmhmmm... But it's not just the trust thing," Elise sat up.

Oscar held a raised brow, waiting.

"I... I learned to put on this mask. Pretending I was ok when really, I wasn't," she started. "Frank forced me that way. To pretend that I was ok, so people wouldn't ask questions. He told me when to speak and when not, just by the way he moved his eyes. --- Thing is, I never thought I was any good at it. I always thought, people saw right through me, and that added to the fear. Because if they could see through me, clearly so could Frank. I guess I was better than I thought. People didn't seem to notice."

Oscar sighed then caressed her arm. "I don't think you were pretending," he countered with a serious face, and Elise perked her brow in a "how so" way. "Acting is pretending in part. But to pretend you have to know what you're pretending to be. Observe it. Study it. And not just the occupations. The emotions. The feelings around everything. Take it apart to the core to understand. And soon you realize that you're not pretending. That everything you feel is in some form a part of you at any given second," he paused and played with her hair.

"Sure, I get to pretend to be a villain, or a genius, or painter and romantic lover." The crease in his left cheek deepened, and he wiggled his brows. "Acting opens up to exploration like that. Explore lives, I'd not be able to if I held a single job. So having their jobs or their lives is the pretense," he paused again, this time brushing the back of his fingers over her face.

"But the things these characters feel under their circumstances, they are actually part of me. Suppressed only because I'm not in that situation in real life. I am, of course... for a short moment at least. It may look like pretending but really, if I was in their shoes, I'm certain, I'd feel and react like them. So it's not all pretense. That's why I don't think you were pretending. I think you did what you had to do to stay alive, and if it meant to smile outwardly when in reality you were in pain, in those seconds, you did what you had to in order to stay safe."

"Isn't that what pretending is?" Elise mumbled.

"No. There is a difference. I don't think you were pretending but used part of yourself in those moments. Parts of a repertoire we all accumulate over time to either keep us going or hold us back. And trust me when I say, I know the difference between pretense and repertoire. One is a liar, the other a survival mode. Does that make sense?"

Elise thought for a moment, sighed, then snickered. "I think you're tired," she whispered.

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm seeing things from an observer's perspective."
"So you've studied me, then?"
"Sometimes. Just like you have me. Consciously and subconsciously. Or else you wouldn't hold back."

She caressed over his face. "That's true," she paused. "So?--- Are you using that repertoire right now?"
Oscar quirked an offended brow.
"I'm kidding."
"No, you're not. And no, I'm not. This is as me as you'll ever get," he smiled.

Elise hummed. She cuddled back up next to him and danced her fingers across his chest. "I don't think I could ever do your kind of work. I'd be a horrible actress."
Oscar husked out a chuckle. "Why do you say that?"
"Well, first of all, I'd forget my lines all the time," Elise chuckled. "But also, digging up all those feelings. I don't know. Doesn't it scare you sometimes? Maybe taking it too far? Knowing that at the core they are part of you?"
"Not really. At the end of the day, I get to return to my life and not stay in theirs. Plus, I get to re-evaluate my own life that way. Acting is almost cathartic like that. See yourself under extraordinary circumstances and work through those feelings. It makes scary situations less scary, and great moments, greater."

"You're such a philosopher," Elise giggled.
"Some people call me a hipster." Oscar quirked a brow, again, with a bit of arrogance.
"Yeah, that too," Elise agreed with a laugh. She sighed a few times, and Oscar lightly pinched her shoulder. She looked up, catching a knowing gaze into her eyes.
"You're still working through the whole pretending thing, aren't you?"
"And you're still studying me," she sulked.
"Hmmm, I guess I am. I just have this feeling there is more. And you're holding back, again. Don't hold back. Not for my sake at least." He squeezed her arm.

"I don't know. Everything has been so much. Frank scared me. And I was scared how you'd react when you find out. So I kept it all to myself. And all this exposure. The gossip. The pictures. Frank used it in court. He told me how he was worried about me. I know, he wasn't. He just...pretended." Elise's gaze shifted to some spot in the darkness. "I don't know how much of myself I want to put out there. I love you. I'm in love with you. I just don't want to pretend to be someone I'm not and yet, I don't want them to see me like this." She drew in a long breath.

"This?"
"Yes, this. This person that Frank has reduced me to. Someone who's scared of her own damn shadow. I mean if not pretense, what else is there?"
"There's you."
Elise's brows shot up, and Oscar chuckled.

"Sweetie, how much you offer of yourself out there, when you know they're watching, that is up to you. I know it's exhausting that when you're done talking people will ask for more. To give more of yourself. I know because that's what they do when I go to movie premieres or interviews. They always ask for more when I just gave them something. I rather talk about the movies than myself. But they prod on. That's when I smile and politely move on. But I never pretend to be someone I'm not. I never lie about what makes me happy, where I'm from, what keeps me going. But I control what I offer. They know that. If I did pretend, they'd know that, too. Mainly because Mike has a tendency to blab." Oscar scrunched up his face and Elise laughed.
"He does, huh? I noticed that," she smirked. "I'm still worried, though. I want to be by your side, but I prefer if they stopped digging. I'm always scared they'll dig and dig and sooner or later it'll turn you away because it'll interfere with your life. That's why I didn't tell you about Frank. Because I was worried, it would interfere. I don't want you to put your life on hold for things like that. And I don't want you to feel like you have to hide yourself because of me."

"I think that's up to me. Well, us really," Oscar countered. "Hmmm... yes. Still. I just don't want my whole life out there. At least not my past, because...," she stalled.

"Because it's painful."
"Yes. And tiring. And distracting. And...," she paused to think. "Something that's been holding me back for far too long. I'm not that person anymore. At least, I'm trying not to be," she paused again, looking for the right words. "I want to be by your side, give you my support, but give them little."
"Then that's all they'll get. Whatever you want to give and a smile. A smile to make them wonder."
"I think, when they see me with you, they'll know why I'm smiling," Elise laughed.
"Hmmm... True," Oscar wiggled his brows.

"Oh, you!" Elise pushed against his chest and rolled over.

"Nooooooooo! Don't roll away. I want to hold you," Oscar whined. He scooted closer to her and slipped his arm around her.
"You need to go back to sleep," she snickered at his tone.
"I will. I promise. Come on. Closer. I missed you." He buried his face into her hair and she wiggled as close as possible. "Ich liebe dich," he mumbled before dozing off.

Friday morning greeted with sunshine and a knock on the door. Oscar clearly hadn't heard. He was still out, snoring onto his pillow because like so many times before, they had shifted apart throughout the night. Elise snickered. Another knock and she scrambled to her feet. "Just a minute!" She glanced at her watch. 6:30 a.m. Who in the hell?

She peeked through the peephole and rolled her eyes. She ought to have known.
"Sorry, no solicitation," she snickered.
"Come on. Let me in," the voice behind the door whined.
She laughed and opened the door, ignoring the fact that she had a massive bed-head and smudged mascara, because, as usual, she had forgotten to remove all her makeup.

"Morning," Mike wiggled his brows. "Brought breakfast. Figured you might need it." Oscar's brother grinned ear to ear, a large brown bag in hand.
"I'll take the breakfast and you can wait right by the door with that smug smile." Elise perked a brow.
"Oh, come on. We all know what happens after long absences." Mike wiggled his nose this time.

"Do we now? Enlighten me." Elise's brow perked higher, and Mike pointed to her hair and face. "Maybe this is a new trend." Her hand slipped to her waist. "And you just didn't know."
"I probably wouldn't." Mike winked, a mischievous spark in eyes. Elise rolled hers, then leaned in for a hug, and Mike squeezed her close.
"Bro, hands off." Oscar stumbled through the bedroom arch, hair as messy as Elise's, and still only in his underwear.
"She hugged first." Mike's hands shot up then he lost himself in laughter. "Dude, please put on some clothes."
"You're just jealous of my body," Oscar grumbled.

"Yeah, your body. Let's talk about that." Elise gestured for Mike to come in while grabbing
whatever he had brought along.  
"What's wrong with it?" Oscar peered down himself then flexed his arms and abs.  
"It's a little much." Elise gave Oscar a once-over then got plates to set the table.  
"You didn't complain last night." Oscar scrunched his nose.  
"I knew it!" Mike squinted, and Elise threw up her hands, shaking her head, semi-stomping back to the bedroom.

"I'm sorry. Sweetie. I'm kidding. Come here." Oscar caught her before she had a chance to disappear. "I'm kidding." He teased a kiss onto her cheek.  
"Ass," she snickered. "And so are you," she geared at Mike.  
"I know. But we're lovable asses," Mike grinned.  
"I agree. With the asses part. Lovable, eh." She motioned her hand so-so.  
"What?" shot out in unison, big puppy-eyed stares attached.  
"See, now I'm kidding," she winked. "Going to get ready," she smirked, then made her way to the bathroom.

"But for real this time. How is she?" Mike asked and Oscar updated with what he deemed necessary.  
Fifteen minutes later, Elise rejoined, fresh-faced and damp hair, in distressed skinny jeans and an off the shoulder shirt that revealed a turquoise bra strap. Oscar smiled, kissed over the strap then geared to get ready himself.  
"Are you coming to set today?" Mike smiled.  
"Yes. Are you?" Elise bit into a bagel.  
"Later on," Mike grinned.

"What's that for?" Elise pointed to his face. "Oh my god. Are you still thinking that we got it on?"  
"No, but now that you mention it. Did you?" Mike offered a toothy smile.  
"Did Oscar ever talk about his bedroom adventures when his girlfriend was present?"  
Mike shook his head no.  
"Ok, well we're not about to start now, so..." Elise stuck out her tongue.  
"Feisty," Mike smirked. He glanced at his watch then to the bathroom door. "I have to get going. Picking up a VIP."  
"More VIP than your brother?" Elise smirked this time.  
"Way more VIP than my brother." Mike got up and kissed into her hair. "So that's why he calls you strawberry, huh?" he laughed when he got a scent of her freshly washed hair.  
"Amongst other reasons," she nodded with a giggle.  
"Don't want to know that one actually," he laughed.

Mike left and Elise finished her bagel. Oscar rejoined her five minutes after. He ate while she scrolled through messages on her cell, almost aimlessly like she was waiting, sighing now and then.  
"What's wrong?" Oscar sipped on some coffee. "And don't say nothing."  
"Tina isn't talking to me." Elise tucked her cell into her jeans.  
"Why?"

Apprehension met a waiting stare and an impatient thudding finger on the table. "She was in the courtroom. And well, the judge brought up California."  
"I see. So she found out that you've been back for a while," Oscar assumed.  
"Yes. And that James knew." Another minute of silence. "She moved out. Or well, she left to stay with a friend and took Chloë with her."  
"And now you're worried she won't come back?"
"Yes. And that their marriage is over."

Oscar inhaled sharply. "I doubt that."

"You didn't see her. She wasn't just angry. She was furious. She started hitting James. I mean, not hard. She's not a violent person," Elise gulped.

"Did you guys expect her to be anything less, though?"

"No."

"They're not getting divorced. I know them. Not as well as you, obviously, but James won't give up."

"Well it's not up to him, is it? Not in this case," Elise countered with a cold voice.

"You're right. It's between them." Oscar's lips curled into a frown. "Look. I could sit here and tell you not to worry about it, but I know, you're going to anyways." He took another sip from his coffee and she started clearing the table, definitely frustrated in the way she slammed the plates into the sink.

Oscar inhaled sharply again, got up, and paced towards her, embracing her from behind. "It'll be ok."

She spun around, doubt in her eyes.

"They'll be ok. I can feel it." His eyes fixed on hers. He kissed over her brows and tickled her nose with his. "Now. --- Wear comfortable shoes. I got something planned after work," he smiled.

"You do?"

"Hmmm... it's a surprise."

"A small one?"

"A nice one."

Elise scrunched up her face in disapproval, but he wouldn't have it. He nipped her nose, then pushed on to get ready.

The drive to set was stop-and-go again, but Elise didn't care. She happily munched on some of the cookies Oscar had bought her. Damn that time of the month. "Stop smirking at me," she pouted.

"What? It's cute. My little Cookie Monster."

"Hmm... let's not start with another nickname. Cause I've got a few for you," she grinned.

"Yeah? Let's hear them. I bet I've heard them all." He laughed a kiss onto her temple, and she angrily stuffed another cookie into her cheeks.

They arrived on set, and as soon as Elise got out of the car, Olivia swept her away. "You can have her back in a little while," the actress grinned when she saw Oscar frown. "Alright, scavenger hunt is set up. Well almost. We just need an item for Oscar and we'll place the first clue for him wherever you get the item from. Everything else is the same," Olivia grinned.

"Oh man. I haven't even had time to think about it," Elise admitted.

"What? It's cute. My little Cookie Monster."

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"Oh man. I haven't even had time to think about it," Elise admitted.

"Well, what does he use but doesn't actually need? Like need need."

"His PlayStation controller? He plays quite a bit when I'm not here," Elise snickered.

"Perfect."

The two women made their way to his trailer, Elise letting out a loud laugh when she opened the door. Unlike last time, when it looked semi-organized, this time it looked like a nerd bomb had gone off. Comics everywhere. More video games on the small table. Star Wars and X-Men merch throughout. A few movie posters were plastered on the walls that hadn't been there last time. A started Lego project sat on the vanity next to the sofa.

"Good god, I wonder if he'd even notice a missing controller," Olivia gaped with wide eyes.

"He will, if we take both," Elise laughed.

They did, setting an oversized scroll with the first clue in place.
"At least tell me, it's not across the city," Elise snickered.
"No. Just around the studio. Bryan is in on it. So are Sophie and Alex and a few of the cafeteria staff. And Charlene. You remember her, right?" Olivia asked while stashing the controllers into a bag.
"Confidentiality agent? Spunky, with a southern accent?"
"Yup. That's her. I gotta hurry. Few close ups today. See you later, girl." Olivia beamed, then dashed off.

Elise shook her head laughing, peering around the trailer some more while setting her bag on the sofa. Oscar really was a bit of a hoarder, or maybe it was because Mike had been here for the last week or so. Somehow that would fit. She shifted her attention to the vanity's mirror and noted a few more pictures of her stuck into the edges; words once again describing Oscar's favorite spots to kiss on her.

Another minute then she slowly made her way to the cafeteria next to the stages. There was a desperate need for coffee and more chocolate.

Halfway there, Mike greeted her with a big smile, hooking his arm into hers.
"Thought you wouldn't be here until later?" Elise perked a brow.
"Eh. Picking up the VIP took a lot less time than I thought," he grinned. "She's waiting for us, actually."
"She?" Elise stopped dead in her tracks.
"Yes. She," Mike's smile widened.

Elise held a breath and peered around, her search stopping when she saw a short woman hugging a surprised Oscar. Thin frame, salt-peppered hair, and dark-eyed. The woman lovingly cupped Oscar's face, and he kissed her on the forehead.

"You didn't tell me your mother was coming to set today," Elise's gulped. She could feel her heart speed up, nervousness setting in. Judging by Oscar's reaction, he didn't know either.
"Well, she wanted to meet you without rehearsal," Mike's usually cheery face settled to a serious expression.
"Rehearsal?"
"Yes, you know, be your truest you. Without prepared conversation starters."
"And you brought her here right after her flight?" Elise's voice was close to scolding.
"She insisted," Mike countered.

Elise glared at Mike and he took a step back. "Well, she insisted after I told her about you after Comic Con." Mike's lips pulled into an awkward, toothy grin.
"So Oscar didn't tell her?"
"He did. After I told her, mom started interrogating him. I mean, he would've told anyways, but he was //rehearsing// the how."

Elise peered back to Oscar, his mother still holding his face, now talking to him. "I never asked to be kept a secret, you know." She side-eyed Mike.
"I know. Oscar knows that, too. He's just always been careful who he's brought into her life," Mike reminded Elise about their conversation in San Diego.
"That's a good thing." Elise sighed. "I guess now is as good a time as any," she hinted to start walking again, and they did.

Before they reached Oscar and mom, Oscar dashed for them. "Dude, you should've told me, mom was flying in today," Oscar scolded this time.
"So you two would have had time to practice conversations? Or so you would have had time to clean up your trailer." Mike quirked a brow with an attitude.
"Shit." Oscar ran his hand through his hair then geared a nervous chuckle at Elise. "I didn't know, Sweetie. Mom was supposed to be here tomorrow. I was going to show her the city and then eat lunch. I had it all planned out." Oscar squinted at Mike. "I understand if you..." he didn't finish the sentence. Elise had muted him with her index.

"She's already here. It would be rude to turn away," Elise whispered and Oscar nodded in agreement. He folded his hand over hers and pulled it in for a kiss, then the three made their way over. The increasing squeezes on her hand didn't go past Elise. He was nervous. First introductions to parents always were.

"Mom," Oscar beamed ear to ear. He squeezed Elise's hand again, drawing in a deep breath to calm his nerves. "This --- This is Elise." He turned a few shades of red. "Elise, this is my mom, María," he beamed even wider, his ears redder, still.

"María, it's nice to meet you," Elise smiled, stretching out her hand, but María aimed for a hug instead. "How was your flight?" she asked when María let go.
"Too long but comfortable."
"Do you want to get some rest?" Elise asked, gearing a disapproving glare at Mike. Mike flinched and María chuckled. "No. Some coffee would be nice right now," María glanced at her sons. There was a sense that, despite her looking rather tired, she wanted to talk.

Oscar and Mike took the hint and led the way to the cafeteria. Elise hooked her arm into María's and the women followed. "I understand if you need rest," Elise repeated.
"Sleep is for old people and babies," María smirked. A familiar sparkle in her eyes made Elise chuckle. María's sons definitely inherited the spark from her.

The brothers aimed for a quiet table in the back corner, Mike pulling up a chair for mom and Oscar one for Elise.
"Ok, mom. What do you want?" Oscar waited.
"The usual."
"And you?" he geared at Elise.
"Same. And chocolate."
Oscar smirked, but a warning glare and he scuttled.

The brothers made their way to the line and Elise shifted attention to María. "I'm sorry, I didn't want Mike to tell you," María started with a warm smile on her face.
"I don't mind. Better than prepared conversation," Elise smiled back.
"Very true. But I know this must be a little uncomfortable."

Elise thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Honestly, it's not so much uncomfortable as it is odd."
"Odd?"
Another moment to sort out thoughts that suddenly flooded Elise's mind. She mentally traced María's face. That warm smile was confidence boosting. "It's odd because I've only ever met the mother of one man, and I feel like that part of my life is coming to an end. I know it's not but I feel like I've reached a pivotal moment, and instead of enjoying it, it somehow makes me sad." Elise explained, surprised the words came out with such ease. Not that honesty was a bad thing but she didn't expect to be this straightforward.

María sat quietly for a minute, her warm smile wanling a little. "I'm sorry," Elise whispered. "I didn't mean to make it sound like you make me sad. I'm glad to
meet you, actually. I need more stories on your son, you know," she chuckled. "I'm just being melancholic, I guess. It's silly."
"I don't think it is," María returned soft-spoken and with a warm smile, again. "Oscar told me quite a bit. About your heartbreak. So, it is not silly."

Elise smiled, her cheeks turning pink. Of course, María would understand. Her sons were kind and understanding, so why did Elise expect anything less of the woman who had raised them. She glanced over María's face again, noting deepened lines. Some, she was sure, were from laughter. Oscar shared those same lines. Others she recognized from heartache and a difficult life. It was just one of those things even an untrained eye would catch.

She looked to the queue and saw Oscar and Mike being held up by talking to Fassbender and McAvoy, Oscar occasionally looking over his shoulder in her direction, a smidge of nervousness in his posture remaining. Elise chuckled. "Were the kids easy?" she asked when she returned attention to María.

María, in turn, gave a look, and Elise laughed. "I know that look," she continued laughing. "My mother had that look when we were caught doing something bad."
"There is bad and then there is my boys," María laughed.
"Nicole was well behaved then?" Elise raised her brow. She had heard stories.
"Oh, all three of them were mischievous. But, you know, kids were kids." María shrugged with a smirk. "But never like some kids. You know the kind that break their mothers' hearts. The three of them knew when to stop, but they were a handful."

"Ah yeah? My sister and I were a handful, too," Elise snickered. "I can only hope we didn't break our mom's heart," she drew in a breath through her nose.
"I doubt that." María wrinkled her nose. "You know my Oscar he... he can be quite stubborn. And a smart-ass."
Elise gasped in shock. She didn't expect Oscar's mom to use such language, and María acknowledged it with a warm laugh. "He's a passionate man," María's face became serious.

"I know," Elise agreed with a nod.
"Hmmm... He... He gets lost in his passion." María laid her hand on top of Elise's. "He will bury himself in whatever he is working on at the moment and sometimes he forgets that others in his life still exist, but when he returns, he returns one-hundred percent, and he will pour that passion into his relationships because he doesn't know how to do anything less."

Another minute of silence. Quiet moments to realize that María had just told Elise something very intimate. A hint at what Elise might be in for. Not that she hadn't gotten those hints from him, but it felt like María saw this as much long-term as the couple did and needed to emphasize.

Elise smiled then, from her peripheral, spied Oscar ambling their way. Coffee cups in hand, wide smile on face. "You forgot the chocolate," María pointed out with a raised brow.
"I did? Oh, I'm sorry." He looked down on Elise while biting his bottom lip. There was a request hiding in the corner of his eyes, and she got the feeling he had forgotten on purpose.
"It's ok, María. I'll go get it. Gives me a chance to catch up with everyone else." Elise pulled herself to a stand, trading places with Oscar. "You want something besides coffee?" she geared at Oscar's mom, but María shook her head no.

Oscar looked after Elise pacing towards Fassbender, McAvoy, and Mike; chuckling when the actors squished her with laughed bear hugs and smirking when Mike teased a kiss onto her hair
from the side. Elise looked over to where Oscar and María were seated and waved their way, then returned to laugh-filled conversation.

"I like her," María smiled.
There was an audible sigh of relief from Oscar. "I like her, too. A lot."
"Like? Or love?"
"Mom."
"Hijo [son]. We both know it's love. You've said so yourself on the phone. So don't pretend that it's anything less. Not around me."
"I know that, mom. I just... I don't know. I mean, I was worried because Lorraine and I. It hasn't been that long. And Liz wanted to meet you. Well --- after Mike brought it up, I asked her and she agreed. And so did I. Although, I didn't agree to Mike and you switching up plans on us." Oscar raised his brow.

"First of, your brother had nothing to do with it. I decided to fly in sooner because I'm an adult and make my own decisions," María scolded and Oscar flinched.
"Sorry, Ma."
"Second. You never needed my approval..."
"I know that. And that's what I told Mike and Liz..."
"Excuse me. I wasn't finished!" María lifted a brow this time. "You never needed my approval but I'm glad she agreed it was better to meet beforehand. As long she didn't press it."
"She didn't, mom. She was actually worried it was too soon."

Oscar looked back over to Elise. She caught his glance and smiled. So did he. María caught the fleeting exchange and squeezed her son's hand.
"I'm not one to tell you who to love or to marry, but I see the way you look at her, and I see true happiness. Real love. I still believe that you don't need my approval. You're an adult, and you make your choices. I don't think she needs my approval either. It doesn't feel like she is that kind of woman," María smiled knowingly and Oscar agreed with a nod. "But for the sake of traditions, you have my blessing. Both of you."

Oscar rubbed his hand over his face, smiling. "Thank you, Ma." He leaned forward and kissed his mother on the forehead.

María returned to observing, watching her son and Elise trade more smiles, then she squeezed Oscar's hand again. "Do you want some advice?"
"From you? Always."
"Don't rush this."
A pause and Oscar drew in his brows in confusion. "But you just said..."
"I know what I said. And that is the truth, but I can see behind your eyes. A mother never misses anything. I know you want to ask her. And I hope you will. But don't rush this. Not with her. Don't take forever, of course, but give yourselves a little more time. Hmmm? Give her time to truly see the beginning of a new life."

Oscar processed what his mother advised, trying to wrap his head around the last statement. "What did you two talk about?"
"Important things," was all María offered and Oscar knew not to prod on. Things said in confidence, he knew, weren't meant to be shared. He guessed, of course, but he knew not to ask more questions.

A few minutes later, Mike and Elise rejoined the table, trays with food in hands.
"Chocolate cereal for me, and toast for you." Elise placed a plate in front of María. "I know you said you weren't hungry but I know airplane food. Brought some jams, and cold cuts," Elise smiled.
"Plus it gives us time to chat some more. I have so many questions, so I plan on taking advantage."

María laughed at that. "Ask away. I know all of my son's secrets."
"Of course. Moms know everything." Elise wiggled her brows and Oscar gulped. "Did he really skip school to pet bunnies?" Elise started.
"Oh yes. He skipped school numerous times for that. He talked to cats, too. And sometimes Nicole dressed him up," María snickered.
"Ma!"
"Reeeeeeeally? Do tell," Elise egged on.
"Liz!"
"He was always late for P.E. Not a morning person," Mike chimed in.
"Bro, if you don't want mom to find out what really happened to the garden gnome..." Oscar's eyes and lips became alarmingly thin.
"What happened to the garden gnome?" Elise prodded on, looking back and forth between Mike and Oscar.
María tilted her head and Mike gulped. "Gotta run. Have to pick up... uhm... something," he suddenly was fast on his feet.

María hummed with a lifted brow then sipped on her coffee before nibbling on some toast.
"I have to go for now, too. They're done setting up for the voice-overs," Oscar frowned. The look on his face appeared as though he would rather stick around the two most important women in his life, but Elise knew him too well by now and ventured that really he wanted to divert from his childhood years. She snickered into the palm of her hand, and he squinted knowingly.

"Mom, just... Liz, please..." he stammered while getting up.
"Don't worry, Lindo," Elise said in the most honey-coated voice. "I'm sure your mom has stories on Mike, too." She winked at María and mom agreed with a snicker.
"Oh boy. Well, as long as it's even share. Nicole's got some skeletons, too," Oscar reminded with a scrunched up face.
"Go already!" Elise pushed Oscar, but he stood steady.
"No kiss?" he sulked.
"Your mom is sitting right here!" Elise's eyes widened in shock.
"So? She knows couples kiss."
"Well yes, but..."

Elise didn't finish the sentence. Oscar had cupped her face and pulled her up for a kiss. One of those. The sigh-inducing, losing-track-of-time, turn-her-face-red kind. And he knew the effect when he walked away with a smirk on his face, hands in pockets, and a skip in his step.

Elise peered at María and blushed even more. "I'm sorry," she sat back down.
"Nothing to be sorry for," María beamed ear to ear.
Elise rested her chin in her propped up hand and wrinkled her nose. "Anyways. So. He skipped school, huh? What about Mike? Did he emulate?"
"He did. But Oscar kept him in check. Especially after he graduated."
"Big brother responsibilities."
María nodded.

The women talked a little while longer while eating their food. Guatemala came up. And so did Germany. They reminisced and talked about missing their respective countries of origin. In a way, they paralleled lives. Moving around a lot. Immigrating to a - in their eyes - strange and vast country. Learning new customs, new languages, new approaches to everyday life. Traveling the world was also a shared passion. There was laughter about trying odd foods and
María yawned a few times throughout, traveling exhaustion quite apparent. When she yawned again, Elise insisted María go back to the hotel and rest. "It's almost lunchtime, so an afternoon nap will be good," she encouraged. María agreed and Elise called for one of the drivers. "We'll see you tomorrow," she smiled before shutting the door.

"So langsam wird's ernst, [It's slowly getting serious,]" the Hessian accent announced Fassbender's presence.
"Ja. So langsam. --- Ich dachte du bist am drehen, [Yes. Slowly. --- I thought you were filming,]" Elise raised a smirking brow.
"Mittagspause. [Lunchtime.]" Michael pointed to his watch.
"Oscar auch? [Oscar, too?]" "Ja. Er wartet auf dich im in seinem Wohnwagen. [Yes. He's waiting for you in his trailer.]" Michael nodded.

A snicker behind the actor had her lean her body left and she spied McAvoy and Oscar hiding behind the makeup trailer. "Und er hat dich geschickt um mich zu holen? Oder versuchst ihr rauszufinden wo Olivia eure Sachen versteckt hat? [And he sent you to get me? Or are you [all] trying to figure out where Olivia has hidden your stuff?]" Elise crossed her arms.

"Aha! Du wusstest also über die Schnitzeljagd bescheid! [Aha! So you knew about the scavenger hunt!]" Michael shot out, and Elise shrugged nonchalantly.
"Sei froh das es nur eine Schnitzeljagd ist. Wenns nach Alex und Olivia ging, dann würdet ihr im Bananenanzug durch die Stadt tanzen. [Be glad it's just a scavenger hunt. If it was up to Alex and Olivia, you would be dancing through the city in banana suits.]" Elise laughed.

"What is she saying?" McAvoy called out from behind the trailer.
"Dude!" Elise heard Oscar scold.
"That you three should be lucky that it's just a scavenger hunt," Elise called towards their direction. "At least help us with the first clue." Oscar stepped out from the behind the trailer.
"You guys need help already? I'm disappointed," Elise snickered.

"Or, you know, just tell us where our stuff is hidden," McAvoy tried to persuade with a smolder. "I can't. I actually have no idea where your stuff is hidden. Which is a good thing, because I'm sure Olivia saw this coming." Elise wrinkled up her nose.
"Really? Awe man. But PlayStation..." Oscar frowned.
"You'd rather play video games than hang out with me?" Elise's jaw dropped in disbelief.
"Well, we can't... kind of..." Oscar stammered, his eyes widening in horror when Elise shot him a death stare.

"Oooohhhhh. Someone's in trouble," Fassbender mocked with a laugh.
"So you don't need my help, then?" Elise gave Michael the same stare and he gulped.
"Well we know what the first clue is but it doesn't make sense," he countered, another gulp in tow when Elise didn't let up with her death stare.

Pleading puppy eyes all around a second after and Elise caved. She held out her hand and Oscar gave her the clue. She read over it and smirked.

"What? Come on, mi Reina. Please? Pretty please?" Oscar blinked his eyes. The puckered duck lips that came with those eyes clearly a sign that he was desperate.
"Alright, just this once," Elise snickered. "It says 'If you find me on the ground with my head up, you'll have good luck.'" She scanned over the men's faces, waiting to see if they actually got the
clue. "Penny," shot out in unison. "Which doesn't make sense. They'd have us search for a penny for the next clue?" Michael repeated.

Elise folded her arms and quirked her brow. "You guys are all trained in English literature or at least to read between the lines, and you don't get this?" She waited again. Nothing except //help us// open hands. "Have you guys considered that maybe they're not talking about an actual penny. That maybe it's the name of someone here."

The men shook their heads collectively. "I don't know of anyone with that name here." McAvoy's gears were turning. Elise read over the clue again, then smiled. A memory had popped into her mind. It hit her at lightning speed, and she instantly knew where the next clue would be. "Well --- maybe --- maybe, it's about who is on the penny?"
"Abraham Lincoln. He's dead," McAvoy sulked. There was an unspoken //well, no duh// response from the rest. "I mean, it's not like anyone ever created images of him. You know, posters, stamps, pennies --- and busts." Elise drew out the last two words.

"Charlene's office," Oscar blurted out. "What?"

"Help us with the rest of the clues?" Michael was now doing the puppy dog eyes. "Nooooo. What kind of friend would that make me? This is what you get for egging on shenanigans." Elise crossed her arms again. "I told you she wouldn't help us," McAvoy frowned at Fassbender while gesturing to head to Charlene's office.

"Babies," Elise laughed, watching after them, then pivoted to head back to the cafeteria. Or at least tried to. Oscar captured her by the waist and pulled her close. A lingering gaze and soft smile were followed by a lasting kiss. "What's that for?" Elise blushed. "For being you," Oscar smiled, giving her another kiss.

"Oscar! Come on man. No alliances with the opposition!" Michael yelled with a laugh and Oscar hung his head. "Go. I'll see you later," Elise encouraged with a spark in her eyes. She freed herself then made her way back to the cafeteria, Oscar eyeing her until she disappeared behind the doors. Another yell and he scurried to catch up with Fassbender and McAvoy.

Inside the cafeteria, Elise was waved over by eager hands, Olivia, Sophie, and Alex sitting at a table near the register, and eating their lunches; only Sophie and Alex in costume. "I can't believe, they needed help with the first clue," Olivia laughed when Elise filled her in on the men's attempt to spill the location of their stuff. "Me either. You think they'll find everything today," Elise snickered. "They should. We didn't make it long. Four clues only, but if they already needed help, who
knows." Alexandra's eyes widened. "I'm just surprised Oscar is sharing you today," Sophie grinned.

Elise laughed at that. "He's not the possessive type."
"Oh, girl, we know. Don't get us wrong. But you've been apart what? Three weeks?" Olivia mumbled through chewing on some waffles. Mischief behind dark eyes. "Eh..." Elise leaned in. "It's... that time of month," she whispered, a unified //ahhhhh// the response.

The women caught up, the actresses going over their busy film schedules and Elise recounting recent events in her life. "Are you scared?" Olivia raised a worried brow when Elise talked about Frank. "I am. More for my family than myself," Elise admitted. "Hmmm... I kind of get that. There've been some weird encounters with fans, and weird letters," Sophie frowned. "Some of the fan mail I used to get was very explicit. So now, all fan mail gets filtered through the agency."
"I'm sorry," Elise frowned. "People say it comes with this life," the young actress tried to excuse. "The hell it does! I mean, there's fan mail and then there's stalking and sexual harassment," Elise shook her head. "Not acceptable. Ever."

The other women agreed with nods. "Helps to know self-defense," Olivia pointed out. "I learned that the hard way," Elise's face darkened. There was a pause from everyone. "Meh, this conversation just got too serious," Olivia pulled her lips down. "Shouldn't let insecure assholes with tiny penises ruin our day," she added and the round laughed in agreement. "We should check and see if the guys have made any progress." Alex wiggled her brows. "They may just have." Sophie gestured with her chin towards the cafeteria entrance. "Ohhh. This will be fun," Olivia elbowed Elise.

The women tracked the men's confused search pattern, trying their best not to laugh when they scrounged through the fruit display. "Are we getting warmer?" James rolled his r's extra sharp when he caught the girls gawking. "Nope." Olivia sat pokerfaced. "Don't get it. The clue is a fruit. And there's none of those here." James scratched his head. "That's because I'm sure you're taking it literally again," Elise snickered.

Oscar uncrumpled the last clue from his pocket, and read over it again:

"I'm orange and round
but don't get confused;
I'm not an orange,
yet I belong
in the family tree,
although I'm the smallest
and sweet as can be."

He scratched his head. "It's a tangerine. How can we not take this one literal, unless you're telling me someone here is named tangerine."
"First of all, you never know, and second, tangerines aren't the smallest in the orange family," Elise blurted out.
"Girlfriend. Really?" Alex dropped her head to the side. "I'm sorry, but they're taking forever," Elise laughed.

"So wait. They're not. Well, then what?" James looked helpless and the girls laughed. "Uggghhh," Michael groaned when realization set in. "Clever, clever," he admitted then made his way to the end of the queue. "Wait, you know what it is?" Oscar and James hurried after. "You'll see." Michael rolled his eyes and shook his head.

A few more minutes in the queue and they came face to face with the answer. A woman, somewhere in her mid-sixties, manning the register grinned widely. "How's it going, Clementine?" Michael pressed his lips into a thin line, and Clementine laughed. "What took you boys so long?" She procured a bag from underneath the register and handed it over. "Should've known, you'd be in on it. That sweet face is a facade." Michael raised a brow. "Careful now. Or this place might just run out of Pflaumenmus [plum jam]."
"You wouldn't dare cut me off like that." "Watch me." "That's cold."

"Alright, we've paid our dues. Can we call it even now?" James pulled his MP3 player from the bag. "Only if you promise not to tease Elise again," Sophie warned. "It was a joke. She understood. Right, Elise?" Michael pulled part of his costume from the bag. "It wasn't well thought out, and you know it. You shouldn't have done it in front of so many people," Alex reminded and Oscar pouted. "We promise not to pull a stunt like that again." He blinked his eyes, and Elise chuckled.

He pulled her up to his side and teased a kiss into her hair. "I have a few more voiceovers and then it's time to go." "Where are we going anyways?"
"It's a surprise."

The actresses hurried to finish their lunch then the group was off to finish whatever each was working on. Elise decided to stay behind. She liked being in the cafeteria. It was a gathering place for interesting people and interesting conversations. Some of the crew members recognized her from last time and they exchanged stories. A few times, Elise came across German-speaking actors. "They were shooting some kind of club scene," Clementine explained when she cleared another table nearby. "A German club scene?" Elise snickered. "I think so. Some of the props are behind stage one." Clementine pointed with her chin in the general direction. "That, I gotta see." Elise cleared her own table then meandered towards Stage I.

"Oh my god!" The exclamation was more like a squeal when she found her way. Right there, in an awful off-white color, stood a car she hadn't seen in nearly twenty-two years. "Trabant!" One of the German actors she had encountered in the cafeteria explained. "Ich weiss was es ist. [I know what it is]," she grinned. "Funktioniert das Ding? [Does this thing work?]" she asked, excitement bubbling through. "Ja. Aber es hat nicht den originallen Motor, [Yes. But it doesn't have the original motor,]" the
actor explained as he opened the hood.

Elise was a little disappointed. The sound of the original motor made this car what it was. She thought it neat nonetheless. "Ich frag mich ob ich den mal fahren darf, [I wonder if I'm allowed to drive this,]" she blabbed out loud.

"It looks uncomfortable," a familiar voice behind her chimed in.
Elise spun on her heel and came face to face with brilliant blues and jet black hair. "Leon," she beamed.
"Surprised you remember my name." Leon perked his left brow in a New York arrogance kind of way. Elise didn't care when she rushed to hug him.

"Ugh. I'm sorry. I'm a bad friend. I've been..."
"Busy? I know. I saw the //news/>. Looked like you had fun at comic con, huh?" Leon wiggled his brows.
"I did. I haven't had that much fun in a long time." Elise blushed. "What are you doing here? --- Sorry. --- That sounded rude. I mean here, on set. Don't you have a class?"
"No. Everyone is off today. Oscar invited me." Leon's eyes wrinkled at the corners.

"He did? Wait, so you're the surprise?" Elise squinted.
"I guess, partially." Leon nodded. "And no, I won't say where we're going."
"Dammit. He prepped you for my inquisitive nature," Elise grumbled.

"I sure did." Oscar appeared behind Leon. The men shook hands, but unlike the first time they'd met, there were signs of friendship. "So is Ned here?"
"He's meeting us there." Leon started in long strides towards a dark red SUV.
"Your husband is here?" Elise followed in fast steps, two for every one of Leon's.
"Oh... gotta grab my bag from the trailer." She dashed, returning not even five minutes later.

They drove northeast across a bridge, the traffic getting denser by the minute. Leon flashed passes and they were directed up a road separating from the highway. A few more minutes past that and Oscar's brother waved them into a parking lot behind a large tent.
"I was getting worried. Thought you got lost," Mike grinned when he opened the door.
"Where are we?" Elise looked around. Loud music came from several directions, people's cheers cutting through now and then. Different scents of food swept their way, the most prominent smells cotton candy and of freshly grilled burgers. All the signs of a music festival that much she knew.
"Osheaga Music and Arts Festival," Mike confirmed, handing her a backstage pass.

"So that's why you're actually here, huh?" Elise grinned.
"Eh. Might as well take advantage. Besides gotta pay my bills." Mike pointed to his press pass, hinting that he was actually working. "Anyways. Oscar said you missed Florence and the Machine's set while you were at Bonnaroo, so..." Mike slipped a hand into Elise's and pulled her through the tent's entrance before she had a chance to tell Oscar and Leon that she would be back.

"No way! No fucking way!" Elise's eyes got wide. Not ten feet from her stood Florence with her band, warming up vocal cords by repeating scales up and down.

"Surprise," Oscar startled from behind a few moments after. He wrapped his arms around Elise's waist and hugged her close, and she returned to wide eyes and slacked jaw. Florence finished her warm up and ambled towards the small group.
"She's speechless. That's a first," Mike joked when Florence greeted Elise and she, in turn, barely managed a "hi".
"Yeah well, standing opposite greatness has that effect," Elise found her voice. "Sassy. I like her." Florence bobbed her head in approval. "So are you ready to sing your hearts out?"

"Yes!!!" was an instant reply that came with a great deal of excitement. Oscar side-eyed Elise. He had not seen her giddy like this. "What?"
"Nothing. You're cute," he laughed.
"Oh, shut up." She pushed him back at the chest. Oscar laughed then hitched a breath. "This is going to be interesting. I've never seen you at a concert. Good thing I brought my camera." He wiggled his brows.

"Eh. Go ahead. Take embarrassing pictures of me. I don't care. I get to see Florence and the Machine, and nothing is going to stop me from singing and dancing along," Elise beamed. "I was hoping you'd say that," Oscar smiled widely.
"Why?"
"Because there's nothing better than seeing you happy."
Elise blushed and Oscar pulled her close to his hip. "Ich liebe dich, my little nerdy Erdbeere." Elise snickered. "I see Michael taught you a new word."
"He taught me many words."
"Ah yeah? What else did he teach you?"

Oscar ran his fingertips through her hair then down the side of her face, the words sitting at the back of his throat. "I'll tell you another day," he gulped when he recalled his mother's words. "You promise?"
"I do."
Chapter 23

She pulled the blanket over her shoulder and rolled into his side. He chuckled at a sharp inhale, drawing feathery lines down the length of her arm first before playing with her hair. She stirred again, flipping to her other side, digging her toes into the mattress, and he followed, hugging her close.

Lazy Saturday morning was on both of their minds the way they kept going back and forth like that. Five minutes, maybe ten before he decided to stay on his side with his head propped on his hand, watching her shuffle under the blanket. Sleepy haze replaced by a certain restlessness because she had lost that comfortable spot and was trying to find it again.

She found it after tossing a few more times and with her face squished into his chest, inhaling his scent. He chuckled, again, and she looked up.

"Morning," Oscar smiled
"Morning," Elise smiled back.
The creases in his cheeks deepened in amusement.
"What so funny?" Elise perked a brow.
"You still have flowers in your hair." He leaned in and kissed the perked brow.

Elise reached into her hair, feeling around, and, indeed, there were still flowers in her hair. Tiny roses, daisies, and baby's breath. A reminder from Friday night at Osheaga, where - after she had met Florence and the Machine- Leon had introduced her to Ned; right before the couple had whisked her away for festival things, including getting flowers braided into her hair.

She snickered at the memory and at the fact that Ned had convinced Leon to do the same. Oscar pressed his index onto her nose to get her attention. "What?"
Elise rolled to her back, wide smile on face. "Just thinking about last night," she whispered.
"Hmmmm... It was fun, huh?"
"It was."

She gave Oscar a once-over, her smile growing wider when she saw flecks of glitter still clinging to his cheeks. Mike had insisted that, in order to blend in, his brother must wear glitter on his cheeks. "Go big or go home," the explanation offered. Although, Mike sneaking a picture of Oscar in festival makeup and posting it to Twitter to tease may have been the true reason.

She skimmed over his cheek and giggled.
"Never going to hear the end of it." He scrunched up his face and she laughed.
"Just his way of keeping you humble."
"He better be careful. I've got plenty of stories about him."
"Like the garden gnome story?"
"Keeping that one to myself, just in case."
"That bad?"
"Let me just say, mom might disown him. In fact, she might deny him as her own flesh and blood." Oscar's eyes went wide.

She gaped in shock then fell into laughter.
"Glad you think it's amusing," Oscar pouted.
"She would never. She loves you. All three of you," Elise kept giggling, and Oscar squinted before
pinching her nose.

He laid back down and squeezed her close to himself, both enjoying the lingering morning warmth. She traced lines across his chest, staring vacantly at a freckle on his skin. "I'm so glad you're not the possessive type," she whispered out of nowhere. Oscar raised his brow in surprise, and she lifted her head to focus on him. "I mean. We've been apart a couple of weeks,-- almost three weeks actually,--- and you let me hang out with Leon and Ned. And just... I don't know. Never mind..." She shrugged, nestling her cheek on his chest, embarrassed she had even mentioned it.

Oscar cupped her chin and she tilted her head back up. "I told you. I'd never cage you like that." He swept a loose strand of her hair out of her face.

She nibbled her bottom lip. "I know."

"Good. --- Besides, I got some pretty good pictures of you when you thought I wasn't looking. I especially like the pie eating contest one. Bit disappointed you lost that one," Oscar laughed loudly.

"Ned cheated. He made me laugh. Even Leon said his husband cheated." Elise rolled her eyes, sulking after.

"Still a picture worthy moment," Oscar kept laughing. "Meh."

She tried to wiggle out of bed but he pulled her close, again, throwing the blanket over their heads. "No. Stop it. Stop." She squirmed when he smothered her with kisses.

"Never." He kept kissing her. "One more," he laughed another kiss onto her cheek then rested his nose in the curve of her neck, pushing a few breaths onto her skin. "I cannot wait until we wake up next to each other every day," he mumbled.

"Hmmm..." She threaded her hands through his curls.

"I mean it." Oscar lifted his head and teased her cheek with his fingertips. "I love you so much. So much," he whispered dreamy-eyed and turning red at the cheeks and ears, and she took notice.

She palmed his face, looking into his eyes. There was a thought behind those deep brown irises. A thought that had his gears spinning. Just like last night when he had let it slip that Fassbender had been teaching him new words.

Her lips curled at the left side and she knew she couldn't hold back the question. Curiosity - once the fuse was lit - got the better of her that way. "What words did Michael teach you?"

Oscar gulped and Elise noted his ears and cheeks turning ten more shades of red. His heart rate was up, too, but his breathing seemed to have nearly stopped.

He blinked a few times, biting his lower lip. "Nice words," he whispered. "Words, I should wait to use." His face became serious.

"Why?"

"Because --- someone who knows all kinds of heartache told me to give you more time. To not rush you. Ease you into my life. Into us." He drew in his brows, sweeping his fingertips down the side of her face.

Elise curled her fingers around his hand and held it in place against her cheek. She closed her eyes and chuckled. "You mother is a wise woman." Elise's left brow shot up when she opened her eyes. He couldn't hide the surprise spreading over his face. "How did you...?" he paused, his mind going back to yesterday; back to the cafeteria. "What did you two talk about?"

Elise thought for a minute. She wasn't about to break María's trust. Not that what Oscar's mom had told was a secret, but it felt like María had entrusted her with something only people closest to their
family knew. Something, Oscar himself might not always be aware of.

Elise smiled then kissed into his palm. "That you have a big heart," she mumbled. He scrunch up his nose with a bashful smile. She pulled his hand from her cheek and slipped her arms around his neck. "Aaaaand ---that you're a smartass." Her lips squeezed into a thin line as she tried to suppress a laugh. "Oh, --- fantastic," Oscar pouted with an overdrmatic roll of the eye. This time he tried to get out of bed, but she hung on. Another second of serious thin pressed lips before her laugh cut through the room, joined by his a moment later, then the sounds of languid kisses took over.

She hummed into the last kiss before finally shuffling to stand up, dragging the blanket with her and leaving him uncovered on the bed. Half naked, three-fourths naked really, with him only wearing underwear. Mutual gazes were a given in that moment. And deepened cheek creases because he couldn't help himself. She shook her head, sticking out her tongue, then snickered. "I'm going to take all these flowers out and take a shower."
"Mind if I join you?" He wiggled his brows.

Elise's eyes shot wide open. "Uhm... Period..." She blushed this time. "So what?" Oscar shrugged. "You're not grossed out?"
"Sweetie, I worked at as an orderly at my dad's hospital. I've seen things." He quirked his left brow high. One of those raises that was between appalled and trust me. "A little blood doesn't shock me." His brow lowered. "Besides, I miss taking showers with you."
"Hmmm...," Elise's lips curled several ways. "Ok, but... give me a few minutes, to start the water, and... well, --- so I can get in first?"

He agreed with a nod, and she took off to the bathroom. She hurried to take out the remaining flowers then started the water and moved the tray that held her favorite soap and shampoo. She snickered again at the fact that he had remembered.

She stepped in, Oscar joining her a few minutes after he heard the water start. He glanced her up and down, and she could feel her whole body flush, embarrassed at his gaze. "Sorry." She blinked. "Sweetie. I get it, but really, you don't have to be embarrassed. It's something that happens once a month." He shrugged and she chuckled. He soaked a shower pouf with soap and water then gently massaged over her skin. Extra gentle when he reached her stomach. "How did Joe handle this? I mean,... you don't have to answer..., just asking out of curiosity because --- well --- you guys were married."

"Not as well as you." Elise gaped first then laughed wholeheartedly. "Really? I'm surprised."
"Yeah. For a military man, it was surprising that he couldn't handle certain things. ---One time, he had to go to the store for me to pick up tampons because I was out. He came back with ten different boxes and as red as a beet, proclaiming that those should last a year and that next time I should call Tina," Elise laughed again, and so did Oscar. "I honestly don't think that he would've been able to handle us having kids. At least not the delivery."

There was a pause. A moment where she backtracked. For one, because talking about Joe with Oscar suddenly felt like a normal thing. There was no apprehension like usually. And he didn't seem to mind that it was a normal thing now. For two, because it set in how it must have sounded. Considering what Oscar had been through with Lorraine.
Elise studied Oscar's reaction. There was a smile but his eyes were a little sad. "I'm sorry. I... I didn't... I know you and Lorraine... I didn't think. It just slipped out."
"Don't be." Oscar's face became serious for a fraction of a second. "I'm glad you didn't hold back. The whole thing between me and Lorraine --- and the baby... It hurts sometimes, but I don't want you to feel like you have to hold back talking about children because of it." He bobbed his head softly, and she nodded in understanding.

Another pause and reassuring nods then he prompted her to turn around so he could wash her back. "So you don't think Joe would've been able to handle the delivery, huh?" Oscar chuckled a kiss onto Elise's shoulder.
"Honestly, I don't think he would've. He would've probably fainted," she laughed.
"At least there would've been doctors around," Oscar laughed as loud as Elise.
"True."
"Well. I hope I won't faint when the day comes. But I make no promises."

Elise gulped at those words. When. Not if. When! The last time she had been here, it had been if. Now it was when. She turned back to face him, a tingling sensation pooling to all her limbs. Oscar just bobbed his head, those words Fassbender had taught him caught right at the back of his throat.
Oscar chuckled in confusion. "What?"
"You once asked me what I'd want to name our dog if we ever get one. --- I'd name it Pebbles." She held a serious gaze and he husked out another, perplexed chuckle.
A minute of recalling what she was talking about, his mind going back to when she had been in Montreal the last time. The memory came to him. Sunny day. Balcony. Weekend at the cabin in the woods. He raised his brow and smiled. "You serious?"
"Yes." She took a step back and he offered a waiting stare. "What's wrong with Pebbles?" Her voice nearly squeaked with the last word.

He fell into laughter. "Nothing. It's cute," he managed through trying to catch his breath. It took a minute for him to stop and she pouted. "Sweetie. It's cute. --- So what kind of dog do you want?"
"A small one. Dachshund size maybe. Actually," She squinted, thinking. "Two. One with scruffy hair, just so we can call it Scruffy. Or two short hair puppies, so we can name the second one Jelly Bean."
He gaped for a second then fell back into loud laughter. "You actually thought this through, huh?"
"Mmmmaybe...?" She snickered.

There was more laughter over silly things; her taking over to wash him. She loved soaping him up, especially his hair. The way he squinted when he felt bubbles edging to his brows. How he rinsed his curls, gasping for air when water rushed over his face. "So what's with the high and tight?" she asked while kneading some conditioner into his curls.
"You'll see tomorrow," he grinned. "It'll be the last haircut though. I need to grow it out for the next movie. Beard, too. Eventually."
She snickered. "Ah yeah. Hmmmm that'll be interesting." She wiggled her brows.
He just hummed with a mischievous smirk before pulling her in for a kiss under running water. They both gasped for air after that.

A few more minutes of tenderness then he got out first so she could take care of womanly stuff as she called it. He shook his head with a snicker and she threw the shower pouf after him. When she got out, he was already dressed for the day; a simple gray tee and dark washed jeans his choice, and his hair slicked back making the undercut more prominent. And he wore his old, scuffed up
leather boots. She loved those on him, despite knowing that he had at least two other, nicer pairs that would fit better with the pants. Somehow she preferred when he wore the old ones. They were him. Just so him.

"You alright, Sweetie?" Oscar caught her dreamy gaze.
"Hmmm... yup." She scrunched up her face.
He gave her a dreamy gaze of his own; smirking at her only wearing bra and panties, and she rolled her eyes. She grabbed her suitcase that was still in the nook by the door and rolled it into the bedroom, digging through to find the right outfit. "What time are we supposed to meet your mom?" She called out.
"Ten." He called back. He heard her groan and rushed to the bedroom. "You alright?"
"Yes. I can't decide what to wear." She tossed a balled up shirt onto the bed where she had spread out several outfits.
"Sweetie. Wear what's comfortable. You don't need to dress up for my mom, you know that, right?"

Elise huffed, her hand on her hip. "I know. But. Ugh... I feel blah, and nothing I brought fits right and... Stop smirking."
Oscar snickered then paced to the closet. "How about the turquoise dress. The one you were wearing in San Diego." He opened the closet and inside hung the clothes he'd taken along because her bags had been too full.
"You weren't supposed to wash those." Elise squinted at him in disapproval.
"I didn't. The people at the dry cleaners did." His voice went up in pitch in a mocking way.

"Smartass." She stuck out her tongue.
"Lovable smartass!" His hands slipped around her waist. He tugged her close and kissed the tip of her nose.
She hummed, and he let go to make his way back to the kitchen to get breakfast ready. When she joined him a few minutes later she was wearing the turquoise dress, along with the flower accented sandals, and the golden snitch necklace. Her hair was open and in soft waves, just the way she knew he liked it, and over her arm hung a thin white cardigan which she casually tossed over the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

"Not wearing mine today?" He jested.
"Left it in Seattle. On my office chair. That way I have it in the mornings and evenings when it's chilly."
He smiled at the image of his cardigan wrapped around her. "Looking forward to the thirtieth," he mumbled when he set the coffee cups on the table.
"Hmmm... me too," she whispered back while reading over the newspaper. A glance across the edge made her snicker. She could've sworn she saw him choke on a sip of coffee before he returned the glance. Both their gears were turning.

A knock on the door interrupted the moment. Oscar heaved himself up with a long breath, annoyed at whoever was on the other side. He stared at Elise for a second before reluctantly making his way to the door. "Morning," he pouted at his best friend.
"Wrong time?" James lifted his brow.
"Yes and no," Oscar gestured for James to get in.
"You said nine thirty, didn't you?" James peeked at his watch, and Oscar just nodded.
"Then what?"
"I'll tell you later."

James made an //ohkay// face, then paced to the kitchen. "Your boyfriend is being grouchy," he
jested when he poured himself some coffee. "Is he? He wasn't like that a minute ago. What did you do?" Elise perked a brow at her brother-in-law, smirking. She noticed that he looked a little more rested than a couple of days ago, the dark circles under his eyes gone.

"All I said was good morning," James shrugged. "Anyways. Mike called. He said he'll pick up your mom from the hotel and that he'll meet us at the art museum around ten fifteen, which is perfect. If we leave in fifteen and walk, we'll get there just in time," he geared at Oscar. "It's up to Liz. You want to walk? Or take a cab?"

"Walking is fine," Elise smiled. Oscar mouthed //you sure// her way, a fleeting glance going to her stomach, and she mouthed back an //I'm sure//. They exchanged looks. The kind that came with continued spinning gears, getting lost in the moment.

Elise's cell chimed and they were back to the now, both catching a what's-going-on raised brow from James. She moved her head in a firm no then read over the text. "Olivia wants to know what we're doing."

"Tell her to come along. Or meet us there," Oscar smiled. "You sure?"

"Yes. Leon, Ned, and Lenny are going to be there, too. And Lenny's family. Maybe McAvoy and Fassbender. If they're not, they'll be here tonight with Alex," Oscar smiled. "You invited Leon and Ned?" Elise was genuinely surprised. "I told you, I had it all planned. Midday to afternoon with mom and friends, evening with cast and friends. Night with you," he drew out the last words with a long breath. "Dude. TMI. T.M.I.!'" James stood wide-eyed.

"Geez, why do all men think it's about sex. You know there's more than sex, right?" Elise rolled her eyes then texted Olivia. "I know that, but ... you know what... I will forever pretend you two don't do that. I did when you and Joe were together, and I'm doing this now." James turned red. "You won't be able to when we have kids," Oscar joked and Elise coughed up a piece of waffle. Way to feed into James' assumption.

James blinked a few times. "A, B, C, man. A. B. C.!'" "This is the twenty-first century, right?" Oscar winked at Elise, his gaze dropping to her stomach on purpose this time. "First of, stop it. You're giving him the wrong idea. Second. He knows. He's just traditional. More than Tina, which is surprising." Elise drank the rest of her coffee then started clearing the table. "How is she, by the way?"

James hitched a breath, the tiredness from the last few days suddenly etching back onto his face. "She's good."

"Chloé?"

"Teething but good."

Heaviness settled and Oscar didn't like it. He offered a //she'll come around//, but it was met with hopeless sighs. "She will. Just give her some time," Oscar reiterated. "I hope so. I don't know what to do without her." James frowned while he quietly helped Elise with the dishes.

When they were done, Elise palmed James' face. "Oscar is right. She will. She might not forgive us for a long time, if ever, but I don't think she'd leave you."

A nod from James felt weighted. "I really hope so. If not, mom will probably send me to an early grave."
"You told her?"
"Yes. And Raimund. He's taken it rather well. Better than my parents."
"So your dad is upset, too, then?"
"Disappointed more like it."
Elise sighed. "Your parents will never talk to me again," she frowned.

"Guys. Come on. I know this sucks but let's try and forget all of it for a few hours," Oscar cut in. "Things will be ok. I know it. Christine loves you. Your parents love you. Give it time," he repeated with an airy chuckle; the last sentence reminding him of his own impatience. All three stood quietly for a moment; a collective smile a few seconds after an agreement to try and enjoy the day.

Elise's cell chiming again broke the silence. She read over a turquoise highlighted message, beaming ear to ear. "Olivia said she'll meet us there. So, I guess we better get, huh?" She slipped on her cardigan.
"Yes. We better. The museum has an erotic art exhibition. And today is the last day." Oscar wiggled his brows.
"You're not serious!" Elise gaped with wide eyes, and Oscar just wiggled his brows again.

"Your mother!" Elise's eyes grew wider.
"Yes. My mother. She appreciates fine art. Just like you," Oscar grinned and Elise's eyes widened even more. Like a deer caught in the headlights, and it made Oscar laugh. "I'm kidding, Sweetie. I'm kidding. There's a Frida Kahlo exhibition. That one actually does end today. And I know you both would appreciate it, so..." He pulled Elise close.
"Nearly had me convinced," she chuckled.
"Ah yeah? Hey. My acting must be getting better," Oscar jested.
"Only nearly." She pretended to be un-amused, and he laughed again.

The walk to the museum was slow paced. The sun was out and so was most of Montreal's population. Summer mood was apparent in the way people were dressed and how they chose to spend the day: some eating ice cream while checking out window displays, others stopping for street musicians, or taking a seat at one of the many cafés' outdoor sections.

The lofty mood rubbed off. Oscar had his hand wrapped around Elise's, swinging both their arms as they walked. James seemed to smile more often. A welcome sight to both, Elise and Oscar. A few times, people steered glances after Oscar, usually when recognition set in, but no one stopped them.

The glances didn't go unnoticed by Elise."You think anyone is taking pictures?" She looked around when they crossed a busy intersection close to the museum.
"Probably. Nowadays you can't tell with all the smartphones. There's already a few pictures from last night making the rounds." James peered around quickly before his attention shifted to a worry-faced Elise. "Nothing bad. Just a couple of people who recognized Oscar at the concert and who happened to get a snapshot of you two. But no gossip hurricane, definitely nothing about Joe. Lenny took care of that by the way, so we shouldn't see old pictures in the news anymore. But people had their own interpretations. Again, nothing bad," James assured.

Elise let out a sigh. Something between relief and worry and Oscar took immediate notice. "You ok Sweetie?" He circled his thumb on the back of her hand.
"Yes. Just wondering what it'll be like once Star Wars gets released."
Oscar stopped walking and so did she. "It'll be fine." His grip around her hand tightened. It was to assure her that he was around and that they'd battle through anything coming their way together.
"And if not, I'll have Mike photobomb every picture."

She laughed at that. Into the palm of her hand. Just like he loved it. "Might just get him a girlfriend that way, who knows." Oscar shrugged, and Elise laughed harder. Infectious because he laughed as well, right before hugging her close and kissing her without caring about who was watching.

"Wow. Kissing in public. That's a step forward," an all too familiar voice interrupted their little tête-à-tête. "And this is why he doesn't have a girlfriend. - Perfect timing, bro," Oscar frowned. Elise buried her face in Oscar's shirt, trying to hide the fact that she had turned close to crimson for getting called out like that. "Awe. She's shy," Mike poked. Elise's head quirked up. "I'll show you shy." She raised a clenched fist but Mike just grabbed it and pulled her in for a hug. "Strawberries." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Oh, shut up."

Then Elise felt someone tug the bottom of her cardigan. She looked down and found a little girl staring up at her, the eyes almost familiar. "Sorry about that," Lenny's voice cut in from behind. He took the girl's hand and knelt down to her level. "Ruth, you're not supposed to just run up to strangers."

Looking between Lenny and Ruth, Elise noticed they shared the same eyes. "So this is your youngest? Nice to meet you, Ruth. My name's Elise," Elise smiled at the girl but Ruth suddenly became shy, hiding behind her dad's legs before dashing off. "She's always like that," Lenny chuckled, watching after his daughter run to her mom. "You guys ready? I got the tickets. Everyone else is already inside, waiting."

Hellos were followed by hugs. Introduction of Leon and Ned was only necessary for María and the rest of Lenny's family for Elise. Lenny's wife introduced herself as Isabel. The names of the kids would take time. They all seemed to want to talk at once.

At least Elise remembered the name of the youngest sprout. Ruth. A bright-eyed girl with fire-red curls and olive skin. Just like her mother. One of the most beautiful combinations Elise had ever seen. The rest of Lenny's kids all had dark brown, wavy hair like their dad, but olive skin like mom. Eyes were all Lenny's. A sea of bright, golden ambers. Genetics was fascinating in that way, Elise thought.

She pondered for a moment, thoughts drifting. His thick curls, her skin? Her wispy waves, his skin? Eyes? Nose? Mouth? --- It took her bumping into Lenny to snap out of dreamed probabilities. "I guess McAvoy and Fassbender couldn't make it." Elise quickly scanned around to divert her own mind from going back. "Hmmm... They have a photo shoot," Lenny explained while scrolling through his cell. His wife lifted an annoyed brow and Lenny cringed, pocketing his cell at lightning speed. "Alright, who's ready to see some art," Lenny geared at his kids, but only the twins' hands shot up. Lenny hitched a breath, then tilted his head for his kids to follow.

"Wait. One, two, three, four... where's Ruth?" Isabel counted, the question quite calm like it was a normal thing one of her kids wasn't near. Elise peered around, snickering when she found Ruth tugging on Oscar's shirt. "Ruth!" The girl's mom scolded. "It's ok. She just wants to hang with uncle Oscar, don't you, nugget?" Oscar lifted Ruth to his
shoulders and the girl giggled. "Go! Spend some time with your husband and your older kids," Oscar smiled.

Isabel raised a sarcastic brow.

"Izzy, I got it. Tell her Ruth. Say 'we got it, mom.'"

"Yeah, Mom! We gots it!" the five-year-old yelled fiercely, her curls bouncing as she nodded. Elise snickered at the sight. Seeing Oscar with kids had an effect. The fuzzy to-the-core tingling sensation crawled back. It was almost overwhelming.

"Alright. But only because your mom is here, and James," Isabel's brow stayed raised.

"And what are we? Chopped liver?" Mike took offense, gesturing with his thumbs to Elise, Olivia, Ned, and Leon.

"No. But you don't have kids."

Mike gasped in shock.

"Just saying. Parents know not to be fooled by cute smiles and puppy dog eyes," Isabel laughed then sped after her husband and her four other kids, all of whom chattered in excitement over some statue.

Elise eyeballed Oscar from the side for a second, and he, her. A pause. Realization, really.

"I think, you're right. One... or maybe two. Two is a good number," Oscar still gaped after Lenny and family, the bunch of them loud in continued excitement.

"A. B. C.!” James interjected before Elise had a chance to reply.

"A. B. C.?" Olivia cut in this time.

Elise laughed. "You know. First comes love, then comes marriage..."

"...eventually a baby carriage," María nonchalantly chimed in, confident in tone, then started walking to get the rest of the group moving. Everyone just kind of gaped after Oscar's mom, shocked that she had just tossed those words out there like that. Everyone except Oscar and Elise. The couple turned red at the ears instead.

"What exactly has happened since May?” Leon drew in his brows.

"How much time you got?" Elise squeezed her lips into a thin line.

"Well, we're here, so spill," Leon hooked his arm into Elise's right arm and Ned, albeit not knowing her as well, into her left, and all three took lead, with the rest following closely.

There were laughs from Ned and Leon when Elise recounted the last two months, and Olivia shared a few snapshots from SDCC to aid storytelling.

"I didn't know you took that one." Elise peered over Olivia's cell from the side; a photograph of her and Oscar keeping Chloé entertained while backstage at SDCC on the display. As if they were a perfect family.

"It was too cute to pass up. I also got a few of you dancing with the cast," Olivia beamed.

"Oh god. Delete those." Elise's eyes went wide.

"Hell no. I want to see those," Leon demanded with a laugh and Olivia obliged. "Now those are art," he continued laughing. "Look at your cheeks! How much did you guys have to drink that night?"

"Not much," Elise blushed.

"Technically.... a few shots each," Mike grinned as he threw out the word rummy-bears.

"I told you to go slow," Elise countered.

"So that's what it's like to party with you, huh?" Leon smirked.

"You don't know the half of it..." James started with the biggest grin.

"Hmm, before you say anything else, Jim, let me just say that it's a good thing your parents aren't here because you know, ---Jim's dad once owned a red truck..." was all Elise got out before James'
hand shot to her mouth. "Oh, this is good. Family secrets make great party stories," Mike egged on, and James just scoffed out a grumble in response.

The group continued on, Elise still filling in Leon and Ned. Now and then, they stopped at paintings someone liked, Oscar once again noting Elise's affinity for blue hues. "You want me to paint the apartment walls blue?" he asked when he caught Elise alone for a minute. "I haven't even seen your apartment, yet."
"Hmmm... that's true, huh?"
Another spark in his eyes. Another silent moment of gears turning.

"I gots to go potty!" Ruth declared quite loudly, and Elise couldn't help but laugh because Oscar's face went from dreamy smile to shocked gape in an instant. He'd clearly forgotten that he was carrying the girl on his shoulders.
"Oh... ok... let me get your mom." There was a bit of panic in his voice. He lifted Ruth from his shoulders, searching for her parents.
"I gots to go." The girl fidgeted side to side.
"Oh, man.. ok... ok. Ok. Can you hold it?" Oscar panicked even more.

Elise snickered, amazed that Oscar seemed terrified. "I'll take her. I mean the bathroom is right there," she offered, pointing to a restroom sign. Oscar gave her a look. "Wow. Ok. Look. This is different. Not like changing diapers. She knows how to use the potty, right Ruth?" Ruth just nodded while Elise took the girl by the hand. "If we're not back in five, send help," she joked.

Oscar stared after Elise, a little surprised that she didn't try to delegate this task to Olivia or his mom, or even James. Her taking that kind of charge left him smiling, though. Butterflies were an understatement when his mind went back to this morning. Back to how easy it had felt when they talked about kids and anniversary scenarios. He was lost for a moment. So lost so, he almost didn't feel his mom softly linking her arm into his and guiding him away from the now waiting group.

They stopped after a few yards and María looked up at her son, smiling. "I like her a lot." She gave her son a mother-knows-everything glance, and Oscar chuckled like he'd been caught without even knowing what for.
María blinked at her son a few times, waiting. Like she knew what he wanted to get off his chest because - like Elise - she could see the gears turning. He drew in a slow breath, and María squeezed his arm.

"I love her, Ma," he spoke softly. "I love her so much. I know you said to wait, but Ma,... I ... I ... I know she's the one," he gulped.
"I can see that." María's eyes twinkled. A mother-sees-all twinkle because she had been observing her son the minute he'd stepped into the museum. María's gaze followed Oscar's when he peered to the restroom doors, waiting.

He chuckled when Elise and Ruth reappeared, Ruth holding on tightly while pulling Elise towards a statue to get a better look. Oscar kept gazing at the sight, smiling. Elise lifted Ruth up so the little girl could read along while Elise pointed to the words on the info plaque. Then they moved on to another statue. And another. And another. Elise feeding information to a knowledge-hungry Ruth. They both bubbled with energy, the way the sped from statue to statue, and painting to painting.

Oscar pushed out a content sigh, refocusing on his mom. "She's the one," he repeated with a whisper, and his mom nodded in agreement, eyes still twinkling.
A lingering smile and Oscar managed a perplexed //what// at his mom. María palmed her son's cheek, rubbing over the deepening crease in his cheek. "Then..., go get her." María's eyes crinkled upwards at the corners, and Oscar chuckled a kiss into his mother's hand, followed by a relieved sigh.

"Everything ok?" James' voice snuck in from the side. Oscar still held his mother's hand when he started nodding. "Yes. Perfect, actually," he geared at his agent.
"Time for lunch, huh?" James' eyes softened like he knew something was up. After the stint at breakfast, he had an idea what they may have been talking about, but refrained from pushing in that direction; and Oscar looked grateful for not getting interrogated while in public.

"Lunch sounds good," María smiled warmly. She freed her hand from Oscar's, then paced towards Elise and Ruth. Oscar's eyes followed mom; another lost-in-thought stare in tow when he watched Elise hook her arm into his mother's arm while with the other hand she still held on to Ruth; the three of them gearing towards Lenny's family who was turning a corner towards them.

James side-eyed Oscar for a moment, smirking at lost in thought expressions. He squeezed Oscar's shoulder to get his friend's attention. "Make sure you ask her in private. Just the two of you. So she won't feel pressured, and the answer is true to the heart, and --- only yours."
Oscar chuckled, finally shifting attention to James. "You think your parents will be upset?"
"Why? --- Because of Joe? Don't worry about that. I know my mom is a little cold towards you, but even she knows it's time for Liz to move on. If anything, they'd probably be willing to foot half the bill," James laughed.

Oscar traded a smile for a horrified stare.
"Don't worry, man." James boomed out an even louder laugh. "Liz isn't the extravaganza type. I wouldn't be surprised if she asked for holding the whole thing in a grassy field, guests all sitting on the ground..., on blankets."
"Not a bad idea," Oscar replied with thin pressed lips.
"Oh my god. You wouldn't dare have your wedding in a grassy field without chairs and a gazebo," Olivia's voice came out of nowhere it seemed.
Oscar threw his head around, brows narrowing. "How long have you been standing there?"
"Long enough to know that that is not your cell in your back pocket," Olivia grinned, pointing to Oscar's jeans.
Squinted glares were exchanged, Olivia promising not to tell. "She's not oblivious."
"I'm aware. But she doesn't know I have this." Oscar's hand went to his back pocket to check that the slim case was still there.
"Surprised she hasn't found it, yet." Olivia quirked a brow, then sped to catch up with Elise.
Oscar shook his head. "Good thing, Liz is leaving tomorrow. Olivia is a blabbermouth," he chuckled.
"Hmmm... Liz seems to like her." James gestured to follow the rest of their group that was now catching up with Elise's group.
"It does seem like they've hit it off from day one," Oscar snickered.
"That's good. Liz is going to need friends she can turn to. People who understand show business and who know how to deal with your ego." James' left brow hitched high.
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"Exactly what you think it means."
The friends gave each other wide-eyed once-overs, then laughed.
"I'm just messing. --- Seriously though. It's good Liz is getting along that way. That way she won't be lonely when she moves to New York."
"I haven't even asked her, yet."
"I think it's a given."
"Well if she wants to move... You think she'll like it there?"
James halted, deep creases on his forehead, eyes intense. "I think... change will be good for her. Don't get me wrong. She'll miss Seattle. She'll miss her friends and family. But with everything that's happened, I think it'll be good for her. Break a few ties to the past. As long she can visit, she'll be happy."

Oscar hummed, his brows contracting sharply. "I don't want her to move because she feels obligated."
"Oscar. She'll move. Trust me when I say, she's ready for a change."
"How do you know?"
"She's quitting her job. Not for you, but... it's a big deal. She's walking away from financial stability. That takes guts of course, but she wouldn't have done this if there wasn't a hint of something better. Of someone having her back. --- Plusssss, she's been asking about your schedule. What you're doing for the next few years. If it would be easier to move there. Trust me... she'll say yes, and if not, would it really be so awful to move to Seattle? Either way, you'll travel. Just take it one step at a time." James squeezed Oscar's shoulder, again, and Oscar hummed, again. This time in agreement.

"Come on you two," Elise's voice carried impatience.
"Yeah. Come on, you twos," Ruth imitated, tiny hands on hips, Peter Pan pose. Elise knelt down, whispering something into Ruth's ear. "We're hungry," the girl shouted a second after.
"Alright, alright," Oscar chuckled with hands in the air, picking up pace towards the group. The lot moved on, Oscar hugging Elise into his side. "You're a bad influence on the nugget," he snickered a kiss onto her temple.
"I am an aunt. I don't know how to be anything less," she winked.

Since it was the last weekend for filming, they decided to spend lunch at the regular gathering place for cast and crew. The small café in Central Montreal Oscar had taken Elise to when she'd visited the first time.

Javi, the manager, greeted the familiars with vigorous handshakes, except for María. For her, he reserved a kiss on the hand. Elise snickered at the chivalry.
Oscar, on the other hand, was not as amused. "Javi is a flirt."
"So are you," María called out her own son.
There was a loud Ha! in the group before Javi led them to a secluded area in the back where he pushed two, long tables together.

Lenny sat with his family on one end. An attempt to somewhat control his five rather rambunctious kids. His wife sitting next to him was a must, though. It was so that the couple could share the occasional kiss; something their kids deemed gross and had the other adults poke fun with //awes// and snickers.

Elise sat between María and Leon on one side of the table, Oscar opposite her, him between James and Mike. Ned sat next to Leon, and Olivia next to Mike. Oscar had initially protested the arrangement with a pout. Mainly because he loved pulling Elise close to lean his chin on her shoulder, but he knew she had more catching up to do, and likely snicker at whatever María had in store for her.
Once everyone seemed settled, Javi hurried to get them started on drinks and take down food orders. Lenny in the meantime tried to pacify his kids with coloring books and crossword puzzles, but Ruth didn't want any of that. She was the most fidgety of the bunch, constantly trying to get up and walk around.

"You wanna come sit over here, Ruth?" Elise offered with a snicker when the little sprout tried to escape her current seating situation again. Ruth's mom shook her head but caved when Elise mouthed an //it's ok// her way.

"Really, I don't mind," Elise reassured. "Bring your coloring book," she then told Ruth. The five-year-old stuffed a box of crayons and a coloring book into her arms then dashed towards Elise, her curls bouncing wildly with each little step.

Elise snickered. Ruth was too cute.

Elise lifted Ruth to her lap and the two chose a picture of a flower bouquet to color in.

"I wents over the lines," Ruth pouted some time in.

"That's ok. Sometimes coloring outside the lines makes the picture more beautiful," Elise smiled, kissing the top of Ruth's fire red curls. "Look at this flower. In Germany, we call it Gänseblümchen, which actually translates to little goose flower."

"What's that?" Ruth pointed to another flower and Elise's smile widened.

"In German? *Ruth nodded excitedly* Sonnenblume. It's actually my favorite."

"What's that?" Ruth continued to point to other flowers and Elise translated with unwavering patience.

The questions ended when all flowers were identified, Ruth continuing to color in the bouquet. Quietly; which seemed to impress the parents, Isabel pointing out that Ruth would've whined for her food by now.

"You should teach." Leon gently nudged Elise's side.

"That's what I told her," Oscar smirked.

"Don't bother. Tina has been asking Elise for years. The answer is always no," James pointed out, and Elise shrugged.

"I ... I don't know. I wouldn't be any good." She shook her head lightly, helping Ruth fill in the last of the flowers.

When they were finished, the five-year-old jumped off Elise's lap and grabbed the coloring book, dashing back to mom, showing off the finished masterpiece with pride.

"Rainbow colored roses. I like those," Isabel chuckled, then winked at Elise.

"Why would you think that?" Leon prodded on, and Elise mumbled out a //what?// because she was lost watching Lenny and his family - who got their food first- help their kids with their plates.

"Why do you think you wouldn't be any good at teaching?" Leon repeated her words back to her.

"No patience."

"You're dating Oscar. How do you not have patience?" Mike took over.


"He's right."

"Ma! You, too?"

The whole table fell into laughter.

"I have a feeling there are a few stories waiting to be told," Ned grinned sheepishly and everyone looked at María.

"Maybe next time. It's better with pictures," María snickered into the palm of her hand.

"MaaaAAaaa! Don't encourage them." Oscar's whole posture was that of a despaired man.
"Please tell me, there are pictures of him talking to cats," Elise grinned and María nodded yes, also with a grin.
"Liz!"
That was countered with a shrug and everyone laughed again.

The rest of the food was served; chatter between people across the table. Olivia talked about her next project and traveling to see family. A theater production was also in the works, but commitment was pending.
Leon updated on his teaching job, Ned sighing a few times when separation talk came up.
"I feel that." Elise's chipper mood waned a little.
"I don't even know how you two deal with your schedule," Ned pointed out, gesturing with his chin to Oscar.

Oscar reached across the table and folded his hand over Elise's. "I don't know either but so far, it's been going well."
"Hmmmm... It helps to stay busy," Elise smiled, again.
More talk: Elise mentioning plans for her startup; Leon revealing that he only had one semester left as guest lecturer and that he'd be returning to New York before Christmas. Those words put a smile onto Ned's face, and Leon leaned in for a kiss. Collective //awes// had the couple blush.

Javi returned to clear plates, and when he asked if anyone wanted dessert, Lenny's kids' hands shot up.
"We should get one of everything." Elise wiggled her brows and Lenny's kids agreed with a unified "Dad, can we? Please? PLEEEEEEAAASEEEEE?"
Lenny sat pokerfaced.
"Come on, Lenny. We behaved," Mike encouraged shenanigans.
"What do you think, María?" Lenny raised his brow; all eyes on Oscar's mom now.
María peered around the table, drawing out a fidgeted wait. Even Oscar shuffled in his seat.
"Maaaaaaaaa!"
"I suppose." María scrunched her nose, and Lenny's kids nearly screamed.
They ordered two of everything so that there was enough; plates going back and forth as people shared, and for the first time since Elise had met them, Lenny's kids didn't say a word, the younglings too busy trying different sweets. Not like they needed to say anything. Their faces spoke for them. Big smiles with sweet treat smudges all across.
Elise smiled at the sight with her head cradled in her hand. Despite an abundance of energetic kids, Lenny and Isabel seemed content. Elise was sure they had bad days, but right now, they looked happy. Attention shifted across the table when she felt Oscar gazing at her with the widest smile, that damn tingling sensation crawling back into her stomach. Unspoken words behind dreamy-eyed stares.

It wasn't until James got up that they broke gaze.
"Going to pay," James grinned knowingly, patting Oscar on the back.
"Wait," Elise hurried after.
"Don't even!" James swatted away Elise's attempt to hand her card to Javi.
"Paying for the desserts since I kind of instigated." Elise quirked a stern brow.
Squinted stare-off, both knowing whoever blinked first would lose.
James blinked first, so the bill was split. Elise paid for desserts and James for the rest. He did grumble on the way out, though, but she wouldn't hear of it.

At the exit, Lenny and family bid their farewells. "Taking the kids to the shore. Sugar to burn of,"
the P.R. rep explained with a crooked smile
"Awe... come on, man. You gotta spoil them now and then." Oscar winked at the kids and Isabel. Just then, Ruth beelined to Elise for a hug, and Elise stood perplexed for a second.
"Looks like you're the chosen one," Lenny laughed when he watched his daughter dart back to mom.
"The chosen one?"
"Our new sitter."
"Oh dear."
"Teasing."
With that, the large family took off one way, and the rest of the group another.

The afternoon was spent strolling down busy sidewalks and checking out window displays, Oscar holding Elise's hand. He caught his mom smiling at them now and then; scrunching up his nose in response. Elise, on the other hand, caught other things. Namely María yawning when she thought no one could see her.

"I think, it would be good to call it a day, or at least, afternoon," Elise whispered into Oscar's ear, and he seemed confused. "Your mom looks tired." Elise lifted her chin towards María and this time Oscar caught a yawn.
Oscar traded Elise's hand for his mom's. "Ma, you should go back to the hotel. Take nap," he started, but María declined. Oscar geared an unspoken plea at Mike.

"Mom. Oscar is right. It's not a bad thing to get some rest. We have a whole week to check out the rest of the city."
"A whole week with you boys but not Elise. Besides, sleep is for old people and babies," Marí±a smiled a tired smile.
"Then I must be old because I could use a nap," Elise took over for the brothers when it became clear that María wasn't going to budge.

The group stopped walking, Elise smiling at María. "Really, it's ok María. We'll see each other real soon. And you have my number now. You can call me anytime," Elise nudged on, a smile conveying that it was ok to slow down for the day.
"I guess, my children have spoken, hmmmmm?" María switched back and forth between her sons. "More like the food has spoken," Mike rubbed over his stomach and the group laughed.
Marí±a agreed to that one and Oscar hailed for a cab.

Marí±a and Elise embraced, mom holding the hug quite long. "You'll watch out for him, won't you?" Marí±a asked, her face serious.
"I promise."
Marí±a gently cupped Elise's face then went to hug Oscar. "You watch out for her, you hear me!"
"I will, Ma." Oscar kissed his mom on the forehead then helped her into the cab. Mike followed, wiggling brows. "See you later, bro."
"Make sure Ma gets rest," Oscar told his brother.
"I'm a grown woman." Marí±a raised a brow at both her sons from the backseat. Oscar flinched."I know, Ma!"
Mike mouthed // I promise// and Oscar shut the door.

"I think maybe we should head back, too. Take a break before meeting up tonight," Leon suggested, and the rest agreed. They parted three ways: Leon and Ned heading back to their place, James back to his hotel, and Elise, Olivia, and Oscar back to Lorne Crescent.

"My mom loves you," Oscar beamed while toeing off his boots by the door.
"Ah yeah? How do you know?" Elise slipped off her sandals. "Because," Oscar pulled Elise close by the waist. "I just know." He trailed kisses to the curve of her neck and she sighed. Oscar's response to that was a wicked smile against her skin.

He let go and paced to the sofa, plopping down, stretching out his body. He patted the free spot he reserved for her, wiggling his brows, and Elise followed with a chuckle.

"So what's the get-together tonight?" She asked once she found that comfort groove. "Oh that. Olivia bought a bunch of games. Last weekend together, you know." "So I won't see them again," Elise frowned. "Oh Sweetie, of course, you will. At the premiere, or just because. I mean you and Olivia seem to get along. I'm sure she'd love to stay in touch with you." "Hmmm... true. I do quite like her." "I just need to make sure I'm out of town when you two meet up. Hell, I should probably go into hiding if Mikki and Tricia ever meet Olivia." "Why?" "I have a feeling the scavenger hunt was just the beginning." Oscar quirked a pretended annoyed brow and Elise laughed.

"Scared?" She elbowed his stomach. "Kind of," he admitted with a nod, and she laughed again. He played with her hair, strawberry blond strands falling from his fingers over and over. Now and then he kissed into her hair, and she sighed with content.

Post lunch lull and afternoon tiredness set in and before they knew it, they were out.

Oscar drew in a breath, the song "Fare Thee Well" echoing through the apartment. He chuckled, scanning around to see where the sound was coming from but couldn't pinpoint the source. The song stopped then started over. Just the first verse and chorus. "Uhm... Sweetie?" He gently shook Elise by the shoulder, and she grumbled. "Sweetie, I think your phone is ringing." "What?" "Your phone."

She shot up, looking around confused. When did they even fall asleep? The song went off one more time, then stopped. A chime followed. Someone had left a message. Elise pulled herself up, still half asleep, dragging her feet to her purse, digging out her phone. "I really need to put this thing on a chain around my neck." She grumbled.

She unlocked her cell and found a missed call and a message from Judith. Elise's heart rate instantly doubled, and she hit the call back button at lightning speed, disregarding the missed message. The words "what's wrong" trembled out, the worst of worst coming to mind. "Everything is fine, Darlin'," Judith's voice crackled calmly through the speaker. The sigh of relief that followed was loud enough to get Oscar's attention. He sat up, gearing a questioning look at Elise and she lifted a //one second// index. "Hold on," Elise requested. "It's Judith." She held her hand over the receiver. "Everything ok?" "Yes.

The panic from a moment ago slowly faded and Elise returned her attention to Judith, deep breath in to fully calm down. "I left a message. Did it not go through?" Judith asked. "It did. But I didn't check it. Last time you called when I was away,..." Elise gulped. She couldn't
even say the words. "Oh, Darlin', I promise, Richard is fine. I called because I need your help. Well actually, it's more of a job offer," Judith explained. "Job offer?" Elise raised a surprised brow.

Her eyes cut to Oscar and he seemed as surprised. "What kind of job offer?" Elise's interest was piqued, and so seemed Oscar's the way his eyes widened. "A onetime kind of deal, really. I have a seller for a house. And a possible buyer. The buyer is from Germany and speaks very little English. Usually, I have an agency on call for international buyers but Richard mentioned your startup, and that you needed some help building a client base." "Ohhh. --- I don't even have business cards, yet. I mean, I do, but the company's name is on those." Elise worried.

"That's alright, Darlin'. The buyer is flying in this coming Friday. So it gives you a little time, and if you don't have any by then, it's ok. I do need you to come by the house and pick up a copy of the contract and translate it. And maybe do a walkthrough of the house to be sold, so you can get a feel of what questions might come up," Judith further explained. "I also want to make sure you understand the lingo. I know you have experience with contracts, but construction and real estate are a little different."

Elise stood perplexed. This was an actual job. She had never worked anything on the side. This was odd and exciting at the same time. "Ok," she whispered. "So it's a deal?" Judith asked.

"Yes," Elise confirmed more confidently, beaming ear to ear. "Ok, good. Do you think you'll be able to come by Monday evening? If not, maybe Tuesday? Monday would be better so you don't have to rush. The contract is quite long."

"I'll be there Monday evening."

"Good. We can talk about your fee then as well. I take it you charge per word?" Judith wondered. "For longer translations, yes. By the word."

"Ok, good. If the sale goes through, there's a bonus in it for you."

"Do other translators get bonuses?" Elise worried for a moment. She didn't want this to be done out of charity. "Yes, Darlin'. Only if the house sells of course. If it doesn't, you'll still get the translation fee."


Oscar watched her for a while from the sofa then got up to set up for guests. Paper plates and plastic cups because he didn't feel like dealing with a big clean up. He checked over wine and beer inventory in the fridge then pulled snacks from the cabinet, all while keeping his eyes on Elise.

He loved the new excitement in her voice. The way she laughed. And the way she blushed when she caught his gaze. When she hung up, she swayed his way and swung her arms around his neck, and he wrapped his around her waist. "I can't believe you have Fare Thee Well as your ringtone." Oscar wrinkled his nose. "I like hearing you sing," Elise confessed, blushing. "Ah yeah? Hmmm... I have to remember that."

A quiet moment of soft gazes and tender kisses. From him on her. Mostly her nose.

"So, job offer," Oscar smiled.
"Hmmmm. Judith needs a translator for a contract." Elise bit her bottom lip, a spark behind her eyes hinting at excitement.

"That's great, Sweetie. Your first client. I'm sure you'll do great. And I'm sure Judith will be more than willing to recommend you." Oscar hugged Elise closer.

He swept one hand down the side of her face, then leaned in for a kiss. This time lips on lips, and she sighed again. "You just watch. You'll have clients call you left and right in no time," he smiled warmly, and she hummed. "What?"

"I feel like..." She paused.

"Feel like?"

"Like my life is finally falling into place. It's a nice feeling."

"That's good." He smiled again.

They let go of each other so they could get ready.

"Best change into some pants, mi Linda. Olivia bought Twister," Oscar snickered when he changed into more comfortable clothes.

"Oh boy. This will be interesting. Will we even have enough space?"

"We'll make it work."

A little past eight, and the first guests knocked. Elise opened the door, Alex, Sophie, and Olivia aiming for a group hug, Olivia with a big tote slung over her arm. Not even five minutes after that, McAvoy and Fassbender stood in the living room, mischievous smiles plastered on their faces. Another ten minutes and Leon, Ned, and James [Redfield] squished into the tiny abode. Mike arrived last, a bottle of Zacapa in one hand and a bag of gummy bears in the other.

Oscar shook his head. "You do know that I have to work tomorrow."

"Pssshhhitt... you made through other filming days stoned. This is nothing." "Stoned? While working?" Elise gaped.

"Yup. Stoned." Mike poured gummy bears and Zacapa into a large bowl. "Not to worry, Sis. He doesn't do that on the regular."

"What did you call me?"

"Sis. You know. In law," Mike's voice lowered.

"Bro!" Oscar warned and Mike scuttled to the far end of the living room.

For a second, Elise saw the gears turning again. She scrunched her nose, then squished herself between Alex and Ned while Olivia set up Monopoly.

"So Ned. Leon never told us how the two of you met," Elise started.


"Hmmmm... He drove over my foot with his bike." Ned's eyes became wide.

"Not my fault you didn't get out of the way. I did yell to move," Leon countered.

"You shouldn't have been on the sidewalk. There's a reason we have bicycle lanes in New York," Ned countered back.

"I did pay for the hospital bill, didn't I?" Leon pressed his hands against his chest.

"You did," Ned admitted. "Right after you asked me out."

"Hey, some people do dinner and a movie. We were hospital stay and rehab," Leon laughed. So did everyone else.

They started Monopoly and Oscar ordered pizza.

A few rounds and drinks in, the first friendly debate had people throw game pieces at each other.

"Yer cannot build hotels right away," McAvoy scoffed.
"Yes you can," Fassbender crossed his arms.
"No, Yer. can't!"
"Yes, you can."
"The official rules say you can't." Alex scrolled through her phone to double check.
"Oh my god, Michael, you cheat! That means the last time we played, you lost." Olivia threw one of her houses at him.
"Boo. You're out of the game." Alex tossed one of her houses.
"Sore losers." Michael stuck out his tongue.
"Someone is about to be sore." Alex raised a fist.

The doorbell rang and people hushed for a second. Only for a second. They returned to debating when Oscar got up to get the door. He returned with a few large pizza boxes and the game was over with that.
"I still would have won," Fassbender stated, smug expression in tow. The girls threw all their pieces his way, Fassbender begging for mercy with a laugh.

People got up to get pizza and more drinks, seating arrangements switching around as they went back and forth.
"So James, what's the deal with the red truck?" Mike hadn't forgotten.
"What red truck? I don't know of a red truck," James denied.
"Really? So your dad didn't have a red truck?" Mike peered to Elise, prodding that way.
"Hmmm... a heavy duty one. Like the F-150s," Elise recalled with a snicker.
"Liz. Why?"
"Because you know you want to share with family."

Oscar coughed at that. He couldn't deny that the way she had just said that sounded like music in his ears.
"Family, ey?" McAcoy elbowed Oscar.
"Shhhhhhh."
"Come on. Storytime." Mike wiggled his brows. There was no way out of this one.
James heaved his chest. "It's at the bottom of a lake."

"My dad doesn't know. He still thinks it was stolen."

"I may have been the one who put it there."

"Oh my god! How?" Sophie's voice peaked in pitch.
"Joe was trying to teach him to drive. In the middle of winter of all things," Elise revealed and suddenly all eyes were on her. "The truck would've been fine, had you remembered to put on the brake."
"And you know this how?" Oscar gaped.
"Because I was there."

There seemed to be a unison gasp and Elise laughed. "It was quite a sight. The truck rolled onto the ice and when it got close to the center, the ice broke and the truck just sunk into the lake." She motioned her hand to show the speed at which the truck sunk.

"Jesus fucking Christ. Are yer serious?" McAvoy seemed simultaneously impressed and shocked. Elise grinned and her brother-in-law heaved another breath. "Yup."
"And yer dad still thinks it's stolen? After all this time?"
"Yup. --- And none of you will ever tell him," James warned with a squint.
"The gnome incident seems innocent compared to this," Mike mumbled.
"What's the deal with that, anyways?" Elise prodded this time, but Mike was suddenly tight-lipped.
"Hey now, we shared. Pay up!"
"He and his friends turned the gnome into a bong," Oscar shot out.
All eyes on Mike.
He groaned. "It was kind of on a dare."
"Whose dare?" Leon nudged on.
"Some kids from school. Would've never gotten caught if Oscar hadn't found the evidence."
"In my old room of all things?"
"I was going to toss it. Trash day was a day after."

Oscar grumbled.
"I'm sure your mom will forgive you since I'm almost ninety-nine percent sure she knows you two lit up a few times," Elise pointed out.
"Oh that? Yeah, she knows about that. The problem is, dork here used mom's favorite gnome. That thing survived hurricanes and earthquakes. She thought of it as a good luck charm because we never got hurt."

"Geez Mike, how could you?" Alex scolded.
"What? Really? The gnome is worse than the truck?"
"At least we didn't mutilate the truck." James sat wide-eyed.
"No. You only watched the whole thing disappear making your dad think it was stolen," Mike countered, eyes as wide.
"Let's... just... keep these stories between us," James squinted again, peering from face to face, the lot of them falling back into laughter.

Rummy bears made the round and Olivia set up Twister.
It truly was a good thing Elise had changed. She somehow ended with one arm around Sophie's leg and one leg on the far end of the mat between Sophie's arms, the tall redhead perched over Elise somehow, all while Ned towered over them both, ready to move his left hand to a red circle somehow, but he would have to twist around Elise's leg.

"Move your foot."
"I can't. Stuck."
"Hier. Ich helf dir."
"Michael. Don't."
"Hey! No helping the players!"
"Ned. Don't you dare! Don't..."

Next thing, the three laid in a pile, everyone else taking the chance to snap a few pictures.
"Sorry, mi Linda. I need a few more pictures from different angles."
"Really? Reeeeeaallllly? You wanna sleep on the sofa tonight?"
"Oooooooohhhhh."
"Eh. I'll risk it." Oscar shrugged while taking a picture of Elise's face.
Elise gasped in shock. A few more portraits then Oscar helped un-pretzel the group, tugging Elise close and aiming for a kiss.

"Uh no. You let me suffer." She pressed him away at the chest.
"Awe. Come on. A kiss to make up." He gave her puppy dog eyes.
Damn him when he did that because he knew she couldn't resist. "Guys, we're still here," James reminded. "Well maybe it's time you guys left," Oscar cracked, gaze shifting to the bedroom. "I really don't want that image in my head." James shook his head.

A peek at the watch revealed shortly past midnight and Sophie pointed out that maybe it was best to get going. "Six a.m. call. A few hours of sleep would be good," the actress explained. "Awe. Alright. I'll see you guys on set then," Elise frowned. "I actually need to get back to the hotel and pack." James stretched away stiffness from sitting on the floor. "Make sure you bring your suitcase. We're going directly from set to the airport." "Will do."

The rest of the actors and Mike bid their farewells, Leon and Ned staying behind to help with cleanup. "You don't have to do that," Elise tried to take the plastic bag from Leon's hands but he insisted. "We don't mind," he smiled. "Sooooo --- you and Oscar are getting serious serious, huh?" "How do you figure?" "Hmmm. Lunch today. The way he kept looking at you when you held Ruth. Mentions of family. Mike calling you sister." Leon's eyes twinkled.

Elise blushed, gaze tracking to Oscar who was showing Ned whatever pictures he took tonight. "Yup. It's serious alright." Leon gently elbowed her when she remained quiet. "Hmmm... He's... He's the one," she paused, backtracking. "Well... technically... he's the second one... I mean, uhm... --- you know what I mean," she stumbled over her words, and Leon knew exactly what she was getting at. "I'm happy for you. Joe would be happy, too." Leon smiled, then kissed into the side of Elise's hair.

The clean up after that was fast but goodbye hugs lasted. "Don't be a stranger." Leon pulled Elise in for another hug. "Call us when you visit New York. Call us before then, too," he chuckled. "I will. I promise," Elise could feel the tears edging to the corners of her eyes. She always hated goodbyes. A few more hugs then only her and Oscar were left.

"I should probably pack my bag," Elise sighed. "You need help." "No. It'll be fast but I don't want to wait until morning." She started gathering her things, sadness in her tone. "Sweetie?" Oscar stopped her by hugging her close to him. "You'll see them again. All of them. There'll be premieres and award shows."

"Hmmm... I know. But it's not like this. Just us and no cameras." Oscar's heart skipped a beat at those words. "There will be. You'll see."

She went back to packing her things and Oscar readied the bed. "Should I take these with me?" Elise pointed to her clothes he had taken along after SDCC. "If you need them, yes. If not, I'll take em back to New York." He crawled on the bed and waited. She ran her hands over her clothes a few times then decided to leave them on the hangers which made his heart skip another beat.

She brushed her teeth then joined him; him squeezing her close to his side. "Did you have fun today?"

"I did."
"Good."

He traced up and down her arm, sighing now and then. She looked up and saw his gears turning again. Deep caramels met green-slivered grays and he blushed. "What?" Elise whispered with a chuckle. It was rare to see him blush. Oscar shook his head and drew in a deep breath, and Elise noticed the vein on his neck picking up speed. "Tell me," she requested, her voice soft.

He scratched over the back of his head, a nervous smile on his face as he did so. One step at a time came to his mind. One step so she doesn't feel pressured or rushed. "I uhm... I know we haven't talked about what's going to happen after your last day of work. I mean, you'll have the startup. I know you'll do fine once things pick up. And you'll make money, and --- you know, I'll be helping with rent and everything when you come to Spain with me. It'll be interesting. It'll be the most time we've spent together," he chuckled, that nervousness increasing, more blood rushing to his cheeks.

"I'm just... Uhmmm... I...," he scrambled to find the right words. He swallowed a few breaths and focused on her grays. How much he loved her grays. Especially when the green sparkled through. And today the green seemed the most prominent he had ever seen.

He closed his eyes for a second, and she brushed the back of her fingers over his face, waiting. It was as though he needed that touch. That calming warmth of her skin against his. He slowly opened his eyes and saw her smiling, still waiting. "Move to New York," he held his breath.

A silent moment followed. A long, silent moment, during which he felt his calmness crumbling. "I mean... Uhm... You... You don't have to move in with me. If... if you don't want. I can help you find an apartment. So you have your own. And I'll help. And I'd help you move. You wouldn't have to worry about a thing. And it doesn't have to be like right away. It can be when we come back from Spain. Or ..... Or even after Christine has the baby, if you want to wait, and... And... you can... I'm... I...," he stopped. Not on his own accord but because she had crashed a kiss onto his lips.

A long, passionate kiss.

She pulled away and he gasped. "$Ok," she whispered so quietly, it was nearly inaudible. "$Ok?" "$Ok!" she repeated louder. He blinked his eyes, unsure if he had heard right. "$Wait. Ok as in yes?" "$Yes, you dork," she laughed. "$Ok! But..."

"Ohhhh," his gaze dropped at that word. "$But..." She lifted his head by the chin. "$I do want to be there when Tina has the baby. I know we're not talking right now, but I feel like I need to be there this time. So I want to spend December in Seattle."

"Of course. Of course. Yes. Yes... That's ok. Whatever you want," he smiled, his breathing close to hyperventilating.

There was a sudden impatience. From Oscar that is. He shifted to the edge of the bed and sat up, fidgeting, his smile wide as ever. "$You want to tell Mike, don't you?" Elise quirked a brow.

"Yes. He's always first to know." Oscar's cheeks turned even redder.
"You do know it's nearly two in the morning," Elise snickered.
"Oh... oh... ok I'll tell him when we get to set, then." Oscar scooted back. "Actually, I'll tell him once we get up." He wrapped his arm around Elise and held her close. He wasn't going to let go tonight, that much she knew.

Sunday morning rushed in. The alarm went off at five and both dragged out of bed. Surprisingly neither were hung-over, just tired. Elise gathered up the rest of her belongings, stuffing items into her suitcase however, and Oscar reminded her that whatever didn't fit, he'd take along to New York this coming Friday. Another quick glance around the apartment, then it was time to leave.

The drive to set was fast. Not many people were out early on Sundays.
Once there, Oscar hurried to the makeup trailer. "I'll see you in a couple of hours. If you want you can go and take a nap in the trailer."
"I think, I'll just walk around. Stay awake. I can sleep on the plane," Elise yawned.
"Alright. Meet me at stage two. Around eight." He leaned in for a kiss then disappeared into the makeup trailer.

Elise stowed her suitcase in Oscar's trailer then meandered towards the cafeteria. Strong coffee was a must and she needed at least two cups this morning. Clementine greeted with a cheery bonjour while pouring the first cup and a surprised you're back already? when Elise ordered the second not even ten minutes after.

"Du ziehst also nach New York, [So. You're moving to New York,]" Fassbender's voice surprised from behind.
Elise spun on her heel, unsurprised by the statement. Word traveled fast. "Wo hast du das gehört? [Where did you hear that?]"
"McAvoy."
"Und von wem hat er's gehört? [And he heard it from whom?]"
"Olivia. Und sie von Mike," the German-Irish actor grinned.
"Und Mike von Oscar?" Elise shook her head with a chuckle. Gossip between actors seemed worse than tabloid chatter. Elise was sure everyone else knew by now, too.

"Und, aufgeregt oder...? [And, excited or...?]" Michael wiggled his hand.
"Alles auf einmal, [everything at once,]" Elise sighed.
"Ist verständlich. New York ist 'ne grosse Stadt. Da wird so einiges anders sein [Understandable. New York is a large city. Things will be different there,]" Michael nodded. He motioned to start walking because he needed to get into costume.

"Wirst du gleich bei Oscar einziehen, oder ne eigene Wohnung suchen? [Are you moving in with Oscar right away, or search for your own apartment?]"
"Hmmmm... ich ziehe bei ihm ein. Werde aber die Wohnung in Seattle behalten. [I'm moving in with him. Going to keep the apartment in Seattle, though.]"
"Gut. Im Fall der Fälle, huh? [Good. Just in case, huh? [lit.: In case of cases.]]"

Elise bobbed her head.
"Na dann, viel Glück! [Well then, good luck!]" Michael stretched out his hand but Elise went for a hug. Damn tears edging in again.
"Danke," she barely held it together.
"Man sieht sich, ok? [We'll see each other, ok?]"
"Das versprech ich. [That, I promise.]"
With that Fassbender was off to change.
Elise paced to stage two, her heart getting heavier with each step. She’d grown quite fond of all the people here. If she had to do another goodbye, she’d cry for sure.

She got to the stage, looking around for Oscar but didn't see him. Instead, Bryan approached and the two talked weather and film; Elise impressed again by the fact that the inside of the stage looked nothing like the outside. This time around, she seemed to stand in a temple of some sort, hieroglyphs all over the walls.

Bryan was just about to show her some concept art and how everything had been translated, when a hug from behind made her jump. She spun around and found Oscar wiggling his brows at her. Usually, her eyes stayed on his but in that moment hers went to the top of his head.

"Looks pretty good, huh?" Oscar pointed to his head.
"I... uh... I thought you said you had to let your hair grow out?" Elise stared.
"So you don't like me bald?"
Thin pressed lips and lingering stare. Elise didn't know how to respond. "It'll take time to get used to?" The last words went up in pitch. Unintentionally.

Oscar boomed out a laugh. "Don't worry, Sweetie. It's a bald cap," he kept laughing.
"Oh, thank god."
"Hey! So you really wouldn't like this?"
"Like I said, it would take time getting used to," she grinned.
"I see how it is. I can't wait until you have your first grays or wrinkles or your butt starts sagging, just so I can say that it'll take time getting used to," he teased.
"First of all, my butt will never sag. Ever. And second, I like wrinkles. I just kind of prefer to have something to grab onto when..." Her eyes dropped to below her waist, and he boomed out another laugh.

"Fair enough," he smirked; pulling her close, leaning to her ear. "I can't wait for you to grab my hair then. I'll make sure to go extra slow and extra long next time," he whispered, then pressed an opened-mouthed kiss behind her lobe, drawing a wet circle with his tongue onto her skin.
"Hhhhhhh... fuck." Elise felt the blood rushing from her head. The sigh escaping her was inevitable.

"Get a room," Bryan's voice had them dart apart. How did they keep forgetting that there were others around?
"If I didn't have to work, I would." Oscar wiggled his brows.
Bryan took off with red ears, and Oscar laughed again.

"I know you have to leave soon. I'll be stuck here. On that slab right there," he pointed to a table like structure.
Elise chuckled. "Well, make sure you don't fall asleep." She raised a brow.
"I never..." he started and she gave him a //yeah right// face. "Ok. Once. But no one knew until the scene was over."

He pulled her close again, wanting her near for as long as time allowed.
"Liz. We have to get going."
Elise turned her head and saw James pacing their way. "Ok. Let me see if I can find Olivia real fast. And Sophie and Alex. Ten minutes? Fifteen tops."
"Alright. Fifteen. And get your suitcase."

Elise dashed off, cell in hand to text her friends.
Oscar and James watched on until she disappeared behind the stage doors, both chuckling.
"I need a favor," Oscar geared at his best friend, serious tone and even more serious face.
"Something wrong?" James worried.
"No. The opposite. Everything is great."
"Alright... What's the favor?"

Oscar looked around, people speeding past them left and right to ready lights and cameras. He leaned close to James and whispered in his ear.
"No problem. I'll make a few calls. Anything else you need?"
Oscar thought for a second. "Enough sunflowers to fill the room," he smiled, and James nodded in agreement.
The flight back home seemed shorter. A lot shorter. Maybe because it was direct. Or maybe it was because Elise had fallen asleep.
"Long weekend, huh?" James smirked, amused by her hazy confusion when she woke up. Elise stretched arms and back, resetting her seat to the upright position. "You can say that again. When did I fall asleep?"
"Eh... like ten minutes after takeoff," James chuckled.
"Fuck. That means I won't be able to sleep tonight. Hello jet lag," Elise grumbled, and James chuckled again.
"Stop it."

Fifteen minutes after that, the plane landed. Local time: 1600 hours [4 p.m.]. Elise contemplated a workout once getting home. Maybe that would help her fall asleep and stave off the dreaded jet lag the following day but it seemed James had other plans.

He skipped the usual exit to her place and the next three that would have led around to 1st Avenue.
"Where are we going?" Elise craned her neck, looking back to the exit they'd just skipped.
"You'll see." James winked from the side.

A few more skipped exits then he headed north-west, more west than north, driving past suburbs and around Discovery Park. He drove up to a private entryway, punching in a code at the gate, heavy metal slowly screeching open after that.
"You're not kidnapping me, are you?" Elise jested as they slowly continued up a long driveway. Large trees left and right swallowed daylight and made it seem darker than it was. James quirked a brow then laughed.

Another minute and the trees started thinning out, a massive, redbrick, white window-framed mansion coming into view.
"Holy shit! Nice house." Elise gaped. "Your clients have great taste!" She exclaimed when she got out of the car, still gaping at the sheer size of the place. "Sorry, didn't mean to yell," she snickered.

She leaned against James' car for a moment, him joining her. He crossed his arms, one leg swinging lazily in front of the other while he peered up and down the facade. "It doesn't belong to a client." He looked down on Elise to see if she got the hint.

She stood there for a moment then did a slow three-sixty, scanning the area around the house: a large, fenced in lot with lots of tree house worthy trees, close to a park on one side, close to the water on the other.

A playground halfway hidden off to the left-hand side caught her eye. She paced closer to get a better look. Slides connected over a bridge to a playhouse. Next to that stood a set of swings and a large covered sandbox. Even monkey bars and a small climbing wall were installed. All of it - the lot, the playground, and the area around the house - was a little overgrown with weeds and wildflowers. Clearly, no one had taken care of this place for a while.

She looked back to the house then back to the playground. An audible gasp followed.
"Oh. --- My. --- GOD! Oh my god. **OH MY GOD!!!! James! AHHHHHHHH!** Oh my god!" She jumped up and down then dashed up the stairs to the front door. "Show me!" She demanded, her
eyes sparkling with excitement.
"Did you forget the magic word?" James laughed.
"Come on! Really?"
James didn't budge.
"Pleeeeeeaaaaasse!"
James laughed again then made his way up the stairs.

He pulled a key from his pocket, wiggling his brows when he unlocked the door. "Welcome --- to Redfield Manor," he beamed when he pushed the door open.

Elise squeezed past him, awestruck and lost for words for a moment. But only a moment. "Oh my god, James! When did you guys buy this?" Her voice echoed through an empty first floor as she took in the sight in front of her.

The living room was huge, almost the size of a volleyball court, and with a red-bricked fireplace on one side, open to the kitchen on the other side. The vaulted ceiling - more like cathedral height - was a glimpse into future holidays with eight or ten or twelve-foot trees and still ample space for guests. Large windows ran the length of the living room's wall to the backyard; the windows reaching as high as the ceiling.

The kitchen cabinets offered contrast to white walls; wood stained in dark Kona brown. White marble counters, stainless steel appliances, and white subway-tiled backsplash pulled the look together. Past the open layout of kitchen and living room, the house seemed to extend into either direction.

"Oh my god," she repeated, still stuck in taking in the size of the living room. "How many rooms?"
"Bedrooms? Six. They're all upstairs. Three of which have their own bathrooms. Down here, living room and kitchen. Formal dining room and library are past the kitchen. Two offices and a guest bathroom past the wall with the fireplace. And past that is the laundry room that leads to the double garage," James explained, pointing at the same time.

"Six bedrooms? How many kids are you guys planning on having?"
"Three. Two bedrooms are reserved for guests," James laughed.
"This is amazing! --- I'm surprised Tina didn't mention this." Elise took off her shoes and spun around a few times, testing the friction of the floor while sliding across in her socks.
"That's because she doesn't know."

Elise came to a dead stop, nearly tumbling to the floor, her jaw dropping. "What?"
"She doesn't know."
"How does she not know? Don't you guys share mortgage payments?"
"She won't have to worry about that. It's all paid for."
"How?"
"I may have forgotten to mention a few bonuses over the last --- uhmmm --- five or six years." Elise raised her brow in disapproval.

"The taxes are paid on those. I just put it all into a few high-yields, and here we are. Plus Oscar and a few others." James sheepishly scratched the back of his head.
"I see. So he's a cash cow." Elise frowned.

James heaved a sigh. "I know you disapprove of how show business works at times, but trust me when I say, I made sure I gave him a fair deal. He's a lot smarter with money than he lets on. If he felt taken advantage of at any point, he would've let me know by now. It's actually why he left his old agent," James explained.
Elise hummed, letting the explanation sink in. James was great with contracts. She knew that. His experience with corporate and business law meant that he knew how to get the most out of everything. Not to mention that they all had been taught to be savvy. It just came with their lives, through their parents.

That didn't stop past conversations flooding her mind, though. Her face darkened and James knew instantly where her thoughts had carried off to. "I left it all behind when I quit law. The greed especially."
"I wasn't insinuating."
"I know you better than you think. I told you. My life, the way it was before Tina, that's not me. Not anymore. I know what greed does. I know how ugly it is. I know when it's enough to make sure we're ok."
"I know you do. I guess that's why I still have a difficult time picturing you like that. Like Henry." Elise paused, looking around the empty room again. "It's a good thing actually," she reassured and James nodded.

"Aaaaaaanyways..." Elise spun on the ball of her foot, a smile back on her face. "I cannot believe Tina doesn't know. I mean, damn. You bought her a house. A HOUSE!" Elise yelled just so she could hear the echo. "When did you close on this?"
"Thursday, before I picked you up for the airport. And before you ask, this has been in the works for a couple of months now, so NO --- I didn't buy it after the day at court." James' left brow quirked high in assumption. "Although, she may not see it as //just because// once I tell her." His shoulders dropped when realization set in that this might be for nothing.

"I think, as long as you explain that this isn't to buy back her love, I don't think she'll see it as an apology gift," Elise countered James' thoughts. He considered the advice then nodded in agreement. A dragged breath and he smiled. "Let me show you the upstairs."
"Yes!" Elise dashed up the stairs by twos before James even had a chance to turn on his heel, her eagerness to explore the rest of the house making him laugh.

"Holy wow!"
"Go ahead. I know you want to run across."
"Damn right, I do," Elise laughed then rushed across the bridge that connected the two distinct parts of the upstairs; the bridge granting an open view to the living room. "The Holidays will be amazing." She thought out loud, making her way back to James so he could start the upstairs tour.

The section above the kitchen featured the two guest bedrooms, one of which had a full bathroom. Both rooms were spacious with walk-in closets and currently painted white, which James explained: "will change once we know what we want the guest rooms to feel like."
The remaining four bedrooms were located above the side with the fireplace, the master suite taking up almost one-third of the entirety of that section.

"I don't think Tina owns that many shoes," Elise quipped when she counted the shoe shelves in the walk-in closet of the master suite. A closet so big, it nearly counted as an extra room.
"I'll buy her more." James leaned against the suite's doorframe, watching Elise speed between walk-in closet to master bathroom and back.

The three other rooms in the section were smaller but decently sized. Definitely kids' rooms. All with a ton of closet space and one of which had a half bathroom attached. The room right across the master suite was already painted purple, a collection of plush dinosaurs in the back corner already waiting for the new occupant.
"Chloé's?"
"You know it."
"What colors will the other rooms be?"
"That's up to Tina. As long as I can paint my office in Seahawks colors, I'll be happy."
Elise snickered at that. James was a true Seattlite.

"And the bathrooms stay all white tiled?" Elise wondered.
"The guest bathroom and kids' bathroom, yes. For ours, I'll replace the cabinets and counters. Maybe the shower tiles, too. Create some contrast," James beamed, and Elise wrinkled her nose.
"I'm sure my dad and your parents won't mind helping out with that."

"Hmm... Come on. Gotta show you the downstairs."
"There's more?"
James smirked then led her back to the living room. From there they went towards the offices by the fireplace's side. Elise couldn't resist poking her head in the doors.
"Wow. I'm guessing this one is yours." She opened the door to the second office wider and stepped in, running her hands over the top-to-bottom walnut shelves.
"It is. Have to store all my law books somewhere."
"You still have those?"
"Oh yes. They're expensive." James scrunched up his face.

Elise went back to the first office. Unlike James', it was bare but offered bigger windows and direct access to the yard. "Tina is going to love all this space."
"Hmm... I plan on installing a blackboard on this wall." James pointed to the wall next to the door.
"And new shelves, a new desk. Also, some wires above so she can hang up the kids' work. I mean, she's a principal but she'll always be a teacher first, and I know she'll display all their stuff."
"She's going to love it," Elise repeated as she closed the office's door.

James smiled warmly then led his sister-in-law towards two doors at the end of the hallway. One led to the laundry room, the other to a set of stairs to the basement.
"Geez. This is a basement?" Elise peered around, the room below stretching nearly the entire length of the house, a few pillars spaced evenly throughout.
"Well, part of it will be. Going to split it three ways with sliding walls. Storage all the way to the end, then personal home gym, and the front area will be entertainment. Pool, darts, eh maybe a jukebox and a bar." James' brows danced.
"So... a man cave?" Elise's voice pitched in such a way that they both ended up laughing.

"You know it." James smiled then his face became serious. "I'll have pictures of Joe on this wall." He pointed to a section of the basement. "Of us. And our parents."
The two fell silent for a moment, exchanging understanding nods when James ran a hand over the chosen section. "Let me show you the yard," he whispered, gesturing with his chin to go back upstairs.

Back in the living room, he opened a door leading out onto the patio, waiting on Elise who kept peering around in amazement. "There's a sectioned-off area for gardening. Tina will be able to plant tomatoes again. And whatever else." James walked out into the backyard until he reached the fence and Elise followed. He opened a gate, and a few steps later, they stood by the shoreline.

The sun was still out, barely just, painting the skies in hues of orange, red, and pink, and other than a couple walking by the water hand in hand, there was no one around. It was quiet and somehow Elise knew this tranquility was part of the reason James had chosen a house in this location. "God, Jim --- This place --- is amazing. Tina going to love it. I just know it," Elise gasped, watching on
while the sun set slowly behind the mountain range across Puget Sound.

James didn't respond. Hands buried in the pockets of his pants, he, too, watched the sun disappear, his chest rising in deep breaths as he took in the sight. "I miss her," he whispered when dusk turned to absolute darkness.

Elise rubbed over his arm, feeling an anxious tension under her palm. "Call her. Tonight. Let her know you're back," she suggested softly, and James bobbed his head. "Hmm... I will. --- Let's go. You have work in the morning and so do I."

Half an hour later Elise stood back in her apartment, the place feeling a little cramped after seeing the house. She chuckled, wondering who would clean all those rooms. Christine wasn't fond of cleaning services. She had her way of dealing with things. She might just cave once they move.

Elise laughed again. A house! Her brother-in-law had bought a house. For a growing family. She contemplated if she should tell Oscar, her hand already reaching for her cell. Before she knew it, she had hit the number next to his name. Funny how he had become the first person she wanted to call whenever she had news. She internalized a laugh at her observation while she waited for the connection trill to end.

"Guten Abend, Erdbeere," Oscar's voice crackled.

Elise couldn't help an actual laugh. The way he'd pronounced Erdbeere had her in stitches. "Did I say it wrong?"

"No, Lindo," Elise laughed, again. She didn't have the heart to correct him. Not just yet. "I see. I try and this is what I get. Mocked. You're not one hundred percent with your Spanish, mi Reina."

Elise could almost feel the sulk through the phone. "First of all, I never claimed that my Spanish is perfect. Second. --- I'll teach you. I promise. And you'll teach me to become more proficient."

"Hmm... I like that idea."

Now there was an almost felt smirk from his end. "So what's up, Strawberry? Miss me?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?

"Alright. I miss you," Elise paused. She nibbled her bottom lip. Not even a day apart and she missed him.

"Talk to me, Sweetie," Oscar encouraged. "You're not going to believe this, --- but --- James bought Christine a house."

A "wow" from Oscar seemed an invitation to spill like a waterfall. "..., and there's access to the shoreline, and they have a huge yard and a sectioned-off garden. I might ask if I can plant strawberries for next year, and I will have Chloé help me, and there's a ton of trees, and I know whenever my dad comes back to visit he'll want to build a tree house. ---- And Tina will love it. I just know it." Elise caught her breath.

A soft laugh was the response. "That's great, Sweetie. --- Have you talked to your sister?"

Another pause.

"Sweetie?"

"Not yet. I... I feel like I should give her some more time. Maybe another week or so."

"Alright. If you think it helps. But don't wait too long. I'm sure she misses you. I know this whole thing is difficult but she's your sister. And you won't be able to avoid talking to her if you want to be around for her."

Yet another pause. And a hitched breath. "You're right. You're --- right. I will talk to her. Just ---
"One more week."
"Ok. One week. --- So, how was your flight?"
"Enough about me. How is your mom? She came to set after I left, right? Was she well rested?"

This time Oscar was the quiet one.
"Lindo?"
"She --- she was ok." Oscar's response came with a heaviness.
One, Elise wasn't too fond of. "Lindo... what's wrong?"
A long exhale. A stalling technique.
"Oscar. Talk to me!" Elise became alarmed.
"How did you...? When your mom...?" Oscar's voice trembled. "I mean, --- did she tell you, or..."

"She didn't tell us. Not for a while," Elise cut him off softly. She could tell he was holding back tears. It was in the way he held his breath. Almost like he was choking back the thoughts invading his mind.
"But?"
Elise drew in a long breath. "I don't know. I just --- knew."
"How?"
"It... it was the way she moved. She seemed tired more often. She needed more breaks. And... she called more. I mean, we talked quite often on the phone, but it got more. She'd call me in the morning and in the evening. Talk about mundane things just to hear my voice, I think."

Elise paused again. The next question would take some courage, but if she didn't ask, he'd likely not say his thoughts out loud. Not in this case. "Do you think your mom is sick?"
The short silence that followed was almost too much to bear. "I do. Mike does, too. --- We don't know how to ask. Not without sounding like we're invading her privacy."
"Has she been sick before?"
"Hmm... yes. Once."

"Then ask about her last blood count. Or checkup. A simple "How are you mom?" And then steer it in that direction," Elise suggested, then waited. Oscar remained silent. Uncharacteristic for him, so she knew this was getting to him. "Lindo, it's not in my place to pry but --- the last time she was ill, did your dad know?"
"Yes. He did," Oscar whispered.
"Do they get along? I know divorces can be nasty, but are they on a talking level?"
"They are. They've always been talking. For us. Their divorce... it's complicated. But they've always talked," Oscar explained, his voice a little steadier now.

"Then tell him. He's a doctor, so maybe his input will be a little more weighted." Elise waited again, and again she was met with silence. "Lindo? You ok?"
"Yeah... yes. I'll ask dad to call her. She is just so..."
"Stubborn?"
That procured a laugh. A weak one. One nonetheless. "Yes. Very."
Elise laughed as well. "Hmmm... My mom was, too. But you know," her voice softened, "they do that because they think they're protecting us. From the pain. And the thoughts. All I can tell you right now is... be there for her. And if you don't have time, tell her to call me. And I'll talk to her."

Elise heard Oscar take in a few deep breaths. "Thank you, Sweetie."
They both went quiet for a moment.
"So, tell me. How did your mother react to your trailer? And is that what your apartment looks like?"
"What are you trying to say?"
"That you're messy," Elise snickered.
"Wow. That hurts. It's all organized, you know," Oscar sulked.
"Into what? Messy pile one? Messy pile two?"
"No. One pile is Marvel. And one is Star Wars... and... and the other...." Elise laughed. "I'm teasing, Lindo. I admit, my place gets messy. Especially after a long trip."
"So it's messy now?"
"No."

They both laughed.

Some more back and forth and whispered "I love you" then it was time to call it a night. Elise sighed at that. Nearly two weeks without him were ahead. Daytime, she knew, would be easy. Busy schedules were sure to keep mind and body occupied. Nighttime was another story. She had grown accustomed to having a warm body next to her again. Pillows would have to make do yet again. And his cardigan. She didn't care that it was way too warm to wear it to bed. There was nothing better than to fall asleep in something of his.

Monday morning at home started with a normal routine. Well mostly. Checking emails, some yoga, small breakfast, and in between texts from him. Heart emojis overload. grouchy selfies next to an untouched pillow where she usually slept.
"Should've hugged the pillow. That's what I do." She sent a snapshot of her bed.
"It's not the same. You're softer and warmer. *sulking emoji*"

She rolled her eyes with a snicker. "Ditto."
"Get to work. Don't want you in trouble the last couple of weeks."
"I'm going. Chat later, Lindo. Be nice. No one likes an angry Smurf."
"Ha! Ha!"

Monday morning at the office was a different story. Anything but routine. Helen and Matt had left for their new careers, the only friendly face left being Thom's. And he seemed grumpy or tired or maybe both.
"Morning, boss." Thom slumped while handing over a cup of coffee.
"Just morning, huh? You look like you've been through the ringer." Elise took the cup of coffee and paced to her office.
"You can say that again." Thom followed; contracts that were due for revision in hands instead of on Elise's desk. He was behind. "Your replacement arrived on Friday. Early. And let me just say: Zickenalarm."

Elise gasped at her P.A., a laugh surging through the room a second after. "Who the hell taught you that word?"
"Helen. Before she left."
"Do you know what it means?" Elise waited with wide eyes.
"Yeah. B-i-t-c-h alert."
"I should scold you both; you and Helen."
"For what? Teaching practical terms?" Thom's face lifted to a grin.
"Touché."

A knock on the door and their attention shifted. The CEO - *toothy smile on face* - let himself in. A second after, a woman with a high-and-tight bun, sucked-on-a-lemon face, and rigid posture followed. The CEO introduced the woman as Madame Claire DuMont, and she made it clear to be called by her last name before Elise even had the chance to shake her hand.

Madame DuMont strutted around the office, already pointing out the changes she wanted to make, completely ignoring the fact that the current occupant was still around. Thom rolled his eyes at
that, the replacement raising an arrogant brow when she caught him. "I'll be introducing Madame DuMont to the rest of the teams. Once I'm done, could you explain the day to day routines to her?" the CEO geared at Elise.
"No problem," Elise faked a smile.

The CEO gestured to continue the tour of the company, and Madame DuMont raised another arrogant brow. This time at Elise, but the reason was uncertain. The thought of a mocked curtsey entered Elise's mind but she held off. There was no need to piss off the CEO now and make those last two weeks a true horror show. "Zickenalarm, alright," Elise breathed through gritted teeth. "Glad, I'm not staying for that." Thom eyeballed his boss from the side. They both laughed.

Half days came as a blessing, it turned out. Elise tried her best to hold a welcoming demeanor to Madame DuMont, and she succeeded for most of the day, but one too many arrogant hums and brow raises had her turn cold as ice right before it was time to leave. "I'm not one to tell people which managing style is best, but the teams don't react well to arrogance. So maybe a little less attitude and a little more humility, or else you'll be faced with metaphorical brick walls." "We'll see about that," was all Madame DuMont offered, tone as arrogant as the rest of her.

Elise just shook her head on the way out. All these changes, from people leaving to the way everything was being micromanaged... Suddenly, it didn't feel scary to leave this company behind. No! Instead, it felt like a shift in energy. Like that was the final push Elise had needed to throw herself into her startup. To get serious about it and not waste any more thoughts on what ifs. A sudden realization that it was time to roll up sleeves and take this from theory to practice.

The first stop after work was at the bank. She set up a business account, just like Oscar had suggested. Transfer of funds would take a few days, but she was fine with that. Then she was off to a local printing shop. A graphic designer there drew up three quick ideas for business cards. Elise took a snapshot of each one, fingers dancing fast across her cell's screen when she texted Oscar. "Quick. Which one do you like best?"

Not even a minute later, her cell chimed. "Your name in turquoise handwriting, and career title in sans type underneath on the front. The rest of the info in black, sans type on the flip side, and justified in the lower right corner. Add a turquoise stripe on the left side." The fact that he had replied this fast left her speechless for a moment. "You don't think it's too simple?"

"Less is more. Olivia agrees. So does Michael."

"It's too late for lunch and too early for dinner over there. What did you guys break?"

"*shocked emoji* Who says we broke anything."
"Now I'm certain something is broken!"
"*row of laughing emoticons* Do you really want to know?"
"Might as well tell." 
"Michael's cape."
Elise laughed out loud at that response "Oh dear. There's a reason people shouldn't wear capes. Villains and heroes alike!"

"Very true. So. Business cards! *wide smile emoji*"
"Yes. Also opened a business account."
"Wow. Sounds like you finally know what direction you want to go."
"No. I still don't know. *frowny face* But I have to start somewhere. I'll tell you tonight. Gotta run.
Need to call Judith.
"Awe. Ok. *frowny face*"
"I miss you, Lindo."
"Miss you, too, Erdbeere."
"Talk tonight."
"Sweetie?"
"Yes."
"Good job. On moving forward. You'll do great."
"*blushing emoji* Gracias."

More hurried typing. This time to Judith. The women agreed to six o'clock at Judith's and Richard's place. The dinner invitation that came with it was unsurprising. Once there, Judith whisked Elise away to her office and went straight into work mode. "Want to get this out of the way before dinner," she explained while gesturing to sit by a large glass desk. Elise agreed, chuckling nervously when Judith heaved a thick folder onto the smooth surface of the desk.

Luckily, the realty contract to be discussed wasn't the entirety of the folder. Still, at thirty pages, it was more than expected. They went over the contract, Elise taking notes whenever Judith emphasized a section. "I didn't know contracts to buy a house were this long," Elise stared at the stack of papers after they finished going over the fine print. "Oh, yes Darlin'. Lots of clauses to protect seller and buyer. Especially in luxury real estate. Most of it is standard realty contract lingo. Only the last ten pages are different because the buyer is from another country. We need to make sure they have proper documentation before the property goes into escrow, that way the buyer doesn't have to travel back and forth," Judith explained. "Wow. Well, I'll have it translated by Wednesday, if that's ok. You can show me the house then, too." Elise flipped through the contract one more time before stashing it into her briefcase. "That's perfect actually. Bring a copy of your German language certificate. Did you have time to get business cards?"
"Ordered them today. They'll be ready tomorrow," Elise smiled. "Great. --- Now, enough work talk for the day. Time for dinner." Judith got up and tilted her head in the direction of the kitchen.

Elise followed suit, Judith sliding her arm around Elise's. "So tell me. What did you think of your brother-in-law's new house?" Judith's eyes twinkled. "He bought through you?"
"He bought through you?"
"Yes. He did. He knew exactly what he wanted."
"So that's why you rushed him away when we came over a few weeks ago," Elise squinted and Judith laughed.

"What's so funny?" Richard asked when the women reached the kitchen. Elise had to stop for a second, giving Richard an almost shocked once-over. He looked great. A little thicker again. Healthier. Clearly, recovery was going well. But that wasn't what had Elise stop in her tracks. It was the fact that she'd never seen him in regular at-home clothing. Even when throwing summer parties in the backyard, Richard usually wore slacks and a button-down shirt.

The lumberjack-shirt-and-worn-in-jeans combo, along with the start of a growing beard, took a moment to settle in. "Wow!" Elise stood mouth slightly agape, still a bit taken aback. "You... you look great." She blinked a few times, turning red from trying her best to suppress the laugh building in her stomach.
"Can't go wrong with plaid and jeans, huh?" Richard rumbled out a laugh. It had been a while since Elise had heard that laugh and her response was a lasting hug and laugh of her own. "So tell us. What's new with you and Oscar?" Richard grinned as though he knew something. "Why do you ask?"

"Hmm... just because." Richard shrugged but Elise didn't buy it. She countered with a crossed-arms and raised tell-me-brow stance, waiting. "He's asking because he watched E-News." Judith set the table then geared towards the fridge. "You did not!" Elise pushed hard against Richard's shoulder, brows furrowed and frowning. Another rumbled laugh from Richard, and Elise shook her head in disbelief. "Didn't peg you for the gossip type."
"Well. I'm not. I came across by accident."

"Accident my ass!" Judith stuck her head out from behind the fridge's door then returned to gathering whatever she was gathering. Elise squinted at Richard. "Ok... ok... so I watched. I have ever since you made the front pages of a couple of magazines in May. But I promise it's only to make sure you're ok."
Elise kept squinting. "I promise," Richard reassured, squeezing Elise's arm, then helped Judith fix up salads.

"So, tell us. What was it like meeting his mom?" Richard prodded on, another grin spreading across his face. Elise blushed, burying her face in her propped up hand. "It was... wonderful." She blushed even more. Then she filled them in on everything that had happened on her short getaway, the three of them eating dinner, Richard grumbling at the minuscule size of his steak.

"Wow. New York. And here I thought I could keep you on retainer." Judith poured Elise some wine. "I'm sorry."
"Don't be, Darlin'. We're happy for you." Judith squeezed Elise's hand. "Oh. I know. It's just... everything is falling into place at lightning speed. It's crazy. And scary." Elise sipped on her wine, shaking her head. "In my mind, logically I mean, I know I should take a step back. Slow down a little. But in my heart... In my heart, I don't want to. And I think Oscar feels the same."
"Well... love happens the way it happens. Sometimes it's a slow burn, and sometimes it strikes at lightning speed. The most important questions you have to ask yourself are: are you happy, and do you see yourself with him through thick and thin?" Richard asked.
"Yes... and yes." Elise beamed, blushing again. "Then --- here's to New York; to new beginnings and --- lasting love." Richard raised his glass, Elise and Judith clinking theirs against his.

When Elise returned home that evening, the jet lag she had been trying to avoid caught up with her. She was out not even five minutes after she had rolled herself into her blanket.

The rest of the week was busy, to say the least. She was glad. Although there were times she wished she could skip over the mornings. Her replacement, Madame DuMont, encroached more and more into her space. A few brazen encounters were inevitable and it put Elise on edge.

Sure, she was leaving, so why should she care. But the office was still hers. The communication teams were still hers to manage. Officially at least. But it quickly became clear that, unofficially,
she had already left. At least in Madame DuMont's eyes. And the CEO's. Showing up was more of a formality at this point. Clenched jaw smiles were all she could do as to not lose her temper.

The frosty atmosphere at the office didn't discourage her to work on her startup. If anything, it caused her to push harder. To work harder. To really want this. It was almost an //I'll show them// attitude. Not that she needed that. Her family and friends were, after all, behind her. Still, it felt necessary. She was going to walk out with her head held high, and someone like Madame DuMont wasn't going to take that from her.

On Tuesday, Elise picked up her business cards, sending a snapshot of the small stack to Oscar. He, in turn, sent her a bouquet of sunflowers via delivery in the late afternoon.
"You didn't have to send me flowers, Lindo, but thank you," Elise mumbled into the receiver with a tinge of bashfulness in her voice.
"Yes, I did. This is a big day. The business cards make it official. You have your own startup now. How does it feel?" Oscar's voice crackled back.
Elise could almost feel his pride-filled smile through the speaker. She drew in a hissed breath.
"Fucking terrifying."
Oscar laughed. So did she.

"I'd be worried if you weren't a little scared," Oscar said a few seconds later. A hummed response was her agreement. "When we meet up in Walla Walla, I'll take you out for dinner, Sweetie. In fact, why don't you find a winery with a restaurant you want to check out and make reservations. I'll pay of course," he suggested.
"So you'll come along then?" A hint of surprise pitched her voice. Until now, him being there had been hanging in the clouds.
"I'm going to try, Sweetie. Right now, I'm still working around my schedule. I have a premiere to go to and an Expo, but I can push a few things around. It'll be a bit crazy, but I'll make it work. I'll be there for one of the concert days for sure. That much I promise."
"A premiere?"
"Yes. For Show Me A Hero. I think I put it on your schedule. Unless I forgot."
"Let me check... I think... Wait... I see it. Ugh, so much stuff to remember," Elise sighed scrolling through her calendar.

"I would've asked you along, but I wasn't sure about the exact dates for Walla Walla. You can still fly out and attend if you like. I'll pay for the ticket," Oscar offered.
"I wish I could but that's my last day at work. It's also the day before we have to drive up. But --- thank you --- for the offer," Elise smiled.
"Well, we'll have plenty of premieres to attend together," Oscar smiled. Again. Elise could tell. It was in the way his voice softened and in the small sigh right after.

She chuckled. "Do I have to get a new dress for each one?"
That made him laugh. "No Sweetie. In fact, if you want to wear one of your summer dresses or one of your party dresses, that's fine. The only time it's required to dress to the nines is at award shows. If I'll ever get to go to one again, I'll make sure that you won't have to worry about a single thing, including your dress."
"Really? I should've recorded this as proof for future reference." A sassy snicker followed that.
"Do I have to set a spending limit already?" Oscar gasped.
"Mmmmmmaybe."
"Maybe?"
"I'm kidding."
"I know you are."
A few more minutes of snickers and whispered "I love yous" then it was time to refocus. Elise whipped out the realty contract and reference books, typing at lightning speed and late into the night. Good thing she knew contract lingo. Only a few terms were new to her. Still, her eyes felt on fire by the time she finished. Hours of screen time while editing and double checking terms to ensure everything was correct was exhausting. If it hadn't been for Oscar sending her more texts, keeping her motivated, she'd probably have stopped halfway through.

"Make sure to eat dinner!" was one of the said texts, and he didn't stop reminding her until she sent him a picture of herself while eating a grilled cheese sandwich.

Wednesday was long. At least it felt that way. Early morning in the office, late night the night before, and the remainder of jet lag had Elise tired by 10 a.m. No rest for the wicked that day. After lunch, she reviewed the contract one more time, then met up with Judith at a coffee shop near Pike's.

"Well, I don't speak the language but it looks professional. I like that you kept the formatting the same." Judith peered over the contract, paying close attention that numbers matched up. "Send me an invoice on Monday. Word count, charge per word, and final cost. Make sure you include a rush fee. Anything less than forty-eight hours should always include a rush fee. And remember to include an hourly charge for when I show the house. Since I need you to be there, it counts as time worked."

"Uhmmm... ok." Elise offered a half-smile. To her, money negotiation with her metaphorical mom was odd.

"You're worried you might overcharge," Judith pinpointed one of Elise's concerns. "A little. I mean, I know the average cost. And demand. So..."

"Liz. Don't undersell yourself. If I think it's too much, I'll let you know. That said... as a woman, I know you're going to undersell yourself because that's what women do. So --- take the average per word and add a couple of cents." Judith smiled, and Elise agreed with a quiet nod.

After that, the two were off to see the house to be sold. Another mansion-sized estate, right by Union Bay.

"Do I even want to know how much the property taxes are?" Elise scanned up and down the facade then around the lot. Pristine conditions, this place had been prepped for a high bid.

"Not unless you want to cry," Judith joked.

They walked through the house, Elise once again taking notes. Questions that the buyer might have; from distance of nearest schools and shopping malls to age of wooden floors and recent repairs.

"Women tend to ask about the kitchen and bathrooms. Especially the age of the appliances. Men usually want spatial facts. Square footage, measurements from wall to wall, height of the ceiling," Judith explained when they finished the tour in the garage.

Elise let out a soft sigh. "I wonder if Oscar ever wants a place like this. Not a big place, but a house with a small yard. Enough space to have family stay now and then."

"What does he have now?" Judith asked while locking the doors.

"An apartment. I haven't even seen it, yet." Elise chuckled.

"And you agreed to move to New York?"

Elise laughed. "Yup."

"Wow. That is a bit crazy." Judith joined the laugh. "But truth be told. Small places are nice. Less to clean. Less space to collect clutter. More incentive to get outside. I actually miss our first apartment. A one bedroom with barely enough space to fit a queen sized bed."
"Then why did you buy..."
"... the house we have now? Mainly because of my business. But also because we thought we'd have kids. But when that age passed..." Judith shrugged. "There's a lot of love in that house, regardless of us not having kids. Richard spent a lot of time fixing things up. Besides, the extra rooms are for guests. And you know us. We constantly have people over, so the house is just as busy. Sometimes worse, I imagine." Judith laughed, again.
"Around football season?"
"Especially around football season!" Judith's face changed to something between despair and discontent. Then she laughed again.

Thursday was another long day. Elise started packing up her office despite the fact that her last day was in a week. Somehow she ended up with five large boxes, all stuffed to the top with personal items. She had no idea that she had accumulated so much stuff.

Good thing Patricia was around to help her out. It was a trade sort of speak. Elise's BFF exchanged use of a newly bought car and physical labor for Elise watching the kids that evening. At Elise's apartment.
"Have fun at the concert." Elise hugged her friend, and Patricia blushed. "Who's up for cheese pizza?" Elise then asked Donnie and Danielle. The answer of course as expected. A yelled "me" from both. When said cheese pizza arrived, Elise got out *Labyrinth* [board game] so they could play and eat at the same time.

"No fair. You're supposed to walk and move the wall, or move the wall and then walk," Danielle argued with Donnie.
"Nuh uh... You can walk and move the wall and walk again." Donnie countered, ready to move his pawn.
"No!" Danielle tossed hers.

"Alright. Alright. Let me check the rules again," Elise mediated. "It says to move the wall pieces first, then walk. What you can't do is look at all your cards at once. You're supposed to work through the stack from the top."
"Ha! Cheater!" Donnie pointed at Danielle. That was a mistake. Danielle was ready to jump on her brother for being called out, but Donnie was faster and dashed to the living room. Danielle of course followed. It didn't take long for her to catch up, and before Elise could intervene, the kids were on the floor, pummeling.

"Ok... ok... no... stop! Hey... No! Ok. Look, I don't want to give you guys... time... out! Stop! It!"
Elise pulled them apart by their shirts. "Geez. You two remind me of my me and my sister," she huffed. There were a few growls. And a few sour-faced expressions. Stuck out tongues, too.
"Come on guys. You're siblings. I know you won't always get along but let's behave for the rest of the evening. I'll put on a movie, and we can eat ice cream. Ok?"

"Mmmmm ... ok," Danielle mumbled with crossed arms, one foot circling a spot on the floor while she looked down, pouting.
"Donnie? --- Come on, dude. You gotta meet us halfway. Peace?"
Donnie mirrored his sister's posture, but only her posture.
"Please. I got hot fudge and sprinkles," Elise bribed.
Nothing.
"And Oreos," Elise was getting desperate. "And M&Ms."
Donnie looked up. "Hmmmmm ... Ok. But I only want the yellow ones."
"You can have the yellow ones so long neither of you tell your mother that I'm feeding you junk
food. --- Deal?"
"Deal."

All three shook hands on that. Elise got the ice cream ready. Special order. Danielle's was more sprinkles than cream and a river of hot fudge. Donnie's: three scoops built like a volcano with yellow M&Ms on the outside and Oreos stuffed in the center. Elise opted for Oscar's special: double chocolate chip with peanut butter cups, Oreos, and a mountain of whip cream. Then they watched *The Neverending Story*.

It was nearly midnight by the time Patricia returned to pick up her kids, Owen smiling over her shoulder before kissing into her hair, which of course made Patricia giggle.

"Shhhh... they're sleeping." Elise whispered as she gestured for the couple to step in.
"Did they behave?" Patricia let out an airy chuckle when she found her kids passed out on the sofa.
"Yes," Elise fibbed.
"Really?"
"Ok. They had a little fight, but --- they were mostly good."
"Figures."

"Do you mind taking them to the car?" Patricia geared at Owen, a hint that she wanted a few minutes alone with Elise in her eyes.
"Sure." Owen woke Danielle, then Donnie, the kids hugging Elise with long yawns on the way out, both dragging their feet.

"Everything ok?" Elise's left brow perched high.
Patricia waited for the door to close before she shifted attention to Elise. "Why didn't you tell me you're moving to New York?" A smidge of disappointment could be heard.
"Oscar only asked a few days ago."
"Mikki knows."
"She does? Well, she didn't hear it from me," Elise explained.
"So it's true, then?"
"Yes. I was going to bring it up during the festival trip."

Patricia sighed, sadness spreading to her whole body with a notable slump.
"I'm still going to visit. And call. And Skype. And if you guys want to visit us in New York, I don't mind helping with the airfare. Oscar won't mind either, I'm sure," Elise reached for Patricia's shoulders, squeezing her gently, but the sadness didn't wane.
"I know. It's just, --- everyone is leaving it seems. Mikki's moving to England. You to New York. A couple of my coworkers left for L.A."
"Tina is still here. And Owen... You have Owen now."
"Hmmm..."

"What's hmmm? I thought you liked him."
"I do. A lot. But... if we want to make this work, I might have to move. The kids and I.--- Seattle is our home, but he works mostly in L.A."
"You only just started dating. Give it time."
"You and Oscar don't seem to need time."
"Me and Oscar... we don't have children. So it's different. I mean... I don't know what it's like being a parent, but I'd say do what's best for the kids. In the end, they're the ones who need you more. Not that it's a competition."

Patricia nodded. "Damn decisions," she scoffed.
"Look, don't write Owen off. Give it time. You never know. He might be willing to move here."
There's plenty of music-related work here. And I'm sure James would be willing to help if it comes down to it. His agency is always looking for people."
"I keep that in mind." Patricia smiled at last. Thinly but a smile nonetheless. "I should go. With my luck, the kids are fully awake and have tied Owen to the roof of the car."
"Wouldn't be surprised," Elise admitted with wide eyes then laughed, hugging Patricia. "I'll see you in Walla Walla?"
"See you in Walla Walla."

It took a while to fall asleep that night. Elise kept tossing and turning. Moving to New York seemed like an exciting adventure when she had initially said yes, but after Patricia's reaction, Elise wasn't so sure anymore. She had family here, in Seattle. Family and friends. Connections. Moving meant she would have to start over on a few things. The starting over wasn't what worried her though. "Call me in the morning. I need to talk." She texted Oscar, then the exhaustion of the day washed over her and she was out.

Friday woke with chimes from her cell. At five in the morning. She squinted at the screen, the brightness way too high for her liking. "What's wrong?" was highlighted in turquoise next to Oscar's icon. "I talked to Patricia about moving." Elise messaged back. A minute later, Fare Thee Well echoed through the room. "I take it she's upset?" Oscar asked with a raspy voice. Being that he was only three hours ahead, Elise guessed that he had either just gotten up or was in makeup.

"Sad more like it," she exhaled, pulling the blanket over her head. "And how do you feel?" Oscar asked, a slight tremble in his voice a sign that he was worried. "I don't know. I was excited. And now... My family. My friends. Joe. I mean... I know he's gone but... he's here. In Seattle." Oscar's response was silence. "I'm sorry," Elise whispered. "For what?"
"I don't know. I... I want to move but... I'm..."
"Scared?"
"Yes. What if I don't like it there? What if I don't make any friends? I don't know. And what if my startup doesn't work out? And my family. What if something happens and I can't be there right away? And what... what if I'm having one of those days? When I need to... just... see his site?"
"Sweetie..." Oscar sighed. A heart-dropping kind of sigh. "Do you want to wait?"
"Would waiting change it?"
A sharp exhale through the speaker and Elise imagined Oscar was running his hand through his curls. That is if he didn't have the prosthetics on already. "I suppose it wouldn't," he admitted then they both went mute. "Look. I want you to be happy. If you don't want to move that's ok. I'll move to Seattle. If you want me to move there, that is. Whatever you decide, that's what we'll do."
"I don't want you to feel like you have to, though."
"Neither do I, for you. --- I tell you what. Why don't you come visit first? I'm off for a couple of weeks after August sixteenth. We can look into the job market over here for you then. I'll show you around. Introduce you to my friends. They're all quite eager to meet you," Oscar proposed. A long pause on her end. "Liz. You there?"

"Yeah. Yes. Let's do that."
"Ok."
Another moment of silence.
"Liz?"
"Still here."
"I want you to know, I'm not upset. Ok?"
"I know."
"It's good that we can talk about this. I'm glad you said something."
"I know."
"Good. Because you know, this... this is nothing. If we got rattled by this, I'd be worried. But we'll make it work, ok?" Oscar's voice was calm and even now.
"I know," Elise repeated for the third time, then she heard Oscar giggle out of the blue. "What?"

"Ich liebe dich, meine kleine Erdbeere."
Elise laughed. He had said those words almost perfectly this time. "I see, Michael has been helping you with your pronunciation."
"Yup. And he taught me more words."
"Really? Like what?"
"Like... Ich vermisse dich."
"Awe. I miss you, too. And?"
"And... Ich will dich küsse."
She laughed. "Hmmm... me, too. And?"
"And...," Oscar gulped. "I'll tell you later. I gotta go." That felt like a white lie.
"Chicken." Elise snickered.

The rest of Friday went by fast. Fast enough to not dwell on doubts. One thing was certain: after the call, Elise felt better. It was nice being able to talk about fears and possible compromises and not fear some sort of lashing out. That, and the fact that Oscar was willing to move if she didn't want to, kept her stomach tingling and her mind at ease. This was the real deal. He was the real deal.

There was a happiness that seemed to envelop Elise the more she thought about their talk and it transcended into everything she did that day. Not even Madame DuMont got to her, which in turn got to Madame DuMont, but Elise didn't care.
"Is Oscar back?" Thom joked when Elise kept smiling after another snide remark from the replacement.
"Nope. Just had a talk this morning."
"Ahh. A talk, huh?" Thom grinned cheekily.
"Not that kind." Elise rolled her eyes but Thom kept grinning. "Aaaaanyways, you want to come along this afternoon. I'm showing a house with Judith. I'll be speaking German. You can see what it would be like working in this field as an on-location interpreter."

Thom agreed. Elise texted Judith, and the realtor replied with "as long he's wearing a suit and his hair is neat, I have no problem with him sitting in."
Elise gave Thom a once-over and snickered. "Fix your hair."
The "yes ma'am" response was met with a fierce squint.

The showing of the house itself didn't take long. The buyers, a middle-aged couple, weren't as talkative as Judith had expected. The focus were spatial conversions, general living costs within the area, and technical information on all the appliances; questions always short but forward, expected responses the same. Being that Elise was from Germany, she wasn't surprised by the straightforwardness and lack of small talk. In fact, she welcomed it.

That didn't stop the occasional, muted snicker when she caught Judith and Thom staring at her from the side, both perplexed at the rather formal and rigid way Elise handled everything. Only at
the end did the buyers grant a smile. "Wo können wir unterschreiben? [Where can we sign?]" was an almost unexpected question considering the way the couple had inspected the house: stern-faced and with silent nods.

"Looks like there's a bonus in it for you," Judith smiled when she waved after the couple's car with one arm, a signed contract tucked in a folder under her other arm. "I'll let you know once everything is approved but... I mean you have seen the sales price. Seven percent of that is commission, sixty-five percent of that goes to me, the rest to the broker, and you'll be getting two percent of what I get."

Elise did the math in her head and added her translation fee. "Geez, at that rate, I'd only have to sell a house per month." Her eyes went wide.

"Hmm, it's lucrative when the market is great. Of course... it's not always this easy." Judith pointed out. "Send me your invoice. By Monday. I'll pay for the translation services as soon as I get it. The bonus will take a while."

"What about my bonus?" Thom shimmied his shoulders in anticipation, wiggling brows and big smirk in tow.


"Alright! Lobster and filet mignon, here I come." Thom rubbed his hands together and the women laughed.

They settled for a fine eatery near the waterfront and with view on the Great Wheel. Elise's thoughts went straight to Oscar when she peered out the window. Straight back to that first week. The week she had met him. She watched the softly lit wheel rotate while they waited for their food, the sunset in the background adding a romantic touch to the whole scene.

"25th." She sent a photo of the view to Oscar.

"*smiley face* 25th, mi Reina. And 50th?"

"If I ever get to be that old, yes."

"It's a date."

She giggled.

A quiet moment followed. Too quiet. A feeling of two sets of eyes staring holes into her had Elise shift attention back to the table.

"Oscar?" Judith wiggled her brows.

"You know it," Elise beamed.

"Can I plan the shower already, or what?"

"No. Not yet."

Judith frowned. "Geez, what's taking him so long?"

"Bridezilla fear," Thom stated nonchalantly.

"Hey now! I would never..." Elise's palm met the table, making Thom gulp.

Squinted stare-off then they all fell into laughter.

The evening ended on a cheery note. Very cheery. Wine helped with that. Now and then, Elise let Thom sneak a sip, but only because he had agreed to take a cab home instead of the bus.

When the weekend finally rolled in, Elise welcomed it by snoozing in close to lunch time. If it hadn't been for her cell ringing, she would have likely stayed in bed way past noon.

"What do you want?" she grumbled when her cell went off for the third time.

"Wow. Grouchy this morning, huh?" James' voice was chipper.

"It's been a long week."

"Awe. I'm sorry. --- Get dressed. I need your help."

"You can't make demands on the weekend."

"Yes, I can. - Besides. I got something for you. So get dressed. Old clothes you don't mind getting dirty."
"Uuuughhh... why?"
"Because the new house doesn't clean itself."
"Mehhhhh.....alright."
"Great. I'll be there in fifteen."
"Thirty. And not a minute sooner. Unless you want an empty coffee mug thrown against your head."
A laughed response from James and she hung up.

Thirty minutes later, James picked her up in a rented midsize moving truck.
"You're moving house already?"
"Not exactly. It's new stuff. Well, technically old stuff. From a few antique shops."
"Wow. Decorating the new house on your own. Bold move."
"What are you trying to say?"
"Nothing. --- But I know my sister, sooooooo...."
"As a reminder, I refinished the bathrooms, and I never heard a complaint."

"Hmmm, true." Elise side-eyed James. He looked tired again, but she couldn't tell if it was because he had been busy with work or the house or if it was because of Christine. "Have you talked to her this week?"
James gave Elise a fleeting glance. "I have."
"And?"
The heavy lift of James' chest was enough of an answer.
"Does she know about the house, yet?"
"Nope."
"She'll come around."
"I'm sure," James smiled thinly then they both sighed, the chipper mood from earlier gone.

"Well, let's get this truck unloaded." James pulled up to the front of Redfield Manor and they got to work. Most of the items he had bought were for the offices. Only one piece went upstairs. An antique bassinet in deep brown and with ornate brass details on the outside, which they carried into the master suite.
"Christine will definitely like this one." Elise rocked the bassinet lightly. "Your kids are so lucky," she whispered with a distant smile.

"How so?" James wondered.
"Just saying. They're lucky to have you two. You love them. I mean. Of course, you love them. I don't know. Forget it. Forget it, I'm being silly." Elise drew in her brows.
"It's not always easy, you know. There's a lot of tears. And I imagine there'll be a lot of yelling in the future. Especially when they reach the teen years."
"Oh god. Don't remind me," Elise laughed but as fast as that came it vanished. She gently rocked the bassinet again, the thought crawling into her mind now unavoidable. "Do you think Joe would've been a good dad?"

James thought for a moment, a soft smile spreading across his face. "I do." He paced to Elise and cupped her face by the chin then leaned a kiss on her forehead. "And Oscar --- I think he'll be good, you know."
"Hmmm... I know." Elise peered around the upstairs again. The house felt empty right now. Almost too spacious for a family of [soon to be] four, but she could already envision the laughter that would fill this place. Laughter and little squeals. Pitter patter of tiny feet running across oak wood floors. Mom and dad pretending to be dinosaurs chasing them.
Cries, too. Arguments about missed curfews. And bad grades. First heartbreak.

"You alright?" James squeezed Elise's shoulder. She managed a thin yes. "Let's go outside," he smiled.

James led Elise to the patio towards the backyard, a table and chairs she hadn't seen before set up. Iron wrought and with beautiful leaf details. Definitely vintage.

"When did you get this?" She outlined the leaves with her fingertips.

"Tuesday." James' hazels sparkled. It was excitement about getting the house ready. "Sit down. I got some lunch in the fridge." He disappeared back into the house, returning five minutes later with homemade sandwiches and a couple of sodas. And a small box.

"What's that?" Elise gestured to the box with her chin while biting into her sandwich.

James hitched a breath then cleaned his hands with napkins. "I was clearing out the storage room. Found a lot of stuff I thought we'd lost or sold," he chuckled. He opened the box and pushed it towards Elise, taking in her reaction while he waited.

"Oh my god. Wow! I'd forgotten about these." Elise reached in and pulled a stack of photographs from the box.

"Me too. --- And there's more. I found a whole box of undeveloped films. The ones in there are from about four or five films. I have maybe twenty or thirty more rolls. I always knew I was missing pictures, but I think with all the moves, I forgot where I'd put them."

Elise didn't reply. She'd only heard half the words her brother-in-law had said. In that moment, she was lost in memory lane. Vacations they had taken together. Playground shenanigans. Summer days in the forests near the houses they had called home.

James watched her until she reached the last photograph. "You can keep those. I can develop more since I have the negatives," he smiled.

"Thank you," Elise whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek. She went through the stack again, stopping at one of the photographs. "I think, I'll frame this one," she snickered, flipping said photograph towards James, the snapshot showing Elise, Christine, James, and Joe covered in mud from head to toe, all of them smiling, ages ten, eight, ten, and twelve.

"Oh man," James boomed out a laugh. "That was a good day. Good summer, actually."

"It was," Elise grinned. "Good thing this was during summer. At least we were able to hose off outside. I'm sure our parents would've just left us out in the cold had we shown up like that during the winter," Elise laughed wholeheartedly.

James scrunched up his nose then ate the rest of his sandwich. He looked out into the yard. Content sighs and dreamy gazes accompanied the occasional soft chuckle. Long summer nights and s'mores came to mind. Playing chase and water balloon wars. Birthday parties and barbecue Sundays.

Then his cell went off. Furrowed brows and confused eyes a sign that he didn't recognize the number.

"Redfield," he waited.

Elise side-eyed him. The way his brows and eyes moved converged that he was processing the information told to him. The gasped words "what?" and "when?" not even a minute later panic-inducing. He hung up and shot to a stand.

"Where... my keys... did you see my keys?"

"What's wrong?" Elise shot up equally as fast but James seemed too lost in his search to answer.

"Jim... what's wrong?" Still no answer. "JIM!"
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

This is not a new chapter. After revising this book, I decided to split the last chapter in half.

It took Elise gripping her brother-in-law by the arm to make him stop fidgeting for a second. "Tina... she... hospital..." He started panting as though his air was getting cut off. "Ok... Ok... stay calm. I think you left the keys in the kitchen. I'll get em. I'll drive." Elise pushed James into the house, him clearly distracted again when he stumbled over the threshold. She grabbed the keys from the counter then they were off.

On the way there, Elise could feel her own panic rising, her heart rate upping each passing second. It was a miracle she abided by the traffic laws even when James urged her to drive faster. Once there, she was lucky to find a parking spot that fit the truck. Barely just. "I'm outside the lines." She set the truck into reverse to adjust. "Fuck it. I don't care if we get a ticket." James hopped out of the truck before Elise had a chance to pull back forward. She set the brakes then rushed after James who was already halfway to the ER entrance.

"Redfield," James panted once at the desk. "My wife... I got a call from here. Christine... uhmm..." The name slipped his mind when he tried catching his breath. "Christine Isolde Redfield," Elise jumped in, out of breath, but far better at holding it together. Adrenaline was great that way. The admissions clerk typed the name into the computer. The few seconds it took to pull up the info felt infinity. "Fourth floor. Ob/GYN."

"What? OB? Fuck... That's... that's... What? ....The baby!" James ran to the elevator, pushing the buttons over and over. "Fuck this! Stairs!" he hissed then sped to the staircase.

Elise was barely able to keep up but somehow, she managed. They reached the floor, out of breath, heart rates through the roof, Arlene spotting them and speeding their way.

"James. I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. She was fine and then she got up and... and... she fainted. She hit her head on the chair. I... I... The doctors aren't telling me anything."

Christine's friend started crying. "Which room?" was all James could say. Elise was sure he hadn't processed a word Arlene had said. "Dammit, Arlene, which fucking room?" James yelled, fear intertwined with anger and frustration.

"Three. Room three," Arlene startled, then cried again. James rushed to the room, nearly knocking over the doctor exiting when he reached the door. Elise was but two seconds behind him.

"My wife?!" James held a terrified breath.

"She'll be ok," the doctor explained calmly.

"And the baby?" Those words trembled.

"The baby is fine."
James' entire body seemed to sink into itself by at least half a foot while he let out a sigh of relief. The tears that followed were a mix of everything he had felt just moments before.
"We're going to keep her overnight. As a precaution. She did faint and hit her head. So this is to make sure she doesn't have a concussion, but also, we'd like to run a few tests. Just some routine blood work to see what's going on. And an ultrasound. The Doppler was a little off."
"Can I see her?"
"Yes. I'll let the nurse know you're here. I'll be back as soon as I'm finished checking on a couple of other patients."

James turned to Elise, tears still running fast over his face.
"Go. I'll wait out here," Elise encouraged, trying her best to hold back her own tears. The second James disappeared behind the door, she let go, the panic from earlier catching up with her that way. She clutched her chest, relieving breaths replacing erratic bursts of air when it settled in that her sister was ok.

A few more minutes then she paced to the waiting area. "She's ok," Elise geared at a still crying Arlene.
"Oh, thank god. I thought maybe..." Arlene didn't want to finish the sentence.
Elise peered around, only now realizing that something was amiss. "Where is Chloé?"
"I left her with my neighbors." Arlene wiped away the smudged up mascara from her eyes with some tissues, sniffling.
"I think it would be good to get her. I'm sure James wants to take her home tonight," Elise suggested and Arlene agreed with a sniffled nod. "It's not your fault. James... he didn't mean to yell. He was scared." Elise clarified when sniffles turned into sobs again.
"I know," Arlene gulped. "I better get Chloé so she can be with her dad."
"Ok... thank you. For watching out for them. And take your time driving, ok? Don't rush. Everything is ok."

When Arlene left, Elise flopped into a chair in the waiting room, the adrenaline wearing down to its last drop, leaving her exhausted. "Tina is in the hospital." She texted. Not even a minute later her cell played Fare Thee Well.
"What happened?" Oscar asked.
"She fainted and hit her head. James is with her right now."
"Is she going to be ok?"

It was amazing how a simple thing like the sound of someone's voice could be so calming; albeit him sounding as worried as she had felt on the way over. Elise closed her eyes for a second.
"Liz?"
"What?... yes. Yes! The doctor said they'll be keeping her for observation overnight. But she's ok. And so is the baby."
"That's good, Sweetie. Are you ok?"
"I'll be fine."
"That's not what I asked."
"I'm..." she had to think. "Shaken up?" she mumbled.
"I'd be, too, Sweetie."

A few skipped breaths, a few quiet seconds because all she wanted to hear was him breathe. She wished he was here. She would probably sink her head into his chest so she could hear his heartbeat. "I love you," she whispered.
"Ich liebe dich, auch," Oscar replied.
A soft chuckle then Elise saw James stepping out of the room and pacing towards her. "I gotta go. Looks like Jim is done talking to Tina."

"Alright. Let me know if anything changes, ok? Call me. I don't care what time it is! If I don't pick up, leave a message. Ok?"

"I will."

"I mean it, Sweetie. Keep me in the loop."

Elise smiled, whispering "I promise" before hanging up to focus on James.

His face looked worn, eyes bloodshot, creases deep. "Tina wants to see you."

Elise peered towards the door, fear settling in the pit of her stomach. After all this,—No! Despite all this, it still took courage to face her sister. Elise had a feeling, she was about to confront everything she had been trying to avoid.

"Hey," Elise kept her voice low when she entered the room.

Christine - who sat at an angle, eyes closed, a few cables attached to fingers, chest, and tummy—clearly hadn't heard Elise enter or else she would've stirred. She looked pale but otherwise ok. A little fuller than Elise had expected, actually.

She snuck to Christine's left side and curled her fingers around her sister's hand. Christine's eyes opened, a short smile quickly replaced by an agonized and twisted frown. "Liz," she whispered, lips quivering. "Shhhh..." Elise pulled her sister's hand close to her face, placing a wispy kiss on the back. "I wanted to call you. I wanted to call you so many times, but... I was..." Christine started, but tears drowned out the words.

"I'm so sorry." Elise held back her own tears. "I'm so sorry. I never meant... I didn't think. I didn't know what to do. I'm so sorry." She leaned in and held a shaking Christine, the sisters both crying.

"Can you ever forgive me?" Elise sniffled when she ran out of tears. "I will. In time. I just need a while. And more answers. Talks." Christine wiped away first her own then Elise's tears, then cradled her sister's face between her hands. "Promise me... promise me you'll never disappear again. No matter what the problem is. Promise me you won't just up and leave."

"I promise."

"And that you call me every day when you move to New York."

Elise's left brow went up. "How did you...? Who told you?"

"Oscar."

"When?"

"When you visited him."

A disbeliefing chuckle. "Of course."

Elise stepped back, holding Christine's hand again. "So... James bought me a house, huh?" Christine chuckled. "He told you? Awe, I thought he was going to just drive you up there. Surprise you."

Christine chuckled again. "Does it look nice?"

"I don't want to spoil it but... yes. Yes! It's amazing. The kids will love it. You... You're going to love it. Dad... oh my god, Dad. He will love it. I can already picture him building a tree house for the kids."

"So there's trees?"

"Trees and a playground. And the living room is ...mmmmmassive. And... I don't want to say more. You have to see it."

"I will. After Walla Walla."
"You're still going?" Elise's eyes became wide in surprise.

"Hell yes!' Christine laughed.
"Are you sure. I mean..." Elise glanced to Christine's tummy, the baby-bump a little bigger now. Actually quite a bit bigger. "Arlene made sure you're eating, huh?" Elise snickered.
"Hmmmm. I think I'm just putting on more weight this time."
"That's good, isn't it?" Elise squeezed Christine's hand.
"It is. Although, it doesn't explain why I feel so exhausted all the time. And nauseated. It's almost twenty-four seven now. It wasn't this bad last time."
"Maybe... it's the age?" Elise guessed but before Christine could answer James poked his head in the door.

"Hey. Everything ok?" he asked, revealing a cup of coffee in hand when he stepped into the room.
"Yup. Just talking. About you, and how you couldn't keep your mouth shut about the house," Elise scolded sarcastically.
James flinched and the sisters laughed.

The door widened and Christine's doctor rolled in a portable ultrasound machine, a nurse right behind him carrying several vials. "Let's draw some blood first," the doctor instructed the nurse.
"Geez, how much blood do you guys need?" Elise stared while the nurse kept filling vial after vial.
"You'll need a cookie after that one," she snickered after the nurse filled the last vial.

"I'll have the nurse bring something in a little while," the doctor chuckled. "Now, let's take a look at your baby and make sure everything really is ok."
"I'll wait outside." Elise was ready to get up and leave but Christine held on to her hand.
"Stay."
"Are you sure?"
"Of course I am. James doesn't mind, do you?"
James just smiled.

"Alright. The gel is cold this time, so apologies in advance." The doctor squeezed a small amount onto Christine's tummy then gently ran the transducer from side to side. "Hmmmm..."
"Something wrong?" Instant worry shook James' voice.
"No. Let me... let me get a second set of eyes just to be sure." The doctor left. A few minutes passed before he returned with a woman. An NP [nurse practitioner] who now ran the transducer over Christine's tummy.
"Your eyes didn't deceive."
"Explains the severity of morning sickness."
"I'd say so."

"What does?" James' voice went up a notch.
"Well," the doctor smiled, "the good news is, everything is fine."
"What's the bad news?" Now Christine's voice became alarmed.
"I wouldn't call it bad news, but --- you'll be needing to buy two of everything."
"Two of...?"
"Car seats, cribs, high chairs. You'll be needing double," the doctor's smile grew wider. "You're expecting twins," he explained while pointing to two tiny but distinct heartbeats on the monitor.

Elise's hands shot to her mouth, a muffled "oh my god" coming through.
"Twins? As in, --- two babies?" James' jaw dropped. So did Christine's.
"That's usually what that means," the doctor chuckled.
Christine shook her head, stunned. "I don't understand. The last ultrasound showed ... one."
"Yes, it did. I'll be reviewing those to see what we missed, but it looks like the second baby was
hiding behind the first. It's rare but it happens, especially if the last ultrasound was early. But this explains the exhaustion. The severity of morning sickness. --- Once we get the other test results we can discuss possible medications to help you through. I know, you're reluctant but there are a few drugs on the market that have undergone lengthy studies and are safe to take. We'll start with the smallest dosage possible."

"Can you tell...? --- Actually... I don't know if I still want to know," Christine whispered, the news still settling in.
"The babies' sex? I could. But... we can talk about that on Monday. If you want to set up an appointment for that day, I have a couple open. The test results should be back by then."
Christine nodded, unable to say another word.
"I'll leave you alone for now. Going to check in again in a couple of hours. Try to get some rest."
The doctor geared towards the door, gesturing for the NP to do the same.

"Twins," Elise gaped. "Twins!" She looked back and forth between James and Christine.
"Ufffff." James plopped on the chair next to the bed, running his hands across his face. "Well, I guess I better look for another bassinet." His lips pressed into a thin line.
"A bassinet? You... bought one?" Christine held a perplexed expression.
"Yeah. Thought it'd be nice to have one this time around."
Christine started laughing. Softly first, then louder. "Twins," she whispered when she stopped. She looked at Elise and let out an airy chuckle. Elise had her cell in her hand, tapping her thump impatiently on the screen. "Go ahead. I know you want to tell Oscar."

Elise scrunched up her nose then her fingers danced across the screen.
"Are you serious???. *shocked emoji*

"I am! Two babies!"
"Tell them congratulations, Sweetie. I'm sorry, no time to chat. I have to go. *frowny face* Just packed up the rest of my stuff. Plane is leaving in a couple of hours."
"Oh right. I forgot you're going home this weekend."
"Yes. A few days in NYC, promoting the show. *smiley face* And then off to see you, meine kleine Erdbeere."
"Kann's kaum abwarten."
"What?"
"Can hardly wait."
"Oh. New words. Need to save those."
"You do that, Lindo. Give whoever is still around a hug, please. Tell them, I'll miss them."
"Will do."

The next few days stretched even longer. Eighteen-hour days with barely enough breaks to catch a breath. But busy meant time flying by, long hours feeling more like cramped minutes at most.

Sunday, Elise watched Chloé while James picked up Christine from the hospital, the couple stopping by Arlene's to pick up whatever Christine had brought to her friend's house. Elise didn't mind watching Berenjena Pequeñita. There was teasing of tiny feet and tiny hands while Elise excitedly told Chloé about the news, her nine-month-old niece of course not understanding what aunty was talking about.

Monday through Wednesday at the office was all go go go, keeping Elise busy past half-day schedule by at least an hour. Madame DuMont may have felt in control the week before, but just as Elise had predicted, her replacement was met with metaphorical brick walls and silent treatment when arrogance didn't wane. So now Madame DuMont was desperate for last-minute pointers and help.
"You guys. Just do what she asks. It's not worth risking your job over this," Elise tried to persuade at her goodbye party Wednesday afternoon.
"Maybe if she got that stick out of her ass and didn't treat us like we're incapable," one of the translators countered with crossed arms.
"I'll have another talk with her. But for now, you all will have to try and get along... if not for your job at least for your sanity’s sake." Elise pointed out before making her way to her old office.

Arrogance remained high but at least Madame DuMont was willing to listen without interruption.
"Again. Every person has their own managing style, but unless you plan on losing some of the best people in the business, I highly recommend you step back now and then, and let them do their jobs. They're an independent bunch, and if they need help, they'll let you know." Elise looked across the floor, smirking when she saw some of the people peering and eavesdropping over the edges of their cubicles.

"Anyways. These are yours." Elise pulled a set of keys from her briefcase and slowly placed them on the P.A.’s desk. A last flash of hesitation when she kept her hand folded over said keys. But only a flash. "Good luck." She let go of the keys and stretched out her hand, waiting.
Madame DuMont accepted, surprisingly with a strong grip, and that was it. The hesitation was quickly forgotten. She was ready to leave. To move on.

"Thom, you ready?"
"Just a second, boss. Showing the new P.A. how to log international calls." Thom replied. A few more clicks of the mouse then he bid his farewell and followed Elise.
"So. What's for lunch, boss?"
"First of all, I'm not your boss anymore, so it's Elise. Second, didn't you eat like a third of my cake?"
"That was an hour ago."
"Where do you keep putting it?"
"I'm young." Sly grin.
Shocked gasp. "And I'm not?"
Laughter.
"Alright, what do you want for lunch?" Elise aimed for the first-floor button in the elevator.
"How about the Cuban restaurant. Quite liked that one. I'll pay this time," Thom smiled.
"Suddenly, I feel hungry," Elise laughed then finally pushed the button.

Monday through Wednesday afternoons that week were also go go go.
Festival prep was a given. Picking out two or three favorite fan shirts from a stack of twenty seemed nearly impossible. Of course, it was more than just picking favorite shirts. Camera, SD cards, battery packs, wristbands, backstage passes all had to be gathered. Phone calls to Mikki and Patricia increased. Scheduled shenanigans with festival buddies. Three-peas-in-a-pod get-togethers.

Then there were unplanned dinner invitations.
Monday at Judith's and Richard's place where afterward Judith handed Elise a check. "Still can't believe this is my last week," Elise ran her index over the check. Her first official payment through her startup. "But this... this is... better."
"Feels nice to do your own thing, huh?" Judith smiled.
"Yes. Still scary but..." Elise paused, thinking.
"I get it. Trust me. To be your own boss. The freedom of flexibility. There's quite a bit to pay attention to, but in the end, you get to choose what you want to do."
An abashed smile and wrinkled nose from Elise and Judith reminded that if there were questions,
Tuesday evening was spent with Helen and Matt. At their place. A small two-bedroom house halfway between Tacoma and Seattle, the place was still filled with a few moving boxes as they had just relocated.
The topic of the evening: wedding plans.
"Geez. When did weddings become so complicated?" Elise sat with mouth agape, flipping through a stack of bridal magazines while they made a list of everything needed.
"Tell me about it. Why can't we just do a courthouse wedding?" Matt grumbled.
"Because my mother insists on an outside venue," Helen countered.
Matt shook his head. "If she was paying for it, I wouldn't have a problem," his voice gained an edge.

"Guys! Stop. --- You can have a nice outdoor wedding and not pay an arm and a leg. I mean what's the biggest cost?" Elise intervened before the couple had a chance to pick up the argument.
"The venue," Helen sighed.
"And the food," Matt frowned.
"Ok. Listen! I don't want to make promises, but hear me out," Elise started, and the couple listened.
"My brother-in-law bought a house with a large lot. It's big. I mean, massive. I'm sure that if I asked, he'd let you have the wedding there. Ceremony and reception."
"Uhmnnmm... I don't know," Helen shook her head. "I mean your sister is having another baby."

"Twins, actually."
"What?"
"Yup. But they'll be a little bigger by then, and you know that's why there are sitters and family. Trust me. James loves throwing parties. I mean looooovves...," Elise drew out the word with a snicker. "Remember my birthday party?"
Helen and Matt nodded.
"James planned that. Well mostly."
"That would still leave the food, which is actually more expensive," Matt sighed.

"James has a caterer on retainer. Not joking. And if that's too much,--- I know it sounds silly but what's wrong with people bringing in their own favorite dishes? You know, instead of gifts. I mean people can still bring gifts but you guys seem to have most of the stuff new couples would need anyways. And if guests gift money, it'll be used to pay down whatever debt you're taking on for the wedding."
"We might end up with twenty potato salads," Helen laughed.

"Ok. So then, let's make a list of food items. And each person or family can pick a thing they'll bring along. We'll send out an email first to see if people are willing to do this. If they're not, I'm sure Xavier will give you guys a great price. So the only thing you'd be left with is alcohol and the wedding cake," Elise suggested.
"My mom is paying for the cake," Helen smiled.
"Alright, there we go. Now, what about a dress?"

"I have a few ideas." Helen heaved another stack of bridal magazines onto the table, and Matt groaned.
"A few, huh?" Elise's eyes widened at the amount of colored sticky notes littering the magazines' pages.
"I need a beer," Matt scoffed, getting up, and the women snickered.
When Matt tried to return to the table, he was shooed away. "One grand!" he husked out before he disappeared to the living room. "I mean it!" he yelled from one room over; Helen shaking her head
with a blushed giggle.
"A thousand bucks for a dress is not bad." Elise skimmed through the pages.
"I know. But we won't need it. I actually already found a dress," Helen hushed.
"What? Then why all these magazines?" Elise kept her voice just as low.
"Decoy." Helen got up and tilted her head towards the bedroom.

Elise followed, watching while Helen quietly pulled a garment bag from a hidden corner in the closet.
"Huhhhhh... oh my gosh, wow. Helen, that's beautiful," Elise gasped. "Where'd you find it?"
"Don't laugh."
"Promise."
"A thrift store, downtown."
"You found this in a thrift store. Wow! It looks like... Rose's dress. From Titanic. But in white."
Elise gently detailed the beading with her index.
"I know, right?" Helen beamed. "I still need to get it steamed. But it fits. I have a tiny bit of room actually."
"Wow," Elise repeated then helped Helen stow the garment away again.
"Let's have a glass of wine and pretend we're still looking at dresses, and you can tell me all about your visit with Oscar," Helen grinned.
"Why do I get a feeling you know a few things already?" Elise squinted but Helen just kept grinning.

Tuesday ended late. Wednesday even later. After an early dinner with Thom, Elise packed the rest of her suitcase for the getaway. By the time Thursday morning arrived, Elise was almost too tired to care about the trip. In fact, she fell asleep on the drive there; in the backseat because James played chauffeur.
"We're here," she heard James laugh when she came to.
"What?" Elise looked around, confused and with messy travel hair.
"Another long week, huh?" James winked.
"I should've just skipped the workouts," Elise grumbled, stretching when she got out of the car.

"I wonder if Mikki has checked in already," Elise looked up the side of the hotel while grabbing her backpack. Brownstone, quite square, it seemed to be the tallest building in the immediate vicinity. She got out her phone and texted her BFF. Lack of response meant Mikki was likely busy.

"Tricia said she just got here," Christine scrolled through her cell. "The kids and she are setting up their tent. Surprised she didn't book a room instead."
"Hmmm... not really. The kids love camping. I just hope she has everything she needs," Elise scrolled through her own phone, texting Patricia. The concern quickly shot down when her BFF sent her a picture of a luxury tent Owen had bought for them. There was, however, a request "to use the shower at the hotel and stash high valuables there as well" to which Elise responded with a "no problem".

"Let's go check in. We'll get the rest later," James tucked Chloé into her stroller then took lead to the lobby.
Elise peered around. The hotel was luxurious, to say the least. Antique furniture and seating options were spread out on marble floors, the front desk was heavy oak with ornate gold details.

To Elise's surprise, it wasn't as busy as she thought it would be. She only spotted a few staff members rushing back and forth with large sunflower arrangements in arms one minute, returning empty-handed the next. She chuckled, sneaking a picture of the back and forth and sent it to Oscar. "Looks like this town loves sunflowers as much as I do," she joked with a string of smiley faces
attached.
"Looks like it. *smiley face*" was the response. And the only response.

Elise kept staring at the screen. Somehow she had hoped for more. Then again, she noticed that she only had one bar. Then none. Then two. Then back to one. Maybe replies didn't make it through. Failed messages in remote locations weren't entirely implausible.

"Your name, Miss?" the receptionist asked for the third time.
"What? Oh... sorry. I was waiting for a text." Elise drew in her brows.
"I apologize. The service is a little spotty with the recent wildfires and now the festival," the receptionist explained.
"Ah.. well. There are phones in the room," Elise shrugged, then tucked her phone into her jeans. She looked around the lobby again, another staff member carrying yet another sunflower arrangement to wherever. An awkward chuckle and Elise refocused on the person in front of her.
"Sorry. My mind just seems all over the place. The reservation is under Elise Redfield."

"Ah... yes. Single room with two, full-sized beds," the man behind the counter smiled.
"Is it possible to switch that to a room with a king sized bed?" Elise asked with a sugar-coated voice and the sweetest smile.
"No. I'm sorry. We're completely booked. You can try and check back in the evening. If someone doesn't show without notifying us we have to open up the room by nine."

"Awe. Alright. Well. The person staying with me, he won't be here until... I actually don't know. Is that a problem?"
"Not at all. Just let us know when he arrives. The room will be ready in an hour. If you like you can wait in the lobby or check out downtown. The center is one street across and over."
"I think, I'll do that." Elise shouldered her backpack, then stopped. "Can you tell me if Michele Westley has checked in?"
A quick search and the receptionist shook his head. "Doesn't look like it. Would you like to leave a message?"
"No. It's ok. I'll try and text her."

Elise ambled towards Christine and James who were waiting for her by one of the luxurious sofas, Chloé cooing and babbling in James' arms.
"Oh... well.. you want to come upstairs with us? Our room is ready." Christine offered.
"Nah... I'll go walk around. Check out the area," Elise smiled.
"You sure?"
"Yes. Slept the whole way here, so..."

Arriving early had its perks. Downtown was mostly empty for now. A welcome sight because Elise liked checking out window displays without bumping into tourists and festival goers. The town itself was definitely ready, the local shops having gone all out with painted windows and flags hanging everywhere and even painted sidewalks. Only the stages weren't quite finished; crews still hanging lights and connecting cables while a few smaller bands already did their sound checks.

There were vendors all over the place selling everything from shirts to food to trinkets; a market in a hidden corner already buzzing because the individual tents there offered hands-on, "how it's made" activities; and even a pop-up shop was getting readied, selling items of her favorite band. Closed today, open only Friday and Saturday.

The record shop across the pop up caught Elise's eye, the name making her laugh.
"Hot Poop. Who comes up with a name like that?" She snickered quietly. "Probably someone who had a few," a deep voice behind her made her jump around. "Ted?!"

"Elise, right? Thought it was you." The bassist of Mumford and Sons went straight for a bear hug. "You guys are here already?" Elise stepped back, perplexed when he let go. "Arrived a day early. Rest of the boys are playing football [soccer] right now."

"But not you, huh?"

"No. I like walking around when it's quiet. Take pictures." Ted's eyes wrinkled at the corners. Only now did Elise notice the Rolleiflex hanging around his neck. "Wow! Nice camera. I bet Mikki would love that one."

"Yeah, she does."

"You've seen her?"

"Yup. Ran into her on the way here. She had a flat."

"Awe. So the gentlemen you guys are, you stopped and helped."

"Not exactly. She got towed to a gas station. We just happened to have stopped there." Ted's blues sparked.

"Is the flat fixed?" Elise asked, a little alarmed. Maybe her BFF needed a lift but couldn't get a hold of anyone with the spotty cell reception.

"It is. She's at the field. Taking pictures right now. We can go over, if you like?"

"Uhmm... no. If she's taking pictures, I rather not interfere. She goes into full work mode. Besides, I think I want to see a little more of the town."

"You can join us if you want. Chris [Maas] is inside the store, probably buying the whole inventory." Ted boomed out a deep from the chest laugh.

Elise looked around. "Sure."

"So, how's the boyfriend?" Ted's blues sparked again. A bit of mischief in there.

The evening was spent at a local bar. Girls night out while James watched Tiny and Patricia's kids. "Did you text Mikki?" Patricia scanned around the bar, the third pea still amiss.

"I did. Maybe the text didn't go through." Elise scrolled through her cell.

"Let me try, I have better service." Christine messaged instead. "She says she's already here."

"Where? I don't see her." Elise now peered around.

"Upstairs?" Christine perked a brow.

The women grabbed their drinks, maneuvering around small groups towards a spiraled staircase. "Sorry ladies. VIP only." A bouncer blocked their path.

"Our friend is upstairs." Patricia pointed up but the bouncer didn't budge. Not even the flash of backstage passes worked.

"They're alright," a familiar English accent rasped through. Elise looked up and saw Marcus Mumford smirking down on them.

"Thank you," she scrunched up her face.


"I know," Elise whispered back.

"But --- Marcus Mumford," Christine turned pink, a bit of giddiness in her voice.

"You'll see." Elise winked and grabbed her sister's hand.

Once upstairs, the women scanned around again. "Still don't see her," Patricia searched across the faces.

"See who?" Mikki's voice came out of nowhere. The women spun around, jaws dropping.

"Damn girl! When did you get that done?" Elise stared.

"A week ago. You like?" Mikki puffed up her hair a little, turning a slow circle, showing off
cascading curls in hues of pink to purple to dark blue.
"Wow!" A unified response.
"Does David know?" Patricia asked.
"Not yet. But he will soon," Mikki grinned. Then they all hugged.

"So ladies. We meet again. Except, you. You're new." Winston pointed at Christine. She just stood agape, lost for words.
"Oh.. sorry, uhm Winston. This is my sister, Christine. Christine, this is Winston," Elise smiled.
"Hi hhh hi," Christine giggled. It was amazing she was even able to say hi.
"I can see the resemblance." Marcus snuck in from the side, hinting at the first time Elise and he had met. "What are you ladies drinking?"
"White Russians." Shot out.
"Water for me." Christine blushed even more.
"Oh, come on. It's a festival!" Winston nudged against Christine.
"I know, but I can't." Christine rubbed over her shirt, the fabric tightening to show her baby bump.
"Ah. I see. Alright. Well how about something better than water, huh? Juice?" Winston nonchalantly hooked his arm into Christine's and led her to the upstairs bar.

Elise laughed when she caught Christine mouthing an "oh my god" over her shoulder. "She'll never forget this night."
"No kidding. --- So, is Oscar going to be here, or what?" Mikki asked while gearing towards an empty table.
"He said he'll try for one of the concert days. So either tomorrow or Saturday."
"Text him," Patricia stated the obvious.
"I did. Earlier. But I think he's busy with the premiere of the show. I'll try again tomorrow morning," Elise explained.

A few minutes later, the place became too loud hold a conversation. Mumford and Sons had teamed up with a local band and were now playing a few songs on the minuscule stage downstairs.
"This is the best night," Christine yelled over the music.
"It sure is." Elise squeezed her sister's hand, happy because Christine was happy.

Friday morning came with a bit of a headache and a string of messages from Oscar.
"Sorry I didn't reply, mi Reina. Premiere was busy." "I hope you had fun." "Mikki sent a few pictures. Tell her nice hair." "I'll be there tomorrow evening. Hopefully, before Mumford take the stage."
The last message procured a simultaneous smile and frown. She was happy, he'd be there, but sad that he might arrive late.
"Should I still reserve a table for Saturday?" She texted back. No reply again. The cell service was frustrating, to say the least.

At least she got to spend the day with her family and friends.
"Ohhhh, a scavenger hunt. Should we do it?" Mikki shimmied her shoulders. A sign that she had already decided on a yes.
"Yeahhh... scavenger hunt," Patricia's kids yelled.
"Sounds fun!" Christine smiled at James, wiggling brows an unspoken request.
"Go ahead. I'll watch Chloé, but if you feel sick..." James started with a serious expression.
"We'll make sure she's ok," Mikki assured, then whisked Christine away, speeding to the first stop, taking pictures once there.

"You sure you're up for it, Sis?" Elise caught up; worried but also surprised because her sister looked better than she had the last few weeks.
"I'm sure. I took some of the medication my OB recommended, so I'm way better. I might still puke, though. Now and then. For whatever reason, the smell of chicken just..." Christine twisted her face in disgust.

"Got it! No chicken." Mikki bobbed on her heels with some impatience, ready to search for the next stop, finger always on the shutter release.

"Geez. What's up with you?" Elise asked.

"Just excited that we're all here together," Mikki smiled widely, then took a picture of her friends.

The whole day went like that. They searched for scavenger stops, Mikki taking picture after picture. Then they were off to the main stage for the first set of concerts. Foo Fighters rounding off that night.

Saturday morning felt rushed in this time. At least it was headache-free, a feeling of a thousand butterflies fluttering in her stomach in its place.

"Can't wait to see you, Lindo." Elise texted Oscar. No reply. She ventured he was on the plane to Walla Walla. She sighed, smiling, then took her time to get ready. She had taken along numerous dresses, shirt and short combos, and concert outfits. All of it now laid spread out on the bed and the floor. She paced around a few times, always returning to the same dress. The one she knew would put a smile on Oscar's face if he saw her in it first thing on arrival.

She slipped it on, a big smile spreading across her face when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror; then she stuffed the rest of her clothes back into her suitcase.

On the way to breakfast, she met up with Mikki, Christine, and James, her brother-in-law once again holding Berenjena Pequeñita. Elise got the feeling that he didn't want to let go of his daughter. Nor of his wife. Albeit the fact that he was ok with Christine spending Friday with them, Elise had caught the gaze when he'd said to go ahead. Not the worried one but the one right after. The type that conveyed he would never let his wife down again. Ever.

Elise muted a sigh and looked around the breakfast room. "I wonder what they did with all the sunflowers," she mumbled.

James seemed to choke on a bite. "What sunflowers?"

"The ones they delivered on Thursday. I saw a bunch of hotel staff carrying bouquets."

James looked around. "Hmmm... maybe they weren't for the hotel?"

"Eh... maybe. Would've been nice to see some in the room but..." Elise shrugged.

"So what time is Oscar getting here?" Christine bit into a bagel.

"I have no clue. He said it'd be late. So... eight-ish. Hopefully before Mumford."

Elise peered around again, missing the fleeting glances between Mikki, Christine, and James.

"So are we finishing the scavenger hunt?" Mikki diverted.

"Oh hell yes!" Christine beamed. "With Donnie and Danielle, we'll be done in no time."

"I know, right? Those kids are too smart for their own good," Elise laughed, recalling Friday's hunt when Donnie and Danielle had found nearly all points before the women had even had a chance to figure out the next clue.

"They are scavengers," Mikki squinted with pursed lips. The whole table fell into laughter.

The scavenger hunt was a welcome distraction but by noon Elise could feel the butterflies getting to a point of overstimulation. "I think I'm going to take a short nap. Just an hour. Need to just clear my mind."

"Excited to see Oscar again, huh?" Patricia nudged Elise.

"Hmmm. Especially now that I'm not returning to my old job. It'll be nice to spend more time with him. Not twenty-four seven, but more time." Elise drew in a long breath.

"I know what you mean," Patricia smiled softly. "Well then. Let's take a break. We could all use
"One," she chuckled when she saw both her kids yawning. "Alright, so meet up around five?" Mikki set a timer on her cell. "You guys have your passes, right? Otherwise, we'll have to get in line now if you want front row."
"Five sounds good."
They group-hugged, then parted two ways. Patricia and her kids went back to the campgrounds.
Elise, Mikki, and Christine meandered towards the hotel.

On the way back, Elise spotted a bookstore. "You guys go ahead."
"You're such a bookworm," Christine snickered.
"You know, I have to, right?"
That was met with a unison "we know" and rolled eyes.
Elise just shook her head then disappeared into the bookstore.
She took a deep breath in once inside. The smell of books, new and old, crawled into her nose and
and to her, there was almost nothing better than this. Nothing, except... Oscar.

Suddenly she felt a bit lonely. Maybe she should wait to check out the rest of the store. Bring him
here tomorrow. Yes. Tomorrow she would show him this store. And the record store. She replaced
the book she was holding then slowly made her way back to the hotel. On the way there, "Fare
Thee Well" muffled through her backpack.

She hurried to find her phone, nearly dropping it when she saw Oscar's name flashing across the
screen.
"Lindo!" was the first word that shot out.
"Hey, Sweetie. Hey, listen... I'm sorry. I missed the plane. Looks like I won't be able to make the
concert," his voice crackled through.
"Oh... oh okay." Elise's heart sunk a little. How much she had wanted him to be around. To see her
favorite band live but with him by her side. Share this experience.
"I really am sorry. One of the interviews took too long, so everything else just backed up," Oscar
explained.

"It's ok. I understand." Elise pretended to be ok and Oscar immediately picked up on it.
"I'm so sorry, mi Reina. I know this sucks. But hey... listen... I called the hotel and upgraded your
room."
"What? Why?"
"Because... I have to make it up to you, Sweetie."
"You don't have to worry about that."
"I know... but... wanted... that... " Oscar kept cutting out.
"Ugh. Lindo, I think the connection is bad. I only heard every second word I think."
"I said... I wanted... to... up... because... you..."
"Oscar?"
Nothing.

"Dammit," Elise cussed. Texting it was. Even if it took nearly a minute to send out a message.
"Lindo, the connection broke up. What did you say?"
"I said, I wanted to make it up to you because I love you. Go to the front desk and tell them your
name and they'll give you the keys to the new room."
"Can I get my stuff first?"
"*laughing emoji* Of course."
"Thank you."

No reply again. Looking at the corner of the screen, Elise noted absence of all bars. There was an
audible groan this time. She was ready to throw her cell against a wall.
She went up to her room and gathered her things, then made her way to the front desk. "Hi... uhm... my... uhhmmm companion called. He said he upgraded my room. It's for Elise Redfield." The receptionist typed her name then nodded. "Yes. To a suite in the tower." He handed Elise a new key card and she slowly paced to the elevator.

She shook her head. If this was his way of making up, how would she ever be able to do the same for him? She didn't want this relationship expanding on a base of materialistic, guilt-driven make-up gestures. Time with him would have been more than enough. Then again, it felt nice to be treated in a way that she recognized as him thinking of her.

She sighed and slid the key card into the lock of the suite; flipping the light switch once inside. Then she dropped everything she had been holding in her hand, time stopping because she was trying to process what she was seeing.

It was an upgrade alright. But she'd never seen one like this. A sea of turquoise and yellow left her speechless. Every surface of the room, with the exception of bed and TV, was draped in turquoise silk fabric, bouquets of sunflowers standing atop. She counted. There had to be hundreds of sunflowers. All different sizes, ranging in hues from brightest yellow to burnt sunset. She touched them, her fingertips meeting silky petals. They definitely felt real. The silk, too, felt real.

She gulped, scanning the room some more. A sign by the TV drew in her attention. She walked closer, letting out an airy chuckle when she saw the sign pointing to a disc on the DVD player underneath the TV, the disc reading //play me//. She put the DVD into the player, turned on the TV, and pressed play; the screen black at first when the song "Not With Haste" started playing.

"You once asked me what I see..." panned into view "...when I look at you." "This... this is what I see." A compilation of pictures started. Pictures of Elise. That was Her at Christine's promotion party. Her on the balcony at said promotion party. Her at Pike Place Market, at the chocolate store, and the bookstore. Her on her apartment's balcony looking out to the waterfront. Her singing at the bar and laughing with Mikki and David. Her walking the office floor when he had visited her for the first time at work. Her at Saint Edwards State Park pushing Chloé's stroller. Her snoozing and hugging a pillow in Montreal. Her checking out the sunflower painting in the gallery in Montreal. Her at the bar laughing with his costars. Her flipping pancakes in Montreal. Her in the red and white polka dot bikini at the beach. Her gazing at the sunset at the Portuguese restaurant. Her at her birthday party talking with her dad, her friends, her colleagues, blowing out candles. Her laughing with her dad at her place, eating dinner. Her in the crowd at Bonnaroo. Her snoozing at Bonnaroo. Her jumping along to music at Bonnaroo. Her at the bowling alley. Her laughing with Thom, Helen, Matt, and Irene at the Cuban restaurant. Her helping Patricia move into her friend's new place. Her playing cards with Donnie and Danielle when they took a break.
Her eating pizza.
Her in the crowd at SDCC, and in the park holding Chloé, and shopping for gifts for friends.
Her laughing with Toni while talking about Italy.
Her on set in Montreal joking with Sophie, Olivia, and Alex.
Her talking to his mom.
Her laughing with Mike.
Her playing Monopoly.
Her talking to Leon and Ned.
Her getting crushed under Ned and Sophie, playing Twister.
Her talking to Marcus and Ted in Walla Walla.
Her doing the scavenger hunt in Walla Walla.
Her singing along to Foo Fighters in Walla Walla.
And her,--- the day he had met her at the Café in Seattle, waiting for strawberry shortcake.

"And this."
A picture of Seattle's Great Wheel, 25th and 50th written across.

Then the video stopped and she stood there, her gaze still fixed on the screen, out of words, lost in thoughts. A soft rustling noise pulled her from her trance, but it took another ten seconds before she dared to turn around.

"Hi," Oscar whispered, a soft smile on face.
"Hi." Elise barely managed the word.

He stood there a moment, just smiling, in a dark gray suit and light blue shirt. Tie and dress shoes, too. Curls tamed, freshly shaven. His best self. He let her scan over him a couple more times. Let her take him in. He was sure he didn't have to say another word. She knew why he stood there the way he did, why he wore the suit he did, and why he smiled the way he did. And yet, she stood frozen. Like time had stopped for her because, despite all the evidence in front of her, she needed time to process, so he let her. Because --- if he were to rush now, in this very moment, she'd probably not hear a word he wanted to say.

She gave him another once-over, and he chuckled then slowly paced towards her. Very slowly. He skidded the edge of her dress, right by her collarbone, the vein on her neck beating rapidly. A contradiction to the calm surface.
"I had a whole speech prepared," he chuckled again. "I didn't expect you'd be wearing this dress."
He outlined one of the lacy sunflowers.
"It's your favorite," Elise whispered.
"It is." He nodded. "Because ... it's you."

He ran his fingertips down her arms to her hands, feather-light touch, then folded his hands over hers, pulling hers to his chest. He closed his eyes then slowly opened them, heavy-lidded gaze intensified the way he gazed at her. The skipped breath, soft smile, and the slight tremble that seemed to shake his whole body didn't go unnoticed either.
"I had so many things I wanted to say. So many words saved just for you, and now... they're all... gone. But...." he gulped. "Let me try."

"Elise... Liz... Sweetie, mi Linda, mi Reina, my little nerdy strawberry. Not too long ago, I was told to not rush. To wait. To give you more time. But... I knew... from the moment I saw you in the rain, wearing that turquoise trench and carrying that pink umbrella, I knew, even though I couldn't see your face until you stepped inside, I knew, there'd be no one like you. And then you waved... granted it was directed at Jim," Oscar laughed softly, his left brow perching high in amusement.
"But... it wasn't the wave that had my attention. It was your smile, and your rosy cheeks, and the way your eyes sparkled with life and warmth and care, and for a moment, all I saw was... you. And I knew, there'd be no one like you. I keep telling myself that this is insane. That all of this is so fast. I even tried to find an answer to why love happens the way it does. But the universe can't tell me. All I know is that I know there's no one like you. Not for me."

"I know you had your share of heartbreak and tears and... I can't even imagine the darkness during those times. But I also know, there was laughter and joy and love. I'm not asking to replace that. I wouldn't dare. But to be a new chapter in your book of life... well, that would make me the happiest man alive. So... I ask you this," he dropped to his knees and pulled her closer, and she held her breath, internalizing the answer she already knew. The answer getting louder in her mind. But she held back. Because...

... she had to hear it. The question. She had to hear it if only to make sure this wasn't a dream. She had to hear it because hearing it, would make it real. So she held her breath, and so did he. A skipped breath and a skipped heartbeat an eternity for both.

He smiled, lips parting with the first letter of her name, his hands squeezed hers over and over. "Elise Nadine Redfield, --- willst du mich heiraten?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. This was real. THIS WAS REAL. THIS. WAS. REAL.

She slowly opened her eyes and found him still kneeling. Softest gaze waiting for her response. Let it fall away. Everything. Let it FALL AWAY.

A hitched breath, a growing smile, and a single tear. "Yes" came out with a whisper so thin it was nearly inaudible.

He nodded, eyes widening, grip on her hands loosening. "Uhhhh ... what?"

"Yes. As in... Yes?"

"Yes... as in ja, as in sí, as in da, as in hai, as in oui, as in..."

She stopped. She stopped because he had jumped up and pulled her in for a kiss. A kiss where his lips pressed so hard against hers she thought she was going to suffocate. A kiss that was trembled but passionate. A kiss that ended in just lips holding against lips because he didn't want to let go.

"I... uhhh... I... I have a ring," he mumbled against her lips, and she couldn't help a laugh. "Wait," he reached into his jacket, procuring the slim case he'd been carrying with him at all times since she'd visited him in Montreal the first time. The case that held the platinum band with the tourmaline stone.

"Oh no... it's too big." Oscar pulled in his brows when he saw the ring sat just a tad bit too loose.

"That's ok. I'll wear it on a different finger then."

"I'll have it readjusted."

"Lindo, don't worry. It's perfect," she smiled. "It's perfect," she whisper-repeated.

"You really like it?"

"You could've presented me with a piece of twine, and I'd still think it's perfect," she snickered softly.

She gazed at her hand, the smile waning for a fraction of a second and he saw.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I just... I don't know if I want to move." She stepped back, holding her breath. Why did that come to her mind right now? Why RIGHT NOW?

"Ok. Ok... Sweetie. I don't care. I don't care where we live. If you don't want to move, you don't have to. I'll move here." Oscar inched closer to her to close the gap she had just created.
"I can't... I can't let you do that." She stepped back again.
"Sweetie. Don't worry." He inched closer again.
"I'll move. I want to move. Just, --- not this year. Not until Tina had the babies and the house is ready and I know for sure what I want to do with the startup and," Elise panicked.
Oscar slowly wrapped his arms around her. "Sweetie. Look at me."
She did.
"One day at a time. We'll stay here. Until you're ready."
"What if I'm never ready?"
"Then we'll stay. As long as I get to wake up next to you."

She sank her face into his suit jacket, inhaling his scent. Forrest, after the rain, with a hint of spice.
"I can't believe, I'm engaged." Her voice muffled through the fabric, and he laughed. She lifted her head, focusing on his face. "What about Lenny? Does he know?"
"I'll deal with him later."
"So keep it under the radar?"
"You mean hide the ring? No. Don't hide it. And don't hide yourself."
Her brows shot up.
"Sweetie. It'll be ok. If they see, they see. If not." He shrugged. "But if you feel more comfortable walking around without the ring, I understand. I won't be upset."

She looked at her hand again. "Nah... I think... I think I'll keep it on."
The smile after those words rivaled a half moon. "I'm going to go change." He cupped her face and kissed her again.
"Why?"
"Uhmmmm... concert."
"You want to go and watch me embarrass myself on the day you proposed?"
"Yeah. I mean, let's get all the weird stuff out before we tie the knot," he laughed.
"Here we go."
"I'm teasing."

He kissed her again, then went to go change.
Sharp at five, they stood outside the main stage, flashing passes, Mikki, Christine, Patricia, Donnie, and Danielle already waiting for them behind the stage.
"Where's James?" Oscar looked around.
"At the other end. He's watching Chloé. If he was closer, it'd be too loud," Christine explained.
"Actually about to leave and meet up with him."

"You're not staying to watch from front row?" Elise sulked.
"I'm four and a half months pregnant. I think it'd be better to stand in the back. Besides. I got to meet my favorite band," Christine beamed widely. "Also, the boys are hungry so... I need food."
"Wait? What? The boys? The..." Elise pointed to her sister's tummy. Christine just nodded.
"You're in for a wild ride," Oscar smirked over Elise's shoulder, hugging her from behind.
"And so are you," Christine winked, her gaze dropping to Elise's hand. "A very wild ride," she leaned in and whispered.
"Is that supposed to have a double meaning?"
"Maybe." Christine winked again then made her way through the crowd to meet up with James.

"So. When did he ask you to take pictures of me?" Elise geared at Mikki and Patricia when she couldn't see her sister any longer.
"Uhm.... uhmmmmmm."
"I know you guys were in on this," Elise raised a brow, hinting at pictures that Oscar couldn't have taken.
"Your birthday party was just one big disguise," Patricia blabbed. "I should've known," Elise wrinkled her nose, her gaze tracking Oscar when he went to talk to a few of the bands behind the stage. "Yeah. You should've. Now, show us the damn ring!" Mikki demanded, and Elise held out her hand. "Middle finger? Way to flip off the paparazzi," Mikki laughed. "It's a little big." Elise snickered. "Well it's a pretty ring," Patricia smiled. "It is." This time Elise blushed.

When Oscar rejoined them, the group headed to a VIP section in the front, Oscar carrying Donnie on his shoulders. They danced and jumped along to most songs. A few times Elise caught Oscar snickering from the peripheral, so she stuck out her tongue. A couple of times, Elise cried quietly but not unnoticed by Oscar. During those times, he squeezed her hand and kissed into her hair.

"God fuck, I can barely walk," Elise groaned on the way back to the hotel. "I feel like I had sex for three days straight." "Care to test that theory?" Oscar laughed, his arm around her waist to keep her close. "Dear God! You two are aware that we can hear you, right?" James grumbled, walking behind them. "Very," Elise wiggled her brows when she looked over her shoulder back at James. "Make her stop!" James looked at Christine. "Not in my job description." "You're her sister. So it is in your job description," James countered. "Nope. That changed when I had Chloé," Christine grinned.

Back at the hotel, Elise bid farewell to Mikki. Festival season kept the photographer busy, and the next event was just two days away, and nearly three states east. Promised //see you soon\ eased the goodbyes a little. So did //drive safely\ and //talk tomorrow\. The elevator ride up was quiet. "You alright, Sweetie?" Oscar lightly tapped her nose with his index. "Yeah... just... processing the day," Elise smiled. "It was a lot, huh?" He pulled her close and kissed into her hair. "A little," she admitted.

"Then let's get some rest," he smiled warmly and pulled her close again. Another kiss. This time into the curve of her neck. And another. Behind her lobe. By the time they reached their room, kisses had migrated to lips on lips. Tender and slow.

Clothes came off fast once the door closed. Fast but gentle. It was all about feeling the moment they went from clothed to exposed; garments slipping of skin, teasing tingling nerves on the way down.

A cleared off wing chair was his choice this time. He sat down, helping her straddle him. Kisses down her neck while he parted her there, gently and slowly, rubbing his fingers over wet lines before he pushed the same fingers up and in.

She gasped. Scratches down his back were inevitable the way he moved inside her in search of that spot. The one that made her twitch and wanting to escape. When he found it, he flattened his free hand against her back, holding her in place while he sucked in her skin in the curve of her neck, rubbing against that spot inside of her over and over.
"Fuck. Oscar!"
"Hmmmm. Yes?" He smiled.
"I need you."
"Yeah? How? Tell me," he breathed, looking up into her eyes.
"Inside of me. Closer. Just closer."
"Hmmm..." He kissed her neck again, letting his fingers fall out of her.

He rubbed over her back to her ass, lifting her just enough so he could line up and slip in.
The familiar pressure coaxed out a satisfied moan and he pulled her closer, yet.
She tugged on his curls, pulling back his head, gazing down into his eyes. Soft gazes. Smiled gazes. His hands sliding up her back coaxed out another, parted lips moan. How much she loved the feeling of his hands against her skin. How much she loved him knowing just how much pressure to apply.

It was clear that tonight was all about continued, tender touch. From the way he kept massaging up and down her arms and back, to the way she kissed him. Slow kisses, languid kisses, tongues only skimming the edges of lips before retreating to their owners kisses. Open-mouthed, dragging lips against heated skin types of kisses.

Only when he reached the point where he felt his whole body tighten, did he dare a stinging bite. A deep bite, right into the flesh of her shoulder with just enough pressure to send her over the edge, too.

He sighed against her skin, holding on to her. No rush to go anywhere. Sitting in the chair, her weight pressed against him was all that mattered.
"I love you," he whispered.
"Ich liebe dich auch," she breathed.

She had no idea how long they sat there. All she knew was that eventually nature called, and she ran for the bathroom, which made him laugh.
"Going to get some ice and a couple of waters. You want anything, mi Linda?" he called towards the bathroom while pulling on sweats and a shirt.
"Uhm... why are you talking to me while I'm... potty, ok. POTTY!"
He laughed again. "Alright. I'll just bring whatever," he waited.
"Peanut butter cups," she yelled out a few seconds later, and he left.

She was wrapping herself into the bathrobe when she heard the door open and shut again.
"That was fast," she called out, snickering. No reply. Maybe he was prepping for another round. It wouldn't surprise her.

She quietly opened the bathroom door, walking into the bedroom area of the suite, but the bed was empty. "Alright Oscar, you can come out now," she chuckled. Still no reply. Not even a snicker to give him away. "Come on, Oscar. This isn't funny. Where are you?"

"Still getting ice, I assume," a voice behind her said.
She froze, fear shivering up her spine at the recognition.
"Not even a hello, hmm?" The voice closed in.
Elise could feel her lungs constrict with rising panic. It took all her strength to pivot around and face the voice. "Fffrank."
"I missed you, too."
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