

# BEFORE EVER AFTER

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*Before Ever After*

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Edited by Anna Bloom at The Indie Hub

Cover design by Kirsty-Anne Still at The Pretty Little Design Co.

## BEFORE EVER AFTER

### ***Welcome to Ealynn Sands...***

One small town. Three couples.

*See what happens before they get their happily ever afters...*

Lennon and Justin - opposites attract romance

*Kiss Me Ever After*

Georgie and Alex - workplace romance

*Promise Me Ever After*

Ems and Mason - second chance, roommates romance

*Love Me Ever After*

## LENNON

“UGH, I’m so jealous, Lennon. I can’t believe you’re heading to New York soon for the most fantastic summer ever!” Portia waved her empty champagne flute around, trying to catch the attention of one of the servers.

“You could have come too,” I observed. “If only you’d got off your arse and arranged an internship like I did.” A smug smile split my features, and she harrumphed.

“I plan on planting my arse on a sun lounger in Tuscany and not moving for six weeks, thank you very much.”

We sat in the patio garden of one of our favourite bars in Covent Garden surrounded by carefully tended to plants and flowers. The early summer sunshine made it pleasantly warm as tourists and businesspeople alike stopped to take in the atmosphere. Term would finish this week, and then I’d be flying into JFK for the start of a three-month PR and marketing internship with a fashion house. It had been arranged for almost

an entire year. For the first time ever, I wouldn't be spending the start of my holidays in Ealynn Sands like I usually did.

Excited didn't even go halfway to describing it.

My phone vibrated with a message and I glanced down at the table.

MUM

Lennon, can you come back to the apartment? I need to speak to you x

I ignored it, turning the phone over so I couldn't see the screen. Martha Cole worried too much. She had called me earlier to say she was on the way to my flat, no doubt wanting to supervise my packing; it wouldn't do for me to be seen in the trendiest parts of Manhattan in the wrong labels.

"What am I going to do without you?" wailed Portia, over-dramatic as ever.

I rolled my eyes. "Shag any number of hot Italian guys as far as I can tell. Much like you do every summer."

"And you'll have your pick of eligible New York bachelors." She pretended to swoon. "It will be like an entire season of Sex and The City. You have to FaceTime me every night with updates."

Another bottle of champagne materialised on the table. "Compliments of the gentlemen at the bar."

We looked over to where the server pointed at two men dressed in sharp suits, the look of City brokers about them. The bar had to be on their way home, as it was a long way

from the City Mile. One dark, one blond, both of them raised their own beer glass to us.

Portia tugged my sleeve. "We should go over," she hissed in my ear.

"Yeah, sure." Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my phone doing a little dance across the table. Someone wanted to speak to me. When I picked it up, there were three more messages from my mother.

MUM

Please, Lennon, this is important x

MUM

Where are you? I need to talk to you.

MUM

Lennon, come back NOW!

Two missed calls and a voicemail. I bit my lip. Whatever it was, it must be serious. Perhaps something had happened to my grandparents. My blood ran cold.

Portia waved the two guys from the bar over while I pressed the phone to my ear. Mum sounded upset, barely able to get the words out as she begged me to come home as soon as I could. My brows knitted together. This wasn't about what clothes I should take to New York. It *was* something else.

The two guys from the bar settled down onto the vacant couch opposite ours. The blond one reached for the bottle and began refilling our glasses.

I grabbed Portia's wrist and pulled her close to me. "Por-

tia, I have to go. That was my mum. I think something's wrong; I need to go home."

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

She looked at me, then gestured to the men who had just joined us. "Really? You want to leave this?"

"Message Ella, she's only down the road. I'm sure she'd be more than happy with free champagne and decent eye candy." I flashed a wide smile, kissed Portia on both cheeks, and then stood up and grabbed my bag. "Sorry I can't stay. Have fun!"

All the way back to my apartment, a million things ran through my mind about what could possibly be so bad Mum had come all this way. Almost every thought led back to my grandparents. I prayed they were both okay.

Finally, I got back and turned the key in the door. The television blared from the living room, tuned to some arts channel I never watched. When I walked into the open plan living area, my mouth dropped.

Standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by packing boxes was Mum. She stood there, tears openly running down her face, her hand trembling as she tossed back whatever was in the glass she held.

My bag dropped to the floor and I ran over. I wrapped my arms around her shaking shoulders, breathing in the smell of strong gin from her glass. Christ, was she drinking it neat? And why were there packing boxes in my living room?

"Mum? What's wrong?"

She mumbled something into my neck, which I didn't catch. I pulled back, taking in her pale skin and make-up-less face. This was not the Martha Cole I was used to.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

"It's your father."

My knees threatened to give way. Dad? Surely not. He was fit, healthy, played golf six times a week, watched what he ate, drank in moderation. Well, maybe not the last bit, but everything else was true.

"He's been arrested." Mum put her glass to her lips and inhaled the remaining gin.

"He's what?" I almost pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. My Dad wasn't a criminal. He'd barely even had a parking ticket. "I don't understand?"

"Sit down, Lennon." Mum took my hand and tugged me down onto the sofa. Her hand shook as she placed the empty glass onto the table with a thud. "You know your father works with investments."

I nodded, keeping up the pretence of knowing what Dad actually did. It was something in the City and involved big numbers, hence why I was able to live in an apartment like this, attend university without having to get a part-time job, and wear all the designer stuff I loved so much.

"He's been accused of making some bad decisions for his clients, ones which go against the financial regulations..."

Mum carried on with her explanation, but I didn't understand everything. Occasionally a word would sink in; 'illegal', 'frozen', 'prison', 'fraud', 'investigation'.



It sounded bad, really bad.

I hadn't realised she'd finished speaking until she took my hand.

"Lennon. This has an impact on all of us, not just your father."

Suddenly, I understood the relevance of the packing boxes. I had to leave the flat because of the investigation. But I'd be going to New York soon, so a few nights staying at home wouldn't hurt. "I get it. I can't stay here anymore."

She sucked in her bottom lip, something she only did when she delivered bad news. What else could possibly go wrong?

"Lennon, because of the ongoing investigations, none of us can leave the country. You won't be able to go to America."

The words hung in the air.

*I couldn't take on the internship. I couldn't go to New York.*

For a moment, I went totally numb, unable to think of anything to respond with. My life as I knew it shattered in front of me. "I-I have to stay at home for the summer?"

Mum shook her head and took a deep breath. "Your father and I are going to stay with my parents in Cornwall."

"Right, so that's not so bad."

"Lennon, I don't think you understand. There won't be enough room for you there as well. Remember they downsized? But you can stay in the house in Ealynn Sands."

Oh, well, that made everything better didn't it? I got banished to the holiday home for the summer. What was I

meant to do there on my own? I wanted to verbalise my thoughts. But even in my own head they sounded selfish, spoiled. *Poor little rich girl.*

"We're not sure if we'll be able to keep this flat. You'll probably have to find somewhere else to live when you come back to university after the break. You'll need to find a summer job." Mum didn't believe in softening the blow.

It was too much to take in.

Everything I knew, everything familiar to me, swept away and I couldn't grasp it back.

I wished I'd stayed in the pub with Portia.

"I know this is difficult," Mum went on. "But we have no idea what will happen to your father. Until we do, we must pull together."

"How can we do that when we'll be hundreds of miles apart?" I cried. "Why don't you want me with you?"

The silence that met my question broke my heart.

"Whatever happens, Lennon, we want you to be happy."

Happiness would have been letting me go to New York.

Happiness would have been letting me stay with them in Cornwall.

Happiness would have been me not knowing all this shit was going on.

A single tear escaped. Mum reached over and swiped it away with her thumb.

"This is hard, I know. And I'm sorry."

I threw myself into her arms, crying, my heart in a million pieces with the loss of everything I'd had.

It was going to be a long, painful summer.

## JUSTIN

“SERIOUSLY, Justin, do you expect me to believe you weren’t eyeing up that girl?” Candace stood with her hands on her hips, glowering at me.

I glanced around at my best friend Alex, his sister Amber, and her boyfriend Curtis, also my best friend. They all stayed silent. So much for being good friends and stepping in when I needed backup.

“Candace, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

We were in the beer garden of The Old Dock pub, enjoying an early summer night out. It wasn’t too packed, and we’d been able to get a table right in the last rays of the sunshine. We’d been in there a while, a lot of alcohol had already been consumed, and tempers - or should I say Candace’s temper - had started to fray.

She pointed in the direction of a blonde, who was about seventeen and hanging out with a group of her mates, much like we were. Until Candace pointed her out, I hadn’t even

noticed she was there. On closer inspection, she was pretty, with long blonde hair, which she kept tossing over her shoulder, and an infectious laugh which carried over the air. If she wasn't ridiculously young, and I wasn't with Candace, I might have considered chatting her up.

"Why do you do this, Candace?" I sighed into my pint.

"Do what? What am I doing? I'm trying to make sure my *boyfriend* isn't cheating on me." She cast a glare at my sister and friends. "Make sure he doesn't do anything while I'm in the loo." With a flick of her hair, she stalked off inside.

I felt the gazes of the others fall on me following her exit.

"What are you going to do, Justin?" asked Alex. "You can't keep letting her treat you like that."

"Exactly!" his sister chipped in. "You're better than her. She's so bad for you."

"And bad for us too. Every night out doesn't need to end up in an argument," added Curtis.

It wasn't that I didn't disagree with them. All of them were right.

Candace and my relationship wasn't anything other than toxic.

We fought.

We broke up.

We got back together and had great sex.

And repeat.

This wasn't the first time she'd accused me of cheating on her in public. I only wished she hadn't done it in a beer

garden full of people. She made me look like the bad guy when, in truth, she didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

Sure, I cared about her, I wouldn't keep going back if I didn't, but it had become wearing. Exhausting actually, the arguments, the accusations, the fake incriminations.

Maybe it was time to stand up to Candace and put an end to this for good.

We changed the subject and chatted about the upcoming summer and our plans, not that there were many. Curtis and I worked in the Ealynn Marina Hotel, Alex was a chef in one of the most popular local restaurants, and Amber worked in one of the beauty salons. When you grew up in Ealynn Sands, the tourist season was big business and if you could get in with one of the businesses supporting it, you were made. Sometimes I thought I should have had bigger ambitions, but I liked the flexibility of my work schedule. It suited my social life.

When Candace came back with a tray of drinks for everyone, I didn't have the heart to call her out in front of the others. I'd wait until later, until it was the two of us. Which meant if she kicked off, she wouldn't have an audience.

"Thanks, Candace, that's really sweet of you." Amber took her glass of wine from the tray and took a sip. I watched her try to hide her disappointment as she wrinkled up her nose at the taste.

"Yeah, thanks," chorused Alex and Curtis as they grabbed their pints.

I pulled Candace towards me and kissed the top of her head. “Thanks, babe. You didn’t have to do that.”

She slid out of my grasp and giggled. “I didn’t. You did.” She waved my debit card at me, which she’d obviously nicked at some point earlier that evening.

“Fuck’s sake,” I huffed, swiping the card back from her and slipping it into the pocket of my jeans. I shouldn’t really have been mad at her, she was trying to do a nice thing—I think, even if I’d ended up paying for it.

The rest of the evening passed without incident. The girl Candace had brought my attention to earlier disappeared with her friends shortly before closing time. A part of me wondered where they’d gone on to, and I almost suggested we head to a club. But if I was going to make good on the promise to myself about ending things with Candace, it wasn’t a good idea. I didn’t need diversionary tactics to put off the inevitable.

Alex, Amber and Curtis said their goodbyes and headed off in a taxi, leaving me and Candace alone. We started walking along the road to the bus stop.

“Did you want to get some chips?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?” Okay, so maybe I did need a diversionary tactic.

There were a few people in the chip shop, including the blonde girl and her friends. The instant Candace clapped eyes on her, her mood changed.

“Oh, knew *she* was going to be here, did you?” She rounded on me, eyes blazing.

Some of the people waiting started nudging each other,

knowing something was about to kick off between me and Candace. There were times when I thought she ought to go and see a doctor or counsellor, considering her mood swings were so fast and extreme.

I shook my head. "Candace, you suggested chips. How the hell did I know she was going to be here?" Reasoning with her sometimes worked, but it seemed tonight was not one of those nights.

"Do you even want to be with me?" she demanded.

Now was my opportunity to be done with her. To step away from all the drama, the bad mouthing, the not knowing which Candace I was going to get.

But I wasn't prepared to do it in front of an audience waiting for their chips.

I grabbed her arm and all but dragged her out of the shop back into the street.

"I can't do this anymore." I let go of her arm, bracing myself for whatever would come next.

"I knew it!" she crowed. "I knew you were cheating on me."

My head fell backwards as I let out a silent scream towards the sky. I almost wished I had been, then Candace really would have had something to get upset about.

"Honestly, Candace, in all the time we've been together, I have never been with anyone else. Even during the breaks we've had. You clearly don't trust me, and I don't need to be with someone who thinks of me that way. I can't deal with all your shit." Once the words were out of my



mouth, it was as if someone had lifted a huge weight from my shoulders.

A single tear streaked down her cheek. I didn't make any move to brush it away. She would misinterpret the gesture. If this was going to be over, there shouldn't be any misunderstandings. Clear and concise in a language she understood. It was the only way.

"It's over, Candace," I reiterated, just to make sure she understood.

After a beat, she sniffed. "Perfect timing for you to get together with blondie." She jerked her chin in the direction of the chip shop.

My fists balled at my sides. I wouldn't move on so quickly. I needed some time to recover from Candace. I bit back the response I really wanted to say. "Don't be ridiculous."

Candace tilted her head. "No, you're right, not that blondie. Although it is summer, there will be plenty of fresh meat for you."

"You're right, a summer of shagging my way through the entire female tourist population of Ealynn Sands is exactly what I need to get over you." My lip curled.

"Maybe not the entire population. Just one." Her mouth stretched into a tight smile. "Lennon Cole."

At the mention of Lennon's name, I thought back to last year and the great delight Lennon had taken in telling us all she would be in New York this summer. Her news she'd be doing some placement scheme thing was etched with vivid detail into my memory. As was the image of her in a satin

slip dress, erect nipples showing through the thin material. I shook the picture away.

“No chance of that. She’s not coming, remember?”

Candace clutched her hands to her chest in mock concern. “Boohoo for you.”

“If nothing else happens this summer except you and I splitting up, I’ll take it.” Even as I said the words, I knew I meant it.

No Candace meant no drama.

Which boded well for the summer.

Famous last words.

## KISS ME EVER AFTER

*Read Lennon and Justin's story in*

***Kiss Me Ever After***

SHE HAS A LOT OF PLANS. ***None of them involved him. Until now.***

Lennon Cole has it all mapped out, bright lights, New York and living the high life. Until a shady deal in her father's business world brings everything she knows down around her. With nothing left, Lennon ends up in the one place she doesn't want to be; at her grandparents' holiday home in Ealynn Sands.

Justin Navarro has it all sorted. The bad boy of Ealynn Sands, his reputation precedes him. If there's one thing he can't abide, it's tourists flying into his hometown and leaving again without a backwards glance. Like Lennon Cole. Sure, they've had moments... Near misses and almost kisses, but

he could never be interested in a pampered princess like that.

Until the night he saves her life.

Now the tourist and the bad boy are seeing each other properly for the first time... but it's just a summer fling... isn't it?

**Kiss Me Ever After is a standalone romance, where opposites attracting could just change your life forever.**

<https://books2read.com/u/b6OPK6>

## GEORGIE

THE RESTAURANT BEGAN to empty out at last. It had been one hell of a long shift. I went over to the last table and placed their bill next to the guy who'd been barking orders at me and the rest of the staff all evening. I wouldn't be sorry to see them go.

"When you're ready, just let me know and I'll be back with the card machine." I forced a smile, faking the sincerity in my voice.

He all but ignored me, and picked up his tumbler of whisky, making some inane toast to the rest of his friends.

Turning my back, I walked over to the kitchen area where Tony and the rest of the kitchen hands were cleaning down their stations.

"Seriously, it looks like they'll be staying until you turn thirty, Georgie." Tony grinned as he wiped down the surface. "So if you wanna get off..."

I threw a napkin at his head. "If one more person teases

me about my age, I swear they won't see their next birthday."

It wasn't so much I was having a crisis about turning thirty, more that everyone kept reminding me of the fact. I had no reason to worry about it at all. I had a job I loved, a flat, and a fiancé I'd be marrying just as soon as we could agree on a date. Russ seemed to be great at avoiding the subject of pinning down a date. Even a month would be fine. Hell, I'd even settle for a year. Maybe he'd make a decision by my birthday.

Finally, the table was ready to pay their bill. I stood fiddling with the card machine, while they argued over who was paying how much and by what means.

*It's okay, guys, it's almost midnight and I've been on my feet since around half five. Any time before I turn into a pumpkin would be great.*

It's a wonder the words didn't come out loud for all the fuss they were making. Thankfully, I knew as soon as they'd gone, so could we. After another ten minutes, they were done. I said cheerful goodbyes and ushered them out of the door, while Tony and a couple of the other kitchen staff cleared away the detritus on their table.

"You can go, Georgie, I'll lock up," Tony offered. "I know you wanted to see Russ tonight."

I could have hugged him. "Thanks, mate, that's great. I owe you."

"Oh, don't worry, I won't forget!" He flashed me a grin.

Before I left the restaurant, I messaged Russ to say I was on my way home. We only lived a seven-minute walk away.

I didn't get scared, even at this time of night. Russ hadn't replied by the time I got to our block of flats, which was unusual. He'd usually send some sort of reply, even if it was just a GIF or an emoji. There was still nothing as I got to the front door. I let myself in, resisting the urge to call out. From the living room, awful screechy noises drifted towards the hallway. I rolled my eyes; he'd probably fallen asleep watching one of those weird horror films he liked which I always flatly refused to watch.

The greeting on my lips died the moment I entered the living room.

There, on the sofa, was Russ, thrusting into a dark-haired woman I didn't recognise, her tits hanging out of her blouse.

We clocked each other at the same time, both of us letting out an ear-piercing shriek.

"Yeah, that's it, baby, come for me." Oblivious to the fact I was in the room, Russ let out a guttural growl. He never spoke to me like that. Whoever this woman was, she certainly brought out something animalistic in him.

"Russ, Russ, stop, there's someone here." She clutched at her top, pulling it up to cover her modesty, and trying to push him off.

Despite the car crash unfolding in front of me, I turned my back. I couldn't unsee that. Ever.

"What? Don't be ridiculous, Georgie's still at work." I heard him grunt, the tell-tale sound of him being close to his climax.

The dagger hovering over my heart shot forward and

pierced it. He wasn't even pretending he was single. Bile rose in my throat, and I dry retched. Part of me wanted to flee, but this was *my* flat, *my* home, *my* fiancé.

"No, she's here," the other woman said.

"What the actual fuck? Shit!"

Within seconds, he stood in front of me, hands fumbling with his trousers and belt as he struggled to make himself decent. "Georgie, you're home." Russ ran a hand through his dark hair, eyes wild—either with passion or panic, I wasn't sure.

"Clearly." I could barely speak, consumed with anger. Questions raced around in my head. Who was she? How long had it been going on for? How could he do it to me? But whoever she was, I didn't want her to witness what would happen next.

Turning back to the sofa, where the woman now sat fully clothed, I addressed her directly. "I don't know who the fuck you are, but I'd appreciate it if you would get the fuck out of my house."

She scrambled around for her shoes, picking them up, then her handbag along with a laptop bag. Great, so she was someone from work. Or worse, one of Russ's clients. When she walked past me to get to the door, I thought I heard her murmur, 'I'm sorry,' under her breath. I snorted. Like she cared about me. If she had, then she wouldn't just have fucked my fiancé on the couch we chose together, in the apartment we *bought* together.

"Georgie, I can explain," said Russ. "We should sit down."



I whirled around to face him. "On the sofa you just fucked some random woman on? I have no intention of sitting in her juices while you fumble for an excuse as to why you cheated on me." The thought sickened me. All of it did. Less than fifteen minutes ago, my world had been perfect and now it lay shattered.

Russ reached for my hands, but I crossed my arms over my chest. There was no way I wanted him touching me. I stepped back, trying to put as much distance between him and me as possible.

"This was the first time I brought her here, I promise," he began.

"But not the first time you shagged her?" A bitter taste filled my mouth at my realisation. It could have been the tenth, thirtieth, one hundredth. My mouth curled. I fucking hated him.

He cast his gaze to the floor, which was more of an answer than any words.

Torn between wanting to know and being ignorant, I asked, "How many times, Russ? How long has it been going on?"

The shrug he gave me told me everything I needed to know. The air in the flat started to disappear and I took several deep breaths to stop me either screaming or punching his face.

"We're over." I looked at the engagement finger on my left hand. The solitaire diamond had no doubt cost a fortune, but in the bigger scheme of things was totally

meaningless. Without another thought, I pulled it off and tossed it towards him.

Russ made no effort to catch it and it tinkled on the wooden floor before rolling under the sofa.

"Come on, Georgie, let's talk. We can sort this out," he begged.

"What is there to talk about? You can't possibly want to marry me!" I yelled in his face.

"Please, it was a mistake."

"Oh, you're absolutely fucking spot on with that." Had I come home half an hour later, I would have been none the wiser. I paced around the floor, torn between wanting him to leave and needing to get out of there myself. My fingers tapped against my thigh. I knew what I needed right now. Turning away from Russ, I headed towards the front door.

"Where are you going?" His voice grated on my last nerve.

"Out."

"Can we talk when you get back?"

I sucked in my lips. If I never spoke to him again, it would be too soon. Without another word, I walked out, slamming the door behind me. No doubt we'd get complaints from the neighbours about the noise at this time of night, but I didn't care.

The owner of the twenty-four-hour corner shop nodded at me as I walked in. It wasn't unusual for me to frequent the place after work, loading up on snacks or booze or whatever took my fancy.

Tonight, though, it wasn't any of those things.

I walked straight up to the counter, staring at the shuttered shelves behind him. Six months of good work was about to go down the drain, all because of Russ. I'd given up for him. Listened to his stupid advice about my health and addiction, and how much damage it did, little knowing how much damage he himself was going to do.

"Can I get a pack of Marlboro, please?"

The owner's eyebrows shot up. "I thought you'd given up?"

"Rough night." I forced a smile and reached into my purse for my debit card.

Lips pursed, he turned and pulled up the shutter, before locating the pack I wanted. I could feel his silent disapproval, but I wasn't ready to share my reasons for falling off the wagon. I tapped my card on the machine, listening for the approval ping, before taking the pack.

"Thank you." I hurried outside and pulled the cellophane off. Despite not smoking in ages, I still had a lighter at the bottom of my bag. With shaking hands, I lit the cigarette, relishing the scent of the freshly lit tip, and sucked in the poison. The nicotine had an instant calming effect. I exhaled an almost mesmerising stream of smoke towards the starry night sky. *Oh, how I've missed you, my old friend.*

My phone rang. I almost ignored it, expecting it to be Russ wanting to know where I was, wanting to know what I was going to do. I couldn't deal with him now. When it rang off, then almost straight away rang again, I reached into my bag.

Mum's name filled the screen. I scrunched up my face. Why was she calling me at this time of night?

"Mum?"

"Oh, Georgie." Her voice cracked, sounding as if she were speaking through tears.

My skin broke out in goose bumps. "What's wrong?"

She spoke through another sob. "It's your gran, she, she..."

The tears I'd been holding at bay over Russ filled my eyes and streamed down my cheeks. Gran had gone into a care home a few months ago, unable to look after herself any longer. As a family, we knew it probably wasn't going to be long, but she'd battled on, making herself popular with the staff and other residents. Her death didn't come as a surprise, but combined with everything I'd discovered that night, I doubled over, sobbing my heart out.

What the fuck else could go wrong?

## ALEX

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you're really leaving." I shook my head as I reached into the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer. I popped the caps off both and handed one over to Justin.

"Yep, last night in Ealynn Sands and then off to the big smoke in the morning." He raised his bottle to mine, and we clinked them together.

It wasn't a celebration I wanted, but I completely understood his reasons for leaving. After what could be classed as a pretty shit summer, my best friend Justin had finally got the happy ending. I was happy for him, I truly was. But I couldn't shake the feeling I was getting left behind.

Honoured that Justin was choosing to spend his last night with me, instead of his mum, it should have been marked with more than having half an eye on the football and chatting shit.

“What’s going on at the restaurant? Calmed down much after the summer trade?”

I took a slug of my beer. I worked as a chef in one of the town’s most popular restaurants, Anna’s Kitchen. Serving a mixture of American and Mexican food, along with local fish dishes, it attracted good trade from both tourists and locals alike. The summer had been chaotic, as usual, but it made the time fly by. Earlier that week, our boss had announced there would be a new front of house manager starting soon, as our current one was going into teaching in October. Given he’d had to deal with a bunch of unruly - and sometimes unreliable - restaurant staff for the entire summer, teaching a bunch of teenagers would be a breeze in comparison.

“Yeah, it’s good.” I nodded, not really knowing what to say. Justin wouldn’t be interested in what was going on, he wasn’t going to be around.

“Want me to keep an eye out for vacancies in London? Then we could get that flat together.” He was only half-joking.

Something we’d always planned to do was get a place here together. We’d even got as far as registering with a couple of the local rental agencies, hoping there would be something available by now. Thankfully, we hadn’t been successful, so I wouldn’t be losing out on a deposit for a flat I couldn’t pay the rent on.

“Sounds good. I bet there are hundreds of places who need a hard-working chef like me.” I grinned, thinking of the opportunities that might open up.

"You got it. We'll be living in each other's pockets again before you know it."

We both fell silent, turning our attention back to the players on the screen.

The front door slammed shut.

"Evening, boys."

"Hey, Sonya." Justin leaped up from the armchair and went over to my mum, enveloping her in a huge hug. "I'm glad you got home before I left. I wanted to say thank you for everything you did for me this summer."

She hugged him back hard. "Nothing to thank me for. I knew you needed somewhere to stay, and you are always welcome in this house."

He dug down into the carrier bag he'd brought with him and brandished a bottle of rhubarb gin at Mum. "Here, it's not much, but I know it's something you'll enjoy."

Mum laughed. "Thanks, Justin. You know I will. And I hope everything goes well for you in London. Fresh start for you." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Now I'm going to check that I like this, can I get you two another beer?"

Justin checked his watch. "Thanks, Sonya, but no. I really should get home. It's an early start tomorrow."

"I understand. Good luck!" She nodded and disappeared towards the kitchen.

"Looks like this is it then, buddy." I stood up, spreading my hands wide. "Are we doing the hugging thing?"

He laughed. "It would be strange if we didn't." Without another word, he grabbed me, and slapped my back. "Thank you, Alex. If it wasn't for you and Curtis..."

I knew exactly what he was referring to. "Don't mention it. Just glad you're going on to bigger and better things."

We said our final goodbyes and Justin left. I slumped back down onto the sofa, staring at the television screen without really seeing it. It hadn't hit me until now exactly how different things were going to be. Not having Justin around would be strange. He'd been such a big part of our lives for such a long time.

Mum's heels clacking in the hallway brought me back to the present.

"Here." She held out another bottle of beer to me. "I thought you might need this."

I took it from her, and watched as she settled herself into the armchair, a balloon glass of gin and tonic in her hand. "Thank you. How was work?"

She rolled her eyes. "I hate working the late shift, but we managed to get a few things sorted for this year's charity event. Emily and I think we have a plan. If you could have a word with your boss about a sponsorship or a donation, you'll be my favourite child." The corner of her mouth curled up as she took a sip of her gin. "Ooo, he's got good taste."

The Ealynn Marina Hotel was the most prestigious hotel in the town. Each year, they hosted an event, with all the proceeds going to local good causes. The restaurant usually got involved in some way, and this year would be no different. Mum worked as their Operations Manager, overseeing a lot of the day-to-day administration, as well as



anything out of the ordinary. She often worked odd hours, early mornings, late nights, and sometimes we could go days without seeing each other properly. During the summer months, it was like ships passing in the night, as my shift pattern varied as well. Anna's Kitchen only opened at night, but it was every night. On a rota basis, I worked four days on, three days off, which at least meant I had some week-ends free. Although now Justin was gone, I had no idea what I would do with all that free time.

"It's going to get quiet around here soon," said Mum, taking another sip of her drink. "Once Amber moves out, it'll just be you and me."

Along with the announcement of Justin's departure was also the news that my sister was moving in with her boyfriend. Curtis also happened to be my other closest friend. Yes, he was dating my little sister, which I hadn't been too pleased about at the start, but it had turned out well. They were practically inseparable, sickeningly in love actually, it wouldn't be too long before we would be hearing wedding bells.

The thought of it just being me and Mum rattling about in this big old house both scared and saddened me at the same time.

At twenty-six, I'd be the only one living at home.

While I'd been considered as 'man of the house' ever since Dad left when Amber and I were toddlers, I knew it was time to step out of my comfort zone.

But I couldn't leave Mum on her own.

As if she were reading my thoughts, Mum said, "You don't have to stay here if you don't want to. I know you and Justin were excited about getting a place together."

"Who would I share with though? Justin'll be in London and Curtis is with Amber." I threw my hands up in the air, spilling beer over my jeans.

Mum bit her lip, stifling a grin. "I can't believe I'm saying this to you at your age, but you'll find new friends, Alex."

Inwardly, I knew she was right. It wasn't as if I was in pre-school and didn't know anyone. There were people at the restaurant I could hang out with. And even though Curtis would be living with Amber, I'm sure he wouldn't abandon our boys' nights, even if it was only the two of us.

"I know. It feels strange losing my two best friends at the same time though."

"You're not losing them, Alex, they're moving on in life."

Although I'm sure she didn't mean them as I heard them, Mum's words hit me in the chest. Everyone else was moving on, new homes, new girlfriends, new jobs, new experiences. And here I was, drinking with my mum on a school night.

But I was torn.

Torn between living my life and abandoning my mum who had done so much for me, my sister and my friends over the years.

Whenever the time came, it would be a tough decision. For now, I had to be happy with the familiar.

Maybe the new front of house manager would be someone I'd get along with.

I guess I'd find out soon enough.

## PROMISE ME EVER AFTER

*Read Georgie and Alex's story in*  
***Promise Me Ever After***

SHE DIDN'T GET ***the happily ever after she wanted. Until now.***

Betrayed by her cheating fiancé, Georgie Cavanagh heads to Ealynn Sands to start over.

After a drunken, much-too-high bid in a silent auction results in her work colleague, the delicious chef Alex Kane, cooking her a private dinner, it turns out the way to a *woman's* heart is also through the stomach.

But since her history with whirlwind romances doesn't exactly come with a pristine track record, she can't fall for him, it's way too fast.

Alex Kane's usual approach is to offer up a couple of hot, no-strings-attached nights of pure pleasure.

He doesn't do commitment or relationships. He'll never fall hard.

But the more time he spends with the gorgeous Georgie Cavanagh, *working and playing together*, the harder it is to resist temptation.

For the first time he can see a future with someone.

And that's freaking him out.

Can either of them risk the fall that might break them both?

**Promise Me Ever After is a standalone romance where a workplace fling could just change your life forever.**

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## EMS

“EMILY, do you have the quote for the marquee hire?” Sonya Kane hovered by my desk.

“Sure, it’s here somewhere.” I flexed my fingers, looking at the mess of paperwork in front of me. Every day, I promised myself I’d be more organised and by the end of my shift, it always looked as if a hurricane had whirled its way through the office, only ever hitting my desk. I shuffled a few things around, finally locating the sheet she needed.

I often tried to implement a paper free office, not least for my own sanity, but it seemed everyone else was oblivious to that idea.

The last hour of my day was usually spent putting the papers into some kind of order, but within ten minutes of the next day everything was strewn wherever it landed after one of the staff needed something from the pile.

I loved my job as Events and Marketing Manager at the Ealynn Marina Hotel. It was a role I’d been longing for ever

since I first started doing work experience there in my teens. After I graduated university with a Business and Marketing degree, a position for a Marketing Assistant came up and it grew from there. Within three years, I'd been promoted. Three short months into the role and I loved it more than ever.

Sonya sucked in a breath through her teeth. "This is more expensive than last year. Can you offer them any kind of sponsorship incentive so we could get them to drop the price?"

We were in the midst of organising the autumn charity event, usually something to do with food, which linked into a number of restaurants in the town. As well as making sure we had coverage in all the local publications, arranging posters and flyers, I had somehow ended up getting involved in sponsorship. Using my PR talents, I'd come up with a package which meant they had maximum publicity if they sponsored us as well.

I clicked open their file on my computer, browsing the correspondence and documents in there. "I'm sure I can come up with something."

"Brilliant. I'll leave you to it. I've got a meeting with the bar manager about potential new stock." She rolled her eyes. Our bar manager was easily swayed by shiny new drinks and products, but not always the best at getting a good deal. Sonya often said he could learn something from me.

Before I had the chance to reach for the landline, my mobile pinged.

MASON

Hey, lovely, are you free for dinner tonight? Anna's Kitchen at seven? I really need to talk to you about something. It's important xxx

Excitement bubbled up inside me. Mason and I had been together for almost a year, it was nearly our anniversary. If he had something important to say, it could only be about us moving in together. We spent so much time around each other's flats, it would make perfect sense. There was a recently renovated flat in the centre of town which I knew was coming up for rent, the timing couldn't be more perfect.

EMS

Sounds good! Do you want to get a drink first? Xxx

MASON

I'll meet you there. Have a good rest of the day, love you xxx

EMS

Love you too, see you soon xxxxx

I placed the phone back down on my desk and squeezed my arms around my chest. How was I going to get through the rest of the day until dinner this evening?

Trying to negotiate a new deal with the marquee supplier took most of the afternoon. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with emails, until finally we had a conversation and managed to agree on something which would appease everyone. Sonya would be pleased with the result.



While I took my usual time sorting out the papers on my desk, I messaged my flatmate, Sara.

EMS

Want to meet for a quick drink? I'm meeting Mason, but I think there is NEWS!

SARA

Sure, but I can only stay an hour because I've got yoga.

It always made me laugh when Sara drank before a yoga class. On the rare times I'd attempted to contort my body into weird positions, I got a head rush anyway. Mixing it with alcohol would only make it ten times worse.

We met at The Winking Fox, which was nice and quiet.

Sara was less than enthusiastic about Mason's reasons for talking to me. "It's probably nothing as exciting as you think it is. He's probably been asked to go on some lads' holiday and wants your permission to go. Or maybe there's a work thing he's been drafted into and he's going away to a conference." Sara twisted her glass around, trying to eke out the gin and tonic a little longer.

I shook my head. "He wouldn't bother to arrange a dinner to talk to me about either of those things. He'd just ask me outright." I sipped my own drink, not wanting to be too wasted before I went to dinner. "It has to be something about us and moving in together."

Sara pouted. "You can't leave me, I'll never be able to cope with the rent on my own."

We shared a small, two-bedroomed apartment above

one of the shops in town. It was adequate, but I couldn't deny I wanted something more, something bigger, something that meant more than flat sharing with a friend. And I hoped, after tonight, I'd have all that and maybe more. I knew it was too soon for Mason to propose, and it honestly wasn't something I'd been thinking about. But moving in together would shift things on to the next level.

"If I did move out, I'm sure you'd have plenty of offers to take my room." I winked.

She rolled her eyes. "Ugh. I can't think of anything worse than having to interview a bunch of idiots. Plus it would probably be people we knew, who I wouldn't want to be in close proximity with anyway."

That was one of the challenges of living in a small town. When you'd grown up there, everyone tended to know everyone's business. It was a close-knit community, although Sara preferred to refer to it as a nosy one.

"You'll be fine." I mixed the last of the tonic into my drink and swirled it around with a straw. "Besides, we don't even know if I'm moving out yet."

"I don't want to piss on your bonfire, but you shouldn't get too excited, Ems." Sara's comment came with a sympathetic smile. "You do have a habit of jumping the gun a little bit."

I bit my lip. She had a point. It wasn't the first time I'd got excited about something, only to have my hopes dashed at the last minute. But I had a good feeling about this.

Tonight was the night Mason Miles was going to ask me to move in with him.

And I was going to say yes.

## MASON

I'D SAT on this news for almost a week.

Seven whole days of keeping something so massive to myself.

And I had to decide *today* whether I was taking the offer.

When my boss called me into her office, I'd braced myself for a bollocking. I'd narrowly missed my targets for the past two months, despite getting us a major new client to recruit for. The skills they wanted appeared to be rarer than hen's teeth. When I'd blindly agreed to finding them ten new software engineers with a technology I now realised was an ageing one, my bubble burst.

Janine Helen didn't suffer fools gladly.

"Mason, sit down." She steepled her fingers, resting her elbows on the edge of the desk.

I did as I was told, reaching for the glass of water her PA had put out. Needing a drink after a meeting with Janine

was pretty much a necessity, the water would suffice for now.

“I wanted to talk to you about your recent performance.”

Here it was. Here was the reduction in commission. The ‘I’m disappointed’ conversation. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, fingers tapping on my thigh. “Okay,” I managed to say.

“I have to admit, I was impressed with your handling of the negotiations in the LimeBox deal. Bryan told me you did a great job in dealing with their initial reservations to give us all the work. It’s such a shame they aren’t as forward thinking as they led you to believe. Bryan has done a bit of digging since we signed the deal, and it turns out they weren’t exactly honest with us.”

My jaw dropped. This was unexpected and a pleasant surprise.

“Your targets have suffered as a result. I’ve seen how hard you’ve worked on sourcing and headhunting but coming up with nothing.” Janine leaned further forward. “So I’m taking you off the LimeBox account.”

It had been coming. I wasn’t surprised at all. But being pulled off a major client this close to the end of a quarter hurt. Knowing how Lane & Parks Recruitment worked, I’d get shoved onto one of the low profit, high turnover temp accounts, expected to find hundreds of first line support workers to do a summer stint. I jiggled my leg in frustration. I’d half promised Ems, my girlfriend, a holiday with my bonus payment. Now that didn’t seem likely.

"I understand." I forced out the words. And I did, I totally got it. I wasn't the first person it had happened to, and I sure as hell wouldn't be the last.

Janine tilted her head to one side. "Good. Because I have a proposition for you."

I rearranged my features into an interested expression, pretending not to know what was coming next.

"We'd like you to go on a secondment to the New York office for nine months."

Glad I wasn't taking a drink, because otherwise I would have spat the water all over Janine's desk, I sucked in a breath.

That wasn't what I'd expected at all.

"New York? Seriously?"

It wasn't unheard of. The Lane & Parks office in Times Square often had secondments and exchanges on offer, but they usually went to the London team. They rarely, if ever, went to regional staff.

"Yes, Mason. Really." Janine's face split into a grin. "It'll be a great experience for you."

My mind went into overdrive. Not least the experience of working in the States but living there as well. Gigs and games at Madison Square Gardens, hanging out at the Bowery Ballroom, visiting the Guggenheim. All the things Ems and I had talked about doing if we went on holiday there.

*Ems.*

I hadn't factored her into this possible opportunity. Would she come with me? She had a great job she enjoyed

at the Ealynn Marina Hotel. Would they let her take nine months off?

“You don’t have to decide straight away.” Janine’s voice broke into my reverie, no doubt taking my silence as indecision. “I’m on holiday after today, back in a week. If you can let me know your thoughts as soon as I get back, that would be great. In the meantime, Bryan can answer any questions you might have.”

I hoped he was prepared for the million which had flown through my mind already.

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THE PAST WEEK had been torture. I seesawed between wanting to take up the offer and turning it down. I’d been really quiet whenever I’d seen Ems. Convinced she’d probably decided I was breaking up with her, I’d organised a night out for us this evening at Anna’s Kitchen. I’d tell her whatever I decided and deal with the consequences.

Because my decision-making process had almost come down to the toss of a coin, I’d arranged to talk to my parents. They lived abroad in Mallorca, and while we’d spoken since Janine had made the offer, I hadn’t told them yet.

In the short time I had between finishing work and meeting Ems, I video called them from my phone.

“Mason, what a lovely surprise!” Mum said when she connected the call. “Is everything okay?” Her brow furrowed at the unexpected contact.

“Is Dad there too?”

She turned away from the screen and called out for my Dad to join her. Before long, the two of them were squeezed into the frame, snuggled together on their garden sofa.

“What’s up, Mason?” Dad asked.

Why they both thought something bad had happened, I didn’t know. It wasn’t as if I called them all the time with bad news.

I let out a hard breath. “I’ve been offered a job opportunity.”

“That’s fantastic!” they both said at the same time, before laughing at each other.

“In New York for nine months.”

The line went quiet and for a moment I thought technology had failed me, as they sat frozen on screen.

After a beat, they both started talking at once, so fast and loud I couldn’t hear either of them properly.

“Wait, I can’t understand what you’re saying!” I yelled.

Mum passed the phone over to Dad, who took the lead. “Mason, we were just saying what a fantastic offer this is for you. Don’t let life pass you by. Don’t be the one who regrets not saying yes, when this could be the chance of your lifetime.”

Deep down, I’d expected this. They’d chosen to leave for Mallorca in their early fifties and their sense of adventure was still strong, stronger than the average thirty-year-old in most cases.

“Your dad’s right, Mason. You should do it while you’re young. Don’t leave it too late like we did.” Mum nudged Dad in the ribs.



“So you’d be happy with me going?” I still had some reservations, but I had to make the final decision in less than twenty-four hours.

They both nodded, muttering other positive affirmations.

“Okay. Looks like I’m going to New York!” The corner of my mouth curled up. “I’ll need to give Janine my decision in the morning, so I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Tell us if you need anything to help get you there,” Mum added. “Love you, Mason, well done.”

Coming off the call with my parents, a wave of excitement rippled through me.

*It was really happening.*

Less than an hour later, my heart was in my boots.

“Nine months in New York?” Ems’ hand froze, her fork halfway to her mouth. Her brows knitted together. “What does that mean for us?”

I swallowed down a mouthful of beer. “You could come with me.”

Her cutlery clattered onto her plate. “And do what? Sit on my arse while you set Wall Street alight?”

“I’m sure you’d be able to find something to do.”

She snorted. “By the time I got a green card, it would be time to come home.”

“Then take a sabbatical, take nine months off, enjoy being a tourist.”

“Or stuck in some scummy studio flat, waiting for you to finish work each night, getting a couple of hours with you before you fell asleep? I know the hours you work here,

Mason. I'm sure they won't be any less over there. And then there's client functions and making friends with your new office colleagues."

The way Ems said it made it sound less than appealing. Suddenly, I saw it through her eyes. She was right. It wasn't as if she'd be able to get a job like the one she had now. I would need to schmooze and sweet talk my new clients and get to know my work mates.

*But I didn't want to pass on the opportunity.*

"I should have told you sooner, given you time to get used to the idea." I sighed into the space between us.

Her eyes narrowed. "How long have you known?"

I lifted a shoulder, screwing up my face. There was no way to say this and make it sound good "Around a week."

"And you didn't think to talk to me about it before now?"

"Janine gave me time to think it over. I wanted to get things straight in my own head before I spoke to you." My reasoning has seemed stellar until I said it out loud. "I didn't even tell my mum and dad."

Her hard stare answered my last admission. "Well, I'm pleased you had the time. It's not like you sprung this on me without a moment's notice." Ems crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you looking for my permission or something?"

My gaze fell to the table. I didn't know what I was looking for. I didn't need her permission to go, but maybe her blessing would be nice. She could at least be happy for me.

When I didn't reply, Ems pushed her chair back and

stood up. "Now I know what this little dinner was all about. It was to soften me up so I wouldn't make a scene."

I jumped up, ready to grab her arm and tell her it wasn't like that. But I knew when she was in a certain mood, she wouldn't listen. "Ems, it's not like that."

"Then what is it like?" she hissed. "Mason, I can't do long distance. If you're going to go to New York, then we're over." She yanked her bag and coat off the back of her chair and flounced out of the restaurant.

I sank back into my chair, the enormity of Ems' words sinking in.

This wasn't how I hoped it would go.

But it looked like I was going to New York alone and single.

## LOVE ME EVER AFTER

*Read Ems and Mason's story in*

***Love Me Ever After***

HE DIDN'T BELIEVE ***second chances had consequences. Until now.***

Sharing a house with his ex was the last thing Mason Miles expected when he came back home. After nearly eighteen months away, he finds himself in the spotlight at work with a career that's threatening to go stratospheric.

Moving in with Ems was the easy option, although it seems she's determined to make it hard for him at first - in more ways than one. But he soon realises he can't let her slip through his fingers again.

For Ems Berry, sharing a house with Mason, more ripped and tattooed than when they were last together, is massively testing her willpower. Until one night of passion

in the wrong place at the right time draws them back together.

When he gets a job offer he can't refuse that will take him away again, can their newly reestablished relationship survive? Especially with the added complication of a baby on the way...

***Love Me Ever After is a standalone roommates romance where a second chance and an accidental pregnancy could just change your life forever.***

**<https://books2read.com/u/mKRBdd>**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Archer is the author of contemporary romance featuring rock stars, small towns, a healthy dose of angst, some steamy times and always a happy ever after!

When not writing, I can usually be found binge watching teen drama series on Netflix, or supporting Spurs from my armchair, and running around after my two feline children, Corey and Elsa.

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You can also sign up to my newsletter or catch up with me on social media.







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