

## James

I wake in the middle of the night to find her beside me, sound asleep, leg draped over my hip, hair spread out on the pillow. As much as I want to wake her I don't. Instead I lay there, watching her—her face untroubled in sleep—and wonder how I can possibly live without her next year.

The FBI is expecting me in Paris once I finish law school in May. So where does that leave us? It leaves me in France with a girlfriend who still has two more years of college back in the states. A seven-hour flight and a four-hour bus ride apart. I won't be able to fucking stand it, being away from her like that. And I'm not sure I have a choice.



IN THE MORNING, after several rounds of half-awake sex, she leaves to find a dress for her mother's bridal shower next weekend. I shower and then wait for her at an outdoor table in Soho, feeling as impatient for the sight of her as I did at the bus stop last night. Even I realize how fucking pathetic this is. My girlfriend is out of my sight for two hours and I miss her like a toddler waiting for his mom to pick him up from preschool.

How are we going to do this next year? She'll be a junior in college...it wouldn't even be fair for me to ask her to wait for me. To miss out on everything while I'm gone. But the alternative—Elle with anyone but me—is unbearable.

She finally comes into view. Even in frayed jeans and a t-shirt, bare-faced, I've never seen anything more perfect in my life. And I don't want to lose her.

"You're looking very solemn," she says with a grin, bending over the table to kiss me.

"Just trying to figure out what the odds are that there's some lingerie in that bag."

"I *did* walk right past the La Perla store, but I'm guessing my father wouldn't be fired up about seeing that on his credit card statement. If he's going to threaten not to pay for tuition, god only knows what he'd say about lingerie."

"I wouldn't object to seeing it on *my* credit card," I reply. "Maybe we should stop there after we eat."

She laughs. I've never told her this but I fucking love her laugh. The way it's husky and girlish at the same time. "I think you are seriously underestimating how expensive La Perla is."

"I think you're seriously underestimating how much I'd enjoy seeing you wear it, though."

WE FINISH BRUNCH and are walking back to the apartment when my mom calls. Given that she won't have anything pleasant to say when she learns my girlfriend is here, I have no intention of answering, but Elle puts a hand on my arm.

"Go ahead and take it," she says. "I'm going to grab coffee. I'll be right back."

Reluctantly I answer, feeling a sudden burst of resentment toward my mom as I watch Elle cut through traffic. We didn't create this problem and we shouldn't need to act like this is something to be ashamed of.

"I left you two messages yesterday," my mother says. "Why didn't you call me back?"

"Elle's here," I tell her. "She got in last night."

There is silence, my mother's quiet disapproval. "I was calling to make sure you had your aunt Julia's 50th birthday

on the calendar. We're doing it in the city that last Saturday in September."

"Is Elle invited too?"

"You've got to be kidding me, James. You really think I want her at a *family* event?"

"Okay, then it's not going on my calendar."

"Why are you doing this?" she demands. "You can't possibly think this is going to work next year if you insist on taking that job in Paris."

I remember when I first applied for that job, how it seemed like the answer to everything — a chance to break free of my parents' law firm and their expectations. I had no idea I was going to fall in love with a girl who still had three years of college ahead of her. "I signed a contract, Mom. I have no choice in the matter at this point."

"What I said is no less true. There's no chance it's going to last, so your decision to put me through this boggles the mind."

Elle emerges from Starbucks with a cup of coffee in each hand. She smiles at me from across the street—a smile brilliant enough to stop traffic, power a city block—and I feel a sudden burst of love for her so strong it hurts. My mom's tirade has continued, but I've long stopped listening so I cut her off. "Fun talk, Mom," I reply. "Later."

She's wrong about me and Elle. She thinks this is a fling. She think I'm too young for something serious and that, at 19, Elle's way too young for it to last. And she is wrong. We are permanent, solid as the ground I stand on. I'm going to fucking make sure of it.

Elle holds a cup out to me. "They were out of the blonde roast so—"

I slide my hands through her hair and kiss her. I kiss her in a way I normally reserve for when we're alone, but I

suddenly feel the way I do *when* we're alone—as if I'd give up anything in the world to have her and nothing else matters.

Her smile is confused and pleased simultaneously when I pull away. "I should get you coffee more often."

My stomach sinks. I wanted to wait until the weekend was over but this is the moment. And I feel like I'm lying by not saying it aloud. "I have to tell you something—I asked the FBI if I could work out of New York instead of Paris so we'd be closer next year—" Her face lights up before I can finish. "They said no."

She stares at the ground. "I wouldn't want you to give up Paris for me anyway, but I love that you tried."

"If I hadn't signed a contract..." But I did. I signed the fucking contract, like a fool, and getting out of it would be difficult if not impossible. It would also ruin any chance I'd ever have to work for the bureau later on. "I just wanted you to know I tried."

She bites her lip. "There *is* another option," she ventures, taking a sip of her coffee. She pauses. "I could go to school there."

"In *Paris*?"

"The American University of Paris teaches their classes in English. And they've got an amazing communications program."

The smallest trickle of hope enters my veins. "How do you know all this?"

"I might have investigated it a little," she says, blushing.

Before I can stop myself I picture it: the two of us living together in a small flat, making dinner or wandering to some local café at night, with Europe in our backyard and our weekends free to travel *anywhere*—London, Belgium, the Alps. The image is so appealing it's hard to say what I do

next. “You’re at an Ivy League school,” I tell her, sighing. “Are you sure you want to give that up?”

She laughs. “You think I’d actually be giving something *up* by moving to Paris for the remainder of college?”

I reach out to grab her free hand. “I would love that, but it isn’t something you should jump into.”

“Oh.” A flush steals across her cheekbones. “Right. I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to rush you.”

I shake my head vehemently. “Elle, I’d move in with you tomorrow if it was an option. I’m just saying you’re talking about giving up an awful lot. Your school, your friends, your country...at least for a few years. I just want you to take some time and be sure you’ve thought it through.”

She smiles, giving me that sly look of hers that usually leads us to bed. “You really think this is a spur-of-the-moment decision? I’ve already started filling out the application. I know the tuition, the cost of living. I know what classes I’d take. I even know how many blocks apart my school is from your office.”

I’m speechless. She is the best thing that has ever happened to me and that will ever happen to me. And I don’t care what her parents or mine have to say about it—I am never going to let her go. “I guess I’d better start teaching you French.”

She pulls my hand. “I learn better naked.”

Yep. Definitely never letting her go.

