

THE Love You Deserve

EPILOGUE

Josie

“Ready?” I glance at Cory before ringing the bell on Mom’s front door, wanting to give him a minute, but he grins and reaches past me to press the button.

“Hell yes. I can’t wait to meet your mom.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Butterflies swirl in my belly as I hear Mom’s footsteps inside. I tuck and untuck my hair from behind my ear, my nerves mingling with excitement. “I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

“I can’t tell you what it means that you invited me, Joze.” Cory reaches for my fidgeting hand, gently lifting it to kiss my palm. “Your mom is going to be so happy to see you.”

Guilt ripples through me as I gaze up at him. He’s always so supportive, but I’m not sure how he’s going to feel when I tell him the news I’ve been sitting on—that Gerard offered me a paid job at Animal Oasis, and last week I accepted. I’ve only been back at Bounce for a few months since leaving in the middle of the year, and every night Cory tells me he couldn’t run the bar without me by his side. How am I going to tell him I’m leaving—again?

The door opens and Mom stands there beaming. “You’re here!” she cries, pulling me into a hug. My throat tightens as she squeezes me hard, as if one hug can make up for five long years of not seeing each other.

God, I should have come home sooner. I won’t let that much time pass again.

My cheeks are wet when we finally draw apart. “I’ve missed you, Mom.”

She dabs at my cheek with her sleeve, pausing to hold my face in her hands and take a good look at me. “I’ve missed you too, Sugarplum.” She plants a kiss on my forehead and turns to Cory. “You must be Cory. I’m Mariam. I’m so glad you’re here.” Before Cory can say a word, Mom pulls his huge frame into a hug. She’s only five-foot-three so Cory has to stoop way down and I laugh.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Cory says as they draw apart. He’s grinning so hard my chest feels like it will burst.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Mom pats Cory’s arm, then glances past him. “I thought you were bringing the dogs?”

“They’re in the car,” I say, gesturing to our rental. “Should we bring them in now?”

“Absolutely.” Mom smiles. “I’ve set out water bowls and toys and everything.”

Of course she has. “Thanks, Mom.”

Cory turns to me. “Why don’t you two catch up while I unpack the car and round up the trouble-makers?”

I laugh. “Okay. Thanks.” I step up onto my toes to kiss his cheek, then follow Mom inside. The sweet, spicy scent of gingerbread cookies baking in the oven wafts over to greet me as I toe off my shoes, and I glimpse the Christmas tree in the corner, where Mom and I have always had it. There’s a tug in my heart as I look at the presents stacked underneath, then glance at the familiar floral wallpaper and framed photos of me and Mom on the wall.

Wow. Coming back here after being in the city for so long feels weird—almost like stepping back in time. As I wander across to look at the pictures, I realize I’m not the same woman I was when I left Austin five years ago, chasing a man who didn’t really want me halfway across the country. Sadness trickles through me as I think about her and how misguided she was, but when I glance out the front window, and see Cory unpacking our bags from the car, the feeling is quickly replaced with gratitude. It might have been a bumpy road to get here, but I’m glad for every pothole and wrong turn. If I hadn’t taken that path, I wouldn’t be standing right here—with a ring on my finger from a man who adores me, about to spend Christmas with my mom. There’s nowhere I’d rather be.

I smile to myself as I turn into the kitchen, my heart full.

“So,” Mom says, peeking out the window as she slides another tray of cookies into the oven. “He’s a tall drink of water, isn’t he?”

A laugh bursts out of me. “Yes, Mom. He is.”

She watches Cory wrestle with the dogs on the driveway. “He’s a little older than I expected.”

I grimace as I slide onto a stool at the breakfast bar. I know what she’s thinking—she’s thinking of my ex, who was also older. We all know how that ended. “Yes, but... he’s not like Paul.”

Mom’s gaze comes back to me. “I know. I could tell the moment I saw him on the doorstep. The way he looks at you...” She shakes her head with a chuckle. “I’m so glad you’re happy, Sugarplum. You deserve a good man.”

Something about those loving words from my mom makes my throat constrict. Remorse rushes up inside me and I blurt, “I’m sorry, Mom. I should have come to visit sooner.”

“Hey.” She rounds the breakfast bar, pulling me into another hug. “It’s okay. You’re here now. That’s what matters.” She gives me a squeeze and lets go, just as we hear the sound of claws scratching on the wood floor.

“Pretzel! Wait!” Cory’s heavy footsteps follow and he appears in the doorway with a dog leash in each hand, trying to kick off his boots as Pretzel and Inigo attempt to charge into the kitchen. I spring up to help him, laughing. Pretzel lunges at me as I grab his leash, dropping to pet him and calm him down.

“You’re such a good boy. Want to meet my mom?” He gives a little bark which I take to mean yes, and I rise to my feet with a giggle, walking Pretzel across the kitchen.

“Hi, Pretzel!” Mom crouches to his level, letting him lick her face. “I’ve heard so much about you, sweet boy.”

I unclip his leash and let him jump at Mom, knowing it won’t bother her. Then I go over to Cory and let Inigo off too, letting him run at Mom as well. She laughs and greets him with affection, then watches as the two dogs chase each other around the kitchen. Cory chuckles, sliding his arm around my waist as he watches the dogs play. I soak in the perfection of this moment, here in my mom’s kitchen, with the people and pups I love. Having everyone I care about the most in one spot is almost too much to bear.

“How was the drive?” Mom asks, motioning for Cory and I to take a seat at the breakfast bar. We slide onto stools and watch as Pretzel and Inigo discover the chew toys Mom bought for them.

“Long,” I say, laughing. Cory and I decided we’d drive instead of fly, and turn it into a road trip. I was surprised Cory was okay with taking so much time away from the bar, but I’ve noticed him stepping back a little more lately. He’s been so different these past few months—more like the guy I watched play cornhole in the sun on the Fourth of July. He laughs a lot, is more relaxed, and generally just seems... happier. Seeing him like this has made me happier too, but also anxious to tell him about the shelter job.

“How are things at the shelter?” Mom asks, as if reading my mind.

The guilt from earlier winds through me and I glance away from Cory. “They’re good,” I murmur. I can feel Cory’s eyes on me as I shift uneasily on my stool, desperate to move the conversation along.

He clears his throat. “I’ll take the bags up to our room. Which—”

“Straight ahead at the top of the stairs,” Mom answers for me. “You can’t miss it.”

I hear him go and breathe out. I’m going to have to tell him soon; I don’t want this hanging over me for the holidays.

“You okay, Sugarplum?”

I look up to find Mom watching me as she rinses a bowl in the sink. With a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure Cory is out of earshot, I tell her about the shelter job.

“You think he won’t be happy for you?” Mom asks, drying her hands on a dishtowel.

“Oh, no—he will. He always supports me.”

“So what’s stopping you from telling him?”

“I...” Huh. It occurs to me as I ponder this that perhaps my reluctance to tell Cory is less about how he’s going to take it, and more about me feeling sad to leave Bounce. I exhale. “Ever since I’ve been in the city, I’ve spent my evenings working with him. Taking on this new job means that’s going to change.”

Mom nods. “Yes, it will, but is change a bad thing?”

I think back to who I was when I left this place, and the woman I am now, and

shake my head. “No, it’s not. I guess it will just take some getting used to.”

Mom smiles and steps around the counter, leaning over to squeeze me again. “Go tell him, Sugarplum. I bet he’ll be thrilled for you.”

Cory

I set the bags down, glancing around Josie’s bedroom. There’s a chair in the corner piled with stuffed animals and a poster of New York above her bed, which makes me smile. The day I met her, she told me she’d always wanted to live in the city, and wasn’t going to let her breakup keep her from staying. When she mentioned that the one thing that would send her back to Austin was not being able to get a job, I immediately offered her one. I don’t think I was fully aware of what I was doing, but on some level I guess I knew. I knew she was the woman I was supposed to be with, even if I wasn’t ready at the time. I thank God every day she was patient enough to wait for me to come to my senses.

I wander over and pick up a stuffed Dalmatian from the chair, smiling. This room is so perfectly Josie. Mariam is exactly how I pictured her, too—kind and sweet, like her daughter. I love seeing into this part of Josie’s life, and knowing I’ll always be part of it now. I’m the luckiest bastard on the planet.

“I see you’ve met Spot,” Josie says behind me, and I turn around with a grin.

“Spot?”

She shrugs, coming over to take the stuffed animal from my hand and smile down at it. “Not a very creative name, I know, but I was a kid.” She dusts off Spot’s head and gives him a kiss before setting him back on the chair. I gaze at her, wanting nothing more than to haul her into my arms, but when her gaze flits to mine then away, there’s an uneasy twinge in my gut. She’s been a little off the past week and I assumed it was because she was nervous about coming home after being away for so long, but after settling in with her mom she still seems on edge.

“Buttercup,” I murmur, reaching out to stroke her cheek. “Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you, or do I have to draw it out of you with some form of torture?”

She arches a brow. “What kind of torture did you have in mind?”

I chuckle. “Given your mom is downstairs, it won’t be anything fun.” I drop a kiss on her forehead, pleased to see her soften a little. “I’ll recite football stats until

you cave.”

She huffs a laugh, stepping away and lowering herself onto the edge of her bed. “God—no. Okay, I’ll tell you.” She pats the spot next to her and I sit, watching as she inhales. “Gerard offered me a job at the shelter, and... I’ve accepted.”

Oh.

I wait to feel disappointment, but instead relief washes through me. Ever since Josie turned down the job at Animal Oasis earlier this year I’ve felt awful. I know how much she loves that place and I couldn’t help but think that if things had been better with us at the time, she would have felt comfortable taking the job instead of staying at the bar.

I pull her into my arms, smiling. “That’s awesome, Joze. I’m so glad.”

She twists to look up at me. “You are?”

“Yeah. That shelter and those animals mean the world to you. You’ve given so much of yourself to that place and I think it’s high time you get paid for your contribution there.”

A tentative smile nudges her lips. “Thank you,” she murmurs, folding her hands on her lap.

I tilt my head, studying her. “What’s wrong?”

She sighs. “I’m going to miss working with you at the bar.”

“I’ll miss having you there, but the truth is...” I pause, scrubbing a hand over my beard. I hadn’t planned on bringing this up yet, because Rob and I haven’t ironed out the details, but now that she’s told me about the shelter job, it makes sense. Besides, I’m excited. Being with Josie has made me optimistic about the future in a way I’ve never felt before. Not just my future with her, but my future in general—my own dreams.

I take a deep breath. “Things are going to change, anyway. Rob’s been talking to me about the possibility of expanding. He’s interested in opening a gastro-pub in Chelsea and wants me to partner with him.”

Josie’s eyebrows spring up. “Really? I love that idea.”

“And I was thinking, if that goes ahead and I hire a manager to run Bounce, I could work better hours in the new place.” I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately. Not just as a business opportunity, but as a chance to free up more of my evenings—to free up time for Josie, and to become a dad.

She nods. “That would be nice. We could do normal couple things at night, like go to the movies or snuggle on the sofa. I love spending my nights at Bounce, but sometimes... I think it would be nice to do those things.”

I smile, leaning down to press my mouth softly to hers. “I think so too. I never really had a reason to want free time before, and now I do. I want my time free to do things with you. I want my time free to start a family. I’m hoping that will be soon.”

Her eyes are full of love as she gazes back at me. “I hope so too,” she whispers. Her lips meet mine and I wrap my arms around her, pulling her back onto the bed with me.

“I love you so much, Joze.”

She strokes a hand across my cheek. “I know. Why else would you get it inked on your skin?”

I chuckle as her hand strays to the hem of my shirt.

“Can I see it again?”

“Sure.” I shift my weight so she can pull my shirt up, exposing the extra star tattooed on my ribs. I got the first three in my early twenties—one each for me, Cat, and Mom; our family. A month after Josie accepted my proposal, I realized I needed another star for her.

“I still can’t believe you did that,” she murmurs, tracing the outline with her fingertip.

“Why?”

“It just seems so... permanent.”

“That’s why I did it. And when we have a family of our own, I’ll expand on it.”

Her eyes move over my face, wide and searching. “You will?”

“Yes.” I roll onto my side, capturing her mouth with mine. “I want a whole galaxy on there, Buttercup.”

Her eyes shine as she kisses me again. “I love you so much, Cors.”

I move to kiss her back, but something lands on top of me, furry and panting. I roll over with a groan to find Inigo, followed by Pretzel, joining the pile on the bed.

Josie laughs, tugging Pretzel into her arms and squeezing his wriggling body.

“Cookies are ready!” I hear Mariam call from the bottom of the stairs and Josie sits up with a grin.

“My mom makes the best gingerbread cookies. Come on.” She pushes to her

feet as the dogs leap off the bed, and reaches out to pull me up. Her hand is warm in mine, and as we head downstairs, I realize I've never felt more at peace. Things are going to change with the bar, and with me and Josie, in the best possible way.

I've never been more ready.



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