

LAKEFRONT BILLIONAIRES



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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*To those who see themselves as broken.
I hope you find someone who admires your scars for what they
are: A sign of your struggle and a testament to your strength*



CHAPTER ONE

Ellie

“Unbelievable.” Being a glutton for punishment, I continue scrolling through the article on my computer, ignoring the way my stomach tightens with every line of betrayal.

America’s sweetheart and world-renowned folk-pop star Ava Rhodes is expected to release her sophomore album this summer with MIA Records. The record label first discovered her during an open mic night at a local Los Angeles bar, where Darius Larkin found the future breakout star singing a cover of “Lies and Stolen Lullabies.” Later that year, Ava released her critically acclaimed debut album, Looking Glass, which skyrocketed her career and won a Grammy.

The journalist goes on to boast about Ava’s successful first album, which shot her to stardom and won Album of the Year. It was an album *I* helped cowrite, although the public doesn’t know since my name was never listed in the production credits.

The dull pain in my chest returns, all thanks to the invisible dagger Ava embedded in my back a year ago.

“Everything okay?”

I look up and find myself pinned in place by a pair of rich brown eyes. The color and deep undertones might be warm and welcoming, but the man they belong to is anything but.

After working for Rafael Lopez as his son’s live-in nanny for eight months, I thought I would’ve gotten used to his intimidating gaze, but it still holds the same power over me now as it did when I first met him.

Objectively speaking, my boss is handsome. With a face that belongs on a magazine cover, a deep voice that drips with quiet authority, and enough height and muscle mass to make me—the town’s resident tall girl—feel small and dainty, he checks every box.

Hot single dad with more emotional baggage than London Heathrow Airport during Christmas? Check.

Brilliant tech billionaire who teamed up with his cousin to create Dwelling, the most popular real estate app on the market? Painfully cliché yet impressive nonetheless, so check, check.

A philanthropist with a life mission to find and rescue mistreated animals before fostering them in his backyard barn? Triple check *and* triple threat.

In fact, I could spend the next thirty minutes listing Rafael’s redeeming qualities, but nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, would make up for his biggest con.

He is my boss.

Whatever silly spark of attraction I felt toward him since we were teenagers no longer mattered once I was hired as his son’s nanny. While it was difficult at first to ignore the way my heart raced whenever my old high school crush looked at me, it only took

a few encounters to ruin the fantasy I'd created in my head about the lonely Lake Wisteria single dad.

My change of heart has nothing to do with his post-divorce wardrobe change and the lumberjack aesthetic he has maintained for the last two years, but rather the rugged personality that comes along with it. I can deal with an ungodly amount of flannel shirts and picking up after Rafael's dusty cowboy boots, but I draw the line at his constant scowls and insistence on making me feel like an outsider despite working for him for nearly a year.

He shifts in place on the other side of the kitchen island, casting a shadow over the marble countertop. "What's wrong?"

I jerk back. "Why are you asking?"

He scratches at the thick, short beard that covers half his face and neck. "Does it matter?"

Kind of, seeing as he has never bothered asking me before. So rather than open myself up to being vulnerable, I stick to the status quo.

"I'm fine." I shut my laptop with a surprising amount of self-control.

"If you're going to lie to my face, then at least look me in the eyes while doing so."

"I am not lying." I drag my gaze away from his.

"Good try. Now do it again without breaking eye contact. That ought to convince me then."

An image of me wrapping my hands around his throat flashes before my eyes. I'm not a violent person, but something about Rafael always brings out the worst in me.

His eyes narrow. "Are you picturing my murder again?"

"In graphic detail."

"Poison?"

“Asphyxiation.”

His eyes have a rare glimmer to them. “Switching it up?”

“Nico suggested it.”

“My son is giving murder advice now?”

“Are you seriously surprised? His favorite comic book is about a *villain*.”

His mouth curls a fraction of a centimeter. The small, mundane gesture wipes away my bad mood about Ava and replaces my bitterness with enthusiasm.

“You smiled!”

“No.” His lips press into a thin line, but it’s too late.

“I know what I saw.” I bite back my grin as I walk over to the magnetic dry-erase board attached to the fridge and add a tally below the pinned photocopy of his high school superlative page.

I was only a freshman when he was a senior, but everyone knew who Rafael Lopez was. The Wisteria High student body was obsessed with him, including me, although I’d deny it until my dying breath. To be fair, it was impossible not to be, with his devastating good looks, otherworldly athleticism, and charming yet nerdy personality.

During the time Nico and I have kept count of Rafael’s smiles, I’ve yet to witness one like the bright-eyed grin from his high school years. The photo is evidence that even the brightest stars can fade away, becoming a fraction of what they once were.

It’s hard to believe the person who won *Best Smile* has only done so twelve—now thirteen—times in the last three months since I jokingly invented the tracker to cut some of the tension in the house.

Between Nico keeping his father at arms’ length and Rafael going out of his way to avoid uncomfortable situations with his son, they both could use a little humor in their lives.

God help them if you're considered the comedic relief.

I'm the friend people go to when they need a stiff drink or a good cry, not the one they turn to for a nice laugh, but I'm doing my best here.

"One day I'm going to tear that photo into a hundred pieces," Rafael says to my back.

"Do that, and I'll replace it with one of your baby ones." I cap the dry-erase marker and return it to its spot above the board.

His eyes narrow. "What are you talking about?"

"Turns out your aunt has a whole collection of photo albums dedicated to you."

He blinks twice. "She showed you those?"

"Yup. Right before she brought out some old home videos." My gaze flicks over him. "For someone so surly and antisocial, you sure wanted to be the center of attention when you were younger. But who could blame you with that karaoke machine of yours?"

His tan cheeks slowly turn pink. "It was Lily's machine, not mine."

"Really? I couldn't tell with how much you hogged the mic."

"She and Dahlia forced me."

Blaming both of his family friends only makes me want to embarrass him more, even though I know he is telling the truth about the machine belonging to the Muñoz sisters.

"No one asked you to go *that* hard on singing the Spice Girls. That much I can guarantee."

His blush quickly spreads to the rest of his face. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I pull out my phone. "I have a video of it in here somewhere that could jog your memory. Just give me a second..."

"You filmed it?"

“Obviously. Whenever Nico and I are having a bad day, you dressed up as Sporty Spice always makes us laugh.”

“I was an athlete.”

“Who also knew every lyric to ‘Wannabe.’”

He sighs like I’m the biggest inconvenience in his world.

“Remind me why I put up with you?”

“Because you love your son more than you dislike me.”

A long crease appears on his forehead. “I don’t dislike you.”

“But do you like me?”

His palm brushes over his short beard. “I’m still deciding.”

“Anything I can do to speed up this lengthy decision-making process?”

“Quit?”

I chuckle to myself, and his gaze drops to my lips.

“What?” I wipe at the corner of my mouth.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

I pull out my cell phone and double-check my teeth just in case.

“Ellie!”

My phone slips from my grasp as Nico shouts my name from the opposite side of the house. It clatters to the floor, and I curse with a hiss as I bend over to pick it up. My blond hair falls in front of my face and hangs around me, blocking my view of everything but my lit-up phone.

The base of my neck tingles, and I peek over my shoulder to find Rafael’s gaze focused on my ass.

Oh my God. Why is he checking me out?

I shift my weight, and his eyes follow the length of my leggings, confirming the truth. If it were anyone else, I would take it as a compliment after spending too many years picking at

my appearance and complaining about my small boobs, ass, and barely-there curves, but Rafael isn't someone else.

At least not to *me*.

Catching him checking me out isn't something I expected, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't excite me a little.

My stomach swoops as I stand upright. The sudden motion rips him out of his temporary lapse of judgment.

Before I have a chance to mutter a single word, his gaze shifts from heated to bored in the blink of an eye. If I weren't so taken aback by his interest, I would be impressed by how he schooled his features in a millisecond.

In the months I've worked for Rafael, he hasn't shown the slightest bit of interest in me or any other woman in town. Rumor has it that Rafael hasn't been with anyone since he divorced his ex-wife, Hillary, over two years ago.

After working here for eight months, I can confirm that, despite Rafael being one of the most eligible bachelors in town, he is completely disinterested in any kind of connection, including a platonic one.

Nico calls my name again, and his impatience becomes my saving grace.

"Coming!" I rush toward the kitchen exit.

"Eleanor?" Rafa's deep timbre has me turning in place.

A shiver rolls down my spine as I turn to face the grumpy giant across from me. "Why do you insist on calling me that?"

I'm surprised he can effortlessly shrug with how much his trap muscles must weigh.

I swallow back the urge to say something that could get me fired. "Everyone calls me Ellie."

"I know," he says after a long pause.

“Yet you insist on calling me by my full name for some annoying reason.” Usually, I’m even-tempered, but there is something about Rafael that seems to draw out my claws.

“Do you have a problem with that?” His dry tone grates on every single one of my nerves.

I battle between speaking my mind and ignoring his obvious attempt at getting under my skin.

“Ellie!” Nico yells louder this time, deciding for me.

“Coming right now!” I take a few steps toward the hallway, only to halt midstride. “Did you need something?” I ask Rafael in a sickly sweet voice.

“Not anymore.” He walks over to the fridge and yanks the door open, making the bottles on the side shelves rattle. I don’t take his dismissal personally since he spoke to me more in the last few minutes than he has all week.

Rafael has always been moody, but over the past month, I can barely get him to speak more than a few words at a time. Most exchanges end as they started, with me questioning why I bothered trying to connect with him in the first place.

People like Rafael don’t mix well with people like me. I feel way too much, and he barely feels at all. Opposites don’t attract, no matter what propaganda teachers spew in fourth-grade science class while distracting kids with magnets.

I bolt from the kitchen before Nico comes searching for me instead. My fuzzy pink socks, which were a colorful Christmas gift from Nico because he says I wear too much black, muffle the sound of my footsteps as I walk down the long hallway toward the back of the house.

Despite Rafael having enough money to make his great-great-great-grandkids billionaires one day, he purchased land near the outskirts of Lake Wisteria, far away from the coveted lake and its

million-dollar views. At first, I thought he chose this property because he needed space for a barn and the animals that live there, but I've since learned the truth.

Rafael is hiding from the world.

Despite the lack of neighbors, everything about the Lopez house feels charming, with vibrant paint colors Nico picked out himself, a movie room with the comfiest reclining chairs and our choice from the latest blockbuster releases, and a master nanny suite that is triple the size of my old Los Angeles apartment. It has everything I could need and more, with its own separate guest entrance, private sitting area, gorgeous spa bathroom, and a canopy bed that makes me feel like a princess.

I find Nico standing beside the elevator Rafael had installed to help his son navigate the three-story house easily, tapping his sneaker against the hardwood floor with an irritated expression on his cute little face. He is taller than other kids his age thanks to his father's DNA, which gives him the illusion of being older.

"What took you so long?" He snatches my hand and pulls me inside the elevator car.

"I got distracted."

"By what?"

"Your dad smiled."

"Really?" Nico stares at me with eager eyes.

That look right there is the main reason I created the smile tracker in the first place, because whether Rafael realizes it or not, his son cherishes his smiles. They're a symbol of hope and happiness—two things that have been severely lacking in this house as of late, although I haven't figured out why.

I reach over his dark head of hair and hit the button for the basement. "It was small, but I caught it."

“Wow. Two days in a row,” Nico says in disbelief.

“Looks like I may win that bet after all,” I tease halfheartedly. If Rafael smiles every day for thirty consecutive days, then Nico promised to let me borrow his favorite action figure for a month.

To a kid, those stakes are higher than me winning the lottery and retiring at the young age of twenty-nine.

“Oh no.” He fakes distress.

“It’s okay if you lose. I’ll even agree to shared custody.”

He hip-checks me with a giggle, and I ruffle his dark hair in retribution. The smile on his face dies as he looks up at me with narrowed eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing.” His defensive tone catches me off guard. Although I’m used to that kind of tone from his father, I’ve never heard Nico speak like that before.

Nico pulls his glasses off with a frown and wipes the lenses with the edge of his blue T-shirt. He always loves to pick out his own outfits, and today’s attire features thick red frames that match his comic book graphic tee and red basketball sneakers.

The elevator doors open, but he is too focused on cleaning his lenses to move, so I block the doors from closing and wait. He gets increasingly frustrated as he struggles with the task, but I refrain from helping him, no matter how much I want to.

Like every other eight-year-old kid, Nico wants to be autonomous, especially given the retinitis pigmentosa condition he was diagnosed with about eighteen months ago. According to my late-night Google searches, promoting independence is important, especially as his vision progressively worsens and he gets more frustrated by having to rely on others.

He places his glasses back on his face with thinly pressed lips.

“All good?” I ask.

“Yup.” He squints at my face before rubbing his eyes.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” His harsh tone stuns me as his body brushes against mine on his way out of the elevator, resembling his father so much in that moment.

I clear my head with a quick shake. “All right, sir. Take the attitude down a notch before I make you practice the recorder today instead.”

My comment seems to pull him out of whatever funky mood he was in, and he sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We all get grumpy sometimes.” I follow him out of the elevator and into the basement.

Soon after I was promoted from Nico’s after-school music tutor to his live-in nanny, Rafael converted the unfinished basement into a music studio for his son, mainly due to the drum set his godmother bought him. The large open space is decked out with soundproof insulation, state-of-the-art recording studio technology, and enough instruments to create a whole album if I wanted to.

My stomach sinks at the idea, but I’m quick to recover.

I spin the ring covering my pinkie tattoo. “What do you feel like playing today?”

Nico’s gaze bounces between the display wall of string and brass instruments and the drum set before landing on the black grand piano. “Piano.”

“Really?” If it weren’t for Rafael insisting that Nico practice the piano and violin at least twice a week, I doubt he’d bother with anything but the drum set. Usually, I have to pry the drumsticks out of his hands.

“I want to try something new today.” Nico heads for the bench with a pinched expression that tugs on my heart.

I take a seat beside him, ignoring my impulse to ask him what’s wrong. “Show me what you got, little rock star.”