
THE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

This short story takes place after One Night Only, so should be read after the book has been completed.

“Lulu,” the voice calls to me across as I walk across the carpark towards my car.

I stop walking and turn around to look in the direction of the voice.

“Yes?” I ask. I wait for Theo to catch up with me.

“I was going to offer to walk you to your car,” he says, giving me a small smile.

“How very gentlemanly of you, offering to walk me from here to there,” I tease, pointing to where my car is parked, two car distances away.

Undeterred by my teasing, he shrugs and starts walking again, and I walk with him.

“I’m glad it’s Friday,” he comments.

"Yep, me too, it's been a long week."

"Late finishing today," he adds.

"Yep. Had a lot to get through, surprisingly." I smile slightly. It's long past the time people usually leave the office. I'm sure that aside from the security guard, we're the last to leave today.

"Do you have any good plans for the weekend?" he asks as we reach my car. I open the door and drop my bag onto the seat, turning to look at him.

"A few bits. How about you?"

"Me? Yeah, I have plans."

"Anything good?"

"I'm getting married to the love of my life," he comments, and then all the teasing in him is gone.

He takes a step closer towards me, pulling me into his arms.

"I thought you had maybe forgotten," I joke, laughing at his earlier nonchalant conversation.

"How could I forget anything related to you?" he murmurs, kissing my temple.

"I hope you're going to give me a better kiss than that given you're determined to stick to this idea of a night apart," I grumble.

"I am sure you'll survive for one night," he teases.

Before I can respond, he pulls the end of my ponytail. It's a gentle tug, tipping my head back slightly. He smiles and then kisses me. It's a beautiful, all-consuming kiss, the type only he knows how to give. I'd sell my soul for his kisses.

He pulls away from me, right at the point I think I could lose my breath.

"You're still planning on a chaste church kiss for tomorrow, aren't you? I don't want to faint in church," I joke once I've regained a bit of my composure.

“I promise. So, tonight, are you, Fee, and Jess going to rush off anywhere for a second hen party?” he asks, and it makes me chuckle.

“No, we will be having a quiet night at my dad’s house. We’re going to have a nice dinner and I’m going to get my beauty sleep and miss being in bed with you. Are you planning on visiting anywhere scandalous tonight?”

“Nope, you know I’m only scandalous when I’m with you,” he says with a laugh. “I’m playing a couple games of pool with Ryan and Adam, and then home to my empty bed.”

“I’ll miss you tonight,” I tell him. I can’t remember the last time we spent a night in different beds.

“I’ll be dreaming about you,” he murmurs, pulling me close and giving me another kiss.

“I should go, before Dad and Tia send out the search party,” I grumble when I force myself to pull away.

It wouldn’t take much to convince me to leave here with Theo and to go to the beautiful home we built together. I love our home because it is always filled with noise. Whether it is the music that we play in the background, or conversations and laughter between us, or when the house is filled with all of our friends when they visit – I love it. Most importantly, it’s our space and a place where I never feel like I need to be anybody but me.

I wouldn’t be considering a night in my childhood home if it wasn’t something that will make my dad happy. Dad’s such a good guy. It was us two for so long after my mother died, years where we muddled along together but we were always close. He’s always been there for me, and I know he loves the idea of having his little girl at home the night before her wedding – even if I’m long past the point of being called a girl.

“Love you, Lulu,” Theo declares. He gives me a kiss on the cheek.
“Shall I phone you later?”

“Phone me at ten to wish me goodnight,” I suggest. He gives me another smile, and I get into the car. He shuts the door for me and gives me a little wave. He waits and watches as I drive away from the office.

As I leave the car park, I throw him a little wave. Then I drive away, leaving him behind, smiling to myself that the next time I see him, it’ll be as I walk down the aisle to become his wife.

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“Okay, Dad, you are stressing way too much right now,” I scold. Dad makes no attempts to stop pacing around the living room, so I look at Tia who gives me a small smile.

“I don’t think anything is going to calm him down, Eloise. He’s been counting down the hours to the wedding,” she says and she chuckles when Dad stops pacing, turning to her with his eyebrows raised.

“You’ve been just as excited,” he retorts.

He’s not wrong. Tia may have only been in my life as more than a work colleague for a few years, but she’s been excited about the wedding. Nobody could ever have replaced my mother, but Tia does her best to try. She came dress shopping with me, Fiona and Jess. She joined me, Theo and Dad when we went to sample the cakes and menu for the wedding breakfast.

Loving Theo has demonstrated to me that family may not always be blood, but the people you choose – those people who stand up to support. Tia has done that with me. Ryan’s parents do that for Theo. I adore them for the way they love Theo like an extra son, there as almost surrogate parents given both Theo’s were killed in a plane

crash. I know they'll be with him now, along with Ryan and Adam, and doing the things the parents of the groom would do.

"I know you're both excited, but you have to calm down. Maybe go get some fresh air as I get into my dress," I suggest.

Jenna, the hairdresser who has been working on my hair gives me a wry smile as I walk towards the door. I wonder how many times she sees neurotic fathers as she does the hair for brides and bridesmaids.

"We'll keep him calm," Fiona promises.

Fiona looks beautiful in her bridesmaid's dress, as does Jess. This morning, after the makeup artist had been, I'd told them they both looked beautiful. Fiona and Jess had both countered that it was because they were rested, given both of their children stayed with grandparents last night. Apparently, a night off from parenting duties, with another night scheduled, is not to be scoffed at.

"Do you need a hand?" Jess asks. I shake my head.

"No, you chill out and enjoy some peace and quiet. I'll be fine, but I'll come down for help with the zipper if I need," I reply. I leave them all in the living room.

I walk up the stairs to the bedroom I had when I lived here. My wedding dress hangs on the wardrobe. I take another look at the layers of tulle and lace, the boned bodice, the long a line shape, the beautiful strapless neckline and the still-modest-but-quite-daring dipped back.

I shrug off the dressing gown that I have on. Underneath, I'm already in my wedding lingerie. On the top of my head, my curls woven around it, sits my mother's tiara – the one she wore to her wedding to my dad. All I need now is my dress and then we're ready to go to the church.

I pull the dress from the hanger and carefully step into it. I do the zip as much as I can by myself. There is a soft little knock at the bedroom door.

"I'm decent," I call. I half expect it to be Fiona, but instead it is my dad who steps into the bedroom.

"You look beautiful, Eloise," he says.

"You're looking amazing yourself, Dad," I retort.

"I thought I'd check if you needed your dress zipping up," he explains.

I nod and smile. I turn around so he can see my zip. He steps towards me and zips the dress up for me. I glance at my reflection in the mirror across from me.

"Thanks, Dad."

"You look so much like your mother. I'm sure she's looking down on you right now and beaming with pride," he says, sounding gruff and hoarse. "She'd approve of Theo. He's a good man, Eloise. I know you don't need anybody to take care of you, but I love knowing he'll take care of my little girl."

"She'd approve of Tia as well, Dad. She's a good woman. I know you don't need anybody to take care of you, but I love knowing she takes care of my dad." I throw his words back at him.

Dad gives me another smile. He offers me his arm.

"Are you ready to get this show on the road?" he asks.

"Can't wait to be rid of me?" I tease.

I slip my arm through his and let him lead me out of my old room. I pause at the top of the stairs and gather the bottom of my dress so I can walk down the stairs easily.

"Oh, wow, Eloise, Theo is going to lose his damn mind," Jess exclaims when I reach the bottom step.

"Is everybody ready?" I ask.

"Yep. The cars are here, they arrived just after Jenna left," Fiona says.

"Perfect. Okay. Let's get this show on the road," I proclaim.

Tia walks out of the living room, carrying the box that houses bouquets of flowers. She puts it onto the ground and makes swift work of pinning the buttonhole flowers on Dad before handing Jess and Fiona their little posies of flowers. She gives me my bouquet, smiling as she hands over the colourful spray.

Theo and I had agreed – no white flowers. Not in the bouquet. Not in the buttonholes. Not in the centre pieces. All the flowers are colourful – bright and happy. We’ve had enough white flowers to last us a lifetime.

“I wonder how Theo’s doing,” I muse as we walk out of the house. Jess and Fiona pick up the skirt of my dress so that it doesn’t drag on the floor as we walk towards the sleek wedding cars that are parked outside Dad’s house.

“Ryan messaged me earlier. He’s feeling pretty smug right now,” Jess says, laughing heartily.

“Why does he feel smug?” I wonder.

“Theo told you Ryan was a bit neurotic before our wedding, right? Well, Ryan’s lapping up the fact that Theo is currently pacing as he waits for you to arrive,” she explains.

“Oh, poor Theo.” I chuckle.

Theo regularly jokes about how nervous Ryan was before the wedding. I hadn’t noticed any nerves when I arrived as Theo’s date. Most of my memories of that wedding day take place in the evening – when Theo and I disappeared from the reception and started the first steps of our relationship.

“Let’s go put the poor boy out of his misery,” Dad proclaims.

He opens the car door for me – the fancier of the two. Everybody helps me in so my dress is neat. Dad gets in beside me and closes the door. We watch as Tia, Fiona and Jess get in the other car and then drive away. Our driver starts the engine and then starts the short route

to the church where Theo waits for me, and where our new chapter in life will start.

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The ceremony is beautiful. We both get teary eyed. My cheeks ache from smiling as we stand in front of one another in the church. The kiss to seal our vows is as chaste as Theo promised it would be, but I get the taste of the promise for more on his lips.

My cheeks ache even further as we pose for what feels like a million photographs outside the church. I can't stop smiling, and nor can Theo.

It feels like it takes an age for us to be in the car by ourselves, traveling from the church to the place we are holding our reception. All the guests are ahead of us, in the transport we arranged for everybody.

"So, somebody told me you were nervous this morning," I tease.

"Nerves? Me? Never," he jokes.

"Liar," I shoot back, grinning at him.

"Maybe I had a few nerves this morning. I mean, I still pinch myself that I was lucky enough when you said yes. Well, I pinch myself that I was lucky enough you queue jumped that night in the club." He has a smile on his face as he talks.

"Theo," I say. I reach for his hand. "We are the luckiest people in the world. I'll spend every day of my life happy that I queue jumped and how my life changed—for the absolute best—that night. I wouldn't change a single thing. You make me so happy."

"You make me so happy too, Lulu."

"So, seeing as it is just us here, shall we have that non-church, non-chaste—"

I don't even have chance to finish my sentence before his mouth is slanted over mine, giving me one of his delicious kisses, making my heart race and my skin heat.

“Love you, baby,” he murmurs when he finally pulls away.

“I love you too.”

I keep my hand linked in his. We watch as the scenery changes around us until the driver turns up the driveway to the manor where we are holding our reception.

“Are you ready for more photographs?” Theo asks.

“With you, of course.” I chuckle.

“Got your speech?” he asks.

I tap the side of my head. “Up here.”

“I hope mine is as good as yours,” he muses.

“Theo, you are the king of wedding speeches. You’ll have me crying, I’m sure.”

“The evening entertainment is going to be fun,” he comments.

“Karaoke. I cannot wait.” I grin at him. It might be an unusual entertainment for what looks like a fancy wedding reception, but I am looking forward to the karaoke.

I’m looking forward to everything – the reception, the entertainment, the singing, our first night as husband and wife, and the long honeymoon we have planned. I’m looking forward to the fun and the laughter and the joy in our lives.

“I’m looking forward to everything with you, Lulu,” Theo murmurs.

I beam at him. I’d be willing to bet there has never been a happier bride than me right now, and from the look on Theo’s face, I’m sure he thinks there has never been a happier groom.

The car pulls to a stop outside the manor. A banner hangs above the entrance: “Congratulations to Theo and Eloise”. A second banner hangs above one of the windows. This one reads: “Welcome, Mr and Mrs Goldman O’Connell.”

“Still set at the double-barrel surname?” I ask.

“Of course. Equal partnership,” he reminds me. I’d told him I didn’t want to lose my surname. His immediate response was to merge them, and I loved him even more because of it.

We get out of the car, smiling at our friends and family members. There are shots of confetti fired, the bright pieces slowly floating down on the slight breeze, lighting up the view in front of us with colours. There is laughter and happiness all around us, and all I can focus on is how much love I have in my heart for my husband, and the beautiful life that lies ahead.