
THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

In One Night Only, Eloise and Theo have both had heartbreak in their previous relationships. There are no specific spoilers for One Night Only as the below takes place before the story, but this is more about Eloise and Daniel's relationship.

“Oh, Lou, please tell me you are going to stop texting when you’re supposed to be enjoying yourself,” Fiona groans when she catches me on my phone during a break from the singing and dancing. Everybody else is still on the dance floor. We’ve been at the table for ten minutes, having a drink and catching our breath, but the pull of checking the mobile had been too much to ignore.

"I'm not texting," I protest. It's true, because Daniel hasn't responded to the last message I'd sent him, confirming where I was with my friends.

"Well, what messages is lover boy sending you that has you so invested?" she queries, and then she grabs the phone from my hand. I'm not bothered, there's nothing inappropriate in my messages with Daniel, and I don't typically keep secrets from Fiona.

"He's not my lover boy," I argue. It's been a week, far too soon for anything significant to have happened between us. We're at the hand-holding and soft goodnight kisses stage of a relationship.

"I was being poetic. He sure sends a lot of messages," she comments, scrolling through my message thread with him.

"He's consistent, and chatty." I shrug.

This was something that Daniel had said to me on our first date, that he thought it was a sign of a healthy relationship to have open, honest, and regular communications. That night, we'd exchange numbers over the dinner table and then he'd driven me home. We'd shared a kiss on my doorstep and about ten minutes after I shut the door behind him, he'd texted me to tell me he'd had a wonderful night. Now, he texts in the morning to wish me a good day, and always one in the evening to wish me goodnight. Between those, there are texts peppered throughout the day, musing of his day, telling me he's thinking about me.

"You seem to like him," Fiona muses, handing my phone back to me.

"I'm tentatively excited about what this could become." I smile at her.

"Well, I'm looking forward to meeting him given you seem to be grinning like an idiot when he's mentioned." She rolls her eyes at me, but I'm not offended. Fiona and I often keep each other in check. If

one of us is getting too carried away with a guy, the other brings them back to earth.

“Are we getting back to the dancing or are we going to hit up the karaoke bar?” I ask, putting my phone away into my pocket.

“Come on, I think we are ready to get onto the stage for some dancing, and then we’ll hit the karaoke bar,” she says, laughing.

Fiona rises from the booth, pulling me with her. We walk up towards the stage area, past the rest of our friends who are dancing, heading to the stage at the back of the bar. We come to this bar often, and we tend to end up dancing on the little makeshift stage at some point in the night.

As we walk to the stage, the song changes to one of my all-time favourites. I turn and grin at Fiona.

“Oh my God, this is like a special birthday treat!” I exclaim.

I hop onto the stage, and she joins me, us both joining in singing along with the song. The group of friends we’re with shout out in excitement, laughing at our exuberance. When we get to the chorus of the song, Fiona pulls me close, kissing me on the cheek and then spinning me around on the stage.

As I finish spinning, I spot Daniel. He’s in the middle of the dance floor, one hand on his hip, and I could swear that he looks a little disappointed, but then his gaze meets mine and the big smile is on his face, dimples on display, that boyish charm making my heart thump in my chest.

I hop down from the stage, pulling Fiona with me to stand in front of Daniel.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Daniel says, shouting a little to be heard over the music.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” I exclaim. “This is Fiona,” I tell him.

“Nice to meet you, Daniel, I have heard a lot of good things about you.” Fiona grins at him, and she takes her hand from mine so she can hold it in front of Daniel for him to shake.

For a second, he looks uncertain, too long of an awkward pause before he takes her hand to shake it. I remind myself he’s probably not used to being in situations where people shake hands as a greeting. He works in software; he’s told me it’s quite an insular and remote role, not particularly conducive to teambuilding. It’s different for me and Fiona. I work as a Project Manager. I meet what feels like a million people and shake hands regularly. Fiona uses handshaking as a way of establishing trust with the women at the charity she works for.

“I’ve heard things about you too,” Daniel says.

“All good, I hope.” Fiona laughs as she looks at me.

“Of course. I wouldn’t slander my best friend,” I tease.

“I hope you don’t mind us turning up,” Daniel comments.

As soon as he says ‘us,’ I see Eleanor standing a bit further at the back, near the bar. She looks a little overwhelmed, but I imagine this isn’t the kind of place she frequents often. She stands in the bar, looking like an outlier to the rest of the crowd. It isn’t her outfit that makes her look out of place, though her plain, long black dress is a contrast to everybody else in their sparkly party outfits. It’s the arms folded across her chest that makes her the outlier. She looks uncomfortable, and I feel bad that Daniel’s clearly dragged her here so he can see me.

It’s the first time I’ve seen her since the day I’d moved in, but I’ve heard a lot about her from Daniel, about their friendship, adventures they’ve taken together. I know she’s important to him, so I want to make a good impression on her. I don’t want to be some person he’s abandoned her and their plans for.

I pull my gaze from Eleanor and back to Daniel, smiling at him.

“Of course I don’t mind, I’m happy you’re here, but let me introduce Fiona to Eleanor, and get her a drink,” I suggest.

I pull Fiona with me to Eleanor, Daniel at my heels. Eleanor drops her arms to her side as I approach her, there’s a new, bright smile on her face which replaces the pinched expression she’d had before.

“So lovely to see you again, Eloise,” she shouts to be heard above the music.

“Eleanor, this is Fiona, my best friend,” I announce.

Eleanor gives Fiona the once over, but she turns her attention to me.

“Are you having a fun evening? Daniel insisted we popped in to meet you,” she explains.

“I’m glad you could come. I’ll introduce you to everybody else all in a bit, none of them like to be pulled off the dancefloor.” I laugh.

“You looked like you were having fun on stage,” she comments.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask. “Fiona and I are drinking the Croakin’ cocktail, it’s really nice,” I suggest.

“I’ll get the drinks. Why don’t you three lovely ladies sit down, and I’ll bring everything over,” Daniel suggests.

I beam at him and walk with Fiona to the booth where all our things are. I’m halfway over when I realise Eleanor has followed Daniel to the bar rather than coming with us.

“Oh, I’m not sure I’m making a good impression on her,” I complain to Fiona as we sit down.

“I’m sure you’ll charm her when you’re on neutral grounds. I assume this just isn’t her type of place to have fun in.” Fiona shrugs.

“I hope I can charm her. I really like him, Fee.”

She laughs. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“What do you think of him?” I ask.

“I spoke to him for all of two seconds. Ask me later,” she suggests.

"I'll ask you in the morning when your handover has worn off," I shoot back, grinning, and she leans over to playfully smack my hand.

"We can dissect my opinion over a bacon sandwich," she offers.

"Can't wait."

I settle back in my seat, waiting for Daniel and Eleanor to arrive with the drinks, excited at us all getting to know one another, hoping that Daniel will love my best friend as I do, and that I can forge a friendship with Eleanor, because I've had a lot of fun talking to Daniel over the last week, and for the first time in a while, I'm excited about the future.

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The bright lights of the morning make me throw my arm over my eyes, groaning as I try to shield myself from the pain.

I roll over in Fiona's spare bed, reaching for my mobile phone that I vaguely remember throwing onto the floor last night when we'd come back to hers.

My fingers connect to the phone, and I pull it towards me, squinting at the screen. On the screen is an alert that I've had a message from Daniel and I'm sure that's the reason I've woken up so suddenly.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment to try to get them to work properly. I'm not particularly hung over because I hadn't had much to drink last night, but I'm tired because we didn't get home until three once the club closed. Eleanor and Daniel had declined to attend, telling me they had early starts this morning. Eleanor had mentioned an early class, but I can't remember why Daniel couldn't stay.

I open my eyes again and now I can see properly. The message on the screen from Daniel reads: *'I didn't realise you were such a party girl.'*

I sit up in bed and think about last night. I know it wasn't too wild or rambunctious, but the lack of any emoji at the end of his message makes me think there is a little bit of judgement in his message. He

and Eleanor had only stayed for a few drinks before they'd left, and all we'd done was drink a few drinks and dance.

I type a message back. *'I don't consider myself to be a party girl, but we were celebrating my twenty-fifth birthday.'*

I send the message and then hold my breath, wondering if I did something wrong last night. Did I say something silly? Was it my outfit, because he hadn't seemed too impressed with my short skirt and high shoes. Maybe he just didn't expect to see the exuberant side of me given the other times we have seen one another; I've been a little more subdued.

As my phone beeps, I let out the breath I have been holding and read his message.

'Would the birthday girl be free tonight for a dinner date?'

I smile to myself and type back a yes, I'd be delighted.

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"This is a very nice restaurant, you seem to pick out the best restaurants for our dates, should I be concerned that you have a list of places to take the ladies?" I tease as I get settled in my seat across from Daniel. It's a different restaurant to the one he took me on our first date, but it's just as fancy.

He flashes me a smile. "You don't need to be concerned about anything, Eloise, I asked around for the best places to take the amazing woman I've met."

"Well, if that's me, consider me flattered," I joke.

"It is for you."

"I was concerned this morning when I got your first text. I wondered if I'd scared you off last night."

"No, not now you've explained that's not a regular occurrence for you." Daniel smiles and then he picks up his menu.

"What do you mean about a regular occurrence?" I wonder.

He puts his menu down and stares at me.

"I mean the dancing on the stage, and the singing. It's not particularly behaviour I'm used to seeing from women. Most females I go out with, friends and girlfriends, they're not that extroverted, I guess." He shrugs and reaches to pick his menu up again, but I reach and touch the top of the menu, holding it so I can keep his attention. I don't know why but his use of the word female makes me feel a little funny inside, but I shake it off. It's just an odd choice of word.

"I enjoy going out with my friends. I like dancing. I'd quite like it if we went dancing, too." I give him a small smile so that he doesn't think I'm complaining.

"There's dancing and then there's that type of dancing."

"Do you do any dancing?" I wonder.

It's not like I expect him to take me ballroom dancing every week but it's nice to know a man is willing to dance. I love dancing, and I love when I'm in places where couples are dancing. There is something so beautiful about a couple dancing together. A friend of my father's got remarried last year and I still get a warm glow when I think about the couples dancing, like they were in their own private bubbles of happiness and love as they swayed to the slow, romantic music.

"I'm not a huge fan of dancing. I'm probably a bit more introverted than you," Daniel states.

"Well, I guess dancing is something I'll have to continue doing with my friends, if I can't convince you to get on the dancefloor with me. I'm sure we can find something else to do together, like dining in fancy restaurants." I give him another smile and then release my hold on his menu so he can reopen it.

He smiles and opens his menu, looking engrossed in the pages. I pick up my own menu and look at the options. I wonder if he's going to have a starter or a dessert. We'd just had a main course on our first

date, even if I'd have loved a dessert, even if just to extend the time we were talking and getting to know each other.

Daniel lowers his menu.

"Eloise?"

"Yes?"

"I love your hair like that. It makes you look very classy," he comments.

I smooth down the hair that I've spent ages straightening. I don't straighten it often, mostly because it is too much effort and I love my natural curls, but occasionally I like a change, to turn up somewhere looking like an entirely different person than my usual bouncy curls.

"I thought I'd show you what it looked like," I say.

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

"It depends on the time. I'm supposed to meet my dad for tea. He likes to cook a traditional roast," I explain.

"I was hoping I could take you shopping, so I could buy you something for your birthday."

"Oh, you don't need to buy me anything, you've only known me for a short while," I protest. He puts his menu down and reaches across the table, holding my hand.

"It might not have been long, but I feel like this could really become something, and I want us to start how I mean to go on. I have something in mind for your birthday present, but I'd need you there."

"What are you thinking?" I wonder, curious.

"I'm building up a picture of you and I think you're somebody who likes shoes, so I'd quite like to take you shoe shopping. What do you think?"

I smile at him because he's not wrong. I do like shoes. I wonder if he saw how many of my boxes were labelled 'footwear' when he'd seen my moving boxes.

“That would be lovely.”

“Well, I can pick you up early tomorrow, and then maybe if things run late, I can drop you at your dad’s house in time for dinner.”

“If you drop me at my dad’s house, he’d be offended if you didn’t come in, so I’d only offer if you’re not going to get scared away by meeting him. I know it’s a little early for any meet the parent kind of activity.” I chuckle.

Dad’s always waiting on the driveway for me to arrive for Sunday dinners, so there is never a chance of being sneaky. He’d insist on Daniel coming in to eat, and that could be awkward if Daniel felt put on the spot. Dad always cooks too much, so an extra mouth to feed wouldn’t go amiss. I think he still cooks as if Mum is still around.

“I’m not scared.” Daniel smiles broadly, and then he returns to his menu, leaving me to pick up mine as I try to ignore the little skip in my heartbeat about the conversation, pleased that Daniel thinks this could be something special, and that I didn’t ruin things last night.

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“So, how was the rest of your weekend?” Fiona asks over tea on Monday evening. It’s her turn for cooking. After we moved out of our shared place, we agreed we’d have tea at each other’s house every Monday, and I’m loving our tradition. I’m trying not to get too distracted by the smell of the chicken she’s frying for the fajitas.

“It was good. Daniel came for dinner at Dad’s yesterday.”

She glances at me, a look of surprise on her face. “I didn’t realise you were at that stage yet.”

“Well, he wanted to take me to town to get something for my birthday, and I’d mentioned I was having dinner with Dad, and he didn’t seem fazed at the idea.”

“Oh, well, before I bombard you with a million questions of what your dad thought about Daniel, what did he get you for your birthday?” she asks.

“Some shoes, and he insisted on buying me a dress as well. I think he wants me to wear it when he takes me out next time.”

“Smart choice on the shoes. Have you pictures to show me?” she asks, moving away from the frying pan so she can pick up the tortilla wraps. My stomach rumbles because I know that the food is nearly ready and I’m really hungry.

“I have pictures. I’ll show you once you’ve dished up,” I suggest. I reach for the carton of juice she’s left on the little table in her kitchen, pouring us both a glass.

A minute later, she’s pushing a plate of fajitas towards me, making my mouth water in anticipation.

“Show me before you start eating, I know what you’re like when you get going on the fajitas,” she jokes.

I reach over for my bag, getting my mobile phone. I open my photographs, finding the ones I’d send to Daniel yesterday. He’d asked me to send a photograph after he’d dropped me home after Dad’s house.

I slide my phone towards Fiona. I watch as she wrinkles her nose but quickly rubs it like she’s trying to pretend it didn’t happen.

“That’s not your usual style, Lou,” she comments.

“Maybe, but it’s comfortable to wear. It’s nice,” I counter.

Truthfully, the dress isn’t anything I’d particularly buy for myself if I was shopping. It wasn’t even from a shop I’d usually go into, but somewhere Daniel had steered me into with determination. Most of my dresses are either a vibrant colour or a patterned fabric, rather than anything plain, and the ones that I do have in a plain black are usually short and strapless. This is a black dress, ends mid-calf, and has sleeves

that end at my wrist. It's now the only long-sleeved dress I have in my wardrobe.

"At least the shoes are nice," she concedes.

"You should have seen the ones that he wanted to get me."

"Do tell."

"Flat ballet slipper type ones. I feel like they're the type he sees perfect Eleanor in," I admit. They're so far removed from the style of shoes I'd wear, but when I'd picked up a pair that had caught my eye that I loved and wanted to buy for myself, Daniel had made a comment about high heels. I'd still purchased the shoes because they'll look amazing with my suits for work, but I got the sense he was disappointed, until I'd picked up the pair that he did buy me, a compromise between the two extremes in style.

Fiona snorts. "The day I see you in shoes like that, I'm going to march you to the shops and sort you out," she vows.

"Here, these are the ones I got for work," I say, leaning over and swiping on the pictures to the ones I took of my new shoes, knowing she'd want to see them.

"Much more your style," she confirms. "Now, eat up, before your fajitas get cold," she coaxes. I need no further persuasion, picking up one and taking a big mouthful.

"Oh, Fee, marry me and cook me fajitas every night," I plead.

She chuckles. "What are you going to do for me in exchange?"

"I promise to keep the house tidy, and buy you a pomegranate every week," I promise. She smiles and leans over to ruffle my hair.

"Don't ever change, Eloise," she says before picking up her own fajita and taking a bite. She finishes her food and looks at me. "You're pretty perfect exactly as you are, and don't let anybody convince you otherwise."

"I won't, I promise," I vow.