

What the Sky Couldn't Hold

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1

Gate 12, 6:17 PM

The terminal was quiet in that specific, stretched-out way it only got after the final afternoon departures had cleared a stillness that clung to the air like static, too wide and too tired to carry anything important. Callum stood beside the arrivals screen, not looking at it. He wasn't waiting for a flight. Not really.

His shift had ended twenty-three minutes ago. He could've gone home. Most nights he did. But sometimes, lately, he lingered in the quiet, in the soft buzz of announcements that didn't concern him, in the thin chance she might be there.

Elodie Hayes.

He didn't know her schedule. Not exactly. Just that she came through now and then — usually wearing her mum's old lanyard, trailing a suitcase and an unbothered smile, the kind people wore when they knew how to leave without hesitation.

He'd seen her four times. Five if you counted the first the day she walked past staff security wearing a navy coat that didn't quite fit and boots that did. She hadn't looked at him, but he remembered the way her gaze had scanned the space like she already knew the exits. Like she never expected to stay long.

The first time they spoke, it had been about coffee. She was sitting on the wide windowsill outside the break room, sipping from a paper cup like she wasn't in a rush, like time owed her something.

"Looks cold," he'd said.

She didn't look up right away just gave a half-smile and said, "Still better than what they serve in the air."

That was it. He'd gone back to work, but her voice had stayed. Dry. Confident. Unapologetically calm.

Since then, he noticed the moments she passed through. Not because he meant to watch for her but because the airport always seemed louder when she wasn't around.

Now he stood in the same spot again. Same worn floor tiles. Same view of the tarmac through fingerprinted glass. The sky outside was cracked with pink at the edges, like a sunset that didn't know if it wanted to stay or leave.

A flight from Barcelona was due to land. She wouldn't be on it. Probably. But maybe her mother was. Maybe Elodie would be waiting outside arrivals, slouched against the wall, bored in that beautiful way she wore boredom.

Callum had no plan. No reason to be here.

He just wanted to see if she'd show up.

And maybe just maybe — this time he'd say more than he did last time.

2

Somewhere Between Terminals

Elodie hated airports when she wasn't leaving.

There was something about staying still in a place built for departures that made her itch. Every echo of suitcase wheels, every delayed announcement, every bored child kicking their mother's leg — it reminded her she was meant to be somewhere else.

But she was here.

Waiting.

Again.

Her mum's shift was supposed to end at 6:30. Probably would. Probably wouldn't. Cabin crew hours weren't real hours. They ran on time zones, delays, and gate changes.

Elodie had learned early on never to ask when only where.

She leaned against the tiled pillar just past arrivals, one boot scuffed up against the wall, scrolling half-heartedly through her phone. Not checking for anything. Just pretending not to be looking around.

He was there again.

The guy by the screen.

She didn't know his name. Not yet. But she knew the way he stood like he was always halfway through leaving but hadn't figured out where to go. He wore his lanyard like it belonged to someone else. Like maybe he still wasn't sure this place fit.

She remembered the coffee conversation.

He'd said something quiet, almost awkward. She'd answered like it didn't matter because it didn't. Not really. But then she thought about it later. On the train home. On the escalator. In the shower.

She'd thought about him.

Not because he was particularly striking though he wasn't bad to look at. But because he didn't talk like airport people usually did. He didn't try to charm her. He didn't overshare. He just... noticed. And there was something rare in that.

She glanced up now, just long enough to catch him not looking at her.

But not looking on purpose.

She smiled without meaning to.

It was small, but real the kind you could miss if you didn't know her.

Elodie wasn't here for long. Two days. Maybe three.

She'd fly out again by the weekend. Madrid. Or Lisbon. She couldn't remember. But tonight, she was grounded. Just another girl in an airport with a mother still in uniform... and a stranger she might speak to again.

If he speaks.

If she lets him.

And maybe just maybe this time she'll answer like it matters.

3

Gate 12, 6:28 PM

Callum caught the movement before he saw her face.

A shift in the light. A reflection in the glass. That slight change in the air that happens when someone you're thinking about steps into the room.

There she was.

Same boots. Same effortless presence. Leaning against the tiled column just past arrivals, like she'd been part of the building all along. She wasn't looking for him — not directly. But she wasn't avoiding it either.

He pretended not to notice. Not because he didn't want to but because he didn't trust what might happen if he did.

There was a kind of gravity in her stillness. Like she belonged to motion, but had learned how to pause just long enough to draw people in.

He turned, slow and casual, toward the vending machine. As if he were deciding between crisps and chocolate. As if he hadn't already bought something two hours ago just to pass the time.

She glanced up. Just for a second.

Their eyes met.

Not long. Not dramatic. But enough.

She smiled.

Small. Crooked. The kind of smile someone gives when they already know the ending to a story but want to hear you tell it anyway.

Callum swallowed whatever line had started forming in his throat. Something about the arrivals screen being frozen again. Or the vending machine always skipping B7. Something useless. But safe.

He didn't say it.

Instead, he picked the chocolate bar, punched the number, and dropped the coins in too fast. The machine groaned, buzzed, then clunked it out like it owed him something.

He turned, hoping she was still watching.

She wasn't.

She'd gone back to her phone. Or was pretending to.

Callum walked past her. Slowly. He didn't stop. He didn't speak.

But he set the unopened chocolate bar on the windowsill as he passed.

Just enough of a pause to make it clear it wasn't accidental.

Just enough silence to say what he couldn't.

Then he kept walking.

4

The Windowsill

Elodie didn't look at the chocolate bar right away.

She heard it land a soft thud on the windowsill beside her but kept her eyes on her phone, pretending to scroll. Not because she wasn't curious, but because something in her knew the moment mattered more if she let it breathe.

He didn't stop.

Didn't wait.

Just kept walking, like that was all he'd come to do.

She waited five seconds. Maybe ten. Then she looked.

It was nothing special. Just a standard bar the kind you grabbed when you were too tired to think and too polite to leave empty-handed. But it was also exactly the one she always bought at Gatwick before a flight. The same one her mum used to pack in her bag when she was ten and hated the air pressure.

Coincidence, probably. But still... it made her smile.

She picked it up, ran her thumb along the wrapper, and glanced down the concourse.

He was still walking slow, like someone who didn't want to look back but kind of hoped there'd be a reason to.

Elodie wasn't the type to chase. Or follow. Or initiate, most of the time. She preferred to hover just outside of things until someone invited her in.

But this time, she stepped away from the pillar.

She didn't call out. Didn't say his name because she still didn't know it.

She just walked.

Not fast. Not dramatic.

Just... toward him.

He heard her. She could tell by the way his shoulders shifted slightly, like he was caught somewhere between surprise and hope.

She stopped beside him. Held out the bar.

“I don’t take snacks from strangers,” she said lightly, like it was a joke. But her voice cracked just enough to let the moment in.

Callum looked at her properly this time. No glances. No pretend distractions. Just... her.

He smiled. Not big. Not clever. But real.

“I was hoping you’d break that rule,” he said.

She held the bar up between them. “This is bribery, you know.”

“I know.”

“And it worked.”

They stood there for a second, neither moving. Neither rushing. The airport buzzed quietly around them, but none of it touched this little pause this perfect, ordinary moment that could've passed them both by.

Then she unwrapped the chocolate, broke it in half, and handed him a piece.

“Still better than what they serve in the air,” she said.

And this time, she meant it.

5

The Quiet After

They didn't sit down.

Didn't walk off together.

Didn't exchange names, numbers, or anything else people usually did when moments like this happened.

They just stood.

Half a chocolate bar each.

A silence between them that, somehow, didn't feel awkward at all.

Callum wasn't sure how long it lasted. A minute. Maybe two. But it folded into him soft, quiet, and dangerous in the way hope always was.

He thought about saying something else.

A question. A compliment.

Even just: What's your name?

But all the words turned to static in his head, like a radio stuck between stations.

So instead, he smiled that tired, slightly crooked version he used when everything he wanted to say was sitting too close to the surface.

Then she said, "I should probably go find my mum."

Not goodbye.

Not nice talking to you.

Just... I should go.

But the way she said it — slow, almost reluctant it didn't sting.

Callum nodded. "Yeah. Of course."

She stepped back. Just one step.

Then: "Thanks for the chocolate."

He watched her go.

Didn't follow.

Didn't stop her.

And afterward long after the buzz of the concourse returned to full volume he sat on a bench near the service door, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and exhaled like he'd been holding his breath since she showed up.

This was exactly the kind of moment he'd play back later at 2 a.m., on the walk home, while brushing his teeth. A dozen different versions. A dozen different things he could've said. Should've said.

But he didn't.

Because deep down, Callum had never been good at starting things.

He was good at observing. At waiting. At letting people go.

He knew what to do with absence.

Presence was harder.

Because presence came with weight. With risk. With the chance of being seen and maybe not being enough.

So when he'd seen the girl with the boots and the confidence and the air of someone who never stayed long, he'd told himself to stay out of it.

And then she smiled.

And then she walked toward him.

And now it was too late to pretend he wasn't in it.

He didn't know what came next.

He just hoped it wasn't over.

6

Two Platforms From Home

She didn't cry.

Not when she walked away.

Not when she found her mum, still halfway through a debrief with her crew, laughing like she hadn't been on her feet for ten hours.

Elodie didn't cry when they hugged. Or when she pretended the chocolate bar had come from a vending machine. Or when they got on the train together and sat in separate rows because the carriage was full.

But now two platforms from home, alone on a bench with her coat too thin for this kind of wind she felt it.

Not tears. Not exactly.

Just... pressure.

In her chest. Behind her eyes. In the part of her mind that kept replaying how he'd walked away like he hadn't left something behind.

She'd expected the chocolate to be a one-time gesture. A quiet maybe. But when he didn't follow it with a question, a name, or even a see you, it settled differently in her.

Elodie didn't like wanting things she couldn't hold.

And he? He felt like something that could slip through her fingers even if she wrapped both hands around him.

That was the problem with grounded boys. They didn't chase.

They waited.

And she didn't know how to ask anyone to wait for her.

The thing was she had noticed him. Long before the chocolate. Long before the coffee. He moved like someone used to being overlooked, but not in a bitter way. Just... quiet. Careful. Like he didn't want to take up space he wasn't invited into.

And Elodie had always been drawn to quiet things.

Until they asked her to stay.

She pulled her knees up onto the bench and rested her chin on them.

Maybe he'd be there next time.

Maybe he wouldn't.

Maybe this was one of those almos

The kind that follows you not loudly, but enough to make you wonder.

She pulled out her phone. Thought about finding him. Asking his name. Something. Anything.

But she didn't.

Not yet.

Instead, she opened her notes app and typed two words:

“Still here.”

She didn't know what she meant by them.

But it felt like something.

7

Seventeen Days

He didn't see her the next day. Or the next. Or the fourteen after that.

Seventeen days — not that he was counting.

But he was.

Callum tried to pretend he wasn't watching the doors at Arrivals. Tried not to time his lunch breaks around the usual long-haul returns. Tried not to pause whenever he passed the vending machine the one where he'd picked the chocolate without thinking and ended up saying more than he had in months.

But his body remembered, even when he tried not to. His steps slowed. His eyes wandered. His chest tightened for no reason at all.

Seventeen days was long enough to convince himself she wouldn't be back.

But not long enough to stop hoping she would be.

He told himself he was fine.

That it had been one conversation. One moment. A smile, a bar of chocolate, a half-joke about bribery. Nothing more.

But it had been more.

Not in volume in weight.

It had shifted something inside him. A quiet space where possibility used to sleep. Now, it stirred.

He thought about her voice. The way it dipped at the ends of sentences, like she was never quite giving you all of it. The way she moved through the terminal like it was temporary. Like everything was temporary.

Maybe that's what drew him in.

She didn't stay.

And he always did.

The contrast felt like a match and a warning all at once.

Callum sat on the bench near Gate 12 most nights after his shift. Not every night. But enough that the cleaner with the grey gloves started nodding at him like he was part of the furniture.

He didn't know what he'd say if she came back.

He just knew he wouldn't let it be silence again.

Not this time.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the wrapper from the last chocolate bar he'd bought — the same kind. Unopened. Untouched.

Still there.

Just like him.

8

Return to Gate 12

Elodie didn't come back for him.

Not officially. Not in any way she could explain without sounding like someone who believed in signs or fate or second chances.

She came back because her mum had forgotten her passport.

That was the reason. The real one.

Her flight wasn't until tomorrow, and there was no emergency but her mum had panicked and asked her to swing by the crew lounge and bring it before check-in

opened.

It was routine.

Boring.

Simple.

But Elodie had hesitated.

She'd stared at the passport sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter right beside the kettle — and felt her stomach do a small, stupid flip.

She told herself not to read into it.

Not to think about chocolate. Or benches. Or a boy who looked at her like she might be worth staying for.

But she wore the same coat.

And the same boots.

And when she reached the edge of Arrivals, she didn't go straight to the lounge.

She stopped.

Just for a minute.

Gate 12 hadn't changed. Still scuffed tiles. Still the vending machine humming in protest at nothing. Still that slightly sour smell of old coffee and recycled air.

And him.

Still him.

Sitting on the bench with his elbows on his knees, head tilted like he was half-listening to the noise around him and half somewhere else entirely.

He hadn't seen her yet.

That made it worse.

And better.

Elodie didn't move at first. Just watched him. Noticed how still he was. How steady. Like he didn't need anything to fill the silence around him.

It was her who always ran.

It was her who left.

And yet... here she was.

She started walking before she made the decision.

One step, then another. Like the ground was doing the choosing for her.

He looked up.

Saw her.

And this time, he didn't pretend not to.

He stood.

They didn't smile right away.

They just looked.

And something in her chest — the part that always lifted
when a plane did — finally settled.

9

The Second First Time

Callum stood too quickly.

He hadn't planned this. Hadn't rehearsed anything in his head. Hadn't let himself believe she'd actually come back at least not while he was still standing here like someone who didn't know how to leave.

But she had.

And now she was walking toward him.

The chocolate bar wrapper was still in his coat pocket. Crinkled now from restless fingers and half-made decisions. He almost reached for it but stopped. She wasn't here for nostalgia. At least... not just that.

When she stopped in front of him, they didn't say anything at first.

She tilted her head same slight smirk, same unreadable softness in her eyes.

"You're still here," she said.

Callum gave a slow, awkward smile. “Could say the same about you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m just passing through.”

He nodded. “Aren’t we all.”

That made her laugh. Quiet, but real. It landed somewhere in his chest.

“I’m Elodie,” she said suddenly, like she’d just remembered to offer it.

He nodded once. “Callum.”

They stood there like that — introductions hanging gently between them, as if they’d only just met. And in some ways, they had.

She shifted her weight, glanced past him toward the bench. "Mind if I sit?"

"Not at all."

They walked to it together, sitting with a space between them wide enough for a stranger, and small enough to feel intentional.

It was quiet again, but not heavy.

Callum looked straight ahead. "I wasn't waiting, by the way."

She smirked. "Of course not."

"I mean, not... obviously."

“Obviously.”

Another beat of silence.

Then she asked, “Do you always stay after your shift?”

He nodded. “Not always. Just... lately.”

She looked at him. “Why?”

Callum didn't answer right away.

Because you might show up.

Because I couldn't stop thinking about the way you said
better than in the air.

Because I haven't been able to stop picturing that half-
smile.

He shrugged instead. "It's quieter here after the rush. Easier to think."

She leaned back, watching him carefully. "And what do you think about, Callum?"

He didn't lie. But he didn't tell the full truth either.

"Nothing useful."

She smiled again.

And this time, he did too.

10

The Kitchen Light

She didn't tell her mum.

Didn't mention the boy at the airport or the conversation on the bench. Didn't bring up the way he said his name, or how it sat in her chest like something worth keeping.

They talked about groceries, and laundry, and the weather at Tenerife base the kind of light, floating dialogue Elodie was good at. The kind that skimmed the surface and never asked for too much.

But after dinner, while her mum scrolled through crew messages, Elodie stood in the kitchen with the light off, leaning against the counter with a glass of water and that weird little smile you only wear when something real has just happened.

She wasn't used to real.

She was used to movement. To moments that blurred together. To people who flirted fast and vanished faster. She was used to being looked at but not seen.

Callum hadn't said much.

But he'd seen her.

She could feel it in the way he didn't push. In the way he didn't try to be clever. In the way he left space for silence without needing to fill it.

That kind of quiet could be dangerous.

Because it didn't ask you to perform. It invited you to stay.

Elodie didn't know what to do with that yet.

She sipped her water and stared at the fridge like it might give her some kind of answer.

Tomorrow, she'd leave. Again. Her bag was half-packed upstairs, and her mum had already reminded her twice not to forget her ID this time.

There was no plan to see him again.

No exchanged numbers. No "see you soon." No next step.

And yet... it didn't feel finished.

That was the part that got to her the open edge of it. The unfinished sentence.

She pulled out her phone. Opened her notes app again. Looked at the last two words she'd typed:

Still here.

Underneath them, she typed one more:

Callum.

11

Three Letters

He didn't see her leave.

One minute she was beside him on the bench, unwrapping half a joke into something real and the next, she was gone. Swallowed back into the rhythm of an airport that had never slowed down for anyone but somehow always seemed to pause for her.

Callum didn't chase her.

He wanted to.

But he didn't.

He stayed on the bench for another ten minutes, maybe twelve, replaying the sound of her voice over and over until it no longer felt like memory just possibility.

When he finally stood, he expected the evening to feel the same as it always did. Grey tiles. The hum of vending machines. Announcement tones that never fully faded into the background.

But it didn't.

Something had shifted. Just slightly.

He walked toward the exit, hands in his pockets, not really looking where he was going. That's when he felt it.

A folded piece of paper.

Not the chocolate wrapper that was still there too but something else. Something tucked neatly into the inside pocket of his coat.

He stopped under the pale blue light of the corridor and pulled it out.

Three letters.

Scrawled in handwriting he didn't recognize yet but already knew.

CAL.

No note.

No explanation.

Just that.

Callum.

She'd left her name.

And taken his.

It wasn't a message, not exactly. But it said everything she hadn't said out loud that she remembered. That she'd wanted to leave something behind. That maybe just maybe she wanted him to find her again.

He folded the note once more, carefully, and slid it back into his pocket like it was something breakable.

And for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel like he'd been left behind.

He felt... chosen.

If only for a moment.

And maybe that was enough.

Or maybe it was just the beginning.

12

Cruising Altitude

Somewhere over Spain, Elodie stared at the seatbelt sign and thought about ground.

Not just land but steadiness. Stillness. The feeling of knowing where your feet were, and who might be waiting when you landed.

It wasn't a feeling she trusted.

She shifted in her seat, knees tucked awkwardly toward the window, earbuds in but music off. The couple beside her had fallen asleep with their arms crossed and their

heads tilted in opposite directions like strangers pretending they hadn't once been in love.

The irony wasn't lost on her.

This flight wasn't long. Just under two hours. But her mind had already stretched the time into something elastic a loop of thoughts circling back again and again to the moment she'd slipped that folded paper into his coat pocket.

She didn't know if he'd find it.

Or if he'd understand what it meant.

She barely understood it herself.

All she knew was that when she saw him again when he looked up and stood, no hesitation this time something in her shifted.

He hadn't asked her to stay.

But he didn't have to.

Not when he looked at her like that.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but her chest felt too full. Not in a bad way. Just... full.

With maybe.

With not yet.

With almost.

She reached for her phone, opened her notes app, and stared at the last entry:

Still here

Callum

She added a third line, quietly, like a breath she didn't want to draw attention to:

Next time.

She didn't know when that would be. Or how. Or even if.

But she'd written it now.

And somehow, that made it real.

13

Departure Board

Callum didn't normally use the departures board for anything other than checking if a flight was late enough to cause problems.

But now, standing in front of it with his hands deep in his jacket pockets, he scanned each destination like it might lead to a version of his life he hadn't lived yet.

Lisbon. Madrid. Tenerife.

All the places she'd mentioned.

Or maybe hadn't. Maybe he just imagined she had.

She'd left.

He knew that. He wasn't delusional.

But the note — those three letters, folded into his pocket like something stolen from a storybook had done something to him. Not loud. Not fast. But enough.

He hadn't stopped thinking about it since.

CAL.

It wasn't just his name. It was a door. Left cracked open.
And maybe, for once, he wasn't supposed to wait for
someone else to walk through it.

So he found a bench near check-in, opened his phone,
and searched her name.

Elodie Hayes.

Not much came up. A couple of blurry Facebook profiles.
One LinkedIn. A handful of tagged photos that might've
been her, might not.

He hesitated. Closed the screen. Reopened it.

He didn't want to chase her.

Not really.

He just didn't want to be invisible.

He pulled out the wrapper again, unfolded it fully for the first time.

There was writing on the back.

"I don't take snacks from strangers."

E

His heart kicked once.

It was her. It was really her.

She remembered. Not just the moment but how it had landed. The exact words. The way they'd circled each other in the silence between sentences.

He smiled. Slow. Stunned.

That was a reply.

A note in the wrapper. Hidden, but not impossible to find.
Like her.

He pulled out his phone again. Opened a blank message.
Not to send. Just to write.

Still here.

Callum.

Next time.

Tell me when.

He didn't press send.

Not yet.

But he saved it.

And for the first time in weeks, he didn't feel like time was passing without him.

He felt like it was waiting, too.

14

Room 317

The hotel room was beige in that global-chain kind of way. Same curtains. Same desk. Same too-soft bed with too many layers tucked in too tight.

Elodie dropped her bag on the chair, kicked off her boots, and fell backward onto the mattress with a sigh that didn't quite reach her chest.

Third city in five days.

New crew.

Same sky.

But she wasn't thinking about Madrid.

She was thinking about the bench.

The chocolate.

His name.

She hadn't planned on leaving that note not really. But her hand had moved before her brain caught up. Three letters. One small sentence. It felt like enough, then.

Now, she wasn't sure.

The silence since she left had grown louder by the day. And the thing about silence was, once you noticed it... it didn't go away.

She reached for her phone.

No new messages.

No social media follows.

No friend requests.

But she hadn't given him anything to find her with. Not really. Just a folded wrapper and a memory.

She should've said more.

She shouldn't have said anything.

She didn't know which.

Her fingers hovered over her notes app again. She opened it, scrolled past everything else, and tapped the last entry.

Still here.

Callum.

Next time.

She stared at it for a while.

Then she did something she hadn't done in months.

She opened the Contacts app.

Started typing: CAL...

Stopped.

Deleted it.

Instead, she opened Instagram.

Typed: Callum airport into the search bar.

Scrolled.

Scrolled more.

She didn't expect to find him.

But she kind of hoped she wouldn't not find him either.

After ten minutes, she gave up. Closed the app. Dropped the phone beside her.

And that's when it buzzed.

Once.

Then again.

Her heart jumped before she even looked.

But it wasn't him.

Not exactly.

Just a message from her mum.

A picture.

“Look who I bumped into on break.”

It was blurry, taken too quickly. But the face was unmistakable.

Callum.

By the vending machine.

Holding a chocolate bar.

Her mum had captioned it:

“He says hi. I think.”

Elodie smiled. Slow. Soft.

For the first time all week.

She picked up her phone, opened her notes, and added a fourth line:

Tell him I said hi back.

15

The Vending Machine

He hadn't expected to see her mum.

He was halfway through punching in the number for a chocolate bar he wasn't even craving when she appeared red lanyard, worn travel bag, and that unmistakable voice that sounded like she'd done this job in every country and every kind of weather.

"Still hanging around Gate 12?" she'd said with a wink.

Callum had smiled, because what else could he do?

He liked her mum. Had spoken to her a few times before — casually, in passing. She always looked at him like she knew more than she said.

And today, she looked at him exactly like that.

“You’re a quiet one,” she added. “But I’ve got a feeling you’re not as invisible as you think.”

He hadn’t known what to say to that either.

So he nodded, paid for the chocolate, and offered it out as a kind of peace offering.

She’d taken a picture.

“I’ll send this to someone who’ll appreciate it,” she said, and then she was gone sweeping off toward the lounge like she’d never paused at all.

Now, Callum stood by the vending machine, holding the bar, staring at the reflection in the glass.

He didn’t know if the picture would actually reach Elodie.

But a part of him — the part that had started writing drafts of messages he never sent hoped it would.

Later, on his break, he opened his phone and saw the notification.

A message.

“She said to tell you hi back.”

No name. No extra words. Just that.

But it was enough.

His hands stilled. His chest lifted slightly in that strange, invisible way — like catching the first moment of takeoff when you're not sure the wheels have actually left the ground.

He didn't write back.

Not yet.

He just opened the message again. And again.

And sat there, on the bench, with the chocolate still unopened beside him.

The silence didn't feel heavy this time.

It felt like a door.

Still open.

Still waiting.

16

Boarding Pass

Gate 12, Again

She didn't tell him she was coming back.

There was no message. No hint. Not even a vague, accidental post online that he could read too far into.

But when Callum walked past Gate 12 after a long shift, tired and still unsure whether he'd even stop, she was there.

Sitting on the windowsill again same boots, same coat,
same quiet presence that seemed to stretch time around
her like soft fabric.

Elodie didn't look up right away.

But she knew he was there.

She felt it.

Callum stopped, just a few feet away.

No chocolate this time.

No vending machine to lean on.

Just her.

Just him.

"Hi," he said.

She looked up, smiled the kind that lived halfway
between apology and invitation.

“Hi.”

Neither of them moved for a moment.

Then she shifted, tapping the windowsill beside her.

He didn't hesitate this time.

He sat.

The silence between them wasn't awkward. It felt earned now. Familiar. Like they'd spent enough time with it to know it wasn't empty just quiet.

She glanced over. “My mum says you've become a regular.”

Callum smiled. “Didn't mean to.”

“Liar.”

He laughed a soft, surprised sound, like it had caught him off guard.

She reached into her coat pocket and pulled something out.

Not a chocolate bar this time.

A folded wrapper. The same kind.

She held it out. “I figured it was my turn.”

He took it, slowly, like it might crumble in his hands.

Unfolded it.

On the inside, in her now-familiar handwriting, was a single line:

“I don’t take snacks from strangers. So stop being one.”

Callum read it twice.

Then looked at her. Really looked.

“What happens if I don’t want to be a stranger anymore?” he asked quietly.

She met his eyes.

“Then don’t be.”

17

Not a Stranger

They sat there for a while side by side on the windowsill, watching people pass with their luggage and voices and rushing lives. No one looked at them. No one paused.

And maybe that was why it felt safe to start saying things out loud.

“I almost didn’t come back,” Elodie said softly.

Callum turned his head but didn’t speak. He didn’t want to interrupt whatever this was.

“I had this whole plan. I was going to fly out, go straight to the hotel, forget the chocolate, the note... you.”

Her voice didn't crack, but her thumb moved restlessly along the edge of her coat sleeve.

"But I couldn't. I just kept thinking... what if you were still sitting here?"

Callum smiled — not out of pride, but something quieter. Gratitude, maybe.

"I was."

She looked at him. "Why?"

It was a fair question. Maybe a dangerous one.

He didn't answer right away.

Didn't rush it.

“Because,” he said eventually, “I wanted to see what happened if you came back.”

She blinked, then nodded. Not dramatic. Not emotional. But like she understood more than she let on.

“Okay,” she said. “So now what?”

Callum let out a breath that felt like it had been sitting in his chest since the first day she walked past him.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

And then, after a pause:

“But maybe we figure that out... slowly.”

Elodie smiled again. Tired. Warm.

“I don’t do fast anyway.”

He tilted his head. “You’re literally in the air half the time.”

“Exactly.” She smirked. “That’s why I like slow. It feels more real.”

They didn’t make any promises.

Didn’t exchange numbers.

Didn’t map out what happened next.

But when he stood to leave and she reached for his hand — just for a second — he didn’t pull away.

And that felt like a beginning.

18

Two Coffees, One Window Seat

It wasn't a relationship.

Not yet.

They hadn't defined anything.

Hadn't talked about what this was or where it was going.

But Elodie started flying back through his airport more often.

Sometimes for her mum.

Sometimes for a crew rotation.

And sometimes... just because.

She never admitted that last one.

Not out loud.

But she knew he knew.

They fell into a rhythm.

No labels. No schedules. Just a shared understanding.

Whenever she landed, if she had more than an hour,
she'd send a message:

“Window seat?”

Callum always knew what it meant.

The bench by Gate 12.

Two coffees hers with too much sugar, his black.

A quiet space that wasn't home, but started to feel like
something close to it.

They talked more now.

About ordinary things.

How she hated turbulence but loved takeoff.

How he hated silence but was good at living in it.

How neither of them knew how to say the right thing at the right time, but somehow kept saying just enough.

They didn't touch much.

A shoulder against a shoulder.

A passing brush of hands when one reached for the coffee cup.

But the space between them kept getting smaller.

And somehow, that was louder than words.

19

The Space Between

They hadn't met in three weeks.

Not because of distance. Not exactly. Elodie had flown in twice, but once her layover was too short, and the second time she didn't message him. She told herself it was because of timing — because she was tired, because she needed sleep.

But it wasn't timing.

It was fear.

Because things were starting to feel real.

Not dramatic. Not overwhelming.

Just... real enough to be terrifying.

Callum felt it too.

He didn't say it, but the last time she left — when she squeezed his hand and whispered, “Soon,” — something in him had gone still. Not disappointed. Just... cautious.

So when she texted again:

“Window seat?”

He didn't hesitate.

But his reply came slower than usual:

“Already there.”

They didn't talk right away.

They sat beside each other on the bench, coffees in hand, shoulders brushing every now and then with the movement of breath and shifting weight.

Elodie looked tired.

Not the kind of tired that came from flying.

The kind that came from carrying things you hadn't said yet.

Callum noticed.

He always noticed.

"Rough flight?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "Just a lot of silence."

He nodded. "Sometimes that's louder than noise."

She smiled at that, but didn't laugh.

There was a pause — the kind that usually felt natural between them. But this time, it stretched a little too far.

Elodie turned toward him, legs pulled up onto the bench now, one arm resting on her knee.

"Do you ever wonder what we're doing?" she asked.

Callum blinked. "What do you mean?"

"This," she said. "Us. The coffees. The windowsill. The almost-something."

He looked down at his cup, then back at her. “You think it’s nothing?”

She shook her head. “No. I think it’s everything. That’s what scares me.”

He swallowed. “It scares me too.”

They sat with that for a moment — with the kind of honesty that usually didn’t survive conversations like this.

Then she said, softer: “I don’t know how to hold something that stays.”

Callum didn’t answer right away.

Then: “I don’t know how to be something someone chooses to hold.”

That was it.

The confession neither of them had planned. The one that settled between them like a second heartbeat.

Elodie reached out. Slowly. Let her fingers rest on his.

Not a grip. Not a claim.

Just contact.

“I’m not asking for forever,” she said.

“I’m not offering it,” he replied. “Just... now.”

She smiled. And this time, it reached her eyes.

“Then let’s start there.”

20

Unscheduled

Callum didn't go to work the next day.

It wasn't a dramatic decision.

He wasn't sick.

Wasn't burned out.

He just needed air that didn't smell like recycled coffee and tired travelers.

So he called in, walked until his feet hurt, and ended up sitting on a bench at the edge of the park he used to pass every day without stopping.

Elodie didn't message that day either.

Which wasn't unusual they had never been a daily thing. Their rhythm had always been occasional, quiet. Like notes tucked into coat pockets.

But this silence felt different.

He opened his phone more than he wanted to.

Typed and deleted a message twice.

Closed the screen.

Waited.

Nothing.

Elodie didn't mean to go quiet.

But delays turned into cancellations, and one overnight layover became three. Her phone was out of battery for most of it, and by the time she reached the hotel, she didn't know how to start the conversation again without making it seem like an excuse.

She told herself he'd understand.

That he knew her well enough now to know it wasn't avoidance.

Still... she hated how easily time slipped between them.

By the time she returned to the UK, three days had passed.

Three days of nothing.

No texts.

No "still here."

No photo of a coffee cup or vending machine chocolate bar.

The silence felt heavier this time.

She didn't go straight to the bench.

She wasn't even sure he'd be there.

She wandered the terminal once. Twice.

Didn't see him.

So she sat down at the windowsill anyway.

Alone.

She stayed for seventeen minutes.

Then stood.

And that's when she saw it — tucked behind the edge of the vending machine:

A folded piece of paper.

She hesitated. Then took it.

Unfolded it slowly.

“I didn't know what to say. But I'm still here. Just... a little quieter today. Cal”

Elodie smiled. Closed her eyes. Exhaled.

Then reached into her pocket, pulled out a pen, and wrote three words underneath:

“I noticed anyway.”

21

Unspoken

Elodie didn't wait for him this time.

She didn't sit at the windowsill or stand at the bench. Instead, she walked straight to the vending machine, where she'd found his note.

And there he was not waiting for her either, but standing with a coffee in his hand like it had always been meant for someone else.

Callum didn't look surprised when she stopped beside him. He didn't need to.

He just stood there, quiet and steady, like he always did, letting her come to him when she was ready.

“Are you always this early?” she asked, trying to fill the silence that already hung between them.

He smiled, slow and thoughtful. “Depends on the day.”

Elodie glanced at him, taking in the little things his hands, his posture, the way his coat sat differently now, as if it were more familiar to him here than anywhere else.

“You left a note,” she said, her voice low.

He nodded, looking at the floor for a moment. “I wasn’t sure how to say it. But I guess I don’t really know what to say still.”

Elodie smiled slightly. “That makes two of us.”

The words hung between them for a beat. Neither of them moved. Neither of them had to.

“Maybe that’s what this is,” she said. “The not knowing. The not needing to say anything at all.”

Callum didn’t respond right away. He just handed her the coffee he’d been holding.

“Your usual,” he said.

Her heart skipped a beat. “You remembered.”

He smiled again. “I don’t forget the little things.”

They both looked at the coffee cup for a long moment, as if it held the answer to something neither of them had yet figured out.

“I’m still not sure where this is going,” she said finally, looking up at him.

He nodded, his gaze meeting hers. “I don’t think either of us knows that yet.”

They stood there, not moving, just existing in the quiet space between them. For a long time, that was enough.

“Next time,” she said quietly, almost to herself.

Callum reached for her hand without thinking. Just a brief touch, but it felt like everything was starting to come into focus.

“Next time,” he agreed.

22

Leaning In

The next few days were a blur of texts and missed chances. Elodie was back in the air, as always a constant whirl of airports, hotel rooms, and long-haul flights. Callum was grounded, staying at the airport, watching planes depart without him.

They didn't talk much. Not because they didn't want to, but because the quiet between them had become something comfortable. They didn't need constant words. It was enough to know they'd been in the same place, even for a short while.

It wasn't until she texted again that night, after another long day of flying, that Callum felt the weight of everything shift.

"I'm back in town. Same gate. Window seat?"

He didn't hesitate.

“Already here.”

When she arrived, there was a new layer to the air around them. The usual space between them was gone, replaced by something almost tangible — the kind of connection that was finally starting to feel real.

Elodie sat beside him, her bag resting at her feet. She didn't look at him right away, but he noticed the small sigh she gave, like she was relieved to be home — even if it wasn't really home.

She glanced over at him after a moment. “I've been thinking about what you said,” she said, her voice softer than usual.

Callum raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"That we should take it slow." She smiled, but there was a slight tension in her shoulders. "I think you were right."

He nodded, feeling the weight of her words settle between them.

"But you're not the only one who's been scared," she added, looking down at her hands. "I've been running from things for so long, I'm not sure how to stay."

The vulnerability in her voice hit him more than he expected.

He shifted a little closer, not wanting to break the moment. "You don't have to know how to stay. You just have to decide if you want to."

Her eyes met his, and for the first time, she looked like she was letting herself believe that might be possible.

“I’m still figuring it out,” she said quietly.

“And I’ll still be here,” he replied, his voice steady. “If you want that.”

She smiled again, this time with more ease. “I think I might.”

23

The Test

Callum wasn’t sure what he expected the next time he saw her, but it wasn’t this.

He stood by the same gate, the same spot where they’d sat weeks ago a small distance away, but the pull between them felt stronger now. She had texted earlier that

morning, saying she'd be here. Same time. Same place.
The routine, unspoken.

But when she showed up, she wasn't alone.

Callum saw her first. She was walking toward him, her bag over one shoulder, her eyes already scanning the terminal. He smiled at the sight of her, his chest easing just a little.

But then he saw the other man the one standing beside her. He was tall, confident, laughing as Elodie nudged him playfully. His hand was resting casually on her shoulder.

The moment hit like a cold gust of wind.

For a split second, Callum thought he might turn and walk away. Maybe he should. He wasn't ready for this. He hadn't signed up for this.

But then Elodie spotted him.

Her eyes softened, and she excused herself from the man, walking over to Callum with that familiar, almost shy smile.

“Hey,” she said. “Sorry, I should’ve told you. This is Ben . He’s a friend of my mum’s.”

Callum swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. His smile felt strained, but he couldn’t hide it entirely. “Nice to meet you, Ben.”

Ben gave him a nod, smiling back, but Callum could tell there was no warmth in it. This wasn’t a casual encounter. This was a test.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Elodie asked, her gaze flicking between the two men, her voice low, almost uncertain.

Callum tried not to let his discomfort show. “Of course not,” he said, trying to sound casual, but the words stuck in his chest.

They all stood there for a moment, awkwardly, the space between them filled with unspoken things.

Ben looked between them and gave a small chuckle. “I’ll leave you two to it. I know when I’m out of my depth.” With a small wink, he turned and walked away, leaving Callum and Elodie alone.

Elodie shifted her weight. “I didn’t mean for you to feel weird about it.”

“I’m fine,” Callum replied, though his voice felt distant. “It’s just... I didn’t expect that.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “I know. I should’ve said something earlier.”

Callum took a deep breath, watching as Ben disappeared into the crowd. “So... Jake?”

She looked at him sheepishly. “He’s harmless. Really. Just a friend. But he’s always around when I’m home. Mum thinks I need a good guy friend who’s not... well, you know.” She hesitated. “It’s just the way she sees things.”

Callum nodded, though the weight of her words lingered. She didn’t mean for it to feel this complicated. But it did. It always did.

“I get it,” he said softly. “You’re allowed to have friends.”

Her eyes softened again, and she stepped closer. “Callum...”

He raised a hand to stop her. “It’s fine. You don’t need to explain. I just wasn’t ready for... all that.”

Elodie bit her lip again, her voice quiet. “I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. I don’t want you to think I’m...”

“Not sure what you mean.”

She smiled slightly. “I’m not sure either.”

Callum took a step forward, his expression softening. “I know you’re not. I just didn’t know if I was the guy you wanted to talk to about this.”

Elodie’s smile faded for a moment. “You’re the one I want to talk to. But... I don’t know how to make this easy.”

Neither of them had answers. But standing there, side by side, was as close as they’d come to figuring it out.

24

No More Waiting

It was late when Elodie got the message.

She'd been sitting at a café, her phone resting on the table beside her, the screen lit up with the usual flow of texts and unread notifications. But one stood out.

Callum:

“Can we talk?”

For a second, Elodie thought about ignoring it. It had been weeks since they'd had a real conversation, since they'd even seen each other. Her flight was in the morning, and the last thing she needed was to dive into something that felt too much like a confrontation.

But she'd already been carrying this weight for too long.

She hit reply.

Elodie:

“I’m free now.”

When she arrived, Callum was already sitting on the same bench. The one by Gate 12. The place that had become their quiet corner, the one spot where their words didn’t need to fill the silence they could just be.

But tonight, it was different.

There was something heavy in the air between them. Neither of them said anything right away. Callum just gestured to the seat beside him, but Elodie didn’t sit. She stood a few feet away, her arms folded across her chest like she was still deciding.

“Callum,” she started, her voice softer than usual. “What do you want to say?”

He took a deep breath, meeting her gaze without hesitation. “I don’t know.” He shifted his weight, fidgeting slightly. “I just know I can’t keep doing this — waiting, hoping, then pulling away when it gets real.”

Elodie nodded, her lips pressing together in a quiet smile. “I know. Me neither.”

Callum stood then, his feet scuffing against the worn tiles. He ran a hand through his hair, looking up at the ceiling for a moment before focusing back on her. “I guess I just don’t know how to do this.”

She took a slow step closer, her voice quiet but steady. “Do what?”

“This,” he said, gesturing between them. “Whatever this is. The not-relationship. The waiting. The wanting something that feels impossible.”

Elodie didn't move. She could feel the tension — the space between them growing smaller, and the weight of it pressing down on her chest.

"I don't know how to do it either," she admitted softly.
"But maybe that's why I've been so scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of what happens when you realize you don't have control anymore. When you stop running and realize you might actually want to stay."

Callum took a step toward her. "And do you?"

Her breath caught in her throat for a second. She looked at him, really looked at him, like she hadn't in weeks. The light from the overhead terminal lamps caught in his eyes — warm, steady, waiting.

“I think I might.”

25

Out of Orbit

Callum didn't want to rush it.

He didn't want to push her, even though every part of him was waiting. But the quiet in the terminal was becoming too much. Every step he took felt like the distance between them growing wider, not closer.

He didn't want her to walk away again. Didn't want another moment of what if hanging between them like unfinished business.

“I want this,” he said, his voice steady but a little strained. “I want you to stay.”

She didn't move right away. Just looked at him, eyes searching his face like she was reading something he wasn't sure how to say. The silence between them wasn't heavy anymore — it was something else. Something that had been building up, unspoken.

And then she stepped closer.

Callum exhaled, not realizing he'd been holding his breath.

"I don't know what comes next," Elodie said quietly, her voice soft but honest. "But I don't want to walk away from this either."

Her hand brushed against his, almost by accident. But it didn't feel like an accident. It felt like permission. Like an invitation.

He reached for her, slowly at first, his fingers grazing hers before his hand closed around hers. It was simple. It was real. And it was more than either of them had said in

weeks.

“Then let’s figure it out,” Callum said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Elodie nodded, her smile small but there, just for him. “I think we already are.”

They didn’t kiss. Not yet. Not here. But for the first time, it felt like they were both willing to stop running. To stop waiting for things to fall into place on their own.

Maybe they didn’t need all the answers.

Maybe they didn’t need a grand declaration.

But standing there, hand in hand, they both knew one thing:

They weren’t alone anymore.

26

In Transit

Elodie couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this uncertain.

She wasn't used to it. The restlessness. The not-knowing. It was too familiar, too much like every other time she'd walked away from something she hadn't figured out.

But this wasn't the same.

Callum hadn't asked her for anything. He hadn't rushed her, pressured her, or even made her feel like there was some deadline she was missing. But now, sitting on the edge of a bed in a hotel room in Berlin, she felt the weight of silence.

She had four hours before her next flight. Four hours to decide if she was going to keep running or figure out how to stay.

She glanced at the clock.

3:45 PM.

She needed to make a decision. Because this moment this quiet, uncertain pause wasn't something that lasted forever.

Elodie had never been good at staying. At planting roots. At believing that a connection could go beyond a moment. That was the part she'd always avoided.

But Callum had changed that. At least, he'd challenged it. He'd stayed. Not with words, but with presence. With the way he looked at her like there was no rush. Like maybe things could take as long as they needed.

She stood up, pacing the room for a few minutes before pulling out her phone. Callum's last text lingered in her inbox, a simple message that made her smile:

"Still here if you want me."

It was enough.

She typed back.

"I'm on my way."

Hours later, after her flight back to the UK, she made her way to Gate 12 ,but she didn't want to waste time. She wanted to get there, to see him. To feel the space between them fill with something real.

He was sitting at the same spot. The same bench. His legs crossed at the ankle, elbows resting on his knees, his gaze lost somewhere between the ground and the world outside.

He didn't see her at first.

But when she walked up to him, he looked up and smiled that same, warm, unguarded smile that had drawn her in every time.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," he replied, standing up, the space between them closing.

She didn't know what came next. But she didn't need to. Not yet.

“I’m still figuring this out,” she admitted, her voice steady but soft. “But I’m here. And I’m not running anymore.”

Callum nodded, reaching out to take her hand, his fingers brushing against hers before they held on.

“Me neither,” he said, his voice low and steady. “You’re not alone in this.”

And for the first time, it didn’t feel like just another almost.

It felt like the beginning.

27

Unspoken Distance

It wasn't the conversation they'd been having. It wasn't the soft smiles or the quiet moments that had filled the last few weeks. It was something simpler.

Something small.

Callum had always been good at waiting. At letting things happen in their own time. It was part of his nature his job, his life. But now, sitting on the edge of a bench in the terminal, it felt like waiting was starting to feel like something else. Something heavier.

Elodie had said she wasn't running anymore, but she hadn't said what she was doing instead.

Callum looked at his phone for the hundredth time. No new messages. Nothing.

It had been three days since that moment, since the unspoken connection had been acknowledged. Since they had both agreed, however quietly, that they were ready to stop hiding.

But Elodie wasn't there.

She hadn't texted. She hadn't shown up at Gate 12. Nothing.

It wasn't like her.

And that's what made him wonder had she really meant it?

The silence between them had changed since then. Where before, they had danced around each other with soft words and shy smiles, now the space between them seemed filled with something else: distance.

The kind that happens when you want someone but don't know how to ask them for something they're not sure they can give you.

He picked up his phone again.

Still nothing.

Elodie sat in her hotel room, staring at her phone screen. She had typed out a message to Callum twice once when she woke up, once before she went to bed. Both times, she erased it.

She didn't know what to say.

What could she say?

She had meant it when she told him she wasn't running anymore. She had meant it when she said she was ready. But now that it was real, now that she was standing on the edge of something that felt too deep to wade into without drowning she felt like she was drowning anyway.

She couldn't tell him that. Not yet.

Elodie had spent her life running. First from her mother's expectations, then from the life she had never quite felt part of. Now, Callum was asking her to stay to choose something with no promises, no guarantees.

She wasn't ready to admit that she wasn't sure she could.

Callum stood up, pacing in the quiet space near Gate 12.

He wasn't waiting anymore.

He was choosing. Choosing whether to make the first move. Choosing whether to risk whatever this was.

A text popped up on his screen. Elodie's name.

"I'm sorry. I've been thinking."

His heart skipped a beat, but the next words made the ground under him feel unsure.

"I'm not sure I'm ready."

Elodie hadn't expected to send it. But there it was.

She let the message hang there, unsure of what would happen next.

The space between them wasn't just physical. It was emotional, filled with all the things they hadn't yet said to each other. She didn't want to walk away from what they had but she didn't know how to lean into it, either.

28

Taking the First Step

The next morning, Elodie woke with a sense of weight pressing down on her chest. It wasn't the weight of the city outside her window or the pressure of the work she needed to do. It was something more subtle, something she hadn't quite been able to name until now.

She hadn't messaged Callum back.

She knew she should that she wanted to. But something kept holding her back. Something kept her in this fragile space between making a choice and staying frozen in place.

Elodie stared out the window, where sunlight filtered through, soft and warm. The city was already waking up, but she felt like she was still somewhere else — caught in a moment that had no end.

Her phone buzzed.

It was Callum.

She hesitated.

But there was no point in putting it off any longer.

She opened the message, her heart already racing.

“Hey, Elodie. I just wanted to say I understand. I know it’s not easy, and I know you’re still figuring it out. But whatever you decide, I’m here. Always.”

That was all. No pressure. No demands. Just his words, simple and open, hanging in the air.

Elodie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. A small smile tugged at her lips.

It was exactly what she needed to hear.

Callum stood by the window in his apartment, the world moving outside but feeling distant. He didn’t know how to fix what was between him and Elodie. He didn’t know what she needed.

But he couldn’t deny that he was scared scared of losing the one person who had started to mean so much to him.

He had been ready to take a risk, to see where it could go, but it seemed like she needed more time.

And that was okay.

Elodie typed out a message, then paused. She wasn't going to overthink this one. She wasn't going to hold back.

"I'm sorry. I've been thinking about everything. And I don't have the answers yet. But I want to try, Callum. I want to stop running."

She pressed send before she could second-guess herself.

The minutes felt like hours as she waited. The room was still, the only sound the distant hum of traffic outside.

Her phone buzzed again.

Callum's reply came quickly.

"I'm not asking you to have the answers right now. We'll figure this out, together."

Elodie exhaled, feeling a weight lift off her shoulders. It wasn't the perfect solution. There wasn't some grand, romantic gesture. But for the first time in a long time, she felt like she wasn't alone in the choices she was making.

Callum smiled as he read her response. His fingers hovered over his keyboard for a moment before he typed out a simple message.

“Good. We’ll figure it out.”

Elodie closed her eyes, letting herself feel the moment. The uncertainty was still there, but it wasn’t as overwhelming. She wasn’t running anymore. And that was a start.

29

The First Glimpse of Real

The next few weeks weren't perfect.

They didn't suddenly have everything figured out, and the connection between Elodie and Callum didn't instantly erase every fear or hesitation they both carried. But things started to feel like they might.

There were small moments:

A text before her flight.

A message when she landed.

The quiet, unspoken understanding that they were choosing each other, one step at a time.

Elodie had finished her shift late, as usual, and the bright lights of the airport felt especially empty at 3 a.m. But tonight was different. Tonight, she wasn't just leaving.

She wasn't running.

She found herself walking past the vending machine where she had left that first note, just to see if it was still there. But there was no chocolate bar, no crumpled wrapper.

There was Callum. Sitting, waiting. As though he hadn't moved.

His eyes met hers immediately, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I thought you might be here," she said, her voice soft, uncertain.

He smiled, standing up. "I figured you'd stop by."

Elodie let out a quiet breath. "You were right."

He didn't say anything else, but he didn't need to. She knew the rest.

They walked toward each other slowly, the quiet building between them, neither wanting to break the fragile trust that had grown.

Callum's voice broke the silence. "It's not easy, is it?"

She shook her head. "No. But I think... I think I can be here, even if it's messy."

He reached for her hand, his fingers brushing hers before they held. "Messy is better than nothing at all."

Elodie smiled, the weight in her chest easing. “I’ve never been good at staying.”

“I know,” he said gently. “But I’m not going anywhere.”

She let the words hang between them. He didn’t rush her, didn’t pressure her to say the next thing. They just stood there, in the space between the arrivals gate and the world outside.

And for the first time in a long time, Elodie felt like maybe staying wasn’t so scary. Maybe being here was enough, even if it wasn’t perfect.

30

Crossing Paths

Elodie couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to change.

It had been two weeks since that night since she had stood there with Callum, the space between them finally filled with something real. He hadn't pushed her. She hadn't pulled away. They had let the quiet build, letting everything that needed to be said hang in the air between them without rushing it.

But the airport was starting to feel small. More like a home, maybe, but still small. Callum was always there when she arrived, standing by Gate 12, his steady presence like a beacon she could always count on. But it was only a matter of time before this bubble between them would burst, or they would have to decide what was next.

The text came at the worst time.

Elodie had just finished her shift and was walking through the terminal when her phone buzzed. It was a message from her mother, which she'd come to expect as

the norm. But this one was different.

“Elodie, there’s someone waiting for you. It’s important. I don’t know what to do. Call me.”

Her heart skipped a beat. She didn’t have to read it twice to know exactly who it was. The one person who had been waiting in the wings of her life for far too long. The one person who never truly left.

Her ex.

She stared at the screen, her breath catching in her throat. This wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have. Not now. Not after everything she had started to build with Callum.

But her mind was already racing.

She texted back quickly:

“What’s going on?”

Callum noticed Elodie's hesitation before she even looked at her phone. He'd seen the change in her posture when she read the message. She didn't try to hide it — the momentary stiffness, the way her fingers gripped her phone a little too tight. Something was happening, something that wasn't part of their quiet rhythm.

“What's wrong?” he asked softly, stepping a little closer.

Elodie looked at him, a flash of worry in her eyes, but she didn't say anything at first. She just shook her head and typed another quick message.

“I need to go,” she finally said, her voice tight. “I'll be back in a bit.”

Callum frowned. “You don't have to explain anything to me.”

But Elodie paused, biting her lip. “I don’t know how to explain it to myself.”

As she walked away, her mind was racing. The last thing she wanted was for the past to come barging in, especially now when she’d just started to let herself believe that this — what was happening between her and Callum — could be something real.

But the past had its own momentum. And no matter how much she tried to outrun it, it always seemed to catch up.

She stepped outside, looking for a quiet place to call her mother back. Her heart was beating faster now. Her ex, the man who had always been just a shadow in her life, was waiting for her. Waiting to finish things that never truly ended.

31

The Past Reappears

Elodie stepped out into the cool night air, her breath quickening as she scrolled through her phone. Her fingers shook slightly as she called her mother back.

“Hi, Mum,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t know what to do, Elodie. He’s here he’s waiting for you outside the terminal.”

The words hit her like a punch. She’d been expecting it. She just hadn’t known when it would happen. Not this soon. Not after everything with Callum.

Her ex.

The one she'd walked away from, the one she hadn't seen in months. She had moved on from him, or at least, she thought she had. But now here he was, waiting.

"Why?" Elodie asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't know. He just showed up, said he needed to talk. He said it was important."

The uncertainty in her mother's voice made Elodie's stomach turn. She hadn't been prepared for this. Not when she was finally starting to believe in something else — something with Callum.

"I'll be right there," Elodie said, ending the call abruptly. She stared at her phone screen for a moment, breathing deeply.

The past. The one thing she couldn't outrun. It had come back to claim her, just when she thought she was ready to leave it behind.

Callum sat by Gate 12, waiting.

He was used to waiting, but this uncertainty was different. Elodie had walked away quickly, her mind somewhere else, and he didn't want to push. But the feeling of uncertainty hadn't left him. It hung in the air like a question he couldn't answer.

He glanced at his phone again, hoping to hear from her, but there was nothing.

Maybe he should've gone with her. Maybe he should've asked what was wrong. But something about her distance made him hold back. He wanted her to trust him enough to come to him when she was ready.

But what if she wasn't ready? What if the space between them wasn't something she wanted to close?

Elodie walked back into the terminal, the sound of her footsteps feeling too loud. She could already see him standing near the sliding doors, his arms crossed, waiting.

Jake.

She hadn't spoken to him in months, hadn't thought about him much in the last few weeks. She had moved on. She had chosen to move on. But now here he was — as if the past didn't care that she had tried to bury it.

He looked up as she approached, his expression unreadable. But she could see the same familiar signs of impatience in his face. The way his jaw tightened. The way his eyes softened just a little when he saw her.

“Elodie,” he said, his voice almost too calm. “We need to talk.”

Her heart skipped. The words felt too familiar. Too easy. Too much like the ones she had heard too many times before.

“I don’t know if we do,” she said, her voice low, controlled. “You can’t just show up here and expect things to pick up where they left off.”

“I didn’t expect that,” Jake said, stepping closer. “I just... I need to know where we stand. You didn’t give me a chance to explain, Elodie. To tell you why I left.”

Her chest tightened. She had heard it all before, and she didn’t want to hear it again. She didn’t want to be pulled back into something that never really ended — something that had always been filled with more silence than they ever cared to acknowledge.

“We ended, Jake,” she said, her voice firmer now. “You made the choice. I made mine.”

He looked at her for a long moment, like he was searching for something — an apology, an opening, a sign that she would soften, that she would come back.

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” he said quietly. “I never meant to. But I didn’t know what I was doing, Elodie.”

Her heart twisted. She didn’t want to care. She didn’t want to feel that ache, the one that had stayed with her long after he walked away. But it was still there, a ghost she hadn’t been able to shake.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said, her voice breaking slightly. “I’m not the same person I was when we were together. And I can’t go back to that.”

Jake opened his mouth to say something, but she turned, her heart pounding in her chest.

She walked away, not looking back, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the quiet terminal.

She didn't know what she was going to say to Callum. She didn't know if there was anything to say. But she knew she couldn't stay in this space forever, caught between two worlds — one she was trying to leave behind, and one she wasn't sure she was ready for.

32

Coming Back

Elodie didn't know how long she stood outside the terminal, staring at the cold, dimly lit pavement beneath her feet. The night had drawn in, and the soft buzz of the airport felt like it was miles away.

Her breath came in shallow gasps, her heart pounding in her chest. It wasn't just the confrontation with Jake that had shaken her. It was what it meant. She hadn't

expected him to show up tonight. She hadn't expected to have to face that part of her life again.

And she hadn't expected the ache that came with it. The ache of remembering how it felt to be pulled between two choices — the past and the present, the person she was and the person she wanted to be.

She wiped her eyes and pulled her coat tighter around herself. She had to go back inside. She had to find Callum.

She didn't know what she'd say to him. She didn't know how to explain everything that was happening inside of her — the fear, the uncertainty, the desire to run, and the need to stay.

But she had to try.

Callum was still sitting on the same bench when Elodie returned. He hadn't moved, and the quiet of the terminal felt heavier now, as if everything had slowed down to this one moment.

His eyes met hers when she came back through the door. There was a weight in them, but it wasn't judgment. It was concern. He was waiting, but he wasn't rushing her. He was giving her space to come back to him.

Elodie stood still for a second, unsure of how to start, her mind swirling with thoughts she couldn't quite organize.

"I—" she started, her voice low. She cleared her throat. "I didn't expect him to show up."

Callum stood up slowly, his gaze soft but steady. "You don't have to explain everything to me, Elodie."

She shook her head. "But I want to. I need to."

She took a step closer, feeling the distance between them shrink but not quite close enough yet. She didn't know what she was asking for — if it was forgiveness or understanding, or if it was something she didn't have a name for yet.

“I didn't want to go back to him,” she said quietly. “I didn't want to face him, but I did. And I thought... I thought it would be easier. But it wasn't.”

Callum nodded, his expression softening. “I get it. The past is always there. It doesn't just go away.”

She looked at him, her voice breaking a little. “And now I don't know what comes next.”

He stepped closer, his voice gentle. “I don't either. But I'm still here.”

Elodie swallowed, her chest tight. “I don't want to hurt you, Callum. I don't want to drag you into something messy.”

Callum reached for her hand, his fingers brushing against hers before their palms met. He held her hand gently, a steady anchor in the storm she felt inside.

“You’re not dragging me anywhere, Elodie,” he said, his voice firm but warm. “I’m right here, with you. And I want to be. No matter what comes next.”

The air between them shifted, lighter somehow, as if a wall had been cracked open, even just a little. Elodie’s breath steadied, and for the first time in what felt like forever, she allowed herself to be held — not by the weight of expectations, but by the quiet space they’d made for each other.

“I don’t know where this is going, but I know I’m here,” Callum said softly.

“I’m here too,” Elodie whispered.

And for the first time, it felt like something was beginning to settle. Something they both wanted to stay.

33

The Push and Pull

Callum hadn't expected the call.

He had spent the last few days with Elodie, their time together feeling like a breath he didn't know he needed. They had shared more quiet, simple moments, each one pulling them closer, like the airport had become their own space, theirs to define.

But the call was from his sister.

"Hey, Callum, it's... about Elodie," she said, her voice tentative. "I saw her at a coffee shop today. She was with someone."

He froze, the words hanging in the air like a weight he couldn't shake off. "What do you mean, 'someone'?"

"A guy. She didn't see me, but he was sitting with her. They were talking, laughing. I don't know... but it looked like more than just a casual conversation."

Callum's chest tightened. A guy? He hadn't thought about it like that. It wasn't that he thought she couldn't see other people. It was that he wasn't prepared for it.

"I'm sure it's nothing," his sister added quickly. "But I thought you should know."

Callum's fingers tightened around the phone, his mind racing. He didn't know if it was the right thing to confront her, or if he should wait, let her come to him. But the uncertainty gnawed at him, pulling at the part of him that had started to believe in what they had.

Elodie had been thinking about everything for the last few days. About her ex, about Callum, about the quiet moments that felt too important to ignore.

But the moment she'd walked into that coffee shop and saw Jake sitting there, looking at her with the same expectation she'd seen a hundred times before, she'd frozen.

She hadn't known why she agreed to meet him, but something in her had. Maybe it was the need for closure, or maybe it was just the feeling that she hadn't finished that chapter. She had always been good at running, but she hadn't learned how to stop.

But when Jake spoke to her, when his words felt too familiar, like they were still a part of the life she was trying to leave behind, she had to stop herself from falling back into the past. She had to remind herself that it wasn't that life she wanted. It was this one, the one with Callum — or at least, the possibility of it.

Later that night, Elodie stood by the window of her hotel room, staring out at the city lights. Her phone buzzed, breaking the silence.

She looked at the screen. Callum. She hadn't seen him all day, hadn't heard from him since their last meeting.

She took a deep breath and answered.

"Hey," she said, her voice quieter than usual.

"Hey." His voice was calm, but there was something underneath it that she couldn't place. "How's everything?"

“It’s good. Busy.” She hesitated, her hand tightening around the phone. “Callum... I need to be honest with you.”

The silence between them felt heavy.

“I saw someone today,” she said softly, her words tumbling out before she could stop them. “It wasn’t like you think. It was Jake. My ex.”

There was a pause on the other end. She could almost feel him processing the words.

“And?” Callum asked quietly.

“It wasn’t anything,” she said quickly. “I promise. But I didn’t know if I should tell you. I don’t want you to think I’m still holding onto that. I’m not.”

Callum took a breath, letting the silence stretch between them. “I just... I don’t know what to think right now.”

Elodie's heart skipped. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to make this harder than it already was.

"I never wanted to make you feel like you're second to anyone," she said, her voice thick. "I care about you, Callum. But I need you to know that I'm not ready for everything right now. Not yet. And I don't want to keep you hanging. You deserve more than that."

The words hung between them like a fragile promise, something both of them were holding onto but didn't know how to make real yet.

"I know," Callum replied softly. "But that's the part I'm willing to figure out. Together."

34

Breaking Point

The next few days passed slowly.

Elodie couldn't help but replay the conversation over and over in her mind. It wasn't the words that stuck with her — those were simple enough. It was the feeling of everything hanging in the balance. The uncertainty. The heaviness that had returned between them, even after they'd agreed to figure it out together.

But they weren't figuring anything out. Not yet.

Every time her phone buzzed, she felt her heart skip. She wanted to reach out to Callum, but something held her back. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk. It was that she didn't know what to say.

She wasn't ready for everything, and she wasn't sure if she ever would be.

Callum sat at Gate 12, the same as always. He wasn't sure why he kept coming back, why he waited when the answer was clear. Elodie hadn't messaged him, and the tension between them had started to feel like a wall. He had told himself he wouldn't pressure her, that he'd give her time.

But time was turning into something else — something more like doubt.

The phone in his hand buzzed again. Elodie's name.

He exhaled. Maybe this time it would be different.

But when he opened the message, it was short.

“I can’t keep doing this.”

The words hit him like a cold gust of wind.

His heart dropped. What did she mean?

He stared at the screen, his mind racing. Was it over? Was she walking away? After everything they’d shared? The connection, the moments, the promises — was it all meaningless now?

His thumb hovered over the keyboard. He wanted to ask what she meant. He wanted to tell her everything he hadn’t said yet. But the fear of pushing her away — of breaking what they had left — stopped him.

Instead, he replied with something simple. Something honest.

“I’m still here. Whenever you’re ready.”

He hit send and set the phone down.

Elodie stood in front of her hotel room window, staring out at the city lights below. She hadn’t meant to send that message. It had come out before she could stop herself.

She couldn’t keep doing this.

The uncertainty. The back and forth. She hadn’t expected it to feel like this. The weight of what might be was heavier than she realized. She had hoped, had wanted to believe that things could stay light, that they could exist in this place of possibility. But it was getting harder. Harder to breathe, to think clearly, to let go of the past while keeping herself anchored in the present.

She didn't know how to do this with Callum. She didn't know how to be what he needed, or what she needed for herself.

Her phone buzzed again.

She looked at it, then closed her eyes. She knew who it was.

"I'm still here. Whenever you're ready."

The words settled into her chest like something she had wanted to hear, but was too afraid to accept.

Elodie sat down on the edge of the bed, her heart racing. She had told him she wasn't running anymore, but hadn't realized just how much she still was.

Callum waited for her reply, his heart pounding as he sat there. There was nothing but the sound of the terminal around him. People passing, voices blending into a background noise he could no longer hear.

He had given her space. He had given her time. And now he was sitting with the uncertainty of waiting for her to decide.

Maybe that was the problem. The waiting. The silence.

He had no control over this — over her, over them.

35

Facing the Truth

Elodie didn't sleep that night.

She sat on the edge of her bed, her phone lying face-up on the sheets, as if waiting for something she didn't know how to give. The message from Callum lingered in her mind, his words echoing in the stillness:

“I'm still here. Whenever you're ready.”

She had wanted to believe it. She wanted to believe him. But the weight of the past felt too heavy, and she couldn't tell him everything — not yet.

What was she waiting for? Was it the right moment? Would it ever come? The fear of making a mistake kept her rooted in place, even as she ached to move forward.

The next morning, she didn't text him. She didn't send a message or make a call. Instead, she spent her day navigating the busy airport, her mind elsewhere. Every

time she passed a gate or saw someone sitting alone, her thoughts drifted back to Callum, to what they had shared and what might have been.

At lunch, she took a break in the staff lounge, eating her sandwich in silence, her thoughts racing. She saw a few crew members chatting, laughing about some shared moment, and it hit her: she couldn't keep avoiding this.

She couldn't keep running from what she was starting to feel. Running was easier, safer. But staying — staying would mean opening up. Trusting again. Giving more than she had before.

Callum sat by Gate 12, as always, watching the steady flow of travelers and waiting for the quiet moments between the noise. He hadn't heard from Elodie all day, but he wasn't surprised. He'd seen the way she'd been moving through her life — guarded, hesitant, even when she was close to him.

He wanted to give her the space she needed. But it was hard.

The uncertainty wasn't just something that floated between them. It was starting to sink into his bones.

He could feel the distance growing, even as he told himself he was willing to wait.

Late that afternoon, Elodie found herself standing in front of a café window, staring out at the busy terminal. She felt the weight of her indecision heavy in her chest. The messages she hadn't sent. The things she hadn't said.

She knew what she had to do.

She typed out the words before she could stop herself, her thumb moving across the screen in a quick, purposeful motion.

“I’m ready. To talk. To try. To stop running.”

She pressed send before she could second-guess herself.

Callum’s phone buzzed, and when he saw the message from Elodie, his chest tightened with anticipation.

“I’m ready. To talk. To try. To stop running.”

A relief washed over him, but a new kind of uncertainty settled in. What did this mean? Where would they go from here?

He didn’t waste a moment. He stood up quickly, moving toward the door, his steps purposeful.

Elodie saw him before he saw her. She had barely set foot near Gate 12 when Callum appeared, walking toward her with a steady, sure step. His eyes met hers, and for a brief second, neither of them spoke.

He stopped in front of her, close enough that she could feel the heat of his presence. The silence stretched between them, but it didn't feel heavy anymore.

"I'm glad you texted," Callum said quietly, his voice steady but soft.

Elodie nodded, her hand instinctively reaching for his. "I don't want to be afraid anymore, Callum. I don't want to keep running."

He reached out, his hand closing around hers, grounding her in the moment. "Then don't. Not with me."

And for the first time, there was no hesitation. No doubt. Just a quiet understanding between them.

36

The Space Between Us

The next few days were quiet.

They spent most of it together — small, fleeting moments that felt different from everything before. They talked more openly now, shared more of what they hadn't said before. But there was still something hanging between them. Not the tension of uncertainty, but something deeper. A hesitation. A fear of what could come next.

Callum didn't mind the quiet. He didn't mind the pauses between words, the spaces where they weren't quite sure what was next. But the more time they spent together, the more he felt it: The thing Elodie hadn't said. The thing she hadn't fully admitted to herself.

Elodie sat on the bench again, as usual, her fingers tapping against the edge of the table in front of her. She hadn't thought about the airport this way before — as a place to stay, not just to pass through.

It had been a week since she and Callum had crossed that line. The line that had once felt like a chasm now seemed like the beginning of something new, something unexpected.

But she was still afraid.

She wasn't sure what she was afraid of. The future? The past? Or just the weight of what this connection could mean?

Callum stood near the vending machine, just outside her view, as he had so many times before. He didn't want to rush her. He didn't want to put pressure on her, but he knew — he could feel it — that she was still holding back.

And maybe it was okay. Maybe this was the pace they needed.

But he couldn't stop wondering if they were going to make it. If they were both willing to take this step.

Elodie's phone buzzed, and she looked down, surprised to see Callum's name.

“Do you want to meet for coffee? I know a quiet place.”

She smiled at the simplicity of it, at how easy it felt, and yet how much it meant. They weren't figuring it out in the grand sense — they were just two people who had decided to try.

She replied quickly.

“Yes. I'll meet you there.”

They found a small coffee shop tucked away from the usual rush. There were no crowds, no distractions. Just the soft hum of quiet conversations and the smell of fresh coffee in the air.

Elodie sat down across from Callum, and for the first time in days, they just looked at each other. Not with expectation. Not with anxiety. Just looking — sharing the quiet space between them that had always existed, but felt more present now.

“How’s your flight schedule?” Callum asked, breaking the silence.

Elodie shrugged. “Busy. But I don’t mind.”

Callum smiled, his eyes soft. “I’m glad. I like spending time with you.”

Elodie nodded, letting herself breathe a little easier. “Me too.”

There it was again — that unspoken understanding. The one that didn’t need words to explain it.

Elodie looked down at her coffee cup, tracing the rim with her finger. “Callum... I’m not sure I can give you everything you want. I don’t know how to be what you need yet.”

He leaned forward, his expression serious but gentle. “You don’t need to be everything. You just need to be with me. That’s enough.”

Her heart tightened in her chest, but in a good way. A warm, steady feeling that let her exhale.

“I’m trying,” she said quietly. “I really am.”

“And I’m right here,” he said, his voice low, steady. “Whenever you’re ready. We’ll figure it out, one step at a time.”

Elodie met his gaze and smiled softly. It was the first time in a long time she didn’t feel like she was drowning in what could be. The future didn’t seem so daunting now. Not when she was here. Not when he was here with her.

And for the first time in a while, Elodie believed she could stay. And maybe, for the first time, she wanted to.

37

The Outside World

It was one of those mornings that felt like it was meant for something more — a rare, early flight where the terminal felt quieter, the world still waiting for something to happen. The airport hummed, the air thick with the scent of coffee and stale croissants. But Callum didn't notice any of it. He only noticed her.

Elodie had texted him earlier, saying she'd be here — she'd asked if he could meet her for coffee, as they usually did when her flights were early enough. But something was different today. The usual ease between them felt strained, like it was waiting for something, a shift they weren't ready for.

She arrived just after the sun broke over the horizon, casting a soft golden light over the airport. As always, she made her way toward him, her face neutral,

unreadable. But her eyes were different. Callum could see it before she even said a word. There was something she wasn't telling him.

"Morning," she said, her voice steady but tight, like she was holding something back.

"Morning," Callum replied, standing to greet her. "Everything okay?"

She hesitated, just for a moment, before sitting down beside him. "I got a call this morning. From my mom."

Callum's stomach twisted, but he didn't let it show. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He's here he's waiting for you outside the terminal."

The words hit her like a punch. She'd been expecting it. She just hadn't known when it would happen. Not this soon. Not after everything with Callum.

Her ex.

The one she'd walked away from, the one she hadn't seen in months. She had moved on from him, or at least, she thought she had. But now here he was, waiting.

"Why?" Elodie asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't know. He just showed up, said he needed to talk. He said it was important."

The uncertainty in her mother's voice made Elodie's stomach turn. She hadn't been prepared for this. Not when she was finally starting to believe in something else — something with Callum.

"I'll be right there," Elodie said, ending the call abruptly. She stared at her phone screen for a moment, breathing deeply.

The past. The one thing she couldn't outrun. It had come back to claim her, just when she thought she was ready to leave it behind.

Callum sat by Gate 12, waiting.

He'd never been good at waiting, but it was all he could do now. Elodie had walked away quickly, her mind somewhere else, and he didn't want to push. But the feeling of uncertainty hadn't left him. It hung in the air like a question he couldn't answer.

He glanced at his phone again, hoping to hear from her, but there was nothing.

Maybe he should've gone with her. Maybe he should've asked what was wrong. But something about her distance made him hold back. He wanted her to trust him enough to come to him when she was ready.

But what if she wasn't ready? What if the space between them wasn't something she wanted to close?

Elodie walked back into the terminal, the sound of her footsteps feeling too loud. She could already see him standing near the sliding doors, his arms crossed, waiting.

Jake.

She hadn't spoken to him in months, hadn't thought about him much in the last few weeks. She had moved on. She had chosen to move on. But now here he was — as if the past didn't care that she had tried to bury it.

He looked up as she approached, his expression unreadable. But she could see the same familiar signs of impatience in his face. The way his jaw tightened. The way his eyes softened just a little when he saw her.

“Elodie,” he said, his voice almost too calm. “We need to talk.”

Her heart skipped. The words felt too familiar. Too easy. Too much like the ones she had heard too many times before.

“I don’t know if we do,” she said, her voice low, controlled. “You can’t just show up here and expect things to pick up where they left off.”

“I didn’t expect that,” Jake said, stepping closer. “I just... I need to know where we stand. You didn’t give me a chance to explain, Elodie. To tell you why I left.”

Her chest tightened. She had heard it all before, and she didn't want to hear it again. She didn't want to be pulled back into something that never really ended — something that had always been filled with more silence than they ever cared to acknowledge.

“We ended, Jake,” she said, her voice firmer now. “You made the choice. I made mine.”

He looked at her for a long moment, like he was searching for something — an apology, an opening, a sign that she would soften, that she would come back.

“I didn't want to hurt you,” he said quietly. “I never meant to. But I didn't know what I was doing, Elodie.”

Her heart twisted. She didn't want to care. She didn't want to feel that ache, the one that had stayed with her long after he walked away. But it was still there, a ghost she hadn't been able to shake.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said, her voice breaking slightly. “I’m not the same person I was when we were together. And I can’t go back to that.”

Jake opened his mouth to say something, but she turned, her heart pounding in her chest.

She walked away, not looking back, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the quiet terminal.

She didn’t know what she was going to say to Callum. She didn’t know if there was anything to say. But she knew she couldn’t stay in this space forever, caught between two worlds — one she was trying to leave behind, and one she wasn’t sure she was ready for.

38

Coming Clean

Elodie walked back into the terminal, her thoughts a whirlwind, her chest tight as she made her way back toward the gates. The weight of the conversation with Jake lingered in her mind, but she pushed it aside for the moment. She couldn't think about that. Not now.

She needed to talk to Callum.

The reality of everything — her past with Jake, her uncertainty, her hesitation — had come crashing down in that instant, and she knew she had to be honest with him. She couldn't keep pretending everything was okay. Not anymore.

When she reached Gate 12, she found him waiting, just as she knew he would be. Callum was standing near the bench, his shoulders relaxed but his gaze intense, like he'd been waiting for her to come back.

“Callum,” she said, her voice soft, unsure of how to begin.

He looked at her, his expression steady but unreadable. “Elodie.”

She swallowed, stepping closer. The distance between them suddenly felt enormous, like there was an invisible wall that had grown between them while she was gone. “I’m sorry. I... I should’ve told you sooner.”

Callum’s gaze softened, but there was a quiet intensity there, like he was bracing for something. “Tell me what?”

She took a deep breath. This wasn’t easy. “Jake was here,” she said quietly. “I saw him. He’s been trying to get in touch with me. I didn’t want to let him back into my life, but he showed up today, and I didn’t know what to do.”

Callum nodded, his jaw tightening slightly, but he didn't say anything.

"I didn't want you to think that I was hiding anything, or that I was still involved with him. I haven't been. But seeing him... it brought everything back, Callum. The things I thought I had moved on from."

Her voice broke slightly, but she didn't stop. She couldn't.

"I don't know how to be this — with you. With us. I'm not sure if I'm ready to let go of everything I've been holding onto. I've been afraid to let myself be here, with you, because I'm still figuring out how to stop running from the past."

Callum took a slow breath, his eyes never leaving hers. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Finally, he stepped closer. “Elodie, you don’t have to have it all figured out. You don’t have to know exactly what you want right now. I’m not asking you for a perfect answer.”

Her chest tightened as he continued. “But I need you to be honest with me. I can’t be part of something if we’re not both in it. If you’re still holding onto things that are stopping you from being with me, then we can’t move forward.”

Elodie closed her eyes for a moment, fighting the rush of emotions threatening to spill over. She didn’t want to lose him. She didn’t want to push him away. But she had to be honest with him, and she hadn’t been. Not completely.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she whispered, finally meeting his eyes. “But I’ve been afraid. Afraid of this getting too real.”

Callum stepped forward, his hand resting gently on her arm. “I don’t want to lose you either. But if you’re still running from everything — from me, from the past —

then we can't build anything."

Elodie nodded, the words feeling like a weight lifted off her chest. She had been running for so long, trying to outrun everything that had hurt her, everything that had made her feel like she wasn't good enough. But Callum was right. She couldn't keep running. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice thick. "I should've told you. I'm not running anymore. I just... I need time. But I want to try, Callum. I do."

Callum smiled softly, his hand still resting on her arm. "I'm not asking for anything perfect. Just you. And whatever that looks like."

Her heart tightened in her chest, but in a good way. A warm, steady feeling that let her exhale.

"I think I can do that," she said quietly. "I really am trying."

And for the first time, there was no hesitation. No doubt. Just a quiet understanding between them.

39

A Step Forward

The quiet between them had become familiar, comfortable even. But Elodie knew there was more to be said — things they hadn't fully acknowledged, feelings they hadn't let surface.

Callum hadn't asked her for anything, not really. He'd let her come to him, every time. And she appreciated that. But it was becoming harder to just exist in the in-between, where they were close but not entirely open. She could feel it — the weight of what had been left unsaid.

Elodie was sitting by the windowsill again, the airport terminal bustling with travelers and workers moving in every direction. But she was focused on Callum, who sat a few feet away, reading a book.

He'd asked her to join him for coffee this morning, a simple invitation, but she had hesitated. She wasn't sure why. She didn't want to take a step backward, but a part of her was still unsure of what this was. What they were.

He looked up from his book, sensing her gaze. "You good?" he asked, his voice warm and steady.

She smiled faintly, nodding. "Yeah. Just thinking."

Callum set the book down, closing it with a soft snap, and leaned forward, his eyes meeting hers. "About what?"

She hesitated for a moment, then shook her head, her fingers playing with the edge of her cup. "I'm still figuring out how to be here."

Callum's expression softened, and he reached across the table to place his hand over hers gently. "You're here. I can see that. But if you're not sure, that's okay too."

Elodie bit her lip, the weight of his words hanging in the air. "I'm not running anymore," she said, her voice low, almost a whisper. "But I still don't know how to be what you need."

Callum's hand tightened slightly around hers, but he didn't pull her closer. Instead, he let the silence settle between them for a moment. "I don't need you to be anything other than who you are, Elodie. Just you. That's enough."

Her heart fluttered in her chest, a feeling she hadn't fully understood until now. He wasn't asking her to change, to become someone she wasn't. He just wanted her, exactly as she was.

"I'm trying," she said quietly. "I really am. But I've been afraid to let myself feel this... real."

Callum smiled gently, his thumb brushing over her hand. “You don’t have to do it all at once. We’ll take it slow, whatever pace you need.”

The words settled into her chest like a soft reassurance. She wasn’t alone in this. He wasn’t going anywhere.

Elodie nodded, finally meeting his eyes. “I want to try. I really do.”

He reached for her hand with both of his, pulling it closer to him, as if to anchor her in the moment. “Then we’ll figure it out together.”

For the first time in what felt like a long time, Elodie allowed herself to believe it. That they could move forward, not with certainty, but with a willingness to try. With a quiet understanding that neither of them had all the answers — and that was okay.

They didn't need to rush. The connection they were building didn't need to have a destination. For now, it was enough to just be with each other. To be real, without the fear of running.

40

In the Balance

Elodie stood at the edge of the terminal, her phone still vibrating in her hand from the earlier message. The weight of Jake's sudden return to her life hung over her like a storm cloud — threatening to break at any moment.

She'd promised Callum she wouldn't run anymore. She had meant it. But the reality of it was harder than she'd expected. The past was something she couldn't just erase. It had been there for so long, always in the background, waiting for the right moment to show itself again.

And now, Jake was back, standing at the doorstep of everything she was trying to build with Callum.

Her phone buzzed again, and Elodie sighed, seeing Jake's name flash across the screen.

“We need to talk.”

She had read that text a dozen times already, but it still didn't change the pit in her stomach.

Callum had felt the shift. He could see it in Elodie's eyes every time they met, the way her guard stayed just a little higher than it had been before. She was holding something back, and he wasn't sure what it was. He didn't know if it was Jake, the weight of their past, or if it was something deeper — something about herself she wasn't ready to confront.

She hadn't mentioned Jake in days, but it was impossible to ignore the change that had come over her since he'd been back in the picture.

Elodie had always been honest with him, but there was a quiet distance growing between them that neither of them had addressed. The question wasn't if Jake would come back into the picture, but how and when.

And as much as Callum wanted to be patient, to wait for her to open up when she was ready, he knew there was only so much he could do without her taking that final step.

Elodie finally looked up, her gaze meeting Callum's. He was standing by the vending machine, looking over at her with the same steady, gentle gaze that had drawn her in from the beginning.

But she knew this was different.

“I need to see him,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Callum's brow furrowed as he stepped closer, but he didn't say anything right away. He wanted to, but something in the way she spoke made him pause. He'd expected this moment, but he hadn't expected to feel so... unsure.

“I don't want to keep avoiding it,” Elodie continued. “I thought I was ready to let him go, but I don't know if I can until I talk to him. And I don't want you to think that I'm doing this for the wrong reasons.”

Callum stayed silent, his eyes watching her, waiting for the rest of what she needed to say.

“I'm not sure where we are anymore,” she admitted softly, her voice breaking at the edges. “And I don't know how to move forward until I know if I've really moved on.”

Callum's heart tightened in his chest. She wasn't asking for permission, but he could hear the uncertainty in her words.

"I can't tell you what to do, Elodie," he said, his voice calm but steady. "But I need you to be honest with yourself. With both of us. If you need to see him, then do it. But I need to know that you're not holding on to something that isn't there anymore."

She nodded, tears brimming in her eyes but not falling. "I don't want to hurt you, Callum. But I can't just pretend everything's fine when I know it's not."

He stepped closer, gently cupping her face in his hands. "You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to have all the answers. But just know, I'm here — whenever you decide. I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes softened, and she leaned into his touch. "I know," she whispered. "But I still need to do this. For me."

He pulled her into a gentle embrace, holding her tight for a moment. “I’ll be waiting, Elodie. Whatever happens.”

41

The Conversation

Elodie stood in front of the coffee shop, the same place where she’d seen Jake just days before. Her heart was racing, and the familiar ache from their past tugged at her chest. She hadn’t seen him in months — not since everything had ended. She had moved on, or so she thought. But seeing him again, feeling the weight of unresolved feelings, stirred up things she hadn’t fully let go of.

She reached for her phone, her fingers trembling slightly. The screen lit up with a new message from Callum.

“Whatever happens, I’m here. No pressure.”

Her breath hitched. She needed to see him, needed to face whatever this was. But seeing Jake again — it felt like an unfinished chapter. Callum had always been steady, patient, and kind, but her past had a way of pulling her in, reminding her of what she thought she had left behind.

With a deep breath, Elodie hit reply.

“Thank you. I’ll be okay. I’m going to talk to him.”

She glanced once more at the message from Callum, then slipped her phone into her pocket and walked into the coffee shop.

Jake was already seated, a cup of coffee in front of him. He looked up when she entered, his face softening just slightly as she approached. She took a seat across from him, trying to steady her breath, her heart beating faster than she liked.

“Hi,” she said quietly, her voice almost unfamiliar to her own ears.

“Hi,” Jake replied, his voice low but not unkind. “Thanks for meeting me.”

Elodie nodded, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. “You said you wanted to talk?”

Jake leaned back slightly, his gaze steady. “Yeah. I know I messed up, Elodie. And I know it’s been a long time, but I just... I need to say things I didn’t say before.”

Her stomach tightened. She had heard these words before, felt them before. But this time, something was different. She wasn’t the same person anymore, and she didn’t owe him anything. Still, she felt a pull — not because she wanted to go back, but because she needed clarity.

“I didn’t think you wanted to see me again,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Jake's gaze softened. "I didn't know how to reach out, but I never stopped thinking about you, Elodie. I know I left without any explanation, and I'm sorry for that. I was scared. But that doesn't excuse how I handled things."

Elodie let out a quiet breath, her fingers curling around the coffee cup in front of her. She had heard this before, and part of her wanted to let it go, to walk away and not waste another second. But there was a voice inside of her that told her she needed to hear him out — that she needed closure, even if it was painful.

"I don't know if it matters," she said, her voice tight, "but I've moved on, Jake. You walked away. You chose to leave. And I'm not the same person anymore. I can't just pick up where we left off."

Jake's eyes flickered with something — regret, maybe, or something deeper. "I understand. I really do. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I just wanted you to know that I was wrong. I was selfish, and I wasn't ready to be what you needed. I wasn't ready for us."

Elodie swallowed, the ache in her chest threatening to overtake her resolve. “I’ve spent so long trying to figure out what went wrong, trying to piece together who I am after everything that happened with us. And then I found Callum.”

Jake’s expression darkened at the mention of Callum, but he didn’t say anything at first.

“I didn’t think I could ever trust someone again,” she continued, “but Callum’s shown me what I’ve been afraid to let myself see. That I can trust. That I can open up again.”

Jake leaned forward, his voice quiet but firm. “I get it, Elodie. You don’t owe me anything. I’m not asking for you to come back. But I wanted you to know that I regret leaving you the way I did. And if you ever need to talk about it, I’ll be here.”

Elodie looked at him for a long moment, feeling the finality of their conversation settle around her. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “But I’m done running from my past, Jake. And I’m not coming back to it.”

When Elodie stepped back into the terminal, the weight she’d been carrying for so long felt a little lighter. She didn’t know what the future with Callum would look like, but she knew this: She had faced the past, and now she was ready to move forward.

Her phone buzzed once more. It was Callum.

“You okay?”

She smiled, reading the message. For the first time in a long time, Elodie felt like she could breathe. She replied:

“Yeah. I’m okay. And I’m ready to be here.”

42

Building Something New

The days after Elodie's conversation with Jake were quiet, but they were the kind of quiet she hadn't experienced before. It wasn't the stillness of uncertainty or hesitation. It was a peace she hadn't realized she needed.

She had finally let go of the weight she'd been carrying for so long. Her past with Jake no longer had the power to define her, and now she was ready to move forward. Ready to build something real with Callum — no more running.

Callum and Elodie spent the next week together, navigating the balance between work and their growing connection. They found themselves in the same familiar rhythm — shared coffee breaks, quiet conversations, and moments where neither of them needed to speak to understand what the other felt.

Elodie still had her doubts, but they weren't as loud anymore. Every time Callum looked at her with that steady, unwavering gaze, something inside her settled. She knew they didn't have all the answers, but they didn't need them right now. They were choosing each other, one small step at a time.

One afternoon, Callum invited her to a quiet café they had passed many times but never entered. It wasn't fancy. It wasn't anything special. But it felt like the right place for them.

Elodie sat across from him, her hands wrapped around the warm coffee cup, feeling the weight of the past lift from her shoulders.

“How’s the airport today?” she asked, her voice soft.

“Busy,” Callum replied with a smile. “But it’s better when I get to spend time like this. Just... being with you.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest at his words. She hadn’t realized how much she needed to hear that. “I’m glad we’re doing this,” she said, looking down at her coffee. “I’m glad we’re trying.”

“Me too,” Callum said. “I think it’s worth trying. Even when it’s not easy. Even when it’s messy.”

Elodie smiled softly, her eyes meeting his. “I think we’re worth trying for.”

Callum reached across the table, taking her hand in his. The simple act grounded her, and for the first time, she realized just how much trust she had placed in him — and how much trust he had placed in her.

As the weeks passed, the space between them grew smaller. They talked more openly, shared more of their vulnerabilities. But it wasn't just the big conversations that mattered. It was the little ones — the way Callum knew she liked her coffee, the way Elodie always seemed to know when he needed a break.

They had found a rhythm together. A dance of small moments and shared silences, built on the foundation of trust and honesty.

Elodie no longer felt like she was running from something. She felt like she was building something. With Callum. With herself.

One evening, after a long day of travel for Elodie and work for Callum, they sat together on the couch in her apartment. The city was quiet outside, the lights twinkling through the windows. For once, everything felt still.

Elodie leaned her head on Callum's shoulder, her eyes closing in contentment. She had come a long way from the woman who had feared intimacy, who had run from everything that felt real.

"I'm glad we're doing this," she said quietly.

"Me too," Callum replied, his voice gentle as he rested his head against hers. "I think we're getting somewhere."

"We are," Elodie whispered. "And it's not perfect, but it's ours. And that's enough."

43

The Quiet Beginning

The airport had become a familiar space for Elodie, but it wasn't the only place she found herself anymore.

For weeks now, she had been navigating both her own heart and the spaces between her and Callum. But this evening, as she walked through the terminal toward Gate 12 once again, everything felt different. It wasn't just a place she passed through anymore — it had become a part of her life. A life that was now shared.

Callum had always been there, waiting patiently in the wings. And now, it seemed, everything was ready to move forward.

Elodie entered the terminal with the kind of peace she hadn't realized she'd been craving. It wasn't the certainty of knowing everything — no, she still had questions. But it was the kind of peace that came from understanding that this — what they had — was real, and it was worth every messy, complicated moment.

She spotted Callum immediately, standing by the same bench where they'd first met. His smile was steady, his presence grounding, and for a moment, Elodie felt everything fall into place.

“Hey,” she said softly, her voice filled with warmth and something deeper.

“Hey, you,” Callum said, his smile widening as he stood up. “I was starting to wonder if you were going to walk past me.”

Elodie laughed, stepping closer to him. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said, her heart full of something she had never allowed herself to feel before. Surety.

Callum reached out, pulling her into a gentle embrace, and Elodie rested her head on his shoulder, letting the quiet fill the space around them. There were no more questions, no more fears about where this was going. Just two people, here, now, together.

After a moment, Elodie pulled away slightly to look at him, her hand brushing against his. “So... now what?”

Callum’s gaze softened, and he smiled, as though he’d been waiting for this moment. “Now we start living it, Elodie. No more waiting.”

She smiled back, her heart swelling with gratitude. “I think we’re already doing that.”

Callum took her hand in his, squeezing it gently. “Then let’s keep doing it — together.”

The weeks that followed were filled with the kind of moments Elodie had once thought impossible — shared mornings, impromptu dates, and quiet evenings that made everything else fade away. The connection they'd built wasn't perfect, but it was theirs, and it felt stronger every day.

Elodie didn't need to ask the question anymore. Could she stay? Could she really be the person Callum needed? She had already answered it, with every quiet moment, every step forward they took together.

One evening, as they sat on the couch, Elodie looked at Callum — really looked at him — and smiled.

“Do you ever think about where we started?” she asked, her voice soft.

Callum looked at her, his expression thoughtful. “Every day. But I think about how far we've come, too.”

Elodie nodded, leaning into him. “It’s funny, isn’t it? How we spent so long running from what we needed.”

“I think we were just figuring out how to get there,” Callum replied, his voice steady and sure. “But we’re here now.”

Elodie smiled, her heart full. She had feared so many things along the way, but she had learned that sometimes, it wasn’t about finding all the answers. It was about walking forward, step by step, hand in hand.

Elodie’s phone buzzed on the coffee table, and she glanced at it. The text was from her mother.

“I’m proud of you, Elodie. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

Elodie smiled, feeling the warmth of those words settle over her.

She looked at Callum, her gaze steady. “I think we are, too.”

And for the first time in her life, Elodie truly believed it. She was where she was supposed to be — right here, in this moment, with the person who had shown her that she didn't need to run anymore.