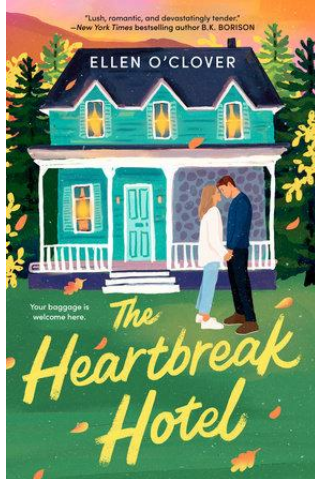




The Heartbreak Hotel

By ELLEN O'CLOVER

One

It happens past midnight, in a fluorescent-lit room. I'm shaky with adrenaline and not a little bit sweaty. I'm having trouble hearing.

"Louisa," Nate says, an edge to his voice like he's repeating himself.

"What did you honestly expect?"

Not this, honestly. Not Nate, who's only ever called me Lou, pulling out Louisa like a weapon. Certainly not the mottled bruise along the sweat-ringed neckline of his T-shirt, evidence of someone else's mouth.

"We've been so scared to call this what it is, but it's actually obvious, right?" He keeps talking, the end of every phrase turned up like a question he expects me to agree with.

I let his voice haze out, become wordless as I watch his lips move: the freckle just off-center of his Cupid's bow, the thin white scar from his near-feral childhood cat. He raises a hand to scrape his fingers through his hair, fidgety, then tugs at the leather bracelet slung around his left wrist. I made it when I was twenty-three and briefly consumed by handicraft.

Bad timing, I think he says. Less than ideal. He starts fiddling with things on his dressing room desk: a haphazard stack of picks, a tin of cinnamon breath mints. The set list is taped to the mirror, Purple Girl (Acoustic) highlighted yellow. He opened with it tonight, not making eye contact with me where I sat in the VIP section, and for once I didn't sing along.

"Say something," I finally make out. A demand, halfway petulant, as Nate turns to face me. He's always been this way: defensive when he's wrong, made accusatory by his embarrassment. "You owe me a response, here, at least."

"I owe you?" My voice surprises me, like this is a scene I've been watching from a distance and I'm disoriented to hear myself in it. Someone whoops from the hallway-Kenji, maybe. Nate's drummer. Everyone else is packing up to go home, or go out. But I have the paralyzing feeling that I'll never exist outside this moment again. "I don't think so."

"No?" Nate tips closer to me, and I bite the insides of my cheeks so hard I taste iron. "After six years, you don't have a single thing to say?"

Six years. Six years. Six years.

I do have one thing to say. When I tilt my chin upward, Nate tracks the movement like a sniper.

"Don't think for even half a second that you're keeping the house."

He blinks, surprised. It's a victory, however small, to shock him.

And it's what I'm thinking of, as Nate Payne-my first love, my first everything-dumps me backstage at his own concert. Not the humiliation of being cheated on right under my nose. Not the fallout when the press learns that Louisa Walsh-Nate's purple girl-is out of the picture. Not even the anticipatory shame of telling my mother, my sister.

It's this, simple and salient:

I cannot lose that goddamn house.

Two

Three hours earlier

I never get floor seats anymore. It used to be a physical thing, watching Nate play: the press of bodies against mine, the bass vibrating up through my sneakers, the guardrail crowded into my spleen as I tipped over it to get closer to him. Now his tour manager, Roger, always books me into the VIP section. Tonight it's stage left, separated from the pit by a railing and a smattering of security guards in yellow polo shirts. Roger says it's to keep me safe, but I've always had the distinct suspicion it's to keep me out of the way.

Kenji's waifish girlfriend sits next to me, white sneakers propped on the rail, phone glowing in her hands. She doesn't look up, even when they take the stage. I think her name is Florence-though it could be Frances, or Frieda. Kenji's girlfriends are hard to keep track of; they come and go, each one more beautiful than the last, sort of incomprehensible to me. When I met Kenji he was a greasy-haired nineteen-year-old with a "hard-line moral stance" against deodorant and a grade point average so precarious it could only be salvaged by a string of expensive tutors. The only thing he cared about was drums, and-sometimes-Nate.

Onstage, Nate waits for the screaming crowd to quiet. "Hellooo, Denver!" he shouts. A woman in the very front row, once my place, shrieks so loudly in response I see a vein throb in her neck.

Beside me, Florence/Frances/Frieda is shopping for face serum.

"We're Say It Now," Nate says, his lips brushing the mic. "And it's a dream to be in our hometown, singing our songs." Kenji hammers out a drum riff that sounds like the train jingle at the Denver airport, and a laugh ripples through the stadium. "If you know the words to this one, sing along for us, all right?"

He plucks out the opening chords of "Purple Girl" and suddenly I'm twenty again, writing an essay in my Boulder dorm room, Nate cross-legged on my bed with his guitar. I close my eyes and think of us like that: children. I loved him like a fever, with an intensity that left me sleepless. Before Abe and Mateo joined the band, before "Purple Girl" took off, before the record deal or the tours or any of it at all—just Nate Payne, the first and only boy I ever loved, writing me a song.

"But I'd give it all up," Nate sings, "these purple mountains, the alpenglow . . ." He steps back from the mic and smiles into the stadium, waving his hand to give them the stage. And they step up, twenty thousand voices, to finish the verse: ". . . for my purple girl."

For years Nate sang those words right to me, no matter how big the crowd. His eyes on mine and the time collapsing between us, making us college kids again. He doesn't look for me, now, and the truth is the song isn't mine anymore. We haven't been those kids in a long, long time. Nate called me purple because he said I was like a bruise: hurt beneath the surface, carrying the remnant of something painful. You try to hide it, he said. But it's right there under your thick skin. Nate could be poetic like that—around his huge laugh and his scrappiness. There was something tender inside of him.

Last fall Nate posted an acoustic version of "Purple Girl" that went viral overnight, eleven million views by morning. He recorded the video in the attic office at the house, sitting in my desk chair with afternoon light coming in from the garden behind him. The song was five years old, by then. It had always been one of their most popular—but not like this.

It's the version he sings tonight, the one that catapulted Say It Now to the level of fame that's had them on tour since winter. I haven't seen Nate in months. When the song hit the Billboard charts and everything changed, his story did, too: Lou's a kaleidoscope, he told the press. Full of every surprising color—purple most of all. It was happier that way, if less true. And I couldn't quite blame him: we haven't been those people in years. It's been a long time since I've been the girl he wrote the song about.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket. My sister, Goldie. The reply to a text I sent

hours ago. What are you waiting for, though? Can't you just get a date on the books for your licensing exam?

My throat gives an involuntary grumble, a strangled noise that makes Frieda(?) glance over at me. I stuff my phone back into my pocket and feel it vibrate again. I try to focus on the music, but I can imagine what else Goldie's saying: You're wasting time. . . . You can't put off your career forever. . . . Twenty-six is too old not to have a 401(k). Goldie was nine when I was born, and when we were kids I called her Vice Mom, like a vice principal but worse. She's been on my case since I was an infant.

When Nate and I were students in that dorm room, imagining our life together, I had the future mapped out exactly as Goldie wanted it. I was going to be a therapist. I was going to have the steady job, the reliable income, the health insurance. Nate was going to play guitar. But before we even graduated that all changed-Nate was touring and then I was in grad school and now we're here: in a packed stadium, together in the same room for the first time in months with a sea of people separating us. Nate's given me the exact thing Goldie hates most: a safety net. An excuse not to stand on my own two feet.

With Nate paying for our lives, I can keep putting off the inevitable for a little longer, and then a little longer after that.

I don't need Goldie's approval, I remind myself. The band transitions into "Louder," and everyone in the pit starts jumping. I watch Nate's face on the big screen-his full lips, the dimple in his right cheek, the jut of his nose where he broke it rock climbing at sixteen. I have my own life, I remind myself. And then, even though it grates-even though it hasn't felt true in a long while-I think, I have Nate.

Frieda follows me backstage when the set's done, finally dropping her phone into her shoulder bag and giving me a thin-lipped smile that doesn't touch her eyes. I've had two hard seltzers-those giant-barreled cans they only sell at stadiums-and I'm feeling a little fizzy. I tell myself I didn't think of Goldie when I ordered the second one. Didn't think about how she'd never drink on a school night, because she always has work in the morning. Certainly didn't think about the fact that I have no plans tomorrow-or any other day, really.

"Floooooooo!" Kenji bounds down the hallway toward us, his voice bouncing from the concrete walls. It's Florence, then. When he scoops her into his arms and spins her around, she looks genuinely repulsed. In her defense, Kenji's pretty sweaty. "What'd you think, baby?"

"It was great," Florence says, adjusting her hair as he puts her back down. "You ready to go?"

"Where's Nate?" I ask, and Kenji notices me for what seems like the first time. A weird look storms over his eyes, there and then gone. "Uh, he's . . ."

"Dressing room?" I prompt.

"Yeah," Kenji says slowly. His hand's wrapped around Florence's waist, rucking up her shirt. "But look, Lou, he's not-" Kenji breaks off, swallows. Kenji's a lot of things, but taciturn is not one of them. I hike my eyebrows.

"I don't know if you want to go back there," Kenji says. There's a flush spreading over his cheeks. I feel it start to mirror in my own.

"Why not?"

Kenji's eyes flicker down the hall, back to me, down the hall.

"Kenji."

"Ah, Lou, it's really not my place-" He breaks off again, grimacing. And I know, fully and all at once, like a shoe dropping. A door slamming shut.

I start to walk, autopiloting my body down the concrete hallway even as he calls after me. Kenji's been my friend for years-but he's Nate's friend first. It's not me he's trying to protect.

". . . Abe always gets so pitchy on 'In Flux,' but he's insistent on that solo." I hear Nate before I see him, his voice carrying through the cracked door of a room with his name on it.

When I push it open and step inside, he's standing next to a girl. A woman, Goldie would chide me. She's tall and curvy, with tumbling red hair and a shirt that dips low enough for me to see that her breasts have significantly more presence than mine. His hand is on her ass, all four fingers tucked into the back pocket of her jeans, and in the same moment it registers that I recognize her, she reaches to unwrap Nate's earplugs from around his neck.

The photo, I think. That damn photo, from the spring.

She's nobody, Nate had said. Nobody.

But here she is.

Three

I get home past two o'clock and don't turn any lights on. Nate stayed downtown-whether with his bandmates or that woman, I don't know-and I went home to the house we've shared for the last four years. A historic wood-and-stone cabin in the mountains (if you can call something a cabin at five thousand square feet and six bedrooms). With its wraparound porch and stained-glass windows and vaulted, gnarled-beam ceilings, it's my happiest place. A home that Nate's almost never in, that feels like it's mine as much as my own face, my own fingernails.

It was nearly ninety degrees in Denver, where August's always sticky and sweltering. But up in Estes Park the evenings are cool all summer long, and when I step out of my car in our smooth driveway it's clear and breezy. It smells like pine trees. The stars are otherworldly bright.

I kick off my sandals inside the front door and walk through every room of the house: moonlight coming in through the tall windows, whispers of wallpaper and doorframes under my fingertips. Trying to memorize every piece of it. Trying to imagine my life anywhere else.

Seriously? Nate had said, when I told him I wanted the house. That's really all you have to say? Not an answer to whether I could keep it, and it was all I'd had to say, at least right then. His words from the stadium are still swirling through me: What did you honestly expect? We've been so scared to call this what it is.

I would never have admitted it to him, that he was right. That it's been at least a year-longer, probably-since Nate and me have been Nate and me. We settled so invisibly into our shared but separate lives that I can't see the seam, looking back. The line where things changed. I only know that they did: that Nate had become my long-term plan by default, not choice, and that there was a part of me-not insignificant-that stayed with him only to prove something to myself. That I'm capable of an everlasting relationship. That I'm settled and grown-up and taken care of. That I'm, maybe most of all, not like my mother.

It was unfair to him, to hold on for reasons like that. But now we're here, more than even in our unfairness. I'm insulted and humiliated and relieved.

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