

d e w y d M M o s s

Someone
to Love



Noli & Cooper's Story

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Prologue

Cooper Smith's hazel eyes locked eyes with a pair of deep brown ones causing him to almost drop the case of liquor he was carrying into his restaurant. Noli Freeman had haunted his dreams while thoughts of her had terrorized his heart in the months since she'd left without notice. He just stood there and stared at her, ignoring the heavy weight of the case in his hands until Trevor cleared his throat to prompt him to move from blocking the doorway. He avoided taking the straight path to the back room that would take him past her bar height table and instead he traversed the obstacle course behind the bar. The remainder of the order he carried in without walking through the bar all together.

As he put the stock into the proper location, his mind worked double time as he tried to convince himself he didn't care that she was here. Each time he thought maybe she was here for him, he'd tell himself she was here to see her cousin Diane. Diane had just married his buddy Jack earlier in the year. There would be no reason for her to be here to see him. The time for explanations into her sudden departure was long gone. Even if she was here for him, he didn't want to see her, much less actually talk to her.

"Coop, did you see Noli out there?"

"I saw her."!

"She's here to see you."

"I need to finish stocking. It's New Year's Eve and we're going to be packed. This will run smoother is stuff is where it's supposed to be." He concentrated on the task at hand like it was surgery.

"I can finish putting this stuff up."

"That's okay. I want to do it."

Kayla looked at him with raised eyebrows. She'd rarely seen him this dedicated to the menial tasks of owning a bar. "She's been waiting a long time. Just sitting there waiting for you."

He didn't want to see her, but he didn't want to have to send his employee out there to do his dirty work. So he'd just hide out.

"Tell her I'm busy and I can't see her." That resembled the truth enough to not be a lie. He was busy, because he didn't want to see her.

"Why don't you want to see her? Tell me the truth, did she experience the legend that is Cooper Smith and can't give him up? Has

she turned into a fatal attraction stalker? ” she said leaning over a stack of boxes and exposing more of her not so subtle cleavage.

For the last few months her necklines had headed south at a steady pace while her hemlines inched north.

“Kayla, you’re not wearing the uniform.”

“Yes I am.”

She stood up tall revealing the black t-shirt with his bars logo in white.

“You altered it.”

“You mean this?” she said pointing at where she’d cut the crew neck to create a cleavage popping V neck. “I thought it was cuter this way.”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“No one else seems to think so.”

“I should fire you for altering the uniform.”

“This isn’t a uniform, it’s a t-shirt. Anyway, we both know you couldn’t live without me,” she said and bopped out of the storage room.

She was right, she was too important to the business and to him personally for him to fire her. She was also right that he was a legend. There were many satisfied women that would verify his legendary status. But things had changed. He had charmed many into his bed for a few weeks then moved on. There were also some women who continued to pursue a relationship because they wouldn’t accept the fact that while he was loving in bed, he didn’t do love or relationships. Noli Freeman was as far as possible from being one of those women.

Cooper wondered if his best friend, Jack, had known Noli was back but hadn’t told him. Then again, neither Jack nor Diane knew of the brief relationship between him and Noli so they would have no reason to update him on her. They didn’t know that he couldn’t do anything to keep her out of his mind. He’d not asked about her whereabouts but craved any information.

For the next hour he avoided the bar, even though it took him less than twenty minutes to finish stocking. He still refused to go out where she was. Instead he opted to go over some financial records, a task he’d been avoiding. That was preferable to giving her the satisfaction to say whatever it was she had come here to say. He hoped she’d get tired of waiting and just leave. After all, leaving was something she was an expert at doing.

Normally he could do math in his head, but today he had to pull out the calculator and even that was somehow not adding the numbers up correctly. He gave up trying to concentrate on the task at hand and decided to give in. Confronting the source of his problem was the only way to solve it.

Noli had the taxi take her to Cooper's house first. Her heart began to accelerate with each turn of the tire on the dusty road, but he wasn't there. The taxi driver smiled brightly as she paid a generous tip in addition to the three digit fare. When she arrived at his bar she was informed that he had run to a couple of suppliers to stock for the holiday weekend. The lunch crowd had dissipated so the bar was pretty empty as the staff prepared for the big New Year's Eve crowd.

She wondered how long she would have to wait for Cooper to return. It didn't matter how long she had to wait, because she would wait for as long as it took to talk to him. It took her months to build up the nerve to return and have this conversation with him and she wasn't going to leave until it was done. With each second that passed her resolve diminished and her anxiety increased. He wouldn't greet her with open arms and he was well justified in having less than warm regard for her. She was certain he'd like her even less once he'd heard what she came here to say.

To bide her time she sat and watched. She watched the TV she couldn't hear over the music playing through the speakers. She watched Kayla flirt her way to larger tips. She watched as another waitress poured half empty bottles of ketchup into other half empty bottles of ketchup. Noli smiled because she knew that was called marrying the ketchup. She watched as Trevor, one of the brawny bartenders read a text message, left from behind the bar and headed out the door.

Noli was moving the few remaining shreds of cheese with her fork through the salad dressing residue on her plate when the door opened and Cooper walked through carrying a box. Seeing him again stole her breath just as much as the first time she saw him. His bulky muscles filled his shirt to capacity. It wasn't his muscular physique that attracted her, it was the confidence of his smile and the laughter in his eyes that she could see even from across the room.

She noticed him long before he noticed her. Seeing him brought up a myriad of emotions. Part of her wanted to run and throw herself at his feet until he pulled her into his arms and kissed her because her transgression was forgiven. Another part of her wanted to hide behind a menu so he didn't see her and she could just sneak out. There was still another part of her that was pulling out a mental sword and putting a shield in front of her heart to prepare her for the battle that was about to ensue.

When his eyes met hers she wrapped her hands tightly around her glass. The smile that had crossed his face just moments before fell as soon as he saw her which caused her heart to plunge. He stood at the door just staring at her. She couldn't read the expression on his face and hoped her emotions were disguised by her neutral expression.

Trevor came and stood behind Cooper carrying a box as well. The other man's presence forced Cooper to break their eye contact and move on. The bartender walked past her with the box in his hand but Cooper took the path furthest from her. Once again she was left with nothing to do but watch. Watch Cooper avoid coming near her and disappear into the back. Watch Trevor make several more trips outside and returned each time with a box. Watch the door to the back waiting for Cooper. He did not reemerge.

Cooper forced his feet to move towards her table. With each step closer he felt the anger that had been growing inside of him begin to wither. He knew that by time he was close enough to see the depths of her eyes or smell her sweet scent that it would vanish. For the sake of his sanity and his heart, he needed to remember that this was the woman that left him devastated just a few months ago. He put up a wall as he sat in the chair across from Noli with folded arms and didn't say a word. He just looked at her with cold, emotionless, eyes and a raised eyebrow.

A hesitant smile crossed her face. "How are you?"

"You didn't reappear as suddenly as you disappeared just to ask how I am. I doubt that you care how I am. Noli, why are you here?"

His words were harsh, but he still was taken at how beautiful she was. Sitting across the table from her he could see she'd made some changes. Her hair was a mass of thick curling corkscrews and her face was void of all makeup except the sheer red tint of gloss on her lips. A

memory of the pleasure of kissing those lips interrupted his thoughts. He looked down at the table to stop his amorous thoughts from leading him down a path of ill decision. He tried to focus on the table but instead noticed that her cleavage seemed more apparent. In fact her breasts seemed much fuller than he remembered. He shifted in the seat to adjust the treacherous tightening of his pants.

“I do care how you are. There are a million reasons for me leaving, but I won’t bother you with them because they all sound like excuses and there’s no acceptable excuse for that act. I would say I was sorry, but that doesn’t seem sufficient either. I’m not here to ask for your forgiveness, because I don’t deserve it.” She looked into the glass of water clasped in her hands instead of holding eye contact.

She seemed nervous and a bit distressed. He thought her eyes moistened with the threat of tears. Despite the anger at her return, he still wanted to reach out and comfort her. He didn’t give into that desire.

“That brings me to my previous question. Why are you here?”

This was more difficult than she thought it would be. He was using her nickname, which he’d never done. He’d always used her full name as if it was his special pet name for her. She longed to hear him say Magnolia. Cooper radiated anger and she didn’t blame him. She left without saying goodbye or even telling him she’d be gone. Her leaving hurt her just as much as it hurt him. The past few months had been miserable for her and she could only imagine how he felt. Though his negative image of her was justifiable, he was going to have to put that behind him. They needed to find amicable ground to stand on. It was the only way to deal with the issue at hand.

“I’m here because I have something to tell you.” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“If it’s not excuses and not apologies, then what is it? What do you have to tell me?”

She reached out and touched his hand that was resting on the table, but he yanked it out of her grasp. “I know you don’t like me for the way I ended our relationship, but I’m afraid that when I tell you you’re going to hate me even more.”

“I don’t hate you at all Noli.” Even though he was still using her nickname and not her full name as he usually did, for a brief moment she

felt some relief and some hope that he wouldn't be angry. That spark of hope was doused by his next statement. "I don't think enough of you to hate you. We didn't have a relationship. You were just another girl in my bed, nothing more than a prolonged one night stand."

His words stung and a tear finally fell from her brown eyes and rolled down her cheek. She thought she saw regret in his eyes but his continence didn't change.

She put her face into her hands to hide the remaining tears that escaped. "This is so hard."

"Why don't you go away for a few more months and come back when it's easier for you," he said with venom in his voice as he stood to go.

"Wait," she said and grabbed his arm to prevent him from returning to the back. He stopped and shot daggers into her slender fingers clasped around his arm. She followed his nonverbal command and removed her hand from him. "I can't say it so I'll just show you." Slowly she pushed her chair back from the table and stood in front of him. She watched as several emotions danced across his face finally settling on an angry confusion.

The words she'd been struggling to say shot of his mouth. "You're pregnant!" He grabbed her hand and began to walk her to his office. She snagged her purse with the fingertips of her other hand, but failed to grab the coat she'd used to conceal her belly up until this point. She struggled to keep up with his wide strides as he rushed through the nearly empty bar. Every eye there was on them until he slammed the door.

Cooper paced back and forth, occasionally cutting a glance at the seated Noli. She just sat there, too afraid to say a word, watching him with her head following back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match.

"Is it mine?"

She hadn't expected the question, but it didn't make it hurt any less. He had to know she could not have moved on so quickly. "It is yours, but don't be alarmed. I'm not expecting anything of you."

"Don't be alarmed!" he shouted. He shook his head and leaned against his desk. "She says don't be alarmed," he said to himself. "Wait, what do you mean you don't expect anything of me?"

"I mean that I just didn't want you to not know. I mean I wanted you to know, because you not knowing would be wrong."

The anger in his eyes pierced her at the core. She took several shallow breaths unable to pull a much needed full breath. When she could finally get air in she said, "I'm trying to say I just thought you should know you're going to be a father, but I'm not expecting you to be a daddy."

"Were you planning on coming here, dropping this bomb and being a ghost again?"

She hunched a shoulder. Her only plan was to tell him. She had not allowed herself to think beyond that. There was no certainty in how he would react. Perhaps he would be satisfied with knowing he was a father and only seeing his child on the occasional picture posted online. She knew he wouldn't go for not being part of his child's life, deep down inside, that's why she was here. Though she was fighting it, there was something in her screaming for a family -- her, the baby, and Cooper.

"You have to be almost due."

"I have about another month."

"Were you going to leave before or after the baby was born?"

"I was planning on having the baby in Indy."

He came and knelt down in front of her. He placed his hands on her rounded belly. A smile appeared on his face as he felt his child move. "Do you know what we're having?"

"No, I don't know what I'm having."

The angry scowl returned, replacing the smile on. "Why do you hate me?"

She covered his hands resting on her belly. "I don't hate you."

"It sure seems that way. First you leave with no explanation, knowing that that's exactly what my father did. Then you come here on the verge of delivery just to tell me you want me to abandon my child the same way my father did me. You have to hate me to intentionally hurt me as much as you do."

"I don't hate you. I'm not trying to hurt you. It pains me to see you hurt and know I'm the one that caused it." She reached out and touched his face.

He leaned in to the feel of her touch. "Why did you leave?"

"I couldn't stay Cooper. I just couldn't." She moved her hands to her chest and grimaced. Magnolia leaned all the way back in the chair and fanned herself. Her breaths were shallow and frequent because there was a pain that kept her from breathing in deeply. It felt like a heart

attack, but she knew it was a panic attack. “I was overwhelmed,” she said between gasps.

“What was overwhelming? It was the best months of my life. Followed by the worst. Are you okay?” She was still clutching her chest. She closed her eyes and nodded.

“Let me get you some water.”

Noli knew the water wouldn’t help because this was mental and not physical, but she accepted it anyway. She drank half of the bottle then sat it on the table.

“I’ve felt different all day. Probably because I was nervous about coming here.”

He was back on his knees in front of her with his hands on her belly. “Your stomach is harder than it was before.”

“It’s been feeling that way for a few hours.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure.”

“Good. Then we can discuss our next steps. I can think of three options to our situation. One, you take the baby and I see her every now and again. Two, I keep the baby and you see him whenever you’re not traveling. Option one isn’t fair to me. You know I can’t just let you leave and take our child. You know that right? And two isn’t fair to you.”

“You’re right, neither of those options are fair. What’s three? We share custody and I move close, like maybe Indy?” It had been the logical and preferred choice to her.

He shook his head. “Option three, we get married.”

She rocketed out of the chair, throwing him off balance for a moment. That wasn’t an option. Marriage was until death do you part and she couldn’t fathom someone else close to her dying. “Married! That’s not an option.” Her hand began to rub her belly.

He stood to tower over her. “Why not? It’s the fairest. It’s fair to you because you won’t have to endure raising our child alone. It’s fair to me because I’ll get to be a constant and active part of my child’s life. Our baby will benefit from having both parents.”

“We don’t have to get married for the child to benefit from both of us. The idea of marriage for the child’s sake is antiquated. People don’t do that anymore. Plus, what are the chances of a marriage surviving based on nothing more than shared lineage?” She tried without success to get enough air.

“There’s more than the baby. We were good together. No, we are great together. No one in my life has ever made me...” he paused, and a look she didn’t recognize crossed his face. “No woman’s made me feel the way you make me feel about you Magnolia.”

For the first time that night he’d used her full name like he used to. She’d missed that. She’d missed him.

“And we have excellent chemistry, both in and out of the bed,” he continued.

He caressed her neck with his fingers. She wondered if he could feel her rapid pulse.

“We can’t base a marriage on getting along well, awesome sex, and a baby.” She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

He pulled her closer and whispered in her ear. “Most successful marriages are based on those three things.” He pulled her as close as her pregnant belly would allow and nibbled on her ear. “The sex was awesome.”

“What about love? Isn’t that supposed to be part of a marriage?”

“Yes, it is. And there’s a lot of love. You love when I do this.” He caressed her back. “And I love this.” His hand moved lower until he reached her bottom and squeezed it. “And we both love this.” He lowered his mouth to hers and finally kissed her. She’d wanted to feel his lips on hers since the moment he walked into the bar. Her memories didn’t do justice to the way his kiss felt.

She let out a soft moan. Then a loud groan as she pushed back away from the kiss and grabbed her stomach. She blew out a long breath and a high pitched sound that probably perked the ears of every dog in the county. She reached out for his hand and squeezed it tight. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow. Mmmmm. Holy cow that hurt.”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “It’s passing.”

“Noli, was that a contraction? Are - are you in labor?” he stuttered.

“I think it’s just a Braxton Hicks.”

“What kind of hick?”

“Braxton Hicks, it’s like a fake contraction. A book said they sometimes happen the closer you get to the actual due date.”

“Are you sure? That didn’t look fake. Do we need to get you to the hospital?”

“No. I’m fine.” She realized her hand was still in his. “Thank you. Sorry I hurt your hand.”

His smile made another appearance. “You didn’t hurt me. You could squeeze my hand off if it helps even a little. Do you really think you want to do this by yourself? Labor is just the beginning. You want to take care of a baby by yourself? Do you want to raise a child by yourself? My mother will tell you it’s not easy. Why do it alone when we can do it together, as a team?”

“Can’t we be a team and not be married?”

“We could. This baby changes things. It raises the stakes. I need more than just your agreement to teamwork. I need a commitment and marriage is just that.”

She took a step away from him and knocked into the table. The bottle of water fell, spilling water on the floor. Cooper turned to get a small towel that was sitting on his desk. Noli grimaced as the puddle on the floor continued to grow. Her brown eyes widened. “Cooper, I don’t think that was a Braxton Hicks.”

“Why not?” He turned back towards her. The puddle on the floor was much larger than what could be accounted for by the contents of the knocked over bottle.

“Because my water just broke.”

A note from the author...

Thank you for reading this sneak peak at Someone to Love (Noli and Cooper's Story). While I see no reason to change this preview, there is a chance that there may be some changes to this chapter when the book is released. Many have been asking when this book would be released and I'm glad to announce that it will be in April.

*Thank you,
Lena*