

SUNDAY

By Allison Whittenberg

Characters:

- Elias - early 20 years old, thin, gaunt. Earnest but defensive, trying to recover from an eating disorder.
- Lara - mid 20s, warm and grounded, with an easy laugh. She carries herself with quiet confidence but not without vulnerability.

Scene 1

SETTING: Outside the cafe

(Lights rise on a small café exterior. A chalkboard menu is displayed in the window. Elias stands awkwardly, reading it over and over. His sweater hangs loosely on his frame, shoulders jutting sharply beneath the wool. Lara enters. She carries a small tote bag slung over her shoulder. She spots Elias and smiles brightly.)

LARA (cheerful)

You've been waiting long?

ELIAS (shaking his head, almost too quickly)

No, not at all.

(ELIAS opens the door for her, almost bowing, grateful for something to do with his hands. They step inside.)

ACT I

Scene 4

SETTING: The Café Interior

(A small table with two chairs. Wine glasses are already set. The lighting is warm, intimate, slightly dim. They sit. ELIAS pulls out LARA's chair then ELIAS moves carefully, as if afraid of breaking himself. His posture is rigid, unnatural.)

LARA (glancing at menu)

Everything looks so good. I'm starving.

ELIAS (nodding, neutral)

Yeah.

(They order.)

ELIAS

I know I took a while to order like it's some life or death decision.

LARA

Some people are very particular about what they eat. Some people have allergies. Do you have allergies?

ELIAS

No.

LARA

None?

ELIAS

No.

LARA

Neither do I. I guess we have that in common... So, you said you like the beach.

ELIAS

I like swimming.

(He shifts in his seat, uncomfortable.)

ELIAS (correcting himself)

I like the water... after I go in.

LARA (smiling)

That makes sense.
(curious, playful)

What else do you like?

ELIAS (stiff, awkward laugh)

I... don't remember what I wrote.

(Lara giggles softly. Elias's face softens, just for a moment. Dishes are placed down with quiet clinks. Elias stares at his plategrilled chicken, brown rice. He reaches for his fork, stops, then picks it up.)

LARA (chatting casually)

I used to be in grad school. Veterinary program. But I dropped out. Now I'm back at the animal hospital as a receptionist. It's... nice, actually. Not thinking about school all the time.

ELIAS (nodding)

That sounds... good.

LARA

You're a graphic designer, your profile said.

ELIAS

Yeah, I used to work for a company but now I freelance.

LARA

That must keep things loose.

ELIAS

Except when it gets close to deadline.

ACT I

Scene 5

SETTING: Outside Lara's Apartment

(The scene shifts. They walk side by side under soft streetlights. Elias keeps his hands in his pockets, close to himself.)

ELIAS

Can I walk you home?

LARA (smiling)

You're sweet to ask.

(They walk a few paces in silence. Elias glances at her out of the corner of his eye. Her sweater fits snugly around her waist and hips a quiet, natural softness. Something in him stirs. He quickly looks away, embarrassed by his own thoughts. They reach her doorway. A pause. The night holds its breath.)

LARA

Thanks for walking me home.

ELIAS

Of course.

(They stand close. Lara leans in, kisses him softly. Elias freezes, then melts into it. The kiss deepens. Lara's hands trail down his sides, then playfully she gives his ass a quick squeeze. She smiles against his lips. Elias exhales sharply, a laugh caught somewhere between surprise and wonder. For a

moment, he forgets himself. There's no weight, no fear, just her warmth anchoring him. The lights dim slowly as they continue kissing, until the stage goes black.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

SCENE 6

SETTING: A lecture hall, evening.

(Lights up. LARA and ELIAS are seated side by side, waiting for a lecture to begin. Lara adjusts her tight sweater, and Elias helps her with her coat, his cold hands briefly touching her back.)

LARA

Your hands are cold. Let me warm them up.

(takes his hands briefly)

I hope you don't mind.

ELIAS

(he studies her hands as he rubs his then releases

them) LARA

Thanks for coming to this lecture with me.

ELIAS (looking about)

No, this is a nice, nice place. I walk by here all the time, but I've never

stopped in...How long does this run?

LARA

About forty minutes. But then there're questions.

ELIAS

A lot of questions?

LARA

(shrugs) We'll be out in an hour. We have aisle seats we can jet.

ELIAS

Jet?

LARA

Yeah, leave if you're really bored give me a sign.

ELIAS

We'llll, stay for the whole thing, Thermoregulation in Desert Animals, I don't want to miss

a moment.

(LARA shoves him, playfully. ELIAS at once seems more at ease and takes off his coat.)

LARA

What did you do today, Elias?

ELIAS

A whole lot of nothing. Just knocked around some ideas.

LARA

So you brainstormed.

ELIAS

You see the positive, Lara.

LARA

That's how artists create, right?

ELIAS

I'm not an artist, Lara. Besides that, I am miles a way from a prototype..

LARA

Whatever a prototype is, I bet you're not as far from it as you think you are.

(Silence.)

LARA

I had to say goodbye to Ben today.

ELIAS (confused)

Ben?

LARA

Benji. My foster dog. I don't think I told you, I foster. (she pulls out her phone) I'm going to

miss him so much. (suddenly near tears) Let me show you a picture. So cute, and such an

easy way about him. (shows Elias a photo) It's for the best, though. He's back in his home, and I

know he'll be happy there.

ELIAS

How long did you have him?

LARA

Since July 12th. One of the longest times I've had one. (pauses, composing herself) But I know what I'm in for. They always have to leave. (shakes off the sadness, smiles) Anyway.

(They both look forward, settling into the moment. Lara turn to Elias)

LARA

You have a really nice profile. Most people don't.

(A pause as the lecture hall lights dim slightly, signaling the start.)

LARA

Oh, it's about to start.

(LARA leans closer.)

The museum might still be open when this is over. Maybe we can see some bones.

ELIAS (amused)

Bones, huh?

LARA

The oldest saber tooted tiger in the world is here.

(The lecture begins. Lara impulsively kisses Elias on the cheek, then playfully slides her finger down his nose, admiring his profile. Elias blushes, caught off guard but pleased. They settle in, smiling, as the lights dim further and the lecture begins.)

ACT I

Scene 7

SETTING: Lara's small apartment.

(The stage is softly lit with warm, golden morning light filtering through sheer curtains. The space is intimate: a modest couch, a cluttered coffee table, a tiny kitchen counter visible at stage left. It feels lived-in, comfortable, very hers. The bed, slightly mussed, is visible upstage. Lara, in a peignoir, sits cross-legged on the floor ELIAS sits on the edge of the bed, oversized t-shirt, boxers quietly watching her. There's an easy domesticity to the image but under it, a faint hum of unease.)

LARA

I wish every day was Sunday.

ELIAS (with a hint of reverence)

Amen.

LARA

Saturday you're still recuperating from the week, but Sunday morning... I always feel

so rested. Even though last night we didn't exactly get a lot of rest.

ELIAS (half-smile)

We did get some exercise. That's the next best thing.

LARA (teasing, playful)

I'll say. I used muscles I didn't even know I had. (He laughs, his shoulders relaxing for the first time.)

LARA

You bent me.

ELIAS (grinning)

No, Lara. You're freakishly flexible.

LARA (with mock offense)

Eight years of yoga pays off.

ELIAS (teasing)

Oh, so that's what it is?

LARA (smirking)

That and my partner.

(They share a laugh. For a moment, it's pure intimacy, easy and safe.)

LARA (standing,
stretching)

I'm starving. How about breakfast before another round? Omelettes?

ELIAS (slight hesitation)

Omelettes?

LARA

It's one of my specialties. I like Swiss, but I've got cheddar and gouda, too. You?

ELIAS (quickly)

Cheese, no.

LARA

Two omelettes. One with, one without. You don't mind mushrooms, do you?

ELIAS (looking over her
shoulder)

No, mushrooms are fine...Whoa! How many eggs are
you using?

LARA

Three eggs each, pretty standard.

(beat, noticing his expression)

You don't cook much?

ELIAS (with a small laugh)

I mostly boil water.

(LARA laughs warmly, shaking her head. She crosses to
a small speaker, wiping her hands on a towel.)

LARA

What's your favorite food?

ELIAS (after a pause, evasive)

I can take pasta.

LARA (playful)

Take it or love it?

ELIAS

I don't know.

LARA

That's not an answer. What do you *love*?

ELIAS

I don't know.

LARA (accepting his answer, moving on)

What about music?

ELIAS

I listen to anything.

LARA (smiles)

Good. Then you won't mind this.

(She hits play. A jazzy, upbeat tune fills the apartment. She sways to the music, her body loose and unself-conscious. Elias watches her, mesmerized but increasingly tense as she returns to the eggs.)

ELIAS (placing his arm on her waist)

Dance with me.

LARA (laughing)

I'm cooking!

ELIAS

Just one song.

(He pulls her into a dance. At first, she resists, laughing, but soon gives in. They spin and sway around the small space.)

LARA (catching her breath)

Okay, okay, you're distracting me on purpose!

(playful but suspicious)

You don't think I can burn.

ELIAS

Burn?

LARA

Yeah, it kind of means the opposite. You're afraid of my cooking.

ELIAS

I'm not afraid of your cooking. I'm sure your cooking is wonderful.

LARA

Then let me cook. We'll dance later.

(She returns to the counter. Elias hovers nearby,

restless.) LARA

Set these on the table for me?

(She hands him plates. He takes them but doesn't move toward the table immediately.)

ELIAS

Anything else?

LARA

Set the table and then just sit.

(She pours him a glass of orange juice, sets it at his place. He sits but doesn't touch the juice.)

Lara cracks eggs into the hot pan and they sizzle loudly. Elias flinches slightly at the sound.)

LARA

The secret is low heat and patience.

(Elias nods but says nothing. His leg bounces under the table.) You okay? You seem...

(She glances back at him, noting the untouched orange juice.) You haven't touched your juice.

ELIAS (quickly lifting the glass, taking a small sip)

Sorry. Still waking up.

LARA

Okay.

(She plates the omelettes, his noticeably bigger than hers and sits across from him.)

LARA

Yum?

(Elias cuts a small piece, chews deliberately. His jaw works overtime, as if forcing himself to swallow.)

ELIAS

Delicious.

(But he doesn't take another bite. Instead, he cuts the omelette into smaller and smaller pieces, moving them around the plate.)

LARA (eating, watching him)

You're not eating.

ELIAS

I am.

LARA

You're rearranging.

(A pause. Elias sets down his fork.)

ELIAS

It's really good, Lara.

LARA

I had a friend in high school who used to do that. But she had...
Nevermind... Do you think we're moving too fast with everything?

ELIAS

No.

LARA

You sure? It was our first time. Times last night. You're first
time staying over and all.

ELIAS

I think it's going well but (standing abruptly) if you have
things to do I could get going.

LARA

It's Sunday, Elias. I love Sundays. I usually don't do
anything. Remember? We had a whole

conversation about this subject.

ELIAS

I know, but I don't know.

(He moves toward his clothes. Lara stays seated, staring at his barely touched plate.)

LARA

What? What are you doing? Did I do something wrong?

ELIAS

No. God, no. I had a great time. I always have a great time with you.

LARA

Then why do you look like you can't wait to bolt?
(He stops dressing, caught. A long silence. The music continues softly in the background, now feeling almost mocking.)

ELIAS

I'm starting to feel. Feelings. Look, Lara, I'm not good at this.

LARA

At what, Elias? Breakfast?

(She rises, moves toward him slowly.)

LARA

Elias. What's happening?

(He looks at her, then back at the table where his untouched omelette sits growing cold.)

LARA

Talk to me.

(Silence.)

Or don't talk to me.

(The statement hangs in the air. Elias's hands shake slightly as he reaches for his shoes.)

ELIAS

I know we're only two weeks in, but I keep wondering if I can give you what you want.

LARA

You gave me what I wanted last night.

(She doesn't move closer, but her voice is gentle, inviting.)
Sorry, that was stupid... That's it isn't it. You think I'm a hornball?

ELIAS

A what?

LARA

Loose, easy, promiscuous.

ELIAS

Oh.

LARA

So do I overdo it?

ELIAS

Of course, (stammering) of course not.

LARA

My personality tends to get to people after a while. I'm what you call a little much.

ELIAS

I don't think so.

LARA

What do you think I want from you?

(Elias stops, one shoe in his hand. The vulnerability in his face is raw, terrifying.)

ELIAS (quietly)

You, um, want. Someone who's got it together. Like you do. Someone who doesn't make everything complicated.

LARA (stepping closer)

Elias, I don't know what happened in the past five minutes, but I'm really happy with who I met online. I know, this whole thing, it's like throwing a dart at a wall. I think I got a bullseye.

(The words land. Elias sets down his shoe but doesn't sit. They stand in the golden morning light, the space between them charged with possibility. The lights begin to dim slightly as the music fades. Elias looks once more at the abandoned breakfast, then back at Lara.)

ELIAS

I haven't been in a lot of close relationships.

LARA

I haven't been in a ton either.

(Beat. He takes a small step back toward her.)

ELIAS

Okay.

LARA

Okay. You don't stare at me, Elias. It's more like... you're studying me.

ELIAS

I don't mean to, Lara. I promise I'm not, like, a... serial killer or anything.

LARA

What do you see in me?

ELIAS

You're kidding, right?

LARA

(shakes her head)

No. I've had these— *(she gestures to her chest)* —since I was twelve. Then came the hips. The picture I posted on Match? Neck up only. No full-body reveal.

ELIAS

So did I.

LARA

Yeah, but you've got that killer jawline. Me? I've got a pie face.

ELIAS

(quietly, almost to himself)

No, you don't.

LARA

Nobody is interested in this.

(she frames her face)

Or this.

(pointing to her brain).

ELIAS

That's not true.

LARA

I don't know what you want.

ELIAS

I don't mean to be cryptic, Lara.

LARA

Then tell me what you want from me...I meet a lot of guys who are comfortable inside of me, but

not comfortable with me.

ELIAS

That's not what's going on, Lara.

LARA

I'm trying to tell you. I've gone through this my whole life. I don't know what I have to do.

ELIAS

I'm not like that, I care about you, Lara.

LARA

That's why you won't stay for breakfast.

ELIAS

Lara...I'd like to stay but I can't.

LARA

So now it's can't...I usually attract gym guys, confident guys who know exactly what they want. They want my body, not me. So when you come on all quiet and careful and you actually listen, you tricked me. You made me think that you meant something different.

ELIAS

I do mean something. Look, these two weeks...

LARA

Yes?

ELIAS

Well, everything between us. It means something.

LARA

Does it? Or is this some kind of performance?

ELIAS

It's not that. It's me.

LARA

You how?

ELIAS

I just get these... feelings that I feel. And then I don't feel them and I'm not explaining this well.

LARA

You're saying two things at once.

ELIAS

I don't mean to. I want to be direct. Truthful.

LARA

Well, maybe you don't like voluptuous women, Elias. Maybe you think I should have breast reduction surgery.

ELIAS

(startled, blurts a short laugh)

Lara... no. God, no.

LARA

(hurt, defensive)

That's funny to you?

ELIAS

No. It's just. It's the furthest thing from what I think when I look at you.

LARA

(sighs, still unconvinced)

I'm older than you.

ELIAS

Two years.

LARA

And taller.

ELIAS

(hesitates, then quietly)

Yeah.

LARA

And I know I weigh more than you -

ELIAS

Let's not get into that-

LARA

Well, once you add all that up-

ELIAS

(cuts her off, urgent)

Lara. Who's counting? I'm not.

LARA

A

(small, shaky laugh)

Sorry. I just... don't know how to read you. "You're feeling feelings" who talks like that? What does that mean?

ELIAS

That's why I need to go.

LARA

Can you tell me why you acting like this first? Playing with your food? What's that about?

(They sit in silence for a moment. Elias swallows hard, then slowly reaches across the space between them. His fingers brush against hers tentative, unsure. She doesn't pull away. Instead, she turns her hand over, lacing her fingers through his.)

LARA

If you're not going to tell me, then goodbye, Elias.

ELIAS

I don't even get a kiss goodbye?

(LARA kisses ELIAS passionately then

withdraws.) Goodbye, Elias.

(ELIAS leaves. LARA grabs a magazine. She sits back at the table and eats as she flips through the magazine. After a few moments, there is a single knock at the door, so faint that LARA doesn't even look up. Beat. Then another knock, louder, more deliberate.)

LARA (looking up from the magazine)

Yes.

ELIAS (heard from the other side)

I'd like to finish breakfast.

(LARA gets up and opens the door. ELIAS comes in, sits down, and starts to eat. He concentrates deeply as he eats. Lara observes him in shock.)

ELIAS

It is good.

LARA (rolling her eyes)

Whatever... So...what do you usually eat for breakfast?

ELIAS

I eat a bagel sometimes.

LARA

Then I should have gotten bagels. You know there's a shop, Bert's, it's right on the corner. It smells so good when I pass it. I've never gone in but I bet - You know what, let's not talk about food any more.

ELIAS

Gladly.

LARA

I'm sorry. I overreacted.

ELIAS

Lara, I was illogical. I mean it's, it's just food. (LARA raises her glass. ELIAS follows suit. They clink glasses.) (BLACKOUT).

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 8

SETTING: Elias's apartment

(Late evening. Soft music plays from a small speaker. Two half-empty glasses of amber-colored craft beer sits on the coffee table.)

LARA

Four weeks going strong, Elias.

ELIAS (*snaps his finger*)

Time is flying.

LARA (*sipping*)

In a good way.

ELIAS (*taking a larger drink*)

Yeah.

LARA

We've gone through another milestone. The fundraiser. My co-workers loved you.

ELIAS

I tried my best.

LARA

It was great, as much as I talked you up. They were dying to meet you. You made quite an impression. I didn't know you played piano. What was that song you were playing? I know I've heard it before.

ELIAS

Nocturne.

LARA

That's one of those famous ones by Mozart, right?

ELIAS

Chopin.

LARA

Chopin, of course. You've been playing for years, obviously.

ELIAS (drinking quicker)

I've been playing for years. My mom has a parlor grande.

LARA

Is that anything like a Steinway?

ELIAS

You're thinking of the make. She has a Mason and Hamlin.

LARA

You play very well, and you never mentioned you did. What other talents are you keeping from me?

ELIAS (*swirling his glass, taking a longer drink*)

What do you mean?

LARA

Nothing. Thanks for coming with me, I hate to go to those things alone.

(She raises her glass to meet his glass then they drink some more.)

ELIAS

Mmm. smooth.

LARA

(teasing, amused)

I think I found something you like.

(He takes another drink, this time way too quickly. He blinks, as if surprised. He

takes another, longer drink.)

ELIAS

It's... getting warm here, isn't it?

LARA

(Smiling.)

I don't feel anything.

ELIAS

(His words start to slur just a fraction.)

I'm fine. It's one beer. You play... so beautiful. The piano.

LARA

I don't play the piano, Elias, you do.

(Elias drinks some more. He starts laughing too loud.)

LARA

Something is coming over you.

(Elias tries to drink some more. Lara gingerly takes the drink from his hand.)

ELIAS

Why are you taking, where? Hey!... It's getting warm here. It's hot, isn't it all of a sudden?

LARA *(patting him, trying to steady him)*

I don't feel anything, Elias.

ELIAS

It's just warm in here. It's hot! I feel like taking something off.

(ELIAS takes off a layer of clothing showing another layer and he takes off that. He stands. Wobbly. Then he dances clumsily to the soft music. He has a different beat going on in his head. LARA laughs at first, unsure but charmed, but then

quickly becomes concerned. Then ELIAS stops dancing and has a hard time taking off his socks. He almost falls. LARA steadies him. She guides him back to the sofa and has him sit.)

LARA

Stay still. Just for a minute. Just for... just for a few seconds. Just still yourself. I think you're just a little tipsy.

(Lights shift to a warmer, softer tone. ELIAS is slumped against LARA, his head on her chest. He nuzzles in till he finds a comfortable position then closes his eyes.)

ELIAS (with drunken emotion)

I could stay here and... So nice. Forever. With you. Wonderful. You were wearing this green sweater, this same green sweater. I love you, Lara. I love you.

(Lara nods, unable to speak at first. Lara looks down at the top of his head, her expression a mixture of tenderness and pain. She says it so quietly it's almost a breath.)

LARA

I love you, Elias.

(to the audience)

Now what?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT.)

ACT II

Scene 1

SETTING: Elias's apartment.

(The play opens on LARA sitting at a small table, eyes trained at the bedroom door. ELIAS emerges from the bedroom, he is in

yesterday's clothes. He is groggy, squinting in the light. A pause.)

LARA

You're up.

ELIAS

Yeah.

LARA

It's after 4:00.

ELIAS

That's most of the day.

LARA

You really needed the sleep.

ELIAS

I guess.

LARA

It was no problem... I wanted to make sure you were comfortable...How's your head?

ELIAS

Little something still going on.

LARA

Your eyes are clear. That's a good sign.

(She indicates a paper bag on the table.)

I got some bagels from that place that I was talking about when I asked what do you like to eat? For breakfast, I mean. It's more

like supper now.

ELIAS

Let me take a shower. And... you know, get woken up some more. And then let's... let's, let's have something.

LARA

No. Now that I see you're okay, I better get going.

ELIAS

Get going?... We still have some Sunday left.

LARA

I better get going.

(She stands, starts to gather her things.)

ELIAS

Lara.

(She stops, doesn't look at him.)

What happened last night?

LARA

... You loosened up.

ELIAS

What does that mean?

LARA

You had a lot to say.

ELIAS

I hope I didn't overstep anything.

LARA

You have no memory of the things you said to me last night.

ELIAS

I hope I didn't say anything insulting.

LARA

Just the opposite.

(A long, heavy silence.)

ELIAS

I'm sorry. Either way.

(LARA looks at him, her expression crumbling for a split second before she masters it. She gives a small, hopeless shake of her head. LARA puts on her jacket and heads for the door. She stops and turns.)

LARA

When was the last time you had a physical, Elias, a complete workup with bloodwork and scans?

ELIAS

Bloodwork? Scans?

LARA

All you had was a glass. You weren't drinking before I came over last night, were you?

ELIAS

No.

LARA

Are you on medication? Do you have a condition?

ELIAS

No.

LARA

Then how did you get so plastered?

ELIAS

I'll ask my nutritionist.

LARA

You have a nutritionist?

ELIAS (lying)

No.

(Silence.)

LARA

Please see nutritionist for many different reasons. Some people are diabetic.

ELIAS

I meant trainer.

LARA

You have a personal trainer?

ELIAS

No.

(LARA studies him for a long beat, then lets it

go.) LARA

You should see a doctor, Elias.

ELIAS

I will never drink again, ever.

LARA

Okay.

(LARA turns to leave again, getting all the way to the doorknob, but turns back to him. She moves toward him. He moves toward her. They meet in the middle with an embrace.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

Scene 2

SETTING: (Elias's apartment.)

ELIAS (pulling out his
nutritionist's meal plan)

Dinner. Protein, carbs, vegetables. Four ounces, half cup, one cup.

(ELIAS opens the refrigerator. Stares at the contents. Closes it. Opens it again. Takes out ingredients with shaking hands. He weighs the chicken on his food scale. Too much. He cuts a piece off. Weighs again. Nods. He cooks methodically, setting timers. When the plate is ready, he sits. And stares.)

ELIAS

Eat. EAT!

(ELIAS takes one bite. His phone rings MOM on the screen. He silences it. Takes another bite. The phone rings again. He stands abruptly, goes to the sink, stands there breathing hard. Returns to the table. He sits. He picks up the fork.)

ELIAS (coaching himself)

I will do this...I can do this...I have to do this.

(He takes another bite. And another.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

SETTING: Elias's Apartment

(LARA stands by the door with her tote bag, Mel a small, wiry rescue dog sniffs at ELIAS's feet. Elias leans against the counter, tense but trying to play it cool.)

LARA

I want you to watch Mel for me while I go upstate for the conference.

ELIAS

(glancing down at the dog)

Mel?

LARA

Yeah, for Mellow. He has such a gentle nature. You know I foster pets.

ELIAS

Yeah, you said that. What's his story?

LARA

He's from North Carolina originally. Unfortunately, I think he was abused there. He's terrified of loud noises, firecrackers especially, so I can imagine what happened to him.

ELIAS

Poor guy.

LARA

(immediately backtracking)

He's not like other dogs,

ELIAS

I don't know dogs so I don't know what is normal and what's not.

LARA

He's been through a lot. I know it's a hassle. If you don't want to, I understand.

ELIAS

No, I'll do it. It's not that. I've never had a pet. What do you do with them?

LARA

Well, you have seen people take dogs for a walk, right?

ELIAS

Once or twice.

LARA

Well, do that. Twice a day, and here's some dog food. (hand in a package and a bowl) and put out some water.

ELIAS

What else?

LARA

I'll leave a lot of instructions like, a ridiculous amount - kidding. There's not much to his upkeep.

ELIAS

Okay.

LARA

You know, Mel's low-key. Easy. Maybe we haven't been going out long enough for me to ask you for such a big favor.

ELIAS

It's been six weeks.

LARA

Six really, really nice weeks.

ELIAS

Agreed.

LARA

You're the best, Elias.

ELIAS

(kneeling slightly to look at Mel, who stares back with unblinking eyes)

Okay.

(beat)

Hi, Mel.

(LARA crouches next to the dog and pats his head. ELIAS watches her, almost studying her more than the dog. The moment feels intimate in its own quiet way. LARA exits. Immediately, ELIAS sits with sticky notes and a marker. Mel sleeps nearby. ELIAS writes "FEED MEL" on one note, sticks it to the fridge. Writes another. Sticks it to the cabinet. He surveys his work, then writes more. The apartment slowly fills with yellow reminders. He crouches next to Mel.)

ELIAS

We'll be fine. Right, Mel?

(BLACKOUT).

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

SETTING: Elias's Apartment

(Two days later. The apartment is quiet, too quiet every dish is put away, the couch cushions perfectly aligned. The scale still slightly visible, as is some takeout trash from a "safe" meal. Mel barks wildly as the door opens and Lara steps inside, travel bag slung over her shoulder. She kneels immediately, her laugh bright and unguarded as Mel leaps into her arms.)

LARA

Hey, buddy! Did you miss me?

(Mel licks her face, tail thumping against the floor like a drumbeat. Elias stands a few feet away, hands buried in his pockets, watching them with a small, almost shy smile. He looks tired, his frame slightly hunched, like he hasn't been sleeping well.)

ELIAS

Yes, I did.

LARA

(looking up, breathless from laughter)

Thank you so much for watching him. How was he?

ELIAS

(shrugs, voice deliberately even)

Good company.

(As LARA rises, her gaze catches on a sticky note clinging to the fridge: "FEED Mel!" written in big, uneven block letters. She blinks. Then, as her eyes adjust, she notices another on the cabinet door. Another above the sink. Two more near the food bowl. Mel trots by, tail wagging. Lara straightens slowly, her laughter fading into a puzzled silence.)

LARA

(noticing notes everywhere, trying to sound light) Wow.

Lots of notes. You really didn't want to forget, huh?

ELIAS (defensive, moving to tear them down)

I was going to take them down before you got here. LARA

(watching him, concerned)

How many are there?

ELIAS (avoiding her eyes as he crumples them)

I don't know. Enough.

LARA (gently)

Elias... this is a lot of notes for remembering to feed a dog.

ELIAS (stopping, voice tight)

I just wanted to make sure I didn't mess up. You trusted me.

LARA (softening but still worried)

I did trust you. I do. But this...

(gestures at remaining notes)

...this seems like more than just being careful.

ELIAS

(too fast, a touch defensive)

Yeah. Just, you know, being thorough. I was going to take them down. I thought you wouldn't get back until later.

(He moves quickly to rip the remaining notes down, crumpling it in his fist. The motion is sharp, almost violent. Lara flinches slightly, then masks it with a faint smile. She crouches to pet Mel again, hiding her face so Elias won't see the worry flicker across it.)

LARA

There wasn't a lot of traffic.

(she looks at Mel)

He looks well fed (beat) and happy. You must've done a good job.

ELIAS

It was easy. Mel does have a gentle nature.

LARA

Glad he wasn't a bother.

(She leans up and kisses his cheek, tender and brief. Elias goes perfectly still, like a fragile structure that might crumble if touched too hard. For a moment, everything holds. Then Lara exhales and pulls back with a small, tentative smile.)

LARA

I should get home. Unpack. Do laundry. Go over my notes.

ELIAS

You got back a little earlier than expected - why don't you stay the night?

LARA

I'd love to.

ELIAS

So stay.

LARA

I want to go over my notes while they are fresh in my mind.

ELIAS

Notes?

LARA

Yeah, from the conference...but I'll be back tomorrow. Right after work. Sounds good?

ELIAS

Okay.

LARA

I really missed you this weekend. It was only a little bit of time, but it seemed so much longer. Come on, Mel. Thank, Uncle Elias.

(LARA grabs the dog, her bag, and heads to the door. Before she leaves, she turns back, studying him. There's love in her eyes, but also unease, puzzlement.)

LARA

I'm not sure about all the sticky notes, but, thanks again, Elias.

ELIAS

Anytime.

(She exits. The door closes with a soft click. The apartment falls silent, without Mel's faint panting. Elias stands motionless for a moment, staring at the closed door, his shoulders sinking.)

ELIAS

I didn't forget to feed him. Not once. Feeding myself, still a problem. (He glances at the remaining sticky notes plastered on the wall and cabinet doors, his breathing uneven. He starts tearing them down, one by one, until only a single note remains. His hand hovers over it... but he doesn't remove it. Lights dim. Elias sits in shadow surrounded by silence and one stubborn note on the wall: FEED Mel!)
(BLACKOUT).

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 7

SETTING: Elias's Apartment

(Lights up on ELIAS's apartment. The lighting is soft, warm but slightly muted, as if holding its breath. LARA enters, shrugging off her coat, smiling in that easy, natural way of hers. She starts setting the table with two takeout bags. She takes out the burgers and fries.)

LARA

Hi.

ELIAS

You're back.

LARA

You seem surprised.

ELIAS

I've been thinking... about the note we left things on.

LARA

Bad note? You mean you being a sweetheart and watching Mel all weekend?

ELIAS

I mean the sticky notes.

LARA

Whatever works, right?

ELIAS

Right.

LARA

You said you'd never had a pet before. There's nothing wrong with writing things down... Hungry?

ELIAS

(beat)

Sure.

(They unwrap the food. The sound of paper tearing and fries spilling onto the table fills the quiet space. They begin to eat. Elias takes slow, careful bites, watching Lara out of the corner of his eye. After a moment, Lara notices. Her chewing slows. She sets her burger down and wipes her hands deliberately on a napkin. Elias freezes, then sets his food down too, mirroring her exactly.)

LARA (gently)

Elias, are we doing this again?

ELIAS

This?

LARA

You're studying me and now mimicking me...
You mind if we talk about us? About
our relationship?

ELIAS

Okay.

LARA

I've never met anyone like you, Elias.

ELIAS

Thanks?

LARA

That's a compliment.

(beat)

In so many ways, you're everything I've
ever wanted.

ELIAS

Thank you.

LARA

Am I what you want?

ELIAS (caught off guard)

Huh?

LARA

Hear me out. You never complain, you never ask for anything.

ELIAS

I just... enjoy being with you.

LARA

But you must want something.

ELIAS

More than you?

(beat)

No. Nothing.

(The lighting begins to shift, softening, as if the world outside their conversation is fading away. A faint, dreamlike glow settles around them. LARA studies his face. She wants to believe him, but something in his tone lingers like a shadow.)

LARA

It's like you're... managing everything. Even me.

ELIAS

What do you mean?

LARA

Sometimes I feel like I'm dating a polite stranger. Elias... sometimes I feel like you're holding part of yourself back.

ELIAS

Maybe I am. When I look into your eyes, Lara, I feel. I feel... I feel so many things.

(For a moment, silence hangs between them. LARA lets him draw her into his arms. The tension in the room dissolves

into fragile warmth.)

I like the way you feel in my arms, Lara.

LARA (trying to lighten the mood)

I like the way you feel too. You're... slinky.

ELIAS

Slinky?

LARA

Yeah. That's the right word.

ELIAS

Doubt it.

LARA

No, really. You're wiry, you snap back... like one of those old toys.

ELIAS

I used to have one when I was like seven.

LARA

See? Perfect fit.

(LARA touches his cheek gently. For a heartbeat, they simply breathe together.)

ELIAS

Lara, you have an apartment.

LARA

Yes.

ELIAS

It's small and it has a lot of stuff in it.

LARA

Guilty as charged, I have too many things. I'm a horder in training.

ELIAS

And I have a place with hardly anything in it.

LARA

You do keep things sparse, open. But that's all right, everyone's different. Where are you going with all this?

ELIAS

Nowhere. (to himself) I'm not ready.

LARA

Not ready for what?

ELIAS (quickly)

Nothing.

LARA

I love you, Elias. Do you love me?

(beat)

ELIAS

Yes.

LARA

Is that how you really feel?

ELIAS

Yes.

LARA

What else do you feel?

(beat)

ELIAS (opening up)

... Lara, I'm starving.

(LARA glanced at the untouched food on the table then circles back to ELIAS with a grin.)

LARA

Then let's eat.

(ELIAS and LARA sit back at the table. This is the first time they eat normally together.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)