



A **SECRET BABY**  
ROMANCE

my **best** friend's  
*Sister*

NATASHA L. BLACK

# MY BEST FRIEND'S SISTER

---

# A SECRET BABY ROMANCE

NATASHA L. BLACK

Copyright © 2023 by Natasha L. Black

All rights reserved.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations.  
It is intended for mature readers.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

# CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

[Epilogue](#)

[My Second Chance \(Sample\)](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[Books by Natasha L. Black](#)

[Connect with Natasha L. Black](#)

# INTRODUCTION

**A fake relationship seemed like a good idea at the time.**

**Too bad it turned out to be anything but fake...**

I panicked, and possibly made the worst choice of my life.

My former bestie told me she's engaged to my ex,

And had the nerve to invite me to the wedding!

Kissing my brother's best friend was the obvious solution,  
right?

Mark came back to our small hometown take over his dad's  
medical practice,

Now he's stuck being my fake boyfriend at my ex's wedding.

When he tenderly wraps my sprained ankle, sparks fly.

And I'm catching feelings I have no business catching.

The wedding weekend is fine,

Unless you count the part when the bride humiliated me in  
front of the whole town,

And I found myself in bed with the one man I shouldn't be in  
bed with.

I can't face Mark after that debacle,

Until a pregnancy test leaves me no choice.

**I'm either going to get everything I've always wanted,**

**Or end up a single mom with a broken heart.**



**How did I let it get this far?**



## CARMELA

**B**ig Danny T's was the best bar in town, and my favorite place to unwind. Especially now that I was going to have Trevor with me. I could only imagine how much better that was going to be.

We had been dating for a few months now, although we probably weren't as far along on the relationship as most people would have been by now. Mostly because he lived in a different town, and we conducted a lot of our relationship long-distance. Late night phone calls and check-ins through text and chat apps kept us in each other's everyday lives even when we couldn't see each other.

Now that I had him with me, and it was time to finally introduce him to my friends.

Some of them were a bit miffed they hadn't met him by now. Jade had given me shit about it, insinuating that I was hiding him from them for some reason. It was ridiculous, but she was kind of right. I was hiding him, but only because I wanted him to meet them in a way that they could all hit it off. A way that we could all be comfortable and in our element.

We were both in our late twenties, but he maintained so much of that swagger that men tend to have before they hit forty. He was different. A little dangerous.

Sometimes maybe a little too much.

The relationship hadn't been perfect, but really, whose was? The combination of the distance and the lack of mutual

friends had put extra strain on us that led to some sarcasm or tiffs between us. I tried to overlook them, chalking them up to the kinds of things that are bound to happen when two people try to stay committed to each other even if they couldn't see each other all that often.

This was a big step, and I was nervous. Introducing my friends to Trevor meant that I was asking for their feedback. I knew they would give it to me straight too. If they thought he was no good, they would let me know. But I wanted them to like him so badly, and I was just sure they would be fine.

As Trevor drove, I sat in the passenger seat, giving him an overview of each of my gal friends. I provided him with a head's up cheat sheet as to what he should expect, not that he seemed particularly interested.

"Also, please don't forget, Jade has that scar down her arm that she's very sensitive about. If you see it, don't mention it."

"Uh huh," he said, fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

"Oh, and remember how I told you Jess was blonde? She's not anymore. She's a redhead, and she is desperate to have everyone believe that's her natural color. I told her no one would believe that for a second, but you know, you just have..."

"I got it," he said. His tone had a sense of finality to it. "You don't need to go over all this again. I've heard it. A hundred times."

"Not quite a hundred," I joked. "Maybe ten."

"Enough," he said. "Enough times."

"Fine," I said, straightening up in the seat and turning to look out the window. "Turn right up here. Not this stoplight, the next one."

"I have a GPS," he grumbled.

"I know, but it's telling you to go in the entrance from this road on the side, which is always packed, and accidents

happen there all the time. It's faster and safer to go right up here."

Trevor didn't respond, but his fingers tightened a little harder around the steering wheel. Part of me wished I had driven my own car rather than have him pick me up. Then he just would have followed me, and if things got too weird, he could escape if he needed to, and I could make a slower, more natural exit afterward. But that wasn't what Trevor wanted. A united front, he called it.

"I know I keep going over stuff with you," I said. "I'm sorry that it's annoying. I just want them to like you as much as I do."

The fingers released a little from the wheel, and he turned to smile at me. I returned the smile, even if we were blowing right through the stoplight, I'd told him to turn at.

As I thought, the turn into Big Danny T's nearly caused a wreck, and Trevor let out a string of curses under his breath. I shook my head and tried to keep from saying I'd told him so.

We parked and headed inside, excitement clenching my belly as I saw my friends in the distance. When they caught sight of me, the squeal and careful running in heels to get a hug was followed by the introduction of Trevor to the group.

"This is Jade," I said, pointing out my gorgeous, dark-haired friend. "This is Jess and her boyfriend, Ronnie. And this is Gary and Tom."

"Hey, nice to meet you guys," he said, shaking hands and flashing the megawatt smile that had caught me off-guard and made heat rise up my neck when I first met him.

He was as charming as I'd hoped, and everyone seemed to think he was fun and personable. Jade pulled me aside at one point to tell me how great it was that she and he had so much in common, which surprised me. Apparently, she had family from his hometown, and they knew some of the same people. They were both soccer fans and liked the same bands that I personally found to be a bit pretentious.

“He’s cute too,” Jade said, elbowing me in the ribs. “Does he have a brother or something? Hook a girl up.”

“What about that guy you were seeing?” I asked. “The one from Austin.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not as good at the whole long-distance thing as you are.”

We laughed and linked arms as we headed back to the stools. The guys were taking shots of something, which meant I was going to be dealing with a very drunk Tom in a few minutes. He was a great friend and a wonderful, soft soul, but the man had the alcohol tolerance of a mosquito. Liquor went directly to his brain, and before too long he was stumbling and giggling and incapable of controlling the volume of his voice.

We sat at the bar, me on my favorite stool, chatting and talking and getting to know each other for a few hours. Secretly, I hoped this was the beginning of something. The beginning of Trevor thinking that Murdock, Texas was better than where he was in Greene. The beginning of Trevor thinking that there really was something long-term here, and that maybe moving here would be the best way to take the next step in our relationship.

The more he got along with my friends, the better, and the easier it would be to convince him to come. With every laugh, with every smile, I thought for sure that I had pulled it off.

*Six Months Later...*

The same stool.

The same bartender.

Even the same damn dress.

Everything else was different.

This time, I was sitting at the bar all by myself. All the joy and fun that Big Danny T’s normally brought was gone. I was

sad and angry and a ton of other emotions that equaled abject misery.

The drink in front of me was mostly untouched. I'd thought that alcohol would help me forget, but now that I was sitting in the bar, all the memories of the last couple of months came rushing back to remind me of how dumb I had been. How angry I still was. And how alcohol never seemed to make any of those things any better.

I picked up my plastic sword stirrer and jabbed downward. Another miss. The cherries moved in the pink, fizzy drink, sliding away. At first, I had been attempting to spear the cherries and eat them, but after ten minutes, it became just another mindless distraction.

Here I was failing. Failing even at stabbing cherries. How freaking appropriate.

“Hey there, stranger.”

Slowly, I turned around and found myself staring at a wide, muscular chest inside a tight T-shirt with a gym logo on the breast. My eyes protested the instruction to move up, but eventually followed and led to a thick neck, broad shoulders, and a gorgeous face on top. Short black hair and a wide pearly-white smile inside a five o'clock shadow.

I recognized Mark Murphy from years before, a good friend of my brother's growing up and a boy that I had seen many times before he moved away.

Now years later, here he was. Standing in front of me, the dulcet tones of his velvety voice bouncing around in my ears and making my breath hitch in my chest.

Mark sure had grown up.





## MARK

It took a few moments to recognize her when I first saw her at the bar. I moved from my seat in the corner to a stool across from her to make sure, sipping casually on my longneck beer and watching her stab a cocktail sword into her drink. She looked lonely. And sad. Also, drop dead gorgeous.

The last time I'd seen her, she was a teenager. Skinny and a bit mousy with an overbite, she was still cute back then. I was eighteen and friends with her brother, and about to head off to college. She was fifteen and just starting to figure out how to navigate the piranha-filled waters of high school. Even though it was silly and there was an age difference, I'd had a little crush on her. Too bad she was my buddy's sister.

Now she was grown up. Like, very grown up. Big, pouty lips pressed together in concentration as she used her long fingernails to clench the sword and stab again, unsuccessfully. She sighed, her surprisingly large chest pushing at the thin blouse, making my stomach clench and my eyes dart away.

I had to talk to her. I couldn't help myself.

I walked around the bar, up behind her, and took a deep breath.

"Well, hello, stranger," I said.

She turned around slowly, and her gaze floated up to mine in confusion. Her big, brown eyes narrowed after a moment, and her lips parted. I was drawn to them. I wanted to taste the cherries on them.

“Mark,” I said.

The confidence I had gone into this conversation with faded quickly. She was still looking at me like she had no idea who I was or why I would be talking to her.

“Yeah, I remember who you are,” she said. “I just didn’t know you were back in town.”

The look on her face had faded from confusion to almost annoyance. I was seriously starting to second-guess my attempt at talking to her, but I was in too deep now. I had to at least see this thing through to the end.

“Well, not really so much back in town,” I said. “Just here visiting Pops.”

“Pops?” she asked.

“My dad,” I said. “The town doc, Dr. Murphy.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “Of course. I forgot you were his son.”

“Ah,” I said. “Yeah, he’s not feeling well, so I came back into town for a few days. I just got in and thought I’d swing by the old stomping grounds and grab something to eat.”

“Oh,” she said. “Do you want to sit here?”

“Yeah, that would be great,” I said, suddenly feeling a bit more upbeat. Even if she wasn’t still fully remembering me, at least she hadn’t told me to get lost. “You know, the cherries are usually easier to stab when you drink the liquid first.”

It was an attempt, and a poor one, at striking up conversation. As soon as it was out of my mouth, I realized that perhaps criticizing her drinking choices and methods was not a good look. But she didn’t seem to mind, shrugging and picking up the sword again to take another attempt.

“I was just lost in my thoughts,” she said. “I was supposed to be here with my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” I asked, a sudden heavy feeling filling the bottom of my stomach. Heat went up the back of my neck. I was going to need an exit strategy, apparently.

“Ex now,” she said. “We were supposed to be getting engaged.”

“Supposed to?”

“Yeah,” she said, stabbing again before tossing the stirrer aside and taking a big, deep sip. “We were talking about getting married. He led me to believe that he was going to ask me soon. Today should have been our anniversary, and we had planned this trip back here. We were going to come to Big Danny T’s. I was positive he was going to propose.”

“What happened?” I asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I don’t care,” she said, downing the rest of her drink and signaling the bartender for another. “He left me for my best friend.”

“What?” I asked.

“Well, he didn’t say that in so many words. But it’s what he did,” she said. “A couple of months ago he just calls me out of the blue and says he needs his space. So, I figure he’s just getting cold feet about the whole thing and say sure. You know? Just let him have his damn space. I get that. It’s a big life choice to get engaged.

“Then he calls me again like three days later, and I’m thinking he’s come to his senses. Instead, he goes on and on about how he supposedly hadn’t been happy with me for a long time and said he was done. Just done. Like it was nothing.”

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“You haven’t heard the worst part,” she sighed. “Two days later, I get a call from a friend of mine, and she says she saw him around town. With my best friend. Or who I *thought* was my best friend. Traitorous bitch.”

“Whoa,” I said, having not expected a life story and now receiving what sounded like a prequel to an episode of one of those shows about why women murder. “Do you think they were together before he broke up with you?”

She nodded.

“I mean, it’s possible they weren’t,” I said. “I’m sure he just kind of stumbled into it with your friend. I don’t think your friend would do you dirty like that, right?”

She shrugged. “I don’t really think that’s a possibility,” she said. “He cheated. With her. She was probably at his house when he called and said he needed space.”

“Yeesh,” I said. “I am so sorry to hear all that. No one deserves that kind of bullshit, especially someone as beautiful as you.”

She paused, the glass of her refilled cherry-bottomed drink halfway to her lips. She smirked.

“Uh huh,” she said. “Right.”

“It’s true,” I said. “You’re gorgeous. Anyone who cheats on you is a moron.”

“Well, here’s to morons then,” she said, holding her glass out. “There sure do seem to be a bunch of them.”

“And may no more of darken your door,” I said, clinking our glasses together.

“Amen,” she agreed, tipping her drink back and almost emptying it in one go.

“So other than all that, how have you been? Do you still live in Murdock?” I asked, eager to move away from the subject.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m a lawyer now. Mostly deal with family law and real estate, that sort of thing. All the boring stuff.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” she laughed. “There’s nothing sexy about family law, trust me. It’s not like *Matlock* where I passionately argue cases in front of a jury.”

“I can’t believe you just equated speeches by Matlock to being sexy,” I laughed.

Finally, a real smile seemed to cross her face.

“Yeah, well, maybe it was the seersucker suit,” she said.

“Maybe,” I said. “I’m just shocked you remember that show.”

“Dad loved it,” she said. “Watched it all the time before wrestling. I always caught the tail end of it because I’d watch the matches with him.”

“I see,” I said.

“Are you going to see Camden while you’re here?” she asked. “I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“I’m planning on it actually,” I said. “Every time I swing into town, I go by the ranch.”

“Weird that I didn’t run into you then,” she said.

“Yeah. A couple of the other guys in our little crew moved back already. Ryan’s here, and Graham too. Apparently, he coaches at the high school.”

“The famous ballplayer?” she asked. “He came by the ranch just the other day, actually.”

“We have a little group text chat,” I said. “I think Graham is the only one who ever says anything in it other than Camden. I’m more of a lurker, so anytime I pop up they ask when I’m coming to visit. Now I’m here.”

“Well, I know Camden will be glad to see you,” she said.

“I’ll be glad to see him,” I agreed. “And I’m glad I got to see you too.”

The faintest hint of a blush went up the side of her face as she took another sip of her drink. We stayed there, chatting, and polishing off a few more drinks as we talked. As we spoke, she seemed to loosen up, and some of that girl I remembered from being fifteen and hanging around the house was showing up again.

“Do you see the guys often?” she asked. “I know Camden talks about seeing one of you boys every couple of weeks.”

“It’s tough,” I said. “The guys have gotten together in different places, but I should have gotten back here more

often. It would have made Camden happy for sure. And my dad.”

“You didn’t tell me what you did,” she said. “As a job. Why did you leave Murdock, other than it being... well, Murdock?”

“College,” I said. “Then medical school.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re a doctor? Like your dad?”

“A doctor,” I agreed. “Not much like Dad, though.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, stirring her drink. She had long since stopped stabbing the cherries, content to pull the stem up enough to pull one out and bite it.

“I mean he’s this wildly loved and respected doctor in a small town, and I’m some schmuck living in a big city who patients only ever see when there’s an emergency.”

“Ahh,” she said. “Where did you go?”

“Austin,” I said. “Then Dallas, then Austin again. I love the big city lifestyle. When I finished my residency, I just stuck around and kept building my career. I worked in some city hospitals doing emergency room stuff for a while and then started aiming more toward my specialties. I moved to Dallas for an opportunity, then back to Austin when they offered me a better position.”

“So, like your Dad, just in a high population place,” she said. “Got it.”

“I guess,” I said. “I see a few dozen more people in a day than he sees in a week, and no one knows my name, but sure.”

“I know your name,” she said. “Mark Murphy.”

I nodded. “That’s me. Just a weird Irish kid from Texas, struggling with being too tall in elementary school and too nerdy in middle.”

“You seemed to be looking fine in high school,” she said casually, then turned beet red. She turned her face toward me, her lips partially around a straw. “I mean doing fine. Doing fine in high school.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Nice recovery,” I said. “At any rate, it’s nice to come back home once in a while, you know?”

“I live here,” she said. “I don’t get to come back home because I can’t ever seem to leave this damn place.”

“Then I should get the hell out as fast as I can, shouldn’t I?”

“As fast as you can,” she repeated, serious for a moment.

“Well, I enjoy coming here to visit,” I said. “It’s always nice to run into someone you haven’t seen in a long time and get a chance to catch up.”

“Likewise,” she said.





## CARMELA - ONE YEAR LATER

“Go see if they need help tacking up,” Camden said, nodding toward the barn where a little girl was walking in.

“Doesn’t she come here all the time?” I asked.

“Yes, but she’s real small. Sometimes she has trouble getting stuff off racks,” he said. “Then meet me out by the big corral.”

“All right,” I said.

Strictly speaking, looking after young riders who were taking lessons was not what I was there for. Camden had lots of people coming in these days for lessons and just to be around the horses, but my entire purpose that day was just to be like one of them. I was there for the horses. But, like usual, once Camden saw my face, he put me to work, starting with mild, innocuous things and moving on to full-fledged ‘carry this over there and bring me that thing’ stuff. It was confounding how he always managed to get me to do it too.

It was probably the horses. I loved being around them. I would pay for the privilege of being around the horses, regardless of the price. Considering the price was only ever an hour or so of chores around the ranch, and he never asked me to muck a stall, I figured it was probably a good deal.

Weekends were generally spent at the ranch these days. I loved being there with the horses, especially the two new ones

that Camden was training for use at his buddy Ryan's bed and breakfast.

I liked Ryan, as a person. He was a good man who'd gone to war for his country and came back a shell of himself. The combination of horse therapy and meeting his now wife Allison got him back on his feet and returning to his old self. It was good to see, and Camden was thrilled that he had anything at all to do with his friend being okay again.

Now Ryan and Allison were running a bed and breakfast across town, and apparently, Ryan had long dreamed about having horses living on the expansive grounds so the guests could enjoy them too. Camden had agreed that it would be nice and offered to help train any horses they bought for it, as well as helping them learn everything they would need to know to stable them on the grounds or he could keep them at the ranch if they needed.

A couple of weeks ago, two new horses showed up at the ranch, and Camden had been spending most of his time working with them. This meant that more of the chores were going undone, and Camden, ever the stickler for finances, was resisting hiring someone new to help him. Consequently, I was picking up part of the slack and running over to make sure one of the girls who took lessons was apparently now part of that.

Poking my head into the barn, I saw the girl using a stool to grab a saddle and watched as she tacked the horse expertly. It was honestly impressive for such a tiny girl, but Camden was an excellent teacher. The people who went through lessons with him tended to be very knowledgeable when they were done.

I watched as she led the horse out to the smaller corral where one of the few employees was waiting for her to begin a lesson. As I headed back to the big corral where Camden was waiting on me, my thoughts drifted back to Ryan and Allison. Ryan needed her in his life, someone who could lift him out of his often grumpy state of mind. Not that Ryan ever noticed he was grumpy. It made me wonder if anyone ever thought I was grumpy.

Or if I would ever find someone who would help lift me out of it.

I tried shaking that off and thinking about something else. It was hard because my brain wanted to wallow in the depression and self-doubt that had settled over me in the last few months. But being around the horses and on the ranch helped distract me, helped me work through it.

Camden was leaning against the wooden fence and watching an adult on their lesson. He wasn't looking at me, but I was sure if he had, he would be giving me the same grimace that he had all morning so far.

As soon as I'd arrived that morning, he told me that he needed to tell me something, and that I probably wasn't going to like it. I hated how that sounded. Nothing good ever came with that kind of introduction.

But then, rather than just coming out with it, he beat around the bush and started asking me to take care of chores around the place. At first, I thought he was simply referring to the chores themselves and was mentally preparing himself to tell me he needed me to muck out a stall. It was the only thing I had yet to do, and I figured the initiation was coming at some point.

Leaning against the fencing beside him, I watched the lesson for a moment before turning to him. Camden's eyes were following the rider and horse from under his baseball cap. Most men would jump at the chance to wear cowboy hats and dress up, but Camden refused. He wore jeans, and flannel shirts when it was cold. But unless he was specifically trying to impress someone, he tended to avoid the cowboy hat, opting instead for the baseball cap of the team Graham played for in the majors.

I thought it made him look more authentic.

"So, what's this big thing you needed to tell me?" I asked.

"Ah," he said.

For a moment, there was nothing else, and I nearly gave up.

“Ah?” I asked. “Come on, tell me.”

“You won’t like it,” he said.

“You mentioned that part,” I said. “What is it I won’t like?”

He looked visibly uncomfortable as he shuffled his feet and leaned on the fencing again.

“I got a new client possibility. Asking about riding lessons,” he said.

I waited for a moment, expecting something else, and when nothing came, I shook my head in confusion.

“I don’t know why that should be upsetting. That’s what the ranch does. Horse riding lessons are a big part of the business here. Why would I be upset you got a new client? Is it because I have to run the lessons? Is it like some spoiled rich kid?”

“No,” he said, looking anywhere except my face. Mostly at his boots. “It’s not a kid. It’s your friend Jade.”

My throat clenched shut, and my heart thudded in my temples.

That made perfect sense then.

“Ex-friend,” I corrected quickly.

“Ex-friend,” he muttered back.

“Why would Jade want horse riding lessons in Murdock?” I asked. “Did she say? She moved away with Trevor a year ago.”

“I have no idea,” he said.

“I just don’t get it. Why would she come back here? And why would she ask *my brother* of all people to do horse riding lessons?”

“Not a clue,” he said. “But listen to me. I won’t take her on as a client if it will bother you. You’re my sister, and if you say no, I’ll tell her to take a hike.”

I bit my tongue, hard.

The first words that wanted to come out of my mouth were a string of very degrading expletives that I had often used for Jade in my thoughts, and then several suggestions of alternative things Camden could do for or to Jade that I thought would be a better use of his time than teaching her how to ride a horse. Namely, flying lessons with no parachute off a rocky crag somewhere.

Admitting I didn't want him to do business with Jade would be me admitting there were still feelings there. I absolutely could not give her that win.

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "Don't be silly. All that stuff was a while back. You shouldn't turn down work. I'll be fine. Absolutely fine."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, literally capable of hearing my voice go up an octave as I lied through my teeth. "It'll be just fine. No worries."

Camden seemed relieved by that and let himself grin a little bit.

Him feeling better about it so visually meant I must have done a good job selling it, and his shoulders sagged as he relaxed. But then they tensed right back up when a loud car door sound came from the front of the ranch, by the main house. Camden grinned, though, and I felt a sense of dread flood through me that tilted almost full-on into panic.

"That's not her, is it?" I asked.

"No, no," he said, almost laughing. "No, that's not her."

"Good," I said. "I just... I would need to prepare for that, I think."

"Gotcha," he said. "No, that's someone else."

"Who?" I asked.

"It's a surprise."

"Oh, Lord," I sighed.

I wasn't prepared for any more surprises that day. After learning Jade was going to be hanging around my happy place, I felt like any other surprises were just unknown elements of potential suckage. The mere possibility they could be good surprises was gone with the wind.

"Come on," Camden said. "Looks like Will's got this."

Will, the man riding the horse, did indeed seem like he was doing fine. He was a portly, older man, another veteran that Ryan had suggested come by. He hadn't taken immediately to the horses, but in recent weeks, his aptitude had been growing.

I followed Camden as he walked across the back of the house grounds toward the gravel driveway. I tried to steel myself for whatever the surprise would be. As long as it wasn't Jade, I would probably be fine.

Unless it was Trevor.

Irrational terror struck my heart. He wouldn't just spring him on me, would he? No, of course not. He would know better than that. My brother might have a bit of a prankster's sense of humor, but he wasn't cruel.

I rounded the house behind Camden and looked up at the vehicle that had parked in the open space beside the house.

My breath hitched.



## MARK

**M**urdock, Texas. It had been a year since I had been there, and when I left, I was positive I wouldn't be coming back. Not for a long time, at least.

The plan had been to come down, spend a few days with Dad, and then head back home to Austin. I would stay there unless I was needed in Dallas again, in which case I would move again. I was fine staying in Dallas, and in fact, kind of wanted to go back. I liked the big-city life. The busy atmosphere. The people. The nightlife.

But I had gotten back to Austin and found myself being loaned out all right. All over the damn mid-South. At first it was great, traveling to Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Tampa, Savannah, Charleston, Birmingham, and Memphis... all over. Then it got tiring. Three weeks here, three weeks there. Hotel after hotel. No real cooked food at home, just restaurant after restaurant. I was doing good work, but I felt like a stranger everywhere I went.

I was so distracted by the moves and the sheer volume of work that I barely noticed my father's calls were coming further and further apart. Or that he sounded weaker each time I talked to him. Or the symptoms he did let on about were signs of something much more problematic than the sickness he'd had when I went to visit him last.

Then, one day, he called me while I was getting on a plane to head back to Austin. He had been transferred to Dallas for treatment. I asked what for, and when he told me, my heart



sank. His health had taken a nosedive, and the cancer had progressed so quickly there was no fighting it. He had a matter of days left, not weeks.

I took a leave of absence from my hospital network to go meet him in Dallas and be with him in his final days. The treatment quickly turned to hospice care, and I tried to get them to move him back home and let me care for him there. But Dad didn't want to go. He wanted to stay in Dallas so that the people of Murdock would never see him in that state. They cared for him so much, and he didn't want anyone to be sad.

That was Dad. He was always thinking about other people. The citizens of Murdock loved him. He was the only doctor who would do house calls and work at his own clinic on the edge of town. On one side was a major network hospital, sharing with the next town over, and on the other side of town was Dad. And that was where most of the people of Murdock went if they didn't need an emergency surgery.

I stayed with Dad in Dallas, not leaving the hospice room as he died. During the last conversation we had where he was fully awake and fully functional, he asked me to do him a favor. A favor only I could do.

“Come home and take over the clinic.”

His eyes had been so full of hope and worry. I couldn't tell him no. I'd never wanted to take over his clinic. I'd never wanted to live in Murdock again. But Dad had always harbored the hope that I would, that there would be another 'Doc Murphy' in town, and it would be me. The town and the people of Murdock meant everything to him, and with his dying wish, he asked me to come take over the clinic that bore my family name.

So, I quit my job at the hospital network, flew back to Austin, packed my apartment up, and headed back. Home.

Ostensibly, I was going to live in the old house. I'd grown up there, and Dad had owned it outright for many years, using the life insurance money from my mother's death to pay off the mortgage. I remembered it fondly for what it was when I

was a child, but in the years since I left town, it had fallen into some disarray.

Dad had never been much of a homebody. He tended to think of his house as a place that he slept and occasionally ate sandwiches. Other than that, it was just walls to hold stuff in. Without me there to keep up the place and with the cancer slowly stripping him of his energy and motivation, the house had gone into disrepair quickly.

I'd had no idea he was that sick, but when I saw the house, I knew it was going to be a project and a half to get it livable again. It certainly wasn't something I could do while living there, not the major stuff, anyway. I was going to have to stay somewhere else in the meantime.

That's where Camden stepped in. The second he heard I was coming back to Murdock to take over the practice, he offered his home for me to crash in should I need it. Ryan and Graham had made similar offers, but both of them had young families. Wives and children and careers that I would get in the way of. I would be a weird, busy third wheel all the time. Even staying at the bed and breakfast would feel weird since I would be a client and not a friend.

I had left with a trailer full of stuff and a storage unit pod with the rest being delivered a couple days ago. The pod would have most of my things that I didn't need day to day, but the trailer had to come with me wherever I was going. I drove it all the way to Murdock and straight to the house, parking in the driveway and noticing immediately that the outside looked terrible.

Vines were growing up one side, and the gutters were full of sticks and leaves. It was badly in need of a power washing, and the shutters needed to be replaced. The porch steps needed to be repaired, and the railing on one side was just simply missing. I could see my dad in my head when I was younger losing his mind over those sorts of things. Calling to have them fixed immediately and most of the time getting it done as a favor by someone who owed him their lives or their partner's lives or their kids' lives. Everybody in town had a Doc Murphy story.

But seeing it this way was disheartening and reminded me again of the sharp pain of loss in my chest. How big a hole he was leaving, not just as town doctor, but as a man. As my father.

Dad and I had always had a good relationship, but to say it was strained when Mom passed would be an understatement. I was growing into a teenager and suddenly fell into a deep depression over her loss. It was difficult for everyone, especially my father, who also was experiencing the pain of loss of the person he'd planned to spend his life with.

He did the best he could, but he also threw himself so deeply into work that I didn't see him as much as either of us would have liked. He wanted me to take over the practice one day even then, and I resisted. I didn't want to stay in Murdock. I didn't even want to stay in Texas. I wanted more from life than that.

It was like we took two very different lessons from Mom's death. He took the lesson of holding on to your roots, living each day as simply and fully as possible, and loving your family and friends because they would be who you lean on in tough times. I learned that life is short and that if you wanted to do something, you needed to do it as soon as you could. There was no time to waste, and death could be waiting behind every window.

So, when I left home to go to school, I didn't look back. I didn't visit much, and Dad didn't really ask me to. He was busy with work. It was only last year, when he started getting sick, that he asked me to come see him. When I did, I figured he would get better, that his cancer was treatable, and if it got worse, he would tell me.

How naïve I had been.

Not wanting to bother anyone with his own personal problems, Dad didn't tell anyone. It wasn't until he had to cancel appointments so he could attend chemo that anyone in town knew what was going on. When he came back bald, struggling, and unable to fill his schedule like he used to, people began to talk. To speculate.

So, he told them. He told them all what was going on, that he only had so much time. The whole town got to mourn him for a year while I was blissfully unaware, traveling around the mid-South working my own job.

In retrospect, I had gotten a letter from Dad's lawyer a few months before the call that should have tipped me off. He had altered the will. He hadn't touched it since Mom died, and in it, he had chosen to leave the house to me and donate all his money to charity. He told me he was doing it then, and I was fine with it. I didn't expect him to leave me money and was honestly okay with the decision.

But the changes were very specific. He had line-itemed donations, choosing exact dollar amounts to go to specific charities. Not something one does when they think they might be adding to the amount of money to be donated. I didn't think about it at the time, much like I didn't think about the line item that was listed as "home repairs."

Now I knew what he had done. He had taken care of the distribution of his funds so I wouldn't have to. He had also left me a lump sum that should be enough to fix the house, since I anticipated that it was enough to tear the whole damn thing down and start over again if I wanted.

When I saw the state of the house, I called Camden and asked if I could stay at his place. He loved the idea and told me to come by whenever. I spent one night in the old house, gathering things up to take with me and calling various contractors to price certain repairs.

I had a feeling some of those repairs could be done without hiring them out. Between me, Ryan, and Graham, I was sure we could do a lot of them if we needed to. Ryan especially was good at that sort of thing, and if he guided us through them, I was sure Graham and I could do it.

In the meantime, I was going to be staying with Camden on the ranch. As I got out of the car, pulling my luggage out of the backseat and decoupling the trailer so I could drive the truck without it while I was there, I saw him making his way around the back of the house. I waited by the car for him to

arrive, and as he did, he held his arms out for a big, back-slapping hug.

Right behind him was Carmela.

It was all I could do not to stop in my tracks and stare.



## CARMELA

I was certainly surprised.

I hadn't expected to see Mark back in Murdock, probably ever. When we saw each other at the bar a year before, we had hit it off quite well, but I got the impression that he was only interested in being there if he absolutely had to be. His father had been sick, and he'd come back to help him for a week or so at most. Then he was going to be back off to Austin or Dallas, whichever one he was living in then.

Then again, I probably shouldn't have been all that shocked. His father had passed away recently. It had a huge effect on the community since he was the primary doctor for most of the folks in town and was the only doctor in that practice. People were having to go to the other side of town to the main hospital, even when they just had a case of the sniffles.

I felt for him when I heard about it, but when I didn't see him around, I assumed that he was probably with his father wherever his father was spending his last days. It was apparently not in Murdock, but I didn't know where. I figured that if I hadn't seen him in the days around when news of his father's passing got around the grapevine, I likely wouldn't.

But him being in town made sense. His family house was still here, and there would be matters of his father's estate to take care of. I could only imagine how difficult that would be as an only child.

"Mark, hi," I said.

“Hello, Carmela,” he said, his voice just as velvety and smooth as it had been the last time I’d heard it. Like warm chocolate.

“Mark is moving in for a bit,” Camden said. “Do you mind helping us get his stuff inside?”

“Moving in? Here?” I asked.

Camden nodded, grinning.

“Yeah, my dad’s place isn’t really ready to live in right now,” he said. “So, Camden suggested I stay here at the ranch while it’s being fixed up.”

My surprise was doubled by that. Not only was Mark going to be in town, but he was going to be at the ranch? Where I was all the time?

A flicker in my chest, just like at the bar last year caught my attention. A hitching in my breath that I couldn’t quite control. The warmth running up my cheeks.

The persistent voice in the back of my mind repeating over and over that not only had Mark grown up, that he was incredibly attractive. Unnervingly attractive. Dangerously attractive.

“Cool,” I said, trying to maintain a level of composure that would be taken casually and not as a desperate attempt to pretend I was okay. “What do you need me to get?”

“If you could grab my laptop bag and some of the leather bags, I would appreciate it,” he said, grinning at me. “Camden and I can get the heavy stuff.”

I nodded, grabbed the bags he’d asked for and brought them inside. Camden had a couple of guest rooms at the house, mostly for the veterans that came to work with the horses for help with their PTSD when they needed to decompress. The largest of the rooms, the one closest to the front of the house, had a bathroom and a big closet in it, and Camden guided us there.

“Thank you,” Mark said as I set the stuff down on the bed. “I appreciate this. All of this.”



“Don’t worry about it,” Camden said. “You would do it for me. You stay here until you are comfortable moving into your dad’s. In the meantime, you and I can hang out and we can catch up. How about we all go get something to eat at the diner?”

“Lunch sounds amazing,” Mark said. “But I’m paying. Least I can do is take you out for a meal once in a while.”

“Fair enough,” Camden said. “Carmela, you coming?”

“Sure,” I said, before my brain had time to think about it.

“All right then, let’s get going,” Camden said.

“Give me like ten minutes, if that’s okay,” Mark said. “I just want to grab a quick shower.”

A frustratingly visceral vision filled my mind of Mark, shirtless, hooking his thumbs into his jeans and peeling them off before climbing into the shower. It was enough to nearly make me squirm, and I looked away so he couldn’t see the red climbing my cheeks.

“Yeah, sounds good,” I said, hoping my voice didn’t give away my thoughts.

“Sure,” Camden said. “I’ll meet you outside?”

“Sounds good,” he said.

With that, we walked out of his room and closed the door behind us. I ducked into a bathroom in the hallway and freshened up a bit while Camden went outside. When I came out, I sat down in the couch in the living room and turned on the TV. Maybe some dumb cooking show would take my mind off the obvious. The obvious being that Mark was stupidly hot and that I hadn’t even thought of another man since the whole Trevor thing.

The show was droning on, and I was barely paying attention when the door of Camden’s room opened. For a split second, I hoped he would be coming out of there in a towel, still soaking wet, needing something I could get for him so I could let my eyes linger.

Unfortunately, he was fully dressed, looking clean and happy.

Before I could say anything, Camden came in the back door and saw us both standing somewhat awkwardly in the living room.

“You guys ready?” he asked. “I’m famished.”

“I could eat a horse,” Mark said, then paused, hanging his head. “Not literally, of course.”

“It’s fine,” Camden said. “Some of the horses I’ve trained might make better burgers than workers.”

Mark laughed, and we went out to Camden’s truck, all piling in together before he pulled out and got onto the road. Sitting next to Mark, I couldn’t help but notice the cologne he wore, the way his clothes smelled like laundry detergent, and the fact that his hands were seemingly double the size of my own. He was big and muscular and rugged for a doctor. I wondered how many of his patients had crushes on him. My guess was a lot.

The diner was relatively empty that time of the afternoon, and we got seated quickly. The food was delicious, and we started reminiscing a bit on days gone past. Back when the boys were kids and their primary concerns in life involved which girls they could ask to prom.

As we ate, Mark’s eyes would flash over to mine and linger there for a moment. I didn’t know exactly what to think about it. Did it mean something? Or was he just trying to be friendly? I didn’t know for sure, and it was driving me crazy. I wanted to blatantly flirt with him, which was absolutely ridiculous, not to mention embarrassing considering my brother was right there.

But the chemistry that had been there a year ago, when I was in such a terrible place and he was just passing through, was still there. I felt that spark, and I couldn’t stop letting my eyes roam all over him. The way his eyes twinkled when he laughed. The way his lips pursed when he spoke. The way his

forearms looked when he rolled up the sleeves of his button-up shirt.

Not long after our entrées arrived, so did Graham, Ryan, and their wives. A round of hugs from the boys, both of whom were clearly delighted, were followed by hugs to me too. Mallory, Graham's wife, was very pregnant.

"Oh man, this is awesome," Ryan said. "The four of us together again. All we need is Vick and we'd have the whole crew."

"Good luck with that," Graham said. "That man barely takes time off to text us back, much less come to lunch. If he isn't working, he's sleeping."

"We'll get him out sooner or later," Camden said. "Now that we have all four of us down here together, he'll have to show up at some point."

"I'm just glad to see you guys," Mark said. "And to meet your lovely ladies again. Now that I'll be in town for a while, I'll finally get a chance to really know you."

"So how long will you be here?" Allison asked, finally putting out a question that I was wondering too but didn't want to ask.

"I don't know," he said. "My father wanted me to take over the practice, so I will. At least for a little while. I don't know how long it will last, to be honest."

"Long enough to catch some of the ballgames I'm coaching?" Graham asked.

"Of course," Mark laughed. "Hell, if you need another base coach, I might be game."

Graham laughed. "The last time you coached baseball, didn't you end up sending every runner that hit third home whether they would make it or not?"

"That's beside the point," Mark said. "It could be fun."

"Indeed," Camden agreed. "But while you are staying at the ranch, you're learning to ride a horse."

“I am?”

Camden grinned, and it was such a genuine expression that it made me feel warm inside. He was so happy to have his friends again. He missed them when they were all gone.

“I know just the horse for you,” he said with a smirk.



## MARK

“Man, this is no joke of a driveway,” I said as we made our way down the long path that led from the main road to the ranch. “It was one thing in the daytime, but at night, it seems like forever.”

“It used to be worse,” Carmela said from the passenger’s seat. Camden huffed a laugh from behind the wheel. “It was all dirt and loose dirt at that. You would come down about twenty yards, and it would kick up so much dust that you would get lost, and your car would be covered in it.”

“I had to put a bunch of stuff down and put in a sprinkler system just for the road,” Camden said. “Now it doesn’t kick up so much anymore.”

“A sprinkler system for your dirt driveway,” I said, shaking my head. “Wild. You sure went all-in on the cowboy thing, Camden.”

He shrugged. “I like it,” he said. “I always knew I liked being around horses, but I love this.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “At least one of us had his shit together right from the start.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Camden muttered almost under his breath. There was a note that seemed to embody an emotion I couldn’t decipher in it. Was it sadness? Was it bitterness? I couldn’t tell. I just knew it wasn’t centered on me. I certainly didn’t have my shit together, not in any reasonable facsimile of

reality. Whoever it was he was comparing himself to, it had to be someone else.

We pulled into the ranch a few minutes later, a light rainfall beginning to tap on the roof of the truck. As we got out, Camden and Carmela were talking about something I couldn't quite make out, and I followed them inside. As soon as we were in, I shed my jacket and boots and took them to my room, putting on the slippers that I loved so much and making my way back into the living room area.

Camden was in the kitchen, and Carmela was sitting on the couch, looking at her phone. I sat down across from her on one of the reclining chairs and tried to work up the question that was burning in the front of my mind. Eventually, she must have noticed I was staring at her and lifted her eyes.

“So,” I said, “are you staying here too?”

She laughed, in a light and easy sort of way. It wasn't dismissive or mean, just genuinely amused.

“No,” she said. “I have my own place.”

“Oh,” I said.

It dawned on me that I was just assuming she was still picking up the pieces of a life that had ended a while ago. Of course, by now she would have gotten her stuff together and moved on. It was funny, I thought, how you can just freeze a person in your mind. When they aren't there, you just assume the next time you see them that time hasn't passed at all.

But it had. So much time. Enough time for a lot of things to change.

“You'll see me around, though,” she said. “I'll be here plenty to bug you. I come and help with the horses as much as I can.”

“She actually teaches riding lessons,” Camden called from the kitchen.

He walked in with a couple of mugs and a few beers, along with some chips.

“Only under duress,” Carmela said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’m going to get going.”

“What?” Camden said. “I brought you a beer. We’re catching up.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Work in the morning. Helping a family out with an adoption. I need to get home and get some sleep.”

“Ah, damn. All right,” Camden said. “Love you, sis.”

He gave her a big hug, and Carmela turned to me, offering a little wave.

“Good night, Mark,” she said.

“Good night,” I echoed.

There was a tightening in my chest that I tried to ignore as she smiled and turned to the door. We weren’t kids anymore. I wasn’t supposed to have a crush on her.

“Well,” Camden said, “now that it’s just us, we can drink and burp and fart all we want.”

“Carmela being around never stopped you before,” I laughed.

“True,” he said, handing me a beer and a cold mug, “but now I don’t have to feel bad about it.”

“Fair,” I said.

“Here,” Camden said, holding out his mug for me to clink mine into. “To good days, both past and future.”

“To good days,” I said.

I let the cold, delicious beer slide down my throat and pull back memories with it. There was something about the brown lagers in this area of Texas. They were just objectively better. The one we were drinking, Flat Tires, was one of my favorites, and was hard to find outside of the region.

“Man, I missed this beer,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s damn good. Hey, did you know that Murdock has its own microbrewery now?”

“No,” I said, intrigued. “Where?”



Camden was grinning wide. “Downstairs,” he said.

“What?” I asked. “I didn’t know there *was* a downstairs in this place.”

“I finished it out two years ago and created a little brewery there. It stays nice and cool naturally, and I have a backup generator just for that room and the refrigeration units. I’ve been making my own beer for about sixteen months now. I’m bottling it and passing them out as Christmas gifts this year. If people like it...”

“You son of a bitch,” I said. “Not only have you taken a dilapidated ranch and turned it into a booming business, but you are becoming a micro brewer too?”

He shrugged. “No wife, no kids,” he said. “I’ve got to do something to fill the time and spend my cash.”

I laughed. “Most people take up golf.”

“Fuck golf,” he said, laughing. “I’ll take the alchemy of making beer any day.”

We hung out for a while, drinking a few beers, including one of his own creations.

Around ten, I decided to go to my room and settle in for the night. Saying good night to Camden, I made my way to bed, feeling glad that our two rooms were on opposite sides of the house. From what I understood, Camden had a house on the property that was his primary residence, but he spent a lot of time at the main house.

A little TV was mounted on the wall of my room, and I flipped it on using the remote on the bedside table as I undressed and pulled out my suitcase.

Putting away my clothes in the drawers was a surreal experience. I was back, and putting my clothes away felt like an act of finality. I was closing the door on a part of my life, at least for now.

With my clothes put away and my favorite sweatpants and T-shirt combination on, I crawled into the bed and arranged the pillows so I could sit up for a bit. Then I pulled my phone

off the charger and looked at my messages. I had an email waiting for me from the estate lawyer that simply said ‘urgent’ in the subject line.

No skipping that one until tomorrow.

I opened up the email app and read it, cursing halfway through.

The estate lawyer had assured me everything was straightforward as it pertained to my father’s will before I moved back home. Yet here he was in an email telling me that, essentially, none of that was true. In fact, it was getting wildly complicated.

Dad’s sister, an aunt who I had probably only ever seen about four times in my life, all of them before the age of five, was contesting the will. Apparently, their father had left the clinic to both of them, and when Dad took over, my aunt left to get married. Dad had operated on the assumption that she didn’t want anything to do with it and claimed it for himself.

He’d built his entire career on that practice, becoming wildly successful and putting a large amount of money into it. But now my aunt was claiming that since the business was put down as going to both my father and her in my grandfather’s will, that she was legally half-owner. Her husband had passed a few years ago, and now as a widow, she was looking to get what was hers in any way possible.

Even if that meant screwing over her nephew.

I groaned, putting the phone down and turning over on my side in the bed. This was not what I was hoping for when I came down. Murdock Drama. I didn’t need or want it, and yet it had found me. All I could do was deal with it—and my aunt.

But that was a problem for Future Mark. Current Mark was busy getting a good night’s rest. It had been a long day, and one that was filled with some confusing and complicating feelings. It would do me good to get some shuteye and see how I felt in the morning about all of it.

I turned the television over to a sports recap show and curled up so I could half-watch it as I dozed off.

Sighing, I drifted off to sleep and at one point, woke up enough to turn the television off. The sound of the light rain still coming down on the roof helped lull me into a deep sleep. Yet, even in my sleep, I couldn't escape everything.

I dreamt of Carmela.



## CARMELA

Working with families looking to adopt was one of the more rewarding things I could do in my position. While I handled all sorts of different family law matters, adoption was one of the ones I enjoyed the most, even if it was extremely challenging and not without its heartbreaks.

The system in Texas was set up to make it difficult for some families to adopt, and I had to do a lot of legwork to figure out a way to make it happen. I was passionate about it. I loved those kinds of clients, and they always made me feel happier. I was aware of most people's view on lawyers and how they made their money, but I was very proud of what I did. Especially when I could help someone the way I intended to.

This family's case was a particular smooth case, and I was excited that my work-around of having them foster the child first had helped. They were weeks away now from full adoption, and they couldn't be happier. They'd even invited me to dinner in a few days at their place, just to thank me for my help.

It was gestures like that which trumped whatever payment I did receive. Knowing I made such a big difference in their lives was more than enough. The paycheck was just icing on the cake.

As I walked them out, another car was pulling into the parking lot of my tiny office building. We shared the lot with a

dentist and a tax specialist, so I didn't think much of it until I caught sight of Mark behind the wheel.

The family drove away, waving as Mark parked and got out. He watched them go and then turned to me, a smile on his face.

"Hey," he said. "Clients of yours?"

"Yes," I said. "Good people who got good news."

"Nice to hear," he said. "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you want to come into the office?"

"I would, yeah," he said.

I led him inside my tiny office and headed toward the kitchenette to offer him a coffee and make one for myself. It had been a long morning, and I had been up very early. I was going to need the caffeine to power through the day. But before I could offer it, Mark was already talking.

"I wanted to pick your brain about something," he said. "My aunt, who I haven't seen since I was a kid and who I am pretty sure hadn't talked to Dad in years, is suddenly contesting the will. Dad left the office and the business itself to me, and I picked up and moved my entire life back to Murdock to fulfill his dying wish that I keep it going, and now Aunt Judy is making it her mission to take part or all of it for herself.

"Get this, she claims that Dad *forgot* about her. Like he could just forget he had a sister. He didn't forget about her. She ran off and got married and forfeited her part of the business. Dad ran it for forty years without her even so much as stepping foot inside the building, and now all of a sudden, she wants to be known as the owner? What kind of bullshit is that?"

He was ranting, pacing back and forth behind me at the coffee maker. I went ahead and made myself a pod of the extra-caffeinated stuff and one with decaf for him. He seemed like he had already hit the caffeine pretty hard that morning.

Turning around, I held out his mug, and he stopped long enough to take it and take a sip. I decided to use the opportunity to get a word in.

“Okay hang on,” I said. “Let’s start from the top.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Oh, that’s hot. Good, though. What kind of coffee is this?”

“Just some random stuff from the grocery store,” I said. “Come, let’s sit and you can tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m not keeping you from any appointments, am I?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I was just going to be doing paperwork for the rest of the afternoon. It’s fine. Take a seat.”

I led him over to the waiting area where we had a few chairs and a loveseat that couples often sat in when they were talking with me.

He chose where to sit and I took a seat across from him.

“So, before I have you start, I have to ask. Are you coming to me to talk as a friend or as a lawyer?”

“Kind of both,” he said, somewhat sheepishly. “I don’t really know who else to go to, and this *is* a family law situation. But I trust you because you’re my friend.”

“Okay,” I said. “I will try to give you advice as a friend, but unless you actually hire me, don’t take anything I say as absolutes, okay?”

“Got it,” he said. “Sorry, I don’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “Really.”

“I just don’t want you to feel like I am taking advantage of you,” he said.

There was an honesty to that, and I felt like in that moment, if I had said I was uncomfortable, he would have walked out and not held it against me. It wouldn’t change anything. Except he would still need help.

“Not at all,” I said. “Continue.”

He sighed, reaching up to unbutton the top button of his dress shirt before leaning back in the seat. I had to control the warm flush that went through me at the sudden reveal of the top of his chest, looking away to my coffee for a moment as I gathered myself.

“So, my father died,” he began, “and in his will, he left me the clinic with the hopes that I would run it. But it was more than that. He owns the building, as did my grandfather before him. There’s been a Doc Murphy around these parts for over sixty years. But Dad had a sister. They weren’t particularly close since his sister was much younger than he was, and when Dad was taking over the business, she went and got married and had nothing to do with it.

“Anyway, so she barely ever comes around, no one hears from her for years, and she doesn’t even come to the funeral, right? She only sent flowers. I thought it was just how she was coping with all of it, but it turns out she hired a lawyer that day.”

“The day of the funeral?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“That’s interesting,” I said. “And cold.”

“Very,” he said. “Dad had asked me when he was in hospice to take over the business for him. Have another generation of Dr. Murphys. And I promised him that, even though I had my own life and my own thing going on. I told him I would come back and run it for him.

“If I’m being honest, I wasn’t sure I would stay. I just knew that I was going to fulfill my duty and come down here and run it for a while and see how I felt. And if I needed to later on, I would hand off running it to someone else and I would move back. But then last night I get a text from Dad’s lawyer in Dallas. Apparently, my aunt is contesting the will. She wants half the business and the whole building or the whole business and half the building, claiming it was left to both her and Dad when Grandpa passed.”



“Is that true?” I asked, reaching over to my yellow notepad and jotting down notes, as I never had one far from me, and in fact, I had one on each coffee table in this room.

“Apparently, yes. But the tricky part is that it was contingent on having some sort of working stake in the business before either could inherit it. Dad clearly ran the place, and my aunt had no interest in any of it. She’s claiming she was pushed out by Dad, but I can’t find any record of her even stepping foot in the place to work. Not even to answer phones or file charts.”

“Well,” I said. “I can see how you would be frustrated and upset. I have a feeling that was a bit of a short version of everything. We have some time. Why don’t you start at the top again and go through it slowly?”

He seemed confused but nodded and did so. It was a tactic that I used quite often for complicated cases. People tended to give shortened versions of their problems to hit what they considered relevant points. The problem was they weren’t lawyers. They didn’t know all the things that could be considered relevant. That was my job and getting them to go over it slowly for the third or fourth time often had the effect of unraveling pieces of information that they assumed was either inconsequential or intuitive because they lived it.

After he was done explaining it again, I felt like I had a better handle on the information and had it all written down for the purpose of pouring over it later.

“So, what should I do?” he asked.

I hated that he was going through this. Mark was such a good man, and though I was trying to talk him through it, the fact of the matter was it wasn’t cut and dry. His aunt did have a valid enough claim that was probably going to have to be settled in court. It wasn’t going to be as simple as him showing the will to a judge and it all going away, either. It might be a fight.

“From what I am seeing here,” I said, flipping through my notes, “you think there might be documentation that would

back her up in your grandfather's will that's vague enough that she might be able to argue her claim, right?"

"There might be," he said. "I don't really know. I don't speak legalese."

I smiled thinly. I hated that word but had long accepted it as a layman way of describing language that was perfectly reasonable and almost an art form if you put the time in to understand it. The way some lawyers were able to bend the English language to do their bidding was nothing short of awe-inspiring sometimes.

"Okay," I said. "As your friend, I will look into this for you. But because it's as your friend, I can't tell you when I will be able to get back to it. I'm pretty booked up for the foreseeable future, and I might not be able to find time to go deep into this immediately."

"I understand," he said. He didn't look terribly thrilled, but the look of frustrated desperation on his face told his story well. He didn't have any other choice.

"Well, then," I said. "If I find something out, and I can help you, I will offer you the family rate to actually hire me, okay?"

"What's the family rate?" he asked.

"Cheap," I said. "We will talk about that later. Just don't worry about it. Focus on the business itself, and I will work on the legal stuff. I'll let you know as soon as I have advice one way or the other."

He nodded, standing. "Thank you, Carmela," he said.

"You're welcome, Mark."

With that, he nodded again, tried to force a smile, and brought the mug to the sink. He rinsed it out, put it in the drainer, and waved as he headed out of the door.



## MARK

Aunt Judy apparently didn't have a phone number, email address, or physical address beyond a P.O. Box, as far as I could tell. I had tried everything legally available to me to find a way to contact her and talk about things, but she wouldn't speak to me. And she hadn't gotten my messages. Her attorney wouldn't say either way, but he also seemed absolutely positive that they were going to be successful in court if it made it there.

No matter how many pleading messages I could leave, none of it was going to get to Aunt Judy. She had decided to play hardball, and there was no going back now. It sucked, but I was going to have to deal with it.

"Well, if you happen to see her—" I said as I spoke to her attorney on the phone.

"I won't, but continue," he interrupted with a smug tone.

"Just tell her that I would love to speak with her in person. Either on the phone or I will come to her wherever she is."

"I will relay that message," he said. "But I have to tell you, it won't do any good. She won't see you. She is adamant that she gets what she deserves. What is rightfully hers."

I sighed.

"I wish she had said anything about this before Dad passed," I said. "She could have made this whole thing a lot easier."

“Is that an admission of her rightful claim?” he asked, excitedly.

“No, it’s not,” I said quickly. “Thank you for your time.”

I hung up before he could object any further. He was a snake of a man, and I was glad just to be off the phone with him. If Carmela did end up helping me, I was going to feel extra guilty just in her having to deal with him.

The sound of a horse whinnying outside caught my attention, and I brushed aside the curtain to look out of the window. It oversaw the corral where someone was being led through a lesson by an older gentleman with one arm. I assumed it was part of Camden’s veteran support program, a program our mutual friend Ryan had benefited from and was now a spokesman for.

I could see Camden in the background, tooling around in the stables and shrugged. I might as well spend some time with my friend and offer to help where I could while I could, especially since he refused to take any pay for rent or anything.

Grabbing a ballcap and my boots, I got myself ready to go outside and headed out of the back door. Camden saw me coming and waved me in, grinning wide. I didn’t know a whole lot about horses, having grown up around them in the same general way most people from Murdock were familiar with livestock and work animals. But it didn’t take a horse expert to know how to muck a stall. I figured doing a little bit of grunt work might make me feel better about crashing at his place for a while.

“Afternoon,” Camden said as I walked into the shade of the barn. It was cold in there, and I thought about going back to grab my coat.

“Afternoon,” I said. “I thought I’d come and see if there was anything I could do for you. Any help you needed.”

“Well,” he said, “I’m never one to turn down free labor. But are you sure? You’re my guest. I don’t want you to feel like you have to earn your keep. I’m having you stay with me

not out of obligation but because I want you here and to help you. It doesn't bother me at all."

"I know," I said. "And I appreciate that. You just know I can't let it go that I'm being a lazy mooch."

"You've always been a hard worker," he laughed. "You remember that summer the five of us worked at the pizza shop?"

I laughed at the memory and shook my head.

"God, yeah," I said. "Vick hated that place. Said he always smelled like cheese."

Camden laughed.

"Yeah, but we all got fed all the time, didn't we? Every day, before we clocked out, the owner told us to make ourselves a pie. Who made them?"

"I did," I admitted.

"And did you do that because we asked you to, or because it was expected of you?"

"No," I said.

"Right. You did it because you liked doing it, and you were helping take care of your boys," he said. "That's how your stay with me should look like. I like having you around, and I like taking care of my boys. I got an extra room. You need a room. No need to feel obligated to do anything."

"I appreciate that, Camden," I said, feeling a lot better. "I really do."

"Good," he said. "Now, with that speech out of the way, if you feel like mucking out a stall or something, be my guest."

I laughed and turned around to grab a shovel. As soon as I did, I stopped in my tracks. Someone was coming in the barn door, and my brain short-circuited.

It was Carmela, but she looked so different. I had just seen her in her business suit and looking all professional, but right now she was in tight blue jeans and a denim jacket over a T-shirt with the ranch logo over her full breasts. The shirt

seemed like it was stretching pretty hard over them, and I had to divert my eyes from trying to make out the outline of her bra, which I assumed was holding on for dear life.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s up, Carmela?”

Now that I had gotten control of my wandering eyes, I had them pointed at her face. She looked upset about something, and I didn’t know what. Whatever it was, it seemed to have put her in a bad mood.

“I volunteered to come help with horseback riding lessons today,” she said. “I wish I had known who was on the schedule first.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Camden briefly look over his shoulder at her and then turn his attention immediately back to the horse he was tacking up.

“Oh?” I asked.

“My former best friend Jade is on the list today,” she said. There was venom in her voice, and I searched my memory to see if I could remember the name. When it hit me, I rocked my head back and closed my eyes, scrunching my face up in empathetic pain.

“Damn,” I said. “Damn, damn, damn. I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she said. “But I promised him I would come help out, so here I am. Isn’t that right, Camden?”

“Yup,” he said, keeping his back turned. I had a feeling that he hadn’t done it on purpose, but he also had no ability to look his sister in the eye without being certain she would wither him away with a glare.

“So, you’ll be out in the corral today?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Yup,” she said. “Feel free to watch. Maybe make sure I don’t commit murder or anything.”

“I’ll see if I can,” I said. “Look, I think it’s really cool that you’re willing to do this. It speaks a lot of your character that you would help your brother, even in this situation. It takes guts to be the bigger person.”

“Yeah, well, let’s not congratulate me yet,” she said. “I could still find a way to cripple her or something before the end of the day. Then you’ll have wasted all those compliments.”

“You go right to the dark place, don’t you?” I joked.

“She was born in the dark place,” Camden muttered. “Why do you think she became a lawyer?”

“Har har,” she said. “I’ll see you around, Mark.”

“See you around, Carmela,” I replied.

“Don’t feel too bad for her,” Camden said as she walked off into the distance. “I told her that if I scheduled her and Jade at the same time, I owed her a favor on top of the normal pay rate. She’s got me in for some kind of wackiness now, I’m sure.”

“Sure, sure,” I said.

“Anyway, get that rake over there. Stall four could use some attention.”

The next few hours were spent with Camden, doing odd jobs around the place and taking a stroll around the grounds. Camden had built a little empire here, and while it was still a small crew, they were very good at what they did. Each person had a list of duties that they performed, and they all seemed happy to do it.

Other chores were completed as part of the rehab program for the vets or for the new riders taking lessons, learning about how to care for the animals and the grounds by doing some of the work. I had to admit, Camden had the place running like a machine. It was impressive as hell to see.

I kept going back to the horses, doing whatever work was available with them throughout the day. This allowed me to



keep stealing glances at Carmela as she did her own job, which she was splendid at.

Carmela seemed like a natural at teaching. There were at least five kids in her class currently, and she was making sure each one got the special attention they needed while also knocking out five birds with one stone. I watched her as she rode around on her own horse from time to time, bouncing in the saddle like she was born to do it and guiding the children gently but firmly.

That was all aside from the fact that she looked fantastic in her riding gear. She was beautiful when she was all dressed up to go out like I had seen her at the bar or at her office, but her dressed up to just get her hands dirty in the stables was something else entirely. I thought I liked it more. She seemed more like herself when she was in a saddle or guiding a horse around with a bit of rope as a timid child learned how to ride it.

On second thought, I knew I liked her better this way, working hard and focused on the task at hand. She didn't seem to even notice me looking at her, and I wondered in the back of my mind if she knew but was playing it cool or if she was going to say something to me or, worse, to Camden about me staring.

Either way, it was worth the risk.



CARMELA

## *CARMELA*

I kept pulling out my phone to check the time. Jade was going to be there at nine.

The more I did that, the longer it seemed to take, and the less time passed between checks. Then I would get distracted by something, one of the riders getting frustrated at not being able to get the horse to turn, and the next time I would check, fifteen minutes would have gone by, and my heart would jump. It was simultaneously taking too long and happening too fast.

Jade was going to be there any minute now, and I resolved that I would be prepared for it. I just needed to get it over with. It was why I didn't call out for my shift or simply not show up. I knew this day was going to come, and I needed to face it head on by pulling up my big girl panties and acting like a grown up.

Yet, as the time ticked away from minutes left to seconds, panic started to settle in at the base of my spine. I wasn't ready. It had been a year, but that wasn't long enough. Roughly never would be long enough for that type of betrayal.

Then I saw her rounding the house and coming down the dirt pathway behind it toward the corral and into the sweeping grounds of the ranch. Instinctively, I wanted to duck and hide and escape before she could find me and just put all this off to another time.

But it was too late. She saw me almost immediately.

And she smiled.

A strange shock hit me in the gut as Jade came running toward me, arms extended, squealing like a teenager. She hit me with a tackle-hug, and I just stood there, my arms reaching up to lightly pat her back as she squeezed me. She was acting like I would be thrilled to see her, and I had absolutely no idea how to respond.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” Jade yelled, bouncing in excitement. “Oh, boo, it’s been so long! How have you been? You look so great, girl, what are you doing with your hair now? Do you go see that new hairstylist over in Norge? I bet you are, because that look is hot, hon. I can’t get over this, I had no idea you would be here! I thought you moved out of town. Have you been here this whole time? Oh, my God, this is so amazing!”

It was a bombardment of words, and no matter how much I wanted to respond to any single one of them, my jaw was slack, and no specific response came to mind. It was like my brain had become an Etch-a-Sketch that had been shaken, taking all the things I had wanted or fantasized about saying to Jade the next time I saw her and jumbling them together into a mess that no longer meant anything.

I had dreams about telling this girl which bridge she could jump off and still other dreams where I assisted her in her leap. Now she was hugging me and jumping up and down and smiling with her impossibly white teeth. I tried to smile back. It was like I forgot how to do that too.

Then, it hit me. I needed to play along. Even if it was fake, even if I just did it so I could plot revenge for later, I needed to at least pretend to be happy to see her. Fake it until you make it.

Suddenly, like a switch had been flipped, it all came back to me. A coldness went over my heart, and I accepted the situation as it was. A wide smile broke across my face.

“Come with me,” I said brightly. “Let’s go down to the paddock where the horses are ready for your lesson.”

“Yay!” she said, a joy on her face that I remembered from better days when ice cream sundaes were had and discussions of which celebrity we would most like to be stuck on a desert island were the deepest of conversations.

Jade proceeded to talk, non-stop, all the way to the paddock, through saddling a horse, leading it to the ring where the beginning adult riders started, and mounting up. When she was finally on top of the horse, she stopped to take a breath,

but I realized I hadn't actually paid any attention to anything she had said. It was all one wall of sound that had emanated from her. Desperately, I searched for any snippet of any of it that I could recall and turned to her.

"So, you live in Ashton now," I said. "That must be nice."

"Oh, yes, it is," she said, beaming. "Trevor inherited a beautiful place from his uncle who died last year. Girl, it is gorgeous. Four thousand square feet of it is the living area. Then there's a big dining room and kitchen and a whole-ass ballroom. I told Trevor we will never use a ballroom, but he said he thinks we will. His family got so much money from that dead uncle they are going to go into politics. Trevor's father is a shoo-in to win the congressional seat in his district."

"Wow," I said.

"It's amazing. So, how do I make it go?"

"Hmm?" I asked.

"The horse," she said. "I don't know what I'm doing, remember? I've never ridden before."

"Oh, right," I said. "Remember how I showed you to hold the reins. Now just lightly with your heels, tap him here."

I showed her where to kick, and she did so, getting the old horse, Bentley, to move. Jade's mouth went wide in a smile as Bentley did all the work and started going around in the circle. Bentley was probably the most amiable of the starter horses for adults. I chose him because, for one, he was open for the day, and for two, I didn't want anything to happen to Jade and for Camden to think I did it on purpose by setting her up on a more difficult horse. If she got hurt on Bentley, then it would just be karma.

Me saying silent prayers that maybe Bentley would buck her off in a sudden bout of mild hysteria was beside the point.

"This is so wonderful," Jade said a moment later, seemingly dashing any hope that she was having difficulty at something simple. Of course, she didn't. Jade never had trouble with anything.

“It is,” I agreed half-heartedly.

“I always wanted to ride a horse. Did you know that?” she asked. “My folks thought it was stupid of me to learn unless I was going to compete, and you know how I felt about competitive sports.”

*Yeah, I thought. You left them for others while you competed for boys.*

“Uh-huh,” I said instead.

“I only signed up for this class because when I mentioned it to Trevor, he had the best idea. He wants to do a huge destination wedding on San Jose Island, just off Port Aransas.”

“Where is that?” I asked.

“It’s right on the gulf. It’s this gorgeous private island. Literally, there is only one way onto the island, and that’s by ferry. No vehicles allowed. But Trevor wants to bring horses, and we can ride them there on the island. It’s going to be so romantic. We’re going to ride them into the ceremony and then when it’s over, ride off into the sunset. Then the guests will stay at the south end of the island, and he and I will be whisked away to Cancun.”

“Sounds wonderful,” I said, trying to keep my voice even.

I felt like I had been punched in the gut. I was managing a smile but only just barely. I searched my heart to figure out what exactly was hurting about it, but I wasn’t even sure. I didn’t love Trevor, at least not anymore. I wasn’t even sure I ever really had.

It wasn’t about him so much as it was how Jade had just replaced me in this charmed life. How she had just taken over where I was supposed to have been. I should be the one having a beautiful destination wedding where I got to feel like a princess on a white steed, riding off to the sunset with my cowboy husband.

But that was the thing. I didn’t care about the husband himself. I was just mad about the fantasy. The ceremony and excitement of the life that I felt like I should have had, the one

that Jade had wormed her way into and forced me out of. Not to mention the betrayal of my supposed best friend.

“Congratulations,” I forced out. “It sounds lovely.”

“It is,” she sighed.

She nearly fell off the horse as she looked up for the first time on the ride, and I pulled back on the lead that I was using to walk Bentley around with. It was only her first lesson, so she wasn't riding alone yet, which meant I needed to be there to listen to her blab on and on. At least in future lessons, if I could stomach them, she would be able to just take Bentley around the track, and I could sit in the center and shout out instructions. Or force Camden to make good on his promise that I wouldn't have to lead her lessons if I didn't want to.

“Easy,” I said, touching Bentley's shoulder to get him to calm down. He did so at the touch, and Jade looked down at me with a look that somehow combined wonder and jealousy.

“Anyway,” she said, adjusting the helmet that she had brought with her, emblazoned with the word *bride* on it, “so what about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

“Of course,” my mouth said, without any apparent consultation with the rest of my brain. “I sure am.”

“Oh?” she asked.

Panicked, I wondered how I was going to get out of that one. I had been so distracted and so determined to not look like a loser that it had just blurted out of me. But this was Jade I was talking to. I couldn't just make this up. She would see right through it. The ‘he goes to another school, you wouldn't know him’ defense was going to be torn right through, and I would look even more pathetic than I already was. Here she was getting married in this beautiful wedding to my ex-boyfriend that she'd stolen, and I was rapidly hurtling toward my thirties, alone and with no prospects.

I couldn't let her win like that.

“Tell me,” she said. “What's he like? Is it anyone I know?”



“I don’t know,” I said. “He’s nice. And tall. Really tall. And muscular.”

“Ooh,” she said. “What’s he do for a living?”

“Hmm?” I said, desperate to find a way to give myself a few seconds to think. If I pretended, I didn’t hear her, it gave me an extra second.

“Your boyfriend,” she said.

“What about him?”

“What does he do? For a career?”

“Oh, he...”

I was desperate. Anything would do. I just needed to come up with something.

My eyes glanced into the distance, and I saw the back door of the house open. Mark stepped out, looking around with that big smile he had. He stretched and yawned.

“He’s a doctor,” I finished. “Hang on, I’ll be right back.”

“A doctor?” Jade asked, a hint of disappointment in her voice. “Really?”

“Stay here. Don’t move,” I said, pulling on the lead and wrapping it around the post nearest us. Jade was facing the house as I jogged over to where Mark was coming toward us. He saw me and smiled.

How was I going to sell this? I needed him to go along with it and be convincing.

“I am really sorry about this,” I muttered as I got within hearing distance. I looked over my shoulder to where Jade was sitting on Bentley, watching me, then back to Mark. “Please just go with it. I’ll explain later.”

“Explain what?” he asked, but just as the words were out of his mouth, I was on my toes, pressing my lips to his.



## MARK

Carmela's lips were soft, and she smelled like an intoxicating combination of berries, jasmine, and dirt. It was a curious combination, but one that stirred something deep inside me and made my entire body harden. When she pulled away, and I started to regain some sense of the rest of the world around us, I could hear a squealing, giggling sound from inside the paddock. I looked up to see a woman that I also vaguely recognized in a general sort of way on top of a horse.

She was clapping.

“Oh, you two just *have* to come to the wedding. I won't take no for an answer.”

“Wha—” I began.

Then I felt Carmela's arm wrap around my waist as she turned back toward the girl. She rested her head on my chest for a moment and then looked up at me with a smile and eyes that pleaded for me to just play along. I could feel it in my bones how much she needed me to go with it.

“Absolutely,” she said. “We wouldn't miss it for the world. We will definitely be there. Right, honey?”

I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her tight, smiling as I looked back up at the girl on the horse. I was all too aware of her breasts pressing against the side of my chest, and how good they felt pushed against me. My jeans felt like they were getting tighter.

“Right, of course,” I said.

The girl on the horse jolted and reached down to her pocket. She pulled out a phone and looked back up at us with a pained expression on her face. I wasn't entirely sure it was genuine, or if it was the kind of expression a person has when they are trying to politely excuse themselves by pretending to have something important to do.

“I had no idea how late it was,” she said. “My time is up, and I need to go meet my mother for lunch. It's too bad, I was having so much fun!”

“Ah, well, you can just hop down,” Carmela said. “We will go over how to take care of the horse when you put him away some other time.”

“Sure,” the girl said. “I'll be back very soon for another lesson. Oh, Carmela, I am so glad you were here!”

She hopped down off the horse and yanked off the pink, glittery helmet she was wearing. I believed it said *bride* on it in fake diamonds, but I couldn't tell for sure.

“Me too,” Carmela said in a voice that made me think she was lying through her teeth. “Bye, Jade.”

“Bye!” Jade said and waved as she jogged toward the driveway, fiddling with her phone.

We stood there and watched her as she exited, waiting until she was completely out of earshot before Carmela suddenly separated from me and started walking toward the horse. I followed her, jogging behind her as she grabbed the reins and turned toward the stable.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Sorry,” she said. “I am very sorry about all that.”

“What was it all about?” I asked.

“That's Jade,” she said.

“Yeah, I heard you call her that,” I said. “Who is Jade?”

“You don't remember?” she asked. “She was one of my best friends. Until she stole Trevor from me.”

“Trevo—oh,” I said. “Your ex.”

“Yes, Trevor, my ex,” she said, guiding the horse back to the stable. I stood outside of the stall as she removed the saddle and started putting him away.

“So what happened?”

“They’re getting married,” she sighed. “I was so flustered. I thought I would be ready for all of it, but then she showed up and acted like she was so happy to see me, and I got bowled over. I didn’t know how to react, you know? She was being kind of sweet, but also, kind of bitchy? Like bragging, right? Bragging about how she was engaged and this wonderful life they were going to live in this mansion he has now and all this money the family has.

“Then she said they were getting married on this island. How she was only here to learn how to ride a horse because she was going to ride it in the ceremony and then ‘off into the sunset with Trevor.’”

That last bit, she did an affected voice and threw her hands out to the side mockingly.

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah, wow,” she said, still ranting as she took care of the horse. “She just made me so angry talking about her charmed life. The life that I was going to have before she stole it from me. Then she was going on and on about how great it was and then just asked me if I was seeing anyone. So of course, my big fat mouth opens, and I just start talking. I just start saying stuff, and I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Oh,” I said.

“It was such an impulse reaction. I didn’t realize what I was doing. I can’t believe I said it.”

“Said what exactly?” I asked. “I’m still a little bit confused as to what I just agreed I was doing?”

“I just wanted her to think I had someone. That I wasn’t some big loser who was still angry at her for Trevor, which

I'm not. It's not about Trevor anymore. I just... I just said yes. On impulse. I said yes. Now I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean?" I asked, wondering if I was hearing this correctly.

Her eyes widened a little as she looked up at me, almost as if she was seeing me for the first time.

"We're going to have to go to the wedding," she said. "Together. As a couple."

"What?"

"Okay, look, this is perfect. Just hear me out, okay?"

She was rubbing down Bentley with a brush now and gesturing at me with it.

"All right," I said.

"So okay, I looked into your situation a bit. You are definitely going to need a lawyer. It's complicated and could take some time, but I think you can win if you go about it carefully and have someone on your side that knows the law. As it turns out, you happen to know someone who not only is very careful, but knows the law really, really well. I have done plenty of estate disputes. I can handle this one.

"Maybe, if you're willing, I can help you, and you can help me."

"Help you how exactly?" I asked.

She hung her head and then looked back at me, taking the lead of Bentley and guiding him to his stall.

"I need a date for this wedding. Someone who looks good in a suit and can charm people and is successful. You can do all three. We can go and act like a shiny, happy couple, then Jade and Trevor will get hitched and be out of my life forever, and I never have to think about them ever again. I will never mention it. I will never think about it. I will probably never see either one of them again. I will just avoid going to Ashton, which shouldn't be hard since I don't make enough money to even cross into their zip code."

“They live in Ashton?” I asked.

“I told you. Giant house, destination wedding. They’re loaded.”

“All right,” I said. “So, what happens if you run into her again? Ashton isn’t that far away. We share the same hospital, and there’s only one Wal-Mart between the two cities.”

“First, Jade wouldn’t be caught dead in a Wal-Mart now. She thinks she’s too good for it. Did you see her boots?”

“No,” I responded. “I mean, I physically saw them, but I don’t know what I should have noticed.”

“They are Khaitees. They cost fifteen hundred dollars. And she’s just wearing them to ride a horse. She was showing off.”

“Oh,” I said. “Fifteen hundred dollars? For boots?”

She rolled her eyes, shutting the door of the stall where the horse was now standing and crossing the space between us. She looked suddenly wistful in a sad way.

There was an awkward silence as I watched her. She wasn’t looking directly at me. She was staring at my chest, and I wondered what her mind was projecting there. Some memory of times simpler times, I guessed. Times where she had her friend and a future she was expecting, only to have it ripped away from her and to lose both. I felt for her.

“Well, all right, so you think I can win my case?” I asked, trying to get back to the subject.

“I think I can help you,” she said. “I can’t guarantee anything. But I can tell you I have seen a lot of similar cases and that I have a high degree of confidence that this won’t be any more complicated than anything I have dealt with before that I have settled successfully for my clients.”

“Is that legalese?” I joked.

“No,” she said, her face suddenly going stern. “That’s basic English.” She seemed to catch herself and shake it off, the rising flair of anger subsiding almost as quickly as it came. “Sorry. I’m just upset.”

“I can tell,” I said.

“Look, I can’t tell you for sure I can fix this for you, but I promise, I will try. I will treat it like any other of my paid cases. In return, all I am asking for is for you to accompany me to a wedding and occasionally kiss me and hold my hand in front of other people and act like you like me. How does that sound?”

My stomach tightened at the thought of kissing her again. It was almost enough just by itself to say yes.

“When is the wedding?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. Please say yes,” she said.

I could afford to take some time off to accompany her on a wedding, depending on when it was. Hopefully, she would be able to figure out how to resolve the whole situation before then, anyway, and it wouldn’t matter. But even if she didn’t, I was having a hard time saying no to playing boyfriend with her.

Her big, pouty lips were pressed together as she looked at me with sad, desperate eyes. She was so pretty. I wondered if she knew that. Even stressed out, frazzled, sweating, and worn out from working with horses, she was so damned pretty. I wanted to feel her nuzzled up next to me again. I wanted to feel her lips pressed against mine again. I wanted to taste her again.





## CARMELA

It was a heck of an ask, for sure, but he had to say yes. He just had to. If he didn't, I was going to be humiliated beyond anything I had ever experienced. But my embarrassment, or potential of it, might not be enough to convince him. Asking someone to be a date for a wedding was one thing, but with the story between Jade, Trevor, and me, it wasn't just a date. It was an act.

"Geez," he said, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand and looking away.

The hesitation was giving away everything. He didn't want to tell me, but he wasn't interested. It was too much to ask. He was going to say no.

"Look, I—" I began, ready to let him off the hook so he didn't have to outright say it. It would be better that way. Easier for both of us.

"I'll do it," he said, interrupting me.

I paused for a second, unsure if I'd heard what I thought I heard.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"I'll do it," he said. "It could be fun."

He shrugged and flashed a boyish grin that was wildly attractive, especially when plastered on a face that sat on top of his athletic, muscular body.

"You will?" I asked. "Really?"

“Yeah,” he said, grinning wider and nodding. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Oh, Mark, thank you!” I exclaimed, throwing my arms around him for a quick, tight hug. I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach him, and for just a fleeting moment, I found myself relishing having his body pressed against mine. Surrounding me. Holding me. Squeezing me gently with his massive arms that could squeeze so much harder if he wanted.

I pulled myself away.

“Thank you so much,” I repeated. “Seriously, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said.

“Wow, just, this is great. I’ll give you all the information when I get it,” I said. “Just one night, and all this will be behind me.”

“She said it was a destination wedding, though,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

Then it hit me. He was right.

“Oh no.”

“Something about a beach? I think?” he said. “Riding a horse off into the sunset, I believe.”

I had been so frazzled by the whole thing I’d completely missed that part somehow. It went in one ear and out the other. This made everything way more complicated.

Almost on cue, my phone made a sound, and I pulled it out of my pocket. It was a text message from a number I didn’t recognize. I opened it and groaned.

“Ugh,” I muttered.

“Let me guess, Jade?” Mark asked.

“Yes,” I said. “She’s going on and on about how excited she is.” The phone binged over and over. “She always did this. She can’t text in full thoughts. It’s always three or four words at a time. This will keep happening for the next ten minutes or so while she tells me all about the plans for her wedding.”

“Yikes,” he said. “Anything interesting?”

“Well,” I said, looking at the messages that were still coming in rapid fire speed, “she’s really excited, obviously. It’s going to be so pretty, she’s excited about her dress...” I skimmed ahead a bit and then stopped. “It’s going to be four days. A lakeside campground with a pavilion and cabins for the guests. She says it’s going to be so much fun. Somehow, I doubt that.”

“Depends on your definition of fun, I guess,” Mark said.

“Does anyone define fun as watching your former fiancé marry the former best friend that he left you for?”

“Probably not,” he laughed.

“Then, no.”

Leaving to go home and clean up before an afternoon at the office, I felt like I was going to explode. The shower I was looking forward to taking wasn’t just to get clean, although I was exceptionally grimy as usual after the horses, but it was also to get in a hot shower and relax. Anything to get my shoulders to stop feeling like two bricks that were shoved against my neck.

By the time I pulled into my place, it was just after noon, meaning that my time in the office was going to keep me there until well past six. Thankfully, I pretty much made my own schedule these days, and since I shared the office with two other lawyers who did most of their work in the mornings, I had the building to myself after three or so anyway.

Getting in, I peeled my clothes off before I even made it to the bathroom, wanting to be out of the dirty, sweaty things as fast as possible. The calculation of how long my day would be was running through my head. I had two families that were coming in and another client who was looking at drawing up a will and wanted advice. None of the three appointments started before four, and none of them should take more than a half hour. I had some time to kill.

Walking naked through my living room made my skin tingle. The sweat that beaded down my body from the physical work being hit by the cool air of a temperature-controlled room was part of it. The other part was thinking back to that hug that I'd shared with Mark. I tried not to think about it too much, but as I passed a mirror and glanced at myself, I couldn't help but think about how good he felt against my body. I wondered if that thought went through his mind too.

Four whole days in a cabin on an island. Just Mark and I locked in a tiny space, with the whole world expecting that we were an item. That we would be sleeping together. There would likely be a moment just like now where I would be naked and getting in the shower and Mark would be just on the other side of the bathroom door. The only thing that would separate us was a thin piece of wood and a doorhandle.

I shook my head. Enough of those kinds of thoughts. Mark was going to accompany me to the wedding as a friend and as a favor. He probably was only doing it because he felt the obligation after my brother invited him to stay on the ranch and live there while he got his feet under him Murdock again.

The shower was hot, but thankfully, the tension being released in my shoulders was enough that I could focus on that and not where my mind had been going. I got clean and felt a little bit of the rocks in my neck loosening and got out before I got too comfortable in there. Before I did something I would regret.

I got dressed and headed into work, ordering takeout for delivery to the office. I got there with an hour or so to spare before the first meeting, and the food arrived moments after I did. It gave me a chance to eat in peace and go over files to prepare for the meeting.

In between meetings, I kept digging into Mark's case. There were certainly options to explore there, but it was going to take time. And focus. That being something I didn't have a ton of that day.

The wedding was looming large in my thoughts. It was only a couple of weeks away, which just made the whole

situation much more awkward. I was clearly not in the initial invitations and had been added at the last minute. Whatever plans Jade had created for the guests was going to have to be modified now that I was going to be there.

Which I was sure she was delighted by. Jade was either completely oblivious to my feelings about her and Trevor being together, or she was looking forward to rubbing it in my face. I wasn't sure which one was on deck, but it wouldn't be long before I found out.

I had just sent the last client out of the door when a knock got my attention. It was well after seven, and I wasn't expecting anyone else. I assumed it was my last client, having forgotten something.

"Just a second," I said, heading to the door. "Did you leave something, Mr. Watts?"

I opened the door to see not Bill Watts standing there, but Mark Murphy. He was holding a pizza and a bag with breadsticks and a two-liter of soda in it. He shook the bag and grinned.

"Not sure about Mr. Watts, but I thought we should get to know each other a little better. Since we're going to have to be a couple for a few days."

I laughed and rolled my eyes, stepping aside so he could come in. A little voice in my head reminded me of all the thoughts I'd had to push away in the shower earlier, and I tried to shake them off. Thankfully, the pizza smelled so good, it did part of the job for me.

"You got pizza," I said. "How did you know?"

"How did I know what?" he asked, putting the pizza down on one of the coffee tables in the waiting area.

"A, that I hadn't had dinner yet, and B, that pizza is my favorite," I said.

"Well, you are your brother's sister," he laughed. "And I do have some memories of you from years ago. If I'm not mistaken, you liked mushrooms, pepperoni, and pineapple, yes?"

My jaw slid open and hung there for a moment.

“You remembered that?” I asked. “How? How in the world did you remember that?”

“Camden’s sixteenth,” he said. “I happened to be the one to order the pizza for the party. I asked what everyone wanted, and that’s what you said. Then it came, and...”

“They forgot the pineapple,” I finished for him. “Oh wow.”

“Yup,” he said. “We ended up finding some pineapple chunks and draining them and putting them on your pizza for you. And I decided to try it on mine. I’ve been eating it on pepperoni and mushroom pizzas ever since.”

“You have?” I asked.

He nodded.

He pulled two slices off and put them on a paper plate that had come in the bag and cracked open the two-liter. “So, aside from our mutual pizza preference, I thought we might need to come up with some relationship stories. If we’re going to be convincing, that is.”

He handed me the plate and poured the soda into one of the empty coffee mugs that were sitting in the kitchenette.

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate you being all in on this.”

“Ah,” he said, waving his hand like he was waving me off. “I’m only in it for the pizza.”





## MARK

As we ate, we talked about our childhood in an amiable way. I learned that she was more athletic as a kid than I knew. Track and field, basketball, you name it, she did it. It was impressive and an element of her life I'd never known. It also made sense as to why she was so good with the horses. Being athletic and inclined to competition, she fit well with the nature of taming wild horses and teaching newbies how to ride.

Intentionally, I avoided bringing alcohol to our dinner. I didn't want any pressure to think of this as a date. This was just me helping out a friend and enjoying some time hanging out. But I couldn't help that the way her eyes lingered on mine over her glass as she took a drink, or the way she laughed so easily and freely, and we sat closer and closer as the evening wore on seemed to be flirtatious in nature.

I had to write that off. I needed to let that go. She was the sister of one of my best friends, and she wasn't looking for anything other than a fake date to a wedding. That was it. Nothing more.

When the pizza box was empty and we were both happily full, I made a quick exit with the promise to talk to her soon and go over more details about our fake relationship. We hadn't gotten to much of it while we talked. We were busy enjoying learning more about each other's real lives.

When I got back to the ranch, Camden was waiting for me in the living room.

“Hey,” I said, shutting the door behind me.

“What’s up?” he asked. “I heard you were hanging out at my sister’s office.”

“Yeah, I was,” I admitted. “How did you hear that?”

“Small town,” he said. “Word gets around pretty quickly.”

“Ah,” I said. “I forgot about that.”

Camden laughed, cracking open a beer. He held it out to me, and I took it gratefully. Then he cracked another and took a deep sip.

“So what were you doing up there?” he asked.

“Nothing much,” I said. “I just agreed to go with her to this wedding, so I figured if I was going to be her fake boyfriend, we should get comfortable eating around each other and come up with a good story.”

“Her fake what now?” he asked.

“Fake boyfriend,” I said, trying to sound as casual as possible. “It’s her friend Jade. Ex-friend, I guess. Sort of friend?”

“Yeah, I know all about Jade. Continue,” he said.

“Well, when Jade was here doing her riding lesson, she asked Carmela if she would come to her wedding, and she said yes. And I happened to be there, and one thing led to another, and now, as far as Jade knows, I’m her boyfriend.”

“Oh, Lord,” Camden groaned.

“Seriously, it’s not like that,” I said. “It’s a favor. I’m just doing her a favor.”

I didn’t bother to elaborate any further, opting instead to head into the bedroom and change into my sweats. When I came back out, Camden didn’t mention his sister again, and we just watched TV for a while before going to bed.

Waking up the next morning, I tried to prepare myself for the day. It was going to be a difficult one, one that I had been

dreading since I drove into town. But I needed to go get it over with so I could move on.

I was going to go check on the progress of my father's house.

My house, I reminded myself as I got dressed and went to the car. It still felt strange to think of it that way. It was my house now. Not just the house I grew up in. Not just the house that had been in our family since my grandfather married my grandmother and had their children. My house.

I drove over in a bit of a daze, letting the memories wash over me as I passed by corners where I used to stand and wait for the bus and parks where I used to play with Camden and Ryan and Graham. It was almost eerie how familiar and yet strange it felt. Life had moved on here. New people lived in houses that were once occupied by families long since gone. Middle aged men I used to see on riding lawn mowers were now wrinkly and gray, wearing their bathrobes out to fetch the paper in the morning.

Pulling in behind a contractor's truck, I hopped out and was greeted by a smiling man a little older than me. He was slightly heavy and had a trucker's cap pulled down over his head, but his smile was disarmingly charming. He held his hand out for a shake before he even said a word.

"Charlie," he said. "I presume you're Mark?"

"I am," I said. "Nice to meet you, Charlie."

"Nice to meet you too," he said. "Come on in, I have some things to show you."

I followed him into the house and felt my gut tighten when I looked at the disrepair and the way that things had been broken in order to repair the bones of the house.

"Wow," I said.

Charlie nodded and turned to me as I surveyed the scene in what was once an immaculate living room.

"As you can see, we have been rather busy," he said. "We were going to lay down some vinyl flooring here, as we

discussed a few weeks ago, but as we got the boards pulled up, we discovered some rot down there. It's something you're going to want to address now rather than later since we already have everything pulled up."

"I see," I said.

"Then, over here, you've got some leakage from the plumbing in the walls behind the sink. Now, I could do a patchwork job over it and probably get it up to code and whatnot, but you would want to fix it before you sell it, if that's your aim. Is that your aim?"

"I don't know yet," I answered honestly. "It's a lot of house for one person."

"Oh," Charlie said, looking around at the three thousand square foot house. "Just you?"

"Just me," I said, sighing.

"Well, at any rate, if you're looking to get in here quickly, a patchwork job would save some time and would be good for at least a year or two. Otherwise, we're looking at a couple extra days at least. Probably more, since I'll have to take out part of the wall to find the leak and have the plumber replace the piping."

"Do it," I said. "I don't want anything half-assed. Do what you need to do. Just get it done right."

"Fair enough," he said, grinning. "That's what I like to hear."

The rest of our meeting was a bit of a haze. Like driving through the neighborhoods, I could see my old life playing out in each room as we went through them. I was agreeing to pretty much anything Charlie suggested they do, which I was sure he was thrilled with, and when we were done, I shook his hand and signed off on the repair changes.

I didn't know how I felt as I left, but I did know I wanted something else to think about. I had the doctor who was filling in for my dad staying on at the clinic for a few weeks while I got things handled with the house and got my feet under me, so I needed to come up with distractions. I thought about

Carmela and the lies we needed to tell to convince Jade that she and I were a couple.

I kept it up over the next couple of weeks, occasionally calling or visiting Carmela at her office. Sometimes she would drop by the ranch house and hang out with me there, piecing together our fake relationship and peppering it with stories we both agreed on. It turned out that she needed the escape too. Jade had been spending a bunch of time on the ranch and was specifically looking for Carmela to teach her. And to brag about the wedding that was coming.

As the weeks went by, I also started seeing patients, taking advantage of the fact that the business remained open, even while we debated the ownership with my aunt. Some of the clients that had been with my father were reluctant to come to me, but most of them came around after a week or two.

One afternoon, as I was happily signing a medication order for one of the elderly patients that had just come to see me for the first time that afternoon, I looked up at the sound of the bell in the lobby. From my place in the back near my desk, I could see the front door clearly, and was shocked to see Carmela coming in. Limping.

Worried, I signed the slip and handed it to my assistant and ran out to the lobby. Carmela was sitting just past the sign-in desk, with a clipboard in one hand, filling out paperwork.

“What happened?” I asked as I came out. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Hey, Mark.”

“Hey,” I said. “Can you walk? Do you want to go in the back?”

“I’ll wait my turn,” she said, motioning toward an old man asleep in a chair on the other side of the lobby.

“Him? That’s Mr. Hammet. He comes in and naps while his wife is next door at the hair salon.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I don’t know what I need, honestly. I hurt my foot doing a lesson.”

“What happened, exactly?”

“I was teaching Jade, of course,” she said, shaking her head. “I was busy saying something to her and not paying attention and got my foot caught on the stirrups. I think it’s just a sprain.”

“Well, let’s get you back in the examination room,” I said. “I want to take a look at it.”

“It’s not that serious,” she began.

“I won’t hear it,” I said. “Do you need a crutch?”

“No, I can hop,” she said, sighing. “Here I go.”

With considerable effort, she got to her feet, with me holding her under the elbow for balance. She hopped into the examination room, and I had to avert my eyes a couple of times when they landed on hers while I was holding her foot. It seemed like whatever was happening in those seconds, she was feeling too. The room felt too hot.

“Why don’t you just wrap it for me?” she asked. “Then I can get back to work. With all I’ve been doing at the ranch, I’m way behind at the office.”

“You’re just going to the office?” I asked.

“I swear,” she said. “I won’t get up from my chair the entire time I’m there.”

“Well,” I said, “I think you probably need an x-ray, but I will wrap it for now. But I want you to promise you won’t put any pressure on it for today and see how you feel tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure,” she said. “Promise.”

With that, I wrapped her ankle, and she slid off the table as soon as it was pinned shut.

“Careful,” I said.

“I will be. Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said to her back as she began hobbling away. “See you around.”

“Yup,” she called back without looking over her shoulder.

Then she was out of the door, and the office felt weirdly empty.





## CARMELA

I absolutely should not have been feeling the things I was feeling while he was examining my ankle. The way he was so gentle as he picked my foot up and touched the sole, pressing softly in various places and asking where it hurt. There was something so intimate about him touching my bare skin. It was intense, and when I felt a shudder go through me and my skin flush, I got out of there as fast as possible.

Unfortunately for me, it hadn't gotten better just going into the office and keeping it elevated.

Keeping the ankle up on another chair while I sat at my desk in my office and made phone calls only seemed to accomplish the task of making my leg go to sleep. Which, of course, meant that my foot started to tingle, and that added to the pain. It was just one thing after another with it, and by the end of the day, it was hurting way worse.

I was going to need to go to the hospital. Dammit.

I glanced at the clock. It was after seven already. Sighing, I picked up my phone and turned it over in my hands.

My foot was killing me, but I wanted to go home. I just wanted to get to my house and put ice on it and see if I could tough it out. But one second of my heel touching the ground later and I was back to sitting in the chair, wincing and trying to hold back a stream of curse words that would make Quentin Tarantino blush.

“Carmela, what did you do to yourself?” I muttered to the empty room. “He’s going to laugh. He’s going to laugh a lot.”

I was fairly certain I knew how my brother would react, based on years and years of those interactions. He was a caring, gentle man, but he was also a big brother. If he didn’t torture his little sister when she was hobbled in some way, he would break the code of generations of big brothers.

Still, I didn’t have any other choice. I needed someone else to come get me, help me to the car, and take me to the hospital. There was no way I was going to be able to press the pedals.

I clicked the picture of my brother in my contacts and put the phone on the desk on the little holder I had installed for just this purpose.

“Mela, what’s up?” Camden said as he answered. He was in his car, having clearly pulled over on the side of the road. That wasn’t good.

“Hey, Camden, where are you?”

“Buford,” he said. “I told you yesterday I needed to come up here today. Bringing ol’ Bess to the vet.”

“Shit,” I said. I’d forgotten all about that. Bess was one of the older horses and had been having some issues with her stomach in recent years. Usually, the vet was able to make the trip to us, but they had been swamped recently, and Camden decided to bring her in. He wrote it on the schedule by the stable and everything. I just forgot.

“What’s going on, sis?” he asked. “Did you need something?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I just hurt my foot today while I was riding.”

“You hurt your foot? How?”

“I got it caught in the stirrup. Ended up on my ass and in a lot of pain. It’s way worse now.”

“Crap,” he said. “I’m sorry, Mela. Are you going to go to the hospital?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I went and saw Mark at the clinic today, but I just got it wrapped and didn’t do an x-ray. He wanted to, but I was in a hurry to get back to the office. But now, I think I need the x-ray. I was hoping you could come pick me up and drive me.”

“Shoot, I would, you know that. But Bess’s appointment is a late one. The vet is already staying in the office hours after closing just to help me out, and I’m already in Buford.”

“I understand,” I said. “It’s fine.”

I was about to tell him I could call someone else and was currently wracking my brain to think of someone who could and would be available.

“I’ll call Mark,” he said. “He’ll come get you.”

“Oh, no, I don’t want to bother him,” I said.

“It won’t bother him,” Camden said. “He was telling me before I left how he was just going to sit around and watch TV tonight.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Just give him about twenty minutes. He’ll be there,” he said. “Keep me updated as to what’s going on.”

“I will,” I said.

With that, he hung up, and a minute or so later, my phone dinged with a new text message from Mark. It simply read, *Be there in ten.*

When Mark arrived, he looked like he had gotten dressed again before coming. I knew he wouldn’t have been sitting around the house watching TV in a button-up shirt and jeans with boots on, but here he was, walking into my office looking like he’d stepped right off the ranch.

“Not as good as you thought, huh?” he asked with a grin as he came in.

“Not even remotely,” I said. “Can you help me up?”

“Yeah, I’ve got you,” he said.

He helped me stand and then wrapped my arm around his neck as he guided me out of the room on one foot. His truck was parked up against the building, and he opened the door for me to tumble into. The drive was only a couple minutes away, since my office was right by the highway exit, and the hospital was only a few miles out of town.

It was awkward having him with me and a little embarrassing, but at the same time comforting. Having someone there to talk to made it less depressing under the florescent light of the hospital. He talked to me while they got me into the chair and into the X-ray room and then waited for me to come back and wait for the results.

Unfortunately, the results weren't terribly clear. It was at least sprained, and there might be a small fracture in the ankle, but they were going to need me again in a few days for another X-ray to confirm it once the swelling went down. With that, they wrapped it again, gave me some crutches, and Mark brought me home, helping me into the living room and onto the couch.

"Let me grab you something to snack on and something to drink," he said. "You stay here."

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"Nonsense," he said. "We have a wedding to pretend to be a couple for coming fast. I plan on being a very attentive boyfriend. I need the practice."

A few moments later, he returned with a glass of wine and a little box of dark chocolate I had stored in the wine cabinet.

"How did you know?" I asked, laughing.

"I had a hunch," he said.

"Can I drink with the medication they gave me?"

"It's just acetaminophen," he said. "Just don't drink more than a glass and you should be fine."

I unwrapped the chocolate as he picked up a pillow from the couch and set it on the coffee table.

“Ouch,” I said as he picked up my ankle gently and moved it to the pillow.

“Sorry,” he said. “Yeesh, they did a terrible job wrapping your ankle.”

“I thought so,” I said. “It didn’t look like how you did it. And it hurts.”

“Hang on,” he said, kneeling down in front of me. “Do you mind?”

“No, go for it,” I said.

My heart started thudding harder in my chest as he gently, slowly unraveled my wrap. When it was off, he readjusted it and wrapped it again, taking his time and being extremely careful with me. As he wound the wrapping, he started moving up my leg, leaning closer to me as I leaned forward toward him. His fingers brushed my leg, and I could tell he was breathing harder too. He looked up, and our eyes locked on to one another for a moment. And then he leaned in, kissing me.

Our lips pressed into each other gently but passionately, and when he pulled away, I felt like my mind had completely stalled. We searched each other’s eyes, our noses still only inches apart.

“Sorry,” he muttered, his voice husky and low.

“Don’t apologize,” I said and grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him to me.

Our lips met again, and I sank into the kiss.

Gently, making sure to not hurt my foot, Mark crawled over me, settling between my thighs with his knees on the floor. I held his cheeks as my lips parted and his tongue slipped into my mouth. Passion consumed me. The need for him, the yearning for his skin to touch mine, and the illicitness of our relationship made me so hot.

I craved him.

Yanking at his shirt, I unbuttoned it, and he threw it behind him while I went to work on my own buttons. As soon as his shirt was on the floor, he was pulling at the hem of mine, and

when it was open, he pushed it back, diving down to kiss my neck and slowly working his way down. His hands pulled at the clip in the front of my bra, and I felt the pressure release.

He groaned in appreciation as my breasts spilled out. Immediately, he took one into his lips and sucked on my taut nipple. Reaching up, he grasped the other in his hand, and I reached down to unzip my skirt. I pushed down on it, wincing as it rolled off me and my foot moved.

Mark pulled away and smiled. "Hold on," he said. "I'll help."

Gently, he pulled the skirt down and off one leg and then the other, raising my foot in the air to pull it underneath. Tossing it to the floor, he then reached down and tugged on the waistband of my panties, pulling them down to my knees, revealing my soft mound. Another groan rolled from his chest, and I pulled my good leg out of the panties and let him get it off the other.

I was naked on the couch, and I felt beautiful in his gaze. His eyes roamed over my body, and his lip curled into a grin as he unbuckled his pants and yanked them down. As he kicked them away, my lips trembled at the sight of his thick cock pressing against the fabric of his boxers. When his thumbs hooked into the waistband and started pulling them down, it was my turn to moan in appreciation.

His long, thick, throbbing member was revealed, and I needed it inside me. I wanted to feel his power as he mounted me. I would gladly take the pain in my ankle if it meant his cock buried deep in my body.

I spread my thighs, and he settled between them. He curled over my body, and our lips touched again, my breath hitching as the head of his massive dick slid through the folds of my pussy, gathering the fluids there and resting at my entrance. Our eyes burned into each other for a moment and then he thrust once, mightily.

I cried out as he entered me, stretching me. The line between pleasure and pain was erased, and I fell somewhere between as he slowly rocked back and forth. I kissed him

passionately, my hands running down his back as he buried himself deep in me.

“Take me,” I said.

The grin stretched into a wide smile, and his chest flexed as muscles tensed and his body prepared. He began to thrust into me harder, and I fell into a dizzying feeling of ecstasy. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he slipped his hands under my ass, picking me up without pulling out. I giggled at the feeling of weightlessness as he carried me carefully to my bedroom and laid me down on the bed.

For what seemed like hours, our bodies tangled, and we covered each other in kisses and sweat. My body climaxed over and over as I felt reality slipping away with my concept of time. Then, with one leg draped over the other, lying on my side and him entering me with a grunting, furious speed, I felt him tense up. I clenched around him, my hand grasping his ass as I pulled him tight into me and he exploded.

We came together, and my body shook, toes curling, pain be damned. He collapsed beside me, leaving me shaking and his cock still twitching as I curled into his arms and fell into a deep sleep.





## MARK

I didn't dream, or at least, I didn't remember my dreams. I simply opened my eyes and groggily started to piece together where I was. The bed was warm and cozy, and tucked into my chest, my arm underneath and around her, was Carmela. She was dozing peacefully, one arm stretched out over my body and her naked breasts pressed against my side.

Shifting ever so slightly caused her to stir, and her eyes fluttered open momentarily, looking up into mine. She smiled, and then they shut again. I thought she fell back to sleep, but a moment later they opened once more, and there was much more recognition behind them. Suddenly, she sat up and pulled the blanket to her chest, looking around wildly, then wincing and gazing down at her exposed and wrapped foot. Throwing herself backward onto a pillow, she lay there a second, eyes clenched shut.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a lot of pins and needles," she said.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No," she said. "Maybe some of that Tylenol they sent me home with in a minute."

"Sure," I said. "Say when, and I'll go get it."

She nodded, and I lay back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling beside her for a few quiet moments. We were going to have to address the elephant in the room at some point, but it felt like both of us were working up the courage.

“So last night,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” I said.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m just going to come out and say it. That was... unplanned. Really good, but unplanned. And we can’t let it happen again.”

“Agreed,” I said, relieved. “It was fantastic. But with Camden and all...”

“Right,” she said. “It’s just not something that would work out. It’s too weird. And I don’t know about you, but I’m not looking to jump into a relationship right now anyway.”

“No,” I said. “There’s too much going on. It would be irresponsible.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“So we just need to kind of put this behind us and focus on getting through this weekend,” she said. She turned her head and stared at me, and I met her gaze. She was incredibly beautiful, and I wondered how I hadn’t seen it before. My cock was hard and wanted another taste of her, and I shifted to hide the massive erection that was creating a mountain in the blankets. “I don’t regret what we did. We just can’t do it again.”

“I agree,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Well then. I am going to go grab a quick shower and then I need to get ready to go to work. My ankle kept me from getting a lot done yesterday, and with the trip coming Thursday, I have a lot to do ahead of time so I can take days off.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll see myself out. Be back here Thursday around six?”

“Sounds good,” she said. “We can get on the road and be there by lunch.”

There was a brief moment of silence as we both waited on the other to move.

“All of my clothes are in the living room,” I said.

“So are mine,” she said.

Another moment of silence.

“I guess it’s not like we haven’t seen each other naked,” I said.

“Right,” she agreed.

Slowly, I lowered the blanket and sat up. Carmela did the same, exposing her breasts. We both stood, and as I did, my hardened cock swung out in front of me. I watched as her eyes traveled down, opened wide, and then darted back to mine. Then we both laughed.

“Well, we will chalk that up to getting to know each other for the wedding,” I said. “See you Thursday.”

“Yup,” she said, giggling and darting to the bathroom as fast as she could on one leg.

I went to the living room, gathering my clothes and getting dressed before finding the pill bottle for her medication. I filled a glass with water and took them to the bathroom, gently opening the door and peeking in. Carmela had a clear shower curtain, and I could see her through it, wet, shampoo making rivulets of soap that streamed down her body. I wanted nothing more than to yank that curtain open, join her in the shower, and fuck her against the wall.

“I brought your medicine and some water,” I said.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, turning to see me through the curtain. I expected her to cover up, but she didn’t. Instead, she just smiled.

The next couple of days I spent making myself so busy I didn’t think about what had happened between Carmela and me or thinking about the trip. I loaded my schedule with patients at the clinic, and when I wasn’t there, I was volunteering to help on the ranch, making up for the lost work from Carmela not being there and for both of us being gone all weekend.

When I arrived at Carmela's place around six on Thursday morning, she met me at the door, already ready. I grabbed her things and put them in the back before opening the door for her. I had a bit of time, since she was still hobbling on the crutches, and it took her a few extra moments to get to the car.

Once inside, we got on the road, heading southeast, and I turned on some light music to fill the quiet. I half-expected Carmela to fall asleep once we were on the road, but she had brought a book with her and seemed quite well awake. Our small talk was mostly unfocused and not really a conversation as much as it was just us awkwardly trying to figure out how to speak to each other with the new dynamic.

"So, you look like you're getting around a bit better," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"Still hurts," she said. "But it's better. I'm able to put a shoe on again, so I take that as a win. As long as I don't put pressure on the heel, I'm mostly okay."

"Good, good," I said.

"Did you talk to Camden before you headed over?" she asked.

"I didn't," I said. "He was already out with the animals."

"Sounds about right," she said. "He gets up with the chickens. He's supposed to be trailering up the horses on Saturday for the ceremony."

"Wait, he's coming down with them?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, sighing and sounding non-plussed. "I'm going to meet him and take over the responsibility of them once he gets there. You have a hitch on this truck, don't you?"

"I do," I said. "I hauled all my stuff down in a trailer with it."

"Do you think it could pull the horse trailer?"

"Sure," I said.

"Good. Then if I meet him when he drops them off, I can tell him to go on home and we can bring them back," she said.

“Easy enough.”

The rest of our drive was much more pleasant, and when we arrived at Port Aransas, I helped her off the ferry. We were supposed to go directly to see Trevor and Jade and be shown to our cabin, and I knew she was nervous about it all. It would be the first time she had seen Trevor since they'd broken up, and the first real test of our ruse.

I squeezed her hand and kept my hand on the small of her back as the golf cart dropped us off at the main venue cabin and met the couple inside. Once in eyesight of Jade and the man I assumed was Trevor, she straightened up and did a remarkable job of trying to try to look as elegant as possible while on ugly metal crutches.

Trevor spirited away pretty quickly, only barely acknowledging Carmela before excusing himself. He didn't even introduce himself to me or shake my hand. It told me a lot of what I needed to know about him immediately. Jade, on the other hand, seemed delighted and was excited to show Carmela and me to our cabin for the weekend.

After a few moments of gushing about how happy she was and bragging a bit about some of the amenities, Jade eventually got around to asking Carmela about her ankle and if she call the golf cart to take us to the cabin. When Carmela said it was going to be no problem, I rolled my eyes. Thankfully, I had a bottle of the extra-strength acetaminophen with me. I had a feeling she was going to need it.

We followed Jade to the cabin, which was only a few dozen yards from the main venue. The view from the area where it sat was lovely. Each cabin was separated from the others by a little tree line, and there was a view of the ocean from the room.

Jade brought us to our door, handed us a key, and then had to run back to meet another guest, leaving Carmela and I opening the door by ourselves. Figuring I could go get the rest of our luggage and things in a few minutes, I opened the door for Carmela and followed her inside.

The cabin was cute but small. It was all open floor with a bed in the center of the room underneath a window that looked back toward the mainland. There was a small kitchenette on one side, what I presumed to be a bathroom beside it, and then large windows overlooking the ocean and leading out to the beach across from the bed. A couch, a couple of chairs, and a small, ancient-looking TV filled the rest of the room other than a couple dressers and nightstands.

“That’s a double bed,” Carmela said.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I can sleep on the couch. You take the bed.”

“That couch is small. You can’t fit on that thing,” she said. “Hell, I don’t think I could fit on that all night.”

“It’ll be tight, but I can make it,” I said.

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “We are both adults. We can share a bed.”

As she said it, our eyes connected, and we shared a look that said both of us kind of doubted that.

I left a few moments later, wanting to break that tension and go get our things. There was a welcome reception that evening, and we needed to get ready for it. Once I brought everything inside, Carmela took up residence in the restroom to get ready while I got dressed in the main room. As the sun set, she came out of the bathroom wearing a dark blue evening dress and looking absolutely stunning.

“Wow,” I said. “You look great.”

“You don’t look half bad yourself,” she said, smiling. “Come on. I need the extra time to get there on these damn metal monstrosities.”

We made our way across the bridge and to the beach where the welcome reception was being held by tiki torch light. We had made a pact to do our best to seem like a happy couple, and within seconds of being there, I realized I didn’t have to try very hard at all. I really was happy being there with her.

I liked her. There was no getting around that. Even at my most stubborn, I couldn't deny the way she made me feel. In any other circumstance, I would have tried to see where our relationship would take us.

But as we walked along the lit walkway, I realized I was being ridiculous. Why couldn't we try? Just give it a shot? Yes, her brother was my best friend, but we were adults. What did my relationship with her brother have to do with anything? If we approached it slowly and eased Camden into it, it might just work.

Watching Carmela smile and be delightful with people at the reception, I made a decision. I was going to talk to her about it. Maybe I could turn our weekend getaway into the opening experience of a new relationship.

I had to try.





## CARMELA

Leave it to Jade to turn her wedding into a giant production where everyone had to play a part.

As long as I'd known her, Jade had been an actress. Not one that wanted to audition for plays or actually do anything in the field, mind you. Just a woman that liked being the center of attention and would act accordingly. Everything about her had to be a giant 'thing.' When we'd been young, it had sometimes been fun being in her orbit. There was always something interesting happening.

But now, with a bitterness that still hadn't completely gone away and struggling with pain in my ankle and foot, I was not exactly feeling the myriad of events she had planned for everyone. Not that it was going to stop me. I was bound and determined to be my most impressive and well-adjusted self this weekend.

Especially when I had to encounter Trevor's family. It was the first time since the breakup that I had come in contact with them—or Jade's folks, for that matter. I was going to be seeing a lot of people who had closed ranks around Jade and left me out in the cold, including former friends. But the more I encountered them, the thicker Mark laid on our 'relationship' and went about being the charming doctor that made some of the other women blush and get red with envy.

I was kind of loving it.

Still, with as much as I was enjoying Mark and his dedication to making me look good, I was not looking forward

to one of the events planned for the day. In fact, I was dragging my feet getting ready for it, and Mark seemed to notice. He came out of the bathroom dressed for the occasion in cargo shorts and a tight polo, playing the part of the athletic but mature boyfriend to a T. I had to admit, the way the fabric of his shirt stretched over his chest was pleasing as hell.

“You ready?” he asked, eyeing me somewhat critically.

“I guess,” I said. “Can’t I get a doctor’s note to get out of it?”

He laughed.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Though you can think of it like this. If we lose, then you can blame your bum foot.”

“It’s a canoe race,” I said. “How is my foot going to have anything to do with it?”

“Come on. It will be fun.”

Unconvinced, I reluctantly followed him to the little alcove between the island and the mainland, where several canoes were lined up and ready to race along a tiny lake. Most of the other boats were filled already, leaving two empty ones. Mark and I headed to one of them, and just as we got settled, Jade and Trevor appeared and got into the other.

“You have got to be kidding,” I muttered.

It was such an eighties movie cliché. Of course, they were going to be directly racing us. It had to be that way because Jade needed the universe to play along, and so it did. She was the star of her very own John Hughes film, just in real life.

“You guys ready to race?” Jade asked, grinning from ear to ear. Trevor avoided eye contact but did seem to glance at Mark and smirk.

“I’m ready to do... whatever this is,” I said. “You ready, honey?”

“Absolutely. Let’s do this.”

“Ready?” came a voice up the beach. It was followed almost instantly by a gunshot.

Startled, I began rowing frantically, watching as Jade and Trevor took off ahead of us. There was much splashing and grunting, but not much movement. Finally, we started going, well behind Jade and Trevor, but still ahead of a few of the others.

“Come on,” I said. “We have to catch up!”

“Umm,” Mark said behind me, “so I might not have ever done this before.”

“Now you tell me?” I yelled.

“Well, I thought it was intuitive, you know? Something I could figure out.”

Slowly, we began to move. In a circle. No matter which side either of us put our oar down, it only seemed to speed up our spinning.

“Dammit,” Mark said. “Hang on. You put yours in on this side, and I’ll do the other.”

“Okay,” I said, following his lead.

When we did start moving, it was back toward the shore.

“Well, this isn’t it,” Mark said. “Hang on.”

Paddling as hard as he could, he seemed to get a little bit of the hang of things, and we started heading into the lake. Ahead of us, I saw that Jade and Trevor had gotten stuck along the side of the beach in some reeds, giving us an opening. Paddling hard, we caught up to within a few boat lengths of them as they dislodged and got going again.

We had caught our rhythm, and suddenly the intense competitive spirit was back in full force, urging me to catch up fully. To beat them. To win.

Mark was pushing hard, and when I looked back over my shoulder, I saw the determination in his face too, the muscles flexing in his forearms and his brow furrowed. We were almost caught up. It was going to happen.

Suddenly, something brushed by the canoe and startled me. It looked like a large fish, and just after I reacted, I heard Mark

behind me do the same.

“Shit,” he said.

“What?” I asked, turning around. “Oh no.”

His oar was in the water, and Mark instinctively reached for it. I could see what was going to happen before it did, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. I reached for him, grabbing at his shirt to pull him back, but it was too late, and he was too big.

“I’ve got it,” he yelled.

“Mark, no!”

We rocked, and Mark froze, turning to meet eyes with me for a single instant before the boat flipped and we both found ourselves dunked in the water. I immediately sank, coming up inside the overturned canoe and gasping for breath. Some of the water had gotten into my lungs, and I coughed hard.

A second later, Mark popped up in front of me, also in the dome of the overturned canoe.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit,” he said, frustrated.

“Well, so much for beating Jade,” I said.

“Carmela, I am sorry,” he said. “I’m so stupid.”

“Stop,” I said. “It’s fine. Let’s just flip the boat over and go back.”

Nodding, Mark pushed on the boat until he got it turning again and it landed right side up on the water. The problem at that point was that we couldn’t get into it without it tipping again. I sighed and put one hand on the side, prepared to swim it back, but Mark held fast, his hands on both sides of the hull.

“Get in,” he said.

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “We can swim it back.”

“What kind of a boyfriend would that make me?” he asked.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve got it. It won’t tip with me holding it. Go ahead and get in,” he said.

Struggling against the rocking of the boat and my jacked-up ankle, I crawled up the side and into the canoe. My oar was nearby, and I grabbed it, but we had to swim the boat along a little way until Mark could grab his and toss it inside. As we got closer to the shore, I could hear the laughter. Everyone had seen what happened, and some of the people I used to call friends were pointing and laughing like high school kids. Embarrassed, we pushed the canoe ashore, and I sat down on the rocky beach while Jade and Trevor made their way back, having gone all the way around the island and returning to shore.

“That was a hell of a flip,” Trevor said smugly as he tossed the oars back in the canoe and handed the rope to someone I assumed worked for the island. “Thought you two drowned.”

“Yeah, well, we didn’t,” I muttered.

“Catch any fish there, Mark?” Trevor asked, loud enough that it caught the attention of several others around us and making the embarrassment even more miserable.

Mark just laughed, though, shaking his head and letting it slide off him.

“Nah,” he said. “No need anyway. I already got the best catch when Carmela agreed to marry me.”

Slowly, I turned and stared at him from my seated position on the beach. My jaw fell open but then snapped shut as I realized Trevor and Jade were looking over at me. Trevor’s face was hard to read, but it almost seemed like anger was behind his eyes. Jade, on the other hand, was nearly vibrating with excitement.

“You’re engaged?” she thundered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I…” I began, then rallied. “I didn’t want to upstage your wedding.”

It seemed to work as she shook her head and smiled.

“I am so happy for you two!”

“So are we,” Mark said. “Now if you will excuse us, we need to go dry off.”

Reaching down and scooping me up, Mark threw me over his shoulder and laughed as he started back to the cabin. I couldn't help but giggle as I watched Trevor's and Jade's faces as they disappeared in the distance.



## MARK

“I can’t believe you just did that!” she said, laughing uproariously as I carried her into the cabin.

She’d kicked off her sandals the second she got inside, a little tick I had noticed about her. She loved being barefoot. I found it adorable.

“I can’t either,” I said. “I just felt like we needed to up the ante a little bit. Especially considering how much of an ass I made of myself.”

“You didn’t,” she said, shaking her head and laughing. “It was adorable, actually. You tried something you hadn’t done before, and we had fun. Right? I had fun.”

I nodded, feeling a little more relieved that she didn’t think I was a complete idiot. The truth was I had felt like a moron when the boat flipped over, and her competitive nature must have rubbed off on me. Victor and Graham were always the competitive ones growing up, doing all the workouts, and playing all the sports. But I felt so energized, and the adrenaline was pumping through me so hard I felt like I could go out and challenge Trevor to a one-on-one right now.

And win.

“I had fun,” I said. “I had a fucking blast.”

“Me too,” she said, her laughter slowing.

We were looking into each other’s eyes, our shifting, excitable bodies suddenly coming to a standstill. It was like I



was rooted to the ground, staring into her soul. Something was happening. Something exciting. Illicit.

“I appreciate how much you are doing to make this work for me,” she said.

She stood on her tip toes and pressed a kiss to my lips. It was soft and longing, the kiss of a woman who wanted more but was holding back. But she was kissing a man with so much adrenaline, and so little desire to hold back at this moment, that it wasn't enough.

I kissed back.

My tongue slipped into her mouth and tasted her. It wrestled with hers as our bodies pulled into each other, crushing into one another, so I could feel her pressed against me. Our still wet clothes clung to us and were paper thin as her breasts pushed against my lower chest and my cock strained to reach her through my shorts.

I picked her up again and carried her to the wall, pressing her against it as my lips moved from hers to her neck. She pulled at her shirt, and I had to break apart from her for a moment to let her get it up and over her head before kneeling as I kissed down her chest to the swell of her breasts inside her bra. Reaching behind her, I unhooked it, and she pulled her shoulders together to let it fall off, revealing them to me.

They were glorious. Deceptively large and round with perky pink nipples that looked like they were dying to be sucked. I took one into my mouth eagerly, and she moaned as I pulled down on her wet pants, forcing them over her hips so her lower half was exposed to the knee. She kicked them away and put her hands in my hair as I moved ever downward, following the happy little trail below her belly button to the mound at her core.

I wasted no time in slipping my tongue between her lower lips, and she braced herself by slamming one hand into the wall and raising her injured leg up to drape over my shoulder. A devious laugh escaped my body as she arched her back, pushing her wet pussy into me and letting her head fall back,

the top of it against the wall and the rest of her body bowed out toward me.

Sliding one finger into her, I felt my body harden even more at how wet and warm she was as my tongue brushed over her clit. She was moaning in heavy, breathy sounds, and I reached my free hand up to palm one of her breasts. The sounds were rising in pitch and frequency as I increased my speed, my finger sliding in and out of her, the pad brushing against the upper wall wet with her juices.

Suddenly, her leg tensed, and I felt her toes curl on my back, gathering up my shirt as she shook violently, bucking against me so hard that I had to hold her in place, pushing her hips back into the wall.

“Please,” she said, pulling me up. I kissed her body as I rose. “Please, fuck me.”

I lifted her again, carrying her to the too-small bed and setting her down on the edge. Pulling at my shirt, I struggled to get the wet, heavy fabric up and over. But as I struggled, she undid the button of my cargo shorts and yanked them down, along with my boxers. My shirt was over my eyes, but I could feel the warmth of her tongue as she slid it from the base up to the head of my cock, and I groaned.

With the shirt finally yanked off, I gazed down at her as she took me into her mouth. She had slid off the bed, sitting on her knees below me, and I had never felt more powerful. My cock was thick and engorged. As she sucked me, her eyes opening wide and watching my facial expressions as she took me as deeply into her mouth as she could before she gagged.

The head of my cock brushed the back of her throat, and she pulled me out, stroking me as she gathered herself. I could barely contain myself, but I didn't want it to be over yet. Not until I had been inside her. Not until I had bent her over the bed and fucked her like she asked. Like she had begged.

I pulled her up, hearing a disappointed sound from her as she released my cock from her lips and turned her around. She giggled as I bent her over the bed and positioned myself behind her. She spread her legs and arched her back as she

looked over her shoulder at me, eyes begging and mouth curled up in a smile.

I entered her, sliding deep into her pussy in one mighty thrust. She was tight but wet and welcoming. I held myself in her, relishing the throbbing and squeezing sensation of her pussy adjusting to my girth. Grabbing her by the hips on either side, I let my own rock back and then forward again, thrusting hard. She cried out in pleasure, and I grinned at the sound. I began rocking, pumping hard as she moaned with each time I drove deep inside her.

My fingers gripped tight around her hipbones as I plunged into her over and over, feeling her give in to the pleasure, to my control. It was intoxicating. The sounds she made as she quivered and came on my cock was like a drug, and I only wanted more. I wanted to hear that sound. I wanted to feel that throbbing. I wanted her to know that in that moment, I owned her body and could bring her pleasures she had never experienced before.

Pleasures I had never known either. Not like this. Not this intense.

I rolled her over onto her back and pushed her up onto the bed so I could climb in between her thighs. Settling there, I pulled her arms over her head and held them tight as I plunged into her deeply again. Her eyes widened and she let her mouth fall open to cry out.

“Yes,” she cried. “Yes, Mark, yes!”

Picking up the speed again, I held her wrists tightly and pressed down onto them as I continued my rhythm. Her breasts bounced and jiggled with each thrust, and I watched them, mesmerized, as I pounded into her.

It was almost time. I could feel myself losing control. A deep, guttural, growl began somewhere in my chest and seemed to permeate out of me. She matched it with moans so loud I felt like it was the only sound in the world. Everyone else must have heard us. I didn't even care.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Come for me,” she cried.

A primal roar escaped my lips as a release more intense than anything I had ever felt took control of me. I came until my body had nothing left, and I collapsed into her twitching, vibrating body. I pressed kisses onto her chest as her pussy squeezed and emptied me, and slowly, we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Camden wasn’t supposed to arrive with the horses until tomorrow, but apparently they wanted them a day early. Something about Jade wanting to get one more practice ride in, doing it on the beach itself. Carmela had blurted it all out as she got herself dressed hurriedly while I was still half-awake in the late afternoon sun.

She had already left to go help with them when I was getting up myself, going through my luggage to find something to wear. I found a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and figured that would be good enough. Putting on a pair of shoes, I headed down to the beach to see if I could be of any help.

When I arrived, Carmela was gone, but Camden was standing with a horse and Jade in front of him. They seemed to be talking, and it suddenly dawned on me that we hadn’t clued Camden in on anything. That must have been why Carmela had been trying to get to him so fast. But where was she?

Jade said something to him and laughed, and Camden turned his attention toward me, walking closer. His expression was confused, and I instantly knew Jade had blown our cover. She traipsed away in the carefree hurricane way she seemed to do with everything in life, and Camden came over to me shaking his head.

“Dude, I thought you were just pretending to be her boyfriend. Now you’re engaged?” he asked.

I grimaced. “Yeah, that kind of came out of nowhere. Trevor was being a real ass and I couldn’t help myself.”

Camden continued to just shake his head. “I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into,” he said.

“I do man. It’s just for a couple of days.” I withheld the information that I wanted to see if this could be real after the weekend was over. I didn’t want to say anything to Camden without talking to Carmela first.

“Well just don’t get any funny ideas staying in a romantic cabin with my little sister,” he said with what sounded like a warning.

It took everything in me not to look guilty. “Of course not, man. I’d never try to get with your sister. I’m sleeping on the couch,” I lied.

“Good. Well, have fun I guess,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder before he walked off.

I felt bad for lying to my best friend, but until I knew how Carmela felt about it all, I wasn’t going to say a word.



## CARMELA

“You mean I went through all that to make sure that she was able to live out her dream of riding a horse to her ceremony, only for her to decide she isn’t going to do it?” I asked, staring at Mark.

“They are still riding the horses,” he reassured me. “Camden said Jade told him this morning that she and Trevor thought it would be more meaningful and symbolic if they surprised the guests by arriving to the reception on horseback.”

I stared at him for a second.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t, either. Something about riding off into the sunset, or ride or die, or something. I’m not sure. Anyway, they want to make a dramatic arrival to the reception on horseback, so we need to make sure everything is in place for that,” Mark said.

“Including my most tolerant state of mind,” I said.

Mark laughed and reached out to pull me into a comforting hug.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be just fine. Remember, you’re a blissful bride-to-be now,” he said.

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Exactly. If I check out in the middle of the ceremony and my eyes go glassy because I just

can't anymore, people will just think I'm off in my own world dreaming about my own wedding."

I giggled and shook my head. It was so nice just being with Mark that I'd almost forgotten we were at a wedding, which meant actually going to the ceremony. When he said we should probably get going so we weren't late, my stomach sank. This was going to be extremely difficult. As much as I could honestly say I didn't want to be with Trevor, that didn't mean the idea of watching him marry the woman who used to be my best friend sounded like fun.

Them getting married with me sitting there in the audience was like having a front-row seat to a dramatic presentation summing up the failures in my life. Not only was that the man I thought I was going to spend my life with, but he was getting ready to stand up there at that altar with the woman I always imagined as my maid of honor. They even had the same groomsmen and bridesmaids who Trevor and I would have had at our wedding.

Essentially, they'd taken my vision for my wedding day, kicked me out, and squeezed the wedding party in to create their own. It wasn't something I was looking forward to witnessing.

I was dreading the experience right up until Jade and Trevor took each other's hands and I saw them exchange a smile. I'd anticipated having a lot of feelings during the ceremony, and I was absolutely having them. But they weren't for Trevor. They weren't even for what could have been.

All the powerful emotions I was experiencing were for Mark. I was teasing when I said if my face went blank people would just think I was lost in fantasizing about my own wedding, but now that I was sitting in the decorated seats watching the two of them gaze at each other, I realized it was actually happening.

I glanced over at Mark and felt my heart flutter. I wasn't sure what to do with those feelings. This wasn't something I thought was going to be happening in my life any time soon. I hadn't been focused on relationships in my life before now,



and even if I had been, I wouldn't have thought one was going to come to me this way.

I'd always heard people say you can't start a relationship with a lie. But I wasn't lying *to* Mark, I was lying *with* him to someone else. Didn't that count? I couldn't deny my feelings for him. They were very much there and only getting stronger the longer we spent together. I just didn't know if he felt the same way. It was his idea to spontaneously pretend that we were engaged rather than just dating, but I was the one who had roped him into the fake relationship to begin with. He might have just been playing along and saw an opportunity to up the ante and smooth out an embarrassing situation.

The sex was definitely incredible. Better than anything I'd ever experienced in my life. But did that really mean anything? We could just have good chemistry and be comfortable enough with each other to really enjoy ourselves. I couldn't stop thinking about him telling me he'd never been serious about any relationship before. This didn't seem like the type of situation that was going to change that.

Besides, Mark was going through a hard time. He was still grieving the loss of his father and trying to navigate what it meant to be back home in a place where he never thought he'd live much less be the local doctor.

Maybe this wasn't the time for us to push anything. I told myself I should just let this wedding play out the way we planned it and then go back to our lives.

Then Mark reached over and squeezed my hand. I looked at him, and his smile told me there was no way I was going to be able to just go back to my life and pretend none of this had happened. Pretend Mark didn't happen. I was just going to have to feel it out and figure out what to do one step at a time.

The ceremony finally ended, and the new couple rushed off for pictures while the guests filtered out to the cocktail hour before the reception. While we mingled, people came up to us to congratulate us on our engagement. Some had been there to witness the sudden announcement in the water, and others had heard about it when they arrived for the festivities.

Mark kept his hand on my waist or holding mine the entire time, occasionally leaning down to kiss the side of my neck or my cheek. I didn't have to fake the smile that brought to my face. When we were alone for a moment, he leaned down toward me.

"We sure are getting a lot of attention for our engagement," he said with a hint of glee.

"Good job on the quick thinking explaining my ring is being sized," I said. "I had no idea people would be so invested in admiring a woman's engagement ring at another woman's wedding."

"I hope you're not feeling too bad about that," Mark said.

"Well, there is a little part of me that is feeling a bit guilty about stealing some of Jade's bridal thunder, but at the same time, I figure she kind of had it coming. And let's be honest, I was going to be getting looks at this wedding no matter what. I'd rather them be jealous glares than pitying ones," I said.

"That's a good outlook," he said. He surprised me with a kiss. "Just in case someone is giving you one of those glares right now."

His whisper brought heat to my cheeks and made my heart thump in my chest. I started to say something. I wasn't even sure what it was, but there were words right on the tip of my tongue, and I opened my mouth to say them, but then noticed my brother off to the side staring at us.

He'd hung around so he could watch the horses and bring them back to the ranch as soon as Jade and Trevor were done with them, so we didn't have to deal with them. Now it seemed he'd slipped into the cocktail hour for a couple refreshments, but he had his eyes glued to Mark and me.

"Did you tell Camden what was going on?" I asked.

"What?" Mark asked, turning his attention away from something he was watching across the room to where I was looking at my brother.

"He's over there staring at us. He doesn't look particularly pleased," I said.

The two men locked eyes, and Mark nodded. “I did. We should probably talk about that later.” I was going to ask what that meant, but he glanced at his watch. “It’s time for Jade and Trevor to arrive.”

I had been expecting to offer some help with the horses, but right after the ceremony, the maid of honor had let me know Jade said she didn’t need me. She was going to be fine. As the couple rode up, I had my doubts.

The image of the two of them was undeniably magnificent. The animals looked beautiful, all groomed and polished up for the day, and the couple holding hands between them was an impactful image.

At least, it was right up until the guests started gasping and clapping. The sound and sudden onslaught of so many people spooked the horse Jade was riding, and he reared up. This frightened the other horse, and soon both were panicking.

“Oh, no,” I said, shoving my drink into Mark’s hand and rushing to help as quickly as I could on crutches.

Camden ran toward them from the other direction, and we struggled to get the horses under control. Jade was panicking, which only made the situation worse. When she yanked too hard on the reins and smacked the horse’s sides with her heels, it was the end. The animal lifted up again, this time shaking and bucking her off.

Jade screamed dramatically as she tumbled to the ground, landing in a puff of white satin and tulle as her gown billowed up around her. She wasn’t hurt, and I couldn’t help but laugh as she rolled around trying to get up and the horses sauntered off to snack on the cupcakes sitting on a nearby dessert table.

Guests swarmed to try to help, and Mark and Camden did their best to try to ward them off, telling them it was only going to cause more trouble. Finally, Jade got to her feet. She whipped around to look at me, her face red and streaked with makeup. Her teeth were gritted, and her fists clenched as she stormed at me.

“This is your fault!” she screamed. “You did this on purpose!”

“I did this on purpose?” I asked incredulously. “I was across the room. Your guests are the ones who scared the horses, then you yanked on him and pissed him off. That’s on you.”

“Don’t you dare try to make me look like I did something wrong here,” she shouted. “This is you. You’ve been planning this from the very beginning, haven’t you? You’ve wanted to sabotage my wedding because you are so envious you just can’t stand it. From the second I showed up to take lessons, you were so wrapped up in your jealousy you couldn’t take it, so you purposely didn’t teach me to ride well so something like this would happen.”

“Jade,” I said, holding up my hands to try to settle her down, “you need to calm down. This is not my fault. The horse got upset. That happens. He is a living creature, not a prop. He’s going to respond to the things happening around him, and unfortunately, he got spooked by everything going on. But I in no way did it on purpose. I taught you just like I would teach anyone else. First and foremost because I would never do anything that might put the horses at risk. They could get seriously hurt in a situation like that, and I would never want that to happen to them. Especially not just to amuse myself.”

Jade let out a bitter scoff. “Bullshit. You did this. You gave them some sort of signal or something to buck me off like that because you wanted to humiliate me. It’s so obvious you aren’t over Trevor and just can’t deal with the fact that he chose me. But what’s really sad is just how far you would go to make yourself look good at my wedding. You are so pathetic that you made up a fake fiancé. Your darling lover boy here would never try to get with you in real life. ” She smirked at me, crossing her arms over her chest as if in victory. “I heard him say it myself.”

I looked at Mark, then over at my brother. All around me, people were laughing and whispering. Humiliation burned my

cheeks and stung my eyes. I couldn't even speak. Pushing past the people in front of me, I stumbled away from the reception.

"Carmela!" Mark called after me, but I didn't stop. "Carmela, slow down."

When I was far enough away from the party that I couldn't hear the laughter anymore, I stopped and turned around to face him.

"I guess that's what you wanted to talk to me about," I said. "You would never try to get with me in real life? Is that what you wanted to say?"

"Carmela, listen to me," he said, trying to take a step closer to me.

I shook my head. "Just stop. Don't. I don't want to hear it. This was a bad idea to begin with." I looked around, the tears starting to spill over now. "I guess I got what I deserved."

I gathered everything as fast as I could and asked Camden to take me home with him.

The ride back to Murdock with my brother was quiet and awkward, neither of us saying much.

Over the next few days, Mark tried to call and text several times, but I didn't answer. My brother finally decided he wasn't going to deal with my ignoring him anymore and showed up at my house to talk about it.

I cut him off before he could really start. I didn't want to get into it. Not with him, not with anyone. It had happened, it was over, that was enough. There was no point in dwelling on it at this point. Mark and I just needed to keep our distance.

But a few weeks later as I stared at the stick in my hand and tried to process the two pink lines on the screen, I realized I didn't really have that choice anymore.



## MARK

I hung up the phone and set it down on the counter, pursing my lips to one side and staring at the screen. She wanted to speak to me. In person. What would she possibly need to speak to me in person for unless it was about why she had disappeared for three weeks?

Deciding I should at least look presentable, I ran a hot shower and got cleaned up from my daily workout before picking out some decent clothes.

I headed over to her office and noticed there was only one other car besides hers in the parking lot. Curiosity eating me up, I went to the door and rapped on it a couple of times before trying the handle. It was unlocked.

I opened the door and stood in the doorway, peering inside of the lobby and not believing what I was seeing. It was my Aunt Judy, sitting in a chair across from Carmela. Aunt Judy looked just like I remembered her from the last time we had been in the same room, years before, only older. She had her hair permed and piled high on her head in a style that looked like a poor imitation of Marge Simpson. She wore a lime green dress and jacket that looked like it had come out of the seventies and a pearl necklace that gleamed so white against her grossly dark artificial tan that it almost hurt to look at.

She looked up at me with her blue eyeshadow and too bright red lipstick curling up in a half-grimace, half-polite-smile and nodded.

“Mark, good to see you,” she said.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked. “What is she doing here?”

“Mark, I am right here,” Judy said. “You can speak directly to me.”

I took a moment to stare at her then turned my attention back to Carmela.

“Carmela?” I asked.

She sighed and glanced at Aunt Judy before adjusting her own skirt down near her knees and clearing her throat.

“Hello, Mark,” she said. “Please sit down.”

“I don’t think I want to sit,” I said. “I do enough sitting.”

“Please,” she said, and something in her voice got to me. My lips pushed together tightly, I walked across the room, past Aunt Judy, to take a seat on the other side of Carmela.

Carmela cleared her throat again and fiddled with the papers in front of her for a moment before looking me directly in the eyes. There was reluctance in that look, like she didn’t want to but knew she had to look at me. Like she was doing all this under duress.

“I have been speaking with your aunt for a few days now,” she said. “She has been reconsidering her position about the practice.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, suddenly dumbstruck.

Judy had a thin smile on her face but was looking away. I couldn’t tell if it was embarrassment or frustration, but I moved my attention back to Carmela. She was peering at me over the top of a manila envelope open in her hands. Slowly, she closed it and leaned forward, holding it out to me.

“After a lot of soul searching, she has decided that she no longer wants to contest the will. She agrees that you are the one who should be operating the clinic, and that if she wanted to lay claim to anything of her father’s, she would have done so a long time ago. She would rather have positive relations with her family than a practice she could not effectively run.”



“That’s right,” Judy said. “I’m sorry, Mark. I just... I didn’t know how to deal with losing my brother too. I felt like I lost my family, and that building and business was the only thing I had connecting me to them. But it was selfish of me to contest it, especially when you expected to take over and are an actual doctor. Miss Smith was telling me that you gave up your entire life in Austin to come here and take control of the family business. I guess with dedication like that, I should be happy to know that the family name will be done proud.”

“Thank you,” I said, somewhat at a loss for words. “That means a lot, Aunt Judy.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, and for the first time in my memory, I saw a twinge of real emotion on her heavily painted face. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and spilled out down her nose. She didn’t try to wipe it away. She let it fall. “I loved your father. He always took care of all of us. It’s something that I understand you do as well. Just promise me you will keep that part of your father’s legacy. Always take care of people.”

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

“Well then,” she said after a moment, clapping her hands down on her knees and making like she was about to stand. “I think that about wraps things up for me here.”

“You aren’t going back tonight, are you?” I asked.

“Oh, I have to,” she said. “I have my cat I need to get home to. He doesn’t eat at all if I’m not home and I really just want to get home.”

With that she stood, and we said our goodbyes. As she left, I turned back to Carmela, who was putting some things away in her desk and locking them up. She glanced up at me once, looking like she was going to say something, but held back.

“Why did you do that for me?” I asked, breaking the silence. “I thought... well, I didn’t think you would help me anymore.”

“I made a bargain,” she said, shrugging. “I was going to keep my end of it, no matter what.”

“Well, I appreciate it,” I said. “Seriously, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said.

“All right, well,” I started, “if that’s all, I guess I’ll get going for now.”

She nodded and kept her eyes on her desk.

I started to head for the door, frustrated I couldn’t think of something to say, some way to extend our conversation. At the same time, I didn’t want to overstay my welcome. She had done something huge for me, and I owed it to her to let her determine how things went from here. Maybe now that the arrangement was fully behind us, she might talk to me again.

“Mark,” she said behind me as I opened the door.

I froze. Turning slowly, I faced her and saw her eyes downcast, her fingers splayed on the desk as she leaned on it, like she was using it to keep herself standing.

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s up?”

“You... might want to sit down,” she said.

My heart started thumping in my chest even though I had no idea what this was about. But the tone of her voice, the way she was avoiding eye contact, the fact that she had almost let me get out of the door before stopping me was all combining to make me very concerned about what it could be.

“Carmela?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“When I said I did that for you, to pay you back, that was true,” she said.

“Okay...”

“But it wasn’t the whole truth.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering where she was going with all this.

Carmela sat back down on her chair and seemed to take a deep, focusing breath. Her eyes were wide as she looked at her

desk, almost like she was looking for something. I clasped my hands together, interlocking my fingers. Whatever was going on, I had a feeling I wasn't going to walk out of there feeling the same.

"The truth is," she said, stumbling over herself and rallying, "the truth is... I didn't do it *just* for you. Being a doctor, that's a good future. And you are a good man, like she said. You take care of people. Your family always has here, for generations. That's what I want for our baby."

It took a moment for that last bit to sink into my brain and percolate, eventually bringing realization with it. My heart dropped into my stomach. Carmela's eyes were now on me, and when mine refocused, they met hers, and there was a moment of silence that was probably only a few seconds long but felt like an eternity. I couldn't remember how to talk.

"When?" I finally got out.

She nodded, looking down at her desk again for support and then back up to me.

"I found out a couple of days ago. I just didn't know what to do about it, you know? Not with"—she motioned between us—"this. I just didn't know what I should do. So, I took a few days to figure it out. I know I probably should have let you know immediately, but I just needed that time. I'm sorry."

"A couple days ago?" a voice that sounded a lot like mine said. It sounded like me, but like it came from far, far away.

"Yes," she said. "I didn't know exactly what to do about it, but eventually I decided you needed to know. You deserved to know. But I want you to know there's no catch. I don't expect anything from you. If this is too much, if all this is just too much...I get it. I do. So that's up to you."

I nodded and sat back in the chair.

My head was spinning with different thoughts.

I was going to be a father.

I had a very difficult time thinking past that one thought. It permeated every corner of my mind. A father. I was going to

be a father.

“Mark?”

I looked up and saw Carmela staring at me expectantly. I wondered how long I had been sitting there, staring into space. It was long enough that my fingers had dug into the backs of my hands and left marks where my nails had gone.

I shook my head and stood up. Carmela stood too. I was unsure of what to do. Part of me wanted to run to her, to scoop her up and hold her and celebrate. Part of me wanted to go for a walk and let the evening air breathe life into my lungs, forcing them to work since I hadn't felt like they had done much since I'd sat down.

“I think,” I began, not sure what I was going to finish the sentence with. I was on the ride as much as she was on that one. “I think that I might need some time to think about all this.”

Carmela forced a smile. There was no fooling me. She had been expecting something else, some other kind of response, but I didn't have it in me. I didn't have anything in me other than the blankness in my mind and confusion as to how I felt. She nodded, and I returned the gesture.

“Sure,” she said. “That's fine. I understand. You know how to reach me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I'll...talk to you later.”

“Okay,” she said, following me as I made my way to the door. I thought I saw a tear in her eye, perfectly mirroring the one that had been in Judy's, but she wiped her face with her fingers and brushed it away.

“Bye,” I said lamely.

“Goodbye,” she said and shut the door behind me.

I took a deep breath of the night air. It didn't help.



## CARMELA

I thought I'd churned through everything and was completely prepared for whatever he was going to say and however he was going to react. I thought I'd steeled myself against it and was going to be able to handle whatever direction the situation took.

But that actually stung.

He wasn't angry. He didn't scream and shout and completely freak out. Maybe that would have been easier. If he'd had an explosive reaction like that, I would have known the emotions going through his head. I would have known how to feel and how to react in turn. Him being angry would have given me something to latch on to. It would have let me be angry back at him, or defensive, or even just sad that he'd turned out to be that kind of man.

Instead, he barely reacted. He looked confused when I first mentioned the baby, but then when it occurred to him what I was saying, he just said he needed time to think about it. There was no real reaction, no sign of what he might be feeling. He didn't emote in any way, and he definitely didn't ask how I was feeling about it, or what I was going through. It almost felt like a disconnect.

And I really hated it. Even though I told myself I was going to be fine no matter what, I realized after it happened that I really did want something more from him. Maybe part of me was even hoping for him to be happy or excited.

I gave myself only a few seconds of feeling like that, then chided myself for it. It was ridiculous for me to have those kinds of feelings about Mark's reaction. We weren't a couple. We never were. We weren't even really friends at this point. Having a baby suddenly sprung on him would have been a lot even if we were together. As things were between us then, it was nothing short of a shock.

I realized I was judging him based on where I was in processing the news. When I'd first found out, I had the chance to think it through and let it settle in. Mark should have that opportunity as well. He would need his own time to let it sink in that he was going to be a father and to think about what that would mean for the two of us.

I didn't know how long it was going to take for him to have something to say about it. Maybe he would get back to me in a few days. And maybe it would turn out that he had no idea how to handle something like this, and I never actually heard back from him again. Forcing myself to remove emotion from it, I knew either way I would be fine. If I needed to, I could do this on my own.

That night I went home and gave myself permission to hide from the rest of the world. I wanted a long hot bath, but the research I'd started doing as soon as I found out I was pregnant told me soaking in hot water wasn't recommended. Instead, I settled for a shower with my fragranced bath gel I'd gotten as a Christmas gift and had been hanging on to since. Afterward, I got into my favorite worn gray sweatsuit, curled up on the couch, and melted away into a marathon of old TV shows and Chinese food.

I went to bed that night with my mind drifting back to Mark. I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking and how he was feeling.

I'd prepared myself to wait it out. Mark deserved to be given as much space and time as he needed to come to a place where he was willing to talk about the baby and what the pregnancy meant for us moving forward. I wanted to give him that and not put any pressure on him. Cornering him into being a part of the baby's life, or mine, would never give any of us

the kind of life and relationships we should have. Whatever we were all going to be moving forward, it needed to be right for all of us.

The next morning when I arrived at work, I discovered I wasn't going to have to wait nearly as long as I thought I might. When I pulled into the parking lot of my office, Mark was already there. My stomach flipped with nerves as soon as I saw him. I hated not knowing what he was going to say. I wished I could have at least an inkling of what was going through his mind so I could prepare myself.

Parking, I took a second to glance in the rearview mirror at myself before climbing out of the car. I didn't pause when I got close to him. This wasn't a conversation I wanted to have out in the parking lot where someone could show up at any time. Instead, I made eye contact with him and continued on to the door so he could follow me.

Letting us into the office, I went straight for the coffeemaker.

"Coffee?" I asked, hoping my voice didn't sound as creaky as it did to me.

"No. Carmela, come on. We need to talk."

I let out a heavy sigh and nodded. Abandoning the machine, I led the way into the private room at the back of the office and closed the door.

"Have a seat," I said, gesturing toward the small sitting area at the front of my office. It was more comfortable than having us sit in the chairs at my desk and would help keep me from slipping directly into lawyer mode.

I clasped my hands in front of me and prepared myself for whatever he was going to say.

"I've been thinking about everything since you told me about the baby," he said. I nodded and braced myself. "And it is certainly a surprise, but that's what life is about."

I wasn't sure if I'd heard him correctly. Or maybe I just hadn't interpreted what he'd said the right way. It sounded



almost positive, but he hadn't really been clear. I stared at him for a brief second.

"It is?" I asked when he didn't say anything else.

Mark nodded. "Yes. Life is all about things that aren't expected and aren't what you thought they were going to be, but that turn out to be exactly everything you really needed. That is what this baby is. It's what you are. What we are. I never expected this to happen. When I came back here, the idea of falling for anyone was the furthest thing from my mind. I wouldn't have even considered it was something that would happen for me, especially with you."

"Why especially with me?" I asked. My heart was fluttering, and I knew my voice was soft and powdery, but I didn't do anything to change it. I was caught in the moment and in Mark.

He stared into my eyes with an expression on his face I couldn't quite read. Reaching forward, he took both of my hands in his and brought them close to himself.

"Carmela, ever since we were just kids, I've thought you were a beautiful, incredible girl. And ever since I came back into town last year and ran into you again, I haven't been able to get you out of my head. I've thought about you at some point almost every day since then. And the last few months, spending time with you, my feelings have only grown stronger.

"I'm in love with you. I want us to be together, for real this time. And I want to make sure you understand this isn't just about the baby. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the wedding, and I've wanted to tell you exactly how I feel. Now that I know you're carrying my child, it makes it even better. It won't just be us; we will be a family. This is what I want, Carmela. More than I have ever wanted anything."

"But you told Camden that you wouldn't ever be with me in real life," I told him, the though still stinging.

He shook his head. "He caught me off guard and it was a stupid thing to say. It was also a lie. I'm sorry I hurt you like

that.”

My breath caught in my throat, and tears stung in my eyes. I was smiling so hard my cheeks hurt, but I didn’t try to stop it. I was stunned and touched by his words. I could hardly believe this was really happening. It was better than anything I could have imagined, and I was so happy.

“I love you, too, Mark,” I said. “I always have. And I want us to be a family.”

Mark grinned and leaned forward to catch my lips in a kiss. It was soft and full of promise and love. I sighed into him, my hand lifting up to rest on his chest. When the kiss ended, he leaned his forehead against mine.

“I don’t want to go,” he whispered. “I don’t want to leave you here.”

I thought about it for a second. “You don’t have to. This is my office. I don’t have to work today.”

He smiled even wider. “Then I say take the day off.”

I kissed him again. “Done.”



## MARK

So that is what it was supposed to feel like.

Spending the day with Carmela had been delightful. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, just a general outline, but that seemed to work out better. First, we went to a little boutique shop on Main Street that sold baby stuff and just let ourselves sink into the reality of it. I was especially hit by looking at the tiny onesies, feeling myself torn between wanting a boy or a girl.

Eventually, I decided it didn't matter. I just wanted them to be healthy, which meant I needed to make sure Carmela stayed healthy. This led us to our discussion about lunch.

An hour or so later, a couple of bags of unisex clothes and one or two toys stuffed in the bag from the boutique, we dropped by the diner to grab lunch. But I had no interest in eating there. Instead, we packed everything up, drove out to the ranch, and made our way deep onto the property, way back where the resident cows grazed among hills of grass and the horses roamed free.

"I'm glad our baby will be able to grow up with all this," I said, gesturing to the land and the animals.

It felt good to say 'our.' The expression on her face seemed to say she felt that way too.

"It's pretty fabulous," she said. "I love it out here. As much as I love my job, being out in the dirt with the horses..."

it's calming. When I don't have to teach ex-best friends how to ride, that is."

I laughed and opened up the bottle of orange juice I'd brought with me so Carmela would have something other than water. In an effort of solidarity, I'd brought some ginger ale and mixed the two to make a fizzy drink rather than beer or wine for myself.

"Fancy," she said as I handed her the drink.

"I thought so," I said. "I used to drink these all the time when I was a kid. Dad made them on special holidays."

Carmela took a sip and closed her eyes with a smile.

"Oh, that's delicious," she said.

"Right?"

We took a few moments to eat our sandwiches and drink in silence as we looked out over the fields.

"So, I wanted to say how sorry I was for how I reacted last night," I began.

"Don't," she said. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't," I said. "I've been mad at myself all night last night and all morning this morning about it. When you told me about the baby, I walked away from you."

"Mark, really, it's okay," she said, smiling. "I understand. It makes sense that you would need some time to really wrap your head around it. I won't lie, it stung a little, but it made sense. I don't blame you for how you reacted."

"Well, I still feel like I should have reacted better than I did," I said. "So, forgive me."

"You are forgiven," she said, her hand reaching over and clenching mine. "I promise."

She smiled again, and I felt a little smile come up one side of my mouth too. It felt good to get that off my chest and even better that she would be so forgiving about it. I had been worried all night that I'd ruined everything.

“You know,” I said, “I’ve always wanted to be a father.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, laughing softly to myself. It was hard to admit any of this, but around her, I felt safe. “I always saw myself as a father, like my dad was, like his. They all had sons first. In my father’s case, obviously, it was just me. Mom died when I was still little.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It was a long time ago.”

“But your dad, he was a good man. I went to see him when I was younger.”

“Everybody did,” I said. “If you lived in Murdock, at some point you came to my dad.”

“And now they come to you.”

“I guess,” I said. “My dad was amazing, though. If I can be half as good as he was, then I’ll be happy.”

“You sell yourself short,” she said. “You’re a good man, and from what I know about you and your abilities to help women with bum ankles, you’re a great doctor.”

“Hah,” I said. “That’s easy stuff.”

“Uh huh,” she said. “So, your life away from here. What was it like?”

The question made me pause for a moment. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Honestly?” I asked. “Until you and I went to spend the weekend at the wedding, I thought it was the best place in the world for me and kind of resented being back here.”

“Oh,” she said. I didn’t know how to read that, so I decided to press on.

“But that changed,” I said. “Where I was, it was big city lifestyle, lots to do, lots to keep me occupied, you know? Things I could go do and keep myself entertained when I wasn’t working. And I worked all the time. All the time. I

thought I loved it. I thought I loved the hectic nature of my life there. But then I came back here. And reconnected with you. When we went on that trip, I was still missing my old life. But the longer I was there with you, the more I felt like I was right where I belonged. I feel like even with the circumstances not being good, and me never thinking it would lead back here, but I am so, so grateful for it because of you. And our baby.”

Her eyes were locked on mine, and we stayed quiet for a few moments, letting my words settle in the air. I worried what she thought, and if maybe I had said too much. Then she reached out and touched my hand before pulling me toward her, and we kissed.

It was a soft, easy kiss. The kiss of two people who were growing more comfortable with that intimacy. Two people who hoped there would be many more of those.

“What about you?” I asked. “Is this where you saw yourself?”

“Unmarried and knocked up by one of my brother’s best friends? No,” she laughed.

“Fair,” I said.

“No, I didn’t see myself having a baby yet, but I didn’t necessarily think I wouldn’t either,” she said. “When I went into law, I kind of figured I would have a hard time dating and finding a partner because of how busy I could be. But getting into family law, helping all these families adopt and reconnect, it did make me wish that I had a family of my own.”

“I can see that,” I said. “With Dad’s practice, it’s all families. I spent a couple days there, and suddenly, I started thinking that maybe something was missing in my life. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do about it, though. I’ve never been the one to go pursue anything other than my education and career.”

“Well, growing up, you wouldn’t have been able to convince me of that,” she said. “You seemed so confident.”

“I was,” I laughed, “at least as far as having my career trajectory mapped out for me. But as for family, anything like

that... I just didn't. Then I came back, and we went on our trip, and I started thinking a little differently. Honestly, I loved playing your fiancé. I enjoyed that so much that I knew something was up."

"Me too," she said.

"So, the repairs on my house are almost done. It's got an awful lot of space." "Are you asking me to move in with you?" she asked, her head tilting to one side.

"When the repairs are done," I said quickly. "And I have a chance to touch it up a bit."

She grinned wide. "All right," she said. "Let's do it. Why not? It's not like we aren't already jumping ahead a bit."

She rubbed her belly, and I laughed.

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. "Good. All right then."

I felt like I was floating. My cheeks burned, and the smile was so wide on my face that my lips hurt. But I would keep it there forever if I could.

"So, I move in with you in a couple of months?" she asked. "What about until then?"

"Well, I'm staying at your brother's place, but I'm not sure how tenable that will be when he hears about... you know."

"Yeah," she said. "That might need a little bit of adjustment. Like, all of it. Us dating, us being serious and then us having a baby. We might have to take all that in stages."

"Or drop it all on him at once like a bomb," I said. "Over the phone. While in another state."

She laughed. "Are you scared?" she teased.

"No," I said, laughing. "Maybe. He's not going to be pleased, I don't think, but then again, maybe he will be. At least he'll know that you aren't with some shmuck."

"You are some shmuck," she joked. "But I like you."

"Good," I said.



It was three hours later, and Carmela was dozing in my lap. It was barely evening, but I figured that with the changes going on in her body, taking a nap once in a while was completely reasonable.

I leaned back into the couch, slowly letting her slide onto my stomach as I shoved a pillow behind my head and made myself as comfortable as I could on the couch with both of us stretched out on it. She made a cute little sound in her sleep and nuzzled into my chest, pushing herself up a little more. I stroked her hair and grabbed the remote.

The television had been playing a comedy-cooking show for the last couple of hours, and the screen had a prompt asking if we were still watching. I clicked it and put the remote on the back of the couch, relaxing again. There was no way I was changing anything about this. It might not have been what I planned for celebrating a new life with her when I pictured how things could go if they went perfectly, but it was somehow even better.

Slowly, my eyes closed too, and even though I knew it would mean being up before the sun tomorrow, I dozed off too, listening to the sound of her breathing as she curled up on my chest.



## CARMELA

It had been a few months since Mark and I had started the experiment of seeing each other, and in all that time he had yet to meet any of my friends from out of town. Jess, in particular, was excited to meet him since she and her husband Ronnie had just returned from Ronnie's deployment to Japan. It was Jess who was at that moment on her way over to our place to help get ready for the big party.

"You're sure you don't mind the guys being here?" Mark asked as he hung a banner from the doorway.

"Yes, silly," I said. "I couldn't imagine leaving my brother out, and if I am going to have a rugged cowboy in the building, I might as well have you and the other guys too."

"I just don't want to step on your toes is all," Mark said. "Did you say Ronnie was coming too?"

"No, he couldn't make it," I said. "Jess said he was still laid up in bed. Poor guy."

"Breaking your ankle sucks," Mark said.

A knock on the door interrupted us, and I crossed the room to open it.

"Mela!" Jess said, dropping a bag and a wrapped gift on the porch and wrapping her arms around me tightly. She always gave the best hugs.

"Jess!" I exclaimed. "It's so good to see you. Come in, come in."

“Nice to meet you, Jess,” Mark said, coming up behind me and offering a hand. Jess took it and shook, grinning wide.

“Nice to see you, Mark,” she said. “I guess you don’t remember me without the glasses and the braces.”

“And the blonde hair,” I said.

“Oh, right,” she said, flipping her dyed red hair over her shoulder.

“Wait, Jess Montgomery?” Mark said.

“It’s Neilson now, but yes,” she laughed.

“Oh, yeah, hey,” he said. “I don’t know why I never put that together.”

“I probably only ever mentioned her married name,” I said.

“That’s probably it,” Jess said. “So how much time do we have?”

“Guests get here in two hours,” I said excitedly. “If I know the boys, they will be here early though.”

“Which boys?” Jess asked.

“Well, Ryan Beasley is coming with his wife Allison, Camden will be here, oh, and Graham Miller and his wife Mallory.”

“Graham Miller?” Jess asked. “The baseball player?”

“Retired,” I said. “He’s one of Mark’s old buddies.”

“Ronnie is going to kill me,” Jess said. “He’s missing out meeting Graham Miller because I let him move that bookshelf by himself.”

“Why would you do that?” I laughed.

“Well, Ronnie was insistent he could do it, and frankly, I wanted it in my parlor. He blames me for owning all oak bookshelves.”

“Yeah, boo on you for wanting bookshelves,” I said.

Jess went about helping us continue to put together the party, and not long later, the guests began showing up.

Camden was first in the door, expecting that he would be early to help out and finding himself walking into a finished room to wait for twenty minutes. It had been a rough few weeks after we'd told him the news, but eventually my brother had come around and was genuinely happy for us. Allison and Ryan showed up next, and the boys slowly started forming their own pod slightly off to the side.

Initially, the idea had been for this to be an all-girls party, but then apparently Ryan and Graham heard about it and decided that someone should do something for Mark too. After some back and forth, I just decided to have them all over for silly games and tiny food, and let the boys celebrate alongside us however they wished. I couldn't leave them out.

The party itself was a blast, and while I could only have my new obsession of orange juice and ginger ale, the rest of the partygoers imbibed on wine and liquor. I didn't mind. They were having fun celebrating Mark and me and our little one, and no one was going to get hammered, least of all Mark. He kept his drinking down to a whiskey and Coke and otherwise sipped on my special OJ and ginger ale cocktail for the evening.

It struck me just how happy I was with my life as I sat in the living room, surrounded by friends and opening gifts. It wasn't how I'd ever seen my life going, but somehow it was fine. Maybe better than I thought it would be. I had to realize I didn't always need to be right or follow a plan on how things should go. Especially when the result was something so amazing.

So, what if I was pregnant before I got married? Or that it was my brother's best friend I was with? Love had found me, and nothing was going to keep me and Mark apart, especially now.

When the party finally ended and Jess walked out of the door as the last guest remaining, Mark shut the door and turned to me.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

“Exhausted,” I said, “but happy. It’s always so good seeing everyone.”

“Good,” he said. “Now what do you say I run you a bath and we get an early night?”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said. “But on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You get in the bath with me.”

Mark grinned and closed the gap between us with a soft kiss.

“I’ll go start the tub,” he said.

I grinned as he walked past me to the bedroom and went to clean up a little of what was left in the dining room. The guests had mostly picked up after themselves, and Jess had finished up almost everything else, but I wanted to get a few of the decorations down so I could scrapbook them later. Once I pulled a few things down and put them away, I made my way into the bedroom.

Mark had spent a lot of time working on the house, and one of both of our favorite things he’d added was this tub. It was gorgeous and had jets in it, which was wonderful, but the best part was that it was big enough for both of us to fit comfortably. I opened the door of the bathroom and found him already in the tub, bubbles piled high, his arms across the back. Waiting.

The heat between my thighs was instant, and I felt myself yearning to rip off my clothes and join him, but I tried to control myself. I wanted him to want it. To need it.

Slowly, I unbuttoned my blouse as his eyes traced over my body. My breasts had swollen with pregnancy and were now almost annoyingly large, but Mark didn’t seem to mind. The way they burst out of my bra when I unhooked it made him groan from where he sat in the tub. One of his arms was moving up and down under the water, and though I couldn’t see it, knowing he was touching himself made me feel even more excited.

I slipped out of my pants and hooked my thumbs in the elastic of my panties, turning around to drop them slowly and present my backside to him. I heard the sloshing of water behind me, and before I could stand up, he had pulled me backwards a step or two, so that I was touching the tub with the backs of my legs.

Suddenly, I felt a tongue slide over my pussy, and I cried out. I was still bent over, but his hands were on my ass with his face buried in me. His strong, thick tongue was diving into my pussy, then sliding out to flick my clit. I moaned as he slid one finger inside me and kept licking. Though I was looking at him upside down, I could see his arm vigorously moving as he stroked himself while he pleased me.

I was so sensitive that I felt the first of the climaxes take me almost immediately. I clamped one hand on the sink as I lifted up on my toes and came, crying out his name. He groaned in appreciation as I shook and vibrated on him, and then the sloshing of the water was intense as he stood and clamped his hands around my hips.

He entered me, and I felt him drive deep inside my pussy. I couldn't even make a noise as he filled me, his cock slick with the water from the tub and the fluids from my core. He held himself there as I pulsed on him, still riding an intense orgasm to its completion. His hands slipped around me, and wet palms squeezed over my tender breasts, lighting me up as every inch of my body was more sensitive to his touch.

He began to rock into me, his hips moving with exacting speed and force to bring me from one climax to the edge of another. His body was made for mine. I knew that. We were designed for each other, and as he fucked me, I felt the awesomeness of our connection growing ever still. We were molding from two people to one with every day that passed, in every silent moment we held hands, from every passion-filled night when our bodies tangled together.

My body ached for him constantly, and he never disappointed. As he held me in place, now half standing, he slipped one hand down to swirl a finger over my pearl and bring me to a shouting climax again. My eyes rolled back, and

my jaw hung open as I came for a second time. But he was just getting started.

I joined him in the bath, my legs trembling as he sat down, and I mounted him. There was something even more intimate about being on top of him while he sat, his face buried in my chest and his hands pulling at my cheeks as I rode him. His cock throbbed with each thrust as he pounded into me with wild abandon.

The water from the tub spilled out with the vigorous way he slammed into me, but I didn't care. There were towels for that. I just wanted him to feel the intense pleasure that he gave me.

His body shook and convulsed as he spilled into me, and I cried out as the release of his essence into me brought me into another, more intense orgasm.

We collapsed into each other in the tub, his body spent and mine tingling.





## MARK

The last two weeks had been nothing but rain. Texas wasn't used to that. A day or two of rain was like an act of God, and two weeks was like the apocalypse. The animals at the ranch seemed to love it, according to Camden, but it was getting crazy being stuck inside all the time. Going stir crazy was not on my list of things I wanted for a very pregnant girlfriend, but she had run through just about every craft, including scrapbooking, crocheting, and sourdough breadmaking.

I wasn't sure I could take any more, much less her.

"Babe?" I said, touching her shoulder as I woke up and looked outside through the window beside the bed. "Babe, wake up."

"What?" she asked. "Look outside."

She sat up, rubbing her eyes and positioning herself so she could see without leaning too far in any one direction.

"It's not raining," she said with a sharp inhale.

"Nope," I said. "My phone says its only fifty degrees out there right now. I think that sounds like perfect hiking weather."

"Hiking?" she asked, and I wondered if she was going to reject it outright. She had been feeling pretty good throughout the pregnancy, but with the last few weeks of inactivity, she worried her days of vigorous exercise were done until we had the baby. "Where?"

“Well, there are all those trails behind the ranch,” I said. “We could go there and hike, and it would be close enough to the house that if we needed to get back, it wouldn’t be that far to go.”

She nodded, excitement rising with each passing moment.

“I love it,” she said. “I would love to go for a nice walk. This baby is due in a couple of weeks, and if I don’t take the opportunity to get out and move around now, I might not get another.”

“All right, I’ll go get our backpacks together. You get dressed,” I said.

I went into the closet and grabbed her camelback bag and my hiking backpack. It had been a while since we’d used either one, but they were put away clean and empty aside from the few things I kept in them for quick accessibility. A box of bandages, some rubbing alcohol and dressing cloths were in a zip lock bag at the bottom. Another bag had a couple of energy bars and trail mix. I took it into the kitchen and stuffed two water bottles in it, along with some ice packs in the refrigerated section.

With our bags fully packed a few minutes later, I slipped into some cargo shorts, put on my boots, and we loaded up the truck. As I got into the driver’s seat, I noticed Carmela had a tiny soft cooler with her as well. I motioned to it as I started the car.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Is it the pizza from last night?” I asked, remembering that the cardboard box from the local pizza place had been mysteriously missing from the refrigerator when I was gathering our things.

“Maybe,” she said. “It might also be some M&Ms. And a small jar of pickles.”

“Pickles?” I asked.

“Do you want some?” she asked. “Dill, not bread and butter.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “Do they go well with the pizza?”

“No, silly,” she said. “They go with the M&Ms.”

“Oh,” I said, putting the truck in gear. “Right.”

Carmela pulled out her phone to connect to the radio and started streaming music as I drove. It would only be a ten-minute drive or so, but she loved having her music on any time I was driving, and I didn't mind either way. I was fine with music as much as I was fine with silence, but anything to make the woman I loved more comfortable while she was clearly struggling with her nine-month tenant I was down for.

We made it to the ranch before the second song was through, and it had just faded out when I cut the engine.

“Good timing,” she said, sliding out of the truck and landing on her feet.

“You should really let me help you get out of the truck,” I said, laughing as I went around to her side and she took my arm.

“I can do it,” she said. “I'm fine. Is Camden here?”

“I don't see the truck,” I said.

“It's Tuesday, isn't it?” she asked. “Ugh, I hate not working at the office. I can't ever remember what day it is anymore.”

“What happens on Tuesday?” I asked, avoiding the subject of her working at the office as best I could.

It was one she brought up occasionally, but then also made me promise to talk her out of it every time she did so. She had an irrational fear of giving birth at the office.

“He has to go up to Crozet to get specialty feed,” she said. “He always makes a trip up there on Tuesdays and stops at the sandwich shop.”

“Oh,” I said. “When does he usually make it back home?”

“Around three,” she said.

“So that means we have a couple hours with the ranch all to ourselves then,” I said.

“I guess it does,” she grinned.

“I brought the blanket,” I said, indicating the overly full backpack on my back.

“Dr. Murphy,” she said, her eyes cutting deviously toward me. “You know what the books say. That could induce labor.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Perhaps we should refrain.”

“I didn’t say that,” she said, laughing and taking my hand.

We walked into the ranch land and headed for the trails around the back. There were several back there, each one at a different level of difficulty. Some were designed for experienced hikers who wanted to do something challenging, going through heavily wooded areas near the back and up some pretty steep hills. Another was meant for leisurely strolls, a trail that horses sometimes took intermediate riders on to get a taste of what riding a horse outside of the ring was like.

We took the easier route, still heading into the woods, but with fewer hills and more clearings along the way. I didn’t want to risk Carmela over-exerting herself.

We chatted amiably, mostly just taking in the cool air and mild exercise as we made our way deeper into the trail that eventually wound back around to the stables. Technically, we were going down it backward, since most people taking the horses would go from the trails to the open fields. I was about to point out the last time I had been on the trail—where we were was a place that I had almost fallen off the horse because it got spooked—when I noticed Carmela making a face.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “Indigestion. I shouldn’t have eaten the pepperoni before going on the hike.”

“I thought that pizza was a bad idea,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Tell me again what you were thinking about for the nursery. You mentioned something about a built-in speaker.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, excited to go back to the subject we had discussed the day before. “I was thinking about installing a two-way speaker system in the room. Like one of those doorknob ones. We could pull it up on an app and hear everything wherever we were. For instance, if I was at work, I could listen in on the baby if I felt like I just wanted to hear her.”

“Mark, that’s weird,” she said. “The last thing I need is to be putting the baby to bed and have you start talking to me through the wall and scare me to death.”

“You wouldn’t be scared because you would be used to it,” I said, using what I thought was flawless logic.

“Yeah, I don’t—” she started and then froze.

“Babe?”

Her eyes were shut, and she was doubled over a bit, but she had one hand out with a finger pointing up as if to tell me to give her a second.

“I feel weird,” she said. “Not bad. Just... weird.”

“Maybe we should turn back,” I said. “We aren’t quite halfway through the trail. It would be faster to go back the way we came.”

“Yeah,” she said. “That might be a good idea.”

She froze, her eyes going wide, and then she doubled over completely.

“Mela?” I asked.

She took a few more steps, seeming to look for a good place to sit and then crumpled to the ground.

“It’s contractions,” she said. “I’m having contractions.”

I knew being due in a few weeks was not a reason why she couldn’t be in labor now, but still, my brain was stuck on the

idea that I had more time. This couldn't possibly be happening now. Could it?

“Contractions,” she said through gritted teeth. “Spread out the blanket.”

“Why?” I asked. “You can't possibly mean... here?”

She looked up at me, her face pained and panicky. She nodded.

Then it hit me. The internal voice of the part of me that was a doctor. It told me I needed to man up and get cracking. There was a baby on the way.

I dropped the backpack and pulled out the blanket, spreading it out at the side of the trail. She scooted toward it and lay down on her side, holding her stomach. She began breathing exercises as I pulled out my phone. I had already dialed the number of her midwife when she looked up at me as a moaning cry came from deep in her throat.

I looked down at her and then followed her gaze to the growing puddle between her legs on the blanket.

Her water had broken.

“Okay,” I said, sticking the phone back in my pocket. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. We are going to have a baby today. I'm not getting any reception out here. I need to get back closer to the trailhead and call for help. Are you going to be all right here by yourself for a few minutes?”

Carmela nodded. “I'll be all right.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I don't really have a lot of other options right now,” she said. “Unless you feel like giving me a piggyback ride, this is what I'm working with.”

I wanted to laugh, but I felt like that probably wasn't the beset reaction at the moment. Instead, I kissed her and rushed down the trail, hoping I was going to be able to hold it together for her.





## CARMELA

This couldn't be happening. There was no way this was happening.

I'd spent my whole pregnancy preparing. I took the classes. I read the books. I even watched videos online trying to find out as much as I could about all the different ways people approached labor and delivery so I could choose the path that was right for me. This was my first birth, an experience I was never going to get to have again, and I wanted it to be as perfect as possible.

Of course, there's no such thing as perfect when it comes to bringing a baby into the world. I told myself that, and my midwife reiterated it to me. That was why we made a plan but stayed flexible. I was to envision what I wanted for the birth, tell myself my body could do it, then follow the steps to make that happen, while at the same time accepting the reality that things could change, and I needed to be willing and able to adapt to them.

However, giving birth out in the open in the middle of my brother's ranch, was not anywhere near any of the scenarios I'd come up with. I took a breath and tried to focus on getting through another wave of pain as it washed over me. The contractions were getting stronger, and I was doing everything I could to stay relaxed during them. That was key to helping my body through labor, my midwife told me. If I could encourage my body to stay relaxed and allow it to do what it needed to do, the process would be smoother and less stressful.

I wasn't sure that fully applied to women unexpectedly going through labor in the woods, but I wasn't going to completely throw away the wisdom. But I was struggling to relax. It wasn't just being out on a hiking trail, and it wasn't just the pain. It was still early, and I was afraid something was going to go wrong with the baby.

For weeks, since my belly first started to show and it all was getting real, I had been looking forward to delivery. I couldn't wait to hold my baby in my arms and just enjoy being a mother. I wanted to see Mark as a father and experience life together. I'd spent so many hours rubbing my belly and talking to the baby, wondering who this tiny person was. I was so excited for the day to come when I would finally get to meet my child. But this wasn't the way I'd ever thought about it. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

As feelings of fear and panic started to sink in, I stopped myself. I pulled myself out of those feelings and made the conscious decision not to allow myself to get overwhelmed by them. The stress and negativity weren't good for me, and they weren't good for the baby. I needed to stay calm and think about keeping my little one safe and healthy as they made their way into the world.

In that moment, I had to accept that this was not going to go the way I wanted it to. I wasn't in the birthing center at the hospital or even at home. I didn't have my midwife or any nurses to help me through. I was out on a hiking trail in the middle of the woods, and I definitely wasn't going to be getting back to the car like this.

But there wasn't anything I could do about it. This was happening. My contractions were coming steadily and becoming more painful. There was no denying it now. I was in full-on labor. This baby had its own ideas about when and how it wanted to be born, and all I could do was go along for the ride.

I let my head fall back and breathed my way through another contraction, silently talking my body through the pain. Behind me, I heard running footsteps approaching. Either

Mark was back or there was another hiker about to get far more than they'd bargained for.

The thought of what a person stumbling onto this scene made me chuckle, and when I felt a hand on my back and looked up to see Mark crouched down beside me, he had a relieved smile on his face.

"Laughing is good," he said. "Right? Laughing is good."

"You're a doctor," I said. "You've seen women in labor before."

He nodded. "I have. But it's never been a woman I love who is in labor with my baby, so that's a change."

I managed a smile. I would never get enough of hearing him say he loved me. It reassured and calmed me, even as I could feel the very beginning of another contraction start to form deep in my belly.

"Did you call for help?" I asked.

It wasn't really a question. I knew he had. He wouldn't have gone off like that and come back if he hadn't been finding help for me. But I needed something to keep my mind focused on something other than the pain. Talking would keep it occupied and give me something else to concentrate on, even if only for a few minutes.

"I did," he said, continuing to rub my back. I pressed into the feeling of his hand at the small of my back, and he rubbed a little harder, releasing some of the pressure. "The ambulance is coming, but it might take a little while to get here. Do you think you can try to move back down the trail so you're closer to the trailhead? It would be easier for them to get to you than if they need to come all the way down here."

The thought of trying to get all the way back to the car and drive to the hospital seemed totally out of the question before the last contraction, but hearing the ambulance was coming somehow made it less intimidating. I knew help was on the way, and if it was going to be easier for them to get to us, I needed to do whatever I could to get there.

I nodded. "I'll try."

“All right. That’s my girl. Let’s do this,” he said.

Mark stood and took my hands to help pull me to my feet. The weight of the baby seemed to pull harder on my belly than it had before, and I had the compulsion to reach under it and hold it up. He held one hand and kept the other arm wrapped around my waist as we started walking down the trail. It only took a few steps for the contraction to build all the way. It made me stop, and Mark turned me toward him, lifting my arms to wrap them around his neck.

I got through the contraction and was able to get a few more yards down the trail before another hit. I was conflicted about continuing on as the contractions got more intense and closer together. When the next contraction ended, Mark started to help me move farther, but I hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Can you not keep going?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“Why? What do you mean?” he asked.

“I know the farther I get, the easier it’s going to be for the ambulance to get to me, so the sooner I’ll have medical assistance. But I also know the more I’m up and moving around, the faster labor is going to progress,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “The baby will be fine. You don’t need to worry about that right now.”

“How about the fact that I’m out in the woods?” I asked. “And don’t have a midwife or even a doctor with me?”

“You do have a doctor with you,” he reminded.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “You aren’t an obstetrician, and you don’t have any of your supplies with you. Unless you are suddenly going to produce a backpack full of clean bedding and birthing implements, we are at a distinct disadvantage here.”

I gasped as another contraction hit me. This one threatened to buckle my knees and bring me right down into the dirt. Mark gripped me tightly and help me up, letting me lean my

weight on him as I breathed through the pain. They were getting much stronger, and I knew I couldn't fight them.

"Carmela, you need to listen to me," he said when the contraction was over. "I know this isn't ideal. I know it's not what you had in mind, and it isn't what you prepared yourself for. But it's what we have. You are in full active labor, and there's nothing we can do about it. This baby is coming. We can't stop it. We need to be prepared to do this on our own."

I drew in a breath but was shaking and had tears forming in my eyes. "I'm scared."

It didn't matter how much I was trying to tell myself not to be afraid and to only think calm, positive thoughts. The fear was real, and it was threatening to take over again. But Mark was steady. If he was feeling the same kind of fear I was, he didn't show it.

"I know you are," he said. "But I'm right here. You can do this. We can do this together."

I nodded. "All right. Let's keep going."

I was able to get a little farther, but soon it was obvious I couldn't keep going. The pain was too much, and my body felt too tired and weak in between contractions to keep walking. Mark brought me to the side of the path and helped me down to the ground. I leaned back on my arms, and he kissed my head as he comforted and reassured me.

I knew the baby was going to come before the ambulance did. All I could do was hope it went smoothly and the baby arrived healthy and safe.



## MARK

I had seen a lot of things in my career, including the delivery of plenty of babies in stressful or dangerous situations. But there was nothing that could compare, none of it, to those twenty minutes of my life, kneeling at the side of a hiking trail deep in the woods, catching my own baby.

I was strangely calm. Every instinct was on high alert, every time I had ever been there for another mother fresh in my mind. I was sharper, more in tune with every single moment than I had ever felt. It was like everything I had ever done prepared me uniquely for that exact moment.

Then it happened.

I was holding her.

My daughter.

The emotion overwhelmed me in that moment, and I sat back, cradling her for a split second, staring at her tiny face. The miracle of life had come again, and I was witness to the majesty of birth. Of my own daughter's birth. I brought her to Carmela, who was propped up with the extra clothes I'd brought so her head rested on something soft and placed her on her chest.

The next few moments were a blur.

The ambulance finally arrived, cutting through the grass and following the trail to get to us as quickly as they could. EMTs peppered me with questions, but when they realized the situation was essentially settled, they relaxed. They joked with

me, and I joked back, but I could only remember that they had released that pressure valve with humor, not what they said.

I had just experienced the single most unbelievable and unforgettable moment in my life. The aftermath was not nearly as important. All that mattered was that Carmela was safe, glowing and happy with tears streaming down her face constantly, and our baby girl was on her chest, noisily learning to breastfeed and spending her first moments outside of the womb in our arms.

It suddenly dawned on me that I wasn't wearing a shirt after a few moments when my skin prickled, and I shuddered. I had taken it off to catch her and to have skin-to-skin contact in the first moments she was out. It was important to me to have that moment with her, and as I followed the gurney to the ambulance, I rummaged in the bag where I had thrown the clothes and found one of the shirts that had been under Carmela's head. I slipped it on and smiled.

I was a father.

"Do you want to ride with us, Dad?" the EMT asked.

"Yes," I said. "I'll send someone for the car. I don't want to be apart from her."

"Hop on in, then," he said, and I tried to make a mental note of his face so I could thank him later. He had been so sweet, so nice and helpful since he'd arrived.

The drive to the hospital was quiet as both Carmela and the baby dozed off to the rocking of the ambulance. Carmela kept waking up and looking down at her and then back up to me before her eyes fluttered shut again. She never closed them for more than thirty seconds or so.

Upon arriving at the hospital, I hopped out and followed them into the post-delivery room that was designated for her. A doctor arrived and introduced himself as Dr. Gibson before doing a checkup on Carmela and the baby. As he wrapped up, he sat down in a chair across from Carmela and looked over his notes.



“So, Dr. Murphy,” he said. “I’m sure I’m not going to tell you much that you don’t already know.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said. “I’m not a pediatrician. Please.”

“Well, that’s very kind, but your reputation precedes you, even all the way out here.”

“Even still,” I said.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Well, as you probably knew, the baby looks fantastic. She is a few weeks early, I see, but the midwife left extensive notes. You two did a terrific job with the pregnancy.”

“She did a great job,” I said. “I just hung on for the ride.”

Dr. Gibson laughed. Carmela did as well, but hers was weaker. She was so tired. I could see it on her face. But she was happy.

“Carmela, you did a great job, and both of you are getting a clean bill of health from me today,” he said. “The only thing I recommend now is that we continue on as if the baby were born here with the shot schedule and letting you both get some rest. I am sure everyone is exhausted after such a traumatic experience.”

“We will get some rest, no worry,” I said. “Thank you.”

Dr. Gibson nodded and stood, then stepped over to offer his hand for a shake.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Murphy,” he said. “Your daughter is beautiful. The nurse will be in shortly to finish with the paperwork and go over the next steps.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“And you, young lady,” he said to Carmela. “You handled this labor and delivery like a warrior, by all accounts. You should be incredibly proud of yourself. Enjoy your new baby and get some rest. It might be some of the last bit of rest you get for a little while.”

With that, Dr. Gibson left, and I sat down next to Carmela again, reveling in being near them both and just enjoying existing in the moment.

“You should let everyone know,” she said. “Have you told Camden?”

“I texted him from the ambulance,” I said. “Nobody else, though.”

“You should,” she said. “And can you find my phone and text Jess and Gary? They will be so upset that they weren’t here and that I didn’t tell them if they find out through the grapevine.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll do that first.”

Nodding, she turned her attention back to our baby, placing her nose on the top of her head and inhaling deeply.

“So, did you decide which one you liked the most?” I asked as I dug through the bag for her phone.

She smiled.

“Did you?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Which one?” she asked.

“You first,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Together. On three. One, two, three.”

“Cassandra,” we said at the same time.

I laughed as she giggled softly, trying not to wake the baby, who had just drifted off.

“There it is, then,” I said.

“Cassandra,” Carmela repeated. “My beautiful angel, Cassandra.”

I smiled and pulled the phone out of the bag, swiping it open and finding her messages. Pulling up a group text between her, Jess, Gary, and Tom, I sent out a message, noting it was from me, telling them where we were and what

happened. A string of emojis came back from all three of them, and I showed them to Carmela, who laughed.

*We will be there tonight*, Gary messaged. *Jess, be ready.*

“Tonight?” I asked. “I thought they lived out of the country.”

“I didn’t tell you?” she asked. “How did I forget that? They came back to visit their parents last week. They said they were going to be here for a month and told me I needed to have the baby while they were here.”

“Well, you did,” I said, chuckling.

“I think she’s full and very asleep,” Carmela said, looking down at baby Cassandra. “Do you want to hold her?”

“Of course, I do,” I said.

“Come take her. I need to switch to my other hip anyway. This one is killing me,” she said.

I got up and gently scooped up my daughter, pulling her tight to my chest quickly. She gurgled lightly but then settled, her tiny button nose pressed against my lower neck. I took the opportunity to smell the top of her head and felt my whole body tingle. It was one of the most overwhelming sensations I had ever had. The complete sense of unrestricted love I had for this tiny being in my arms was immeasurable. It was the fullest I had ever felt in my entire life.

I carried her over to the window and sat down, pulling out my own phone and shooting off a text to the guys and their wives. A series of responses came in, and I made sure to mute the phone so none of them woke up the baby that I was already mentally calling Cassie. I relaxed into the chair and held her, occasionally kissing the top of her head.

The door opened after a couple of short knocks, and a nurse with a kind smile came in. I had seen her before but couldn’t remember her name. It felt like several of the nurses all looked alike and were named Emma, though. A series of interchangeable Emmas. I figured she was probably one of them.

“Dr. Murphy,” she said quietly. “It looks like Mama has gone off to sleep.”

I glanced over at Carmela, who had indeed drifted off to sleep, one hand under her head and the other hovering over her belly like she had slept for months. I figured it would take a little time for that instinct to wear off.

“Looks like it,” I said.

“You look pretty tired too,” she said. “After we go over the list of what’s next, I can bring the baby to the nursery and let you guys shut your eyes for a bit.”

Instinctively, I squeezed Cassie a bit tighter to my chest.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” I said. “I’m fine. I’m a doctor. I’m used to not sleeping a whole lot.”

“Well, that’s just fine then,” she said. “I will need you to sign a waiver saying you didn’t want to take the baby back to the nursery, though.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

“And I have some other forms to sign if you don’t mind. One thing we need is the name for the birth certificate. We can get that all started and come in to do the hand and footprint in a few minutes.”

I smiled.

“Cassandra,” I said.

“Marie,” Carmela said in a half sleep. “Cassandra Marie.”

“Cassandra Marie,” I said, grinning as Carmela seemed to fall back to sleep.

“Is that going to be Smith?” the nurse asked, trying to ask as tactfully as possible.

I hesitated. I knew what I wanted, and I had a strong feeling what the future held, but this was a technical matter. I had to play it by the book, for now.

“Yes,” I said. “Smith.”

“All right, then, I will get that down and bring it out to you to confirm before we sign it and do the prints. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“Thank you,” I said.

As she walked away, I refocused on Cassie in my arms, looking out over the view from the window. It overlooked the stretch of highway that led back to Murdock. I faced her toward it and held her close to my face.

“That way is home,” I whispered. “Thank you, little one. Thank you for choosing me to be your Daddy. I promise you. I swear to you that I will love you and your mama more than anyone else on this earth. I will protect you and raise you and love you with every inch of my heart. I will love you forever. And your mama. I promise.”



## CARMELA

When I went into labor early, the biggest thing on my mind was my baby getting here safely. I was worried something would go wrong or that she wouldn't be strong enough when she was born. I hadn't even considered the time after.

It was such an incredible relief to find out she was strong and healthy when she first arrived, but soon we had to come to terms with the reality that she was still premature. Even though she wasn't in serious distress when she first arrived, it became obvious she needed a little more help and was taken off to the special care nursery for extra support.

Mark sat on the edge of the bed beside me and held my hand, reassuring me that Cassandra was going to be fine. We were all going to get through this together. It was comforting having him there and knowing he was speaking from experience, having watched other mothers go through the challenge of having their newborns in the specialized nursery for days and even months after their births.

He talked about not being an obstetrician or pediatrician, so he didn't have this kind of experience, but I knew he was just being humble and cautious. He was the kind of doctor who helped anyone who needed it and having been by his father's side while he was the small-town doc meant he was with him during all kinds of calls.

Being a doctor in this kind of town meant being willing to be a jack of all trades sometimes, and while that had changed

some in more recent years as the hospital grew and more specialists established offices closer to town, there were always going to be instances of emergencies and unexpected moments when he needed to use all his skill and compassion to help people through.

Right now, it was me. But I also knew he needed the support as well. He'd bonded tightly to Cassie the second he saw her, and it was difficult for him to watch the nurses wheel her away. I could see in his face that he felt helpless and hated that he couldn't be right there with her and take care of her. We needed each other in those first hours, and I felt myself falling even more in love with him.

The few days Cassie had to spend in the special care nursery were harder than I ever could have imagined they would be. I was so thankful for the special room the hospital had near the unit so that we could stay while they were caring for Cassie rather than having to go all the way home. I knew even if they didn't have that space, I wouldn't have left. I would rather have spread a blanket out on the floor of the hallway and camped out. There was no way I was going to leave my baby.

Finally on the fourth day after she was born, the doctor called Mark and me to the nursery first thing in the morning.

I braced myself for finding out our little girl was going to need a longer time in the hospital than we thought, or that maybe they'd found a health problem or issue that would affect her more than we imagined. It didn't matter what they told me. She was everything to me, and I would love her and do anything for her no matter what she needed.

I'd prepared myself so much to hear challenging news when I walked into the nursery, I was almost shocked to see the smile on the nurses' faces and the happy, easy way the doctor was cradling our daughter in his arms. He grinned down at her, talking softly and laughing when she made a face at him.

"Good morning," I said to let them know we were there.



They all looked up, and one of the nurses clapped her hands together happily.

“Hi, Mom and Dad,” Dr. Reinard said. “Cassandra here tells me she’s ready for you to pack her bags. She’s really excited to see her brand-new nursery at home.”

“At home?” I asked, not sure I just heard what I thought I did. “She can go home?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. She’s done so well and gained the weight I wanted to see. She’s breathing well and eating perfectly. It’s still a few weeks before her official due date, but I’m not worried about her. She is just excited to get going. If you’re ready to bring her home, she’s ready to go with you.”

Mark wrapped an arm around me and squeezed happily.

“We’re ready,” he said. “We’ve been ready.”

“The nursery,” I said, looking up at him. “We haven’t finished her nursery.”

He laughed. “She doesn’t need much. I don’t think she’s going to mind that the mural isn’t finished yet or that we haven’t set up the wipe warmer.”

“Pro tip,” one of the nurses said, leaning toward us with a conspiratorial look on her face. “You’ll use the wipe warmer about four times and then realize it’s more of a hassle than it’s worth. Just hold one of the wipes in your hand for a couple of seconds, and it warms up just fine.”

I smiled. “We can really bring her home?”

They all grinned wider around me and nodded. Dr. Reinard stepped up to me and nestled the baby into my arms. I couldn’t believe it. Happiness like I’d never experienced rushed into me, followed by a sense of excitement and anticipation. We were a family, and our whole life was stretched out in front of us. I couldn’t wait to get her home and to see what was ahead for us.

I wondered if it would hurt the feelings of the important people in our life if we didn’t have them waiting at the

house to welcome us home and meet the baby. They hadn't been able to come to the hospital to see her, and I knew they would be expecting to see her as soon as possible. But there was a feeling deep inside me that Mark and I needed to nest with her, just the three of us, for a little while.

When I told Mark how I was feeling, he told me he was feeling the same way. We'd been through so much already, and I wanted to enjoy the peace of being home together. Once we were settled in, I looked forward to having everyone we loved over to meet Cassandra and welcome her into our growing chosen family. But for now, it was just going to be us.

Fortunately, everyone understood. Even though the doctor gave our little Cassie his seal of approval to go home, we were aware that she was still fragile. Still so tiny, she was vulnerable and delicate, so we needed to protect her. But soon enough they would be able to give her all the snuggles and kisses they had waiting for her.

It was almost surreal walking through the door and realizing we were home with our baby. The three of us were really a family, a true family, and there was nothing standing between us and living our lives together.

Cassie was a dream in those first hours. She slept comfortably in Mark's arms, ate eagerly every half-hour, and made the sweetest cooing sounds I'd ever heard. It was so beautiful, and I couldn't imagine ever not feeling so content and filled with happiness.

Then night hit. We had a blissful time giving the baby her first bath, reading to her, and settling her into her bassinet before dinner. Right as we were sitting down to eat, she started to cry. While I finished serving the food, Mark went in to comfort her and help her back to sleep. She went quiet again, but it only lasted long enough for us to take a couple of bites.

Everything went downhill from there. For the rest of the night, we tried everything we could think of to soothe her back to sleep. We paced with her, bounced her, sang to her, and sat with her. Each of us got the chance to catch snippets of sleep

between shifts with her, but the longest the house went without her cries was less than an hour.

She went to sleep on my shoulder as the sun started coming up. I wanted to cry myself. At the same time, there was something so fulfilling and incredible about knowing I'd gotten my child through her first night at home and she was comfortable and safe in my arms.

I carefully lowered her into her bassinet, and Mark got into bed next to it as I went to take a shower. When I was finished, I went to tell him he could take his turn, but found him sleeping deeply, one hand reached out to rest on the side of the bassinet like he wanted to be able to touch her. I slipped into the bed beside him and instantly fell asleep.

I woke up to the sound of Mark singing and realized he wasn't in bed beside me. I peeked into the bassinet and saw Cassandra wasn't there. Following the sound of his voice, I found him in the kitchen making breakfast while he danced and sang with her. He smiled when he noticed me.

"Mama is up," he said. "Did you get some good sleep?"

I nodded. "I definitely feel better. Still tired."

"Well, I think both of us are in for being tired for the next eighteen years or so."

"Then everything is going exactly as planned," I said.

He smiled and leaned down for a kiss. I took Cassie into my arms and brought her into the living room to feed her.

This became our rhythm for the next few days. Gradually, Cassie started sleeping better and we learned how to handle each of her cries. The first few nights were trying but wonderful. Even when I was so tired I thought I was going to fall over right where I stood, I was still happier than I had ever been. I had my daughter, and I had Mark. He was right there beside me, helping me through the hard moments and cherishing the fun, joyful ones.

It was difficult, I would never pretend it wasn't, but it also felt so normal. There was a shift that came with going from just the two of us to the three of us, but by the third day, I

could barely remember what it was like to not have her. Being a mother made me feel more like myself than I ever had, and the more I watched Mark being a father, the deeper in love with him I fell. I knew soon he would have to go back to the clinic full-time, but for now, I was having the best time in our own little corner of the world, just the three of us.



## MARK

Carmela was an amazing mother. It was a revelation to watch her, and I constantly found myself amazed by her. I mean, she was always incredible, but there was something particularly special about the way she cared for our little one. Watching her care for Cassie, carrying her around and doting on her and being so great with her, just made me love her more. She was somehow even sexier and more beautiful as a mother.

I was thinking about how gorgeous she was while watching her play with her on the couch by the Christmas tree. We had put it up the day after Thanksgiving. Both of us had gone a little crazy over the holiday already, and it was only the first of December. It was going to be our first with the baby, and even though we knew she wouldn't remember any of it, we wanted to make it as big as possible.

Carmela was wearing red and green striped leggings under what was essentially an elf's outfit. It was adorable, and she said it made her feel festive to wear something so silly. I just liked seeing her so happy and playful, even with the long, hard nights that happened with a newborn.

She was so incredible. I just couldn't get over it. And I wanted her to know how incredible I thought she was.

Which led to what was in the top drawer of my dresser, wrapped in a sock.

It had taken a fair amount of sneaking around and a credit line she wasn't aware of yet, but I had gotten the engagement

ring a long time back. I'd known I loved her and wanted to marry her for quite a while, but I didn't want to do it while she was pregnant. The last thing I wanted was to have people think I was only marrying her because of the baby. Not that I thought any of our actual friends would think that, but I could only imagine what other people in town would say.

No, I wanted the baby to be here and for us to be a family, and for there not to be a single thing she had to deal with when it came to people looking down on us for getting married. Plus, I knew she had a vision for how she wanted to look at her wedding. She had mentioned it before. Carrying a bowling ball in the center of her stomach was definitely not part of that vision.

So, I'd held off, and every day was torture. I wanted so badly to ask her, to put that ring on her finger and set a date as soon as possible. But now that the baby was here, that pathway had finally been cleared, and it was up to me as to when I wanted to do it. Christmas seemed like the perfect time.

As I watched her playing with Cassie's feet and doing peekaboo with her, I formulated exactly how I would do it. We had spoken before about how we bonded over making fun of cliché couples and their cliché celebrations. Yet I knew deep down she liked those silly things, and I had a feeling she secretly wanted something like that to happen for her.

So, I would do it that way. It would be sincere because I thought it was a beautiful idea genuinely and because it would be a total surprise for her. Plus, I had a few weeks before the big day, and I could plan it all out how I wanted it. At least I already had the ring.

When we went to bed that night, I knew it had to be Christmas morning. It was the perfect combination of actual meaningful gestures and sappy silliness that we could both love and enjoy. I went to bed that night not dreaming of sugarplums dancing, but of Carmela swirling around the living room with Cassie in her arms, dancing to Christmas music streaming from her phone.

Weeks went by so quickly and yet at the same time, seemed to crawl toward Christmas Eve. The season was a blast, and I got to spend quite a bit of it with my old friends and taking Cassie around town to experience what a Texas Christmas was like. On the day before Christmas Eve, I even drove us up to Houston, where they had a giant indoor town built up with a real snow machine and sledding down a massive hill.

When we got back home, we were exhausted and had just enough energy to change into pajamas and crash into bed, knowing full well that Cassie would have us up in an hour or two for a change and probably for another feeding. Yet Carmela didn't complain. She was glowing with a megawatt smile when she laid her head down to sleep, and when she came back to bed after putting the baby back down, she kissed my chest and thanked me for a wonderful day before drifting back out.

The next morning was hectic as I did everything I could to make the day special for her. I woke up early and made her breakfast to the best of my abilities, taking care of Cassie so she didn't wake Carmela up. Mela preferred to breastfeed, when at all possible, but there were a few bottles in the fridge for just such an occasion, and I did my damndest to let her sleep in as long as possible.

When she finally did wake up, still early but late for her, she stumbled into the living room with a grin on her face. I was just plating her breakfast of eggs and bacon and pancakes when she sat down, and I brought it over to her with a mug of coffee.

"Merry Christmas Eve," I said, kissing the top of her head.

"I didn't think we were doing gifts until tonight," she said.

"This isn't a Christmas gift," I said, "this is a you-work-too-hard-and-deserve-breakfast gift."

"I'll take it," she said. "Is this decaf?"

I smiled.

"Well, it *is* Christmas," I said.



“So bottles until noon,” she said, pointing at Cassie in her swinging bassinet. She was happily asleep, and I knew it was killing Carmela not to take her out and cuddle her, but she didn’t want to wake her up either.

“Got it,” I said. “She’s already had two this morning.”

“Hungry baby,” she said.

“Hungry papa too,” I said. “My only request of you today is that you come through on those cookies. Santa is in need of the homemade cookies.”

“Oh, Santa is, huh?” she asked, giggling.

“Yup,” I said. “He has a long night of work ahead of him, you know?”

“I’ve heard,” she said. “Well, I will make sure he has some nice, homemade cookies this evening then.”

“Good,” I said. “Now get some of that bacon in you.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and my stomach tightened.

As the day went on, we spent some time calling family, even including a nice chat with Aunt Judy, and doing more traditional Christmas routines. It was perfect. Cocoa, cookies, reading *The Night Before Christmas* with the baby, it was an old-fashioned night and when we finally went to bed, I was more excited than I had been since I was a little boy.

Christmas had meaning again. Real, true meaning, specific to me. I had someone to be Santa for, and a woman to spoil. And tomorrow I was going to spoil her in a way she never would expect. In the middle of the night, when I was sure she was out cold, I slipped out of bed and got the ring from my hidden spot and snuck into the living room. When I came back, she was still asleep, and I slipped back into bed, barely able to drift off for a nap for a couple of hours.

When Carmela first stirred the next morning, I was out of bed in a hurry, and I beckoned her to come with me into the living room. The baby was still awake and happy, and I knew she would be going down for a nap eventually, so we did little

gifts for her first. It meant Carmela did most of the opening, but I took tons of pictures anyway.

After the babies' presents were done, it was time to finally do our own. I handed her the stocking and waited for her to open it up. She put the baby back in her bassinet and started with some of the silly little things that were in there, making a big deal out of stuff she knew I'd gotten her at the dollar store just to fill her stocking.

Then she reached the bottom and noticed the box tucked all the way at the very end. She pulled it out and flipped it over in her hands for a moment and then looked at me, her eyes widening. I nodded toward her encouragingly, and she unwrapped the paper, getting to the little box inside. I could sense her excitement as she opened it and then looked back at me.

“Mark...”

“Carmela, will you make me the happiest man on this planet and marry me?”

“Yes,” she said, throwing the stocking off of her but clutching the ring box in her hand tightly and crawling over to me.

She wrapped her arms around me, and we kissed deeply, tears streaming down her cheeks as I pulled her into my lap and held her close. When our lips separated, I put the ring on her finger, and she admired it before kissing me again.

“Is the baby asleep?” I asked.

“I think so,” she said. “She went down early for her nap. It was a big morning.”

“That it was,” I said, getting another giggle from her. “Why don't you lay her down in her crib and I'll get the fire going.”

“Okay,” she said, getting to her feet.

As she put the baby in her crib, I laid down a blanket in front of the fireplace and waited for her. She was taking a bit

longer than usual, and I figured Cassie was keeping her. When the door opened, I was amazed by what I was seeing.

She was standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame, wearing a tiny negligee that was mostly see-through. It was red and white, and she looked like a candy cane. I had a few ideas as to how to treat her like one.

“You look amazing,” I said.

“You think so?” she asked. “I bought this a couple of weeks ago, and I wanted to wear it for you, but time got away from us.”

“Well, you’re wearing it now,” I said. “And it looks incredible on you.”

She grinned. “Well, hopefully I won’t be wearing all of it for too long.”

I grinned back. “Come on over here by the fire, and we will find out.”

She crossed the room to join me and lay down next to me on the blanket. I pulled a second one up over us as she fell into my arms, and we kissed deeply. Her body was warm and soft, and she gasped at a simple kiss to her neck. I smiled as I moved my lips further down. She made herself comfortable with a pillow from the couch and watched as I licked her stomach all the way to the hem of her panties and then dipped below.

Pushing them aside, I revealed her wet, waiting pussy and let my tongue flick out to brush across her lower lips. She cried out softly, and as my eyes drifted back to hers, I saw her biting her bottom lip, an expression of anticipation and pleasure on her face.

I extended my middle finger and touched her gently, and she quivered underneath me. When I dipped inside, she began to shake, and when my tongue slid through her folds, her eyes closed, and her jaw dropped open, letting out a tiny sound of ecstasy.



## CARMELA

I watched as long as I could before my eyes fluttered back, and I let my head rest on the pillow. My body was so sensitive. All Mark had to do was place his hands on me, and I was paralyzed, and he knew just how to touch me. Just where, just how, and when.

Trying to keep from making noise, I kept my mouth closed as I moaned. I clenched my hands, gathering up the blankets in my fists as I tried to keep some measure of control. My hips rocked side to side, but Mark held me in place, showering me with attention. I was so close already to a climax that I could barely think, and the soft, gauzy negligee brushing across my incredibly sensitive nipples only heightened my senses.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

His finger was sliding into me in a slow but consistent motion, brushing the upper wall while his tongue swirled over my clit. The sensation was building like a wave inside my mind, and my body broke out in goosebumps as I arched my back in preparation. I felt like I could barely control my body as the feeling overwhelmed me and I sat up sharply.

My legs quivered and squeezed around his neck, and my toes curled on his back. Mark pressed his tongue down over my clit and held his finger deep inside me as I rolled with the sensation and then collapsed back onto the blanket. My pussy was throbbing and aching for him, and as he worked his way up my body with his lips, I reached down to push on his pants.

Hovering over me, Mark grinned as his cock sprung out, and I wrapped my legs over his hips. I didn't care that he wasn't naked yet. I needed him. I always needed him, but now especially. My body cried out for him.

"I need you," I whispered.

Mark kicked off his pants, pushing them down off his legs quickly and settling between my thighs. He pulled his shirt up and over his head, and I reached up with one hand to run down his muscular chest and the other to wrap around his staff. He was so thick and long, and I wanted to guide him into me, not that he needed the help. He knew my body better than I knew it myself.

Pressing down over me like a push-up, he kissed me, and the head of his cock slid through my folds. Just the touch of his warm, hard, rod against me was almost enough to send me into another electric orgasm. But it was nothing compared to how it felt when he slid inside me.

My body ached as it stretched and made room for him. He was so strong, so dominating and yet so tender. Looking into his eyes, I could see how much he cared for me, how much he wanted to make sure he wasn't hurting me. It made me want him even more.

He plunged all the way inside me, and my eyes clenched shut as my legs shook and I cried out in spite of myself. Mark dipped down to press his lips to mine to silence me, and I moaned into his kiss. He rocked slowly, allowing me to get used to him again. I clenched at him with my fingers, dying to find purchase, digging my head into his neck and taking in the smell of his skin and the salty taste of his sweat as he slowly increased his speed.

My body relaxed, and he slowly sat up on his knees, gripping my hips in his strong, capable hands. Our eyes met, and I nodded gently, eliciting a grin. He began to rock harder, faster into me, and I closed my eyes to sink into the feeling. I gave over control and relished in his power as he fucked me harder and harder with each thrust.

Mark buried himself in me and held there for a moment before lifting one of my legs and rolling me over to my stomach. I groaned as he mounted me from behind, legs settling on either side of my hips and his hands gripping my ass as he curled over me. I bit down into the pillow as he slammed into me, his cock penetrating so deeply that it brought another wave of climax.

“Mark,” I moaned, “harder.”

A grunt of effort above me preceded his fingers digging into my ass as he started rocking harder into me. He was giving me everything he had, and I arched my ass up to give him a better angle. Sweat beaded down my back as the warmth from the fire mixed with the warmth of our bodies, pleasuring each other.

He slowed down after a few moments, and I pulled away from him, turning around and pushing him down on his back. He laughed at the silliness of me trying to push him around and went with it anyway. I straddled him and settled my core over him, then sunk down. He filled me so completely, and from above, I had control.

I rode him, letting my hair fall back between his legs as one hand massaged a tender breast and the other dove between my thighs. His thumb swirled over my clit, and I bit down on my bottom lip to not make any sound as the crashing orgasm began to roll through my body yet again. Below me, Mark groaned and suddenly jolted.

He came hard, and I slowed my motion, collapsing into his chest and kissing him on his neck and shoulders while he emptied himself inside me.

I rolled off him, pulling the blankets up to my chest as I curled into his arms. Sighing happily, I let my eyes close and made a little cooing sound.

“I love you,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

“I love you too,” I said.

couldn't believe how fast time had passed. It seemed like just a few days before that it was a gorgeous fall season, and I was still pregnant, waiting and wondering what it was going to be like to be a mother. Now my baby girl was nearly two months old, and it was the end of the year.

Our first Thanksgiving and Christmas as a family of three were behind us, and I was preparing for a brand-new year with the new title of fiancé. The ring was still new on my hand, and Mark and I hadn't yet announced the engagement to anyone, but I already knew that by the time the next year rolled around, that title would have changed over to wife.

It was incredible to me how much had changed and how quickly my life had come together. It was more amazing than I ever would have been able to imagine, and I knew it was only going to get better. Every single day with my daughter was something brand new and wonderful as I watched her grow and learn. It seemed every evening when I put her to bed, she'd changed from how she was when I got her up in the morning. It was truly breathtaking, and I couldn't get enough of it.

That was at the very front of my mind when I got up on New Year's Eve and dressed Cassandra for our adventure together. For most of my life, New Year's Eve wasn't something I particularly looked forward to. It wasn't that I ran and hid from it; I just didn't really get excited about celebrating the end of one year and the beginning of the next.

Even with my successful career, my friends, and my brother, I always ended each year feeling like I hadn't made the most of it, like I wasn't really fulfilled and ready for the next one to come. At the same time, I looked ahead to the new year waiting for me after midnight and didn't have anything that really made me excited. There were things I knew I would enjoy, and things I wanted to do, but never something I was eagerly anticipating, or that made me especially excited for the new year.

That was all different now. The year had been an unexpected whirlwind I never could have anticipated. It was a roller coaster, and there were definitely times when it wasn't



what I wanted it to be, but I would always look back on it as the most monumental one of my life. At least, so far.

That was the best part. For the first time in my life, I was genuinely excited about the prospect of another year ahead. Not just in the way that I was always grateful for another year of living and would look for ways to make something great out of it. Not even in the way that came when I had big milestones or achievements within reach and was looking forward to getting to them.

This time, I was excited about not knowing. Marriage was a beautiful new journey I couldn't wait to start with Mark, and I was quickly learning that being a mother wasn't something that ever stayed the same. I was new to motherhood because my baby was so young, but so much changed with every passing day with Cassie. I felt like every mother was new to motherhood with each stage of their child's life.

In the year ahead, my baby would go from a tiny newborn through sitting and crawling to walking around, maybe even saying her first words. It was difficult to really wrap my head around that, and I was excited to watch it happen.

This was the first year I thought of New Year's Eve not as a time to celebrate the end of a year, but the chance to celebrate all that happened in it and all that was to come. And Mark and I weren't going to be doing it alone. It wasn't really our intention to essentially disappear from the world for so long. We knew we wanted to lay low for the first couple of weeks of Cassie's life, but we ended up enjoying our cozy, private bubble so much it had stretched on, and now we were a couple of months later and still hadn't gathered our friends together.

Those closest to us had met her, of course. But the meetings were brief and isolated to just one or two people at a time. That night we were getting everybody together again for a party, and we were looking forward to showing Cassie off.

But that meant party preparations, and if I was going to have any kind of event at my home, I had one destination that

was non-negotiable. Bundling the baby up, I hooked her into her seat, and we headed into town.

The bakery was busy, just like I expected it to be. People were stocking up on goodies for their own parties, as well as pastries and bread to have on hand for the next day when the vast majority of them would probably not feel like doing anything involving cooking. Or, honestly, moving a whole lot.

Fortunately, I had thought ahead and put in a preorder for the majority of what I wanted to pick up. I was hoping to add a few extra little things in, so I got in line and waited until I got to the counter. The girl working that morning smiled brightly at me. I had to admire her ability to look that happy and cheerful even when I knew she had to be stressed.

I gave her my name and order number.

“But I was actually hoping to add some things. Would that be all right?” I asked.

“What would you like?” she asked.

“A dozen cheese rolls, two dozen muffins, and a couple of loaves of onion bread,” I said.

“What kind of muffins?” she asked.

“Just an assortment would be fine,” I said. “Every one I’ve tried has been delicious.”

She smiled a little wider. “I’m glad you like them so much. There’s a new batch of the rolls in the oven right now. It will be just a few minutes.”

“That’s fine. I can wait over here.” I nodded toward a sitting area off to the side. “Can I have a croissant and coffee for right now?”

“Of course. I’ll be over with it in just a second.”

I carried Cassie over to the last open table and sat down. A few people around me oohed and ahed over her, and I couldn’t help but smile and show her off a bit. I never thought I would be the kind of person to want to show dozens of pictures of my child or put them on display to be admired while I was out, but here I was, happily lifting her up a little

higher so the elderly women at the table beside me could gaze at her.

As I was cuddling her back against me and my croissant appeared on the table, I looked up and noticed Jade come into the bakery. I was surprised to see her, but there was none of the discomfort or awkwardness of the last time. She walked up to the counter and placed an order. Even from where I was sitting, I could see her expression change and her body language sag in a way that said she wasn't hearing what she wanted to.

She looked around like she was trying to find a place to stand, and her eyes met mine. They moved away from me, then snapped back quickly like it took those few extra seconds to really process it was me. I gestured at the empty seat across from me at the table. Jade hesitated for only a second, then crossed the bakery and sat down.

"It's crazy around here," she said. "Who would have thought so many people would need baked goods for New Year's?"

"I mean ... kind of everyone," I said. She looked like she was going to argue, then relented and nodded. "What are you doing back here? Aren't there any good bakeries out a bit closer to your home?"

"Well," Jade said. "It just so happens that I am close to home. Trevor and I have decided to move back to Murdock."

I couldn't really read the look she gave me. It could have been smugness. It could have been embarrassment. I wasn't sure, and I realized I really didn't care.

"That's great," I said. "I hope you'll be happy here."

For the first time, I really meant it. I was far too happy in my own life to not feel that way.

"Thank you," she said. "I could say the same for you. Look at that little sweetheart."

She nodded toward Cassie, who had drifted off to sleep against my chest.

“This is Cassandra,” I said.

She looked at me with a bit of surprise in her eyes. “I heard you and Mark were really together, but I didn’t know if it was true.”

I nodded. “It’s true. We’re actually engaged.” I smiled to show I wasn’t carrying any lingering negative feelings. Or at least that I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of thinking she still held it over me. “For real this time.”

She was the first person I’d told, but that felt right. After all, she was what had brought Mark and me together.

“Congratulations,” she said. “That’s really wonderful, Carmela. I’m glad you’re happy.”

I wasn’t sure if she was being genuine about that or not, but I chose not to care. There was far too much to be positive about. Including the big boxes of treats brought over to me so I was able to get up and leave the bakery with a smile and a wave.



## MARK

“Almost everyone is here tonight,” Carmela said as she joined me in the kitchen.

She was carrying a couple of empty glasses, and as she rinsed them out and put them in the dishwasher, I grabbed a couple of the red plastic cups that we were switching to for the evening festivities.

“I know,” I said. “Sad that Victor couldn’t make it out, but it’s good seeing everyone else.”

“Camden is still trying to get beer pong going,” Carmela said, rolling her eyes. “Can you talk him out of it? It’s almost midnight.”

“I can try, but you know Camden. He cuts loose like this, what, three times a year? When he goes big, he goes big. And that man loves beer pong.”

“I know,” she said, pouring the new drinks into the cups. “Oh, can you get Mallory a water?”

“Sure,” I said, digging through the cooler to grab one of the water bottles we had icing down.

“Thanks,” she said, then leaned up on her toes to press a kiss to my cheek. “I appreciate you doing the food tonight, but you should come on out. It’s almost time for the ball to drop.”

“Just one more minute,” I said. “The bacon crackers are almost done.”

“You’ve got one minute,” she said teasingly. “There’s only five until the ball drops, and I want you standing beside me with our baby and no bacon crackers in your mouth when the new year starts.”

“Breaking my back, babe,” I said, laughing.

“I know, I’m such a taskmaster,” she said.

Carmela went through the door and back into the living room as I pulled the delicious snack out of the oven. The parmesan cheese was the way to tell if it was done. Once it was gooey and melted between the bacon and the cracker, it was time. I took a close look at one and set it back down on the cooking sheet, shaking my hand to cool off my fingers.

“Perfect,” I muttered.

I arranged them on the plate and grabbed myself another drink. It had been a good while since I’d had anything harder than a glass of wine, mostly out of solidarity with Carmela. But she had pumped quite a bit in the last forty-eight hours, specifically so she could have a couple glasses of champagne with us to celebrate the new year, and I was glad to have the reprieve for myself as well.

Taking a sip of the bubbly, I smiled. I could barely recognize my life now compared to a year before. The last time I rang in a new year, I was still living near Austin, alone, and wondering when I would be able to get around to living more of a life than just work.

Now I had the woman of my dreams, the most adorable little baby in history, and I was looking at a new life in Murdock with friends that were slowly coming back home, one by one.

I walked through the door and brought the drink to Carmela. The baby was in her arms, and she was patting her back gently. Cassie’s eyes were open, but she seemed tired still, draped over her mama’s shoulders. I reached for her, and Carmela let me take her, happily taking a deep sip of her champagne.

“Come here, you,” I said, taking my little bundle of happiness into my arms and bouncing her gently.

The television was showing the big ball and the countdown was getting low. I took a brief look around the room at my friends and held up my cup. They all joined together with me, and I smiled.

“To a new year and new horizons,” I said.

A chorus of agreement met me, and the countdown began. Carmela sidled up to me and pressed herself into my chest, brushing the baby’s cheek with her thumb.

“Happy New Year!” we chanted as the ball dropped and the clock changed over to midnight.

As *Auld Lang Syne* played and most of us flubbed the lyrics, I kissed Carmela and then kissed Cassie on the top of her head. In that moment, I couldn’t imagine having a better way to ring in a new year. There was only one more thing. It was the reason that Carmela had naked fingers and was reaching into my pocket as we sang and kissed. She wanted to tell everyone as much as I did.

Once the song was over, I dropped the volume on the television and brought Carmela with me to stand in front of it. We looked out over our friends, and I cleared my throat. It took a few moments before everyone noticed what I was doing or stopped making out with their significant others. Ryan and Allison were seemingly very much enjoying their new year already.

“Ryan,” Graham said. “Ryan, can you get your tongue out of Allison’s throat for a second? Mark has something he wants to say.”

“Hoo-rah,” Ryan said as he broke his embrace. “Sorry, guys. Got carried away. You were saying?”

“Thank you,” I said, shaking my head. “So, I wanted to tell you guys first before we let anyone else know. You all are so incredibly important to both of us, and since we couldn’t all get together before now, I figured this would be the best place to tell you.”



“Spit it out,” Camden said. He was grinning wide, and I was glad he was the only one who had known ahead of time. He had embraced the idea of us being together and was sworn to secrecy the day after Christmas to the news of our engagement. I felt like being part of the secret had eased some of his discomfort at his sister marrying one of his best friends.

“Well,” I said, “as Camden suggested, I’ll get to the point. Carmela and I are engaged.”

“What?” Mallory’s voice shouted louder than the explosion of cheers that came as the words sank in. She and Carmela had grown pretty close in recent months, and I knew she would be among the happiest for her when we let the secret out.

“I knew it,” Jess said, running up to embrace Carmela. “I knew it! Congratulations, you two!”

We celebrated for quite a while with them, the girls disappearing to one side of the room to talk wedding details and suggestions for plans while the guys all collected on the other.

“Sorry I stopped smoking, or I’d have the cigars out for us,” Camden said.

“You didn’t smoke,” Graham said, “you only ever had cigars three times a year.”

“Same-same,” he said. “It was a bad habit.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We don’t need them. I’m just happy to have you guys with me.”

“Shame about Victor,” Camden said.

“Why don’t we video call him?” Graham asked.

“We did earlier,” I said. “You were busy talking to Carmela, but he said hey.”

“Oh, well, all right then,” Graham said. “So, when is the wedding?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” I said. “But I kind of hope it’s quick. Not that I’m going to step on her chance to have the

kind of wedding she wants. Especially not with the girls suddenly jumping to help. I can only imagine how complicated that will get.”

“Man, I am happy for you,” Graham said.

“We all are,” Camden said.

I turned to him and saw the genuine emotion in his eyes. He might have been a sucker for beer pong, but it wasn’t the alcohol talking. Not this time.

“That means a lot,” I said.

“Well, it’s true,” he said. “You take good care of my sister. I couldn’t imagine her falling for a better man than you.”

“Hear, hear,” Ryan said. “To Mark!”

“To Mark,” the other boys replied, raising their glasses again.

**T**wo hours and a rideshare call for a couple of them later and the house was empty again. Mallory had taken Graham and Camden home, but Ryan and Allison had chosen to take an Uber to get there faster. With the house empty and Cassie in her crib, I went about cleaning most of what wasn’t already tidied up while Carmela sat on the couch.

I could tell she was exhausted, but she wanted to have a little time with me alone after everything, and I tried to finish up as fast as I could. When it was all done, I came back into the room and turned off the overhead lights. It was a dangerous game I was playing, considering I had a habit of falling asleep on the couch after long days, but I figured as long as they were both in the room with me, I would probably stay awake.

“There you are,” she said sleepily as I sat down next to her.

“Here I am,” I said.

She curled into my chest, and we leaned back in the recliner of the couch.

“I had a wonderful night,” she said. “Happy New Year.”

“I did too,” I said. “Happy New Year, baby.”

“Do you want to go on to bed?” she asked.

“No, we can stay here for a little bit,” I said. “I just want to enjoy this moment with you.”

“Okay,” she said. “Just remember we have a lot more moments to come.”

“Yes, we do,” I said, grinning to myself. “Yes, we do.”



## CARMELA

As soon as we announced our engagement to everyone, the questions started coming. Everyone wanted to know when the wedding was, where we were going to have it, and what kinds of plans we had for it. Mark and I joked that they seemed even more invested in the whole thing than we did, considering we were taking much the same approach to our engagement that we did to our baby being born and just spending some time relishing the feeling of being engaged.

But all the questions seemed to get to Mark, and the morning after our announcement, he told me we could have as long an engagement as I wanted. He wanted me to have the wedding of my dreams and understood that might take time to plan. As far as he was concerned, he would marry me that day. He just wanted to be able to call me his wife. But wanted me to have everything I'd ever imagined.

That was all I needed to hear. I immediately told him I didn't want to wait long. It didn't matter to me if I got all the details I'd ever envisioned. I could barely even remember anything I planned before I fell in love with Mark. The truth was, I already knew he was everything to me. I'd known that for a long time, and I was never going to let go of that feeling.

The only thing that would make it the wedding of my dreams was to marry him. It didn't matter what the rest of the celebration looked like. Mark seemed almost hesitant to believe me when I said that, thinking I was just saying it to agree with him. But I reassured him that the thing that was

important to me was having him waiting for me at the end of the aisle, not anything else.

It helped matters that I genuinely never wanted anything huge and splashy. While other girls were dreaming of weddings with dripping crystal chandeliers, lavish multi-course meals, and several different venues and dresses, my tastes had always run simpler. For me, it wasn't about how elaborate the wedding was, or how much we impressed our guests. The day was about joining us together and the promises we would make to one another in front of everyone we loved.

A simple, beautiful ceremony and fun reception was perfect, and I knew exactly where I wanted it to be. It was just a matter of finding the right vendors and pulling everything together. It only took a few months, and in the soft warmth of an April afternoon, I stood in one of the upper bedrooms of the ranch house looking into a full-length mirror as I did my makeup.

Originally, I'd planned on having a makeup artist come and do my makeup for me, but there were only a couple in town, and they were heavily booked with proms and senior portraits during the spring. Waiting another month until one of them was available just wasn't worth it for me. I wanted to look beautiful for Mark on our wedding day, but I reminded myself I'd done my own makeup every time he'd seen me throughout our whole relationship, real and fake, and he'd always liked what he'd seen.

I didn't want to look like a different person at the altar, just a special version of myself. So, I was doing it myself. I glanced over at the clock on the bedside table and saw I was quickly running out of time. I expected any second for Camden to come knocking on the door to tell me to hurry.

In keeping with our plans for a small, simple ceremony, Mark and I had decided to forgo long lines of bridesmaids and groomsmen on either side of us in favor of a single witness each. Camden was playing two roles, acting as Mark's witness and also walking me down the aisle. Neither one of them particularly appreciated my lawyer joke that it was a conflict

of interest for him to escort me under the pretense of giving me away to Mark when he was also acting as Mark's representative and clearly had his interests in mind. I thought it was funny.

I'd asked Ryan's wife Allison to be my witness and stand up with me. She and I had gotten closer after I helped Ryan secure the property for her bed and breakfast and he started bringing her to the ranch to spend time with the horses. While I was getting ready, I'd asked her to go downstairs and check on the baby, but I was still expecting my brother when there was a quick knock on the door before it opened.

Allison stuck her head in with a bright grin, but it faded when she saw I was still in my satin bridal bathrobe.

"Carmela! Your wedding starts in five minutes," she said.

"Technically, it can't start if I'm not there," I said.

"I'd like to hear you make that argument to a judge sometime," she said. She came into the room the rest of the way and hurried over to me. "Come on. Let's get you dressed. Everyone is ready."

I let her help me slip into my dress. I wanted a simpler wedding, but that didn't mean I was going to give up my opportunity to wear a wedding dress. The one I chose was long and glistening, the blush color perfect for the spring. She helped me get my arms into the lace sleeves and buttoned up the back. She nestled a pearl comb holding a cascading matching blush veil into my hair and arranged the layers of frothy fabric against my back. When she gave me a nod, I turned around and looked in the mirror.

Tears sprang to my eyes as soon as I saw my reflection. Of course, I'd seen myself in the dress, and I'd tried on the veil, but it was different seeing everything put together and knowing this wasn't practice. It was for real this time. In a matter of moments, I'd be walking down the steps and out to a wagon decorated with flowers that would take me to the place where Mark was waiting for us to say our vows.

I did my best to calm my emotions and stem the tears before they smeared my makeup. Fanning my face to cool and dry it, I finally nodded.

“All right. Let’s do this,” I said.

Allison smiled and went to the vase at the side of the room to get my bouquet. Just like the rest of the flowers for the wedding, these weren’t from a florist. Mark and I gathered them from the ranch together, dedicating hours yesterday to collecting the most beautiful spring blooms and putting them in water with a special solution to keep them fresh. The result was a gorgeous burst of color that was a celebration of spring, of nature, and of the ranch itself. It felt authentic to us and was one of my favorite details.

The wagon wasn’t designed as a special entrance for me for the ceremony. It was just to get me close without me having to walk the whole distance. Camden waited for us near one of the stables and helped me down out of the wagon. Allison went on ahead so she could go down the aisle before me. For a few seconds, my brother and I hung back. Emotion was tugging at my chest again. This was one of the moments I thought about often when I was younger and still grappling with the loss of our parents.

It was Camden and me against the world in so many ways. The two of us had to cling to each other and prove we could make it through life with only each other to rely on. It wasn’t always easy, but I was grateful we’d done it. My brother meant more to me than I could ever express, and I’d always known he would be the one to walk me down the aisle when the day finally came.

Now it was here, and I was not only preparing to take that walk, but when I reached the end, it would be to meet with one of his oldest and dearest friends, a man he’d known most of his life. It was more than I ever could have asked for, and I was nearly overcome with the happiness filling me.

“Are you ready?” Camden asked.

I nodded and squeezed his hand. “Yes. Thank you for everything.”



“You, too,” he said. He squeezed me in return. “I love you, sis.”

“I love you, too.”

The music changed, and we headed toward the spot Mark and I had chosen for our ceremony. Perhaps exchanging vows in the middle of a horse corral wasn't the most conventional or expected option, but it was exactly right for us. This was where we reconnected and where I'd announced our fake relationship. Not everyone at the wedding knew that detail, and I liked it that way. It was something for us, and I would treasure it.

We'd selected a straightforward ceremony and a couple of brief readings rather than something long and drawn-out. One thing we agreed on right from the beginning is that we weren't going to write our own vows. We both liked the idea of using an established ceremony with traditional vows that had the prestige of having been repeated countless times before for generations. It felt more real to us, like we were doing something significant rather than just exchanging nice words like we already did all the time.

During the ceremony, I was thankful for our choices. I was shaking as he held my hands and gazed into my eyes. I didn't feel like I would have been able to stay on my feet if we'd chosen a longer version of the ceremony. This was so surreal, and yet it felt exactly right. This was everything I'd been wanting for so long.

Finally, it was time for our kiss, and the officiant declared us husband and wife. My heart leapt, and I joyously leaned into the first kiss from my new husband. Allison handed me my flowers back, and Mark and I headed back up the aisle under the cheers and applause from our friends and family.

After some pictures and reuniting with our baby daughter for a few cuddles, it was time for the reception. I couldn't wait to let loose and celebrate with Mark. We had a spread of all our favorite foods, a huge tent set up in one of the fields was full of light and music, and everyone was cheerful as they congratulated us. It was nothing short of perfect.

During the dancing while our guests were distracted, Mark took my hand and led me out of the tent. We giggled as we scurried through the dark toward the nearest barn. The horses looked at us with their big, soulful eyes as we ducked inside. They'd been specially groomed, and flowers woven into their manes and tails for the wedding, but now they were back to normal and settled into their stalls for the night. We'd decided not to ride off into the sunset on horseback, but that didn't stop Mark from stealing a kiss right there in front of them all.

# EPILOGUE

---

## CARMELA - FIVE YEARS LATER

Looking back at our wedding day on our anniversary, I could still remember the sheer joy and fulfillment I felt as Mark took me into his arms, and we danced surrounded by our loved ones. I'd looked into his eyes and seen everything I'd always been looking for and never knew, as well as the future we'd promised each other.

Even with all the years stretched out in front of us, on that day, I couldn't imagine ever feeling as purely happy as I did then. But I was wrong. The last five years had been the happiest of my life, and more amazing than I would have even dared to dream.

I woke up on the morning of my fifth anniversary to the feeling of a little one squiggling around under the sheets with me. I opened my eyes and saw Mark wasn't on his side of the bed, but a small lump in the covers was moving around as it came up toward the pillows from the end of the bed. I was very familiar with that small lump. It was just two years before when it was still in my belly.

I pulled back the sheets suddenly, and Amelia gasped, then grinned and giggled. I loved that sound. Scooping my toddler daughter up, I kissed her all over her face and the curve of her neck. She still smelled like a baby. It wasn't going to last, I knew that. Cassandra had started kindergarten in the fall, and our son, named after his grandfather, was a little honeymoon souvenir for us, arriving just a couple of months after Cassie's first birthday. They both had their distinctive smells I figured

were stronger for me as their mother, but they'd lost the special baby scent that went with the first couple of years.

We didn't think Amelia was going to be our last. Neither one of us were fond of the idea of having just three children. We'd been talking about having one more and then deciding if our family was complete, or if we were going to commit to a truly large family and keep going.

"What are you doing?" I asked my giggling, squirming daughter.

"Having breakfast," she said matter-of-factly.

I looked around. "There's no breakfast up here. Want to go downstairs and get something?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

I was about to ask what she was talking about when the door to the bedroom she'd left cracked when she slipped inside and wriggled up from the bottom of the bed swung open the rest of the way. Mark came inside, and I immediately saw what she meant. He was carrying a huge tray loaded with plates of my favorite breakfast foods.

"Happy anniversary," he said.

I felt my heart skip a beat. Even after five years of marriage and three children, he could make my heart flutter and give me butterflies in my stomach. I hoped that never stopped.

"Happy anniversary," I said. "What's all this?"

"Five years is a big milestone," he said. "I wanted to do something special."

He settled the tray over my lap, and I looked at the huge spread.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing I have a volunteer to help me with breakfast," I said.

Amelia's little hand snapped out, and she grabbed a strawberry, making her father and me laugh.

"There's one more thing," he said.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “We promised we weren’t going to do anniversary gifts.”

“Don’t think of this as a gift,” he said. “Or at least just think of it as a gift for both of us.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. I took it and opened it, finding confirmations for reservations for a mountain cabin.

“A cabin?” I asked. “We’re going to the mountains?”

He nodded. “Just the two of us. I already have care for the little ones lined up. Allison and Ryan and Graham and Mallory are going to alternate.”

“How long is this?” I asked.

“Just five days. Not even a whole week.”

It was hard to imagine being away from the children for so long, but the more I thought about it, the more excited I got thinking about getting the chance to relax and spend time just with my husband. By the time I finished eating, I was ready to start packing.

The next day, we loaded up the car and headed for the gorgeous cabin. It sat in a lush, wooded area with a beautiful sparkling private lake. The secluded, quiet area meant it was totally private. It reminded me of the destination wedding where we’d first fallen in love, and we hadn’t even unpacked before I was tugging Mark toward the bed with me.

We giggled as we tumbled onto the bed, taking off each other’s clothes in between kisses. It was possible we might just not leave the cabin. Maybe we’d try again for our next anniversary.

**The End**

Enjoyed the story?

Please check out my previous novel that was released

*All stories can be read standalone*

[My Hot Neighbor](#)

Keep reading for a short preview of the story.





## MALLORY - FIFTEEN YEARS AGO...

The bell rang signaling the end of the day for most of the students. In a way, it really meant the beginning of it for me. It was what I looked forward to most, and the only place where I felt like myself. Alive.

I made my way out of the last class of the day, thankful to no longer have to pretend to care about letters that had somehow made their way into math class and what they mean. My locker wasn't too far from the class door, which was a little bit of a relief since that last bell usually meant a mad rush for the exits and getting to your locker was nearly impossible if it were far away.

Normally I wouldn't have to rush, since usually I wouldn't be leaving for a good while. But today was a bit different. Instead of dawdling around the theater, spending time under the lights on the stage just for the sake of it and helping other students' workshop scenes and rehearsals, today I was responsible for helping work on the sets for the upcoming play.

The rest of the crew was due to be there at two-thirty sharp. While theater teachers tended to be a lot more lenient on showing up on time, or even showing up at all, the technical directors ran their departments like a well-oiled machine. The militia of make-believe, as they called themselves. I had joined them to help paint sets and get things together for the play since my role was small in the production, and needless to say their work ethic had shocked me.

Not only were they constantly running around in a craze, but the entire atmosphere was different. I was so used to the dramatic, long-drawn-out discussions about characters and motivations, that the intense silence of people working their butts off, building and painting and hammering and listening to heavy metal was a departure I wasn't quite prepared for. I kind of liked it, though.

Still, the tech director was a hard-ass, and that meant I needed to get to the stage as fast as I could in order to help them lay out canvas to paint with. It was also my duty to bring the paints and canvas to the stage, since I was the last one who'd borrowed them from the art department.

With my hands full with my canvas and paint tubes piled together, I shut my locker with my elbow and sent up a silent prayer that I could make it all the way to the theater without dropping anything. That lasted about ten seconds.

I rounded a corner, hugging the wall tight to avoid the rush of kids that were streaming past. Most of them were apparently oblivious to me, though that wasn't new. Who noticed the mousy girl with the hairbow and ill-fitting dresses that never seemed to make any good of the shape of my body? No one. Not outside of the geeky but sweet boys in the theater production class, but none of them had the gall to actually talk to me. I might as well have been an alien to them.

Two hurried steps after rounding the corner and every thought about boys, my lack of fashion style or dreams of being a big famous actress were tossed summarily aside in an ultimately failed attempt to keep my balance and not drop everything in my hands. I collided with someone big enough that it was like hitting a brick wall. Paint supplies went everywhere, the canvas unfolded itself and spread over the bottom half of me as I fell and landed on my ass, staring up at a belt buckle.

Oh no.

Not the belt buckle I knew all too well.

Graham Miller was tall, talented, gorgeous, and ultra-athletic. He was the star of the baseball team, and everyone

knew, without the whisper of a doubt, that he was destined to put little Murdock, Texas on the map by making it to the major leagues. Indeed, scouts were a regular occurrence in the stands. They would check out when the team came to bat, but any time Graham Miller took the mound, they were on the edges of their seats.

He was perfect. At least I thought so. I'd had a crush on him for three years running, and even his tacky insistence on wearing massive belt buckles did nothing to dissuade me from going to every game. I would sit in the crowd on the top bleacher, usually with an umbrella spread over me to keep from getting sunburned. It was that kind of sweet crush that you fawn over that makes you reach for every chance you get to see them. But right now I couldn't think about that. Not when I felt like a giant fool in front of him.

Slowly, my eyes trailed upward, doing everything they could to stay focused somewhere near his belt buckle but perhaps a bit lower. I didn't want to look up. That's where his face would be. A face that would be staring down at me. And probably laughing.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall as I scrambled to my knees and began sweeping the mess I made towards me.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, repeating myself in a voice that felt like it was far away.

"Hey, it's okay," he said, kneeling down. Suddenly, I felt a jolt of white-hot electricity and looked down to see his hand on my shoulder.

He was touching me.

"Sorry," I repeated again, though the words barely escaped my lips.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his eyes focused on mine.

"I'm fine," I muttered after a moment, struggling to regain the ability to control my lips. "I'm fine. I'm sorry. I was clumsy."

“No, you’re fine,” he said. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. Here, let me help you.” Graham started picking up bottles of paint and pulling them toward me. “Do you need help carrying this? It’s a lot of stuff.”

“No, I’ve got it,” I lied. “I just... lost my balance for a second.”

“Seriously, I can help,” he said. “I don’t need to be at practice for another half hour. I was just going to go grab a shower first.”

Something inside my stomach did a gymnastics routine at the thought of him in the shower running through my mind. I had to clamp that down like a vise, both so I could have any functioning capabilities at all and so I could crystallize it and think about it later.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, standing with the canvas and paint on top. Almost immediately, a couple bottles fell, and as I reached for them, the canvas unfurled and fell again too. “Shit.”

I clamped my hand over my mouth. I never cursed.

Graham just grinned. It was the kind of grin that had the ability to melt. I couldn’t seem to feel my fingertips all of a sudden.

“Where are you headed to?” he asked.

“You don’t need to help,” I said. “I’m sure you’re busy. You have way, way more important things to do than help me carry things to the theater.”

“The theater it is,” he said, smiling. “Here, I’ll take that.”

Reaching around me, he grabbed the canvas and folded it back up easily. He was so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. His cologne was warm and spicy, and I felt like I could slather it on my pillow and sleep forever, happily.

Graham stood, somehow carrying everything in one arm and holding the other out to me. The light behind him on the ceiling made a halo around his head, and for a moment, he looked like a hero from one of those comic book movies. He

might as well have been. Graham Miller, baseball superhero from Gotham... or something. I was a bit behind on big explosive summer blockbusters. It wasn't like anyone was taking me to the movies, so when I went, it was to whatever romance chick flick I wanted to see.

I took his hand and felt like my knees might just not work when I got upright. Thankfully, they had just enough to hold on, and when he let me go, I briefly thought about how I might just stand around and look at my hand for a while later. He had held it. With his pitching hand no less.

"So, what's the play about?" he asked. "I keep meaning to go to one, but I'm always so damn busy."

"The play?" I asked, suddenly going completely blank. Then it hit me. I was having a conversation with him. A real, one-on-one, real-person conversation. Not one where I was making up the whole thing in my head while I daydreamed about him, but one where actual words were going to have to come out of my mouth. Lovely words. Words that showed interest in me and what I do.

Hell, I would take any words at the moment. He was looking at me and waiting. Panic struck my throat, and I tried to force something out. Anything.

"Death," I said.

Nope, that wasn't it.

"Death?" he asked. "Kinda morbid, but cool."

"I mean, it's about death, but also struggle. It's a classic, but not many people know about it. *Camino Real*. I play a small character this time around."

"Cool," he said. "You do a lot of acting?"

"I try," I said. My cheeks were burning, and I knew the smile on my face probably looked crazed, but I couldn't help it. We were halfway there, and I felt like time was slipping away so fast. Before I knew it, we would be there, and then the conversation was going to be over. Why couldn't I think of something interesting to say?

“You should try out some time. You would have been perfect as Kilroy,” I said.

“Me? Nah,” he said. “I’m no actor. I bet you’re great, though.”

My cheeks pinked quickly, the heat crawling up my neck intensely, and I opened my mouth to say something else when his head turned as Debbie Lee, the prettiest girl in the school walked past. She was smart and beautiful, and all the boys wanted her. All the girls wanted to be her. And she looked at me like I was personally violating her eyes.

“Graham,” she said. “What are you doing here? You’re going to be late to practice.”

“Oh, hey, Deb,” he said casually. Of course it was casual. People like him moved in circles with people like Debbie Lee. They even called her ‘Deb.’ “I was just helping her get some stuff to the theater.”

“Well, you need to hurry,” she said. “Marcus said your practice got moved up because of the rain coming in. There’s a scout here today too. That’s more important than”—she looked me up and down— “whatever this is.”

“I’ll be there, Deb,” he said.

“No, now,” she said. “Marcus made me promise if I saw you, I would deliver you personally. He wants you to make him look good like you promised.”

“Marcus is a catcher,” Graham said offhandedly to me.

“Oh.” I nodded. He might as well have told me he was a triangle in a banana suit for all it meant to me. “It’s fine, I can handle it on my own. You should get to practice.”

“Sorry,” he said as I took everything out of his hands and staggered away a step. “Good luck with the play!”

I smiled at him but sighed under my breath. As Graham walked away, Debbie Lee took an extra second to look me over one last time before she pranced off behind him. She was undoubtedly going down to the field to watch practice herself. I knew enough to know baseball didn’t have cheerleaders, but

in the case of someone like Graham, I was sure she was looking for a way to change that.

I made it to the theater workshop and dropped everything on a table. As I did, I sighed to myself one last time. I guessed the only way to not think about all that was to throw myself into the work. It was always the best remedy to dissuade my thoughts.





## GRAHAM

Curve, low and away. Not my favorite, but I got it. The scouts like seeing the curve, even if it isn't as polished as the slider. Personally, I found the curve didn't work as well outside. Down and in, that was the ticket. They always swung like they were trying to hit a golf ball, and if they did make contact, it was either a lazy fly ball or they stung it right into the ground in front of them.

I wound up, spread, and pivoted my hips, nearly bouncing on the rubber as I shot my body forward as violently as possible, twisting my arm so the ball came out of my hand at an angle that was almost upside down. The rotation would make it appear to come in almost straight and then dive away, losing speed and curving instead of falling.

It hit the dirt right where Marcus's glove was. He pulled it up and out, holding it above his head to an invisible umpire. It was theatrical, but it helped his game. Showing instincts like that meant he was a good framer behind the plate and had soft hands. Things scouts liked to see.

I was happy to do it for him. He was a good guy and a better batter mate. I knew that once we went off to college, we would lose touch, but for now I appreciated having someone behind the backstop who could dig balls out of the dirt and make it look like I meant to do it. Of course, in this case, and in most others, I did.

He tossed the ball back to me, and I did my traditional walk around the mound, bending over to bounce the resin bag

on my hand and letting my body get loose. I was still only warming up. The speed gun behind the plate, connected to the big black and yellow electric sign, showed my fastball only hit ninety-three.

I could get it higher than that.

My mind wandered as I tried to loosen up my arm. Usually, I would stare out into right field and think about one of my classes. Maybe one of the books in English class, or some complicated math concept I was learning in trig. Not this time. This time it went to the cute, nerdy girl I'd helped get to the theater earlier. What was her name?

I realized I didn't know it. I recognized her in the vague way I recognized any number of people who saw me in the halls and knew who I was. I was a celebrity in Murdock already. But certain people were always around. I wondered where I had seen her. She didn't seem like a fan.

Whoever she was, she was cute in an artsy way. She seemed so excited about the play she was in, and it made me want to know more about it. More about her. I liked that kind of energy. It was the kind of energy I had for baseball, and I admired it when I saw it in someone else, regardless of the subject.

Shrugging, I shelved the thought of her for later. Right then, I needed to focus on my two-seamer. It had a little less miles-per-hour, but it made up for it with what coach called 'stank.' It certainly had some stank to it. I found my grip and took my spot on the rubber. I shook off two calls until he shifted to three fingers down. I nodded and set myself.

The two-seamer was going to impress. It always did.

As I got out of the locker room a little while later, I high-fived Marcus and nodded in the direction to Coach. Someone was in the office with him; I could see them through the glass doors. I didn't care, though. It didn't matter who it was. All that mattered was that Coach kept them away from me. I just wanted to focus on getting as good as I could on my own, without some representative offering his two cents.

I slipped into the school, which was quiet and dark. Mostly everyone was gone now, even the teachers who opted to stay late and grade papers in their classrooms rather than home. I enjoyed this time of evening. Tired, accomplished, and able to roam the halls peacefully with only the occasional janitor to say hi to before I made my way home.

It was then that I noticed a light on in a room in the distance. I walked toward it, thinking it might be one of my teammates or one of the teachers. As I got closer, I realized it was the theater workshop. Peeking my head inside, I saw the girl from earlier. Grinning, I opened the door and made her jump, dropping the brush she had in her hand as she worked on painting what looked like a scenic backdrop.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to spook you,” I said.

“It’s fine,” she said, holding one hand over her chest.

“You don’t look fine,” I said, laughing. “Seriously, I just wanted to come say hi again.”

“Really, it’s okay. I’m sorry again about earlier,” she said. “It was a mess. I hope I didn’t get paint on you.”

“Nah, just a little spot of blue on my hand,” I said. “Was it hard getting all that cleaned up? It looked like it kind of got you pretty good. Your back is a couple different colors.”

She cringed, and I realized she might not have known. Turning to try to look behind her, she saw what I was talking about. I had been nice by saying it was her back. It was actually, primarily, her ass and the back of her legs. They were a variety of colors, but the most prominent was yellow. Her jeans looked like they were out of an early nineties’ music video.

“I haven’t gotten it all cleaned up yet,” she said. “I still have to go back to the spot in the hall and finish cleaning that up before I leave. I told the janitor I would do it.”

“I could help,” I said. “I mean, it was partially my fault.”

“No,” she said. “No, you don’t have to do that.”

“Really, I don’t mind,” I said. “I insist. It’s already late. You shouldn’t have to stay that much longer because some oaf ran into you in the hall. I could have been occupying any other space.”

She laughed, and her cheeks flushed. She was even cuter that way. Something about her was drawing me, and I could barely even acknowledge it, much less put a finger on it.

“Okay,” she said. “Just let me clean this up. I figure this is good enough for today.”

“It looks amazing,” I said, stepping a little more into the room and admiring the backdrop. It was a desert, with old Spanish-style buildings rising on either side and a road leading out of a long white building in the back.

“I can’t take all the credit,” she said. “Tennessee Williams was pretty explicit about how the thing was supposed to look.”

“Tennessee Williams... that’s the *Streetcar Named Desire* guy, right?” I asked.

Her jaw noticeably dropped, and she shifted to one foot.

“Yes,” she said. “How do you know that?”

“Watched the movie in English last year. Brando was great,” I said, then put on an affected voice that was my best impression of him. “I coulda been a contendah!”

She laughed, a deep guffawing laugh. It wasn’t the demure bubbly laugh that girls tended to do when I said something I thought was funny, or when I made a reference that went past them and they wanted to pretend they understood. It was genuine, loud, and somehow extremely attractive. It made me reciprocate the widest smile I could manage.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s right. It was a play first. Brando played the part on Broadway, too.”

“Cool,” I said. “So are you ready?”

“Yeah,” she said, tossing the brushes into the sink and rinsing them off, shaking her head. “Let me get the cleaning stuff.”

She crossed the room and grabbed a couple of buckets and mops from where they were leaning against the wall. I shrugged, taking the bucket and filling it with water and carrying it with me to the hall, following her to the spot where we ran into each other.

“How did you get this stuff?” I asked. “The cleaner you poured into the bucket is the stuff they keep locked up in the janitor closet.”

“How did you know that?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I know Tom,” I said. “Usually when I’m done with practice, he’s still here cleaning up. I recognized it.”

“Well, I know Tom too,” she said. “We’re pretty tight, I guess.” She laughed again and knelt down to start swabbing away at the paint stain on the floor. I joined her. “I am known for being a little bit clumsy.”

“Ahh. We have one mutual friend then,” I said. “He’s a good guy.” She giggled and nodded, focusing on the spot on the floor and occasionally looking over at me. I moved so I could be across from her, working on the same big spot with my own rag and cleaner. “So, you were telling me about the play.”

“Huh?” she asked.

“The play,” I said. “You were telling me about it before Debbie Lee interrupted us.”

“Oh,” she said. “It’s a Tennessee Williams play. But I guess I already told you that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve never heard of it before, though.”

“A lot of people haven’t,” she said. “It’s not one of his better-known works like *Glass Menagerie* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It’s kind of surrealist and silly, while also being very gut-wrenching.”

“You said I would like the lead, right?” I asked. “What did you mean by that?”

“He’s an athlete,” she said. “A boxing champion. Only he has this heart condition and is going to die if he doesn’t find a

way to treat it. It's too big. So he goes to Camino Real and falls in love with a prostitute."

"Whoa," I said. "They let you guys do that kind of stuff?"

"Well, it's not explicit or anything," she said. "You have to pay really close attention to understand that part of it. Can you hand me that dry rag?"

I nodded and grabbed it for her. She proceeded to wipe up the spot she was on, the paint coming up easily, and she grinned.

"This is good stuff," I said, gesturing toward the cleaning bottle. "No wonder they keep it locked up."

"You sound like an alcoholic," I laughed. She also chuckled, rolling her eyes.

We kept working on the stains for a few more minutes as she told me all about the play. The story was fascinating, if a little hard to follow, but the way she told it, with the passion she had, it was magnetic to listen to.

With the paint all cleaned up, I helped her get the cleaning supplies put away as she took a paper towel and started wiping down her arms. When she looked down at her shirt, she groaned.

"What?" I asked.

"I have paint all over me," she said. "It was just on the back of my jeans, but now I've got it everywhere."

"No, you don't," I said. I dipped my finger into the paper towel in her hand, picking up a smudge of light blue paint and then touched her nose. "There. Now it's all over you. Lucky for you, that's a really good color on you."

Grinning, I winked and grabbed my duffel bag and snapped off a wave. I walked away before she could say anything.

\* \* \*

**\*\*End of Preview\*\***

Grab the story here today.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank for you taking the time to read my latest release.

I hope you loved reading my story, as much as I enjoyed writing it.

It would mean the world to me if you could take some time to leave a quick review for this book. Reviews allow me to understand how my readers truly feel, and they keep me improving to be better.

I appreciate you supporting me, thank you so much.

- Natasha L. Black



## BOOKS BY NATASHA L. BLACK

### Men of ALPHAbet Mountain Series:

[A is for Aiden](#)

[B is for Brett](#)

[C is for Carter](#)

[D is for Deacon](#)

[E is for Everett](#)

[F is for Finn](#)

[G is for Gerry](#)

[H is for Hawk](#)

[I is for Ian](#)

\* \* \*

### The King Brothers Series:

[Forbidden](#)

[Off-Limits](#)

\* \* \*

### *The Rockford Falls Romance Series:*

[Hot Cop](#)

[My Fake Husband](#)

[The Lumberjack's Nanny](#)

[I Hate You](#)

[Falling in Love](#)

Complete box set below:

[Rockford Falls Romance: A Secret Baby Romance Collection](#)

\* \* \*

### *The Anderson Brother Series:*

[Second Chance Baby](#)

[Taboo Boss](#)

[His Best Friend's Sister](#)

[Boss Daddy](#)

The Marriage Contract

Complete box set below:

The Anderson Brothers: A Secret Baby Romance Collection

\* \* \*

***Freeman Brother Series:***

Millionaire Boss

Millionaire Daddy

Millionaire Crush

Millionaire Hero

Millionaire Best Friend

Complete box set below:

The Freeman Brothers: A Secret Baby Romance Collection

\* \* \*

***Forbidden Lovers Series:***

Billionaire Boss

Date Your Brother's Best Friend

Falling for my Enemy

Forbidden Crush

Damaged

Complete box set below:

Forbidden Lovers: A Contemporary Romance Collection

\* \* \*

***Secret Daddies Series***

His Secret Baby

CEO's Secret Baby

Boss's Secret Baby for Christmas

Daddy's Secret Baby

My Ex's Secret Baby

Bad Boy's Secret Baby

Complete box set below:

Secret Daddies: A Contemporary Romance Box Set

\* \* \*

***Alpha Male Collection:***

Forbidden Daddy

Redemption

Protecting Her

Saving Sky

Protecting Sasha

Complete box set here: *Men in Charge*

\* \* \*

***Reverse Harem/Ménage Collection:***

Double Dirty

The Cabin

Double Trouble

Training the Rookie

Cuffed to my Roomies

Complete box set here: *One Lucky Girl*

\* \* \*

***Fake Marriage Collection:***

Pretend You're Mine

Pretend I'm Yours

Let's Pretend

Faking It

Complete box set here: *Playing Pretend*

\* \* \*

***Other stories you may enjoy:***

Back To You

Brother's Best Friend

Forbidden Protector

Sweet Tooth

# CONNECT WITH NATASHA L. BLACK

Natasha L. Black is an Amazon Top 100 bestselling author. Dreaming and fantasizing ever since she was a young teenager, her love of writing flourished from a very early age. After working for 15 years as a veterinarian, she now follows her passion in writing for a living. She currently resides in a lovely country home in a rural area of Dallas, writing steamy novels to fulfill her readers' desires.

\* \* \*

Want to contact me? Please e-mail me at: [contact@natashablackpublishing.com](mailto:contact@natashablackpublishing.com)

Follow me on [Bookbub](#), [Goodreads](#), [AMZN](#), and [Facebook](#) by clicking the icons below!

