



NEEDING

HIS TOUCH

MEN IN CHARGE

TORY
BAKER

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MEN IN CHARGE

BOOK 6

TORY BAKER

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“You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased.” - Darcy

PLAYLIST

Needing His Touch Playlist

wait in the truck (feat. Lainey Wilson)- Hardy

Delta Dawn- Tanya Tucker

Wouldn't Have to Miss You- Pecos & the Rooftops

23- Chayce Beckham

Can't Tell You No- Muscadine Bloodline

Sleeping Alone- Flatland Cavalry

Wild as Her- Corey Kent

I Remember Everything (feat. Kacey Musgraves)- Zach Bryan

Wild Ones (feat. Jelly Roll)- Jessie Murph

I've Been Thinking- Brooke Lee

Wilder Days- Morgan Wade

Fade Away- Rob Baird

All I See Is You- Shane Smith & the Saints

Daylight- Watchhouse

To Be Loved By You- Parker McCollum

Beauty in the Struggle- Bryan Martin

Memory to Drown- Bryan Martin

Dancing in the Sky- Sam Barber

Oh My God- Adele

BLURB

One look and I knew the new girl in town would be mine.

Carsynn was the last thing I expected after coming home from being out of town for work. The whole time I've been gone, Gramps has talked about the pretty waitress non-stop. It's not until I walk into the diner and see her with my own two eyes that I get it. She does too, judging by the way her cheeks flush when I catch her watching my every move.

When the cold weather turns suddenly, it's me out on the iced over roads rescuing the woman who has me thinking of forever.

Now we're snowed in, she's wearing my clothes, sleeping in my bed, and is giving me the sweetest gift possible, herself.

PROLOGUE

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Carsynn

Today is the day. Today is the motherstinking day. It's pathetic. No, I take that back. *I* am pathetic. A whole lot naïve, too. I should have known things weren't ever going to get better. They haven't thus far, and now here I am, at the age of twenty-five, feeling as if I'm double the age I truly am. My body hurts, my heart aches, and my soul yearns for an easier way of living. I should have taken the scholarship and run. What person doesn't take the opportunity given for zero dollars? Oh yeah, that would be me, and the reason for that is currently yelling in my face.

“You're a piece of shit, Carysnn. I should have aborted you when the clinic gave me a choice.” Dear old mom is at again, as usual when Dad leaves to go on a three-day bender. There once was a time when I'd look at her and see so much of myself that I was happy. Lucky even to have her genes. Now I'm thankful I don't have an addiction, and I know what it can destroy all too well. My mom is a shadow of herself. Her skin is paper thin, her hair is brittle, and I swear her teeth are starting to decay. We no longer look anything alike. Well, maybe there's one thing we have in common—the bags beneath our eyes. Mine are from working doubles, whereas hers are from drug abuse. Two very different scenarios, but one I'm getting myself out of. If I'm going to work my fingers to the bone, I'm at least going to come home at night to a peaceful and happy home.

My dad, on the other hand, well, we look nothing alike, not at all. We've never been close, and now that I'm older, it's even worse. I'm still unsure of how he's able to maintain his job in order to pay for his penchant of alcohol. Probably because even alcoholics can function enough to get their next fix. All I know is I'm the one who pays the rent, power, water, and groceries. When I started working at the legal age of sixteen, all I thought was *yes, now I won't go to bed hungry*. I can take care of myself, save money to get out of this hellhole. The joke was on me. The money I worked for was taken away the second my mother got a whiff of cash. A never-ending saga in this house with four walls, a roof, and running water.

I remain silent. Mom is itching for a fight, ready to continue on her tirade, and I've learned that the less I say, the faster she'll go away. Which is what she needs to do, soon. A lightbulb went off a few months ago, on one particular night when I came home after working a twelve-hour shift. Both of them were home, one womb donor and one sperm donor coming right up. They were sitting on the couch in front of the TV, Dad drunk on his beloved bottle of cheap rum, Mom much the same except she likes to take pills.

Everything became clear. The need to get out of here as fast as possible hit me. If I didn't, I'd end up being exactly like them.

"Got nothing to say for yourself, do ya? Just standing there like the mute girl you are!" She sways on her feet, slurring her words and enunciating each in anger. I'm not exactly sure the reason why she's always so angry and Dad's always the quiet one.

I shake my head. Mom can call me everything in the book. Tonight is the night. I've been scrimping and saving, working as much as possible without raising an alarm of where I am or what I'm doing. Talk about always being on edge, going so far as to barely sleep at night due to a whole different type of dread of what could possibly happen. It's the fear of uncertainty, who they could let in through the apartment door if Mom owed money to a dealer, or what she was doing to make extra money on one of her particular bad benders.

Tonight, though, tonight is the night. As soon as she's passed out on the couch, I'm out of here. It's time I put myself first.

There's no saving people who don't want to be saved.

Had that been the case, I'd have worked my fingers to the bone in order for that to happen.

Obviously, it's not. They can figure out the bills on their own. I put my extra money in a different bank account, so neither of them are any the wiser. And they were both too blitzed out to realize my late shifts at the diner. On the rare occurrences they were still awake, I'd climb the fire escape and sneak into my bedroom of the small two-bedroom apartment.

"Useless. You're useless, Carsynn." She smears my name, yet I should be the one calling her those names. Especially after the car accident we were in when I was nearly six years old. Somehow, Mom came out unscathed yet addicted to pain medicine by what I know was faking an injury and smooth-talking her doctor. Meanwhile, it was my side of the vehicle that suffered most of the impact, literally and figuratively. Mom ran a red light, we were T-boned, and I sustained a fractured wrist, broken collarbone, and a concussion. The only thing that saved me from getting hurt worse was sitting in the backseat, always my first and only choice. The further away from my parents, the better off I am.

The slamming of the front door allows me to breathe. "God, if this is you watching out for me, thank you. Also, please give me ten minutes to get out of this place without her returning." I look up at the water-stained ceiling with a smile on my face for the first time in, well, ever. I take a deep breath, unsure why since the air in the apartment is anything but fresh. This life of turmoil ends today.

I've got a solid game plan, a new place to live thousands of miles away from Virginia. I'll be in New Hampshire in less than a day and far away from parents who think I'm nothing but an ATM machine.

What I don't expect is becoming stranded on a desolate road and a gorgeous man stopping to save me on a cold snowy

night.

CARSYNN

PRESENT DAY

“O rder up, Cars,” Denny shortens my name. He’s my new employer at my job here in Plaine Hills, New Hampshire. Everything is new and exciting while also scary at the same time.

I wish I could say it’s been all hearts, fairies, and unicorns thus far. Well, it’s not. It’s been shit, shit, and more shit. Let me amend that. On the way here, it was like the saying ‘*When I was a kid, I walked to school uphill both ways while it was snowing.*’ My phone tried to sabotage me; the cell phone provider I was hoping to use until I was an hour outside of Plaine Hills decided to take a massive dump. I had zero reception, was lost for a good hour, and I’m pretty sure I went around my ass to get to my elbow. After finally finding a small strip mall, I parked my car and locked everything I owned in my small vehicle. My stomach was full of lead, worrying about leaving everything I owned while I walked inside with my purse strapped across my chest, hand on the pocket even though it was zipped. Inside my small bag was the start of my new life: more cash than I wanted to travel alone with, breaking every cardinal rule in the book. Thankfully, the pre-paid semi-smart phone I have now works and is cheap. I don’t need a lot, no frills or thrills necessary. I’ve had more than my share of excitement to last me two lifetimes.

“Thanks.” I grab the plates from the warmer when the food comes out, not that they sit under the heat lamp very long. The morning rush had us all hustling. There wasn’t much time to pee, let alone think of anything except making sure each guest

in my area had their drinks full, their food was hot, and then they were heading out the door after paying their bill. It wasn't the relaxed feel it is now. Gone is the crowded diner, and in its place is a much more peaceful thrum. There's no more loud clinking of silverware, no more voices carrying over one another, and finally, the television is on mute. The news is nothing short of depressing, droning on and on about the same thing over and over again. It's not my idea of fun. It's pure torture. As soon as the clock hit nine, I grabbed the remote to turn it off like I have been since I first landed this job.

"You got it," Denny responds. He's half-owner of The Sunshine Diner. His wife, Nikki, is the other half, and she runs this place like a well-oiled machine. Between Denny, Nikki, another waitress, Olive, and now myself, we've got it down to a science. Olive and I work the early mornings, Monday through Saturday. Sometimes, Nikki will come in to help or give one of us a day off in the middle of the week. Denny and his wife close down most days unless they ask if we want extra hours. I almost always take them if Olive doesn't. I don't need to make as much money as I used to, but having a nice nest egg as a cushion really helps.

I take my plate to my only table. Once he's gone for the morning, I'll be able to take a quick break.

"Here you go, Mr. McCoy." I place the eggs benedict with two sides of bacon in front of my usual. On my first day an older gentleman in his late seventies struck up a conversation, talking about everything. Where I came from, why I left, what I'm up to. He managed to sneak his way into my heart, had me sitting down for a quick break, and I told him everything, dumping all my childhood and adulthood trauma on him.

"Girl, I told you more times than I can remember. Call me, Bernie. And sit down for a minute. I know Denny and Nikki owe you a break. Come chat with me a minute." Mr. McCoy isn't leaving much room for argument, and I'd drop down in the vinyl booth if it weren't for my stomach growling.

"Alright, Bernie. Let me put my order in, grab the coffee pot for your refill, and I'll take a seat." Denny and Nikki offer one free meal on every shift. A perk I have no problem

cashing in on. It's one less meal to have to worry about, and I make sure it's packed full of protein, vegetables, and carbs to hold me over until dinnertime. Is it healthy to only eat one real meal a day? Absolutely not. Do I like eating what I want, usually a platter of cheese, crackers, and fruit? Absolutely, but a girl dinner is a must after not having the choice for too many years to count. While yes, I could have cooked and kept a pantry full at my parents' house, I did not and would not. The reason is they'd probably have sold the food for their next high or bottle of liquor.

"Don't take too long. You look like you're dead on your feet," Mr. McCoy acknowledges. I must be limping or rubbing my lower back again. I was trying to hold off for a few more weeks, but sadly, I think this weekend's agenda is going to consist of heading to the mall where I purchased my phone.

"You got it, and I'm okay." I don't stick around any longer. He'll try and tell me to quit coming by the one day a week to help out, and that will make me cry. You see, as much as I've helped him, he's helped me tenfold. The grandfather figure I've never had, a friend when I never really knew what a real one was. The friends I did have slowly disappeared when all I did was work my life away, and let's face it, my life was full of secrets. Especially when you're trying to hide the fact that your parents are addicts and don't care about you.

"Hey, Denny, I know it's technically still early, but is there any way to get a deluxe club with hashbrowns?" I make it back through the maze of tables, picking up a few plates, cups, and trash. Olive and I have a system—I'll clean up, and she'll wipe down. It helps not make things too monotonous when we swap out days. My fingers are crossed behind my back, hoping that I'm not requesting too much. I'd prefer French fries, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Sure thing, hon. Everything's out and ready to be made for the basics when it comes to lunch. You don't have to worry, Carsynn." His chef's hat is askew on his head, and the white apron he's wearing is stained, mainly in the midsection. Denny is a burly man, tall in stature, yet he's a softy deep down inside. I think Nikki plays a big part in his personality.

They both are nicer than anyone ever has to be, going the extra mile for their employees.

“Thanks, Denny, I really appreciate it.” After eating more breakfast food than I cared to in the past couple of weeks, I’m thankful for the reprieve.

“Go have a seat. I’ll bring it to you.” I nod, swallowing the golf-ball-sized lump forming in the back of my throat. In Virginia, no one was nice like this, and if they were, it was for their own reason and not out of the goodness of their heart.

“Thanks.” I put the plates in the sink to soak and wipe my sweaty palms on my own apron. Another plus in the pro column about The Sunshine Diner is the uniform, or lack thereof. As long as you wear the shirt they provided for you, a few ranging in color from white to butter yellow, to black, Nikki and Denny are perfectly happy. My last job in Virginia was not that way. I’d have to wear a dress-like smock. It didn’t matter the weather or that customers would try to play grab ass, you wore what you were told, and you kept your mouth shut. I know for a fact Denny and Nikki would never allow that to happen. It’s a different pace of life, a different atmosphere, and one that I’m finding I really love.

“Go on. This won’t take but a few minutes. Ol’ man McCoy enjoys your company, considering his grandson being out of town for as long as he has this time around. I’m sure he likes the company as much as you do.” Denny is talking about Gabe, Mr. McCoy’s one and only grandson. He talks about him wistfully on my days off. Days where I have gone over to his house once a week since we formed our friendship. Bernie works fast, a smooth talker in making someone feel like you need them in your life, and vice versa. We’ll sit down in his living room and chat. When I noticed his pile of firewood was dwindling, I got to work on bringing more in. That’s when he told me about his grandson. He waited until the second time I visited him at his house to drop that little bombshell.

“I like the company, too,” Mr. McCoy admitted earlier he enjoyed my company. Gabe has been out of town in a neighboring state, dealing with a natural disaster, a flooding. I guess the relief money was too good for him to pass up. Bernie

likes to joke that we probably passed one another on the interstate. Doubtful, as I was coming from the south and Gabe was heading to the west-ish area of Vermont. Ugh, directions never were my strong suit, and still aren't, as my drive to Plaine Hills was a disaster. Anyway, Gabe McCoy owns McCoy Auto and Towing. He's the owner but has a few guys to run the shop while he is out on the road making extra money. The way his grandfather tells the story, he's using the money he makes to help buy another tow truck and a new bay for his shop. Right now, with him out of town, the guys are using a car tow dolly. Not the best, yet they're making it work. It's not like the small town needs a tow truck driver every day. It'd help all the guys take shifts for being on call. Of course, this is all Bernie's version. Thankfully, I haven't needed any assistance in the mechanic department or needed a tow.

"More coffee?" I ask the customers sitting at the bar after grabbing the pot to refill Bernie's cup. It's a wonder I'm not addicted to what seems to be everyone's go-to around here. Back home, they'd choose between sweet tea, coffee, or juice. Here it seems like they only ever ask for coffee, and on the rare occurrence, water.

"Yes, please." I take care of them and then head to Bernie, doing the same to a few other customers along the way who sit in Olive's section, since right now, all I have is Mr. McCoy, until the next hungry patron walks through the glass double doors.

"Alright, Bernie, I'm all yours." I make it to his table, slide into my seat with a sigh, and pour his coffee sitting down. My body is loving the small reprieve.

"Good. Next time, we'll eat together. I feel like a damn fool eating with a pretty woman in front of me, when she isn't doing the same," he grumbles. I quirk a smile, having no problem hanging out with him while his food doesn't get cold, plus Denny won't take too much longer, so we'll be eating together.

"Tell me about what's on the agenda today," I change the subject. He responds, and we talk until my food is placed in front of me. I wolf it down, hunger hitting me because I've

been up for several hours, and when it's time for Mr. McCoy to go, his hand reaches out to mine and squeezes it gently.

Each time, I have to suck back the tears that threaten to fall.

He has no idea what a simple touch means, a hug, or even having a conversation that's not one-sided or where the other person isn't beating you down. It's all I could ever want, here in this tiny corner of the world, away from my parents, who never cared, and finding my own way. I'm finally breathing freely for the first time ever.

GABE

“Goddamn motherfucking, cock-sucking son of a bitch,” I say under my breath, looking down at the palm of my hand. There’s a jagged cut beneath my thumb. The dirt and grease are not helping matters, and now I’ve got to add stopping by a walk-in clinic to my never-ending to-do list. This day started bad and is turning worse by the hour, between putting this car on a winch, my phone ringing incessantly in my chest pocket, and the onlookers watching my every move. I’m ready to throw my tools into my truck and blow this popsicle stand. Except I can’t, and I won’t. There’s too much on the line, too much money I’ll lose, plus I’m not looking to get blackballed if I walk off the job.

I finish putting the flooded car up on the bed, hitting the lever to flatten it so it’s not an incline, and shake my head. A damn good thing tomorrow is my last day on this job, then I can head home. Though, if I can’t clean this damn wound out myself, I’m gonna be even more behind and unable to leave once the last of my slips are fulfilled. Then I’ll be on my way to help the shop out. As it stands, it has four bays, only two of which have lifts, and one tow truck. It makes it damn hard when I’m the only auto repair shop as well as tow truck driver within a thirty-mile radius. The money I’ve been making for these the past few weeks while leaving the shop to my best friend, Travis, and another guy who’s newly hired, Danny, will go right back into the business. When I took this side hustle, I was only supposed to be on it for a week, but one week turned into three, and now I’m at the end.

Once the car is on the flatbed and strapped down, the gawkers disperse. A good thing because my temper can't handle too much more today. I'm tired as hell, my body aches, and I'm about over drinking coffee for the energy alone. Not to mention it's getting colder out every day. I walk to my driver's side door, open it with my good hand, pull the lever to the seat up, and locate the first aid box. The elbow on my bleeding hand pushes the seat back in place while I open the lid once the kit is on the seat. A bottle of water sits untouched in the cup holder, another one in the cooler I've got in the passenger seat. I try to make as few stops as I can in order to get everything taken care of during the day. Working through the night isn't a whole lot of fun, and I try my best to make sure that doesn't happen.

"Shit." Uncapping a bottle with your non-dominant hand is a pain in the dick. I end up using my teeth while holding the water with my left hand. Meanwhile, my phone stops vibrating only to start up again. My lips curl into a smile even while dealing with my bleeding hand, knowing that the old man gets impatient and worries like an old lady. He's got ample reason. He's buried his wife, his daughter, who was my mom, and then finished raising me. The man hasn't had an easy day in his life. He's worked hard, watched me bust my ass to earn my shot at McCoy's Auto Repair, and when Grandpa Bernie was ready to retire, well, he didn't give it to me without strings attached. Every dime I saved went right into an agreement. I'd given him a lump sum and made monthly payments. There were contingencies. If I defaulted on a payment, he'd take the shop from me and sell it. All my money would go down the drain. I knew what Gramps was doing—he was molding me into the man I am today, one who doesn't go back on his word and works his ass off to prove his worth.

I clean up the gash, noticing it's not deep enough to warrant a hospital or walk-in clinic. It doesn't take me long to clean it up, wiping the wound with antiseptic, grabbing the gauze, wrapping it around my hand to hold it tight, and then using the brown ACE bandage to go over it. The skin on the palm of your hand is impossible to use a Band-Aid on, and I'll

be damned if I'm gonna fuck with it while I'm knee-deep in horse shit.

My phone starts vibrating as I finish dealing with putting the supplies back in the first aid kit. I grab it out of my chest pocket, not bothering to look at the display screen. There are only a few people who would be calling me on repeat: Gramps, Travis, or the sheriff's department regarding good ole Grandpa Bernie. Usually, because he's out trying to do something he shouldn't, pulling someone out of the ditch if I'm not available, digging some hole for God knows what, and the last time it was for Gramps hot-rodding a little too fast down the main highway.

"Can't a man work in peace, old man?" I answer the phone, not an ounce of annoyance in my tone. There's no way he could ever piss me off, even when he calls my phone repeatedly until I answer.

"Can't you answer a man on the first call? And you're damn right old. Older than you, that's for dang sure. Which means you should pick up the phone when I call. What if I was on the floor, saying 'Help, I can't get up,' or needed advice on wooing a lady?" I'm trying to hold back my laughter. The day he makes me get him a damn device to wear around his neck is the day he'll put my ass in the ground. As for flirting with a woman, yeah, right. He's full of shit, so deep I need hip waders to get out of the pile of manure.

"You got a young filly that has your heart pitter-pattering?" I ask, shaking my head as I climb into the truck, throwing my phone in the cup holder once I hit the speaker button. The tow truck is older and doesn't have Bluetooth. A pain in my ass with all the time I've been on the road lately.

"As a matter of fact, I do. For you." Luckily, I hooked the car up, strapped it down, and am ready to put my truck in *Drive* while rolling my damn eyes.

"Not this again, Gramps." He's been on a tangent ever since a new girl landed in town and he took her under his wing. At first, I was worried. A quick call to Travis, then to Sheriff Sanders, and everything was put to bed. Denny and

Nikki wouldn't have hired the woman if she were shit. And seeing as how she sat on the front porch the first time she spent a few hours with my Gramps, it eased the tension in my gut.

“Oh, this again. Get your ass home boyo. Someone else is going to snap Carsynn up, and then you'll have to fight to get her back.” He's been telling me this since two days after I left, not about Carsynn. That didn't come up until recently, but he's been annoying about describing her, telling me every detail about her. Going so far as to say how she reminded him of his wife, my grandma when they were young and in love.

“I'll be home tomorrow night. Does Carsynn know you're trying to hook her up with your grandson, old man?” I ask him, starting my commute. Our conversation can last as little as a few minutes to a few hours. It doesn't matter what he talks about. It could be about the Farmer's Almanac and their prediction, and I'd still give him the time of day and day of the week. The man gave a lot his whole life. Bernie and his wife, Grandma Winnie, married young. She was from Canada and immigrated via a work visa. Once they were happily in love, they were married and had one child, my mother, Naomi. I shake my head, really not wanting to go down memory lane, not when the anniversary of her death is right around the corner.

“About damn time. Now tell me. Did you make enough to keep your ass home for a good long while? It's about time you quit taking these jobs here and there. Surely, you've got enough money in the bank now to do what you want and not have to take another job for three weeks next year?” He's asking a pile of questions he already knows the answers to. When I left this round, I told him it would be the last time. I'd take the equity out of the shop if need be. The place is paid off, and I could have taken a loan from the bank, except I've got a penchant for being a tight ass when it comes to money. I can't imagine where I got that from. Thank you, Bernie McCoy.

“Yep, I'm too damn tired for this shit. I'm not getting any younger. The shop will be in good working order after this

check, and we're staying steadier now that the other place closed down six months ago."

"You bet your ass they closed down, because they were shady little shits," he grunts out his response. He's not wrong. We were getting all of their fuckups, and I had to charge half price because my conscience couldn't handle new clients losing their ass even more.

"Alright, Gramps. I'm going to drop this car off and move on to the next. You need me, you know how to get ahold of me." I'd stay on the phone longer, except I'm going to have to do some paperwork and figure out where the next vehicle is located. Seeing as how half the damn town was an eight-foot-deep river, it's anyone's guess if the car is in a ditch, on top of another car, or sitting in a tree.

"That's fine. I've got to get ready myself. Carsynn is coming over this afternoon, and I'm going to make my famous potato soup. The girl doesn't eat nearly enough and works herself to the bone. Did I mention she reminds me of my Winnie?" *Only about a million times.* I bite my tongue and hum my response.

"Save me some of your soup with a healthy dose of bacon. I sure do miss real food." Eating fast food or hotel continental breakfast has me ready to crawl out of my skin.

"You got it. Love you, boyo. Be safe." One thing Gramps has never been shy about is telling anyone he cares about exactly how he feels.

"Thanks, Gramps, love you, too. Talk later." I wait for his response. Ain't no way I'll hang up first without him saying goodbye. I did that once when I was younger and got a damn earful. Never again.

"Bye, Gabe." I hit the end button and get this show back on the road, more than ready to be back home, this time for good.

CARSYNN

“Home sweet home.” I unlock the door to my place. It’s nice and quiet, the only noise is the heater running in the background. Still, there’s a briskness to the air because I kick the dial down when I leave each morning and turn it up when I get home before I take a much-needed shower. It was sheer luck or some random act of kindness to find this place when I did. The pictures on the social media marketplace seemed nice, and to be honest, pickiness was the least of my concerns. Anything is better than where I came from. My home doesn’t have a ceiling covered in water stains, the walls aren’t yellowed, and the place is beautifully kept up. The air is fresh, the appliances work, and I can take a long hot shower or bath without worrying about someone banging the door down because they need to use the toilet.

I kick off my shoes in the small, tiled foyer. The carpets are beige, and the vacuum lines are still perfect where I haven’t walked after I cleaned the small one-bedroom detached house. It’s not a studio apartment, which was a major selling point. I’ve also gotten into the habit of cleaning every night. Obsessive much? Probably so, but this place is mine, and the last thing I want to do is live in filth. I take my jacket off, hang it on the hook the owner has placed behind the door, and do the same with my purse. The first order of business is a glass of ice water, the book I picked up at the library, and a hot bath. My number one priority when I rolled into town was to secure a place, which I did, in cash. Depleting the majority of my bank account by handing over first month’s rent and a

deposit was hard but so worth it. The apartment came furnished, so all I needed was bedding, towels, cleaning supplies, and food. The second order of business was to find a job, which didn't take me long, seeing as how The Sunshine Diner had a *Now Hiring* sign up in the window. I filled out the application, and Nikki hired me on the spot. I started the very next day, and after work, even though I was dead on my feet and had zero energy in my bones, I left the diner and walked right to the library.

“Start the water first. The hot water is going to take a minute to heat up,” I breathe out loud. There aren't a lot of downfalls to my home here in New Hampshire, minus the well that's run for water. It's downright cold water coming from the faucet, and it takes a while to come out hot. I walk through the tranquil living room. A small couch, coffee table, and end table are on one side, opposite a console table with a flat-screen television. It's small and cozy, not that the TV is on a whole lot, only long enough in the mornings and evenings to check the weather. I'd rather not sit around listening to the news, or anything else for that matter. I prefer my nose stuck in a book or, on the rare occurrence when my tips are exceptionally well, a home decorating magazine.

I make my way into the kitchen, desperately thirsty for water after working at the diner. The weather is getting colder by the day. Ice will be forming on the roads here soon, and I know I'll need to get my car looked at sooner or later to make sure the old girl can navigate the mountain roads. The cream walls are carried through the entirety of the house, making it easy to envision what I can add to the space when spring comes around and there will be more garage and rummage sales. The wooden kitchen cabinets are beautiful, and for this place being a rental, the owner really did go a long way in making it feel cozy. I open the cabinet, grab a plastic cup, and then move to the fridge for my iced water. So much for starting the bathtub first. Clearly, my thirst got the best of me. I don't even bother filling the cup all the way before I'm guzzling it back. Once I've finished the first, I refill it and then head to the bathroom. I guess I'll start the water while I do other tasks. The other thing I'm going to do is kick up the heat

before anything else. There's no way I'm going to be naked and freezing, no thanks. Just because I chose to move further north doesn't mean I want to be an ice cube.

The thermostat is set at sixty-seven degrees. I kick it up another three, making a mental note to turn it back down after my bath. I'll wear my flannel pajamas and throw an extra blanket over me if need be. My rent includes everything, like utilities and cable. The caveat is the power, though. If there's a huge spike, then I could have to pay extra. My savings has dwindled with the move, and now I'm trying to replenish it as fast as possible. I know when the winter storms start hitting, roads could be closed, and that means getting to work will be nearly impossible.

I move to the bathroom and flip the switch. It has two doors, one that opens from the hallway and the other from the bedroom. A plus if you had people staying over. Since that won't be happening, I keep the door to the hallway closed. It's less aggravating when the heat kicks on and closes it in the middle of the night. I learned that lesson my very first night here. It wasn't like I slept a lot the first few nights, getting acclimated to all the new noises, but that had me sitting up straight in bed. A flashback of my past life overwhelmed me, and I sat straight up, sweat coating my body and worry plaguing my mind. When I realized it wasn't someone slamming the front door, a fatigue like no other hit me, and since then, the door has remained shut. I shake my head at the memory, reminding myself I'm safe, away from my parents and their monstrosity of a life. I pull the shower curtain out of the way, turn the faucet all the way to hot, and let the water run while I run into my bedroom to grab my book. The need to soak my tired and achy body has me wishing the water would hurry up. In the meantime, I take off my socks, unbutton my jeans, and then check on the water.

"Wow, that's a shocker." I pull my hand back quickly. The water pouring from the faucet is scorching hot. I turn it down a smidge, close the stopper, and finish taking off the clothes I wore to work. My reflection in the mirror catches my attention. No longer is my skin pale, my cheeks have filled back out, and I'm no longer looking like a walking zombie. I

pull my shirt over my head, dropping it to the floor, watching as my breasts bounce in the almost too-small bra now that I've put on a few pounds. I shimmy my hips, causing my jeans to fall to the floor, and I kick them the rest of the way off. The woman looking back at me is not the same person from a year ago, let alone a month ago.

She's a warrior.

My arm bands around my back, and I flick the clasp to unhook my bra. It loosens, my hands drop, and then my panties follow suit until my clothes are all piled on the floor. I can't help but notice the curves of my body. The tips of my fingers trail up my stomach. A shiver runs through my body, goose bumps pebble my flesh, and my hands take on a life of their own. My head tilts back, eyes shuddering as I cup each breast, my thumb sweeping over each nipple. I never thought I'd be a virgin at the age of twenty-five, yet given life's circumstances, there was no way I'd take a chance of getting stuck in our town. It also didn't help that everyone knew who my parents were. Not to mention when all you do is work, the friends you once had seem to disperse, making plans with others and forget all about you. I can't say I blame them; it's the harsh reality when you lived a life like mine.

"Oh God," I sigh. The lids of my eyes lift slightly. I'm self-confident in the way I look, but putting myself out there for a man after I've conditioned myself to blend in? I pinch my nipples, pulling on them, and feel the direct connection to my core. I work myself up while only playing with my breasts, knowing if I delay moving to my bare center hot and heavy, the orgasm I give myself will be all the stronger. Except today isn't going to be one of those days. I need a release. My shoulders are to my ears, and for no good reason either. Except maybe the regency romance I've been reading. The duke takes his virgin bride, there are rumors that she's not innocent, and when he takes her, there is no holding back. In fact, he bends her over, throws her skirts up, rips his pants down, and rams inside her as she cries out. Only to realize what he's done. Well, the duke makes up for it. He pulls out, drops to his knees, and takes care of her until she's ready.

One of my hands skates down my torso. A shiver races through my nervous system as I make my way to my center. The insides of my thighs quiver, all too aware of the orgasm I'm chasing. I watch the entire show of one in the mirror, hoping one day, a man will be behind me, using his hands on my body instead of my own. I graze my clit with the tip of my finger, and my hand working my breast moves to the vanity counter for purchase. I'm on a hairpin trigger, and I've barely started.

"Jesus, Carsynn," I rasp out loud. The humidity from the hot running water starts to steam up the mirror. My breathing becomes more labored as I slide two fingers inside my wet heat before going back to my clit. I'm careful to never push too deeply. I may be a virgin, but I don't want to be the one to take that from myself. One day, I'll have the courage enough to put myself out there, and it'll be a man who takes me with his cock and not my fingers. I lose my grip on the counter. Thankfully, my forearm holds me up as my head meets the same demise. Trying to hold myself up was futile. My fingers work my clit, clockwise and counterclockwise, as I think of the handsome duke in my book using his mouth on his wife, how she comes all over his face, and how he continues to tongue-fuck her the entire time through her orgasm. I want that, God, do I want to know what that sheer uninhibited bliss feels like, and not by my own hands. I clench my eyes closed. Stars burst behind my lids, and my orgasm takes over. A cold chill coats my body, which makes my fuzzy mind snap back to reality. The bathroom is hot, and the tub is nearly full. I quickly turn the faucet off, make sure my fluffy robe is within reaching distance as well as my book, and then I sink into the hot-as-fuck water. All while wondering what else my latest book boyfriend is capable of doing to his no-longer virgin wife.

GABE

I step out of the tow truck I parked in my grandfather's driveway. Why he insists on living on his own is beyond me, but the man is unwavering in his independence. It would have been nice if he'd have taken me up on living closer to me, except Grandpa Bernie never wants to be a burden on anyone. Once, I'd like him to realize I want to be there for him like he's been there for me my whole damn life.

"About time you get your tail home, boyo." The stretch I was after comes to a screeching halt when Bernie opens the screen door and I'm greeted by the old man who always gives me shit. I should have known he wouldn't keep himself inside where it's warm. Oh no, he chose to stand in the open door, letting all the warm air out of the house. The man doesn't have so much as a pair of shoes on his feet.

"Get inside and shut the door," I throw back at him, neither of us bothering with pleasantries. It's how we communicate our love for one another. I shut the door to my tow truck, pocket my keys, and make my way up the driveway.

"Oh hush, you act like I'm going to wither away from a little cold weather," he retorts, doing the exact opposite of what I'd like him to do. There's no changing his mind. No amount of lecturing will change his mind, and so I double-step it, my long strides eating up the distance between us. I worry about him. He's not getting any younger, and he's all I've got left in this world besides a few friends and the nosey townspeople. Grandpa Bernie is spry and sharp as a tack. He still cooks, cleans, and drives around town. There's nothing

wrong with him for the most part. He's on cholesterol medicine and could probably control more of it if he weren't at The Sunshine Diner five days a week. They do watch his heart since it likes to be a slow ticker at times. Ten or so years ago, he needed a pacemaker. We didn't see it coming. One minute he's talking, the next he was slumping over. A short stay at the hospital, and he was good to go.

"I hear pneumonia isn't any fun, unless you like to flirt with the nurses in the hospital." I wink. Grandpa may be old, but he's not dead, and he's a shameless flirt. The last time he was at the doctor for routine testing, he tried to get a nurse's number. She batted her eyes and let him down easy. Apparently, the ring on her finger wasn't a deterrent. Smooth-talking Bernie was out in full effect.

"It'd be a vacation to be surrounded by so much beauty. Speaking of, get your butt inside. We've got some talking to do." Here we go again. He's been angling to talk to me about something or other. Usually, his last will and testament, whether he wants to be resuscitated or not, what to do with his house and belongings. Last but not least and for what seems like the eighteenth time a day, he'll want to chat about Carsynn. Damn it all to hell, I've heard enough and done enough. Now I'm going to get wrangled into another conversation when all I'd like to do is eat a real meal that's not of the fast food or restaurant variety, see how Grandpa is doing, and then head the fuck home.

"Don't I even get a hug before the lecture? It's been weeks, old man," I tell him after I take the two steps leading up to where he's standing. Grandpa Bernie is in a thin white cotton shirt and plaid pajamas, not even socks on his feet as he stands on the concrete porch.

"I suppose." My hand takes his place, propping the screen door while I give him a one-armed hug. It lasts longer than our usual, probably because I've been gone for so long and it didn't matter that we talked on the phone daily, sometimes more than a few times. I missed him and he missed me. Our bond goes deeper than most grandfathers have with their grandsons. A product of being the only grandchild from his

only child. We both lost a lot, him more than me. I can't miss what I never had, a father who never showed up. My grandparents and Mom never missed a single thing along the way. At any baseball games, I had a cheering squad behind the plate. When I graduated from high school, they were the loudest section on the football field when I walked across the stage. Anything big or small, they were there. It wasn't until Grams died and my mom only a year later, both to cancer, two different types. Grams had bone cancer. We had no idea she was riddled with the nasty disease until she fell and broke her arm. Gramps rushed her to the hospital, pissed at himself that she was trying to ride a bike without him around, only to find out once the doctor came in to set the bones she was riddled with cancer. One scan and a somber look from the doctor later, and we were all at a loss for words. She passed away two months later, only for my mom to be diagnosed with a different type of cancer six months later. Our family was rocked to its core when we heard that vile fucking word again, this time pancreatic cancer. Let's just say our family had a rough couple of years, and I wasn't sure how Grandpa Bernie would be able to recover from it. That was ten years ago. Now, while we miss them, the heaviness isn't surrounding us.

"Missed you, Gabe," Bernie tells me in a hushed tone.

"Missed you. I'm home for a good long time now." We pull apart, I nod, and he gets the clue, finally going inside. "If you're going to meet me at the door, at least put on a pair of socks or your slippers."

"I'll do what I want. I've been an adult a lot damn longer than you've been alive." He shakes his head as he walks inside, and I already know where he's headed, straight to his recliner. "Dinner is in the microwave. You'll have to heat it up. Grab me a glass of milk and my cookies on your way into the living room." He veers left, and I go to the right. Every night, it's like clockwork. He turns on the television, eats his evening snack, and watches professional basketball if there's a game, or he'll watch an old western. How he manages to stay up past midnight most nights and get up to be at the diner by eight the next morning, I've got no idea, except maybe the cat naps he

takes in his recliner in the afternoon might be part of the reason.

“Thanks. What have you been up to, old man?” Usually, when we get on the phone, it’s a few-minute conversation here or there. Gramps told me how busy the shop is when he drives by, the latest stats on his team, and to check in on me.

“You know, same shit, different day. The highlight of my day is The Sunshine Diner and when Carsynn comes over once a week. Which reminds me, I’m going to need more firewood. She’s been bringing it off the back porch for me. The woman reminds me of your grandma and mom all wrapped in one.” I hit the button on the microwave, watching as it lights up and shows me I’m in for a damn good meal. Beef stew on top of a bed of rice. I’ll bet it’s Gram’s recipe, too, big chunks of seared meat before adding the potatoes, carrots, and the rest of the fixings, along with her secret ingredient—rosemary.

“I’ll work on it tomorrow after work.” I pour the two of us a glass of milk and grab the bag of chocolate chip cookies from the pantry where Grandpa Bernie keeps them in stock from the local bakery.

“Thank you. Carsynn helped make our dinner. She stopped by while I was getting the ingredients. The woman doesn’t know how to sit still for a minute, so I offered her a meal if she cut up the vegetables,” he tells me as I carry the cookies under my arm, two glasses in one hand, and my plate of food in the other. His face lights up when he talks about the new girl in town. The man is trying to matchmake. Too bad I’ve got too much on my damn plate to even think about letting my grandfather set me up on a date.

“That’s nice. Is she settling in?” He called me when I was out of town, and she applied for the small apartment I had for rent. You know, the one I built for my grandfather, who refused to move once it was all said and done. It’ll be there whenever he’s ready. In the meantime, I may as well make back what I put into it.

“You’d think she’s on cloud nine. Gone is the girl who rolled into town looking dead on her feet, wary of the world, and too damn skinny for anyone’s liking. Thank you for not requiring first, last, and a deposit. It might have bankrupted her.” He knows me well enough, and I know him well enough that if she couldn’t afford it, then he’d attempt to take care of the fee. It was easier to waive it, even though she didn’t come with a wealth of background in the renting department. Grandpa Bernie is a good judge of character, and since I was out of town, he did most of the work.

“No big deal. She’s been hanging out with your old ass voluntarily. I think I’m making out in the long run.” I wink. He grunts but helps take a few things out of my hands so I can sit down and dig into the first real meal I’ve had in weeks. “Damn, this is real good.” I’ve barely sat down before I’m shoveling a forkful of the stew and rice into my mouth. Gramps opens the bag of cookies and sets them on his lap. He’ll share a meal with you. His cookies are a whole other story.

“Of course, it is. It’s your grandmother’s recipe.” He’s gearing up for more, I can see it written all over his face. Either Gramps is about to ask for a favor or he’s about to lay something out I don’t want to hear.

“What’s on your mind? Spit it out. You know I won’t say no to you,” I say in between bites.

“Good, I want you to pick me up tomorrow morning. We’ll go to the diner and then to the shop. I haven’t been in a while. You’ll probably need help with something or other, and I’m bored.” He’ll usually meet me at the diner, then follow me in his car to the shop. I’m beginning to think he missed me more than he let on.

“I can do that. Normal time?” I ask.

“A bit earlier. I want to make sure we get seated in Carsynn’s section.” And there lies his scheme. I should have seen this one coming. I nod. No use in replying. Grandpa Bernie officially got his way.

CARSYNN

“Wow.” I’m standing behind the counter of the diner the next morning. The early morning rush has come and gone. Now I’m slack-jawed as I watch the McCoys walk through the door. While Mr. Bernie is tall and his stature more on the lean side, Gabe is so much more. I’m not sure how to describe him. All I know is he has to duck his head in order to clear the door and that the pictures Bernie had around his house don’t scratch the surface of his grandson. The older gentleman has always talked about Gabe with nothing but pride in his voice. You’d think his grandson hung the moon. Never in my life have I ever had someone like that in my corner. A hint of jealousy hits me in my sternum even when it shouldn’t. The McCoys had their fair share of heartache, and me being all in my feelings is doing nothing but making me seem like an idiot.

“Here, you’re drooling, Cars.” I’m interrupted when a napkin is thrown at my face. I catch it with one hand. Olive is laughing, and I’m busy ducking my head in embarrassment. No longer am I the shy and standoffish girl around her. We’ve grown closer with each passing day. She teases me, and I have no problem giving it right back to her. While I’m in my mid-twenties, Olive is only twenty, a baby compared to how I feel. When she saw me taking a breather in the break room, a magazine flipped open, my eyes bulging at the most beautiful design I have seen—rich in colors, dark blue walls, mustard yellow, and big, beautiful flowers in different textures—Olive teased me about drooling then, too. At least my nose wasn’t in the same book it was last night. Shew, that would have been

hard to explain, especially the spicy scene I read in the bathtub. The duke now owns his wife completely. She's no longer a virgin of any kind. If only I could have stayed up another hour to finish the book. I break away from my thoughts on my book, and dang it, I really wish my hair were down right about now. I could use the concealment. "He's not looking, Cars, you're good," she whispers once her laughter is under control.

"No way. I'll just see myself out. You don't know me, and you've never met me. Bye now." I spin around. My back is facing Bernie and Gabe, hands covering my face while I worry that I made the biggest fool out of myself.

"Considering Mr. Bernie and his grandson are sitting in your section, waiting on you, judging by the way the older McCoy is tapping his fingers, I'd say your time for running has long since passed." Olive delivers the news like a final blow in *Mortal Kombat*. Great, now I'm going to have the visual and how the cartoon says it in my head all day. I can do this. I've been in worse situations and came up swinging. However, this situation doesn't need me to keep my head down and blend in. This time I'm safe. I can lift my head and allow myself to be brave.

"I can do this," I mutter under my breath, turn back around, plaster a smile on my face, and look at my section, where Mr. Bernie nods his head in good morning. I smile in response, then wipe my hands on the front of my apron, trying to settle my nerves. It's when I go to grab two mugs that I notice my hands are shaking. How in the hell am I going to make it through the next hour, and I haven't even interacted with Gabe McCoy. It's now or never. Unlike living in Virginia, here in Plaine Hill everyone knows the new girl in town. One hand is holding two coffee mugs by their handle, and since my hands are no longer visibly shaking, I grab the pot of coffee and set off to fake it till I make it. I fill up a few customers' cups along the way. My face may show a happy and smiling Carsynn Nichols, but on the inside I'm a damn mess.

"Hey, Mr. Bernie," I greet my friend. "Hi, Gabe, it's nice to meet you." I set the mugs down, already knowing that

Bernie will want his daily cup of joe, no cream or sugar. He said coffee is enough to destroy his body; he didn't need to add anything else to the mix.

“He-ya, sweet pea. You're right on time. This guy made me wait on the porch for ten minutes this morning. An old man like me could get frostbite, you know?” I pour his cup of coffee while shaking my head and chuckling lightly at his antics.

“You coulda stayed your tail inside the house, too.” Pause, then, “It's nice to meet you as well, Carsynn.” I look up from pouring his coffee after finishing Bernie's and am caught in the gaze of gray eyes. Stormy, turbulent, and so all-consuming that I'm sucked into their vortex. It seems everything about Gabe McCoy is unique. I'm going to have a hard time not picking apart every difference between him and Bernie.

“Anytime. Your grandpa is a hoot and a great friend.” I manage to move my focus off Gabe to ask Bernie, “You want the usual?”

“You know it. Is Denny working you too much? I know the owner.” My eyebrows furrow, wondering why he'd bring something like that up.

“You look a little flush. I know you've been working a lot. I don't want you getting sick.” If only he knew the reason why my cheeks are tinged with color.

“I'm good, probably just warm from running around all morning.” Shew, I pulled that lie out of my ass without a stutter. I'm not sure who this woman I'm becoming is, but damn, do I like her.

“Gramps, let her be,” Gabe interjects.

“Oh hush, I can worry about whoever the heck I want.” Bernie's word must be law because Gabe sits there quietly while taking a sip of his coffee.

“I'm alright, promise. Denny and Nikki would send me home if I weren't.” Now that my hands aren't full, I'm able to reach my hand out to Bernie's and squeeze it gently with mine.

“That’s good,” Bernie replies, and I pull back, digging into my apron for my pad of paper in case Gabe’s order is too much to remember.

“What can I get for you?” I can feel the heat of Gabe’s gaze branding my body, which makes me wonder what he sees. I’m not dressed in anything special, a black shirt with the diner’s name in yellow print and a pair of jeans I’ve had for far too long. The knees have holes in them; and not in the trendy sort of way, but in the way I’ve refused to buy anything new unless it’s an absolute necessity. My sneakers are dirty from lots of grime. Even my hair is up in a ponytail, and I don’t have a lick of makeup, not that I’d allow myself to pick up anything extra right now. I’m still too busy trying to pad my savings account and worry that I’ll never be able to get ahead. The need to live debt-free and not paycheck to paycheck comes from my childhood trauma. I also know one day, I’m going to have to figure out a long-term plan. Being a waitress is an honest job, but a career it won’t be, not in the forever kind of way.

“I’ll have the same as Gramps, but fried eggs and breakfast potatoes.” Bernie gets two waffles, two eggs over easy, bacon, and hashbrowns. A small variation and easy to remember, there’s no need to use my guest pad.

“Sounds good. Anything else to drink besides coffee?” I look at both guys. It’s hit or miss with Bernie.

“No juice for me today, Carsynn. Thank you, though,” Bernie says, grabbing the utensils we keep on the table, unwrapping the napkin, and setting his utensils on top.

“None for me either, thanks,” the younger of the two says, though he’s still much older than me.

“You’ve got it. I’ll put your orders in and get it out shortly.” I grab the pot of coffee I had set on the table and make my way back to the counter. Denny and Nikki were smart; the commercial-grade countertops and tabletops throughout the diner can take the heat of the piping-hot coffee. There’s no need to set anything beneath, and it sure helps not to have to hold the pot or make an extra stop between tables. I

weave in and out of the tables, stopping to say hello to Olive's customers, and make sure no one needs anything since she's behind the bar, an area we both split when it comes to tickets. Teamwork makes the dream work and all that jazz. It was an oddity when I first came to work here, but Olive showed me the ropes, being her super friendly and bubbly self. I had absolutely no idea what to think, but it was like she had two heads after coming from my last job.

"I see you survived. I probably should have warned you. Gabe McCoy is larger than life, a hometown legend, one of the good guys, and one of the hottest eligible bachelors in Plaine Hill. The best part is he's humble, gives back, and will do anything for Bernie." Olive comes up beside me while I'm putting the McCoy's order in. Everything is pen and paper, minus the register, which relays the orders to Denny. We have a credit card machine, but it barely gets used. For the most part, people like to use cash.

"I kind of assumed, seeing how great Bernie is. You also never know." I shrug my shoulders, attempting to keep my eyes on the machine instead of Gabe McCoy. The man who made my thighs clench, my heart rate soar, and my cheeks redden.

"Girl, you can act unaffected all you want, but with a man like that, if he were looking at me like he is at you, well, I'd be shooting my shot." Olive wiggles her eyebrows. "In fact, he's looking at you right now. He has the entire time since he walked into the diner. Are you sure you've never seen him before?" What is she talking about? I thought it was me staring at him the entire time, not the other way around. Surely, Olive has this all wrong. I mean Gabe McCoy looking at me. Maybe she's seeing things. My eyes sweep the length of the diner, sneaking a glance at him without being too obvious. It's hard not to be fascinated by him, the way he carries himself, not slouching even though he's got to be close to six and a half feet tall. He's built, has broad shoulders, muscular arms, which are probably bigger than my thighs, and thick corded forearms, and I haven't even mentioned his tapered waist or his ass. My virgin self thought all about the way he'd potentially spread my legs with his thick thighs. How he'd stretch me to the max

in all sorts of delicious ways and leave me feeling his presence for days after.

“You’re wrong. There’s no way.” I drop my eyes back to the register. Surely, my cheeks are showing my blush yet again. I shouldn’t be looking at anything more than his face, but he’s impressive from the top of his light brown hair, dimpled cheek, eyelashes a woman would kill for, down to the impressive package I saw bulging with each slow-gaited movement.

“Girl, he is eating you up.” This time when I sneak another look at Gabe, our eyes lock, and when he gives me the slightest tilt of his lips, I realize maybe Olive is right. That brings a whole other host of worries to navigate. Jesus, this being an adult and allowing yourself to live is not for the faint of heart.

GABE

“I told you she was a looker, and that’s not all either.” I’ve been waiting on the old man to give me hell. The sad part is, Gramps isn’t wrong. My cock stood up and took notice when I walked into the diner. That was before I heard her voice or saw the full package of Carsynn. Grandpa bided his time while we ate, humming here and there, making conversation all while my eyes were glued to her. She’s tiny, much smaller than my frame. Hell, my two hands can probably wrap around her waist so far that my fingertips meet. Olive complexion to my fairer skin, dark hair with natural highlights wrapped up in a tight ponytail. My hands were itching to take hold of the hair tie holding it up and watching as her light waves fell down her body.

I remain quiet as we pull into the parking lot of the shop. Gramps chooses that moment to keep on at it. “Not gonna admit it, huh? That’s the problem with men today. They don’t know how good they have it until it’s gone. Men in my day went after the woman who made their heart beat faster. Mark my words, you’ll figure it out sooner or later. Either that, or I’ll set sweet little Carsynn up with the deputy. Maybe that will light a fire under your slow ass. She’s been here for nearly a month. It’s about time Carsynn goes on a date. Apart from the diner, my place, the library, and the grocery store, all she does is stay home.” Gramps tries to get out of the truck, but I hit the button to lock him inside for a few minutes. There are a few things I need to get off my chest.

“You gonna breathe a minute and let me talk?” I’m holding back my smile, knowing he’s going to put me in my place the second I let him out. Which is why I keep my finger pressed on the lock button. Payback is gonna be a bitch. It’ll be worth it, though.

“If you pull the stick out of your ass and admit I was right all along.” Gramps crosses his arms over his chest and looks me dead in the eye. One thing I can guarantee is Gramps isn’t setting up the sweet and tempting little morsel with anyone, especially not the deputy. She’s fucking mine. I may not have set my eyes on her first compared to the other fuckers in this town, but I am now.

“You were right. None of that shit about her being with Deputy Carter or anyone else. Also, I’m doing this on Carsynn’s timeline, not mine and not yours. Judging from the stories you’ve told me and the skittish looks I got today at the diner, she needs to know I’m not going anywhere.” My damn track record for being out of town for three weeks sure as shit isn’t helping. My finger comes off the lock button.

“Good, I knew you’d see it my way. I just had to light a little fire under your stubborn ass.” He doesn’t have a poker face to save his life. The shit-eating grin is spread far and wide. The old man is proud as fuck of himself.

“Yeah, I hear you. Don’t start becoming Cupid. Carter doesn’t need you playing matchmaker.” No one knows this, but my buddy, Carter, has his own woman no one knows about. He’s somehow managed to keep it under wraps. No one in town knows. How he’s been able to keep things a secret with the town librarian, I have no idea. Kudos to him, though. It’s bad enough everyone knows everyone in Plaine Hill. They’d go rabid, nit-picking the shit out of their relationship, or they’d start knitting booties for a child neither of them have announced.

“Boyo, you think I’m dumb. I was waiting for you to come out with it. Carter is with Marybeth.” I don’t confirm or deny it. It’s a story that isn’t mine to tell. “Yeah, I knew you’d be tight-lipped. Word of advice, tell him to stop walking out of the library with a goofy-ass grin, otherwise, the cat will be out

of the bag faster than they'd like." I swear my grandfather is worse than some of the women in this town. The only difference is he doesn't gossip. Nope, Grandpa Bernie prefers to sit back and people watch, always has, and since Grams and Mom are gone, he does it even more.

"I'll let him know."

"You do that. It was her eyes, wasn't it?" Gramps asks quietly. I look at him. He nods, and I know who he's talking about. Carsynn with her amber-colored eyes, solidly golden in color.

"Yeah." I've never seen a single person in Plaine Hill or anywhere in my travels with her rare eye color, black lashes surrounding them. I was fucking sunk. Carsynn with her full lips that made me want to run my tongue along the seam, see how they'd look wrapped around my thumb, and damn if I didn't want to see what they'd look like during and after she sucked my cock. And it didn't stop there. My eyes drank her all the way in. Her shirt was loose but not too loose so I couldn't see the size of her tits. My palms itched to find out how they'd look and feel in the palms of my hands, on her hips that flared out and lean legs that had my dick standing at its full attention. Her eyes, though, they were deep and soulful, held secrets and heartache, and I wanted to slay her dragons one by fucking one.

"I'm heading in. I'll give you a few minutes to get your head on straight. I can still remember the day I met your grandmother. I told her I was going to marry her one day. She didn't believe me, made me work for her attention. Knocking on her dad's door was the scariest damn thing of my life. It was all worth it." I've heard the story a thousand times, and I'll hear it a thousand more. Some might get annoyed or tired of it. Not me. It's a memory I want to hand down to my children one day, reminiscing about the days I sat on the floor as a kid, listening to all the stories, Grams doing needlepoint while Gramps talked. She'd interject when the story wasn't told right, they'd get into a spat, and we'd all laugh. Mom included.

“Appreciate it. I won’t be too long.” Gramps grabs the door handle. Now that I’ve got my finger off the lock button, it opens easily. He uses the oh-shit handle to swing his legs out first. The years are getting harder on his body. The bigger truck he used to drive has been downgraded to something a bit smaller yet still works for his long legs. I made sure of it when we went to the car dealership, and it wasn’t me who persuaded him either. He called me and told me to take a ride with him. Gramps drove, and I listened to what he had to say even when I stated a hip replacement would put most of his problems to bed. An old fall from his escapades of being on a ladder without anyone there to watch over him. It’s something the doctors say eventually he’ll need to have surgery for. He wouldn’t hear of it. He was done with hospitals, only went to his doctors because I scheduled his appointment, and if he didn’t show up, I was notified right away.

“Take your time, but the next time, I’m bringing my truck. Either that, or I’m going to need a damn step stool.” He gives me grief anytime he can. It keeps him youthful. My truck isn’t jacked up or on big tires, and it damn sure isn’t squatted like some of the kids have running around these days. It’s a diesel, bigger than most trucks, and comes with a different suspension kit. There are running boards that slide out when you open the door, but Gramps refuses to use them. Stubborn old goat.

“I’ll run to the store later to get you a squatty potty, too.” He turns around, gives me a look I was once scared of when I was a snot-nosed teenager. Now I just smile.

“You do that, and I’ll put laxatives in the next dinner I cook you.”

“Fine, have it your way. A walker instead.” He shakes his head, grumbles under his breath, calling me a dickhead, and I laugh at his antics. It’s not until he shuts the passenger door that I close my eyes, the back of my head meets the headrest, and I think about everything Carsynn. How I’m going to convince her to give me some kind of a chance, though with the pretty blush and the small looks I caught, that may not take too much. The one factor that concerns me is I’m her landlord. I’m hoping she’ll be okay with it, and if she’s not, I’ll sign the

damn lease over to Gramps' name, allowing him to handle it from here on out. Then there's getting the bay started and ordering the new tow truck. Those two items will be the easiest: a few phone calls, a hefty bill to pay, then it'll get sorted. I don't expect the new bay to be finished until spring. The weather is expected to turn worse tonight and into tomorrow. Which reminds me, when I take Gramps home, I need to chop some wood, or he'll be without heat if the power goes out. Another reason I wish he'd have moved in with me or into the apartment, though I guess it's a good thing now he didn't, or Carsynn would be out of a place to live. Still, the generator only runs my house. Fuck, I should have added the apartment to it, but when I built the place, it was for family. I didn't think I'd be renting it out, and Gramps could always walk the few hundred feet to my place if it got too bad.

I open my eyes. There's no use sitting in my truck worrying about shit I need to get done. Now is the time to get started on my to-do list. I'd like to get my head back under the hood instead of under a car to hook up and haul off. My head finally on straight, I take the keys out of the ignition and follow my grandfather inside. I'm sure the bookkeeping is a damn nightmare. He'll help me get caught back up and cuss me up a storm that I need to hire help. When he owned the place, Grams or my mom would help keep the shop stocked, the bills paid, and would work the front desk. Sometimes they'd call when a mechanic was too busy or didn't have the balls enough to tell the customer they needed this or that and it would cost so much. It's the one job I haven't found the right candidate for. The thought gives me hives even now. So, for now, I'll bide my time until I can't take it anymore or until Gramps quits coming in every few weeks to give me a hand. I already know who he'll suggest should I bring it up and, hell, maybe this time he's right. It's also another way to tie Carsynn to me. That's right, the thirty-two-year-old Gabe McCoy has plans, one that includes the pretty waitress being mine in every way possible—my wife, the mother of my children, and working right alongside me. Exactly where she belongs.

CARSYNN

I'm splurging today. Okay, maybe I'm not making a massive splurge, but I am getting a pair of sneakers. Not the box store special either, where they're only twenty dollars and wear out in a few months, make your feet hurt because they have zero support. After my shift at the diner today, I counted my tips. I was left a rather large tip from Gabe. There was a reluctance on whether or not to spend the extra tip I don't usually receive. Thirty dollars after he paid the bill was a lot. It also gave me a nice little cushion in order to splurge and not make me feel so bad. That's why I also bought a cookie and a Coke once I walked into the mall. The last time I was here, it was for a phone and only my phone. There were no extra expenses allowed while I was trying to move into my new place. I was in and out, lickity split. I didn't even stop and smell the fresh baked goods, or I'd be suckered in.

Olive saw me counting the money, staring at it in awe. The McCoy's bill was barely twenty dollars, which meant he tipped more than double, and I was worried it was a mistake. She assured me there was no error on his part. After my shift was over, I asked Denny to make me a sandwich. I woofed my food down so fast I had hiccups for a good five minutes before I said my goodbyes to Olive and Denny. Nikki left after the morning rush as per usual. The drive home was downright cold. Winter is upon us, and if I didn't make the trip today, I'd be up shit's creek without a paddle. Plaine Hill, from what I'm told, keeps the roads cleared from snow. Ice, on the other hand, is a bit harder to control. The drive home from the diner

was fast, the shower I took was at record speed, and then I was back on the road.

I slowly nibble on my chocolate chip cookie as I window shop, looking at the mannequins and the latest fashion trends. You know, those things most teenagers do. It seems I'm years late to the game. It's probably why I'm enjoying it as much as I am right now. The sweaters, jackets, and jeans are all different shapes and sizes, the colors either bright or neutral; there's no in between when it comes to outerwear. As for the jeans, a loser baggier style seems to be the only thing trending in the same direction as my own. I look down at my own jeans. They're straight legged, lose all the way down, and maybe I'm more fashionable than I thought. Thank you to the last time I went to the thrift store along with the discount store before moving to New Hampshire. I paired my jeans with a long-sleeved Henley and a jacket that's a smidge too small in the chest area. I'll for sure need a thicker material, and one that zips up. What I have was good for Virginia, but now that I'm in a state that has a lot of winter storms, I'll need thermals, a thick hat, gloves, good boots, and well, now I'm overwhelmed. *One thing at a time, Carsynn.* Sneakers first, then work on the rest. I make a mental note to look at the second-hand stores in Plaine Hill for a better winter jacket. I take the last bite of my cookie, mourning the fact that I consumed it entirely too fast. On my next grocery trip, I'm going to get ingredients to bake them at home. It'll be my first foray into baking, and while there's a bit of excitement at doing something new, I'm also worried I'll screw them up.

I walk toward the shoe store, taking the last few sips of my soda, toss my cup and the cookie wrapper in the waste basket near the entrance of the store, and walk in. There's a wall of shoes, different activity types, men's, women's, and kids' areas, and now that feeling of being overwhelmed is amplified. Maybe I should have ordered them online instead of coming in person. It would have saved me gas money and the extra snack. I could have read reviews on what size to buy and which ones would work the best. Instead, I'm doing the exact opposite, not even going so far as to research what would be the best for me.

“Hi, I’m Taylor, can I help you with anything?” Usually, I’d shy away from help, but this is a whole new world, and I have no idea where to go from here. Plus, there are too many options to choose from.

“Hi, yes, please. This is a lot, and I don’t know where to begin. There are so many, and the colors, wow. Yeah, I need all the help I can get.” Apparently, word vomiting to a stranger as well as talking fast when I’m nervous is my go-to. This is weird considering my job, where I’m talking to strangers as well as my regulars daily. Maybe it’s the mall that has my weirdness creep out of me. Either way, I’m going to zip my damn lips after she leads me to the right place.

“That’s okay. I’m here to help. First of all, what is your main activity? Biking, running, weightlifting?” I shake my head. None of those pertain to me. Voluntarily working out would have never happened at my old job. Working doubles meant a lot of wear and tear on my body. There were some days I could barely make it from my car to the inside of the apartment without limping of some kind.

“I’m a waitress and stand on my feet for eight hours a day.” She taps her finger on her chin, thinking about what I said. I should have asked Olive what shoes she wears, though if memory serves me correctly, she usually goes for looks over comfort. We are not the same. She’s younger, trendier, has a great outlook on life. I’m older, go for affordable any day of the week, and am somewhat jaded. Alright, maybe not jaded. I do have a lot of apprehension when people do something out of the kindness of their heart. Childhood trauma is a bitch. The promise I made to myself sits at the forefront of my mind. When the time comes and I have children, I’ll make sure they never know what it’s like to experience the pain I grew up with.

“I have just the right ones for you. We get quite a few customers who are on their feet in retail. A lot like myself.” She winks and starts walking toward one of the walls for women. I look at Taylor’s shoes. Hers are cuter than the ones I currently wear on my feet, so maybe she knows her stuff. I follow her lead. She’s faster than I am, so I’m a few steps

behind her. Apparently, when I'm not at work, I like to take my time, probably because I've never had a slower pace of life before and I'm currently loving it. "Okay, so, this section would work really well. Price point?"

I start to say, "Nothing over a hundred," then re-evaluate that number knowing it's not feasible in order to get something really good. "Under a hundred and fifty."

"Perfect. Here are a couple of pairs." Taylor shows me a black pair, which aren't my favorite. Would the color be smart? Absolutely. Do I like them? No. Of course, the white pair catches my attention, and I have no problem reaching out when she hands them to me.

"Wow, they're so lightweight." I bend them and look inside, my hand hitting the arch support. "These. Do you have them in a size seven to try on?" I'm usually a six or six and a half. After years of being on my feet, I know they'll swell, and you should be a size bigger.

"Let me go look in the back. I'll be right back." Refraining from looking at the sneaker in my hand is hard, specifically because of the price. I'm trying not to stress about it, to not think about what it'll set me back and justify what I can do to pinch money here or there. My rent is inexpensive, my car is paid off, and I've managed to keep comprehensive insurance on it. Basically, the minimal I could possibly have to keep the monthly payment down. Plus, my car gets me from point A to point B. It's nothing special, it runs, has heat, a radio, and a recent oil change. If it were to break down, I'd sadly have to junk it, unless it only needed a few hundred dollars' worth of work. My grocery bill isn't much. Nikki and Denny keep me well-fed, so I can afford to go a little more on the shoes. It was only when I started thinking about needing winter gear that my chest started tightening with anxiety.

"Here you go. The last pair in your size." Taylor returns, calming my overthinking self trying to put me in a tailspin.

"Perfect, I appreciate your help. A lot." I sit down on the bench. It's time to take off my shoes. This pair isn't my work shoes because yuck. I put on a pair of canvas sneakers, not a

lot of support or warmth, which wasn't smart considering the temperature only reached the low fifties today. Tonight is when the weather is supposed to really dip low, and I'm hoping to be back in town before that happens.

"Anytime. I'll let you try those on and see how you like them. I'll be right back." Taylor leaves me to my own devices. I slide one foot into the new shoe. My eyes close when I feel the support hit my high arch. There's no way I'm not getting these sneakers. I'll eat ramen for a month to make up of it if need be. I slide my other foot inside and walk around the store a bit, already knowing with these shoes, my lower back won't be killing me, my feet won't ache near as much, and maybe I won't need to soak in a bath nearly every day just to ease some of the pain. However, that's not the only reason I enjoy my oversized tub and burn my skin during hot bath time. That would be my book, especially with a certain duke to keep me company.

"Do you like them?" Taylor asks, meeting me where I've been walking around in the ultra-luxurious shoes.

"I love them." A huge smile spreads across my face. "I'll take them." I more than likely look like a loony tune with how cheerful I am.

"Great news! Is there anything else you need that I can help you with?"

"Nope, this is all. Let me just take these off, and I'll meet you at the cash register." Taylor nods, and I walk back to where I started. It's time for me to put my other shoes back on. I don't want to wear these out just yet. Plus, I need to get back to Plaine Hill before the sun starts setting, and since I walked around the mall longer than I anticipated, it's about time I move my booty. The last thing I need to do is drive in the dark when rain is supposed to come along with frigid freaking temperatures. No thanks.

I quickly transfer the new shoes back into the box, slide my sneakers back on, and carry my purchase to the cash register. My next stop is home, where I can snuggle and relax for the rest of the night.

GABE

“Goddamn,” I grunt while in the shower. All fucking day, my head has been filled with Carsynn. It was hard as hell to keep my attention on work after setting my eyes on the beautiful waitress Bernie had been hounding me about. I was reluctant at first, until I saw her for myself. I knew it, Gramps knew it. The only one who may not know it yet is Carsynn.

And she will.

Tonight.

The minute she’s home, I’ve got every intention of marching my ass over to her apartment, banging on her door until she opens it, and tossing her over my shoulder before bringing her back to my place. Once we’re here, I’ll use more than my words to tell her how things are going to play out. How I’m claiming her as my woman, and how I’m gonna be her man from now until fucking ever.

I close my eyes, head tipping back, the water beating on my back and shoulders as I think about everything I’d do to my tiny fairy. Carsynn would strip herself bare for me. I’d watch the entire time, biding my time instead of tearing off her clothing. My hand wraps around my thick dick as I imagine her naked body in my mind, tits that would fit perfectly in my hand, nipples as ripe and red as berries. A narrow waist, so slim the tips of my fingers would touch as I wrap them around her midsection. My cock flexes in the palm of my hand, spurring me on, and that’s when I plant my feet further apart

instead of using the wall to prop my body up. No fucking way am I going to stop jacking my cock in order to use the tile wall. I lick my lips, my mouth watering at the thought of tasting her everywhere. Fuck, I'd be the one falling to my knees, getting up close and personal with her pussy. Now, I'm busy thinking about how wet Carsynn would be for me. I'd bet my left nut she'd be dripping. There's an innocence about my fairy. I'll bet she's not shaved, not so much as a landing strip, probably just trimmed, and now I'm thinking about something else entirely than getting my mouth all over her body.

Carsynn on my bed, feet planted on the mattress, thighs spread, a towel beneath her as I shave her completely bare. "Fuck." My body locks up, muscles straining, and my balls draw up tightly. It won't be much longer until my cum is swirling down the drain in the shower. That doesn't mean I'm ready for this to end. I'd shave her with precision, not so much as nicking her beautiful skin. When she's completely clean.

I'd do a fuck of a lot more than get my first taste of Carsynn.

I'd tease her clit with my tongue until she's rocking her hips back and forth.

I'd wait till she's on the edge and pull back prolonging her orgasm.

I'd do fucking everything to her.

My hand tightens around my length, and I keep the visual exactly where I want and need it as I spur my body on. My pre-cum drips at a steady pace from the tip, giving me more than enough lubricant to guide my way. Once I've got my head buried between Carsynn's thighs, she's clenching me with her firm muscles from all her time working as a waitress. That's when I take. It's about her pleasure, and it's also about mine. The need to know what she tastes like, to have her cum soaking my cheeks, how she'd say my name. Would she scream it, or would she whisper it breathlessly? That's all it takes. My body takes over, the urge to come overwhelming.

"Carsynn." Her name rumbles through the shower stall, and it's only because I puss out and place my hand on the tile

so I'm not flat on my fucking face. I come so hard, I'm seeing damn bursts of stars when I finally lift my head and open my eyes. My cum spills all over my hand, and fuck how I wish it were Carsynn's hands, face, or tits I was painting instead of my own.

"Soon, it'll be my little fairy in front of me," I say quietly, stepping further under the spray, grabbing my body wash to clean off the evidence of coming all over myself. It doesn't take my long to clean up. The way I just came and how I've become obsessed with Carsynn, I know my body enough that if I lingered a moment too much, my cock would be like, *'Hell yeah, Carsynn's involved. Let's fucking go.'*

I turn off the water, grab the towel I slung over the glass enclosure, and make quick work of drying myself off. Once I'm dry, I wrap the towel around my waist and grab my phone off the vanity. I glance at it, keeping it on me since the weather changed from bad to fucking worse. You'd think Gramps would have taken me up on my offer for him to stay with me. Nope, he didn't do that. The old goat only asked that I chop up more wood and help him bring it inside, which is what I did, cussing him out in my head the entire time. Calling him a stubborn fool while making sure he was ready should anything happen. There were plenty of lights and extra battery packs, and the generator was ready should he need it. I'd also told him the minute he changes his mind, I'll be on my way.

"Motherfucker." I move the blinds in my bedroom window, looking out toward the driveway. The sun has long since set, and there the driveway sits, empty. There isn't a sign of Carsynn's car anywhere, and the rain is pelting down, freezing the damn concrete. My phone is in my hand. I don't bother checking if Gramps called or texted. I'm too busy unlocking the phone and hitting his number. The only person I know who has Carsynn's number is him. Sure, she rents the place, but Gramps currently has the paperwork at his house. A fat lot of good that's doing me right now.

"You better not be pestering me. I told you I'm fine on my own, been doing it for too many years to count," Gramps answers the phone with a retort. I wish it were me pestering

him. Honestly, it would be a fuck of a lot easier than having to worry about a woman who's grown and should be more than fine by herself. Tell that to my gut.

"Have you heard from Carsynn?" I ask, running my fingers through my hair while pacing, going back and forth from the doorway to the bathroom, then back to the window, where I'm hoping she'll suddenly appear.

"No, should I have?" There's a worry in his tone.

"She's not home, and you see the weather outside, plus it's dark. Would she be with Nikki or Olive?" I stop at my dresser, ripping a drawer open, grabbing a pair of sweatpants, then repeating the process for the shirt.

"Boyo, Carsynn only hangs out at the library after work, goes to the grocery store, or comes over to my place. Let me call her and see if she answers." This isn't boding well. I stay on the line with him. Calling the house line is a guaranteed answer. His cell phone is hit or miss. It's well past the time since the library closed, and no way would it take her this long to grocery shop. She wasn't home when I pulled in, and that was over an hour ago. I put the call on speakerphone, step into my sweats, then slide the shirt over my head before grabbing a pair of socks.

"Fuck, Gramps, I'm going out to find her," I tell him. My worry is escalating as I hop on one foot then the other, trying to work as fast as I can. Carsynn's in a little tuna can type of car, probably doesn't have good enough tires to be scooting around on ice. And don't get me started on the clothes. Gramps has already tried telling her she needed new shoes and a thicker coat before the weather sets in. She needs a man in her life, a man who will take care of her, to make sure she's warm, to make sure she's safe, and that man is damn well going to be.

"No answer," he says after a few beats. "I'll go out, too." His voice is strong and steady. It's going to take me too damn long to convince him to stay put, but I'm going to do it anyway.

“Stay put. I can’t have you sliding off the road either.” Gramps goes to respond but stops when I say, “Please.”

“Fine, go find our girl. Call me the minute you do. The house line should be good in case cell towers go out.” Last year, we were all snowed in, and a Nor’easter took down the power lines and cell phone towers. I couldn’t get to Gramps with all the snow surrounding us, and I swore to God if he was that bullheaded again, I’d carry his ass out. Shows how much of a pushover I am. We’re about to get more than a foot of snow, which can turn into more depending on the weather, and look where he’s at.

“Will do. Call the Sherriff for me, and see if he’s seen her car? That might help me narrow down my search. I’m going to put my boots on and grab a jacket. My cell will be on me.” It’ll take a minute for my truck to warm up. I probably should have brought the tow truck home, except it’s uncomfortable as fuck for Gramps, and I missed driving my truck.

“Alright, be safe, Gabe McCoy, very fucking safe.”

“Always, love you.” I know he’s worried. I would be, too, if my only living relative was about to drive out of town to look for someone who may or may not even be in town.

“You too. Get our girl.” We hang up, and then I’m rushing out of my bedroom. I’ve got a gut feeling I’m not going to like what I find, and my gut has never let me down before.

CARSYNN

“I shouldn’t have taken another stroll around the mall. I shouldn’t have driven into another town without checking the weather. Never again. I shouldn’t have done a lot today.” When I left the mall, it was because the stores were closing. There’s something about walking around, having no destination in mind, and letting your brain not talk about all of life’s little nuances. A necessity I didn’t know I so desperately needed. The sun shined in the distance, still high in the sky, not a cloud in sight. The same could be said for the rain. A beautiful winter day, and while yes, I was walking around indoors, I still enjoyed the weather Mother Nature gave us.

I almost stayed to watch a movie in the theatre but knew I’d be pushing it. Boy, was it tempting. I have no clue what’s playing or if it would have been any good, but since I spent enough money, I refrained. While my apartment has all the creature comforts of home. Sometimes it’d be nice to watch a movie outside of my house too. I kind of miss the idea of getting lost in something other than a book. Next time, I tell myself, I’ll splurge and get a massive tub of popcorn, extra butter, and a Coke, too. At least it won’t be like the last time I caught a movie I went on a Sunday afternoon, a completely different place and time. Mom and Dad were fighting so bad that I didn’t dare attempt sneaking in. I backed away from the apartment, paid for one ticket, and stayed for three movies. I was also early on in my teen years, still learning the way things worked in such a volatile household. It’s sad to think I believed the way they loved each other was normal. I soon

learned differently once I found solace in a good book. They may be fiction, but they were still a whole lot better than what my parents showed me. My fictional characters showed me when people made mistakes, they righted the wrongs, they showed unconditional love, and they found the one person who meant everything to them. Maybe one day, I'll have a love for myself. I can almost believe it, too, especially after the way Gabe McCoy lit up my whole body with one small glance.

“Get your head out of the clouds, Carsynn. Focus on the road,” I mutter, taking my hand off the steering wheel to turn the radio off. I had it turned low, but damn, was it driving me crazy. Silence is a necessity. All the talking coming through the radio station was not helping my current situation. The whole drive on the interstate was fine. My car didn't shake, rattle, or roll, unlike a certain song that talks about the movements a person can make. Even as I drove in the slow lane and went the minimum speed limit. There were lights on each side, enough light from the setting sun. It didn't matter that semi drivers as well as others went around me. I was completely okay with it. I would have done similar, you know, minus the rain coming down in sheets, my windshield wipers having the time of their life trying to keep up. I was doing fine, really, or at least I was until I turned off the interstate onto the two-lane highway into Plaine Hill.

The rain was gone, and in its place was ice. The road was freaking scary. Both sides of the highway are lined by woods. Plus, there are no streetlights. My headlights are the only light guiding my way. Maybe at the next town meeting, I can advocate for streetlights. Who am I kidding? I could never stand up in a room crowded with people, telling them what should be changed as the new person in town. Yeah, I think not. No, thank you. I'll just make sure I'll be home a lot earlier than I am today.

“Ugh, I hate these curves in the road.” I take my foot off the gas, slowing down and drifting around the corner. The trees give off an eerie feeling, only making the driving conditions that much worse. Plus, there's literally no other car in sight and hasn't during the past couple of miles.

“Ten more minutes. We can do this.” My knuckles are white, gripping the steering wheel as tightly as possible. I’m sure once the drive is over, my joints are going to ache. I’ll need a hot bath to decompress and make a vow to myself never again to do something as stupid again. I have a phone for a reason, and clearly, I was on some kind of cloud nine without a care in the world, when glancing at the weather app on my phone would have prepared me for this moment. I mean, a hotel would kill the budget without a doubt. I could have left earlier at least.

“Stupid, Carsynn, you were stupid, stupid, stupid.” I feel my tires start to slip. The ice is no match for the lack of tread on my wheels. Instead of shoes, I should have taken my car into McCoy’s to have them make sure it was ready for all the elements, rain, ice, or snow. You know, the conditions that come with a winter in New Hampshire. Obviously, they aren’t good enough. I could literally break down and cry. Hell, I probably will by the time I make it home. Nothing like big, fat tears streaming down your face while driving at an ungodly slow pace while you’re slipping and sliding all over the road. Let’s add one more element into the mix, why don’t we.

I was not thinking I’d need tires this soon. I should have known better. Nothing good ever happens to Carsynn Nichols.

Am I having a pity party while trying to keep my car from sliding into a ditch?

Yes.

Is it keeping my mind off the fact that I’m an idiot?

No.

My car and I can’t keep up. I’m creeping along the road, not using the gas, and I’m certainly not using the brake. If I could take my eyes off the road, I’d look down to see how slow I’m really going. That’s not going to happen, not with the way I can now hear my tires squealing along the iced-over road. I can’t keep up. My car can’t either. I’m pushing it and myself to the limits, and unfortunately, I’m going to have to give up. So, maybe my pity party was for a good reason after all.

“Pull over, Cars, you can call McCoy for a tow. So, it’ll set you back a few hundred dollars. You can’t live if you’re buried in the ditch.” I slowly turn my wheel, hoping above all hope I can get off the shoulder without teetering into the ditch. Ugh, of course, I’m going to have to use my brakes. They’re no match for ice, and the traction on my tread won’t help at all. I try to remember if I’m supposed to pump them or not and then realize it’s too late. My right foot is already attempting fate. We’ll just have to go with it. I could really use those thump-thumpers to help reduce my speed. Sadly, Plaine Hill doesn’t have them, and this is what I’m working with.

A shiver races its way down my spine. I can feel the ice beneath my tires. Don’t ask me how, I just can. Panick is added into the mix, the tightening of my chest. The way my vision is starting to tunnel. I’m not only going to die in a car accident, I’m going to lose consciousness for lack of breathing. The weather in New Hampshire is nothing like in Virginia. Sure, we had the same elements, but at least I could get home in a reasonable time without all of this commotion.

Tell me again why I didn’t head further south. Oh right, because your parents always said they’d eventually move somewhere where the climate is warm. So, what do I do? I head north to the freaking Antarctic. Smart move, Carsynn, smart move.

“Goddamn it!” One minute I’m slowing down, the next I’m spinning out of control. My car doing a complete one-eighty a few freaking times, my arms are hurting trying to control the steering wheel. It’s no use. I’ve lost any semblance of power I thought I had. My four tires were once firmly on the ground, like they should be, except I can feel my car teetering and tottering back and forth, trying to gain its own momentum.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” I chant over and over again. I let go of the steering wheel. The ice is having its way with my car. There’s no use holding on. All I can do now is leave it in the hands of a higher being. I’m like a see-saw, rocking back and forth along with some slipping and sliding. I cover my face, burrowing into my forearms and thanking everything in

me for the invention of seatbelts. Maybe it will save my life that is currently flashing before my eyes.

My thoughts go haywire. I haven't really lived, and here I am, going through the last thing I expected. I'm going to die a virgin. Yep, that's my brain going in a million different directions. Not how to control the situation, even though I know I can't. I'd never survive a zombie apocalypse. I'd collapse instead of being a problem solver. I'd have really liked to think Gabe McCoy could help me offload that pesky little label of virgin at the age of twenty-five.

I'm also completely bummed I've yet to finish my book about the duke and his virgin bride. Never mind I've yet to wear my sneakers. You know, the very reason I'm out in this stupid, brutal weather.

My car flips over. A loud screech leaves my lungs. One flip after the other, the loud metal crunching and the shattering of glass create their own symphony, one I'd rather never attend again. The airbag deploys, exploding toward my face as well as the left side of my body. The sound is so loud I'd imagine it's a lot like what a gunshot would sound like at close range. It's a noise that will stick with you for all of time. It's a feeling you'll remember, too. And through all of this, my car doesn't stop, one tumble after the other until it stops, landing on the roof. My body hangs upside down, and the adrenaline that was pumping through my veins slowly fades. The bracing of my body was of no use except for maybe my face not meeting its maker called the airbag.

"Damn," I groan, trying to push the fabric out of my face. The smoke from it smells and causes me to cough. My eyes grow heavy, the blaring of my horn doing nothing to stop the foggy haze taking over my brain. I reach my hand out, trying to reach for my phone only to realize it's probably somewhere else than the cup holder I usually place it in. I'm screwed. There's no other way around it. I'm not going to be able to save myself this time around. There's no rescuing the damsel in distress. It's enough to make my body shiver and shake. Stupid traitorous tears make their presence known, and I'd

laugh if it didn't hurt. Instead, I close my eyes. I'm bone tired, chilled to the core. Sleep is the only thing I want to do.

“Come on, Carsynn, finish your woe-is-me bullshit and get yourself out of this mess,” I say to the cold air swirling around me. I only hope I don't freeze to death before getting out of this car or, you know, lose fingers due to frostbite while walking down the road until someone finds me or I find a house with not so crazy people inside.

GABE

“Damn it, Carsynn, where are you?” My eyes are peeled, looking down every back alley I can think of. I drove near the diner; she wasn’t there. I drove by the grocery store; it was completely desolate. The library was closed, and still my eyes haven’t found her car, and I’m beginning to think I’m running out of luck. Gramps has called me every ten minutes, like clockwork. It’s about that time again, and I’ve had to resort plugging my phone in to charge because at the rate we’re going, it’ll be dead by the time I finally do find my fairy of a woman.

The first time we spoke, he said he was waiting on a call from Sheriff Sanders. I don’t know what he’s doing or what’s taking so long for him to call back. There isn’t a lot of crime happening tonight. For the most part, people are off the roads after the emergency weather alert was broadcasted through phones. I glance at the clock, noting it’s been nearly an hour since I spoke to Gramps at the house and realized no one had heard from Carsynn.

“Hey, Gramps.” I hit the button on my steering wheel, my head whipping back and forth to look for her faded red car. I guess as far as good news goes, her car should be relatively easy to find.

“I’m getting in my car and am about to whoop Sheriff Sanders. I’ve known that boy since he was in diapers. He finally called me back and said he hadn’t seen Carsynn and to tell you to get off the roads. A fat lot of good he’s doing for the town of Plaine Hill. He’s sitting on his ass drinking a cup

of hot chocolate while that poor girl is nowhere to be found.” My blood boils over. Friend or not, Sanders is going to get his teeth kicked in.

“The hell did you say?” I’m pissed as fuck. The next time he needs his patrol car serviced or repaired, he better check his brake lines because I’m liable to cut the fuckers.

“Boyo, you find our girl?” He tries to change the subject.

“Not yet. I’m running out of places to look. And you’re not getting in your truck either. I’ll deal with Sanders after I find Carsynn. You stay near your phone. I’m going to broaden my search and head toward the interstate.” I turn my truck away from the area with a handful of stores and restaurants. Not much of a downtown square in our tiny town. More like a few stoplights, a mom-and-pop place here or there, the library, a post office, the diner, the grocery store, and my auto shop. Other than that, you’ve got to go out of town to get anything Plaine Hill doesn’t offer.

“Good idea. You better call me the second you find her, or I’ll whoop your tail like I will Sanders’.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see how elections go next year. That will make him think again. I wouldn’t be on the roads as long if he’d answer the damn phone and do his job.” The palm of my hand beats down on the center console. I’m driving entirely too slowly for my liking, and it would have been fucking helpful to have two trucks on the road to find Carsynn rather than one. Hell, Gramps could have driven if I’d had the forethought to drop him off at the shop to grab a bigger truck. Selfishly, I didn’t want to worry about two people I care about, and now I’m in a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation.

“Damn straight. Alright, I’m getting off the phone in case our girl calls. Be safe and don’t forget to call,” Gramps states.

“I won’t have to call. You will in another ten minutes,” I make light of the situation even though worry is settling in deeper and deeper by the minute.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replies. I hear the click of the phone call ending, and I’m back to having my full attention on the road. My foot presses down on the accelerator faster than I should, testing the abilities of my tires and skill with the way the ice is thickening on the asphalt, but I’ll be damned if Carsynn is out stranded on the side of the road. Gramps nodded to her car when we walked out of the diner, putting thoughts in my head without so much as saying a word. Us McCoy men know what we want once our eyes are locked on the prize. It’s a story Gramps tells over and over again. Why he’ll never move on and start a new life with someone else. When he vowed *‘til death do us part*, he meant it, and he said he’ll meet her again on the other side.

One look at Carsynn, and I knew she’d be mine. Now if only I could find her. I hit the two-lane highway, flick on my high beams, and drive like a bat out of hell. The curves are a nasty bitch. I make it work, though there are a few that are a little sketchy, making me slow down, pissing me off.

“Goddamn it, where are you, Carsynn?” I hope to hell she isn’t broken down on the side of the road because her car should have seen a junkyard ten years ago. All I know is once I find her, she won’t be in that car anymore. I’ve got plenty of extra vehicles that run in the back of McCoy’s shop, a few that other owners didn’t want to put the money in and I bought off them for a fair value. A fuck of a lot newer than Carsynn’s car, that’s for damn sure. I shook my head when I saw the state it was in, there wasn’t much time to jot down a list of things I noticed, the tires were one of them, damn near bald. There wasn’t anything I could do right then and there. I’d only met her, and she hadn’t said too many words to me. I was going to wait until my little fairy was at Gramps’ later this week, stop by and use him as an in.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, fucking hell.” I round the last embankment and see all too clearly what I didn’t want to see. Through my truck and the road noise, I can hear the horn like someone is pressed against it. A car is flipped over on its roof, and judging by the color, my worst fucking nightmare has come to life. I slow down, making sure I stay on the road and don’t hit the iced grass of the shoulder, or I’d be right there

beside the car. As soon as I'm stopped, I throw my truck in *Park*, fling the door open, and climb out. The cold-as-fuck weather does nothing to deter me. The smoke coming from her car is either a blown head gasket or from the airbags. Either way, I'm getting Carsynn the fuck out of there, and I'm not waiting on an ambulance.

"Carsynn, baby, I'm coming." I plant my feet as I slide down the ditch. Not hearing her call out to me makes me worry even more. Christ, this is a clusterfuck. I should have made Gramps call Nikki or Denny as soon as I had this gut feeling. The rain has turned into snow, pushing the weather further into the lower digits. I'm not wearing nearly enough clothes for this shit, and I know Carsynn isn't either. Even if she had a thick winter jacket, most take it off while they're driving. Now that her windows are shattered, she's more than likely freezing her ass off.

"Carsynn, it's Gabe. I'm here," I tell her once I make it to the passenger door. The driver's door is wedged against the ditch, trapping her in. Luckily, from this side, the window is out and I can crawl through.

"Gabe?" Thank Christ she's not unconscious, or worse. I gulp down the rest, refusing to put the words to the what-ifs. Carsynn is hanging upside down. Her lip is cut, her eyes glossy, and her arms are a bit banged up from what I can see so far. All things considered, shit could be so much worse.

"Yeah, fairy. It's me." I meander closer, wondering how I'm going to get her out of here without dropping her on her head once I press the seatbelt button.

"Okay, I must be dreaming. Maybe I won't die a virgin after all." Her amber eyes are open, lids fluttering, eyelashes wet, and I know it's time to get her out of here. Even with the words she just spewed, there's no guarantee she'll remember them tomorrow. Hell, she could have a concussion for all I know, and while yes, I'm well fucking aware I should call Sheriff Sanders as well as an ambulance, the likelihood of them coming is slim to none, especially with the way the snow is falling. It won't be too long before we'll all be snowed in, which means I need to get a move on things.

“You save that for another time, fairy. Is there anywhere you’re hurting before I get you out of this tin can?” I’m on my stomach, hands going to her body yet scared to touch her too much in case she’s in pain or has a broken bone.

“Just my head a little bit, and I’m really cold,” she replies, eyes shuddering closed.

“Stay with me, alright? I’m going to get you out of here, but first, I want you to lean on me as much as you can while I get your seatbelt off.” The dash isn’t pinning her legs in place, and the steering wheel looks to be good. I’m imagining she wasn’t speeding, so that means her flipping was in slow motion, probably the reason she’s not in worse shape than she is.

“Okay.” Her voice is soft, sweet, and all too trusting. Damn if that doesn’t hit me square in the solar plexus. I move closer, feeling her hands go to my shoulders while I locate the seatbelt button to release her from its hold.

“Almost, fairy, we’re almost out of here.” As soon as I feel her holding on, I press the button, my back taking her weight, and then I’m trying to figure out a way to move her as little as possible, which is going to be near impossible given the current situation.

“Oh God, I feel so much better.” Carsynn sounds delirious.

“Alright, use my shoulders to get your knees beneath you. I’m going to slide backward and help guide the way, but it looks like you’ll be crawling.” She doesn’t respond. The only thing I can hear is a soft hum and her breath across my neck. This is going to be a bit more difficult if she manages to fall asleep. I’ll make it work, but fuck will it make shit take longer.

“So tired,” she mutters, but I watch as she drops her body, landing on her knees with a loud thud, and I’m sure there will be more scrapes I’ll have to take care of.

“Don’t go to sleep just yet, Carsynn. Grandpa Bernie would be pissed as hell at me. You wouldn’t want that now, would you?” I feel her chest lift and a chuckle is let out.

“Okay, I can do this. Bernie is the best, you know?” I slide back, my jacket covering the way as I practically arm crawl out of the car, Carsynn’s hands on my shoulders the entire time.

“You can do this. A few more paces, and we’re home free.” The crunching plastic can be heard around us along with my labored breathing. I’ll never forget the feeling of coming up on her vehicle and her, not knowing what I was going to see. She’s damn lucky. An angel was definitely looking out for her.

“Almost there,” she agrees. My legs hit snow, the sweatpants doing nothing against the cold and wet. At least I had enough sense to put on a jacket and boots, or I’d really be cold.

“Yep, I’m going to get the rest of the way out and help you up, okay?” Carsynn doesn’t respond. “Need you to talk to me, fairy,” I nudge.

“What? Oh yeah. I’m good with whatever.” Her teeth chatter, and that’s the end of going slow. I make quick work until I’m out of the car, losing her hands on my body in the process, and squat down waiting for Carsynn to crawl out.

“Oh wow,” she greets me on her hands and knees, eyes on the outline of my dick. Fuck, I really didn’t think this through. My gray sweatpants are soaked, plastered to my body, and now she’s getting one hell of a show.

“Come on, babe. Let’s get you in the truck.” I stand up, taking her with me. She’s no sooner on her feet, and I’m lifting her up and in my arms, carrying her to my truck.

“I-I-I...” Carsynn stammers. “Can I get a few things out of my car? It’s silly, I know, but it’s my stuff.”

“Let me get you in the truck, and I’ll go back for whatever you need. Give me a list.” I hope it’s not a lot of things because we really need to get back to the house.

“Oh, um, my purse, phone if you can find it, and there’s a bag with a pair of sneakers in it. The whole reason I’m in this situation to begin with. I was finally able to afford a nice pair

of shoes, only it's costing me my car. I'm so stupid." My lips graze her forehead. There's going to be some talking in the near future, particularly about her calling herself stupid.

"You got it." It's a slippery slope up the embankment, a few backtracks of sliding and planting my feet one in front of the other. Once I'm on the asphalt, I'm able to move a bit faster. My truck door is still wide open. Rookie fucking move, letting the heated air out when it could be warm inside for her.

"Thank you, Gabe. Bernie said you were the best. He wasn't wrong." Carsynn lets out a tired yawn as we make it to the truck.

"You can thank me later. Right now, let's get us home." I open the door, offload the tiny fairy into the seat, and grab the spare jacket from the back seat to cover her up. "Be right back."

I cuss the entire time I run back to her car. When I was helping her out of the wreck, I wasn't thinking. This second trip could have been spared if I had grabbed her stuff along the way. Now I'm worried that by the time we get on the road, even my truck is going to struggle, and it's made for this shit weather. "Fuck," I grunt. Her purse and bag were easy to locate. The phone I have to search around for, and when I see it smashed to hell, I know it's toast. I'll have to see if I've got an extra in the drawer. The company is always getting replacements for the guys when they go out on the road. Most of the time, they come back with a busted screen or soaked in water. Still, I grab it just the same. The SIM card will make it easier for her to get a loaner, if nothing else. I'm out of the destroyed car and back at the truck as fast as I can.

"You good?" I ask, climbing into the driver's seat, closing the door, and cranking the heat up as high as it can go. I had the forethought to turn on the seat heaters when I left my house, so at least I didn't lose all my few brain cells tonight.

"Yeah. My car, I can't leave it there." She looks out at the window, giving me only a side profile.

"Baby, your car is totaled, and it can stay there until the weather passes. I'll grab the tow truck and see what we can

do.” I conduct another quick sweep of her body to make sure nothing is worse for the wear. Carsynn’s scraped and bruised, along with what I’m sure will be a killer headache as soon as her adrenaline comes down.

“Add it to the list of things I always lose.” My hand reaches for hers. Our fingers entwine. She doesn’t pull away, and for that I’m grateful. I think we both need a little bit of comfort after tonight.

CARSYNN

I'm comfortable, really comfortable, almost too much, and I have no problem scooting my body into the warmth behind me. I can't remember the last time I slept this deeply and woke up not freezing without a pile of blankets on top of me. In fact, I'm almost too hot. I don't open my eyes. Instead, I move my leg out of the covers, needing some kind of moving air on my heated flesh. What I don't expect is to feel a leg on top of mine, pinning me to the mattress. It's heavy, hairy, and a heater much like the rest of the man lying beside me. Everything comes flying back, my eyes fly open, and somehow, I manage to remain stone-cold still.

Last night replays in my mind. The car accident, being cold, unbearably so, and the noise. It's a sound I'll never forget. I'm only thankful Gabe found me when he did. I couldn't tell you how long I was sitting upside down in my car, probably not long. I was frozen to the core, and not in the I-can't-get-warm feeling either. An almost panic was more like it, unable to get my hands to move, let alone my body. The worst feeling I think I've ever experienced, and there've been more than a few doozies in my life. The relief was instantaneous. I was able to formulate words and do as he said to get me out of the wreck.

"Did I really say that out loud?" I recall being on my hands and knees, coming face to face with Gabe's very well-endowed package and then, of course, I blurted out that still intact virginity status.

“Which time are you referring to?” My hands slap to my face, attempting to hide the fact that Gabe McCoy is the person beside me, his heavy thigh draped over mine, and the reason I feel like a furnace is heating me from the inside out. I spread my fingers, turn my head slightly, and look beside me. Why does he have to look so gorgeous first thing in the morning? His hair is messy from sleep, face soft, and I know without a shadow of a doubt the same can’t be said for myself.

“Oh God, I said so much.” I roll away, remembering everything. Did I really tell Gabe McCoy I was a virgin last night? Did I really see the outline of his cock and mention it? Yes, yes, I did.

“Carsynn, look at me, baby.” Gabe’s leg stays on top of mine while I attempt to wiggle away, trying to hide my embarrassment. He’s not letting that happen, not with the way he is using his leg, ankle hooking around mine and pulling me closer to him.

“Nope, not happening. I appreciate you helping me last night, but I can’t look at you. My face will be as bright as a tomato. I’ll just see myself out.” I’m not looking at him. Nope, no way. I keep my head turned, use my hands that are no longer covering my face to push the sheets away.

“Kind of hard to leave when we’re snowed in. How are you feeling? Any aches or pains?” Gabe’s touch on my hip is hot, searing me through the shirt I’m wearing. His gaze is heated, and with him so close to me, it’s hard to miss the outline of his cock.

“I don’t think so.” The man hovering above me dips his head, a grin appearing on his lips, only making him that much more desirable that I forget about the news he laid on me. “We’re snowed in?” I abandon thinking about getting out of bed or wiggling all my body parts to check on any aches and pains.

“Afraid so. The house runs on a generator when the power is out. The weather turned fast. A Nor’easter hit. We’ve got six feet outside right now, and they’re expecting more to drop throughout the day.” My eyes close, and I lose sight of the

handsome man in front of me. A variety of things runs through my mind, mainly Bernie. Then there's me being at Gabe's house and stuck here when who knows if he's okay with that. I mean, the man did bring me into his room and handed me a shirt from his dresser. He looked through his shorts and sweatpants, but none would fit. Gabe is massive in height and muscle compared to me. He looked from me to the drawer then back to me, mumbling under his breath about me being a tiny thing. I helped him make the decision, telling him I'd be fast in the shower, to which he replied to take my time, and he'd help sort out the scrapes afterward.

"What about Bernie?" I ask, trying to forget what it felt like to shower in his bathroom, use his bodywash and shampoo. It sucked there was no conditioner, but I couldn't very well complain. The minute the water turned off, Gabe was knocking on the door, asking if I was ready to get bandaged up. I was quick with towel drying my body, using the same towel to put my hair up in a turban, and slipping his shirt over my head before squealing out an okay. Gabe proceeded to check me over from my head to the tips of my toes. My forearm took the brunt of it, a big scrape down the length of my left arm. He babied the heck out of the injury. Meanwhile, my eyes devoured his naked torso and a hell of a lot lower. Too bad for me, I didn't get to see more of what he was packing like I did when I was crawling toward him.

"He refused to come stay with me. I chopped enough wood and brought it in for him. There's plenty of food at his house. He's self-sufficient. Which reminds me, you need to call him soon. He's called twice already." Gabe lowers his head even more. He's nowhere near my forehead or my cheek. Oh God, is he going to kiss me?

"What time is it?" I ask under my breath. Last night after Gabe doctored me up, he deemed I was okay and didn't need to go to the hospital. Which I would have told him absolutely not. Health insurance is a benefit and luxury at this point in my life. Gabe ushered me to his bed, kissed my forehead, and I promptly passed out. I didn't ask if I should sleep somewhere else or anything. I was completely oblivious to anything else. I didn't feel when he got into bed with me. My body went

through an emotional rollercoaster, and it was ready to sign off.

“Nearly noon,” he replies like it’s no big deal. I guess it isn’t since we’re snowed the hell in.

“What!” I realize I didn’t brush my teeth before bed, and morning breath, dragon breath, dumpster breath, or whatever you call it, is a real thing. It’s also foul and why I place my hand over my mouth swiftly, which also pulls on my forearm, making me wince in pain.

“You’re hurting, and I’m not worried about your breath, fairy.” His eagle eyes narrow. In a swift yet steady movement, his arms wrap around my body and he’s helping me sit up. “Let me look at your forearm, then you can get up and call Gramps before he has a coronary and tries to navigate the streets in this shit weather. I swear he wouldn’t listen when I told him you needed the sleep, wanted to hear your voice for himself.” I melt. No one has ever cared about me enough to worry about my wellbeing. It’s foreign, and it’s making my eyes water and my heart ache a little bit more than I thought possible.

“I’m okay. Let me use the restroom, and if you have a spare toothbrush, I’ll take that as well, then I’ll call Bernie.” I attempt to duck my head once I tell him my plans. Gabe does something I never see coming. His fingertips slide to my chin, lifting it up, and then his lips are barely a breath away from mine. My body ignites, reminding me that I’m not wearing anything beneath his shirt. There are a lot of things I can handle, and wearing a bra to bed and re-wearing panties is not one of them. Gabe doesn’t slide his hands beneath my shirt, and I almost want to groan in dissatisfaction. He does one better, one I wasn’t at all prepared for. His lips press against mine, soft and subtle, careful yet packing a punch all the same. My eyes close, and I sink into him once again, kind of like I did all night. Anytime I’d move, Gabe was there, holding me or wrapping his big body around mine. I felt a sense of peacefulness I never had before, a place that felt like home, and damn if I’m not hoping that this isn’t all a dream. I’d

pinch myself, but Gabe might think I really hit my head good. Either that, or I've lost the plot.

“Don't give a fuck about morning breath, fairy. Now, do what you need to. I'll side-track Grandpa Bernie for another ten or fifteen minutes, but if you don't call him by then, you won't be the only one in trouble.” These McCoy men. It seems when they want you in your life, they'll stop at nothing for that to happen.

“Okay, I feel like there's so much more to say, but, umm...” I point to the bathroom. Thankfully, Gabe gets the memo. My bladder is screaming at me, as it should. I've ignored it for far too long given the number of hours I've slept, plus our conversation got the best of me, too.

“Take care of business. I'll see if I can't scrounge up a few sandwiches to tie us over until dinner.” I nod. Gabe stands up from bed first, hand reaching for mine. He's still wearing a pair of sweatpants low on his hips, and I have to tear my eyes away from him before I throw myself on the bed and beg for way more.

“Okay, I'll be fast. Promise,” I tell him, shuffling to the bathroom. He says something, yet I don't hear him, too busy silently screaming, pumping my arms, and having an all-out cheer session for myself that Gabe McCoy kissed me, Gabe McCoy held me all night, and Gabe McCoy wants a whole lot more after I saw what the evidence of our kiss did to him. Never mind the way my body is tingling, nipples hard and pebbled, wetness coating my bare thighs. I am one hundred percent in my *pinch me, I must be dreaming* era.

GABE

One slip of my tongue, and I could have had Carsynn flat on her back, my hand sliding beneath her shirt. I'd take it slow, wanting to relish the feeling of her body against mine, her spread thighs stretched to capacity as I wedged mine between, wanting to feel every nuance of her body. I could have taken things a lot fucking further with Carsynn. She was putty in my hands. Christ, the small taste of her alone isn't enough, and I'm having to tell my cock to calm the fuck down. I'd have probably taken things a hell of a lot further if there weren't certain barriers looming over our heads, her virginity not included.

As much as she'd like to pretend she's okay, I know there's some lingering pain. Hell, I woke up throughout the night to check on her. She'd make a jarring movement, a soft mewl in her sleep, and I'd be sitting up in bed worried that I'd somehow have to manage to get her to a hospital. A damn impossible task before this morning. My truck was proving its worth with the ice on the roads, but even then, we were still sliding, try as I might to keep it from happening or to lessen it. There was no missing the tires not grabbing in a couple of instances. For the most part, Carsynn clenched her hands together in front of her, I'm sure reliving the moment she went through. I couldn't take my hand off the steering wheel in order to hold hers, and it about killed me. I heard and saw her take a deep breath of relief once we were parked inside my detached garage.

“Hey, Gramps,” I answer my cell on the first ring. Carsynn still hasn’t made it out of the bathroom yet, an annoyance Grandpa Bernie is going to grumble in my ear about.

“Hi, boyo, our girl awake yet?” His voice sounds optimistic, and for that I’m glad. When I told him about the accident, I could hear the strain of emotions in his voice. Shit, he could probably hear it in mine, too.

“Yep, she’ll be out in just a minute. I think she’s up for the day,” I tell him. I’ve been up since before the day broke, looking around the house and property. Mainly the ceilings in each room, the windows and doors. Shit can get in when you least expect it. I’ll be shocked if my place or Carsynn’s won’t have a few issues once things thaw.

“She okay?” It’s the same question he’s asked each and every time he’s called. I couldn’t answer him until Carsynn woke up, which didn’t help calm his nerves any.

“She seems to be. Her forearm is bothering her some. After you two get off the phone, I’m going to take the bandage off and clean it again.” I didn’t think she’d sleep for damn near sixteen hours, or I would have done a better job at bandaging her up. As it was, last night, she was dead on her feet, eyes drooping with every movement. So, it was a rush job.

“Good.” Gramps already knows I was up throughout the night, checking on Carsynn and the house. There’s a lot of snow outside, well above hip deep, which means it’s sitting on top of my metal roof. Once we’ve eaten, I’ll rebandage her arm, and we’ll take care of the elephant in the room of her renting the apartment from me. And I plan on getting on the roof to shovel off the snow that’s piling up.

“Here she is. Don’t take too long with her. She hasn’t eaten yet,” I tell Gramps as Carsynn rounds the corner. She’s in my borrowed shirt from last night. It hangs down to her knees because she’s that fucking tiny. The truth of the matter is, her size is probably the reason she didn’t come out worse for the wear from the wreckage. My eyes sweep the length of her body, landing on her feet. She stole my slippers that were sitting on the floor at the end of the bed. Carsynn must be cold,

and while I run hot, she clearly doesn't. I learned that last night when she was on her side of the bed and would roll toward me, pressing herself to me, her skin was cool to the touch.

“Alright, give the phone to her already and cook her something to eat.” I shake my head at his antics. He's always trying to boss someone around. Today I'm on his list to bully.

“For you. It's Gramps,” I mouth to her. Carsynn comes within reaching distance, and I hand her the phone. My hand wraps around her waist, pressing her closer to me while she talks to my grandfather. I tune the conversation out, too busy feeling her body along mine. Her breath hitches while she says hello to Gramps. My head dips, and I run my nose down the length of her cheek, squeezing her to me one more time before guiding her to a barstool. She's going to sit her pretty little ass down and rest, doctor's orders. Living in a small town helps, a quick phone call to the sheriff to tell him he's an asshole for not trying to at least find Carsynn, who was missing. Some kind of citizen of Plaine Hill he is. Election day will be here before you know it, and I know Gramps. He'll be spreading his displeasure far and wide that his grandson had to go looking for the new-to-town sweetheart. After I left the sheriff stumbling and stumbling with someone yelling at him in the background, I called Doc, who answered on the second ring. I told him what was going on with Carsynn, and he asked me a slew of questions, concussion protocol, how bad the injury was, and even told me to video call with him today so he could double check on her. I'd say Gramps worked a hell of a lot faster than I thought he would, considering all the calls I'm able to make without a shit ton of questions. She's got her good arm holding the phone to her ear. When I move to step away from her, I feel her fingertips. They're sliding along my lower abdomen, a ghost of a touch. Except her touch is anything but small. She sears my skin in a way that leaves a lasting impression. My cock flexes beneath my sweats. The boxer briefs I have on underneath aren't doing a damn thing to conceal me either.

I move away from Carsynn. My head, heart, and cock don't like the idea. Except the woman can't survive on air

alone. We need to eat, her especially. They continue talking. A few words catch my attention, but for the most part, I'm busy going through the motions of pulling out ingredients. I'll have to pull something out for dinner, too, so I root around the fridge for ideas while finding ingredients to make grilled cheese with a twist. I grab the butter, bread, cheese, and at the last minute, I realize we'll both need protein and more sustenance than dairy and carbs, so I pull the drawer open for lunch meat to add to our meal.

"I'll call daily, promise," I hear Carsynn say after I place everything on the kitchen counter.

"All good?" I ask, grabbing a pan from the cabinet. The floorplan of my house was a damn mess when I bought the place eight years ago. Gramps always told me a man with his shit together is better than one without a plan growing up. So, I bought the house before the shop, put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into it. It's no longer a bunch of small rooms in a hodge-podge layout. I knocked walls down until the house was just a shell of a place. The only thing I had to hire out was the headers, because that shit was above my paygrade. Everything else, from framing, drywalling, and electrical, was done by me. Gramps helped with the plumbing. I knew the basics, but he knew a fuck of a lot more. He stood beside me and told me how to do it as he explained everything. It was a labor of love, worth it in the end, and now seeing the woman I know is meant to be mine, for-goddamn-ever, it solidifies that even more.

"Yes, your grandpa is a good man, Gabe. You're lucky to have him." She pushes the phone toward me. I leave it where it is. The only person who'll be calling while we're snowed in is Gramps, and he won't want to talk to only me.

"He is, and he's also yours now. Grandpa Bernie doesn't call me every hour on the hour for just anybody, fairy." I stop what I'm doing, giving her my eyes, so she can see the conviction in them. "Speaking of, we need to talk." Her face goes from pleasantly surprised to looking like someone ran over her kitten. Damn, I don't know what's happened in the past, but I'll be damned if I'll put that look on her face again.

“Oh crap, do you need me to find a way home?” Her thumb goes to her mouth, and she nibbles on the nail. I drop what I’m doing. There’s too much fucking distance between the two of us. The forlorn look on her face has got to go.

“No, you’re staying right where you are.” I walk around the island. She looks up, head tipped back with me standing and her sitting.

“Okay, then, did I do something wrong?” Yeah, my woman has a past, one that can’t be good if everything she’s coming up with is nothing but negative.

“No, sweetheart, you didn’t. This thing between us is building, and I’ll be damned if we start it with a lie by omission. I’m clearing the air, right here and now. The apartment you’re living in was built for Gramps, but he didn’t like the idea of living with me or by me. He’s too damn stubborn and too fucking independent.”

“Do you need me to move out?” she interrupts me, thinking the worst yet again. My hands engulf her cheeks, holding them on either side as I lower myself so we’re eye to eye.

“No. The only time you’ll move out of your apartment is to move into my house. This will be happening. You and I are very much together. I’m letting you know the realtor who rented out the apartment to you was hired by me. Gramps called me the minute he saw you at the diner, told me there was someone who needed a place to stay, and I got the ball rolling. Gramps even told me I’d fall for you after one look. He wasn’t wrong about that, either. One look, and I knew, the new girl in town, tiny like a fairy, sweet like nothing I’ve ever seen before, would be mine, and you are, Carsynn, you’re mine.” I let it soak in for a moment when all I really want to do is slam my mouth against hers and take everything I can from her.

“Gabe, you can’t possibly feel this way, can you? This isn’t real. Good things don’t happen to me. I’m not the girl who gets her duke.”

“I’ve got not one fucking clue why you think that or who the girl and the duke are. I do know I’ll bust my ass to prove to you that you’re worth more than you think you are. That I’m worthy enough to be in your life, and that includes showing you in every possible way. The next ball I’m about to drop on you is your apartment is on the same property as my house.” I’m not sure if she saw it on our way in. The way it’s set up is off to the side, closer to the road. I knew Gramps wouldn’t want to feel like he was up in my business, and I was trying to give him a piece of his own area to feel like he’d still be in a home instead of an apartment that’s more than half of his house now.

“I kind of figured that since you said you built it for Mr. Bernie. What I’m confused about is why I’m staying here and why you want me to.” The grumbling in her stomach makes me pause. I was about to list off all the damn reasons why, start telling her, and then I’d show her the reason why.

“I see I still have work to do on making you aware how much you mean to me. We’ll get back to that, later.” My woman is hungry, and I’m going to get her fed before we dive into the heavy shit. You’re staying here because I want you here. Not only that, the power is also out at your place. When I built the apartment, I didn’t bother hooking it up to the home generator. Gramps could always come up here, but no fucking way are you staying in a cold-as-hell place when you can be here *with me*. Now, I’m going to make us some food, and you’re going to make me a list of what you want from your place. Though, I like you in my clothes and slippers. So, I’m not opposed to not grabbing your clothes. I don’t have a spare toothbrush, and I know you asked for one. Okay?”

“I can always walk over and get what I need, Gabe.” Oh, this woman. It’s clear I’m going to have my work cut out for me.

“Not up for discussion, fairy. You write me a list while I’m cooking.” Carsynn’s chest rises. She’s about to say something, and I’m not about that. My head lowers, and I take her mouth with mine. I’m going to do my best to make her forget all the things she could do on her own. Those days are over, and

when I feel the way her fingers press into my skin, I take that as my cue to deepen the kiss. My tongue slides along her lips. One little gasp is all I need to make my way inside her mouth. I drop my hand to her knee, my thumb sweeping the inside of her thigh, and I get what I want. My tongue gets the taste I've been after ever since I met my little fairy yesterday morning. Now that I've gotten what I want, I'm never going to stop kissing her to quiet the noise swirling in her head.

CARSYNN

I'm in a Gabe McCoy lust-induced fog. My lips still tingle from the first kiss before he cooked us grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. He refused my help, so I got to watch him the entire time. It wasn't a bad deal. The feeling of laziness definitely set in. I'm not used to sleeping so much, nor am I used to sitting around and watching others.

Now, I'm reeling from our second kiss and looking out the window at Gabe's masterpiece of a home. It's beautiful with its real wood floors that creak here and there. The walls are a soft creamy color, a mixture of beige and coffee heavily loaded with creamer. The leather couches are a deep brown, look inviting in a way you can grab a blanket, curl up beneath it, and enjoy the roaring fireplace Gabe currently has on. I'm still in his shirt and slippers. The blanket he had lying on the couch is draped over my shoulders courtesy of the man I'm currently watching make a path through the snow with a machine. It won't be much longer before I won't be able to see much more of him through the snow being flung away from him.

"You have things to do besides stare at the man who is rattling your insides, Cars." The blinds and curtains are open, courtesy of my nosy self. I wanted to keep my eyes on him for as long as possible. Worry seeped through my bones while I made the list. I was mortified when I handed it to him: toothbrush, bras, panties, a few pairs of pajamas, a few shirts, and leggings, along with my fluffy socks.

While he offered to pick up my things, I offered to work on dinner. There was no way I could sit on my ass and do nothing, even if he groaned under his breath that the doctor wants to video call later today to check in on me. And it's a sad state of affairs when you have no car, thank you very much, snow and ice. No phone either because, again, the blizzard likes to kick me when I'm down. I mean, the car is one thing, but I just bought my phone, and now I'm going to have to drive or get a ride into town to replace it. A tremor runs through my body. I'm not sure how I'll be able to face that curve along the highway again. Maybe I can order one online and not have to get behind the wheel of a car until winter is long gone.

I move away from the window, keeping the view open and unobscured. The heavy blanket slides off my shoulders while I'm walking toward the kitchen. When Gabe was inside and I told him I'd take care of dinner, I did some investigating of my own. The whole fridge and pantry are well stocked for someone who was out of town for weeks before this storm hit. I wonder if Mr. Bernie came up here and stocked everything when Gabe told him he was heading home. He had everything for a vegetable beef stew and biscuits. My years working at a restaurant and diner are coming in handy right about now. Especially with the dream of a kitchen Gabe has going on. My apartment has a nice kitchen, too, yet the thought of cooking for one person always seems silly. Plus, even if I made half of the batch I am today, it'd take over the majority of my freezer space, and then I'd have no room left for ice cream.

I'm about to head to the kitchen when I realize I'm going to need a jacket of some kind in order to cook. The long shirt I'm wearing, along with Gabe's slippers, is doing an okay job, but not enough to keep warm, and I won't ask him to kick up the thermostat again. I go to the mud room off the kitchen, looking to see if Gabe has a jacket or hoodie hanging up on the built-in coat rack. "Hmm." I check but don't find anything. When I walked him out the door, he put on his snow suit, boots, and a beanie. I didn't think it'd be enough, but Gabe assured me he'd be fine. He's a heater and would probably drip sweat by the time he was finished for the day. There's

nothing hanging up, but there was a basket of folded clothes when I walked by the laundry room. Maybe that will have something; if not, I'll have to go into Gabe's room and root around in his drawers or closet. I'd rather not do that even though he'll be doing similar shortly.

“Ah-ha!” I find the laundry basket filled with clothes. I dig through the stack until I find a flannel. It's not as thick as I'd like, which is why I also snatch a pair of socks. His slippers, while comfortable, are entirely too big and a tripping hazard when walking back and forth in the kitchen. I slide one arm into the dark black and red flannel shirt. It's longer than the borrowed T-shirt, which is good because there is most definitely a draft trying to creep its way up my body. Once I have it on, I cuff the too-long sleeves, and then I cop a squat on the cold floor to put the socks on. I'm sure I look like a hot mess right now. This is as good as I can make it for the time being. My hair is a lost cause. There's no fixing it until Gabe brings the toiletries I asked him to pick up. That leaves putting it in a low messy knot, wrapping the hair around itself and calling it good enough.

“Alright, let's get to work, Carsynn. Gabe is going to come back hungry and needing something to warm him up.” I clap my hands together. My forearm isn't hurting nearly as much. The doctor did, in fact, call Gabe on his phone. He wanted to see my wound and said it looked to be healing nicely already. Doctor Wade also told me I was lucky to walk away like I did. He's not wrong about that. I'd like to think Gabe had a lot to do with that, him finding me when he did before the storm really started coming down, or I wouldn't have survived. I know that more than anyone. I've got to get that out of my head. Those thoughts will only bring me down, and I've come too far to spiral downwards. I shake the memories away. It's time to keep myself busy. I walk back to the kitchen feeling warm and ready to take on the task of cooking. My eyes go from where I'm pulling things out of the fridge, doing a search to find everything I need to cook dinner, to the window where Gabe is. He's still out there, working on clearing a path, now further along, and I feel better that my eyes are back on him. There's no way I should be feeling this deeply for a man I've

only met yesterday, Bernie talking him up a good game, and, of course, seeing the pictures he had plastered all over his walls. Still, I wasn't prepared for Gabe McCoy, not like this. I move around the kitchen, stopping at the vintage radio and flipping it on, then turning the dial until there isn't talk radio but instead an old country song. My body moves to the beat while I get lost in cooking. Last night may have been a mess, but today is a new day. And while I'm still a bit apprehensive about this thing between Gabe and me. I really do want to see where it leads.

GABE

“Carsynn, you good, fairy?” I ask as I stomp off my boots on the mat in the mudroom. I drop the bag of items on the built-in bench and start taking off my outerwear. It was cute the way she worried about me being too cold. I could have taken a layer or two off and probably would have if I didn’t have to go inside her cold-as-fuck house. Jesus, it was cold, really freaking cold, and when I saw what she had her thermostat set to before the power went out, I was ready to take my anger out on anything besides Carsynn. Those stupid rules the realtor had added in, it wouldn’t have mattered who it was. Your heat shouldn’t be set at sixty damn degrees in the dead of winter.

“Yeah, I’m in the kitchen.” I can hear another sound besides the stove, more lyrical, and I wonder if she’s got the television on. Gramps told me she wasn’t one for watching it a lot unless a game show was on that the two of them enjoyed competing against one another. I grab the bag after stripping my clothes down to just my pants. The bulky material needs to come off. It’s soaked and needs to dry out. I could grab a pair of sweatpants from the laundry, except I know my little fairy wouldn’t blink at me only wearing my boxer briefs. Carsynn likes to look at me as much as possible, and the feeling is fucking mutual.

“Dinner smells good. You been taking it easy with your forearm?” I ask as I walk into the kitchen. “Damn, fairy, you don’t need your clothes after all. Mine look a hell of a lot better on you than they ever did on me.” There isn’t but an

inch of skin showing on her legs and a few inches of her forearm. It's the lack of what she's wearing underneath that has me fired up to feel her smooth skin, to slide my calloused hands up the outside of her thighs, my thumbs gliding along the insides, and feeling her body come to life beneath me.

"Gabe." She peeks at me over her shoulder, amber eyes full of lust, and I'm moving my feet as fast as they can take me. My long strides help me along the way.

"Say it again, Carsynn." Her eyebrows furrow, and I place the bag with her clothes, toiletries, and something else I found on her nightstand on the counter. It was face down, the pages curling up, and the cover was of a man embracing a woman with her dress half undone. It was the title that had me reaching for it. Imagine my surprise when I picked it up and read the first few lines. Carsynn may be a virgin, however, she definitely has no qualms about her sexuality and what she's feeling, never mind what she likes to read.

"Say what?" she asks.

"My name. Say my name, fairy." My hands cage her hips in their grasp. I feel her body come alive beneath my touch, face softening and body leaning back into me.

"Gabe." Her voice has my dick perking up, imagining what it would sound like when I'm fucking her into my mattress. Maybe I'll bend her over the bed, get down on my knees, and fuck her with my tongue before I take her with my cock. Her gaze goes back to the stove, and she places the lid on the Dutch oven and sets the heat on low. She wiggles and shifts the entire time, her ass doing nothing for my dick that's hard as a rock whenever she's near.

"I like the way you say my name." I've got not one single problem telling her exactly what she does to me. My only worry is coming on too strong. "You gonna warm me up, baby?" My cold hands find her skin beneath her clothes, gliding up the outside of her legs.

"Gabe," she repeats, her arms wrapping around my bare waist, unable to reach my shoulders. "Thank you for my

things.” I can’t help it, not anymore. I need a piece of her, a taste of her, the feel of her wrapped around me.

“No problem, fairy.” Her breath hitches when my hands reach her upper thighs, my thumbs having a mind of their own and sweeping the insides of her legs along the way. It’s not until I reach her bare hips that my head tips forehead, eyes hooded with desire, that I take her mouth while picking her up. Whether she means to or it’s pure instinct, her legs wrap around my hips and her heated core hits my lower abdomen. I can feel her. Damn, nothing prepared me for what I’m about to take. “You good with this?” I ask. She nods. That’s not good enough. “Need the words, Carsynn, want to hear them come from your lips.” It takes her a moment. She keeps rocking her hips, coating my stomach with wetness. I’m about to see exactly how she looks, how she tastes, and how she feels once I get my answer.

“I’m okay with this. Um, well, you know I’m a virgin, and when I said I’m a virgin, I mean I’ve never done anything besides kiss a boy before.”

“Don’t talk about him, Carsynn. I’m hanging by a thread, and the thought of someone kissing what’s mine has me ready to breathe fire.” While I know we both have a past, that doesn’t mean I want to hear about it. Carsynn must think I’m funny, since a laugh escapes her lips while she tightens her legs around my hips. “It’s not funny, fairy. The fucker may have been your first kiss, but I’ll be your last.”

Those are the last words out of me before my mouth is too busy taking hers. My cock is dripping pre-cum at the thought of taking more than her sweet lips. I’m dying for a taste between her legs. I’d get on my knees and beg to worship her. Thankfully, Carsynn wants me just as much as I want her. The evidence is slick along my stomach, the soft purrs leaving her, and the way she’s got her hands in my hair. My tongue snakes around hers, and the tips of my fingers dig into her ass, feeling the heat as I lift her body up higher and onto the counter.

“Off. Want you naked.” I pull away from her mouth for a moment. I’m going to keep her apprised of everything I intend on doing to her lithe little body.

“Please,” she hisses out when her bare ass meets the cold counter. My fingers bunch the fabric of the clothes on her body, lifting it up, watching as her flesh is bared to me. She’s so fucking delicate, and I watch as inch by inch is revealed.

“Goddamn, Carsynn, you’re beautiful.” She flutters her eyelids, fanning them across her cheeks as a blush forms beneath. The hunger inside of me is almost uncontrollable, but I hold back, worried this is going too fast, and the last thing I want is for her to not enjoy my mouth on her body.

“Gabe.” Fuck, how she says my name, it’s deep, rich, and consumes my being. I slide my hands up the slope of her body. Her tits have my mouth watering. Unable to resist, I cup them, sweeping my thumbs across her nipples. My gaze coasts from her eyes to where my hands are, watching to make sure she’s enjoying herself.

“More.” Her hands tighten their hold on my hair, pulling me closer. Game fucking on. By the time we’re done being snowed in, I’m going to have tasted every inch of her body.

I groan as my tongue licks at one cherry-red-tipped nipple. I blow on it and see the goose bumps appear on her fevered flesh. I repeat the same process to her other nipple, only this time pulling it deeply into my mouth, loving the way her hands dig into my scalp, silently asking for more. I decide to let my free hand in on the action, moving it toward her wet cunt. Jesus, I can’t wait to get my mouth between her legs, to suck on her clit like I’m currently doing to her nipple.

“More, Gabe, more.” She rocks her hips, arching into my thumb grazing her slit. Carsynn is fucking drenched. My mouth moves to her other nipple, knowing I’m the impatient one right now. I work her clit, coating my thumb, slowly pressing it inside. No way will I take her virginity with my fingers. My cock will do the job and try to make it as enjoyable as possible for her. I’ll watch as her pussy takes my cock, rocking my hips in and out slowly until she’s ready for more. The thought of pulling my dick out of her cunt, my length coming away with the proof of what she gave me? Jesus fucking Christ.

“You ready for my mouth, fairy?” The popping of my mouth coming away from her nipple, her breathing, my breathing, and the fire crackling are the only noises in the house.

“Yes, then I want you to teach me how to make you feel this good, too.” She knocks the wind out of me. Never in a million years did I think I’d be the lucky one to teach and show her how to suck my dick.

“Damn, fairy, you want to wrap your pretty lips around my cock and have me guide you the entire way. I’ll give you that, but first, I’m going to bury my head between your thighs. So, lie back for me, baby. I’m about to show you how much better I am than the duke.” She drops to her back, her arm covering her eyes, a throaty impatient whimper leaves her lips. I wrap my hands around her thighs until they’re draped over my forearms.

One stroke of my tongue along her soaked folds, and Carsyn’s legs to try to close around my head. The way I’m holding her open prevents that. Thank fuck, because the grip she has with her thigh muscles, I might die from suffocation. But, Jesus, what a way to go. I twirl my tongue around her clit, watching for cues of what she likes the most. Up and down, side to side does something for her, but it’s nothing close to what the tip of my tongue circling does to her. I don’t stop, looking up the slope of her stomach, watching as her breath turns choppier. Her head is tipped back, one hand in her hair, gripping it tightly, and if it weren’t for our size difference and the way she’s laid out, I’m sure they’d be in my hair. As it is, this is what we both have to work with. I tighten my hold, fingers digging into her thighs, hoping to leave my mark on them come tomorrow. I leave her clit for a moment, groaning against her center as I taste more of her. My arm wraps around her thigh, thumb going to her clit, and I fuck her tight-as-sin pussy with my tongue much like I’m going to do with my cock.

“Gabe, Gabe, Gabe,” she chants my name. Her whole body locks up. My lips, chin, and cheeks are soaked with her wetness. I keep up with the dual ministrations on my woman.

Ready and waiting for her body to catch fire, and when she does, I'm going to have a hard time not ripping my boxer briefs down my legs. The need to fist my cock, slowly jacking myself, is already there, as is imagining my cum coating her bare flesh. Fuck, she needs to come, and fast.

"Gabe." This time when she says my name, it's higher pitched, her body is attempting to twist away, and I know she's close to coming. My pointer finger joins my thumb, pinching her clit. My eyes stay locked on her pretty face. Even with her eyes closed, Carsynn is a thing of beauty, and her exploding on my mouth is even prettier.

CARSYNN

“More. Please,” I beg Gabe. The orgasm he stole from my body is unlike anything I’ve ever done to myself. Literally earth-shattering, body-shaking, and there’s an ache between my legs of emptiness.

“You sure, fairy? I’m good with what we just did.” He helps me into a sitting position. I made an absolute mess. My thighs, beneath my ass, and his face are soaked with my juices. Gabe, for one, is not embarrassed. Oh no, he looks proud, very proud. I try to stay calm, cool, and collected, but the blush that blooms across my cheeks does absolutely nothing to hide what I’m feeling.

“Yes, I’ve never been surer.” He takes that as his cue and lifts me into his arms yet again, carrying me to God knows where. I’m pretty sure it could be anywhere, and I’d be happy. My mouth attaches to his neck, wanting to make him feel as good as he did me. The strong pulls of his mouth on my nipples, the way he didn’t stop when my body was trying to get away from the onslaught of never before felt sensations.

“Carsynn.” I lick at his skin before sucking it into my mouth. Never in my life have I felt this confident with someone, let alone a man. Gabe McCoy makes me come alive in more than just a sexual way.

“Yes?” I answer, there’s a grown to his voice, kind of like earlier when he lifted me up and I rubbed my bare center along him. It was hot, and now it’s that much hotter knowing I’m about to feel his cock inside me. My hands are looped behind

his neck, my fingers playing with the soft curls as I move my mouth from one area to the next.

“You’re going to make me lose any sense of control I have, fairy.” With each step he takes, his cock hits my center. I’d be a liar to say I’m not enjoying the sensation or the fact his boxers are slowly slipping down and I’m feeling the head of his length.

“That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?” I’m tempted to take control and lift my hips up only to slide all the way down Gabe’s hard cock.

“Carsynn, the last thing I want is you so sore tomorrow you won’t be able to take me again. Or walk.” That puts a damper on my idea completely.

“Ugh, I should have taken care of this stupid thing a long time ago,” I mutter as we make it through the doorway to Gabe’s bedroom. He goes silent, minus the grunt that is. His fingers deepen their hold, and I may have awoken a beast I didn’t know was lurking below the surface.

“Don’t bring that up again. Not kissing another man or talking about giving something so special to a man who doesn’t deserve you. Fuck, Carsynn, even I’m not worthy of the gift you’re giving me.” He sits down on the bed. My thighs are on the outside of his, straddling them. Maybe he doesn’t realize what’s happening between us.

“Gabe,” I let out a mewl, ignoring his worthiness speech. I’m going to choose who I give my virginity to, and I’m choosing Gabe McCoy. I look down between us, our bare bodies. When did he lose his boxer briefs, and how didn’t I notice this before?

“Here’s how this is going to go. I’m going to let you do the work, guide you as much as I can. I can’t be trusted to go slow, not with the way you look, how you feel, and the clutch your cunt had on my tongue. No fucking way.”

“Well, I’m not sure giving me the ropes is a good idea.” I pull my body up, hands going to his shoulders, lining my body

up with his cock. “Help me?” I beg, looking at his eyes. I see his clenched jaw.

“Carsynn.” His eyes close, his nostrils flare. “I’ve got no fucking condoms, and I’m guessing you’re not on birth control.” My mood flattens. The one time I’m ready to have sex with a man who sets my body on fire and who has no problem talking about his feelings, and then there’s this.

“To answer your question, no, I’m not on birth control, and obviously you didn’t have this planned.” I mentally calculate my last period and when it’s due next. “I’m on day twenty-two.” Gabe looks at me like I’m going crazy. “Of my menstrual cycle. I mean, we probably should still, you know, pull out, but the chance of me getting pregnant is slim.”

“You’re sure? There’s still a chance it could happen.” I can feel the heat on my cheeks creeping down my chest. Before I can respond, Gabe lays it all out. “I’m gonna be honest, there’s no bullshit between us. I want you, all of you, every damn piece of you. You get pregnant, it’s one more way to tie you to me forever. The last thing I expected when I came home was the way I’d feel about you. But know this, if I had a ring in my possession, it’d be on your finger. I’m that fucking serious.”

“Gabe.” We only just met. The town will talk up a storm, and who knows what they’ll think or say about me. So, why am I suddenly excited at the thought of being Gabe’s completely?

“Words, Carsynn.” This man and needing me to say words when my body is already giving him the answer.

“Yes, please. Whatever happens, happens.” My knees slip along the fabric of the comforter, and the tip of his dick meets my entrance.

“Fuck, there’s no way I’m going to be able to pull out of you. I can feel how wet you are for me, Carsynn, and once I get inside you, I’m never going to leave.” His hands grip my hips, holding me for a moment too long. I use his shoulders and press down, feeling the burn as his head slowly works itself inside me.

“What if I said I didn’t want you to?” I breathe through the sting. The good thing about all of my readings is I’m somewhat prepared. Though, the duke in my recent book isn’t like Gabe, different circumstances and all that. Still, I think there’s something to be said by losing my virginity with one hard thrust.

“Goddamn it, Carsynn. You’re not helping me from ramming my cock into you,” he grumbles.

“Do it. This waiting is making it ten times worse.” I spread my thighs some more, and my eyes close. I know this isn’t going to be a walk in the park, but prolonging the process is dumb.

“Fuck it. My mouth will take care of any pain you feel later,” Gabe grunts. He’s lifting us up once again. I swear this man thinks it’s his job to always have me in his arms. “Gonna take you now, fairy. It won’t be soft and sweet, which is what you fucking deserve, but my restraint can only last so long, and I’m giving you what you want, this time. Next time, we’ll do things my way.” My back meets the mattress. How he managed to hold himself still without sinking further inside me, it’s beyond my brain capacity. All I know is Gabe is hovering above me, hand inching its way along the outside of my thigh, hitching it up his waist. I finally catch on and wrap him up, my ankles clasping together.

“Gabe, please.” My eyes close as I feel him move in and out, slowly at first, gathering my wetness to coat his cock.

“Getting you ready, fairy. I want your juices running down your legs, covering my cock, dripping everywhere.” His words amplify the way he makes my body tremble in need. “There’s my girl. Fuck yeah. Work with me, Carsynn.” I lift my hips up each time he pulls out. I don’t know it’s coming, so lost in the shallow thrusts that when Gabe plunges his cock all the way inside me, my eyes slam open, a silent scream attempts to leave me, and my body locks up.

His forehead meets the center of my chest, his breathing hard and ragged. I wrap my arms around his back, the tips of my fingers drifting along his muscular back. I’m the one who

has a stinging sensation between my thighs, yet I'm soothing him. I'm not upset about it. Honestly, I rather like it. Gabe's feelings run so deep for me that it hurts him to hurt me.

"Gabe, I need you to move, honey," I tell him after a few moments, when my body has adjusted to his girth.

"Gonna have to give me another second. I so much as move, I'm going to come inside you, and you deserve to come, too." He lifts his head. Stormy gray eyes meet mine. "I love the way you feel, Carsynn, love the way you look, and love that you're all mine. The next time my mouth is between your legs will be after I shave you bare, let you feel all the sensations."

"Gabe." I lift my hips, spurring him on, and he finally pulls out a bit before sliding back in. "I don't want to know why you know that, and we're not discussing it. I'm also not going to analyze why the idea of you shaving me is a turn-on. What I really need you to do is finally take me like we both want you to."

"Fuck, yeah, I can feel your cunt clutch my cock. You feel that, Carsynn, how your pussy doesn't want me to leave?" He works his hips back and forth, each time going deeper, harder, and while I know the chance of me coming the first time is slim, I'm happy to have the best view to watch Gabe lose control and come inside of me. "Show me, fairy. Show me how you play with yourself when you're all alone, reading your book, and what sets you off."

I take my hand away from his back, making sure to continue touching him, watching as his muscles ripple with every rock of his body. "Gabe."

"Look at my fairy. All soft and pliant, needing my cock." The tips of my fingers move from his body to mine. He sits back, my thighs on top of his, spreading me open more. Gabe's eyes are locked on where we're joined. "Jesus, you're fucking perfect. I can see the proof of me taking you. Play with your clit while I play with your pussy." Keeping my head up is no longer an option. Gabe starts moving, and I use my two fingers, making a V on either side, slowly warming

myself up. Not that I'll need very much time. My eyes close when Gabe goes harder than he did before, building the orgasm up inside the both of us. I very much want to open my eyes to see him come for the first time, but I'm not sure that'll be possible.

"Gabe," I sob on another powerful thrust. It's everything in this moment, the feeling of completeness, the knowledge that Gabe, a man who barely knows me, will take care of me so thoroughly.

"Fuck, yes, you're gonna push me over the edge." My body locks up, ankles tightening on his lower back, trying to keep him right where I need him. Gabe must understand because he doesn't move. He stays right where he is, my pussy convulsing around his dick as I have another explosive orgasm in one day.

"Gabe." His name is filled with need, hoping he'll come with me. Secretly or not so secretly wanting to know what it'd feel like for him to come inside me.

"Last chance, Carsynn. I'm coming inside you unless you say otherwise."

"Inside." I'm not sure I ever had a choice in the matter, not with the way I can feel each hot and heavy spurt as he comes inside me. My eyes open at the last minute. Watching Gabe in his own world, one that I know perfectly well is filled with rapture, and seeing him now. I know Gabe was meant for me all along.

"Carsynn." His body goes rigid, head tipped back, and he lets go one last time. After that, Gabe's body lies on top of mine, careful not to give me all of his weight while still holding me to his warm, sweat-slickened skin. I may never move from this spot. My eyes close, I breathe in the spicy scent of the two of us, and that's the last thing I remember before I drift off to sleep.

GABE

“Gabe,” Carsynn moans against my chest the next morning. After she drained my dick dry last night, she passed out. I was worried at first that she may have over done it, but the soft sigh she gave me made me realize I’d fucked her into a deep sleep. It gave me ample time to watch as my cock slid out of her, our combined come and the evidence of her virginity coating my skin. I laid there in a stupor, not wanting to move away or wipe either of us clean. A picture would have made it last forever, and while I thought about doing just that, I held back. No way would I want an image of the two of us to get in the wrong hands. I stayed there until Carsynn started turning into herself, the air cooling her heated flesh, creating goose bumps. I took a quick trip to the bathroom, hurriedly cleaning myself off, not worrying about the cold water hitting my cock. I needed it to cool myself off. It was Carsynn who needed the warmth. Shit, had she not fallen asleep, I’d have run a warm bath for her to sit and soak in. Her muscles could have really used it. Once I gently cleaned her up with a washcloth, I took my time watching her face and body to make sure she wasn’t feeling a single thing. Another quick trip back to the bathroom to throw the cloth in the sink, then I went back through the house, making sure everything would be okay while we took a quick nap. I knew without a doubt after an hour or so, I’d be hungry for more than a second taste of Carsynn.

“Hmm, you want something, fairy?” I open my eyes. Her body is draped on top of mine, lips on my neck, feeling her

lick and suck on me yet again. My woman is obsessed with using her mouth.

“Your cock. I want you to show me what you like. I want to make you feel good like you did me when we were in the kitchen, and while I’d like to ride you again, I’m a little sore.” My eyes that were hooded with sleep open wide. Carsynn starts climbing between my legs when I spread them open for her.

“What a way to wake up. My woman greedy for my cock, body nice and warm, hair tousled from my hands, and she wants my dick in her pretty little mouth.” She keeps moving down my torso, kissing each inch as she goes. My hand goes the back of her head, holding on to her hair as if my fingers were a hair tie. I’m going to want to watch her take my dick in her pretty mouth the whole fucking time.

“Gabe,” she groans. Her ass is tipped up in the air, and the sheets slide off the rest of her body. There isn’t a single stitch of clothing or fabric between us. She reaches my lower abdomen, hand wrapping around my length, and dips her head further.

“Fuck, yeah, lick the tip, fairy. Take your first taste of me.” There’s no way I’m going to miss a second of watching Carsynn’s tongue sliding out of her mouth. When she does as I ask, my eyes try to close, but I’ll be damned if I don’t watch the entire thing.

“Mmm,” she moans when she swallows the pre-cum that’s dripping from my slit.

“You ready for more?” I ask. The question isn’t necessary. Either she’s looked up a few things online, or her books have given her the heads-up. My head rocks back on the pillow, eyes closing as she takes me deeper, her hand still slowly twisting up and down on my length. It’s when she takes me deeper than I expect that I lift my head back up. “Fuck yeah, fairy, your sweet mouth is going to make me come before I’m ready.” Maybe it’s the fact that she’s new to this, never having taken anyone else, and thank Christ for that. I don’t care if that makes me sound like some caveman in a loin cloth, jumping

from rock to fucking rock. I know at the end of the day, I was her first, and I'll also be her last. I don't need to guide her, not with the way she's got me under control. Her head bobs up and down as the hand not working my dick cups my balls.

“Jesus Christ, keep doing that, baby, and you need to tell me where I'm coming.” She comes up, sucking harder than before, making me see goddamn stars. My hand tightens its hold on her hair, hips pushing up even though I'm trying my hardest not to choke her. My abs ripple with each suck and pull she has on me. “Figure out where I'm coming, fairy. I'm not gonna be able to hold back.”

Carsynn gives me another soft hum while she's taking care of my dick, bathing it with an attention a man can only dream about.

“Gonna come,” I groan, pulling back on her hair since she didn't give me the go-ahead that she's going to swallow my cum. Truth be told, I'd rather she didn't anyways. I liked watching her pussy milk me, and when I pulled out, fuck me running, it was hot to see. I know without a shadow of a doubt, either me or her jacking my cock until I'm spraying her body with my cum is going to be hot as fuck.

“Gabe.” She's not thrilled with me judging by her pouty lips.

“Wrap your hand around my dick, Carsynn. Let me finish on your pretty tits.” She does as I say. My hand covers hers, and we work together to finish the job. It doesn't take too long to bring me back to where I was.

“I wanted to taste you like you did me.” She's sitting on her knees between my legs, one hand on my dick, the other holding my thigh. Our size difference is quite the contradiction with how she can barely wrap her fingers around my length.

“Next time. You want to taste, I'll feed it to you once I come over these pretty tits,” I grumble, my body locking up, balls drawing tight, and through the whole time I'm coming, I notice Carsynn's eyes are locked on my dick. I paint her chest, tits, and stomach. The thick ropes of cum look fucking phenomenal on her.

“Holy shit.” I drop my hand from my cock, and Carsynn does the same.

“Holy shit is fucking right. Your mouth, fairy. It’s damn lethal. Now, you said you wanted a taste. I’m going to give it to you.” My fingertip draws a line where I came, gathering it. “You still want it?” A nod is all she gives me. Her mouth opens, and when I push my finger inside, she wraps her lips around it, moaning as she savors my flavor.

“Yeah, I’m never going to get used to the surprise that is you, Carsynn.”

“Good. I don’t want you to.” I pull her on top of me, not worrying about the mess we’re making even though I know cum is a bitch to wash off once it dries. I’ll think about us eating later on, locking the house, down, and making sure the heat is set to a temperature she won’t get cold. Right now, all I want and need is wrapped in my arms.

GABE

“I guess you didn’t need your clothes after all,” I tease Carsynn, walking into the living room. She’s on the couch, curled up in the corner, a blanket covering her legs that are propped on the coffee table in front of the leather sofa. It was hard to peel myself away from her this morning, but hearing the heavy plow trucks meant it was time for me to get to work before my phone starts ringing off the hook.

“Nope, yours are warmer and more comfortable.” She tucks the loose strands from her messy bun behind her ear. I make my way closer to her, needing to deliver the news of me going out in the weather. Carsynn woke up last night gasping for air. She swore up and down it wasn’t a nightmare, but I knew the truth. It took her an hour to settle down, and only then did she fall asleep. As for me, I watched over her until I knew she was out for the count.

“Not gonna argue, it’s a sight I like seeing.” I take my hat off my head, run my fingers through my hair, and leave it off while I make my way toward my fairy. “I’ve got a question for you.” She puts her book down, her face as bright as a tomato. I wonder what part she’s at. If it’s similar to what I read when I picked it up from her apartment, the duke was eating his wife from behind, his thumb on her ass and teasing her. Fuck, it must be something racier because I’ve eaten her twice now, told her I was going to take her ass, and what did she do? She lit up like a firecracker, and her cunt clamped down so tightly I barely had time to pull out and jack my cock on her stomach. That’s how much she liked the idea.

“Oh, well, ask away.” I notice she keeps her book within reaching distance, hand on top of it, and I smirk. The duke is probably taking his wife’s ass, and if I were taking Carsynn’s, I’d have two fingers in her wet-as-hell pussy, pumping them in and out in tandem with my cock while using the palm of my hand to hit her clit. Goddamn, now I’m going to need to make that happen, and fucking soon.

“Fairy, you think I don’t know what you’re reading? Kind of hard not to put two and two together from the cover alone.” I bend down, dropping a kiss to her lips before standing back up to my full height. “I’m not judging you. Love that you’ve got something for yourself. Maybe one day, we’ll implement what you read in the bedroom if there’s something in there we haven’t tried.” I didn’t think she could turn any brighter than the shade of red she was sporting a few moments ago. It’s fucking adorable.

“Gabe.” My name is said in a way I know she doesn’t want to be self-conscious, but also, I can see by the way she scrunches her nose that she’s not opposed to the idea. The past two days, I’ve done nothing but become obsessed with the woman I fell for at first sight. Fuck, the way my heart quickens, my dick thickens, and a whole slew of other shit I’ve never felt before, I’m pretty sure Grandpa Bernie would call it love.

“We’ll be doing exactly that, fairy, and soon. First, I’m about to get on the road and work. McCoy’s has the only tow truck in town.” I watch as her shoulders rise to her ears. Fuck, she’s worried, probably about a slew of things. She’s mentioned being out of work is going to set her back. Carsynn doesn’t know it yet, but her rent won’t be an issue any longer. In fact, within the next few days, you can find her ass along with all her belongings here at the house. Her place is beside me, not in a house two hundred feet away where I can’t wake up with her wrapped around my body or I can’t walk inside and set my eyes on her wearing my clothing. I also know she’s stressing over her car being a total loss and her having the bare minimum insurance coverage. The vehicle wasn’t worth enough to keep anything else on it, so that means she’ll need a car now, too. Another thing I can help her out with. I’ll have to

ease her into driving again. The first order of business will be her moving in with me, and then I'll battle the argument I'm sure will ensue when I try to give her everything I possibly can.

"Shit, I guess I need to call the insurance company. Not that it'll do any good, but it has to be done." Her voice is full of defeat. Fuck that, not when I've got the tools, the knowledge, and the ability to take care of shit.

"Babe, I own a tow truck and an auto shop. We don't specialize in bodywork, but you'd need a whole new frame as it is. While I can't fix your car to drive again, I can do other stuff to help you out. I'm gonna hook your car up, take it to the shop, and you can deal with the insurance once I'm able to pick up a spare phone. The question I have is if you want to ride with me or if you want to stay here. Grandpa Bernie is itching to get out of the house and see you with his own two eyes. It's up to you, hang out here with Gramps or ride with me?" I pick up her legs, sitting down on the coffee table while placing her feet on my lap. My woman has stolen my socks, too. She refuses to ask me to kick up the heat, and honestly, when I'm not in the house, I wouldn't mind doing so. Carsynn only asks for help to start the fire and stays near it when I'm outside. My winter clothes are too big for her, or no doubt she'd be wearing them and helping me tackle the few chores I have to do around here. Mainly chop firewood to keep her warm, a task she watches from the window the entire time, especially when I get hot and my shirt comes off.

"Umm, tow, a phone? What am I missing here, Gabe? I know you can help me out with the tow truck. A favor I will be paying back once the insurance company reimburses me. As for the phone, well, I'll have to purchase another one. No way, can I go too long without one. If you give me a ride to the store, I'll pick one up." I knew she'd have a hard time accepting my help. I'll have to persuade her another way. My hand goes to her foot, massaging her instep, staying silent for a few minutes until she's more relaxed. She has only mentioned little blips from her past, but from what I gather, it hasn't been an easy life.

“I’m not buying you a brand-new phone, fairy. These are replacements the guys use when needed. If they take the tow truck, technically, they’re on the clock, so they need a phone. We’ve got a few old ones at the shop. We’ll pop out your SIM card and put it in the replacement. Good as new, another item taken care of, and you don’t have to worry about it. As for the towing of your vehicle, that’s fine. Don’t strap yourself when I was going to handle it already.” Her head drops back, eyes closing, and a long sigh escapes her sweet-as-fuck mouth. Her whole body relaxes, and it seems my hands on her body help her not overthink and overanalyze every single thing. I love that she’s independent to a point, but I hate that she won’t let me shoulder some of her burdens.

“Gabe, I don’t really want Bernie out on the roads, let alone you. Can I go with you to pull out my car? There’s probably stuff in there that I should clean out. I can do that another day, though.” Her eyes open, but she doesn’t lift her head to look at me. I’m liking where this is going. She’s not saying no, she’s not saying yes, and while she’ll have to go through her car, it doesn’t have to be today. Plus, it’s damn dangerous with the amount of glass and metal. I’ll make sure I’ve got the time to help her do it, which sadly won’t be today.

“I can do that. I’ll pick you up when I’m through with work, or if the roads are better and you feel comfortable with Bernie driving you, he can bring you back here.”

“Oh God, Gabe. It’s kind of hard to think when you do what you’re doing with your hands.” Her voice is soft and dreamy, enjoying my massage.

“Want me to do more? The couch you’re on hasn’t been broken in yet,” I tease, my hand going past her socks, meeting the smooth bare skin of her legs.

“No, well, yes, but maybe later?” She lifts her head off the back of the couch, amber eyes meeting mine. I can see the hunger in them, and damn it, I want nothing more than to take her right here. This morning clearly wasn’t enough for both of us. “As far as Bernie driving me home, I’d rather you do that. I’m sure he’s going stir crazy, too.” She takes a deep breath, emotion building in her entire body. “I don’t want anything to

happen to him. I've never had anyone like you or Bernie to care about or to care about me, and the thought that something could, it makes my stomach sink to my toes."

I'm off the coffee table, kneeling on the ground, spreading her thighs, and wedging myself between them. My hands cup her cheeks, body on top of body. It'd be better if we were naked. That's just me being selfish. Right now isn't the time for that. "I want your full attention on me when I tell you this, Carsynn." She nods, lips pursed and hands going to my forearms while hitching her legs over my hips. "I get that shit was bad for you before you rolled into Plaine Hill. I'm not sure how bad, and soon you'll tell me, when you're ready. I'll be here to listen. Now, I know you're gun shy after the accident. I would be, too. I can promise you this, I'm going to be damn careful today and every other day. My goal is to come home to you every night and wake up to you every morning." She blinks away the tears as much as she can. What slides down her cheeks, my thumbs wipe clean.

"Gabe," she tries to interrupt, and as much as I love the sound of her voice, she needs to hear this more.

"One more thing, fairy, then the floor is yours. Bernie and I have lost a lot in our lives. He's extra careful, and so am I. He calls me three times a day when I'm not in town. He called me every ten minutes like clockwork when I was out searching for you. The phone rings while we're snowed in, and he's calling to check in on us, or I'm doing the same to him. Bernie won't do anything to take that away from you or himself." She nods, her lips quivering, and she's falling a-fucking-part. All I can do is hold her until she settles down.

CARSYNN

“I’m sorry. I swear I’m not usually a crybaby,” I blubber into Gabe’s neck as he holds me while I have a meltdown like a four-year-old when they don’t get the toy they’ve been eyeing at the store. Gabe wraps me up in his body further. A sheet of paper couldn’t fit between the two of us with how close he’s holding me.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You need to cry, let it out. You need to scream, let it out. You need to hit something, let it out. I’m here for you, Carsynn, no matter what.” I suck back my tears along with other gross fluids that an ugly jag makes you let loose. Through it all, Gabe remains my rock. A man I only dreamt about having, one who you only see in book boyfriend material. And while he may not be my boyfriend, fiancé, husband, or really a label. What he is, is everything to me.

“I’m okay. My past, it’s not pretty. My parents are addicted. Dad to alcohol, Mom to drugs, mainly pills, but I’ve seen the track marks, too. I don’t know why I stayed for as long as I did. Their addiction took over my life, made me realize they loved their vice more than me. My mom, God, she was the worst of the pair.” It’s hard for me to look at Gabe while I admit how much my parents didn’t like or love me. I’m still dealing with my childhood trauma. I’ll be a work in progress, there’s no doubt about it. It’s hard not to have flashbacks or worry you may translate your past situations into your future. Especially when there’s a relationship involved or children. What I do know for certain is I’m going to work on

breaking the cycle. My children will know they're loved and adored, unconditionally. I close my eyes for a moment, a memory hitting me like a ton of bricks. Mom pushed me to hide in the closet, turning off the lights and telling me to be quiet, or else I wouldn't get dinner that night. I was only seven, thinking it was totally normal until strange sounds came through the thin door. There were lots of slaps, thumping, and screams. All I could do was move away, huddle myself in the corner, and wait. I hugged my legs to myself until the noise became unbearable. My hands slapped over my ears so hard I was seeing stars. I stayed quiet, though, even when I was whimpering with the need to go the bathroom. I did what my mom said. Still, when she opened the door and saw the state I was in, tears and snot running down my face, head held in shame because I couldn't hold the need to go the bathroom, Mom snatched me up by my arm, marched me into the bathroom, told me to clean up in the nastiest way possible, and still I went to bed hungry.

“Look at me, fairy. You don't have to tell me everything. I can piece together enough to know you went through a lot.” This man, he amazes me. No one, and I mean no one, has ever made me feel like he does. I'm not a number in the world. I'm a person, his person.

“I'm alright. I want to get this out and then close the door on my past forever.” Gabe stays where he landed, hands still cupping my cheeks, tears still streaming down my cheeks, and he's trying to wipe them down. It's at this moment I realize I'm at peace. This crying jag is cathartic. It's for the girl who lost her childhood because two people were so selfish they couldn't think about their child.

“As long as you're sure.” He doesn't look sold on the idea. Hopefully, this doesn't have him running for the hills and hiding from the overly emotional woman after we're done.

“I went to school, walked to and from, which worked well considering their apartment wasn't too far away. I was guaranteed breakfast and lunch. Not sure who made that happen. My parents would never bother with doing paperwork, so maybe the school saw the poor girl and took

mercy on her. I made sure to stay as late as possible, reading in my teacher's classroom or helping her clean, anything to stay away. That worked until middle school, when I found the local library and did the same. My goal was to remain hidden. The less I was seen, the better it was. Then high school came around, and I became more aware of my body, wore the baggiest clothes I could, and hung out at the library when I wasn't working in order to have food, power, and water. It wasn't until earlier this year that I knew it was time for me to make my escape. I wasn't living, I was surviving, and it was damn lonely. I made a plan, worked doubles, and saved money. Once Mom was finally out of the apartment, made my break." I don't tell him about the leering eyes, the way my mom looked at me with jealousy, or how my dad ignored me more and more. I didn't think he was that bad of a person. He didn't yell or scream like Mom. He just sat on the couch, drank himself into a stupor, got up each morning to go to work, and repeated the cycle.

"Something else happen, Carsynn? Your mom had people over, your dad wasn't around much?"

"God, no. I mean, there could have been opportunities. Luckily, the fire escape was out my bedroom window. I'd leave if things got sketchy. The library was my safe haven when I was younger. As soon as I graduated high school, even had full ride scholarships, stupid me didn't take it because I thought they would change, obviously that was a mistake on my part," I take a deep breath, in my feelings about how I let that slip through my fingers. "I thought my life would be work, hide, sleep, and work again. An endless cycle." Finally, my story is over, and the heavy weight on my chest feels like it's been lifted.

"Carsynn, you amaze me." Gabe must have gotten uncomfortable with how we're sitting. I'm lifted, his knees going behind my thighs, he wraps my body in his arms, and then he's settling on the couch, this time with me on his lap. I really liked the weight of his body on me, a comfort of sorts, but this way is nice, too. Every way with Gabe McCoy has been perfect. I only hope it continues this way for a good long time.

“I don’t know about that. Some have it worse.” I shrug my shoulders.

“You are, fairy. So damn amazing. The sperm donor and a womb donor are not parents. The titles mother and father do not pertain to them. I’ll bust my balls ’til the day I die to show you how amazing you are until you believe it, too.” His words are conviction. He won’t let me say otherwise.

“Okay, we can share the title. I’m here now, and I thought my bad luck followed me. Turns out I was wrong. My luck changed the day you walked into the diner.”

“Fuck, fairy, not gonna get anything done now. Shit will have to wait, since your words hit me in the heart and in my dick, Carsynn.” I snort out a burst of laughter with his proclamation. He further proves his point by flexing his hips.

“Oh no, you don’t. I need to get over my fear. Eventually, I’ll have to get behind the wheel of a vehicle, and Bernie is waiting on us. Plus, you have work.” I dip my head. Gabe cups the back of my neck, pulling me down. My good sense falls by the wayside. The only thing that matters when his lips are on mine is it’s just the two of us. The sweep of his tongue along my lips, the way my breath chases his, and I’m lost in everything except Gabe. He doesn’t help matters by the fisting of my hair in his hands or the way his other hand is pulling his clothes up, baring my body to the cool air. “Gabe,” I breathe into him, my body shivering when the palm of his large hand meets the cheek of my ass, heating me instantly. I know it’s going to have to be me to put a hold on our clench. A kiss always seems to turn into more when Gabe and I are with one another, and while I love the complete abandonment we feel, I know Grandpa Bernie needs to see both of us.

“Gabe, we have to get ready.” I pull away, but he holds me steady. My own hips were in on the action. My core is soaking with need, my nipples aching to feel his chest hair against them. Damn, adulting really does suck.

“Fuck, I hate leaving you like this, all warm and wet. My dick is hard and aching for you.” He doesn’t let me go. He’s relentless in holding me in his grasp. “You good, Carsynn?”

That was a lot to off-load. I'm not going to leave you raw, baby."

"I'm good, great even. Thank you for listening to me. It was needed. I'm going to get dressed. We'll go see Bernie first. Then you can go off to do your saving the townspeople of Plaine Hill. No saving damsels in distress, though. Save that for me." His lips tilt. My newfound confidence is bolstered, and I'm sure a lot of that is for the big guy in front of me.

"Damn straight. You're the only one I need, Carsynn. Glad you're seeing that, fairy." He lays another kiss on my lips. I smile through it, completely and totally happy. He stands up without so much as a huff of breath, my legs wrapping around his hips again, and he's carrying me to his bedroom, where I know we won't finish what he started. I'm okay with that. I'm happy, happier than I've ever been in my life. I saved myself by leaving that day, coming to Plaine Hill, starting over, and even though I'll be doing it again, at least this time, I have my big guy holding my hand along the way.

GABE

“**B**oyo, Carsynn, you two are a sight for sore eyes for this old man.” Gramps meets us on the front porch in a flannel and a pair of jeans, no fucking shoes on his feet. I swear to God he’s going to be the reason I go prematurely gray.

“How are you doing, Mr. Bernie?” Carsynn and I walk up the steps. My hand holds open the storm door, trying to get Gramps in the house where it’s warm. Just because the snow isn’t falling doesn’t mean it’s not cold out here. Shit, even my woman doesn’t have the appropriate clothes for this type of weather. She’s currently wearing her warmest clothes, which isn’t much. We stopped at her apartment to grab a thermal, sweatshirt, and jacket, but it still wasn’t enough, so we came back to my house, where she put on a pair of my thermal socks, one of my jackets that was too big but covers up most of her body, and a thick hat. Carsynn thought it was overkill at first, until she stepped outside after leaving my garage, where the truck was heated before we left. Her teeth instantly chattered once she was out in the open air, and her tune changed on borrowing my clothes.

“Good. Bored to death. Never lost power this time, though,” Gramps boasts. Usually the wind blows, a little ice hits the power lines, and he’s without for days on end. This latest storm wasn’t a doozy like most can be. It came as fast as it left. Though, it being this early in the season means we’re going to have a cold-as-fuck winter with a shit ton of storms.

“Well, at least it’s over,” Carsynn says. I’m pretty much chopped liver right now. Carsynn and Gramps hug for a moment, then he guides her inside, something I’ve been trying to do since we walked up the steps. Maybe I can get my woman to talk some sense into him about his lack of footwear. Damn man acts like we live on the beach in Florida.

“For now,” I tell her, following the two people on this earth I’d give everything up for.

“Why did I think New Hampshire was such a great place to live?” She laughs, but I can hear an edge to her tone. Fuck, I’m going to have to get her behind the wheel soon, or she’s never going to be comfortable driving again. I haven’t brought up the fact there’s a spare vehicle she’ll be using. I’m going to take care of a few things first before I head to the shop, where I’ve got an SUV in the yard with four-wheel drive, tires that aren’t bald, and it’s newer. The problem will be Carsynn accepting the damn thing without paying me.

“I think you landed right where you were meant to be, sweet pea. Now, tell me what you two lovebirds have been getting into while we were snowed in for three days.” He disentangles from my fairy, and I step in to help her take off my jacket. I see the look he tosses over his shoulder as he continues to walk toward the kitchen. I know the look, seen it more than a few times in my thirty-two- years. He’s ticked about what she’s wearing beneath my jacket. I nod.

“Gabe couldn’t sit still. He was doing this and that, checking the house and apartment, feeding me non-stop, and then the damn man got on the roof!” She is still pissed about that. I didn’t tell her it was a necessity. There was more snow on one part of the roof than the other, sitting, not melting or falling off like it was supposed to. It happens when the sun doesn’t hit a part of the roof. I deal with it every year. She never had that issue living in an apartment with warmer temperatures. We had a stand-off, Carsynn telling me to get down while I was responding for her to get in the damn house. She’s as bad as Gramps, wearing my flannel, nothing on her legs, except at least she was wearing my slippers.

“Honey, that old house of his does it every storm. Why do you think I stay at home? Gabe won’t let me help him, and he won’t let me order him from the ground either. The less I know, the better. It seems he’s your problem now.” I hold Carsynn’s hand while she steps out of her shoes, some rubber-looking things that do nothing for insulation, but at least she’s not getting her feet soaked in the snow.

“Well, someone should yell at him more. I had no idea he was up there. One minute I was watching him with the snowblower, figuring he’d be on the ground and out there for a while. I started baking chocolate chip cookies, and the next thing, I heard thumping on the roof. Needless to say, the first batch of cookies came out burnt. We did not compromise, but he knows now to keep someone aware when he’s climbing a ladder and standing twenty feet up in the air on the roof,” she throws me right under the bus. Gramps’ eyebrows arch as we follow him into the kitchen. My hand lands on her ass, smacking it lightly but with enough of a slap to get her attention. “Gabe!” she squeals, jumping up and looking at me like I’ve got two heads.

“Gabe McCoy, you’re going to give an old man a heart attack. We had an agreement.” Gramps is standing near the coffee pot, pouring a cup for himself in a ceramic mug, a travel mug next to it for me to take on the road.

“Yeah, Gabe McCoy.” Carsynn pinches my side in retaliation. It’s not enough to hurt, more to get my attention. A damn shame she doesn’t realize my eyes and ears are always on her.

“Carsynn was home, and I was in the zone.” I pull her closer to me, my hand going beneath her hair to massage her neck. She’s tense, worried about me out on the road, and I want to reassure her as much as I can.

“Do better, or I’ll get in my truck when you tell me not to, you hear? Jesus, next time tell her or call me.” He’s pointing the finger, though not the middle one. The one that means business, and it’s right on me.

“Will do. You good to take Carsynn home whenever she’s ready? I’m going to tow her car, grab a phone from the office, and work my way back to the house if there isn’t much to do. I’m not sure how many calls the office got or how long I’ll be out.” My lips press against the side of Carsynn’s head, her hands slip around my waist, and she holds on to me.

“Yep, we’ll be good, won’t we?” he asks the woman wrapped around me. She nods in agreement. “Though you tell me. Carsynn can run the shop, and answer the calls for that matter.” I furrow my eyebrows. I didn’t want to bring it up to her yet, but now that Gramps has, I realize he’s right. It would help me out. She could cut down on hours at the diner, and it wouldn’t kill her body nearly as much.

“That’s not a bad idea. A few hours a day or a few days a week. It’d sure free up Gramps from grumbling about the state of my office.” And I’d get to see my fairy a fuck of a lot more.

“Me? I’ve never done anything like that before. What if I screw up?” She moves away from me, or tries to, but I hold the fuck on.

“Sweet pea, you can’t screw up more than Gabe already has. The office is a damn mess. Whatever he offers you, ask for double. Besides, it’s just an idea. You can always say no. I mean, it’s an office job with benefits, means you’re not on your feet all day, and you’ll get more pay. It’s worth a shot, though I’d miss seeing your pretty face first thing in the morning,” Gramps lays it on thick.

“Think about it, okay, fairy? You don’t have to say yes or no right away, but I do have to go. Walk me to the door, and I’ll get Gramps the cookies you brought for him.” I turn to Gramps. “I’ll see you later.” He walks toward me, a travel mug in one hand for me, his own in his other.

“Did someone say cookies? I was hoping you’d brought me some after your story.” He winks at her, handing me my coffee and giving me a side hug.

“I’ll think about it.” I nod. That’s all I can ask of her. While all I want is to immerse Carsynn completely in my life, she’s been on her own for as long as she can remember. It’s a

lot for both McCoy men to barge into her life and try to make it better.

“Works for me, fairy.” I guide us out of the kitchen and to the front door. Thankfully, Gramps stays behind. We don’t need an audience when I kiss her, especially since I’m not giving her some chaste kiss. I’m going to leave her breathless and with a promise for a whole fucking lot more when I get home tonight.

CARSYNN

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?” I ask Bernie as we pull into Gabe’s driveway. We spent the better part of the day together. The man is a busybody, going from one room to the other to tinker on this or that. I helped him bring wood in again even though he wanted to yell at me because of the lack of clothing I wore. Gabe called to check in around lunchtime, and he and Mr. Bernie talked for a few minutes before the phone was passed to me. A phone I’d never seen the likes of before. Growing up, we didn’t have a lot, so a house phone was a luxury my parents would never put before their drug use. Grandpa Bernie, as he now tells me to call him, has an honest to God phone that’s rotary style. It’s attached to the wall. The spiral cord is long enough he can sit down in his recliner to have a long conversation. Gabe let me know he’d be home for dinner and that my car was in his yard at the shop. Then he had to go, but he’d see me later. Once we hung up, I asked Mr. Bernie how it worked, to which he told me the phone company made them obsolete. You can receive calls; you just can’t call out. He uses his other phone in his bedroom to dial out if necessary. For the most part, he’ll talk to Gabe on a cell phone if he’s out on the road. That way, he doesn’t miss a chance to chit chat. Secretly, I believe Bernie calls Gabe as much as he does because he worries, rightfully so. He told me about losing his wife and daughter back to back. I’m sure that hits you in a way you’re never prepared for.

“I’m sure. You two lovebirds need your time alone. I remember when Winnie and I first got together. We would stay

out late, stay up late, and the next day, we were dog tired. It was worth it, though.” Bernie is lost in a memory, a good memory I’d guess, judging by the smile on his face. We talked about Winnie and his daughter, Gabe’s mom. I didn’t bring it up and wouldn’t think about doing that to Gabe either, but he told me how they passed away within months of each other, how it broke his heart, and how Gabe was the only reason he got up each morning after everything happened. Winnie and his daughter would have kicked his ass from their grave if he screwed up.

“The offer is there should you change your mind.” Before we left, I took out ingredients to make a quick dinner of spaghetti and meatballs. I’m still shocked Gabe has such a well-stocked kitchen, a kitchen I’ve been putting to good use. While we were snowed in, he’d make breakfast, mostly because he woke up well ahead of me. Apparently, my body is too tired to move in the morning. Gabe says I’m catching up on years of sleep deprivation, and I tell him it’s from his powerhouse of a sex drive. Which in turn starts a whole new conversation about how I’m not complaining when it happens, and then he’s seducing me all over again.

“I know, and I appreciate it. I’m glad you’re here, Carsynn, not glad Gabe had to find you the way he did. But I’m glad you’re a part of the family.” He hits the clicker for the garage. There was no talk about where he was dropping me off. Clearly, I’m going to Gabe’s. These McCoy men, always doing what they want and how they want.

“You’re my family, too, but we need to talk about something funny or embarrassing. I’m at my max capacity for crying today.” Bernie parks in Gabe’s spot in the garage. He didn’t have to do all that, except I know why he did. It’s also the reason I’m going to accept a part-time position at McCoy’s Auto Repair. I need better winter clothes. I’m also going to need a car, extra hours, extra money, so I’d be stupid not to accept the offer.

“Do I need to whoop Gabe’s ass for making you cry, sweet pea?” My laughter is the only thing you can hear in the cab of his truck. I’m shaking my head.

“Didn’t think so. I’ve got a great set of ears. They’re all yours whenever. It’s an open invitation,” Bernie says with a soft smile on his face. “You go on in now, and I’ll watch you until the door is closed, alright?” My hand covers his on the center console, squeezing it before leaning over and kissing his cheek.

“You’re the best, Bernie. I’ll probably take you up on that offer. Some of my childhood and adulthood was hard. Gabe was upset today when I opened up to him, not that I blame him. It wasn’t easy to live through, let alone tell someone else, and he’s awfully protective of me, kind of like another McCoy I know.” I wink, and he nods slightly. I see the way his throat bobs, and maybe telling him won’t be a good thing either. Gabe and Bernie are fixers, but the past isn’t something you can fix. You can only work on your future and breaking the cycle, so you don’t treat someone the way you were treated.

“Anytime, sweet pea, anytime.”

“Oh, do you think I can get a ride to work every now and then? I’m sure Denny and Nikki will have me on the schedule as soon as everything is back open. I’ll be able to walk to the shop once my shift is over. At least until I get a car?” I ask him.

“You got it. You know as well as I do, Gabe will be the one taking you to work. Coming home, I’ll pick you up whenever. Think about the job he offered you. You’re an amazing waitress, but, honey, it’s hard on your back, your feet, and a whole list of other stuff. You talked about going to college one day. You’ll make money faster, have more time to study, and I’m not sure what you plan on going to college for, but I’ll tell you this: there’s a lot of businesses around here that could use your enthusiasm and work ethic.” Man, today must be one of those days when the tears are going to fall no matter how much you don’t want them to. Everything Bernie is saying is true. I’m stubborn to the core, thinking and assuming I could do everything on my own. Refusing to take the help Gabe offered is dumb.

“You’re right. I’m going to do a lot of thinking between now and when Gabe gets home, though I already know the

answer. I'm pretty sure you do, too. Thank you, Grandpa Bernie, for everything. I can't find the words," I tell him as my hand grabs the handle.

"You don't have to thank me, Carsynn. You keep loving my boy as much as I know you do, give me a few great-grandkids before I'm too old to chase them around, and that's all the thanks I'll need." My lips quiver, my eyes water, and I nod, unable to respond with the emotion clogging my throat. "Go on, honey. I'll see you later." I look at Gramps one last time, chest aching with happiness, tears ready to tumble down my cheeks. You'd think it's that time of the month with the way I'm all over the place with my crying jags today.

"I'd say call me when you get home, except Gabe doesn't have a house phone. Maybe I can convince him to install one like yours?" Then again, it's probably an added expense and not a necessity.

"I'll call Gabe when I get home, and he'll deliver you the news I made it there safe. Carsynn, there isn't much he wouldn't do for you, but if you want a phone like mine, we'll hit up the antique mall and find one of your own." See? He's the best. Bernie's house is full of amazing items he's collected throughout the years. There isn't anything brand new in his house, except for maybe his beloved recliner.

"Okay, thanks again, Grandpa Bernie. Today was a great day." I finally say my goodbyes. I've prolonged him leaving long enough. It's time for me to go inside, cook dinner, and clean up the house a little bit before Gabe gets home. It's funny. I was so opposed to help, but now, a few days of being around him, I'm changing my tune. Maybe Grandpa Bernie has the right idea about me loving Gabe. It's hard to put a name on something you've never had, but if the ache in my chest when he's away, the way my eyes track his every move, or how my stomach flutters when he walks into a room are an indication, then yeah, this must be what love feels like.

GABE

After working late, later than I was expecting, it's well past dark by the time I head home. Gramps came back out to tell Carsynn I wasn't going to be home for dinner, and he took my place at the dinner table. A whole lot of shit went sideways today. Her car took a fucking minute to pull out of the ditch, with a shit ton of onlookers, including Sheriff Sanders, who came out to look at the situation himself. It took everything I had not to send my fist flying into his ugly mug. When he commented that she was lucky to be alive, the look I sent his way had him lifting his hands up and walking backward. Still, it pissed me off. Gramps asked for help, so he should have been out looking for a citizen of Plaine Hill, but he abandoned his duty. I towed her car back to the shop and put a tarp over it, not that it wasn't shot to shit with the snow melting into water and slush. What I should have done was take Carsynn to the shop with me this morning, grab her a phone, and then drop her off at Gramps'. I wasn't thinking things through, more worried about keeping my fairy calm while in the car.

"Boyo, you make it home?" Gramps asks when I walk through the door of Carsynn's apartment. She doesn't have a lot in the way of clothes or shoes at my place, and I noticed she's on the last few pages of her book.

"Yep, well, I'm at Carsynn's old place. I'm picking up a few of her things before I make my way home." I'm taking my phone off Bluetooth, ready to step out into the cold night air.

“Won’t do you any good. She had me help her pack all of her belongings tonight.” My gut tightens, wondering where this conversation is going. We spoke twice today after I left. Once at lunch, the last at dinnertime when Gramps was over.

“What do you mean she packed everything?” I cut him off. Where the hell would she go?

“If you hadn’t cut me off, you damn idiot, you’d have known she decided to move all of her things from the apartment to the main house. You’re welcome, by the way.” There’s a smugness to his tone. The worry leaves me. I close the door to my truck, turn the ignition back on, put my phone on speaker phone, and back out of the now empty apartment’s small driveway.

“Thank you. Jesus, you about gave me a heart attack, old man.”

“Well, the feeling’s mutual. Carsynn about gave me one, too, when she wouldn’t let me lift a freaking box. I was on *stand there and watch* duty. Bullshit, I tell you. At least she used my truck. I’m pretty damn sure she’d have walked back and forth until every last box was at the main house.” I’m hitting the garage button, hard, out of my mind with the need to see my woman, to celebrate the fact she’s right where she belongs. Finally, the damn thing starts to lift, and I’m racing to get my truck parked in the garage.

“I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not. Thanks, Gramps, for being with Carsynn tonight. I’ve got her a phone and a set of keys, and tomorrow, the guys are going to bring the SUV up to the house for her. Then she can start working again,” I tell him as I put the truck in *Park* yet again, take my keys out of the ignition, and hit the button to close the doors behind my vehicle. This weekend, I’ll have to clear a spot out for her SUV. For the time being, I’ll park in the driveway.

“Alright, it’s late. Go see your girl, and we’ll talk tomorrow. I’m proud of you, Gabe. I knew Carsynn would be the one for you. Love her like I love your Grams.”

“I will. Love you, old man.” I climb out of my truck, ready to finish this conversation and celebrate with my woman.

“Love you, too. Talk tomorrow.” He hangs up the phone. I’m already up the steps, opening the door and ripping off my jacket now that my hands are free. I kick my boots off, place them in the boot tray, hang my jacket up, and start walking through the house while unbuttoning the flannel I wore today. I should probably take a shower before even thinking about touching Carsynn. Too bad that’s not going to happen.

“Fairy, I’m home!” I call out into the mostly dark house. There’s a lamp on in the living room, the fireplace has a few coals burning, but she’s nowhere in sight. A few books sit on the coffee table, as well as a new candle. It’s unlit but is set up in a way she’s putting a stamp on our home. Fuck, I love that she took what I said to heart. The whole reason for me stopping at the apartment was to pack all her shit, regardless of what I told Gramps. He doesn’t need to know how obsessed with Carsynn I am that I’d move her in while she was sleeping.

“In the bedroom.” Her voice is muffled. My eyes sweep the rest of the living room. There’s a blanket on the loveseat, draped over the arm, and one of her giant claw clips for her hair sits on top of the floral blanket that’s been added. A smile tugs at my lips as I head toward the hallway. The two spare rooms in the house are pretty much empty. Gramps always refuses to stay the night if it’s too late, and much like this last time, he won’t stay when there’s a storm coming our way. One of the rooms sits completely empty with the door open, while the other holds a few odds and ends, like a nightstand from Gramps’ house, and some artwork is leaning against the wall that I’ve yet to decide where to hang, and that about sums it up. Before Carsynn came into my life, my house was a place to eat and sleep. The bulk of my time was spent at work or with Gramps. Now things have changed for the better.

My feet take me to the entrance of the master bedroom. Clothes are spread out on the bed, a few boxes sit near the dresser, and for a woman who didn’t have a lot in the apartment a few days ago, it seems her stuff has exploded everywhere, but I’m not mad in the least. I look to the left. She’s sitting on the floor in the closet, moving things back and

forth until she has her shoes in the place she wants them. “Fairy.” My voice grabs her attention.

“Gabe.” She was on the floor, legs crossed in front of her, when I moved toward the closet, but I watch as she stands up quickly, standing only a few feet in front of me, and then I’m snatching her up in my arms.

“Seems you’ve been busy.” My hands grip her waist, and I wrap her up in my arms, her legs rounding my hips without guidance. I stand in place and watch as her face lights up in pure happiness.

“You told me this is where you wanted me, and I had an epiphany.” I grin, knowing who had a hand in this but waiting to see if she’ll tell me who helped her figure this out. “Oh, alright, you already know. Gramps helped push me along. This was my idea, though. I’m tired of surviving. I want to live with you, with your family, in Plaine Hill, and I’d like to take you up on that offer to help out at the shop. I’ll still work at the diner, of course. It won’t be easy to learn something new, but I promise to try my hardest.”

“Carsynn—” I start to speak, but she places her hand over my lips.

“Not yet. Don’t say anything, Gabe, show me.” I move one of my hands away from her sweet-as-fuck ass to pull hers away from my mouth.

“Say fucking less.” My mouth takes hers as my hand moves to the back of her head, cupping it while holding on to her with everything I have. Carsynn’s lips are soft and pliant beneath mine, opening greedily to accept my kiss, allowing me inside. My tongue glides along hers in a promise of way more to come. With my woman pliant in my arms, the only thing on my mind is getting her naked, flat on her back, and fucking my cock into her sweet-as-hell pussy.

CARSYNN

ONE WEEK LATER

“G ramps, you need anything else?” I place his usual on the table before filling up his cup of coffee. Everything is back to normal, or as normal as it can be considering how this whirlwind of a romance between Gabe and me has been going. He gives me too much, I refuse to accept, he shuts me up with his mouth, and I’m his willing slave when it comes to him using his cock on me or in me.

“I’m good, sweet pea. You like working two jobs?” I’d bet the tips in my apron Gabe is asking Grandpa Bernie to snoop. My days are slowly dwindling at the diner. Denny and Nikki know I’m working the afternoons and my days off at the shop.

“It’s not so bad. The money is good, and I’ve been able to put myself on a budget to get my savings back to not seeing donuts.” The hardest part in all of this was sitting down with Gabe and showing him what I wanted to save and how much I need to earn weekly in order to get to and from work in my newly acquired vehicle. You know, the SUV Gabe demanded I take because it was sitting around collecting dust. I highly doubt that was the case. Who collects vehicles without driving them? Gabe McCoy apparently. After the uptick in gas with a bigger vehicle, along with insurance, my bills went up in the car owning budget. Which is fine because I no longer pay my rent at the apartment. Gabe with his *I’m the man, I’ll take care of you* attitude did not help when I mentioned needing to pay something since we now live together. It did not go over well. I threw a hissy fit while he remained calm, though neither of us was willing to compromise. We were at an impasse. With

nothing else to say, I went my way into the bedroom to take a hot bath, and Gabe went his way into the garage. I was worried that I put all my eggs in a basket only for them to fall over and crack. A good ten minutes into my soak later, Gabe came barreling in, shirt off, boots gone, and running his fingers through his tousled hair. He apologized first, saying he wasn't thinking, that all he wanted to do was give me a good life, and not watch his woman work her body to the bone. It was kind of hard to stay mad at him after that. I nodded, he stepped out of his jeans, I sat up in the bathtub, and Gabe wedged his big body behind me, his cock hard against my lower back, and finally, he agreed to letting me help out. We didn't get very far into our conversation. I hated being at odds with him. My heart ached, and my mind went haywire there for a while. I needed to see his pretty grey eyes, to look at him instead of the tiles in the bathroom. The minute I spun around, his cock lined up with my pussy, and I sank down. Needless to say, talking stopped after the first inch. The only thing that mattered was the two of us connecting in a more intimate way.

“You'll get there, sweet pea. There are times when you have to crawl before you can walk. It doesn't matter your age or stage in life, it just happens.” I nod. It's hard to swallow the fact when he's right.

“Yeah, still stinks, though. Alright, let me check on my other tables, and I'll come back to sit with you.” The chime on the diner door jingles, and my eyes automatically glance up to greet the next customer.

“You go do that. I'm going to take my breakfast and sit with the sheriff. We have a few things to discuss.” Gramps grabs his cup of coffee from the table, as well as his wrapped silverware and plate. I move back, watching as he does something he's never done before. He leaves my section and heads toward Sheriff Sanders. I shrug my shoulders. He's now sitting in Olive's section, so I head back to the back to grab a rag. I'll wipe down his table and serve the next customer who comes in. Hopefully, it won't get too busy now that the sheriff is here. I swear the man brings an entourage, and I have no idea why. He's average looking, just a regular-looking guy to me. Maybe it's the badge people like. Either way, he's no eye

candy to me, and while I know I'm beyond biased, Gabe McCoy is one thousand times hotter. I'd follow him around everywhere if I could.

I shrug again. Before I clean up the table, I'm going to put my order in with Denny. Then I'll grab the cleaning supplies, take care of the table, and by then, my brunch will be ready. I still don't eat breakfast in the morning. It's too early, and with this newfound sleep my body likes, when Gabe gets up, he works around the garage, still trying to make room for both our vehicles in there. Even though I tell him I'll just park in the driveway, he's adamant my SUV is in the garage. The problem with him moving things around is where he'll put his workout equipment. That sparks a whole different conversation when I mention putting it in one of the spare bedrooms. He's trying his best to convince me to let him come inside me. He's come close a few times, talking about how I'd look with my stomach swollen with his child. Yeah, talk about hard to say no. Then I mentioned moving his equipment to the apartment and got another no. He says it's too far away from the house, and eventually, he knows Grandpa Bernie will be in there. So, I just let the man be to figure it out on his own.

"You're a no-good, high-fallutin' piece of trash. The town should have kicked your ass out a long-as-hell time ago!" I hear Grandpa Bernie yell on the other side of the kitchen.

"Ah shit, this has been brewing. I better get out there before Sanders decides to do something he'll regret for the rest of his days." Denny turns the grill off, places his spatula down on the spoon rest, and walks out as I'm looking over my shoulder.

"What?" I follow him, standing on the tips of my toes to see over the big guy.

"Bernie, don't go starting an argument you can't finish. You know as well as I do the reason why I wasn't going out in the weather. It was going to be a lost cause." I'm busy pondering what the heck they're talking about, trying to get closer but not be a gawker, not like it matters. The rest of the diner is tuned in and watching.

“Lost cause, my ass. Gabe was the one who found her. She would have been dead in another few hours. You call yourself a civil servant, but what you are is nothing but a piece of gum on the bottom of my shoe. You’re scum, Sanders, the worst kind there is!” Denny walks closer. My eyes narrow on Sanders as he stands up, the barstool scooting backwards. Gramps does the same. They’re chest to chest, eye to eye, neither backing down. And Grandpa Bernie may be older, but he’s still taller than Sanders and probably could pack a solid punch.

“I wasn’t risking my life for some foolish girl who shouldn’t have been out on the roads.” A pin could drop in the diner. The customers aren’t eating, there’s no movement, and the only thing that can be heard is my sharp intake of breath. Jesus, I didn’t think I was being stupid. Never in my life would I have put someone else’s life at risk for my own.

“Coward, that’s what you are. That’s what your daddy was before you, too.” Gramps hits a trigger with Sanders. The sheriff steps up to him, but Bernie does not back down.

“You listen here, Bernie McCoy. I can make your life a living hell.” Denny takes that time to step between the two men, and I put on my brave face for Gramps. No way am I going to allow a man like Sheriff Sanders to haul Gramps off because of me.

“That’s enough. Gonna have to ask you to leave, Sanders. We all heard you loud and clear,” Denny states, his voice leaving no room for argument.

My eyes move from Sanders to Denny, then to Grandpa Bernie. The sheriff looks fired up, ready to beat either Denny or Bernie. This is not what I signed up for when I came to work today. Where’s Nikki when we need her? She’d bust some heads, and no one would come at her for it.

“Oh no, oh no, no, no.” I move around Denny’s back, watching as Gramps’ hand goes to the back of his chair. My eyes fill with horror. He’s going down, and with his height and weight, the chair won’t be any help, and him hitting the floor will be even worse.

“Denny, oh God! Someone call 9-1-1. We need an ambulance.” I come up beside Gramps, arm wrapping around his waist. Denny springs into action, turning his back to Sheriff Sanders, who isn’t doing a fucking thing but staring in disbelief. What a waste of human space.

“Olive, call Gabe. Sanders, get the fuck out, right now!” Denny barks, and if he weren’t helping me with Bernie, I’d bet the sheriff would have a fist in his face and were laid flat out.

“Gramps, can you hear me? You’re okay. We’re going to make sure of that. Don’t leave Gabe, okay? Don’t leave me,” I whisper into his ear once Denny helps lower him to the ground. I stay near him the whole time, not letting go of his hand, worried that he’s gone forever.

“He’s got a pulse,” Denny states.

“Grandpa Bernie, stay with us. You have a lot of people who love you, including me.” The outside world fades away. All I worry about is the man who took me under his wing, who’s been helping me since I landed in Plaine Hill, this amazing person my man loves so much.

“Carsynn, we gotta give them some room. The ambulance is here. You need to go with him. I can’t get ahold of Gabe, so I’m going to drive over to the shop. You go with Bernie, alright?” Denny tells me what seems like hours later, but I know better. I’ve been in this situation before with my adrenaline pumping, thinking about the worst and praying for the best. He pulls me away. My emotions are messy, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Okay, I can do this. Please tell Gabe to hurry.” I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hands, watching as the paramedics work on Gramps, unaware of when they showed up. Besides Sheriff Sanders, Plaine Hill and its citizens are amazing people.

“You got it. Go with Manny. He’ll make sure you’re with Bernie the entire time.” Olive comes rushing around, my purse in her hand, looping it over my head, and giving me a fast hug. They have Gramps loaded, and Manny is waiting on me to follow him out while he starts to ask questions about his

medical history. I answer what I can, mostly his medicines, and mumble. “I don’t know” when there’s a question I don’t know the answer to. This happens the whole time we walk to the ambulance and continues while I look on, watching as they work on Gramps. My hand grips the strap of my purse, tightening its hold while I chant over and over in my head to please hurry and get us to the hospital.

GABE

Jesus fucking Christ, two scares in less than a month. My damn gut can't take much more. First Carsynn and now Gramps. When Denny came rushing toward my bay to deliver the news, I thought my knees were going to give out beneath me when he told me Gramps was at the hospital and that Carsynn was with him. The tightness in my chest loosened a bit at knowing she was with him, but it didn't prepare me for the sight of her when I walked into the emergency room, talked to the front desk clerk, and gave the nurse my name. Apparently, she already knew who I was. Carsynn's doing. She gave me a name badge, hit the button, and told me where to go. The whole drive here I was hitting the dial button on my woman's number, but it was no use. Cell reception in the hospital was obsolete. It sucked because Denny wasn't sure how Gramps was doing, only that they were working on him when the paramedics loaded him up. He had a pulse, but other than that, there was no fucking news. Denny couldn't tell me what was going on, and since I had no way of getting ahold of Carsynn, it was a long-ass ride here. It didn't even dawn on me to call the hospital. I drove as fast as I could, found the closest spot, and double-timed it until I walked through the sliding doors.

“Carsynn!” I call out her name. She's sitting down in a chair, biting her nail, rocking back and forth, and looking down at the ground. When she lifts her head, giving me her amber eyes, I'm kicked in the gut. There are tears streaming down her face, her eyes are bloodshot, and she looks like her world ended.

“Gabe, thank God you’re here. He’s okay. Gramps is okay.” She’s out of her seat, running toward me. My arms are open, and I’m hugging her tightly. “I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what, baby?” I ask, breathing a sigh of relief as I hold her head to my chest, my arm wrapped around her lower back. Carsynn’s tears saturate my shirt, and as much as I want to know how Gramps is doing, something tells me this has everything to do with my grandfather.

“Gramps. He confronted Sheriff Sanders. One minute he’s cussing him out, the next he’s dropping to the floor.”

Fucking hell. I pull back from our hug, needing to see her, and cup her cheeks. There’s no use wiping them away, they’re coming down so rapidly. “Tell me everything.” My mouth is as dry as the Sahara, thinking the worst. How Gramps could have been at the wrath of Sanders and how my woman is worried about me thinking she’d put someone in harm’s way.

“They asked me to leave the room for a minute to run a few tests.” Her lips quiver. She’s probably thinking about him being unconscious again. “He looks so tired. God, Gabe, I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I’m the reason Grandpa Bernie is lying in that hospital bed right now.” I shake my head. No way this is coming from her. “It is. He confronted the sheriff about my accident, Sanders said a few choice words, and Gramps gave it right back to him. One minute Denny is telling that arrogant, pompous asshole to leave, then Gramps is collapsing.” It figures Gramps couldn’t wait a moment longer. He was chomping at the bit, ready to go after Sanders. Instead of waiting for the election, it seems he decided to take matters into his own hands.

“No heart attack or stroke?” I ask. She shakes her head. “This isn’t your fault. Sanders knew he fucked up. Gramps wasn’t going to have the dumb fuck strutting around thinking his shit doesn’t stink. He for damn sure wasn’t going to let him eat at the diner you work at when it was Gramps calling Sanders while I was out looking for you. Sanders knew what he was doing when he walked in, eating where Gramps does

every single day. He was taunting you, Gramps, and me. I'd have confronted him sooner, but I've had my hands full."

"I heard all of that. I promise if I knew the weather was going to be that bad, I'd have never left and put anyone in danger. You know that, right?" Carsynn's past is trying to rear its head, and no fucking way am I going to have her second-guessing anything right now.

"Fairy, we all know that. Sanders does, too. He didn't give a shit. Weather changes fast around here. You didn't know that. Still, it doesn't give him the right to act like a dick bag." She huffs out a laugh and closes her eyes. It's time she knows how I feel. "Carsynn, I knew who you were before I met you, loved you the moment I laid my eyes on you, the first time you gave me yourself. I knew you'd be mine forever. I love you, always."

"Gabe." My fairy says my name breathlessly. "I love you, too. God, do I love you." My lips land on hers. There's no way I can deny the two of us this moment. The hospital probably wasn't my finest moment to lay it on her, but nothing we've done has been by what others would call the standard.

"Fuck." I pull back, my cock hating me, and believe me, I'm hating myself, too, but taking this further in a hospital would see us both kicked out. "We're going to resume this later."

"Okay." Her lips are swollen and wet from my kiss.

"Now, how about we go see the old man and interrupt whatever the hell they're doing to him?"

"Yes, please. It's been hell sitting out here thinking about everything I could be doing to help him. All I know is time crawled by." I take her hand in mine.

"Which room?" Most hospitals have an emergency room where family members and friends sit out in the common area waiting with others. Plaine Hill being a small population has it set up in a unique way. The patients already in a room in the emergency area have a different waiting area for moments like these.

“One-ten.” I guide her, my hand staying where it’s the most comfortable for both of us. Right now, I need her in the worst way. There were a few moments when the absolute worst was running through my head.

“Knock-knock.” I wrap my knuckles on the wood door, pushing it open with my foot.

“Come in,” I hear gramps voice.

“Gramps, you’re giving us a hard time. Hell, if you wanted our attention, you could have asked for it.” We’re not strangers to this place. We both hate it like hell, and to keep us from being frequent flyers here, well, that means we take care of our regular doctor visits, Gramps more than me now that he’s getting older, but we both hold the other accountable.

“Damn pacemaker acted up right when I was going to give that damn sheriff a piece of my mind. I’d have loved to knock him off his high horse.” Gramps groans. He’s hooked up to a few monitors with the nurse standing off to the side, holding back her smile.

“He’ll be good as new. He will need to stay for a night or two. Today, we’ll get his tests done and make sure everything else is good. Tomorrow, we’ll get him on the schedule. Another night here to monitor the new pacemaker, and hopefully, he’ll be good to go home.”

“Come ‘ere, Carsynn, give me a hug.” Gramps opens an arm that isn’t hooked up to wires. I’m chopped liver again. My woman has her place with him. I’m not replaced; it’s like Gramps sees a piece of his own daughter, my mom, in her. I can see it, too. They’re both strong willed, independent, and to the core sweeter than honey.

“Gramps, you gave me a scare. I’m going to need a list of everything—medicine, hospitalizations, procedures. I could barely answer the paramedic’s questions,” she tells him before bending down to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Ah, you can have it, but once my ole ticker is fixed, I’ll be back to normal.”

“I’ll be back in a little while to move you to your room, Mr. McCoy,” the nurse tells Gramps, wrapping up what needs to be done before leaving.

“Thanks, we appreciate you taking care of him,” I tell her. My eyes watch as Gramps and Carsynn share a quiet conversation. I’m not privileged to what they’re talking. The two of them are lost in their own little world. I take a seat in the chair, taking my first deep breath since Denny came to the shop.

My eyes close, my head tips back and legs stretch out, crossing my ankles one over the other, while I wait on them to finish their discussion.

“You two go on home. No need staying with me. I’m going to watch some television and take my own nap,” I hear Gramps say. My head lifts.

“We’re not leaving you,” Carsynn says adamantly.

“Gabe, get your ass up, boyo. Come give me a hug and take your woman home. The two of you can come up tomorrow. Bring me some breakfast and entertain me then.” There’s no changing his mind. I’m up on my feet and make my way toward them.

“Come on, fairy, say your goodbyes. Gramps hates being in the hospital. The only attention he wants on him are the cute nurses.”

“You got that right. They can’t deny my charms.” We all laugh for a minute, but then the energy is zapped from Gramps, and Carsynn must see it because she’s relenting now.

“Love you, Gramps. You have your phone?” I bend down to hug him, the palm of his hand holding me for a minute.

“I’ve got my phone. You make her an honest woman and give me some great-grandbabies, you hear?” My eyes are lifted and on Carsynn. He’s not being as quiet as he thinks he is. Knowing Gramps, he probably said it loud enough on purpose.

“I’ll work on that.” I wink at my woman. A light flush colors her cheeks. We break apart, Carsynn gives Gramps

another hug, and then we're on our way out of the hospital room. He's right about one thing: it's time I make Carsynn an honest woman, but first, I'm going to do my best to start on her getting pregnant with our child.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

Gabe

“**Y**ou want to try that, fairy? My cock in your ass?” We’re in the bathtub together, her back to my front. She’s got one leg on the ledge of the tub, book in her hand, reading to me about another regency era hero who takes the governess. He’s a widow turned rake, hired the governess, and now they’re falling for one another. I don’t always read with Carsynn, but she has no problem catching me up on the story, and when we have time like we do today, she’ll read me the spicy parts, usually blushing as she does, and I get to reap the rewards.

“Maybe, You might be too big.” Her hair is up in a bun, a few tendrils falling down, the heat and humidity from the bath causing them to curl more than normal.

“I’d work my way in, start with my mouth until you’re nice and wet, then use my fingers, stretching you, and only when you’re ready would I fuck you with my dick up your tight ass.” The book drops to the floor beside the tub. She winces, but the desire is what wins her internal battle of going after the book or listening to me.

“Can we try?” She’s looking over her shoulder, and damn, my woman looks beautiful. She’d look a hell of a lot better straddling my lap with her bare pussy on my cock. Carsynn let me shave her the very next day after she gave me her virginity. It was hot and another memory I filed away to savor forever.

The woman gets me going so easily. The first time I met her and she smiled at me, the proof I took her virginity, and when she lay down on the bed so I could shave her bare before licking her juices clean. Yep, Carsynn got wet with each stroke of the razor's edge. She'd spread her legs wider, practically begging for more, and when I was finished shaving her, there was no way we were keeping our hand off one another. I gave her my mouth, and she felt the full effect of being bare, especially when she came and I was able to lick her completely clean. Of course, that created another problem. One where Carsynn wasn't backing down, no matter that she was sore and had just sucked my cock before I shaved her. My dick should have been completely drained, and she was sore, but my woman's sheer determination is the reason why I fucked her from behind, her request, and I wasn't strong enough to say no when I wanted her just as badly.

“You tell me when you're ready, and I will. Straddle me, sweetheart.” Her neck being strained is the last thing I want when she can sit on my dick while I do what I've been planning. It took some time, mostly due to Gramps' hospital stay for a new pacemaker. Damn stubborn man tried to get up the next day to take a shower without help. Needless to say, he was still weak, had a fall, and landed his ass in the hospital a fuck of a lot longer with a broken hip. He was fighting mad, pissed at himself, and wasn't able to deal with Sheriff Sanders the way he wanted to. I took care of that little problem. A few phone calls to my friends in high places put him under investigation. They found out he was doing a lot more than not taking care of his citizens. He was picking up hookers in the next town over while on the job. The county and state don't like that too much, so he no longer has a job. The town dragged his name through the dirt so much, Sanders left town, and Deputy Carter is now standing in as sheriff until the next election. After Gramps was released from the hospital, he had to do a stint at a rehab facility. Carsynn was there every single day. She'd work at the diner, then come to the shop for an hour or two, and then she stayed with Gramps until he shoed her away. Now, he's home, still not in the apartment on our property, and I'm going to give Carsynn what I planned on the minute my eyes landed on her.

“I have something to tell you.” She’s careful in situating herself, hands going to my shoulders as she steadies herself. My hands land on her hips, the view of her tits deterring me from my plans and her statement for the moment. Sue me. She’s wet, nipples pebbled, and I’m enjoying my woman. “Gabe, did you hear me, or are you going to stare at my breasts all day?”

“Both. Keep talking, and I’ll keep watching.” She isn’t having that. Her hands slide from my shoulders to my cheeks, and I pull her closer. Two can play that game.

“I need your eyes on mine.”

“Not a hardship to look at your pretty amber eyes, fairy.” She doesn’t realize it, but in some way, my eyes are always glued to her.

“I never went to the doctor about birth control. Things happened with Gramps and, well, the thought of being pregnant with your child, I want that, well, wanted that. What I’m trying to tell you is we’re going to have to turn one of the spare bedrooms into a nursery within the next eight or so months.” Carsynn doesn’t have a chance to say anything else. My mouth fuses to hers, and I show her how happy I am she’s pregnant and thankful as fuck I’ve got her ring ready for her.

“Fuck, I’ve never been happier, Carsynn. Love you with all my heart. You’re all I never knew I needed or wanted, and I’m going to put my ring on your finger to-fucking-day.”

“I love you, Gabe McCoy, always and forever.” She has tears in her eyes, and while I know they’re nothing but happiness, I still don’t like them, and I can take care of them by kissing each and every one away for the rest of our lives.

I hope you enjoyed Carsynn and Gabe’s story!

Coming next is Naughty Noelle, a fake dating romance that releases Dec 1st

[Amazon](#)

Chapter One

Noelle

“You better run sis, mom is gunning for you now that everyone has left. In fact, don’t worry about helping cleaning up, run for your life,” my brother Antonio says. I’m in the kitchen, scrubbing dishes after the birthday party for my niece, his daughter when I’m given the forewarning of our mother and her nagging. I should have known, she’s been on her best behavior, probably due to the fact Antonio’s wife, Gabriella does not put up with her pestering me nonstop. I love my sister-in-law, she’s a saint to deal with my brother while also running interference with my mother. It’s not that I don’t love my mother, I do, she means well, maybe. What I can’t handle is the incessant questioning, the time has come where I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m thirty-one, I have a great job, my car is paid off, I own my home, and have minimal credit card debt.

“Seriously, again?” I ask, my hands are full of soapy water, trying to get the platters washed since they’re too big to go in the dishwasher.

“Runaway Noelle or hide in Isa’s room,” Antonio is talking about the little girl we celebrated today, she turned three and is now down for the night. There is no way I’m going to hide in my nieces room like a coward especially after it took Gabriella so long for Isabella to come down from her sugar high to finally fall asleep.

“I’ll head home, give Gabriella and papa my love,” I finish cleaning the dish, rinsing it off, and placing it on a towel to dry. All that’s left is to pull the drain, it kills me to leave a task unfinished, except tonight is going to be the exception.

“You could always hire a boyfriend,” Gabriella says, dashing into the kitchen, like the flames of hell are on her heels.

“Shush Gabriella, Noelle will do no such thing,” Antonio would rather me be a single spinster for the rest of my days which at the rate I’m going could happen.

“How did you know?” I ask, closing my eyes for a second to gain my composure. I’m not going to have enough time to run out the back door, get to my car, and escape her. The truth of the matter is I love our mom, we’re close, not as close as Antonio and her are. That’s because I’m more of a papa’s girl, have been since the day I was born, the probability of could talk, will probably always will be.

“She brought up Alejandro,” there’s a collective groan from my brother and me. We dated in high school, mom thought we’d be high school sweethearts. It didn’t happen, he broke up with me to go away to college, it broke my young naïve tender heart at the age of seventeen. I thought it was love, clearly it wasn’t seeing as how rumors got back to me that he was fucking anything who was willing. We broke up, I went my way, Alejandro went his, things were fine or so I thought. Mom swore we’d get married and have kids, she’s delusional. I’d never get back with someone who could forget me so easily.

“Noelle, there you are. Come with me, come with me,” mom must have some kind of radar, Gabriella gives me an apologetic look, Antonio looks everywhere except at me. Yeah, he knows I’m not leaving anytime soon, maybe I’ll have that third glass of wine after all.

“Mama,” there’s no use, I’d try to get away, she’d call papa they’d start bickering, I’d feel like an asshole, and still she’d try to ask me the never ending question *‘When are you going to meet a nice man and settle down. We’re not getting any younger mi hija,’* she’ll use the term of endearment. A rarity unless we’re in trouble or she’s trying to schmooze us into one thing or the other.

“Come now,” I’ve officially been summoned, I sulk to my death, one that is going to be slow and torturous. Our mom should work for the FBI with the way she can question things to death, by the end of it you’re so tired you’ll tell her anything in order to leave. Once I’m in reaching distance, she loops her arm through mine, guiding me to the living room. Everyone has dispersed to the backyard, I’m doomed. There’s no one here to save me from this conversation and once

Gabriella said the name that starts with the letter A, I know it's going to be a long conversation.

“Mama, can we get this over with. I don't want to argue tonight, it's Isa's birthday and I'm tired,” I untangle my arm from where she was holding me close, so close it was like she knew I'd runaway.

“Alejandro's home, for good. What don't look at me like that,” I back away a few steps, crossing my arms over my chest. She acts astonished that I didn't want to know the news. I could have gone my whole life without giving two single fucks about him. It's not that I'm holding a grudge against what he did as a boy, it's that I now understand what I do and don't deserve, learning your self-worth is a wonderful thing.

“No,” I shake my head while saying that, my hip cocks outward, my toe starts tapping, and I'm ready to scream.

“He's divorced now. His wife didn't want children and he did,” mom must think she's adding valuable traits, she's not and still continues on her tirade, “You're single, he's single. He'll be here next week for our Christmas party, we'll make sure you two sit together.”

“Now that you have my lift planned out, I'm leaving. Tell papa I love him and I love you too but you've gone too far,” I turn around, ready to take the advice my sister in law, hiring a date seems like a hell of a lot better plan than to sit next to an ex-boyfriend while your mother tries to matchmake.

Amazon

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tory Baker is a mom and dog mom, living on the coast of sunny Florida where she enjoys the sun, sand, and water anytime she can. Most of the time you can find her outside with her laptop, soaking up the rays while writing about Alpha men, sassy heroines, and always with a guaranteed happily ever after.

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Jordan: Oh my lanta, the hand holding, the me calling you hysterically crying or laughing, day or night, good or bad. I love you bigger than outer space. If it weren't for you pushing me to write, to see the potential in me, I wouldn't be here.

Mayra: My sprinting partner extraordinaire. Girlfriend, we made it through 2022 ahead of schedule. One day I will fly my butt to California to hug you!

Julia: How do you deal with me and my extra sprinkling of commas? The real MVP, the one who deals with my scatterbrained self, missing deadlines, rescheduling like crazy, and the person I live vicariously through social media.

Amie Vermaas Jones: Thank you for always and I do mean always helping me on my last minute shit. It never fails that I'm sending you an SOS asking for your eyes. Beach days are happening and SOON!

Thank you for being here, reading, not just my books but any Author's stories. We do appreciate you more than you know, the reason why we can live out our dream is for readers, bloggers, bookstagrammers, bookmakers, Authors, and everyone in between. THANK YOU!

All this to say, I am and will always be forever grateful, love you all!