

Thanks for Waiting



Carolyn G. Beus

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Dedication

To my husband, Brody,

For being my greatest supporter, my shoulder to lean on, and the man I will love for all eternity.

P.S. I rearranged the kitchen cabinets again, I hope you don't mind. ;)

Chapter 1

The rain beating heavily on the rusted tin roof of my home fills me with dread. My stomach twists in anxious knots, not just because it is my first day officially as a teacher, but also knowing that nothing good happens when it rains. I was hoping the weather forecast would be wrong or that the rain would magically disappear and I would be granted a sunny day instead like I asked for in my prayers. Such pleas have gone unanswered.

My father watches me check my bag for the fifteenth time that morning to ensure that I have everything I need packed in my bag. I already checked the car this morning to ensure all of my office decorations and supplies are packed in the trunk.

“Caroline, I think you have everything,” my father sighs tiredly.

“You can never be too careful.”

I glance over at my father to notice him shivering even though it already feels like it's above eighty degrees in the southern Maryland humidity. His next doctor's appointment can't come soon enough. My father finished his latest round of chemo last week and it'll take a month to get the results back from his scans. The results from his last scans looked promising; the cancer hadn't spread any further and some cancerous

spots even shrunk. I'm hoping that these latest scans will show continued improvement.

I pull an extra blanket out of the linen closet and drape it over my father's thin shoulders. He already has two layers of blankets piled upon him and the pile almost makes his shoulders look as broad as they once did before his cancer diagnosis two years ago.

"Thank you," my father mumbles as he attempts to hide his trembling shivers while adjusting the third blanket across his shoulders at the same time.

I kiss the top of his head which has lost all of its graying blond hair.

"Mrs. Forbes will be stopping by around lunch to visit," I remind him while slipping my arms into the sleeves of my raincoat and untucking my dark curly hair from under my jacket.

"Okay, thank you."

I meet my gray eyes in the reflection of the antique gold-framed mirror by the front door and my lips fall into a frown. No matter how much frizz control cream I put in my hair this morning my hair has managed to make me look like I just got off the set of an eighties rock music video. I don't have time to fight my hair this morning; I take a hair tie from around my wrist and hastily twist it back into a braid. My hair is still obviously messy, but at least it's slightly more controlled.

I may be having a bad hair day, but I still look presentable. My favorite pink overall dress isn't wrinkled and my white sneakers don't have any dirt spots on them. I look cute and comfortable.

I take a deep breath as I check over the contents of my bag one more time. I know everything is in there - my folders, writing tools, and planners are accounted for - but checking gives me a chance to focus and helps slow my heart that is trying to beat out of my chest.

My phone lets out a chirp and I see my screen illuminate one of the side pockets in my bag. I check my watch and see that I have a few more minutes before I need to leave, just enough time to return a quick text. Opening my messages I see that my best friend, Roxy has messaged me. In all caps, the text reads:

Roxy: CARRIE! HAVE A GREAT FIRST DAY OF WORK! DINNER AT MY PLACE LATER! Mom is making Arrollado de Huaso for dinner to celebrate so you and your dad need to come!

Most people call me Carrie, but my parents have always called me Caroline. The same goes for Roxy, they have always called her by her full name, Roxanna. My parents claimed that they love to appreciate the beauty of someone's full name.

I smile at Roxy's message that is oozing excitement through the screen. It has been busy, I haven't seen Roxy in a few weeks because I've been so busy getting ready for my new job and trying to set up care for my father since graduation. It'll be great to finally catch up while eating pork completely mummified in bacon.

"Hey Dad, Mrs. Soto has invited us over for dinner to celebrate my first day of work. Is that okay with you?"

My dad perks up and turns his attention away from the TV loudly blasting the local news and

meets my eyes with a smile.

“I look forward to it!”

I hastily tap my thumbs against the illuminated screen of my phone:

Me: Sounds good! Can't wait!

Roxy: Sweet!

I check the time in the corner of the screen and see that it's time to go. Right on schedule. I tell my father goodbye as he continues to watch the news. Before opening the door I throw the hood of my coat over my head and brace myself to step out into the torrential downpour outside.

As the TV blares with a carpet cleaning commercial jingle, I pause and stare at my father. I hate leaving him behind with someone to check on him only once a day, but in-home services are expensive and there's no way my dad would agree to live in a senior care facility. For now, though, my father is no longer shivering and he's content watching the latest story about puppies from a local animal shelter being allowed to run free around a local pro-football field.

Most people my age don't have to care for their parents. It's a lot of responsibility at only twenty-three - but my parents had me later in life - so making decisions for my aging parents is something I have had to figure out sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, it has also cost me one of the happiest things that has ever happened to me. I shake my head to banish the memories of sweet whispered words and strong arms around my body to the remote corners of my mind. I sacrificed a lot

for my family, but I won't regret it. At least that's what I'll keep telling myself.

I quietly head out of our small two-bedroom home and into the dreaded rain storm. Fat raindrops fall in rapid succession as I carefully maneuver around muddy puddles in our gravel driveway to the family car. A 1993 sedan with peeling burgundy paint. There's a dent on the back left bumper from one of my dad's failed attempts at parallel parking when we visited Georgetown in D.C. as a family back in 2000. A stain on the front passenger seat chronicles where my mother unintentionally gave birth to me on the side of the road when my parents got stuck in traffic on the way to the hospital.

A thin layer of sweat already builds across my skin underneath my raincoat in the thirty seconds that I have been outside. I already dread how warm the car must be right now considering that the air conditioning no longer works. When I open the door I can feel the heat radiating out of the car, this is going to be a hot fifteen-minute drive to Prince Frederick since I can't roll the windows down to air out the car without getting drenched.

I set my bag down on the passenger seat and stick the key into the ignition. As I turn the key the sound that escapes sounds like both it and God are laughing at me. The engine isn't turning over, it's a dead battery.

“No, no, no! Don't do this to me!”

I harshly turn the key over and over, hoping that the battery would suddenly decide to have a charge again but it appears that it won't be so kind. I quickly check my watch and see that if I don't leave now I'm going to be late. All of my careful

planning is frustrated by a dead battery. I even splurged to take the car to the mechanic just to make sure something like this wouldn't happen.

The car and the rain have been my biggest enemies since the day I was born. First, my parents didn't make it in time to the hospital to have me, resulting in a NICU stay because the heating also doesn't work in this car, so I couldn't regulate my body heat. I broke my wrist when I was five for slipping down the slick stairs in front of my school from a brief afternoon rain storm. Opening night for the first show where I was cast in the leading role, got canceled because of flash flooding. My parents missed my final high school show because the car broke down. My father and I were late to my mother's funeral. I am hot and running late to work because of the rain and the car. What else could go wrong today?

I take a deep breath and imagine blowing away the intrusive thoughts with my exhale. I can't keep thinking negatively. Throwing a pity party will just use up time that I don't have. What I need to do is get my car jumped. I pull my phone out of my bag and frantically call Roxy. She picks up on the third ring and immediately guesses that I'm having car trouble. She'll be here in five minutes.

Normally I would ask our neighbors for help, however, Mrs. Forbes is just as clueless as me when it comes to cars. I own jumper cables but I have no idea how to use them. My dad would know but he is in no condition to help me.

I just hope that this is the last of unfortunate events for my day. Even better, I'm getting a two-for-one deal so that the rest of the school year goes smoothly. Yes, that must be it, it has to be it.

Roxy swerves into our driveway in her brand-new red pickup truck. She jumps out still dressed in her white tank top and neon green pajama pants with her long wavy hair thrown up in a messy bun. Roxy shoos me away to wait on my small covered porch while she goes to work jumping my battery. Within minutes she has brought my little car back to life and is slamming the hood shut. Roxy jogs under the porch with her clothes completely soaked through from the rain.

“You’re good to go. I’ll stop by school during your lunch break to replace your battery.”

“You don’t have to do that-”

“No arguments, you’re already behind schedule. I’m stealing your clothes and shower as payment, so you’re good.”

“Yes ma’am,” I salute sarcastically before running back to my car.

She didn’t say it, but I could see the look in Roxy’s eyes. If I wasn’t running behind schedule, she would have taken the time to tell me how she told me to not take my car to the mechanic that can’t tell the difference between oil and mud. Come to think of it, she’s probably saving that conversation for lunch.

At the very least my car is now running so that I can make it to work. And while my lunch will come with an extra side of lecturing I won’t have to worry about asking a coworker to jump my car so I can get home later.

While driving to work I take the time to repeat to myself in my head that this morning sucked but my day will be better.

* * *

Prince Frederick, Maryland isn't that large of a town but there is a lot packed into it. Several popular fast-food joints have been built in between shopping centers. Several grocery and office supply store parking lots are full of parents and students buying last-minute supplies before school starts in two weeks. Seagulls stalk closely to the doors of minivans, hoping to find a stray Cheerio that has fallen out of car seats.

My stomach does an excited flip as I think about how in two weeks I'll soon start my first year as an official teacher. I'll be teaching students the greatest subject, theater. Not only that, I'll be teaching at my old middle school.

As I turn at an intersection, Oaks Middle School immediately comes into view. There are teachers still pulling into the parking lot and groggily getting out of their cars while clutching thermoses containing coffee. As I pull into the parking lot I manage to snag a spot underneath a small Red Maple tree.

A big smile involuntarily grows across my face. All that time in college and student teaching finally paid off. As I walk up to the main entrance my excitement grows. This school was where I realized what I wanted to be when I grew up, a teacher where I get to teach kids the thing I love most, theater. Not only that, I got the job shortly after graduating from college. Sure, my morning may have initially been rocky, but now that I'm here there's nothing that can ruin my first day. Not to mention the rain has finally stopped. *Let's do this!*

As I glance around the campus I take in all of the updates the school has received since I attended. The small playground and some of the exterior structures of the school have been replaced and painted with vibrant colors. The doors have been replaced and there is a bulletin board locked behind a glass box frame near the main entrance. I curiously walk over to the bulletin board and find the calendar for the school year posted, a new club announcement, and then right underneath the calendar is a flier with my picture on it announcing me as the new drama teacher.

I pull my phone out of my bag, take a picture, and text it to Roxy.

A glance at the time on the corner of my screen reminds me that I'm behind schedule. I quickly shove my phone back into my bag and head inside. I already know the principal, but I wonder who my other coworkers will be.

Chapter 2

Sweet, refreshing cool air from the the school's air conditioning is the first to greet me as I walk through the doors. The scent of lemon floor polish mixed with warm printer ink fills my nose. I take in the clean scent of the school, it won't be long till the building is filled with the pungent scent of body odor mixed with too much body spray.

The floors are polished to a reflective shine - when I look down I can see my reflection in the tile. *I need to focus!* I don't have time to look around, I need to get settled into my office before my first faculty meeting. Careful not to slip on the polished floors that are slick from puddle trails of people walking in from the rain, I pick up the pace towards the administration office and quickly find myself in front of the secretary's desk.

The school secretary is wearing the brightest orange pantsuit I have ever seen. As her fingers type rapidly across her keyboard I notice that her nails are painted the same bright orange as her suit.

“Good morning, you must be the new drama teacher! I'm Mei, the school secretary, it's nice to meet you!”

Mei stands from her seat while brushing back the straight black bangs of her chin-length bob.

“Morning, it’s nice to meet you too. I’m Caroline, but I normally go by Carrie.”

Mei suddenly frowns, “Would you like to borrow my brush? It looks like your hair got messed up in the rain.”

“Oh,” I start while digging into my bag to pull out my phone and check my hair in the camera.

When my face pops up on the screen I find that my hair has managed to frizz up even more from the rain and is beginning to fall out of its braid. *The first thing I need to add to the grocery list when I get home is a stronger frizz cream.* I shut off my screen and smile bashfully at Mei who is already holding out a hair brush.

“Thanks, but unfortunately brushing this will only make it worse.”

Mei tilts her head in confusion. Her bright hazel eyes widen in realization before lowering the brush.

“Oh I see, it’s a perm?”

I shake my head, “No my hair is naturally curly. It just gets frizzy in high humidity. So brushing it will only make it worse.”

Mei pouts her glossed lips sympathetically.

“Bummer. I’m supposed to take your picture to print on your school I.D., I’ll see if I can edit it a little bit before printing so your picture doesn’t look as bad.”

“Thanks, Mei.”

I think.

“Stand over by that wall over there, and I’ll take your picture.”

“I’m late for a meeting with Principal Johnson, maybe I should wait till after.”

Mei looks down at the corner of her computer screen and again tilts her head to the side in confusion.

“Your meeting isn’t for another five minutes, you have plenty of time.” Mei breaks out into a loud laugh, “Oh you’re one of those Type A personalities.”

“I suppose you could say that,” I nervously laugh while shrugging my bag slightly more behind me.

There is no way that she could know by looking at it, but I still feel the need to obscure the view of my bag. Safely tucked away in my pink briefcase are two separate planners with their own individual pencil pouches holding pencils, pens, and highlighters for color coordination.

“Do I hear a familiar voice out here?”

Principal Johnson walks towards the front of the administration office as her tightly coiled curls bounce around her golden bronze face. She greets me with a big beaming smile with her signature red lip color highlighting her full lips.

I smile back excitedly as she makes her way around Mei’s desk and holds out her arms to envelope me in a hug. Mrs. Johnson is significantly taller than me; I have to stand on my tiptoes so that my head lands closer to her shoulders instead of getting smothered into her chest.

“Carrie, it’s great to see you again,” she squeezes. As Mrs. Johnson’s arms fall away she turns to Mei, “I’ve known Carrie for a long time; she was once my student at this school.”

Mei looks between the both of us excitedly, “So that’s why you were so excited about the new teacher you hired.”

Principal Johnson nods enthusiastically. “Okay, let’s head back to my office to chat for a couple of minutes and then I’ll pass you off to Mei to get set up.”

“Sounds good.”

Back in Principal Johnson’s office, I take a seat in a chair across from her desk. She pulls up my file with a couple of clicks of her mouse and then folds her hands and rests her forearms on top of the desk.

“First of all, congratulations again on graduating from UMDBC. I am glad to have you on board as our new drama teacher.”

“Thank you,” I beam at her praise.

Principal Johnson glances over at her computer before turning her monitor towards me.

“The superintendent emailed me this morning with your budget for the school year.”

I take in the number on the screen. Most of my budget will be used towards getting the script and performance rights for the fall musical this school year. Getting props and costumes will be tight.

“That will be enough for the fall musical,” I respond neutrally.

Principal Johnson smiles knowingly as she turns the monitor back to face her, “Welcome to the life of a teacher.”

We sit for a few more minutes to discuss the plans for the school year and schedules before

Principal Johnson finally looks back at her watch.

“I better let you go, I have a meeting with a parent this morning in ten minutes.”

I follow her lead. Rising from my seat I wait for her to open the door to her office. She gives me one more smile and pats me on the shoulder before sending me back to Mei. When I return, Mei is waiting with a hot pink digital camera that looks like the one I owned in middle school in 2010.

“Carrie, let’s get that picture!”

“Sure thing.”

I slip my coat off my shoulders and drape it over a nearby chair before obediently positioning myself in front of the white-painted cinder block wall. Since my brief meeting with Principal Johnson, my hair has almost completely fallen out of its braid. I tug the black hair tie off of the ends of my dark brown hair and comb my hair with my fingers to make it look slightly more presentable.

As Mei circles her desk with the camera she encourages me to smile.

“Ready? One. Two. Three!”

The flash on the camera almost blinds me but I somehow manage to keep my eyes open for the picture. Mei squints her eyes to scrutinize the picture on the screen before finally smiling in approval.

“Beautiful, give me a couple minutes to tweak your picture and I’ll have your I.D. printed.”

I nod and gather my things while I wait. I’m not sure how to feel about my picture being photoshopped for a school I.D., but at least I can

hope it will look better than the picture on my driver's license.

The printer roars to life and Mei rolls across the floor in her chair to the printer and grabs my school I.D. When she hands it to me I'm surprised. I don't know what Photoshop magic, Mei had to perform to make my hair look less frizzy in this photo, but it looks more presentable. (And it looks better than my driver's license photo.)

"What do you think?"

"I think you are magic."

Mei lets out a youthful laugh, "Thank you. Let me know when you need me to make fliers for the fall play, I have a way with graphic design."

"That would be great, thank you."

I pull out my pink and white wood-beaded lanyard and attach my new I.D., Mei also hands me a set of keys to the building and my office that I attach as well. Again I get excited butterflies in the pit of my stomach. My I.D. and keys hanging around my neck solidified even more that I finally achieved my dream of becoming a drama teacher.

"I'll walk you over to your office," Mei smiles.

I nod and follow behind her while fighting the urge to excitedly skip down the eighth-grade hallway. We enter the auditorium which has recently been updated. Thick navy blue curtains are partially opened and framed by a polished light wooden border of the proscenium stage. We walk past the velvet curtains to backstage where the set and props shop, as well as my office, is located. The set shop still carries the scent of freshly cut wood and damp summer air from the back doors being left open.

Mei gestures with her hand for me to unlock the door to my office. I twist my key into the lock within the round silver door knob and push open the yellow wood-colored door. My office still smells of fresh paint from the white-painted cinder block walls. There's a window sitting in the middle of the wall parallel to the door that overlooks the school garden with the athletic fields in the distance.

I circle in place as I take in my office. My office. It will take a while to get used to saying that. It's small, but it has enough space for everything I need. I can't wait to start decorating.

"Do you need a tour of the rest of the school, or do you still remember where everything is?"

"I'm good. Thank you, Mei!"

"Sure thing, call if you need anything." Mei pauses, "By the way, there's another teacher here who went to the UMDBC. Maybe you might know him?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. His name is Evan Stanton, do you know him?"

I freeze in place as I feel the color rush from my face. Evan Stanton. She couldn't possibly mean that Evan, could she? It has to be someone with the same name.

"The name sounds familiar," I finally respond.

If Mei notices my hesitation she doesn't show it.

"He's an English teacher here. If I see him I'll send him your way."

“Sure, sounds good.”

Sounds terrible! The Evan I knew was studying to become an English teacher. *Please let this be someone else.*

Mei waves goodbye and as soon as she's gone I slide open the window to not inhale lingering paint fumes as I take deep gasping breaths. There's no way that Evan is here. Maybe Mei got the name wrong, or maybe she confused the University of Maryland Baltimore County for the other University of Maryland campus. I set my stuff down on the desk that had already been set up in the room.

I take another deep breath of fresh air laced with the scent of wet rich soil and growing vegetables and flowers. It's not him, Mei made a mistake. Freaking out like this will not solve anything, nor will it bring in the rest of my materials from the car. I glance out the window - the sky is still overcast - it looks like it will rain again soon.

“Alright, let's get set up,” I mumble to myself and make my way back to my car.

When I walk back outside I notice a cool breeze carrying the distinct scent of impending rain. I need to hurry up and get my stuff out of the car. I scamper across the parking lot and pop the trunk to pull out my first crate of materials. As I carry the crate across the parking lot a large drop of water splashes on my arm with several more drops following afterwards. I pick up the pace, but the rain seems to match it as the clouds release a downpour.

“You've got to be kidding me!”

I hurry as fast as I can to the front door and prop the crate against my hip as I reach for the door.

“Hold on, let me get that,” a voice yells over the crescendo of rain splattering against the pavement.

“Thank you. It just started randomly pour-”

The end of my sentence gets caught in my throat as my eyes meet a familiar set of a gentle hazel hue. I blink a few times, desperate for this to be a dream. It’s not. Standing before me is,

“Evan?”

“Carrie,” he breathes.

Even though we quickly become soaked from the rain we stand in an awkward and horrified staring contest. He looks the same. Tall. Wavy dirty blonde hair, broad shoulders, muscular arms, and a beauty mark on his left earlobe.

“Um, hurry. Let’s get inside,” he finally breaks the silence first.

“Yep,” I somehow manage to utter as I duck under his arm and into the building.

I set my crate down and begin to wring the water out of my hair and onto the large doormat with the school’s name and emblem woven into it. Anything to keep myself busy to help distract myself from the man I was deeply in love with during college.

“So...what are you doing here,” Evan asks with a slight nervous tremble.

“I’m the new drama teacher. I’m guessing you teach English?”

“Yeah.”

Another painful pause of awkward silence.

“Oh my gosh, you two have finally met!”

Mei comes jogging out from the administration office while looking between the two of us excitedly.

“Yep, we did,” I smile tightly.

“So do you two know each other?”

“Yeah. We took some classes together,” Evan answers for me.

“Oh my gosh you’re reunited, you two must be excited to be working together!”

How wrong Mei is about that. I think Evan and I can both agree this is the worst-case scenario. No one wants to work at the same place as their ex.

“Well, I’ll let you two catch up. Have fun,” Mei cheers while wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Now is the time to make my escape while I still have some semblance of pride left.

“Thanks for getting the door. See ya,” I call as I reach to get my crate.

“Here, let me get that for you.”

Evan leans down and picks up my crate before handing it to me. As I take the crate out of his hands our fingers lightly brush against each other sending shivers up my spine. Evan jerks his hands back to his sides and balls them into fists. It’s as if my touch scorched his skin.

“Thanks. Again,” I nod awkwardly.

“Sure thing.”

I focus on the black plastic crate in front of me containing various books and vases to be used as props for students. If I look up at Evan again I'm afraid I might crack. I have spent too long constructing a dam between my heartbreak and the world, I refuse to let it crack.

I hurry down the hall to my refuge in the theater as my glued-together heart begins to splinter. Finding out I'm teaching at the same school as the man I left behind was not a part of the plan. I blame the rain.

Chapter 3

My office looks just as I envisioned it. Framed posters in sets of two hang on each wall of my office containing musicals I've performed in. Scripts from varying plays and musicals are lined neatly on the back of my desk with golden metal bookends depicting the theatrical comedy and tragedy masks. Finally, three small faux succulents sit in pink and white ceramic pots on the windowsill.

I sit in my office chair, exhausted. Once I lugged all of my stuff into the school in a torrential downpour, I had my first faculty meeting of the year. It took more self-control than I'm willing to admit to remaining focused during the entire meeting instead of glancing across the table at Evan every ten seconds. Then to add insult to injury, the rain disappeared by the end of the meeting with not a cloud in the sky. I'm fully convinced that the weather decided to mock me today.

A text from Roxy lights up my phone, letting me know that she has arrived and is waiting outside by my car. I consider skipping lunch altogether since I would have to head to the teacher's lounge to get my lunch out of the fridge, but my stomach growls loudly in protest as it starts to feel like it's eating itself. Hopefully, Evan won't be there.

Voices and chuckles can be heard from the teacher's lounge before I make it to the door. I pause at the door to listen to the voices, none of them sound like Evan - I'm in the clear. My stomach growls again, whining about how I need to hurry up and feed it.

"Needy jerk," I hiss under my breath as I glance down at my stomach and open the door.

When I enter the room, Evan jumps out from behind the door, yelling, "Gah!"

I yelp in surprise and jump two feet in the air. Evan slouches with his mouth twisting in a disappointed frown before his eyes soften and stare at me apologetically. I lean against the wall and hold my hand over my heart as I slow my breath while the other teachers sitting at various tables laugh maniacally over their lunch.

"What was that for?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you were Wilson."

"Why were you trying to scare poor, Wilson," I accuse.

Evan shrugs, "It's a running gag we have going."

Speak of the devil, Wilson walks into the room and looks around confused as everyone bursts into another round of raucous laughter.

"Am I missing something," Wilson questions.

"Congratulations, I saved you from a jump scare," I respond dryly before heading over to the white fridge to grab my lunch.

I grab my sandwich off of the cool wire rack along with my sliced apple. Looking up I can see a

small toaster oven sitting on the burgundy linoleum counter. I was hoping to toast my sandwich for lunch, but considering how Roxy is waiting for me outside and I'd rather escape being in the same room as my ex-boyfriend, I'm going to forgo my toasted sandwich plans.

Hopefully, there won't be any more surprises today.

“Hey, how's your first day going?”

Before I can stop myself I once again jump in surprise and hit my head against the door of the freezer. What did I do to deserve such bad luck today?

I glance up from the fridge while rubbing the top of my head. The gym teacher is leaning over the door of the fridge with his mouth formed into a huge “O”.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” he apologizes.

Very slowly and cautiously I back up from the fridge and stand up straight.

“Don't worry about it, I'm fine!”

A few snickers are emanating from the tables behind me. At this point, I have lost count of how many times I have embarrassed myself today.

The gym teacher - I believe his name is Ken - makes his way over to me and begins to gently run his hands over the top of my head.

“No bumps,” he diagnoses.

“That's great,” I smile quietly as I do a brief once over.

Ken has striking green eyes and blond hair with a splash of boyish freckles across his nose. His tall frame is covered in lean muscles and he is dressed like the stereotypical gym teacher; a black tracksuit with a white t-shirt underneath, dirty sneakers, and a whistle attached to a lanyard around his neck. He's very handsome, but I can't help comparing him to Evan.

"Anyway - besides hitting your head against the fridge - how are you liking your first day?"

"It's busy," I respond neutrally.

"Really? It's been pretty chill for me. Remind me of your name again?"

"Caroline, or Carrie for short. Your name is Ken, right?"

"Whoa, nice memory."

"Thanks."

While I would love to make friends with the other staff members, the urge to escape to the comfort of my best friend is taking precedence.

"Well Sweet Caroline, would you care to sit with me for lunch?"

I internally bristle at the song reference. That song likes to follow me around like a shadow that never goes away.

I feel a set of eyes drilling holes into my profile. I glance to the side and notice Evan watching out of the corner of his eye while talking with Wilson. Evan's face is pulled in a scowl and his eyes take on a dark hue in the fluorescent lighting. I know that expression all too well, he is ticked. He must hate that we're working at the same school.

“Hitting on the new girl already,” a snarky voice teases.

The math teacher, Nadia, towers over me as she stands beside me. Nadia glances down at me with a haughty smile before looking back at Ken as she puffs her chest out more to accentuate the cleavage peeping from her v-neck blouse. Ken’s gaze lowers before rising back up to her eyes.

Nadia can best be described as a bombshell blonde. A curvy hourglass figure, tall, long flowing blond hair, and piercing ice blue eyes. From what Mei whispered to me during the faculty meeting, Nadia also happens to be a hit with male students and teachers alike because of her form-fitting wardrobe and coming to work in stiletto heels. She knows she is beautiful and she openly flaunts it.

“Just being friendly,” Ken responds challengingly before giving me a wink.

The air between the two of them feels tense; it’s suffocating.

“I already have lunch plans. Thanks for offering me a seat though,” I interject hurriedly.

“Maybe another time then.”

“Yep,” I answer noncommittally before practically speed-walking out of the room.

When I make it outside I find Roxy parked next to my car and sitting on the back of her tailgate wearing a pair of one of my running shorts and a white cropped t-shirt. Her tan legs swing casually as she stares off towards a group of birds bathing themselves in a puddle.

Roxy turns her head upon hearing my approaching footsteps and flashes me a bright

smile that quickly turns to a frown. She slides off of her truck and crosses her arms while jutting out her hip.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hi, nice to see you too,” I sigh as I set my lunch on the tailgate before fishing my car keys out of the pocket of my dress.

“What’s wrong?”

“Where do I begin?”

I pop the hood of my car and Roxy immediately lugs the new battery over.

“I’m guessing the rain cursed you even more after I jumped your battery?”

“Cursed and mocked me to add insult to injury.” I take a breath, deciding to start with the biggest piece of news. “Evan works here.”

Roxy’s head pops up while her hands drop the dead battery on her foot.

“Ouch, son of a-”

“Language, we’re at school.”

Roxy glares at me while holding onto her foot. She finally decides to swear in Spanish instead. Hopefully, the Spanish teacher isn’t nearby to hear her. I’m certainly not as fluent as Roxy, but I have picked up enough of the language over the years of being her friend to know that the words she’s using would even make the crudest talker blush. After a few moments, Roxy lowers her foot back to the ground and takes a deep breath before continuing.

“Evan is a teacher here?!”

“Yes.”

“What happened when you two saw each other?”

“It poured.”

“Huh?”

“It literally started pouring down raining. We got soaked, said hi, and I ran away.”

“No hot movie poster kiss in the rain?”

I give Roxy an annoyed glare, “You really think after what happened, Evan would sweep me up in his arms, kiss me, and tell me that he’s been waiting for me to come back and he’s not hurt at all by what I did?”

Roxy shrugs before slamming the hood closed, “I don’t see why not. You are still in love with him, maybe he is too.”

“I highly doubt it.”

I hoist myself onto the tailgate of Roxy’s truck and pull my sandwich out of its container while Roxy takes the time to ensure that my car will start. She slides the dead battery onto the bed of the truck and takes a seat next to me.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I won’t interact with him unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

The image of the way Evan looked at me while I was talking to Ken burns in my memory. Limiting our interactions is the best option.

“I have a better plan. How about you say you’ve missed him and ask him to take you back.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is that simple.”

“I think I like my plan more.” Roxy rolls her eyes, and as she opens her mouth to argue I continue, “Besides, I still don’t have a lot of free time to get back into a relationship. Dad still isn’t doing well and getting a home nurse to help out hasn’t gotten any cheaper.”

“Evan would help you?”

“He shouldn’t have to.”

Roxy looks as if she’s about to say something, but seems to decide against it and simply swallows back her response. I check my watch and notice that lunch will end soon and I need to get back to work.

“I better go. I have lesson plans to create and fall play orders to make.”

Roxy nods and we both hop off of her tailgate.

“I’ll see you later for dinner.”

“Sounds good. Thank you for helping me out with my car.”

“No problem! Anything to keep ol’ Bessy running,” she responds while slapping the roof of my car like a shady car salesman.

I wave to her one more time from the front doors as she drives away before I head back into the building. Everyone is slowly meandering out of the teacher’s lounge in groups before making their way to their various classrooms. Evan is walking out with Wilson and the Spanish teacher. He talks animatedly with a bright, white smile that spreads up to his eyes where his skin crinkles in the corner. That’s the Evan I used to know.

Evan and I briefly lock eyes and his smile falters. Before I can look away Nadia grabs his

attention. A pang of jealousy digs into my chest like a dull knife as she begins twisting her hair and slowly gliding her hand up Evan's arm. As they continue their conversation I notice how Evan's voice gets quieter and he leans in closer as they talk.

Roxy was wrong, there's no way we could have a steamy get-back-together moment because he has gotten over me.

I must have been staring for longer than I thought because both glance back over at me. I quickly look away before lifting my chin confidently. If Evan has gotten over me and can confidently flirt with someone else, then I can show him that I don't care. Or at least can pretend I don't care. I keep my shoulders back and walk as calmly as I can passing them toward the theater.

As soon as I make it back to safety my hands begin to tremble and tears threaten to spill over. I take deep breaths and force the tears back as I jog through the theater, back to my office. There is work to be done, I don't have time to wallow in self-pity.

I take another steadying breath and open my laptop.

First things first, finish my final proofread of my lesson plans for the semester and email them to Principal Johnson. Next, buy the scripts and music, and pay the royalty fees for the fall musical. Then my to-do list for work today will be complete.

Chapter 4

The Soto home is bursting with boisterous laughter. Music and the decadent aroma of bacon and pork mingled with an array of spices greets us when Roxy opens the door upon Dad and I walking up the brick walkway to the large Colonial-style mansion.

“You’re finally here,” Roxy gripes.

“Sorry, we got stuck behind a tractor.”

“How rude of *John Deere*.”

Roxy steps down the circular brick steps to support my dad on his other arm to help him into the house. The smells and the sounds bounce off the high ceilings as we enter the grand foyer and make our way over to the kitchen.

At the large kitchen island, Mrs. Soto is chopping fresh tomatoes from her garden and tossing them into a wooden salad bowl. Her auburn wavy hair is tied up in a high neat bun while a floral patterned apron covers her purple dress. She looks up from the cutting board and sets down her knife before coming over to us with arms wide open.

“Carrie! David! It’s good to see the both of you,” she cheers excitedly.

She hugs my dad and me and gives us both a kiss on the cheek, leaving red lipstick stains to rub off with the back of our hands.

Mrs. Soto has been like a second mother to me. When Roxy and I became friends in elementary school Mrs. Soto invited my parents over to her home. Since then my mom and Mrs. Soto became instant friends; they would garden together and my mother taught her how to quilt. My father and Mr. Soto would typically hang out in the Soto's entertainment room and watch sports while drinking beer.

Over the years we would spend holidays together and even went on vacations together every few years. Even though Mr. and Mrs. Soto quickly grew in wealth from Mr. Soto's programming business, they never looked down on my parents' meager earnings. They loved our family so much that they would have helped us buy a new house and car if my parents weren't against it.

When my mother got sick, Mrs. Soto would regularly come to visit her and bring over meals. She would also drive my mother to the hospital to take her to doctor appointments and treatments once my mother wasn't able to do it herself. Mrs. Soto would be doing the same for my father, but ever since she became president of her church's charity program I insisted that she focus on her volunteer efforts. We aren't totally without the Soto's help though, Roxy has stepped in a few times to help out.

My dad has always adored Roxy, he found her wit and ability to walk to the beat of her own drum entertaining. Knowing Roxy she would help out

more, but she is currently busy starting her own flower-pressing company. Over the summer it started to take off due to the wedding season.

“Hi, Mrs. Soto. Thank you for having us over for dinner.”

“Of course! Today was a big day for you, we have to celebrate.”

Mr. Soto enters the kitchen and greets us with muted enthusiasm as he pulls off his glasses and tucks them into the pocket of his white shirt. You’d think for someone as vibrant and excitable as his wife and daughter, Mr. Soto would be the same. Instead, he’s reserved and prefers to tinker with his computer and watch whatever local sporting event is on.

“Hi, Mr. Soto. How are things going?”

“Hello, Carrie. Everything is going well, thank you.”

“More than well, Mateo just opened a new office in California. The company has finally traveled all the way west,” Mrs. Soto brags proudly.

“Angelica, don’t brag,” Mr. Soto asks quietly.

I smile when Mrs. Soto struts over to her husband with a wide sway of her hips to give him a lingering kiss in response. The two may be opposites but they balance each other well. Just by looking at them, it is easy to tell that they’re still just as in love with each other as they were when they were younger. I hope to one day have a marriage like my parents and the Soto’s; full of love, adoration, and passion.

Without further argument, Mr. Soto turns back to my father and guides him gently to the entertainment room to watch the *Baltimore Orioles* play against their greatest rival - the *New York Yankees* - on TV.

“Is there anything I can do to help,” I ask.

“Absolutely not, you and Roxana go relax out back.”

Mrs. Soto pours me a glass of Moscato into a crystal wine glass and gently pushes it into my hand before shooing Roxy and me out to the back deck.

“You know she’s never going to accept your help,” Roxy quips as soon as we’re outside.

“I know, but I feel bad that she is making dinner for so many people by herself.”

“You know how she is about her kitchen - *The kitchen is the headquarters of my kingdom, I will not be disturbed* - and then she might add a good whack from a wooden spoon if you don’t leave fast enough,” Roxy quotes while perfectly imitating her mother’s Chilean accent.

I nod and head over to the planters lining the back deck to admire the colorful variety of freshly grown vegetables and fruit before gazing off to the English-style flower garden below. The entire garden is surrounded by a low red brick wall with thick vines of ivy creeping over it. Wooden benches are scattered throughout and a modest-sized fountain with water spilling over a bowl is carried on top of a Grecian woman statue’s head.

I wish I had a green thumb like Mrs. Soto, any plant she touches grows large and healthy. Meanwhile, if I simply look at a plant it will begin

to wilt. My mother and Mrs. Soto tried to cure my black thumb, but eventually, both gave up to protect another plant from dying tragically by my hand.

“So how did the rest of your day go? Did you have any more run-ins with Evan?”

“Only when I went back into the building after lunch. The rest of the day we successfully managed to avoid each other.”

Roxy nods, “So what about the other teachers? Did you meet any of them?”

“Yeah, the math teacher doesn’t seem to like me that much.”

“Math teachers are not to be trusted, so we don’t need to like her anyway.”

I chuckle at Roxy’s camaraderie. If someone doesn’t like me or is mean to me, they are officially on Roxy’s *Despicable People* list. However, if a person is a math teacher, they immediately are placed at the top of that list.

“Oh, and I guess the gym teacher was flirting with me.”

A sly smile spreads across Roxy’s face, “Oh? And what does this gym teacher look like?”

“Tall. Blonde hair and green eyes. Looks like he goes to the gym daily for two hours.”

“Sounds yummy.”

“He also comes across as someone that will flirt with anything that breathes and has breasts.”

“I wonder,” Roxy hums to herself.

Nothing good ever happens after Roxy says that phrase. Mischief and trouble normally aren’t far

behind when Roxy *wonders* about something. I better nip this in the bud now.

“No.”

“I haven’t said anything yet!”

“I don’t have to, I just know it’s best to cut you off now.”

Roxy pouts but continues anyway, “I think it might be a good idea to flirt back with Hottie Thottie.”

“Hottie Thottie? As in the acronym for, *that hoe over there?*”

“Yes! Brilliant isn’t it? I just came up with it on the spot.”

Roxy has an uncanny ability to come up with the most ridiculous nicknames for people she comes across. Thankfully when she nicknamed me Carrie, it was because she overheard the name when Mrs. Soto was watching *Sex and the City* one night. If it wasn’t for that movie who knows what name Roxy would have come up with for me?

“No and no.”

“Think about it - you don’t have to date him - all you have to do is flirt with Hottie Thottie to see if Evan gets jealous. If he does then that means he’s still in love with you and you have the green light to try to get him back.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because Nadia - math teacher - and Ken don’t seem to get along so that would give her more of a reason to not like me. Secondly, I saw Evan and Nadia flirting with each other so he clearly must be

over me. Lastly and most importantly, I'm not going to manipulate someone in an attempt to make my ex-boyfriend jealous."

"The fact that it will bother Baddie Naddie doesn't seem like a problem to me."

"What is with you and rhyming nicknames today?"

"I'm on fire today! Anyway, math teachers drink students' tears for breakfast. So just consider upsetting Baddie Naddie as a form of retribution."

Of course, anything to torture a math teacher. According to Roxy if you frustrate a math teacher you frustrate numbers themselves so that they suffer in return for causing people pain for having to deal with math. Roxy was a notorious offender to all math teachers from elementary school through college.

"Are you ignoring the part about not manipulating people? Or do you have a vendetta against gym teachers as well?"

"But Hottie Thottie already flirts with anything that breaths, so his feelings won't get hurt."

I take a tiny sip of my wine before placing my arms against the black Edwardian-style iron railing of the deck. I rest my chin on top of my arms and watch the evening sky fade into light blues and pinks.

"You're killing me, my head is going to explode."

The French doors leading out to the deck open and Mr. Soto steps one foot outside, "Ladies, dinner is ready."

"Alright, thanks, Papa."

“Saved by the dinner bell,” I mutter.

“And I’m not changing the nicknames,” Roxy calls over her shoulder before running into the house before I can argue.

I throw my head back and groan my frustrations towards the evening sky before following slowly behind Roxy to the dining room. Now I won’t be able to look at Ken and Nadia without thinking of them as their respective nicknames.

Chapter 5

The cicadas chirp loudly to each other as fireflies lazily dance in hazy twinkles of light through my front yard. With stomachs full of the best dinner we've had in weeks and throats dry from constant laughter and talking, my father and I tiredly make our way into the house. It's late, and certainly past both our bedtimes, but we had a lot of fun. However, I know getting up early for work tomorrow will be painful.

As my dad shuffles his way over the old moss-green carpet in the hallway to his bedroom I head to the kitchen to grab him a glass of water. I hand him the glass just as he's about to step into his room.

"Remember to take your pills before you go to bed."

"I will. Goodnight, Caroline."

"Night, Dad."

Dad gives me a gentle peck on the cheek before he closes his door. I head down the short hallway lined with several pictures of my parents and all of us together as a family. A picture of my mother smiling widely while holding me on her hip when I was about one year old stops me in my tracks. I wish my mom was still here. Uterine cancer ended her life two years ago. I hate cancer; I hate

everything it did to my mom and I hate everything that it is doing to my dad. If it wasn't for my parent's cancers maybe Evan and I wouldn't have broken up.

I shake my head to clear away the thought that has been softly on repeat for two years. Giving up Evan to take care of my parents was the correct decision. There is no way I'm going to regret that - right?

I sigh softly as I walk into my bedroom. The walls of my room are still painted a bright bubble gum pink with *Peter Rabbit* wall-paper runner lining the top of the wall where it meets the white popcorn ceiling that has been gradually collecting dust over the years. I would dust it but every time I try, dry crumbles from the ceiling snow down onto everything in the room. After having to spend a whole day dusting and then vacuuming up the crumbles I have decided to let myself avoid this one project.

One day I'll renovate my room to look more like an adult woman sleeps here instead of a baby nursery, but for now, that is on the back burner. Besides, my father saved up as much money as he could so that my mother could create her dream nursery. I might as well let the room remain as it is a little longer to get Dad's full money's worth. Not to mention my mother was always proud of how she decorated my room; it makes me feel close to her when I look at her personal touches.

I turn on the window AC unit and change into my pajamas as the cool air quickly fills the room and begins to banish the lingering heat from the day. It's still humid and water droplets begin to

build on my window from the cool air mixing with the lingering heat and humidity.

Now that I'm finally alone, the stress from the events of the day cascades over me and I have to sit on the edge of my bed. Today has left my head spinning. I hold my head in my hands and take some deep breaths to calm my nerves. I look over my shoulder towards the window. My room faces my backyard where a small grove of pine trees sits on the property. At the center of the grove is a small wooden bench that my father built for my mother shortly after he bought the house. My mother would often go out there to think and be alone when she got overwhelmed, a habit that I quickly picked up when I was a little kid. If there is any time that I need to be in peaceful solace, it would be now.

I quietly step out of my room and head towards the kitchen to grab a flashlight under the farmhouse-style sink. The back door squeaks slightly as I open it. I turn on the flashlight step down from the single stair off the back door and make the fifty-foot walk to the grove. A few barn owls can be heard off in the distance, mixing their call with the cicadas. The sound of pine needles crunching under my sandals as I make my way to the bench joins nature's chorus.

It's peaceful in the grove and I let the quiet swallow me whole. I take a moment to breathe in the crisp pine scent and allow my back to settle against the rough back of the bench. I can't believe the kind of day I've had.

For the first time in two years since we've broken up, I see Evan again. He hasn't changed much, he still dresses well and has that hidden,

mischievous twinkle in his eyes. He still has an affinity for pulling harmless pranks and gets along with everyone that he works with. However, he seems to have become a little more muscular than he was in college. The biggest difference though was not seeing his smile. I saw it briefly when he jumped out and surprised me during lunch, but as soon as he realized that it was me, his smile immediately faded. Of course, what should I expect? That he'd be happy to see me?

I stare up through the trees and catch a shooting star zipping across the sky while several other stars are twinkling against their onyx backdrop.

Seeing Evan again has brought back so many memories, many of them happy and some I want to forget. What am I going to do now that we're working at the same school? I'm not ready nor prepared to see him every day. How am I going to manage to work together when just the mere sight of him makes my heart race? Even thinking about him makes me breathless.

My lips turn down while my brow furrows.

This is ridiculous, I am an adult. I got my dream job at my first pick school right after graduating from college. So working at the same school as my ex-boyfriend wasn't a part of my plans, oh well. I have worked too hard to let my feelings for Evan ruin it. My first year of teaching will go great, and it will be great because I am doing what I love.

I nod to myself in finality and stand up. It's getting late and to have a good day tomorrow I need to get some sleep. I march back across the yard and into the house to get ready for bed. My nightly routine slowly soothes my racing heart.

With my clothes picked out for tomorrow, my lunch made, and my materials packed in my bag I can finally get some sleep. I pull back the quilted covers of my twin bed and lay down - the old white metal bed frame creaking. As I lay in bed my eyes travel up to the eight frames hanging above my headboard. Each frame contains an arrangement of pressed flowers against painted canvasses with visible brush strokes complimenting the shape and texture of the petals. Roxy made them for me when I was in college, she claimed it was practice for when she opened her own “*artistic flower pressing business*” which is now known as *Impressed Floral’s*.

All of the flowers were from bouquets Evan gave me after he saw me perform in productions during college. I can still smell the sweet scent of the roses, poppies, and magnolias of each bouquet. Evan would hide the bouquets behind his back in an attempt to surprise me. When he’d finally reveal the bouquet, there would be an excited and proud smile on his face.

Tears suddenly begin to sting my eyes and I have to force them closed. There was always a part of me that hoped he’d wait for me. However, considering how he was flirting with Nadia, I feel stupid for hoping.

I squeeze my eyes tightly to not let one tear escape and tell myself that I’m done crying over Evan. I’m done crying over what we could have been. What we were. I’ve worked too hard since we broke up to carefully construct my heart back together, I can’t let seeing Evan again undo all of that.

Squeezing my eyes shut may have stopped the tears, but it doesn’t stop my memories from

bursting forward. Evan's image immediately comes to mind; a bright smile framed by dimples on each cheek. The way he smiled at people could make anyone feel like they were in the glow of a warm spotlight. That was the first thing I noticed about him when we first met.

* * *

High school taught me that college professors are orderly and timely - so never be late. That has to be the biggest lie I have ever heard, not only was the professor for my previous class late, but he went over time. Now I'm forced to sprint across campus in the rain to my next class - Shakespearean Classics - so that I won't be late.

I hate the rain. I hate running. Most of all I hate running outside in the rain. I pride myself on my organization and time management skills, but today all of that has been thwarted by one professor. Now I look like an underprepared freshman instead of the seasoned Sophomore that I am. This is just my luck. Of course, why would I ever expect good luck on a rainy day?

You think from all of the dancing I do for theater I'd be in better shape, but here I am gasping for air while I stand in the doorway of the classroom for my next class. I look for an empty seat with a view that isn't blocked by someone taller than me until I spot a seat near the end; hopefully the guy next to it isn't saving it for someone.

"Excuse me, is that seat taken," I ask quietly.

"Nope, it's all yours."

"Thanks," I stutter before shuffling past him.

As I pull my notebook and pencil pouch out of my bag I can't help but steal glances at the guy next to me. The waves of his dirty blond hair create this tousled bedhead look. His shoulders are broad and the muscles in his arms almost fill out the sleeves of his dark blue t-shirt. A mole on his left ear makes it look like he has an earring and when he smiles, deep dimples appear on both cheeks. I have never seen a more attractive man in my life. This man is breathtaking.

He seems to sense me constantly looking at him because he turns to me and catches me stealing another glance. I feel my face begin to heat to a hundred shades of pink and red from being caught.

“Since we're desk neighbors we might as well introduce ourselves. I'm Evan.”

Evan holds out his hand to shake mine. I gingerly place my hand in his and it instantly feels like electricity running through my hand under his touch.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Caroline, but my friends call me Carrie.”

“Nice to meet you too, Carrie. So what year are you?”

“Sophomore. What about you?”

“I'm a Junior. Have you decided on your major yet?”

I nod, “Yep, Theater Education.”

Another bright smile, “Wow that's awesome, we're both education majors. I'm planning on teaching English.”

The professor walks into the classroom, interrupting our conversation as he takes his place

at the front of the classroom. The lecture quickly begins and I find myself fighting to stay focused. I've never been so awestruck by a man before. It's ridiculous, one breathtaking smile and I'm suddenly surrounded by sunshine and rainbows while every musical love song score creates a playlist in my head.

Before I realize it, class is over and I have to schedule extra time to study for this class to make up for what I missed from constantly trying to refocus.

“See you on Wednesday,” Evan smiles.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“See you around, Carrie.”

I wave as he strides confidently out of the classroom. My skin prickles in bumps yet I somehow also feel pleasantly warm.

Chapter 6

No amount of prepping, revising, and having all of the props I could want to use for class and performances can ward off my nervous jitters. It is the first official day of the school year and my first official day teaching my very own students. I was naive to consider my first day two weeks ago to be nerve-wracking. Teaching my first classes is way more anxiety-provoking.

It feels like my stomach will drop like on a roller coaster and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. An excited smile creeps upon my face as I walk towards the entrance of the school building. The adrenaline rush feels similar to the rush I'd get before a performance. It's intoxicating and addicting. I'm about to perform the ultimate role; teacher.

The sun is shining brightly in a deep blue sky without a single cloud. Luck is on my side today.

When I walk through the doors, Mei frantically waves with a huge smile on her face. I wave back with the same amount of intensity and head into the admin office.

“Good morning,” I chirp.

“Good morning!”

Mei stands up from her seat and walks around her desk giving me a full view of her outfit. Today's

outfit reminds me of Cher from *Clueless*; a yellow plaid shirt with a matching blazer and a white button-down blouse underneath.

“I like your *Clueless*-themed outfit,” I compliment.

“Thank you! I was watching it this weekend and knew I had to channel my inner Cher.”

A laugh bubbles in my chest as Mei does a model twirl like she’s on a runway.

“You definitely nailed it.”

“Thank you. So how do you feel? Today is your first day teaching.”

“I’m excited and a little nervous.”

Mei pats my shoulder, “I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“I have no doubt she will.”

Mei and I look towards the back of the admin office to see Principal Johnson striding over to us in her pointy-toed heels and wide-legged, black pantsuit. Her red shirt matches the shade of lipstick she is wearing. I recognize that outfit immediately, Principal Johnson has worn that suit on the first day of the school year every year since I was in middle school. Roxy and I like to call it, *The Power Suit*.

Principal Johnson quickly wraps me in a hug before pulling back and smiling brightly.

“Good morning, Principal Johnson.”

“You’re still going to insist on calling me Principal Johnson instead of just Janice? You are an adult now, it’s okay for you to use my first name.”

I shake my head, “I can’t, it feels too weird and almost disrespectful to do that.”

Principal Johnson lets out a breathy laugh while shaking her head, “You’re always so polite.”

“Thank you,” I laugh.

Principal Johnson turns to Mei, “Mei, did everyone get the lunch duty schedule for this semester?”

Mei gasps before running behind her desk and holding out a sheet towards me. “I forgot to give you this last week. Sorry about that.”

I gently take the sheet from Mei’s outstretched hand and start to look over the schedule, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll make sure to add...” This has to be a mistake. It’s not raining today, so why is this happening? I have lunch duty today and Friday.

“Is something wrong,” Principal Johnson asks.

Clearly, I’m reading this wrong.

“I just want to make sure I understand the schedule; I have lunch duty on Mondays and Fridays this semester. Right?”

“Yes. You and Evan will both be in charge of monitoring lunch on Mondays and Fridays.”

I was reading this right. It’s not a typo. How can I get out of this? Maybe someone will switch with me.

“Isn’t it great! You and Evan can have some time to catch up,” Mei gushes while giving me an obvious wink.

“I’m sure we’ll be busy keeping the kids in line.”

Mei and Principal Johnson look at each other with Cheshire cat smiles before rolling their eyes. They slowly look back at me, their eyes scanning my face with predatory smirks. My throat tightens and I instinctually back away.

“Have a good day, Carrie,” Principal Johnson and Mei say in unison.

I feel like I’ve just been dismissed like a toddler by her mother. Their voices are laced with sweetness and a patronizing undertone.

“Thanks, you too,” is all I mutter as I walk out of the office and down the hall to the auditorium.

My plan to avoid Evan as much as possible has now been compromised.

* * *

I have never felt tempted to risk starting a mutiny among a group of teenagers more than I do today. According to my watch, I have two more minutes until the bell rings over the intercom to dismiss my students to lunch. I want to try to convince the kids to stay a little longer past class time to delay having to go to lunch duty. However, asking ravenous teens to stay late for class is asking for more trouble than I care to engage with today.

So far my classes have all gone smoothly. I was able to create a nice balance between being an authority figure and being approachable with all of my students. It is the first day so everyone may be behaving themselves - more or less - as they get a feel for all of their teachers. However, it feels like things have gone a little too smoothly considering how I found out that I have lunch duty with Evan twice a week for a whole semester. I expected that

a stroke of bad luck would be a precedence to how the rest of the day would go.

The lunch bell rings and I wave goodbye to my class and wait for all of them to leave the theater. I was hoping for one or two stragglers but apparently, none of them are willing to risk squandering their lunch period.

There's no point in delaying this any further. I force myself to lock up my office and head towards the teacher's lounge to grab my lunch from the fridge. The sooner I get to lunch duty, the sooner I can get this over with.

The teacher's lounge is starting to buzz as teachers wander around the room grabbing their lunch and chatting in their respective cliques. I wave to the music, art, and home economics teachers who are settling down to eat. They each smile and wave back before giving me pitying pouts.

"We'll miss you," the music teacher sighs dramatically while holding out her hand towards me.

"Try to not forget me," I tease back before heading towards the fridge.

As I open the door and lean down to grab my sandwich and apple, I feel someone standing close behind me. I look over my shoulder to find Ken standing behind me and very obviously eyeing my butt. His gaze makes me feel like hundreds of tiny ants are crawling all over my skin. I quickly straighten and step behind the door of the fridge to create some distance.

"Hey, Sweet Caroline," Ken hums.

"Hi, Ken."

“You’re lookin’ smokin’ hot today,” he winks.

I hold back a gag. This man’s vernacular is stuck in the early two-thousands.

“Thank you,” I nod quickly before heading towards the door.

Compared to Ken’s uncomfortable staring, lunch duty with Evan doesn’t sound that bad.

The door swings open and Evan strides into the room with Nadia following closely behind him while pouting her bottom lip.

“Can’t you trade your lunch duty day with someone?”

“Sorry, it’s too last minute to change. If I had known earlier I might’ve been able to. It’s odd, Mei normally doesn’t forget scheduling stuff like this.”

My ears perk up; Evan didn’t find out about lunch duty until today too. Nadia immediately spots me and struts over to me; her cleavage bouncing in her low v-neck blouse as she walks.

“Carolyn, do you think you could trade lunch duty with me today?”

I have to force myself to not groan in response to her saying my name wrong. Over the last couple of weeks, it seems that Nadia has made it her mission to pronounce my name incorrectly.

“There will be no shift trades for the first week,” Mei interjects as she slides next to me.

I don’t know when Mei came in or how long she has been listening but I’m grateful. While I would rather avoid Evan, I’d much rather avoid having to listen to Ken’s noxious flirting.

“Since when has that been a rule?”

“It’s new. If you have a problem with it, take it up with Principal Johnson.”

Nadia *humphs* in response before turning on her red stiletto heel and marching back over to Evan who stares intently at a square linoleum tile.

“I’ll see you after school,” Nadia purrs before grabbing Evan by his tie and pulling him down for a deep kiss.

I quickly look away but the image of Evan kissing Nadia is burned into my mind.

“So it is true,” Mei mutters under her breath before gently rubbing my arm and walking away.

When the couple finally pulls apart Evan’s eyes meet mine as a soft frown pulls at his lips. Nadia looks back at me with a victorious smirk while her hand is still gripping Evan’s tie. I have to force myself to not burst into tears and run back to my office. My heart is racing and my skin feels clammy. I can feel the cracks in my heart immediately split as my chest gets splintered by the shards.

I change my mind, I’d rather deal with Ken’s flirting.

“We should get going,” Evan calls to me.

My throat tightens and I can’t get myself to say a word. Instead, I simply nod my head and pull my phone out of my skirt pocket.

Me: He’s dating Baddie Naddie.

Almost immediately, Roxy responds.

Roxy: What?!

Me: On top of that, I now have to serve lunch duty with him.

Roxy: Wanna skip?

Me: I wish.

Roxy: Tonight. You, me, red velvet cake, and My Big Fat Greek Wedding.

Me: Thank you.

I shut off the screen of my phone and shove it back into my pocket. After this afternoon, a girl's night is exactly what I need.

Chapter 7

With all things considered, I can successfully say I didn't cry during lunch. My appetite though, was completely ruined. I managed to force down a few bites of my sandwich before finally returning my food to its container.

The kiss between Nadia and Evan won't stop replaying in my head no matter how hard I try to forget. What's even worse, an event that lasted only five seconds maximum is playing slowly. I can't stop seeing how Nadia's body was pressed firmly against Evan's or the mocking smile she flashed me. It was never a competition between me and her - while I still hoped Evan would magically tell me he wanted me back - a part of me always knew that I would always be the ex.

A new fear immediately clenches its fist around my chest. Is it obvious that I'm still in love with Evan? Is that why we were paired up for lunch duty together? I truly thought that I did a better job at hiding it. Evan and I barely spoke to each other, and during faculty meetings, we always sat on opposite sides of the room. Our paths barely crossed over the last two weeks, there is no way I gave away that much information. Did Evan say something? No. If Evan did reveal that we were more than simply classmates, Mei would hunt me down and drive me to a corner to spill the details.

I didn't cry and the only thing Evan and I had to do was exchange polite pleasantries to each other at the end of lunch. After lunch, however, I was ready to go home. Keeping my emotions in check while sitting in awkward silence was draining. I remember when sitting in silence with Evan was comforting, now it's deafening. Is this how every lunch duty with him is going to go?

I fill my belly with a deep breath and slowly exhale as I secure the flap over my bag with its snaps. Evan and I didn't give anything away, Mei must simply assume that because Evan and I went to the same school it would be cute to pair us together. I sling my bag over my shoulder and make my way out of my office.

As I walk quickly down the hallway I see Evan and Nadia walking towards the front entrance with their fingers interlaced. They both stop and turn back to me upon hearing my footsteps. I fight the urge to look down at my feet; I will not make myself look pathetic and heartbroken. Nadia turns up her lip in a tiny sneer upon making eye contact with me.

Leave drama for the stage.

I flash Evan and Nadia the brightest smile I can muster and walk towards them.

"Have a good evening. See you both tomorrow," I chirp with feigned excitement.

"You too," Evan mutters for himself and Nadia.

With all of the confidence I can muster, I stride past the couple towards the front entrance.

"I'm feeling kind of tired. Do you think we could have dinner at my place? Maybe enjoy some

dessert together,” Nadia asks loud enough for me to hear.

“Sure.”

I can hear the smile in Evan’s voice. As soon as I’m out the doors and out of sight I bolt towards my car as tears begin to stream down my face. My car - thankfully - sputters to life as I twist the key in the ignition before I’m even fully seated. I slam the door and frantically drive out of the parking lot as I use the palm of my hand to wipe the trails of tears that have painted my cheeks.

The drive home from Prince Frederick normally takes fifteen minutes, but today it feels longer. I swipe the tears that keep blurring my eyes as I fly down Route Four. It’s tempting to speed so I can get home sooner, but the last thing I want is to get pulled over by a cop while ugly crying. My hands grip the steering wheel till my knuckles are white and my fingers ache.

By the time my tires crunch on the tan gravel of my driveway my hands are cramping and dotted imprints decorate my palms. I take a deep breath before finally getting out of the car. It would make my dad worry if I came into the house still crying.

As I approach the front door I can hear voices from the show *M.A.S.H.* blaring from the TV. I gingerly pull on the screened storm door that is still barely holding on by its hinges. As I rest the door against my hip I grab my keys and shove them into the lock. The lock audibly clicks as I turn the key. As I turn the brass knob to open the door, the storm door loudly crashes down against the concrete porch. The twisting iron railing clangs as the storm door bangs against it. The storm door has finally bit the dust.

“Are you alright?”

I hear our lumpy couch rustle as Dad gets up and takes slow but steady small strides over to the door.

“I’m fine,” I sniffle.

Dad peers out the door with a concerned frown. His lips purse and he pauses upon seeing me.

“Are you sure?”

“Yep,” I smile before a few more tears escape.

My father holds out his arm for me to come inside. I quietly obey and he wraps his arm around my shoulders as he guides me to the couch and mutes the TV.

“Did something happen today?”

“No. The storm door just whacked me as it fell off its hinges.”

My dad points his index finger at me and shakes it, “Do not lie to me, Caroline.”

I wish he would let me lie to him and leave me to commiserate with the pine trees out back.

“It’s not a big deal,” I conclude.

Dad stares at me, the wrinkles on his forehead and around his mouth deepen with his frown.

“Your mother used to say the same thing to me, even till the end of her life. I don’t know why the two of you feel the need to baby me, but I don’t like it. It makes me more worried when you refuse to tell me anything.”

I’ve heard this speech before. He’s been saying this to me since mom passed away. It isn’t that I don’t trust my father, when I was a kid he was the

first person I'd go to whenever I felt sad or scared. However, as I've gotten older I've noticed how frail my dad has become and I've felt like I need to protect him.

"An ex-boyfriend is a teacher at my school. So it's been a little tough seeing him every day."

My father's hand tightens on my shoulder, "Who?"

"Do you remember my boyfriend from college? Evan Stanton."

My father's gaze falls from my face and travels to the floor as his grip on my shoulder tightens even more.

"I see."

"But I'll be fine, I just need to adjust to seeing him again."

My dad nods before finally relaxing his grip and gently massaging my shoulder.

"Anyway, Roxy will be stopping by later to hang out. I better get changed."

Dad takes his arm from around my shoulders and unmutes the TV. I get up from the couch and head towards the hall. As the closing credits to *M.A.S.H.* plays on the TV I glance over my shoulder. Dad normally would want me to talk more about the thing that's bothering me, but instead, he immediately gave up upon finding out. Even though he has gotten over the lingering side effects of his last round of chemo, he still hasn't gained any weight back. Is he still not feeling well?

"Hey Dad, are you feeling okay?"

My dad looks over to me and smiles, “I can feel the weather changing so it’s left me feeling a little crummy.”

I won’t argue further, for all I know I’m probably worrying for nothing. Dad has been on top of his healthcare since his diagnosis, if something was wrong he would have told me and called the doctor already.

For now, I need a chance to try to clear my head before Roxy comes over. I hastily change into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before slipping out back to the bench in the grove.

A gentle breeze flows through the pine trees, causing their tops to sway. I take a deep breath of the pine-scented air before holding my face in my hands. The tears have finally stopped but instead of feeling numb I still feel a dull ache in my chest. Breaking up with Evan was torture, but seeing him with someone else is even worse.

I haven’t been outside very long when the crunching of pine needles catches my attention. The breeze blows the scent of jasmine in my direction and I immediately know it’s Roxy. I don’t bother to look up. Roxy takes a seat next to me on the bench; she doesn’t say anything, just simply sits in silence with me.

“How am I going to handle seeing him with Baddie Naddie?”

Roxy sighs, “That’s why I’m here. We’ll figure it out.”

I slowly lift my head and give Roxy a small smile.

“Thank you.”

Roxy flashes me a comforting grin, “Of course. Now let’s go inside; my mom sent me over with some steak and potatoes.”

“You brought the red velvet cake, right?”

“Of course!”

I follow Roxy out of the grove and back into the house where my father has begun setting the table.

Chapter 8

It has been almost a month since I started teaching and I have a cast for my first directed musical. The fall musical for this year is *Beauty and the Beast* and my cast of kids is buzzing with excitement. A good fairy tale story is always a crowd-pleaser, and considering how everyone is familiar with the story we should be able to drum up a good crowd.

There are some talented students this year so I'm not too concerned about the performance side of the production. However, I am feeling a little overwhelmed since I still have yet to find two people on the stage crew who are willing to be in charge of props and help the home economics teacher with costumes. Thankfully the school's librarian has experience with lighting and the sound board - which leaves me in charge of directing, choreography, and teaching the music.

It's a lot of work to be in charge of directing, teaching the music, coming up with and teaching the choreography, managing the stage crew, and meeting with lighting and costumes. However, I was often praised for my organizational skills throughout college, so as long as I stay organized I can manage everything just fine.

At least everyone is familiar with the music, so learning the musical numbers won't be too difficult. Unfortunately, no one is familiar with

ballroom dancing. I'm not asking the kids to learn anything too difficult, I'm sticking with a basic waltz. It may not have been the most popular form of dancing in eighteenth-century France, but it's the one ballroom dance I feel the most confident teaching.

Or at least I did feel confident teaching the waltz. I had a feeling that a group of middle schoolers would most likely not have experience with the waltz, and I was right. That is why I decided to teach the choreography for the numbers that involve the waltz early on. The longer the kids have to learn the steps, the more time they have to get it down and feel comfortable dancing with their partners. At least that was what I was hoping for. However, it seems my cast is struggling to learn the waltz more than I expected. Don't get me wrong, there are a few kids who seem to have picked up the steps almost instantly, but the majority seem to still be struggling.

I'm not sure how to explain the steps in a way that will click. I had already shown them videos and taped down Xs on the stage; I even went so far as to dance with a broom to try to show them the choreography. Nothing has worked. Teaching choreography for one of my college classes was an assignment I tended to score the lowest on, and the cast struggling with the waltz is a painful reminder of those scores.

There has to be something I haven't tried to teach these kids the waltz. I need to think back to what I learned and use it. Memories of watching my classmates who were better at teaching choreography play in my mind but nothing stands out.

“Hey, Sweet Caroline.”

My thoughts are interrupted by Ken.

“Hey Ken,” I force a smile while trying to ignore the song reference that has followed me around my whole life.

At least no one has tried to serenade me with that song yet, but I know it’s only a matter of time.

“That was an intense staring contest you were having there with your coffee.”

“Oh uh, I was just lost in thought,” I shrug while lowering my mug.

“You must have been thinking about something hard. What’s going on?”

Ken is the gym teacher and has to teach kids how to move a certain way all of the time. Not to mention he currently isn’t taking the time to inappropriately flirt with me. Maybe he has some good ideas that could help me.

“My cast is having a hard time learning the waltz for the show. I’m trying to figure out a way to teach them in a way that makes sense.”

“Did you try showing them a video?”

“I did. No luck.”

Ken hums to himself as he crosses his arms.

“Dance isn’t my thing, but I’m trying to think of something.”

“Well, she already tried to teach the kids by dancing with a broom. I saw it, it was hilarious.” Nadia announces to everyone in the teacher’s lounge.

The tips of my ears begin to burn. Did she see me? No surprise she waited till now to announce it to everyone. That seems to be a trend with Nadia, she catches me doing something embarrassing, and she waits till just the right moment to tell everyone while watching for my reaction. She already announced to everyone about the one time I had toilet paper stuck to my shoe for half a day and loudly informed me one morning that I had spinach stuck in my teeth. This time to add insult to injury, Nadia decided to inform everyone of my broom dance partner while sitting on Evan's lap.

Her light blue button-down blouse is opened to the lowest button she can get away with in a school setting while the rest of her buttons strain and the fabric puckers. As she sits on Evan's lap her cleavage is in perfect view when he looks down at her and her knee-length pencil skirt has managed to ride up her thighs.

I don't understand how everyone allows her to dress this way. How she chooses to dress in her free time is her business, but at school, it might be a better idea that it doesn't look like she's been cast in the starring role of a sexy secretary. Her outfit compared to my calf-length skirt and Peter Pan collared blouse makes me look like a nun.

I notice Evan's hand lazily rest on Nadia's bare thigh. While my chest still aches from Evan dating someone else, I've started to feel more annoyed with their relationship. Nadia has taken every moment she can to rub it in that she and Evan are dating...and rub on him. I have lost count of the number of times that I have seen them share long kisses before leaving the teacher's lounge or Nadia flashing everyone her panties from her skirt riding up when she sits on Evan's lap.

There are kids around, you'd think that they would tone it down with the PDA. Come to think of it, Evan was never one for excessive public displays of affection. Typically while we were out in public the most physical affection he would show me would be a quick kiss and holding hands. I guess that has changed.

I'm surprised nobody else has complained about their behavior. I would like to, but I'd hate to be the only one. And considering how Nadia's wardrobe gets a pass; I'm guessing they're excessive PDA is permissible as long as students aren't present.

That fact is frustrating. Go ahead and make the staff feel like they're watching a PG-13 movie in real-time, just don't do it in front of the kids. A sour taste fills my mouth, I sound like the jealous and prudish ex-girlfriend who shames the body-confident girl.

Ken's laughter brings me back to the present, "And that didn't work either?"

"No," I huff before taking a sip of coffee to hide the blush creeping up my face.

"What if you gave them an example by dancing with someone," Evan suggests neutrally.

I glance in Evan's direction before looking down at the coffee in my mug. Since the first day of school, we've only shared polite conversation; comments about the weather, or sharing something funny that we overheard a student say. For the majority of the time though, we have stayed out of each other's way and pretended the other doesn't exist when we're in the teacher's lounge.

At least I haven't been on the receiving end of another jump scare.

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," Ken beams.

"But who is she going to dance with? She's already danced with her broom boyfriend," Nadia teases.

"I'll do it," Ken volunteers.

"Really? Don't you have to lead basketball practice," I ask.

"Yeah, but Wilson can run things for a little bit till I get back. Besides, I wouldn't want to lose the opportunity to dance with a pretty girl."

I think that is the sweetest flirty comment, Ken has ever given me. Normally his flirts so far have been full of sexual innuendos and that's-what-she-said jokes that are not worth repeating.

"If you can that would be great!"

"Great I'll see you in the auditorium after school," Ken winks before striding out of the room.

"How about Evan and I join you? It would be fun to take a free dance class," Nadia chirps.

Before I can stop it, a snicker bubbles out.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, sorry. I just remembered something funny," I answer quickly while recalling how Evan asked me to teach him how to dance once.

Long story, short, Evan has the coordination of a three-legged dog. Off-beat and clumsy. My toes throb in remembrance of the multiple times that he stepped on them during that lesson. I glance down at Nadia's shoes peeping out from over the

table. They're her signature black patented leather stilettos with a pointed toe. Her feet have no protection from Evan's clumsy footwork in those heels.

"I don't know if it would be helpful to Caroline if we drop in on rehearsal," Evan intervenes.

"Are you passing up the opportunity to dance with a pretty girl," Nadia asks while quoting Ken.

Evan sighs and looks to me for a response. Every fiber of my being is screaming no but considering how I'm now forced into a corner to give the final say I force myself to smile and say,

"It's okay. It might help the cast to loosen up if they see teachers learning with them."

Nadia smiles proudly before leaning over and giving Evan a long kiss.

"See you after school," she waves before strutting out of the teacher's lounge, her hips swaying in exaggeration.

Evan and I are left alone in the teacher's lounge. We're both silent. My head begins to throb with a headache from stress. Rehearsal is going to be such a pain this afternoon. I turn towards my bag sitting on the counter and pull out a bottle of Tylenol. Evan comes to stand beside me as I pop two pills in my mouth and chug my coffee which has since gone cold.

"I can tell Nadia that we can't come to rehearsal," he says quietly.

I glance over at Evan out of the corner of my eye. His brows are pulled together and his posture is slightly slouched as his hands tightly grip the edge of the counter. While I can tell he feels guilty I

can't help but feel hot anger build a tight ball in my chest. He should've convinced his girlfriend to not go in the first place. Evan dug himself into this hole, if he wants to get out of it he should do it himself. I look up at Evan with the brightest smile I can muster and respond,

“No, it's fine! If you two want to learn you can join in.”

Before Evan responds I sling my bag over my shoulder and march confidently out of the office. As I head down the hall the school bell rings, signaling the end of lunch. Time to get back to prepare to give an impromptu dance lesson.

Chapter 9

Just as promised, Ken shows up at the theater after school with Evan and Nadia filing in behind him. My cast looks up curiously from their conversations with the surprise guests before looking to me for answers.

“Alright everyone, gather on the stage please.” Ken, Evan, and Nadia sit in the front row of the audience as they watch the teens clamber up to the stage; either through walking up the stairs, climbing up the edge of the stage, or getting a running start and catapulting themselves up. I wave for the teachers to join us on stage, “That includes you three.”

I take my place beside the wooden upright piano and everyone falls silent.

“Before we start warm-ups let’s welcome Coach Anderson, Ms. Green, and Mr. Stanton. They will be joining us for a part of the rehearsal today. They have kindly volunteered to learn the waltz with all of you and hopefully provide an in-person example of what I want all of you to do for the choreography.”

The cast briefly claps and lets out a few laughs and cheers. This is a good sign, if they are excited then they’ll have a better chance of picking up the steps. Hopefully learning alongside teachers will

give them the visual aid they need to learn the choreography.

I play a few chords to get everyone's attention and begin leading the cast through vocal warm-ups. The other teachers join us as we run scales and other vocal exercises. I close my eyes and listen to the voices blend and can easily pick up the teacher's voices. Nadia is a decent alto, but both Evan and Ken struggle to stay on key. I join the ensemble of voices with my own to help Evan and Ken match the key.

It's not perfect but Evan and Ken's voices blend better with the group. I take the time to quickly run through a couple of songs while everyone's voices are still warmed up. Now and then I stop a song to correct a pronunciation or pitch with an example.

Every time I open my mouth to sing I swear I can feel Evan's gaze, but when I briefly turn my attention to him he is staring intently somewhere else. I'm probably imagining it. There is no way he would stare at me when he has his bomb-shell blonde girlfriend beside him.

"Alright everyone let's work on the choreography for Beauty and the Beast (Reprise)."

I wait for everyone to take their place on stage before placing Evan and Nadia where they won't run into anyone. I grab Ken to join me down center stage.

"Let's see what you remember; can anyone show our guests the proper form for holding your partner?"

A few seconds pass before our cast Belle and Beast step forward and hold each other stiffly. As

hard as they try, the teen's mouths twist like they've tasted something sour. They feel awkward. I smile remembering I would feel the same way during acting. As I got more experience I would quickly get over any awkwardness with my new leading man for that show. Our Belle and Beast will get more comfortable with each other, they just need a little more time.

"That's right, very good," I praise the two leads. "Mr. Stanton and Ms. Green, do you think you can copy that?"

Evan and Nadia slowly get in position. While Evan's arms go rigid, Nadia closes the gap between them as much as possible before crossing the line of it being inappropriate in front of the students.

"Like this," Evan asks.

"Almost," I walk up to the pair. "You need some more space between the two of you."

"Seriously? Aren't you supposed to hold your partner close? I thought ballroom dancing was supposed to be romantic." Nadia whines.

A few students let out uncomfortable groans but I don't bother to correct them, if I was able to I would be making the same noise.

"It's just proper form," I respond simply.

Evan creates more space while Nadia rolls her eyes. I gently adjust the placement of their hands and arms before stepping back over to Ken who immediately holds me properly. His hands never stray like I was worried they would, and his arms are relaxed. I raised my brow at him; I thought he said he wasn't skilled at dancing.

“What’s next Director Monroe,” Ken asks enthusiastically.

“Next we will start with a basic box step. The man leads with his left and the woman follows with her right.”

I verbally guide Ken through the steps and he immediately picks up the steps and the rhythm. Not bad for a beginner. After showing everyone the box step I count the beat aloud and watch everyone go through the steps. So far everyone looks good... for the most part. Nadia yelps as Evan steps on her toes. I hold back a laugh, the man still has two left feet.

“Are you sure we have to be spaced so far apart,” Nadia complains.

“The spacing is fine. Mr. Stanton, please take smaller steps. You do not need to take large strides.”

“Right, got it,” Evan sighs while a few students snicker as they watch their teachers struggle with the steps.

I counted out the beat again and the pair successfully managed to perform the box step twice without any toes getting stepped on. The cast along with Evan and Nadia dance through a few more counts. Looking good. Now it’s time to move on to turning which seems to still be stumping several members of the cast.

Ken joins me as my partner once more and quickly picks up on traveling diagonally in a box step fairly quickly. A few of the kids slouch with withered grimaces when they see how quickly he can pick up the steps.

“I know this is still challenging for some of you, but I know all of you can get it.” I walk over to Nadia and Evan, “You two ready to try it?”

Evan’s jaw clenches before turning to Nadia and taking her in the proper hold. Nadia frowns under Evan’s straining to keep her further apart. I count the beats and watch in dismay as toes get stepped on again and a round of giggles echoes from the cast. Nadia’s face flushes red and I shoot the cast a warning glare to keep their amusement to themselves.

“How can you still step on my toes even though you’re so far away? I feel like we’re dancing like middle schoolers during a slow dance,” Nadia yells in frustration. She looks down at her heels and finds that they have been scuffed from Evan stepping on them. That’s going to be a pain to polish. “And you scuffed my favorite heels!”

“Oh no,” one of the boys from the ensemble gasps sarcastically.

Nadia growls before turning to me, “I’m done being the comedic relief,” she huffs before stomping off.

“That’s not what I was trying to do,” I call after her.

“Nadia, wait,” Ken calls while chasing after her.

I look back at the cast who watches in amusement while some record with their cellphones.

“Hey, no phones on stage!” I sigh while pinching the bridge of my nose. The only drama I enjoy is scripted, not real life. “Everyone take five.”

“Thank you, five,” the cast responds in unison before everyone exits the stage.

“And to those of you who took a video of Ms. Green, I expect every video to be deleted. If I find out that one of you shared that video you are out of the production. Am I clear?”

The teens cast worried glances at each other before nodding in unison and clambering off the stage. It’s not often that I have to raise my voice or threaten to discipline my students, but when I do they seem to take notice.

Evan is still on stage while silently staring at me apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make the two of you look bad,” I apologize quietly.

“No, I had a feeling this would happen. I should have convinced Nadia to not invite herself to a closed rehearsal.”

No kidding. If Nadia didn’t like me before, I’m sure she hates me now.

“I’ll apologize to her later when she’s cooled off.” I pause as Evan continues to stand beside me, “You should go. I’m sure she needs you.”

Evan pauses before finally nodding slowly. Before he leaves, Evan gently rubs circles on the small of my back, “Thanks for teaching us; it seems that dancing is still not my thing, sorry.”

“No problem,” I nod while my breath gets caught in my throat. I’m surprised he referenced the time when I tried to teach him how to dance. Even more surprised that he reached out and touched me.

As Evan waves goodbye to the cast I check my watch and see that five minutes have passed. I call everyone back on stage and run through the dance again. Still a little shaky but it seems that everyone has got the gist of it. I suppose showing the kids with live models worked after all. I just hate that helping them learn it was at the cost of Nadia growing to hate me more.

Chapter 10

It has been a week since the last rehearsal with Nadia and she is still giving me the death glare whenever she sees me. She is not going to let this go any time soon. It also probably doesn't help that I have lunch duty with Evan in the cafeteria; she tends to be moodier on those days.

I grab my lunch from the fridge and stand to find Mei staring at me excitedly. I jump in surprise and my head bangs against the top door of the freezer. People need to quit cornering me at the fridge.

“Ouch,” I hiss while rubbing my head.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” Mei apologizes.

“It's okay,” I groan.

I take in Mei's outfit. She's in a bright neon green pantsuit with a neon pink blouse underneath with her nails painted to match her shirt. A pair of acrylic neon pink hoops sway from her ears. With every outfit Mei dons, I take the liberty to name them in my head. This one shall be known as the Rave Suit.

“I wanted to catch you before lunch duty. Word in the halls is that Ken seems to be sweet on you.”

“I suppose,” I shrug.

“Considering that and the especially good mood Ken seems to be in, I think he’s going to ask you on a date, today.”

I laugh nervously, “I doubt that.”

“I’m sure of it. Before Ken asked Nadia out on their first date last year, he had this big goofy smile on his face and would have the students play with the parachute during gym class.”

“Nadia and Ken used to date?”

“Yeah, but they broke up close to the beginning of this school year. That’s probably why Nadia is dating Evan, she’s trying to make Ken jealous.”

“Oh,” *how do I even respond to that?*

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know. I know Nadia isn’t your biggest fan so I wanted you to be aware in case you say yes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I nod.

“Evan, can’t you get someone to trade lunch duty with you,” Nadia whines as she and Evan walk into the room.

“Speak of the devil,” Mei mutters under her breath.

“I can’t, I promised a few students that I’d join them for a game of *Uno* during lunch.”

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you,” Nadia purrs while running her hand down Evan’s stomach to his belt loops.

I did not need that image in my head. *Someone, please stop this.*

Mei loudly gags, “There are children nearby, please keep things G-rated.”

And the hero of my day is Mei. A thunderous applause roars in my head for Mei.

“Don’t be such a prude, it’s harmless flirting,” Nadia huffs before turning her ice-cold glare in my direction. “Carolyn-”

“Caroline,” I interrupt.

“Whatever, same thing. Why don’t you and I switch so Evan and I can have lunch duty together.”

She is not going to like my answer, but considering how she refuses to pronounce my name correctly I don’t feel sorry.

“I also promised the same group of students that I’d play *Uno* with them too.”

“You know, it’s reasonable to not keep your word with students – they’re just kids. Besides, it prepares them for the real world where life isn’t fair.”

“Nadia,” Evan hisses.

Nadia stares silently at Evan for a moment with her lips pursed and her eyes narrowing.

“Fine.”

She struts away with an angry stomp; you can hear her heels clack loudly down the hallway.

“Finally, she’s gone,” Mei sighs in sarcastic relief. She pats me on the shoulder, “I’ll see you later. Bye, Evan.”

“See ya,” Evan calls over his shoulder while pulling his lunch out of the fridge. He walks over to me and gives me a small smile – still cordial, but over the last few weeks, I’ve noticed his eyes have grown softer when he smiles at me. “Ready to go

show some middle schoolers who are the reigning champs of *Uno*?”

Another small memory resurfaces that I was sure he had forgotten.

“Yeah, but I think it’s more accurate that you’re the reigning *Uno* champ.”

“Too bad there isn’t a family-friendly version of *Cards Against Humanity*. The kids wouldn’t know what hit ‘em if they played against you.”

“Very true.”

With my mind replaying one of my favorite memories of us, we walk into the cafeteria to face our teenage foes.

* * *

The *Uno* table is surrounded by a group of students watching intently as Evan battles a group of twelve to fourteen-year-olds. I smile at how a simple card game can bring kids of different grades together when they would normally avoid each other in the name of social hierarchy.

“Take that Pleabs, draw four,” Evan laughs.

“Woah-”

“Are you kidding?”

Everyone at the table grumbles while the surrounding crowd cheers and laughs while jumping excitedly. I rest my chin in my hand while chuckling to myself before going back to scanning the room to make sure no one is taking advantage of the chaos to get into trouble.

“Max! That is not what furniture is for,” I call to one of the notoriously mischievous sixth

graders who attempts to use the empty chairs and tables as playground equipment.

Max flashes me a guilty grin before sitting down in his seat and taking a drink from his soda while acting like I didn't just catch him. He's a little mischievous but he's a good kid. When I'm positive Max isn't looking I let out a chuckle. He reminds me of what I imagined my future kids with Evan to be like. I shake my head; I do not need to think about that.

“*Uno*,” Evan shouts.

“Look out teach! Draw four!”

“Blocked!” The crowd cheers while Evan stands and puts out his arms, “Bow down to your *Uno* King!”

“Ms. Monroe, why didn't you warn us,” one of the players shouts.

“I did. You responded with, and I quote, *there's no way I'll lose to a dorky English teacher.*”

“Just take comfort that you beat, Ms. Monroe,” Evan teases.

“Whatever,” I huff while tucking some curly strands of hair behind my ear that have escaped from my half-braid.

The bell rings over the intercom and everyone collectively groans before picking up their trays and stacking them before making their way out of the cafeteria. Evan and I waited for every student to leave before cleaning up after ourselves and heading toward our respective classrooms.

“That was fun,” Evan smiles widely.

“Does defeating teenagers really feel that satisfying,” I tease.

Evan playfully elbows my side, “It does. Just like I’m sure it annoys you that you lost to teenagers.”

“Touché,” I concede.

He’s not wrong. It did hurt my pride a little bit to be beaten by a group of teenagers. There’s no doubt that those kids will be hanging their win over my head for a while.

The sound of agitated tapping against the linoleum floor grabs our attention. Nadia is standing in front of us with her arms crossed and her lips pressed tightly into a displeased line.

“Well aren’t we chummy,” she hisses.

I look between Evan and me to see that we’re standing close enough to each other that our arms will occasionally brush against one another. It feels so natural to be close to him again that I didn’t notice. Without hesitation, I take a step to the side while students walk around us with heads turned toward the confrontation.

“Good game, Mr. Stanton,” I nod before hurrying back to the auditorium.

Having an uncomfortable confrontation with my ex-boyfriend and his girlfriend in front of students is not how I wish to spend my planning period - not to mention it’s unprofessional. Besides, I have a ton of work to do.

When I sit at the desk in my office I pull out my laptop and begin working on programs for the show. As my fingers hover over the keys my mind keeps wandering back to Evan. The smile he gave

me in the hallway was the least guarded one yet. And the way he teased me was the same as he did when we were in college.

Could we possibly go back to at least being friends? It would be nice to have him back in my life as more than just a coworker. No. The thought of being friends while watching him date someone else still causes my heart to squeeze till it pops. I've been getting too comfortable, I need to go back to keeping my distance and learn to move on.

A knock interrupts my thoughts. I look over my shoulder to see Ken leaning casually against the door frame while giving me a charming smile.

“Hey, got a minute?”

“Sure,” I close my laptop and turn my swivel chair to face him. “What’s up? Don’t you have class right now?”

“Yeah, but Wilson is taking a few minutes to watch the kids while they do their *Pacer Test*.”

“Oh, okay.” I’m pretty sure Wilson has a class to teach right now as well.

“Are you free tomorrow night?”

Mei was right! It’s scary how she notices all these little details about people. She could tell when the science teacher had been kicked to the couch by his wife by simply noticing the color tie he was wearing. If she can notice all of that then there’s a chance that she’s noticed how Evan and I have been acting around each other recently. I need to do something to get over Evan and fast. The risk of Mei deciding to ask if Evan and I were more than just acquaintances in college is too high. Especially since there is a likelihood of her not believing me if

I try to lie to her. The last thing I want is to be grilled on how well I *actually* knew Evan.

“Why?”

“I’d like to take you out to dinner tomorrow night.”

I open my mouth to say no but then I think about how this is just the distraction I need. Ken is attractive, and he was sweet enough to help me out last week during rehearsal. His flirting is horrendous but it couldn’t hurt to give him a chance. Right? It’s not like I’m using him, I’m simply getting myself back out into the dating world. What better way than with someone interested in me?

“Okay, that would be great.”

Ken breaks out into a full-toothed smile, “Awesome, I’ll pick you up tomorrow at six. Text me your address later. Kay?”

“Sure.”

Ken slaps the wall while making eye contact with me before striding out while I sit there motionless.

I have a date.

Chapter 11

The usual women that attend Zumba class are present; stay-at-home moms and retirees. Roxy eagerly waits by the door to the dance studio at the gym, bouncing on the balls of her feet with a wide smile. She seems to be more excited about my date than I am.

“Okay, tell me everything! How did Hottie Thottie ask you out?”

I walk past her and into the room while nodding and smiling to a few of the ladies.

“He stopped by my office after lunch and asked.”

Roxy frowns at my lack of enthusiasm, “I know you. You didn’t say yes because you simply wanted to go on a date with him.”

“I figured it’s time to get back out there and get over Evan .”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“And this has nothing to do with the fact that he’s dating Baddie Naddie?”

I sigh, “I’m getting too comfortable around Evan, I need to distance myself.”

Roxy nods knowingly, “I see. If you really want to go on this date with Hottie Thottie then you should, but would you like to hear an alternative that I think you’ll like more?”

“What?”

“Just tell Evan to break up with Baddie Naddie and start dating you again.”

I frown at Roxy while staring at her in silence for a few beats. “No.”

“Fine. But wouldn’t this count as using someone?”

I pause before finally answering, “No. I do want to go on a date with Ken

“But you don’t want to go.”

“I do.”

“If you were actually into Hottie Thottie you would be glowing right now. That’s how you were with Evan.”

“Well, I’m not some hopelessly romantic twenty-year-old. I’m a grown woman who is looking at love practically. Now just drop it.”

“Fine,” Roxy frowns as the Zumba teacher gracefully walks in.

Music begins to play loudly from the speakers and the Zumba instructor takes her place at the front of the room. My heart is already racing before I even take a first step.

* * *

My phone buzzes as I check myself in the mirror for the twentieth time today. To say that I’m nervous is an understatement. I haven’t been on a

date in a long time. It also doesn't help that it is now twelve-thirty and there is still no sign of Ken. Am I going to get stood up on my first date in three years?

When my phone buzzes a second time to remind me that I received a text I quickly unlock it and see that Ken has texted me, letting me know he's arrived. Too late to back out now. I exit the bathroom and grab my purse hanging on the coat rack. My father frowns over his plate of leftovers as I head towards the door. Dad and Roxy have both decided to grill me on if I want to go on a date with Ken.

“Caroline, wait for him to come to the door.”

“No one does that anymore Dad.”

“Men still would if you set the expectation.”

I ignore my father's comment and wave to him before closing the door behind me.

Ken is waiting in his black two-door Mustang with rap music blaring from the radio. He turns down the radio when he sees me and leans towards the passenger side of the car to open the door from the inside.

“Hey!”

“Hey.”

My face pulls into a grimace as my feet crunch down the pile of trash on the floor of the car. I close the door behind me and quickly buckle my seat belt as Ken's car lurches sharply as he switches gears and speeds out of my driveway. *Who taught this man how to drive a stick?*

“Sorry I'm late, I overslept.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say while shifting my feet uncomfortably on the pile of trash.

“Are you hungry?”

“Definitely. What’s for dinner?”

“I was thinking we could go to Ricky’s. I know it’s not fancy but I am craving a burger.”

“Sounds good,” I reply with a chipper voice even though I’m not too thrilled.

I know we teachers don’t make a lot of money but I was hoping we’d go somewhere...anywhere that isn’t the greasy dive of Prince Frederick. I’m not asking for anything fancy and I know it sounds ungrateful but it’s just that I didn’t see my first date in a few years to be at Ricky’s. Then again, maybe going to Ricky’s won’t be too bad. I was feeling nervous about going on this date, maybe going to a more casual environment will help me relax.

What won’t help me relax though is Ken’s driving. Whenever Ken switches gears the car stutters and I’m afraid he’ll blow the transmission. As Ken rounds a bend I hold onto the handle above my head for dear life and when he speeds towards a stoplight my foot subconsciously begins to push towards the floor to break. Part of me wants to ask if I can drive.

When Ricky’s sign with the peeling orange paint comes into view I thank God that I’m almost to safety. Never in my life have I felt more excited to see Ricky’s. When Ken finally parks the car he reaches across me to open my door before getting out himself. Upon the door opening, I look down and find a giant puddle in front of me with gasoline creating lazy rainbow swirls.

“Hey, would you mind helping me out, there’s a giant puddle on my side.”

Ken walks around the car and a big smile spreads across his face.

“Woah, that is a huge puddle! I bet you could do one of those frilly ballet jumps across it!”

Is he serious? I look up at him and see that he makes no effort to help me across. While I do have some ballet training I don’t see myself able to perform a Jéte out of the car and across the puddle. However, I don’t want to walk through this puddle and ruin my favorite flats. It looks like doing some sort of an awkward leap out of the car is my only option. I balance on the balls of my feet while holding onto the car door.

One.

Two.

Three.

I leap out of the car and promptly land in the puddle a few centimeters away from the dry pavement. My favorite pink flats take on a muddy hue and soak all the way through while my floral skirt gets splattered with gasoline-tainted rainwater. Ken laughs.

“I thought you were a triple threat?”

Excuse me, I didn’t know leaping out of a car disqualifies me from being a triple threat. I guess I got all of those leading roles in musicals by pure luck!

I reach behind me to shut the car door before finally stepping out of the puddle.

“Leaping out of a car wasn’t covered in ballet,” I grimace.

Ken looks over my splashed outfit with a teasing smile.

“Man, you even dress like a teacher outside of school.”

I look down at my outfit – a white t-shirt tucked into a floral shin-length skirt and some flats – it’s comfortable and cute. At least I think so.

“Umm, thanks?”

I can’t tell if his comment is a compliment or an insult. Regardless of my outfit being ruined – our eating venue and Ken currently dressed in a stained white T-shirt and green basketball shorts that are fraying at the hem – make me look overdressed.

“It’s not bad, it’s cute. You got that good girl thing going on.”

“Oh, okay.”

“And I love good girls, especially when they turn bad.”

I have no response, but suddenly I want to leap back over the puddle and get back into the car I was just thankful to get out of and go home.

“Let’s eat. It’s been a while since I’ve been to Ricky’s.”

“Really? I’m here multiple times a week!”

He is taking the role of slovenly bachelor seriously.

When we walk through the doors we are immediately bombarded with little kids screaming and running around with a long table in the back of the room decorated with balloons and streamers. As I glance around the room I immediately notice

that all of the kids are wearing cone-shaped birthday hats.

“Aw man, there’s a birthday party going on. I wonder if I can sneak some cake.”

Is he serious? Taking cake from a kid’s birthday party? I want to go home. I take a deep breath. No! I’ll see this through, even if things aren’t looking too great I should still give Ken a chance.

We snake our way through the crowd of kids and go to order our food at the front counter of the restaurant.

“Hey by the way, would you mind paying for yourself? I’m a little short on cash at the moment.”

This date keeps getting worse.

“Sure.”

When the cashier rings up Ken’s order his face falls into a frown before nervously looking over at me.

“Umm, could I borrow a couple of bucks from you?”

“How about I pay for the both of us,” I finally decide as I push myself in front of the cashier who watches the interaction. Her expression looks just as pained as I feel.

“Really? Thanks, Sweet Caroline, you’re awesome!”

Again with the stupid song reference.

Ken takes his cup and heads over to the soda machine while I place my order.

“Sooo, this may not be my place but I think it’s time to dump your boyfriend,” the cashier mentions quietly while leaning over the register.

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend. It’s just a date.”

“Definitely the last.”

No kidding. I give the cashier a small smile and grab my cup to get my drink while Ken finds a table. When the number for our order is called I go to retrieve it while Ken talks up one of the young mothers at the birthday party. At this point, I could care less if he tried to flirt with a plant, let alone a young mom. As long as it’s not me I’m happy.

As I lay out the food in front of us Ken takes a few bites and spends half of the meal still chatting up the young blonde mom. She laughs flirtatiously while playfully shoving his shoulder. It doesn’t take long for me to finish my meal and start scrolling through Pinterest on my phone.

“Hey, sorry about that. I just talked us into getting some cake.”

I stuff my phone back in my purse and flash my best fake smile.

“You weren’t kidding about getting a slice of cake.”

“Of course not!”

There’s an awkward silence before Ken decides to pick up the conversation.

“So...what sports do you like?”

“I don’t have one. I was always busy with theater growing up.”

“Really? Nadia is the same way - minus the theater part - she hates sports. She was actually in the math club when she was in school.”

I keep my face neutral but my stomach immediately sinks to my feet. The last thing I

thought I'd hear on this date is a list of fast facts about Nadia.

"Huh," I hum.

The young blonde mom reappears with a single slice of chocolate cake and places it in front of Ken.

"Here you go, enjoy," she says with a wink.

"You're awesome, thank you!"

Ken digs his fork into the cake and cuts out a large bite. He pauses with the large bite of cake poised outside of his gaping mouth and looks at me.

"Would you like some?"

"No thank you, I'm pretty full," I smile while waving my hand.

I have a feeling that slice of cake was never intended to be shared as I catch a glimpse of the mother scowling at me over Ken's shoulder.

"You sure?"

"Yep!"

"Alright then!"

Ken devours the cake within five bites and with each bite he takes, a name and phone number appear, written across the plate. So I'm guessing the mom is single. I take one more glance at the young mother and notice a small yellow-gold band on her left hand. Never mind, definitely not single; looking to have an affair.

"I'll clean things up," I offer while gathering up our trays and trash.

As I throw away our wrappers and place our trays on top of the trashcan I notice Ken

attempting to sneakily snap a picture of the plate with his phone before crumbling up the blue-colored paper plate. I think this date takes the cake for the worst date I have ever been on. Pun intended.

Chapter 12

I don't bother to wait for Ken to open the door for me. All I want is for this date to be over with. This afternoon was a giant mistake. I tiptoe across the puddle in my still-soaked flats and hop into the car. Never in my life have I wanted to go home more badly than I do right now. Ken ducks into the driver's side and puts the key into the ignition before playing some slow jazz from his phone attached to the car stereo by an AUX cord. He puts his arm on the back of my headrest and leans close to me over the center console. I have a feeling I know where he is going with this and I don't like it.

“Hey, I had a great time tonight.”

I'm sure you did. “Yeah.”

“So do you wanna head back to my apartment? Maybe do a little Netflix and Chill?”

I thought I would never hear that term again after college; I was miserably mistaken.

“I have to get back home to my dad. I need to give him his pills.”

“Can you maybe get someone else to do it?”

“I can't, sorry.”

“How about we quickly go back to your place to give him his drugs and then we head back to my place?”

Ken bites hard on his bottom lip in an attempt to look seductive and I come to realize that it seems only Evan can pull off the sexy lip bite. *Dang it!* I need to stop thinking about Evan!

I need to turn him down gently, I have a feeling Ken is the kind of guy that does not take rejection well. Typically I don't like to have this conversation on a first date with someone that I said yes to on a whim, but it will hopefully kill the mood while also convincing Ken to never ask me on another date ever again.

"It's not just my dad."

"Oh...you got an STI or something?"

Never have I ever been provoked to hit someone, but I'm getting really close to smacking this man across the face. I ball my hands into fists and force them to stay at my sides. How is a sexually transmitted infection his first guess?

"No," I respond with fake sweetness, "I don't sleep with people on the first date."

Ken's face falls as he leans back and presses himself against the car door like I actually do have an STI.

"I see, so you're one of those kind of girls."

"Yep, I am."

Whatever that means, but I'm certain I'm not missing out when it comes to Ken.

"And there's no way you'd be willing to bend your rules a little bit?" Ken pauses as his eyes scan my body, "Wait a minute, are you a virgin?"

So what if I am? He still isn't someone I would want to sleep with even if I wasn't. Wait, besides

that, how does this man's brain work? How does he jump from assuming I have an STI to being a virgin within a matter of seconds?

"That's kind of personal," I laugh nervously.

Ken wraps his hand behind my neck and pulls me close till our mouths are a mere centimeter away.

"Don't worry Sweet Caroline. I've slept with plenty of virgins. I'll be very gentle. So what do you say," he asks as he leans in to steal a kiss.

I shove my hands hard against his chest and push him back to the side of the car. This is the worst way someone has ever proposed to have sex with me. Has this ever worked on anyone? I sincerely hope it hasn't or else I might feel a deep sense of disappointment for my gender.

"No."

Ken stares at me in shock before slowly turning to face the steering wheel as he turns off the song. His bottom lip begins to pout as he scrolls through the music library on his phone and puts on something else. Okay, enough is enough. This guy tried to force me to kiss him and when I say no he plays *You Only Call Me When You're Sober* to pout. There is no way I am staying one more second in this car.

I open the car door and slosh my way through the puddle. It doesn't matter if the water is disgusting and I completely ruin my clothes; I need to get as far away from Ken as possible.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I think I should get a ride home. Thanks for the date."

I close the door and hurry across the parking lot. He may tell me “I told you so” when he picks me up, but I’m willing to listen to my dad lecture me on chivalry for the rest of the day than continue this date for another second.

Ken doesn’t chase after me. He revs his engine and then speeds out of the parking lot with his balding tires squealing on the turn. Good riddance. I can see why Nadia broke up with this jerk; he’s a selfish man-child.

My phone buzzes in my purse and I pull it out to see a text from Roxy.

Roxy: How’d the date go with Hottie Thottie?

Me: Horrible.

Roxy: How horrible?

Me: Horrible as in: I’m about to call my dad to pick me up.

Roxy: I’m on my way now. Where are you?

Me: Ricky’s.

Roxy: Oh god! Please tell me that wasn’t where you had your date.

Me:...

Roxy: I’ll be there in ten.

When Roxy pulls into the parking lot I run over to her truck and jump in. She looks me over with a pitying frown before finally saying, “I would offer to buy you a milkshake from Ricky’s, but I have a feeling that wouldn’t be the right call.”

I crack a small laugh in response. While this date was awful the level of awful is almost comical.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to look at Ricky’s the same way ever again.”

Roxy puts her car in drive and drives away with Ricky’s fading in the review mirror.

“Okay, lay it on me. Tell Roxy what happened,” she sighs in an exaggerated Greek accent to sound like the aunt from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

By the time I’ve finished my story Roxy and I have been sitting in my driveway for ten minutes. Roxy is silent, out of what appears to be both rage and shock with the way her face is turning purple and her hands are gripping the steering wheel.

“How is this man real? I’m going to kill him. ”

“I found myself asking the very same thing. However, homicide doesn’t look good for your business.”

Roxy forces herself to take a deep breath, “Okay, I’m sorry I ever suggested you go on a date with that guy.”

“I’m sorry for saying yes in the first place. This is what I get for trying to pretend I was ready to date again.”

“I’m sorry for not trying harder to convince you not to go. Karma bit you in the butt and took out a whole chunk. Crap that must mean something is going to get messed up with my projects this week, Karma won’t forget what I’ve done.” Roxy looks up at the roof of her truck reverently, “I’m so sorry. Have mercy on me.”

We both break out into laughter before settling into a comfortable quiet.

“Hey, I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier.”

Roxy leans her head back against the headrest and turns to look at me, “No I’m sorry. I should have approached you about your date with Hottie Thottie differently.”

“You were right though. Leading up to the date I only felt nervous, not excited. To be honest, I kept thinking about Evan the whole time.”

Roxy looks over at me sadly. “ I know. No guy has ever made you as happy as Evan.”

“And no other guy will probably make me as happy as Evan.” I take a shaky breath while tears start to slide down my face and drip from my chin. “I was so stupid,” I whisper.

Roxy soothingly pats my back, “You did what you thought was best for your family.”

“But what if I made the wrong choice? What if...”

No, I won’t entertain this any longer. I dutifully took care of my parents and gave them everything I had. Besides, I was so busy taking care of them while going through school and working that I wouldn’t have had time to be in a relationship. Giving Evan up was the best thing I could do for both of us in that situation.

“It’s not up to me to tell you if it was the wrong choice or not. But I will tell you that I think what you did was honorable.”

I silently nod while I get my emotions under control.

“Thanks, Roxy. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Roxy sighs worriedly as I climb down from her truck.

I wave goodbye from my front door before I head in. When I close the door behind me, my father is waiting on the couch while watching *I Love Lucy*.

Chapter 13

Dad turns down the T.V., “How was your date?” his sentence falls quiet when he notices my red-rimmed eyes. “Was he a clunker?”

I nod, “Yeah, a real clunker.”

I walk over to my dad. He hums with a nod before turning back to his show while grabbing my hand and giving it a gentle kiss.

“That’s okay. You’ll find the right one.”

“Yeah.”

But I’ve already found the right one. The problem is I let him go and I’ll never have a chance to get him back. I could go on a hundred dates and the guy will never measure up to Evan.

My attention is drawn back to my soaked shoes and splattered skirt. I feel dirty covered in old rainwater and make my way to the bathroom. I take off my skirt and examine it to find stains around the hem and with a few splatter marks that made their way up the skirt. I dab some liquid dish soap I keep under the vanity on the stains and let the skirt fall to the floor with the rest of my clothes. The old nickel knobs are cool in my hand as I turn on the water to fill the claw foot tub.

The warm water feels good against my skin and when the tub has filled I sink into the water and

allow the warmth to relax the muscles I tensed up over the day. I can hear the opening song to *I Love Lucy* from the TV through the closed bathroom door. Slow drops of water drip from the bath faucet. These sounds are comforting. My home is peaceful and nothing is going on and there's nowhere I need to be.

I think back to my ruined flats now sitting by the front door. I could try to clean them, but suede shoes are one thing I've never been able to get clean no matter how hard I try. It makes me sad I'll have to throw them out, they were the ones I wore when Evan and I had our first kiss. I lean back against the side of the tub and close my eyes as memories begin to play. The events leading up to our first kiss are captured in my mind like a film on a movie reel. Every color, word, and sound is still vibrant in every detail.

* * *

The heat from the stage lights and the thunderous applause from the audience fade into the background as the lights in the theater's house fade up to the audience. Standing to applaud in front of his normal seat - center seat in the center aisle of the center row - is Evan, clapping and beaming with a proud smile.

I have to force myself to slow down and not run backstage to change out of my costume. Reminding myself that Evan is just a friend has become a failed mantra since the first time he saw me perform during the spring play last semester. Yet I still chant that we are just friends in my head anyway to try to keep my emotions in check.

When I glance at the clock after changing into my clothes I notice that it's only been about five minutes, I need to take a little more time than that. I take a seat at the makeup station and begin to clean off my makeup. Looking in the mirror at the sweat streaks that melted through my foundation I'm glad I'm taking the time to clean myself up first. Evan may be a friend, but that doesn't mean I don't have to put effort into my appearance.

By the time I've cleaned my face, I look back at the clock and see another five minutes have passed. Ten minutes should be enough time to not look too eager, right? I grab my bag and head towards the lobby.

I scour the crowd talking in clustered groups to find him, but it's hard to locate Evan in this crowd considering how most of the people here tower over me like giants.

“Carrie!”

I look to my left and find Evan huddled against a wall. He waves one arm overhead while the other hides behind his back. I hurriedly swerve through the crowd until I'm able to stand in front of him and bask in the glow of his brightest smile.

“Hey, thanks for coming!”

Evan pulls his arm from behind his back to reveal a beautiful bouquet filled with magnolias and greenery. He hands me the bouquet before wrapping me in a tight hug and lifting me off of my feet. When Evan sets me down I sniff the sweet perfume coming from the magnolias.

These are my favorite flowers, thank you,” I smile while looking up from sniffing the bouquet.

“I know. I figured I’d get you your favorite flowers since tonight is special.”

I hum in confusion, “What’s special about tonight?”

“Well...I was wondering if maybe you and I could-”

“Carrie,” a cast mate calls.

Evan immediately makes eye contact with his shoes while Mariah runs over.

“Hey Mariah, what’s up?”

“You’re going to come over to my apartment with the others to have a celebratory game night, right?”

“Oh, actually...” I hesitate.

“Evan you should come too!”

Evan looks between me and Mariah before answering, “Sure, sounds like fun, thanks!”

“I’ll see you guys in thirty minutes?”

“Yeah, see ya,” I answer quietly. I turn back to Evan, “Sorry, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to. What did you want to ask me?”

“I’ll ask you later. Why don’t we drop off your flowers at your dorm and head over to Mariah’s? That is if you want to go.”

“Yeah, sounds great!” I force myself to sound chipper. While I’d rather have found out what Evan wanted to ask me, I still won’t pass up an opportunity to spend time with him - even if it is with a group.

* * *

We arrive at Mariah's and most of the cast is already packed into the small Baltimore apartment. I welcome the warm air radiating throughout the living room, the walk over to the apartment in the November evening chill made my feet turn into icicles inside of my flats.

"Hey guys, do you want something to drink," Mariah offers while shoving red solo cups into our hands.

"Sure."

"Thanks," Evan says while lifting his cup in a cheers.

I sniff the mystery concoction and pick up a strong scent of vodka overpowering the sweet scent of cranberry juice. Cautiously, I take a sip of the drink and my lips pucker. This drink tastes like it has half a bottle of vodka and a splash of cranberry juice. I take one more sip to be polite before setting my cup down on the kitchen peninsula near me.

Evan whispers in my ear and the skin on my neck prickles in pleasurable bumps, "Good idea, I think you might be black-out drunk if you finish that."

"Shut up," I tease while gently digging my elbow into his side. He's not wrong though, we found out during my twenty-first birthday that I am a lightweight.

The apartment door opens behind us and the rest of the cast files in and gets served drinks as well.

"Alright guys, let's play," Mariah calls out.

We sit in a circle in the living room while Mariah deals out cards for a game of *Uno*. When we all have our cards the game begins.

“I apologize in advance, but I’m going to crush you in *Uno*,” Evan whispers into my ear.

I turn my head towards him and our faces are so close that if I leaned in a couple of inches I could kiss him. My eyes glance down to his lips, they look so soft and inviting. I wonder what it would feel like to kiss them.

“Whoa, no kissing in the *Uno* circle guys,” a cast mate heckles.

Evan and I quickly lean away from each other while staring intensely at our cards as the room fills with laughter.

“Everyone shut up and let’s start the game,” Mariah shouts.

Everyone takes rapid-fire turns around the circle and it doesn’t take long till there’s a cacophony of competitive shouts and despairing wails. And just like Evan promised, he is crushing me in *Uno*. So far it’s between him and Mariah who are the most likely to get to *Uno* first.

“This is rigged,” I protest while shaking my cards.

A few cast mates grumble in agreement as we watch Mariah and Evan battle it out.

“Let’s make a bet for who is going to win. Whoever bets on the loser has to do a double shot,” another cast mate shouts.

A series of hands go up to make note of who everyone is voting for before putting down our

cards to watch Evan and Mariah play against each other.

“You know I don’t do well with shots, so please win,” I beg into Evan’s ear.

Evan glances over his shoulder and gives me a quick wink before immediately getting more aggressive on his turns. He manages to hit Mariah with a draw four just before she can declare *Uno*. It seems Evan has a lot of pick four cards stashed up because he manages to win the game with Mariah holding twelve cards in her hands.

There’s an uproar at the final results followed by several shots of vodka.

“Nice job,” I congratulate Evan.

“Thanks, but I had to win. There was no way I was going to let you suffer through a double shot of vodka.”

“My hero,” I tease as I feel a blush creep up my neck.

“Hey, I brought *Cards Against Humanity*, let’s play,” Julia - a freshman - calls out over the groans from those who took their shots.

I lean over to Evan gently rest my hand on his shoulder and whisper, “You may have beaten me at *Uno*, but I’m going to crush you in *Cards Against Humanity*.”

Evan subconsciously bites his bottom lip and I’m again drawn to his mouth. “Game on, Carrie.”

* * *

Another round of shots is poured while I bask proudly in winning the game.

“Such a dark and dirty sense of humor,” Evan teases.

“Everyone here has a certain sense of humor and I just so happened to capitalize on it,” I shrug.

Evan shakes his head while laughing, “Likely story.”

I check my watch and see that it’s currently past midnight. Realizing the time my body immediately begins to lag as my energy quickly dissipates.

“It’s getting late, let’s get going,” Evan suggests.

“Yeah, sounds good,” I nod.

Evan stands up first and holds out his hands to help me up.

“Mariah, we’re going to head out. Thanks for having us over,” Evan calls.

“Aw already? Alright, see you guys!”

I follow Evan out the door and fold my arms over my chest as I brace against the cold. In my excitement, I forgot to grab my jacket before I left my dorm. Evan unbuttons his pea coat and drapes it over my shivering shoulders.

“Thank you, but won’t you get cold?”

“I’ll be okay,” Evan smiles while wrapping his arm around my shoulders to give me extra warmth.

My body instantly heats at his touch. Once more, pleasurable bumps cover my body while the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

When we return to campus Evan stops in front of the terraced fountain in front of the campus library.

“Mind if we stop here a second?”

“Sure,” I nod.

“So, about what I was going to ask earlier...” he pauses and gives me a sweet smile.

“You’re turning red.”

“Because it’s cold,” I lie.

“No, your face was pink. It turned red as soon as I started talking which means you’re blushing. So that must mean you really like me.”

My stomach leaps into my throat.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I huff before quickly turning away.

Evan is quiet for a moment and I worry that my heart might actually beat out of my chest and run away down the street.

“I’m sorry. I’m putting all of the pressure on you to hide from what I actually want to say.”

I slowly look over my shoulder to see Evan staring nervously down at his feet before finally meeting my gaze.

“What do you *actually* want to say,” I say barely above a whisper.

Evan slowly approaches while his hands fidget at his side.

“That I like you. And that I want to have you all to myself.”

I think my heart has popped out of my chest and is running footloose and fancy-free around campus. My hand reaches to touch my chest; no blood and my heart is still drumming inside of it.

“Are you saying you want me to be your girlfriend?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

It’s my turn to take a moment of silence, is this real?

“I’m sorry, I’m just scared that if I answer I’ll wake up and find all of this to be a dream.”

Evan chuckles and takes another step forward while cupping my face in his hands.

“Say yes, Carrie.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

His hands gently tilt my head up slightly more as his mouth gingerly presses against mine; long and slow. When he finally pulls back I open my eyes to see him smiling contentedly at me, sweet and loving.

“See, it’s not a dream.”

“Can you do that again? I just want to double-check.”

Evan lets out a bright laugh and throws his head back. When he looks back at me he gives me a mischievous grin.

“I’ll kiss you as many times as you want me to.”

The next kiss followed. Then another. And another. And another.

* * *

A loud knock on the door shocks my eyes open.

“Caroline, can you get out? I need to use the bathroom,” my dad calls from the other side.

“Yeah, give me a minute!”

I pull the plug and step out of the bath as I wrap a towel around myself. If only I could live that moment again.

Chapter 14

Out of all of the doctor's appointments, my father has to go to, today is the day we realize that my father misplaced his medical folder that holds all of his notes from his previous appointments. I had to go on a hunt throughout the entire house to find the folder that Dad swore he knew where it was the previous night. Now I'm running behind getting to work.

Regrettably, I had to drive more like Ken than I care to admit, to arrive at a reasonable time for work. I fast walk from the parking lot to the front doors and find Mei anxiously waiting outside of the administration office.

“What's going on?”

Mei looks around to ensure no one is in earshot before finally speaking. My heart hammers against my chest.

Did something happen? Am I in trouble?

“Look, I need to hear it from you because everyone is talking.”

“Talking about what?”

“Your date with Ken on Saturday.”

I immediately feel my blood go cold and my face pale.

“What are people saying?”

“That you were a total priss and that you tactlessly rejected his...nightcap invitation.”

My fists clench at my sides as my nails dig into my palms.

“Is that what Ken said?”

“I don’t know, I heard someone mention that they heard this from Nadia who overheard a conversation about your date between Ken and Wilson. I know she’s not your biggest fan so I figured I’d ask you myself.”

Nadia. Is she still holding a grudge over rehearsal, or is it something more? No, she never misses an opportunity to embarrass me. However, I’m sure her grudge didn’t fail to enable her to use this information about my horrible date as a way to get revenge.

Mei watches me anxiously for a response. How do I even answer this question? The date with Ken was awful but that doesn’t mean I want to air my complaints to the entire faculty.

“I don’t want to add fuel to the fire.”

“Carrie, Nadia has been nothing but nasty to you. If you tell me I can set the story straight.”

“Yeah, and if you realize this then I’m sure others will too and this will all blow over by the end of the day.”

“What about Evan? Don’t you want him to know how she’s treating you?”

“Why would I want him to know that?”

Mei sighs and looks at me like I just asked a stupid question.

“You two seem more familiar with each other than you both let on. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Come on you’ve seen it. Evan will get this adoring look...and I may have caught him checking out your butt a few times.”

A brief spark of hope ignites before I quickly put it out. Mei must be mistaken.

“I’m sure that’s not what is going on. Anyway, what happened on the date is between Ken and I. People can talk all they want. Thanks for trying to help though.”

Even though I’d rather they not talk at all.

Mei gives me an empathetic smile, “It’s a little ironic how the drama teacher isn’t dramatic.”

I give her a small smile in return, “Don’t worry, I’m very dramatic. I just try my best to avoid being dramatic in front of a crowd off-stage.”

“I like you.”

“Wow, thanks,” I respond hesitantly.

Another comment from Mei that feels like it’s coming out of left field. Mei begins to walk away but stops before finally adding.

“By the way, if it means anything, I don’t believe what Nadia said. I don’t doubt the date didn’t go well, Ken and Nadia used to complain about their dates all the time when they were a couple. However, I don’t think it was your fault.”

“Thanks, Mei.”

As I walk towards the teacher’s lounge to drop off my lunch I wonder how I keep ticking off Nadia

and begin to wonder if the Macbeth curse transfers into real life. Have I said Macbeth in a theater recently and didn't realize it? No, I would never be so careless. It's not even raining today so why am I having such bad luck?

When I enter the teacher's lounge people immediately look up and follow my stride with their eyes as I walk across the room. Principal Johnson's advice from middle school immediately comes to mind.

“Do you know what students and teachers have the most in common? Both are avid gossip mongers. Develop thicker skin and prepare for it, because if you're going to be a teacher, expect at least at one point in your career for your coworkers and sometimes even students to feast upon gossip about you.”

She was right, but I was hoping that I wouldn't be subject to it during my first year as a teacher. However, the best way I've learned to deal with gossip is to completely ignore it. The less attention I give it, the faster it will blow over.

“Good morning everyone.”

A few people nod while others just stare at me awkwardly. I again force myself to ignore the silent thoughts about the rumor that seems to be filling all of their heads and place my sandwich in the fridge before fixing myself a cup of much-needed coffee.

As I add cream and several scoops of sugar to my coffee, a set of approaching footsteps catches my attention. I turn around and see that it's Wilson.

“Hey Wilson, what's up?”

He wrings his hands nervously while staring down guiltily at the floor.

“I owe you an apology.”

I lean against the counter while wrapping one of my arms around my abdomen.

“What do you mean?”

He leans closer while glancing over his shoulder nervously. No one makes an indication that they’re listening, but knowing that I’m the headlining story of the day, I don’t doubt that they are probably listening.

“It’s my fault that the rumor about you started.”

“Rumor, what rumor,” I feign ignorantly.

“About your date with Ken. I’m sure Mei already warned you since I saw her talking to you earlier.”

I nod, “I did hear. How is it your fault?”

“Ken was telling me about the date this morning. When he’s frustrated he tends to speak a little too loud. Nadia overheard our conversation and must have told someone else and then someone else must have told someone else... anyway, you get the picture. I should have tried harder to settle him down.”

So Wilson and Mei seem to be on my side, at least I have some allies in all of this.

“I don’t blame you, Wilson, it’s not your fault. You can’t control Ken and Nadia.”

“Yes, but I should have done something.”

“There’s nothing you could have done. It’s alright.”

He pauses before finally nodding.

“Okay. Also, I’m sorry about your date with Ken. He’s really immature.”

I don’t need to be reminded.

“It’s all good. Thanks, Wilson.”

Ken walks out of the room while I silently let out a deep breath. Somehow I feel like I’m still on a date with Ken considering how much I’m having to be reminded of it. I wish I called off of work and took my dad to his doctor’s appointment instead of Mrs. Forbes.

“I’m still so sore from this weekend.”

I glance up at the ceiling and question what I did to make God so mad at me. As if my morning couldn’t be any more frustrating, the person who started spreading this rumor has arrived.

Nadia hoists herself up onto the counter beside me with her skirt riding up her thighs. Today her blouse’s buttons seem to be unbuttoned more than usual allowing any onlooker to get an eyeful of cleavage and a peak of her nude lace bra.

“Nadia,” Evan hisses.

“Don’t be embarrassed, you should be proud of how magical your touch is.”

At that moment I had the sudden urge to regress to a four-year-old and mockingly repeat what she just said. Her obvious good mood is clear, she’s satisfied with the damage she’s done and is now rubbing it in my face.

“We’re still at school,” Evan scolds.

“Hmph,” she grumbles while folding her arms under her breasts to push them up and exaggerate

her cleavage.

What would happen if she just happened to slip off her perch? Could she catch herself while wearing those stilettos?

“Whatever,” Evan huffs.

Evan’s responses are coming out short and irritable, and it seems I’m not the only one who notices. Nadia frowns and promptly hops off of the counter and walks over to the round table sitting in the corner. She takes a seat next to Ken without saying a word. Meanwhile, Evan reaches into the cabinet next to the microwave and pulls out a mug before reaching for the coffee pot.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Evan growls when he realizes that the coffee pot is empty.

I flinch at the sudden outburst and look over at him with concern. He notices my reaction and runs his fingers through the waves in his hair.

“Sorry.”

I look down at my milk-colored coffee and hold it out to Evan.

“Here. I know it has way more sugar than you would like, but you can have mine.”

Evan hesitates before finally taking the mug without argument. “Thanks.”

Nadia returns to Evan’s side and pecks a curt kiss on his cheek.

“Bye, see you later.”

“Yeah, later,” Evan mutters before taking a sip of the coffee.

I look between Nadia and Evan as the awkward tension grows in the air. While I feel guilty to admit

it, I'm glad that what appears to be a couples quarrel has taken the wind out of Nadia's sails.

Evan takes another sip of my coffee and grimaces at the sweetness before turning towards me with a concerned frown.

"I still don't understand how you can drink this. There is more milk and sugar in this than coffee."

"It's simple, I only want a hint of a nutty taste to enhance the creamy, sugary goodness."

"It's like a bunch of melted candy in a cup."

"If you don't like it you can give it back," I tease while holding out my hands for the mug.

Even holds the mug closer to his chest with a feigned hurt expression, "No."

"Then beggars can't be choosers," I conclude.

There's a beat of silence before Evan cautiously steps closer to me.

"So...I heard your date with Ken didn't go well. Are you okay?"

Of course, he's caught wind of the rumor, "Yeah. I'm fine."

Evan lifts a single eyebrow while observing my face, "You sure? The two of you seemed kind of close?"

An amused laugh bubbles in my throat, "I wouldn't exactly say that. Ken only thought I was a pretty face, simple as that."

Evan hums to himself and takes another drink. After swallowing, he turns back to me and opens his mouth just as the bell rings to announce that it is time for the students to enter the school building.

“I’ll see you later. Thanks again for the sugar rush,” Evan says while lifting the mug.

“You should know what you were getting with drinking my coffee,” I respond quietly.

Evan pauses at my comment and a slight smile forms at the corner of his mouth before finally walking away.

It looked like Evan was about to say something before he got interrupted. I wonder what it was about. Whatever Evan had to say was probably about work, not anything related to us. I need to stop hoping that he’ll reveal that he still secretly misses me. After all, he has Nadia.

I sigh and grab my bags, if there was more time I would’ve made another pot of coffee before class. It looks like I’ll have to survive without caffeine until lunch.

Chapter 15

When I return to the teacher's lounge for lunch a majority of the teachers not on lunch duty are already here. Just like this morning the room goes eerily quiet before others start to whisper behind their hands. I frown as I march over to the fridge to get my lunch; can't people have the tact to at least gossip about me behind my back?

I consider skipping my afternoon coffee - but, with the stress that I'm feeling between the rumor mill, directing a musical, and the fact that my dad still hasn't called me after his doctor's appointment this morning - I need a boost of energy. I glance over my shoulder and see Nadia and Evan walking into the teacher's lounge - hand in hand - as usual. Nadia smiles brightly up at Evan; looks like she's back to being in a good mood. Begrudgingly I pull a mug out of the cabinet and begin to pour the coffee.

I need this day to be over. When I get home I will definitely take some time to sit in the grove and then indulge in a nice bubble bath.

"Oh Evan, stop you're so bad," Nadia giggles.

Can I have a moment of peace for one moment? I have to bite back my complaint of her endless flirting, I will not make a scene. I glance around the room to see if Mei is here but it seems I've missed her. If she were here she would make fun of Nadia

and knock her off her high horse. Oh well, I won't have to deal with her for much longer since I'll be heading off to lunch duty with Evan as soon as I turn my black coffee into a creamy white.

Evan doesn't respond, he simply reaches for a cup of microwave ramen. I glance at the flavor on the cup of ramen and a small smile spreads across my lips. The flavor is labeled as hot and spicy, his favorite.

Nadia hoists herself up onto the counter and crosses her legs, hiking her navy blue skirt up more in the process. I swear she even flashed the whole room the thong she is wearing underneath.

"You know Evan, aren't you glad that you're dating a real woman?"

I can feel my pulse spike upon Nadia's question.

"I'm not sure what you mean?"

"You get to date a woman who isn't afraid of intimacy. Only little girls make a man wait."

"Nadia-"

I interrupt Evan by slamming my hands down on the counter, grabbing everyone's attention. Since the very beginning I have ignored and turned the other cheek, however, today my patience is exhausted. Forget about being nice and not causing a fuss! If Nadia wants to be petty then I can be just as petty. Let's see how she likes the taste of her own medicine.

Ladies and gentlemen welcome to the show.

"You know what Nadia, I am sick of-"

My cell phone vibrates on the counter. I glance over and see it's Mrs. Forbes calling. That's

strange, normally Dad calls me to let me know how his appointment went. Did something happen? My wave of vengeance instantly comes to a halt and I somehow find the composure that I lost. Something is wrong.

“What? What do you have to say, Carolyn,” Nadia jeers.

I grab my phone, “You know what Nadia, I’m feeling a little sick. Could you cover lunch duty for me today,” I respond quietly while choosing to ignore her pronouncing my name wrong.

A sickeningly sweet smile quirks up her lips while a glint of victory sparkles in her eyes.

“Of course I can! Let’s go, Evan.”

Evan doesn’t follow after Nadia, he simply stands there looking towards me with a soft frown.

“Hold on Nadia.” Evan leans closer to me, “I’m sorry, is-”

“Excuse me,” I brush by Evan and hurry outside.

My thumb slides across the screen to answer the call as soon as I step outside the school. I huddle close to the building to ward off the cold gusts of wind carrying fallen brown leaves in its current.

“Hi, Mrs. Forbes.”

“Hey Carrie, is now a good time?”

“Yeah. How was Dad’s appointment, is everything okay?”

Mrs. Forbes goes over the typical run-down my father would give me; one medication is going to

replace another while the dosage of another is increased or reduced.

“Sounds good. Thank you so much for taking him Mrs. Forbes, I really appreciate it.”

“It’s not a problem.”

The silence on the other end of the line hangs anxiously. Suspense builds a tightening knot in my chest.

“Is there something else that the doctor said?”

Mrs. Forbes sighs, “Are you sure you want to hear about this over the phone?”

Well, now I have to know, “What is it? Is Dad okay?”

“Your father’s chemo results came back earlier than expected. The chemo had very little effect and the cancer has cropped up in new places and returned to the others that were clean on the last scan.”

I lean against the brick wall for support as my lungs struggle for air. The round of chemotreatment before this last one showed promise. Why did his cancer all of a sudden get so aggressive? There has to be some mistake.

“Is the doctor sure,” I ask as my voice begins to tremble.

“He is, unfortunately.” I fight to keep my emotions under control as Mrs. Forbes continues, “The doctor said that at this point he doesn’t believe your dad should do another round of chemo. It was recommended that end-of-life care should be the focus and that your dad might be more comfortable if he gets hospice care.”

Dad's cancer hasn't improved...he's going to die slowly and painfully as Mom did. There's no way that we can afford hospice care, I'll have to do this all on my own. Can I care for him like I did Mom? Can I even handle watching him die like Mom did? Why is this happening?

"Carrie, are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just processing."

"It's a lot to take in." Another silent pause. "Is there anything else I can do for you? Maybe drop off some dinner tonight?"

"Oh, no. We'll be okay, thank you."

"Alright. If you need anything you know where to find me."

"Yeah, thanks again. Bye."

My hands fall to my side. I don't know if I can continue working today after getting this news on top of everything that has happened today. A racking sob builds in my chest and I immediately cover my mouth to muffle the sound. I want this day to be over, or even better a nightmare. I want to curl up in a ball and disappear. I want to go home. I want my mom to pet my hair and tell me everything will be okay.

Loud laughter immediately echoes from inside the school as lunch period comes to a close. I still have a job to do and the show can't afford to have a canceled rehearsal. I take a deep shaky breath and remind myself I only have one more class left and then rehearsal. Dad will probably want time alone at home to process the news. That's probably why he asked Mrs. Forbes to call me in the first place.

The show must go on. I must go on. My students need me and my dad needs me.

I take a few more minutes to steady myself and get the tears to stop. I probably look awful but lunch is over and I need to prepare for class and rehearsal. My mind creates the Carrie I need to be - confident, controlled, and peaceful - and executes it. I allow the character to take over so that I can simply run on autopilot. One of the greatest skills acting has afforded me is being able to fake it till I make it when it matters most.

When I return to the teacher's lounge, Nadia is nowhere to be found, but Evan is the last teacher remaining in the room. Evan looks up at me apologetically before frowning in concern. The hurt and scared Carrie hiding under my character bubbles up and my chest begins to ache. My body begins to sway, wanting to collapse into his arms and cry into his broad chest. I don't want to face this news alone.

Confident, controlled, peaceful - let it take over - the character returns and my face stays in a neutral expression. I can handle this on my own. If I did it for Mom then I can do it for Dad too. All I need to do is take it one moment at a time.

I remember my coffee sitting idly on the counter, it has to be cold by now. Thankfully, it's currently my planning period, so I have time to warm it up. I gently place my mug in the microwave and jab my finger into the reheat button.

My back is turned to Evan and I don't make an effort to acknowledge that he is still here. Unfortunately, the sound of Evan's chair scooting across the room and his approaching footsteps tell

me that he isn't going to ignore me. I keep my eyes focused on the numbers counting down. Maybe if I continue to ignore Evan, he'll take the hint and leave. Evan silently stands next to me. So much for him leaving.

“Hey, is everything okay,” he asks quietly.

I give him my best fake smile, “Yep, everything is fine.”

“Look, about what Nadia said-”

“Don't worry about it.” The microwave beeps to announce that my coffee is finished. I open the door and pull out my mug, “Excuse me, I have a lot to do for my planning period.”

“Caroline,” Evan calls after me, but I simply wave without looking back.

If I look at him again, I'm afraid I'll break character again.

Chapter 16

When the last student waved goodbye before running out of the theater I let out a tired sigh. Keeping back the racing worries with the occasional tears that stung my eyes had been exhausting. I found myself struggling to focus while running rehearsal. The cast managed to work on everything I had planned, but the stage crew needed a little more guidance than I initially planned. Oh well, anything that needed to be done during rehearsal for today can be made up tomorrow.

I regret not taking up Mrs. Forbes's offer for her to cook us dinner tonight, I guess I could always splurge and order takeout. Dad would probably like that.

The sky is dark with looming ominous clouds blowing in. I don't recall the weather report calling for a storm this evening. The parking lot is mostly empty with a few cars staggered about randomly. A clap of thunder echoes loudly. Just my luck, a freak fall thunderstorm, how is that even possible it was cold all day. I pick up the pace and hurry to my car, I don't want to be caught outside in a downpour.

“Caroline!”

For the love of all that is good, not now! Can this day just end?

I glance over my shoulder to see Evan jogging across the parking lot to catch up with me. A gust of wind pushes back the strands from his stubborn cowlick while his forest green tie flies over his shoulder. His exposed, forearms flex as his hands ball into fists.

It's almost as if I'm in a romantic drama where the handsome male interest chases after the girl to confess how much he loves her. Then he sweeps her up into his arms and draws her in for a deep passionate kiss as the rain begins to pour and they get soaked through their clothes. But in this drama, I'm not the love interest, I'm just the pesky ex that reappears to cause conflict between the actual couple.

“Evan?”

“I'm glad I caught you,” Evan's broad chest rises and falls quickly. “Look, can we talk for a moment?”

“Sure,” I agree.

The sooner I let him say what he needs to, the sooner I can leave. I turn my back to Evan as I unlock my car and pop my trunk.

“So - here let me help you with that -” he takes my bag that I was shrugging off my shoulder and places it gently in the trunk, “I'm sorry about what Nadia said to you earlier. I'm also sorry that she seemed to be the source of that rumor about you. I didn't think she would do something like that.”

Is he really that blind to her passive aggressiveness?

“Don't worry about it, I was having a bad day. I'm sure she didn't mean any harm.”

I'm sure he could pick up on my obvious lie, but I'm not about to say that it ticked me off that she was flaunting their relationship in my face while also claiming that I'm juvenile for not wanting to have sex with a man-child. Her passing around the rumor, however, was no surprise. Whether she was the first or the twentieth one to repeat the rumor, she would have done it regardless out of pure spite.

"Is that all," I ask while reaching for my driver's side door.

Evan races to the front and quickly gets the door for me. Why does he have to do all the chivalrous things he used to do for me? It reminds me of how much I still love him, and I hate it. Why do all these little gestures have to make my heart flutter and ache when I'm nothing to him?

"Caroline, I know it bothered you. It was obvious that you were upset, and when you came back from outside you looked like you had been crying."

"I was not," I argue before ducking into my car.

"You're a great actress but a horrible liar."

"And your persistence is unwarranted. Now if you'll excuse me."

I slam my door shut, jab the key into the ignition, and turn the key. The car won't turn over, it just grumbles back at me in protest. Did the battery die again? Roxy replaced it last month, there's no way the battery has already gone bad. I turn the key over and over but nothing happens. I slam my fist against the side of the steering wheel before resting my head against it in defeat. As soon as I can afford a new car, I'm going to joyfully sell this piece of junk.

As I force myself to take a deep breath something catches my eye on the turn signal. I look up and see that I left my headlights on, in my rush to get to school I must've forgotten to turn them off.

A knock on my driver-side window startles me. I jump in my seat and look over to discover Evan leaning against my car with a sympathetic smile.

“Need a jump?”

I crank the window down, “No it's fine. I'll just call Roxy, you should get home.”

I'm sure Nadia is waiting for him all laid out on his bed in the lacy bra and thong she was showing off to everyone.

Evan groans, “Will you stop being so difficult and just let me help you? I'm parked right over there,” he points to the gray SUV parked across from me.

“The day I stop being difficult is the day I die,” I grumble while pulling out my phone.

I press the home button to find that not only has my car battery died, but so has my phone. The rain has already begun to curse me before it even starts. Evan leans against my car and gives me a mischievous smile before pulling his phone out of his pants pocket.

“Do you want me to call Roxy for you? I still have her number.”

I frown, he has to be bluffing, “I highly doubt that.”

Evan quickly unlocks his phone and taps the screen before turning the phone back to me to show Roxy's number is still saved in his contact

list. I purse my lips - I would normally be surprised that he kept anything related to me - but right now I'm annoyed. However, I'm not losing to him.

“So would you like me to call her?”

“No. I can handle this by myself.”

I scan the parking lot through my windshield. Everyone is gone except for Ken. There is no way I am asking for a jump from Ken.

“Ken won't be able to help you. He doesn't know how to jump a car.”

“I wasn't going to ask him anyway,” I pout.

“Then how do you plan to get home? Walk or hitchhike?”

“How I get home is none of your concern.”

Evan groans as he leans his head against his forearm resting on my car. I'll admit that I may be acting immature and a little stubborn, but this is the hill I've climbed and I currently intend to die on it.

“Please, just let me help you.”

“No, now-”

A giant clap of thunder interrupts my sentence. Evan and I look up towards the sky as a torrential downpour mixed with hail begins to descend from the sky.

“Crap,” Evan swears before running around to the passenger side of my car and hopping in while I frantically crank my window back up.

I look over to Evan as he pushes his hair out of his eyes. His hair is already drenched and his white button-down shirt is soaked through in some places - clinging to his toned body.

“Why did you jump in my car,” I huff while forcing my eyes away from where I was ogling his body and banishing all lewd fantasies from my mind.

“It’s raining!”

The rain pelts loudly against my car while water runs heavily down the windshield, making it appear like we’re going through a car wash on the rinse cycle. Through the downpour, I can see tiny chips of hail bounce off the hood of my car.

“And your car is right over there,” I point.

“Yeah, but I’m not going to let you drive away from me when you’re still angry,” he responds so quietly I almost don’t hear him over the pelting rain and hail.

I sigh as I cross my arms over the steering wheel and rest my head against them.

“Fine. You win.”

This is just my luck. A horrible day ends with being trapped in my dead car with my ex-boyfriend whom I’m still hopelessly in love with. I hate the rain.

We’re silent for a few seconds. I’m not willing to start the conversation, if Evan wants to talk then he can start.

Chapter 17

I keep my head down as Evan awkwardly clears his throat, “Look, what Nadia said wasn’t right. On top of that she shouldn’t have been contributing to your embarrassment over the rumor going around about you today.”

“Ugh,” I groan, “Don’t remind me about that stupid rumor. I turned down a guy for his invitation to, *Netflix and chill* - his words not mine - because that was the worst date I’d ever been on. He made me fear for my life with his driving nor could he properly drive a stick. Then he decided to park by the largest puddle known to man and asked me to do a *frilly ballet jump* - again his words, not mine - across it which ruined my favorite shoes. When we finally got inside for our date - which was at Ricky’s by the way - he asked me to pay for myself. Then realized he didn’t even have enough money to pay for his meal so I ended up paying for the both of us.

“During the date, he proceeded to flirt with a married mother to get a slice of birthday cake which had said mother’s phone number written on the plate. Once the date was finally over he tried to force me to kiss him after he asked me to sleep with him. Yet somehow I’m the uppity priss.”

My knuckles turn white as I clench the tan steering wheel. Today has been one giant mess and

the last person I expected to be complaining about it to is Evan.

“Are you serious?”

I lift my head at Evan’s tone; his voice has gone dark and gravelly. His expression darkens and his face turns into a furious frown. I find myself hesitating to answer his question.

“Yes,” I squeak.

“He didn’t hurt you did he?”

“No,” I stutter.

“Good,” Evan sighs. “Wait here, I’ll be back.”

Evan moves to get out of my car. I quickly grab the sleeve of his shirt to force him to stay in his seat.

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“No, if I have to be honest then you do too.”

Evan groans before finally admitting, “I’m just going to make sure Ken knows to never force himself on someone.”

“Oh my gosh,” I groan, “he stopped trying to kiss me as soon as I shoved him and said no. I don’t need you to go defend my honor. I took care of it.”

Evan falls silent before finally saying, “You’re sure you’re alright?”

“I am.”

Evan settles back into his seat, “Alright, but if he ever bothers you again, tell me.”

“Sure.”

As if I'd actually run to my ex-boyfriend to protect me.

"I can't believe you went out on a date with him," he huffs.

"And I can't believe you're dating Nadia," I blurt before I can swallow back the words. I immediately turn my gaze to my hands on the steering wheel. "Sorry, forget I said that. I'm sure she's sweet," I cover quickly.

"Not anymore. After how she treated you I broke things off."

"Oh, I'm sorry." And I do feel sorry; just because I didn't like Nadia and Evan dating doesn't mean I wanted to come between them.

"I'm not torn up about it." I turn my head to look over at Evan and he's giving me a relaxed smile. "Though she did make a bit of a scene over it so I'm sure we'll be the hot gossip topic tomorrow."

"That's going to be rough."

"Not really, I'm sure once Mei hears about my breakup she'll throw a party. So in the end everything will work out."

"I'm in awe at how unbothered you are about all of this," I bite.

"I'm not crazy about people talking about me but it'll blow over soon enough. Nadia and I weren't too serious so there's no harm done." His lips quirked up into a crooked smile, "So you were bothered by what Nadia said?"

I cross my arms with a frown, "Yes, it bothered me to claim that I'm not a real woman because I didn't sleep with Ken on our date. Just because she

wants everyone to know that she screwed you every night doesn't mean..."

I force myself to stop. If I keep talking I'll go down a conversation rabbit hole that I have no intention of entering.

"That's not what she meant-"

My hands tightly grip the steering wheel,

"What else could she have possibly meant? That you were dating a human being instead of a silicon sex doll?"

Evan is quiet for a moment, clearly still coming to terms that he dated the faculty's resident mean girl.

"You're right, she did mean it that way. And I'm sorry that she has been so vocal about...you know... I tried to get her to calm down with that."

I nod and continue to watch the rainwater cascade down the windshield. This storm looks like it's going to take its sweet time blowing through. I wish it would move faster. Knowing that Evan broke up with Nadia because of me is giving me too many mixed emotions.

"Did Nadia make you cry with what she said?"

"No."

"Okay, then what did?"

I take a deep breath and slowly breathe out as tears immediately sting my eyes. Should I tell him? Evan would probably just keep guessing until I got annoyed and told him. I'm already annoyed that we were talking so much about his ex-girlfriend; playing twenty questions right now doesn't sound pleasant.

Let's just get this over with.

“My dad went to the doctor’s this morning and found out there’s nothing more they can do for his cancer. The doctor is recommending he go into hospice care.” My voice cracks as I say the words that have been repeating in my head all afternoon.

I go back to hiding my face in my arms and slow down my breathing to keep myself together but it doesn’t work. Against my will, tears boil over and my body begins to shake as I fight to hold in the wails building up in my throat.

It has been hard taking care of my parents by myself for these past two years, but I would never wish to see him suffer and waste away as my mom did. I don’t want to watch that process again. I don’t know if I can handle watching that process again.

I can’t.

I can’t.

I can’t do this again...

Evan’s hand falls gently on the back of my head; I look over at him in surprise. His eyes are soft and his touch lingers against my hair. This is the same way he looked at me when I learned that Mom’s cancer had spread out of control.

I want to fall against his chest and cry into his shirt so badly that I have to force my body to lean away. Evan’s hand slides to the back of my neck and he gently pushes me forward. It’s as if he knew what I was thinking. My head lands into the crook of his neck and my nose is filled with his familiar cologne; lemongrass mixed with cedar. He doesn’t say anything, he just holds me gently in place

while his other hand slides down my arm to take my hand and hold it against his chest.

I should push him away from me and force him out of my car. Yell at him to not hold me like this because I can't handle going back to not being anything to him anymore. That I don't deserve to have him hold me like this or show me an ounce of empathy and comfort. Right now though, I let myself give in to his embrace.

I turn my face into his neck and tighten my hold on his hand that's holding mine while the other grips his damp shirt, not caring that it gets me wet in the process. I press myself as firmly as I can against him while the center console digs painfully into my side. The wails that were building up in my throat finally escape and are slightly muffled by Evan's neck. His hand on the back of my neck soothingly pets my hair before his fingers gently rake through my curls.

The feeling of his touch is so familiar and comforting, I never thought I would ever feel it again. I cling to him desperately, not wanting to let go of him. For right now I allow myself to believe he's mine again. In the back of my mind, however, the muffled thought that I'm a horrible person for indulging myself in Evan's comfort rings on repeat.

"I got you. I'm here," he whispers into my hair.

That sends a fresh flood of tears to blend with the ones I was already shedding over my father. I want to beg for him to take me back. To apologize for not trying to work things out so that we could have still been together while I was caring for my parents. Finally admit to him that letting him go is the biggest regret of my life and that I still love

him just as much - no, I love him even more than I did almost two years ago. I want him so bad that it hurts. It hurts to know that I no longer make him happy.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Shhh. Don’t you dare apologize.”

“I shouldn’t-”

“Don’t argue with me, Carrie.”

Carrie. It still sounds so beautiful and intimate when he says it.

“Okay.”

Evan tilts his head down till his face is buried into the top of my head while his fingers tangle into a fist in my hair. His hold on me tightens to match mine. I wonder why his touch feels almost as desperate as mine. Could it be that he misses me as much as I do him? No, I can’t let myself even continue to entertain that idea. He has moved on.

“How is your mom taking the news,” he finally asks.

“Mom passed away two summers ago.”

Evan stiffens and then pulls away slightly to look at my face. I look down to try to hide my tear and snot-ridden face but he takes his hand under my chin and tilts it up to look at him.

His face is so close to mine. My eyes flit down to his lips and if I leaned just a few inches closer I could finally kiss him again. Do his lips still taste the same?

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers gently. “Things must have been rough for you.”

“You have no idea,” I finally admit.

Sunlight bursts through the windshield from a large pocket of clouds. We both wince at the sudden light and notice that the rain has finally stopped. I find myself now wishing that the storm hadn't passed as quickly as I previously wished. Couldn't it have rained a little longer so that I could have Evan to myself for a few more moments?

Evan turns back to me as he fishes for something in his pants pocket. He pulls out a tissue and begins cleaning my face.

“Look at that, the rain has finally stopped. Let's jump your battery, and if that doesn't work I'll give you a ride home.”

I simply nod and take the tissue from him once he's done and reluctantly pull myself out of his arms.

“I'm sorry ol' Bessie, this time it's my fault,” I apologize to the car as I remember how a few minutes ago I had vividly imagined scrapping her.

Evan opens my door and holds out his hand to help me out.

“Do you have any idea why your battery died?”

“Yes,” I sigh in embarrassment, “I forgot to turn my headlights off this morning because I was running late.”

A muffled chuckle hides behind his closed lips.

“What?”

“You're just so meticulous. To think you'd forget to turn off your headlights is kind of amusing.”

“Ha ha,” I laugh sarcastically.

“Wait here while I get things set up.”

I lean against the side of my car and watch as Evan gets to work on jumping my car. When the engine turns over I find myself feeling disappointed that I’ll be driving myself home.

“There we go. Good as...” Evan pauses as he eyes my car, clearly remembering its reputation, “It’s now as functional as it’s going to get.”

“Thanks.”

Evan holds my door open and waits for me to get inside and buckle my seat belt.

“Get home safe,” he smiles.

“I will, thank you.” As he begins to close the door I hesitantly call, “Evan?” I need to know if calling me by my nickname was a fluke.

His full lips slowly turn up into a smile. It’s *the* smile. The one that feels like warm and comforting summer sunshine.

“Yes, Carrie?”

It wasn’t a fluke. At least not for this moment.

“Thank you. Thank you for...you know...”

“Sure thing. I’m glad I was here for you.”

We’re both silent for a few seconds, smiling at each other like idiots. I want to hold on, but my time is up. We have to leave this little bubble that was created. I have to go back home to my dad and figure out what to do.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” he winks before shutting my door and walking back to his car.

My car suddenly feels empty and I'm even more tired than I was before. The weight on my shoulders however feels slightly lighter. Evan may not be mine, but at least things finally don't have any twinge of awkwardness. For now, that's good enough.

Chapter 18

It's quiet behind the door when I go to unlock it. Normally I can hear the TV blaring through the front door, something must be wrong. My mouth instantly goes dry and I frantically unlock the door, afraid of what I'll find behind it.

The living room is dim with light from a single floor lamp casting a small yellow glow from the corner of the living room. My father is sitting on the couch holding a framed picture of my mother, totally still. The TV is off and the curtains are closed, covering the two large windows behind the TV.

“Dad?”

My father slowly looks up from the picture and I release a held breath. He's alive.

“Why are you home so late?”

I shut the door behind me and shrug my bags off my shoulder.

“I'm sorry, I was having car problems and my phone died.”

Dad just nods and goes back to staring listlessly forward.

There's a fat white folder sitting on the small entry table by the door. When I move closer I read *Monarch Hospice Center*, with an image of an elderly

patient smiling up at an equally happy-looking nurse. Happy expressions seem out of place for a hospice center. I open the folder and quickly glance over the papers inside. On the first page, the doctor circled the financial information that states Dad would qualify for paid medical assistance due to his brief military service during the Vietnam War. The following pages go over the in-patient and out-patient information such as standard care, available resources, activities for residents during their stay, medical staff, and procedures for when the patient has passed away.

This is nice. To be honest this care seems a lot better than what I was able to give Mom at the end of her life. It's not to say I didn't do the best I could, but with everything that was going on at the time it wasn't always possible to give mom more of the intensive care that she needed towards the end.

A thought flits across my mind, I may not be doing a million things at once this time around but will I be able to give Dad the care he needs? Dad is already high maintenance, he's only going to require more care and attention as time goes on. I also don't have the schedule flexibility like I did while I was in college. In mom's final weeks, I had to take off work and school because she needed round-the-clock care. I can't take weeks off of work right now. How am I going to take care of him? Mrs. Forbes has her own family to take care of, so I can't ask her to help out more.

We'll have to request in-home care. Considering how we are on better insurance and Dad qualifies for paid medical assistance it is now a viable option. I know Dad is apprehensive about strangers but if he wants to stay home that might

be the best option. It's a good thing we have better insurance now.

"Caroline."

My head snaps up to my father and I slowly walk towards the couch and sit next to him with the packet. I wait expectantly, allowing my father to speak first. His eyes are glassy and red-rimmed. The last time I saw him look like this was the weeks before Mom died and the next few months following her death.

"Mrs. Forbes called you about the news?"

"She did."

Dad nods, "The doctor says that I have 9 months left at best."

Fresh tears well in my eyes and quickly begin to stream down my cheeks. "What do you want to do Dad?"

"I want to die at home, like Ruth."

I figured as much.

"Okay. Then let's discuss how to get you the proper care you need while you're here at home."

"Can't Mrs. Forbes or Angelica care for me while you're at work?"

I shake my head, "Mrs. Forbes is busy with her kids and Mrs. Soto has her own responsibilities. If you want to stay home we are going to have to have nurses come in to help out."

My father's gaze slides away from mine and looks down at the wedding picture of my mother in his hands. His expression says it all, he's sad that he'll die soon but he's excited to be reunited with my mother. Even if it means leaving me behind.

“Daddy?”

My father returns his gaze to me and his eyes brighten slightly, “You haven’t called me that since you were eight.”

“Are you ready to go see Mom, or do you want to make another appointment with the doctor to see if he’d consider trying chemo or radiation again to try to lengthen your life?”

His eyes well up with tears that slowly brim over, “I want to see my Ruth.”

My lips tremble and I can only nod at his answer. Dad wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me to lean on his while his other hand fiercely clings to mine. We both begin to cry.

I look back on my dad’s life. He was drafted at the end of the Vietnam War, and when he came home he married my mother - his high school sweetheart. After they were married he was a fisherman for a local fishing company. He saved up money and bought this tiny two-bedroom house. Then, after years of trying, he and my mother had me at forty-two. We didn’t have a lot of money, but he surprised my mother with gifts and flowers now and then. He always got the door for her and held her hand. He pushed me to work hard. He didn’t care that I didn’t like fishing or that I didn’t want to become a doctor or lawyer, he just asked that whatever I chose to do I worked my hardest.

“I know that boy you went on a date with was a clunker, but do you think he’d be willing to marry you so I can see you get married before I die,” Dad finally says.

A breathy laugh manages to slip past my grief, “Sorry Daddy, it was so bad that I wouldn’t stand

being married to him briefly before filing for divorce.”

Dad turns to look at my face. “How bad are we talking?”

“He wouldn’t help me over a puddle.”

My father frowns, “Oh no, definitely not him then. What about Evan?”

“I don’t think it would be fair to ask that of him.”

Dad sighs, “I know you gave up a lot to take care of me and your mother, Caroline. It wasn’t fair to you. I’m sorry that I’m acknowledging it now, but I know you’re mother had put the idea in your head to break up with Evan to have more time to take care of us. I shouldn’t have let you do it, but I could never tell your mother no. When she made you promise to take care of me I couldn’t tell her no then either. I figured after we adjusted a little better to your mother being gone I would see about getting some extra help so that you wouldn’t have to do as much...well the way you took care of everything reminded me of your mother and I couldn’t bring myself to...”

His sentence drops off and I see his eyes widen and fresh tears brim in his eyes as the truth hangs heavily in the air. We never talked about Mom asking me to break up with Evan to take care of them. We never talked about how I fought with her on it until I finally gave in.

“Dad, I made a promise to Mom that I would take care of you. All the sacrifices I made were because I love the both of you.”

Dad shakes his head, “A lot of the sacrifices you made you shouldn’t have had to do.”

It's too late now though, we both made our choices back then and now live with the consequences. Questioning if we made the right choice would be too overwhelming and crushing for him to bear.

"I still did them."

"Caroline, I need you to do something for me."

"What is it, dad?"

"For the last few months that I have left, I want to see you be happy. Do what makes you happy so I know you'll be able to live normally after I'm gone. Maybe even seeing if you can get that man back and get married before I die."

I shake my head, "Don't worry about it dad, I can focus on that after...all of this."

Dad fixes his face in a stern frown and points his finger, "No. You need to start living your life for yourself. Do not deny a dying man's request."

He's already playing the dying man card.

Can I do it though? Start doing what I want to do without worrying about taking care of him? What exactly do I want to do with the time I would have not taken care of Dad? It wasn't that long ago that I started taking care of both of my parents but that life I had before where I was solely focused on my goals and desires is gone. I did achieve my biggest goal, becoming a drama teacher, but what else? Looking back my other dream was to marry Evan and start a family.

I want to get married, but even now I can't picture myself marrying anyone else besides Evan. I am pretty much living the life I pictured professionally, that should be enough. It has to be

enough. Other than marriage and family, I didn't exactly fantasize about my future personal life very often.

"You barely go out with Roxanna, why don't you spend more time with her?"

"I would like to, but Roxy and I are only able to meet in the evenings and I don't like to leave you home alone at night."

My dad frowns, "It's not like you're going out every night, I can manage."

I would like to hang out more with Roxy, I hate neglecting her as much as I do.

"Okay, I'll see when she's free."

Dad nods and points his thumb over his shoulder, "Diane left some dinner for us in the kitchen. It's in the oven keeping warm."

"That sounds great."

Thank you Mrs. Forbes for not listening to me and dropping off food for us.

Chapter 19

The old ladies at the gym have way more energy than I do. It seems like every few minutes a yawn forces its way out of my mouth. I'm so tired that I swear I can still hear my creaky old bed calling to me, inviting me back into the comfort of its covers.

My bed is a convincing temptress; I woke up late this morning which forced me to forgo my morning coffee. Now I'm paying the price. I feel like I could fall asleep standing up. Hopefully, Hell week will pass quickly and I can spend all of next Sunday in my pajamas once the show closes on Saturday.

Roxy gives me an empathetic smile as she stretches her arms behind her head. "You sure you don't want to go home and get a little more sleep before rehearsal?"

I shake my head, "Even if I tried to take a nap at home I wouldn't be able to get much sleep. Dad's nurse is a chatterbox."

"I love Wacko Wanda, she tells the best stories," Roxy sighs as she stares off into the distance.

I can't help but laugh, Wacko Wanda - as Roxy has affectionately named her - became my dad's in-home hospice nurse. Wanda cares for Dad during the day and then leaves after dinner.

Several times I have come home to Wanda prepared to tell me a tale about a patient's psychedelic delusions during her time at nursing school or how a handsome EMT swept her off her feet when she was younger. Her tales are quite entertaining, and sometimes a little raunchy.

I wish we could have a nurse from hospice come to stay with Dad in the evening within a few months, but insurance denied our request. At least Wanda agreed to come to our house at night during emergencies or if I suspect Dad is about to pass away.

"Yeah she's great, but I'd rather not have her try to tell me a bedtime story."

"Fair enough. I would let you sleep at my place but you know how my mom likes to clean on Saturdays."

"Was she blasting eighties pop or early two-thousands hip hop when you left?"

"A mix of of both."

"Ah, it's a deep cleaning weekend," I muse.

"Don't sound so happy about it. I'm not thrilled to be scrubbing baseboards for the rest of the day."

"Your mom's deep cleans are so fun," I tease.

"Just because you enjoy them doesn't mean I do. You're such a weirdo," Roxy grumbles.

I chuckle in response and stretch to the side, hoping that some movement will help me wake up more. What I wouldn't give for a nap or a strong cup of coffee right now. There's a gentle tap on my shoulder and I look over to find Evan smiling down at me.

The most handsome man alive will work as a wake-up call... I blink in surprise; since when is Evan a member of my gym?

“Evan. Hi,” I stutter.

Roxy excitedly puts her arms above her head, “Evs!”

Evan matches the pose, “Roxs!”

Normally I would laugh at their typical greeting, however, I’m too stunned by the fact that they are acting like they just saw each other yesterday rather than a few years ago. Though come to think of it, when they first met they instantly acted like best friends. I suppose Evan and Roxy picking up where they left off isn’t abnormal.

“What are you doing here,” Roxy asks.

“My last gym raised their rates, so I switched. Do you guys come here often?”

“Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday for Zumba!”

Evan turns to me, “I bet you’re good at this.”

“Of course, Carrie is the queen of Zumba.” An evil smirk grows on Roxy’s face, “Why don’t you join us?”

“Sure, sounds like fun,” Evan agrees.

Evan is going to join us for Zumba. I have never seen a man join us for Zumba, it’s typically just full of women. On top of that, as it has been made very obvious in the past, Evan has two left feet. Not to mention that this class tends to be high energy with more watching the instructor than the steps being explained.

However, I wouldn't mind stealing some peaks at him. Evan always dresses well, but there is something about him dressed in black workout shorts and a white t-shirt that makes me drool. I'm not the only one who seems to find him very attractive. I take note that most of the retirees and some of the moms of the group whisper to each other and giggle as they stare unabashedly at Evan.

"What do you think, Carrie?" Evan's voice pierces my meandering thoughts and wandering eyes.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

Evan quickly looks me up and down with a mischievous grin. Note to self, do not stare at Evan's perfectly toned legs from running, or his muscular arms or his butt looking extra attractive in his shorts. I shake my head realizing that I was continuing to scan his body.

"Are you okay with me joining you and Roxs for class?"

"The class is open to everyone," I respond, trying to not sound too eager.

"What she means is: yes, she would love for you to join us," Roxy interprets.

"Great!"

Roxy grabs my arm and pulls me off to the side before hissing in my ear, "Are you serious? He wants to know if you want him here and tell him anyone can join the class. This is your chance, don't blow this!"

I shrug off Roxy's grip on my arm, "He does not, he probably wanted to make sure he wasn't intruding on us."

“Sometimes, you make me want to smack you,”
Roxy huffs before sauntering back over to Evan.

There isn't time to argue back, as I approach Roxy and Evan the teacher blares the music through the gym speakers to start the class. I take my spot next to Evan and start to bounce to the rhythm of this morning's warm-up song - a classic - *Material Girl*.

The Zumba instructor brightly greets the class as her eyes land on Evan standing next to me in the front row. A tooth-filled smile spreads across the instructor's face,

“Look out ladies, we have a man in the class today! Let's see if he can keep up.”

The women in the class chuckle over the music. Poor Evan doesn't know what he is getting himself into.

Evan leans down till his lips brush my ear. A pleasurable shiver runs down my spine.

“Should I be afraid?”

I look up at Evan and can't help but quirk my lips up into a flirty grin, “You should be very afraid,” I tease.

We turn our attention back to the Zumba instructor and I easily fall into the choreography of the warm-up song. There are already snickers and chuckles trying to hide underneath the bass of the music from the rows behind us. I glance over to Evan out of the corner of my eyes and find him already struggling to follow along and keep beat.

My head falls back in laughter. Evan looks over to me and gives me a thumbs-up while nervously grinning. On impulse, I take his hand and gently

pull him along to help him keep up with the steps. As soon as my hand is clasped in his I realize what I'm doing and loosen my grip to let go, but Evan tightens his hold. He gently pulses a few squeezes and allows our clasped hands to linger before finally letting go so we can do a turn.

As we come back around to the front, Evan's body rams into mine, throwing me off balance. The force of the hit sends me stumbling backward. I put my arms out to balance myself from falling to the ground when two strong arms wrap around my waist. When I look up, Evan is staring down at me with an amused smile.

"Sorry, I turned the wrong way," he breathes.

Evan gently holds me steady while I regain my footing before slowly unraveling his arms from my waist. My body suddenly feels hollow without his touch. I want him to run into me all over again just so that I can feel the way his arms hold me close while the pads of his fingertips press firmly into my back. Never has clumsiness been more attractive to me.

"Don't worry about it," I finally choke out.

I suddenly don't feel the need for a morning coffee. Evan's touch was enough to wake me up.

* * *

An hour later Evan is panting and dripping in sweat. He sits on the floor and begins to stretch. Evan is winded from Zumba, and he is not the only one feeling breathless.

Evan has a way of making me laugh and feel flustered all at the same time. Even though it's been an hour I can still feel the way his fingers

intertwined with mine and the strength of his arms around my waist. My heart continues to race just thinking about it.

“How do you guys do that,” Evan pants.

“Lots of practice,” Roxy beams.

“I’m exhausted.”

“How? Aren’t you a long-distance runner,” I ask.

“There’s a difference between running long distances and sprinting for a straight hour.”

Roxy and I look at each other and shrug. Neither one of us has an affinity for running, so Evan’s comparison falls on deaf ears.

“You two didn’t tell me you’re Zumba professionals,” Evan continues his complaints.

“We are not professionals,” Roxy laughs.

“But there was a new dance introduced to the class today and Carrie managed to pick it up easily.”

“I’ve gone through enough training to be able to pick up quickly on choreography, you are not,” I tease.

“Whatever Ms. Triple Threat,” Evan laughs.

I glance down at my watch, I need to head to the showers now so that I can leave on time to get to the school for rehearsal. Though leaving Evan behind already feels tough; throughout the entire class it felt like like when we were dating. Constant laughter, banter, and a yearning to always be as close to him as I could possibly be.

A reminder alarm from my phone sends me jerking back as it breaks me out of my reverie. I pull

out my phone with the alarm labeled in all caps, "**GET READY FOR REHEARSAL!**" Hell Week is the worst.

"I better get going if I want to make it to rehearsal on time."

Evan looks up from his butterfly stretch, "Opening night is in a week isn't it?"

"Yep, so we are in the final, hellish stretch."

"I remember. It kind of sucked how you would not only have Hell Week for finals, but you would also have Hell Week for shows."

Another little detail he has revealed to remember. My heart beats furiously in my chest.

"It'll be okay, seeing it all together will be worth it."

"Are you going to come to see the show," Roxy asks.

"Yeah, I already bought my ticket for closing night."

"That's great! I'll be coming that night with Mr. Monroe, we should all sit together!"

"Sounds good to me," Evan smiles before looking back at me. "I'll stop by later today to bring you a coffee, okay?"

"You don't have to if you're busy."

"I'm not busy. More importantly, I want to bring you something to help you stay awake today."

Roxy leans over to my ear, "Just say yes," she whispers loud enough for Evan to hear.

I glare at Roxy while she gives me a sarcastic smile before looking back at Evan who is watching the interaction with amusement.

“That would be great, thank you. We’ll have a lunch break at noon, if you could bring some coffee during lunch that would be great.”

“I can do that, I’ll see you later.”

I wave goodbye and hurry out of the studio towards the women’s locker room. Roxy quickly catches up and whispers in my ear.

“He was totally staring at your butt as you walked away.”

“Shut up,” I hiss.

The butterflies in my stomach flutter rapidly and I almost feel like skipping to the shower. This is the time when I should be telling myself to not get my hopes up or get too excited. However, just this once I’ll believe that Evan wants to see me later today just as much as I want to see him.

Chapter 20

The weekend had passed far too quickly and we are now deeply entrenched in the throws of Hell Week. Opening night is Friday and everyone is flitting about with excitement and nervous jitters. With only two days left, we are taking this time to run the whole show through from start to finish.

I can't stop the proud smile that spreads across my face as I sit in the audience. The kids have worked so hard and there are a lot of talented actors in this cast. I'm also fairly certain that I saw a few students who are new to theater get bit by the acting bug.

All of the painstaking hours I put into planning, coordinating, and organizing have finally brought this show to fruition. I am still in awe at how well this show came together. What I envisioned is being portrayed perfectly on the stage. Everything from the blocking to the choreography to the lighting and sets is all playing before me like I imagined. While my first love will always be performing, I have to say that directing takes a close second.

The lights in the house fade up as soon as the lights on the stage fade down and the curtains close, signifying the beginning of intermission. I pull back the sleeve of my white cable-knit sweater

to check my watch - right on time - the first half of the show ran exactly an hour and ten minutes long.

My cast and stage crew file back into the theater from backstage, waiting for me to share some brief notes and dismiss them to the dinner that is waiting for them out in the hall. The scent of delicious comfort food is wafting in from the door. I'm so glad that some parents of the cast members were willing to volunteer to bring everyone dinner. The faces of the cast members are glowing from a successful run-through of the first half mixed with the heat from the hot stage lights shining down on them.

“Great work everyone! I have very few notes to share.” I quickly go down my short list of notes for the actors and crew. Everyone listens seriously while nodding to the instructions given. “That’s all I have for you guys. Change out of your costumes and take forty-five minutes for dinner. After that change back into costumes and be ready to start the second half.”

“Thank you forty-five,” everyone shouts in unison before bounding backstage to change.

As everyone rushes to change and get dinner I take a moment to check the ticket sales on my laptop. So far opening and closing nights are completely sold out, Saturday night has sold about ninety percent of its tickets and the Sunday matinee has sold about seventy percent. That’s pretty good.

I look up as the few remaining kids enter the theater to head out to the main hall for dinner.

“I can’t wait for opening night,” Sarah- the show’s cast Belle - exclaims.

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re going to do great,” Sarah’s friend Julie responds.

They both wave to me as they pass. I wave back and add the sales numbers to my spreadsheet before I head over for dinner myself. We’re in the home stretch, just a couple more days and then it’s show time. Hopefully, things will continue to go smoothly.

“There’s no way that is true and I’m going to prove it!”

I look over my shoulder to see one of the crew members, Max, strolling in along with some members of the ensemble.

“Don’t do it or you’ll curse us,” an ensemble member cries.

I close the lid to my laptop and head over to the group of teens. It looks like it’s time to referee an argument.

“It’s just superstition,” Max sucks in a big breath before shouting at the top of his lungs, “*Macbeth!*”

Everyone in the theater freezes in horror, including myself. There are a few things you should never do in a theater: use your cell phones, illegally record a performance, and eat. But I would say the number one rule you should never do in a theater is say the name, *Macbeth*. If you do then a curse will fall upon the production.

The Shakespeare show, *Macbeth* has a long history of unfortunate events occurring when it was produced, hence becoming notoriously known as a cursed play. If *Macbeth* must be mentioned in a theater - outside of performing it - then it should only be referred to as, *The Scottish Play*. My

stomach sinks to my feet and I can already feel the curse's inky tentacles permeate the theater.

“I can't believe you did that!”

“Now we're doomed!”

“Ms. Monroe, tell him!”

How am I supposed to calm everyone down when I believe in the curse myself? This is the one time I wish I wasn't the responsible adult at the moment.

The best I can do is redirect, “Let's head back out to the halls for dinner.”

The ensemble members exchange nervous glances before finally walking away with Max following behind them with a smug smile. As soon as the kids are out of the theater I look around, searching for any sign of a stage light about to crash to the floor or the curtains to fall. Everything is eerily still and quiet.

“I'm so sorry. Kids. What are you gonna do,” I apologize to the theater.

The damage has already been done and I highly doubt I can convince Max to perform the ritual to break the curse. All I can do now is finish running rehearsal and pray that the theater forgives Max and doesn't unleash the curse on the show.

When I exit the theater everyone looks anxious. The word must've already spread that Max shouted Macbeth in the theater.

“We have twenty minutes left for dinner, make sure to eat up and thank the parents that brought the food,” I announce before grabbing a plate.

The delicious scent of fried chicken and macaroni and cheese causes my stomach to growl eagerly in anticipation. I dish out a serving of chicken and pasta as well as some salad that has barely been touched. With my plate loaded with food I make my way over to the group of parents enjoying their plates of dinner and thank them for bringing the food.

I glance out the window and see raindrops splattered against the glass. Great, first Max says *Macbeth* in the theater and then it rains. There's bad luck everywhere! No, I have to think positively. Everything will be fine, let's just enjoy dinner. I stick my fork into my food, but before I can take my first bite of food a scream echoes through the hall.

I drop my plate on one of the tables and sprint down the hall in the direction of the screams. Outside the front entrance, Max is lying unconscious on the ground in a puddle of blood mixed with vomit as rain drizzles down.

"What happened," I call out to the other stage crew members standing in a semicircle around Max with panicked expressions.

"Max was showing us a rail slide on one of the benches. Towards the end of the bench, he lost his balance and fell on his head. We don't understand, he's done this like, a million times!"

I pull out my phone and immediately call for paramedics while I gently roll Max out of the puddle of bodily fluids. Several streams of blood run down his face from the top of his head. I'm not a doctor, but judging by the look of things, Max is going to need some stitches and most likely has a concussion.

The parents finally break their way through the kids crowding at the entrance to assist me while one mother holds an umbrella over Max to protect him from the rain. As I speak with the dispatcher I put my hand under his nose and find that Max is still breathing, but when I call to him, he is unresponsive.

“It’s the curse,” I hear a few of the kids whisper behind me.

“Everyone go back inside and get ready for the final act. We’ll start once Max is taken care of,” I order.

Very slowly the cast meanders back to the theater. I stay on the line with the dispatcher until the ambulance appears. Once the EMS workers take over I call Max’s parents and give them the information before also calling some members of administration to let them know about what happened. This is all one scary mess.

* * *

By the time the ambulance leaves for the hospital with Max and all the necessary phone calls are made, it is already seven when I make my way back into the theater. The kids look at me nervously while others look anxious to go home.

“Max should be okay,” I inform everyone.

“Are we still going to finish rehearsal,” someone in the ensemble asks.

“Yes. I will help the stage crew divvy up the tasks Max was in charge of and then we will start. In the meantime I want the cast to do a brief warm-up.”

As the actors warm up I work with the stage crew members. Thankfully we have a decent-sized stage crew so I won't have to search last minute for a replacement. However, giving new assignments to the crew is bound to create some issues for the remainder of the run-through.

This is going to be a rough night. Hopefully, nothing else happens.

Chapter 21

A series of unfortunate events steadily continued for the remainder of the week; Belle's gold ballgown ripped in the back of the bodice, the stage crew struggled to get their timing right when moving sets, and the show's Gaston got a head cold yesterday. Tonight is opening night and I'm praying that tonight will go smoothly. I have never seen so much go wrong so quickly while working on a production, but at least there haven't been any more injuries and Max will be able to come back to school next week.

This week has been rough and rainy. It has gotten to the point that I've decided to turn it into a competition; my rainy day bad luck and the *Macbeth* curse give me a problem and I push back with sheer stubbornness and determination to make the show great. By tonight I shall be the victor when my cast pulls off an astounding opening night performance.

Most days this week I have holed myself up in my small office during lunch when I'm not on lunch duty. The only human interaction that I have had during these breaks has been when Evan has come by to surprise me with a cup of coffee. Ever since Saturday, Evan has appeared with coffee and an encouraging smile. It reminds me of when he

used to do the same thing for me during college productions.

Speaking of coffee, I need some to get through lunch duty.

Before I head over to the cafeteria I snake through the meandering clusters of students to the teacher's lounge. The rich and nutty smell of a fresh pot of coffee brewing fills my nose as I step through the door. Just from the aroma alone, I can start to feel a small amount of energy return. Whoever just made this batch has made it nice and strong, exactly what I need.

A few of the other teachers nod to me in acknowledgment while Nadia's laugh fills the room. I glance over the islands of tables to see her draped over Ken while Ken's hand is resting obviously on her butt.

Ken and Nadia got back together shortly after Evan broke up with her. Ever since Ken and Nadia started dating again I have seemingly fallen off of Nadia's radar. It's a relief to not be on the receiving end of her petty taunts.

"Disgusting isn't it," Mei gags as she points her coffee mug in the couple's direction.

It seems that the theme for Mei's outfit today is seventies sunshine. She's wearing a bright baby yellow suit where the legs of the pants flair out into bell bottoms. On her ears are a pair of earrings in the shape of suns with smiley faces on them. I feel like I'm dressed like a storm cloud next to her. My first opening night as a director left me feeling nervous and distrustful of my car. So I came to school dressed for the performance tonight - a simple gray A-line skirt with a black turtle neck.

I glance back at Ken and Nadia who are giving each other quick pecks on the lips.

“It’s like they’ve forgotten that there are children nearby,” I mutter under my breath.

“I wonder how long they’ll last this time.”

I shrug in response. Nadia and Ken’s relationship is not worth wondering over. What is worth wondering over is who made the fresh batch of coffee. Whoever made this latest brew deserves to be the teacher of the year.

“Carrie,” Evan calls

I turn my attention to Evan who confidently strides over with two mugs in his hands,

“Hey,” I yawn.

“Hey, I figured you’d need this.” Evan pushes a mug with an image of William Shakespeare and a quote from Richard III, Act One Scene Two,

“Out of my sight! Thou dost infect mine eyes.”

The quote brings a tired laugh to my lips before I take a sip of the hot coffee. I close my eyes and hum in contentment. This coffee has the perfect amount of my caramel creamer in it with just the right amount of strength I need.

As I take another sip of my coffee, a thought crosses my mind. Perhaps the fatigue is getting to me but I don’t remember seeing salted caramel coffee creamer normally being in the teacher’s lounge fridge; yet every day this week that creamer has been added to my coffee. I take another sip of the coffee and enjoy the feeling of the warm liquid sliding down my throat. In about fifteen minutes I should be wired and bouncing off the walls.

“Thank you, this is perfect.”

“It should be, I watched him make this pot of coffee specifically for you,” Mei teases with a wink. “I also caught him sneaking in some caramel coffee creamer this week. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Is that so,” I hum.

“I better head back to my desk, see you two later,” Mei wiggles her fingers in a wave; showing off her white sparkly nail polish glimmering in the fluorescent lighting before sauntering out of the room.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Teacher of the Year award goes to Evan Stanton.

I take another look at the mug and realize that I haven’t seen this mug in the cabinet either. Evan stuffs his hands in his pockets while looking off toward the wall and chewing on his cheek. I love it when he tries to hide when he’s feeling bashful, he looks like a kid who got caught playing a joke on someone - it’s pretty cute. He normally looks so confident, seeing him get flustered is such a rare sight.

Evan turns his attention back to me.

“I know how tired you’ve been, so I’ve been making your coffee. I also made sure to make it stronger since you tend to drink more of those towards the end of the Hell Week.”

I’ve come to find that there seems to be a lot that Evan remembers. Like how strong I like my coffee or how much creamer I need based on the strength. I shouldn’t be surprised at this point, he’s been randomly sharing little facts that he knows about me for a while now. Yet somehow the novelty has yet to wear off.

While I haven't revealed how much I remember, I still remember everything. Like how his favorite color is green and when he's stressed he will go on long runs outside no matter how cold or hot the weather may be. Evan also has an obsession for notebooks with unique covers and there's a scar on the back of his knee from falling off of a pier when he was twelve.

"Thank you for thinking of me. I really do appreciate you bringing me my caffeine fix every day this week." I look down at the mug. Since he was so willing to admit that he made the coffee he might be willing to admit where he got the mug. "And the mug? Where did this come from?"

"It's a gift for you. It's your first official production that you've directed and I know this week has been rough. I went with your second favorite Shakespearean insult since your first isn't exactly appropriate for school."

"Wow, I can't believe you remembered," I say quietly while staring down into the steaming tan contents of my cup.

"Of course, I remember."

My head snaps up to meet his gaze. Evan doesn't say anything past that, but the way his gaze steadily holds mine with his lips curved in a half smile almost screams that he not only remembers a few things about me, but he remembers everything. The way he continues to hold eye contact with me makes it feel like it's almost a challenge, that if I look away then I'm admitting that I don't remember everything like he does. I should look away so that the hope I carry inside of me can get forced down again, but I can't.

Would someone go out of their way like this for an ex?

No matter how I try to convince myself that Evan has moved on, Evan keeps creating more reasons to believe that he's not. Roxy's advice to flirt with him rings loudly in my ears. Perhaps she's right, and the need to know how Evan feels about me is growing wildly. I need to know.

"We better get going, who knows what kind of trouble the kids are causing."

I nod in agreement as the nostalgic atmosphere around us dissipates. As I follow Evan towards the door I put my toes to the edge. Depending on how he responds will determine if I'll take the leap into an emotional free fall. I'll allow myself to hope. It may be selfish to try to win him back after our breakup, but if he wants me, I won't say no.

"Hey." Evan stops and looks over his shoulder. "*Villain, I have done thy mother/* is still your favorite quote right?"

A mischievous tooth-filled grin spreads across his face, "Yeah. It's still your favorite, right?"

"Yeah."

I glance down one more time at my mug before following behind Evan. My heart leaps and my stomach drops like going down a steep decline on a roller coaster.

He's right, that quote from *Titus Andronicus* would not be appropriate for school.

As I follow Evan to the cafeteria I catch a glimpse of the torrential downpour outside the windows at the end of the hall. There is no foreboding feeling of dread like I would typically

experience. Memories of Evan and I in my car during the thunderstorm a month ago and him bringing me coffee over this past week filter through. Sure the show has had some major issues come up this week but I've managed to work through them. Come to think of it, the first time Evan and I met it was raining.

I still don't like the rain - it's dreary and makes my hair frizz - but it's not a curse. Maybe even at times, it can be lucky.

Chapter 22

The familiar heat from the stage lights beats down above me as I stand on stage with my cast for final bows on closing night. I couldn't be more proud of my cast; we had a rough Hell Week, but every night the kids put everything they had into every show. After every performance, I would hear audience members rave over the kids' performance and how the production was so professional they could hardly believe it was middle schoolers putting on this performance.

With it being the final night there is an excited energy that feels almost electric. It's honestly one of the most satisfying highs I've experienced. It's the high of knowing that I saw an entire project through to its final, successful end. If I could I would freeze this moment just to enjoy it a little longer.

From backstage, a member of the stage crew walks towards me and hands me a large bouquet of red roses. As the cast joins the audience in the applause the corners of my eyes begin to sting from pride. I gingerly take the bouquet in my arms and turn to face my cast as I thank them over the crescendo of applause and music.

One production down, several years of more productions to go. My mind is already sparking with excitement at the prospect. I already have a

few productions in mind to choose from for next year.

I turn back to the audience and join hands with the cast to take a bow one final time as the finale music begins to fade. For the final time in this production, the house lights fade up and the stage lights fade down. It's strange how such a simple light cue can already bring on a feeling of nostalgia. However, I've come to admit recently that I'm a tad bit more nostalgic than I originally believed myself to be.

The cast members exit the stage first in an excited charge. Meanwhile, I stay behind and wait for all the teens to make their way off stage. While I wait I take one final glance at the audience. Out of habit, I look over my shoulder to the center of the house, middle row, middle seat. My eyes widen. There in the audience next to Roxy and my father is Evan applauding with his eyes fixed solely on me.

All of the noise in the theater becomes muffled and butterflies beat furiously in my stomach. All I can do is stand frozen on stage as memories from eight shows race in rapid succession. Each memory is of Evan standing in that exact spot looking at me with that same smile fully encapsulated in pride and adoration. My stomach can't stop doing cartwheels and flips. I knew that Evan was coming tonight, he told me he would. He came to support the students, but I can't shake the feeling that he came to support me as well.

I should've prepared myself better for seeing Evan at the show. All I want to do is jump off of the stage and run to Evan. I would leap into his arms and have him press my body against his as his

mouth captures mine. Then the whole room would fade away.

It takes more willpower than I'm willing to admit to force myself to remember where I am. We are back to being friends - maybe even friends who are interested in each other - but tackling the man to kiss me doesn't seem like the best idea.

As the very last cast member exits the stage I follow behind and make my way to the hall outside of the theater to meet with the parent volunteers. There isn't much that I need them to do; there are already volunteers monitoring backstage and the volunteers for the box office have already cleaned up concessions for intermission. One of the parents hands me the black metal lock box full of coins and cash before running off to praise their child actor.

The lock box is cool in my warm hands. I shouldn't feel so nervous seeing Evan, but I am. Ever since I made up my mind to begin showing Evan that I'm interested in dating again I have become a complete, bumbling mess. I've never been good at flirting and after a few years of never flirting I have found that I am painfully rusty in the skill.

Yesterday after school I thought it would be sweet to help Evan fix his crooked tie. Somehow I managed to make it worse while also choking him. This morning at the gym, I tried to catch his eye by gracefully stretching in front of him. Instead, I randomly lose my balance coming up from a toe touch and face plant on the rubber floor.

I consider running back to my office to curl up in a ball and hide under my desk before I embarrass myself further, but Mei and Principal

Johnson practically skip over to me like excited school girls. Principal Johnson wraps me in a hug with Mei following after her. While Principal Johnson has taken on a classic look with a black dress, low heels, and red lipstick, Mei has gone with something more festive. A golden yellow, knee-length taffeta dress with matching heels covered in glitter. Around her neck hangs a delicate crystal rose that sits at the base of her throat. It looks like a modern-day version of Belle.

“You did wonderfully! That’s the best theater performance our school has put on in years,” Principal Johnson applauds.

“This is my favorite story; you really brought the show to life,” Mei beams.

I flush before their praise. “Thank you, but the kids were the ones that made everything come together.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, you got middle schoolers to take something seriously; that is an accomplishment in of itself,” Mei scolds.

Two tan arms suddenly wrap around my shoulders as an excited giggle fills my ears.

“Carrie! That was awesome!”

“Thanks, Roxy,” I laugh.

Principal Johnson and Mei turn to Roxy as my father follows closely behind while leaning on his cane and Evan for support. My dad hasn’t seen Evan since the Christmas before we broke up. I don’t know how to feel about them seeing each other again, especially since my parents were the reason I broke up with Evan in the first place.

That thought is quickly replaced by the way Evan smiles down at my father while laughing at whatever he says. Evan's smile is genuine and his hands gently hold my father's while slowly walking to keep pace. There is nothing more attractive than a man who shows genuine kindness. Evan is also extremely attractive with the way his dark wash jeans manage to be just tight enough to hint at his muscular legs underneath. The sleeves of his flannel shirt strain against his arms.

I'm sure those muscles are being put to good use to help support up dad. Wait a minute; Dad hates being treated like an old man. Why is Dad willing to let Evan help him walk?

I open my mouth to ask my dad if he's alright, but the impish smile while raising his eyebrows suggestively at me tells me everything I need to know. The old man is acting all buddy-buddy with Evan to try to sweet-talk him into a shotgun wedding with me. Conniving old man.

I shoot my father a warning glare before giving quick introductions.

"Are you staying out of trouble, Roxy," Principal Johnson teases.

Roxy laughs as we share a knowing look with each other. Frequently during middle school, Roxy was sent to the principal's office for fighting or being disruptive. It wasn't that Roxy started trouble or went looking for it, trouble tended to find her. And by finding her I mean she would find out that I was getting bullied and she would go out of her way to protect me. Like a lot of middle school girls, I was awkward and a late bloomer. I was the quiet theater nerd with an odd obsession

for organization and aesthetic office supplies. Roxy was the outspoken art kid with hourglass curves by the sixth grade and tomboyish style.

“Only when it suits me,” Roxy teases back, causing raucous laughter to fill the air.

“That’s the best way to be,” Mei encourages with a thumbs up.

I look over at my father who seems to be resting more of his weight on Evan. While he is smiling, his eyes are drooping tiredly and his brow is pulled together suggesting that he needs another dose of his pain medication. While Mei and Principal Johnson are distracted by their conversation with Roxy, I turn my attention to my dad.

“Hey, Dad. Do you need to go home?”

My dad smiles up at me apologetically, “Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Did you ride with Roxy,” Evan asks.

My dad nods. I look over my shoulder at Roxy and see that she is still deep in an exciting conversation.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I interject. Everyone stops and turns their attention over to me, “My dad needs to head out.”

Roxy looks over at my dad and nods in agreement. Everyone warmly gives their goodbyes while I follow Evan, Dad, and Roxy to the door.

“I’ll help Roxy get your dad home,” Evan informs me.

“You don’t have to do that-”

“Don’t worry about it. He needs a little more support, I’m happy to help.”

Evan pats my arm before he leaves with my father leaning on Evan.

“That’s very kind of you Evan. You would make a wonderful son-in-law.”

“Dad,” I warn.

My dad doesn’t look back, I just hear him cackle before turning his attention back to Evan.

I suddenly feel like my dad is doing a better job of sweet-talking Evan than me. Before I know it there will be a whole wedding planned and I’ll just be shoved in a white dress and pushed down the aisle. Am I truly that hopeless of a flirt? Once again I remember my failed flirting attempts and get another painful dose of embarrassment. On second thought, it might be best to let my dad do all the work.

Chapter 23

The last few cast members have just walked out the door with their parents. I take the time to lock up everything backstage. With everyone gone the theater is blissfully quiet and the stage is mostly empty with a few set pieces remaining.

I look out over the empty rows of seats. Once again I have the theater to myself. For some people, an empty theater is hauntingly unnerving, but for me, it's a sanctuary with the freedom to fill the space with anything I can imagine.

The itch to perform builds in my chest. I check to make absolutely certain that I am the only one here. During the school day I don't indulge myself in this so that I don't risk someone potentially walking in on me, but with no one around I allow myself to take center stage. *Someone Like You* from the musical *Jekyll and Hyde* pops into my mind and I allow the opening note to play in my head. At this moment I'm playing one of my favorite roles, Lucy.

As I sing acapella, I can perfectly hear the notes played by a small orchestra inside my head. My body warms down to my toes in my brown-heeled booties as my voice echoes through the room. The lyrics come easily and the words quickly resonate inside of me. Evan's smiling face immediately pops into my head and my heart swells. My imagination

swiftly takes over and my body moves gracefully across the stage.

It's not what happens in the play, but the scene I'm imagining is beautiful. In my head, I'm meandering through an empty park at midnight in a large city. It has been a long night of faceless strangers and all I want to see is the one face that brings me comfort. I hop from one circular glow of a street light to the next before hopping onto an imaginary wooden bench and walking across it as if I were on a balance beam. I jump down from the imaginary bench and stroll around a large granite water fountain containing a statue of embracing lovers.

The embracing lover's statue is the secret rendezvous I imagine having with my lover. Shivers race up and down my spine, as I remember Evan's arms around me and the feeling of his breath tickling my ear as he whispers loving compliments. I can almost smell the cologne that clings to his shirt.

The music builds to a crescendo and I belt down center stage. As the music begins to fade I slowly walk backward upstage as I sing the final notes of the song - ending where I started, standing at center stage - surrounded by dozens of hydrangea bushes where my lover finds me. He stares at me with unadulterated adoration and lust before approaching me and capturing my lips with a ferocious and possessive kiss.

A lone applause breaks me out of my imaginary garden. I've been caught. My eyes quickly scan the house of the theater and find Evan entering and walking down the aisle closest to the stage right with one arm behind his back. I feel my face

immediately ignite in embarrassment. This is the third time I have embarrassed myself in front of him. I have successfully managed to look like an utter fool in less than twenty-four hours.

“How long have you been here,” I squeak.

Evan bounds up the stairs to the stage with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, “Would you be mad if I said since the beginning?”

That little sneak.

“You could have let me know you were here so I wouldn’t have embarrassed myself.”

Evan stops in front of me, “You didn’t embarrass yourself. I haven’t seen you perform in a long time; I enjoyed your performance.”

I humph while pouting out my bottom lip and crossing my arms over my chest. Evan takes my response as humorous as he chuckles.

“Here.” Evan pulls a bouquet of light lavender-colored Aster flowers with delicate stems of white Baby’s-breath mixed in. “These are for you.”

A gasp slips past my lips as I take the bouquet. “Oh wow, they’re beautiful.”

“Congratulations on directing your first show. You put together a great production.”

His voice is quiet and intimate while his hazel eyes hold mine. I want to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

“Thank you.”

Evan looks over his shoulder before looking back at me. “Would you mind humoring me with something?”

“I suppose. You did help my father and bring me a beautiful bouquet,” I tease.

Not bad, that was pretty smooth. After three tries I have successfully managed to flirt.

Evan smiles and gingerly takes my bouquet and sets it down on the stage before taking my hands. He holds my right hand in his while he places my left on his shoulder before finally gently placing his hand on the small of my back. His palm presses firmly into my soft black sweater. He begins to slowly lead me through a basic box step. I smile in surprise at how his feet have yet to land on my toes.

“I hope your broom boyfriend doesn’t mind me stealing a dance with you.”

I throw my head back in laughter, “Don’t worry, we broke up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t worry about it. The breakup was mutual.”

Evan leads me silently through the steps while staring down at his feet as he silently mouths the count of the beat.

“You’ve been practicing. Was your practice partner a broom as well?”

Evan looks up from his feet and his eyes brighten, “Yes, she is quite a stoic dancer.”

“I hope she doesn’t mind that I’m dancing with you.”

“She’s just a friend, but I can tell her girlfriend - the mop - is not pleased that we have spent so much time together.”

Another wave of laughter cascades from my lips. “My condolences to the mop.”

“Don’t worry,” Evan raises our conjoined hands to twirl me, “the broom now feels confident that I can dance well enough with someone that has feet. So the mop will no longer have to watch us with jealousy.”

“Congratulations. Considering how you haven’t stepped on my feet yet, I would have to agree with the broom.”

Evan’s deep laugh booms across the theater as he continues to lead me through the dance before we both fall into a comfortable silence. It feels like it did when we were dating. Making jokes that aren’t very funny to each other while smiling at each other like idiots. We don’t care that we aren’t dancing to any music, impromptu dancing to the sound of silence still feels just as romantic as dancing along to an eight-string orchestra.

“And now for the big finale.” Evan guides me to spin out before spinning into him with my back pressed against his chest.

We stare up at each other as we hold the ending pose. My eyes wander down to his light rose-hued lips. When I finally force my eyes to return to his I catch him still staring down at my mouth. The air around us suddenly feels magnetic, like it’s trying to push us together. Our heads slowly start leaning into each other and I can almost feel the warmth of his lips on mine as we are about to close the gap between us.

He does still have feelings for me! I never imagined that I would have another chance in this lifetime to be with Evan again. To feel his arms

securely wrapped around my waist. To see him look down at me with love mixed with desire. To taste the cinnamon that is always on his lips.

My eyes begin to flutter closed as our noses cross. We are less than a breath away. Soon everything will be right again.

My upbeat ringtone blares in the pocket of my gray plaid skirt. Evan and I jump in surprise before begrudgingly releasing our hold on one another.

“Sorry! I didn’t realize that my ringer was turned up all the way.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and look down to see my father on the caller I.D.

“Hello?”

“Caroline, are you okay? It’s late.”

I hold my phone to my ear with my shoulder, pull back the sleeve of my sweater, and see that it’s a little past eleven. I didn’t realize it was so late.

“Sorry Dad, I was double-checking to make sure everything was locked up. I’ll be home in fifteen minutes.”

“Alright, be safe. Love you.”

“I will. Love you too.”

I end the call and turn back to Evan who has his hands stuffed in his pockets. He looks up when he sees I’m off the phone and gives me a shy smile.

“Let me walk you to your car.”

“That would be great, thank you.”

We’re both quiet as we make our way to the parking lot. I shiver when the cold November evening air blasts against me through a strong

gust of wind. Evan quickly wraps his arm around my shoulder and rubs my arm to help keep me warm as we walk to my car.

I slowly unlock my door, hoping that Evan will stop me and pull me back into his arms to pick up where we left off in the theater. Instead, he gets the door and holds my bouquet so I can get in my car. I'm disappointed that he hasn't tried to kiss me again yet. My lips are still tingling from almost kissing him.

After I've buckled my seat belt, Evan passes me my flowers and I set them down on the passenger seat beside me. I feel like we're back at square one with how awkward it's starting to feel between us. There has to be something I can do to stop making things feel so strained.

"Thank you for the dance. Your practice paid off."

"Sure thing."

We both stare at each other, not sure of what to say next. What should we say next? It's not like I can get out of my car and ask him to kiss me. Can I?

"You better get home to your dad so he doesn't get too worried."

"Right, yep. I better head out," I mumble.

"I'll see you on Monday?"

"Yep, see you Monday."

Evan firmly closes my door and waits for me to start the car and drive out of the parking lot. As I drive back towards home I let out a loud groan. Technology had to ruin everything.

Chapter 24

With the closing of the fall musical, my schedule was a lot more open than it had been in several weeks. With all this newfound time I almost have no idea what to do with myself. Thankfully the holiday season is just around the corner.

All of the students are practically bouncing off the walls with excitement for Thanksgiving break. All of us teachers are ready for a break as well, but it won't be as carefree as it will be for the students. As soon as Thanksgiving break is over the students will have final tests before the end of the semester, and inevitably there will be a series of begging and bribery from students who are behind on assignments. I'm grateful that I teach theater and not a more academic subject, most of the grades in my class are performance-based, not paper tests.

I wonder how Evan is doing with the end of the semester coming up. As I walk down the hall towards the front entrance I see Evan sitting at his desk in his classroom with one arm propped against the top of the desk and his forehead resting in his hand. The red cap of a pen sits lazily between his teeth as he stares down at a paper.

This doesn't look good. Evan is officially in stage one of his five stages of stress. Symptoms are as follows:

Holding his forehead to ward off a headache.

Shoulders scrunching up towards his ears.

Dejected frown while his red pen looms over an essay but fails to lower to make another correction.

I lightly rap my fist against the open door and Evan looks up at me with tired bags under his eyes with a frown. He quickly pulls the cap out of his mouth and returns it to the pen while slowly turning his lips up into a lazy half-smile. Stage two will be upon him soon, the fatigue is starting to set in.

“Hey, Carrie.” Evan tries to sound cheerful but ends up sounding robotic.

This is worse than I thought, he’s already in stage two. He’s tired and getting to the point of focusing more on the thing that is stressing him rather than managing the stress. Stages three through five will quickly follow if he doesn’t leave stage two soon.

Once he gets tired he’ll decide to go on a run to clear his head and then try to start again on his project - stage three. After wearing himself out with running, all of the words on a page will begin to blur together. He’ll procrastinate and have a *Lord of the Rings* movie marathon that will encompass a couple of days - the fourth stage. Finally, for the fifth stage, he’ll realize how much time he has left to get the task done and pull all-nighters until the project is completed.

For Evan, it’s not getting started on a difficult task, it’s when he hits a plateau in the middle that causes him to lose steam. To say the least, Evan is not the best when it comes to planning and organization. He tries to get everything done at

once to speed up the process but ends up delaying himself once he gets overwhelmed.

I quietly approach Evan and gingerly pull the paper he was grading off of his desk. I immediately noticed several things wrong with this paper. To start, the student didn't even type their name. The next jarring offense is that the student titled the paper, *Rodeo and Juliet: Why Their Stupid* instead of *Romeo and Juliet: Why They're Stupid*. Perhaps the title is just a typo and Romeo isn't referred to as Rodeo throughout the entire paper. As I scan over the sea of run-on sentences and broken paragraphs I find that Romeo is indeed referred to as Rodeo throughout the entire paper.

"This is painful to look at," I finally respond before hiding the nefarious paper behind my back.

"I can't take one more look at these," Evan groans while smacking his pen against the stack of papers next to him.

"Are all of them this bad?"

"No. I decided I'd grade the papers by the students that are struggling, first."

Of course, he did; he decided to grade the papers that needed the most effort first.

"That sounds tiring."

"Yeah, but I'm sure once I go on a long run to clear my head I'll be ready to get back to work."

I shake my head as I return the nameless paper to the stack of essays waiting to be graded.

"How about tomorrow after school, we come up with a grading plan and I help you grade these papers."

Evan's eyes widen into pleading saucers, "Really? You're not too busy with your classes?"

"No, my class doesn't involve a lot of paperwork."

"So I can put the papers away for tonight?"

"Yes. So go run to get your frustrations out, get some rest, and tomorrow afternoon we'll grade papers."

Evan hurriedly files away his stack of papers in a large folder and tucks it into his briefcase. I watch as Evan shrugs on his black pea coat and covers his head with a knitted beanie.

"Shall we," he asks while holding his arm out towards the door.

I nod with a soft smile and walk out of the classroom first. Once the lights are off and the door to his classroom is locked, Evan turns to me with a bright smile. He still looks tired, but the risk of him continuing onto to remaining stages of stress has ended.

"Let me carry this for you," Evan asks while reaching for my bag.

I shrug off my bag and pass it to him to carry. Heat rushes to my cheeks as he makes an effort to walk close to me so that our arms brush against each other as we walk out of the school and to our cars. Recently I've noticed that Evan has been arriving at the same time as me and parks in the space right next to my car.

After unlocking my door, Evan gently places my bag down in the trunk and turns back to me with a lazy smile.

“How about I pick you up tomorrow so that after school we can go back to my house to grade papers?”

My heart jumps into my throat at the suggestion, I have to practically swallow it back down to my chest so that I can answer.

“Sure, that sounds good. I’ll text you my address.”

Evan opens my door for me, “Don’t worry about it. I still remember where you live.”

“Okay then,” I stutter before ducking down into my car.

As I sit in the driver’s seat, Evan reaches down and takes my hand. He presses a kiss on the back of my hand and looks down at me through his thick lashes with a sly smile. The skin on my hand tingles from the touch of his lips.

“Thank you for rescuing me from my slump. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

All I can do is nod before he finally releases my hand and closes the car door for me. My heart is pounding in my chest as my stomach performs tumbling gymnastics. I can’t stop smiling; I’m smiling so wide that my cheeks hurt.

Evan will pick me up to go to work together tomorrow. Not only that, we will be going back to his house alone. Does this constitute as a date? He didn’t say that it was a date but it feels like a date. Perhaps I’m reading too much into this and Evan is just thrilled to have someone help him grade papers. However, he could have easily had us stay after school and grade papers in his classroom. Why would he want to take me back to his home when it would be much easier to stay at school?

Working isn't exactly romantic. Normally people don't choose to grade essays by middle schoolers as a date activity. Evan was obviously flirting though; he kissed my hand and that isn't something he would do with just anyone. So maybe this is a date and he was afraid to call it that. However, if he was scared to call it a date, why was he scared? Does he think I'll reject him if he calls it a date?

My mind keeps flip-flopping between the idea of whether going back to Evan's house is considered a date or not. As soon as I pull into my driveway and throw the car in park, I pull my phone out of my coat pocket and text the one person who may be able to decipher this.

Me: Evan invited me back to his house to help him grade papers tomorrow. Alone...

Roxy: Ahhh!!! I'm coming over to your house right now. Be ready to tell me everything!

Me: Hurry, I'm going crazy trying to figure out what this means.

Roxy: That is why you have me.

I shove the car door open and quickly get my bag out of the trunk before running into the house to change into something more comfortable.

Even though I'm still not sure what tomorrow means to Evan, I can't stop smiling. I consider trying to quell my excitement but decide against it. My hand is still tingling from where Evan kissed it even though it's been twenty minutes.

As soon as I retreat to my bedroom to change I bashfully lift my hand and place the back of my hand against my lips. I swear I can still feel the warmth and softness of his mouth. My ears heat

when I realize how I am pathetically pressing my lips to the back of my hand to get a second-hand kiss from Evan.

I hate to admit it because it feels like I'm throwing all caution to the wind by doing so, but my love for Evan is continuing to grow stronger.

Chapter 25

Half days at school are supposed to go by quickly, but today it feels just as long as a full-length school day. On top of that, not only are the students having a hard time not getting overly excited for the Thanksgiving break that begins as soon as the lunch bell rings, but I'm also brimming with excitement.

This morning I changed my outfit three times and spent a whole five minutes simply debating on wearing a clear lip gloss or bold red lipstick, just to settle on a tinted lip balm. According to Roxy, this afternoon is an unspoken date. Translation: Evan and I both see this afternoon as a date but it will not be labeled as such until a mood is set. That explanation in itself did not make any ounce of sense to me but after spending several hours dissecting Evan's words, facial expressions, and body language I was too exhausted to ask any more questions.

So because our, not-a-date-but-kind-of-is-a-date, I decided to take on the impossible task of dressing for such an occasion. There is an art of subtlety to it - and just like flirting - I am horrible at achieving such subtlety. So in the end I settled on wearing my favorite rose-colored sweater, jeans, and my favorite heeled pink booties. I look

cozy and cute all at the same time while wearing my signature color for a confidence boost.

My attention turns back to my students who I have allowed to have an unstructured class. As any teacher knows, getting students to do anything remotely school-related on the day of their break is like trying to force a horse to drink water - nearly impossible. If it wasn't for their parents I know that very few students would show up to school today. So instead I'm blasting show tunes while students sit on the stage or in the audience and take the time to chat and relax.

A few of my students sing along to a number from *Wicked* that is playing from my show-tune playlist. I smile at how much fun everyone seems to be having. A break is exactly what everyone needed, including me.

The bell chimes over the intercom, dismissing all of us to Thanksgiving break. Everyone quickly jumps up and hastily grabs their backpacks before yelling their hasty goodbyes to me.

"Have a great holiday everyone," I call as the wave of students cascades out of the theater and into the cacophony of excited yelling and stampeding footsteps in the hall.

An excited shiver runs down my back. As soon as all of the students are gone, Evan and I will head back to his house.

* * *

Evan meets me outside of the theater as I lock the doors behind me. It takes every ounce of self-control to not be practically bouncing on the balls of my feet in anticipation. As I turn back to Evan he

quickly takes my bag and slings it over his shoulder before we make our way out of the building.

Before we reach the front doors Mei stops us. An amused smile quirks up my lips as I take in Mei's outfit. Somewhere she has managed to find and purchase a sweater that has the image of a giant turkey knitted on the front of it. She paired the sweater with a pair of brown corduroy pants and dangling turkey earrings.

“And where are the two of you off to? A date perhaps?”

Evan gently places his hand on the small of my back, “Carrie is going to help me grade some essays.”

I can't stop myself from looking down at my feet while I frown. My heart sinks a little at Evan not calling it a date.

“That sounds like a pretty boring date,” Mei grumbles.

“To each their own,” Evan shrugs.

I suddenly look up at him with hope rapidly rising. So this is a date! Isn't it? With Mei pursing her lips in disapproval, we both wave goodbye to Mei and head out to Evan's car.

Evan quickly gets the passenger door and holds out his hand to help me up into his SUV. While he goes to place my bag in the back of the car I am still impressed that his car is so tidy. When we were in college, Evan's car was constantly a mess. It wasn't until the first time that we carpooled home from school that I started regularly cleaning out his car.

I quickly glance over my shoulder to make sure Evan isn't looking. Perhaps he has gotten better about keeping his car clean, but I find his car being clear of trash and the mats freshly vacuumed a little suspicious. He even has a mini trashcan secured to the back of the center console with a bungee cord.

I open the glove box as quietly and quickly as I can and find a lack of receipts and state inspection papers exploding out from the box as soon as I open it. All I can find is his car manual and the paper from his latest car inspection tucked neatly inside. I turn my attention to the center console, surely which has to be a mess. When I open the lid to the center console I find a small bottle of hand sanitizer, wipes, a pack of tissues, and a file folder just big enough to hold receipts. It's all perfectly tidy.

"Can I help you find something," Evan teases.

I gasp and hastily slam the console shut while my face immediately burns red. He caught me.

"No. I'm just surprised with how clean your car is."

Evan chuckles as he steps up into the car and closes the door behind him.

"Your organization system rubbed off on me."

My eyes roam over his body; I'm impressed and find it extremely sexy that he kept up with my car organization.

"So, I was thinking of ordering Chinese for lunch. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah, that's great," I nod as I try to settle comfortably against the leather seat.

Riding with Evan used to feel so comfortable and easy. However, now that our relationship is in this weird limbo of trying to figure out if we are just friends or friends with the potential to go back to dating, I am a nervous wreck. So instead of feeling relaxed, I have to fight to keep myself from squirming anxiously in my seat. I wish he would just come out and say if he considers this a date or not.

I spend so much time trying to act like I don't have a million fire ants crawling all over me that I'm surprised when Evan pulls up in front of a white brick house surrounded by oak and maple trees shading the moss-covered front yard. As soon as Evan turns off the car he quickly jogs around to open the door for me. He holds out his hand again to help me down before grabbing my bag from the car.

I instantly recognized the neighborhood. This neighborhood is about two minutes away from mine. My eyes travel up the paved driveway to Evan's home. The house is small but looks a little bigger than mine. None of the white paint is peeling from the brick and it appears to be a single-level home. Even though all of the leaves have fallen from the trees there is still a level of privacy from the fence of trees surrounding the property. The neighborhood itself is fairly quiet and it's easy to hear cardinals call back and forth to each other.

"Come on in," Evan invites before leading me up the concrete steps to a teal-colored door.

The welcome heat of the house immediately wraps around me like a fuzzy blanket as I walk through the door. The living room has an exposed

brick fireplace with a TV mounted on the mantle. Through the living room, I can see straight through to the updated kitchen. As I peer further into the house I can see a formal dining room off of the kitchen, and a short hallway a little past the front door leads down to what I'm assuming are the bedrooms.

There isn't much furniture or decorations. However, the home still feels cozy and full of potential. It's beautiful. This is the kind of house that I would want to call my own.

"You're home is beautiful."

"I thought you might like it," Evan smiles softly. His eyes widen before looking off towards the window and awkwardly clearing his throat. "I bought the place shortly before the school year started."

I cock my head to the side, "Even though this neighborhood is close to mine?"

Evan looks back towards me and shrugs, "It's a good house, it was a good price, and it's a short commute to work."

Now it's my turn to look away. I don't know what I was expecting; him to say, *I secretly wanted to be close to you*. He probably wasn't crazy at the prospect of living so close, but hopefully, he doesn't feel that way now.

A knock on the front door interrupts our silence.

"You make yourself at home while I get the food."

I nod and make my way over to the dining room. All of these mixed signals from Evan make me feel like I have whiplash. As much as I would like to sit

close to him on the couch, I need some physical distance to give my racing heart a break.

Evan appears in the doorway of the dining room holding up the bags of Chinese food. My mouth begins to water at the scent of fried egg rolls, rice, and chicken.

“I’m going to grab some bowls and drinks.”

“Would you like some help?”

I start walking around the table but Evan holds up his hand to stop me.

“Sure. You can unload the food from the bags if you don’t mind.”

“Yep.”

My eyes wander over to Evan as his back is towards me. As my hands slowly lift various containers out of the plastic bags, I watch Evan’s shirt strain against his shoulders as he reaches for the bowls in the cabinet. I still clearly remember the time Evan and I went to Dewey Beach in Delaware before we started dating. Droplets of water would slowly slide down his back tanned from the bright sun. His hard abs were on full display. I can still feel his hands gently massaging sunscreen into my back. The whole experience felt so intimate.

My stomach coils at the memory. He’s too perfect; it isn’t fair that he is gorgeous while also one of the kindest people I know. Perhaps sitting across the table from him isn’t such a good idea. Instead of reducing the tension, sitting across from him only jacks up the tension. In my imagination, we’re eating lunch before I finally shove the food out of the way and crawl across the table to kiss him.

“Here’s a bowl, and here is some strawberry lemonade; your favorite.”

Is this table sturdy?

“Oh wow, thank you.”

Evan pulls out my chair for me to sit before taking the seat across from mine. As we begin to fill our bowls with fried rice and various chicken dishes, Evan starts,

“So I’m sure you already have a detailed plan for grading these papers?”

He knows me so well.

“I do,” I lean down to grab the printed itinerary out of my bag and slide it across the light wood-stained table.

Evan takes a bite of General Tso’s chicken from his chopsticks while looking over my plan with an amused smile.

“You even have scheduled breaks with suggested relaxing activities,” he beams.

I take a moment to bask in the glow of his smile; its warmth consuming me like a big hug.

“Yep.”

“Your organizational skills never cease to amaze me.”

“Thanks,” I smile quietly before taking a bite of food.

As we eat lunch we talk about movies we’ve watched recently and the journals Evan has recently bought to add to his collection. I’m still very tempted to crawl across the table, but I manage to restrain myself.

At exactly forty-five minutes after we began eating we cleaned up our dishes and any leftovers before we began to grade the essays.

“Let’s go grade papers on the couch,” Evan invites.

I nod and follow behind Evan, excited and nervous all at the same time to have the opportunity to sit closer to him. Evan lays out the papers on the coffee table and goes over his grading rubric with me before passing me a red and black pen. We separate the large stack in half.

As I begin to read through the first essay I tuck my legs underneath myself and lean into the corner between the plush back and arm of the tan, suede couch. I look up when I hear Evan shift next to me. He quickly drapes a large knitted green blanket over both of our laps.

“Thank you,” I say as I snuggle down deeper into the couch under the blanket.

My heart practically melts from the gesture while my stomach performs acrobatics. The blanket smells like him and I feel my body relax more into the comfort that can only be tied with Evan. The comfort I feel with Evan is like the feeling you get when you’re curled up under a cozy blanket while watching *Charlie Brown* as rain pours outside the window on a fall evening.

I want to hold onto this comfort for as long as I can.

Chapter 26

I love the holiday season, it is my favorite time of year. Homes and streets are decorated with twinkling lights, going to see the *Lights on the Bay* at Sandy Point Park, the scent of pine and cinnamon is in abundance, and the best part of all: an abundance of food. Some of my best memories growing up as a kid occurred during the holidays. Baking cookies in the kitchen with my mom, my dad and Mr. Soto betting on who will win Thanksgiving football games, and joining Roxy and her family for a big Christmas Day celebration all done in the comfort of our pajamas.

Now a new tradition has been added to the holiday season; the faculty and staff Christmas party held the night after winter break begins, at Mrs. Johnson's house. I add my car to the line of cars parked in the gravel semi-circle driveway at the front of the house. Mrs. Johnson's home is breathtaking; a classic Queen Anne Victorian home that she and her husband restored. I admire the red ribbon looped around the white banister leading up to the covered wrap-around porch strung with warm, white glowing Christmas lights. Covering the window on the carved front door is a large, fresh evergreen wreath decorated with small red, green, gold, and silver bulbs secured into the woven branches.

I take a moment to sniff the crisp pine scent of the wreath before finally ringing the doorbell. As I wait to be let in I can hear muffled voices laughing and happily chatting inside the home. The door swings open to Mr. Johnson who ushers me inside with a warm and excited grin. I pass him a bottle of local strawberry wine,

“I brought this for you and Mrs. Johnson. Merry Christmas!”

Mr. Johnson studies the bottle behind the thick frames of his glasses. “Oh, Janice will love this. Come on in,” he ushers with his hand placed gently on the small of my back.

The inside of the home is just as gorgeous as the outside. The floor of the entryway is made of small, black, and white octagon-shaped tiles. The original oak doors of various rooms hold glass doorknobs. The living room - where it seems most of the party is being held - contains a turret with a grand Douglas Fir Christmas tree decorated with white lights and vintage ornaments with a vintage illuminated angel at the very top.

Old homes certainly have a charm to them. However, my parent’s dilapidated tin roof shack from the twenties has turned me off from ever wanting to own a home that was built before the sixties. My mind immediately goes back to Evan’s house. It wasn’t too old, well maintained, and cozy.

I have to force myself to stop imagining what it would be like if we lived together. Our grading date ended without any passionate kisses or confessed feelings. It still stings to think about it.

A few of the teachers in the living room greet me as I allow Mr. Johnson into the updated kitchen

where Mrs. Johnson is setting a freshly baked tray of something wrapped in bacon to cool on the gray granite countertop.

“Janice, look what Carrie brought,” Mr. Johnson calls while presenting the bottle of wine.

Mrs. Johnson’s lips pucker in a tight “O” as her eyebrows raise. “Let’s open this bottle up right now,” she calls excitedly back to her husband across the kitchen island.

“On it!”

Mrs. Johnson tosses her oven mitts on the counter and walks around the island to pull me into a tight hug. “Thank you for the wine.”

“Of course! Mei mentioned that strawberry wine is your favorite.”

Mrs. Johnson leans across the counter and sticks a skewer into the bacon hors d’oeuvres. She fans it with her hand and passes it to me,

“This has been a big hit tonight, you must try it before Evan inevitably eats most of them.”

“Sure, thanks.” I pop the hors d’oeuvres in my mouth. The crispy bacon melts in my mouth before revealing a layer of cream cheese on top of a single Jalapeno.

As I enjoy the saltiness of the bacon mixed with the soft cream cheese and mild heat of the Jalapeno, I immediately recognize why Evan would be the main consumer. While he prefers his food to be much spicier, his favorite food overall is peppers.

“What do you think,” Mrs. Johnson asks.

“It’s really good. I can see why Evan has eaten most of them, he loves peppers.”

I quickly shut my mouth when I realized what I admitted. Ever since Thanksgiving break ended, Mei has been hounding me about the details of our *date*. Meanwhile, both Mei and Mrs. Johnson have been teasing Evan and me relentlessly about how we should get married and that we would have beautiful babies. As I meet Mrs. Johnson’s interested gaze, I can already tell that she is itching to tease me some more.

“Why don’t I help you get this food out to the living room?”

“Sure.”

Mrs. Johnson watches me silently with that teasing grin; deciding to not make any comments at the moment.

“Thank you, Carrie,” she says finally after I’ve plated the hors d’oeuvres.

I hurry out of the kitchen to the living room and set the tray down on the long table covered with a simple red tablecloth and several other hors d’oeuvres platters.

“Yes, Janice made more!”

I look over my shoulder to find Evan beaming down at me before he reaches around me for the bacon-wrapped jalapeno and pops it in his mouth.

“I see you made it.” Evan looks down at my empty hands, “I’ll get you a drink. Wait here.”

Always the gentleman.

Since my visit to his house, it feels like things have gone back to our normal limbo. One moment

he is stepping back to put space between us, and the next his hand will find its place on my lower back. Then if we are talking about my father I've noticed that he'll immediately shut down and only respond with the appropriate answers I would get if I was talking to a stranger.

Roxy's advice again repeats in my head, "*Flirt with him and see if he flirts back. He might be waiting on you to make the next move to make sure you're still interested.*"

I snort at the thought; I've been flirting with him and all I have to show for it is confusion.

"Here you go." Evan passes me a glass filled with a dark pink liquid.

Upon tasting the drink, I realized he had gotten me a glass of the strawberry wine I had brought for the party.

"Thank you," I smile.

"Don't drink it too fast if you don't want to treat everyone to a rendition of, *I Drove All Night.*"

I scowl up at Evan, "Shut up, this wine doesn't have a high alcohol content."

Evan chuckles in response while reaching for another Jalapeno. He looks stunning in the low lighting. His forest green sweater is straining against his broad shoulders. As he leans over to get another pepper I can't help but notice how nice his butt looks in the pair of dark-wash jeans he's wearing.

"So—"

"How—"

Evan and I both start at the same time.

“You first,” Evan nods.

“Oh, yep...so...” What do I even say? *Can we talk about how you are becoming the living embodiment of the song Hot and Cold?* “I forgot what I was going to say, you go.”

At least I’m smart enough to not force something out of my mouth that could cause any potential awkwardness while we are in public.

“I was going to ask how your dad is doing.”

“He’s doing as well as he can in his current situation. But, it’s becoming more obvious that his health is declining.”

“I’m so sorry,” Evan apologizes while gently rubbing his hand up and down my upper arm.

I quirk my eyebrow up questioningly at his touch. Like I said before, any conversation about my dad has made Evan distant. Why is this one suddenly different? However, I’m not going to waste this opportunity.

“I’ll be okay. It means a lot to me that you care,” I cautiously flirt as I step closer to him and place my hand over his that is still on my arm. I’m desperate to know his reaction.

Evan looks down at me curiously and I watch as the gears turn in his mind.

“Of course,” Evan responds slowly before continuing. “So, I have a Christmas present for you. Is there a good time I could stop by and give it to you?”

“Really? I have a gift coming in for you too. How about you come-”

“Carrie, Evan! You’re not going to believe this,” Mei interrupts. “Oh I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Evan lightly chuckles, “what’s up?”

Mei looks between us hesitantly but quickly decides that what she has to tell us is more urgent. My hand falls away from Evan’s hand and my arm suddenly feels cold as Evan’s touch leaves my arm.

“Have you guys noticed that Nadia and Ken aren’t here?”

I quickly scan the room and see no sign of Nadia and Ken making out in a corner somewhere. (I had the unfortunate experience of catching them doing just that in Nadia’s classroom after all of the students had left for the day).

Mei doesn’t wait for our response before continuing, “Well I just heard that as soon as school let out, Nadia and Ken ran off to the courthouse to elope. They are now on their honeymoon.”

“Wow, congrats to them,” Evan smiles.

“That was fast,” I add.

Mei nods before finally scampering off to probably inform the next unknowing faculty member.

“Are you okay,” I ask Evan?

“Yeah, I’m glad that they finally tied the knot.”

I nod as I slowly watch his expression. His smile lights up his eyes and there isn’t a hint of dishonesty in his voice, Evan is genuinely happy that Ken and Nadia got married.

“As long as you’re alright.”

“Hey Evan, let’s play a round of ping pong in the drawing room,” Wilson calls.

“Sure, be right there!”

“Come watch? Maybe kiss my paddle for good luck,” Evan winks.

“Okay, I can do that,” I stutter.

I may not be kissing him this evening, but at least he’s asking for my lips.

Chapter 27

This morning I woke up to a thin blanket of snow sparkling in the sun. It's been several years since southern Maryland has seen a white Christmas. My heart swells with excitement, waking up to snow on Christmas morning has a magical feel to it. I quickly slide out of bed and stuff my feet in a pair of slippers before heading out to the living room.

My father is sitting on the couch watching, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, like he does every Christmas morning.

“Good morning, Merry Christmas,” I greet before kissing my father on the head.

“Merry Christmas,” he smiles before turning his attention back to the movie.

I quickly turn back to the kitchen and begin to prepare breakfast. I wish I was a talented baker like my mom, every Christmas there would be homemade cinnamon rolls with a large bowl of frosting paired with a beautiful tray of arranged fruit and bacon. Breakfast on Christmas morning would look so beautiful it could have easily been featured in *Southern Living Magazine*.

However, I never paid close enough attention to when mom would try to show me how to make her signature recipes. Since Mom died, Christmas breakfast has consisted of eggs, bacon, and toast

with a side of store-bought orange juice. A breakfast that is certainly not worthy of being photographed.

After lunch, we'll be heading over to Roxy's home to spend the remainder of Christmas Day with the Soto's. At least that tradition remains. As I prepare breakfast I gaze out the kitchen window and stare at the small grove of pine trees. The snow from the night before slowly melts off the branches in the morning sun. It's so peaceful I wish I could pause time so I could stay in this moment a little longer.

I dish out breakfast and set the food on the table. When I look over into the living room I see the closing credits for Dad's movie have begun. Perfect timing.

"Dad, breakfast is ready."

Dad doesn't respond. My stomach drops to the floor as I rush into the living room to find Dad leaning back on the couch with his eyes closed and his mouth hanging open. A soft snore rattles in his chest and I breathe a sigh of relief. He's asleep. I gently shake his shoulder and Dad slowly opens his eyes.

"Hmm?"

"Breakfast is ready," I answer softly.

"Oh, okay," he responds groggily.

I hand Dad his cane and help him slowly off the couch to his feet before letting him lean against me as we walk over to the kitchen table. Dad holds both of my hands as he carefully takes his seat in the old wooden chair. He looks over the simple breakfast and smiles at me as he lays the red linen napkin by his plate in his lap.

“Looks great, Caroline. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I nod.

As we eat our breakfast I can’t help but think that this is the last Christmas I will spend with my father. I wish I could convince myself that the doctor is wrong and my dad will live another year, but looking at his withering frame and diminished mobility seems to only prove that he will not make it to next Christmas. Tears burn behind my eyes and threaten to break free. I need to get a hold of myself, I don’t want Dad to spend his last Christmas watching me cry into my scrambled eggs. There will be time to cry later, for now, I need to enjoy the time that I do have with him.

* * *

Shortly after breakfast, my dad returns to his room to take a nap before we open presents. He asked me to not get him anything but I didn’t listen. As soon as I shut his bedroom door I quietly run to the closet in my room pull out two wrapped presents and place them under our tree.

Our Christmas tree may not have the same vintage charm as Mrs. Johnson’s, but the way my family decorates our tree is still my favorite. Handmade ornaments from over the years grace the branches with a few antique ornaments that have been in our family for a few generations filling the spaces. A simple red felt ribbon is tied at the top of the tree. But my favorite decoration by far is the multicolored bubble lights strung around the tree. My parents got these lights for the first Christmas that they were married, and they have been on our tree every year since then. I remember sitting in front of the tree for hours just watching

the bubbles frantically race to the tip of the light when I was a little kid. Hopefully one day I'll get to see my children stare at these lights with the same fascination.

Again my heart sinks. By the time I have kids, my dad won't be around. He won't get to experience holding his first grandchild or having them sit on his lap while watching movies together. He won't be able to take them fishing and tell them the stories he used to tell me from his job as a fisherman. Tears immediately begin to spill over. I hastily pull on my boots and dress myself in my coat, hat, and gloves. I need to be totally alone.

I quietly slip out the backdoor in the kitchen and head to the grove. The cold nips at my nose and stings my cheeks but I need to get out of the house. The wooden bench has a light dusting of snow that I quickly brush off with the sleeve of my jacket. As I take a seat my jaw clenches and I let out a hiss as my butt and thighs quickly begin to freeze.

I'm enclosed in the grove. It's quiet except for the familiar sounds of sparrows twittering songs back and forth to each other in the branches and the occasional tapping of a woodpecker. The birds are the only witnesses as my head falls in my hands and loud whimpers strangle my throat.

I hate that this is my last Christmas with my dad. I hate that my mom is no longer around. And I hate that I am still doing this alone. I may have Roxy helping out when she can and a day nurse to take care of Dad - but when it comes to bearing the grief and the endless questions of what happens next - I am the only one to bear it. The weight of the grief is like a heavy boulder upon my shoulders.

I'm worried if I focus on it for too long I will collapse and be crushed beneath it. This is one of the moments when I wish I had a sibling to help bear this with me. Most of all, this is when I wish I still had Evan to comfort me.

I take my time to get out all of the tears that have built up before finally prying my numb butt off the bench. The weight of the grief may not have lightened, but the pressure in my chest has eased a little so that I can continue with the day. I will do everything in my power to make sure Dad has the best Christmas possible.

When I step back inside I can hear my dad snoring from his bedroom. I quietly slip off my outdoor clothes and boots before heading to the bathroom to take a shower to warm up and change into a dry set of pajamas.

My dad is still asleep when I'm done so I take the opportunity to drape a blanket over my lap and indulge in my favorite movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The Greek music playing in the background settles the tension that was steadily winding up my body like those old wind-up toys.

Just as I'm getting comfortable there is a knock on the front door. I pause the movie and slowly uncover myself from my cozy blanket cocoon. I wasn't expecting anyone this morning, maybe Mrs. Forbes is dropping by to wish us a Merry Christmas.

When I open the door, Evan is standing on the front porch holding a small wrapped present in his hand. I'm glad I changed into a fresh pair of pajamas before he got here.

"Hey," I smile in surprise.

“Hey. I’m sorry to stop by last minute. I know we planned on meeting up when I got back from my parent’s house after the holiday, but I couldn’t wait. I wanted to give you your Christmas present.”

I stare down at the crudely wrapped present and smile. While I’m not the best at wrapping presents, Evan’s wrapping makes me look like a professional.

“That’s okay. Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah,” Evan smiles. He looks around the room, “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s napping right now.”

“I’m sorry, I should’ve texted to let you know that I was coming over. I don’t want to wake him up.”

“It’s fine, dad is a heavy sleeper,” I wave.

We sit on the sofa and I neatly rip the paper off of the small square, blue felt box. I gingerly open the lid to find a beautiful marquise diamond necklace with five stones arranged to look like flower petals.

“Oh wow. Evan, this is beautiful,” I gasp.

“I saw it and had to get it for you,” Evan smiles.

I take the necklace out of the box and hold it up as I watch the clear diamonds sparkle in the sunlight streaming in from the window.

“Let me help you put it on,” Evan asks.

I hand him the necklace, gather my thick hair, and hold it up. A pleasurable shiver runs down my spine as his fingertips lightly brush the back of my neck.

“There,” Evan whispers.

I turn to face him as I gently run my fingers over the pendant.

“How does it look?”

“Beautiful,” Evan whispers as he tucks a few strands of curls behind my ear.

Our gaze lingers on each other. The mid-morning sunlight fills the room and highlights his beautiful hazel eyes staring gently into mine.

I can't believe he bought me a diamond necklace. That isn't something you simply buy for a friend. I want to continue to stay under this gaze but I quickly remember that I have a gift for him as well.

“Oh, I have a present for you too.”

I jump off the couch and run to my room to pull Evan's present off of the top shelf in my closet.

“This is for you.”

I pass him the present wrapped in gold wrapping paper. Evan shreds the gift wrapping off in several chunks to reveal a white rectangular box. He lifts off the lid and folds back the green tissue paper to reveal a reddish-brown leather-bound journal with a red silk ribbon bookmark sewn into the binding. Evan gently lifts the journal from the box and turns it over in his hands while running his palm over the textured spine.

“This is beautiful,” Evan smiles, “Thank you.”

I nod while smiling bashfully down at my lap. A romantic haze surrounds us and when I look back into Evan's eyes there are flames of adoration. If he doesn't bring up how he feels now then I will do it. I'm tired of trying to decode the meaning behind stolen stares and cryptic sentences. Aside from

that - I don't want to wait till my life slows down to make time for him - I want Evan.

I open my mouth to start as a quiet shuffle of footsteps calls our attention. We both look up to see my dad walking into the room. He looks between the both of us in confusion before smiling.

"I didn't know we were expecting company. Hi, Evan. If I knew you were here I would've woken up earlier."

Evan stands and crosses the small room to shake my dad's hand. "I'm sorry I stopped by unannounced."

"Don't worry about it. It's a pleasure to see you again."

"You too, sir." Evan helps my dad over to the couch and ensures my dad is comfortable before finally saying, "I better get going. My parents are expecting me for lunch."

My dad sighs dramatically, "Oh, I was hoping you had come over to propose to Caroline."

"Dad!"

Evan chuckles, "No, not today. Carrie would kill me if I did. If I recall correctly, she said that she refuses to have a Hallmark movie proposal."

My head is spinning. Not today? Is he appeasing my father with his blatant request that Evan marry me? Ever since my dad saw Evan after the closing show he asked Evan to marry me twice that night.

"Do it soon son, I'm not going to live much longer."

"Dad, you're horrible," I scold. "Also it's not good to pressure Evan to marry me when we aren't

even dating.” *At least, not yet.*

“Don’t worry about it, I’m sure if my mom was here she would be joining your dad.”

“Really,” my dad hums, “I would like to meet your mother.”

“If you two aren’t busy tomorrow you should come over.”

“Yes, that would be lovely.”

I glare at my father before answering, “We really shouldn’t impose on your parents last minute.”

“My mom offered, I’m just the messenger.”

“We’ll be there,” my dad confirms while patting my shoulder.

I quickly get off the couch and stand between the two conspirators in my living room.

“Well Evan better be on his way, it takes an hour to get to Annapolis.”

I led Evan out the door and shut the door behind me. “I’m sorry about my dad.”

“I don’t mind. I enjoy talking with your dad.”

I pause before finally asking, “Do you really want us to come over?”

Evan takes my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze, “I do.”

I take a deep breath, unsure of how to feel about all of this. However, seeing him tomorrow might give me a chance to talk to him.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Evan leans over and kisses my cheek, “Good. See you tomorrow.”

I stand frozen on the porch as I watch him get in his car and drive away. A full minute passes and I can still feel his lips against my cheek. My hand goes up to fidget with the pendant of my necklace.

He kissed me.

Chapter 28

The clock on my nightstand says that it's midnight. I stare blankly at the popcorn ceiling of my bedroom while listening to my father's snores echoing up the hall from his room. How did I get roped into visiting Evan and his family tomorrow? It's going to be so awkward seeing his parents again. Throughout the day I've started a cancellation text on my phone just to delete it.

When I told Roxy about our plans for tomorrow, all she could do was scream in excitement. She told me to not think about it so hard because the reason must be obvious; Evan still loves me and he's going to make some grand confession when we get back together. At first, I considered that a possibility, but considering how we will be surrounded by family there is very little privacy for us to have a grand romantic re-connection.

I stare up at the latest framed flowers on my wall. For Christmas Roxy took the bouquet Evan got me for my fall musical and made me another framed arrangement. The warmth of Evan's hand against my back and the strong grip of his hand on mine immediately burned my body. I can still feel the heat from his lips just barely above mine.

I pull the quilt over my head and force my eyes shut. Sleep - I need to fall asleep - once I'm asleep I can take a break from over-thinking about

tomorrow. All I need to do is let my mind drift and I'll manage to nod off. I take a few deep breaths and clear my mind.

Even though I try not to, my mind manages to wander its way back to Evan. The first thing I see is his smile followed by my favorite memories of us; taking classes together, going for walks around campus in hunt of the prettiest colored leaf during the fall, and carpooling home from Baltimore during breaks. I can't help but smile as I remember all the little day-to-day things we'd do together.

Memories gently float from one to another in order from the time that we first met to the time we started dating. I begin to feel myself slowly start to drift off as my memories meander further along in our relationship. As my memories get closer to our ending I try to will them to stop at the last happy memory I have of us during that time, but my mind has other ideas in mind.

* * *

My lungs suddenly decided to stop working as my mother delivered the news over the phone. The feeling is familiar - it happened when I got the news about my mother's cancer - I never thought that I would have to feel this sense of suffocation again so soon.

"Caroline, are you still there," my mother asks; her voice shaking with emotion.

"Dad has cancer," I finally repeat.

Mom was diagnosed with uterine cancer a year ago and since then her health has been going downhill. The rounds of chemo and radiation left her withered and tired with only a worsening

prognosis and a shaved head to show for it. She hasn't been able to garden or quilt in months and she and my father have been living off of my subpar casseroles that I make over the weekend when I go home to help out.

Recently Dad hasn't been feeling well either, and I've had to go home some days during the week to help when Dad has been feeling especially ill. Now not only is my mother sick, but so is my father.

"Yes. The doctor wants to start him immediately on radiation before doing a round of chemo."

My mother's experiences with chemo and radiation play through in my memory; her body became fragile and weak from the treatments. She constantly felt cold and could barely keep any food and liquids down. My mother has become so thin, that she looks more like a living skeleton than a human. It was hard to watch her go through all of that, now I have to watch the same process all over again with my dad.

"What do you need me to do?"

There's a pause before my mother takes a ragged breath, "We need you home more during the week. I'm doing the best I can but I'm so tired. I don't have much longer to live."

The tears that I was fighting to hold back finally spilled over. I don't know if I can do this on my own, I shouldn't have to. It's my junior year of college, I should be studying and going out with my boyfriend, not worrying about how to care for my dying parents. I shake my head at the thought, I feel awful for thinking this way. My parents don't

have anyone else to help them, I am the only help they have. A hospice nurse was offered to come in and help care for my mother a month ago but my parents can't afford what the insurance won't cover. The medication alone takes most of the money I make while working on campus, anything left goes towards the car so that I can drive between Baltimore and home.

“Okay. Tell me what days you want me home and I'll work it out.”

I can hear a fresh round of tears tighten my mom's throat as we work out a plan. By the time we're done, I feel drained.

“Caroline; one more thing?”

“What do you need a mom?”

“I was thinking about Evan.”

“What about Evan?”

“You'll be pretty busy, do you think he'll be okay with you not being able to give him as much time as you do now?”

I pause at her question. Of course, Evan will be okay, he would understand that I need to take care of my parents.

“I'm sure he'll be fine.”

My mom is quiet, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, why wouldn't he be?”

“Relationships take time and attention, it can be hard on a significant other when they can't get the attention they need.”

My blood begins to boil at what my mother is suggesting. Evan is not conceited enough to demand the same amount of attention when he

knows that I am taking over being my parent's primary caregiver. He would help me where he could.

"Evan isn't that kind of guy. He would never be that selfish," I hiss.

"That's not what I'm suggesting. I'm simply stating that it might be hard on him."

"I'm not talking about this with you anymore. I'll see you Wednesday," I say before finally hanging up the call.

This is ridiculous, I'm not giving up the man I love because of a rough season of life.

* * *

I'm exhausted when I make it back to my dorm past midnight. My parents both weren't doing well today and they needed help getting to bed and taking their pills in the middle of the night. Getting up later for my early morning class will be painful; and depending on how my parents feel when they wake up, I might have to go back home tonight to help.

When I walk through the front door of my dorm, Evan is sitting on the couch while working on his laptop. The first draft of his senior thesis is due in two days and he has been spending most of his time in the library working on it whenever he has a free moment between classes and work.

I walk over and lean over the back of the couch to kiss him on the cheek before taking a seat next to him on the couch.

"Hey, what are you doing down here?"

“Waiting for you, I got worried when you weren’t back yet and you didn’t pick up your phone.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologize, “tonight was rough. I meant to respond to your texts but things got busy and then I would forget.”

Evan takes his eyes off the screen of his laptop and frowns. “How long does it take to send a thumbs up to at least let me know that you’re okay?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot. I’ll do my best to respond next time,” I huff.

“I always make sure to respond to you, even when I’m busy.”

“Well excuse me; when I wasn’t cleaning up puke because my dad didn’t make it to the bathroom in time, I was getting my mother her pain meds. It’s hard to text and do that at the same time.”

“You came back way past the time your parents go to bed. You must have had some free time at some point.”

“My parents needed someone to wake them up to give them their midnight meds. When they finally went to bed all I was able to do was set an alarm before falling asleep on the couch.”

Evan slams his laptop shut before standing from the couch. “Whatever. It was stupid of me to worry about you when you’re too busy.”

I shoot up from my seat and stare incredulously at Evan who is fuming at me before his eyes begin to soften with regret.

“Carrie, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant,” he sets his laptop down and holds out his arms to pull me into his chest.

I flinch away as tears freely cascade down my face. “Don’t touch me,” I whisper.

“Carrie-”

“I’ll talk to you later,” I choke before running towards the stairs and up to my dorm room.

Ever since Evan and I have had busier schedules we’ve had several little petty fights, but this one has to be the worst one we’ve had. My mom’s question from a month ago rings in my ears. Will Evan be alright? Maybe my mother was right, maybe having barely any time for Evan is too much for him. I can’t give him the attention he needs, and my parents need me more than we initially anticipated.

* * *

For a few days, I’ve been avoiding Evan. Any time he texts me I give a simple reply while ignoring his phone calls altogether. I needed time to think this through, but the only solution I have come up with is breaking my heart into tiny fragments.

Evan agrees to meet me off campus at a nearby coffee shop. As I walk off campus my legs begin to feel like I’m walking against a current. I can’t stop myself from crying even though I’m out in public and passersby stare at me with concerned grimaces. Why can’t there be some other way?

I wait outside the coffee shop. When Evan arrives his face immediately falls into a concerned frown. He pulls a tissue out of his pocket and presses it against my cheek. I turn my head away

from his touch, I need to do this fast, or else I won't be able to do it at all.

“Carrie, what's wrong,” he asks seriously.

I look him in the eyes and memorize his features. This is the last time that I'll be able to gaze into his eyes and observe the wave in his bangs fall across his right eyebrow. My fingers itch to brush his hair back. Even though I'm keeping my distance between the two of us I can faintly catch the comforting scent of his cologne.

My heart is beating so fast and every fiber in my body is screaming and begging me not to do this. I want to selfishly hold on to him, I want to tell my parents to figure out how to get help from someone else because I can't do it anymore. But the thought of leaving my parents at home and not being there as often as possible so that I can spend time with them before they die also leaves a large gash in my chest. There is no choice that I won't regret.

“We're done. My parents need me now more than ever and I don't have enough time to give to you.”

“Done! What do you mean done?”

“I'm breaking up with you.”

“Carrie, no. Look, I'm sorry about what I said, it was a horrible and selfish thing to say. Don't do this, let's sit down and figure this out.”

I shake my head as my body shakes with the sobs I'm holding in. “No, there is nothing to figure out. You need someone who can give you more time and I need to see my parents to the end of their lives.”

Evan's mouth hangs open as he struggles to find the words to argue with me. I watch as his brows scrunch together and tears begin to well in his eyes. Watching his heart, break before my eyes is unbearable, if I stay any longer I'll break down and take back everything I've said and instead begin begging him to forgive me for trying to break up with him in the first place.

“Goodbye, Evan,” I sob before finally sprinting away from him.

He doesn't call after me as I run back to campus, and I don't look back.

Chapter 29

My eyes snap open as the early morning sun begins to stream through the sheer curtains by my window. I sit up and fight to catch my breath as my heart races. The back of my hands reaches up to wipe my cheeks to find them wet with tears.

I'm tired and feel like I barely slept. *I hate that memory.*

A knock raps on my door, "Caroline, are you awake," my father calls.

"Yeah, I'll be out in a minute!"

I dig my palms into my eyes and take deep breaths as I sit in bed for a moment. My heart slowly calms down as I force myself to think of anything else but that memory. When I look up the necklace that Evan gave me catches my eye as it gleams in the sun on my nightstand. I pick it up and hold it tightly in my hand as I press my fist against my chest. We may not be together, but he's back in my life. Hopefully, soon, he can be mine again.

* * *

I drive slower once I enter the city. Not only is the traffic slowing me down, but so is the anxiety I feel about seeing Evan's family again. It's plain weird to invite the girl who broke up with you, to your

family's home. His parents must hate me. Is this his way of getting back at me for breaking his heart? No; that isn't something he would do. Still, it's weird to invite your ex over to your parent's house.

"The speed limit is thirty-five, Caroline. You can speed up," my father reminds me.

"Right," I mutter.

In two minutes we'll arrive and with each corner I pass I feel my heart accelerating to the point that I feel like my heart will beat out of my chest. Maybe I should turn around and go back home.

As that thought crosses my mind I see Evan waiting on the sidewalk in front of his parent's colonial-style townhouse. He points for me to park on the street in a space behind what appears to be his parent's gray BMW. I guess running away isn't an option now.

I carefully parallel park on the narrow street and turn off the car. Evan is quick to run to the driver's side and open the door for me before helping my father out of the car. I take in the small street located in historic, downtown Annapolis.

Evan's parents live on a street about a block away from the Chesapeake Bay. The sidewalks are laid with uneven red brick and all of the homes are skinny townhouses that easily cost a million dollars or more considering how it is located in Annapolis's historic district with proximity to the water and the Naval Academy. A breeze blows down the street and I can smell the briny air coming off the Chesapeake Bay.

"Carrie, you're here!"

I quickly turn around to see Evan's mom bounding down the three concrete steps leading up to the navy blue front door. Charlotte Stanton is smiling widely as she jogs over to me and wraps me in a tight hug. I slowly wrapped my arms around her in shock; I was not expecting her to be this happy to see me.

After a few seconds, Mrs. Stanton pulls away and looks me over with an approving smile.

"You look beautiful!"

"Thank you," I stutter as I take in the vibrant woman in front of me.

Her bright, white smile reaches up to her hazel eyes. While I doubted two years would do much, Mrs. Stanton looks just as I remember her. High cheekbones that women would kill for, wavy shoulder-length blonde hair, a beauty mark on the left side of her face below her bottom lip, and a small frame.

Mrs. Stanton quickly turns her attention over to my father and greets him just as warmly with a gentle hug. I quickly joined Mrs. Stanton with my dad to do introductions.

"This is my dad, David. Dad this is Evan's mom, Charlotte Stanton."

My dad smiles brightly, "It's nice to meet you Charlotte. Now tell me, I heard from Evan that you might be interested in a little scheme to get our kids married?"

For the love of all that is good; right out of the gate?

"Dad!"

“I’m with Carrie, don’t encourage her,” a commanding voice teases.

I look over to see Mr. Stanton standing in the doorway with an amused smile and a mug with a picture of the Naval Academy’s mascot – a goat – printed on the side. Mr. Stanton is taller than Evan by about an inch or two and his dirty blonde hair is starting to gray in certain areas.

“Good morning, Lieutenant Stanton,” I greet.

Mr. Stanton rolls his eyes before stepping down the stairs and giving me a one-armed hug, “Come on Carrie, you know you can call me Tom.”

“Oh, right,” I nod as I watch Tom introduce himself to my father.

“The same goes for me too, Carrie. I don’t want to hear you call me Mrs. Stanton. Mrs. Stanton is my mother-in-law.”

Does Evan’s parents have amnesia or something? Have they forgotten how I broke up with their son? Evan comes over to me and looks down at the necklace he gave me resting between my collarbones.

“Are you okay? You look like a deer in headlights.”

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine?” Even lifts a brow at me, silently calling me out on my obvious lie. “I wasn’t expecting such a warm greeting,” I finally whisper.

Evan shrugs as if what I just said didn’t have any relevance. “They love you.”

He doesn’t say anything further, instead, he and Tom help my father walk up the steps into the warmth of their home. As I follow everyone down

the hall I look at the pictures that line the pale yellow walls. The first few are Tom and Charlotte on their wedding day with Charlotte in a large ballgown with *Princess Diana sleeves* and Tom in his Naval Uniform. As I walk further down the hall I see pictures of Evan as a little kid and his little sister, Esther. At the end of the hall, before you enter the living room, there is a picture I haven't seen; Evan in his college graduation robes.

I don't have a chance to linger as I am ushered into the living room. The walls are painted a soft pale blue with pictures of Annapolis hanging above the gray L-shaped couch flanked with two white side tables. Sunlight streams in from two windows overlooking the street outside with the nautical-themed Christmas tree standing between the two windows.

Evan's little sister - Esther - is sitting on the couch under the arm of a guy with auburn hair and striking pale blue eyes.

While Evan looks the most like his mom, Esther tends to take more after her dad. Two years ago, Esther was a senior in high school. She hasn't changed much, but her cheeks seemed to have filled out a little more which makes the light dusting of freckles across her face even more adorable. Her chin-length hair is wavy and dirty blond, just like Evan's.

When Esther's eyes meet mine she gasps before jumping off the couch and flinging herself against me in a hug.

"You're here! I didn't believe it when I heard you were coming to visit this loser," Esther exclaims while gesturing towards Evan.

“Ouch, you don’t have to be so mean,” the guy that was sitting on the couch teases as he comes up behind Esther.

“Hey, I’m Patrick. You’re Carrie, right?”

“Yeah, nice to meet you.”

Esther pulls Patrick forward while lovingly wrapping her arms around his. “He’s my boyfriend by the way. Ain’t he handsome?”

“His eyes are beautiful,” I agree.

“Esther,” Charlotte calls, “David is on board with the plan.”

Esther smiles at me with the familiar glint of mischief I have caught before in Evan’s. “Excellent.”

Patrick smiles at me sympathetically, “Good luck.”

“Wait! You know about whatever they’re plotting,” I call.

“Yeah. I would tell you, but I know Charlotte and Esther would kill me and sink me in the Bay with no remorse.”

“That is not true,” Charlotte quips while rolling her eyes.

“Yeah. We would feel *a little* remorseful,” Esther finishes.

A round of laughter fills the living room, but I can’t help but groan as I helplessly meet the eyes of my captors.

Evan comes up behind me puts his hands on my shoulders and whispers, “Don’t worry. Let them have their fun for a little bit and then I’m going to whisk you away.”

“My hero,” I whisper back.

Our eyes hold on each other; the sun shining in from the windows highlights the pale green in his eyes. I love seeing that color - I can only see it in the right lighting and standing close to him. When I catch a glimpse of the green I can't help but stare.

“Aww,” Charlotte and Esther gush.

I pout towards Evan, “Is it time to whisk me away yet?”

“Sorry. It's too early.”

I frown but allow Charlotte to lead me into the dining room where a big buffet for brunch is set up on their white dining room table. The Stantons' and my dad may be plotting to embarrass me for the rest of the day, but at least I can comfort myself with a plate full of food.

Chapter 30

My father has somehow made a whole team out of the Stantons' where he is the captain. Evan looks at me; *awws* are cued from the peanut gallery. Someone compliments my necklace; my father does a dramatic retelling of the story even though he was napping at the time. After a few hours, I am anxiously waiting for Evan to fulfill his promise of whisking me away.

I glance over at Esther who is snuggled under Patrick's arm as they sit against each other on the couch. They are acting all lovey-dovey yet no one has made a single taunt in their direction. Why can't they get teased too? Why are Evan and I the sole targets?

As Charlotte and Tom begin to recall a story about how Evan used to suck his thumb until he was ten, I glance across the room at Evan who is lounging on the living room floor. As we lock eyes I can tell by the way he tightens his jaw that he's had just about enough.

"I think it's time to take a walk. Let's go, Carrie."

"Are the two of you going on a walk together? How cute! Just make sure to pick a good alley to make out in," Esther teases.

“Caroline, as your father I forbid you to do anything inappropriate till you’re married.”

I grab my coat and hurriedly shove my arms into the sleeves, “I’m not having this conversation, goodbye!”

As soon as we step outside, Evan grabs my hand and starts pulling me into a run down the street.

“If we don’t move fast enough one of them will get the bright idea to follow us,” Evan smiles slyly.

“Then hurry,” I laugh as I pick up the pace.

We managed to run to the water and stop in front of the famous, Ego Alley. Only a few boats are docked and bobbing slowly in the water. We finally pause to catch our breaths. My lungs are burning from sprinting in the freezing December air. When I glance in his direction, Evan has already gone back to slow steady breaths. How is he able to go running in weather like this and not feel like a thousand knives are stabbing his lungs?

Evan looks over at me, “I’m sorry about them,” he apologizes with a meek smile.

“I’m sorry about my dad. He finally found the perfect instigators to enable him,” I pant.

Evan reaches to pull my white hat poking out of my pocket and places it on my head.

“Sorry! I know you get cold easily...”

My skin is buzzing from where he touched me. Part of me wants to completely unzip my jacket so that I can get him to come closer and touch me again.

“Thank you,” I smile before staring down at my black boots. There’s a pause between us, “So we’ve

escaped. What should we do now?”

“Want to go see the *Annapolis Christmas Tree*?”

I nod, “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Evan and I walk side by side. I keep waiting for him to take my hand, but every time our hands brush against each other he just apologizes and keeps his eyes forward. His apologies grind annoyingly in my ears. *Don’t flirt with me and then pull away now.*

We’re alone, now would be the perfect time to talk. I want to do what I should’ve done two years ago and figure out a way to still have a relationship with him while caring for my family. I take a deep breath of the cold, briny air and look back on everything that has happened over the last two years.

I wish we could have stayed together, but would we have been able to maintain our relationship through everything? Right before we broke up, I was commuting between home and Baltimore to take care of my parents on top of working and going to school. At the time Evan was working on his senior thesis while student teaching, and he was picking up more hours at his on-campus job. We barely saw each other.

The Annapolis Christmas Tree comes into view with the Chesapeake Bay as a beautiful backdrop behind it. Evan stops and silently stares up at the tree. The pressure in my chest feels like it will explode. I can’t stand questioning if I made the right decision or not. At the end of the day, I put my family first because I love them and will do anything for them. We can work out how we feel about how it impacted our relationship.

Roxy would be thrilled that I am finally taking her advice.

“We need to talk,” I start. Evan looks down at me in surprise but nods for me to continue. “I don’t know if breaking up with you was the right thing to do. At the time we were both so busy and my family required so much attention; I thought that it wasn’t fair to you that I couldn’t give our relationship the time it deserved and I thought it wasn’t fair to my parents to not have enough time to give them the care they needed. I made a really hard decision and screwed the both of us over with it.

“However, what I do know is that ever since we broke up I have missed you and I continued to love you...I still love you. I know that this is random and out of the blue, but...”

But what? I just spilled my entire guts to him and expect him to just say, *yeah it’s cool that you dumped me?* I didn’t give him a chance to try to figure out a way for us to still be together even though we were busy, I decided for us. Now here I am again deciding to talk with him about something that he might not be ready to talk about yet. This was a mistake. Why did I have to open my mouth and give the world’s most embarrassing monologue?

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t-”

“I still love you too,” Evan interrupts.

“Wait, what?”

“I still love you too.”

“Even though I dumped you, over my parents?”

Evan pauses before speaking, "I'm going to be honest, it really hurt that you didn't want to try to make things work. However, looking at everything you do for your dad, I can see why you made that decision. The love and loyalty you have for them is admirable."

My heart sinks to my feet. I knew I hurt him badly but to hear him admit it is difficult to hear.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as tears begin to roll down my cheeks and drip from my chin.

Evan takes my face in his hands and begins wiping away my tears with the pads of his thumbs.

"If a woman is willing to do whatever it takes to help her family; that is the kind of woman I want by my side."

"But-"

"I mean it. I want you."

"Then why didn't you say so earlier?"

"I didn't know if you wanted to continue to give more focus to your family considering the current circumstances. Your dad needs a lot of care and I didn't want to put you in the position again where you had to choose between me and your family. But I wanted so badly to still be around you that I tried to take every opportunity I could to see you."

"You could never get in the way..." I stop as my mind begins to reel.

Evan would never be in the way, if anything he would help. I had the same thought just a couple of years ago but somehow along the way I never let him have the opportunity to help me. The idea of not having to face caring for my dying father alone feels like taking a deep breath after holding it. My

family has always been my responsibility, but so far a nurse cares for my father during the day. I have already allowed someone in to help me.

“I don’t want to keep doing this alone anymore. I want you to be here with me.”

Evan pulls me in till our bodies are pressed against one another. He searches my eyes briefly before finally capturing my lips with his. My eyes flutter shut as my head begins to spin. It’s nostalgic how his lips feel on mine; they have the same sweet urgency that they did a few years ago. His lips are intoxicating and his touch ignites my skin underneath my coat. I don’t want to stop kissing him or feeling his fingers get knotted in my curls as he gently pulls on my hair. My fingers lace through his light waves before firmly knotting in his hair and pushing his head harder into mine. I want to get as close to him as I possibly can and never let go.

“Get a room!”

We suddenly spring apart when a stocky old man yells at us while angrily waving around his newspaper.

“Sorry sir,” Evan calls respectfully before grabbing my hand and quickly leading me back up the hill toward his parent’s home.

“I guess we should have listened to Esther,” I tease once we’re out of earshot of the grumpy old man who takes a seat on a bench by the Christmas tree and begins to read his newspaper.

Evan throws his head back in a laugh before kissing the top of my head. “Don’t tell her that when we get back.”

I nod and we fall into a comfortable silence. As I enjoy the feeling of Evan holding my gloved hand. I suddenly stop in my tracks before we get too far.

“What’s wrong?”

“Can you kiss me again? I want to double-check that I’m not dreaming.”

Evan’s lips quirked up into a crooked smile, “I’ll kiss you as many times as you want,” he whispered.

We share several more kisses before the cold forces us to hurry back to Evan’s house in search of warmth. When we return with our hands interlocked, everyone stares at the two of us in silent excitement before erupting in raucous cheers.

Chapter 31

Leaving Evan behind at his parent's house was harder than I thought it would be. Waiting for Evan to come back from his parent's house was even harder. Meanwhile, Dad walked around the house with a gloating smile on his face. It seems Dad has decided to credit himself for Evan and me getting back together.

I check my watch for the tenth time in an hour. Evan called me last night to make plans to go on a date to the Marine Museum shortly after he got back home from Annapolis. It feels like time is moving at a snail's pace. I want to see Evan now. Even though it's only been two days I feel like I'm going through withdrawal from his touch. Now that we're finally back together I'm aching to make up for all the kisses and lingering touches we've missed. Also, I would love a break from Dad's incessant teasing.

I catch my father taking on a Cheshire cat grin from the corner of my eye. He has noticed that I have been longingly staring out the window from the couch instead of paying attention to the movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*. I, however, have decided to ignore his taunting stare.

"I'm sure Evan will be here soon. He knows better than to not be punctual with you."

I lean back against the couch and sink into the sagging cushions while nodding. Patience is the one virtue I believe I do well with; but when it comes to seeing Evan, I find it hard to sit still. I pull back the sleeve of my white sweater and check my watch again; Evan should be here in three minutes.

Even though I'm sure my father will continue to tease me for doing so, I once again keep my eyes trained on the window. I watch droplets of water drip from the icicles hanging from the gutters above. Each drop of water twinkles vibrantly in the sunlight before gathering in muddy puddles along the house. I look down again at my watch and see the time is currently three-fifteen.

Gravel on our driveway crunches underneath car tires. I look up from my watch and see Evan's SUV slowly pulling into our driveway before finally parking.

"Wait for him to knock," Dad instructs while grabbing my hand to keep me from flying off the couch.

"But—"

"A lady should never look too eager. Make the man work."

I huff out a sigh and stay put on the couch while I listen for Evan's footsteps leading up to the door. Evan knocks firmly on the door and Dad's nurse, Wanda, rushes in from the kitchen shouting,

"I'll get it," while primping her shoulder-length blond hair that is gradually turning white.

My father nods in approval while I watch as Wanda opens the door.

“Evan, it’s so good to see you again! You look very handsome today.”

“Thank you, Wanda,” Evan smiles sheepishly before heading over to Dad and me.

Evan and Dad shake hands before Evan reaches out his hand to me to help me up from the couch and wraps me in a hug while giving me a chaste kiss.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yep!” I turn back to my dad and kiss his cheek, “I’ll be back after dinner. Call me if you need anything.”

Dad pats my shoulder, “Alright, you two have fun.”

“We will.”

Dad turns his attention to Evan and starts pointing his finger, “Take care of Caroline, and no funny business. Got it?”

“Yes sir.”

Wanda sighs while pressing her hand against her heart, “Young love. That reminds me of Victor from Montana. Oh, I can still feel the wind blowing in my hair as I rode on the back of his motorcycle.”

“That sounds interesting. You’ll have to tell me that story later,” I quickly interrupt Wanda before she gets swept away in another story to tell.

Evan and I quickly say our goodbyes to Wanda before heading out the door. As Evan closes the front door behind us we can hear Wanda sigh,

“I hate to see him go, but love to watch him leave.”

Evan's eyes meet mine as amusement dances across his gaze. He gently takes my hand in his and guides me to his car. As we drive away Even laughs,

“I can see why Roxy nicknamed your dad's nurse, Wacko Wanda.”

I flash him a teasing smile, “That's not the only reason. Wanda loves to share stories from when she was younger. Today she told me a story about a whirlwind affair she had with a rich man from Spain who was twenty years her senior.”

Evan bites the inside of his cheek while he chuckles under his breath. “Interesting, I must hear the story.”

I lean my head back against the seat as I laugh and begin to retell Wanda's tale.

* * *

The Marine Museum is fairly empty when we arrive. It's towards the end of the day and people are mostly staying home to prepare for the approaching new year. With the museum mostly to ourselves, it creates a peaceful atmosphere as we meander through the exhibits containing information on boats that sailed across the Chesapeake, before visiting the river otter exhibit where two otters gracefully dive into the water of their tank.

Coming to the Marine Museum is the perfect date. The small museum makes everything feel intimate while you get to enjoy the view of the Patuxent River from the large windows. There aren't any large crowds and it highlights the natural beauty of the surrounding area. This date reminds me of how Evan and I would search for

obscure hole-in-the-wall galleries and restaurants in Baltimore to escape the hustle and bustle of campus.

As we continue to meander throughout the small museum, Evan's hand never leaves mine. The warmth of his palm mixes with mine, and every so often he will give my hand a loving squeeze.

When we're not laughing at Evan telling cheesy jokes inspired by exhibits, we are walking in comfortable silence. Everything feels so natural, almost like we were never apart, to begin with. Our relationship feels like an heirloom quilt, warm and comfortable yet the stitching binding the squares together is still as secure as when the quilt was finished. However, something feels a little different. Our time apart has made both of us appreciate the present more instead of constantly daydreaming about the future. Of course, my mind has wandered to the possibilities of our relationship for the future - marriage, living in the same home, starting a family - but enjoying our date is at the forefront of my mind.

Evan and I stop at the rays exhibit where they swim in circles around a shallow pool. I reach my hand into the pool and gently pet the rough back of a sea ray as it swims past.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

I shake the water off of my hand, “Sure.”

Evan leads me over to a nearby bench, our thighs press against each other as we sit and continue to watch the sea rays glide through the water.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day; about not wanting to care for your father alone. I wanted to know how I can help. Honestly, I should’ve asked you this question back when you were taking care of both of your parents, I’m sorry I didn’t.”

I lean my head against Evan’s shoulder and breathe in his familiar cologne.

“I should’ve said something too, instead of waiting for you to offer to help. I’m sorry for not saying anything, and for not giving you a chance to try to help me in the first place.” Evan turns his head and kisses the top of my head while his thumb traces circles around my knuckles.

“We both got trapped in doing our own thing. That’s why I want to make sure I know what you need me to do.”

“I want to spend as much time as I can with Dad since he’s getting closer to the end of his life. So even though you and I won’t get as much alone time as we would like right now, I want to make sure I make as many memories as I can with Dad before he dies.”

Evan hums to himself, “Okay. Then would it be alright if, for some of that time, I hang out with you and your dad?”

“As long as you’re okay with constantly being hit on by Wanda,” I laugh.

I listen to Evan’s chuckle rumble from his chest, “I can handle that.”

I turn my head up to Evan with a content smile, “Sounds good.”

Evan leans down and caresses my jaw with his free hand before gently capturing my lips. My eyes slowly shut as my body relaxes and presses further into Evan's. When we pull apart I bask in the warm glow of his smile aimed solely at me.

It may have taken us a few years apart to figure it out, but this is how it should be. Evan and I together, facing each problem head-on. Both of us comfortably resting in the security of each other.

Chapter 32

Winter break has come to an end and a new year has begun which means it is time to go back to school to start the second semester.

Wanda knocks on the door first thing in the morning before walking in.

“Good morning,” she smiles brightly at my father and me.

Wanda quickly takes off her coat and sits at the kitchen table with my father as he slowly continues to eat his breakfast of toast and eggs.

Ever since we came back from the Stanton’s house last week, my father seems to have slowed down entirely. His walking is at a snail’s pace and less stable, he eats his meals slower, and for the majority of the day, he spends it napping. I feel sick every time I think about all the signs he’s showing of the end being near. Mom deteriorated quickly as well, but that still didn’t prepare me to watch my father go through the same thing.

Another knock on the door pulls me out of my thoughts and I quickly walk to the living room to enter the front door. Evan is standing on the front stoop with a bright smile and bundled up in his black pea coat. My heart flutters against its cage in my chest as he quickly leans down to give me a chaste kiss before I invite him into the house.

Wanda peaks out from the kitchen and her eyes light up.

“It’s good to see you again, Even,” she purrs.

Evan smiles impishly before crossing the room to take Wanda’s hand and give it a friendly pat.

“Good morning Wanda.” He greets me before heading over to my father.

I watch as Evan gently places his hands on my father’s shoulders and checks to make sure my father doesn’t need anything before we head off to work.

Since our date at the Marine Museum, Evan has come by every day to visit me and dad. Evan will normally arrive around lunchtime and sit with us at the kitchen table while we listen to Wanda share one of her riveting tales while shamelessly flirting with Evan. After lunch we watch Wanda guide Dad back to bed for a nap and then head out of the house for the afternoon. Sometimes we take a walk on the pier around Solomon’s Island and other times we go back to Evan’s house to watch a movie...or pretend to watch a movie while we hold each other close on the couch and share passionate kisses. In the evenings we have dinner with Dad before Evan heads home for the night.

I still feel a little guilty sometimes about how much time Evan spends at my house. It’s not easy to watch someone deteriorate - nor to be hit on by a late middle-aged nurse more than his girlfriend. However, just as I start to feel that guilt, Evan flashes me a smile between Wanda’s stories and helping Dad reorganize his unused tackle box. That’s all it takes, his smile reaching up to his loving hazel eyes makes that guilt fall away.

Even though the way we spend our days together has changed since we were in college, everything that was natural in our relationship has returned. We are constantly laughing at our banter, randomly breaking out into funny dance moves, and Evan simply smiles and nods when I insist on things being organized a certain way.

“We better head out,” Evan calls to me quietly as Wanda helps my father up from the table to his room to take his morning nap.

“Sounds good,” I nod as I head over to my father to tell him goodbye.

I shrug on my winter coat as Evan gets the door.

When we are in Evan’s car I ask, “What do you think everyone’s reaction will be when we show up this morning?”

Evan chuckles while throwing me a glance and then looking back at the road.

“We will be like celebrities for the day.”

* * *

When we arrive at school, Mei immediately notices us walking into the building with my hand in his. We watch in amusement as Mei shoots up from her desk and sprints out of the office and into the lobby in a red flash. Her sparkling cherry earrings are swaying frantically from her earlobes as she smooths the red pencil skirt under the peplum of her matching suit jacket.

“You two! You’re both! You’re here! You’re...” Mei jumps up and down breathlessly between her incomplete sentences.

“Mei, take a breath please,” I beg as I watch her do more jumping and stuttering than breathing.

Mei takes a few deep gulps of air before finally saying, “You two are finally together! Thank goodness, it was so painful watching the both of you stare at each other longingly. It was honestly like watching the sixth graders flirt.”

“Thanks - I think,” Evan smiles while looking towards me in hopes of interpretation.

I simply shrug in response.

“Well, I’m going to get set up for the day, see you in the teacher’s lounge,” I smile to Evan.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

As I walk towards my office my phone *pings* to let me know that I got a text message. I pull my phone out and see Evan sent me a message saying,

Evan: How could you abandon me? Mei is now grilling me about when we made our relationship official.”

I let out a small laugh as I set my bag down on my desk.

Me: You should be thanking me, I just handed you an opportunity to make up the most ridiculous and elaborate story you can think of.

Evan: I already tried. She said that you don’t seem like the type to go skydiving.

Me: Okay, tell her to come find me. I’ll take care of it.

Evan: Good, you also owe me for leaving me to fend for myself.

*Me: I’m sure I can think of some way to repay you.
;)*

I set down my phone and began looking over my to-do list in my teaching agenda. It looks like I will be the one to find Mei instead. I need to copy some scenes to assign to my students and the only printers are located in the admin office.

A knock on my door calls me to look over my shoulder at Mei smiling expectantly. "I'm sure you know what I'm here for."

I nod knowingly as I grab my script of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "I do. I'll give you the story as I make some copies," I wave the script in my hand.

Mei bounces on the balls of her feet while excitedly clapping her hands together. "Yay! And make sure you tell me the real story, Evan tried to tell me some tall tale."

"I'm sure he did," I laugh.

Mei follows me out of the theater, listening intently as I retell the story of how Evan and I finally got together the day after Christmas. Of course, she tried to find out more details than the quick summary I gave her, but some things I want to keep between myself and Evan - like when an old grouch yelled at us to get a room.

By the time I have sated Mei's curiosity and made my copies there isn't a lot of time left before the students are allowed into the building. Mei's rapid-fire questions have left me needing a third cup of coffee for the morning. I hastily make my way to the teacher's lounge, hopefully, there is still coffee left in the coffee pot.

When I open the door, Evan is waiting with a second cup of coffee next to his. We smile at each other as I walk over to the table. Evan holds out my

cup for me to take. My hands begin to heat as they wrap around the Shakespeare mug. The rich aroma of the coffee mixed with sweet caramel creamer invites me to take a sip. I hum in approval,

“Thank you, this is great.”

“Of course,” Evan smiles as he stands from his seat.

Evan leans down to press a firm kiss on my cheek.

“You missed Nadia and Ken. Ken got Nadia a four-carat diamond ring.”

“Wow, that’s a big diamond.”

I wonder how Ken managed to afford a ring like that.

“You’re not wanting a diamond that big are you,” Even teases.

I cough on my latest sip of coffee. There’s no way Even is thinking about proposing to me already. Right? I wouldn’t say no if he did, but I doubt that Evan would be ring shopping when we’ve only been dating again for almost two weeks. However, it wouldn’t hurt to at least tell him what I like.

“No. I still want a very simple ring.”

“Marquise cut with two triangle-cut side stones on a yellow gold band. Would that be good?”

Thankfully I was not taking another sip of coffee or else I would be choking again. That description is very specific. I remember we talked briefly about rings while we were in college, but nothing that specific.

“Are you proposing to me right now? Because that was a very vivid ring description.”

Evan laughs, “No. That was the dream ring you described in college, remember?”

My eyes narrow, he slipped up and now he’s covering for it. “I don’t remember that.”

“You did, on your twenty-first birthday after you drunkenly serenaded me with Celine Dion.”

My cheeks ignite and I quickly take another drink of coffee to hide behind my mug. Evan watches in amusement and I see boyish mischief dance across his eyes. I hope nobody overheard our conversation.

“Whatever,” I finally mutter after swallowing.

Evan sweetly rubs circles on my back as the bell rings to announce our students’ arrival. We quickly hug goodbye before heading off to our separate rooms.

As I make my way back into the theater my chest twists in disappointed knots. I’m disappointed that Evan didn’t propose to me. This is ridiculous. I shake my head, I would hate to have Evan propose to me at school so there is no need to be disappointed. However, I can’t stop my mind from wondering if perhaps he’ll propose to me at lunch.

Chapter 33

I'm practically bouncing on the balls of my feet as I head down the hall to the teacher's lounge for lunch. This semester the lunch duty times have been switched. No longer will I have to monitor lunch in the cafeteria on Mondays and Fridays. It still seems that Evan and I have been paired to monitor together, but until summer vacation we will have lunch duty on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

I'm excited to spend my first lunch period back from winter break eating and relaxing in the teacher's lounge. As I open the door the room is surprisingly quiet. What is going on?

"Gah!"

I jump back into the hallway and I let out a high-pitched shriek. Students quickly turn their heads at the same time to watch me gasp for breath while clutching my chest. Meanwhile, Evan steps out from the teacher's lounge doubling over himself with laughter while holding his hand out to me apologetically.

"I'm so sorry Carrie, I thought you were Wilson. You both walk so quietly," he apologizes between laughing fits.

Several students join in with Evan's laughter.

"Who knew Ms. Monroe gets scared so easily," students loudly whisper to each other.

I can already feel the eyes of several students eyeing me with plans for future pranks. Evan is going to pay for this; if he thinks he can pull pranks with only Wilson trying to get him back then he has another thing coming. However, for now, I better act normal to not tip him off.

“What did I miss,” Wilson asks behind me.

I pout my bottom lip and I frown in his direction, “You’re welcome.”

Wilson tilts his head to the side before his eyes widen when he realizes what just happened.

“Sorry. Thanks for taking one for the team.”

“Sure thing,” I mutter before heading into the room and escaping from the onlooking students.

When I enter the room Nadia is flashing her new wedding rings to Mei.

“Aren’t they beautiful,” Nadia sighs.

“Ken did a good job picking them out,” Mei agrees halfheartedly.

“Oh Ken didn’t pick them, I had him take me to the jewelry store and he handed over his credit card once I picked what I wanted.”

Mei hums before turning her attention over to me.

“Carrie, there you are,” she gasps while shuffling over to me.

“Yes,” I question.

Nadia grimaces in my direction before finally strutting over to me and flashing her left hand in my face.

“Carolyn, did you hear the news? Ken and I got married over the break.”

I give Nadia the courtesy to look down at her rings, though I do roll my eyes when I’m sure she can’t see me. On her left hand is a large diamond ring surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds. Her wedding band arches around the oval shape of the engagement ring to look like a princess crown, which is also completely covered in diamonds. The ring suits her - it’s large and flashy.

“I heard. Your rings are beautiful.”

Nadia frowns, “You’re not heartbroken that I married Ken, right? I mean, you did go on a little date with him.”

I bite back a mean retort that has something to do with her marrying a man-child and give a tight smile, “Not at all. I’m happy for both of you.”

Evan walks in and a sly grin spreads across Nadia’s lips.

“Hey Evan, how are you taking the news?”

“News?”

Nadia sticks out her hand to display her rings to Evan.

“Oh wow, you got married! Congrats,” Evan cheers.

“Why is no one excited that Ken and I got married?”

Mei rolls her eyes, “We all said, congratulations.”

Nadia lets out a frustrated groan as Ken walks into the room. He claps Evan on the back,

“Hey Evan, I heard about you and Sweet Caroline, congrats dude!”

“Ken! Don’t...” Nadia suddenly stops before running out of the room while covering her mouth with her hand.

“Whoa, Nadia,” Ken calls before chasing after Nadia.

Mei looks between me and the door in confusion before finally announcing she is heading back to the admin office. I’m surprised Mei didn’t follow after Ken and Nadia to see what was going on. I glance around the room to see everyone has gone back to their conversations.

Nadia looked sick and Ken couldn’t go into the women’s restroom. Someone should check on her. I sigh, I guess I’ll go do it.

“I’m going to go check on Nadia,” I whisper to Evan before releasing his hand that had found mine.

Evan pauses before nodding.

I walk out the door and down the hall in the direction I saw Nadia and Ken run towards. Why am I even checking on Nadia? She’s hated me since my very first day here, the last person she’ll want to check on her is me. I should just mind my business. At the end of the hall, I find Ken waiting outside the women’s bathroom while nervously wringing his hands. Ken looks up at me when he notices my approach.

“Is she okay?”

Ken looks around before leaning towards me, “I don’t know, she’s been feeling...sick lately. Could you go in and check on her for me?”

I consider saying no, but the concern in his eyes stops me.

“Yep. Wait out here.”

The bathroom is surprisingly empty for lunch hour, even though it’s not the closest bathroom to the cafeteria there will normally be a few people in here. I hear loud retching coming from one of the stalls – I look down and notice Nadia’s heeled feet on the tiled floor behind her knees. It feels like several minutes go by before the retching finally stops and the toilet flushes. However, Nadia doesn’t come out, she sits on the floor and leans back against the stall with a tired groan.

I knock on the stall door and Nadia jumps.

“Hey, Nadia. Are you okay?”

I listen as Nadia slowly gets back on her feet unlocks the door to open it and scowls at me.

“I’m fine. You can go now.”

Her face is pale and she looks exhausted.

“Maybe you should go lay down in the nurse’s office for a little bit. It sounds like you were throwing up for a while in there.”

Nadia silently shoves past me and walks over to the sink. She scoops water from her hands into her mouth and swishes water around before spitting it out.

“Why are you even here?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’ve been taking care of my sick parents for a couple of years now, I guess when I see someone not feeling well my knee-jerk reaction is to make sure they’re okay,” I shrug.

Nadia sighs as she stares at me through the reflection of the bathroom mirror. "I'm not contagious," she finally admits, "I'm sure you can guess what's wrong with me."

My eyes widen and I quickly check one more time to make sure we're alone, "Are you pregnant," I whisper.

"Yeah. So are you going to go tell everyone now? Or maybe tell Mei and she can spread the word that Ken knocked me up."

I shake my head, "Of course not. You should share this happy news when you and Ken are ready."

Nadia studies my face, "If someone asked, what would you tell them?"

"You ate something bad for breakfast, and you'll be fine."

She turns around and leans against the sink while crossing her arms over her chest.

"You're not going to try to get back at me for spreading that rumor about your date with Ken?"

I'm surprised she admitted that she was the one to spread the rumor.

"I wouldn't." We're both silent. "Besides it being early, is there another reason why you don't want people to know that you're pregnant?"

Nadia sighs, "Because everyone knows that we eloped. It wouldn't be hard for someone to do the math and figure out that I got pregnant before we got married. I don't want people to think we had a shotgun wedding because I'm pregnant."

She's not wrong, I would have thought the same thing.

"If you didn't get married because you two found out you were pregnant then what other people say doesn't matter."

Nadia rolls her eyes, "Easy for you to say. People pitied you with that rumor about you earlier this school year. And now people are focused on you because they're happy for you and Evan - but not one person has seemed excited for me."

Everything clicks in my brain, Nadia knows that not a lot of people like her and usually don't have anything nice to say about her behind her back. My heart sinks and I feel guilty about how I have complained about her behind her back.

"I'm sorry people haven't seemed happy for you. It might not mean much, but I am happy for you and Ken - both for the marriage and your baby."

"Whatever," Nadia huffs.

I nod and start heading out the door before stopping, "Ken is waiting outside for you, he looks really worried. I'll let him know that you're okay."

She doesn't answer. As I begin to open the door she calls, "Caroline."

I look over my shoulder and see Nadia giving me a small smile while staring down at the tile floor.

"Thanks."

"Sure thing."

As soon as I walk out the door Ken quickly meets my gaze with his eyes darting around

anxiously.

“She’s okay, once she’s done cleaning herself up she’ll be out.

“You’re sure? And the baby? Is the baby okay?” Ken’s concern is absolutely sweet and adorable. “I mean...” he stutters when he realizes that he just admitted to Nadia being pregnant.

“It’s very normal for mothers to get sick during pregnancy. My mother was sick for a long time when she was pregnant with me.”

“Really? Do you think Nadia will be sick for a long time?”

Oh boy, perhaps my mother was not the best example in this situation.

“It’s rare that women get sick past the first trimester.”

“Trimester?”

“May I suggest that you look up information on pregnancy?”

“Got it, thanks for the homework,” Ken nods.

Nadia quietly emerges from the bathroom still looking a little green. I watch as Ken wraps his arms around Nadia and comfortingly rubs her back. Nadia and Ken look up at each other and share quick kisses that quickly become sloppy.

“I’m going to head back. See you guys around,” I interrupt.

They quickly pull apart, “Thanks Sweet Caroline, we owe you one. Right, Nadia?”

“I guess,” Nadia grumbles.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” As I start to walk away a genius idea strikes; it would cut into my class time but I’m sure my students wouldn’t mind. I quickly turn back to Ken and Nadia, “Actually there is one thing I would like help with. Could one of you sit with Evan’s class after lunch for a few minutes?”

Both Ken and Nadia’s brows scrunch together before Nadia finally answers, “I have a planning period. I can sit in for a few minutes.”

“Great.”

“What exactly are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about it, the less you know the better.”

Nadia shrugs and takes Ken’s hand in hers, “Fine by me.”

I quickly thank Nadia before heading back to the teacher’s lounge; there are fifteen minutes left before the lunch period is over. Evan gets up from his seat as soon as I walk into the room and walks over to me.

“Is everything okay,” he asks quietly.

“Yeah, she’s fine,” I smile.

“That’s good,” he sighs while gently rubbing circles on my back and leading me over to the chair next to his at the table.

As I join him for lunch I begin to plot my revenge. Evan will never know what is coming.

* * *

One of the best things about being a drama teacher is that I have a variety of props at my disposal.

Another perk of being a teacher is knowing that when a teacher plans for a little mischief against another teacher, the students are typically more than willing to help. It is the perfect recipe to create a prank to get back at Evan.

The thrill sends my blood pumping and excited goose bumps to spread across my body. I've never tried to pull a prank on Evan, especially not in front of students. However, with my planning and directing skills, it feels like a waste to never use it for something like this. I guess over this school year I have gained a new level of confidence.

All of my students have mischievous smiles painted across their faces as I prep our props. I set the remote-controlled mouse underneath a red bucket. My lips twist into a grimace as I handle the toy mouse; I hate mice, they make my skin crawl whether they're real or not. However, I'm willing to deal with the fake mouse for the sake of the plan.

"Is everyone comfortable with the plan," I call once I have the mouse under the bucket.

"Yeah," my class cheers.

"Alright. Max, go get Mr. Stanton, everyone else, let's take our places on the risers."

Max, who is thankfully no longer concussed, sprints out of the theater and down the hall to get Evan. Meanwhile, I checked one more time that the remote for the mouse was on and that the mouse would still move underneath the bucket. As the bucket slides across the floor of the stage, my excitement only grows even more. This is going to be good.

Voices from outside the theater quickly call our attention, Evan and Max will walk through the doors any second. I nod to my students and they all begin to play their parts. A few pretend to be scared while a few others are either teasing me or acting annoyed. Evan and Max burst through the doors and jog towards the stage. I hide the remote in my fist and direct the mouse to push the bucket around the stage as I let out a few frightened squeals.

“I heard there’s a mouse in here?”

I frantically nod, “Yes! It must have gotten in from the doors behind the stage. Get it!”

Evan looks around at the other students.

“We would have gotten it but Ms. Monroe won’t let us.”

Evan waves his hand, “It’s alright. We don’t know what diseases it could be carrying.”

A few of the students pretending to be scared let out a few whimpers as Evan heads toward the bucket. Just as he reaches down to grab the bucket and slip a clipboard he brought underneath, I press the toggle on the remote and send the mouse racing away. It’s time to send Evan on a little chase.

It is hard to stay in character as I watch Evan go after the mouse just for it to barely escape his grasp. My students however easily break character and begin cackling at Evan being thwarted by a toy mouse. Evan looks back at me with a quirked brow, the jig is up. I slow the mouse to stop just in front of Evan’s feet.

He bends down lifts the bucket and immediately starts laughing as he picks up the toy mouse.

I finally allow myself to break character and laugh as he walks back over to me with the mouse.

“Gotcha,” I beam proudly while holding up the remote.

Evan turns over the mouse in his hand as he inspects it while playfully shaking his head.

“You did. I did think that there was a mouse at first.” Evan turns to look at my class, “And all of you were in on this?”

My students rapidly nod their heads with excited grins plastered on their faces. Evan turns back to me and hands me the mouse.

“Not bad, Ms. Monroe.”

Evan quickly bids my class goodbye before jogging back to his class.

I think I will consider this little prank a success.

Chapter 34

Winter gave way to the warmth of late spring as the school year came to a close. I glance around my office once I finish packing a small box of office materials to store at home until the next school year. I can feel my heart squeeze at finishing my first year as a drama teacher. It's crazy to think about everything that has happened in just ten months. There was a lot of excitement mixed with monotony - a lot of surprises mixed with the normal. It was challenging and fun all at the same time. But I have to say the best thing by far that happened was Evan coming back into my life.

A quick knock on my open door causes me to spin around and find Evan waiting at the door.

“Ready to go?”

I pick up my box, “Yep!”

Evan takes the box out of my hands and we walk side by side out of the school building and to his car.

“Carrie, Evan! Are you guys coming to the Beach Bar, tonight,” Mei calls from across the parking lot from her car.

“Sure are,” Evan calls.

Mei cheers before ducking into her cherry red Mazda and driving out of the parking lot. Evan

gently places my box in the trunk of his car before getting the door for me.

As we drive back to my house I can't stop worrying about going out tonight. Something in my gut keeps telling me that I should cancel and stay home. Over the last few months, Dad has deteriorated. He is now bed-bound and has been eating less for the last couple of weeks. The hospice doctor last night said that my dad should expect to live for a few more weeks, but a nagging voice in the back of my head tells me that he has less than that.

Evan seems to notice my silent anxiety reaches over for my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

"It's okay if you want to stay home tonight. We can order takeout and watch a movie."

"Are you sure? I know you wanted to go with everyone to the bar to celebrate the end of the school year."

Evan pets the back of my head, "I don't want to go without you."

A small smile pulls at the corners of my mouth as I reach over and pat his thigh before resting my hand on his shoulder for the rest of the drive home. I'm still in awe of how Evan is back in my life. It's comforting to know that without fail, Evan will be constantly in my life.

Wanda is sitting on the living room couch when we return home.

"How is he," I ask nervously.

Wanda stands up from the couch and pats me gently on the shoulder. "I've been making him as comfortable as I can."

I nod as I take a shaky breath, “Thank you, Wanda. I really appreciate you taking care of him.”

Wanda gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze, “Of course, it’s what I’m here for. I better head out but you know how to reach me if you need me.”

Evan sees Wanda out of the house while I make my way to my father’s room. He’s awake like he usually is when I get home from work. The small TV on his dresser is playing *M.A.S.H.* as usual on the screen. My dad turns his head in my direction as I enter the room and blinks tiredly.

“How was your last day of school?”

“It was good, but I think the kids were more excited for summer break than I was.”

My dad lets out a little chuckle as I lean over to hug him and kiss his forehead.

“You’re still going out tonight, right?”

I shake my head, “No, I think Evan and I are going to stay in and order takeout.”

My father frowns, “You’re not staying in because of me are you?”

“I don’t want to be far away from you right now,” I admit.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, Roxanna promised me that she’d surprise me with a movie to watch with me tonight. I have plans, so you need to get out of the house.”

“You want to have a movie night with Roxy and not me,” I tease.

“Yes. As soon as Roxanna gets here you and Evan better get out of here.”

My dad is stubborn, there's no way that I will win this argument. Even though my gut is screaming for me to not go I fold to my father's wishes. Besides, the bar is on Solomon's Island which is only fifteen minutes away, if anything happens I can get home quickly.

"Fine, you and Roxy have fun tonight."

"Thank you," he huffs before turning his attention back to the TV.

* * *

Roxy walks into the house without bothering to knock bearing two cold bottles of Coke, a few bags of popcorn, and her laptop to hook up to Dad's TV.

"Dad wasn't kidding when he said you guys were going to have a movie night."

Roxy smiles proudly, "Yup, your dad and I are going to live it up while watching *Mamma Mia*."

I laugh, Roxy knows as well as I do that my dad is secretly a big fan of the actress who plays Donna.

"Alright," I sigh before getting up and walking with Roxy to my dad's room.

"Roxy is here, and she brought the movie theater with her," I smile.

Dad looks up at Roxy and weakly shakes his fist to do a little celebratory dance.

"Wonderful, now get out," my dad orders.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

"You heard the man, get out. We have a date with three bachelors to get to," Roxy teases.

I roll my eyes. Evan comes up behind me and gently begins to massage my shoulders.

“Fine, we’ll go.”

After saying goodbye, I followed Evan out to his car. We drive to the Beach Bar at Solomon’s Island in silence as I watch the trees fly by in a green blur on the side of the highway.

“Everything will be fine. And we won’t stay out too late, okay?”

I silently nod but I can’t shake the sinking feeling in my stomach.

Evan parks a few blocks away from the Beach Bar and holds my hand as we walk down the pier by the Patuxent River. The river is calm tonight but the pier is busy with strolling couples, wandering tourists, and families racing towards the ice cream shack. The sky is painted with beautiful purples and oranges as the sun begins to dip towards the horizon in the west.

“You look beautiful,” Evan smiles while letting go of my hand to wrap his arm around my waist.

His hand finds its way to rest on my hip while his thumb slips under the hem of my light pink tank top to rub circles on my bare skin. The hairs on my body stand on end at the pleasure that comes from his touch. My mind can’t help but wonder what it would be like to feel his fingertips on every square inch of my body.

“Thank you,” I stutter while my hand rises to my chest to gently touch the necklace he got me for Christmas.

It has been so humid today that I settled for a wide-strap pink tank top a pair of white capris and

brown sandals. My hair is in a high ponytail that I can feel swishing against the middle of my back as I walk. Glancing over at Evan I take in how handsome he looks dressed in a blue linen button-down and a pair of dark blue jeans. The man looks like he walked off of a photo shoot for *Nautica*.

As we get closer to the bar, we can hear the song *Two Piña Coladas* blaring from the open windows. Raucous laughter and patrons drunkenly singing along with Garth Brooks song mix with the music. The vinyl siding of the building is painted a bright yellow with a mural of a beach with a palm tree across the front entrance. The bamboo shades are lifted while the windows are wide open to let in the cool breeze with an unobstructed view of the river.

This bar is popular during the summer for college kids who have come home for the summer and tourists, and tonight is the kick-off night for the season. Evan and I show our I.D.s to security and make our way over to a large table where our coworkers are already standing around while talking to each other over the music.

“Hey guys,” Mei smiles while opening her arms out to give us each a hug.

I admire Mei’s tropical-themed outfit. She’s dressed in a short palm leaf patterned dress and white wedges. Palm tree earrings dangle from her ears and it looks like she stopped to get a spray tan after work was over.

“Hey,” Evan and I greet.

A few other teachers and admin staff greet us before we make our way over to the bar to order some drinks. Evan passes his card to the bartender to pay before the bartender gets our drinks. As we

wait I look around the room and feel overwhelmed with the amount of people and noise. I've only been to one bar in my life - it was for my twenty-first birthday - and that was only a karaoke bar.

The bartender passes me a virgin Piña Colada with a tiny red umbrella sticking out of the glass. Meanwhile, Evan has a glass of cranberry juice with tonic. It may be weird to not get alcohol at a bar, but I'm not willing to have my coworkers find out that I'm a lightweight. I already get a headache from drinking one glass of wine, they don't need to see what happens when I have liquor.

A few teachers already look tipsy when we get back to the table. When I look over at Ken and Nadia at the end of the table I'm glad that Evan and I aren't the only ones not drinking. Ken appears to have settled for an alcohol-free beer while Nadia sips on a glass of pineapple juice and rubs her hand over her abdomen on the small bump that is becoming more apparent. Nadia nods to me when we lock eyes and I smile back while lifting my glass in a silent cheers. We may not be friends, but we aren't enemies either.

It's hard to talk to anyone over the country music blaring from the speakers, but being here with Evan while smiling with the friends that I've made at work allows me to slowly relax. Maybe my worry is for nothing, Dad is probably having the time of his life watching *Mamma Mia* with Roxy. By the time we get back Dad and Roxy will probably have crashed from their soda-sugar high.

For now, I'll simply relax into the cheerful atmosphere.

* * *

The sun had sunk beyond the horizon a few hours ago. Evan and I are still at the bar dancing with each other to the music. Both of our faces are flushed and the baby hairs on the back of my neck are drenched in sweat. I'm glad we came out tonight - it's been nice to spend time together without having to take care of my dad at the same time.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out to see that Roxy is calling. I show Evan my phone and he nods before grabbing my hand and snaking our way between dancing and drunk bodies to go outside.

By the time we make it outside, I've missed Roxy's call. I'm about to call her back when her name lights up my phone again. My heart quickly began to race, she wouldn't be calling me back to back unless it was an emergency. I quickly swipe my thumb over the screen and hold my hand over my other ear to block out the noise from the bar.

"Hello?"

"Carrie, you need to come home now. Your dad isn't looking too hot."

I grab the sleeve of Evan's pale blue button-down shirt and pull him along to let him know that we need to go.

"What's going on, what's wrong?"

My voice doesn't sound like it normally does. It sounds frantic and distant.

"I've already called Wacko Wanda and she's on her way. Your dad seems to be..." Roxy doesn't finish her sentence but I instantly know what she means.

I quickly start into a sprint while I tell her that we're on our way. Evan follows beside me as he fishes the car keys out of his jeans pocket. He doesn't ask questions, he can tell by the fragmented bits of my conversation with Roxy that we need to get back to my house as quickly as possible.

We jump in the car and watch my phone for updates from Roxy. I only live fifteen minutes away from Solomon's Island, but fifteen minutes easily feels like fifteen hours when you're trying to race against death.

Chapter 35

Evan slams on the brakes when he pulls into my driveway behind Wanda's car. I frantically hop out of the car and run into the house before Evan even has a chance to turn off the car. Roxy is waiting outside of my father's room while anxiously swaying side to side.

"Wanda just got here, she's in with your dad," Roxy informs me quickly while stepping out of my way.

When I step into the room, Wanda looks up at me from checking my father's pulse and gives me a sympathetic frown. I recognize that look immediately. That was the same look the EMT gave me when they came to check on my mother before she died. My legs instantly turn to jello and I fall to my knees at my father's bedside and clasp his hand with both of mine. His eyes are closed and his breathing is slow. The color in his face has already drained; he looks almost ghostly.

"Daddy," I call to him gently.

Dad slowly opens his eyes and turns his head on his pillow to look at me.

"Caroline," he smiles weakly, "I'm sorry to ruin your night out."

I shake my head as fresh tears quickly stream down my face. "No, you didn't. I shouldn't have

gone out - I knew I should've stayed home," I sob.

My father continues to smile at me, "I'm so happy you went out. Did you have fun?"

I open my mouth to argue that my night doesn't matter - that I wish I stayed home so that I could've had just a few more hours with him - but I remember his request nine months ago. He wanted me to live my life. I swallow back what I want to say and give him the answer I know he wants to hear.

"Yes, I had a lot of fun."

"That's good," he whispers before gasping for air.

My eyes shoot up to Wanda, desperate for her to suggest anything to help my father breathe better. She seems to know what I'm silently pleading for and simply shakes her head, no. I wish I could give him my own breath to make him breathe easier.

"Please don't go yet, Daddy."

I'm shocked by the selfish plea that came out of my mouth. I know that he is suffering and uncomfortable, but there's a part of me that isn't ready to let go of him yet. I want him to stay just a little longer. He'll never see me turn thirty or walk me down the aisle when I get married. I won't get to tell him good morning, or make him breakfast, or come home to him watching *M.A.S.H.*, or listen to him watch *I Love Lucy* marathons on the weekend.

"Caroline, I love you so much. Your mother is waiting, it's not right to keep a lady waiting." My dad looks off to a corner by the bedroom closet, "See, she's right over there."

I look over my shoulder and don't see my mother. My mother said the same thing about her brother before she died. This is the end.

"I understand, I love you too" I choke out.

My dad looks around the room before asking, "Where's Evan?"

"He's probably waiting in the living room."

"Go get him please."

Roxy who is watching from outside the room hears my father's request and runs towards the living room to grab Evan. I hear Evan's rapid footsteps across the hallway carpet. He quickly enters the room and stands behind me while resting his hands comfortingly on my shoulders.

"Hey, David. I'm here."

My dad tiredly closes his eyes, "I wish I could've seen you marry Caroline, but I won't be around for that. Promise me you'll take care of her."

One of Evan's hands leaves my shoulders and I can hear him digging through his pocket behind me.

"I planned to propose to her tonight. I know it's not the same as seeing us get married, but you can at least see Carrie get engaged."

My head snaps to look at Evan behind me. He shuffles next to me and kneels next to me on both knees. In his hand is a closed royal blue box edged with gold.

"I love you, Carrie; I have only loved you, even when we were not together. I want you to be my

wife, and I want to be your husband. So, Caroline Marie Monroe, will you marry me?”

Evan opens the box to reveal a dainty marquise-cut diamond with two triangle-cut side stones on a simple yellow gold band. Just as he described a few months ago. I'm in shock - out of all of the times he could have proposed he chose to propose while my father is on his deathbed! This is never how I would want to be proposed to, Evan knows that...of course, he knows that. I suddenly realized that Evan must be doing this for my father.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Evan gives me a small smile takes the ring out of its box and slides it on my left hand. It fits perfectly.

We look back at my father who is watching with heavy-lidded eyes. He smiles happily as a tear slowly rolls down his cheek.

“Thank you,” he whispers as his eyes fully shut.

My father's labored breathing goes still - I watch his chest, willing it to rise again - the only sound I can hear is the second's hand on the clock in the kitchen ticking obnoxiously. Reminding me that time has not stopped even though it feels like my world has.

“Daddy,” I squeak out. He doesn't respond. “Daddy, wake up!” I frantically call as I jump to my feet to shake his shoulders.

Wanda takes his pulse while looking at her watch. She gently lowers my father's wrist and rests his hand on his abdomen.

“He's gone,” Wanda whispers.

I no longer have self-control. A blood-curdling scream claws its way out of my throat as I collapse over my father and violently sob onto his chest while the hand I was holding remains clasped in mine. I wasn't like this when my mother died, I was too busy trying to keep myself together so that I could be strong for my dad, and now I have no one to be strong for. I no longer have a family, all of them are dead.

* * *

It takes everything in me to let go of my father as the morgue worker comes in to pick up my father. I can't stand to watch them roll my dad out of the house and into the hearse. I already had to watch my mother leave the house like that, I can't watch the same process again. Evan takes over directing the morgue director and Wanda while Roxy sits next to me on my father's bed with her arms wrapped around me.

Everything feels like a blur. I can hear various voices asking me questions but none of them register. I can't answer. Roxy and Evan take over answering for me, but again what they say doesn't register. It feels like my body is here but I'm somewhere else. I begin to wonder if maybe I'm dying too.

What should I be doing right now? What do I need to do? I need to plan. Yes, I need to plan. I need to go to the funeral home tomorrow pick out a casket and make funeral arrangements. I'll need to make a call to our pastor to give him the news and invite him to the funeral home to plan the funeral service. What else? I need to go to the cemetery to make sure they prepare the family

burial site. Do I want to still live in this house or should I sell it? I should probably donate my father's clothes to charity...

"Carrie," Evan calls. I look up at the sound of his voice and stare at him blankly. "Everyone is gone. Do you want to sleep here or do you want to stay somewhere else?"

"I don't want to be alone," is all I can manage to answer.

"You won't be alone. If you want to stay here I'll stay with you and sleep on the couch. Or you can come stay at my house."

"Or you can come and stay with me at my parents," Roxy adds.

I look around the room. A half-empty bottle of coke sits on his nightstand and *Mamma Mia* is paused at the scene where Donna is running up a winding set of stairs towards the church with her red scarf blowing dramatically in the wind behind her. Dad didn't get to finish the movie.

The house is still so quiet, normally I would hear Dad snoring. Even with Evan here I don't think I could stand to stay in this house overnight.

"I would like to stay with Evan," I finally answer.

Roxy nods, "Okay, let's go pack a bag and head out."

I slowly get up and blindly grab some clothes from my room. Roxy and Evan are waiting by the door. Evan opens the door to help me into his truck car before tossing my bag into the back. As I sit in the passenger seat I hear Evan quietly telling Roxy

that she can come over to his house in the morning.

Before we leave, Roxy comes over to my side of the car, “I know this might not make you laugh now, but I’m sure it will eventually. After I called for Wacko Wanda, your father said: *“What a horrible time to die, it was just getting good.”*”

I humor her and give her a breathy laugh, “That does sound like something dad would say.”

Roxy gives me one more hug before stepping aside for Evan to close the door. We wait for Roxy to drive away before we finally head back to Evan’s house for the night. Normally I would stay overnight with Roxy if I wanted to get out of the house, but tonight I need Evan to stay by my side.

When we pull into Evan’s driveway, Evan quickly shuts off the car and gently leads me into his house.

“Why don’t you wait on the couch while I get your bag and the room ready.”

I silently follow directions and curl up in a ball on the couch. I hug my knees into my chest and a fresh round of tears well in my eyes and quickly spill down my face. I knew I should’ve stayed home. If I was home I could’ve had a little more time with my dad.

Evan takes a seat on the couch and begins to pet my hair. “Carrie, do you want to go to bed or do you want to stay up for a little bit?”

The lingering scent of sweat and coconut reminds me that I need a shower, but the thought of being alone feels like a rip current trying to pull me under water where I can’t breathe. It’s gross, but I’m going to forgo the shower.

“I think I want to go to bed.”

Evan nods and holds out his hands to help me off the couch. He guides me down the hall to a room at the end.

“This is my room. My bed will be more comfortable for you than the futon I have in the guest bedroom.”

I blink the tears from my eyes, “Where will you sleep?”

“I’ll sleep on the futon.”

My fingers grip tighter around his hand, “Please stay in here with me.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod, “Yes. I need you.”

Evan wraps me in a hug and squeezes me tightly. The pressure mixed with his lemongrass and cedar scent feels like a weighted blanket filtering out the unbearable grief.

“Alright. Let’s get ready for bed.”

We hastily change into our pajamas before picking our respective sides in Evan’s bed. I scooch as close as I possibly can next to Evan and lay my head on his chest. Evan slowly wraps his arms around my waist.

“Goodnight, Carrie.”

“Goodnight,” I whisper.

I allow the slow rhythm of Evan’s chest rising and falling to lull me to sleep. But before I finally shut my eyes, the last thing I see is the engagement ring on my left hand.

Chapter 36

The days following Dad's death were a blur, but I somehow managed to plan a funeral. After two days my father was laid to rest next to Mom at the cemetery with his favorite fishing rod in his casket. It was a small funeral; Evan and his family as well as Roxy and her family, Mrs. Forbes, and members of our church gathered in the old brick church house that has been around since the eighteen hundreds. Before Dad's casket was lowered into the ground *TAPS* was played and a folded flag was presented to me in honor of my father's former military service.

All that is left to do is go through Dad's stuff and sell the house. I know it is stupid to sell a house that is fully paid off and left to me, but I need to start fresh. There are a lot of good memories in that house and I'll miss having my little private grove, but watching both of my parents die in that house are memories I don't want to be reminded of every day. For now, I'll sell most of the furniture, donate Dad's clothes, and find an apartment.

For the last couple of weeks, I've been staying with Evan. Even through the fog of grief, there have been bright patches of sunlight that would beam through to highlight the happy moments I've had living with Evan. Staying at his house has

felt like a fantasy brought to life. Every morning when I wake up, Evan is there smiling and ready with a kiss. While I make breakfast Evan makes me a cup of coffee. We cuddle on the couch while watching movies. Every night I get to fall asleep wrapped tightly in Evan's arms. However, I can't stay at Evan's house forever.

Of course, we're engaged and we'll get married, but until then I want to experience the romantic air of marital bliss by coming home to Evan as Mrs. Stanton. I can't get that when I'm still, Carrie Monroe.

It's a frilly dream I've had since dating Evan. Even though I've already had a taste of it I want to be able to call Evan's home my home once I have the title of wife. I may not have gotten the proposal I wanted, but I'm determined to get the married life I want.

So here I am with Evan at the Realtor's office to hire a Realtor to help me sell the house. The house is small and dated. I'm worried that it will be difficult to sell, however, the Realtor reassures me that it shouldn't be too difficult since the property is on a lot with a great amount of privacy and in a highly desired area.

"Alright, now that we have plans to sell your house. Are you looking to buy or rent for your next home," my Realtor asks while looking down his nose through his small circular framed glasses.

The Realtor I've hired - Richard Worthington - looks old enough to be my grandpa. Stocky, heavysset, and jowls drooping around his neck. He has a raspy voice from what sounds like years of smoking cigarettes. As the air conditioning turns on, the air from the vent above him blows the few

wisps of white hair on his head till they start to stand up. I glance at the bookshelf behind his desk and see several awards he's earned as a Realtor, acting as bookends for various binders and books.

I meet Richards's brown eyes before answering, "I want to rent a one-bedroom for under two thousand dollars in or near Prince Frederick."

Richard nods and slowly stands from his maroon leather office chair. He walks towards the bookshelf and pulls down a thick binder. As walks back to his cherry-wood desk, he plops the binder down with a hefty *thud*.

"I have a few listings in here that you can take with you to look up. Give me a call tomorrow with your thoughts on these apartments and I'll set up some tours."

I take the three listings out of Richard's outstretched hand and frown. There are not a lot of options - and two of them are at the top of my budget - I was hoping there would be more available options than this.

"This is all," I ask, hoping that perhaps Richard simply forgot about another property.

"Afraid so, Maryland tends to be an expensive place to live."

I nod and fake the most enthusiastic smile that I can muster, "Right. Thank you for your help. I'll be in touch."

Evan and I quickly stand from our seats and shake Richard's sweaty hands before heading out of the office while wiping our hands against the legs of our pants.

I stare down dejectedly at the listings. My budget is going to be a lot tighter than it has been in the past - seeing my options reminds me of how spoiled I was to live with my parents. Evan interrupts my thoughts by wrapping his arm around my waist and walking me to his car.

As Evan buckles his seat belt when we get back in the car, he says, "Let's go walk around Solomon's Island for a little bit."

"Sure."

I look down at the diamond ring that is still on my left hand. Ever since the night my dad died, we haven't talked about wedding plans or even the fact that we're engaged. Though I suppose Evan has been giving me space to mourn and plan a funeral. However, I wish he would bring it up - or at least say that he's excited that we're engaged.

Evan parks his car in the parking lot facing the pier. The noontime sun sparkles on the river and people are leisurely strolling on the pier and between the small boutiques and restaurants. The cool breeze coming off the water carries the scent of freshly caught seafood and Old Bay from nearby restaurants - it smells like summer.

As Evan and I walk hand in hand we are both quiet. I glance up at Evan now and then; he normally isn't this quiet. His jaw is taught and his lips are pulled in a tight frown. I watch as Evan's eyes anxiously dart between the gazebo on the boardwalk and the parking lot.

"Is everything okay?"

Evan doesn't answer; he won't stop staring at the gazebo. I stop, forcing him to look down at me.

"Are you okay," I ask again.

“Yeah, sorry,” Evan apologizes quickly before glancing over at the gazebo - for what must be the tenth time - which is surprisingly empty. “Let’s go sit in the gazebo.”

“Okay.”

Evan leads me to the gazebo and we sit down on the bench facing the water. His leg bounces nervously before he finally asks,

“Can I have your ring, please?”

My heart sank while my breath anxiously hitched in my throat. Has Evan changed his mind? Did he decide that he’d rather not marry me? Or even worse, did he propose to me out of pity for my dying father? I pull the ring off my finger and hand it to him with a shaking hand. Evan holds the ring between his fingers and looks it over before looking back at me.

“I’m sorry that my original proposal was at your father’s bedside. He looked so sad that he wouldn’t see you get married and I wanted to at least sort of fulfill his wish. I was originally going to propose to you that night in the grove behind your house, but then you got the call and I didn’t have a chance to do it. So let me propose to you again?”

My mouth falls open as tears immediately sting my eyes. My heart races, was he going to propose to me that night? He didn’t seem anxious that night like he is now.

“You really do want to marry me,” I blurt.

Evan leans back and stares at me like he just told me there are no such things as stupid questions but I somehow found the stupidest question to ask.

“Yes! I wouldn’t have proposed to you in the first place if I didn’t.”

I look down at my shoes in embarrassment. That was a stupid assumption of me.

“You can propose to me again, now,” I say quickly.

Evan laughs as he moves to kneel on one knee in front of me. He lifts my chin to have me look into his eyes. The pads of his thumb brush against my cheek to wipe away the tears that have spilled over. Love and adoration are evident in Evan’s beautiful hazel eyes. He holds up the ring between his fingers while holding my left hand.

“I love you Carrie, and I don’t want to go another year without being able to call you my wife. Marry me?”

“Yes,” I laugh while somehow sobbing at the same time.

Evan slides the ring back on my finger and I leap off the bench and throw myself into his arms before kissing him long and slow. As our tongues begin to dance with each other there is loud cheering behind us. We quickly break apart and look over our shoulders to see Roxy and her parents, and Evan’s family watching behind us with Mrs. Soto and Charlotte taking pictures and screaming excitedly at the same time. Several people on the boardwalk look towards us and begin to clap and cheer when they realize what is going on.

I look down to admire my ring. It’s beautiful as I angle the diamonds to shimmer in the sunlight.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, you did great,” I smile.

“I’m glad you still like the same style or else I would’ve had to get you a new ring.”

“What do you mean.”

Evan rubs the back of his neck while looking out towards the water. “I got you this ring before we broke up. I didn’t get a chance to propose.”

Once again I am stunned into silence. He was going to propose back then? Not only that, he kept the ring all this time. I pull Evan by his shirt to crash his lips into mine. When we finally pull away I stay wrapped in his arms.

“Thanks for waiting.”

“You are worth the wait.”

Evan’s lips find mine once more, not caring that everyone is watching. My fists firmly ball in his shirt while one of Evan’s hands slides up to the nape of my neck and tangles his fingers into the curls of my hair.

When we finally pull apart an exciting thought sparks in my mind - it’s time to plan a wedding.

Epilogue

Evan holds our framed wedding picture up against the cream-colored wall.

“A smidge more to the left,” I hum. Evan slides it over very slightly and looks over his shoulder at me. “Perfect.”

I pass Evan the pencil to mark where the picture will go before taking the picture from his hands and gently setting the frame on the floor. Evan holds out his hand for me to pass him a nail and he begins hammering the nail into the wall.

My lower back begins to ache and I slowly make my way over to the couch. I sit back in *our* living room to take a break. I look towards the window adjacent to the lit fireplace and watch fat raindrops turn the mossy yard into a muddy mess. Hopefully, the rain will encourage new grass to grow.

“How’s that?” Evan asks while stepping away to give me a view of the wall that we plan to use as our family album wall.

“That looks good,” I beam.

Evan nods with a smile before getting back to work with hanging up more of the pictures on already hammered-in nails. I drape a blanket over my lap and close my eyes to listen to the sounds of the wood crackling in the fireplace mixed with the rain tapping against the window pane.

Shortly after our do-over proposal, I moved in with Roxy and her parents while Evan and I took a month and a half to plan our wedding. Our ceremony was held in the Soto's garden and our reception was held at a local restaurant on the pier in Solomon's Island. The wedding was small, but it was perfect.

After the wedding I moved into Evan's house, officially as Mrs. Stanton. I open my eyes and smile when I see our wedding photo hung on the wall. Planning my wedding was fun, and now I have something else that I've been planning for since the end of my second year of teaching.

I struggle to get off the couch and make my way into the third bedroom where several gift bags are waiting with contents to be sorted and organized. A month ago Roxy and Evan installed white ship-lap paneling that goes from the floor up to the middle of the wall. The wall above the ship-lap is painted a matte eggshell blue and the windowsill has a fresh coat of white paint.

As soon as the lingering paint smell dissipated I began to decorate our son's nursery. An oversized light tan glider sits in the corner of the room with a white wooden side table and a spindle-style lamp with an eggshell blue shade. Tan and white checkered curtains frame the bedroom window that overlooks the backyard. The walls are adorned with white floating shelves holding stuffed carrots and *Peter Rabbit* as well as some faux ferns in various tan, white, and blue pots. Sitting against the center wall of the room is a light wooden crib with *Peter Rabbit* sheets and three framed pictures of *Beatrix Potter* characters hanging above it.

My baby shower was a few days ago and I have sorted through most of the gifts. I take a seat in the glider and begin to go through the remaining bags. I make a note of each gift and who it is from on a notepad sitting on the side table. Inside one bag is a pack of pacifiers, an adorable blue overall outfit from *Carters*, and a t-shirt with the *Oriole Bird* mascot on the front for the *Baltimore Orioles* baseball team. The gift still brings a chuckle to my lips, Nadia and Ken got this gift for the baby. According to Nadia, she had a lot of fun shopping for boy clothes since she and Ken had a daughter. Ken said that my baby needs to be introduced to sports early.

I smile as I sort clothes, toys, and diapers into drawers and bins. It is a lot of fun designing a nursery and organizing all the cute baby stuff. Thankfully baby boy is due in three weeks - which means plenty of time for me to rest and nest. Especially nest.

Evan finds me in the nursery and smiles as he sees me place the final set of footie pajamas in a drawer.

“Shouldn’t you be resting? The baby could come any week now.”

He holds out his hand to invite me out of the nursery. I take it and allow him to guide me back to the couch where he drapes a blanket over my lap and passes me my water bottle and the remote to the TV. I look over at the finished photo wall and smile to see our wedding picture hanging in the center with pictures of Evan and me as kids along with pictures of our parents. Finally, there is a frame holding an ultrasound picture from each trimester.

There's a knock on the door before Roxy lets herself in.

"Hey," she greets excitedly. "Any sign of baby yet?"

"Not yet," I sigh as I rub my belly and feel the baby kick in rapid succession.

"Darn," she pouts.

"Thanks for coming over to help me set up the bassinet. I swear this thing is somehow more difficult than the crib."

"No problem," Roxy waves.

Evan looks back over at me, "And you, Mrs. Stanton, better stay on this couch and rest. No more cleaning and organizing for the day."

I pout out my bottom lip at him, but Evan simply smiles and leans down to kiss the pout off of my face.

Roxy strides over to the kitchen and pulls out a bag of pretzels from the pantry. Since I moved in with Evan, Roxy has become very acquainted with our house. She is now just as familiar with my new home as she was with my childhood one.

"Here, have a snack. That should keep you busy."

I happily take the bag, pop a pretzel into my mouth, and prop my feet up on the couch before turning on the TV. Organizing the nursery kept me so busy I hadn't realized how hungry I was. The pretzels taste amazing, like it's the first meal I've eaten in years instead of an hour ago.

"Alright, I'll stay right here," I concede.

“Good.” Evan kneels and puts his hands on my belly, “Okay David, you’re in charge of making sure Mama stays on the couch,” he says before kissing my belly.

“You got this, David,” Roxy cheers as she heads down the hall to our room to begin helping Evan assemble the bassinet.

I laugh as I watch Evan follow after Roxy with less enthusiasm. The man can jump a car battery, hang pictures, and play a mean game of Uno, but when it comes to building furniture Evan tends to struggle. Thank goodness for Roxy or else poor David would be sleeping on the floor.

As I settle deeper into the couch and log into Netflix I see *Mamma Mia* show up in my suggestions. I look over at my parent’s wedding photo hanging on the wall. It’s been a little over a year since Dad passed away; I still get teary-eyed every so often when I think about how I still miss him and wish that he could be here. I can just imagine the face he would have made at learning that we are naming our baby after him. The song *Mamma Mia* begins to play as the cursor holds over the movie title.

“Let’s finish *Mamma Mia*, Dad. It was just getting good.”

I press play and the song *I Have A Dream* begins as the moonlit Grecian backdrop paints the screen.

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With that, I would like to close with wishing all of you, a happy reading.

About the Author

Carolyn Beus is a wife and stay-at-home mom to two daughters, and an adorable pet turtle in the Blue Ridge Mountain region of Virginia. She grew up in Hyattsville, Maryland, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern Virginia University. When Carolyn isn't writing, she is reading, watching anime, or reorganizing the house so that her husband can't find anything (at least, that's what he claims).

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