

You Saw The  
Best in Me

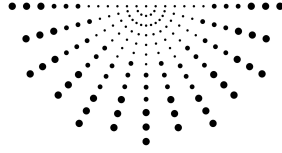


**Taylor James**

# YOU SAW THE BEST IN ME

FOREST FALLS

BOOK ONE




# TAYLOR JAMES



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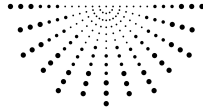
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*to every woman who had their girlhood stolen by a man,  
fuck them; it was ours first.*

# NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR;



DEAR READER: THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING MY BOOK OFF YOUR VERY LONG TBR IT MEANS THE WORLD!! PLEASE CHECK THE TRIGGER WARNINGS, AS THERE ARE HEAVY TOPICS DISCUSSED THROUGHOUT. PROTECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH, READING SUPPOSED TO BE AN ESCAPE! - TAYLOR

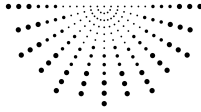


## **TRIGGER WARNINGS:**

**STALKING, DOMESTIC ABUSE, KIDNAPPING, SUICIDE,  
ALCOHOL, STRONG LANGUAGE, AND SEXUAL SITUATIONS.**

**MENTIONS OF: GUNS + WEAPONS, DEATH OF FAMILY  
MEMBER, CANCER.**

# PLAYLIST



SHOW ME WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR - CAROLINA LIAR

DRESS - TAYLOR SWIFT

THE FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST - SHERYL CROWE

I DARE YOU - SHINEDOWN

IRIS - THE GOO GOO DOLLS

NATURALLY - SELENA GOMEZ

DELICATE - TAYLOR SWIFT

EXCHANGE - BRYSON TILLER

ANGEL - THE WEEKND

LOVE ME HARDER - ARIANA GRANDE + THE WEEKND

YOU ARE IN LOVE - TAYLOR SWIFT

MR. BRIGHTSIDE - THE KILLERS

WICKED GAMES - THE WEEKND

HIM & I - G-EAZY + HALSEY

WOULD'VE, COULD'VE, SHOULD'VE - TAYLOR SWIFT

FACE DOWN - THE RED JUMPSUIT APPARATUS

NEVER LET ME GO - FLORENCE + THE MACHINE

LOVE ME LIKE YOU DO - ELLIE GOULDING

DAYLIGHT - TAYLOR SWIFT

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[Read on for an EXCLUSIVE sneak peek of Reilly's story!](#)

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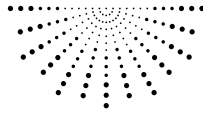
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# KARINA



*I*m perfectly fine on my own, but being in a brand-new place is lonely. It's my first night in a new town, a new apartment, and another new start. It's just me, my cat, and small boxes of belongings.

I travel light because I've been on the run since I was eighteen, and whenever I have to relocate, it's easier to pack boxes versus a bed or couch. My old roommate gave me the bed I slept in at her place, so thankfully, I have a mattress to sleep on.

I sit on the hardwood floor, eating Chinese takeout from the container, wondering how much longer I can survive like this.

Living with Juliette was the happiest I'd been in years, and it fucking sucks that Asher has taken that away from me.

Now, I'm hours away from that old life and starting afresh in Forest Falls.

But, wherever I put roots down, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, hoping today isn't the day he's found me again.

The fear of Asher finding me is consuming, and I accepted long ago that I'll never lead a normal life. I don't know why I bother getting close to people anymore; I always have to flee.

This town seems cozy enough, and maybe I'll get lucky and make a few friends to keep me from feeling lonely.

Once again, I need to shop for furniture, find a new job, and settle into an unfamiliar place. This apartment is lovely and very spacious, considering I have nothing substantial taking up space.

I hope it'll feel like home when I fill it with things that bring me happiness. I spend the rest of the night shopping online, ordering new decorations, and filling my cart with everything I need to make this place feel less empty.



“FUCK!” I SCREAM, DROPPING THREE PACKAGES DOWN THE stairs. My voice echoes in the stairwell, and I have no clue why I didn't just make two trips. The last thing I need to do is embarrass myself in front of my fellow tenants.

“Do you need any help?” A tall, blonde man asks me, and I can't help but notice his dark green eyes.

I stare at him way longer than I should, and he looks annoyed.

“Uh, no thanks. I got it, thanks,” I say, my voice trembling.

Color me fucking *embarrassed*. I don't know how to form a proper sentence.

“Suit yourself,” the handsome, green-eyed man pushes by me, racing down to the door.

I sigh deeply, gathering my shit and struggling the rest of the way.

I finally return to my apartment, dropping all the boxes on the floor and slamming the door behind me.

It's been five days since I moved here, and I've carried so many boxes up and down the stairs my muscles are exhausted. On the bright side, I now have a couch to sit on, and I decorated the place with plants, candles, and a cute area rug that April loves.

I've set up her cat tree and hung a hammock on the window so she can stalk birds and squirrels all day. It's just me and my cat in this lonely ass town; how pathetic is that?

I pour a tall glass of wine, admiring my work and wishing I had someone to share it with. I sent pictures to Juliette, and she was so excited, but having her – or anyone – here would make it so much better.

My computer lights up with a new email, and I glance it over before realizing it's from the salon I applied to. I have an interview later this week and am excited to return to work.

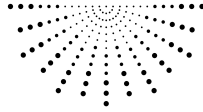
I don't *love* doing hair, but the first time I found myself on the run, I had to make a choice, and I knew I needed something stable. One of the many sacrificial decisions I had to make early on in my adult life.

Years later, and I'm still in the same profession, but salons are always hiring, and I need job security to survive, especially when I'm constantly running.

I like it, but it's another thing my ex stole from me. Salon gossip is a perk of the job, though, and I could use a couple of girlfriends to shoot the breeze with.

I decide to celebrate, turning up the music and dancing around my living room. Finally, the first good thing that's happened to me in a while, and I refuse to be down on myself or my situation — at least for tonight.

# MAVERICK



*I* drive home in a daze; work kicked my ass today, but that's not what's got me stressed. The bills from my grandmother's most recent hospital stay have piled up, and I can't catch up quickly enough.

All I want to do is kick back with a cold beer, leftover pizza and fall asleep to the sound of any sports game.

I park my truck in my numbered spot and roll my eyes when I see the tiny car parked next to me. It belongs to my new neighbor, the petite brunette who moved in last week, and I haven't had a moment's peace since she arrived.

Whenever I see her, she's carrying boxes, furniture, falling all over herself, and refusing help. If that wasn't bad enough, she blasts her shitty bubblegum-pop music all night, ensuring I get no sleep.

I've already decided that I can't stand her and I don't even know her name.

Sighing, I grab my lunch box and work clothes, heading inside the building.

As luck would have it, she's getting her mail from the lobby, exactly where I need to be.

This is the first time I've seen her without anything in her hands, and I can't help but notice her curves and how her tits are barely contained inside the tank top she's wearing.

*Fuck.*

A man could only dream of a perfect pair of boobs like that.

“*Get it together, dumbass,*” I think to myself. Drooling over my annoying, obnoxiously loud neighbor is not a part of the plan.

As if she read my mind, she glances up at me, her hazel eyes shimmering.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I in your way?” she asks, and I shake my head. “I’m Karina, your new neighbor.”

She offers her hand to me, stepping close enough that I can smell her fruity perfume.

“Maverick,” I reply, barely shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you. Once I get my place set up, maybe you could stop by for a drink,” she smiles, and I have to look away before my ice-cold heart begins to thaw.

“That’s not necessary,” I frown, attempting to clarify that I want nothing to do with her.

I turn away completely, opening my mailbox and taking out the pile of bills.

“I don’t bite,” she teases, giggling at her own joke, and I roll my eyes.

I walk away from her, attempting to end this conversation, but I forget she lives across the hall.

We walk up the stairs silently, but I can feel she has something else to say.

“Did I do something to piss you off?” Karina asks, and this woman makes me want to rip my hair out.

“You’re loud. You keep me up late playing that shit you call music,” I turn to face her as we reach our doors, and it looks like I deflated all the air out of her.

“You’re an asshole, aren’t you, *neighbor?*” she says, rage dripping from every word.

“You’re a pain in the ass, aren’t you, *neighbor*?” I mock her sarcasm and rage, which pisses her off even more.

She slams her door in my face, and I sigh, throwing my work shit on the floor and slamming my door in response.

I don’t know how one woman can frustrate me so much, and yet she just so happens to be right next door.

I nearly jump out of my skin as Karina blasts her music so loud my walls vibrate. Clearly, she’s playing a game because I offended her, and it’s not amusing.

My phone rings, bringing me out of my rage. I smile when I see the name on the screen: Harper.

“Hi, Mav!” my little sister squeals, ready to update me on her day.

“Hi, Harp, how was school? How’s Grams?” I ask, listening intently as she describes another riveting day in the eighth grade.

Harper is thirteen and the only family I have besides my grandmother.

When Harper was three, my mother died of cancer, and neither of us knew who our fathers were. Leaving the three of us to fend for ourselves, and survive in this cold world.

“Grams is doing okay. She’s still sore from the fall,” she updates, and I rake my fingers through my hair.

“Is she taking the pain medicine the doctor prescribed?” I ask, knowing my grandmother can be stubborn regarding directions.

Grams is prone to falling, especially down the stairs to her garden, and last week, I had to rush her to the emergency room. She has no broken bones, but she’s got severe bruising and can’t get around quickly.

I hate that Harper is the only one around to take care of her, but I’m working hard to be able to pay for a home nurse to check in on her daily.

“Mav?” my sister asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, Harper?” I can tell when her voice changes that she has something to say to me.

“I miss you, big brother,” she says, and I start pacing around the room.

I miss her and reserve my Sundays for her, but this week is dragging.

“I know, little sis, I’ll be there Sunday. Text me what you want to cook, and I’ll get everything, okay?” I bargain, which satisfies her.

Cooking together is one of the ways we bond, but also a sneaky way of teaching her how to be independent.

“Alright, Harp, I have to go. Call me tomorrow night. I love you,” I say, starting the prep for my lunch tomorrow.

“Love you too, Mav,” she hangs up, and my apartment is silent again.

I make my lunch for tomorrow, packing it in a cooler bag and tucking it into the fridge.

I crack open a beer, put my feet on the coffee table, and surf the channels until I find something to watch.

My obnoxious neighbor cranks up the music again, rattling the walls and raising my blood pressure.

I could stomp over there, bang on her door, and insist that she turn it down, but the way I stared at her chest earlier was a sign that I should stay away.

I don’t do relationships. I haven’t dated a woman since I was nineteen, and I don’t get close enough to let anyone in. I have enough on my plate with my sister and Grams; another person to care for would be disastrous.

I turn my TV volume higher, attempting to drown out the music, which only helps a little.

Unfortunately, I’ve only come to one conclusion: I need to make this right with Karina and fast — I can’t live like this.



I WAKE UP TO MY ALARM, SIGNALING THE START OF ANOTHER day. I dress in cargo shorts and a company t-shirt, *Avery Jones Bros.* plastered across the back, and lace up my work boots.

I started this construction gig a few months ago, and it's going well. The pay is good, and the bosses let us leave early sometimes.

The guys on site still call me *new kid* which doesn't bother me. Everyone else has silly nicknames, and I keep to myself, not giving anyone a chance to know my actual name.

I don't do friendships; I don't have the time to get to know someone, and I certainly don't have the effort to go out, drink and socialize.

I grab my lunch, extra clothes and head out the door.

Lucky for me, my irritating neighbor is walking down the stairs as I lock the door behind me.

"Are you stalking me, Maverick?" she teases, flipping her brown hair over her shoulder.

"I'm going to work," I grumble, uninterested in morning chit-chat.

Karina is wearing shorts that are way too small, highlighting her ass, and I do everything I can to look away. I may lose my mind if she's in a teeny tank top again.

This woman is gorgeous, and her curves are tempting, but then I remember how much she pisses me off, and the attraction fades.

"Oh, I'm getting my coffee order. Those delivery apps are a lifesaver," she attempts to make conversation, but I blow her off.

"I hope my music wasn't too loud last night, some asshole got on my nerves, so I was trying to make him angry," she turns around to me as we reach the lobby, a devilish grin across her face.

"Not a bother at all darlin, now, if you'll excuse me," I walk to the door, ignoring that she's not wearing a bra underneath that oversized t-shirt.

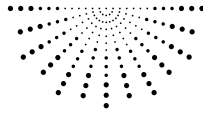


“Have a wonderful day, *neighbor*,” she calls out, sarcastically.

If she wants to play dirty, I’ll have to think of something to counter her.

The ball’s in my court, and I will spend most of my day thinking of ways to exact my revenge. That is of course, if I can keep her body off my mind long enough to formulate a plan.

# KARINA



I love nothing more than a challenge and my smokin-hot neighbor might be my toughest one. I'd at least like to be neighborly and friendly, but he's barely given me the time of day. His bad attitude is annoying, and his complaints about my music makes me turn it up louder.

I grab my coffee and breakfast from the tray in the lobby and push my grumpy neighbor out of my mind.

I've got an interview to prepare for, and my first order of business is to make sure everything is in order with my resume and cosmetology license. The interview is tomorrow, and I'd hate to look stupid by not being prepared.

I plan to run errands the rest of the day, do my laundry, and pick up a few more things for my apartment. House shopping is a great way to spend an afternoon, but my bank account could use a source of income after all the spending I've been doing.

This town is small, but it's bigger than Rose Hills. There's a shopping mall and chain restaurants, which is a relief. My friends wanted me to stay in Rose Hills, but it was boring. I'm a city girl and need my shops and food joints nearby.

It's a great place to hide out; luckily, I have people who care about me one town over.

I quickly stop at the grocery store, grabbing essentials and easy-to-make meals. I don't cook and can't live off delivery

food much longer. I also stop for liquor; tonight, I'm in the mood for something stronger than wine.

Ten minutes later, I've got my tequila and limes, and I'm heading back to my apartment.

Thankfully, Maverick's truck isn't parked next to mine, and I don't have to worry about running into his broody, moody ass.

I carry all my bags upstairs in one trip, only dropping one this time, which is a small victory that I desperately need.

I pour myself a drink, turn up the TV to a trashy show Juliette got me hooked on, and throw together a chicken Caesar salad for dinner.

A few hours later, I hear Maverick opening his door, and I'm tipsy. I'm feeling unusually bold, and want to get under his skin. I grab my bottle of tequila and two slices of lime and knock on his door.

"What do you want?" he answers, slightly opening the door and peering at me.

"I wanted to apologize for the music incident. Figured after a long day maybe you could use a shot?" I ask, hoping he'll ease up on the grumpiness.

"Fine. One shot, and then you're leaving," he says sternly, and I smile at him as he opens the door to let me inside.

I take a look around, noticing how empty his walls are. He doesn't have any pictures hung or any artwork — *typical man*.

I follow him into the kitchen, which looks exactly like mine. He pulls two shot glasses from the cabinet, takes the bottle from me, and pours one for each of us.

I decide not to test my luck by clinking our glasses, instead, I dump the liquor down my throat and suck on the lime to alleviate the burn.

Maverick does the same, shaking his head and gasping.

"How'd you know tequila was my weakness?" he smiles — *actually smiles* — at me, and I feel my cheeks burning.

His smile is to die for, and his green eyes shimmer, making me weak in the knees.

“I didn’t, but I do now,” I wink at him, and his smile fades.

“Thanks for the drink, but I have shit to do,” he says, waving his hand toward the door.

So much for small talk or pleasantries; that slight second where he seemed to enjoy himself is gone, and that hard exterior is back.

“Uh, alright. Truce, then?” I turn to face him before opening the door, hoping to catch his rare smile again, but it’s not there.

“No chance, kitten,” he growls, and I’m hung up on how he gave me a nickname.

Heat flushes through my entire body, and oddly enough, that one comment was enough to turn me on.

“I’ll have to keep you on your toes then,” I laugh, and let myself out of his apartment.

My pulse races, and one small encounter with him has me fighting off these girly feelings of a crush.

I pour myself another drink and flop onto the couch, thinking of how fucking sexy he looked in those work clothes, his hands dirty from whatever he does for a living. I think of how he called me kitten, a hint of seduction behind the word, and I can’t figure out why he said that.

He’s made it clear he can’t stand me, yet he’s giving me pet names after we share a drink.

My mind is spinning, and I take another drink, petting my cat all alone.

I realize I should be getting ready for my job interview tomorrow, not drinking tequila or daydreaming about my grumpy neighbor who hates me — but could also fuck me senseless — so I draw a bubble bath in an attempt to reset my mind, focus on what’s important, and sober up. The last thing I need is to be hungover before an important day.

I let the bubbles relax me, and afterward, I do my skincare routine and get ready for bed.

My mind wanders back to Maverick, and I groan, increasingly irritated that I can't get him out of my head. He's a bad idea, and I can guarantee that if anything were to happen between us, it'd go down in flames. There's no high that could be worth that much pain.



WAKING UP THIS MORNING, I'VE BEEN RUMMAGING THROUGH my closet a hundred times until I manage to find acceptable clothes for an interview, even if it's at a hair salon.

I dress to impress, and today, I'm wearing a black button-up blouse paired with khaki-colored pants. Simple, yet elegant enough for the occasion. I hope I'm leaving early enough not to run into Maverick because I need to focus solely on what's ahead of me, not what I imagine him doing to me.

I kiss April goodbye, grab my homemade coffee, and head out the door. When I do, I trip over something left at my door, falling and spilling coffee all over myself.

Someone taped a wire on each door frame, assuring I'd *fucking trip*. Frustrated, I gather my shit off the ground and now, I have to go back and change. I'm cutting it close, considering how many outfits I deemed unacceptable and tossed to the side. I know I'm going to end up being late.

Maverick's door opens, and he looks down at me on the floor, that smile creeping over his face again, and it's right then that I realize he did this.

"Did you fucking *prank* me?" I ask, getting up and dusting myself off.

He's still smirking but pretending he had nothing to do with it.

"I thought we called a truce, you ass! I'm going to be late for my job interview!" I yell and turn back to go inside.

"We never called a truce, actually," he says, and I nearly trip over the wire again, which makes him laugh.

“Fuck off, Maverick. You’ve completely ruined my morning,” I slam the door, rushing to find another blouse that isn’t slutty, too revealing, or sequined.

Once I settle on a light pink sweater, I’m rushing out the door, skipping the coffee this time.

Maverick is cleaning up his stupid prank in the hallway, and I have choice words for him as I step around his muscular frame bent over the stain on the carpet.

“You better watch your back, *neighbor*. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s winning a war,” I say, storming off and leaving him no chance to respond.

*Game. On.*

He’s never going to know what hit him. If he thinks loud music is the only weapon in my arsenal, he’s got another fucking thing coming. There’s nothing I can do better than revenge, pranks, and pettiness.

I push the asshole neighbor out of my mind, driving toward the salon and putting on my best smile. The confidence slowly starts flowing through me again, but admittedly, I wish I brought perfume because I *reek* of coffee.

I get there right on time, but in my book, if you’re not early, you’re late.

“Hi, you must be Karina. I’m Alivia, and I’ll be doing your interview,” the lady behind the desk greets me, and I follow her to the back room.

She’s tall, with fiery red hair curled at the ends. Her smile is soft, and as we sit, she fires off a few questions, but it’s more of a casual chat than an interview.

“Honestly, I’m looking for someone I can rely on. I know you’re from out of town, so you’ll be building your client list, and I think our salon would be a great fit for you,” Alivia says, and I can’t contain my smile.

“I can absolutely be relied on. Whatever hours you can schedule me for, I’ll be here!” I shake her hand and follow her around for a quick tour.

The salon is clean and organized. All the products are labeled and dated, which I immediately love. I've worked at some dirty salons and am relieved to be in a well-kept place.

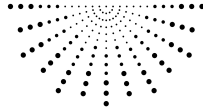
“Let's sign some paperwork, and you'll be all set. I'll have you on the schedule starting next week, Karina,” Alivia smiles and hands me a stack of papers to fill out.

Overall, the day started shitty, but I got a job, and nothing will stop me from celebrating another small victory.

Now that I've acted like an adult, it's time to get childish.

Revenge is best served cold, and I'm ready to deliver.

# MAVERICK



I feel a little guilty about pranking Karina so harshly, but it was revenge for her loud music, and it was successful. The only bad thing was that she spilled coffee everywhere, and I didn't anticipate dousing her shirt with coffee, but it was the payoff that made the prank so much more delectable.

It's a rare day off for me, and I'm spending it with Harper when she's out of school. It's a surprise. When we spoke on the phone I didn't tell her I had a weekday off or about my secret plan to take her out for ice cream at her favorite diner.

I shower after I finish getting the coffee stain out, and I hear Karina come in from her interview. My focus is all over the place, and she's dead-center in my mind.

This woman is stuck in my head, a movie that's on repeat, and I can't stop thinking about her.

How she blew in here last night, offering me a drink and then slugging the tequila like a pro, was enough to wake up my dick. Sporting a semi-hard in the kitchen, I had to kick her out before it went any further.

She smelled like roses, maybe a fruity perfume, or possibly her hair products, but it was entrancing. I'm doing my best to hate her, but if I'm not careful, I might let my guard down around her.

After she left, all I could think was I had to do something to get her attention, and I thought of a classic prank that



*literally* knocked her off her feet.

Lunch with Harper will clear my head, and I need to focus on what matters most: my family. Everything I do is for my sister and Grams; I can't let that slip.

Girlfriends or annoyingly hot neighbors won't distract me from providing only the best for Harper.

I wear a T-shirt and a pair of shorts and grab my keys to head to Harper's school. She'll be out soon, and I want the best parking spot.

When I step outside the door, my feet roll, and I can't catch my balance. I fall right on my ass and land on marbles.

*Fucking marbles.*

This woman put at least one hundred marbles in front of my apartment.

"Oh no, are you okay?" she peeks out her door, smirking.

"Marbles? That's all you've got?" I tease, making my way to a standing position.

"I had to get you back. Don't start a battle if you can't handle the war," she says, winking at me before closing her door.

The *Prank War* is on, and I'm going to enlist the help of a savvy thirteen-year-old to get Karina back for this.



I BEEP THE HORN, AND HARPER LOOKS UP FROM HER PHONE, smiling from ear to ear when she sees my truck.

"Mav! What are you doing here?" she asks, throwing her arms around me for a hug.

"Surprising you, of course. Wanna go get ice cream?" I wait for her to buckle her seatbelt before driving off.

The only thing Harper loves more than her phone is ice cream, and I know she won't deny an after-school snack.

"Does Grams know you picked me up? I don't want her to worry when I don't come home right away," she shifts in her

seat, worried about our grandmother.

“Yes, I called her this morning. She wants a to-go order,” I laugh, and Harper shakes her head.

I listen as she updates me on the wild world of eighth grade, including all the drama surrounding her friends. It pains me to hear this, but teenagers need an adult on their side, so I pretend to be enamored with all things *Forest Falls Middle School*.

We order our ice cream: mint chocolate chip for me and Rocky Road for Harper, as we take our seats in one of the booths.

This diner is her favorite place, bordering the line between here and Rose Hills, making it an easy trip.

“So, how can I help you beat your neighbor?” she asks, licking her spoon and digging in for another bite.

“Yeah, she declared a prank war on me, so I need some of your good ideas to get a leg up,” I tell her, and I can see the gears in her mind spinning.

She may be thirteen, but she has a wise mind beyond her years.

Soon enough, Harper has given me some golden ideas, and I’m bringing her back home to Grams’ house.

It’s not what I want for her. I’d legally adopt her tomorrow if I could afford a reasonable attorney.

Unfortunately, our grandmother’s declining health isn’t enough to revoke her custody, and I refuse to bring this to court for a fight.

Grams is stubborn, thinks she’s in the prime of her life, and loves having Harper with her. It’s not like she’s being abused; I just hate to see her watch someone worsen healthwise, as I did at her age when our mother got her first cancer diagnosis.

It’s a huge burden to have a loved one’s sickness dropped in your lap and be expected to care for them all alone, and I won’t let that happen to my sister. She deserves to be a carefree, average teenager.

“Thank you for the ice cream, Mav. Are you coming inside?” She hugs me tight, hopping out of the passenger seat and waiting for my answer.

I’m not in the mood to see Grams today, so I politely decline and remind her I have a prank war to win.

I pull into the apartment’s parking lot, and a man is peering through the windows of Karina’s car. He’s tall, skinny, and looks to be a few years older than me. I wait before pulling into my spot to see if he plans to move when I see him starting to tug on the door handle.

Rage consumes me, and I hit the gas hard, tires screeching as I park beside him, our eyes locking.

I roll down my window, and before I can say anything, he has the nerve to question me.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he asks, and I suppress the urge to laugh in his face.

“You’re the one who’s attempting to break into a car. What is *your* problem?” I unbuckle my seatbelt, preparing for a fight, and turn my truck off.

“Do you know whose car this is?” he looks me up and down, and I take in as many of his features as possible.

This dude is a criminal, and it doesn’t sit right with me that he’s picking Karina’s car as his mark.

“No, I don’t. What’s it to you?” I say, gauging his reaction.

“Nothing. It just looks like one who belonged to someone I used to know,” he ends our conversation at this point, pulling a hoodie over his head and running off into traffic.

If my red flags were going off when I first pulled in, they’re off the charts now. Whoever this guy is, he has a specific interest in Karina, and I don’t like it one bit.

I debate knocking on her door and telling her everything I witnessed, but I don’t want to worry her.

Instead, I make a mental note to monitor her better and the strange man I saw lurking around her car.

My urge to protect her has nothing to do with the fact that I'm hopelessly attracted to her. I won't let someone get hurt under my watch, especially by a man.

I check my door for any traps, half expecting a bucket of water to dump on my head as I unlock my door, but luckily, no pranks are waiting for me this time.

I order a dashcam online, planning to put it in my truck, facing toward Karina's car. If the creep comes back, poking around her car again, I'll catch a video of it.

A light tap at my door jolts me out of my trance, and I place my laptop on the table before answering the door.

"Hello, sir. We received an inquiry that you were interested in solar lighting. Do you have a moment to talk about what our company can offer you?" a small kid recites his lines, and I stare at him in disbelief.

"This is an apartment building. Where the *fuck* am I going to install solar lights?" I ask, and he looks like a deer caught in headlights.

"Sorry, sir, I must have the wrong address. Have a good day," he mumbles, almost sprinting away from my door.

Karina emerges from her apartment, carrying a backpack with a cat inside, and I should've known.

"What'd you do, sign my address up for solicitors?" I ask, irritated that she thought of such a great prank.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Maverick. I'm taking April out shopping," she says, pointing a finger at the fluffy white cat in her bag.

I shake my head and stare at her, a million questions running through my mind, but I only land on one important enough to ask.

"Do you lock your car at night?" I run my hands through my hair, impatiently waiting for her answer.

"If I remember, why?" She looks annoyed, like I'm bothering her, and I decide to keep pushing those buttons.

I'm confident she sent that idiot here about solar lights, so she'll pay the price by listening to a well-crafted lecture on the dangers of leaving your car unlocked.

"There's been a lot of break-ins around here lately, and that girly little thing you call a car will be first on any burglar's list," I say, still standing in my apartment.

"Good to know, thanks, *Mr. Officer*," she says, rolling her eyes and attempting to walk away.

"Don't ask me for a ride when yours gets stolen, kitten," I use the nickname that accidentally slipped out last night, hoping to see the same flare in her nostrils.

I thought this attraction might've been one-sided, but she likes it, and I know when the heat flushes her cheeks.

"I wouldn't dream of it, broody," she smiles and turns on her heel to walk away.

Whenever I interact with this woman, I slip further into the abyss. I want to get under her skin, I want to irritate her soul so severely it's like an itch she can't scratch, but at the same time, I want to rip the clothes off her body and fuck her on my kitchen counter.

It's an endless battle, and I may have to hang up my gear if I can't keep my head on straight.

Just as I think of a way to get her back for the marbles incident, my phone rings, and it's a number I don't recognize.

"Hello, is this Maverick Carter?" the voice on the other line asks, and I can already tell what kind of call this will be.

"Yes, this is. How can I help you?" I say, grabbing my keys because I'm sure it's the hospital.

"Your grandmother, Martha Carter, has been admitted for dehydration and low blood pressure. As her next of kin, we request that you come down immediately," the nurse says, and I'm already running down the stairs to my truck.

I rush into the ER, looking for a familiar face, and finally, I see the doctor who helped us with her fall.

“Hey, Doc, is Martha Carter alright?” I ask, out of breath and desperate for an answer.

“Maverick, right? She’s right over here,” he leads me to her spot behind the curtain, and Harper sits in a chair beside her bed.

“Harp, are you okay?” I hug her tightly, even though I saw her less than two hours ago.

“I’m fine, Mav. Grams’ monitors were going crazy, so I called 911. I’m sorry I didn’t call you first,” she says, and I reassure her that I’m not upset with her.

Grams is a grown woman who knows she should drink water and eat right, but sometimes she refuses, just like the pain medication.

That is another reason I wish I could teleport Harper out of there. Medical manipulation is serious, and I’m afraid Grams did this because we went out for ice cream today without her.

“Go grab something from the vending machine upstairs. That’s the one with your favorite snacks,” I say to Harper, handing her a ten-dollar bill.

Once my little sister is gone, I take her seat right next to Grams.

“What happened this time?” I ask, knowing that she can hear me.

“I’m fine, Mavvy. Don’t worry about my old soul,” she whispers, and I have to control the rage that builds inside me.

“Do you enjoy scaring Harper? She knows exactly when to call the ambulance because you can’t keep your shit together,” I grit my teeth, keeping my voice as low as possible.

“Harper is just fine. She’s a good girl,” she slurs as the medication takes her under.

I rub my temples, so frustrated with this woman that I can’t be around her any longer.

I checked in with her doctor, and they’ll be keeping her overnight.

“I got your favorite spicy Doritos,” Harper says, bringing me out of the rage inside my head.

“Thanks, Harp. Grab your things. You’re staying at my house tonight,” I tell her, and her eyes widen.

“Is Grams going to be okay? Her voice is trembling, and I pull her in for a hug.

“She’s going to be fine. They want to keep her overnight again, so I’ll bring you to school tomorrow,” I tell her, and she nods in agreement.

“I need some stuff from the house and a steak dinner,” she slaps me on the arm, laughing, and I tell her to say goodbye to Grams before we go.

I leave my number with the nurse at the desk, letting them know to call me if anything changes, and once Harper is ready, we hop in my truck toward Grams’ house.

I tell Harper to make it quick and order take-out from a local place that will cook Harper’s steak a disgusting well, well done.

“Alright, I’m ready. Can we watch what I want tonight?” she asks, and I roll my eyes.

I’ll sacrifice my sports channels for whatever teeny-bopper show she’s obsessed with this week.

I pick up our dinner, and Karina’s car is back in her spot when we pull in.

I pray to everything that could help that she doesn’t have another prank in store for me tonight.

The last thing I need is for Harper’s nosey self to know who Karina is, personally. I’d never hear the end of it.

Luckily, we get inside with no problems, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I get the sofa bed set up for Harper while she’s in the shower when I hear a knock at the door.

“What do you want?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at Karina through a crack in my door.

“I just wanted to say hi. Want a drink?” she smiles, holding up the same bottle of tequila.

“Who is it, Mav?” Harper yells from the bathroom.

Karina’s face turns a shade of pink I’ve never seen before, backing away as quickly as possible.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you had company,” she stammers.

I should let her go, allowing her to think whatever she has in her mind, but my mouth reacts before my brain can.

“That’s my little sister, Harper. Uh, she needs to stay here tonight,” I rush the words out, hoping she’ll listen.

She stops dead in her tracks halfway between our apartments and turns around to face me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Rain check?” she smiles, and if I could bottle the radiance bouncing off her face, I would.

“I’ll think about it, kitten,” I say, and I hear her giggle outside of the door, and there’s nothing more I would’ve liked than to invite her inside.

Wearing a tank top – without a bra this time – and another pair of tiny shorts, I could’ve devoured her instantly.

Does this woman own any clothing that doesn’t drive me wild? She’s always wearing just enough to keep my mind wandering to filthy places.

I tell Harper to get ready for bed and mentally remind myself that weekdays off aren’t a blessing but a curse in disguise because this day has taken too many wild turns.

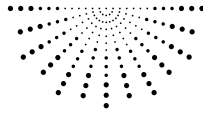
I have a busy morning ahead of me, but when my head hits the pillow, I can only imagine Karina and what she was wearing today.

Her nipples poking out of the fabric, sideboob escaping the confines of the shirt, and I’m battered and bruised at this point. Sleep seems nearly impossible, as I have sex on the brain. I’m fighting this attraction so hard, my mind is coming up with new ways to torture me.



Either I give in, just once, and see if she's into me as well, or I continue to dance on the line between hating her, and flirting with her, which may very well drive me insane.

# KARINA



I can't contain my embarrassment. As much as I want to hate my neighbor, I'm so *pathetically* drawn to him. After three shots of tequila, I worked up the courage to knock on his door again in the teeniest outfit I could find, and to my surprise, he had a guest — a woman.

Except, it wasn't a woman. He read the disappointment on my face and had to clarify that his *little sister* was staying over.

To cover up how mortified I was, I offered him a rain check, and he used that seductive pet name again, sending flares of heat throughout my soul.

I played it cool, but I want to evaporate now that I'm on the other side of my door.

I down another tequila shot, shaking off the events of the last few hours, and I choose not to blast my music tonight out of respect for his sister.

It intrigues me that his younger sister sleeps over at his apartment. They must be close, an endearing quality in a man his age.

My phone rings, and I smile when I answer the phone.

“Hi, Mom! How are you?” I say, bracing myself for her tone.

With me being in hiding, we can't text. It's safer that way, so we call each other every other night and catch up the old-

fashioned way. Some days, she has an attitude and hates my choices; others, she acts like she loves me.

“Hi Karrie, how’s the new apartment?” she says, a dash of sarcasm in her voice.

“It’s good. I bought new furniture and decorations, trying to make it feel like home,” I tell her, and she sighs on the other line.

“Karina, I thought we talked about that. You’re so far away now. How can you move at a moment’s notice if you need to pack, move couches, and do it all by yourself?” she asks, and I know she’s right.

“Mom, I just want to live my life. I want cute shit I can hang on my walls and a comfortable couch to watch TV on. I’ve already given up so fucking much. Can’t I have the little things?” I say, pouring another drink because this conversation is too heavy.

“Of course, I want that for you. A couch, a bed, and wall decor aren’t the small things in your situation. They’re big and hard to pack quickly. I’m just looking out for you,” My mom quips, and I roll my eyes.

“I have a neighbor, and he’s a big pain in my ass. He declared a prank war on me because I listen to music too loud,” I changed the subject, hoping that talking about a guy would make her stop worrying about furniture.

“Sounds like he’s interested in you. Is he cute?” she asks, and I dish out all the details.

Before I know it, we’ve been on the phone for nearly an hour and agree it’s time to hang up.

Sometimes, I feel like a prisoner, especially when I talk to my mom. She’s just a reminder of the life I lead.

I’m always on guard, checking my surroundings and traveling lightly. After years of living on the run, I’m tired of not feeling like my own person.

I’ve decorated and planted roots and intend to stay this time. I won’t be moving again, no matter if Asher finds me.

I remember when I was seventeen, a stupid kid desperate for love, no matter the cost.

My dad left us a year earlier, moving overseas for business and never looking back. That year shaped who I am today, and Asher was the worst thing that ever happened to me.

I survived his abuse, drug addiction, and the endless cycle of him cheating, apologizing, and forgiving him.

One time, our fight got so bad he threw me through a window at an abandoned building we used to crash at with our friends, and luckily, someone called an ambulance.

I had cuts and scrapes all over my body and needed stitches in too many places to remember.

My mom was so angry as she had already forbidden me from seeing Asher, which only solidified after that incident.

I wasn't allowed to see or speak to him for months, but you think you know everything when you're young.

All his apologies made me believe he truly loved me, and it wouldn't happen again. Asher was twenty-two and introduced me to drugs, heavy drinking, and relationship trauma, all before I had turned eighteen.

Then, the summer before I was supposed to start college, I made the mistake of accusing him of cheating on me again, and this time, I paid for it with three days of unconsciousness in the hospital.

I don't remember any of it. I was drunk and smoked a lot of pot, but witnesses said he slammed me down so hard on the concrete they heard bones break.

I had a slight brain bleed, a broken arm, and a few fractured ribs.

My mom had enough and sent me to an inpatient treatment center, mainly for my protection. She wanted me to have counseling to help me understand that this relationship wasn't healthy, especially with our age gap.

When I was released, I begged her to help me hide from Asher. I realized that the way he treated me wasn't love, and I

needed to get away from him.

Ever since then, I've had to look over my shoulder, change my name, and live in fear that this time, he'd leave permanent physical damage.

The emotional pain took years to heal, and I've never felt safe enough to let another man close to my heart.

I've had hookups, one-night stands, and even the occasional situationship, but never more. Surface-level, sexual release. That's all I can bear to give because I'm terrified of being hurt again.

My story scares people off, but the last time I told it, it saved my life.

My best-friend Juliette and her boyfriend, Adam, came to my rescue when Asher found me, and I'm so fucking lucky to have met people who didn't run away.

Instead, they brought me somewhere safe, cared for me, and helped me recover.

For some reason, all my shit life choices have come back to haunt me tonight, and it's a lethal combination when paired with tequila.

I'm a mess of emotions, unable to stop the waterworks once the flood gates open. My cat jumps on my bed, looking for attention, and curls up into a ball right on my lap, which makes me cry even harder.

I don't know how cats can *sense* when something is wrong, but April brings me comfort when I need it most, like my own little emotional support animal.

She wasn't my cat, but when I lived with Juliette, she took a liking to me, and rather than separate us, my old roommate let me keep her, which meant the world to me.

It's slightly pathetic that I'm in bed with April, drinking and crying, when a knock at my door causes me to jump out of my skin.

I'm paralyzed with fear, almost positive that it's Asher and he's found me again.

I get out of bed, moving slowly and trying not to make any noise.

It's late – past midnight, and when I look out my peephole, it's not Asher.

*It's Maverick.*

I wipe my eyes, breathe to compose myself, and open the door.

“What do you want?” I ask, continuing our tradition of seeming annoyed when answering the door.

“Rain check still good?” he says, holding one small lime.

I smile and let out a small chuckle before removing the chain and letting him inside.

I pull down the bottle of tequila and two glasses before noticing I'm in an oversized shirt and a lacy blue thong. *Perfect.*

“I'll be right back. Pour me a double,” I say, rushing to my room to put on a pair of shorts.

*Embarrassment - 3 Me - 0*

If we're keeping score, and right now, I'm seriously losing.

“Alright, *broody*, tell me what's got you at my door this late,” I say, throwing my drink back.

“No lime this time?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“Rough night. I've been drinking so long that it tastes like water. Don't answer my question with a question,” I counter, and he takes his shot, chasing it with a slice of lime.

We stand at my kitchen island, leaning on the counter, looking into each other's eyes, and the dim lighting makes his dirty blonde hair look like the perfect handle *if his head was between my legs.*

God, I'm so tipsy my mind immediately runs to filthy places.

I attempt to keep my emotions and thoughts from showing on my face by giving Maverick my full attention.

“I can’t sleep. Too much on my mind,” he says, and his eyes linger on my chest while he talks.

He’s at least a foot taller than me, and it’s self-evident when a man sees a pair of tits he can’t keep his eyes off.

“I know the feeling. Wanna sit?” I ask, grabbing the bottle and waving my hand toward the couch.

To my surprise, he follows and sits beside me.

“So, Karina, what’s keeping you up late at night?” he looks at me, those green eyes piercing a hole into my skin.

I’m unsure how to answer that because how can I trauma dump on a man who barely likes me as it is?

“Thoughts of the past,” I offer, hoping that answer will satisfy him.

“An ex-lover? You must be missing him hard to stay up this late, drinking alone,” he teases, and my body tenses.

“Quite the opposite,” I chug straight out of the bottle, forgoing the niceties of a shot glass and passing him the bottle.

There’s a silence between us as Maverick takes a sip out of the bottle, placing it on my brand-new coffee table, and I hand him a coaster.

“My turn. What’s got you at my door, in my apartment, so late?” I ask, muting the TV and turning my attention to him.

He shifts in his seat, taking another big sip from the bottle before turning straight at me.

“*You*,” he says, a deadpan look on his face that shows me he’s serious.

“What about me?” I say, leaning back and biting my lower lip.

I’m taking a risk, being this inviting, but with my clothes and the tension between us, it’s a wonder he hasn’t ripped them off yet.

“Everything. The tiny outfits you wear, the way you irritate me so fucking much that I want to rip my hair out. You

might be too much for me, Karina,” he whispers, the confusion painted on his face.

“Is there something you’d like to do about that?” I ask, smirking as I turn up the heat.

He leans forward, our lips inches apart, and his eyes searching mine for any subtle form of consent.

I bite my lip again, challenging him to make the first move, and he read my mind because suddenly, he’s on top of me and kissing my neck.

“You were put here to tease me, kitten,” he whispers against my collarbone.

“No, I was put here to drive you insane,” I say, pushing him off me and climbing into his lap.

He immediately submits, letting me control the tempo now that I’m on top.

He tugs at the hem of my shirt, and I lift my arms to allow him to take it off.

He wastes not a second, grabbing my boobs and sucking on each of my nipples like he’s been dreaming about this.

I remind myself that I’m in control and decide when to raise the stakes.

I grind my hips into his crotch, tipping my head back as he bites my nipple, and I can tell I’m driving him wild.

“Let me see,” I say, breathing heavily and signaling what I’m talking about with another grind of my hips.

“Anything you want, kitten,” he says, pulling down his shorts and showing me exactly what he’s working with.

“I can’t stand you, Maverick,” I whisper before I get down on my knees and put him in my mouth.

“You drive me insane, Karina,” he thrusts himself in my mouth, and I open my throat to take it all.

He groans, and I can feel his dick pulsing in my throat, and I can’t help but choke on it.



He pulls me off the floor and rips my shorts off, revealing the lacy thong he saw when I first let him inside.

“Get up here,” he growls, fumbling with a condom in his wallet.

I do as I’m told, removing the thong and leaving it on the floor with the rest of our clothes.

I lower myself onto him, moaning as soon as the tip reaches my wet entrance.

“Holy shit, you’re so wet,” he mumbles in my ear, only making me ride him faster.

I drop my lips to his neck, trailing my tongue along his collarbone, before he pushes me up, grabbing my breasts and teasing my nipples.

He thrusts into me, forcing me to keep up with the new pace he’s set, and I’m so sensitive that I can feel the tingling sensations slowly starting to overtake my body.

“Oh my god, Maverick, I’m so close,” I moan, and he leans me backward, making me take him even deeper.

Just as I think this all I can take, he uses his free hand to rub my clit, sending fireworks through my body and causing me to scream.

“Shhh, kitten, don’t wake the neighbors,” he teases, lightly biting my earlobe, and sending me over the edge.

My vision goes blurry, unexpectedly, I’m falling apart in his arms, and shaking against his body.

He finishes right behind me, groaning into my ear as he gets his release.

My mind completely forgot to tell me this was a bad idea because the second the post-orgasm bliss fades, I realize I just *drunk-fucked* my neighbor.

*Jesus Christ.*

“Oh. My. God. We just did that,” I breathe, climbing off him and grabbing my tank top.

“We can’t do that again,” he says, and I agree.

A quick release, and then it’s back to hating each other. I can’t start something new — I’m barely functioning as it is.

“Never again,” I whisper as he gets me with those bright green eyes.

“Never again. Even if it was fucking *electric*,” he smirks, grabbing his clothes and heading toward the bathroom to clean up.

I throw my shirt back on, taking another sip from the bottle, and questioning my choices for the second time tonight.

How could I be so reckless? The last thing I need is a situationship, or a fuck buddy, who lives across the hall.

Not to mention, he irritates the fuck out of me, and I drive him crazy.

“One more for the road?” I ask as he emerges from the bathroom, pouring the tequila into a glass this time.

He takes it and clinks the glass against mine, “Here’s to never having great sex with each other again,” he toasts, and I let the liquor burn down my throat.

He turns to leave, gently kissing me on the cheek.

“Goodnight, Maverick,” I say, smiling at him in only my tank top.

“Can you wear more clothes? I can’t promise that won’t happen again if you don’t,” he gestures toward my chest.

“I’ll think about it,” I wink, holding the door open for him and watching as he sneaks back into his apartment.

I close the door and drop to the floor. That was arguably the best sex I’ve ever had, and I can’t let it happen again.

Once was enough, and now he’s out of my system.



A FEW DAYS AFTER THE *INCIDENT*, MY NEW MANAGER FINALLY called, and I have three shifts coming up this week. I’m

relieved. I'm starting to go stir-crazy in my apartment, and the tension between Maverick and I is getting too hot to handle.

He still hasn't pranked me back after I got him twice in one day; first with the marbles and then again with the Solar Guy.

Whenever I leave my apartment, I brace myself for whatever he has in store, but nothing has come yet. The anticipation is killing me.

We're clearly avoiding each other, but it's only a matter of time before we have to face what we did, and either move forward or behave awkwardly toward one another.

I'm taking April for a ride this morning to get her out of the house. This cat loves adventures, and once she's tucked into her backpack, we're off to see what the day holds for us.

Besides the one glaring memory we share, another thing that replays in my mind is the time Maverick asked me if I locked my car at night, and it threw me off-guard, but I gave him a bullshit answer.

He doesn't need to know that I obsessively lock my car and set traps inside to ensure nobody has gotten in.

First, I unlock it and let the paperclip fall to the ground. Once that step is complete, I take a survey of my surroundings, including looking in the window of the backseat.

Now that I know it's safe, I push all the carefully placed trash on the passenger seat to the floor, locking the doors immediately.

My checklist is complete, and my car is safe to drive.

I never worry about the trunk because unless I plan to use it, it's filled to the top with random shit.

No person is hiding in there; if there were, I'd notice.

I neglected to share this insanity with Maverick, mainly because he'd probably think I'm crazy, but in reality, I need to stay vigilant and safe.

The second I let someone in, I run the risk of slipping and falling right into a trap.

I take April to the salon, deciding to pop in and say hello to my new co-workers.

The first woman I see is short, blonde, and looks to be my age.

“Hi honey, I’m Jolene,” she says, pulling me in for a hug.

“Who’s this cutie?” she asks, waving at my cat in my backpack.

“April, she loves to see new places,” I set April on the floor, and she looks around at her new surroundings.

Next, I meet Hannah, an older lady who seems to hold this place together by the stories I’m told.

One other woman works here, but it’s her day off. The salon is quiet, and I quickly get to know these ladies.

“Alivia is a great boss. Her mom owns the place. That’s how she became the manager. She’s easy to work with, at least,” Jolene fills me in, and I’m already loving the salon gossip.

“Alivia’s mom is a control freak, actually, so when Alivia took over the day-to-day, I was relieved,” Hannah says in a long southern drawl.

She tells me she was born and raised in Texas. That’s where the accent comes from.

I can’t tell anyone where I’m from when they ask, so I’m stuck with the lame-ass response, “*I’m from everywhere,*” which always gives off weird vibes.

Hannah and Jolene are no different. The looks on their faces tell a story. They don’t need to use words.

“What kinds of clients do you usually get?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Men who need haircuts, mainly. The women are picky. One thing you’ll notice about Forest Falls is everyone is snobby,” Jolene says, and Hannah laughs at that.

I feel good about this place and this group of girls that I'll be working with. I've had a good feeling about Forest Falls since I got here, but this further solidifies my desire to stay in this place for the foreseeable future.

"I'll see you in a few days, ladies!" I shout as I head out the front door.

Our gossip was cut short by two teenage boys who needed cuts, so I'm taking April to the pet store and the party store.

I can't be caught slacking when it comes to the prank war, and I figure there's no better place to find silly items than a store filled with corny shit.

I hit the jackpot, and my ideas are so good I can't help but laugh at myself.

I buy two hundred plastic ducks, shock pens, and a remote-controlled fake cricket.

These things will drive him crazy, and I take it one step further, buying oil that I plan to rub on the door handles to his truck, and apartment.

Satisfied with my supplies, I load April in the car and take us home.

When I pull into my parking spot, I notice a sign has replaced my apartment number, so I get out for a closer look.

**PARKING RESERVED FOR THE LOUDEST WOMAN  
THIS COMPLEX HAS EVER SEEN. SHE HAS A  
MARVELOUS TIME NOT LETTING OUR TENANTS SLEEP.**

I SHAKE MY HEAD IN DISBELIEF. THIS DUMBASS HAD A REAL sign made and had it installed in front of my spot.

*Game. On.*

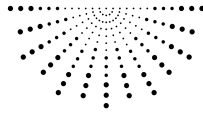
I thought he went soft on me after our ill-advised hookup, but he's back in the game, and I can't wait to get him with something new.

His truck isn't here; he's most likely at work, so I'll start plotting my revenge as soon as I get inside.

He better be ready because the tricks I have up my sleeve are long-lasting and will ensure continuous suffering.

This act of war is just what I needed to get out of the funk I've been stuck in, and I'm running on a full-tank, cruising to the winner's circle.

# MAVERICK



I've done everything in my power to avoid Karina since the night we hooked up, and I'm starting to go wild without hearing her sarcastic comments.

*Sign number one that I'm weak for her.*

Last night, I put up the sign I ordered, and I can't wait to hear what she says about it.

I'm surprised she hasn't hit me with a prank yet, leaving the ball in my court.

Sleeping with her was so irresponsible, considering I left my thirteen-year-old sister alone and got drunk in the process.

This is why I steer clear of relationships and I learned my lesson. The guilt has been eating at me. If I want to prove I can be a proper guardian to a child, I can't do shit like that again.

I got her out of my system, and I have to leave it at that, no matter how *badly* I want her again.

It was perfect. Being with her, taking her perky tits in my mouth while she took charge and willingly sucked me off, was better than I could've imagined.

That woman can blow the socks off anyone, and I need to stop replaying every second of that night in my head for my own sanity, but I'm coming to the harsh realization that *one taste* of Karina was absolutely *not enough*.

*Sign number two that I'm completely fucked when it comes to her.*

“New kid! Big boss wants to see you in his office,” one of the guys shouts at me from across the yard, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Hunter Avery is co-owner of the company and a great boss so far. He’s the only one who’s taken the time to learn my real name, but he signs my checks, so it’s his job.

I knock lightly on the door, poking my head in.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Avery?” I ask, and he waves me in.

“Cut that, Mr. Avery shit, it’s Hunter, alright,” he says, not turning around to face me.

“You got it, boss man,” I sit on his office couch, which reeks of whisky and cigarettes.

“Your probationary period is over tomorrow, and Adam thinks we should bring you on full-time. What does that look like for you?” he finally spins around in his chair to face me, and I hadn’t thought of them considering my suggestions.

“Well, what do you normally offer to your full-timers?” I ask, hoping to draw inspiration from his answer.

“It differs for everyone. Some guys want the benefits or the overtime. It’s more about your situation,” he tells me, and I think it over.

Grams has shitty insurance, and getting better benefits for Harper would be nice.

“Can I have dependents on my insurance? My grandmother and little sister have shitty coverage, and I’d like them to be taken care of,” I say, shifting in my seat a bit.

I haven’t disclosed any personal information about my situation to anyone here, and I’d like it to stay between us. I trust Hunter, and he seems like the kind of guy who doesn’t fuck around.

“A family man? I can support that. Yes, your family will qualify to be added as your dependents. What kind of hours are you looking to work?” he asks, and I never noticed how flexible things could be around here.



“Whatever you have, I’ll take. The only day I can’t work is Sunday. My little sister and I cook dinner together,” I counter, and his eyes perk up at me.

“Absolutely, Sundays are yours, no matter what,” he shakes my hand, and somehow, I know his word is his bond.

“Thanks, boss man, I appreciate all of this. You have no idea,” I say, standing up to leave his office.

“Keep it up, Maverick. You’re standing out in the crowd right now, and I want to see more from you moving forward,” he smiles and turns back to the computer.

It’s always good to hear praise from a boss, and I’m lucky to have one of the easiest guys to work with. I was in need of good news, and thankfully, it came in the form of providing better insurance for my family.

These moments are why I work as hard as I do for them.



I’M AT THE GROCERY STORE, PICKING OUT INGREDIENTS FOR the cheeseburgers Harper wants for dinner, when I see the perfect opportunity for a prank war purchase.

It’s a cat caller toy, supposed to drive your cat crazy and encourage them to play.

I immediately throw it in the cart, hoping to use Karina’s cat as a way to drive her insane.

I’m satisfied with everything I have, and check out, heading off to Grams’ house.

Ever since our short conversation at the hospital, it’s been tense between us.

I’m certain that she purposely wanted to go to the hospital for attention, but Harper is convinced that her health is worsening. I must keep them both happy, so I suck it up and continue our Sunday dinner tradition.

I ring the doorbell, groceries in hand, when Harper sees me through the screen door.

“Jesus, Mav. You’re so late,” she rolls her eyes at me, opening the door and walking toward the kitchen.

“Hi to you too, Harp. Hi Grams,” I bend down, kissing her on the cheek.

“Don’t mind her. It’s that time of the month,” she whispers, and I immediately shake off the thought.

“Ready to make cheeseburgers?” I ask, and Harper already has seasonings and a salad prepared.

“As I said, you’re late.”

She is full of attitude today, and I try to step around her teenage hormones.

“I’m sorry, Harp, the store was crazy busy today. I’m here now,” I say, handing her a bottled Starbucks drink and a bag of her favorite chips.

Her smile is back, and she hugs me tight. There’s the girl I know.

I start unpacking the food, putting aside everything we’ll need for tonight’s dinner and filling the fridge with the staples I picked up.

“What in the hell is this?” Harper holds up the cat toy, and I can’t help but laugh.

“It’s for the prank war. I plan to make Karina’s cat lose its shit,” Harper gives me a thumbs up and places it back on the counter.

“Who’s Karina?” Grams asks, walking into the kitchen from her spot in front of the TV.

“Mav’s neighbor, they’re in a prank war. He’s *so totally* in love with her,” Harper declares, shooting me a playful smile.

“I am not. The woman drives me crazy,” I defend myself, but both exchange a look before bursting into laughter.

“Riiiiight. That’s why you went to her apartment at midnight to tell her how crazy she makes you?” Harper teases, and my face burns with embarrassment.

“That is not where I was. I needed some air,” I counter, but Harper and Grams don’t believe it.

“Finally, a woman. I was starting to think he was a bit fruity,” Grams says to Harper, and they both cackle at my expense.

“If you two want premium health insurance, you’d better cut the shit and stay out of my love life,” I warn, but they don’t take me seriously.

“*Oh*, so there is a love life we should be sticking our noses in?” Harper tosses the block of cheese at me, and I throw an onion at her.

I can’t believe she knew I had left, but she was sleeping in the living room. No matter how quiet I was, I should’ve known she’d hear.

I’m pissed she brought it up in front of Grams, though. The last thing I need is her thinking I sneak off to do shit when Harper is over at my house.

The three of us cook dinner together, my personal life declared *off-limits* as I listen to more updates on the love triangle that has swept the eighth grade off their feet, and Grams pulls me aside after we eat for a talk.

This ought to be good.

“I’m sorry about the other day, Mavvy. Harper should mind her business, though; I was fine,” she says, digging in the fridge for a beer — something she’s not supposed to have.

“Grams, you need to be better. She shouldn’t have to see you like that,” I take the beer from her, drinking half of it in one sip before letting her finish the rest.

She rolls her eyes but drinks it.

“I know, I know. But you’re no saint, sneaking over to do dirty things with your neighbor? What kind of impression does that leave on a teenager? You don’t get to judge me and my choices,” She shakes her head at me, and I won’t admit it to her, but she’s right.

“That’s not what happened,” I stand firm, hoping to end this narrative once and for all.

“You can’t lie to me. That little bitch you’re screwing better not get in the way of your responsibilities here,” she spits, her actual colors showing.

“Enough. It’s none of your business, and I do everything for Harper. Remember that,” I say, turning my back and walking away.

Grams can be a mean old woman, especially when she thinks she’s better than everyone else. Knowing how explosive we both can get, I give up, not feeling like arguing.

Once I clean the kitchen and load the dishes, I say goodnight, promising to see them soon.

“I’ll call you tomorrow after soccer practice, okay, Mav?” Harper asks, hugging me goodbye.

“Of course, send me the game schedule so I can start requesting time off. I don’t want to miss a single one,” I tell her, knowing I’ll have to remind her again.

Now that I’m out the door, I sigh in relief, walking back to my truck with that stupid prank toy I got for Karina’s cat.

I stop at the liquor store, and an idea comes to mind that I should ignore but choose not to.

I buy Karina’s tequila, along with all the limes they have, and a cute gift bag to put it all in.

*Sign number three that I’m so screwed, it’s almost laughable.*

I grab a napkin and write a little note with my phone number. Admittedly, I love it when she knocks on my door, but I can’t have that anymore when Harper is around.

This is such a stupid idea, considering we agreed this wouldn’t happen between us again, but the magnetic force pulling us together is fucking intense, and I’m running out of ways to duck for cover.



IT'S BEEN HOURS SINCE I DROPPED THE BOTTLE OF TEQUILA AT Karina's door. She hasn't texted me yet, but that's not what keeps me awake tonight.

There's a fucking cricket loose in my apartment, and I can't find out where it's coming from.

Whenever I get close, thinking I've found it, the noise comes from the opposite side of the room.

I'm losing my mind, and I hold a pillow over my head to drown the sound out, waving the white flag against the obnoxious bug.

Eventually, I drift off to sleep, but my alarm wakes me up, and I'm exhausted. I'm not usually a big coffee drinker, but I may need to stop for one to survive the day.

When I'm getting dressed, my phone rings with a new text, and I wonder who the hell is awake this early.

It's Karina, and I shake my head. I should've known the cricket was a prank. I'll never admit defeat, so I text her back, playing coy.

Hey neighbor! Sleep okay?

Like a baby, I see you got my gift.

I did, thank you very much. Come over tonight and open it with me.

I'll think about it.

Catch you later, broody.

Have the day you deserve, kitten.

I'M SMILING AT MY PHONE LIKE A FUCKING IDIOT, STANDING IN the middle of the room in only my boxers, which are now constricted by the hard-on I'm sporting.

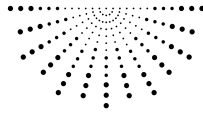
All because of a couple of flirty fucking texts.

My armor is cracking, and I'm realizing that she may not be my nemesis after all. Something is happening where I'm feeling vulnerable when it comes to her, and no matter how hard I try to avoid it, it's hitting me like a freight train.

The signs are all pointing straight toward her, but I'm so set in my ways to accept anything less than the plans I've curated for my life.

I should just leave the tequila as a gift and decline the invitation, but I can't help but think about Karina for the rest of the day.

# KARINA



*I*t's my first day at the salon, and I'm a little nervous. Texting Maverick was probably a bad idea, even worse to invite him over later, but it's helped my anxieties. He left me a gift and his number on a napkin, so he had to assume I'd text him, right?

I have no clue what's going on between us.

One minute, he hates me, and we're starting a prank war.

The next we engage in a drunken one-night stand, he's leaving me gifts and his phone number.

I want to hate him, stay away at all costs and protect my fragile heart, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to sleep with him again.

It's on a loop in my mind, the way our bodies did something so fucking perfect together, and I'm hopelessly stuck thinking about him way more than I'd like to be.

*I'm fucked.*

He's set the boundaries, though, ensuring we don't let it happen again, and asking me to wear more clothes around him. He's got a lot on his plate it seems, and I have to respect a man who can draw that line in the sand, and put his family first.

I finish getting ready for my first day, and shake off anything that doesn't relate to hairstyling. I'm on a mission to make a good impression today and focus on work, *not* Maverick.

Once I arrive, I'm greeted by the ladies I met yesterday, and I'm booked for a more in-depth tour with Alivia. For most of the morning, I've taken notes and followed her around.

It's not an ideal way to spend my time, but she's thorough and I can respect that.

The final thing she shows me is how to work the computer system, and I have my tab for appointments I book.

She's got me on for two haircuts and a root touch-up.

I hope to prove myself immediately and make a good impression on everyone here.

Alivia is a stickler for organization, so she has me in the back room looking over all the colors and dyes. She also gave me a catalog to go through; I can either order my own supplies online or drive an hour away to a store where I need a cosmetology license to purchase from.

I decide to make a list and drive there after work. I have nothing better to do besides sit around and think about *not* fucking my neighbor.

It's quiet here, and Hannah tells me that we close for lunch from noon to one, so I have an hour before I need to be back.

I've never worked in a salon that closes for lunch, and I'm relieved not to be eating next to chemicals and stray hairs.

I grab a slice at a local pizza place, driving aimlessly while eating. I didn't expect to have time off during the day, so I'm a bit bored.

Next shift, I'll stop home for lunch. My bank account is hurting badly, and I can't live off fast food much longer.

When I get back, my first appointment is waiting for me, and he's a middle-aged man.

"Hi, I'm Karina. I'll be your stylist today," I say, leading him to my station.

"Just a little off the top and the back, please," he says, and I get to work.



“You must be new in town. I haven’t seen you here before,” he makes small talk and smiles at me in the mirror.

“Yes, I just moved a few weeks ago,” I tell him, and we chat for another few minutes until I finish.

“Thank you, Karina. It’s perfect,” he says, handing me a ten-dollar bill.

Good for my first client.

My root touch-up is next, and the rest of my day seems to fly by now that I’ve got customers.

Overall, it was a great first day, and now I’m cleaning my station and going shopping.

“Goodnight, ladies,” I call out to Alivia and Hannah, and they wave as I walk out the door.

I set my directions to the store, roll the windows down, and blast the music the whole ride.



I’M IN HEAVEN. THERE’S A VARIETY OF HAIR STYLING TOOLS IN this store, and I’m loading up my cart fast. I pick out the cutest set of scissors and combs, bright pink to match my vibe.

Next, I get brushes, spray bottles, clippers, and three colored aprons.

Finally, I grab a big pack of hair clips, gloves, and small hair ties.

A silver box of dye draws me in, and impulse control is lacking because I buy it and a bleach kit.

*New town, new hair.*

I’m satisfied with everything I have to start, and I dig around for my license to hand to the cashier.

Luckily, I had a good day with tips to cover most of this stuff; the rest I throw on my credit card and I’ll let my mom handle that charge when she sees it.

She gave me this credit card years ago so I’d never be out of money, and I rarely use it anymore, but it’s nice to have.

I'm excited to start on my hair, and my phone rings with a new text.

What kind of pizza do you like

Meat lovers or just pepperoni why?

I'm bringing dinner. Be there in twenty.

SHIT, I DIDN'T THINK HE'D ACTUALLY WANT TO COME OVER after what happened last time.

*There go my plans to dye my hair.*

I get home a few minutes before Maverick said he'd be here, so I have time to change.

I decide to be teasing, but keep a bra on this time, choosing a v-neck shirt that shows off my cleavage and comfy shorts.

*Better than last time.*

I hear a knock at the door and take a deep breath. Dinner and tequila with the man I'm not supposed to fuck again ... *what could go wrong?*

I open the door and I am instantly blasted in the face with confetti.

"What the fuck, Maverick?" I yell, my vision blurred by tiny pieces of colorful paper.

He laughs hysterically, a sound I could listen to on repeat.

"Sorry, neighbor, I had to get you back for that fucking cricket noise last night," he says, bringing the pizza box inside and placing it on the counter.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about," I say, pulling down two plates and two shot glasses.

"Yeah, right, and I didn't just blow a load of confetti all over your face," he immediately bites his lip, realizing the words that came out of his mouth.

I can't help but laugh out loud at the most ridiculously strung-together sentence I've ever heard.

Maverick's cheeks are bright red, but he's laughing, too.

"Let's eat," I shake my head, handing him a plate.

"This is the best pizza place in town. Thankfully, your taste in toppings is better than your shitty music," he smiles at me, and I can't get enough of the shimmer in his eyes.

"How come your sister had to stay with you?" I ask, jumping up to sit on the counter.

Maverick is tall, probably over six feet, so now we're at an even level, and he can't stare down my shirt.

He clears his throat and looks at me as if he's debating whether or not he can trust me.

"My grandmother went to the hospital, and I couldn't let Harper sleep there," he pours us both a drink, handing me mine and a slice of lime.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Is she okay now?" I ask, knocking back the tequila.

"She's fine, and so is Harper. Although she knows I snuck over here that night," he laughs, and my eyes widen.

"She sounds like a smart kid," I smile, and he takes a few steps closer to me.

"The smartest one I know. So what's your story? How'd you end up in Forest Falls?" he asks, and I pour myself another drink before diving into this conversation.

"It's a long story. My ex is crazy, and I'm never safe, no matter where I go. The last time he found me, I hid out in Rose Hills with some friends and then decided this was the town for me," I tell him, and he never takes his eyes off me as I share my sob story.

Neither of us say anything, and I'm afraid I brought the mood down with my confession.

This was a *terrible* idea. I should've just given him a stupid, vague answer.

“What’s his name?” he asks, a darkness taking over the color in his eyes.

“Uh, Asher, why?” I shift uncomfortably, wondering what is going through his mind.

“Next time he finds you, there’s no hesitation. You call me, no questions asked, do you understand Karina?” he’s dead serious, a fire lit behind his eyes.

I nod in agreement, not sure what words can even counter that. Tears well up in my eyes, and I struggle to stop them from falling.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I say, wiping my face and attempting to hide my embarrassment.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You’re the victim. Has he ever hurt you?” he’s asking a loaded question because if he knew the extent, I feel like he’d lose his mind.

“Once or twice, nothing serious,” I fidget with the string on my shorts, trying to avoid eye contact.

“He won’t lay a finger on you ever again, kitten. I promise you,” he whispers, coming another couple of steps closer to me.

I can feel the heat between us, and I suddenly feel nervous.

Him being close enough to touch makes my insides tremble.

“What are you doing, Maverick?” I whisper, taking the plunge and looking up into his sea-green eyes.

“I have no fucking idea, Karina. I can’t get you out of my head.”

He bites his bottom lip and puts his hands next to my legs on the counter, lightly brushing my thighs with his thumbs.

For a split second, I think he will kiss me, which scares me even more.

I don’t kiss anyone, it’s too intimate. The only person I’ve ever made out with was Asher, and I’ve spent the years since refusing to let anyone else get that close to me.

“Don’t. I’m too damaged,” I say, my voice barely audible over our heavy breathing.

“If you’re damaged, that must mean I’m shattered,” he tangles one hand in my hair, and I can’t stop the moan that passes my lips.

“Tell me you want this, too,” he’s looking straight into my eyes, waiting for my answer.

A million things are going through my mind, and I can’t bring myself to say *yes* as much as I want this.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” I say, and he immediately backs away.

I take the bottle of tequila and take a sip, passing it to him.

The silence is so loud, and I start to cry again.

“It’s fine, Karina. We said never again. I shouldn’t have pressured you,” he says softly, and I shake my head.

“It’s not you. Seriously. I, um, haven’t kissed anyone since I was seventeen,” I hide my face with my hands, ashamed that I even said it aloud.

Maverick shocks me, taking my hands into his, piercing me with a look that melts my brain.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I hadn’t slept with anyone in years before you. We all have our baggage,” he tells me, and I don’t dare move.

Our connection feels strong, him standing in front of me, gently holding my hands, while I sit on the counter, perched slightly above his emerald green eyes and messy blonde hair.

Trauma dumping and almost kissing weren’t what I expected from this night, but I feel like I know Maverick.

More pain, secrets, and wounds are under the surface, and even though I shouldn’t, I want to know everything about him.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I WAKE UP HUNGOVER ON MY COUCH, with no sign of Maverick.

The last thing I remember is that he was stumbling around trying to heat more pizza, and I was drinking straight out of the bottle.

Last night was a whirlwind. We went from talking about the skeletons in our closets to watching shitty game shows and trying to see who could take more shots.

We're both very competitive, but I think I lost by passing out.

At first, I was so reserved around him, but now I feel like I've known him for years.

We made plans to have dessert tonight since I drunkenly pointed out that he was rude for not bringing any.

He thinks he'll be able to pinpoint my favorite dessert, taking it as a challenge.

I pull myself off the couch, flopping onto my bed and burying my head under the pillows.

Thank goodness I don't have a shift today; the smell of chemicals would probably make me pass out or puke everywhere.

Suddenly, April lets out a terrifying meow and jumps into the air.

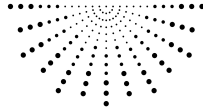
I sit up, my head pounding, wondering what her issue is, but I don't see anything.

"Cut it out, April. There's nothing here!" I yell, but now she's running around the apartment, meowing very loudly.

Sleep is useless now, and I put on a pot of coffee while I shower.

It's time to cure this hangover and get on with my day.

# MAVERICK



The sound of my alarm rips me out of my sleep, and I let a string of curse words fly out before finally getting out of bed.

I stayed over at Karina's too late and drank enough to make me throw up last night.

That woman never ceases to amaze me. She drank me under the table and then some.

I start getting ready for work, dreading the day ahead.

*This* is why I don't do friendships or relationships. I will spend my day in a haze, wishing I could sleep the day away.

My boss told me to step up more, and I have been, but today won't be my best performance.

I promised Karina I'd bring her dessert tonight but I won't stay long. I need to put some distance between us.

She's infected my mind, and I don't know how to get her out.

The memories come flooding back and I practically begged her to kiss me, breaking our pact about not letting anything happen between us again. I know she wanted to; I could read it all over her face.

Learning about her past opened up another soft spot I have for her, and if I ever see her ex-boyfriend hanging around, I'll lose my mind.

Keeping my distance but keeping her safe is my priority.

I check my phone for new messages and have two new voicemails from Gram's primary doctor. I roll my eyes and listen as he details the results from her recent labs.

Her sugar is high again, which means she's not eating properly.

After work, I'll need to stop by and check on her, reminding her for the millionth time that she needs to take the doctor's order seriously.

As I drive to work, I reflect on everything Karina shared with me, and my whole body tenses.

The guy I saw poking around her car a few weeks ago was likely the ex.

I punch my steering wheel, pissed off at myself for not doing more at the time.

He knows where she lives and probably has followed her to work.

I remember some details about him, but not enough to take my concern to the police.

That dashcam I ordered is still sitting in its box in my backseat, and I need to get it set up immediately.

My blood is boiling; I can't let anything happen to her, and I also can't be this concerned about her.

I'm fighting a war against my head and heart, but either way, I feel like I'm losing.



HALFWAY THROUGH THE DAY, I GOT A CALL FROM HARPER'S school. Her principal needs me to come to pick her up immediately.

I don't get any other details, and I don't think this day could be worse.

"Hey, boss, I'm so sorry to do this, but I need to leave early. Family emergency," I say to Hunter, and he looks up from his computer with concern.



“Is everything alright?” he asks, waiting for my answer.

“I’m not sure. My sister’s school called, and I need to pick her up,” I tell him, and he gives me the rest of the day off.

I rush to my truck, heading straight for the middle school.

When I arrive, Harper is waiting in the principal’s office, and I need to meet with them both before we can leave.

“Hi, Maverick. You’re Harper’s guardian?” She stands to shake my hand and gestures me to the seat next to Harper.

“I’m her older brother. Our grandmother is her guardian, but she has severe medical problems,” I fill her in, and she nods.

“Well, I called you this afternoon because Harper was involved in a fight with other girls, and unfortunately, she’ll be issued a three-day suspension for her role in the events,” I stare directly at Harper, in complete shock at what I’m hearing.

“Mav, she’s got it all wrong!” Harper yells, and I wave my hand to signal her to stop talking.

“I’m so sorry. We’ll be dealing with this at home,” I stand, taking Harper by the arm and ordering her to get her things while I complete the paperwork.

I thank the secretary and take the folder of schoolwork Harper needs to finish by the time she’s allowed back at school.

There’s no way I’m taking her back to Gram’s house, and her punishment will be stuck in the confines of my apartment without her phone.

I don’t say another word to her in the school; I wait until we’re in my truck and down the road before letting it out on her.

“What the fuck, Harper? Fighting in school? I had to leave work to come pick you up! You’re so grounded; it’s not even funny. You’re coming to my house and leaving your phone at Grams’,” I yell.

She's trying to talk over me, but I won't let her.

"Mav! You're not fucking listening! I wasn't fighting anyone. I didn't lay a hand on any of the other girls. I was walking by and got pulled in by accident!" Harper cries, tears streaming down her face.

Fuck. I was too caught up in my anger to ask her what happened from her point of view.

I know my sister, and fighting isn't in her bones.

Arguing? Definitely. Not physical violence, though.

"I'm sorry, Harp. You're still staying with me, though, and completing all your work, deal?" I ask, turning around and stopping at a fast food place.

"Deal, thank you, Mav," she says, wiping her tears and reading the menu.

"When you return to school, I'll come with you and talk to the principal again on your behalf, okay?" I smile at her and prepare to fill her in on all the prank war details.

After we fill up on junk food, I take her back to Gram's house to pick up her things.

I plan to have a quick talk about her recent labs and get the hell out of here.

First, I tell her what happened with Harper, explaining her side of the story and promising to make it right.

"Your doctor called again. You need to get your shit together. I can't keep running you in and out of the hospital," I tell her, but she just waves me off like usual.

"I'm fine, Mavvy. Don't fucking worry about me. Just pay the damn bills," she says, and I choose to be the adult and walk away.

"Alright, I'm ready!" Harper yells from the living room, and we're out the door.

Pulling out of the driveway, I get a new text.

Hi broody, are we still on for dessert?

I have to cancel. Harper's staying over for a few days.

Is everything okay?

Fine, she got suspended.

Bring her over for dessert? I'll be on my best behavior.

I'll think about it, kitten.

I CATCH MYSELF SMILING AT MY PHONE AGAIN, AND THIS TIME, Harper's here to notice.

"Why are you making that face?" she calls me out, and I can't help but laugh.

"Nothing. My neighbor invited you over for dessert tonight," I say, her eyes widening in curiosity.

I drive us to the grocery store, Harper nearly bouncing with excitement over meeting Karina.

I don't know why I'm so nervous, but having these two meet is a lot of pressure.

We stroll the aisles, comparing ideas on what we think her favorite dessert would be before settling on turtle brownies.

They're chunked with chocolate chips and topped with shaved coconut, along with other shit I don't understand, but this is Harper's choice, so she better be right. I can't stand to lose, *especially* to Karina.

"You should buy her flowers," Harper elbows me in the ribs, pointing at the rows of bouquets next to us.

"She's not my girlfriend, Harp. I will not buy her flowers," I remark, rolling my eyes at her.

“Oh yeah? Then why am I meeting her? You can lie to Grams all you want, but I know you were with her that night,” she smirks and crosses her arms.

Teenagers and their obsession with romance. She may have a point. I probably shouldn't introduce them, considering hours ago, I wanted to create distance between us.

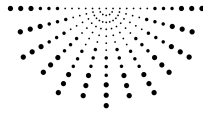
Here I am, bringing Harper and brownies to her place like we're a couple.

My head hurts; it's been a long couple of days, and I've never been more conflicted.

“No flowers, and no mentioning the word girlfriend around her, got it?” I lay down the law, but Harper will absolutely find a way to embarrass me tonight.

I'm merging my two lives, one where I'm an older brother who protects his sister at all costs, and the other where I'm getting *dangerously* close to the girl next door.

# KARINA



*M*y cat has been off the rails all day, and I can't figure out why. She's calm and quiet typically, napping on her cat tree or playing with her toys.

Today, she's been meowing and hissing all over the place, jumping in the air and running from room to room, and I'm at a loss.

Maverick and his little sister are bringing dessert, which has my nerves at an all-time high.

After the tension between us last night, how he wanted to kiss me and stay until the early morning hours, I don't know how to keep this up anymore.

I'm doing my best not to let him in, but confessing some of the stories about Asher is the opposite of shutting him out.

He's got that fiery instinct to protect, and I feel he'd be there for me if I ever needed him.

We're supposed to hate each other, pull pranks, and complicate life. Instead, we've got some connection blooming, and I fear it's becoming magnetic, almost like we can't stop it if we try.

My head has been spinning all day, replaying my last few encounters with Maverick over and over again, and it's beginning to give me a migraine.

Gifts, dinner, and now dessert; after tonight, I need to set a boundary between us and put the brakes on whatever's happening.

There's a knock at my door, and I look in the mirror before opening it.

I chose an old sweatshirt to cover up and eliminate the chances of Maverick staring down my shirt. I picked leggings to hide some of my curves and make it look like I'm just a regular neighbor.

This girl is supposed to be wise, and I don't want to mess anything up with his situation.

"Hi, come in!" I open the door as Maverick hands me a grocery bag.

"I'm Harper," the petite girl says, her brown hair in a ponytail.

I can see how they're related; their facial features are similar, and Harper is tall like Maverick.

"Well, open it. Let's see if we nailed your favorite dessert," Maverick teases, and I pull out a tray of brownies.

Fuck. Seriously, how did he know? Chocolate brownies with any kind of toppings are my weakness.

"Oh, my god. You are good!" I say, smacking his arm and opening the treats.

"Harper had the final say. She must have the same powers as I do," he puts his arm around her, beaming with pride.

"It's one of the Carter specialties," Harper winks, and we laugh.

The way they are with each other is adorable. I can see that they have a strong bond, and Harper idolizes her big brother.

I don't know enough about their family life to fully understand, but it's evident that they're tight-knit for a reason.

"Karina, I hear you two are in a prank war?" Harper asks in between bites of her brownie.

Before I can answer, April darts off her cat tree and runs into the bedroom like she's seen a ghost. This cat has been driving me crazy all day. I'm ready to lock her in the bedroom.

“I’m sorry, my cat is clinically insane today,” I warn, and they exchange a knowing glance, attempting to hide their smiles.

They know something I don’t.

Maverick walks over to April’s tree and pulls out a small white device. I stare at him, a million things running through my mind when Harper starts laughing.

“I can’t believe you used that!” She smiles at me, and I have no clue what’s happening.

“Okay, can someone tell me what’s going on, please!” I beg.

The strange little device is starting to freak me out.

“I put this here last night. It’s supposed to send out signals that drive cats wild. I showed it to Harper the day I bought it,” Maverick finally speaks up, and I take it from him, throwing it in the trash.

“You got me good. I’ll admit that. But you’re dead meat now,” I tease him, sticking my tongue out.

“You should fill his room with spiders; Mav is terrified of them!” Harper smiles at me, and I like this girl already.

I make a mental note, filing it away for later when I run low on prank ideas.

“So, you’re staying here for a few days, Harper?” I ask, turning the conversation to her.

“Yeah, I got tangled up in a fight at school, and they suspended me. Now, I’m a prisoner in Mav’s apartment for three days,” she groans, rolling her eyes like a typical teenager.

“Harper has plenty of schoolwork to keep her occupied while I’m at work. She won’t even notice I’m gone,” he replies, tossing his napkin at her.

“Well, I have an hour for lunch. I can bring something for you tomorrow if you’d like. Check in and make sure you’re alright?” I offer, hoping I’m not crossing a line.

“I’d appreciate that, Karina, thank you,” Maverick smiles at me, and I can’t help but smile right back at him.

“Do I get a say in this?” Harper sounds annoyed, and I remember the days of being an unruly teenager.

The attitude is off the charts, and I laugh, knowing Maverick will have his hands full the next few days.

I might even let up on the pranks, knowing he’ll suffer enough.

“What’s there to say, Harp? She’s offering to bring you lunch, a nice gesture that she doesn’t have to do,” he warns, a sternness in his voice.

“Fine. Can I watch TV now?” she asks, and Maverick tosses her his keys.

She stomps off without a word, slamming the door behind her.

“Teenagers, right?” I laugh, and he sits on the couch.

I join him, sitting on the opposite side.

He sighs, looking at me with sympathy in his eyes, and I feel like he has something to tell me.

“What’s on your mind, Mav?” I tease, using the cute nickname his sister calls him.

“I have something to tell you. Well, two somethings,” he says, shifting his position on the couch to face me.

I don’t say anything, anxiously awaiting whatever he wants to tell me.

It’s silent between us for a few beats before he sighs deeply, and prepares to drop a truth bomb right into my lap.

“So, I saw someone poking around your car. The first day Harper stayed at my apartment. He was older and asked me if I knew who it belonged to. I didn’t answer him, but he took off running,” he spills, and my body instantly freezes.

I can’t move or find the words because my nightmare is becoming a reality.



*Asher followed me to Forest Falls.*

I thought I was careful, hiding in Rose Hills and moving discreetly, but he must've had his eyes on me the whole time.

I think I might throw up, and I feel Maverick staring at me.

I know he's waiting for me to say something, but I can't. I'm devastated.

I thought I finally found a place to call home, to place roots and build a life.

All of that has gone to shit, and I want to scream.

"Karina, are you okay?"

"Is it your ex?" he moves closer to me, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

"Yeah, it's Asher. He found me again," I whisper, the tears starting to fall.

"I promised you I wouldn't let anything happen to you, and I meant that. I didn't mention it at first because I thought it was nothing, but your story about him last night made me realize what was going on," he sits me back up, holding my gaze, and there's fierce anger in his eyes.

"Thank you. I appreciate you telling me," I say, unsure what to do next.

Do I run away? Do I hope his obsession will fade, but continuously look over my shoulder? I want to stay and fight, but I don't know if I have the strength to do it alone.

"What else did you want to tell me?" I ask, remembering he had another thing up his sleeve.

He sighs, seemingly contemplating if he should say something or not.

"I want to put a little distance between us. I shouldn't have asked to kiss you last night, and I can't be the guy in a relationship; that doesn't work for me," he chooses his words carefully, probably trying to let me down easily.

“I was thinking the same thing, especially if Asher is around. It’s a strict reminder of *why I can’t trust men*,” I say, hitting him where it can hurt him.

I don’t know why I’m mad, I was planning on talking like this with him, but it feels like something is ending, and it fucking hurts.

*Everything hurts.*

“We can still be friends, continue the silly pranks, but I think we’ve crossed lines by drinking and sleeping together,” he tries to move closer, but I stand up and walk away from him.

I feel like I’m about to cry and *refuse* to let him see that. I grip the countertop so hard, my knuckles turn white, and my breathing is so intense, I feel like I might faint.

I muster up the courage to say something — anything — to get him away from me.

“It’s fine, Maverick. It didn’t mean anything. It was the alcohol, nothing more,” I spit, keeping my back turned to him as the tears flow down my cheeks.

“Karina —” he tries to talk, and I hear his steps getting closer to where I’m standing, but I cut him off.

“I said it’s fine. You should probably go. Harper’s waiting for you,” I don’t move, listening as he grabs his stuff and walks out of my apartment.

Once the door clicks shut, I let myself fall apart.

Emotions take over, and I’m so upset I can’t even think straight.

It’s not like I consciously thought there was anything between Maverick and I, but him telling me we need space has me so over the edge that I realize it was much more than just the alcohol — at least for me.

I blame myself, and this is my fault for letting him in that first night and multiple times since.

On top of it all, I have confirmation that Asher knows where I am, and I'm fucking terrified.

Everything that's happened tonight is a shitshow; all I want to do is hide in my bed and escape my thoughts, fuck ups, and all the torturous situations I continue to put myself through.



I WAIT UNTIL I HEAR MAVERICK LEAVE BEFORE EVEN DEBATING going to work. There's no way I'm running into him in the hallway after I spent most of my night crying.

My cheeks are swollen, and my eyes have bags underneath, showcasing that I barely slept.

Once the coast was clear and I hear his truck drive away, I say goodbye to April — who is finally back to normal — and head off to the salon.

Halfway there, I remember promising to bring Harper lunch on my break, and suddenly, I am dreading it.

I have nothing against the girl and want to help, but I'm a mess.

What happened with Maverick last night wasn't a break up, but *fuck* if it doesn't feel like one.

I want to avoid him, and anything that makes me think about our time together, but bringing lunch to his family is throwing me right into the middle — exactly where I don't want to be.

My schedule is busier today, and I remind myself to act happy for the customers' sake. That way, I make the tips and build my client list.

I greet the girls I already know and introduce myself to the only one I haven't met.

"I'm Karina. Nice to meet you," I say, smiling at her while I set up all the new things I bought at my station.

"I'm Eva," she says, barely giving me the time of day.

I was warned that it would take her some time to warm up, but today isn't the day for me to play pretend; if she doesn't

want to socialize, then neither do I.

The morning goes by fairly quickly, even though I spend most of it in a fog. Only speaking when spoken to, or when I politely entertain the small talk with customers.

The girls are giddy, bouncing out the door before turning to me.

“Want to join us for lunch, Karina?” Hannah asks, and I politely tell them I’d love a raincheck.

Explaining that I promised to bring lunch for my neighbor’s sister incites many questions, and the girls want all the details.

I don’t feel comfortable talking about him, and how we’ve connected, so I keep it neighborly.

“It’s nothing! I just offered to look out for her since I planned to stop home at lunch anyway. I promise we’ll go out together soon,” I casually explain, hoping they take my answer at face value.

“No worries, honey. We do lunch once a week,” Jolene chimes in as we walk out to our cars.

I stop at the grocery store, buying two premade sandwiches, chips, and sodas.

When I return to the apartment and take in my surroundings. I don’t see any sign of Asher, even though I can’t sure where or what to look for.

I knock on Maverick’s door, and Harper answers, smiling at me.

“Hi, are you hungry?” I ask, holding up the bag.

“Thanks, Karina. I know you did this for my brother,” she says, inviting me inside.

It’s the last thing I should do, but I did promise to check on her, and even though I’m mad at Maverick, I’m keeping my word. Harper doesn’t deserve my cold shoulder.

“Not at all, sweetie. I did this for you. I want you to be comfortable while he’s working,” I smile at her, and I think

she believes me.

We talk about school, and I hear the dirty details of what eighth graders are into these days.

She asks me about work and thinks doing hair is fascinating.

“How about I trim your hair tomorrow after lunch? If it’s okay with Maverick, of course,” I offer, immediately regretting it.

He’ll probably think I’m using Harper to get to him. That I’m attempting to stay involved in her life, even though we were never in a relationship.

“I’ll ask him later. Thanks, Karina!” she hugs me, a total change from how she left my apartment last night.

“No problem, kiddo. Let him know I brought you lunch, alright? I have to get back,” I say, cleaning up the mess we made.

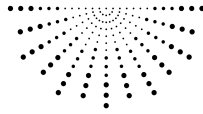
“You’re not going to text him and dish all about me?” she asks, and I shake my head.

“No, what you and I talk about can stay between us,” I take my half-eaten sandwich and soda, waving goodbye as I close the door behind me.

I sigh, letting the armor fall that I put up to keep Harper from reading my emotions like an open book.

Only a few more hours left at work, and then I’m free to heal how I please. I vow to turn off my phone, drink wine, and dye my hair tonight. Self care is essential, and I plan to treat myself to everything that brings happiness, and gets me over this strange hump of sadness.

# MAVERICK



*I* feel like the biggest asshole in the universe.

Not only did I break the news to Karina that her ex-boyfriend had been at our apartment complex, but the look in her eyes was devastating.

She may downplay it, but I can see that she's terrified of him. Something more must have happened because the fear that took over her body was almost paralyzing.

Then, I told her we should distance ourselves and keep our relationship friendly.

She was pissed, and rightfully so. I can't switch my moods regarding her every other day, making her believe something more could happen.

It's in both our best interests, but it doesn't make it suck any less.

She kicked me out, and I'm positive she was on the verge of tears.

I'm laying in bed, unable to sleep because of how awful I feel. She let me in, told me what scared her, and all I did was string her along and destroy her perception of what was real or not.

I fight the urge to bang on her door until she forgives me, but I know she'll never trust me again.

I deserve it and more.

When the sun rises, I wake up Harper, making her stick to her school routine.

“I can’t sleep in, seriously?” she whines, and I give her a firm no.

“Eat breakfast, and then start on your work. I’ll text you later to check on you,” I say, grabbing my things and heading toward the door.

“Is Karina still bringing me lunch, like a fucking babysitter?” she asks, rifling around the fridge for something.

*Fuck.*

I completely forgot about her offer. Considering how we left things last night, I won’t be surprised if she backed out.

“I believe so. Let me know if she does, alright?” I leave the conversation there, heading out the door.

Karina’s car is still parked, and I take off quickly to avoid her.

Work drags on today. All the guys are curious about why I left in such a rush yesterday.

I keep it simple, only saying it was a family issue, and it’s been dealt with.

Adam, the hands-on owner, pulls me aside after lunch to talk.

“Everything alright, new kid? Hunter filled me in on your situation with your sister,” he says, smoking a cigarette and leaning against one of the trucks.

Great, just what I need: gossip spreading about me.

“It was a misunderstanding, but she’s staying with me for a few days until everything is back to normal,” I inform him, keeping the details as slim as possible.

I’m uncomfortable when it comes to talking about my personal life, especially at work.

“That’s good to hear. If you ever need anything, you know where to find us,” he says, tossing his cigarette and ending the

conversation there.

I'm relieved and hoping the news stays between the bosses and me.

My phone rings, and I duck behind the truck to check it quickly before returning to work.

Karina brought lunch and stayed to eat

She offered to give me a haircut tomorrow. Is that okay?

Let's talk about it over dinner. Tell me what you want to cook.

Grilled cheese and tomato soup?

Done.

MY MIND WANDERS; I KNOW KARINA IS ONLY TRYING TO HELP, and I appreciate the attention she's given Harper. Maybe she's not mad after all and wants to stay friends.

I smile at the thought, hoping we can move forward from the unfortunate events that have taken place.

I consider texting her to thank her, but I decide against it. Boundaries were set, and I can't be the one who crosses them less than twenty-four hours later.

Instead, I will mention it next time I see her.

Work drags, but I took a step in the leadership direction that Hunter spoke with me about.

Two of the guys had nothing left to do, so I convinced them to start cutting up the wood for the next phase of the project, and they finished just as it was time to call it quits for the day.

I didn't take the initiative for the praise, but when Hunter nodded at me on my way out, I appreciated that he noticed.



Good leadership starts from the top and trickles down, and I like how Hunter runs his company. If there's a person to look up to, it'd be him.

My thoughts are erratic as I drive home, jumping from Karina, to work, and everything in between. I'm so unfocused that I almost forget to stop for what Harper wants for dinner.

I hate going to the grocery store, but here I am for the second day in a row.

I move quickly, grabbing everything we'll need for grilled cheeses. I take the liberty of getting Harper's favorite ice cream, rewarding her for being a good sport in this suspension situation.

Once I finish shopping, I head home and hope to avoid seeing Karina.

*I'm not ready yet.*

I check my mailbox and take the groceries upstairs, making it safely inside.

"Harp! I'm home. Let's cook," I call out, and she comes from my bedroom.

"Did you get everything?" she asks, not looking up from her phone.

"Yes, I did. What's your job?" I let her decide what she wants to cook between the two parts of the meal.

"I'll make soup. Your grilled cheeses are the best in the world," she smiles, finding a pot and getting the ingredients together.

She's right; I do make the best-grilled cheeses. It's my secret ingredient that brings them their magic.

We cook silently; she has her headphones in, and my thoughts are all over the place.

"*Soup's on!*" she yells, which is her classic catchphrase when anything is done cooking.

Harper may be a moody teenager, but deep down, she's still my dorky little sister, and I love this side of her.

She sets the table, fills our soda glasses, and places the plates down.

“I’m so excited about this, Mav,” she squeals, dunking her sandwich in the tomato soup.

“So, lunch with Karina went well?” I ask, saying her name out loud for the first time today, and it turns my stomach into knots.

“Yeah, she’s cool. Can she take me to her salon tomorrow?” she begs, throwing in puppy dog eyes.

“If you finish all the day’s work, yes. I’ll leave cash on the counter so you can pay and tip her, okay?” I attempt to turn this into a small lesson about financial responsibility.

“Thanks, Mav! I can’t wait,” she says, smiling at me between bites of her sandwich.

“Ice cream sundaes and a movie?” I ask, and she gets even more excited.

“Absolutely. But I’m picking the movie,” I already knew that was coming.

Harper is a certified television control freak.

We finish dinner, and she offers to do the dishes so I can shower.

I’m shocked, but I take her up on that.

“Thanks, Harp. I’ll be right out,” I yell, shutting the bathroom door behind me.

Movies and ice cream make the perfect combo for tonight but *fuck*; I can’t help but wish Karina was here too.

*It’s hopeless.*

In such a short time, she’s completely consumed me to the point where I can’t get through one evening without thinking of her, or wanting her beside me.



ANOTHER MORNING PASSES, AND I DON’T SEE MY NEIGHBOR. She must be avoiding me, too, because before our falling out,

she left around the same time as me.

I shrug it off and get in my truck, placing my tools on the passenger seat.

I plan to install the dashcam today during lunch. That way, I can have peace of mind knowing her ex isn't creeping around.

I'm looking forward to working today, knowing we got a jumpstart on the project by cutting the wood yesterday.

I'm focusing on ways to simplify the job and continue showing my leadership skills and desire to advance in this company.

By noon, we're ahead of where we should be, and I couldn't be happier with how this shook out.

"Hey, Maverick, got a sec?" Hunter calls out, and I follow him into his office.

"What's up, boss?" I ask, hoping to make this quick so I can install the camera.

"I wanted to let you know that your quick thinking yesterday led to great results today, and I'm happy you took my advice," he says, shaking my hand.

I'm not used to being praised for anything, so this is unfamiliar territory.

"Of course. Anything I can do to help," I smile, and he lets me go.

Hunter, I'm learning, isn't a man made for small talk. He says what needs to be said, and that's the end of it.

I appreciate it, considering I hate small talk and making friends.

My phone rings with a new text, and I know it's from Harper.

I finished my work. Can I go with Karina?

Take the money on the counter. There should be plenty.

I got it. How much should I tip?

Give her everything I left.

Okay, thanks, Mav.

I SHAKE MY HEAD. MY LITTLE SISTER IS GROWING UP WAY TOO quickly.

I set up the camera and link it to my phone in no time. All I need to do is get the angle right once I'm home, and her car is next to mine.

I debate if I should tell her about the camera. I don't want her to think I, too, am stalking her, but if she were to notice something, at least she'd have peace of mind knowing I caught it on camera.

Once we begin to talk again, I'll bring it up.

I finish lunch and return to work, ensuring I'm on my game.

Adam comes out shortly after, telling us all to go home early.

"Thanks to the new kid for thinking ahead and having wood ready for today," he yells, and everyone cheers.

"Beers are on the new kid this afternoon. Let's go, boys," Trevor, one of the older guys on the crew, shouts and grabs me by the arm.

"Where are we going?" I ask, getting in my truck.

"Bar down the road," he says, telling me to follow him.

"I can only stay for one round," I warn, and he laughs.

Following the guys to the bar, I have too much on my mind. I don't usually socialize and can't think of a way to

escape it.

It is only a short ride down the street, and we all pile inside and sit in a booth.

The waitress comes over, greeting them all like they're regulars.

Thomas, another one of the crew, orders two pitchers for the table, and the waitress heads off to bring us glasses.

"Nice work, new kid. I guess we can officially ask you what your name is," Trevor asks, smiling at me.

"It's Maverick," I say, hoping the attention turns off me and onto anyone else.

"So, Maverick, what's your story? You never really talk," Andrew asks, and I guess I'm not so lucky.

They all look at me, waiting to say something, and I feel the spotlight beaming on me, my cheeks burning red, matching the uneasiness I feel in my belly.

"I don't have one. I just work and go home. I've got family like you all do, and that's about it," I offer, hoping that satisfies the desire to get to know me.

The waitress brings our pitchers, and the guys start flirting with her, seemingly taking the attention off me.

Soon enough, they're back to shit-talking each other and letting me breathe.

I drink two beers and call it quits, leaving cash on the table to pay for the pitchers.

"Oh, come on, Maverick! One more!" The guys call out, but I have to drive safely.

Harper made it home a few hours ago, and I don't want her hanging around without me any longer.

I say my goodbyes and drive home.

I plan to order out tonight, letting Harper choose whatever she wants. When I park my truck, I point the camera toward Karina's spot, hoping to catch any activity, and make my way

through the lobby without an awkward run in with my neighbor.

“Harper, I’m home!” I call out, and my jaw nearly hits the floor when I see her.

“What do you think, Mav?” she asks, fluffing her hair and spinning around.

“What the fuck did she do to your hair, Harper?” I yell, and she steps back.

“It’s two pink highlights. It’s not the end of the world!” she yells back at me, and I stare at her in disbelief.

It may be *two pink highlights*, but they’re on each side of her face. You can’t miss the changes.

I can’t believe Karina would be this irresponsible and permanently dye my sister’s hair without asking.

“Mav, don’t!” Harper begs, but I’m already walking out the door.

I knock rapidly on her door and push inside when she opens it slightly.

“Did you put pink hair dye in a thirteen-year-olds hair?” I yell, which causes her to step back defensively, and her eyes glaze over.

“Excuse me! She wanted it, and it will wash out after a few shampoos. It’s not permanent! I would never do that without permission. Who the *fuck* do you think I am?” she screams, and I realize I fucked up again.

I stand there, looking between the two of them, feeling like a total dumbass.

Of course, she wouldn’t do something like that, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on either of them. I feel awful.

“I’m sorry, Karina, I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” I say, walking toward her.

She stops me, holding her hand out and pointing to the door.

“Get the fuck out, Maverick. *How fucking dare you.* The other night, and now this? Don’t come back to my apartment again. I mean it. Get out!” she pushes me until I reach the door, and I don’t bother attempting to say anything more.

It’s done; our relationship is beyond repair, and it’s my fault.

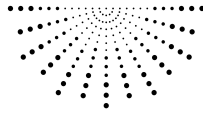
“What the fuck, Mav. You didn’t need to do that. It’s not her fault, and I begged her to do it. It’s harmless,” She slams my bedroom door in my face, and I sink into the couch.

*Perfect.* I just keep on making things worse.

If I had any hope of staying cordial with Karina, spending time together as friends, or just being civil with one another, that is dead and gone now.

I’m back on this island all by myself, and it’s lonelier than I remember.

# KARINA



I'm standing in my kitchen, crying *again* because of Maverick. I took his sister out for a little spa day, letting her pick a temporary color for her hair for fun, and this is how I'm treated.

He burst into my door, screaming at me just like Asher used to, and I'm reminded *again* why I don't trust men.

The rage always takes over, makes them yell and say shit they don't mean, then they apologize and promise it'll never happen again.

*Rinse, wash, repeat.*

The cycle never changes.

If I spent my last few days sad over him, that is gone now. I could've gotten over how he wanted to stay friends; that wasn't terrible and was for the best. I needed a few days to heal from that wound, but what just happened is irreparable.

I refuse to be treated like that, again, and I can't believe I keep letting people see these deeper sides of me, because all they do is *destroy* anything sacred.

I do the only thing I know now, I call my mom.

She answers right away, and my voice is shaking.

"Mom, I need you," I say, the tears coming down fast.

"What happened? Is it Asher? Do I need to come get you?" she fires off questions before I can even calm down enough to answer them all.



“No, it’s not Asher. I fucked up, Mom. I let someone in,” I say, lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling.

“What do you mean? You’re making me nervous,” she’s pacing; I can tell by how fast she’s talking.

“My neighbor, the one I told you about? We started to get close, and I thought I could trust him,” I let it out, the tears flowing again now that I’ve said it aloud.

“Did he hurt you?” she’s got a severe tone in her voice, and I rush to tell her he didn’t.

“Not physically, but he screamed at me like I’m responsible for everything awful in this world. I don’t know what to do,” I cry, and my mom listens.

I explain everything that’s happened, leaving no detail out, and by the time I finish the story, she’s sighing and apologizing.

“Oh, Karrie, that sounds terrible. You don’t always have the best choice in who you let between your legs,” she says in her judgmental tone.

She chatters on, asking questions about Maverick and seemingly picking every little detail about him into shreds.

Of course, a blue collar man could never be good enough for *her daughter*, even if I’ve reminded her a thousand times we weren’t dating.

“Do you plan to forgive him?”

“No, Mom. He basically told me we had to stay friends and then screamed at me the way Asher used to. I can’t forgive that,” I tell her adamantly so she understands I can’t go through this again.

“Okay, I hope you stay away from him,” she says, and we leave it at that.

I should’ve known she’d be no help.

It’s quiet again, and I pour myself a glass of wine. Maverick won’t bring me down, not this time. I stick to my plan, getting the bleach kit ready.

It's time for a refresh.

I'm letting the bleach sit, hoping that it'll get my hair light enough for the silver-platinum color I picked to stick. I put some music on but keep it at a respectful level — only because of Harper. Once she leaves, my rage will reign down on that jerk.

There's a knock on my door, and I instinctively yell at Maverick to go away.

"It's Harper," she says quietly, and I immediately open the door.

"Are you okay, honey?" I ask, knowing she had to witness that shit show just as I did.

"I'm fine. I'm used to Mav's temper. Are you okay? I'm sorry I got you in trouble with him."

She looks so sad, and I feel terrible she had to deal with this.

"I'm okay. Thank you for checking on me, Harper," I reassure her and promise we can do something together next time she stays here.

"Thanks, Karina, for everything. I had so much fun with you today," she walks away, and I stop her.

"I had fun, too, and your hair is amazing. Don't let what happened with Maverick and I get you down, okay?" I smile, and she races over to hug me.

I can't help it. I love kids. I don't care what Maverick thinks; I'll answer whenever Harper knocks on my door.

After I rinse the bleach, I add the new color. I didn't need to lower my levels too much, so I hope this works how I envisioned.

I sip my wine and replay everything that's happened since I moved here, wondering where I went wrong.

I've been with guys since Asher and never got upset when it was time to call it quits. I had one semi-serious situation, but I never told him about my past or had him *beg* to kiss me.

It was a mutually beneficial agreement that ran its course. I moved on and eventually found a replacement.

For some reason, it was more with Maverick, but I can't put my finger on what is so *different* about him. From the moment we met, he was an asshole and took every opportunity to give me shit.

*Until the night we slept together.*

After that, he softened up, leaving me gifts and giving me his number. We spent time together — not having sex or opening up about our past — where we just enjoyed each other's company as friends.

Even so, I think the way I felt when he wanted me so badly is what's different.

He could barely resist coming to my apartment late and begging for me. Everything that happened since that night felt like the beginning of something real, which hooked me on him.

The *fantasy*. The *fairytale*. The *wonderland* of it all. I let myself believe in something that doesn't *fucking* exist; love.

I'm not a princess who gets the guy then they live happily ever after. That's not the story written for me.

I'm the girl who burns shit down everywhere she goes and likely ends up dead from the one person she mistakenly fell in love with at seventeen.

Nobody sticks around for a girl like me. They use me for what I can offer them, then run away once they realize they could never like me, for just me.

Just as I'm at the height of my breakdown my oven timer beeps, signaling it's time to rinse my new hair color.

I wipe my pathetic tears and get in the shower.

I wash everything off, every idea of love, every tiny glance or touch that made my heart flutter.

I scrub the memory of the pet name he gave me, the way his voice shook when he asked to kiss me.

That night, I warned Maverick I was damaged, but he didn't notice until he looked closer at me.

I vow to be different as soon as I turn this hot water off.

It's time to cut the shit and pretend I can have a life away from everything that's plagued me and lean into the hand I was dealt.

*I'll never be the princess. My story isn't a fairytale.*



I LET MYSELF SLEEP IN SINCE I DON'T HAVE WORK TODAY, hiding myself from everything in the outside world.

The fight with Maverick triggered a complete breakdown, and I haven't been so hard on myself since I ran away from Asher.

He made me feel weak like I didn't deserve anything good life could offer. His anger issues made me think I was the problem. When he cheated on me, or hit me I always blamed myself.

I had similar thoughts last night.

In the midst of feeling sorry for myself I made a choice, and I refuse to believe that I'm not worthy.

I'm not a kid anymore, and despite the circumstances, I've made a life for myself everywhere I've lived.

I'm strong, resilient, and fiercely independent.

I need someone to see the sides of me that I built, and I know exactly where to go.

Hi Juliette, can we meet for lunch?

Of course!! Let's meet in an hour. I'll send you an address.

Okay, babes, see you soon.

JULIETTE IS THE ONLY PERSON WHO'S EVER MADE ME FEEL safe and my only friend right now. I need her, and I'm thankful she can hang out today.

I force myself out of bed, and do my make up to look better than I feel. My new hair came out incredibly, and I curl it to show off a bit.

I wear jeans and a low-cut shirt, keeping it casual and feeling comfortable in my body.

Once satisfied with my look, I start my car and head to the restaurant Juliette sent me.

I don't plan to divulge my current struggles with my neighbor or Asher. I just want to enjoy an afternoon with someone who makes me happy.

I get to the restaurant a few minutes early, and it looks like an average mom-and-pop diner.

Juliette pulls up beside me and honks her horn, smiling from ear to ear.

"Hi!" I scream, pulling her in for a hug.

"Karina, it's so good to see you. Oh my gosh. Let's go inside!" Juliette grabs me by the arm, already chatting away about everything and anything.

We order drinks and lunch as I listen to her Rose Hills updates for me.

Seeing her so happy is incredible, and it radiates off of her.

"Tell me about Forest Falls! I want to hear everything!" she says, and I aim to trim as much of the story as I can.

"Well, I have a broody son of a bitch for a neighbor," I start, and so much for being lowkey.

Juliette's eyes widen, and she smirks at me.

"So, how many times have you slept with him?"

She has a devilish way of knowing precisely what I'm hiding.

“Oh, my god, Juliette!” I whisper, and she reminds me I did the same thing to her.

I smile at the memory, missing the roommate days with her so much.

I explain our dirty history, including the whole prank war situation, which she finds hysterical.

“What’s his name?” she asks, her curiosity taking over.

“Maverick. He’s a total prick,” I say, pausing as the waitress brings our meals.

I order a double cheeseburger with extra fries, ready to load on carbs.

Juliette orders her usual chicken Caesar salad, which she got me into when we lived together.

It’s her favorite meal, and she orders it shamelessly.

“Hm, that name sounds familiar,” she mulls it over for a minute before it clicks.

I drown my plate in ketchup, ready to dig in when Juliette shakes my arm, nearly knocking me out of my seat.

“Oh shit, Karina! That’s Adam’s new hire! Remember the new kid he told us about?” she squeals, and my jaw drops.

I’ve seen him in his work clothes, the company name plastered on his back and me, being a clueless idiot, never made the connection.

“I should’ve known. Of course, I know both of his bosses,” I shake my head, but an idea forms.

“Can Adam and Hunter help me prank Maverick? Like the most perfect prank to end the war,” I smile, and Juliette immediately pulls out her phone.

Within the half hour, a plan has been set in motion. Juliette took the liberty of texting Adam, telling him his new employee fucked with me, which has his attention.

Adam and I have a fun friendship, but when I need him, he’s always there for me.

We've lived through hell and know how to survive. When I told him my story, once I trusted him enough, that was it. We were bonded, and I wasn't just Juliette's roommate or friend. I became a part of his world, and for that I'll always be thankful.

I give Juliette some juicy information, which she passes on, and Adam assures us that his new nickname will stick by the end of the day.

I high-five Juliette and thank her for her help in this crucial mission.

I hold the keys to the prank war championship, which feels so good.

"This is exactly what I needed, Juliette. Thank you," I say, hugging her in the parking lot.

"Next time Hunter and Willow have a dinner party, you're coming!" she exclaims, and I agree that I'll be there.

I drive home with a smirk painted on my face, and it's not going anywhere. I just fucked Maverick over at work beyond the parameters of our usual playing field, and I know he'll be livid.

I run a few errands, picking up detergent to do laundry and a few other cleaning supplies.

I spend hours at the store, wandering around and ending up with more than need, but retail therapy is a proven scientific cure.

I feel great after lunch and shopping, but when I reach the lobby I realize I should check my mailbox. I tend to forget, which is a terrible habit, and when the lock pops open it's stuffed.

I carry the load upstairs and toss it on my kitchen counter, it's most likely junk mail, considering my mom pays all my bills, and I pay her back.

A handwritten note is mixed in, and my heart nearly stops when I recognize who wrote it.

This is *bold*, even for him.

I immediately throw up in my kitchen sink, overcome with terror and anxiety.

I look out my window and don't see anything, but I have no idea when this could've been sent.

The last time I checked my mail was one of my first days here when I met Maverick.

I pull my phone out to call my mom when I see an unopened text.

We need to talk. I'll be home in thirty minutes.

*FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.*

I completely forgot about the prank I pulled, and my mind fogged by this letter.

I don't know what to do. Should I tell him? I can't be that stupid damsel in distress, but this is fucking scary, and if I tell my mom, she'll make me leave again.

I don't want to move anymore, and I don't want to run away.

Maverick promised me he'd never let Asher hurt me, so let's see if he really meant it.

I'm pacing the floor, and it feels like an eternity as I wait out the thirty minute window Maverick mentioned.

In the meantime, I change into a big sweatshirt and a pair of shorts, forgoing my cute outfit for something more comfortable. I toss my hair in a messy bun, tired of the reminder of optimism when I curled it this morning.

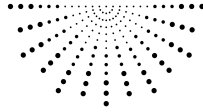
My palms are sweating, and I feel a pit in my throat whenever I try to swallow. The fear is threatening to take me under but finally, I hear a knock at my door and take a deep breath.

It's time to put up or shut up, run and hide, or stay and fight.

It all hinges on how Maverick reacts when he sees what I'm holding in my hands.



# MAVERICK



After my fight with Karina, I didn't think she'd go so low, but here we are. Halfway through the work day, all of a sudden, the guys gave me a new nickname.

I was no longer the *new kid*. Instead, they found something personal to use to taunt me.

*Born again virgin.*

Considering I told Karina she was the first woman I'd slept with in years, this has to be her doing, but I can't wrap my mind around *how*.

*How* that information that only she knew about could've traveled to my place of work.

I don't like my personal information spread around, and this stupid nickname will haunt me. On top of the nickname, it's came with a rumor that I haven't had sex in years and have chosen to reclaim myself as a born-again virgin.

*Perfect.*

At the end of the day, I dodge everyone except Adam, who pulls me aside.

"Maverick, got a sec?" he asks, using my name for the first time since I've worked here.

I swear, if this prank bullshit has cost me my job, I will be furious.

"What's up, boss?" I attempt to keep my cool, leaning against my truck.

“I heard the guys gave you a new nickname today,” he says, laughing.

“I’m so sorry about that. I don’t know where it came from, but it was a distraction that I take full responsibility for,” I scramble, finding the words to make this right before I get fired.

Adam doesn’t say anything. He just smiles while I talk and gives me a look I take as a warning.

“Next time, you’ll appreciate a good woman when you find one. Karina is a friend of mine, someone I’ve vowed to protect through thick and thin. I brought her to Rose Hills and ensured her safety in that *shithole* you call Forest Falls. Don’t fuck with someone I care about again, or you’re out of here,” he says, a somber darkness taking over his face.

It all falls into place now. Karina mentioned having friends in Rose Hills who saved her; I didn’t realize it was also people I knew and worked for.

Adam starts to walk away, thinking he bested me, but I have questions.

“Adam, wait. Please,” I beg, and he stops walking. “I know Karina, yes. But she told me about her stalker ex. Are you the one who helped her?”

“What did she tell you?” he asks, sitting on the edge of my truck and lighting a cigarette.

“I know he’s followed her and hurt her a few times. Did she tell you that he found her again? I caught him poking around her car,” I explain, and his eyes look me up and down, judging if I’m lying or not.

“No, she didn’t mention that. Are you sure it was Asher?” he raises an eyebrow, waiting for my answer.

“Yes, I’m sure. I mentioned it to Karina, who broke down knowing he’d found her. I promised her I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. We may have gotten into it a bit, but that doesn’t change anything,” I rush to get it all out, hoping he doesn’t lose his shit on me.

He drags his cigarette, not saying anything, but I can tell he's processing everything I've said.

"It's worse than you think, Maverick. He hurt her badly and put her in the hospital with broken bones and brain issues. I'm no doctor, so you'll have to ask her for specifics. He's dangerous, and if you think he's around, you need to help us protect her," Adam stands, tossing his cigarette, and gets close to me before letting me say something.

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe. That's not something you need to worry about with me. He's hurt her, and he won't be breathing if it happens again," I assure him, and he takes me for my word.

I feel like I'm under a microscope, with Adam judging if I can be trusted or not. I don't usually feel defensive, but right now, I know I fucked up and need to make it right.

"I have to bring my sister home, but once I'm done, I will talk to Karina," I tell him as we get into our cars.

"Sounds good, but listen. Either you get with her, or you stop messing with her. I don't need my girl texting me about your personal life at work," he laughs, rolling up his window and driving away.

I'm floored. I never thought Karina's situation was this bad, and I wish she had told me I worked with people who knew about her history.

Karina wasn't home when I picked up Harper, and we went back to Gram's house silently.

She's still pissed at me for yelling at Karina yesterday, and I can't argue with her right now, so I let us ride in silence.

"I'll meet you after school in Principal Chambers's office tomorrow, okay?" I say, attempting to make peace before I go.

"Be nice to Karina. She likes you, Mav," she hugs me and runs into the house before I can say anything else.

Apparently, Harper isn't the only one who knows how Karina feels about me, and I wish I could take back everything that's happened between us since I suggested we stay friends.

I don't want to be *friends* with her, enemies, or whatever else has happened.

I want the vulnerable girl I held in my arms when I asked if I could kiss her.

I want the woman who wasn't ashamed of having sex in the middle of the night and invited me over again afterward.

I can't hide anymore, afraid of someone distracting me from my family.

Karina has already made her mark on Harper; I can't take that for granted.

I have a feeling that she's the one who would stay by my side if I told her everything about our past, and I'm done protecting myself from what could be the best thing that ever happened to me.

I know she's mad at me, but I text her anyway, leaving no room for surprise when I knock on her door.



I PREPARE MYSELF FOR A MASSACRE WHEN I KNOCK ON Karina's door, ready for her to aim, shoot, and fire at me.

Instead, when she opens the door, I see a broken woman. Her eyes are swollen and red from crying, and she's pale. The usual flush in her cheeks is gone, and she looks like she's seen a ghost.

She doesn't say a word, but invites me inside.

"Karina, I'm so sorry —" I start apologizing, but she cuts me off.

She walks to her kitchen counter and hands me a folded piece of paper.

I look into her eyes, and she nods, encouraging me to open it.

The fear radiates off her body. Usually, Karina is strong, standoffish, and ready for anything.

Right now, she's a shell of herself. The emotions have taken control, and I can't stand to see her this upset. I want to pull her close, hold her tightly, and promise that everything's going to be okay.

*I can't do that.*

After our last two encounters, I lost all right to touch her or give her an ounce of hope.

I'm lucky she's allowed me to step back into her apartment again, and I can't do anything to jeopardize that.

I unfold the paper she handed me and take a deep breath. It's time to unveil whatever hell this letter holds.

**KARRIE, IT'S TIME TO END THIS. I'VE PLAYED YOUR GAME FOR YEARS, FOLLOWING YOU, AND YOU RUN AWAY. CAT AND MOUSE IS OVER.**

**I WILL ALWAYS FIND YOU, AND WE ARE MEANT TO BE TOGETHER.**

**NOTHING IS GOING TO STOP ME FROM HAVING YOU BY MY SIDE.**

**I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN FUCKING THE GUY IN THE TRUCK, BUT THAT'S OKAY, BABY. I FORGIVE YOU.**

**YOU HAVE SEVEN DAYS TO QUIT THIS GAME AND COME HOME WITH ME.**

**IF YOU DON'T, I'M COMING TO GET YOU, AND YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO RESIST ME.**

**THE GUY IN YOUR BED BETTER NOT GET IN MY WAY, OR I'LL HAVE NO CHOICE.**

**SEE YOU SOON, KARRIE. I LOVE YOU.**

**XOXO -A**

I DROP THE LETTER ON THE FLOOR, MY HANDS SHAKING FROM the vile words printed on the paper.

I turn my attention back to Karina, remembering that she's terrified of this guy and his threats should be taken seriously.

"Can I get you anything? Have you eaten today?" I look into her eyes, but they're hollow.

The usual hazel specs that glimmer in the light aren't there; they've been replaced with sadness and exhaustion.

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

This is worse than I thought.

Karina is sitting on the floor in the kitchen, and I get down beside her.

"Are you okay?" I ask, which is probably a stupid question.

Her face has makeup stains running down her cheeks, and she can barely hold back the tears.

"I can never get away. No matter where I go," she cries, and I pull her close to me.

"You aren't going anywhere. I won't let you run away to somewhere I can't protect you," I whisper, holding her on the floor while she falls apart.

We stay down here for a while, and I let her cry on my shoulder until the tears stop falling.

"Maverick, what are you still doing here? I thought you wanted nothing to do with me," she says quietly, all the fight and sparks seemingly disappeared from her body.

"I'm not going anywhere, Karina. I'm sorry for everything. I got scared of what was happening between us and took the easy way out. If you let me, I'll be right by your side," I tell her, wrapping my arms around her tightly.

"I don't need to be saved," she tries to say, but I cut her off.

“I’m not here to save you. I’m here to fight with you, for you, and everything in between,” I stand up, offering her my hand.

She looks at me, unsure if she can trust me, and I will wait as long as it takes.

I feel her soft hand grasp mine, and I pull her off the floor. I hold her close, letting her head rest on my chest.

“Let’s order something to eat and go to my place. Bring that bottle of tequila. I think you’re going to want it,” I say, and she lets go of our embrace.

“You don’t have to do this, Maverick. You don’t want me. I’m fucking broken,” she tries to walk away, and I grab her arm, bringing her back to face me.

I wipe the tears off her cheeks and rest my hands on her shoulders.

“I *like* that you’re broken.”

I don’t leave anything up for discussion, and I don’t let her argue anymore.

I know I fucked everything up, but I’m deadset on making it right again.

She won’t trust me for a long time, at least not entirely, but that’s okay if she stops fighting this, at least for now, when her life is at risk.

I give her space to pack a bag and take the liberty of ordering dinner.

I try one of those delivery apps that she likes, opting for greasy cheeseburgers, fries, and sodas.

I don’t feel comfortable with either of us driving right now, so the food must come to us.

I leave specific instructions for the driver to call me before buzzing in. That way, I can ensure nobody else can get inside.

“I’m ready,” Karina says, coming out of the bedroom, and I take her bag.

She brings the tequila, taking a sip from the bottle before we walk across the hall.

“You can take my bedroom, the couch turns into a pull-out bed,” I lead her toward my room and point out the bathroom.

I take a moment to notice that she dyed her hair a light greyish color, and it shines under the bright kitchen lights. It’s different, but I like it. It suits her well.

She looks around my apartment and dips into the bedroom to put her bags down.

I toss the coats from the closet on the floor, digging around until I find my safe.

I punch in the code, my mother’s birthday, and pull out the shiny silver protection piece, checking that the safety is on before securing it in the waistband of my jeans.

“What the fuck is *that*?” Karina startles me, and I take it back out to show her.

“It’s what you think it is. I said I was going to protect you. They were all out of baseball bats,” I shrug, laughing at my joke.

Shockingly, she laughs, too, and walks up to me.

“Can I hold it?” she lays her hands out flat, and I pass it to her.

Clearly, she’s never held a weapon before, given the way she’s trembling.

“Have you ever used it?” she warms up, putting her finger on the trigger.

“Easy, kitten. Let’s put this somewhere safe, alright?” I say, and she looks into my eyes, holding my gaze.

I take the piece back from her, tucking it into my pants and concealing it with my shirt.

I return to the safe, taking the permit and placing it in my wallet.



Karina pulls me in for a hug, which shocks me initially, but I let myself relax and wrap my arms around her waist.

“Thank you, Maverick. I thought this was all in my head,” she whispers against my neck, making me shiver.

“It was, and is, real. I promise you that,” I kiss her forehead, showing her a small ounce of affection.

This is the first time we’ve held each other like this, close and intimate, but I can’t recall a time when *anything* has felt as perfect as Karina does in my arms.

I catch a whiff of her fruity perfume, intoxicating me once again. I knew that if we got this close one more time I wouldn’t ever be able to let her go.

I don’t get a second to contemplate that thought, and how it affects me before Karina takes a deep breath, and her body slightly tenses against mine.

“You said we needed to talk in your text?” she says, breaking our embrace and locating the liquor bottle.

I follow her to the couch, sitting beside her and taking a sip before handing it off.

“You know my bosses?” I ask, smiling at her.

“Oh, my god. I just realized it today!” she explains the connection and tells me about her former roommate, who dates one of the owners.

“Adam, yeah, he almost killed me today. Thanks for that and the new nickname,” she scrunches her nose and offers me a sympathetic smile.

“Sorry about that. I wanted to get you back, and I figured it’d rattle your cage,” she winks, and I stay mad at her for a single second.

“Well, Adam told me that things with your ex were more severe than you let on,” I hit a soft spot, and she recoils.

She sighs, folding her legs on the couch and rubbing her eyes.

“I didn’t think you needed every dirty fucking detail. It wasn’t pretty, hence the running away,” she tries to be funny, but I don’t laugh.

“Is there anything else I should know about him? I’m your soldier now, and I need all the intel,” I stand up as the buzzer rings by the front door.

So much for following the delivery instructions I left.

I verify the name against the one I have on the app and instruct him to leave the food in the lobby.

“Don’t let anyone else in the building understand?” I clarify, ensuring that we won’t be welcoming any unwanted visitors.

“Stay here. Lock the door behind me,” I say, and she nods.

The coast is clear, and the food is in its designated spot in our lobby.

I check everything is there and head back to Karina.

I wasn’t gone for more than five minutes, but she’s panicking.

Her body is on high alert, and she’s standing against the kitchen counter, slightly shaking as she stares a hole through the wall.

I gently break her trance, letting her know I’m back, but she still nearly jumps out of her skin.

Underneath that tough exterior, this girl has been through the wringer and needs help getting her life back.

“Maverick, what am I going to do? I have no clue when that letter was sent, and he could show up here at any time, or at my job,” she sighs, holding her head in her hands.

“Tomorrow, we’re taking that letter to the police station, and you’ll give a detailed statement. We’ll have a report filed, and then I’m going to teach you how to shoot,” I toss her a burger wrapped in paper, and she catches it, mulling over what I said.

“You sound like a professional. I assume this isn’t your first rodeo?” she teases, opening her burger and putting french fries on it.

“I watch too many TV shows,” I smirk, handing her the soda I ordered.

“Mhmm, so you say, broody,” she rolls her eyes.

My phone rings with a new text, and I’ve been put into a group chat with Hunter and Adam.

Adam: How’s Karina?

She’s fine. I’ve got her at my place.

Hunter: Take the day tomorrow and get her situated.

Thanks. I’m taking her to the police station.

Adam: Good idea. Let us know if you need anything at all.

I will. I have my concealed carry permit, and he won’t get close enough to hurt her.

Hunter: Good man, Maverick

NOT ONLY ARE THEY GREAT BOSSES, THEY’RE STAND UP MEN, too. Every time I’ve needed a favor, or had a slight issue, they’ve been more than happy to help.

“Is everything okay?” Karina asks, and I put my phone away.

“Of course. My bosses are very worried about you.”

“Adam and Juliette got me out of town last time, and Hunter offered me a condo to crash in until I got my footing. His wife is pregnant with twins,” she fills me in, and I did know that last part.

I chose not to attend the party I was invited to; it seemed like an intimate event, and I was still new enough not to have connections with anyone.

“They’re good people,” I say, and she agrees.

Karina pours a drink, and I tell her this is my last one. I need to be sober in case anything happens.

We don’t know when the letter was sent, and it’s not postmarked, so Asher had to get inside the building to deliver it.

How he pulled that off, I don’t know, but he’s fucked in the head, so we can’t take any chances.

It’s surreal having a woman inside my apartment, inside of my head and heart. I’ve kept it together for her sake, but deep down, I’m terrified.

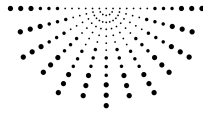
It’s like everything has been in overdrive since the day she moved in here, and I’ve had so many mixed feelings about her that my head spins whenever I try to make sense of it.

I want to find the words, break down my walls, and let her in but I’m clueless as to how. She doesn’t trust me yet, and I’ve ruined things between us twice, before we truly had something resembling a relationship to destroy.

I decide to hold off on telling Karina how I feel until I can figure it out for myself.

It’s been a long couple of days, and I hope my actions can speak for me until I’m ready to spill my heart, soul, and past to her.

# KARINA



The last week has been a fucking whirlwind, and I can't stop my head from feeling like it's spinning. Here I am, eating cheeseburgers in my asshole neighbor's apartment while my ex is out there hunting me down.

Everything is fucked, and to top it all off, Maverick is casually walking around with a weapon in the waistband of his jeans.

It's arguably the *hottest fucking thing* I've ever seen, but nonetheless, it's not a distraction for the fact that I'm in a scary situation.

I don't forgive him for everything we've been through, but having him keep me safe is a step in the right direction. He left me no choice, lifting me off the ground, and carrying the weight of my fucked up baggage across the hall, into his home.

He told me it was real, not something I conjured up in my mind, and I genuinely think I'm more afraid of falling in love with him than I am of Asher.

If I could trust him, I could have a *once-in-twenty-lifetimes* kind of love, but I can't let myself get carried away yet. He's still the same man who ran away when things got scary and screamed in my face over a misunderstanding.

Right here, I promise myself I'll enjoy the moment, even if I am being threatened, stalked, and forced out of my home.

“I like your new hair,” Maverick says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Oh, you noticed? I was going for a refresher,” I smile, and he has a pang of guilt in his eyes.

*As he should.*

I take this as an opportunity to dig into Maverick a little bit while he’s in the mood to be vulnerable.

“So, tell me more about Harper and the rest of your family,” I say, which elicits a groan from him.

“What do you want to know?” he asks, finishing his food and cleaning the trash we left on the counters.

“Everything you’ve got, broody,” I smile and sit on the couch, patting the spot next to me.

“Well, Harper and I are technically half-siblings. Neither of us know who our fathers are,” he sighs like he remembers something painful.

I don’t say anything, letting him fill the silence whenever he’s ready.

He already knows most of my past and dark secrets, and I think it’s time I start to learn some of his.

“When Harper was three, our mom was diagnosed with brain cancer. It was caught so late that we could only watch her die and keep her comfortable. I had to take care of her and Harper alone,” his voice cracks, and I can’t help the tears welling in my eyes.

It explains his protective instincts and his bond with his sister, they’re all each other has.

“Does Harper remember her?” I ask, rubbing his arm in an attempt to console him.

“No, she doesn’t. We have pictures and videos, and I keep her memory alive with stories, but it’s not the same. Life, destiny, fate, whatever the fuck you call it, took our beautiful mother too soon, and we have to live with that pain every day,” he wipes tears from his cheeks and stands up, walking to

the kitchen and gripping the counter so hard his knuckles turn white.

I follow him, wrapping my arms around his waist. He didn't leave my side when I broke down, and I won't leave him either.

Surprisingly, he doesn't resist, almost embracing that I'm holding him.

It's quiet for a few minutes as I let him work through his thoughts and finish when he's ready.

"I was seventeen. I had to quit school to take care of them both, and on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, I held my mother's hand while she took her last breaths. Harper screamed for what felt like hours, hungry for lunch, but I couldn't let her go. I didn't know how," he breaks down into a full-on sob, and I have to hold him up physically, or he'll fall straight to the ground.

I'm crying at this point, wrecked over this emotionally charged story. It's nowhere near what I expected, and I almost wish I didn't ask.

"Maverick, I am so sorry. Nobody should have to deal with that pain alone," I whisper against his back, listening to the sound of his breathing.

"Grams was too busy partying in Vegas to come home, and she didn't even know Mom died until two days later when the hospice nurse called," I let him go, dipping between his arms and leaning against the counter, so he has no choice but to look at me.

"We don't have to talk about this anymore. It's okay," I say, stroking his cheek and moving the hair out of his eyes.

He doesn't say anything, but his sea-green eyes tell the real story. The pain, grief, and pressure have built up over the years, and he's supposed to be the one who keeps it together. He keeps everyone safe, and that includes me now too.

It explains the fierce need to protect me, it's because he's done it for the people he loves all his life.

Neither of us say anything for a while, and we don't move. We're slightly intertwined in the middle of his kitchen, the weight of his pain holding us close together.

Finally, he takes a deep breath, and I brace myself for what he's going to say next.

"Her name was Carissa, and you reminded me of her the second I saw you. When you told me your name, I nearly fainted," he can barely get the words out, stammering over his tears, and I can't do anything but hold onto him.

This grumpy, moody man has carried the weight of his family and baggage heavier than mine for so long, and I misjudged him from the moment I met him.

"Do you have any pictures of her that I can see?" I ask, and his body tenses with my question. "It's okay, Maverick; I shouldn't have asked. Another time, maybe."

I rush the words out, not wanting to ruin this moment or upset him anymore. I pull him closer to me, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my cheek against his chest.

"Thank you," he whispers, and we stand together in the kitchen for a long time, just holding each other.

Nothing else needs to be said or shared. This is enough right here.

Usually, I'd be terrified of this kind of intimacy, the way we've opened up to each other without having sex, but this feels *right*.

This is two damaged people attempting to survive in a world where everything has gone wrong, and we have the trauma, scars, and deep-seated fears to prove it.

The only difference is that we're relying on each other. Finally, we let someone else into the world the way we see it and combine that fucked up shit into a place where we can be our stripped-down, natural, and free selves.

This, between Maverick and I, is delicate. It's too soon; we've made many promises and had our fair share of drinks and revelations, but it's *real*.



Real enough, that I won't run away from this place or, more importantly, him.

"I've never told that story to anyone else," he says, breaking our silence and pulling away from me.

"Nobody? Not some old girlfriend I should be jealous of?" I smile, attempting to get him to flash that smile at me.

It's a flicker, only a fleeting moment, but I catch it.

"Nope. Haven't had a girlfriend since I was nineteen. I couldn't handle the pressure once Grams got sick too," he pours a drink for me, handing it off and wrapping his arm around me.

I decide not to delve more into the story that is Grams; it's been an emotional night, and I don't think he could handle it.

"Harper is an amazing young lady, Maverick. That's because of you and how much you care about her. You're so present in her life, and she's beyond lucky to have a big brother like you," I tell him, making it known how important he is.

"That means a lot, Karina. Thank you. For everything, for listening," he wipes his face one last time and takes me by the hand.

I follow him to his bedroom, and my mind is scrambling. Does he think we're going to have sex now? There's no way he opens up slightly and expects me to sleep with him right after.

I couldn't get in the mood after that heavy trauma dump.

I sit on his bed, which is surprisingly comfy, and watch as he digs in his dresser drawer for something.

He hands me a stack of photos, and I realize it's his mother.

She's smiling at the camera, holding baby Harper, with the sun shining over a pool in the background.

Her hair was long, dark, and curly. I can see how I remind him of her; our smiles are similar.

I have the same hazel-colored eyes, and as I flip through photos of the three of them together, the familial resemblance is unmistakable.

Even if they have different fathers, Maverick and Harper get all their features from their mother.

“She’s beautiful, Mav. Thanks for showing these to me,” I say, handing them back.

He smiles at the one on top.

“This was a few weeks after Harp was born. We took her to the park, but she hated the stroller. Mom got tired, so I held her, and a stranger took this photo with his Polaroid camera. It was her favorite picture,” he stares at it for a few beats before putting it with the rest and returning them to their spot in the drawer.

The way his face lights up when he talks about a happy memory with his mother is something I wish I could frame forever.

In the heat of the moment I feel something for Maverick that I’ve never felt with a man before.

I can’t quite put my finger on what it is, and maybe it’s the liquor and trauma dumping session that’s leading the charge, but there’s nothing more I want than to feel as close to him as possible.

“*Kiss me, Maverick,*” I whisper, my voice shaking.

He turns to me, confusion plastered on his face before he asks me if I’m sure.

“As sure as I’ll ever be. I need to know that this isn’t some fucked up fantasy I created in my mind,” I confess, and he doesn’t break my gaze as he leans in close.

“It’s a dream come true, kitten,” he whispers, slowly bringing his lips to mine.

It’s been years since I’ve kissed someone, and I’m terrified, but I need to take this leap with Maverick if I ever expect us to be something more.

At first, he moves slowly, gently cupping my face with his hand and letting our mouths explore each other.

His tongue parts my lips, and I let him in, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

I can feel the heat flooding my body; this is the closest anybody has been to my heart in so long, and in a second, I come to the conclusion that I never want to let him go. It's beautiful, and overwhelming at the same time.

I pull away, deciding that I've had enough, at least for now, and when I look into his eyes, I see how our kiss affected him, too.

He's breathing heavily and still has his hands glued to my body.

"That was incredible," he breathes, pulling me down on the bed.

I adjust to face him and rake my fingers through his dusky blonde hair, admiring the fragile man before me.

"*Electric*," I say, shutting my eyes in an attempt to feel this moment forever.

We don't say anything for a while, just lying here and embracing the silence.

"You could be the thing that breaks me completely or brings my heart back to life," I say softly, offering another vulnerable piece of myself to Maverick.

He doesn't say a word. Instead, he leans in and kisses my lips again.

Slow, a quick peck that makes my heart rate speed up.

"I need to shower. Are you going to be alright out here?" he asks, and I nod.

"I'm going to make your bed my personal kingdom," I say, sprawling out and making myself comfortable.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, kitten," he bites his bottom lip, instantly shooting me a look of seduction that lights me on fire.

“God, I *love* when you call me that,” I tease, crawling under the covers and turning away from him.

The sexual tension between us hangs thick in the air, and if the day weren't already fucked with everything going on, I'd invite that pretty mouth in between my legs and ride his face until the sun came up.

Instead, that fantasy will have to wait for another day.

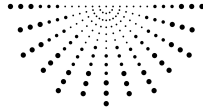
Right now, I'm pouring myself a drink and enjoying the comfort of Maverick's bed.

His sheets are soft, and they smell incredible. A man with good hygiene who cleans his bedspread regularly is a major turn-on.

I can't help but lean into the magic that's happening. Maverick doesn't see me as a damsel in distress or a dumbass for getting involved with an abusive man. He sees beyond that, further into me as a person.

We may have started out hating each other, our hearts and minds closed off to anything more, but each day that passes is another chance for us to open our souls to each other.

# MAVERICK



The shower water has turned cold, but I can't pull myself out of the confines of these four walls. Today has been so mindbendingly fucked, and it's barely dinner time.

Talking about my mom with Karina was like experiencing the pain and grief all over again, considering I've never spoken about her last moments alive with anyone else.

For ten years, I've kept the details of that day to myself — until today.

Something about Karina makes me want to open all my wounds and let her see the shit I hide from the world.

I can feel how much she cares when she looks at me or listens to my stories. We've both been through things that would scare other people away, but somehow, it's only strengthened our connection.

When she asked me to kiss her, all the breath was stolen from my lungs, and the thoughts in my brain were wiped away. All I could think about at the moment was how this could change everything between us forever.

It was a big deal for her, and I did my best to be gentle. It wasn't about me; it wasn't about lust or desire. It was a kiss that had to be enough to change her mind about everything she's believed for years.

Laying beside her in my bed was overwhelming, but calming, in a strange mix of emotions. Everything has changed

in twenty-four hours, and I'm trying to wrap my head around it all.

I finally get out of the shower, my bones frozen from how cold the water turned. I wrap the towel around myself and realize I didn't bring a fresh change of clothes.

If it were an average day, I'd be slightly embarrassed about having to walk out in only a towel in front of Karina, but at this point, I couldn't care less.

I open the door and see her looking like a work of art in my bed.

She's tangled in the sheets with her hair draped across the pillows, and she looks so cozy I almost don't want to disturb her.

I walk in front of the TV she's watching to get a pair of boxers, and her eyes widen when she notices me standing there.

"Dinner and a show? This night can't get any better," she smiles, stretching and sitting up.

I can't help but smile back at her, shaking my head and wondering how this is reality.

It's hard to fathom that a woman as beautiful as Karina is in my bed, but her witty comments throw me off guard even more.

I bring the rest of my clothes to the bathroom, close the door, and hear her call me a tease from the comfort of my bed.

"Shower's all yours," I say, tossing the dirty clothes in the laundry basket.

"I'll go in the morning if that's alright?" she asks, sipping her drink and lying back down.

"Of course. I will lock everything and set up the sofa bed. Do you need anything else?" I lean against the door frame, waiting for her answer.

She looks like she's thinking about something, but I don't rush her. Our dynamic consists of many things, but patience is

a big one. We seem to never overstep or attempt to fill the silence, and I'm learning how beautiful a connection with another person can be.

"Sleep with me? I don't want to be alone, Mav," she finally says, the words coming out slow and her voice shaking.

"Are you sure?" I ask, not wanting to pressure her into anything.

I'd hate for her to think this is what I expect because I'm keeping her safe in my apartment.

"Please," she begs, and I can't resist.

I tell her I'll be back in a few minutes, and she gets back under the blankets, waiting for me.

Even though we are on the second floor, I ensure all the windows are locked in the living room and triple-check that the deadbolt and chain are secure.

I take two bottles of water from the fridge and turn off the lights. The last thing I need is my weapon and I intend to keep close by, right on my nightstand.

I take a deep breath and walk into the bedroom, where the most beautiful woman waits for me to climb into bed with her.

"You're bringing that to bed?" she asks, and I nod.

"It won't do anything if it's in the kitchen or back in the safe. We need to have it close, just in case," I say, and she doesn't question me further.

I get under the covers, the bed warm from her being in it already.

"Hi," she whispers, coming closer.

I move the hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear and admiring her beauty.

I've never noticed the freckles on her nose that spread across her cheeks, but now that I've seen them, I could never forget.

She has a slight grin on her face, like she's finally relaxed, and her eyes are back to their normal, captivating hazel color.

"Are you scared?" I ask, purposely being vague to see what she says.

"Scared of Asher? Yeah, I always am. I think I might be more afraid of you, though," she touches my cheek, her fingers stopping on the small scar on my chin.

"You scare the shit out of me, Karina," I whisper, not taking my eyes off her.

"Where'd you get this from?" her fingers are still tracing the faded line that indents my skin.

"A few years ago, Grams threw an ashtray at me when the doctors said she needed to quit smoking. She wouldn't listen, so I flushed her cigarettes down the toilet. She wasn't happy," I tell her another piece of my history, but this kind of shit is something I know she relates to.

She takes my hand, leading it to a spot on her head; underneath all the hair, I can feel a slight indent, and she squeezes my hand.

"*This* is the reminder of why I run. Asher slammed me down, and I was left with broken bones. But I had this gash that kept me in a medically induced coma for three days," she stops, letting go of my hands and moving close so her head is on my chest.

I wrap my arms around her, bringing her whole body to mine. We're skin to skin now, and the warmth of us together radiates under the blankets.

"Anyways, after this happened, I decided to run. It was a whole thing; my mom put me on an involuntary hold, and when I got out, I knew I didn't want to live this way," she stammers through the last sentence, almost as if she remembers the pain she felt.

"That wasn't love. A real man would never," I tell her, stroking her hair and feeling her heartbeat on my chest.



“I know. I went through hell and back to finally realize that. But along the way, I became terrified of anything resembling a relationship,” she sighs, and I can feel her tears falling on my shirt.

“Until now,” I reply, testing the waters to see what she’d say.

“Until *you*, Mav,” she looks up at me, tears softly rolling down her face, but still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I wipe her cheeks, not letting that asshole take any more away from her. I don’t understand how a man could have a *diamond* like Karina in his arms, giving every ounce of love she has to him, and he abuses her body, trust, and mind.

I get angry thinking about it, but I can’t let that side of me take over, not right now.

She’s already vulnerable, and I realize now that my outburst last week probably triggered some traumatic memories for her.

Instead, I brush my thumb over her lips, almost begging to kiss her again.

She scoots up closer to me and rests her hand on the nape of my neck, bringing her lips to mine.

I let her take charge, following her pace and not rushing anything more than this kiss. She needs to regain her power, and I will be patient for as long as that takes.

Karina tangles her hands in my hair, and I pull her body onto mine.

She takes this kiss from slow and sweet to hot and heavy within seconds, and I feel her grind her hips into my crotch.

I groan in response, feeling her smile through our kiss.

She breaks our kiss, sitting on my chest and biting her bottom lip.

Holy fuck, she looks like a goddamned goddess like this, and I can’t keep my hands to myself.

Karina tugs at the hem of my shirt, and I sit up to let her pull it off.

Tossing it on the floor, she bends down and kisses my chest, dragging her tongue around and leaving goosebumps on my skin in her wake.

I let my hands roam her, feeling her ass through her sweatpants. She grinds into me again, driving me wild.

She rips her tank top off, letting me unclasp her bra, and revealing her bare chest.

In this position, her breasts are in my face, and I can't help but take them in my hands, which makes her moan.

"Oh, fuck, Mav," she tips her head back, and I tease her nipples even more, twisting them between my fingers.

Watching her writhe on top of me is the sexiest thing I've ever seen, and I could easily get used to this view.

I let her go, grabbing her and pulling her lips back to mine, taking her breath away instantly.

I pull her hair like I did the first night we were together, just a little tug that makes her moan into my mouth. I can't get enough of her and want everything she's willing to give me.

She trails her lips down my throat, sucking each spot gently, and I might just explode right now.

"No marks, kitten," I whisper, as she considers that a challenge.

"No promises," she teases, but I remind her I have an appointment at Harper's school tomorrow.

She stops, running her hands through her hair and climbing off me.

Mentioning my little sister was an immediate mood killer, but I didn't care.

That was everything I wanted and *so* much more.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have —" I try to say, but she cuts me off.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t know if I could’ve stopped myself, honestly. I’d rather take things slow if that’s okay?” she says, smiling sweetly as she lays back on my chest.

“Anything you want, Karina. I mean that,” I tell her, rubbing her back and listening to her breathing.

“You’re not the big ole grump I first met. There’s so much more to you than what you let the world see,” she traces her fingers across my chest, and I close my eyes, loving the feeling of having her in my arms.

“I don’t want the world to see me. All I want is for you to know, deep down, who I am. That’s all that matters to me,” I tell her, reaching for the water I brought in earlier.

I hand it to her, and she takes a sip before saying anything.

“I do,” she says, and my heart feels like it skipped a beat.

We lay together for a long time, trading sweet nothings and keeping the conversation casual versus all the heavy shit we’ve dumped tonight.

“Wait, you’re kidding. You actually enjoy watching sports?” I ask, and she nods.

“I can watch anything, really, but I’m a football girl,” she smiles, and I shake my head.

“Where did you come from?” I kiss her forehead, wondering how she ended up here.

Everything that happened in our lives could’ve led us in different places and directions, but the stars and planets aligned to bring us together.

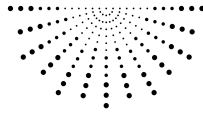
She was my annoying, loud neighbor, but now, she’s the light in my darkness.

“You’re my dream girl, Karina.”

I’ll never stop telling her that, no matter how long it takes her to believe me.

She doesn’t say anything, but I’m comfortable with the silence. Neither of us move for the rest of the night, and I fall asleep with so much more than I had when I started this day.

# KARINA



The sunlight breaks into the room, waking me up, and I realize I'm still lying on Maverick's chest. It wasn't a dream. Last night was so much better than a dream; it was the *beginning*.

I watch him sleep, his hair messy and in his face.

I'm dreading the day ahead, knowing Maverick will drag me to the police station and make me give a statement about Asher.

I don't know what to tell them. Do I go back through my entire history? Listing every address in the towns I've lived in?

My mother filed charges when I was in a coma, but I never asked what happened, and back then, I was too busy telling her she was right and running away.

My head is filled with questions, and the nerves are making my entire body tremble. I thought I could be strong, stay, and fight back for once, but I'm terrified of even admitting the words out loud.

"Good morning, gorgeous," Maverick whispers, his eyes groggy from sleep.

"Hi," I fake a smile, but he knows something's bothering me.

"What's wrong?" he sits up, reaching out to pull me in for a hug.

“I’m so scared, Mav. I don’t know what to say. What if the cops don’t believe me? I’ve been running for so long, they’re probably going to ... ” I’m rambling, and Maverick puts his fingers on my lips to shush me.

“Relax, Karina. Breathe, baby. They have no choice but to believe you. Remember, he left a letter in your mailbox, in our building that he doesn’t have access to,” he says, making me feel a little better.

“I can do this,” I repeat, trying to make myself believe it.

Maverick gets out of bed, still shirtless from our night’s hot makeout session. I’m tangled in the sheets but also shirtless underneath. I bite my bottom lip, watching him get dressed, the muscles in his back flexing with every move he makes.

Those grey sweats he’s wearing leave nothing to the imagination, and I think his ass may be bigger than mine.

“See something you like, kitten?” he teases, his back still turned to me.

“Maybe,” I smile, watching the sweatpants come down, falling to the floor.

“What about now?” he asks, still rifling through his dresser drawers.

“Better. *Much* better,” I whisper, enjoying the view.

“Get that pretty ass in the shower. We have a busy day,” he tells me in a deep voice that sends a shiver through me.

I take his sheets with me, smirking at him as I walk by and get my overnight bag. I appreciate the free show he offered, but I want to drive him a little crazy with a shred of mystery.

I fill his shower with all my hair and body products, adding color to his bland bottles.

His shower is squeaky clean, though, and I’ve seen some guys who never bothered to take care of their bathrooms, so this is a welcome surprise.

I let the water steam the bathroom before getting in, allowing the hot water to scald my body, erasing any doubts about my actions.

I no longer want to second-guess myself. I'm making a decision about Asher, choosing to file a police report and take my life back.

I rub shampoo through my hair, recalling every single time he made me scared for my life and all the times he told me I was worthless to everyone except him. He was wrong, and today, I'm holding the power.

I'm making a choice with Maverick, allowing him to see my scars, heal wounds that he didn't cause, and bring me back to life.

There's a knock at the door, startling me and stripping me out of my inner monologue.

"Karina, can I come in?" Maverick asks through the door, and I give him permission.

"Where are your keys?" he turns his head, not sneaking any peeks through the glass door.

"In the bag on the floor, why?" I call out, running conditioner through my hair.

"I'm going to check on your place and feed your cat. Where do you keep the food?" he says, that protective fire coming out again.

I tell him where to find everything and thank him for caring for April. Once the door closes behind him, I lean against the wall, reminding myself I'm strong and can do this.



AFTER WE CLEAN UP BREAKFAST, IT'S TIME TO HEAD TO THE police station. I've been stalling, but Maverick is persistent. I grab my purse and Asher's letter, following orders by staying strictly behind Maverick.

I can see the weapon in his waistband again, and something about that shiny piece outlined under his shirt

drives me fucking wild. I breathe and try to keep my shit together, focusing on the task at hand.

We make it to the lobby, and he signals that the coast is clear.

“I need to check on my car first,” I say, and he stands right behind me as I do.

I press the unlock button, but the headlights don't flash. My heart is pounding so loudly I can hear it in my head, and my legs tremble as I walk to the driver's side.

“Oh, my god,” I turn, and Maverick is behind me.

“What is it?” he asks, a puzzled look on his face.

I haven't told him about my safety precautions, but when I point at the paperclip on the ground, explaining what it means, he ushers me into his truck.

He starts it, immediately driving away from the complex, stopping once we reach a gas station.

“Let me out, Maverick,” I say, but he shakes his head.

“Talk to me, tell me everything about the last time —” he starts, but I have to stop him.

“Let me out, or I'll throw up all over your fucking truck,” I yell, which makes him finally pull over.

A few minutes later, Maverick's lovely breakfast is all over the bushes, and I feel weak again.

“I'm sorry. I lost it for a minute,” I say as I climb back in his truck.

He faces me, concern spread across his face, and I know he's waiting for a better explanation.

“I have a couple of safety measures. That way, I know if anyone's been in my car. I never get in without checking and never get out without setting the paperclip,” I tell him, staring out the window and avoiding his eyes.

He probably thinks I'm insane, and I don't want to see what that looks like on his face.

“That’s smart, Karina. It’s quick thinking like this that could save your life,” he says quietly, and I’m in awe.

We get to the station, and I ask him if we can sit for a minute so I can calm my nerves.

I felt so good before we left, thinking that this could be what changed my life, and it was instantly stolen from me.

“Come here. Are you okay?” Maverick says, lifting the middle console so I can be next to him.

I tuck under his arm, feeling safer and stronger already.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing at the weird thing hanging from his windshield.

“*Oh fuck. Fuck!*” he yells, pulling out his phone and freaking me out.

I let him do his thing, not breaking his focus by distracting him.

Finally, he hands me his phone, and my jaw drops.

“Is this?” I ask, the rest of the words failing to come out.

I watch the video, taken from what I assume is a camera inside Maverick’s truck, and I see Asher checking the handle on every door. To my surprise, the passenger door opens after he does something to it that I can’t make out on the grainy video.

He gets inside my car, poking around my glove compartment, and after six minutes, he emerges from the driver’s side.

I try to hand the phone back to Maverick, but he shakes his head, and we keep watching.

Instead of leaving, Asher approached the building and didn’t come out for thirty minutes.

The camera picks up his motion again as he sits on the hood of my car.

This is all too much; I feel sick again and tell Maverick to put it away.



“Let’s go inside. We need to show them this video, too,” he says, pulling his arm from around me.

“Why do you have a camera in here?” I ask, pointing to it.

“I got it after I saw that fucker near your car. After I told you about him, I set the camera up the next day. I’m sorry. I completely forgot to mention it. I haven’t checked it once, I swear,” he’s panicked, but I’m not sure why.

I pull him by the neckline of his shirt, kissing him softly. It surprises him but it’s brief since we are in a public parking lot.

“I will never get tired of that, Karina,” he breathes, his eyes still closed.

“Me either, baby. Let’s go inside,” I say, checking myself in the mirror before leaving.

He helps me down and closes the door behind me, locking his truck.

I stay a few steps behind him as he instructed but decide to be bold, and act on what I’m feeling.

“Thank you, seriously. You are fucking incredible,” I take his hand in mine and walk tall with him into the police station.

When we walk in, Maverick drops my hand, pulling out his wallet and taking a small card out.

He hands it to the officer at the desk, then places his weapon inside a basket.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Carter?” the officer asks, and Maverick requests that we speak to a detective.

“Ma’am, do you have anything on you?” he turns to me, and I blink in confusion.

“I don’t think so?” I say, truly not understanding his question.

“Drugs, weapons? Anything that can harm anyone in this building?” he reiterates, looking at me as if I’m dumb.

“Oh, no, Officer. Sorry, this is my first time in a police station,” I smile, but he doesn’t give a fuck.

He types on his computer and then tells us where we can wait.

Maverick laughs at me as we sit, asking me what is wrong with me.

“Personally, I think you have too much experience with this shit. I am an average woman who’s never been in trouble with the law, so excuse me for not knowing what that meant,” I say, laughing at myself, too.

“Mr. Carter, Detective Benton is ready for you two,” a different cop calls out to us, and we follow him to the detective’s desk.

He shakes both our hands and tells us to take a seat.

“So, what can I do for you? I heard you have some evidence for us and would like to file a report?” he says, shifting his eyes between Maverick and me while he speaks.

“Yes, sir. My girlfriend, Karina, is being stalked by her ex-boyfriend, and this has spanned across multiple towns, counties, and years,” Maverick tells the detective, and I’m more floored that he referred to me as his girlfriend.

I’m sure it was to sound less confusing. I’m sure that cop wouldn’t take us seriously if he explained our history, calling me, “*the loud woman next door I used to hate until I fucked her, then discovered how fucked in the head she is, like me. We want a restraining order, please.*” As much as it caught me off guard, I did love the sound of it.

“Miss Collins, can I see your piece of evidence?” the detective asks, breaking me out of my head.

“Of course, here it is,” I hand him Asher’s letter, and he takes it to make a copy.

Maverick reaches for my hand under the desk, squeezing it three times as if he’s letting me know I’m doing alright.

“Mr. Carter, can I ask why you have your concealed carry permit?” the detective returns, looking strangely at Maverick.

“No, you may not. It is my second amendment right as an American citizen,” he says, and my eyes widen with each

word that comes out of his mouth.

*Dear God*, we are going to get arrested or detained — whatever word they use on TV.

“You’re right, sir. I apologize,” the detective says, then turns his attention to me.

“Miss Collins, a female detective will take you aside and take the rest of your statement while we speak privately with your boyfriend,” he’s looking at Maverick strangely again, and I don’t know how I feel about this.

He squeezes my hand again, letting me know it’s okay, so I follow the detective, who has a fake smile tattooed on her face.

I sit at her desk and explain my whole story, detailing every incident I’ve ever had with Asher, going back to my hospitalizations and the charges my mom filed against him.

“I’m sorry you’ve been terrorized by this man, Ms. Collins, but can I ask why you’ve waited nearly eight years to file a report of your own?” she asks, and I’m nearly on the verge of tears as it is.

I knew they wouldn’t believe me. I knew they’d discredit me because I never left a paper trail. This was so stupid and pointless, and I couldn’t help it when the waterworks opened.

“Detective, I’ve already told you my soured history with this man, who openly dated me at twenty-two when I was still a minor. I didn’t file reports because I was scared and didn’t have a support system. I’ve never kept friends from past places I’ve lived until recently,” I pause as she hands me a tissue.

The makeup I tried to wear to be taken seriously is running down my face, and I just want to leave and forget all of this.

“Continue, Ms. Collins,” she says as if she hasn’t already demoralized me enough.

I clear my throat, take a deep breath, and wipe my tears.

*I am strong, and I can do this.*

“I’ve never had people care enough about what happens to me. So, to answer your question, I’m filing a report now

because I want my life back. I want to live freely and enjoy the company of the friends I've made. He's stolen enough from me, detective; I just want to feel safe," I finish, using every muscle in my body to hold back tears.

I refuse to cry in front of this woman again.

"I understand. It must be difficult. I'll be able to open a case using your letter and the video your boyfriend provided," she says, and relief floods my veins.

"Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me," I shake her hand, and she offers me a genuine smile.

"Judging by your story, I think I do, Karina," she escorts me back to the waiting room where I sat a little while ago, and I impatiently wait for Maverick to return.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter, your dedication to this young woman is admirable," Detective Benton says, shaking Maverick's hand.

I jump to my feet, thankful he hasn't gotten into trouble.

"Wait here, and the sergeant will give you further instructions," the detective says as he shakes my hand.

I'm shocked, beyond shocked.

*They believed me.*

Twenty minutes later, we're walking out of the police station the same way we came in, holding hands. Asher will have a warrant out for his arrest, and until he's in custody, there will be a police car outside of our building.

"You did amazing, Karina. I'm so fucking proud of you," Maverick says, taking all the paperwork and placing it on the dash.

"I cried, like a few times. I think they only agreed to file the report and keep a police car outside because I wouldn't stop crying," I say, and he shakes his head.

"No, baby girl, you did great. You told the truth, and they had no choice but to issue the warrant. You're going to be safe

soon enough,” he says, holding my thigh as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“They believed me,” I whisper to myself, hoping he doesn’t hear me.

I can’t stop the tears from falling because I never thought someone who lived through the cycle of abuse could get actual justice.

I’m grateful to Maverick for standing beside me and pushing me to be powerful.

He doesn’t pressure me to talk, letting me get all my emotions out.

Instead, he places a hand on my thigh while he drives, and I use his touch to ground me.

“That took longer than I thought. Are you okay coming with me to meet Harper’s principal?” he asks, and I don’t hesitate to say yes.

There’s no way I’m comfortable staying alone yet.

“Can I come in with you?”

I judge his reaction and know he’s fighting for Harper’s reputation, but I want to be there, too.

“Yes, especially if you can keep Harper from exploding. That girl has no filter,” he smiles and stops at a fast food place.

“Like brother, like sister,” I tease, and he rolls his eyes at me.

His white T-shirt, jeans, and weapon combo are seriously turning me on, and I don’t know how much longer I can hold myself back from him, especially if we sleep in the same bed again tonight.

“So, back there, you called me your girlfriend,” I bite my bottom lip and shift in my seat toward him, the friction in these jeans making me crazy.

“Did you like that, kitten?” he whispers, making me even hotter than I was already.

“I did,” I breathe, not complicating things by talking too much.

“I liked the sound of it, too,” he smirks, and I can’t get enough of how natural this all feels.

“The detective referred to you as my boyfriend,” I blush, and he flashes that gorgeous smile at me.

Suddenly, I feel guilty. I still haven’t told Maverick my secret.

Juliette and Adam don’t even know this about me, and something placing all my eggs in one basket is terrifying, but the way Maverick has stepped up for me, I feel like I need to confess.

Not right now, though. It will take more than twenty-four hours of this bliss before I reveal my real name to him.

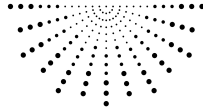
I’ve had enough revelations and deep personal talks over the last few days.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I say, taking his hand and embarking on his journey.

He held my hand through what I had to deal with today, and I will do the same for him.

Maverick and I will always be linked no matter what happens because of the way we stand tall together in the face of our adversities.

# MAVERICK



I feel confident that I can make things right on Harper's behalf, and with Karina by my side, I feel unstoppable. Our story is writing itself, and we're taking it slow, chapter by chapter.

The first part of our day is complete, with the cops being helpful and actually taking Karina's story seriously.

In Forest Falls, the cops are known for dicking around and busting teenagers for weekend drinking. Luckily, none of them remembered me from my sordid past and frequent trips to the drunk tank.

Those are tales for a different day, and I'm thankful Karina didn't have to hear any of them before I was ready to tell her that dark side of me.

I went dark when Grams decided to take over the family, angry at the entire world and using anything to cope with the pain.

I shake off the thoughts from the past, admiring the woman presently in the front seat of my truck.

Karina's hair is blowing in the wind, and she's finally at peace. Today was a big deal for her, and I couldn't be happier that she can start healing from the trauma of that fucked up relationship.

We pull into the parking lot of Harper's school, and I open the door to help Karina down.

"You ready?" I ask, holding my hand out to hers.

When she's nervous, I do anything I can to ease that. Touching her is the best way to settle her down and I swear, I *feel* the tension leave her body.

"Let's do this," she smiles, interlocking her fingers into mine.

I remind myself that we're on our way to stick up for Harper, and I have to stop staring at Karina's chest. It's nearly impossible in her light pink sweater, showing off just enough cleavage to distract me.

I hold the door open for her and follow her inside, pointing her toward the principal's office.

Harper's eyes light up when she sees both of us together, coming to her defense. I'm taking a risk, letting Karina into this side of my world, but I feel she'll be good for Harper.

"Karina! What are you doing here?" Harper hugs her first and turns to me next.

"I'm apart of *Harper's Army*. We all know you didn't deserve that suspension. I need you to do me a favor, okay?" she says, Harper hanging on to her every word.

"Anything," she smiles, and the secretary hands me papers to sign.

I listen over my shoulder as Karina tells Harper to bite her tongue and let me do the talking.

"Sit next to me, and we'll listen to everything they say. It'll make your case better, and you know Maverick won't stop fighting until your name is cleared," she suggests gently, and Harper agrees.

If only it were easy to get that kid to listen to me. I'm thankful that Karina can talk sense into her, making me sound like I've got everything under control.

The principal calls us in and looks between Karina and me with an eyebrow raised.

"I asked to meet with you again because Harper told me her side of the story, and based on her recollection of events,



I'd like us to sit down and discuss it further," I say, doing my best to sound calm and collected.

"I understand, Mr. Carter, but the suspension can't be undone," she shuffles papers on her desk, barely glancing in my direction.

This woman isn't going to make this easy, and I'm annoyed by her lack of empathy.

"That's not what we're asking for. Harper was trying to avoid the situation and was pulled in the middle of the girls who were fighting," I informed, and finally, she glanced up at me, her glasses on the end of her nose.

Karina and Harper exchange a high-five behind me, and I have to keep myself from smiling.

"My hands are tied here. Your sister was described as being involved in the fight by witnesses. I can't change what's already happened," she reiterates, and I can feel Harper getting antsy behind me.

"Is there anything we can do to keep this from affecting the rest of her time here? I don't want this unfortunate miscarriage of justice to follow Harper through the end of the school year," I ask, trying to bargain slightly.

"Mr. Carter, I assure you that our staff is professional, and nothing will interfere with Harper's education," she stands, ending our conversation.

I shake her hand and thank her for the time, following my girls out of the office.

They're quiet until we reach my truck, and Harper is the first to break.

"God, she's such a bitch!" she yells, throwing her backpack in the backseat.

"Harper, we knew that this might happen. At least we tried," I remind her, and she rolls her eyes.

"Can we go get ice cream?" she whines, already pulling out her phone.

“Is that okay with you?” I ask Karina, and she nods.

I head toward the diner, resting my hand on Karina’s leg again as we drive, and a sense of calm has fallen over all of us. The silence is refreshing, with the light hum of the radio serving as background noise.

“Are you two dating now?” Harper pokes her head up to the front, and we exchange a slight smile.

Can’t get anything past the smartest thirteen-year-old known to man.

“I knew it! I knew you liked her. This is so exciting!” she squeals, and I don’t interfere.

Karina shakes her head and shrugs, clearly okay with letting Harper come to her own conclusion.

Sometimes, it’s easier to let her imagine whatever scenario she’s got in her head, and it can’t hurt to let her be happy.



AFTER ICE CREAM, I DRIVE A DISAPPOINTED HARPER BACK TO Grams’ house.

“Come on, Mav, let me stay over again! I want to hang out with you guys,” she begs, and I have to remind her that she has school tomorrow.

“I will see you on Sunday. Text me what you want to cook, okay?” I say, opening the door for her.

“Karina, do you cook? You should come for dinner!” she asks, and I can’t help but love the bond they have already.

“I shouldn’t cook. It’s a disgrace to food when I do,” she smiles, hugging Harper goodbye.

“Are you coming to say hi to Grams?” she walks toward the house, waiting for my answer.

“Not today, Harp. Tell her the bills are set, and I’ll see her Sunday. Love you,” I call out, and she waves before closing the door behind her.

I didn't want to expose Karina to the shitshow just yet, and I'd rather spend my time with her anyway.

"Where to now, broody?" she grabs my hand, and I tell her the world is her oyster.

It's late afternoon, and we already had dessert, so she suggests we go for a long drive.

"You got it. Thank you for being so good to Harper. It means a lot," I smile, and she blushes.

I've never been around someone who reacts to the little things, like a smile or the touch of a hand.

Karina has been through more than most, but it hasn't hardened her. Deep down, she's still a little girl dreaming about her fairytale.

"I love kids. I might like her more than I like you," she teases, a sly smile on her face.

"Somehow, I doubt that, kitten," I bite my lip and see that slight reaction from her again.

Her nostrils flare like she's trying to catch her breath, and I notice the glimmer in her eyes. It's quick, but lets me know that she's still very much into the nickname I graced upon her what feels like another lifetime ago.

"Can I control the music?" she asks, and I immediately shake my head.

"Absolutely fucking *not*. Do you want to go back to hating each other?" I warn, and she rolls her eyes.

"Fine. Play something you like since you have superior music taste," she challenges me, and I fucking love that about her.

Karina can make anything competitive, and she isn't a sore loser. We find common ground on nearly everything, and our mutual love for winning is at the top of the list.

I turn the radio on to a classic rock station, watching as she listens to the song playing, her head slowly moving with the music.

It's a song from the late eighties, and I'm shocked when she starts singing along.

"You listen to classics?" I ask, and she nods.

"My dad loved this shit. I grew up on only the best."

She starts singing the chorus, and I join her in belting out the lyrics, both of us giving it everything we've got.

This woman amazes me with each second I spend with her. She's like a gold mine of qualities, and every new one I learn makes me beg for more.

"Where are we going?" She asks curiously, scooping her hair into a messy bun.

"Wherever the road takes us?" I offer, and she seems to like the thrill of it all.

It feels like we're moving at a million miles per minute, but I can't stop myself from stealing every *single* second.

It almost doesn't seem real, like I've been dreaming, but when I look into her eyes, I feel how electrifying we are together.

"What are you thinking about over there?" she breaks me out of my mind, and I don't even bother trying to hide it.

"You. Everything about you, Karina," I'm honest, and that seems to shock her.

"Oh yeah, what about me?"

"You're like a dream, and I can't tell if this is real or not. We're moving fast, but I don't care; I want every second with you," I confess, and she smiles sweetly, listening to every word.

"I'm all in, Mav. Nobody else could light a fire in my soul like you. I said I wanted to take it slow but meant in the bedroom. There's nothing slow about how I plan to fall insanely in love with you," she whispers, and I love how she lets her voice drop low when she's saying something important.

She's spent years showing the tough side of her, guarded and secretive, but with me, she lets the softer side show.

I've been studying her, learning about these small little quirks, and gathering information as if my life depended on a pop-quiz with Karina Collins as the subject.

"Bite your tongue until you meet Grams on Sunday, then tell me you still want me," I joke, and she laughs.

"So that invite wasn't just Harper asking?" she teases, and I shake my head.

"I want you to come and see what crazy shit I deal with. You've already got one foot in the door; might as well come all the way in," I bargain, hoping she'll say yes.

"I'll give you all of me. In exchange, you give me all of you. Deal?" she holds her hand out with one pinky up.

"A pinky promise?" I raise my eyebrow, and she's serious.

"It's the only promise that counts, duh," she insists, and as silly as it sounds, I love it.

We lock pinkies, and at that moment, I feel like I signed my soul over to her.



WE'VE BEEN DRIVING FOR OVER TWO HOURS, BUT IT'S GETTING late, and I want to take this girl home and hold her in my arms, so I turn around and head back toward Forest Falls.

"So you can't cook?" I ask, and she makes a disgusted face.

"No, absolutely not. I burn shit, or it tastes like plain shit. There's no in-between," she shakes her head, and I don't know how she survived all those years alone.

"What's your favorite meal? Something you can't cook on your own?" I want to ask her a million questions, attempting to learn every tiny detail about her.

She thinks about it for a minute, and I'm all ears when she's got her answer.

“Mac and cheese. Not the box kind. That shit’s gross. But when I was a kid, my mom made baked mac and cheese, usually with pulled pork, and it was always my favorite,” she smiles at the memory and tosses her hair over her shoulder.

The shiny silver color looks so good in the sunlight, and I smell the rosy hair products she uses, instantly captivating me.

“I can make that, no problem,” I say confidently, and she scoffs.

“No problem? Okay, Mr. Chef. I’ll judge that,” she never fails to make everything a competition.

We drive home, deciding on what to eat tonight, and she gets her way when we pick up grinders. I learn that her comfort food is a sandwich with any meat and toppings, and I’m down for it.

We’ve spent the day together, and as the sun sets behind us, I realize it’s been one of the best days I’ve had in a long time. I carry our dinner and her bag upstairs, admiring how good she looks in those jeans.

When we reach the top of the stairs, she screams, and I nearly drop everything before I see the problem.

It’s April, her cat, sitting in the hallway.

I take the last two stairs and see an even bigger problem.

Karina’s door is wide open, and I shove everything I hold into her hands.

“Go inside, straight to the bathroom. Lock every single door,” I whisper, handing her my keys.

She opens my door and rushes inside, the lock clicking quietly.

I pull the weapon out of my jeans now that I know she’s safe and slowly walk into her apartment.

Everything is trashed. Her cabinets have been raided, the plates and coffee mugs smashed on the floor, along with what seems to be broken glass.

Her trash can has been dumped, the garbage scattered along the hardwood floors in a way that seems deliberate.

I check every room, and it's clear, but I don't want her to see her apartment this way.

The asshole dumped all the clothes in her room, ripped down every piece that was hanging in her closet, covering every inch and emptying every drawer.

I make my way back through the mess, close the door to her apartment, and knock on mine, telling Karina it's safe.

"What happened?" she asks, holding her cat.

April will be staying with us, too, I assume. The cat hisses at me as I take a step closer, and she's just as stubborn as Karina, I see.

"You don't want to see it, baby girl. It's not good," I warn her, but she's a firecracker.

She pushes right by me, slamming her door open, and I watch as she takes it all in.

"What the fuck!" she screams, jumping into action and kicking trash out of her way as she surveys the damage.

"It's okay. We don't need to clean it right now," I tell her, but she isn't listening — she's making it worse.

I watch from the hallway as she shatters any unbroken glass on the floor, sending shards through the air with reckless abandon. She throws, smashes, and destroys anything she can get her hands on.

I let her go for a few minutes, but finally, I rush in and stop her. I almost get whacked in the face with a picture she had hanging on her wall, but I take her hands and make her look at me.

"Karina! That's enough. It's done, okay? Come on," I urge, dragging her back to my apartment.

She breaks down, screaming into my arms, and there's nothing I can do but hold her.

“Listen, baby girl. We need to call the detective,” I say, and she wipes her eyes.

“I lost my shit. I’m sorry,” she picks our dinner off the floor and tries to wrangle her cat.

“It’s okay. Don’t apologize to me. Let’s have dinner, okay? Forget about this for at least a few minutes,” I tell her, and we sit down to eat.

“Is it okay if April stays? I can’t leave her alone again,” she asks in between bites of her sandwich.

“Of course. I’ll call from the hallway while you grab everything you need, okay?” I kiss her on the forehead, and she leans on my shoulder.

I’m pissed about this, more than I’ve let on to Karina. The cops said an officer would be outside our building, but somehow, this guy broke into her apartment.

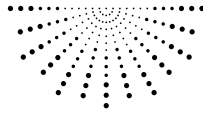
It makes no sense, and I’m trying to keep it together for her sake, but when I get the detective on the phone, I’ll give him a piece of my mind.

This is the last time he’s allowed to hurt her, and if I catch Asher around here again, the cops will wish they’d done something when we asked.

*I’m done seeing Karina cry because of him.*



# KARINA



I can't cry sad tears anymore; my only emotion is anger.  
I'm fucking *infuriated*.

Hours after I filed a report, we come home to see my apartment destroyed. My belongings that I spent so much time shopping for, and carefully choosing to make this place feel like home have been ruined. It's demoralizing.

My poor cat was terrified, waiting for me to rescue her, and our safe space was broken.

I stand in the doorway, thinking of everything I can for April to stay with Maverick and I. As much as I love spending time with him, my mind is racing because we can't live in this bubble forever.

We both have jobs and our own shit to take care of. I can't just move in with him because my apartment has been trashed, and my safety is absolutely in jeopardy.

We went to the police for a reason, and it didn't help one bit. I'm less safe than I was before filing a report, and the more I think about it, the more enraged I become.

I'm frozen in this spot, waiting for Maverick to finish with the detective so we can have some fucking answers. The sooner Asher is in jail, the better off we'll all be.

My patience runs thin, and finally, I go to my bedroom, pick the clothes off the floor, and toss them on the bed. I want to lift the mattress and throw everything across the room again, but stop myself when I notice something on my pillow.

My hands shake, but I force my feet to move and scream when I see the photo, carefully placed so I wouldn't miss it.

It's Maverick and me this morning, sitting in his truck at the police station. The exact moment when I pulled him in for a kiss.

It's printed on paper like he printed this somewhere public.

Maverick comes running in, weapon drawn and sighing when he sees me.

"Jesus, you scared me. Are you okay?" he asks, putting the piece down on my dresser.

I don't say anything, handing him the picture of us.

He curses a few times and turns it over, his eyes flashing with rage.

"What is it?" I ask, and he tells me to read it.

**HE CAN'T KEEP YOU FOREVER YOU'RE MINE**

I CRUMPLE THE PAPER AND THROW IT ON THE FLOOR, STOMPING out of the room and walking back to Mavericks.

If Asher wanted to piss me off, he's really done it now. Messing with me is one thing, but now that I have other people I care about, he's trying to take them from me or, worse, hurt them too.

I rest my elbows on the counter, holding my head in my hands and trying not to let the frustration take over. Everything about this situation threatens to break me down, but I shake it off.

Maverick was right — we won't let him ruin our time together.

I had so much fun with him today, something I can't say often.

I go back into my apartment, eavesdropping on his conversation with the detective on my case. He's mad, demanding that we get the protection we were promised and the justice I deserve.

*Fuck.*

He's got such a way with words, and it makes people take him seriously.

Finally, he hangs up and sees that I was listening.

"Come here," he says in a seemingly defeated voice.

I settle in his arms, resting my head on his chest, and instantly feel grounded.

The troubles fade away when he holds me, even if we're standing in my trashed apartment. The sky could be falling, bridges burning, or the whole *fucking world ending*, and I'd be content letting it all happen as long as his arms are securely around my body, holding me tightly.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asks, kissing the top of my head.

"I need one more thing," I say, wiggling out from his embrace and grabbing my favorite bottle of wine.

"Drink wine in bed with me, baby?" I dangle it around, and he smiles.

The anger melts away, bringing back the soft side of this fierce man.

"Absolutely. After you," he holds the door open for me and locks it with my keys.

April meows when I open the door, and she wants me to pick her up. She may be evil, and selective of who she likes, but this cat is a big baby with me, so I carry her around Mav's apartment, giving her the full tour.

Slowly, I attempt to introduce them, but she sniffs Maverick's finger and immediately hisses at him. He puts his hands up, backing away slowly and getting out of her space.

"Where did you get that evil thing?" he laughs, and I tell him how this used to be Juliette's cat.

He helps me set up her litter and food, and we clean the kitchen together. It's like an alternate universe where I'm

settling into domesticated bliss with a man, and loving every second.

My phone rings in my bag, breaking me out of my happy place and I know it's my mom.

I haven't told her anything that's been happening. The last thing she heard was how broken I was over Maverick. *Shit*. I should've called her at least once.

I know I'm not going to hear the end of it, and her call completely kills my mood before I even answer the phone.

Maverick tells me to take the bedroom, and he'll shower, giving me space.

"Hi, Mom," I answer, and she sounds relieved.

"Why haven't you called me?" she asks, immediately changing to pissed off.

"It's been a little crazy around here. Asher's found me," I rip the bandaid, not hiding anything from her.

"Jesus fucking Christ! Where are you? I'm coming to get you," she yells, and I hear her panicking.

"No, Mom. I'm okay. I'm at Maverick's. He took me to the police station today, and I filed a report," I fill her in, feeling the tension looming over the phone.

"Your neighbor? How in the world is that safe? I thought he broke your heart?" she asks, the curiosity killing her.

I explain everything, leaving out the more intimate parts of the story, and once I'm finished, she can finally breathe.

She's mad at me for not telling her everything Asher has done. The weapon situation doesn't thrill her either, but I promise her that Maverick is a good man and I'm safe.

Once I get the lecture of a lifetime, my mom gets girly on me.

"So, tell me more about this mystery neighbor. Can you trust him?" she asks, and I know what she's getting at.

“His name is Maverick, Mom. I’m in his bed right now,” I laugh, knowing I’m driving her insane on this call.

She’ll probably tell me that I shouldn’t be around him or that he’s dangerous. Always judging people and their choices. I wish she weren’t my only family, sometimes.

“Have you slept with Maverick again?” she asks as he exits the bathroom, my phone echoing around the room on the speaker setting.

He’s dripping wet in nothing but a towel again, and I can’t contain my laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

She has no idea what’s going on, and he starts laughing, too.

“Hi, Mrs. Collins. I’m Maverick,” he says, and she shrieks.

“Karina! Did he hear me?” She’s mortified, but I find it hilarious.

“He did. He’s in nothing but a towel, so I gotta go!” I shout, and she scrambles to find the words to end this call fast enough.

“Jesus, Karina. You’re going to put me in my grave,” she finishes, hanging up before I can say anything else.

“So, I met your mom,” he laughs, and I get off the bed to bring him close to me.

He smells incredible, and I can’t wait to spend the night with him again.

“I think she liked you,” I say, opening the bottle of wine and passing it to him.

“Well, you didn’t have to tell her I was in a towel! I figured you’d be off the phone by now,” he smiles and digs in his dresser for clothes.

“My mom has been the only consistent person in my life since I was seventeen. The stories she could tell you would shock you, but she’s also a raging bitch when she wants to be,”

I strip down, dying to get out of these clothes I've been wearing all day.

I feel Maverick's eyes on me, watching as I stand in only a pair of panties while I dig in my bag for a t-shirt.

"See something you like, baby?" I tease, the same way he did to me this morning.

He groans, not saying anything, and I know I'm driving him wild.

"Absolutely," he says, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist.

He kisses my neck lightly but just enough to make me shiver.

"I can't seem to find a shirt. Can I borrow one of yours?" I ask, taking him out of the trance I purposely put him in.

"Shirts are overrated, kitten," he whispers in my ear, reaching around to touch my breasts.

He's much better at teasing me because I'm fucking failing at keeping things a mystery.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, feeling how hot my body is getting just from one touch.

"Come here," he growls, spinning me around to face him.

He smiles and bites his lip before bending to place his lips on mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and getting into this kiss.

We're both naked, with only his towel and my panties separating us, but I don't worry. I told Maverick I want to take things slow and I know he'll respect me when I hit my limit.

I let his hands roam my body as our tongues explore each other, and suddenly, he stops everything, pulling away.

That wasn't my limit, but I can tell he was stopping us from moving too quickly, and maybe he has his boundaries, too.

“Let me get you a shirt,” he kisses my nose, the cutest form of affection he’s shown me thus far.

I slip into the black t-shirt he hands me, and I watch as he puts on a pair of boxers and nothing else. He passes me the bottle of cheap rosé, and I unscrew the top, taking a big sip.

“Come here, baby girl. I want to hold you,” Maverick pats the spot I laid in last night, and I get comfy next to him.

“Hi, Mav,” I whisper, and he wastes no time pulling me onto his chest.

“Hi,” he smiles, a relaxed look on his face.

“You never told me what happened with the detective,” I say, and he sighs.

“There won’t be a car outside until tomorrow, even with the reported break-in. They wanted us to come in and make statements, but I said we were too worked up for that,” he tells me, and I understand.

He spoke on my behalf, but I trust him to make decisions for me, and it was the right call. I would’ve probably burned that station house down if I had to make a second statement in one day.

“So what does that mean for tomorrow? I have to work,” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“I already told my bosses I need one more day, and I always have Sundays off,” he smiles like he’s figured it all out.

“I’m new at the salon, though. I can’t cancel on them so soon,” I tell him, and he says he knows the owner and will make a call.

“I’m taking you somewhere special. It’s more important than your job. Karina, this is your life we’re talking about,” he strokes my cheek, and I feel like a prisoner again.

It’s not Maverick’s fault, but he wraps me with bubble wrap, as my mom does sometimes. Controlling everything I do and deciding what’s suitable for me.

It's to keep me safe, yes, but at the same time, it's been years of putting what I want aside. I'm not saying I want to go out clubbing, drinking, and partying all alone, putting myself in incredibly dangerous situations.

I just want to be responsible and go to fucking work.

I've felt the power of taking a stand, and I refuse to let that slip out of my hands.

"This is the last shift I take off on account of him. If Asher isn't in custody, I'm going back to work. I can't let all the ladies handle my slack," I say, standing firm in what I believe.

"Is that what you want in life? To work at a salon, saying yes and no to a boss?" he asks, a sternness in his expression.

"No, it's not. I want to own a business, create something from the ground up," I reveal, and surprisingly, he doesn't laugh or run away.

Instead, he supports me. He gives me ideas of how to make that happen, and in turn, I ask him what he wants for his future.

"I want to legally adopt Harper before she's eighteen. Beyond that, I want financial freedom and a happy life," he smiles, and I love his determination.

"What needs to happen for you to adopt her?" I ask, not knowing much about how the process works.

"Lawyers, money, proving Grams' health is a concern. Until you, that was my only goal," he sits up, taking the wine and handing it to me.

"And now?" I sip from the bottle, waiting for his answer.

"Keeping you safe, breaking down all your walls, making you believe in love. Lots of things, kitten. As long as you let me," he says confidently, taking my breath away.

I think about everything he said and realize I want those things, too. The fairytale kind of love, the kind that keeps you guessing but feels like home.

That's what I want: a place to call *home*.



“You’re like my guardian angel or something cute like that,” I tell him, scrunching my nose at my inability to use fancy words like Maverick does.

“I also want to teach you how to shoot. What do you think about that?” he surprises me, and I think about it.

I’ve never thought of it as my thing, but it’s not a bad idea. I should be able to protect myself, especially if I want to feel free.

“Okay, I’m in,” I smile, and relief floods his face.

“I thought you’d push back a little bit. There’s a class you take, and then you’ll have a permit like I do. We’ll get you something small but mighty,” he rubs my shoulder, and I agree to learn.

If he thinks I can do it, then I know I can.

The more I break out of my comfort zone and push my limits, the better I feel.

Talking to the police, agreeing to shoot a weapon, and opening my heart again — it’s all a cumulation of how my life is changing.

I could credit Maverick, but something inside me is blooming, and I take pride in feeling like I am finally reaching my full potential.

No more scared Karina, looking over her shoulder and running for the hills.

I am powerful, and I’m ready to fight back.

I break myself out of the cage in my mind, vowing to put Asher — and everything relating to him — in the very back of my mind.

Instead, I focus on the gorgeous man in this bed with me, tuning into those green eyes and throwing my energy into our budding relationship.

A bold word, for a girl like me, but it feels *right*.

“Do you have a deck of cards?” I ask, an idea forming.

“Maybe. Why?” he shifts to dig in his nightstand.

“Play a drinking game with me?” I smirk, and he pulls out a deck.

“Let the games begin, baby girl,” he teases, and I can’t get enough of how competitive we are.

He shuffles the cards, and I find two glasses in the kitchen, grabbing snacks, too.

I’m still wearing a t-shirt and panties, my hair tossed in a bun, and Maverick smiles at me like I’m dressed for a gala.

He looks me up and down, slightly biting his lip, and I’ve never felt more beautiful.



WE POLISHED OFF THE BOTTLE TWO HOURS LATER, TAPPED INTO the tequila, and were both drunk. I can’t stop laughing at Maverick, who can barely walk to the bathroom. He’s stumbling around, trying to steady himself, but I lose it when he falls flat on his face.

I’m embarrassingly close to peeing my pants, and I have to jump over him to get to the bathroom.

“Karina, you can’t leave me here,” he whines, still face down on the carpet.

I help him off the floor, and we crash onto his bed, laughing hysterically.

“Come on, Angel. Let’s cuddle,” I say, trying to move his body toward the middle of the bed.

Finally, he adjusts, wrapping his arms around me as I fit my ass right in the curve of his midsection.

I listen as his breathing evens out, signaling he fell asleep. Getting Maverick drunk is entertaining because usually, he’s so put together and in control, but all of that slips away when he hits his limit, and it’s a treat to watch.

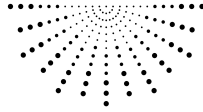
He carries the weight of his family on his back, and it’s admirable, but he hasn’t made time for happiness beyond them since he was a teenager.

If I can break him out of that cycle, I feel like I'll see the side he rarely lets loose more often.

Something new I learn tonight is that he talks in his sleep, and I hear him mumble something, but I can't quite make out what he says. He snores slightly, and I feel butterflies in my belly thinking about the day we spent together.

Everything that's happened between us has been at lightning speed and so intense that it's borderline insanity, but at the same time it feels so ethereal.

# MAVERICK



When I open my eyes, the weight of my hangover smacks me right in the face. I expect to feel Karina in bed with me, but her body isn't against mine, and when I open my eyes, searching the room for her, I come up empty.

Panic takes over, and I rush around to find where she went.

My search ends quickly as I spot her on the couch, looking out the window, holding a coffee mug.

She's still wearing my shirt, her hair is in that messy bun that I love, and she looks absolutely breathtaking.

Her natural beauty will never cease to amaze me.

She hasn't noticed that I'm watching her, and I try not to startle her when I sit beside her, wrapping her in my arms.

"Good morning, Angel," she leans her head back on my chest.

I smile at the thought of us doing this every morning and falling asleep together every night. I've never pictured a future with a woman, but it's all possible with Karina, and then some.

"Ready for your shooting lessons?" I ask her, holding her tightly.

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous," she admits.

"It's okay. Once the nerves wear off, you'll feel powerful. I promise," I reassure her, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m going to take a shower. What should I wear?” she faces me, her hazel eyes glowing in the sunlight.

“Something comfortable. Do you need me to get anything from your apartment?” I brush the stray hairs from her eyes while she thinks about it.

“Asher destroyed my room, so it’d just be a waste of time,” she sighs sadly, averting her eyes and looking at the floor.

An idea forms, and I plan to implement it when she’s showering. This poor girl has had so much stolen from her. The least I can do is attempt to help her get through this mess.

“It’s okay, baby, you’ll be perfect in whatever you wear. This nightmare will all be over soon,” I kiss her on the cheek, which makes her smile.

“The cops aren’t outside yet,” she rolls her eyes and closes the bathroom door behind her.

She’s angry, rightfully so, but I’m trying my hardest to make lemonade from all the lemons life has given her.

I send a quick text to my bosses in our group chat, asking for a bit of help.

Hey guys. The ex broke into her apartment yesterday and trashed the place. Can we get it cleaned up for Karina? I’m teaching her how to shoot today.

Hunter: Absolutely. I’ll see if Willow and Juliette can come over and help.

Adam: Jules here: I’ll be over in a few hours.

Thanks. I’ll leave her door unlocked.

NOW THAT WE HAVE A PLAN TO CLEAN UP HER SPACE, IT’S TIME to teach her how to shoot. I know the perfect spot where we won’t be bothered and hopefully, she’ll be a pro by the end of the day.

I throw on a pair of jeans and an old T-shirt, pairing it with my work boots. Just as I finish lacing them up, Karina emerges from the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel.

She chose black leggings and a skimpy, baby blue tank top that highlights every single curve. If this is what she considers comfortable, I can't complain.

She catches me staring and winks, that devilish smile making my heart skip a beat.

"You look gorgeous," I say, spinning her around to face me.

She opted for a natural look today, no makeup, and I can see the little freckles on the bridge of her nose.

I tilt her chin slightly, looking deep into her eyes, and she licks her lips, almost as if inviting me to kiss them.

"May I?" I whisper, and she nods.

I gently kiss her, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling our bodies closer.

I feel her hands tangled in my hair and part her lips with my tongue, immediately finding hers.

She sighs into me, and I let my hands roam until they're planted on her ass.

In a quick moment, we've gone from a sweet kiss to passion, and if I don't pull away, I might never be able to stop.

I lightly bite her bottom lip and pull our lips apart, which drives her wild. I can see it in her eyes; she wasn't ready for it to end.

I watch as she shakes her hair out of the towel, the wet locks falling down her back.

"Here, baby girl, it might get cold," I hand her a sweatshirt from my closet, and she smiles at me, taking my hand in hers.

"Let's do this," she says, and I let her lead the way.

Once in the parking lot, we notice a cop car has arrived, and we both offer him a wave. Finally, the protection Karina

deserves has shown up, and some weight has been lifted off my chest.

I open the passenger door for her, watching her hop in and buckle up. I look around her car, and nothing seems to be out of place this morning, which means Asher must've left her alone after the break-in.

I doubt he'll stay away for more than a few days. His last move was bold, and as much as I hate to admit it, he's not a complete idiot and he'll most likely lay low for now. Hopefully, now that Karina has spoken out, he'll be in custody where he belongs sooner rather than later.

The drive is a bit long, so I let Karina play DJ, and she surprises me by playing classic rock. I assumed I'd be in for a rough ride with her girly pop shit, but I nod to the music, keeping one hand on her thigh where we both feel the comfort in one touch.

"Where are we going, Mav?" she asks, getting impatient.

"You'll see, we're almost there," I squeeze her leg to settle her, trying to keep her anxiousness from creeping in.

Ten minutes later, we pull down a dirt road that leads to an open field. The sign-out front indicates that Tony is available, and we park next to his cabin.

Old Man Tony is a doomsday planner, equipped with a bomb shelter and stocked with everything he'd need to survive the end of the world. He's a short, stocky man with a long white beard and an old baseball cap.

He knew my mom, they grew up in this town together, and I spent a lot of time up here after she died, letting my anger out on his shooting range.

"Maverick Carter, that you?" he shouts from the porch as he tosses a cigarette aside.

"Yes, sir. How are you?" I smile as he reaches to shake my hand.

"Got a few more rifles in the cellar, fixin' to come down and test 'em out?" he asks, that southern drawl thick and hard

to understand.

His glance shifts from me to Karina, and he takes his hat off before shaking her hand.

“Who’s this foxy lady?” he smiles, and I introduce them.

“Karina plans to learn today. Mind if we use the range for a few hours?” I ask, pointing behind his cabin.

“Of course. Maverick, how the hell did you land a pretty girl like this? It can’t be your good looks or charm,” he laughs at his joke, and Karina blushes.

“Not too long ago, I hated his guts,” she elbows me in the ribs, and Tony shoots me a smile.

“She’s a keeper, Maverick. I can tell,” he winks before leading the way to his shooting range.

It’s a large, open space with targets of all kinds, and he has an array of weapons lined up against a piece of plywood screwed onto his fence.

This is where I learned to shoot, and I owe Tony a lot for keeping an eye on me all those years ago.

“Alright, young lady, let’s get you some goggles and earplugs. I have the perfect fit for you,” he says as he pulls a small black piece off the wall dedicated to pistols.

It’s the perfect size for her and exactly what I had in mind when I told her I’d teach her.

“I’ve got it from here, thanks, Tony,” I pat him on the back, and he gives me a playful smile.

“I’ll be down the cellar if y’all need me,” he walks off, heading toward his bomb shelter.

I turn my attention back to Karina, who looks cute as hell with those goggles on. I kiss her nose and get my gear on.

“Tony’s nice,” she says, and I fill her in on our history while we walk to the spot I think will be good for her as a starting point.



“He’s a little strange with his end-of-the-world theories, but he’s a great guy,” I finish, and she takes my hand in hers while we follow the trail the rest of the way.

Finally, we get to a secluded area with a few trees for cover. Along the ledge, there are twenty beer cans lined up, and this is the first place I want Karina to practice.

“Ready?” I ask, and she nervously chews on her bottom lip.

I stand behind her, putting the weapon in her hands as I explain how to work the trigger and the safety.

“The recoil won’t be too harsh on this, so keep your hands steady and put your finger on the trigger when you’re ready to fire,” I say, stepping back and giving her space.

Her first few shots miss the cans, but finally, on the fourth shot, she knicks the side of one.

“Oh! I did it! I hit one,” she squeals, jumping up and down.

“Let’s keep going, kitten. Take a deep breath and aim,” I remind her, and she returns to the cans.

She’s a quick learner and hit most of the cans in no time, so I decide to up the difficulty.

We make our way to the silhouette cut-outs, and Karina challenges me to say she can hit more targets than me.

“Oh yeah? Okay, tough girl, let’s see it then,” I wave toward the cut-outs hanging up.

I let her go first, mainly to observe and see how she does. Almost every shot hits a vital spot.

“You’re up, broody,” she smiles at me, stepping to the side.

I hit my targets, and when I turn back to brag, her face is flushed.

It reminds me of the first night we spent together, when she asked me what I was doing in her apartment, with a breathy tone to her voice that is her tell-tale sign.

Her cheeks were rosy, and she kept biting her bottom lip. I know she was drunk, but her turned-on face is exactly the same, and on display for me right now.

I test my luck, taking a few steps closer to her, and when she bites her lip, I know I'm right.

Instead of pleasing her, I tease her and load my clip up again.

I fire off the rest of my round into a new silhouette, hitting the head every time.

"Oh, *fuck*," she groans under her breath, and I smile to myself before facing her.

"You okay, kitten?" I ask, knowing damn well that I've got her right where I want her.

"I'm fine," she breathes, and I place my weapon on the table.

I wrap my arms around her like I did when demonstrating how to shoot. She melts into my chest, tipping her head back with closed eyes.

I kiss my way down her neck, moving the strap on her tank top to leave a small mark. I can feel her breathing speed up, and she hasn't told me to stop, so I let my hand trail down to the waistband of her leggings.

She moans a little louder, and I cup her breast with my other hand, the heat of the moment taking us both over completely.

"Don't stop," she whines, and I almost slip under the spell until realize we're in public.

I'm so caught up in the moment that I forget we were at Tony's. I immediately move my hands and gently kiss her cheeks.

"We can't do this here, but I'll take you home right now. Just say the word," I whisper, and I feel her body shake with anticipation.

“Take me home, Mav,” she kisses my neck, running her hands up and down my back.

I scoop her up, tossing her over my shoulder and smacking her ass as I carry her back to my truck.

I toss a twenty in Tony’s tip jar to thank him for letting us stop by.

Karina climbs into her seat and takes the scrunchie off her wrist to toss her hair in a messy bun.

I spread her legs a little as they dangle over the side of the seat and slide between them. She can see through my jeans how she affects me and smirks at me before letting me kiss her.

“You’re in for it, kitten,” I groan after she drags her lips off mine.

“Give me all you’ve got,” she breathes, and I *need* to get this woman home, and fast.

I thought we were taking things slow, but after this, I don’t think either one of us can hold back any longer. The desire is too strong, and we’ve both comes to terms with the act that we’re on a fast-track.

I drive slightly over the speed limit, my hand on her thigh, and once we confirm the officer is still parked, we race each other up the stairs. We reach the landing, and Karina beats me by half a step, pulling me into her for a kiss.

I fumble with my keys as I try to unlock the door, and a voice nearly knocks us both off our feet.

*Fuck.*

I forgot Adam’s girlfriend was coming to clean Karina’s apartment.

“Hi guys, am I interrupting something?” Juliette smiles, looking at us with her eyebrow raised.

“Jules! What are you doing here?” Karina lets go of me, and hugs her, slowly realizing Juliette is in her apartment.

“Maverick asked us to help you. Willow, Adam, and Hunter have already left. I was just finishing up the last of the floors,” she smiles, opening the door to show off their work.

Karina is shocked, and before I know it, she’s crying.

“You cleaned my apartment?” She wipes her tears and then looks at me. “You set this up?”

“You were so upset this morning. I wanted you to be able to get things from your apartment without the reminder,” I wipe the stray tear rolling down her cheek, and she leans into my chest.

“You’re fucking incredible, Mav. I don’t deserve you,” she says, and I shake my head.

“You deserve everything good this world has to offer, Karina, and I intend to be the one to give you those things,” I kiss her forehead, excusing myself so Juliette can give her a full tour.

I hear them whispering to each other as I unlock the door, and my heart feels complete for the first time in a very long time.

If Karina is happy, I’m delighted, and that’s all I care about. I quickly text my bosses, thanking them for helping and promising that I owe them each a favor.

When Karina came back inside, she wipes more tears and thanks me again for having her friends help. I assured her that it wasn’t a big deal, but I know how much this small gesture means to her.

“Come on, I still have plans for you,” she smirks, leading me to the bedroom.

I follow her, watching her remove her tank top and pull down her leggings.

I’m flustered, still fully clothed, and my mind is racing. There are a million things I want to do with her, but I let her take control this time.

Karina grabs the neckline of my shirt, yanking it over my head and kissing my chest. She pushes me onto the bed and

climbs on top, grinding her hips on my jeans, and I guide her movements with my hands on her ass.

I let a soft moan escape my lips, euphoric as I watch my woman take what she wants. Her eyes are closed as she rides me, attempting to tease me until I break.

I love competition, and she underestimates me if this is about who will beg first.

“Take it off,” she whispers, moving my hands from her ass to her tits.

I don't hesitate, fidgeting with the clasp of her bra and ripping it off. Her nipples dance in my face as she edges me to oblivion. I can't resist putting one in my mouth, sucking and biting it, which makes her moan loudly.

Just as she gets enough pleasure, I stop, playing her game twice as hard. The second she loses focus, I take the opportunity to flip her over, flattening her back onto the bed as I take my turn to pull off the last remaining piece of clothing she's wearing.

I rip the thong down, tossing it on the floor and admiring the view.

“Spread those legs for me, kitten. I'm not stopping until you're shaking and my face drips with your come,” I growl, watching as she opens her legs for me.

“Good girl,” I whisper before kissing her inner thighs, working my way toward her pussy.

Already glistening with wetness, I go straight for her clit, sucking and licking all around it as she writhes beneath me.

Instantly, she moans my name, bucking her hips and riding my face while I lick every inch of her.

I slip a finger into her entrance, thrusting it in and out, feeling her clench around me. She's close, and I only stop when she screams, squeezing her thighs around me as they shake from the pleasure.

“*Jesus Christ,*” she whispers, attempting to catch her breath.

If she thought I would let her off easy, she's very wrong. I take off my jeans and boxers, dipping down to kiss her before asking if she wants to keep going.

"I need you right now. I have an IUD implant, so we don't need a condom," she says between my lips, and I don't hesitate.

I press the tip in, and she's already gasping at how much I'm stretching her.

"Holy shit, You're so tight, fucking perfect, Karina," I say, burying myself deep inside her.

I hold her legs on my shoulders, opening her all the way up, and she's begging me to go harder.

I thrust into her, rubbing her clit with one hand to drive her wild.

"You're mine, now, kitten. Tell me who you belong to," I growl, nearly on the edge already.

"You, Maverick. I'm all yours," she moans, and I have to pull out, not wanting this to be over yet.

Karina takes control back in a split second, climbing on top of me and running her hand up and down my length.

"You want me to ride you, angel?" she whispers in my ear, and I submit to her desire.

She lowers herself onto me, pressing her hands on my chest and bouncing on my dick.

I squeeze her hips, assisting her in keeping pace. I feel her walls clench around me, and she tips her head, arching her back as she reaches her orgasm.

I let myself go, spilling my release inside her, and she collapses on my chest.

"That was so much better than the first time," she says, and I can't agree more.

"You're a goddess, Karina," I tell her, stroking her hair.

I'll never get enough of this woman. She's mystifying and mercurial, like a drug I can't get through the day without. She's terrifying and exhilarating, a rollercoaster I'd ride to feel alive.

The bliss fades, and we decide to go to the grocery store since she challenged me to make her favorite dinner, and I need to pick up Harper's choices for Sunday.

Karina tosses on sweats and a t-shirt, looking magnificent in my clothes and the post-sex grogginess plastered across her face.

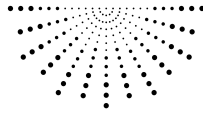
If someone told me I'd be cooking dinner for a woman, letting her sleep in my bed and wear my clothes, I'd have told them they were fucking insane.

That they had the wrong guy.

Turns out, I didn't have *the right girl*.

Karina is the only exception to every rule I've ever made regarding relationships, love, and everything I'd been closing my heart off from.

# KARINA



*I*'m nothing but a jumbled mess of emotions and orgasms. I wasn't planning to take things to the next level with Maverick so soon, but watching him fire that weapon made me so hot I couldn't hide it.

I wanted to jump his bones instantly, not caring if Old Man Tony or *the world* saw how badly I needed him.

The whole ride back, I was dead set on not letting us have sex, coming up with ways to stall the inevitable, but when he asked my friends to come clean my apartment as a surprise, nothing could've held me back.

He makes me feel important, as if I'm the only woman he could ever love, and I genuinely believe he was perfectly made for me.

I've never connected with someone during sex, usually just fading out and letting the primal instincts take over, but it was so intense with Maverick.

I was aware of every breath he took, and how our bodies moved together. It was addicting, and I felt so safe with him, allowing myself to truly *feel* every movement he made inside me.

Now, I'm sitting in his truck, daydreaming about how fucking hot he was, dirty talking and hitting all the right spots.

Maverick thinks he can make my favorite dinner, and I intend to be a harsh critic just to mess with him.



Tomorrow, I have to return to reality and stop taking shelter in the little bubble I've created with Mav. If Asher wants me, he'll have to come and get me because I'm done hiding from the world.

On the flip side, as much as I love being with Maverick, I need my space and freedom back. I'm naturally independent, and I want to be able to run errands or go outside without someone holding a weapon close by.

"Harper chose pasta and meatballs for dinner tomorrow. Is that okay with you?" Maverick asks, pulling me out of my trance as we walk the aisles.

"Absolutely!" I say, excited to get another glimpse into their lives.

"Grams is going to talk your ear off, treat you like garbage, and tell you stories about me," he warns, and I can't wait.

"I hope she pulls out the baby pictures, too," I playfully smack him on the arm, and he rolls his eyes.

I'm a bit nervous about meeting Grams. I haven't gotten enough information on her to form an opinion, but what I have heard makes me think she won't be pleasant.

Once we have everything we need for two dinners, we check out and load the groceries into his truck.

"When Asher is arrested, I want to invite my mom to stay for a week. Would you be okay meeting her?" I blurt out, afraid of what he might say.

I haven't spent quality time with my mother since I was sixteen, before Asher.

Since I started running, I only saw her when she had to help me move to a new place.

This last time, I had help, and I didn't even get the chance to have her come to Rose Hills for fear that Asher would follow her.

"I have a better idea. You stay with me and let your mom have your apartment. We can have her over for dinner and maybe take her out a few times. How does that sound?" he

squeezes my leg, and I really need to stop crying when he says sweet shit to me.

“You’re a dream, Mav. That would be perfect. Thank you so much,” I grab his hand, kissing the top of it before interlocking our fingers.

“Binge-watch *Deal or No Deal* tonight and eat mac n cheese in bed?” he smiles at me, making me melt in all the right places.

“Deal. I’ll pick the right case each time,” I wink, and I can’t help but make everything a game with him.

He loves to win, and I love to beat him at everything. I already plan to reignite the prank war before I move back into my apartment, missing the thrill it gave me.

I don’t cook, so watching Maverick work in the kitchen is fascinating. He knows exactly what to do with each ingredient, making it look like an art form. Before I know it, the mac n cheese and pulled pork he whipped up on the side were ready.

“I’m terrified to let you out of my sight tomorrow, Karina,” he says while he serves my dinner.

The nerves have also set in, but Asher doesn’t scare me anymore. The threat of stealing my livelihood again doesn’t keep me up at night.

The only thought that rattles my bones is losing my independence. I’ve never stopped enjoying myself, and I won’t start now because I have someone who cares about me at home.

“I’ll be okay, Maverick. I’ve done this before with no help. Let me be my own person again,” I tell him, hoping he understands.

“I want you to text me throughout the morning until you get to Grams’ house, okay?” he bargains, and I immediately agree.

That went easier than I thought. He’s over-protective, and I adore that about him, but I need the freedom to be myself.

“So, how’s the food?” he asks, changing the subject.

I'm relieved; talking about Asher is exhausting, and I've given him too much space in my mind lately.

"This is incredible, Mav. You nailed it," I smile, giving him the truth.

It's arguably the best mac and cheese I've ever had, but if I told him that, it'd go straight to his ego.

"I told you. You should stop challenging me. I win every time," he elbows me in the ribs playfully, his macho ego on full display.

I turn on our game show, cheering on the contestants while we slip into food comas. Maverick rests his head on my lap, and I run my hands through his hair.

We're at peace when we lie in bed together, snuggled up in our little corner of the world.



I WAKE TO THE SUNLIGHT CREEPING THROUGH THE BLINDS A few minutes before my alarm is supposed to go off, and I smile at Maverick, who's lightly snoring.

I'm tucked under his arm and try to slip out of his grip without waking him up, but he's the lightest sleeper.

"Running away, kitten?" he mumbles, still half asleep.

"No, Angel. I'll be in the shower," I whisper, kissing him on the cheek before sliding out of bed.

I turned the shower as hot as possible, letting the water shrink all my doubts about today.

I'm fucking strong, and I refuse to let Asher win this war for one more second. I will stand tall at work, deflect the questions, and keep my head on straight.

I can't show any weaknesses.

There's a light knock on the door, and I tell Maverick to come in.

"What can I make you for breakfast?" he asks, keeping his eyes off me.

“You can look, Mav. You’ve seen it already,” I tease, and he stammers, trying to find the right words.

“I’m trying to be respectful,” he scoffs, rolling his eyes.

“Coffee will be fine, thank you!” I chirp, and he pokes his head through the curtain, looking me up and down.

“*Fucking perfect*. See, *this* is why I didn’t want to sneak any peeks,” he growls, motioning toward his tented boxers.

“If I didn’t have to work, I’d drag you in here with me, kicking and screaming,” I turn around, letting him see me from behind.

I take every chance I get to drive Maverick crazy, especially when it comes to being a tease.

The way he gets flustered is so cute, and he makes me feel beautiful when he loses his calm, collected demeanor.

The dynamic between us is complicated with the skeletons in our closets, but we find a way to push the bones aside and let our true selves shine.

“Coffee it is,” he says, reaching into the shower to slap my ass.

“Hey!” I shout, sticking my tongue out at him.

I hear the door close behind him, and I finish washing my hair, the hot water almost running out.

I wear jeans and a black t-shirt, one of Maverick’s that perfectly fits my curves, and do my makeup lightly.

Mascara, eyeshadow, and lip gloss should be enough for clients and Grams later today. I have some severe ass-kissing to do with the ladies at the salon, so if I look my best, I’ll feel my best.

“You look radiant, kitten,” Maverick slides his arms around my waist, kissing my collarbone.

He never misses the chance to compliment me, and I can’t get enough of him. I realize I might miss him today, something I can’t say I’ve ever felt for another man before.

We've spent these last few days glued at the hip, barely spending more than five minutes apart, and at this point, I feel so connected to him that I'll carry a piece of him wherever I go.

"I should get moving. I can't be late," I say, pouring cream and sugar into the coffee mug Mav prepared.

"That is a ridiculous amount of cream, Karina," he points out, and I shake my head.

"I like it a little sweet," I lick the spoon and wink at him, taking another chance to rile him up.

"Come on, you little temptress, I'll walk you to your car," he motions for me to step ahead, and I catch him biting his lip out of the corner of my eye.

I lock my fingers into his, snuggling up to his chest while we walk, and he strokes my hand with his thumb.

He does a five-point safety check on my car before allowing me to get close, waving me over when he deems it safe.

I climb into the driver's seat, dreading the fact that my reign as a passenger princess has come to an end.

"Text me as soon as you get there, okay? I'm going to worry about that pretty face until I have you back in my arms this afternoon," he bends down to kiss me, and I pull away before we get too into it.

"I will. I promise, Mav," I breathe, slowly opening my eyes and nearly drowning in his.

Those emerald green specs sparkling in the morning sunlight should be criminal.

He nods, watching me pull away, and the police officer waves at me as I pass him.

It's been a day, and Asher hasn't come around. The cops can't sit outside our building forever, though, and I fear that's exactly what he's waiting for.

Despite all he's put me through and the stupid shit he does, I don't think he'll try anything on me while I'm at work. A public place with strangers for witnesses isn't his style.

When I get to the salon, there's a new face at the station next to mine, and I look to Hannah for any clues.

"Hi, I'm Reilly!" the red-haired woman smiles, waving while she organizes her things.

"Karina. Nice to meet you," I say, placing my purse and coffee down before looking for Alivia.

I text Maverick that I made it in one piece and go about my mission.

Eva shoots me a dirty look, pissed off that I called in two days in a row, I assume, but I just flash her a smile. *Kill 'em with kindness.*

Finally, I find Alivia in her office, tapping lightly on the door before entering.

"Karina, come in. What can I do for you?" she asks, not looking up from her computer.

"I wanted to apologize for the last few days. I was ... am dealing with an emergency. I would never bail on my shifts for no reason, and I hope to make it up to you and the other ladies," I scramble, tripping over my words.

She finally glances in my direction and offers me a sympathetic smile.

"We've all been there. I hope whatever it is resolved itself?" she says flatly, almost like a warning rather than a question.

I shift in my seat, unsure of how to answer that. Can she fire me for having a stalker who has openly threatened my life?

Do I even bother explaining my situation to her, or do I thank my lucky stars she didn't fire me the second I walked in here?

I opt to tell the truth, hoping she can at least acknowledge that I wasn't out partying or avoiding my clients.

"I had to file a police report. I'm being stalked, and it got scary. It hasn't been resolved yet, but the cops are looking for him. I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between us?" I spill my guts, hoping to connect with her on some level.

She nods while I talk, seemingly taking in everything I say.

"I'm sorry you're going through this. It sounds awful. Yes, this will stay between us. I'd hate to have your personal life brought into the salon," she sneers, the fake concern melting off her face.

I thank her for her discretion and head back to my station. That woman is hard to read, and I'm focusing on mending fences with my co-workers.

I check the books to keep myself busy, but this downtime has me going wild.

Only two customers have come in this morning, neither of them mine.

"I love your hair. Did you do it yourself?" Reilly asks, interrupting my trashy magazine reading.

"Thanks. I always mess around with my hair when going through life changes. It's like a bandaid," I smile, and explain the process I took to get my hair this silver color.

I like her so far, and our energies match well. She shows me pictures of her three dogs taped to her mirror, telling me about each of them. I thought one cat was a handful, but dogs sound like a nightmare.

I'm a cat girly, through and through.

"We should go out for drinks! I'm new in town and have no idea what's hot," she suggests, and I have to admit I'm also behind the times in Forest Falls.

"I will take you up on that once I get my shit together," I say, and she makes me shake on it.

“So, Karina, you gonna fill us in on your little vacation?”  
Eva steps up behind us, glaring at me in the mirror.

“Um, I had an emergency. It’s being handled. Thanks for your sincere concern,” I roll my eyes, not in the mood to deal with her bitchy attitude.

“Well, that’s nice, but we picked up two days of your bookings. A thank you might go a long way,” she walks away, attempting to get the last word in.

I don’t take shit from women who aren’t team players. Since the day I walked in here, Eva’s had a problem with me, and I don’t like it.

We can be friendly without having to like each other, but she must’ve missed that memo.

“I appreciate you, Jolene, and Hannah covering my ass, but that doesn’t mean you can speak to me that way, Eva. We can co-exist peacefully and be respectful to one another,” I stand my ground, not taking my eyes off hers in the mirror.

Reilly’s eyes widen, and she tries to muffle her laughter with her hands covering her mouth. I definitely like this girl.

The other ladies in the salon go silent, watching the show as I stand up to the resident bitch who thinks she runs the place.

Jolene chokes on her drink, and Hannah gives me a slow clap of approval.

Eva is pissed, seeing all her co-workers instantly turn on her. That was never my intention, but sometimes people have the day they deserve.

“Watch your back, Karina. I won’t take a single hair off your workload from now on,” she stomps off, probably going to tattle to Alivia.

The girls swarm me, everyone praising me for how I stood up to Eva. I didn’t eviscerate the woman like they’re exaggerating, but it’s nice to be out in the thick of things.

Eventually, it’s time for me to clock out, only having one client all day.



I'm relieved.

Maverick has been texting me all day, and I miss him so much. Right now, I need him to wrap his arms around me, grounding me in reality.

I brush past Eva, the air between us frigid. Reilly gives me her phone number, making me promise to text her.

It was a great first day back, but I'm dying to get to my man and that spaghetti he's cooking.

I'm used to takeout, junk food, and microwave meals, so Maverick's chef skills are a welcome change in my diet and heart. My mom was the last person to make me a home-cooked meal before him, and every day, he showed me another reason to call his soul *home*.

I follow the directions to Grams' house, and it's a familiar drive, the same one we took to bring Harper home. I take a deep breath and prepare myself for the endless possibilities on the other side of that baby-blue door.

The door opens, and Harper comes barreling outside, rushing to hug me.

"Karina, I'm so glad you're here! Come on, come inside," she ushers me in, and I take in my surroundings.

The house is cluttered, almost as if I were on an episode of a hoarder show. The tables are lined with old magazines, books, and newspapers.

If you missed a headline from the early 2000s, this house has it saved.

Maverick smiles at me from the kitchen, standing over the stove in his element, and I make my way to him.

"Hi, Angel," I whisper into his chest, feeling complete in his arms.

"Missed you, Karina," he kisses my forehead, and Harper screams from the other side of the room.

"I knew you two were in love! This is incredible. I can't wait to tell the group chat," she runs off, the excitement

sweeping her right out of the room.

Maverick and I shake our heads, and he brings me to the garage to meet Grams.

He warns me that she's in a mood today and to tread lightly.

"Grams, you in here?" he taps on the door, looking around before spotting her.

"Is this the mythical Karina?" she stands, coming to greet me.

She moves slowly and is heavier set but looks like an average grandmother with permed, white hair.

"Yes, Grams. This is Karina," he drapes his arm over my shoulder, pulling me close.

"Thank god. I thought he had an imaginary friend," she walks by me, barely giving me the time of day.

Maverick squeezes my arm, telling me not to take it personally. I follow him inside, watching as he takes the reins in the kitchen again, Harper right by his side.

This is arguably the cutest thing I've ever seen. He gives her direction, and she follows everything he says and implements his techniques perfectly.

I can't sear a meatball to save my life, but Maverick's teaching his thirteen-year-old sister how to do it like a pro.

"Karina! Come over here," Grams shouts and the siblings exchange a knowing glance, something I'm not tuned into.

I sit beside her on the couch, unaware of what she could want to talk to me about. I let her be the first to break the silence, and I hear Mav and Harper whispering as they watch us.

"So, you like my grandson?" she asks, never taking her eyes off the TV.

"Yes, very much, Mrs. Carter," I clear my throat and hear a roar of laughter from the kitchen.

*Shit.*

Did I say something wrong already?

“Mrs. Carter was my whore of a mother, don’t call me that again. It’s Martha, please,” she spits, and I am fucking this up.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Martha, it is. Your home is lovely; thank you for having me,” I try my hardest to be polite, but she isn’t buying it.

“Cut the nice shit. You don’t need to play games with this old broad. Mavvy can be a pain in the ass. You sure you can handle him?” she deadpans, looking straight into my eyes.

*Mavvy?* Jesus, that’s a nickname from hell. The way she says it comes out condescending, not endearing. I can see why Maverick hates to talk about her, and Harper wants him around as much as possible.

She’s a crotchety old bitch, with some sort of axe to grind against her grandson.

From what I’ve gathered, he takes complete care of her financially, and she clearly takes it for granted.

“Maverick is wonderful, the best thing that ever happened to me. Maybe you should step back and realize what a treasure he is,” I counter, and the peanut gallery gasps behind us.

She shifts in the chair, turning to face me completely. I smile right back at her, never backing down from a challenge.

If this fossil wants to go toe-to-toe with me, she better prepare for the storm.

If this woman thinks she can scare me off or get the best of me, she’s got a lot to learn.

“He’s nothing special. You must be after his money,” she scoffs, and I don’t dare show the anger flowing through me.

I put on my best poker face.

“This is the twenty-first century, Martha. Women are allowed to work, vote, and even own property. I know you’re stuck in the *barefoot and pregnant days*, but the world doesn’t stop evolving just because the old broads can’t find a man to

dust off the cobwebs,” I assert myself and stand up from the couch.

I’m done with this conversation.

Maverick and Harper are equally shocked, both their mouths hanging wide open. I hope I didn’t cross a line, but *fuck*, she had it coming.

“I thought you’d be a pussy and run for the hills. I’m impressed. Turns out you’re a smug little cunt,” she calls out, and I laugh.

“The biggest one you’ll ever meet,” I say over my shoulder, effectively ending this war.

That’s two people I’ve out-bitched today, and god damn, it feels fantastic. The power flows through my veins, and I take one more bold step before settling down.

I sit on the stool at the kitchen island, waiting for Harper and Maverick to collect their jaws from the floor before going in for the kill.

“Martha, you should appreciate your grandchildren more. Such a lovely woman raised them,” I shout, and she curses before turning the volume up on her TV show.

Maverick smiles, shaking his head while he tends to his pasta, and Harper looks entertained. I may not have nailed meet-the-grandmother, but I certainly made an impression.

I don’t care who she is; there’s no reason to be an asshole to those who love and care for her.

I’ll defend Mav and Harper from anybody.

Finally, dinner is ready, and we sit in an awkward silence as we fill our plates. Harper breaks first, filling us in on her soccer schedule and the eighth-grade gossip.

Martha doesn’t say a word and barely looks up from her plate. Maverick squeezes my thigh under the table, erasing any doubt that I could’ve crossed a line or upset him.

The food is delicious. These two know their way around the kitchen, and these meatballs nearly melt in my mouth.

I compliment both chefs and offer my clean-up services once everyone has cleared their plates.

“Can I help?” Harper asks, and I let her hand me the dirty dishes.

“Did everyone love the pink in your hair?” I make conversation, and she lists all the colors she wants next.

“We’ll have to check with Maverick first,” I smile, and she rolls her eyes.

“Anything you two want, just leave me out of it,” he chimes in, obviously learning his lesson from last time.

The atmosphere has shifted like it’s just three of us busting chops and enjoying the evening.

Harper tells a story about when she was little and got into a whole container of ice cream, and Maverick laughs like it was yesterday.

“Mavvy, have you told your little girlfriend about the days I’d let you sweat out your DUIs in the drunk tank? Or how about when you ruined your mother’s funeral by showing up drunk? Maybe she wouldn’t think you’re so sweet if she knew who you really are,” Grams yells from across the room, instantly icing the mood.

“Grams, leave Mav alone. He’s nothing but good to us!” Harper defends him, and I pull her in for a hug.

This is no way to behave around a teenager, especially when we’re bringing up past mistakes. I’ve had enough of this woman berating Maverick, but I leave the house rather than show my cards.

I hear yelling from inside the house, mainly Maverick’s voice. Harper is close behind me, and I tell her everything will be okay.

“They fight like this sometimes, but Grams is really mad about you. She thinks he’s spending too much time on you,” Harper fills me in, and now my blood boils.

Being jealous of your grandson because he’s finally happy? That’s twisted as shit.

Now, I know why my instincts never told me to push on learning more about this vile woman.

“Should we rescue him?” I ask, a softness in my voice.

“No, Mav will come out when he’s done. He’ll probably bring me back to his apartment, too,” she whispers, and my heart hurts for this poor girl.

Witnessing this brand of crazy at such a young age, on top of what she’s already endured, can’t be easy on her, especially when she knows the pattern and the routine that follows.

“Go pack a bag, everything you’ll need for school tomorrow,” I tell her, deciding before Maverick can.

I refuse to let her stay in this environment after our night and feel responsible for it all. I should’ve bit my tongue and let them handle their family dynamic rather than stick my nose in their business.

“Did you tell Harper to pack a bag?” Maverick storms out of the house, nearly yelling in my face.

I take a few steps back, uninterested in seeing him rage at me. We can talk like adults, but I draw the line at yelling.

He will not treat me that way again.

“Yes. She has school tomorrow, and I don’t think we should leave her here after all the fighting,” I wave my hand toward the house, emphasizing how fucked this all turned out.

“I’m not mad, Karina. It’s exactly what I would’ve done. I’m just worked up, and I’m sorry if I seemed angry with you,” he steps toward me, and I thaw, letting him back in.

I stroke his cheek, letting my touch heal him in the ways it does for me. He rests his head on my shoulder, and I wrap him tightly in my arms while we wait for Harper.

“She’s important to me,” I whisper, and he nods.

Nothing else needs to be said.

“Okay, I’m ready. Can I ride with Karina?” Harper asks, and I immediately say yes, clearing space for her.

“You follow me, okay?” he says, holding my hands and kissing me before we leave.

“Wouldn’t dream of anything else, broody,” I tease, and he pushes me toward my open car door.

I let Harper control the radio, following closely behind Maverick’s truck and my mind swirling with a million different things.

The venom Martha spat at us was cruel and intentional, but was it true? Mav has told me that he had a rocky time after his mom passed, but she made it seem horrible.

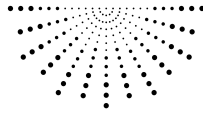
I would never judge him for a second he lived before me, but I’m also curious if I’m dealing with someone who has alcohol dependency problems.

I certainly use liquor to heal my pain or celebrate a good time, but I could never imagine being physically and mentally addicted to it. It’s not who I am, but I’d never push Maverick away if that were his vice.

I don’t judge, and we all have our demons.

I would just like to know what I’m dealing with before it becomes a problem I’ve already been through once upon a time.

# MAVERICK



*I*'m so thankful that Karina took Harper because I'm livid. Grams crossed too many lines tonight, and we had it out. It's been a while since we screamed at each other that way, but it was necessary.

From the moment I walked into the house this afternoon, she was a Grinch. Nagging at Harp and me for the minor things, complaining about the new insurance switching her oxygen company, and finally, talking to Karina like she was trash.

I put my foot down. If she wants to keep custody of Harper and my financial help, she'll be friendly to Karina and both her grandchildren while she's at it.

Of course, she refused, acting like she was the Queen and we must kiss her ring. I've had enough, and it's time to take Harp away from the craziness and toxicity. I'm ready to fight, get her out of there, and I don't care what it takes.

My little sister won't be corrupted by a bitter old woman who didn't want the responsibility of a three-year-old in the first place.

I can't stop checking the rearview, ensuring Karina and Harper are behind me the entire drive. This woman is everything to me, and she's got my heart in her passenger seat.

Karina is a fighter, and she stood up to Grams tonight. I beamed with pride, watching her take on the beast and slay her.



She also sheltered Harper and claimed her as her own when shit hit the fan.

Karina is the sole reason they coined the phrase *ride or die* because she would do anything for Harper and me.

This is who I've been waiting my entire life for.

She looked further into the mess of my life, and instead of backing down or playing nice, she jumped in to fight like she had been waiting for this moment.

When we get back to the apartment, the cop car is still outside, and now that Harper is here, my nerves are at an all-time high.

I set the sofa bed for Harper while *my girls* prepare ice cream sundaes. We all crash onto the couch, putting on a movie. Harper surrenders control of the remote, allowing Karina to choose what we watch.

*Great.*

They're *both* TV tyrants.

We all settle on a classic, *Stepbrothers*, and even though Karina knows every word, she laughs like it's the first time she's seen it. Her nose scrunches when she laughs and sometimes snorts, too, and it's adorable.

I found myself watching her more than the movie.

"Alright, Harp. Wash up and get to bed. We have to leave early," I say, turning off the TV and cleaning up our messes.

Karina tends to her cat and climbs into bed, and I wait until Harper is settled before closing the door and joining my woman.

"Hi," she scoots close, resting her head on my chest.

Hi, beautiful," I whisper, kissing her forehead softly.

Now that I have her in my arms, my body finally stops feeling like it's shaking. I panicked all morning while she was working, thinking about the absolute worst-case scenario and counting the minutes until I could hold her.

“I’m so sorry about what I caused with Grams. I should’ve kept my mouth shut and minded my business,” she says reluctantly.

“No, baby girl, you don’t need to feel bad. Grams was being a bitch, and you were incredible. Someone needed to stand up to her. You started it, and I finished,” I say, reiterating that this wasn’t her fault.

I hate when my anger takes control, and when I’m around Grams, it’s already on a short leash.

I don’t want her to see me like that, and I want to promise that it’ll never happen again, but I don’t have blind confidence in myself.

“Was it true?” she questions, and I know what she means.

Grams had no right to bring up my past. How I dealt with my grief wasn’t the best, but she made my pain ten times worse and never acknowledged how terrible she was after Mom died.

“To an extent, yes. Grams didn’t want custody of Harper and me. I was seventeen and had been fending for myself, but a three-year-old was too much responsibility. She tried to fight it, but we didn’t have any family,” I close my eyes, picturing how small and defenseless Harper was.

I was still a kid, but I couldn’t face the adult problems that piled up on my plate. I was alone in the world, drinking anything to forget that sad fact.

Karina doesn’t overstep, letting me process what I want to say rather than rushing an answer.

“Anyways, I would drink from sunup til sundown, hanging with shady people, and I ended up with two DUIs. After the second one, I cleaned up my act. Harper was five, and she needed a big brother when Grams was diagnosed with diabetes, amongst other things. Since then, I’ve worked tirelessly to provide for them, and she’s never shown an ounce of gratitude. Shit has always been rocky between us, and that’ll never change,” I sigh, hating every second of this.

As much as I want Karina to know who I am, this is a chapter of my past I'd rather skip than re-read.

"I'm sorry, Mav. I had to ask. I understand how scary the world can be when you're left all alone to survive," she sits up, propping her elbows on each side of me and looking into my eyes.

I smile at her, staring straight into my whole world. Nobody understands me like Karina, and nobody will ever get the chance because I intend to keep her as mine forever.

"I promise you, I don't have issues with alcohol. Not anymore, at least. You don't have to worry that I'll end up showing sides of me that remind you of the past," she smiles sweetly, listening to every word I say.

One thing about Karina is that she doesn't judge me.

Every time we share pieces of our souls, she listens to mine intently and finds a way to ensure it brings us closer.

The first time I shared anything about my mom was with her, and she allowed herself to open up to me, inviting me to kiss her and solidifying our connection.

Ever since then, it's been easier to share things with her, giving her those vulnerable stories about my past one day at a time.

She's the eighth wonder of my world. I know there are seven for everyone else, but to me, she is the most wonderful thing the universe has produced.

"I believe you. I'm sorry your grandmother was so awful toward you. You needed someone looking out for you, not dragging you into hell with them," she says quietly, the empathy in her voice radiating straight to my heart.

"You take my pain and heal me with your words, baby girl," I whisper into her hair, closing my eyes and vowing not to take this moment for granted.

"I could say the same to you, but you're a better speaker than me," she laughs, lightening the heaviness in the room.

“You do just fine, baby girl,” I kiss her forehead, and she pulls the blankets tighter over us.

“Your meatballs were incredible, best I’ve ever had,” she changes the subject.

“I’m glad you liked them, but how was the dinner I cooked?” I joke, and she playfully slaps my arm, laughing so hard her nose does the scrunchy thing again.

*God*, she’s so beautiful.

“Ha ha ha. Put the show on, broody,” she laughs, and I do as she asks.

That ends the deep conversation for the night, and we spend quality time together, arguing over how well we think people on TV will fare against *the Dealer*.

We finish the *Deal or No Deal* episode that we left unfinished and watch two more before falling asleep tangled together.



THE MORNING WENT SMOOTHLY, EVEN THOUGH WE ALL HAD TO leave the apartment relatively early. I kissed Karina goodbye while she was doing her makeup, hating that I had to go before her.

I did my best to check her car, but I didn’t want Harp to think something was wrong. I drove her to school, my knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel so hard.

I waited for Karina’s text that she made it safely and didn’t fully exhale until it came through.

I pull up to the job site, confident that the guys will question my absence, and I’ve already used the family emergency card. I’ve drawn too much attention to myself lately, and I can’t wait to fall back into the shadows, keep my head down and do the work.

On my way in, I stop by Hunter’s office, and he asks me to sit down.

“Is everything okay?” he watches as Adam walks in, sitting beside me on the couch.

“Karina’s hanging in there. The cops have been at our building, but no signs of him since the break-in,” I inform them of the latest updates, and they ask many questions in return.

“You’re a good man, Maverick. We appreciate you looking out for her. We’d never hear the end of it from our women if it weren’t for you,” Hunter laughs, attempting to make light of the situation.

I’m itching to get out of here, tired of having the spotlight on me. Not only have I called out two days in a row, but now I’m in the boss’s office bright and early.

“Let us know when he’s in custody,” Adam fistbumps me and then walks out of the office.

“Thanks for being so understanding, boss. I couldn’t have lived with myself if something happened to her,” I shake his hand to show my appreciation, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

“You two started hooking up, didn’t you?” he smiles slightly, just the tops of his lips curling upward.

“Thanks again, boss,” I nod, walking toward the door.

“You sly fox,” he laughs at me.

I shake off that conversation and focus on the work ahead of me. Being gone for two days meant the guys had to carry my slack, and I intend to make up for that immediately.

The banter is hot today, the guys all taking bets on what made me call off, but I keep my nose out of it and let the gossip spread on its own.

I work through lunch, cutting more wood we’ll need, measuring and marking the drywall, and organizing all the tools at my site.

The guys threw every tool, nail, and screw out of place while I was gone, and it feels good to fix it back the way I like it.

My phone rings, and I almost let it go to voicemail when I realize Karina could be in trouble.

Just as I thought, her name flashes on my screen, and I race to answer it in time.

“Hi, baby girl. How are you?” I asked, pacing around while I hear her heavy breathing on the other line.

“I’m good. Maverick, they caught Asher today. He was trying to break into the building again,” she cries and takes several deep breaths.

I wish I were there to calm her down. A simple hug would be enough to settle her overwhelming emotions.

“Fuck. Finally, that’s amazing, Karina. Are you okay?” I express concern, and she knows I’d run to her if she needs me.

“Yes, but there’s more,” she stammers, the panic rising in her voice.

“Tell me,” I say, maybe a little too aggressively.

I can’t stand the anticipation. I need to know every detail to ensure she’s safe and mentally alright to make it through until I can see her.

“When the police took him into custody, he had two knives, zip ties, and duct tape in a backpack. They said he would’ve most likely waited for me to come home and attempt to kidnap me,” she’s fully sobbing now, and my heart is breaking listening to her.

I’m speechless.

This *motherfucking creep* was planning something diabolical and only stopped because he was detained. Thank god Karina wasn’t home and had the police protecting her.

“I have to go downtown and pick him out of a line-up, but I said I wouldn’t go until you were with me,” her voice shakes, but her breathing is slowing down.

“Everything is okay now, baby. Breathe for me. You stood up to him, and he couldn’t hurt you. I’ll pick you up after

work, and we'll go, alright?" I tell her, trying to keep her from panicking again.

"Okay, Mav. Thank you."

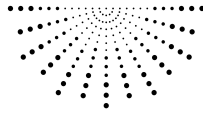
She was quiet for the rest of our call, but I reassured her that she was safe now. We hang up the phone, but I'm on edge for the rest of the day. Knowing she's suffering and I'm not with her is killing me.

After we finish at the police station, I plan to spoil her with the biggest self-care night.

We'll drink tequila, eat pizza in bed, and watch our show. Whatever else Karina wants, she'll have.

It's all about her tonight, and I will remind her how incredibly brave she is.

# KARINA



*I*'m cutting a sweet older man's hair when my phone rings with back-to-back calls. He's chatting about his seven grandchildren, giving me every detail about his visits with them.

I love it when the older clients chit-chat with me while I work. They have the best stories.

I hate to rush him out of my chair, but I need to know that it's not my mom or Mav with some emergency.

Instead, it's a number I don't recognize, and I dial it back, terrified of who is on the other line.

"Hello?" I answer, my voice trembling.

"Is this Karina Collins?" a man asks, and he sounds older.

"Yes, it is. Whom am I speaking with?" I step outside the back door where some of the ladies smoke, leaning against the wall and begging the sky to help me.

"I'm a detective with the Forest Falls Police Department. I'm calling to notify you that a suspect you filed a report against has been placed into custody," the voice sounds monotone, as if he's reading a script.

The words float around my mind, and I can't quite grasp the severity of what he's saying. I've dreamed of hearing this, and I feel like the air has been ripped out of my lungs.

"He's been arrested?" I stutter, unable to form a complete thought.



“Yes, ma’am. I have details from the officers who brought him in. Would you like me to go over them with you?” the detective asks, and my heart rate intensifies.

“That’s fine, yes,” I take a deep breath and prepare for what’s to come.

I listen as the cop informs me of how he was arrested, what was in his possession, and the next steps I need to take.

The details keep getting worse, and my entire body is shaking. I thank the officer and hang up, immediately scrolling until I tap on Maverick’s name.

The only person who can calm me down is on the other end of this call, and once I talk to him, I’ll feel a million times better.

I walk back into the salon after we hang up, completely numb and functioning on auto-pilot.

The girls all stare, waiting for an explanation, but I sit in my chair and stare at myself in the mirror.

The person looking back at me is a wreck; tear stains streak down my cheeks, my blonde-silver hair is messy and stuck to the sweat that beads on my forehead, and my eyes are bloodshot from crying.

I hold my head in my hands, willing myself not to cry again and not here.

I take deep breaths, imagining Maverick and I lying in bed together — finding my happy place and teleporting to it.

A hand rests on my shoulder, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I look up and see Reilly smiling empathetically at me, and I place my hand on hers.

“Are you okay, Karina?” she whispers, trying to be discreet.

There’s nothing inconspicuous about how I must look in everyone else’s eyes right now, especially since I ran out of here like I was on fire.

“No, not even close. I will be, though. Thanks, Reilly,” I smile at her in the mirror, and she wraps her arms around me.

“If you need to talk, you know where to find me,” she winks, returning to her station.

People always say that when they don’t really care about your problems, but Reilly meant it when she said it. She seems genuine.

I have one more client on the books, and then I’ll clean every inch of this place if it’ll get me out of here quicker.

I feel trapped like an animal in a cage, pacing and waiting for the second I can escape.



I STAND IN THE MIDDLE OF MY APARTMENT, THE DOOR WIDE open, scanning the room and realizing how much has changed since the last time I was here.

Not counting the times I ran in to grab clothes or when I witnessed the wake of Asher’s anger.

I’m teleported back to the last time I slept here, and I remember how pissed at Maverick I was for the stupid fight we’d gotten into, and I planned to avoid him at all costs.

The days have felt like weeks since that happened, time blurring together to remind me that my life – hiding out with my asshole neighbor, trading secrets in the dark, practically living together domestically, and falling so fucking hard for him – isn’t normal.

Everything feels off-balance when I’m in my own apartment. I feel empty, like I’m missing pieces of me that are healing.

Maverick is what’s missing.

This place was just mine. I was always alone, mourning what my life could’ve been, hating Asher, and drinking to numb the pain.

I don’t belong here anymore.

Mav's apartment feels like home. We've made his bare white walls our canvas, painting memories across every square inch.

I thought I'd have to be a million miles away from my ex to allow myself to be happy, to love and be loved, to heal the spaces he broke inside of me.

The realization hits me stone-cold.

I wasn't safe from Asher when I met Maverick, and I still opened my heart to him. I was waiting until I finally found the man who was made for me.

I wholeheartedly believe in that.

We were made to be *partners in trauma*, healing each other's broken hearts and filling the void left behind by those we cared about.

"Hi," I hear a voice behind me, jolting me back into reality.

I turn around and see Maverick leaning against the doorframe, hands in his pockets, smiling at me with softness.

I run to where he's standing, immediately feeling warmth and comfort when he wraps his arms around me.

"Hi," I say into his chest, refusing to move an inch.

He holds me and strokes my hair, whispering, "*Everything is okay. I've got you now,*" over and over again until I finally release my grip on him.

I wipe my tears and look into his eyes, and he's crying too.

"Why are you crying, you big softy?" I giggle, easing the tension.

"I'm so relieved to have you in my arms. I was a mess at work, thinking about what that psycho had planned. I needed to hold you to feel better," he shakes his head and takes my hand.

"I needed that too," I say, grabbing my purse and following him across the hall into his apartment.

We agree to take some time to settle down before going to the station. It's a heavy burden, but I know I need to be strong and face this last obstacle to be free.

My phone vibrates with new texts, and I crawl into Mav's bed while he showers to read them.

One is from Harper, and two are from Reilly.

Harper: I miss you, Karina. Are you coming to my soccer practice?

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Miss you too, kiddo.

Reilly: Hey girl, checking in. You seemed so sad today, and it broke my heart.

Reilly: You have a friend in me, remember that!!

Thank you again, Reilly. I appreciate you. I'm home now.

BOTH TEXTS BRING A SMILE TO MY FACE, AND I CAN'T HELP but feel the love from the people around me.

I send one last text to Juliette, telling her the news about Asher, neglecting to add the gruesome details but celebrating the headline.

I put my phone away and close my eyes, releasing all the negative thoughts from my body.

I'm shaken up by what Asher was planning, but he will not take any more of my happiness. I will hold my head high, identify him in the line-up, and close this horror story for good.

Instead, I focus on my future, and he's decided to stop hiding behind a towel.

Coming out of the bathroom completely naked, looking like a Greek god, he winks at me before pulling clothes out of

his drawer.

“Kitten, if you keep staring, we’ll never leave this apartment,” he still has his back to me, but our connection is too strong.

“I was *not* staring. I was admiring,” I smirk, and he dives onto the bed.

“Kiss me,” I breathe, needing that intimacy from him right now.

“Please?” he teases, and I grab his shirt, pulling his lips to mine.

I breathe in the scent of his body wash, a mix of sea salt and vanilla, and it’s enthralling.

He tangles his hands in my hair, biting my lip occasionally, and maybe he was right – I shouldn’t have been staring.

I let his tongue part my lips, inviting him in, and we seem to be playing a game of who would be the first to break away.

I moan into his mouth, unable to hold back, and in turn, he groans, pulling his lips off mine.

*I win.*

“Come on, baby girl. I have plans for you after we get home,” he adjusts his jeans, and fuck, I’m starstruck.

“Plans?” I ask, intrigued by what he has in mind.

He doesn’t answer me, though. Letting me wonder what he could have in store for us.

*Game recognizes game*, and I see the one he’s playing.

I let it rest for now, but I will crack his armor and beat him at his own game.

I take his hand in mine, leading the way out of the apartment and taking a deep breath as we reach the parking lot.

“This is the first time I’ve felt completely safe walking out of the building since I’ve lived here,” I say, turning to him with a smile on my face.

He squeezes my hand and tells me how proud he is.

We spend the drive talking about our day, and it's refreshing to have things to flow the conversation besides our fucked up past.

I fill him in on the new girl I'm considering asking for drinks at the salon, and he tells me that Hunter and Adam guessed we were hooking up.

We laugh at that, and I know Jules will be happy with Adam for bringing home gossip.

We park at the police station, and I don't feel as painstakingly anxious as I did the last time we were here.

I needed Maverick's support to make it through, but I believe my own strength will guide me this time.

He's on this journey with me, and I couldn't be happier with the man standing beside me again today.

Sometime after we check in with the desk sergeant, the moment has arrived.

I'm called back to a dark room, separated by a pane of glass, and I'm about to put a name to my abuser's face.

He can't see me, of course, but I can see him, and that's empowering. I'm not the scared girl under his microscope anymore.

He's at the mercy of mine, and with Maverick's hand on the small of my back, I confidently tell the detective which number Asher is holding.

"Number four. It's number four," I whisper, barely hearing myself with how loud my ears are ringing.

When the detective knocks on the glass, I know it's finally over, and I want to cry, but not here.

I shake it off and stretch my fingers, trying to ground the anxiety attempting to break through to the surface.

Maverick notices and takes my hands, kissing them both before interlocking our fingers.

We thank everyone involved and are assured that we'll receive updates on his case, but for now, he's locked up behind bars without a shot of getting out.

*I'm free. I'm safe.*

I can't stop the smile that's spread across my face. I'm thrilled I followed through with this and am getting the justice I deserve.

"You were incredible, Karina," Mav grabs me, lifts me off the ground, and kisses my lips.

"Thank you, Angel," I kiss him once more before he puts me down and opens the passenger door for me.

"Ready to hear what I've got in store for us tonight?" he asks, squeezing my thigh as we drive through town.

"Hit me," I smile, imagining the wildest possibilities.

I want to photograph this moment in time, saving it for when we're old and restless.

Maverick's eyes gleam in the golden sun as he looks at me, one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting comfortably on my thigh.

The traffic light turns red, and we almost miss it because of the intensity of our locked gaze.

"Jesus Christ, kitten, what are you doing to me," he laughs, returning his attention to the road.

"Waiting for you to tell me what we're doing tonight," I tap the imaginary watch on my wrist, laughing.

"Impatient little lady," he sucks his teeth, rubbing his hand further up my thigh, creating the slightest friction in my jeans.

"Fine. I don't want to know," I cross my legs, essentially trapping his hand in place, and he breaks.

"Okay, okay, death grip. I need my fingers," he pleads, and I uncross, allowing his hand freedom.

"First, we're picking up a pizza. After that, you're going to take me to the store, pick out everything needed for a girl's

self-care night, and we'll do everything you choose until you feel relaxed and at ease," he finishes, and my heart is about to melt into a puddle.

Or maybe that's my panties. Either way, this man can't be serious.

"You're volunteering yourself to a full-on girls' night?" I ask, and he nods, explaining a bottle of tequila's role in his compliance.

My smile might be contagious if it weren't just us in this truck, and I can't get enough of this extraordinary man beside me.

He follows my lead in *Target* as I browse the beauty section for face masks, nail polish, and the perfect bath bomb.

Once I'm sure of my selections – besides one Veto on the bath bomb scent, Mav didn't like the lavender, and we had to agree to disagree on strawberry vanilla – we pay for our items and head back to the apartment.

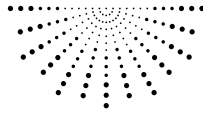
I can't wait to put a face mask on him; only the manliest man will allow their woman to treat them in self-care practices.

I've always been down on myself, harboring the blame for being involved with Asher, but now, with Maverick, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

I chose a good man, and he proves me right every day.



# MAVERICK



There's a cucumber lime mask on my face, tingling my skin underneath, and I couldn't feel any better if I tried.

Karina is happy, laughing, and smiling. After the news about the arrest, I was afraid she'd be a mess, but she proved that resilience is stronger than fear.

Now, I'm painting *lilac purple* polish on her toes while she downs another tequila shot, forgoing the lime.

We devoured the pizza we had delivered and a ton of snacks. The final phase of girls' night is a bubble bath with the bomb thingy she picked out.

It's supposed to be invigorating and relaxing, but I'm all in as long as I can hold her in the tub.

"Your time's up," she says, turning off the alarm on her phone.

"Help me get this damn thing off, baby girl. I don't want to rip my skin off," I plead, fearing that this mask has permanently clung to my face.

"Come on, broody. I've got you," she teases, leading the way in her skimpy PJs she insisted we change into.

Silk, lace, and the color blue on her body are a dangerous combination, and fuck, she looks *ravishing*.

Mine aren't as cute, but I've caught her looking at my boxers and workout tee more than once.

This is the definition of happiness. Being so comfortable around another person that anything goes, and nothing is off-limits.

I trust her, and she trusts me.

Karina fills the tub and drops the bomb in the water. I watch in awe as it fizzes, changing the water to a light pink color, and the aroma of strawberries fills the air.

We climb in together, her back against my chest, and our legs tangle together at the other end.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, checking in on her seemingly calm demeanor.

“I’m okay. The details scared the shit out of me, and I nearly had a panic attack. But he didn’t get the chance to hurt me, and I’m focusing on the good things in my life,” she says, squeezing my arms wrapped around her chest.

“That’s a good way to think of it. Now, we move forward. What does that look like for you?” I close my eyes, waiting while she thinks about her answer.

This bath is seriously relaxing, and my body is so content I’d stay here all night if the water didn’t turn cold.

“I want to heal and have a place to call home. I haven’t had that since I was a teenager, and I feel like I deserve that,” she trails off, sighing deeply, and I can tell she’s trying not to cry.

“Your apartment doesn’t feel like home?” I pull the hair from her face, tucking it behind her ears.

“No, it never did. I stood inside for a while this afternoon, and all I could think of was how it means nothing to me. It’s not where I belong,” she says softly.

I drain the tub, helping her to her feet as we grab towels to dry off. My ass is numb, the water is cold, and I want to end the night lying in bed with my girl.

“I think this is your home,” I wrap the towel around her tightly, spinning her to face me.

She doesn't say anything, looking into my eyes as if she's searching for something to guide her.

I pull her into my chest, not forcing the conversation or pushing her further than she wants to go.

"I think you're right," she whispers, lifting her head and wrapping her hands around my neck.

I lean down to kiss her, bringing this moment full circle, giving her the intimacy she's always feared, and I ran away from.

It's a slow kiss, the kind that solidifies what's in both of our hearts. There's no running away just because the threat has been neutralized.

It's been more than that from the moment we met.

I lead her to the bed, and we both climb in naked, facing each other.

We haven't had sex since I took her to the range, and I don't mind.

No matter how much she teases me, my feelings about this woman have nothing to do with what her body can do for me. That's a bonus.

"I love your freckles," I say, tapping the line of dots across the bridge of her nose.

She scrunches her nose, making them stand out even more, and I smile.

"I don't want to move into your place or anything. I don't want to stay at mine, though," she whispers, almost sounding like she's afraid of disappointing me.

"I'm okay with that. How about we talk about what works for us? For example, I'd love it if after work we have dinner and sleep in this bed together. Maybe spend the weekends together, doing things that make us happy," I offer, judging her reaction to see what she thinks.

Karina has mastered the art of thinking before she speaks, and I give her the space to decide what she's comfortable with.

“Okay, I like that. On my weekdays off, I can spend time there or wherever, but I don’t need to inhabit your space constantly,” she lights up, finding precisely what she wants and using her voice.

“Anything you’re comfortable with is okay with me, baby girl,” I kiss her forehead and bring her closer to me.

“Mav ... are we moving too fast?” she whispers, closing her eyes and biting her bottom lip.

Now that her ex is in jail, she’s scared of us. I understand it, but nothing has changed for me.

Maybe we’re moving too fast, but outside forces are not considered because we believe in what we feel for each other.

“No, I don’t think so. Our connection is undeniable, and our desire to be close is a part of our relationship,” I tell her, not hiding the truth in my bones.

“Relationship?” she smiles, that sparkle in her hazel eyes shining, even in the darkness.

“Is that what this is?” I ask, raising my eyebrow and leaving the ball in her court.

“Not until you call me your girlfriend,” she kisses my nose, looking at me like I hung the stars in the sky.

“Karina, at the risk of sounding like the corniest person in the world, will you be my girlfriend?” I wait while she laughs, agreeing that I am, in fact, corny as shit.

“Of course, Mav. You’re my boyfriend now,” she teases, like we’re little kids on the playground, and I feel my heart skip a beat.

“I still think you should get your permit and learn how to shoot. It’s just another form of protection,” I suggest, hoping she agrees.

“I want to learn, and I want my own weapon. Not on my body like yours, but maybe I can keep it in my car or something?” she asks, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Of course. If that’s where you want to keep it, that’s your safe place. I always kept mine in my gun safe until recently. It was my preference,” I tell her, and she smiles, almost as if I’m cementing a thought she had bubbling at the surface.

I pour us both another shot of tequila, clinking our glasses together as we toss them back.

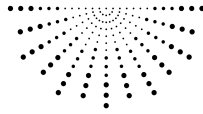
Karina wants to watch our show, so I put it on and let her fall asleep on my chest.

She’s snoring long before I can drift to sleep, and all I can think about is how fucking perfect she is.

This is all so new to me, but being with Karina makes it feel like we’ve already spent a lifetime together.

Everything I ran from led me to where I belong, and I’ve come to the firmest conclusion that I will never let her go.

# KARINA



THREE WEEKS LATER

There's something to be said for feeling consistently happy, and since it's my first time, I'll say it's *fucking incredible*.

Since Asher was arrested, I've felt so free and enjoyed the things in life that I'd always sacrificed for safety.

I went out for drinks with my co-worker, Reilly, and we had a fucking blast. She's quickly become one of my favorite people and has no clue about my past.

I don't know anything about hers, and it's refreshing. We vibe so well together.

"Girl, how'd you find a man so fucking hot in this small town?" she asks, sipping her vodka-cran from a straw and moving with the music.

"I'm the luckiest lady in Forest Falls," I say, pulling her toward the karaoke machine.

We're drunk, and we're going to sing. I choose for us, and it's a fucking banger.

*Mr. Brightside* by *The Killers* blares through the speakers, and we sing-scream the lyrics until the song finishes, eliciting a roaring cheer from the crowd.

"You're the only friend I have here, Karina," Reilly tells me afterward, and I hug her tightly.

"Same, girl. You're my best Forest Falls friend," I say, and we cheer a tequila shot to that.

We dance for the rest of the night until Mav picks us up and takes her home.

She doesn't live too far from us; her apartment building is just around the corner.

"Bye, bestie," she slurs, climbing out of the truck and nearly falling on her face.

Maverick waits until she's inside before pulling away, and I can't help myself from lifting the middle console and teasing him under his sweatpants.

"Kitten, don't start something when you're wasted. I refuse to take advantage of you," he says, stopping my hand from dipping into the waistband of his boxers.

"I am a fully grown woman who is completely capable of consent. Now, fuck me in the backseat. Please," I beg, and he rolls his eyes but pulls over to an abandoned lot.

"Get that fine ass over here," I say, biting my lip and climbing into the back.

"Karina, you drive me fucking insane," he says, leaving love bites on my collarbone and breasts.

Somehow, I convince him to let me suck him off in the backseat of his truck, and when he finishes down my throat, I'm ready for my turn.

"Jesus Christ," Maverick breathes, moving me so my ass is in the air.

He pushes inside me, and I instantly moan, feeling how his cock stretches me.

His thrusts are fast and reckless, making me scream with pleasure until he covers my mouth with his hand, slapping my ass lightly with the other.

"Quiet, kitten. Let's see if you can be a good girl," he whispers in my ear, sending shivers through my body.

Before long, I'm silently begging him to let me come, and when I do, I swear I see fucking stars.

My man pounds into me until I feel his muscles tense, and he finishes inside me.

“Fuck, Karina,” he whispers, kissing my shoulder where he left a bite mark.

We help each other get dressed, and he lets me rest my head on his shoulder for the rest of the ride.

Being in a relationship isn't as horrifying as I always made it out to be, but that's because I'm with Maverick.

He makes life simple, happy, and so much more fun.

On Sundays, we go to the shooting range at Old Man Tony's, and I recently took the test to own a concealed firearm legally. I'll know the results soon, and Maverick thinks I aced the test.

He made me study for days, rewarding me with little treats whenever I got a section of practice questions correct.

Soon enough, I'll be able to carry a weapon legally and know how to use it. I'd have laughed if you had told me this would be my life. I never cared for domesticated life like this, but now that I know how good it feels — I'm addicted.

I can't wait to pick out my own little piece of protection at Old Man Tony's. He has a few saved solely for me. We've formed a great relationship over the last few weeks, and he's so proud of my progress.

Harper has been around more often, too. Maverick trusts me to pick her up from school on my weekdays off, and we wander around the mall or grocery store while we wait for him to get home.

She's cooking fantastically, preparing an entire chicken parmesan meal for us this weekend without Maverick's help. I already took her to the store, following as she took the lead picking out her ingredients, learning a thing or two about the difference between fresh shredded cheese compared to the stuff in the bag.

It mostly flew over my head, but a big part of mine and Maverick's dynamic is how well I get along with his little



sister. I love kids, and this girl is by far my favorite.

Once one anxious door closes, another opens, and now that my mom is coming for the weekend, I'm losing my mind. Everything needs to be perfect, and I think I've fluffed the couch pillows twenty times in the last few hours.

"Baby girl, stop worrying. Your mom will be happy here just because she is with you," Maverick tells me as I rearrange my living room for the hundredth time.

He's right, I need to relax, but I haven't spent more than twenty-four hours with my mother in nearly eight years, and before that our relationship was fucked.

My dad left us, and I rebelled so hard that I had to flee my life. I've missed out on so much, like my mom marrying again, and I couldn't attend the wedding.

Her new husband is lovely, but we've only talked on the phone a few times. With me constantly hiding, I don't have a solid relationship with him and he has two daughters a few years younger than me — technically my stepsisters — and I've never met them.

It doesn't feel like I belong in her life, especially now that we're seeing each other in circumstances different than usual.

"I'm so fucking anxious. I don't know what to do with my hands," I say, waving them in the air as if they're not attached to my body.

Mav wraps his arms around me and looks into my eyes. The safety I feel when he holds me is unmatched, and I can settle myself down enough to reason.

"Karina, let's wait for her Uber in the lobby, okay? Maybe you can check your mailbox to keep you distracted," he smiles, kissing my cheeks and leading the way.

I don't know what magnetic force he has over me, but it always works like a charm.

I haven't opened my mail since the day I found the letter from Asher, and when the door pops open, the contents spill onto the floor.

“Oh my god,” Maverick laughs, helping me organize everything.

We’re bent over a pile of papers and junk mail when his smile catches my eye.

God, he’s so fucking gorgeous, and I can’t resist this moment.

I caress his face, stroking the light facial hair he’s let grow out before connecting my lips to his.

He immediately reacts, wrapping his fingers in my hair and cementing my position in this kiss.

We hear the lobby door open and retreat immediately, staring my mother in the face. I forgot I gave her my code to get in the building and this was just the kind of first impression I was hoping to avoid.

“Am I interrupting?” she laughs, shaking her head at us on the floor.

*Fuck.*

“Hi, Mom,” I say, pulling Maverick up to his feet and locking our fingers together.

I can’t be without his touch in this absurd moment, and he squeezes my hand three times to ensure my nerves are calm.

“Karina. This must be the infamous Maverick,” she looks him up and down, and he politely offers his hand out to shake hers.

“Yes, ma’am. Nice to meet you, finally. Let me take these for you,” he grabs her suitcase and bags, letting me lead the way up the stairs.

My mom looks just as I remember, dressed in a long pencil skirt, a fancy blue blouse, and heels at least five inches tall.

She never leaves the house without a killer outfit and a full face beat with makeup. My grandfather was a politician, and from a young age, she was taught how to leave the house dressed like a lady.

Even though he's long gone, those teachings have been wired into her personality.

The platinum blonde hair is gone, replaced by a dark chocolate color, which suits her age well.

"Thank you for letting me have your apartment. It's much better than a dingy hotel," she smiles, following me inside.

"Of course, mom. Maverick was nice enough to let me stay at his place while you're here," I say, smiling at him from across the room.

"Hmmm, yes. Maverick. The mysterious *asshole neighbor* that my daughter now practically lives with. Come, sit," she waves him over, and I cover my face with my hands.

She can be so *snotty* without realizing it.

I silently apologize to Mav as he makes his way toward the couch.

"Karrie, make us some cocktails, why don't you?" she demands, and I cringe when she uses my real name.

The one thing Maverick doesn't know may very well come out this weekend, and I'm fucking terrified. I need to pull my mom aside and ask her not to call me that again, even if it sounds like a nickname.

I want to tell the truth on my own terms.

I hear her quizzing him on his life story and asking why he's decided to protect me from Asher. I shake my head, already frustrated with her.

These conversations could've waited until they've known each other for more than five fucking minutes.

"I don't make cocktails, Mom. But how's about a tequila shot?" I ask, passing the shot glasses around with slices of lime.

"That's my girl. Been sneaking the stuff out of my liquor cabinet since you were fourteen," she laughs, holding the glass up for a toast, and I roll my eyes.

This was a *terrible* idea.

Over the phone, my mom is an angel sent from above. In person, her real personality comes out, and the reminders of why we had mother-daughter issues in the first place are ever-present.

“Mom, let’s reign in the attitude, okay?” I warn, and she laughs at me.

“Oh, Karrie. Such a party pooper. Is that what you’re wearing to dinner?” she scrunches her nose at me, and I put my hands up to defend myself.

“Yes, mom. I’m not going to a fucking charity dinner. It’s a goddamn Mexican restaurant in a small ass town,” I say, practically on the verge of tears.

It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other, and she immediately goes for the jugular. She acts like we’re dressing to impress the press every time we step out, but I guarantee her new husband’s hounds didn’t follow her out here.

My mother, Katherine, sees dollar signs and power before anything else.

It stemmed from watching her father be the most powerful man in any room he walked into and cascaded into my father.

Wherever he is now, he used to be a big fish in the stock markets, always dressed in suits and flashing his money to anyone looking his way.

My mom is a trophy wife. A prop on the arm of a man and nothing more.

The cycle continues: her new husband is an aspiring politician, and she’s never been happier. Playing the part of a doting wife and mother, even though she’s the complete opposite.

“Fine. If you don’t care about your appearance,” she waves me off and turns her attention back to questioning Maverick.

I’m wearing jeans and a sweater, modestly covered but stylish enough for an evening out. She’s just a fucking snob, and I wish I never invited her here.

“I’m sorry, I hate to cut you off, Katherine, but we should get back across the hall and check on April,” he says, and my heart melts.

“He’s right, mom. The cat will lose her mind if she doesn’t have her dinner at the right time,” I chime in, excusing us of her horrid attitude.

“What’s an April?” she asks, fixing her appearance in her compact.

“My fucking cat, Mom,” I grit my teeth, ready to attack, but Maverick holds my arm and guides me toward the door.

“Dinner in a half hour, Katherine?” he asks, and she nods from across the room, not bothering to look up from her reflection.

Once he closes the door behind us, I can finally breathe again and want to escape the situation I put us in.

“I’m so sorry, Angel. She’s a piece of work,” I apologize, feeling horrible for dragging him into her universe.

“It’s okay, baby girl. Nothing we can’t handle. It’s only two days, right?” he elbows me in the ribs, and I want to scream into a pillow so loud my voice breaks.

“Two days, too many,” I say, grabbing the bottle of tequila from the kitchen cabinet.

I spend too much time in his apartment because this bottle is fresh, barely opened, and the one in my place is god knows how old.

I pour myself a drink, knocking it back in record time.

We don’t have to feed April — that fat cat eats all day, but he came up with that excuse to bargain for my freedom.

“You’re seriously my saving grace,” I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing his cheek as my way of thanking him.

I don’t know how I will manage a whole dinner with her, but thankfully, we’ll be in the same vicinity as margaritas, and I will be getting drunk.



I STUMBLE FROM MAV'S TRUCK, CATCHING MYSELF ON THE opened door while he helps my *evil spawn* of a mother out of the backseat.

We both drank three margaritas to combat our irritation with each other, and it turned into a full-on screaming match on the ride home.

I suggested she just fucking leave now, and she agreed, planning to go in the morning.

We're oil and water, only getting along when she feels I'm in danger. Now that I'm safe and happy with Maverick, she's back to being a bitch, just like when I was sixteen and met Asher.

Her behavior then was warranted, but Maverick has been nothing but kind to her, and she has no reason to treat him like trash.

He drove us to the restaurant and paid for dinner, yet she treated him like a servant on the ride home, and I'd had enough.

"Come on, baby girl, let me get you upstairs," Maverick says, and my mother bursts out laughing.

"That's what her father and Asher used to call her. Nothing ever changes when the girl is always desperate for attention and a good-looking man," she spits, swaying around the staircase in an attempt to climb it herself.

"Fuck you, Mom. You resent me because you think I made Daddy leave. He left because you're an intolerable cunt, impossible to please. Leave us the fuck alone," I yell as we get to the adjacent apartment doors.

Her jaw hits the floor, and she lets herself into my apartment without another word.

This trip is a fucking disaster, and when we finally close the door behind us, the tears flow fast.

"I don't understand how she can be so nasty to me. I'm her fucking child," I cry, and Maverick doesn't interject.

He holds me in the kitchen while my emotions work themselves out. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom alone to cry alone for a little while.

This was the worst thing that could've happened, and I wish I never asked her here. I should've known she'd disapprove of Mav, no matter how well he's taking care of me.

It boils down to one thing: *I love him.*

Therefore, she picks and picks until she finds the worst in him.

I leave the bathroom, laying in bed, begging the universe to take this night back. I want to forget it all.

I was so excited, so nervous about having her come out here and see how well I'm doing, but all she did was shit on my life.

She said it wasn't what *she pictured for me*, right in front of Maverick.

He's the best thing that's ever stumbled into my path, and nothing she can say will tear that down.

He may not be the man who wears a suit to every occasion or has eloquent table stories reserved for the elite, but he takes fucking *care* of me. I don't want her anywhere near me if that's not enough for her.

"Karina, are you okay?" Mav asks, breaking my trance from the tears that have been flowing since we got back from the restaurant.

"No, I'm not," I whimper, ultimately defeated from the last six hours.

He doesn't waste a second, climbing into bed with me and wrapping his arms around me.

"Don't worry about your mother. We all have people in our lives who don't deserve our light," he reassures me, and I can't help but sob into him.

I thank him for staying impartial, taking my mother's condescending remarks off the chin, and keeping his

composure.

“Anything for you, kitten. I only have one question for you,” he says, holding me tight, but I feel the tension in his body.

This is it, he figured it out, and I brace myself for the fallout.

“Did you have to change your name?” he whispers, almost as if he doesn’t want to know.

I sigh, turning to face him, the tears still falling.

“Yes,” I say quietly, not wanting this perfect bubble we’re in to pop.

I’m afraid he’ll be mad that I didn’t tell him the truth sooner or think of me as a fraud.

Instead, I’m met with grace.

“I’m so sorry, baby girl. I didn’t realize he’d stolen so much from you,” he strokes my cheek, wiping the places where the tears have pooled.

“You’re not mad?” I stammer, unable to shake this feeling of doom.

“No, why would I be?” he asks, raising an eyebrow as if my question is preposterous.

“I didn’t tell you the truth,” I close my eyes, afraid to look at him.

“It’s your secret to protect. Your life, even. I’d never be mad at you for protecting yourself,” he kisses my forehead, snuggling closer.

*God damn it. How is this man real?*

Everything that should make him run away only brings him closer.

“My real name is Karrie, with a K, like my mother. She knew that you weren’t aware but kept calling me that anyway. That girl is dead and gone. She had a trust fund, a plan for



college, but a miserable life. That's not me," I say, sitting up in bed to take another drink.

Fuck this night. I wanted to reveal this on my own, when I felt comfortable, but it's just another thing that's been taken from me.

Maverick rubs my back, allowing me to process everything before saying anything. I appreciate the silence, it allows me to remember all the good things I have now.

"It doesn't fit you," he whispers, and I know exactly what he means.

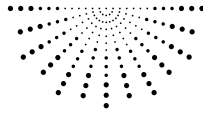
"I don't have any more secrets. I promise," I lean against his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

There's nothing else for us to say. It's officially all out in the open, and he's still here.

We're quiet for a while, and when he thinks I'm asleep, I hear him whisper, "*I'm not going anywhere, Karina.*"

I pretend not to hear, staying still and silent. I've had enough emotional rollercoasters for one night, and this feels good to keep to myself.

# MAVERICK



*I*t's finally Sunday, and the day has arrived. Karina and I are going to Old Man Tony's so she can pick out her new weapon and give it a few practice shots.

She passed her permit test with flying colors, and I couldn't be more proud.

In a few short weeks, she learned everything she needed to become legal, and today is the payoff.

Since her mother left two weeks ago, we've returned to our blissful routines.

As shitty as that night was, Karina bounced back better than ever, finally free from the clenches of her disappointed mother.

Not much can phase me, but Katherine's blatant disrespect toward her daughter was disheartening. I held Karina all night while she cried, wondering why her mom didn't love her enough to accept her as she was.

*I* put her pieces back together, reminding her she's a force to be reckoned with and *nothing* would change how I see her. That includes the fact that she hid her real name from me.

I know she wanted to reveal that information on her own, when she felt safe enough, but her mom fucked that up.

It was still a moment I cherish because she opened up and let me all the way in.

“You okay, Angel?” Karina asks, the wind blowing her hair all around the truck.

“I’m great. Are you excited?” I ask, taking her hand in mine and locking our fingers together.

“I am. I can’t believe I passed,” she smiles, the happiness radiating off her.

We pull down the dirt road that leads to the cabin, and Tony’s perched in his rocking chair, waiting for us on the porch.

He opens the passenger door for Karina, helping her down and hugging her.

“You ready for this lil lady?” he asks, and she tells him to lead the way.

I’ve lost my mentor to my girlfriend, but I don’t mind. Tony is the best, and I knew he’d be there for us.

When Karina opened up about why she was learning to shoot, he went into protective *Papa Bear* mode, vowing that he’d lock him up in the bomb shelter and teach him a few lessons if he came around again.

“Alright, darlin’, these are the pieces I set aside for ya. Go on and test ‘em out,” Tony tells her, and she marvels over each one before choosing.

“Thanks for everything, Old Man,” I place a hand on his shoulder, both of us watching Karina shoot.

“Oh, it’s no bother. She’s a natural,” he wears a proud smile.

“I think this is the one,” she says, joining us.

“It’s yours. No charge,” Tony tells her, and she tries to argue, but that old man is stubborn as hell.

“Relax, Karina. He gave me my first on the house, too. It’s his way of saying you did good,” I say, hoping she’ll accept his gift.

“Okay, fine. Thank you, Tony,” she hugs him, and he pulls out a small matching case.

We spent a lot of time showing Karina everything she'll need to know about her new weapon, and she absorbs it all with ease.

Before long, we're heading back to town, and Karina's smile is bigger than the whole sky.

It's Sunday, so we're going to Grams' for dinner. She's played nice the last few times we've been over, but I know that can only last so long.

My phone rings in my pocket, and it's Harper, so I let Karina answer while I drive.

"Are you almost here?" she cries, and I immediately take the phone.

"What's wrong, Harp?" I ask, the muscles in my body tensing with every passing second.

She's crying, and I can hear the chaos in the background.

It has to be Grams.

"She fell. Going down the stairs to the garage. It's bad, Mav. There's blood everywhere," she screams, and we're only a few streets over, so I hit the gas.

"We're coming, Harper. Stay on the phone," I instruct, and Karina tells her to control her breathing.

"Will you stay with her? I think she's seen enough today," I whisper, and she nods.

"Absolutely," she assures, and I'm so lucky she's here for both of us.

As we approach the house, the ambulance pulls away, and Harper stands alone in the doorway.

I rush out of the truck, scrambling to get to her.

Karina's right on my heels, and we both scoop Harper in for a hug. I leave the girls on the porch to see what happened, and she wasn't kidding.

There's blood everywhere, and that's not a good sign.

“I’m going to the hospital. You guys stay here. I’ll call in a little while,” I say, hugging them both.

Just as everything has been going smoothly, another wrench gets thrown at all of us. I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to center my thoughts and keep calm.

I take the familiar road toward the hospital, hoping to see Grams soon and return to my girls.



TWO HOURS HAVE PASSED, AND I’M STILL IN THE WAITING room. I’ve been told she’s stable, but they still won’t let me see her or inform me of what exactly happened.

Finally, the emergency doctor, who always seems to be here, emerges and heads straight for me.

“Mr. Carter, I wish I had better news. Your grandmother took a nasty spill and her blood alcohol was well over the legal limit. As I understand, she’s not supposed to consume alcohol, correct?” he asks, and I nod.

I never should’ve let her convince me that one or two wouldn’t hurt.

“Her lung is punctured, and she’s suffered a serious laceration on her head, which will require stitches. We’ll be keeping her for observation, but her labs indicate that she’s not getting enough oxygen,” he holds his hand out for me to shake and directs the way to her room before walking off.

*Jesus Christ.*

I was expecting different news. I figured it’d be the usual bumps and bruises, then back home. The same cycle we’re used to.

This time, the doctor made it seem much worse, and I don’t know how the fuck to break the news to Harper.

Once again, I’ll disrupt her school routine by taking her back to my place, and it’s too dysfunctional for a kid. I hate the circumstances surrounding this, and I wish that my apartment was Harper’s home.

I haven't saved up nearly enough money for a house, and all this comes slamming at me like a freight train.

When I pull up to the house, Harper and Karina are drawing chalk on the sidewalk, probably a way to keep Harp's mind off what happened.

They both bombard me with questions when I step out of the truck, and I'm overwhelmed. I give them the rundown, telling Harper to grab a bag and pack it with what she'll need for the week.

"The whole week?" she cries, and I try to calm her down.

"It's easier this way. You'll stay with me this week, and once Grams is settled, we'll get you back, okay?" I hug her, and she groans but accepts her fate.

Once she went inside, Karina poked for more information, but I didn't have it in me to explain.

"Not now, okay? Later," I push past her to go inside and help Harper pack.

I feel bad, but I need to focus on my sister.

The drive isn't long back to my apartment, but it feels like a marathon today. The tension hangs in the air because of how I dismissed Karina, and Harper's worried about Grams.

I tell them to order whatever for dinner and lock myself in the bathroom. I turn the water on but have no intention of getting in the shower.

I just want a quiet few minutes to think, but every thought is worse than the last.

There's a light tap on the door, and I know it's Karina checking on me.

"I'll be out soon. I need a minute," I yell, but she insists on letting herself in.

Finally, I open the door, and she squeezes into the bathroom with me.

"Are you okay, Angel?" she whispers, pulling me in for a hug.

“I don’t know,” I say, breaking apart from her embrace.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” she asks, that glimmer in her eyes nearly impossible to resist.

I’m shutting down and pushing her away, but I can’t help it.

If Grams dies, I’ll be all alone again.

It’ll be me and Harper and I don’t know if I can take it.

Death is a sore subject, and with Grams nearly on the edge, I can’t escape the memories that haunt me from the last time I dealt with this.

“Karina, I appreciate everything you’re trying to do, but I think you should go home,” I tell her, instantly seeing the pain in her eyes.

“That’s not my home,” she whispers, almost as if she can’t believe it.

“Neither is this,” I open the door, effectively letting her out of this.

This tangled mess that is my life. I might have to become legally responsible for a teenager, and I can’t drag her with me.

“You don’t mean that. There’s no fucking way you mean that Maverick. Look at me,” she begs, and I can’t.

“I’m right here. I’ve got my scars, my heart, and I’m all fucking yours. Don’t push me away. Just let me fucking help you,” she cries, and I have to turn away.

Seeing her cry will send me into an emotional spiral I’m unprepared for.

“Karina, for now, I do. Let’s talk in the morning,” I shut the bathroom door and hear her sobs from the other side.

I’m breaking what I love, and it’s all my fault.

I listen as she composes herself, and grabs her essentials from my room, until I hear the bedroom door close behind her.

It's a long time before I come out, and when I do, Harper is already asleep, and I'm a mess.

There's no chance that I'll be able to sleep tonight, my overthinking will consume me until the morning comes, and there's a whole new fresh set of problems to face.

Sure enough, I toss and turn all night, regretting my choices. Karina's side of the bed is empty, and I realize that I haven't slept alone in months.

I feel hollow.

After a sleepless night I know exactly where I went wrong, and I'm hoping I can fix it. Luckily, I don't have to travel far because my girl is right across the hall.

It's early, the sun has barely risen, but I'm standing outside her door with my apology in hand.

"What, Maverick?" she glares at me, looking cute as ever in her lacy pj set.

"I'm so fucking sorry, baby girl. Please let me in," I beg, and she opens the door.

I hand her the coffee I made, sweet as shit, but just how she likes it.

She doesn't say anything, sipping the coffee and standing with one hand on her hip. I can't hold in my fears anymore, and it all comes out like word vomit.

"I'm scared she's going to die," I blurt, and Karina immediately wraps her arms around me.

"Don't fucking push me away, do you understand, Maverick Carter?" she says, the stern look on her face scaring me a little.

"I'm sorry. I won't shut you out again. No matter what," I kiss her forehead, and she softens.

"Whatever happens, I'll be here. You can't get rid of me that easily," she smirks, and don't I know it.

"I feel like I'm treading water, thinking of all the things that could happen. I'm not ready to take Harper alone," I wipe



the fallen tears and sit on her couch.

I look around Karina's apartment, mostly clean, but barely lived in, and it hits me.

She was right. This place *isn't* her home.

It's a spare bedroom for when I act like an asshole, something I haven't done since we've been together.

"You won't be alone. I'm not going anywhere. If you become Harper's legal guardian, I will help you every step of the way. You're my family. You're my home, Mav. Anywhere you are is where I belong," Karina sits beside me, and I feel complete with her by my side.

Last night was wrong. *All wrong.*

She's my other half at this point, and I'm lucky she put up with my little outburst.

"That's a lot for me to ask of you," I shake my head, but she counters quickly.

"You're not asking, and that's what *all-in* means. Let's save this what-if conversation for the day we need to have it," she smiles, pulling me off the couch and into the bedroom.

"Baby girl, I need to get Harper to school," I say, but she's got a death grip on me.

"I will take Harp to school. I have the day off, now get your ass in that bed," she pushes me, and I could never say no to her.

After a quick round of morning sex and a shower with Karina, I'm heading to work.

I trust her to get Harper to school, and she also agreed to pick her up after and take her to visit Grams if the doctors say it's okay.

I regret every single second yesterday when I forced her away from me. Karina is fucking incredible, and we promised to be there for each other.

She kept her promise, but when shit got hard, I failed. I retreated and tried to run away.

*Never again.*

I will hold her hand and face the world with the toughest soldier by my side.



I GOT THE CALL BEFORE LUNCH. PER MY REQUEST, THE doctors took Grams off oxygen the night before, and she passed away peacefully in her sleep.

Last night, I went to see her, and they said she was in pain from the punctured lung. I cried and promised her I'd care for Harper if she went peacefully.

For once, the old bat listened to me, and she went peacefully, but at the same time, I'm the last one left. The only adult in our family lineage.

It's not even lunchtime, my grandmother is dead, and I'm now the head of the family.

The family that consists of harper and I. We're the last two remaining, and I intend to keep us as strong as possible.

I won't be like Grams was. Harper won't ever have to question if I'm on her side, or my commitment to her. That's a fact.

Grams and I had a very complex and challenging relationship. She was a bitter old woman who hated that she had to settle back down after her retirement, and I was a teenager who was traumatized from the life I was forced to live.

Our frustrations co-existed. We blamed each other for the direction our lives turned to.

My next step is to meet with a lawyer to discuss her will, someone she'd already appointed when my mother died years ago.

I was unaware of this, so I'm terrified of what will happen with Harper.

In my mother's will, she left custody to Grams. If she didn't have the same provisions, I may have a fight ahead of

me.

“Maverick!” Adam calls from across the yard, and fuck if this isn’t the worst time for a one-on-one with my boss.

“Yeah, boss, what’s up?” I say, not moving to where he’s smoking.

“You grew up in Forest Falls?” he asks, not the conversation I expected to have.

“Yeah. Why?” I say, walking toward my truck.

I want this to be as quick as possible. I need to talk to Karina.

“There’s an abandoned lot over there for sale. You think you could hook us up with a meeting with the owner?” he smiles, and this is some kind of test.

One that I’m not in the mood to pass.

“I can try,” I say, turning my back to him.

“This is your opportunity, Maverick. Don’t turn it down,” he pushes, and I push back.

“I appreciate you coming to me, but my grandmother died an hour ago. I am the only living relative to take guardianship of my little sister, and I’ll be honest. I don’t fucking care about a new site right now,” I spit, and he backs off instantly.

“Fuck, that’s heavy. The shit with your sister will work itself out. We’re here if you need anything,” he slaps my shoulder, letting me escape this conversation, finally.

I climb into my truck, lock the doors, and call the only person to calm my nerves.

“Hi, angel. How’s your day?” she asks, and I can’t hold it in any longer.

“Grams is gone,” I blurt out, unable to hold back.

Karina draws a long breath on the other side of the phone but reserves the silence for me.

“I don’t know what to do if she didn’t leave custody to me,” I cry, hating this side of me, but she doesn’t miss a beat.

“If Grams was smart, which I know she was, she knew the end was coming. That is probably why she drank so much that day. I don’t see a reality where she wouldn’t have made sure Harper was completely taken care of,” she says, instantly making me feel lighter.

“Are you ready to fight with me?” I ask the only thing that I need to know.

“I’ve been fighting with you since the day you made me stay in your apartment. This time, we’re fighting for family, not my freedom,” she tells me, and I break down again.

Something has been holding me back from telling her that I love her, but at this moment, there’s not a single thing I want to say more. But not over the phone.

I’ll express myself when the time is right.

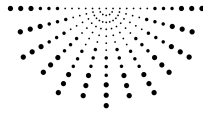
We need to tell Harper that Grams is gone and have her funeral. After that, I meet with the lawyer, and our future will be read from a piece of paper.

I’m fucking terrified, but this is everything I’d hoped for before Karina.

The chance to adopt Harper.

That’s my only focus, except this time, my partner in crime is by my side.

# KARINA



The three of us are sitting on the floor in the living room, eating pizza off paper plates and attempting to adjust to our new normal.

Harper didn't take the news well, and she's been crying on and off since we picked her up from school.

Maverick is a shell of himself, barely able to hold eye contact. I sit between the two of them, but none of us has said much.

Grams didn't want a funeral, opting to be cremated, so Maverick doesn't want to plan a service. Apparently, she didn't have many friends and no other family to speak of. That lightens his load, but I don't think it makes this any easier on either of them.

I try not to push too hard or step on their toes, but I hate not being able to help them through their grief.

When Maverick shut down on me, it felt like my world was falling apart. I won't let him push me away again — it's not how our relationship works.

What we've built is extraordinary. Our foundation is the most important thing; it only works when we're our natural, raw selves.

"Harper, do you want me to set up the sofa bed?" I ask, helping her unpack all of her things.

"Actually, Karina, is it okay to let Harper get set up in your apartment?" Mav interrupts, and I'm a little taken aback.

I figured he'd want to keep us all as close as possible, but instead, he's giving her space. The apartment is small for the three of us, and a teenager needs her privacy.

"Absolutely. It's all yours, Harper," I smile, gathering her things and handing the keys to Maverick.

"Thank you," he whispers, kissing my forehead.

Once Harper is settled in at my place, Maverick makes her lock the door behind us, and she promises to come back if she needs us.

"Can I do anything for you, Angel?" I ask, hugging him in the middle of the kitchen.

Months ago, I stood in this kitchen, barely making eye contact with this man and failing miserably at flirting.

Now, we stand here, holding each other up during our worst times. This is our safe haven.

Falling in love with Maverick was inevitable, and I could spend my whole life trying to put it into the right words.

"I don't feel bad that she's dead. I feel bad for Harper. Grams was complicated, and she didn't want the responsibility of us. I miss my mom, though," he starts to cry, and there's nothing I can do but hold him.

"Let's go to bed," I whisper, leading him toward our room.

We don't say anything else the rest of the night, and he doesn't move off my chest, where his head rests.

I stroke his hair and rub his shoulders while we lay together, making it known that I'm not moving until he does.



THE SCARIEST PART ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED TO us is Harper. Maverick has been on edge for a few days, waiting to meet with Gram's lawyer.

He's begged the guy to tell him if he has custody of Harper, but that information can't be revealed over the phone.

Maverick went for a drive yesterday and didn't return until this afternoon.

I haven't bothered to ask where he went because I know he needs his space, but I'm starting to worry about him.

If he's not talking to me, there's no way I can know how he's feeling or if he's processing his grandmother's death.

All he cares about is Harper, and it's admirable, but I don't want him to lose himself.

Our resident teenager returned to school today and wasn't happy about it.

I had no choice but to send her, with Mav being gone all night. I'm not her guardian or her family, and I couldn't make the call to keep her home.

I promised her that her brother would be here when she got home, and they could discuss it further.

I'm not mad at you, Karina," she kissed my cheek and went into school without any more arguing.

I'm working when he shows up, looking like he hasn't slept. He sits in the waiting room chairs until I finish with my last client before my hour lunch break.

"Drive with me?" he says, pulling me close.

"Of course," I grab my things and jump into his truck without knowing where we're going.

He hasn't spoken the entire ride, and I'm getting anxious.

He seems in lost a daze. I'm not exactly sure what he's doing, but I'm treading lightly and following along.

I recognize where we're going, and it's the abandoned lot we had sex in a few weeks ago.

That feels like a different lifetime ago. So much has changed since that care-free night.

We park, and he finally faces me, but it's not sadness that I see in his eyes.

It's *hope*.

“My bosses want me to set up a meeting with the owner of this land,” he says, lifting the middle console and tapping the seat next to his.

“Are you going to do it?” I ask, snuggling under his arm and resting my head on his chest.

“I have options. I could sell Grams’ house to Old Man Tony, and he’d give me this land. I could build us a house here,” he stops, sighing like he fears what comes next.

I don’t interrupt or question him, letting him work through what it is that he needs to tell me.

“Or, I could sell it to my bosses,” he finishes, and he’s lost me.

“How do you know you can even sell Grams’ house?” I ask, and that smile I love is back.

He’s got something up his sleeve, and I’m dying to know what it is.

“I met with the lawyer this morning. Grams left me everything. The house, her car, and her bank account. That old witch was holding out on me for years,” he laughs, and now I’m even more confused.

“Harper?” I look up at him, and he’s beaming with pride.

“I’m her legal guardian,” he whispers, almost as if saying it too loudly will jinx it.

“Oh my god, this is incredible news,” I hug him tightly, kissing his cheek.

Finally, the anxiousness feels like it’s left his body, and the real Maverick is sitting before me.

I let him fill in the rest of the pieces to his puzzle, and I’m relieved that everything will be okay and work in his favor.

Old Man Tony wants the house to be fixed and resold, making it an easy out for Maverick. He spent the night shooting at Tony’s, which seemed to help clear his mind.

He will work out more details in the coming weeks, but everything is coming together overall.



The final piece is to tell Harper everything, including that he'll sell the house. I'm afraid she'll resist the idea entirely and push Maverick away.

It's too much change for a kid, and she's fragile after losing the woman who raised her since she was three.

Whether or not Grams was the best guardian, Harper grew up with her, and the grieving process can be difficult at her age, even with her big brother beside her.

"Do you want me to be there when you talk with her tonight?" I ask, buckling up as he takes me back to work.

"I think I can handle this one. I know she's going to fight me a little, and we have a lot to go over," he says, hoping I don't take offense to that.

I'd never butt into their relationship, especially now. They need to communicate, and I don't mind giving them the space to do so.

"I'll go to the store and grab stuff for dinner then. We cannot live off takeout for another night," I laugh, kissing him on the cheek as we return to the salon.

"See you tonight, baby girl," he closes my door and watches until I make it inside.

It's like a weight has been lifted, and I can finally be happy for Maverick and Harper. This has been his goal for a long time, and it's finally achievable.

Maybe not as he'd pictured, but nonetheless, he has what he's always wanted.

My smile is radiant, and Reilly wants all the details. She's quickly become one of my best friends, and I love having someone here to confide in besides Maverick.

When Grams died, she switched shifts with me instantly, and I didn't have to use any sick time. I'm indebted to her for that, and I'm sure I can guess what she'll want in return.

"So you're adopting a thirteen-year-old?" she asks as we snack on the brownies she made.

“No, I have nothing to do with the legal side. I’m there for whatever he needs,” I tell her, but her eyebrow is still raised, with a strange look on her face.

“You love him?” she questions, and it’s very blunt.

I haven’t thought about defining my feelings for Maverick. Our relationship has so many layers that it hadn’t occurred to me.

What I feel for him seems deeper than love, like some sort of *cosmic gravitational pull* that ensured we’d be perfect for each other. Deciding we were meant to be before we even realized it ourselves.

That’s how I’d describe how I feel about Maverick.

He was my *destiny*.

“Yeah, I love him,” I dumb it down for her, keeping it simple and not delving into the specifics.

“You two seem great together. I’m happy for you,” she smiles, and it’s the genuine kind that I’ve grown to love from her.

My phone rings, and it’s a number I don’t recognize, so I duck outside to answer.

It’s an automated message informing me of Asher’s status. After weeks of delaying tactics, he’s finally been before a judge. He pleaded not guilty to the charges of stalking, trespassing, and breaking and entering.

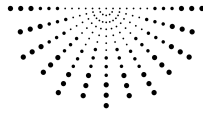
I’m mortified to hear that he’s being held on bail, meaning if someone out there cares enough, they can get him out of jail until this goes to trial, which could be months.

I’m sick thinking about it, but I doubt Asher knows anyone with that kind of money or assets.

He can’t hurt me, and he can’t contact me. I’m still free to live my life, and that’s the most important thing.

Everything has fallen into place here, and I couldn’t be more grateful for the people I’ve chosen to call my family.

# MAVERICK



*I*'m waiting for Harper outside the school, ready to discuss our future. It's her first day back at school since Grams died, and I plan to take her out for ice cream to cheer her up.

"You're back," she says coolly, getting into the passenger seat.

"I'm sorry about last night, Harp. I needed to clear my head," I offer, but she rolls her eyes.

This isn't going well, but I should've known that she'd be mad at me for disappearing. It was selfish, but I couldn't stand being in the apartment any longer. I had to take the time to process my thoughts and make a plan.

I'm back, and I'm better because I left.

"Want to go for ice cream?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"If you have something to say, just spit it out. I'm not a kid anymore, Mav. You don't need to bribe me before telling me shit," she deadpans, waiting for me to speak.

I wasn't prepared for her attitude, and I guess she's right. I should treat her as my equal now, not the little girl I remember her as.

"Okay, fair enough. I met with the lawyer this morning, and they said that I'm your legal guardian now," I say, holding my breath for her reaction.

“Alright, that’s fine with me. That’s it?” she asks, and I brace myself for this.

“She also left me the house. I plan to sell it and get us something of our own. How does that sound?” I tell her, and she sighs.

“Why? Are you trying to forget all about Grams?” she whispers, holding back tears.

“Of course not. We can keep anything we want to remember her by. I think it’s time we start brand new,” I say, and she nods.

I figured she’d push back more, but we’re both silent for the rest of the ride. I let her into Karina’s apartment, reminding her to do her homework, and I closed the door behind me.

It’s been a long day, and I’m counting the minutes until my woman gets home. I need to hold her longer than I got on her lunch break.

I know she was worried about me last night, and I want to find a way to make up for that — and everything else I’ve put her through lately.

I’ve been closed off and moody, but that’s over with. Grams is gone, and Harper is where she belongs.

The three of us are starting a new journey together, and I want to show Karina that I’m still all in. Nothing’s changed.

“Honey, I’m home!” I hear her shout, and I can barely contain my excitement.

“Hi, baby girl. How was your day?” I ask, taking the groceries and kissing her on the cheek.

“It was fine. I got a call from the court today,” she says, and my eyes widen.

I’m frozen in place, waiting to hear about her ex’s case. If he’s out and free, I might lose my fucking mind.

“He’s pleaded not guilty, and his bail was set pretty high,” she finishes, and I exhale.

*Thank god.*

There's still a chance he could be let out, but I doubt that'll happen with how much the bail is.

"That's amazing news, kitten," I pull her close, holding her face in my hands.

She stands on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine, and I kiss her back with force. I've missed being with her, and this dash of intimacy is just what I need.

I scoop her up, her legs wrapping around my waist, and push her into the wall. She moans into my mouth, and I lightly bite her bottom lip.

Her hands tangle in my hair, and mine are firmly placed on her ass, holding her in place. I break our kiss, staring into those hazel eyes, and I can't hold back anymore.

I've been shaking inside, terrified of saying how I feel, but I'm done being afraid.

"*I love you, Karina,*" I pause, not expecting her to say it back, but she bites her lip.

"*Fuck.* I love you so much, Mav," she breathes, and my heart skips a beat.

I carry her to our bed, kissing her collarbone as I gently lay her down.

Her eyes glimmer, and I take a moment to close and lock the door.

"Get over here, Angel," she whispers, slowly lifting her shirt off, and I don't waste a second.

I kiss her breasts, still trapped in the confines of her bra, and lightly tease the skin with little bites. She groans, tugging on my hair and kissing my neck.

We're tangled in each other, ripping clothes off, stealing kisses, and Karina and I *make love* for the first time.

She pushes me down, taking control and leaving kisses across my chest. Her hand is wrapped around my cock, slowly working it before climbing on top of me and sinking down until I fit all the way inside her.

I let a moan escape my lips, she feels so fucking good, and I take her perfect tits in my hands, pinching her nipples while she bounces up and down on me, her hands placed on my chest.

Her head tips back, and I can feel her clench around me, signaling that she's close. I thrust my hips, matching her pace, and when she comes, I watch as she loses all control.

"Fuck, Mav," she whispers, kissing my neck and breathing heavily.

"You amaze me, kitten," I bite her shoulder, making her scream.

I cover her mouth with my hand, telling her to be quiet.

"I'm going to make you come again, and this time, you can't make a sound," she nods, and I immediately pick up my pace.

I can feel her heart pounding, and her urge to moan is making her crazy, but when she bites my hand, I know she's finished.

I let her go, and she's trying to catch her breath.

"Good girl," I whisper into her neck, kissing her hard enough to leave a mark.

"I love you, Maverick," she says as I finish, letting my release go inside her.

"You're a *goddess*. I love you, too," I kiss her, soft and slow, until neither of us can breathe.

"We should cook dinner," I say, still completely naked underneath her.

"Yeah, you probably should," she laughs, and I toss her off me.

We race to the bathroom, and I beat her there. I lock the door behind me and listen as she begs to come in.

"You have to say please, kitten," I tease, and she groans.

"Please," she huffs, and I happily open the door.

I give her space to clean up and change into sweatpants and a t-shirt.

I pick through the things Karina bought and this woman shouldn't be trusted with food.

It's like she picked the things that would never go together and thought, "*Yes, this is cohesive!*" while tossing it in the cart.

Luckily, I can always make something out of nothing, and an idea starts to form.

Once Karina is dressed, she runs next door to see Harper, and they both come back to keep me company while I cook.

I will *absolutely* get used to this.



DURING ONE OF OUR LATE-NIGHT PILLOW TALK SESSIONS, Karina made it a point to stress that I never formally asked her out on a date. We merged our lives and became one overnight.

"I promise I'll take you out on a proper first date," I kissed her scrunched-up nose, knowing she'd hold me to it.

Tonight's the night, and I'm taking her to a new steakhouse that opened recently. I found my best button-down shirt, choosing the light blue one and matching it with black pants.

I thought about wearing a full three-piece suit to mess with her but ultimately decided against it.

I feel like this is important to Karina as she wants to feel a bit of normalcy in our relationship, so I'm taking it seriously and intend for this to be the perfect first date.

Once I'm ready, I walk across the hall and knock on her door, flowers in hand.

Harper answers, inviting me in.

My face bounces off something, and I realize I've been pranked.

The girls hung cling wrap across the door frame, ensuring I'd walk into it.

I can't help but laugh, enjoying the feeling of the days when Karina and I would prank each other. God, that feels like eons ago.

"Gotcha!" she calls out, bent over the side of the couch from laughing so hard.

"Very funny. I will get you back," I smile, hugging her from behind.

I take her in, and she looks fucking incredible.

Her hair is pinned up in some fancy updo, and she worked hard on her makeup.

My mouth almost falls open when I see her dress. It's black, with tiny sequins that make her sparkle, and, of course, shows off her cleavage.

I'm in awe, and when she slips her hand in mine, I feel like the luckiest man alive.

"You look breathtaking, kitten," I whisper as I help her into the passenger seat of my truck.

Her perfume is mesmerizing, and I'm having trouble focusing.

"Thank you, Angel. You clean up well yourself," she smiles, and it's electric.

"You think Harper will be alright on her own?" I ask, a little nervous about leaving her with access to not one but two empty apartments.

"Yeah, she's a good girl. She'll probably turn the volume on the TV all the way up since we're not there to bug her about it," she laughs, and I can't help but agree.

I listen as she talks about work and the rumors of her salon closing permanently. I know the woman who owns it, so I'm surprised at the possibility.

Reilly, her co-worker turned friend, is paranoid about it, trying to devise ways to save their jobs.

I like her new friend, even though I only met her once. I'm just happy that Karina has settled in Forest Falls so well,



making it her permanent home.

We arrive at the restaurant, and the atmosphere is perfect for a first date. Dim lighting, quiet music, and private booths. We follow the hostess to our table and order two glasses of champagne.

I'm going all out for my woman, and I want everyone in this establishment to know who she belongs to.

"Have you decided what to do with the house and the lot?" Karina asks, sipping on her drink and looking utterly perfect.

"Yeah, I think I've figured it out. Tony can have the house, and my bosses can have the lot. I want to take my girls' house hunting and pick out something we all love. That's where we'll plant our roots," I tell her, holding her hand across the table.

She looked surprised, like something I said was abnormal. We never talked about her living with me and Harper, but maybe that's because I assumed she'd come with us.

"Your girls? As in me and Harper?" she questions, with an arch in her eyebrow.

"Yes, baby girl. I want you to live with us. We're a family," I say, sipping my champagne slowly while she gathers her thoughts.

"Is that your way of asking me to move in with you?" she smiles sweetly, expecting more of a grand gesture.

"No. *Absolutely not*. That was my way of floating the idea. When I ask you to move in with me, it'll be so big and romantic, you'll have no choice but to say yes," I cover my tracks and hope it suffices.

Karina is a romantic at heart, and she wants everything she sees in the movies. She'd never admit that, but deep down, she's a girl who likes her fairytale.

We order appetizers and entrees, skip over the moving-in talk, and find new little things to love about one another.

I know so much about the woman before me, but I only scratch the surface. Any chance we get to sit, talk, and learn

more about each other, I'm all ears.

Thankfully, I now know she takes her steak medium rare, a giant plus in my book.

My plan tonight is to pick her brain with rounds of questions and let her fire as many as she wants at me.

"Do you want to have kids?" I ask while we wait for our dinners to come.

"Yes, one day. Not more than two, though. I used to want a huge family like you see in those movies, but now, realistically, as an adult, I think I'd lose my mind," she laughs, and I can sense how good of a mother she'd be.

"How about you? You technically already have one," Karina winks at me, and the champagne makes her a little silly.

I love her smile, but in this dim lighting, it's *incandescent*.

I've seen a million sides of Karina: when she was broken, the times she's woken up next to me, the radiance when she's pleased, and the times she doesn't realize I notice everything about her, but tonight, in this restaurant, is my absolute *favorite*.

"It's scary to think about because my mom died so young and left Harp and me behind. I think I would like at least one of my own, though," I say just as our food arrives.

We marvel at how excellent the steak is, savoring every bite. Karina orders another glass of champagne, and I opt for water since I'm driving.

"Did you always want to be a cosmetologist?" I ask between bites, keeping our conversation flowing.

"No, absolutely not. It was easy to learn and get certified. Something to fall back on because I was always running, and salons are everywhere," she answers, and my heart pangs with sadness.

I hate when she talks about her life before us. It's the last thing she deserved. She spent her twenties running away and constantly having to start over.

“I lucked out with construction, but I wanted to be a gym teacher when I was growing up. I loved sports and played until mom got sick,” I confess, knowing the only person who ever knew that was my mother.

Karina picks up on that and takes my hand across the table.

“You’d be an amazing teacher, Mav. Especially with how much you know about sports,” she smiles softly, squeezing my hand.

“Maybe one day, I’ll coach our kids’ little league team,” I joke, her cheeks flush.

“I will absolutely hold you to that,” she says, and I know she will.

The waitress asks if we want dessert, and I decide to take a slice of chocolate cake home for Harper.

Once I take care of the bill, I drive us to the other side of town near the river.

We get out and walk, the sun slowly setting beyond the horizon.

“I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher,” she says quietly, and I almost miss it.

“Really? How come?” I ask, interested in what made her choose to teach.

“I’ve always loved kids. In high school, we had this class where we took care of toddlers every class, and it was so much fun. We did crafts, read stories, and took them to the playground. I took the class all four years, even though it was an elective. I was passionate about it,” she finishes, and I’m not surprised.

Her heart is so big, and she’s so patient. She’d make the perfect kindergarten teacher.

“We’d be the teachers in school who were married, and it’d gross all the kids out,” I laugh, and so does she.

“First, we’re having kids, and now we’re married? You’ve got quite the fantasy rolling around up there, Angel,” she

smacks me on the arm, and I pull her into me.

“It’s not a fantasy, kitten,” I whisper, kissing her cheeks before placing my lips on hers.

It’s light and fluffy. Perfect for a first date.

“You kiss on the first date? I wonder if I can get up to your bed, too,” I tease, and she pushes me off her.

“In your dreams, broody,” she says, walking faster to escape me.

I chase her down, and we collapse onto a bench close by.

“I love you, my beautiful girl,” I hold her tightly, admiring every inch of her.

She snuggles under my arm and rests her head on my shoulder.

“I love you more than anything, Mav,” she says, closing her eyes and enjoying the sound of the river.

The air turns chilly, and we decide to call it a night. I help her into her seat, and she catches me by the shirt before I can close the door.

“I think you’ve earned a spot in my bed,” she winks, and my pulse races.

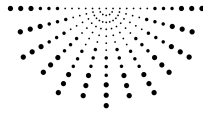
This was admittedly my first date ever, and it was absolute perfection. I plan to do this more often because nothing feels better than spoiling the girl of your dreams.

I keep my hand on her leg the whole ride. I started doing this to settle her nerves or reassure her that I was right by her side, but now I realize I do it for me, too.

Her touch keeps me focused and makes me feel connected to her.

*I am hers, and she is mine.*

# KARINA



Settling into our new normal has been surprisingly easy. Harper, Maverick, and I get along perfectly, even through her teenage attitudes, and we've gotten into a routine.

Harper still sleeps in my old apartment and spends the evenings with us.

It's not an ideal situation, but it works for us. Soon, the sale of Grams' house will go through, and once Mav sells the lot to Hunter and Adam, we'll be free to find our own house.

Even though he hasn't formally asked me, I know I'll be going wherever they do.

It's unspoken, but also lovely to have that sense of romanticism in our relationship.

Maverick is a huge grump; he can't stand to socialize or make friends, but he's nothing of the sort with me.

When I filled Reilly in on our super sweet date night, her jaw was permanently stuck to the floor. She couldn't believe my handsome yet grumpy boyfriend could be romantic.

That was the only actual date I've been on, and it was magical. *Absolutely phenomenal.*

He took me home, and after we checked on Harper and gave her the cake, he whisked me away to our bedroom. We role-played a first date scenario, where I said things like, "*I never do this,*" and he swore he doesn't sleep around.

It was silly, light-hearted, and most of all, it was fucking *hot*.

Maverick and I are electric together in bed, but our priority is and always be, ensuring we're connected on deeper levels. His emotions are my concern, and if there's one thing we do well, it's communicate.

Maverick's a softy, and I love everything about his tender side. It's almost as if he's been hiding it all these years, and our soul connection brought it out of him.

I'm a sucker for long conversations, trauma dumping, and building that bond with the people I care about. That's the best thing about our relationship, we bring these incredible, vulnerable, and emotionally intelligent qualities out in each other.

We always vow to see the best in one another, and we're stronger because of that.

Tonight, I'm closing up the salon with Reilly. We're blasting the music and dancing around, enjoying the monotonous clean-up.

"Alright, bitch, I'm out of here. Need anything else?" Reilly asks, grabbing her stuff from the back room.

"No, thanks for staying. I'll see you tomorrow, Reills," I smile, hugging her before she goes.

I'm a few minutes behind her, and I decide to call Maverick while locking up and turning off the lights.

There are a few missed calls and voicemails on my notification screen, but I bypass them all, dying to talk to my man.

"Hi, baby girl. How was your shift?" he answers immediately, and I'm instantly smiling.

"I closed with my girl, so it was fun. I should be home in a half hour or so. I have to make a quick stop," I say, locking the front door and heading toward my car.

"Okay. I miss you, and I love you. Get home safe," he tells me, and I say I'll see him soon.

This is my third closing shift in the last week, signaling that the rumors may be true. Alivia is usually a stickler for her routines, but we've barely seen her lately. This salon may be shutting its doors after all.

I glance at fiery sunset, admiring the orange and yellow colors dusted across the sky. Fall is finally upon us, and the leaves are changing colors.

My favorite time of year.

The flannels are coming out, my pumpkin spice coffee creamer is back in stores, and I'm dragging Harper and Mav to a pumpkin patch with a hayride this weekend. It doesn't get better than the autumn season.

I unlock my car and slide in, tossing my purse and sweatshirt onto the passenger seat.

I start the car, lock my doors, and get the radio set when I hear a noise from my back seat.

I turn to check, but I feel something cold on the back of my neck before I can.

I freeze, not speaking, moving, or breathing.

"Drive, now," A voice says, and I'm flooded with fear.

How is this possible? This isn't happening right now. My heart is racing, and my mouth has gone completely dry. I want to scream, cry, or make noise, but I'm *frozen*.

"Did you hear me, Karrie? Fucking drive!" he screams, and I do as I'm told.

I pull out of the salon parking lot and listen to the directions I'm given. Soon enough, I realize we're driving toward Maverick's abandoned lot, and I'm praying to anything that Tony is nearby.

*No such luck.*

It's empty, and I had a feeling this was where he'd want to go. It's obvious he's been out of jail for a few days, following me and probably Maverick, too.

“Get out, slowly. Any sudden movements and I will hurt you, Karrie,” he says, and I don’t test my luck.

*Not yet.*

In the headlights, he tells me to stop walking. I watch as he dumps the contents of my purse and takes my phone.

I thought he’d smash it, but he goes through a few things and stuffs it in his pocket. The ringtone I picked for Maverick goes off, and Asher declines the call, laughing out loud as he does.

I want to run while he’s distracted, but I don’t know which way to go. Tony lives up the road, but I couldn’t run fast enough, confidently. I stash the escape idea for a different time.

I need to survive, and right now, Asher is in charge.

“Get in the passenger seat,” he spits, and I do.

“Ash, what are you doing?” I ask, using the nickname from when we were together all those years ago.

“We’re finally going to be together, Karrie. I got your message, and I know that you’re scared. I’m sorry about that, but we’re going someplace special,” he says, and I’m relieved that it doesn’t sound like he *wants* to hurt me.

Over the years, I pictured this a million times. He found me and forced me to be with him.

Over and over, I practiced how I’d approach him, and I want him to feel comfortable.

He’s taking a considerable risk, and I don’t want him frazzled or jumpy.

I’ll comply and be the best hostage I can, but when I get the chance ... *I will run.*

We drive for a while, not saying anything, when he finally speaks up.

“Karrie, you know you don’t love him, right? You’re using him to make me jealous?” he asks, and I’m hanging on my door for dear life.



“I never wanted to make you jealous,” I say, keeping my cool.

“You’re a used car lot. Everyone has had a test drive. You couldn’t find the thrill I gave you and are mending your heart. So don’t play fucking stupid. This truck guy, he loves you? You’ve fucked him?” he rambles his delusions, keeping his eyes on the road.

I don’t say anything, but he nudges me with whatever weapon he had on my neck earlier, and I open up.

“Yes. Yes, yes. He loves me,” I cry, begging the stars, planets, and everything in between that Maverick could save me.

“He’s nothing compared to me. I’ll remind you of that,” he says, and we don’t talk for a while.

I’m crying, my head resting against the window, watching all the cars go by that don’t realize I’ve been kidnapped.

I’m being held in this car against my will, and nobody will make eye contact with me as we pass them.

Mav knew something was wrong, that’s why he called me. It’s been fifty-three minutes since I got into the passenger seat, and I know he’s rallying the troops to find me. My man will find me, and he will save me.

It’s all I’ve got to believe in right now.

“Your mom looks incredible,” Asher breaks the silence, and my confusion is evident.

“My mother? When did you see her?” I ask, terrified of the answer.

If he’s been stalking her or plotting against those bratty step sisters of mine, I’ll never forgive myself.

“She hired the fancy lawyer I have. Katherine visited me and promised she’d get me out. I didn’t believe her, but when I saw her in the gallery at my court date, I knew she’d finally come to her senses. A few weeks later, I was released. Katherine made it all happen,” he smiles proudly, and I feel like I’m going to throw up.

“*My mother?*” I ask the only words that I can form.

“Katherine said your life is fucked, and you made a mistake. By sending her, you finally realized who you belonged with and stopped running,” he says, and I beg him to pull over.

“Ash, stop this fucking car, or I will throw up everywhere!” I scream, and finally, he does.

I take in my surroundings, but it’s all trees. There are no mile markers or exit signs.

It’s darkness, trees, and me.

Reluctantly, I make my way back to the car. It’s the only way I can survive right now, and I’ll do anything to see Maverick again.

“Karrie, drink some water. I don’t want you to get sick again,” he says, but I refuse.

No amount of caring gestures will make me trust him. I turn toward the window in protest, but I feel coldness on my cheek and freeze.

“Now. Drink some water, princess. You must be thirsty,” he says, and I take the water bottle from him this time.

I sip until I feel his weapon leave my skin, and I finally regain the ability to breathe.

He starts driving away, and eventually, I start seeing double everything. The water had to have been vodka, and I didn’t even notice because of how paralyzed with fear I was.

“So, what do you want from me?” I slur, barely able to form a sentence.

“I want you right here, Karrie,” he says, and my world goes black.

I think about Maverick as my eyes force themselves closed, how he smiles and bites his lip when I say sexy things.

I think of Harper, the young lady I treat as my little sister, and how much fun we have together.

My brain goes foggy, and I can't breathe anymore unless I remind myself to do so.

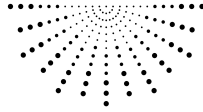
I'm lying in the front seat of my car, manually breathing, with Asher driving. I've been drugged and know I'll lose all my cognitive abilities shortly.

The last thing I remember before slipping into the black isn't Maverick.

*It's Old Man Tony.*

My power is here, and all I need to do is *breathe*.

# MAVERICK



*I*t's been over three hours since I talked to Karina, and I'm starting to worry. I've called everyone I can think of. Juliette, Adam, Hunter, and even Reilly.

Nobody has heard from her.

Reilly said her goodbyes to Karina right before she called me, and that's the last anyone's heard from her.

It's not like her to not check in. She would've called me if she had gone somewhere else or needed space. I'm hellbent on that.

My phone rings, and it's nearly eleven p.m., a number I don't recognize. I hope it's my woman, and I answer, but I'm fucking trucked as I listen to the words on the other side.

Asher was released on bail.

There's only one reason I'd get the phone call: Karina didn't answer hers.

I'm her emergency contact. I was there that first day we filed the report, and she made sure it was okay if she put my name down.

It's official in my mind.

*Asher kidnapped Karina.*

He has my woman, and I won't rest until I have her in my arms.

I make calls — way too many phone calls — until there's finally a plan in place.

“You guys didn't have to come,” I say as Hunter and Adam pull up to my apartment building.

“That is where you're wrong. We'll be here until Karina is home,” Hunter's wife says, parking her pregnant belly on the couch.

Suddenly, my apartment is filled with people who care about Karina.

Juliette sits beside Willow, inviting Harper to join them.

“Girls, stay here with this lovely young lady,” Adam says, referring to Harper.

“We need to get out there and find her. That lunatic kidnapped her, and I won't rest until she's safe,” I say, eliciting strange looks from everyone.

I'm emotional. I can't stop crying, and my anger keeps coming in waves. I should've been there. I should've known something was wrong sooner.

Unfortunately, I did not know that, but I beat myself up anyway.

“You think you can make rational decisions right now?” Hunter says, and I shake my head in protest.

He takes me by the arm, and he's surprisingly strong,

“Let us take the lead. You go wherever we go, but Adam and I do the talking. Understand?” he barks, and I nod.

I'm not the person who should be in charge.

“How do we get Karina home?” I break down in tears, and Hunter catches me.

“Do the cops have any information on who bailed him out?” Adam interjects, joining us outside.

“No, it was an automated message, but I think I know someone who can help,” I say, relief flooding my veins.

I pull out my phone and call Old Man Tony.

Tony has surveillance of one of the two ways out of town. One of those ways crosses his property line – the abandoned lot – and he keeps a camera there.



HUNTER DRIVES, AND I RIDE IN THE PASSENGER SEAT, LOOKING for clues. Adam follows behind in his truck, and I can't see anything with his high beams on.

“Tell Adam to kill the lights,” I say, and Hunter nods.

It doesn't help. Everything is just dark now.

It's quiet as if nobody has been out here since the daylight, but Old Man Tony awaits us at the abandoned lot.

Before I even see the camera footage, I see Karina's purse.

Everything is dumped, but her phone isn't with the rest of her things. I've been calling non-stop, but it keeps going straight to voicemail. If it isn't here, he must have it.

“Alright, Maverick. Here are the shots my eye in the sky picked up. I'm sorry. If I'd known ... well, I already told *lil lady* what I'd do to him,” he says somberly, handing over his phone.

The four of us watch Karina get out of the driver's seat, and Asher joins her. He's got a knife on her, and she stands by while he tosses the contents of her purse.

I see that motherfucker pocket her phone, and if he doesn't think I'll keep calling, he has another thing coming.

Eventually, she climbs into the passenger seat, and he drives away. They were heading out of town, but we need to find the highway they took from here.

“Thanks, Tony. We'll call you if we hear anything,” I say, shaking his hand.

“You call if you need backup,” he gestures to the weapon on his hip, and we all nod.

“Now what?” I turn to Hunter and Adam, who look as lost as I am.

“I think we go to the police station,” Hunter sighs, and Adam agrees.

I know the cops can help, but don’t want to spend hours inside the station house. I want to be out looking for her. That’s difficult without a lead, so ultimately I give in and follow Hunter’s plan.

On the ride, he calls his wife, updating her on everything and checking in on Harper. I would give anything to be talking to Karina right now. I start to cry again, terrified of what’s happening to her.

I know she’s counting on me to save her, and I will do just that.

I call Karina’s phone again, but it goes straight to voicemail. Eventually, he has to turn it on, and I won’t stop calling.

“You ready?” Hunter asks as we pull into the parking lot.

I don’t hesitate. I take a deep breath and walk inside to report my girlfriend *missing*.

Two hours and a shit ton of questions later, Karina is officially a ‘*missing person*.’

There’s a *BOLO* on her car, and Asher is listed as ‘*armed and dangerous*.’

It’s nearly three a.m., and I’m fucking wired.

I want to go back to all the places they could be hiding, but Hunter and Adam want to call it night.

I feel like a caged animal.

I’ve called Karina sixty-two times since the last time we spoke, and finally, the phone on the end begins to ring.

I hold my breath, waiting for her to answer, but she doesn’t.

Relentlessly, I dial her number, knowing that asshole is declining my calls. If he wants Karina for himself, he’ll quite literally have to *get through me*.

I won't stop until she's safe in my arms.

On the eighty-sixth call, someone finally answers.

The room goes silent as we hear heavy breathing on the other line.

"Hello?" I say slowly, waiting for the beast to speak.

"Karina!" I scream, and I hear laughing in the distance.

"Karina can't come to the phone right now. She's in my backseat," he says, and my hands ball into fists.

"Listen, you sick motherfucker. If you lay a single hand on her, I will fucking kill you. I will hunt you down, find you, and kill you. Do you understand me?" I say, staying as calm as I possibly can.

"Catch me if you can," he laughs, and the phone disconnects.

I hold my head in my hands, resisting the urge to throw up. That asshole thinks he's won and acts like kidnapping Karina is a game.

Harper shouldn't be seeing this, and I beg her to go to bed.

"Mav, I'm not going anywhere. You *and* Karina need me. She's okay, I can feel it," she says, pulling me in for a hug.

"How do you know, Harp?" I ask, the tears falling again.

"Karina said that when people die, you feel them all around you or notice them in different things like butterflies or dragonflies. I don't feel her here, and I don't see her in anything. So she's okay," she says, sounding like an innocent kid, and I have to take her word for it.

"Thank you, Harper," I kiss her cheek but usher her into Karina's bed.

I don't sleep. I stay up all night, pacing around while everyone else spent the night in Karina's apartment. I'm ready for a game plan when Hunter and Willow come in with coffees for everyone, and a little while later, Reilly joins us.



“I’m taking Harper to school,” Juliette says, looking for someone to give her their keys.

I toss her mine and hug Harper goodbye.

“One of us in this room will pick you up today. I will text you who and in what car by lunchtime. I love you, Harp,” I say, not wanting to let go.

“Okay. If Karina comes home, will you text me that, too? I don’t care if I get in trouble,” she asks, and I promise her I will.

*Fuck.*

Harper shouldn’t have to deal with this, and I swear, if I get my hands on Asher, I’ll kill him for what he did to all of us.

“Hi, I’m Reilly. I brought footage from the salon,” she says, stepping forward and plugging her phone into my TV.

We watch Reilly leave, and Karina comes out, her phone in hand. That’s when we hung up, and she got in the car like nothing was wrong.

“He had to have been inside the car. Reilly, did you get any earlier stuff?” I ask, and she shakes her head.

“I didn’t, but I will. The cameras save twenty-four hours of footage,” she says, and we all practically rush her out the door.

The more footage we have, the better we can understand what happened.

This is pointless to show where she is now, though. It’s morning, and still no sign of her car.

I won’t give up. This is the most painful thing I’ve gone through since my mother’s death. I want to reach out and touch Karina’s thigh or squeeze her hand a few times, but I can’t.

*She’s not here.*

He can’t have her. Nothing on this planet is going to stop me from getting her home safely.

I will burn down every forest, lift every car, and swim every ocean to find her.

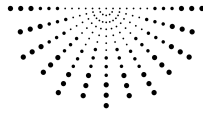
Asher may think he's with Karrie, the young girl desperate for love and anything to numb the pain.

But I know the woman she grew into.

Karina Grace Collins is strong as fuck, and she will find a way to tell me where she is.

That is one thing I do not doubt.

# KARINA



*I*t's dark, and I can't feel my hands. My eyes are groggy, almost like they're refusing to open to shield me from seeing the predicament I'm in.

My hands are tied together, and the black plastic burns my skin. I must've been fighting in my sleep because my whole body is sore.

The last thing I remember was being in the front seat, and I realize now that I'm lying down in the back with a blanket covering me.

"Relax, Karrie. You're fine. Just a few safety precautions until we get where we're going," Asher laughs, and I fight harder to get this blanket off me.

I'm so weak from whatever he gave me that I can barely move. I try lifting the blanket off like hell, but thinking of Old Man Tony strengthens me.

I don't know why, but it works. That short, bearded man channels my fear into power, and I use every bit of it to sit up.

"Ash, please. You don't have to do this. Untie me," I choke, my mouth dry from whatever he drugged me with.

"Your man called. We had a little chat. He said he won't bother us again, so I guess he doesn't love you after all," he smirks at me in the rearview, but I know he's lying.

That scrunch in his nose and how he slightly shakes his head while talking is a dead giveaway. Just like when we were together, his tell is the same.

Instead of calling him on it or rattling his cage, I play along.

Relief floods my body like a bad hurricane because Maverick has called and he's not giving up on me. That thought alone is enough to give me strength, and I will continue to fight.

I refuse to submit to Asher, and whatever he demands of me. I'd rather die than let him have any pieces of me. My body is meant for Maverick and will always be that way.

"See? Nothing is holding us back. Take these restraints off, please?" I whine, but he doesn't flinch.

We drive for a long time, my hands bound and my mind wandering.

I'm slowly letting the rage build inside, and I remember that Asher mentioned my mother before I passed out.

"Why did Katherine bail you out?" I ask, and I'm sick just thinking about her.

I'm genuinely curious why my mom would be on the side of my abuser and stalker. She's sheltered me all these years, and to switch sides over one fight makes no sense.

"We've stayed in touch. It took me a long time to realize you'd changed your name, but your mom clued me in, and I watched you for a few months while you lived with that hot blonde," he tells me, and my stomach clenches.

He'd watched me and Juliette, and my mom told him where to find me. This cannot be real. I recall her disapproval of me moving in with Juliette, and we didn't talk for weeks.

She thought I was behaving irresponsibly. Apparently, when we fight, she sides with my fucking ex-boyfriend and acts like nothing is wrong with that.

"So why did it take you so long to show yourself?" I asked, referencing when I saw him on the security feed.

"Your roommate left, and I thought maybe it was time for you to know I was nearby so you didn't feel lonely," he sounds so fucking delusional, and my anger is boiling.

“I was never lonely. I was always terrified. How did you not understand I want nothing to do with you?” I spit, my emotions breaking free.

I wanted to stay calm and keep him talking, but I couldn't help but be fucking angry. He stole my life and made me look over my shoulder for years.

I deserve to be mad, and I'm the one who's being held hostage. It's been like this for eight years, except this time, he *physically* has me.

“You were young and stupid, Karrie. I forgave you for running away,” he says, swerving around a minivan and knocking my head into the window.

“I was fucking seventeen! I should've never gotten involved with you. I was a child! You were a grown-ass man. In no world did we belong together,” I scream, letting the built-up rage escape.

“You've twisted our history in your head. You loved me, Karrie. More than anyone ever has,” he pleads his case, and I want to hear none of it.

“I regret you all the fucking time, Asher. If I could go back and change it all, I would. I wouldn't have blushed when you walked by or dressed to get your attention. I would've kept going and let you destroy someone else's life,” I say, hitting him where it hurts.

“You don't mean that. You were so desperate for me, always wearing those tiny tank tops and showing off how sexy you were. You were a tease,” he smiles like he's reliving it all.

I need to keep myself from throwing up everywhere with disgust.

“I was a fucking child! Do you not understand that? You were an adult. You should've walked away, knowing that our age difference was wrong. Instead, you saw me as a broken little girl and used me to make yourself feel better,” I try to argue, but he elbows me in the nose, blood gushing from my face.

I hold the blanket over my nose, but I'm positive that he broke it. There's blood all over my face, shirt, and hands.

I hold in my pain and act like he didn't phase me. We don't speak for a while, and I take in every exit sign and mile marker I see.

We're going south on a major highway, and when he stops for gas and snacks at a rest stop, I refuse to get out.

"Karina, let's go. Go to the bathroom," he suggests, but I shake my head.

The last thing he wants is for me to make a scene. I kick my feet and yell before he holds a hand over my mouth.

"Your hands and feet are tied. I will circle back and kill that man if you try to escape," he says, and I don't even blink.

I lock my eyes into his and hope he sees something genuine in them.

Asher walks away from the car, taking the key with him and locking me inside.

I should panic or cry for help, but I have one mission in mind.

I maneuver my hands to launch myself into the passenger seat and go straight for the glove compartment.

I go for my power instead of wasting my time waving down help.

I beg, plead, and pray to everything I believe in that my weapon is still there.

I close my eyes and lift the lever, and the small piece awaits me.

I take it and look around my car for a safe place to stash it. An armrest in the back seat can come down or stay tucked into the trunk. I stuff it in there, knowing I'm going to need it.

It's my only hope, and instead of pushing my luck, I lie back and pretend I didn't make mastermind moves.

“You’ve been such a dream, princess. You’ll get your reward soon,” he sneers, and I turn away.

I’m crying silently, wondering how I got myself into this situation, but in this moment I slowly realize this isn’t my fault. All these years, I’ve blamed myself for being young and dumb. I was a baby, and I was preyed on.

Asher was happy to corrupt and ruin me. He was an adult, and nothing would ever come back on him. I’ve spent years tearing down anything that connected me to Asher, constantly rebuilding my life in order to stay far away from him.

I refused to be that miserable little girl. Instead, I grew into an adult and built something worth fighting for.

My family and the friends who love me.

It’s easy to fall into the traps of my mind when I have nothing to do but *think and reflect*.

All of my mistakes, triumphs, and everything in between are swirling through my head like a cruel tornado.

*Why won’t this fucking die?* I sob quietly, praying that I can survive this.

“We’re almost there,” he says, breaking our long silence, but I don’t bother asking where we’re going.

*I don’t care.*

“Don’t you want to know the surprise I’ve planned for us, Karrie?” Asher asks, turning to face me at a red light.

“Not even a little bit,” I roll my eyes, and he warns me to behave.

“We’re going to a cabin. Nice, secluded, and it’s on a lake,” he explains, and I fight the urge to laugh at him.

“Or you could take me the fuck home. Maybe find yourself a woman as batshit crazy as you are that’ll love you,” I scoff, purposely trying to rile him up.

If we’re getting close to wherever we’re going, I will lose access to my weapon and the advantage it gives me.

As much as it pains me, I need him to stop driving and get back here with me. It's my only chance.

"You need to watch your mouth and be grateful for everything I'm doing for us to be together," he slams on the brakes, and I smash my head into the front seat.

*Fuck.*

"That's not going to happen. You can take your plans and go fuck yourself," I spit blood from my lip at him, trying to get a reaction.

"You're being a brat. Do you need me to remind you who's in charge here?" he asks, and I've got him right where I want him.

"Fuck you. You'll never be in charge of me," I feel a sharp sting across my cheek.

"One more time, Karrie. Fucking mess with me again," he says, the anger boiling over.

"You won't do anything. You don't know how to tame a woman like me. I'm not the scared little girl you once dated," I smirk, offering a challenge.

I hold my breath, waiting for his reaction, but he doesn't say anything. He just keeps swerving in and out of lanes. Finally, he takes an exit, and maybe my approach is working.

When he pulls into the parking lot of a shady-looking motel and chooses a spot away from any other cars, I silently rejoice, knowing my mind manipulation worked.

I take a deep breath and shake off the nerves. I only have one chance to save myself, and it's right now.

"I'll show you who's the boss. Lay on your back," he gets out of the car, and I do as I'm told.

*This is it.*

*Breathe.*

I let his hands roam my body, biting my lip to hold the tears in and keep my head away from him.



He grabs my chin hard and forces his lips on mine. I try to pull away, but his grip is too tight. His hand moves from my face to my throat, cutting off my ability to breathe.

I feel his tongue part my lips, frantically searching for mine, and I do anything I can to get him off me.

I lightly buck my hips, which catches his attention. He breaks the kiss, and I have to keep myself from spitting the taste of him out of my mouth.

“God, Karrie. You’re as beautiful as ever. I’ve pictured us like this so many times,” he whispers, unzipping his pants.

*No. This isn’t right.*

“Take my shirt off. I want to feel your skin on mine,” I breathe, and he attempts to lift it over my head.

“I need my hands, Ash,” I whine, bucking my hips against his leg to appear desperate for him.

He pauses, unsure if he can trust me. I beg, whining again, and he takes a knife from his pocket.

“You better behave, princess,” he warns before cutting the plastic off my wrists.

I rub the tender skin where the ties cut into me, and he rips my shirt over my head.

I wrap my right arm around his neck, bringing him close to my lips.

I tease him with kisses on his neck while my left hand slowly moves toward the crease in the seat. He’s entirely into this, and I ramp up my efforts when my hand touches the cold metal.

Slowly, I slide it under my ass, gripping the handle and trigger with my left hand.

Asher pulls himself up, sitting on my stomach and admiring my breasts. Roughly groping them through my bra and I pretend to moan in pleasure.

“Come here, baby,” I whisper, using a finger to lure him close.

He leans down, and I pull the trigger as his stomach touches mine.

A round going straight into his midsection.

His eyes grow wide. He attempts to grab me, and I fire again. The sound echoing loudly in my ears.

“You fucking bitch,” he chokes, blood coming from his mouth.

*“I’ve fucking had enough.”*

I push him onto the floor of the car and frantically look for the knife he used to cut my wrists free.

I find it in the passenger seat and climb over his bleeding body to reach it. I cut my ankles free, tuck my weapon into the waistband of my pants, snatch my keys, and flee from the car.

I’m only in a bra and black leggings, but I don’t care. I can’t stop running.

There’s blood all over me, some mine, some his, but when I reach a gas station, I run inside, begging to use a phone.

The lady behind the counter looks at me like I have three heads, and I ask again.

“Please! I was kidnapped. I need to use a phone!” I beg, and she comes from behind the register and hands me her cell.

“Thank you,” I breathe while she locks the store’s door.

I dial frantically, trying to remember Maverick’s phone number. It’s no use, and instead I decide to call the police. Asher won’t be able to drive, and I need them to arrest him.

Once I confirm my identity to three different operators, I hear sirens in the distance. The state police are coming, and I hide in the store until they arrive.

“Where are we?” I ask the lady, and she tells me I’m nearly ten hours away from home.

*Fucking Christ.*

An officer taps on the door, and we unlock it to let him in.

“Karina Collins?” he asks, and I nod.

“Here,” I hand him my weapon, promising I have a permit in my car.

“This is legally registered in your name?” he gives me a strange look.

“Yes, sir. I shot my kidnapper twice in the stomach with it,” I say, wiping tears from my eyes.

“Okay, let’s get you into my cruiser,” he leads the way, and I thank the gas station employee for her help.

He takes me to my car, where police handcuffed Asher to a stretcher. He’s lost a lot of blood, and they’re taking him to a local hospital.

“Can I get my things?” I ask, and he shakes his head no.

“Please! Just my phone and shirt. I won’t touch anything else,” I beg, and he sympathetically offers to get those things for me.

“Where’s your permit?” he questions, and I instruct him exactly where it is.

I watch as he rummages through my car, finally coming back with my phone.

“You have five minutes. It’s evidence,” he says, and I thank him.

I pull the shirt over my head as I find Mav’s name on my phone.

I dial, and he answers on the third ring.

“You son of a bitch. Where is Karina?” he screams, and I can hear him the pain in his voice.

“Mav. It’s me,” I say, immediately breaking down into tears.

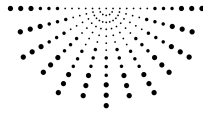
I watch as the ambulance drives away, and the officers take items from my car and bag them for evidence. They dust for fingerprints and take photos of everything.

I’m frozen in this cop car, unable to move a single muscle.

I broke free. I escaped.

*I survived.*

# MAVERICK



*I*t's been twelve hours since the last time I heard anything about Karina. I'm an absolute wreck, and everyone around me is stressed. We've tried to retrace Asher's steps, but Reilly's videos were inconclusive.

We've essentially run out of options aside from sitting around and waiting.

Harper's still in school, and Juliette offers to pick her up. I can't see her like this. I'm barely holding on, taking turns between crying and breaking things.

Every time someone's phone goes off, I freeze. Praying it's Karina. It never is, and I can't hide my disappointment.

"Maverick, why don't you rest? You've been going at this all night," Hunter pulls me aside, but I refuse.

"There's no way I can rest while she's out there," I fight back, but he shakes his head.

"What if they find her? What use are you going to be if you haven't slept?" he asks, and he has a point.

"I'm too wired," I say, and he hands me a joint.

"I don't smoke," I hand it back, but he's pushy.

"Even better. It'll knock you right out," he assures me, and I take his advice.

Even if I don't sleep, resting will help me gain clarity. Karina needs me to be strong for the both of us right now, so I light the joint and lay on my bed.

I hear everyone whispering outside my door, and eventually, I drift asleep.

I dream about Karina. We're running down the shoreline, playing in waves while the sun sets. She's so far away I can't reach her, no matter how hard I try I can't touch her.

Suddenly, she slips further away, into the ocean, and I can't see her anymore.

I'm jolted awake by Willow, and she's screaming at me to answer my phone.

"It's Karina's number, answer it!" she yells, tossing it to me from the doorway.

"You son of a bitch. Where is Karina?" I scream, the tears falling.

I'm so angry, I can't take this anymore. I need to know she's okay.

"Mav. It's me," she says, almost whispering.

My heart stops beating. I shake my head, making sure I'm not dreaming.

I put the phone on speaker, and everyone gathers around my bed.

"Karina? Where are you? Are you hurt?" I ask, listening as she takes a deep breath.

"I shot him twice," she sobs, and I run my hands through my hair.

*That's my fucking girl.*

"I don't know where I am. The cops are taking me to a hospital. My nose is broken," she tells me, and my blood boils.

That son of a fucking bitch. I'll kill him.

The officer tells Karina to wrap it up and gives her the hospital's name.

Hunter types it in on his phone, telling us she's ten hours away.

*Fucking Christ.*

“I’m coming, baby girl. I’ll be there as soon as possible. I love you,” I say, and she says it back before giving her phone to the officer.

I’m frantic, attempting to gather my things and get on the road quickly.

“What’s the plan?” Adam asks while the girls chat about Karina being okay.

“What do you mean? I’m going to her,” I say, slipping my wallet into my pocket.

“You can’t drive alone for ten hours, running on two hours of sleep,” Hunter chimes in, and I shake my head.

They’re starting to grind my nerves.

There’s no reality where Karina is safe, and I don’t immediately go to her.

“Listen, I’ll drive your truck. Adam can follow in his. We’ll all rotate shifts until we make it there, deal?” Hunter offers, and I accept under one condition.

“This isn’t a fucking road trip. No stops,” I say, and they both nod in agreement.

“Gas and bathroom breaks, that’s it,” Adam proposes, and I give them space to say goodbye to their wives.

I grab Karina a small bag of her necessities and a few of my own. I don’t know how long we’ll need to stay, and I want her to be comfortable.

“Juliette, can you pick up Harper and stay the night?” I ask, slipping her cash for dinner.

“Absolutely. Willow and I will have a girl’s night with her,” she smiles, hugging me before I go.

Hunter leaves Willow the keys to his truck and reminds me to text Harper.

We’re on the road ten minutes later, and I’m incredibly anxious.

Juliette and Willow will pick you up in Hunter’s truck.

Karina is safe. The guys and I are driving to get her. Call you soon.

This ride is absolutely monotonous. There's nothing but trees, and I have to listen to Hunter mumble along with the music for the first three hours.

I attempt to nap but can't stop thinking about my girl. She sounded so broken and terrified, all I want is to hold her in my arms.

"So, you taught Karina how to shoot?" Hunter asks, his attempt at making conversation.

"Yeah, she's a natural. In a few weeks, she passed her carry test," I say, staring out the window at all the trees passing by.

"It may have saved her life. Where'd you take her?" he takes his eyes off the road, waiting for my answer.

"Uh, Old Man Tony's cabin. He's an old friend. Why?" I counter, wondering what he's getting at.

"I should learn. I've got babies on the way, and I want to protect my family," he says thoughtfully, and I respect his willingness to learn.

"After this shit settles, I'll introduce you," I slap his shoulder, and he thanks me.

I can't believe she had to use her weapon, and she shot that asshole twice. I'm so proud of her. Her instinct to keep it in her car was spot-on, too.

I'm grateful she had access to what possibly saved her life.

Every time I think about what she went through, my heart hurts. After hours of being trapped in the car with her abuser, she only escapes by shooting him.

I didn't even ask if he was dead or alive.

I've never used my weapon against someone. I keep it for security, so I can't imagine how she's feeling right now.

I need to be with her.



After three hours, we switch out, and I'm driving with Adam in the passenger seat.

He immediately falls asleep, and I get a peaceful ride.

My mind wanders to a night we shared when we couldn't sleep, and Karina was so tired she couldn't stop laughing. Her little nose scrunch was ever-present, and she was only wearing my t-shirt.

We played silly games to try and get sleepy, including thumb wars and arm wrestling.

She looked up at me, the light on the nightstand illuminating her face, and she whispered so soft and sweet, "Mav, you're my best friend," and I kissed her nose.

It was innocent, but it meant the world at the time. Before we'd said I love you or talked about our future together.

It was her small way of saying how much she cared for me, and I was so flustered I didn't know what to say.

I'd give anything to go back to that moment. I'd have told her how much she meant to me, too. Her smile was infectious, and that laugh was music to my ears.

"How much further until we stop?" Adam wakes up, and he scares the shit out of me.

"Fuck, man. Probably another hour or so," I say, attempting to breathe.

"Sorry, you looked deep in thought over there. Thinking about your girl?" he smiles and lights a cigarette.

"Always. She's the center of my world," I smile, unable to keep my mind off anything else.

"You tell her that lately?" he asks, and I immediately say yes.

If there's one thing about Karina and I, it's that we communicate our feelings. Maybe not by traditional means, but we do it in our unique way.

We all rotate once we're at the seven-hour mark, and I'm now driving alone.

*Thank god.*

I won't stop until the gas light comes on. After all this time, it feels like I'm finally getting close.



WE'RE FOLLOWING THE SIGNS FOR THE HOSPITAL, AND I'M SO anxious I may throw up. It's been a painfully long ride, and I'm exhausted emotionally.

Since Karina went missing, I've felt everything from sad to mad. I want the racing thoughts to slow and my breathing to feel natural rather than forced.

Hunter pulls up behind me to the emergency entrance, and I don't hesitate to jump out of the truck.

They both plan to park in the garage and hit the cafeteria until I update them.

"Hi, can you please tell me what room Karina Collins is in?" I ask the nurse behind the desk.

She barely looks at me while she looks it up on her computer, and finally, she has an answer.

"Take the elevator to the third floor, take a right, and she'll be in Room 312," she sounds robotic, but I thank her anyway and make my way to her room.

The hallways are quiet, and I quickly reach her room. I tap lightly on the door, but there's no answer. I find a nurse, pleading with her to tell me where Karina went.

"Oh, another nurse took her for a walk. She's been very anxious waiting for her boyfriend. I assume that's you?" she smiles, leading me to where I can wait.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," I pace in the small waiting room, unable to sit still.

This might be more tortuous than the long ass car ride. We're in the same building, but I don't know exactly where she is.

I want to rip my hair out. It's been too long since I've seen her, held her, and I can't take another second without having

Karina safely beside me.

It's been fifteen minutes, and just when I'm about to search every inch of this hospital for her, a voice breaks through the silence, sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

"Mav? *Maverick!*" I hear from behind me, and when I turn around, there's my girl.

I catch her in my arms, and her legs wrap around my waist.

"Never let me go," she whispers, and I have no intentions of doing so.

"Hi," I place her back on the floor, taking her in, without taking a hand off her.

There's dried blood around her face, and her eyes are bruised and swollen. Her hair is knotted in a bun, and she's wearing a plain blue hospital gown.

Everything about her appearance floods me with relief, gratitude, and love, but at the same time, I can't let her see how angry I am.

Knowing that Asher did that to her, put her through something so terrifying and traumatic makes me feel powerless.

"Hi," she says, taking my hand and leading us back to her room.

One look at her, and I can see how fragile she is. Her hands shake, and that sparkle is missing from her hazel eyes. The swollenness around her eyes isn't only from the broken nose, I realize, she's been crying.

I don't say anything. The silence does the talking for us, and I wrap my arms around her. We stand in the middle of this cold hospital room for ages, and I can't bring myself to let go.

My nerves are gone, smashed to bits within the second I touched her body.

I feel whole again. My missing piece is back in place, and I can finally breathe.

Karina shifts, pulling out of my embrace, and looks up at me. The tears well in her eyes as her hands caress my face.

“I love you,” she whispers, and I can’t stop tears from falling.

“I love you, too, kitten,” I lean in to kiss her, but she flinches.

It’s slight, but it’s there. She’s terrified again. This time, it’s not intimacy holding her back.

It’s pure fear and trauma.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve asked,” I wipe a few fallen tears from her eyes gently.

“No, it’s me. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Mav. I can’t feel anything. You’re finally here, and I don’t feel a single thing. I’m not happy, or sad, or scared. I’m just ... numb,” she cries, and I stroke her hair.

Clearly, she’s traumatized. *God*, I want to rip a hole through that fuckers skin. I can’t bring myself to ask what happened yet.

I’m too fragile to hear details.

“Don’t worry, baby girl. You’re okay, and I’ve got you. Have you eaten?” I ask, and she shakes her head.

“I’ve been staring at these walls, giving samples of my blood for the drug screen and letting the detectives rip me apart, piece by piece. I can’t even bring myself to shower,” she says, staring blankly ahead.

I don’t say anything. I wait for her to speak. She sits beside me on the bed, holding my hand as she seems frozen. It takes a while, but finally, she has something to say.

“I lured him in the backseat with me. He’d said we were almost to our destination, and I knew I had to fight. My hands were tied, and I let him touch me, pretending I wanted it. When he kissed me, I had to lie there and take it. I couldn’t cry or spit him out like poison. I had to behave to survive,” her eyes are squeezed shut as she recalls the details, and I can’t breathe.

Hearing this is breaking my heart. I should've protected her better. The system should've saved her. That fucking psycho shouldn't have been anywhere near her.

I brace myself as she draws a breath, ready to listen to what comes next.

I have to be strong for Karina, so I stroke her shoulders while she talks, needing to feel her skin on mine.

"I begged him to rip off my clothes and let me out of the restraints. I didn't want his hands on my skin, but I had no choice. Finally, he cut the plastic off my wrists. It was only a few moments, but I had to distract him. I kissed his neck while I reached for the weapon. His body was on top of mine, and I could feel every part of him on me," she's sobbing now, and all I can do is hold her.

I don't rush her, even though I'm dying to know what he did to her. I can't make this about me, so her comfort is my only concern.

I'll wait all night if I have to.

"It's okay, Karina. We don't have to talk about this right now or ever," I reassure her after the silence has gone on for nearly thirty minutes.

"No. I need to tell you what happened. I just need to," she fights back, and I don't argue.

"I knew I only had one chance, that if he saw it, or I missed, I'd be dead. When he unzipped his pants, I begged him to kiss me again. Just before he could, I shot him in the stomach," she freezes, holding her hands on her belly.

Standing up, she lifts the hospital gown, and her torso is completely stained blood-red. My mouth opens, but I don't speak.

Instead, I reach for her, but she shakes her head.

Respecting her boundary, I sit back down. I move at her pace, even if it's killing me.

"When he tried to choke me ... I shot him again. I forced myself to keep fighting. I cut my ankles free and ran until I

found help. I tried so hard, Mav, I swear, but I couldn't remember your phone number. I wanted to call you and tell you I was okay. Hear your voice, but I couldn't remember your fucking *phone number*," she sobs and collapses into my arms.

Karina's biggest worry was that she couldn't call me right away. That's the last thing she should've been concerned about, but I'm rubbing her back and letting her get it all out.

"It's okay, baby girl. We don't have to worry about that now. I'm here because you called me," I say, and she sniffles a bit, the tears slowing.

"I know. I feel so guilty, though," she looks into my eyes, and a little bit of her sparkle is back.

"You did absolutely nothing wrong. You did what you had to do to survive, and you're with me right now because of how smart you are, baby," I kiss her hands, still respecting her fragile state.

"You don't think less of me?" she asks, and I shake my head.

"*Never*. I'm so proud of you," I smile, and she looks relieved.

"I was scared you'd judge me for using my body to hurt him. Or you wouldn't want me anymore after he laid hands on me. Like my body was damaged goods," she squeezes her eyes shut again.

"You stopped him from hurting you. It's why I taught you how to shoot in the first place. You're *my* girl, and he means *nothing* to us. You survived, Karina. Nothing in this world would prevent me from loving you for the rest of our lives," I say, slowly reaching for her hands.

I pull her up and hold her in my arms. I kiss her forehead lightly and ask her what she needs now.

"Food, please. I haven't eaten since ... *God*, I don't even know," she smiles, the tension finally leaving her body.

“Hunter and Adam are in the cafeteria if you don’t mind visitors?” I ask, and she looks nervously around the room.

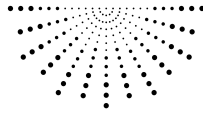
“I brought you clothes,” I hand her the t-shirt I packed, her favorite one.

She stands on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek, slipping into the shirt and wrapping her arms around my waist. I drape my arm over her shoulder, keeping her as close as possible.

If confessing her situation and concerns brought back some of the life in her, I’m happy she felt safe enough with me to do so.

It will be a long road ahead, but I’m with her every step of the way.

# KARINA



The hours passed like days while waiting for Mav to get here. I wanted to scream, kicking out every person who tapped on my door that wasn't him.

Instead, I obliged every one of their demands.

Blood work, swabs of Asher's blood on my body, photos of every injury down to the rash on my wrists and ankles from the zip ties.

Detectives wanted my statement over and over again. They questioned me as if they didn't believe me, as if I made up this elaborate story just to kill my ex.

"You have my police report from home in your hands! You see that he was arrested with things that suspiciously looked like kidnapping tools. Why don't you believe me?" I begged the female detective, and finally, she let up on the victim-blaming narrative.

After the pieces they *stole* from me satisfied them, I was free from visitors. Stewing in my recollection of events, I was forced to overthink *every. tiny. detail.*

Maybe I didn't need to make him think I wanted sex from him. I could've used a different approach.

Maybe I shouldn't have kissed his neck, and Maverick will probably think I crossed a line.

I probably didn't have to distract him *that way.*



These scenarios swirled in my mind, numbing my entire body until I could barely breathe. A full-on panic attack crept in, and a nurse offered to take me outside for fresh air.

Bailee, the nurse, was the only one who treated me like a human since I've been here.

Everyone else saw me as a victim, a patient, or a lunatic. But Bailee understood how scared I was and how I just wanted Maverick.

“Come on, sweet girl. Let's go in the courtyard and get your breathing right,” she had said, leading me onto the elevator.

I sobbed in her arms, finally feeling like someone cared about me.

Then, every emotion — good and bad — flooded me when I saw him standing in the waiting room. Instantly, I panicked again. Terrified to tell him what I did, how I survived.

Of course, my anxiety was for nothing.

He was proud of me and didn't care what I had to do. He only cares that I'm *alive*.

All the fears I had that he'd love me less, or even leave me, were cast aside and burned at the stake.

Maverick Carter is by my side no matter what, and I couldn't feel anything more comforting than his body pressed against mine.

His touch heals the parts of me that feel broken on the inside, but I can see the pain in his eyes when he sees the injuries on my body.

I'm scared of everything right now, practically trembling as we walk down the hallway together, but I know he'll let me work it out at my pace.

That's why he's my guardian Angel. If he'd never shown up in my life, I wouldn't have been able to escape Asher.

I wouldn't have the strength in my soul that I only get from fiercely loving and being loved by Maverick Carter.

“Are you sure about this? I can tell them to leave, trust me,” he laughs, and I tell him it’s okay.

Seeing people from home will be nice, and I want to talk to the girls.

Hunter and Adam stand when they see us coming, and their faces are plagued with sympathy.

“Thanks for hanging around,” Mav says to them, and they all bro-hug.

“Mr. Muscles, you came all this way for lil ole me?” I tease, and he laughs.

“Oh, Karina, I knew you were trouble the second you started calling me that,” Adam says, pulling a seat for me at their table.

“Can we get you guys anything?” Hunter asks, and I tell them to surprise me.

Maverick holds my hands, unable to let me go a second without his touch. I need it right now. It’s the only thing keeping me from crumpling to the floor.

I put on a brave face, but I’m falling apart inside. I want to eat and hide away from the world, back in the safety of our bubble, in our bedroom.

Stupid game shows, tequila bottles, long nights, and early mornings. That’s my happy place, and Maverick is my home.

Hunter brings us both sandwiches, simple but effective. I eat mine in record time, not bothering to savor it. My ability to function is finally returning to me now that Mav has grounded my reality.

“Someone really wants to talk to you,” Mav smiles, handing me his phone.

“Hi, Harper,” I smile, instantly wiping tears.

I thought of this girl endlessly. She’s my family, and I can’t wait to hold her again.

“Karina,” she cries, and I’m a mess.

We talk for a few minutes, and I say hi to Jules and Willow before it's too much. I'm overcome with emotion and can't take this conversation any longer.

Mav takes the phone, and I hold my head in my hands.

A million thoughts are racing through my mind, and I need to get out of here.

Sensing my anxiety from across the room, Maverick rushes over and helps me stand up.

"Please, get me out of here," I whisper, and he nods.

He excuses us from Adam and Hunter, who decide to stay in a motel for the night.

They offer to bring breakfast in the morning, and Mav thanks them for everything.

Just as they leave, I throw up everything I ate into the nearest trash can.

My body shakes, and I can't breathe. Images of Asher driving my car and laughing come flooding back, and I feel the pain in my body all over again.

The pain from the elbow that broke my nose radiates through me, and my head suddenly aches from smashing into the window.

My wrists and ankles tingle and burn where the zip ties rubbed my skin.

A roadmap of where he touched my body boils to the surface, and every place is red-hot, like his hands were made of fire.

I'm having a panic attack, but the flashbacks are the driving force. I feel Maverick's hands on me and hear him screaming for help, but the only thing I can focus on is the taste of poison in my mouth.

My vision goes black, and all I can think about is the drugs that previously coursed through my veins.

This time, though, I float with the darkness rather than attempting to fight through it.



I HEAR MUFFLED VOICES AND WHISPERS, BUT MY EYES WON'T open. I feel heavy, as if my body is weighted to the bed. It's not Maverick's bed though, and I'm instantly paranoid.

I feel around for anything that can help me know where I am, and finally, my eyes open. A light touch on my back soothes me, and I feel safe. When I turn over, my eyes lock into Mav's, and I'm instantly settled.

We're in the hospital.

It's all coming back to me, and I rest my head on him.

"Hi," he whispers in my ear, and I reach for his hand.

I intertwine my fingers in his and close my eyes. It's peaceful now, and I can breathe again.

"Should he even be allowed in here? He's not family," I hear from across the room, and I immediately jolt upright.

I scan the room until my eyes land on hers and find every ounce of strength in my body.

"Get her the fuck out of this room! Get her out of here before I *kill her with my bare hands*," I scream, climbing out of bed.

I'm wobbly on my feet, and Maverick races to my side, holding me steady.

"Karrie, I know we had our little fight, but I want to be here for you, baby," she says, stepping closer.

I take a breath and walk up to her, rage coursing through my veins.

I know the truth behind her fucking lies. *She's* the reason I'm here.

I get close to her, grit my teeth, and spit the venom I've been waiting to say since I found out what she did.

"*You* bailed Asher out. *You're* the reason why he kidnapped me. You told him I wanted him back and was waiting for him to come and get me. Stay the *fuck* away from

me. You are never allowed near me again, you sick, twisted, fucking *bitch*,” I scream, not allowing her to defend herself.

I walk to the bathroom and slam the door shut behind me.

I hear her scrambling to defend herself and Maverick not taking her shit. He tells her she needs to leave or he’ll call security.

That will be the last time I ever see or speak to Katherine Collins.

*She is dead to me.*

There’s a light tap on the door, and Maverick tells me she’s gone.

I let him in and rub my eyes. My body is weak, and after nearly two days without food, comfort or rest I feel like I could pass out at any second.

“Karina, was that true?” he asks, stepping to me.

“Yeah, it is. Going back to when he found me at Juliette’s. She visited him and bailed him out after our fight,” I’m shaking again, the panic rising to the surface.

I think about Asher and how funny he thought it was that Katherine was on his side. He was beaming with pride, ready to instantly throw it in my face that she sold me out.

His words – her words – echo in my brain so loud that everything else sounds like a buzzing noise.

“Baby girl, look at me. Right here,” Mav says, and I can’t focus on him.

The bright lights are blinding and making me nauseous. I feel the betrayal coursing through me, stabbing me in the heart. I close my eyes and let the feeling sink to my stomach, and the sobs come out of me like a cleanse to the soul.

Maverick takes my hand and leads me to the ground just as the room starts spinning. He sits with his legs stretched out and places me on top of him, he wraps me entirely in his arms and holds me as if he intends to protect me from the rest of the world, forever.

I feel him stroke my hair, and his chest is heaving. He's crying, and I feel so horrible for putting him through all this. He'd be *fine* if it weren't for me and my shitty baggage.

I close my eyes and let myself feel safe. I'm not thinking of this thing that happened to me. I'm solely focused on my man.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my words hoarse.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. It's breaking me into pieces seeing you like this, that's all," he says quietly, and we stay on the hospital bathroom floor until a nurse comes to get us.

"The doctor we spoke about earlier is here, Mr. Carter," she whispers, and I'm confused.

"Thank you," he helps me to my feet and holds my hands.

"Karina, baby girl, can you do a favor for me? Please," he begs, and I nod.

"Anything, Angel," I kiss his hand and let him lead the way.

We step into the room, and there's a woman in a white lab coat sitting in a chair opposite the bed.

There's a tray of food on my table and what I assume is a water pitcher.

I know what Mav wants me to do.

"Karina, I'm Doctor Halls, and I'm here to talk with you for a little while if that's okay. I thought we could have lunch together?" she asks, and I slowly nod.

She's a psych doctor. I'm being evaluated. I've been through this before, and I can't believe this is what Maverick wants me to do. I'm not returning to a place where I was when I was seventeen.

*I refuse.*

"Are you trying to commit me? You know I've been through this before," I say, turning to Maverick, who is standing behind me with his body creating shield behind mine.

“Absolutely *not*, Karina. I want you to talk to someone. I want you to be able to come home with me and find a way to live with what you’ve been through. I would never send you somewhere that I couldn’t be with you. You know that,” he looks into my eyes, and the sea of green that is his shows his genuine concern.

He’s terrified. Just like I was when he left after Grams died.

We’ve never claimed to have it easy, every step of the way seems to test us as people and in our relationship, but I know without a doubt that I want Maverick to be my anchor in my recovery.

Slowly, I recognize what his motives are for this, and I know that I need to talk to this doctor and heal my wounds, internal and external.

“*I love you*,” I kiss him on the cheek, and he promises to be right outside.

I cautiously sit on the bed, uncovering the food tray. I expect shitty hospital food, but instead, two pieces of meat-topped pizza are on my tray. I raise an eyebrow at the doctor, and she smiles.

“That boyfriend of yours is very persistent. I don’t see anything,” she holds her hands up in surrender, and a small smile creeps across my face.

I don’t know what I did to deserve him, but I *will* get better for him — for us.

“I want to make one thing abundantly clear. That *woman* who was here today is not my mother, and she has no say over what happens to me. I will marry Maverick Carter right now if that means he can make decisions for me if I’m found unfit. Do you understand that?” I say, emphasizing my disgust for the woman who is called my ‘*mother*.’

“There’s paperwork we can draw up for him to be your power of attorney. Is that what you want?” she asks, and I nod.

“Absolutely. Thank you,” she writes on her notepad, and I attempt to eat the pizza.

She asks me questions about Maverick and smiles when I describe our relationship.

“So, would you say that you two depend on each other for things like comfort and safety?” She waits for my answer, and I take a few moments to think about it.

“Yes, but not in a way that should be concerning. Everything is natural for us, almost like I was meant to find him at this point in my life. To prepare me for the battle for my survival,” I say, Mav’s power with words rubbing off on me.

We switch gears to Asher and the past between us. I explain everything in detail, down to my involuntary hold brought on by my mother.

I’ve eaten both pieces of pizza, and the doctor slips out to get the entire large box that Maverick bought for me.

Doctor Halls indulged in a slice with me as I slid the box her way. I like her so far; she listens while I talk and asks questions that don’t make me feel like a victim.

“Can you describe some of what happened with Asher? Whatever you feel comfortable sharing,” she says, and I nod.

I reviewed how he waited for me in my car and the same story I told Maverick. I break down a few times, and she offers tissues.

We sit silently for a few minutes while I find the right words to describe how I’ve felt since escaping the car.

“Do you feel bad for shooting him?” she asks, and I immediately shake my head no.

“It’s the only way I had to *survive*. I was so relieved when the weapon was still in the glove compartment that I cried silently in the backseat. I knew what I had to do and planned it out using my knowledge of him to my advantage,” I explain, and she nods while taking notes.

Before I know it, we’ve been talking for two hours, and a nurse interrupts to bring me medication.

“No, Amber. I’ve removed that from her chart for now. I’ve taken over her case from the emergency department,” and



the nurse obliges.

“What was she going to give me?” I ask curiously.

“A sedative. Your panic attacks last night were severe, and the on-call physician ordered sedatives. I’m here because of Maverick,” she smiles, and I feel safe again.

“Thank you,” I say, and she dives back in with the questions.

“What did you and Asher talk about on your drive?” she asks, and I shiver.

I can’t think of getting back into a car, and the panic builds again. I try to control my breathing, but I’m struggling.

“Karina, *back to me*. What just happened?” she tries to bring my focus back to her.

“I, uh, thought about being in a car. Going back home,” I breathe, feeling grounded.

“Okay. Understandable, but let’s circle back to what you spoke about,” she re-words her question.

I noticed, and this time, I’m able to answer it.

“I spoke a lot about our inappropriate relationship. He stole my life, my twenties, and everything innocent about me,” I explain, and she closes her notebook.

“This is where I want us to end things for right now. Is that alright with you?” she asks, patiently waiting for me to answer.

“Yes.”

I’m relieved. I’m tired of talking.

“Thank you, Karina. I have another patient to see. After I complete my workup, I will recommend a few things for you and pass them along to a nurse on my service, okay? She’ll be your new resource for anything you need. I’ll be by later tonight if you have any questions or anything else you want to share with me,” she smiles and closes my door.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I did that for Maverick at first, but by the end of our session, it was for *me*.

I'm determined to heal from the trauma caused by Asher and my mother, no matter what it takes.

A little while later, Maverick comes in, and his smile is the highlight of my day.

"Please, come lay with me. I've missed you so much," I beg, and he wastes no time.

"I've missed that smile, baby girl," he kisses my cheek.

"Thank you for absolutely everything. Most of all, for loving me," I smile, moving over so he can fit in this bed with me.

"Thank you for having that session. I didn't know what to do, and I couldn't see you, so ... broken anymore," he snuggles into me, resting his head on my shoulder.

"You're my *Angel*," I turn to kiss him, but he hesitates.

"Are you sure? Yesterday, you seemed afraid," he checks in, always ensuring I feel comfortable.

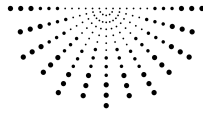
"I'm certain. I love you, Mav. He'll never change what's in my heart and soul for you," I smile, and he pulls me in for the kiss of my lifetime.

I'm confident we will get through this together.

I had a lot of time to reflect on the shit choices I've made thus far, but Maverick is the light in my twenty-year darkness.

He's the soldier in my army, always on the front lines to protect me, and I'd do the same for him in a *heartbeat*.

# MAVERICK



When Karina fell to the floor in the hospital cafeteria, I stopped being her boyfriend and became her advocate. The doctors wanted to ship her off for a seventy-two-hour hold, and I withheld consent. I let them give her something to sedate her because according to her intake paperwork, she hadn't slept since she was in the car with *him*.

Karina slept for fifteen hours only because she woke up from a nightmare and nearly attacked a nurse. They pumped her with more sedatives until she woke up when her mom came.

I don't know who called her, but she strutted in here like '*Mom of the Year*,' and I refused to entertain her delusions.

We argued about who should control Karina's medical care outside the room, and I did not back down. Karina solidified that by waking up and accusing her of bailing Asher out of jail.

Katherine immediately asked for the opposite of my requests. When Karina came to, she basically appointed me in charge of her, and I'm taking this role seriously.

I've been here all night, begging for a psych consult and a doctor to show her empathy. I've made it clear that a doctor who wants to pump her full of drugs and hold her involuntarily won't be the right fit.

I refused to watch Karina be sedated again, so I held her on the bathroom floor for three hours when she was on the brink

of another episode.

She didn't know how long we were there or how many nurses poked in and checked on us, but I did.

I counted every minute and held her for every single second. She fell asleep quickly, the sedatives still in her body, and I was thankful that she didn't have another public panic attack.

I love Karina with everything inside of my body. I would do anything to keep her safe, and right now, I'm the person who medically advocates for her.

In a sea of strangers, I'm the only one who *knows* her.

I'm the only person with her best interest at heart, and nothing will stop me from getting her the care she deserves.

Finally, they found a doctor to take on Karina's case, and she's made progress. When she agreed to speak to the psychologist on-call, my body could finally relax.

The nurses on the floor were all over me, ensuring I didn't need anything since I hadn't slept since arriving. They kept me comfortable, and when Doctor Halls came out for the rest of the pizza, I knew I'd made the right choice.

She whispers with the nurses, and a few minutes later, I'm given paperwork to fill out to be Karina's *Power of Attorney*.

I don't waste a second, filling every line out with care.

If what she says is true about her mother, I refuse to let a technicality be why I'm not awarded this.

Halfway through Karina's session, a security guard that I'd slipped a hundred-dollar bill returned with information that I asked for.

I inform the nurses that I'm going for a short walk and to call my phone immediately if Karina needs me.

Nurse Bailee, the one with Karina's best interest in mind since she arrived, agrees, and I thank her.

I follow the security guard to where I need to be, and he warns me that I have five minutes.

I open the door and walk inside. The little bitch is connected to monitors, wires, and he's handcuffed to the bed.

"Do you know who I am?" I whisper, and he pretends to be asleep.

I smack him, bringing him out of his little game. I was only informed of his room number because he'd woken up.

I'm not here to talk to a fucking vegetable. I'm here to deliver a message.

"Yeah, I do," he says, his voice weak from almost *dying*.

"You're going to plead guilty when you see a courtroom. You're going to implicate Katherine Collins in this mess you caused Karina," I grit my teeth, my hand hovering over his stitches.

If he even breathes in a way I don't like, I will open them individually.

"If I don't?" he asks, and I show him exactly what I mean.

"Okay, okay. I'll do that. I'm sorry, man. She's nothing like I remember. Do you love her?" he asks, and I spit in his face.

"You don't get to ask me questions. I love her more than I value my own life, and I will kill to protect her, do you understand?" I say, twisting my fingers into a stitch.

"Yes. I understand," he cries, and I hold my gloved hand over his mouth.

"Good. Your last instruction will come once you're in prison. It'll be your way out and Karina's freedom."

Nothing else needs to be said. He nods, knowing exactly what I mean.

"If you try and make contact with Karina, I know people who know someone else, and you won't last the night. You've caused her enough pain, and once she's stable I'm taking her home," I say, slapping his face, and his eyes widen.

"What do you mean, once she's *stable*?" he begs, and I deliver the final blow to his fucking conscious.

“She’s under a psych evaluation because of *you*, for the second time in her life, and this time, I’m the one who’s got her best interests at heart,” I twist my hand in another stitch for good measure before walking away.

“Wait. Please, wait,” he cries, and I turn, not stepping closer to him.

“What?” I spit.

“Tell her I’m sorry. I could never be the man you are. I’ll do everything you ask if you tell her I’m sorry and that I love her,” he finishes, and I race back to his bedside, wrapping my hands around his neck.

“I will never apologize on your behalf. You kidnapped her, and that is the last thing you’ll ever know about Karina,” I say, slowly easing my grip on him as the guard pulls me away.

“You’re done,” he yells, holding me strong and dragging me away.

The elevator closes, and I take a few deep breaths, collecting myself.

“I’m sorry. I lost my mind when I saw him,” I say, and he shakes his head.

“I would’ve done worse if that was my woman,” he replies, and I’m around a man who understands my anger.

“Why didn’t you let me, then?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“You need to be there for *her*. Leave the pain for the men who have nothing to lose,” the guard says, his empathy visible.

I return to my place outside Karina’s door when Nurse Bailee informs me that the doctor has left. I slowly enter the room and sigh in relief when I see her smile.

My girl looks radiant, and I can’t take my eyes off her. I lie beside her in the bed and hold her close.

She’s not panicked or sedated; she’s here with me, and it feels perfect.

“Mav?” she whispers, long after I thought she’d fallen asleep.

“Yes, baby girl?” I say, sitting up a little.

“Will you take a shower with me?” she asks, a vulnerability in her voice I’m not used to.

“Absolutely. I brought some of your things from home,” I smile, kissing that scrunch in her nose.

I help her under the water, letting the hot spray wash all of the blood off her body. I hate that it’s still stained on her skin, so I scrub it with her rose-scented body wash.

The bruises on her face are shades of blue and purple, but her hazel eyes finally have their glimmer back, and the tension in her body is at ease.

“I can’t take the ride back home,” she says, washing the shampoo out of her hair with her back to me.

“What do you mean?” I ask, a lump of paranoia growing in my throat.

“I can’t sit in a car for ten hours, or however long it takes. I just ... don’t think I’m ready,” she faces me, and there’s uncertainty behind her expression.

“We’ll book a flight. No questions asked. Anything you need, kitten,” I pull her body against mine and wrap my hand around the nape of her neck.

“May I?” I hover above her lips, ensuring she’s okay with it first.

She nods, and I don’t hesitate to crash my mouth onto hers.

I need her right now, any little piece of her, to satisfy my craving.

She parts her lips, inviting me in, and our tongues tangle together. A soft moan escapes her, only making me crave her more. Her hands tug at my hair, and I lightly bite her bottom lip.

“Mav, please,” she whispers, pushing her body against my hardness.

“Are you sure?” I ask, tenderly caressing her face.

“I need you to make me feel whole again. Don’t hold back, please,” she breathes, and I push her against the shower wall.

She moans, pushing her ass out to me, and I take my cock and line it to her entrance.

“Oh, kitten. You’re dripping,” I hiss, slowly pushing my way into her.

I groan, feeling how much I stretch her, and bury myself deep inside her.

She moans, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

I thrust into her, picking up the speed as she begs me to go harder. If there’s one thing about Karina, she loves it rough.

I grab a fistful of her hair, tipping her head far enough to kiss her lips. Her breathing intensifies, and she moans my name.

*Fuck.*

I’m so close, and she tells me not to stop.

“Come for me, kitten. Remember who you belong to,” I whisper in her ear, driving her wild.

I grip her hair tighter, kissing her jawline as I pound deep into her.

“Oh my god, Mav. I’m right there,” she cries, and I don’t stop until she screams.

I cover her mouth with my free hand, easing my grip on her hair. My back stiffens as my release creeps on me, and I grit my teeth as I spill my come in her, slowing down my thrusts.

“Fuck. You’re so perfect, baby girl,” I breathe, kissing the back of her neck.

She spins around to face me, kissing me with such force that I start to get hard again.

“I love you,” she says in my mouth, biting her lip as she pulls away.



The water starts to turn cold, and I help Karina out, handing her a towel.

Her body is clean, and I'm the last person to touch her. That thought comforts me, knowing that this is the first step in her healing process.

We snuggle in bed again when there's a light knock on the door.

Doctor Halls enters, and Karina lights up.

"Hi Karina, Maverick," she greets us and sits on a chair at the end of the bed.

"Can he stay?" Karina asks, and the doctor nods.

"I have a roadmap for you. Things I want you to work on once you leave here tomorrow. Is it okay if we go over it?" Doctor Halls asks, and Karina is all ears.

I beam with pride as I listen because she did this to get better. I asked, but she opened up so much that the doctor had a plan for her.

She did this for herself more than anything, and I couldn't love her any more than I do at this moment.

Doctor Halls has diagnosed her with severe anxiety and PTSD. It makes sense, given what she's been through.

She has a list of tools to help when she feels a panic attack coming on and prescriptions that will help now and in the long run.

It's also recommended that she seek a therapist, but Karina pushes back.

"I don't want to speak with someone new. You already know me. Can't we have sessions over the phone or video calls?" she begs, and the doctor concedes.

"I'd love to be your doctor moving forward, but I have a tight schedule. I run a practice as well as consulting for the hospital. At first, my schedule will be hectic, but once I can lock us in for a certain day and time, it'll be more routine. Are you willing to work with me for the next few weeks, taking

sessions whenever I have an opening?” she asks, and Karina immediately agrees.

“I want you, Doc. Nobody else,” she laughs, and my heart swells.

My girl is slowly coming back to the surface.

“Alright then, it’s settled. You’re free to be discharged in the morning. Maverick, can I have a word outside?” the doctor turns her attention to me, and I’m slightly surprised.

I follow her into the hall and close the door behind me.

“I highly recommend taking Karina home by plane. During our session, she nearly panicked when I mentioned being in a car. It’s a trigger for her,” she says, and I nod.

“She expressed that to me. Now that we know she’ll be discharged tomorrow, I’ll book a flight the minute she’s asleep,” I say, shaking her hand.

“Karina is lucky to have you, Maverick. Keep being good to her,” she smiles and turns on her heel.

“Doc?” I call out, and she stops in her tracks.

“Thank you. You’re the only person who took a chance on her here. I’ll never be able to thank you enough,” I say, and she nods before walking away.

Finally, I can take my woman home. We’ll be in our bed tomorrow, and everything else will sort itself out.

Juliette and Willow have been incredible with Harper; I can’t wait to see her.

Adam and Hunter are still in town and planning to leave in the morning, so I called them and asked if they minded taking my truck back since we needed to fly.

They immediately agreed, having witnessed Karina’s panic attack the night we arrived. They stayed to ensure we were okay and picked up the pizza I brought her this afternoon.

My bosses have been extremely helpful; at this point, I need to start calling them my friends.

It's hard for me, but I'll try it, just like I did with Karina.

I walk back into her room, and the smile on her face can be seen for miles.

"Are you feeling better after talking with Doctor Halls?" I ask, and she nods.

"I really like her. Thank you for being my rock," she says, and I climb back into bed with her.

"If you only knew how crazy I went to get you the care you deserved," I kiss her cheek and wrap my arms around her.

"That's why you're my family now. No matter what, Maverick Carter. You're stuck with me," she smirks, and I can't help but take comfort in that.

"I think I was always meant to be yours, Karina Grace," I say, believing in the power of our soul connection.

I won't use her last name until it matches mine. It represents a life she's leaving behind. A life that once included her mother and an ex who viciously stalked and kidnapped her.

From now on, she won't be reminded of those fuck-faces if I have anything to do with it.

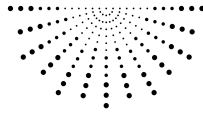
*I'm her family.*

Harper, Reilly, Juliette, Willow, and their husbands are her family now.

We hand-picked these people, and it's our chosen family. The only one that matters.

One day, Karina Grace will be my wife and carry our children, but for now, she's my girlfriend, and I'd lay down my life for hers or kill to protect her instantly.

# KARINA



The second my body touches this bed, I'm in heaven. I've been home for two hours, greeted by all our friends. Harper's in school, so I haven't seen her yet, and I'm thankful for that.

Mav will pick her up and explain the bruises on my face first.

It was great to see everyone, including Reilly, who seemed to fit in while I was gone.

It's quiet in our apartment now, and all I want to do is lay with Mav until he has to get Harp.

The musical truck situation has been handled, with Adam and Hunter coming home and everyone returning the keys to their respective pick-ups. It's adorable how much these boys love their trucks.

"Hi," I pull him close, tucking the comforter over us.

"Hi," he whispers, kissing my nose.

God, I fucking *love* when he does that.

"Are you okay? Do you need your medicine?" he asks, checking my well-being.

I needed a *panic pill*, as I like to call them, when we first got home. The amount of people waiting to see me, the same people I pictured while I thought I might die, was severely overwhelming.

I threw up in the bathroom and hid away until the pill finally kicked in, settling me into a sense of calm.

“No, I’m okay, Angel. Just hold me,” I plead, and he does exactly that.

I always want to stay in the comfort and safety of this bed.

“I’m so sleepy,” I say, fighting the urge to yawn again.

“Sleep, baby girl. I have to pick Harper up soon, but I won’t be gone long, I promise,” he trails his fingers along my collarbone, and I crave him.

“But I want you,” I whine, and he smirks.

“You’re a little menace, kitten,” he teases, tracing a finger around my throat.

I bite my lip, already insanely turned on by just one touch.

“Please,” I beg, and he shakes his head.

“Sleep, first. I’ll fuck that pretty pussy of yours tonight, and I won’t stop until you scream my name, deal?” he kisses my neck, lightly sucking my delicate flesh.

“You’re such a fucking tease,” I groan and turn my back to him.

Minutes later, I fall asleep and don’t wake until the sun sets.



THE DARKNESS IN THE ROOM IS TERRIFYING YET CALMING AT the same time. I search the bed for Maverick, but he’s nowhere to be found. My heart rate speeds up, but I take deep breaths and face this on my own. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

I pull a hoodie from Mav’s closet and slip on shorts.

I can be by myself without breaking down. I open the bedroom door, and the apartment is quiet. Hours ago, this place was filled with people, but now it’s empty.

A bottle of my favorite tequila is on the kitchen counter and a note.

**TAKE A DRINK AND COME TO HARPER'S  
APARTMENT WHEN YOU'RE READY.**

I SIGH, THANKFUL THAT MAVERICK IS ONLY ACROSS THE HALL. I smile at the note and how he called my apartment *Harpers*.

I do as he instructed and pour myself a drink. The liquor burns my throat and warms the icy chill in my veins.

I don't feel like socializing, so I intend to pop in only to steal Harper.

I hear music playing and everyone hanging out when I walk into the apartment.

Juliette is cooking, and it smells incredible. It's a mini party, and I wish I were in the mood, but I'm not.

"Karina!" a chorus of voices greets me, and I fake my best smile.

"Hi, guys. Where's Harper?" I ask, scanning the room for her.

"She's doing homework. I told her the truth. She knew most of it, being here while we searched for you, but I told her how you fought back and got injured in the process," Mav says, and I thank him.

Anything he's comfortable sharing with Harper is okay with me.

I knock on the door that used to be my room, and when I open it, she runs to me.

I catch her in my arms and hold her tight.

"So, has Lucas forgiven Mallory for kissing Andrew, or what?" I ask, and she laughs.

"I missed you so much, Karina," she cries, and I missed her more than I realized.

I sob into her hair while she holds onto me for dear life.

"Karina, can I ask you something?" she says, breaking our embrace.

“Of course, Harp. Anything,” I sniffle, stuffing the tears back inside.

“Since you’re with my brother, can I call you my sister?” she asks, and I start crying again.

Nothing in this world could’ve stopped my tears or made me happier.

“I’d be fucking honored, Harp,” I smile, and she hugs me.

“You and Mav are my family,” she whispers, holding me tight.

“That’s right, Harper. It’s the three of us against the world,” I smile, and we leave the heavy stuff there for the night.

We sit together on my old bed, and I catch up on the drama of eighth grade and hear about the newest TV show that’s swept them all.

“Karina, please don’t go anywhere again. I need you,” she says, and I promise I won’t.

“You’re my world, baby sis,” I laugh, and she loves every second of it.

“I love you, Karina,” she whispers, and I let her finish her homework.

I held it together for her sake, but fucking god, I missed her more than anything.

I’m so happy to be back in her presence, hearing about the wonders of middle school.

After a while I give Harper space, and I join Maverick on the couch, snuggling into his arms.

I look around the room at everyone, taking it all in. Adam is telling a story, which has Willow rolling her eyes. Reilly is helping Jules cook, and I can’t stop smiling.

These crazy fuckers are my family, and I love every single one of them.

“You okay?” Mav whispers, and I nod.

This is the best I've felt in days.

Reilly brings me a drink and breaks the news that I'm officially unemployed.

*Perfect.*

The salon will be closing immediately, and I'm relieved. I was nervous about going back there.

"Rumor has it someone already bought the building and plans to turn it into a bar. The liquor license was filed yesterday," Reilly gossips, and I shake my head.

"You're so gullible," I smack her on the arm, and she laughs.

"I missed you, bitch," she says and hugs me.

I missed her crazy ass, too.

Tonight, I'm surrounded by the people who mean the most to me, who sacrificed so much to bring me home safely, and I'm eternally grateful for every single one of them.

Mav's hand rests on my thigh, and I catch him smiling at me from the corner of my eye.

Even though my face is bruised and swollen, his expression makes me feel so beautiful and loved.

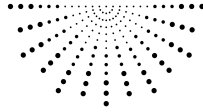
He's everything I need. This was inevitable, I think.

Forces stronger than us plotted to ensure we'd fall in love.

All we had to do was be in the right place at the right time.



# MAVERICK



*I* sit in the back of the courtroom until the name I'm waiting for is called. Karina doesn't know I'm here, but I need to be. I'm witnessing this with my own two eyes.

Finally, the judge calls the following case, and this is it.

The laundry list of charges is read, and when asked how he pleads, Asher only replies with one word.

*"Guilty."*

Sentencing will occur next week, and I leave the courtroom satisfied.

He'll be spending the rest of his miserable days behind bars, where he belongs.

After weeks of waiting, Asher has finally been arraigned. First, he had to get strong enough to be transferred for a ten-hour ride back home. Then, he'd chosen to represent himself, which pushed his date back even further.

Karina has no interest in knowing what happens to him, but I do.

I'm going to know exactly where he is at all times.

Thankfully, her panic attacks have subsided, and she's been able to return to daily life. We've had a few hiccups here and there, and one detailed nightmare, but my girl is strong.

We're healing from the event that traumatized us both and doing it together.

Doctor Halls has had time for two sessions over video chat, and Karina seems to be doing well with therapy.

About a week ago, a letter arrived in the mail for her. At first, she refused to open it, but eventually, the curiosity got the best of her.

As soon as she recognized the handwriting, she tried to back out, but I offered to read it aloud, and she agreed.

It was hard to get through for both of us, but it finally offered Karina an explanation and closure on the biggest gut-twisting betrayal either of us had ever seen.

I took her onto the patio, ensuring she was comfortable, and took the plunge.

**DEAR KARRIE,**

**I CAN'T EXPLAIN HOW SORRY I AM FOR WHAT I'VE DONE TO YOU. IF IT'S ANY CONSOLATION, I LOST EVERYTHING. MY LIFE IS IN SHAMBLES, AND I'M LOST WITHOUT MY FAMILY. ONCE I CONFESSED MY ROLE IN YOUR UNFORTUNATE SITUATION, MY HUSBAND CUT TIES, PROTECTING HIS CAREER. NOW, THAT HAS LEFT ME ALL ALONE TO REFLECT ON MY CHOICES, AND I BEHAVED TERRIBLY BUT TREATED YOU EVEN WORSE.**

**I HAVE NO EXCUSE FOR WHAT I'VE DONE, BUT I THOUGHT I WAS HELPING YOU IN MY OWN TWISTED MIND. IF YOU COULD JUST ACCEPT YOUR FATE WITH A MAN YOU CHOSE TO LAY DOWN WITH, YOU COULD'VE HAD A NORMAL LIFE.**

**I SEE NOW THAT HE WASN'T IN YOUR BEST INTENTIONS - THAT'D BE MAVERICK. THAT MAN LOVES YOU THE WAY YOU DESERVE, AND ALTHOUGH YOU WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH ME, I'M LEAVING**

**YOU EVERYTHING I HAVE LEFT SO YOU CAN BUILD A  
FUTURE WITH HIM. ONE YOU DESERVE. MAKE YOUR  
DREAMS COME TRUE, BABY.**

**XOXO - MOM**

WE SAT IN SILENCE FOR A LONG TIME, NEITHER OF US ABLE TO find the right words to explain how we felt. It was a whirlwind of a letter with so many condescending undertones that it can't be taken seriously.

Karina initially wanted to burn the check, along with the letter, but I tried to reason with her a bit without being too pushy.

"Baby girl, let this be her way of making it up to you. You can't hate her forever, it'll consume you. Take the check, and let her go for good," I convinced her, and she deposited the check into a savings account for when the opportunity to better her life presented itself.

Finally, I decided what to do with the land Tony sold me, and I let Adam and Hunter have it for our next project.

It was a test of loyalty and leadership because I was promoted to Adam's position a week later. He and Juliette are traveling the world, and I'm now the boss of the job sites.

Hunter still runs the office side of things, and today was my first official day in my new role.

A few guys who'd been there since they started the company were pissed, but Hunter told everyone who didn't like his decision to quit.

Nobody did, and it'll be a while before I earn their respect, but I'm here to work, not make friends. That hasn't changed.

Hunter and Willow invited Karina, Harper, and me to a celebratory dinner tonight. I hear Willow can't cook for shit like Karina, so I'm a little nervous.

"How do I look?" Karina steps out of the bathroom in a long, baby-blue sundress and white heels.

*Fuck.*

I'm getting hard just looking at her.

The bruises have faded, and her smile is entirely captivating.

"Fucking perfect, kitten," I kiss her neck, ready to throw her on the bed.

"Thank you, Angel," she bites her lip, looking me up and down.

"That suit should be a crime," she smirks, pulling me by my tie.

I kiss her hard, wrapping my hands around her ass and slapping it to drive her wild.

"Tonight, the only thing you're wearing is this tie. Understand?" I growl in her ear, and she melts in my arms.

"Yes, Mav," she whispers, her knees going weak.

Her new tattoo is on full display, a little piece she got to remind herself of what she survived.

It starts on her shoulder, expanding down her arm, a beautiful phoenix rising from ashes. She got a small quote, "*It was mine first,*" and two tiny numbers interwoven throughout.

Seventeen, for how old she was when she met Asher, and twenty-four, for how old she was when she met me.

It was completely impulsive. Reilly took her to the woman who does her tattoos, and I instantly fell in love with it.

It suits her and her journey perfectly.

I couldn't be more proud of her for everything she's survived and how hard she's fought to regain control of her life.

After dinner, I have a surprise for Harper and Karina. I'm taking them to the house I bought for us and officially asking Karina to move in with us.

I drove by it on my way home from work a few weeks ago, and I knew it was perfect. It's been the hardest secret to keep, but I can't wait to show them both.



I LINED THE ENTIRE LIVING ROOM WITH FLOWERS, WHICH CAN be seen as soon as the front door opens.

In the room that will be Harper's, there are two vases of flowers on the floor, along with the legal documents that prove she's legally considered my child now.

Of course, I'd never treat her that way, but I've ensured nobody can break the three of us apart.

In the master bedroom, the rose petals spell out, "*Will you move in with us.*"

I got the keys yesterday and spent an hour setting this surprise up for my girls today.

We're riding in my truck, and they have no idea where I'm taking them. Karina had two glasses of wine, so she was extra bubbly.

'Where are we, Maverick?'" Harp asks from the backseat, and I put my truck in park.

"Somewhere special," I smile, and she rolls her eyes.

The yard needs a little TLC, and the house itself needs to be painted, but overall, it's the place I want to call home with my girls.

"Come on, Karina. Take my hand," I say, helping her out of the passenger seat.

"You could lead me to hell, Mav, and I'd still take your hand," she slurs, and I shake my head.

I better make this quick before she gets sleepy.

I lead them both to the front door and pull out the keys. Harper gives me a strange look, while Karina is just happy to be included.

"Welcome home, girls," I say, pushing the door wide so they can see.

"Oh my god, is this?" Harper asks, unable to find the words.

“This is our new home,” I smile, and Karina’s face lights up.

I give them the whole tour, and Harper squeals with excitement. The kitchen has an island in the middle, perfect for our cooking adventures.

The screen door leads to our fully fenced-in yard, with an area off to the side for a garden.

I led the girls upstairs, taking Harper to her room first.

“Is this real?” she asks, holding the adoption papers.

“Yes, Harp. You’re my kid now, and nobody can take you away from me,” I smile, and she hugs me.

“I’m not calling you dad,” she laughs.

“*God, please don’t,*” I say, hugging her again.

We pass by the spare bedroom, which can be used as storage until we need a crib in there. One step at a time, though.

First, Karina needs to agree to move in with us.

I know she’ll say yes, but my palms are sweaty, and my nerves kick in.

The main bedroom is at the end of the hall, with a small bathroom attached. It’s perfect, and I let Karina walk in first.

The petals are perfectly placed, and she reads the words aloud before fully realizing what I’m asking.

“You want me to live here, too?” she says, looking at me with those beautiful hazel eyes.

“Of course, baby girl. You and your demonic cat. Will you move in with us?” I ask, and she barely lets me finish.

“Absolutely, one hundred million percent!” she smiles, and I lift her off the ground.

She wraps her legs around me, and I kiss her tenderly.

“April’s going to be so excited! I thought you’d never fucking ask, Jesus,” she laughs, and I smack her ass.

“Hush, kitten,” I whisper, lightly biting her neck.

This is the dream.

A family, a big house, and enough love to go around.

Months ago, if someone told me I’d have this much in my life, I’d have laughed. I had sworn off relationships and vowed never to fall in love.

All along, something inside of me was waiting for my Queen. The only one who could make me believe in what I thought was impossible.

*Love.*

Now, I’d give up my life to protect hers, and nothing on this planet could keep me away from her.

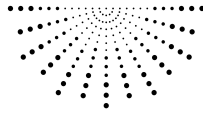
Karina Grace met me when I was broken, and she put every single piece of me back together.

She saw my scars and flaws on the outside, but when she looked into my soul, that’s when I finally felt complete.

She saw the *best* in me.

My one and only, my lifeline.

# KARINA



ONE YEAR LATER

*I* have no idea where we're going, and I'm feeling the anxiousness creep over me. I still don't do well in cars, especially for long rides, and this one is starting to cross my boundary.

Maverick, always sensing when something's wrong, reaches over and squeezes my thigh.

I smile at him, and he just knows me too fucking well.

Finally, I see the ocean.

"Are we going to the beach?" I bounce in my seat, the excitement taking over.

I haven't seen the ocean since I was a little kid, and I can't believe this is our super secret destination.

"I don't have a bathing suit! I wanna play in the waves," I pout, and Mav smiles.

"You think I planned a trip but didn't smuggle your sexy little pink bikini?" he laughs.

Once I changed, we found the perfect spot, and Mav brought us a small picnic.

Of course, there's tequila in the basket, too. The signs say no alcohol on the beach, but I sneak a drink or two while I lay out in the sun.

He's gone above and beyond to surprise me, and I can't stop smiling.



The sand is white, the waves are big, and the sky is clear without a cloud in the sky. It's the perfect beach day.

We spend the afternoon in the ocean, playing like little kids.

Maverick pulls me close and kisses my nose.

"Best day ever?" he asks, and I nod.

"*Perfection,*" I smile.

Once the sun begins to set, Maverick has to bribe me to leave the beach, promising that he has more in store for us.

Our next stop is dinner on the boardwalk at a cute little shack, enjoying margaritas and cheeseburgers.

We dine overlooking the ocean, watching as the seagulls clean the scraps left by beachgoers, and the lifeguards clear down the umbrellas and chairs.

"Take a walk with me, pretty lady?" He asks, lacing his fingers through mine.

The boardwalk is lined with shops, food booths, and artists of all kinds.

I admire the twinkly lights on the pier railings while we walk, loving how they illuminate the boardwalk as the sun sets in the background.

"I booked us a suite at that hotel," he says, pointing to the building behind us.

"A hotel? What is the occasion?"

I didn't notice he stopped walking until he doesn't answer my question.

I turn around, and he's kneeling on one knee, holding a box.

"*Oh my god!*" I say, stunned.

"Karina Grace, you changed my life and made me a better man. You're the light in my darkness, and every day I get to be with you is a dream. Will you marry me?" he asks, and I scream.

“Yes! Took you long enough,” I smile, and he places the ring on my finger.

He looks into my eyes, and the love radiating off us could start a fire. It’s as if we’re the only two people in the world right now.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, and he does.

In front of a crowd of people, he lifts me off the ground and kisses me with such passion I see why he booked a hotel.

“I love you, Karina,” he says, kissing me again.

*Fuck.*

I love this man more than I ever thought possible. Every wound I carried with me, he’s healed. Any doubts I had, he’s erased. I was destined to meet him, and the stars aligned so I’d fall in love with him.

Maverick Carter was made to be *mine*.

“You have no idea what I’m going to do to you tonight, kitten,” he whispers, and I bite my lip.

We need to get in that hotel room *fast*.



I CAN’T STOP STARING AT THE SPARKLY DIAMOND ON MY finger. It’s beautiful and elegant. The diamond shines in the light, and the band is littered with smaller diamonds. It’s absolutely perfect.

As someone who never thought this was possible, it’s a bit surreal.

This is a symbol of love, and I can’t help feeling like the princess in a fairytale that I thought wasn’t written for girls like me.

Broken damsel. Smart-mouthed brat. Terrified girl, afraid of intimacy. Victim of abuse.

I thought those were the things that defined me as a person.

I was *fucking wrong*.

Maverick showed me parts of myself that I never knew hid beneath the surface.

Powerful woman. Filthy-mouthed Queen. Blissfully happy, embracing the intimate forms of love I feel every day. Survivor of abuse.

Those are some traits I'd use to explain who I am as a person. Most of all, the word I use is *resilient*. I find a way to come back stronger from anything that threatens to tear me down.

Mav smiles at me, and I realize I've been lost in my thoughts. He squeezed my hand three times, and I wasn't panicking, but I take comfort in knowing how much he pays attention to me.

We're driving home from the beach engagement trip, and I can't wait to get home and show Harper.

Since the first day I met her, she's been the biggest fan of her brother and me being together.

I think she knew we'd end up like this before we did.

Tonight, we're celebrating.

Reilly is coming by to discuss our ideas for owning a salon. I finally made a choice regarding the money Katherine left me, and I want Reilly by my side.

Ever since my ordeal, she's been there for me nearly every day.

Whether we go for walks, hit the bar, or just watch movies on the couch, it's always me and Reilly.

I love her to death, and I'd do anything for her.

Mav calls us *the twitches* – *twisted bitches* – because of how crazy we drive him and how trauma bonded we are.

Once I learned about her fucked up past, it was solidified. She's my other half – in best friend form.

This town brought me to the people I was meant to be with, as if there's underlying magic hidden in its roots.

The house is quiet while we wait for Harper to get off the bus. She spent the night with Juliette and Adam in Rose Hills, and they brought her to school.

Now that I think of it, everyone must've been in on the plan. Something like this doesn't just spawn overnight.

"You planned this, didn't you?" I ask, and Mav smiles.

"Of course I did, kitten. Anything to ensure it was the most special night," he winks, and I bite my lip.

It was more than extraordinary. It was absolutely magical. We spent the night tangled in the hotel sheets, making love until we physically couldn't anymore.

Room service, champagne on ice, and rose petals awaited us when we checked in – the full honeymoon suite.

"You never cease to mystify me, Angel," I say, kissing his hand.

Finally, the bus pulls up, and Harper comes straight for us.

"Let me see!" she screams, and I glare at Mav.

"You couldn't let me surprise one person?" I ask, slapping his arm.

"I needed her help," he shrugs.

I hold my hand out, and Harper marvels at the shiny diamond.

She hugs me tightly and is elated that I'll someday be her true sister.

"I'm making dinner!" she shouts, immediately hustling to the kitchen.

That girl is a natural in the kitchen, and she's been musing about attending school to be a chef. I'm all for it, backing the dream entirely.

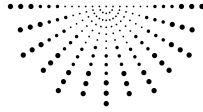
We end the night, joined by Reilly, around the bonfire pit Mav built.

We're toasting s'mores and passing a wine bottle around, and I pretend not to see Harper sneak a little sip.

She winks at me, and I shake my head. I love her more than I ever thought was possible.

When the sun sets and the music stops, we call it a night, but I'll always remember us this exact way.

# MAVERICK



## ONE YEAR AFTER ENGAGEMENT

When you're sitting in the visitor's room of a cold prison, you evaluate your life choices and thank your lucky stars you didn't end up in a place like this. At least, that's what I think about while I wait for a meeting.

I'm treating this as a business meeting, but frankly, I mean fucking business.

I'm not playing games or entertaining the low-life criminal I'm seeing. I'm here to deliver a message I promised would come in a hospital room, two years ago.

Dressed in an orange jumpsuit and escorted by a guard, I catch sight of the asshole I'm visiting.

*Asher.*

The man who stalked and kidnapped my fiancée. The man who she still has nightmares about. The man who nearly stole the most important thing in the world to me — Karina Grace.

He's handcuffed, and the guard seats him across from me, only separated by plexiglass. I lift the phone to my right, and he does the same.

"Maverick Carter. What do I owe the pleasure?" he smirks, and he's lucky I can't wrap my hands around his throat.

"You remember what I said in the hospital?" I ask, getting right to the point.

He turns his head to the side, giving me a look I can't decipher.

My patience is running thin.

"Answer me, asshole," I spit into the phone.

"Yes. I remember," he reluctantly says.

"Good. Those instructions will be coming later today. Take the book given to you," I say, watching as he realizes what I mean.

"If I don't?" he tests me, and I try not to show the anger coursing through me.

"I'll get someone else to do it, and it'll be less than merciful," I say through gritted teeth.

"How's Karrie?" he asks, and I nearly lose it.

"Do what you're told, you piece of shit," I finish, slamming the phone down.

My adrenaline is pumping, and I finally feel like I'm doing something that can end Karina's pain. Her panic attacks are rare nowadays, but they still have their way of returning, as do the nightmares.

I don't plan on telling her about this visit, not right now, anyway. One day, I'll let her know the truth when I feel like she's ready for it.

I've told her I would kill to protect her, including having someone else do the deed if I'm unable to, like in this instance.

Old Man Tony knows a guard who works at the prison and frequents his cabin's shooting range, so when we had an opportunity to finish this once and for all, we took it.

Paying off the guard wasn't cheap, but they're all a little corrupt in one way or another. Later today, he'll be delivered what's necessary to end his life, and Karina will finally be free. Living in a world where her abuser isn't breathing.

It's the closure she deserves after the hell that fuck-face put her through.



ON MY WAY HOME, I STOP FOR A BOTTLE OF TEQUILA AND TWO bouquets.

My girls don't know why, but we're celebrating tonight. Harper has been doing great in high school, and her boyfriend, Alex, is coming for dinner.

I don't like the little punk, but he's good to Harper, and that's all I care about.

Last weekend, he escorted her to the Homecoming dance and was a perfect gentleman. Harper looked all grown up in her lavender-colored dress. Karina took her shopping for weeks until they finally found the right one. They spent the entire day getting ready, doing hair and makeup.

I couldn't believe my eyes when she came down the stairs, the dress trailing behind her. Karina ensured Harper wore something elegant and classy, and she looked amazing.

When I get home, Harper is cooking, and Karina is ordering products for the salon. Neither of them hear me come in the door, so I take a moment to watch them.

Karina's hair is lazily tossed in a bun, pieces of hair falling around her face. She's wearing one of my sweatshirts, two sizes too big for her, but she looks stunning as always.

Her legs are crossed on the barstool, and she's planted at her laptop on the kitchen island.

Harper is stirring pasta and cooking chicken cutlets at the same time. Her recipe for chicken parm is to die for, and it's her favorite to cook. She's showing off for her boyfriend, but if her food is involved, I'm okay with it.

I clear my throat, and they both look up in unison, smiling at me.

I hand them each their flowers and ask about their day.

Karina kisses me on the cheek when I sit on the barstool beside her and tells me about her clients today.



I'm so proud of how hard she and Reilly have worked on their spa, and it's becoming a success.

"How was your day, Angel?" she asks, closing her laptop and giving me her attention.

"Same as usual. The job is moving along slowly but surely," I say, neglecting to mention my pitstop.

It's been two years since I took the promotion to run the company alongside Hunter. I never pictured myself keeping a job and turning it into a career, but I love what I do.

Hunter and I are close, and we run a tight ship.

Currently, we're working on a medical office building an hour outside of town, and even though the commute is a pain in the ass, the project has been successful and on track thus far.

"Why the tequila?" Karina asks, smirking.

"Celebrating something. I'm not sure what, but I was in a good mood on the ride home today," I say, getting up to answer the doorbell.

I open the door for Alex, and he shakes my hand.

"Hi, Mr. Carter, thank you for having me tonight," he says, uncomfortably shifting in my presence.

I may or may not have scared the life out of him before I allowed him to drive Harper to the dance.

He's a year older than her, and Karina encouraged me to let them be together as long as we kept a strict eye on them.

"I told you, Alex. Mr. Carter was a phenomenal album, but you can call me Maverick," I say, ushering him inside.

Harper lights up when she sees him, and he greets Karina before hugging Harper, who's still at the stove.

She wants to be a chef, and her heart is set on attending culinary school. I told her I'd support whatever decision she makes, and the money from Grams' house would be enough to cover her tuition.

I put some aside before buying this house. That way, she'd have options for her future.

Judging by how her meal smells, I think she will make a fabulous chef.

"Let's give them a few minutes, Mav," Karina tugs on my arm, and I reluctantly follow her out of the kitchen.

She brings the bottle of tequila, and we snuggle on the couch, sharing a drink.

"You and me in that bedroom tonight, kitten?" I whisper, tickling her ribs.

"If you're nice to Alex. I'll think about it," she teases, resting her head on my shoulder.

Her rose perfume is intoxicating, and I've missed her like crazy today. After my little trip, the need to be with and hold her is more potent than usual.

"Soup's on!" Harper calls for dinner with her signature slogan, and we all sit around the table.

She serves us all and surprises us with garlic bread from dough she made from scratch. She's been perfecting her skills and today, she knocked it out of the park.

It's nice having a teenage sister who dreams of becoming a chef. We never go hungry around this house, and it always smells incredible in our kitchen.

I couldn't be more proud.



MY GIRLS TEAMED UP ON ME TO GET THEIR WAY, AND I'M unhappy about it. I am in charge of cleaning the dishes, and Harper is also going out for ice cream with Alex.

She begged, pleaded, and promised to be home by dark. Karina urged me to let them have a little freedom, and the diner is only ten minutes away.

The house is quiet, with Karina abandoning me to shower versus helping me with the kitchen.

She claimed she needed a *self-care shower*, and I rolled my eyes.

“Mav!” I hear her yell, and I race up the stairs.

She might be having a panic attack, and I try to remember where her panic pills are.

When I reach the bedroom, she’s sprawled across the bed in a lacy matching bra and panty set.

“Oh,” I manage to say, captivated by her beauty.

“Get your ass over here, Angel,” she says, wiggling her fingers at me.

“This is a surprise,” I say, kicking off my work boots and locking the door behind me.

“We rarely get the house to ourselves, and with what I plan to do with you, it’s a requirement,” she smirks, biting her lip.

I stand above her, reaching out to touch that perfect ass of hers, but she stops me.

“No touching,” she whispers, pulling me to the edge of the bed by my belt.

“But kitten,” I start to say, but she forcefully rips my jeans and boxers down.

“No talking,” she teases her hands around my thighs.

I take a breath, letting her have control.

My cock is already hard for her, and when she wraps those perfect lips around my tip, I drop my head back and groan.

*Fuck.*

She works her mouth up and my length, using her hand to jerk me simultaneously. I take a fistful of her hair and guide her further, feeling the back of her throat.

She moans with my cock in her mouth before coughing, so I ease my grip, and she takes a breath.

“Look at you, kitten. Sucking my cock like a good girl. Do you want more?” I ask, and she nods.

She starts up again, and I let her work at her own pace until I can barely hold on.

There's no way I'm finishing down her throat, not tonight. I need to be inside her.

I lay her on her back, kissing her neck and reaching her breasts. I slide the lace over, taking a nipple in my mouth, teasing it lightly with my tongue.

I reach down and line my tip at her entrance, the wetness already pooling and waiting for me.

I push into her, and she arches her back. At first, I go slow, pushing in and pulling out, which drives her wild.

She moans my name, and I push all the way inside her, feeling how she stretches for me.

She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down for a kiss while I work my hips, angling her legs so I can push in deeper.

Our lips break apart, but I keep my forehead on hers, and we share the same breaths.

"Fuck, Mav. Harder," she whispers, and I can feel her clench around me.

I thrust harder, the sound of our skin slapping together filling the room.

She moans softly and digs her nails into my back, and I watch her eyes fall shut as her orgasm takes over. I feel her legs shaking against mine, and she's still moaning while I chase my release.

"Come for me, Angel. Show me what I do to you," she says, bringing me over the edge.

I groan, hot spurts of my come filling her.

I collapse onto her chest and it feels as if she's trying to catch her breath.

"Is this why you wanted Harper to go for ice cream?" I ask, and she mischievously smiles.

“Maybe. Maybe I was so distracted thinking about you all day at work, I couldn’t wait to get you alone,” she bites her lip, and I pepper kisses across her tits.

“You’re a horny little devil,” I smile, and she strokes my cheek.

We shower together, and I gently wash her hair. The water trickles over us both, and I tilt her chin to meet my gaze.

“You and me, we’re invincible,” I say, and she closes her eyes.

“Keep loving me as you do, and never let me go,” she whispers, and I melt.

“I promise,” I vow, and I mean it.

The water turns cold, and we dry off, deciding to spend the evening on the patio and snuggling together under a blanket when the air turns chilly.

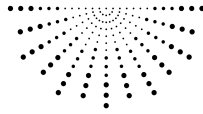
Nights like these make everything I’ve survived worth it. After my mother died, I never thought I’d find someone who would understand me, and my pain.

Karina changed my thinking and made me believe that love is possible.

Two broken people can heal each other and learn to live with the pain rather than being defined by it.

I will love Karina Grace with every piece of me until the end of *time*.

# KARINA



## SEVEN YEARS LATER

The sun is going down, but two little voices beg me for five more minutes, and I can never say no to them.

“Five minutes!” I say, and they run back to the swing set.

“Thank you, Mommy!” Penelope says, our four-year-old daughter.

She’s fearless, flying through the air with her belly flat on the swing. With curly blonde hair just like Maverick’s and an attitude that’s all mine.

Our youngest, Pippa, is two, and she’s much quieter. Taking after her daddy, she simply tolerates all of us and doesn’t like other people.

They’re wrapped around Daddy’s little finger and take off running when he walks into the yard.

He scoops them both up, kissing their cheeks.

“Daddy, is it time for teesball?” Nellie asks him, smiling like he hung the stars in the sky.

To her, *he did*.

Mav is her whole world.

“No, Nellie, not today. Tomorrow, we go to teesball,” he says, laughing.

As promised all those years ago, he coaches Penelope’s ‘teesball’ team, as she calls it.

It's a mix of Rose Hills and Forest Falls kids. Hunter and Maverick's company sponsors the team, so all the kids wear bright orange jerseys with '*Avery Construction*' printed on the back.

It was our way of bringing everyone together and keeping our families close. Whenever Adam and Jules are in town, they watch the games, and Willow is the honorary snack mom, always ensuring our sideline has goodies for the players and the adults.

He loves every second, and the kids call him Coach Carter, which always makes me chuckle.

"How's my wife?" he asks, kissing my forehead.

"Living' the dream, Angel," I smile, and he lets the girls go back to playing.

"Are we still on for tonight?" He asks, sitting beside me on the patio couch.

"Wouldn't miss it," I say, leaning into him for a kiss.

Nights like this are what we've built our family dynamic on. We don't shy away from showing affection to each other in front of the girls.

They know how much Mommy and Daddy love each other, and we show them what a family should be.

Maverick built the girls an entire playhouse out of wood, and they spend every moment they can on it.

Pips loves the sandbox, while Nellie is obsessed with the swings.

My phone rings, and it's my business partner and best friend, Reilly.

I take her call while Mav races over to push Nellie on the swing, and Pippa is likely eating sand for dinner.

That child keeps us on our toes.

"What's up, Reills?" I ask, assuming something is wrong at the salon.

After Katherine left me an enormous amount of money, I decided to open my own spa salon. With Reilly by my side, we run something special together.

We got our licenses in waxing and service our clients like no one else.

We offer hair coloring and cuts, complete waxing services, and pedicures. It's a one-stop shop decorated head-to-toe with self-care slogans and adorable pictures.

My favorite is the waterfall wall. It's in the lobby and runs into a small pond with cute fish we picked out.

"You'll never guess who came in today," she says, the gossip queen at it again.

"Hit me," I laugh.

"Alivia. Our old boss!" she tells me, and I'm shocked.

When the salon we'd worked at closed, we heard whispers that her mother was embezzling the money, and Alivia skipped town.

Reilly goes on to tell me all about it, down to the way Alivia admired our spa.

"Alright, Reills, fill me in tomorrow. I have to go," I say, knowing she'll talk all night if I don't hang up.

Maverick is bribing the kids with chocolate milk to go inside, and I shake my head at him. Always giving them sugar and treats.

We live in the same house Mav bought all those years ago, and it's our home. Every day, we fill it with love and laughter; this is the home we'll someday pass on to our children.

When Harper left for culinary school two years ago, Pips was a newborn and let us turn her room into a nursery. Lucky for us, she didn't move too far away, and Auntie Harper babysits the rascals every weekend.

The life we've built is comfortable. We do things our way and never let the rest of the world bring us down. Mav and I face every challenge together and work as a team.



I wouldn't have it any other way.

After we cook dinner and get the kids in bed, we treat ourselves to a glass of wine.

Today is a day we honor every year.

Five years ago to the day, Asher killed himself in prison. He hung himself in his cell, and I received a call from the domestic assault worker assigned to my case.

Even though Asher pleaded guilty, I was still given constant updates on if he was transferred or anything that could threaten my safety.

That included when he chose the coward's way out, ending his own life.

We're not celebrating his death but my freedom. I finally felt free, knowing he was no longer breathing.

The first year we decided to celebrate the date, Maverick confessed something that shook my core.

I remember how nervous he was to tell me, but it didn't make me love him any less.

Maverick visited Asher in prison and made good on what he'd promised him in that hospital bed. His final instruction was to take his life and finally give me the closure I deserved.

Shockingly, he had listened and did it later that night.

Before he hung himself, he wrote me a letter. It was sent a few weeks after getting the news, but I refused to read it.

Maverick did and to this day, he hasn't told me what was written. I didn't want to know, and he respected my choice.

I'm a survivor. I wear it with pride, never forgetting my history.

One day, my kids will ask what my tattoo represents, and I'll have to tell them the truth.

When they're teenagers and want to date, they'll know what I had to endure. Not to scare them but to give them the

knowledge to make the right choices in who they trust and love.

I survived against all odds and am thankful for that every day.

I found my person and dedicated myself to loving him wholeheartedly. I vowed to love him in sickness and health til death do us part, and I intend to honor that vow with every piece of my soul.

After all, Maverick is the one who brought me back to life and gave me something to believe in.

I once believed love was supposed to hurt, that men cheat and lie, but that's how it goes.

I once believed it was as simple as black and white.

That's not love.

Love is *golden*.

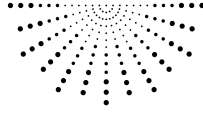
Feeling safety and security with a person, intertwining yourselves together, and choosing them daily is what love is in my mind.

I'd choose him in every lifetime. Every single time.

Our love was destined: two souls that would go to the ends of the earth to find each other.

We're an age-old classic, *timeless*.

READ ON FOR AN EXCLUSIVE  
SNEAK PEEK OF REILLY'S  
STORY!



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Haley Fotopoulous + Alyssa Cote - Where to begin. I never knew that I could meet strangers on the internet and hold them so close in my heart. Truly, two of the best friends I've ever had. Whenever I ramble about my writing, share snippets, and word counts, you're always the first to offer support. I can't thank you enough.

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Friends and family - Thank you for the continuous support! From spreading the word to shoving copies in my face to sign, I appreciate every single one of you. This journey of writing stories is still new to me, but the support from the people who care is what keeps me coming up with new ideas to write.

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Tianna Delgado - GIRL. You were my beta reader, and slowly, became my friend. An author loves having a dedicated reader, and you are mine. I appreciate your feedback, advice, and allowing me to bounce ideas off you at all hours of the day and night. You called me your favorite author, the first time someone has ever said that to me, and I cried. Your support has helped me get through this book, along with the ones to follow. In a few short weeks, you became my confidant, and I love you. Just wait until they see what we've come up with next ... \* *evil laugh* \*

To the readers - YOU are the reason I can say that I'm an author. Reading, sharing, and writing reviews for my silly little books mean the world. I can never thank you all individually, but from the bottom of my heart, I appreciate everyone who reads anything I've written.

# ALSO BY TAYLOR JAMES

*Have you visited Rose Hills? It's only one town away ...*

## **Someone You Won't Talk About - (Book One)**

### ***Present:***

*Willow Brooks* would rather be anywhere than back in her hometown - Rose Hills - the secrets buried here are enough to destroy her. Luckily, she only plans to be in town for two days, long enough to clean up another one of her deceased father's messes, until she runs into her high school sweetheart. The chemistry and sparks fly instantly, but so do the dark reminders of what she did in the past.

*Hunter Avery* is happy; he co-owns a construction company with his lifelong best friend and has a loving girlfriend at home. Or so he thought. Hunter's life is turned on its head when his soulmate from the past blows back into town. Can Hunter resist their deep connection, telepathic conversations, and his undying love for her?

### ***Past:***

High school relationships never last...or do they? Meet teenage Hunter and Willow as they form a bond that could never be broken or understood by anyone. Doing their best to survive - and move on from their traumatic childhoods - their romance blossoms into a love that can withstand anything except the dark secret that forces Willow and Hunter apart. Plagued by one night, one mistake, and guilt, Willow flees town, leaving Hunter with only a letter and heartbreak.

*Someone You Won't Talk About* is a second-chance romance told in alternate timelines between the past and present. With two stories unfolding, the suspense will keep you guessing as the truth from the past is uncovered, and the tumultuous fallout threatens to destroy everything they know as present-day adults. Willow and Hunter lost everything years ago, but when fate intervenes and gives them a second chance, will the past's secrets consume them again? Or can two high school sweethearts defy the odds, survive the flames and rekindle the life they've always dreamed of?

\* \* \*

## **Somewhere We Can Be Alone (Book Two)**

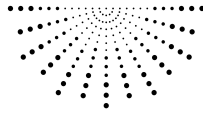
Juliette never expected to find love in a small town, but when she's swept off her feet by the man of her dreams, nothing stops her from falling hard. Distance, timing, and fighting consume her relationship, but when she gives Adam one last chance to prove himself, will this be the fairytale she's always dreamed of? One blizzard, one shot to open her heart to the broody, muscular man who's pushed her away one too many times.

Adam has never been in a relationship and has no plans to settle down. Until Juliette blows into Rose Hills, stealing every piece of his soul. When his grief over his mother's death, and subsequent depression, pull him under, it will take everything in his soul to prove himself to the love of his life. One weekend, one chance to make things perfect for the only ray of sunshine in his dark, messed-up life.

*Somewhere We Can Be Alone* is a friends-to-lovers romance and tells the tale of two people who can never seem to get it right, or can they? When a massive blizzard forces Juliette to stay in Adam's small town, there's nothing left to do but flesh out each other's souls and take a chance on their romance. A heart-wrenching

love story, told in dual POVs, that will make you laugh out loud and believe in the power of soul ties.

## REILLY



*I* moan loudly as if I just had an orgasm. Too bad I didn't.

I had to fake it so this asshole would stop *jabbing* me with his dick.

He was gorgeous, almost like a model plucked out of a magazine, but he was god-awful in bed. The chiseled abs and million-dollar smile don't make up for that horrendous attempt at sex.

I won't bother saving his number; he was just a dating app hookup, and I'll need my vibrator to finish the job.

"That was incredible," he breathes, rolling over to face me.

I smile sweetly, but I want to roll my eyes.

"Yeah, well. I have an early morning," I say, wrapping the sheets around my body.

"Are you sure? I need a few, then I can go again," he kisses me, and thankfully, he's good at that.

*God. No.*

"Sorry, but I really should get to bed," I say, and reluctantly, he climbs out of my bed.

I watch while he gets dressed, utterly disappointed at how *disappointing* he was. Something from above must've determined he was too good-looking to have the full package.



Once he leaves my apartment, I draw a bubble bath and pour a tall glass of wine.

I need to scrub the memory of what just happened off my body and forget it all with a bottle of pinot.

It's been way too long since I've had a solid guy to rely on for quickies, and the ones in this town aren't making the cut.

Are good looks *and* good dick too much for a girl to ask for? *Christ.*

I came to Forest Falls last month, and it's my chance for a fresh start. I made a mess in the town where I grew up, leaving a string of situationships and guys who wanted relationships in my wake.

My only hope was a new place, but I haven't learned my lesson.

I've tinder-fucked three guys since I've been here, and none of them were good enough to add to my list.

I keep a detailed record of who I sleep with, and if they meet my standards, I let them join my rotation of guys I call when I want something from them.

I don't bother with relationships and can't recall the last time I was in one. I love being alone, honestly.

I let the bubbles soothe my skin and clear my mind. There's no use dwelling on shit I can't change.

After I finish the bottle of wine, the room feels like it's spinning, and I drain my bathtub. Tomorrow, I start the monotonous routine of finding a new job since the salon I was working at abruptly shut down.

I climb into bed and turn out the lights, scrolling endlessly on my phone until I fall asleep.

\* \* \*

LOUD BARKING PULLS ME OUT OF MY SLEEP, AND I GROAN.

All three of my dogs are ready for breakfast, prancing around my bed until I finally get up and feed them.

My Pomeranians are named after different kinds of cheese, mainly because I thought it was funny.

I intended to foster them as puppies but fell in love and kept all three.

Colby is my quiet boy, always ready to be cuddled.

Cheddar is high-strung and high-maintenance. She always needs the best of the best and settles for nothing less.

Monterey is Colby's twin, and their middle names are both Jack. He's constantly barking, especially in his own shadow.

Again, it's a cheese reference.

I love these dogs more than life, and they keep me busy.

"Breakfast is served, pups," I call, and they dive into their bowls.

After breakfast, they'll want to go on our morning walk, so I duck into the bathroom and freshen up.

I toss my long, red hair into a messy bun and throw on an old college hoodie. Before I finish washing my face and brushing my teeth, the dogs are outside the door, ready to go.

"Let's go, babies. We need a long walkie today," I say, leashing them all.

We walk two miles into the center of town, and I admire the building that's captivated me for the last week.

A beautiful brick building now painted white, with a green door and the windows with cardboard taped over them. I'm so nose-y. I just want to see the inside.

Before and after projects are my favorite, and I love seeing how everything comes together.

I shouldn't have worn a sweatshirt and leggings; it's a lot warmer out than I anticipated, and I'm sweating.

I wrap all three leashes around my wrist and attempt to pull the hoodie off, but they slip off when I pull the sleeve down, and all three dogs take off running.

*Fuck.*

I try chasing them down, yelling their ridiculous names, but they ignore me.

I follow them behind the new building, and they're heading straight for the dumpster.

Luckily, it's enclosed by a fence back here, so I know I'll catch them.

The backdoor opens, and a man covered in tattoos comes out with a trash bag. His gaze is on the ground, but I swear I'd recognize that head of dark hair anywhere.

*Jagger Ace Hartley.*

My face flushes with embarrassment as I attempt to wrangle my dogs. He looks up, and his eyes go wide.

"Chipmunk?" he says, the nickname he gave me when I was six.

Jagger is my older brother's best friend; we've known him since we were kids. I haven't seen him since my brother, Rocco, married nearly five years ago.

Last I heard about Jags, he was getting married himself.

Now, he's standing in front of me in Forest Falls, looking like a fucking dream.

"Jags, what are you doing here?" I hug him, and he smells like a mix of paint, cigarettes, and lavender laundry detergent.

"Opening a bar," he says, waving his hand toward the building.

My dogs bark at him, thinking he's dangerous, so I toss treats to keep them occupied.

"This is your place?" I ask, and he nods.

"Yeah, I needed a fresh start, and this place seemed quiet enough," he runs a hand through his hair, and I notice the absence of a wedding ring.

Some higher power may have answered my silent pleas because if there's a man who fits what I described, it's Jagger.

“I know what you mean. I moved here last month. It’s tranquil,” I make conversation, but he looks eager to return to whatever he’s doing inside.

“I’ll catch you around, Reilly. I’ve got a lot to finish,” he smiles, and I can’t let him go so soon.

“Can I see inside? The outside is beautiful. I pass by on my daily walks with these hounds,” I say, gesturing toward my dogs.

“Not yet. It’s a mess. Come by tomorrow night, drinks on the house,” he winks, and I will take him up on that.

“You’re on, Ace,” I tease, using the middle name he despises.

“Never mind, I’m charging you double,” he rolls his eyes, but I see a small smile creep across his scruffy face.

“I dare you. I’ll leave the worst Yelp review known to man,” I shoot back, and he shakes his head.

“Get outta here, Chip. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he commands, with a slight growl in his voice that turns me on.

“I’m not a chipmunk anymore,” I call out over my shoulder, and I catch a glimpse of him staring at my ass.

God herself must be smiling down on me today because that sexy hunk of a man will absolutely be in my bed soon, and he knows what he’s doing between the sheets. That much, I can guarantee.

I can’t stop smiling for the rest of the walk home. The last person I expected to see in Forest Falls was Jagger, and he looked so much better than the last time we slept together.

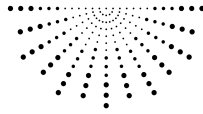
The welcome addition of muscles and tattoos – as well as the facial hair he’s sporting – are to thank for that.

Knowing they’re still close, I planned to call Rocco immediately to get the full scoop on Jagger. However, Rocco doesn’t know I have a past with him, so I’ll tread carefully.

My older brother is protective as hell over me; it’s the Italian Mob blood we have coursing through our veins.

One small interaction has completely changed my outlook on the day, and I'm looking forward to catching up with Jagger tomorrow.

# JAGGER



The amount of work that needs to be done in my new bar is the perfect distraction from thinking about the life I left behind.

I've spent my days ripping up floorboards, painting, and throwing away countless trash bags. Nothing is in my way; nobody awaits me, and I live upstairs. That means all my time is spent at the bar, and it's precisely why I chose this place.

This building in particular.

This next phase of my life is all I'm focused on. I'm running a bar I've built from the ground up. My blood, sweat, and tears are poured into this place, and I care more about this endeavor than anything else that has come my way in the last ten years.

Including my ex-wife.

The very person I ran away from, leaving her in the ashes of the life I burned down by speaking out.

Abigail was nothing special, but she made me happy for a while, and I thought that meant I should marry her.

I was dead wrong, and I have the scars to prove it.

Forest Falls is my new home; my only concern is this bar. Nothing that led me here matters anymore.

I have no plans to make friends or find time for a relationship. I'm rebuilding myself and healing the trauma I've experienced since I graduated college.

The only two friends I have in this fucked up world are Rocco, my childhood best friend, and Axel, my old college roommate.

I don't have room for anyone else, even if they're both miles away from the new roots I'm putting down.

I came to Forest Falls with a dream: a few bags, two cats, and a motorcycle. When I fled from the prison confines of my old life, I packed light as a feather; the fewer reminders, the better.

I blast the music, enjoying the vibes as I clean up from the day's progress. I need to buy trash bags in bulk because this is the third one I've brought out in the last half hour.

The area is quiet, and I feel free in this peaceful town.

No bodyguards, constant visitors, or high expectations.

Just ordinary people who make an honest living.

This is where I blend in.

I'm carrying another bag to the dumpster in the alley when I see three little fluff balls running around and a woman with bright red hair chasing them.

She notices me, but I purposely keep my head down. Whatever's happening here is none of my business.

Those piercing blue eyes catch my eye, and I know exactly who the dog lady is.

*Reilly Jordan Corazza.*

Fucking Christ.

"Chipmunk?" I say, fighting the smile, trying to force its way across my face.

Her eyes meet mine, and my body tenses.

Of all the people to run into, it had to be Reilly.

My best friend's sister.

The girl I've been *hopelessly* in love with since I was nineteen.

The minute her lips touched mine all those years ago, I was hooked.

*Addicted.*

“Jags? What are you doing here?” she asks excitedly, pulling me in for a hug.

Even the slightest touch ignites my fire; instantly, I feel like a kid again and remind myself to breathe.

We chat, and she invites herself into the bar. *Typical Reilly.*

I promised her I’d drink with her tomorrow, but I shouldn’t have asked her to come. I’ll be weak in the knees the minute she walks in the door, at her mercy the second those baby blue eyes meet mine.

Whenever I see her, we end up in bed together.

I’ve known her since she was six, small but mighty, and she reminded me of those stupid chipmunks who sing.

Once I ensure she’s gone, I pop out back for a cigarette. I need to clear my head of Reilly and get back to work. My grand opening is scheduled for two weeks from now, and I’ve got a lot of ground to cover.

“*Remember who you’re doing this for,*” I think to myself, and I find the mental strength to get more work on the bar done.

It’s dark when I finish polishing the wood, and I admire my work before heading up to my loft.

My two cats, Tequila and Kahlua, wait for me by the door.

As lonely as my life was, these two stray cats made me happy. They’d come to the balcony every morning and night, waiting for the can of tuna I started feeding them.

When shit hit the fan, I brought them inside my fancy prison cell, and they kept me from jumping off the balcony they came in from.

I finally decided to leave that shit hole behind, and my kitties came with me.



Tequila is a light beige, with a brown nose, which is where his name came from. He's mischievous, curious, and loves to sleep on my chest.

Kahlua is all white, fluffy as hell, and a bit chunky. She's fierce, though, always challenging her brother to play fights and stealing all his toys.

While I prepare their dinner, they meow endlessly, half a can of tuna mixed with half a can of some nasty-smelling wet cat food.

Only the best for my babies, and they immediately start purring when I place their bowls in the trays.

I start my nightly routine: showering, eating dinner, and putting on whatever catches my attention on TV.

I pour a large vodka and coke, zoning out on the couch while both cats sleep beside me. This is the life I envisioned when I left, the peaceful, safe haven I'd been stripped of.

My mind wanders back to Reilly and how fucking gorgeous she looked with messy hair and in workout clothes.

Those leggings should be a crime because her ass looked phenomenal. Her curves have only gotten more entrancing as the years passed, and she's always been impossible for me to resist.

My ultimate weakness — my fucking *kryptonite*.

I knock back my drink and immediately pour another one. I need to shake off how seeing Reilly affected me.

The dream is the focus.

I fall into bed after two more drinks, absolutely failing at not thinking of she-who-won't-be-named.

She's stuck in my mind on replay, the memories flooding back to me in the cruelest way possible.

Just as my eyes close, my phone rings. It's Rocks, my best friend and Reilly's older brother.

*Fuck.*

He's never known about our history. He'd probably rip my throat out or skin me alive if he did.

"Hey, Rocks, what's up, man?" I answer, staying calm.

"You and Reilly live in the same town?" he asks, not beating around the bush.

My heart is ramming against my chest, and panic builds. The one thing he can never know might be coming to the surface.

"Uh, yeah. I ran into her today at the bar. Why?" I deflect, holding my breath, waiting for his answer.

"That's a crazy coincidence. You'll keep an eye on my baby sister out there, right, Jag?" he sighs, almost as if he's relieved.

Rocco has always been over-protective of Reilly, nearly knocking my head off when we were nine because I called her Chipmunk. He thought I was making fun of her.

"Absolutely, Roc. Not even a question, you know that. Did she call you?" I poke, seeing if she mentioned anything else.

"She did a little while ago. Thank god, I was so worried about her out there alone. You didn't tell her you were divorced?" he asks, a tone of curiosity in his voice.

"No. We'd only run into each other for a minute. Her fluffy rat dogs made their way to my dumpster," I laugh, and so does he.

Reilly didn't say we were having drinks tomorrow, so I also neglected to mention it.

Rocco updates me on what's going on in his life while I trade stories about the progress on the bar. After all was said and done, we spent an hour on the phone, and I felt much better.

He's my safe space, the person to whom I can confess *nearly* anything. Rocks is more like a brother to me, especially with how I grew up spending all my time at his house.

I fall asleep thinking about the days when I was carefree and happy. These two things I haven't experienced since I was in college.

*God*, I miss who I used to be, and tonight, the tomb of memories won't stay closed.



THE TABLES AND CHAIRS HAVE FINALLY BEEN SET IN PLACE, and my next mission is the bar stools.

Overall, the finishing touches will be done over the next two weeks, and I'm perfectly on track for the grand opening.

I'm interviewing two bartenders, a waitress, and a cook tomorrow. I'm keeping the staff small since I plan to be here daily.

I've been pacing around for the last hour, holding my breath until Reilly stops by. We didn't exchange numbers or make a plan so she could show up at any time.

Who am I kidding? She probably won't even come. It's been five years since we've seen each other, and Reilly is the girl who slips out when you're still sleeping.

I hear a light knock on the back door when I'm about to give up and call it a night.

I unlatch the lock, and there she is.

Standing before me, holding a bottle of vodka, looking like a red-headed princess.

"I didn't know if you actually had any alcohol yet, so consider this a present for your new bar," she giggles, handing me the bottle and stepping inside.

"Thanks, Chip. I do have alcohol, but not the full order," I say, leading her toward the bar.

She looks around, taking it all in.

I don't know why I'm nervous, as if her opinion will make or break me.

"It's incredible," she breathes, spinning around to face me.

“Make you a drink?” I ask, and she nods.

“Vodka-cran on the rocks,” she says, but I remember.

Reilly perches on a stool, flipping her curly hair over her shoulder and propping her elbows on the bar.

I can’t help but stare. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Always has been.

Her pouty lips are covered in pink gloss, and her long eyelashes dance on her cheeks when she blinks. I notice all the small details about her, like how her hoop nose ring shines in the light or how her baby blue eyes sparkle when she looks at me.

I hand her the drink and begin making my own.

“This is perfect, Jags,” she says, sipping it slowly.

“What are you naming this place?” she asks, and I sigh.

“Alcott’s Bar,” I say, not explaining.

Knowing Reilly, she’ll ask eventually. She’s nosey as hell.

“Did Rocks call you last night?” she muses, and I laugh.

“You know he did. Probably the second he finished talking to you,” I smile, sipping my vodka and coke.

“I’ll bet he asked you to look after me here,” she says, leaning closer.

I can smell her vanilla-scented perfume, and it’s intoxicating.

“Something like that was said, yes,” I rest my arm on the bar, looking into her eyes.

Her gaze is locked on mine, and she knows I’m wrapped around her little finger.

“Mmm, I knew it. So, Jagger, are you gonna look after me? Make sure I behave?” she whispers, a hint of seduction in her voice, twirling a piece of hair around her finger.

*I’m completely fucked.*

“Reilly Jordan behaving? That’s never going to happen,” I bite my lip, and she smiles.

Just when she leans closer, and I think she’ll kiss me, she jumps off her stool.

I watch as she comes behind the bar, heading straight for where I’m standing.

“Can I try to make my next drink,” she leans against the bar, standing close enough to touch.

I step back and watch as she tries replicating the vodka cran I made for her earlier.

“How is it?” I ask when she’s done, and she scrunches her nose.

“I’ll leave the bartending to you,” she laughs, dumping it down the sink.

I pull two shot glasses out and pour vodka into each of them.

“Shot for shot, Jordan?” I challenge her, and she clinks her glass to mine.

“You’re on, Ace,” she tips the drink back, finishing it in one gulp.

This is a dangerous game I’m playing, but flirting with danger is my specialty.

I realize I’m in over my head when she plugs her phone into the speaker and climbs onto the bar.

We’ve both had three shots, and it’s hitting her quickly.

A song from her favorite movie blares through the bar, and she dances on the top like the girls from *Coyote Ugly*.

Reilly made us watch that stupid movie hundreds of times when we were kids, knowing every word and song.

I should’ve known she’d try to reenact it.

“Come up here, Jags,” she whines, and I kick my shoes off before climbing up.

I take her hand and spin her around, letting the music take over.

When the song ends, I help her down, and she wraps her legs around my waist.

“How’d you end up here, Jagger?” she asks, pushing the hair out of my face.

“In the same place as you? The universe must be punishing me,” I tease, and she tugs my hair.

“Maybe. Maybe the universe knew we needed each other,” she says, and I place her down on the bar top.

“You don’t need anyone, Chipmunk,” I breathe, my lips inches from hers.

Her legs are still wrapped around me, and I place my hands on each side of her leg.

I’m inviting her to make the first move, but even when she’s drinking, she’s too stubborn to do so.

“What we need is another shot,” she reaches around me for the bottle and sips from the glass top.

I copy her and let the liquor burn as it goes down.

“Why’d you get divorced?” she asks, and my body turns to ice.

I’m not ready to tell anyone this story, and I won’t do it while drinking.

“It just didn’t work out,” I counter, hoping she leaves it there.

“You still love her?” she searches my eyes, waiting for my answer.

“I don’t think I ever did,” I say honestly, which surprises her.

Reilly wraps her arms around my neck, daring me to kiss her.

I keep my cool and let her sweat it out.

“Have you ever been in love with anyone, or are you just a rogue soldier?” She trails her fingers through my hair, sending shivers down my spine.

“You know the answer to that, Reilly,” I whisper, and she shakes her head.

“Jags ...” she starts to say but stops.

“I know, Reilly. I know what you’re going to say. I’ve heard it before,” I say, backing away from her embrace.

She looks defeated, as if I beat her at a game we were playing. In a way, I did.

She wants me to take her upstairs and fuck her til she screams my name. But when I wake up in the morning, she’ll be gone.

*Just like every other time.*

Normally, I’d bend to her will and do exactly as she wanted. But not this time.

I’m not falling down the Reilly Jordan rabbit hole.

“Why did you even ask me here, Jagger?” she asks, sipping from the bottle again.

“To catch up, maybe share a drink like two old friends?” I say, and it comes out harshly.

“We’re not just friends, though,” she quips, her legs dangling from the bar.

“I think we are. That’s all I’ll ever be to you,” I hit her where it hurts, and I can see the change in her eyes.

“That’s not fair, Jagger,” she whines and jumps off the bar.

She reaches into my pocket for my cigarettes, and I gesture toward the back door.

Reilly craves a smoke when she drinks. It’s her thing.

“It’s not fair, Chipmunk. But we’ve been here before,” I hold the lighter for her while she takes a big drag.

“We’re friends who fuck occasionally, no strings or expectations. I see nothing wrong with that,” she leans against

the wall, and I can't take my eyes off her.

Her skirt rises dangerously high, and her tits pop out of her tiny tank top.

Reilly came here on a mission, and I know her endgame.

I won't deny that we're electric together in bed; arguably, the best sex I've ever had was with Reilly, but something feels different now.

"It's more complicated than that, at least for me," I say, and she looks at me empathetically.

"It doesn't have to be, Jags. You think too much," she laughs, and I can't help but join her.

I don't hold it against her that she'd never love me back. I accepted that long ago. It's not in her nature. She's tough and fierce and makes her intentions clear.

I knew nothing would ever go further than the bedroom with her, but I still held out hope. I was a kid, but now, I know better than to expect anything more.

She stomps out her cigarette, lacing her fingers into mine, and leading us back into the bar.

I pour us both another drink while she fiddles with the music again.

A familiar track plays over the speaker, and she holds her hand out to me.

"Reilly Jordan Corazza, you turn this off right now," I smile, but she shakes her head.

"If you're turning me down, you're doing it to our song," she says, and I can't resist.

I take her hand, and her eyes sparkle in the dim light.

My hands wander to her ass, and I squeeze gently.

She wraps her arms around my neck, bringing us inches apart.

The chorus comes on, and she belts it out dramatically, never breaking her gaze.



She rests her head on my chest, humming with the words, and the memories flood me like a hurricane.

Reilly and I had our first kiss to this song a *million* years ago at a frat party.

“What are you trying to do to me, Chip?” I whisper, and she looks up at me.

“Kiss me, Jagger. Just like you did the first time,” she says softly, and I’m a goner.

I grab her by the throat and crash my lips into hers. She moans and parts her lips, letting my tongue in.

Her hands tangle in my hair, and I lift her off the ground.

If we’re doing this – we’re doing it right.

I place her on the bar top and spread her legs, slipping between them.

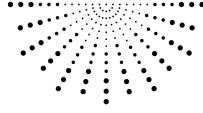
She bites my lower lip, and I can feel her smiling.

I take a fistful of her fiery-red hair and tilt her head back, biting her neck.

She moans my name, and that’s it.

*I’m hers to ruin, just like all those times before.*

REILLY & JAGGER'S STORY  
COMING SOON!



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taylor James resides in Connecticut with her husband, two daughters, and two cats.

When she's not writing, editing, or designing book covers, you can find her in the kitchen cooking. Family life is most important, always juggling the endless after school activities, dinner parties, and celebrations.