



SEXY
BASTARD

J. L. PERRY

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A COCKY HERO WORLD NOVEL

SEXY BASTARD

A Cocky Hero Club Creation

J. L. Perry

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Reading Order

Bossy Bastard

Sexy Bastard

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my silver fox...

My husband,

My heart.



*When a woman is loved correctly,
she becomes ten times the woman
she was before.*

Prologue

Grayson

CARLA WON'T EVEN LOOK AT me. *Not a glimpse.* I know because I haven't been able to take my eyes off her all night. It's been over two years since I've seen her, *two fucking years*, and I'm still not over her. I thought she was *the one*, the woman I'd spend the rest of my life with.

How could I have been so wrong?

I loved her with everything I had; I thought she loved me too. I even got down on one knee and professed my undying devotion to her in front of my entire family. That's how much she meant to me. How sure I was of our union.

Not even twenty-four hours later, she handed back the ring and told me she was sorry. *Fucking sorry.* That's all I got. No explanation, no reason, no glimmer of hope for a second chance, just a measly two words.

She ripped my damn heart out.

She crushed me in the worst possible way.

Yet, here I sit, still pining for the woman I can never have, still loving her even though she doesn't love me back.

I'm pathetic.

The last time I saw Carla was at Charlotte's christening. We were asked by Ashton and Emma, our best friends, to be her godparents. I tried to talk to her that day, but she said it wasn't the time nor the place. I'm still waiting for that conversation.

After Carla broke off our engagement, she disappeared. She quit her job, moved out of her apartment, and vanished into thin air. I even hired a private detective to track her down but to no avail.

I'm not letting her walk away from me tonight.

Not a chance in hell.

I want answers.

I need to know why.

That's what kills me the most. I've gone over that day in my head umpteen times, including the weeks and months prior, and nothing stands out. There were no signs, no rhyme or reason. What we had was strong. We were tight. We were fucking happy. You can't fake that shit. *Can you?*

"Could we have the bridal party join the happy couple on the dance floor?" the master of ceremonies announces over the microphone, pulling me back into the present. His request has adrenaline thundering through me.

Here's my chance. It may be the only one I get.

I rise, and Carla tentatively does the same. We both move around opposite ends of the bridal table, meeting in the middle of the dance floor. My heart is hammering in my chest. I've dreamed of the day I'd get to hold her again, I only hoped it would be a mutual amalgamation, not a forced one.

Carla bows her head when I come to a stop in front of her, but I don't hesitate, snaking my arms around her waist. This is the closest I've been to her in years. It's both terrifying and thrilling in equal measure. One wrong move on my part and I can fuck this all up.

She makes no attempt to pull away, so I close the small distance between us, tightening my embrace.

It feels like old times.

I never want to let go.

Our union has her body trembling under my touch; she can deny it all she wants, but she's still affected by me.

I bring my face down, burying it in her hair and inhaling deeply. She smells amazing, just like I remember. Her scent has always been my drug; I'm like an addict craving the next hit. It's been too long.

"You look stunning," I whisper, moving my mouth close to her ear.

Stunning's an understatement. Spectacular, breathtakingly beautiful, a damn goddess—all those words and more come to mind, but none of them can do her justice.

“Please don’t,” she replies in a shaky breath.

“Please don’t what? Be honest? That’s rich coming from you.” It’s a low blow, but the hurt I hold inside is still as strong as ever. I’m not sure if I’ll ever get over what she did to me.

Tilting her head back, she makes eye contact with me for the first time in what feels like *forever*.

She’s so goddamn pretty.

I scan over her face, her flawless skin, her bright hazel eyes with specks of green and gold mixed throughout them, her petite, perfectly sculptured nose with the smattering of freckles that I’ve missed... her plump, full red lips that I’m aching to kiss. After all this time, she is still able to steal all the air from my lungs.

“I miss you,” I say, not meaning to confess that but unable to stop the words that effortlessly pour from my mouth. “I miss you so fucking much, Carla.”

Tears rise in her eyes, yet she doesn’t look away.

The sadness I see within them is palpable; it tugs at my wounded heart.

Does she miss me too?

I’ve tried to let her go and move on with my life. Fuck, have I tried, but for some reason, I can’t. I still love this woman with everything I have, even after what she put me through.

Does she feel the same? If I’m honest, the past few years have had me questioning if she ever truly loved me at all.

We stay in this position for the remainder of the song—me holding her as she stares up at me. Neither of us move despite the fact we should be. I don’t care how ridiculous we look. All I care about is being *here* with *her*.

It reminds me of the first night we met, where I briefly held her for the first time. It was on the dance floor in the middle of the club. Just like then we were so lost in each other that dancing was the last thing on our minds.

I'd give anything to go back to that night. It was one of the best of my life.

The song ends, and my stomach sinks. Our time is over too quickly, but I don't want to let her go. I want to stay locked in the moment, *with her*, like this, until the end of time.

Carla makes the first move, looking away and breaking our connection. When she removes my arms from around her waist and steps back, turning to flee the dance floor, *flee me*, I'm hot on her heels.

I follow her across the back yard and into Ashton's parents' house. The sound of her shoes clicking against the marble floor echoes off the walls as she runs down the long corridor.

When she reaches the bathroom, she slips inside. I hear her strangled sob as she goes to close the door, but I stick my foot into the gap just in time.

"What the hell," she says as I force my way inside. Her fingers wipe furiously under her eyes trying to hide her tears, but it's no use, I've already seen them. Did she honestly think I'd let her run again? "Get out!"

"I don't think so," I reply, closing the door and locking it behind me.

I turn to face her, and Carla's eyes go wide as I stalk in her direction. She slowly backs away until she hits the far wall, leaving her nowhere else to go. I'm on top of her in a flash, caging her in with my arms.

"You know I can kick your ass, right?" she says, and a smile tugs at my lips as I'm reminded of her ninja skills.

"Nothing you can do will hurt me more than you already have, sweetheart," I retort, bringing my face within an inch of hers. "I'm not letting you out of here until I have answers."

"I have nothing to say to you," she says, raising her chin and straightening her spine.

"Well, I have plenty to say to you."

"I don't want to hear it, Grayson."

“Tough.”

Her eyes bore into mine, and I can feel the warmth of her breath caress my skin. I inhale her air as we remain frozen in a silent standoff.

Reaching up, I cup her jaw. I’m through playing games. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t love me,” I demand. Unsurprisingly, she remains stoic. “Tell me you don’t love me goddammit because I still love you, Carla. I’ve never fucking stopped.”

She intakes a sharp breath, and my lips are on hers before it even registers in my mind. I’m half expecting her to knee me in the nuts or flip me over until I’m flat on my back like she’s done on more than one occasion. But she doesn’t. Instead, she fists her hands in the lapels of my tuxedo jacket, pulling me closer and kissing me back.

She kisses me back.

Our mouths, our tongues and our hands are everywhere. Two and a half years of pent-up frustration all released in a feverous kiss. My cock is so hard for her, it aches.

Moving her hands in between us, she fumbles at the belt buckle on my trousers. My fingers skate up her back, dragging the zipper of her dress down until it’s pooling at her feet.

The moment she has my cock freed, I lift her. “Wrap your legs around me, babe,” I say against her mouth. I don’t have time to remove her panties, so I push them aside, burying myself deep inside her in one quick thrust.

“Fuck,” I grate out as my head falls back, resting between my shoulder blades. *I’m fucking home.* “I’ve missed your pussy... Christ, you feel so good.” I draw back to the tip before surging back in. Her arms slide around to the back of my head, her fingers tangling in the short hairs at the nape of my neck as I bring my lips back to hers. “Please tell me this pussy still belongs to me?”

“There’s been no one else,” she says against my mouth.

What?

Pulling back, my eyes meet hers. “No one else since me?”

“No one else.”

“*Sunshine.*” Does she have any idea what that does to me? I can’t even tell you how many nights I lay awake going insane with jealousy thinking another man was touching what’s mine.

I only wish I could say the same. I didn’t go near anyone else for the longest time, I couldn’t. She was all I ever thought about. *All I wanted.* And even though she was the one who left me, it felt wrong to be with someone else.

Over the past year though, when the realization finally sunk in that she was gone and never coming back, I did everything in my power to forget her. I’ve tried to fuck her out of my system. *I’ve tried to hate her.* But it’s all to no avail. None of the others made me feel a fraction of what Carla does.

Not even close.

Desperation claws at me as my lips crash back into hers; I savor her taste, her touch, her scent.

My movements quicken as I pound into her possessively. *Mine.* Each thrust taking us higher. The room is filled with sounds of our bodies slapping together mixed with our carnal cries of pleasure. This is raw, unadulterated fucking at its best. That crazy, overpowering feeling of hunger that only she brings is an agonizing reminder of everything I’ve lost.

Her heels dig painfully into my back, the sting sending heat rocketing up my spine. But I welcome it. She feels incredible. I’ve never felt anything more perfect than her. She was made for me.

I’m teetering on the edge, not sure how much longer I can last. “Let go, sunshine, I need to feel you come around my cock.”

Moments later, her pussy spasms as she throws her head back and screams out my name.

My fucking name.

It’s enough to send me spiraling over the edge. “Fuck, Carla... fuck.” My body stills as my hips jerk forward, spilling

myself deep inside her. Staking my claim. Marking my territory.

Mine.

She's fucking mine.

I rest my forehead against hers as we both try to catch our breath. I came in here to talk, I never expected this to happen. Trust me though, I'm not complaining.

"Tell me you still love me... that we can be together again. That we can try to get back what we once had. I don't know what I did wrong, but I'm sorry. Do you hear me? I'm so goddamn sorry. I need you in my life, babe. I feel empty inside without you."

I know I'm putting it all on the line here, setting myself up for heartbreak again, but she needs to know. Cupping her face in my hands as my thumbs gently skate over her jaw, I draw back. It's only then I realize she's crying. She looks so sad, so broken. It tears my heart in two.

"Don't cry, sweetheart. Whatever it is, we can get through it together... just like we used to." The pad of my thumb rises, softly brushing the tears from her cheeks, but my words only seem to bring on more. "Talk to me."

"I can't."

"Please," I beg.

"I have to go." She unravels her legs from around my waist, placing her feet back on the floor. I stand there stunned as she pushes on my chest.

I take a step back, giving her space. "That's it? You're going to walk away from me again?" My eyes bore into hers as I silently plead for her not to say it... not to go.

Please, I fucking need you.

"I'm sorry," she cries, burying her face in her hands as a sob breaks free. "I can't do this... I can't be with you."

Her words have me seeing red, literally. *How could she?*

“You know what?” I say in a tone so calm it surprises me. I tuck myself back into my pants as I try to tame the fury that’s raging inside me. “Fuck this! And fuck you. I thought you were worthy of my love... *I was wrong.*” With that, I turn and storm from the room.

I don’t stop until I’m out the front door, across the drive, and seated in my car. The palm of my trembling hand rubs over my chest in an attempt to relieve the crushing ache that’s now settled there.

I start the engine, roaring down the long driveway and out the front gates.

I can’t be here.

I can’t be near her.

I’m so fucking done.

Chapter One

Carla

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED AT someone and just knew they were put in your life for a reason? That one person who would not only be your best friend, your lover, but your absolute everything? A recognition so powerful it almost knocks you flat on your ass.

No?

Well, I have.

The day Grayson Edwards got down on one knee and professed his undying love for me, asking me to spend the rest of my days by his side, was a moment I'll never forget. "Carla," he'd said, "*I feel like I've waited my entire life for you.*" Those words resonated with me immediately... right down to the very depths of my soul. Because, I too, had waited my entire life for this man. When I was a little girl, I even prayed for him.

We were like two star-crossed lovers that fate had brought together for a reason... we were meant to be. Or so I thought.

I should've known from the onset it was too good to be true. *Life's a bitch*—who am I kidding, she's a lowdown-dirty-whore. She's fucked me over more times than I can count.

Good things don't happen to people like me.

Never to people like me.

I've been cursed from the moment I took my first breath. I knew this! *I fucking knew it.* But that knowledge did nothing to deter me from moving forward, from finally opening up my bruised and battered heart and letting Grayson in. After all, I'd been searching for him my entire life, how could I just let him go?

He showed me an existence I'd once only dreamt about. I was the center of his world, and he quickly became mine. But I should've listened to that constant niggle in the back of my mind. The one warning me that no matter how tightly I hung

on to him he'd eventually be ripped away, because that's exactly what happened.

It only took six short months for me to free-fall back into the reality I'd grown up in... for everything I treasured with the man of my dreams to crumble into a big pile of hopelessness. It was my fate, *my destiny*, and there wasn't anything anyone could do to change it.

Growing up, life for me was no fairy tale; I was born into a living nightmare. A place where just surviving to see another day was all I knew. I learned from a very young age that there'd be no happily ever after for a person like me.

Exhaling a deflated breath, I once again accept the shitty hand I've been dealt. I'm still standing here in the bathroom long after Grayson left, preparing myself to return to my best friend's wedding reception. I stare back at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, straightening my red dress. First glances can be deceptive, but if you looked close enough, you'd see the lifelessness in my eyes. The fire is gone, long snuffed out. I'm a shadow of the woman I once was.

I no longer want to be here at this wedding, but this is Emma's special day, something she's been waiting a long time for. She's my best friend. *I'm not going to ruin it.* I have the rest of my life to wallow over my loss, I just need to get through this night. Her friendship means the world to me, and I'd never knowingly do anything to upset her. She's one of the only good things I have left, and after everything her and Ashton have been through to get to this point, they deserve every speck of happiness. I envy them both.

I swipe my fingers under my eyes to remove the last of my tears. *I just have to keep it together for a few more hours and steer clear of Grayson.*

With that thought in mind, I inhale a deep breath and plaster a huge-ass smile on my face. This is what I do best. I'm a queen at masking my true feelings; I've had years of practice to perfect it. I pull back my shoulders as my mother's words swim around in my mind... "*Suck it up, Princess. Shitty things happen to shitty people.*"

From a very young age I learnt not to rely on others, because you'll be left disappointed if you do. Even your shadow leaves you in times of darkness.



I managed to get through the rest of the reception on autopilot. Smiling on cue when necessary. Grayson never returned. It was probably for the best.

It's usually an hour-and-forty-minute drive from Rancho Palos Verdes back to Temecula where I now live, but I managed to do it and an hour and fifteen. The traffic was sparse, but considering the lateness, I guess that's a given. It's just after two in the morning when I pull up outside the gymnasium. I live in the two-bedroom apartment that sits directly above it.

I don't remember much of the journey home. And although, my heart is sitting somewhere in the base of my stomach, in a million tiny fragments... shattered beyond repair, I couldn't stop myself from reliving every second of my time with Grayson tonight.

I can still feel him.

Smell him.

Taste him.

For nine-hundred-and-fifty-three excruciating days I've had to live without his touch, his kiss, *his love*. It's been so long since my body felt this... *alive*.

Grayson used to call me his sunshine, but he's the one who filled me with light. A kind of brightness I never knew existed until him. Now I'm left looming in the darkness once again.

Our time together tonight may have been fleeting in the grand scheme of life, but I don't regret a single second of it... well, except the part where I *again* had to push away the best thing that has ever happened to me. The first time was hard, tonight was no easier. If anything, it was more difficult because this time round I knew how hollow life was without

him. There'll be no one else for me. Nobody will ever be able to replace him. I'll forever cherish my memories, but I already know they won't be enough to quench the longing I have for him deep down within my soul.

My mind drifts back to the moment when the monster from my past reared its ugly head once again, forcing me to remove my engagement ring and walk away... just the thought of it has bile rising to the back of my throat. Grayson wants answers, and countless times over the past few years I've thought about how I could explain everything to him, to tell him what happened the day I fled... the reasons why we can no longer be together, but what am I to say? I can't make sense of it myself, much less explain it to him. Words won't help either of us.

Nothing I say or do can erase the shame of my past. Lives are at stake here; I need to remember that.

It's for his own good, I remind myself. I'm protecting him.

If only I could make him understand that the truth won't set him free, it will destroy him... I've already hurt him enough.

Blowing out a puff of air I drag my weary ass out of the car. My body feels like it's weighted down with bricks, and the tightness in my chest makes it hurt to breathe. I feel empty, lifeless. It's impossible to feel whole when your heart is no longer in your body. Mine lies with someone else.

I unlock the front door, stepping inside. After firmly closing and locking it behind me, I flick off the lights and activate the alarm before heading toward the stairwell at the rear of the gym.

Once upon a time this was my happy place... but not today. Today it feels like a prison. Like the walls are closing in, slowly suffocating me. When I was a little girl, this very room gave me something safe. Somewhere I could expel all the demons that were too heavy for my small body to carry around.

When I walked away from Temecula six years ago, I never thought I'd return. This town holds too many bad memories.

It's where I grew up, and the only other home I've known. The reality is I had nowhere else to go... and I needed to be close to Reece. That's why I came back.

In some ways I even wanted to be near my mom.

Although she never gave a damn about me, she messed up needy side of me still cares. Still pines for her love, for her acceptance, even though I'm old enough now to know I'm never going to get it. I'm a glutton for punishment. She has no idea what I have sacrificed for her, I doubt she'd even care if she did. She's always been a selfish bitch like that.

I was never high up on her list of priorities. I fall somewhere under the booze, drugs, her one-night stands, or whatever flavor of the month she's got supporting her filthy habit.

When I first left here, and moved to Gardena, I tried so hard to leave that part of my life behind, but the damage bad parenting brings to a child never really goes away. It's imbedded in my DNA. I'm the daughter of a whore, dirty by default.

Dropping my bag on the floor just inside the front door of the apartment, I kick off my heels and head toward the bathroom. I'm so emotionally spent I'm not even bothered by them lying there; they're the least of my worries right now. I usually can't stand disorganization or mess. They say a turbulent upbringing will do that to a person, and believe me when I tell you my childhood was beyond fucked up.

I release a defeated breath as I will my body to keep moving through the small living room toward the bathroom. It would be so easy to fall down into a crumpled mess and give in to the heartache, but I can't do that. Instead, I'll keep doing what I've done for the past two and a half years. Take each second... each minute... and each hour, one step at a time. Placing one foot in front of the other, and if that fails, I'm not above crawling. I have no choice but to move forward, because as much as I wish it wasn't the case, there's no going back.

Chapter Two

Carla

TURNING OFF THE FAUCETS, I blindly reach for a towel after exiting the shower. The hot water did nothing to heighten my mood, I still feel like I'm dying from the inside out, but the majority of my life was spent alone. I did it once; I can sure as hell do it again. I know from experience this feeling of utter helplessness will diminish somewhat in time, *every day may not be good, but there's something good to be found in every day*. I have to hold on to that sentiment. Still, there's a part of me that wonders if I'll ever feel like the old Carla again. The Carla pre-Grayson Edwards that is. The damaged yet strong woman that eventually found peace in navigating this cruel world in solitude. The girl that was constantly let down and overlooked. I'd never experienced real love until him.

That's a sobering thought.

I wrap the towel around my body and clench my eyes closed, willing back the tears. I tilt my head toward the ceiling. *Be strong*, I remind myself.

Bending over, I scoop up my bridesmaid dress off the floor, clutching it to my chest and burying my nose in the soft red fabric. I can still smell Grayson's cologne imbedded into the silk. I inhale deeply. *My sweet, beautiful man*.

On a heavy sigh, I exit the bathroom and pad down the hallway toward my bedroom. It's better to have loved, than to never have loved at all, I suppose.

"Shit," I squeal when I round the doorway and see a large figure sitting on the edge of my bed with his head cradled in his hands. *Reece*. His eyes dart up as soon as he hears me.

"Hey." He quickly diverts his gaze when he notices I'm only dressed in a towel.

Normally I wouldn't walk around his place like this, especially if he's home, but it's some ungodly hour in the morning. "I didn't realize you were still awake," I say, walking over to my dresser and fumbling through the drawers for some clothes.

“I wasn’t, the constant blowing up of your phone woke me.” He holds it out toward me. “You left your bag just inside the door.” He raises an eyebrow as he speaks, knowing full well that’s out of character for me. My need for order has driven him crazy over the years.

Who’d be calling me this time of morning?

Taking the few steps that separate us, I take my phone from his hand as he stands. “Emma,” he says, nodding down at the screen. “I thought it must be important.”

Emma?

Why would she be calling? It’s her wedding night, she’s supposed to be on her honeymoon.

I glance down and see that there are four missed calls and three messages.

Emma: Carla, pick up. I need to speak to you.

Emma: Please call me as soon as you get this!

Emma: It’s urgent.

Urgent?

My stomach churns and my hands start to tremble as I press call. My heart is now lodged somewhere in the back of my throat as I wait for her to answer.

“Carla,” she says breathlessly the moment she answers.

“Em, is everything okay?”

“Car... oh God... I’m at the hospital.”

“The hospital? Why, did something happen after I left? Shit, Charlie... is she alright?” I may only be her godmother, but I love that little girl like she’s my own. Panic starts to set in when the line goes quiet. “Em, please say something, you’re freaking me out.”

“It’s Gray, Car... he’s... he’s been in an accident.”

The phone slips from my grasp and I drop to my knees as her words settle over me like a dark cloud. *Oh, dear God, no.*



Reece is a man of few words, the silent broody type to be exact, but he undoubtedly has a heart the size of Texas. He's been my rock since I was a young girl, and this time is no different. Although neither of us has said a word since we rushed from our apartment, his hand clutched around mine has been a constant. I'm grateful for that because I'm not sure I could face this on my own.

An accident... I still can't wrap my head around those words.

Torrance Memorial hospital is a two and a half hour drive from Temecula, but less than ten miles from Gardena, the place where I used to live. I swore I'd never go back, but given the circumstances, I can't stay away. Not this time.

"Hey, look at me," Reece says as his eyes move from my bouncing knee back to my face. He's ten years older than me, but you'd never know it. He treats his body like it's a temple and it definitely shows. He's a hard-ass most of the time but there's a softness on his face, a look I've witnessed a handful of times over the years... one I know he only reserves for me. I divert my gaze before it becomes my undoing. I'm too fragile right now, I can't take his pity. His grip on my hand tightens. "He's going to be okay."

Tears rise to my eyes. "You don't know that," I whisper, my voice cracking.

This is all my fault.

Reece was the one who finished the call with Emma—getting as much detail as he could—while I remained in a devastated heap on the floor by his feet. All we know is Grayson was stable when they wheeled him into surgery... *fucking surgery*. Apparently, he lost control of his vehicle on a sharp bend after leaving the wedding, colliding with a streetlight. I saw what his emotional state was when he left Ashton's parent's house, and it wasn't good. It was also because of me. That thought weighs heavily on my heart. I'm

responsible for this. I'm the reason the love of my life is currently in this condition.

Leaning my head back into the seat I release a shaky breath. I should've kicked his ass when he barged into the bathroom instead of letting him have his way with me. It was a selfish move on my part. He's my weakness, hence why I've stayed well away since we split. But I can't help feeling if I'd only remained strong, like I've done for the past few years, he may not be in this current situation. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to him.

Never.



I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience by the time we reach the hospital. I remove my seat belt and exit the car before Reece even turns off the ignition. *Be strong*, I tell myself. My stomach is in knots and I actually feel like I'm going to puke, but again, I pull my shoulders back like I always do, preparing myself to tackle this catastrophe head on.

Reece's hand is resting on my shoulder as he maneuvers me to where Emma told him they'd be waiting. The moment we round the corner and see them, my heart drops. They're both still clad in their wedding attire. Ashton is sitting on a chair positioned along the wall with his face buried in his hands. His wife is beside him, her hand soothingly running up and down his back. Her lips are moving, but I can't hear what she is saying from here. Words of comfort, no doubt. After all, Grayson is like a brother to him. They've been best friends since elementary school.

Grayson's mother is leaning against the opposite wall and Kaitlin, his little sister, is wrapped in her arms. The graveness I see on her face does nothing to ease my anxiety. I divert my eyes when she looks in my direction because I'm a coward. I avoided his mom like the plague at Emma and Ashton's wedding. Not because I don't like her, because I do. She welcomed me into her family with open arms from the very beginning. I'm embarrassed... *ashamed* of how I have treated

her son. He deserved so much more than what I gave him. So much more.

I come to a complete stop, unable to take another step forward. Reece pauses beside me but doesn't remove his hand from my shoulder.

Emma's head darts up, eyeing us down the corridor. She doesn't hesitate as she leaps out of her seat and rushes toward me. "Carla," she mutters as the tears stream down her face.

"Em," I cry, closing the distance between us. The tears I held back on the drive here, finally falling free.

She wraps me in her arms, squeezing me tight. I bury my face in the crook of her neck and my body shudders as I break down.

"How is he?" I finally ask, although I'm petrified to hear the answer to that question.

"Still in surgery."

I pull back from her, trying hard to hold myself together. I'm sure the worry and devastation I see on her face is mirrored on my own.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Carla?" Ashton sneers, coming to stand beside his wife. I resist the urge to roll my eyes at his douchebaggery. Don't get me wrong, I love the guy, but we've had more than our fair share of clashes throughout the years.

"Ashton," she gasps. "She's here because I called her... because she cares about Grayson."

She's right, I do. We may no longer be together, but she knows how much he still means to me.

Ashton's eyes ping-pong from me to Reece, and I feel Reece's hand squeeze my shoulder. It's his silent reminder that he's still here and has my back. *He always has my back.*

"I came as soon as I heard. I... I—" I stammer.

Ashton holds up his hand, stopping me from finishing my sentence. "I don't give a shit. And the audacity of you to come

here with... *him*.” His piercing gaze moves back to Reece as he flicks his chin in that direction. “That’s a new low even for you, Carla. Leave, you have no right to be here. You gave all that up when you walked away.”

As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right. To this day, nobody knows why I left, *why I had to leave*. Not even Reece. It’s my shame... my secret. One that I refuse to share with anyone. Some things are better left unsaid.

“Hey,” Reece barks, suddenly moving me behind him and stepping up to Ashton. “Who the fuck are you?”

Ashton’s face contorts in anger. “Who the fuck are you is more like it?”

Ashton has no idea who Reece is, or how important he is to me. Emma does, but I know my secrets are safe with her. God knows where I would’ve ended up if it wasn’t for this man. He was the first person to ever show me kindness and compassion, and I doubt I’d even be alive today if it wasn’t for him.

“Don’t,” I warn, reaching for Reece’s arm when he growls. He’s about to lose his shit. His body is rigid and his stance tells me everything I need to know. I know what he’s capable of and this isn’t the time or the place. Besides, Ashton has a point. Do I really have a right to be here? I can’t fault him; he’s only looking out for his friend. “Reece, we should go.”

Reece frowns as he glances at me over his shoulder. “You sure, killer?” It’s his nickname for me, which is kind of ironic coming from a guy like him. The ninja skills I have are because he taught me everything he knows.

He studies me for a moment as his eyes scan over my face, I know he’s giving me a choice, despite what Ashton’s saying. If I want to stay, he’ll make it happen. Reece doesn’t know the logistics of mine and Grayson’s breakup, but he knows I still care about him, even after all this time. I’ve fallen apart twice in front of him—once when I first returned to Temecula, and again tonight—that alone speaks volumes, because despite the shit I’ve gone through in my life, I’m not usually a crier.

“Yes, I’m sure.” I give him a small nod. “Please.” It’s going to slay me to leave, but I know it’s for the best.

Emma shoots daggers at Ashton as she steps toward me, gathering me in her arms again. This is their wedding night, and the last thing I want to do is cause trouble for them. I shouldn’t have come, but when Emma called, I didn’t give it a second thought.

I needed to be here.

I needed to know he was okay.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers into my ear.

“Don’t be. I understand.” It hurts like hell, but I do. “Will you keep me updated?”

“Of course.” She tightens her embrace and I hear her snuffle. I squeeze my eyes closed attempting to halt a fresh wave of tears from falling. “Jesus, Carla, I hate this,” she utters before she eventually releases me and takes a step back.

Her eyes dart to Reece. They both know about each other, but they’ve never officially met. “It’s nice to finally meet you,” Emma says, extending her hand to him. “I only wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Likewise,” he replies with a small nod.

Emma’s gaze moves back to me and the confliction I see on her face makes my heart ache. As much as I hate this whole situation, leaving is the best option.

With that in mind, I reach for her hand and give it a reassuring squeeze before I turn and walk away from my heart, my everything... and probably for the final time.

Chapter Three

Carla

(10 years old)

ROLLING OVER IN BED AND clutching my middle, I groan into my pillow. The constant spasms that accompany an empty stomach are unfortunately my norm, but it doesn't make it hurt any less. My head throbs to the point I'm struggling to sleep. It's not the first time I've felt like this, you think I'd be used to it by now, but I'm not.

I'm four days into spring break, and my mother, Roxy, has been MIA for two of them. The first few days she was holed up in her room, sleeping off a three-day bender. And when she finally rose from the dead, she showered, slathered on a full face of makeup, clad herself in one of her sexiest dresses, and headed out to do it all over again.

Most kids look forward to school breaks, but not me. At least I'm guaranteed a meal at the cafeteria.

Tossing back the threadbare blanket that covers me, I rise from the paper-thin mattress that lies on the floor of the small two-bedroom trailer I share with my mom. Unlike her, I don't have a bed frame. For as long as I can remember, I've been stuck in the far back corner of this shitty trailer. Out of sight, out of mind, I guess.

I make my way into the tiny combined kitchen/living/dining space, opening the pantry. It's not the first time I've done this over the past few days. I sigh... it's still empty. I knew it would be, but it didn't stop me from hoping food would somehow magically appear.

A girl can dream.

Glancing up at the clock on the wall I see it's just after 1:00 am. It's not the first time my mom hasn't come home when expected. She said she'd bring back food, but her empty promises don't mean much to me anymore. She breaks them often.

Grabbing the lone cup that sits beside the sink, I turn on the cold-water faucet, ignoring the loud protest of the creaky old pipes as I pour myself a tall glass of water, chugging it down.

Unfortunately, it doesn't fill the empty void in my stomach, but it's something at least.

Pacing back and forth like a caged lion, I eventually head to my room and tug open the bottom draw of my dresser. If she won't come home, then I'm going out to look for her. What choice do I have?

I pull out a pair of my mom's old sweats. They're a little big, but at least they fit. It's been a long time since I've gotten any clothes from goodwill. I've outgrown most of what I own, and even though these pants are faded and worn, I'm grateful to have something that doesn't feel like it's cutting off my circulation, or about to bust at the seams. I'm sick of getting teased by the kids at school for the way I dress, I can't help it that I'm poor.

Slipping my legs in to the pants, I roll the waist a few times to keep them from falling down. The T-shirt I'm wearing is also one of my mom's old ones; it sits just above my knees because I've yet to have a growth spurt. I've always been tiny for my age. I'm not sure if it's from lack of nutrition or just my genetic makeup.



The streets are eerily quiet, well except for the noise the sole of my right shoe makes whenever I take a step forward. The slap, slap, slapping sound of the loose rubber connecting with the concrete, echoes in the silence.

It's over a mile from the trailer park to the strip club, where my mom works for extra cash to supplement her welfare payments. I've done this walk a heap of times, but today seems more difficult. The lack of food has made me weak.

For normal folks, I'm sure the thought of a ten-year-old girl wandering the streets alone in the middle of the night would be shocking... *unheard of*, but for kids like me it's nothing out of the ordinary. I've been looking after myself for as long as I can remember.

I come from a single-parent home—well if you can call it a home—my mom’s mostly absent, and even if she’s present, she’s not. She’s either drunk, high as a kite, or screwing some random dude. Whoever they are, none of them stick around long. They’re originally taken in by her beauty, but it doesn’t take long for her ugliness on the inside to shine through.

It’s still dark out when I arrive at Juicy Lucy’s, that’s the name of this wonderful place. It just screams class, right? In hindsight, I guess it’s fitting my mother would frequent this dump. She may scrub up alright in the looks department, with a seemingly endless supply of men, but classy is not a word most would use to describe her—crazy-ass bitch, a drunk, junkie, or whore are just a few of the names she’s been called over the years.

The men she meets in a place like this are the wrong kind. She’s never going to get her shit together hanging out with this crowd.

I dart between the vehicles in the parking lot as I sneak toward the front of the building. I shouldn’t be here; the last time I came, Roxy beat me so bad I couldn’t get out of bed for two days. She’s warned me not to show my face around here again, but I guess I’m a glutton for punishment, I have nothing to lose.

If she doesn’t kill me, starvation certainly will.

The strip club lays at the end of the main street in the seedy part of town. The once bustling strip mall is now littered with long-forgotten businesses and boarded-up storefronts. A pawn shop, and a dingy old laundromat still remain. It’s where the thieves, drug dealers, and prostitutes now reside. These streets are haunted by the undesirables. It’s a scary place for some, but I’ve lived much worse.

I resist the urge to rub my hands along my arms to warm my frosty skin as I come to a stop beside an old red pickup truck. It’s early April, but evenings still get chilly. I’m not opposed to the cold. California is one of the warmer states in the US, but our winters can be brutal, especially in our shitty run-down trailer, with a leaky roof, no heating and not a warm blanket in

sight. Weather has nothing on hunger though. I'd gladly walk through a snowstorm, or a desert for that matter, as long as my stomach was full.

Crouching down, I push the loose strands of my long, blonde hair back inside the baseball cap I'm wearing. I've tucked it up so I look like a boy. I've learnt from previous experience, I'm less likely to gain attention if I do. A young girl in this area is easy prey.

The hat is the only thing I have left of my dad. I don't remember much about him, but I do recall he was always wearing this. Roxy threw all his belongings onto the dirt outside our trailer within hours of him being hauled away by the cops, leaving a free-for-all for the scavengers nearby. I was quick to pluck it off the top of his discarded clothes, hiding it in my room. One day when he gets out of prison and returns for me, I know he'll be happy I saved this for him.

My head moves from left to right as I take in my surroundings. The strip club is a large, box-shaped, brick building that was painted jet black somewhere during its history. The color makes it almost disappear under the dark backdrop of the night sky, only illuminated by the hot-pink neon sign that flashes across the front facade.

There's no sign of my mother anywhere. I don't even know if she's inside, but I know better than to march up to the door and ask for her. When her boss first found out she had a kid, thanks to me showing up here, he gave her earlier stage times so she could be home at a decent hour to care for me. *What a joke.* All it got me was an ass-whooping.

My eyes are locked on the bouncer that mans the front door. He's a different guy to the last one. He's younger and not bad looking, I wonder if Roxy has gotten her claws into him yet. She has a few good years on him, but I doubt that would be a deterrent.

He glances around briefly before dipping his head to continue scrolling through the phone that's clutched in his hand. I use the distraction to move closer. Staying hunched over, I dart toward the side of the building. Thankfully the

drowned-out music coming from inside lessons the annoying sound of my busted shoe as I bolt toward the alleyway. I need to get my hands on some tape because getting a new pair of shoes is highly unlikely.

I'm almost at my destination when I hear someone call out, "Hey!" *Shit*. I wasn't quick enough, so I pick up the pace. "Hey, you, get back here."

The alleyway smells like a combination of rotten food and stale urine, but I eye the graffiti-covered dumpster further down. If I can just make it there, I can hide inside. My fingers latch on to the folded waistband of my sweats when I feel them slip over my narrow hips, furiously pumping my free arm to help me along.

I'm almost there.

The stench of the dumpster is bad, but it still makes my stomach growl. Maybe there's some discarded food inside? If I'm lucky enough, I may even get a feed while I hide out until the coast is clear. A hungry child is not a fussy one, and it wouldn't be the first time I ate something questionable. Starvation will do that to you, it takes away your pride and dignity. A person's will to survive can make you do unspeakable things.

The footsteps behind me are getting nearer and when I quickly glance over my shoulder, I see the dark outline of a huge giant approaching. I will my legs to move faster. It's not the first time I've had to flee for my life, but where I'm heading is dark and deserted. Nobody knows that I'm down here. If this guy catches me, there's no telling what he will do.

"Stop," the voice calls out again, but I don't even consider it.

As I bypass the dumpster, the unthinkable happens. The loose sole of my shoe folds under, making me lose my balance and I stumble forward. I'm running so fast there's no way I can right myself as I go tumbling down to the rough concrete below.

I whimper as I roll to my side, clutching my injured left knee. That, and the palms of my hands took the brunt of the fall. The rough surface being unrelenting on my skin. I can feel the damp fabric of my sweats and I know that I'm bleeding.

I bite my bottom lip to temper down the cry of pain that threatens to escape. I've experienced a lot worse in my short life, and as Roxy often tells me, *nobody likes a crybaby*. Peeping over my shoulder, I see the guy nearby and my wounds are soon forgotten as my fight-or-flight mode kicks back in. My life may be a constant nightmare, but the thought of being chopped up into itty-bitty pieces by some random psychopath is far worse.

I don't stand a chance against this angry monster, so I push myself off the ground, disregarding the burning, throbbing pain in my hands as I start to hobble away. My broken shoe gets left behind, and the small rocks below dig into the base of my bare foot, but I ignore the discomfort. It's no use though; it only takes him a few steps to catch me, his arms snaking around my middle as he effortlessly lifts me off my feet.

"I've got you," he says.

I thrash around in his arms as he turns and starts making his way back down the alley. I may be scrappy, but I'm not going to go down easy.

I don't know where he's taking me; does he have a car waiting nearby? Both my arms are pinned to my sides, so I start kicking my legs. My erratically beating heart, thumps against my rib cage as my feet lay blow after blow against his thick, muscular thighs that resemble tree trunks, but it doesn't deter him in the slightest.

"Let me go," I scream, slamming my head back into his chest.

His body stalls as soon as the words leave my mouth, tensing behind me. "Shit," he mumbles as he lowers me back to my feet, spinning me around to face him. "You're a girl?"

Despite the fear that's coursing through my body, my hands land on my hips as my head tilts back so I can see his face. "No shit."

His dark brown eyes narrow and his brow pinches together as he stares down at me. It's only then that I realize my captor is in fact the nice-looking bouncer that was manning the front door of the club when I arrived.

Oh boy, I'm in trouble now.

Reaching for the baseball cap I'm wearing, he yanks it off my head causing my long blonde hair to flop down around my face.

"Give that back," I screech.

I was only three years old when my dad went to prison, so that hat is my greatest treasure. The bouncer guy holds it high in the air when I lunge for it and I have to resist the urge to kick him in the shins. I roll my bottom lip between my teeth to mask the quiver as I blink my eyes trying to will back my tears. Crying only makes Roxy angrier.

His features instantly soften and relief floods through me when he hands me the cap.

Stepping back, he runs his fingers through his dark hair as his eyes scan over my face. "You're just a damn kid."

"I'm ten and a half," I snap, standing taller. "Two whole hands and a bit." After shoving the hat back on my head, I hold my ten fingers out in front of me, wiggling them to prove my point. *That's a lot of fingers mister.*

I notice his lip twitch slightly as he glances down at the watch on his wrist. "It's after two in the morning, where the hell are your parents?"

Using my thumb, I point over my shoulder toward the entry to the club.

"Your parents are inside?"

"My mom is, I think. She works here."

"Your mom works here?"

“Yeh, Roxanne.”

“Roxy’s your mom? I didn’t know she had a kid.”

That doesn’t surprise me. It’s not something she flaunts, hence why she makes me call her Roxy. I’m her biggest mistake, a thorn in her side... well that’s what she tells me.

“Is your old man in there too?”

“Who?”

“Your dad?” He points to the cap.

“No, he’s in prison.”

He winces when I say that. “Who looks after you when your mom is at work?” His gaze moves around the parking lot as he speaks.

“Nobody.”

His eyes snap back to me as the furrow in his brow deepens. He shakes his head before speaking again. “Give me a minute.” He mumbles something under his breath as he takes a few steps away, pulling his phone out of his suit jacket. After pushing a few buttons, he holds it to his ear. “It’s me, Reece, is Roxy still inside?” He lets out a long breath as his eyes dart in my direction. “Damn,” he says after a brief pause. “Her kids here; do you think you can bring her out?”

My mom’s gonna be pissed if she’s brought out here because of me, maybe I should just leave.

After ending his call, he slides his phone back into his pocket. “Frank’s going to bring her out.” He clears his throat, scratching the back of his head. “She’s pretty wasted.”

“Figures,” I say with a shrug.

“Does she do this often?”

I don’t want to get her in any trouble, although, she’s worked here long enough. I’m guessing they know what she’s like by now. Shrugging my shoulders again, I stare down at my shoes, or should I say shoe. My eyes dart toward the alleyway. The one I lost when I ran may be busted, but they’re the only ones I own.

“Can I go get my other sneaker?” I ask. It’s a long walk home and I don’t fancy doing it in one shoe.

His gaze darts down to my feet before replying. “I’ll get it. Wait here.”

I probably should use this time to make a break for it, but the damage is already done. My throat tightens at the thought. I shouldn’t have come here.

I watch as Reece jogs down the alleyway to retrieve it. “Looks like it’s busted,” he says, flipping back the loose sole before passing it to me. “You’re going to need a new pair.” Ignoring him, I slip it back on my foot. I’m embarrassed to tell him it was already like that.

Minutes pass as we stand there in awkward silence, waiting for my mom to make her appearance.

Both our heads swing toward the front door of the club when it bursts open. “Ah, come on, Frank, don’t be so mean,” Roxy slurs as he escorts her outside. She’s so drunk, she’d probably fall flat on her face if he wasn’t holding her up. “Just one more drink?”

“I’m sorry, Roxy, we’re cutting you off, you’ve had enough. It’s time to go home, sweetheart.”

I’m surprised by how gentle his voice is given the situation, but he probably deals with people like her all the time.

I grimace when my mom’s arms slink around his thick waist, her bright red lips puckering as she tilts her head back and bats her long eyelashes at him. She has no shame. Sober, she may be able to pull off that seductive look, but not when she’s hammered. I feel my face heat, and I’m not sure if I’m humiliated for her, or myself.

Frank shakes his head as he untangles her from his body. His actions have her pouty lips instantly thinning into a fine line as her red eyes glaze over and the anger sets in. *Shit*. I know what’s coming; I’ve seen that look enough. She’s like a ticking time bomb when she’s been drinking and she’s about to blow.

She stumbles slightly before Frank reaches out to clasp her elbow, stopping her drunk ass from falling over.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” she screams, thrashing her arms around, trying to get out of his hold.

Here we go.

“Hey,” Reece says, stepping forward. “Watch your language in front of the kid.”

I barely know him, but I inch in his direction because he makes me feel safe. I’m usually on the receiving end of my mother’s cruelty, so I know the moment she notices I’m here, her rage will be redirected toward me. If someone, or even something upsets her, I’m the person she lashes out at. It’s always my fault.

“You ruin everything.”

“I should’ve got rid of you when I had the chance.”

“You’re my biggest regret.”

“I hate you.”

I’ve heard it all before, but the last one hurts the most.

I try to act like her words don’t cut me to the bone, but they do. I didn’t ask to be born into this shithole of a life. I try to be good, and stay out of her way. I do everything she asks of me, but it’s never enough.

“Who the fuck...” she shrieks, snapping her head in our direction, but her words die out the moment her eyes narrow on me. “You!”

Instinctively, I take another step backward. Frank still has a tight grip on her arm, but it doesn’t stop her from trying to lunge for me.

“I don’t think so,” Reece says, maneuvering me behind him and stepping into Roxy’s path to block her attack.

“Get out of my way,” she yells.

“Calm down.” Reece holds his hands up in front of him as he speaks. “She’s just a kid.”

“She’s a little cunt. I warned you to stay away from here, Carla. I’m gonna beat your sorry ass when I get my hands on you.”

I can’t see her because I’m shielded behind Reece’s tank of a body, but even that doesn’t stop the fear from surging through my body. She terrifies me when she’s like this.

“Well, you’ll have to get through me first,” Reece retorts, making my mouth gape open. Nobody has ever stood up for me before.



“Are you okay, kid?” Reece asks as we travel down the main street in the direction of the trailer park.

It took close to half an hour for Reece to get my irate mother in the back of his vehicle, all the while shielding me from her outbursts. Thankfully, within minutes of being sprawled out in the back seat she passed out cold. The patience he’d shown her despite the awful things that spewed from her mouth surprised me. At one point, she even spat in his face, it was awful. He kept his cool though. Numerous times Frank suggested calling the cops or throwing her in a cab, and he probably meant literally after the way she acted, but Reece refused, saying there was no way he was letting me go home with her on my own. Even our neighbors at the trailer park turn a blind eye when Roxy is on one of her tirades.

“I’m okay,” I whisper as my gaze moves toward the passenger side window. I’m ashamed by the way my mom acted just now. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve seen her like that, or worse, but I feel horrible for the way she treated Reece. I’ve known him for less than an hour, yet I can already tell he’s a good guy. He didn’t deserve any of this. It was all my fault. I should’ve just stayed home.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I reply, turning my head in his direction.

“What are those marks on your arms? They look like small burns.”

Again, I just shrug, not wanting to elaborate any further. I'm like an abused puppy, loyal despite the neglect.

He's right though, they are burns. Sometimes when my mom is drunk, she puts her cigarettes out on me. The ones I have now are fresh, but I still carry scars from the others. The kids at school say I have scabies. It's just another thing they pick on me for.

Although this life is all I've known, I'm also aware of the consequences that come with speaking out. I've witnessed a few kids in the trailer park being removed from their families. The last thing I want is to be taken away from my mother. She needs me, and in a way, I need her too. We're all each other have. I've heard stories about what happens to kids in the system. I don't want to be another statistic. My circumstances may not be ideal, but it's better the devil you know. She's a different person when she's sober, so I can't hold it against her.

I turn my head away from him when he raises an eyebrow, but thankfully he doesn't push it any further.

"Is your mom violent with you often?"

"What? No, why would you ask that?" I lie.

"I saw how she acted toward you tonight."

"She was just upset that I came here is all. She's warned me not to."

"Then why did you come?"

I blow out a puff of air. "I was hungry. She said she was going to bring home food."

"I see. When was the last time you ate?"

I dip my head. "A few days ago."

"A few days?"

He doesn't say anything further, but he puts on his indicator when we reach the next intersection before turning left.

"You don't turn here," I say, wondering if he mistook my earlier directions.

“I know. I’m taking you to get something to eat. There should be some fast-food restaurants still open.”

“You don’t have—”

“It’s not up for negotiation, Carla,” he says, his words cutting me off. “A few damn days,” he mumbles under his breath, shaking his head in disgust. I wonder what he’d think if he knew it was actually four?



“Let me help,” I offer, coming to stand beside Reece. It’s the least I can do after everything he’s done for me tonight. I may be tiny, but I’ve had to drag her unconscious ass into the trailer on more than one occasion. Although, with my small frame it took a lot of persistence and determination to make it happen. In the end I’m pretty sure it was the frustration and rage I felt toward her in that moment that got me over the line.

“I’ve got her,” Reece replies, huffing out a breath as he reaches into the back seat of his car and scoops a comatose Roxy into his arms. Her head falls back the moment he lifts her, and she mumbles something unintelligible, but thankfully doesn’t wake. Despite her obvious deadweight, he doesn’t even flinch. “Hold open the door to the trailer for me.”

Dashing up the front step of the small porch, I use my backside as a prop to hold open the rickety screen, while I turn the knob on the front door, kicking it open with my foot. I didn’t lock the door before I left because I don’t have a key. It’s not like we’ve got anything worth stealing anyway.

He enters the trailer, and I point toward my mom’s bedroom. “Just put her in here,” I say.

Following me in to her room, I see him wince the moment he enters, I know it’s because of the smell. I’m used to it now, but sometimes it still turns my stomach.

After Reece carefully lays her down, I scoot around to the side of the bed, removing her shoes and setting them over by the wall. After rolling my mom onto her side in case she gets sick, I use a pillow to keep her propped up and pull the blanket

over her, making sure she's covered before turning back around to face Reece. I usually hate having strangers here, but I get a feeling I can trust him.

I watch as his eyes dart around the room taking everything in. This place really is a shit hole, and it doesn't smell much better. I tidied up in here after my mom left earlier, and made her bed, but I'm pretty sure the stench of stale cigarettes, vomit and probably piss, is embedded into not only the walls, but the filthy worn carpet.

"Is it just the two of you that live here?" he asks without showing any judgement. I like that about him. He doesn't make me feel like I'm less than.

"Yeh."

"Are your grandparents in your life?"

I shake my head. "I've never met them."

"When does your dad get out?"

Soon, I hope.

A few years ago, I found a letter he'd sent Roxy from prison. It wasn't a long one, it basically asked why she still hadn't been to visit, I'm not sure if there'd been others sent prior, but there was a sentence at the end of this one which still makes the hairs on my arm stand on end when I think about it, "*You better be looking after my little girl,*" he'd written. Seeing those words made tears sting the back of my eyes as I clutched the piece of paper to my chest. *Someone cared.*

"I'm not sure. I've written him a few letters, but Roxy wouldn't send them for me."

"Did she say why?"

I shrug. "Just that it costs money."

"Hmm. Do you still have the letters? I'd be happy to send them for you."

"Really?"

"Sure, kid."

“Ah, okay. Let me just grab them.”

I race into my room, stopping by my bed and falling to my knees. I slide my hand under the mattress, feeling for the envelopes I've hidden there. My heart is beating out of my chest at the thought of finally getting in contact with my dad. I've secretly hoped that one day he'd come back here and save me.

I try not to wish for things. You just set yourself up for heartache if you do, but I know that thought will help keep me going. Without hope, what do we have?

My stomach growls as I head back into the main room, where Reece now stands by the door and waits. He stopped and got me something to eat before coming here and I devoured every morsel. Even going as far as licking the sauce off the inside of the burger wrapper. I wasn't even discreet about it. Who knows when my next meal will be? He kept telling me to slow down as I ate, saying I'd make myself sick if I didn't. But even if I wasn't on the brink of starvation, I wouldn't have been able to. Has he ever eaten a burger before? Doesn't he realize how delicious they are?

Roxy doesn't cook, opening a tin can and heating the contents is about her limit. He did ask me if I wanted another when I was done. I could have eaten a dozen more, but I didn't want to take advantage of his kindness. He'd already done so much for me. Hopefully tomorrow, when Roxy finally surfaces, she'll go to the store.

I hand the letters to Reece and see him look over the envelope on top. “I'll get these posted for you tomorrow.”

Smiling, I nod my head.

He flicks his chin in the direction of Roxy's room. “Are you sure you're going to be okay here on your own?”

“Yes.” Tonight, I'm feeling grateful. I got a happy ending, and they don't come around often.

“Okay, if you're sure,” he says. “Take care of yourself, kid.”

Sadness washes over me as I stand at the front door and watch him walk back to his car. His shoulders are slumped,

and he pauses briefly. When he glances over his shoulder, he looks conflicted, but the reality is, he's probably glad to see the back of us. We're more trouble than we are worth; I'd run and never look back if I was him.

Once he drives away, I close the front door and lock it. After checking on Roxy again, I head to my bedroom.

That night I hardly slept. It was crazy because I barely knew Reece, but the thought of never seeing him again felt like I'd suffered a great loss. I've been neglected and let down my entire life; I've never had anyone I could truly count on. But having someone as magnificent as him around would be too wonderful for words.

When I woke the next morning something magical happened. To my surprise there were three things sitting on the porch by the front door: a bag full of groceries, a box of freshly baked donuts, and the last thing had a smile bursting onto my face because it was a brand-new pair of shoes.

A warmth spread through my entire body, a kind of happiness like I'd never known. It was such an unfamiliar feeling for me, but I liked it. I liked it very much.



THE BEGINNING OF US...

Chapter Four

Carla

Three years ago...

AS I ENTER THE DINER, I smile and wave at the two ladies standing behind the counter. I'm meeting Emma Phoenix, my best friend, here for breakfast. Heading toward the back of the restaurant, I take a seat at our usual booth. This place has become a regular haunt for us.

I've been living in Gardena, California, for around four years. I moved here, from Temecula, a few months after my twenty-first birthday. That's how I met Emma. She's been my neighbor for three of those years, and has quickly become a godsend in my life. The dynamic Reece and I have is vastly different to the one me and Emma share. She's my first real girlfriend. She was also the first person to tell me she loved me, not knowing at the time what those three words meant to me. I'll always cherish her for that.

The apartment I'm living in now is owned by Reece's cousin, Brandon. Brandon went on an extended backpacking tour around Europe, and I wanted a fresh start. So far it has worked out perfectly. Reece made a verbal agreement, so there's no lease. Not that my mother would ever bother to come looking, but it would be impossible for her, or anyone associated with her, to find me here if they did.

Although I miss Reece, life here is good. I have a great job managing a local bar, and a cherished friendship with the sweet girl next door.

When I was thirteen years old and Roxy kicked me out, I had nowhere to go. I was destined for the streets, until Reece stepped in and offered me a room in the apartment above the gym he owns.

When I graduated high school, Reece got me a job at the bar where he bounced at night. He'd long left the strip club; he didn't want to associate with Roxy after what she'd done to me. That's how I got into the hospitality industry. College was never on the radar. I was only eighteen when I started working there, so I cleaned tables and served food until I turned

twenty-one and was able to serve alcohol. In my downtime, I taught self-defense classes at the gym.

I had no intentions of leaving my old life in Temecula, it was my home, all I knew, but when I heard my mother was still hanging around with the man who almost destroyed me when I was a child, I was left with no choice. Call it self-preservation, but I needed to get as far away from her as I could, cutting all ties once and for all. I should've learned my lesson long before that.

We never really had a relationship anyway. Not a healthy one. The wounds I'd collected over the years ran deep.

I was happy and safe under the care of Reece. He gave me a real chance at a good life. One I've never taken for granted. I owe that man everything. Although he doesn't have children of his own, he's been more of a parent than either of the fuckups that created me.

Living with him had allowed me to see what stability looked like. I was cared for, cocooned in a bubble of contented bliss.

I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to forgive Roxy for the things she's done, but I also know that carrying hate around in my heart won't serve me well. Grudges are like poison, they're difficult to get rid of once you allow them to settle in. The last thing I want is to be bitter and resentful like her.

It's been impossible to forget the years of abuse I've been subjected to; I still carry the scars from where she used my skin as an ashtray, and that's just the visible damage.

All these years later there's a part of me that's still broken inside. I don't do sleepovers, I can't. I have no problem with the act of sex, maybe because I was unconscious when my innocence was stolen. *It's hard to be traumatized by events you don't remember.* My nightmares extend from the thought of waking up with someone lying beside me.

My trust issues hinder me from ever having a serious, long-term relationship. It's just another thing that sick fuck stole from me. To this day I religiously lock my bedroom door each

night, even going as far as checking behind the curtain, under the bed, and inside the closet like some kind of freak. It's become a sick compulsion that I can't let go of. I even have to sleep with the light on; not because I'm afraid of the dark, but because I need to be aware. To be prepared for whatever threat may be lurking in the shadows. I trusted Reece with my life, but I even struggled living under the same roof as him in the beginning.

The sad truth is, my mother and her misguided loyalty is a lost cause. Everybody has a line, and she's more than crossed mine. She leapt over that motherfucker without a second thought about me or my welfare.

I'm more than done with her bullshit.

I've had to train my mind not to think about her. She's like a constant black cloud hanging over my head, but for my own survival I had to let her go once and for all. Nobody knows the true extent of her selfishness. Not even Reece; I never told him the real reason I showed up at his gym that fateful morning. To this day all he knows is my mother kicked me out, and being the beautiful soul he is, he didn't hesitate to take me in. Loyal to a fault. Roxy could certainly take a leaf out of his book.

I've given Emma tiny snippets of my past, but I do my best to shut the conversation down whenever she broaches it. Opening that Pandora's box and sinking down that rabbit hole is not an option for me; no good will come from reliving my childhood. It'll forever be my *dirty little secret*, something I'll take with me to the grave.

It's been a long road getting to where I am today, but I've finally accepted I'm better off without Roxy in my life. Reece and Emma have shown me my worth, and they're all the family I need.

Sometimes blood isn't thicker than water.

"Hey, hon," the waitress says, coming to a stop beside the booth where I'm sitting, pulling me back into the present. "Can I get you something to drink while you wait for your friend?" I look down at the time on my phone. Emma should've been here twenty minutes ago.

“I’ll wait,” I reply. “She shouldn’t be far off.”

“Sure thing, darlin.’ I’ll head on back when she gets here.”

Emma and I have been coming here for breakfast the first Saturday of every month for the past two years. It’s what she calls her Sinful-Saturday. The one day she doesn’t watch her calorie intake. She had an eating disorder when she was in her teens, and she’s still mindful of everything that passes her lips.

Emma’s childhood was very different to mine. She comes from a loving home, but she still has her demons. She was bullied throughout high school about her weight, and even tried to end her life when things got too much. She’s come a long way since then. She’s found what works for her and she’s flourishing. I truly admire her for that.

She’s beautiful on the inside and out, but those assholes she went to school with really did a number on her. She’s the kindest person I know, sweetness right to the bone, and I hate how the damage they caused still follows her around. She has such a sensitive soul. I gave up caring what people thought of me years ago. There was only one person’s validation I craved, and I was never going to get that. So, if Emma needs to watch what she eats to maintain balance in her life, who am I to judge? I have my own hang-ups.

There’s nothing wrong with falling down, it’s staying down that’s the problem.

I pick up my phone and start typing out a message. Emma usually beats me here. Her car was gone when I left the apartment complex earlier, and I know she stops at her favorite bakery for her jelly donut fix. But I’m still concerned. If she was unexpectedly held up, she would’ve let me know.

Carla: Just checking you’re okay.

As I go to press send, the bell above the door chimes, drawing my attention in that direction. The moment I see Emma I can tell something’s wrong. She looks flustered and on the verge of tears.

I place down my phone and stand, stepping out of the booth.

“Hey,” I say with concern, approaching her. My stomach drops when I see tears welling in her eyes. It’s rare to see her upset; she’s always so nauseatingly happy. “Em.” Without even thinking I open my arms and she collapses into them. My protective streak comes out when she starts to sob against my shoulder. “Who do I have to kill?”

Emma pulls back, wiping her eyes. “Nobody,” she replies, forcing out a smile. “Don’t mind me, I’m just being ridiculous.”

There’s more to this. She doesn’t break down for no reason. Hooking my arm through hers, I carefully lead her toward our table. “Come sit. Tell me what’s made you so upset.”

I wait until we’re both seated before I reach for her hand. “Spill.”

Emma looks down at her lap and sighs. “I met a guy.”

“Okay, and this is a bad thing?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I actually ran into him just now... literally,” she says, making eye contact again. “This guy was so hot, Car, like seriously melt-your-panties-off-good-looking.” She blows out a puff of air before continuing. “He was also bossy, and kind of infuriating, but so damn hot. I said that already, right?”

When a smile tugs at her lips, I release a small laugh. “You did, but I’m guessing he was hot enough it required repeating.”

“Most definitely.” She fans her face, making me chuckle. “Way too hot for a girl like me.”

“Enough of that,” I snap. “You’re a babe, there’s not a guy on this earth that wouldn’t be worthy of you.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.” I know she doesn’t believe me, but it’s the truth.

“So, you ran into a hot guy,” I probe, trying to get to the bottom of this. “I get that part, but what am I missing? You were heartbroken when you got here. Did he say something to upset you?”

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t what he said exactly.”

“He didn’t hurt you in anyway, did he?” Just the thought of someone getting physical with her makes my blood boil.

“No, not physically. Maybe it’s best if I start from the beginning.”

I nod, squeezing her hand for encouragement before letting go, and she continues.

“After I bought my donut, I was walking back to my car. I’ve waited an entire month for one of those babies, and jelly donuts are life.” I’m grinning as I listen to her. She’s so animated and I love how much she worships those damn donuts. Kind of like me with burgers... or food in general. “So, I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and took a bite because come on, *jelly donut*. My eyes were closed as I absorbed all the sugary goodness, and I’m pretty sure I moaned like a porn star.”

This time I throw my head back and laugh. Christ, I love this girl.

“That’s when the stupidly hot guy entered. He walked straight into me, knocking the donut out of my hand in the process.”

I gasp, in a teasing way. “I’m so sorry, Em.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “That’s not what made me cry, bitch.”

“I’m just messing with you. Did you kick him in the balls at least?”

“Of course not. I don’t have your ninja skills.” We both laugh at that comment. “I was seriously pissed at him, but despite that...” She pauses for a moment. “Okay, you’re going to think this is crazy because I know you don’t believe in this kind of thing, but we connected. I’m certain he felt it too. There was this magnetic pull between us.”

“So, you bonded over a jelly donut lying on the sidewalk?”

“No silly. It was just... I don’t know, I can’t explain it, but it was there I swear. I’ve never felt anything like it before.”

“And that’s why you were so upset?”

She exhales a large breath. “No.”

“Did you get his number at least?”

She shakes her head. “I never would’ve asked for his number; you know what I’m like, but if he had asked for mine...” She shrugs, staring down at the table. “It’s irrelevant anyway because everything went to shit when he noticed the scars on my wrists. He totally freaked out and couldn’t get away fast enough.” When she looks up again, I see the tears welling in her eyes.

“Oh, babe.”

Her breath hitches. “His reaction brought back all the shame from my past.”

The waitress chooses that moment to approach our table to take our order. Emma looks away, discreetly wiping her eyes. I know she’s embarrassed, poor thing. She has such a gentle soul; she’s like the yin to my yang.

Picking up the menu, I quickly place my order, giving her a moment to collect herself.

When the food arrives, I tuck straight into mine, I’m starved, but Emma just pushes hers around the plate. It concerns me because it’s her Sinful-Saturday... her feast day. This guy’s judgement has messed with her mojo. Only a wuss would be scared off by a few tiny scars.

“Hey, why aren’t you eating?” I ask.

She shrugs.

“Don’t let that twat-waffle in your head, Em. He doesn’t know you, or what you’ve been through.”

“I know. It just rattled me, I guess.”

“Well, don’t let it. Who cares what some hot guy thinks? Hot guys are seriously overrated.”

“Totally,” she says, fighting a smile.

“Tonight, we’re going out to paint the town red. Fuck all the haters. You, me, some cocktails and dancing. It’s just what you need. Just the two of us... a girls’ night. A dick-free zone.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip, but I’m not giving in. She needs to let loose and forget, otherwise she’ll spend the entire weekend wallowing. I hate seeing her like this.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” I encourage, nudging her foot with my own under the table.

“Sure, okay. Sounds good.”

Her response is half-hearted, but I’ll make it my mission to see she lets loose tonight and forgets. That’s the problem with pain, if you let it fester enough it will slay you. Like a wild beast clawing at your insides. I refuse to let that happen to either one of us.

Chapter Five

Grayson

SLIDING MY SEAT BELT OVER my shoulder and clicking it into place, I reach for the ignition switch, bringing the motor to life. The roar of the engine has my lips lifting into a smile. I love this damn car, my silver, Saleen S7 sports car, is hands down my favorite. *She's my baby*. Her sleek curves and hard lines are any man's wet dream. I have a fleet of fast cars, well technically only four, but my mother thinks owning more than one vehicle is a tad on the excessive side, but I can afford them, so why the hell not I say. You only live once.

I sit for a brief moment, reveling in the vibration pulsing from underneath the hood. I listen to her purr, before shoving the gears into drive and speeding up the incline of my driveway.

I'm on my way to Vanessa's. She texted me earlier to see if I wanted to meet up. I had nothing better to do, so I agreed. She's one of my semi-regular hookups; I have a few. Sure, I've been around the block a few times in my life, but it's not like I have an endless list of fuckbuddies, I'm pretty selective. The girls I do see on the regular know the deal going in. I'm not the type to feed a woman false hope. I give back just as much, if not more than I take.

The clingy and crazy ones however, are usually a one and done for me. I don't care how attractive they are. I saw firsthand what Ashton, my best friend, went through with Anastasia, his psycho ex. It really opened my eyes, making me wary if nothing else. I never want to find myself in a predicament like he did. The poor bastard is still dealing with the turmoil that relationship brought on.

I'm not opposed to girlfriends per se, I just haven't met anyone I'd like to get serious with of late. The women I date are what I refer to as surface beauty, great to look at, but superficial and shallow on the inside. Mostly they're interested in my body, my looks, or the number of orgasms I can give them in one night. Others see me as a meal ticket, a quick path

to an easy life. I have dreams for my future, and moving from one bed to the next isn't it.

I have a lot more than money and a good time to offer.

I'm looking for a woman with substance. That all-consuming love... that once-in-a-lifetime special someone.

A woman I enjoy being around, in and outside of the bedroom.

A mother to my future children.

A person I'd happily grow old with.

It's not much to ask, but I've yet to find anyone who ticks all those boxes.

There's no doubt in my mind I'll settle down one day, but I'm in no rush. I'm thirty, but unlike women, I don't have to worry about my ticking biological clock. My uncle was pushing fifty when he had his first child with my aunt... she's twenty years his junior.

I want the kind of love my parents once shared. Growing up and seeing them so madly in love is the reason I'm searching for the real deal. I may have only been a boy when we lost my dad, but I vividly remember the intense passion they shared for each other. You could literally feel their connection whenever they were in the room together. That's why my mother was so shattered when he passed, it almost broke her. Half of her soul died right alongside him.

My father once told me he knew the moment they met that she was the one. That's what I'm searching for. An awakening... a deep-seated knowing in my gut. I've been with a lot of beautiful women in my life, especially when I was modeling during college. Yet, nobody has ever made me feel that way, and I flat out refuse to settle for less.

I'm confident when I meet that special someone I'll know. In the meantime I intend to enjoy the ride, and all the bountiful beauties on offer. I'm a man after all, so I'll keep sampling the wrong ones, until the right one comes along. As my granny Edwards always says, "*We are here for a good time, not a long time.*"

Thirty minutes later I pull up outside Vanessa's condo. It's been weeks since I've seen her. As I go to exit my vehicle, a text message comes through on my phone.

Ashton: SOS. I'm at my mother's. Get me the fuck out of here!

I throw back my head and laugh. He's such a pussy. Surely, he could tough it out through an entire dinner. His family only meet up once a month for Christ's sake.

Granted his mom is constantly trying to marry him off, which annoys him to no end, but Valentina's heart is in the right place. She's been good to me and my family over the years. Especially after my father died and we lost everything. In my heart I know she was the anonymous donor that funded the rest of my private schooling right through to graduation. I'm not sure if she did it for me, or for Ashton, but I'm still eternally grateful. I wouldn't have gotten the education I did without her help; my mom could no longer afford to pay the hefty fees.

My mother not only lost her soul mate when my father passed, but she went from being a socialite to bussing tables during the day and cleaning offices at night just to keep a roof over our heads. It killed me to see her like that. My sister, Kaitlin, was only a baby at the time, so Granny Edwards had to move in to help out.

I wait a few minutes before dialing Ashton's number, letting him sweat it out a bit longer.

"Hey," he says, answering after the first ring. "What's up?"

"You're a fucking child you know that?" I reply, laughing.

"Shit really. Okay, that's no good. Oh, an emergency you say?" I shake my head as he puts on a show for his parents' benefit. "I understand, hold tight I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Whatever, dickhead, man the hell up."

I end the call and stay seated in the car because I know he'll ring me once he's used my phone call as an excuse to escape. Bros before hoes and all that.

It only takes a few minutes for my cell to ring. I'm chuckling as I answer it. "Dude, this shit has got to stop."

"You have no idea. At least your mom's not constantly shoving potential brides in your face every chance she gets." I can hear the frustration in his voice, but I still laugh.

"We've been friends for over twenty years, I think I do," I say. "Who was it this time?"

"Willow fucking Henderson. I tell you one of these days I'll show up there and she's going to have a preacher waiting ready to seal the deal before I get a chance to shut that shit down."

I can't help it, I crack up. I'm not sure she'd go that far, but she's been pressuring him for grandbabies for years, so if she's desperate enough she might just do it.

"Come on, man, Willow's not that bad."

"You're shitting me, right?" he snaps. "Have you seen her lately? She's so plastic the amount of greenhouse gases she emits into the environment are contributing to global warming."

I have to wipe the tears from my eyes I'm laughing so hard. I don't doubt him though. Rich bitches in our circle regularly go under the knife. Daddy's money can buy almost anything these days. I'm all for a nice rack, but sometimes they take it too far. It's fake advertising; you never know what you're truly getting. I've seen poor unsuspecting schmucks thinking they've hit the jackpot when they snag a beautiful young wife, only for their significant other to pop out a kid ten months later with a nose like Pinocchio or ears that resemble Dumbo's.

I'm a red-blooded male and guilty of bedding chicks like this myself, but a natural beauty is way more appealing to me. I may have been blessed with good genetics, but what's wrong with being satisfied with what God has given you? Vain and shallow people piss me off.

"Well, on that note I'm out of here," I say. "I've got a hot date."

“With who?”

“Vanessa.”

“That’s not a date, it’s a booty call.”

“At least I’m getting some action tonight.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You could always waltz back into your mother’s house and proposition Willow. I’m sure her plastic lips would feel rather... adequate wrapped around your tiny cock.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he says, making me laugh again. “Ditch Vanessa. I’ve had a shitty day. Come have a drink with me. You can hit that up later.”

Resting my head back against the seat, I sigh. I hate seeing him like this; he’s been to hell and back. I’ve always been there for him, and I don’t plan to stop now.

“Fine, but you’re buying.”

I’m already texting Vanessa as he rattles off where to meet him.

Grayson: Something’s come up. I’ll have to take a rain check.

Vanessa: What a shame, and my friend Sarah is staying the night too.

I drop my head forward and groan. Vanessa knows the score, we’re not in a relationship, never have been, we can go weeks, sometimes months without seeing each other. Occasionally when we meet up, like tonight apparently, she invites one of her friends over to join in the festivities. Those are fun times. I’m not opposed to threesomes; I’ve even participated in a few foursomes in my old modeling days.

Fucking Ashton. He owes me big time for this.



I look up from the bar where I’ve been sitting for the past fifteen minutes, waiting for my best friend to arrive. My eyes follow him as he crosses the club, heading in my direction. The sullen look on his face has me exhaling a large breath. I get it, I really do, part of him died six years ago when his

psycho ex killed herself to spite him, along with their unborn child. But that doesn't stop me missing the fun-loving guy he used to be, the man he was before Anastasia destroyed him.

Call me coldhearted, but I'm glad she's out of the picture. I never liked her. She made his life a living hell, even before she did what she did. He deserved so much better than that.

She ruined him in the worst possible way, and I've spent the last six years trying to get a semblance of my old friend back. He hasn't dated anyone since. Sure, like me, he has his fair share of women, but those hookups are a one-time thing, purely a release and nothing more. They also come with a set of rules. Rules he sticks by. I try not to delve too much into it because it upsets me to see what's become of him.

"Hey," I say, when he's close enough to hear me.

"Hey."

He pulls up the stool beside me, and I raise my hand getting the bartender's attention so I can order him a drink. "Beer?"

"Sure, thanks," he says with a nod.

We polish off two beers each, without uttering another word. It's a comfortable silence. Ashton gets like this when he's brooding, but just being here helps. If the roles were reversed, I know he'd do the same.

"Amber messaged earlier to say the contracts for the Conrad deal were couriered over this afternoon," I say. He and I are business partners in a very lucrative property development company. It's how I made my millions. Ashton's a trust fund baby. Money has never been a problem for him.

My parents grew up with nothing, but my father was a genius with numbers, and quickly became a self-made millionaire dabbling in the stock market within years of graduating from college. Life was good for them... for all of us. Until my dad got sick. They lost their entire fortune trying to save his life. It was a constant struggle after that, right up until I graduated college. But I'm living the dream now, and I've been fortunate enough to be able to care for my mother and younger sister in the process.

I look up when Ashton doesn't acknowledge what I've said. His predatory gaze is honed in on a chick at the far end of the bar. *Interesting*. I observe them both for a few minutes. The woman in the red dress doesn't appear to notice she's being eye-fucked by my best friend, and as for Ashton, I'm pretty sure he hasn't even blinked. It's very unlike him.

My gaze darts to the chick beside her. "Did you hear a word I said, Ash?" I ask, my eyes now glued to her friend.

"Yep, every single one."

"You fucking liar, what did I say then?"

He ignores me again, unable to tear his eyes away from Red. She's pretty, but not my type. Her friend with the tattoos though... she looks like a good time.

"Check out the tits on that one in the red." I bite my lip to try and hide my amusement when I hear him growl beside me. This is fun.

"Put your eyes back in your head, asshole." He gives me a death look, making me laugh. My attention purposely moves back to her. I'm goading him because I'm curious to see his reaction. "I'm serious," he snaps.

"She obviously wants people to look, she's got them out on display for the entire world to see." I'm not sure what's going on with this girl, but she's definitely piqued his interest, and that makes me happier than I care to admit. It's been too long since I've seen him act this way, maybe there's hope for him yet.

"Just stop looking at her like that, all right?"

I give him a strange look. "Wow. When did you become so possessive of a woman?"

"Just drop it, okay?"

"Do you know her?" I ask. I'm fishing now. Is it a chance meeting, or has he met her before? When he lifts his beer to his lips, taking a chug and shrugging his shoulders I know there's more to this. "Jesus, you do. Who is she, Barclay?"

"None of your business, Edwards."

I stand, because I'll get it out of him if it's the last thing I do. "Maybe I should go over there and introduce myself, then." I'm bluffing, although I wouldn't mind getting to know her friend a little better.

"Sit the fuck down."

When he reaches for my arm to stop me, I laugh, ignoring his request. "I want to meet the woman that's got your nuts on a platter."

"I mean it, Gray. Don't force me to hit you."

"All right, lover boy, settle down." I retake my seat.

"Lover boy," he scoffs. "As if."

Reaching over, I slap him on the back. "Keep telling yourself that, buddy. I've never seen you like this before..." I pause for a moment. "Well, not for a long time, anyway. Would you really punch me if I went over there?"

"Damn straight."

I throw my head back, cracking up. "I think every guy in this club has eye-fucked her tonight. Are you going to take us all on?"

"If I have to," he grumbles.

Although I'm extremely pleased by his answer, I still shake my head in disbelief. "I'll be fucking damned; this one's got you good." Even though he's refusing to look at me, I stare at him. "Sweet baby Jesus. Who is this woman?"

"If you must know, I met her this morning, but that's all you're getting."

Hmm, so he does know her. "The girl she's with is pretty hot," I say, flicking my head in their direction. "Those tattoos are smokin.' Damn, I'd tap her."

Aston chuckles. "You'd tap anything that moves."

"Hey, I have standards."

"Sure you do," he says.

When the girls take their drinks and move toward a booth on the other side of the club, I drop the subject, although I continue to see his gaze flicker in their direction when he doesn't think I'm paying attention. I should try and convince him to go over there and introduce me to her friend, but I don't want to push him.

I clear my throat when two women suddenly appear. One of them moves in between us, rubbing her tits against Ashton's arm. I'm confident I know how this is going to play out, so I sit back and observe.

"Do you want to dance, handsome?"

"No," he snaps.

"Come on, it'll be fun," she coaxes, running her long nails through the side of his hair.

When he shrugs her off, I have to bite back my laugh. "Go away."

"Wow. No need to be so rude." She retreats a step, and when I hear her mumble, "Bastard," I snicker. I know exactly why he just ran her off, and it has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with the woman dressed in red. Damn, I want to know who she is to him.

"Move along, ladies, someone's on their period tonight," I say, deciding to help him out.

"Fuck off," he grumbles.

"Just because your head's all wrapped up in the babe in red with the killer rack and the mile-long legs, it doesn't mean you have to ruin my chances of getting laid tonight."

When he grits his teeth at my comment, I bring the beer bottle to my lips and wait.

"Stop talking about her rack and fucking legs." I'm grinning to myself because I knew he'd bite. He chugs the rest of his beer, slamming the bottle down onto the bar. "I'm going to get out of here, you coming?"

"Fuck," I grumble, finishing my own drink. I was really hoping our night would end with getting more acquainted with

Red and her hot friend. “Guess I’ll be taking care of myself tonight.”

“You say that like it’s foreign to you. I shared a dorm room with you, remember? Considering how many times you’ve manhandled yourself, I’m surprised your dick hasn’t fallen off.”

“Very funny, asshole.” We both stand, and my eyes scan the room looking for the girls as we head toward the door. I flick my head in their direction when I spot them on the dance floor. “Your girl’s got all the moves,” I say, smirking. But my eyes are more engrossed in her friend.

“She’s not my girl.”

“Right. So, you wouldn’t mind if I went over there and ground my big cock against that shapely ass of hers?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“She’s so your girl.”

“Remind me again why we’re friends,” he says as I pull him into a headlock, ruffling his hair. He hates when I do that.

“Because you love me, Ashton Barclay.”

“Yeah, like a hole in the head.”

My eyes are still on the tattooed hottie, but when they flick to Red, I see a handsy douchebag approach her from behind. I instantly stop walking, and Ashton bumps straight into my back.

I let out a low whistle. “Shit’s about to get real.” Ashton hated me even looking at her, so I know this isn’t going to go down well. He walks around me, stalking across the dance floor. The man is on a mission. “I’ve got your back, bro,” I say, quickly following him. This isn’t his first hoedown so I know he’s got this, but I’m there just in case some other asshole tries to step in.

When Ashton grabs the guy by the collar of his shirt and yanks him backward, I bark out a laugh. I’m finding this whole situation thoroughly entertaining. We’re grown-ass men, neither of us have gotten into a physical altercation with

anyone since high school. If this doesn't scream, *she's his girl*, I don't know what does.

A few punches are thrown, but the fight is over in seconds. The douche is dragged off the dance floor by his friends before any real damage can be done, and I'm a little disappointed by that. My gaze moves back to the girls, and I find them both slack-jawed and wide-eyed. Ashton's on Red in a heartbeat, grabbing her hand and dragging her off the dance floor.

"The fuck," I hear the tattooed hottie screech when she realizes her friend is being taken away. My arms automatically come out, snagging her around the waist before she can go after them. "If you value your life, you'll remove your hands, asshole," she snarls, making me chuckle.

I spin her in my arms so we're facing each other. From a distance I could tell she was gorgeous, even under this subpar lighting, but I'm in no way prepared for the mere sight of her up close. *She's stunning*. Her pretty hazel eyes narrow as soon as they lock with mine, and the strangest thing happens... my skin starts to prickle all over, like tiny live wires zinging around underneath the surface of my body. It literally steals all the breath from my lungs, and something my father said to me just before we lost him, plays on repeat in my mind.

"I've been looking for you." The words fall from my mouth voluntarily, and I'm not even sure what they mean, but all I can think is, is this girl *the one*? Is she what I've been waiting for? *Crazy right?* Since I've known her less than a minute.

She doesn't acknowledge what I said, unless you count her growl. She literally growled, and that amuses me to no end.

"Feisty and beautiful, my favorite combination," I say, popping a dimple before giving her my most charismatic smile. I don't bring out the big guns regularly, usually I don't need to, but I feel it's warranted with this one.

She falters for a moment, and I know my smile has done its job, I'm moments away from having her under my spell. But then she drags her attention from me as her head darts around in a panic, trying to find her friend. It's a blow to my ego, but I admire her loyalty.

She shifts in my arms, so I tighten my hold. “Relax.” I bring my lips to her ear so she can hear me over the music, and her sweet, flowery scent envelops me. She smells good enough to eat. “Your friend is safe,” I say, trying to ease her concern. “They know each other, and I can assure you that Ashton won’t harm her.”

He can be a sour bastard at times, but he has a big heart. Underneath all that bitterness is a stand-up guy. He’s just messed up inside.

She draws back to get a better look at my face. I’m not sure if she’s searching for the truth or checking me out. When her eyes slightly widen and that pouty mouth of hers gapes open, I know it’s the latter. I’m used to that reaction from women, and to be honest being constantly objectified gets old fast. I’m much more than a pretty face. Placing my hand under her chin, I chuckle to myself as I gently push up, snapping her jaw closed.

“You need to unhand me,” she says, wiggling around in my embrace.

I tighten my grip on her tiny waist, drawing her body even closer. “Not happening, sweetheart. I like you right where you are.”

Her eyes narrow and she growls again, making my smile grow. She’s got spunk. I like that she isn’t making this easy for me, but what she fails to realize is, I’m definitely up for the challenge.

We’re still standing in the middle of the dance floor, but neither of us move. We’re transfixed in each other, but the sudden vulnerability I see in her eyes has my heart squeezing in my chest. Her hazel depths are like a vortex to her soul and for some reason it calls to me on the highest level. They hold an underlying sadness that tugs at something deep inside me. It’s a look I recognize all too well because I’ve seen that same hidden torture swimming in Ashton’s eyes since Anastasia fucked him over. In this woman though, I find it alluring. I want to get to know her, find out all her secrets, and make it my mission to bring that spark back.

My gaze moves down to her plump, ruby red lips. Her sweet body melts against mine. It's like she can't seem to get close enough. An overwhelming desire to lean down and kiss that fuckable mouth of hers thunders through me, but I stamp down the temptation. I can tell she's feeling this connection too, but the reality is I've just accosted her as she tried to go to her friend's aid; if I make a move now, she's going to think I'm a creep.

She's a petite thing, with a cool vintage vibe going on. A rare look for this day and age, but I like her individuality. She reminds me of a pin-up-girl from the forties, with her rockabilly blonde curls strategically pinned into place on top of her head. Her tats though, definitely bring her into the twenty-first century. I find her uniqueness a total turn-on. It's only taken mere moments for me to be completely spellbound.

What kind of witchery is that?

She's straight-up sexy, but the doe-eyed look she's giving me as she nibbles on her bottom lip has my insides all kinds of messed up. Fuck it, I'm going in, I need to taste her. I inch my face forward, but the moment is broken when a flash zooms past us, and I see Red's retreating back as she flees. My gaze moves over to where she was standing with Ashton minutes earlier, and he's watching her leave, his fingers are weaved together, locked behind his head. He looks crestfallen the poor bastard.

"I've got to go," hot tattooed girl says, wiggling her banging body to free herself from my hold. *No*. I want more time with her, I never even got her name.

"Wait." I reach into my back pocket and pull my phone out in a panic, handing it to her. "Can I get your number?" If she walks away now, I may never get to see her again, and that would be a travesty.

She frowns down at my cell, before looking over her shoulder once more. Her friend disappears down the corridor that leads to the restrooms.

"Please." I'm not above begging. I don't know the first thing about this woman, but I want to get to know her better.

Reluctantly, she takes my phone and punches in her digits. “Here,” she says, passing it back to me when she’s done, and a sense of relief washes over me.

Only then do I release my hold on her, letting her slip through my fingers as she retreats. My eyes flicker down to the screen and I see a bunch of numbers there, but nothing else.

“Wait,” I call out. “What’s your name?” But she’s already too far away to hear me. “Fuck,” I grumble, looking down at my phone again.

I press on the field to enter her name, typing ‘Hot tattooed girl from the club’ in the section allocated. I stare at it for a few seconds before deciding she deserves something better than that.

On impulse I’m deleting what I typed, replacing it with ‘Future Mrs. Edwards.’ I shake my head as I press save contact. It’s a spontaneous, and some might say a ridiculous, move on my part, but fuck me if it doesn’t make me smile. Maybe my dad was onto something all those years ago.

An eerie feeling settles over me... *did I just meet my soul mate?*

Chapter Six

Grayson

(10 years old)

ASHTON'S DRIVER PULLS UP OUT the front of my place, and I give my best friend a fist pump before reaching for my backpack that's lying by my feet. My mom used to pick me up from school, but when my dad got sick, I had to start taking the bus. That only lasted a day. As soon as Ashton found out, he insisted his driver take me home in his ridiculous stretch limousine, even though I lived in the opposite direction to him. My family have money, but his parents are stupid rich. Like gazillionaires.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say, grasping the door handle. Ashton refuses to let his driver open our doors. I know he's embarrassed by being chauffeured around. We go to a private school where everybody's families are wealthy, but most of us aren't in his league.

After exiting the car and closing the door, I give Ashton a quick wave through the window before turning and jogging across the front lawn toward my place. I used to love coming home, but not so much these days. Everything has changed since my father's illness. There's a constant black cloud hanging over our family.

I feel the knots in my stomach return the moment I step through the front door. My mom used to greet me with a warm smile and a hug before leading me into the kitchen for some milk and cookies, always asking about my day. Although I miss those times, I don't begrudge her for not being present lately; she's dealing with a lot. Not only my father's cancer, but caring for Katlin, my baby sister.

My dad is her life, and the light that once shone bright in her eyes is slowly diminishing with each passing day. I can't wait until my dad's well again so everything can get back to normal.

I drop my school bag in the mudroom, kick off my shoes, and head toward the kitchen to get a drink. When I hear

Granny's voice and my mother's muffled sobs as I approach, I freeze.

"He's my soul mate, Mom, I can't do this without him." Even though Granny's technically my dad's mother, my mom and her have always been close. She's the best.

"Hush now," Granny replies. "You need to keep it together; those babies need you."

I peek my head around the corner and see Granny cup my mother's cheeks, lifting her face from where it was resting against her shoulder. They both have tears streaming down their faces, making my heart sink. They usually put on a brave front around me.

Has something happened?

"You heard what the oncologist said, they've exhausted every avenue, there's nothing more they can do. I can't do this on my own. I'm going to have to sell the house just to cover the medical bills, how can I look after the kids and provide for them too?"

Sell the house?

"You have me... always," Granny says, "besides, my boy's a fighter; I refuse to believe this is the end for him."

Those words scramble my brain. I knew things were bad, but this? I clutch my stomach as bile rises to my throat. *The end?* Is my dad going to die? It can't be true.

Turning, I run across the great room, heading down the long hallway that leads toward the bedroom at the back of the house. My parents moved down here, to the lower level a few months ago, when the stairs became too much for my dad.

My hand is trembling as I reach for the handle. I knew my dad was pretty sick, but my mom told me not to worry, that everything was going to be okay. I guess that wasn't true.

Cracking open the door, I pause, taking in the fragile man that's curled into a ball on the bed. He's wearing striped pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt that's swimming on him.

There are countless orange canisters filled with his medication cluttering the bedside table. The treatment he's been on made his hair fall out months ago, but it's the weight loss I'm struggling with. I was told his hair will grow back. Although the changes in him happened gradually over time, I'm looking at him through different eyes in this moment. He looks so much sicker than I allowed myself to believe. Tears rise to my eyes. It's true, we're losing him, I can see it, I can feel it, and it hurts. It hurts a lot.

Creeping across the room, trying not to wake him, I crawl onto the bed. I can't lose him. He's my best friend. Well, technically Ashton is, but my dad has been there for me my entire life. My mind drifts to all the things we've done together over the years. Tossing the ball in the back yard, playing catch, camping, fishing, and all the things he's taught me. Things I've taken for granted up until this moment. I know exactly how my mom feels, I'm not sure I can do life without him either.

I lie here for the longest time, just staring at a man I barely recognize. His face is gaunt and a funny color, greyish instead of pink. His breathing is shallow, how could I have been in such denial?

A coughing fit eventually wakes him, and when he spots me a smile tugs at his dry, cracked lips.

"Grayson," he says, which comes out more like a wheeze.

"Hey, Dad." I lift my hand bringing it down to rest on his boney upper arm. I can feel the tears burning the back of my eyes, but I swallow them down along with the lump that's now lodged in my throat.

"Everything okay, son?" he asks.

"I just got home from school and I wanted to see you."

"How was your day?"

"Okay," I reply with a shrug. School is the last thing on my mind in this moment. I can't get past what I just heard in the kitchen. I have so many questions. Like is it true, are you leaving us? Are we going to be homeless? But I'm not sure

I'm ready for *those* answers, so I choose a safer subject instead. "Dad, what's a soul mate?"

"A soul mate? Why, do you have a girlfriend I didn't know about?"

I scrunch up my nose. "No way. Yuk. Girls are gross." He chuckles, bringing on another bout of coughing. "I heard Mom tell Granny you were her soul mate."

Those words have him smiling again. "A soul mate is a person that's made especially for you. The other half of your soul."

"Wait what? We're born with only half a soul?"

My dad lets out another small laugh followed by more coughing. It hurts so much to see him like this. He was always so strong. He used to carry me around on his shoulders with zero effort at all.

"Technically no, I was speaking metaphorically. I guess what I'm trying to say is after your mother came into my life, I felt more whole."

"Oh," I reply, because it sounds like gibberish to me. Maybe the medication he's on is making him a little crazy.

"I'm not doing a good job of explaining am I? I can see the confusion on your face." I shrug in reply. "I'm not saying I wasn't happy before I met her, because I was. I had a good life growing up. Things just became better once your mom came along. One day you'll find your own special someone and you'll understand."

I hold back my gag, because I'd rather eat a slug. "How did you know she was the one?"

"It's hard to explain, Gray," he replies, pausing for a moment to find the right words. "It was like a sudden realization, an enlightenment you could say; I just knew in that instant she'd become my wife one day."

"But how?" I ask, because none of this is making sense.

"Well for starters, when she smiled at me all the air expelled from my lungs. That had never happened to me before.

Something told me she was different to all the others prior. It was a strange feeling, but my heart just knew in that moment she was mine.”

Even at my impressionable age it seemed a little far-fetched, but I’d witnessed the love they shared firsthand. They both lit up when the other was around; they couldn’t be in the same room without touching each other, or kissing—which was kind of gross—but something deep inside me just knew he was speaking his truth.

It was one of the last conversations I’d have with my father, he slipped into a coma two days later, and was sadly gone from this world by the end of that week.

Chapter Seven

Carla

I DISCARD THE FACIAL WIPES I just used to remove my makeup, into the small trash bin next to the vanity.

Moving to my hair, I carefully pull out the pins before dragging a brush through the long blonde strands. The curls I put in before I left to go out tonight are still there, making my hair spring back up on release. I brush my teeth and strip down to my underwear, dumping my dress into the laundry hamper.

My thoughts filter between my best friend and the hot guy who detained me at the club tonight. I don't usually like being manhandled like that, but for some strange reason he made me feel safe in his arms. *His panty-dropping good looks had absolutely nothing to do with it.* I roll my eyes at myself in the mirror.

Who am I trying to kid?

Poor Emma was quiet on the Uber drive home, today turned out to be a total bust for her. Or did it? She said her and that Ashton guy just talked, but her red lipstick was smeared all over her face like some kind of freakish circus clown, so I knew there was more than words exchanged. I didn't push her for more information though, that's not how our friendship rolls. I know she'll talk to me when she's ready.

Padding back into my room, I move over to my dresser to grab a T-shirt and a pair of sleep shorts. I feel safe here, but I can't go to bed naked. I'm still held captive by my past, and therefore I'm compelled to be ready to flee just in case.

As I slip the shirt over my head, my phone dings. I left it sitting on the nightstand to charge. Pushing my feet through the legs of the shorts, I slide them over my hips before reaching for my cell. I'm expecting something from Emma, thinking she's ready to open up about what happened with that twat-waffle tonight, but it's not her name that I see.

Unknown: Hey. Hope you got home safe. What are you up to?

Future Mrs. Edwards: Who is this?

Unknown: Wow! Am I that forgettable? You wound me pretty girl.

Future Mrs. Edwards: ???

*Unknown: We met earlier at the club. You may have already erased me from your memory, but I can assure you you're still alive and well in mine. You're kind of hard to forget. *insert cartoon heart eyes here**

A woosh of air leaves my lungs as I reread what he sent. A second later another one comes through.

Unknown: The nights still young, do you want to meet up? Our time together was short... we need to rectify that.

Unknown: ???

His messages are coming in rapid succession. I barely get time to formulate my reply before the next one arrives. I eagerly throw myself backward, landing on my mattress with a bounce and a tiny squeal. I know he asked for my number, but I wasn't confident I'd actually hear from him. He's all GQ-model-worthy hot, and I'm just... well me.

Unknown: Are you ghosting me now?

Future Mrs. Edwards: Sheesh! Slow down there, tiger. Give me a chance to reply.

Unknown: My apologies, go ahead...

Future Mrs. Edwards: I didn't get your name, and this number came up as unknown. I'm not in the habit of agreeing to meet up with strangers. You could be an axe murderer for all I know.

Unknown: If you didn't run off so fast, I would've given you more than just my name. ;)

Future Mrs. Edwards: What, like an STD?

Unknown: Whitty, feisty and beautiful. A lethal combination. I think I've hit the jackpot.

Unknown: My name is Grayson BTW. The people I'm close with call me Gray.

His reply makes me smile. I like his name, it suits him. From our brief encounter, I knew he was different from the guys I usually date. Although he oozed sex appeal, he's clean cut... a pretty boy, and not my usual type. I typically gravitate toward the rough and ready kind of guys. Damaged by their life's circumstances... kindred spirits. Ones least likely to judge and look down at me... *people from my side of the tracks.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: Nice name. I'll call you Grayson then since we aren't close.

Unknown: Wow! Harsh. But be fair warned, it's only a matter of time before you fall under my spell. Nobody can resist my charm. Give me an hour and I'm sure we'll be BFF's.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *I doubt that. I already have a BFF.*

Unknown: *Talk about a stab right to the heart.*

I bite my lip to suppress another smile.

Unknown: *Are you at least going to tell me your name? You only gave me your number earlier, so I'll be forced to refer to you as, 'Hot tattooed girl from the club,' if you don't.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Oh, so you're one of those?*

Unknown: *One of those?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Those men that have an abundance of female friends *insert cough here* and can't remember said names so their contact list appears something like this:*

Blonde with the great rack

Brunette with the bootylicious ass

Redhead that sucks cock like a champ

Tell me I'm wrong?

Unknown: *LMAO. I like you already. Are you sure we can't be BFF's?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *That would be a no. And I don't see you denying my claims, so I guess I hit the nail on the head.*

Unknown: *You've got me. FYI, the one who sucks cock like a champ, actually has black hair. Unfortunately, the redhead didn't make the cut. She had a really tiny mouth, and the most pitiful gag reflex. I had such high hopes for her, but alas, she turned out to be a huge disappointment. I lost her number ASAP. *insert sigh here**

This time I laugh out loud. I think I like him too, he's funny.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *A dreadful gag reflex? Gasp! Good thing I don't have one of those.*

Unknown: *You're killing me here. You're definitely going to need to prove this.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Nah, I'm good. You'll just have to take my word for it.*

Unknown: *No really, I have to witness this firsthand or it didn't happen. *insert a thousand praying hands here* Actually, make that ten-thousand. You show me yours and I'll show you mine kind of thing. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I can do magical things with my tongue.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Says who? You?*

Unknown: *No, my abundance of female friends. *cough* I'll have you know I'm pretty well-known for said tongue action. Feel free to save my contact details under, 'The Adonis with the magical tongue.'*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Cocky much!*

Unknown: *If you've got it flaunt it. I don't just talk the talk, sweetheart, I walk the walk. Be honest, you know you want me to come over and rock your world. If you play your cards right, I may even upgrade your*

description on my phone. E.g. 'Hot tattooed blonde with no gag reflex.'
How's that sound?

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Hmm...*

Unknown: *Does that mean I get your address now?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Umm, that'll be no. Like I said I'm not in the habit of giving my details out to strangers. You've yet to prove you're not an axe murderer.*

Unknown: *I can assure you I don't own an axe. You're completely safe with me.*

Unknown: *Well with axes anyway. But be warned, my tongue is lethal.*

Unknown: *Address?*

All this tongue talk is making me antsy. He's confident and cocky, I know what guys like him are about, but it's been a while since I've hooked up with anyone. I ponder that thought for a moment before finally replying.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *How about this... I'm in the mood for some pizza. I'll send you the coordinates of my favorite place. You can meet me there. Be prepared for a grilling because I'm bringing out all the uncomfortable and hard questions. If you pass, only then will I decide whether you're worthy of my address.*

He may consider my request hard work, but I'll take my chances. I've brought guys home before, but I make sure I know them first. I'd like to think I'm a good judge of character, and don't trust people easily. My gut instincts have got me out of many precarious predicaments in the past.

Unknown: *You're making me work for it, I like it. Easy girls are no fun.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *I thought most guys liked easy girls.*

Unknown: *I'm not most guys...*

Unknown: *I'm up for the challenge 'hot tattooed girl from the club' (You still haven't told me your name) so until you do, you'll be forever known as that. Unless of course you prove you have no gag reflex.*

My amusement grows. I like his wittiness.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *It's Carla.*

Unknown: *No last name? Mine's Edwards. You're welcome to google me. You'll see I'm a pillar of the community. A real upstanding citizen.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Really? That makes you sound kind of boring actually. Such a shame. I have a weakness for bad boys.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *And it's Carla, just Carla.*

Technically I do have a last name, but I prefer not to use it. *My parents are assholes.* They don't want me, so in turn I

don't want their name. It's only fair. An eye for an eye and all that bullshit.

Unknown: Hmm, that's an interesting last name. Well, Miss Just-Carla, as luck would have it, one of my middle names just happens to be Bad-boy. Grayson Robert Bad-boy Edwards.

This man has me grinning like a fool.

Unknown: And I think it's only fair to warn you, I'm bringing my A game with me tonight. Be prepared to be wooed. ;)

Bring it on, Mr. Edwards.



I pace back and forth outside the restaurant, my anxiety growing with each passing minute. I've been here for close to half an hour. This place is only five blocks from where I live, so I walked here. I'm no stranger to wandering around at night on my own. Emma hates when I do it, but her upbringing was a lot different to mine; she lived a sheltered life in the bum fuck of nowhere.

Illuminating my phone, I check the time. It's just after eleven, I'm not sure where Grayson's coming from, but I'll give him another ten minutes. Maybe my request for a little more than a hookup was too much work after all.

I still don't cope well with rejection, even after all this time.

A few minutes later my attention is drawn toward a silver sports car as it slows, pulling up alongside the curb. Gardena isn't a flash suburb by any means, so it's not common to see swanky cars around this part of town.

I watch on in amazement as the driver's side door opens upward instead of outward like most cars. Very fancy. It's futuristic and kind of cool.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach the moment the guy steps out, his eyes instantly locking with mine over the top of the vehicle.

Cheese on a cracker, it's him.

His smile lights up his gorgeous face making my heart flutter in my chest. My first thought is he really is beautiful, and totally out of my league.

I'm suddenly wishing I put more effort into my appearance before coming now. Tonight, I left my hair down, and parted at the side. The long, loose waves reach down to my lower back and cascade over one shoulder. I don't go out like this often, especially on a date.

It's not my signature style. I usually wear my makeup like armor, and in this moment, I'm feeling extremely exposed.

In my defense I was heading to bed when he texted me, so I got ready in a rush. He gave no indication of how far away he was, and I didn't want him to think I wasn't going to show.

I'm wearing a pair of formfitting three-quarter red plaid pants and a tight black off-the-shoulder top, which is tucked in at the waist. The sleeves are ruffled, and super cute, showing the majority of my inked arms. The black ballet flats on my feet take a few inches off my already short height, but since I was walking here, I went for comfort. My face is free from makeup, bar my red lips and a dash of mascara.

Sliding my phone into the back pocket of my pants with shaky hands, I rub my sweaty palms down the side of my legs. Shit, I can't believe how nervous I am.

He's just a guy, I remind myself.

Granted a very hot one, but...

Christ, get a hold of yourself Carla.

"Hey," he says as he steps up onto the sidewalk coming to a stop in front of me. He leans down, brushing his lips lightly over my cheek, causing goose bumps to rise along my arms.

I crane my neck so I can make eye contact with him, he so dang tall.

"Hi." It comes out more like a breathy sigh. Gah.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long."

I tuck my hands behind my back, so I'm not tempted to reach out and grab him. "No, I just got here," I lie. Sue me, I don't want to appear too eager.

The smile on his face grows as his eyes peruse me from head to toe. The heat I see in his gaze scorches my skin. I'm surprised it doesn't make me feel self-conscious; I usually hate being scrutinized. Maybe it's the appreciation and hunger I see reflecting back at me, maybe it's something else.

I use this time to make my own assessment. The look he's giving me is devilish, making me want to drink him down like chocolate. His lips are plump and his straight, pearly white teeth are toothpaste-commercial worthy. His parents must have skimmed the very top of the gene pool when they made him.

Damn, I want to do dirty things with this man.

Subconsciously I run my tongue over my bottom lip, and I hear a strangled groan rumble in the back of his throat as his eyes zero in on my movements.

He's still dressed in the designer blue jeans and the white button-up shirt he wore to the club; the sleeves are now rolled up to the elbows. The picture perfect of casual and cool. There's a striking resemblance between him and James Dean, with a dash of Matthew McConaughey thrown into the mix. However, if you hand-picked their best features and mashed them together, you still wouldn't do this man justice.

My eyes continue their appraisal, moving down the tanned skin on his toned forearm. Is that a Rolex? I knew a guy that used to sell those kinds of watches, rip-offs of course. I guarantee Grayson's isn't. He reeks of money and class. The total opposite to me. I'm what some people once referred to as trailer park trash, and I'm as poor as a church mouse.

Sheesh, what am I doing here?

Those disarming dimples he dealt out at the club earlier are back on full display. He obviously uses them like a weapon, and it works; my body is on sensory overload. I'm itching to paw at him, to run my fingers through his flawlessly tussled light brown hair. It has a slight wave to it. It's shorter on the

sides and longer on top. His eyes are an unusual color and alight with mischief. The center is a captivating emerald green, surrounded in a ring of brown. Like mint chocolate. *Yum*. God, I could eat him up.

“You look different,” he says, reaching for one of my loose curls, twisting it around his finger. I drop my head, staring down at my feet. *Damn*. It’s rare for me to let my bravado slip, but sometimes that insecure little girl rears her ugly head. *Please don’t reject me*. “Hey.” He places his knuckle under my chin, bringing my gaze back to his. Tingles run down my spine when his thumb skims over my cheek. “The made-up woman I met earlier tonight was stunning, but the one in front of me now, the natural version of her... she takes my breath away.”

God this man is good. He’s only been here a few minutes and he’s already got me swooning all over the place. He warned me he was bringing his A game, but there’s not a hint of deception behind his words.

His eyes hold mine for a moment before flickering to the pizzeria behind us. This place is nothing flash, but the authentic Italian food is to die for.

“Do you want to go in?” I ask, throwing my thumb over my shoulder. I need a few moments to gather myself. This man makes me feel off-kilter.

“Sure.” He gives me a devious wink, like he can read my thoughts. It’s unnerving. Stepping around me, he opens the door. “After you, pretty girl.” He gestures with his hand for me to go inside. I move forward and as I pass, he rests his flattened palm on the small of my back, following me in. The heat from his touch electrifies my skin, even through my clothes. “I’m ready to be grilled,” he leans in and whispers, causing liquid heat to form in my core as his warm, minty breath ghosts over my skin. “I’m actually looking forward to it.”

“And I’m ready to be wooed,” I counter, grinning at him over my shoulder.

“Baby, you haven’t seen nothing yet.” The tone of his voice makes his words sound more like a caress.

This man is sex on a stick.

We approach a table toward the back of the restaurant, and Grayson moves to pull out my chair. I raise an eyebrow, glancing up at him. I'm not opposed to chivalry; I'm just not used to it.

"What?"

"Nothing," I say, taking a seat.

"My mom raised me to be a gentleman. Do you have an issue with that?"

"None whatsoever," I reply, reaching for the menu. Emma and I order from here often, so I already know what I'm getting. I just need something to do with my hands. "Thank her for me next time you see her."

"I'll do that." He rocks back in his chair watching me. "So, Miss Just-Carla, what does a girl like you do for fun?" I bite back my smile when he says my name like that.

"The usual."

"Like?"

"If I'm not working, I hang out with my bestie..." I shrug. "...amongst other things." I give my most seductive look when I say the last part, emphasizing the innuendo.

"Hmm," he says, shifting in his seat slightly. "Your bestie? Is that the girl you were at the club with tonight?"

"The one and only. Her name's Emma."

"She seems to have caught the eye of my friend, Ashton."

"Ugh." I'm not a fan. Both times she's seen him he's managed to upset her. I want to junk punch him.

"You don't sound too impressed by that."

"I'm sorry, but your friend's a colossal douche." My confession makes him chuckle.

"Ashton mentioned their infamous meeting this morning, but failed to tell me any specifics. Care to fill me in?"

“There’s not much to tell. He knocked a donut out of her hand and made her cry,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I rest my case.”

This time he laughs, shaking his head. “Wow, you’re right, what a douchebag. I honestly don’t know why we’re friends.” I can tell he’s joking by the way he says it. *Whatever*. “I probably should reevaluate that.”

“You should,” I retort dryly, giving him a stink eye. Seeing Emma upset makes me go all momma bear, and I don’t appreciate him making light of it.

“He may be a tad prickly at times, but I can assure you deep down he’s a good guy. He’s just had some issues of late.” Naturally he’s going to defend him, but I’m still not convinced. “Did your friend really cry over a donut? She must really love them.”

My stink eye grows stinkier. “It wasn’t the donut that made her cry, it was the douche.” I wave my hand dismissing it; I don’t want to mention how he acted when he saw the scars on her wrist. It’s not my story to tell. “He better watch his back; I have ninja skills you know.”

His face lights up with mirth. “Ninja skills? And you’re worried about my axe wielding abilities.”

Now I’m smiling. “Be a good boy, don’t piss me off and you’ll be safe.”

He drums his fingers on the table. “Duly noted.”

Chapter Eight

Grayson

THERE WAS AN INSTANT ATTRACTION the moment I saw Carla at the club tonight; I was immediately drawn in by her beauty. Her face was perfectly made up, only enhancing all her delicate features. Her long blonde locks are now flowing free, and I'm surprised by the length of her hair. She's virtually void of makeup, allowing her natural beauty to shine through, and I like what I see. I like it a lot. I get the impression she has no idea how appealing she truly is.

Crossing my arms in front of me, I lean forward in my seat, resting my elbows on the table so I can study her more closely. I'm currently counting the cute smattering of tiny freckles on the bridge of her nose. It looks like someone sprinkled her angelic face with a dusting of gold. I probably look like a creeper the way I'm staring, but I can't seem to take my eyes off her. There's a purity surrounding her... she's so dang sweet, and looks dangerously wholesome without all that gunk on her face.

Thirteen.

I finish my calculations on her nose and move on to study the rest of her lovely face. Her long dark lashes frame her hazel eyes... eyes that sparkle under the lighting, and from here I can see the specks of gold and green that surround her irises. She's incandescent, glowing from the inside out. Like sunshine, warming something inside me like no woman has before. It's an unfamiliar feeling, but I can guarantee I'm not the first man to be enchanted by her beauty.

"So, any other boyfriends I need to worry about?" I ask because I'm curious to see if I have any competition.

"Hey, I'm the one who's supposed to be doing the grilling here, mister," she says, making me laugh. "And the answer is no. I don't do boyfriends... I'm a no strings kind of girl."

Interesting.

"So, you're saying you don't do relationships... ever?"

“I’m not opposed to them; I’m just not interested in anything long term.” For some reason her answer rubs me the wrong way, but I try not to let it show. She may not be into commitments, but if this night goes the way I’m planning it to, she’ll need to reevaluate that. We’re only ten minutes into our date, but I already know I want to see her again. “I take it you’re not seeing anyone either?” she asks.

“No, but I’m working on it,” I reply as the corner of my mouth tugs up. “I recently met this incredibly beautiful, sassy woman.”

“Nice,” she says nonchalantly.

“The best part is, she claims to have no gag reflex.”

Carla tries to fight her grin as her cheeks pinken. “Wow, she sounds like a keeper.”

“She’s every man’s fantasy. A walking, talking wet dream,” I say.

The server approaches our table, interrupting our conversation, just as things were starting to get interesting. “Are you ready to order?” he asks, drinking Carla in.

It pisses me off. She’s totally oblivious to the attention she’s attracting. I get it, I really do. She’s hard not to look at, but I still want to punch the guy.

I rein in my anger as I reach for the menu. I’ve been so preoccupied with the woman sitting opposite me, I haven’t even thought about food. The only thing I want to eat in this moment is her.

“I’ll get a large pepperoni pizza with thin crust, a serving of devil wings with ranch dressing on the side, and some cheesy garlic bread,” Carla says without missing a beat.

That’s an awful lot of food for one person. “Are you ordering for both of us?” I ask, lowering the menu in my hands as I eye her curiously.

“I wasn’t planning on sharing,” she deadpans, “but I guess I will if I have to.”

I bark out a laugh. I love a woman that can eat, especially since she just ordered a shit load of carbs. But I'm curious how someone so petite can pack away that much food?

"Make it two servings of chicken wings, and we can share the pizza."

"Fine," Carla mumbles, blowing out a puff of air. Christ, she's amusing. There's no way she can eat all that by herself.

"Anything to drink? The server's damn eyeballs are still glued on her.

"A chocolate shake, thanks," Carla answers, looking up at him with a sweet smile. I grit my teeth when I see the dick's face light up.

My attention moves back to her as I arch a brow.

"You?" the server grumbles, and again I want to punch him. "Just a coke." I don't bother to make eye contact or use my manners, because he's being a rude fucker.

"So," I say once we're alone again. "What do you do for work?"

"I manage a bar, and do some volunteering in my spare time. You?"

"I'm a property developer."

"Nice."

"What kind of volunteer work do you do?"

"Self-defense classes at a local women's shelter," she says with a shrug like it's no big deal. "And occasionally, when I have some spare time, I help out at the soup kitchen. I like to give back where I can."

"Why is that?"

She stares down at the table briefly before finally bringing her eyes back to me. "My life started out pretty rough, but I'm blessed with what I have now. Not all people can say the same."

I wasn't expecting so much honesty from her, but the more she talks, the more I want to learn. I'm finding her fascinating, and so different to the other women I've dated in the past. They're so self-centered, spoiled, privileged and entitled. The polar opposite of Carla. I have no idea what her childhood was like, but I've lived through hard times myself. It makes me feel connected to her in some way.

"These self-defense classes, do you teach them?"

"Yes."

"Your ninja skills?" I rest my elbows on the table again, giving her my full attention.

"Something like that," she says, grinning.

"These skills you talk of, is it something you've learned or were you just born kick-ass?"

We both have a small laugh at that.

"I used to live in an apartment above a gym."

"So, you took ninja classes there?"

"Yes, Reece the guy who owned the gym was also my custodian."

"Oh." I sit back in my chair letting her words settle in.

Who is this Reece guy? What happened to her parents? Before I get a chance to formulate a response, she elaborates.

"My mom kicked me out when I was thirteen, and Reece took me in."

Jesus.

What kind of mother kicks their daughter out when they're so young? She was just a kid. Reaching across the table, I take her hand in mine as I search for the right words to formulate a response. "I'm so sorry," I eventually say, inwardly cringing at my lame effort.

"Don't be." She shrugs. "It turned out to be a blessing."

Tightening my grip, a million questions flicker through my mind. She gives me a tense smile before removing her hand

from my grasp. There's a brief pause as her eyes look everywhere but me. She's obviously uncomfortable with this topic of conversation, so I'm left feeling like an asshole.

I rack my brain for something to say that'll break the tension. "I'm a little disappointed in you," I state, leaning forward in my seat.

Her eyes snap back to mine. "Why?" I bite back my smile when she scowls. She's a fierce little thing.

"I seem to be the one asking all the questions?" I cock an eyebrow as I tap my fingers on the table. "Your grilling skills are severely lacking, Miss Just-Carla."

The corners of her lips lift slightly. "You're right." The tension uncoils from her body as she rests her elbows on the table, mirroring my stance. "I've been letting you off easy."

"I hope you're going to rectify that."

Her smile grows. "Most definitely, pretty boy."

"Do your worst, beautiful."



Making good on her promise, she grilled me throughout the entire meal, asking about my family, work, where I grew up, things of that nature. I however, kept my own questions light. I'm enjoying our time together, and the last thing I want to do is upset her again.

When I texted her earlier, I was hoping we'd meet up, have some hot sex and call it a night. I'd been slightly disappointed when she suggested we go for a meal first, but on the other hand, I liked that she was making me work for it. I'm used to easy. I hadn't anticipated any of this. My attraction to her is irrefutable. The longer I'm here, the more the allure grows. She's fun, down to earth and so easy to be around... like a breath of fresh air.

"Are you going to eat that?" Carla asks, eyeing the last piece of pizza.

She's got to be kidding me; she couldn't possibly be thinking of eating it herself. Does she have hollow legs?

"Have at it." I lean back in my chair rubbing my hand over my stomach. "I'm stuffed."

"Pfft." She shakes her head as she reaches for it, placing it on the plate in front of her. "You, Mr. Edwards, are a disgrace to all the pizza-eating, beer-guzzling men in this country."

I throw back my head and bark out a laugh. "Is that so?"

"Yes. You should hand over your man card this instant."

I smile when she holds out her small, delicate hand and wiggles her fingers. "Not happening, sweetheart, I'm abundantly manly."

"Uh huh," she says with a smug grin, like she doesn't believe me. I have a good mind to bend her sweet ass over this table and prove it.

The server picks that exact moment to approach us again, his leering eyes still focused on her. I'm not the jealous type, but this guy has been grating on my nerves all night.

"Are you finished with these?" he asks, gesturing to the empty plates.

"Yes."

"Can I get you guys anything else? Some dessert maybe?"

I'm about to say no, *now get lost*, but Carla gets in first. "Dessert sounds good."

"You have room in that teeny body for dessert after everything you just ate?"

Carla gives me an accusing eye. "Sure. I mean, someone did eat half of my pizza." She's so damn cute.

"Where in the hell do you put it all?"

She pokes her tongue out instead of answering, making me chuckle. Brat.

"I'll have the tiramisu, thanks." Her voice is sugary sweet as she turns her attention back to me. "You should try it. It's so,

so good.”

The douchebag looks at me and raises an eyebrow. “Just bring two spoons, we’ll share.”

Sitting back in my seat I eagerly await her response, and she doesn’t disappoint. “Like hell we will. You really need to work on your wooing skills, Edwards.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!” Moving her attention back to the douche, she says, “Bring us two servings, please.”

She entertains me to no end.



“Mm,” she moans, dragging the fork between her pillowy, fire engine red lips, and my cock hardens behind the zipper of my jeans, to the point it’s painful.

It’s not just the sexy noises, the way she licks that damn utensil with each bite is driving me to the point of insanity. Her little show is like food porn at its best. I move my hand under the table to adjust the chub in my pants. My need to fuck her has gone from pure desire to a deep-seated yearning.

I open and close my fist a few times, trying to get my body under control. I’m finding it hard to contain myself. This woman is turning me inside out, and my dick is envious of that piece of cutlery that keeps sliding between her lips. He wants a turn.

“You should try yours, it’s seriously good,” she says as her eyes move to the untouched dessert that is sitting in front of me, but I’m too engrossed watching her eat.

“I’d rather be eating something else,” I say, leaning forward in my chair and lifting a brow, suggestively. I’m so turned on by the thought; it almost comes out as a growl.

Her eyes widen slightly before a seductive smile curves at her lips. She knows exactly what she’s doing the little minx.

“What, like more pizza?” she asks, innocently. “Eating half of mine wasn’t enough for you?”

“You and I both know I’m not talking about pizza, Carla.”

She scoops some more tiramisu onto her fork before running it down the length of her tongue, and I groan. I’m tethering on the edge, and mere seconds away from dragging her into the restrooms and bending her over the sink.

“Oh really? What are you in the mood for then?”

“Are you almost done? I think it’s time we left.”

She gasps. “I’m still eating. Rude much.”

Shaking my head, I can’t help but laugh. This woman is too fucking much.

We sit there in a silent standoff as she continues to eat at a leisurely pace, like she doesn’t have a care in the world. My fingers drum impatiently in a steady rhythm against the table. I feel like I’m trapped in some kind of erotic torture.

I sigh with relief when she finally eats the last piece. I place my palms flat on the table, ready to stand.

“I’m not done yet,” she says, reaching for my plate.

“You’re done,” I snap, intercepting it before she does.

She pouts her pretty mouth. “You’re no fun.”

“I disagree. Let’s get out of here and I’ll show you just how much fun I can be.” I signal the server, handing him my uneaten dessert. “Box this up and bring us the check... make it snappy.”

Chapter Nine

Carla

GRAYSON SLIDES HIS BLACK AMEX card back into his wallet and snatches up the box containing the dessert he didn't eat. Wrapping his free hand around my elbow, he practically drags me toward the door. I bite my lip to hide my grin.

The poor guy has reached the end of his rope.

The unadulterated craving in his eyes as he watched me eat was palpable. It made me all hot and bothered. Nobody has ever looked at me like that before.

The moment we step outside, he turns me so I'm facing him. "Address now?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play cute with me, Carla. I've held up my end of the bargain, now it's your turn."

"I'm still considering it," I say, tapping my finger against my chin like I'm pondering. I'm playing with him of course.

His eyes light up with a challenge as he casually slides his free hand into the pocket of his jeans. "What do I need to do to sway you?"

"Well, for one thing, you'll have to kiss me first."

"Is that so?" He gives me a cocky smirk, once again showcasing his captivating dimples.

I shrug, feigning indifference. Truth is, I love this back-and-forth banter we have going on. "I refuse to go home with a man who could quite possibly be the world's worst kisser. What if you're all tongue and no substance?" I tuck my hands behind me, rocking back on my feet.

His brows furrow. "I can assure you I have plenty of substance, sweetheart, and I have no doubt you're going to love my tongue." He speaks with such confidence I know he'll be able to back those words up. "Once you've had a taste of me, you'll be ruined for all the men that follow."

"That's a pretty big statement. You like talking yourself up, don't you?" I tease.

He gives me a boastful wink. “Just stating facts, sweetheart.” This man has swagger in spades.

“What if your kisses are all sloppy.” I scrunch up my nose in disgust as I speak. “I’d hate to end up all wet, half drowned in your saliva? Because that would be seriously gross.”

He chuckles, his eyes illuminating with amusement. “I have it on good authority I’m an excellent kisser, Miss Just-Carla.” My gaze moves down to my shoes, as I bite back my smile. I look up at him through my lashes and find him grinning. Boy, do I want to take this man for a test drive. “But I can guarantee once I’m done with you, you *will* be wet.” He moves his face so close to mine, we’re sharing the same air. “*Soaked* actually.”

He makes me feel giddy, like I’m literally high on dick, or him, possibly both—I feel like a lovesick teenager discovering the opposite sex for the first time. It irks me because I’m not usually that sappy kind of girl.

“Prove it,” I challenge, throwing his own words from earlier, back at him.

He growls, dropping the box in his hand onto the pavement below. Part of me wants to cry about the discarded dessert, but I’m far too desperate for this kiss to care. Snagging me around the waist, he tugs me forward until our bodies are flush.

“I’ve been dying to taste you all night,” he whispers against my mouth.

His lips gently brush mine, once, then twice. It’s like he’s testing the waters. He draws back slightly as our eyes lock. The look he gives me is so hot it has my panties disintegrating... *poof gone*.

I can feel his erection digging into my stomach, so I know he’s just as affected as I am. “Is that the best you’ve got?” I tease, pushing up onto my toes and running my hands up his chest until they’re settled around his neck.

“Not even close,” he murmurs before crashing his lips against mine. This time he’s not so gentle, gobbling me up like a starved man and I’m his last meal. *I love it*. His kiss is soul

shattering... burning me up and scorching me from the inside out. He's practically murdering my mouth; it's like nothing I've ever experienced before. I feel tingles right down to the soles of my feet. I've been kissed a lot of different ways in my life, but I've never been devoured with such debauchery.

The flirting and the banter we shared over dinner has brought us to this moment. The perfect aphrodisiac. We attack each other with a depravity I've never known before.

I moan into his mouth as one of his hands fists in my hair, tugging it slightly. *It's so hot.* He tilts my head back to gain better access to my mouth, plunging his delicious tongue inside. His other arm skates down my back until he's palming my ass. He groans and my toes curl in my shoes. He most definitely wasn't talking himself up; this kiss is sizzling, scorching me from the inside out. He's everything he claimed to be, and so much more.

We eventually part, gulping in much needed air. My head is spinning, but I don't dare open my eyes and look at him. *I can't.* If I do, I'm pretty sure I'll burst into flames.

I need more.

I'm uncertain if he reads my mind or if he feels it too, but he's suddenly walking me backward away from the illuminated shop front. He stops once we reach the side of the building. We may be in public, but we're now shrouded by darkness and away from prying eyes.

He effortlessly lifts me up until my feet dangle in the air. His beautiful face is now level with mine, and the heat I see in his hooded eyes burns with such a ferocity I think I might self-combust.

"Wrap your legs around me," he commands and I don't hesitate to do as he asks. I don't usually like being ordered around, but he's rendered me powerless in this moment. I lock my ankles together and draw him closer. His hard length grinding into my core as his lips meet mine once more. He kisses the life out of me, seemingly as desperate for this as I am.

Cheese on a cracker this man.

I'm not sure how long our lips remain locked, but with every stroke of his tongue he's making me greedy; I don't want him to ever stop. I can feel the rough surface of the brick wall snagging on my top and digging into my flesh as he crushes my body with his, rolling his hips in a hypnotic rhythm. I already feel like I'm going to explode and he's not even inside me yet. I've never wanted anyone as much as I crave him in this moment.

"More," I whimper against his mouth. "*Please.*" It comes out like a plea; I'm not even sure what I'm asking for, but whatever it is I need it like I do my next breath.

Abruptly pulling out of the kiss he untangles my legs from around his waist and lowers me back to my feet. Disappointment floods through me. I never beg for anything, I'm stubborn like that. Did my desperation turn him off? I mean look at him, he's flawless. He probably has women throwing themselves at him all the time. I open my mouth to protest, or maybe apologize, I'm not sure which, but before the words are spoken, he spins me around until I'm facing the wall.

Reaching for both my arms, he lifts them above my head, using one of his hands to hold them in place. "You're driving me crazy," he utters, sweeping my hair to the side and licking a path up my neck, tasting my skin. His other arm curls around my waist crushing my back to his front as he sucks my earlobe into his mouth, nibbling on the soft flesh. I tilt my head back and moan into the night as his hand slides down the front of my pants. For a moment I think he's going to take me right here.

After growing up with a mother like mine, I've always shied away from exhibitionism, but this man makes all my reserves disappear. That should have the alarm bells going off in my head, but I'm too wrapped up in him to care. The anticipation of what's about to come has all my senses on high alert.

Long, thick fingers delve down the front of my pants and inside my panties, skimming over my slit. He's got beautiful

hands; I was admiring them earlier tonight. I studied him with a ferocity. I'm always looking for the flaws in the men I date, it makes it easier for me to leave them behind when things start to get too serious, but I'm yet to find one thing I don't like about Grayson Edwards... well apart from the fact he ate half of my pizza.

He's almost too good to be true.

He bites down on my lobe with a growl when he feels how wet I am for him. "I want to taste you so badly," he groans.

A finger dips between my folds, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek in an attempt to keep quiet as he circles my clit. He's strumming me like a practiced musician; it feels so good, but it's still not enough. Turning my head my lips seek his, and a shudder runs through me as he slides the first, quickly followed by a second digit inside me. Pushing them in as far as he can, stretching me in the most delicious way.

He uses his knee to kick my legs out further, widening my stance. His thumb moves to my clit as he crooks the two fingers inside me, delving even deeper.

"Fuck," he hums, while my back arches and I cry out. He jerks his hips forward and his hard length digs into my lower back. "I'm beyond desperate to be inside you."

His skillful hand works me over with precision and it only takes moments before I'm shattering. The orgasm that rocks me is so intense, I weep into his mouth as my inner muscles clench around him. He doesn't stop until he's drained every ounce of pleasure from my body, tightening his hold on me when my knees threaten to give out from underneath me.

Removing his hand from the front of my pants, he draws back, turning me to face him once again. The look he gives me has my already alarming heart rate quickening. Bringing his hand up to my mouth, his hooded eyes track his own movements as he runs the tip of his fingers over my lips, coating them with my own arousal.

"I need your address now, sunshine," he growls, using his tongue to follow the path his fingers just took. "I'm through

playing games.”



My legs are locked around his waist, and my mouth is kissing a path along his strong jawline as he fumbles with my keys, trying to open the door to my apartment.

He drove us here in record speed, lecturing me the whole way on how unsafe it is for me to walk these streets on my own at night. He almost had a coronary when he found out how I'd gotten to the pizzeria. I just sat there reapplying my lipstick and refraining from rolling my eyes, because it was sweet that he cared. I'm going to need to be careful with this one.

His reprimanding reminded me a lot of Reece, but what he failed to realize is that I've been walking the streets on my own since I was a kid.

I lower myself to my feet once we enter my apartment, straightening my top and toeing off my shoes. I click the lock into place before turning to face Grayson.

“Would you like something to drink? I have beer or coffee?”

I grin when he gives me a stern look. “We both know I'm not here for a beverage, Carla.”

His smile turns predatory as he goes about undoing the buttons on his shirt before whipping it off and flinging it across the room, like my own personal stripper. This man is off-the-charts hot. I could watch him undress daily and never get bored.

A strangled whimper permeates in the back of my throat as my eyes drink him in. His skin is golden and sun-kissed, and I want to lick him all over. My not-so-subtle gawking starts at his broad shoulders before moving to his toned chest, then down to his rippled abs, pausing when I reach the delicious V that disappears into the waistband of his jeans.

“Like what you see, baby?” he says, giving me a cocky smirk.

“Meh,” I reply, shrugging a shoulder. His ego certainly doesn’t need any more stroking.

Quickly closing the distance between us, I drop to my knees, curling my fingers into his belt loops, dragging him closer. The sizable bulge straining behind the denim has me licking my lips. My mouth salivates in anticipation.

“Just meh huh?”

I roll my eyes.

He knows he’s all that and more; he doesn’t need to hear it from me. He informed me during my interrogation over dinner that he modeled back in college, that’s how he made the money to start up his own business with his douchey friend. You only have to take one look at him to know he’s had women fawning over him his entire life.

“Fine,” I say, popping the button on his jeans. “You’re a sexy bastard. Happy now?”

My eyes dart up to his as I reach for his zipper. He doesn’t answer, but his pleasing smile leaves me breathless.

Chapter Ten

Grayson

CARLA WASTES NO TIME REACHING inside my boxer briefs and freeing my rock-hard cock. She's not timid or shy in her movements and I like that about her.

My eyes clench closed when she licks a path from the base to the tip of my engorged dick, swirling her tongue around the head and lapping up all the precum. I intake a sharp breath. I've been tethering on the edge since my fingers brought her to orgasm outside the restaurant. I hope I don't embarrass myself here.

When she parts her lips, I gather her hair in my fist, guiding myself deep into her mouth... the same mouth I've been obsessing over all night. She opens her throat, swallowing me all the way down. Sweet baby Jesus, *I mean all the fucking way*. I'm buried so deep, her cute button nose and those thirteen tiny freckles are now squished up against my pubic bone. I'm pretty sure the head of my cock is now lodged somewhere down her neck.

"Holy shit," I groan, throwing my head back. It's almost too much. She wasn't kidding when she said she had no gag reflex.

I tighten my grip on her hair, tugging slightly. She pulls out almost to the tip before swallowing me all the way down again. I growl when she hums, contracting her throat so it pulsates around my dick like a vice. It's been mere seconds and I have to will myself not to blow. She already seems immune to my charms, so I'll be humiliated if I let go so soon.

Her teeth and tongue work me into a frenzy. Her plump, red lips stain my skin with each pass and it's so damn hot. I don't even want to know how she learnt to suck cock like this.

The roar that rumbles out of me almost sounds feral as my hips buck with a ferocity all their own. My dick's never experienced anything like this; he's like praise to the Lord and hallelujah to all the fucking gods. We're in some kind of blow job heaven. This is exactly where I want to spend eternity

when I die. Who needs paradise when your girl's got a mouth like this?

She's most definitely getting an upgrade on my phone. No fuck that, I'm putting her on speed dial.

"Fuck, baby, don't stop."

I desperately suck in a lung full of air when I start to feel light-headed. I'm so invested in this blowjob, I've forgotten to breathe. Her delicate fingers are kneading my tight balls, and her tongue is whirling and gliding against me like it did with that damn fork as she ate her tiramisu. It's like I'm the most delicious thing she's ever had in her mouth. She's driving me wild, to the brink of insanity. I'll never be able to look at that dessert again without thinking of her, or this moment.

Everything goes white behind my eyelids as my groan forms the shape of her name. "*Caaarlaaaa.*"

Both my hands are now fisted in her golden locks and my hips glide back and forth of their own accord. I'm not going to be able to hold off much longer, she's that good. If sucking cock was a sport, she'd be breaking records, and probably hearts, all over the damn country.

She ramps it up a notch, causing me to jerk out of control... my balls are throbbing. My dick is harder, longer, and thicker than it's ever been before. She has me buried to the hilt again and I'm not sure if the noises floating around us are coming from her or me.

Shit, am I cutting off her airway?

In a panic my gaze snaps down to her as I try to draw back, but her fingernails dig painfully into my backside, pulling me in deeper. Her voodoo mouth is punishing me in the most euphoric way, so much so, I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience.

I think I'm going to pass out.

Shit, don't pass out, Edwards.

I need to see this through till the end.

On second thoughts, can I stay right here for the rest of my life?

My balls draw up and tingles shoot along my spine as my release builds inside me. It's like a volcano ready to erupt. I'm starting to panic now. If I start coming, I may not stop. I really like this girl... the last thing I want to do is drown her in my cum. She's a keeper.

I'm done for.

No man can come back from something like this.

I'll never be the same.

She's ruined me.

Throwing my head back, I expel a tortured cry, spilling myself down her throat. My cock is pulsating against her tongue and my entire body tremors. "Take it all, sunshine," I rasp, my fingers curling around her neck to hold her in place. "Take every last drop of me. Fuck, yes. Just like that."

When I'm completely spent, she drags her lips down the length of my shaft before removing my cock from her mouth with a pop, and my heart swells. She has every right to look smug. Unlike me, she played down her skills.

I smile down at her in awe. I've only known her a few hours, but I think I'm in love. Okay, I'm pretty sure that's my dick talking right now.

She wipes her lips with the back of her hand as I use my fingertips to brush her hair from her face. *She's perfection.*

I quickly tuck myself back into my jeans, when she rises to her feet. My hands are trembling and my legs feel like Jell-O, but I still manage to slide my arms around her waist, pulling her in for another scorching kiss. Only when I've had my fill, do I hoist her over my shoulder and go in search of her bedroom.

As soon as I find what I'm looking for, I bring my hand down hard, slapping her ass before dropping her onto the mattress with a bounce.

"My turn," I growl.

I waste no time reaching for the waistband of her pants, dragging them down her legs. Carla grabs the bottom of her top, pulling it over her head and flinging it aside.

She reclines back onto the bed in her red lace bra and matching panties. *She's so goddamn sexy.* I don't follow her down, I just stand there openly gawking. The ink on her arms is all she has. The rest of her body is all creamy, smooth, silky soft skin that's begging for my touch, and my mouth. She's a tiny thing, borderline too thin, which is surprising giving the amount of food she packed in tonight, but stunningly beautiful nevertheless. I usually like my women a little meatier, but my eyes still run over her narrow waist and toned yet faintly muscular body appraisingly. I can tell she works out.

My gaze makes a path over her flat stomach to her small, full breasts. They're natural, I can tell. I've had more than my fill of silicone tits over the years. You've seen one you've seen them all.

I lick my lips as I take her in. Her hardened nipples peak through the thin fabric of her bra, and my mouth waters. Hovering over her, my fingertips glide across the swell of her breast, dipping into her cleavage.

"You're the most perfect thing I've ever seen," I admit, and damn it if I don't mean every word.

"Me?" Her teeth sink into her bottom lip as a blush rises to her cheeks. She's looking all bashful and cute as hell. "Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

Ignoring her comment, I lean down toward her, placing my hands on the mattress either side of her body, my eyes still locked on her face.

"I'm going to devour these babies first," I say, softly biting her nipple through the lace, causing her to whimper. She arches her back off the bed, and my cock's already swelling again.

One of my hands slide around to her back as I effortlessly undo the clasps of her bra with two fingers. When that's done, I tug the straps over her shoulders and down each arm before

dropping it on the floor beside her pants. I groan when her soft tits come into full view. She's not going to know what hit her, because I'm going to consume every inch of this woman.

"Let me apologize to the rest of your body in advance," I whisper against her skin as I draw one of her hardened peaks into my mouth. "Rest assured, I'll make it up to you once I'm done here."

Although her eyes are slightly narrowed, I don't miss the twitch of her lips. "I'm going to hold you to that, Mr. Edwards, and let me just throw this out there, it better be one hell of an apology."

My teeth, my tongue, and my hands are everywhere and my dick is jealous. He can't wait to sink inside her, but he'll have to wait; I'm running the show here, and I want to take things slow. I don't want to rush this because I have a feeling our time together, tonight, is going to be monumental, quite possibly life altering, so I need to enjoy every second of it.

Standing, I use both hands to grab the skimpy lace between her legs, sliding them over her hips. A growl rumbles in the back of my throat when I find her pussy bare.

"Are you going to stand around and gape all night, or are you going to fuck me?"

Christ, I love her dirty mouth. I flip her over onto her stomach, leaning down to bite the fleshy part of her ass. She looks at me over her shoulder with large soft eyes as she pushes herself up onto her knees. Her perfectly round, peachy ass is perched high in the air, just inches from my face. Not only is it a sight I won't forget in a hurry, but it also just made it to the very top of my spank-bank list. I'm practically salivating as I run my tongue over my bottom lip.

"You have no idea the kind of filth that's playing out in my mind right now."

"Your thoughts alone won't get me off, I'd like to see some role-playing please." A smile bursts onto my face as I gaze down at her. When I make no attempt to move, she adds, "I'm waiting."

I'm not sure if I want to lick that smart mouth of hers, or shove my damn cock back in there to gag it.

Moving upward, I rain a combination of tiny kisses, mixed with prolonged languid licks, along her skin, dragging it out a little longer as punishment. She whimpers and squirms as I do; I'm so fucking hot for her.

When I reach the top of her spine, I notice a cluster of raised scars on her right shoulder blade, then I see a few more near the nape of her neck. They're small round circles, like someone has jabbed her with the tip of a burning hot poker. My heart clenches at the sight. I'm not sure how she got those, but I don't know her well enough to ask.

My mouth moves toward them and I dot kisses over each one. Her body tenses the moment I do, confirming there's a story behind these. I stand to my full height, taking a few calming breaths, trying not to imagine the worst, but it's no use. In my gut I just know something sinister has happened to this woman, and it makes my stomach churn. One day I'll find out who did this to her.

Pushing all the ugly thoughts from my mind, I drop to my knees, sliding both palms up the back of her legs before spreading her cheeks apart to get a better view. Christ she's got a pretty pussy. It's ripe and glistening, just waiting for me to dig in.

"Are you ready to have your world rocked, Miss Just-Carla?" I shake my head at the ridiculousness of her fictitious surname; I need to find out what her real name is.

"A little less talking," she quips, making me chuckle. I really should tape that smart mouth of hers shut.

She moans when I lick a path from her clit right up to her asshole; she tastes as sweet as I knew she would. I plunge my tongue in where no man will go again. This. Is. Mine.

She tilts her head back and arches her body as my mouth fucks her with a vengeance. "Yes," she cries out, bucking her hips. I want to give her as good as she gave me, hopefully muting that sass of hers in the process.

Drawing back, my hands grasp her hips, flipping her over onto her back in one fluid movement. Placing the palms of my hands on her inner thighs, I spread her out like she's a banquet waiting to be devoured.

The moment I bury my face between her legs she lets out a breathy moan. It's time to show her how monumental my tongue can be. She's not the only one with skills in the bedroom.

Pulling herself up onto her elbows, she watches me work her over. Her soft cries rain down on me, and I want to drown in them, *in her*. My tongue does kinky things to her clit as I slide two fingers deep into her tight, wet pussy, twisting my hand on an angle so I can insert my thumb into her ass. She whimpers and her body jerks with the invasion, but when she starts rocking back and forth toward my face, I know she's enjoying it. There's nothing hotter.

I can feel her swollen clit pulsing against my tongue, and within moments she's squirming, so I ramp it up, scissoring my fingers inside her and pushing my digit deeper into her ass until I have her spiraling over the edge.

"Grayson," she screams, letting her head fall back, exposing her long, lean neck. I love the sound of my name falling from her sweet mouth. I continue my assault until she collapses back onto the mattress, making her tits bounce in the process.

Carla sucks in a lung full of air as I place a soft kiss on her inner thigh. "You weren't lying about that tongue of yours," she utters.

"I never lie."

Standing, I remove an accordion of rubbers from my pocket, tearing one off. I drop the rest on the bed beside her. I always come prepared, but I'm now wondering if tonight's stash is going to be enough. I want to fuck this woman into oblivion, and I'm pretty confident she'll let me.

She cracks open an eye, giving me a sweet smile. *Damn she's pretty.*

Her gaze tracks my every move, so I make a show of it, slowly tugging down the zip of my pants, sliding the jeans, along with my boxer briefs, over my hips and stepping out of them once they're pooled around my ankles. Her attention has zeroed in on my engorged cock. She licks her plump lips like a damn porn star... *poke a stick in me, I'm done.*

The eagerness to sink inside her is almost too much; it's a desperation I can't seem to get a hold of. Like my life literally depends on it.

My clumsy fingers fumble as I tear open the foil packet, all the while trying to remember what the hell I'm doing with my dick. This has never happened to me before. Usually, I can do this with my eyes closed, but her pussy has infiltrated every last brain cell in my head, wreaking havoc in its wake.

With determination, I finally manage to sheath myself all the way to the hilt before flipping her back over onto her front. I really want to see her face when I sink inside her, but I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it. She maneuvers herself onto her knees, like a good girl, and yelps when I slap her peachy ass.

Leaning down, my lips gently press against her pinkened cheek. There's something about seeing my mark on her.

Lifting my head slightly, I kiss the cute dimples either side of her lower spine before my tongue tracks a line along the ridges of her backbone, this time purposely avoiding her scars. I grasp her hips, pulling her closer. I stroke my cock a few times as I rub it along her sleek wet slit, coating myself in her arousal. She whimpers as I continue to tease her... the anticipation will only make it all the sweeter in the end.

"Grayson," she growls as I continue my slow movements back and forth.

On my next pass, I slip the head of my cock just inside her tight opening, and we both moan in unison. She's so snug... so warm. She wiggles her hips, trying to take me in further, so I withdraw again.

I'm in charge here.

She lets out a whine in protest as she glances over her shoulder. “Put it in me now, or get the fuck out.” I have no control over the laugh that bursts from me.

Jesus Christ, that mouth of hers.

This time I don't hold back, driving inside her, all the way to the hilt. In one quick thrust, my dick is buried so deep it might never find its way back out. But I'm okay with that.

My eyes roll back in my head as she arches her body. Although she's barely big enough to accommodate me, Carla pushes her ass toward me, like the sex kitten she is, squishing my balls in the process. She's so snug. I've found my very own slice of paradise; the best kind of ecstasy.

Reaching around her front, my hand moves between her cleavage, not stopping until it's coiled around the column of her slender neck, resting right over her clavicle. It pleases me when she tilts her head back giving me better access. I somehow knew she'd like a bit of kink. Not all women are into this type of thing, but I'm not doing this to hurt her, *I'd never hurt her*; I just want to heighten her pleasure. The fact that she's even allowing me to do this shows a level of trust, and that makes me want to beat on my chest like a goddamn caveman.

My grip on her elongated neck tightens as the tips of my fingers dig into her skin causing her to moan. I can feel her pulse point thundering against my fingertips, but I know it's caused by her arousal, not fear.

Leaning forward, resting my chest against her back, I suck her earlobe into my mouth. “You like that don't you, dirty girl?” I rear back my hips before plunging back in at lightning speed. I usually start off slow, pacing myself, but she's turned me into a greedy fucker, and I want it all. If you could feel the way her tight walls grip me, or hear the sweet noises she's making, you'd understand why I've lost the ability to even think straight. I have zero control as I continue to drive into her like a savage beast, over and over again.

“Fuck you feel so good,” I groan, throwing back my head, letting the pleasure consume me.

I may have gone in guns a blazing, but I had every intention of making this last as long as possible. There's no hope of that though, my balls are already tightening as tingles shoot up my spine.

Next time.

I have all night, and I don't intend to leave here until I've had my fill.

Chapter Eleven

Carla

“OKAY, THAT’S IT FOR ME,” I say as Grayson rolls off, collapsing beside me on the bed. We’ve been going at it for hours. “If I have one more orgasm, I’m pretty sure I’m going to keel over and die.”

He chuckles, rolling onto his side and curling his arm around my waist, dragging my body toward him. “Death by orgasm... it doesn’t sound like a bad way to go.”

“I’m serious,” I say as he buries his face in the crook of my neck. I’ve lost count of how many times he’s gotten me off, but I’m beyond the point of exhaustion.

“Maybe we can have a power nap and then reassess it when we wake.”

“Not happening,” I say, pushing on his chest. “You should probably get dressed and go.”

He draws back, looking at me with a frown. “I’d rather stay... we can get some breakfast later.”

“I don’t do sleepovers.”

“What? You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“You’re really kicking me out?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I’m asking you to leave so I can get some sleep. There’s a difference.”

Sitting up, I scoot to the edge of the bed. “It’s been fun, but you really need to go.”

Keeping my gaze trained forward, I stand. I can feel his eyes on me as I walk toward my dresser. I retrieve some clean pajamas and fresh underwear. I need a shower ASAP. I’m spent and every muscle in my body aches, but I won’t be able to sleep if I don’t clean up first.

Rising from the bed, Grayson crosses the room. His arms wrap around me from behind pulling my body flush with his. His fingers splay against my stomach, the other hand cups my

boob, squeezing it. I can already feel him hardening against my back. He's got to be kidding me. This man is an animal, where does he find his stamina?

"Let me stay," he pleads, kissing a path up my neck. "I just want to be here with you."

I sigh. "Don't get all needy on me now, Edwards, it doesn't suit you."

I'm sure I sound like a bitch, but I don't mean to be. This is the first time in my life that I'm even considering letting someone stay over, but deep down I know that can't happen. That hollow space in my chest is now filled with a frenzied beating. This man is not only dangerous for my heart, but also my preservation. There's no telling how I may react when I wake to find somebody lying beside me. That thought alone makes me shudder. It won't be pretty, and that's only going to bring up a barrage of questions I'm not prepared to answer.

"Harsh," he says, turning me in his arms. "Can I at least see you again?" The hopefulness in his eyes sets off a wave of panic inside me.

We've had a good time tonight, probably one of the best in my life, but we're from two different worlds. I'm not the marrying type, especially for a guy like him. I'm damaged goods... *tainted*. I'm the type of girl you keep around until someone better comes along.

"You have my number," I say. It's the best I can give him right now.

He arches an eyebrow. "I have your address too."

"Hmm," I hum, when he gives me a devious look. "I could always up and move in the middle of the night."

"You can try," he says, smugly. "But I'd find you." My stomach flips. I could so easily fall for this man, but I already know that's not an option for me.

"I'm going to take a shower."

His pitiful eyes track over my face as his mouth opens briefly before closing. I can tell he wants to ask if he can join

me, but I'm thankful when he doesn't.

"Fine," he says, blowing out an exasperated breath as he runs his fingers through his unruly hair. "I'll go. But this is not the end of us, Carla."

He places a soft kiss on the side of my neck, just below my ear, before reaching for my hand and bringing it toward his face. I gulp in some air when he places another kiss on my open palm. It's such a sweet gesture I feel tears prick the back of my eyes.

Retreating a step, and putting some distance between us, I turn to leave the room. "Lock the front door on your way out."

"I'll call you," he says to my retreating back, but I resist the urge to turn around. I know if I do, I'll cave. Once I'm safely locked inside the bathroom, I lean against the door as a heavy weight settles in my chest. In a few mere hours this man has me all kinds of messed up.



Unplugging the hair dryer and winding up the cord, I stow it away neatly under the bathroom sink. I'm dead on my feet, but I can't stand going to bed with wet hair.

I discard my towel in the hamper. I'll need to head to the laundromat tomorrow. I don't have a lot of dirty things, but I get agitated seeing them sitting there.

Turning off the bathroom light, I head toward the front door, making sure it's locked. I do a quick scan of the main room and kitchen area before heading back to my bedroom. I lock that door too, checking it twice just to be sure, then I start my rounds. I look behind the curtains first, then move to the closet, shuffling around the hanging clothes to be sure nobody is hiding behind them. Lastly, I peek under the bed. Once it's confirmed I'm alone, I let out a huge sigh of relief.

This ridiculous bedtime ritual has been a part of my life for far too long... I hate it, but it's a necessity. It's just another reason why Grayson couldn't stay. I'm a freak.

I strip the sheets and remake my bed before slipping under the covers. An unmade bed runs havoc with my anxiety and there's nothing I won't do to settle my frantic mind.

As exhausted as I am, I lay on my back and stare at the ceiling, trying to process what happened tonight. I wasn't expecting all the feels, but Grayson handed them out in bucketloads. It's something I've never experienced before. I'll never forget the fire I saw in his eyes as he gazed down at me. The way he touched me, kissed me, moved inside me... it was too much. He made me feel like I was the most precious thing in those moments. *Gah*. It was unnerving, but I'd be a fool to even entertain a future between us.

Finally, I look over at the clock sitting on the bedside table, it's nearly 6:00 am. Rolling onto my side, I puff out a deep sigh and close my eyes, forcing myself to go to sleep.



Grayson: *You never called!*

I stare down at the message I just received. I ran into Grayson at the animal shelter earlier, when I was picking up my bestie at the end of her shift. I've lived in this area for four years, and last night was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on that sexy hunk of a man, so I definitely wasn't expecting to bump into him today.

Emma told me on the drive home that her car wouldn't start this morning, and it just happened to be at the same time Grayson was leaving my place, so he dropped her off on his way home. Hence why I had to go get her. It was sweet of him to do that. He seems like a genuinely nice guy, but I'm too untrusting to really believe that. Sometimes the nice guys are the ones you have to watch.

When I told him I was free tonight, he asked me to call him. I didn't. I mean I wanted to and all, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it wasn't a good idea. We had fun last night, *a lot of fun*, he's a damn beast in the sack, but the reality is, things between us would never last. Cut and run has always been the safest option for me.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *I take it you're not used to that?*

Grayson: *No, I'm not.*

Grayson: *What are you up to?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *I'm having a blast. You?*

Grayson: *You're having a blast without me? I don't like the sound of that. Where are you?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *I'm at home.*

Grayson: *Alone, I hope?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Is there a problem if I'm not?*

Grayson: *Depends who you're with. I don't share, Carla.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *That sounds a little bratty. Didn't your mother ever teach you that not sharing isn't cool?*

Grayson: *I'm capable of sharing things smartass, but I won't share YOU.*

The smile on my face is huge as I write my reply. I'm a sucker for this man's possessiveness.

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Wow, selfish too. Your true colors are starting to shine through now Mr. Edwards, and here I thought you were kinda perfect.*

Grayson: *I am perfect, sweetheart. Now tell me who's there with you?*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Relax caveman, I'm alone... folding laundry. When I said I was having a blast, I was actually being sarcastic. *insert eye roll here**

Grayson: *Fear not pretty girl, your evening is about to look up.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Oh, are you going to send someone over to fold my laundry?*

Grayson: *Not just anyone. I'll be there shortly. Save all the sexy lingerie for me.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *No can do I'm afraid. All the sexy undergarments have already been folded and put away. I'll leave the granny panties for you though. Okay?*

Grayson: *Fine. *insert a sigh here* A man's got to take whatever he can get, but I'm confident you'd even rock the most unappealing undergarments.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Aww. You say the sweetest things. *insert another eye roll**

Grayson: *Don't force me to put you over my knee. I'm not above spanking.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: *Oh, now that sounds like fun. *insert smiley face and praying hands emoji**

Grayson: *See this just confirms it, you're perfect for me. *Rubs hands together* See you soon, beautiful.*

Future Mrs. Edwards: **Slides down underwear and bends oneself over the arm of the sofa (ass in the air) in anticipation**

Grayson: *Fuck, are you trying to kill me? *Breaks every speed limit in a mad rush to get to his girl**

His girl? Why does that send my heart into a flutter.

Chapter Twelve

Grayson

I PULL UP OUTSIDE CARLA'S apartment complex in record time. I'm eager to see her again; she's been on my mind all day. I would've reached out to her earlier, but Ashton came around my house after he left Emma's this afternoon. He seemed spooked, so we sat around and had a few beers. I needed to get him out of his own head.

Initially, he was upset that I'd given Emma a lift this morning, but that's a good thing. If he's possessive that means he likes her, and if he likes her, he's not as broken as he thinks.

I did him a solid and explained that her car wouldn't start, and hinted that it would be the perfect opportunity for him to reach out. She's exactly what he needs; he just doesn't realize it yet.

Emma's sweet, kind and the polar opposite to his psycho ex, but I need to be on my game when it comes to my best friend, Ashton will self-sabotage and fuck it up if I'm not. This could be his fresh start, a chance to finally move on, and I'm going to fight tooth and nail to make sure that happens.

I bound up the stairs two at a time. I'm anxious about seeing her again. I can't remember ever feeling anything close to this. I've fucked a plentitude of women over the years. Christ, I was barely fifteen when I lost my virginity. I still smile when I think back to that night.

Ashton and I had been unexpectedly invited over to Alana Benton's house; she was a senior in high school, and on the cheer team, a total babe. Neither of us knew what awaited us that night, but we never would've guessed it also included a group of her friends. It was our first introduction to pussy, and from that day forward there was no looking back. Those girls had unknowingly unleashed the monster in my pants, AKA my dick.

I've had plenty of great sex in my time, no scrap that, phenomenal or mind-blowing may be a better description, but none of those encounters can compare to what I experienced

here last night. A rush of pure adrenaline. A feeling that made my body run hot, like lava coursing through my veins.

If you asked me what the difference was between Carla and the ones that came before her, I wouldn't be able to pinpoint one particular thing. Maybe it was her smart mouth, or the fact that she made me work for it.

Maybe it was the way she kissed me with such abandonment it reached right down to my very soul. Or how it felt to move inside her, and those sexy little noises she made during the height of passion. Her openness and willingness to try anything, and the way she so freely gave her entire body over to me, time and time again. That blow job... fuck, how can I not mention that? I even jacked off to images of my cock buried down her throat in the shower this morning.

I adjust the chub in my pants as I clear the last step and head down the corridor toward her door. See what I mean, just thinking about her gets me all hot and bothered.

She holds all the power, and I'm not used to that. The way she kicked me out last night when she was done with me... that's never happened before. I'm usually the one giving the marching orders.

You know a woman has you by the balls when your gut is tied up in a bundle of damn nerves. There's something thrilling about this feeling, it's completely foreign. I'd be lying if I said this whole situation didn't scare the hell out of me.

I nervously run my hands through my hair when I reach my destination. I even take a moment to shake off the tension that coils around my body before raising my hand to knock. She had me going during our earlier messages. It was scary how panicked I became when I thought she was entertaining another guy. I was consumed by one word... *mine*.

Carla opens the door seconds later, and the smile I see on her face expels all the air from my lungs. See again. *There's got to be something to that*. Her hair is still pinned up into large barrel curls, like it was earlier, but she's now tied a hot-pink bandanna around her head. She's no longer wearing the tight, sexy-as-fuck leopard print dress she had on earlier today,

but even in a simple pair of black yoga pants, a white oversized T-shirt with the iconic red, mouth and tongue Rolling Stones logo printed on the front, she looks damn fine. The shirt is hanging off one shoulder, and I can see the strap of her pink bra.

My eyes scan the length of her body. “You’ve put your pants back on?” I say, arching a brow. “I’m a little disappointed you’re not where you claimed you’d be in your message.”

She rolls her eyes. “A girl can only stay bent over the arm of a sofa for so long before she starts to cramp up.”

This woman.

“Well, I’m here now, feel free to resume that position.”

She steps to the side, allowing me to enter. As I pass, I sweep her into my arms and press my mouth to hers. I’ve been obsessing about her lips all day.

“Mm,” she moans as my tongue sweeps along her bottom lip.

She leans her tight curves into my body, her arms snaking around my neck as I push her up against the door, deepening the kiss. I guide us into the room, backing her into the sofa. She moves her hands down to my chest, halting me from lowering her any further.

“Let me pack my stuff away first.”

Glancing over her shoulder I see a pair of scissors, a pile of newspapers, magazines, and one of those black ring-binders lying open, propped up on one of the cushions. The plastic sleeves inside have rows of small pockets, they remind me of the ones I used for my baseball card collection when I was a kid.

Moving her to the side, I pick it up. “What’s all this?” I ask.

“I finished folding my laundry, so I thought I’d update my coupon album.”

“Coupons?”

She narrows her eyes. “Yep. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, no problem at all. It just concerns me that you’re relying on coupons to get by. If you ever need money—”

“I don’t need your money, Grayson,” she snaps. “I’m quite capable looking after myself.”

I didn’t mean to offend her, but there’s a lot of fucking coupons here, the binder is full of them.

“I never said you weren’t capable, but you’re my girl and it’s my job to look after you.”

“I’m not your girl.”

“Yes, you are.” I try not to let her see that her words sting. Why can’t she accept the inevitable? She’s *mine* now, end of story.

“I’ve known you what? Five minutes.”

“You’ve known me more than five minutes, Carla. Technically this is our third date.” Her eyes widen. I count them down on my fingers before she has a chance to dispute me. “One: the club where we met. Two: the pizzeria, and this moment makes three.”

“Whatever,” she says rolling her eyes, but she’s smiling as she does it. “That still doesn’t make me yours. I told you I’m a no strings kind of girl.”

“I hate to disappoint you, sweetheart, but we have strings.” I gesture back and forth between us with my hand.

Her lips turn down into a frown as she lifts her hand in the air, spreading her pointer and middle fingers into a V before snapping them closed to mirror a pair of scissors. I shake my head because I’ve only been here a few minutes and she’s already starting to piss me off.

Newsflash, our strings cannot be cut with imaginary scissors.

She’s my girl whether she likes it or not.

I take a deep breath trying to calm myself before I say something I'll regret.

"I'm serious about the money, Carla," I state, changing the subject. "If you need anything all you have to do is ask."

I can remember when my mom relied on coupons, and I hate to think that Carla might be in the same position.

"Like I said, I'm good. There's nothing wrong with being frugal. I've been like this my entire life." She pauses for a moment and shrugs. "I guess you can take the girl out of the trailer park, but you'll never take the trailer park out of the girl."

"You grew up in a trailer park?" I ask surprised. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

I don't care where she's from, or how much money she has for that matter. She could live in a cardboard box in a dingy alley and I'd still want her. My family struggled a lot after my father died. I may be worth millions now, but I know firsthand what hardship looks like.

She straightens her spine and pulls back her shoulders, showing both her strength and fire. Tough times build character, and this woman has a plentitude.

"Having money doesn't necessarily make you a good person you know."

"I agree wholeheartedly," I reply. "I'm around wealthy people daily, and the majority of them are assholes."

"Like your douchebuddy friend?"

I chuckle shaking my head. "You mean Ashton? No, he's actually one of the good ones."

"Wow," she says, taking the album out of my hands and carefully placing it on the small coffee table behind me. "You must know some pretty sucky people then."

I slide my arms around her waist, drawing her closer. "I know this girl who sucks..." I clear my throat before continuing. "...like a champ."

Her eyes light up with mischief. “Tell me more about her.”

“Well,” I say, tightening my hold on her. “Jesus.” I throw my head back and groan. “Just thinking about her gives me a boner.”

She moves her hand between us, palming my dick through my jeans. “I can tell,” she declares as I tilt my head forward to rain kisses along her jawline. “She must be pretty hot if just thinking about her does this to you.”

“You have no idea... she’s sizzling. A walking fucking wet dream.” I run my nose up the side of her neck before sucking her earlobe into my mouth, softly biting down on it. “She smells amazing too... good enough to eat.”

“Is this the one with the black hair you were telling me about?”

I draw back for a moment, studying her. It takes me a few seconds to realize what she’s talking about. *Our text messages.* “No, this one is new. She’s a blonde, and sexy as fuck. She recently made it to the top of my list... she bumped all those other bitches off.”

“Wow,” she says as her smile grows. “The top, hey? She must be good.”

“Best I’ve ever had,” I reply without missing a beat, because it’s the truth.

“Is she saved under ‘Blonde who sucks cock like a champ’ now?”

“No, this one needed something special.”

“Best blowjob ever?”

I throw my head back and laugh. There is no way I’m going to tell her what I really have her number saved under. She’d think I was a stage five clinger if she knew the truth.

Originally, the whole ‘Future Mrs. Edwards’ thing was a crazy whim on my part, simply because she’d taken my breath away, but after spending more time with her, I realize maybe my subconscious is onto something here. I’ve never met anyone worthy of that title before, but a huge part of me can

see myself with this woman long term. If I can get her to drop this whole '*no strings*' bullshit that is.

There's something about Carla that called to me the moment I laid eyes on her. It was a deep-seated knowing, that even I can't explain. I've never connected with someone so quickly.

"Enough talking," I say, swinging her around so her back is now facing my front. I place my hand between her shoulder blades, gently pushing her torso forward and bending her over the arm of the sofa.

Ghosting my hands over her hips, I hook my thumbs in the waistband of her tights, dragging them down until they're scrunched up around her ankles. Damn her rear looks amazing in that hot-pink thong, all round and peachy. I'm going to take that sweet ass of hers one day.

Crouching down, my teeth sink into her right butt cheek while my hand palms the left one. When she arches her back and whimpers, I move to slide her panties down her legs. Her position doesn't waver and I love how compliant she is, even lifting one foot at a time, allowing me to remove them all together.

Once her ankles are no longer restrained by her clothing, she widens her stance, and her body shudders when I run my tongue along the inside of her thigh.

My hand slips between her legs, to prepare her for what's to come. I groan when I find her wet and ready. One of my fingers sinks deep inside her. I'm torn between staying down on my knees and feasting on her sweet pussy, but my need to be inside her is too great. I'll get to the feasting part later, first things first, I'm going to fuck her into a stupor.

Sliding my hand into my pocket, I frantically search for a rubber. After the number of times we fucked last night, I made sure I came prepared, stuffing in as many as I could. Tearing one off, I drop the rest to the ground and pop the button on my jeans.

My hands slightly tremble as I drag down the zipper. The anticipation to sink into her heat is almost too much.

Once I'm sheathed to the hilt, I place my palm at the base of her neck, pushing her face further down into the cushion. I use the other hand to stroke my cock, running it over her slick seam and lining myself up. I throw my head back as I slowly sink the tip inside her.

"Fuck, Carla," I growl, jerking my hips forward until I'm buried balls deep in her heaven. She's so tight, she wraps around me like a glove.

"Grayson," she says all breathy, and I love hearing her say my name like that.

She pushes her body back, meeting me thrust for thrust. I can tell by the sweet noises she's making she's enjoying this just as much as I am. My mind feels scrambled as it tries to process the magnitude of emotions this woman incites in me. I want to climb inside her and take up permanent residency.

Drawing out to the tip, I drive back in hard. "You feel so good, baby. *So, goddamn good.*"

Leaning over, my chest rests against her back as I slide my hand under her chin so I can tilt her head to the side and taste her mouth. Desperation seems to take over whenever we're together, like we can't get enough of each other.

I'm pretty sure I'll never get my fill of this one.



Carla scoops up her underwear and slips into the bathroom to clean up. "Help yourself to a drink if you want one," she calls out as she disappears down the hallway.

I tuck myself back into my pants, tossing the condom in the trash when I enter the kitchen. My eyes survey the space. It's so tiny in here, but everything has its place. She's a neat freak I can tell.

Opening the fridge, I bend over to look inside. It's practically empty, apart from a carton of milk, butter, some ketchup, a lone beer, and a bottle of wine. There's no meat, or

fresh food. That concerns me. Maybe she has those coupons for a reason.

Closing the door, I head over to her pantry, expecting to see sparse shelves as well. But that's not what I find at all.

“What the fuck, Carla?”

“What?” she says, exiting the bathroom and coming up behind me.

I point to the contents inside. “Did you rob a cannery or something?”

There are rows, and rows, and fucking rows of neatly stacked canned food lining the majority of the shelves. Each one has the label facing forward. SpaghettiOs, baked beans, spam, canned sausage, chili, tuna fish... But again, not a fruit or vegetable in sight.

Tucked away in one corner is a lone jar of instant coffee, alongside a small clear plastic container that I presume contains sugar, nestled next to multiple jars of peanut butter and an equal number of grape jelly. There are at least five bottles of ketchup, and the top shelf is box after box of breakfast cereal. She has a mini convenience store right here in her kitchen.

She scrunches up her cute little nose. “I have food in my cupboard what's the big deal?”

“It's not the food per se, it's more the quantity.” I shake my head at the absurdity of it all. “Do you have an addiction to canned products?”

Her jaw ticks and I can tell I've offended her. It wasn't my intention; I've just never seen anything like it.

“Do you know what it's like to go for multiple days without food because your crack-whore of a mother would rather score a hit than feed her own daughter?”

“What?” Her statement takes me back. Is this something she experienced personally? Or is she just throwing out a far-fetched scenario to help plead her case? When she pokes my chest, an uneasiness settles in the pit of my stomach.

“Well, unfortunately I do, so I’m sorry if this”—she gestures to the expansive contents of her pantry with her hand —“offends you. But I didn’t grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth like you Mr. Moneybags, I grew up with empty cupboards, so if this is what I need to do to give that starving little girl peace of mind then so be it. Fuck you, Grayson Edwards, you judgmental ass.”

She turns in a huff and is storming toward her bedroom before I even get a chance to respond.

“Hey,” I say taking a few steps forward and reaching out to snag her arm.

Carla tugs out of my grip and spins around to face me. “You should probably go.” Her eyes look glassy, like she’s about to cry, and I feel like scum.

When she attempts to slam her bedroom door in my face, I stick my foot out, stopping her. “Hold on a minute.”

“Move your foot,” she growls, putting her full body weight behind the door, trying to force it closed. “Don’t push me, Grayson. I’ll kick your ass if need be.”

She’s got some strength, but she’s no match for me. “Is what you just said true?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I do. Those small scars on your back, do they have anything to do with your upbringing?”

“You saw them, huh?”

“You know I did, don’t act coy. You tensed up as soon as I kissed them.” She bows her head but neither confirms or denies my assumption. I place my hand under her chin, tilting her face back to mine. “Did someone do that to you?”

Given the position of them, it would be almost impossible to be self-inflicted, but the question needs to be asked.

She shrugs, and my stomach sinks. That’s a good enough answer for me. My eyes search hers, and the sadness I see swimming in those hazel depths is almost my undoing. Without hesitation I pull her into my arms, crushing her petite

body to mine. I try my best to remain calm on the outside, but on the inside, I've almost reached boiling point.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into her hair. "I'm so fucking sorry that someone thought it was okay to hurt you like that."

She lets me hold her for a time before stepping out of my embrace. She extends one of her arms toward me. "I have more. I don't see the ones on my back, so sometimes I forget they're there."

I wrap my fingers around her bicep, gently running the tips over her tattooed skin, and down the length of her arm. To the naked eye they can't be seen, beautifully hidden behind the colorful ink, but I can feel the small raised bumps on her skin, and there's a lot of them. I move to her other arm and have to swallow down the lump that forms in my throat when I feel a ton more. It breaks my fucking heart. *Literally, breaks it.* What kind of monster would do this to her?

"Is this why you got your ink? To cover them up?"

She drops her gaze, staring down at the carpet, but I can see her face is now flamed red. "People always asked where they came from, and it's not something I like to talk about. They're a painful reminder of a time I want to forget."

"Who did this to you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," I say, because I need to know who I have to kill.

"My mother," she whispers without meeting my eyes.

Her mother, *what the fuck*. "Your mom did this to you?"

"Yes," she answers with a small nod.

"How?"

"Her cigarettes. She was a mean drunk."

"Fucking hell, Carla."

Turning my back on her, I run my fingers through my hair. It's not because I can't bear to look at her now, quite the opposite. I'm just struggling to keep my shit together. How

could a mother inflict that kind of torture on her own child? My mom would rather die than hurt me or my little sister, Kaitlin.

My mind tries to process everything I've just learnt. What she's been through both saddens and infuriates me, and I'm sure I don't know the half of it. There's also a huge part of me that's immensely proud of the kind of person she is today, despite it all.

She's a survivor.

I'm struggling to wrap my head around it, but none of what I learnt tonight makes me want to bail. It just confirms that overwhelming feeling that's been swimming around inside me since yesterday... *she needs me just as much as I need her.* Every single part of me wants to wrap her in my arms and protect her from all the ugliness in this world.

It's been less than twenty-four hours since I first laid eyes on this woman, but something deep inside me screams she's my *one*. That special someone my dad talked about. Those words he spoke that day suddenly have clarity. Is she the person I've been searching for?

I've had beautiful women clawing down my door, blowing up my phone, and literally throwing themselves at my feet from the time I hit puberty. But my reckless ways are no longer fulfilling. The women from my past are all the same. Carbon copies of each other. None of them have been able to keep my attention for long. That's because they weren't Carla. In my heart I know she just shared a part of herself that she never gives anyone, and that means everything to me.

It takes a few moments for me to pull myself together; when I do, I turn back around and reach for her. I crush her tightly against my body, burying my face in her hair.

“Where was your dad when this was happening?”

She shrugs. “Not around, but I doubt he would've cared even if he was.”

I exhale a long breath. She really lucked out on the parent front. I didn't even know her back then, so rationally I know

there's nothing I could've done to prevent any of this from happening, but I hate that there was nobody around to protect that little girl.

“I won't let anyone hurt you again,” I whisper. And I mean every word.

She doesn't reply, but I can feel her mouth curve into a smile against my chest. That right there is enough.

Chapter Thirteen

Carla

(11 years old)

AS SOON AS THE SCHOOL bell sounds announcing the end of the day, I leap out of my chair, grab my backpack and dash for the door. I don't even bother to stop at my locker to store my books inside. I'm too excited.

The past year things have really been looking up. If I'm honest, I've gotten a taste of the good life, but I know my recent experiences are just the tip of the iceberg. Today is the day of new beginnings. It's the day I'm going to get that happier ever after I've always wished for. Something that once felt so far out of my realm, I was foolish for even thinking it was a possibility, but thankfully I was wrong. Meeting Reece was a lucky break for a kid like me, and him posting those letters to my dad in prison is what brings me to this very moment.

We're finally going to meet.

Eeep!

Well, technically he was around when I was little, so we've already met, but I don't remember much about that time. It's been eight long years and I can't begin to tell you how eager I am to see him again. I've dreamt of this day.

Cutting across the lawn at the front of the school, I bypass the bus I usually take home. It's traveling in the opposite direction to where I want to go. I've been writing back and forth with my father for the past six months. *Thanks to Reece.* Roxy went ballistic when she found out, apparently she's still harboring a lot of anger toward him for going to prison and lumbering me with her. I'm pretty sure he didn't have a say in it. Nevertheless, he's my dad, she can't stop me from communicating with him.

In his last letter, my father informed me he was being released. He said he couldn't wait to see me. The feeling was mutual. I haven't been able to think of anything else over the past few weeks.

My heart is thundering so hard in my chest as I race toward my destination; I hope it doesn't give out before I get there. I'm so happy I could squeal, and I'm by no means a squealer. Today is the day my life changes for the better. Sure, I can't abandon Roxy, despite everything rotten she's done, she's my mom. But having my dad back in my life will be amazing. The start of a brighter future. And I cannot wait.

That's why I've arranged to meet him at Reece's new gym this afternoon. I don't want my mother ruining this for me. Reece has been nothing but supportive and he's become a huge part of my life over the past six months. He's my first real friend.

After our initial meeting at Juicy Lucy's, bags of food started appearing regularly on my front porch. They were always dropped off some time during the night, or early morning. He'd come a few times a week, always leaving enough essentials to get me by until his return. One day I decided to stay up, waiting for my fairy godfather to show, because in my heart I already knew it was him. Who else could it be?

It was just after 5:00 am when I saw the car lights approaching in the distance. He didn't park out the front of our trailer, instead choosing to pull over further down the road. I was sitting in the far corner on the front porch, completely shielded by the dark.

I watched on as he got out of his vehicle and removed a bag off the back seat. He casually strolled toward our trailer, tiptoeing up the front steps and across the threshold.

"Hey," I said, standing as he bent to place the bag down.

"Jesus, kid." He stood back to full height, retreating a step.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." I held my hands up in front of me, letting him know I didn't mean any harm.

"You didn't scare me," he scowled. *"I just wasn't expecting you to be out here is all. Are you locked out?"*

I stepped out of the shadows, moving toward him. *"No, I was waiting for you. I wanted to say thank you... you know, for"*

all this.” I pointed to the bag that was now laying by his feet.

“It’s no big deal,” he replied, flicking his hand trying to wave it off.

No big deal. Is he kidding? It was huge. Who continually shows up at a stranger’s house with food, expecting nothing in return? Nobody I know that’s for sure.

I think carefully about my next words. *“It’s...”* I paused for a moment trying to get my emotions in check. I was worried I’d scare him off if I turned into a blubbering mess. I’d hate for that to happen. Even if the food stopped coming, I liked the fact that someone actually gave a shit about me. *“It’s umm, it’s everything,”* I finally managed to say, blinking away the tears. *“It means more to me than you’ll ever know.”*

Reaching up, he rubbed the back of his neck, and I knew I was making him feel uncomfortable. *“I get it kid,”* he replied. *“I’m just glad I’m in a position to help.”*

“Are you rich?”

“No,” he chuckled. *“I bounce between the strip club and the bar on O’Connell Street. The pay’s okay, but it’s not going to make me rich any day soon.”*

I shrugged. *“Who needs money right?”*

“Me,” he said. *“I’m saving up to buy my own gym.”* I didn’t miss the way his face lit up as he spoke those words. *“That’s my big dream, kid.”*

“To own a gym?” My dream was to get out of this hellhole.

“Yeah. I’ll teach martial arts and self-defense classes... stuff like that. People need to know how to protect themselves, especially in this day and age.”

He suddenly looked really sad as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and dropped his gaze to the floor. I knew that look well, and it made me wonder if there was a reason why he wanted to teach people how to protect themselves. Had something bad happened to him?

“I bet it will be awesome,” I said, not really knowing what else to say.

“Yeah, it will be,” he replied, the smile returning to his face. “You can come do some free classes when it’s up and running.”

“Really? I’d like that.”

And that’s how our friendship blossomed. He no longer drops food off at the trailer because I’m at the gym every afternoon after school, and again on weekends. Roxy never questions my whereabouts. She’s probably glad to see the back of me to be honest.

Reece feeds me while I’m there, and teaches me lots of cool ninja stuff. In return I help out where I can, painting, sweeping, vacuuming, or cleaning windows. Sometimes I run errands for him. Nothing comes for free in this world. And this way I get to give back instead of feeling like a charity case. I’ve never questioned him as to why he’s so kind to me, although, I often wonder. I’m just grateful to have him in my life for as long as he wants me around.



I burst through the front door of the gym and fist pump Michelle, who mans the front desk on my way past. I don’t need to ask where Reece is, he’s usually finishing up one of his classes when I arrive straight from school.

“Killer,” he says, smiling the moment he spots me heading his way. That’s my new nickname since I brought one of Reece’s regulars to his knees in a sparring match a few weeks ago. “*Watch this one,*” he said to the rest of the class after the incident. “*She may be scrappy but she has a lot of heart.*”

“Hey, Reece,” I reply, bouncing on my feet as I come to a stop in front of him. I’m struggling to contain my excitement. I can’t remember the last time I felt this happy.

“Today’s the big day.”

“I know. I can’t wait.”

“Good, good,” he says ruffling my hair as the smile on his face widens. “Come, I’ll make you a sandwich before he

arrives.”

Reece lives in the apartment above the gym. It has a small kitchen and bathroom up there, as well as a sofa that pulls out to a bed. The living area is huge. He doesn't even own a television, saying it'll rot your brain, which is total baloney, but I don't call him out on it. He plans on making it into a real home when he can afford it, by putting up some internal walls, but I think it's pretty cool just the way it is.

We head up the stairs and I follow him into the kitchen. “PB and J?” he asks, reaching for the loaf of bread.

“Please.” He makes me the same sandwich every day because he knows it's my favorite.

I sit on the barstool and watch him work. When he's done, he slides the plate across the counter toward me. “Milk?”

“Thanks,” I answer.

“There's some bananas over there if you're still hungry when you're done.”

I screw up my face making him chuckle. Reece is a health freak, and he's always trying to add fruit and vegetables to my diet. Grape jelly counts as fruit, right?

I hook into my food as he rounds the counter, grabbing a plastic bag off the sofa. “I bought this for you today.”

My eyes dart to him when he places the bag beside my plate. “What is it?” I ask.

“Open it and see.”

The food is quickly forgotten as I scoop it up, rummaging inside. Nobody ever buys me gifts.

I pull out a new pair of jeans, they have sparkly beads lining the pockets, and a matching tie that's threaded through the belt loops. There's also a white T-shirt in the bag that has a colorful butterfly on the front.

“You bought me clothes?” I ask, trying to contain my exhilaration. They still have the tags on them. I've never owned anything so beautiful before.

“I thought you’d want to look your best for your dad,” he replies with a shrug. “Maybe he’ll want to take you somewhere.”

“Take me somewhere? Like away from Roxy?”

He must see the worry on my face because he quickly adds, “I mean for a meal or something like that.”

“Oh, right. Of course. I’d like that.” With my panic subsided, I leap off the stool, throwing my arms around his waist. “Thank you for my new clothes.”

He pats my back awkwardly. I’ve never hugged him before. When I release him, he clears his throat and takes a step back. “You’re umm... welcome,” he says, scratching the back of his head. I look down at the clothes still clutched in my hand in disbelief. “Finish your sandwich and then you can get changed in the bathroom. I’m going to head back downstairs. Come down when you’re ready.”

With that, he turns and heads toward the door that leads back to the gym. I’m glad he doesn’t turn around, because if he did, he’d see the tears that are now welling in my eyes. How did I get so lucky?



I descend the stairs adorned in my new clothes, and you wouldn’t be able to wipe the smile off my face if you tried. It’s the first time I remember ever wearing something new.

Reece’s lips turn up at the corners the moment he sees me, giving a subtle nod of approval. Michelle tells me I look beautiful. *Nobody has ever told me I looked beautiful before.*

“Girl, give me a twirl,” she encourages. I spin in a circle and notice a brush in her hand the moment I’m facing her again. “Want me to braid your hair?” She nods to the stool behind her desk and I climb up.

I wonder if Reece asked her to do that?

A lump rises to my throat as she runs the brush through the strands. My mom has never done anything like this for me.

“You have the most amazing hair, and don’t even get me started on your flawless skin.” I tuck my arms behind my back, sitting on my hands. She obviously hasn’t noticed the tiny round burn marks marring my skin. After securing the hair tie, she grabs her handbag from under the desk, rummaging through it. “Pucker up,” she says, holding up a tube of pink lip gloss.

It’s the first time I’ve ever worn makeup. I’ve watched Roxy apply her own countless times, and I’ve been tempted to try it on when she’s not home, but she’d kill me if she found out I was using her stuff.

Could this day get any better? *I feel like Cinderella.* I only hope my father will be able to recognize me when he arrives. If I was to look in a mirror right now, I probably wouldn’t know myself.

“I’d kill for your lips.”

What?

She must see the horror on my face because she quickly adds, “They’re so full, women pay big money to achieve what you have naturally.” I give her a small smile, because I still don’t understand what she’s trying to say. “There you go, perfect. You’re going to break some hearts when you grow up, Miss Carla.”

I smile at her words, even though I’m unsure what she means. I know what heartache feels like, and I’d never want to inflict that kind of pain on anyone else.

“You ready, killer?” Reece asks, coming to stand beside me.

I look up at the clock on the wall. “So ready. Thank you for letting me meet him here.”

He should arrive anytime now. I told him I’d be here around four and it’s almost half past.

“Don’t sweat it, kid.”

I take a seat on one of the chairs adjacent to the reception desk, my legs swinging nervously back and forth. I have a perfect view of the entrance from here. My eyes keep glancing

toward the front door... the longer I wait the more edgy I become.

“I’m nervous,” I admit, giving Reece a tight smile. “What if he doesn’t like me?” I don’t mean to say those words out loud, but the closer it gets to his visit the more freaked out I’m becoming.

“Not possible. Besides, he’s your dad, he has to like you.” He smiles, trying to make light of the situation, but that doesn’t mean anything to me. My mom hates me the majority of the time. *Oh God*. That thought almost sends me over the edge.

Please don’t hate me, Dad.

I stay rooted to the spot, my eyes constantly flicking to the clock. It’s been over an hour now, he’s late. Reaching into the back pocket of my jeans, I retrieve the last letter my dad wrote me. I stuffed it in there before coming downstairs, along with his baseball cap. I love that hat, but I thought he may want it back. I don’t need it to feel close to him anymore, I’m going to have him instead.

Quickly scanning over his reply, I double-check the date he mentioned in his letter. “It’s the 22nd today, right?” I ask Michelle, who’s been watching me curiously from behind the desk.

“Sure is, sweetie.”

The corner of my lips turn up slightly, but I don’t say anything in return. He’ll be here soon he’s probably caught in traffic.

Rising from the chair, I head toward the front door and Michelle catches my movement.

“Oh my God, is he here?” she squeals with enthusiasm.

“No, not yet. I’m going to check outside.”

“Ah. Okay.”

My gaze moves from one end of the street to the other. I don’t even know what kind of car he has. That sets my mind wondering. Imagine if he arrives in a flashy sports car; I’ve

never been inside a car like that. What if he has the top down and takes me for a spin around town? That would be so cool.

I pace the sidewalk, all the while scanning the area for any signs of him. As time passes, that feeling of dread returns. Maybe I'm expecting too much. Maybe he won't arrive in a sports car. I really don't care what kind of vehicle he drives I just want to see him. To be honest, he could arrive on a bicycle or even on foot... I wouldn't mind at all.

"Hey," Reece says, popping his head out the door. "You all right out here?"

"Yep."

"Any sign of him yet?"

"No. He must be running late."

He nods. "I'm sure he'll be here soon." His words are meant to encourage me, but I see the truth on his face. He's doubtful.

"What time is it?" I ask.

He looks down at his watch. "Almost six."

I cringe. We didn't actually discuss a time, all I said in my letter is that I'd be here at four.

"Why don't you come in and wait? It's getting cold out here."

"Okay," I begrudgingly agree.

I follow him back inside, but instead of sitting by reception, I take a seat on the carpet in front of the large windows. I have a better view from here.

As time drags on, I rest my elbows on my knees, dropping my head and burying my face in my hands. It's well after seven now and I'm struggling to hold the tears back, but I only have myself to blame. You create your own heartache with expectations, right? *If you expect nothing, you can never be disappointed.*

"How you holding up, kid?" Reece asks, squatting down beside me.

“He’s not coming, is he?”

I lift my head and glance at him over my shoulder when he doesn’t reply. The pained look on his face tells me everything his words don’t. Yet, my eyes still plead with him for an answer, but in my heart I already know the truth, and it hurts way more than I want to admit.

Why am I such a hard person to love?

Standing quickly, I wipe my eyes with the heel of my palms. I’m ready to get out of here. I take one last look outside the window and spot a man across the road. He has what appears to be a map in his hand, and he’s studying the buildings that line that side of the street. My heart thunders in my chest.

He came.

“I think that’s him,” I squeal, already making my way toward the exit.

“Carla,” Reece yells from behind me, but I don’t stop. I’m on a mission.

Leaping off the curb, I frantically check either way for traffic before running across the road. The man has already started walking again; he’s now further down the street.

“Dad,” I call out. Even though his back is toward me, I’m waving my arms in the air as I go, trying to gain his attention. “Dad, it’s me Carla.”

When he doesn’t stop or turn around, I pick up the pace. I feel like I’m running for my life, when in fact I’m running toward it... toward my future. *He came.* For once I wasn’t let down.

He does love me.

He didn’t forget about me.

“Dad,” I call out again. “Dad... Daddy.” When I’m within reach, I tug on the back of his jacket, finally making him come to an abrupt stop. “Dad, it’s me. Carla. Your little girl.” Although I’m out of breath, the smile on my face is huge.

His eyebrows pull together as he glares down at me from over his shoulder, confusion on his face. “I’m sorry, miss, you must have me mistaken for someone else. I don’t have any children.”

“No, no, you’re wrong,” I cry as the tears I’ve been holding in all afternoon flood my eyes. “You have to be him. You’re here to save me. I... I need you. I can’t do this on my own anymore. You promised. Look I have your cap, see.” I tug it out of my back pocket. “I kept it for you.”

His lips pull into a tight line but I see compassion in his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

I’m silently pleading for him to admit he’s wrong. To tell me he’s made a terrible mistake and he really is my dad. His gaze moves behind me just as I feel two strong hands come to rest on my shoulders, squeezing slightly. And my heart shatters a little more. I don’t need to turn around to know who it is. It’s certainly not my father. *He’s not coming after all.* He doesn’t love me either. It’s just another thing to add to the already long list of disappointments that are my parents.

Why did they have me if neither of them wanted me?



“Hey, killer,” Reece says in a soft voice when we pull up outside my trailer. He places his hand on my knee, gripping it. I appreciate that he’s trying to be gentle with me, but I’m hanging on by a thread as it is. I haven’t said a word the entire drive here. I even ignored his offer of a hamburger. Food is the last thing I want. My gut is all churned up inside. I’m numb... I’m humiliated... *I’m heartbroken.* “I’m so sorry about today.”

I glance over at him as a few stupid tears leak from my eyes. I hate showing my weakness, but my emotions are all over the place. It feels like any hope I had for a brighter future just went up in smoke.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” I say, trying to hold in the sob. “You are the one good thing in my life.”

His eyes glass over and he dips his head before clearing his throat. “Some of the most poisonous people come disguised as family, believe me I know.” He’s never spoken about his kin before, but he sounds like he’s speaking from experience. Is that why he’s been so kind to me? His eyes meet mine again. “I want you to listen to me, Carla, strength and growth come from continued struggle. And you may not feel like it in this moment, but you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. You’re going to be okay; I promise you that.”

I nod, wiping my eyes. *I’ve survived worse.* I have so many questions, but I can’t deal with anything right now. I just want to go to bed and forget today ever happened.

Reaching for the handle, I open the car door. “Thanks for the new clothes,” I say, before I exit the vehicle. “I’m sorry you wasted your money.”

“Don’t be silly. It was worth it just to see you smile.” I nod, as the lump returns to my throat. “I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah.” Going to the gym, seeing Reece and the other guys, is the highlight of my day. At least they want me around.

I get out, closing the door behind me. I stop when I reach the front porch and take a few deep breaths before I enter the trailer. Roxy’s home, and she’s the last person I want to see in this moment.

That sentiment is only amplified the second I step inside. “Where the hell have you been?” she slurs before placing a straw under her nose with shaky hands, then leaning over the table where two neat lines of white powder sit. My eyes scan around the space, noticing all the empty beer cans. Seems like she’s spent her day having a party for one. I straightened up before I left for school this morning. It’s amazing how she can always find the money for drugs, liquor, makeup and new dresses, but never enough to feed her child.

I hate her; I hate this miserable life.

“I needed you to go to the laundromat for me,” she sniffs, placing her finger under her nostril, sucking the residue up her

junkie-ass nose. “I’ve run out of panties.”

I pause, giving her words a moment to sink in. She’s kidding, right? I’m the damn kid here, when did washing her laundry become my job? Why she even bothers wearing panties is beyond me. It’s not like she keeps them on for long.

“Here’s a thought, why don’t you get off your lazy ass and be a parent for once in your miserable life. You’re a disgrace.”

“What did you just say?” she seethes, standing and taking a step toward me. I don’t usually poke the bear when she’s under the influence, but today I have no fucks to give. She raises her hand as she approaches, ready to strike, but I don’t even flinch. Nothing she can do will hurt me more than I’m already hurting.

Squaring my shoulders, I stand taller. “Go to hell, Roxy. I’m not in the mood for your bullshit tonight.”

She falters for a second before throwing her head back and laughing. It makes my anger rise. When she wraps her hands around her stomach and doubles over, my tiny hands ball into fists. It takes every ounce of restraint I have not to sock her one.

I stand there seething until she gets herself under control. “When did you get a backbone?”

“Leave me alone,” I say, turning and heading toward my bedroom.

“Hold on.” I glance over my shoulder briefly, but I don’t stop walking. “Where did you get those clothes from?” Advancing toward me, she reaches out, fisting my new shirt in her hands and tugging me backward. I stumble. “Did you steal them?” The humor she just showed is gone. Her glassy eyes are now narrowed into slits.

“No, I didn’t steal them.”

“Well, where the fuck did you get them then?”

“None of your business,” I say, spinning around to face her.

“Have you been whoring yourself around? Is that how you got them?”

Her words stun me. *What the hell.* “No, Mom!” She hates it when I call her that, she says it makes her feel old. “One whore in the family is enough.”

“You little bitch,” she screams, yanking me forward by the neck of my T-shirt. When I hear it tear, I want to lash out at her, but I don’t get a chance. Instead, I’m forced to bring my hands up to cover my face as she starts laying into me.

It’s a fitting end to the most fucked-up day ever!

Chapter Fourteen

Carla

“HOTTIE ALERT AT TWELVE O’CLOCK,” Mandy, my coworker, says as she passes behind me with a tray full of clean glasses in her arms.

Lifting my eyes, I glance toward the entry of the bar. The moment my gaze locks onto the said hottie, my stomach flips. *Grayson*. What’s he doing here, and how did he find out where I work? I mean I don’t really care, it’s not like it’s a secret. I’m just surprised. It’s been four days since I last saw him because I’ve worked every night this week. We’ve messaged though.

I’m trying hard not to get attached, but he’s making it difficult. Good looks aside, he’s a sweet guy. Yesterday he even had a bouquet of Hershey’s Kisses delivered to my apartment. Each one was individually wrapped in red foil, which made them look like roses. Nobody has ever sent me flowers before, well technically they were chocolates, which is even better in my eyes. He has this wooing thing down pat.

I’ve missed him, but the break has done me good. I needed some space to collect myself after my revelation about my past. I’m not even sure why I opened up to him about my mom. He’s the first person I’ve ever been so upfront with. I usually skirt around the gory details, nobody wants to hear that stuff, but for some reason the words just tumbled out of me. The next thing I knew I was holding out my arm, like some attention-seeking wannabe, offering up more of my secrets.

When he turned his back to me, I literally held my breath. I was sure he was going to run. But when he turned around and folded me in his arms, promising to keep me safe, I think I fell a tiny bit in love with him. It was in no way the reaction I’d expected.

“Sunshine,” he says, smiling as he struts toward the bar. This man has swagger in spades.

He comes to a stop in front of me and just stares for a moment. I use this time to do the same. It’s only been a few days, but I swear he’s gotten even sexier. There’s a sparkle in

his eyes, like he's genuinely happy to see me. I'm not used to people looking at me like that and it's strangely affecting.

Is it a look he reserves just for me, or part of his overall charm? Either way, it makes me all swoony.

"Hey, handsome," I reply, returning his smile. What I really want to do is leap across the bar and climb him like a tree, but thankfully I manage to rein in my crazy. "What brings you here?"

He is here to see me, right?

I have a mini panic attack when that thought enters my mind, but then he answers, "I've been missing my favorite girl," and a calmness settles over me.

The butterflies in my stomach take flight, but hopefully on the outside I manage to keep my cool. I'm not a gushy kind of girl, but this man makes me feel things the others before him didn't. I wonder how many *girls* he has. It's not like we're exclusive or anything, but the thought of him lavishing his attention on someone else doesn't sit well with me at all. I push those thoughts aside. I'm the one that wanted no strings, so I have no right to expect anything more from him.

"Can I get you something to drink, or did you just drop in to say hello?"

"What time do you get off?"

"Not until two I'm afraid. I'm on close tonight."

"Ah, okay. Would you mind if I hung around for a bit then?"

"Not at all." There's a couple of people waiting to be served, and as much as I'd like to spend the rest of my shift entertaining him, I can't. "What can I get you?"

"A kiss wouldn't go astray," he says, eyeing my mouth, "but if that's off the table then a beer would be great."

"A beer it is then, but I'll give you a rain check on the kiss." I give him a cheeky wink as I say it.

I pop the top off the bottle and place it in front of him. "I've got to serve the others," I say, gesturing in their direction with

my thumb.

“All good, babe. I’m happy just to sit here and observe.” He picks up his beer and points toward the tv screen behind me with the neck of the bottle. “There’s also a game on. I don’t want to get in your way, I only came here because I wanted to see you.”

His words have me grinning. “Are you hungry? I can get the kitchen to send out some wings, they’re pretty good.”

He nods and brings the bottle to his mouth. My eyes are glued to his throat as he swallows. He even drinks sexy. “That would be great.”

Weeknights aren’t as busy as the weekends, but we do get a bit of a crowd Thursday evenings when there’s a game on. I’m not a huge fan of football, but what’s not to love about watching a bunch of guys in tight pants roughing each other up?

I head down the other end of the bar, and although Grayson said he’d watch the game while I worked, I can feel his eyes on me. I try not to let it distract me from doing my job. I have guys that come in here and ask me out all the time, but I love it here, so I’d never mixed business with pleasure. I may occasionally flirt back, because it gets me bigger tips, but that’s as far as I let it go. I don’t need any drama in my workplace.

“Spill,” Mandy says, coming up behind me. “Who is that delicious man?”

“Just a friend,” I reply. I like Mandy, but I don’t get too cozy with the staff either. I manage this place, therefore I’m technically their boss. Lines get blurred once things become personal, and I don’t have time for that bullshit. I just want to do my job well and go home at the end of the day.

“Just a friend? I don’t believe that for a second. I saw the way you two looked at each other.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bitch, come on,” she says. “Are you tapping that hottie or what?” She leans over the bar and eyes him from head to toe.

“Damn he’s fine.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

She pokes out her tongue as she picks up a cloth and starts to wipe down the counter. “You’re no fun. Does he have any hot friends at least?”

“I’m plenty fun, and no, his friend is a douche. Can you go to the kitchen and put in an order of wings?”

“Fine,” she says, sighing. “Just how douche is this friend of his?” I give her the stink eye. “What about a brother?”

“Go.”

“Okay, okay, I’m going,” she grumbles, turning away in a huff.



The night moves along fast, I head back to Grayson every chance I get. I feel bad that I can’t spend more time with him, but he seems happy enough just sitting there. He occasionally chats to the guy beside him about the game. He doesn’t really fit in in a place like this, but I love how friendly and easygoing he is.

“Dude, look at that man. Seriously, look at him,” Mandy says, coming up behind me, again. She’s starting to get on my nerves. “You need to lock this one down, girlfriend; he’s got every woman in this room throwing their vaginas in his direction.” I tilt back my head and laugh. “It’s true.”

My gaze darts around, and I don’t like what I see. Most of the women here tonight are eye-fucking him. Even some with their significant others sitting right beside them. I get it, I really do, that kind of hotness doesn’t come around often, but their ogling still gets under my skin. I’m not usually the jealous type, but I’m suddenly feeling stabby.

“Hey,” Mandy says, putting her hand on my shoulder. “Don’t let it upset you. They may be gawking, but he hasn’t even noticed. He only has eyes for you. God, I wish someone would look at me that way.”

“What way?”

“Like he’ll die if he didn’t.”

My attention flicks to Grayson, and Mandy’s right, he’s oblivious to the attention he’s getting because his focus is solely on me. The beautiful smile he gives me when our eyes meet sends warmth coursing throughout my body. I drop my gaze; I’m in a whole heap of trouble with this one and I need to rein myself back in. Things are moving way too fast.

Brad, one of our regulars, approaches the bar, so I head toward him. “Another beer?” I ask.

“The guys and I want to do a round of shots,” he slurs, swaying on his feet.

“You sure about that?” He’s already half-tanked. “Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

Brad places his forearm on the bar, leaning forward. “I’m a big boy, I can handle myself, darlin.’”

“Okay.” I reach for the tequila, lining up four shot glasses. “It’s your funeral.”

I place the bottle back on the shelf when I’m done, lifting the drinks onto a tray. I’m not confident he’ll be able to get them back to the table without spilling them.

“You want me to carry this over for you?”

“What I really want,” he says, leaning a little closer and fingering one of my curls, “is your phone number.”

“You’re persistent, but unfortunately it’s going to be the same answer I’ve given you the last hundred times you’ve asked.”

“Damn,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m gonna wear you down sooner or later, beautiful.”

I crack a smile, because there’s no chance of that ever happening. Brad’s a nice-looking guy, but he’s in here more nights than he’s not. He also leaves shit-faced. He’s not a mean drunk like my mom was, but I’d still never consider getting into any type of relationship with a man like that.

“The answer will still be no.”

“Ah come on, Carla, give a man—” He doesn’t get to finish what he’s saying because Grayson grabs a hold of his collar, dragging him away from the bar.

“I believe the lady said no.”

Brad is so drunk when Grayson lets him go, he stumbles forward, falling to his knees.

“What the hell?” I screech. All eyes in the bar swing in our direction.

“Oh shit,” I hear Mandy say as she dashes past me toward the kitchen. Craig, our cook, is the only male working tonight, and I know she’s going to alert him that there’s trouble brewing. I hope this doesn’t come back to bite me on the ass.

Grayson’s shoulders rise and fall with fury as he stares down at Brad. The last thing I want is for this to turn into a fight. He should’ve butted out, I had it under control.

He takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. One of Brad’s friends comes over, helping him to his feet. I swiftly move around to the other side of the bar, ready to intervene if things escalate.

“You want to tell me what the fuck that was, Grayson?” I question the moment I’m standing in front of him.

His angry eyes move from Brad to me, but they soften the moment they skim over my face. He runs his fingers through his hair, blowing out an exasperated breath.

“He had no right to put his hands on what’s mine,” he answers in a relatively calm voice, but I know he’s anything but.

“Yours?” I seethe.

“Yes, mine.” He takes a step closer, getting up in my face. The hurt I see in his eyes is almost my undoing. “You’re my girl, Carla and nobody has the right to touch you.”

The nerve of this guy. I’m not some type of property he can lay claim to. I’ve known him what? Six days. We spent two

nights together, granted we bumped uglies multiple times, and it was insanely hot, but I'd hardly call that a serious relationship.

The next words out of my mouth are automatic, but a part of me wants to take them back the moment they're spoken.

"That's where you're wrong," I say poking his chest. "I'm not your girl, Grayson Edwards."

He's not the first man to pull a stunt like this, and he probably won't be the last. But I'm my own person, and nobody has the right to force their insecure bullshit onto me. I spent my entire childhood being submissive, but I'm not that naive little girl anymore.

Throwing his head back in frustration, he tugs at the longer strands of his hair. "You're my fucking girl," he states matter-of-factly. "*You are!*" Before I get to say anything else, he's turning and stalking toward the exit.

Everything in me wants to call him back... to tell him I want to be his girl, more than anything I want that, but we were doomed from the very start. I'm just saving us both a shitload of hurt by keeping things casual. We're too different. *I'm damaged goods.* I'm like a shiny new toy to him right now, but the fun will eventually wear off, it always does. He'll soon see the ugly, fucked-up part of me, and it's not pretty. I wish that wasn't the case, but sadly it is.

I'm not the kind of girl you take home to meet your family.

I'm a good time, nothing more.

I'm my mother's daughter.

Chapter Fifteen

Grayson

I LOOK DOWN AT MY watch as my forehead rests against the steering wheel of my car. It's just after two, Carla should be out any minute. Well, I hope so. I drove away from here hours ago, only to circle straight back. I overreacted tonight, but the thought of anyone touching her makes me borderline insane. I'm not usually so domineering, but the moment he placed his fingers on her hair I was on my feet and dragging him away.

I need to make this right. I'm just hoping I haven't fucked us up before we've even begun. I've always been the easygoing and fun-loving guy, never the jealous asshole I was earlier. This woman has flipped my life upside down and I'm powerless to stop it.

My head rises when I hear voices approaching. It's Carla and the other girl that was working with her tonight. I reach for the door handle and exit the vehicle. I'm in my silver Range Rover, and she hasn't seen this car before, so she wouldn't realize it's me.

Her head's down as she fishes in her bag for what I presume are her car keys. Her friend nudges her with her elbow, and when Carla looks up, she points in my direction.

Carla stops walking the moment she notices me standing there. Her face is void of any emotion, so I'm not sure if she's happy to see me. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I remain motionless as I wait.

Please let me be able to fix this.

"You want me to hang around?" her friend asks.

When Carla shakes her head, they say their goodbyes and she starts walking toward her car. I wait until she's driven away before I approach.

"Can we talk?"

Carla's gaze moves down to her shoes, and everything in me wants to reach out to her, but I don't. I promised her the other day I wouldn't let anyone hurt her again, yet tonight that's exactly what I did.

“I’m sorry about earlier.” I run my fingers through my hair, I’m not sure what I can say to make this okay. “I had no right to do what I did.”

She blows out a puff of air as she lifts her face to meet mine. “You’re right you didn’t.”

Reaching for her small hand, I wrap my fingers around it. “I don’t know what came over me tonight, I don’t usually act that way, but when he touched you, something inside me snapped. My body went into autopilot and I was dragging him away before my mind even registered what I was doing.”

“You can’t come into my workplace and cause trouble, Grayson. I need this job, and I rely on the tips it brings in.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“It better not. Guys flirt with me all the time, but it’s harmless, it never goes any further than that. They tip well, and it’s the only reason I allow it.”

That irrational caveman side of me is already fighting his way back to the surface. It makes me crazy to think other guys are hitting on her, but thankfully I manage not to voice my concerns out loud. This woman is turning me inside out and I don’t know how the fuck to deal with it.

“I guess I blew that for you tonight then?”

“You owe me two hundred dollars, he’s a good tipper.” When I see her repressing a smile, I know she’s severely overinflated the amount.

Nevertheless, I pull out my wallet. It’s a small price to pay for her forgiveness. Hell, I’ll give her my bank account number if need be.

Carla raises her hand. “I was joking.” I pull out a stash of cash anyway, holding it out to her, but she slaps my hand away. “I told you I don’t want your money, Grayson.”

“What about me? Do you still want me?”

I tug on her hand, pulling her closer so I can wrap her in my arms. She buries her face in my chest and sighs. That’s not a good sign.

“I’m just saving us both from the inevitable,” she says.

“What does that even mean?”

She doesn’t pull out of my embrace, but her arms remain limp at her sides. It makes my stomach churn. Is she breaking up with me?

Tilting her head back, she finally makes eye contact. “Look at you, you’re rich, successful, and drop-dead gorgeous. You could have any girl you want.” She lets out another sigh before continuing. “I’m a nobody. You could do so much better than me.”

When she turns her face away, I gently cup her cheek, bringing her gaze back to mine. “Stop. Don’t put yourself down like that. You’re far from a nobody. I don’t like hearing you talk about yourself in that way. You’re beautiful, kind and so fucking strong. You may not realize this, but your strength inspires me. You’ve been through a lot in your life, but you don’t let any of that hold you back. If anyone is out of their league here it’s me, but I’m a selfish prick, so I’m going to keep you anyway. You can’t give me back I won’t let you.”

My thumb sweeps across her cheek in soft, gentle waves.

“Do I even get a say in this?”

I want to say no, but again I refrain. I’m already treading on a thin line as it is. “You’d really do that?”

“Do what?”

“Break my heart.”

She rolls her eyes. “I seriously doubt your heart would be broken after only two nights together.”

“I beg to differ; well-endowed men have fragile hearts.”

“Did you just make that up?”

I chuckle. “No, it’s a scientific fact. You know the saying big dick, big heart? Well, I’m proof it’s true.”

She shakes her head and laughs. “You’re a dick.”

“But a big one though, right?”

“The jury’s still out on that one.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do I have to bend you over the hood of my car and remind you just how big it is, Carla?” She gives me a toothy grin, so I draw her in closer. “You’d like that wouldn’t you, minx?”

She lifts one shoulder. “Maybe.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“I guess.”

“Geez, don’t sound so convincing.” I lift her hand to my face, placing a soft kiss on her palm, followed by one on the side of her neck, just below her ear. They’re fast becoming my favorite spots.

“Schmoozing me will get you nowhere, I’m still upset with you, mister.”

“I can live with that, as long as you’re still mine.”

She rests her cheek against my chest, so I place my chin on her hair as my hands run up and down along her spine. I don’t want to push her, but I’m not what you’d call a patient man when it comes to getting something I want. I will be for someone like Carla though. She may not fully realize my intentions, but I have zero plans of letting her go.

“I know it’s late but do you want to go grab a bite to eat?” I need her to know that this thing between us is more than just sex. I don’t care what we do, or where we go, as long as we’re together.

She shrugs her shoulder. “I guess I could eat.”

Her response makes me chuckle. Of course, she can.



“When is your next day off?” I ask, drawing Carla nearer. We’re in her bed, and she’s yet to kick me out, but I know it’s coming. I hated fighting with her tonight, but we just had the best makeup sex ever, so it had its upside. You’ve got to take the positives where you can.

“Why?”

“I want to spend the day with you. We can hang out at my place; I can teach you how to cook something other than SpaghettiOs.”

“Hey, don’t knock my SpaghettiOs,” she says, playfully slapping my chest. “They’re the bomb.”

“I also want to take you to meet my mom.”

“What?” She raises her head from my chest and stares at me in horror.

“I told her I had a girlfriend, and she wants to meet you.”

“I’m not your girlfriend, Grayson,” she says, using my chest to push herself up.

“Hey.” I tighten my arms around her waist, pulling her back down. “If you want to discuss this we will, as long as you agree we’re in a relationship by the end of it, I’m good.”

“I told you I don’t do relationships.”

“I know, but that was before me. Things are different now.”

“Really? How so?”

“Simple, because those other douches weren’t me.”

“You’re so full of yourself.”

I flip her over onto her back, settling myself between her legs. “You’re going to be full of me in a second,” I state, rubbing the tip of my cock through her slick heat.

She opens her mouth to protest, but before she can get a word out, I drive myself inside her. “Grays...” she doesn’t get a chance to finish saying my name because I withdraw and then slam back in. I’ll keep fucking her like this until she relents.

“Admit you’re my girlfriend, Carla.”

“No.”

I slide my hand behind her knee, lifting her leg and draping it over my hip. She moans into my ear when I change my position and delve deeper.

“You’re my girlfriend,” I growl as I pick up the pace, hammering into her at lightning speed. Fuck, I need to slow down. I’m ready to blow. “Say it.”

“I can’t.” I feel her inner walls tightening around my cock, so I know she’s teetering on the edge as well. It forces me to do the only thing I can, I pull out. “What are you doing?” she screeches.

“I’m getting dressed and going home. I’m going to deny you until you concede.”

I use my hands to push myself up, moving to the side of the bed. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Like a heart attack,” I say, reaching for my pants.

“That’s not fair, I was almost there.”

I slide my legs into my jeans and stand. “No, what’s not fair is you refusing to be my girl.”

Carla drapes her arm across her chest and sits up. “It’s not that simple for me.”

I leave my button and zipper undone as I take a seat on the side of the bed. I get it, she’s had a shitty life, and she’s scared because trust doesn’t come easy for her, but I’m not them; I’d never treat her the way others have in the past.

I reach for her hand. “Sometimes people build walls to keep others out. Sometimes they do it to protect what’s left inside.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“I don’t know, are you?”

“You can’t answer a question with a question.”

“Do you know why I call you sunshine?”

She narrows her eyes. “So, you’re going with another question then?”

Reaching out, I cup her face, skimming my thumb over her plump lips. “Because when I see you, you light me up inside. Your smile, it’s radiant, but sometimes the biggest smiles, the

ones that shine the brightest, are just a front to hide the pain that's raging on the inside. Am I right?"

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Psychoanalyze me."

"I'm not psychoanalyzing you, sweetheart, I'm just calling it how I see it."

"And how do you see it?" She's getting annoyed now, but we need to get past this so we can move forward. She's pushing me away because she's been constantly let down by the people who should've cared the most. I can't begin to imagine the horrors she's endured throughout her life. I'm sure I'd go crazy if I let my mind wonder there for too long.

This is self-preservation, I understand that, but I need her to know I'd never treat her that way. I want to be someone she can always count on.

Standing, I remove my jeans, sheath my cock with a rubber, and climb back onto the bed. I need to be close to her when I say this.

She cautiously lies back down as I hover over her, maneuvering my body back between her thighs. "I'm not them," I say, hoping she understands where I'm coming from. I know her mother fucked her over, and I doubt she was the only one. That breaks my damn heart. Her vulnerability speaks to me, and in time I hope to bring down all her walls. She may not realize it yet, but she can count on me. I'm here for the long haul.

Carla closes her eyes and lets out a breathy sigh when I slowly enter her again. "Look at me, baby." As soon as she opens her pretty eyes, I see the tears that are pooling in them. Seeing her like this hurts. I gently brush the hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear. "Let me take care of you, sunshine. Let me fix what the others broke."



It's the weekend, and Carla has the day off, so we're going to spend it together. I feel like we've made real progress over the past few weeks. We've spent every chance we could together. Carla is yet to admit she's my girlfriend, but she's still here and that's enough for now.

I'm still getting kicked out when it's time for her to go to sleep, but that's another wall I intend to knock down in time. I want to spend our nights together, and her gorgeous face to be the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning. It's hard with me working days, and her nights. Our time together is limited, and I don't want to waste a second of it.

I'm sitting on my front step waiting for her to arrive. A nervous energy runs through me. It'll be her first time here, and I plan on making the most of it. If I'm lucky I may even convince her to stay over tonight.

When her little red shit-box pulls up, I leap to my feet and walk down to meet her at the curb. I've decided I'm going to get her a new car because I hate that she's driving around late at night in that thing. I need her to be safe.

Most evenings, I've been waiting in the parking lot for her when her shift ends, so I can follow her home. There will be times when I'm out of town with work, so I'll be unable to do that then.

She exits the vehicle before I reach her, opening the back door to collect her bag. I told her to pack her bikini. Since my home is situated on the shores of Hermosa Beach, I'm going to give her a surfing lesson. I usually try to take my board out before I head to work each morning. I love being on the water, it's a great way to start the day. My favorite color is the ocean, and you can't beat the thrill that comes with chasing the next wave. *It's freeing.* The rest of the world disappears when I'm out there. For me, life's a lot like surfing, to keep your balance you must keep moving. I only hope Carla gets as much out of it as I do.

Sliding my arm around her waist, I pull her back to my front, burying my nose in her hair. I inhale deeply, her scent calms me.

“Hey, sunshine.”

“Hey, you.” She turns in my arms, getting up on the tip of her toes to plant a kiss on my lips.

“Did you find the place alright?”

“Uh huh.” Her eyes dart toward my home. “I can’t believe you live here all by yourself... it’s *big*.”

“What did you expect? Big cock, big house, you know the saying.”

She shakes her head and laughs. I love that sound coming from her. “I’m pretty sure you made that one up too, but I’m starting to see a pattern here. Are you sure you’re not overcompensating for something, Mr. Edwards?”

“My dick’s huge, Carla, you and I both know that’s a fact. I don’t need to compensate for shit. And as for the size of my house, I was just thinking ahead. You and our future babies are going to live here with me one day, so you better start getting used to it.”

Her face drops, and although I meant what I said, I realize it’s probably too soon to be talking that far into our future. Here I am planning the rest of our lives together, and she’s constantly looking for reasons to run. She’s still warming to the idea of our relationship, so maybe I should’ve waited before throwing the whole marriage and family thing into the mix.

I take her bag from her hand, slinging my arm around her shoulder, guiding her toward the house. Let’s hope she can forget what I said. She just got here and I don’t want to fight with her.

“Grayson,” she says, halting her steps.

“Yeah?”

“I need to tell you something... I don’t want kids. Like ever.”

“You don’t?” She turns to face me, and I do the same. I can tell by the look on her face that she’s serious about this. I’ve

never not seen kids in my future, so her statement should send up a huge red flag for me, but somehow it doesn't.

"You know my childhood was less than stellar, and from what little I know about my extended family, my mom's mother wasn't much better than she was. Both my parents are fuckups, and neither of them should have ever procreated. I have a chance to stop that cycle, so kids have never been on my radar."

Her answer is an honest one, and part of me gets where she's coming from, but she's so strong, caring and loyal to the people she cares about. I'm confident she'd never follow in their footsteps.

"You're nothing like them you know? I happen to think you'd be an amazing mother."

"I don't even know what a good mother looks like."

"Well, you haven't met mine yet, but you will soon."

Her eyes widen. "She's not coming here today, is she?"

No," I say, chuckling. "It's just you and me, pretty girl. If I told my mom you were coming over, chances are she would've sprang a surprise visit on us. But I'm not ready to share you just yet, I want to keep you all to myself for a little longer."

Her expression looks grim. "I'm serious about the children thing, Grayson."

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I know you are, but what I love about this whole situation is you're not fighting the fact that you're going to be my wife one day. That in itself is a huge win for me."

She thumps me in the chest when I bite back a smile. "I never agreed to that either."

"I beg to differ."

"You're infuriating."

"Now that's not a nice way to talk to your future husband, Miss Just-Carla."

“Ugh.”

Reaching up, I bop her cute little freckly nose and laugh when her frown deepens. “Come on, let’s get you inside. I have big plans for us today.”



“Are you ready?” I ask, when I look over my shoulder and see the next wave coming. Carla’s lying toward the front of the board, and I’m behind her. My torso is resting between her spread legs, my chest leaning against her luscious ass. Her knuckles have turned white from the death grip on either side of the board, and it has me grinning.

I’m using my dad’s old board today; he’s the one who taught me how to surf. I rarely bring this one out, but it’s a lot longer than the modern-day surfboards, so it’s perfect for the two of us.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she answers as I start paddling to gain some momentum as the wave encroaches.

I place a chaste kiss against the middle of her spine as I use my flattened palms to push myself into a standing position. Carla drags herself up onto her knees like I taught her, and I crouch down and slide my hand around her waist, helping her to her feet. We only remain standing for a few seconds at best, but it’s the closest we’ve gotten so far.

We both tumble into the white wash and the smile that’s plastered on her face when she breaks the surface of the water steals all the air from my lungs. It’s a look that has more power over me than anything, or anyone, should.

“I fucking did it,” she screams, punching the air. “Did you see that, Grayson, I can surf.”

I reach for her as she throws her arms around my neck, planting an overenthusiastic kiss on my lips. I love seeing her happy and carefree like this, so I don’t have the heart to tell her that our attempt barely qualified.

“You were awesome, sunshine.”

When I first informed Carla I was going to give her surf lessons today, I kind of expected her to freak out. You know the old... *"I'm not getting my hair wet,"* or *"I don't want to mess up my makeup"* bullshit, or my personal favorite, *"Gasp. You want me to get in the ocean with all those slimy creatures? Nah ah."* And yes, I've heard them all before.

But this is Carla we're talking about. She whipped off her sundress, revealing her sexy-as-fuck, high-waisted, white bikini that was underneath, and said, *"Let's do it. I'm going to suck, and I can't really swim that well, but I'll give anything a go once."* It had me beaming.

If anyone is allowed a woe-is-me attitude, it's her, but that's not who she is. Carla grabs life by the goddamn balls. I seriously love that about her. It takes tremendous courage and strength to grow up and become the person you were meant to be all along. She's like a lioness... brave and graceful, with a fierce and mighty roar.



"Mm," she moans and those sexy little noises travel straight to my dick. "So good. If I didn't watch you cook it with my own eyes, I'd never have believed you made this."

"Glad you like it."

We've had the best day; I don't want her to leave.

I want to keep her here forever.

We're both freshly showered after spending the rest of the afternoon in bed. Despite fucking her six ways to Sunday, I felt compelled to bend her over the bench seat in the shower stall again before we came down to eat, thrusting into her like a desperate man who'd been starved of pussy his entire life. I didn't stop until those sexy whimpers she makes became cries of pure unadulterated pleasure; she was enjoying the ferocity of our fuck-fest as much as I was. The violent roar that tore from my body when I came was so intense it startled us both. She's like the worst type of craving, the more I have, the more I seem to need.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” she asks, scooping the last of her dinner into her mouth.

“Mostly, my grandmother.”

“Did you spend a lot of time with her growing up?”

“She lived with us for a spell after my father died. My mom was working two jobs at the time and my sister was just a baby, so she moved in to help out.”

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

“It was a long time ago,” I say, shrugging. “I still miss him though.”

“I’m sure.” Carla’s gaze drops to her lap, she suddenly looks sad. Is she thinking about her own father? Is he in her life now?

“What about your dad?”

She turns her face away, but I don’t miss the grimace as she does. It in no way answers my question, but that look alone tells me he’s also hurt her somehow. There’s so much more I want to ask: I want to know everything there is when it comes to her, but she clams up when I ask questions that make her feel uncomfortable. I don’t want to taint her time here.

“Have you had enough?” I ask, standing and reaching for her plate. “There’s more if you want seconds.”

I only made a simple spaghetti dish, but she scarfed into it like it was Michelin star worthy. Considering she’s used to eating her pasta out of a can though, I shouldn’t be surprised.

“I could go another bowl,” she answers, picking up a piece of garlic bread and bringing it to her mouth.

I bite back my smile. Her healthy appetite is just one of the many things I adore about this woman. She’s like a breath of fresh air. She’s nothing like the other girls I’ve dated. Just put a carb in their vicinity and they’re liable to flee the room screaming.

I place another full bowl down in front of her, and she wastes no time tucking in. “Seriously, this is the best thing I’ve

ever put in my mouth.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Not the best thing, Carla.” I’m still standing, so I reach for the waist band of my sweats, hooking my thumb in the elastic. “Do I need to remind you?”

“Keep it in your pants, lover boy, come back and see me when I’m done here.” She gestures to her plate making me laugh.

This woman.

I take a seat beside her. “I make a mean breakfast too.” I’m hinting on her staying over, but I don’t want to push too hard. If I do, it’ll likely scare her off.

“Nice,” she says with a nod. “This whole marriage thingy is looking better by the minute.”

She wiggles her eyebrows and I chuckle.

Resting my elbows on the table, I lean in her direction. “You’re going to love having me as a husband.”

“Oh really, why’s that?”

“I’m going to be so good to you, sunshine,” I say, reaching for her free hand and bringing it toward my mouth. Turning it over, I gently place my lips against her palm, lingering there. Her fork is suspended in midair as she watches my every move. “I’m going to make you coffee first thing every morning, well after I’ve fucked you senseless of course. Then while you’re getting ready for the day, I’ll whip you up some breakfast. We can eat out there.” I point toward the deck through the floor-to-ceiling windows that span the entire back of the house. It’s my favorite place to sit and stare out at the ocean. It grounds me. “And that’s all before 9:00 am, we still have the rest of the day and night to get through. You’re going to have to pinch yourself everyday... that’s how great our life is going to be.”

“Sounds nice,” she replies, opening her mouth and shoveling in some more pasta. I watch the fork slide between her luscious lips, and again I want to trade places. This woman can give me a boner without even trying. I probably should stop watching her so intently, but damn she’s exquisite.

“Nice doesn’t even begin to describe the life we’re going to have together. I’m going to make it my daily mission to woo the pants off you, Miss Just-Carla, so much so you’re going to fall hopelessly in love with me and never want to leave.” Her fork drops to the table and she swallows thickly, dipping her face and resting her chin on her chest. Did I say something to upset her?

“Hey.” I reach for her hand, giving it a light squeeze. “Don’t you like the sound of that?”

She still doesn’t make eye contact with me, so I place my knuckle under her chin, turning her gaze in my direction. When I see the tears pooling in her eyes, I don’t hesitate to pull her onto my lap, wrapping her tightly in my arms.

“It all sounds wonderful,” Carla whispers into the crook of my neck. I want to give her the life she’s never had, the one she deserves.

I hold her for the longest time, stroking her hair. When she eventually moves back to her seat, I make a conscious decision to keep the conversation light. There’s no doubt in my mind we just shared a powerful moment; I just hope she knows I meant every word. I can’t even explain what this thing is between us, it’s just there.

Carla pushes her food around the plate, her appetite now lost. “Let me clear the table and we can watch a movie or something.”

“Let me help you.”

Bending, I place a kiss on the top of her head. “You’re my guest, pour yourself another glass of wine and relax.”

“That’s not how it works I’m afraid,” she says, rising and taking her plate out of my hand. “You cooked; I clean. That’s how Emma and I work.”

“Emma lets you heat up SpaghettiOs for her?” Her eyes narrow as she glances at me over her shoulder, making me chuckle. Carla’s cooking prowess may be limited, but in her defense, she did make me a mean peanut butter and jelly sandwich the other day.

“No, she cooks for me and I clean up, smarty-pants. I always pull my weight.”

I follow her over to the sink, wishing she'd let me take care of her. I want to argue the point, but I also know I'm going to get a whole lot of sass from her if I do.

She turns on the water and unhooks the coiled tap from its holder and starts rinsing the dirty plates. There's something truly sexy about seeing this woman doing dishes in my kitchen.

I lean against the counter beside her, folding my arms across my chest. I use the time to take her all in. Absorbing the visual until it's seared into my brain. Imagining our future once I finally make her my wife.

“So, since I'm going to be the cook in our marriage, does this mean I'll never have to wash a dirty dish again?”

She turns the tap my way, spraying me in the face. “Don't get cute with me, Mr. Edwards.”

I just stand there for a moment in shock. The droplets of water drip down my chin and onto my T-shirt. I can't believe she just did that to me.

Swinging around and placing my front against her back, I cage her against the countertop as I reach for the hose in her hand, trying to turn it around toward her. She puts up a good fight, but she's not as strong as me.

“Grayson,” she squeals when the water hits her chest at close range. It soaks through her shirt instantly.

We're both laughing as we continue a tug-of-war over the hose. When I finally manage to redirect it toward her face, she screams and releases her grip, ducking under my arm.

She spins on her feet and tries to run when I turn and direct the water at her retreating back, and my heart stops in my chest when she slips in the puddle on the floor, landing on her ass with a thud.

“Shit,” I say, dropping the hose back into the sink and reaching out to help her back on her feet. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She slaps my hand away, and when I notice the pretty blush forming on her cheeks and spreading down her neck, I bring my hand to my face and bite my knuckle to hide my amusement.

“You think this is funny?” she asks, but before I get a chance to answer she swipes out her leg, kicking my feet out from under me, sending me ass-over-head onto the kitchen floor.

All the air expels from my lungs as I lay there in a daze, blinking up at the ceiling, trying to wrap my head around what just happened.

Damn her and those fucking ninja skills.

“Grayson,” she says in a panic, moving to my side and hovering over me. “I’m sorry, I acted on instinct. Shit, I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“I’m pretty sure my ego just took a battering.”

“Naww. Poor baby,” she coos.

My hands grasp her waist, maneuvering her so she’s straddling my hips. I’m still lying in a puddle of water, but I don’t care. One hand fists her hair, bringing her mouth down to mine, while the other stays on her hip, holding her in place. She may have just winded the fuck out of me, and bruised my pride, but that little tactic she just pulled was so damn hot I’m taking her right here on the kitchen floor.

Chapter Sixteen

Carla

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I LET you talk me into this,” I say, scowling. It’s taken Grayson over a month to get me here, but after his nonstop pestering, I finally relented.

“Relax, sunshine. My family are going to love you.”

I gasp. “Your family? You said I was meeting your mom, not the entire family?”

We’re still sitting in his car, parked outside a house that I presume is his mother’s. It’s certainly not as grand as the house Grayson lives in, but it’s still like a palace compared to the shitty trailer where I grew up. He’d be horrified if he ever met Roxy and saw where I came from.

“I’m not sure if my sister, Kaitlin, is home, but my Granny Edwards is visiting.”

“Your grandma? Jesus, Grayson. I’ve changed my mind; you need to take me home.”

He chuckles but makes no move to honor my request. Instead, he opens his door and exits the vehicle. Ugh!

I watch on in horror as he walks around the front of his car. He opens my door and extends his hand to me. “Come on, beautiful.”

I fold my arms across my chest like a child. “Nope!”

He shakes his head. “I’ll carry you inside, if need be, and how’s that going to look?”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Watch me.”

My eyes narrow and I growl at him. “They’re going to take one look at me, Grayson, and freak the hell out, I’m not exactly grandma meeting material.”

She’s going to be horrified by my tats. Most old people are, immediately getting all judgey. Having ink doesn’t make me a bad person, in my eyes it’s art and more pleasing to the eye than the ugly scars that lay underneath.

He laughs at this, and my annoyance grows. “Trust me when I say my granny is not your typical sweet little old lady. Shit, she’s probably hipper than both of us combined.”

He extends his hand again and this time I take it, sighing as he helps me from the car.

Without releasing me, he guides me along the path toward the front porch. My stomach is in knots, I don’t think I can do this. I’m not normally a nervous person; I’m just not wired that way. My life has been filled with uncertainties. I probably wouldn’t have survived any of it if I’d given into the panic. Right now though, my anxiety is through the roof. This feels like a make-or-break moment for us, and my confidence is at rock-bottom.

“Why does your mother want to meet me so bad? It’s not like I’m your first ever girlfriend.” I glance at Grayson and find him beaming. “What?”

“I just love hearing you say you’re my girlfriend.” His grip on my hand tightens. “I mean, I knew you were, but the validation is nice.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s got me. I can’t exactly argue his point. “How many girls have you brought home before?”

“None.”

“None?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I’ve never had a girlfriend I liked enough to bring here.”

“Are you serious?”

“One hundred percent.”

His answer floors me. “Wow. You must’ve had some pretty sucky relationships if I’m the best you’ve had.”

He scowls at me. “Don’t put yourself down like that, Carla. I don’t like it.”

“I’m just stating a fact.”

Pausing, he drops my hand and slides his arm around my waist, tugging me closer. “You’re wrong. I wish you could see

yourself through my eyes. Any man would be lucky to have someone like you as their girl. Can't you see how special you are? Because I certainly can."

He's the only one who's ever made me feel like I'm special. "I guess nobody else can see me the way you do."

He leans in, placing a soft kiss on the tip of my nose. "Sunshine, you're all I see."

We climb the front steps and the door opens before we even reach it. My breath hitches, and my stomach rolls. None of the previous guys I've dated ever introduced me to their families. Granted, I usually broke things off before things got serious, but still...

A beautiful woman stands at the threshold, wearing a smile that looks a lot like her son's. "Mom," Grayson says as she steps forward and wraps him in her arms. When she releases him, her eyes zero in on me and I just stand there in stunned silence.

"You must be, Carla?" She engulfs me in a tight hug before I even get a chance to reply. My arms remain limp by my sides. She draws back taking me in before skimming her hand affectionately down the side of my face. "Look how beautiful you are."

"Told you," Grayson says, grinning.

"You have no idea how happy I am to finally meet you."

The sincerity behind her words brings a lump to my throat. She's the polar opposite of Roxy, and that thought makes my heart pang. I would've killed for a mother like Grayson's when I was a little girl.

"Likewise, Mrs. Edwards."

"Please call me Janelle, Mrs. Edwards makes me feel so old."

"Watch your mouth," a female voice says from behind us.

"Granny," I hear Grayson say, and when I look over his mother's shoulder, he's wrapping his arms around the short,

older lady standing in the doorway, lifting her off her feet. It's such a sweet thing to witness; I love this side of him.

"Ah fuck-a-duck, Grayson," his grandma screeches, slapping his arm. I inhale a sharp breath. Did she just say fuck? "Put me down you big baboon, you're going to break my hip and I have a hot date tomorrow night."

Grayson throws back his head and barks out a laugh. He plants a big kiss on her weathered face before slowly lowering her to her feet. When he steps back, my eyes take her in. I must've misheard her; she doesn't look like someone who'd cuss. She's wearing rollers in her short silver hair for Christ's sake.

She barely comes up to his chest, and her head is tilted back as she smiles up at him with so much love in her eyes, it brings a lump to my throat. It's a look I'm not familiar with, but one I envy nevertheless. This man may be worth millions, but he's rich in love, and for me that's far more valuable.

Janelle lets me go, shaking her head at her mother-in-law, but she's smiling as she does. "I thought you were going to change your shirt, Mom?"

She shrugs her frail body, feigning ignorance. "What you see is what you get, I'm not going to put on the airs and graces for anyone." She side-eyes me briefly as she speaks. "Grayson's new girl needs to realize that me and my grandson are a package deal. If she wants to be with him, she'll need to accept me too." There's a hint of animosity in her voice.

Does she view me as a threat?

My gaze moves away from her face and down her body. My eyes widen to saucers when I read the large, white, bold print on the front of her dark grey T-shirt... *'I tried to stop swearing, but I cunt.'*

I blink a couple of times in case my eyes are playing tricks on me. Cheese on a cracker, this sweet looking old lady has the C word, as Emma calls it, on her top.

Grayson said she was hip, but I wasn't expecting this. I was thinking more along the lines of someone laid-back and open-

minded for her generation, but instead she's like Woodstock on crack.

"She's going to love you, Granny, and you her. This one's different," he says.

Different how?

He draws me closer, tucking me under his arm. All the while his grandma sizes me up. A smile tugs at her lips when her eyes skim over my arms. I see no judgement there. I've had enough of it over the years to recognize it when I do.

"Nice ink." She lifts up the hem of her shirt and pulls down the side of her yoga pants, showing me the large red rose she has tattooed on her hip. "I got this in my twenties, hurt like a bitch, but I have no regrets. It's kind of pruney looking these days, but the men at bingo still go crazy over it."

This time I laugh. Grayson was right, I love her already.

"Come inside," Janelle says, rubbing her hand down my arm. "We've made lunch."

We enter the house and I'm still tucked into Grayson's side. Leaning down, he plants a kiss on the top of my hair. "Are you okay?"

I glance up at him with a smile and end up gulping in a woosh of air when I see the expression on his face. He's staring at me, and if I'm not mistaken, he's giving me the exact same look his grandma just gave him.

My step falters, and his arm slides from my shoulder to my waist, keeping me upright. "I tripped over my own feet," I say, laughing, trying to mask my embarrassment.

"Nah," he whispers, leaning down closer to my ear. "I think you're just falling for me."

"You're delusional," I snap back, instantly on the defensive. And it's not because I don't believe him, I'm pretty sure that's exactly what's happening. Panic wells up inside me; I've never let any of my previous relationships go this far. I feel like I've come to a crossroads, and I'm veering toward the road less traveled, and that thought scares the bejesus out of me.

“Lie to yourself all you want, but I see the truth.”

“You see what you want to see, nothing more,” I whisper angrily.

He chuckles like a smug motherfucker, because he knows I’m full of shit.

Janelle leads us toward the dining room off the kitchen at the back of the house. Her home is impeccably clean and stylish, yet still has a homely feel to it. Worlds away from where I came from. There are family pictures framed throughout that I’d love to get a closer look at, but I don’t want to appear nosey or rude.

Grayson and I take a seat at the table while his mother and grandma disappear into the kitchen to plate up the food they’ve cooked.

“You’re allowed to like me, you know?” Grayson states, gripping my knee under the table. I keep my eyes trained forward as I brush his hand away. He laughs at this, scooting closer, and throwing his arm around the back of my chair. “Stop fighting it,” he says, leaning in to place a kiss on my cheek. “Just let it happen and before you know it, it’ll come as easy as breathing.”

That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. What happens when I let my defenses down, allowing him to see just how fucked-up I am on the inside? He’ll leave me for sure. I can’t process any of this right now, I feel like I’m on the verge of a panic attack. I definitely don’t want that to happen in front of his family, or him for that matter.

The women bring out dish after dish of scrumptious looking food, lining it all up in the center of the table. It’s a feast fit for a king, and my stomach grumbles with anticipation. Do they eat like this all the time? It reminds me of how those perfect families on television dine. I didn’t realize people actually did this kind of thing in real life.

“Let me help?” I ask, going to stand.

“Nonsense.” His mother places her hand on my shoulder to stop me. “Sit, sweetie, you’re our guest.” I nod, taking my seat

again. I was hoping for a distraction. “Don’t forget to take your washing before you go, honey,” she says, moving her attention to Grayson.

She points across the living room to where a neat pile of folded clothes sits in a basket. There’s a stack of perfectly ironed shirts, and jeans and long pants on hangers hooked over the door handle above it.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I wait until she turns and leaves the room before I speak. “You still make your mother do your washing and ironing? Remind me how old you are again?”

“She wants to do it,” he answers defensively. “My housekeeper is more than willing to do my laundry, but my mom insists.”

“You have a housekeeper?”

“I’m a busy man, Carla. My company doesn’t run itself. I don’t have time to look after that monstrosity on my own.”

“Oh, so you admit your house is too big now?”

He shrugs. “Only because I live there alone, once you move in it won’t feel that way.”

Glancing at me, he winks and I gasp. This whole thing is moving way too fast, it’s making my head spin. “I’m not moving in with you, Grayson.”

Picking up one of the bowls in front of him, he starts dishing food onto his plate like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “All in good time, sunshine. All in good time.”

Gah.

After lunch’s finished, we moved to the main room, where we stayed for the next few hours. I find out that Grayson’s sister is away at college, she’s eight years younger than him. A few questions throughout the afternoon are leveled in my direction, but thankfully nothing I can’t answer without incriminating myself, my past, or my parents.

Janelle touches briefly on her husband, Robert's, passing, tearing up when she talks about him, so does Granny. Grayson just bows his head. I reach for him when he does that, folding my hand around his. I've actually enjoyed my time here; it's been nothing like I imagined. His family's really nice, and despite my earlier reservations, they seem to be very accepting of me.

When it's time to leave, they walk us out to the car, helping carry out Grayson's clean laundry. I still can't believe a grown man lets his mom wash his clothes, but seeing how motherly she is toward him, I don't doubt that she enjoys doing it.

Janelle hugs me. "Don't be a stranger."

"Thanks for having me today, and for lunch it was amazing." They even gave us some leftovers to take home.

I wind down my window once we're seated in the car, and his grandma sticks her head in. "Oh, Gray, I almost forgot, do you have any condoms on you?" I bite back my smile when Grayson groans. She extends her hand through the window toward him, wiggling her fingers like she's waiting. "Dan from bingo is taking me out tomorrow night. Rumor has it he's been shagging that skank Delores from down the street. He never brings protection with him, so God only knows what kind of diseases that dirty hoe has passed onto him. I warned him no glove no love. He may get my juices flowing, but he's a stubborn old bastard."

I throw back my head and laugh when Grayson grimaces and scrubs his hands over his face. "Spare the details, Granny,"

"I'm old, love, not dead. Help an old lady out." Sighing, he reaches over and opens the glove compartment retrieving the box of condoms he stowed in there. As he goes to open the top flap, to take a couple out, she snatches the entire box out of his hand. "Love ya, kiddo," she says, blowing him a kiss. Her gaze moves to me. "It was nice meeting you, Carla. Look after my grandson, he's a keeper... did I mention he's my favorite?"

Like a hundred times. But I can see the close bond they have.

“I’m your only grandson,” Grayson grumbles.

“You’re still my favorite, and you know it.”

“I’m very loveable,” he says with a shrug, making my eyes roll. It may be true, but modesty isn’t exactly his forte.

Our trip home is a quiet one; Grayson’s hand is wrapped in mine, the other is on the steering wheel. It’s a comfortable silence, but my head is still spinning a hundred miles an hour. Today I got a glimpse of what it would be like to be part of a normal loving family, and it was glorious, but I’m too scared to hope this could be my life one day. I know he keeps mentioning our impending marriage, but it’s just in jest, right? He doesn’t really see that in our future?

“I told you my family would love you,” he says, pulling me back into the now. I can see the coastline off in the distance, so I know we’re almost home. I was dreading this day when I woke up this morning, but now I’ll be sad to see it come to an end.

“They’re really nice, you’re lucky to have them.”

“I’m lucky to have you,” he says, bringing my hand up to his mouth, flipping it over and placing a kiss on the center of my palm.

Looking over at him, I smile. “I’m lucky to have you too.”
Because I am.

I get a pang in my heart when we turn into his street, and I spy my beast of a car, aptly named the Red-rocket, parked on the curb outside his house. It really doesn’t belong in a neighborhood like this and stands out like dogs’ balls. But that car has been loyal and I love her for that. She may be old, but she’s been getting me around for years.

I drove to Grayson’s place earlier today, because it was out of his way, even though he did offer several times to pick me up. His mother’s house is in the opposite direction to mine, and Gardena is a half hour drive from Hermosa. It made more sense for me to come to him.

He presses his remote to open the garage door, driving down the incline and inside. I reach for my bag and exit the

car before he has a chance to open my door. When he gives me a look, I know that move pissed him off. I love his gentlemanly ways, but I'm quite capable of getting out on my own.

Moving around the front of the vehicle, he comes to my side, pulling me into his arms. "You know I like doing that for you."

"Next time, I might let you," I say, patting his chest. Extending his arm, he goes to press the fob on his keys to close the garage door. "Leave it. I can head out to the street from here."

"What? You're not going already, are you?"

"It's getting late, and we've spent the whole day together. You've got work tomorrow, and I've got stuff to do."

"What stuff?"

I shrug. "Just stuff."

His eyes track my face. "Stay."

"I can't."

"Pretty please with multiple orgasms on top." He pouts his bottom lip, so I get on the tips of my toes and suck it into my mouth.

"The orgasms sound nice, but I really should be going."

"Is this how it's going to be all the time?" he asks, and I can hear the exasperation in his voice. "We've been together for a few months now... it's time."

"I told you from the very beginning I don't do sleepovers."

"Why?"

"I don't like people sleeping beside me."

"So, what's going to happen when we're married?" His voice has now raised a few octaves. "Do we sleep in separate beds, or God forbid live in separate houses?"

This is bullshit. "Look," I say stepping around him. "I'm not going to stand here and argue about something that may never

happen.”

He reaches out, wrapping his fingers around my wrist. “What are you trying to say? You don’t want to marry me now?”

“Can you hear yourself?” I swing around to face him. “We’ve known each other a few months, Grayson, it’s way too soon to be talking about marriage.”

I snatch my arm out of his grip and turn to walk away. I’m not fighting with him about some make-believe wedding. *This is insane*. When the garage door starts to come down, I clench my hands into fists. It’s going to be like that is it? I’ll beat his ass if I have to.

“Stop running away from me when things get too hard,” he shouts, snagging me around the waist. “I never pegged you for a coward.”

“That’s because you don’t even know me.”

“I know you better than you think. You’re a fighter... you’ve had to fight your entire goddamn life, and I’m so fucking sorry for that. But you’re not a victim of circumstances, you’re a fucking warrior, Carla. Start acting like one.”

His words only add fuel to the fire that’s burning within. My stance widens and one hand wraps around his wrist, the other moves to his bicep and before I realize what’s happening, I’ve cocked my hip in his direction and he’s flipping over my shoulder and crashing down onto the concrete by my feet.

“For fuck’s sake,” he says infuriated.

I really need to stop manhandling him like this.

When I attempt to step over him, he clutches my ankle. I try to shake him off but his grip is unrelenting. “I’m not letting you go until we’ve sorted this shit out.” I open and close my fists a few times, trying to rein in my anger. He doesn’t know when to quit. “I just want to wake up with you here, is that too much to ask?”

He keeps his fingers wrapped around my lower leg as he sits up, tethering me to him. I don't know why he bothers because the fucker has locked me in his garage, so it's not like I can go anywhere.

"Don't do this," I say.

"Do what?"

"Try to make me feel bad, do you think I like being this way?" I twist my body in his direction and point to my chest as tears burn the back of my eyes. "This... the way I am, it wasn't a choice you know?"

He pushes himself to his feet, sliding his arms around my waist.

His chest rises and falls as his sad eyes scan over my face. "I just want you here, so if it means you have to stay in one of the spare rooms then so be it. I'll settle for just having you under the same roof." I inhale a sharp breath, because the hurt I hear in his words slays me. "Please stay, sunshine," he pleads. "*Please.*"

How can I argue with that?



We come to a stop when we reach the threshold of the spare bedroom. One of Grayson's T-shirts is tucked under my arm. Since I didn't have any other clothes with me, he offered to lend me something to sleep in; he also let me choose which room I wanted. The master bedroom takes up the entire top floor, so it didn't matter which one I took because we're not even on the same level.

It's just after midnight, and since he has work tomorrow, he suggested we head to bed. We started to watch a movie earlier, but we were only five minutes in before Grayson had me pinned to the couch with his hands down my pants. By the time the credits rolled we were still going at it.

"Are you sure you want to stay down here all by yourself?"

I'm not certain about any of this.

Internally, I'm freaking the fuck out about spending the night here, but I plaster a smile on my face to try and mask it.

I've slept in a total of three beds in my lifetime. The trailer, the room I had above the gym, and the apartment I'm living in now. I've never stayed at motels, or anywhere other than my own residence. Not even Emma's. I prefer my own surroundings. Familiarity gives me comfort.

My eyes quickly flicker down to Grayson's chin when I see the hopeful expression in his eyes. I'm not falling for his emotional blackmail again. His puppy dog eyes and sweet words are what got me into this mess in the first place. It's a shitty move on his part, but I don't want to fight about it anymore.

"I'm positive," I answer.

Grayson tries hard to hide his disappointment, but I see straight through it. I hate that this is hurting him. I wish I could tell him the reasons why we can't sleep in the same room, but that's never going to happen.

"One day I'm going to get you in my bed, Miss Just-Carla... and what a sweet day that will be."

"I believe you've already had me in their numerous times," I say teasingly, trying to lighten the mood.

"I mean for something other than fucking."

"You could feed me breakfast in bed tomorrow morning," I offer, twisting the hem of his T-shirt around my fingers. "I'd gladly come up to your room then."

"It's not exactly what I had in mind."

This is turning out to be harder than I anticipated. My fingertips move up to ghost his jaw. "I'm sorry, okay. This isn't easy for me either."

He nods like he understands, but I know he doesn't. It's only a matter of time before Grayson gets tired of my baggage, and that makes the uneasy feeling in my stomach intensify. It's the reason Roxy could never hold down a man. Men will only

put up with a woman's drama for so long before they label them hard work.

He wraps me in his arms, pulling my face into his chest. I release a contented sigh when he places a kiss on my hair. "I can't begin to understand what's going on in your head, but just having you here is a step in the right direction. I can't ask for more than that."

Drawing back, I gaze up at him through my lashes. There's a kaleidoscope of emotions mirrored back at me. It makes a warmth spread throughout my body. It's a look that says so much. The intensity has me eventually diverting my eyes because it unnerves me.

"Hey," he says, grasping my chin and bringing my gaze back to him. "Are you okay?"

"Uh huh... it's just the way you look at me sometimes," I admit.

My eyes drop down to his neck, and I see his Adam's apple bob as he swallows hard. "How do I look at you?"

Like I'm the center of your universe.

My gaze flickers back to him, and his expression hasn't changed. "Just like that," I answer pointing to his face as my teeth run nervously over my bottom lip.

His smile grows, making his dimple pop. He reaches up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Can you be a little more specific, sunshine?" I shake my head, making him chuckle. "It's a good look though, right?"

"Definitely good. It gives me the warm fuzzies."

"The warm fuzzies? Wow, that's some look." His hand moves down to cup me between the legs. "Here?"

I slap it away. "You have a one-track mind."

"I'm just trying to understand what that look does to you."

"In here," I say, grabbing his wrist and laying his palm over my chest. I'm never this vulnerable with people, I have an

intense fear of rejection, so putting myself out there isn't easy for me.

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh.”

He gives my boob a squeeze, and I roll my eyes. He's such a horndog. “You should definitely keep me then, because no one else can look at you the way I do.”

“Is that so?” I say, grinning.

“You heard what my granny said, I'm a keeper.”

“Hmm, I think your granny is a tad bias.”

“No way, she was just stating the obvious.”

“Right,” I say, biting back a smile; he's so full of himself. “I'll give it some serious thought then,” I tease, leaning in to nip at his bottom lip.

His hand comes down, swatting my ass. “You better keep me, wench.”

There's a renewed sparkle in Grayson's eyes as he cups my face, brushing his lips with mine... once, twice, three times.

“Good night,” I whisper against his mouth. If I don't put an end to our hallway rendezvous, we'll be fucking again in no time, and neither of us will get any sleep.

He sighs, getting the hint. “Okay, good night.” He places another soft kiss on my lips before releasing me, and taking a step back. “You know where to find me if you get scared of the monsters under your bed.”

He chuckles to himself as he turns to walk away, and I'm glad his back is to me. If it wasn't, I'm sure he'd be able to see the terror his statement just inflicted.

I hear his footsteps pad down the hallway as I close the bedroom door, leaning my back against it. My heart is thumping against my rib cage as my eyes dart around the unfamiliar room. I can already feel a panic attack clawing its way to the surface. It happened the first few nights I stayed at

Reece's and again when I moved to Gardena, so I don't doubt another one is in store for me tonight.

Briskly taking air into my lungs, I step away from the door, turning to click the lock. My heart drops when I notice there isn't one there. *Shit*. I scan the furniture in the room, looking for something I can move in front of it. The small matching tables each side of the bed won't do and the dresser is too big and bulky, I'll never be able to move it.

My mind tells me I'm safe, but it does nothing to drown out the terror bubbling up inside me. Crossing the room, I open the door that leads to the closet, flipping on the light and finding it completely void. I move to the en suite bathroom next, stepping inside. I stop in front of the large mirror that spans the length of the wall above the double-sink vanity.

My shaky fingers glide over the white marble countertop. This bathroom is smaller than the one in Grayson's bedroom, but no less beautiful. Oh, how the other half live.

Leaning in toward the mirror, I take in my pasty, clammy skin. "You've got this," I tell myself, sucking in another gulp of air. "You're safe, he can't get you here."

Turning on the faucet, I splash cold water on my face. My body quivers as a chill runs down my spine. My fingers and toes tingle as the palpitations in my chest intensify. I grip the edge of the countertop as the dizziness takes over. My throat clogs up and my nostrils flair as I struggle to get air into my lungs.

Dropping to my knees, I crawl toward the corner, curling myself into a ball. I feel like I'm dying, but I've had these enough to know that I'm not. I just need to ride it out, and hope that I emerge on the other side in one piece.

There comes a point in your life where you just have to accept your fate; you'll never be able to move forward if you don't.

If Grayson saw me now, he'd probably bundle me into my car and send me on my way, grateful he dodged the bullet... *namely me*.

Chapter Seventeen

Grayson

I FLIP ONTO MY BACK and scrub my hands over my face. Turning my head, I look at the time on the clock beside my bed. 2:35 am. I've been tossing and turning for the past two hours.

I'm happy Carla agreed to spend the night, but I'm struggling to understand her reasons for not sharing a bed. Hopefully in time she'll at least give it a go. I don't care if she's a bed hog, I'll hug the corner of the damn mattress if it means I get to have her by my side.

She's so close, yet so far...

Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful she's here, and I'll get to see her before I head to work. But there lies my conundrum ladies and gentlemen... that's fucking hours away.

I want her here beside me, and in my arms right now.

Christ, when did I become such a needy bitch?

I roll over onto my side, punching my pillow a few times in frustration. This is the worst kind of torture.

Sitting up, I throw back the sheets and climb out of bed. I grab a pair of sweats from my drawer, slipping them on. I need a drink of water, or maybe a straight scotch, more importantly, I'm hoping I'll run into her on my travels.

Switching on the light by the staircase, I head down to the second floor. As I round the corner to take the stairs to the bottom level, I notice the light coming from under the door where Carla is. Is she having trouble sleeping too?

Abandoning my quest for a drink, I creep toward her room. She chose the one down the very end of the hallway, although the previous ones she looked at are almost identical. Was it because it's the one furthest from me?

I lightly rap my knuckle on the door. "Carla, are you awake?"

When I don't get an answer, I cautiously turn the handle, peeping my head inside. My heart clenches in my chest as

soon as I see her. She reminds me of a doll, so small and fragile... so easily broken. The polar opposite of the tough exterior she wears when she's awake.

She's curled up in a tight ball toward the edge of the bed. She's obviously *not* a bed hog. Then why won't she sleep next to me?

It's really messing with my head.

I understand when someone doesn't want to stay over after a one-night stand. Nobody enjoys the awkwardness that's associated with those early morning wake-ups beside a stranger. But that's not us. The first night we spent together, maybe, but we've moved past the fuck-buddy stage. I'd like to think what we have is a little more long-lasting, and far more profound.

Without even realizing it, I move further into the room, coming to a stop beside the bed. I'm drawn to her. As I take her in, all the air gushes from my lungs, forcing me to inhale sharply. She's a damn thief, always stealing my breath.

The sheet's pooled around her tiny waist, and I smile when I see she's wearing my T-shirt. Her long lashes are resting against her velvety soft cheeks. My eyes flicker to those thirteen freckles that dot her perfect little nose, and her full lips that are slightly parted. I'm tempted to lean down and kiss them. I gently sweep back the few strands of long, blonde hair that have fallen across her face. She's so dang sweet.

I'm at a loss as to why anyone would want to harm Carla; I have this deep-seated need inside to shelter her. I'm well aware of the fierce infatuation I seem to have developed, but the depths of possessiveness I feel toward her is alarming. A tight feeling settles in my chest as the truth becomes clear... *I'm falling in love with her.*

The realization hits me full force, sending a shot of terror through me. What if she never reciprocates those feelings?

Again, my feet seem to have a mind of their own as I move around to the other side of the bed, peel back the covers, and climb in behind her. If she's doing this because she's scared to

take us to the next level, she needn't be, I've got her. I'm pretty sure I'm leaps and fucking bounds ahead, I can only pray one day she eventually catches up.

I scoot toward the middle of the mattress and slide my arm around her waist, gently pulling her body toward mine. Her back's now flush with my chest. She's in such a sound sleep, she doesn't even flinch.

I will my heart rate to slow. I need to just live in the moment and appreciate the here and now. I bury my nose in her hair, inhaling her sweet scent, and a calmness settles over me.

This is how I want to wake up every day for the rest of my life, with her in my arms and our bodies meshed together. My eyelids drift close as the exhaustion takes over. This was all I needed... her by my side.

When I wake, I'm going to hook her leg over my hip and slide deep inside her—slow and lazy as my fingertips circle her clit. I want that special kind of sex with Carla, the one that's specifically made for early mornings.



I'm jolted from a deep sleep when a sharp elbow comes into contact with my ribs. I groan from the pain, and my eyes spring open when the body beside me starts to thrash around.

“Let me go.” I know it's Carla, but her voice sounds different... *childlike*, almost terrified. “*Please, please let me go.*”

Instantly, I do what she asks, lifting my arm to release her, and in a flash, she shoots off the bed. She's lightning quick, but one of her legs is still tangled in the sheets, causing her to fall forward onto the floor with a loud thud. What the fuck?

Whimpering, she rights herself immediately, scurrying toward the door on her hands and knees. Tossing back the covers, I rush in her direction to make sure she's okay. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins as I lean forward and encircle my arms around her waist.

The tortured cry that escapes her sounds like a wounded animal. “No, no, no!” she screams.

Seeing her in this state breaks my heart. My lips part in an attempt to pacify her, but before the words are out of my mouth, she’s violently throwing her head back, colliding with my forehead and the bridge of my nose. Her elbow is next, striking me in the side of the head. I swear I’m seeing stars.

“Jesus, fuck, Carla.” Releasing her, I drop to my knees, placing my hand under my nose to catch the dripping blood.

Her body freezes for a moment before she spins around to face me. I raise my right arm, ready to block her next strike.

“Grayson?” she shrieks. *Who in the hell did she think it was?* “Oh my God, Grayson.” She leaps toward me with such ferocity, the collision sends me backward onto my ass. Her petite arms wrap around my middle, clinging on for dear life. “I didn’t know it was you.” She buries her face in my chest and starts to sob uncontrollably, causing her entire body to convulse.

“Shit, babe,” I say, sliding my free arm around her, pulling her in tight. “It’s okay.”

“I thought you were him.”

“Him?”

“Bobby.”

“Who the fuck is Bobby?”

She snuffles before answering. “I... never mind, I don’t want to talk about it.”

I sit up straighter. “Who’s Bobby, Carla?” She may not want to talk about it, but I do. She just whipped my ass; I deserve to know why. And if she tells me there’s someone else, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“He... he’s nobody. Just someone from my past. An old boyfriend of my mom’s.”

For a moment none of this makes sense, and then it dawns on me. The realization of what’s really going on here sends

shock waves through my entire body... like ice running through my veins.

Releasing the pressure on my nose, I wrap my other arm around her. Fuck the blood, she's more important.

"Did he hurt you?" I already know the answer, but I have to ask.

She nods her head and internally I see red. I'm still trying to process what her piece of shit mother did to her and now I have this to deal with too. How many other people in her life have betrayed her? A lump rises to my throat... my heart bleeds for this poor sweet girl and the horrors she's had to endure.

There were tough times after my father passed, but I was always loved and protected, my mother made sure of that. It was still hard for a kid who once had everything, to be suddenly thrust into the real world. To a place where we had to fend for ourselves, hoping that at the end of each day we'd come out in one piece. In the beginning, I remember being jealous that Ashton still had both his parents and an endless amount of money to burn. Now I feel like a selfish prick for feeling that way. It pales in comparison to anything Carla had to face growing up.

Shifting her off my lap, I stand, then bend to scoop her up. Her arms wrap around my neck and she rests her cheek against my chest as I walk us into the bathroom.

Carla's eyes finally meet mine when I place her down on her feet. "Oh my gosh, you're bleeding," she says, her eyes widening to saucers. "I hurt you." Fresh tears rise to her eyes.

I lean into the shower stall, turning on the faucet. "In my defense, my girlfriend's got ninja skills," I reply, shrugging it off like it's not a big deal. I'm more concerned about her.

She comes to stand beside me, a washcloth in hand. Getting up on the tip of her toes, Carla gently places it under my nose as she peppers tiny kisses all over my face. "I'm so sorry." I can see the anguish in her eyes, and it kills me. A bleeding

nose is nothing compared to what she's been through, and I don't even know the details yet.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I state, placing my lips on her forehead. And she doesn't. She told me she didn't like sharing a bed, and I should've respected that. I've messed up bad, I only hope she can forgive me.

I reach for the hem of the T-shirt she's wearing. "Lift up."

She raises her hands in the air, and I gently drag the shirt over her head, tossing it on the floor. Crouching, I slide her panties down her legs and she steps out of them. I remove my sweats and reach for her hand leading us under the hot spray.

When I drape my arms around Carla's shoulders, she scoots closer, hugging my waist. "Talk to me, sweetheart." She vigorously shakes her head. "Please."

"I can't," she whispers.

"Yes, you can."

Her sad pleading eyes move up to mine. "You don't understand."

"Help me understand."

"I don't want you to look at me differently."

I cup her sweet face in my hands. "Nothing you can say will ever make me stop caring about you." My statement has her inhaling a sharp breath as she tightens her hold on me. Whatever this guy did to her is bad, I can feel her body trembling beneath my hands. "I've got you," I whisper.

I'm feeling like scum for pushing her to stay over tonight, thinking her issues involved me... or our relationship. What a self-centered asshole I am. I deserved every blow I just took from Carla.

I hold her in my arms for the longest time, running my hand soothingly down her back, giving her a moment to collect herself. "Is he the reason you can't share a bed?"

"Yes."

"How old were you when this happened?"

Diverting her gaze away from me, she whispers, “Thirteen,” but she doesn’t give me any more than that. I can see the shame in her eyes, and it tears me up inside.

“What did he do to you?” I don’t want the dirty details; I just need to know how far this went.

She clenches her eyes shut and I can see the pain on her face as she more than likely relives that moment in her mind.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t shut me out, sweetheart.”

“Please Grayson...”

“I need to know, Carla, did he force himself on you?” She nods her head again and my body tenses, making her alarmed eyes snap back to me.

I hope my reaction doesn’t make her think this will change things between us, because nothing she could say would make me feel any different. If anything, it would make me love and admire her more. This woman has been to hell and back, and I’m in awe of her strength.

Lifting my hand, I skim my knuckle down the side of her face, trying to ease her concern. Inside though, I feel like I’m about to pop a damn artery. Never in my life have I felt this kind of rage. Murder is not something I’ve ever thought about. Taking another life seems unfathomable to me, but if this guy were in front of me right now, he’d one hundred percent be leaving in a body bag. I’d tear him limb from limb and have zero regrets.

“Sunshine,” I whisper as I place my lips against her forehead, because I don’t know what else to say. Sorry doesn’t seem like a strong enough word. “Did you tell your mom what happened?”

I brace myself for her answer. “Yes,” she whispers, and the sadness I hear in her voice tears at my heart.

“And what did she do?”

“She kicked me out.”

I have no words for that... *not a goddamn one.*

Chapter Eighteen

Carla

(13 years old)

“MORNING,” ROXY SAYS WHEN I exit my bedroom, heading toward the kitchen area. I pause doing a double take. Not only is it rare to get a greeting from her, it’s even scarcer to see her up so early.

“Morning,” I reply, eyeing her suspiciously as she sits at the table nursing a cup of coffee.

Today must be a good day. They’re usually few and far between, but the past couple of weeks I’ve noticed a change in her. There’s a new guy on the scene of course, and she obviously likes this one because she’s been on her best behavior ever since he came into the picture.

It’s nice to see her happy for a change, but to be honest I’m not really a fan of this Bobby guy. He’s nice-looking, I guess, for an older dude. I can see why my mother is attracted to him. He has charisma, a kind of charm that seems to draw you in, but thankfully, I can see straight through him.

Roxy’s endless stream of creepy men over the years has been a huge learning curve for me. He seems to be treating her well, and he drives a flashy car. But there’s something about him that makes my skin crawl. Maybe it’s his leering eyes, or the not-so-subtle glances that come my way. I don’t think Roxy notices, but the way he looks at me sometimes gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Last week for instance, I was bending over getting something out of the fridge. I was unaware that he was behind me until I heard him groan. When I glanced over my shoulder, his eyes were glued to my ass and the pervert was licking his lips.

I’m willing to put all of that aside though, as long as he keeps his hands to himself. It’s a small price to pay to get this version of my mom.

“What are your plans for the day?” Roxy asks, surprising me. She doesn’t usually care what I do, as long as I’m not in

her way.

I shrug. "I was going to help out at the gym."

I'm still there on a daily basis. Reece even pays me now. I've learnt enough over the past two years that I'm able to teach a few classes. It's usually just the little ninja class, but I enjoy it. Sometimes I even fill in at reception when Michelle is on her break or running errands.

"Hmm," she says. "I'm not sure if I like you spending so much time there."

"I like it."

"Something just seems off, is all," she says, reaching across the table to place her hand on top of mine. Again, not the norm, but I'll take any affection I can get from her at this stage. "He's a grown-ass man, what would he want a kid hanging around all the time for? I don't trust him."

"Reece is only twenty-three, and he's good to me."

"You're what, ten... eleven? It's wrong."

"I'm thirteen," I say, rolling my eyes. My own mother doesn't even know how old I am.

"Exactly."

"Roxy, it's not like that. I help out around the gym and he pays me."

"He gives you money?"

"A little," I say, shrugging. I shouldn't have told her that part. I have some saved, it's stashed under my mattress where she can't find it, but most of what I earn goes on groceries and occasionally clothes. "Where do you think all the food comes from?"

"And what does he expect in return?" I notice she ignores the comment about the food.

"Nothing like that. I told you, I help out and he pays me. Don't try to make this into something it's not. He's never once did or said anything inappropriate toward me. He's a nice guy."

“Are you in love with him?”

“What?” I screech. “Eww, gross. Of course not.” She may get on her back in exchange for money, drugs or booze, but I have more self-respect than that.

“Fine. Whatever,” she replies, waving her hand around as she stands. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She needn’t worry about Reece. She should be more concerned about the losers she brings home.

Placing her coffee cup in the sink, she turns back to face me. “You want to do something together today?”

“What?”

“You know, hang out.”

“You want to hang out with... me?” I ask, stunned.

“Sure, why not. Isn’t that what mothers and daughters do?”

Yes, but not this mother and daughter duo. “Okay... sure,” I say hesitantly.

“Good. I’m going to jump in the shower.”

“Okay.”

To say I’m surprised by her offer would be an understatement, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t excited about the prospect of spending quality time with my mom. It’s a rarity. I remember when I was about eight years old, she tried to get me to have a drink with her. She said she hated doing it alone. I’d never tasted alcohol before, and I didn’t like it one bit. How she consumes that stuff daily is beyond me. She got mad and screamed at me when I spat it out. It was the first and last time she asked me to be her drinking buddy.

Standing, I turn to head back to my room to get changed when I hear a car pull up outside. I move the dusty, ratty curtain aside and see Bobby’s car parked out front. *Great.* There goes our mother and daughter bonding session. There’s no way she’s going to want to hang around me now that he’s here.

He exits the car, so I turn quickly, heading for my room, but he's calling out, "Knock, Knock," before I make it. Blowing out a puff of air, I spin around to let him in.

"Carla, hi," he says the moment I answer the door. His hungry eyes scan the length of my body before coming back to my face. I have an overwhelming compulsion to pull my T-shirt down further, even though I'm wearing sleep shorts underneath.

"Umm. Hi."

"Is your mom home?"

"Yeah, she's in the shower," I say, moving aside to let him in. "You can come in and wait if you like." He takes a step forward and I take in a sharp breath as his arm brushes over my breasts when he passes. *Ugh, he's such a creep.* Retreating a few steps, I turn with the intention of leaving. "She shouldn't be long."

Reaching out, he grabs hold of my arm. "Where are you going?"

"To my room," I answer.

"Stay. You can make me a cup of coffee while I wait. It'll give us a chance to get to know each other better. You're not around much when I'm here."

Because you make my skin crawl.

"I, umm..."

Closing the distance between us, he drapes his arm around my shoulder, holding on tight. "Come on," he says, giving me a disarming smile. "I don't bite, and I could really go a cup of coffee right now."

Ducking out from under his arm, I skip ahead. I'll make him his damn coffee, but he better not put his hands on me again.

He takes a seat at the table as I move toward the cupboards. I hope he likes instant because that's all we have.

My back is to him, but I can still feel his leering eyes on me. "How do you have it?" I ask, reaching up for a mug.

My body freezes when he steps up behind me, pushing his chest into my back. “Here, let me help you with that,” he whispers, his lips ghosting over my ear as his hand comes to rest on my hip. I shudder, and not in a good way.

“What the fuck?”

Bobby immediately steps back when we hear Roxy’s high-pitched scream. When I look over my shoulder, she’s scowling, draped only in a towel.

“It’s not what you think,” Bobby says defensively, holding his hands up in front of him. He’s full of shit. There was nothing innocent about what he just did.

Roxy’s eyes dart between the pair of us before finally settling on me. When her eyes narrow my heart drops. *Oh crap.* Looks like I’m going to take the fallout for her sleazebag boyfriend’s actions.

She reaches for my arm and yanks me forward. I glance over at Bobby and he just stands there watching the carnage unfold. If he was closer, I swear I’d kick him in the nuts. This is all his fault.

“Do you want to explain what the hell that was?” Roxy seethes, getting up in my face.

“It... it was nothing. I was just making him a coffee, I swear.”

“A coffee? Are you serious? Do you think I’m fucking stupid?” Her grip on my arm tightens and I know it’s going to leave a bruise.

“I’m telling the truth. I didn’t do anything. He came up behind me when I was reaching for the mug.”

“Roxy,” Bobby finally speaks. “She’s right, it was nothing.”

Her angry gaze moves from him to me, I don’t think she believes either of us.

“Get out of my damn sight,” she sneers, letting go of my arm and shoving me toward my bedroom.

Gladly.



Weeks pass, but unfortunately Bobby's still on the scene. Apparently, he's not from around here. My mom told me he travels a lot with work, so we only see him when he's in town. I'm grateful for that. I just need to bide my time. Roxy will run him off sooner or later. It's what she does best. And when that day comes, I'll silently rejoice because I won't have to deal with him anymore.

I've tried to avoid him at all costs. If Bobby comes over, I usually jump out my bedroom window and head to Reece's so I don't have to be around him. I don't trust him as far as I can kick him, and it's safer for me if I stay away. I've never seen my mom so taken with a man before, and I should be happy for her, but if he's going to come onto her kid the moment her back is turned, God only knows what he gets up to when he's traveling.

I'm sitting on my bed doing my homework when there's a knock on my door. I totally suck at school, but I work extra hard to keep my grades up. To be honest, nobody gives a shit if I go to classes or not, but I do. A decent education is my only ticket out of here. If I ever want to get a job and away from this hellhole, I need to graduate.

"Yeah."

The door opens and Roxy pops her head in. "I'm getting ready to leave. Bobby's in town and he's taking me out tonight," she says, bouncing on her feet. I force out a smile because I can see how excited she is. It's nice to see this side of her I just wish it wasn't because of him.

"Cool."

She clutches the beer bottle in her hand, hugging it to her chest. "I think he's the one, baby-girl." *Baby-girl?* That's a first. "I've never felt like this before. I think I'm in love." Her eyes are all dreamy like and it makes me want to puke. It's weird to see her so smitten over a guy, and that thought fills me with dread.

“I’m happy for you both,” I say, the lie tasting bitter in my mouth. I don’t know what I’ll do if she ends up marrying this creep.

She glances over her shoulder when a car door closes in the distance. “Oh my God, he’s here,” she shrieks.

“Knock, knock,” I hear him call out, the sound of his voice making me cringe.

“Come in,” she says, turning and heading toward the front door. “I’ll just grab my purse.”

Rising from my bed, I go to shut my bedroom door. There’s no way I’m going out there to say hello.

I jump back with a start when a hand comes out to stop me from closing it all the way. “Hey, Carla,” Bobby says, coming into view.

“Umm... hi.” I force out another smile.

“I bought you dinner,” he says, surprising me by holding up a takeout bag. “Since I’m taking your mom out, I thought I’d get you something to eat.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t expecting that.

“Call it a peace offering. I want to apologize for what happened last time I saw you. I was out of line.” *Yes, you were.* “I shouldn’t have done what I did... I’m sorry I got you in trouble with your mom. It was all my fault.” I blink a few times because I’m too shocked for words. “Here,” he says, pushing the bag toward me. “There’s a burger and fries inside. I got you a soda too.”

“Umm, thanks.” I take them, it beats the tin of SpaghettiOs I planned on heating up for dinner. If he thinks he can bribe me with food though, he’s got another thing coming.

“I hope we can put the past behind us and move forward, Carla. I really like your mom, so it would be great if we could be friends.” I guess I could try to get along with him for Roxy’s sake. But friends? *That’s a hard no from me.* “What do you say, truce?” He extends his hand toward me.

I pause for a second before tucking the soda into the crook of my elbow. I'm skeptical of everything this man says. Is this a trick? Is he trying to lure me into a trap? Despite my reservations, I take his hand in mine and shake it briefly.

Placing the food and the soda on the floor beside my mattress, I wait for them to leave. Only when they're gone, do I reach for the bag. Regardless of what he just said, can I really trust him not to tamper with my food?

I unwrap the burger and inspect every inch of it before bringing it to my nose to sniff it. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, but it appears and smells just fine. *I'm being ridiculous.* He said he really likes my mom. He wouldn't poison me if he did, would he? I slowly bring it to my mouth and take a hesitant bite.

"Mm," I groan as the delicious taste of meat and cheese floods my tastebuds. *God, I love burgers.* Reece is a vegan; he's all about a healthy body and mind, so he doesn't let me eat fast food often. I can't fault him for that, but burgers should be a staple in all American households. I wonder if they come in a can?

I demolish it in seconds and then tackle the fries. When I'm done, I bundle up the trash and place it back in the bag before reaching for the drink.

I'm both full and satisfied as I take a large gulp of soda, followed closely by another. I overreacted earlier and a small part of me feels bad now. Bobby did a nice thing for me tonight and I should've been more grateful. As long as he keeps his hands and eyes to himself, maybe we can get along.

I take another large drink before leaning forward to place it down on the floor, beside my mattress, but I'm suddenly feeling light-headed and dizzy. My heart rate starts to accelerate as my body flops forward, causing the drink to slip from my hand and spill all over the carpet... my face follows suit and the coolness of the ice and liquid against my heated skin is the last thing I remember before everything goes black.



I wake with a start when I hear someone groan the word, “Shit,” as they scramble off my mattress. It’s followed by, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

My eyes fly open to an image that will no doubt haunt me forever. Beside my bed is a bent over naked man. The sight of his bare ass and hairy ball sacks hanging down between his legs makes me gag. *Literally.*

My body is consumed with fear as I lie there motionlessly watching the man, who I now realize is, Bobby, scoop up his underwear, black slacks, and the white dress shirt he was wearing last night, off the floor. I hear the buckle of his belt jingle as he scrunches his clothes into a ball, shoving them under his arm. He takes a few steps toward my bedroom door, before pausing and running his free hand through his dark hair. He glances over his shoulder as his gaze frantically scans the room before finally landing on me.

“Carla!” There’s panic lining his voice when he notices I’m awake, watching him with what I’m sure are large, horrified eyes.

“W... what,” I choke out, struggling to form words. My mind is scrambled as a million questions filter through it.

What’s going on?

Why is he naked?

Why was he lying beside me without any clothes on?

What the hell is he doing in my room period?

His gaze leaves my face, slowly dropping down to my chest, my eyes follow his movement and that’s when I realize I’m not wearing a top. My arms fly up to cover my small breasts. I may only be thirteen, but I’ve developed enough that I’m now wearing a bra.

I’ve never gone to bed without clothes on. It’s a rule I don’t break. I’m always prepared to flee. I’ve learnt over the years that things can go south pretty quickly around here.

My heart is thundering against my rib cage as I hesitantly lift the blanket that’s pooled around my waist, peering

underneath. Something isn't right here, but I can't seem to wrap my head around any of it.

When I comprehend my underwear and sleep shorts are missing too, I gasp. I shift toward the edge of the mattress, and further away from him, feeling the burning ache between my thighs. When I notice the small patch of red that's illuminating my pale pink sheets, I immediately file the image away in that shitty little box in my head—the place where all the bad things get locked away—because I just can't deal with it.

Bile rises to the back of my throat.

Throwing back the blankets in a moment of panic, I clamber out of bed and somehow manage to stand. “What did you do to me?” I cry out through a sob as I swing around to face him. “Answer me, goddammit.”

The heavy pain that's now settled in my chest intensifies. My breathing is labored. Bobby just stands there, gawking like he doesn't understand my reaction. His disgusting, perverted eyes move down, coasting over my entire torso, and I see his dick start to harden. My body folds over and I'm suddenly struggling to get air into my lungs.

I feel faint.

Shit, am I going to die?

Please, please, please let this be a bad dream.

My forearm flies up to cover my boobs, and my other hand moves down to rest against the junction between my thighs. “What did you do to me, you sick fuck?” I scream.

The door to my bedroom suddenly flies open, making both me and Bobby jump. Roxy stumbles in, obviously still under the influence of whatever she consumed last night.

“What's with all the racket?” she asks over a yawn, rubbing the heel of her palms into her eye sockets. “I'm trying to sleep.” Her hair is sticking up all over the place and the smudged remnants of last night's eye-makeup make her look like a panda bear.

I hold my breath as I await the tornado that's about to be let loose. She notices Bobby first, and he quickly pulls the wad of clothes that are stuffed under his arm, down over his junk. Her eyes widen as she takes him in before shifting her attention back to me.

"What the fuck is going on here?" she asks, her scrutiny moving between the two of us.

I'd like an answer to that question too. "I don't know," I whisper, my voice cracking as I speak.

"You don't know? You don't fucking know!? You're locked away in a room with my man and you're both naked, and you don't fucking know?" Her face goes bright red; she's on the verge of a full meltdown. To be honest, I feel like I'm about to lose my shit too.

"Babe," Bobby says, stretching his free arm in her direction as he takes a step forward. "It's not what you think."

My mom may be blonde, but she's not dumb. Any idiot can see what's going on here.

She bats his hand away. "Don't touch me," she snaps, giving me a small dash of hope. For once in her life is she going to do the right thing and take my side?

Tears of gratitude rise to my eyes. "Mom," I say, even though she hates me calling her that, but it's what I need in this moment. A protector. A confidant. *A parent*. Someone who'll have my back. I've needed her many times over the years, but nothing like I do right now. "I think he drugged me. I think he... he did something to me." My words come out choked as tears stream down my face. Reality has truly set in. My chin flickers toward the bed. "I wasn't wearing any clothes when I woke, and there's... there's blood on the sheets."

"She's lying," Bobby says, and it takes every ounce of strength I have not to lunge at him. But the thought of touching him makes me want to puke.

Removing the hand from between my legs, I bend down and throw back the blanket to reveal the evidence. While I'm down

there, I scoop up my discarded clothes from beside the mattress, the ones I was wearing before I passed out.

The room falls silent for the briefest moment, but it feels like an eternity. I think we're both waiting to see which way Roxy is going to go.

Please, please, please let it be with me.

I watch on as her own tears start to fall, and it hurts me to see her cry. She wipes her hands under her eyes before she turns to face me. It all happens in a split second; she's on me and I don't have a chance to react.

"You fucking little whore," she screams, fisting a handful of my hair and tugging hard. "I want you out of this house, you hear me? I don't want to see your lying face ever again."

It takes a few minutes, but I manage to free myself from her grip, bolting toward my bedroom door. I come to an abrupt halt when I near Bobby, noticing that cocky smirk on his face. He thinks he's won, that he's gotten away with what he's done, but one day I'll make him pay for everything he stole from me.

My arm draws back before surging forward. The heel of my palm connects with his nose, hard. Just like Reece taught me. My spirit and heart may be broken, but when I see blood dripping over his mouth, and down his chin, I can't help but smile.

Take that you motherfucker!



My mind and body have completely shut down by the time I arrive at the gym. Reece's place is a few miles away from the trailer park. I vaguely remember slipping into my sleepwear on the front porch, sans underwear, before fleeing my home. I'm grateful I was together enough to do that, but there's no shoes on my feet.

I heard Roxy and Bobby arguing in my bedroom, but I didn't stick around to see the outcome. There was no need. She's already picked her side.

I don't even recall how I got here. All I know is I'm breathless and hanging by a thread when I barrel through the front doors. Thankfully, the gym opens early so the masses can do their fitness classes before going to work.

"Reece," I yell, darting my head around the large space. "Reece!" I probably look and sound like a crazy person, but my mind isn't right. When I fled, my feet automatically led me here. I have nowhere else to go. I'm homeless, I don't want to live on the streets. But I can't ask Reece to take me in; he's already done so much for me. Yet, here I am. This is my safe place. Somewhere I can exist without fear.

The group of people doing the circuit training toward the back of the room pause, and all heads swing in my direction. My eyes are frantically scanning the area, looking for the man I came here to see. Where is he?

"Carla." I jump when he suddenly appears by my side. "Jesus, what happened to you?" He places his hands on my shoulders, bending so his eyes are level with mine. Confusion mars his face. "Carla," he says again, shaking me slightly. "Talk to me, what's going on?"

Tears rise to my eyes, but the words won't come out. I shake my head as a small sob escapes. I can't tell him what happened; I'm so ashamed.

What if he doesn't believe me either?

"Did Roxy do something?"

I try to gulp in some air, but a weird sound comes out instead. When I don't answer, he takes a step back and runs his hands through his hair, his gaze taking me in from head to toe. I wrap my arms around my middle, dipping my head. I'm afraid if I look him in the eyes he'll see the truth.

He crouches down in front of me, his worried gaze staring up at my face. "Sweetheart," he says in a gentle voice. "Are you okay?"

I nod, even though I'm anything but.

His eyes roam over me again, and I can see the wheels turning behind them. He's always been incredibly perceptive.

Can he tell I've been violated just by looking at me? Do people appear different once they've lost their virginity, even if it was stolen from them without their consent?

"You don't look okay. Even your feet are bleeding. Where are your shoes?"

I look down; I'm so numb inside I didn't even realize they were cut up. "Roxy kicked me out," I whisper. "I didn't know where else to go."

He stands again, pulling me into his arms. "I'm sorry," he says as his hand soothingly strokes my back. "I don't know what happened, but she doesn't deserve you. You did the right thing by coming here, and you're welcome to stay as long as you want."

Those words open the flood gates and I break down into his chest.

"Shh," he says, gently rubbing my back. "I'm not sure what happened to you kid, but I hope when you're ready you'll tell me."

I nod my head because I don't know what else to say.

Stepping back, I frantically wipe the tears from my face, because nobody likes a crybaby. Inhaling a few deep breaths, I stand taller. I need to show my strength, even though I feel like I'm dying inside. He crouches back down so his eye level with me.

"You don't deserve the shit this life has dealt you, don't ever doubt that. It's okay to cut toxic family out of your life, Carla. Blood isn't thicker than peace of mind." His hand softly glides over my hair as he speaks, and I rapidly blink my eyes, fighting back the tears that threaten to return. "Everything is going to be okay. I'll take care of you, kid, I promise."

Nobody has ever been this kind to me, and I'm so grateful I finally have someone in my corner.

He's the first person to ever truly want me around.

Chapter Nineteen

Carla

I TURN INTO ONE OF the parking spaces out the front of the swanky office building. *'Barclay and Edwards Developments'* is scrawled across the façade in large silver letters. I took a chance coming here unannounced, but my need to see Grayson was too great. I've been on edge all morning, pinging off the walls, and unable to calm down the crippling anxiety raging inside me.

When he left to go to work earlier, things seemed okay between us. Well, apart from the fact he was sporting two black eyes. It fills me with dread every time I think about what I did to him last night. He's been so attentive and caring, but he's a good guy, that's what he does. I'm worried that my confession is going to change our relationship.

Are things going to be weird between us now that the truth is out?

Will he start distancing himself from me?

Is he still able to look me in the eye without feeling sick to the stomach?

Is our sex life ruined?

All these things and more run through my mind on repeat.

My stomach churns at the thought. I've worked myself into a tizzy, to the point where I feel like I may actually hurl.

I never wanted this secret to come out. That's why I've fought so hard to conceal it for so long.

I reach for the brown paper bag sitting on the passenger seat and exit the car. I wanted to do something nice for Grayson, so I made him lunch. It's only a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a store-bought cookie, because honestly that's about my limit, but I hope he appreciates the sentiment behind it if nothing else.

Pushing through the large glass doors, my eyes scan the lush, expansive foyer. This place reeks money, just like everything else he owns. The pretty brunette sitting behind the

front desk looks up at me and smiles. I freeze; I probably shouldn't have come here.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“Umm... I'm wondering if Grayson is free?” Her eyes move down the length of my body, taking me in, but not in a bitchy way. I see curiosity more than judgement. “I bought him some lunch.” I hold up the bag in my hand.

Her smile widens as she stands. “Oh, wow. You must be Carla.”

“You know who I am?”

“Grayson never shuts up about you,” she says, rounding the desk and extending her hand to me. “I'm Amber, his assistant.”

“Grayson talks about me... to you?” That thought makes me feel uneasy. What kind of things does he tell her?

“Relax,” she states, noticing my discomfort. “He only says good things.”

“Ah, okay.”

“Come,” she says. “I'll take you to him.”

I hope he's okay with me being here.

The knots in my stomach intensify as Amber leads me toward his office. Her high heels click against the polished marble floor. She's dressed to the nines, looking very put together in her power suit. It's a far cry from the casual attire I wear to work. It's just another reminder of how I don't fit into Grayson's world.

We walk down a long corridor, passing door after door and what I presume is a conference room. It sits behind large glass, floor-to-ceiling windows, there's a long wooden table inside, with a plentitude of chairs sitting around it.

Amber stops when we reach the end of the corridor, and I look up to see '*CEO Grayson Edwards*' in bold black letters written on the gold plaque in the center of the door. My anxiety ramps up a notch.

She knocks twice before opening. “You’ve got a visitor,” she says. I’m standing behind her, but off to the side, so I have a clear view of him from here. He glances up at her and my tummy flips. He looks so hot sitting behind his desk in his sexy suit being all businesslike. I want to gobble him up. “I know you said you didn’t want to be disturbed, but I thought you’d want to see this one.”

Shit, I should’ve called first.

When Amber nudges her head in my direction, his eyes dart to me. I hold my breath, anticipating his reaction, but the moment our eyes lock, his face lights up and relief floods through me.

“Carla!”

“Hey.”

“Come in,” he says, sitting back in his chair and motioning me forward.

I step into the room. “It was nice to meet you, Carla,” Amber says as she reaches for the door handle to close it behind her.

“Likewise,” I reply, giving her a brief smile over my shoulder.

Turning my attention back to Grayson, I find him still grinning. “This is a nice surprise.”

I observe the mountain of paperwork around him. “I’m sorry to disturb you, I can see you’re busy.”

“Come here,” he says, crooking his finger at me. His eyes track my movements as I cross the room, stopping when I reach his side of the desk. Scooting his chair back, he pulls me down on his lap. “I may be busy, but I’ll always make time for you, sunshine. You’re my girl... my number one priority.”

He always knows the perfect thing to say. Nobody has ever made me feel like I’m their number one. I may have fought us in the beginning, but not anymore, I love being his.

“I won’t stay long, I just wanted to bring you some lunch.” I hold up his sandwich, and he takes it from me, placing it on

his desk.

“I’d rather have you for lunch.”

“That sounds... nice.”

He grasps my chin, bringing my face closer to his. “I may not have been expecting you, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make the most of your visit. You’ve been on my mind all morning.”

I cringe a little on the inside. I hope his thoughts weren’t about last night. I don’t want him thinking about what happened to me, I just want to put it behind us.

I swallow thickly. “What do you have in mind?”

“Wicked dirty things of course.” He closes the small distance between our faces, nipping at my bottom lip.

I shouldn’t have expected anything less from this man. He’s an animal. “What kind of dirty things?”

“First, I’m going to bury my face in your pussy and make you come with my tongue, and then I’m going to lay you out on my desk and fuck you into next week. How does that sound?”

I feel my cheeks pinken as moisture floods my panties. “It sounds like a really good plan.”

“See this blush,” he says, running the tip of his finger from my neck down to my cleavage, “it almost brings me to my knees.”

He lifts me off his lap, placing my ass on the edge of his desk, maneuvering his chair closer until he’s nestled between my parted legs.

My fingers glide through his thick hair. “What did Ashton say when he saw your black eyes?”

He winces. That douche better not have made fun of him or I’ll gladly give him a matching set.

“I lied to him,” he confesses.

“Lied how?”

“I told him I tripped and faceplanted the ground. Naturally he was concerned, but still smiled like a motherfucker.” He shakes his head. “If I told him my girlfriend whipped my ass, I’d never live it down.”

My fingertips ghost down the side of his beautiful face. “I’m so sorry.” I hate that I hurt him.

“Stop apologizing.”

“I feel awful.”

“Sunshine,” he says, tipping my chin up. “If I had respected your wishes in the first place, none of this would’ve happened.”

“I still feel like a boyfriend basher.”

“At least I know if someone ever jumps us, I’ve got you to protect me.”

I slap his chest. “You’re supposed to protect *me*, asshole.”

“Always,” he says chuckling. Leaning forward he places his lips against mine. “Never doubt that for a second, babe.”



When I arrive at Grayson’s house, I find him standing outside waiting for me. A few weeks have passed since I told him what happened to me when I was thirteen. And he’s still here. Things between us have been amazing, but those old insecurities I have about not being worthy are still in the forefront of my mind. Although there are no signs that the end is near, I can’t help feeling we’re living on borrowed time.

Grayson opens my door before I get the chance to. “Hey,” he says with a smile, leaning an arm on the roof of my car and reaching for my hand with the other. “I’ve been standing out here forever, what took you so long?”

“Traffic.”

He helps me from the vehicle before rocking back on his feet... he seems on edge. I’m staying over tonight... in his bedroom... beside him; it’s possible he’s nervous about that. I

would be if I was him, especially after I physically assaulted him last time. This is our second attempt. I chickened out on our first. I was worried I was going to unknowingly injure him again.

He's perceptive though, noticing straight away that something was off. I was scared to speak up, but he stepped in and took the decision out of my hands. Cupping my face, he placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. "*You're not ready,*" he whispered against my skin. When he turned and left my apartment, I felt like a coward, but in my heart, I knew he was right.

"Well, you're here now, that's all that matters." Tugging me forward, he plants his lips on mine. "I've missed my sunshine." It's been two very long days since I last saw him, but who's counting.

I draw back, taking in his handsome face. The bruising under his eyes is long gone, but I still beat myself up about what I did to him that night. My fingertips graze down the side of his face. "I've missed you too, Gray."

His eyes enlarge, and his smile grows. "You called me Gray."

"So."

"You've never called me that before."

"And your point?"

"It means we're close."

"We bump uglies every time we're alone in a room together, so I'm pretty sure that's a given."

My vulgarity makes him chuckle. "There's nothing ugly about your pussy, babe."

"I'm pretty fond of your cock too, just sayin.'"

"I'm happy to hear that, but what I'm trying to say is that you like me, Carla."

"I think you know I like you."

I more than like him.

I can't even put my feelings into words because they're so foreign to me. All I know is that somewhere along the way he went from a good time to my entire world.

"You don't just like me, Carla, you *like me*, like me."

"Okay," I say, filling my lungs with air. Where is he going with this?

"Admit it, I want to hear the words, pretty girl."

I casually lift one shoulder. "I might be falling for you, so what."

His fingers twirl around the ends of my hair, but his face gives nothing away. "Might be?" I don't miss the twinkle in his eyes, he's enjoying watching me squirm.

It's hard for me to put myself out there like this. I'm so used to the rejection. "Don't go getting too cocky, mister, I said I'm falling... that means I haven't landed yet."

His lips tilt up at the corners as he tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear. "Well, you're lucky I have these exceptionally big guns," he says, flexing one of his impressive biceps. He's such a suave bastard. "It means I'll have no trouble catching you when you finally do fall."

Reaching up, I give his hard muscle a squeeze, just because I love touching him. I don't add any commentary because the last thing his ego needs is inflating.

"That's very chivalrous of you, Mr. Edwards."

He shrugs. "What can I say, I'm a great guy like that."

I laugh at this, because modesty has never been his strong suit. "Of course, you are."

"On a serious note, I get you're still working on it. With some people it doesn't always happen easily." Lifting his hand, his finger gently skates over my lips. "I can wait, just don't make me wait too long."

"You've lost me. Are we still talking about the same thing?"

He blows out an exasperated breath. "We're talking about your heart, sunshine. You know this thing in here." His finger

moves from my face to my chest, where he lightly taps the tip against my breastbone. “One day that little switch in here will flick on, and when it does, there will be no turning back.”

“Huh?”

“Sweet baby Jesus, woman.” He tilts his head back in frustration, staring up at the sky. When his gaze finally comes back to mine, his features have turned serious. “Let me make this a bit simpler. I love you, Carla Just-Carla, and I’m looking forward to the day when you love me back.”

I gulp in some air. “You love me?”

“You happened in a heartbeat for me. The moment I first saw you, I knew I didn’t stand a chance.”

His words almost knock me on my ass. *He loves me.*

“I—”

“Shh,” he says, placing his finger over my mouth. “I know this may seem too soon for you, but I can’t help how I feel.” When tears burn the back of my eyes, I instinctively raise my hands to cover my face. “Hey.” Grayson gently peels them away, and his brows draw in when he sees my tears. “Christ, Carla.” He pulls my face into his chest when a small sob escapes. I have no control over my reaction; I’m feeling so overwhelmed. “Fuck, I didn’t mean to make you cry. I’m sorry, I’ll take it back if you want me to.”

“Don’t you dare take it back,” I reply through a hiccup. How have I lived my entire life without feeling anything close to this?

“Sweetheart,” he says, tightening his embrace and resting his chin on the top of my head.

“I’m sorry for being a crybaby.”

“Don’t be. I’m not going to lie... it wasn’t the reaction I expected.”

“It’s not what you think; I’m just a little stunned. You’re the second person to ever say those words to me,” I mumble into his chest. “Emma was the first.”

He cups my face, tilting it back to his. “Are you serious?” I nod as my eyes well up again. “I find that hard to believe, you’re such an easy person to love, Carla.”

Emma has said the same thing, but it makes me wonder why my parents have never been able to see what they do?

The pads of his thumbs gently brush over my cheeks, wiping away my tears, and I sniffle. “Thank you for saying that.”

“It’s the truth. The best decision I ever made was meeting up with Ashton at the club that night. If I hadn’t, I may never have met you, and that, *my love*, would’ve been a travesty. You’re everything I never knew I wanted... a gift I’ll treasure forever.”

My love. He’s so goddamn swoony.

“Thank you for wanting me.”

“For wanting you?” He clenches his eyes closed for a brief moment, inhaling a large breath. “That statement alone breaks my damn heart. How could anyone not want you?”

That’s a question I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to answer.

He brushes his lips over mine once more before reaching for my hand. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, come, I have a surprise for you.”

“You do?”

“Uh huh.” He reaches into his pocket pulling out the control for his garage door as we walk hand in hand down his drive. The first thing I see when it opens is a shiny red car. It must be new.

“What do you think?” he asks as we step closer.

“Very nice, but seriously, did you really need another car?”

“It’s not mine, it’s yours.”

My eyes widen. “You bought me a car?”

“A Mustang GT convertible to be precise. Red, just like that sexy fuckable mouth of yours.” I stand there blinking up at

him in stunned silence. “I’ve got to say I got an instant boner thinking about you sitting behind the wheel of this car.”

“It’s... it’s beautiful, but I can’t accept it.”

“It’s a gift, Carla.”

“You don’t need to buy me extravagant things, Grayson. That’s not why I’m with you. I’m not used to this kind of thing.”

“Well, get used to it. One day this is all going to be yours too.” He gestures his hand around our surroundings as he speaks. I know he’s referring to us being married. As strong as we are, I still struggle to believe that this will one day be my reality.

“Money isn’t important to me.”

“And that’s just one of the many things I love about you.” My throat clogs up when he mentions the *L* word again. “I want to give you the world... *please let me.*”

“You really are the sweetest,” I say, fisting my hands in the front of his shirt. “But, none of that matters to me. Not your bank account, or your ridiculously big house. *Just you.* I just want you.”

“I just want you too, babe. All the other fluff is just an added bonus, the perks of having too much money. Let me look after you, Carla. I worry about you driving around late at night in that... *thing.*”

I gasp. “Thing?” I step back, letting my arms fall by my side. “There’s nothing wrong with the car I have.”

He scrubs his hand over his face in frustration. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“Well, you did. Is that what this is all about, you’re embarrassed of your neighbors seeing my car parked outside your place?”

“What? Christ no. That didn’t even cross my mind. I’m not a pretentious snob, Carla. Like I said, I just thought you’d be safer driving around in a new car. It comes with roadside assistance, and remember the other night when you said you

almost froze your ass off when you left work? Well, that's no longer a problem because your new ride has heated seats."

Heated seats? I didn't even realize that was a thing, but I push that thought from my mind. "I'm not accepting the car, Grayson."

He raises an eyebrow, challenging me. "Yes, you are. It's rude to give back a gift." Placing the key fob he's holding into my hand, he curls my fingers around it, like it's a done deal. "Let's take her for a spin."

Grr. He's such a caveman sometimes.

Reluctantly I walk around the driver's side. "Just because I'm letting you force me into taking it for a drive, doesn't mean I'm keeping it."

"Fight it all you want, but I have every confidence you'll change your mind once you get behind the wheel."

"You're delusional if you think that."

He comes up behind me, sliding his arm around my waist and pulling my back into his front. He swoops my hair to the side and places a kiss in his second favorite spot, just under my ear. "Nah, I'm just a man in love with his girl," he whispers, making me swoon.

Grayson opens the driver's side door, gesturing for me to get in. The first thing I'm hit with is the smell of new leather. Once I'm seated inside, my eyes are everywhere. The interior is a stylish combination of red and black, perfectly matching the outside. She really is lovely, it's a shame I can't keep her.

Once Grayson is seated beside me, he starts going over the features of the car. Most of it goes straight over my head, but I'm still engrossed in his enthusiasm. He knows what he's talking about; it's so dang hot I have to fan myself as I listen to him.

"I'm nervous," I say, once the engine purrs to life. Did I mention it's a push start... no key?

"Don't be. Just enjoy the ride."

"The only ride I enjoy are the ones I take on you."

He reaches over to squeeze my thigh. “You can take me for a test drive when we get back.”

“Oh, I plan to. You’re so getting laid.”

He chuckles as I tentatively put the car into drive and start moving at a snail’s pace. “Babe, I’ve seen you drive; I know you can go faster than this.”

“I’m scared. What if I ding it or something?”

“It’s just a car, Carla, don’t worry about it.”

“Just a car? To you maybe. I’m not used to fancy things.”

I turn onto Beach Drive, still going well below the speed limit. The car behind us honks his horn, making me jump.

“You’re going to have to go a little faster,” Grayson says, suppressing a grin.

I cautiously take a right onto 10th Street and then a left onto Hermosa Avenue. There’s no set route planned; I’ll just drive around until I’ve had enough, or until Grayson tells me to stop... or I crash. *Shit*. I hope I don’t crash.

“Open her up,” Grayson encourages as we get a break in the traffic.

I do as he instructs, putting my foot down a little harder, and the nerves are soon replaced by a thrill. It drives like a dream. The top’s down, the wind is in my hair, and there’s a huge smile on my face. This car puts my little Red Rocket to shame, but I’m still not keeping her. *I can’t*. One day I’ll save enough money to get myself a decent ride, but that day isn’t today.

Grayson knew exactly what he was doing when he encouraged me to take it for a spin. He’s cunning like that. I’ve never driven anything like this before, and I’m pretty sure that was his motive.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she is.” I admit, sighing.

“You’re going to keep her right?”

My eyes leave the road to glance in his direction. I shake my head and he unleashes his infamous puppy dog eyes. I'm a sucker for those big mint chocolate orbs at the best of times. He doesn't play fair.

"Grayson."

"Carla." He reaches across the center console, placing his hand on my leg. When his fingers inch their way under my skirt, I squirm in my seat. "Do you know how fucking hot you look driving this?" He uses his other hand to adjust the bulge in his pants. "I'm so hard right now. I have a good mind to make you pull over so I can have my way with you right here on the side of the road."

"Anyone would look good in this ride."

"Not as good as you, sunshine."

"I'm not saying this car isn't amazing, because it is. And I really do appreciate the sentiment behind you buying it, but I really can't accept it."

"You can and you will."

"Stop being a brute."

"I will as soon as you stop being a brat."

"You're pissing me off."

"Ditto. Just suck it up and accept the damn car. You know you want to."

He's right, I do, but it doesn't sit right with me. Roxy mooched off her men her entire life, it's how she got by, but I swore to myself a long time ago I'd never be anything like her.

"You're infuriating."

"And you're a feisty little spitfire, who's now the proud owner of a brand-new mustang. Let me do this for you, it'll give me peace of mind to know you're safe when I'm not around to escort you home from work."

"You don't play fair."

The cocky fucker that he is, looks over at me and winks. “I never claimed I did.”

An hour passes, maybe longer, before we finally pull up outside his house again. I’m sure my hair is a windblown mess, but I don’t care. Once I got used to driving the mustang, there was no stopping me. I tried to make the most of my time in the car, because tomorrow Grayson’s going to have to take her back.

“That was... fun.”

“I knew you’d love it. It’s a done deal, you’re keeping it.”

“No. I meant what I said, Grayson.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Give me one good reason why?”

That’s an easy. “I’m not my mother.”

I go to exit the vehicle, but Grayson intercepts me by grabbing hold of my wrist. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I blow out a puff of air. “Roxy used her men for whatever she could get.” I turn my face to look at him. He needs to understand this. “I’m not her.”

“Carla,” he says, somehow managing to lift me over the center console and onto his lap. “Is that what this is about?” I dip my head, lifting one shoulder. “Hey, look at me.” He places his finger under my chin and tilts my face toward his. “I know you’re nothing like her.”

“Still, I don’t feel right taking it.”

“Our situation is nothing like hers. You’re going to be my wife.”

“So, you keep saying.”

Grayson’s eyebrows pinch together into a frown. “You’re going to be my wife, Carla!”

“Do I get a say in any of this?”

“When I ask you, and believe me that day will come, as long as you say yes than of course you do.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then we’re going to have a problem.”

I narrow my eyes, even though my heart is thumping against my rib cage. He speaks about our future with such certainty, I’m starting to believe there’s a chance we may have one. Will I really be Mrs. Grayson Edwards one day? I’m scared to hope.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Carla. I don’t think you understand just how much you mean to me, and one day I know you’re going to love me back just as hard.”

I’m pretty sure I already do, but I can’t seem to find the courage to voice it out loud.

Leaning forward, he places his lips on mine. “Now, turn around and hike up that sexy skirt.” He swats my ass as he says it. “It’s time for you to take a ride on my cock.”

Chapter Twenty

Carla

I WAKE TO THE SOUND of crashing waves in the distance, wrapped up tight and safe in Grayson's arms, and surprisingly I feel a kind of peace like I've never known. There's no panic raging inside me, no hairs standing on end. This beautiful man beside me has given me something that I'll forever be grateful for. *A feeling of normalcy...* something I didn't think I'd ever get back.

I even slept naked, which is something I never thought I'd do. Grayson's front is pressed to my back, skin on skin, and our legs are a tangled mess. His morning wood is nestled snugly between my ass cheeks, and the arm that's underneath me, resting in the crook of my neck is bent, cupping one of my boobs, the other is anchored around my waist, holding me close.

I lie perfectly still, because I want to stay cocooned up in the deliciousness that's him, just like this, for the rest of my life.

I feel cherished.

I feel loved.

I feel whole.

Minutes, possibly longer, pass before he finally stirs. I feel his lips press against my shoulder as his arms snakes a path down over my stomach, halting when he reaches the junction of my thighs. I bite back a moan as his skillful fingers tease my clit. Last night we went at it until we both passed out from exhaustion, but I'm ready for more. I can't seem to get enough of this man.

It's not even the act of sex, it's one hundred percent him. The way he stares deep into my eyes while moving inside me, or how he worships every inch of my body... *and me.* Nobody has ever come close to making me feel the way he does. I didn't think it was possible to be so in sync with another human being, but when we are together, like that, it feels like we're one.

He lifts his head from the pillow, looking down at me with an endearing smile on his face. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Morning,” I reply, turning my head and brushing my lips with his.

He removes his hand from between my legs, using it to lift my leg, anchoring it over his hip. My gaze is glued to him, watching the way his eyelids flutter closed, and how his lips slightly part as he slides inside me. The pure ecstasy I see on his face warms me from the inside out.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” he groans as he withdraws all the way to the tip before slowly inching back in. “I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of your pussy.”

I struggle to comprehend how little old me can bring a man like Grayson Edwards to his knees.

He’s not wearing a condom, but we’ve previously discussed this in-depth. I’ve had a contraceptive implant in my arm for years. Reece suggested I start birth control when I got my first boyfriend, making it perfectly clear that he was in no way giving me permission to have sex, but he thought it best to be safe than sorry. He was looking out for my welfare like always.

The first-time being skin to skin, was like taking our relationship to another level. I like the idea of having no barriers between us. It’s more intimate. It’s just another small part of me that I’ve solely given to him.

He’s moving at a leisurely pace, long, languid thrusts, not like the usual frenzy that accompanies our sexy times. *It’s nice*. His hand moves back between my legs, circling my clit and I rest my head on his shoulder, moaning as his lips trail along my jawline and down my neck. I could get used to waking up like this.

“I need your lips, actually I need to see your beautiful face while I fuck you,” Grayson says, withdrawing and maneuvering me onto my back before climbing on top. “That’s better.” He grins down at me as he reaches for my hands, lifting them above my head and lacing our fingers together.

“I’m looking forward to waking up between your legs for the rest of my life.”

I return his smile, but don’t reply to his words. I want that too, so much, but I don’t want to jinx us.

He wastes no time sliding back in, and I wrap my legs around his waist, using the heels of my feet to draw him closer. There’s something about the heavy weight of his body pinning me down that I love.

Resuming his leisurely pace, he brings his mouth down to mesh with mine. The kiss is sweet and scorching in equal measure.

He’s so skilled at his craft, it doesn’t take long for him to bring me my first orgasm of the day, and I already know there’s going to be many more to follow. He’s an unselfish lover, going out of his way to make sure I’m satisfied multiple times. Always giving so much more than he takes in return.

He draws back, looking down at me as his pace picks up a notch. He’s on a mission now, aiming for number two. He won’t even consider finding his own release until he achieves his goal.

My eyes don’t leave his, and no words are needed from either of us. Our bodies express it all. But it’s time for me to put my big girl panties on and tell him how I feel. He deserves to know. I intake a sharp breath as I formulate the words in my head.

Untangling one of my hands from his, I gently cup the side of his face. “I love you, Gray.” His face lights up as he starts to pound into me with a vengeance.

“I know, sunshine,” he groans, throwing back his head as the pleasure takes over. “*I know.*”



We’re still in bed, neither of us wanting to get up. I’m snuggled into his side, wrapped in his warmth. My head is resting on his chest as I listen to the steady rhythm of his heart.

“I want to talk about the car you bought me,” I say, breaking the silence.

“I thought we already went over this.”

I lift my head so I can see his face. “Hear me out.”

He exhales a long, drawn-out breath. “You’re keeping it, Carla.”

“Okay, but I have some conditions.”

“And they are?”

“You let me give you whatever money I get from the sale of my old car.”

“I’m—”

“I’m not finished,” I say, cutting him off. “And we formulate a payment plan for the balance. I’ll probably only be able to afford fifty dollars a week, but if I pick up some extra shifts, I may be able to give you more.”

“I’m not taking your money, Carla.”

“Well, I’m not taking the car. It’s that simple.” I roll onto my back in frustration, staring up at the ceiling.

“Jesus Christ, woman,” he says, growling as his hand scrubs over his face.

“You either agree to my terms or the deal’s off.”

“*Shit.*” He sighs in defeat because he knows I won’t back down on this. It’s the only way I’ll except his gift. “Fine. But I’m going to put whatever money you give me away for any future expenses you may have, like registration and insurance.”

I open my mouth to protest, when his phone pings. “Saved by the bell,” I hear him mumble.

He holds up his finger to halt me from speaking as he reaches over, retrieving his phone from the bedside table. I poke him in the side.

His brow furrows as he rolls onto his back and reads the message on the screen. “It’s from Ashton,” he says as his

thumbs start to type a response.

“Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know. He asked if I could go and get Emma from the hospital.”

“The hospital?” I screech, sitting up and snatching his cell from his hand so I can read the messages for myself.

Ashton: Can you do me a favor? Can you come to Ami South Bay Hospital and pick up Emma?

Grayson: Is everything okay?

Ashton: I have to leave, but she’s going to need a ride home.

Grayson: What the fuck man!

Ashton: I’ll explain later. Can you come and get her or not?

Grayson: On my way.

“If he’s hurt her, he’s a dead man,” I say, handing Grayson his phone, and rising from the bed.

“He wouldn’t hurt her, Carla... well not physically anyway.”

Those words do nothing to calm me. Things may be going well for Ashton and Emma at the moment, but the jury is still out on my true feelings for him. Grayson may wear rose-colored glasses when it comes to his best friend, but I see a whole different side to him. He’s a swine and has made my friend cry too many times for my liking.

I throw on yesterday’s clothes, and head to the bathroom to brush my hair and teeth. I need a shower, but it’ll have to wait. Emma needs us, and she’s my priority right now.

We take my new car because it’s the one closest to the exit, but I let him drive. My head’s not in a good place, I’m too worried about Em.

My nerves are shot by the time we arrive at the hospital. I’ve worked myself into a state, imagining every scenario possible. None of them good. I’ve tried to call Emma countless times on the drive here, but it kept going to voicemail. I have no idea what’s going on, but I won’t be able to relax until I know she’s okay.

I'm out of the car and striding across the parking lot before Grayson's even turned off the engine.

"Carla, wait up," he calls out, jogging to catch me.

I burst through the glass doors like a woman on a mission. I have no idea where she is, but I'll find her, even if I have to scale every damn inch of this place.

I make my way toward the desk that sits along the back wall, but before I reach it, I hear her.

"Carla," she says.

Pausing, my eyes scan the rows of seats that line the waiting room. The moment I see her, my heart drops. She looks so sad, so frightened. Her fingers are knitted together, resting in her lap, her eyes are red and puffy.

"Em."

I close the distance between us in a few strides. My arms are open, ready and waiting for her. The moment she stands, I engulf her and she breaks down, sobbing. I don't let go until she's let it all out.

"I've got you," I whisper, rubbing my hand up and down her spine.

Only when she draws back and wipes her eyes, do I ask the million-dollar question. "What's going on?"

"I'm pregnant."

"You're what?"

"I'm having a baby, Car. Ashton's baby."

"Is that why he left you here?"

"I don't know." She sniffles, swiping the back of her hand under her nose. "I think so. The doctor gave us the news and he just got up and walked out. I thought he needed a moment... that he'd come back, but he never did."

Ashton Barclay is a fucking dead man.



“I’m gonna kill you,” I scream the moment I open Emma’s door and see Ashton standing there. He’s got a nerve showing his face around here after what he just did.

Grayson appears behind me in an instant, wrapping his arms around my waist just as I lunge for his friend.

“Let me go.” My arms and legs flail around in the air like a woman possessed.

“Settle down, Rambo,” Grayson says, chuckling.

“Your ass is mine, Barclay. Do you hear me?”

“Not on my watch,” Grayson replies.

Is he kidding me? Maybe he needs his ass whipped too.

“You’ve got some nerve showing your face around here,” I scoff, trying to wiggle myself out of Grayson’s hold.

“I’m here to see Emma,” Ashton says, shoving his hands into his pockets. I however, want to shove my fist into his face. His gaze moves to the floor. “I need to talk to her.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you abandoned her at the damn hospital.”

“I know... I just needed some time to digest—”

“Ashton,” Emma says, appearing in the doorway.

“Let’s go, Carla,” Grayson says.

He must be smoking crack if he thinks I’m leaving Emma here with that twat. “I’m not leaving her alone with him.”

“Have it your way.” Before I even realize what’s happening, I’m scooped up and thrown over Grayson’s shoulder.

“Put me down.”

His hand comes down to swat my ass hard. “Not a chance in hell.”

In turn, I rain my own blows on his perfectly round, firm backside. Not hard enough to hurt him, but enough to get the message across.

Only once we're back in my apartment, and he's locked the door, does he gently place me back on my feet. As I adjust my clothes, he retreats a few steps.

Smart man.

"I can't believe you did that."

"It was for your own good," he says, holding his hands up in front of him. "Let the two of them work it out. It has nothing to do with us."

"Ugh." I stamp my foot like a child. I'm so pissed right now... correction, *I'm nuclear*. I'm going to junk punch Ashton, so hard, he's going to choke on his tiny man balls. "For *my* own good? Are you kidding me? You heard what she said, he abandoned her at the hospital the moment the doctor told her she was carrying his child. Who does that? We were the ones that had to go and get her. I was the one who had to hold her while she sobbed in my arms." I feel tears rise to my eyes. He's a low-down dirty cunt for doing that to her. The lowest of low. "If that doesn't deserve a beatdown, I don't know what does."

"A beatdown?" he says, chuckling.

I swat his chest. "This isn't funny."

His hands rise a little higher; I'm not sure if it's to pacify me, or to shield himself. "Let me explain."

"Explain what? There's nothing to explain. He's an asshole."

"I know why he did it."

"There's nothing you can say that will make this okay, Grayson."

"You're wrong."

"Can you hear yourself," I scream. "I'm sick of you defending him."

Stepping around him, I march toward the front door, ready to return to Emma's to wreak havoc on Ashton's sorry ass, but Grayson snags me around the waist again. On instinct I widen

my stance, wrap my fingers tightly around his arm, twist my body and push out my hip, flipping him over my shoulder. He lands on the ground with a thud.

“For fuck’s sake, Carla, will you stop doing that?”

I take another step forward. I need to stop using my ninja skills on him, but in all honesty, he really did deserve that one.

His hand comes out, snagging my ankle. “Sunshine,” he pleads.

“Don’t you dare sunshine me.”

“Babe, calm down. Let me explain. At least hear me out and if you’re still not convinced, I’ll walk you back over there myself.” I narrow my eyes, because I don’t believe him for a second.

Grayson springs to his feet and reaches for my hand, but I slap it away.

“I cannot talk about this when the devil himself is raging inside of me.” He cracks a smile and I clench my fists. He’s walking a very fine line right now.

Sensing danger, he retreats another step. “Ashton didn’t leave because of the pregnancy, and it had nothing to do with Emma. *He loves her*. It was about him...” He runs his hands through his hair as he speaks. “*Fuck.*”

“Spit it out Grayson.”

“Ashton’s ex, Anastasia, was four months pregnant with their child when she killed herself.”

“What?”

“For the past six years he’s struggled to deal with what happened. Well, to be honest he’s never really dealt with any of it. I think today he reacted purely on instinct. He just needed a moment to process it all. He’s here now, and he’ll do right by her, that’s all that matters.”

“Until the next time he gets spooked.”

“There won’t be a next time. This is what’s been standing in his way all along. Deep down he’s a good guy, Carla, and I

know for a fact he'll look after this baby, and Emma. And if by chance I'm wrong, which I know I'm not, I'll personally kick his ass myself."

I blow out a puff of air. "Promise."

"Cross my heart," he says, stepping forward and pulling me into his arms. Lifting my hand toward his face, he places a soft kiss on my palm. He knows this gesture is my kryptonite. It instantly makes my anger fade. "Let them sort it out."

I sigh, absorbing his words. I knew the majority of Ashton's assholeyness stemmed from his ex, but I had no idea she was pregnant with his child when she offed herself. I'm still angry at him, but I can't help but feel for him too. It's such a tragic turn of events.

I reciprocate Grayson's hug. "Okay. I'm sorry for losing my shit. I'm just protective of the people I care about."

He places a kiss on the top of my head. "I admire your loyalty, babe. Don't ever apologize for being the person you are."

Chapter Twenty-One

Grayson

“TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD?” Carla asks as we lie side by side on the daybed, sunning ourselves on my back deck. We’ve just finished breakfast. She got me up at the butt-crack of dawn this morning to do damn yoga on the beach as the sun rose on the horizon. She told me it’s something her and Reece have done together for years.

She even opened up, telling me about the relationship the two of them have. I’m grateful she had someone like him in her life, especially when she was younger. He sounds like a stand-up guy for taking in a thirteen-year-old and caring for her when she had nowhere else to go. Hopefully, I’ll get to meet him one day so I can personally thank him for looking out for her all these years.

I spent the majority of the yoga session staring at Carla’s magnificent ass in those tight leggings, and admiring her flexibility. My dirty mind went straight to the gutter, making mental notes of ways we could incorporate some of those positions in the bedroom.

When we were done, we hit the waves. Carla’s still struggling to stay up on the board for any significant amount of time. But I love her fighting spirit and how she keeps on persisting, never giving up. There’s so much to admire about this woman, I only wish she could see herself the way I do.

I lift one shoulder. “There’s not much to tell. My parents were close, the loves of each other’s lives. My mom took it hard when he died.” I swallow down the lump in my throat. “When my dad was alive, we did a lot together. Watched the games, played catch, fished... we’d often go camping. He taught me everything I needed to know about surviving in the wilderness.”

Reaching for my hand, she entwines our fingers. “I’m sorry, I bet you missed all that when he was gone.”

“My uncle stepped in and tried his best to take his place, but my dad was one of a kind... irreplaceable. My uncle started

taking me camping a few times a year, until I hit puberty and discovered girls that is.”

“Your dad’s brother?”

“Yeah, my uncle Jason. He was a few years older than my dad. They weren’t close while he was alive... I guess my uncle tried to make it up to him, through me.”

“That’s nice.”

“He’s a good guy. I don’t know why they didn’t get on... we hardly saw him while my dad was alive.”

“What was camping like?” she asks. “When I was a little girl, still living at the trailer park with Roxy, I’d sometimes sneak into the neighboring camp site... it was down by the lake. I’d climb a tree, perch myself on a branch and spy on the families vacationing there. They’d spend their days fishing, riding bikes and playing board games. They were always smiling, laughing and having so much fun. It made me envious. I used to wish my family was like that.” She lets out a small sigh before continuing. “At night they’d sing songs and make smores around the campfire. Have you ever tried a smore? I’ve always wondered what they taste like.”

I can’t believe she’s never had a smore, or gone camping. I need to rectify that.

“Babe,” I say, rolling over to face her. Reaching up, I use my free hand to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I’ve had plenty. I’ll get the ingredients and we can make some.”

“Really? I’d like that.”

“There’s a special art to making the perfect smore, you’re lucky I’m an expert at it.”

“Of course, you are,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“With your limited cooking skills, you’re probably going to suck, but rest assured you’ll have me to guide you with my awesomeness.”

“Ha-ha.” She pinches my side making me laugh. “I can’t help it if I didn’t have a positive role model when I was young.”

“I’m just messing with you, sunshine.” I pull our conjoined hands up to my face, planting a kiss on her knuckles. “I wish I was around when you were younger so I could’ve taken care of you. My heart bleeds for that little girl, I hate the life that you had.”

I can tell by the change in the expression on her face that my words stir up a range of emotions inside her. “I don’t ever want you to feel obligated to stay because of the life I’ve had. I don’t need anyone’s pity, Gray.”

Why does my heart rate kick up a notch when she calls me Gray?

“I admire you, not pity you, Carla. I keep you around for purely selfish reasons.” Her eyes move over my face, and the vulnerability I saw the night I first met her is reflected back at me. “Do you want to know why I’m still here?” She nods instead of answering. “Because I can no longer imagine a life without you in it. You’re it for me.”

The reality is, this woman doesn’t need me, she doesn’t need anyone, she’s the heroine of her own story.



“What can I do to help?” Carla asks, coming up behind me and sliding her arms around my waist.

“The meats marinating, all I really need to do is make the salad and put the garlic bread in the oven.”

It’s Sunday, game day, so Ashton and Emma are coming over for a barbeque lunch before the football starts.

“I can do that.”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “You can make salads?”

“Ha-ha. It doesn’t involve cooking, smartass, so I’m sure I can manage.”

“Okay then.” Opening the fridge, I grab everything she’ll need, placing it on the countertop next to the chopping board. “Have at it.”

She gives me a dubious look as she opens the second drawer and retrieves a knife. “Do I need to wash all this stuff first?”

“Yeah, babe,” I say, reaching into the fridge for a beer. I crack the top and lean against the counter so I can observe her. This should be entertaining if nothing else.

My gaze sweeps over her sweet round ass, and down her bare legs to her hot-pink-painted toenails. She looks smoking in those tiny denim shorts and one of my 49ers jerseys that falls off one shoulder. She’s tied it in a knot on the side at her waist, bearing a hint of the creamy smooth skin on her stomach. I adjust my cock in my pants as I force my eyes back to the salad prep, or I’m going to need to fuck her again, and our guests will be arriving any minute.

Ashton’s finally gotten his shit together, so much so, he’s not only moved Emma in to his place, but he’s also proposed. I knew he would do the right thing by her and the baby, and I couldn’t be happier for them. He needs a good woman in his life, especially after everything he’s endured, and Em is the best. She’s sweet, kind, and most importantly *sane*. Just what he needs. I’m hoping the guy I grew up with, the one pre-Anastasia, returns full force because he hasn’t been himself in a very long time.

Carla rinses a tomato first, and gets to work. I internally wince with every slice, she’s decimating the fucking thing, but I don’t have the heart to say anything. There’s a combination of giant pieces, and teeny-tiny ones. Absolutely no uniform at all. Hey, it all goes down the same way, right?

She scoops up the mess when she’s done, tossing it in the bowl. She looks over at me with a shit-eating grin on her face, and I can’t help but return it. She’s so dang proud of herself.

“You’ll make a chef out of me yet, Mr. Edwards.”

“You’re doing a great job, babe,” I lie.

When the doorbell chimes, I guzzle down the rest of my beer and toss the bottle in the recycling bin. I also grab a handful of Carla’s luscious ass as I pass, giving it a firm squeeze.

I open the front door, and the first thing I notice is the massive smile on Ashton's face. I can't remember the last time I saw him look so genuinely happy, and fuck if that doesn't do something to me. I feel like I've been fighting for this very moment for years.

His arm is slung over Emma's shoulder, and he has a pie balancing in his other hand.

"Come in, Carla's in the kitchen attempting to make a salad." I hug Emma first, then fist pump Ashton as he passes.

"Attempting?" Emma asks with amusement in her voice. They're best friends, so I'm sure she's well aware of my girl's lack of skills in that department.

"She's giving it her all," I reply with a chuckle.

As we make our way across the main room, I hear Carla say, "Ouch."

"Are you okay, sunshine?" I ask.

"I cut my finger."

I round the island and reach for her hand. It's not bad, but I still don't like seeing her injured. "Come rinse it under the tap and I'll get you a Band-Aid."

Opening the draw where I keep my first aid kit, I remove what I need. Tearing off a piece of paper towel, I wipe her finger and squeeze a small amount of antiseptic cream onto the cut, covering it with the Band-Aid. When I'm done, I place a soft kiss on the tip of her finger.

"How about you sit your sexy little ass up here," I say, grasping her hips and lifting her onto the breakfast bar. "It's safer if you let me finish."

She pouts, so I lean toward her, sucking her plump bottom lip into my mouth.

I look down at the chopping board, and see the mess she's made of the onion. There are still large patches of skin on the outer edge where she didn't peel it properly.

Ashton places the pie on the counter right next to the salad. I don't miss the amused look on his face as he leans in, observing Carla's not-so-handy work. His eyes then dart to the pie, and back to me. I know he's making a comparison between the two. I raise an eyebrow, and he smirks like a smug prick. He doesn't need to say a word, I can read his mind. If he insults my girl, I'll punch him.

Thankfully, he doesn't. And Carla's too busy oohing and aahing over the rock on Emma's finger to notice our exchange. Soon my girl's going to be sporting one of those rings too. I can't wait for that day.

When the salad is done, I grab the tray of meat and two beers from the fridge and plant a kiss on Carla's lips as I pass. Ashton smacks Emma on the ass and follows me outside onto the back deck, taking the beers out of my hand and opening them. He places mine down beside the meat while I start the grill.

This is what the rest of our lives are going to look like. Him, me and the girls catching up on weekends, watching the game together.

"Who would've guessed we'd end up settling down with best friends?" I state.

"At least I got the one who can cook," Ashton snickers.

I shrug, because I don't care that Carla's culinary skills are lacking, she more than makes up for it in other ways.

"You're always trying to one-up-me, but I know for a fact I got the better end of the deal here."

"How do you figure that? I just witnessed Carla in the kitchen, she can't even cut up a damn salad... did you see the pie Em made... *from scratch?*"

"Pfft. I can buy an apple pie any day of the week. Does your girl have a zero gag reflex?" I puff out my chest all proud, because Carla's BJ skills are definitely something to write home about. I glance in his direction, just in time to see his eyes slightly widen. *Ha, take that, Barclay.* "Carla deepthroats

like a porn star, you can't get that off the shelf at the store, motherfucker."

I'm not usually one to brag about my extracurricular activities, but he started it.

"Whatever," he snipes. "At least I'll be getting a home-cooked meal at the end of each day."

"Yeah, and while you're sitting over there..." I flick my head down the street in the direction of his house. "...getting fat as fuck, I'll be here living the good life with my girl and her sweet mouth."

"Talk it up all you want," he says with a smirk as he brings his beer to his lips. "I've seen the size of your dick, Edwards... it wouldn't be hard to deepthroat that little wiener."

"It's not a fucking wiener," I snap. I know he said that just to goad me, but I can't help but bite back. It's what we do.

"Remember who won the measuring contest back in college?" he retorts smugly.

"Only by one sixteenth of an inch, asshole, and you know I'd been swimming that day."

He throws back his head and laughs, so I grab him in a headlock and mess up his pretty-boy hair.

Our relationship has always been like this, and that will never change, but it's so good to see him happy again. I love this guy like a brother.



"Are you going to tell me where you're taking me?" Carla asks as I merge onto the I-110, heading north toward Los Angeles.

"Nope." I told her to pack a bag with some casual clothes because I'm taking her camping in a secluded area in the Angeles State Forest... where my father and Uncle Jason, took me when I was a boy. My grandfather has a cabin up there, which was eventually passed down to his sons. I'm not

heading to the cabin though. We're going to rough it in the wilderness. I want her to get the whole experience her first time. At least for the first night or two anyway.

"You suck."

"Not as good as you do, babe."

She looks over at me, giving me a cheeky smile. "If I blow you while you're driving, will you tell me where we're going?"

Jesus Christ this woman is perfect. "That'll be a negative, but have at it," I say, reaching for the button of my jeans.

"Ugh." Her eyes dart down to my crotch. "Don't bother."

She crosses her arms over her chest with a huff and turns her head to look out the passenger side window. I love her feisty side; it's like an aphrodisiac for my cock.

We're in the Range Rover today, and I've loaded it with everything we'll need for the next four days. I've been planning this trip for over a month, slowly buying everything we'll need and smuggling it into the house so Carla couldn't find them. I even have my permit so we can light a campfire. Camping is not something I usually do with a female in tow, but in my heart, I know Carla will take it in her stride. She's kick-ass like that.

The trip takes just over an hour, and when we first enter the forest, Carla's eyes bug out of her head. "What are we doing here, are we going hiking?"

"Nope."

Her large eyes narrow. "You're not thinking about murdering me and dumping my body in the wilderness, are you?"

"No, babe," I say, glancing her way with a smile. She's so dramatic.

"Then why are we in a forest?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

She rolls her eyes. “Oh sure, silly me. I only asked that question to make conversation.”

I bark out a laugh at her sarcasm. “We’re going camping, sunshine.”

“We are?” She twists in her seat so she’s facing me, and when her scowl disappears and the corners of her mouth tug up, I know she’s pleased.

“Tonight, we’re going to roast smores over the campfire.”

“Yes,” she squeals, punching the air. She’s so goddamn adorable.

We have to drive deeper into the forest to get to our spot. A secluded place where we’ll be surrounded by the mountains and a wall of large pine trees.

“What do you think?” I ask, as I pull up close to the lake. “This is going to be our home away from home for the next few days.”

My eyes remain on her as she takes it all in. “It’s beautiful. Truly beautiful.”

It is, but not as beautiful as her.

Taking off her seat belt, she reaches for the door handle, and I do the same, meeting her at the front of the vehicle. Grabbing her hand, I lead her down to the water’s edge.

“We should set the tent up down here.”

“Definitely.” She inhales a large breath, filling her lungs with fresh mountain air. “Grayson, this place is perfect.”

“It’s pretty special. This area is where my dad used to bring me.”

“Really?” Her arms slide around my waist as she gazes up at me. “That makes it extra special. Thanks for sharing it.”

“There’s nobody else I’d rather share it with.” Leaning down, I brush my lips against hers. “Why don’t you explore the area while I unpack the car?”

“Let me help.”

“I’ve got it,” I say, slapping her ass. “Go look around.”

My eyes keep gravitating toward her as I set up our tent. I’m looking forward to having her all to myself for the next few days.

“Hey, Gray, where are the amenities?”

“There isn’t any.”

“What do you mean there isn’t any? Where do we shower?” I point to the lake, and her eyes widen. “What if I need to use the bathroom?”

I was wondering how long it would take before she noticed. Standing, I reach into the back of the car for the shovel and a roll of toilet paper, holding them up in the air.

“You’re shitting me?”

“Nope.”

She folds her arms over her chest, and I bite back a smile. This woman amuses me to no end. “I’m not doing my business in front of you, Grayson.”

“I’m not asking you to. I love you and all, but that’s a side of you I can do without seeing.” I point toward the trees that surround our campsite. “You can go over there.”

“In the forest, by myself?”

“Uh huh.”

“But isn’t there like wild animals around here? What if I come into contact with a coyote... or worst still a bear?”

“Then my heart goes out to them, may they rest in peace.”

“Your heart goes out to them?” she screeches, making me laugh.

“Carla, I’ve been on the receiving end of your ninja skills. These wild animals you speak of won’t stand a chance.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Grayson

“ISN’T THIS THE LIFE?” I ask Carla as I lift the perfectly golden-brown marshmallow off the flame, bringing it toward her.

“It sure is,” she answers with a breathy sigh. She’s nestled sideways on my lap in front of the campfire, with a graham cracker lying ready in each palm. There’s a square of chocolate sitting on top of the one in her right hand as she awaits the last component of her smore. “I know I’ve already said it, but thanks for bringing me here. I’ve never been on a vacation before.”

That statement makes me so sad. This will just be the first of many for her. I’m going to make it my mission in life to give her everything she’s missed out on.

“It’s been my pleasure, sunshine.” I use my free hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, so I can place a chaste kiss on her neck, letting my lips linger for a beat.

I’ve loved our time together, maybe we can make this a regular thing... bring our kids here one day. Oh, that’s right, she doesn’t want to procreate. My stomach drops at the thought. I always saw kids in my future, I’d be an awesome dad just like my own father was, but if I had to choose between having a family, and Carla, I’d pick her any day of the week.

I watch as she squishes it all together and brings the smore to her mouth. I swear this is about her tenth one. Luckily, I came prepared for her huge appetite.

We’ve had the best day; she’s taken to the outdoors like a pro. After setting up camp, we collected firewood, where I managed to show off my excellent axe-wielding skills as I chopped some of the bigger pieces into smaller ones. She got all hot and bothered as she watched on, I caught her fanning her face more than once.

After lunch we went for a long hike, and explored the area further.

“Mm,” she moans, and the sound goes straight to my cock. I’ve been on my best behavior all day, but I’ve just about reached my limit. I plan to rectify that as soon as we’re hunkered down for the night. Knowing Carla and her love of food though, that could be damn hours away.

This place has always held special memories for me, even more so now I’ve got to experience it with her.

After taking the last bite, she brings her hand toward her face to lick the gooeyness from her fingers, but I intercept it, sucking the tips of her digits into my mouth.

“Smores taste so much better mixed with you,” I state.

There’s heat in her eyes as she watches me. “Is that so?”

Leaning in, she runs her tongue along my bottom lip and I drop the stick I’m holding, snagging her around the waist and bringing her body closer so I can kiss her. I have a one-track mind whenever she’s in my presence.

My chub is digging into her hip, as my tongue fucks her sweet mouth. My dick is jealous, he wants a turn.

When we finally come up for air, I rest my forehead against hers. “You want another one?” I’m already reaching for the box of crackers beside my chair because I know the answer will be a resounding yes.

My dick will have to take a back seat because I can’t deny this woman of anything. She’s waited her entire life to taste a smore, so she deserves them all.

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Her answer makes me laugh. I’m never sure what’s going to come out of her mouth, and that’s half the fun.

This woman has me by the balls, but surprisingly I’m okay with that.



“Oh shit, what was that?” Carla whispers into the dark.

“What was what?”

“That noise? It sounded like it came from outside the tent.”

“It’s probably just a wild animal, scouring the campsite for scraps of food. Don’t worry, I put all our supplies in the back of the Range Rover before coming to bed.”

“When you say wild animal... do you mean like a bear?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Oh, crap. Do you have a padlock we can put on the zipper of the tent?”

“A padlock?” I ask, chuckling. “You do realize a bear has claws as sharp as razor blades. A padlock won’t keep him out if he wants in here, he’ll just tear straight through the fabric.”

“Oh my God, stop,” Carla shrieks, whacking me in the gut.

“Jesus, what was that for?”

“You’re freaking me out.” She shuffles even closer and is now practically on top of me. As amusing as this is, it breaks my heart to see her like this. I’m confident she has the skills to kill a man with her bare hands, but despite that, the traumatized little girl from her past is still in there... still lurking just beneath the surface.

“Babe,” I say, trying to keep my voice even. If there’s one thing she hates, it’s pity. “You’re safe, I promise.”

“How can you say that? Wild animals are unpredictable, that’s why they’re, you know, wild...”

Her small, delicate hand tightens its grip on my waist when we hear another rustling closer to the tent. “I may not have your skills, but I can handle my own. Besides I have an extra advantage.”

“And what’s that?”

“If the woman I love more than life itself, is threatened in any way, then that person, or in this case animal, wouldn’t stand a chance. I promised you that I’d protect you... that nothing would ever hurt you again, and I meant it.”

“Grayson,” she whispers.

“Yeah, babe?”

“I love you.”

My hand skims down her back, over her ass, and hooks around her leg as I drag it over my waist. We’re both lying naked on top of the sleeping bag after round one.

She moves her body over mine, and our mouths mesh together. “I love you too,” I say, slipping back inside her heat. “More than I ever thought possible.” I wish we could stay here, cocooned in our own little bubble forever. Grasping her hips, I lift her until only the tip of me remains inside. “You own every piece of me, Carla. My body, my heart... my goddamn soul.”

We moan in unison as I leisurely drag her back down until I’m buried to the hilt. This time I want to take things slow. Well at least try to. Things don’t always pan out that way when we’re together like this. The wild beast inside me usually takes over and we end up fucking like animals. Filthy, dirty and so damn hot.

Raising her torso, she places her palms flat on my chest. Her perfect, round tits bounce as she starts to ride me like a rodeo bull. I push my head further back into the pillow, groaning loudly as my fingertips dig into the soft skin at her waist, my hips jerking up to meet her thrust for thrust. The sound of our bodies slapping together fill the air.

So much for going slow...

And there you have it ladies and gentleman. I rest my case.

“Gray,” Carla weeps, literally weeps, as she frantically grinds her pussy against my pelvic bone chasing her own orgasm. My hands move down to clench her tight ass, spurring her on.

My cock thickens and my balls draw up as I give her everything I have. The loud and desperate cries that echo from the tent will probably scare off any animal in a one-mile radius.

“Sunshine,” I shout as her pussy spasms around my cock milking me of my own release. My body is still convulsing

from the aftershocks as she collapses onto my chest, totally spent.



I'm just starting to doze off when Carla nudges me. She's still sprawled out on top. I guess she doesn't have the energy to move either.

“What's that noise?” she whispers.

I grin into the dark. Here we go again. “What noise, babe?”

“Shh, listen.” The tent falls deathly silent, I'm pretty sure we're even holding our breaths. That's when I hear the hissing sound. “That... that noise. Can you hear it?” She's whispering, but I don't miss the alarm in her voice. “Oh, shit, Grayson... holy fuck, it's a snake. There's a snake in our tent.”

She pushes on my chest, leaping to her feet in one swift movement, and I bark out a laugh. She starts hopping, literally hopping from foot to foot; she's worked herself into such a panic she doesn't know which way to go. I tuck my hands behind my head, watching on in amusement.

She scoops up the flashlight I left near the entrance, turning it on. “Why the hell are you still lying there?” she screeches, shining it in my face. I move one of my hands from behind my head in an attempt to block out the blinding light. Crouching down, Carla reaches for the zipper of the tent, ready to make her escape. She's still butt naked. “Get up before it bites you, you idiot.”

“You sure you want to go out there?” I ask, not moving an inch. “What if the bear's still outside?”

Gasping, she lets go of the zipper and stumbles back, causing her to land on her ass. Her frightened eyes dart around the inside of the tent. “We're trapped. Cheese on a cracker, we're so fucking dead.” This time I lose it, doubling over with laughter. “Grayson, this isn't funny.”

“Come here,” I say, sitting up and reaching for her. It's time I put her out of her misery, I've had my fun.

“Are you crazy? I’m not going over there.” She tries to tug her hand from my grip.

“There’s no snake, Carla.”

“What?” Her wide and innocent eyes search my face for the truth... now I feel like a cad for letting it go this far.

“That noise is coming from the air mattress. I guess I fucked you so hard we sprang a leak.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nope.”

When I first heard the hissing sound, I wasn’t sure what it was, or where it was coming from, but since I was the one underneath, and Carla was on top, I could feel the loss of pressure as it started to deflate.

Her eyes narrow and her lips flatten into a line when realization finally settles in. Without saying a word, she snatches up my discarded T-shirt from the floor, slipping it over her head.

“Where are you going?” I ask as she reaches for the zipper again.

“Outside... away from you. I’ll take my chances with the bear, asshole.”

“Carla, wait. Babe, I’m sorry.”

She extends her arm, raising her flattened palm toward me. “Talk to the hand, mister, because I have nothing more to say to you.”

I bite back my smile as I spring forward and wrap my arms around her waist halting her from leaving. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, burying my face in her hair. She lets out a tiny growl, but doesn’t try to fight my hold on her.

She’s so damn cute when she’s mad.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Grayson

I CRACK MY EYES OPEN when I hear a boom of thunder, alerting me to the rain that's now steadily drumming against the roof of the tent.

“Shit,” I mumble, lifting my arm that's draped around Carla's waist and scrubbing my hand over my face. She's still fast asleep and sprawled across my chest.

If the rain doesn't let up, we'll need to pack up and head to the cabin for the duration of our stay. Maybe that's for the best given everything that happened last night. A smile tugs at my lips at the thought.

Sweeping the blonde locks back from her face, I lift my head, brushing my lips across her skin. My back protests as I do. I'm not sure I could endure another night sleeping on the hard ground anyway. There's a patch kit in the box the air mattress came in, but I'm yet to inspect the damage. It may be beyond repair.

Gently moving Carla off me, I sit up, cricking my neck from side to side. I feel stiff all over, and I need to piss. I don't even bother dressing, there's nobody around here but us. I exit the tent and lift my arms above my head, stretching out my weary muscles once I'm standing to full height.

The rain beats down on my skin as I survey the campsite. Whatever was lurking around is long gone. I shake my head and chuckle to myself as I again think about the shenanigans last night brought with it. Although Carla's vulnerable side tugs at my heartstrings, I'm sure even she'll be able to laugh about it in the light of day.

“It's raining.”

I glance over my shoulder to see Carla's sweet face popping out of the tent. I love her sleepy morning look. Her hair is sticking up all over the place, but she still gets my heart racing.

“Morning, sunshine. How did you sleep?”

“Surprisingly well... considering.”

When I let out a small laugh, her eyes slightly narrow.

I walk around the back of the tent, out of view. “Hey, where are you going?”

“To take a leak.”

“Charming.”

“Well, you asked.”

“I need to go too, is the bear still hanging around?”

I chuckle again. I doubt it was a bear.

By the time I’m done, Carla emerges from the tent wearing only my T-shirt and a pair of unlaced pink converse on her feet. It’s raining quite heavily, so the shirt is already starting to cling to that sexy body of hers as the water soaks through the fabric. My cock starts to harden, but he’s going to have to wait. I’ve got to pack up camp, and move us somewhere dryer.

“Why don’t you go sit in the car while I pack up. I don’t want you getting sick.”

“We’re leaving?”

“I need to get you somewhere dry.”

“But...”

“Babe, we’re not going home, I’m taking you to my uncle’s cabin.” I’ll need to call him first, but I’m sure there won’t be a problem. “So, be a good girl and get in the car. This won’t take long.”

She places her hands on her hips and I know the sass is coming. “I’m helping. I’m already wet, and I don’t want you to get sick either, so stop your bitching.”

I shake my head as the corners of my lips tug up.

This woman.



“Are you serious?” Carla screeches as the cabin comes into view.

“What?”

“This has been here the entire time... less than a mile from where we camped, and you made me dig a hole to poop in, like some kind of wild animal?”

“I’m pretty sure wild animals don’t dig holes to poop in, Carla.”

She reaches across the center console, playfully slapping my chest and making me laugh. I could’ve easily driven her up here to use the bathroom, but where would be the fun in that? I wanted her to get the whole camping experience, sue me.

A touch of nostalgia runs through me as my eyes take in the old place. There were so many good times spent here with my dad when I was a kid. It’s where he taught me how to be a man, even though I was just a boy. Did he know our time together would be limited? Because I remember him cramming so much into our stays.

This is where I learnt how to shoot and clean a gun, use a knife properly, make the perfect campfire, and thread and hook a fishing line. My dad even taught me how to play poker and chop firewood, amongst many other things. A lump forms in the back of my throat as memory after precious memory floods my mind. Things I haven’t thought about in years.

The first time my uncle brought me up here, after my father passed, was hard. Part of me was glad to be back, but it made me miss my dad even more. This cabin was where a father and son forged an unbreakable bond. That first night I came here without him, I cried myself to sleep. Granted, I was only ten, but nothing was ever the same with him gone.

I shift the car into park near the front porch. It hasn’t changed much, maybe it’s a little more run-down than I recall. It’s been a long time since I’ve been up here. Fifteen years, or more. I called my uncle while we were still at the campsite, and he was fine with us coming here. He was on the road working, but said he might even drop by for a visit since he’s heading back home. I hope he does.

He resides in Los Angeles with his wife and two young daughters, but he's away a lot since he travels frequently with work. It's been a while since I've seen him, and I'm excited at the prospect of introducing him to my girl. She's going to be family one day... hopefully sooner rather than later.

"This place is cute, very log cabin," Carla says, making me laugh. "Has your uncle owned this place long?"

"It's been in the family for over fifty years. It was my grandfather's, and when he passed it went to his two sons, but after my dad..." I dip my head and lift my shoulder as a fresh wave of emotions runs through me. I can't even bring myself to say the words. "It's my uncle's now."

Carla reaches over, grasping my hand. She doesn't say anything, but her touch is comfort enough. One day this place will be mine, but unfortunately, I won't get to teach my sons all the things my father taught me.

"Come, let's get you inside. You need a hot shower and some dry clothes."

I'll take care of all the wet stuff loaded in the back of the range rover once Carla is dry and warm.



It's day two of our stay in the cabin. Yesterday was a wash out, it pretty much rained all day. We spent our time cooped up inside, either in bed or lounging in front of the lit fireplace in the main room, we even played a few games of strip poker. My girl has the perfect poker face, and hustled me out of my clothes on more than one occasion.

Today's our last full day here, tomorrow we're heading back home. I'm not looking forward to returning to everyday life, because it means I won't get to spend every waking moment with Carla.

But today, the sun has returned, and I have big plans for us. My stomach knots at the thought. I'm finally doing it, I've been procrastinating ever since we got here, but my time's running out. I need to man up and lock this shit down.

We've just finished breakfast and Carla's upstairs in the loft getting ready. My dad put a bit of money into this place when him and his brother inherited it. Putting a small extension off the back that included a fully functioning bathroom and renovated kitchen.

I glance over my shoulder when I hear Carla shuffling down the ladder that leads from the loft. Crossing the room in long, purposeful strides, she lets out a tiny squeal as I wrap my arms around her waist, lifting her down the last few rungs. Her golden locks are pulled back into a tight ponytail, so I bury my face in the crook of her neck, placing my lips against her skin.

“Are you up for taking a walk?”

“Of course.”

Placing her down on her feet, I reach for her hand, leading her out through the rear of the cabin.

Carla talks endlessly as we walk through the forest, down toward the lake. I keep pulling my phone out of my pocket, checking for a signal.

“Are you expecting a call?”

“No, just checking for reception. I want to call my mom.”

“Oh” is all she says as she continues with whatever she was saying prior. I usually hang on to every word she speaks, but not today. This morning my mind is preoccupied by something else.

When the bars on my phone go from one to three, I stop walking. That's probably the best reception I'm going to get around here.

“Just let me make a quick call,” I say, searching for my mom's number in my contact list. It's looking a little bare these days. I deleted all the other women's numbers months ago. Carla is the only booty call I intend on having going forward.

I click FaceTime, wrapping my arm around Carla's shoulder, bringing her closer so she can see the screen too.

I smile as soon as my mom's face appears. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, baby. How’s the camping trip going? Oh hi, sweetie,” she says when Carla brings her head closer.

“Hi, Janelle.”

“Have you done it? Is that why you’re calling?” I can hear the excitement in my mother’s voice as she speaks.

“Done what?” Carla asks.

“Hold this,” I say to her, passing over my cell.

“Oh my God, he’s doing it,” my mom shrieks and Granny’s face appears on the screen. “Kaitlin, quick, come here. Run.”

Jesus, what the hell was I thinking calling them first? I should’ve waited until afterwards. I hope they don’t give it away before the words have even left my mouth.

I reach for Carla’s left hand, her right arm is extending out to the side, so the other three women in my life, can witness what I’m pretty sure is going to be one of my most momentous days going forward.

“Fuck-a-duck, he is,” Granny chimes in as I slide my hand into my pocket and maneuver down onto one knee.

I hear a loud ear-piercing squeal from the other end of the phone, I’m not sure if it comes from my mom or my sister. When I glance up at the sweet girl standing before me, I find her eyes wide and her pretty mouth gaping open.

I give her what I hope is a reassuring smile. I had an entire speech planned, but I can’t remember any of it, so instead I speak from my heart and pray it’s enough.

“Carla,” I say, clearing my throat when I hear the crack in my voice. *Why am I suddenly so emotional?* “I feel like I’ve waited my entire life for you.” When I see tears rise to her eyes, I swallow thickly. “I know we’ve only been together for six months, and some may say this is too soon to make this type of commitment, but I knew from that very first moment, you were something special. I love you more than I ever thought possible. You’re it for me, and the only thing I need in this world to be happy.” I hold the platinum, five-carat, round brilliant-cut, halo diamond ring out in front of me.

“Oh Gray, that was so beautiful,” I hear my mom say, sniffing, but neither of us acknowledge her.

I hold my breath as Carla stands there motionless for what feels like a damn eternity, blinking down at me. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, sunshine? Spend the rest of your days by my side.”

My heart thunders against my rib cage as the silence becomes deafening. Why isn’t she saying anything? My eyes plead with her for an answer.

Suddenly, she drops my phone onto the ground below and launches toward me, knocking me backward and onto my ass. “Yes,” she weeps, peppering kisses all over my face. “Yes, yes, yes. A million times yes!”

I hear a few screams and cheers coming from my cell that’s now sitting face down in the dirt. My family obviously heard Carla’s reply. The ring is still clutched between my fingertips, so I rectify that immediately, sitting us up and sliding it onto her finger before she changes her mind. It’s a done deal.

“Are you sure this is what you really want?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

“I’m a little crazy.”

“You’re my kind of crazy, sweetheart,” I say, placing my mouth against hers to seal our union with a kiss.

My heart is so full.

Standing, I bend to scoop up the phone and end the call before wrapping Carla in my arms. I’ll call my mom again later. I shared the best part with them, now this time is mine, and mine alone.

She said yes.

I feel incredibly light, like the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders. It’s every Christmas and birthday present I’ve ever gotten rolled into one.

We make it back to the cabin in no time. I stop when we reach the back door, swooping Carla into my arms. “What are

you doing?" she asks as I open the glass sliders and step inside.

"Carrying you over the threshold."

"Isn't that supposed to come after the wedding?"

I place her on her feet just inside the door. "I'd marry you right this second if I could."

She stares down at the sparkly ring on her finger and smiles. "It's so beautiful, Gray."

"Not as beautiful as you."

One day I'll tell her the story behind the large, round diamond sitting in the center, but not today. It holds special meaning to my family, *to me*, because it's something my dad bought for my mom. That's why I wanted my mother to be present for the proposal. In a small way, it brought things full circle for her. It also felt like my dad was part of this too.

When my parents first got married, my dad was fresh out of college and hadn't made his fortune yet. So, the small diamond ring he gave her, the one my mom still wears to this day, was all he could afford at the time. One of the first things he did when he made his millions was buy the large diamond that now adorns Carla's finger. He intended on using it for a new, improved engagement ring for my mom, one he said was more worthy of her. But she loved the one she already had and didn't want a replacement.

Even when times were tough after my father passed, she couldn't bring herself to part with the expensive diamond, no matter how badly she needed the money it would bring. When I told her, I was going to ask Carla to be my wife, she gave it to me.

"Your dad would want you to have it," she said, cupping my face. *"If he was still here, he'd be honored to see his future daughter-in-law wearing it... he'd be so proud of you, my boy."*

I didn't want to take it because I knew how much it meant to her, but after her words how could I not? When I picked up

the ring from the jeweler, Mom was the first person I wanted to show, and she cried as soon as she saw it.

“Grayson,” Carla whispers, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, babe?”

“Take me upstairs, you’re so getting laid.”

Without hesitation, I lead her toward the ladder and lift her up onto the first rung. I grab a handful of her ass cheek as she starts her climb. “I’m going to fuck you so hard we’re probably going to break this bed as well.”

She looks at me over her shoulder, grinning. “You’re rich, you can afford to replace it.”



I open my eyes, and the first thing I do is reach for my fiancée. *My fiancée.* My lips turn up at the thought. Light floods the room, so I know it’s still daytime, but I’m disappointed to find the space beside me empty and the sheets cold. I reach for my phone that’s sitting on the bedside table and see it’s almost four in the afternoon.

There are two unread messages from my mom on the screen, and another from my sister, but I’ll get to them later. All I can think about right now is my girl.

We’ve been in bed all day. In between making love to my future wife, we talked about our life going forward and our upcoming wedding. Like me, Carla wants a short engagement. We’re both eager to start the next chapter of our life together.

Flopping back down onto the pillow, I grin up at the ceiling like a besotted fool. Don’t judge, I’m still riding my high. I can’t believe Carla said yes; a part of me worried it was too soon for her, but she didn’t hesitate with her answer. Okay, maybe she hesitated for a beat, but in the end, I got the reaction I was hoping for.

Dropping my phone onto the mattress beside me, I flip back the sheets and rise from the bed, grabbing a pair of sweats from my suitcase and slipping into them. I’m being a needy

bitch, I know, but I want her close. A part of me feels like it's missing when she's not around.

"Sunshine," I call out as I climb down the ladder to the lower level. Jumping from the last two rungs, I turn as my eyes scan the room. "Carla."

I search the interior of the cabin, and when I don't find her, my stomach dips. Heading for the glass sliding doors at the rear, I walk out onto the back deck. "Carla," I call out, but there's still no sight of her. I'm starting to panic as I reenter the cabin and jog toward the front door. Where I again find no sign.

I place my hands either side of my mouth, this time yelling her name as loud as I can. *Where the fuck is she?* My Range Rover is still here, so she couldn't have gone far.

Turning around, I head back inside. My gut tells me something is off, but she wouldn't leave without telling me, would she? The cell reception is spotty at best here in the cabin, maybe she went for a walk to make a call. Emma and Ashton knew I was planning on proposing, but they were both sworn to secrecy. I can imagine she'd want to tell her best friend the good news, even Reece. I know how close they are.

That's where she is, I tell myself.

As I'm crossing the main room, heading back upstairs to grab my shoes so I can go and find her, a glint to the right catches my eye. I race in that direction. The light shining through the window illuminates the large diamond ring sitting on the kitchen counter.

My heart drops the moment I reach it. There's a note sitting underneath, with two words scrolled across it.

Two fucking words.

I'm sorry

This can't be happening. It has to be some kind of cruel joke.

I dash toward the ladder, scaling it in record time. My eyes frantically scan the loft the moment I reach it. The backpack she brought with her is gone. *Fuck.*

I reach the bed in two long strides, scooping up my phone. My hands are trembling as I pull up her number and press call. It goes straight to voicemail and the bottom falls out of my world. I drop to my knees and cradle my face in my hands as the realization sinks in.

She's gone.

She's fucking gone.



THE RESURRECTION OF US...

Chapter Twenty-Four

Carla

Present day...

MY STOMACH CHURNS AS I pull up outside Grayson's house. It's been over two and a half years since I've been here, but it seems like a lifetime. My heart aches at the thought. So many good times were had behind those doors, endless precious memories made. I've tried to block most of them out, not because I don't treasure each and every one of them, but because it's too hard for me to relive.

Taking a deep breath to try and calm my nerves, I reach across the center console for the paper bag that sits on the passenger seat. Eight long weeks have passed since I walked out of the hospital the night of Grayson's accident. Emma has been keeping me updated on his progress since. His injuries were substantial, but not life-threatening like I first thought. The damage was mostly confined to the left side of his body... the side that took the brunt of the impact.

His shoulder was dislocated, his collarbone and arm were broken, as well as a few ribs. He suffered a pretty nasty concussion, but the worst injury was to the lower part of his leg. He had to be cut from his vehicle, having multiple surgeries on his limb to correct the damage.

Grayson's been home from the hospital for almost a week now, but I wanted to give him time to settle in before coming here.

I'm not sure this visit is wise after all this time, but there's something he needs to know. Exiting the car, I tuck the bag under my arm before walking up the path toward his front door. My stomach is in knots. He was so angry at me the last time we spoke in Valentina's bathroom during Emma and Ashton's wedding. I have no idea how he's going to feel about me being here.

Tentatively, I climb the front stairs, pausing to collect myself for a moment. I practiced what I was going to say on the long drive here, but it's all scrambled now. I'm clueless what to lead with.

Shaking out my fingers, I reach for the doorbell, pressing it once. I dip my head and stare at my shoes as I wait for him to answer. Minutes pass. I raise my hand for a second time, but before I ring the bell again, the front door opens.

I suck in a sharp breath the moment our eyes lock. The mere sight of him knocks all the air from my lungs. He's so devastatingly handsome; it physically hurts to look at him.

It's such a relief to see him in one piece.

He has a few days' worth of stubble on his face, it's rare to see him unshaven, but this rugged look suits him. It adds to his overall sexiness. My eyes track the length of his body in a slow appraisal. There's a brace strapped to his left leg, and he looks a tad thinner than I remember, but still gorgeous. It would be hard for this man to look anything less.

"Hi," I say, giving him a tight smile, because I can tell by the stern look on his face he's not at all happy to see me. It stings, but it's nothing I don't deserve after the way I've treated him.

I want to tell him how sorry I am for everything that's happened. That I miss him so damn much... that I still love him, I never stopped, but that's not who we are anymore. I hate how awkward things have become, but none of that is his fault, it's all on me.

The look, the one he once only reserved for me, is no longer present. It was a smile that was so happy... so bright, it used to light up his entire face. All I'm getting now is a scowl.

"What do you want, Carla?"

"I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk."

He draws back slightly at my words, like I've just slapped him. "You want to talk?" he scoffs. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Grayson, please."

"Un-fucking-believable." He shakes his head in disgust. "There was a time I would've given anything to hear what you had to say, Carla, any-fucking-thing, but that ship has sailed."

Too little too late I'm afraid, sweetheart, I don't give a fuck anymore."

I blink a few times as the bite of his words settle in. This time I feel like I'm the one who's been slapped.

Grayson exhales a long, drawn-out breath before taking a step back. My heart sinks, and my mouth drops open when he grasps the edge of the door before slamming it in my face.

Tears burn the back of my eyes as I stand there for a moment, wondering what to do next. This is not how I anticipated things going, but I shouldn't be surprised. He's been trying to get me to talk to him for the past few years, so I'm a fool for thinking anything different.

He once referred to me as his sunshine, but in reality, it was his warmth that lit me up from the inside out. The only thing that can drive away darkness, is light... that's what Grayson did for me. He chased away my demons and filled me with his brightness.

How have I survived the past few years without this man? Not to mention my life moving forward. There's a part of me that wishes I'd never met him. It was easier to live with the emptiness when I didn't know it was there.

I'm not sure how long I stand on his doorstep, but eventually I accept my fate, turning and rushing down the stairs toward Reece's car. He let me borrow it for the day. I didn't tell him where I was going, and thankfully he didn't ask.

I never replaced my Red Rocket when I moved back to Temecula. There was no need. I wasn't going anywhere. As for the one Grayson bought me, it was returned here the day I left him at the cabin. I parked the mustang outside his house and slipped the keys into his mailbox like a coward. I couldn't keep the car after what I'd done, no matter how much I wanted to. It was just another part of him I'd lost.

I then flagged down a cab and cried my eyes out all the way to the bus depot before buying a one-way ticket back home... *to Reece*. Because yet again I had nowhere else to go.

My fingers wrap around the car door handle as I gaze back at his house. That's when I lose the battle on my emotions and the first tear falls.

Through blurry eyes, I look further down the street to where Emma and Ashton live with their daughter, Charlie. Although Emma and I have remained best friends, still managing to meet up occasionally when time permits, I haven't been to their house in years. I miss her, and my goddaughter.

With my mind made up I start walking in that direction. Maybe it's hormones, or maybe it's heartache, but I feel like I'm a dam ready to burst its banks. I'm not in a fit state to drive. I need a hug, a comforting ear and I don't know... *a few bottles of wine.*

I pray that Ashton's not home when I press the buzzer at their front gate. It's a weekday, so fingers crossed he's at work.

"Oh my God, Carla, is it really you?" Emma squeals through the intercom.

"Hey, Em." I lift my hand, giving the camera a half-hearted wave.

"Is everything okay?"

"No." I sniffle, dropping my gaze down to my feet. "Not really."

"Hold on, let me buzz you in."

By the time I push through the gate, she's already opening the front door. "I just put Charlie down for a nap, but come in."

When I reach her, she pulls me into her arms. "It's so good to see you. I've missed you."

"I know. I hate that I live so far away."

She pulls back, scanning my face. "What's going on?"

I release a puff of air as tears burn the back of my eyes, but I somehow manage to hold it together. "I just went to see Grayson"

"You did?" Her eyes widen.

“Yeah.”

“How did it go?”

“It was a disaster. He slammed the door in my face.”

The recognition that he no longer wants me is a hard pill to swallow. There’s always been a small part of me that hoped our circumstances would change, and we’d finally be able to be together again.

“Oh crap, I’m so sorry, Car.” Emma places her hand on my arm as she shuffles to the side, making room for me to pass. “Come in.”

We head toward the kitchen and she rounds the island, toward their fancy coffee machine. “Sit,” she says. “I’ll make us a cuppa and then we can talk.”

“A what?”

Emma laughs. “A coffee. Chance calls them cuppas... it must be an Australian thing.” She waves it off as I place the paper bag on the countertop in front of me. “What’s that?” she asks, maneuvering the mug under the spout.

“A pregnancy test.”

Her head whips in my direction. “Did I hear that correctly?”

I shrug. “I’m late.”

“How late?”

“A few months.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were seeing someone.”

“I’m not.”

Her eyes widen to saucers. “Is that why you went to Grayson’s?” I nod. “You think it’s his? How is that even possible?”

I grimace. “We kind of had sex at your wedding,” I admit, looking everywhere but her.

“How?”

“You know, he put appendage *A* in slot *B*.”

She rolls her eyes, sliding the mug of coffee over to me. “Very funny, bitch. I’ve got a kid; I know how babies are made. I mean when?”

“After the bridal waltz. He followed me into the house and we ended up having hot monkey sex against the bathroom wall in the Barclay mansion.”

“Holy shit-balls.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“You know, having sex at your wedding.”

“Please,” she says, flicking her hand in front of her. “God, only last week Ashton and I had sex on the side of the highway in his Aston Martin. We were coming home from date night... his mom was watching Charlie. You know how small that car is, one of my legs was hanging out the window.”

I laugh, trying not to picture it in my head. That’s not like the sweet Emma I know. “La-la-la-la-la.” I put my fingers in my ears as I say it.

She rolls her eyes. “When you have to factor in kids, you’ve got to take every opportunity you can get. Charlie is a grade A cockblock... Ashton’s words, not mine.”

Taking a sip of my coffee, I turn my face away from her, staring out the back window to the ocean beyond. I can’t look at her when I say the next part.

“We had sex right before he stormed out of the wedding and got in his car.”

“Oh crap.”

She knows where I’m going with this. “He was angry and upset. It’s all my fault, Em. I’m the reason he crashed.”

The last few months have been hard; I’ve really struggled with it all. The guilt I’ve been carrying around is almost unbearable.

She reaches for my hand. “It was an accident; it was nobody’s fault.”

It's sweet of her to say that, but I know better.

Once she has her coffee made, she comes to sit beside me. "So, you really think you might be pregnant, hey?"

"I don't know. I haven't been sick or anything."

"Not all bodies are the same. Some women don't get sick at all, others can be totally debilitated by it."

"Well, I guess I'll know once I take the test."

She raises the cup in her hand, bringing it to her mouth. "We'll do it straight after this. What did Grayson say when you told him?"

"I didn't get that far. I asked him if we could talk and he said, too little too late and slammed the door in my face."

"He's just hurt, Car. I know he still cares about you."

"I'm not sure about that. I think he hates me."

"He doesn't hate you. What are you going to do if you are? You've always said you never wanted kids."

"Only because my genetics are messed up."

"There's nothing wrong with your genes. Your parents might suck, but none of their assholeyness was passed onto you. Look at you, you're beautiful, strong, kind, giving... a truly amazing person."

"Thanks," I say, dipping my chin.

"It's the truth." Emma reaches out and grasps my hand. "I love you like a sister, and I'm grateful to have you in my life. You may not think so, but you have a lot to offer. You also know firsthand what bad parenting looks like. You won't make the same mistakes. You'll be an awesome mom, Carla."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Geez, imagine how gorgeous this kid will be having you two as parents?"

I smile at that. "Is it wrong that I kind of like the idea that part of Grayson may be growing inside of me?" I may not be able to have him, but this is the next best thing.

“Right, that’s it.” She places her cup down before taking mine out of my hand. “The suspense is killing me. We’re going upstairs to my bathroom right now.”

She scoops up the paper bag before tugging me off the stool. An uneasiness settles in the pit of my stomach, but it’s time I put my big girl panties on and find out one way or the other.



I tear open the box. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” I admit, lining the contents out on the bathroom sink.

“You’ve never done one of these before?” Emma asks.

“Never. I’ve been on birth control since the beginning of time, but I stopped after Grayson and I broke up. If I couldn’t have him, I didn’t want anyone else.”

“Oh, Car,” she says, rubbing her hand down my back. “I wish I knew what went wrong with you two. Hopefully one day you’ll be able to tell me.”

I nod instead of answering. I wish I could talk to her, but it’s not that simple. There are too many consequences if I do.

“Here.” Emma picks up the stick thingy, passing it to me. “You just need to pee on the strip.”

“Okay.” I walk over to the toilet, pull down my pants and take a seat, doing as she instructs. “Now what?” I ask.

“We wait.”

I place the stick down on top of the pamphlet that came with the test kit, washing my hands. “How long does it take?”

“A few minutes.”

I turn around, giving the test my back. “I can’t watch.”

“It’s okay. I’ll keep an eye on it for both of us.”

Time seems to stand still.

“Anything yet?”

“Give it a bit longer.”

I wrap my arms around my body for comfort. I’m nervous, but I’m too scared to hope. I’m only setting myself up for a letdown if I do.

A few minutes later I hear Emma sigh from behind me, so I glance at her over my shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s negative.”

“Oh.” Those words are like a knife through my heart. My whole body deflates and a crushing pain settles in my chest. This truly is the end of us.

“Hey.” Emma reaches for me, but I shrug her off. If I let her touch me it will be my undoing. “I want to hug you so bad, Carla, but you’re giving off that don’t touch me vibe right now.” She grabs my hand instead, giving it a squeeze, but even that has the dam behind my eyes threatening to spill over. “Tell me what to do, how I can help?”

“There’s nothing you can do.” I wipe my fingers under my eyes, but a few more tears follow.

“Please let me hug you, you really look like you could use one.”

I’m too weak to fight.

As soon as her arms wrap around me, I break down. I feel like I just lost a part of me I never knew I wanted until this moment.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Grayson

I POUR MORE AMBER LIQUID into the glass, tossing my head back and drinking it down in one gulp. I've never been a heavy drinker, but I've drunk more than my fair share over the past few years, no thanks to Carla. She not only fucked up my heart when she left, she's partly responsible for the demise of my liver too.

I still can't believe she came here. I thought I was seeing things at first, like a goddamn apparition. I can't even begin to tell you how many times I've wished for just that... for her to show up at my door. But once I got over the initial shock, the hurt and anger soon took over.

I've waited years for that talk, and now she's suddenly ready. *What a joke.* It drove me to the point of insanity not knowing where she was, or why she'd left. So, I can't help wondering what she had to say to me today. If she was finally ready to give me answers. Why now? Why after all this time? I guess I'll never know, because I didn't give her a chance. Her unexplained rejection is still too raw, so slamming the door in her face was purely a reflex. *Fuck my life.* And fuck Carla and whatever the hell her last name is.

As much as it pains me to say it, when I told her I was done I meant it. I can't keep torturing myself like this. It's time to move on. Why does that thought make me want to hurl?

My free hand grips the edge of the table until my knuckles turn white. Why did she come here? What did she want? Here I go again, letting her back into my head.

Raising my arm, I throw the crystal glass I'm holding across the room, it shatters into tiny pieces against the far wall, just like my pathetic heart.

"Fuck," I scream. Why can't I move the hell on?

I hear the key in the front door and I swing my body in that direction. The sudden movement has my drunk ass swaying on my feet. I know it's not her, but that still doesn't stamp out the hope rising in my chest.

The door opens, and Ashton steps inside. I can tell by the frown on his face he knows what went down today.

“If you came here to talk, I’m not in the mood,” I say.

“I wanted to check you were okay. Emma told me what happened.”

“Of course, she did,” I scoff.

I love Emma and Ashton like family, but nothing is sacred when your ex is best friends with your best friend’s wife.

“How’s your leg?” he asks.

“Fucked,” I say, just like everything else in my life. I want things to be normal again. I want the life I used to have back. I’m sick of the woe-is-me sap I’ve turned into.

“How did PT go today?”

“Cut the crap, Ashton, just say what it is you came here to say.”

“Fine,” he says, stepping up to the bar pouring us both a drink. The last thing I need is more alcohol, but I just want to get fucked up so I don’t have to feel anymore.

“You need to let her go.”

“And you need to mind your own business.”

“It’s time you started worrying about yourself. You’ve been there done that, she’s not the right girl for you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong... she’s the *only* girl for me.”

“Bullshit, you can do a whole lot better and you know it. Look at how she’s treated you the past few years. She ripped out your heart without so much as an explanation.”

“Don’t,” I snap, holding up my hand.

Everything he’s saying is true, but I still want to punch him for it. I wish more than anything I could erase what I feel for her, but after all this time she still owns my damn heart.

“Can’t you see this is just you, being you? You look after people. It’s what you do, what you’ve always done. You’re a caretaker, Gray. You looked after your mom and your sister

when your dad died, you took care of me when..." He blows out a long breath. "...all that shit when down with Anastasia." Ashton swallows hard before continuing. "Christ, you're still looking out for me, and now I'm going to return the favor. This may be hard for you to hear but she doesn't deserve you."

I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration; I know he's right, but I can't help what I feel. "She's the only girl I want."

"You're being ridiculous. You've had others since her."

"Yeah, but none of them measured up." I exhale a frustrated breath. "They were purely filling the void. Helping me forget. Half the time I had to close my eyes and pretend they were Carla just so I could blow."

Ashton shakes his head. "You just haven't found the right one yet. She's out there trust me. Emma came along when I least expected her. Look at us now."

Him and Emma are perfect, blah blah. Good for them.

"Fuck," I grate out. "You're not listening, I don't want anyone else. Carla is my Emma!"

I slam down the glass in my hand. She's the only woman I've ever given my heart to, a heart I forgot to get back from her before she left. She's my *one*, the person my father told me about before he passed, and I refuse to settle for second best. Jesus Christ, I need to get out of this damn house, I'm going stir crazy.

"Look, I didn't want to tell you this, I know you're going through a lot right now, but she's moved on, and you need to do the same."

His words take a moment to register. "What do you mean she's moved on?"

"When I got home from work, I found a pregnancy test in our bathroom. I thought it was Emma's, but when I confronted her, she confessed it belonged to Carla."

My heart sinks. She told me she didn't want kids.

"Carla's pregnant?"

Ashton shrugs. “I don’t know, I didn’t ask Emma to elaborate. Carla is kind of a touchy subject between us since everything went down between you two.”

His words not only make my head spin, they fill me with rage. “Fuck.”

“There’s more. Carla came to the hospital after your accident.”

“She did, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.”

She did come... she does care?

Here I go again, grasping for any sliver of hope I can find.

“I didn’t want to hurt you. You were going through enough.”

“You think her coming to see me would hurt? Have you not heard a word I said? This is great news.” Every day I was in the hospital, a huge part of me wished she’d visit.

Ashton sighs as he bows his head, shoving his hands into his pockets. “She didn’t come alone. She came with another guy. I asked them to leave, I was pissed she’d show up with her new boyfriend in tow. Emma and I got into a huge fight over it, but I knew it would hurt you to see her with someone else.”

“Maybe he was just a friend.”

“I’m afraid not. Emma mentioned they’re living together.”

“What?”

I may be three sheets to the wind right now, but it does nothing to lessen the sting. His words are a crushing blow to my already fragile heart. Why would she do that? She told me at Ashton and Emma’s wedding that they’d been nobody else since me. Was she lying? I scrub my hand over my face. I don’t know why I continue to keep her up on a pedestal. She’s proved time and time again she doesn’t belong there. Have I been so blinded by love that I refuse to let myself see the truth?

Staggering slightly, I start moving across the room. “You need to go,” I say, using the back of the couch for support as I head toward the staircase.

“Grayson.”

I hold my hand up in protest; I don’t want to hear anymore. “Go, I want to be alone.”



My physical therapist, Christy, passes me the leg brace before crossing the room to the kitchen to wash her hands.

“When do you think I’ll be able to get rid of this thing?” I ask, sliding my foot into it and securing the Velcro straps around my calf. *I’m over it.*

I’m only wearing it during the day now, and I’m thankful to be free of this fucker when I sleep, but I want it gone completely.

The doctor removed the last of the pins from my leg before I left the hospital, but I still have limited movement in my ankle. I’ve had three operations thus far, and until my leg completely heals, and I’m given the all clear, I can’t even drive.

The crumpled wreck they cut me out of at the scene flashes through my mind, but I push the image straight back out. I can’t go there right now. Even though I was pretty out of it at the time, I remember looking over at my once-prized sports car as I was being loaded onto a stretcher. She was a fucking mess, just like I was, barely recognizable. It was no surprise to hear the insurance company wrote her off, she was towed back to one of their lots where she still sits, but I haven’t been to see her... *I don’t want to.*

I loved that damn car.

“If you keep improving like this, I’d say a few more weeks tops,” Christy replies.

That may not seem like a long time, but I’ve already lost the last two months of my life. I need to get back to work... I need

to get out of this damn house, I'm craving normality. Being cooped up in the hospital, and now here, is sending me around the goddamn bend. I have too much time to think, and wallow in self-pity.

Too much time to miss Carla.

Three days have passed since she came here... since Ashton informed me on what's really going on. Did Carla come to gloat? Did she really think I'd want to know she's moved on? She didn't want kids with me, so I can't even put into words how it feels to know she's shackled up with some other guy, playing happy families, and giving him the life I wanted for us.

When the doorbell rings, I throw my head back and groan. "You want me to get that on my way out?" Christy asks as she lifts her bag, slinging it over her shoulder.

"Tell whoever it is to fuck off."

Christy's eyes widen in shock. She might think I'm joking, but I'm not. I only let her in because I need her to fix my damn leg so I can get a semblance of my life back.

I stay seated as she opens the door. "Hi," she says to whoever is standing on the other side.

"Hi, is Grayson in?" It sounds like Emma, and it's confirmed when a flash zooms around Christy's legs, and I see a tiny little human run across the main room in my direction. As shitty as I'm feeling, I can't help but smile when I see her sweet face. "Charlie," Emma calls out, but the toddler is already out of her reach.

"Gway-Gway," she squeals, launching herself into my awaiting arms.

"Charlie-bear." I wrap her up tight, blowing a raspberry on her neck, making her giggle as she squirms her tiny body around. "I've missed you, baby girl."

She draws back her upper body, and although she's a carbon copy of her mother, she has her dad's blue eyes.

She places her small, chubby hands on each side of my face, giving me a serious expression. “I miss you, Gway-Gway.” Fuck, I love this little girl. Her large eyes grow bigger and a smile bursts onto her face. “Momma made us tookies.” I chuckle, because this kid is too cute.

I envy everything my best friend now has. The love of his life by his side, and this cute little bundle in my arms. This is what I once saw for my future, not his. It’s funny how life works out sometimes.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Grayson,” Christy says as she moves aside to let Emma in. I’m not in the mood for company, but I guess I’m left without a choice.

Emma gives me a tentative smile as she comes toward me. She has what looks like a photo album in her hand and a plate of cookies balancing on top. Ashton probably told her about our conversation the other day.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Em.”

“Tan I have a tookie now, Momma?” Charlie asks with a pouty lip and hopeful eyes.

“Just one,” Emma replies, placing the plate down on the coffee table and moving to sit beside me. I maneuver Charlie until she’s back on her feet, and Emma reaches out, resting her hand on my leg. “How are you, Gray?” Dropping my gaze down to my lap, I shrug. “Ashton said you were upset when he came over.”

“Do you blame me. I can’t believe she’s having another man’s baby.”

“What?” Emma screeches.

“He told me Carla’s pregnant, and about the guy she’s shacked up with.” I swallow back the lump in my throat. I still can’t believe it.

“Ashton told you what? My husband’s such a dick sometimes,” she says, shaking her head. “She’s not pregnant, and there is no other guy.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, sitting up straighter in my chair.

“She took a test while she was at our place, but it was negative. She thought the baby was yours, Gray, that’s why she came here.”

My eyes widen and a small ray of hope bubbles up inside my chest. “Mine?”

“Yes, she told me what happened at the wedding.”

Reaching up, I rub the back of my neck. “I bet she was relieved to find out she wasn’t pregnant.”

“Actually, she wasn’t. She broke down when the test came back negative.”

“She did?”

“Uh huh.”

“And what about the guy she’s supposedly living with?”

“It’s Reece. I’m sure she’s told you about him.”

Reece, Jesus Christ. I didn’t even factor him into the equation. “That’s who she came to the hospital with?”

“Yes.”

“So, they’re not like... together, *together*?”

“Eww, no way. He’s like a dad to her, or a big brother at the very least.”

Fucking Ashton.

Emma reaches over, picking up the album she brought with her. “I’m sorry Ashton came over here with his half-ass assumptions. If I’d known what he said to you, I would’ve come sooner. I’m only here today because I want to show you something. Yesterday, we picked up our wedding photos.”

“Okay.” God, please don’t make me sit here and go through this entire album.

She opens it up to a page she’s marked with a long strand of white ribbon. It’s a photo of her and Ashton, they’re gazing

into each other's eyes. The last thing I want to see are images of them all loved up. It feels like salt rubbing into my wound.

“What do you see when you look at this image?”

“I don't understand what you're asking.”

“Look at it, really look at it, Gray, at the way I'm looking at Ashton.” She points to her face. “If you had to describe in one word what you see in my eyes, what would it be?”

My eyebrows pinch together. Where is she going with this? I'm not in the mood for this shit. “Love, I guess.” I shrug. “I can see how much you adore him.”

“Bingo,” she says as a huge smile explodes onto her face. “You're good at this.” What the hell, are we playing games now? I can't see why she'd think any of this would help. It's damn depressing to be honest. “Bear with me.” Emma flips ahead to another page she's also marked. “Now look at this one.” I intake a sharp breath when I see it's a photo of me and Carla when we did the bridal waltz. The image was taken from the side but on an angle so you can see the majority of Carla's face. She's so goddamn beautiful it makes my heart ache. Emma pokes her finger at the picture with enthusiasm. “Look at Carla's eyes, Gray. You can see that same look, right?” *Fuck me, I can.* “She still loves you,” she whispers. “It's written all over her face.”

I want a copy of this photo. Will I look too needy if I ask for one?

Swallowing, I try to relieve the baseball-size lump that's now lodged in my throat. “I still love her too, goddammit... *shit.*” I don't know why this makes me mad, but suddenly I'm seething. I stand, raking my fingers through my hair. “If what you say is true, why is she doing this to us?”

Emma bows her head. “I wish I knew.”

“She's never said anything to you? Never given you any indication as to why?” I ask as I start to pace.

“Of course not. I already told you that numerous times.”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “I know... I know, I just thought maybe you were keeping something from me because she’s your best friend.”

“You’re my friend too, Gray,” Emma says, reaching out to grab hold of my hand as I pass in front of her, giving it a light squeeze. “If there was any way I could help fix this, believe me I would. It kills me to see you both like this. You belong together.”

“You think we belong together?” I ask hopefully, even though I already know it’s the truth. Carla owns every part of me and that’s why I can’t let go. Ashton may not think so, but I’m glad his wife can see things as clearly as I do.

“There’s not a doubt in my mind.”

I scrub my hand over my face. “I wish I knew what I did wrong, Em, so I can make it right again.”

“If it’s any consolation, I honestly don’t think it’s anything you did. In my opinion you’re simply collateral damage against the inner war she’s fighting within herself.”

Everything Emma has said since she arrived filters through my mind. And then it hits me like a bolt of lightning. Is it really that simple? Has the answer been staring me in the face this entire time?

“Actually, there is something you can do to help,” I say.

“Name it.”

“Tell me where Carla grew up.”



Temecula. That’s all I’ve got, but it’s a start. It’s the closest thing I’ve had to a lead in a long while. Carla has kept her exact whereabouts a secret from Emma as well, but I’ve now learnt she grew up a few hours from here, and if she’s living back with Reece, it’s possible that’s where I’ll find her.

When I first hired a private detective to help track down Carla after she disappeared, I ended up feeling like a fool. The woman I loved, the one I’d been engaged to, albeit for only a

few hours, was in reality a total mystery to me. I didn't know her last name, or even where she came from. I knew she grew up in a trailer park, and then moved in with Reece, but I had no clue which town or state.

Her apartment in Gardena wasn't even under her name. The person who owned it was no help to us either. My guy eventually found him somewhere in Germany, and all he could tell us was he'd leased it out to a friend of a friend. My gut told me there was more to it, but there was nothing I could do to prove it. He was under no obligation to tell us anything. That's where the trail ran cold. We continued the search, but in the end it was futile.

Reaching for my phone, I search for the investigator's number, but I just as quickly change my mind. I might do a little exploring myself first. How many gyms are there in one city? I'm guessing not too many. I open the Safari app on my phone, typing '*Gyms in Temecula*' into the search bar. I scroll down the list when it appears. Okay, so there's more than a couple, like a few dozen, but I've got nothing better to do. I can knock this over in a few hours.

My stomach churns with nervous anticipation when I click on the call icon at the top listing. "United Fitness, how can I help you?" the girl answers. I immediately know from the sound of her voice it's not Carla, but that doesn't mean she's not there.

"Hi. I'm actually after Reece, is he available?" Carla told me he owned the gym when she lived with him, so it makes sense to ask for him first. There's no guarantee she works there, but if I can find him, there's a chance it will lead me to her.

"Reece? I'm sorry, there's nobody working here by that name." I feel deflated, but this is just the first of many. I can't give up yet. If I run out of gyms in Temecula, I'll move onto the ones in the surrounding area. "I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

I hang up and move to the second listing.

By the time I reach number sixteen on the list, I'm starting to lose all hope. "Mind, Body and Soul, Michelle speaking."

"Hi, Michelle, I was wondering if Reece was available?"

"You've just missed him actually." My heart starts to thunder in my chest as I sit up straighter.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"He had to run a few errands, I'm guessing an hour or so."

"What about Carla, is she around?"

"You're out of luck again, Carla doesn't work here on Wednesdays."

I fist pump the air, just like Carla used to do. "Oh."

"Can I take a message? I can get Reece to call you back when he gets in."

"No bother," I say. "I'll try again later."

"Okay."

"Thanks for your help, Michelle."

"I wasn't exactly helpful," she says with a small laugh.

She was more help than she knows.

"I appreciate it anyway."

Slouching into the chair, I rest my head on the back of the couch as I end the call, dropping my cell beside me. I run my hands through my hair. A sense of pure relief settles over me. It's funny, only a few hours ago I felt like I was in the depths of despair, yet here I am now feeling on top of the world.

I found her.

I fucking found her.

Watch out, sunshine, I'm coming for you.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Grayson

I GLANCE DOWN AT THE time on my phone. It's early afternoon. Common sense tells me to wait and formulate a proper plan. It would after all, be the sensible thing to do, but fuck that. I already know a lifetime of preparation won't be enough. We're heading toward our third year since this shit-show started. I'm not putting this off another second.

With my mind made up, I rise from the couch and head upstairs to change. Temecula is an hour and a half from here. I know I can't drive myself there, but I can pay someone to take me.

Once I'm dressed, I grab some money out of the safe, and pull up the number for Hermosa Beach Taxis. It's definitely not my preferred way to travel, but I've been forced to use them a few times in the past week to run errands. My mom, Granny, Ashton and even Emma, have offered to take me wherever I need to go, but I hate relying on other people. They all have their own lives to live, and I've disrupted them enough in the past few months. Besides, I can't risk any of them trying to talk me out of this lunacy.

When the cab pulls into my driveway where I'm waiting, I open the back door and climb in. "Where are we heading?" he asks.

"Temecula."

He turns his head in my direction. "Temecula?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," he says, "my shift ends in an hour. Besides, that's way out of my range."

"I had a feeling you'd say that," I reply, removing the wad of cash from my pocket, holding it up in front of me so he can see it. "I'll give you five thousand dollars if you drive me there, wait while I do what I need to do, and then bring me back here."

His eyes widen; I can tell he's tempted. Hence why I offered as much as I did. It's not like I can't afford it, and who

wouldn't take that kind of money for a few hours of easy work. "Is it real?"

"Of course, it's real. You saw the house you just picked me up from, right?" I ask, gesturing out the front windscreen. Pulling out my wallet, I show him the address on my driver's license. "I live here."

"Can I see it?" He extends his hand as his eyes zero in on the cash I'm holding.

The money is wrapped in lots of a thousand, so I pull out two bundles and pass them to him. "Here. There's two grand, which you can keep as a down payment. I'll give you the rest once you drop me back home. You have my word."

Two thousand dollars is more than enough to cover this trip, but I'm a man of my word, he'll get the rest.

He removes one of the hundred-dollar notes from the band and holds it up to the light. I should be offended that he thinks it may be counterfeit, but I can't blame him for being suspicious. My request is a random one, but there's nothing I wouldn't pay to get my girl back.

"I'll just need to make a quick call to my boss and get the okay."

"Sure."

"Hey, boss," he says when the call is picked up on the other end. "It's me, Johnny."

"What do you want?" he barks. Wow, what a rude prick. I'd never speak to my employees in that way.

"I have a guy who's offered me two thousand in cash to drive him to Temecula and back." He glances at me over his shoulder and winks, making me chuckle.

"Two thousand you say?" His boss lets out a long whistle. "Is he legit?"

"Yeah, boss. I've got the money in my hand right now. I picked him up from one of those fancy houses along Beach Drive."

“He doesn’t want you to do anything illegal does he? That car is registered in my name.”

Johnny glances my way again, and I shake my head. “Nah, boss. He’s completely aboveboard.”

“Okay, sure... why not. You’ll go over your shift, but I can pay you overtime, I guess.”

Overtime? My assumption about his employer was on point, he’s an asshole.

“Actually, I want half of the money,” Johnny says, and a smile bursts onto my face.

“Half?” his boss screams down the other end of the line.

“It’s only fair. I can always tell him no. I’m sure there’s plenty of other drivers around that would take him up on his offer.” I like this guy already.

“Shit, fine. Don’t go doing that. I’ll give you five hundred and that’s my final offer. It is my taxi you’re driving after all.”

“Eight,” Johnny counters.

“Seven and not a penny more.”

“Okay, seven.”

His boss grumbles something under his breath, and I cover my mouth to muffle my laugh. He thinks he just got swindled out of seven hundred dollars. Imagine if he knew about the other three grand on the table?

“I want you to come straight here with the cash when you return.”

“Okay, boss.” Johnny ends the call and gives me a shit-eating grin through the rearview mirror. “Buckle up, Richie Rich, looks like we’re heading to Temecula.”



The taxi pulls up outside the gym, and I crouch down so I can get a better look through the front windscreen. I’m not sure what I expected, but it looks like a nice place. I’m not even

certain if the Reece and Carla that work here are the same people, but I've got the town, a gym and the correct names, so it would be freaky if it wasn't.

"You want me to wait here?" Johnny asks.

"Please."

I intake a deep breath before exiting the vehicle, walking toward the front door with a slight limp. I'm nervous; I'm not sure how this is going to go down.

Pushing through the front glass door, my eyes take in the interior. It's a lot bigger on the inside than it appears from out front.

"Can I help you?" the girl behind the desk asks, and I wonder if she's the same one I spoke with on the phone earlier.

"Hi. Is Carla in?"

"No, she's working at her other job today."

Her other job? I wonder if she's still bartending. "What about Reece?"

"Yes, he's here." Her eyes search the room before she calls out, "Reece." She points to me when, I presume, she has his attention. "You got a minute? There's someone here to see you."

Shit. What am I going to say to him, I've never met the guy? Twisting my body around, I follow her line of sight and see a tall, beefy dude heading in our direction. He's probably not much older than me, and nothing like I expected. I feel a little sick about it to be honest. He's not bad looking, you know, for a guy and all... maybe there *is* something going on between him and Carla.

He gives me the once-over as he approaches. He looks like a mean motherfucker, and I'm suddenly second-guessing coming here. Deep down I know he's a good guy... he took in my girl when she had nowhere else to go, but I'm still feeling apprehensive. I have no idea what Carla told him about our breakup.

I wait until he's within reach before extending my arm. I'm not giving up that easy. Carla is worth the fight. "Hi, Reece," I say.

"Hey." He accepts my hand, giving it a firm shake.

"I was wondering if you had a minute to chat."

"Sure. About what?"

I rub the back of my neck trying to formulate a response. One that's not going to make me look like an idiot. *I've got nothing*. The silence stretches to a point of awkwardness, so in the end I go with the truth.

"Carla."

"You want to chat about Carla?" he asks, arching a brow. He looks me up and down again. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't." Christ, I should've led with that. "It's Grayson... Grayson Edwards. Carla *was* my fiancée."

I know we've never officially met, but I've been present when Carla and Reece have talked on the phone, and I know she's mentioned me.

"Your fiancée?" I'm surprised in the few years she's been back here, she never mentioned our engagement. That knowledge makes me feel uneasy.

"Yes."

"Hmm, interesting. I thought you looked familiar. Carla's screensaver on her phone is a picture of the two of you."

"It is?" That means something, right? The glimmer of hope that Emma gave me earlier, shines a little brighter.

He bites back a smile, scratching his head. "Maybe forget I mentioned that. She'd probably kick my ass if she knew I told you."

"I've witnessed her ninja skills firsthand, so I don't doubt it," I say, chuckling.

“We call her killer around here; she’s taken down some of my biggest guys.”

“Really? I’m not surprised. If nothing else, that information may help me get some of my street-cred back.”

This time he laughs. “I was sorry to hear about your accident, but I’m glad to see you’ve recovered well.”

“I heard you brought Carla to the hospital that night.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah, your *friend* kicked us out.”

Reece probably thinks Ashton’s a douche, like Carla does. I bow my head because I can’t fault my best friend for having my back, even if it was misguided.

“He thought he was helping,” I say, shrugging.

He nods, but the pinch in his brows speaks volumes. His eyes dart to the girl behind the front desk, who’s hanging on every word of our conversation. “Do you want to chat in my office?”

“That would be great.”

He leads us into a spacious room toward the back of the gym. One of the first things I notice when I step inside are all the framed certificates. They virtually cover the entire back wall. This man is extremely accomplished, no wonder Carla is so well trained.

Off to the right is a sizeable floor-to-ceiling, glass cabinet, that’s overflowing with medals and trophies.

“Take a seat,” he offers, gesturing to the chair in front of me. He rounds the desk, seating himself on the other side. “What is it you want to discuss?”

“I want to win Carla back, and I was hoping you could help me.”

“You want her back? Don’t you think you’re a few years too late?”

I gaze down at my lap. “I didn’t know how to find her until today.”

“Hmm. What happened between you two anyway?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I proposed, she said yes, and then she disappeared. She never gave me an explanation. It totally blindsided me.”

“Hmm,” he hums again.

“She never gave you any indication as to why?” I ask.

“Nope. I didn’t even know you proposed. She unexpectedly turned up here one day... she was a mess. I just presumed you guys had broken up.”

“I loved her... *I still love her*, I thought she loved me too.”

Reece leans back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head as he studies me. “You two were together for a while.”

“Six months.”

“There were others before you, but they all pretty much ended not long after they started. I was surprised you two lasted as long as you did.”

“Do you think it’s her past that’s holding her back? I thought we’d worked through that?”

“She told you about her past?” he asks surprised.

“Yeah. This is probably going to sound dumb, but thank you for all you’ve done for her. I’m grateful she had someone like you looking out for her when she was a kid.”

His eyes widen slightly. “She really did open up to you.”

“That surprises you?”

“It’s not something she usually does. Even with me. I only know what I know because I saw it with my own eyes.” He sits forward in his chair, resting his arms on the desk. “My childhood wasn’t all that different, but I was lucky I had grandparents that gave a shit about me. Carla had no one.”

I swallow thickly. “She had you.”

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to see her happy.”

“Will you help me then? I want to give her the life she deserves. Everything feels meaningless without her. I miss her,

I'll do anything to win her back."

"Don't make me regret this," he says, and a smile bursts onto my face.



It's been eight excruciating days since I was last here. Reece and I exchanged phone numbers before I left his office that day, because we needed to formulate our plan. He's agreed to help me get in Carla's vicinity, but that's as far as he's willing to go. He said the rest was up to me. So here I am.

I worked my ass off with the physical therapist the past week, and was able to finally get rid of that damn brace. My leg is still not one hundred percent, but I'm allowed to drive, and tomorrow I'm heading back to work. My life finally feels like it's back on track.

Carla only works three days at the gym. Tuesday and Thursday mornings she does a ladies self-defense class, and on Saturdays she teaches karate to a bunch of kids. That turned out to be my only option, despite the one obvious hitch... I'm a grown-ass man. I'd gladly spend that time surrounded by a bunch of snotty-nosed brats if that's the only way I can be close to my girl.

Last night I took a drive to her favorite pizzeria back home, the place we went the night we met, and I didn't just get her a slice, I got the entire damn Tiramisu cake to go, which I've brought along with me today. Go big or go home, I say.

I've also added something of my own into the box. They'll be no mistaking my intentions when she sees it. I'm done playing around. I'm all in, and I won't stop until she's mine again.

I've been here for the past half hour, out of sight, watching from the wings. Today's lesson is how to defend yourself if you're being attacked from behind. I've never seen this side of her before, she really is in her element.

When her class finally wraps up, I emerge from the shadows, revealing myself. Her steps falter and her eyes bug

out of her head the moment they land on me.

That's right, sunshine, I found you, and this time I'm not letting you get away.

For a brief moment I see a flash of her vulnerability, but she quickly schools herself. I'm a sucker for that look, it's what drew me to her in the very beginning.

"Grayson, what are you doing here?"

I'm here because I love you... I miss you, and I'm going to win you back if it kills me.

I shove my free hand into the pocket of my jeans. "It's nice to see you too, Carla," I say coolly, despite the flurry of nerves that course through my body.

Her eyes dart around; she almost looks panicked. If she's worried about Reece, she needn't be. "You have to leave. You can't be here."

I wasn't sure how she'd react to seeing me, but I was hoping she'd be a tad warmer. Is she getting back at me for slamming the door in her face?

I lift one shoulder. "No can do, I'm afraid. I've just signed up for a class here." I extend my arm, holding out the bag in my hand. "I also bought you this?"

She hesitantly takes it from me without looking inside. "You're taking a class? Here?"

"One of yours actually."

She draws back with a gasp, and I bite down on my bottom lip to hide my smile. "One of mine? Which one?"

That's right, sweetheart, I'm not going to make this easy for you.

"The weekend class... the tiny ninja one." Technically, it's for four-to-six-year-olds, but since I'll be working during the week, it was my only choice.

"You do realize that's a little people's class, right?"

"I'm fully aware," I reply, smiling smugly.

“Why would you do that?”

“Simple. To be close to you.”

Despite her indifference, that suffocating feeling I’ve carried around for the past few years is already easing in her presence. That’s what she does for me and exactly why I need her in my life. She’s my goddamn air.

“You can’t do that,” she screeches.

“I hate to disagree with you, sunshine, but I can. I’ve already paid for my first month’s classes, and purchased the uniform.”

“You can’t be here,” she repeats, and it ticks me off. Can’t she stand being in the same room as me anymore? I didn’t hear any complaints coming from her when I was balls deep inside her at Ashton and Emma’s wedding.

“I have Reece’s permission.”

“You what?”

“He’s the owner of the gym, right?”

“He made a mistake. I’ll make sure you get a full refund.”

“I don’t want my money back; I just want you. *I want us.*”

She diverts her gaze away from me. “There is no us, Grayson.”

“As long as my heart is still beating, there’s an us, Carla. Don’t downplay my feelings for you.”

I hold my breath as I await her response, but she continues to stare at the floor like it’s the most interesting thing in the room. Maybe I came on too hard too fast, but fuck, I’m desperate here. I just want her back... *I need her*, can’t she see that? She may not realize it, but she needs me too.

“Carla,” I say, reaching for her free hand.

“Don’t.” She pulls her arm back like she can no longer stand my touch. It cuts deep.

Straightening her shoulders, she brings her eyes back to mine. I see that steely determination that I always admired in

her, so I brace myself in preparation for what she's about to say. "You need to let this go, Grayson, we're over."

I clench my fists at my sides trying to deter myself from reaching out and shaking some sense into that damn stubborn head of hers. I need to play it cool and bide my time. Wear her down slowly. Remind her how good we are together. I know in my heart there's more to this than what she's saying, but I'll get the answers I'm craving, I don't care how long it takes. And then I'll work on fixing whatever she thinks is broken. This is not the end of us. I refuse to believe that.

If she wants to be obstinate, two can play that game. "I'll be spending my weekends in Temecula for the foreseeable future, so you're going to need to deal with that, sweetheart."

Her eyes narrow at my threat. "You can't," she says, but I don't miss the panic in her voice. "You have to go, please. It's for your own good."

My own good?

"Fine." I hold out my hand and her eyes flicker between my outstretched arm and my face in confusion. "If you don't want me here, then I'll just take the tiramisu and go." I'm bluffing, but I know this woman and her love of food.

Her eyes widen, and I have to bite my lip to stop the smile that threatens to burst onto my face. "There's tiramisu in the bag?"

I nod. "Your favorite... from the Pizzeria back home."

Whoever said a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, obviously hadn't met Carla.

She maneuvers the bag behind her back, and this time I grin. "It's mine, you can't have it."

Now we're getting somewhere. I didn't bring the dessert here as a bargaining tool, I brought it because I know how much she loves it, but I'm not about to let this opportunity pass.

I take a step toward her, and she sighs in defeat. "You can keep it on one condition."

“Fine, you can do the damn class. For one month only,” she quickly adds before spinning on her heel and marching away.

“See you Saturday morning, sunshine,” I call out. This time I don’t try to hide my smile. That motherfucker is so huge I’m surprised my face doesn’t split in two.

Her eyes narrow as she glances over her shoulder. Her surly attitude doesn’t bother me in the slightest, it actually gives me a slight chub. She’s only fighting me so hard because she’s scared. What she fails to realize is, I broke down her walls once, and I’ll damn well do it again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Carla

MY HANDS ARE TREMBLING AS I stomp up the stairs toward the apartment like a brat. I'm torn. I don't know if I want to cry, scream or rejoice. *He's here.* I'm struggling to comprehend it. How did he find me after all this time? More importantly, why did he come? The last time I saw him he slammed the door in my face. What's changed?

The last thing I wanted to do was send him away, but the desperate part of me, the one that knows the truth, needed to reinforce the reasons why he couldn't stay. The bigger part, however, the one consumed with longing, wanted to hold on tight and never let go. But sadly, the consequences of that are too dire.

I pause when I get to the top of the landing and intake a few shaky breaths. I think I'm on the verge of having a heart attack. I rub the heel of my palm over the stabbing pain in my chest. The initial shock is wearing off and the reality of what this means is starting to set in. *Shit.* This is bad.

What the hell was Reece thinking agreeing to this? He has no clue of the devastation this decision can bring. And I virtually just sealed Grayson's fate by agreeing to let him attend my classes, all because my greedy mouth salivated over a damn dessert. I want to kick my own ass.

I'm scared shitless that the last two and a half years of suffering have been for nothing. That the people I've been protecting all along are no longer safe. Has all this heartache been for nothing?

I enter the apartment and head straight toward the kitchen. Tossing the bag on the counter, I slump onto the barstool and bury my face in my hands. I need to come up with a strategy and fast.

Grayson's coming back on Saturday, and there's nothing I can do to change that now... one day shouldn't be a problem, right? What are the chances of anyone finding out he's here? I may have agreed to a month, but somehow, I need to find a way to keep him from returning. I'm not sure how I'm going

to do that. The last thing I want to do is hurt him any more than I already have, but he's left me with no choice.

My mind scrambles with endless possibilities, but I know Grayson is determined, I saw it in his face just now. This is not going to be easy. If he only knew how badly I wanted him, how hard it's been to stay away, or the reasons why, he'd understand. I can't tell him though, I know that. The fallout from knowing the truth will be catastrophic. It will not only ruin him, but also the people he cares about.

Opening the bag in front of me, I lean forward and peer inside. I've been craving this cake ever since I returned to Temecula. I can smell the delicious, sweet coffee aroma through the box. Any other time I'd be already scarfing into this beauty, but my insides are too churned up to even think of eating.

Despite that, I still flip the lid and inhale deeply through my nose, that's when I notice something shiny lying beside the cake. It's a fork. Does he think I don't own cutlery? I may be a little rough around the edges at times, but I'm not a barbarian.

I lift it out of the box, and see writing engraved just above the four prongs. '*I forking love you,*' it says. My breath hitches as I hug the piece of metal to my chest like the lovesick fool I am. Goddamn him.

The fork is still clutched against my body when the door to our apartment opens and Reece enters. I drop the offending piece of cutlery on the countertop and swing around in my chair. Reece raises an eyebrow the moment he notices the stink eye I'm sending his way.

"I passed Grayson just now," he says, all smug like. "I take it from that look on your face you saw him as well?"

"Don't say his name... I hate him," I lie. Hate is the last word I'd use in a sentence with the name Grayson Edwards, but I need to keep up the charade; if I don't, Reece will become suspicious. He'd lose his shit if he knew what was really going on here.

I'll admit in moments of weakness there have been times I've contemplated confessing everything to him, wondering if there was something he could do to help, but deep down I knew I couldn't put him in a position like that. Not after everything he's done for me. This is my mess and something I have to live with.

"Right," Reece says, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "That weepy face you're sporting has hate written all over it." He rounds the island and I see his eyes dart down to the fork I dropped when he came in. I go to reach for it, but his reflexes are faster than mine. He snatches it up before I can, his eyes slightly widening as he reads the inscription. "Hate," he scoffs. "Don't think I didn't see you hugging this thing when I came in. It's from Grayson I presume?"

"Nope." I lunge for it again, but he maneuvers his arm out of my reach.

"Liar. It's definitely not one of ours, and I've witnessed how lovesick that guy is for you. This has his name written all over it."

He waves the fork in front of my face, and I have to stop myself from snatching it out of his hand and stabbing him in the arm with it.

"So what?"

"So," he says, leaning forward, "I've never seen you hug my cutlery like that. That speaks volumes. When are you going to admit you still love him, Carla?"

"Pfft. I wasn't hugging it; I was wiping it on my shirt to remove the germs. And FYI I don't have a weepy face. If you think that, you need to have your eyes tested." He chuckles because he knows I'm full of shit. "Grayson Edwards is the number one dick on my dick list."

"Okay," he says, placing down the fork and holding up his hand to stop me from continuing. "I don't want to hear that word coming out of your mouth."

His frown makes me laugh. I still remember how awkward and downright mortified he was when I got my first boyfriend

at sixteen. The poor guy was not only sweating, but squirming in his seat as he tried to give me the birds and the bees talk. He needn't have bothered; I was already quite knowledgeable in that area. After all, I'd lived with Roxy for thirteen years. Her conquests were frequent, like a revolving door... a live stream of live-in porn.

"Dick," I repeat the word, and Reece's disapproval is evident as he turns to walk away. "Dicks, dicks, dicks. Enormous dicks, teeny-tiny microscopic dicks, thick dicks, pencil dicks, gigantic, fat juicy dicks, a humongous bag of assorted dicks," I yell to his retreating back, and he flips me the bird over his shoulder.

That'll teach him for meddling in my life.



My stomach is in knots as I make my way downstairs to prepare for my little ninja class. I couldn't even eat breakfast, which is a first for me. I love these kids and usually look forward to my time with them, but not today. I've been dreading it since Grayson showed up here on Thursday.

I head toward the storeroom, that's situated next to Reece's office, to collect the box that contains the thin, square, pine boards I'll be using in today's lesson. Pine is a soft wood and easy to break if you hit it with enough force. My kids are only small, but these boards are no thicker than a piece of cardboard. A local lumber guy makes them for us.

This class isn't as strict as the others; it's more about teaching the kids discipline and the basic karate moves, preparing them to rise through the ranks as they get older. We've been practicing our hand movements for the past few weeks, so today I'm going to be giving them their first test.

I head back out to the main arena once I have what I need. We don't usually let the parents stay during class, it's less of a distraction for the kids, but today being a test day, they're invited to observe and take pictures of their child if they wish. Last night Reece and I set up a row of chairs along the far wall so they had somewhere to sit.

Class isn't starting for another twenty-five minutes, so my breath catches in my throat when I round the corner and find Grayson standing there waiting. He's wearing his white Gi, which is pronounced ghee, and damn does he look sexy.

It's compulsory that all our students wear the correct attire. It symbolizes spirit and readiness to train. Reece supplies the uniforms to the kids whose parents can't afford them. He wants everyone to feel equal. Just another thing I love about that man. I remember how proud I was when he presented me with mine all those years ago. I wore it like a badge of honor. It made me feel included, which was something I wasn't used to back then.

Grayson is a beginner, so his belt is white, which I notice is tied loosely in a knot, slung low on his waist. It's not the correct way to wear it, but I'm too tongue-tied to voice that as he pushes off the wall and heads in my direction. I tear my eyes away from him so I'm not tempted to ogle, but my stomach does a flip-flop as he approaches. I'm filled with a mixture of excitement and worry.

Despite Grayson's slight limp, he still walks with his sexy stagger. Confident to a fault. This man is too attractive for his own good. It almost killed me to give him up, but it doesn't change the fact that I need him gone by the end of this lesson. How I'm going to accomplish that? I'm still not sure.

"Morning, sunshine," he says, popping that delicious dimple of his. This man doesn't play fair. He never has. He extends a hand toward me. "I bought you a coffee from down the street, with hazelnut syrup, just the way you like it."

I eye the cup in his hand and sigh as I tuck the box to one side and reach for it. "Thank you."

"Let me help you with that." When I shift the box further out of his reach, he shakes his head. "Still as stubborn as ever, I see."

I shrug instead of answering. I've never in my life played a damsel in distress. It's not who I am.

I can feel his eyes taking me in as we move across the main floor toward the mats. “How come you get to wear a black uniform? When I got mine the only option they gave me was white. Yours is so much more badass.”

“Because I am badass,” I say, making him chuckle. “By rights you need to be Shodan level or above before you can wear all black.”

“Shodan?”

“First degree black belt.”

“Ah, I see. How long will it take me to get a black belt?”

“About five years.”

“You’re kidding?” Glancing at him, I grin instead of answering. “Damn.”

Busying myself, I start preparing for my class. Grayson hangs back, but I feel his eyes tracking my every move. *I need to stay focused.* No, what I really need is a solid plan. How am I going to put a stop to this, especially now he has Reece on his side?

When the first kids arrive, they dash in my direction for our customary fist pump. I love these little guys, seeing their eager, sweet faces is usually the highlight of my week.

“Morning, Miss Carla,” they each say.

“Morning,” I reply, greeting them individually.

My eyes dart in Grayson’s direction and I notice he’s already gaining a crowd. I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s a people person, everyone loves him. The kids all hover around throwing question after question his way, while the mothers stand there and gawk. It’s annoying, but I can’t blame them, he’s a gorgeous son of a bitch. It was impossible not to notice the endless attention he garnered when we were together.

“Are you new here?” I hear one of the kids ask.

“Sure am, today’s my first class.”

“Are you a teacher?”

“Nope, student.” He points down to his white belt.

“But you’re not five.” That statement comes from Marcus. He’s a cheeky little shit. I’ve had to rein in his attitude more than once.

“Who says I’m not?” Grayson replies.

“Look at you, you’re a giant. You must be like a hundred.”

I drop my chin to my chest to hide my smile. “Marcus,” his mother scolds, and I roll my lips together to hold back my laugh.

“Maybe I just eat all my veggies, kid. You should try it sometime.”

Grayson looks over at Marcus’s mother and winks, and I swear she sways on her damn feet as her face turns beet red. He’s still got it, the swoony bastard.



After we gather in a large circle and bow in, the kids assemble into four lines, spreading out so we can practice the moves we’ve been learning over the past few weeks. I have Todd, one of the teenagers from our black-belt class, walking the floor today helping everyone with their technique.

Grayson stands at the back which I’m thankful for, and I notice Todd spending a few minutes with him, showing him the proper stance. He towers over everyone and looks out of place, but that doesn’t stop him from gaining all the attention of every female in the vicinity.

Unlike them, I try my best not to look at him. I’d like to say he’s doing the same with me, but I can feel his eyes burning into my flesh the entire time. It’s unnerving.

We move through the front punch, back fist strike, ridge and knife hand strike first. We’ll be using the palm heel strike to break through the wood today. I leave that move until last so it’s fresh in their minds.

The entire class calls out “Kiai,” which is pronounced key-eye, in unison with each strike. It’s traditionally used to

intimidate or startle opponents, but at this level it's taught to help instill confidence in harmony with their moves.

Once the practice is over the kids take a seat on the mats, taking turns to come up to the front where I'm kneeling. Each student breaks through the wood in either one or two attempts. I'm proud of them.

I grab the next piece of wood from the pile as I look over at Timothy, or Timmy as his grandmother calls him, nodding and encouraging him to come forward.

He's been hanging back purposely; he and Grayson are the only two left to take their test. He's not only the smallest, but most timid and uncoordinated kid in the class, but he's got a lot of heart. I'm not sure what Timmy's story is, but I know his grandmother has full custody of him. She told me he's been getting bullied at school, and she was hoping these classes would give him some much-needed self-confidence.

Poor little guy.

I have a real soft spot for the underdog, maybe because I was once one too. For some reason I always seem to gravitate toward him during class, giving him extra attention to help him succeed. I know what this place did for me and I want him to get the same thing out of it as I did.

I can already tell he's apprehensive as he bows his head and slowly makes his way toward me. I hope he can find his inner strength to complete this task, it'll be a blow to his psyche if he doesn't.

"Hey," I say when he stops in front of me. He hesitantly raises his head, making eye contact. "You've got this." He nods, but it's not a confident one. I place the piece of wood down on the floor beside me. "Get into your stance." He complies, placing his right foot forward. He's left-handed, so he'll step with the same leg to help put more force behind his strike. I widen his legs a little. "Put all your weight on your front foot and hold up your hand. Good. Now show me your palm strike?" He does as I ask, and I tilt his fingers back further so his palm is protruded. I don't want him to get injured. "Perfect. You ready?"

I pick up the piece of wood again. Grasping the edges, I hold it out in front of me. “Step forward, and use your palm to hit the center, okay?” He nods again, this time with a little more finesse. “I want to hear a big, loud Kiai from you.”

He strikes but there’s little power behind it, and his Kiai is barely audible. His entire body deflates and I hear him sigh. “Hey.” I place my hand on his shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze. “You can do better than that, I know you can. You just need to hit it harder, that’s all, and your Kiai needs to be louder. I want Reece to be able to hear you all the way over there.”

Timmy looks up, glancing behind me where Reece is sparing in the far back. This time he’s Kiai is louder, and his palm strike a little harder, but it’s still not enough to break through. I hear a few of the kids snicker behind him, and notice the tears that are now pooling in Timmy’s eyes. It makes me livid.

“Hey,” I call out, glancing around the class, even though I know exactly where it came from. “We are a family here; we encourage and support each other, not tear each other down.” My eyes zero in on Marcus and his mate, Brody. They’re the popular kids in the class. The two that think they’re better than everyone else.

“I can’t do it,” Timmy whispers as a tear slides down his cheek.

Placing the wood in my lap, I quickly wipe it away with the pad of my thumb. “Look at me,” I encourage. My heart squeezes in my chest when his big brown eyes meet mine. “You can do this, and you will. Have I ever lied to you?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head.

I place my palm flat on his chest, over his heart. “You just have to believe it in here.” Then I lightly tap his forehead with the tip of my finger. “And in here.”

He nods again and a small, lopsided grin tugs at his lips.

My eyes snap up when I hear. “Timmy... Timmy... Timmy.” It’s Grayson, bless his sexy ass. He starts to clap his

hands while chanting and the rest of the class join in. They're loud and boisterous, and some of the other patrons in the gym stop what they're doing and watch on. It's the exact type of encouragement Timmy needs.

"See, we all believe in you," I tell him. "You just have to believe in yourself."

This time he stands tall and pulls back his shoulders as he gets into position. "Kiai," he screams as he launches forward and the wood splits straight down the center.

The room erupts into cheers, and a huge smile bursts onto Timmy's face. It's the first genuine one I've seen him give. It warms my heart. Holding up my hand, I'm beaming as I high-five him like I did the others.

Some of the kids jump up, crowding around Timmy, patting him on the back and congratulating him, then Grayson swoops in and lifts him off the ground, positioning him on his shoulders. He grabs Timmy's hands and holds them up in the air as he starts doing a victory lap around the outer edge of the mats.

Timmy throws his head back and laughs as tears rise to my eyes. I glance over at his grandmother and see her swipe her fingers over her cheeks. It's a moment Timmy won't forget in a hurry, and I have Grayson to thank for that. He made a small moment in time incredibly special for a little boy who desperately needed it. I couldn't love this man any more if I tried.

When the class finally settles down, I grab the next piece of wood and rise to my feet. I'm still smiling as Grayson saunters my way, I can't help it.

"Thanks for what you just did," I say when he comes to a stop in front of me.

He shrugs it off. "It was nothing. That Marcus kid is a little prick."

I bite back my laugh, because I totally agree.

Grayson takes another step closer, towering over me. I crane my neck and my gaze meets his. That familiar magnetic pull

between us is palpable, so much so I have to look away.

I retreat a step, putting some distance between us. I'm not sure how this is going to work with our height difference. I had to get on my knees for the kids. I extend my arms nevertheless, holding out the board. "Assume your position," I instruct.

He raises an eyebrow suggestively, and the twinkling in his eyes tells me his mind has gone straight to the gutter. "I'd like to put you in a certain position," he whispers, and I have to fight the sudden urge to clench my thighs together.

It's only been a few months since he took me against the wall at Emma's wedding, but it seems like a lifetime ago.

Clearing my throat, I ignore his comment.

He lets out a small sigh before getting into his stance. Letting out a loud "Kiai," the heel of his palm moves swiftly toward the wood, his technique is impressive for a beginner. To the rest of the class, it isn't visible, but his hand pulls up just short of coming into contact with the board.

"Ow," he moans, shaking his hand so dramatically I have no choice but to roll my eyes. I know he's doing this solely for Timmy's benefit, and I've got to say, I admire him for it.

He plays it up even more on his next turn, hopping around like a lunatic. The kids and some of the adults laugh.

"Would you like some eggs with that ham?" I ask, struggling to keep a straight face.

Chuckling, he throws back a sexy wink, and I want to climb him like a tree.

As Grayson readies himself for another try, the most incredible thing happens. Quiet, shy and incredibly reserved Timmy starts to chant, "Gray-son... Gray-son... Gray-son," at the top of his voice.

This time he breaks through the board effortlessly. I'm grinning like a fool when I raise my hand for a high five, and it's not until Grayson's eyes slightly widen when they zero in on my palm that I realize my mistake.

Busted.

I quickly scrunch my hand into a fist and start to draw my arm back, but he's too quick. His fingers wrap around my wrist, halting me. I wait for him to pry my fingers open, but instead, his free hand grasps hold of my chin as he tilts my head to the side. I hear his sharp intake of breath the moment he sees the tiny red heart tattoo on my neck, just below my ear. It matches the one on my palm. The two favorite places he always loved to kiss.

"Carla," he whispers, and everything in me wants to turn around and flee, but I can't. I have a class full of kids and their parents watching on.

"Don't," I say, jerking my head out of his grip.

He was never supposed to see them. I've had these tattoos going on two years now. Maybe it was a misogynistic move on my part, to punish myself for the predicament I now find myself in, but I'd like to think I did it as a reminder of everything we once shared. The part of our relationship I *could* hold onto.

His lips may never touch my skin again, but those tiny little hearts are a souvenir of our love. *Nobody* can steal that from me.

His questioning eyes scan back and forth between mine as I retreat a few steps, dragging my gaze away from him and clapping my hands a few times to get the attention of the kids in the room. He's searching for answers I can't give him.

"You guys did so well today," I say, raising my voice. "I'm proud of each and every one of you... good job. Let's form a circle and bow out."

When the class is finally over, a few of the parents approach me asking for photos with their children, and I'm grateful for the distraction. It doesn't stop my eyes from flicking in Grayson's direction though. He's standing to the side talking to Timmy's grandmother. I have no doubt she's thanking him for what he did today.

People start to dwindle out as I gather my things ready to head back upstairs to the apartment.

“Carla,” Grayson says, suddenly appearing at my side. “I’m going to have a celebratory milkshake with Timmy and his grandmother at the café down the street, would you like to join us?”

His hand rubs across the back of his neck as he anxiously awaits my reply. I wish I could say yes. Letting him down yet again only makes that ever-present guilt intensify. He’s the sweetest man and deserves none of this.

“I can’t.” I force out a smile, even though I feel like crying. “I’ve got to get ready for work. My shift at the bar starts soon.”

“Okay.” The disappointment I see on his face tears me up inside. “I’ll see you next Saturday then.”

“Sure.”

“Enjoy the rest of your weekend,” he says, tentatively taking a step backward.

“You too. Enjoy your milkshake, and safe travels home.”

“Thanks.” He nods once before turning and walking away. It’s only then that I let my heartache show.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Grayson

I'D PLANNED ON HEADING BACK home after lunch, but I couldn't do it. I needed to see Carla again... *those tattoos*. They've been messing with my head all afternoon. They mean something, those tiny little red hearts just confirm she still loves me. I know she does. She got them after she left. Why else would she permanently ink her body with memories of me if she didn't?

Somewhere along the way she became spooked. Why? I have no clue. Was it the proposal? I know we had only been together six months, but when you know, you know, right? She seemed just as happy as me at the time. Or is there something else going on in that crazy head of hers? Maybe her past? The way she's been treated over the years would fuck with anybody's head. But I'm not them. I'd never treat her that way.

I intend to get to the bottom of it one way or another. Whatever invisible barriers she's erected to keep me at arm's length... they're coming the fuck down. I'm going to crush them.

After I left Timmy and his grandmother, I went back to the gym where my car was parked and spoke with Reece. I needed to know where Carla's other job was, and what time she was getting off.

He invited me up to their apartment for a coffee, and it gave me a tiny insight into the life Carla's led since she left. It's a nice place... homely, but she belongs with me. Not here.

It was midafternoon when I left him, and I still had hours to kill, so I drove around town for ages, trying to wrap my head around all of this. To be honest, it gave me a damn headache.

It was too early to go to her work, since Reece said she wouldn't be getting off until midnight, and I knew sitting still for too long would make me angrier. I needed the distraction.

After what seemed like an eternity of driving around in damn circles, I finally gave in. I'm currently parked outside the bar where she works, waiting for her to finish her shift. It's

risky showing up like this, but I have to see her. I can't wait another week. I'm already going out of my mind.

I decided not to go inside. After what happened when I unexpectedly turned up at her work when we first met, I know it's definitely safer to stay out here. I'll probably lose my shit if I see anyone flirting with her again, and I don't want to do anything that's going to blow my chances with her this time round. I'm already walking on shaky ground as it is.

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I check the time. It's a few minutes past twelve, she should be out soon. Adjusting my seat back into the upright position, I scan the parking lot. I've been out here for hours. I'm not even sure what I'm going to say to her when she comes out, but I hope she gives me a chance. A sliver of hope at the very least... something to reassure me that I'm not wasting my time by being here. Not that I plan on giving up either way.

My heart rate spikes when the large metal door adjacent to the parking lot suddenly opens. The light streaming from inside the building illuminates Carla's small frame as she exits, causing me to release the breath I'm holding. My stomach is tied up in damn knots.

She pauses momentarily, quickly looking from left to right, then slowly moves her gaze around the lot. She appears on edge, and for a moment I contemplate ducking down in my seat so she doesn't spot me. I doubt she'd even notice me sitting here amongst a sea of other cars anyway. Besides, the tint on my Range Rover is quite dark.

Turning, she tucks her handbag under her arm and hastily starts walking toward the front of the building, glancing back over her shoulder a few times as she goes. It's like she's scared someone's about to step out of the shadows and jump her, which is so unlike the hard-ass I know Carla to be. It makes me second-guess coming here. Is it me she's worried about running into?

I'm not even sure where she's heading. I'll be pissed if I discover she plans on walking home at this hour. Without

giving it much thought, I reach for the door handle. I'm not about to let this opportunity slip through my fingers.

"Carla," I call out, just before she rounds the corner and disappears from sight. I notice her body stiffen the moment she hears her name, but she doesn't look back. I break into a jog as her pace picks up. I catch her in no time. "Hey, wait up." Reaching out, I gently wrap my hand around her elbow.

The moment I grab her, she swings her body around defensively, ready to attack. I drop my hold and quickly take a step back, raising my hands up in front of me.

"Grayson, shit," she says. "I didn't realize it was you. You scared the crap out of me."

My little ninja frightened? That's new. "Who did you think it was?"

She turns her face away, staring off into the distance, that's when I notice she's shaking. "No one."

I call bullshit on that. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Her eyes dart around briefly before they move back in my direction. "No, but you can't be here."

Her words unnerve me. Somethings off. "I wanted to see you... to talk to you."

"I have nothing to say to you, Grayson."

"Well, I have plenty to say to you."

"Can this wait? It's late and I really should be getting home."

"Where are you parked?"

She blows out a puff of air, diverting her eyes. "I don't have a car, I walked."

Her admission makes my blood pressure rise. "Why don't you have a car, Carla?"

"Because I sold my old one, remember... and returned the mustang."

“You didn’t have to do that you know.”

Just thinking about the moment I arrived home from our camping trip and found that damn car parked in my driveway has the muscles in my chest tightening. I distinctly remember the relief I’d felt. I thought she was there, and everything that had happened in the hours prior had been a mistake. But instead, it turned out to be the confirmation I’d been dreading. She was gone. She’d left the fucking keys in my mailbox. No note, no further explanation.

“I barely paid back a fraction of what that car was worth.”

“It was never about the money, Carla. It was my way of keeping you safe. You should’ve kept it.”

“It didn’t feel right.”

“At the very least I would’ve given you back the money you’d paid me... you know, if I knew where to fucking find you.” My words come out much harsher than I anticipated, but my wounds are still raw. Her eyes slightly narrow, so I bite the inside of my cheek before I say anything that’s going to escalate into an argument. That’s not why I’m here. “Look, I just want to talk. Can we go somewhere?”

Reaching up she rubs her temples. “I’m tired, Grayson. It’s been a long day.”

“Are you hungry, we could go get some food?”

She gives me a casual shrug. “I skipped breakfast this morning, so I guess I could eat.”

A huge smile bursts onto my face. I know my girl better than she knows herself, and I’m not above using her weakness for food to get some more time with her.

She may be confused, and a little lost right now, but I have enough love for both of us. I always have.



We’re sitting in my car, parked by the curb outside Reece’s gym. She didn’t want to go to a restaurant and eat, preferring a

drive-thru burger place instead. I wasn't fussed where we went, as long as we were together.

"I know about the baby," I blurt out.

My statement has her glancing down at her lap and swallowing thickly. "There was no baby," she clarifies.

I exhale a long breath. "I know, but it doesn't stop me from wishing that there were." Her eyes snap back to me and I can see the surprise on her face. Going by what Emma said, she wishes that too.

I reach for her hand, bringing it to my mouth, placing a small kiss on the little red heart tattoo on her palm. I'm yet to query her about them, but I will when the times right.

"I've seen how good you are with those kids in your class. You may not think so, but you'll make a wonderful mother someday."

Pulling her hand from mine, she shrugs her shoulder and turns her face to stare out the passenger side window.

I drop my burger into the wrapper that's spread out on my lap, scrunching it up into a ball. I've suddenly lost my appetite. I hate how stilted things have become between us. Every subject I want to discuss only seems to make her clamp up tighter.

"You pushed me away like I meant nothing to you, do you really hate me that much?"

She swings her face back in my direction. "I could never hate you, please believe that. You should hate me for the way I've treated you though."

"What I hate is you're so close I can reach out and touch you, yet you still feel like you're a million fucking miles away."

She drops her chin, staring down at her lap. "I hate that every time I look at you all I can see is the hurt in your eyes... hurt that I put there."

"Then why did you do it?" Why do you continue to do it I want to add, but I don't?

“Hurting you is the last thing I wanted.”

“Then explain why? Help me understand because that’s been the hardest thing for me.”

She glances at me briefly before turning her face away again. Why can’t she just talk to me? Reaching over the center console, I place my hand under her chin, bringing her gaze back to mine.

“Just say the words, I need to hear them. Help me understand what’s going on in that pretty little head of yours.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Yeah, it is. You just open that sweet mouth of yours and speak.”

“I know you want to know why we can’t be together, but trust me when I say you really don’t.”

Dropping my hand from her face, I run my fingers exasperatedly through my hair. I’m tired of her deflection. “How can you say that? Do you have any idea how hard the past few years have been for me?”

“Yeah, I do. There’s no coming back from this, you think the truth will set you free, Grayson? Trust me when I say it won’t. Please, can we just leave the past in the past.”

“Are you kidding me? Stop talking in damn circles.”

“You don’t understand.”

I take a deep breath as the anger rises inside me. “Then help me understand goddamn it.”

“The truth will destroy you. I’m doing this to protect you. Can’t you see that?”

I’m at my wits’ end with this bullshit. Turning my face away from her, I bang my hand down on the steering wheel. “*Don’t*... don’t fucking protect me.”

Through my peripheral vision I see her flinch, so I stop and take a moment, sucking more oxygen into my lungs as I try to calm myself down. Things between us are already fragile. Screaming or scaring her isn’t going to get me anywhere.

“You can’t ask me to do that. I’ll always do what’s best for you, even at the expense of my own happiness... that’s how much you mean to me, Grayson.”

Reaching over, I cup her face. “You can fight this all you want, but I won’t give up on us. You’re what’s best for me. Can’t you see that?”

When tears start to cascade down her cheeks, I draw her closer and wrap her in my arms. Why is she doing this to us? I can see she’s hurting just as much as I am. The scary thing is, the Carla I used to know, the one with the sassy mouth and feisty spirit, is nowhere to be seen.

I hold her for the longest time as she softly cries into my chest. My mind is spinning with all the possibilities. What is she hiding? Why is she so broken?

Drawing back, I place my knuckle under her chin, tilting her face up toward mine. Even with red puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks, she’s still the most beautiful thing in the world.

My eyes scan over her face, finally landing on her lips. “I want to kiss you,” I admit. “Are you going to let me?” Once upon a time I wouldn’t have even asked, I’d just take what I wanted and she’d give me her all, but sadly we’re not that couple anymore. My hand moves up to cup her cheek. Leaning forward, I place a soft kiss on her forehead, followed by one on her cute little nose, right over those sweet thirteen freckles that I’ve missed. “Don’t make me beg.”

Her eyes drift closed and she releases a sigh. “You’re crazy,” she whispers.

My lips move down to the corner of her mouth, where I lay another kiss before moving to the other side. I draw back slightly so I can see her face. “Yes, I am, I’m crazy about you.”

A smile tugs at her lips. My face inches back toward hers, giving her ample opportunity to pull away, but to my relief she stays put, even tilting her head back slightly, giving me better access to her delicious mouth.

Our lips are now joined, but I make no move to take the kiss further. What I really want to do is devour her mouth until she's breathless, but for now this small connection is enough. The fact that she's even letting me just confirms everything I believe... I still have a chance. Carla is not the type of person that can be forced into doing anything she doesn't want to.

Reluctantly, I eventually draw back, resting my forehead against hers. I take a moment to breathe in her air, reveling in the knowledge that after all this time she's here... *with me*.

After a few moments I clear my throat and force myself to sit back in my seat. I can see the confusion on her face as my eyes take her in. She was expecting more from me, and she has no idea how hard it is to take things slow. But good things come to those who wait, and the reward in the end will be worth it.

"I'll see you next Saturday."

There's so much more I want to say... to do, but baby steps are what I need here. I'm proud of myself for showing such restraint, because every second I'm in her presence, I'm battling my self-control.

"Okay," she says, and I can hear the surprise in her voice. She gathers up her trash and reaches for her bag that she'd placed on the floor. She gives me one last look over her shoulder as she exits the car.

"Carla."

"Yeah?"

"Can I see you after class next week? I know you have work in the afternoon, but I'd like to spend some time with you before you go. I'll take whatever you're willing to give."

"I'll see what I can work out," she says, giving me a small smile before she closes the door and turns toward the gym.

I wait until she's safely inside before I start the engine. It almost kills me to drive away, leaving her behind, but I'll be back next week, she can count on that.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Carla

THE WEEK GOES BY AGONIZINGLY slow, but when Saturday *finally* arrives, so do the nerves. Although I'm worried what the implications of having Grayson around may bring, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't eager to see him again today. He's been consuming my thoughts all week. I even changed my shift with one of the girls at the bar so I could start later.

Grayson said he just wanted to spend time with me, and I want that too. So damn much. Granted I'm scared, but there's been no ramifications since his last visit. Am I pushing it? Possibly, but I'm not ready to let him go yet. His mere presence gives me life.

I venture downstairs earlier than usual with a tiny pep in my step. I'm secretly hoping he's already here, so I can spend some alone time with him before the other students arrive, but when I reach the main floor, I don't find him anywhere.

Pushing down my disappointment, I head toward the mats piled up by the far wall and start laying them out on the floor.

By the time the first of my students roll in, there's still no sign of Grayson. It has me on edge. Has he changed his mind? Given the circumstances I should be relieved, but I'm not.

Internally, I'm so messed up. I've been yearning for this man for what feels like forever, it's hard to let that go, even though in my heart I know I have to.

"Miss Carla," a small voice says, tugging on the leg of my pants, pulling me out of my daze. I look down and see Timmy staring up at me. "Is Gray here yet?"

"Gray?"

"You know Grayson. He told me to call him Gray because we're friends now."

"No, not yet, but I'm happy to hear you two are friends, Grayson's a good guy." Reaching down, I ruffle his hair.

"I know, he's the best."

Yeah, kid, he is.

I delay starting the class for as long as I can, but as the minutes tick by, and the kids become rowdier, I gather them in a circle, ready to bow in.

Plastering a smile on my face, I try not to let my disappointment show. This is what I wanted right?

We are twenty minutes into the class when I look up and catch Grayson walking through the front door. Every head in the vicinity swings in his direction. He's a man who can't help garnering attention wherever he goes. He just has this presence about him.

His gaze however, immediately zeroes in on me, and my heart does a silly little flip-flop. That beautiful smile, the one that ignites that ridiculously gorgeous face of his, is present. It makes me feel giddy inside.

Punctuality is everything in this class. It's a major component of the discipline we try and instill in the kids. I'm sure Grayson has a good reason though. He has a long way to travel to get here. Maybe he caught traffic, or had car troubles. None of that matters now.

He's here.

He came.

And that little zing coursing through my body, the one only he can bring, lights me up from the inside out.



“Are you going to tell me why you were late this morning?” I ask, once we've taken a seat in one of the booths toward the rear of the café.

I purposely led him back here, not because I wanted the privacy, but because it would be near impossible for anyone walking past to see us through the window. Being here is risky, I should've chosen somewhere far, far away. My gut screams I'm taking too many chances, but my heart is giving the rest of my body a big fuck you. When Grayson is near, nothing else seems to matter.

“I actually got into town earlier than last week,” he answers as his eyes scan over my face. “I was eager to see you again. Today couldn’t have come fast enough.” He chuckles slightly as he reaches across the table and links his pinky finger with mine.

It’s the barest touch, but the electric current that it evokes has tingles shooting up my arm. It was like the kiss he’d given me last week. Just a simple union of our mouths pressed together, a pale comparison to the all-consuming passion we once shared, but it was enough to awaken something deep inside of me. A part that’s laid dormant for far too long.

“When I stopped off to grab us a coffee this morning, you’ll never believe who I ran into.”

I intake a sharp breath as my entire body goes rigid. *Oh God, no.* I knew this would happen; *I knew it.*

He opens his mouth to continue and my eyes are silently pleading with him to stop. *Please don’t say it... please don’t.* I know exactly where this conversation is heading. Bile rises in the back of my throat, and sheer panic takes over as I brace myself for the clusterfuck that’s about to unfold. The next thing out of his mouth has me feeling faint.

“My Uncle Jason,” he says, beaming. “Can you believe it? He laughed at me when I told him I was taking your little ninja class as a way to win you back.”

The world around me stops as the realization settles in. *Everything I’ve done over the past few years, all the heartache, has been for nothing.* He continues talking, but his words don’t register. *Fuck.* I feel my body sway in my seat.

“Shit, Carla, are you okay? All the color has drained from your face.”

My hand is trembling as I reach for my phone that’s lying face down on the table. “I need to go.”

“Carla, wait.” I stand, and Grayson follows. “Did I say something to upset you?” The poor clueless fool, he has no idea what he’s done.

When my phone vibrates, I hesitantly turn my hand over so I can see the screen. The moment I read the text message that just came through, I'm consumed with dread.

Unknown: I warned you! He's next.

I do the only thing I can in this moment, I turn and flee.

I vaguely hear Grayson calling my name as I rush for the exit and race toward the gym. Thankfully, it's less than a block away. I'm sprinting so fast, I make it there in no time.

Bursting through the front doors, I go straight to the reception desk. "I need Reece's car keys," I say to Michelle, holding out my shaky hand. "Hurry, it's an emergency."

"Is everything alright, you're trembling?"

"Just give me the damn keys," I snap. I've never spoken to her so harshly before, but she has no idea how dire this situation is.

"Geez, okay," she says, retrieving them out of the top drawer and handing them over. "Are you sure you're okay? Do you want me to get Reece?"

"There's no time, I have to go now... I need to check on my mom."

"Your mom?" I hear her screech as I run back outside to where Reece's car is parked.

That message came from an unknown number, it could've been sent to me by mistake. A bizarre coincidence possibly, but in my heart, I know it's not. I know exactly where it came from.

"Carla, wait," I hear Grayson call out from somewhere behind me, but I ignore him as I unlock the driver's side door and climb inside. My fingers fumble with the key as I desperately try to slide it into the ignition.

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure it's clear, I don't even indicate as I pull out of the car space and do a U-turn, zooming in the direction of the trailer park.

Pure terror is surging through me by the time I arrive; I'm not even sure how I got here in one piece. I drive down the

long dirt path that leads toward the place where I grew up. I'm going so fast, thick clouds of dirt engulf the rear of the car, blocking my view through the back windscreen. I'm unsure if Grayson followed me here or not, but that's the least of my worries right now. Unless the monster is still here... *shit*. Could this be a trap?

I push that alarming thought from my mind. My only concern right now is the welfare of my mother, I'll deal with the rest, if and when, I have to.

It's been years since I've been back here, and that thought fills me with regret. Despite everything Roxy has put me through, a part of me still loves her. She's my mom, she gave me life.

Granted there have been times I've wanted to strangle her with my bare hands, but there's also been moments when I've just wanted to hug her. To tell her she deserves so much more than the life she was handed.

In hindsight, kicking me out was the best thing she could've ever done for me. It may not have felt like it at the time, but it gave me a chance... a future, which is something she never got. She was a product of her environment, and although she could have done better for herself, the reality is she didn't know any different.

I skid to a stop by the front porch, throwing more dust and debris into the atmosphere. I've already removed my seat belt.

Reaching for the door handle, I leap out of the vehicle. The lot is eerily quiet. The only thing I can hear is the *thump, thump, thumping* sound of my blood gushing through my ears.

Dashing up the stairs, I fling open the screen, clutching the door handle and turning it back and forth... it's locked. *Damn*. Clenching my hands into fists, I start beating on the wood. It's so old and ratty, I'm surprised it doesn't splinter from the sheer gravity of my blows.

"Roxy," I call out. "Roxy, open up."

My throat gets tight, and I can feel the tears burning the back of my eyes. *No, no, no*. Please tell me I'm not too late,

please God, let this be a sick joke.

I move around to the side of the trailer, grabbing a discarded bucket that lies on its side by the tap. I flip it over to use as a makeshift footstep, it elevates me high enough so I can peer through the kitchen window. My heart drops the moment her body comes into view. She's lying face down on the shitty carpet; there's been many occasions over the years where I've found her passed out, just like this, but my gut tells me this is *not* one of those times.

"Roxy!" I frantically bang on the glass. "Mom. Mom. Mom," I scream.

Jesus.

When I see no movement, I jump down and rush toward the back of the trailer where my old bedroom is. Sliding off the screen, I lay my palms flat on the glass, pushing the window to the side. The lock's been broken for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid, it's how I got in and out of here when I was too scared to use the front door.

It feels like déjà vu at its worst as I hoist my body up, wiggling through the small opening. Too many years have passed since I've done this, and I'm not that small girl anymore. I never thought I'd come back here, especially under these circumstances.

Once I'm half in, I extend my arms, placing my hands on the floor, using them as a brace as I pull the rest of my body inside. I land on the ground with a thud, but I ignore the sharp pain shooting down my arm.

Springing to my feet, I stumble as I race into the main room, ignoring the stench and dodging the squalor that's become her home.

"Roxy," I cry as I drop to my knees beside her motionless body.

A strangled sob permeates from somewhere in the back of my throat when I grip her shoulder, shaking her. "Mom, wake up." Even through her clothes I can feel how deathly cold she is.

Adrenaline is coursing through me as I maneuver her onto her back. As soon as I get a good look at her face... her blue lips... the lifeless eyes staring back at me, I lose it. I know it's a sight that will haunt me forever. Burying my face in her chest, I start to weep, allowing myself a brief moment to grieve.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. I don't have the luxury of time to fully comprehend the gravity of my loss, I guess that will come later.

After the hell on earth she lived, it kills me to know she died like this... *all alone*, and at the hands of a man who's probably the only person she ever truly loved.

At a quick glance, you'd surmise that her death was self-inflicted... an overdose. The needle is still lodged deeply in her flesh in the crook of her elbow, but the faint bruises on her jaw, cheek, and around her neck tell an entirely different story. I guess he decided to rough her up before administering the final blow... *a lethal injection*.

She's a junkie, and well known by law enforcement around these parts, he probably thought they wouldn't question her death, just another wasted life, but I know better, and he won't get away with this. I've let this man, and his past actions, rule my life for far too long.

Drawing back, I briskly wipe the tears from my face and take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. After removing the needle, I place one hand on top of the other, over my mother's breastbone, and start counting down in my head.

"Carla," I hear Reece call out moments before he starts bashing on the front door. *Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...* I continue my compressions. "Carla, open up."

"Reece, help," I scream, but I can't stop what I'm doing, *I just can't*. I don't even flinch when the front door flies right off its hinges, barely missing me as it crashes to the floor. My eyes snap in his direction as I continue to push on my mother's chest. My head tells me I'm wasting my time trying to revive her because she's long gone, but my heart is willing me to

keep going. Reece rushes toward me, and I see Grayson only a few steps behind. “She’s not breathing.”

“Let me see,” Reece says, gently moving me out of the way. If anyone can help her, he can. He got all of the staff to learn first aid after one of our clients collapsed in the middle of circuit training from a massive heart attack last year. He started working on him straight away, keeping him alive until the paramedics arrived. He saved that man’s life; I pray he can do the same for Roxy.

He checks all her vitals, which is something I didn’t do, and when his tormented eyes move back to me, something deep inside me shatters.

“There’s nothing I can do,” he says. “She’s gone, Carla. Who knows how many drugs are in her system.”

“No.” I shove him out of the way as I resume my compressions. “Wake up, Roxy, *please*... please don’t leave me,” I beg. Tears are streaming down my face as I frantically try to bring her back. I’m racked with guilt; *I should’ve protected her*. She needed me and I let her down.

Reece makes no move to stop me, even if my efforts are futile, he probably knows I need to do this, and I respect him for that.

Eventually, my arms fall limp by my sides. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I whisper, choking on a sob. “I’m so sorry.” My head drops forward as two strong hands wrap around my waist, lifting me to my feet.

“Carla,” Grayson murmurs, turning me in his arms and crushing me to him. “This isn’t your fault.”

Balling my hands into fists, I start to pound on his chest. Deep down I know this isn’t his doing, but I’m not thinking rationally in this moment.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

“Carla,” he says, wrapping his fingers around my wrists, halting my blows. “When you ran out of the café, I knew something was wrong. I had to come.”

“Not here... Temecula. Near me!” I scream. “I said you couldn’t be here, but you didn’t listen. Why didn’t you listen?” I shove his chest, and he stumbles back. Clutching my middle, I bend myself in half, my body racking as I completely break down. “He said he’d kill her if I didn’t stop seeing you.”

“What?” I hear both Reece and Grayson say in unison.

Ignoring them, I drop to my knees, completely overcome with grief. It’s been years since I’ve spoken to my mother, choosing instead to hold a grudge for every poor choice she’s made, and now I’ll never get the chance to make things right between us.

Grayson crouches down in front of me, gently lifting my face to meet his. “Who threatened to kill her?” he asks. I clench my eyes closed, because I can’t do this. “Look at me, sweetheart. I need you to stay with me.”

His words are spoken so softly, so sweetly, my eyelids immediately flutter open. There’s no point in hiding it now, at the very least I need to warn him... I can’t lose him too. “Bobby.”

“Bobby?”

I nod my head.

“Who the fuck is Bobby?” Reece snaps.

“One of Carla’s mom’s exes,” Grayson answers, never taking his eyes off me. The anguish on his face is profound. “Why would he warn you to stay away from me, Carla? It doesn’t make sense. I don’t even know this guy.”

I swallow thickly, trying to get air into my lungs. “I found out a few years ago his real name isn’t Bobby,” I whisper.

“What is it?” he asks.

I turn my head to the side, gazing at the wall. I can’t bear to see the look on his face when he learns the truth. “It’s Jason.”

“Jason?”

“Your uncle,” I confess.

His body jerks back and he intakes a sharp breath. My mind flashes back to that day at the cabin, to the moment where my past collided with my future, and my life as I knew it fell apart.

Chapter Thirty

Carla

Two and a half years ago...

OPENING MY EYES, I FIND myself in my favorite place... wrapped in my fiancé's arms. One of his hands is cupping my boob. He always does this, like a small child who clings to their safety blanket during sleep. Grayson's face is buried in my hair and I smile when I hear his soft snores in my ear. We're both naked, his front is pressed into my back. The little spoon to his big, which is something I've grown to love. I'm no longer haunted by my past, and I have this beautiful man to thank for that.

I fill my lungs with air as a sense of peace settles over me. In my wildest fantasies, never did I imagine life would be this good. And I know as the years pass, with Grayson by my side, things will only get better.

He's already given me so much in the short time we've been together, but the greatest gift of all, the one thing I treasure most, is the freedom his love has brought me. It's like I've spent my life living in the midst of a hurricane, but now the torrential wind and rain is gone, and the dark and dreary clouds that once littered the sky have parted, and been replaced with a bright and colorful rainbow.

I smile to myself knowing this is what my future holds, he's a dream come true.

Extending my left arm out in front of me, I rotate my hand from side to side, admiring the sparkly ring that now adorns my finger. I can't stop looking at it. It's the most stunning thing I've ever seen, even rivaling the rock Emma's now sporting. Not that size is important to me. I would have been satisfied with a plastic ring, from a gumball machine, if it meant I'd get to keep Grayson by my side for the rest of my life.

As I reach for my phone that's sitting on the bedside table, next to Grayson's, my stomach growls. I haven't eaten since breakfast, which is like a world record for me. After the proposal we ended up back in bed, where he showed me without muttering a single word just how much he loved me.

It's almost two o'clock, and I need sustenance, I'm starved. I'm pretty sure our marathon sex session burnt off more than just the calories I consumed this morning.

Gently removing Grayson's arm that's draped over my waist, and the one clutching my right breast, I climb out of bed, careful not to wake him. Grabbing his discarded T-shirt from the floor, I bunch up the fabric as I bring it to my nose and inhale. It smells just like him. I'm smiling as I slip it over my head.

When I get to the kitchen, I pour myself a large glass of water and gulp it down. I'm going to make us a plate of PB and J sandwiches and take them back to bed.

"Knock, knock," I hear someone call out as I reach for the loaf of bread. *That voice.* Those words. It has all the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

I swing around just as the devil himself opens the front screen door and enters the cabin. *Bobby.* What in the hell is he doing here?

I blink my eyes a few times, thinking I'm imagining him. If this is a bad dream, I want to wake up immediately. I refuse to have the best day of my life, tainted by thoughts of this monster.

The hand by my side grabs a chunk of my outer thigh, and I wince when I push my fingers together and feel the sting of the pinch. *This is no nightmare.* My heart rate spikes when he comes to an abrupt halt, and the color drains from his face. He recognizes me instantly.

Oh, dear God, please don't let this be real. I feel my body sway as he recovers from his initial shock and rushes in my direction. Everything in me wants to turn and run, but I just stand there, paralyzed by fear and unable to move.

I've trained for situations just like this since I was a teenager, but even when he pulls a small handgun from the waistband of his trousers, I still can't bring myself to react. After working with assault and domestic violence victims over

the years, I've learned there's a third element to fight or flight. *It's freeze.* Apparently, that's what I'm experiencing right now.

"Well, well, well," Bobby says, raising his arm so the gun is now aimed at my head. "So, you're the new piece he was telling me about? My nephew's one lucky son of a bitch." The predatory shark-like smile he gives me has all the tiny hairs on my arms standing on end.

Nephew?

"Grayson's your nephew?"

"You didn't know? He's the son of my baby brother, Robert, or Bobby-boy as I used to call him."

Bobby-boy?

He stalks in a circle around me, and I can feel his leering eyes as they skate over every inch of my body. It makes my skin crawl. As he passes in front of me, I take in his features, and the similarities stand out. The angle of his nose, his full lips, the strong cut of his jaw. His hair and eyes may be a different color, but the family resemblance is definitely there.

I remain frozen, but my eyes track his every move. The smile drops from his face as he seems to mull something over in his head. "Life just handed those fuckers everything," he sneers. "Neither one had to work for a damn thing. The golden boy and his little prodigy."

I can hear the disdain in his voice. It sounds like a combination of jealousy and hate. Is that why the brothers never got on?

His gaze returns to me. Thankfully, Grayson's T-shirt lands just above my knees, but I'm completely naked underneath.

"The resemblance between you and that crazy-ass mother of yours is uncanny. It was her beauty that first drew me in. She doesn't hold a candle to you though, fuck, just looking at you makes me hard. Do you have any idea how often I've thought about that night, Carla? Christ that pussy. It was so fucking tight."

He reaches down and palms his dick through his trousers as he speaks, and I cover my ears and clench my eyes closed. I'm not only trying to block out his words, but the mental images they bring. The one blessing he spared me from all those years ago, were the details. That's something I've always been thankful for.

Even though I can no longer see him, I flinch when I feel the cold metal against my skin, as the barrel of the gun tracks a path down the side of my face.

"You're all grown up now." He pushes his body flush with mine, and I can feel his erection digging into my lower back. His free hand reaches up to palm one of my breasts. "I like the idea of my nephew getting my sloppy seconds." His warm breath against my skin makes me want to hurl.

My body may be immobile, but my mouth doesn't seem to have an issue. "You're a sick fuck."

"And you're about to get a bullet through that pretty little head of yours if you don't shut the fuck up." He jams the gun into my temple to emphasize his threat. "Now, here's what we're going to do. You're going to collect your things and leave, ceasing all further contact with Grayson."

"You can't ask me to do that."

"I wasn't asking, bitch."

He snickers like the sadistic psycho he is as his free hand fists a clump of my hair. It hurts, and I want to cry out from the sting, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction. When he starts dragging me across the room, my scrambled brain is frantically searching for a way out of this mess.

"I won't tell anyone what you did to me; I promise."

"I have a wife and kids to protect, a life I love, so I'm not taking chances. Up," he says, shoving me toward the rung of the ladder. "One false move and I'll not only kill you, and fuck your dead corpse, I'll make lover boy watch before he suffers the same fate."

"You'd kill your own flesh and blood?"

“Without batting an eyelid.” I see the truth in his eyes, and it makes my blood run cold. It’s one thing to hurt me, but I can’t let him do that to Grayson. “You should know there’s nothing that will stop me from getting what I want. Don’t tell me you don’t remember how I got my hands on you? And what a glorious moment that was. Besides, that boy’s a spitting image of his dear old dad, and for that reason I’ve always despised him. I only spent time with him when he was a kid, because I knew my brother would turn over in his grave seeing me interact with his precious family.” His lips curve into a smile, proving yet again just how deranged this man is.

He shoves the gun into my back, indicating with the tilt of his head that he wants me to start climbing. I hesitantly do what he’s asking. I’ll do anything he says if it keeps Grayson safe.

I reach the top and maneuver myself onto the landing of the loft, remaining on my hands and knees. I glance over my shoulder and see Jason standing on the top rung of the ladder. I could easily extend my leg backward and with enough force kick him off, where he’d hopefully fall to his death on the ground below, but when I notice the gun in his hand is now trained toward the bed where the love of my life sleeps, a completely different kind of fear envelops me.

I need to gather my things without waking Grayson, and get the hell out of here. I refuse to do anything that will jeopardize his safety, even if doing so could potentially save my own life. That’s what true love is right? Making sacrifices for the people you care about.

Once I’ve packed everything up, I chance one last glance over at the bed. Will this be the last time I ever see him? My heart hurts at the thought. I cover my mouth with my hand, to muffle the sob, as I make my way back toward the ladder.

As soon as I step down off the last rung, with my backpack slung over my shoulder, Jason wraps his hand around my upper arm and starts dragging me toward the front door.

I can’t sneak out like this, not without doing something to stop Grayson from coming after me. “You know he’s going to

look for me when he wakes. He's not going to accept I've left, especially without an explanation."

Jason pauses, letting my words settle in before turning and moving us toward the kitchen. When we get there, he opens the top drawer and retrieves a notepad and pen, slapping it down onto the countertop.

"Leave him a note."

"I... I don't know what to say." My voice cracks as I speak.

I hate that I'm showing him my weakness. My hands may be lethal weapons, but in a matter of minutes I've been reduced to the helpless child he once took advantage of.

"I don't give a fuck what you say to him, just do it," he snarls, digging the gun into the side of my head. "Now!"

So many words run through my mind, but nothing I write will be able to convey the heartache and loss I'm feeling in this moment.

I'm sorry that my mother's poor choices have again ruined my life.

I'm sorry that this piece of shit is actually a relative of yours.

I'm sorry that I'm forced to break your heart, but the reality is you've always been too good for me anyway.

I want to rip this motherfucker's heart out with my bare hands. If it wasn't for the immediate threat to the man I love, who's lying upstairs blissfully unaware of the havoc that's about to rain down on his life, I wouldn't hesitate to do just that. Something inside me breaks when I think about what Grayson's going to face when he finally wakes. He doesn't deserve this.

"Hurry the fuck up," Jason grumbles, slapping the pen into my chest.

My hand is trembling as I wrap my fingers around it and move it toward the notepad. In the end I settle with two words.

I'm sorry.

A tear slips down my cheek as I remove the ring Grayson placed on my finger a few hours ago. I bring it toward my mouth and place a soft kiss on it before laying it on top of the paper. My heart is shattered beyond repair and I already know I'll never fully recover from this.

Jason reaches down and scoops up my bag, hustling me outside. When we reach his car, he opens the passenger door and shoves me inside. Is this the end for me? Is he going to kill me and dump my body in the forest? Death is probably best, because being forced to live a life without Grayson's love is a fate far worse.

Half an hour later he pulls up alongside a gas station. He reaches across me, tugging on the handle and opening my door. I'm perplexed is he letting me go?

"You go near Grayson; or tell anyone what happened, your mother will be the first one to die, followed by lover boy." He roughly grasps hold of my chin. It hurts, but again I remain passive. He'd probably take pleasure in the knowledge he's hurting me. "I'm not fucking around here, Carla, so heed my warning if you don't want blood on your hands."

With that, he shoves me with such force, I tumble from the car. I land on my side in the dirt with a thud. By the time I push to my feet, he's already reached in the back seat and grabbed my backpack, tossing it out, just like he did me.

He slams the passenger door shut and leaves a cloud of dust swirling around me as he hastily drives away. I stand there rooted to the spot until his car finally disappears from view. It's only then that I let the gravity of this situation sink in. Falling to my knees I begin to weep.

I take his warning seriously; this man is a monster. I may have the power to destroy him, but he'll do anything to keep his secret safe, and that's a chance I'm not willing to take.

In that moment, I knew what I had to do. As hard as it was going to be to walk away, I needed to disappear, it was the only way.

Chapter Thirty-One

Grayson

MY STOMACH LURCHES AS ALL the missing pieces to this fucking nightmare I've been living fall into place. Carla didn't leave because she didn't love me, she left because she did.

"He came to the cabin that day?" I ask.

"Yes," she answers without hesitation.

Standing, I clutch my head in my hands as I try to wrap my head around this madness. There's no longer a faceless name associated with her attacker. Jason Edwards is the man accountable. Worst still, he used my dad's nickname while doing it.

He's responsible for all this heartache, not to mention the demise of my relationship with Carla. For that alone I could kill him.

I've always been a family man. I've treasured all of my relatives fiercely since losing my dad. If his death taught me anything, it was that life is short, so never take your loved ones for granted. After everything I've just learnt, any affection I held for my uncle, a man I once respected, has disintegrated in mere seconds.

How many others were there? Was Carla his only victim? Images of my two young cousins, his daughters, flash through my mind... my sister Katlin too.

Turning, I start heading toward the doorway. I can't stay here knowing that a man I trusted is responsible for this carnage. Carla was right, this is all my fault.

"Grayson, where are you going?" Reece asks, reaching out to snag my elbow.

"I need to get out of here."

"You're going to see him, aren't you?"

I turn my face away from him and nod. Carla was right on the money when she said the truth won't set me free. My head is so fucked up right now. Thinking of all the time I spent with that man when I was a kid makes me sick to the stomach.

“Let me come with you.”

“Carla needs you here,” I say.

He exhales a long, drawn-out breath. “She’s going to need you too. Don’t do anything stupid, okay.”

When Reece drops my arm, I resume my exit, ignoring his last statement. I can’t make promises I’m not sure I’ll be able to keep.

I don’t look back as I head for my car. I’m on a mission to track down the man responsible. The night I found out what had happened to Carla when she was a child, I swore if the person responsible was standing in front of me in that moment he’d die. Nothing’s changed. By the end of the day, I may be locked up, but reaping vengeance for my girl, and everything he’s put her through, would be worth it.

The moment I’m seated in my vehicle, I reach for my phone in the center console, and search for his number in my contacts, hitting call.

My free hand is clutching the steering wheel so tight my knuckles have turned white. One of my legs is bouncing up and down at a furious pace as I try to rein in my anger. I need to keep my shit together until I find his whereabouts. I don’t want to say or do anything that may cause him to flee, that’s if he hasn’t already. If what Carla is saying is correct, there’s a good chance he’s already gone. I hope that’s not the case.

Either way, he won’t be getting away with any of this. That’s a promise.

The longer his phone rings, the more agitated I become. When his voicemail kicks in, I hang up and dial again. This time he answers.

“My boy, we don’t speak for ages, and now we’re talking for the second time today.” He chuckles into the phone and it’s a serious struggle on my part not to lose it. He sounds so calm... so normal. “Is everything okay? Or do you just miss me?”

Is this fucker for real? I count to ten in my head before I answer. “Everything’s fine,” I lie. “I’m getting ready to head

home and thought maybe we could catch up for a bit before I leave. Who knows when I'll get to see you again?"

"Okay, sure. Do you want me to meet you somewhere? We could grab some lunch."

"No, I'll come to you. Where are you staying?"

The line goes quiet and for a moment I wonder if he's trying to think of an excuse, but then he finally says, "I'm staying at the Embassy Suites on Rancho California Road. Let me know when you're close. I can meet you down in the lobby."

"What's your room number, I'd rather come there?"

"Are you sure everything is okay, you sound... kind of off?"

This time I'm the one who remains silent as I punch the name of his hotel into my GPS. It's only a few miles away. I'm already pulling out of the trailer park by the time I reply. "I'm on my way, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"What's going on, Grayson?"

"You tell me?" I ask.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

I don't want to show my hand before getting there, but my resistance is slipping by the second. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Where did you go after leaving me this morning?"

"I... I came back to my room."

"Are you sure about that?"

"What are you implying, boy? I'm many things, but I'm not a liar. I have nothing to hide." He's lying through his teeth right now, and that only serves to amplify my rage.

I grit my teeth together, shaking my head. "Everything about you is a lie, isn't it?"

"I don't know what your problem is, but I think this conversation is done."

“Are you going to stick by the story you told me a few years ago about never making it up to the cabin that day?”

Despite how fucked up I was at the time, I remember that discussion vividly. I’d been driving around in circles for hours trying to track Carla down; I was going out of my damn mind when I suddenly remembered him telling me that morning he may drop in for a visit. It was a long shot, but on the slim chance he did come, he may have seen her leave.

When I called him, he confirmed he never made it, saying something had come up at home, which I now know to be untrue. At the time I had no reason to doubt him.

I was a mess when we spoke, and I poured my goddamn heart out to him, confessing all my fears and confusion about Carla leaving. He listened, he sympathized, he even asked if there was anything he could do to help. I want to tear him apart. He’s the reason the last two and a half years of my life have been a living hell.

“What?” I hear the change in his voice as he speaks. “I don’t know what that bitch told you, but I can assure you it’s all lies.”

“The only person lying here is you.”

“You’re going to believe a piece of trailer park trash over your own flesh and blood?”

My temper snaps, and I scream into the phone. “I know what you did and I’m not just talking about today you sick fuck.”

The line goes dead and that’s all the confirmation I need. I put my foot down so I can reach my destination as soon as possible.



I maneuver my car into the first available spot I see and exit the vehicle. My heart is racing from the sheer amount of adrenaline pumping through my body as I jog toward the entry to the hotel. The moment I step into the reception area, I scan

the lobby for any sign of my uncle. I'd be surprised if he stuck around after the phone conversation we just had. He knows the jig is up, and I won't rest until he pays for every single thing he's done.

When I find no sign of him, I head toward the front desk. The pretty brunette gives me a complete once-over before finally making eye contact. That only seems to enrage me further. I'm tired of being objectified by women.

"Hi," she says, giving me her brightest smile. "Welcome to the Embassy Suites."

"I need the room number of one of your guests." The tone of my voice has the smile instantly dropping from her face. "His name is Jason Edwards."

She clears her throat before glancing down at the screen in front of her. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm unable to give out that kind of information."

My eyes drop to the name badge pinned to her chest as I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. You catch more flies with honey, Granny always says.

"Please, Josie, it's an emergency."

The calmer tone of my voice seems to help. "It's company policy, but I can call his room for you if you like."

She reaches for the phone sitting on the desk to her right. "Don't," I say, placing my hand on top of hers. "I just got off the phone with him a few minutes ago. He's my uncle, and he wasn't in a good way, I'm worried he's planning on hurting himself." It's me who's planning on doing the hurting, but she'll never give me his room number if I tell her that.

Josie places her free hand on her chest. "Oh, my."

"Can you please help me?"

"I can't give you his information, but I can get someone from hotel security to go up to his room and do a welfare check."

"Would it be possible for me to go with him?"

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, I’m riding in the elevator to the second floor with a big, burly looking guy standing beside me. I give him the side-eye. He’s staring straight ahead, with a don’t-fuck-with-me look on his face. The key to my uncle’s room is clutched firmly in his left hand. He’s a damn tank, and I already know he’ll try to stop me when I lunge for my uncle, but hopefully I’ll manage to get a few good hits in first.

My limbs are trembling by the time we reach our destination, that’s how amped up I am. I stand beside the guard as he knocks twice on the door.

“Mr. Edwards,” he calls out when there’s no answer. We both stand there waiting until he finally knocks again. “Mr. Edwards, this is hotel security. I have your room key; I’m going to enter.”

He doesn’t even get the card in the slot before we hear a loud crack coming from the other side of the door, closely followed by a thud. I went hunting enough when I was a boy to recognize that sound, and since a bullet didn’t penetrate into the hallway, I can only surmise its target. That thought is confirmed the moment the door is open and I see my uncle’s twisted body on the floor with a pool of blood around his head.

Fucking coward.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Carla

“HEY, ARE YOU AWAKE?” REECE calls out before rapping his knuckles on my bedroom door.

“Yeah,” I answer, rolling over in bed. Although I’ve barely left my room in days, I haven’t slept much either. My mind is still clouded by my mother’s death, and surprisingly by Jason’s suicide. I thought his demise would bring me peace, but it hasn’t. Not in the slightest. I’m not sure why.

“Are you decent?”

I sit up, rubbing my eyes. Dipping my chin, I spy the sauce stain on one of my favorite T-shirts, I’m a mess, but at least I’m covered. This shirt is one of many I stole from Grayson while we were together. I have a drawer full of them. They’ve been my chosen sleepwear since we’ve split. It’s no compensation for the real thing, but having a small part of him with me gives me comfort.

“I’m decent,” I reply.

The door slowly creaks open, and Reece pops his head in. His eyes quickly scan over me and when I see him wince, I know I look even worse than I feel. I haven’t brushed my hair in days.

There’s been no contact between Grayson and I since everything went down, and part of me is grateful for that. I know I’m being a coward, but so much has happened, and although I’m partly a victim in all of this, I can’t help but feel responsible for the hurt I’ve brought to his family. I know he’s talked with Reece on the phone, that’s how we found out about his uncle.

Emma’s tried to reach out to me a few times. She ended up sending a text when I didn’t return any of her calls. I just told her I’m not ready to talk yet. I know she’ll understand. Her reply was short and sweet, which I’m grateful for.

Emma: I’ll be here for you whenever you are. I love you!

“You might want to have a quick shower and change; you have a visitor downstairs,” Reece informs me.

“A visitor, who?”

He shrugs. “She said to tell you it’s Granny.”

Granny.

Grayson’s grandmother? Cheese on a cracker. Has she come to chew me out about her son? I almost tell Reece I’m not up for visitors, but I know she’s traveled a long way to see me, and as much as I’m dreading it, I need to face this clusterfuck eventually. I know Reece feels the same way, otherwise he never would’ve come up here in the first place. He’s always been protective of me when needed.

I rise from the bed, pulling down my T-shirt as I go. It swims on my tiny frame. “Tell her I’ll be down in ten,” I say, walking over to my dresser to grab some clean clothes and underwear.

Although the shower has helped to make me feel somewhat normal again, my stomach is in knots as I descend the stairs and head toward the front of the gym. I tuck my hands into my hoodie when I spot Granny sitting on one of the chairs near reception. She looks up as I approach and when a genuine smile tugs at her lips, I feel immediate relief.

Standing, she doesn’t hesitate to open her arms wide, and I feel tears burn the back of my eyes as I step into her embrace. It’s been years since I’ve seen this woman, and I’ve missed her.

“My sweet girl,” she whispers, rubbing her hands up and down my back. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” I say, burying my face further into her shoulder to hide my tears.

Pulling back, Granny cups my face. “You have nothing to be sorry about. Grayson explained everything to me, that’s why I’m here. In some way I feel responsible.”

“For what?”

She looks around before bringing her attention back to me. “Is there somewhere we can talk in private.”

“Of course.”

Stepping back, I look down at her T-shirt not knowing what to expect, and a small smile tugs at my lips as I read it. *'Don't eat clowns, they taste funny.'*

"Nice shirt," I snicker.

"I played it down today, I didn't want to wear anything that may embarrass you, dear." But then she turns around and lets her cardigan slip from her shoulders, giving me a glimpse of what's written on the back. *'Eat dicks instead.'*

I smile for the first time in days. This woman is my spirit animal.

Leading her out to the private courtyard in the rear of the building, I take a seat on the bench that sits along the back wall. I tap the space beside me, and she sits down. I could've taken her upstairs to my apartment, but after being cooped up for days, I could use the fresh air.

Granny opens her bag once she's seated, pulling out a small pink glittery case. She unzips it, removing a hand rolled cigarette and lighter. She holds it out to me, and I shake my head.

"I don't smoke."

"It's not tobacco," she replies, raising an eyebrow.

"You smoke pot?" I ask, my eyes widening.

"I've heard it's good for people with glaucoma."

"You have glaucoma?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Fuck knows, but I'm old, so it's a possibility."

I throw my head back and laugh; she's only been here minutes and I'm already feeling a bit better.

She places the joint between her lips, lighting it. After taking a long draw, she holds in the smoke as she rests her back against the wall behind us. When she finally exhales, she extends her hand toward me offering me a puff.

I shake my head. "My mom was an addict, so I've never touched the stuff."

“I respect that,” she says. “But I can’t be straight for the conversation we’re about to have.”

My stomach churns at the thought of what she might have to say, so against my better judgement I reach for the joint, bringing it to my mouth.

Reece will kill me if he finds out what I’m doing. He gave me a huge lecture about drugs when I first moved in with him all those years ago, but he needn’t have bothered, I saw firsthand what they did to my mother, and there was no way I was going to end up like her.

The moment I inhale I start to cough and splutter, and Granny chuckles as she lightly taps my back. “Amateur.”

We pass the joint back and forth a few more times before any further words are spoken. I’m not feeling the effects yet, so I lean back against the wall and wait to hear what Granny has to say.

“Did you know Jason wasn’t my biological son?”

“He wasn’t?”

“No. He was only three years old when I met his father. He was a cute kid and took a shine to me right off the bat. My husband, James, was a great dad. His ex was a psycho bitch, so when they split, he took Jason with him. He said he wouldn’t be safe living with her. I won’t go into it, but the beginning of that kid’s life was rough. My heart really went out to him.

“His dad and I eventually got married, and I fell pregnant with Robert, Grayson’s father, and everything changed. Turns out the little boy I had grown to love had a dark side. Jason hated his brother from the moment he was born. It was a jealousy thing, and over time I wasn’t comfortable leaving the boys alone. Not even for a second. My sweet Robert was such a good baby, but when I started to find small bruises on him, and bite marks, I knew exactly where they were coming from.”

“That’s awful,” I say.

“As they got older, things got worse. Jason constantly bullied his little brother. He called him Bobby-boy, which Robert hated. That only made him do it more. He was such a spiteful little shit. If I ever chastised him for his behavior, he’d accuse me of playing favorites, or loving Robert more because he was my biological son. I tried so hard to never do that.”

I reach over and place my hand on top of hers, because I have no response for any of this. I don’t want to hear about his life, but she obviously needs to get this off her chest, so I let her speak.

“Robert was good at everything, school, sports, you name it. The girls loved him, and Jason only hated him more for it. My husband, God rest his soul, wore rose-colored glasses when it came to his eldest son. It was obvious to me that Jason had inherited his mother’s genes. My husband didn’t have a nasty bone in his body. He was a kind, loving man, but a little coarse around the edges. A rough-and-tumble kind of guy. He’d always say, *‘Boys will be boys, wait until they’re older, they’ll be best of friends.’*”

“Did that ever happen?”

“No. They barely had anything to do with each other. I was surprised when he showed up at Roberts funeral. They hadn’t spoken in years, and he never bothered to come and visit him while he’d been sick.”

Granny stops talking for a moment and starts digging in her bag again. When she pulls out another joint, and lights it, I know she’s struggling reliving it all. “At the funeral, Jason didn’t shed a tear. Quite the opposite actually. I happened to look over at him as Robert’s coffin was being lowered into the ground, and do you know what that piece of shit did? He fucking smiled. It’s probably the first genuine smile I’d ever seen him make. Any love I held for him, died in that moment.”

When Granny reaches up to wipe away her tears, my heart hurts for her. I can’t imagine how that would’ve felt.

She takes a deep breath before continuing. “When Jason was twelve, I got a call from the principal at his school. A girl a few grades below him, had accused him of touching her

inappropriately. He denied it of course, but there was this little voice in the back of my mind that said differently. He'd become such a practiced liar over the years it was impossible to know when he was telling the truth."

This conversation is heading down a path I'm not comfortable with, but I'm grateful for the pot now. I'm feeling very relaxed and chilled despite her confessions. I believe Granny though, a hundred percent that fucker did what that girl accused him of, and my heart goes out to her. A part of me has always carried around a fraction of guilt. I was always beating myself up, wondering if there was anything I'd done to encourage his behavior, even though my heart knew that wasn't the case.

"There were other incidents in the years that followed, but it was always his word against theirs, and somehow, he managed to talk his way out of all of it. In college he was even accused of drugging a girl at a party and taking advantage of her. He got away with that one too. He ended up dropping out a few months later because that girl's brother, and a group of his friends, beat him so bad he had to be hospitalized."

She turns to face me, reaching for my hands. "This is why I felt compelled to come here today. When Grayson told me what he'd done to you, the shame and guilt I felt was almost too much to bear."

Although it's hard to hear about the other victims, it makes me realize that the monster I knew him to be, was always inside him. There's nothing I could've said or done to change that.

"What he did to me wasn't your fault," I tell her.

"That's where you're wrong. In my heart I knew he was guilty of the things the others had accused him of. If I'd done more about it back then, maybe I could've saved you."

"Oh, Granny," I say, wrapping her in my arms when she begins to cry. "The only person responsible for his actions is him."

“I’m glad that sick fuck is dead. At least he can’t hurt anyone else now.”

“When Reece told me you were here, I was worried you’d be angry at me for what happened.”

She draws back, cupping my face. “Oh, dear God, never. I’ll admit I was pissed at you when you broke my grandson’s heart, but now I know why, all is forgiven. You were protecting him.”

“How is he?”

“Grayson?”

“Yes.”

“Heartbroken. He’s carrying around a lot of guilt for what happened to both you and your poor mother. He feels responsible.”

“Please tell him not to. I don’t want any of you to feel accountable for what he did. I could say the same,” I admit as my own tears start to fall. “If only I’d spoken up when I was thirteen, or reached out for help after he came to the cabin, all of this could have been avoided.”

“Oh, sweetie. You had your reasons for doing what you did. You thought you were doing the right thing, the honorable thing, nobody can fault you for that. Your strength is admirable.”

We both sit there wrapped in each other’s arms for the longest time. It’s nice. I can count on one hand the number of people who’ve hugged me in my lifetime.

“Grayson wanted me to ask you when the funeral will be?”

“It’s on Friday, but I don’t want anyone to attend. This is something I need to do on my own.”

“Oh, Carla,” she says, gently brushing the hair from my face. “Sometimes leaning on others for strength isn’t a sign of weakness.”

“I was estranged from my mother for years; I need this time to say my goodbyes.”

“Okay, I’ll let him know.” She digs in her bag again and pulls out an envelope. “He wanted you to have this... to help with the funeral costs or whatever.”

“I don’t want his money,” I say, holding up my hand.

“Grayson knew you’d say that. He also said it’s yours... money you gave him before you two broke up. Something about a car.” She shrugs her shoulder before forcing it into my hand. “You have to take it.”

I flip back the top flap of the envelope and see multiple bundles of hundred-dollar notes inside. “There’s too much in here. I only gave him a portion of this.”

“That’s something you’ll need to take up with Grayson. Let him help you, he needs to do this. The poor boy is suffering too.”

“I can’t let him do that.”

“Yes, you can,” she says, tapping my leg. “Now, I best be going. I have a long drive home and there’s a box of twinkies waiting with my name on it. I’m going to kick off my shoes, lose this damn bra, and suck all the centers out of those motherfuckers.”



I sneak out of the apartment while Reece is off doing his morning jog. I’m struggling to keep myself together, and I didn’t want to have to face him before I left. The gym is closed today. It’s the first time ever. I only found out when I noticed the sign sitting on the reception desk. It read: *We’ll be closed on Friday due to family reasons.*

I cried when I saw he’d written *family*. I’ve turned into an emotional wreck of late. The tiniest things seem to set me off. Reece already knew I was attending my mother’s funeral alone; he was simply doing this out of respect for me.

We’ve never put a label on our relationship, or discussed emotions or sappy bullshit, but to me he’s always been family. I’ve never uttered the words, but I hope he knows how much I

love him. I'm so grateful for everything he's given me over the years.

I decided not to do a church service. Roxy didn't have a religious bone in her body. I opted for the burial only. The funeral home has organized a pastor to attend and say a few words. I have to meet him at the gravesite at 9:00 am, that's two hours from now.

I'd planned to grab a coffee while waiting, but my stomach is in knots. Part of me is now wishing I hadn't decided to brave this day alone.



I ended up driving straight to the cemetery. I've been sitting here in the car staring out the front windshield at the deep hole that's been dug in preparation for today, my mother's final resting place. It's traumatizing to say the least. I've spent the entire time racking my brain, trying to remember the good times we shared. Is it bad that I can barely come up with any?

A few that come to mind are the times she'd let me sit on her bed and watch her apply her makeup. Sometimes I'd ask her to put some on me, the answer was mostly no, but one day she let me apply some of her lipstick. I smile to myself when I think about that moment. I felt like a princess that day. I was super careful when I ate so as to not rub any of it off.

You may ask what was so special about watching your mother get ready, that answer is simple; they were some of the few moments throughout our time together, that she didn't seem to mind that I existed.

What I'm trying to avoid, are the last images I have of Roxy. The ones that wake me in the middle of the night covered in a cold sweat. She was barely recognizable. She'd aged so much in the years we'd been apart. Time had not been kind to her, and that slays me. I left that frightened, lonely and desperate little girl behind the day my mother kicked me out, but right now, in this moment, she's clawing her way back to the surface.

Out of nowhere the tears start to fall, and I'm powerless to stop them. It doesn't take long before they morph into agonizing sobs. I've not cried this hard since the day at the trailer when I found her lifeless body.

The possibility our relationship may have never improved is a reality I need to face, but I'll forever have regrets for not trying. Even after everything she did to me. There wasn't much I could do when I was a child, as an adult though? Maybe. It's something I'll never know now.

I startle when the driver's side door suddenly opens. I lift my head from the steering wheel when someone reaches into the car and undoes the seat belt that's still wrapped around me. I don't even need to look up to see who it is, I can smell him.

Grayson.

"Sunshine," he whispers as he lifts me out of the car and folds me tightly in his arms. "I know you wanted to do this alone. I tried so hard to respect your wishes, but in the end, I couldn't do it."

"I'm glad you're here," I mumble into his chest as my arms snake around his waist. "Thank you for coming."

Just being here, in his arms, makes me feel stronger.

Leaning down, he places a soft kiss on my hair, and that gesture brings on a fresh round of tears. "Let it all out, sweetheart," he whispers. "I've got you."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Grayson

CARLA MANAGES TO PULL HERSELF together by the time the funeral car arrives. I reach for her hand, threading our fingers together. I can feel her body trembling as we slowly walk in that direction, so I tighten my grip.

When Granny returned from her visit with Carla and told me she wanted to do today on her own, I immediately called Reece. I may have only been a boy when I lost my dad, but I remember his funeral vividly. My mother was a mess and could barely walk, she was so overcome with grief. A few hundred people attended. My father was a good man, and loved by many. The support they brought with them that day meant so much to my family. There was no way I was going to let Carla face today on her own.

The driver of the hearse exits the vehicle and rounds the car to where we're standing. "Carla," the man says, extending his hand to her.

"Hey," she replies.

He then moves to me. "Mark," he says.

"Grayson." I wrap my free hand with his.

"The pastor should be here any moment," he says, turning his attention back to Carla. "We'll get started once he arrives."

"Okay."

"Have you chosen your pallbearers?" he asks.

"What?" Carla gasps in horror as her large eyes move from Mark to me.

"The people you want to carry the coffin to the gravesite," he says.

She obviously didn't notify the funeral home that she intended going this alone. Thankfully, I have it covered.

"I..." Before she gets to finish her answer, our attention is drawn to the black Range Rover that pulls to a stop behind us. The back door opens and Reece gets out, followed by my mother. Ashton exits the driver's side and rounds the car to

open Emma's door. My eyes dart to Carla and I let go of her hand, tucking her under my arm when I see a fresh wave of tears emerge.

She may not have wanted us here today, but we all love her, and there was no way we were going to let her face this on her own. She needs us.



Carla chose a white coffin with intricate gold accents, and it's adorned with a mass of white roses and lilies. It was important to me that she be able to give her mother whatever kind of send-off she wanted, something I knew she couldn't afford without help, hence the fifteen grand I got Granny to deliver. I would've offered to fund it myself, but I know how Carla gets when I pay for things.

That's why I disguised it as the money she'd gotten from the sale of her old car, and the few payments she'd managed to make on her new one. In truth, it was only a small fraction of what I gave back, but it was the only way I could get her to take it. I made Granny promise. Under no circumstances, no matter how hard Carla fought, she wasn't to return with that envelope.

The pastor does a nice job at the gravesite mass; Carla is sandwiched between me and Emma, her hands wrapped in ours. When we are asked if anyone would like to say a few words, I feel Carla stiffen beside me. I never met her mother, and from what little I know, it would be hard for me to find something nice to say, so I'm grateful when Reece steps forward.

"I would," he says. "I only met Roxanne a handful of times, and can't say they were under the best of circumstances. She lived a hard and fast-paced life, constantly struggling with her addictions. I choose to believe, despite that, there was some good inside her. After all, she gave us Carla." He clears his throat, and I'm forced to blink a few times, trying to get my own emotions in check. "Her daughter is honest, hardworking, kind, brave, selfless and the most inspiring person I've ever

had the pleasure of knowing. A precious gift to us all,” he adds, getting choked up. “It’s been my absolute pleasure to watch her grow into the woman she is today. In my heart I know her mother would be so proud of the person she’s become; despite all the odds she’s faced in her life.”

Once he’s finished speaking, Carla lets go of our hands and steps forward. “Thank you,” she says, wrapping her arms around his waist. “I love you so much, Reece. I wouldn’t be who I am today if it wasn’t for you.”

“I love you too, kid,” he replies, awkwardly tapping her back, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

After the burial, we all head to the gym. Michelle stayed behind to set up some refreshments for us upon our return. Reece drives his car home, and Carla travels with me. The mood is somber as she stares out the passenger side window in silence.

“You okay?” I ask, reaching across the center console and placing my hand on her leg.

She turns her face toward me. Her eyes are red and puffy, she looks so goddamn sad. It tears me up inside.

“I am,” she replies with a small nod. “I was dreading today; I’m not sure how I would’ve coped on my own.” She lifts one of her shoulders slightly. “I’m feeling very grateful for the amazing people I have in my life, but on the flip side, I’m sad Roxy wasn’t as lucky.”

“We all love you, Carla.” I squeeze her leg as I speak.

“I know,” she whispers, looking down at her lap. “I know.”



“If I’d known you guys were all coming today, I would’ve organized something for afterwards,” she says as I pull into a parking spot outside the gym.

“Reece has it all under control. That’s why Michelle didn’t join us at the cemetery.”

“Oh.”

When I open her door, I hold out my hand, helping her from the car and lead her inside. I see a long table set up against the adjacent wall when we enter, with a line of chairs either side. Emma intercepts Carla straight away, handing her a glass of wine.

“There’s sandwiches, pastries and tiny cakes over there. How about I make you up a plate?” she asks.

“I’m not hungry right now,” Carla replies. And that’s a sentence I never thought I’d hear her say. I understand exactly how she’s feeling, but it still concerns me. “This is just what I need.” She brings the glass of wine to her mouth, taking a large gulp.

Emma’s concerned eyes flicker in my direction. I give her a small reassuring nod. The funeral is always the hardest. I know the coming days, weeks, and probably months aren’t going to be easy as she starts to heal. It took me a very long time to accept my father’s passing.

The girls move to take a seat, and I let them go. She needs her best friend right now. Even though we were kids at the time, Ashton was my rock after my father’s funeral. He didn’t say much more than sorry, but I knew he was there for me and that’s what mattered. We spent the entire afternoon throwing a football around in my backyard. Not a single word was spoken. It’s what I needed at the time to help release some frustration and take my mind off things.

Emma’s been beside herself with worry ever since she heard about what happened to Carla and her mother. She was torn between driving up here, and giving her the space she wanted. I’m glad she decided on the latter. It’s exactly why I stayed away.

Ashton brings me over a beer, placing his hand on my shoulder. “How are you doing?” he asks.

I shrug. I can’t seem to move past my part in this mess. For the travesties my uncle created, but also the knowledge that my persistence in seeking out Carla is what started this domino effect.

I know Granny has reached out to my uncle's wife to see how her and her daughters are doing, but none of us attended his funeral. He can rot in hell for all I care.



When it came time for us to leave and head back to Hermosa, my heart felt heavy. I wasn't ready to walk away. The thought that this may be the last time I ever see Carla again absolutely terrifies me.

We're standing on the sidewalk saying our goodbyes. Ashton and I are chatting with Reece, while Carla, Emma and my mom are hugging it out beside us.

The moment I notice Carla's body slightly jerking as she silently cries in their arms my decision's made. I can't leave just yet.

"Can my mom travel back with you and Em?" I ask Ashton. "I think I might hang around for a while."

"Of course. If you want to stay for a few days, I can cover for you at the office."

"I'll be in tomorrow; I have meetings scheduled all day." Carla needs time, so I'm not going to overstay my welcome.

"Fair enough. If you change your mind let me know. Either way, I'll make sure your mom gets home safe."

"Thanks."

I turn my attention to Reece. "Is it okay with you if I stay?"

He nods. "It would be good for Carla" is all he says.



Once the others leave, we head up to the apartment, more specifically, Carla's bedroom. I might be reading too much into it, but she looked relieved when I told her I was staying.

I'm sitting on the edge of her bed with my head buried in my hands while she showers. Reece is downstairs with

Michelle, tidying up.

I sit up straight when Carla comes back into the room, rubbing my palms down the front of my suit pants. I removed my jacket and tie earlier, rolling my shirt sleeves up to my elbows.

Carla's hair is pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head, and she's void of any makeup. She still makes me breathless.

Instinctively, my eyes travel down her body. That's when I notice she's wearing one of my old tees. That's where it got to. Come to think of it, I'm missing quite a few of them.

"Nice shirt," I say smiling. I like seeing her in my clothes.

"This old thing," she replies with a shrug. "I have a drawer full of them."

We both have a small laugh at that. It lightens the mood somewhat. The fact that she held on to them after all this time pleases me.

"Are you hungry? Do you want me to run out and grab you a pizza or something?"

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks anyway though."

I tap the space beside me. "Why don't you lie down, and try to get some rest."

"I... I can't," she says, turning her face away from mine.

"When was the last time you slept?"

She shrugs, but I can tell it's been a few days at least. There are dark circles under her eyes and she looks exhausted. I'm guessing the nightmares are keeping her up.

The first time I saw a corpse was when Ashton's ex-girlfriend committed suicide. I was with him the day he found her, and those images played around in my head for many months afterwards. It was a sight I hoped I'd never see again. Last week unfortunately brought that total to three. And as hard as those moments were, what broke me most that day, was seeing Carla fall apart. Fuck, it still haunts me.

“Come. Let me hold you. I’ll be on my best behavior, Scout’s honor.” When I raise my hand, doing the three-finger salute, she rolls her eyes.

“When were you a boy scout?”

“Technically never, but I would’ve been a kick-ass one if I was.”

“I see the past few years have done nothing to quell your modesty.”

Her words have me bowing my head. The past few years have been rough. “I’m still the exact same man you fell in love with once, albeit a little broken inside.”

“Oh, Gray,” she says, crossing the room and sitting down beside me. Reaching up she runs her fingers through my hair before placing a soft kiss on my cheek. “I’m sorry for hurting you. It’s the last thing I ever wanted to do. I hope you know that, no matter how misguided it may have been, I was trying to protect you.”

“I know,” I reply, my voice cracking as I speak.

“Do you want one of your old shirts to sleep in?”

“Please.”

“Okay.” She stands, making her way toward the dresser. “On one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

“You can’t take it with you when you leave.”

Her words make me smile. I hadn’t planned too. I like that there’s a piece of me here, with her.

Once I’ve strip down to my boxer briefs, I slip on the T-shirt. When I lie down beside her, I reach over and turn off the lamp before pulling her into my arms. She scoots a little closer, hugging my waist, and resting her head on my chest. It’s nice. Neither of us speak as I stroke my fingers through her long hair.

This moment feels like old times, but the reality is the last few years apart have changed everything. I’m not sure where

we'll go from here, but I pray to God we can somehow find our way back to each other.

When I hear her yawn, I turn my face and place a soft kiss against her forehead. My hand moves upward so my fingers can massage her scalp. "Sleep."

"Thanks for coming today, and for being here now," she whispers into the darkness.

"There's no place I'd rather be." I wish we could shut ourselves away from the rest of the world and stay like this, right here, for eternity.

She lifts her leg, draping it over the top of mine. It lies mere inches away from the base of my balls. My dick is begging for some friction, and silently encouraging me to place my hand behind her knee, so I can maneuver her limb the rest of the way. I need to come up with a plan to calm him the fuck down. He's getting way ahead of himself here. I'm simply spending the night because I don't want Carla to be alone, no other reason. I can't blame the poor guy, he misses her... *we both do*, but now is not the time or place.

I know firsthand what the death of a parent feels like... even if hers was a shitty one, she's hurting. I'd never take advantage of that.



Morning comes around far too quickly for my liking. Carla has slept soundly in my arms the entire night. I have a long drive back to Hermosa Beach today, as well as back-to-back meetings, so I should've closed my eyes at some point and gotten some sleep, but I couldn't. If the past few years have taught me anything, it's there's no guarantee of a tomorrow. I may never get a chance to hold her like this again, so I need to savor every second. I feel like I'm trapped inside a ticking time bomb, and I don't like it one bit.

Nothing has changed from my end, I still crave her with every fiber of my being, but a part of me fears it's too late. The

distance between us seems insurmountable. Especially after everything that's happened in the past week.

Pushing those negative thoughts from my head, I bury my nose in her hair, inhaling her sweet scent. Our bodies are interlocked, our limbs twisted in a chaotic knot that I can't bring myself to untangle. As I lie here, I'm hoping with all my might this won't be our last time together. My life sucks without her in it.

Closing my eyes, I silently pray that the world will stop spinning, so I can stay right here, in her arms where I belong.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Grayson

IT'S BEEN ALMOST TWO WEEKS since I've seen or heard from Carla. As each day passes, my fears of losing her all over again seem to be coming to fruition.

She was sound asleep when I left the morning after her mother's funeral. As much as I wanted to wake her, she looked far too peaceful. She needed her rest. I did leave a short note on her dresser:

REACH OUT IF YOU NEED ANYTHING.

I'LL ALWAYS BE HERE FOR YOU. GXX

I included my phone number at the bottom because I wasn't sure if she still had it. I'm kicking myself now. I should've written more.

I wish I'd told her how much I love her. How unbearable life is without her by my side. But with everything going on, it just didn't feel like the right time. Since I don't have her new number, I've reached out to Reece, and he assures me she's doing okay. She's had good days and bad. This week she went back to work. That knowledge had me torn. I'm happy to hear she's moving forward with her life, but I'm also petrified she's doing it without me.

I look up from my desk when there's a knock at the door. "Come in," I say.

When it opens, I see its Amber, my assistant. "This just came for you." She holds up the small parcel in her hand, a smile curving on her lips. "The return address is Temecula... since a certain someone lives there, I thought it might be important."

Sitting up straighter in my chair, I hold out my hand. "Don't just stand there, give it to me, woman." I have no idea if it's from Carla, but my heart is racing at the thought.

Once it's in my grasp, I waste no time tearing it open. Inside I find a long hard object wrapped in a piece of paper. The

moment I untangle it, my stomach sinks. Is this the fork I gave her? Why is she returning it? My hand is shaking as I flip it over. When I read the engraving, pure elation courses through me. *'I forking love you too.'* It's different from the one I gave Carla; this is her response.

My hands scramble to pick up the piece of paper that accompanied it:

I miss you! Cxx

I look up to find Amber still standing there watching me. "Cancel all my appointments for tomorrow," I say as I start packing up my things. "I have somewhere more important I need to be."

The smile on her face grows. "I'm on it, boss."



"Grayson." Carla's eyes widen the moment she turns and sees me standing there. Instinctively she reaches out, running the tips of her fingers down my arm. "You're real, you're here," she whispers.

The corners of my mouth tilt up. "In the flesh, baby. I hear you were missing me."

Her breath hitches in her throat. "Like you wouldn't believe," she confesses.

"I got your gift today."

"Oh."

"You should've called me; I've been going out of my mind."

"I wanted to, but I was scared." Her gaze moves down to the bar top.

"Of what? Me? You know I'd never hurt you."

"I know. I'm just worried there's too much bad blood between us now. That the damage it caused is irreversible."

I lean over the bar raising her chin, bringing her eyes back to mine. “There’s nothing we can’t work through if we do it together.” I reach for her hand and lace my fingers with hers. “I’ve missed my sunshine, life’s been pretty dark without her.”

Tears rise to her eyes. “I’ve missed you too. I feel empty inside without you.”

“Ditto, sweetheart.” My heartbeat slows, and a calming peace settles over me. Is this nightmare finally over? Are we now free to be the couple we were meant to be all along? I rub the heel of my palm over the center of my chest. “It’s been really damn hard to breathe without you.”

The smile she gives me when I say that is blinding. “Are you going to hang around until I get off?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re staying until close?”

“Yep.”

“You promise to sit right there and not move.” She points to the stool in front of me and I take a seat.

“I can assure you I’ll remain seated. As for not moving, we might have a problem. What if I have an itch and need to scratch it, or if I get thirsty and need a drink?”

Her eyes slightly narrow making me laugh. There’s my sassy girl. “Are you going to behave yourself tonight, Mr. Edwards?”

I shrug. “I’ll be on my best behavior for now, but once this place closes, I won’t be able to control myself.”

“I think I can live with that.”

My dick smirks, like the cocky fucker he is. He knows exactly where this night is heading. “I’ll need something in return for my compliance though.”

“What?” she asks, eying me skeptically.

“I want a kiss.”

“A kiss?”

“Yep, a proper one this time.”

“You’re not going to buy a girl a drink first? You’re just going to drive straight in, hey?”

Her words make me chuckle, I’ve missed that damn mouth. “Is that what you need, me to buy you a drink first? If that’s all it takes, just say the word.” I wave my hand toward the rows of shelves behind her, the ones lined with bottles of liquor. “I know the perfect place I can get one of those.”

She rolls her eyes before leaning across the bar that’s separating us. “Let’s get this over with Casanova, I have work to do.”

Her eyes flutter shut as she puckers up, and my smile grows. My thumb lightly skims over her plump lips, dragging the bottom one down in the process.

I rise from my stool, closing the last of the distance between us, sighing the moment our mouths connect. I hear a few hollers coming from somewhere behind us, but I ignore it. My sole focus is her, and that sweet mouth I’ve been craving.

The kiss is perfect, a big step up from the peck I gave her a few weeks ago. It has the right amount of lip and tongue, considering we’re in public. The only problem is, it ends far too soon.

Her eyes remain closed when I draw back, like she’s still savoring our connection. “You should keep me, sunshine,” I whisper, running my knuckle down the side of her face. “I’m a good catch, ask Granny, she’ll vouch for me.”

Her lids spring open revealing her hooded eyes. Christ, I ache for this woman.

She stands to full height before raising her hand to playfully bump me on the tip of my nose. “I might just do that, handsome,” she says with a glint in her eye.

“You might just do what? Ask Granny?”

“No, silly. Keep you.”

She gives me a cheeky wink before turning and heading to the other end of the bar. My eyes follow her every move.

Please keep me, I silently pray as my gaze drops to my lap. Because if things don't work out this time, I don't know what I'll do.



The bar has finally closed. The doors are locked and we're all alone. My eyes were glued to her the entire night. She's wearing this tight little denim skirt that's frayed around the bottom edge. It hugs her delicious ass perfectly. It's been driving me to the point of insanity.

I walk over to the old-style jukebox that sits in the far corner of the room, while Carla counts the till. Her shift seemed to drag on forever. I'm so angsty. I slide a few quarters into the machine before scanning the songs on offer, going through each list, searching for the perfect one we can dance to. Shit's about to get real. Music was such a huge part of my life growing up. Well, when my father was alive it was. My mom stopped playing their records after he passed. It was like the music died along with him. But I understood why.

When I was a small boy, I sometimes woke to the sound of singing coming from downstairs. I'd sneak to the banister at the top of the staircase peering down into the living room where I'd find my parents wrapped in each other's arms, dancing. The smile on my mother's face as my father spun her around the room, or the way they used to gaze into each other's eyes is something I'll never forget. You could practically feel their love floating in the air around them, it's the exact kind of connection I've found with Carla.

It takes me a while to find the right song. I choose, *Cry To Me* by Solomon Burke. It's an oldie, but I know she'll recognize it. It's from one of her favorite movies. *Dirty Dancing*. The lyrics sum up exactly what I've been going through the past few years.

The moment it starts to play, I turn around to face Carla, crooking my finger in her direction. A smile illuminates her beautiful face as she immediately stops what she's doing and rounds the bar.

I meet her in the middle of the dance floor. Our eyes are locked as Carla's flattened palms travel over my chest before her arms snake around my neck. I slide mine around her waist, dragging her closer until our bodies are flush.

We instantly start swaying to the music. One of my hands rests on her lower back, while the other moves down her outer thigh, so I can hike up her leg, placing it over my hip. I can't seem to get close enough to her.

I bend her upper body backward, her pelvis pushing against mine as I slowly guide her torso from left to right before maneuvering her until our chests are flush again. Carla's grinning like a fool. Patrick Swayze would be proud. It's dirty dancing at its finest, and I'm so fucking hot for her right now.

My mouth seeks hers out, devouring her with all the desperation I'm feeling. I reach for her other leg, lifting it until they're both wrapped snugly around my waist. Our lips are still connected as I start moving across the room until I have her lying flat on top of one of the tables.

I hadn't planned on taking things further, not until I had her back in my hotel room, but even the best laid plans can go awry. I can't wait; I need to be inside her this instant.

I push her skirt up around her hips before pulling her panties to the side. When my fingers glide down her center, I groan feeling how wet she is for me.

"Every day I've spent without you, I died a little more inside."

Carla tenderly cups the side of my face. "I love you," she whispers as I pop the button on my jeans and drag down the zipper.

Hearing those words from her again has my heart damn well ready to burst. "You're my unhealthy obsession, sunshine," I admit, sinking into her heat, and all the way home. "You have my heart in your hands... please take good care of it."

"I will."

My fingers dig into her flesh, and we both moan in unison as I rock my hips forward. I've missed this. Nobody makes me

feel the way she does.

“Wait,” she says, placing her hand on my chest, halting me. “Do you have a condom with you? I’m not on birth control.”

“You don’t need it. I’m going to fill this luscious body of yours with all my babies. And before you try to stop me, you’re going to be an amazing mother to our children.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I say, grinning. That was way easier than I thought it would be.

Shoving my hand into my pocket, I retrieve Carla’s engagement ring. I waste no time sliding it back onto her finger where it belongs. I held onto it in the hopes one day she’d be wearing it again, and the relief I feel in this moment is indescribable.

“There’s nothing standing in our way now. Don’t ever keep anything from me again.”

“I won’t.”

“You should’ve talked to me when everything first happened.”

“I know that now. I... I just didn’t want to put you in a position. He was your uncle, your family.”

“What you failed to realize, Carla, is you’re my family. My number fucking one. I’ll always choose you, don’t ever forget that.”

She smiles at me through her unshed tears. “You’re the first person to ever choose me.”

Leaning forward, I rub my nose alongside hers. “Promise me you’ll never leave me again, and mean it this time.”

“Cross my heart. You need to exist in my life.”

“I do, sunshine. I fucking do.”

Epilogue

Carla

TWO WEEKS HAVE PASSED SINCE Grayson and I got back together. Our resurrection has been a whirlwind to say the least, but we've lost so much time, so jumping in headfirst was the only option.

I quit my job the following day, packed up my things, said my goodbyes to Reece, and moved to Hermosa Beach to live with my fiancé. I couldn't be happier. Things have finally come full circle and we're right where we need to be.

Last night we flew to Vegas on the Barclay's fancy-smancy private jet, along with Ashton and Em of course. Who knew that little girl from the wrong side of the tracks would one day be living a life of luxury?

Grayson thinks we're just spending a weekend away with our best friends, but it's so much more than that.

After breakfast, the boys head down to the Casino. They think Emma and I are going on a shopping spree, but we're not. We have things to do and big plans to make. We agreed to meet up with them later for lunch. That's when all will be revealed.

By the time midday rolls around, we're all set and ready to go. We text the boys our coordinates, and they're on their way. I'm so excited I could squeal.

Emma and I are waiting on the sidewalk when their taxi pulls up to the curb. We both have suit bags clutched in our hands.

Ashton gets out first, eyeing the tiny white building behind us. "We're eating here?" he whines. I playfully roll my eyes. Although we've buried the hatchet and become friends, he's still a douche at times. Ignoring him, as he makes his way toward Emma, I stand there impatiently waiting for my man to exit the vehicle.

The moment Grayson's lips meet mine, I shove the suit bag into his chest. "What's this?" he asks.

"A suit."

“You bought me a suit?”

“No, it’s one of yours from home, silly. You need to put it on.”

“Why?”

“Because I cannot wait another second to become your wife.”

“What,” he says, giving me a dumb look.

“We’re getting married.”

“Here?” His eyes move toward the chapel behind us.

“Yes.”

“Right now?” And the way he says it has my entire body deflating.

“You don’t want to?”

His arms slide around my waist. “Are you kidding me, of course I do. I just wish my mom was here is all.”

“She’s inside waiting.”

“She is?” he asks, his face lighting up.

“Yes, so you better hurry and get changed.”

He lifts me off my feet and swings me around. “Have I told you how much I love you today?”

“Yes, you did, twice. But feel free to tell me again when I meet you at the altar.”



While the boys head off to get changed, Emma and I enter the adjacent room where we left all our things. We spent our morning getting our hair, makeup and nails done. All I need to do now is slip into my wedding dress.

Reece, Michelle, Grayson’s mom, his sister Kaitlin, Granny, Amber, Emma’s dad, and Ashton’s parents, along with Charlotte, or Charlie as we call her, all flew in earlier. Even

Chance and Aubrey are here. Everyone is seated in the chapel awaiting our nuptials.

My stomach's been in knots all morning, but now that the cat's out of the bag, and Grayson is on board, I'm eager to get the ceremony started. I've booked a restaurant down the street for afterwards.

I'm not wearing a traditional wedding dress today. I've chosen a white, vintage, fit and flare dress. It has a sweetheart neckline and capped sleeves. It hugs my torso like a second skin, flaring from my waist to my knees. There are a few layers of soft tulle underneath to give the skirt a slight flare. My hair is pinned up on top of my head in my signature, rockabilly style.

Once Emma and I are both dressed, I take a seat so she can pin the two silk roses into the right side of my hair. I've chosen to wear these instead of a veil. The rich red color matches perfectly with my lips and stiletto heels.

I stand and straighten my dress once she's done. "You look beautiful," she says, her eyes welling with tears.

"Oh Christ, don't make me cry, it'll ruin my makeup."

"I'm sorry," she says, swiping her fingers under her eyes. "I was just thinking about the day I got married. Remember when we were in the bedroom at Valentina's house getting ready? You broke my damn heart that day. You looked so sad. You were scared to see Grayson, and here we are three months later and you're about to marry him."

I smile at that. "It took two broken hearts, a car accident and a death to bring us back together, but I'm deliriously happy, Em. I love him so much."

"You deserve all the happiness in the world, Car."

"Thank you," I say as a lump rises to my throat.

"When I was growing up, I wished for a friend just like you," she confesses. "I hope you know how much our friendship means to me."

“I do.” I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her tight. “I wished for you too,” I whisper.

“I love you, Carla.”

“I love you too, Em.”

A few years ago, I struggled with expressing my emotions, it was so foreign to me, but look at me now. I’m like Oprah Winfrey when she handed out those cars. You get some love, you get some love, and you get some love too.

Emma and I part when there’s a knock on the door. “Come in,” I call out.

I smile when I see it’s Reece. I asked him to walk me down the aisle today. He’s the closest thing I have to a parent. There was a part of me that worried he wouldn’t want to do it, but he didn’t hesitate with his answer. *“It would be my honor.”*

“I’ll give you two a moment,” Emma says. “I’ll go check on the boys.”

Reece clears his throat as he approaches. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you.”

He slides his hand into his jacket pocket and pulls out a long, narrow white velvet box. “I have a gift for you.”

“Reece,” I gasp when I open the lid and see the pearl choker inside.

“They belonged to my grandmother, and I’d like you to have them.”

“Oh God, Reece. It’s beautiful, but I can’t accept this. It’s a family heirloom.”

“And you’re all the family I have left.”

“Reece,” I whisper, becoming all emotional. “You think of me as family?”

“Of course, I do.”

I place my hand over my heart. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” He takes the velvet box out of my hand and removes the pearls. “It would mean a lot if

you wore this today.” I turn around so he can put it on. Once the clasp is fastened, I face him again. “Perfect. My grandmother would’ve loved you.” With that he turns and starts walking toward the door.

“Hey, Reece.” He pauses, glancing over his shoulder. “One of the best moments of my life was meeting you. Words can never express how grateful I am for everything you’ve given me.”

He clears his throat and bows his head. “It’s been an absolute pleasure, kid.”

Facing the mirror, I finger the strands of pearls around my neck. That broken little girl inside me is beaming, because she now realizes how wrong she’s been. It doesn’t matter where you’ve come from, or how shitty your circumstances once were, we all have the power to rewrite our own ending.



Grayson’s eyes are glistening as he smiles down at me like a goofball. We’re standing here in front of the marriage celebrant ready to exchange our vows.

“I, Grayson Robert Bad-Boy Edwards” He winks when he says the fictitious part of his name, and I swoon a little. “Take you, Carla...”

He falters for a moment, and I realize he doesn’t know my middle name. Leaning forward I whisper, “Roxanne.”

Surprisingly, my mother gave me her name when I was born. I choose to believe that deep down, in her own twisted way, she loved me. She just didn’t know how to be a good parent. Going forward, I can only hope that I’ll learn from her mistakes and break that vicious cycle.

“...take you, Carla Roxanne Just-Carla”—we both smile at the last part—“to be my lawfully wedded wife. I promise to love and cherish you in sickness and in health, for all the days of my life.”

My heart is so full, it's about to burst wide open, because I know Grayson will do exactly as he's just promised. *This man is life personified*. Everything I've always wanted, but thought I could never have. I'm so glad I was wrong.

I frantically bat my eyelashes, trying to keep my tears at bay, but one sneaky sucker manages to escape despite my best efforts. Of course, Grayson's right there to sweep it away.

"I love you," he mouths as he slides the wedding ring onto my finger. And when he's done, he pulls my palm up to his face, placing a soft kiss on the tiny red heart that resides there.

I clear my throat before I speak. "I, Carla Roxanne Just-Carla, take you, Grayson Robert Bad-Boy Edwards, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to love and cherish you in sickness and in health, for all the days of my life."

He holds out his hand a little too eager, making me laugh. Our eyes are locked as I slide the ring onto his finger and the love that gravitates between us is bottomless.

We're still lost in each other as the celebrant finally speaks. "In the powers vested in me by the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, you may kiss the bride."

Grayson steps forward grasping me around the waist and lifting my feet off the ground, giving me an earth-shattering kiss that I feel right down to the tips of my toes. When he finally draws back, I'm feeling all kinds of hot and bothered.

He rests his forehead against mine. "Hello, wife," he whispers.

"Hello, husband," I reply as the smiles on both of our faces grow. It took us a while to get here, going through a mountain of heartache in the process, but we made it in the end, and that's all that counts.

Life isn't about avoiding the punches, it's about collecting the scars as you go along to prove you showed up for it. I have the wounds that say I did, but I also learnt some valuable lessons in the process. Everything I've been through has

helped shape me into the person I am today. A person I can be proud of.

I know firsthand what evil looks like, I lived it, but that life also helped me recognize the good when I found it. I've never been a half of a whole before, so that's why from this day forward I'm reaching out with both hands, holding on tight to this beautiful man that stands before me. I won't let go this time round. I now know what life's like without him, and I don't want to experience that kind of heartache again.

I've lived, I've loved, and I've conquered countless demons in my travels.

But that's all behind me now. With Grayson's help, I've been able to shed all those toxic layers that have been weighing me down for years.

I'm finally free to be the woman I was always meant to be.

Bonus Epilogue

Grayson

Seven years later...

I LEAN THE SURFBOARDS UP against the back of the house and open the sliding doors. Spencer, our four-year-old, the middle child, goes flying past me heading straight for his mother who's standing by the sink rinsing dishes. He's a momma's boy, totally infatuated with her. Can't say I blame the kid; I feel exactly the same.

"Mommy, I missed you," he says, throwing his tiny arms around her legs. "I missed you so much." I chuckle at this, we've only been gone an hour tops.

"Hey, sweetie," Carla says. "I missed you too. How was the surf?"

"Epic," he replies.

"Why don't you run upstairs and get changed out of your wet clothes and I'll make you some breakfast."

"Okay, Mommy." He places a chaste kiss on her hip, because that's as high as he can reach, before turning and fleeing the room.

"Dad-da," my baby girl screams from her highchair, turning my heart into mush.

I smooth my hand over her soft blonde locks. "Morning, baby girl," I say, leaning down to brush my lips against her forehead.

Paisley, our first daughter and the baby of the family, gives me the biggest grin and my smile grows when I see remnants of her breakfast smeared around her mouth and all over her chubby cheeks. The love I feel for my kids is indescribable. She's a mini version of her mom and has me wrapped around her little finger.

I move toward my beautiful wife next, my arms slinking around her waist from behind as I place a lingering kiss on her neck.

"How's my sunshine this beautiful morning?"

“Don’t touch me.”

My brows furrow. “Why not?” I ask, taken aback by her sass. She wasn’t saying that when I accosted her in bed before taking the boys surfing.

“This is why,” she snaps, drying her hands on the dish towel and retrieving something from the pocket of her shorts. When she turns to face me and holds up the white plastic stick, I grin like a fool. There’s nothing sexier than seeing my woman’s tight body swollen with my child.

“You’re pregnant again?”

“Again, being the operative word here. Jesus, Gray, I’ve only just stopped breastfeeding Paisley. You need to keep that monster in your pants for longer than a damn minute,” she says, gesturing down to my crotch.

I laugh at that because there’s no way she can stay away from my dick. She loves it too much. “No can do, sweetheart, I told you I was going to fill you up with all my babies. I meant every word.”

She drops her chin to her chest and sighs. “Today, Em and I were going to get our drink on. We’ve spent the last few days organizing an impressive cocktail list, but then that thing of yours struck again.”

“Thing?” I raise an eyebrow. “No hating on my dick. This is all your fault.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “My fault?”

“You’re just too goddamn sexy, the poor guy doesn’t stand a chance when you’re around.”

She growls, literally growls at me. “Well, as of this moment, this body,” she says, pointing to herself, “is a dick-free zone.”

I throw my head back and bark out a laugh at her hollow threat. I’ve endured three pregnancies with this woman, and my cock barely made it out unscathed. She was insatiable, not that I’m complaining.

“Our monstrosity of a home is filling up nicely,” I say, puffing out my chest.

“The rate you’re going, we’ll need to add an extension.”

“Consider it done.” There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for my little family.

Sliding my arms around her, I lift my baby momma off the ground and place my lips against hers. “You may not be happy about this, but I’m ecstatic. You’re the best mom. Our kids are lucky to have you.”

“I’m not unhappy about being pregnant. You know how much I love our babies,” she says. “It just would’ve been nice if you’d given me a few months reprieve is all.”

I gently place her down on her feet. “Does that mean you’re not really on a dick strike?”

“I’m absolutely on a dick strike.” Then she shrugs her shoulders and I have to bite back my smile. “Well for today anyway, who knows what tomorrow will bring.”

“Tomorrow? I’m betting you won’t even see out the day.”

She playfully slaps my chest. “Maybe I should think about booking you in for the snip.”

I inwardly cringe at the mention of the word. “Don’t even joke about that, babe.”

“Who says I’m joking.” Grinning, she extends her pointer and middle finger, doing that damn fake scissor motion right in my face. “Chop, chop,” she teases as my balls shrivel up and retreat inside my body.

Dropping her arm, she reaches around me, slapping my ass. “Go shower and change, I’ll cook you some breakfast.”

“Cook?” After countless lessons from me, my wife still can’t cook to save her life.

“Placing bread in the toaster and browning it is technically cooking, asshole.” Fuck I love this woman. She turns her face, glancing toward the back sliding doors. “Where’s R.J.?”

I roll my eyes. “One guess.”

Our firstborn was named Robert after my father, it was Carla’s idea. We call him R.J. for short. Ashton and Emma’s

second child, Hudson, was also a boy. They only have the two. Our sons were born weeks apart and are the best of friends. They remind me so much of Ashton and I when we were growing up. They're little shits, just like we were, and always getting into mischief. My mom calls it Karma.

R.J. recently developed a serious crush on Charlie, Ashton's daughter. Despite the four-year age gap. The poor kid's besotted.

"Remind me to pack him some clean clothes before we leave."

We're heading over to Ashton and Emma's for a barbeque later. It's become our Sunday ritual. Our families even vacation together.

Ashton and I still have our thriving business, and when Carla isn't busy being a kick-ass mom to our kids, she's teaching self-defense and karate classes at the Torrance-South Bay YMCA. Our boys are next generation ninjas.

Life's pretty sweet.

They say your first love is temporary, a trial run, a stepping stone to the next. They're supposed to burn bright and fade fast, but that was never us. That organ inside my chest continued to beat at a steady pace, patiently waiting for Carla to come along. From that moment on, I was done for. She's the first person I've ever given my heart to; she will also be the last.

The past is well and truly behind us. Although I'd never want to relive what we've been through, it has made us stronger... *unbreakable*. All the more reason to truly cherish what we have now. A man couldn't ask for more. I have my girl by my side, two sons, a daughter, and another child on the way.

I feel like the luckiest man in the world.





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Ashton and Emma's story.

Bossy Bastard

ASHTON BARCLAY, or as I like to call him, Mr. B. *for Bossy*, is fast becoming the bane of my existence.

After running into him, *literally*, he's now popping up everywhere, and somehow managing to weave his way into my life.

He's egotistical, smug, and so ridiculously good-looking it should be illegal—he's way too hot to handle. I don't do *hot*, those type of guys are more trouble than they're worth.

Although, I'd secretly love to *do* him.

We've kissed once—it was smokin,' and led to me dry humping his leg in front of the entire club like a shameless hussy. Oh, and did I mention I deep throated his thumb within seconds of meeting him ... I didn't even know his name.

Apparently I have issues, *big ones*.

He *makes* me do things I never imagined myself doing.

He *makes* me feel things I'm not comfortable feeling.

It just wouldn't work, even if I wanted it to. Between us we have more baggage than a carousel at LAX airport.

He's everything I want, but can never have.

Or so I thought.

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About the Author

WINNER OF THE 2018 RWA RUBY AWARD FOR
ROMANTIC BOOK OF THE YEAR

J. L. Perry is a mother and wife who grew up in Sydney Australia. She recently moved to wine country in the beautiful Hunter Valley region with her family. Her love of reading from a young age gave her the passion to write and she self-published her first book in 2014.

In December 2015, she signed a five-book deal with publishing giants, Hachette, and to date has released a total of twelve books. Her last six releases—*Bastard*, *Luckiest Bastard*, *Jax*, *Hooker*, *The Boss*, and *Nineteen Letters*—were all number one bestsellers. Some of her novels are published in six different languages.

She is currently rewriting her *Destiny Series* which she hopes to re-release soon.

J. L.'s love of romance and happy endings makes a perfect combination when it comes to writing her heartfelt stories. Her other loves are traveling, shopping, shoes, and wine.