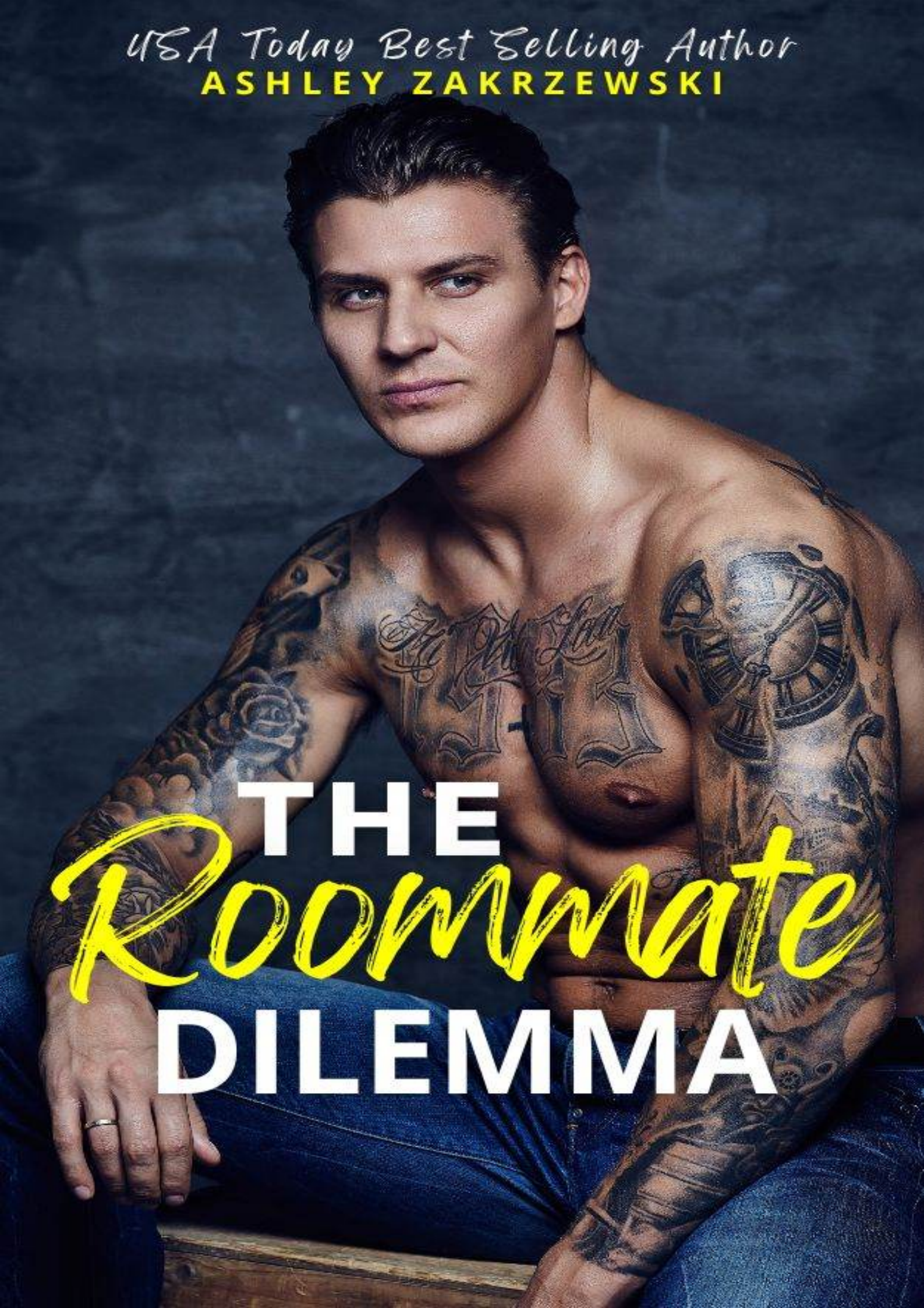


USA Today Best Selling Author
ASHLEY ZAKRZEWSKI



THE
Roommate
DILEMMA

The Roommate Dilemma

ROOMMATES SERIES

ASHLEY ZAKRZEWSKI

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Chapter One

It takes too goddamn long for Samuel to convince the security guards that no, he will not shoot up the building. He's just going to see Eric Baxter, who couldn't get off his ass to see his best friend. Eric always enjoyed making things difficult for Samuel; said it made him into more of a man.

Well, *too bad the idiot didn't take his own advice*, Samuel snorts. Bloody college students swarming around him like ants who lost their way home, maybe it would have made him taller. Samuel had always been the taller one, even though Eric was a year and a half older than him, and Eric always made sure that the age difference hit home whenever the two of them were going to do something stupid. The same stupid that's making Samuel trudge through the halls of college students getting out of class, occasionally backtracking with a grunted fuck because he missed a turn to Eric's office.

He has to shove his way past a couple making out in the middle of the hall, and all he can think is I thought that shit was done in high school, but he's just as lost as Dorothy, and college certainly isn't Kansas. The din of students arguing about some assignment their Anthropology teacher posted starts giving him a raging headache, and he's already having enough of a shitty time trying to find Eric that it's a wonder he hasn't just started flying off the handle at some poor kid. He only holds on to this string of sanity with his brother's help of reminding him to breathe and that's all Samuel can do, even if it's not as relaxed as his brother would have liked.

All he can hear through the annoying as fuck chatter is his breathing, and he's snorting like a bull, and all he's seeing is red, and then there's a flash of a different red. First thing he thinks is fire! But it isn't the case when this girl interjects his panic with a phrase masked with the politest contempt he's heard in a long time.

"Excuse me, Professor Bailey--"

"Call me Landon--"

"Professor Bailey, I'm sorry, but I have to go. I'm twenty minutes late and I need to pick up my daughter from daycare. I won't have anyone thinking I abandoned my daughter. Thank you for class, sir," she spits as she flies out into the hall, running full force into him. She miraculously manages not to fall as she quickly glances up at Samuel, and the fire in her hair doesn't match the cool fire he feels licking at his scars as her ice eyes brush over them before she mumbles a short sorry and rushes off, her hair almost whipping him and burning him for a third time. Somehow she even smells of smoke, but no, that wasn't right. She smells like lemons, but in the laundry detergent sort of way.

Fuck. Maybe it was still some naivety not yet burned out in Samuel, but he had still been holding on to the hope that people with a different fire would still have more compassion than others. Maybe even people as young as she was would have been more accepting and not frightened, and he's hit with the realization that she has a child, and looks no older than twenty. For a brief moment, Calvin fills his mind, always Calvin when he's least wanted, and he hopes the girl never had to endure a night with a man like Calvin. Like he does with all unwanted information, he sorts it out of his mind. There are only clean lines allowed with Samuel, nothing out of place, except for his hair hanging over his scars, just as it's been since middle school, and only grown back now that his time in the military is over.

He missed the curtain of hair filtering out all the things he didn't want to see, because he knows how the world truly is, and even though he enjoys reminding everyone how awful it is, he doesn't enjoy facing it that much. Of course, Eric always

had a blast reminding Samuel how it made him look like an emo loving fuck and got him a black eyeliner pencil for his fifteenth birthday. Samuel used it to draw fake tattoos on his arms because it attracted girls and made him look cool. Now he has the real ink, but he still misses those days of smudgy drawings of skulls and song lyrics.

Somehow he finds his way to Eric's door and barges right in, just as they did when they were in school. Damn the consequences. He sees Eric jump a little in his chair, as it seems that Eric was actually doing work, which probably is a first for the man. It reminded both men of how long it's been - nearly ten years - since they met up for a couple of weeks in D.C. when Eric had just finished graduate school in business and Samuel had been working at the Pentagon itself for a couple of years. They're both older than they'd been back in elementary school when they'd first met: Samuel in the first grade and Eric in the second. They'd bonded over Eric ordering Samuel not to tell the teacher that he was stealing other children's sweets right before recess and burying the pilfered candy under the slides, and Samuel only agreeing when he was told he could have the candy too. They shook hands solemnly, and they sealed the friendship with the declaration of calling their crime syndicate the "Candy Club," which described exactly what the arrangement was without mincing words; and even when Samuel's hand was caught in Minnie's lunch bag three days later, because he hadn't quite figured out how to sneak around properly yet, Eric and Samuel clung to each other tightly sobbing, pleading and begging with their parents not to send them to jail. All they had wanted was candy and instead they got a friendship that has lasted nearly thirty years, though Samuel thinks it might end when Eric yells out a "Sam, what is up my man?" because it seems Eric never learned how to stop being a frat boy. Even though Samuel thinks the worst thing would be to actually accept the hug this man-child is offering him, it's still Eric, and he grudgingly takes it, anyway.

"Not much, Eric, not much at all," Samuel grunts, trying to pretend to have the life squeezed out of him, if only for Eric's sake.

“Bullshit. You move halfway across the country and you’re going to start your own tattoo shop - can I call it a tattooery? What’s the name? - and it’s been ages since I’ve seen your gorgeous face. You’ve grown up, little man,” Eric says, craning his head up to meet Samuel’s eyes. “Don’t tell me there was a reason to leave D.C., okay? Just that it was time to go. Do you have a place to stay yet? I bet you didn’t even think of that at all.”

“Fuck’s sake, man, yes it was time to leave D.C. No, you can’t call it a tattooery, though I’m pretty fucking sure you’re still going to call it that, and no, it doesn’t have a name yet; I only just got in town half an hour ago, asshole.”

“What about a place? You do have a place, right? Ned’s currently crashing on my couch with a massive hangover, though I’m pretty sure his whole life has been one monumental hangover, so you, big guy, can’t stay.”

Samuel didn’t think this through enough. He had just assumed that Eric would have made room for him, at least for a few weeks. Seeing the blank look on his face, Eric laughs, knowing exactly what Samuel is thinking.

“Look, it’s okay. I know this friend who’s looking for a roommate in order to pay bills and has been looking for a long time. She won’t take my charity, but she’s a wonderful person and I really owe her one.”

“A girl, Eric? Are you kidding me right now? I can just as easily get a bloody hotel room for a couple of weeks while I look for a place to stay without having to deal with another person, let alone a friend of yours. Was she Ned’s friend too?” That’s when Eric sent a look that clearly read fuck off, though if there’s anything the years of being Samuel’s best friend has taught him, it’s that sometimes Samuel doesn’t know when to stop talking, and they’re both painfully aware of it.

“Come on, Samuel, what’s the harm in it? You don’t even have to say yes, but it’s an option, and it’s cheaper than getting a hotel room, especially in this town.” Samuel had figured that out, but it’s been ages since he was around a woman, let alone a girl, and all he can think of is the last pretty girl he’s seen,

not more than twenty minutes ago. “How about we go get a beer? she’ll meet us.”

Samuel knows he’s lost the battle when all he can do is sigh and think it could be worse. Despite knowing his scars would be the reason Eric’s friend would say hell no to having him as a roommate, all he can say is fine in the growl he gained after his voice finally broke in the seventh grade, the growl that earned him Eric’s nickname of Beast. Eric’s shit-eating grin reminds Samuel of that fateful first day of candy thievery, as Eric says, “You’ll just love her dog Athena.”

Chapter Two

Carline doesn't know if she'll ever slow down. Maybe she'll just run on forever, away from Bailey, away from the responsibility of raising a child, because who was she to think that she could actually do that? A dumb seventeen-year-old, that's who, she determines, not a nearly twenty-two-year-old that doesn't know what she's doing who can't even pay the rent on time, much less raise a child. But she could never run away from Jenny, because as much as Carline likes to think that Jenny needs her, it's really Carline that relies on Jenny as they grow up together. They may not be blood, but Jenny is Carline's daughter. Just a couple minutes before closing time, Carline notes as she rushes into the daycare's classroom, garishly painted pink and blue and covered with an unkempt rug with the alphabet on the floor, she glimpses Jenny's eyes sparkling behind her dark curls as the director's face grows ever sterner, before Carline promptly turns around with her back to them both.

This had always been one of Jenny's favorite games, because at the age of almost five, she liked to think that she was pretty good at sneaking around and tackling people, and Carline liked to remind Jenny exactly who was the all-seeing mother in the relationship. Carline hears the patter of tiny feet running towards her, and forces herself to stand as still and as long as she possibly can, and on hearing the elated gasp from Jenny, dashes the idea that Jenny could actually take down Mommy this time when she spins around and takes Jenny up in her arms, the two of them giggling loudly to fill the silence of other daycare children already gone.

Both of them still heaving from their running, Carline feels the sweat drip down the back of her neck which isn't helped by Jenny's hot breathing as she stares into the face of Mrs. Avery, glaring at the two girls who obviously have no respect for the sacred halls of daycare or the art of time management. Fortunately, Carline's parents pay for Jenny's daycare, so the crime of late fees won't be added to Avery's list as well. Time to grovel. So Carline puts on her armor and steels herself for the derogatory comments she always hears, even if no one but Carline is there at all.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. Avery! My professor ran very late today, and unfortunately, I couldn't leave until ten minutes ago. I ran over as soon as I was free, but I'll try to run faster when he runs late the next time." Both Carline and Avery know that the college was actually a fifteen minute run from the school, but Carline knows Avery would never call her out on it. That just wasn't proper.

"If you could please pick your child up with every other parent, Miss Lake, both of our schedules would be happier for it. I have a reputation to maintain, as do you, whatever much is left of it. If you need help to raise a child, I wouldn't ask your parents - they certainly didn't do the right job with you."

That bitch. Carline's reputation had gone down the drain when she had broken up with Mason, and even when she moved thousands of miles away, her reputation still followed her, though it likely has more to do with the fact that she's a teen mother, and always will be, no matter if she's eighty years old and living in the middle of nowhere. Mrs. Avery's jab at Joe and Tina hurt more than the idea that she can't raise a child. Damn it, she can.

"Seeing as I've raised Jenny for almost five years on the basis of my parents' teachings, and she has always been one of the most well-behaved children in class, I think I am doing a very good job, Ma'am. I don't need your approval; I only need Jenny's. Thank you for staying until closing to make sure my daughter was safe until I arrived."

And with that, Carline puts Jenny down, and the two of them walk off, backpacks both bouncing on their shoulders.

“Jenny, how about we have some ice cream? We’ll ruin dinner, but I think we’ve both earned it.”

“Really, Mommy?” Jenny had always been polite, and even with the excitement of ice cream, she had to make sure it was really going to happen. She’s a lot like how I was at her age. Carline ruminates as she hums an affirmative and Jenny laughs, all the tension of the past five minutes forgotten. Sometimes it scares Carline how much she and Jenny are alike when they both get a orange ice cream and sit down with a plop and a sigh from the both of them, Jenny mirroring Carline’s face almost exactly. The look of deep thought on Jenny’s face is almost comical when her nose bunches up and her blue eyes squeeze shut after Carline asks about her day at daycare, and Carline knows from pictures that she’s always made that face too when faced with a difficult question. The slow and thoughtful way that Jenny responds transports Carline back to on-the-spot Latin translations, making sure every word is in agreement before spouting out her thoughts.

“I painted a picture for you today, Mommy, but you don’t get to know it yet; it’s a surprise. An’ I made macaroni necklaces before I had naptime, an’ I sleep,” and here Carline interjects with a slept, “slept, for a long time an’ dreamed about dinosaurs an’ knights an’ I think the sky was purple. I learned about the letter b but I knew all about it already so it was boring. B for boring!” One of Jenny’s favorite things was dinosaurs, and she had all the Lakes’ old dinosaur clothing and toys.

Laughing, Carline counters with a “B for Bailey! He was the reason I was late to pick you up. He wanted to talk about b for Byzantium vases, which was very b for boring. I translated some old Roman graffiti, and that was my day. Very b for bland.”

She doesn’t want to mention running into the man right outside of Bailey’s classroom before she picked up Jenny, almost like he was standing over her and daring her to tell her daughter about the man with the scars, even though they didn’t scare her as much as his eyes had, letting her know that if she said anything about those scars, he’d be waiting for her. She

knows what it's like to be pigeonholed, even when her character doesn't add up to the expectation other people placed on her. She wasn't a slut, and she wasn't a bad mother. She was just trying to get by. Sacrifices had to be made.

She's jarred from her thoughts when her phone sounds, a rock song Eric set as his personal tone jarring with the gentle tune of Jenny humming to some song on the radio.

Eric: yo Carline r u and Jenny going 2 b at bardog 2nite

"Jenny Hill, do you think you can clear your schedule to see Uncle Eric tonight? We're going to Bardog," Carline asks with a soft smile to clash with Jenny's million-dollar grin.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! I want to see Uncle Eric. Now!"

It's painfully obvious that this is going to be a long night.

Eric, isn't it just easier to use proper grammar?

You're a professor after all.

And as to your question, yes, we'll be there.
Jenny says hi.

no my students expect me 2 b hip + cool.

and good. have friend want u 2 meet. looking 4 apartment

All right, Eric, we'll see.

I have to run this person by the boss first, you know.

she'll <3 him. has black hair

Oh.

Chapter Three

She's up on stage and she thinks that yes, this is the only attention she wants. People not sorting her into a certain pile because she has a wildling for a daughter, but instead just laughing and smiling as Jenny reaches the pinnacle of her sugar high and starts screaming *SING MY SONG, MOMMY* and *WHERE'S UNCLE ERIC*. Although Eric said the reason, he's late is that he still hasn't finished grading papers and said he would only come once he's finished with that, Carline is sure it's because he's trying to find the exact right time to embarrass Carline in front of everyone, especially in front of this person he's trying to shove into her life.

Right now Carline has more important things on her mind, like how to make Jenny calm down before Eric and his friend actually get here, so Carline resorts herself to the only thing she can do, and before she does it, she slowly covers her ears.

"Come on up, Jenny, let's sing your song."

Jenny's shrieks still pierce the bustle and laughter of the bar area and Carline's hands, and from way back in the corner, there's Eric's voice reaching out.

"That's my girl!"

So he wasn't really late at all, which is so Eric, and when she squints, she thinks she sees his friend nursing a beer, but they're so far away and the lights are so bright on her face she can't really tell where Eric ends and his friend begins. But Jenny's there tugging at her jacket sleeve, and she readies herself for the endless teasing Eric will give her when she's

done singing - or more screaming in Jenny's case - *It's The End of The World*, and without knowing it, the song really marks the start of the end of the world as she knows it.

Although the singing is nice and helps keep his irritation under control, it doesn't hide the fact that this girl is late in even showing up. It doesn't surprise Samuel that this chick is late in paying her bills. If she can't even bother to show up on time to meet a potential roommate, then what's the point? Samuel had always valued efficiency and time management, as it was beaten into him during his time in the military and proved useful working at the Pentagon. Even though he was supposed to be relaxing and forging his own path, as his brother had put it, it didn't mean that society's graces had to fall to the wayside as well.

He looks over at Eric, who as usual has this smug grin on his face, and Samuel has a sinking suspicion that something's not quite adding up, but then again, he should have suspected it from Eric. Eric had changed a little, but there were so many things that Samuel had forgotten about Eric. Things like the way he could talk a mile a minute even if he wasn't saying anything much at all, or the way his hair always seemed like it glowed from the lights behind him, or even the awkward laugh they'd both share after a particularly stupid joke. Still, it's a comfort to know his friend who would skateboard with him after school and pretend to smoke candy cigs is still inside this man who wears a blazer everywhere.

"All right, *old man*, tell me about this girl. I want to know exactly what I'm getting into, because I think there are several things you aren't telling me."

Eric feigns shock and hurt as he clutches his shirt, exclaiming, "You wound me, good sir! Of course, I'm telling you most of the truth, just not all of it, in order for suspense to be built, and just to see your face get redder by the minute. Remember in Mr. Perry's class when he wouldn't shut up about the use of suspense in *The Indian in the Cupboard*? Those were hard times; he always knew how to drone on and on ..."

“Exactly what you’re doing right now,” Samuel glowers. “I really don’t have time for this suspense bullshit you’re doing. I need to know everything about this girl that can’t even be bothered to show up, bloody idiot.”

“Fine. Carline is a senior in college here. I had her in a few of my classes, but I knew her before she came to the university. She’s about to turn twenty-two in a couple of months, and she has a young daughter named Jenny. When Teapot meets you, she’ll remind you that she’s *almost* five, but she’ll love you anyway. That’s all you need to know,” and with that, Eric sets his beer down on the bar and points to the singer, and the pit of Samuel’s stomach sinks. Samuel grits his teeth, already guessing the next words out of Eric’s fat mouth but resenting that he already fucked up the first meeting. “That’s Carline right there, and the little black haired tyke on the chair is her daughter.”

His fucking scars are going to terrify the daughter like they already did Carline earlier. His fucking tattoos, his bloody hair, his hulking body, his eyes are going to slice the two of them apart. They’re too young; he’s too old. They’re just kids; hell, she was just a kid when she had her daughter and he was already old when that happened. He doesn’t want to be a glorified babysitter that’s also paying Carline to stay in her apartment. His fucking *scars*.

“I can’t do this Eric, just say I’m sick. I can’t do this.”

“Samuel, she had a shit time with Mason, and I need to help her somehow. She won’t take my money, but she does have a daughter to support, and I think they’d both like you, scars and all - yeah, I know that look, buddy.”

And then suddenly the air is split with a shriek that makes Samuel nearly drop his bottle, and he sees the little girl, Jenny, run up to the stage while Eric yells out a *That’s my girl!*, and Samuel can see Carline just glare at Eric, and then it clicks for Samuel: she thought she was stood up by him. But then the two of them, and soon the rest of the bar, start singing or yelling to that R.E.M. song and the little girl’s just running around the stage without stopping, and Carline’s chasing Jenny, but never gaining on her daughter.

It's like the world's melted away and it's just fire and smoke dancing together; he's mesmerized. These two girls, without even saying a word have hypnotized him, and he hopes deep down that they like him, which is strange, because the last child he liked was his sister, and that was so long ago.

He's not sure how long he sits there just staring at them, but then Eric's calling the two of them over and his head whips towards the blond haired man with wide-eyed panic, the silent *no* that's drowning him is overturned by the crash of a little girl against his legs and an equally wide eyed Carline looking in terror at the little girl clutching his legs like Samuel is Jenny's favorite person in the world and he has no idea what to do at all, especially when she asks:

“Are *you* my daddy?”

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry! Jenny, no. This nice man isn't your daddy, but we'll keep looking, okay?” He's struck at how pretty she is, even though she doesn't look like the nearly twenty-two-year-old Eric said she was. She's looking at him in shock and embarrassment, and he's just surprised that neither of them seems to be that terrified of his scars. But then he realizes it; they're just being polite. Figures.

“But I want him to be my daddy! I'm tired of looking and I want him.” While Carline is trying to tug Jenny off his leg, Samuel's mind has gone blank because there is no way in heaven or hell that these two would ever get close to him of their own free will, so he must be dreaming.

“I'm really sorry about my daughter, sir.” She's frantic, like she doesn't know how to stop apologizing. “Jenny thinks every man with black hair could be her father. Eric thought it would be funny for Jenny to do her thing without warning you, and I'm really sorry about not getting to her in time.” Finally she breathes, and Samuel realizes his breath has seized in his throat too. Her *eyes*.

“I'm no sir, girl. And it's fine, so stop apologizing.” God, could he sound any stupider? Eric didn't tell him she'd be pretty.

“Oh thank god; I’m so embarrassed. Since you’re here, we can go look at our apartment and figure out if we’re a good fit, and I’ll have to ask the boss first, but Jenny already likes you and she’s liked no one else Eric’s suggested before - Oh! I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Carline. Carline Lake.” With one hand still on Jenny’s shoulder, who’s still holding onto his leg, her right hand thrusts itself at him, and she looks up into his eyes, at his scars. He takes it.

“Samuel Warren. Which way’s your apartment?”

And while Carline’s, Jenny’s, and Eric’s faces all light up at his words, it’s only the first face he really looks at. And while he’ll never admit it, he’s smiling inside, too.

Chapter Four

Carline decides she likes this stranger with a name when he doesn't complain about the four flights of stairs to her apartment, and partially because he doesn't glare at her or Jenny when the teapot, as Eric affectionately calls the toddler, alternates between whining and singing the wrong lyrics to *It's the End of the World* at the top of her lungs.

Carline notices the way his hair falls over his shoulders and, more importantly, his face as he looks down while waiting for Carline to get her keys out of her backpack, Jenny doing the bathroom dance around Carline's legs. The faint scrabbling of Athena's claws on the other side of the door lets Carline know that Jenny's not the only thing under five that needs to go to the bathroom, and once the door is open, both of those things dash to each other, all their worries forgotten.

Carline pretends to look at her place with fresh eyes and is dismayed by the disarray found there. There's Jenny's artwork hung up everywhere, even though most of it is just scribbles, although one of them looks like an old lady, and Carline's not exactly sure why. Dog toys litter the floor, followed by toy dinosaurs on the couch stuffed in the cracks and on the kitchen counters and she knows that there are even more dinosaurs in the bath and she wonders about the state of her bedroom. Where else will Samuel sleep? She's not going to exile him to the couch. So I'll take the couch, Samuel will have my bedroom, and Jenny stays in her room with Athena and all these dinosaur toys, Carline thinks. She's not exactly sure about how the shower situation will work, or whatever his schedule is, and how much money he'll be bringing in for rent,

but then the panic starts rising and she realizes she hasn't even said anything to Samuel at all.

With an unsure smile, Carline turns to Samuel and starts to lead him around the small apartment, nudging various toys to the side with her foot, Jenny picking them up and tugging on Samuel's arm, trying to tug the massive man to her bedroom so she could show him her dinosaurs. "So, um, this is the main entertaining area. Kitchen over to the left and living room to the right. Down the hall is the bathroom - sweetie, stop badgering Samuel - on the right, then it's Jenny's room, and at the very end is the master bedroom. It's not much, both the bedroom and the apartment, but it's what I have to offer. If you decide that this is the place for you, then I'll take the couch. I sleep there most of the time, anyway."

It's a lie, and they both know it. Carline from the way she twists her hands and Samuel from the way his nose wrinkles and his brow furrows, like he was smelling something bad. Jenny still tries to get Samuel's attention, even putting one of her toys in his hand and gently moving his fingers so they would close around it. Then Samuel speaks for the first time since he asked where exactly her apartment was in the first place, and the bluntness surprises Carline.

"I can smell a lie. I'll have you know. If I stay, I'll take the couch."

"You should tell Jenny that you can smell lies. She'll love you for it. But I'm grown. I can take the couch."

Jenny makes herself known by running over to the couch and leaping atop it, a toy in each hand, Athena following and failing to actually make it atop the couch. "I can sleep on the couch! Then all my dinosaurs can sleep with me and then Mommy and daddy can take the bedroom." With those words, chaos exploded, Carline and Samuel whipping towards each other.

"Jenny, he's not your—"

"I'm not your Daddy."

“That’s what I’m telling her! Don’t interrupt me!” Carline’s eyes throw daggers of ice, her face becoming violently whiter, but she still stomps her foot a little. Right after she lifts her foot, she instantly regrets it. *You’re not a child, you’re not Jenny.*

Samuel’s face becomes red enough to match his scars. “I think I have a right to tell her I’m not her daddy. How many roommates have you had - am I the first one she’s done this to?” And with that, Carline deflates.

“Jenny, why don’t you go and figure out what pjs you want to wear tonight? I’ll come and get you, okay?” Jenny’s unaware of the nuclear zone around her as she sings a quick *okay mommy*, and Carline watches her black hair, so much like Samuel’s, bounce away on her back, and Jenny’s door closes gently behind her.

“What the hell is going on?”

Carline sighs and motions Samuel, the everlasting brick wall, over to the couch. “I’m guessing Eric didn’t tell you; thought it’d be funny for the both of us.”

He side eyes her suspiciously as they both sit down, as far away from each other as they can be on the couch. “What didn’t he tell me?”

“Well, I already told you that Jenny really likes black-haired men since she thinks her father has black hair, but that’s really just because she wants a father. I have dated no one since she was born, but since she turned two, she’s occasionally asked me when daddy is going to show up. And all I can say is “he’s coming in beat up armor, because he’s been through hell and back trying to find us.” She always smiles when I say that; says she’s going to give him a million kisses to make up for the ones he missed giving her. She just really wants a dad, and she’s tired of looking.”

Samuel doesn’t know how to react to this. For the first time in a long time, he’s actually wanted, and not just for his skill set. He’s wanted because a slip of a girl wants him to be her dad and it pains him because he knows he can never be that for Jenny. He doesn’t know how to be a father, much less

does he actually want to be. *But you're just here to live here until you either find your own place or until Carline kicks you out; you're not dating Carline, you're not Jenny's father.*

“Why the beat up armor?”

Carline smiles at that.

“Because he's done a lot more fighting than the one in shining armor. He's also not a,” Carline whispers, the look on her face like a kid who knows they're going to get in trouble anyway, so they might as well say the last thing on their mind, “*shitty knight.*”

Samuel's howl of laughter brings Jenny tearing down the hallway with dinosaur pajamas in her tiny fists, giggles erupting from her mouth as Carline tries to hide her own snorts behind her hand. Athena's long white fur streaks past as she runs around the table, little yips interrupting the peals of laughter from all three of them. Athena successfully leaps onto the couch and over to Samuel, starting to sniff his burns and lick them too, while Jenny tries her hardest to get up onto the couch with those bundled up fists. When Carline finally picks her up with a groan, Jenny sits down with a plop and a sigh, trying desperately not to giggle anymore.

Samuel sneaks a peek over at Carline. With the light of the lamp on the table right next to her, she's glowing, flushed a little red, and when she looks over at him, she's panting slightly from trying to repress her own happiness.

“Does Jenny know anything about these true knights of yours?” he asks with a smirk and a wink at Jenny, making the toddler scoot even closer to him. “Absolutely not! The only knights she cares about ride on dinosaurs. Isn't that right, Jenny Hill?” Jenny nods furiously, blushing a little when Samuel looks at her. A beep from Carline's watch startles the two adults in the room, and Carline gasps when she looks at it. “It's almost ten! Jenny, say goodnight to Samuel and then go to your room. I'll get you in a second, okay?”

Pouting, Jenny scoots over even closer to Samuel, nearly landing in his lap, and with as much strength as she can muster, her face scrunches up tight as she hugs him. Samuel's

mouth does a little quiver as he pretends to have the life squeezed out of him, just like he did with Eric only hours earlier. He awkwardly pats the girl's back and only returns the hug when she moves over to his ear and whispers as children do, "Don't go, Samuel!"

"Sorry, Jenny, but it's time all of us went to sleep," states Carline as she tries to disentangle Jenny from Samuel. "Go get ready for bed, Athena." Jenny trudges off to her room, whining a little. Athena sprints after her, and Jenny turns around for one last forlorn wave at Samuel, who repeats the gesture. *My brother would be proud. I've never been good with children after ... the accident.* He doesn't notice he's at the door until Carline unlocks it, so he gathers up his coat and folds it over his arm, just staring at Carline. He still doesn't understand how she's a mother, but he can see she's good at it. Once again Calvin fills his mind, so he tries shaking his real brother out of his head.

"I'll call you if your apartment is good for me?" Samuel sees a faint glimmer of happiness in Carline's eyes, and he thinks he likes it when she's happy. She's always happy when she looks at Jenny.

"Texting would be better; I'm locked out of my voicemail on my phone and I haven't had time to fix it. I hope you'll stay. Not counting the money, I think you'd be good for both of us." He feels a twinge of something in his chest, and it hurts. It really *hurts* to be wanted for his character.

"I'll text," He tries inputting her number in as slowly as possible; he doesn't want this night to end, but soon enough it's time. "Good night, Carline. Tell Jenny I said good night, too?" And there's that grin on her face, with those little crow's feet at the ends of her eyes, too soon to be there, and he wonders where her wings are.

"I'll tell her. Vale, Samuel."

"Vale?"

Her eyes widen and the crow's feet disappear. "Oh! In Latin, that's goodbye to one single person, that is. Sorry. I'm a creature of habit."

He feels his scarred lip twinge into something that might be a smile, might be a smirk, and tips an invisible hat at her. "Hasta la vista, Carline."

Walking down the stairwell, Samuel muses on Carline's apartment. The climb up the stairs isn't too terrible, he's had worse. Commute from his work and the apartment also isn't half bad. The only thing he has to muse on is the inside of the apartment. It's cluttered and crowded and small, even for a young girl like Jenny, he thinks. He doesn't know where he'll sleep, because he's not going to sleep in Carline's bed. First of all, that'd be rude, and second of all, it'd be *big trouble for him*. Carline's smell - detergent lemons and the remnants of Jenny lingering even now in the stairwell - is already intoxicating and heady for him. *Maybe I'll be the one taking the couch in the end.*

It isn't until he tries opening the door to his car that he realizes he still has Jenny's dinosaur toy in his hand, and he thinks that if Carline and Jenny really want him, he could manage.

Chapter Five

Carline's been looking for that damn dinosaur for at least fifteen minutes.

She looked under the couch, in the couch cushions, in the kitchen cabinets, in the bathroom, in *her* bedroom, all around Jenny's bedroom. She even went down to check her car, even though she knows it's not there. But still, that's nothing to console Jenny.

Carline regrets letting Jenny have ice cream, because now Jenny has decided that loudly sniffing isn't enough to make Mommy find her Brontosaurus, and has wailed, the pitch getting higher and higher. It doesn't help that it's now half past ten. Carline never threw tantrums, and she was proud of it.

However, there was one incident that came to mind...

So Carline follows her mother's example.

"Look at me, Jenny. If you're going to throw a tantrum, then you're going to have to do it right." And with that, Carline throws herself on the floor, kicking and screaming. Pounding her arms, crying out for her toy in an incessant whine. *This is humiliating; it'd better work*, she thinks, grimacing at the idea that she has to stoop this low to make Jenny stop. *It sure made me stop when I was young*. Carline goes about tantruming for a minute before she stops abruptly, picks herself up, and brushes invisible dirt off her shoulders. All Jenny does is huff a little, as though she's insulted that she had to be that despicable in order to throw a good tantrum.

But then both mother and daughter grin the same smile, the same crinkles at the corners of the eyes, though the laughs are different. Jenny had the prolonged giggle that didn't stop until well past hurting, and Carline had learned that laughing at the wrong time meant something wrong. She never quite lost that habit of checking herself before she made the wrong noise, so her laugh is again hidden behind a hand. Jenny tries the same, and Carline's heart aches. *She doesn't need to learn these habits.* So even though it scares her to do so, Carline lowers her hand and laughs a little louder, and Jenny does the same.

“All right, Jenny, let's put on those pajamas.”

She strokes Jenny's hair, soft and silky smooth, humming their song, thinking how nice the last five years have been.

I wonder how the next five years with Samuel would be... Carline sits straight up, missing a few notes of the song, Jenny eying her mother with surprise. Internally berating herself, Carline starts the verse over again, Jenny relaxing back into her blankets. *You've only known him for six hours, Carline. That's no reason to think that you'd be spending so long with Samuel, much less that you'd be staying in this apartment for another five years.* Shaking herself from her thoughts, she decides to make the decision. Will Samuel even be staying here or not?

“Well, what do you think? Samuel: Yes or no?”

There's no hesitation when Jenny replies, “Yes, but only if he plays with me and my dinosaurs.”

Carline giggles and Jenny joins in. “I'm sure if you ask nicely and don't b for bother him, he'll play. Good night.”

And with a kiss on Jennica's cheek, Carline thinks that yes, both of them could learn how to be b for brave with Samuel.

Carline walks over to her room, and the bedspread is still disheveled. It's almost too bright and cheery and clashes with the vibrant covers of books, and the CD player in the corner is a relic. It was Mom's first, and if it's still working years from now, Jenny will have it too. *I'm going to have to move it if Samuel's sleeping here ... what else do I need to shove in the*

closet? The books and CDs for one. *It's the digital age, Carline, get used to it.* The shoes piled in the corner need to be sorted out, and the jackets hung over the chair should be put in the closet. Winter is coming, or at least that's what Dad would say.

Carline grimaces a little. She should call Dad soon, thank him and Mom for paying for Jenny's daycare. And their clothes. And Jenny's toys. And a hundred other things, just not the rent. Carline had been adamant on that - she could take care of the rent herself. Turns out she couldn't, but a few white lies here and there wouldn't hurt. But that Latin translation on her desk would if she didn't start drinking espresso by the gallon in a few minutes. *Caesar's such an illiterate turtle. Even Jenny's better at stringing words together coherently.*

It's almost three before Carline finally finishes her work and goes to bed, and she still had the real work in the morning. Waitressing was no piece of cake, but at least she served it with a smile and customers tipped her well for it. She only hopes Bailey isn't going to be there in the morning again. He may be her best tipper, but he was Bailey, and she isn't exactly looking forward to anecdotes on the good old days with Mom and Bailey again.

If only Samuel would be there. Carline blushes in the darkness and those butterflies start growing bigger and bigger until all she can hear as she goes to sleep is the quick beating of her butterfly-winged heart.

Chapter Six

It was far too early when Eric called Samuel, who had only finally gone to sleep in the hotel room not five hours before. Carline had invaded Samuel's mind, conquered his every thought, and made herself home in his head. Jenny had run around on the outside, drumming the names of dinosaurs into his skull until his head ached from the pounding inside and out. His sleep was just as painful. Memories...

But all was forgotten when Eric called, demanding he come down to Main Street for breakfast on the ASAP. Samuel bit back a *yes, mother*, but called Eric a douche instead. Eric only laughed, and Samuel could hear Ned groan in the background. When Eric told Samuel that he wouldn't miss the diner and would fit right in, Samuel didn't expect it to be called "The Beauty Shop."

Samuel slides into the chair across from Eric. "Asshole."

"I told you you'd fit right in. I mean, look at this place!" Eric gestures around him, as though he owns the place, and it's like he actually does because no one else is there. It's a '50s style diner, Samuel thinks, delicate and thoughtful, like Carline. *Exactly the opposite of me*, Samuel glowers.

But Eric ignores Samuel's changing mood, as he always does.

"So I noticed that your tattooery is near here and opening soon, and I figured you don't have any employees yet. We're going to be interviewing someone I know for one of your employees," Eric is unfazed by Samuel's glare. Samuel knows

Eric's just trying to make the move easier for him by first finding him a place to stay and now employees, because Samuel hasn't thought of that yet, but *Jesus*. Eric doesn't need to keep playing big brother anymore. "Anyway, his name's Liam, and he used to work at Daryl's old tattoo place—the one you just purchased, actually!—and he's really good. He does his girlfriend's tattoos all the time. And speak of the devils."

A waitress comes up to them, with a coy smile and two full sleeves of tattoos peeking out from under her rose printed dress. *It's good work, the outlines done right, colors work well together. Some of them even look dimensional.* Samuel sneaks a look at this Liam character, who seems to have the same scowl as Samuel on his own face, about the same age that he and Eric are. Maybe even a bit older, if he's being honest. He's got tattoos too, and some of them look like the same style as on his girlfriend's sleeves, *so he's at least skilled enough to have done them himself.* As Liam pulls out a chair and sits down in it heavily, his girlfriend scowls at him, but kisses the top of his head, anyway.

"Welcome to The Beauty Shop! I'm Dionne, the owner, but everyone calls me Di. And you are?" She's a bubbly thing, though it looks as though she has something planned for him up her sleeves, though Samuel's not sure if it's up her tattooed sleeves or not.

"Samuel." Even with his gruff response, Dionne's not put off by this at all, and seems to brighten more than before.

"Well, it's very nice to meet you, *Samuel*. I hear Liam will be working for you at your tattoo parlor. Have you decided on a name yet?"

The truth is that he hasn't thought of it at all. Every name he's thought of has seemed all wrong. He wants a place to feel like home for him, and not anything forced. His brother warned him against that sort of thing when he was telling Samuel about the forces of life and how we make our own destiny and that sort of bullshit. *Then again...*

"I've decided to call it 'The Outsider.'"

And it works for him because it's true, because he really is an outsider in this town. He's no college kid, he's no professor. He's not the same person that Eric once knew. He's not even the same person he was yesterday. There's a dinosaur in his coat pocket and a whiff of orange detergent in the air that proves it.

"I think that's a lovely name, if a bit dark. But who doesn't love when the lights are turned off?" Di points to her shoulder, and a skull surrounded by red and gold roses grins at Samuel. "Anyway, your waitress will be right with you. Anything besides water?"

They all shake their heads. Di saunters off into the kitchen, doing a mock salute as she turns the corner out of sight of the three men, sitting around a tiny, pastel green table.

"So you're here about a job? I saw your work on Di; it's very well done. But I'm wondering what sort of experience you've had. Tell me."

Liam leans back in his chair and takes a deep breath. "I worked over at Daryl's for about four years, but I was apprenticed to him first for three years before that. I was really into art since I was five years old, so it's been a long-time dream. Since he retired, I haven't had a steady job, so if you'll take me, I'll work hard. I'm good at American Traditional, Realism, black and grey, dotwork, horror, that biomechanical shit that every college frat boy is having done, and Japanese Traditional, but I can do most anything. I don't know what you can do, but there was another guy, Shawn, who worked with me. Damn, he was better than me at horror and portraiture and really fucking fantastic at making horses. Also liked Polynesian tattoos. He was down with that. You should consider him, too. Doesn't talk much, but he's good at what he does."

Samuel had to admit, his credentials were good, almost parallel with his own experience. Even though Eric didn't need to hold his hand through all of this, Liam sounded like he was a good worker, and Samuel wanted to get *The Outsider* up and running before Halloween. Halloween tattoos, especially if

Liam and Shawn could do horror too, would be a goldmine for the three of them.

“You’re hired, though if you mess up, you don’t get any sort of second chance. Got it?”

It seems like the mock salute was a code between Di and Liam, because when Liam did it with a *yes, sir*, Di finally came back with their waters and beignets, which she said were on the house, mainly because her boyfriend would finally bring home some money.

Suddenly, the front door chimes and there’s Jenny and Carline right behind her. Jenny has on a dinosaur print dress, and two little ponytails go flying as she launches herself at Eric and hugs him around his legs. Carline skids to a stop just before she crashes into Jenny, and Samuel can see that her dress has heavily muscled men all over it, but it didn’t seem like their faces were exactly detailed. Samuel had to snort a laugh at that, and when both Jenny and Carline looked over at him, Jenny with a gasp and another launch at his legs, Carline with a faint smile and a question in her eyes, Samuel knew he had to tell Carline he was staying.

“Hi, Samuel! I don’t think milk is real!” Jenny’s blue eyes peered up at Samuel, and she’s bouncing up and down a little, as if asking permission to get up on his lap. But Jenny tries climbing up on him already, which reminded him so much of his own sister, that he picked her up anyway and she squirms in his lap. It feels like home already.

“I have no idea what that means, Jenny. But I think I accidentally took someone home last night,” he says as he pulls out Jenny’s dinosaur, and with a squeal of wonder, Jenny snatches it from him and starts playing with it on the table, making tiny roars as it gallops through the powdered sugar sprinkled everywhere. Carline just gapes at him.

“You mean *you* had it? Why didn’t you text me and let me know? I spent at least twenty minutes looking for it! I didn’t even know when I’d be seeing you again and you had her favorite dinosaur?” Carline scowls at him, and even though he

feels guilty for putting it there, it doesn't look like she has much practice with it, so seeing it there is almost comical.

“Yes, I did, and I *was* going to tell you that I'd be staying at your apartment, but my phone died so I couldn't text you and all that crap.”

That scowl died as soon as it started, because then both girls were beaming at him. They are stars in the daytime and cannot be put out.

“You're staying? Really?”

“Um, yes, really?”

That's when Carline cries, and at first Samuel is confused as the rest of them. He thought she wanted this, but of course, who would want someone like him? He's scared and terrifying and he doesn't fit in and he doesn't know how he can stand it when Carline runs away into the kitchen and all he can think is *Carline* before she's back with a plate of orange pancakes. Her eyes are still rimmed red, but she's smiling and he knew he didn't just make the biggest mistake of his life when Jenny looks up at Samuel and Carline both, and places her dinosaur right on top of his pancakes. The smallest roar coming out of Jenny's mouth is more like a question than an actual statement, so Samuel makes the tiniest growl next to her ear and yes, he is home now. After thirty-four years of waiting, he is finally, *finally* home.

Chapter Seven

Carline woke up that morning to Jenny jumping on her bed, but that just made the butterflies in her stomach flutter again until they turned into a herd of elephants. No, it was just Athena and Jenny trying to get her off and dance like they did every morning. Just like Carline and Joe did every morning before Joe went off to work and Carline off to her own daycare. And it's the same song Carline puts on for Jenny, the sounds of Suavecito in the air, and Jenny steps on Carline's feet and stays there as Carline moves them around. The aching in Carline's chest must have been the same pains Joe felt when he was dancing with his first daughter all those years ago, because the smile Jenny gives her mother reminds Carline that Jenny won't be young forever, and she doesn't want Jenny to make the same mistakes she did.

It's already too late after eight when both of them have on their dresses for the day, even though Jenny's probably going to ruin hers when she spends the day with Eric and Nadia and Carline's going to feel like ruining her own when Bailey eventually shows up to The Beauty Shop to order the same old thing which only takes ten minutes to make and another ten to eat, but he always manages to stay there for at least another hour just loitering and leering. If only she could sick Athena or Eric on him, or maybe even Samuel would do that for her, but it wouldn't end well.

It never ends well, Carline thinks as she pulls Jenny's hair into two ponytails, topped off with a headband made of the same fabric as Jenny's dress. The slight curl at the end of

Jenny's hair is almost the same as Carline's own curl at the end of her own high ponytail.

Carline throws Jenny's dinosaurs into a backpack, patterned with dinosaurs, *of course*, except for Jenny's favorite. She has absolutely no idea where it is, and she only hopes there's a similar one at the toy store, but even she feels at a loss. It was hers first, after all.

Jenny sheds a few tears, but doesn't mind when Rat Bear is thrown in there instead. Rat Bear was some stuffed animal Eric had won for Jenny at the roller rink. Carline was never quite sure if it was a rat or a bear, so Rat Bear it was, and it was ugly. It didn't have a tail and the arms, legs, and head were barely attached. The head was the worst because it was lopsided without a purpose and had a nose like a rat and ears like a bear. The nose was always falling off, and the eyes weren't even straight. *Rat Bear reminds me of Samuel, but he'd be a dog, instead.* It made sense; it sounded like Eric had fished Samuel out of a castaway bin, and Carline didn't think if Samuel was put together according to custom, but there was something lovable about him if he would only let people in.

He certainly let Jenny in when he picked her up and placed her on his lap, and she felt a twinge of jealousy, and that's why she cried. Jenny was *her* daughter, not his, and though Jenny wants a father, it's her mother she should love first. Jenny doesn't know this man, and though the black hair is the same, he's still not her father. But when Samuel says that he'll be staying with them, how could she deny either of them? They need each other, and Carline needs Samuel, too. Those butterflies come back when she thinks she doesn't want him just for the rent, and when her eyes meet his as she gives him the pancakes, she thinks she's found home for true now.

After Jenny and Eric leave, and Liam exits to moon over Di at the bar, she only has Samuel and a few other people to wait on. It's nice just to have this quiet morning, making tips, people smiling, and Samuel watching her move around. When she asks him how he liked D.C., he tells her she worries too much about seeming interested in other people, but the truth is

that she is fascinated by other people's stories, except for Bailey's.

Speak of the devil. Di tried putting him at a table Carline doesn't take care of, but he specifically requested hers, and a chill runs down her back. She doesn't like him in class and doesn't do particularly well in it either. Yet he's always there, always gives her a good grade, even if it's a barely coherent essay. When he talks about himself and her mother, who hasn't talked to him in over twenty years, the way he looks at her makes her think she's just her mother all over again. But she does it all for Jenny. It's always for Jenny.

But when he puts his hand on the small of her back, it's like the whole world stops. This can't happen. He shouldn't be doing this. He's her professor, she's his student, she's not her mother, and *what if he goes after Jenny next?* With the excuse that she needs to get another customer's food, she flees to the kitchen and sobs rip through her because she's falling apart. She's weak and Bailey knows it. Carline knows that she could get Bailey banned from the restaurant, but what was the point? She'd see him every other day in class.

Carline puts on her armor, because she forgot to put it on that day after she was dancing with Jenny and seeing people like Di and Eric and even Samuel now, because she thought her armor wasn't needed anymore. Mason was gone and Bailey has never touched her before. She walks out of the kitchen with Bailey's food and she's ready to take whatever he can give her, but Samuel's standing over him, and the scars on his face have changed from eye-catching to their alternate form of downright *horrifying*. Bailey seems unnerved for once as Samuel whispers something in his ear, and Carline can only guess it's a threat when Bailey swallows almost comically.

Bailey says nothing to her as he quickly finishes her food and leaves without looking at her, though he does spare a glare at Samuel, who just leans back in his tiny chair and the smile he gives Bailey suggests that he could disembowel the professor in one fell swoop.

Samuel beckons her over with a look, and she goes cautiously, not knowing exactly what he's going to do or say

to her. His face falls a little when she looks at him like that, but she smiles at him, unsurely, but she smiles all the same.

“Has he ever pulled that shit before?”

“No, never,” Carline says, looking at her dress and fiddling with it.

“Tell the truth, Carline, for god’s sake. No use lying to me, because he won’t be doing it again.” Her heart soars, because here is someone who doesn’t know her and cares for her all the same. It has been a long time since that has happened.

“Thank you, Samuel. Thank you so much.”

So Carline Lake takes off her armor and puts it aside for another day.

Chapter Eight

It's late, nearly midnight, when Samuel pulls into his new parking spot outside of Carline and Jenny's apartment. Carline's waiting outside, a thin bathrobe pulled around her, arms crossed, and her pajama pants seem to have little birds on them. *When will she fly away home?*

When he gets out of the car, Carline strides over to help him with the two suitcases he brought from D.C. He didn't need the rest of his crap, anyway. It could all be bought again, but he thinks if he told Carline that, she'd probably glare at him. Probably had little to spare now, and maybe not even before she went to college.

They lug the suitcases up those damned four flights of stairs, and when Carline hands him a brand new key and says he can do the honors, he feels a sense of pride at unlocking and opening the door. He doesn't own his new home, but maybe his intrusion in Carline and Jenny's life will help him feel like he belongs in this new life.

Carline drags his bags to her bedroom, and he tries to argue with her, he really does, but all she says is a *god damn it Samuel, just sleep there*. How else can he respond to that besides just accepting and sleeping there?

After Samuel brushes his teeth in the bathroom, he walks out to see Carline in Jenny's room, her hair a curtain blocking her face as she leans down to kiss Jenny's face. *I probably shouldn't have seen that*. And he doesn't know exactly what Carline says, but he recognizes a word from Spanish class. He

thinks Carline is a moon, and Jenny is the sun, and he's just trying not to be blinded by their light.

But they are all that flash behind his eyes when he finally turns off the lamp on Carline's bedside table. And the dance from last night, which felt like so long ago, flickers like flames and is hazy smoke when he slips into good dreams for the first time in a very long time.

It's not the fingers of light through the curtains, nor is it the opening and closing of a door that wakes her, but the opening of her bedroom door and the muffled yelp that Samuel makes when Jenny screams *good morning, Daddy!* As she leaps onto the bed and starts jumping on it, Athena yipping at her heels. Carline groans and gets out of her makeshift bed. It's been a week since Samuel moved in and Jenny still hasn't learned not to wake him up at seven in the morning on a Sunday, when every respectable person is sleeping. She shuffles over to her former bedroom and sees Jenny still jumping and then body slamming on top of Samuel, who whimpers in pain. He still won't accept her apologies for Jenny's behavior, saying she reminds him a lot of his little sister, but he never speaks about his sister after that.

"He's not your daddy, Jenny! His name's Samuel. And don't do that jumping, it's rude."

Jenny stops bouncing and worms over to Samuel, trying to hug him, but can only manage to access his forearm and is barely able to wrap her chubby little arms around him.

"But Daddy *loves* me. Right, Daddy?" Jenny squeezes his arm, and Samuel hums a yes. His eyes finally open and blink wearily at Carline - they had stayed up most of the night talking to each other about their pasts, but he had said nothing about his scars and she had said nothing about Jenny. Even Eric didn't know the whole truth about Jenny, and she wasn't sure if Eric knew everything about Samuel's scars. Maybe someday they'd share the truth, but today was not that day.

Samuel swung out of bed and grabbed Jenny hanging on his arm, holding her in his arms bridal style, and dipping her backwards like her brothers Teddy and Miles used to dunk Carline in their pool when they felt like being playful. Samuel was shirtless today, Carline noticed. His myriad of tattoos painted over his body are intermixed with little scars, and Carline just stares at his chest and his back when he turns around to actually get his shirt. Carline hardly notices Jenny tracing his tattoos and rubbing her tiny fingers back and forth as if she's coloring them in, or maybe even erasing the tattoos. All she can see is Samuel, Samuel, *Samuel*, and then his eyes are staring right into hers. She wonders what he sees: a disheveled mother, an exhausted college student, someone who just doesn't belong? Likely a mix of all three, but she wished he saw someone who is just doing her best.

She's breathless; she's not sure why, but she *is* when she breathes out, "Good morning, Samuel."

He huffs out a laugh and a *morning, Carline* back at her. Carline wanted to beat herself over the head with a brick, or maybe with one of her Latin textbooks. *Stupid! You're staring at him like he's the hottest thing on earth and all you can say is good morning. Way to start the day, Carline...*

"Mommy, I want breakfast. And dancing! Dance dance dance dance dance, Mommy!" Jenny squirms in Samuel's grasp, so Samuel just tosses her on the bed and she bounces and giggles and it's very infectious. Carline starts laughing too, and holds out her hand for her daughter to quickly take, and they run out of the room. Carline whips her head around, catching a glimpse of Samuel's bewildered face before he's gone from sight.

"What do you want? Cereal, eggs, pancakes?"

"Pancakes, Mommy, pancakes! Lots and lots," Jenny yells and then her voice drops to a whisper. "And some for Daddy, too?"

"Yes, Jenny, we can make some for *Samuel*, too." Jenny mutters a *he's my Daddy* under her breath and even though Samuel stalks into the room with his tattoo sketchbook, and

Carline disappointedly notices he put a shirt on, Jenny's off towards Carline's phone and puts on the song they dance to every morning. Carline keeps catching Samuel watching them, but whenever their eyes meet, he goes back to his sketchbook and she goes back to making sure Jenny doesn't fall off her feet as they twirl around and around, and there are such beautiful colors from the music. But it just stops all too soon and both girls are heaving as Carline looks to Samuel, embarrassed at dancing with her daughter, but why should she be? Samuel just stares at Carline and she stares back, as if daring him to tease her about it.

The magic is broken when Jenny runs into the kitchen and pulls out a pan from under the stove, the clanging suggesting that Jenny might get hurt if Carline isn't there to stop the accidents from happening. So Carline goes and makes the pancakes, asking Jenny and Samuel if they want regular or orange or even blueberry pancakes. While Jenny wants orange and Samuel says regular, Carline can't help but feel like this is where they all belong, her daughter and their new roommate bickering over what the best type of pancake is and she's cooking up a storm, quietly interjecting that double chocolate pancakes are the best.

They're all almost done with their breakfast when Carline's phone chimes, and damn, she's supposed to meet Di for a girls day out in thirty minutes. She hates asking Samuel to do this, he's no babysitter, but Eric's out of town and Carline can't take Jenny to her dance lesson if she's out with Di. Carline distracts Jenny by giving her a few dinosaurs to play with and pulls Samuel into her old bedroom.

"Samuel, I really hate to ask you this, but I'm supposed to meet Di really soon, and Jenny has a dance lesson at the other side of town. Can you take her? There's no one else who can, and I trust you more than I trust Bailey to do it..." Carline looks up at him, and she sees that Samuel's shocked by this question, but when she mentions Bailey, there's a fierce determination that falls over his face.

"Sure, Carline, I can do that." She knows her inner relief is visible on her face and winces internally at that. She doesn't

have many friends, she knows that, but her old friends all abandoned her when Mason left, anyway.

“Oh, thank you so much, Samuel. Here, let me write down where it is and what time and I’ll pack Jenny’s bag and we should probably put her booster in your car. And I’ll call ahead so they know you’re coming with Jenny and not me. You’d probably want to bring a book or something; it can get boring if you don’t have anything to do,” Carline stops scribbling her note down and looks up at Samuel, his hands lying limply at his side, a slight scowl on his face, but not one that she thinks is there on purpose. “Really, thank you, Samuel. I really do appreciate it.”

“It’s nothing,” he says as he takes the proffered note, a little spark where their fingers barely touch, and she wonders if he feels it too.

Chapter Nine

Carline had said that Jenny would probably just keep playing with her toys and wouldn't bother him until it was time to go, but after Carline had kissed her daughter's head and left for the day, Jenny moved right over to his side, bringing a couple toys with her.

"What are you doing?" Jenny asked, as she peered up at him.

"Drawing. You're in the way."

"Why?"

"Because I can't move my arms if you're right there."

She patted his thigh solemnly. "Then I'll sit right here."

She wouldn't be pushed away, almost as if some sort of magnetic force was keeping her attached to him, but it was hard to draw if she insisted on being on his lap. Still, how could he say no to her? If Jenny said one wrong thing to Carline, he'd be out looking for a place to stay, and who knows how long that would take.

He rested his head on top of hers as he moved his pencil across the page, the motions flowing like water as he drew some dogs that made Jenny laugh, then some flowers he thought Carline might like if he ever shared this piece of his soul with her.

"Daddy, draw some dinosaurs."

He groaned at the daddy bit, but he drew the damn dinosaurs anyway, studying the toys Jenny had brought over.

He drew a whole family of dinosaurs, and Jenny named them all. One was named Maggot, and when he asked why she would ever name anyone Maggot, she said simply, "That's who Mommy is seeing today. I love Maggot."

She means Dionne, and not that Di is actually a maggot. He figured it was just a mispronunciation, but when Jenny said she knew "everything about aliens now," he didn't know what to make of that.

"Draw Mommy." Jenny wouldn't take no for an answer.

And so he did. He drew her the way he saw her when she was being led out his bedroom door by Jenny, the way she looked when he was waking up that morning, the way he first saw her after she ran into his chest before they knew each other's names.

Jenny didn't speak for a long time after he was done, tracing the lines he made as if she couldn't really see anything until she had touched it. She moved around the paper the same way he had, moving her arm instead of just her hand. She stopped tracing them and spoke very quietly, almost too quietly for a four-year-old.

"You drew her sad." Jenny twisted in his lap to look up at him. "Is she sad? Do *I* make her sad?"

Samuel regretted having Jenny sit on his lap and watch him draw. It took him a minute to find the right answer; honest, but not cruel. Not like he was before.

"No. You don't make her sad. You make her incredibly happy, Jenny. I think she's just sad she can't do more for you, because she loves you very much. She really does. I see that whenever she looks at you whenever anyone mentions you. You are her happiness, Jenny. Don't forget it."

But Jenny just kept looking up at him, and she reached her hand up to his scarred cheek and whispered, "But you're sad. Do I make you happy, Daddy?"

She could call him Daddy forever if she liked. How could he deny her anything when she reminded him so much of Eleanor?

“Yes, Jenny, you make me very happy.”

He regretted not correcting Jenny on calling him Daddy, especially now that she’s bouncing up and down in front of him, chanting *Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, put my shoes on and dance with me, Daddy*, holding her tap shoes in her hands. The surrounding moms look at him a little warily, their daughters hiding behind their mothers’ legs, but the dance instructor just ushered her students into the studio. Jenny pouted, holding her shoes up towards him, and sat down, nudging his feet with hers.

Samuel sighed, wondering which god condemned him to this fate as he kneeled before Jenny and slipped the tap shoes on her feet. Jenny jumped up, and before he could stop her, she kissed his cheek, and whispered *don’t be sad, Daddy* in his ear and then ran off into the dance room.

I should never have moved away from D.C., Samuel thinks, trying to ignore the nosy looks the other women were giving him as they whisper about him in their little circles. *I am right here, you know*, he wants to shout at them. He should never have stayed in Carline’s apartment, but he couldn’t deny that spark he felt as she passed him that note earlier. He takes it out of his jacket pocket and smirks at her handwriting. He knows she can write better than this; her grocery lists are found everywhere he looks, but this is no better than a scrawl. He could easily have thrown it away.

Samuel stuffed the note back into his jacket. Who knows when he’ll need it again?

“Excuse me, but are you Jenny’s father?” Samuel lifts his head up to the speaker, and sees a young woman staring at him, or maybe suspiciously at his scars.

“What does it matter to you? And she did call me Daddy, didn’t you hear?” He thinks that would solve the problem, but then another one titters to her friend.

“I can’t imagine *Carline Lake* sleeping with someone like him and then keeping the baby. And then he only comes back now? Pitiful.” Samuel feels his jaw throbbing. It’s not the

insult to him that matters, it's the insult to Carline that hits him hard.

“Look, regardless of whether or not Carline slept with me, which she didn't, it doesn't actually matter who she slept with. All that matters is she loves Jenny, which is more than I can say for *you*. Honestly, they're both just doing their best and they love each other. So shut up about Carline and Jenny.” Samuel leans back in his chair and opens the book he borrowed from Carline. He instantly closes it, because it's some sort of princess book. And not just any princess book, but a *princess romance novel*. He'd rather not know what Carline likes to read anymore.

Seeing flashes of Jenny through the door, he pulled out his sketchbook and started to draw her. He has a few doodles of the girl riding a dinosaur and tap dancing in front of an audience of her toys before he flips to a new page and starts working on some tattoo designs. All he can draw are little birds and dogs and a few dinosaurs as well, and he's not sure why, but it feels right to be drawing them. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a girl staring at him and his work. She's about the age he thought Carline was, and she's got scars on her cheek too. She notices him staring back at her and she shrinks away before he motions her over to him.

“What's your name, girl?” he rasped.

“Lisa. Yours?”

“Samuel.”

Clearly, this isn't enough for her as she points to his sketches.

“And what are those for?”

He sighs. He doesn't really like sharing his work but already Jenny has seen his stuff today, so he might as well just tell this Lisa what exactly he's doing.

“Designs for tattoos. I'm opening a tattoo shop near the campus.” Instead of this girl turning away in disgust, she gapes in wonder and digs through her bag to get her own sketchbook, flipping through the pages as she blathers on.

“I *love* tattoos. I’m thinking of getting one when I turn twenty later this year. Are you hiring? Look at my work; I’m really good. Since I was a child, I have been drawing. I don’t know, seven or something? And I don’t mind sticking people with needles, either. Here, look.” She shoved her sketchbook into his arms, and Samuel flipped through her work. She wasn’t just good, she had a talent. And she insinuated she wanted a job...

“Tell you what. I’ll hire you on a trial basis. If it turns out you can’t handle sticking people with needles, you’re out. Agreed?” He stuck his hand out and Lisa violently shook it, a grin splitting her face.

“Agreed. Now show me how you sketch. I want to learn.”

They sat there for the rest of the hour, sketching. Samuel offered her pointers and Lisa gratefully accepted them. She was honestly the best student he’d ever taught. The time flew by quickly as they ignored the other women gawking at their faces, and when Jenny jumped into his lap with a *hi, Daddy!* and kissed his cheek again, Lisa laughed and took his sketchbook from him when he said a *hello, Jenny* back to her. She jotted a note while Samuel took off Jenny’s tap shoes and socks and put on her sandals and jacket. A quick farewell was all that was managed between the two scarred souls before Jenny dragged him out the door for ice cream.

Samuel flipped open the sketchbook to the page Lisa wrote on to copy down her number. He squinted at the note; her handwriting was miniscule.

Samuel,

*Even though you look nothing like Jenny, I
can tell you’re still her Dad.*

Carline runs up to Di, panting a little as she skids to a stop. Dionne just smiles at her, laughing a little.

“I’m so sorry I’m late, Di. Time just slipped away from me.” Di shoots a knowing look at Carline, a suggestive smile on her lips.

“You mean time slipped away from you while you were eyeing Samuel, right?” Carline slapped Di in shock on the arm. “You know I’m right, Carline! I saw you the other day at the restaurant. You two couldn’t keep your eyes off each other. I honestly thought you two would start making out halfway through.”

“No, you didn’t, and no, we weren’t, Di! You’re just making it up.”

“I saw what I saw, Carline,” Di nodded sagely. “And Liam saw it too, and he’s basically blind as a bat with romance, you know that.”

“Just because Liam saw something doesn’t mean it’s real, Di.” Carline scoffs and turns her head away, peering through the window of some jeweler’s, admiring a necklace there before Di interrupted her thoughts with a cough. Carline turns to look at Di, whose brow is furrowed a bit.

“But you want it to be real. And that’s okay to want it. I think he wants it, too.”

It was already past seven before Carline finally made it home and she hears stomping around from her apartment as she fumbles with the keys. When she opens the door, she’s treated to the sight of Jenny in her pajamas and ponytails getting a piggyback from Samuel Athena leaping around his heels. They tear around the room, Jenny yelling at Samuel to run faster and *be more T-Rex, Daddy* and Samuel just roaring.

A few seconds pass before the three of them notice Carline’s actually home. Although Athena trots primly over to her, Samuel and Jenny charge towards Carline and she

squeaks, absolutely terrified that Samuel's going to run into her, and they're all going to trip and die. He stops less than five inches away from her, and he's breathing heavy. A trickle of sweat makes his way down his face and Carline lifts up her hand to wipe it away. When she does, his breathing stops.

After Jenny's put into bed and after she stops making comments about aliens, Carline walks over to Samuel sitting at the edge of her new bed.

"You really didn't have to do that, you know." Samuel looks up at her in confusion.

"Do what, exactly?"

"You know, buy her food—I do have food here, play with her, get her ready for bed. I could have done that." Samuel pushes himself off the couch and towers over her.

"I know you can, Carline, but that doesn't mean you have to parent her all yourself. What else was I supposed to do? Ignore her because she isn't related to me? As long as I'm living in your house, Carline, let me help with Jenny. I'm not asking to replace you. I just ... want to help. I don't want to see you burn up before your time and start hating Jenny." Carline knows something's unspoken there.

"I could never hate Jenny. Never. She's the world to me." Carline hates the lump in her throat and the tears falling down her face, but she can't stop it. "Jenny's my daughter. She's all mine, Samuel. No one else's. All mine."

Samuel takes her in his arms and holds her while she cries, and she knows he doesn't do this because he's stiff as he holds her, but at least he wasn't Mason telling her to stop her sniveling. *He'll never be like Mason.*

She doesn't deny the electric spark's access when he strokes her hair and tells her everything's going to be okay. She thinks back to her father's words after she broke up with Mason and she had Jenny. Yes, Samuel was brave, gentle, and strong.

And maybe it wasn't wrong to want this to be real.

Chapter Ten

It's a slow day at The Outsider, but they've only been open for a week, so Samuel really isn't worried about that. It's already close to four in the afternoon, the sun shining through the windows, a stark contrast against the black walls. Lisa's mopping the floor, groaning about how this isn't exactly what she expected when she wanted to work for him. Shawn and Liam are playing cards at one of the stations, cursing at each other when the other wins. Samuel sits at the back of the room, listening to the quiet song Lisa put on as he sorts out paperwork. He made good money this week, even if Friday should have been his busiest day. But it's not really about the money - it's about doing what he wants, and this is a life he's waited for.

Lisa interrupts the tranquility of the room as she drops the mop with a clatter. All three of the older men jump at the unexpected sound and glare at her. Lisa just shrugs at them, and it's so crazy to think that she's only nineteen working with a bunch of *dangerous* men in their thirties. She's really one of the most mature of them, even if she does whine about not being able to tattoo people yet. *She does shut up and take good notes when she shadows one of us, though*, Samuel muses as she looks at him like she's going to say something, but doesn't know exactly how to phrase it. *Whatever it is, she's not ready to tattoo people yet, so she'd better not ask about it.*

"Yo, boss," Lisa calls out, and it's the same way he used to talk to Eric when they were younger. Those long days and even longer nights when Samuel would run over to Eric's house, wondering if Calvin was on his heels this time.

Wondering if maybe he ran fast enough, he'd leave the United States behind him and live in Mexico. All that was forgotten as he would vault into Eric's room. Jason would always raise an eyebrow when Eric said he just forgot to mention Samuel would be staying over that night, but the old man didn't do anything about it, didn't do anything about any situation regarding Samuel. Only Eric stuck by him, always Eric, the rich idiot, Samuel smirks.

“What, pipsqueak? You'd better not ask if you can tattoo people, because the answer is still no.”

Lisa glares back at him for the nickname, and he knows she's trying to think of a way to get back at him for that insult. She sets that aside just as she sits to the side of him covered in scars and looks at him with determination in her eyes.

“I'll pay you for this, but I want a tattoo.”

“Your parents won't like that, you know.”

Lisa shoves him, and he looks over at her. He sees so much of himself in her, and thinks the conversation to getting his first tattoo was a lot like this, even though he can't really remember it that well in the first place.

“I want it to be in white ink, and on my hip. My parents will never see it. Come on, the design's not even that big! It won't even take more than like half an hour!”

“Just tattoo her already!” Liam called.

“She won't stop pestering you until you do it, boss,” Shawn boomed.

Samuel knew he had lost, and besides, maybe they'd even close early to do Lisa's tattoo.

“Fine, I'll do it. Shawn, get the station set up. Liam, get Lisa's tracing done. I'm going to go put this shit away and clean up.”

Samuel gathered up all that god-awful paperwork and walked into his office. There were pictures of tattoos he was especially proud of all over the walls, sketches scattered on the desk. Framed right behind his desk was a picture that Jenny

drew in his notebook. When he had picked up Jenny from daycare earlier in the week - because Carline had cleared him to do that, why not be nice for once? - and sat outside of her classroom with the little Teapot in his lap. She decided to take out her crayons and draw some dinosaurs. They were absolutely hideous. Jenny had drawn three stick figures riding stegosaurus with only two legs and triangles for spikes sticking out of its back was breathing fire, or at least had yellow and orange lines coming out of its mouth. Apparently, the people riding the dinosaur were supposed to be Carline, Jenny, and himself, but seeing as there was no distinction between the figures, he had to take her word for it. He told her to sign it, and her signature was almost as big as the dinosaur itself, with only capital letters and spelled ENJNY, because she ran out of room at the very bottom right corner, and had to go above to fit her name in. Samuel had it framed the very next day, much to Carline's shock, Jenny's delight, and his employees' and Eric's amusement.

When he made his way over to the station, Liam had applied the tattoo tracing to the part of the hip Samuel was going to be tattooing. Shawn already putting in the white ink in the tattoo machine. Lisa was humming some song just as she did every single day. How did his life get so *normal*?

He looked closer at Lisa's tattoo and saw X-II-MMXXII.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He knew it was Roman numerals. Carline dated everything with them *for practice*, but that didn't mean he actually knew what it said.

"Good lord, Samuel. You're living with Carline. I thought you would have known. It's 10-2-2022, or October second." Samuel stared at Lisa blankly as she looked expectantly back at him. "That's the day we met? A few weeks back? It changed my life forever, you know?"

Oh shit. Did she have a crush on him? He looked around and saw that Shawn and Liam were already back to playing cards at the other side of the room. He whipped his head back around to look at Lisa, who looked shocked back at him. He realized he asked if she had a crush on him aloud.

“No! Yuck, no. Never in a billion years. You’re way too old.” Lisa’s nose crinkled up in disgust.

“I’m not that bad! The ladies totally dig me once they get past the scars,” Samuel shot back. “And I’m not that old, and even if I did like you, you’re way too young for me - “

“And Carline’s not?”

Samuel practically threw the machine on the table. He could feel the rage building up inside him as he spat at her, “Get out of the chair.”

But she was as defiant as ever.

“No. I’m not getting out of the chair. I want you to tattoo me now. You should tattoo what I want and how I want it. I want you to know I’ve seen the glances you throw at Carline, and those lingering looks, too. I want you to know that I think of you as the big brother I always wanted but never had, even if you’re like the rudest person I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. You may think you’re tough, but get Carline or Jenny around you and you melt like butter. I don’t think you could ever say no to them, so I have to keep you in check, even if you don’t want me to. Now tattoo me, old man.” Lisa fell back with a huff.

“Screw you, Lisa. I’m no big brother, and I definitely don’t *melt like butter*.” But he tattooed her anyway, against his better judgment, against whatever judgment he would get from Lisa’s parents when they would eventually find out their precious daughter got a tattoo and considered him her older brother. Maybe he would be a better brother this time around.

Chapter Eleven

Carline got up bright and early to take Jenny out to breakfast after they danced together as a treat, a reward for going to sleep early when Eric had visited, and the three adults stayed up talking and laughing. The laughing especially felt foreign to Carline, but it was infectious when Samuel and Eric recalled the times they spent together in high school. Eric said he would make it up to Jenny by spending the day with her, even if he did have classes to teach that day. Carline knew he had a massive hangover, but that didn't stop Eric from being a fairly competent babysitter, so she agreed. It was cheaper than taking Jenny to daycare, at any rate.

Carline had to wait at the door while Jenny hugged and kissed Samuel goodbye, neither adult really knowing what to do with Jenny. But Carline knew that she secretly liked seeing Jenny do that with Samuel and almost laughed at the twinge of jealousy that it wasn't her hugging and kissing Samuel. It was strange to think that they had been living together for almost a month; it felt like forever, but in a good way. Only a few arguments here and there, and even though neither of them had opened up completely to each other yet, they were comfortable. Happy, almost.

I wonder what it would be like if Jenny didn't exist at all. Would I even have met Samuel? Probably, knowing Eric. But Carline didn't think she would have liked Samuel as much as she did if she had never seen him with Jenny.

Jenny and Samuel were who she was thinking of as she debated whether to call her parents or not. Jenny was probably

making Eric's students laugh as she made faces at him while his back was turned. Samuel ... who knows what he was doing. He was never really descriptive about his job, and she hadn't yet been able to go and see this other side of him; he never offered to show her either. Carline checked the time on her phone. It was about two right now, which meant it was around one where her parents were. She didn't think they were working that day, so she might as well call and see. Nothing too long, but they'd be able to hear their granddaughter's voice, too. Carline took a deep breath and dialed the number, holding that breath as she walked towards Eric's office.

They picked up on the fourth ring, and after Carline let out a *hi*, her mother's voice came through.

"Carline! You've finally called! How are you and Jenny doing? Your father's not here right now, but maybe you can call again later? Is this semester going well so far? Say hi to Landon and Eric for me, will you?"

Carline had no intention of saying anything to Bailey any time soon, but didn't say that to her mother. "I'm good, Mom! The semester's fine so far, even though there are a ton of translations to do. And Jenny's doing wonderfully. She's doing really very well in ballet, even though tap is still her favorite. She'll love to tell you more. She's with Eric right now. How are you and Daddy doing?"

"Your father and I are doing just fine. The company's doing well, even if Teddy says it's a little too much of a hassle. You know, Carline, if you ever think about dating Eric, I won't understand it, but I won't say anything about it either. Your father might not like it, though."

"Mom, I'm not interested in dating Eric. We've already been through this." Carline blushed, thinking of a different older man. "And, oh, Mom, I forgot if I told you or not, but I have a roommate now. He's helping with the bills; Jenny loves him."

"*Him*? So there is a man in your life? There's no shame in settling down, Carline..."

“Mom. No. It’s ... not like that.” Carline reached the door to Eric’s office, knocking on it a few times before she walked in on the scene of Eric and Jenny working on a pop quiz. He always asked Jenny to pick the answer option for the tests. One time, Jenny picked all Ds on the test, except for the last one, which was a C. Carline remembered that test all too well...

“Well, maybe if he’s not the one, you could always try, Eric.”

“I don’t think so, Mom. But Jenny’s here now. Do you want to talk to her now?”

“Yes, I will. And I love you, Carline. Your father and I always will. We’re so proud of you for doing what you have for Jenny. Bye, sweetie.”

“Bye, Mom!” Carline handed the phone off to Jenny, kissing her forehead before looking up at Eric. “My mom thinks we’re in love, by the way.”

“Sorry, Carline, but you’re not my type, and I don’t think I’m yours. But maybe Samuel is?” Eric tried wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, but it looked more like he was trying to scratch an itch without using his hands.

Carline blushed as she mumbled, “Yeah, right...”

Eric leaped up, pointing his finger at Carline. “I knew it! You have a crush on Beast! On Samuel! I can’t *wait* to tell him that.”

Carline thrust her own finger at him. “Don’t you dare, or I’ll have Nadia castrate you.”

Eric snatched his hand away from her. Jenny’s giggling alerted Carline that her daughter was still on the phone with her mom and just caught the end of Jenny’s sentence.

“ And he’s my Daddy an’ I love him so much. He’s the handsomest man alive, even more than Uncle Eric!”

Eric pointed at Jenny. “I’m definitely telling Samuel about that, though.”

Eric yelled it at Samuel when they walked inside the door to The Outsider after classes ended, completely ignoring the fact that Samuel was tattooing Lisa at that moment.

“Guess what, Samuel? Jenny—” Jenny shrieked when she heard her name, hiding behind Carline and peeping out behind her mother’s legs to see Samuel’s reaction. “Jenny loves you and thinks you’re more handsome than I am! No, wait, she said you were the most handsome man alive.”

Samuel didn’t look up from his work of applying last minute ointments and bandages to Lisa’s hip, his hair pulled back so it didn’t fall in his face. It was so *long*, and Carline wondered if it was as soft as it looked. After a moment, he asked, “Is that so, Jenny?”

Jenny blushed and nodded before realizing Samuel couldn’t see her. She stomped her feet one at a time, trying not to run over to Samuel, as she chanted *yes, yes, yes*. Carline glanced around. It seemed that Liam and Shawn were trying and failing to not laugh at this scene, but Eric was just smirking his own trademark smirk.

Carline thought it was a nice place. She wouldn’t have chosen black for the walls, but the tattoo designs she saw were exceptionally good, and despite the chaos she would have felt it had in the past, she felt absolutely calm when she watched Samuel pat Lisa on the head and distantly heard him tell her how to take care of it. Lisa scoffed and told Samuel she knew everything there was to know, and Samuel cuffed her on the back of the head for that. Carline was mesmerized watching him put away his equipment. The way his muscles rippled was intoxicating, and the way he let loose his hair made her knees feel weak. Or maybe that was just the way Jenny pushed on her knees to get her moving towards Samuel as he walked over to the three of them. How Carline wanted to get lost in those eyes.

Samuel kept looking into Carline's eyes as he knelt down and held his arms out to let Jenny run into them. And Jenny leaped into them as Samuel scooped her up and swung her around. When they finally stopped spinning, Carline watched as Jenny kissed his cheek and patted it where she left her mark. Samuel kissed Jenny's cheek back, even though Carline knew that was so incredibly different for him. She saw that second of hesitation in his eyes before Carline nodded subtly, telling him it was okay to love her daughter.

Samuel was the one who spoke first. "Hi."

"Hey." She felt so awkward, so out of her element, but she almost always felt like this around him.

"How were classes today? Do any translations?" Carline felt lighter at that moment. At least someone was interested in what she was studying.

"Classes were fine. Professor Eric's class today was immensely boring, though." She ignored the pout from Eric and moved toward Samuel, trying to fool herself that it was to brush Jenny's hair with her fingers instead of moving closer to look in his eyes more deeply. "I've been translating Cicero, the *Hortensius*, actually. I'm hoping one day the entirety of it isn't lost forever. All that knowledge, gone forever." She couldn't breathe in his presence. She hoped he couldn't breathe, either.

Her breath hitched when he moved a bit of her hair back behind her ear. Maybe this wasn't really happening. Maybe she was seventeen again. Maybe she could love him if it was real, if this wasn't a dream of hers, not the same one she'd been having almost every night.

Eric tried to ruin the moment as he cleared his throat, and suggested that Samuel meet the three of them around the street for dinner at some restaurant, but Samuel still seemed lost in thought as the two of them stared into each other's eyes. Neither of them really noticed Jenny trying to braid Samuel's hair or kissing his cheek, but Eric pulled Jenny away from Samuel, and Carline felt a light tug from her daughter. She snapped out of her trance, thoroughly embarrassed that she was caught like that, just staring at Samuel. Samuel said he

wouldn't take long, and when she was led away, she felt his eyes glued to the back of her shirt.

Carline didn't think she would settle down immediately after college, but a small part of her hoped it would be with Samuel and Jenny at her side.

Chapter Twelve

Samuel snapped out of his trance when the door closed, and Carline was gone. Damn Eric for taking her. He wanted her with him. Then he heard cat calls from his staff.

“*Shit*, Samuel, you got it bad. When’s the date? I hear wedding bells,” Liam hollered, his grin so wide it was a wonder his face didn’t crack from the pressure.

Shawn nodded solemnly. “Remember the best things happen out in nature, boss? A bit of romance before you sweep her off her feet and onto her back.”

Lisa was the worst. She skipped around, phone waving in the air, singing, “I took pictures, such beautiful pictures. The sexual tension was so thick, big brother.”

Samuel darted after her, but it had been too long since he was on the track team, and his own big brother wasn’t running after him for motivation. He caught her as they were turning, and it was a great miracle that they didn’t fall over. He snatched her phone from her and flipped through her pictures.

They were absolutely sickening. Was his adoration of Carline really *that* visible on his face? And what was that move of tucking her hair behind her ear? And Jenny kissing him was the icing on the cake. But he didn’t delete them.

Before he went over to see two of the people he cared about the most, even if he’d never admit it, and Eric, he muttered to Lisa.

“Text me those pictures.”

Later that night, after he had spent over two hours playing Candy Land with Carline and Jenny, he gathered up the courage to look at those pictures again. His girls, *wait, when did they become my girls?*, looked absolutely beautiful against the black background lit up by the setting sun.

It wasn't until the next morning, as Samuel heard the two of them dancing, when he recognized the look on Carline's face was the same as his own.

Jenny's scream pierced the dark morning silence. Carline's eyes snapped open, and she tumbled off the couch, her face hitting the floor with a sickening crunch. Her own howl mixed with Jenny's as she rushed towards her daughter's bedroom, yelling out to Jenny that *yes, she was coming*. She felt something drip down her face and heard the door to Samuel's bedroom open. His eyes panicked.

He was shirtless again, Carline scowled, or at least she tried to. It hurt to move her face. Samuel nearly crashed into her as he ran to Jenny's door, stopping her from going in.

"What are you doing? Jenny needs me. Let me *go*." He shook his head, his hair falling over his shoulders. He bent over her, his own face almost too close to hers as he raised his hand to her nose and wiped away the wetness.

"Not like that. You're going in there. You've got a nosebleed; she doesn't need to see that," he shoved her towards the bathroom. "Your nose isn't broken, but wipe up the bleeding. I'll calm her down, okay?"

Carline glared at his back as he softly opened the door, wishing it was Jenny crying for Mommy instead of daddy.

"*I'll calm her down, okay*," Carline sniffled, wetting a washcloth and wiping up her nose. "*I'll do everything that needs to be done. I'll take care of you and Jenny. I'll walk around your house and sleep in your bed without a shirt on. I'll flex my muscles when I see you staring. I'll play with Jenny and take her away from you. I'll be her favorite parent.*" She

looked in the mirror. Her face was scrunched up, her frown almost comical next to her raging bedhead. Not anything like *oh so wonderful Samuel, who Jenny just loves*. She wishes she could hate him, but she just couldn't. No, instead she had to have a stupid crush on a stupid man, just something stupid Carline would do. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection and, with one last mocking noise, she flicked off the light and made her way to Jenny's room.

"Did you know I once had a sister just like you?" Carline stopped short. He never mentioned he had a sister. She crept closer to the door.

"Daddy has a sister?" She rolled her eyes. Daddy this, Daddy that. Whatever happened to *Mommy, everything?*

"*Had*. A big, strong, scary man took her away from me once. She fought him real hard. Just like you did in your dream. Never stop fighting, okay?"

"Okay. But did Daddy get her back? Daddy's big an' strong, but he's not scary."

"No, babysaurus, I didn't get her back. I wasn't big and strong then. But I'm big and strong now, and I won't let anyone take you away from me. Or your Mommy." Carline's chest ached, feeling absolutely horrible about what she said only a minute before. But *babysaurus*? Nothing about this man screamed, giving pet names. And Jenny was nearly five. She wasn't a baby any longer!

"Where's Mommy?" Carline stepped back quickly, just in case Samuel made his way to the door. She leaned forward anyway.

"I think she's just prettying herself up for you. She likes to look extra special for you, because she loves you very, very much."

"But Mommy is already pretty! Isn't she, Daddysaurus?" Carline had to creep closer as Jenny tried to whisper. "And you love Mommy, right Daddy? You told me you did, I remember!"

Carline pressed her back flat up against the wall, eyes wide and wild. Samuel had been here for two and a half months. Two and a half months was long enough to be in love with someone, right? Was that too quick? It sounded too quick. But her parents met and got engaged within eight months. Rhett confessed she loved Halden after three weeks of dating and they were still together four years later. Surely that was way too fast? So two and a half months might be average? Her heart was beating almost too loudly, but she still managed to catch what Samuel said.

“Mommy is exceedingly beautiful, not just pretty, Jenny. And I thought that last part was just between us?”

When did he even *tell* Jenny that? Was it yesterday? A week ago? A month ago? How had Jenny been able to keep a secret that long? Was Jenny keeping other secrets from her? Carline felt hot and weak. She needed to sit down. No, she needed to see Jenny. *Slow, deep breaths, Carline. You know nothing.* She knocked on the door and entered.

Samuel and Jenny stared at her as she glided over to Jenny’s side and sat down on the bed. She kissed Jenny’s head and stole a glance at Samuel with nearly closed eyes. He was blushing. And staring at her. And she *liked it*.

“Hi Jenny. What was your dream about?” She stroked Jenny’s hair, ignoring the pounding of her own heart.

“I dream ‘bout a scary man taking me away! But Daddysaurus said he’d protect me, ‘cause no one’ll take me away from Mommy.”

“That’s very true, Jenny. No one will be able to take you away from me, not ever. I’ll make sure of it, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

In the end, Jenny insisted that she sleep with both Mommy and Daddy tonight, and so the three of them made their way to Samuel’s room. Jenny slept in the middle, kicking Samuel’s knees through the rest of the night, Carline’s arms curled around her daughter. Carline pretended not to notice when her and Samuel’s legs tangled up with each other in the night, and

pretended it did not hurt when he tried to quietly extract his legs from hers and his hand from her hair in the real morning.

Chapter Thirteen

The morning sky was very blue when Samuel made his way up the sidewalk to the apartment's stairs, Athena in tow, thinking how much like the sky Carline's eyes were. And how terrified they were the night before when blood was dripping down her nose and Jenny was screaming for the two of them. He didn't like the dream Jenny had; it was too much like what happened to Eleanor. Maybe Eleanor was trying to tell him something beyond the grave. Maybe Jenny was Eleanor all over again, and this was his second chance.

But he didn't expect Jenny to ask about the loving Carline thing. He didn't *love* her yet, but how can you say to a four-year-old that you can care about someone and not actually love them? He'd like to love her one day, but he hadn't even asked her on a date yet. A month and a half just seemed too soon. *But you did sleep in the same bed as her last night. Jenny was there, sure, but it still counts for something, right?* Maybe he'd ask her out. Maybe.

He could hear their music playing as he unlocked and opened the door, seeing a flash of Carline and Jenny as they ran around, dodging tables and jumping on the couch before collapsing on the carpet in a fit of giggles as they tried to tickle each other. The door closed with an accidental slam, and both their heads shot up at him. Jenny clambered and torpedoed to him, but like he saw Carline doing once, he turned around and waited until the last second before sweeping her up in his arms. He felt his burned cheek being attacked with kisses, but he didn't really mind at all anymore. It was just Jenny, and Jenny did what she wanted.

“Daddy, put me down. I got to pee.” She tugged on his hair. She tried braiding it one day, the day she asked if he loved Carline. He put Jenny down gently, and she toddled off to the bathroom, leaving just Samuel and Carline in the same room. He could hear Eric’s voice now. Just *do it, dumbass, just ask her already.*

“So, Carline, I was wondering...” Lisa’s voice pitched in: *seriously, that’s your intro? This is the defining moment of your life, big brother. This is where you kiss, kiss, fall in love. Make it count.*

“Yes...?” She was still sitting on the floor, hair wild. He liked it that way.

“Um, would you ... um. Would you like to go on a date with me?” Her eyes widened again, and his heart thrummed with anticipation. “I mean, you don’t have to. If you don’t want to, that is. I know I’m a lot older than you, but, hell, why not, right?” *Stupid idiot!* Lisa and Eric interrupted. Carline picked herself off the floor, not facing him as she dusted the seat of her pants. He didn’t dare look away.

“Yes, why not? I don’t have anything going on tonight - I know Jenny would love to see Uncle Eric again,” she walked over to the record player, the sway of her hips intoxicating. “Do you know where you want to go?”

“No...? Is dinner good?” Carline stood very, very still.

“No, not really.” He felt his face grow hot. Dinner wasn’t enough? Wasn’t that a good first date? He thought it was a good first date but this was the twenty-first century. Things had changed.

“Dinner and a movie? We could look at art? Is there anything you’d like to do?”

She whipped toward him, a gleam in her eye that he had never seen.

“I’d like to go to dinner *and* laser tag,” She walked closer to him, almost too quickly. “Maybe on another date, we’ll go roller skating.”

“Another date? Oh, sure, yes. If you want.” He was going on a date tonight. A date with Carline. *A laser tag date with Carline*. She was so close now, almost pressed right up against his chest.

“And I hope you know, I intend to win tonight. So be on your toes, big man.” Her watch beeped frantically and she dashed off, grabbing her bag and jacket before pulling on her shoes, yelling at Samuel the whole way. “Aw shit, I got to go to class. Can you drop Jenny off at daycare and drop her off at Eric’s after daycare’s over?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. What time should I pick you up? Where do you want to eat? Where is laser tag anyway?” This had to be a trick.

“I’ll text you - don’t call me!” Jenny ran past, and Carline kissed her on the head before running out the door. “See you tonight!”

“Mommy sees you every night.” Jenny observed as they sat together, trying to put on the technical wonder of children’s sandals.

“Yes, but tonight Mommy and Daddy have a date. So it’s different.” Damn these shoes.

“Why?”

“Because it means Mommy and Daddy are getting to know each other by doing fun things together.”

“Why can’t I come?” These *buggering* shoes!

“Because you’re going to see Uncle Eric and do fun things without us.”

“Like futuristic investalligators?”

“Futuristic Investigations?” He was getting better at decoding Jenny’s mispronunciations.

“That’s what I *said*, Daddysaurus.”

“Sorry, babysaurus, I’m old, and deaf.” Liam and Shawn’s voices rang out in his head: *wrong thing to say, boss.*

“WE’RE GOING TO DO FURTRISTIC INVESTALLIGATORS, DADDYSAURSUS.”

Chapter Fourteen

“So let me get this straight, you’re going on a date with Carline, and you’re going to dinner and laser tag?” Eric was leaning on the door frame of his loft apartment, ignoring the sound of twenty dinosaur toys being dumped on the wood floor behind him.

“Yes, I am, believe it or not. What’s her favorite restaurant, anyway?”

“Just go to like some burgers and fries joint; there’s a good one on West, and it has milkshakes. It’s her go to pre-laser food. She’ll love you if you bring her there. And you’ll just die when you see what she’ll wear.”

“Well, yeah, Eric, she looks good in anything.” Eric just shook his head.

“No, no, you don’t *get it*, you lovesick oaf. Just ... wait ‘till you see it. She gets super into it. She even has a call sign. And she’ll expect you to get it right.”

He did not expect to see Carline waiting at the restaurant in a Battlestar Galactica jumpsuit.

“It’s a replica BSG Viper Pilot jumpsuit. With a helmet, too,” she slurped on her strawberry milkshake, raising her helmet in the air. “It has my call sign on it.”

Archaeopteryx was printed on the side. What the hell...

She interrupted his train of thought: “Ar-key-op-ter-ix. It’s the earliest known bird, back when the dinosaurs roamed the earth. Got the call sign for Jenny. How’s your shake?”

“Oh, it’s good, you know. Just chocolate.”

Carline shook her head, loose hairs flying. “No such thing as just a chocolate shake. But what’s your call sign going to be?”

“Beast. That’s my call sign; my military code name, that is.” Her face lit up.

“I didn’t know you were in the military! Beast ... I like it. Easy to say.”

Samuel ... no, Beast - seemed to have a lot of trouble pronouncing her call sign.

“Archeoptero-dactyl, what’s your status?” He was pressed up right against her back as they dashed from corner to corner, trying to stay away from the group of teenage boys attempting to take the two adults down. She fired twice, hitting one of the boys square in the chest, deactivating his gun for a few seconds.

“Took down one of these toasters. Move your ass, Beast!” He snaked one of his hands and grabbed her arm before dashing to the next cover, shooting two of the boys before they could aim and fire.

She took her helmet off and placed it in Beast’s hand, ignoring the glare he gave her as he took down another teenager. She scratched her head a little and reached for the helmet before feeling a jarring vibration in her back.

“I’m hit!” She tugged on Beast’s arm, pulling him down to her level, face almost touching. “Go on without me, darling, but remember me as the best damn shot there ever was.”

“Carline, you’ll be fine - “

“My call sign is Archaeopteryx!” She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down for a searing kiss, distracting Beast and the toasters alike before she reached up and shot the five remaining boys just as time was called.

She pulled away from Samuel, panting. His hair fell over his face and his eyes were dark. With what, she did not know. He held her hand out to her, but she decided to play a little longer.

“My love, I am slain! I can’t move my legs. Carry me, dearest. Bury me beneath our favorite tree, you know, the weeping willow we used to play under,” Carline kissed him again, softer this time, and she noticed he gave in to it. She didn’t know what to feel about that. “Remember me…” Carline shut her eyes, a peaceful smile on her face. She heard a faint groan from Samuel before he picked her up, and carried her out of the arena and into the front room, stopping to look at the TV screen with the point totals on it.

“What the hell? How’d you beat me?” Her eyes snapped open, and she squirmed in his arms to see the board. Her 3010 beat his 2990.

“It’s because I’m *really stressed*. And I like shooting people with lasers.”

“Oh, really? I couldn’t tell.” She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, really,” she paused, suddenly realizing she kissed him twice, and he’s said nothing so far. “I hope you’re not mad I kissed you.”

“How could I be mad, Carline? Besides, I think it was A-is-for-ox kissing Beast instead.”

She felt a blush coming on. Carline hated her blushes. “It’s Archeopteryx!”

“Hey, I wasn’t done yet,” he leaned closer to her face. “Beast *really* liked kissing Archeoptrix, so I hope you don’t mind if he steals one again.”

Samuel leaned his mouth towards hers, stopping millimeters before her mouth. Carline leaned up to finish the deed, thinking that while she didn’t do this on first dates, this felt so very, very right.

Chapter Fifteen

Samuel was being teased by his employees over the date last night with Carline, simultaneously bouncing Jenny on his lap and ringing up a customer before he closed for the day. He faintly smiled, thinking of how Carline must be doing in Eric's class right now; apparently she and her classmates were given a pop quiz, simply because Eric felt at least one of his students was having too much fun on a school night. He opened his phone, navigating to the texts Carline had sent at one in the morning, needing to reread them to make sure they were really there and were really *real*.

I kicked your ass. I hope you know that

I'm well aware, Carline.

But what the hell? How did you beat me

Contrary to your belief, I have held a gun before

back on the ranch

... ranch?

yes, my family is a family of PROUD
RANCHERS on Greenpath Ranch

it's misleading all we do is cut down trees

we don't even ranch anything

no one in my family likes ranch dressing either

you do know that liking ranch dressing is not a requirement right

oh

okay look I'm tired

you're the one that woke me up

come to my room

excuse me everything in this glorified trash heap is mine

so technically that is my room you are asking me to come to

and i will not come to my room

technically i am occupying it and have been

living in it for over 2 months

so it's mine

(i need another good night kiss to go to sleep)

(you've got a strong incentive, but no)

are we dating now

because we are going on dates

i think we should go roller skating tonight

we're dating if you want to date

are you asking me on a date

yes

but roller skating yes no?

i have some sick moves to show off

fine but i'm not skating

that's okay you can sit with Jenny

or teach her to skate i don't mind

(i'm slowly letting go of the reins on Jenny's parenting)

(because you're pretty good at it)

oh you could do the arcade games

especially the claw machine get another rat bear

you there?

you must be asleep. That's fine by me

and as for the above question

We're not dating yet but maybe soon okay?
maybe

i had a wonderful time with you last night. I hope
you know that because you are a wonderful
person

Oh hey can you pick up Jenny today? Eric is
giving us a pop quiz

how did you manage to be friends with him?
Okay bye pop quiz now could you pick up some
dinner on the way back home?

Samuel tugged on Jenny's ponytails, telling her to go get her backpack from cousin Lisa and also to kick Liam in the shins for being a douc ... not very nice person today. Lisa and Shawn's laughs at Liam's yelp of pain made him smile as he closed up shop, telling everyone to get the hell out before gathering up Jenny's drawings from that day and hanging them in his office, though most were hanging low on the ground since that's where Jenny told him to put them. *You'll probably keep those drawings forever.*

He threw Jenny's backpack in his car and the two of them walked to the grocery store a few blocks over, Jenny running in front and then pausing for Samuel to take her waiting hands and swing her around.

"Daddysaurus?"

"Babysaurus?"

"What'd you an' Mommy do last night? Because I saw you kiss! I *made* you kiss," Jenny squealed, and Samuel swung her around some more before holding her in his arms as they walked into the grocery store and got a cart. He gently placed Jenny in it, tapping her nose before he replied.

"We went on a date. I told you last night how those went, didn't I? We did kiss, but if you really want to know, Mommy started it." He remembered Carline's giggling as they walked up the stairs, kissing him at every landing. Samuel had pressed her against the door, hot and heavy and ready for more, but she ducked under him and opened the door, racing to the closet and bathroom to change into pajamas. Jenny came home minutes later, Eric only staying for a few minutes to tease Carline on her wardrobe and Samuel for his never-ending grin. The three of them stayed up a little while longer, playing house, but with dinosaurs instead. Carline had whispered in his ear that it seemed they'd been playing house for the past two and a half months, but hadn't been quiet enough, because Jenny said that mommies and daddies should kiss each other before they go to sleep. This kiss was more hesitant than the others, only because Jenny was watching. The last kiss Carline stole before he went to his room, and he remembered her saying very clearly that while she doesn't kiss people on the

first date, it felt like they had been together for much longer. She didn't really mind that at all.

“Mommy was real happy today, Daddy, probably ‘cause she kissed you! I got to have dinosaur egg oatmeal! An’ I got chocolate in my lunch today! An’ I’m making a picture for Mommy, but you can’t tell her. Shhhh...” Jenny tried to make the shushing noise, pressing her finger up against Samuel’s mouth, but all she was really able to do was make raspberries. Samuel kissed her finger, making Jenny laugh.

“I promise I won’t tell her. Now what should we get for dinner tonight, hm? And dessert, too.”

“Time’s up everyone! Take your papers and place them up here. No assignments due tomorrow, so feel free to take the night off and rest, or use that time to continue dating my best friend,” Eric hollered through the din of students cheering. Carline made her way up to his desk and was about to leave the room before Eric grabbed her hand and told her to wait.

Carline watched everyone slowly go out of the room - all she wanted to do was go home and see Jenny and Samuel so they could all get ready for skating. Eric took his sweet time, making sure everything was in place before he looked up at her and sighed.

“He really likes you, you know,” Eric started to say. “To be completely honest, I haven’t seen him this enamored with anyone since his sophomore year of high school, when he fell in love with the head cheerleader. Needless to say, she used him for everything below his face, and he got used to that, though I know he wishes it wasn’t that way. And you’ve been in a ton of shitty relationships, Carline, one of them with Mason. I don’t think you’ve ever been in an actually good relationship. So while I’m going to say Samuel’s worth it, and I’m not just saying that because we’re pretty much brothers, you can’t make this relationship of yours a shitty one. And I suppose that’s me acting like the protective best friend, but if

you mess this up for Samuel or yourself, then I'm not going to be happy. And I especially won't be happy if Jenny gets hurt, too. Got it?"

"I got it, Eric. I'm giving it time and I'm keeping Jenny in mind." Jenny was always in mind. Carline's whole life is Jenny, Jenny, *Jenny*. How could Eric forget that?

"Have you told him about Jenny yet?"

"No." Carline didn't like that question.

"Will you?" *Probably not. Maybe never.*

"When he tells me about his scars."

Eric winced. "That might be soon, so I hope you're ready to tell him all about Miss Teapot. Little Jennywompus. *Jennica Antigone Lake. Jenny Hill*. I mean, seriously, Carline, Jenny's not going to be very happy when you literally made her name about her birth - "

"Shut *up*, Eric!" Carline felt those tears swimming, saw them blurring his grim face. "I know she might hate me when she's older. I know it. I think about it every night before I go to sleep and every time I wake up and when I can't make the rent and when I have to tell her, she can't have a new toy because we need to eat food. I feel a grip on my heart and it tugs whenever Jenny cries or when she giggles. It's so hard to *breathe*. I'm just trying to do my best, but what if my best isn't enough? Don't you think I know I'm not enough? Sometimes I wish I took a different path home that day, but then I think about what that means. How could I ever give up on Jenny? I need her, Eric. I wouldn't be Carline without her. So don't you dare tell me I don't think of Jenny."

"Okay."

Driving home was hard. The roads just didn't feel the same anymore, and making fun of the billboards on the freeway just wasn't the same. It was like she had just woken up and had that bad taste in her mouth, yet no matter how hard she tried to get rid of it by turning the music up, it stuck. It stuck when she parked her car and made her way up the staircase, hearing echoes of the night before - her laughter and she could almost

hear his grin before he came in for a kiss. It stayed when she opened the door and mechanically greeted her daughter and her not quite a boyfriend before making her way to the bathroom and sitting in the bathtub part of the shower. The cold brought her to tears, or at least that's what Carline told herself as she tried not to let the tears fall. It was almost like she was underwater, because everything was distorted looking, and the knock on the bathroom door seemed like it was real and also never existed.

Carline heard Samuel sit down next to her on the other side of the bathtub before she saw him. He picked up the hand resting on the divider and made her splay her fingers before he laced them with his hand and squeezed. He was warm, so warm. How could anyone be so warm when Carline was just so very, very cold?

“What's up?”

“Today was just off and nothing went right.” she wiped the tears threatening to spill over and sniffed. “I hate days like that.”

“Yeah, me too.” Carline snuck a glance over at Samuel. He wasn't looking at her, just staring at the slightly peeling paint. She'd have to fix that sometime soon. He kept staring at it, absentmindedly running his thumb over hers in soothing circles. “It isn't because of me, right?”

“No. You're the best part of today, and Jenny too. Just some things didn't go as they should. Like for me, everything has its order, its place, and when things aren't how they should be ... it just gets hard for me to be okay,” she smiled, thinking of long ago days. “Probably why I was such a pain when I was younger - I kept nagging my brothers, especially my sister, to stay in line and do as they're told. There are rules and I was always good at following them. I mean, I've gotten better, but still, it's hard sometimes. And today was just not my day.” Samuel raised her hand to his lips and kissed it softly.

“Do you still want to go roller skating tonight?” He kept kissing her fingers; it was incredibly ticklish and Carline giggled.

“Yeah, I want to go. It should be quiet tonight.” Samuel got up, still holding her hand.

He offered his other hand, which she took before he raised her up to her full height and kissed her forehead.

Chapter Sixteen

Jenny was sitting very still on the chair as Carline adjusted her skates and tied them. Samuel was sitting next to the two of them, as he had conveniently opted out of skating since there were no skates his size. *Next date we'll do what he wants.*

“Come on, Jenny. Let me teach you to skate,” Carline looked over at Samuel. “You sure you’re all right just sitting there?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he waved her off. “Besides, I think you had some sick moves to show me.”

“Well, maybe they’re not that sick. I can go backwards and that’s pretty much it. Can’t really do much with blades,” she shrugged. Jenny held onto her hands as Carline skated backwards onto the rink. Almost no one was there, and the music being played was quiet and fairly slow. She felt Samuel’s eyes watching her and Jenny as he stood at the side of the rink.

“Baby steps, Jenny. Just hold onto my hands and move your feet forward.” Jenny kept sliding her feet back and forth, but never actually moved anywhere. “You got to pick up your feet. It’s just like walking, but you have shoes with wheels on them, okay? See how I do it.” She turned around, facing away from Jenny, and slowly skated. Jenny giggled behind her, being tugged along. “Come on, Jenny, pick your feet up.”

It took at least twenty minutes, but finally Jenny could skate mostly by herself. She fell a few times, but she always

got back up without a tear. *Jenny's a survivor*, Carline thought, thinking back to earlier that day. It was a good thing Jenny wanted to sit with Samuel then.

“Give me half an hour to skate? You and Jenny can play some arcade games; I’ll pay.”

“*I’ll* pay, Carline, you skate. And take all the time you want, okay?”

So Carline had been skating around the rink for the past fifteen minutes, listening to the songs change from the top 40 hits to more of the slow dance songs that played at prom. She skated forwards, backwards, did some jumps and turns like she used to up north on her family’s lake when it froze over.

She kept thinking about how she got Jenny. Everything kept replaying in her mind: Mason walking home, and then Jenny. How could she ever tell Samuel? What would he think about everything she’s done for Jenny?

She skated over to where Samuel and Jenny were sitting. Her daughter was nodding off, head in Samuel’s lap, squeezing a new stuffed dinosaur. Samuel took out a stuffed animal behind his back: a dog was in his hands. Carline glanced over at the little stuffed bird next to his leg.

“That’s mine. The other two are for my girls.” Carline cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Your girls?”

Samuel nodded, “Just like I’m ya boy.”

“Have you been talking to my brothers? You’d better not be.” Carline shook her head as she untied her skates and slipped her flip-flops on.

“*Somehow* your brothers got a hold of my phone number and have been ‘interrogating’ me while you’ve been skating.”

Eric.

He liked watching Carline glide around the rink, even though he knew she’d been having a horrible day and didn’t really look like she was there skating around. He didn’t mind that he wasn’t able to skate next to her; he had enough fun

trying to get Jenny the stuffed animals she wanted and talking to Carline's brothers and sister.

When they finally got home - he was getting very used to calling Carline's apartment home now, Carline put Jenny to bed. He was going back to his room to sleep, but Carline stopped him with a hand to his chest.

"Do you want to watch a movie? I kind of didn't really *date* you tonight."

He sat under the blankets of Carline's makeshift bed, watching *Back to the Future*, while Carline curled up beside him in one of his sweaters and a giant mug of hot chocolate in her hands. She passes it up to him, he'd take a sip, and then she would. It wasn't very effective, but he really didn't mind, especially when she adjusted herself, so she sat pretty much in his lap. He kept thinking of his scars, though. He probably should tell her about them if they were going to date. It's only right.

"Hey, so, about my scars..."

"Yeah?" She put her mug down and shifted a little in his lap, looking more directly at him. Damn, she was *pretty*.

"I figured that since we're dating or whatever, I should tell you about my scars." He didn't want to do this now; it was too soon, it wasn't right.

"Maybe you should, Samuel, but are you ready to tell me? It's okay if you're not."

"Yeah, maybe I'm not. I'll tell you, but not now," he sighed, relieved that he could hide it from Carline for at least another day.

"Okay, and that's fine. I just hope you know that I like you, no matter what." She leaned forward and kissed him, hands running over his chest and upper arms before holding his face. He felt his arms wrap around her waist and pull her close to him, kissing her back when she squeaked at the sudden movement.

He woke up with Carline splayed on top of him, blankets haphazardly strewn everywhere on the couch and the floor. He

tried to move off the couch, but Carline quietly mumbled a *don't leave me, Samuel*, and wrapped her arms around as much of his chest as she could. As he laid there, eyes blinking open and closed slowly, he thought how Carline and Jenny were truly his home now.

Chapter Seventeen

Samuel was an incredibly loud snorer.

Carline was eagle-spread on his front, cheek pressed against his chest, ear right above his slowly beating heart, and eyes unable to close. Samuel was astoundingly warm; Carline noticed that all the blankets had been kicked off the floor and she felt no chill at all. Her dad would say it's the northern blood in her, as he consistently forgot that Carline would wear a jacket if the weather was anything colder than seventy-five degrees.

Carline drew lines on Samuel's chest, mapping the dips where his muscles were defined, tracing the scars on his arms, running her fingers through the thick hair on his chest. He barely even moved, just kept sleeping and snoring. It was comforting - just like how she used to hear her dad snore when she was up studying late at night. Like the nights before, she started taking care of Jenny.

Carline scooted up Samuel, ignoring his body's reactions to her squirming, and reached over to the couch-side table to grab her phone. It was six in the morning, which was surprising, because no birds were singing yet. She wasn't singing either, but maybe while Samuel was still sleeping, she could tell him about Jenny.

Carline cleared her throat; she hated her morning voice. It was too thick, too throaty, so deep. It didn't help that her throat felt like it kept closing up, as if she was about to cry.

“I used to have a boyfriend named Mason,” she whispered, her cheek pressed back against his chest, hearing that steady heartbeat keep drumming. “And I thought he was everything. Not everything I’ve ever wanted, but *everything*. He could do no wrong, because he looked perfect and seemed perfect and I was fifteen and thought I loved him.

“I was sixteen, and he started wanting more from me. If you were awake, I think you’d be able to guess what he wanted. I gave him a little, not a lot, but what I thought was enough. All he wanted was more. After a while, I wanted to leave him. But he didn’t want me to go, because he wanted to be better than someone. Better than me. He was hitting me and threatening my family and I wanted out. He didn’t let me go. So I gave him a little more of myself. I thought that would be enough.”

Her skin crawls just speaking about it.

“I was seventeen when he actually tried more. He tried holding me down to get what he wanted, and I guess trying to escape my older brother’s tickling helped because I got away. He screamed after me that I was worthless, that no one would want me. I thought about doing a lot of things to myself as I ran home, but I’m happy to say that I didn’t. I was walking up one of the hills on the way back to my house - there’s a big trash pile up there because that’s where the unwanted things go. I wanted to get rid of a necklace Mason gave me, and I did. I threw that necklace down onto some suitcase and then there was a tiny cry. I thought it was me.”

Should she be saying this? What if he wakes up and hears her?

“But it wasn’t me. It was a little baby in a suitcase, just left on the side of a hill. I didn’t know how long she was there. I didn’t know whom she belonged to. All I knew was that she was a little baby that was unwanted, like me. She had the most beautiful hair, just a few little curls of soft black against her skin. When I picked her up, she opened her eyes, and they were such a deep blue and I thought they could have mirrored the sky. I thought about how tragic and cruel it was that no one wanted such a beautiful and innocent baby that they would

leave her to die instead of considering adoption. I tried walking away, but when I found myself twenty feet away, she was in my arms.”

This story isn't one that many people know. It's better that way.

“I was eighteen when I adopted Jennica Antigone Lake. Jennica for the hill I found her on, and Antigone because it means ‘against birth.’ Because she's not really mine. Because I'm not really hers. But I am hers and she is mine. You know what I mean. My family was supportive of my decision. They didn't really understand it at first. I mean, I was the perfect one with the great grades and I was going places. I don't know how to be a mother; I'm barely an adult. All I seem to know is how to look good on paper and make bad decisions, but I was going to do something great. Why would I ruin it with a child that wasn't even mine?”

The realization of saying all of these things aloud make her stop and wonder how different that night could have played out if she didn't find herself along the hill on that particular night?

“It's because she's worth it.”

Samuel woke up when Carline started playing with his muscles. He thought she heard him wince when he became uncomfortably hard as she scooted up and over him. He thought she noticed when he stopped snoring because she just started talking.

He was not expecting this story to come out of Carline's mouth.

He didn't know why she didn't tell him when she knew he was awake. Did she think he'd judge her? Well, of course she'd think that. But he thought she was incredibly brave. And he knew he loved her for it.

He stayed still, though. She kept tracing his chest, humming a little, occasionally kissing his scars. It tickled, he thought, the way she put those feather-light kisses on him, the way her hair followed just a few inches behind, the way her eyelashes would flicker against him when she blinked.

She stopped her inspection of him, and pushed herself off him, grabbing a blanket and going over to the kitchen sink to start making coffee and what smelled like pancakes. He liked the way her hair swayed when she moved, the tiny curls at the ends bouncing up and down. He liked the way she wrinkled her brow as she tried to read whatever was written on a flashcard. He liked her.

“My brother burned me when I was only a little older than Jenny.”

Carline jumped and faced him, ignoring the egg she just dropped on the floor.

“You’re awake?”

“Evidently,” Samuel said as he swung off the couch and stood behind Carline, wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on hers. He had to bend down a lot in order to do it, but Carline leaned into him, inviting him closer to him, so he really didn’t mind *that* much.

“I’m sorry your brother did that to you,” Carline murmured as she stroked her thumb over his hand. “You want me to kill him for you? I do know how to use a gun.”

“Sorry, you can’t; he’s dead. But why on earth would you want to do that for me?”

“Because you’re my boyfriend and no one’s allowed to hurt you.” Carline kept flipping the pancakes and frying the eggs as if what she said was not the one thing he’s been waiting to hear since he first knew her name.

He did not say anything, but merely turned Carline towards him and kissed her, ignoring her excuse that they both had morning breath.

Chapter Eighteen

Lisa would not stop pestering him about his efforts to “seduce” Carline. He hadn’t yet told her they were dating, and it was almost closing time.

“So have you tried the whole flowers thing? Or chocolates, she probably loves chocolates,” Lisa kept rambling as Samuel cleaned down his station. “Oh, get her a book! Draw her. Yeah, do that. When you get married and have babies, name your firstborn girl after me. And let me design Carline’s wedding dress, okay?”

“Sure, whatever you want, sister,” Samuel rolled his eyes. “I want you to finish up tonight, okay? Don’t forget to lock up, or else I’ll have to fire you.”

Lisa gasped. “Really? You trust *me* to do that? Something must be up at home. Tell me everything right now.”

Samuel shook his head, inwardly grinning. He liked baiting Lisa. Currently, she was writhing on the floor, or close enough to it, not trying hard enough to stay still. He left her there, moaning and groaning as she tried to figure out what was going on between himself and Carline. Before he drove away, he texted Lisa: “I’m Carline’s *boyfriend*.”

Lisa’s shriek of excitement could be heard from all the way inside the building, and all the way home, she spammed him with date ideas, wedding rings, and baby names all starting with Lisa and ending in Warren.

Samuel unlocked the apartment door and found Jenny and Athena watching a cartoon while Carline typed away at her computer, hardly glancing at him when he sat down next to her. She scooted over to him just the same, and he pretended to yawn as he stretched his arm over and around Carline, ignoring her, rolling her eyes and smirking.

He glanced at the screen. On one side there was a block of Latin and on the other was a translation. Carline quickly switched to another screen, opening a tab to check a word, but not before he noticed the picture she set as the background. It was a picture of himself and Jenny, asleep on the couch, Jenny's thumb in her mouth and Samuel had his arm protectively wrapped around Jenny. Athena was collapsed on his feet. He didn't know when Carline had taken it and even though he felt a little vulnerable because of that, he still actually liked the picture.

They all stayed there on the couch for an hour, except for when Carline told Samuel to first preheat the oven and second go to his room and find one of Carline's Latin textbooks. It was one of the most relaxing evenings he'd had.

It was even better when he convinced Carline to come into his room, *technically hers*, and sleep with him throughout the night, even when a storm came along and both Jenny and Athena jumped into bed.

Carline's mind kept running through the information Samuel had given her that morning. His own *brother* burned him. His own brother had burned him when he was barely older than Jenny. It made her sick to imagine. She couldn't imagine any of her brothers doing that to her, much less Carline burning one of her siblings.

But he had told her at least part of what happened. She told Eric that she'd tell Samuel. She wasn't going to go back on a promise. She opened her mouth to tell Samuel that *Jenny wasn't hers* when her daughter burst through the door, Athena on her heels.

"Mommy, Daddy, can I sleep in here tonight? I don't like the storm."

Carline got out of bed and picked Jenny up, glancing at her *boyfriend* as if asking if it was okay. He nodded and Carline placed Jenny on the bed, watching her four-year-old crawl over to Samuel before picking up Athena and plopping her at the end of the bed. She distantly heard Jenny asking Samuel to kiss her on the forehead and heard Jenny's giggle when he gave her a loud peck. Carline squirmed back under the covers, kissing Jenny on the cheek before kissing Samuel, much to Jenny's delight. It was quiet for a while, and Carline had almost fallen asleep when the silence was broken by another clash of thunder, only this time, the thunder wasn't from the storm.

"When am I getting a baby?" Jenny asked. "I want a baby brother or sister. I want its name to be Stegosaurus."

"How about when you have your own baby? You name it Stegosaurus?" Carline deflected. "Now go to sleep. We're going Halloween costume shopping tomorrow. Maybe Daddy will even come along."

Jenny quickly fell asleep and was unaware of Samuel and Carline playing footsie under the covers, the two of them getting more tangled up in another as they battled, giggling softly before they finally slumbered.

Chapter Nineteen

Jenny ran around him in a velociraptor costume, while Carline stood looking in the mirror and smoothed her hair down over her Dorothy costume. Samuel remembered the first time he watched *The Wizard of Oz*. It was several years ago, when he and Eleanor were sick one Halloween night and while Calvin went to some party with his high school friends, his mother put on the movie for them. In truth, he wasn't really sick; he just remembered the teasing his classmates spewed about how it wasn't fair that Samuel's face was scary all the time. At ten years old, he expected to dislike the movie. Besides, he had wanted to watch *Ghostbusters*, but Eleanor at nine had insisted it was too scary, even if it was Halloween.

He was captivated by the movie anyway, and as he laughed at the special effects and hugged Eleanor when she got frightened by the monkeys, he forgot all about Calvin and what would eventually happen when his older brother got home. Even though his face ended up bleeding and bruised at the end of the night, he was still proud of himself for at least trying to melt Calvin. Too bad life wasn't like the movies; otherwise, he'd be throwing water on everyone.

Samuel was pulled out of one of his more happy memories by Carline practically skipping over to him, the skirt bouncing perhaps a bit too high for this all-holiday store. She stopped right in front of where he was sitting, twirling a little for him. He had to admit; he did like the view.

“What do you think? I'm debating between this one and the Black Widow.”

Samuel smirked, “Well, it’s not entirely accurate to the movie; I’m pretty sure Dorothy didn’t have a corset accentuating her assets.”

“Yeah, I know,” Carline sighed. “There’s not really much of anything. I think we waited too long to get costumes. Halloween’s only two weeks away!” She sat on his lap, hands folded on her own. “But what are you going to wear?”

“I’m not wearing anything, Carline. That’s not what I do.”

“Why not? It’s fun! And I know for a fact that Jenny would love if you dressed up,” Carline pouted, and Samuel felt a sudden desire to kiss her. “Please?”

“Carline, nothing’s going to fit me - “

“I will personally make you a costume. I was going to do that with mine, anyway. And I already have costumes in mind.”

Samuel felt his glare reflected in Carline’s own gaze. It was clear that she was not going to let him not wear a costume, so he moved his hand slightly to concede defeat. She kissed him on the cheek, pulling out her phone.

“So, I was thinking that you and I could be these two characters from a TV show. His father scarred him as a young child, and he had to regain his father’s approval. It’s too bad that your scar is - oh my God, Samuel, I am so sorry,” she turned to look at him, distress clearly written on her face. “That was so insensitive of me. God, this entire costume and my horrible attempt of referencing an episode ... clearly I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.” Carline pulled away from him a little, but he grabbed her arm and brought her close, wrapping his arms around her.

“No, you weren’t really thinking about this,” he gestured to his scars, “and you’ll need to work on that.” Samuel took his finger and moved her face towards his. “But you were still thinking of me, and wanting to do something with me, and wanting to share something with me. And that’s the nicest way someone has ever screwed up in consideration with my face. I may have no idea what you’re talking about, but clearly this

character makes you think of me, so why don't we go home and watch whatever this thing is, okay?"

"Okay. Don't you dare forgive me, though. I'm still going to be sorry, because you're very important to me." She kissed him softly and paid for Jenny's costume. Though Samuel did feel a tiny ache for how Carline stuck her foot in her mouth, he could not help but think that maybe he was falling in love with her.

The three of them spent the weekend watching all twenty-two hours of the show. Jenny fell asleep during most of it, mumbling in her toddler talk that she had seen it before, and since there were no dinosaurs in it, there was really no point watching. Carline spent most of her time alternating between watching the show, sewing up their costumes, and watching Samuel's reactions to a TV show.

He understood why Carline thought of him. He recognized his own attitude in the character on screen, and the physical appearance was much the same. During one of the bathroom breaks, Samuel called his brother to ask how he was doing. Samuel apologized for some things he had said in the past, and Samuel would swear later on that his brother had actually quoted the show.

He nudged Carline, and he kissed her when she blushed. He did not even mind when Carline forced him to put on his costume and saw that it showed more than enough of his chest. When he asked why exactly she had done that, she only smirked and replied that she absolutely had to show off his assets.

He spent that night dreaming that he found his sister and mother.

Carline woke up with Samuel practically sprawled on top of her. This had been happening almost every night since she had moved back into her room three weeks ago. The only

problem was, her bed was barely enough to hold Samuel, and if Jenny joined in sometimes, there was hardly any space. There was no point even trying to shove Samuel off or push him away. He'd just pull her closer subconsciously, and while she appreciated the gesture, she didn't want to suffocate from love.

That being said, she was not going to tolerate his gorgeously muscled arm splayed on her face. She'd learned from experimenting that the best way to wake Samuel was to run her fingers up and down his sides. She scooted closer to him, and while he was in the process of bringing her closer to him, she tickled his side.

"Carline!" Samuel shrieked. Carline snickered; it was truly amazing how high his voice got in the morning *and* when he was caught unaware by her teasing.

"Good morning to you as well," she tapped him on the nose. "Stop trying to kill me in your sleep, you big lug. Stick to your side of the bed."

"The whole bed is practically on my side of the bed, babe," Samuel winked.

"Did you seriously just call me babe? And wink?" Carline pressed the back of her hand to Samuel's forehead, wrinkling hers in mock concern. "Are you sure you're not sick?"

"Yes, my darling angel of Mason's eternal hell, I am perfectly okay."

"Good, now go back to sleep and stay on your side of the bed," Carline started to say as she rose out of bed, but Samuel pulled her back in, making her face him.

"Carline, I have an idea, so hear me out." Carline did not trust what he was about to say next, but she nodded anyway. "Let's just buy a new bed together. We can take a day off from school and work and take Jenny on a day trip to that IKEA a few towns over. We'll find a bed we like, and struggle with putting it together, and we'll yell at how incompetent the other is, but at the end of the day we watch a movie and make out. We can even call it a *date*."

“No. We’re not buying a bed together.”

“Why not? You—we—need a new one. This one barely fits me. Besides, it’d be a good birthday present.” Samuel tried leaning in for a kiss, but Carline nearly shoved her hand into his face.

“Your birthday’s coming up? When?” How did she not know her own boyfriend’s birthday? “How old are you turning, exactly?”

“Yes; it’s actually Halloween; and I’m turning thirty-five.”

Thirty-five. She wasn’t even twenty-two yet. Her birthday wasn’t even close, which meant that Samuel was like thirteen and a half years older than her. He was getting out of middle school when she was born. Was he really even aware of how old she was? Maybe he just added a few years because of Jenny, even though he definitely knew how old she was when she found Jenny and how old Jenny is now. Now he wanted to buy a bed with her. Carline startled, nearly leaping out of bed, throwing on her bathrobe. She’d slept in the same bed as a man who was about to turn thirty-five in less than two weeks, and admittedly, she did know in the back of her mind how old he was, it just didn’t *sink in* until now. She trusted Samuel. She just didn’t know if her family would be okay with this ... whatever this was.

She was aware of Samuel’s concern, because she heard him get out of the bed and shrug on some pants before coming to stand behind her. She heard the awkward shifting feet and throat clearing.

“Carline, are you okay? We don’t have to get a bed.”

She turned to face him, meeting his eyes before dropping them down to stare at the floor.

“I’m fine, really, I am. It’s just ... I feel almost like we’re moving too fast, you know? I mean, you know how absolutely horrible my relationships have been, and I don’t mean to say that I think you’re like that! I’m just trying to protect myself from the inevitability.” Carline wrung her hands, a nervous habit she had picked up from her time with Mason.

Samuel frowned. “What inevitability?”

Carline felt the tears leak, “You know, the one where we’ll be together for like eight months, and throughout that you’ll get tired of me and Jenny, so our relationship will get worse and worse, until finally you’re bored with me and you’ll just leave! That inevitability.”

“First of all,” Samuel said, pulling her into his arms, “no, that won’t happen. Second of all, the real inevitability is that you’ll leave me for some younger, handsomer man in three months. Third of all, I really don’t understand how this all relates to buying a bed, but we’re doing it because it’s a necessity, okay?”

“It’s just in my mind, buying a bed is a big step,” Carline mumbled into his chest, tickled by the hair growing there. “It just makes this whole thing real. I don’t mind it being real, but I’m just Carline. I’m not anyone special.”

Samuel shook his head, his hair smacking into her face as he picked her up. Carline automatically wrapped her legs around his waist, wondering where he was going, where exactly he was taking her with this conversation as they walked into the living room. “Carline,” he started to say as he sat on the couch, her legs still wrapped around him, “you’re incredibly special to me, and Jenny, and your family, and your friends, and probably a ton of other people I don’t know. But damn it all, you’re special without us thinking you are. You’re not *just* Carline; you are simply Carline, and that includes a shit-ton more than just being a Lake, ex-girlfriend of Mason, and has a child. It includes having a family that loves you way more than I’ve seen any family love their kid, surviving a fucking abusive boyfriend for years, and putting a lot of your life on hold to take care of a baby that isn’t even yours. You’re selfless and strong and smart and beautiful. And I know what I’ll say next might freak you out a bit, so I can stop now.”

“No, keep going,” she said, smiling a little. “You’ve already said it in your sleep when you pull me closer.”

“Really? Damn it,” Samuel groaned, leaning his head back over the couch, though Carline saw him grin at her giggles.

“Fuck, I think I love you, Carline.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think I love you, too.”

Samuel’s reaction brought her back to high school, how the crowd would cheer as Teddy and sometimes Miles would score touchdowns during those football games. He picked her up and spun her around in circles, cheering the whole time. Once, he stopped spinning her around to kiss her, and the two of them did not notice when Jenny came out, bleary-eyed and hardly moving as she tried cheering too.

Samuel could not believe that Carline was starting to have those feelings for him. It was like he was in a dream, one where everything was coming up roses. Maybe he was dreaming up something really elaborate after Calvin had burned him. If so, he’d really rather not wake up. He even liked building the bed together with Carline, no matter how horrendously frustrating it was, because in the end, the three of them just ate Chinese food together, and watched some Disney movie, and the two of them slept in that bed.

Samuel could not deny that he deserved this happiness when Carline was the one to pull him close that night, murmuring that she loved him.

Chapter Twenty

Carline had spent all of Halloween Eve not sleeping. She had been studying for one of Eric's notorious multiple-choice tests (which she'd never taken before), desperately trying not to be swayed by Samuel and Jenny's pleas to put down the books and watch Halloween movies with them. Carline had felt her resolve cracking when Samuel tried his seduction techniques, most of which included too vague sexual innuendos and horrifying sexy dance moves, which mainly just involved moving his hips in circles and flexing his arms. She almost accepted his admittedly enticing offer, but then she remembered what Max said to her when she was young and he was younger still. She had been crying over some middle school test grade when he strolled up to her, patted her head, and said, "*There's no crying in baseball,*" before just leaving her confused as to what had just happened.

Thinking about it now, she was sure that was a line from a movie and didn't even apply to any situation she would ever be in, but it helped to just scream it at Samuel in a panic, because it represented just how insane this test made her feel. She almost felt bad for him, but when he came back with a plate of orange cakes, she felt that her mini breakdown was entirely justified.

Carline picked up the first orange cake, but soon noticed there was a note stuck to the bottom of it. It read:

*Eric is predictable: he uses all four letters
about the same amount, but he likes the letter B*

most and C the least. So out of 60 questions, expect something along the lines of A: 15, B: 18, C: 12, D: 15. Not exactly, but close enough to that sort of pattern. He also likes hiding the answers to some problems in other questions, if that makes sense. I've never told him I know that, so let's keep that on the down low.

You've studied a lot, and you're going to be fine no matter what. Come on out and watch a movie with us when you're done, okay?

Love you.

P.S. That line's from *A League of Their Own*. Max keeps spamming me with it.

Carline smiled, nibbling on the cake. At least she knew how to tackle the test if she accidentally forgot everything. Besides, she'd already gone through the chapters three times; she could take a break. Carline tossed the book onto the bed, shrugged on one of Samuel's jackets, and picked up the plate of orange cakes before making her way over to the couch. Jenny was staring up at the TV, completely ignoring Samuel and Carline as she watched *Monsters, Inc.*, dinosaurs forgotten next to her. Samuel was sketching in his notebook, his attention focused on the sketches, as he drank his beer. Carline smirked, looking at the braids in his hair, before the smile fell as she saw what Samuel was sketching.

It was Jenny, but at the same time, it *wasn't*. Sure, the blue eyes and the black hair were the same, but the blue wasn't Jenny's blue but her own. Even the black wasn't the same shade as Jenny's, but was Samuel's black. This not-Jenny had Carline's nose and forehead, but the cheekbones were Samuel's. Carline recognized the cheeks - Samuel showed her a baby picture of himself, and his cheeks were incredibly chubby. Even the ears were Carline's.

“What’s that?” she distantly heard herself say. Her voice did not sound like her own. There was some vague recognition that the man sitting on her couch was Samuel, but even he did not seem like himself.

His response was like he was talking to her with her head underwater. “I was just wondering what Jenny would look like if,” his voice dropped to a whisper and she did not hear it, but she knew what was said, “we were her parents.”

“That’s not Jenny. There’s no Jenny left in there.” Carline walked to the kitchen, only a few paces away, putting down the orange cakes. She did not want them anymore. She did walk back to the couch, where the not-Samuel was sitting, working on a different sketch.

“So, are you done with studying for the night?” Samuel rested his head on hers, and she accepted it because Samuel was trying to be nice to her. And truth be told, she liked him.

“Yeah, but I’m not emotionally ready for this test. Thank you for the help, though.” She felt him kiss her head, murmuring a *you’re welcome* before she heard the scratching of a pencil on paper. “You’re turning thirty-five tomorrow. Is it okay if I invite a few people over tomorrow night after we take Jenny out to get candy?”

She heard Samuel sigh. “Who were you thinking of inviting?”

“Eric and Nadia, Liam and Di, Shawn and Dahlia, and Lisa ... I need to set someone up with Lisa. It’s small, I promise.”

“None of your college friends?”

“I don’t really have any friends in college, Samuel. And besides, it’s your birthday.”

“I hope you didn’t get me a gift. We got a bed; that’s enough.” Samuel snaked an arm around her, and she leaned into him.

“A gift for the three of us. It doesn’t even count as a gift just for you. Technically, it’s from my parents.”

“I suppose I’ll accept it. What category is it?” Carline rolled her eyes.

“I’m not going to give you clues so you know what it is. Sam’s ruined every single one of his surprises that way ... Sam told you to do that, huh?” She felt Samuel’s grin and heard a murmur of admission. He shifted a little next to her and pulled out his phone.

It turned out that all her siblings were in a group chat with Samuel. Carline felt a little insulted that she wasn’t in the group, but she could just chew out her family in a month or so if she needed to. She asked Samuel if she could read the conversations and he hesitated, but he handed the phone over anyway.

if you’ve screwed my sister already, I’ll kill you

Carline whispered, “Oh my god,” and kept reading.

I’m saying nothing about that

first of all, Rhetta what the hell. now that image is in my mind

Also Samuel pm me about Lisa she sounds cool

how’re Jenny and Carline doing?

yeah how’s my favorite niece doing?

*only niece

Please tell me she’s still into dinosaurs or I’m screwed for her birthday present

when’s her birthday again please forgive me

Jenny and Carline are doing well they miss you all

and Jenny still loves dinos

i have no idea when her birthday is

shit. i should figure that out

Carline found Jenny October 31st

“You didn’t tell me our birthdays were the same, Carline.” Samuel played with her hair. He always seemed fascinated by it.

“We celebrate her adoption day - May 19th - same as mine,” she said, holding Samuel’s free hand. She looked down at it; it was calloused and cruel looking, scars crossing back and forth in spiderweb silver veins. It was giant and tanned and it was all his hand. Despite the calluses, it was soft and warm. Always gentle with her and Jenny. She’d never tell him, *but she’d tell Eric*, but he was a big puppy dog and coming home to him was a blessing and a curse because she loved him - she *loved* him!

Carline decided this last night; after they watched TV and did a little more than what her mother would consider appropriate and she stayed in his arms—his strong, warm arms, Carline decided that she loved the way he snored and kept her safe. She loved the way he stretched throughout the day, and she loved the glimpse of his stomach when his shirt got higher than normal. She loved the way he played with her hair and she loved the way he played with Jenny’s hair. Most of all, she loved the little things he did with Jenny. The day he painted dinosaurs on Jenny’s walls, laughing at how excited Jenny was, she felt that all too familiar twinge in her heart. That fall from like to love.

What made her feel safe was that it was a different feeling than the one she had with Mason. It was a fairytale romance with Mason - until it wasn’t. That was danger and heartache and fear. Those were the fears she still had at night; those fears manifested before she would stand in Jenny’s room and make sure her daughter was still there, safe and sound.

Carline looked over at Samuel, instantly noticing he was staring at her with his stone grey eyes, except there was

warmth and shelter exposed on the surface. Samuel was bad at lying to her, and she saw the love in him, even if he'd never admit it out loud.

She kissed him and fell asleep in his arms. Her dreams were filled with the future, of growing up and bad decisions, of quiet nights and great beginnings.

Chapter Twenty-One

Halloween was okay for once. Samuel didn't mind that he had to take Jenny out trick-or-treating with Carline. He didn't mind that he had to get dressed up, because the funny thing was, people weren't afraid of him that night. He got complimented on his face for once, as if it wasn't an actual horrific burn. He didn't even care that Carline was making such a big deal about his birthday. At least it proved to him that she really did like him.

Currently, Jenny was on the floor of the living area, lounging against Athena's back, counting her candy and trading it with a distracted Lisa, who had dressed up as some sort of undead red fire woman drenched in blood, complete with fangs and two inch fingernails. Lisa called it an "artistic representation" of her step-mother.

The rest of the adults were sitting on the floor or the couches and chairs, all gathered around the table where there was even more candy and wine and whiskey. Jenny's juice box sat at the edge of the table. Cards were littered in one messy pile as everyone, except for Jenny, was playing B.S.

Dionne slammed her cards on the table, making the drinks shake. "I believe that would be four queens."

"Bullshit!" Liam yelled, ignoring the slap that Di gave him to reprimand him on his language and also show her displeasure of taking the entire twenty card pile.

Lisa was next, randomly throwing down one card as she traded with Jenny. "One king," she mentioned in passing,

ignoring the laughter of everyone as her card landed face up to show one six. Shawn flicked the card back at Lisa as Dahlia put down three aces, Samuel two twos, and Liam one hidden eight (which he managed to get away with - no one really knew when he was lying.).

As everyone was laughing at whatever joke Shawn and Liam had just made, Samuel saw Carline slip her cards onto the pile and quietly say “Five fours,” before motioning to Eric that it was his turn. It was such a ballsy move that Samuel didn’t even call her out on it, and as Eric put down his one five, Carline leaped up and shouted “Peanut butter, bitches! I won!”

Carline had lost every single game of B.S. because she couldn’t keep a straight face.

Samuel tugged on her hand, and she turned to him with a smile. “Hey, do you mind covering for me? I’m going to go to the bathroom.” Carline nodded, kissing him when he reached his full height, before sitting in his spot.

When Samuel reached the bathroom, he flicked the lights on, looking at himself, but it wasn’t his face in the mirror. He kept staring at himself as he splashed his face with water.

To be completely honest, he was amazed that these people actually liked him. Sure, Eric was stuck with him, but no one else had to like him. Nadia only liked him because Eric was his best friend. Carline probably only liked him for the same reason. No. He couldn’t think those thoughts. People liked him. He had to remember that. He’s not his brother. His brother is dead and is just a shadow now.

“You have no hold on me anymore.” Samuel blinked, and his brother was gone. He would be okay. He blinked once more, dried his face, and walked out.

Hours passed before everyone left. The two of them sat outside on the park bench in front of Carline’s apartment, not talking, but simply sitting in silence. Lisa broke it when she turned and opened her purse and pulled out a large piece of paper, scrolled up with a yellow ribbon wrapped around it.

“I know you said no gifts, but I made you one, anyway. It’s not really much, but I wanted to give you something.” She handed it over to Samuel, his hand absolutely dwarfing hers. He took the ribbon off, shoving it in his pocket before opening the piece of paper.

It was a drawing of himself and Carline and Jenny and Lisa, Eric and Nadia, Liam and Di, and Dahlia and Shawn. Athena was there too, sitting in front of Jenny and Carline. All of them were made of puzzle pieces, and there were parts of their bodies missing, blacked out in the shapes of those pieces. Everyone held puzzle pieces in their hands, and they melted into one another.

“Thank you, Lis, but really, you didn’t need to do this.”

“I did anyway.” Lisa turned to look at him. “I did this because you are my family now. You and Carline and Jenny and everyone else is the family I have chosen for myself. I mean, I know my dad loves me, but he’s moved on. He hasn’t gone to a single one of my art shows since I got into high school. You’re always there. Mom’s absent, and Gina has some agenda that I fit into, but I’m really just an expendable part of her life. My dad’s friend Lucas is the only other person who actually pays attention to me and cares about me. But you and Carline, and Jenny have given me your home, your love, and a place in your family. I chose you as my big brother for a reason and that’s because, despite your hard exterior, you actually give a fuck about the broken people in your life. And we’re all broken, Samuel. We’re all missing pieces, even Carline, even Jenny, even Di, Liam, Eric, Nadia, Dahlia, Shawn, and especially you. Our misfortunes may not all add up to your tragedies, but we’re all falling apart; we might as well fall apart together. So don’t tell me that I didn’t have to do this when you still dream about your brother and sister during the daytime.”

Samuel just pulled Lisa to him and hugged her as she cried into his chest.

Carline was reading in bed when Samuel came back to their bedroom. He shucked off his clothes, leaving him in his boxers before he slid under the covers. Carline scooted over to him and he lifted his arm, draping it over her shoulders. She set aside her book, opened her bedside table's drawer, and pulled out an envelope. She wordlessly handed it to him, and he opened it with trepidation.

Inside were three plane tickets to somewhere up North. Looking at Carline's face confirmed that they were definitely tickets to her family's ranch, for what appeared to be during Thanksgiving weekend.

"I hope you don't mind my parents doing this, but I haven't seen them since last Thanksgiving, and they do really want to meet you."

"Carline, I really can't accept charity - "

"It's not charity; it's a gift. It's a gift for your birthday, a gift for Jenny's finding, and a gift for me for putting up with the two of you," Carline said firmly, brushing her fingers through her hair and shaking it loose. "Now come on, I have another birthday surprise for you," she said, more softly this time, pulling something else out of the drawer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next few weeks passed quickly for the three of them. Jenny had Thanksgiving themed projects at daycare, Carline was picking up extra shifts at Di's restaurant, and Samuel was tattooing as usual. Carline was worried about Samuel; he had barely said anything about meeting her family, and she had pestered him about it plenty of times. Was it all too much for him? Or was something else going on with him?

She remembered when Mason isolated himself from her - that was dangerous and led to unpredictable behavior. Usually, she ended up beaten. And she hoped that Samuel wouldn't do that. *No*, she admonished herself, *Samuel would never do that. He's just nervous.*

And she knew Samuel would never do that because there he was behind her, wrapping his arms around her and leaning his chin on her head as she made their morning coffee. He was always there for her and Jenny and she loved that about him.

"Have you packed your bags?" he asked, suddenly. They were leaving that morning.

"All ten of them," she started to say.

"*Ten?* Good god, woman, are you packing for an army? It's only a weekend..."

She poked him in the side, making him jump a little at the unexpected touch. "I'm kidding. I don't even own enough stuff to pack in three suitcases. I put everything in your suitcase. We're all good to go when you are," Carline said as

she poured Samuel's coffee into a mug that said *bad dog* on the side.

Samuel grumbled, "Give me a few minutes to wake up and then we can go head to the airport. Why don't you get Jenny ready and the suitcase in the trunk of my car and we'll leave in ten minutes?"

"Okay, mister," Carline replied, not even minding how grumpy Samuel was in the morning. She was going back home and she would get to show Samuel off. Sure, her family had already been talking to him through the text, but they didn't know him like she did.

Right after Carline put the suitcase and other carry-on bags in the car, Jenny ran out of her room, half dressed, her shoes in her hands, hair pulled into at least five different ponytails, and launched herself into Carline's waiting arms. Carline started making Jenny more presentable by distracting her daughter with food, while Samuel just laughed as he drank his coffee at the table.

"Mommy, when are we leaving?" Jenny asked, mouth full of muffin crumbs.

"Soon, baby, in just a few minutes. Are your dinosaurs all packed up?" Carline responded, knowing that everything was almost all ready to go. Jenny nodded, and Samuel scooted his chair back from the table, rinsed his coffee mug, and shrugged on his jacket. "Go get them, Jenny, we're going!" Carline squealed.

Carline looked out the airplane's window, and as they neared the airport, she could see her family's ranch.

"Look!" she nudged Samuel. Jenny was sleeping in between the two of them. "That's where I grew up."

"It's pretty, Carline, just like you," he murmured, just before he kissed her quickly and softly, leaving an ache that made her need more. Too bad they couldn't do anything about

it. Apparently, everyone was visiting, and while Samuel would be in the same room as her, so would Jenny.

“Thank you,” she whispered back.

The landing wasn't so bad, and she made Samuel carry all the luggage while she carried Jenny. It wasn't long when Teddy came to pick them up.

“Sammy! Over here!” Teddy called from outside the tiny airport.

“Is he talking to you or ... ?” Samuel asked, trailing off at the thought of Sammy being a nickname for himself.

“It's an old nickname that he's using to annoy me. Just watch,” she smirked, readjusting her grip on Jenny, before yelling. “Yo, sweetcheeks! Wanna bang?”

“That was *one time, Carline. Oh my god!* And you dared me to say that!”

“I win.” Carline grinned under the sound of Samuel's hysterical laughing. This would be a good weekend.

She was home. Sure, Samuel and Jenny and everyone else back in her small college town were home, but this was home. She was always happy here. She was surrounded by her family, and teasing abounded. Max wouldn't stop pestering Samuel about Lisa. Sam wouldn't stop talking about the merits of tattoos in identifying gang members and asking if Samuel had ever tattooed a gang member before? Miles and Teddy were busy playing video games with Samuel, the three of them trying to outdo the other in Halo. Her parents were incredibly interested in the fact that Samuel had worked at the Pentagon, and Carline knew that they approved of him when Clarissa caught Carline's attention and made an incredibly obvious thumbs up motion.

Only Rhetta wasn't herself. She was playing with Jenny and participating in conversations, but she didn't really talk to Samuel. *It's only the first night. Maybe Samuel scares her?*

Carline seriously doubted that. It took a lot to actually scare Rhetta; Carline knew from experience.

Rhetta's voice cut through her thoughts. "Samuel, can I talk to you? Outside?"

"Sure," Samuel grunted. "Max, you want to cover for me?" he asked. Max immediately sprinted to take Samuel's place, and as Samuel passed by Carline, he bent down to her level and kissed the top of her forehead. He was gone, and Carline was in the unsettling dark.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Samuel was unsure about following Rhetta. She was the hellion, and sometimes his nights with Carline were filled with stories of her. Those were the nights when Carline recalled times that the two of them hadn't gotten along. From what Samuel could tell, it was only recently that Rhetta and Carline actually started to really talk to one another. Samuel got home early one day and walked in on Carline and Rhetta talking on the phone. He was sure they were talking about him, because he heard Carline say something along the lines of "Damn it, Rhetta, I love him" before Carline noticed him, hung up on Rhetta, and ran over to jump in his waiting arms and kiss him.

Still, he followed her anyway, noticing that he towered over her small frame. She led him outside to the great beyond that was the Lake home. A vast and open range stood before him, and giant mountains towered over everything in the distance. He saw horses galloping across the range and a river flowed to the left. On the right was a giant forest, the Lake forest, green and thick with trees. But Rhetta Lake stood in front of him, looking at him with a glare. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest as she led him far away from the house, but still in sight of everything around. Samuel assumed it was so that she could see anyone coming and make sure no one could sneak up on them.

She sat. So did Samuel. She sighed, and so did he. Rhetta scowled at him, and Samuel just grinned back at her. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

“Don’t you dare hurt my sister. If you do, I will end you.” Rhetta said, baring her teeth at him, and Samuel didn’t feel threatened by this girl, who was no more than five feet tall.

“Like you could take me down. *Ow!* What the fuck?” Rhetta had kicked him in the shin and elbowed him in the arm.

“I can definitely take your lumbering ass down, but that’s not even the point. Don’t you hurt Carline and don’t you hurt Jenny.”

Samuel glowered. “I’m not *going* to hurt them. I’m not my *brother*. I’m not going to hurt them like my brother hurt my sister, okay? I’m not the one they have to look out for. I’m going to protect them, because I love them.”

Rhetta just laughed. And laughed. And wouldn’t stop laughing. Samuel was confused. Wasn’t ... didn’t she bring him out here to fight him? To make sure that his love for Carline and Jenny was true? To threaten him? Samuel didn’t think that it was so that she could just laugh at him.

“Oh, my god you have it bad. And for Carline! She’d never even look at you in high school. To be honest, it’s a wonder she’s even talking to you now, much less screwing you. This is just...” Rhetta stopped, looking aghast. “This is not good. She’s probably going to marry the shit out of you.” She screamed, falling back on the grass. “I’ll be related to you. Be horrible to her, Samuel! Break up with her. I couldn’t bear it if I had to know you for the rest of my life.”

“You think she’ll marry me?” Samuel felt a smile grow on his face, even though it pulled the scars tight. He didn’t think marrying Carline would be that bad, especially if Jenny was part of the package. And the rest of the Lakes weren’t horrible either; in fact, they already treated him like family. Except for Rhetta, but, Samuel thought, if she was the worst part about being a Lake, then he didn’t really care that much at all.

“Yeah. Sadly, I think she will. Just never visit me, okay? I can’t take all this,” gesturing wildly to Samuel in general. She pulled a face like she just smelled something horrible.

“Likewise,” Samuel flipped her off, matching Rhetta’s own grin before they picked themselves both up and strolled back to the house. Samuel shoved Rhetta in the river when she told him not to get Carline pregnant before marriage, or as she said, “Keep her pure, Sir Samuel.”

Ned called him over next, and this conversation he was infinitely more terrified of. Sure, nothing Joe said about staying away from his daughter would stop Samuel from dating Carline, but he still wanted to at least have the man’s approval. And maybe some small part of Samuel wanted a good relationship with Joe, just in case Carline really did want to marry the shit out of Samuel. Because he sure as fuck wanted to -

“So Samuel, what are your opinions on Harry Potter?”

They talked about Harry Potter until dawn. *I think that’s a good thing*, Samuel thought, though he was somewhat concerned with the fact that his hopeful future-mother-in-law was a Slytherin.

It was quiet on Saturday morning. Somehow, Jenny left her bed and managed to squeeze in the little space left on Carline’s bed, which was even smaller than the one they had back home. Samuel could just barely make out what Carline’s pink clock read, but it seemed like it was around ten in the morning. Carline was at her desk, typing at her computer. He figured it was work for one of her classes, probably Bailey’s. He liked that she was wearing his sweatshirt.

“Hey,” she whispered. She probably heard him wake up, or maybe it was the lack of soft snoring that alerted her.

“Hi,” he whispered back, trying not to wake Jenny or move too much in a way that would wake her up. He picked up one of the books from Carline’s bedside table.

“Hello.” he could practically hear Carline’s smile. He quickly glanced at the book: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

“Let me guess, Gilderoy Lockhart fan?” Samuel could tell that Carline’s family was full of what Eric called *fantasci nerds*. All around the house were signs of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Battlestar Galactica, Star Trek and Star Wars (even though Samuel quickly found out that the house was very divided on which was better. Rhetta, Teddy, Max, and Clarissa were on the Star Wars side, and Joe, Sam, Miles, and Carline were apparently die hard Trekkies. He happened to enjoy both, to the slight satisfaction of both parties). Apparently, Clarissa had started reading both Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings to her children since Teddy and Miles were five.

But Carline brought him back to the present with a “No, I was a Tom Riddle fan, actually. I loved to hate him,” before she returned back to her work. “Mom should be making pancakes and waffles right now. Just don’t go out of the room until she calls you; otherwise, you’re on cooking *and* cleanup duty. Also, it’d just be too many cooks in the kitchen. She’s very ... particular about how things should be done.”

“I like your mother though,” Samuel started to say, but Carline looked over at him, her face in apparent confusion.

“Really? Most people think she’s too abrasive. They call her a bitch sometimes.” Those people have it all wrong, Samuel thought.

“She’s a boss; she knows what she wants, and she gets it. She’s inspirational, frankly, and I like her. She reminds me of my mom, in a way.” Samuel said this quietly, as if embarrassed to share that with Carline.

“You know they all love you, right? Mom and Dad, and Sam and Max and Teddy and Miles, and even Rhetta, too. They’re so glad you’re you, and they’re your family now if you want them.” Jenny squirmed next to him, and he held his daughter closer. He wanted a family since that day when Calvin took it all away from him, and now it seemed he had a

family - a large one filled with people he wasn't related to -
but it was his.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jenny did not remember a time when Dad, Samuel, was not in her life. It was almost as if she had blocked out all the memories when Dad did not comfort her after a long cry, or tease her for crushing on good-looking people they saw on week-long family vacations. Dad shut up quickly when he learned that Jenny actually found one of her old infatuations was going to the same college and had been dating him. She only remembered the times when Dad and Mom slow danced late at night, how they both ran to check on her younger siblings when they cried in the night. She always chose to never remember that Mom and Dad were not her birth parents.

Jenny fidgeted in her gown. It was entirely too hot in Palo Alto to be wearing black and to be thinking about her future now that she had successfully graduated college. She had felt so assured when she threw her cap in the air, but now that she was trying to find her family, she was reminded exactly how young she was.

“Do you see them anywhere?” she asked her boyfriend, Finch, beside her. Her lawyer boyfriend was almost as tall as her dad, while Jenny could barely measure up to her mom’s shoulder. “Being five feet *sucks*.”

“Do I see the parting of the Black Sea of graduated seniors as a terrifying man with scars all on his face tries to find his daughter, fiery hair flowing behind him as their offspring try not to get lost but also try not to hold on to their parents’ hands?” Jenny scowled and kicked Finch’s shin. “*Ow!* But,

yes, I do definitely see that,” Finch mentioned as he starts waving his hand around.

It wasn't too long before Dad and Mom and her siblings reached her, Finch shaking hands with Dad, Mom kissing both of her cheeks and telling Jenny how she was *so proud of you, my darling*. Jenny didn't like the grey hairs she saw in Dad's beard, or the wrinkles around Mom's eyes, and she didn't like how much taller her little brother James was than her, especially since he was only fourteen, and she was just shy of twenty-two. Nora was too busy putting on lip-gloss to look at her sister, but Jenny didn't mind. Today was too overwhelming, and when Mom asked if she was coming with the family and Finch, Jenny barely heard her.

Apparently Dad understood. Dad always understood. As the group walked away from the two of them, he knelt down, looking her almost straight in the eyes. He was so old now.

“What's wrong, Babysaurus?”

“I don't think I'm ready to be an adult yet, and I'm scared. I don't know what I'm doing, Daddysaurus; I'm just barely holding onto things and I feel like no one can hear me crying for help,” she sniffled, feeling the snot almost drip out. She hoped her mascara wasn't running. Her throat clenched even more as Dad's eyes softened, steel to the grey of an ending storm, as he drew her closer to him.

“I still don't think I'm ready to be an adult, and not everyone is your mother. Only God knows how she managed to take care of you at eighteen,” he laughed. “I was thirty-four when I met her, and thirty-four when I met you, and these past eighteen years have flown by faster than I would have liked, but I like to think I savored every day with you and your mother. I've told you the shitty stories of my youth. You know how they go. I think I had a second childhood with you, so we're in the same boat here, kiddo. I remember all the days I had with the two of you, when I still wasn't sure of who I was. I remember the day she told me about how she rescued you and how she saved herself; and I think that's when I really fell irreversibly in love with her.” Jenny wiped the still flowing tears from her eyes. “But I fell in love with you first, because I

saw me in you and I saw my sister in you and I saw Carline in you and I saw Eric as well, but you overpowered us all, and look at you now. You graduated from Stanford and made fools of us. I fell in love with you the day that you wanted me to draw your mother, and you said I drew her sad and asked if you made her sad, and you never ever did. Jenny, you saved us. And if you can do that at four, I have no doubts that you will be astounding no matter when you decide you're ready for the world to see you as Jennica Warren. You fly with your own wings, you know that. Come here, sweetheart." Jenny was crying into his shoulder, and he smelled like how she always remembered him - on the day he and Mom got married a year after Carline's graduation. He cried then when he saw her Mom trying to navigate her way down the aisle, dodging the miniature dinosaur "flower petals" Jenny sprinkled everywhere. He smelled the same when he cried after Jenny turned eighteen and she told him that she was a Warren through and through. He cried when she asked him to tattoo her, mainly because he didn't think his little girl should actually get inked.

He chose the phrase, mainly because he said it reminded him of her mother and Jenny.

"Let's go home, Babysaurus," he said, and they walked hand in hand in silence back to the car, watching Carline wave in the distance.

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